

# DIRECTIONS IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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## City Brand

**Urban lives are filled with brands. Now, cities are waking up to the prospect of place brands.**

As globalization intensifies, urban development has come to include an image dimension. The common rationale is that a well-known place name often creates opportunities for international attention, events, investments and become ‘winning’ places. Notwithstanding critical voices pointing to the challenges and disadvantages of the new reliance on city branding, many cities are proactively positioning and promoting themselves with strategic intent. The aim is often to orchestrate the totality of perceptions, experiences and feelings that people hold about that city to ensure that it is as distinctive, compelling and memorable as possible. As Baker (2007) reminds, ‘In the 21st century cities will increasingly compete on the value that they provide in terms of their physical, service and experiential offer, their heritage, their ambitions and their character. In short, they will compete on their brand and will develop in line with it.’<sup>1</sup>

As interest gravitates toward cities as growth poles, innovative and creative places and the like, there is a moving away from competitive or comparative advantage toward constructed advantages between cities. Cities, regardless of size, are seeking to differentiate themselves, emphasizing why they are valued options in the global economy. There is increasing willingness to improve city image (brand identity)—the attractiveness and vitality of urban spaces, cultural, leisure and entertainment industries—in order to attract and retain mobile international talent, businesses and visitors. A number of urban economists, geographers and other urban analysts in recent years, prominently Richard Florida, have argued that in the knowledge economy, companies, creative workers and entrepreneurs are attracted to cities with strong brand identities as open, tolerant and dynamic places.<sup>2</sup> Others have offered the tourism development potential as a primer for strong city brand.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, others have invoked city rankings to unpack the essence of cities: *you can’t manage what you don’t measure*. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of city rankings from Best Value Cities (353 US metropolitan areas), Best Performing Cities (200 largest metropolitan areas) and Best Places to Live in USA (50 largest metropolitan areas), to global cities ranking such as Anholt’s city brand index

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(60 cities), Foreign Policy’s Global Cities Index (66 cities), GaWC ranking of cities in globalization (178 cities), The Economist Intelligence Unit’s global city competitiveness (120 cities) and the world’s most livable cities indices (140 cities), among others. All of which have reinforced attention on city brand in urban policy.

Despite growing research on how to build and manage city image and competitiveness, city branding is no easy task. City branding (more generally, place branding) is also referred to as place marketing, place imaging and reimagining.<sup>4</sup> The branding process is a complex interaction involving many factors including economic development plans, marketing strategies and socio-cultural features. This Note discusses the emerging practice of city brand and place marketing. It outlines what is involved in city brand, city identity and strategy for promoting a city brand, illustrating with the case of Seoul, South Korea.

### Place Marketing

Place marketing is not new. Early examples can be traced to 1850.<sup>5</sup> The approach, however, has changed over time, from one of place selling, place development (developing the image of the city based on geographical and/or physical features

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such as paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks) to an increasing emphasis on consumer perspectives and urban entrepreneurialism in which the image of the city is relentlessly packaged and presented through place marketing.<sup>6</sup> Place marketing enables a targeted strategy of differentiating the city from the competition. The underlying principle is the necessity of place excellence among cities.

Since the 1990s, eager to strengthen city attractiveness in local economic development, the notion of a strategic approach to place marketing (in particular, city branding) has been embraced by a widening number of cities and countries around the world. Some urban analysts have argued that city branding is a cultural strategy of an entrepreneurial city.<sup>7</sup> From Amsterdam, Barcelona, Chicago and Dublin to Montevideo, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Tel Aviv, Tokyo and Valencia, cities have invested in city brands to compete more effectively on the international scene (Box 1). As OECD reports on Stockholm,<sup>8</sup>

To play an even bigger role in Europe and globally, the Stockholm region will need branding to increase its international visibility. Compared to many other European cities, Stockholm is far less known. Stockholm may have to rely on regional branding to attract foreign resources (businesses and workers). Regional branding could serve to overcome the disadvantages of being located at the edge of European and global markets as well as increase its currently low international visibility.

In some countries, e.g., US, place marketing is a multi-billion dollar industry where places are promoted aggressively as 'commodities to be consumed'.<sup>9</sup> Common branding strategies include,

- Architected branding where the branding has a logo and a slogan designed to create an image and is highly memorable, e.g., New York City's ILOVENY campaign created in the 1970s;
- Propositional branding where the branding is a statement and a proof of the positioning of the city, e.g., Hollywood, Los Angeles, the VIP city has constantly brought forth new films and new star celebrities, establishing itself as the embodiment of American cinema; and



New York City, US. Source: Belinda Yuen

### Box 1. Some Examples of Place Branding

Spain, for instance, has built its place brand strategy on a combination of evolving and distinguishing characteristics, commencing with being a new democracy, its tourism, culture, sports (e.g., the Barcelona Olympic Games) and more recently, the development of new technologically advanced businesses, especially in computer gaming and virtual reality sectors.

New Zealand has defined a national branding strategy around the environment theme. At the start of the 1990s, New Zealand promoted the country as the 'environmental destination of the 1990s' in order to take advantage of the world's interest in nature-based tourism, building upon its green image. In 1999, this was refined and given a more precise image when Tourism New Zealand launched the New Zealand 100% Pure campaign, using the landscape as the brand essence and reinforcing the country's clean and green positioning. In 2002, a future innovation perspective was added when the prime minister released a policy framework for economic transformation structured around the theme of 'growing an innovative New Zealand'. The centerpiece was to pursue long-term sustainable growth and 'promote a contemporary and future-focused Brand NZ, which projects New Zealand as a great place to invest in, live in, and visit' and 'brand New Zealand as being technologically advanced, creative and successful and to present that consistently across sectors' (H Clark (2002) *Growing an innovative New Zealand*, Wellington: Office of the Prime Minister, pp48; 7).

In 1988, the mayor of Tel Aviv launched a city promotion campaign with the supporting slogan: 'Tel Aviv – A Non-Stop City'. Under the slogan, Tel Aviv began to re-emerge as Israel's night-life capital and as a city that never sleeps, in sharp contrast to the other cities in Israel at the time. This attracted people, especially the young, who in turn attracted businesses, night-life, fashion, raising real estate demand and development followed. The city's residents began realizing the vision, and Tel Aviv was regenerated and reborn as the focal point of Israel's cultural life, business activity and nightlife.

Source: F Gilmore (2001) A country—can it be repositioned? Spain—the success story of country branding, *Journal of Brand Management* 9(4):281-293; Shir and Spitzer, *There is a place for branding places: Branding cities and institutions—Tel Aviv-Yafo—A non-stop city*, <http://www.2sh.co.il/?ItemID=2473> accessed 18 Dec 2011 2pm; N Morgan, A Pritchard and R Piggott (2002) *New Zealand, 100% Pure: The creation of a powerful niche destination brand*, *Journal of Brand Management* 9(4/5):335-354.

- Naked branding where the brand is the city itself and the branding strategy is to change people's perceptions (usually negative) of the city, e.g., Pittsburgh has changed from being 'hell with the lid off' to becoming America's most livable city.

In Europe, the Guggenheim Museum has transformed Bilbao from a declining steel and shipbuilding city into an international creative city, positioning Bilbao strongly on the European cultural map, commonly referred to as the Bilbao effect. Another is the regeneration of Barcelona using culture and entertainment (hosting the 1992 Olympic Games) in its redevelopment and branding effort. Others, including Glasgow, Liverpool and Prague, have used the European cultural capital program to promote their cities. Increasingly, a large range of material features and immaterial qualities (usually the city's strengths)



Barcelona, Spain. Source: Belinda Yuen

have been used to promote the city’s image and choice position. The image carriers include unique/scenic landscape, famous architects and architecture, public art, painters, musicians and historical figures, mega-events, special quality of place, lifestyle, culture, diversity, international sports and recreation and history of innovation. Put simply, the city brand is deeply rooted in the city’s physical aspects, qualities and in many cases, stereotypes of the place and its people.

The implication is that the making of a good city is ever more important. Increasingly, city planners’ efforts are directed to not just the built infrastructure but also intangible dimensions of city image and positioning (the city’s calling card), its ability to attract and retain talented labor and provide places where new ideas and innovations can grow, where people’s experience matters. The prospect of place marketing recognizes and seeks to enhance the brand equity of a place, that is, brand awareness (how easily the brand comes to the consumer’s mind) and brand image (overall impression in consumer’s mind) through communication and marketing measures with brand-related identities.<sup>10</sup> The focus is on gaining positive associations in the minds of the ‘place consumers’. These include residents, businesses and visitors; all the people and organizations that are critical for the functioning of the city. The interest lies usually in the positive impacts of place branding for the benefit of foreign investment and cultural and tourism destination development.

A review of the extant literature indicates that much place marketing generally involves three primary ingredients: identification of target markets (and the tools that a city adopts to market itself), marketing factors (the physical and observable aspects from which a city can be seen, such as the image and infrastructure of the city) and planning groups (includes partnerships, peoples’ perception, experience and communication about a city) (Figure 1). Kavaratzis has suggested six key questions to help frame the creation of a recognizable place identity and subsequent use for branding: what the city indubitably is, what the city feels it is, what the city says it is, what the city is seen to be, whom the city seeks to serve and what is promised and expected.<sup>11</sup>

There are several cornerstones for change. Hankinson (2007) has posited five basic principles for successful destination brand management: strong, visionary leadership, a brand-oriented organizational culture, departmental coordination and

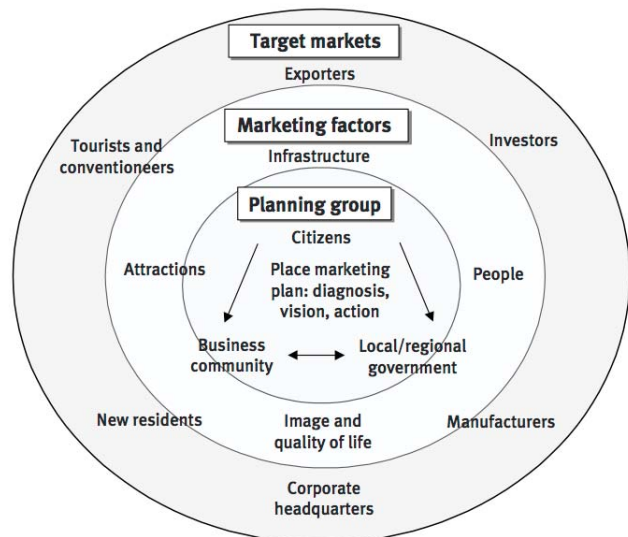
process alignment, consistent communication across a wide range of stakeholders and strong compatible partners.<sup>12</sup> Even though city authorities have their own aspirations, and in most cases are responsible for the implementation of city branding, Baker (2007) has further accentuated the need for a community-based brand that has been developed with stakeholders, involving a communitywide effort and partnerships to effectively communicate, create and deliver a city destination experience that is memorable to its consumer.<sup>13</sup> The underlying premise is that there are close emotional ties between people and places. Those are developed, as Holloway and Hubbard (2001) explain, ‘through direct experience of the environment or indirectly through media representations’.<sup>14</sup>

### The Case of Seoul

Seoul is among the group of cities that has recognized early the value of city brand in urban competitiveness. Seeking to improve its low brand value position in the 2008 City Brands Index (ranked 33rd among 50 world cities), Seoul has implemented a large-scale city branding program and increased its advertising expenditure 10-fold, from 4 billion won in 2007 to 40 billion won in 2008.<sup>15</sup> The motivations are several.

First, Seoul, as the capital city, has come to represent the image of the country. Seoul’s ambition is to maintain its key role in world economy, a global city that is the latest place in which to do business. Second, with globalization and internationalization, other major Asian cities, e.g., Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok, are intensifying their economic development efforts and identifying new opportunities such as the creative and cultural industries to attract the best people and businesses. An improved city brand could help enhance Seoul’s image and improve tourism and investments. The tourism industry in Seoul contributes 7% to gross regional domestic product when compared with 10% in most other developed countries.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1. Place marketing framework



Source: P Kotler, M A Hamlin, I Rein and D H Haider (2002), Marketing Asian Places, Singapore: John Wiley and Sons, p46.

The mayor of Seoul's strong leadership has been critical. A Global Marketing Division has been established within Seoul's Metropolitan Government to coordinate and spearhead the city branding effort. There is increasing recognition of the need to enhance Seoul's city brand within the government administration. Even so, the branding (and its investment) is not without its controversy. Many have questioned its expenditure (is it necessary) and the city's ability to effectively manage the branding project and budget. Others have pointed to Seoul's identity crisis. A key challenge is the difficulty of delimiting Seoul's identity and core values in a manner that is widely acceptable, easily marketable, presentable and open to experience on a daily basis. As Yoon (2012), director of Seoul Metropolitan Government Global Marketing Division, summarizes, Seoul is a 'city without a concept'; it is difficult to determine 'what exactly is Seoul'.<sup>17</sup> He attributes this to Seoul's numerous images and the lack of a clear 'special characteristic'. Among the first tasks of improving Seoul's brand value are to develop and manage a clear city brand to become better known both internationally and to Seoul's own citizens. This includes,

- Defining the city's strengths and weaknesses (hardware and software) so as to assess competitive brand position and sharpen the city's brand identity;
- Determining the target group(s) to identify potential customers and their motivational factors; and
- Designing the brand communication strategy to create a promise and translate it into a concept—how the brand will be communicated and delivered, e.g., core brand elements, brand messages and images, etc.

This is implemented through a comprehensive city branding communications strategy including stakeholder involvement, studies on other cities' brands and media coverage, comprising televised commercials, print and commercial advertisements and cultural and sports marketing. But, the notion of place identity is dynamic and will vary in relation to the social context in which an individual interacts. The challenge lies in creating and profiling an identity of the city from the diverse values and interest groups that could be condensed into an appropriate identity acceptable to all people. This raises an often overlooked, crucial reality: city brand invariably will lead to contestations over competing representations, understanding and identification of the city. For exactly this reason, it is

pertinent to involve the local population and stakeholders early in the city branding process.

Rather than a standardized city brand, Seoul Metropolitan Government has opted to identify five target markets (based on its tourism strategy), a plurality of place identity and associated communications strategy (Table 1). Emphasis is on projecting Seoul as a city of culture, a cutting-edge city, a city that is traditional yet a leader in IT industry and has a modern, dynamic feeling with audience-specific city branding messages to create unique values to individuals, both current residents and outside audiences. Thus, in China, the communication is of Seoul as a city where 'one can simultaneously enjoy a diverse cultural experience and enjoy a city of infinite possibilities'. In Japan, it is Seoul as a city where 'you would like to come again to find an infinitely new city', while in South East Asia, the image is that of a 'fashion forward Seoul where one can experience the infinite excitement of Korean fashion', and in North America and Europe, it is Seoul as 'a city of strangers that invoke infinite curiosity'. Put simply, the basic concept, as Yoon (2012) explains, is that you could get all you want in Seoul: Seoul—City of Infinity, 'Seoul is a place full of fun, novelty, excitement, and curious experiences'.<sup>18</sup>

As with many other cities, the place promotion message is a critical instrument in Seoul's brand promotion. Many place brand campaigns are structured around a slogan. For instance, Malaysia uses 'Truly Asia' (promising an authentic Asian experience) while South Africa's slogan is 'It's possible' (suggesting that visitors can find any experience they seek) and New York's image, logo and song is 'I Love New York' (inviting visitors to discover what they love in the city). The Seoul Metropolitan Government has adopted 'Hi Seoul: Soul of Asia' (Figure 2). 'Hi Seoul' was the highest scored entry from among over 7000 submissions to the Seoul Metropolitan Government's 2002 citywide Seoul Brand Contest. This slogan was chosen for two main reasons: it is perceived to convey a friendly image of Seoul to the international community and to promote harmony and unity among Seoul citizens.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from a slogan, Seoul also uses colors (national colors of blue-orange-red) and the voices of cultural icons like Chen Kaige, Murakami Ryu, and George Winston as well as ordinary people to tell personal 'Seoul stories'. People have long played the role of 'ambassadors' of

**Table 1. Seoul's brand concept**

Target markets	Place identity	Communication strategy
China	Stylish metropolis	Emphasis on images of being more fashionable, more elegant than Shanghai and Beijing
Japan	Warm and humane metropolis	Emphasis on images of being more humane than Tokyo
South East Asia	Advanced metropolis	Emphasis on images of being more energetic and more oriental than Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur
North America	Exotic metropolis	Emphasis on Seoul's advantage on energetic and oriental charm compared with New York and London
Europe	Traditional metropolis	Emphasis on the impression that Seoul has similar traditional culture deposits like Paris and Rome

Source: Y S Yoon (2012), Designing the Seoul city brand in C Y Wun and X Liu (ed) Asian Great Place Branding Campaigns, Communication University of China, pg.

Figure 2. Seoul's city brand slogan and logo



Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government, <http://english.seoul.go.kr/> accessed 17 Dec 2011 6:50pm

the city, communicating their experiences, evaluations and identifiable images.<sup>20</sup> A strong driving force behind Seoul's city brand effort is the vision for Seoul's future. The vision is for shaping the future of Seoul as 'a clean, attractive and global city' in five major directions—warm life welfare, dynamic livelihood economy, clean and green eco-environment, attractive cultural capital and trusted and transparent city administration to strengthen the city's international competitiveness as well as improve the citizens' quality of life.<sup>21</sup>

The process of Seoul's branding has involved parallel physical development and reconstruction of the city to convey a modern, cultural, cosmopolitan and people/environment-based city. These included massive investments to improve environmental sustainability including targets to reduce air pollution, energy use, carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels by 2030, improve public transport and create more parks and public recreation spaces within the city. An exemplar is the restoration and regeneration of the Cheonggyecheon stream from highway to parkland within the city. How cities are developed will provide the foundation for their image position and promotion orientation.

Increasingly, the urban qualities of livable, smart, environmentally sound and sustainable cities are chief among the new benchmarks used in assessing competitive city position.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, as the critical literature shows, many city marketing campaigns have failed because decision makers focused on the marketing aspects and neglected physical changes to the place, resulting in a mismatch between image and place.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the city brand campaign and media strategies on the city's momentous identity must be backed up by reality—physical transformation of the city. City branding will not mask a city's problems.



Cheonggyecheon stream, Seoul, Korea. Source: Wikimedia Commons, stari4ek

As the Seoul experience testifies, city branding necessitates a clear vision for the city and a coherent strategy for building and spreading the destination brand. The brand key is coordination and direction. Importantly, this means action that prioritizes local needs, aligns key stakeholders (providers and consumers) and communicates the city's assets in a way that would connect with the city's target consumers and deliver the brand. Beyond the slogans and logos, the design of city branding should consider the various demands and synergies of target markets (local and external audiences) and develop joined-up yet appropriate audience-specific brand communication messages to improve people's self-relevant imagery of the city and attract the city's audiences where it matters most.

City branding is not a one-off activity but a long-term dynamic process. The difficulty of achieving successful city branding should not be underestimated.<sup>24</sup> As international city branding experience demonstrates, a successful brand image can bring its own challenges such as the risk of architectural fatigue, visual overload and the city becoming a destination for mass tourism, crowded with visitors.<sup>25</sup> Effective city branding requires effective policy implementation. This implies a willingness to evaluate impact and effectiveness—what has been done right and what not, what was successful and what has failed so as to ensure that the city is on-brand and can innovate more effectively.

The ultimate test for the place brand lies in the feelings and responses of its target audience. Although early days yet, Yoon (2012) has reported that since the start of Seoul's comprehensive city branding and international city promotion campaign in 2008, Seoul has been listed among the world's top city to visit and tourist arrivals have increased by 21%: 1.37 million tourists during 2008-09.<sup>26</sup> Seoul has been named the World Design Capital 2010, reinforcing the city's ambition to reinvent into a global city of design and cultural innovation.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

In recent years, city brands are increasingly being seen as the new tool to enhance city positioning and development. By capturing the spirit of the city and its characteristics, a successful city brand can stimulate increased attractiveness, competitiveness, investment and pride in the city as well as coherent city development to deliver the brand promise. Equally, poor branding can erode city attractiveness.

Given the close link between a city's brand and its identity, having a clear city brand strategy is useful in supporting cities to develop a long-term vision and future perspectives. It offers a means to think about what the city is, what the city wants to be and how it wants to get there. It could help cities focus on how they wish to develop in the future and think beyond their present situation so as to create new growth opportunities that builds on a city's strengths, core values and characteristics. But, it could also lead to an increased focus on competitiveness and a top-down approach involving image experts, neglecting the voices of the community to foster a collective construction of the communicated city for the tourists.

Those cities wanting to enhance their brand image to compete for tourism and economic development would do well to address several basic branding questions—what does the city want to be known for, how can the city stand out from the rest and what thoughts and feelings does it want to project when people are exposed to the city's name?<sup>28</sup> As illustrated by the Seoul experience, this requires careful definition of the brand image, target markets and communications strategy. It requires stakeholders' buy-in and partnership, creating opportunities to strengthen the city's social cohesion. At the same time, it needs infrastructure, equipping the built environment with the ability to represent and reinforce the city's brand, without which the city cannot attempt delivering the expectations created by its brand. This also requires continuous development since the city is constantly evolving.

There is no single place marketing model, depending on local economic and socio-cultural factors. The key is sufficient time to build up the city brand, improving it over time to reinforce and reflect the city's core values while adapting to changing circumstances. Making it work requires the city to deliver on its brand promise, providing the experiences associated with the brand image to ensure brand credibility. This calls for identification, organization and coordination of all the variables that have an impact on the city's identity—its urban infrastructure, quality of local services, 'soul' and image of the city—in order to achieve a coherent, desired city brand identity.

Since cities are by definition multilayered, each city will need to create and manage their own specific city brand in the way that is best for their situation. It is about evoking the uniqueness of place.

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