

# LEADING WITH PLACE

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR REGIONAL TOURISM COMMUNITIES

Strategic Insights White Paper

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regional tourism projects rarely fail because of a lack of ideas. They face challenges when leaders are required to navigate competing priorities without a shared framework for decision-making. Communities want to be heard and to see places they value reflected with care and integrity. Councils seek certainty, credibility and forward momentum toward quality outcomes. Funders require measurable results. Visitors look for experiences that feel authentic, meaningful and worth the journey.

In this environment, leadership is less about consensus-building and more about clarity. This white paper explores place-led leadership as a practical, transferable approach to guiding regional tourism and community projects through complexity. Drawing on lived experience across regional visitor, cultural and civic projects, it positions experience design — including predesign analysis, stakeholder engagement and characterisation of place — not as branding or aesthetics, but as mechanisms that support considered decisions, make trade-offs visible, and build long-term confidence among stakeholders.

**Rather than asking how to tell better stories, this paper reframes the challenge: how do regional tourism leaders use place to lead thoughtfully through change, growth and uncertainty?**



# THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE IN REGIONAL TOURISM

Regional tourism sits at the intersection of economy, identity and community life. Unlike metropolitan destinations, regional places are not abstract brands — they are lived in environments where tourism decisions directly affect how people see themselves and how their towns function day to day.

Leaders in this space are routinely asked to reconcile:

- Economic growth with community identity and liveability
- Short term funding cycles with long-term stewardship
- Visitor expectations with local values
- Ambition with finite budgets, skills and operational capacity

These tensions are natural to regional tourism. The challenge arises when leaders must respond quickly, publicly, and often under political or funding pressure. In these moments, the instinct to compromise can dilute outcomes — projects that attempt to be everything to everyone can struggle to deliver impact, pride or longevity.

Leadership, in this context, is not about smoothing tension away. It is about holding complexity long enough to make decisions that are well-considered, values led and grounded in place.

Using structured engagement early in the process can clarify priorities and strengthen decision-making without making it feel prescriptive.

## WHEN EVERYONE WANTS SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Most regional visitor projects begin with goodwill and enthusiasm, accompanied by multiple — and sometimes conflicting — ideas about purpose.

Common patterns emerge:

- Local government views the project as economic infrastructure
- Community members see it as a reflection of identity and memory
- Operators look to it as a driver of visitation and yield
- Funders focus on measurable outputs and reporting frameworks

Each perspective is valid. Challenges arise when no shared framework exists to prioritise between them.

Without clarity, project briefs expand. New ideas are added to maintain engagement. Scope grows, budgets stretch, and the original intent becomes harder to articulate. The result can be a space that feels busy rather than meaningful — over-programmed, difficult to maintain, and disconnected from the very place it was meant to champion.

Strategic preliminary work including stakeholder engagement and place characterisation provide a way to focus discussions and explore tensions thoughtfully, helping ensure that trade-offs are clear and deliberate.

## PLACE AS A DECISION MAKING FRAMEWORK

Place-led leadership offers an alternative to compromise-driven decision-making. Instead of asking what should this project include?, leaders ask:

- What is this place responsible for carrying forward?
- What stories, values or truths are non-negotiable here?
- What would feel wrong, even if it were popular, profitable or easy to fund?
- What must this project protect, not just promote?

These questions shift conversations from personal preference to collective responsibility. Place becomes the reference point — not individual agendas, trends, or political cycles.

Pre-design work to refine the brief early through engagement and community co-design processes, and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of what makes 'place' - and especially what makes this place special - offer practical ways to explore priorities and guide decisions, helping leaders navigate complexity without being prescriptive.



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# EXPERIENCE DESIGN AS LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Experience design is often misunderstood as theming or fit-out. Used properly, it is a leadership tool.

Well-constructed experience frameworks help leaders to:

- Translate abstract values into tangible decisions
- Create a shared language across technical, political, and community groups
- Test ideas against intent, rather than personalities or momentum
- Stage ambition over time in line with funding, capacity, and risk

Narrative logic allows leaders to see where additions strengthen meaning and where they dilute it, supporting confident decision-making and reducing the risk of scope creep.

Practical tools such as visitor journey mapping, experience prototyping, or iterative design reviews support structured decision-making subtly, reinforcing clarity without being overt.

# COURAGE - AND THE GROUNDS - TO SAY NO

Strong leadership is often most visible in what is left out.

In regional tourism projects, the pressure to include is constant. Every idea has a champion. Every exclusion has implications.

Prioritisation is inherently challenging.

When decisions are anchored in place, refusals become easier to explain and defend. Leaders can say:

- This does not align with the purpose of this place
- This would undermine the experience we are responsible for creating
- This is a future stage, not a current priority

Place-led frameworks allow leaders to navigate tensions with clarity, maintaining trust even when not every idea can be accommodated. Early engagement and return briefs inform these choices, providing rationale without implying failure.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Across regional visitor, cultural, and community projects, several consistent lessons emerge:

**Leadership requires holding tension, not resolving it too quickly**

Taking time to explore complexity allows purpose and values to guide decisions effectively.

**Every idea has a champion. Every exclusion has implications**

Structured engagement and strategic frameworks help balance multiple perspectives to maintain trust and impact.

**Consistency in place-led frameworks builds credibility**

Applying predesign project scope development, targeted and intentional engagement, and deep characterisation of place and values consistently helps build confidence and support among communities, councils, and funding bodies.

**Documenting decisions strengthens learning and legacy**

Clear records of rationale, trade-offs, and priorities enable continuity across leadership changes and future projects.



# MEASURING SUCCESS BEYOND METRICS

Traditional success metrics — visitor numbers, revenue, or occupancy — capture only part of a project's impact. Place-led leadership encourages a broader view:

- Are community values reflected authentically?
- Do visitors understand and connect with the stories of place?
- Has the project supported sustainable, long-term outcomes?
- Are lessons from the process informing future projects?

Integrating engagement and place-based analysis into evaluation allows leaders to capture both tangible and intangible outcomes without implying a checklist approach.

## NEXT STEPS FOR LEADERS

Leaders in regional tourism can begin to apply these principles by:

1. Initiating predesign scope development and analysis of place character before finalising project briefs.
2. Structuring stakeholder engagement to surface value and place based analysis over needs assessments.
3. Using place-led frameworks to evaluate and guide decisions, particularly when difficult trade-offs arise.
4. Documenting rationale and learning to support transparency and future leadership continuity.

By embracing these steps, leaders can transform complex, high-pressure projects into opportunities for clarity, cohesion, and meaningful regional impact.

### About the Author

S2 Architects works with regional communities, councils and cultural organisations to create place led visitor experiences that balance ambition with responsibility. Our work sits at the intersection of leadership, storytelling and the built environment, supporting decision makers to navigate complexity with confidence.

If you're leading a regional tourism project and want to explore how place-led leadership can help you make clear, values-driven decisions, get in touch with us to continue the conversation.

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