The image of the creative city, eight years later: Turin, urban branding and the economic crisis taboo

Alberto Vanolo

Dipartimento Culture, Politiche, Società, Università degli Studi di Torino, Lungo Dora Siena 100A, 10153 Torino, Italy

ABSTRACT

The article looks at the evolution of urban branding in the city of Turin, Italy, over a period of about ten years. As reported in a previous article published in *Cities*, at the end of the nineties the city of Turin started investing heavily in creative and cultural branding strategies, in order to modify its former image of an industrial one-company town. This article looks at the same city eight years later: both Turin and the general socio-economic situation have changed, primarily because of the ongoing economic crisis. As a result, other discourses are emerging in the field of urban branding, with a meaningful divide between the 'internal' dimension of branding (messages directed to inhabitants and city users) and its 'external' dimension. Specifically, the article considers the role and heritage of 'old' discourses on culture and creativity and the diffusion of new branding messages related to food and to the imagery of the 'smart city'.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss potential relations between urban branding discourses and the economic crisis. Turin, Italy, will be used as a case study; the global crisis, which started in 2008, impacted the city in many significant and unexpected ways. In the twentieth century, Turin was the most typical Italian example of a Fordist one-company town. Home to the FIAT car manufacturing company, Turin experienced the well-known urban dynamics of Fordist cities, from massive growth and immigration in the early twentieth century, to industrial stagnation, and ultimately the social and economic crisis of the eighties. At the end of nineties urban branding was mobilised as a key tool to modify the way in which the city was perceived by external investors, tourists, and local inhabitants, i.e., fighting the stigma typically associated with decaying industrial cities. Like many other cities all over Europe, Turin tried to represent itself as a dynamic, technologically advanced and culturally vibrant city.

In the early twenty-first century, many circumstances led to the 'golden age' of urban branding in Turin. First and foremost, the 2006 Winter Olympic Games: political momentum and huge amounts of money poured into the city to implement several urban projects and internationally celebrate the idea of a 'new' Turin – dynamic, cosmopolitan, cultural and creative (Vanolo, 2008).

The situation has changed radically since the end of the 2006 Winter Olympic Games and the gradual demise of the hyper-optimistic aspirations of a 'wannabe global city' (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012); these two events then overlapped with the massive economic crisis which began in 2008. Now, at the end of 2014, Turin is arguably the northern Italian city hardest hit by the economic crisis: massive public debt and growing unemployment, issues which will be discussed later.

The article investigates the changing role and changing mechanics of urban branding after Turin's shift from a period of generalised optimism to the current difficulties linked to the economic crisis. The paper will argue that the elements behind the pre-crisis urban image are still at play (stereotypes and visual referents involving creative and vibrant cultural lifestyles), since the economic crisis is a taboo subject in urban branding discourses, and yet many aspects of urban branding have changed somewhat over the years. This is particularly visible in the case of *internal* branding, i.e., promoting the city's image vis-à-vis local residents. In fact, there has been a shift from the celebration of Turin's beauty 'here and now' to a growing emphasis of what Turin 'will be': this aspect will discussed in the paper in relation to the notion of making Turin a 'smart city'. At the same time, the city's manifest economic crisis is a sort of 'taboo', or 'invisible presence': clearly there is no mention of it in branding materials, but it nevertheless hovers around the city.

From a methodological point of view, the arguments presented in this article are based on the mobilisation of multiple sources of

E-mail address: alberto.vanolo@unito.it

evidence, including observation, qualitative interviews and critical discourse analysis (Lees, 2004). More specifically, branding materials concerning Turin – both in English and Italian – have been collected between September and October 2014. These include web-based materials as well as brochures and other printed materials distributed by local tourist offices. The materials have been carefully analysed and catalogued using keywords according to their content. Secondly, three qualitative interviews with local policy-makers and five interviews with local scholars working in the field of place promotion have been carried out between October and November 2014. The interviews, which have been quite open and loosely structured, have had the two functions of acquiring new perspectives and impressions, and getting informed feedbacks on the thesis obtained from the analysis of marketing materials. Finally, being an inhabitant of the city, I have had the possibility of observing, over the years, the development of many branding activities, and to informally discuss both past and current branding processes with people.

The article is organised as follows: the next section reviews theoretical discussions on urban branding, with particular emphasis on the role of the economic crisis, followed by a section focusing on the analysis of branding in Turin and, finally, the conclusions summarising the most important results.

2. City branding in times of crisis

Urban branding is a well-known concept in urban studies, and will only be overviewed in brief. In the early nineties, several authors began to analyse how to apply business marketing and business management tools, approaches and perspectives to urban policy-making (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, 1994; Gold, 1994; Gold & Ward, 1994; Paddison, 1993; van den Berg & van Klink, 1995). The concept of city marketing, now more commonly known as city branding (for a systematic discussion of the two terms see Kavaratzis, 2004), refers to the production and circulation of attractive urban images (or, more precisely, imageries: ideas, stereotypes, mental associations, etc.; see Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). Of course, building and improving the image of a city involves social and political practices situated not only in the realm of the virtual, immaterial and discursive. There are many reasons why urban branding overlaps with complex and controversial politics of representation (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Pike, 2009; Rossi & Vanolo, 2012); here the discussion will be limited to three key arguments.

First, urban representations are always performative. As widely discussed in philosophy (see the classic works of Austin, 1962, and Butler, 1990), there are two ways in which representation tends to produce 'reality'. First, representations generate different ways with which to frame social phenomena and issues, thus paving the way for different kinds of interventions and discursive tactics. For example, representations linking a city's economic success to the presence of artists, intellectuals and members of the creative milieu in general (Florida, 2002). In fact, this discursive construction tends to implicitly support the idea that a city's *lack* of success may be due to the absence of members of the creative milieu, thereby legitimating creative policies as a mean to achieve urban development (Peck, 2005). Then, representations influence the actions and choices of human agents. For example, if an urban place is represented as dangerous (e.g., due to the alleged presence of criminal activities), people may be scared and start to avoid it: as a result, the place will become stigmatised as less dynamic and, arguably, more dangerous (see Wacquant, 2008). There is another example more closely linked to urban branding: the more a city is represented as an interesting and attractive place, the more people will visit it, and this has a cumulative effect thanks to people's feedbacks, ideas and discussions (see the classic work by Urry, 1990). Of course,

these examples are mere schematisations aimed at emphasising the performative nature of images and representations; nevertheless, it is always difficult to predict the effects and consequences of branding campaigns. For example, a badly designed urban branding campaign may be perceived as ridiculous and out of place, and may provoke unexpected and undesired consequences.

Second, urban branding has been described as 'selective storytelling' (Jensen, 2007; Sandercock, 2003): only a limited number of optimistic voices, images and representations will conflate in urban branding materials. For example, urban branding campaigns will focus on vibrant city centres and potential cultural experiences and amenities, while there will be absolutely no mention of several urban problems such as unemployment, urban decadence in the suburbs and lack of welfare services. In this sense, urban branding may be a highly controversial terrain: representing a city as a place of pleasure may be offensive or even violent in the eyes of those who do not fit into the optimistic picture, such as the unemployed, homeless, and elderly (Johansson, 2012; Rossi & Vanolo, 2012). This consideration begs a more general question: who has the right to produce an urban image which, in a certain sense, represents the collective identity of a place? In this perspective, recent contributions in the literature on place branding have stressed the need for participation and consultation of residents, and local stakeholders in general, in order to produce a more effective and sustainable place branding (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). In fact, in order to avoid the pitfall of developing 'artificial' place brands which lack credibility, it is necessary to produce brands which are coherent with local identities, where identities have to be considered as dynamic and contested social constructions (Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2012).

Third, images and stereotypes at the heart of urban branding campaigns circulate globally. This means that urban representations are not only consumed in distant places, but that there is a kind of global imagery of urban success (McNeill, 2009; Rossi & Vanolo, 2012). In other words, the symbols, narrations and ingredients of urban branding are often all the same. For example, during the nineties most of the cities in the global north wanted to become 'intelligent', 'technological' cities, while the twenty-first century has been the turn of 'creative', 'cultural' cities. There are a number of reasons behind the global convergence of urban branding messages. For example, urban policy making tends to imitate individual cases considered 'successful best practices', giving rise, for instance, to well known urban policy-making phenomena such as the 'Bilbao effect' (construction of a cultural image; Gonzales, 2006; Plaza, 2000) or the 'Barcelona model' (with reference to the management of the Olympic Games; Cook & Ward, 2011; Gonzales, 2011). There is a trap behind the obvious consequence of this global convergence: the 'serial reproduction' of promotional policies – to use the expression introduced by Harvey (1989) in the framework of his 'entrepreneurial city' thesis – with the risk that branding messages disappear in the mass of almost identical urban images.

An interesting and rather unexplored topic in urban branding is the ambiguous relationship between image promotion and urban crisis. On the one hand, literature stresses how the impetus for urban branding often depends on crisis situations, for instance the need to face the gradual deindustrialisation of many industrial cities (see for example Greenberg, 2008; Short & Kim, 1998). On the other hand, there is seemingly little room for discourses about crises in the optimistic representations of urban branding.[1] In this

---

[1] The case of Berlin can be mentioned, as the city has been unofficially branded 'poor but sexy' because of its bad economic performance compared to all other German cities. See: http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/sep/11/poor-but-sexy-not-enough-rise-fall-berlin-mayor-klaus-wowereit (last consulted 21 November 2014).