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## Place branding in strategic spatial planning

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## Summary

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This Ph.D. thesis directly scrutinizes the actual or potential roles of place branding as an instrument of the strategic spatial planning approach, specifically at the regional scale. By a thorough exploration of the theoretical links between place branding and strategic spatial planning, the thesis addresses significant gaps in the place-branding literature, contributing to its theoretical refinement and a maturation of its praxis. At the same time, the thesis contributes to the instruments-kit of the strategic spatial planning approach and spatial strategy making; hence, it strengthens the foundations for a renewal of strategic spatial planning.

The thesis investigates the empirical significance of a region-branding initiative, integrated as an instrument within wider strategic spatial planning, by taking one of the five mainland NUTS II-regions of Portugal - the northern region - as a case study. It is the aim of this thesis to contribute to the academic debate and practice of regional branding by discussing its relevance and effectiveness in supporting spatial-economic and social-spatial realignment through the shaping of clearly envisioned, agreed and realistic futures for places, such as regions.

The primary strand of reasoning postulated in this thesis - place branding as a strategic spatial planning instrument - is separate from the corporate branding and marketing approaches to the process of place branding that stills dominate the discourse. This was undertaken without aiming to undervalue the relevance of translating mainstream methods from business and corporate branding to places; instead, it highlighted the value and effectiveness of a more geographical and spatial planning perspective in place branding.

The fields of research that this thesis engages with are gaining particular momentum in a period when place branding has been embraced by place managers and policymakers as a panacea for a bewildering assortment of local economic and social ailments. In addition, strategic spatial planning has been conceived as a means of overcoming the temporal and often spatial limitations of traditional spatial-planning instruments. Moreover, the application of branding procedures and philosophies to districts, cities, countries and, to a lesser extent, to regions and cross-border regions has become an appealing topic for academic research. This has resulted in several theoretical developments as well as methodological contributions to place branding in the form of journal articles, books and reports.

Despite the growing interest in the theory and practice of place branding, several significant gaps and unresolved issues remain to be explored. Notwithstanding the extent of the debate on place branding, it still lacks a conceptual framework to unveil its relationship to spatial-planning strategies. Furthermore, strategic spatial planning literature has seldom discussed place branding or related concepts, as chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis underline. Hence, this thesis reveals critically the links between place branding and strategic spatial planning. Linking place-branding initiatives with spatial planning may also counterpoise the criticisms that charge the practice with being ineffective, neutral regarding the real needs of local communities, favouring more powerful economic and social groups and lacking civic participation and cooperation.

Place branding is thought to facilitate strategic change in places - specifically, through reimagining, repositioning or rescaling processes as well as by supporting endogenous urban and

regional development. Place branding may also be used to support the shaping of a vision for the future of places, as well as to foster economic restructuring, social inclusion and cohesion, political engagement and participation, the reinforcement of place identification and the general long-term well-being of citizens. Place branding as a means of communication between governments and those who are governed can support the communication of place potentials and excellence, thus giving visibility and enhancing national and international recognition.

Place branding is not thought to involve promotional measures alone, but primarily spatial-functional, organizational and financial measures that are meant to improve and change structurally the socio-spatial and spatial-economic conditions of places. A range of possible approaches to place branding can be found in the literature. This Ph.D. thesis advocates a more strategic spatial planning oriented approach to place branding. It is an approach that attempts to support the search for ways of thinking able to contribute to the solving of some unresolved theoretical and empirical issues within place branding. The eighth chapter of this thesis refines this approach, aiming to make place branding more effective; more economically, socially and environmentally responsible; as well as more grounded in the theoretical field of research and practice. The discovery of a new theoretical foundation makes a contribution by rethinking place branding beyond the business context, as well as far beyond the self-regarding fascination of place promotion and/or advertising strategies on which some place managers and politicians rely. This excessive reliance on place logos, taglines and mainstream promotional campaigns have proven to be fruitless for changing the global perceptions of a place, contributing to the well-being of local communities or enabling structural change.

This thesis asserts that place branding and place brands must be primarily oriented towards the support of local businesses, improving infrastructures and providing health and educational services, rather than being focused mainly on attracting investment, tourists and highly qualified workers. For this to happen, this thesis argues that a possible solution is to integrate place branding as an instrument within strategic spatial planning. Chapter 2 reflects critically on the thesis' main research questions - How and why might (and, eventually, should) place branding be taken as an instrument in the strategic spatial planning approach (thus contributing to the improvement of the socio-spatial and spatial-economic conditions), reshaping responses to contemporary challenges faced by places and shape clearly envisioned, agreed, socially responsible and realistic futures for places?

Strategic spatial planning, which takes an integrated approach to the development of a territory, is aiming at overcome the shortcomings of traditional or/and statutory spatial planning. Traditional spatial-planning instruments are mostly concerned with the location, intensity and harmonization of land use and development. However, it has been widely debated whether cities and regions, such as northern Portugal, are faced with a complex range of challenges that can no longer be addressed and managed adequately with only the traditional approach to spatial planning. The strategic spatial planning approach thus emerged as a way to provide a frame of reference for focusing and coordinating the decisions and actions of place actors dealing with spatial changes, by confronting the contemporary social, spatial and economic needs of a place and envisioning better futures.

A vision for a place provides citizens and place actors with views of the future that can be shared, a sense of direction and mobilization around agreed, important matters for spatial development. In addition, strategic spatial planning is thought to be an active force in enabling change as well as helping to change public agendas in an integrative way. As a set of governance practices for developing and implementing strategies, plans, policies and projects, strategic spatial planning is able to encourage different levels of government to work together and attempts constantly to find a mutually beneficial dialectic between top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

Strategic spatial planning processes, ideally, seek to resolve conflict between regional actors, citizens or groups of citizens; contribute to eliminating social exclusion and neutralizing power relations, which often tend to favour the most powerful. It allows for multilevel governance and public, economic and civil-society involvement during planning, decision-making and implementation stages. Civic and organizational participation is a key element of the definition of place branding postulated in this thesis, as it is in strategic spatial planning. Chapter 4 debates co-creation in place branding, chapter 5 touches upon the need for participatory place branding and chapter 8 picks up the key considerations of those two chapters and reflects critically on the idea of co-production in regional branding.

Place branding and strategic spatial planning both require a high level of engagement with key actors (local and/or regional) as a way to both guarantee the use of local and expert knowledge and to ensure that planning and branding processes are responsive, well informed, just and fair. This civic and institutional involvement before, during and after any place branding and spatial strategy making practices can assist and complement theoretical development. Aiming to capture different aspects of strategic spatial planning that contribute to the theoretical framework discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 5, this thesis proposes a strategic spatial planning framework that will support the construction of the main theoretical framework of the study that guided the qualitative, in-depth interviewing employed as a data-collection method.

After a thorough literature review, this thesis reflects and further explores the following six key focal points of strategic spatial planning. Strategic spatial planning focuses on: (i) place-specific qualities, assets and key regional social, cultural, productive, intellectual and physical strategic domains; (ii) addressing issues that really matter in the day-to-day life of communities; (iii) enabling structural change in an integrative, creative and innovative way; (iv) involving/engaging with key regional actors, civic society and institutions, and supporting the co-production of just and fair regional planning strategies; (v) envisioning agreed (hopefully better) and realistic futures within a more hybrid mode of democracy and multilevel governance that is open to diversity, equity and local and expert knowledge and values; and (vi) acquiring and strengthening spatial identity and the reinforcement of spatial feelings of belonging and attachment.

The six key focal points listed above have been reshaped with knowledge derived from the place-branding literature and tested using empirical evidence from the case study on northern Portugal. It was subsequently translated into a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework on which this thesis is based is the result of the intertwining relations between place branding and strategic spatial planning. Chapter 5 summarizes these relationships and establishes the theoretical framework of the study, which comprises six key vectors: (i) a focus on the region's qualities,

strategic domains, assets and attributes; (ii) a focus on addressing the region's economic, social and political constraints; (iii) a focus on enabling and communicating structural change; (iv) a focus on involving key regional actors and civic society; (v) a focus on envisioning shared, better and realistic futures and (vi) a focus on reinforcing of sense of belonging and regional feelings.

The theoretical framework of the study demonstrates the fact that a region brand striving for synergies with strategic spatial planning and focusing on the above-mentioned six vectors would be effective in improving the spatial condition of places, as well as envisioning shared futures. In addition, it would also be effective in fostering the attraction of investment, increasing tourism revenues, supporting local businesses, attracting and retaining talented people and inhabitants and supporting job creation and its maintenance. As clarified earlier, the theoretical exploration of this framework was conducted by taking northern Portugal as a case study. Chapter 5 also details relevant findings from a set of interviews with regional actors with a stake in and expertise of day-to-day issues of northern Portugal. It is worth mentioning that the starting point for chapters 5 and 6 resulted from the research findings debated in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3 explores the roots of place-branding theory and practice in Portugal and its northern region, specifically. It synthesizes the main literature on the subject at the national and regional levels, with a special focus on the approaches taken. The chapter employs content analysis aiming to understand how place branding has been approached (or not) in spatial-development plans, strategic initiatives and policy documents mainly for the period between 2014 and 2020, at the national (Portugal), regional (northern Portugal), cross-border Euroregion (Galicia-northern Portugal) and supra-national levels. There are four key concluding remarks worth noting regarding the integration of branding principles into the current context: (i) 'place branding' is an absent term; (ii) there is a predominance of tourism-oriented promotional initiatives and investment-oriented marketing campaigns which are lacking vertical and horizontal institutional articulations; (iii) that inconsistent communication strategies exist, which are each supported by unique visual elements and aesthetic values and (iv) only the documents produced at a cross-border level (Galicia-northern Portugal) seem to articulate marketing initiatives in a better way, with more strategic spatial interventions and a vision for the Euroregion with an eye on the 2020 horizon (the 2020 horizon follows the European Union (EU) Strategy 2020 and the Partnership Agreement EU-Portugal for the period 2014–2020).

Chapter 4 shows how content analysis can be used to identify and understand the ways in which tourists and travellers perceive Portugal and its northern region as a place for tourism. This chapter underlines that the application of content analysis methodology to online material could contribute to a refined place-branding initiative for Portugal and its regions, including the northern part, by integrating user-generated and travel experts' content into the place-branding strategy — this is the co-creation of place brands.

Chapter 5 analyses the opinions of 16 key regional actors on a region-branding strategy for northern Portugal that is integrated as an instrument within wider strategic spatial planning. Its findings identify the key strategic domains in which the region excels. These domains could fuel a potential regional brand as a way to overcome deep-seated regional constraints and limitations identified in chapters 1 and 6. The strategic planning documents in force, however, have not yet

been successful in dealing with region branding. Testing the theoretical framework on the case study attempts to reinforce the primary strand of reasoning. Chapter 5 reveals that region branding integrated as an instrument in wider strategic spatial planning for northern Portugal would (i) support the communication of ongoing structural change and provide visibility to the region; (ii) support investment attraction, thereby supporting job creation, by linking key strategic domains with the demand needs and aligning regional strategies to support local business; (iii) boost the regional identity by focusing on the region's unique qualities (tangible and intangible elements) and (iv) contribute to envisioning different futures through the participation of key regional actors and organizations, aligning planning and branding based on regional narratives, stories, hopes and wills.

Chapter 6 brings into the debate the opinions of key regional actors on the tourism potential of northern Portugal, as well as an in-depth analysis of the main documents for the tourism sector the country. Specifically, the two entities that one can consider the most important in terms of tourism planning, development and region-branding initiatives, (among other substantive matters for the envisioning of better futures for the region) are (i) Tourism of Porto and the North of Portugal and (ii) the North Regional Coordination and Development Commission. Findings show that there are misalignments between the entities; misconceptions, such as the definition of a place brand and the nonexistence of a long-term vision for the tourism sector. The current economic and social environment reflects the lack of territorial organization and the definition of unique trajectories for spatial development and potential branding strategies. In line with interviewees' opinions, tourism plays a crucial role as a generator of jobs and revenues; therefore, it has been identified as a strategic domain able to integrate a wider regional-branding strategy. It thereby reinforces the key regional qualities, strategic domains, assets, attractions and attributes enumerated by interviewees in chapter 5 (see Figure 5.2.): (i) technical textiles, (ii) footwear, (iii) tourism, (iv) health-related activities and (v) agro-food related activities.

Chapter 7 adopts a strategic spatial planning approach to think strategically about potential joint place-branding initiatives between cross-border regions. The case study focuses on the cross-border region that is composed of the NUTS III Alto Minho, Cávado, Ave, Metropolitan Area of Porto/Área Metropolitana do Porto, Alto Tâmega, Tâmega e Sousa, Douro and Terras de Trás-os-Montes of Northern Portugal and the provinces of A Coruña, Lugo, Ourense and Pontevedra of the autonomous community of Galicia in north-west Spain. Chapter 7 aims to shed some light on the empirical significance of a cross-border place-branding strategy able to encourage entrepreneurship, job creation, trade and investment. Findings show that the combination of the key economic domains in which Galicia-northern Portugal excels will echo the cross-border assets and strengthen a joint cross-border region branding strategy. A cross-border branding strategy could give visibility to, build a coherent vision of and a respected storyline for the Euroregion of Galicia-northern Portugal, which is directed towards Portugal, Spain and the rest of the world.

The main contention of this thesis is that place branding must be taken as an instrument in strategic spatial planning (as a means), to improve the socio-spatial and spatial-economic conditions (the end) of places, independently of the geographical scale of application. In addition, this thesis brings a more geospatial understanding to the phenomenon of place branding, thus conveying an alternative approach to the dominant fetishes of business context and place

ranking/indexes. There remain, however, some unresolved issues within the place-branding literature and practices.

Chapter 8 identifies six needs to enhance the effectiveness of integrating place branding within strategic spatial planning: (i) the need to align place branding with place-specific qualities through tailor-made and context sensitive initiatives; (ii) the need to align place branding with spatial-development plans and strategic spatial-planning goals of a place, thus improving spatial conditions; (iii) the need for strategic thinking in place branding, thus enabling structural change in places; (iv) the need for co-production in place branding, thus co-producing a collective place branding initiative in a collective spatial logic; (v) the need to align place branding with the envisioning process of devising desirable futures, thus aligning the expectations people hold in their minds with the actual reality of the place in the present, and the aspirational future and (vi) the need to consider place branding as a possible route to reinvigorate spatial identities and a sense of place.

After highlighting and elaborating on the above issues, this thesis tries to promote interest in the alignment of potential place-branding strategies and wider spatial-planning strategies, and to encourage further research for the establishment of additional relationships. This research might lay the foundations for a rethinking of place branding and a theoretical and practical renewal of the strategic spatial planning approach.