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City Branding and the Link to Urban Planning: Theories, Practices, and Challenges

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Abstract

Through a critical reading of city branding theories and practices, this article identifies a nexus between city branding and urban planning related to master planning and placemaking. It brings attention to the challenges facing city branding including asymmetrical political processes, social inequity, tokenism, and gentrification. While city branding's recent turn to participatory approaches unveils a rampant adoption of planning processes repackaged as master planning the place brand strategy, this stream of research and practice remains isolated and disconnected from urban planning theory and ethics. Recognizing this link, the article suggests, could help city branding address its challenges and develop its theoretical basis with more socially responsible and normative underpinnings.

Keywords

city and place branding, urban planning, placemaking, urban imaginary, master planning, economic growth, social justice, planning theory

Remaining competitive in an increasingly globalized economy has been a chronic concern of city leaders. While historically an inherent dynamic of industrial capitalism (Harvey 1973; Castells 1977) and more recent of financial capitalism (Pike and Pollard 2010), the specter of territorial competition for attracting financial and human capital has compelled civic boosters to increasingly turn to city and place branding to secure greater share of growth in the world economy (Friedmann 1986). Place promotion (Ward 1998; Paddison 1993), city marketing (Hall and Hubbard 1998), and branding strategies (Ashworth and Voogd 1990; Evans 2003) have gained momentum, seemingly becoming in great demand. However, city and place branding practices tend to sidestep the unfavorable reality of cities such as poverty, racial segregation, and disinvestment (Gotham 2007; Boland 2013); the commodification of physical and cultural space (Zukin 1996, 2002); and gentrification, a consequence of growth and redevelopment policies promoted by place branders (Gibson 2005; Evans 2015).

The goal of this article is twofold: to identify the nexus between city branding and urban planning and to bring attention to the limitations and challenges facing city branding. These challenges mainly reveal concerns over the process of city branding and its practice—neither harmless nor innocuous, but with far-reaching implications for local residents. The latter implications, quite familiar to planners, are about the ongoing disenchantment of asymmetrical power relations, top-down decision-making processes, limited inclusion of public input, social inequity and exclusion, commodification of culture, and gentrification. Following "place brand strategies" and "place product development" based on cultural flagship projects and event spectacles, among others, branding agents aim to attract human capital and boost economic growth, yet they often fail to address social justice challenges particularly at the intersection with planning.

This article first presents an overview of city branding, contextualizing its origins and theories followed by a description of city branding practices and their link with urban planning.[1] This section highlights the nexus between city branding and urban planning through placemaking and master planning, as gleaned from practice, unveiling a rampant adoption of planning processes and concepts repackaged as master planning the "place brand strategy." The second part, based on a survey of the city branding literature, underscores the recent turn to public participation in city branding and identifies four social equity challenges to claims made by some city branding scholars that the turn signifies a more socially responsible and inclusive approach to city branding. These challenges include asymmetrical political processes, social inequity and exclusion, tokenism and limited public participation, and commodification of culture and gentrification. Collectively, these social

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equity challenges mirror similar challenges experienced in planning. However, unfettered by public accountability and rather duty bound to powerful stakeholders, city and place branding schemes selectively resort to public participation and urban planning processes in as much as the latter serve to advance economic growth. The article concludes on a hopeful note underlining the potential contribution that certain planning theories could exert on strengthening city branding. Planning theory approaches to social inclusion could bring about a promising direction for city branding theories as the two fields, in the near future, may increasingly converge.

City Branding: An Overview

City Branding in Context

The rise of globalization, neoliberal economic deregulation, and its consequent restructuring of urban spatial transformations (Sassen 2016) have been accompanied by cutthroat global intercity competition and pervasive urban entrepreneurial approaches to boosting local growth (Harvey 1989, 2007; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002). The 1990s ascent of financialization—"shorthand for the growing influence of capital markets, their intermediaries, and processes in contemporary economic and political life" (Pike and Pollard 2010, 29)—has made city branding and city marketing integral economic development strategies for urban growth and for competitively repositioning the city in global urban hierarchies (Friedmann 1986). Given its roots in marketing, city branding thrived as a means for promoting competitive advantages best exemplified in *civic boosterism* (Boyle 1997) and in *selling the city* (Ashworth and Voogd 1990). Specifically, civic boosterism served to legitimize local development policies designed to assert civic pride and identity (Boyle 1997). While capturing investment on a far greater scale than what had previously been attempted, these policies focused attention on (re)creating an image of the city (Jessop 1998; Ward 1998).

The shift in the global economy prioritized "[capital] hypermobility, global communications and the neutralization of place and distance" (Sassen 2017, 11), making those parts of the city penetrated by global capital more alike and homogeneous. Repackaging place distinctiveness, and the city's historical and cultural authenticity for the sophisticated observers, therefore, led to the application of "branding" to "place," and ultimately to "city" as a whole (Donald, Eleonore, and Catherine 2009). This process has accelerated in light of the ensuing entrenched interplay between market and state and the institutional shift to *urban entrepreneurialism* (Harvey 1989). Deemed essential for furthering local economic growth, these entrepreneurial efforts focused on "place" and unleashed a competition between real-estate or place entrepreneurs for catering to the needs of interlocal and foreign investors, while linking the future of local places to global fortunes (Logan and Molotch 1987). Together these forces ushered the rise of urban public–private partnerships (Jessop 2002) and place marketing and branding strategies commonly seen in postindustrial cities (see Judd and Ready 1996; Hall and Hubbard 1996, 1998).

City Branding Theory

In the early 1990s, city branding found its way into academic disciplines such as marketing and geography and reached maturity over the course of two decades (Gertner 2011). However, despite much research on city branding since the early 1990s, the complex and multidisciplinary nature of the field (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Hankinson 2010) has somewhat resulted in a fragmented theory foundation (Lucarelli and Berg 2011) and conceptual confusion (Boisen et al. 2018). Many of these complexities stem from city branding's primary antecedents in *corporate branding*, *identity*, *and marketing* (see Balmer and Gray 2003; Balmer 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001) and offshoots promoting urban image such as *urban branding* (Vanolo 2015, 2008), *city profiling* (Anttiroiko 2015), *city branding* (Dinnie 2011), and *place branding* (Hankinson 2010). The scalar nature of these concepts stretches to nations (Dinnie 2015), regions (Pasquinelli and Teras 2013), and cities (Green, Grace, and Perkins 2016), as well as to communities and neighborhoods (Keatinge and Martin 2016; Masuda and Bookman 2018).[2] This geographical variegated nature of city branding, while adding diversity to its theoretical underpinnings, has attracted increasing attention from different disciplines including planning and urban studies (Ward 1998; Ashworth and Voogd 1990), business and marketing (Dinnie 2011; Kavaratzis 2009; Kapferer 2008), geography (see Andersson 2014; Pike 2009, 2013, 2015), and allied fields.

Relying on *identity* and the process of competitive differentiation (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Anholt 2007), the first theoretical conceptualizations of city branding drew inspiration predominantly from marketing as a legitimate object of study (Kavaratzis 2018). Marketing and business scholars often frame city branding as a strategy for attracting tourism and business investment, while reinforcing local identity (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009; Hanna and Rowley 2011). In business and marketing, identity—either synthetically or authentically—is a malleable object suitable for branding through communication (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). This approach, however, tends to reduce place identity to largely a single-faceted image created directly as a result of urban design interventions. In addition, this not-so-benign treatment of place identity portrays places seemingly as physical sites (Arefi 2014), devoid of social and spatial processes tied to place. Therefore, recent conceptualizations of city branding underscore that city branding has commonly been misunderstood, in that city branding centers on identity and should be thought of as a complex process that facilitates the process of identity formation and that sustains the reputation of place over time (Boisen et al. 2018; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). Far from being politically neutral, city branding is more than marketing techniques and reflects a complex endeavor embracing both elite and parochial cultural dispositions as well as political

narratives and representations of belonging and exclusion (Donald, Eleonore, and Catherine 2009).

Existing literature also reflects a growing characterization of city branding as essentially a geographical research domain that plays an important role in economic geography (Pike 2015; Andersson 2014). In this perspective, place, as the object of branding, becomes the locus of value, embedded in social practice and situated in a spatial location (Pike 2009). In other words, place branding policies most often respond to a geographical location and create different place-based socioeconomic impacts. A tangible example would be "Apple," which for many has been emblematic of finesse, precision, simplicity, and arguably flagship product designs, but what is crucial for the Apple brand is not only its design philosophy but also its "geographical place" and close association with "distinctively Californian and West Coast culture" (Pike 2015, 167).

While city branding retains the basic principles of both marketing and geography, a number of research studies have framed city branding as a strategy that helps capture talent and investment (Okano and Samson 2010; Zenker 2009; Bayliss 2007). This characterization of city branding comes to be understood as representing an effective tool to realize a creative city following Florida (2005, 2002). It fits into a larger view that has gained authority over the past twenty years, claiming that a high degree of tolerance, technology, and talent are fundamental to attracting *the creative class*, the driving force behind successful cities. Despite criticisms (see Peck 2005; Markusen 2006), this view entices cities to galvanize local governments into launching branding strategies that attract the creative class to spur local economic development.

City Branding as an Urban Imaginary

An equally important but less appreciated conceptualization of city branding illustrates the space of social imagination formed through images, memories, stories, and legends. As Greenberg (2000, 228) points out "city is produced not only materially and geographically but also in the social imagination and through changing modes of cultural representation." City branding in this perspective comes to be construed as a competitive strategy that operates on image and its powerful, enduring role in experiencing place brands—whether at the individual or societal levels (Aitken and Campelo 2011; Medway and Warnaby 2008). Apart from the importance of image in environmental psychology, its value for city branding stems in part from two principal strains of research that have informed sociospatial dynamics of the built environment: first, the seminal work of Kevin Lynch and his colleagues (Lynch 1960; Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer 1965), arguing for an irrefutable, profound role of image in shaping individuals' perceptions of the city, and second, the power of image-making and the mass media as instrumental in restructuring urban geography and gaining political and economic leverage (Castells 2010, 2013). Messages and symbols will not survive without their presence in the media, as Castells (2013) argues. Branding agents have thus deployed various approaches to harness the power of mass media to create an image that prioritizes visual appeal over substance, the haves over the have-nots, and the *possible* over the *real*.

While city branding and place branding seek to render a positive image of urban reality (Govers 2012), its attachment to specific places both limits and encourages the kind of urban imaginary developed over time, through cultural legacies and historical discourses (Zukin et al. 1998). The footprint of this urban imaginary is often reflected in Internet outlets such as official city homepages (see Grodach 2009). What gives city branding a central tendency to (re)create an urban imaginary is its ability to penetrate into the mind (Vanolo 2017), internalizing a way of thinking characterized by "*projection*—that is, the active production of realities" (Johansson 2012, 3613). Along the lines of the "real" built city, there exists what Greenberg (2000, 229) calls " . . . a monolithic, consumer-oriented version of the urban imaginary," which are marketed and produced on demand. The urban imaginary not only serves to produce fictions, but it also tends to effect change in the public perception of urban reality.

Cases abound where cities, in particular in the Global South, have resorted to creating positive urban imaginaries as the only conceivable way out of economic stagnation. Dubai is a case in point whose image and identity have massively changed, albeit with the high cost of social disintegration (Elsheshtawy 2010). On the other hand, cities with stigma carry a negative urban imaginary such as Detroit labeled as a shrinking city, along with " . . . urban distress, obsolescence, demographic depression, urban poverty and so on" (Audirac 2018, 12). Overall, despite generating less intellectual interest in academic circles, this theoretical conceptualization of city branding bears important relevance to its practice.

City Branding Practice and the Link to Urban Planning

While city branding is driven by neoliberal policies and consequent institutional realignments, it must coalesce these policies into practice. An overview of the existing literature on city branding demonstrates a growing concern over the disconnect between city branding research and practice (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009; Green, Grace, and Perkins 2016). However, the nature of city branding as a practice-driven field gives way to an emerging link between city branding and urban planning through practice. City branding practice in fact has favored a more freewheeling and less orderly interpretation of urban planning processes with more tangible outcomes.

Internet outlets such as Place Brand Observer and City Nation Place have taken an explicitly prescriptive and rather normative turn to city branding practice with guidelines for practitioners. Figure 1 illustrates a five-step approach to place branding originally developed by Govers, van't Klooster, and Van Keken (2015). The principles outlined in this approach represent a close reference to master planning commonly practiced by municipal urban planners. Private entities (e.g., private developers, marketing consulting firms, and independent researchers and advisors) and public agencies (e.g., tourism

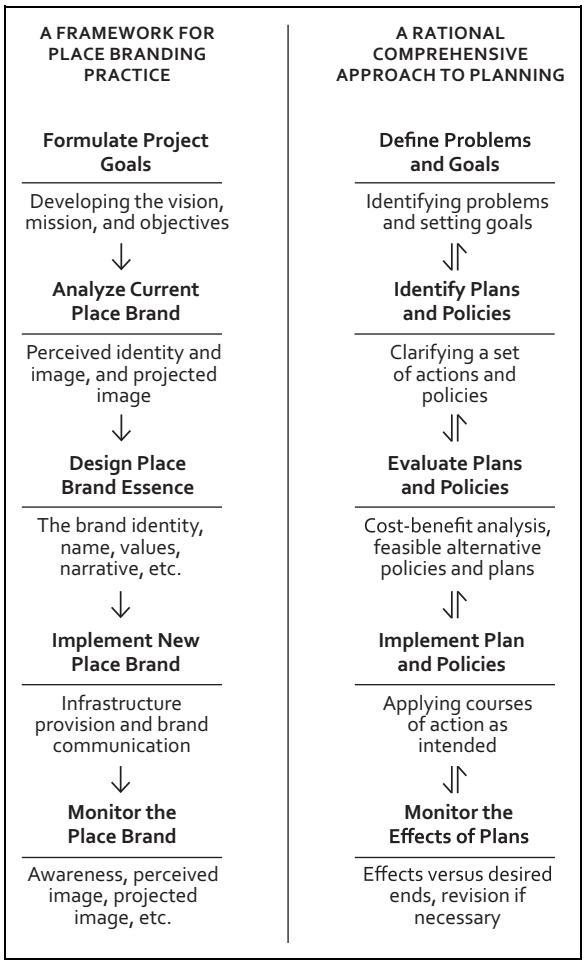

Figure 1. A framework for place branding practice versus a rational-comprehensive approach to planning. *Source*: Adapted from (left) Govers, van't Klooster, and Van Keken (2015) and (right) Taylor (1998, 68).

and convention bureaus, destination management organizations, economic development and strategic planning divisions, communications, and public relations) involved in branding the city seem to be investing heavily in what place branders call "Experience Masterplanning" (Allan 2017), a closely borrowed term from the long-established tradition of rational-comprehensive planning sketched in the seminal writings of Banfield (1959) and Meyerson and Banfield (1955), among others. While visioning and master planning have long been the essential parts of planning processes, city branding has appropriated these techniques and practices to help build durable place brand strategies, though unrestrained by real responsibilities to the public.

City branding practice deals with both materials, hard-branding and symbolic soft-branding, invariably involving the construction of new "urban imaginaries" (Greenberg 2000; Zukin et al. 1998). These urban imaginaries are being framed by place branders as "communication of messages and value propositions to identified audiences and markets that tell stories about the place being created in an engaging, compelling and memorable way" (Allan, Hanna, and Hobkinson 2017, para. 10). On the other hand, what urban planners communicate as goals and objectives in plan-making is increasingly being appropriated and linked to the city's brand, reshaping a new urban imaginary of the city. Therefore, inadvertently or not, city planners are progressively playing a larger role in the place promotion, place marketing, and place branding processes. In fact, city branding practice has adopted proactive, project-driven planning rather than traditional planning approaches that were deemed passive and reactive by new municipal administrations (OECD 2007, 2):

> . . . measures called 'imagineering' and 're-branding' [are being] extensively employed to redefine and re-image cities endowed with negative images inherited from the industrial era. Flagship developments have been employed as 'hard-branding' to produce a significant impact on city image with their large scale, high profile, and innovative design by internationally-famed architects.

The marriage between city branding and urban planning has threaded its way through city branding practice with renewed faith in "placemaking" that has gained much of its power from the ostensible benefits of designing a place with a context-specific, people-centered approach. Following large-scale urban design interventions in the urban built environment, city branding, and more specifically place branding, relies on iconic architecture—as manifest in cultural projects (e.g., Bilbao museums)—and urban design improvement programs such as public space redevelopment projects (Evans 2015). Most often, culture as an integral part of the local identity emerges and is articulated in the city brand narratives (Jensen 2007). Leveraging a culture of local "authenticity" and promoting "distinction" (from competing cities) are thought to be the keys to enhancing the desirability of a place (Donald, Eleonore, and Catherine 2009). Austin is a case in point where actions speak louder than mere logos. "Keep Austin Weird" adopted by the Austin Independent Business Alliance intends to boost the local economy and set the city for the music scene (Salzman 2016, para. 11):

> Local marketers have found ways to play up the idea of keeping Austin weird without alienating the locals who truly want it that way. The music scene feeds on itself, with people moving to Austin for the music, then in turn producing more music, which makes the city even more appealing to the music world. The government is entirely behind that, supporting festivals such as SXSW and Austin City Limits and having a division that focuses specifically on nurturing the music industry. That means that being an Austin musician carries cachet, as does being an Austin resident in general, which means that the locals are actively participating in the positive positioning of their city simply by enjoying their quality of life.

Efforts at city branding practice have followed a somewhat linear trajectory over time, ranging from creating logos and catchy slogans (Anholt 2005), cultural flagship projects

(Vivant 2011; Ulldemolins 2014), architectural edifices (Holliday 2009; Ren 2008), event spectacles such as Olympic games (Zhang and Zhao 2009; Smith 2005), food festivals (Blichfeldt and Halkier 2014) to gearing toward more recent urban greening policies (Shing, Peters, and Marafa 2015; Andersson 2016), social diversity (Hassen and Giovanardi 2018), and smart city profiles (Parks and Rohracher 2019). Among these strategies that speak to the taste of city leaders, cultural projects exhibit a rising trend, where the use of culture as the cornerstone of branding strategies is frequently metamorphosed into monumental structures. Using art museums (Grodach 2010; Vivant 2011; Lindsay 2018) and urban regeneration projects (Peel and Lloyd 2008; Ulldemolins 2014; Farhat 2019), municipal governments attempt to replicate the Bilbao effect and bolster civic pride (Lindsay 2018). While these efforts have remained in universal use, recent city branding practices have found expression in sustainability and green policies to leverage economic resources (see Gulsrud, Gooding, and Konijnendijk van den Bosch 2013; Chan 2017). For instance, Amsterdam has developed a long-standing mission to achieve sustainability by reducing CO_2 emissions, while remaining committed to its role as a smart hub of Europe (Goess, de Jong, and Meijers 2016).

City Branding Challenges

Asymmetrical Political Processes

Critical studies on city branding stress its inherently political nature (see Masuda and Bookman 2018; Vallaster, Von Wallpach, and Zenker 2018; Sihlongonyane 2015), where the presence of varying actors with diverse and often conflicting interests makes it open to debate and contestation. The city branding process invariably involves "decisions regarding what and who can be re-imagined . . ." (Johansson 2012, 3625), which are suggestive of power relations at play. What gives this claim a central position is the fact that, particularly in light of neoliberal city politics, city branding is selective of certain ethnic groups identified as more "valuable" than others (Schmiz 2017). This implication for local communities is exacerbated when the question of *identity* is coupled with *whose identity* (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2010). In this sense, branding agents' efforts at projecting a unitary local identity often fails to capture the actual identities of the residents grounded in cultural legacies and historical narratives. While abetting "the depoliticization of local meaning" (Sihlongonyane 2015, 2148), city branding draws on "a socially and politically distorted interpretation" (Ulldemolins 2014, 3038) of historical and cultural heritage. What remains most of the time is a culturally disparate and vacuous image, aiming to improve an international, rather than a local positioning of cities (Boland 2013). Mainstream city branding practices devoted to this exercise are best viewed as representing the ambitious interests of city leaders, seemingly oblivious to the local residents' wants and aspirations (Greenberg 2008; Vivant 2011; Masuda and Bookman 2018). For instance, tracing the historical trajectory of cultural policies in Buenos Aires, Dinardi (2017) provides insight into a postmilitary state government, where branding campaigns were appropriated for political ends. The city's official branding for tourism relied heavily on the mayor's wants, catering to the upper echelons of the population and business elites. The study demonstrates that the city's brand did not reach out to the Ministry of Culture in creating the brand, nor did it truly incorporate local identities and cultures.

Public authorities and city leaders seem only to support policies that bring their city branding expectations into balance (Pasquinelli and Teras 2013). Given the neoliberal thrust of city branding, the central focus of city leaders has shifted from "meeting the needs of the public to catering to the needs of the market" (Listerborn 2017, 2). This leads to asymmetrical power relations with regard to the dominance of the business elite over the public, a consequential implication, which existing city branding theories have largely neglected. A direct result of power dynamics reflected in the supremacy of elite political stakeholders perpetuates patterns of social and economic inequality and tends to increase the detachment of people from political organizations, while undermining collective actions (Healey 2002). If the city's brand does not represent residents' shared values and those of public authorities, it could lead to the "destruction" of the city brand (Vallaster, Von Wallpach, and Zenker 2018; Maiello and Pasquinelli 2015). The outcome of the internal tension between the "possible" and the "real" may seem logically sound in the eyes of city leaders, but it substantively distorts certain realities of cities such as concentration of disadvantaged communities and poverty. Boland (2013, 268) presents a case study where Liverpool's "world-class" status as promoted by branding campaigns is nothing but an ambitious attempt to transform the image of the city, while eschewing "a true reflection of the life in *all* part of the city."

Social Inequity and Exclusion

A resonant theme relating to social justice surfaces directly as a corollary of the imbalanced power relations associated with the political processes of city branding. The political nature of city branding tends to disproportionately benefit specific target groups, leading to socially divisive outcomes. This has been the case for many postindustrial cities that have resorted to city branding as a ticket to future growth, albeit its high cost in terms of social inequity and exclusionary approaches. In China, packaging and rebranding suburban lifestyle, inspired by a westernized model, has almost become synonymous with a seemingly higher quality of life (Wu 2010). However, this approach has proved counterproductive in that socially disadvantaged residents and migrant workers cannot afford to buy decent housing. On the other hand, in order to improve city image, the state has followed a predictable pathway toward "Developmental Urbanism" (Wong and Liu 2017), which promises a slum-free urban environment through its authoritarian approach to evicting rural migrants and squatters. Despite recent policies adopted by the government to accommodate rural migrants, mainstream branding practices have remained highly centralized (Lu and de Jong 2019).

Cities in the Global South have faced similar challenges. A recent study by Maiello and Pasquinelli (2015) illustrates the growing tension between Rio's official branding campaigns (e.g., logos and slogans) in preparation for the 2016 Olympics and the counter branding efforts (e.g., graffiti) initiated by the community-driven, grassroots organizations. While the former offered an image of glamor sanitized from impoverished communities, the latter expressed disenchantment and opposition as a response to what local communities saw as a clear disregard for equality and social inclusion. In fact, given its marketing legacy, deeply ingrained in the culture of promotion, city branding typically does not entertain the issues of social inclusion and equity (Gotham 2007; Paganoni 2012; Dinardi 2017). Nor does it "improve the lives of significant numbers of local residents" (Boland 2013, 269). Consequently, city branding has spurred many local movements that could be construed as neighborhood opposition advancing the right to the city (Masuda and Bookman 2018).

As an extension of the creative class discourse, city branding has pushed to the fore the global quest for attracting the so-called creative class (Florida 2002, 2005). However, promoting creative class raises the possibility of widening income disparity (Florida 2017, 2014)—a recurring theme that embodies the quintessential critiques of neoliberal policies, the creative class initiatives, and their concomitant consequences, that is, gentrification and elitism (Scott 2006; Markusen 2006; Peck 2005). Thus, even with good intentions, the reliance of city branding on the creative class premise seems to have limited potential to further economic growth. While the commodification of place has become mainstream practice, city branders and growth coalitions benefit from creating monopolies on place, with the intended benefits being increasingly appropriated by corporate elites (Logan and Molotch 1987). Therefore, the less-privileged groups tend to be not the intended recipients of the benefits generated by growth machine advocates. In fact, some scholars view city branding as an overly ambitious economic policy (Pasquinelli and Teras 2013), whose economic benefits remain illusive (Sadler et al. 2016; Bayliss 2007) or negligible at best (Cleave et al. 2017). While city branding suitably entices the creative class with a veneer of city attractiveness, city branding's treatment of underlying economic issues remains inauspicious (Greenberg 2003; Rantisi and Leslie 2006).

Tokenism and Limited Public Participation

A survey of existing city branding literature reveals a persistent issue of limited citizen participation rising out of top-down city branding processes. While there exists a potential for city branding to involve meaningful citizen participation, its top-down process inhibits genuine democratic decision-making. In two Dutch case studies presented by Eshuis and Edwards (2013), city leaders have employed urban revitalization as place branding strategies for two communities in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Their analysis demonstrates that while the two communities exhibited dissimilarities in terms of residents' associations, the degree of citizen participation could be subsumed under lower gradients of tokenism, following Arnstein (1969). In fact, in one community where a public–private partnership led the place branding effort, "citizens were excluded from participation in the development of the brand" (Eshuis and Edwards 2013, 1079). This points to the prevailing yet co-optive relationship between neoliberalism and citizen participation; while neoliberalism is actually happy with public participation, neoliberal administrations promote a participatory environment where opposition is curbed, public accountability is disregarded, and social equity is undermined (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005). In this way of "governing at a distance" (Rose and Miller 2010, 271), public participation provides ample grounds for place branding to serve as a conduit for reflecting the interests of property owners and business sectors (Bennett and Savani 2003) and managing public perception (Eshuis and Edwards 2013), while gaining public support and placating potential public opposition (Eshuis, Klijn, and Braun 2014).

Although city branding differs in approach based on the territorial location where it is practiced—see, for example, Rabbiosio (2015) for an Anglo-American approach and Insch and Bowden (2016) for an Asia-Pacific approach—the expert, top-down city branding approaches are visibly at odds with lay knowledge and local residents' wants (Schmiz 2017; Dinardi 2017; Maiello and Pasquinelli 2015). Disagreement, tension, and even contestation are common occurrences where professional place branders, insulated from local resident input, attempt to replicate place branding schemes. Schmiz (2017) chronicles Berlin's municipal efforts to brand ethnic groups as a marketable "Chinatown," a clear adaptation of branding ethno-cultural diversity inspired by North American cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Toronto. However, the diversity of Asian migrants in Berlin did not entirely fit the "Chinatown" label. Nor did the top-down approach adopted by the public officials capture the historical amalgam of social structures and spatial separation of Asian migrants. Even when such groups are given a chance to be present in branding campaigns, they are represented as cultural symbols, pandering to the whims of economic development agents (Sihlongonyane 2015). Berlin's municipal government place branding approach, though seemingly appealing to city leaders, is underpinned by an interpretation of culture that is highly reductionist (Pratt 2010) and that tends to favor a polarized style of social class (Peck 2005). This latter relationship ultimately leads to costly social conflicts between local residents and branding agents, a parochial form of civic participation, and an undemocratic decision-making process that renders city branding outcomes constantly contingent and fragile.

Commodification of Culture and Gentrification

Viewed by some planners as the obvious outcome of neoliberal policies, urban redevelopment is tantamount to commodification of the built environment, through prolonged, large-scale urban design interventions lumped under the umbrella of urban revitalization programs (Keatinge and Martin 2016; Dinardi

2017; Farhat 2019). The drive for mobilizing entrepreneurial efforts to create a need for revitalization has in fact been a central premise of global neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Globalization's "conflictual process of diversification and homogenization" (Gotham 2007, 823) renders places as prime candidates for commodification. This gains expression in a case study analysis by Gibson (2005) in Washington, District of Columbia, where urban policies promoted by the mayor back in 2003 aimed to attract 100,000 new residents to the city over the course of a decade. While expanding the tax base for the city, these policies were assumed to bring new home owners and a sustained stream of revenue to tackle the city's fiscal distress. With the inclusion of business booster organizations allied with public–private partnerships, the city managed to promote the branding campaigns "city living, DC style" through print and digital advertisement. This whole gamut of city branding schemes while promising a series of real-estate-development outcomes culminated in gentrification and the displacement of local residents.

This rampant approach to commodifying the city has not fallen from grace and has been the case for many cities around the globe, although with context-specific nuances. In recent years, Auckland, a major city in New Zealand, has started to gain prominence by competing with its counterpart cities, seemingly oblivious to perpetuating gentrification, socioeconomic disparity, and limited housing affordability for local residents (Insch 2018). Cases abound where branding of culture does not offer a distinct identity, but rather an oversimplified, competitive one predicated on an "urban vision of consumption" (Dinardi 2017, 85). Museum franchises are seductively promoted as engines of growth, becoming so pervasive that many cities now strive to build one (Vivant 2011; Grodach 2013). Despite the potential economic benefits of museums that may accrue to local residents, branding has done little for advocating the interests of local residents and much less for those of under-privileged groups (Maiello and Pasquinelli 2015; Paganoni 2012; Gibson 2005). In large part, gentrifiers are staunch advocates of neighborhood branding, particularly in growing cities where place of consumption has superseded place of production (Keatinge and Martin 2016; Evans 2015; Johansson 2012). In theory and practice, however, city branding lacks the wherewithal to address displacement and commercial gentrification.

Toward Participatory City Branding: A Recent Turn

"City Marketing and Branding as Urban Policy" was the title of a special issue featured in the *Journal of Cities* in October 2018. While this illustrates the rising significance of city branding as an "urban policy" (Lucarelli 2018), grounded in the recognition of "interconnectivity between place marketing, place branding, and urban governance" (Zenker 2018, 2), it logically follows that city branding represents a growing field that has gained momentum in planning and urban studies. Of particular interest, this issue contextualized city branding and its challenges, calling for both theoretical insights and practical applications. While the opening commentaries attempted to untangle the confusion and apparent chasm inherent in conceptualizing city branding (see Boisen et al. 2018; Zenker 2018), the overarching theme raised concerns over the widespread implications of city branding, including rigid decision-making processes, gentrification, and social inequality, as suggested by Kavaratzis (2018, 62), "... it is fair to think of city branding as a contributing factor leading to these challenges."

But questions necessitating critical attention still loom large over city branding: have city branders and generally agents of growth repositioned the theory of city branding so that branding practices devoted to growth do not yield "exclusive and highly divisive" (Broudehoux 2017, xiii) outcomes? Given the entrenchment of neoliberal doctrine tightly knitted into city branding core values, is it conceivable that city branding becomes a force for the common good?

Critical perspectives on city branding have brought these concerns from a marginal topic to conventional practice. Research on city branding has started to invest in rethinking the somewhat nebulous concept (Boisen et al. 2018) and fragmented theory of place branding (Lucarelli and Berg 2011) to direct attention to socially just practice. Acknowledging that slogans, logos, and top-down branding campaigns do not deliver the expected outcomes, city branding practice has turned to public participation and urban planning to craft durable and "authentic" place brand strategies. City branding scholarship is beginning to recognize social inequity and exclusion as manifested in mainstream place branding practices, calling for participatory approaches as a viable remedy (see, e.g.,Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015; Jernsand and Kraff 2017; Joo and Seo 2018). These welcome contributions celebrate the notion of social inclusion (Eisenschitz 2017), embody sufficient measures to prioritize civic participation (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015), and accommodate the communities' aspirations and their diverse interests (Jernsand and Kraff 2017).

For example, analyzing the branding process of Bogota, Colombia, Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) explain what they see as the city's "participatory branding in practice." Using systematic observation of the city's streets, outreach to major stakeholders and local authorities, content analysis of websites, policy documents and extant press articles, in-depth interviews with local stakeholders (business representatives, tourism officials, etc.), and focus groups with local residents, the authors emphasize that the process was designed to capture culture, economy, tourism, and urban development, as the main four themes of the city's brand formation. The process aimed to avoid unilateral decision-making and to rely on more bilateral procedures where the presence of local residents was believed to ensure that the process of vision and goal formulation was in keeping with what residents aspired to achieve.

Another example is Seoul's new policy paradigm aiming to make the city a global Asian hub with the potential to become one of the world's top global cities. Joo and Seo (2018) base their analysis on Seoul to make a case for what they claim to be participatory branding. Their examination demonstrates that

Seoul's government efforts, unlike orthodox, top-down city branding approaches, were informed strongly by crowd-culture and democratic conscience, recognizing the plurality of voices, the reality of the city, and the centrality of local communities. The authors believe that these socially progressive approaches have placed more emphasis on public participation, while reinforcing the local identity and communicating the city's brand to the public.

Some Caveats: From Public Participation to Social Inclusion

The examples discussed above appear to be a welcome change from what was traditionally seen as top-down city branding, marking the beginning of the importance of people as co-owners and coproducers of city brands. However, while these sectorial and somewhat isolated attempts in and of themselves are advancing the practice of city branding, there exists a dearth of evidence-based research that confirms whether participatory approaches actually represent a more insightful means for addressing social exclusion, asymmetrical power relations, and tokenistic processes. Given the contested role of citizen participation (Forester 2006), a few caveats warrant attention.

First, as commonly experienced by planning practitioners regarding the limitations of participatory approaches, vulnerability to the specter of tokenism, as characterized by Arnstein (1969), remains a concern. While citizen tokenism can assume various forms, the danger of co-optation and placation needs to be raised and addressed (Parker and Murray 2011). In the case of Bogota discussed earlier, the role of the public was not only "the sole source of vision but also [was] used to validate different strategic goals and to recommend and prioritize measures" (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015, 1378). This point still poses the question of whether the participatory approaches were mobilized to curb the resistance commonly forged by political activism (Inch 2015; Monno and Khakee 2012), or whether they were strategic means for democratic co-optation and legitimization of decision-making processes (Purcell 2008, 2009). These concerns foreground the specter of whitewashing top-down branding processes through participatory approaches and underscore the challenges to consensus building that render visible the hidden yet highly political structure of city branding. These points ring a cautionary bell about the issues of alienation, mistrust, and dissatisfaction that impede genuine public participation (Innes and Booher 2004).

A second caveat concerns the amenability of participatory approaches to power relationships (Friedmann 1998; Flyvbjerg 2002). Rooted in the ideals delineated by Habermas (1981, 1985) in the theory of communicative action, participatory approaches fall short of addressing how power relations shape actual politics of urban development. In large measure, neoliberal policies advocate for public participation, since the latter rarely challenges existing power relations, rather it often helps maintain their political legitimacy (Purcell 2009). Therefore, while democratic resistance is arguably a promising way to defy the status quo, deliberative forms of democracy typically support neoliberalism (Purcell 2008). This challenge to participatory approaches unfolded in the branding process in a Dutch community, where public–private partnerships used their influence to "lobby local politicians to ensure that they adhered to their earlier decision to restructure the neighborhood (including . . . demolition) and to ignore any on-going protest from local residents" (Eshuis and Edwards 2013, 1080).

The distinction between participation and inclusion also calls for due attention (Quick and Feldman 2011). The common conflation of the two concepts is a common occurrence and tends to produce insensitivity to the presence of racially and ethnically diverse groups (Umemoto 2001). Participation is a deliberate effort to increase public input on matters of great importance, whereas inclusion signifies the ongoing, sustained coproduction of outcomes and policies not only by underprivileged groups but also by the broader spectrum of social groups with different class and status (Quick and Feldman 2011). High public participation does not necessarily lead to greater inclusion nor reduces conflicts over divergent interests of the community. In the case of Bogota characterized as a participatory city branding process, the challenges facing the approach were manifest in "whose voice gets heard and whose arguments favored" (see Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015, 1378). These challenges, however, were only explained with reference to logistical and financial limitations. Although the authors were cognizant of the barriers to participatory approaches, the recent participatory turn in city branding does not rule out the possibility of social exclusion lurking behind actual public participation.

Despite the turn to engaging the public, tokenism, social exclusion, and the unequal power relationship are challenging issues that city branders need to critically address to ensure equitable and socially inclusive processes. Participatory approaches seem to be only a means adopted by branders to attain "buy-in" from locals in order to promote "place brand strategies." Place branders' efforts are seemingly designed to attract external audiences (e.g., investors, visitors, creatives), without acknowledging larger social concerns. While academics see these participatory approaches as a moral guide to the field, city administration, developers, and property rentiers as the client of city branding utilize public participation as a means to successful place brands to placate public opposition and leave participants with the sense that they have been heard. In addition, while democratic practices aim to enable citizens to have a voice, often public participation in practice tends to dominate the general public, leaving them dissatisfied, excluded, and marginalized. Participatory city branding, thus, remains conceptually and practically the grounds for contestation, debate, and future studies.

Conclusion and Future Research

This article identified several challenges to city branding that echo similar concerns historically leveled at urban planning. It suggests future research to encourage scholarly discussion over what this article described as glaring challenges to city

branding practices namely, an oversimplification of power relationships, sidestepping social inclusion, trivializing tokenism, and disregarding the commodification of culture and gentrification. City branding as a growing and maturing field in search of professional recognition emerged nonetheless within globalization, spawned by neoliberal marketing, and infused with urban entrepreneurialism. As such, it has become a strategic arm of economic development endeavors that legitimize growth initiatives through the construction of public consent and alluring, powerful urban imaginaries.

While city branding enjoys a professional domain of seemingly sanctioned cultural and economic practices, its theoretical foundations are interdisciplinarily fragmented (e.g., marketing and design professions) and its substantive underpinnings are informed by the global, neoliberal growth paradigm. City branding posited as an inherent dynamic of public–private partnerships (e.g., partnerships for place management and "place product development") follows the strategies central to attracting the privileged, skilled groups presumed to contribute to the creative economy. These strategies, however, seem to be prisoners of their own contradictions, creating an urban imaginary with sensory appeal that primarily benefits elite residents and external audiences. While an urban imaginary is essential to linking external developers and local communities, it tends to be sanitized from local precarious conditions, the underprivileged, and the less savory aspects of urban life including racial segregation, poverty, displacement, and social inequities. City branding is highly selective in promoting a reality that aligns well with local elites and politicians' aspirations, while seeking legitimacy and support from the public. This poses a social equity challenge to agents of city branding as to how the costs and benefits of the outcomes of city branding accrue to local residents. While boosting economic development, branding agents need to consider social inclusivity as a barrier to be tackled for the benefits of all local communities including the most marginalized.

Although the city branding literature seems unacquainted with urban planning theories, city branding practitioners are rediscovering master planning principles and making them the core of city branding best practices. However, framed as a "place brand strategy" critical for "place product development," city branding and place branding remain essentially a competitive urban policy for growth, free from any responsibility to the public (Sevin 2011) as in the code of ethics of professional planners. In helping city stakeholders "to identify their strengths and assets, how their place might work in the future and how it will be different from others, and better" (Allan, Hanna, and Hobkinson 2017, para. 8), city branders rely on public participation to generate, legitimize, and authenticate the creation of urban imaginaries.

While economic growth informed the main streams of thought on city branding, critical perspectives on city branding have emerged and focused attention on its social justice challenges to city branding. Reflecting both theory and practice, these critical inquires have begun to see participatory approaches to city branding as a social process that solicits the voice of the public (Sevin 2011). These ideas begin to coalesce with urban planning processes through participatory approaches and visioning exercises often led by planning consultants and municipal planners. While embracing the social and political prerogative of local citizens, such efforts advocate for a more socially responsible practice through democratic decision-making processes. However, as discussed, despite the renewed interest in prevalent approaches to engaging the public, this new direction of city branding must critically and practically engage with the issues of power, social exclusion, the specter of citizen "tokenism," and the commodifying and eventual gentrifying outcomes of branding policies, as experienced in many domains of urban planning. The increasing acknowledgment of social justice challenges facing city branding is best viewed as a future interdisciplinary research platform for addressing these challenges, while ensuring processes that actually engage local residents as coproducers and co-owners of city brands. This is of course not an easy task, requiring branding agents to collaborate with local communities as much as with major elite and corporate stakeholders to address these challenges and consider any new possibilities.

Future scholarship on critical city branding could investigate the more practical side of the field through deep case study analyses that provide evidence-based insights on whether and how the new participatory turn can tackle the barriers associated with public participation and inclusion. Furthermore, future development in "normative" theories of city branding could draw inspiration from planning theories to strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of the field and address its social justice implications. New directions for city branding need to muster not just the symbolic power of the public but also the much larger capacity of the public that has lain dormant. Of course, this new path should center on the issue of power and the ways it needs to be addressed in theory and more importantly in practice.

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Notes

1. In order to avoid an inherent risk of alienating other disciplines, the authors initially identified more than 200 journals related to business, marketing, branding, planning studies, and closely related fields (e.g., public administration, urban geography, urban studies).

For the most part, extant literature was limited to peer-reviewed articles on city branding mostly published in the last twenty years (1999–2019). The authors gave social justice challenges to city branding more weight since these challenges echo those criticisms attributed to physical planning since the 1960s.

2. Given this background, this article uses the concepts of place branding and city branding interchangeably. While they differ in terms of scale, the concept of branding is similar in both.

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