

# Branding brings a place to life

Branding theory and practice has a direct and powerful bearing on the work of urban and economic planners and urban designers, say Sicco van Gelder and Hugh Roberts



Sicco van Gelder (top) is founder of Placebrands Ltd and Hugh Roberts is a director of Colin Buchanan & Partners

Increasingly, cities compete with other places for attention, investment, visitors, shoppers, talent, events, and the like. Accelerated and intensified globalisation has led to a situation where the main competition is no longer the city down the road or the town across the bay, but where competitors are places half a world away. And this global competition is no longer limited to the big cities that compete for the HQs of multinational corporations and UN bodies, or for large sports events.

Thanks to technological advances and market deregulation, even smaller places can suddenly be confronted with competitors located on another continent. Entire towns in Italy have lost their *raison d'être* as their furniture making industry clusters have been wiped out by Chinese competitors making the

same products at much lower costs. Alicante in Spain struggles to compete with equally sunny beach destinations ranging from Antalya in Turkey to Pattaya in Thailand. Bordeaux and its region face stiff competition from Chile, South Australia and the South African Cape Region for its primacy in premium winemaking.

Traditional car manufacturing in the West Midlands, Detroit, Stuttgart and Nagoya feel the heat from Bratislava and Shanghai. Meanwhile London competes as a global financial centre with New York and Hong Kong, and at a regional level with Frankfurt and Paris.

#### Promise of value

How does a city cope with this new multitude of contenders? Competing on tax breaks, tax credits,

free land, soft loans and other financial incentives to attract investors and to shore up local industries is clearly a 'race to the bottom' - ultimately one that is impossible to sustain. Advertising on CNN and sending trade missions into the world to flog the existing offer of the city is equally ineffective in the long term and a waste of precious financial resources. Shoring up the city's current offer with some new commercial, industrial or cultural development is not likely to turn the tide either.

What is needed is a frank rethink about what the city offers. What can be created that is so valuable about the city that its businesses, institutions and residents want to remain, that will attract investors, visitors and talent, and that will make commentators and influencers recommend it as the place to live, do

Illustrations:  
*Right and overpage* – Overhoeks development in Amsterdam  
*Opposite* – Canary Wharf framed by the Thames barrier.



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business or visit as the new vibrant centre with a clear sense of its future as well as its past and present?

Your city's brand is the promise of that value. City branding is about deliberately creating, developing and demonstrating that value through appropriate 'on-brand' actions, which consist of investments, physical and economic plans, attraction programmes, events, communications, and the like.

City branding is not something that is the sole preserve of local government or any of its departments or agencies. It is a shared responsibility and practice of the city's main stakeholders who include its residents, its businesses large and small, and all too often forgotten, those who are frequent visitors and have a good sense of how the place is perceived. What is more powerful than having the city's stakeholders jointly define and realise the brand of their city, using their own particular strengths to ensure the world receives a compelling, joined-up and consistent message about the city?

### Stakeholders

For city branding to be successful, it is necessary for its key stakeholder organisations to come together in partnership. This is not your usual public-private partnership or a committee of wise men and women.

This is a formal or informal body but one with clearly stated terms of reference and a programme with deadlines and deliverables, in which the key stakeholders jointly develop, create and lead on the implementation of the brand of the city, under shared responsibility. Creating such a partnership is the first step in changing the way the city operates, because it simultaneously crosses divides such as those between town and gown, government and business, arts, leisure and sports, commerce and culture, and the public, private

and voluntary sectors.

The partnership should be one of equals between those stakeholders that can realise the brand of the city through their actions, investments, decisions and communications.

During the city brand strategy development process, the members of the brand partnership need to understand and reconcile differing policies and strategies; decide on what the future of their city will look like; what it will offer of value to consumers; how that will be experienced; and what it is they can jointly do to make that future a reality.

This requires willingness to come together and work through these challenges even when that may be difficult through conflicts of interest, different opinions, differing timescales and sometimes even personal dislikes.

All in one common cause: to make the city better able to compete for the things that will make it a better place, a more sustainable and competitive place with a renewed sense of purpose for where it is going and how it is getting there.

### City branding and planning

In an ideal world, a city's brand strategy is developed before any pens are put to paper for master-planning, economic planning, urban and spatial design and architecture, and landscapes design purposes alike. The reason for this is simple; once you know what your place's agreed promise of value is these activities form part of what will demonstrate the brand in action.

The brand becomes your decision making tool to determine whether a certain plan, design or activity is 'on brand' (i.e. in line with and reinforcing the brand) or 'off brand' (i.e. counterproductive or even harmful to the brand). For example, if a place is to be known for being creative and



elegant, this needs to be reflected in all its planning and subsequent implementation.

This may entail thinking about innovative forms of access, the use of public spaces for performing arts, inventive forms of architecture, attraction programmes for specific creative individuals, businesses and institutions, graceful landscape design and attract amenities that offer elegant and creative products and services. And the same goes for places that wish to be known for being functional or historic, or lively, or tranquil, or cutting edge!

Using the brand of a place to think and decide about planning issues makes planners' work much easier, as they are then able to work from a shared and common viewpoint of what the place is to become and what it has to offer. In our practice we often experience the difference between plans and designs that are guided by a place's brand strategy and those that are not.

The former are usually well received and reflective of the shared views of clients, while the latter

often lead to (lengthy) discussions, alterations and frustration all round. This is not the fault of the planners and architects, but of their clients who have not thought through what they want the place to become and how it relates to its surroundings physically, socially and economically.

### The relevance to London

London has recently started the enormous task of redeveloping much of its eastern segment either side of the Thames, the so-called Thames Gateway. One key starting point of this development is the Olympic Area north of Stratford City, but the Gateway stretches all the way to Southend on the north bank and Medway to the south of the Estuary.

Large parts of this huge stretch of riverside are currently either severely degraded, economically run-down, underdeveloped or natural areas in need of protection against potential redevelopment at the cost of the environment.

The Gateway's development is influenced by a bewildering array of London Boroughs, Districts and Unitary Authorities, not to mention

several Regional, Olympic and the Thames Gateway Development Agencies, the Thames Gateway London, Kent and South Essex Partnerships and the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Judith Armit, CE of the Government's Thames Gateway Directorate, talks of the four "economic heartbeats" of the Gateway, namely Canary Wharf, the Olympics and Stratford Town Centre developments, the soon to be opened high speed rail link to mainland Europe and its benefits for Ebbsfleet and the recent commitment to develop Shellhaven as a much enlarged port complex. These are investment initiatives which any sub region would gladly have in their backyard, but even they do not alone point to a common strategy with which to brand and identify the area.

There is much more at stake here than pulling off a successful Olympics, fast communications or investment in commercial or industrial land uses - though these will be a good start! The future of London involves the full range of its stakeholders to come together and develop a brand for the Gateway which will guide all of its development and provide it with sustainable competitive advantage. Unless this happens, the sub region will remain devoid of certain types of inward investment, in particular in the form of new and creative businesses, educational and cultural institutions and the types of new residents who can at once bring fresh individuality to the area and contribute spending power to its recovery as a vibrant social and economic entity.

The challenge of developing the Thames Gateway is to create a brand for it that is at once reflective of the diversity of the places being created within the area but also reflect their totality from regional,

national and international perspectives.

The brand of the Gateway must drive what mix of functions are created and encouraged in the area; what activities, investments and amenities are attracted to these places; how they are connected to the rest of the city; and how they are managed in order to remain competitive in future.

The onus, therefore, is on the Gateway's stakeholders to come together in true partnership as distinct to ones merely written on paper, and decide what its future will be like and then to distil from that its persuasive promise of value. This cannot solely be a government undertaking and the key stakeholders to be involved in the partnership must be drawn from the Gateway's private and civic sectors too.

Once they have developed their brand and know how they wish to see it implemented, planners can get to grips with what this means for the spatial, economic and social relationships in the Gateway.

We firmly believe that branding theory and practice (originally a purely commercial activity) has direct and powerful bearing on the work of urban and economic planners and urban designers or the 'Place Shapers' to use the latest term favoured by Government. When their clients have made up their minds about the brand of a place, it becomes much easier to develop fitting plans and designs that will help to bring the brand of the place alive and to deliver on its promise of value.

