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Accentuating the Positive: City Branding, Narrative and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This commentary on the contribution made by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) examines the antecedents to which it responded, the key ideas that it offered at the time of publication, and assesses its lasting impact. There are three main sections. The first reflects upon the informal and improvised approaches that characterised place promotion, marketing and branding in the final decades of the twentieth century. The second surveys Kavaratzis and Ashworth's critical reflections on the existing theory and practice of city branding. The third section discusses their as contributing a benchmark in scholarly discourse that reflected convergences with management science and policy relevance, but recognises that it was implicated in a broader meta-narrative shaped by neoliberalist approaches and values.

INTRODUCTION

What is it that indicates whether or not a publication has achieved classic status?   Inevitably the answer is partly bibliometric and partly historiographic. Commonsense logic suggests that papers that attract significantly higher citation scores in a particular journal or field of inquiry are of greater importance than their lower-scoring counterparts. Citation analyses also assist an assessment by indicating the breadth or otherwise of a paper's appeal. Yet a paper's importance also partly rests on the evidence about the sense made of its contents, in particular the 'narratives' that it promotes and into which it is incorporated. A narrative involves a story, understood as a structured and usually textual account of a sequence of events that occurred in the past, and a discourse, which refers to the way in which the story is presented (O'Neill 1996; Czarniawska 2004; Herman *et al* 2005). Applied to the present context, we generally assign value to key papers from the past according to the position that they occupy in prevailing narratives of intellectual or professional development. *Inter alia*, a paper might seem a 'breakthrough' or 'turning point' because it captured a specific moment when new directions or radical change occurred. It might have offered a technical or methodological advance that remains relevant to subsequent researchers on a day-to-day basis. It might have supplied foundational knowledge crucial to the establishment of a field of inquiry, most notably by supplying definitions of fundamental concepts. It might have offered a landmark overview, or supplied a definitive critique, or challenged established wisdoms, or simply supplied 'points of reference and pivots around which people construct their own arguments' (Harries 2011, p. 800). Each and every one of these reasons can be enough to secure lasting repute for a work of scholarship.

When assessing the contribution made by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) – a paper which, for convenience, we henceforth refer to as *City Branding* – we focus both on its citation record[1] and narratological significance. The first part of this paper provides context by briefly considering the state-of-the-art as it existed at the turn of the twenty-first

century, in particular surveying pre-existing literature on place promotion, marketing and branding. The second section examines the key ideas found in *City Branding*, in terms both of the critique that its authors offered of existing research and their suggestions about issues that should inform future practice. The third and final part evaluates the subsequent contribution *City Branding* is felt to have made. As such, it is identified as having supplied a benchmark in scholarly discourse that emphasised convergence with debates about management science and policy relevance, but recognises that it was implicated in a broader meta-narrative shaped by neoliberalist approaches and values.

ANTECEDENTS

Although earlier examples can be found (e.g. Gates 1934; McDonald 1938; Kane 1939; Jones 1946), sustained interest in the use of persuasive techniques to change the perceptions and economic prospects of cities or regions only essentially dates from the late-1960s. This timing would prove to be important. Place promotion, marketing or branding is highly sensitive to changes in planning structures, urban governance, political regimes or economic circumstances. In 1970, such activities could often be amateurish and low budget; accepted as part of the armoury of measures used to aid urban and regional development, but often undertaken without clearly-defined aims and liable to be assigned to non-specialists in administrative departments felt to have time on their hands (Gold 1974). By 1990, the dramatic changes experienced by formerly prosperous industrial cities and the advent of neoliberal urbanism – broadly understood as a form of urbanism, subordinated to the dictates of market economics, 'where urban powers attempt to position their cities in higher positions of the hierarchical global urban network in which competitiveness is the key" (Vives Miró 2011, p. 2; cited in Jaffee 2019, p. 120). The agendas derived from this approach would revalorise the need for active promotion and marketing as a high-profile response to post-industrial decline and to the fact that 'cities around the world compete in a crowded global market' (Short and Kim 1996, p. 55).

These, however, were distant horizons for the field of study that had emerged less than two decades previously. Multidisciplinary but endemically disaggregated, it had three initial foci. One stemmed from the work of historical geographers interested in the role that promotional literature and advertising had played in facilitating European colonial and neo-colonial expansion (e.g. Merrens 1969; Cameron 1974; Artibise 1982). The second centred on the history of tourism, highlighting particularly the ways in which health and seaside resorts had been promoted (Cazes 1974; Buck 1977; Stallibrass, 1980). The third engaged with processes of contemporary urban and regional development, examining the use of publicity and marketing in projects to stimulate growth and, not infrequently, to counter negative stereotypes (PEP 1972; Camina 1974; Gold 1974; Burgess 1982).

In most respects these were discreet areas of study, but common ground existed. Regardless of the specific context, for example, researchers in all three areas sought to create distinctive identities for schemes that were actually very similar to their rivals and where competitors quickly copied any convincing innovations. Nevertheless, there was little cross-referencing of sources, scant recognition of shared conceptual or methodological underpinnings, and no agreed name for the overarching field of inquiry. The nineteenth-century term 'boosterism' – defined as the 'exaggerated proclamation of worth of a

particular place over all others' (Knight 1974, p. 10) – was perhaps too closely tied to the experience of the American West to be satisfactory as an umbrella term. Other notions, such as 'selling places' (Burgess 1982; Kearns and Philo 1993; Ward 1998), would only briefly inform the discussion. In the event, the key to defining the characteristics of this area of inquiry revolved, then as now (Boisen *et al* 2018), around coupling 'place' with one of three words: 'promotion', 'marketing' and 'branding'. All emerged as formal concepts during the 1990s, although each had been used informally earlier. Equally, all remain in current parlance although, arguably, 'place marketing' has slipped from favour compared with 'place branding' (Zenker and Braun 2017).

Taken in order, an eponymous text defined 'place promotion' as 'the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target audience' (Gold and Ward 1994, p.2). The loosest and hence most accommodating of the three categories, it attracted work from a wide variety of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds (Gold 1994) and has retained lasting use as an *omnium gatherum* for studies covering the spectrum from quasi-management science to iconography (see below). However, place promotional research is characterised more by deconstructing representations and considering cultural meanings than with addressing the typical agendas of professional practice. Largely as a result, it has tended to become sidelined in discussion about urban policy when compared with either 'place marketing' or 'place branding'.

For its part, 'place marketing' drew on developments in management and marketing theory (Enis 1980; Kotler 1982) to offer a view of place as a saleable product (Ashworth and Goodall 1990; Ashworth and Voogd 1990; Kotler *et al* 1993; Paddison 1993). Coterminous with neoliberal approaches such as urban entrepreneurialism and the associated reflective response from scholars in the field of critical urban studies (e.g. see Harvey 1989; Soja 1989; Barth 1996; Peck and Tickell 2002),[2] place marketing was conceived as a social and managerial process that involved 'analyzing marketing opportunities, researching and selecting target markets, designing marketing strategies, planning marketing programmes, and organizing and implementing the market effort' (Haider 1992, p. 128). Admittedly the 'product' was highly complex and the consumers were extremely diverse, but the direct applicability of the product analogy appealed to hard-pressed city managers coping with the effects of postindustrial urban change (see also the contribution by Alberto Vanolo, this volume). Always an exercise that accentuated the positive, place marketing featured the selective 'reimagining of place, the promotion and communication of place narratives, the employment of strategies that aim to match the promotional claims of imagineering, and the governmental and political processes surrounding its production' (Paddison 2019).

The related field of 'place branding' represented a further step down the same road. Although similar notions had appeared earlier under different names (e.g. Echtner and Ritchie 1991), it was only at the end of the 1990s that place branding fully emerged. The underlying idea came from product advertising, in which it had long been accepted that the brand – the product itself along with its image and reputation – is a prized asset that needed to be identified, valued and managed if a commodity or service was to stand out against its competitors (Anholt 2007). Applying that idea to places is no easy matter, particularly for large cities where the process of distilling a striking message that is acceptable to a sizable

number of stakeholders often requires careful negotiation. Nevertheless, place branding apparently offered the advantages of an approach with immediate policy relevance through identifying and enhancing a city's positive features as a weapon in the highly competitive market for resources and investors. This presentiment quickly bore fruit in the form of a growing corpus of scholarship (e.g. Gnoth 1998; Greenberg 2000; Hankinson 2001, 2004; Bennett & Savani 2003), along with the founding of several specialist journals.[3]

CITY BRANDING

City Branding needs to be seen against this pluralistic and somewhat chaotic background. Described as an 'exploratory paper' (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005, p. 506), it does not present original research, does not provide guidance as to the practicalities of branding techniques, and leaves something to be desired in terms of presenting real-world exemplification. Rather its strength lies in the interrogative mode displayed throughout. The article's subtitle poses a headline indication of this intent by posing a question as to whether city branding effectively asserts identity or is just a passing marketing fad and that is an accurate indication of what is to come. Thereafter questions are continually asked and answered about contemporary developments, replete with helpful didactic lists of key features and critical reflection on their characteristics and implications.   Where possible, Kavaratzis and Ashworth suggest ways or at least agendas by which the gaps might be filled. Overall, the tone is measured. The authors certainly do not seek to pan city branding, but are not afraid to point to lack of knowledge or identify confusions, some of which could be fundamental (as the paper's subtitle again suggests).

City Branding opens with a truncated account of provenance that sorts the morass of overlapping and competing notions, as previously identified, into a simple and compelling narrative of chronological succession with the advent and adoption of city branding as its endpoint. To elaborate, 'city boosterism', itself 'not a new idea in the nineteenth century', was succeeded by 'promotion (largely treated as a synonym for advertising)', and 'since the beginning of the 1990s… [by] a serious attempt to create a distinctive place marketing approach' (*ibid*, pp. 506-507). That particular approach was: 'facilitated by theoretical developments within the marketing discipline' and these had 'paved the way for an understanding of marketing implications for urban planning and management' (*ibid*, p. 507). However, the process of convergence had not yet reached fully satisfactory outcomes. Marketing specialists had not given sufficient thought as to marketing's application to places; 'public sector planners' had been prone to adopting, overusing and discarding fashionable slogans. In looking for improvement, increasing attention had turned to city branding, with the resulting 'transition from city marketing to city branding' drawing both on 'the extensive use and success of product branding' and the newer and rapidly developing practices of corporate branding (*ibid*).

The ensuing discussion focuses on how place branding can be employed as 'an instrument of urban planning and management' (*ibid*), but there are immediate caveats. Places do not immediately acquire new identities through coining memorable slogans and logos. As with any product, place branding exercises needed to go beyond creating distinctiveness to embrace 'the whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs which are associated with the product' (*ibid*, p. 508). However, while it was easy to

assert that place branding was 'the application of product branding to places', it was necessary to recognise that there was no single accepted definition of a product brand or agreement about its exact nature.

With that in mind, the next section seeks to clarify matters and fill in the gaps, offering a view of branding as a process involving two-way communication and then providing an overview of the three principal components of the brand: products, producers and consumers. Attention turned towards application of these ideas to places. The feasibility of place branding, of course, is not in question given that it has been practised under various labels almost as long as cities have competed with one another. What is more problematic is whether similarities between product and place branding are homologous or analogous. For example, the three requirements listed for a branded product – identity, differentiation and personality – are awkward fits when applied to place products without significant shifts in meaning. While similarities are easy to identify, they are difficult to measure or to 'accommodate them in applications of place branding' (*ibid*, p. 511). Conditions of social inclusiveness, for example, may make it difficult for cities in democratic societies to promulgate a single clear identity in the manner that a private corporation might seek to do. Moreover there are various types of place branding, ranging from a simple use of geographical nomenclature (naming a product after a town or region), through ideas of co-branding (where a physical product and the area where it is produced trade beneficially off the same set of perceived advantages), to a much more profound immersion of place branding into the planning process to create identity. Conducted by different agencies operating in different circumstances, these divergences suggest corresponding layers of complexity that bring into question the extent to which a unified concept of place branding could ever be usefully identified.

In keeping with the thrust of most of the paper, the authors eschew detailed discussion of the specific methods by which places 'brand themselves', but make mention of 'three main techniques currently fashionable among urban planners': namely 'personality branding', 'flagship construction' and 'events branding'. Their value is seen not only as serving to 'attract attention and place recognition (thus brand awareness) but also to raise associations between the place and attributes regarded as being beneficial to its economic or social development (thus brand utility)' (*ibid*, p. 513). In passing, it is worth pointing out that these continue to be employed in association with strategies for urban regeneration, where their economic success hangs primarily on convincing outsiders that a certain town or locality is an attractive place to visit, live and work.

In drawing to a close, the reader might have anticipated a conclusion that essentially emphasised the inchoate nature both of city branding *per se* and of the disaggregated bodies of research that had examined that strategy. Certainly, the authors reject arguments based on homologous applications of branding, where places are branded the same as any other product. Instead, place branding is regarded as analogous to product branding; similar in form but sufficiently different in essence for place products to be conceived as a distinct genre, with distinctive attributes that stem from precisely the features of scale, hierarchy, complexity, facilities and texture that serve to make cities identifiable as cities in the first place. Sensitivity to that point lies at the heart of bridging the gaps in understanding and aligning the interests of planners and marketing specialists. If the

distinctiveness of the place product is recognised and incorporated into the city branding process, then the latter becomes 'a valid and effective form of management, if not, it is an irrelevant distraction' (*ibid*, p. 513).

CONVERGENCES

Even a cursory review of recent international literature dealing with contemporary urban and regional development shows that *City Branding* has been and continues to be a standard reference for authors working within a wide swathe of the social sciences and urban studies. To have retained this degree of saliency over time clearly owes little to addressing the day-to-day concerns of city branding in 2005. City branding then was in its infancy as a formal pursuit, far removed from a world transformed by the arrival of social media, league tables, brand indexes, and professional consultancies that specialise in conducting branding exercises up to the level felt necessary for competing for an Olympic Games. Rather, *City Branding*'s achievement in maintaining relevance despite changing organizational and economic circumstances was due to the fact that it both helped to shape a narrative and, in due course, would be integral to a larger metanarrative.

It was the former that established its short-term impact. As noted above, the first part of *City Branding* renders the historical development of place branding as the point of arrival after the unfolding of a sequence of earlier modes: boosterism, place promotion and place marketing. To the authors' credit what followed was no Whig interpretation of history;[4] no presentation of the emergence of city branding as the result of a march towards progress in which the bright and new replaces the deficient approaches of the past. Yet anyone with a specific interest in urban development strategies reading *City Branding* in 2005 would have had their curiosity piqued. *City Branding* offered perspectives, based on a review of recent history, which might help to move things forward through suggesting important convergences with other areas of debate. First, it suggested that considering the lessons of professional practice, often with a basis in management science, could help to give direction to a diffuse field of inquiry. Second, it also held out the prospect of policy relevance, with greater convergence between public policy and academia. Even if the authors' sanguine tones seemed to disavow unqualified endorsement of city branding as the next best thing, these were powerful messages to take forward.

Looking towards the longer-term, it is worth pointing out that not all parts of the analysis were correct. For example, the sense of succession was not born out by experience, particularly given that the other approaches persisted. Place promotion, for example, has continued in its own right to act as a separate, if overlapping forum for research (e.g. Gold and Gold 1995; Wu 2000; Bennett 2013, Vollero *et al* 2018). Yet in terms of lasting impact, prescience about the future mattered rather less than *City Branding*'s role as a benchmark.

First, it continues to be a point of reference that subsequent researchers have been able to identify when explaining the provenance of their own work. In recent times it has been acknowledged as a forerunner, *inter alia*, by studies of emotional geographies (Nogué and Vela 2018; Sousa and Rocha 2019), public policy (Doyle 2018; Rusko 2018), reimaging cities (Neumann 2018), advertising (Botschen *et al* 2017; Martin and Capelli 2017), heritage

(Krakover, 2017; Adamo *et al* 2019) and, in particular, tourism and event management (Richards 2017; Ardyan and Susanti 2018; Warren and Dinnie 2018). While that list of examples is itself far from comprehensive, the enormous range of topics covered by that selection is enough to point to its accessibility and relevance to the prevailing trajectory of city branding research.

Second, there was the question of its position within the broader metanarratives of urban studies and public policy. In both areas, the activity of city branding represents a substantive response to the neoliberal agenda and too often uncritically endorses the values of that agenda. Issues linked to resource use and allocation, social and public responsibility, sustainability and ethics are frequently sidelined in discussions focusing on the efficacy of specific campaigns and analyses of the tools by which place branding is performed. Many of these issues had fully crystallised by 2005 and could have been part of the territory covered by any critical review. Junctures occur in *City Branding* at which some of these points might have been picked up, for example in the brief mention of about the three main techniques used by places to brand themselves (see above), but here as elsewhere the discussion steers off in another direction. Yet in its defence, while *City Branding* does not specifically interrogate the wider issues of social and political context, its authors do maintain a critically reflective and analytic tone throughout towards their subject matter. That tone is perhaps the most neglected part of *City Branding*'s legacy, but it would certainly merit revisiting.

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NOTES

[1] At the time of writing (May 2019), the Scopus database listed 338 references to this paper in peer-reviewed literature, with the more inclusive Google Scholar recording over 1300 from two different versions.

[2] For more recent analyses of the origins, anatomy and scope of the critical urban analytic response to neoliberal urbanism, see Peck (2010), Brenner and Theodore (2012) and Perucich (2019).

[3] These included *Place Branding* (established 2004) and *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2005).

[4] Originally coined by Herbert Butterfield (1933), Whig history came to stand for historical narratives that selectively viewed the past in terms of the march towards ever greater achievement and enlightenment, replete with heroic figures who advanced the cause and villains who sought to hinder its inescapable triumph.