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Making Places Better: An International Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The global industry of making places better is vast. It includes all those professionals that develop and design places (architects, urban designers, transport planners etc.), the people that manage places (through initiatives such as Mainstreet Programmes and Business Improvement Districts) and those that market places (through providing, for example, tourist information or through the process of attracting inward investment). Nevertheless, whilst successful places are ones that adapt to meet the needs of their communities over time, there is often little or no collaboration between all the necessary players that are needed to bring about change in a location. The three aspects of place improvement (the making, the management and the marketing) are often undertaken by separate bodies, working in isolation from each other.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide an international perspective on how specific locations, around the world, have responded to the global and local challenges they face in order to bring about beneficial change. From undertaking primary research in two continents (Australia and Europe), we know there are thousands of people and partnerships that are trying to make a difference to their towns and cities. In some countries, such as the UK, there have been government-led national programmes to support specific types of intervention, such as the creation of Business Improvement Districts, but there are criticisms of these “off-the-shelf” approaches, not least the increasing commodification of public space, where areas which had once been publicly owned and managed become controlled by the private sector.

As well as presenting an international review of the practice of making places better, this paper also reviews the theory and academic research that has been undertaken. A number of key themes are identified and explored in more detail in the paper, namely issues around the governance of place, the innate difficulties associated with the creation and management of place brands and the international drivers of change, such as the increasing globalisation of the retail and property industry and the opportunities inherent in a growing consumer movement towards localism.

KEYWORDS: place making, marketing, management; partnerships; global trends

1. INTRODUCTION

Place management has been defined formally as “a coordinated, area-based, multi-stakeholder approach, harnessing the skills, experience and resources of those in the public, private and voluntary sectors” (Journal of Place Management and Development) and informally as “the process of making places better” (Wikipedia). In this respect, place management can be defined as a ‘loose’ process with an outcome (a better place) as ...there is no ‘one right way’ to do place management “(r)ather a conscious decision is needed about how to set the boundaries and what intensity of management is desired” (Halliday, 2001). In the same way, the objectives of any place management initiative can vary from the long-term and strategic (e.g a city centre regeneration programme) to the short-term and tactical (a town centre litter-pick).

Not suprisingly, there also variations in the structures and systems place management adopts. In their review of different place management schemes in Europe, Coca-Stefaniak et al (2009) identify two factors by which place management initiatives can be categorised. Firstly, by their level of formality (e.g. does the scheme exist as a separate legal entity to other bodies, such as the local council) and secondly by their sectoral affiliation and funding (is the scheme predominantly privately or publicly funded?).

From an academic perspective, place management is a nascent subject. There are currently only two journals or periodicals dedicated to its study (Journal of Place Management and Development; Place Branding and Public Diplomacy). Nevertheless, there are a variety of other subjects and professions that contain elements related to the management of places.

1.1 Background

The global industry of making places better is vast. There are those who are involved in the design, construction and regeneration of locations (architects, planners, urban designers). There are those involved in the governance and control of places (elected members, council officers, street-wardens, police officers). Finally there are people who are marketing and branding places (such as inward investment agencies and tourist boards). This paper does not argue that making improvements to a specific area is anything new, rather that the *process* by which these improvements are made – *a multi-stakeholder partnership approach* is something that, until recently, had not been tried, to any great degree, in many countries and certainly had not received much attention in the academic literature.

In effect, the way our towns, cities and other locations are created, adapt and communicate is a rather haphazard affair. The professions that are involved in making places (the planners, architects and designers) are often not embedded or attached to the places they create. The making of places is undertaken without much involvement from those that take on the legacy of the maintenance of those places, on a day-to-day basis. With the increasing popularity of outsourcing, these two functions are often no-longer fulfilled ‘in-house’ by the Local Authority. Finally, those that are charged with marketing the benefits of the location, the tourist offices, the inward investment agencies etc often only communicate with those outside the area, and are not well connected internally nor charged with communicating *within* the

location. The result is disparate and fragmented and not cost-effective. Just as the joined up government movement “seeks to coordinate the development and implementation of policies across government departments and agencies with the aim of addressing complex social problems” (The Oxford English Dictionary) so place management seeks to coordinate the resources and activity across various stakeholders to solve place problems and make place improvements in a far more ‘holistic’ way.

2. DRIVERS OF CHANGE

David Adams (2008) identified 4 main drivers of change fuelling the adoption of a place management approach. Firstly, the difficulty in coordinating activity across a number of unconnected organisations, departments, agencies and individuals. Many improvements to locations have ridiculously long lead times and there is a “perception of governments and public services as siloed, aloof and out of touch” (p.17). Secondly, he recognises “a more savvy public demanding more localised and responsive services and engagement with governments and the public sector” (ibid). At first glance, this public need for engagement appears paradoxical, in light of their disengagement with traditional forms of influence, such as local elections. Even at national elections, worldwide voter turnout has been in steady decline since the 1980s (in countries where voting attendance is non-compulsory). Thirdly, Adams argues that places themselves are a factor in terms of productivity and innovation. Silicone Valley is a much-quoted example of the cluster effect (Porter, 1998) that results from the many different parts of the supply-chain of an industry being co-located. Likewise, in places like Paris, many different competitors, in a small geographic area can interact, share ideas and get artistic inspiration from what is going on around them. The recognition that place is “a factor of production” (Adams, 2008; 17) has meant a more concerted effort to manage some places, to encourage the growth of certain industries, rather than just leaving it to chance. Finally, as many communities become more transient and/or more diverse, community well-being, capacity –building and cohesiveness are also outcomes that may need ‘a helping hand’ – through some sort of place management initiative.

Other authors have identified other drivers of change. For example, the proliferation of the ‘out-of-town’ retailer has led to many town centres having to improve their offer and attract footfall back to traditional retail centres (Warnaby and Medway, 2004). Nevertheless, the rise of the national/international retailer has led to an increased standardisation of many traditional retail centres, making it hard for centres to compete in terms of distinctiveness or uniqueness. Even shopping centres also recognise the need “for shopping space individualism, identity, integrity and sensitivity to locality” (Myers et al, 2008; 109).

Place competition is not just contained within countries. Lower air fares and a more mobile population has led to many cities having to compete against each other in an international marketplace. In 2020 the number of people travelling internationally is forecast to reach 1.6 billion and the resulting revenue is expected to exceed US\$2 trillion (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Destinations compete not only for tourists and delegates etc. but also for relocating companies and often a skilled workforce (Hospers, 2004). The increase in place marketing and branding also fuels more place competitiveness at both local, national and international levels.

Nevertheless, behind the place brand there has to be a place product – in other words the location needs to meet the expectations of its consumers, be they permanent or temporary. This is the essence of a successful place – the ability to meet the needs of its communities.

Unfortunately, many place brands and marketing campaigns are developed with little regard to the reality of the location. Until very recently, only “tranquil and pastoral scenes abound in the current main promotional brochure for Belfast and Northern Ireland which is knowingly entitled The Best of Northern Ireland. It can be confidently assumed that potential visitors already know the worst” (Neill, 2001: p.820).

Place branding and marketing has become an industry in itself and, often, not a particularly imaginative one. The place marketing tag-line “a land of contrasts” when googled with “tourist information” lists the official tourist information websites of Wales, Scotland, Taiwan, Chile and Botswana to name just five. In contrast, “Berlin’s place marketing is plagued by a tension between distancing the city from the fears conjured up by the city’s Nazi past but still finding an acceptable way to confront and keep alive the memory of this awful reality” (ibid; p.826). This tension or challenge is, at its very least, authentic and means the branding and marketing of Berlin does not attempt to commodify or standardise the city into a politically correct ‘norm’.

2.1 Social Drivers of Change

There are also social drivers of change. To combat an increasingly globalised marketplace there has been a rise of consumer interest in local products and alternative retail formats, such as farmers’ markets. Interest in local heritage is on the up, fuelled by the growth of people researching their family tree and also, in some part, by a need to belong in communities that may not have been a lifelong home. Again, this results in an appreciation for and often involvement in initiatives that ‘make a difference’ at a local level, such as the Tidy Towns network. An interconnectiveness based on technology also helps support people that are interested in their towns and cities.

In the UK, The Magazine The Idler started to collect comments from its readers about the places they lived, called “Crap Towns”, this culminated in an index of the 50 worst places to live in the UK. This is a typical view of one of respondents

“There is nothing in Wick except sullen faced youths hanging around chip shops and denim clad drunken tinkers who talk to cider bottles. There is nothing to do except drive cars for no reason other than to make their tyres squeak with handbrake turns. Everybody in the entire town has snot hanging from their noses. It has a river full of shopping trolleys.

The best thing about Wick is the lighthouse built by Robert Louis Stevenson’s uncle. Aged 17, RLS was in Wick and hated it. He ended up living in Western Samoa because geographically it was the furthest point from Wick on any atlas.

They have an amusement park in Wick. It is called a field. Their only export is Caithness Glass – most of which the factory buys from Accident and Emergency on a Friday night”

<http://idler.co.uk/category/crap-towns/>

The ease with which views can be posted and shared on the internet can be a powerful force for change. For example the Crystal Palace Campaign, in London, has successfully used the internet to successfully prevent a 20-cinema multiplex from being built on the historic, Grade II listed site in Crystal Palace Park (Crystal Palace Campaign).

The internet availability of local statistics and place key performance indicators relating to the performance of local schools, crime figures, property prices, amenities etc, gives local people more information and data to not only challenge those in charge of places but also can often mobilise them into making a difference themselves (such as through local crime prevention initiatives).

3. PLACE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

As already stated, the process of improving places needs to involve those that can bring about physical change (place making), those that are responsible for its every-day functioning (the place maintenance) and those that have a role in communications about the place (place marketing). Unfortunately, in many locations, these three groups work independently of each other. Other authors (such as Mant, 2008) have tried to understand why this has occurred (e.g. the functionalisation of local government into distinct specialist departments all pursuing their own specialist agendas) and proposed a partnership approach (with local business, residents and other stakeholders) to solving problems/making improvements to a specific location. This has been termed place management.

“As towns and cities across the world evolve due to pressures both local and global we are seeing more forms of management in a valid attempt to take a proactive approach to change to ensure locations meet the needs of their users in a more sustainable fashion”

(Parker, 2008)

In their most recent survey, The Institute of Place Management (Campin et al, 2008) compared place management practices in Australia with the UK and Sweden. In summary, there was little difference in the activities undertaken by the place management initiative (the most common activity was “planning/managing/delivering projects and events”) all under the umbrella objectives of making area improvements, attracting new businesses, increasing footfall and general marketing. Likewise, the area the initiative covered was very similar across all three countries (less than 4km²). Nevertheless, there was a marked difference in the size of the initiatives, in terms of staff employed (83% of Australian and 79% UK initiatives employ less than 6 people with 87% of Swedish initiatives employing more than 6 people), income sources (25% of Swedish initiatives are fully funded from the private sector, compared to 16% of Australian initiatives and only 3% of UK initiatives) and membership (89% of Swedish initiatives operate a membership scheme, compared with 63% of Australian schemes and only 48% of UK schemes). In terms of turnover all countries were similar (average between \$100,000 and \$200,000 AUD) but 29% of Australian and 28% of UK initiatives did not allocate any of this to staffing or overheads).

The partnership approach was common across all three countries with the place management initiative reporting to a board with a Chairperson, although the Chairperson was more likely to be an Elected Member or public sector employee in Australia. In both the UK and Australia the structure of the place management partnership was likely to be either part of the local authority/government department or agency or a partnership “with no legal format”

(63% and 75% respectively). This compares to 75% of Swedish partnerships which are either companies or cooperatives (i.e they are separate legal entities). This also probably explained why the Swedish initiatives, on the whole, took responsibility for funding all their costs (including salaries and overheads). This is interesting, as, over time, it has been proposed (see Coca et al, 2009) that place management partnerships evolve, from being ad-hoc partnerships, or public sector initiatives into formal structures with their own legal identity. This research demonstrates that as there is so much commonality in what place management is trying to achieve, but differences in how it goes about doing this, there is huge potential to learn from other countries and other places.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to discuss the 'state of play' in relation to the nascent practice and study of place management. For years, towns, cities and other places have been planned, maintained, changed and marketed in a rather haphazard way. In many countries, government is not able to act quickly and engage with its electorate in a way that mobilises citizen participation in the way many local place management initiatives appear to.

Nevertheless, new forms of governance, in relation to place, need monitoring and evaluating. There are critics of some forms of place management, such as Business Improvement Districts. In the book "Ground Control" (Minton, 2009) the author argues that there is a creeping privatisation of public space and that place management initiatives that consist only of the private sector will not protect and enhance the social and cultural fabric of UK towns and cities. Nevertheless, through the use of other company formats, such as not-for-profit companies, cooperatives and charities, public space could be managed in a more efficient way with a clear emphasis on meeting social, environmental or other non-commercial objectives. The management company behind Federation Square in Melbourne (Fed Square Pty Ltd) is an example of this (Sydenham-Clarke, 2009).

With a growing worldwide interest from academics and researchers in the subject, an ever-increasing number of place management initiatives being formed across and widespread adoption of new forms of communication, such as social networking sites, place management has the potential to deliver benefits, both locally and globally. Towns, cities and other places can learn from each other and network to improve the quality of life for their inhabitants and the population as a whole.

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