

Place Branding and Place Identity. An integrated approach

Descrizione

Marketing places, as an activity that seeks to position places in a globalized market environment, is a phenomenon that has existed for centuries, albeit probably in very different forms (Ashworth and Voogd 1990, Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2010). Yet, the last decade or more has seen an important shift from place marketing to place branding, at different scales (neighbourhood, city, nation etc.) and with different scopes (destinations, investment, talent etc.) (Kavaratzis 2007, Lucarelli and Berg 2011). Is place branding simply another term for place marketing or are we dealing with an altogether new practice? (Kavaratzis 2004, Kalandides and Kavaratzis 2009) It is worth considering the concepts together with others: what is place identity and place image? How do these differ, let's say, from place reputation? How is it all related to place management or spatial planning? (Kalandides and Kavaratzis 2011)? The present article is a – highly subjective – attempt to throw light onto some of these issues, using eclectic examples from around the world, mostly from my own professional experience.

Place identity is probably the most elusive and paradoxical of the above concepts (Govers and Go 2009, Kalandides 2007, 2011a, 2011b, Boisen et al 2011, Kavaratzis and Hatch 2012). Etymologically, identity simply means “that which is the same to itself” and such a definition probably sounds straightforward enough. Yet, what is “itself” in something so heterogeneous as place and how can anything ever be the same in a world caught up in constant change (Warnaby 2011)? For example, we use the name “Milan” and denote a rather clear concept in our heads, though the place itself is quite muddled and has changed dramatically down the centuries. Are we reducing place to a point on the world map? If it is not so, what is Milan, or, as it is usually asked, what is quintessentially, typically, characteristically Milan? Is it the Piazza del Duomo, the Brera district, the popular housing blocks in the periphery? We need a concept of place (and place identity) that incorporates change and continuity, unity and heterogeneity.

Weichhart *et al* (2006) distinguish between three types of place identity: *identification of, being identified as* and *identification with*. The first refers to the ways in which people (groups or individuals) understand and recognize places, as they do other objects, assign them characteristics and particularities. The second (“being identified as”) in a reverse way refers to the ways in which people (again both groups and individuals) are recognized in their relations to their place or origin, residence etc. And finally the third (“identification with”) following the phenomenological tradition that seeks to explore the links between the human and the world in which it lives, is about the ways that people incorporate place into their own identity construction. What Weichert *et al* consciously avoid doing, is to talk about place identity as something independent of the human. The material world, they claim, cannot have an identity of its own (Weichhart *et al* 2006,19).

Nonetheless if we understand identity as the “undifferentiated unity or sameness, one that constitutes the essential ‘being’ of an entity” (Martin, 2005, p. 97), we may be entitled to use the term place identity, either with one of the three meanings that Weichhart *et al* give it or with in the sense of place specificity and distinctiveness, provided that we are clear about the semantic traps. The question that arises though, if we accept that place can have an identity of its own, is, how do we understand *place* ?

There are two approaches here that may be very useful for our needs: Doreen Massey on the one hand talks about *place* as the locus of interconnection of open-end trajectories (Massey 1994). Both people and objects exist simultaneously, but at the same time carry in them their own history (trajectories) that may come from far away and long ago. These trajectories may not be unique in themselves, but the complex ways in which they intersect in that particular locus, is quite singular. Place is both the product of social phenomena and a modus of their reproduction. In other words, it is social relations that produce places and places have the capacity to reproduce these relations in an endless movement. Seen this way, place becomes the simultaneous existence and reproduction of difference, and it is that unique blend of different trajectories that gives place its *specificity* and *distinctiveness*. The second approach that helps put things in perspective is this by David Harvey, who talks about space (not *place*, though I shall not get into the distinction here) as at the same time

absolute, relative and *relational* (Harvey 1996). Absolute, in the sense that it can be limited (though all kind of boundaries), divided up and measured; relative in the sense that it is constituted by relations among objects (very much as Einstein defined it); and relational, in the sense that each object contains in itself its relations to other objects across space. Only an understanding of space/place as all three concepts at the same time allows us to bridge apparently contradictory notions. Place is always the same and different, unique and multiple, distinct and interchangeable.

We seem to be entangled in a tension between two concepts of place identity: one that sees it in relation with human perceptions and the other that understands it as an inherent quality of the material world. I will argue here that place (and its specificity) is constituted in a double process both dependent and independent of perceptions. The German sociologist Martina Löw, in an attempt to offer a more systematic approach to these two dimensions of space/place, talks about *spacing* (or the placing of social goods in the material sense) and *synthesizing* (or the process of linking things together in unity in the human mind) (Löw 2001). In this sense place identity is both what is “out there” and how that is perceived, the two being indissoluble. Place image (or the collective form of mental perceptions of place) becomes an integrated part of place identity and cannot be juxtaposed to it.

I have argued elsewhere that “place branding is the strategic scheme to improve a place’s image”, i.e. that it refers to and intends to alter the ways that places are perceived in people’s minds (Kalandides 2011a). In the above context, place branding influences a place’s *identity*, since it touches one of its constitutive elements. There are two questions that should be asked before we proceed: How do we influence these perceptions and why should we influence them in the first place? I shall begin with the latter:

Think about the way that people treat you when you travel abroad. Probably, without exception they want to know where you are from. You can literally see how your answer triggers images in their mind: if you say “I am from Berlin”, the word will conjure particular qualities they associate in their mind with your city, and which they then project to you (“being identified as”). Their automatic reaction to your person

may depend on the image they have of your country or city of origin. This in its turn may have an influence on your chances to get a job, sell a project or find a partner. Now, consider the way you make decisions about your next holidays. You may go to a place you already know or choose to go to a place about which you've heard (or seen) some interesting things. The way you perceive that place plays a crucial role in your decision, alongside very practical things such as "how do I get there?", "how expensive is it?" etc. There are several similar situations where individuals, groups or institutions make judgments or take decisions according to – though not exclusively because of – place images (investment, political power etc.). Whether we decide to live in a neighbourhood depends very much on its reputation; whether we can identify with our city and engage with it, may be directly linked to bad or good qualities that we ascribe to it in our minds. Thus, the abstract place image, those mental perceptions in our head, can have very material consequences, and this alone is a strong argument for wanting to influence it.

Yet, how can we influence these perceptions in an organized, strategic way? Yes, every single newspaper article, every image that goes around the world, every film and book about a place add up to what people know or think they know about a place. But, do we have a way of influencing these images, provided of course we believe in the freedom of expression? This is the main question that place branding experts have to deal with: they need to find a strategy that can influence the way people perceive a place – be it a town, a region, a country or any other spatial unit. There are several ways of dealing with the problem, but experience has shown that in most cases, the attempt is to influence representations (symbols, artefacts) of place. Logos, campaigns, photos, texts etc. are all different forms that represent the reality out there. There are very controversial estimations on how a logo or a claim may really influence the way we perceive a place, ranging from complete rejection to almost religious adherence (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2007, Kalandides 2011b, Müller 2012). While the answer is bound to remain open and – in my opinion – not really measurable, it is worth looking closer at other approaches. For that, we should turn to place identity once again and consider the elements that constitute it.

Läpple's (1991) "Essay about space" may throw light on several of the issues we are considering here. Läpple proposes the following four constitutive elements of space: first, the material-physical substrate of social relations, as the material external form

of social space. This socially produced substrate consists both of place-bounded artefacts and of the human body. It also functions as crystallized history and materializes collective memory. Second, there are the structures of social interaction, i.e. human practices in relation with the material substrate. This includes production, use and appropriation of materiality and relates to differentiation of class. Third, there is an institutionalized and normative regulation system as mediator between the material substrate of social space and the social practice of its production, appropriation and use. This regulation system consists of forms of property, power and control relations, legal regulations, planning guidelines, social and aesthetic norms. And fourth, there is the spatial system of signs, symbols and representations linked to the material substrate (Läpple, 1991, pp. 196-7). Finally there is a totally separate process, where all these elements are synthesized into spaces in the human mind (s. synthesizing in M. Löw's approach above). If the desired result is to influence the latter (the synthesis, i.e. the perceptions in the human mind), it is usually done by working on the "system of signs, symbols and representations". But what happens with the rest? Do we decide to ignore it? What about the material substrate, the norms and regulations, the complex human practices? Of course, a very valid argument would be that none of that is the job of the place branding expert per se: the "material substrate" is the task of an architect or a planner, the institutional framework this of a legislator etc. But do we really believe that alone the designer who creates a new logo or the marketer who produces an excellent advertising campaign can have a strategic influence on how a place is perceived? Hardly. Then maybe it is time to think of all the above together in a more integrated way.

I call *integrated place branding*, the strategic approach to improving a place's image, which considers place materiality, institutions, practices and representations together (Kalandides 2011b). In this sense, decisions on architecture and planning, on what laws to implement or what kind of practices to prioritize, all influence place image and thus become elements of integrated place branding. It is obvious that all of the above has existed way before the term place branding was coined. What may be novel here is the integrated strategic approach, the need for place managers to consider all these elements together. In other words, I claim that in order to change the way places are perceived it is not enough to work on representations (it may actually prove to be counter-productive), but you need to work on place itself.

Let us now make a full circle to the beginning of this article and close it with one more consideration. If we say that space/place is at the same time absolute, relative and relational, what consequences does that have for integrated place branding?

If places are “the coexistence of difference” (s. above), and are constantly produced by relations among very diverse elements, then it goes almost without saying that we need to find ways of paying tribute to this heterogeneity. There is an inherent impossibility in this undertaking that is deeply rooted into the paradox of place itself: if we decide to brand a place as a whole, we only consider its absolute nature, obscuring diversity and place’s contingency. If we decide to work on multiplicity, relations and flows, then we can hardly find the quintessence, the simplicity of symbols that the human mind seems to need. Any kind of place branding effort is caught up in this dilemma and any answer will have to be context-dependent. In general, I prefer to abandon the idea of the possibility of branding *the* place directly, and think of ways to create positive images of the individual elements that make up places in constant flux. This way, place branding would only be possible indirectly, but, I argue, would be more efficient.

Finally, if we take the relational character of place seriously, i.e. if we accept that the constitutive elements of place are linked with others far away, we may want to reconsider the way we understand inter-place competition. Places are involved in extremely complex relations of co-dependency, cooperation, competition etc. and reducing these bonds to mere competition is, to say the least, a naïve political oversimplification with disastrous consequences (I think the recent European crisis has made this clearer than ever before). An integrated approach to place branding may privilege agreements of cooperation, networks and organisations, over the blind constant race for investment, talent or tourists.

Integrated place branding is about considering the complex ways in which place identity is constantly produced and negotiated, and how place image is just one of place’s constitutive elements. Space/place is understood at the same time as absolute, relative and relational, with multiple consequences for both theory and practice of place branding. Finally, I believe that we need to rethink place identity as a

concept, put humans once again in the centre of our understanding of the world, and make them both the actors and beneficiaries of place development.

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