Urban identities in a globalising world: Reimaging Dublin city

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ABSTRACT

Cities are the economic drivers of globalisation and the need for them to be increasingly competitive has resulted in major challenges for urban identity. This paper examines how the pursuit of urban entrepreneurial policies in Dublin, Ireland has fostered a culture of creating globally recognisable images as a means of competing for international investment. One result of this in practice has been the replication of apparently successful global images and strategies in a wide variety of locations with some minor variations. The paper illustrates how local government and business organisations are creating and projecting very similar urban identities and it argues that this is a core aspect of an entrepreneurial urban

agenda designed to retain and maximise the city's global appeal. The results of the analysis demonstrate the key role of urban design in promoting the entrepreneurial agenda of a variety of urban stakeholders, but also generate questions related to the sustainability of this approach to creating an urban identity.

Keywords: Urban identity, globalisation, marketing, image building

RÉSUMÉ

Les villes sont les chauffeurs économiques de globalisation et le besoin pour eux pour être de plus en plus compétitif s'est ensuivi dans les défis importants pour l'identité urbaine. Ce papier examine comment la poursuite de politiques entrepreneuriales urbaines à Dublin, Irlande a encouragé une culture de création des images à l'échelle mondiale reconnaissables comme un moyen de concurrence pour l'investissement international. Un résultat de cela a en pratique été la réplication d'images globales apparemment réussies et de stratégies dans une large variété d'endroits avec quelques variations mineures. Le papier illustre comment la collectivité locale et les organisations d'affaires créent et projettent des identités urbaines très semblables et il soutient que c'est un aspect de base d'un ordre du jour urbain entrepreneurial conçu pour retenir et maximiser l'appel global de la ville. Les résultats de l'analyse démontrent le rôle clé de design urbain dans la promotion de l'ordre du jour entrepreneurial d'une variété de parieurs urbains, mais produisent aussi des questions rattachées au sustainability de cette approche à la création d'une identité urbaine.

Mots clé: l'identité urbaine, la globalisation, le marketing de la ville, l'image

INTRODUCTION

Cities are the economic drivers of globalisation; a striking fact given that just 14% of the world's population lived in cities in 1900. In recent decades, globalisation and rapid urbanisation have resulted in the shaping of the structure, appearance and design of many cities. Competition for a shrinking pot of international investment is critical in this increasingly globalised world shaping both economic and policy choices. However, these cannot be separated or considered in isolation from the social and cultural elements that give cities their identities, rather they are inexplicably intertwined.

This paper examines how the pursuit of urban entrepreneurial policies in Dublin, Ireland has fostered a culture of creating globally recognisable images as a means of competing for international investment. The process of doing so has resulted in an increased use of marketing strategies, once primarily associated with the business world but now incorporated into the privatised realm of local government. At the heart of these campaigns are the images created for promotional and attraction purposes, and it is these images that I suggest are utilised to create a global urban identity for the city. Identity is generally assumed to be place specific but this is challenged when numerous cities replicate images, and the processes that created them, in order to put their locale on the international map. The effects of this process has generated considerable debate in geographic circles, and many argue the uniqueness of place is greatly reduced in such instances (Amin & Thrift, 1996; Harvey, 1996; May, 1996; Healey, 2002; Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 1994, 2005, 2007).

Global Political Processes of Change

The concept of globalisation first emerged in the 1960's with the discussion by Marshall McLuhan of a global village (Johnston et. al, 2000). This period was characterised by a move to considering social, cultural, political and economic processes at a global scale. The rise of 'the global' was explained by the concept of time-space compression, whereby high speed communications between states and societies in different parts of the

globe was being facilitated by new technologies. It was no longer necessary to conduct business in person neither did it necessitate unnecessary international travel. Key to the expansion of globalisation was the development, strengthening and continued reliance on international networks, relationships and linkages, while the command and network roles of cities gained in prominence. The neoliberal political framework that guided this transformation continues to shape the pattern of global interconnectedness; it is for this reason that neither globalisation nor neoliberalism can be understood to be complete rather they are intertwined political processes that are on-going and constantly evolving (Ward, 2003; Healey, 2004; Peck, 2005; Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). Amin &Thrift (2009) define the city as a "*set of constantly evolving systems or networks"*. They further emphasise the importance of cities as "*places of work, consumption, circulation, play, creativity, excitement, boredom"* (ibid). If the influences upon, as well as the influences of, these global cities are constantly evolving then it is reasonable to suggest that the identity or image they project must also transform.

The context within which this transformation occurred has been variably described as an 'urban renaissance' (Scott, 2008) or the 'new urbanism' (Massey, 2008; Allen, Massey & Pryke, 1999; Ward, 2003). These concepts embrace the process and consequences of the move away from heavy manufacturing toward a flexible post-fordist, knowledge based service economy marked by the embracing of neoliberal urban policies characterised by liberalisation, marketisation and privatisation (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1995; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Ward, 2003; Brenner, 2004; Scott, 2006; Pratt, 2008; Ren, 2008; Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). This approach is largely responsible for the current shape of cities today, particularly in the Western world but increasingly in countries like China. Entrepreneurial urban governance, which marked the decline of a Keynesian type approach to urban development (Harvey, 1989; Ren, 2008), has provided the mechanism through which neoliberalism has been 'grounded' in space. Harvey argues that *'the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices."* (2009) and in his earlier work he characterises the entrepreneurial city as one where public-private partnerships dominate and risk taking, profit motivation, inventiveness and increased competitiveness, have become key drivers (Hubbard and Hall,

1996). As "*cities are the economic drivers of the regional and national economy"* (Ward, 2003), they must be successful and this has become ever more important in the context of growing competition for mobile investment. The adoption of international marketing strategies, construction of large scale redevelopment projects such as sports arenas and entertainment venues, the designation of cultural quarters, promotion of local events and festivals coupled with the involvement of international designers and architects in re-shaping the built environment have become key tools in delivering the entrepreneurial agenda. It is therefore unsurprising that urban design has become critical in communicating the global aspirations of cities and has become a key activity in facilitating the city marketing and branding agendas. Actors involved in this process include but are not limited to private developers, city managers, chambers of commerce and other business associations. Together the processes of urban design, image production and city marketing actively create a particular brand and identity for a city that often outlives the strategies that produced them.

The images of the city conceptualised by this broad coalition of actors and created during the urban design process cannot be considered shallow visual images but rather they are embedded with meanings of the city (Lynch, 1973). Vanolo (2008) describes the meanings attributed to city images by local inhabitants and actors as "*internal images"* (2008) but it would be naive to assume that these are read in the same way by all stakeholders. In addition, the images projected internationally through city marketing can be defined as external images and it is these combined with the internal images that construct urban identity. However, Castells (2004) argues that the "*social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relations"* (2004) so not all urban actors will or can equally influence the production of the city image in the same way. Lynch and de Chernatony (2004) suggest that a successful image or identity should embrace a cluster of "*functional and emotional values that promise a unique and welcome experience"* (cited in Dinnie, 2004). Thus for a city brand or identity to achieve its goal of being globally attractive, it must promote its place-specific qualities while simultaneously retaining a global appeal. One result of this in practice has been the replication of apparently successful global images and strategies in a wide variety of locations with some minor variations. The remainder of this paper illustrates this phenomenon in

Dublin, Ireland, highlighting how local government and business organisations are creating and projecting very similar urban identities and argues that this is a core aspect of an entrepreneurial urban agenda designed to retain and maximise the city's global appeal.

This will be achieved through a visual analysis of advertising, promotional and other literature used to communicate a strong global message about the city. Crang (2002, 2003a, 2005) and Rose (2007) have both highlighted the potential of this type of qualitative research in a geographic context. Most social research uses this technique in relation to human subjects (largely found in education studies and anthropology), but this paper adopts an innovative approach by focusing on inanimate objects such as iconic building structures and urban spaces.

Data, in the form of visual imagery such as photos and computer generated images, has been collected from four primary sources:

1. Tourist Material: brochures, leaflets and postcards

3. Websites of key agencies

4. Websites of private companies located in the city centre and attracted here by the Industrial Development Authority

5. Online databases of photographic images: Google Images and Getty Images

Key information such as image type, image content, and source was recorded in a database generated for each category. Each of the three databases were analysed separately in terms of location portrayed in the image and frequency of recurrence and the results were then combined for further analysis. Paramount at this later stage of analysis was the source, style, content, dominating style of architecture and designer of each image. The cross referencing of these features generated an understanding of both the intention and use of the images across a wide spectrum of fields, some examples of which are discussed in the following section.

Dublin: The Political and Economic Context

Dublin not unlike other cities during the 1980's experienced a declining economy with its resultant effect on the social and physical landscape. The movement outward of industrial and manufacturing activities left behind a declining central core, characterised by high unemployment, dependency and low educational attainment. This was further exacerbated by zoning restrictions placed on residential development and a national economy in crisis. Mindful of changes in urban policy elsewhere, Irish policymakers increasingly saw the neoliberal urban agenda as a way of reversing the fortunes of the inner city. Influences by British approaches such as Urban Development Corporations and Enterprise Zones, Irish policymakers quickly moved to embrace a more entrepreneurial approach to urban development. The Urban Renewal and Finance Acts of 1986 marked the beginning of political, economic and physical change. While they aspired to social, environmental and economic revitalisation, a firm focus was placed on 'property-led regeneration' through fiscal incentives, with the overall goal of stimulating national recovery. By the late 1990s, the city had been transformed and was being described internationally as the engine of the Celtic Tiger economy, a dramatic change from the 'dirty, old town' image of earlier decades. The city began to play an increasingly important role in facilitating Irelands' embeddedness in global economic and cultural networks and thus the image projected to an international audience became a critical concern for policymakers.

Dublin's 'Official' Identity

The image of 'official' Dublin projected to an international audience is the responsibility of a range of actors including local government departments, business associations and other economic stakeholders. The data suggests the incorporation of very narrow and specific representations of the city into branding strategies with clear links evident between city marketing strategies and urban policies aimed at attracting inward investment. The type of message that Dublin wishes to convey to potential investors is clearly represented through the way in which the local authority, Dublin City

Council, as well as other organisations with an economic remit brand themselves. In 2001, the name, image and logo of the local authority was recreated to project a more entrepreneurial external image. Evidence of this rebranding dominates the current banner page of Dublin City Council website, where the three 'castles' of the city coat of arms is juxtaposed with a computer generated image of the Dublin skyline highlighting specific iconic symbols (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Dublin City Council Web banner.

These are Liberty Hall (one of the only examples of high-rise modernist architecture within the city and for 30 years the most dominant feature on the skyline) and the Custom House (one of Dublin's most iconic examples of Georgian architecture) with the Monument of Light (otherwise known as the Spire) between the two. The latter is a new stainless-steel monument commissioned as a Millennium project and was a core element in the overall re-design and re-imaging of Dublin's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street, over the last decade. The juxtaposition of these three symbols creates the impression of a unified past and present, a city with historical connections but very much at the cutting edge of contemporary urbanism. The importance of the Spire is evident in its recent incorporation into a city-wide marketing strategy to raise the profile of the city centre and is also referenced in a large number of other image-making activities. Dublin Chamber of Commerce, an organisation representing the interests of business in the city, similarly incorporates references to both the Spire and Dublin Castle into its new logo and these are accompanied by a very clear visual cue to the importance of bridges within the city (Fig. 2). The importance of bridges in connecting a city that is divided both physically and in many terms culturally by the river Liffey is highlighted in their marketing. Each of these three elements appear central to the contemporary identity of Dublin City and reappear frequently in many fields of image projection and across the range of literature examined during the visual analysis.

Figure 2. Dublin Chamber of Commerce Brand Logo.

The high visibility of the Monument of Light (Spire), designed by Ian Ritchie Architects, across all of the data sources, might be explained through its role as a focal point on O'Connell Street, the main street of the city. Primary thoroughfares in cities receive a lot of attention across a range of media e.g. the Champs-Elysees Paris, Broadway or Fifth Avenue in New York and the National Mall in Washington D.C. Tourists flock to these places for sightseeing, residents traverse these locations in daily commutes and activities, they are often important meeting places and of historic value. O'Connell Street, Dublin is no different. The motivation for erecting the Monument of Light was to herald a new future for the centre of Dublin, to mark the regeneration of a large swathe of the north inner city and is perhaps why it has become such a central plank of marketing strategies by a range of agents. Figure 3a illustrates the central location of the monument, while Figures 3b and 3c demonstrate how it has been incorporated into a number of branding and marketing campaigns. All representations of the spire uncovered in this research use bright, clear focused photographs or digital reproductions emphasising the iconic appeal of the full height of the spire. A striking example of this is evident in the *Make the City Yours* campaign which incorporates the actual spire into the lettering of the advertising campaign. This further allows the people to make this new feature of the urban landscape theirs by interacting with it.

Figures 3a, b, c. The Spire, O'Connell Street.

A second major feature of Dublin's projected identity emerging from the results of the visual analysis is bridges. Both the traditional stone bridges and more contemporary constructions recur time and again across the range of sources- Getty and Google Image databases, City Jet Inflight magazine, corporate listing databases and tourist material postcards -which were consulted and analysed. The symbolism of bridges makes them perfect elements in marketing campaigns as they are easily understood to join two parts of the city with each other and are dominant physical features on the landscape. The two most recent additions to Dublin's riverside are the Santiago Calatrava -designed James Joyce and Samuel Beckett bridges. These occupy key focal positions in the city and have marked a trend towards understanding bridges as more than just transportation devices or aids. They now symbolise the global status of the city; the commissioning of world renowned architects or 'starchitects' to give a city international credibility has become a key tool in city marketing as it puts the city on the world map of urban development. The styles of the most recent bridges in Dublin stand in marked contrast to the traditional bridges along the river Liffey (Fig. 4-7). However, all of the different types of bridges feed into different aspects of the marketing strategy for the city.

Figure 4. James Joyce Bridge.   *Figure 5. Samuel Beckett Bridge.*

Figure 6. Halfpenny Bridge   *Figure 7. Grattan Bridge.*

A surprising result was that specific images one would have expected to be central to Dublin's attempt to market itself are absent from the visual data. The city has recently opened the doors to a new performing arts theatre, Grand Canal Theatre, designed by the acclaimed architect Daniel Libeskind. To the front of this development is an impressive and newly-created open space in the city, Grand Canal Square, designed by world-renowned landscape architect Martha Schwartz. One would have expected that the profile of the designers combined with the iconic designs would have resulted in their appearance in the range of materials consulted. Figure 8, a computer generated image from the Dublin Docklands Development Authority, illustrates the potential wow factor held by both of these spaces within the redeveloped Grand Canal dock area and illustrates why one would

expect these development to have become more central to the marketing of the city.

Figure 8. Grand Canal Theatre and Grand Canal Square.

Another iconic development that opened its doors in September 2010, the Convention Centre Dublin (Fig. 9) designed by renowned architect Kevin Roche, has been slowly appearing in marketing material such as the head banner of the Discover Ireland tourist website. However the scope and field of vision of the images used direct attention toward the promotion of the regenerated waterfront and docklands generally while very indirectly showcasing the recent addition to the urban landscape. To date and contrary to what one might expect, images of the National Conference Centre are very limited. While specific images have been generated by the promoters of the national conference centre to attract business (Fig.s 9a and 9b), the development has yet to make a visual impact in wider marketing materials and more generally as part of the image of the contemporary city.

Figures 9a, b. Dublin Convention Centre.

Relatedly, it is worth noting the dependent relationship between marketing of these iconic venues and the linkages on their websites promoting Dublin as a 'destination' relying on place specific qualities.

Discussion: Dublin as an entrepreneurial city

The results of the visual analysis demonstrate a very specificimage and set of messages of Dublin being projected to external stakeholders including potential tourists and investors. The various sources drawn upon in this study illustrate how urban marketing strategies in Dublin have become heavily dependent on a juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern using a very limited range of urban images to generate a specific image. It may be argued that the goal is to produce an urban identity that, through the focus on iconic, contemporary architecture such as the Spire, is globally appealing but one that also portrays a certain place-specificity or uniqueness. References to and the deliberate incorporation of important historic buildings such as the Custom House into the 'city brand' are designed to generate a specific sense of place and function as unique selling-points or attractions to a range of local and international stakeholder. This process of 'glocalisation' is key to the goal of demonstrating global competitiveness while simultaneously highlighting the local attractiveness relative to other places. This supports Ward's (2003) contention that the entrepreneurial city should be understood not only in terms of the policies implemented but also the discourses created and told through particular representations of the city.

What is clear from the evidence is that urban design has become a key tool in the city marketing arsenal. The commissioning of four world-renowned architects to design important recent additions to the urban landscape is a very clear example of the so-called Bilbao effect in Dublin. Grodach (2008) defines this as a process whereby a leading designer is employed to develop an iconic building in the hope of spearheading the attraction of inward investment The meaning of these flagship developments and their role as catalysts for future economic development almost become more important than the art contained inside them. This would explain the growing role and expansion in numbers of iconic or flagship developments across western cities, particularly as part of regeneration projects. Dublin is

no exception and the results of this analysis demonstrate the range of structures and buildings that have been developed in the last decade to achieve this goal.

These recent constructions demonstrate a move away from redevelopment as a process designed to revitalise inner cities through re-population and residential development as was the case in the late 1980s and 1990s. Rather current and recent redevelopment projects appear to privilege commercial developments aimed at attracting global attention. This is a core part of a more entrepreneurial urban agenda that focuses specifically on the prosperity of the city rather than necessarily on the needs of its residents (Ward, 2003; Jones & Ward, 2002; Kearns & Paddison, 2000; McGuirk, 2000). Hubbard (1996) links the production of new urban identities through the combination of iconic developments and more place-specific references to the awareness of both urban residents and governing authorities of the need to compete internationally for capital and simultaneously create a distinctive character for their city. One of the side effects of these kinds of activities is that while residents may recognise the economic imperative to heighten the appeal of their city, they often cannot develop an association with or recognise the identity projected to external stakeholders. A significant gap can emerge between the external and internal image of the city, a result of the different power relations between various actors and the uneven opportunities provided to influence the urban identity. In some instances, unanticipated interactions and negative engagements can result. For example the construction of the Monument of Light (Spire) in a historically important location in Dublin City in the early 2000's, generated a very strong negative response from a large proportion of city dwellers who simply considered it an appropriate and meaningless structure for its proposed location. Colloquially, the monument has been referred to as the *Stiletto in the Ghetto*, *The Nail in the Pale* or more generally *the Spike*, indicative of a very different image to that portrayed in more official circles.

One of the most interesting findings from the data analysis was the low level frequency with which the most recent additions to the urban landscape have been incorporated into the official marketing of the city. One possible explanation may be that some sort of timelag occurs between the appearance of the structure in the city and its incorporation into the identity of the city. It is possible that the frequency with which structures such as the National

Conference Centre and Grand Canal Theatre appear in visual representations of the city will gradually increase in the coming months and years. However another explanation may be that these two iconic structures in a dockland location that was widely perceived as the heart of the Celtic Tiger economy may be too closely associated with the excesses of the economic boom that characterised Ireland until very recently. Their incorporation into the urban identity of the city may be much slower as they represent a recent past that has resulted in dramatic and negative social, economic and cultural consequences. It will only become clear in the coming years whether this is indeed the case or whether they can be re-positioned as beacons of the future for Dublin City.

CONCLUSION

As discussed in this paper, the active pursuit of an entrepreneurial agenda in Dublin in recent years has been facilitated through the development promotion of a 'glocal' identity for the city. New flagship developments, often designed by world-renowned architects, have been combined with impressive historic images of the city to generate a specific kind of global image with which the city is attempting to attract and retain global investment. Through visual analysis of a range of data sources, this paper has adopted an innovative approach to unpacking the way in which the city is promoted on a global scale. The results of the analysis demonstrate the key role of urban design in promoting the entrepreneurial agenda of a variety of urban stakeholders, but also generate questions related to the sustainability of this approach to creating an urban identity. Future papers will examine in more detail the processes through which the portrayed identity is constructed and question the sense of place constructed and interpreted through such image-making strategies.

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