Chapter 2
Place Branding and Nonstandard Regionalization in Europe

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Abstract Place branding might, could, and maybe even should play a central role in urban and regional governance. The vantage point of this chapter is that every place is a brand and that the processes of nonstandard regionalization that can be witnessed all over Europe create new places and, thus, new place brands. When employing place branding to these new types of regions, however, the traditional meta-geographies cannot be ignored. In this chapter, the aim is to take a first step to bring some order into the chaos. To this end, three categories of nonstandard regionalization are proposed and compared concerning place branding.

Keywords Place branding • Nonstandard regionalization • Urban and regional governance

Introduction

This chapter offers a critical view of place branding in relation to nonstandard regionalization. It is not meant to be the outline of a theoretical framework, but together with the rest of the contributions in this book, it aims to set out some lines of thought for both theory and practice.

The recent decades have seen a strong increase in the implementation of place marketing and place branding instruments in relation to economic development in Europe (Kavaratzis 2004; Boisen 2007; Braun 2008). Although some voices have been heard proposing that place marketing and place branding can be (and, arguably, should be) viewed outside of the traditional focus on competitiveness (Kalandides 2012), the neoliberal economic policy doctrine places strategic thinking and policy action in line with the competitiveness paradigm firmly on the agenda of local and

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regional authorities. At the same time, various developments have seen a rise of nonstandard regionalization in Europe. Many of these "new" regions engage in so-called place branding.

The belief that places are actors in an increasingly competitive struggle against each other in ever-expanding markets might partly explain the rising attention for place marketing and place branding (Boisen 2007; Lucarelli and Berg 2011; Zenker et al. 2013), but it does not tell the whole story. Regardless to what extent this interurban and interregional competition is real or just perceived, the consequences has become facts (Boisen et al. 2011). Brenner's *re-scaling of statehood* and Harvey's famously coined *from managerialism to entrepreneurialism* both signify structural changes still in the process of happening. Brenner (2004) explains that the distribution of responsibilities, costs, and benefits over different scalar levels of spatial authorities (e.g., EU, state, region, municipality) and between the public and the private sector is changing. Harvey (1989) observed that the roles of local and regional authorities are shifting from the provision of public services to a more direct involvement in the economic activities themselves, viewing the place as a collective project. Both scholars signify a shift from government to governance, while pointing out that the trajectories vary highly from one geographical context to another.

The emphasis on competitiveness and entrepreneurialism has created an incentive for places to engage in promotion, marketing, and branding. The perceived competitive field has evolved from a situation wherein most cities and regions asserted themselves within a national context to a situation where the national contexts are becoming less important. As a consequence, cities and regions sense that their position in a larger geographical context is of more importance than ever. The application of traditional marketing and branding techniques to places has brought about a golden age of mass implementation (Boisen et al. 2011).

Looking at strategies, policies, projects, advisory reports, and the body of emerging scientific literature, the concepts of "promotion," "marketing," and "branding" are often used as synonyms for various instruments employed in place assertion. This is probably due to the fact that the theory was largely formed *after* the first waves of implementation. There exists a substantial amount of terminological confusion among both practitioners and scholars. And within the scientific community, no shared definitions exist so far (Gertner 2011; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). However, as far as the author of this chapter is concerned, there is a significant difference between the three most frequently used concepts: (a) *promotion* is mainly about generating favorable communication, (b) *marketing* is mainly about the strategic process of value exchange through the balancing out of supply and demand, and (c) *branding* is mainly about creating, sustaining, and shaping a relevant presence in the minds (and hearts) of people. However distinct, these three concepts are unquestionably interrelated. But only the concept of *branding* requires an indivisible presence: a "brand." In this chapter, *place branding* therefore refers to the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people.

Every Place Is a Brand

Every place is a brand, but not every brand is a place. Places and brands work in much the same way. They are both distinctive presences in the human mind. They are denominators, loaded with associations, and take up unique positions within a nestled hierarchy of relationships. Mentioning the name of a known place immediately produces a set of associations and values in the mind of the listener. Mentioning the name of an unknown place produces a vacuum, because of the lack of associations. The human mind will do its best to fill this vacuum using all information at hand (see also Chap. 1 in this book). This includes spatial knowledge and representations from other places, often at other scalar levels. The name of the place thus signifies values that are attributed to the place. And the place itself is more than a spatial defined area that has been named. Places are spatially annotated, mental containers that have meanings, values, features, and stories attributed to them in a complex interplay between expectations, experiences, and emotions. In this understanding, a place is not a point on a map but a social construct (Boisen et al. 2011).

A place is an entity; it exists as long as there are people that agree to its existence. This suggests that places can emerge and disappear as a result of social processes. Places hold power over people (Brenner 2004; Massey 2005), over their self-perception, and over their ambitions. Places tell stories, raise expectations, and promise specific values. In a recent work, Umberto Eco (2013) eloquently makes the case that places that might never have existed in the material world have inspired people either to go look for them (thereby discovering new, "real" places) or to improve their own places. In a temporal sense, a place comes into existence when meaning is attributed to space and ends when no meaning is left. Places that have lost all reference yet still appear on historical maps are still seen as places simply due to their historical dimension. As such, historical dormant places can be brought back to life if they are relevant enough to contemporary people. Places can thus (re-)appear and disappear if they gain or lose relevance. More often than disappearing and reappearing, the meanings attributed to a specific place change over time through a continuous re-structuration process of "direct" and "mediated" experiences with and of the place (Adams 2009). If this change is something that happens collectively, one could argue that the place itself changes through an evolutionary process.

Weichhart et al. (2006), as utilized by Kalandides (2012), distinguish three processes of place identity: (a) *identification of*, (b) *being identified as*, and (c) *identification with*. These processes of place identification closely resemble how people relate to corporate and consumer brands. Also, they fit into the evolutionary approach sketched in the above: If more people stop identifying the place as such, stop being identified as belonging to a place (and stop identifying other people to belong to that place too), and stop identifying with the place, the relevance of the place weakens. When the opposite happens, the relevance of the place strengthens. In this sense, outside of the conceptual discussion, there is no clear distinction between the identity and image of a place. They are two sides of the same coin.

It's a matter of perspective. If we can discern an evolutionary process referring to spatial identities, we can also discern an evolutionary process referring to spatial images.

So if places are brands entangled in a process wherein their meanings and thus their identities and images are continuously evolving, where does that leave place branding? The "-ing" refers to the process of consciously trying to influence and even orchestrate this process. Ambitious. Kalandides (2011) argues that place branding is "a strategic scheme to improve a place's image." Writing about city branding, Kavaratzis (2004, p. 67) states: "Everything a city consist of, everything that takes place in the city and is done by the city, communicates messages about the city's image." Combining the two, place branding becomes a strategic scheme to improve everything that happens in the place and is done by the place. The reference to the place as an actor here is a metaphor. It includes all actors doing something in, with, about, or towards the place. It is therefore dramatically wrong to view place branding (or traditional branding for that matter) as similar to promotion, advertisement, and campaigns. Place branding is not about selling the place, but about being the place or becoming the place.

Following this argument, place branding can only hope to achieve a measure of success if it unites, employs, and targets both the mental and the material attributes of place. This requires that the place brand strategy has a say in all other policy domains. Otherwise, policies can be counterproductive in terms of their consequences for the brand of the place. Although this might seem impossible to implement in any given institutional context, it is not. The place brand strategy could be a framework of core values, emphasizing the identity of the place. Such a framework should then work as a set of guiding principles against which all other strategies and policies should be judged to the extent to which they are on-brand or off-brand and to the extent to which their contribution to the place brand is positive, negative, or neutral.

But if place branding emerges as an integral, strategic approach to everything in and about the place, how does it differ from governance as such? Maybe it does not? Maybe a place brand strategy should be the centerpiece of the governance of a place? Since place branding combines both the material and the mental aspects of a place and consciously aims to influence both, it is broader, more strategic, and more inclusive than traditional governance strategies, which tend to focus on either the mental (often limited to promotion) or the material (often limited to development) aspects of place. Place branding might, could, and maybe even should play a central role in urban and regional governance.

Nonstandard Regionalization

The processes of re-scaling and entrepreneurialism mentioned in the introduction are highly interwoven. As a result, local and regional authorities find themselves in a position where they are gradually becoming more responsible for their own revenues, their own services, and their own economy (Brenner 2004; Hall and Hubbard 1998; Jessop 1998). The welfare and well-being of the inhabitants are on their shoulders. The future prospects and the current challenges are to be dealt with through local and regional governance, with limited support from the national government. The national governments are experiencing their own problems, instigating austerity measures to cut spending in traditional areas of the welfare state, including the redistribution of wealth between richer and poorer regions. This development has been going on for decades and has been only slightly emphasized by the contemporary financial crisis. An evidence to that is that the economic disparities between EU member states have declined while at the same time disparities between regions within the member states have increased (Barca and McCann 2012). Convergence on the national level has gone hand in hand with divergence on the regional level.

This cocktail of comparative divergence, increased responsibilities, and relatively limited financial resources is a strong incentive for local and regional authorities to organize tasks in what appears to be a spatially more functional way or to engage in regional cooperation to achieve European funding. This has been one of the drivers of what we can term "nonstandard" regionalization in Europe (Deas 2006). The "nonstandard" here refers to the fact that the constructed regions do not (have to) follow a standardized, hierarchical, spatial division. Examples are countless, and they manifest themselves quite differently. Without proposing a comprehensive, consistent typology, a number of main categories that can be witnessed are presented below:

1. *Nonstandard regionalization of urban agglomerations*. Metropolitan regionalization is often instigated to improve the governance of urban agglomerations, thereby crossing established territorial-administrative borders on different scalar levels using a "functional" argument frequently related to infrastructure planning and the provision of public services important to the daily lives of the citizens (Salet et al. 2003; Brenner 1999). The common denominator is the central, dominant city, which is believed to be the strongest asset of the metropolitan area. Positioning the metropolis as an entity to the rest of the world as a good place to invest, do business, visit, and live is becoming part of the *raison d'être* for the new wave of metropolitan regionalization in Europe. Examples include metropolitan areas such as London and Paris, but also the regions around cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Copenhagen are employing branding techniques to the metropolitan region as an entity. The same is true for the many metropolitan regions that have spawned throughout Germany, including traditional monocentric examples as Hamburg, alongside polycentric examples such as the Ruhr area.
2. *Nonstandard regionalization of areas dominated by specific business sectors*. In areas where a certain sector has a predominant position either in real economic terms or in terms of perceived uniqueness, nonstandard regionalization can occur around the spatial distribution of this sector. Such regionalization is often driven by growth coalitions of companies, institutions, and public authorities. Typically,

companies and institutions that do not belong to the dominant sector align themselves towards this sector because of their dependence on the success of this sector. The sector becomes the common denominator of the region (Boisen et al. 2011). The central argument in such cases is often to project a strong proposition to potential investors, which – if successful – is believed to benefit the entire area. Examples of this category are equally popular, including areas such as the Food Valley (the Netherlands), the BioValley (France, Germany, and Switzerland), and the Medicon Valley (Denmark and Sweden).

3. *Nonstandard regionalization of project-based cross-border cooperation*. As a result of European integration and specific policy from the European Union, many projects have been launched with the explicit goal of "crossing national borders" (European Commission 2014). Along the current borders of the European states, many regions share a cultural, social, linguistic, and economic history. When the national borders are becoming less significant, these regions might share their future as well, a strong incentive to get the cooperation right and legitimize it. The European Union has provided and still provides substantial funding for cross-border cooperation through the Cohesion Policy (e.g., the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Cohesion Fund) – and especially through the different pillars of the INTERREG initiative. Curiously, the common denominator of such regions is often the border itself. As a result, new cross-border regions are emerging, and some of them appear to become institutionalized and continue to exit after the funding period has ended (Perkmann 2003). Again, examples are ample, with the recent explorations to brand the Fehmarnbelt Region (Denmark and Germany) and the former endeavors to brand the Öresund Region (Denmark and Sweden) and the Centrope Region (Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czech Republic). Sometimes, this category of regionalization even occurs on a supranational scale, such as the efforts to build a brand for the entire Baltic Sea Region.

These three categories, and arguably nonstandard regionalization as a phenomenon, share the trait that they render existing territorial-administrative borders less important. Yet, at the same time, they create new borders and disrupt existing spatial hierarchies. Although these new borders often have a fuzzy quality to them, they are both inclusive and exclusive. As a result, the multi-level governance approach inherent to such regions becomes an exercise in complexity. The formal responsibilities of such regions are unclear or (deliberately kept) vague. The democratic legitimization of their existence is weak, the legal frameworks that govern them are fragile – if at all existing – and they are often presented as promises of better futures, yet they just as often lack the organizational capacity to realistically keep such promises. More problematic, the established territorial-administrative entities can employ such nonstandard regions as vehicles to implement policies that would not have been received well by the established electoral constituencies. This can result in a democratic deficit.

At the same time, the "nonstandard" means that these new regions are not only in opposition to the established territorial-administrative hierarchy but also in opposition to consolidated meta-geographies. Since childhood, most people have been taught to view their country and even the world in a nicely organized and administratively divided map. Since the European Middle Ages, multiple loyalties have largely been ignored to produce political maps of the world, systematically arranged with different administrative entities holding different powers on different scalar levels. In consequence, people are taught and trained to automatically perceive spatial entities (and thus spatial identities) within a meta-geographical framework of meaning. The nonstandard regions disturb this relationship.

A Place Branding Perspective on Nonstandard Regionalization

From a place branding perspective, nonstandard regionalization can make a lot of sense if the resulting regions share common denominators, relevant to both their stakeholders and their target groups, internally and externally. Otherwise, the resulting regions do not become places, meaning they have no other relevance than a specific funding stream for a limited period of time. The denominators can be historical, cultural, economic, or likewise, but ideally they should set the region apart from other regions, if possible in a way that strengthens the general proposition of the area. Although this theoretically makes sense, this is not always the case in the practice. To understand why, let us review the three categories formulated in the above:

1. *Place branding and nonstandard regionalization of urban agglomerations*. Often called "metropolitan regions," these young entities often float between the traditional territorial-administrative levels of the municipalities and the provinces. Europe has seen different waves of re-scaling around large cities, but only in a limited amount of cases has this resulted in regions that have been incorporated into the territorial-administrative system. If we consider these new regions to be places, their place brands will be strongly dominated by attributes "borrowed" from the dominant center city. This is especially true from an outsider's perspective. The large city will probably be better known, already hold a mental presence in the mind of the outsider, and as such be considered more relevant. To insiders, it is more complex. The metropolitan level borrows attributes from the dominant city and increases the point of reference to which these belong. This can spawn opposition among insiders who might feel excluded, although they feel that the place belongs to them. Finding the right balance between engaging the outsiders and inclusion of the insiders is tricky. Achieving consensus among the numerous stakeholders involved is challenging and often results in an exercise in trying to say everything at once, evidently resulting in saying nothing at all.
2. *Place branding and nonstandard regionalization of areas dominated by specific business sectors*. In some cases, when growth coalitions of companies, public and private institutions, and public authorities in an area with one or two strong

business sectors ally to strengthen this sector, a "new" nonstandard region emerges. These are the prime examples of the regions that Terlouw (2009) had in mind when he coined the term "thin regional identities." Because such regions are created around specific business sectors, their relevance is rather high for very specific segments of inside and outside actors, while their relevance can be close to nonexisting for other actors. In a sense, such regions are only places for the segments that deem them relevant and view them as such. From a place branding perspective, this creates the situation closest to traditional branding. A place, which is largely unknown, can never be seen outside its spatial context, yet when the region is designed and projected around one or two specific attributes, the brand becomes more focused, narrower, more distinctive, and thus stronger (Boisen et al. 2011). In this category, the business sector(s) function as the common denominator, and the region does not become a region in the sense that it does not aspire to be so. It can peacefully coexit alongside other, overlapping regions, and it does not have to deal with the same magnitude of opposition and balancing out of the interest of stakeholders. In potential, such regions can become very strong place brands if they manage to keep their focus.

3. *Place branding and nonstandard regionalization of project-based cross-border cooperation*. In some cases, these new regions are simply the products of funding schemes, related to various versions of the European Cohesion Policy (Nelles 2014). This means that the area involved is often put together to achieve a specific balance of territorial-administrative entities and create a basis for project-based governance. The goals vary from case to case, spanning a broad spectrum from the establishment of large-scale infrastructure and the exchange of cultures and best practices to the strengthening of entrepreneurial corridors. Place branding is only relevant when the cross-border region has a vision for a shared future. And it is only sensible if there exist a number of shared denominators. In many cases, there are historical denominators (e.g., a shared past), but in a lot of cases, there are none. In such cases, the common denominator could be found in the contemporary economic sector – resembling the second category. In the cases where there is no vision for a shared future and no common denominators, place branding is not directly of added value. In fact, when the border itself remains the common denominator, the nonstandard cross-border region will not aspire to become a place – whereby the instrument of place branding seems to be the wrong choice.

A curious situation can be identified where all these three categories happen at the same time for the same place. This has been – and still is – the case with Copenhagen. Having undergone the Danish Structural Reform of 2007 (Boisen 2006), Copenhagen found itself in a new context where the regional level of the territorial-administrative system in Denmark did not fit the metropolitan level of the city. Therefore, municipalities and regions joined up in the creation of a different, nonstandard region to support the development of the city at a regional level (category 1). Copenhagen was already investing in the setting up of various independent institutions to promote growth thereby employing a regionalization strategy for specific sectors, such as the life sciences with the Medicon Academy and Medicon Valley initiatives (category 2). And at the same time, the efforts to brand the Öresund Region (category 3) was obviously relying quite intensely on Copenhagen as the biggest city, far outreaching Swedish Malmö in terms of worldwide acknowledgement and attractiveness. Speaking from a branding perspective, it seems inefficient to have at least three different regional entities trying to brand themselves while concerning themselves with the same actual physical places.

In all three categories, the nonstandard region is less "place" than streets, squares, parks, neighborhoods, cities, regions, and countries are. This fact has some interesting consequences for the place branding process. By striving for a certain level of homogeneity on a larger scalar level, the nonstandard region might unwillingly weaken existing place brands on other spatial levels.

Concluding Remarks

Place branding is becoming a commonly used instrument for both old and new regions to assert themselves. Although there is a lot of terminological confusion at work, the beginnings of some disciplinary consensus are emerging. The popularity of place branding and kindred instruments (place promotion, place marketing) is not likely to decline anytime soon. The competitiveness paradigm and the processes of re-scaling and entrepreneurialism means that more and more places engulf in activities to become or remain relevant in expanding markets and disrupted meta-geographies. "New" places are not blank pieces of paper that can be "brought to market" or "branded" distinctively from their spatial context.

Compared to more established regions, the nonstandard regions seem to come with a lot of deficits. By establishing the new region as a place that matters, the governance institutions in charge hope to strengthen their own institutioinalization. By claiming or aspiring to matter to the world at large, they hope to convince themselves and their stakeholders that they actually matter to themselves. Therefore, when such nonstandard regions indulge in place branding, it is both to "secure a place in the world" and as a way of legitimizing their own existence. Needless to say, the latter should not be the reason for employing place branding as a strategy. If the goal is to create better places, place branding should be employed at the scalar level that makes most sense to both insiders and outsiders. This might well mean that the multi-level approach to governance should result in a multi-level approach to place branding.

As we have explored in this chapter, the combination between nonstandard regions and place branding poses some interesting questions. The other contributions in this book form a good vantage point to approach these questions further, yet, as always, more research is needed to truly grasp the value and relevance that place branding offers to nonstandard regions.