



Instagramable Architecture

The role of architecture as cities brand element in the age of information technologies & social networks

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Abstract. This article tackles the idea in cities branding in general within the development of information technologies and the domination of the internet as the medium for contemporary human activities. The article investigates the definitions of branding and its elements in literature and the role of architecture as both tangible and intangible branding element of prominent symbolic values. It touches the presence of the imagery qualities of architecture as markers of cities and with the rise of social networks, specifically image-based ones like Instagram and Facebook, this hypothesis is tested via a structured questionnaire that involves the perception of respondents on how architecture stand as a dominant brand for cities.

The main findings that this research concludes are that the notion of city branding is no longer a spontaneous environmental behavioral act but should be a well-designed one. With its importance, the current branding practices of city managers and stakeholders has to be altered to work with the new dynamics of branding depending mainly on users' direct feedback and influence via different internet-oriented means.

Second that the cities' symbolic elements, on the top of them architecture, play a prominent role in defining the city brand due to its inherited visual and experiential magnitudes. Lastly, the fast pace of the development of information technologies, and the social media platforms, that allows a direct response from city users has the great effect on shaping such symbolic elements and these platforms will be playing a dominant role in the future of shaping our cities as the physicality of the city has to be internet shareable or 'instagramable' if it will be part of the whole image of the city

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the unprecedented shift towards consumerism, and the dominance of globalization as a global ideology, societies around the world are being challenged with the concepts of the loss of identity and the absence of belonging, which pushed for a counter search for symbols of identity. The cultural, economic and political realms are ever changing and are affected with vast number of variables that changes with the minimal alteration in everyday global events. The today interconnected global scene results in a domination of the copies and the total loss of identity. Individuals are forced to a search of identity and belonging and

position themselves within the amalgamated world. In times before, the individual identity was part of a bigger religious, national or ideological identity, with all its cultural and social associations. Today, the reign is to the consumerist economic ideologies, accordingly the individual identity is rather formed by the products consumed and their brands, as brands, in such context is considered the only marker of belongingness to a solid group of values.

Brands becomes markers of identification the goes over the social, cultural and local boundaries. The brand turns to be a symbol of the insubstantial structure of notions and values

that are common between larger groups of individuals irrespective to their cultural, religious or national.

In such context, when looking at cities, their physical structure formed by the city's or a destination's architecture becomes an important branding symbol for this place and its users, whether residents or travelers, and stands as a distinctive marker for such a destination among other similar on the global scene.

The distinctiveness of a city or a destination is conceived with such physical and experiential markers that are not present in others which are merely formed by the physical environment and architecture. Thus, this paper will be discussing the position of architecture as a strong branding destination tool and its effect on the positioning a city within the global destination contest, as an attractor for both visitors and residents towards this destination. The paper will explore this concept within the interconnected medium of the information technologies as the contemporary medium for the transfer of knowledge, and as the prominent channel for the brand image transfer. This will include a specific focus on the way the internet based social media forms an important platform for identification and city's brand spreading and how it affects the way city architecture is formed and then conceived. The paper will explore the general definitions of branding holistically and the city or destination branding specifically and will carry the exploration towards the online presence of a destination and the transfer of its image on the different web platforms. The study will not be addressing the tourism practice and its complex economic affiliations but will be limited on the general image able perception of the city user or visitor and how architecture affects this perception.

2. Definitions of Branding and Architecture as a brand element

Throughout history, the idea of branding and how it's defined has been altered over time. Branding was one of the ways to distinct the product, a symbol of skill and quality of a certain product affiliated to a producer. Overtime the value of the brand as a symbol has super passed the actual value of the product represented in its quality and the brand is no longer a represent of the product as a functioning one rather than a collective of

associations of what this product represents (Kladou,S.,et al. 2016,p.2)

This transformation in the branding concept could be understood as a result of development of the notions of consumerism and the tendency to indemnity consumers by the products they consume more than of their sociocultural identities. Within this realm, markers of identifications get more importance than before, thus brands fill in this spot.' In a world in which social, economic, and political value systems are defined by continual change and movement, individuals are forced to create their own identities and find ways of signaling their place in the world ' (Klingmann, 2007,p.235)

2.1 Definition of Branding

In literature, Branding has taken various definitions .the brand is defined as a product or service to which human beings attach a bundle of tangible (functional) and intangible (emotional and symbolic)meanings that add value, (Gordon 1994,p.29)'. The brand is adding to a product either rational or tangible dimensions (i.e. related to how the product performs) or symbolic, emotional and intangible dimensions (i.e. related to what the product represents) that differentiate it from other products that fulfill the same need. (Keller et al. 2005,p.740-759).for Batey(2016,p.30) a brand is defined as a collection of associations concerning attributes, benefits and values. brands could be also defined as multidimensional constructs, consisting of functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements that collectively generate a unique set of associations in the public mind'. These associations are formed in peoples' minds and they are not necessarily the associations intended by the branding authorities. (Aaker 1996,p.20)

In all previous definitions, branding is defined mainly as a way of identification, which marketers use to give distinctiveness to a product or a service, using its tangible and intangible qualities, to convince the consumer of its specialty, while the consumer on the other hand use the brand as a way to identify himself by belonging to a particular group o individuals who share the same perceptions and point of view around the product. It's the ultimate identifier in the age of consumerism.

2.2 Architecture as City Brand

As the main purpose of branding is to distinguish a product among others of similar function and characteristics, if cities and destinations are to be considered to a certain extent a consumable product, then cities and destination would use the same notions of branding to stand out from other cities.

With the vast interconnectivity of to days modernized world, culture of copy prevails and becomes the ideology of today. As individuals became rather copies and boundaries of localities have fade with the expansion of globalism, cities are no different and their distinctive local features gradually disappears. The importance of place branding increase as a counter way of identification.

In their true nature, cities as products have the embedded potentials of any other brand. As any city holds the basic branding elements of brand identity in terms of name, visual identity, and branding symbols. In corporate branding, the brand symbol would be the logo or the sign, and similarly, cities have their symbols represented in their significant architecture and landmarks, thus a 'brand image' is formulated in the city users mind.

In understanding architecture as a brand symbol, the characteristics of the brand symbol is its distinction whether it's a sign or a logo, or a slogan and a tagline. Hence, architecture plays the role of the brand symbol for the city as it's very tangible and sensible, and at the same time very distinctive. Although number of cities undergo the same historical, social, and political circumstances, yet , their architecture no matter what, always has a different slight twist, which makes it distinguished. These differences what can turn architecture to a successful brand symbol.

Brand positioning is very important for a successful brand (Aaker 1996,p.2). The brand positioning is what guides the marketing strategies for a product, and the brand positioning involves two important parts: Brand tangibles (as explained those of physical visual symbolic qualities) and brand intangibles, which mainly is about the experiential associations that formulates the apperception about the product in the consumer minds, those associations related to how this brand fulfils his desires before his actual needs it includes the brand personality as the position or identity originally created by the marketers, the brand relationships , which evolve between the consumer and the brand and

the brand experience, which deals with the experiential dimension of the brand , the way they Sense experiences involving sensory perception, Feel experiences involving affect and emotions, Think experiences which are creative and cognitive, Act experiences involving physical behavior and incorporating individual actions and lifestyles, and Relate experiences that result from connecting with a reference group or culture. (Schmitt 2003).

City's architecture plays this dual role in constructing the brand positioning. It works both as a brand tangible and intangible element, as with its visual and symbolic qualities, it stands as a symbolic marker for the city, and offers a medium for the desire fulfilment and experiential part. When an encounter occurs with an architectural symbol of the city, it completes the perceptual image of the city and evokes the associated expected or before experienced sensual image of the city. When names of cities with successful brand positioning such as Paris, Dubai, London.etc. are mentioned, instantly a physical image of the city and most probably a significant landmark image , pops in mind, bringing all associated expected experiences or memories to mind, and this fits architecture as an intangible brand intangible.(Fig.1)



fig. 1: the Eiffel Tower, Paris. Source: Researcher

Today, the way consumers, in this case, city users encounter the city brand has radically changed than before. Today, with the rise of the information technologies , the city brand consumer deals with the city brand in a more virtual image affected way. This requires a profounder look on how the information technologies represented in the internet, and its elements, more likely social media , affects how city brands' consumers, whether residents or visitors perceive the city.

3. The Online City Image

3.1 Destination Branding and online sphere

Nowadays , the internet has become the new medium for human activities, and this medium governs the flow of information that directs our decisions , whether forming an opinion or a position, or buying a certain product, and even visiting certain places. The development of internet has set a new value for the ‘image’ as a valuable impact factor in constructing a position as consumer towards a product, as internet, is the perfect medium for the fast spreading of image and due to its interface, it could be considered as an image based platform in general.

The virtual world on the different internet platforms , social media, websites and blogs not even competes the physical real one, but exceeds it in affecting branding of products and specially places , since branding, as previously explained is intended to construct this mental association between the consumer and the product , in the case of this current research the product is place or city, based on the perception that is dependent on the distinctiveness of such product exhibited through symbols, images as tangible elements of branding and intangible ones like word of mouth, resulting in a kind of a desire of belonging to a certain idea around the product(Hammouda 2018)

Now , the main flow of information about as places comes from internet , on one hand through the word of mouth on social media internet-based platforms , such as Facebook or Instagram etc. , or even through reviews about places and cities on travel websites and blogs (Beerli and Martín 2004; Sirakaya and Woodside 2005,p.657). On the other hand , as mentioned, internet is the seamless platform for the spread of image, thus, internet is the perfect medium for city branding, as it deals with tangible side of symbolism and visuality of place through the imagery, and the intangible side that constructs the mental perceptions and the experiential side through the social media posts which carries the personal experiences of users and make others aspire to have a similar one or at least create a position towards this place. The development of cyber space and the wide spread of smart phones have accelerated Homo Interneticuse (Barnes, 2010). Searching, collecting, and distributing information on the Web have become the inherence of humans like reading, listening, speaking, and writing. While other media (e.g. guidebooks, brochures,

advertisements on TV and newspapers, etc.) exhibit comparative disadvantages such as “passive communication, expensive to produce, difficult to monitor effectiveness, and message is often not heard” (Kolb, 2006, p. 45). Even if the usual advertisement is not considered an obsolete way of place marketing , unlike many researchers has like Hildreth puts it, the main stream of advertisement is now online advertisement through websites, emails and mostly social media sites. The main difference is that advertisement is to be thought of as a passive generic way f branding , as it might not reach the right target group, unlike the other cyber sources as social media , which gives the opportunity for the user to choose the information and construct a perception based on a more trusted resource as the word of mouth provided in the social media posts. Accordingly, the internet, and the social media platforms in specific gives fresh potentials for city branding and would present a new way to approach the city branding and reconsider the way we use architecture as a branding element for cities.

3.2 Social networks and City branding ; Instagramable Cities

With 800 million monthly active users– more than a tenth of the world’s population – , the social media platform, has since become one of the most powerful sources in the way our environments are being shaped. It’s no longer a coincidence for a place to be shared on Instagram or Facebook. It doesn’t only take picturesque qualities for a place or a product, but it is a very conscious act of both clients and designers . this act has evolved from a teen like social activity on the cyber space, to be a big concern for decision makers for multimillion dollars industries. It becomes a target to design a place/space, and make it ‘instagramable’ , making people aspire to take a picture of and share it with others.

Today, the Instagram has increasingly influenced how are cities are shaped, as works are being commissioned to form an integral part of the people’s behavioral activities in the city(Wainwright, 2018). Take an example of the Cloud Gate in Chicago by Anish Kapoor, a metal polished bulb that reflects the images of the visitors and the city in a distorted manner, such a sculptor has led other cities to look for similar engaging figures that puts the users as part of the act in a piece of constructed scenography.(Fig.2)

Social media, and Instagram in particular, have touched two dominant human needs that prevail in this consumerist era, which are ; the need of belonging and the need of being distinguished from others in a vast culture of copy. As per the words of Instagram creator, Kevin Systrom,” Our goal is to not just be a photo-sharing app, but to be the way you share your life when you're on the go”, and he explains that the majority of the Instagram users share the following :



fig. 2 Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Chicago. source Jewel Samad AFP, Getty Images

- their lives
- things that excite them
- things they’ve achieved
- things they place value on

As mentioned, it’s not a youth-oriented practice, as nowadays, famous designers have realized the fact of the importance of the share ability of their designs on Instagram, furthermore, the potentials that Instagram and other social media platforms offers for the development of fresh designs to meet their standards. As the British architect Farshid Moussavi puts it , the difference that social media has resulted in is “that these environments are not just containers for storing goods or providing services. Instagram is reinforcing the fact that space matters, which can only be good news for designers and architects.”

Yet , it’s worth to mention a downside that has to be dealt with while designing instgramable buildings and structures, which is the fast pace on which the spectacle of the design wears out. Designing buildings and public spaces as a selfie set may promote the city brand for what might be a temporary or short termed phase, but as the effect of the surprise fades, it becomes like old news, which sets the seek of affordable yet fast changing designs that might be altered or replaced quickly with the next catchy design. This has led in some examples of constructing

poorly enduring structures which would be good for a photograph but won’t last for a long time. The worn-out facades and falling materials from some spectacular building facades testify on that in some cases the photograph ability of the building has exceeded its real functionality.

This could be negated when considering the lasting spectacle of landmarks in cities , such as the Eiffel tower for Paris, that after more than a hundred years, still stand as a prominent selfie image sharable spot. The idea behind this is, people desire to live their own experiences as heard of from others. When a post of a photo catches the eye of a user on Instagram of a building or a place, he tends to visit this very same place, although it has been already posted, the fulfil his mentally built expectation of the place and live his own experience about it.

To test the effects of the cyber space in general and the social media in particular, and the characteristics of those buildings and structures that form the city brand , a pilot study through a standardized questionnaire has been carried out and would be discussed in the next section of this research.

4. Research methodology

A structured questionnaire was used that aimed to explore the above themes of investigation. In exploring the basic concept of the role of architecture as a city or destination branding element, a standardized questionnaire with frequent travelers’ subject to different cities experiences . The choice of this method was much affected by the nature of the hypothesis to be tested, as dealing with the subject of experience and perception, it was very important to conduct a method that gets in a direct connection with subjects represented here as respondents that allows them to express freely their personal reflections on the position of architecture. Before conducting the main study, the some of respondents were subjected to a focused interview which gives them the opportunity to go in a more narrative explanation to elaborate their expression of experience and to work as a guide to define the issues to be tested via the questionnaire and helps the questionnaire construction, which as clarified looks onto more depth regarding the brand- architecture hypothesis and would get a more definitive qualitative/quantitative responses for bigger number of subjects. For pre-testing purposes, the questionnaire was administered to a small group of ten respondents who were visitors to Greece. In this

phase, the clarity of the questionnaire and the time required to fill it in were tested. For this research, a sample of twenty interviewees were chosen upon specific criteria. These criteria are put to guarantee the adequacy and illegibility of the subjects to be able to respond, having the basic knowledge and experience needed. All the subjects are frequent travelers, who had different city experiences over the years. The sample was selected by adopting a convenience sample based on parameters such as the ability to speak English, accessibility and willingness to participate in the research. A total of 305 fully completed questionnaires were returned: a relatively small sample size but any how goes along with other studies with a similar research area.

5. Results and discussion

Starting with a description of the sample, both genders were almost equally represented, as 47.57% were men and 52.43% women. Furthermore, the vast majority of the sample was between 18 and 59 years old (in detail, 21% belonged to the 18-24 age group, another 34.62% to the 25-34 age group, then 40.38% to the 35-44 age group, and the 12.92% to the 45-59 age group). As far as the country of origin is concerned, the majority came from the middle east in general and the rest from 35 other countries. All respondents confirmed that they are frequent travelers and other answers of respondents who have not traveled before were excluded.

For reasons of travel, 84.62% expressed that the main reason for travel was for leisure and tourism, 33.65% was for work or permanent residence, 29.81% was for study, and 25.00% was for business. 3.85% was for other reasons mentioned in the responds. the duration of travel varied from a short 1 week visit to a long more permanent stay that lasted for more than 24 months, giving a wide range for the getting results for both short and long termed travel.

5.1 Internet as a travel platform

As for planning the travel, and to test the use and effect of internet on travel plans, 47.12% of respondents planned their travels by themselves online, while 27.88% also planned their travels through direct reservations and booking of flights and hotels, 17.31% had their travels planned through travel agents, which express in a way the domination of the internet as a user friendly platform for planning travels (Fig.3). 82.96% of respondent check travel websites before traveling, as a way to get a pre-visit

mental image. In w a way the information coming from internet is thought to be in a way more reliable than any other way, as internet provides an active way of knowledge transfer, as even on websites not only on social platforms, internet opens a wide range of user's feedback and the transfer of word of mouth and personal experiences. In the next session, the effects which accompanied the online booking will be more discussed as reserving online usually includes the exposure to images, reviews etc. about the destination

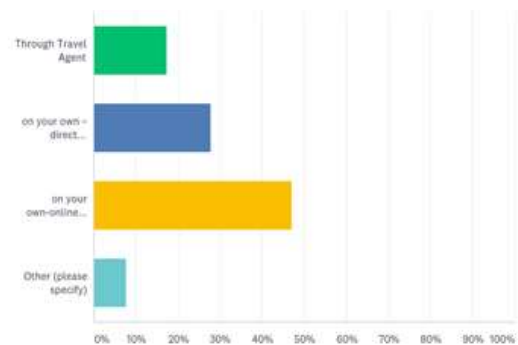


fig. 3 Ways of travel planning

5.2 Images as an effective branding element

The images of the city or a destination is as expressed in the hypothesis is a very effective tool of destination branding. The images do not only work as vehicles of transferring the image of the destination, they are sources of documentation and self-expression. When respondents were asked about the approximate number of photos taken during their visits, 43.27% of answers were over 200 photos per visit, 15.38% took from 100-199 pictures, 22.12% were between 50 and 99 photos, and the left were under 50 photos taken per visit. when compared to the duration of travel, the number of photos taken did not reflect the duration of the visit, as for short visits that lasted for not more than one week, it was also over 200 photos for more than 50% of the responses. (Fig. 4)(Fig.5)

Over 39.42% of the mentioned that over 50% of their pictures involved a building (of significance). 33.65% showed 31-50% of their pictures involved building, and 19.23% had from 11 to 30% of their pictures involving buildings. These results show the domination of architecture in general as a subject of photos, hence documentation, of the user's experience with the city. architecture marks the visiting experience of the user to the city as the main physical proof of visit, so there is a great keen to take photos of/with buildings as they are the main 'symbol' of the city.

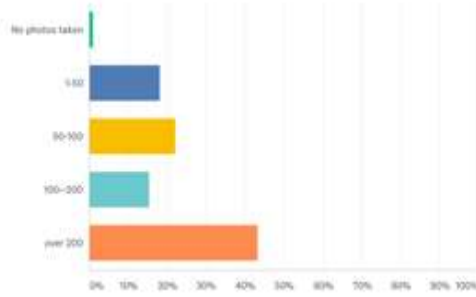


Figure 4 Number of Photos taken per visit

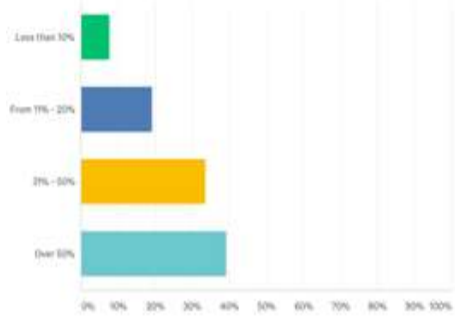


fig. 5 Percentage of photos with architectural element

This is more solidified when respondents were asked the what defines in general their choice of destination to travel to as for the seek of leisure and tourism. 69.23% of respondents expressed that a main drive being their choices is to see the unseen of the architectural physical environment, whether heritage or contemporary. Of course, other drivers were expressed such as recreational activities, ether and climate , cultural venues, or shopping. yet, even though architecture stays in the frontline, and when it was deeper discussed through the focused interview, respondents expressed their mere interest in also seeing the buildings in which any of these activities occur. The architecture as an incubator for human activities make it a must be branding element that is involved in all other human activities.(Fig. 6)

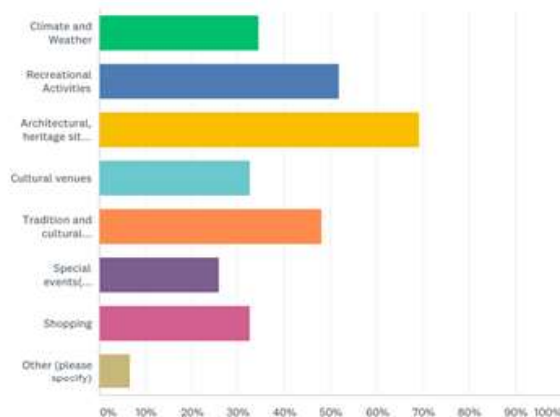


fig. 6 Main intriguers for travel

Furthermore, 73.08% of the respondents recognized friends/acquaintances as a valuable source of information prior to their trip. Their stories expressed in social media posts is the key player. Stories post proved to be a more reliable source to get information about destinations in specific. Unlike other branded products, if cities are to be considered ones, personal experiences have a more significant effect on forming a mental perception about it, as cities in specific are experience based products , so word of mouth is the leading mean of transferring knowledge or information about them. Users showed to be more confident towards what they hear or see of other experiences , more than being affected by direct advertisement, specially if these others are acquaintances , as friends on social networks. Even through direct advertisement, social media platforms now present one on the most prominent media for advertising. 65.38% of respondents answered that they receive advertisement regarding travel on social media more than any other means of advertisement, and 20.19% receive via emails, another internet-based way , yet more passive than that of social media. Advertisement might be thought of as obsolete way of marketing yet, as shown from the responses, still received and acknowledged by consumers. Advertisement might intrigue relatively small number of users, yet with their posts and stories, they affect larger number of people sharing the same social media channel.

The social media role continues to the documentation of travel, as 77% responded that they use promptly social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook special to post about their travels, Instagram is in a way more than other means (Fig.7). Both means are image-based platforms and gives opportunities for adding description about the image from a very personal point of view. 83% confirmed that they posy an image or a video of their travel of which 85.86% of these posts included or revolved around aa piece of architecture. Two important results appear from these responses, that social media is a more likely mean of self-expression when it comes to experiencing cities in specific, and second , that architecture governs these expressions , another proof that architecture would stand as a perfect branding element of cities.

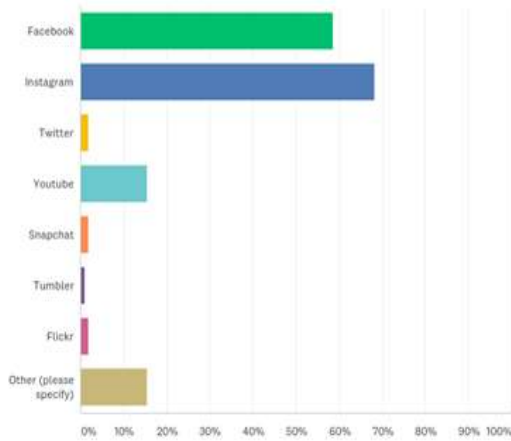


fig. 7 Social media platforms for documenting travels

5.3 Architecture as a symbolic branding element

Architecture is the could be considered as the main label of cities. 73.08% of respondents search for architectural monuments, older ones and contemporary before traveling to cities.(Fig. 8) In a way it's a way for them to form an image about what they are about to experience, the whole scene was their adventure will take place. And when asked about their insights after travelling if they recall any other symbolic branding element such as a logo, slogan or coat of arms of a city during their travel, 75.96% answered negatively, while what remained in their memories is the physical architectural environment they saw and experienced.

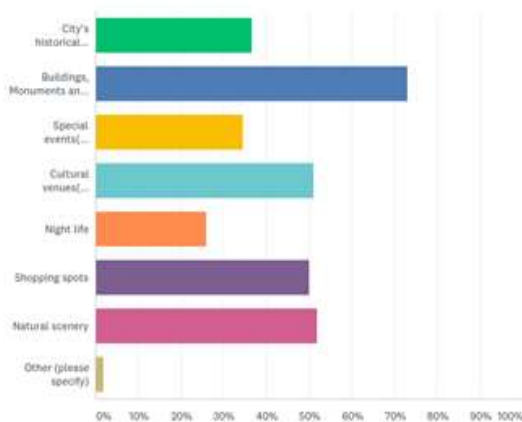


Figure 8 Most searched topics before traveling

When asked through the questionnaire and earlier on the focused interview, about what pops up in their mind with the mention of any of these cities (Dubai- Paris – London – New York – Amsterdam), 78.43% replied that an architectural landmark marks their mental image of the city. Cities like Dubai or Paris, the Burj Khalifa tower and Eiffel tower were the most apparent on replies, while cities like

Amsterdam, showed a variety of answers. From this, a preliminary result starts to appear that it's not only about significant architecture, rather that it's more about a landmark with significant features, such as shape, form and size that makes a distinctive mental image for the city, thus a brand. Landmarks showed in responses as also the most reliable way to navigate through cities as they are set as points of reference for visitors and residents. It's both physical and mental place marker to orient users of the city. According to responses more than 70% expressed when asked in a direct way when designing new cities, what gives the city its unique brand, architecture was in the lead. This proves that architecture is not only a subconscious element of branding personality, but a very tangible one, considered by city users and consumers.

Conclusions

This study helps to draw useful conclusions on the issues of brand formation and the role of architecture as both tangible and intangible brand element for cities. The study addresses actual responds from actual travelers and tests their perception of the city brands and how this perception is affected with the internet stream. Based on the empirical material presented here, certain potentially valuable conclusions about destination branding can be drawn. Based on the empirical material presented here, certain potentially valuable conclusions about cities branding can be drawn:

- The activity of city branding has become a remarkable activity that needs more consideration from city managers and stakeholders in order to promote the city's position within a global contest of destination rivals. Branding today exceeds its role as an identifier of a product to be a marker of belonging and identification within a vast culture of copy in consumerist societies.
- The symbolic branding elements for cities are preceding others, specifically architecture, as architecture provides a fulfilment for both tangible and intangible needs of users, with its visual and experiential qualities.
- Architecture, unlike any other branding element, creates a permanent rapport to city users, whether visitors or residence, as with its inherited values, it exceeds being physical environments incubating activities, to be a

- symbolic element for other meaningful qualities.
- Cities landmarks stands as orienting devices for cities, marking their presence and creating a point of ambition to visit and encounter.
 - The practice of branding has changed immiscible with the rise of information technologies. Internet has indeed proved to be the medium of human activities nowadays, and thus branding activities must be those engaging this medium.
 - This medium is not a passive one but a free one providing a large space for self-expression and impulsive transfer of information. The image affects extensively the transfer of knowledge in a fast-paced social communication era, and the word of mouth is the confident source getting information.
 - Here the importance of studying the dynamics of social networks as the ultimate imagery and user expressive platforms is a must while tackling city branding activities. Normal advertisement is an out dated way of marketing for cities, and both city managers and designers should have a deeper consideration of the appearance of such an important element as architecture on social networks.

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