

Where are you from?

Presentation by Tim Gardom (TGA Ltd.)

Transcript of a presentation on branding place and culture, delivered in Copenhagen in 2006.

Our business is unusual in that we work about equally in the cultural and the commercial sectors. On the cultural side we undertake strategic cultural planning for national organisations and governments. We research, plan, write and help to create major museums and exhibitions around the world.

It's a fascinating area, partly because of the different stories we get to tell, and partly because the media we work with is developing and changing all the time. We collaborate with designers, architects, AV developers, filmmakers, interactive game companies, web developers and many others.

On the commercial side we have a long track record of brand communication work with world leading creative agencies like Wolf Olins and LIVE communications in London. Our client list includes Xerox, Motorola, HP, Ford, Vodafone, the European Union and many more.

We also work in projects where the cultural and commercial areas cross over and learn from each other.

For example Motorola's Innovation Centre in Chicago, which is both a serious sales tool for the Motorola brand and a popular day out visit for tour parties.

Or promoting the Royal Navy by creating a dramatic son et lumiere public performance to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar.

For example London's 2012 Olympic Bid developed by LIVE, which was a narrative not just about hosting a sporting event, but about what the whole city and country could offer to the Olympic movement. The cultural and place brand narrative of London as a diverse world city was one of the key factors in the final decision.

For example with the Oresund Network – more of that later.

The cultural projects we create come in different shapes and sizes. What's significant about all of them is that they are all closely linked with the identity of the city or region or country where they live. They are part of the place brand. Indeed, for many of our biggest projects – whether in London or the Gulf or Jerusalem – the place brand is the driving force.

So today I'll be talking briefly about some of the ways that culture is used in place branding right now.

I'll be looking at how place brands can draw on the wider cultural sector to make culture a more powerful weapon in your armoury.

And finally I'll be looking to the future. At how new technology and changing perceptions

can make public engagement with culture a driver for tolerance and social cohesion in a world that badly needs these things.

Let's start with the present day.

Using culture to sell a place is a very familiar idea. Tour companies like Thomas Cook have been doing it for over 200 years. But do the cultural assets of the places on the tour routes really convey something about their unique identity as a place? Or do they just make them one more stop on the cultural tourist trail?

In the case of Florence you can say for sure that the cultural assets and the identity of the place are inseparable. It does take 600 years of the worlds greatest artists and architects and a few bloodthirsty Borgias to get the effect, but the culture is totally part of experiencing the city. And it's part of how every Florentine thinks about themselves.

Could you say the same about the Guggenheim and the Bilboans? It's a world famous cultural artefact no doubt, but does it say anything about the true identity of the place? Or has it just landed there from cultural outer space?

That's a question we can certainly ask about the new Louvre, destined to be built in Abu Dhabi. This seems to offer almost no connection with the cultural identity of the Gulf region. So little connection in fact that the city authorities were considering bids from competing cultural institutions right up to the last minute.

So if you aren't a Florence or a Copenhagen or a Lund, if you do not have a Milan fashion week or a Munich beer festival, is culture just too limited an asset to use in your place branding?

No it's not. But we have to seriously expand our ideas of what we mean by culture, and rethink the way we communicate it.

Chris Jenks points out that in most European language, culture largely equals idea of "civilisation". Culture stands in opposition to what we call vulgar or backward or ignorant. Art and music and architecture are seen as the highest expressions of this kind of culture.

But the cultural commentator Raymond Williams suggests that if you asked most people to describe their cultural, they'd be likely to explain it in much broader terms. As a particular sense of life, for example, a particular community or experience through which the their unique way of living is celebrated and somehow passed on.

And Jette Sandahl takes it further still. She was the founding director of the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg and she places particular emphasis on the dynamic that occurs when cultures meet, merge and change. She says:

"I place my emphasis where cultures want to take themselves, who they want to be and who they want to become in the future."

Suddenly we're a long way from the fixed cultural assets of conventional place branding. In fact, we're a long way from the whole idea of a defined and managed place brand at all. In our new definition, the unique culture of a place is made up of two parts:

- The assets that you can claim – people, skills, history, tradition, attitudes, a bridge, a port, your geographic position, your landscape.
- And your concept or idea about yourself – what you think you are, who you want to be and become in the future.

This form of culture is what Benedict Anderson calls the ‘Imagined Community’, not a real geographical location but a hugely more powerful space in the collective imagination that you belong to, that you want to celebrate and share with others.

And culture-narrative is the way to do it. Culture-narrative is the structured communication you use to engage a chosen audience with your imagined community, draw them into it, convince them of its value, inspire them with your idea about yourself and make them want to be part of it.

Culture-narrative is how place branding taps into the immense power of the imagined community.

I’m going to look at a couple of examples of where culture-narrative has worked to brand different places. The first was put together with LIVE Communications in 2006.

Cambridge University is 800 years old. It has beautiful architecture, wonderful music, ancient costumes and traditions and a unique method of teaching. It has famous past students and professors like Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Crick and Watson, who discovered the structure of DNA there.

But the University is also a world leader in biotech research, alternative energy resources, and genetic engineering. It supports a network of science and technology, including the largest Microsoft research facility outside Seattle. 40,000 high tech jobs were created last year with an average of 25 new business start-ups each month. In short, Cambridge University competes successfully in the world market for students, teachers, research grants and commercial partners.

So those are their assets. What is their idea about themselves? As we discerned it, their concept was that the University was never a thing on its own. Its value has always been the value that others get from being alongside it. Students, researchers, governments, Microsoft, developing world populations.

Now that’s a very diverse imagined community. But it needs a very simple culture-narrative to engage an audience.

We made it as simple as this “...with Cambridge.” For example:

- The students who learn...with Cambridge
- Ideas that transform society...with Cambridge
- The DNA test that saved my life...with Cambridge
- The tents in our refugee camp were designed...with Cambridge

It's a culture-narrative that applies right across the spectrum of the University's activities and audiences. You can use it as the basis for a communications campaign that references both 800 years of history and the present day. It will act as the basis for exhibitions, TV documentaries, fundraising, recruitment and keeping in touch with alumni.

Most importantly for today's theme, "...with Cambridge" is an evolving sustainable culture-narrative that communicates the unique place brand of Cambridge University. It describes the place, it celebrates the place and draws you into the imagined community.

Here's another example of culture-narrative driving place branding.

We were asked to create a new national museum of industrial history for Wales. The location was the redeveloped docks in Swansea (that's Catherine Zeta-Jones' hometown by the way).

Swansea is Wales' second city and, like Malmo, it's reinventing itself after half a century spend in the shadow of its industrial past.

The new museum now sits at the heart of the whole waterfront regeneration project. There's a high tech university campus and technology and bioscience park at one end, a public access leisure centre at the other and in between retail, catering, eco friendly offices and housing. Well over two billion euros of regeneration hinged around a culture-narrative of the museum at its heart.

The conventional way to tell the history of industry in almost any country has always been as a series of chronological eras - the age copper, the age of coal, the age of steam the age of steel and so on.

This would be accurate history, but it tells us nothing at all about the Welsh people's idea about themselves today, or in the past. It doesn't draw you into the imagined community of the people of Wales.

So our culture-narrative was dramatically different. We started with the unique features of the place that shaped Wales as an imagined community in the past and continue to shape it in the present day. Things like networks, money, communities, belief, communications, the sea and the land. And at every point we tried to show how this imagined community was experienced by the ordinary people of Wales in their everyday lives.

This culture-narrative is conveyed in a series of interactive experiences using a mixture of traditional story telling techniques, new media and computer based interactive technology. Visitors can choose their own narrative routes and experience, and become part of the imagined community.

So in this area you can go shopping at different points through time to understand how people spent their money and what this tells us about their lives. Did workers buy their own tools? What did families eat? What did you need when you got married? What were the luxury goods?

In another exhibit, users can pull everyday objects out from a Virtual Showcase and then hear the personal story behind them. As you go deeper into the storytelling, the media delivers actual archive recorded voices of people retelling their own experiences.

The new Museum is hugely popular, with over half a million visitors in its first two years. And its culture-narrative of people and skills, of constant growth and change, of communities adapting and responding to new conditions, clearly reinforces the whole place branding regeneration story of region.

The imagined community and its culture narrative has a power to work far beyond the branding of individual places. I believe it has application on a national and international level.

In 2000 TGA was invited to work with the nine main religious and faith communities in the UK. Our task was to create a popular cultural experience that expressed their place in the culture and identity of the country. It didn't look like an easy assignment.

We had nine totally distinct groups, each with their own traditions, beliefs and forms of worship. Most of them knew nothing about each other, many of them were at best suspicious and at worst hostile to what some other faiths believed and taught.

What kind of imagined community, what kind of culture-narrative was going to persuade these groups to share and celebrate their identity in the same space?

In the end, the culture-narrative was utterly simple. We called it Life Points.

Each faith in its own way marks the most important life experiences of its members. Each faith celebrates birth, each nurtures its young people, there are ceremonies to mark initiation and marriage. Each faith teaches, each faith prays. And each faith marks the end of a human life with dignity and respect. These are shared human Life Points for all of us.

We commissioned some of the world's leading photographers to capture the way the faiths mark these different Life Point stages in the UK. We put the pictures with some simple explanations on huge glass pillars and invited the public in. They stayed for hours, and more came every day for a year.

This project had real potential for fragmentation and discord. Only the power of the culture-narrative was able to draw people of all faiths and of no faith into the imagined community of their shared human experience.

We need more culture-narrative like this. Copenhagen and the Oresund region know as well as anywhere the tensions caused by migration and the cultural differences between groups. Culture-narrative can help unite our divided communities.

And we could access it in some new and surprising ways. Right now we're quite remote from the culture-narrative of the places where we live. There are historic buildings, streets named after famous people, plaques on the houses where great artists or writers lived. Cultural soundbites, not culture-narrative.

Right now an internet enabled GPS phone will help you find your way to the nearest pizza restaurant. You can even order a pizza with extra mushrooms.

Clever people are working hard on ways to bring you advertising and special offers and music downloads and credit card payment right to the specific location where you're standing. Context aware information, we call it, and it the aim is create a whole parallel world customer choice alongside the real world you walk through.

This is good. But when we get bored of it, say after about 20 minutes, what's next. What can this technology do that's really interesting.

Well imagine if this device, and millions like it, could link you directly to the diverse culture of the spot where you're standing anywhere in any town or city in the world.

Not just high art and architecture, but history and memory and myth and popular music and personal recollections and experiences. Vast, unlimited amounts of culture-narrative tagged to meter square locations

Who lived in this house? Show me their portrait.

What did this street look like a hundred years ago?

Let me hear the busker who was playing here last week.

Let me hear the speeches made in this town square.

I'm talking about a complete layer of cultural-narrative overlaid on the landscape and as much part of our view of that place as the street signage or the road markings. And now imagine that we're no longer getting this from a hand held device but directly to our ears and eyes through projection onto head-up displays that we can turn on and off as we walk around. Now that is culture-narrative on a truly global scale. And it's coming.

And surely we have to believe that if I know something about the beautiful stained glass window in your synagogue, I'm less likely to want to throw a stone through it. If I've heard you sing, I won't want to blow up your bus. If you've heard the children's story that was written here, you might feel better about your children playing with mine. Culture-narrative can do that.

I said at the start that culture can be a powerful place branding tool. I firmly believe this can be true, if culture is appreciated as an imagined community with a unique idea about itself, what it is and where it's going.

The culture-narrative of your imagined community is the most authentic and sustainable way there is to brand a place. There's always a better development grant deal or faster trains a few more scheduled flights on offer somewhere else. Somewhere else will build a longer bridge or a taller tower or hire a Nobel prize-winner or buy a better Guggenheim. When they do, your culture-narrative is still working uniquely for you and your place brand.

For example in the Oresund Region.

When I first started to look at this with LIVE communications in London, the Wolf Olins branding was already well established. The region's idea about itself had moved on from its initial focus on the bridge, to what we see today – a successful, growing region where the market is leading the drive towards further integration at every level. The Oresund Network is working to promote the place brand through tried and tested brand management mechanisms.

Yet the very scale and diversity of the Oresund region's success is making it difficult to find a clear, identifiable culture-narrative that people will hear and use.

What you're trying to brand has got beyond your power even to describe, let alone communicate as a unified proposition. Conventional brand management and marketing approaches can't keep up. They're too rigid and fixed to tap into the immense power of the Oresund imagined community and your idea of yourself.

- International giants such as Ericsson, Tetrapak and IKEA don't consider that the Oresund narrative offers them any advantage and choose to ignore it.
- Groups such as the University and Medicon Valley play on the 'critical mass' attribute of the Oresund narrative.
- For some enterprises (such as the CM Port or the Bridge) success is clearly linked to their location, and it's an obvious choice to promote yourself as an Oresund company.

But the vast majority of small and medium sized businesses are unaware of the Oresund brand narrative. They are neither committed nor hostile – they simply tell their own stories in their own way.

It is clear that the Oresund region needs a new kind of culture-narrative.

It needs a new way of delivering it.

And it needs a sustainable partnership of creativity and resources to make it happen.

Just how we propose to make this happen, you'll hear about this coming up shortly.....