

# Branding in Area Development

**A brand is suited for developments with a fairly high level of complexity, involving many stakeholders and an extended period of development, such as inner-city, mixed-use developments.**

IN THE CASE OF AN AREA development, the branding of what is generally a mixed-use project needs to be in the form of a promise of value that has to be kept—simultaneously—for different audiences, including the various mix of residents, visitors, businesses, investors, and institutions. How the promise of value is fulfilled will differ somewhat for each group, but what will be the same for all the groups will be a clear relatedness among the various venues of the project. Consequently, a brand for an area development often is not a single promise, but instead includes several related themes.

In the case of a waterfront development in the Netherlands that is located across the water from Amsterdam's Central Railway Station, an all-new urban quarter is

being built. Overhoeks, named for its tower designed by Dutch architect Staal, was previously a Shell research center. Shell's newly built state-of-the-art center—the New Technology Centre (NTC)—which is nearing completion, uses 20 hectares (49 ac) less land than the old facility. The surplus land was sold to the Amsterdam municipality, and in 2001, a consortium of ING Real Estate and housing corporation Ymere was appointed to redevelop the area for residential, commercial, cultural, and recreational purposes. A total of 2,500 apartments, 70,000 square meters (753,474 sq ft) of office space, 35,000 square meters (376,737 sq ft) of commercial space, and 25,000 square meters (269,098 sq ft) of cultural and other noncommercial space is planned for the area.

Creating a completely new urban quarter so near the historic city center was regarded as a major challenge. Although the site offers proximity to the city center, a waterside location, and views of the water, it is located in an area with a poor reputation, known as North Amsterdam, which, despite changing attitudes, still is perceived as a remote and isolated industrial area.

The area development partnership included the municipal and district governments, Shell Research, the developers, real estate investor Vesteda, and the Dutch National Film Museum. The aim of the partnership was to convert the isolated industrial area into a new city quarter with its own distinctive character; Overhoeks is a first step in establishing North Amsterdam as a valued and integral part of the city.



**A new waterfront development in north Amsterdam, the Netherlands—once a remote and isolated industrial area—is designed to be an urban quarter that will include apartments, office and commercial space, and cultural facilities. The goal was to portray the waterfront quarter—known as Overhoeks—as an ideal neighborhood, shielded by water from the noise and confusion of the city, where there is an eclectic urban mix.**

Starting in 2004, Placebrands, a company that specializes in brand strategy services for cities, regions, and countries, worked with the Overhoeks partners to develop a shared vision for the area. From the various and sometimes disparate views of the partners emerged a vision of an authentic, lively, waterside quarter of Amsterdam that combines the convenience of a central location with the space, views, facilities, and quiet of the most-favored urban areas. The goal was to portray the waterfront quarter as an ideal neighborhood, shielded by water from the noise and confusion of the city, where smart, eco-friendly science (Shell has a research lab there and space for energy tech startups) combines with modern culture to create an eclectic urban mix that is “always fresh, always surprising.”

This vision for the waterfront quarter, together with research findings from discussions and interviews with potential residents, investors, and visitors, was used to develop the brand—that is, the promise that each time people come into contact with the Overhoeks, they can always count on finding the same, identifiable character. In sum, the brand strategy that

was created portrays Overhoeks as different from other parts of Amsterdam because of its unique high-rise skyline and its waterfront park, its lively atmosphere, and its friendly, creative, and stimulating character.

The brand strategy will influence the urban plan of Overhoeks to incorporate restaurant facilities as well as influence the architectural styles of the buildings. It also will guide the development program for the area, which will include new cultural institutions, a designer hotel, and public spaces suited to small music gatherings, theater, and film events. The brand strategy will help the developers pick and choose businesses and institutions for the area that are “on brand,” such as modern cultural institutions, multimedia companies, and energy tech startups.

Residential sales for the first phase of Overhoeks started last year and reportedly were eight times oversubscribed, with prices up to 80 percent higher than anticipated. The first waterfront apartments will be ready for occupants by the end of next year. The new National Film Museum building is being designed in keeping with the brand and is scheduled to be completed in spring

2011. Office and commercial space will begin to come on the market next year, with the overall project scheduled to be finished in 2016.

Since developing the brand strategy and the subsequent plans, the Overhoeks brand partnership continues to plan individual and joint actions to manage the Overhoeks brand. This partnership also is credited with having had beneficial effects on seemingly unrelated processes, such as difficult negotiations between the municipality and developers over significant unforeseen costs. The brand acted as a common cause that required the parties to seek solutions together, rather than engage in conflict.

Not only is a brand a leading principle in the development of an area that involves urban planning, architecture, landscape, and materials, but also in the management of the project—involving, for example, programs and events to attract interest, area management, and communication. The development, implementation, and management of an area’s brand are the shared responsibility of the stakeholders: government, developer, investor, key tenants, residents, and any others. During the process of creating the brand, all of the stakeholders together define core values, achieving a consensus that establishes a base of cooperation throughout the entire development process. As the brand develops and strengthens, it becomes a means of communication and a binding factor among stakeholders. A brand is suited for developments with a fairly high level of complexity, involving many stakeholders and an extended period of development, such as inner-city, mixed-use developments.

Branding differs from marketing and concept design in scope and timing. While marketing is targeted at selling a product to a particular group of consumers, the audience for branding is much wider. The challenge is to change the public’s image of an area. Compared with an urban

concept that embodies the essence of a specific design solution for an area, a brand acts as a nucleus out of which different design solutions can form and grow.

Branding should be started early in the development process in order to advance partnerships and to use the brand itself as a coherent decision-making tool, guiding design, marketing, management, events, programs, and other procedures. Such action allows the area development to achieve its fullest potential in terms of value creation.

Providing an example of an even earlier application of branding is ING Real Estate’s entry of a proposal in the development competition for Leidsche Rijn Centrum, an area in Leidsche Rijn, a new suburb in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands, that lies across the A2 motorway from the old city. Late last year, the city issued a European tender for the development of a new central district to sit on top of the motorway, thereby connecting the old and the new parts of the city. Leidsche Rijn Centrum is to complement the old city center by introducing a mix of residential, commercial, business, leisure, and cultural uses. Its master plan envisions an almost classic European city with squares and street grids, quite unlike traditional Dutch city centers. The project encompasses a total of 784 apartments, 13,200 square meters (142,084 sq ft) of office space, 26,500 square meters (285,244 sq ft) of retail space, 2,500 square meters (26,910 sq ft) for dining and cafés, 1,400 square meters (15,069 sq ft) of commercial space, and 4,000 square meters (43,056 sq ft) of noncommercial space.

Developers ING Real Estate and Proper Stok asked Placebrands to help define a brand for Leidsche Rijn Centrum as a whole to guide the development of their proposal and to exemplify “on brand” public and private spaces, architecture, retail uses, bars and restaurants, and residential uses. A team was formed, consisting

**The brand strategy behind the proposed Leidsche Rijn Centrum near the historic city center of Utrecht presents the center as a place that offers a wide variety of experiences with different spatial entities, such as squares, shopping streets, secluded courtyards, and a city garden, each with its distinct identity and atmosphere.**



of the developers, the coordinating architects, and a local housing corporation. Representatives from cultural and retail sectors were consulted during the process.

The brand strategy that was developed describes Leidsche Rijn Centrum as a place with a distinctive sense of class offering a wide variety of experiences, and providing landmarks, secluded courtyards, and rising streetscapes. Core values were tagged as class, intimacy, recognizability, variety—and a pleasant place to meet. This overall brand strategy was used to define coherent subbrands for particular parts, each subbrand with a distinct identity and personality that informed its look, feel, and activities, as well as its retail, residential, and leisure amenities. The brand and subbrands

strategy was used to help brief the architects and define the residential, retail, and restaurant offers.

The parties believed that the branding approach to this project generated a proposal that reflected their joint ambitions, that was coherent, and that offered the entire city of Utrecht a valuable new addition. Unfortunately, the entry was disqualified by the development competition committee because of a financial technicality, as were four of the five proposals submitted.

Developing large areas in European cities is a public/private challenge that makes lasting collaboration essential. Branding can be used as an innovative way to reach and maintain these partnerships. An example of this is highlighted in the recent ULI report, “Bridging the

City Investment Gap in Europe: The Role of an Urban Investment Network,” which launched the Urban Investment Network, a new platform for cities and private investors, and which will be presented at ULI’s Paris Conference in February 2009.

“Introducing branding to our capabilities as [an] area developer has resulted in tangible added value,” says Anneke de Vries, managing director, ING Real Estate Development Netherlands. “The brand partnership of Overhoeks has enabled our partnership of developers and public bodies to realize a truly imaginative and feasible strategy for the area development.” The brand promise is credited with attracting others, such as local entrepreneurs and cultural institutions, which can help bring the area to life. A professional

branding process can lead to more trust among the groups involved, reducing the role of legal contracting.

Such a process requires large investments of money and time, as the participation of representatives with substantial decision-making power is required. When these decision makers act on a brand, it can help establish strong mutual ties, enabling a partnership to overcome setbacks and search for novel solutions to create an area of lasting value to a city. **UL**

**GERT-JOOST PEEK** is research director, development international, ING Real Estate, which is headquartered in the Hague, the Netherlands, and has offices in 22 countries. **SICCO VAN GELDER** is the founder of Placebrands, a firm providing brand strategy service in urban areas, cities, regions, and countries, with offices in Amsterdam, London, and New York.