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**Alexandra PĂCESCU
Vlad THIERY**

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Heritage in Place Identity. An Urban-Scale Approach

Alexandra PĂCESCU¹

Vlad THIERY²

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, the fading specificity is producing homogeneous images that make cities more and more difficult to tell apart. The market economy tends to commodify each and every aspect of urban life, even those belonging to the cultural realm. As a consequence, a need for differentiators arises, which can be best embodied by the local heritage.

The present paper is trying to establish a link between the concept of Place Identity, seen from a marketing point of view, and Heritage, as a key factor to build or emphasise a 'point of difference' for 'a unique selling proposition'. Although 'brands' are commonly associated with globalization and its supposed tendency to erase defining characteristics, their marketing principles could prove to be the very solution to regaining the lost specificity, since they help embed local heritage, already an asset, into the 'mix' that determines 'place identity'.

Building and promoting an identity is also the endeavour of branding, hence the overlapping of these two concepts. It is therefore useful to examine the evolution of brands from simple marks of identity to entities which develop complex relations with the users. The need for a 'a unique selling proposition' that brands have already acknowledged should be considered when building the much needed place identity cities need in their fierce competition for attracting activities.

Branding through heritage could prove to be a safe bet to reinforce the particular in the globalised market, if correctly managed and planned. Promoting the city and salvaging one of its key differentiators at the same time is, for sure, a win-win situation.

Keywords: Branding, heritage, commercial, cultural, specificity.

¹ Teaching Assistant PhD Arch., UAUIM, Romania, alexpacescu@yahoo.com.

² Teaching Assistant PhD Arch., UAUIM, Romania, vladthy@yahoo.com.

Introduction

Globalisation is a double sword. On one hand, it enhances communication, mobility and flow of information. On the other hand, it brings about loss of specificity resulting in a global landscape with bland features and with it comes a difficulty in orientation, a loss of place and feeling rooted, both physically and culturally.

Commoditisation is a dangerous path, affecting local communities and regionalism in the best sense of the word, and it has to be avoided at all costs. Cities are in a global competition to secure an upper hand that turns better representation into economical advantage and subsequent well-being. The “points of difference” thus consists of local features that need to be firstly identified, secondly maintained (saved from being lost) and, finally promoted to create the “unique selling proposition”.

As part of an intended larger study, this article discusses one of the aspects of the link between Place Identity and Heritage. Its starting point is the idea that cities can rely on principles mainly used in Marketing, in coming up with a strategy for “city-branding”.

Heritage becomes the main differentiator in positioning the City in the global market, since it embodies local specificity, along with other ingredients (culture, language, traditions, even food) that turns a particular place into an “experience” for both visitors and inhabitants. Taking an urban scale approach of Heritage in discussing its connection with Branding, the study aims to better integrate it into the larger system of the strategy for “communicating” Place Identity of a City.

1. Why Heritage can be an essential element in building Place Identity

As we have argued in a previous article (Păcescu & Thiery, 2015), global economy has brought about a fierce competition between cities or regions to attract and secure activities within their administrative territory. Business, a direct source of income, but also other kinds of activities like education or culture as indirect income providers, generate economic activities being thus the main engine of economic growth. Since in the Post-Fordist era, in the system of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1992), these activities are more mobile than ever, the former rigid criteria used until its beginning for locating economic activities have become obsolete. Nowadays, when relocating the means of production is no longer an issue not to be overcome, when you can get qualified labour force almost everywhere, new criteria in choosing a place for a business or economic activity emerge.

When considering tourism, an economic activity indissolubly linked to the place, things are even more obvious. Choosing a city or a region to spend the leisure time involves a lot of issues since the tourist's demands are increasingly diverse. If first, a postcard-like image can determine a choice, afterwards a good personal experience is essential for a tourist to come back and recommend a particular place to others. But the image and the experience of a city is essential not only for tourists, but also for people involved in business activities, for students when choosing a university and even for people when looking for a place to work and live in.

These new trends in the economic life brought Place Identity in the foreground as countries, regions or cities developed a brand-like behaviour: "the advance of globalization means that every country, city or region must compete with every other for its share of the world's commercial, political, social and cultural transactions. In such an environment, as in any busy marketplace, brand image becomes a critical factor; the necessary shortcut to an informed buying decision." (Anholt, 2010, p. 3)

Building or emphasising Place Identity to act like a brand in a global competition is an action worth taking if we look at the local communities that did it. It is a question of building and, of course, unceasingly supporting awareness and reputation that are making things easier for them, as Simon Anholt observes: "Countries, cities and regions that are lucky or virtuous enough to have acquired a positive reputation find that everything they or their citizens wish to do on the global stage is easier: their brand goes before them, opening doors, creating trust and respect, and raising the expectation of quality, competence and integrity." (Anholt, 2010, p. 3)

In this sense, there are cities "lucky" and "virtuous enough" that the only thing they have to do is to maintain and promote their heritage. Tuscany region is one of these cases, but not the only one. If we look at Florence, Siena or Pisa we see how some well-known pieces of heritage became icons for their towns and a mere image of one of them is instantly recognized and can trigger strong emotions inside almost everybody.

In this marketing approach, towns and regions which don't have enough power to be or to become leaders in their geographic area can find or even "build" some profitable niche and "compete on the basis of their cultural, environmental, imaginative and human qualities rather than on raw power." (Anholt, 2010, p. 35) But as globalisation provides small cities with this opportunity, it also comes with the threat of erasing local features. And for small communities, this is the biggest threat of all. It is only a well-managed local identity that can create the "point of difference" essential for

a town or a region to place itself as a “nicher” and to state its “unique selling proposition” in this global market.

Finding or building a “point of difference” is also considered by important and powerful cities as they want to reinforce their uniqueness in the global competition. Large metropolises are constantly investing in iconic buildings which speak of their power, in a sustained endeavour to be in the top headlines of contemporary architecture. For smaller communities though, joining this competition would be pointless, as they do not have enough financial power to sustain such investments. Even more than that, large iconic buildings are most likely to destroy or make local features fade away.

It is at this point that heritage comes to the scene. As historic cities are products of local communities and were shaped by local traditions, it is most likely that their particular features can easily become a differentiator. Thus, they can both shape a strong brand image and become a key-differentiator for the outside world on the global market and help reinforce the community spirit and social cohesion.

Architecture, as part of this heritage is no exception. This appears more clearly when we look at it as resulting from three elements. Firstly, architecture is the material outcome of the thought and work of a particular community or of an artist employed by the community or its leader to express its will. Secondly, it is a result of local conditions: the weather and its constraints, the local materials, the local building techniques. Thirdly, we have to consider that even when architecture was, at the beginning, a somehow alien element to its context, it finally came to be appropriated by the community as people and the built environment are ceaselessly shaping each other.

It is true that, in the history of architecture we are dealing with international styles, and gothic is the best example for this. But even though gothic architecture was the product of non-local teams of masons from all over Europe and has very little to do with local conditions, gothic cathedrals were built to be icons for their cities and are now important elements in defining a particular image that is easy to tell apart.

As a differentiator, architectural heritage can contribute to building place identity in two ways: firstly, through its iconic buildings powerful enough to take a place in the brand image and secondly, as “scenery” when one experiences the place. Although iconic architecture is usually very present at an urban scale, it is only its features as an architectural object that gives it this role, so this topic will be better addressed when discussing of the object-scale. It seems that a genuine urban scale contribution of heritage can

only be acquired through the historical urban fabric that becomes a stage set for the urban experience.

2. Historic City in the age of globalisation

Globalisation changed the way we view and relate to the city. We are now “citizens of the world”, still we form close attachments to place and we feel the need of belonging, so much of this need being embedded in our way of existing in this ever-transforming environment. Some would argue that the economic changes that globalisation brought about only increased the importance of cities, as “drivers of development” (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012). Competing against each other, they strive to offer advantages to attract means of production, such as ensuring technical infrastructure, transportation facilities, fiscal benefits etc. But along with these advantages, another type of incentives is born. Cultural services and facilities as well as a pleasant environment and good quality of life for the new relocated employees get to be more important in the choice of location for a new business. Sometimes, we are more driven by the location than by the job itself, so large companies will place a great value on location when they choose their new headquarter or production facility if they are to attract the better educated, more competent employees.

As a result, we live in an era when cities become driving forces of development. They tend to polarise economic activities, but at the same time they spread their influence over vast territories around them, practically erasing the difference between urban and rural. “Place marketing” and “place branding” (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012) become crucial in attracting business interests, tourism, people in search of an elevated way of life, more leisurely, or more glamorously, or more culturally.

In this changing context, we need to preserve Heritage and develop the city. The fine line between “conservation” and “development” needs to be surmounted, since we need to find the better way to overlap these two concepts in what Francesco Bandarin calls “managing change”, that is to determine the amount of change acceptable for a historic place in order for it to develop without losing its place identity, its defining traits that make it unique.

Another transformation of recent times is a change in the structure of society. Richard Florida talks about the rise of a new Creative class (Florida, 2011), made up of creative professionals of finance, law, health, along with the more traditional “creatives” stemming from engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music. He makes his case about the

rise of Creativity as a “fundamental economic driver”. In his book, Florida states that “our economy is moving from an older corporate-centred system defined by large companies to a more people-driven one”. That is to say that the thinking individual has come to be placed higher than the corporate “team” of, let’s say, before the year of 2000. Generating ideas goes a long way and becomes so valuable that companies are willing to offer more free time, environments to stimulate creativity (such as the fancy Google offices), “experiences” to get the creative juice flowing. This includes upgrading people’s surroundings, whether home, office or city. Creative people tend to break with conventions, preferring more underrated places, thus making city-centres more attractive than suburbs, disused locations such as former factories or stations more interesting for high-tech industry, IT services or the manufacturing of specific items than the conventional plant outside the urban limit or the skyscraper in the office district of the city. This is because creativity is turned into an “experience” as much as “creating” becomes an exhibit for outside watchers.

Florida further goes to say that “It has often been said that in this age of globalization and modern communication technology, “geography is dead,” “the world is flat,” and place no longer matters. Nothing could be further from the truth. Place has become the central organizing unit of our time, taking on many of the functions that used to be played by firms and other organizations” (Florida, 2011, p. 8). This is where Place Identity becomes relevant.

Up till now we have discussed people that would opt for a place or another to live in or to place their business. Another aspect of change though, one that profoundly affects historic places (city centres or other marginal areas of historic importance) is tourism. This is a crucial matter, since it brings an influx of people that is both beneficial in terms of revenue and potentially destructive, as it overcrowds and sometimes suffocates important locations, as, for instance, the case of Venice and Santorini.

This mix of factors determines important shifts of functions in the Historic City. Once an exponent of civic identity and residence of a poorer social class, it now becomes a main place for leisure and an attractor for the economy of arts, creative industries and tourism. Historic areas become interesting and “mainstream”, the new “cool places” to be. But this success is, in fact, a double sword. It is this new polished look that brings about change in terms of social structure, functionality and appearance.

Globalisation brings mobility, the economy of experience, a mixed group of people – age-wise and interests-wise, and the historic centre is the main attractor for all of these. But they are temporary visitors, nobody wants

to live in the centre anymore, since it is noisy, there is no parking space and prices are extremely high and unaffordable. This is instead a good place to work, if you are a creative in need of exposure and centrality. So your clients will get mixed with tourists and this can be a beneficial fact for business and creativity.

The downside of these factors is that historic areas get to exclude locals, with devastating socio-economic effects. Locals are directly or indirectly removed from their homes by high prices of renting or services in the neighbourhood and often feel excluded from the public space, since all the options for public space have costs attached to them.

The end results of all the fore-mentioned factors are loss of authenticity, a potential Disney-fication of heritage, and a commoditisation of culture (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012), all of these great perils to be dealt with.

So, as a general result, in historic areas nowadays we have an emerging lot in the form of creatives, a large amount of tourists (sometimes too large) and almost no permanent residents. We have diversity, dynamic functions and livelihood on the one side but, on the other side, we risk turning these areas into fabulous displays with no real substance to back it up. Somehow, a balance must be achieved in order to obtain a sustainable development in the long run.

Conclusions

At first glance, globalization seems to be a serious threat to the heritage area, as it tends to erase local specificity and reduce the images of cities to a common denominator. But, as we look more carefully at this phenomenon, we realize that, as a reaction to the commodification of the place image, cities are beginning to search for differentiators as elements that can act as a “unique selling proposition”. In this endeavour, maintaining and promoting architectural heritage is the answer of this quest for local features to build and emphasize place identity.

Heritage architecture can strongly enhance place image both through iconic buildings and as scenery for experiencing the city. To these, proper functions and a mix of users help enforce place identity both to its inhabitants and to its visitors through ensuring continuity in time and place.

“Cultural continuity is a defining element of identity and urban pride, both of which are equally important assets in determining competitiveness and building resilience” (Campbell, 2003).

Resilience can be translated in many ways, but one that would apply to this theory is achieving a mix of people and functions to ensure diversity

and uninterrupted use during all times. Commerce and leisure are an important factor but it is equally crucial to sustain residence, otherwise segregation will soon follow.

The emergence of the fore-mentioned Creatives can become a crucial ground for manoeuvre since they are willing to bend rules and live in less conventional fashions. They would be perfect candidates to choose such a location to work or to live in. Specificity becomes the main ingredient, since places like these provide the key-differentiator to bring “interesting” to the mix, meaning having something that no one else has. As a result, unconventional workspaces or living spaces can be marketed having these people in mind. On the other hand, having only them in mind ultimately creates segregation and this is where local policies must intervene to generate a mix of compatible people, maybes students or other type of people that would not normally afford the location but appreciate a diverse lifestyle and would be comfortable with it. These people should be encouraged, by means of appropriate policies, in order to secure a wider range of ages, incomes and lifestyle, beneficial to all.

On the other hand, commerce and leisure must also be tailored according to place. The value of a historic area is undeniably lessened if you can only find large corporate brand names, whose presence is fine, but not if it constitutes the majority and certainly not if it is the only choice. It is better for local brands to populate these places, be they central or marginal, in order to promote local features but also to ensure a selling market for local creativity, thus encouraging local business and trade. This applies not only to art but also to clothes, foods etc, all of these being part of a local “experience” of the city, one that makes it memorable to both visitor or inhabitant.

The definition given by Prohansky for Place Identity as “sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives” (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983) can be interpreted, in the sense of what has thus been discussed, as the part of self-identity that is shaped by our own way of experiencing a place and incorporating it into our own personal venture that ultimately defines self-identity.

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Biodata

Teaching assistant PhD **Alexandra PĂCESCU**

Alexandra Păcescu is a Romanian architect and Teaching Assistant at “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest, part of the Synthesis of Architectural Design Department. She is the author of the PhD thesis entitled “Public Space in the Historic Centres of Towns in Romania” (advisor: Professor, PhD, Arch. Nicolae Lascu) and of several published articles, mainly concerned with the topic of Heritage and contemporary architecture in historic urban environments. She is currently self-employed at Origami Studio, working on projects ranging from housing to office spaces and interior design.

Teaching assistant PhD **Vlad THIERY**

Vlad Thiery is an architect and teaching assistant at “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest, at the Department of Synthesis of Architectural Design. The topics he has focused on in his research are architecture and brand, narrative architecture and experience in architecture, and were presented in conferences and articles and also in the PhD thesis “Architecture an Brand. The narrative Part of Architecture” guided by Professor PhD Architect Ana Maria Zahariade.