

What Makes a City Distinctive?

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ABSTRACT

Financial pressures apparently require that revitalization of cities and towns must occur according to a kind of logic at cross-purposes with sustaining a strong degree of place identification in the built environment. The mechanisms of real estate investment, development and speculation, which are seen as positive agents of urban regeneration, filter out memory and attachment to places out of supposed economic necessity. In contrast, over the long duration, legibility, deriving from a continuing elaboration of place identity, stands a far better chance of assuring continuing economic survival (and social thriving) of cities and towns than re-branding ever could. Even if marketing, in the form of city (re) branding, promises a quick fix to problems of economic viability for cities and towns, solving the problem of how to give a dying city or town a renewed sense of purpose lies elsewhere—it is rather identification and comprehensibility that nurtures attachment.

In view of the above, this paper argues that commercial and tourist viability cannot be the key criteria for making improvement decisions in the built environment. No matter that the default position for regeneration schemes nearly always encompasses entertainment, whether in the form of passive consumption of spectacles or active consumption of themed experiences (including shopping, sports, gambling or culture), spectacle alone is incapable of establishing enduring legibility or place identification. Entertainment turns on stimulation and satisfaction; identification with a place entails a level of emotional attachment far subtler than technology, consumption or media can offer alone.

As an alternative to the standard operating procedures of regeneration, this paper advances the proposition that individuals and groups will develop durable attachments to places only when their emotions are touched. Moreover, affection for a setting is a good indicator of its long-term survival. Developing on this, elaboration on how place legibility could be established will be outlined. Key to this argument is to show why an alternative perspective on regeneration and re-branding will require government officials (including local authorities and planners), developers, architects and urban designers to learn to deal with problems of how individuals and groups respond to the world of artefacts and how communities appropriate space.

Key Words: distinctiveness, place, regeneration