

Graphic Design approach to City Branding

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Abstract:

City branding has emerged as a crucial strategy for urban development, tourism, and investment attraction in an increasingly competitive global landscape. This study explores the pivotal role of graphic design in the formulation and dissemination of city brands, emphasizing how visual identity elements—such as logos, typography, color schemes, and layout systems—contribute to a city's perceived image and narrative. Drawing on examples from diverse cities, the research analyzes how cohesive and culturally resonant graphic design solutions can visualize a city's values, heritage, and aspirations. It also investigates the interplay between graphic design and public perception, stakeholder engagement, and digital media platforms. The research suggests that successful city branding relies not only on compelling storytelling but also on strategic visual coherence, which graphic design uniquely facilitates. Ultimately, the paper highlights the need for using graphic design to craft authentic and impactful city identities.

Keywords:

City Branding, City Visual Identity, City Image

Study problem:

The research problem is concluded in the following questions:

- 1- How are branding theories, concepts and strategies applicable on cities?
- 2- What is the process of city branding?
- 3- How is graphic design used by cities to build the city brand and visualize its identity?

Objective:

This research aims to identify the meaning of city branding, its history, process, importance and how are the theories of branding being applied to cities to visualize their identity and enhance their image. The research also investigates the approach of using graphic design to brand the cities. The research focuses on various cities around the world applying graphic design to visualize its identity.

Study approach:

The research will use the qualitative method as it is the study that is used to explore the meaning of city branding by collecting data and images, then the analytical approach for examples of cities around the world which are using graphic design to build their brand. The research will analyze the data that is processed according to thematic analysis.

الملخص:

برزت هوية المدينة كاستراتيجية مهمة للتنمية الحضرية والسياحة وجذب الاستثمار في مشهد عالمي متزايد التنافسية. يقوم البحث بدراسة الدور المحوري لتصميم الجرافيك في صياغة ونشر هويات المدينة، مع التركيز على كيفية مساهمة عناصر الهوية البصرية - مثل الشعارات والكتابات الألوان في التعبير عن صورة المدن. يقوم البحث بالاعتماد على نماذج لمدن متنوعة، بتحليل كيف يمكن لتصميم الجرافيك التعبير عن قيم المدن وتاريخها وتطلعاتها وثقافتها. يقوم البحث بدراسة العلاقة بين استخدام التصميم الجرافيكي وإدراك العامة لصورته الذهنية. يشير البحث إلى أن نجاح هوية المدينة لا يعتمد فقط على سرد القصص المقنعة ولكن أيضاً على التعبير البصري الاستراتيجي، والذي يقدمه تصميم الجرافيك بشكل فريد. في النهاية، يسلط البحث الضوء على الحاجة إلى استخدام التصميم الجرافيكي لصياغة هويات مدينة أصيلة ومؤثرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

تأسيس هوية المدن، الهوية البصرية للمدن، الصورة الذهنية للمدن

Introduction:

In an increasingly competitive global landscape, cities are no longer just geographical locations—they are brands with unique identities, stories, and value propositions. Graphic design plays a pivotal role in shaping and communicating these urban identities, making it a crucial element in city branding strategies. By leveraging visual language, cities can project their character, aspirations, and cultural distinctiveness to both residents and visitors.

Effective city branding through graphic design encompasses a wide range of visual elements, including logos, color schemes, typography, signage, public art, and promotional materials. These elements work together to create a cohesive and recognizable image that captures the essence of a city. Whether it's the iconic "I ♥ NY" logo or the vibrant visual identity of Barcelona, strong design helps create emotional connections, enhances civic pride, and attracts tourism, investment, and talent.

As cities strive to stand out in a crowded marketplace, the strategic use of graphic design becomes essential—not only for aesthetic appeal but also for shaping perceptions, reinforcing values, and telling a compelling story about what the city represents.

Place Branding:

City branding is a kind of place branding which has been approached from a variety of perspectives with different aims and intentions. As Gertner¹ has emphasized, there is no agreement the definition of place brands or the steps involved in place branding. According to Braun, Goviers, Hankinson, and others², it addresses how branding concepts are applied to places and how they are modified to fit the unique circumstances in which locations carry out their branding. Creating favorable associations with the location and setting it apart from other locations is the most common goal of place branding.

Since the place brand is a name, symbol, logo, word mark, or other graphic that defines and distinguishes the location, Ritchie and Ritchie³ simply replaced the terms "goods" and "services" with the word "place." Additionally, this emblem or logo promises a memorable travel experience that is exclusive to that place.

According to Simon Anholt's⁴ definition, it is the process of creating a brand for a location based on the location's identity and the development of a favorable perception among stakeholders. As such, Hanna and Rowley⁵ characterized the concept as “utilizing brand strategy along with other marketing methods to enhance economic, social, political, and cultural advancement in cities, regions, and nations.

Place branding aims to enhance a place's appeal and recognition via a specific and targeted image, extending beyond just communication tools. This makes the branding idea overall more extensive than the communication process.⁶

So, place branding can be summarized as the process that has to be done by the governance administration by applying branding strategies to a certain place using different communication tools that graphic design is considered one of these tools to create a unique and memorable identity for that place, manage perceptions, enhance the brand image or build a positive new one.

Differences between kinds of place branding:

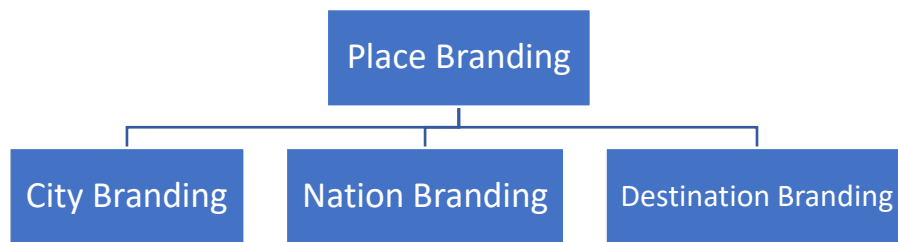


Figure n. (1): Types of place branding

City Branding:

The word “city”, as Cambridge dictionary defines, is a place where many people live, with many houses, stores, and businesses.⁷ It is an area where many individuals reside relatively near one another. Cities typically possess their own distinct governments for managing and supplying utilities and transportation.⁸

There is a global competition for individuals' physical and mental time and focus, and cities are not excluded from this.⁹ Cities globally are marketing themselves similarly to other products and services as they strive to be the best. Urban planners are investing millions in branding to revitalize their cities or, in some cases, to restore them.¹⁰

City branding involves employing marketing strategies to create a distinct identity for a city in the perceptions of residents, tourists, businesses, and investors.¹¹ It involves crafting a mental image of a city that draws people in; the city's distinct identity is what sets it apart from the rest of the world. The core concept of city branding is to present an image of the city to individuals, transforming it from merely a place to a desirable destination.¹²

According to Robert Govers¹³, City Branding involves grasping, assessing, affecting, and overseeing how cities are appreciated and acknowledged by external, local, and internal audiences. This is crucial since awareness and reputation are vital requirements for drawing and keeping tourists, traders, investors, students, and residents.

Example of city branding:

The next image presents the logo of Amman branding campaign. The campaign refers to the strategic efforts to shape and communicate a distinct identity for Amman, the capital of Jordan. This process aims to position Amman in a positive light locally, regionally, and internationally—enhancing its appeal to tourists, investors, residents, and businesses. The design presented Amman's original seven hills, with the word "Amman" in Arabic cut out in an open-ended manner. The logo illustrated the historical depth of Amman through using ancient citadel. The different colors used in the design showed the diversity in the city in a modern way.



Image n. (1): Logo of Amman branding campaign¹⁴

Image n. (2) represents applying the new brand identity in many sectors and services around the city such as culture, investment and city services to achieve integrity and unity.



Image n. (2): Applying Amman branding campaign in many sectors

As shown in Image n. (3) Many touch points are created such as brochures that promote the famous landmarks in Amman, Advertising banners are also used to announce the new identity in addition to applying the design in the different means of transportation.

Image n. (3): Touchpoints created within Amman branding campaign¹⁵**Nation Branding:**

Nation branding is a way for country to create a favorable reputation and useful position for itself in the international community by re-establishing and promoting its authentic cultural, social, and historical identity.¹⁶

Image n. (4) presents the logo of Italy branding campaign which was developed to stand out in the growing competition among nations control the way others see it as a place of art and civilization. The design consists of the letter (I) in red that represents Italy, and the rounded green arch which is an architectural and landscape element that distinguishes the visual culture of the country. The elements are presented in Italy flag colors, red and green.



Image n. (4): Logo and visual identity of Italy Branding campaign

As shown in image n. (5), touch points are created to achieve more communication. The images are used expressing the culture of the country. Catalogues are integrated to announce the different facets of the nation.

Image n. (5): Touch points created within Italy branding campaign ¹⁷

Destination branding:

Destination branding, as Mathieson and Wall¹⁸ defined it, it is the process of creating a distinct brand identity and character for a tourism destination that sets it apart from others. This often involves highlighting the destination's history, way of life, and cultural heritage. It serves as a strategic tool to showcase and promote the unique strengths and competitive edge of the destination.¹⁹ It focuses more to the tourism field.²⁰ Simon Anholt²¹ agreed with this assumption supporting it by adding that it is a way to communicate destination's uniqueness to tourists. Regardless of its size, this geographical location—where tourists spend their leisure time away from their usual place of residence—can be a village, city, island, region, or even an entire country.²² Image n. (6) presents Aswan branding campaign as tourism destination. The visual elements are expressing symbols of the Egyptian old civilization. The identity is applied in signage and murals in an attractive way.

Image n. (6): Project of Aswan branding²³

City brand management:

Building a brand is a long-term endeavor that demands sustained commitment over several years, often yielding only modest results in the short term. Cities must recognize this and approach city branding with a long-range strategic perspective, rather than relying on short-lived advertising campaigns that may offer only temporary impact.²⁴ A city brand is not the responsibility of a single organization; instead, it is collaboratively created and implemented by a network of public and private sector entities.²⁵

Steps of city branding:

The traditional techniques of branding are being applied to cities in a large scale. The branding process has five main steps to produce a remarkable and unique brand. These steps are as followed:

1. Conducting research.
2. Clarifying strategy
3. Designing identity
4. Creating touch points
5. Managing assets.²⁶

1- Conducting research:

This step includes: Clarifying vision, mission, strategies, goals and values. When it comes to focusing on tourists, investments, exports, or talent, a city branding strategy should ideally aim to create a general perception, independent of mission priorities. In reality, there are numerous cities in various countries that frequently develop their own distinct brands.

It is too important to create a single, comprehensive, and unified brand that can be positioned and modified to suit the requirements of particular market segments, such as travelers, businesspeople, or creative talents. In this manner, the branding initiative takes advantage of possible synergies. The process starts with the creation of a common vision, and it is then reflected in a mission statement and particular goals.

The city branding project should start with a realistic and inspiring, vision of the future. The most successful visions concentrate on creating a scenario that increases a city's competitiveness in a sustainable manner. Generally speaking, a sustained competitive advantage is founded on rare, distinctive resources or core competencies that are harder for competitors to copy.

Vision can be built upon the natural environment (climate, resources, or landscape) or cultural heritage (locations that represent place origins in terms of history, religion, or other cultural manifestations, including the arts, architecture, and design). Building on the core capabilities of the host communities is another way for a city to gain a competitive edge. These qualities include organizational skills, sociocultural values, and specialized commercial knowledge. For instance, the way civil society has historically been organized or how conferences and events have been held.

Therefore, the vision has to demonstrate what competitive edge that expresses the competitive identity.²⁷ For example, Dubai is one of the oldest cities that brands itself internationally. The vision of "Dubai Brand" campaign is "To be the #1 'most visited' city for global travel, business and events".²⁸ It is a strategic vision that reflects an ambition for Dubai to lead the world in terms of attracting the highest number of international visitors—across three major areas; tourism, business and events.

The mission summarizes why a brand exists and helps in change and making decisions that align with the vision.²⁹ For example; the mission of “Dubai Brand” is divided into many objectives. These goals are to be: Most recommended, highest rankings, service excellence, diverse experiences and responsible leader. Each goal addresses the specific results that need to be achieved with regard to certain target audiences (including visitors, residents and business). This step also includes researches about stakeholders’ needs and perceptions and evaluating existing brands and brand architecture.

2- Clarifying strategy:

This step includes:

- Clarifying brand strategy, which is too essential part of a successful plan that involves creating a unique, unified identity for the city brand.³⁰ Then developing a positioning platform which refers to the unique value that a brand presents to its customer.³¹ “Dubai Brand” propositioned itself as “Dubai, where Dynamic contrasts meet endless possibilities” that means an environment full of energy, diversity, and limitless potential. It’s a powerful message meant to attract travelers, investors, and visionaries to experience and contribute to the city’s story.
- Creating brand attributes that are the traits that describe the brand³². “Dubai Brand” adopted attributes that reflects its soul and identity. These attributes are “Welcoming, Inspiring, Spirited and Authentic”.
- This step also includes writing a brand brief, achieving agreement, creating a naming strategy, developing key messages and then writing a creative brief.

3- Designing identity:

Many of the methods are alike, as people whether they are part of a company or residents of a city respond to similar forms of motivation, inspiration, and influence. This means the same techniques can be effectively applied in both contexts. A city brand can be enhanced and made more visible through elements like logos, slogans, and promotional campaigns. However, these tools are ineffective unless supported by the active engagement of the city’s representatives. At its heart, city branding is a unified and ongoing effort by citizens from all levels of society to adopt and express a renewed identity. Several respondents pointed out that this approach closely resembles the branding strategies used by private companies.

This step includes:

- Visualizing the future and brainstorming big idea.
 - Designing brand identity, which is composed of visual and verbal elements that express the brand personality and its attributes.³³ The visual elements include the loge, the color palette and typography. The verbal elements include the tone of voice and the used sounds.
- The next example represents the logo of “Dubai Brand”. The design consists of the word “Dubai” in Arabic and English languages combined together in a harmonious way. The colors reflect the welcoming spirit and the warm hospitality of the city.



Image n. (7): Logo of “Dubai Brand”

This step also includes exploring applications that are suitable for the brand. Then finalizing brand architecture, presenting visual strategy and achieving agreement.

4- Creating touch points:

This step includes: Finalizing identity design, developing look and feel, initiating trademark protection, designing application and applying brand architecture. Graphic design has a vital role to remark the city identity which refers to the unique distinctive characteristics and meanings that exist in a place and its culture. These characteristics are constructed through historical, economic, political, religious, social and cultural discourses. The visuals are used in this step have to match and express the desired city image that on turn will reflect the city's reputation. Graphic design have the power to build positive mental impressions and associate it with the city. Integration between several touch points and unity in ideas and appearance are the two main factors behind consistency and appealing look of the campaign.

Image n. (8) presents an example of different applications of “Dubai Brand”. The campaign demonstrated different aspects of the city such as landscapes, sea, shopping malls, entertainment and the energetic facet of Dubai. This diversity has the role of attracting different categories of people, tourists, investors, immigrants and business people.

Image n. (8): Touchpoints with “Dubai Brand”³⁴

5- Managing assets:

This step includes; building strategy around the new brand, developing launch strategy and plan, launching internally first, launching externally, developing standards and guidelines and nurturing brand champions.³⁵

Analytical study about using graphic design in city branding:

1- Sharm Al Shaikh City branding:

The logo is Type-Based logo. The letters are designed in a curvy way to reflect the welcoming and friendly spirit.

Image n. (9): Logo of Sharm Al Shaikh³⁶

The color palette reflects the diversity in the city such as the sea, the coral reef, the mountains, the sun, the mines and the desert.



Image n. (10): Colors of Sharm Al Shaikh branding campaign

The graphics used in the visuals consist of element of the logo and images expressing the various facets of Sharm Al Shaikh such as the sea and the mountain.



Image n. (11): Visuals of Sharm Al Shaikh branding campaign

The colorful iconic elements used in the campaign reflects the dynamic look of the city and added a vibrant essence. Applying the new identity in different touch points such as buses, bus stations, flags, events, advertisements, post cards and stamps which reflects consistency and unity.



Image n. (12): Touch points created with Sharm Al Shaikh branding campaign³⁷

2- Paris City branding:

Image n. (13) presents a logo for “Paris” Branding project. The logo is simple and memorable. The A in Paris become the legs of the Eiffel Tower. The (I) becomes a feature because of the well-known “Tourist Information” symbol.



Image n. (13): Logo of Paris branding campaign

The next image presents the design of the visual identity. The colors are too strong to reflect a dynamic vibe to city. Illustrations used to step aside from the usual postcard pictures of Paris, and offer a fresh look to the city. Visuals used in the campaign expressed many activities can be done in Paris in order to showing the hospitality spirit of the city.



Image n. (14): Visual identity of Paris branding campaign

The visual identity is also applied into many touch points such directional maps of the city, ambient advertisements, issues and catalogues.

Examples are shown in image n. (15)



Image n. (15): Examples of touch points of Paris branding campaign³⁸

Findings:

- 1- The way people perceive a place significantly affects how they feel about it—shaping their impressions of quality, satisfaction, and even their willingness to visit. Graphic design can strongly influence this perception by using visually appealing and consistent elements to represent a city's brand. By clearly expressing a city's character, values, and distinctiveness, graphic design helps spark interest, foster emotional ties, and build a lasting, positive impression.
- 2- For a city's brand to be both authentic and memorable, the visual message conveyed through graphic design must align closely with the city's true identity. This alignment helps establish a genuine and distinctive image that enhances the city's reputation.
- 3- Effective graphic design brings consistency to how a city presents itself across different platforms and experiences. This visual harmony makes the city more recognizable and strengthens its overall brand identity.

Conclusion:

Graphic design holds a pivotal role in city branding, functioning as much more than just decoration. It serves as a strategic communication tool that helps define identity and build emotional resonance. By carefully designing visual elements like logos, color palettes, typography, and marketing materials, cities can convey their unique personality, cultural depth, and future vision to both locals and outsiders.

Moreover, graphic design supports broader branding strategies by reinforcing messages about a city's way of life, history, innovation, and potential. In an increasingly competitive global environment—where cities vie for tourism, investment, talent, and recognition—graphic design becomes indispensable in shaping how a city is perceived and remembered.

In essence, city branding through graphic design is about telling a compelling visual story—one that authentically represents the city's spirit and creates meaningful connections with a wide range of audiences.

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