



CITY BRANDING IN A COMPLEX AND CHANGING WORLD: A COMBINED BOOK REVIEW

With a review of:

Bill BAKER, *Place Branding for Small Cities, Regions & Downtowns: The Essentials for Successful Destinations* (4th ed.), Total Destination Management, Portland 2024, 294 pages, **Eric HÄUSLER** and **Jürgen HÄUSLER**, *How Cities Become Brands: Developing City Brands Purposefully and Thoughtfully*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2024, 226 pages, and **Alex DEFFNER** and **Mihalis KAVARATZIS** (eds), *City Branding: Concepts and Tools for Reputation Management and Tourism Development*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham 2025, 213 pages

1. INTRODUCTION

While leafing through the Wizz Air inflight magazine earlier this year, the first author of this article has noticed that Budapest is now promoting itself as a destination with culinary hotspots and other gastronomic highlights (WIZZ, 2026). Apparently, the Hungarian capital wants to shake off its image as a wellness hotspot and a cheap party destination. Interestingly, as we can read in chapter 11 of the last book we are reviewing here, Budapest is indeed advised to rebrand itself and highlight other attractive aspects of the city in an



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attempt to cope with overtourism. This example illustrates how relevant city branding is today and that it makes sense for cities to reflect on it. To prevent their image from becoming a plaything of the outside world, more and more European cities are investing in branding: they are positioning themselves strategically to increase their visibility, appeal, and competitive position in a dynamic world.

City branding encompasses more than promotion and marketing aimed primarily at the outside world. Or, as Kavaratzis (2014, p. 70) has put it: “City branding is understood as the means both for achieving competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, and also for achieving community development, reinforcing local identity and identification of the citizens with their city and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest.” Ideally, a city brand should generate positive feelings among all the city’s target groups, whether they are visitors, locals or other stakeholders. That is a high ambition, especially in this complex and changing world in which cities are exposed to numerous and sometimes conflicting forces. What exactly is city branding, how does it work and which actors are relevant? What can be said about contemporary city branding from a theoretical perspective? And are there real-world examples from which cities that want to invest in place branding can learn?

2. A BELOVED SENSE OF PLACE

Among city branding professionals, Baker’s *Place Branding for Small Cities, Regions & Downtowns* (2024) has become a classic. In 2024, the fourth completely revised edition of the book was published. Consultant Bill Baker has advised numerous cities and regions in the USA and beyond. What is new about the latest edition of his book is that he relates his knowledge and experience to insights from academic literature and also discusses quite a few examples outside the USA (including European cities and regions). In the text, Baker refers to numerous other experts. Nevertheless, the author positions his handbook as an introduction to place branding without academic pretences. It is intended as a guide for professionals working in everyday city branding practice. The nice thing is that Baker focuses specifically on smaller places. They have fewer resources than large cities, but can nevertheless develop and promote a unique identity – which, according to Baker, is ultimately what it is all about.

The book has three parts, each divided into handy chapters. In part 1, Baker familiarises the reader with the most important concepts from the world of branding and place branding. He explains what brands are, how place brands

differ from commercial brands, and that it sometimes makes sense to consider repositioning and rebranding. A striking example he cites is Bergen: previously, the Norwegian city positioned itself as the ‘Gateway to the Fjords’ (i.e., as a stop-over destination), but now it brands itself as a UNESCO World Heritage City that lends itself well to a longer visit. According to Baker, city branding is about discovering the local identity, with a focus on the unique characteristics of the place. A city should not create an artificial image but build a brand that is rooted in the local community. Part 2 elaborates on this and shows that place branding involves more than marketing: it touches on local history, culture, economy, spatial quality, and food. All these aspects provide input for a distinctive brand promise that goes beyond clichés such as ‘a great place to live, work and play.’ Ideally, the process of ‘brand truth finding,’ as the author calls it, leads to a ‘beloved sense of place’ and a long-term strategy with which residents can identify. Baker also points to the importance of ‘placemaking,’ which he describes as “(...) the practice of creating, administering, and managing the public environment so that it presents attractive and rewarding experiences” (p. 112). In other words, users of the city must be able to see the place brand reflected in the public space on the spot. In part 3, Baker offers a step-by-step plan for putting the theory into practice. Being a consultant, he does so in an appealing way: successful place branding requires going through ‘the seven As,’ namely Assessment, Analysis, Architecture, Articulate, Activation, Adoption, and Action. The book concludes that place branding cannot exist without placemaking: it always comes down to the alignment between policy, communication, and spatial development.

Anyone who compares this fourth edition with the book’s first edition (Baker, 2007) will see that place branding as a field has become more complex, comprehensive, and professional over the years. This is particularly evident in the second part of *Place Branding for Small Cities, Regions & Downtowns*, in which the author discusses the influence of recent megatrends like new technological developments (such as social media), changes in consumer behaviour (e.g., overtourism and the impact of digital influencers), and the need felt by policymakers to involve the population in urban policy choices (citizen participation). Whereas branding initially focused mainly on the communication side – with the associated and heavily criticised logos and taglines – at present the field is interdisciplinary and holistic in nature. Ideally, place branding is a lens through which local authorities view their city and steer urban development. Baker admits that place branding does not usually fulfil that role as a ‘compass.’ But he conveys his message with verve, partly through quotations – there are a lot of them, fewer would have been better – and with the help of examples of place branding from all corners of the globe. Thanks to these examples, from Brainport (the Dutch technology hub of Eindhoven) to the French perfume town of Grasse, practitioners seeking inspiration in the book are well served.

3. CITY BRANDING AS NUDGING

The next book under review, *How Cities Become Brands: Developing City Brands Purposefully and Thoughtfully* (2024) by Häusler and Häusler, is a valuable contribution to the literature on city branding. It considers the field from alternative perspectives, namely the social sciences (Jürgen Häusler's background), and urban history (his son Eric's specialisation). The fact that Häusler senior has also led an internationally operating consultancy firm in the field of branding is evident: while going through the book, the reader must stay focused, because the argument is often related to insights from the world of commercial branding. Surprisingly, the authors do not define place branding until page 80, at the end of chapter 2, using Bill Baker's definition from the 2012 edition of his book discussed above (Baker, 2012) as a starting point. Anyone who thinks that the authors then base their work on this guru is mistaken: the work of Baker and other 'believers' in place branding is strongly criticised in *How Cities Become Brands*. The main thesis of the Häuslers is that a city's image depends on a series of factors – and if place branding is important at all, its role is limited, leaving aside the question of how much autonomy and influence city branders and other local authorities actually have. At best, city branding works as nudging: a push in the right direction in an inherently complex world.

The authors substantiate their argument with a variety of insights. For them, the city is a kaleidoscope. Among other things, they point to the versatility and path dependency of cities, as well as the importance of novels, films and travel guides for urban image formation. In addition to classic and modern place branding literature sources, they refer to the work of authors such as historian Karl Schlögel (2006), sociologist Richard Sennett (2018), and historian Ben Wilson (2021). This provides a refreshing perspective and food for thought for place branders. For example, research shows that, on a global scale, the average city dweller prefers cities with a population of around 625,000 people. And the notion that poor population groups, especially in the Global South, are often not guided by a city's image – they simply go to big cities to look for job opportunities – is thought-provoking as well. Häusler and Häusler also subtly note that, in practice, 'urban icons' like landmarks and other big attractions often fulfil the role that many place branders still attribute to logos. The authors structure their analysis logically: after the introduction, they share their observations of the city as a brand (chapter 2), their own vision of it (chapter 3), and its implications for city branding (chapter 4). In the conclusion, they bring the threads of their story together and urge city branding professionals not to overestimate their role. In fact, they end their book with a kind of Hippocratic oath: if you cannot help, at least make sure you do not harm the city. It is a sobering advice, which leaves readers – especially if they come from the field of place branding – somewhat confused and disillusioned.

It is clear that Häusler and Häusler wrote their book in order to make a critical contribution to the literature and the field. They have succeeded in this – and for that reason alone, the book is well worth reading. At the same time, their extremely detailed argument is open to criticism. To substantiate their vision, they often refer to the ‘usual suspects’ such as Venice, New York, and Tokyo. These cities are so well known that it is indeed questionable how much influence city branders can have on their image. But what about ‘ordinary’ cities that are not so well known and popular? To be sure, in this context, the authors discuss their consultancy role in a branding process for the German city of Ulm (2008–2015). However, this case does not really excel in originality and persuasiveness. It is also a pity that the book is full of classifications, lists, and quotations (in this respect, they resemble Baker in their excessive ‘name-dropping’), which occasionally makes it difficult for the reader to see the wood for the trees. In order to have an impact on the city branding debate, the authors should perhaps have been less guided by their desire for completeness. After all, we know from the branding literature that it is a short, clear and powerfully formulated message that sticks best with the target group.

4. CITY BRANDING PERSPECTIVES

The third book we review here is the edited volume *City Branding: Concepts and Tools for Reputation Management and Tourism Development* (2025). In 12 chapters, a total of 27 authors shed light on all kinds of aspects of contemporary city branding, from ethical aspects of place marketing to co-creation with stakeholders. Practical examples abound in the form of 15 case studies, which also focus on cities outside Europe, such as Bangkok or Johannesburg. The book was edited by Alex Deffner, retired professor at the University of Thessaly, and Mihalis Kavaratzis, professor of place marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University and the co-founder of the IPBA (International Place Branding Association). The publication of their book also originates from this association: the chapters are largely based on papers presented at the IPBA’s annual conferences. As everyone knows, edited volumes are often a miscellany of contributions without a clear common thread. We see that here as well. In their search for a common denominator, the editors ended up with the following structure of the book: Towards new understandings of tools and theories in city branding (part 1), City brand, identity, and reputation (part 2), and City branding and tourism (part 3). In the introductory chapter, the editors try to convince the reader why their book does indeed show coherence. As is usually the case, the emphasis is placed on the motto ‘unity in diversity.’

The lack of a common thread in the book is not a problem, however, as the individual contributions are worth reading in their own right. Take the chapter we referred to at the start of this article: in their contribution on Budapest, Pinke-Sziva and three of her colleagues discuss rebranding as a possible response to overtourism in the Hungarian capital. There are four other chapters that are also very inspiring. To begin with, Warren *et al.* (chapter 3) use research conducted in English and Canadian cities to argue that city branding and urban climate policy can complement each other well. As communication and behavioural influence specialists, city branders are ideally placed to encourage residents to think and act in a climate-friendly manner. The contribution by Jørgensen and Clausen on the Danish cities of Herning and Horsens (chapter 4) also offers hope for place branders. Based on Top-of-Mind Awareness (TOMA) measurements over a longer period, the authors show that organising supra-local sports and music events is an effective strategy for raising the profile of an ‘ordinary’ city, especially if the event venue remains visible and recognisable afterwards. In Chapter 8 on Łódź, Poland’s third largest city in terms of population, Hereźniak and Florek share their experiences with co-creation in place branding. Although involving entrepreneurs in this process is challenging, according to the authors, it ultimately results in a place brand that is more professional and effective and, moreover, supported by the stakeholders. Chapter 9 on regional identity and the architecture of public buildings in municipalities is also interesting. The authors, De Jong and Lu, conducted research in three French border regions and show that locally specific architectural styles – in these regions, for example, the neo-Alsatian and Rhinelandic Renaissance style – are more common in smaller towns in the periphery than in centrally located cities.

Viewed from the perspective of Häusler and Häusler (2024), the city branding book edited by Deffner and Kavaratz is a good example of ‘preaching to the choir,’ i.e., written by and for the ‘believers’ in the field. Nevertheless, we would be doing the volume injustice with that view, because, as indicated, it offers a great deal of inspiration that is also based on original, innovative, and serious research. And more importantly, unlike the book by the Häuslers, it also pays attention to ‘non-usual suspect’ cities in addition to Venice, London or Paris. Indeed, let’s be honest: what is the added value of yet more research into ‘the big and the beautiful’ when most people live in cities and towns that are not so well-known? Better to look at the aforementioned case studies on ordinary Danish towns, a city in Poland or border towns in northern France. Another strong point of *City Branding* (2025) is that it discusses strategies that have proven their value in practice. For professionals, this offers hope and a perspective for action; in any case, it is much more motivating than the finger-wagging from Häusler senior and junior, warning city branders not to think that their activities have much impact.

5. CONCLUSION: IF MEN DEFINE SITUATIONS AS REAL...

What is the role of city branding in the current complex and changing world? The books discussed in this review are not unanimous on this point. They focus on different target groups and take different perspectives. This creates an ambivalent picture of city branding and calls for a nuanced conclusion. On the one hand, it is becoming increasingly difficult for place branders to present the city they work for as a clear, distinctive, and consistent brand – their interventions are only some in a large range of determinants of urban image formation, as Häusler and Häusler see it. And in today's short-term society, in which the latest messages on social media platform X seem to be leading, it is increasingly hard to stick to a long-term strategy – even though this is crucial for branding (Krznicaric, 2021). On the other hand, the field of city branding has undergone considerable professionalisation in the 21st century. We can observe this both in theory (cf. the empirical studies with policy implications in Deffner and Kavaratzis) and in practice (think of the link between place branding and placemaking stressed by Baker). This professionalisation of city branding has undoubtedly increased its effectiveness in practice.

And what is more, can cities today afford not to engage in branding? Other cities are not standing still, and in this increasingly fierce competition, doing nothing is not an option. As the Thomas theorem, a classic sociological wisdom, powerfully puts it: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (DeLamater *et al.*, 2014). According to this principle, perceptions are not just images, but forces that help shape reality. And that also applies to cities – if people think that a former industrial city, for example, has nothing to offer, they will not go there. City branding is, in fact, an application of the Thomas theorem: by telling a compelling city story and translating it into public space, city branders and their municipal colleagues can influence how people see, experience, and treat the city. This is not a simple marketing trick, but making sense of a place. After all, cities flourish when they are able to articulate and reinforce their own identities. In the time of ongoing globalisation, technological change, and social uncertainty, city branding can offer stability. It helps cities to develop a vision, build coalitions, and create trust.

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