Image Building in European Regions: Regional Identity as a Foundation for Regional Branding

AR3U023 Theory of Urban Planning and Design

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Abstract – Globalisation and regionalisation seem to go hand in hand, the process of integration and increasing uniformity has raised opposing processes of accentuating regional differences. Regions face an increasing competition and region branding is used to expose the unique qualities of a specific region. One of the key aspects of regional branding, is regional identity. Yet, regional identity is often mistaken for regional branding, or exploited for wrong purposes. A significant concept in both regional identity and region branding, is image building. It is used to visualise a region, by introducing the subjective level next to the technical level of space in perceiving at a place. The paper introduces a complex layering in which multiple perspectives (regional identification, the influence of actors involved, and the perception of the perceiver) overlap and have an effect on image building and the perceived reality. The identity of the region concerns the image of the region, and can be divided in two parts, the insider's and the outsider's view. In region branding, the image is often focussed on constructing a positive image that is attractive to outsiders. Only when one has an extensive knowledge and experience of the specific region, can one try and create a truthful identity. Yet in regional branding, often political and economic gains are the main driving forces behind image creation for the region. This paper will discuss the link between regional identity and regional branding, the influence of image building in this process, and the pitfalls when exploiting these concepts instead of using them in the rightful way.

Key words: Regional Identity – Regional Branding – Image Building – Regionalisation – Europe

Introduction

In the recent past of the world, stories on the increasing uniformity of the world are frequently heard of. Regional differences are erased and regions and cities are becoming copies of one another. The critique on this process has enhanced since the increasing influence of globalisation and the so-called *McDonaldization* of the world (Bornman, 2010; De Pater, 2011a; Schwinn, 2012). However, it is not a new phenomenon. Even in the nineteenth century, the century of the industrial revolution, colonisation, urbanisation, the railways, and telegraphy, critique was already emerging on how all cities started to look similar. "Wie over vijftig jaar ééne stad heft gezien, heeft ze allen gezien", commented the preacher Jacobus Craandijk from Rotterdam in 1875.

The process of integration and increasing uniformity has raised opposing processes. Globalisation and regionalisation seem to go hand in hand (Bornman, 2010; De Pater, 2011a). Regionalisation in this context being the accentuating of regional differences. This can be seen in the economy, the personal life of people, and politics and governance; local initiatives instead of global chains taking power, residents having an emotional connection to their immediate living context, and the attempt to decrease regional inequalities in politics. The region now has an essential role in social, political, and economical life, understanding the role of the region in these different aspects of life is important for the durability of a region. The role of the region becomes visible in, respectively, the identity, the border, and the branding of the region (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Paasi, 2009; Faludi, 2014).

Regions have been particularly significant in the European Union where both the making of the Union itself and the 'Europe of regions' are concrete manifestations of the re-scaling of state spaces and the assignment of new meanings to territory (Faludi, 2014). This phenomenon of re-scaling and the question to the new meaning of territory have also led to an increase in competition between regions and nations. Regions face an

increasing competition for attention and money from supra-regional governments, but also from transregional and transnational companies (De Pater, 2011a). Bringing in investments increases regional competition and has led to a need for positive exposing of the region. Region and city branding are used to expose the unique qualities of the area, and large numbers are spend on this (Riza et al., 2012).

Regional identity is one of the significant aspects of regional branding. The aim of regional branding is to construct a positive image, which makes people want to attach themselves to this particular region (Kavaratzis, 2007). Regional identity, as a part of region branding, emphasises the intangible values of a region and its connection to the spatial context in which they have been developing (Paasi, 2001). Regional identity has not gone by unnoticed by the EU, as it has been identified in the EU's cohesion policy as an important element for regional development (Faludi, 2007; De Pater, 2011a). However, regional branding is often, though wrongfully, presented as regional identity. Top-down institutions, political or economic, have created an aspired image of a region, but present it as 'the identity of the region', even though it might barely poses local identities (Ji, 2018).

As regional identity is often mistaken for regional branding, this paper tries to research the link between regional identity and regional branding. Regionalisation is an important process in today's Europe and will be in its future. In order for European regions to grow and compete, the way they present themselves is important. One way to do this is through regional branding, in which a region tries to emphasise its unique characteristics and show its distinctiveness. As each region is unique, they all have an own identity, created through a complex and never-ending process (Hague & Jenkins, 2005). The concept of region branding is still less well-known than city-marketing, which has been acknowledged and used worldwide (Kavaratzis, 2007; Riza et al., 2011; Brabazon, 2013). As regions do not always have clearly defined borders or governance structures, and often hold a collection of characteristics or identities, it is complex but important to analyse and clarify the difference and the relation between region branding and regional identity. This paper tries to do this, by discussing the relevance and role of regional identity in regional branding. The structure of the paper is as follows, first the relevant concepts – region, regional identity, region branding – will be explained and clarified in relation to the field of science of urbanism and urban planning. Their background, role in current processes, relation to Europe, and their hazards will be addressed. A significant aspect in both regional identity and region branding is 'image building'. It is a crucial element in these processes, but must be used with caution. This paragraph will address these issues and explain why. In the discussion and conclusion, the difference between regional identity and region branding will be analysed, and concluded on.

The Region

The phenomenon of globalisation in modern literature usually refers to the trend that arose after the 1989 revolutions, in which the division between East and West diminished (Kochanowicz, 2006). This phenomenon is still a trend and relates to the fast growing interconnectedness of economies throughout the world. Due to technological advances, communication and transport networks could rapidly expand across the whole world, enabling nations to enlarge their horizons (Lechner&Boli, 2011). Modern globalisation however, has also led to processes of integration and increasing uniformity, which have raised opposing processes, such as regionalisation. Globalisation and regionalisation seem to go hand in hand, globalised uniformity versus regionalisation, the accentuating of regional differences (De Pater, 2011a). This can be seen in processes in economy, politics, and the personal life of people. Parallel to the globalisation of the economy, initiatives can be seen from local groups and institutions that focus on the uniqueness of a region. An example is the concept of Slow Food, founded in 1986 by culinary Italians in Bra (Piemonte), as a reaction to the global advance of fast-food chains. Slow Food strives for the use of traditional, regional products and has grown to 1300 local division in numerous countries. Regions are not only important in economy, but also play a large role in the personal life of people. The modern man seems to be no cosmopolitan, but actually a person who is emotionally attached to their own region. Through all scale levels the upscaling of governance systems evokes negative reactions (De Pater, 2011a). The population, who wants to retain their own power, is afraid to lose its identity. This phenomenon can also be seen on a European level, the increase of the power on a European level, has led to the rise of successful nationalist parties (Techau, 2016). On the other side of the scale, the introduction of enlarging municipalities evokes resistance as well. New names for regions, when created by new authorities are seldom adopted by

the people, showing that political influence does not necessarily touch ground in the region. The other way around, governments can be confronted with regional 'rebellion' when governance is oriented too much to the main region of power in a country, or when political leaders all represent only a certain region of a country (De Pater, 2011a).

Regional inequalities are also on the agenda on a European level. The Treaty of Rome 1957, the base of the foundation of the European Economic Community – the forerunner of the EU – formulates the ideal of decreasing the deprivation of less fortunate regions. The EU is not aversive of the region, next to *upscaling*, transferring decision-making towards Brussels, there is also *downscaling*, the principle of *subsidiarity* (De Pater, 2011a). The aim to keep decision-making at the lowest possible scale does not always work out in practice, which results in Brussels being blamed of meddlesomeness. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, includes the 'Europe of regions', which has led to the establishment of the Committee of the Regions. No less than 344 regions have a representative in this Committee, of which some regions have or aspire a certain level of autonomous power. This ambition can rely on sympathy from the EU, as they benefit from a good affiliation with regions. The relation between Brussels and the national capitals is not always cordial, as is the relation between the region and the national capital as a result, regions can ignore the national level and go directly to Brussels for support (De Pater, 2011b). The spaces in Europe are complex as they interweave and cannot always be clearly defined, according to Rumford (2006). Europe can no longer be seen as just a 'Europe of nations', it has created a borderless internal market, alongside a multi-levelled and networked polity. Paasi (2003) adds identity as a significant process in this complex system called 'European space', next to it economy and politics. The question of territory in Europe depends on governance structures, and economic networks, but also on identification levels of Europeans. The results of the World Values survey data, referred to by Castells (2004), show that identification with local and regional scales is most common for people. It could be the start of a future for Europe as a 'Europe of regions'. The relationship between borders, identities and governance is complex, but is at the basis of the modern Europe.

Regional Identity

Identity plays a significant role in the future of Europe, and has been a major concept in regionalism since the 1980s. Territorialisation battles over political issues and wealth have shifted to battles over multiculturalism, recognition and an economy characterised by marketing of images (Isin & Wood, 1999; du Gay et al., 2000; Lash & Featherstone, 2002). Defining the distinctiveness of a place based on its identity has become a complex process. The increasing globalisation has, particularly in the western world, led to an increase in individualisation. People have increasing opportunities to create their personal lives and identities, rather than being forced into a characterisation of nationality, class, occupation or home region (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Contrary to this process of individualisation, the awareness of being part in a globalised system has actually generated the search for new points of orientation and increased their sense of belonging to former boundaries (Meyer & Geschiere, 1999). Alongside this, a search for creating new boundaries, resulting from resistance to existing or top-down implemented identities also occurs (Castells, 1997). People are more unrestrained in creating their own identities, and are creating new, but often unacknowledged boundaries. This makes it increasingly difficult to define distinctions between places, and increases the complexity of specifying regional identities.

Identity has for long been an important concept in social sciences, whereas the region has been a major concept in geography sciences. In the recent past scholars have started to consider the links between these two concepts. Humanistic geographers have started to examine the emotional links between humans and their spatial context (Tuan, 1975), where social geographers have showed interest in regional identities, with a focus on Europe. As these scolars realised, the link between identity and space is important and it emphasises the importance of a spatially sensitive approach. Since the meaning of elements such as history, ideologies, or social transformations – which are constitutive of social distinctions and identities – vary for each territorial case (Paasi, 1986a; Gilbert, 1988; Dirven et al., 1993; Rose, 1995). Regional identity embodies the essence of a specific region, the extent to which a person can recognize or recall the distinctiveness of a region (Lynch, 1960), and the sense of belonging and attachment to a region (Faludi, 2007).

According to Paasi (1986) regional identity consists of two aspects; the identity of the region and regional consciousness. This last concept describes the regional identity of the inhabitants and relates for a great deal to the social side of regional identity. As this paper is focussing on the

spatial relation of identity, it will not be elaborated on, but as it is a significant aspect in regional identity, further research is necessary for a complete overview. The identity of the region concerns the image of the region, and can be divided in two parts, the insider's an the outsider's view. The first refers to images created by the inhabitants of the region, the latter to those living outside the region. The process of selecting what to represent always includes subjectivity, as each individual looks at the reality through a certain perspective (De Pater, 2011b). One's perspective consists of values, experiences and knowledge, which are unique for everyone. If others would look at the same reality, they would construct a different image. It raises the question how big the distance is between reality and the 'real' reality (De Pater, 2011). It is therefore important, in the concept of regional identity, to consider through who's glasses is being looked at the region (Groote & Druijven, 2011). The difference between an insider's and an outsider's view is important to understand and acknowledge. "Only those who intensively experience the landscapes of their region can change or recreate their images of those landscapes", this quote by Stein & Schultz (2008, p.148) expresses the importance of local influence in regional identity. Only when one has an extensive knowledge and experience of the specific region, can one try and create a truthful identity.

Regional identity has been integrating in society, for example, a Google search of 'regional identity' finds 958.000 results (loaded 27th November 2018). This shows the worldwide acceptance of the concept and indicates the importance of the resurgence of the region. However, a large amount of web-pages understand the concept of regional identity as a significant aspect of economic competition and tourist promotion of regions (Paasi, 2009). These aspects relate to regional branding, instead of regional identity, in promoting a positive and attractive image of the region that is used to attract a certain target group, and not primarily focussing on representing the unique characteristics of the region.

Regional branding

Regional branding focusses on constructing a positive image which makes people want to attach themselves to this particular region (Kavaratzis, 2007). Regional branding actually relates to the strategy of place marketing, which was inspired by marketing strategies in business (Kearns & Philo, 1993; Kotler et al., 1993; Margarisová &

Vokáčová, 2016). Various scholars have also confirmed that general marketing principles can be applied in the enhancing of regions competitiveness and branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Kemp et al., 2012; Zemla, 2013). An important factor in marketing is satisfying the set target group(s). Knowing the target group(s) for region branding is important, as this determines the type of image that ought to be constructed (Hospers, 2004). In an analysis of existing campaigns of region branding in Europe, three main target groups are important in regional branding: visitors, companies, and inhabitants (Stadt Aachen, 2012; Economische Samenwerking Zuid-Limburg, 2014; Stad Gent, 2017; Maastricht Marketing, 2017; Be Berlin, 2018; etc.). These relate to regional branding's three main purposes, which respectively are tourism, economy, and liveability. Visitors who seek leisure activities, are focussed predominantly on cultural and entertainment facilities. They are looking for an experience that can be found nowhere else, and are not familiar with the place yet. Attracting companies calls for a different approach, as they are focussing on accessibility and connection to various markets. The quality of life in a region is important for maintaining current residents, and attracting possible new residents. These three purposes are interrelated and have effect on each other, which can often be found in region branding strategies. As said before, each region has a unique set of characteristics and will therefore focus on a specific type of target group(s). For example in the Zuid-Limburg region in the Netherlands, the main slogan of the campaign was "Zuid-Limburg, je zal er maar wonen!" *(Zuid-Limburg, you could be living there!)* It could be easily changed in "Zuid-Limburg, je zal er maar werken!" (*Zuid-Limburg, you could be working there!)* This example shows the integration of branding for economy and liveability, which need to be tackled in this region.

Within Europe, region branding has heightened over the last decades. European Regions are competing increasingly over these residents, companies and visitors (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; De Pater, 2011a). In order for a region to be attractive, European regions wish to be a 'high profile' region. This has led to most of the regions – especially in Western Europe – developing a rich supply of infrastructure networks, universities, high-quality shops, museums and theatres. However, the result of this is contradictory, as all regions end up looking relatively similar in physical aspects (Margarisová & Vokáčová, 2016). This spatial result is particularly seen in the 'Blue Banana', one of Europe's metropolitan zones. It has become a relatively homogeneous and prosperous area, in

which regions resemble one another, the trend of *McDonaldization* is now also observed in the geo-economic landscape of Europe (Hospers, 2004). As the spatial context does no longer determine the behaviour of targeted groups – residents, companies, visitors – other factors have become increasingly important, the so-called 'soft location factors'. In addition to investing in local amenities, places must use their unique elements to be able to create an image for their place (Hospers, 2014; Riza et al., 2012). The image based on soft factors of a region is about the relation between the people and the physical land, the regional identity. It focusses on the positive, unique factors of the region and tries to represent these understandably and attractively for outsider's. An essential role of place marketing is the creation of a positive comprehensive image of the place (Medway & Warnaby, 2008). When used correctly, it will acknowledge the region's identity and use this in region branding. However, one of the most occurring pitfalls of region branding is the tendency to lose sight of the actual citizens and local identity of the area (Ji, 2018). Political gains and economic advantages become the main driving force behind image creation for the region, in which achieving goals is more important than truthfully representing a region. This diminishes the position or regional identity as the foundation of regional branding.

Image Building

Region branding and region identity both address the issue of 'image building' or 'image construction', the attempt to make a region visible and create an understandable and attractive image of something, or in this case, a region (Collins English Dictionary, 2018). To be able to 'make a region visible', it implies that the physical level of regional space can be experienced in different ways (Stein & Schultz, 2008). It includes both the technical side of the landscape and the psychological side of experience and emotional focus. The influence of experience and emotional focus leads to a subjective level in image building. It creates a pair of glasses through which one sees reality. Construction of a regional image includes different levels, which will be explained below, these include regional identification, the influence of actors involved, and the perception of the perceiver. These have an effect on the perception of reality, and determine how big the difference is between reality and 'real' reality (Groote & Druijven, 2011).

Regional identification is actually a type of categorisation, including personal influences, with

the goal to construct an image of the region (Paasi, 2003). The constructed image can be used for regional branding. An image of a region is created with a certain goal, to attract tourists, companies or families, to stimulate growth in the region, or to put a new region on the map. The image is influenced through the perception of both the target group and the actors creating the image (Groote & Druijven, 2011). The aim of the image determines the target group, and with this the focus of the image creation. The image should address their demands and wishes and should be appealing to their specific visions. This is the first layer of subjectivity that plays a role in the creation of the image.

The second layer is created by the actors involved in the process, resulting in their visions and experience being included as explained in the previous paragraph. It is therefore important to carefully examine what actors are involved in the creation of a regional image. Influential actors who maintain an adequate amount of power in the process, might lead to a distorted image in which the reliability of the image should be questioned, as it has probably been influenced to create the goal they want to achieve (Groote & Druijven, 2011).

The constructed image has a foundation of regional identity, and should be influenced as least as possible by the actors involved in the process of image building. Yet, the success of the constructed image is mostly determined by the people's perception. People construct an image of a place themselves, based on existing memories of resembling and alternative places. As they cannot know all alternatives, their perception is limited to marketed knowledge (e.g. statements in the media, advertisements), with addition of their own base of knowledge and experience. Therefore they construct their personal image of reality, and is the knowledge they have of a place influenced by previously visited places and external sources (Hospers, 2004). This shows that another level of image building adds to the equation, the image the perceiver creates of the already constructed image of a place or region.

It is important to be careful when creating visualisations of a region, whether this be images, words or feelings, to not fall prey to clichés and lose sight of the identity of the region (Stein & Schultz, 2008). This could lead to an imbalance between the 'real' reality and the reality that is depicted through the constructed image. Next to that, it also proves difficult to visualise a type of area that has been ignored up until now, and for which no adequate images or concepts exist (Sieverts, 1997). Prior experience and knowledge play a significant role in image building, when no

existing imagery exists, this complicates the process.

The SAUL project in the Southern Region of Luxembourg is an example of a project focussing on regional identity as foundation of regional planning. The projects tends to transform a former industrial area to a location for modern services (Stein & Schultz, 2008). The project is sponsored by the EU and by the Luxembourg Ministry from 2004 to 2006. The project explored how regional identity could be created through a planning culture based on partnership building. Municipalities, associations and citizens were included in the process, which enabled an integration of different points of view. This integration has led to a shared experience of space, creating new perspectives for each actor. In the example of Luxembourg the pitfall of

Conclusion

Regional identity is often mistaken for regional branding, or exploited for wrong purposes. This paper has discussed the link between regional identity and regional branding and the influence of image building in this process. As regional identity is a crucial aspect in regional branding, and regional branding is significant in representing a region to outsiders, the relation should be clear. It is important to discuss the role of regional identity in region branding, as European regions have become a key role in the European network of space. The new question of territory has led to the introduction of a 'Europe of regions', for which the complex relationship between borders, governance, and identity is its foundation. The influence of regional identity is important as it embodies the essence of a specific region, the extent to which a person can recognize or recall the distinctiveness of a region, and the sense of belonging and attachment to a region.

Image building is a significant concept in both regional identity and region branding, used to visualise a region. It includes the influence of experience and emotional focus, next to the technical side of the landscape. It introduces a subjective level in image building, by creating a pair of glasses through which one sees reality. Construction of a regional image includes different levels of subjectivity: regional identification, the influence of actors involved, and the perception of the perceiver. This shows that it is a complex layering in which multiple perspectives overlap and have an effect on the perceived reality.

The identity of the region concerns the image of the region, and can be divided in two parts the insider's and the outsider's view. The first refers to images created by the inhabitants of the region, the latter to those living outside the region. In region branding, the image is often focussed on constructing a positive image which makes people want to attach themselves to this particular region, it focusses on the positive, unique factors of the region and tries to represent these understandably and attractively for outsiders through the creation of a regional identity. Only when one has an extensive knowledge and experience of the specific region, can one try and create a truthful identity. Yet in regional branding, often political and economic gains are the main driving forces behind image creation for the region. This results in the exploiting the concept of 'regional identity' for personal gains, in which achieving goals is more important than truthfully representing a region. An imbalance between the 'real' reality and the reality that is depicted through the constructed image is created, diminishing the position of regional identity as the foundation of regional branding. It is important to be careful when creating visualisations of a region, to not fall prey to clichés and lose sight of the identity of the region. Regional identity embodies the unique essence of a region, is important in creating a sense of belonging and attachment for inhabitants, and in defining the distinctiveness of the regions as recognized by outsiders. It should be used in a spatially sensitive approach, to prevent misuse and generalisation.

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