

Brandhubs: European Strategies of Corporate Urbanism

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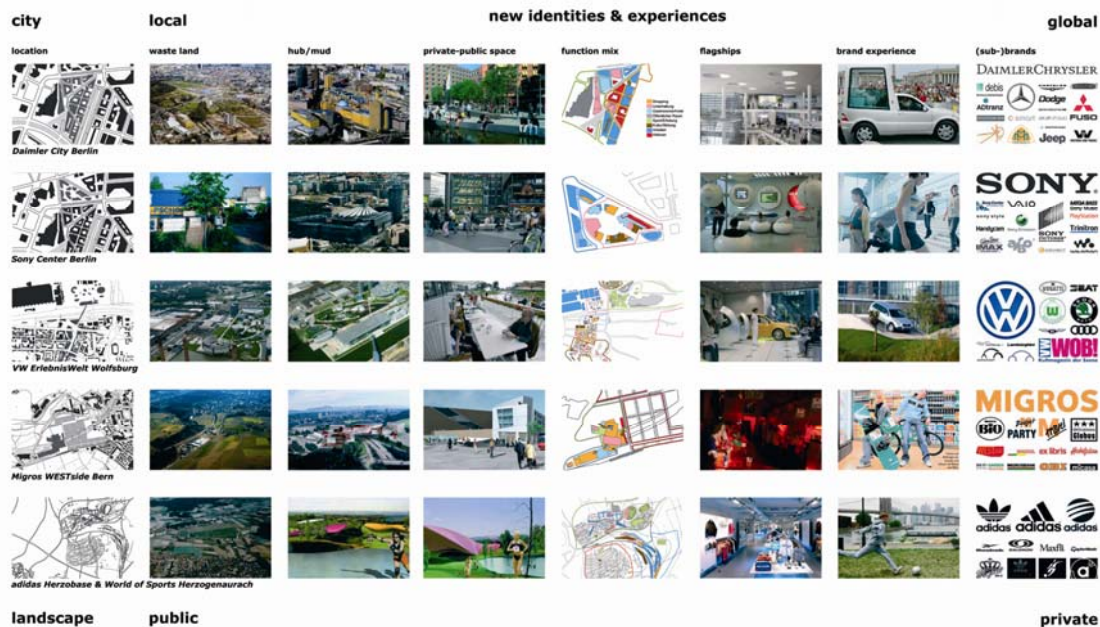
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Abstract

The paper explores the impact of an emerging society of experience on urban space. The generic globalized city is gradually being transformed from monotonous service centres into multifaceted spaces of experience. As the role of civic authorities in the creation of public space decreases, brand-name corporations are increasingly positioning themselves as urban visionaries, inserting ‘Brandhubs’ into the urban fabric as part of their global marketing strategies.



Selection of European Brandhubs: On the right are the globally uniform brands; on the left the specific local place. Both contexts come together in the Brandhub.

Brandhubs are comprehensive mixed-use environments developed by big corporations in partnership with host city authorities. Utilized as branding instruments and designed by signature architects, they aim to mediate corporate identities to a broad audience in an experiential privately financed public space. As embodiments of

symbols or a specific image or lifestyle, Brandhubs constitute a veritable reification of the consumer commodity, whereby the brands themselves become a place, an urban destination. In addition to hosting formerly separated office, retail, and housing facilities, they are highly pervaded by entertainment and cultural components, altogether forming a hub of experiences entirely organized around the given brand or multi-brand identities. The closest precedent of this kind of development is the flagship promotional store such as the worldwide Niketowns or one-of-a-kind Prada Epicenters. These examples, however, are only relevant on a purely architectural, if not solely interior design scale. Instead, this paper presents this phenomenon at an urban scale, where Brandhubs are strategically implemented at planning and governmental levels to foster development in the framework of public-private partnerships. These projects create a new identity and urbanity which are simultaneously commercial and public, a paradoxical model that nonetheless is usually capable of (re-) activating the city but, depending on the strategies, followed, not always in a sustainable manner.

1. The Brandhub: Homogenization or Reinvigoration of Urban Space?

Brandhubs form self-contained places in a kind of urban spatialization of a brand's values. As artificially created spaces representing a brand at the international scale, Brandhubs seem to generate a dreary homogeneity that is displacing the variety and color of local places and cultures, which have slowly developed over time. In this way, they also tend towards the production of *The Generic City* or *Junkspace*, as keenly labeled by Rem Koolhaas, and thus apparently become exchangeable and undistinguishable from one another. However, a closer look reveals the contrary. As originally immaterial and placeless entities, brands benefit strongly from cultural differences and the character of a distinctive place. Through an identity's spatial specificity, a brand can profile itself and even has the potential to establish its image as a socially responsible institution. In return, the location can substantially gain meaning through the realization of Brandhubs. For example, the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin owes his new image and success as an urban entertainment destination to the presence and actions of DaimlerChrysler and Sony, who, in turn, can profit from the particularity of the place, its privileged location, historical importance, and experiential quality. (cf. Lehrer 2002; Klingmann 2003) This new urban centre, in particular the Sony Center, meanwhile has become a major landmark of the reunified city. This symbiotic relationship is based on the connection of a globally uniform brand with a specific local place. While brands clearly have the potential to augment and draw their energy from existing peculiarities of the 'genius loci' with its own unique history and culture, how adequate and inclusive is this relationship, and how is it expressed in the architecture and urban design of and around a Brandhub?

2. Corporate Urbanism as Urban Development and Revitalization Tool

The city as urban actor primarily forms the basis for the geographical space by embodying the identity of the urban space. In contrast, the brand as space producer projects its place-independent identities onto the urban space. It can give a place with weak identity a new identity (Berne-Bruennen), reanimate the lost identity of an urban area (Potsdamer Platz), or transform and newly define the existing identity of a whole city (Wolfsburg). Moreover, Brandhubs as public-private partnerships entail advantages for both the corporation and the city. For the corporation, these ventures purvey incentives such as the provision of cheap land at strategic locations, financing aid, tax abatements, eased planning regulations and, above all, access to local peculiarities and a unique spatial brand experience. For the entrepreneurial city, these (re-)vitalization projects entail economic impulses, job creation, increased tax revenues, and direct investments for public spaces and infrastructures. This sort of 'getting and spending' as well as the common interest to create an attractive urban destination is what bind cities and corporations together. With the architecture, the locally-evoked emotions and the programming of the Brandhub, which combines multifaceted ways of consumption with certain social experiences, formerly

decaying or forgotten areas can be reevaluated and acquire a new image. For example, Potsdamer Platz was transformed from a wasteland at the former Berlin Wall into a prestigious urban centre, with international renown formerly unknown to postwar Berlin. Similarly, Migros's WESTside in Bruennen aims to lend the stagnating civil servant city Bern new impulses for growth in its periphery as well as the surrounding settlements a new identity and community centre. The VW Autovision and ErlebnisWelt (Experience World) in Wolfsburg show how private capital and resources can help reverse the decline of an industrial city and stimulate economic growth. The changes initiated by Volkswagen have effectively reestablished Wolfsburg as a vital urban centre and helped boost the city's self-image. Building on the city's existing strengths in the field of mobility, Volkswagen has stimulated new clusters of activity for IT, health, education, leisure and culture to make Wolfsburg more attractive and compensate for job losses in the car industry. Volkswagen's decision to diversify its own production strategy stimulated activity among sub-contracting companies and also had a sustainable effect on Volkswagen itself, improving cooperation between production and development. Local unemployment, which had reached more than 15%, was reduced by half through the creation of some 6,500 new jobs. (cf. Hoeger 2004 and 2007)

3. Branded Archipelagos: Ephemeral Urbanity or True Urban Catalysts?

While certain Brandhubs utilize the rather economic-driven entertainment mall and Disneyland models to generate identity and urbanity like the DaimlerChrysler District or Migros's WESTside, others, such as the Sony Center or the VW ErlebnisWelt, draw on more sophisticated cultural and context-oriented branding strategies. These strategies dictate specific urban design impacts, where culturalized or even 'anti-marketing' strategies encourage a typology in which the local culture or even the subculture becomes a new branded urban experience itself. As a more sustainable alternative to the purely profit-driven commercial environments, Brandhubs provide a new cultural and social dimension. These newly created brand spaces are meanwhile consumed by society as a mirror of our time like brand articles of daily use. These multifaceted ways of consumption are the motor for an urbanity, which will significantly affect the future of the urban space depending on how they integrate themselves within the city: if the city takes possession of them, or on the contrary, if they take possession of the city.

Although Brandhubs can provide the appropriate reality for all sorts of needs, as artificial islands they remain so far predominantly untouched by the local milieu, since these newly evolved and evolving spaces have not yet conjoined with the cities surrounding them. By virtue of their extraneousness compared to the cities in which they are located, they are still identified as solitaires, which only over time will grow together with the existing urban fabric. Still they have the potential to (re-) activate the city, providing possibilities for landmark character and a temporary sense of belonging, where not so long ago religious, political and philosophical values gave orientation. While Brandhubs clearly create instant urban urbanity, their long-term contribution to the city and real life expectancy remain questionable, especially since they are based heavily on the ephemeral, the event – the experience.

4. Sustainable Corporate Urban Design: Integration and Differentiation

In the stream of rapidly alternating marketing cycles and functional patterns as well as rising critique about the ruthlessness of mass commercialization, there is a need for urban strategies that challenge the spatial and temporal forces of brand-culture. As mediators between private and public values, architects and planners are forced to acknowledge the importance of brand culture in order to use it to their best advantage and develop more sustainable alternatives. Architecture and urban planning have to take up an operative role within the economic and political power game, whereby the principles of branding and a globalized experience economy should be questioned in a critical manner. This integration of architecture and urban design in commercial

mechanisms requires sustainable urban design strategies and planning instruments that creatively integrate sociocultural issues with pragmatic requirements such as economic and functional parameters.

A sustainable Brandhub is based on the creative integration of seemingly divergent urban forces. These include the corporation as well as the public, which is represented by the civic authorities and advocates such as the local community, opposing citizen's groups or nonprofit organizations. While the main objective of the corporation is undoubtedly the search to strengthen their brand equity and thus to maximize profits, the public's aim is to foster local development as well as to meet the citizen's growing demand for meaningful experiences and social responsibility.

In order for corporate and public values to interact in a sustainable manner, the Brandhub has to offer a highly responsive and differentiated urban design. The responsiveness of the Brandhub to its context is chiefly influenced by four major urban design factors. First, the creation of meaningful identities, which highlight ethical values and regional peculiarities rather than the global brand culture and enable the local population to identify with the project. Second, permeable and accessible open spaces as well as good public transportation connections are necessary in order to foster encounters and the vitality of the place. Third, a modular mix of functions, which condenses commercial and social spaces by complementing and enriching existing local uses instead of displacing them, increases the Brandhub's viability both in economic and cultural terms. And fourth, a robust and flexible morphology is needed so that the Brandhub can respond to changing needs, and the urban identities and the unique mix of functions can be adopted and experienced in diverse ways.

Brandhubs are true showcases of how corporate promotion, (re-)vitalization of cities, and the creation of new social experiences and brand spaces can come together. In most cases, clear profit is gained not only in terms of global and commercial aspects, but also through the bolstering of the 'local ethos' and sociocultural assets of the project's context. This benefits both the public and corporation, chiefly because a sensitive and sustainable behaviour towards the local environment significantly enhances the Brandhub's attractiveness, longevity, and impact on the surrounding urban context and, therefore, its ability to stand the test of time.

5. References

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