A Few Notes on Place Branding and Social Aesthetics

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Abstract

Places may also be *brands*, but the brand concept implies something paradoxical. It allows us a simple and direct reference to a given reality, or fiction, we may want to commonly circumscribe; yet, frequently we may not be fully aware of what, if anything, is being specifically circumscribed. The brand subsumes both polysemy and intricate communication strategies tailored to mobilize particular affective or cognitive meanings. As in everything else then, applying the brand concept to places or cities, a growing option nowadays, raises additional questions that extend to the ethic and aesthetic fields. We thus briefly introduce some disciplinary perspectives on 'brand', consider its possible extension to geographical places, namely as "smart cities", and present a few words of caution on issues we then believe as problematic: social interaction as a fight of promises, and the danger of a stereotyped behaviour paired with a biased decoding of complexity. Finally, we argue on the relevance of aesthetics (/taste) in articulating the "smart city" concept.

Keywords: Brand, Place branding, Ethics, Aesthetics, Smart cities

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Introduction

Brand has turned into a basic category of most 'prosumption' cultures, as well as a prototypical core of common understandings, discourses and/or articulation of values. Bread or rice, cleaning devices, small appliances or basic healthcare products, geographical places and cities etc., all become the subject of intensive rhetoric, intellectual property and ubiquitous communication, blurring the 'common vs. special' use and appraisal of things.

Accordingly and as what happens with many other terms (e.g. design, game, art), brand involves a well-known polysemy, deriving both from current speech and from disciplinary perspectives about it. In fact, from the law to economics, and from marketing to social-cultural studies or semiotics (e.g. Bently, Davis and Ginsburg, 2008; Lury, 2009; Manning, 2010; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006), if we look for a definition of brand we will probably be led to conclude, with Kornberger (2010, p5), that we can only find "(…) the corollary of a particular way of conceptualising, practicing and institutionalising a theory that has not been articulated yet". Each perspective then apparently corresponds to one or more 'focal points' (and associated values) related with different components of our human relation with signs and things, both at an elementary level and under different institutionalization conditions.

As a result, the brand evolved to a kind of "metaphysical entity" we, however, daily personify under different name(s), visible face(s) (logotypes), clothes (style), language (advertising), capacity (functions, relations), legal rights, consciousness (ideals, values, strategies, goals, etc.), with "whom" we make friendship (experience) or else relate with as if we are living an human relationship, and in the name of "whom" some of us act or even dream with.

Place branding is no exception, whatever dimensions it relies upon (e.g., natural resources, economic power, culture, technology, etc.), it simply amplifies the concept to a higher, more complex level. For instance, we may certainly devise plenty of benefits in some of its particular focus, as what happens in the appreciation of art and craftwork, cultural heritage or social attitude in the so called "intelligent cities" (Bell, Jung and Zacharilla, 2013). Yet, such benefits must be also paired with legitimate

concerns regarding an expanding competition based on fuzzy social promises, the use of stereotypes like hypothetical place "essences" as substitutes for complex social systems, and the always problematic everyday reliance on a ever expanding use of technology.

Brand polysemy

The distinction from *trademark* and *brand* can hardly be considered clear. Except for the specific, limited and not yet solid 1994 Trademark Act (UK Intellectual Property Office, 2012), over a century was not enough to produce a stable, descriptive or normative consensus on the brand nature. "The brand is a vessel of meaning and myth making, successful only if it resonates with consumers' collective identity projects of the time." (Heding et al., 2009, quoted in Desai, 2012, p1006). Hence it has turned into a kind of "moving target" continually pursued by theories, but immediately overridden by facts.

For instance, beyond all legal procedures regarding the use and registration of names and symbols as trademark, as well as some failures in considering all of the stakeholders involved too (Desai, 2012), the law even so recognizes the brand as a complex semiotic system (Beebe, 2004), full of ramifications (e.g. Lee, Christensen and DeRosia, 2008; Tushnet, 2008) and made up of rights and duties that are so dependent on market actions as on legal, institutional practices (Davis, 2008). Thus without names or logotypes as trademark, but also without contracts, licensing, infringement or dilution law conditions, there would be no brands.

In economics tradition is to take trademarks as a proxy to the correspondent brands, both in the positive sense of considering that it may increase information, lower transaction costs, symbolise wider domains, increase the likelihood of buying, assure quality, etc. and in the opposite one of leading to market distortions, reducing social welfare, creating entry barriers, wasting resources (e.g. advertising) etc. (Dogan and Lemley, 2008; Economides, 1988; Landes and Posner, 1987). Even so, accounting tradition usually keeps the brand apart from most balance sheets whilst frequently considering the trademark in it (European Commission, 2003). Hence, the trademark ends up positioning itself as "both a symptom of imperfect competition and a means

for sustaining it" (Aldred, 2008, p273), while the brand conversely expands in order to cover the whole functioning of a given system, whatever it may possibly be.

On its turn marketing has produced several perspectives on brand, either variously attempting to break down its components or, instead, trying to model an adequate articulation of it (e.g. Holt, 2002; Jones, 2005). Amongst a plethora of choices identity, image, personality and experience are some of the "building blocks" that have been used on brands and given endless formulations, till now without a wide, stable and consensual joint articulation (e.g. Avis, Aitken and Ferguson, 2012; Blumenthal, 2004; Stern, 2006).

Furthermore, brand theory has been gradually influenced in time by the set of pros and cons arguments arising from diverse disciplines (Marion, 2006; Slater, 2011), while "market segments" also frequently evolved to abstract, data mining clusters with scarce or no sociological substance at all (Pridmore and Lyon, 2011). In fact, the brand has morphed into a kind of marketing synonymous and so its theoretical structure, or the set of its relationships, became progressively larger with time: from a single link with a given commercial source to the joint result of all advertising effects, or from a momentary fashion to a more perennial style or myth.

Finally, other perspectives further extend these limits, as in the "brand-as-sign" of most semiotic approaches (e.g. Askegaard, 2006; Lencastre e Côrte-Real, 2010), the brand as world-views, values and inherent characteristics of design (e.g. Karjalainen and Snelders, 2010; Person and Snelders, 2010), or the even wider cultural and sociological perspectives that permanently question its ever changing boundaries (e.g. Arvidson, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2009; Holt, 2004).

As a consequence we can easily see that a "place brand", if possible at all, can only raise additional ambiguities, because it will further imply several other difficulties: semantic (the term is necessary or redundant?), terminological (is it a place, a region, a city, a destination…?), functional (it applies to tourism, exports, country image management…?), or even of plausibility (can we condense a place into a name?), etc. (Hansen, 2010; Anholt, 2010).

A world of promises

For every place that claims a "smart city" statute, a public promise is made. Yet and contrary to corporate promises, places "(…) aren't for sale, aren't easily mistaken one for another, aren't fast-moving consumer goods, and certainly don't come in wrappers" (Anholt, 2010, p9). Therefore a particular "smart city", as a core idea for a brand, must involve a specific way of belonging to the general class of those cities that rightly orchestrate, amplify and integrate the intelligence, creativity and innovation of its individuals with their private and public institutional strategies, workflows, and goals, under frameworks of massive reliance on information and widely use of digital systems and processes (Komninos, 2011).

This, however, is quite a promise indeed, not only because it must be simultaneously functional, symbolic and experiential, but also because it will be necessarily fuzzy in the sense that what may (supposedly) be stated will hardly have a clear correspondence with all those state of affairs at a given time. Both the claimed title (a "smart city" as a brand idea), and the state of affairs involved (the actual place development) are too much vague to be taken literally (Anker, Kappel, Eadie and Sandøe, 2012). Interestingly too, we also detect some overlapping ideals between the literature on place branding (e.g., Anholt, 2010; Hansen, 2010; Rainisto, 2003) and the one on "smart cities" (e.g., Deakin and Al Waer, 2011; Komninos, 2011; Shapiro, 2005; Chourabi et. al., 2012), concerning the high level of social coordination that is needed in order to guarantee what is considered success: on leadership and political coherence, on effective strategic planning, on place Identity and Image, on effective partnerships and processes, etc.

Thus a brand carrying a "smart city" ideal has to represent, instead, a public call for a social interaction that, if adopted, will bring about those states of affairs in the future (Anker, Kappel, Eadie and Sandøe, 2012) i.e.: integration and coordination of disparate geographical interests (physical, social, economic, etc.); decentralized communication; global coherence; efficacy under a lack of central control, etc. Otherwise it will probably be seen as a way of making a given place famous only, and may easily fall into a convenient "buzzword" for less judicious marketing actions too.

Complexity

Broadly, corporate goals under brands are usually conceived as attempts to articulate their strategic vision (main ideas and aspirations), organizational culture (beliefs, values assumptions, manifestations), and existent or desired image (stakeholders' perceptions) (Hatch and Schultz, 2009). Yet, brands also reflect a socially institutionalized practice of building "a dynamic information device subject to interpretation and reworking by all connected to it." (Desai, 2012, p1044), thus embodying a fundamental dimension of social co-creation (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Jones, 2005).

Eventually then, from a set of contributions a given brand emerges, which is a characteristic that is similar to many others in complex systems, namely the social ones: all we can do is to detect a pattern emerging from the disparate interconnections of its elements, which react among themselves and to its surrounding environment and have no central control (e.g., Page, 2011). Hence people, signs and things interact among themselves, cohere in a given pattern and reveal itself as a brand, even if different stakeholders, through different narratives, may claim its "property" or authorship (Hansen, 2010); and this, of course, becomes particularly important the moment we advocate a heavy integration of social procedures and goals like those we usually consider in "smart cities" idealizations. In a sense then, the brand becomes a space of articulations and tensions emerging from within a given population, or geography, translating one (or more) ethical choice(s) that are adopted by its "members" through a particular lifestyle. (Kornberger, 2014).

As expected then, "smart cities" do not seem to be an exception in this regard, both in its intrinsic and "definitional" content and in its publicly resulting image. They are a supposedly higher state of integration between individuals, organizations and technology, circumscribed under a particular geographical space, but they are also the status achieved by such a geographical unit in what concerns a reputation for a shared acceptance and respect, as well as a coexistence of different aspirations, strategies, or particular goals without significant social conflicts. Hence a much broader lifestyle too and something we could here name as: 'an ethics for the city'.

Stated differently, while "smart cities" still suffer from an unstable definition (**Table 1**), we can nevertheless conceive as 'initiative(s)' that should, and most probably do unfold under integrative frameworks (**Figure 1**) (Chourabi, et. al., 2012). Simultaneously while "smart city", as a brand (i.e., meaning) also suffers from an equivalent unstable definition, we may accordingly admit that it too emerges from the contribution of several stakeholders (**Figure 2**). Furthermore both idealizations curiously advocate what may be seen as a contemporary and somehow optimistic version of the Marxist notion of a 'General Intellect' (Arvidson, 2014; Smith, 2013; see also Marx, 2014), emerging here as the global result of (public and private) knowledge workers and entrepreneurs' leadership.

Still most importantly, we may not ignore that smart cities apparently can hardly sustain themselves without a "not so smart areas" in its surroundings, the same way that difficult issues frequently result of its unfolding: from the "digital divide" to conduct behaviour manipulation (e.g., call-centres, financial services, restaurants), or from the human submission to expert information-technology systems, fashions, or styles, to the lack of intimacy resulting from satisfaction measures and quality inquires (Skålén and Fougère, 2008; Smith, 2013). Of these, the digital-divide and the stereotyped behaviour associated with ICT procedures show itself as particularly worrying, as it clearly offend individuals' idiosyncratic rights of being fully respected in his daily life. Perhaps we should be cautious then, in what concern our "bet" in technology and information systems, regardless of the enormous advantages it may also certainly bring to us all.

Table 1 - Working Definitions of a Smart City *

A city well performing in a forward-looking way in economy, people, governance, mobility, environment, and living, built on the smart combination of endowments and activities of self-decisive, independent and aware citizens [Giffinger et. al., 2007].
A city that monitors and integrates conditions of all of its critical infrastructures, including roads, bridges, tunnels, rails, subways, airports, seaports, communications, water, power, even major buildings, can better optimize its resources, plan its preventive maintenance activities, and monitor security aspects while maximizing services to its citizens [Hall, 2000].

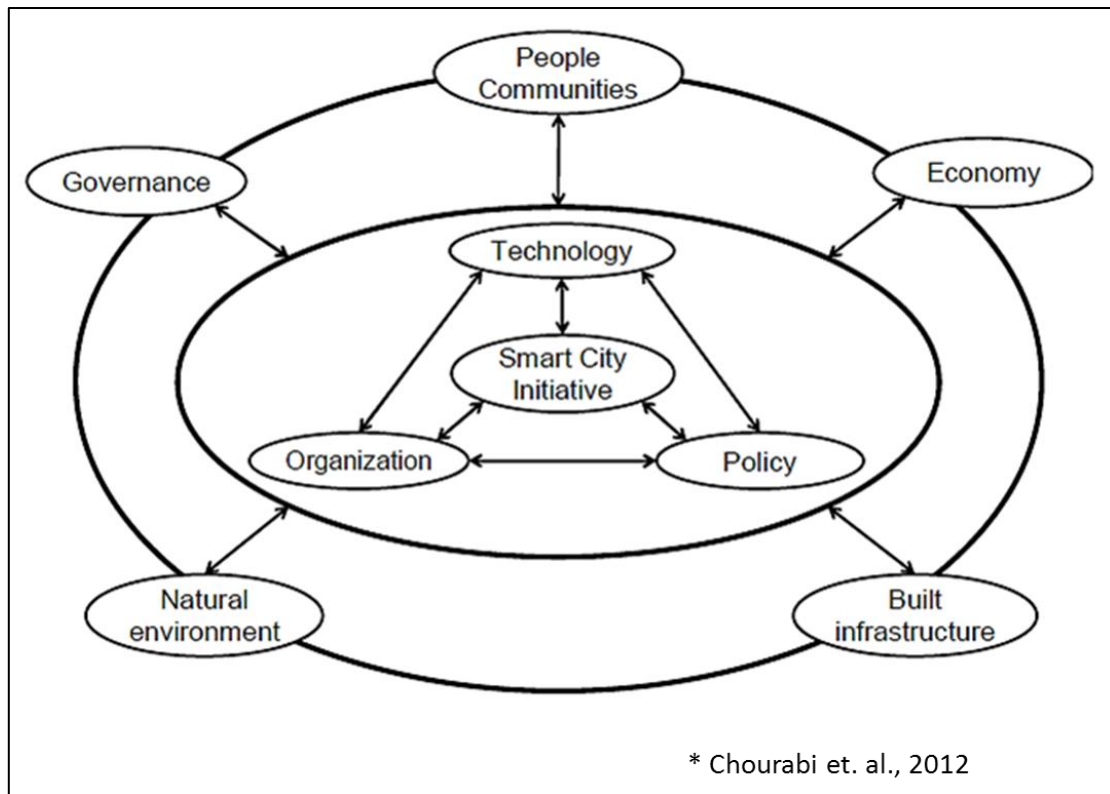| |
|---|
| A city *"connecting the physical infrastructure, the IT infrastructure, the social infrastructure, and the business infrastructure to leverage the collective intelligence of the city"* [Harrison et. al., 2010]. |
| A city striving to make itself *"smarter"* (more efficient, sustainable, equitable, and liveable) [Natural Resources Defense Council, USA]. |
| A city *"combining ICT and Web 2.0 technology with other organizational, design and planning efforts to dematerialize and speed up bureaucratic processes and help to identify new, innovative solutions to city management complexity, in order to improve sustainability and livability."* [Toppeta, 2010] |
| *"The use of Smart Computing technologies to make the critical infrastructure components and services of a city—which include city administration, education, healthcare, public safety, real estate, transportation, and utilities—more intelligent, interconnected, and efficient"* [Washburn et. al., 2010] |
| *** adapted from Chourabi et. al., 2012** |

Figure 1 - Smart Cities Initiatives Framework *****

* Chourabi et. al., 2012

Figure 2 – A Stakeholders Brand Model *

Figure 2 – A Stakeholders Brand Model *

* Jones, 2005
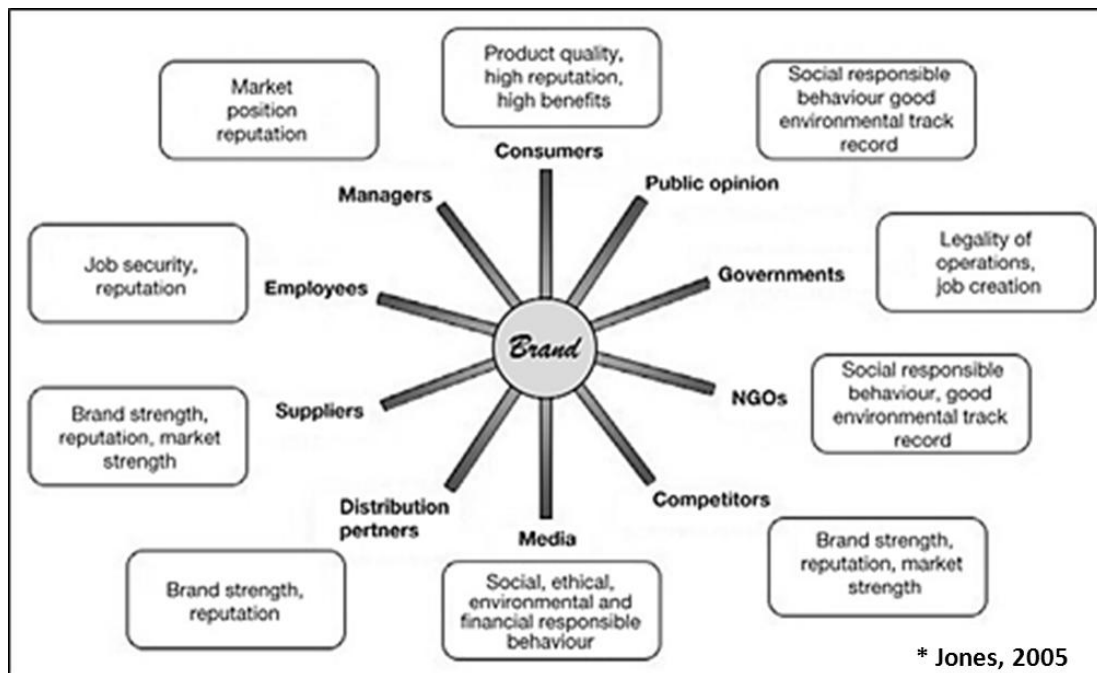
Towards social aesthetics

Brands have also become privileged flags for disparate corporate ethics: consumer-centred, environmental-friendly, stylish-tailored, functionally-oriented ones, etc. (Egan-Wyer, Muhr, Pfeiffer and Svensson, 2014; see also Bertilsson, 2014). Thus if we examine it according to such a function we will pursue an understanding of what they do. Naturally, such reasoning also applies to "smart cities", assuming we take it as a desired state of affairs here "united" under a particular concept too i.e., as "a strategic device to encompass modern human production factors in a common framework" (Caragliu, Del Bo and Nijkamp, 2009). Yet, if we examine it (brands or "smart cities") according to its intrinsic mechanism, which is our concern here, we will pursue an understanding of what they are, or may be.

Therefore, considering the present blurring of art vs. commerce frontiers (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006, 2008; Pelzer, 2006; Hatch, 2012; see also Naukkarinen and Saito, 2012), and expanding here Ritter (2008) discussion on artworks' aesthetic-ethic relationships, we consider that relationships between beliefs, attitudes, and the objects of those attitudes, whatever they are, are similar to the

relationships between aesthetic criteria, aesthetic judgements, and the objects of those aesthetic judgements. Attitudes and aesthetic judgements may then be considered as instrumental, and conceptual entities (including the "smart city" one) toward which we develop the correspondent positive evaluations become then reinforced by it. Furthermore this process unfolds regardless of whether or not media subterfuges, further designed to promote those evaluations, rely or not upon aesthetic criteria in order to ensure the goal of the same subterfuges.

Now, both the overproduction and overconsumption of goods and services, in several contemporary societies, has raised a fundamental tendency: the promotion of the accessory in products and services, or the celebration of its intrinsic banalities, though seldom fully achieved results indeed in a process that is hardly separable from aesthetic and taste practices. As Shapiro and Heinich (2012, p3) put it: an "(…) all-encompassing process of change, both practical and symbolic, of which legitimation is merely a part and a consequence (…)". In fact, brand and aesthetics-taste seem to considerably 'overlap', as practice is a matter of taste (Azevedo, 2012; Gherardi, 2009).

Translated to the "smart cities" domain, we have to ask first how much of this concept has to rely on facts, as opposed to falling into a buzzword about a geographical "atmosphere" only (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012). Both can be the object of an aesthetic evaluation, of course, but to be ethically defensible we have to fix the terms and define what we are taking as "smart" enough so that we may "label" as such a given geographical space.

However, that may turn into a difficult goal. For now it seems that the term "smart city" still has a weak statistical support in urban dimensions such as economy, mobility, environment or government (e.g. Caragliu, Del Bo and Nijkamp, 2009; Hollands, 2008), and fundamentally relates to a desired, though certainly attractive state of higher integration of city domains: between the so called "creative class" (Florida, 2009), Information and Communications Technology (ICT), social and environmental sustainability, etc. Even so, it still mostly reflects an aspired equilibrium of urban factors towards a general well-being, which necessarily translates an ethics for a given

state of affairs in the city future by means of an aesthetic judgment of its imagined nature.

Stated differently, a bold step into an artification agenda for the urban space (Saito, 2007, 2012) and of a mutually constitutive social and aesthetic city domains i.e., of a social aesthetics (Blouw, 2010), because "This social sense of aesthetics is concerned with an epistemology—an understanding of space or place and social structure—and communication, as closely related to the concept of 'affect' […] an examination of the manner in which humans present themselves in space in order to constitute effective and affective social behaviour" (Coleman, Hartney and Alderton, 2013, 4-10).

In addition, the growing impact of a visual culture, the aesthetic evaluation of the urban landscape and environment, as well as tastes that reflect individual choices and lifestyles, do exert a powerful influence over the general judgement and common-sense understanding of the city, clearly signalling the habitual consideration, if not prevalence of this mode of reasoning when addressing the place branding or "smart city" domains.

Concluding comments

To sum up, we devise a clear similarity between the brand concept for a place and the "smart city" concept for urban development. Yet, both suffer from a lack of precision content, or resort to so wide strategies and categories' considerations that it frequently stay as fuzzy promises or intentions only i.e., free-floating signifiers representing attempts to safeguard a given discursive supremacy somehow irrespectively of the underlying facts (Dholakia and Zwick, 2005).

Even so, both concepts show the relevance of imagination, and aesthetic considerations, in its implicit ethics. Hence it may have a strong heuristic power as central devices toward a better urban development, provided it may also more clearly circumscribe in what sense we should consider its terms.

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