



## Urban Images and the Creative City

### **1. The image of the city**

A long tradition in urban studies emphasized how cities are not just material spaces, but also elements of perception and representation. The image of the city thus concerns the general meaning and idea of a place; it is possible for example to look at the symbols embodied in the material components (roads, buildings) and in the immaterial ones (habits, routines, discourses about the city, stereotypes concerning the attitudes of the inhabitants, descriptions from tourist guides, movies). The image is intended in two different perspectives: the *internal* (perceived and reproduced by the local actors of the city), and the *external* (the perception and representation of the city by — and for — people and organizations more or less extraneous to local life).

External images are often vague and simplistic; for example, it is common to associate positive and negative values with unfamiliar cities. These *metageographies* — sets of geographical ideas and spatial structures through which individuals tend to order their knowledge of the world<sup>1</sup> — are fundamental in shaping subjective geographies influencing our actions: places are labeled in order to play an anticipatory function, i.e. to build up expectations about uncertain situations (for example “good” and “bad” places for tourism or investing). Such images are historically produced and actively contested or negotiated, for example by means of place marketing policies. Branding practices are therefore intended (also) as actions aimed at molding social imaginaries and external images concerning a specific place by creating “positive

expectations”. Florida<sup>2</sup>, affirming that the *creative class* is attracted by *cool* cities, fits implicitly into this framework.

Such considerations are important for post-industrial cities: one of their challenges is to make places attractive to specific target audiences, such as artistic communities, with the celebration of “new” post-Fordist urban identities, economies, life-styles, forms of work and consumption<sup>3</sup>. In terms of promotional policies and urban branding, this may be considered as a set of practices of selective “story telling”<sup>4</sup> aimed at trying to manage what sort of understanding and impression potential visitors, investors, practitioner or even inhabitants might get. Of course, this never implies constructing *tabula rasa* narratives; rather, it epitomizes a long articulation and framing process that must have a certain basis in the local identity and debates. Patently fake urban brands are destined to low credibility; the branding process must create evocative narratives with a strong spatial referent<sup>5</sup>.

The aim of this paper is to discuss general trends in the field of urban image promotion in the post-Fordist city. In this perspective, paragraph 2 discusses the crisis of the Fordist city imaginary and the celebration of technology and creativity. Then, paragraph 3 presents some examples concerning the way ideas of social creativity are represented in Helsinki, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Bilbao.

## **2. The crisis of the Fordist city: a crisis of representation**

The 70s and the 80s have been generally experienced by analysts as a period of discontinuity in the evolution of technologies, institutions, market and social forces in the Western society<sup>6</sup>. This sensation of epochal transformation is connected to a number of academic expressions as “post-Fordism”, “post-industrial”, “post-modern”.

Fordism deeply marked the development trajectories of Western cities, particularly in those strongly connected to industry, with the imposition of an intensive regime of accumulation tied to Taylorism, the strong capitalization of the economy, the diffusion of standardized mass consumption, the generalization of homogeneous social behaviors. Regional structures have been regulated by the industrial localization<sup>7</sup>, and the Fordist city has been characterized by agglomeration. The diffusion of cars reflected a remarkable differentiation of the functional space, implying suburbanization, growth of satellite towns, depopulation of specific areas. Nuclear family, car and television have been intended as symbols of a certain (Fordist) way of living the urban space, involving many critical aspects (as the creation of peripheral sleeping quarters).

The crisis of the Fordist regime may be read, from our point of view, as a crisis of the Fordist city. And, in terms of urban images, the Fordist built environment, gentrification processes, celebration of the industrial histories are all examples, in the post-Fordist city, of social disruption. To be seen as industrial is to be associated with the old, the polluted, the distressed and the outdated<sup>8</sup>, and an interesting strategy still played by many cities consists in assigning *new* functions and symbols to old industrial landmarks, in order to celebrate ideas of transition to a “new” phase of urban life, less centered on factories, and more on culture: to name the most famous example, this is the case of Tate gallery in London.

If the Fordist imaginary is generally perceived as a synonym of crisis, it is not easy to detect what kind of alternative urban images may be attractive and sustainable over time, especially considering the variability of fashions and the risk of “imitation” and

“serial reproduction” of similar successful images. For example, during the 90s, the urban marketing scene has been dominated by the rhetoric of the technological city. Urban policymakers commonly believed (true or not) that global flows were attracted towards places associated with high technology, and numerous cities developed specific slogans combining comprehensive approaches to urban planning with the objective of developing information cities<sup>9</sup>, such as Barcelona (*telematics city*), Amsterdam (*information city*), Manchester (*wired city*). The quest for the promotion of images linked to high technology seemed to be a panacea for many different urban problems, and this general attraction towards high technology encouraged promotion of such images even in places without specific vocations, and some authors introduced ironic expressions such as *high-tech fantasies* or *technodream*<sup>10</sup>.

This trend towards an high technology rhetoric slightly changed over time. Technology is still appealing, and no urban marketing campaign ever misses an opportunity to celebrate high-technology research, but ideas of culture and creativity are gaining centrality: in recent years, slogans concerning technology and stereotypical images of scientists, computers, etc. have been often replaced by the celebration of cultural and creative industries. Certainly, this is just a general trend, and many exceptions can be found. This is probably connected to the fact that capitalism itself is moving into a phase in which the cultural forms and meanings of its outputs are becoming dominant elements of a productive strategy<sup>11</sup>.

A central problem is therefore the way to build a favorable urban image in the framework of this “new” cultural narrative. Of course, it should not be thought that policies supporting urban creativity are based only on the construction of *images*;



however, in the eyes of urban promoters, specific labels, symbols, and communicative stereotypes have to be created and must circulate through a variety of media.

Florida<sup>12</sup> indirectly addresses this question. His main idea is that capitalist development today has moved to a new distinctive phase, in which the driving force of the economy is not simply technological, but human. “The creative class” (a vague category, including basically those engaged in knowledge-intensive works, such as artists, scientists, managers, opinion makers) is today the “dominant class in the society”<sup>13</sup>, as it refers to the core of economic growth in developed countries.

Moreover, such creative professionals are not simply motivated by material rewards (salaries), but want to live in “quality”, “creative”, “tolerant” and “exciting” places. According to such a framework, a key question for urban planning refers to the possibility of promoting creative environments and “cool city” images<sup>14</sup> in order to attract these professionals: key elements refers not just to technology, but to multiculturalism, tolerance, the presence of various and diverse cultural stimuli, socially and culturally “open” social environments, where a talented person can easily become part of the social fabric in a relatively short time. Highly educated human capital is drawn to places with vibrant music scene, street-level culture, active nightlife and other signifiers of being “cool” (Florida, 2002).

The creative city narrative is therefore the newest place-marketing product, and there is a considerable overlap, verging on uniformity, in the key notions used by cities in imagining themselves as something special<sup>15</sup>.

### **3. Symbols and stereotypes of creativity: some European images**

In the next pages, I will briefly try looking at promotional materials (brochures, web sites), urban marketing plans and “image building” policies in four European cities whose image is linked (also) to culture and creativity: Helsinki, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Bilbao. The attempt is to discuss some evidences concerning the (common) ways the previously discussed arguments are presented and displayed in terms of external images.

In Helsinki, particularly after being “European Cultural Capital” in 2000, creativity has moved at the center of the urban marketing strategy<sup>16</sup>. According to Florida and Tinagli<sup>17</sup>, the Helsinki region is “the most creative region in Europe”, and the Nordic capital has embraced cultural industries and arts flagship strategies, including the development of a cultural consumption quarter around Glass Media Palace and Kiasma modern art museum, designed by American architect Steven Holl. The European Cultural Capital event has been a great opportunity in order to put emphasis on the centrality of cultural industries<sup>18</sup>. The conversion of the old Cable factory into a post-modern container for small atelier and art studios assumed therefore a strong symbolic power. And, finally, the growth of the ICT sector (with flagship enterprise Nokia) gave credibility to the idea of transition towards knowledge-intensive sectors, an idea well celebrated in marketing materials (“Star performer in competitiveness and creativity”<sup>19</sup>).

The case of Copenhagen is another example of the centrality of creative city policies. Infrastructural projects were intended as global landmarks, positioning the city on the map of Europe: this is the case of the Øresund Bridge and the new urban center of

Ørestad. The general attempt is to develop and portray the region as a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy<sup>20</sup>, particularly connected to:

- the biotech cluster Medicon Valley, and the ICT sector in the Southern Harbour;
- cultural landmarks: the Opera House, the Arken museum and the Statens Museum for Kunst, the Amager Strandpark, prestigious buildings by famous architects, as the Elephant center by Norman Foster;
- international events, as the International Film Festival and the Jazz Festival.

Amsterdam has strongly invested in the creative city approach, and the economic specialization of the city is moving more and more towards cultural industries<sup>21</sup>. A tradition of innovative economic talent, combined with high openness and an image of “tolerant city”, resulted in a major pull for knowledge workers and creative persons<sup>22</sup>. “Freedom is one of *the* keywords in Amsterdam”<sup>23</sup>.

Amsterdam has launched the branding projects *I Amsterdam* and *Amsterdam Creative City* (fig. 1). In terms of physical planning, many old harbors have been redeveloped into living and working environments for artists and cultural industries (the housing shortage is a relevant problem in the city). Amsterdam is today generally perceived as a central node for the creative scenario in Europe, a tolerant, stimulating and lively place for artists, bohemians, actors in the cultural scene<sup>24</sup>.

Fig. 1 – *Branding I Amsterdam*



Source: [www.iamsterdam.com](http://www.iamsterdam.com)

The well known case of the cultural re-imagining of Bilbao dates back to 1991 and to the Plan *Bilbao 2010: The Strategy*<sup>25</sup>. Physical infrastructures and iconic architectures have been central here in molding the image of a cultural city: these include the metro system designed by Norman Foster (in 1995), a new airport and the Zubi Zuri pedestrian bridge by Santiago Calatrava, the Euskalduna Music and Congress Centre by Federico Soriano and Dolores Pacios and, above all, the Guggenheim by Frank Gehry (fig. 2), a landmark so powerful and successful that has been imitated worldwide, starting the (ironically called) “Bilbao effect” or “McGuggenheimization”. Guggenheim is an important example of how an art house has re-imagined an entire city, including above all the port and industrial areas<sup>26</sup>, and it has to be noticed that, at the beginning, Guggenheim has been quite neglected and resisted by inhabitants and artists. And, as in many other cases, its importance is not much connected to the art exposed here, but in the mere building, acting as a post-modern cathedral: according to statistics, 82% of visitors in Bilbao state that they specifically visited Bilbao only because of Guggenheim (Landry, 2006), testifying a relevant embedding of the city image in a cultural field.

Fig. 2 – Iconic landmark: Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao



Source: promotional poster for Pollack’s movie *Sketches of Frank Gehry*

The four cases briefly introduced here share some features and arguments in terms of external images.

First are *landmark building*, by famous architects, posing emphasis on ideas of culture. These are particularly present in three of the four cases: Guggenheim in Bilbao, Kiasma in Helsinki, Opera in Copenhagen. Such an ingredient is less present in the case of Amsterdam, where the main images used to support and locate promotional cultural discourses seems to privilege pictures of canals or the Zuid railway station.

Secondly, the “*buzz*”. In visual materials, this takes the form of scenes with people, and particularly of people meeting and chatting (fig. 3), together with slogans as “Copenhagen is full of zest and life”, or “in the evening, Amsterdam transforms from a working city into a lively entertainment centre”. Basically, all four cases stress images portraying situations of social interactions. Such a narrative is (partly)

overlapping with ideas of entertainment and particularly of night life, including both fancy restaurants and venues which attract young and trendy people.

The nightlife in Amsterdam is versatile, cosmopolitan and never sleeps. Enjoy an intimate dinner or dance to top DJs until 5:00. From night theatre to lounge bars; coffee shops to clubs; cozy pubs to grand cafes, Amsterdam offers something for every taste!<sup>27</sup>

Fig . 3 – *Helsinki: life on Esplanade*



Source: City of Helsinki, Tourist & Convention Bureau, *Pictures of Helsinki. Photo Cd.* (photo by J. Seppovaara)

The tendency of the creative class to move to lively places is symbolized in a *playscape*<sup>28</sup> full of bars, clubs, opportunities to meet people and have fun. “The Helsinki night is filled with music, people and electricity”.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the connection between representations of social interaction and urban entertainment is obtained with images of lively *public spaces*, as natural environments and parks with facilities for outdoor sports. This is a relevant element in all four cases, with many pictures stereotyping the social or the hedonistic (sport, relax) use of public spaces (figg. 3, 4 and 5).

Fig. 4 – *Ideas of pleasure and nature in public spaces: Vondelpark in Amsterdam*



Source: <http://www.iamsterdam.com>



Fig. 5 – *Ideas of quality of life in Copenhagen*



Source: Brochure *Her Copenhagen*, 2008

In line with Florida's arguments, *tolerance*, *variety* and *difference* represent relevant keywords. In general, cities seeking to be both inclusive and project their multicultural ethnoscape now re-label their ethnic quarters<sup>30</sup>: Jewish quarters are quite lively in Amsterdam and Copenhagen; the formerly working class area of Vesterbro in Copenhagen is now trendy; Helsinki celebrates the Chinese community (fig. 6).

Fig. 6 – *Chinese new year in Helsinki*



<http://www.helsinki.fi>



Diversity and tolerance assume also other meanings, emphasizing the openness to the “non-usual”. In the case of Helsinki, a campaign called “Nordic Oddity” proposes materials stressing “strange” thing to do in the city (*Bohemian Helsinki: 24 hours no-nonsense*). Amsterdam is considered a model of liberal society (the marijuana consumption, the annual gay parade, the liberal immigration policy)<sup>31</sup>. In the case of Copenhagen we can mention the gay anti-discrimination environment (publishing specific tourist brochures; fig. 5). Such an emphasis on tolerance is less visible in Bilbao, at least in the field of marketing materials.

Fig. 5 – *The gay scene in Copenhagen*



Source: *Comecloser Free GayGuide*, Copenhagen, 2008

Of course, much reference is connected to the celebration of the *local art scene*, including both “high” and more “popular” art. The first refers to museums (“culture” in the popular meaning of the term), the second is often connected to music, cafes,

street art (i.e. ideas of “creativity”: see fig. 6). There are plenty of art references in all the four cases. The marketing of lively artistic places often occurs through *events*: large demonstrations, concerts, sport and cultural exhibitions have the “hypnotic” power to concentrate, in the same time and place, the attention of a number of people. This strong communicative power can be used to spread ideas of transformation and regeneration, and not just for an external audience: cultural events may add life to city streets, giving citizens renewed pride in their home city<sup>32</sup>. In all four cases it is possible to present a long list of events, each focusing on particular audiences (fig. 9).

Fig. 6 – *Helsinki: art in the streets*



Source: Brochure *Helsinki and Southern Finland 2008*

Fig. 9 – Youth festival in Bilbao



Source: <http://www.bilbao.net>

Finally, a further lever for the promotion of urban cultural images refers to *high-quality education*, for both young people and professionals. This element is particularly visible in the cases of Helsinki and Amsterdam – with slogans as “Helsinki Calling! Get to know Helsinki by studying here”, or “Amsterdam is also a city of knowledge, present in its broad selection of choice for solid education, renowned universities and science research centers and opportunities for following solid vocational training”<sup>33</sup>. In the cases of Copenhagen and Bilbao, these ideas are not particularly stressed in marketing materials.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The main argument of this paper refers to the hypothesis of the presence of alternative paradigms and dominant discourses in the rhetoric of urban branding, following the crisis of the Fordist discourse. While in the 90s the dominant narrative concerned technology, right now we are experiencing the *creative city* (and, more in general, the *cultural city*) paradigm.

The promotion of the creative city never implies a disruptive discourse with reference to high technology: it opens up the discourse, moving from the mere representation of scientists and labs (as stereotypes and iconic symbols of research and development activities) to the celebration of social elements: interaction, buzz, quality of life, tolerance, diversity, art, urban quality. The representation in marketing materials of such “abstract” ideas (creativity, tolerance) of course implies the use of labeling and stereotyping exercises, reducing complex concepts to a few iconic images. This is the reason why most marketing materials converge in representing similar images: young people chatting in a café, crowded and sunny parks, art in the streets, etc., often posing on the background of such scenes a strong visual referent (mainly the local, well known, landmark building) in order to contextualize the message in that specific urban environment.

Of course, the general reflections presented in this paper cannot determine to what degree such images are similar, converging to a single urban stereotype (the cosmopolitan, creative, global city), or else such images are intrinsically different, proposing diverse ideas in the framework of the same general paradigm of the creative city. Certainly, the success of image building for the creative city depends on a

*positioning* strategy, i.e. the tension between proposing the right mix of the discussed “ingredients”, eventually adding “something different”, anchoring these discourses with local identity referents in order to enhance the credibility of the discourse. The four cases briefly presented here, for example, are not identical in this perspective, proposing slightly different mixes. And this positioning strategy is certainly not an easy task, considering the amount of cities claiming today to be *really creative*.

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