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The image of the creative city: Some reflections on urban branding in Turin

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City-marketing and place-branding strategies today often stress ideas and stereotypes of culture and creativity to promote attractive urban images. The aim of this paper is to empirically analyze how the creative city is celebrated and displayed in the case of Turin (Torino), Italy. This case study represents a typical example of an industrial town, trying to promote new urban representations at an international level, and celebrating ideas of a cultural, post-industrial economy through campaigns of urban branding. This paper presents some reflections on the branding policies of the Italian city and, through the review of a sample of promotional materials and policy documents, it tries to determine to what degree Turin's branding represents ideas of creativity.

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Introduction

The popularity of the works of authors such as Florida (2002) and Landry and Bianchini (1995) has given a particular emphasis to the idea of the “creative city”. The core theoretical arguments at the basis of the “creative city approach” have been often criticized (for example, in terms of elitism, incongruent data, ambiguous implications in terms of policy: see, for example Peck (2005) and Scott (2006)), but in any case, creativity has become a major keyword in city-planning and urban-marketing policies around the world. In its simplest formulation, the main idea is that capitalist development today has moved to a new distinctive phase, in which the driving force of the economy is not simply technological or organizational, but human. “The creative class” (a vague category, including basically those engaged in knowledge-intensive works whose function is to “create meaningful new forms”, such as artists, scientists, analysts, business managers, opinion makers: Florida, 2003, p. 8) is today the “dominant class in the society” (Florida, 2002, p. ix), as it refers to the core of economic growth in developed countries. Moreover, such creative professionals are not

simply motivated by material rewards (salaries), but want to live in “quality”, “creative”, “tolerant” and “exciting” places. Therefore, according to such a framework, a key question for urban planning refers to the possibility of promoting creative environments and “cool city” images (Peck, 2005) in order to attract these professionals.

Assuming a critical position towards Florida's accounts, the aim of this paper is not to critically deconstruct the intrinsic theoretical and practical problems of creativity policies, but to discuss how ideas of the creative city are celebrated and displayed in the specific case of Turin (Torino), Italy. Basically, the fundamental question is whether Turin, in terms of urban branding materials and policies, is really sketching the image of a creative city in its attempt to escape its traditional image of a “one company town”. The thesis supported here is that image building in Turin is quite partial and different from the ideal one described by Florida, showing indirectly that a certain “Fordist culture” (or anti-Fordist) is still “in the air” in the field of the promotional and cultural policies of the city.

With this perspective in mind, the first part of the paper starts by presenting some theoretical insights on the concepts of urban branding and creativity. Then, the case of Turin, a city rebuilding a new image for itself in opposition to the old one centered on its automotive industrial past, will be briefly discussed. The third part will present

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some results from an empirical analysis carried out on promotional materials. Finally, some reflections will emphasize the partial nature of image building in the framework of creativity in Turin.

Urban branding and creativity

Despite the great number of different approaches involved in the study of the *image of a city*, which may range from environmental psychology to semantics, or from urban design to geography, an obvious common ground is the fact that the concept must be understood *metaphorically*. The image of a city, in the sense of the general meaning and idea of a place, is formed not only by visual images, but also by many other elements. Contributions to the study of urban images (and of the *sense of place* in general) highlight aspects relating to the *symbols* embodied in the material components of the city (roads, monuments, and buildings) as well as to many immaterial components such as the habits, routines, institutions, and organizations regulating the life of the inhabitants, and in addition to discourses about the city, stereotypes concerning the attitudes of the inhabitants, and descriptions from tourist guides, movies, slogans, and local-marketing campaigns (see among others Shields (1991)). This symbolic construction of the image of the city is usually analyzed from two different perspectives: the *internal image*, that perceived and reproduced by the local actors of the city (those identifying their geographical identities with that particular place: Lalli (1992)), and the *external image*, the perception and representation of the city by (and for) people and organizations more or less extraneous to local life and symbols. External ones are often particularly vague, abstract, and simplistic; for example, it is common to associate positive and negative values with unexplored or unfamiliar cities. Such images are important because they make it possible for us to organize information, formulate generalizations and expectations, and guide our actions (Shields, 1991; Entrikin, 1990) such as the choices made by tourists and investors. This is basically the reason behind the recent interest of many cities in *branding* (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005): the construction of positive and charming images is a fundamental tool for attracting global flows of tourism and investments to promote local development (Gold and Ward, 1994). Florida (2002), who has affirmed that the *creative class* is attracted by *cool* cities (more on this later), fits implicitly into this theoretical framework. Of course, building up a competitive creative economy does not only mean attracting creative flows (firstly, creative professionals are certainly not a class unto themselves because of the lack of internal coherence), but it certainly implies the creation and representation of environments perceived as suitable for creative industries, both by city users and external actors.

Such considerations are important for post-industrial cities: one of their challenges is for example to make places attractive to specific target audiences, such as artistic communities, with their preference for vibrant artistic networks, a climate of support for arts, and a good and affordable quality of life (Gertler, 2004). This implies

the celebration of “new” post-Fordist urban identities, economies, life-styles, forms of work and consumption (Scott, 2000; Kneale and Dwyer, 2008). In line with this argument, one of Florida’s key argument is that the advanced capitalist world is living a revolution (equal in impact to the transformations of the 19th century) leading to a “new economy” characterized less by its dependence on labour input and raw materials, instead posing centrality on human *creativity*, intended as the capability to generate new solutions and ideas (concerning different definitions of creativity see, for example, Santagata (2005)). Such an idea is not new, as testified by widely diffused social and economic literature concerning the centrality of human capital in urban growth (for example, in terms of educated and skilled workforce: Glaeser (2004)). But, at the same time, the idea that particular “bohemian” and “creative” communities are the driving force in the new economy is arguable and simplistic, as testified by a number of statistical analyses (Glaeser, 2004; Peck, 2005). Moreover, Florida’s “creative city” policies, aimed basically at the construction of desirable environments for the “creative class” and the display of “creative images” of the city, often resolves in banal elitist selective policies, including real estate speculative development, gentrification, the enhancement of specific neighborhoods, for example through landmarks designed by famous architectural stars (Peck, 2005). But what exactly does attracting the “creatives” mean? In terms of promotional policies and urban branding, it may be considered as a set of practices of selective “story telling” (Sandercock, 2003) aimed at trying to manage what sort of understanding and impression potential visitors, investors or even inhabitants might get. Of course, branding is not constructing *tabula rasa* narratives; rather, it epitomizes a long articulation and framing process that must have a certain basis in the local identity and debates. Patently fake urban brands are destined to low credibility; the branding process must create evocative narratives with a strong spatial referent. One of the main arguments in this paper, concerning the case of Turin, is that a rooted industrial identity biases the development “new economy” and “creative” visions of the city: for example, how is it possible to talk about Turin without making reference to manufacturing specialization? Urban branding policies that do not take account of strong identity referents (the automobile industry, in the case of Turin) imply specific political perspectives and issues of credibility. They involve, for example, questions of rights: who has the prerogative to define urban identities, and who “lives the brand”? What are the political consequences of building up the image of a “creative city”? This is particularly important considering that brands can operate as a “legitimate vocabulary” for justifying specific urban policies, for example, in the case of creativity, in order to justify the transformation and gentrification of particular areas in order to attract the “creatives” (Peck, 2005).

Secondly, one problem is that it is not easy to detect what kind of urban images may be attractive and sustainable, especially considering the variability of fashions and stereotypes. For example during the 1990s, urban policy-makers commonly believed that global flows were attracted towards places associated with high technology.

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