

THE VISUAL LANDSCAPE'S CONTRIBUTION TO GENERATING TERRITORIAL BRANDS

Joan Nogué

Geography Department, University of Girona
joan.nogue@udg.edu

Jordi de San Eugenio Vela

Communication Department, University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia
jordi.saneugenio@uvic.cat

The image of places is being subjected to a new productive process dictated by post-modern logic in which the brand and its ability to represent territorial identities is becoming essential to a renewed process of competition between geographical spaces (De Uña and Villarino, 2011; San Eugenio, 2013). Thus, territorial brands are concerned with projecting the uniqueness of places in order to compete in a new market of services that goes beyond tourism and that stresses the *a priori* consumption of spaces (images) over *in situ* consumption (physical spaces). As such, the projection of consumable images of places through the management of territorial brands is one of the most significant practices in the renewed process to market (tangible and intangible) geographies that is typical of the post-modern era. This is why the shift from space (without specific forms of symbolism) to place (imbued with certain values and/or attributes, and therefore with meanings) is occurring according to the incentivising nature of raising capital (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Goodman et al., 2010).

For all these reasons, we can determine that something similar to the engineering of spatial images arises, a 'staged authenticity' as MacCannell (1999) has described it, which is becoming paradigmatic in the post-modern consumption of places and even ends up shaping the very geography of real spaces (Sack, 1992). Along these lines, Chatzikadis (2014) examines Athens to illustrate how the Greek capital underwent a failed transition from an 'ancient city' to a 'consumer city', where what is important is not just *what* you consume, but *where* you do so. Athens' transformation into a great 'oasis for consumption' during the 2004 Olympic Games led to a new stratification of class resulting partially from (elitist) new consumer practices of the neo-liberal citizen-consumer. As a result, the city is experiencing profound cultural change (Chatzikadis, 2014, p. 34).

Likewise, the continued use of aesthetics, the prevalence of image over narrative, transience and fragmentation delimit the experiential coordinates of time and space, which to a large extent justifies views of the post-modern as a specific historical and geographical condition (Harvey, 1989). According to Soja (1989) and Beck et al. (1994), the two main features of the post-modern condition are the continuous search for symbolic capital and the great use of widespread cultural production and marketing efforts. This brings us to analysis of the so-called 'economy of symbolism', also described by some authors as the 'economy of the image' (MacCannell and MacCannell, 1982; Schroeder, 2004; Bauman, 2007). In the context described, the emergence of place branding is understood as a possible response to the need to permeate post-modern spaces with 'consumable symbolisms' (Hankinson, 2004; Kavartzis, 2005; Govers and Go, 2009).

Over the years, landscape has been the subject of many definitions coming from different disciplines. In all cases, and based on a clearly geographical view, what is called 'symbolic landscape' has been a recurrent field of study, closely linked to its ability to generate a social imaginary (geographic imaginability) and to the fundamental role it plays in creating a 'sense of place' (Backhaus, 2009). Thus, for Mitchell (2002, p. 384), 'landscape representation is always already ideological, always already loaded with meaning'. For Tuan (1979, p. 90), landscape "appears to us through an effort of the imagination exercised over a highly selected array of sense data". For Cosgrove (1985, p. 55), it 'is a way of seeing, a composition and structuring of the world that may be appropriated by a detached, individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered through the composition of space'. According to Cosgrove and Daniels, (1988, p.1) landscape is 'a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings'. Finally, according to Campelo (2015, p. 56), 'landscape is a meaningful social and cultural construction connecting and mediating relations between people and physical environments. It is through the landscape that people experience the place'. In fact, landscape is a unique spatial category in geography (Rose, 2002), due among other reasons to its enormous importance in the process of creating imaginaries.

In fact, there is an extensive literature on the formation of landscape imaginaries, with the imaginary understood not merely as 'the images of', but as the continuous and indeterminate creation of forms and images that not only refer to what is 'real', but also to what is perceived (Castoriadis, 1985). The concept of the imaginary indicates an endless creation of figures, forms and images that can only refer to something. The imaginary is related to cognitive processes and memory, in addition to its properly tangible expressions, and manifests itself both individually and collectively. In the latter case, 'social imaginary models may then be understood as transversal forces in social thought that give a solid directionality to certain collective behaviours' (Hiernaux, 2006, p. 30).

At present, territorial brand strategies play a very important role in the composition of landscape imaginaries (Campelo, 2015). The use of images of places in marketing and/or branding is nothing new. What is new, however, is the establishment of mechanisms of control and/or appropriation regarding a way of looking at a landscape, the inducement of landscape imaginaries—in short, frame control (Hansen and Machin, 2013; Porter, 2016). This fully immerses us in analysing the relationship between the social construction of the landscape and its economic reproduction and entails the enhancement of landscapes that

have hitherto been little valued by the local population, meaning that it grants 'legibility' and 'visibility' to landscapes that were already there, but either never formed part of the collective imaginary or had been removed from it. In any case, the current management of landscape imaginaries, the interrelation between perception and imagination and the production of spatial meanings, among other aspects, lead us to the concept of 'geographical symbolism' (Backhaus, 2009), something resembling what Rose (2002) and Wylie (2007) call the 'geography of representation', meaning the generation of cognitive formations of a socio-cultural kind.

In any case, the study of symbolic landscape has usually been associated with cultural geography, historically interested in the landscape's processes of social production. Research into the material landscape (physical medium) and the aesthetic landscape (visual images) has dominated many studies of both conventional and more innovative kinds (Rose, 2002). However, both agree that landscape represents the transformation of an ephemeral spatial image into a stable, socially constructed setting (Sauer, 1925; Cosgrove, 1984; Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Jackson, 1989). Moreover, Backhaus (2009) argues that there are two fundamental concepts for analysing landscape: the first is the 'ordinary sense of the landscape' (as a territorial extension), as seen in our daily encounters; and the second is 'symbolic landscapes', which are culturally codified with attributes that represent something more than the meanings of everyday pragmatic association.

In recent years, symbolic landscape and the projection of its cultural values have been widely 'exploited' in advertising, marketing and branding (Nogué and San Eugenio, 2011; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2013). These are techniques that repeatedly use the intangible value of places to generate brand value for products and/or services. In this way, landscape becomes a first-rate symbolic construction, a fundamental 'showcase' for countries, cities and regions to position themselves in a global market of places. Basically, this all takes place through visual consumption (Daniel, 2001; Matless, 2003).

Thus, there certainly seem to be geo-economic implications regarding the generation of networks of value and meaning based on marketing and branding strategies for places, although, as Pike argues (2013, p. 317), 'the economic geographic dimensions of brands and branding lack conceptual clarity and remain undertheorised'. In this regard, this study proposes a tentative approach to the geographies of consumption of places through place branding and based on the visual landscape's core contribution to the generation of territorial imaginaries. Similarly, the consumption of spatial tours is an emerging issue in economic geography (Aoyama, Murphy and Hanson, 2011). Nevertheless, landscape's contribution to the construction of a 'sense of place', a starting point for the current development of place brands, is indisputable (Campelo, 2015).

Landscape has been and continues to be a prime element in the physical and symbolic representation of the territory. Today more than ever, it is being used to promote places based on the creation of territorial narratives usually linked to scenic imaginaries.

In this respect, a line of research must be started that can provide a reliable outlet for the emerging demand for studies relating the creation and subsequent projection of territorial brands and the landscape at a time when it has become a key element in new spatial planning policies, as well as a topic of much debate in social and cultural spheres that focus on practicing the philosophy coming from the European Landscape Convention. This line of

research would ultimately be important for another reason, more social than academic: we need to learn how to distinguish when and how our emotions are manipulated in relation to the landscape, who manipulates them and why. The foray of marketing and/or branding into the field of action of places has often been conceived as a mere perpetuation of rather simplistic stereotypes, and moreover as a harmful simplification of geographical complexity (Porter, 2013 and 2016). However, some studies indicate that implementing well conceived and well designed place branding strategies may be valuable for conserving landscape values and raising environmental awareness (Tobias and Müller, 2013; San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol, 2015).

In this context, we sense that geography has a valuable opportunity to study the enormous communicative potential of landscape, something of which marketing and more recently branding are well aware. Moreover, this can be done without going too far into the very concept of landscape, as was the case with geography. We should be aware that in today's world, landscape is one of the geographical concepts with the most notable communicative dimensions, which is why it is used over and over to inform people about goods, services and/or places, granting the discipline of geography a strategic role in that field. Whether one decides to use it is another question entirely.