

Book review

Dominic Medway, Gary Warnaby and John Byrom (eds), *A Research Agenda for Place Branding* (Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA 2021) 352 pp.

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In the first chapter of this collection the editors state that, when Edward Elgar Publishing initially approached them to produce this book, they had hesitated. The reason lies behind place branding practice being predominantly top-down, and not sufficiently inclusive of the views of residents. Nevertheless, editing this collection coincided with the opportunity to deepen and widen the scope of research on place branding, and with the intention to ‘shake things up a bit’ and shift perspectives on the concept (p. 4). With the selection of a wide range of disciplinary standpoints on place branding, the editors have indeed achieved their goal to extend the borders of enquiry in the field, and to exemplify an eclectic collection of topics that are ripe for future research. It is ironic that the editors have overtly expressed their scepticism of the concept, yet managed to bring together credible thought leaders in the field and curate an inter-disciplinary volume that is likely to raise the legitimacy and profile of place branding as a discrete area of study.

The volume is organised into four parts under the themes of Governance, Contexts, Experience and Creativity. The chapters are bite-sized, which facilitates easy reading, but also quite pithy in providing useful takeaways for further research. Part I, Governance, opens with Chapter 2, which is a searing critique written by Aram Eisenschitz of the neoliberal underpinning of place branding policy and praxis. He argues that activities such as gentrification, regeneration and place marketing have been steered by the privileged classes to entrench their own political interests rather than to benefit the economic aspirations of the wider community. This critique asserts the all-pervasive reach of power and class behind place branding. Yet there are questions as to how far this is the case, as most democratic societies display subversive currents of citizen activism that challenge top-down governance. This opening salvo challenges the legitimacy of the managerialism of place branding, and reinforces the value of exposing the power relations and social disparities that are implicated in the practice. In Chapter 4 Andrea Insch pivots this discussion to argue the case for the bottom-up approach in place branding, and advocates for participatory local engagement that is inclusive of the marginalised. As a counterpoint to top-down governance, the focus of this chapter is on clarifying the participatory methods that may be employed by managers to provide a direct route to integrate locals in place branding governance. Chapters 3 and 5 shift the focus from power in governance to the ‘how’ by highlighting the promising scenarios of utilising big data in place management, and the ways in which place branding contributes to the spatial planning process through innovation and the valorisation of a community’s heritage and cultural assets.

Part II, Contexts, presents an array of thought-provoking chapters covering disparate topics on place branding research. The chapters in this section are not seamlessly

connected under an overarching focus. Consequently, the term ‘contexts’ appears to be a catch-all for divergent studies that attempt to coalesce around the concept of a ‘sense of place’ in place branding. In Chapter 6 Aleks Vladimirov and Gary Warnaby argue that applying a behavioural economics perspective to clarify consumers’ selection of places to visit or to live presents new possibilities for place marketers to influence their choices. Chapter 8 on the Nordic wave and place branding discusses the proposition of a distinctive Nordic epistemology that proposes symbolic attributes of welfare, social equality and peace, and that privileges an evolutionary, fluid concept of place. The other chapters in this section (that is, 7, 9, 10 and 11) examine place branding praxis at the city, region and country level with respect to topical issues of resilience, scalar complexity, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and digital placemaking.

Of the four parts of the book, Part III (Experience) features chapters on what may be considered non-conventional topics applied to place branding. The most controversial is Jack Coffin’s Chapter 12 on posthuman phenomenology, which argues that nonhumans, such as animals, also contribute to deepen understanding of how places are experienced. Initially, this challenge to an essentially anthropomorphic conceptualisation of place branding seems spurious or even fanciful. However, Coffin establishes the rationale for his arguments on the principles of ecological balance and equity, animal welfare and environmental preservation. He still admits, however, that the exploration of non-human phenomenology is blue-sky thinking and critical scholarship, and thus unlikely to be applied in practice. By contrast, Chapter 16 advocates the centring of lived experiences to inform theory building, with an emphasis on studying how everyday mobilities and praxis may contribute to differentiation strategies in place branding. The remaining contributions in this section (Chapters 13–15) are less contentious, and cover topics of co-creation, authenticity and sense-making that are more closely aligned to traditional studies on consumer behaviour and the experience economy and have a strong research tradition in the extant literature on place branding.

The chapters in Part IV, Creativity, span introspective reflections by authors who provide autobiographical, honest accounts on academic research and professional practice in place branding. This section leads with Tim Edensor’s reflections in Chapter 17 on the debate over whether festive light installations in cities contribute to homogenisation and ‘placelessness’. He makes a convincing case in his contention that these installations enable deeper meanings of places that disrupt stereotypical, ocular perceptions of how places are experienced. In Chapter 18 Mihalis Kavaratzis and Gary Warnaby call for art-based and creative methods in place branding research that seem consequent to their grappling with and working through the conundrum of advancing knowledge in a field that does not have a ready home in the four-star academic journals of more ‘mature’ disciplines. As such, the dissonance and perhaps disillusionment of this displacement by scholars committed to place branding research is countered by the freedom and unfettered artistic expression of ideas of place branding that is replenishing and liberating, as well as empowering. The volume concludes with an entertaining review by Stephen Brown, a scholar and place branding practitioner who recalls his idealism in commencing studies of place marketing/branding (as the two are deemed to be synonymous in his view), and the messiness of translating scholarship into practice. Reflecting on his work in place marketing in Belfast, Brown charts the untidiness of impact pathways, which today seems to be the holy grail that dominates the discourse of research excellence frameworks.

In terms of the geographical coverage of the countries in this edited collection, the place branding agenda is mainly positioned as a Westernised construct. In Chapter 7,

'Global City Branding', the discussion commences with a snapshot of the Brazilian city of Salvador's marketing message to visitors in the wake of COVID-19 on delaying visits until after the lockdown. However this mention of the city is not central as a case study review of the topic of city resilience and the role of place branding in contributing to this process. Across the chapters in this collection there are passing references to cities such as Addis Ababa, Chennai, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Somehow, developing nations are not focal to this research agenda for place branding. This overlooks the dynamic growth and energy, as well as wicked problems, in developing countries that require sustained research in the quest for solutions. This is a glaring omission as it gives the impression that developing nations are not equal in the global quest for place recognition and admiration.

The challenge of mapping research trajectories involves identifying the gaps in the extant body of knowledge in the field while raising ambitions on the possibilities for future research. It goes beyond forecasting, to laying out a credible road map to guide scholars on the journey towards fruitful, cogent development of a field of research. The editors of this volume have embraced this mission with their bold choice of topics and inter-disciplinary perspectives that will both affirm traditional research foci and unsettle traditional notions of the priorities for place branding for many years to come.