

Producing differences, constructing palimpsests: Regional & cultural geography as a theoretical framework for place branding in distant urban residential areas

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Purpose

This paper aims to demonstrate the potential of the theory of regional geography & cultural geography combined together as an effective theoretical framework to turn place branding into a research-based practice with a deep emphasize on geographical uniqueness of a territory. I aim to elaborate a methodology of picking up the unique features of distant urban residential areas regarded as place branding identifiers to be used to stimulate local identities through a series of cultural events.

Design / methodology / approach

Place branding strategies are studied first in order to identify the lack of geographical background of place images constructed. Place branding is understood as a “process of conceptualization of a specific place as a brand” (Kavaratzis, Ashworth 2010: 4). It is focused on revealing, legitimating and promotion of certain unique attributes and values of a place through the operational environment of place management.

Then some concepts of cultural geography are examined to single out the methods and models capable of place-specific images’ synthesis. The development of cultural geography from the classical theories of the beginning of the XXth century (Sauer, 1925) to the second half of the XXth century was contradictory, yet important. The cultural turn has become a main trend of that change while the representatives of the new cultural geography criticized the Sauerian Berkeley school for focusing “their studies on the material artifacts, exhibiting a curious and thoroughly antiquarian ‘object fetishism’ over such items as houses, barns, fences and gasoline stations (Price, Lewis, 1993, p. 3). Instead, they regard the cultural landscape through its human interpretation, symbolization & signification (Rowntree, Conkey, 1980). They stated that “the total cultural landscape is information stored in symbolic form” that “in part functions as a narrative” (Ibid., p. 461), and “the symbolic qualities of landscape, those which produce and sustain social meaning, have become a focus of research” as this “allows us to disclose the meanings that human groups attach to areas and places and to relate those meanings to other aspects and conditions of human existence” (Cosgrove, Jackson, 1987, p. 96). This idea of place as being constructed has been developed in various directions inside humanistic geography. “Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning”, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977 [2002], p. 136) states. “The central concept is ‘meaning’, and indeed ‘place’ may be redefined as coming into existence through men according meaning to locations” (Jeans, 1979, pp. 207-208). Dennis Jeans found the exact words for that constructing perspective: “To make a place is to surround a locality with human meanings” (Ibid., p. 209).

In order to study this process of symbolic construction of places I use the theory of regional geography. Different modes of regional geographical descriptions have been described throughout the XXth century (Darby, 1962, Davis, 1915, Hart, 1982, Paterson, 1974). Being opposed by the positivist view of storing the entire data on any place in a form of encyclopedic classification, the idea of a good description as a geographer’s art of constructing a place is as follows: “Good regional geography should begin with, and probably should be organized around, the dominant theme of each region, which of course will vary from region to region. <...> Features that are overwhelmingly important in one region may be completely missing in another, and the regional geographer should give pride of place in each region to its most important or significant features” (Hart, 1982, p. 23).

Finally, the conceptual connections between these frameworks are being investigated in order to state the model of place as palimpsest. The examples of several cultural projects

implemented in distant residential areas of Moscow, Russia, on the bases of the described approach are discussed.

Findings

A metaphor of 'place as a palimpsest' is suggested to be regarded as a model, embracing (a) the potential of new cultural geography to single out the uniqueness of any place, (b) the methods and the arguments of the theory of regional geography to construct any place as meaningful text, and finally (c) the usage of these unique characteristics (identifiers) of a place combined together into a context as basis for further branding.

Practical implications

A paper suggests a theoretical model that may be helpful in the research practice targeting at searching for and constructing place brands of distant urban residential areas.

Originality / value

It has become a common knowledge to contest place branding theories as lacking geographical way of thinking. The article argues that a concept of a place within cultural geography is a key to make future place brands more profound and full of local peculiarities. This is especially important for distant urban residential areas, as the majority of cities all over the World have their symbolic capital concentrated in the central areas. Distant areas lack tourist attractiveness, original / authentic urban environments and any material / immaterial basics of local identities. People are not rooted in the urban districts they live in and feel Alien in them. There is no uniqueness in those residential areas (as seen by the residents), and there is no research or practical methodology to single out those unique features of a place and promote them as potential local brands.

Keywords

Place branding, Cultural geography, Regional geography, Place, Palimpsest, Theory development, Urban distant residential areas

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