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Visual Identity: Creating a Visual Identity for Corbin, Kentucky

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Visual Identity: Creating a Visual Identity for Corbin, Kentucky

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Abstract description:

This paper examines the role and importance of visual identity in place branding. After assessing the definitions of visual identity in the context of place branding, it evaluates the purpose of an effective visual identity. There are many factors that a visual identity can influence such as: portraying the place's reputation, promoting interaction, distinguishing between competition, and building brand equity. The creative aspect of this project is seen in the creation of two visual identities. These factors of a visual identity influenced the design decisions for the two visual identities for the city of Corbin, Kentucky which demonstrates the value of visual identities in place branding.

Keywords and phrases: visual identity, place branding, graphic design, place image, brand, design

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Critical Research Overview

The concept of place branding has been thoroughly discussed in marketing and economics academia; however, the importance of visual identity has not been extensively explored. This paper will examine the aspects of branding, the significance of visual identity, and the outcomes of an effective visual identity. A successful visual identity creates a fortified brand equity, generates interest, and represents the values of a place. These aspects of a strong visual identity can be applied in a design which is illustrated in the creation of visual identities for Corbin, Kentucky.

Definitions of Terms

To understand the concept of place branding and visual identity, the terms brand, brand image, and visual identity must be defined. There are multiple meanings to the general word brand, as well as, multiple meanings specifically in the field of design. The design term branding is attached to the historical root of branding "in which owners actively brand their possessions with their name in

order to establish their ownership and avoid confusion with other people's possessions" (Anholt, "Definitions" 4). This is seen in the context of a corporation design. For example, Nike will use their logo on any of their products to distinguish it from their competitors. However, this definition of *brand* is not relevant in this discussion. Instead, a thicker definition is much more useful in the context of design: as stated by Marsha Lindsay, whereby brand is "the totality of the thoughts, feelings, associations, and expectations that come to mind when a prospect or consumer is exposed to an entity's name, logo, products, services, events, or any design or symbol representing them" (qtd. in van Ham 127). When you encounter Nike's logo you immediately connect it to the corporation's brand and values, their reputation, slogans, and any feelings associated with Nike. However, this is a problem as a corporation's brand can be different from what the consumer thoughts and feelings are towards the corporation. Nike brand might be inspiration, innovation, and sustainability to athletes; however, the public might view Nike's brand as something else.

Therefore, brand has multiple meanings and for the purpose of this discussion will be divided into brand and brand image. Simon Anholt states that "brand is under the control of the producer" and Brand Image is "within the domain of the consumer, and thus outside the direct control of the producer" ("Definitions" 7). Therefore, they are two separate things, brand is what the producer tries to attain and project while brand image is how it is actually viewed by the consumer. Brand image "is a concept that involves straying from

observable reality into the world of perceptions, and keeping a firm grip on meaning starts to become harder." (Anholt, "Definitions" 7).

Therefore, when these terms are combined with the concept of branding a place their definitions relate to a specific place. A place brand is shaped by a producer, such as a city council, politicians, or business leaders, who want to control how a place's values are depicted; the brand image of a place, however, is determined by consumers' or the public's response. For example, when Colorado is mentioned, associations such as mountains, skiing, amphitheater, and outdoors all come to mind, which is the brand image.

Visual identity is the visual representation of the brand by the producer as well as what the consumer associates with the brand image. Anholt argues, "one can also claim that those place 'brands' are often accompanied by visual identities, just as product brands have their logos." ("Definitions" 7). As in the Nike example, where the Nike swoosh symbolizes the company's brand and brand image, a city may also have a logo or visual identity that symbolizes their values. Therefore, brand and brand image are both abstract while visual identity endeavors to link the abstract to something concrete.

Importance of Visual Identity

Many researchers argue for the importance and effectiveness of visual identity in place branding. They assert that it is a "passive operation: it cannot win any new customers, change anybody's mind, increase market share, or affect the [place] prospects in any significant way. It is simply good practice, a useful exercise of reassurance, a piece of housekeeping" (Anholt, "Definitions" 9).

Anholt makes this statement regarding place visual identity: "Establishing clarity on this point is difficult because remarkably few 'nation branding' initiatives appear to include any provision for measuring their impact or effectiveness" ("Place" 2). Visual identity and the related place marketing is "a subject in the periphery of marketing academe" and thus most research on visual identity must be inferred from research in related fields such marketing and branding strategies for corporations and businesses (Braun and Zener 1). While there is not clear data stating the effect of place visual identity there are reasons to think it is significant in place branding. Carmen Blain argues for the importance of visual identity "since brands ultimately serve as 'symbol(s) around which relationships are built' it follows that logo design can be considered a key component of branding" (329). This can be transferred to the idea of place branding where a logo of a city can reiterate its core values to its citizens. The value of creating a visual identity is realized as "images are interlinked networks of associations that will lead to inferences as soon as links are evident to people" (Grovers 228). Thus the visual identity of a place is linked to the brand and brand image of the place. A successful visual identity of a place helps differentiate it from competition and reflects the brand creating a fortified brand equity, which is name awareness, image, and loyalty to that place (Grovers 230).

Just as corporations must market and differentiate themselves from competitors, in the same way places must create unique brand strategies to strengthen their brand equity. This concept was first developed by Kotler who "was among the first to take the explicit position that places needed to run

themselves like businesses, and market themselves like businesses, if they were to respond adequately to the threats of global competition, technological change and urban decay" (Anholt, "Definitions" 2). Therefore, as corporations use visual identity to compete with other corporations, a place wanting to attract tourists, stimulate investments, and boost exports would put emphasis on design as well (Vela 469). "Design is one of the few things that distinguishes a product from it competitors" and, therefore, since places can offer similar attractions the design is what can be the distinguisher between two similar places (Anholt, "Definitions" 9). For example, just as a logo on merchandise can be used to aid in recall so can a place logo (Blain 334). The appeal of the logo to catch the interest of consumers has a chain reaction as it creates "interest, which results in sales, which results in consumer experience of the product, which, if satisfactory and shared, results in brand equity" (Anholt, "Definitions" 10). This same chain reaction is used in place branding to similar effect. Therefore, as the visual identity becomes associated with a place and the experience, it starts building brand equity.

An appealing visual identity also creates interest and can help visually represent the brand and values of the place. However, once a consumer is interested with the design this can lead to interaction with the place and then the place itself must live up to the promised brand. Andrew Turnbull makes this point when referring to destination brands or tourism brands where "success (or failure) stems from the ability (or lack of it) to develop designation brands that touch people emotionally (in part through creative messages) that have

conversational value, status and profile,…that match the promise to the reality"
(93). He stresses the importance of creating emotions in people through brand
and visual identity (creative messages). The reality of the place must match to
the implied promise in the design. The place brand should "reflect its intrinsic
attributes, characteristics and core identity" (Bennett and Savani 75). Here brand
and brand image come into play and visual identity is a point of convergence,
whereby, "the direct objective of the brand is not defined by economic gains,
rather the brand aims to achieve a positive reputation for the place, which in turn
will report economic benefits"(Vela 486). In the same way, the role of visual
identity is not to create a brand image but to positively portray a place brand from
which the brand image and brand itself are united. Visual identity enables the
place to control its brand image to some extent.

A successful visual identity of a place intrigues and invites the consumer
to act upon the design and interact with the place. This is accomplished through
distinctive design that is actively and competitively responding to other place
visual identities. The brand must be accurately portrayed in the visual identity as
well, so that the consumer will trust both. Therefore, visual identity of a place
plays a crucial role in how the place brand is received and viewed by the
consumers.

Creative Project: Creating a Visual Identity for Corbin, Kentucky

History of Corbin

For my creative project I created a visual identity for Corbin, Kentucky
based on my research on visual identity, the history of Corbin, and personal

design aesthetics. I designed two separate marks to illustrate the complexity of the process and versatility of the designs.

I decided to create the visual identity for Corbin, Kentucky because it is my hometown and currently undergoing changes. The tangible and physical aspects of the city influence Corbin's culture. It is a small city in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. It boasts amazing hiking trails and multiple waterfalls in the Daniel Boone National Forest, including Cumberland Falls and the natural phenomenon of the moon bow. Corbin is most commonly recognized, locally and nationally, for two things: it is the only place with a moon bow (a rainbow created by the moon) and it is the home of Kentucky Fried Chicken. However, the citizens see Corbin as more than those two things. They value the community and lifestyle of Corbin. The lifestyle is slow paced and revolves around the people. Corbin is filled with families that have ties and connections to the city and people that have existed for generations. However, a younger population has moved to Corbin and the rejuvenated downtown area. The perception of close mindedness and outdatedness that is perceived by citizens and local individuals are slowly being replaced by collaboration and advancement.

The history and founding of Corbin relied on the railroad being built through the city and bringing in workers and their families. Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which merged into CSX Transportation, was one of the top employers in the city. However, in late 2015 CSX closed down their mechanical shops and laid off many active employees (Ross and Smith 1). This has led to many citizens questioning the future prosperity of Corbin.

However, during this detrimental event Corbin has seen a rejuvenation and interest in the downtown area. In 2011, Corbin got a new Downtown Corbin Director, Andrew Salmons, who initiated an economic upturn for downtown Corbin. This was achieved through the local food movement, launching a downtown farmers market, opening downtown storefronts, and organizing community-led events such as 5Ks, Christmas Parades, and window decorating contests. The farmers market and local food movement, which was the catalyst for two locally sourced downtown restaurants, led Corbin to be recognized by both the White House and PBS. Within three years, Salmons was able to help Corbin reduce its downtown vacancy rate from 40% to less than five percent (O'Brien). This contrast between the city losing a big employer with CSX and the downtown thriving under Salmons has the city at a place of decision.

Corbin is at a crossroad where it needs to decide whether to emphasize its history or look forward to new potential. One approach would be to hold on to Corbin's rich history and try to rejuvenate that image in a fresh way. The other option to venture out and accept the new entrepreneurial spirit that is moving in and reinvent a younger Corbin. I saw this as a great opportunity to use visual identity as a method in which to pursue both options.

Visual Identity Research

While creating visual identities for Corbin, I researched past rebrands to gather inspiration and techniques to use in my design. Montréal, Quebec and Melbourne, Australia were the most beneficial cities in my study. Montréal logo has evolved from a coat of arms in 1833 to the current symbol in 1981, which

was updated in 2003 (see fig. 1). This design influenced my visual identities by the versatility of the logo. The design originates from the flower used in the coat of arms and the heart-shaped leaves symbolize the attachment the citizens have with their city. Within the logo is the recurring 'v' and 'm', which are the initials for "Ville de Montréal". The visual identity can also stand on its own and is easily replicated which helps citizens interact and duplicate it. This helps the citizens feel ownership of the brand and embrace the visual identity better. Melbourne's visual identity is effective in that it is flexible, recognizable, and multi-faceted (see fig. 2). The 'm' can stand on its own or can change patterns based on its application. I wanted to incorporate that aspect into my visual identities for Corbin where the logo can be slightly altered for different functions. This led to the creation of two visual identities for Corbin that integrated these practical and conceptual ideas.

First Brand

Corbin is rich in tradition and history. Many citizens have been born, bred, and raised there and it is a big part of their identity as a person. In this first brand, I wanted to capture the essence of the deep-rooted Corbin pride and its history of established commerce, landmarks, sports, and traditions (see fig. 3). By building on Corbin's foundation I wanted to create a visual identity that would rejuvenate the city's image with a fresh appearance.

The traditional letterman 'C' has long been Corbin's most recognizable but unofficial visual identity. I chose a bold 'C' typeface to create this more modern and versatile mark. This visual identity implies a familiar, recognizable, and

established presence. The design treatment of the 'C' shows progress, movement, and continuation through the increasing segment sizes. Each segment builds on one another, showing history but also new growth. It also highlights the strength of community by the parts making a whole.

This mark can be used in all green or in color (see fig. 4). The multicolor mark is fresh and vibrant and each color can be used for a different aspect of Corbin such as: commerce, culture, cuisine, and conventions (see fig. 5). The wording 'City of Corbin' was chosen to clarify the mark as a design for a destination rather than corporation. The execution of visual identity is quite versatile and can be adapted to many applications. The mark and colors can be used as a design element in part or as a whole, see (see fig. 6-8).

Second Brand

In my second visual identity, I focused on the aspect of Corbin refreshing and reinventing their brand (see fig. 9). Corbin is flooded with new businesses, opportunities, and events. Young entrepreneurs are buying up downtown space to try their hand at new ventures. They are willing to share knowledge, pool resources, and encourage each other's success. This is seen in Corbin as a ceramist collaborates with a local caterer and a local farmer provides fresh farm-to-table meal at a downtown restaurant. In planning this visual identity I wanted to emphasize this collaborative community and the forward thinking of these entrepreneurial advancements.

I used an arrow to symbolize new developments and the idea of looking to the future. Each arrow is the same size showing that Corbin is a collaborative

community and everyone feels that they have equal partnership in the culture. I used the individual arrows forming a 'C' for Corbin and to emphasize the idea of contributing towards something bigger. The design suggests unification and community in Corbin. The arrows are pointing inward demonstrating Corbin reinventing and refocusing. The color green connotes growth and newness, which reiterates the thriving community culture and atmosphere.

I selected a sans-serif typeface achieving a young and bold appearance. The placement of the words under the mark creates a more balanced and versatile logo. It can be used with or without the type treatment. The distinct and memorable mark can be displayed on its own for an expressive approach. The mark and type treatment can be used for different sections of the community (see fig. 10). This still implies the aspect of collaboration within each individual area. The design allows for the adaptation for specific events and occasions without diluting the visual identity (see fig. 11-13).

Conclusion

Visual identity is the concrete link between the abstract concepts of brand and brand image. An effective visual identity of a place reflects the brand values creating a fortified brand equity. Brand equity in place branding is the name awareness, image, and loyalty to a specific place. It is built as the visual identity becomes associated with the place and values. A well-aesthetically designed visual identity differentiates from competition, creates interest, and positively portrays a place brand. A successful visual identity motivates the consumer to interact with the place as a result of the design. Therefore, visual identity of a

place plays a crucial role in how the place is received and viewed by the consumers.

These factors influenced my visual identity designs for Corbin, Kentucky. I created two different designs to highlight the different ways in which a place brand could market Corbin. Each design was created to portray the specific aspects of the place brand while simultaneously promoting interaction and interest among consumers. These visual identities help differentiate Corbin from its neighboring cities in the same way as logos help businesses separate themselves from their competitors. This allows Corbin to compete with other towns to attract tourists, encourage business, and help exports. The mark also builds brand equity among citizens as citizens can feel unification and a sense of identification with a visual identity.

Place branding provides many benefits to a city that can extend with an effective and aligning visual identity. The physical and visual aspects of visual identities gain attention where abstract place strategies may not have the same impact. A visual identity with strong brand equity can wordlessly convey place brand values and characteristics. It is vital to link a strong place brand with a visual identity that can represent the core identity of a place.

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