Green Cities, Competitive Cities – Promoting the Role of Green Space in City Branding

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Abstract

In a globalised world, cities are competing fiercely for money and attention, for talent, innovation and creativity. Both within and across national boundaries, cities need to market their (potential) strengths and distinct qualities. Marketing, or ‘branding’, of a green identity has become popular in this respect. But when is a city ‘green’? This question is especially relevant when everybody wants to be green, for example concerning climate, energy efficiency, and sustainable development – and green becomes a rather ‘empty’ term. This presentation focuses on ‘green city branding’ specifically through a city’s parks and other green spaces, areas which contribute to a healthy and attractive urban environment. More than just nice words are needed when cities want to strengthen their green profile and brand. It is important, for example, to link green space to some of the major political topics of our time, to think strategically, to develop both internal and external partnerships, to think innovatively, and to focus on quality and benchmarking.

Marketing and branding

Marketing has helped companies and organisations to keep up to speed with changes in society. At organisational level, marketing integrates various functions of a company or organisation, connecting the company to its consumers and stakeholders. But marketing also plays an important role at societal level, where it helps build a bridge between production and consumption systems. Marketing has transformed over the years to focus more on customer orientation, quality, and at incorporating the perspectives of different stakeholders (Juslin, 2004). One of the most powerful concepts within marketing is ‘branding’. A brand is the proprietary visual, emotional, rational and cultural image that one associates with a certain company, product or service (Paliwod ans Thomas, 1998). Branding’s power is illustrated by the worldwide success of brands such as Coca Cola, Nike, Barcelona and Leonardo Messi. Branding is done by combining a name, logo and other brand characteristics. Good branding will lead to good (first) impressions and evokes positive associations. People want to be associated with certain brands that connect to their personalities and preferences (e.g. Leventhal, 1996; Kohli et al., 2005). Apple and its loyal customer base are a good example of this.

Branding comes in many forms. Apart from traditional product branding, there is also a form of branding focusing on the level of service to customers (not surprisingly called service branding). Banks and insurance companies, for example, want that people associate their services with good quality and value, customer care, easy access, and so
forth (Grace and O’Cass, 2005). Companies have also started applying *internal branding* to create a certain ‘company culture’. Employees should feel that they are part of and represent this culture, thus strengthening the internal organisation. Companies such as McDonald’s and Nike, for example, train their staff and make them familiar with the company identity in special ‘academies’, integrating employees into the internal brand. Rather than becoming part of a wider company brand, however, individuals can also strive for branding of themselves, called *personal branding*. This is all about selling yourself, and your distinctive qualities, on for example the labour market. Personal branding can take rather extreme forms, as in the case of famous sport and movie stars that become a ‘one person company’ with a huge ‘customer base’. CEOs of some companies are strong personal brands as well. Virgin’s Richard Branson, for example, is such a strong personal brand that the entire Virgin conglomerate has become associated with his adventurous and rebellious character.

Recently the branding types of *sense branding* and *emotional branding* have been given increasing attention. The former, as type of branding which appeals to all senses, and not only to seeing or hearing, has evoked considerable debate. Marketers have used manipulative techniques to appeal to people senses. The Danish sense branding guru Martin Lindstrøm mentioned, for example, that 92% of all ‘new car smells’ is actually added artificially (Hvilsom, 2005). Emotional branding aims to appeal to people’s emotions, striving to develop tight bonds between brand and customer. By creating a base of loyal customers, cost of ‘maintenance marketing’ is reduced. Emotional branding lies also at the basis of the ‘Lovemark’ concept developed by Kevin Roberts (2004). Lovemarks are defined as products and experiences that create long-term emotional relationships with customers. ‘Mystery’, ‘sensuality’ and ‘intimacy’ are fundamental Lovemark elements, with mystery for example enhancing the brand experience by drawing on the past, present, and future, the value of myths and icons, the power of inspiration, and by tapping into dreams.

A type of branding of particular interest to this article is *place branding*, sometimes also referred to as destination branding. This is about selling a bundle of goods and services, or even just the image itself, associated with a certain country, city, region or landscape (e.g. Liping, 2002). Some regions have become very successful in this. Tuscany in Italy, for example, is generally associated with visions of rolling hills bathing in sunshine and the taste of good wine. Other regions, such as formal industrial cities, have had difficulties in getting rid of their negative brand image. Countries such as Malaysia have invested heavily in their ‘national brands’, as for example reflected in the tourist campaign ‘Malaysia, Truly Asia’, which builds on the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity which reflects large parts of Southeast Asia.

It is important to realise that branding and the dominance of brands in everyday life have also been criticised, for example by Naomi Klein in her landmark book ‘No Logo’ (2001). Klein argues that companies have gradually moved from primarily producing things to producing images. Brands have come to dominate our spaces, choices and job; they have become the true universal language. But behind them, states Klein, are injustice, abuse, environmental degradation, and the like. Jones (2001) mentions that many people have started feeling disillusioned with brands, as there are too many brands around, and they’re promising much more than their companies can deliver. Jones argues that it is time to focus on ‘Big Ideas’, on the corporate ideas of companies, shared by these companies and customers alike.
City branding

As mentioned, place branding helps for example cities to compete with one another for businesses, citizens, visitors, talent, or simply for attention in the global world (e.g. Boisen, 2007). According to Richard Florida (2008), cities are competing for three key economic factors: talent, innovation and creativity. Many cities focus on the creative class, a term coined by Florida for the people in creative, innovative and knowledge generating professions, as these people make cities more vibrant and competitive. Florida shows that a clustering of successful city regions has occurred, not in the least because of attractiveness to the Creative class. Our world, says Florida, is a spiky world, where a few successful city regions dominate. A relatively small number of cities are home to most innovations and inventions, for example, helped by their success in attracting talent and investment.

For attracting talent, innovation and creativity, tourists, and so forth, cities try to strengthen their existing image or identity (if it is a good one), create a new image, and/or get rid of a bad one. Cities aim to build on specific strengths, opportunities and ‘claims to fame’. Assisted by marketing experts, they ‘package’ their good characteristics into one or more ‘city brands’.

Joel Kotkin, an American urban development scholar, has argued that the success of cities over time – and until this very day – has depended on three key roles (Kotkin, 2005). First, cities should be ‘sacred’, which relates to the historical role of cities as religious centres, but also has to do with identity and citizens identifying themselves with a city. Second, cities need to be safe, offering a safe environment and high quality of life. The third role has to do with cities being busy, acting as centres of commerce, culture and social life. Cities ‘brand’ themselves based on aspects of the three roles. In addition, in modern times the ‘ephemeral’ (entertainment) city has emerged, when cities are especially geared towards tourists and own residents seeking to be entertained. As Kotkin argues, however, the ephemeral city cannot survive by only catering to the ‘nomadic populations’ that are tourists. It still needs a strong base of committed citizenry to continue to exist as ‘real’, working cities. This is one of the problems faced by Venice, Italy, where a true exodus of native residents has occurred, e.g. due to exploding house prices. There is a risk that only visitors and part-time residents will remain – and that one of the attractions of Venice, namely its particular form of culture and daily life will disappear.

When discussing how we decide where to live, Florida (2008) identified ‘place’ as a key determinant for people’s happiness and success. The creative class, for example, is attracted to a city by high quality living environments that include good parks and public areas. The importance of offering a good quality of life to citizens was also stressed in a recent European development project called The SAUL Partnership. Its final report states: “Competitive city regions are ones that can attract and retain viable businesses and their employees by offering a good quality of life” (SAUL Partnership 2005).

City branding and green space

That cities need to focus on offering a high quality living and working environment to attract people, money and activities has been known for quite some time. Starting many centuries ago, kings, emperors and other rules initiated greening efforts for different purposes, but not in the least to promote their own prestige, e.g. through hunting parks, estates and parades. Many of our current urban parks and other green spaces are results of these efforts. When cities and municipal authorities had gained more power, green spaces
also started playing a role in city branding efforts. Many European cities, for example, purchased parks and other green spaces during the late 19th century, partly to maintain an attractive setting for the more well-to-do (i.e. important tax payers). Cities also had new parks established, with New York’s Central Park, designed by Olmsted and Vaux, as perhaps the best known example.

City governments were sometimes assisted in their efforts by industrialists, who had an interest in promoting healthy and socially-acceptable recreation behaviour amongst their workers. In other cases, they just wanted to build stronger and positive ties with the local community.

‘Green’ branding of cities, however, has often become a rather abstract activity. Green spaces are seldom in focus when cities try to promote a green image in a broad sense. They attempt to connect to, for example, the climate agenda, aiming to become carbon neutral, saving energy, and so forth. Every city wants to be ‘green’. According to American writer Thomas Friedman (2008), ‘green’ was the single most trademarked terms in the USA in 2007. In some cases, specific activities or campaigns are connected to the ‘green image’ promotion. Friedman offers examples of New York City, where an extensive scheme made many of the famous yellow cabs more environmentally friendly. Local ‘champions’ – and often the local mayor – can be a main driver of the greening process, as the example of Dalian, China shows (Friedman, 2008). The mayor of that city has only allowed industries into the city that are energy saving and environmentally friendly.

Examples of successful branding through green space

Chicago, USA, is one of the best-known success stories of how green spaces and trees have been incorporated in successful city branding, or perhaps rather: re-branding (e.g. Beatley, 2004). During the second half of the 20th century, the city suffered from its rather negative image as an industrial city. Large parts of the city had become rather run-down. In a major turn-around move, mayor Richard Daley initiated greening activities at different levels and made them an integral part of city policy. Trees were planted, neighbourhood greening campaigns started, NGOs supported, and green roofs promoted, with the high-profile green roof of Chicago’s City Hall as example. These efforts, together with e.g. urban renewal schemes, successful efforts to attract business (e.g. Boeing) and ‘personal branding’ by President Obama have helped reshape Chicago’s image.

Bolstered by its new image, Chicago even campaigned (be it unsuccessfully) for the 2016 Olympic Games. Greening, urban forestry and the Olympics have been closely connected, especially since the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. Using the Olympics as a ‘vehicle’, a large-scale tree planting campaign was undertaken taken under the title ‘One Million Trees for LA’ (Million Trees LA, undated). The campaign was led by the environmental NGO Tree People, but in close collaboration with city authorities. Subsequent Games have also branded their green image, e.g. the 2000 Sydney Games and the 2008 Beijing Games (e.g. UNEP, 2007). Although green branding has come to relate to more general issues such as carbon neutrality, energy saving and sustainability, tree planting and the development of new green spaces has continued to be a major component. London 2012 follows a very similar strategy (e.g. BBC News, 2007).

But cities do not need Olympic Games to enrol green spaces in a ‘green branding’ effort. A powerful example is that of New York City, which is in the process of transforming its Fresh Kills dump site into a new, large-scale landscape park. Interesting to note is that a substantial part of the budget for the new park has been dedicated to a large-
scale marketing campaign, especially geared towards New Yorkers (Czerniak et al., 2007). The campaign aims to establish a link between the city and the new landscape park, building e.g. on historical links.

Elsewhere, cities are competing for prestigious ‘greening’ awards in recognition of their efforts to improve quality of life and environment. In the USA, for example, cities with a sound programme for urban forestry can be awarded the ‘Tree City USA’ certificate (Arbor Day Foundation, undated). Chinese cities put a lot of energy into being awarded ‘green city’ awards by the central government (Liu, 2009). European cities compete for a range of different ‘greening’ awards, including the title of Greenest City of Europe awarded by the Entente Florale organisation. The latter organises national competitions for cities and villages as well. Winners of these national events, which involve assessment of greening programs, activities and outputs by expert judges, can compete for the European ‘crown’. The Dutch city of Arnhem, already mentioned above, was elected Greenest City of Europe 2009.

Cities such as Helsinki, Finland, but also e.g. ‘Tropical Garden City’ Kuala Lumpur use their extensive green spaces in marketing efforts targeted towards tourists. But the qualities of individual urban forests and other green spaces can also make cities more competitive and interesting. Many tourists schedule in a visit to New York’s Central Park, Kuala Lumpur’s Lake Gardens, Singapore’s Botanical Garden or London’s royal parks. Some green spaces are thus ‘destination brands’ of their own, being promoted through brochures, websites and on-site signs. In the case of forests and nature areas in or near cities, images of a ‘wilderness’ at a stone’s throw of urban mayhem are often evoked.

Individual green spaces can be made more interesting and ‘special’ by granting them a special status. In Stockholm, for example, the Djurgården park has become part of Sweden’s first National Urban Park (Konijnendijk, 2008). Urban forests and nature areas in cities such as Vienna and Warsaw have been granted the status of national park. Zurich’s Sihlwald is now an ‘urban wilderness park’. There could be a risk here, however, as these types of ‘A-level green spaces’ are given most of the attention and funding by planners and managers, leading to neglect of ‘normal’ green spaces at for example the neighbourhood level. These local, everyday green spaces do play a very important role, e.g. in terms of offering nearby recreation environments to local residents.

The road to successful branding through green space

Green spaces and urban forestry can and often do play an important role in city marketing and green city branding in particular. ‘Green’ is generally seen as something positive, and residents, visitors and businesses place high value on high quality, green urban environments. Green space offers a range of special opportunities, for example related to sense branding: a visit to a local woodland or park appeals to all senses. Trees have many (mostly positive) associations, e.g. to stability and sustainability, as a link between life and death.

In order for green spaces and trees to make a meaningful contribution to city branding, it is crucial to link up to the Big Picture. Green space planners and managers need to find out how green spaces can contribute to a city’s main agendas. Today, for example, this relates very much to topics such as global competitiveness, social cohesion, lifestyle changes (and health challenges), and climate change. Green spaces link up to all of these agendas. As shown above, for example, green cities are more successful in attracting talent, innovation, investment and visitors. Green spaces have been found to
offer important public spaces acting as social meeting points for the city’s different resident groups. Use of, and simply having a view of, green spaces promotes people’s health and wellbeing. Moreover, although urban trees help sequester greenhouse gases, urban forestry’s main contribution to the climate change agenda relates to making cities more resilient. Trees and green spaces moderate urban climates, provide share, and help in stormwater management, for example (e.g. Tyrväinen et al., 2005; Konijnendijk, 2008).

In order to connect urban forestry to city branding, partnerships are crucial. Many of the examples mentioned above involved local authorities (often headed by one or more ‘champions’ of greening), interest groups and the private sector. For green space city branding to succeed, it is crucial not only to focus on external branding (i.e. for external audiences, such as tourists), but to take internal branding seriously as well. As argued by the likes of Kotkin (2005), building a strong, engaged citizenry is very important to modern cities. Examples such as that of Fresh Kills in New York show that cities seem aware of this task.

Branding should not only involve ‘green’ phrases, but involve long-term commitment and strategy. It should combine the work of green space professionals, planners, and professional marketers. Sufficient funds should be allocated – also to enhance a city’s green infrastructure. Action plans and ‘on-the-ground’ pilot projects should show to residents and visitors alike that the city really takes its green heritage seriously. Jones (2006) stresses the need for ‘place making’, with a place being ‘a location with a meaning’. In order for a place to have meaning and a clear identity, that meaning needs to be shared among many, and to be based on reality.

If these efforts succeed, green spaces and landscape management can move up on the ladder of political and public attention, being taken seriously as part of a city’s key infrastructure. Branding can also help in building relationships with a series of new users, such as ethnic minorities and children. With those and existing ‘customers’ long-term relationships can be established that reflect the ideas behind Lovemarks (Roberts, 2004). Green spaces are about emotions, about special and sometimes mystic experiences; they are associated with a wide range of symbolic values.

Finally, branding can help to strengthen the internal organisation of municipal and private green-space organisations. This also relates to the need to strengthen the profile of urban forestry as a profession of its own.

References


Urban green spaces are important spaces for cities and have several benefits. They are considered as important contributor to sustainable development. However, the most sought benefits of green spaces in a city are the social and psychological benefits. Urban green spaces, especially public parks and gardens provide resources for relaxation and recreation. Green spaces need to be uniformly distributed throughout the city area, and the total area occupied by green spaces in the city should be large enough to accommodate the city population needs. Bringing green space to the urban landscape can promote and inspire a better relationship with the environment while supporting important services. Green space is part of and also represents habitats and ecosystems.