

Designing the City Identity: Strategic and Product Design for New Experiential Ways of Living, Enabling, and Interacting with the Urban Context

Marina Parente

Introduction

The increasing need for telling and promoting city identity arises from the new kinds of competition in global markets, proposing the subject of distinctiveness and relationship between places and—tangible and intangible—resources in a renewed manner.

The territories, as the products, try to steer their own development and perception in such way as to be “desirable” (Buchanan, 2001), but their success is connected with various utility factors too, that is, the fact of proposing themselves as business-friendly environments and providing opportunities and distinctive qualities, and usability, that is, the possibility of being structured with networks of services and governance systems, such as to render the relationship between environment and its stakeholders easy.

Territory desirability is connected to its identity perception, the implied promise of a system of values of excellence or specialization compared to other places.

This is why cities’ and territories’ identity is increasingly becoming a core project and monitoring theme. Their identity is closely related to their

competitive positioning (Anholt, 2007), necessary to attract investments and to facilitate processes of economic growth, environment quality, and social development.

Designing place identity

Place identity is very complicated to trace because it depends on a multitude of factors:

- **Factors tending to change over time:** Places and towns are developing bodies, where the time dimension can be interpreted not only compared to the past and history (and the related system of values), but also inside a dynamic and changing present, where the different ways of use can characterize again the sense of the places on the same day. The theme that disciplines concerning urban studies are asking themselves is not only functional (Evans, McDonald, and Rudlin, 2011; Landry, 2006), but social and relational too, well summarized by the exhibition entitled “Cities: Architecture and Society” at the 10th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice, in 2006.
- **Subjective factors:** Towns are the scene of collective memories and the personal approach that everybody has with place perception and meaning. From this point of view, towns can be interpreted as the repository of personal stories and emotions embedded over time. This kind

of approach is supported by emotional geography (Bruno, 2002) and environmental psychology (Landry, 2012a).

- **External factors:** Accidental events (e.g., acts of nature) or unforeseeable circumstances (e.g., judicial investigations) can change the place identity suddenly or affect the way it is perceived from outside, as well as events beyond control, such as the testimonies of international prominent personalities from the world of culture, economy, or social movements of dissent, which can strengthen or obfuscate the identity framework we are trying to point out (Anholt, 2007, 2010; Landry, 2006).

Even only the activity of portraying the place identity, even before strategically targeting it, appears as a complicated matter of choice, an operation that cannot be exhaustive, but selective of a portfolio of identities, mutually compatible and converging on defining a framework of values and territorial specificities.

Identity and reputation

With regard to the last issue, we notice that the identity question is mingled with the reputation one. In fact, if identity is a representation reasoned, selected, designed, and reinforced by tangible evidence and congruent actions, reputation incorporates the collective imagination of people who perhaps do not know

these places personally, but got an idea of them through what they perceived by media or other narrative forms (from movies to literature or show business testimonials). A bad reputation can arise from a shallow identity design, which stops at the image level, so it is not supported by the real situation and does not keep the promise.

There are many studies that measure the index of satisfaction of the countries and the major cities around the world each year, including the Nation Brand Index and the City Brand Index by Anholt-GfK Roper or the Country Brand Index by FutureBrand, proof of the growing interest in monitoring the external perception of our own country, taking into account variables measuring factors such as the importance of physical, organizational, or social factors. These rankings arise from opinion polls targeting people who do not know directly the countries or cities under investigation, but who express the perceived idea and their expectations about service level, human relationship, investment and job opportunities, and the vivacity and wealth of the cultural and entertainment experience. So they are indexes other than the specialist ranking for the different sectors, such as tourism, measuring *a posteriori* actual and quantitative results of a specific sector.

Furthermore, FutureBrand has recently conducted a new survey entitled “The Made In Report” (issued in February 2014), concerning the relationship between the products

coming from different countries and their impact on the overall perception of the country system. This survey measures the “value of the country of origin,” that is, how successful products can contribute to a positive perception of the country of origin and vice versa. This first opinion poll confirms what is easily guessed, that is, for example, that fashion or food products for Italy, as well as the vehicle and precision mechanics sector for Germany, are successful testimonials for the country of origin. The first case strengthens the style and good taste idea, and the second the precision and reliability idea.

Countries and cities increasingly focus on strengthening their own image in order to intercept—like the companies do—cash flows and investments in different production sectors, tourism, or culture, by implementing strategic plans to steer their brand identity and at the same time by keeping the reputation variation, that is, brand image, under control. These operations are not easy and need an ongoing commitment and coherence of choice.

Anholt (2007) says that “competitive identity is the art of playing chess by using reality against perception,” a game requiring a great deal of attention, vision, and action adequacy. If reputation is what we seem to be and identity is what we actually are (or what we are trying to be), the only way to align these two visions is to practice identity over time with conviction and coherent gestures.

Some towns, such as Barcelona, Bilbao, or Turin, have been able to recalibrate their identity, directing it toward new strategic visions of development. They acted over time with an action plan, able to affect not only the perceived image, but also the real structure, by accompanying renewal with top-down initiatives and by facilitating the bottom-up ones.

Place branding and place experience

Bauman (2004) claims that in the liquid modern age, even identity is mutable. It is like a dress we use until we need it. But above all, he underlines that identity is something that must be invented rather than discovered; it is like a target, something that may need to be built from scratch or chosen among alternative offers.

If we apply these arguments to the local identity framework, we see that, to find a specific design methodology, we adjust branding—brand design and brand management activities usually used for companies or institutions—for places and cities, considered as complex organizations, which need to be recognizable and able to communicate their own personality to the outside world.

The disciplinary sphere and the methods concerning place branding and city branding, dealing with local marketing and destination management, are gradually consolidating through a specific literature and the

verification of the results of the first experiences (Baker, 2012; Dinnie, 2011; Govers and Go, 2009; Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009). However, they point out some criticisms arising from the multiplayer dimension (there are a number of territory stakeholders with at times widely divergent targets), as well as from the previously discussed changing factors, in the balance between identity and reputation.

In particular, Govers and Go (2009) clearly define the disciplinary scope: “place brand is a representation of identity, building a favourable internal (with those who deliver the experience) and external (with visitors) image (leading to brand satisfaction and loyalty; name awareness; perceived quality; and other favourable brand associations)” (p. 17). They also structure a three-step model of analysis and design of place branding—the “three-gap place branding model” (Govers and Go, 2009, p. 41)—based on

- **Place brand strategy gap:** interlinking place identity with projected place image and product offering (in different possible sectors, such as tourism, trade, talent, and treasury),
- **Place brand performance gap:** interlinking projected place image and product offering with the vicarious and perceived place experience, and
- **Place brand satisfaction gap:** interlinking vicarious and

perceived place experience with the visitors' perceived place image.

So the most delicate issue to be solved is the alignment between what has been designed and what is actually perceived, due to the real evidence in the territory as well as the expectations residing even in the user's unconscious.

The comparison with the real experience that each stakeholder may carry out in the territory leads to a constant verification between the brand promises and the brand experience, which, only if confirmed, may have a positive impact on the reputation and the strength of the identity.

It is therefore clear that place branding cannot act on its own, but needs to be related to political, economic, urban, and social development's strategies in order to avoid being limited to a superficial graphic dress to be put on territories and cities: In order to be effective, place branding must be a synergetic action requiring long-term strategic actions, constant methods of monitoring and design, and the creation of sharing and networks between the different players, including inhabitants themselves.

Cities and processes of bottom-up change

In parallel with the consolidation of this relatively new discipline, the diffusion of digital information technologies, especially of social networks, has made more evident—and

in some cases has also contributed to increase—the presence of many forms of bottom-up activism due to the increasingly growing need to modify the current methods of narration and use of the cities.

Associations, online platforms, interest groups, and young startups are proposing new methods not only to communicate, live, visit, and tell the city, but also to do business, connect, and propose some forms of participatory design by using the Web as a core instrument of action or as an instrument to disseminate information and results, but not always as an exclusive tool. Certainly, the Web and the social networks are a powerful real-time amplifier of what is happening in the cities.

The picture of cities that emerges is vibrant, proactive, dynamic, and made of snapshots fixing the instant of a changing journey. The Web portrays another identity of the cities, linked to a present time looking at itself critically, in order to design and share some ideas of a very near future. Cities as a cradle of some emerging phenomena—the creative cities phenomenon—are not intended just as attraction spots for creativity professionals (Florida, 2005; Landry, 2012), but where social participation contributes to the creation of sense and use of the cities themselves; the smart cities, or better “senseable cities” (Ratti, 2011) phenomenon, where the Web system plays the role

of information collector (sensing) and implementation according to the gathered information (actuating).

The two different processes—top-down design, usually guided by some opportunities such as major sporting, cultural, or religious events (e.g., the Olympic Games and the European Capitals of Culture) or planned by local authorities, and bottom-up design, made of crowd-sourcing, spontaneously suggested by those who want to actively contribute to changes—in the framework of a coordinated project of place branding, should contribute to and mutually support the choices and goals of a competitive positioning, defined in an early stage.

That can happen if local communities are included within the phases of preliminary approach and design, right from the start, with procedures of comparison, co-design, and participatory verification.

Collective narrations of meanings and urban identities: case studies:

With reference, especially, to the Italian situation, we are seeing particularly meaningful phenomena. Italy, thanks to its reputation as a country rich in important historical, artistic, and scenic attractions, together with an Italian style of taste (fashion and design) and the pleasure of good living (environment, food, human capital), has been living on accumulated interest during these years, by poorly investing in

initiatives for the promotion and relaunch of its own image. Its heritage value is fading if compared to a competitive context, where other countries are focused on coordinated actions to strengthen their image. In fact, all ranking systems are registering a slow but progressive decline of the country system image, which some Italian towns have been trying to remedy for some years by promoting their own urban image through more or less successful initiatives of long-term strategic design (e.g., Turin, Genoa, and Milan) or through a new city brand design (e.g., Bologna, Florence, and Genoa).

In the current period of economic stagnation and policy uncertainty, the planning and development coordinated initiatives are struggling to materialize, and prefer to act occasionally in an almost uncoordinated manner, with only the aim of obtaining a wow effect, often ephemeral and not lasting.

In the absence of policy planning, even more clear in the southern regions where economies are weaker and due to the local authorities' evident difficulty in coping with transformation processes and significant investments, surprisingly we are seeing the creation of bottom-up initiatives trying to integrate new methods of narration, and thence perception and creation of sense, of the places.

This is more evident in the southern areas, where it is very urgent to relaunch different economies as an alternative to the big

corporations, based on tourism and the valorization of the cultural and environmental heritage and the productive sectors related to them.

As mentioned above, the Web and social network diffusion make visible what is happening in real time and reduces the time needed to know phenomena, amplifies information, and facilitates its diffusion. But they are also channels that foster sharing methods, collective participation, co-design, and crowdsourcing.

Some case studies have been selected in order to understand the filters used to interpret place identity, what participation methods have been activated in order to undergo physical or perceptive change processes, and what innovative and relational tools are used to renew the experiences of cultural and environmental heritage enjoyment.

In summary, without going into the details of each initiative, we shall try to schematize the narrative models and those of meaning creation and the relationships between the different players.

Bottom-up models of territorial storytelling

Repository of collective memories.

- **Online collaborative mapping:** There is a wish to draw new physical and mental city maps, in order to amplify the sensory perception, find unusual places, or track links during the time and

social evolution. They are an evolution of the parish maps, used to define the values of the ecomuseum areas by integrating the emotional map with the collaborative and temporal dimension of an evolving continuum and the update, which new technologies allow us to do. MappiNA (<http://www.mappina.it>) and Napolirama (<http://napolirama.it>) are two different ways to express this need of Naples: The first one is an alternative city map providing a geolocalized tale, which portrays the contemporary time and the daily relationship of use of the city through little known noises, ideas, methods, and places; the second one is a family album portraying places and people during the 20th century, pointing out the evolution of the relationship between spaces and lifestyles over time. Another important example is Nuok (<http://www.nuok.it>), whose name comes from the pronunciation of a small child of the words "New York": it is the collective travel journal written by Italians about some towns of the world, which wants to express a childlike curiosity about unusual places. It is a collection of stories, perceptions, and urban experiences, managed by a group of urban reporters. More than an online magazine, it is a storyteller, similar in some ways to the

better-known Cowbird (<http://cowbird.com>), which is more focused on human experience narration, where places are only the background.

The common elements between these examples are the collaborative dimension, the storytelling, and the repository of collective memories.

- **Storyteller as a cultural mediator:**

The territory oral storytelling is an ancestral form, which is becoming a core element today. With reference to Basilicata—a poorly known region of Southern Italy, except the city of Matera, recently brought to the world's attention by the movie *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson (2004)—Gianni Biondillo, writer and architect, was commissioned, in the framework of a series of institutional actions of regional promotion, to make a trip in this territory in order to collect testimonies of the inhabitants and local stakeholders. The above shall be set down in writing in “Il Diario del Pollino,” an e-book, which can be downloaded for free: It is not a novel, or a guide; it is a travel journal about the discovery of people, stories, excellences, innovations, and cultures that we would not have been expected to meet. This experience is interesting, even though it is not a bottom-up initiative, but in a certain sense it is nourished with

old exploration practices and authentic testimonies of the territory.

The writer becomes a cultural mediator, who not only reveals hidden identities of marginal lands, told by the voices animating these places, but also provides his own emotional and affective vision, which is amplified thanks to the Web reaching an unthinkable geographic scope. It is a way to feel, and not only to tell, a land.

Collective — online and on site — Actions.

- **Participation using games:** “Critical City” and “Whaiwhai” are two examples of interaction with the urban environment using games. The first one uses a Web site (<http://criticalcity.org>) to create a play community, which, through some missions in the cities, competes with a points classification, with the only social and recreational aim to interact with urban spaces collaboratively. The missions, carried out in real places and documented and shared only on the Web, are demonstration actions of how to regain the urban spaces, imagining different forms and uses, and building a meaningful narrative repository—in the framework of a collective contest—in order to renew them.

Whaiwhai (<http://www.whaiwhai.com/en/>) is a discovery

game, aiming at a different touristic use. It is formed by a physical part—a guidebook of every city—proposing a path to discover the mystery to be solved, and another part available online on smartphone, by entering an access code. Through georeferencing systems and riddles to be solved via text message, the goal is to visit some city spots by following a narrative thread and challenging other user groups to discover the hidden secret.

In both cases, the game is the instrument to trigger the real participation in situ, but the narration role is different: In Critical City you contribute to build it, and in Whaiwhai narration shall become a way to know better what is not visible.

- **Urban critique:** Wedu—decoro urbano (www.decorourbano.org) is a participative instrument reporting the city degradation, a social network aiming to foster the dialogue between citizens and municipality, and it contributes to take care of the city. Active in the Italian territory for about a year, it managed to obtain the accession of several active municipalities, which can in turn report when the problem has been solved. Based on an open-source project, it intercepts the city users' criticisms and moods and directs them toward positive forms of

participation and active citizenship. Among the active municipalities, there are many small towns in Southern Italy that have intuited the potential of redemption of their reputation and narrative and perception reversal and showed a real ability to listen and a resolution capacity.

Culture-led initiatives. There are many initiatives proposing new relationship networks between places and meaning systems, and they propose unusual city visions and narrations with a combination of procedures (online and on site): from innovative experiences of urban exploitation (e.g., geo-emotional map of Citytellers ([<http://www.cityteller.it>]) telling cities through the places of the books the users share; to the Biciclettering's routes, an initiative of the Association of Italian Calligraphy, an urban cycling safari, looking for fonts of near and distant eras in the city spots; to the initiatives proposing multisensorial or participative visit experiences of the cultural heritage (theatrical visit routes, educational experiences, caring activities or guerrilla gardening, accessibility to private sites of creativity, etc.). All demonstrate an exuberant proposal of different narrations that draw inspiration from the different levels of the city's porous identity to create innovative visions and uses. There is an urgent desire to have an impact and create

change, pursued first of all by young creative talents, the real engine of urban renewal (Florida, 2005).

Souvenir as touchpoints of the new city experience

The summary of these initiatives (Table 1) shows the essence of an underground, very visible on the Web and less perceptible in reality, excitement of affirmation of new meanings and new stories, a dynamic and authentic narration opposed to the canonical and stereotyped one, where the city seems to be caged. In the absence of a top-down courageous design of a portfolio of territorial identities, updated to contemporary reality, Italian towns are generally seen, exploited, and perceived by external visitors according to the most traditional cliché. Upon arrival on site, the most innovative and interesting elements of ongoing change in Italian towns are not perceived at all. So they remain common knowledge of the Web people, because all the physical elements of the territorial identity narration, including souvenirs, remain bound to the classic vision made of stereotypes.

For a number of years, through a didactic experimentation carried out in two Italian cities, Milan and Naples, at the Design School of the Politecnico di Milano and the design course of the University Federico II of Naples, we have been checking how, in the framework of affirmation of new bottom-up identity strategies,

the system of souvenirs of the territory visit experience could represent an evolutionary step, becoming a testimonial of alternative visions of the city (Parente, 2012).

Previously considered as unnecessary objects, souvenirs could be interpreted as the physical link between online perception and in situ perception, as touchpoints of the new city experience. In this sense, a new generation of city souvenirs could

- play a role of thickener of the personal experience and the manifold memories embodied by the city, going beyond stereotypes and trying to reveal a more intimate, multifaceted nature of places;
- amplify the territory perception, by suggesting special interpretations and visit paths that otherwise would remain invisible;
- contribute to an active and participatory process of identity reinforcement and definition in a way that can involve the different local players, because the first users of the city are the same inhabitants;
- act on internal and external communication, by materializing and making visible some changes that are underway, in order to ferry the real action of change toward a recognized and shared perception, which starts to influence the crystallized reputations ingrained in the collective imagination over time;

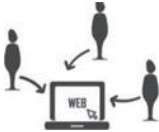




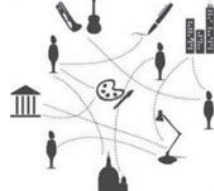
REPOSITORY OF COLLECTIVE MEMORIES	
<p>Online collaborative mapping Network as a participatory archive</p>	
<p>Storyteller as a cultural mediator Storytelling of individual experiences, digital sharing, and diffusion of the territory's emotional narratives</p>	
COLLECTIVE—ONLINE AND ON SITE—ACTIONS	
<p>Collective storytelling through urban game's actions Exchange-based relation between the real and the virtual, between places and Web</p>	
<p>Enjoyment of the territory using narratives as a game Cognitive playful experience of the territory</p>	
<p>Urban critique for city care Collaborative dialogues between users and authorities</p>	
CULTURE-LED INITIATIVES	
<p>Narrative networks of the territories New sense creation through the connection between different environments</p>	

Table 1. Bottom-up Models of Territorial Storytelling

- go beyond the ideas of trip and tourism to interact with the new internal and external city users and to meet the growing demand of cultural entertainment;
- be an instrument to renew the tradition, knowledge, and local know-how elements.

This leads to imaging new kinds of city souvenirs as devices that can contribute to the collective creation of the brand identity of the place internally and can influence its brand image externally, in other words, its reputation.

The concept of device implies not only the instrument dimension, but also the possibility of flanking a more passive mode of sensorial interaction with the product, with an active mode of direct and indirect behaviors and actions, contributing to the territorial identity co-creation.

For design we adopted a three-step method: The first step is focused on city investigation. It is a direct on-field investigation using real and digital ethnographic analysis methods to detect the most significant indicators of the contemporary time and trace the profile of the emerging meanings. The second step concerns the knowledge of the city's tangible and intangible resources and is an analysis of the territorial capital, able to do a map of the values characterizing the place, and to review the elements dulled for a long time and not recognized as valuable sources. The third one, focused on the disclosure of the

hidden city, is the final design step of implementation of formal, cognitive, and relation aspects, which the souvenir must be able to activate in the relationship between city users and the same city.

Conclusion

All the above dissertation leads us to think we are on the brink of a paradigm change:

- complex processes, such as the identity definition of a territory (strategy), the control of the different stakeholders' actions (performance), and the monitoring of the perception compared to the users' expectations and reputation (satisfaction) seem hard to be realized and controlled without significant infrastructural investments and without approving and sharing the aims;
- the capillarity of technologies and digital channels of communication are rapidly changing the social, political, and productive modes and are opening a new participatory, collaborative, and open-source dimension, from the point of view of the meaning definition as well as the action definition;
- the top-down design times are asynchronous compared to the speed of the social changes and the emerging needs of the use and enhancement of urban spaces;
- the place branding discipline must act together with the economic,

infrastructural, and policy planning of countries and cities. At present, this coordination seems to be very difficult to achieve in Italy, and we need to think about new strategies in order to avoid falling further in international rankings.

We thus propose a shift of perspective, able to enhance and give visibility to the positive processes of self-determination and to the creation of new bottom-up meanings, arising from the active participation in the territory by

- creating the conditions for an enabling environment for the expression of creative and collaborative communities;
- monitoring the bottom-up activities and building coordination activities through the debate and the creation of shared visions (participatory design);
- facilitating the communication of the aspects of innovation and implementation of the territorial capital value, and considering the vision vivacity a positive factor of the territory vitality;
- flanking the territory main identity with the emerging ones, traced by creative talents;
- setting up relations between the real dimension and the virtual one, where souvenirs play a new role and are considered as touchpoints of the new forms of city experience.

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