

Information. Communication. Attention!

Exploratory urban research beyond city branding

edited by Sabine Knierbein, Andrea Rieger-Jandl and Ian Banerjee

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Preface

Georg Franck

Branding has become a buzzword in the context of urban planning. It represents a change of focus, foregrounding the packaging and marketing of the services a city has to offer. This represents a shift away from infrastructure and building regulation toward grooming the image of the city. The image determines the city's position in the media. Media that promote images are information markets (much more than just transmission facilities). Since information is not realised until it is absorbed by attention, the media represent markets where the primary competition is for attention. Cities entering the business of branding have begun to compete for attention with one another.

The work collected in this volume deals with the reasons and consequences of this policy change. It is a timely endeavour. Practically, the change dates back to the early 1990s, when regions struggling with the decline of heavy industry began to investigate alternatives to the largely unsuccessful traditional strategies of furthering economic change. The prime examples of successful utilisation of the economy of attention are Lille and Bilbao. The strategy was to replace an image bristling with soot and rust with that of a place of pilgrimage for architectural tourism. Since then, iconic architecture has grown into a common means of image-building. Moreover, it was then at the latest that the various tendencies of post-modern architecture showed a common denominator: the functionalisation of architecture as a medium that offers entertainment in order to attract attention.

Architecture, when looked at as a medium, represents a novel kind of vehicle for attention-seeking strategies. Media serving as information markets have existed for a long time. Traditionally, however, the information offered was sold for money: you bought the newspaper, the book, the theatre or concert ticket. Characteristic of the post-industrial economy are media where information is not sold for money but rather is offered for free: on commercial TV and on the Internet you are showered with information with the sole purpose of getting your attention. The production of the information thus disseminated is financed through the selling of the service of attracting attention to the advertising industry. Although this novel business model may seem strange at first, it has proven extremely successful: think of Google and CNN. The new media put the old media and thus traditional culture under considerable pressure. They have even forced a discipline as ponderous as architecture to assimilate.

Remarkably, city branding did not restrict itself to inter-urban competition, but went on to apply the new media business model to the marketing of intra-urban public space. The advertising industry financing the new media is always looking

for additional media. Inventive policy makers found out that public space in central locations can be turned into a medium like commercial TV or the Internet. It can be leased out to advertisers who harvest the attention of the public populating the places. By thus commercialising public space the municipality gains revenue.

There are many who think that utilising public space as an advertising medium is better than raising taxes. There are others who feel that making money in this way is a perversion of the public interest. There are many, moreover, who think that we have enough iconic architecture and that urban design should focus on problems more urgent than enhancing media presence. Hence, it is high time to subject the issue of city branding to critical reflection. Critical reflection should be preceded by empirical work and thus by case studies. Even though city branding is a global phenomenon, the cases are different. This volume consists of a collection of case studies from throughout the world and a spectrum of critical reflection providing an overview of the analytical work done so far. My hope is that this book earns the attention it deserves in the scientific community and that it proves to be productive by stimulating further work in the field.

Editorial

Information. Communication. Attention!

Exploratory urban research beyond city branding

Sabine Knierbein, Andrea Rieger-Jandl and Ian Banerjee

Two seminal projects in Austria and Germany

This publication project presents exploratory approaches toward an inductive analysis of urban development processes in Bangkok (Thailand), Novi Sad (Serbia), Berlin (Germany) and Córdoba (Argentina). These case studies have been mainly developed in the course of two academic seminars at Vienna University of Technology in 2009/2010 and at Bauhaus University Weimar in 2008/2009.

City branding and civil society – A controversial relationship?

This Vienna UT seminar was held at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning by Andrea Rieger-Jandl (Department for the History of Art, Building Archaeology and Restoration), Sabine Knierbein (Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space) and Ian Banerjee (Centre of Sociology) as a co-teaching course in the winter term of 2009/2010¹. Here, multidisciplinary proceedings were not just required in terms of perspectives on the subject matter among the course participants, but also among the teaching team who shared a deep interest in exploring the crucial relationship between new concepts that affect architectural and planning thought – in particular, city branding – and their implications for wider society.

During the 1990s, there has been a strong debate predicting a general shift from urban planning to urban marketing, as traditional elements of planning seemed to fail (Helbrecht 1994). Today, the debate on city marketing is increasingly supplanted by a debate unfolding around a newly merging phenomenon: city branding. However, it does not seem clear at all why city branding is shaping urban agendas in different metropolises worldwide. More generally speaking, the turn towards city branding might be rather considered a part of a general transition towards the construction of the communicated city by making use of discourses. Recent studies often fail to take a critical perspective on city branding, and oversee to realize inquiry into the material qualities of image production processes, into the construction of the designed city by use of aesthetics. Additionally, current professional

debates on city branding in architecture and planning highlight the new need for branding urban environments, yet encounter difficulties when defining why this need has been generated.

Initial critical voices point to the disadvantages that branding brings as a prevalent communication strategy characterizing the increasing competition for attention in which cities take part. Further critique addresses the issue that city branding strategies and tactics are often implemented as top-down approaches where images are pre-constructed by 'image experts' without taking into account the potential of citizens', visitors', and inhabitants' imaginations to foster a collective, multifaceted construction of a strong and diverse image of the city. Civil society actors are randomly considered to be serious partners within the construction of branding strategies, which again points to the main weaknesses detected regarding the city branding debate: a city is not simply a product as in product branding strategies, where a producer of a washing detergent does not feel the need to ask the washing powder about its opinion, experiences, or wishes.

In a nutshell: Citizens and washing powder are two very different issues. However rough this comparison is, it helps us to come to terms with the simplification and banalization of cities frequently found in debates on branding, namely the argument that product branding strategies can be transferred to cities. Cities are more than just products: they are producers and reproducers and products at the same time, and overall, they give meaning to everyday life routines, and facilitate identity creation processes on the streets. Cities are places where diverse patterns of social life, and sometimes even conflict, unfold on many spatial scales. And finally, cities are complex sociohistoric processes.

During recent years, urban development policy has largely been characterized by a new emphasis on city branding programs that are often seen as a new plan for action in order to position cities by improving their unique selling propositions. However, studies of branding often neglect that it is just one rather predominant facet of a general turn towards a symbolic reinterpretation of cities by means of communication and discursive constructions of (written, visual, acoustic, and other) images. What is outstanding in the respect is that, on the one hand, these initiatives are not realized completely separately from urban and public design policies including design interventions that shape the material image of the city. On the other hand, more and more people are strategically involved in these programs in order to enhance top-down identification processes and to create an atmosphere of acceptance among 'the branded' by means of, for instance, diversity branding.

Debates about branding identity are gaining importance in that the urban context can be seen as a physical expression of collective identity formation. Through the expediency of communication, identities themselves become fluid and undefined, less constrained by either geography or ethnicity. Identities in the contemporary city are syncretistic, crossing traditionally accepted boundaries and participating in global economic processes and political systems.

So if we are talking about city branding, seeking – or expressing – the identity of a place is an increasingly complex endeavor; however, it forms the basis for every ‘successful’ branding process. In this context the relation between the city and the inhabitant is extremely relevant to understand how the identity of a city is strategically positioned through an informed appreciation of communicative rationalities (Lloyd and Peel 2008: 39). Thus, one aim of this book is to search for specific methodologies of how the communicative logic of cities, based on identity and tools of interpretation, can be traced and understood. Collective identities as heterogeneous conglomerates consisting of culture, ethnic affiliation, religion, gender, status, and economic interrelations are constantly re-defined and re-structured by different groups. The dual formation of a strong sense of ‘belonging’ – to a group, a society, a quarter, etc. – on the one hand and the notion of ‘alterity’ – being distinctive – on the other are critical parameters of identity formation, whereas the process of identity formation itself always has to be treated as relational and incomplete (Rieger-Jandl 2009).

Defined cultures as well as collective and individual memories reinforce the particular identities of a city and a multi-dimensional approach, consisting of functional, physical, and psychological aspects, is necessary in order to identify the composition of a city image and thus to trace what is meaningful with regard to the interactions and interdependencies of both internal and external participants and stakeholders (Lloyd and Peel 2008: 43). In order to navigate through the complex realities of a city, individuals create mental maps that constitute how they perceive things. Mental maps can also navigate the perception of a brand through feelings, beliefs, expectations, aspirations etc. (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005: 509).

City branding is not a new phenomenon, however. A thousand years ago, when Vienna, for example, was still an unknown town, the Babenberger princes laid the foundations for a church that had the dimensions of a gigantic cathedral. Cathedrals were only allowed to be built in cities that had a seat of a bishop; the Babenbergers eluded this law and with one stroke put the unknown town on the map of Europe. Thus, the church in Vienna is probably one of the first examples of ‘city branding’ in Europe. The driving force behind the global frenzy for branding cities lies in the

perception of the often-unquestioned dogma of global urban competition. Cities are believed to compete with each other for attention, investment, visitors, shoppers, talent, and the like (Van Gelder and Roberts 2007), and branding is promoted as a strategy to 'survive' in this constantly intensifying contest. Today, it seems the question is not 'to brand or not to brand', but rather 'for whom and for what to brand?'. However, while seeing the necessity of dealing with *city branding as a given practice* in which architects and planners are increasingly becoming involved, the importance of *city branding as an urban development phenomenon* that brings along ambiguities, ambivalence, and manifold criticisms, especially within the social sciences, cannot be neglected (see, for example, Pike 2009).

One of the goals of the seminar was, therefore, to offer a critical reflection for architecture and planning students on an emerging phenomenon that increasingly shapes current professional agendas in practice. Thus, the chosen focus of the seminar was the controversial relationship between city branding and civil society, as cities can perform as collective actors where the interests, purposes, and values of the people living, working, and visiting might conflict with the actions taken by agencies or governmental institutions. The central questions of this seminar were:

- How do cities emphasize their distinctive characteristics? Are there ways – in theory and practice – to build and manage the reputation of cities? Is it possible to transfer such images as export products?
- Which examples can be considered as outstanding cases for new and challenging, integrative approaches to city branding? Can a new understanding of 'City Branding from Below' foster identification processes?
- Is city branding suitable at all to de- and re-codify the experiences and manifold images people associate with cities? Can it help in both the internal as well as external perspective of cities to cope with the challenges of the early 21st century?

Information. Communication. Attention! Exploring the urban realm

'Information. Communication. Attention! Exploring contemporary fields of urban research in Berlin' seminar was taught by Sabine Knierbein at the Institute for European Urban Studies (IfEU) at the Faculty of Architecture at Bauhaus University Weimar (Germany) in the winter term of 2008/2009². In this seminar, two key words often used in current debates on urban development were initially highlighted: information and communication. As information is increasingly shaping daily lives in cities and as postfordist communication technologies offer new channels for the provision of information in urban space, media, advertisement, and city branding agencies as well as a new species of urban curators are trying to grasp the availability, access to,

and individual reception of information, adding a third key concept which has not yet become as popular in urban studies: attention. In this context, different scholars have pointed to the importance of a recently prospering economy of attention (Franck 2008; Davenport and Beck 2001; and others). The first empirical evidence of how contemporary rationales of the attention economy not only affect discourses about urban development, but also urban development in its purest material sense, has pointed to a new competition for attention that metropolises in Europe and beyond are currently undergoing (Knierbein 2010). This competition for attention is closely related to what Piwinger and Zerfaß (2008), and Buß (2008) have called a paradigmatic shift from output-oriented and price competition (Fordism) to a mode of competition that seems to be organized around image and reputation (post-Fordism), or – closer to the context stressed in this publication – towards communication and acceptance.

Countering traditional arguments that urban marketing initiatives and attention seeking strategies such as city branding do not affect the material design of the city, there is a growing evidence in critical urban studies that communication strategies in particular affect and combine both the discursively and the materially designed city, and thus affect professional practice more profoundly than many architects, planners and designers would admit. To be able to grasp this phenomenon more in depth, the central questions of the Bauhaus University Weimar seminar were:

- Who are these actors and institutions engaged in information, communication, and attention-seeking measures in urban development?
- Which new institutional niches do they occupy?
- Which urban places are they particularly interested in?
- And finally: How do these actors engage in current urban development processes?

A dialectical approach to investigate urban development phenomena

It is the aim of this volume to deal with the changing importance of the interrelations between information, communication and attention in urban development processes dialectically. Taking the example of one of the facets of this post-Fordist trend towards the discursive as well as material urban development, that is, city branding, a dialectical approach implies

- to foster inquiry of how the given trend of *city branding as practice* affects professional activities, interventions, and project rationalities of architects, planners, or new agents of urban development, and
- to promote critical reflection on the structural context, individual and collective motivations, and changing rationalities that are revealed if *city branding* is considered *as an ambivalent urban development phenomenon*.

A question that inevitably arises in the context of the first objective is how the ‘success’ of branding is defined and measured. Global rankings are a vivid and simple way of comparing the ‘success’ of cities and nations. The object of comparison can vary widely from business climate (MasterCard Index³) to happiness (Happy Planet Index⁴), from quality of life (Mercer⁵) to crime rate (City Crime Rankings⁶). There are also alternative measuring methods like that of the hugely influential British policy advisor Simon Anholt (City Brand and Nation Brand Index⁷), who states that he is not interested in measuring ‘reality’, like his colleague Mercer and others, but rather in assessing people’s ‘perceptions’ and what they ‘think’ about cities or countries (Albers 2009: 62-63). Anholt, who consults cities in no less than 40 countries (ibid: 65) annually interviews 20,000 people worldwide to gain a picture of the public image of places. In other words, he ranks the attention level of cities and countries floating in global consciousness. The underlying belief is that general opinions about places drive businesses towards or away from them. In fact, Anholt challenges his clients: ‘Places can only change their images by changing the way they behave’, adding that behaviors can take many years to change at best⁸.

Landing at the top of popular ranking lists predictably increases the brand value of a place. Besides substantiating the so often self-congratulatory rhetoric of city governments, it can indeed attract financial capital and other resources. However, referring now to the second, social science context, well-researched phenomena like gentrification, segregation, and growing social polarization (Harvey 2000) in urban societies in well-branded cities drive us to ask uneasy questions. Without downplaying the basic necessity of economic competitiveness to some extent, we have to ask (Pieterse 2008):

- Who benefits? Is anybody being exploited? And: How badly are they exploited?
- Do branding policies per se lead to better lives for greater numbers of citizens, or do they mask the deeper problems of cities?

The challenge that may inspire students or professionals to think differently about branding is whether only the prevailing business-led branding approach exists, or whether there are other forms of branding that can involve civil society in more inclusive ways. Can we see branding through the eyes of Sharon Zukin as a ‘public culture’ (Zukin 1995), that is, by putting all possible interests and priorities of a whole range of citizens on the agenda where they can be discussed and debated (Hollands 2008: 315)?

Diversity of perspectives to grasp the complex nature of newly merging topics

This book follows this dialectical direction of inquiry by empirically exploring several of the manifold possible interrelations between information, communication,

and attention in processes of strategic urban communication (e.g. branding). Eight authors have made very different inquiries into new or changed urban development phenomena that occur in this context. Besides the increasing verve for an understanding of practices, some of the contributors to this edition point to the fact that critical approaches towards the urban competition for attention and related subphenomena are becoming more relevant and gain increasing popularity in urban studies.

Consequently, they offer a way for professionals involved in the implementation of urban development strategies to influence space production processes. Experts who deal with information, communication, and attention in urban space, ranging from cultural entrepreneurs to media agencies, from providers of communication technology to curators dealing with public exhibitions, have been interviewed, while their agencies and their outcomes were subject to the application of further social research methods such as mapping, observations, and qualitative content analysis of reports, press articles, and web sites.

To address these objectives, the authors, who come from Thailand, Serbia, Turkey, Brazil, Croatia, Argentina, and Germany, have carried out empirical work in different cities worldwide, especially in Berlin. The interpretative conceptual frameworks that have been applied to grasp the new dimensions of the interrelations between information, communication, and attention range from academic discourses on city branding, product branding, and marketing, to space production theories regarding the rescaling of statehood, the redirection of territorialization processes, and a substantial reorganization of capital accumulation strategies in urban territories. Toward this end, some of the authors have been influenced by recent scholarly work concerning the concept of the attention economy in media and communication studies.

Exploratory urban research beyond city branding

As this book promotes exploratory approaches that seek to understand how different cities in different countries cope with the emerging competition for attention by – in the first part – offering empirical evidence for one of the current trends of strategic communication, that is, city branding, in Serbia and in Thailand (Chapters 1 and 2). The second part allows for an open empirical inquiry into new sets of actors, institutions, and spatial dimensions that characterize one particular city facing an increasing competition for attention: Berlin (Chapters 3 to 6). Some of these case studies deal with city branding whereas two of them try to grasp the characteristic feature of other subphenomena related to the competition for attention. In the third part of the book the results of case studies on Córdoba (Argentina) and Berlin (Germany)

regarding changing modes of space production in cities in transition have been confronted (Chapter 7). This chapter connects and further develops two critical urbanistic inquiries into different phenomena that seemed to be spatially unrelated on the morphological surface of two very different cities, yet reveal themselves as socially, and thus spatially, interrelated phenomena which point to the changing relationship of information, communication and attention in the post-Fordist city.

Structure of this book

Duangnapa Sinlapasai deals with the need of the city of Bangkok to break with multiple images reflected in the various names for the city used by foreigners and inhabitants in **chapter 1**. She concentrates on both the functional and non-functional qualities of the contemporary city of Bangkok such as history, city appearance, cultural attractions, and contrasts these by pointing to experiences and perceptions of Thai society, particularly of the inhabitants of Bangkok. City branding is seen as a proactive process in which the city's image is managed by influencing the context within which messages are received. From the author's perspective Bangkok is still characterized by an antiquated image that does not reflect the vivid diversity of its contemporary conditions. Hence, innovative and creative measures need to be implemented to reinterpret branding as a practice that takes local context and cultural diversity into account.

In **chapter 2**, **Monika Nemet** analyzes Novi-Sad, the capital city of Vojvodina/Serbia, and focuses on the branding of post-war cities in the process of transition. A vital part of the paper tries to translate the city branding methodology used in ranking practice into a research scheme. Specific research attention is given to a music festival known since around a decade as 'Exit'. Starting as a grassroots student protest in its purest political sense, Exit has grown into a well-established Eastern festival, a 'brand' that has been wooed by other cities wanting to 'buy' the festival and shift it to another location. Although this very concrete competition for attention finally did not result in a shift in location, and it was decided that the festival would stay in Novi Sad forever, the author reveals how temporary branding strategies in the form of music festivals contribute to processes of gentrification of inner city areas and trigger territorial fragmentation and social exclusion within the process of transition.

In **chapter 3**, **Carolina Teixeira** points to a complex post-Fordist network of state, economic, and civil society actors that has been set up in the course of a media event, namely, the Berlin Media Façades Festival in 2008. This ephemeral set of actors is choreographed by a new type of intermediating protagonists ready to switch their approach to use the vocabulary of the economy, artists, and state actors, if necessary.

The author offers a strong empirical and critical analysis of such events mediating and curating a new interface where cultural, economic, and political interests merge and critical interpretation gets more difficult.

İdil Çaliskan discusses the role of curators in contemporary urban discursive development processes by analyzing the communication strategies of museums (e.g., the Jewish Museum in Berlin). In **chapter 4**, she points to the growing importance of edutainment to attract not only urban elites to such museums as containers of high-culture art objects, but also to attract other kinds of publics, especially families, to museums as interactive places of science *mise en scène* like fairytales. Her analysis leads her to consider the popularization of museum culture in Berlin and its crucial interrelations with the economy of attention.

In **chapter 5** and **chapter 6**, **Tihomir Viderman** and **Svenja Jäger** both take a critical stance toward current discourses on city branding in urban studies by dealing with the palpable example of the city branding process in Berlin. Particularly, both authors focus on the Be Berlin Campaign launched in 2008 by considering both the pitfalls and opportunities inherent in city branding processes and suggesting that using particular theoretical accounts to analyze these processes leads to a more up-to-date understanding of this young phenomenon. Agents of strategic development, such as Berlin Partners, as well as urban researchers and social scientists, are put back on the agenda for critical self-reflection. Apart from the similarities in their area of inquiry, the authors offer quite different reflections on the question of whether product-branding strategies can be applied to realize strategic communication campaigns for cities.

In **chapter 7**, **Sabine Knierbein** and **Claudia Tomadoni** explore interpretative interfaces in order to confront the results of two larger empirical case studies in Córdoba (Argentina) and Berlin (Germany). 'From buying cars to buying attention' is a reflection on the simultaneity of the decay of traditional Fordist and the rise of post-Fordist strategies of territorial capital accumulation in contemporary cities in transition. Central mechanisms behind the emergence of new interrelations of information, communication, and attention in the post-Fordist city are strikingly similar to those that were seen in the rise of its Fordist successor. This contribution investigates how a changing balance between production and consumption contributes to the creation of economic activities in the course of the contemporary competition for attention in local urban territories.

By choosing authors who contribute in an open-minded, conceptual manner to illuminating a new set of interrelated subjects for critical urban research as well

as for practitioners, tribute is paid to the fact that there is still much work to be done thinking through these issues in theory as well as improving them in practice. Therefore, this volume is intended to initially claim the need for further multidisciplinary research. It emphasizes both a theoretical as well as empirical need and points to further blind spots to understand the changing relation between information, communication and attention beyond city branding in contemporary cities in transition. How current debates on city branding and beyond are integrated into the production of communicated and designed urban environments in transition.

Endnotes

1. The Seminar at Vienna University of Technology has been offered by Ian Banerjee, Sabine Knierbein and Andrea Rieger-Jandl. URL: http://skuor.tuwien.ac.at/?page_id=1852 [accessed July 8, 2010].
2. The Seminar at Bauhaus University Weimar has been offered by Sabine Knierbein. URL: <http://www.uni-weimar.de/architektur/raum/lehre/WS0809/aushangknierbein.htm> [accessed October 11, 2009].
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