

## **Briavel Holcomb**

### ***Place Marketing: Using Media to Promote Cities***

This session explored the role of interplace competition for economic growth in producing new urban images. Holcomb argues that economic development is changing both the material and the mental city and that the disjunctions between the two are growing. The goal of the city marketer is to convey a particular image of the city's image, which often has little to do with material reality. While Lynch sought to understand people's mental images, city marketers seek to change them and to change their behavior.

As jobs disappeared from cities, local governments reacted by becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in their pursuit of jobs and investments. This has coincided with a rapid rise in economic development as a profession. Although "amateur" boosters have been augmented by chambers of commerce and departments of economic development, there has been a rapid growth and increasing specialization in locality economic development. Critics have shown, however, that entrepreneurial strategies have socially regressive consequences with little improvement in the quality of life for those at the bottom of the economic strata.

The goal is to create and effectively convey positive images of the city to current and potential investors, employers, residents, and visitors.

The typical marketed city image is positive. While many cities claim to be unique, their marketed images are much more generic than their material realities. It is the ubiquitous chain retail outlets that have made the redeveloped parts of cities relatively indistinguishable one from another, but it is these new parts of town which are usually featured in marketing materials. The older parts are included only if sufficiently sanitized.

Though communication and transportation technologies have made places more uniformly accessible, a "central" location is claimed by quite peripheral places.

While the location of the imaged city is central, its time is future. Cities claim to be forward looking, dynamic, progressing into a bright tomorrow and the best place to be in the future. Exceptions are images of a glorious past implied in historically preserved neighborhoods and heritage sites. The residential suburbs, industrial districts and outdated retail areas which comprise the greatest proportion of the built environment of a typical North American city are absent.

The images created by marketers depend somewhat on the potential target audience. The quality of life is conveyed by city marketers in images visual, verbal and auditory. Verbal texts are usually rich in superlatives and hyperbole: greatest, best, most abundant, top,

and excellent abound. And one of the most critical components of the quality of life for marketing purposes is the presence of "culture" in the city.

But these images of cultured cities are not always uncontested. Glasgow is one of the most controversial cases. The new image was resented and resisted by various groups. The marketer's image also produced a new material landscape. The urban fabric of parts of the city was transformed. The poor and working class neighborhoods were still there, but less visible.

Sports in the U.S. are probably equal to culture in enhancing the image of livability in a city. Sporting triumphs are assumed to build local pride and community spirit. The grand prize of sporting events, is to host the Olympic games, and the consensus seems to be that entering the competition is worth the effort. Holcomb also discusses the Gay Games, an athletic and cultural event, held every 4 years. Only large cities with a reasonably visible gay population are likely to compete for the Gay Games since smaller, conservative and less tolerant places would avoid such possible "threats" to their images.

Trophy architecture -- large, impressive and distinctive new buildings -- are effective conveyers of revised urban images.

And the people depicted in marketing images of cities are overwhelmingly not poor, not old, not minority, and not unhappy. They are disproportionately professional, and few African Americans are depicted, even in a city where they constitute a significant portion of the population.

Too often the images used to market cities are highly selective and omit districts, people and even landscape features. These images, produced by the elite of the entrepreneurial city, influence the production of social and material space in the city. Research has found that even successful economic regeneration stimulated by entrepreneurial inner city has not coincided with improvements of local residents welfare. A goal of Lynch's research was to make the city more legible, more comprehensible to its inhabitants. The goal of city image makers today is to hide the real city behind rose colored glasses, to obscure the flaws and highlight the resumed successes.

### **Questions, Answers, and Comments**

Q: Fantasy is being attached to reality. It would be interesting to look at what fantasies are being pushed.

A: The fantasies depend on the audience. Different fantasies are used if you're trying to attract tourists or if you're trying to attract manufacturing.

Q: Is there anything in the literature about the relative success in achieving the goal of marketing?

A: There are very few evaluations of the success of marketing. Everyone does it. It's sort of like tax abatements. You do it because everyone else is doing it. And if you don't do it, then you're not on the map. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. There are many claims by the PR firms that do this. They claim that they're increasing the visitors, the investment, the sales, etc. But the cause and effect isn't there. Cities change certainly, but whether it is due to the marketing, no one knows.

Q: Lynch's work was about illumination and marketing is about obscuring, but are there examples where marketing illuminates?

A: I can't think of one because marketing always focuses on the positive aspects. All advertising is positive, so we take it with a grain of salt, but we're very influenced by it too.

Q: Are there any cities that built their image for the residents, or had campaigns that were more inward-looking?

A: Certainly a number of campaigns have improved the self-image of the city, feeling proud of their city, such as Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Cleveland. It is one of the positive aspects of marketing.

Q: What is the role of city planners? Examples are heritage landscape and main street programs.

A: Planners are ideally those who take the benefits from marketing. If the pie is bigger because more jobs and investment has been brought in, then the planners goal is to redistribute these benefits or wealth more equitably within the community.