Creativity at Work:

Branding Cities, Changing Societies

By Can-Seng Ooi

January 2010

Abstract:

Societal changes are seldom discussed in the literature on city branding. The time element is important because it highlights the fluctuating reality of society. The city brand message freezes the place but in fact, the city branding exercise is a continuous process. Society emerges too. City brands are supposed to accentuate the uniqueness of the city, be built from the bottom-up and reflect the city's identity. This paper highlights three paradoxes, pointing out that city branding processes can also make cities more alike, bring about societal changes and forge new city identities. A city branding campaign does not just present the city, it may change the city. The relationships between the branding exercise and the city are intertwined in the evolution of the place.

Keywords: authenticity, bottom-up, city identity, city ranking, social change, top-down

Note: A similar version of this paper has been submitted to K. Dinnie for possible inclusion in the book Branding - Theory and Cases. The book is scheduled for publication in late 2010 by Palgrave Macmillan.

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Introduction

The 2009 UN Climate Summit (COP15) attracted more than 45 000 people to Copenhagen. The world watched the unfolding of the two-week conference. With international attention and the hope of finding an agreement on managing global warming, the event was a city branding scoop for the Danish capital. The summit started with optimism; the Copenhagen local authorities dubbed the city as Hopenhagen. At the end of the summit, the resulting so-called Copenhagen Accord, was not legally binding and thus toothless. World leaders, including US President Barack Obama and China Primer Wen Jiabao, failed to engineer a firm global commitment on tackling climate change. The summit was subsequently dubbed 'Brokenhagen', 'Nopenhagen' and 'No Hopenhagen' in international media reports. Copenhagen city authorities were disappointed with this feeble outcome but they remained excited by the extensive positive international publicity for the city (Astrup 2009). For example, Tom Chesshyre (2009) of *The Times* (UK) described Copenhagen as 'Europe's greenest city'. Tom Zeller Jr (2009) published a feature in the *New York Times* on how New York City mayor Bloomberg was impressed by the use of renewal energy in the Danish capital. The high profile UN summit increased the international awareness of Copenhagen. The world also saw the city beyond its historical sights (e.g. the statue of the Little Mermaid, castles and churches) and its famed social openness (in the sense of sex, drugs, rock n' roll). The Copenhagen portrayed through COP15 was a modern green city. Although the Danish host was partly to be blamed for the failure of the summit, BBC reporter Richard Black (2009) summed up the ambivalence:

[We] will remember the city and people of Copenhagen with some affection. But it is likely that history will judge that the government's political handling of the summit covered the prime minister in something markedly less fragrant than glory.

Hosting big events is one of many strategies of branding and promoting a city (Brown et al. 2002;Burgan & Mules 1992;Green & Chalip 1998;Smith 2004). As the opening COP15 example shows, hosting internationally significant and popular events draw attention to the place. Besides that, the host city can showcase its strengths and uniqueness. Davos is an example of a city branded literally by a series of annual events, the World Economic Forum meetings. Cannes is best known for its film festival.

A city may also be branded by being the finest and best in certain dimensions. London and New York are financial centres, boasting of intense business activities there. Cities are thus branded for the types of activities they are good at. Along the same line, city branding authorities refer to global ranking surveys such as the *Economist*'s 'liveability' index (*Economist* 2009) to brand their metropolises. Relatively small cities like Vancouver, Vienna and Melbourne are ranked high in the liveability index. Besides recreational and cultural activities, other factors such as crime rate, threat from instability and terrorism, healthcare and education availability, state of transport and communications infrastructure are included in this ranking.

In conjunction with other city branding strategies, a branded city also has a slogan or catch phrase, such as 'I amsterdam', 'I ♥ NY' and 'Uniquely Singapore'. These brands contain messages and stories to describe and portray their respective cities. The brand stories highlight the uniqueness of the city and also provide frameworks to understand these cities. Reflecting the hope for a more sustainable global environment and that Copenhagen leads not only in green living but also in drafting a global agreement on the environment, 'Hopenhagen' was to encapsulate these messages during COP15.

The myriad of strategies are well discussed in the literature. There is however a dearth of research on the evolving relationships between city branding campaigns and the changing society. Branding a city is an on-going exercise. In the case of COP15, the Copenhagen authorities used the UN summit to renew and update the world's image of an emerging green Copenhagen. Cities evolve and new realities emerge. The relationship between city brand and the city is multifaceted. When a city changes, its brand images may not have moved with the city's emerging reality. On the other hand, a new brand may have moved too fast; the new brand stories are aspirations that have yet to be realized. The perception of the city by the outside world may also have changed, while the official brand slides behind public perception. A city brand may also provide the impetus for the place to change in a desired direction. This chapter looks at societal changes and city branding.

City Branding and Societal Changes

Cities are, by definition, relatively large, densely populated and socially heterogeneous. They conjure up images of vibrancy. These images contrast against the idyll of the countryside and the coziness of villages. Many cities are also considered social, cultural, economic and political centres. New social practices and trends often emerge in cities and spread to other places. As spaces for diverse interaction and trend setting, a city is a crucible for social changes. Some changes take time to be entrenched, for example, the evolution of a local dialect. Other changes may come about more quickly, for example, the making of Dubai into a world city. Dubai's progress is now symbolized by the world's tallest building, the Burj

Khalifa. The building has not only shaped the skyline of Dubai, it has also become the brand icon of Dubai's aspirations to be an ultra modern global business centre.

Despite the many mentioned strategies used in city branding, a city branding exercise works within a set of inter-related parameters. These parameters, as will be elaborated later, place paradoxical demands when societal changes are considered. The first perimeter is that the city brand will always present only positive aspects of the place. A city brand selectively frames the metropolis and draws people's attention to positive images of the urban milieu. There are many aspects of the city that are ignored because these aspects are not considered attractive or interesting by the branding authorities, for example, smog, organized crime and ghettos. Similarly, appropriate traditions and history are often roped into branding the society while more negative aspects of the past ignored. For instance, the historical Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square are sites that have come to characterize Beijing. They are constantly featured in branding and city promotional materials. Despite making great strides in political openness in China, the 1989 demonstrations and subsequent massacre at Tiananmen Square are ignored in branding Beijing.

The city brand explicitly aims to modify public perceptions (Andersen, Prentice, & Guerin 1997;Kleppe, Iversen, & Stensaker 2002;McCleary & Whitney 1994;Richards 1992). This is the second city branding perimeter. A city branding exercise is about shaping people's perception of the location. For example, staying with Beijing, the 2008 Beijing Olympics branded the Chinese capital. In challenging perceptions that Beijing is the political centre of a polluted and backward authoritarian state, the opening ceremony of the games reminded the world of the four great Chinese inventions – paper, compass, printing and gunpowder. With the successful hosting of the games, Beijing is now to be seen as modern, efficient and yet traditionally Chinese. It is debatable if the world's perception of Beijing has changed but the games and spectacular opening and closing ceremonies wowed Chinese and foreigners alike.

The third perimeter deals with the tacit link between the city brand and the city identity. Despite the fact that the city brand is selectively constructed, the brand is also the identity statement of the city. The brand is a summary that captures the truthful story and uniqueness of the place. For instance, the Danish city of Aarhus is branded as "Denmark's second largest city, where the pulse beats, but never too fast for the heart to enjoy it" (Visit Aarhus 2010). This tagline highlights Aarhus as a relatively small city that does not overwhelm visitors and residents with too much hustle and bustle. The tagline gives a snapshot of the city and aspires to give an honest image of the place.

The last perimeter highlights the ability of the city brand to affect people's interpretation of the location. A successful city branding campaign, among other things, will provide a framework for locals and non-residents to imagine and experience the place (Moscardo 1996;Ooi 2007;Prentice & Andersen 2007;Waller & Lea 1999). For instance, in the branding of

Singapore as a destination, the "Uniquely Singapore" brand suggests how people should understand and interpret the city-state – it is a modern Asian society that blends cultures from the East and the West, the modern and the traditional (Ooi 2007). Many modern skyscrapers in Singapore must be appreciated through *feng shui* principles or traditional Chinese geomacy. Without the "Uniquely Singapore" gaze lens, foreigners would see the tall buildings in the city-state as just modern structures. In this case, centuries-old cultural practices and values are embedded into the brand to provide an interesting understanding of the city.

These multiple perimeters give rise to a number of challenges to any city branding exercise, in the context of societal changes. A city branding process is on-going and is not static. Neither is society. I would like to highlight these challenges as paradoxes.

Paradox 1 – Being equally special

A city brand presents a picture and packages the place. The brand package accentuates the uniqueness of the city, so as to stand out in the competition. The city branding process is also an ongoing one. Over time, a city changes and the city brand updated. Paradoxically then, as cities develop, they also become more alike, particularly when authorities learn from other cities on attracting investors and tourists. For example, as mentioned before, there are a number of surveys that rank cities. These rankings, among other things, brand cities. Besides the already mentioned *Economist*'s livability index, there is Anholt's city ranking; Paris, London and New York are rated highly because of these cities' vitality, their people and facilities (Anholt 2006). Florida (2003) offers yet another way of ranking cities through his Creativity Index. Florida focuses on three different criteria: technology, talent, and tolerance. Urban places are ranked on the number of patents per head, the density of the population of 'bohemians' and gay people, the proportion of immigrants and the number of so called 'knowledge-workers' (Florida 2003;Peck 2005).

Many city branding authorities refer to selected rankings, pointing to high their cities' high positions. Just as importantly, these surveys have also become frameworks for authorities to organise and manage their cities. For instance, Singapore, in wanting to attract more skilled labour, investments and tourists, have invoked Florida's arguments by loosening up the cultural scene in the island-state and informing the public that the government has no more qualms employing self-professed homosexuals. When conservative voices rise, the authorities justify the changes by saying that these moves are part of the signalling and branding process of a tolerant, open and creative Singapore (Ooi 2007). With the same goals and branding aims, cities thrive forward by using the ranking criteria as benchmarks. Such rankings are then tools for cities to learn from one another, and as a result, many cities become equally special. They are also then branded similarly.

Paradox 2 – The bottom-up and top-down tension

In the branding literature, there is much emphasis on taking the interests of different stakeholders in mind, in particular, local communities and residents. Respecting stakeholders is not only necessary to ensure the success of a branding campaign, it is also ethical. Consultation shows respect and courtesy. Surely, city brands must reflect the different interests in society. The brand must be developed and promoted from the grassroots. Thus studies of place branding have moved beyond treating place branding as merely marketing exercises and into aspects of place management. The branding process requires mobilizing and garnering local support, enhancing public-private collaboration and engaging with audiences around the world (Mossberg & Getz 2006;Nilsson 2007;Tatevossian 2008;Therkelsen & Halkier 2008;Vasudevan 2008). Cities, for instance, are not only enhancing their images through advertising, they are also increasing more activities and events for visitors and residents. Besides beautifying the city through urban planning, city authorities are also enlivening their cities' cultural scenes, nightlife and the celebration of diversity. The enlivening processes would benefit both residents and visitors. Different stakeholders benefit from these strategies (Brown, Chalip, Jago, & Mules 2002;Florida 2003;Harmaakorpi, Kari, & Parjanen 2008;Smith 2004). But bringing the interests of residents and outsiders together through a city branding exercise can generate yet another paradox.

As mentioned, city brands are also brand identities. Identities are supposed to reflect and describe the place. It would otherwise not be sincere and authentic. While the city brand aims to tell a story of the society from the bottom-up, when the brand is "fixed", it also imposes an image on the place. As gaze lenses, the brand story affects how we interpret the place. In other words, the city brand, inadvertently or otherwise, becomes a visionary exercise for the place branding authorities to imagine and reflect on how different their city is from other cities. The crystallized public image may be introduced to the native population for it to recognize itself (Lanfant 1995;Leonard 1997;Oakes 1993;Ooi 2005). The city brand then brings about societal changes in a particular direction. Let me elaborate.

The city branding campaign may destroy the original spirit of the place. For instance, popular local places may become expatriates' and tourists' haunts when it is promoted via the city brand; the social make-up of the place would change and may lose its local appeal. For instance, Chinatown in Singapore is promoted extensively in the "Uniquely Singapore" brand story. It has been spruced up and now attracts expatriates, tourists and yuppies. Bars and cafes have sprung up to cater to new wealthy visitors. As a result, many locals find Chinatown expensive and most shops no longer cater to them. To residents, the traditional Chinatown spirit has disappeared. Ironically, Chinatown was promoted in the city brand because of the local atmosphere. They authorities took the next step of 'enhancing' the atmosphere by renovating the area.

On the other hand, a city branding can bring about societal change that is appreciated by locals. Shanghai is no longer a fishing village or a colonial outpost of the 1930s. Today, it is a beaming metropolis with more than 23 million people. The city is modern. The famous skyscrapers have come to characterize the city. While the city is searching for its soul amidst the tall buildings, highways and shopping malls, the authorities have decided to conserve parts of old Shanghai. The neo-classical colonialist buildings along the Bund have been listed. Yu Gardens – a landscaped traditional Chinese park – and its surrounding area, have been locally dubbed as "Chinatown". Newly built traditionally Chinese-looking houses and shops clutter the area outside the gardens. In this case, the branding of the city, with the support of urban planning, has maintained and re-invented aspects of old Shanghai. Residents shop there and they have come to accept the spruced up Yu Gardens as quintessentially Shanghai. In other words, while a city brand identity is supposed to reflect society, it also brings about and shapes society – top-down.

Paradox 3 – Differing residents and non-residents' interpretations

City branding messages that resonate with locals may not resonate with outsiders. One aim of a city brand is to shape people's perception. The brand messages must be attractive and authentic. The authenticity of the message may be compromised if the message gears largely towards foreigners; it may then sound too simplified and commercial for local residents. On the other hand, while appreciated by locals, a sophisticated and convoluted brand message is not attractive to non-residents. For example, food is often used in city branding. Many non-Chinese do not differentiate the kitchens of Shanghai and Hong Kong. *Xiao long bao* is a Shanghai specialty. It is a type of steamed dumplings. *Dim sum* (in Cantonese) is a range of steamed dumplings from the Cantonese kitchen. To many Chinese, they make a difference between *xiao long bao* and *dim sum*. And thanks to cultural movements, *xiao long bao* and *dim sum* are found in these two cities (and other parts of the world). Dishes travel and add to the variety of kitchens found in cities. Regardless, to enjoy local cuisines as part of the city brand experience, one should enjoy *xiao long bao* in Shanghai and enjoy *dim sum* in Hong Kong. Changes in society have made it difficult for non-Chinese to know what is historically local and what is not. Making such differentiation can be considered pedantic and uninteresting for foreigners although locals will find the differentiation more accurate and sophisticated. City branding authorities do not make such deep demarcation in their promotional materials. To many locals, lumping *xiao long bao* and *dim sum* together as just part of the Chinese kitchen erodes the authenticity of the local kitchen brand. Time will tell if the lack of reiteration that *xiao long bao* and *dim sum* do not come from the same Chinese kitchens will erode local kitchen identities. The attractiveness and authenticity demands of the brand messages may contradict one another. Complex messages of history and societal changes are often ignored,

to the chagrin of some locals. To non-locals, a simple city brand message is beautiful. A new authenticity may emerge (Cohen 1988)(Ooi & Stöber 2010).

Summary

The opening example of local authorities of Copenhagen of using COP15 to tell the world that the Danish capital is modern and green, is an aspiration and a reality. Hopenhagen tells how the city authorities want the Danish capital to change. Many residents share the same vision and imagination of the city. The world should see Copenhagen and Denmark in that light. In the Environmental Performance Index 2010, Denmark was ranked 32 out of 163 countries, behind countries such as Iceland, Albania and Peru (Yale Centre for Environmental Law and Policy & Centre for International Earth Science Information Network 2010). The brand message, the public imagination and the reality may not meet.

Societal changes are often not discussed in the literature of city branding. The time element is very important because it highlights the fluctuating reality of society. The city brand message freezes the place but in fact, the city branding exercise is a continuous process. Society emerges too. City brands are supposed to accentuate the uniqueness of the city, be built from the bottom-up and reflect the city's identity. As the three paradoxes indicate, city branding processes can make cities more alike, bring about societal changes and forge new city identities. City branding exercises affect society, just as the city shapes how it should be branded.

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