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CITY BRAND EXPERIENCE: Urban Trends and Aesthetic Experiences from the Perspective of City Branding

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the aesthetic experiences in the city from the perspective of city branding. The discussions about cities have been drawing attention to how people relate to them and their transformations, and, consequently, their new opportunities. Firstly, the article focuses on a theoretical revision about the related topics, such as urban trends, aesthetic experiences and city branding. Then, through a qualitative study of a subjective analysis of two urban trends described by the BMW Guggenheim Lab, it moves on to some examples of websites/apps which apply the concept of experience in the city. Finally, we suggest some insights related to city branding actions focused on experiences.

Keywords: City Branding; Brand Experience; Urban Trends; Aesthetic Experiences.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to foreground the aesthetic experiences in the city and how they can be applied in the context of city branding for the development of experiences in the fields of design and brand management. It is known that in the case of city branding, the ambiance of the brand is the city's ambiance itself, and it is in this scenario that a series of aesthetic experiences is developed, constructing both the identity and the image of the city.

The discussions involving the cities' problems and opportunities come in such a way increasing

scholarly attention as well as awareness in the business context. Along the centuries, the cities have gradually changed from being a space for economic exchanges to become spaces where a multitude of experiences happen. Therefore, we focus our reflection on the sensorial opportunities in the cities, mainly in the aspect of the production and visualization of data and how to apply this data to city branding projects.

This article can be classified as a theoretical revision, since as Stumpf¹ defines it, a set of procedures were executed with the intention of selecting relevant documents about the subject in order to be used while writing the article. In this case, a theoretical revision was elaborated on the subjects concerning sensorial experiences, brand experience and city branding.

The study can also be defined as one of qualitative nature, since it included the subjective analysis of the information regarding the urban trends identified by BMW Guggenheim Lab, in crossing data for knowledge generation. As to its objective, the research can be defined as descriptive, since, as Vergara² puts it, it does not have the commitment to explain the phenomena it describes; instead, it only "observes, registers, correlates and describes facts or phenomena of a specific reality without manipulating them"³. Therefore, the trends were described and analyzed together with some evidences, aiming to describe the perceived phenomena and to link them with the theory presented previously. Cases that demonstrate the city as a scenario of auditory sensorial experiences were selected as evidence, relating them to the aspects of the theoretical revision presented before, with the intention to outline some experience-based city branding opportunities.

BRANDING, PLACE AND CITY: EXPERIENCE-BASED PERSPECTIVES

The word "brand", has its origin in an archaic Norwegian term that means to "mark with fire". Therefore, its literal meaning described the act of marking with fire the livestock or a cellar, with the intention of identifying its owner⁴. Currently, the concept of branding is understood as the "implementation of a market plan that organizes the strategic actions for the construction and the projection of the brand in the market" (Gomez; Olhatz; Pólo, 2011, p. 16). According to Gomez, Olhats and Pólo⁶, branding involves diverse areas, such as business management, marketing, advertising and design. Therefore, the definition of the term branding does not consist only in the design of a graphic brand; it also consists in the development of a market plan that comprises strategy actions that includes communication and management directly linked to the brand's identity.

As we add to the word branding the place dimension, such as region, city or country, we focus our attention on the area of study designated as place branding or territorial branding, which aims to study the concept and management of brands related to places. Therefore, it configures a field increasing in awareness, both in the academic context as in popular practice⁷. Dinnie⁸ agrees with this perspective

and emphasizes that areas of political decision are also interested in this subject. The author highlights that cities compete globally to attract tourism, investment and talents, as well as to reach many other objectives; thus, the concepts of brand strategy are also applied in the business world targeting the urban development and quality of life⁹.

As to Moilanen and Rainisto¹⁰, the place brand is able to influence the image of the city in diverse aspects, by attracting companies and investments, supporting the interests of the exportation industry, promoting tourism and public diplomacy, as well as fortifying the identity of the citizens and enhancing their self esteem. Kavaratzis¹¹ also highlights some of these perspectives by affirming that city branding, on one hand, foresees the basis for the development of politics in favor of economic development; and on the other hand, serves as a canal for the inhabitants of the city to come to identify themselves with it.

To Govers and Go¹², the place brand is a representation of the identity, developed with the goal to build an advantageous image internally and externally. The authors consider that both the internal actors as well as the external ones must participate in the construction of this image; and that this image is related to several factors, such as the satisfaction, the perceived quality, among other relevant and favorable attributes of the brand. Yet, for Govers and Go, what is essential for place branding is "the relation between identity, experience and image"¹³.

The identity of the city is different from the image of the city. While the identity is the aspiration and reflects the perceptions that will have to be developed and to be strengthened, so that the image would last or would come near to the desired one (concept of the sender), the image reflects the current perceptions (concept of the receptor)¹⁴.

The idea of identity, according to Azevedo, Magalhães and Pereira¹⁵, consists of combining what the city seems to be, what it really is and what it produces and, mainly, what it intends to become and to produce. This last stage seems to include the notion of strategy in a branding plan for the city, which highlights the relevance of a brand in the development of the city, from an administrative and political point of view. The authors suggest that the image of a city is built on the integration of three elements: the functional image, obtained from the level of execution of its activities; the perceived image, as aprehended by the target audience, both the external as well as the internal public; and the intentional image, aspired or desired as visual identity and communication¹⁶. Nevertheless, the perceived image of the city seems to be related with other aspects that go beyond the influence of communication and visual identity. The intentional image also seems to project aspirations for the city that surpass these aspects, configuring changes more related to the city itself than to the visual and communication matters.

Grounded on the idea established by Govers and Go¹⁷, which says that place branding integrates identity, image and experience, the relations constituted between branding and experience need to be determined. To Schmitt¹⁸, brand experience consists in:

subjective, internal to consumer responses (sensations, feelings and cognitions) as well as the behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments¹⁹.

According to Lindstrom²⁰, the brand needs to be transformed into a sensorial experience comprising more than only visual stimuli, and to include the other four senses as well. Before the author conceived this particular field of study as sensorial branding, Kotler²¹ had already studied what looks like the initial conception of what is currently understood as brand experience, using the term atmospherics to describe the sensorial qualities of a point of sale. This concept consists of what Kotler²² determined as the "final product", i.e., an arrangement of qualities able to generate physical, emotional, and behavioral responses from the consumers.

In the case of cities — which could be called City Brand Experience —, differently from what occurs with commercial or organization brands, the brand environment is the city itself. It is evident that the city can take into account other ambiances (digital or even physical, as in the case of stalls in fairs and events); however, the direct environment of the city brand is the city itself. Thus, city branding should be taken into consideration when planning the city as an experience. In this article, we use the term city branding in reference to the attributes of an experience in the city which is capable of leaving a lasting sensation in the mind of an individual. Press and Cooper²³ define experience as "[the] totality of sensations, perceptions, knowledge and emotions that can be obtained through an event or interaction; in the context of design, the definition of a product, service or brand in terms of emotional and/or multisensorial needs"²⁴. In this sense, it is about the interaction with the ambiance of the city as the ambiance or scenery of the brand.

Experiences and Cities

The term experience has been widely discussed in the context of philosophy as the starting point of all the knowledge. In a pragmatic perspective, Dewey²⁵ states that "every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives". Therefore, the experience happens in the context of interaction.

The groundbreaking text of the economists Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, entitled *Experience Economy*²⁶, draws attention to the experience as a new economic value. The authors incorporate the concept of experience to the establishment of a new economic order marked by the consumption of experiences, instead of that of goods, products or services. The economists detail four distinct moments of the economy: the economy of agriculture, the economy of products, the economy of services and the economy of experiences. To Pine & Gilmore²⁷, "commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable", being the first external elements to the purchaser, while experiences are, by their very nature, personal and exist only in the mind of the individual that was engaged in a way that can reach emotional, physical, intellectual and even spirituals levels. Thus, it is possible to make an allusion to the archaic meaning of the word brand as explained by Healey²⁸, since its figurative meaning is about "all the attributes of a product that leave a lasting impression in the memory of a customer".

In the context of the cities, Lorentzen and Jannerat²⁹ argue that the experience economy is capable to set the place as an element which increases the value of the consumption. Similarly, it focuses on the planning of the places as destinations, which results in complex qualities regarding this planning. The authors still emphasize the increase in cultural and symbolic value in the economic activities in the last few decades, which evidences that the ideas of "cultural economy" and "creative economy" are being focused by multiple academic researches and political practices that intend to highlight the culture as an attractive characteristic of a city.

Lorentzen³⁰ points out that some ideas were established in order to deal with economic issues in the post-industrial society, namely the knowledge-based economy or new economy. The author also mentions a sub-group of terms that are specific for dealing with the increasing valuation of the symbolic element in the production and consumption forms in the post-industrial societies. These concepts are clear when we employ the terms "experience-based economy", "culture economy" and "creative economy". By culture economy, Lorentzen³¹ understands the final culture, related to the products and producers; by creative economy, the creative processes that precede the innovation and the production; and by experience-based economy, a perspective, under the optics of the consumption, which takes into account consumers and producers, in one platform wherein experiences that can come to be valued in the complex scenario of innovation. The author believes that the approach offered by the term experience-based economy is the most innovative, holistic and integrated, with an excellent potential of development and research in the local and regional contexts.

As to Peixoto³², the diversity of the expressions linked to the term experience could indicate what the author calls "double origin of the experiences in an urban context":

On one hand, experiences can have a spontaneous dimension, produced by, for example, finding ourselves by chance, in a given moment, in a pleasant urban landscape, or, by motivating within our daily paths a social interaction that we value. [...] Thus, on the other hand, we must recognize the increasing dimension of the experiences that have an organized character and depend on protocols, and provide a service, which depends on a clientele process and the performance actor-audience relation³³.

Dewey³⁴ underlines that life essential conditions determine the nature of the experience and that life occurs not only in an environment, but, due to the interaction with it³⁵. Therefore, the ambiance of the city in the context of urban experiences is fundamental for the design and management of city brands, since it defines the perception of the individuals. As we mentioned before, these aspects configure the direct ambiance of the brand; thus, this ambiance provides experiences that can be considered spontaneous. However, the displacement of the perception of value of an economy based on services to an economy based on experiences offer more opportunities to the cities as brands to explore the dimension of organized experiences, i.e., experiences designed and projected for a specific customer: "A brand is a promise of satisfaction. It is a signal, a metaphor that acts as an unwritten contract between a producer and a consumer, a salesman and a purchaser, an actor and a public, an environment and the ones that

inhabit it, an event and the ones that experience it. The consumer, purchaser, public, inhabitant and 'experiencer' (customers) create their own personal feelings about the meaning of a brand"³⁶.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that the experiences occur in the context of interaction, having the senses as their first instance³⁷; and, as Pine and Gilmore³⁸ point out, the experiences have as an essential characteristic the fact of being memorable.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES AND THE CITY: EXPLORING URBAN SENSORIAL TRENDS

According to Maffesoli³⁹, it is fundamental to understand aesthetics in its etymological meaning, as shared emotional experience⁴⁰. Dewey⁴¹ defines the senses as "the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the ongoings of the world about him"⁴². Experience, to Dewey⁴³, "is a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment, an environment that is human as well as physical, that includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings".

When discoursing on the perspective of the experience in spaces and places, Tuan⁴⁴ stated that "experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality", which includes the "more direct and passive senses (smell, taste and touch) to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization", including sensations, perceptions and conceptions, as well as emotions (feelings) and thought⁴⁵. In addition to that, as Hiss⁴⁶ puts it succinctly, the system that we use to experience our surroundings is based on simultaneous perception.

Dewey⁴⁷ reflected on the existing gulf between the producer and the consumer in the modern society, which also operates creating "a chasm between ordinary and aesthetic experience"⁴⁸. Nevertheless, as Lipovetsky⁴⁹ argues, the post-industrial contemporary society is based on consumerism, and currently, society is seeking to consume experiences. According to the author, this age is marked by the quest for multiple forms of sensorial and aesthetic pleasure, expressed by the valuation of corporal sensations and a slow, sensualistic temporality. As Press and Cooper⁵⁰ exemplified, people feel the desire to experience different emotions, intense physical sensations, even if these experiences involve dangerous or even forbidden pleasures. According to the authors, "polysensuality refers to the need for consumers to experience through all the senses, expressed through the pleasure of feeling silk against the skin, smelling fresh coffee and the texture of ripe brie"⁵¹.

Maffesoli⁵² calls this phenomenon "aesthetic paradigm", which relates to what the author understands as "emotional community", i.e., the importance of shared feelings and collective emotions within the contemporary context of the neotribalism. Tuan⁵³ underlines the distinction between space and place using as reference personal and shared meanings. Therefore, it is evident that daily aestheticization has become a trend that offer opportunities of providing aesthetic experiences through city branding projects. This includes the process of understanding the trends as the representation or identification

of a status quo breakdown movement, with the potential to influence the way we perceive and interact with the world around us. As Caldas⁵⁴ points out, prospecting trends does not prove that there is only one correct direction to follow, in a positivist way of thinking; instead, it opens up a series of possible and reasonable insights about the future, from the signs collected in the present, in order to build narratives that are "pregnant" with possible meanings.

BMW Guggenhein Lab and the 100 Urban Trends

The BMW Guggenhein Lab⁵⁵ was a global project developed as a co-initiative of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the BMW Group. It was conceived as a mobile laboratory about urban life, led by interdisciplinary teams, with specialists in the areas of urbanism, architecture, art, design, science, technology, education, and sustainability. From 2011 to 2014, the lab visited the cities of New York, Berlin and Mumbai, offering free, participatory programs that addressed issues of contemporary urban life in proximity with the public.

The New York City Lab happened between August 3 and October 16 2011, in First Park, a property located between the Lower East Side and East Village neighborhoods. The programs developed by the Lab included tours, workshops, debates, roundtable discussions, screenings, performances, experiments and lectures.

The project was concluded with an exhibition called Participatory City: 100 Urban Trends from the BMW Guggenheim Lab, which was on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City from October 2013 to January 2014. The exhibition identified one hundred urban trends in each one of the visited cities. We selected two trends documented by the New York City Lab that draw attention to the sensorial aspects of the urban environment. These trends — named "urban sensory experience" and "urban sound" — potentially offer insights about how sensorial experiences can be a source of information about the city.

The "urban sensory experience" trend is related to the extensive and complex network of human senses and interactions. These experiences can be generated by the sensorial system of an individual in relation to other individuals or groups, and through the physical layout and appearance of city spaces — i.e., the way a person perceives and moves around the city. Although these stimuli are frequently not noticed, they shape our daily decisions and well-being, in a conscious or subconscious way. Therefore, being able to critically reflect about how the constructed environment can affect the citizens' decisions and well-being can influence the future urban design in a positive way. This trend was perceived during a guided visit to different urban landscapes, through collected evidences on the psychological and physiological effects of public spaces in the minds and bodies of the participants.

This trend, as described by the BMW Guggenhein Lab, emphasizes the importance of sensorial experiences as a phenomenon of the contemporaneity, and attests its increase in value and its

relation to living in urban centers, offering insights to the place branding perspective and the brands' atmosphere. The sensorial stimuli provided by the physical layout and appearance of the urban spaces are determinant for how the city is perceived. Also, viewing the place as an element which increases the value of consumption, highlights the need of planning the places as destinations, considering the complex qualities of the experiences involved in this context, as established by Lorentzen and Jeannerat⁵⁶. The uniqueness of the city as an experience is also evident in this experiential perspective, since the increase in cultural and symbolic value in the economic activities is expressed in the cultural and symbolic manifestations found in the city.

A focus on the urban sensorial experiences directs our attention to the trend "urban sound", which refers to the broad range of sounds produced in the city, "from the rhythm of the steam engine to the drone of the automobile"⁵⁷. The sound of cities is a distinct characteristic of the urban life, though it has an ambiguous aspect — at the same time that these sounds serve of creative inspiration for artists, as they were in the past for the Futurists and later for the American composer John Cage — they are the cause of overstimulation, which contribute to many contemporary illnesses, such as the stress. In recent decades, through new technological resources, sound can be harnessed as an useful tool for measuring data sets in the city.

The sounds of the city influence directly its ambiance, or its atmosphere; thus, they are capable of generating physical, emotional and behavioral responses⁵⁸. Indeed, the Audio Branding Academy highlights the term "soundscape", created by the Canadian composer Murray Schafer, in an analogy to the word landscape. The soundscape is composed by diverse elements, such as "a rather diffuse background with meaningful foreground elements (sound marks in analogy to land marks)"⁵⁹. Therefore, to the Audio Branding Academy⁶⁰, each auditory environment can be considered a soundscape.

This particular way of thinking about the city sounds can be experienced in the website/app Stereopublic⁶¹. Stereopublic is a participatory project created by Jason Sweeney⁶², a composer who, motivated by his own panic and anxiety crises, started seeking quiet spaces among the noise in the urban centers. As a musician, the interest of Sweeney in the sounds of the cities led him to understand the quieter places as "the pauses between the notes of a music", and to get interested in finding places where he could listen to different sounds in its native city — Adelaide, in Australia —, such as the noise of water running in the fountains, the sound of the birds and leaves on the trees, etc.

Based on this idea, Sweeney conceived the project as "a sonic health service for built environments". The Stereopublic project invites the inhabitants of urban centers to think about the meaning of quietness — not total silence —, and what the sounds of the city are like and where shelters of tranquility can be found. Thus, the public can cooperate with the project pointing out a quiet place by marking it on the map with a 30 seconds video. Then, this new place will be classified and will receive an original ambient music composition made specially for it. However, this project welcomes anyone to participate, not just composers — it is only necessary to point out the place on the map with the video and then someone else with the talent to write a composition will visit it and finish the task. Sweeney believes that his

"virtual geo-located musical markers" can come to help people with special needs, physical disabilities or mental illnesses to move around the city with more tranquility.

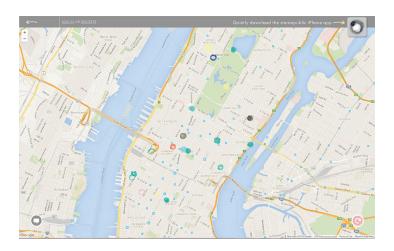


Figure 1 – Stereopublic Website Interface (Stereopublic, 2015)

Similarly, the Sound City Project⁶³ is an ongoing personal project idealized by David Vale, together with with Rick van Mook and Caco Teixeira. The idea of the project is to find a way to capture how we sense the places we know, and, how we can feel the places that we never even visited. Combining two sensorial aspects of our bodies — hearing and seeing —, the Sound City Project website shows us a panoramic photo and a high quality audio in order to present a place sensorially.

On the project website is possible to select on a map places one desires to listen. Currently, the cities of New York, San Francisco, Stockholm, Oslo, Bergen and Flåm are available. The recordings were made through a device called "Soundhead" that was designed and printed in 3D especially for this purpose. The prototype has four ears positioned in 90° angles, that catch the sound simultaneously through four omnidirectional microphones (each one located in an ear) directly plugged on to a recorder.



Figure 2 – Sound City Project Website Interface (Vale; Van Mook; Teixeira, 2015)

These two projects that address the urban auditory sensorial experiences are articulated by the logic of soundscape, seeking to draw attention to the sound aesthetic of the cities. Both seem to mix the two origins of urban experiences described by Peixoto⁶⁴ — on one hand they apprehend the spontaneous experiences lived by the individuals in the cities, which get articulated between sound and silence; on the other hand, they are part of an organized experience, assembling a collection of sound data of the cities and providing new experiences for those that access them.

Another app that also has the city as scenario and the auditory experience as subject is the City Sounds New York, described on the iTunes store as a guide to a musical journey through New York. The idea of the developer is to suggest to the user a trip around the biggest cities of the world through their musical history and current artistic scene, including addresses of points of interest, such as concert houses and record stores, as well as places with a "musical atmosphere", e.g., hotels, pubs and restaurants⁶⁵. This app can be classified as an organized experience, since it offers a projected journey, associating local cultural elements in the construction of a musical experience around the city.

Although the app promises a trip around worldwide metropolises, for the time being it is only possible to find the New York City version. Obviously, there are not many cities that possess the artistic potential to provide a variety of musical associations such as New York, which is a privileged city for having housed and inspired hundreds of artists who became icons of their time, as well as for influencing the arts in a global way. New York is described in the app as a place where "each corner has something to say" about music, where hip hop and punk rock were born, and where some of the most memorable jazz concerts took place.

The app focus on the district of Manhattan, walking through the neighborhoods and presenting musicians of prominence in each region. The journey starts with the jazz clarinet player, Benny Goodman, and his presentation at the Carnegie Hall, a concert hall located in Midtown Manhattan. In each "stop" of the "journey", the app suggests a main artist (for example, Frank Sinatra) and one of his records (in this case, Sinatra: New York, of 2009). Beyond the basic information, it is possible to click on the camera icon that opens up a YouTube video selected by the app (Frank Sinatra singing the theme of New York New York). When rolling the screen down, it is possible to have access to more information, such as facts about the artist's life, other related artists and photos of the neighborhood. When rolling the screen to the right, the app presents a map of the neighborhood related to the artist and his/her "musical scene" (in the figure, Midtown West Side). The app also suggests other places in the city where it is possible to feel "the New York of Sinatra's music".

The other boroughs of Queens, Bronx and Brooklyn are also part of the musical stroll of the app, as well as the Central Park, in a special tribute to John Lennon. Moreover, the app presents local interviews with musicians and personalities (e.g., Public Enemy's Chuck D and Marky Ramone), a picture gallery of the city and extra information also related to music.



Figure 3 – City Sounds New York App Interface (City, 2015)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The city acts as a platform for multiple experiences. The ambiance of the city is perceived as a whole through every single sense, building what is understood as the aesthetic experience in the city. These experiences can be spontaneous or organized⁶⁶, and deeply influence the perception of those who live in the city, configuring memorable events in the individual context. However, the definition of place includes shared meanings⁶⁷, which involve shared feelings and collective emotions⁶⁸. Reflecting on the analyzed cases, it was possible to notice the subtle differences between the forms of auditory sensorial experiences presented in each one of the websites/apps. It seems difficult to distinguish the spontaneous experiences from the organized ones, and, in some aspects, both are confused within the real and virtual ambiances of the cities, which are places with shared and collective meanings, feelings and emotions.

Through analyzing the Stereopublic and the Sound City Project cases, we noticed that both categories of experience — organized and spontaneous — get confused. In this sense, a spontaneous experience — such as the experience of a soundscape — might become part of a designed experience, e.g., this can happen to the person who captures the sound of a place as well as to the one who experiences the soundscape (or the "sound status" information) of that place in another time and space. Unlike the previously mentioned websites/apps, the City Sounds New York app based its narrative on a historical research about New York's musical legacy, which makes it interesting and marketable from a touristic point of view — it is presented and sold on the iTunes store as "an unconventional touristic guide". Likewise, the app is relevant since it foregrounds the city's cultural heritage considering art, and more specifically music, a significant aspect of its memory and identity.

An collection of organized sound data that serve as creative inspiration for artists, can also be an useful source of inspiration for city branding designers and managers, configuring a database of sensorial experiences that can be analyzed while brainstorming for new projects that aim to create new experiences in the cities. Therefore, even the experiences considered spontaneous can become creative supplies when designing projects based on organized experiences, as long as they are coherent with the identity of the city as a brand, i.e., the perceptions that should be developed and strengthened, so that the image of the city becomes memorable and more akin to the project.

This article demonstrates that the images of the cities can be either functional or perceived, and that both are captured as sensorial experiences as a whole, and are not limited by vision only. In this sense, the appreciation of supplies that encompass all the senses and levels of experience can compose an intentional image able to incorporate sensorial experiences to projects of city branding, either in the construction of an experience-based brand or in the management of the experience of the brand. In future studies, we intend to analyze the possibilities of other aesthetic experiences in the city that can contribute to the construction of its ambiance, as well as of its brand design, in order to expand the possibilities of experiences within urban environments.

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