

## **‘BECOMING LOCAL’ IN AMSTERDAM: THE SYNERGY BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND CITY BRANDING IN STRENGTHENING LOCAL IDENTITY**

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### **Abstract**

*Cities are continuously changing due to economic conditions, demographic changes, urban planning policies etc. Newly emerging economies contribute to the consolidation of different outlooks in urban planning practices such as city branding, which has been widely connected with cultural policies. Nevertheless, this approach has been widely criticized since there have often been negative outcomes for the existing places and residents, as for example gentrification or loss of local identity. During the last years, a shift is observed towards the emphasis on the social aspect of city branding. Also, a new economy based on creative professionals appeared, enriching the theoretical approaches of the creative city and adding new dimensions in cultural policies. Strategies are now observed to be directed more to the preservation of the local identity and the collective memory of the city.*

*Two case studies in Amsterdam show two different ways of ‘becoming local’ processes. The first refers to the ‘broedplaatsen’ initiative – the ‘Art Factories’ program. This creative policy led to the construction of meaningful places with multiple uses, housing the creative professionals of the city and hosting multiple activities. Besides, the abandoned places were part of the history of the city and this evolution resulted in the preservation and strengthening of local identity. The second case study concerns Amsterdam’s festivals, combining both global and local characteristics. Festivals are mostly situated in public spaces and offer an easy access for the visitor to the life of the city, thus a different way of ‘becoming local’.*

### **1. Introduction**

Cities are continuously evolving due to factors such as economic conditions, demographic changes, and urban planning policies. Newly emerging economies contribute to the consolidation of different outlooks in urban planning practices such as city branding, which has been widely connected with cultural policies. The idea of the creative city and the practices of city marketing and branding have been widely criticised as expressions of neoliberal ideas in the capitalist city. The literature offers a variety of city marketing and branding cases as well as the controversial discourse of the creative city. This paper analyses the linkage between the social approach of city branding and the creative city idea.

Passing from a theoretical framework to the analysis of specific cases from the marketing of Amsterdam as a creative city, the main hypothesis to be tested is if, and how, local identity is reinforced through the aforementioned processes. The first case refers to the ‘broedplaatsen’ initiative – the ‘Art Factories’ program. This creative policy led to the construction of meaningful places with multiple uses, housing the creative professionals of the city and hosting multiple activities. The second case study concerns Amsterdam’s festivals, combining both global and local

characteristics. Festivals are mostly situated in public spaces and offer an easy access for the visitor to the livelihood of the city.

## **2. City Branding: cultural and creative approaches**

Following the rise of the new leisure, cultural and knowledge urban economies, there was a growing need for cities to obtain distinctive characteristics in the post-industrial city and the economically globalized context (Cox, 1995; Beriatos and Gospodini, 2004). The new ‘product’ (good) of the city to be projected was its image and the new means in urban development was the city marketing process (Hannigan, 2003; Kavaratzis, 2004). During the years, city marketing passed through many phases, from a simple place advertisement or promotion to an integrated city branding procedure, aiming at the production and distribution of an attractive city image (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). The outcome of the city branding procedure is the construction of a strong place identity, acknowledged by the target groups, belonging either to the internal environment (local community) or to the external environment.

Place branding has a variety of expressions, as for example destination branding or place of origin branding (Kavaratzis, 2005). Nevertheless, city branding is considered to be a strategic approach through which the place’s image is improved, involving materiality, institutions, practices and representations (Kalandides, 2012). This offers an integrated version of city branding, taking under consideration all parts of the social context, trying to enhance the city’s image. As Mommaas (2002) cites ‘it is a strategy through which cities gain an image, a cultural value which ideally functions as a source of added symbolic and economic value’.

The place image to be created is strongly interwoven with the cultural psyche of the city. Peoples’ culture (not necessarily coinciding with popular culture) is almost the most authentic element that defines the identity of the place. Thus, city branding that is based upon culture has gained ground, enhanced by the fact that a cultural image contributes to touristic growth. Cultural branding (Kavaratzis, 2005) became a very well renowned practice in the age of the flagship projects and led to the massive production of cultural projects, destined for cultural consumption. This approach was adopted by lots of cities around the world, integrating ‘aggressive’ cultural policies in their urban development agenda, and more specifically applying practices that intensified the ‘cultural consumption’ orientation. The ‘Bilbao effect’ has always been the desideratum, whereas reverse procedures often took place.

All these factors led to the ‘hard branding’ of the cities (Evans, 2003), with eventually homogenized cultural images and identities, without taking into account local distinctive characteristics (Knox, 2011). Gentrification and social exclusion were the most usual impacts after such actions, along with the loss of the collective memory, as many times flagship cultural projects replaced the authenticity of neighbourhoods (often slum or workers’ neighbourhoods), with the gentrifying effects. The case of Barcelona is representative of this effect, with ‘Poble Nou’ and ‘El Raval’ districts being violently gentrified after the Barcelonetta redesign and the cultural redevelopment through MACBA, thus losing their historic local identity and the collective memory of the place. Numerous examples of cities around the world with similar characteristics can be spotted. Moreover, as Kunzmann (2004) says ‘the cultural content remains the last bastion of local identity’. So, cultural branding could have a twofold and ambiguous role; on one side, negative outcomes for the social context of the city could emerge and on the other side strengthening local identity could be at work. The key is to define practices that could differentiate the effect favourably towards local identity and collective memory.

To avoid the negative results of aggressive city branding tactics, during the last years a more social aspect of city marketing emerged. Based primarily on participatory planning procedures and bottom-up processes, the 4R's place branding approach became quite popular (Aitken and Campello, 2011). Referring to the rights, roles, relationships and responsibilities of community's members, the city's image isn't now managed as a 'commercial product' that needs to be communicated. On the contrary, it is created by the true members of a community, hence linking the place's true identity and collective memory to the desired image and strategies. In this way, a place's cultural memory (Olick, 2007) can be preserved, safeguarding collective representations and urban symbols.

During the last decades, interest on urban development has shifted from mere cultural strategies towards the creative class and the creative city discourse (Landry, 2000/2008; Florida, 2002/2012). Creativity and innovation became the keywords in the 2000s EU's policies for an attractive urban image. This resulted in the anguished quest and adoption of the 'creative city' label from many cities. The catching idea, according to Florida's work, was the return to the human capital, entitled as the driving force of the new economy. On the other hand, Landry and Hyams define the creative city in relation to the creative and imaginative thinking at all urban levels, along with a set of attributes that mould a creative milieu (Landry and Hyams, 2012). Landry's ideas are more widely acceptable because of his holistic approach of the city as a complex and multi-faceted entity.

Nevertheless, the creative city rhetoric has been widely criticized, since the relevant strategies and proposals were connected to neoliberalist ideas, leading to 'creative destruction', slum clearance, gentrification, ambiguity of urban policies, etc. (Peck, 2005; Vanolo, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008). More specifically, Pratt (2011) describes Florida's creative city as 'hard branding with soft edge'. On the other hand, there can be a differentiated viewpoint concerning the linkage between city branding and creativity. Creative places can be spotted in cities that try to attract creative professionals or implement creative policies, involving public space, with positive effects on the social milieu.

### **3. Creativity in Amsterdam: Art factories, festivals and the public realm**

Amsterdam is one of the most famous European capitals concerning its city marketing and branding strategy. The successful strategy goes through many stages and at many levels. The strong, but currently obsolete, image of sex, drugs and drinks on which tourism was based since the 1970s, had to be replaced by another image covering various domains in order to maintain and enhance the competitiveness of the city at the international level. Nonetheless, through participatory methods, certain 'priority dimensions' associated mostly with the residents' quality of life and cultural issues, were selected, concluding in three 'core values, namely creativity, innovation and the spirit of commerce on which the brand of the city should be based' (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007). Nowadays, Amsterdam is considered to be the creative capital of the Netherlands, with the relevant policies, professionals, industries, networks, organisations and events.

#### *3.1 The 'Broedplaatsen' initiative*

One of the most interesting policies, especially in the way that it had been evolved, was the 'Art Factories' programme – 'Broedplaatsen' initiative, designated as a 'socially inclusive' creative initiative (Peck, 2012). In the 1990s, Amsterdam had already developed the appropriate environment, where cultural and creative industries could flourish. An open, diverse and vital city along with dynamic, urban culture set the scenery for a prosperous 'creative era'. In the late 1990s, a squatters' movement set the breeding ground for this creative initiative, destined to be one of the most influential

creative policies in the city of Amsterdam and abroad. Vacant, occupied warehouses by artists and anarchists became the beginning of a controversy between them and the property-development bloc, ‘between the soul of the city and the specter of gentrification’ (Peck, 2012). Following violent interactions, a kind of negotiations occurred between the squatters and the municipality, with the squatting movement setting the foundations for the ‘Art Factories’ programme. The final outcome was the emergence of a new creative policy, based on the re-use of abandoned space by start-ups, dealing with culture and creativity.

The ‘Bureau Broedplaatsen’ is the main agency that undertook the coordination of this new venture since 1999. Its goal is to attract young creative professionals, who are considered to be the basis of the creative industry to be grown in Amsterdam. Primary responsibilities are the housing of all these professionals, taking into account the property crisis that offers a vast buildings’ stock, available to re-use, and the precarious nature of creative jobs, thus searching for affordable and inspiring living and working spaces (Bureau Broedplaatsen, 2012). What is more important now for Bureau Broedplaatsen and the city is that the accumulation of such creative professionals attracts international companies, specialised in the creative sector, in order to establish themselves in Amsterdam. This concludes to the combined situation of urban development and the configuration of competitive characteristics in relation to the transformation of abandoned spaces in synergy with the local community.

The facts show that every year approximately 500 young creative professionals look for suitable living and/or working space in Amsterdam, and by 2012 more than 3500 living and/or working places have been created for them (Bureau Broedplaatsen, 2012). The Broedplaatsen Programme in its implementation affects urban environment in four ways: *cultural* – Amsterdam as a laboratory of talent; *economic* – attraction of international corporations; *social* - linking with the neighbourhood and bottom-up approach and *spatial* – avoiding gentrification and reuse of derelict space. The most interesting part is the adoption of the bottom-up approach in the way Art Factories are being created and the interaction with the local community. The ‘NDSM Wharf’ in Amsterdam is a representative case.

NDSM (Nederlandsche Dok en Scheepsbouw Maatschappij) was constructed in a derelict site in docklands, through bottom-up processes. It is about a ‘self-made city that has developed naturally, driven by its residents’<sup>1</sup>. A private initiative, comprised of artists and other creative professionals, asked for the redevelopment of the former industrial area. After the supply of a financial budget, the total site of 80.000m<sup>2</sup> was redeveloped by them to an incubator of creativity, culture and talent (Creative Metropolises, 2010). Nowadays, NDSM hosts a variety of creative professionals and events, transforming a semi-private place to public space. Additionally, the self-organised initiative, derived from the squatters’ esprit, avoided the shortcomings of possible gentrification, whilst allowed the productive usage of abandoned space, yet useful and important to the local community. Being the centre of underground culture and becoming one of the most vivid civic spaces in Amsterdam through creation, innovation and events, the NDSM ‘Art City’ safeguards the heritage, memories and identity of the city, moving from the industrial production to the creative production.

### 3.2 ‘Festivalisation’ in Amsterdam

Experiences, additionally to ‘products’ and goods, have long been targeted as the new cultural goods. The experience economy that emerged in the 1990s intensified the need for organising events in the city as experiences that could emotionally engage the consumer (Klingmann, 2007). Events are widely considered to be of the most important city marketing tools (Kavaratzis, 2004). Mega-events, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vandejong.com/en/#!/en/case/ndsm/>

events and festivals of all kinds are being recruited for the configuration and promotion of the city's cultural image. Particularly during the branding of the 'creative city', the production of spectacular urban events has undeniably become a presumption (Harcup, 2000). The plethora of events in a city has once again been accused for cultural 'hard branding' of the city, whilst cities end up being 'festival marketplaces' (Harvey, 1991). Also, festivals are accused to transform the city, altering its spatial configuration and attributing the city with a particular identity, offering a sanitised version of it (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011).

There exists a variety of impacts of festivals on cities, but festivals serve not only economic development as well as induce erratic symbolisms. Positive social effects can be the residents' or visitors' socialisation, the community's boost of self-confidence and the residents' cultural quest. Some of the events rely on the cultural past or the collective memory of the city, trying to recreate the city's image relating the authenticity of the past to the imaginary present. In the case of Amsterdam, festivals are regarded as the strongest tool to strengthen the city's profile, as they can attract international attention (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007). Along with the principal goal that the city's marketing plan has to serve, the events are considered to be the mirage of Amsterdam's tradition as cultural centre. This old image intermingles with the contemporary cultural image coming from the creative city identity, thus offering a plethora of urban events.

It can be said that Amsterdam 'suffers' from 'festivalisation': quick look on the city's official portal leaves the visitor stunned by the plurality of festivals, organised by various partners. The events are numerous, categorized in many genres, such as music, dance, culinary, theatre festivals etc. Surely, it is the place for a visitor to be from any background and in any time of the year. But do the same also apply for the residents of the city? It is certain that eventually the physical form of public space will be temporarily altered, but this is something required for the proper implementation of the event. What is more important is the representation of the real identity of the city's population through the plethora of festivals. Amsterdam's population is characterized by diversity and openness, with more than 170 different nationalities and 45% ethnic minorities, with great tolerance towards the LGBT community and a large percentage of young and active population<sup>2</sup>. The plurality of festivals reflects this image of the social context of the city, along with the contemporary creativity that defines the city.

Another viewpoint on the contribution of the festivals to the city is that a visitor becomes local and a resident rediscovers local identity or the collective memory of his/her city. Three festivals, amongst others, demonstrate this assumption. 'Grachtenfestival' (Canal Festival) is a classical music festival, open-air situated on the canals of the city providing stage for young, talented musicians. The festival is realized in public space, dominated by the city's history (canals), culture (classical music) and contemporary creative people (young and talented musicians). 'Roots Open Air Festival' is a world music festival, situated on an open park with free entry. The festival gives the opportunity of socialisation (open-air park), 'occupying' public space, yet for culture transmission through music and promoting diversity, supporting local ethnic minorities (world music). 'Amsterdam Heritage Days' is a celebration of the city's history with open doors of important buildings, monuments and private homes, tours, exhibitions and lectures, free of charge. The event features the built heritage of the city, part of its history, giving the opportunity to the resident for a cultural quest of his city and to the visitor a chance to 'become local'<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.iamsterdam.com/en/>

<sup>3</sup> All information for Amsterdam's three festivals are driven from the site: <http://www.iamsterdam.com/en/>

#### 4. Conclusions

City marketing and branding practices have been widely connected to the creative city idea in recent years. The need for cities to establish themselves in the global hierarchy demands new ways of celebrating their uniqueness and distinctive characteristics. Nevertheless, this fervent pursuit of rise in the global rankings leads, in general, to serious impacts on the social context of the city. Cultural ‘hard-branding’ of the city, through flagship projects or spectacular events, can result to gentrified neighbourhoods and social exclusion. Local identity and collective memory are lost and residents feel alienated from the public realm, and not attached to the local community.

With the leading case of Amsterdam, as a city that carried out one of the most famous city marketing plans and place branding tactics along with the domination of creative identity, it has been shown that these practices, usually linked to ‘creative destruction’, don’t only serve economic and urban development, but also serve and respect the culture and identity of the human capital of the city. The ‘Broedplaatsen’ initiative designated the inspiring Art Factories policy, through which the city supported cultural endeavours, subsidizing young creative people to develop their own space in derelict sites. The most important part was the adoption of participatory methods and the bottom-up approach in the process of the whole venture. The spillovers covered all parties and the policy seems to have been successful: the city gained a strong creative community that it was looking for; the squatters and creative professionals acquired officially their own, collective, artistic space, constituting an active community; the abandoned industrial heritage was redeveloped through new cultural uses and a bottom-up approach has been encouraged. The case of the Art Factories policy and NDSM demonstrates the image of the creative city as a multi-faceted entity with intertwined characteristics.

Additionally, festivals and events comprise the most important tools of Amsterdam’s marketing, thus creating a city of spectacle. Nonetheless, local identity, in combination with the distinctive characteristics of the social context of the city, are depicted and celebrated by the plurality of the festivals and their themes. Besides negative outcomes that follow the city’s ‘festivalisation’, people and their cultural diversities are represented through the events, along with the emergence of a collective memory. As a final conclusion, cultural branding of the cities has always been controversial. What is crucial for a socially oriented creative city branding, is the adoption of good practices, involving social inclusion and integration of local communities.

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