

Identity and the City: Urban identity, an asset for sustainable development in times of globalisation

Report by Nils Scheffler



Urban identity, an asset for sustainable development in times of globalisation? This was the subject of lively discussion during the workshop at the Urbact Annual conference in Stockholm in 2009. Find statements and views in this report.

The workshop on “Identity and the City”, lead by *Philip Stein*, Urbact Thematic Pole Manager, started with several statements given by Lead Experts from Urbact II networks and was followed up by focussed reflection from Speakers at the city level. These statements induced a many-sided discussion about urban identity between workshop panellists and the audience.

Statements

Identity to cherish, identity to discard

Paulius Kulikauskas, Lead Expert from the Urbact II REPAIR network, emphasised that people and places are changing as a result of economic and social changes. This leads to the question of which part of the existing identity should be retained and which should be transformed and redeveloped – and in particular for whom. In trying to find an answer we have to be aware that different identities exist within the same place, due to divergence of internal and external perspectives. “Visitors” might see the place differently than “Locals”. So when debating identity people need to be conscious about “whose” identity they are talking about and what the tangible and intangible carriers of that identity are.

Loosening of traditional city identities in metropolitan city regions

Fernando Barreiro, Lead Expert from the Urbact II NeT TOPIC network, stressed that urban centres are the preferential sites for socialization, for the manifestation of cultural identity, for social inclusion, for multicultural links and for the developed awareness of belonging to the same community. In metropolitan city regions there exists a multiplicity of peripheral urban centres, where images are sometimes negative (peripheral, dormitory, marginal, unsafe, etc.), leading to conditions where residents become less interested in participating in municipal life and in turn contributing to the losing of their local identity. So today the linkage of people to their territory is often characterised by the loosening of identities, even the fading importance of previous traditional sources such as national or city identity.

‘Collective’ and ‘distinctive’ identities

Nils Scheffler, Lead Expert from the Urbact II HerO network, underlined the perception of identity on the personal and subjective level, which leads to the appearance of many different identities within a city or of an area, depending on whom you ask. Subsequently, cities that want to deal with identity as a development asset should concentrate on dealing with ‘collective’ and ‘distinctive’ identities. A collective identity is felt by a wider group of citizens - it makes them feel attached to their environment, binding them, and in strong cases even encouraging them to actively advocate for a place. Thus, a collective identity can activate people to become involved in support of an area and its people. The ‘distinctive’ identity is how the city or a place is perceived and viewed from the outside. If this identity positively distinguishes the city from other towns and regions in the context of global competition, this can then be an important force to attract citizens, tourism, skilled people, enterprises and investments.

Heritage based identity to support economic growth

Matthias Ripp, Lead Partner of the Urbact II HerO network from the municipality of Regensburg, highlighted the special situation of Regensburg: Regensburg is an economic, strong developing city and a world heritage site. Both of these factors combine in shaping the identity of Regensburg beyond its city borders. The aim of Regensburg is to use the image and identity of being a world heritage city – being something unique in the world – to attract international companies (and to challenge and dismiss the fear that heritage hinders the economic activities). At the same time this identity, based on the local ‘world’ heritage, is used to further attach the local and regional population to the city of Regensburg.



Re-creating local identity by transforming its carriers

Alessandro Casati from the municipality of Sesto San Giovanni described the change of the local identity of Sesto San Giovanni due to the industrial decline of the area. In the past the steel factories provided jobs and income, strongly shaping the local identity and attachment of the inhabitants to the area (“the city of factories”), building community solidarity based on common (employment/living) experience. With the industrial decline the steel factories lost their positive function as a glue for the community and with it the local identity faded. Now through imagining the re-use of former steel factory sites and their surroundings, giving them new purposes for the community, a new identity is shaped, which builds upon the old identity. Thus, instead of destroying the places which formed the local identity, they are being re-used to re-create the contemporary local identity.

Internal and external views on identity of a place

Marianna Kajantie from the municipality of Helsinki recounted a the story about how the municipality of Helsinki appointed international artists to show the ‘picture’ of Helsinki as a feature of its European Cultural Capital status. The result of the work was that the pictures ‘drawn’ were completely differently interpreted by the decision makers of Helsinki – with their internal perspective – than by the international artists – with their external perspective. This culminated in a breakdown of common understanding and finally the responsible authorities refusal of the pictures ‘drawn’ by the artists. This story demonstrated that there are different interpretations on the identity from the inside and outside perspective and that creating an identity from the ‘outside’ to the ‘inside’ is very difficult, even delicate, as perspectives and perceptions can be very differently interpreted (culturally, economically and socially).

Discussion

The statements of the speakers produced a discussion with the audience about “Urban identities”, which moved around several questions:

What are the key issues to be taken into account?

The audience stressed that dealing with identity is a complex issue as there are several identities within a town, which are influenced by material and immaterial ‘carriers’. Many cases demonstrate that identity is the preserve of the dominant majority based on common experience (language, history, fashion, habits or even professional practices) while we realise that when identity is dissected it may also

reflect notions of identification, linked to community behaviour, proximity factors, feelings of ownership etc. The subject of particular identities linked to youth culture was exemplified as a feature which is often not understood or taken into account by decision-makers. In this context the perception of the identity varies from people to people as well as from the inside and outside perspective. There are also the multilevel characteristics of identity (national, even transnational, regional and local identities which are super-imposed within the same area); some saying that there is a common identity ‘of all’ on which several differing layers of identities are equally operative. It was also underlined that identity is not consistent, that it is open to change due to modifications in social and economic conditions and changes in the ‘carriers’ of the identity. The question of whether identity is subject to a slow or swifter change dynamic divided participants opinion and highlighted different experiences, and concern was expressed that contemporary physical interventions may only have a short lifespan in terms of influencing identity building.

When considering urban identities people have to differentiate between positive and negative identities, which affect the social and economic development of the city. Positive ones should be promoted and can be used as development asset, (Nils Scheffler described “the invisible development asset”). Negative identities demand intervention and change, where educational projects have an important role to play. However in many cases ‘using’ identity is easier than trying to change it owing to the inherent complexity of identity characteristics and dynamics. Also the aspect of inheriting identity from one generation to the other was discussed in the sense that having an interesting, distinctive identity can be more important than having an attractive identity, something which perhaps more cities have in common.

What are the positive aspects associated with Urban Identity in terms of achieving sustainable urban development?

The audience emphasised that strong local identities (uniqueness) can help to present an interesting identity to the outside world, attracting people and development from the outside. Also strong local identities do encourage ownership and peoples attachment to the place, mobilising them to become actively involved in support of the area and its community.

What negative forces or problems need to be recognised and addressed dealing with urban identity?

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The audience discussed that the global (economic) development endangers many forms of local identities, turning them into lowest common denominator global identities, which have a weaker effect of bonding people to the community. Also the 'risk' of trying to develop *new* identities was discussed stating that strong identities with positive effects on urban development processes cannot be easily developed from scratch. In such a situation it is very difficult to manufacture identities that people will readily adopt (arrogant 're-branding'). Here it is important to build up on existing local identities taking centre-periphery distinctions linked to social interaction into account. Also the role of the mass media in creating identities and images from the outside was discussed as a problematic aspect.



Conclusion

The participants highlighted the fact that, identity as a feature of today's urban condition is a complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered and evolving phenomenon. In this sense identity is recognised as a particularly potent foundation of community building (immaterial identification) and/or image development (material –spatial, physical parameters). At the same time it can be a source of division, real but marginalised identities, cultural inequality even exclusion in the changing demographic composition of our cities and neighbourhoods. Summarising the statements and discussion a general view can be reported, confirming that it is therefore important to deal with urban identities, in particular by trying to maintain local and distinguishable identities as a means of binding and attracting citizens and relevant stakeholders. When re-creating a local identity it seems advisable to seek to build upon the positive aspects of the past identity and involve the people 'belonging' to the identity - as still "the" identity is felt on a personal level (respect the local identity - do not impose identity). As there are several identities, in particular internal and external ones, it is crucial to recognise and create mutual awareness of these different perspectives, if urban identities are to play an effective role in managing integrated city development. So finally "Urban identity" was confirmed as an important legacy of the past, a potential force for community building in the present if handled correctly, and an ongoing and highly relevant project for the future of our cities.

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