



The Rigour of Competition

Every city worth a flight is competing, one with another. As the competitions intensify, leading brand commentator and Locum non-executive director **Tony Hodges** casts an eye over city brands and their branding weapons. He finds more inspiration in stories of the city state than in designs on the world wide web.

Taking to Flight

Rumour has it that some airborne anniversary is upon us, that just as we mourn the end of Concorde we celebrate the flight that started it all. Much of the celebration revolves around how air travel has made the world a smaller place, enabled the global village, blah, blah.

It is true, palpably and noisily, that in the first place air travel made far-flung destinations accessible and so served the cause of empire. (Imperial Airways begat B.O.A.C. which begat BA. And the dollar flew across the Americas to conquer the world, except for brief stops to build Inter Continental Hotels). Yet it can be argued that more recently air travel has made nearer destinations more accessible and served the cause if not of the city state (though who knows?), at least of the city brand.

The relationship between transport and branding is long established. In the nineteenth century, it was the train that created the need for products to be branded, as goods were transported far from their source of manufacture and local renown to customers who required some reassurance of quality, or some mark, to distinguish preferred products from

wholesalers'. Far earlier, it was the boat that created the capital city, out of building materials, workforces and trade. (Aside from religious centres, how many great cities can you name that do not capitalise on water? Yet now it is air travel that is creating a new era for the city brand. In the short-haul world of no-frills flights and weekend breaks, the aeroplane revolution has shifted our attention from the global to the local.

If you doubt that a new market for city brands is emerging – and for this you could be forgiven since every branding groupie in sight has been having brand fantasies about minor politicians and minimal suburban clusters – consider the loyalty a city can command. The premium it can charge. Above all, the competitive spirit it musters anew.

Accessibility by air has sharpened competitiveness on land, as city brands enter one competition after another. Who will be the next Capital of Culture? Who will win the right to host the Americas Cup? And, most expensively, who will actually win the 2012 Olympics? Ah, these new fangled competitions.

Beyond the Iconography

The real competition is, of course, for money: inward investment, tourism spending, trade, expensive and wealth-generating talent. This quest for lucre means cities compete for attention.

So in weigh the architects, with as noisy a record of successful attention-seeking as aircraft designers. Few crafts



“You should fix your eyes every day on the greatness of Athens and you should fall in love with her”

are as close to the hearts of investors and decision makers. How soon their totems of branding are matched or surpassed, found wanting or crumbling. Yet the story of man is marked more regularly by architectural icon than any other milestone.

Especially, as our own Charles I might have noted, when that icon is a basilica. The great advantage that temples bestow – be they temples of religion, culture or Mammon – is that they do not merely brand cities, create attention, put them on the map. They enrich the experience of visiting their cities. Let us have a Hagia Sophia, Opera House or Canary Wharf that residents and visitors can use as well as merely gawp at. Beyond all others, let us have an Acropolis.

This was the temple that marked our first great democratic city state, the original city brand if you will. Man had lived on its hill for two and a half thousand years before Pericles rebuilt the Acropolis, investing in place marketing, and simultaneously in quality of life. Originally, the Athenians believed the city existed for the sake of “mere life”. Now they came to realise it was for “the good life” represented in all its hustle and bustle on the Parthenon Frieze. The city was the proper unit for social life, the natural development from family and then from village, the right organism within which man could have just laws blessed by good practice. Pericles rebuilt the Acropolis so that Athens could be “an education to Greece.... You should fix your eyes every day on the greatness of Athens and you should fall in love with her”.

Architecture as branding, city as brand: Athens taught all who followed, and it did not stop at structures. From the

classics we learn the role of theatre, events. Games, as means of branding place. City Fathers (and Mothers) delight in living theatre, because events make news, and sell tickets, which can of course be counted. What their predilection for the measurable brings in train is even more important: events reveal city living, streets buzzing, people at work and play. And it is life in the city that defines the brand. Events make branding, people make brands.

Just as Athens defined the classical city state – through icon and temple, theatre and citizen – so Venice created a template for the modern capital of culture. Perhaps this was the first great city brand to hawk its wares as an international tourism destination. Its wealth brought together religious and capitalist iconography, high art and street theatre. All elegance and stench, it epitomised the truth of the eighteenth century Grand Tour: societies in the throes of decadence are always more interesting than those that still strive.

These capitals of culture, classical and modern, are yet to be matched. Volume breeds mediocrity, in any field, and the sheer scale of today’s cities militates against excellence in all but pockets, quarters, precincts. What is it that modern cities offer in the way of culture: high culture or low?

The high cultural icon of Bilbao, the Guggenheim, has transformed awareness of this city. It is the city’s only branding device and works as far as it goes. But what does Bilbao do for an encore? And is the true brand Bilbao or is it Guggenheim? Or even Gehry? Meanwhile up in the equally industrial port of Manchester, high culture meets low. Along

The “folly and madness” of Carnival in Venice, the first city brand of international tourism.



Great brands have a language they come to own.

the outside of Selfridges store, in rejuvenated Exchange Square, march giant shoppers painted by Julian Opie. Close to the home of its most famous football club, clever old Manchester builds Libeskind's Imperial War Museum North. The city wants it both ways but its visitor numbers bear out the research predictions. “Cultural visitors” to 69 European cultural attractions were interviewed last year and revealed they were equally as likely to be on a “city break” or “touring holiday” as on a “cultural holiday”. Two thirds were there to “experience the atmosphere”. Their responses demonstrated that cultural tourism, for them, was as much to do with “relaxing” as “learning new things”. This quest for experience means that city brands, even “Capitals of Culture”, are less to do with high culture and iconic architecture and more to do with what makes cities live. As with Athens and its citizens or Venice and its street theatre, it is about the people.

When Locum advised the executives of Liverpool on their successful bid to become a European Capital of Culture, Liverpool had chosen to “ask the experts”. (You will, I feel sure, forgive the whiff of Mandy Rice Davies in the Locum proposition). Whilst this was fair, what was even more indisputable was that the city's win was about the people. From the moment that any journalist or competition judge or investor arrived in this bastion of scally wit, he or she was met – smack between the eyes – with a universal ambition, a Scouse mantra: we, the people of Liverpool, all of us, want this to be Capital of Culture, and we will charm your socks off until you give us your vote (or your money, or both). So Liverpool is seeing over

€5 billion of construction and infrastructure projects planned to rollout over the next five years.

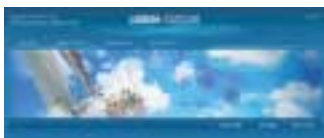
If the true culture of a city is what makes it a brand, then it is the people who create the culture and so build the brand. You can hear it in the air. Great brands and their branding have a language they come to own. None is more distinctive than Scouse. How sane yet inspired of Liverpool's airport executives to capture that sound in their rebranding triumph: “Above us only sky” could only speak of one city brand.

All at Sea on the Web

You might well ask: how do these newly competitive city brands harness their true cultural differences, their people strengths, in their branding activities? And you might well be disappointed. At least I was, in the first place.

I turned to the web to review the wares of modern city branding practitioners. After all, that is where they are all on public display. Yet it is somewhat unfair, in truth, on two levels. First, most city branding is filtered through committees (which as we know produce camels) and public sector employees (who understandably tend to have little experience of branding). Second, the web itself has been populated, very fast, with an extraordinary volume of brands and branding devices (and we have already pointed out the link between volume and mediocrity) and web practitioners are so new to the job that their canon of experience makes the casebook for advertising read like the wisdom of Job.

First candidates for review were those cities engaged in a



The Americas Cup
contenders.



Image appears courtesy of © Wales Tourist Board

VisitBritain showing improvement on
the web, but must try harder.

second major international competition: the contest to host the America's Cup. Now for those members of this island race who have not been seduced by the call of the sea, it should be explained that the last nation to race a boat which won the America's Cup was (joy of joys) Switzerland. And, as you may know, the Swiss are short on great harbours in which major international sailing competitions take place. So bids were invited and four fine cities, each with a great harbour, were short listed.

First, Lisbon. A competent logo squeezed into submission by a character-free banner. The website's mere competence reveals so little of the spirit of place that you could be anywhere. But, crime of crimes, this is the city whose exquisite bridge proclaims Lisbon as the home of a world-renowned, all-time sailing legend called Vasco da Gama – and where is he? Does he not tell a story of interest?

The commune of Naples suffers from ancient heraldry and relegation on the web behind the confusing, interloping, name-poaching Naples, Florida. No contest if our European friends convey something of the glamour, romance, even *cucina* that the very adjective "Neapolitan" suggests. However, they do not.

You would expect a Spanish contender to have a tilt at effective design. The nation brand certainly boasts a design strength and a memorable brand identity. But most Spanish cities seem to lag behind Barcelona in branding their character and, in this scenario, Valencia is no exception. A professional design job, but where is the flavour?

The most fun of the four contenders is provided by Marseille. "Med in Marseille" tells you exactly what the place offers and the truly graphic presentation makes it even clearer. You can hear the creative advisors justifying this imagery on grounds of multi-culturalism and sense of place ... What I enjoy is its complete lack of shame, modesty or embarrassment. Marseille wins this branding competition hands down for me.

What this mini-tour demonstrates is that the web is a challenge for those who would brand. Even the supposedly sophisticated Brits have found it difficult. As regular readers know, this observer has often been a vocal critic of branding standards in British tourism. However, a few weeks ago I witnessed a small earthquake in the promotion of this green and pleasant land. This September, VisitBritain launched a short breaks campaign of typical, daunting complexity: aimed at the eleven European countries who last year sent fourteen million visitors to Britain, it covers all of nineteen cities.

Despite a theme that risks the usual problems of telling more than one story, the headline "unforgettable cities, unbelievable offers" unusually heralds the unfolding of a webstory that is beginning to work. It is not just that the site is user-friendly and the photography of a high order. With many of the cities featured, the branding starts to capture the spirit of place. Cardiff hints at its transformation from what was "formerly the busiest coal port in the world" (Take a bow, Richard Tibbott, for your decade of contributions to that achievement). Manchester inches towards the compelling



Great American Design

notion of “a choice canvas for some of the world’s finest architects”. Liverpool rightly bangs its drum as Capital of Culture 2008 and Portsmouth leaves you in no doubt of its coastal edge. We even get to see people from time to time.

Yet this is only a start and there is much to improve. People shots do not tell us the story of those who shaped the city’s legend. Lists of alliterative adjectives do not capture the essence of a city’s destination appeal. A shopping bag of attractions does not carry the weight of a singular idea about the city. There is an obvious need, city by city, for a more rigorous approach to communications strategy and, across the whole campaign, the copywriter could benefit from some discipline. (Note to VisitBritain contributors: exclamation marks betray insecurity. Consider the following: for Bristol, “Unique ambience!”; in London, “Enjoy fine dining and fun dancing!”; try Birmingham, where “a warm welcome awaits you!”; and my favourite, visit Manchester, “A world class destination! cool, cosmopolitan, a place for culture vultures!”) My encouraging tone about this campaign was beginning to ring less and less true with every “cool”, “unparalleled” (sic) and “!”. VisitBritain shows improvement but must try harder.

The Story Unfolds

What the web reveals is the vast design opportunity which exists for city brands. As far as I am aware, there is only one significant U.K. design company (which significantly describes itself as a brand consultancy) that specialises in city branding. And there is a very slim volume indeed of Harvard Business

School case histories on successful city branding. The reasons behind each of these two observations are the same: city marketing is a relatively young discipline (and I use these terms very loosely) and many still see branding as a branch of the design community. It is not. Branding is the servant of the brand, and until the brand is sure of its individuality, its core strength, its brand story, how can a designer create a famous livery, except by accident?

As a litmus test of city branding success, however, design can help us make the case that there is a long way to travel. How many city insignia can you remember? The first ones I jotted down were all American. The Hollywood sign hoist high above the city. The statement of my love for New York. The instructive welcome sign for Las Vegas. Perhaps American designers are less precious and more direct. The key to the success of the Las Vegas design is its definition of purpose; the story of Las Vegas is up there in lights, 24/7. Yet, the first two examples are not originally for the cities they represent. Hollywood’s parent city is, deliciously, the City of the Angels. The New York hot button was actually created – and is still owned – by New York State, not New York City, though doubtless the city admits benefit, however grudgingly.

Behind the branding of cities, strong and weak, lie powerful brands yet to see justice done in the way they are presented to the world. Architectural icons and famous festivals still do more for city brands than any more modern branding devices. Consider the logo for London 2012: a multi-coloured ribbon representing the River Thames. The president of the Design &



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Does London, let alone London 2012, truly understand its Brand Story?

Art Directors Association has already written of the process involved in delivering this “depressingly predictable” design result: “An open, unpaid competition for a logo was always going to risk being a lottery”. Like him we should all continue to offer support for the bid but I do wonder whether this design process, or even the more conventional advertising agency selection process now being undertaken, is really the issue. Does London, let alone London 2012, truly understand its brand story and is that not the central issue facing this great city brand?

For amusement, I considered the brand stories available to the major contenders for the 2012 Olympics. Each of Paris, New York and London has great architectural icons to boast and there is little to be gained from a return to “mine is taller than yours” arguments. Each has its own great waterway – Seine, Hudson and Thames – so there is questionable distinction there, I suggest. No, their brand stories are more to do with the character which people and place have together forged over time.

So no matter that Paris will surely focus on its track record in handling events, expositions, sheer volume, and will studiously avoid any overt appeal to anti-American sentiment (Mon Dieu), this is the spiritual home of a TV series wrongly and confusingly based in New York: the Paris story is, of course, Sex and the City. Parisians can and should thank movie makers for their city's romantic image: consider “April in Paris”, “Last Tango in Paris”, and the only possible home of “Moulin Rouge”. Yet perhaps, in these squeaky clean, post – Salt Lake, Olympian

days, Sex will not prove the winning brand story.

To the New World we can turn for a track record in Heroic Adventure, the story that informed Sydney's triumph but is umbilically linked to New York. This is not just the city of the fire fighters, remember, this is the city that welcomed “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. Any competitor that dares to claim a multi-ethnic edge versus New York is brave beyond belief. (Remember the words that follow these on Ellis Island: “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” A nice, Olympian touch?)

Tough competition, London. What is your story? We hope it goes beyond your multi-coloured ribbon, your version of “A River Runs Through It”. Since the jury is still out and the advertising agency pitches still incomplete, it would be remiss to muddy the water with specific narrative suggestions. However, London could do worse than heed Pericles and cast an eye on the resurrection of Athens. They say that for next year's Games there is much prayer and even more profit for builders, but think of Athens, reborn, and “you should fall in love with her”. Does London not have such an inspiring story to tell? Let the city branding be as strong as the city brand, let the brand story unfold and let the games commence.

Bon voyage.

Postscript : As this article went to press it was announced that Valencia had been chosen to host the next America's Cup. ¡Felicidades!