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Rebranding Urban Neighborhoods

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Rebranding Urban Neighborhoods

How do you turn a location into a destination?

We rarely think of neighborhoods as having brands. Place names aren't tangible assets that can be owned or intellectual property that can be trademarked. A neighborhood name, like any brand, is an ever-changing bundle of perceptions in a consumer's mind. Yet place brands can influence decisions that affect the bottom line: Are consumers aware of the neighborhood, or do they need to be educated about it? Does the neighborhood provide commodity housing, or does it have a distinct identity? Is this a desirable identity? Does this identity command a premium to market value, or is a negative perception depressing real estate values?

Real estate is typically the single largest purchase consumers make in their lives — and by dollar amount alone, it could be considered the ultimate luxury good (or the most expensive necessity). And just as with luxury brands, a desirable neighborhood brand reinforces how consumers see themselves and how they would like to be perceived by others. Are people living in the neighborhood because they have to, or because they want to? To what extent do prospective residents identify with other “users” of the brand?

Repositioning a neighborhood brand goes hand-in-glove with gentrification. While developers, speculators, and homeowners can improve individual buildings or blocks, this is not typically enough to change public perception of an entire area. With emerging neighborhoods, managing the place brand can create allure for prospective buyers and tenants in two ways: by generating awareness of a place's good qualities, and by dissociating the neighborhood from its prior negative identity. If successful, these efforts result in a positive place brand that can generate increased sales, higher prices and a shorter sales cycle because consumers are more informed, thus creating greater profits for the stakeholders.

Rebranding or repositioning the neighborhood may fail if it creates expectations that a place cannot fulfill, or can generate a backlash if it is not based in how residents perceive themselves. As with any brand, a neighborhood identity is an implied promise. Gentrification occurs in stages, and there are many stories of disgruntled residents who feel ‘betrayed’ when a place's amenities have been hyped beyond the stage of gentrification.

Brands are about relationships and trust, and are reinforced by word-of-mouth. Buzz can boost awareness of a neighborhood's good qualities and desirability, but can just as easily reinforce negative stereotypes about an emerging neighborhood.

Dissociating the neighborhood from its previous identity

What is the identity of the neighborhood? If the neighborhood were a person, who would they be? What would they wear? What comes first to someone's mind when they hear about the neighborhood?

Typically, initial perceptions of gentrifying neighborhoods range from dangerous (“If I run out of gas there, will I get shot?”) to the merely dull (“Nothing going on there.”). These perceptions typically emerge from years of news coverage focused on crimes, or from ‘conventional wisdom’ passed through word-of-mouth but rarely from firsthand experience. But negative perceptions of an area often outlast the reasons for those associations. Often, there is a lag in coverage between a gradual reduction in crime and the start of gentrification: after all, a shooting generates press while a shooting that didn't happen is not news. Boston's Savin Hill is now known primarily for its Victorian homes, but it took years to shake the ‘Stab-and-kill’ nickname. Similarly, development activity and an active nightlife in Somerville's Davis Square helped the town shake the ‘Slumberville’ nickname.

Emerging neighborhoods are often perceived as being further away than they really are. Why is this? In the early stages of gentrification, these neighborhoods have been avoided for a long time by anyone other than immediate residents. Most Bostonians don't realize that the gentrifying Roxbury neighborhood is only a block from the Museum of Fine Arts, or that it abuts Brookline, one of the wealthiest towns in Massachusetts. Many of today's poorest urban neighborhoods are some of a city's oldest ones; these original neighborhoods were typically close to the waterfront, the center of town, or both.

Initially, these neighborhoods typically have few, if any, destination bars, clubs or shopping to attract outside visitors. This is often why early-stage gentrification begins with a commercial outpost that draws outsiders and becomes the center for a ‘scene’ or community. For New York's East Village in the 80's, it was the

Life Café. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, it is Lillie's Bar. And in Philadelphia's Fishtown, it is the Rocket Cat Café.

It is no coincidence that many music scenes have emerged from neighborhoods that have since gentrified — Chicago's Wicker Park (Liz Phair, Urge Overkill), and Seattle's Capitol Hill. Press coverage of the artists who succeed tends to focus on their beginnings, and inadvertently 'mythologizes' the neighborhood where they began. This is especially true if an entire cultural movement begins there — think San Francisco in the 60's or Seattle's grunge scene in the 90's. In Boston's funky Allston neighborhood, one apartment building still advertises itself as where Steven Tyler of Aerosmith stayed in the 70's.

Rebranding or repositioning?

Repositioning a place creates a new set of associations for the existing name. Rebranding may be as focused as promoting a new name for a microneighborhood, or as extreme as changing the name of the entire town.

Even if a new name doesn't stick (and many don't), the attempt to create a new name can generate press — and discussion — about how the neighborhood is actively changing the way that it is perceived. This can raise awareness of the area among speculators and buyers that it is a place worthy of identification, reconsideration, and investment.

This is nothing new. In Manhattan, real estate agents, developers, and residents have been renaming communities for these reasons since at least the Civil War. Neighborhoods such as Harsonville, Striker's Bay, or San Juan Hill don't appear on maps today — they have all been assimilated into the Upper West Side. And the Upper West Side itself was supposed to be called "The West End" to echo the glamour of London's district. However, like Boston's South End, it wasn't able to attract the upper middle class residents the developers had hoped for, and it devolved into a rough area of boarding houses made famous as the setting for *West Side Story*.

In the 1980s, real estate developers and agents began promoting the name "East Village" to create a distinct identity for a neighborhood that had long been regarded as part of the Lower East Side, then an immigrant ghetto. The rebranding was a successful

attempt to imply a geographic connection with nearby Greenwich Village, and to reflect the positive bohemian qualities of nearby Greenwich Village. The area's distinct identity later reached the general public through the musical *Rent* and television such as *Tompkins Square*. This is a level that few place brands will likely achieve — to become a cultural reference point that

Ever since clever agents began marketing the Manhattan neighborhood south of Houston Street as SoHo, other places have used acronyms and medial capitals to connote some of SoHo's hip urban cachet. Besides the obvious NoHo (north of Houston Street), this has been applied to southern Harlem (SoHa), and to an arts district as far away as Charlotte, NC — NoDa, for north of Davidson. One California neighborhood even took to calling itself NoWal — a contraction for 'north of Wal-Mart.'

With microneighborhoods, a single street or block can develop an identity separate from or earlier than the rest of the neighborhood. These can be applied to either early-stage gentrification areas where only a small parcel is controlled or being developed, or in hypergentrified places. In the former case, the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston is one of the largest neighborhoods of the city; gentrification is naturally uneven and concentrated in certain areas. Microneighborhoods such as Savin Hill, Melville Park and Upham's Corner have emerged and are branded as distinct from the neighborhood at large, and as different from each other. The identities of these microneighborhoods can be built around common characteristics such as type of building, age of buildings, or natural or man-made boundaries.

It bears mentioning that the names of these neighborhoods are often unofficial, as are their exact boundaries. These neighborhoods may overlay several census tracts; one example is Boston's Chestnut Hill, which is not a town, but rather a zip code overlay of several towns. Legally changing the name of an entire town is more involved than simply repositioning the perception of an area. North Andover, MA, was actually founded before neighboring Andover, and tried to have its name changed to Olde Andover several years ago to reflect the cachet of being there 'first.' Brookline, MA was originally known as the village of Muddy River. Manchester, MA (founded in 1629 as Jeffrey's Creek) became Manchester-by-the-Sea in 1990 following a town meeting vote and an act of Legislature, and the new name is now reflected on all town documents and the city seal. The hyphenated town name

implies a certain cachet (Croton-on-Hudson, Stratford-on-Avon), but it hasn't been used yet for neighborhood rebrandings — though it could be, to promote awareness of a geographic feature such as proximity to water. Dorchester-by-the-Sea, anyone?

Reaching the Audience

How do new place names come into use? Real estate agents are often the catalyst for a repositioning or rebranding effort, by listing properties for sale or rent under the new neighborhood name. To use a Boston example, rather than listing a property in Dorchester, agents may list it by a microneighborhood name such as Upham's Corner.

Because real estate markets are localized, the best way to reach the desired audience is through advertising and public relations in the regional dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and broadcast media. Having compiled press clippings on several gentrifying areas that were repositioned or rebranded, a predictable pattern emerged. On the public relations side, creative condo or loft conversions (or those designed by a name architect) serve as ideal hooks for coverage in the Real Estate section, and a round-up of trendy restaurants and club nights can feature in a Lifestyle or Weekend write-up. Local publications and alternative weeklies may begin to cover the regular evenings at a bar, or host events that generate coverage. At this stage, these articles typically include language urging people to reconsider their perceptions of the neighborhood. Inevitably the regional paper-of-record does the inevitable "next hot neighborhood" story. Within a few years after this, there is the inevitable "well if you missed out on this neighborhood, here's another one to consider" story using the now-gentrified neighborhood as the comparable for what gentrification can achieve.

Advertising also works to indirectly promote and improve the neighborhood's brand. Bars, clubs and music venues that advertise regularly in alternative weeklies draw attention to the neighborhood and may draw a cutting edge gay and hipster populations that are a source of excellent and credible buzz. These pioneers in turn bring their friends to the neighborhood and help dispel the misconceptions that it is far away, and that there is nothing going on.

In the meantime, community groups, local universities, and cultural centers (museums, etc.) can serve as the catalyst for all man-

ner of made for press events: author signings, block parties, community gardens, farmer's market, film festivals, historic house tours, movie nights, neighborhood cleanups, parades, public performances, road races, walking history tours. When marketing these events, it is key to provide a press kit with photos that depict the event and neighborhood in the best light, and to depict the demographic that you're trying to attract as prospective buyers.

Lastly, blogs and websites dedicated to the neighborhood are additional ways of creating a virtual community, promoting activism, and collecting or linking to favorable press in a single source for prospective residents and developers.

Who pays for it?

Neighborhood brands are as vulnerable as conventional brands to the multiple messages and conflicting identities that may constantly be promoted. There are often many stakeholders in a neighborhood who have different views of how a neighborhood ought to evolve, or whether it ought to evolve at all. Backlash against gentrification can also translate into backlash against repositioning or rebranding efforts.

There are times when the stakeholders' efforts and goals may be aligned — when money from a Community Development Corporation (CDC), a Business Improvement District (BID), non-profit money from foundations, and private funds may be combined for public relations efforts. Local business owners in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn recently pooled \$150,000 for a PR campaign built around the slogan "Bed-Stuy and proud of it," aimed at countering the traditional rallying cry of "Bed Stuy, Do or Die."

In short, gentrification is a process by which a neighborhood's innate value (proximity to downtown, architecturally significant housing stock, walking town center, parks and amenities) is realized and value is created for homeowners, speculators, real estate agents. The city benefits through the creation of a higher tax base and returning abandoned properties to the tax rolls. While gentrification changes or restores the physical fabric of a neighborhood, it must work alongside public relations efforts to create awareness of the physical and infrastructure changes that are occurring in order to capitalize on the benefits.

Why do it?

- Boost real estate values by educating consumers (shorter sales cycles) and creating allure (higher demand for conversions and new construction).
- Marketing externally to attract visitors, marketing internally to help unify and motivate interest groups.
- Repositioning efforts serves as a catalyst for coverage of positive change and development happening in the area.
- Neighborhood lacks a strong, positive identity, especially if it's border area on the edge of another neighborhood.
- Dissociate from earlier, negative connotations (dangerous, dull); create new connotations (vibrant, historic, safe)
- Create a microneighborhood based on geographic borders (the Melville Park section of Dorchester is in a cul-de-sac), or architectural homogeneity (the Boston's Leather District is several square blocks of buildings with cast-iron facades).

Inspirations for Names

- Former name of neighborhood
- Historic Event or Industry (Meatpacking District, NYC; Leather District, Boston)
- Historic figures (Washington Irving & Irving Place, NYC)
- Distinctive Landmark Building (Flatiron District or Battery Park City, NYC; Castle Island, Boston)
- Distinctive geographic feature (Murray Hill, NYC; Ladder District, Boston)

- Similar name to nearby area with cachet (Greenwich Village/East Village, NYC)
- Similar name to a foreign area with cachet (West End, London/West Side, NYC)
- Local nickname (Clinton/'Hell's Kitchen' NYC; Dorchester/'Dot' Boston)
- Generate indirect coverage and awareness through stories featuring celebrities from the neighborhood etc.

How

- Ongoing public relations efforts, usually beginning with use of new name in sales and rental listings.
- Name buildings or restaurants/pubs after the area (or the rebranded name) — not only does it extend the brand, but it reinforces it through repetition: clubs tend to take out weekly ads in publications and generate lots of coverage, so the neighborhood benefits by association (e.g. Tribeca Grill in TriBeCa).
- Use of name architects, fashion photographers, runway models for a project where the building can have even more cachet than the neighborhood itself.
- Commercial microneighborhoods: create a district of a single type of retailer.

Risks

- Rebranding can seem contrived to long-time residents, might create / exacerbate gentrification tensions.

About the Author

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