Guy Julier
Leeds Metropolitan University

e.mail g.julier@leedsmet.ac.uk
website www.designculture.info

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Design Cities : Brand Value

This paper is about the way that design is used in attempts to develop the brand value of urban agglomerations. I want to move away from top-down, marketing-led thinking about branding and take a more bottom-up, human activity centred approach.

It is constructed in three parts. Firstly I want to track the emergence of the concept of 'design cities', drawing attention to the way that design is co-opted into a wider processes of place-branding and urban regeneration. We could look at this from the point of institutional process within cultural political economy by analysing the programmatic approaches that national or regional governments muster and implement in their pursuit of a relationship between place branding and creative industies. However, I'd also like to think about this process in terms of the more 'bottom-up' activities and networks that constitute the agglomeration of design intensities. I'm interested in the interactions and relationships of people, institutions, design locations, actitivities and objects that constitute what I have termed a 'designscape'[1].

[1] Parts of this paper are drawn from Julier, Guy (2005) 'Urban Designscapes and the Production of Aesthetic Consent', *Urban Studies*, 42(5-6): 689-888.

Secondly, I want to look at the relationships between of this notion of design cities and their designscapes and attempts to develop place-branding. In particular I'm interested in the way that traditional marketing-led notions of place-branding are superseded by a more processual conception.

Finally, I am going to speculate on the relationships between the stuff that goes into the creation of this 'design cities' notions, brand value and financialization.

As such, for the purposes of this seminar, I hope I shall be demonstrating how, in the context of design and design activities as discursive networks, the knowledge brands are created and coordinated. I hope also that this paper contributes to the discussion of the relationship of economic competitiveness and social goals. Looking ahead to the second seminar in this series, my speculation on the relationships of design, branding and financialisation is intended, perhaps naively as I am at heart a design historian, not an economic sociologist, in the spirit of experimentation and discussion rather than as a summative statement.

Design Cities

The denomination of 'design cities' has been a recent development in municipal cultural political economy. From the 1960s, London and Milan, followed by Barcelona in the 1980s emerged as clear European centres of design. This was carried by the sheer volume of design activity, the renown of some of their respective designers and the international reach of their influence and commercial activities. Barcelona, however, carries a pivotal role in the transformation of the three factors into a more reflexive, promotional process. While being far from programmatic, the alliance of design identity with urban regeneration processes and promotional exhibitions and events during the 1980s and 90s conspired to effectively re-brand this municipality in

the context of Europeaneity and global change.

‘Design cities’ more programmatically and self-consciously continue this trend. This was crystallised at a conference hosted by Marie-Josee Lacroix, City Design Commissioner of Montreal in 2004 entitled ‘New Design Cities’. This event focused on the experiences of Antwerp, Glasgow, Lisbon, Montreal, Saint-Etienne, Stockholm and Times Square, New York, debating the ‘cities’ different strategies for postioning and growth through design’ (Lacroix 2005: 15). In 2006, Montreal was designated ‘UNESCO City of Design’ alongside Berlin and Buenos Aries as part of UNESCO’s ‘Creative Cities Network’. In the summer of 2007, Scotland was host to the ‘Six Cities Design Festival’, a £3 million initiative aimed at celebrating and raising awareness of the value of design and creativity in all six of Scotland’s cities. This year, Turin is ‘World Design Capital’, a title given by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design and promoted by the International Design Alliance. Later this month the Birmingham ‘Design City’ takes place The Interiors Show, to be held at the National Exhibition Centre Media to celebrate the city's design culture.

In all of these cases they are not design metropolises, like Milan, Barcelona, London or Tokyo. ‘But’, as Lacroix has defined her set of design cities, ‘the cities are medium sized cities … often with an industrial past. They therefore have the challenge of economic transformation to deal with, based most of the time on creative industries, and mainly on design and creative people’ (Lacroix 2008). Combinations of design exhibitions, events, conferences, competitions, awards, open design studio weeks, new urban design, the adoption of design criteria in municipal tendering and procurement and so on add up to a system of soft place-branding.

At one level, such initiatives may be read as the result of the garnering of multiple enthusiasms for the promotion of design. Go to anywhere where there is a

concentration of designers and you'll find initiatives to promote design awareness at public, client and civic levels.

For example the South Coast Design Forum defines its first 5 aims are as follows:

- To provide support, awareness and network channels for the South Coast as an area rich in designers, architects and creatives of all kinds.
- To generate an authoritative and respected body whose skills are recognised and called upon by local authorities and business.
- To provide strong links with education establishments to further raise standards and help create jobs for graduates and students.
- To highlight these skills through the running of competitions and exhibitions.
- To generally raise the awareness and expectations of the South Coast, to turn it about to face the future, whilst acknowledging the historical context of time and place. (South Coast Design Forum 2008)

Designers vigorously perform Bourdieu's classic 'needs production', striving to inculcate their value to a suspecting audience. This may of course the same as with other 'cultural intermediaries'. However, I'd argue at this point that there is a crucial difference in the way that this promtional process is practiced.

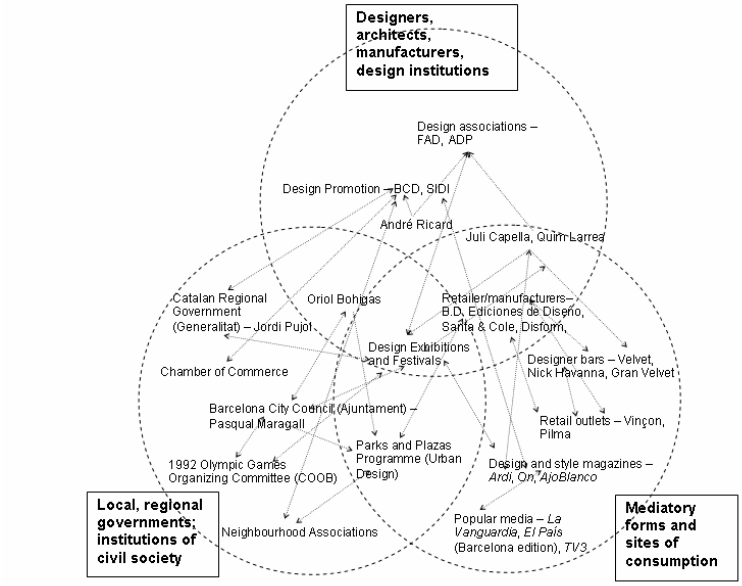
Firstly I want to draw attention to the growing localisation of design cultures. In this instance, what I mean by 'design cultures' are the collectively-held norms of practice that are shared within or across contexts (Julier 2006). Spatially, the palette of contexts has grown and become more variegated in the last ten years. In the UK, for example, roughly a third of design businesses are located in London. However, there has been regional growth with increases in turnover outstripping those in London during 2004-5 in all other UK regions. Alongside this, there is a marked difference in orientation of design firms in the regions as compared with London. The concentration of design in the capital is explained less by the classic clustering effect of mutually interdependent skills networks (as in Michael Porter's Competitive

Advantage' thesis). It has more to do with proximity to global clients and transport networks. By contrast, the commercial orientation of regional design firms is much less international and is focused on local, regional and national business.

There isn't evidence to support a speculation that the reverse of the London situation is true in the regions. Design firms draw on a halo of freelance practitioners – design consultancies in the UK employ 61000 and there are 47500 freelancers against a further 77000 in-house designers (British Design Innovation 2007). The profuse use of freelancers to add skills to design firms is more-or-less even across the country while inter-firm collaboration is, perhaps, less likely than proponents of creative quarters who use the Porter notion of clustering would like to admit. Designers are a jealous lot.

So this brings us back to a different form of and motivation for the networking of designers and design activities in urban agglomerations that may add up to the notion of a 'design city'. Historically, this process has less to do with a Charles Landry or Richard Florida inspired top-down planning approach. Instead, the steps towards self-proclomation or external award of the title of 'design city' is the result of a confluence of activities and artefacts that are often secondary to the core business of designers.

I have studied this most intensively through the emergence of Barcelona as a so-called 'design capital' in the late 1980s and 1990s. It later led me to map the various nodes of what I called its 'designscape'. It is about the 'things' that make up their fabric as much as their representation through mediatory forms and the symbolic role of its participants. It is summarised diagrammatically below.



Domains of design culture that formed Barcelona's designscape, 1980s and 1990s. Arrows denote lines of *direct* relationship and influence.

Bell and Jayne (2003) map out their aspirations for north Staffordshire in terms of design-led regeneration. Thus they suggest that a nurtured co-existence of producers, consumers and designers in a coherent circuit of culture, can in turn generate economic, social and cultural value for a location. Their scope in terms of design ranges across crafts, product engineering, retail and entertainment, public spaces and architecture with the city as the cradle of resultant entrepreneurial networks and consumer practices feeding off each other. The interlocking of such processes within a densely operating, localised framework has a resonance with my concept of an 'urban designscape'.

But to return to Barcelona, Narotzky (2000) skilfully demonstrates, though, that an effective interaction between private and public systems of provision existed in the Barcelonese context. She draws on Kopytoff (1986) who wrote of the 'singularisation' of non-commodified collective goods that are placed beyond the sphere of exchange.

This is achieved, for example, through their taste-brokers such as historical commissions, neighbourhood associations or panels deciding on public monuments. But this could also take place in the frequent exhibitions of Barcelona design or even in the display of individual pieces in design retail spaces. In Barcelona, this process was also manifested in the public sphere of urban design and designer bars where the tastes of this elite were placed as what Narotzky calls ‘secondary commodities’. These spaces provided a backdrop to consuming other things, “such as food, drinks, leisure services or public spaces” (Narotzky 2000: 234). Thus new bars would feature Catalan design objects— the higher cover price on drinks would subsidise this ephemeral design consumption. So whilst this new design originated in the framework of high culture and bourgeois taste for the modern domestic interior, in the 1980s it expanded its sphere of influence into the public sphere. New public spaces and leisure services became pervasive and sometimes (but not always) persuasive loci for the incalculation of a new urban habitus.

This has been less programmatically defined and executed than may be appreciated. There have been key municipal design events, such as the biannual ‘Primavera de Disseny’ (Spring design festival) that was instigated in 1991 or the Barcelona Design event coinciding with the 1992 Cultural Olympiad. However, in both these cases their direction was undertaken by *design animateurs* Juli Capella and Quim Larrea rather than civic cultural managers. Funding from the muncipality for each of these was little more than seed-corn too.

Similarly, the development of Montreal toward its ‘Design City’ status has involved the gradual building up of a network of activities. In this case, the catalyst for this has come more explicitly from its municipal government and more specifically its Design Commissioner. However, the aim was to draw on what Lacroix has described as ‘underground activities’ in developing a city-wide design sensibility. Hence in 1995

she instigated a retail design competition called ‘Commerce Design’. She saw shops, galleries, restaurants, cafés and bars as prime locations for the influence of everyday life. This competition was not guided by specific ‘taste requirements’ or budgetary scope, rather it sought an alignment of the semi-public or –private sphere of commercial outlets and of course their entrepreneurs, design professionals and their institutions and the active engagement of the consuming public through, for example, their inclusion in the award selection process. (I should point out that Lacroix was working entirely independently of Florida’s notion (2002: 226) of ‘third places’ – café culture to attract creative labour.)

To summarize so far, the rise of design as a process and target of urban agglomerations should, firstly, be viewed as itself the product of the professional aspirations of localised networks of designers. Secondly, this takes places primarily where design is taken out of the realm of exchange; the promotion of design involves the promotion of the ‘idea of design’ not solely the commercial movement or realisation of design artefacts themselves or the provisioning of design consultancy. Thirdly, this denomination of ‘design city’ may feed into the place-identity of a location, but it doesn’t exist as brand strategy in itself. Fourthly, this involves the combination of artefacts and actors and it is the density and intensity of their relationships that produces this ‘design city’ effect.

Brand Value

The issue of place-branding is also highly crowded terrain. Place-branding is the process of applying the branding process—as applied to commercial products—to geographical locations and is a burgeoning activity within advertising and marketing (Olins, 1999). The relationship of product–country image is claimed as the ‘most-

researched' issue in international buyer behaviour; there are, it is calculated, over 750 major publications by more than 780 authors who address this theme (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002, p. 294). Specialist place-identity marketing and brand consultancies have emerged (such as Total Destination Management in the US and Placebrands Ltd in the UK). The publication of 'How to do place branding' books has gathered pace. And now there is the an academic journal, the *Journal of Place Branding*.

It is important at this point to distinguish between 'soft-' and 'hard-' branding. Hard-branding typically involves the adoption of very clear-cut rules and guidelines in the implementation of aesthetic and attidudinal markers throughout an organisation – the use of colour palette, typography, slogans etc. Each element plays its part within a tightly orchestrated whole. Hard branding introduces order, certainty and coherence into an unruly urban landscape, making it easier to 'read' (Evans 2003, 420).The job of the brand manager is to ensure that all part of the organisation adhere to the brand guidelines.

Soft-branding allows for more variation within a broad scheme so that sub-groupings or individuals employ their own interpretations of a central concept. For example, Peter Saville, erstwhile graphic designer of Factory Records sleeves for 1980s bands such as New Order and the Buzzcocks, has, since 2004 been employed as the 'Creative Director' of Manchester. His brief was fairly open, it begins with, "images, words, typefaces, colour and all forms of presentation and he will advise Manchester on all aspects of creativity" (Manchester City Council, 2004). In the first six months he came up with the slogan of 'Original Modern' for the city which has been developed into a sparingly used logotype. Saville's current job is meeting with organisations within the city to discuss what their particular take is on this 'Original Modern' notion and help them to carry this forward into designed outcomes (Saville 2007a).

Traditional hard-branding approaches relies on heavy investment in the hardwares infrastructure, monuments or buildings as well as brand identity programmes (Evans 2002). Saville's soft-branding approach focuses more on the intellectual and creative software of the city an in particular, the symbolic capital of design. In a recent interview, he claimed that, 'it's the people in a place that define place … you're dealing with intellectual migration… people don't gotto a place to earn but to learn more … [architects, designers].. they're the ones who make opportunites for others … to regenerate the life spirit of a place … you need more than a logo to regenerate a place … it is the people who do that' (Saville 2007b).

The approach of levering the symbolic capital of design and designers into the promotion of a brand was also to be found previously in a brand strategy that was developed for Manchester. Speaking of its 'Respect' brand value. The report continues 'Market Street may be the economic engine of Manchester's retail scene but it is the independent and quirky Northern Quarter that is seen as most epitomising 'Manchesterness' (Hemisphere, 2003, p. 9). Manchester's city-centre creative cluster, the Northern Quarter has evolved as both a site of design production and consumption, with its rich network of creative businesses supporting and supported by a designerly leisure infrastructure of bars and cafés.

Keeping in view the enthusiasms for the celebration and promotion of creative capital and even drawing on it within regeneration and place-branding strategies, it is perhaps interesting to note that since 2002, revenue and employment in the UK design industry has declined (British Design Innovation 2007). The reasons for this are numerous and this is currently causing an interesting debate as to the future of the design profession. For the purposes of this paper, this statistic throws into the

relief the notion that a soft-branding approach is, perhaps cheap and cheerful, drawing the non-commercial impression of a commercially declining sector.

It also has some resonance with the aforementioned Commerce Design Montréal. Rantisi and Leslie (2006) see this as an example of a ‘fast’ policy that is initiated by the state, but carried out by business owners and citizens. As such, it represents a downloading of the responsibility, and indeed cost, for economic development to the private or individual scale. As such, they argue, this doesn’t represent a ‘hollowing out’ of municipal intervention within place-branding initiatives. Instead, government plays a role in in cultivating and coordinating partnerships with private and non-profit actors. It has its attractions for municipalities as it favours short-term, low-cost forms of urban governance that complements property-led and consumption-oriented strategies.

In this context, the work of the city creative director, design commissioner or brand manager becomes that of the coordination between some of its material and human assets, a role that we have seen Oriol Bohigas undertake in Barcelona in the 1980s, Marie-Josee Lacroix undertaken in Montreal through the 1990s (and in a more muted way, John Thorpe in Leeds) and Peter Saville in Manchester in the noughties.

Brand value of the design city is thus constantly shifting backwards and forwards between spectacle and routine. A design exhibition or municipal competition raises public interest and enthusiasm while also being imbricated into the ‘normal’, everyday activities of a design intense location. It becomes a normalised and essentialised aspect of the urban habitus.

Value, Relationality and Financialisation[2]

Unlike a logo that is regulated by brand guidelines and trademark law, this process is not finite. I have tried to emphasize the relationality of actors and objects within the framework of the 'design city'. By drawing attention to their evolutionary development and the subsequent co-option of this into initiatives in regeneration and place-branding we see that brand value is vested in the intensity and density of the relationships of things, people, understandings, know-how, routines and aspirations. As such this is an ongoing process within which objects are unfinished parts of a wider ecology. Branding in this instance is the process of regulation of that ecology rather than being the stuff that in itself presents value.

Design traditionally may be understood as the process of putting value *into* objects. Products are made more attractive or ergonomically successful, logos are made more visible, clothes more fashionable.

In the case of the design city, design is identified as a source of value. As such it plays a different role within the culture of financialization. It is value *in potentia*, something that exists as a signifier of future value. Saskia Sassen (2003) talks about the way that architecture becomes a way to release capital into global flows. So a building isn't just steel, glass and concrete but a way of raising further capital (presumably by acting as security) into global flows. Ford now makes more money from loans than from selling cars and trucks. More prosaically, home improvement shows on TV are ways of identifying sources of value (the potential of the property) and creating further value. Equally, the 'design city' is a way of materialising and thus evidencing a wider aspiration of the creative city – consciously or not. Value may be

[2] This section is developed from an interview I have conducted with Celia Lury and Scott Lash to be published in the *Journal of Design and Culture* in 2009.

put into to, by further urban design schemes, a new logo or slogan, public art schemes; but its ‘designscape’ may also be drawn as a source of attraction for future investment, tourism or the perception of social well-being. This refers back to questions about atemporality... of things being in the present but also pointing to a future realisation of value.

Here the relationship to the future is more open-ended and heterogenuous. The relationship of production, distribution and reception is no longer sequential ‘in which production was located as the (prior, original and principal) source of value’ (Lury in interview with the author forthcoming). Instead, design, as in this case subservient to branding, adds to a differentiated temporal and spatial network of circulation. What is in circulation, is not so much the products and services within which the temporal order of this circulation is a source of value (as may be understood within conceptions of the New Economy). Instead, design, to reiterate, is removed from the realm of exchange. It becomes understood as *something else*.

Discussion of creative industries, regeneration and place-branding has become crowded territory. However, within these processes it might be helpful to view the role of design not as a static, reified object but as the relationality of the hardware and the software – the things and the knowledge – that conspires in the configuration of a place-brand. The prime motivations of design – of modernity and differentiation – help to underpin the distinctions of a location. That is, of course, until somewhere else does the same thing.

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