



NICOLE PORTER

BRANDING LANDSCAPE

Gardens by the Bay
Bay South

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+ MARKETING, PLACE-MAKING

How does the practice of place branding affect the way landscape identity is conceptualized, designed, and valued? Place—that sense of uniqueness, meaning, and identity associated with a particular locality—is generally valued by landscape architects, who are trained to interpret, conserve, and create landscapes that reflect the diversity and particularity of nature and culture. In recent years those same landscape qualities have risen in economic value too. Post-industrial economies have shifted from manufacturing and selling tangible products toward offering intangible identities, experiences, and emotive associations in the form of brands. In short, 'place' has economic value, and the strategic practice of place branding seeks to exploit that value.

Brands circulate in every sphere of contemporary culture, be it in the form of political parties, universities, celebrities, products, or corporations. Casual usage of the word 'brand' conjures up the image of recognizable logos and advertising; however, branding represents a far more comprehensive and far-reaching set of processes and ambitions. As distinct from ad-hoc advertising, images, or projects, branding is a "professional, systematic and ubiquitous" marketing and management practice.¹ Place branding scholar Mihalis Kavaratzis defines this process as "the creation of a recognisable place identity and the subsequent use of that identity to further other desirable processes, whether financial investment, changes in user behavior or generating political capital."² As publication titles such as *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*³ suggest, this activity occurs in an aggressive bid to compete for economic advantage in a global market place, at a variety of scales.

By adapting the corporate branding model to the management of places (both public and private), a number of key typical features stand out. The process usually starts with the development of a unifying singular 'vision,' with the place branding strategy acting as an overarching long-term framework that defines an identity or set of values intended to capture and promote the positive qualities of the place. These visions are typically simplified and reductive versions of existing places, bringing "a certain order or coherence to the multiform reality around us."⁴ The identity narratives they construct focus on the uniqueness of a place, sometimes called its 'essence' or 'personality.' Taking this raw essence, place brands then target certain markets using sophisticated market research to identify and interact with consumers. The resulting place identity formations are expressed through a coordinated network of traditional advertising, designed spaces, and interactive experiences produced by a range of professionals.

Building the Brand

The following examples of landscapes from different sides of the globe, Singapore and Norway, illustrate the construction of landscapes as place branded 'objects.' In both cases, a place identity based on selected local landscape qualities has been purposefully created and communicated in a systematic and coordinated way, with advertising images and PR being composed in tandem with the design of the physical spaces themselves.

Singapore's Gardens by the Bay is the pre-eminent example of a designed landscape functioning as a place brand. When Singapore's National Parks Board conducted an international design competition for a new urban park in 2006, the project brief expressly called for designs that would celebrate the nation-state's 'City in a Garden' brand identity. This is an ambitious extension of the 'Garden City' place brand initiated by the Singapore government in 1967 as "a deliberate strategy to differentiate Singapore from other developing countries by turning the city into a tropical garden city," an approach seen as "the most cost-effective way to impress upon visiting dignitaries and investors of the commitment and efficiency of the government."⁵

One hundred hectares of reclaimed land—a blank slate awaiting the projection of an identity—are now in the process of being transformed into the physical embodiment of a carefully planned brand.

The iconic 'Gardens by the Bay South' phase (led by Grant Associates and completed in 2012) demonstrates how landscape design can be deployed to reify abstract brand values, with its photogenic SuperTree Grove promoting Singapore as progressively high-tech, tropical, and environmentally conscious. This is branding at its most pervasive, incorporating landscape design into a seamless process of promotion (advertising) and production (spatial design). The landscape comes into being through a simultaneous combination of governance, marketing, master planning, graphic design, architecture, engineering, and landscape design. The result is a cohesive and coordinated landscape identity which has been consciously cultivated and reinforced through online imagery and social media, and most of all it is embodied in the physical space of the Gardens themselves. Like any brand, this holistic product is carefully controlled for consistency: the narratives featured on the official free mobile phone app, the typography and graphic design featured on wayfinding signage, and the forms and details to be found within the design reflect a shared vision and speak with the same voice. A consistent Gardens by the Bay identity is achieved over time via a process that starts with the brief, continues with the multi-disciplinary design of the landscape and its market-friendly graphic image, and is maintained through rules and regulations controlling the reproduction of official brand communications (for example graphics), as well as the content of commercial (and visitors') landscape photography.⁶

Similarly, the image and experience of Norway's remote landscapes are conceptually and physically mediated via a system of advertisements and design. Norway's spectacular landscapes are an integral part of the country's national identity and its tourism economy. One of the government's strategies to increase use of the country's natural and cultural heritage for tourism purposes is the "[d]evelopment of a brand/communications strategy for Norway's national parks, including the continuation of the national park villages and national park districts schemes."⁷ Snøhetta, a Norwegian design firm with an international profile and a track record of designing structures for Norway's scenic tourist routes, was chosen to develop this strategy. Snøhetta defines itself as a trans-disciplinary studio where several design and other creative professions exchange roles and work across disciplines, including branding and landscape architecture.⁸ For this project, glacier-crisp photographs and graphic design frame an expansive natural landscape that is in turn framed by the branded interpretive signage that Snøhetta has produced for the whole of Norway's national park system. The suite of graphics, based on a 'portal' shape, is intended to act as a common motif, "unifying" a vast range of landscapes and their stakeholders under a common brand identity.⁹ This standardized graphic device can be subtly modified to reflect individual parks whilst conforming to a nationwide identifiable symbol.

How Branding Works

Marketing the qualitative attributes of landscape is not a new phenomenon (this has occurred for as long as tourism has); however, place branding represents a shift in how the marketing and management of place image operates in today's global socioeconomic context. We now witness the sophisticated self-conscious formation of identity and 'brand values' by authorities responsible for the economic management of places. Landscapes of all kinds—from urban gardens and development sites through to protected wilderness areas—are increasingly subject to a coherent and "forceful"¹⁰ system of identity construction. The point at which different expressions of identity (organizational, place, landscape) are intentionally brought together to express a predetermined image is, in effect, when a place becomes a brand. The two examples above illustrate a phenomenon of commissioning, designing, and

¹ Aeron Davis, *Promotional Cultures: The Rise and Spread of Advertising, Public Relations, Marketing and Branding* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 1–5.

² Mihalis Kavaratzis, "Place Branding: A Review of Trends and Conceptual Models," *The Marketing Review* 5, no. 4 [2005]: 334.

³ Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁴ Hans Mommaas, "City Branding: The Necessity of Socio-cultural Goals," in Véronique Patteeuw & Urban Affairs (eds), *City Branding: Image Building and Building Images* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2002), 34.

⁵ Kenneth Er & Leong Chee Chiew, "Singapore's City in a Garden: 50 Years of Greening," *Commentary: The Idea of Singapore' Issue*, no. 22, [2013]: 106. For a review of several of Singapore's City in a Garden projects see Steven Velegrinis & Richard Weller, "The 21st-Century Garden City? The Metaphor of the Garden in Contemporary Singaporean Urbanism," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 2 [2007]: 30–41.

⁶ Corporate and place brands are typically managed with in-house brand guidelines outlining the rules governing the use of color palettes, photographic strategies, and other copyright matters. Public guidelines for visitors to Gardens by the Bay are available at <http://m.gardensbythebay.com.sg/en/plan-your-visit/visiting-guideline.html> [accessed February 21, 2016].

⁷ Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry, "Destination Norway: National Strategy for the Tourism Industry," http://www.regjeringen.no/pages/37646196/lenke_til_strategien-engelsk.pdf [accessed February 27, 2015]: 78.

⁸ Snøhetta, "Transpositioning," <http://snohetta.com/process> [accessed February 12, 2015].

⁹ Snøhetta, "Norway's National Parks," <http://snohetta.com/project/226-norways-national-parks> [accessed February 18, 2016].

¹⁰ The comprehensive branding of America's National Parks Service was described as "forceful" by Andrew Gross et al, in "The Multiple Mandates of National Park Systems," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 5 [November 2009]: 285.

¹¹ Robert Govers & Frank Go, *Place Branding: Global, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined, Experienced* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 255.

¹² Mihalis Kavaratzis & Mary Hatch, "The Dynamics of Place Brands: An Identity-Based Approach to Place Branding Theory," *Marketing Theory* 13, no. 1 [2013]: 70.

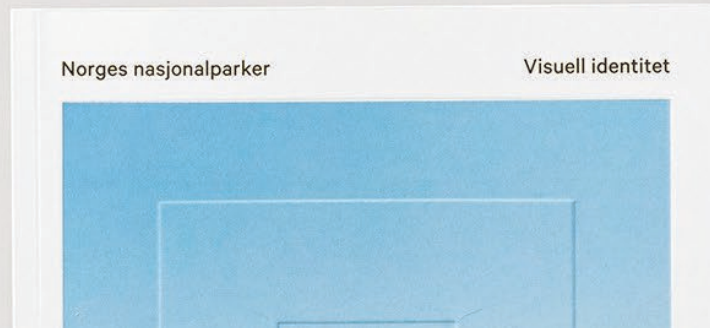
¹³ Zenker & Braun, cited in *ibid.*

¹⁴ Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 151.

¹⁵ Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising and Ideology in Late Capitalism* (London: Sage, 1991).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ Davis, *Promotional Cultures*, 4.



constructing or modifying a physical landscape to be in accordance with a prescribed [that is to say market-led] image. Place brand identities and narratives can—and, according to the place branding discipline, should—be realized in the actual design and management of physical landscapes. This is a process advocated by place branding experts Robert Govers and Frank Go, whose model asserts there should be no gaps between the brand concept, its communication, and the way it is experienced in reality, insisting that this alignment requires the physical construction of place to be consistent with its conceptualization in branding terms.¹¹ As Kavartzis and Hatch put it, place brand identities are “embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design,”¹² a claim clearly implicating the work of designers.

When considering the implications for landscape users, it is clear that branding seeks to influence landscape perceptions and experiences [the extent to which they really achieve this can of course be debated, but the investment of time and resources made in the attempt is undeniable]. Place branding literature expresses the very notion of place as “a network of associations in the consumer’s mind,” even referring to capturing market share as capturing “mindshare.”¹³ Place branding’s rationale is to produce landscape ideas that appeal to consumers, to affect what a given landscape potentially means at a deeply subjective level. It seeks to align the many potentially singular landscape impressions, place associations, and experiences with a common unified theme, a specific aesthetic frame, and a consistent image. It seeks to intervene in every stage of an individual’s engagement with place. First, by using carefully constructed copy and landscape images to frame expectations before a physical landscape has been experienced; second, by facilitating the experience through the design of the space itself; and finally, by influencing how we recall the experience afterwards, through invitations to share imagery and experiences online within a brand discourse [where, notably, social media interactions are used by site owners to obtain consumer data, which informs subsequent branding activities].

Despite the determination to control the ways in which a person engages with a place, place branding discourse and practice repeatedly presents narratives of greater individual choice, either online or on-site, where consumers are repeatedly invited to ‘discover’ landscapes for themselves. Like the branded maps for Norway’s national parks or the aerial walkway in Gardens by the Bay, brands offer a number of landscape routes, themes, identities, and experiences from which to choose, but these inevitably lead the participant down carefully choreographed prescribed paths. Branding does not lead towards open-ended and direct engagement with the landscape, or to the open-ended making of place and identity over time. Within a strategic framework, place branding presents different options, from the most overtly commercialized and iconic landscapes through to others that are more subtle and ‘natural’ in their expression, but all are equally framed by the “indeterminacy within limits”¹⁴ that

characterizes branding at its core. Snøhetta's national parks 'portal' is an apt metaphor for all place brands – mediating devices that stand between individuals and the landscape being framed.

The landscape metaphors, carefully composed images, and particular landscape experiences that are promised in conventional advertising lead to transformation at a physical landscape level, as seen through Singapore's decades-long program to build its city-in-a-garden idea. The mutually constitutive influence of marketing publications, marketing events, websites, and ultimately the 'object' being marketed (that is to say the landscape and the experiences it affords) become difficult to disentangle. When this occurs, the physical landscape is truly incorporated into the brand nexus and is transformed into a "promotional object,"¹⁵ the term sociologist Andrew Wernick uses to describe things whose very function, substance, designed form, actions, and symbolic meaning are fundamentally shaped by marketing imperatives. This results in the instrumental "semiotic and aesthetic fashioning of objects...a matter for systematic and hard-headed calculation about what would maximise customer appeal."¹⁶ This can occur in a knowing or unknowing fashion, for as Aeron Davis notes "promotional practices have spread to a number of occupations and settings which once had little or no promotional function... the need to promote has simply become unconsciously internalized by people and institutions."¹⁷

Landscape Branding

It is important that landscape architects are familiar with the aims of place branding because it potentially frames the design brief, project rationale, and design outcomes of projects. When a landscape design is influenced by branding imperatives, the design will inevitably have a limited number of place identities and place values to draw upon. The drive for market competitiveness (places competing with other places for investment) and positive place perceptions means that *particular* identities are privileged, others omitted. Those landscape values or unique qualities that are perceived (by governing authorities or brand consultants) as being desirable to future consumers are validated, reinforced, and reified through landscape design; this invariably marginalizes alternative heterogeneous identities and narratives. Anything that cannot be neatly distilled to fit the strategic brand framework will be removed.¹⁸

Here a paradox emerges. The more it appears that unique place identity is valued and its virtues promoted through place branding, the more homogeneous place becomes – because all such places serve the instrumental purpose of being products whose identities have been created to serve a common function. An urban park in Asia and a Scandinavian mountain are very different landscapes physically and culturally but both are reduced to functioning as commodified objects when refashioned as brands. With its eye always on the market, place branding practices tend toward a reduction of landscape

toward instrumental (economically driven), standardized, market-friendly narratives, identities, and experiences. Although individual landscapes are inherently unique by virtue of their ecologies, cultural histories, and spatial singularities, the repetitive conceptual branding framework that represents them is like a contemporary Claude glass,¹⁹ rendering everything encountered through its filter with a uniform branded color palette and promotional function. The irony of this is that producing place identities according to market-friendly types can destroy their true uniqueness and inherent value at the same time that it reconstitutes that same identity as a 'unique selling proposition' in marketing parlance. By using landscape narratives and representations in a calculated and instrumental way, these qualitative landscape attributes are "emotionally, and existentially, devalued."²⁰

We live in a branded age where landscape qualities constitute an economically valuable resource that are extracted and refined and consumed in a manner not dissimilar to the extraction and refinement of quantities of economically valuable land resources in industrial times. Compared to physical resource extraction, this form of landscape consumption is sometimes presented as preferable insofar as it represents "a mode of economic development that does not compromise the land."²¹ Alternatively, it constitutes a deeper infiltration of late-capitalist ideology and processes into human-nature relationships. Just as extracting a mineral resource from the land alters, threatens, and, at times, destroys its integrity, so too does extracting qualitative values from landscape for economic ends threaten the integrity of the landscape at that qualitative and intrinsic level.

A diminution in the perceived value of a place, whereby its uniqueness is invariably equated with a single market value, is a perverse and frightening prospect. The dominance of one species of plant will destroy the balance of an ecosystem, and likewise the dominance of one idea or value system will destroy the balance that keeps human culture functioning and flourishing.²² Ideas about identity and experience are important, and a diverse range of ideas—beyond brands—needs to be encouraged, just as a diverse range of physical ecologies needs to be encouraged. It has been said that landscape is lost "through the loss of beauty, the loss of freedom, the loss of wildlife and the loss of meaning."²³ Place branding reduces a landscape's identity and meaning to a single bottom line. Place branding is therefore a problematic process, for even though brands like Singapore's City in a Garden or Norway's National Parks can include 'nature's diversity' and 'visit and protect' as environmentally responsible and ethical brand values, the process of place branding itself represents an ideology underpinned by competitiveness and consumption.

By seeking to control and limit the way the landscape identity is imaged and imagined, place branding threatens landscape diversity, and landscape design risks being complicit in this process. Designers may protest that this is the reality of

contemporary practice, but in that case, we are offering the public and ourselves no choice but to be consumers; every landscape we engage with will be the product of the same system and logic, and will perpetuate that system. Does place and landscape identity have to equate to the same thing as a profit-driven branding identity? All ideologies and belief systems operate by projecting the assumption that what they stand for is natural, correct, and inevitable; capitalism is no different. A critical landscape practice is one that challenges the assumption that landscape qualities are just another commodity, and values other, diverse ways of understanding space and place.

¹⁸ Kent Wertime, *Building Brands and Believers: How to Connect with Consumers Using Archetypes* (Chichester: Wiley, 2002), 46.

¹⁹ The Claude Glass, named after French landscape painter Claude Lorrain, is a tinted mirror used to view the landscape popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The viewer turns one's back on the actual view and instead looks at that same view reflected in the Claude glass, seeing a framed and colored version of the landscape resembling Lorrain's picturesque painting style.

²⁰ Wernick, *Promotional Culture*, 188.

²¹ Sean Cubitt, *Eco Media* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 10.

²² "There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds." See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 484.

²³ Oliver Rackham cited in Robert MacFarlane, *Landmarks* (UK: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), 9.



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