Place as Brand: Lessons from Two Canadian Cities

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At the intersection of urban entrepreneurialism, communications technologies and transnational flows of capital and consumers lies the "place brand": the representation of the city through the logos, slogans and symbols of advertising and branding agencies. Cities are increasingly turning to branding as a means of creating and conveying their identity to a public at large, for the purposes of attracting tourism, trade and talent, as well as greasing the wheels of public diplomacy.

This paper offers a brief overview of some of the origins, methods and outcomes of initiatives by cities to create a "brand identity" through private/public sector partnerships. The interpenetration of government and private enterprise to create the image of a city is not new; what is new is the transformation of the role of business in the articulation of a city's identity. Through a case study of the cities of Montreal and Toronto, this paper investigates the relationship between what the proponents and practitioners of place branding say it does and what it actually does in a conceptual and practical sense.

Introduction

Of the many promises and prophesies advanced by the globalization movement, perhaps the one that has been most thoroughly debunked is the claim that place no longer matters in the global picture. Though it is undeniable that global flows of people, information, goods and services, and capital have led to transnational networks, virtual communities, and new coordinates of production and exchange, this has not reduced the need for national and local frameworks of citizenship and belonging (Taylor 1994; Harvey 2001; Holston and Appadurai 2003).

But if globalization in all its forms has not fundamentally affected our need for place, it is undeniable that it has impacted our understanding of place, and the way in which our identities are formed in relationship to it. The new political and economic realities of global knowledge and practice – what Soja calls the "fourth modernization of capitalism" (1989: 5) – fundamentally alter the ideology of place-based identity. Following Anderson's oft-cited observation that "communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991) we are bound to consider which new forms of imagining globalization has wrought, and what they suggest for the formation of identity with regard to place.

In recent years one such form has seized the imagination of civic leaders, policy-makers and government representatives. This form is place branding, the creation and communication of a place's identity through the profit-based marketing techniques of private enterprise. This particular phenomenon – with its attendant congeries of self-styled place-branding consultants, quasi-academic journals and conferences, and media attention, both promotional and critical – signals a growing trend, one that has been adopted in countries with emerging market economies and with established capitalist economies alike. Place branding is a form of identification, differentiation, and recognition, a local discourse for a global audience.

But what happens to citizenship when places become brands? When Britain's Labour Party retreads its military hymn, "Rule Britannia," with a hip new image, "Cool Britannia"[1]? When policy centres and world summits hold round tables on branding and selling the Middle East,[2] Africa,[3] or Ontario[4]? When Germany is no longer seen as a federation of *Länder* but as "The Land of Ideas," its flag hanging not in front of Parliament but over the shapely figure of Claudia Schiffer?[5]

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[1] See, for example, Thomas Frank, "To the Dot-Com Station: Rebranding Britain with American Quackery," *Harpers Magazine,* May 2000: 76-81; and Peter Preston, "Selling Britain Abroad is Important, but We've Got to Buy It First," *Guardian,* 15 November 1999: 22.

[2] "Red Carpet In, Red Tape Out: Rebranding the Middle East," World Economic Forum, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 20-22 May 2006.

[3] "Strengthening Branding and Changing Perceptions," World Economic Forum on Africa, Cape Town, 31 May – 2 June 2006.

[4] Ontario Economic Leadership Summit, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, October 2005.

[5] See the press release and related materials at <www.land-of-ideas.org>.

Figure 1. Germany's 2006 branding campaign, on display at Grand Central Station, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of Darcy McFadyen.

This brief essay offers an overview of the phenomenon of place branding and the rationale that motivates its increasing popularity among government decision-makers and civic leaders as a key tool of urban, regional and national economic policy. It addresses the contradictions inherent in place branding through the category of "monopoly rent," a term borrowed from the language of political economy by geographer David Harvey to demonstrate its significance in cultural and social contexts, or in Harvey's words, to "generate rich interpretations of the many practical and personal dilemmas arising in the nexus between capitalist globalization, local political-economic developments and the evolution of cultural meanings and aesthetic values" (2001: 394-5).[6] To illustrate the contradictions, two case studies are presented, one about Montreal and one about Toronto, which illustrate the work of place branding in urban contexts.

These cases also offer a micro-portrait of some of the issues Canada faces with respect to national identity. What Charles Taylor refers to as the "unstable and constantly evolving amalgamation that we call Canada" (Taylor 1993: vii) is characterized by ongoing and unresolved tension over issues of identity and citizenship in the national discourse. This tension is a recurrent feature of policy debates that seek to establish a working definition of culture to incorporate divergent ideas and ideals of what it means to be Canadian. International relations scholar Jennifer Welsh calls Canada a "model citizen" for the rest of

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6   In many ways monopoly rent resembles the idea of aura advanced by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." I have chosen to use the category of monopoly rent here because it strikes me as better suited to the particular features of geographic space and the economic determinism of those who control it in branding processes. Perhaps we can conceive of monopoly rent as a kind of geographically specific aura.

the world, with responsibilities, as a successful liberal democracy, to represent its distinctiveness on the global stage. "Even if we haven't always been able to articulate who we are," Welsh explains, "we have prided ourselves on being able to articulate what we believe in" (2004: 192). Yet this ongoing inability to articulate "who we are" underlines the contingency of Canadian identity.

These issues are hardly particular to Canadian cities, however; issues of integration and inclusion of diverse populations, questions of citizenship and belonging, and the increasingly prioritized belief that countries need to promote themselves on the world stage are common to all localities in an era of global awareness.

Place/Brand

Can a place be branded like a product? What happens when a community's identity is forged not through shared traditions and rituals, kinship and ethnicity, language or geographic proximity, but through the profit-based marketing strategies of private enterprise?

"Cities have always been brands, in the truest sense of the word," explains Simon Anholt (2005), prominent branding consultant and oft-quoted "guru" of the place branding movement. By this he means that for an external audience, at least, the character of a city is largely determined by "a handful of qualities or attributes, a promise, some kind of story" (Anholt 2005). This "story," Anholt argues, plays a major role in public perception of the city, which in turn influences powerful external actors to make decisions – whether to visit, invest, or relocate to the city in question. Place branding is always, crucially, about competition for resources made scarce in a global context: tourism, trade, talent, or inward investment. Branding is thus a way to influence decision-making by massaging and orienting the "story" about a place to craft a narrative that will be compelling to the decision-makers. The purpose of the narrative is to present the locality in such a way as to set it apart from its competitors, highlighting its offerings as "unique," "different," "unparalleled" – a hyperbole familiar to us from tourism ads and travel brochures.

In Harvey's terms, this is the work of "monopoly rent" (2001: chapter 18) – the modeling of difference, authenticity and uniqueness of a "tradable item" in the interest of acquiring surplus value and profit. Those who control this resource can extract "rent" from those desiring to use it for its "unique," "authentic" and "non-replicable" qualities. The owner of a unique work of art, for example, can charge considerable amounts for the privilege of viewing it; or exact a high price when selling or trading it.

Monopoly rent can apply equally to a geographically defined space, not by directly trading it, of course, but by "trading upon" it through marketing practices (Harvey 2001: 395). This is the *raison d'être* of place-based branding, a process which constantly seeks methods to make a particular region appear more attractive than that of its neighbors. Each place brand boasts more luxurious hotels, better food, more innovative scientific research, greater tolerance among its people, whiter sand on its beaches, and so on.

But as Harvey points out, the category of monopoly rent contains two vital contradictions. First, although uniqueness and particularity are crucial to the rate of monopoly rent, the commodity cannot be so unique as to be outside the realm of tradability. In other words, in order to function as a commodity, the item – or place – must have a price, which presents its value as exchangeable rather than as truly authentic or unique. To maintain these terms of exchange, the number of categories in which to display uniqueness is restricted to accommodate the perceived desires of those wishing to visit or invest. As Harvey says, "the more easily marketable such items become, the less unique and special they appear" (2001: 396). But here we arrive at the second contradiction. At times, the modeling of difference, uniqueness and authenticity in the global marketplace can also serve to set a place apart in

progressive terms, imbuing its citizens with a sense of empowerment and the ability to resist the trader's calculus.

In their efforts to create a recognizable "brand," two Canadian cities prominently exemplify these contradictions – Toronto the first, and Montreal the second. Let us now turn to the case of Toronto, to illustrate the first contradiction at work.

Selling "Toronto Unlimited"

Toronto's attitude towards its residents can be characterized as one of "diversity management" (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005) – an attempt to reconcile the city's vastly multicultural and multilingual population with ethnoculturally inclusive policies on everything from education to business loans to "employment equity" (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002). This is seen as necessary for Toronto, given that close to half of its population (approximately 1.2 million out of the city's 2.48 million) is foreign-born (Statistics Canada 2002), and over one third of Toronto residents speak a language other than English at home – over 100 languages and dialects are spoken in the city (City of Toronto 2006).

This "politics of recognition" (Taylor 1994) also extends, not surprisingly, to its communication strategies. In 2004 a joint initiative by institutional actors from both the private and public sectors was undertaken to develop a brand identity for the city. An investment of $4 million[7] ($2 million from Tourism Toronto; $1 million from the province of Ontario's Ministry of Tourism and Recreation; $500,000 from the federal government; and $500,000 from the City Summit Alliance, a public/private business-based leadership group) paid for thirteen months of marketing research, including 250 interviews "with key business and community leaders," 14 focus groups, and ongoing citizen input. The brand's visual identity was launched with much fanfare in June 2005:

Figure 2. The "Toronto Unlimited" logo.

To explain the use of "unlimited" as a branding strategy, a press release offered the following rationale:

> Our brand speaks to the unlimited opportunities, offerings and potential to be realized in Toronto. It also speaks to the creative and imaginative perspectives of Torontonians – we have been blessed with a community of varied and diverse backgrounds/heritage which contribute to a broad outlook as opposed to a narrow one. (Tourism Toronto 2005)

Almost immediately, the campaign was roundly criticized by local media. "Toronto Unlimited: Uninspired or Just Unimaginative?" read one headline. "New Campaign "Brands" Us as Suckers," said another. The general tenor of the commentary was that the branding initiative was a waste of taxpayers' money and an embarrassment to the city. Overall, it was felt that the campaign did little to improve public perception of city, either at home or abroad.

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7   All figures are in Canadian dollars.

The criticism only increased when, a few weeks following the launch, it was discovered that Toronto was not alone in its attempt to market itself as a "community of varied and diverse backgrounds" with "unlimited opportunities": In July 2005 I was asked to write an article for the *Toronto Star,* a local newspaper, to address the adverse reactions to the city's new branding campaign When I interviewed the chief executive of a Canadian branding firm, he sent me the following image for inclusion in the article:

Figure 3. Brand identity for external promotion of the City of London (England).

In 2003, a public/private sector tourism promotion group backed by the Mayor of London and the London Development Agency, had launched London Unlimited, a brand identity for the City of London.

"London Unlimited's goal is to maximize international investment in London across all sectors including tourism, trade, inward investment, higher education, creative industries, culture and sport, as well as promoting London as a host city for major events," stated a press release from 11 November 2003. A quote by advertising executive and Team London chair Tamara Ingram reads: "London is a wonderfully diverse city and there is so much here for international businesses, tourists, students and investors…"

Of course, it is not surprising that London should also choose an all-inclusive approach to brand its identity, given the multicultural and multilingual character of its population. Whether this copycat gaffe is the product of ideological isomorphism or merely a regrettable lack of research on the part of the Toronto advertisers, the message is clear: the politics of recognition, the potential for a place and a people to form a culture, do not translate well into the shorthand of the brand.

Branding à la Montreal

> "This is where you come to indulge. To party. To shop. To eat. And most of all to celebrate life… à la Montreal." – Tourisme Montreal advertising brochure, 2004

Montreal's recent economic revitalization puts the city in good stead to regain the international recognition it enjoyed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Expo '67 and the 1976 Olympics put the city on the world stage. Employment growth has steadily risen since 1997, the number of welfare recipients is at a ten-year low, and the number of building and construction permits issued in 2005 rank among the highest of the last decade (Ville de Montreal 2005).

Positive economic signs notwithstanding, Montreal's status as a world city hinges more on its cultural capital than its economic clout. As sociologists Germain and Rose (2000) point out, if economic considerations were the prevailing criteria to achieve world city status, Montreal would be conspicuously absent from the list. With the island's population of just over one million (Statistics Canada 2002) and an economy that still relies heavily on manufacturing, its limited service and industrial offerings put it more on a par with mid-sized North American cities like Baltimore and Boston. It is not even ranked the most important Canadian city: Toronto has a higher population, larger tourist receipts, and a more diversified economy (Germain and Rose 2000).

Rather it is Montreal's symbolic capital that places it in the ranks of world cities along with New York, Rome, and other prominent locales. Its status is in large part linked to language: it is the third-largest French-speaking city in the world, after Paris and Kinshasa (Congo), and the only major French-speaking city in North America (Germain and Rose 2000). This feature grants the city uncontestable "uniqueness," and is heavily leveraged in its branding initiatives. The city is presented to visitors as "a European-style city in North America that offers a unique experience because of how passionately we celebrate life" (Tourisme Montreal 2002). Indeed, tourism has consistently been used as a strategy for urban revitalization in Montreal since the 1960s. The three levels of government in Canada (local, provincial and federal) have invested, by one estimate, nearly seven billion dollars in building Montreal's tourism infrastructure between 1967 and 2002 (Levine 2003).

The discourses employed at each level to justify Montreal's economic strength, however, are frequently at odds, as this "unique" positioning of Montreal and Quebec places it squarely in the middle of the longstanding debate that characterizes Canadian culture. On the one hand, Montreal's cultural distinctiveness is seen as part of the country's strength as a national player on global terrain. On the other, its promotion as a distinct cultural commodity raises concern that this might constitute a crucial step towards Quebec's on-again off-again goal of secession from Canada and establishment as a sovereign entity with the right to self-governance.

The tensions inherent in Montreal's positioning as a unique city in this regard were manifest in the production process of a recent tourism campaign in the province. In 1999 I worked as a copywriter at a Montreal advertising agency. One of our clients was a provincial government ministry responsible for the promotion of Quebec in both domestic and international markets. We were responsible for developing advertisements for the international market – at this time primarily the United States – through the media of print, radio, television, and the Web, as well as direct mail and newspaper inserts. Though our role was to execute the project from creative conception through to market, our mandate was accompanied by a number of restrictions. First, the ministry requested that we avoid the use of the word "Canada" in the ads. Second, photographs used in the brochures were carefully scrutinized to ensure that they portrayed a particular image:
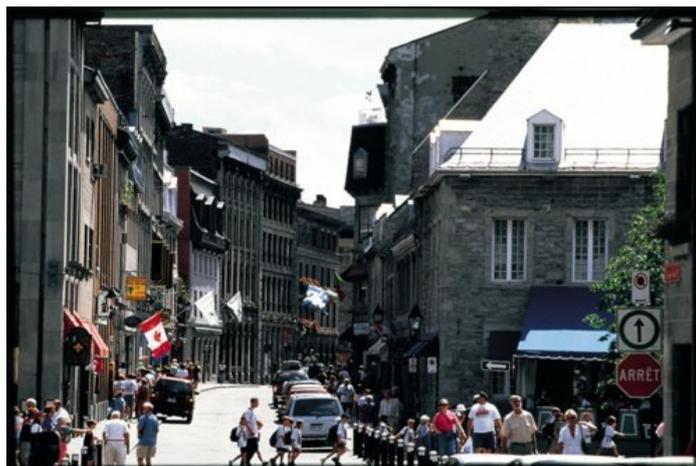
Figure 4. A prominent street in Old Montreal, a popular tourist spot in the city. The advertising agency was asked to modify this photograph before it could be used in the tourism advertising.
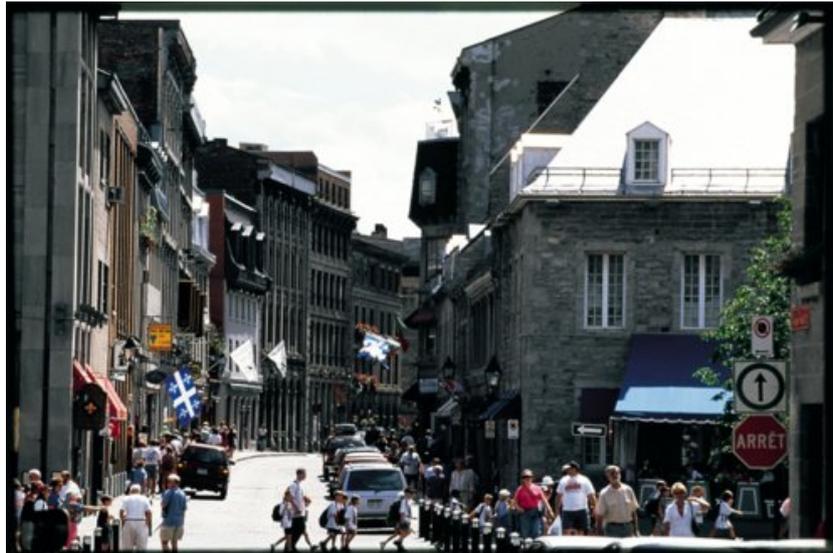
Figure 5. The photograph after modification. The Canadian flag has been replaced by the Quebec flag.

In effect, the image desired by the provincial government was of a Quebec that was "Canada-free" – that is, not reliant on the national interest. If Toronto's brand strategy was to offer diversity through a politics of inclusion, Montreal's brand of diversity was of a rather more exclusive sort. By presenting itself as unmoored from national tethers, the city could better highlight its distinctive ethnolinguistic offering.

Here we arrive at the second contradiction of monopoly rent. Though uniqueness is a marketable entity, used to attract scarce capital resources away from other putatively "unique" localities, it is also the basis for creative local cultural developments which can foster a strong sense of identity, citizenship and belonging. (Harvey 2001). This potential is what Harvey calls "spaces of hope," localities where "the progressive forces of culture appropriate those of capital rather than the other way round" (411):

> The problem for oppositional movements is to use the validation of particularity, uniqueness, authenticity, culture and aesthetic meanings in ways that open up new possibilities and alternatives rather than to allow them to be used to create a more fertile terrain from which monopoly rents can be extracted by those who have both the power and the compulsive inclination to do so. (Harvey 2001: 410)

In this regard, Montreal's "brand" can be considered a successful validation: the portrayal of the city accords with some of its citizens' political and cultural goals of distinctiveness. But not all citizens are represented in this image. Montreal's population, though less ethnically diverse than Toronto's (approximately one fifth of the population is foreign-born [Statistics Canada 2002]), is still home to multiple ethnic and visible minorities. Montreal's selling strategy, as a Europe in North America, operates to the detriment of the other cultures of the city.

Conclusions

As a socio-spatial determinant of identity, branding offers a shorthand for communication and recognition in an international context. What it does not provide is a realistic way to account for the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterizes the population of Canadian cities. If Toronto's city leadership can be criticized for its "all-in" brand of diversity, Montreal's brand suffers from the opposite but no less problematic issue of exclusionary

differentiation. In both cases, the potential for real diversity and an alternative politics is subsumed into a sanitized and commodified form, a "food-and-festivals" brand of aestheticized difference (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005; Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002).

A city's identity is negotiated by branding agencies through a constant oscillation between two related, yet contradictory poles: the desire for uniqueness, and the desire for recognition. Though the status of a global city is predicated on its distinctiveness from other global cities, it must still conform to certain standards in order to be recognized as properly global. Branding applies the logic of best practices in business – efficiency, consistency, and coherence – to keep competition operating on a restricted scale. In so doing it symbolically flattens the social, cultural and physical topography that makes a place inherently unique, then reshapes it until it fits into preordained market categories. In the case of Canada, such aestheticized portraits appear especially deformed in light of the country's already existing progressive policies and successful accounts of tolerance, diversity and respect.

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