

Branding Memphis:
The Power of Perception and Positivity in Place Making

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Second only to being asked your name, being asked where you are from reveals a very critical component of your identity, your association with place. Being from New York, NY bodes a different assumption than Seoul, Korea or even Memphis, TN. The image of a city, country, or region, is tied into more components of our lives than we could even imagine. Considered a result of globalization, commodification, commercialization, and consumption, branding has evolved to no longer just selling products, but place. In this way a city's image and brand becomes part of a person's own identity as one becomes his or her own brand. Place branding has great power to bring together a community and create a united vision, but it can also come at the price of appearing like manipulated propaganda. Therefore, the true power of place branding lies in the art of its collaborative creation and advanced application. In a place like Memphis, that means capturing the balance of a historic past and innovative future. Even though the dialogue of Memphis has traditionally been negative and focused on the city as an underdog, a new optimism highlights the action and people of the city that are not asking for permission to make Memphis the city they want to live in. In altering this narrative and pairing it with real change, Memphis is rewriting its brand. By identifying the strengths of the city and acknowledging the best plan for its future, Memphians aims to instill a pride for their city locally and exude a love for place.

In order to explore this evolution of the role of place branding in Memphis, this paper traces the use of branding from products to place, shifting identity of place for Memphis throughout time, and the contemporary state of Memphis' image and the present reconstruction of its brand. Although a brand can be seen as a manipulation, it also has the ability to establish a united vision, bring together a community, and help

instill a positive perception of place when working with people within or outside of the city. This range of impact is discussed more fully in the literature review and then applied to Memphis specifically in the findings. Contemporary writings on Memphis as well as interviews with nine local community stakeholders help craft the idea of the branding of Memphis and the narrative of the city as a whole. Included in this discussion are the effects of the local community as well as businesses, residents, and tourists being attracted to this city. After approaching Memphis' past and present, a more complete image of its perceived identity and desired identity will be formed.

Literature Review

A city can have many faces representative of its identity. The image of a city, as well as its brand, is critical to the emotional and social response to its meaning, which influences additional economic, political, and cultural factors. Gert and Kotler define a place's image, "as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of that place." They continue that an image is a simplification of larger pieces of the information the mind processes into a more manageable single idea.¹ Greenberg corroborates the complexity of a city's image when he asserts, "the space of the city is produced not only materially and geographically, but also in the social imagination and through changing modes of cultural representations."² To put it succinctly, the psychological and symbolic associations of a city are as defining as its built environment and physical appearance.

If the image of the city is based on its associations and perceptions, then identity is the true reality of what the place is actually is. Understand both image and identity are critical in developing any brand. Figure 1 illustrates the cyclic causes and reactions to primary, secondary, and tertiary communication of a city's image and its resulting structure, infrastructure, landscape, and behavior.³ It follows, then that an image must be "valid, believable, simple, appealing, and distinctive," for any of these qualities make a city both significant and memorable.⁴ Branding has these same cornerstones except for with a more marketable aim. The realization that, "a single fixed city image is rejected in favor of an iterative, socially constructed, and variably interpreted resource" solicits marketers to construct, communicate, and manage a city's image through the creation of a brand.⁵ CEOs for Cities defines in their study *The Importance of Branding*,

“A brand – clear compelling and unique – is the foundation that helps to make a place desirable as a business location, visitor destination, or a place to call home. Development of a brand strategy for a city leverages the features of that place to provide a relevant and compelling promise to a target audience. It is not an ad campaign or a tagline. Rather, the branding strategy is a deeper, more emotionally shared vision that influences actions. A brand is a DNA of place, what it is made of, what passes from generation to generation. It is authentic and indicates what makes a place different from others.”⁶

Therefore a city’s image and brand are simplifying it to its most fundamental core of what it is and what it stands for. This is not only a matter of physical or social for “no human activity is exempt from this rule, and the brand images of cities underpin the emotional part of every decision connected with those places, which in turn affects the rational part.”⁷ Consequently, the result of understanding this signifier of material and emotional identity is an effort to communicate and strategize a certain image of individuality and significance. Figure 2 illustrates how a brand image becomes brand positioning, and ultimately an aspirational brand identity. Similar to brand product positioning, place positioning must be unique, believable, and sustainable in an approximately three-year transition from brand image to aspirational brand identity.⁸ This power of influence has both positive and negative outcomes, but a strong and constructive brand can lift a poor reputation, build a common vision for a community, and enrich its local, national and international status.”⁹ Therefore place branding can elevate the state and support for a city while improving its image. In this way, the effects of globalization and commodification means that branding serves places like it does companies, selling the city like a product and marketing it like the best version of itself.

Branding in Business

As the economy has become more globalized, corporate entities have found power in seeking new markets and watching their business spread around the world. In

this system, a world economy invariably empowers cities as the “logistic heart of activity” where they compete with each other and perpetually exist in a hierarchy.¹⁰ This expansion of business into the association with place means that a city’s marketability and prosperity is more critical than ever. “Companies remain associated with their countries of origin the images and reputations of the brands and states [cities] tend to merge in the mind of the global consumer.”¹¹ In other words, Ford is fundamentally American in the same way that Volkswagen is first and foremost German. Association with place has become as marketable as the brand itself. Whether it is based on the suggestion of authenticity or quality, Belgian chocolate and Brazilian coffee are just the beginnings. Place has become its own brand. Like regions or countries, cities are also being branded like companies or their products. Yet branding is not only about the economic “selling” products, services, ideas, and gaining market share and attention, but also about managing identity, loyalty, and reputation.”¹² In the same way corporate brand helps audiences identify with a company and feel more loyalty to buy their products, “branding has become essential to create value in the relationship between territorial entities and individuals.”¹³ Not to mention, in a world of growing excess and consumptive habits,

“Brands are growing in popularity because people are bewildered and confused amidst the flood of contradictory peddling calls. They crave for confidence and security of choice. Therefore, selecting a branded object carrying a famous logo known and coveted by many, offers such a confidence and certainty without the awkward need of testing, trying, researching information, collecting evidence.”¹⁴

The ultimate comfort and ease of simplifying a decision and reducing risk might bring relief to consumers, but it also means corporations have access to more than their buying power. Specifically, “becoming part of the consumer’s self is the ultimate meaning for a

brand.” Customers build a relationship and achieve resonance “by considering the brand as part of the self, [where] the feelings that emerge are not simply triggered by the brand associations, but are rooted in the brand’s relationship to the self.”¹⁵ The same aim is true with place branding. Figure 3 illustrates the process from brand awareness to resonance that is applicable to products and place alike. Building a relationship with a place and finding a sense of belonging is the ultimate goal. Peter van ham reaffirms this idea in *Place Branding: State of the Art*, when he argues, “brands are a guide for consumers and citizens facing complexity and information overload. Similar assumptions now encourage countries in the development of place branding.”¹⁶ In such a globalized world, place branding serves as the key for cities and countries to develop and run their image in order to compete with the rest of the world. Consequently, “place branding should not be viewed as a luxury that only wealthy and powerful [cities] can afford. Middle sized and small [cities] are under pressure to join the “bandwagon” as well.“ Even though they would not traditional be considered equals or competitors, Memphis, Reykjavik, and Cape Town all have the same challenge ahead of them, to attract people and businesses and economically, politically, and socially excel. One contemporary conversation surrounding place attraction and business is the presence of a creative class. Richard Florida explains the significance of the rise of the creative class:

“The creative class now includes some 38.3 million Americans, roughly 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce---up from just 10 percent at the turn of the 20th century and less than 20 percent as recently as 1980. The creative class has considerable economic power. In 1999, the average salary for a member of the creative class was nearly \$50,000 (\$48,752), compared to roughly \$28,000 for a working-class member and \$22,000 for a service-class worker.”

The creative class is not only important because of their numbers, but their influence in the affluence and growth of the cities they live in. An unbranded entity has a harder time ahead attracting economic stimulants and social attention, like that which would capture the creative class.¹⁷ van Ham argues, “Why would one invest in or visit a city they do not know?”¹⁸ Although externally they aim at attracting more clients and businesses so that they can charge more for their services (higher cost of living) and obtain more economic, political, and social advantage, it’s not all about the money. Internally, place branding makes citizens feel more confident, as if they belong, and prideful towards their “place”. In this way, branding lends the identity of a place to the identity of a person.

Place Branding

Despite having the same desired effects, urban brands are not constructed in the same fashion as corporate brand development. Unlike the more uniform response to a product, place is innately personal. In the same way there is not one story, there is not one author. Various agents throughout the city representing a variety of public and private interests work together to craft a city’s brand. A collaboration of people and disciplines best combines to make the most effective brand. A strong diversified brand is representative of “the physical (infrastructure) and landscape (urban design, green spaces) dimensions of managing urban change and the governance (structural, organizational) and behavioral (strategic planning and leadership) facets of image communication.” This collaborative approach is key in utilizing communication to let a city function as a whole instead of segmented pieces.¹⁹ The art of a collaborative brand is a collaborative creation.

Co-creation and co-invention means that people as larger communities, predetermined leaders and power structures, are the agents of the branding conversation. “The tectonic plates of power and responsibility are shifting...Power is devolving to the places and people who are closest to the ground and oriented toward collaborative action.” This inversion of the hierarchy of power in the United States means that as the players and their power is falling, that of formerly commoners is rising.²⁰ Granted government is not disappearing, only evolving. It is no longer its aspiration to control cities, but rather to inspire the people that claim them. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg asserts that as, “the result of [the federal] leadership vacuum, cities around the country have had to tackle our economic problems largely on our own. Local elected officials are responsible for doing, not debating - For innovating, not arguing - For pragmatism, not partisanship.”²¹ This shift in a traditional power structure provides the opportunity for citizen based leadership and individualized ownership of place instead of that of a previously elected official.²² This shift emphasizes a deeper and more permanent connection between people and place instead of a more essential definition of city by economic or political forces.

A diversified and collaborative approach works both in the short and long run. With a little more time, some cities are able to position themselves with a global significance and universally relatable narrative. For example, “Paris is romance. Milan is style. New York is energy. Washington is power. Tokyo is modernity. These are the brands of cities, and they are inextricably tied to the histories and destinies of all these places.” These brands are not manufactured in a silo or a product of sloganeering, they are an idea that people can buy into and maintain throughout the city’s development.²³

Accordingly, effective brands that work to serve the community prioritize people not success, and engaging locals as advocates. Deciding what the brand is meant to accomplish, will determine who should be involved, and the people involved in brand creation will also continue their support with its maintenance.²⁴ Once the brand is crafted, community stakeholders will buy in.²⁵ When a brand simply hypes up elements of a city without association or meaning, it lends itself to becoming a superficial and irrelevant location. The brand must focus on the people who comprise the city and make it what it is. Likewise, capturing these voices in the construction of the brand is vital to appropriately telling the authentic story of a city. After all, they always say, “Ask a local!”

Aside from the benefits of business and awareness, place branding can serve the city by creating a deeper sense of community and improving its conditions altogether. Specifically, a city’s brand may help develop a shared vision for future, create a stronger self-identity, and maintain a positive self-image.²⁶ In fact, it is argued that, “the synergies between functional and representational aspects of the collective transformation of urban spaces [have] helped support cities achieve a longer-term social vitality and economic viability.”²⁷ In other words, when a city works to improve the performance of a city, as well as what it means to people, the effect is widespread.

Smart Cities Consulting outlines their process saying that it first begins when a city must undergo an assessment of sorts to read the city and see how it is performing in various sectors. After studying these rankings, branding firms look at the numbers, statistics, reports, and other components of its digital identity to know the starting point for the city. Next would be collecting a dialogue of the city by the people who know it

best and beginning the conversation about the branding process with various stakeholders from the community. After laying this foundation, the efforts of a branding firm would engage in audience immersion where they speak directly to the city. Examples of community sentiments could include a mutual sense of larger purpose or potential without knowing what is ahead. Lastly, comparing a city to other cities based on size, location, or demographics creates a competitive review to identify opportunities.

After these steps comes the brand. Anholt breaks down three different types of brands: popular, simple, and advanced. Performing similar to their name would suggest, the popular brand is vague, but catchy and suitable for advertising. The simple brand is universal but generic; it is concerned with a strong visual, logo, or slogan. Lastly, the advanced brand is most sophisticated and corporate, while also being most sensitive to understanding of place.²⁸ Although there are endless options, a brand must find a balance between not being too aspirational or too simple, for either will create a false representation of the place's true identity. It is "important to distill a place's identity without losing sight of its complexity."²⁹ Ultimately, a brand cannot mean all things for all people, so a representation too simplified, diminishes any meaning the place has. A generic brand will not stand out, or be effective, but a disciplined focus will serve as a more effective strategy.³⁰ More strategic image branding has stakeholders buy in and show their support.³¹ Hatch and Rubin identify three foundational elements in the creation of any brand, trace, arc, and collective interpretation. Trace is the intention of authors, the arc is the trajectory of the brand over time, and the collective includes both the internal and external response to and relationship between the crafted brand and the city.³² CEOs for Cities offers touch points to brand delivery based on a timeline

surrounding a visit to the city as seen in Figure 4. Then measuring the performance of a brand can be monitored through brand awareness, recognition, understanding, delivery, value, preference, and uniqueness.³³ Naturally there are also numerous objectives or priorities when branding city, I will be focusing on how putting the people first creates a brand that brings people together.

As key as it is to have a fully functioning city with minimal conflict, also critical is how the city is portrayed locally and internationally. Smart City supports this claim by arguing, “a city’s brand is about creating a reality that is true to the brand.”³⁴ Moreover, a brand might promise a shinier city than the reality, but the city must somewhat match this expectation in order to validate the claim.³⁵ Consequently the only solution to the concern that “the theories and practices of city marketing and place branding that are principally concerned with potentially competing realities and ‘symbolic associations,’” would be improving the reality and accepting the symbolic associations as a challenge.³⁶ In other words, an effective brand must follow through on their aspirations. For a common misconception is that branding is merely a communication strategy, and the creation of a catchy slogan, logo, etc.; however, it is much more about developing a long term vision and shaping positive perceptions.³⁷ In the same way that the state of the city inspires positive attitudes, an improved perception then inspires an enhanced state of the city. Hand in hand they see the largest impact. For example, when Austin branded itself, “America’s live music Capital,” they oversold themselves by stretching the promotion, but they aspired to it. With an intentional direction and branded vision, they were able to make their ambition reality. This is the action based cyclic benefit of place branding.

Strengths of Place Branding

Not only can a brand lift the condition and performance of a city, but it can also unify the community. Smart City suggests four ways to change the culture of a city to unite by stopping the haters and supporting the lovers. Firstly, stop blaming others (especially each other) for the state of the city. Secondly, start being fiercely proud and reject negative comments. Thirdly, create buzz about entrepreneurs who could go anywhere but chose Memphis. Lastly, develop a sense of community through a unified sense of purpose.³⁸ These simple steps can engage the entire city as citizens before any other conflicting association.

A study on identity salience by John Trusue found that when “people identify with broader groups they deemphasize competition, conflict, and negative evaluations amongst the members of subgroups nested within these broader groups.”³⁹ Considering as a people we naturally group with each other, the result is that people are either in the in-groups or out-groups. Even more, in these groupings, despite their “temporary, superficial, and explicitly meaningless identities” people will always put their in-group first. In spite of this truth Trusue argues, “salience of a collective or common social identity may result in greater weight being given to join (collective) gains over individual gains alone.”⁴⁰ Ergo, the unification of a city has the power resolve conflict, reduce tension, and replace battling groups with one core group of residents. Not to mention, cities can also be weakened by the individual communities that comprise it. When a connection to one is lost, the whole area becomes more vulnerable.⁴¹ By making a larger identity salient, subgroups fade, and a collective community is born. In the same way that 9/11 resulted in a nationwide campaign, “United We Stand,” threats can either

“exacerbate internal conflicts” or “draw people together and cause them to unite against a common enemy.”⁴² Do Memphians really feel that it’s Memphis vs. Errybody?

Faults of Place Branding

Despite these advantages, by very definition, a brand is a manufactured representation. Therefore as an intentionally formulated and not natural likeness or portrayal, there is an inevitable difficulty in identifying a specific city image and unavoidable neglect of included every component of its existence. Wanda Rushing agrees that the complexity of place cannot fit easily into a “normal paradigm of analysis or measurement.”⁴³ According to that belief, branding place is not only a doomed course, but it must also resist the likeness to propaganda. For in the public mind, “propaganda equals disinformation, lying and deceiving.” Then you have to deal with what van Ham introduces as the “paradox of ‘branding’ having a bad image.”⁴⁴ Kavaratzis and Ashworth question if this is inevitable by pointing out, “place branding like place marketing in general is impossible because places are not products, governments are not producers, and users are not consumers.” The very idea that a place is a brand-able entity unsettles those who believe their place is above that and cannot maintain its dignity as a marketed product. Since according to this theory, the creation of a brand has no place in place, is every attempt to brand a city fake and deceptive? Place branding stands in a long tradition of reputation management, “spin-doctoring” and propaganda.”

Unfortunately, in an information age, it is often the side which has the better story that wins”⁴⁵ This acknowledges that it is not even the merit of cities competing, but rather the stories they are telling and images they are creating.

Additionally, branding can create an attachment to an environment is it too aggressive. For a world of consumptive habits continues to the world of branding where the same excess of our materials goods can overwhelm just like an excess of branding. If branding becomes too aggressive or excessive, people will start to hate it. Corporations become arrogant when trying to force brands and endless advertising on people because they understand that buying a brand is buying culture. Sao Paulo realized the growing aggression and visual litter of marketing and branding in their city and actually banned it altogether. Before one considers if this is the future of branding, they must remember that “corporations don’t own brands, people do.” In a world where we are even branding ourselves, does a growing grasp of labels connect people in our globalized world, or further commercialize the everyday.⁴⁶

Furthermore, not all press is good press. For a city, “overcoming a perceived negative image of a city is considered vital if that city is successfully to regenerate and secure sustainable economic performance. ‘Poor perceptions of a city can devalue its image and have far-reaching consequences for its future prosperity’ including “adverse economic development, inward investment repercussions, and it would also influence the manner in which a local community perceives itself.”⁴⁷ Likewise, if a city has a damaging history that overshadows its present identity, it must accept the past while speaking to the present and future. In this capacity, an effective brand can serve as a positive intervention to fight the scars of a stigmatized reputation.⁴⁸

Redefining the Space of Place

As perceptions of cities are evolving, so too are their very geography and the resulting identity. Cities now are not the same as they were one hundred years ago. The

“new American city is polycentric and contains many jurisdictions: large and small cities each with its own downtown, suburbs with “faux downtowns” or retrofitted shopping malls, and stand alone shopping centers that have taken over some downtown functions.⁴⁹ The result is a city without a heart, both geographically and emotionally. A segmented city does not choose to separate and distance itself in order to serve as one larger community. It does not help that Mayors and leaders of think tanks are focused on the big picture, and not looking at constituent parts, which all contribute the strength of the whole.⁵⁰ The result of creating 10 groups to serve is that you cannot please them all. Additionally, this scattering of people and personalities from the downtown core results in a disjointed association of place. Skylines may still offer visual identity to a place; however, a small minority of the citizens live and breathe those corridors. Fundamentally this makes identification with a downtown impossible and appreciation of smaller units more unlikely. By extension, a city without a geographic core becomes a metropolitan area with a confused identity, and a population without a unified vision. In this way a city broken in form, can be broken in spirit and community.

Memphis’ Shifting Identity

Memphis throughout time has had shifting roles, titles, and local, regional, and national identities. However, regardless of the decade, base of citizens, or international status, it seems to have constantly been misunderstood and underestimated.⁵¹ In a city like Memphis, the past is not just history, but an explanation of the everyday. This is one of the many reasons that a single brand or title cannot capture the complexity and depth of such a place. Wanda Rushing speaks to this context in her book, *Memphis: A Paradox of Place* where she asserts, “memories and identities from the past and self-

consciousness, pride, shame, and ambivalence about those identities give meaning and narrative coherence to Memphis as a distinctive southern place and shape place identity.”⁵² Bringing attention these connections to the past and its influence on the culture and defensiveness about local identity, Rushing reaffirms the importance of understanding the full story of Memphis before discussing its contemporary image.

The initial draw and boom of Memphis was because of its location. It was first founded in order to secure the physical boundary of the US and access to the Mississippi River, as well facilitate and advance commercial flows.⁵³ Memphis has maintained this devotion to distribution from its status as the largest inland cotton market in the world, to now operating the busiest cargo airport in the world.⁵⁴ However this key location on the edge of so many geographic borders also intersects with the social and political borders of America. As a southern city, Memphis is “part of a larger, distinct part of the US and an imagined community, a place that commands emotional legitimacy, and stirs nostalgic longings.”⁵⁵ Despite this undeniable role as a Southern city, Memphis has always struggled as an “other” within an already established “other” status of being in the American South.⁵⁶ Specifically, its relative inaction and resilience to the Civil War meant that, “few Southern towns suffered as little from the four years of the war as Memphis did.”⁵⁷ Just as Memphis starts to struggle with its collective identity, arrives the yellow fever epidemic.

Although there were several outbreaks of the yellow fever in Memphis, the largest was in 1878 with 17,000 reported cases. Even more significant than the more than 5,000 deaths, was the threat alone, which caused a mass exodus of the city’s population.⁵⁸ Prior to this outbreak, the population doubled from 1960 to 1970 and the city was “poised to

become a prominent commercial center of the new south.”⁵⁹ But the yellow fever halted all growing momentum. For in 1879, Memphis became the only American city to surrender its charter and officially lose its name. As the “taxing district of Shelby county, TN” Memphis first experienced an identity crisis.⁶⁰ In fact, in 1879 the *Nashville American* read, “there will be no such place as Memphis, for she will be numbered among the things that were like the ancient metropolis from which she took her name.”⁶¹ Both locally and regionally, Memphis was dead.

Throughout the 1880s the city’s image revolved around being the “unhealthiest city in the nation,” being criticized for its “scandalous acts of dishonesty,” and a continuation of racial segregation. This status in addition to the growing stigma surrounding the city also ensured an absence of human and capital resources needed to maintain a city and its confidence.⁶² A distinct shift was clear between Memphis as a pre-yellow fever “heterogeneous and cosmopolitan” city to a resulting “homogeneous and provincial” community.⁶³ In 1891, its name was finally restored, but its “inferiority complex” continued as the city and its citizens knew it had to fight to improve itself and its image internally and externally. However, despite the efforts in the realm of health and sanitation, negative perceptions persisted.⁶⁴ Memphis struggled to define itself and its direction. Rushing argues, “no city has gone to such extremes to rebuff its history and discount its legacy of rural traditions and ‘low-down culture.’”⁶⁵ By the end of the 19th century, the city wanted to maintain its progressive status and role as established southern place.⁶⁶ The city was repopulated by a rural underclass that earned it the titles “most rural minded city in the south” and “buckle of the bible belt.”⁶⁷ From the beginning, cities have represented a space of liberation where migrants can leave an impoverished

rural labor-intensive life and go to the city for a better life, as well as a space for the “other”.⁶⁸ As an intersection of new and old south, rural and urban tendencies, black and white populations, and a traditional and progressive course, Memphis remained a polarized city full of loving or hating attitudes. Wailoo reaffirms these contradictions when he argues, “Memphis has come to see itself as an amalgam of characteristically southern urban traits, where close proximity to rural culture bred innovative cultural expression and also fomented vicious racial tension, where the influences of the rural delta still mix uncomfortably with cosmopolitan ideals.”⁶⁹ These opposing qualities create an identity crisis that continues to plague Memphis throughout time.

Throughout the late 19th century, Memphis business boosters reassured locals and outsiders that the city was safe while working to improve its reputation as modern and progressive.⁷⁰ This Capital City of the Mississippi Delta struggled to stay relevant while at points throughout time demolishing sites throughout the city, as if it could ‘sterilize the soil.’⁷¹ This effort was partnered with the City Beautiful reform movement where America entered into a cultural competition with Europe and it was realized that an “attachment to place helped residents form a covenant with the past and future.”⁷² With the development of urban theory and design, the built environment became more intentional and physically and symbolically significant in the lives of residents.⁷³ The Evergreen and Overton areas stand as an example of inspiring civic pride and loyalty to the city through identifying with neighborhoods.⁷⁴

Memphis like all cities in more recent years has experienced the effects of globalization in local identity and modern culture. Peacock uses the term “‘grounded globalism’ [to describe how regional, national, and global identities are being

reconfigured and enhanced, thereby emancipating the south from burdens of the past.”⁷⁵

Despite this liberation, other opinions argue that as the least urbanized place in United States, most cities in the American South have to choose between identifying with being Southern or global. For example, cities like Houston and Miami have urbanized, minimizing their Southern heritage. This claim suggests that cities cannot be both southern and globalized, and that the two categories are contradictory. Gotham and Harvey resist this idea of southern liberation by arguing, “the annihilation or demise of place distinctiveness is considered part of the postmodern condition.”⁷⁶ Similarly globalization “obscures the importance of cities as places that anchor human lives, histories, and relations.”⁷⁷ According to this belief, the scale of a global view leads to the reduction of local identity, culture, and distinction. Griswold and Wright introduce the resulting effect of localization that stands as a resilience of the local, where the “local resists, absorbs, and ultimately transforms the global.”⁷⁸ However, a disadvantage to localization is the resulting, “reactionary nationalism, and competitive localisms.”⁷⁹ Therefore the same way that America competes with nations around the world, traditional place wars make Memphis compete with other southern cities.

The evolution of city growth and the civil rights movement throughout the city, meant first a white flight and then a continued diaspora of the middle class. Specifically, the timing of Martin Luther King’s assassination with urban renewal and white flight meant that people fled downtown, thus changing the identity of the city as a whole.⁸⁰ As the physical structure changed, so did the local and national identity. At the time of the assassination, civil rights activists and reporters blamed the city of Memphis, as a place, for King’s death.⁸¹ Some like Rushing theorize that this was because it was easier for the

backwards south to be blamed for such an act instead of the seemingly progressive US, but regardless of truth, the perception enough is key.⁸² As is true for all points in history, it is not just how events occur, but how people represent it and remember it.⁸³ For when the city focuses on its faults, it limits “our understanding of Memphis as a dynamic urban place, agentic player, role in accumulated local history and intertwined in global processes.”⁸⁴ Continuing the instance of responding to King’s assassination, the creation civil right museum now preserves a valuable part of the past and rehabilitates a potentially scarring image. The museum’s presence as well as the Freedom Awards recognize Memphis as a place of honor and demonstrate the ability to heal and move on.⁸⁵

Selling Memphis

Conversation of Memphis branding can be divided between marketing the internal and external audience, and within the external, tourism and business. Appealing to both audiences involves “Selling Memphis.” The first efforts to sell the city began in 1819 where Memphis stood as a valuable economic asset thanks to its geographic location, transportation, and trade logistics. Building on the location of the city increased the identification between Memphis and cotton and built Memphis into a place of prominence. Therefore, Cotton was the brand and people throughout the city benefiting from the industry worked to build this image, including the pursuit of strategies to attract local traders and financiers.⁸⁶ Therefore, for a city that “derives its sustenance and character so completely or from such a large area of farm and little towns,” it was the booming markets and resulting urbanism that built the infrastructure of the city of Memphis.

Despite this desire to be a world-class city, Memphis has not historically attracted businesses that are best for the community. Specifically, Selling Memphis includes “offering typically southern industrial recruitment incentives, marketing cheap land and natural resources, and maintaining a low-wage labor market, [generating] and [reproducing] inequality.” In a city like Memphis where one fourth of residents live beneath poverty, a rate double the US average, the cyclic creation and not being able to fix it.⁸⁷ In fact, Malizia argues that the South’s practices in recruiting industries are similar to those in developing nations. Specifically, if Southern communities continue competing against each other to create favorable conditions through high tax subsidies, low business regulation, and abundance of low wage labor, then it will never be able to escape the binds of poverty.⁸⁸ It is not surprise to Memphis when citizens and their families earn low wages, when the city markets the abundance of “cheap, docile, and “safe” labor. Not only is this economically concerning for the city, but also racialized and socially problematic. Roediger uses the term “wages of whiteness” that she argues helps keep communities polarized.⁸⁹ For this split labor market enhances the salience of race and decreases class-based interracial alliances.⁹⁰ Memphis is not only suffering from these circumstances, it is pursuing them. Between 1988 and 2000 PILOT cost taxpayers 23 million a year while failing to improve poverty or unemployment.⁹¹ This failed understanding of economic stability is one of the reasons that Memphis is constantly underperforming and begins to build the dialogue that it is a city of “potential” and “opportunity” while maintaining the gap. In 1977 the slogan for Memphis as a “Comeback” city began.⁹² Then from 1979-1980 at the Memphis Jobs Conference, the city admitted that local development was not all it could be, and that it was not living up

to potential. As North America's Distribution Capital and a geographically centralized US location, Memphis had numerous qualities that were not being capitalized.⁹³ Memphis businesses concentrated on Memphis' location or its commitment to entrepreneurship instead of its role between the New and Old South perspective.⁹⁴ This eagerness has continued as "city business leaders officials raise expectations that Memphis [will] become a 'world class city'" when it comes to distribution and biomedical research.⁹⁵

Past or present, Memphis has always been connected to its history. Whether it's the scars of the yellow fever, reflections on Civil Rights Activism, musical hits of the 1950s and 1960s, or the constant reference to what Memphis was instead of what it is, Memphis has not aged gracefully. Although a large piece of this is the narrative used towards the city, the other half is its shifting area, populations, and development as a city altogether. Yvonne Franz comments on an inevitable mutation of a city when she argues,

"Cities are embedded in ongoing transformation processes that are triggered and influenced by a mixture of political, economic, and demographic or social changes. Cities constantly have to reinvent themselves while at the same time preserving their cultural and urban heritage. If they do not, they remain stuck in a status quo and are at risk of facing severe challenges like shrinkage or artificial conversation; they lose their attractiveness and are finally unable to compete with other cities in global competition."⁹⁶

Franz emphasizes that with the transformation of a city, there must be a balance of appreciation of the past and reinvention for the future. Therefore, not all urban evolution is good, but neither is complacency.

Methods

In addition to researching the theory and collecting literature on the basis of the conversation of city imaging, place branding, urban development, and Memphis history, I spoke with a variety of community Stakeholders. When identifying who my interviews would be with, I considered the realm of their professional experience, influence in Memphis, exposure to the city's narrative and power to control it, area of interest, and specific work in developing the Memphis brand. The list includes the perspectives I was able to gather and their position.

Tom Jones, Leader of Smart City Consulting and writer for Smart City Memphis

Blair Taylor, President of Memphis Tomorrow

Abby Miller, Project Manager with the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team

Eric Matthews, Founder and President of Start Co.

John Carroll, Executive Director of City Leadership and Founder of Choose 901

Regena Bearden, Vice President of Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau

Jason Wexler, President of Business Operations with the Memphis Grizzlies

Lauren Taylor, Program Director for Livable Communities

Dewanna Smith, Public Information Officer for the City of Memphis

Combining their interviews with contemporary sources and writings on Memphis created the representation of the present state of the Memphis' narratives, priorities, and branding.

Findings

When pinpointing the evolution of what it means to be a Memphian, one must realize that the ‘City of Memphis’ has redefined its borders and citizens into even the 2000s. Although it has grown to 300 square miles of sprawl, the 1970 census was the last census to show people moving into Shelby County rather than leaving it.⁹⁷⁹⁸ More simply, while the city’s land increased by 55%, its people increased 4%.⁹⁹ The city decided to move, so it “turned its back on the river and ran away from its historic downtown.”¹⁰⁰ First came white flight starting in the mid 20th century, and next followed the middle class flight in the 1990s.¹⁰¹ When the numbers started to shift east, the city followed the growth to try to capture it.¹⁰² With the disappearance of residents from the heart of the city, one of many reasons, people claimed to want or need an escape from city taxes, despite the fact that now the City of Memphis delivers its services at lower rates per capita than Germantown, Collierville, and other local towns.¹⁰³ But it is not just a matter of race. In a seven-year period, the percentage of African Americans, mainly middle class, doubled in Desoto County even though taxes are higher taxes in Desoto County.¹⁰⁴ Not only were people flocking east, but it even seemed that those remaining in the more central historic neighborhoods were not there by choice, but not having the funds to relocate.

Despite this dominant geographic trend, Memphis is now experiencing a reversal where the movement is more centralizing and westward. The recession means lower property values in many endless suburban neighborhoods where now Downtown is Memphis’ fastest growing neighborhood. Thanks to this re-urbanization, developers cannot build housing fast enough, and people are starting to realize that density is

destiny.¹⁰⁵ Despite this massive growth in the heart of the city, there are still those that who consider Downtown the ‘edge city’ and say with pride, “oh I never go downtown.”

¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, living entirely apart from downtown is realistic since the heart of businesses and office space are in East Memphis or along the Poplar corridor.¹⁰⁷ Not only is the city scattered across its borders, but it has room for massive growth for as it stands Memphis could be described as a small town with big city aspirations. Tonnies notes the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* where the first is a smaller village that is based on community, where as *gesellschaft* is a more complex urban society.¹⁰⁸ Memphis is a anomaly attempts to balance between these two ways of life and create a community based urban society. Benefits of its size include the ease, minimal traffic, and low cost of living. Another point of rarity is the city’s demographic populations. By 2045 the United States will be majority minority, but Memphis has already reached that marker. Although there are several cities with minorities as majorities, we are the first city with that minority population of African Americans while our diversity is becoming even more diverse over time. Therefore, in a country where soon no single race will be in majority, Memphis could stand as a great opportunity for the study of urban populations and statistics.¹⁰⁹

Defining the Narrative for the City

When it comes to Memphis today, as critical as the economy, infrastructure, and physical spaces are to the identity of the city, within the narrative of locals and outsiders lies the chance to sculpt a deeper perception and sense of place of Memphis. One respondent discusses this idea when he argues that changing the stories that are being told about Memphis changing the culture surrounding it.¹¹⁰ Narrative has always been

problematic in a place like Memphis where the internal audience is much more negative, and unfortunately people remember the bad before they remember the good. A point of relatability or unity amongst citizens consists of “tapping into a pessimism...in which two people worked to outdo each other in their insults about their own hometown.”¹¹¹ This self-sabotage not only effects the internal perception of the city, but also an external opinion that generally knows very little about the city. A consensus seemed to be the local news as one of the worst factors if not the main source of this negative narrative, with one even calling it, “Memphis’ largest cancers,” and another arguing that in Memphis “if it bleeds it leads.” The key is to realize that, “nothing produces change as much as positive buzz.”¹¹² Ideally the city would have no cracked sidewalks, no vacant lots, lower rates of poverty, and better education, but changing the narrative of Memphis is one of the first steps to creating actual change. Part of this challenge lies with stopping the pessimism and the rest is welcoming a new optimism or a new spirit in Memphis that does not ignore problems, but instead tries to address them creatively.¹¹³ Reviving the story of Memphis with the hope to change the local dialogue of how Memphians view their city, means rediscovering a passion for the city.¹¹⁴ People will not fight for the city until they have ownership for it and fight to make Memphis the best it can be.¹¹⁵ Narrative is key. If perception becomes reality, then negativity is a death wish. Making opposing opinions unwelcome and attracting optimism is the future for Memphis.

As walking through the context of Memphis history and its development reveals, the city has always been a little down on itself. The source of this lacking self worth could be the state of the city during the yellow fever or losing its city charter, it could be the assassination of Martin Luther King, or it could be the constant role of Memphis as

the “other” or “outsider,” but really there was not one point where this narrative began or for that matter, has been successfully challenged. The 1980s Shelby County Mayor, Bill Morris asserts, “Memphis has the longest mourning bench I’ve ever seen, and its time to get off of it. If you cant’ get excited about Memphis these days, you should go to the doctor and get your pulse checked. I think you may be dead.”¹¹⁶ Although this sounds encouraging for bringing back a sense of pride to the city, the fact that the same statement today would not seem out of place means that nothing really has changed. The same is true with a 1986 article that says, “like the mighty Mississippi flowing past its front door, Memphis is a city on the move”.¹¹⁷ This premise of such a lack of self-worth appears so often, that the narrative rarely beyond the fact that we are a city of potential and opportunity, that is moving upward or making a “comeback.” Although people say they do not like that term or think it’s true, it is continuously part of our dialogue. The continuation of such negativity reveals that we think little of ourselves and our future.¹¹⁸ As one interviewed tourist from an article called, *Creating a City that loves Itself*” said, “I absolutely love this city, but it doesn’t look much like it loves itself.”¹¹⁹ It is not just a matter of attitude, but the actions that follow. For example, littered streets, empty and vacant neighborhoods, and a neglected waterfront help tell the same story as a Memphian self conscious about the city would say. One respondent said, “its almost like Memphis is a crutch to blame everything [they] don’t like in [their] life.” If Memphis’ inferiority complex continues serving as an excuse, we are limiting the course of the city, especially considering most of the problems are the same for all cities, and are not uniquely Memphis.¹²⁰ Memphis could serve as a laboratory for cities of the future, but instead it’s a museum of the past. Conversation with community stakeholders broke this mentality

down to two systematic sources of negativity, a “good enough” standard for the city and the fact that Memphis is a “City of Choice.”

The suggestion of the “good enough” mentality as one of the greatest threats to the achievement of the city is not without its evidence. Specifically, underinvesting in city services, transportation, or infrastructure, is a cost for the city as the attitude becomes engrained in Memphians and results in a lack of self worth and inadequate built environment. Design needs to be a priority with physical structures and projects instead of the concern with how inexpensively they can be achieved.¹²¹ Increasing the attention given to a quality public realm and built environment creates positive image and message about city.”¹²² This also means creating peak experiences that people wouldn’t typically be exposed to, and not just settling for what one called “Memphis good” continuing, “we need to challenge our community to think bigger, be braver, take more risks. Bold actions gets higher rewards and changes the narrative.”¹²³ Transitioning from good to great elevates Memphis from a regionally relevant urban center to a internationally competitive city. At the end of the day, “There are things happening that are not only Memphis good, but world good.” The humble nature of Memphians means they are not eager to boast, but it is time to start taking ownership for the capacities of our city or culture that are the best in the world.¹²⁴ Being our own worst enemy has many different faces, and enabling satisfaction with underachievement, prevents Memphis from serving as a world-class city.

Similarly dangerous is that while competing with cities in the region and around the world, consistently Memphis has chosen to reference itself as a “City of Choice”. In 2009, the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program created “Memphis Blueprint for a City

of Choice: advancing city, county recovery,” the very name of the report continues a dialogue wherein the choice is appreciated because there is apparently a high risk of choosing otherwise. AC Wharton also uses the term that Memphis is a “City of Choice” meaning that the idea is not isolated or infrequent. Some fear that bolstering the city’s accomplishments because some feel that Memphis doesn’t have enough going or doesn’t have enough value, creates a problematic mechanism because by emphasizing Memphis as the underdog, we don’t spend that effort promoting why Memphis is amazing.¹²⁵ Here is the choice for the city, if Memphians choose to focus on creating or allowing the charge that it is an inferior city, it will always be at war with itself.¹²⁶ If instead we shifted this paradigm for the city’s narrative, and supported a self-reinforcing mentality, a person would not have difficulty in choosing Memphis.

New Optimism

Despite the mutually held belief that the authentic and unique spirit of Memphis was once lost, there is a growing optimism that believes it has been found.¹²⁷ In fact, in a recent Smart Cities Memphis blog called *Memphis: All Things are Possible* broke the website record with over 25,000 views suggesting there is a pent-up belief that we can change Memphis and things aren’t that bad, that Memphis is worth fighting for.¹²⁸ One comment to this post was that Memphis’ “energy and optimism [was] palpable.”¹²⁹ Therefore, it seems the negative narrative surrounding Memphis pride is being challenged by the rise of new optimism and a realization of the benefits of a place like Memphis. While trying to track a catalyst, one respondent simply said that it was a combination of the right people at the right time and a number of local leaders noticing a need for more positive momentum.¹³⁰ One discussion is Memphis as a city of “access and impact.”

Citizens here have the access to meet with community stakeholders, politicians, investors, and work alongside people from all roles throughout the city, unlike a LA, Chicago, or New York. This community is knocking down barriers to access, and accelerating events and strategic advantages for founding teams¹³¹ Similarly, because of the scale of the city, one has the chance to reach farther and have a larger impact in Memphis than they would in a larger or less community based city.¹³² In this way, Memphis is a community as much as it is a city. The focus on connectivity throughout the city, whether that be through physical creation of Project Greenprint, or the social thread of city pride, numerous efforts of the city are trying to challenge the years of pessimism.

Also encouraging is the idea that a new optimism is not just a group of particularly positive Memphians talking about potential, but Memphis is starting to receive positive buzz nationally. It was ranked the second cheapest city in US, and the fourth happiest city for job-seeking college grads. Career Bliss named Memphis the sixth happiest to work and Zillow names it the sixth best place to buy a home in 2012. Additionally, an average of \$1.2 billion annually is invested into our city's philanthropies.¹³³ The city was announced by Bicycling magazine as the most improved city best biking city in 2012, making Memphis even more of a biking destination. Not to mention, Tennessee bureau of investigation reported that crime dropped dramatically in 2014.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Memphis is no longer fighting for the future, it is working for the present. In fact, one dialogue is that in Memphis, you can become your best self.¹³⁵ Hence, not only are the advantages to living in Memphis being realized, but the authors of the narrative are also shifting. Actors of this new optimism "ask for no permission" and include creative professionals that, "set out to create the city in which they want to

live [and] show little patience for those who want to rehash the past, list grievances or problems, or undermine progress with a negative attitude about their hometown.”¹³⁶

A piece of this shifting internally positive outlook with the future direction of Memphis is the realization that the nation and world is not as hard on Memphis as Memphians would believe. Unknown to some Memphians who do not travel beyond surrounding areas, the stigma and negative image that people associate with Memphis disappears as soon as you leave the region. One poll conducted with Memphis Convention and Visitor’s Bureau confirmed that nationally, Memphis is a blank slate or a music city, sometimes even confusing it with Nashville, and internationally, its only reputation is music.¹³⁷ This only reaffirms that the local audience is responsible for negativity more so than any outsiders throwing blame. One respondent said, “I think it’s a lack of awareness, tourists enjoy Memphis, they just don’t think about it. When it comes to music, Nashville has an actual industry, and we only have a historic legend.”¹³⁸ When it comes to the influence of statistics and rankings that do not always positively light Memphis, it depends on the audience, but most “people don’t care about stats or stupid rankings, they know Memphis for stories they hear and people they know, and in one visit we can sell them.”¹³⁹ Therefore, since Memphis does not have an image to alter or negative brand to reimagine, it has the opportunity to be whatever it wants to be. One Memphian working with urban development said, “we’re doing a lot of great stuff, but we haven’t been capturing national attention. Memphis is not a thought in the same way other cities are. We’re not up there getting our name out. I would love to see Memphis take more ownership and claim its work in place making, urban renewal, blight projects we’re doing. We’re in the conversation, but we’re not leading it.”¹⁴⁰ Considering one of

the first steps of creating a brand is establishing the audience, Memphis must realize that it is not the underdog it thinks it is. If Memphians can focus on internally enhancing pride, while externally actively recruiting residents or supporters in general, the narrative will shift entirely.

The result is a city where “what’s next is what we want.”¹⁴¹ Residents are entrusted to lead the city as much as the local officials are. Lobbying for a grassroots bottom up approach for citizens to make Memphis a city they want to live in means that the vision for the city no longer has to come out of city hall.¹⁴² As a cynical generation, people are tired of listening to packaged and institutional messaging, and they only believe each other. Consequently, what average and active community members say matters more in the long run than government officials.¹⁴³ A Commercial Appeal writer Geoff Calkins continues, “the opportunity is there for all of us to shape Memphis. Every one of us can make a difference.”¹⁴⁴ That means no superhero or single individual will swoop in, Memphians are their own agents. It was even expressed, “Memphis has always had a “DIY” sense, but it’s been repressed. Acting below the power structure of the government means people are not looking for permission or affirmation, they are simply making the city they want to live in.”¹⁴⁵ Even though people from all stations are acting, there is also a more “durable reshaping being led by networks of city and metropolitan leaders, local elected officials, and heads of companies, universities, medical campuses, metropolitan business associations, labor unions, civic organizations, environmental groups, cultural institutions, and philanthropies.”¹⁴⁶ With the government more focused on inspiring the people than controlling them, Mayor AC Wharton is introduced not as an “iron fist” or “hard negotiator,” but instead a “visionary, friend, and

cheerleader.”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, while the local government helps to light a match, the main authors are the ones on the ground doing the work. Good story telling is emergent, not top down.¹⁴⁸

Memphis: One or Many

This community-based approach suggests the city peacefully towards collective action, but in actuality, Memphis is a very geographically segmented city. Between the countless annexations of the city, suburbanization, and mass movements of residents, Memphis is a city where identifying where you live is sharing an essential part of your identity. Figure 5 illustrates the spread of city boundaries over time through its gradual annexation process. Although this could easily be a divisive effort to keep separate Memphis neighborhoods insulated and competitive, most believe that it is the smaller communities that define the city. Specifically, 75% of Memphians would recommend their neighborhoods to everyone.¹⁴⁹ In fact, in discussion of new branding efforts, one respondent mentioned, “in Memphis the magic is in the mix.” The future of local identity and community is not in resisting the strength of varying neighborhoods throughout the city, it is in building them further. Although AC Wharton is currently using the slogan, “One Memphis,” the true Memphis is in its many faces. Midtown is Memphis, but it is not the only Memphis, neither is Raleigh-Egypt, Bartlett, or Binghampton. Most importantly, a strong city is a “collection of really great neighborhoods because pride starts at the most micro level and radiates outward. Loving your specific neighborhood is an investment in the community of Memphis as a whole.”¹⁵⁰ Memphis is a community of people and the more we empower and unify these people to advocate for the city with pride, and branding supports instead of contradicts this intersection of authentically

humble citizens in a meaningful city, we will not be making a comeback, we realize we never left.

Defining the Memphis Brand

Although traditional stakeholders see Memphis as Blues, BBQ, and Beale street, this is the fading past of Memphis branding. These three tenants now serve as a legacy...but over the past three or four years people have shifted their thinking to be proud of more strong neighborhoods like the arts district on broad avenue, downtown, Greenline.”¹⁵¹ The real potential lies in creating a hybrid of the traditional tenants that are still undeniably present in the city, while also featuring the more updated version of recent efforts and investment. Building the strengths of contemporary Memphis means the leveraging people’s identification with neighborhood pride, building the appreciation of music beyond blues and rock n’roll, and including more city anchors like Memphis philanthropies, St. Jude, the Levitt Shell, the Medical District, and the arts community, into a more expansive narrative.¹⁵² The goal would be to come together as a city, with diverse but consistent voice reflective of community buy in and support. Specifically, Memphis is looking at a more advanced brand, rather than popular or simple. Building off the conversation of ineffective branding previously in this paper, those working with Memphis’ rebranding do not want to erode it to the point they just make it a bumper sticker and it no longer reality.¹⁵³ Consequently, they are not going to develop a bumper sticker or logo, because it is understood that such an action is death for city branding.

Instead, Memphis Tomorrow and a group of Memphis stakeholders as well as a branding firm have been working for the past year to create a narrative or toolkit than will then the public can pick up, own, and take it where it needs to go.¹⁵⁴ The president of

this effort fears any resistance to the brand, but argues, “if you don’t get involved in managing your brand, it will get managed for you.” Therefore, if Memphis wants to maintain an authentic and positive image, the city must take the lead and not let pessimism rule. With the branding effort of Memphis Tomorrow, they first outlined their four objectives: attracting talent, attracting tourism, attracting companies and investment, and changing the hearts and minds of Memphians. Although in this listing Memphians are last, they are emphasized as being the first priority. As discussed previously, pride in place is key to its success, both internally and externally. After outlining these goals, Memphis Tomorrow and their firm developed Memphis’ brand essence through an identification of brand pillars and personality attributes. Approaching Memphis in this way highlights qualities such as its authenticity, originality, generosity, etc. Then through the creation of a visual identity and the release of this narrative, Memphis’ “brand” will subtly and creatively be picked up by about 25 early adopters and local businesses and bodies that more personally engages people.¹⁵⁵ Not only must the Memphis brand be reflective of contemporary Memphis, but it also needs to be aspirational to inspire Memphis to come into itself even more.

The authors of this effort acknowledge the power of co-creation and community-based agency and know that the biggest risk is feeling top down. The process and adoption a their narrative must be organic in order to prevent the impression that the new brand is manufactured or not reflective of a real Memphis. Not only has Memphis not been rebranded since the city adopted, “Birthplace of Rock n’Roll, Home of the Blues” in 1991, but it has not even had a recent comprehensive city plan, roadmap, or investment in either of these efforts.¹⁵⁶ The key is to not simply “rinse and repeat” the same rebranding

efforts, but instead letting the work stand on its own, and the integrity and authenticity of Memphis shine through without just putting paint on the same slogans, narratives, and city efforts.¹⁵⁷ For example, the Memphis Grizzlies aim to create something uniquely Memphis while building loyalty for the brand while focusing on connecting with the community and instilling Memphis pride.¹⁵⁸ If successful, this new branding effort, which will release its toolkit in September or October, will enable Memphis to move beyond its underdog narrative and museum town legacy to focus on personal stories or community efforts that define Memphis today.¹⁵⁹

The Effects of a Successful Brand

Creating this brand will serve both the local community, as well as outsiders who are considering a short visit or a long stay. Economically, Memphis has always been anchored by large businesses and corporations. Being able to see the effects of such key tenants as St. Jude, Autozone, or FedEx and not imagining where Memphis might be without them makes one wonder how we might be able to multiply the effort. However, when attracting business former Shelby County Mayor Jim Rout councils, “we must stop selling our community at a discount. Instead, we must sell it for its value. In the old economy, economic development was built on tax breaks, subsidies, cheap land, and cheap labor. But no more. Today, in the new economy, a region's competitive advantage is quality, quality workers, quality of life, and quality innovation.” Despite an ambition to attract bigger and better employment options for Memphians, some might argue the decision to waive 1.16 million to 1.3 million in taxes for \$10.60 an hour warehouse job is evidence we don’t think we deserve the best.¹⁶⁰ Specifically, by waving local \$50 million in Shelby county taxes and \$35 million in city of Memphis taxes, Memphis is not

investing in the most helpful form of business making us more competitive for a knowledge based economy.¹⁶¹ Although most people might advocate for one effort being more important, one respondent commented on the importance of diversification and pursuits in the development of both living wage jobs and well as the employment of a more talented class.¹⁶² Growth in either direction would employ more Memphians, however, more than the importance of the numbers, are the quality of work and life for the workers and their resulting city.

Attracting and retaining the talented class must be a priority for the city because of the direct and indirect influence it has on a city. Moretti claims where a factory might produce hundreds or thousands of jobs to individuals, one new high-tech job creates two more professional and three non-professional positions.¹⁶³ Therefore, investing in a knowledge-based economy, is an investment in the economy as a whole. There is a cycle of poverty wages drawing low-wage, low-skill jobs, that then continues the same state of poverty.¹⁶⁴ Not only is maintaining this cycle dangerous, but it also prevents Memphis from becoming the great city it can and should be. For example, in the most recent four year period, Memphis attracted as many people with college degrees as Nashville and more than Atlanta, yet the city is not as successful at retaining its talent. Not to mention, there is still a significant gap where 40% of jobs in Memphis need college degrees and only 26% of the city's population has them.¹⁶⁵ Where older generations seem to have a "business as usual" attitude, younger representatives of a creative class are more in the game of trying to grow its population than concerning themselves with crime stats. They are interested in re-urbanizing communities and the urban core, making their mark and creating true change.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, "in order to create the jobs of tomorrow, the sexy jobs

that people will move for, we need to increase the percent of high growth entrepreneurs.”¹⁶⁷ Creating a dialogue that people are eager to join and hesitant to leave is the solution to filling the positions available in Memphis, as well as creating new ones.

International place branding expert Anholt explains how a “simple brand narrative can have a major impact on your decision to visit the city, buy its products or services, to do business there, or even relocate there.”¹⁶⁸ Therefore, enhancing the narrative and optimism in Memphis has two great powers. Improving local pride and community unification and leveraging the cultural and historic resonance that Memphis has more than most cities.¹⁶⁹ Memphis stands as its own distinct community, while also being relatable to other metropolitan spaces.¹⁷⁰ Most of the world looks like Memphis, not Silicon Valley. Therefore, the lessons and values we’re acquiring here, are extensible to other communities.¹⁷¹ Aside from this point of relation, choosing to work in the creative class in Memphis provides certain opportunities that every city cannot offer. Memphis emphasizes entrepreneurship as the chance to engage with the community and becoming as diverse and representative as the community, it has a greater offering of access and impact, and it has an international appeal and historic gravity that not everyone can boast about. The result is Memphis being on the upswing, and attracting people who are willing to move to Memphis to start up from San Francisco to Singapore.¹⁷² An excitement for the city capitalizing on its strength also highlights a low-housing cost where “you don’t have to live like a student anymore,” and works to build the public realm that the creative class loves to live in, and distinct love of place is enjoys claiming.¹⁷³¹⁷⁴ In this way, attracting business and workers for a knowledge based economy requires we focus on hardware of infrastructure and buildings, as well as the

software of human and cultural components.”¹⁷⁵ The result will be a stronger economy, larger and more diverse population base, and a maintained motivation to build the social, cultural, and physical environment of the city. Katz and Bradley define a city as, “areas defined by the quality of the ideas they generate, the innovations they spur, and the opportunities they create for people living within and outside the city limits.”¹⁷⁶ Therefore, by investing in a creative class, the city is investing in a creativity of innovation and entrepreneurship that will lift it as a whole.

Similar in an external approach to strengthening Memphis, the Memphis Convention and Visitor Bureau focuses on reaching tourists, talent, and then the local community.¹⁷⁷ With modern tourism, the desires of the tourists be promised, while the needs of the local community maintained. Despite this aim, in a society where tourism is increasing in economic power, some locality of people and place is being traded in for what travelers want and would pay for, further objectifying the people and their space. When false authenticity is regularly added to an object or area in order to enhance a passing experience of a tourist, the whole community is at risk of losing whatever authenticity remained. As authenticity is constructed, it increases for tourists, but decreases for locals, establishing an indirect relationship of style and growth. Memphis has capitalized upon the cultural institutions of the city with the hope of expanding the tourism industry without robbing Memphis from any of its authenticity. Specifically, the tourism industry in Memphis has grown from \$2 billion in 1989 and 1990, to annually \$3.2 billion.¹⁷⁸ With highlights like Graceland, Stax Records, Sun Studios, and Beale Street, a tour of Memphis has used branding to boost with the basis that, “iconic products are loaded with cultural meanings, and brands can build their cultural equity by

establishing connections with such iconic products.”¹⁷⁹ But they are not only selling Memphis’ iconic culture, but also the friendliness of the people, all of its music, distinctively southern food, and of course fun.¹⁸⁰ In fact, the most constant review of Memphis by tourists, other than how they wish they could stay longer, is what a fun city it is. In fact, Memphis has a 58% satisfaction rate, which is above average.¹⁸¹ As Memphis aims to broaden its image and work with its offices in Europe, Canada, Japan, and China, it also knows that they cannot force a brand, but merely hope to educate people on the message that Memphis has trademark experiences that only it can offer. In this way, Memphis is a significant and unique city that people must visit and appreciate.

Conclusions

There is not one Memphis Brand because there is not one Memphis. As the city’s borders, citizens, narratives, and businesses continue to evolve, so must its identity. Although Memphis has a significant history, it also has an innovative present and future. Whether it is changing the image of the city internally or externally, the focus must be the empowerment of the people that make Memphis and its communities, as well as maintaining a collaborative approach to its power structure, leadership, and branding. The branding effort that will be released in September and October will not redefine Memphis or the identity of its citizens, but as the research expresses, there is great hope with the inspiration and motivation of a strong and authentic brand. To pair this branding effort with the already shifting dialogue, Memphians have chosen to be optimistic, active, generous, and collective in how they are rewriting the history of the city. Although a new branding effort may help the city in these ways, many still believe that an attention to brand management overshadows the real problems of Memphis. Additionally, in a city

so individually and authentically minded, there is an inevitable group of citizens that will not support a new brand because of its mere existence. In this way, resistance is not necessarily an opponent to the brand that is created, but rather the idea that they are labeled by a larger manufactured representation. Therefore, the acceptance of this new narrative is key is analyzing whether or not it is in fact the “Memphis brand”. Hopefully, if it is able to partner with a growing confidence and pride of place in Memphis, the branding will help transform Memphis from the city of potential, into the city of authentic accomplishment.

Figure 1.

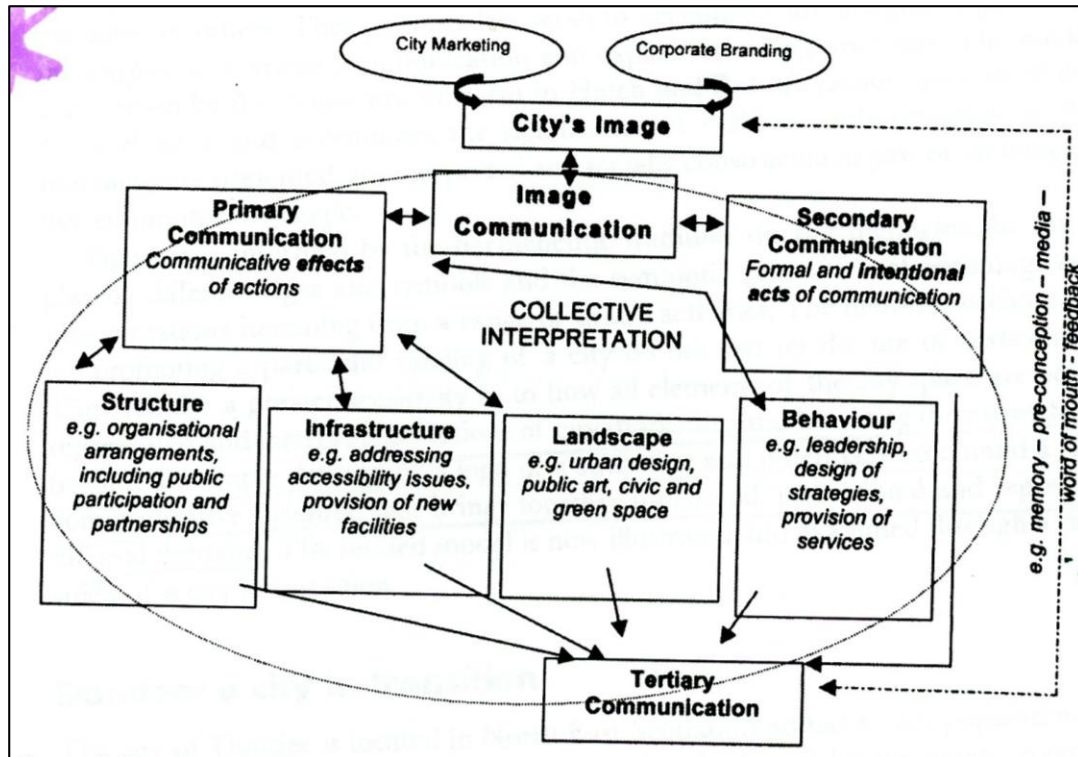


Figure 2.

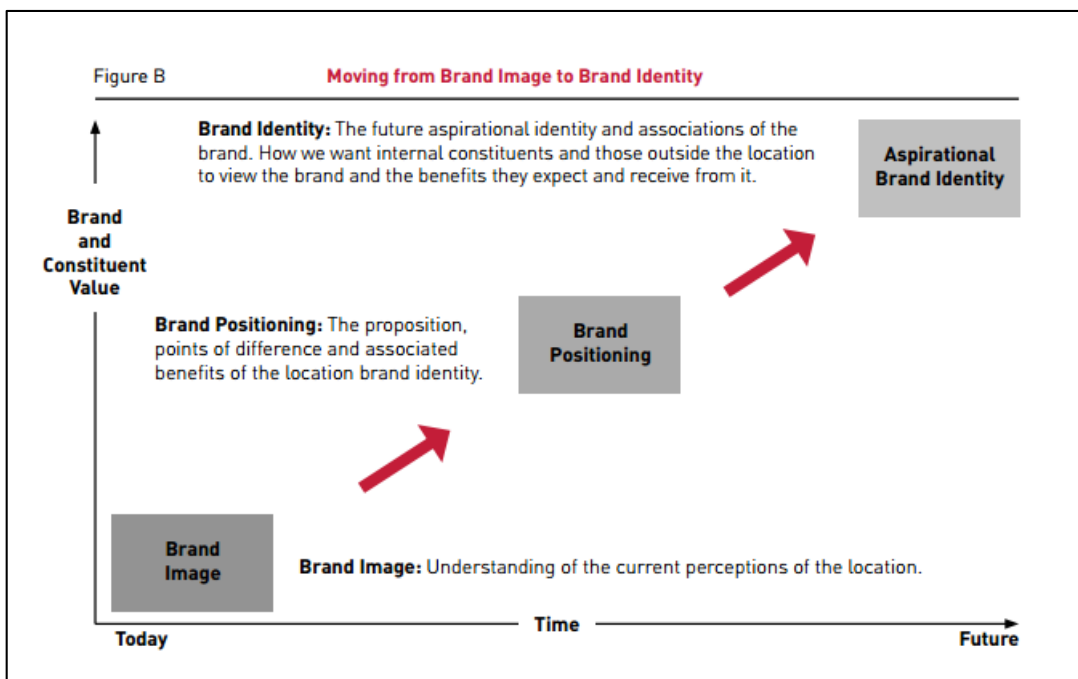


Figure 3.

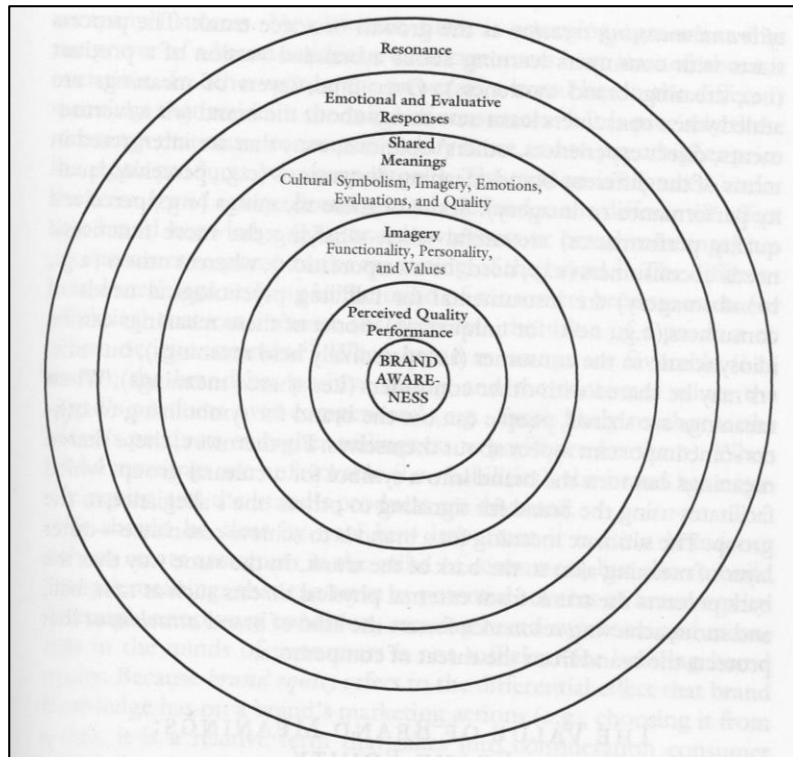


Figure 4.

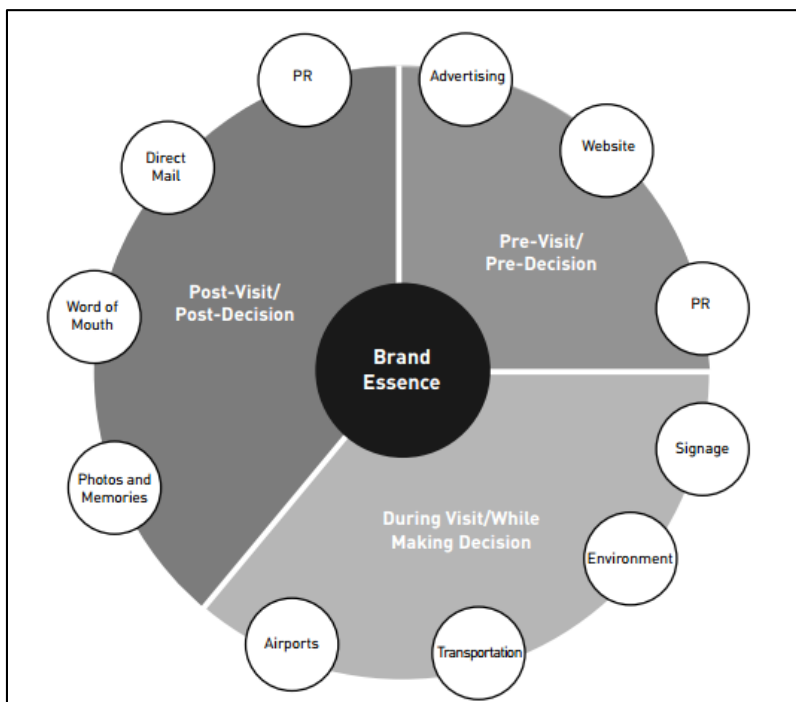
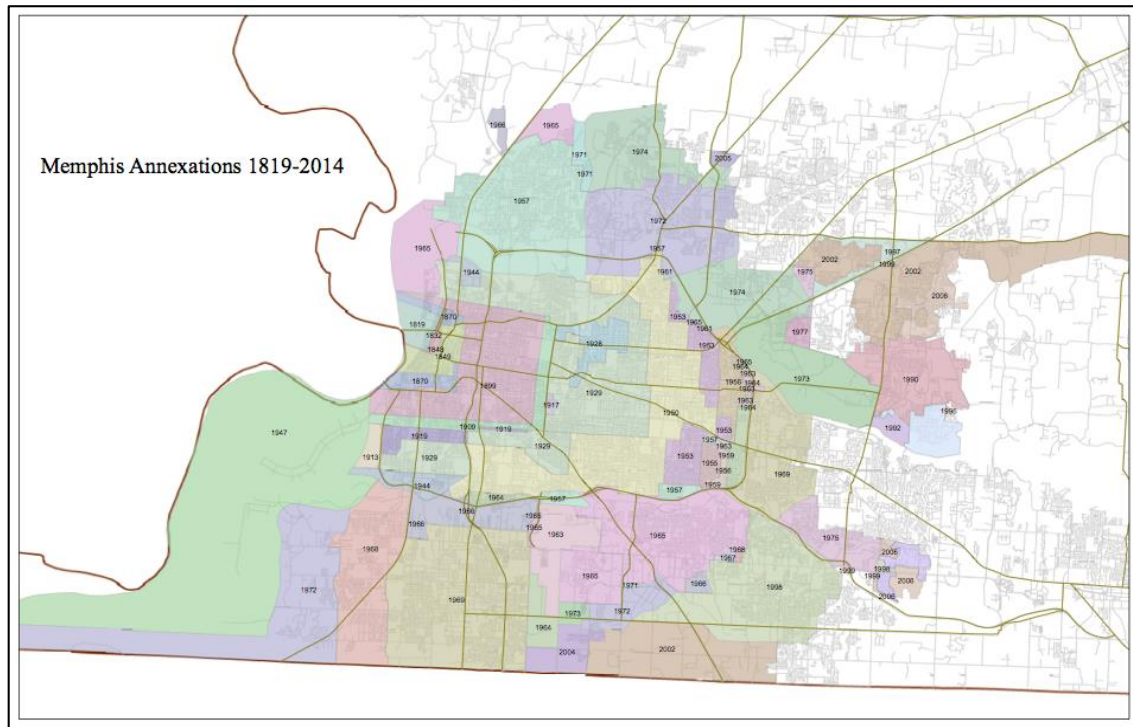


Figure 5.



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