Greetings
from
TRANSFORM city

the power of
PLACEMAKING
in building
CITY BRANDS

Public spaces connect neighbours, promote exercise, spark business investment and attract visitors. They can also improve mental health, air quality, safety and sustainability. **Lisa Battles** explores how placemaking influences city brands within the context of a new global ranking

In May 2023, leading brand valuation and strategy consultancy Brand Finance released its first City Index, which ranks 100 city brands worldwide for familiarity, reputation and perception among 15,000 survey respondents from 20 countries.

Brand Finance chairman and CEO David Haigh states in the report that its purpose is to "emphasise the importance of city brands and the benefits of possessing a valuable and robust city brand."

The survey collected data from people across seven "dimensions of consideration," ie whether respondents perceive the cities as desirable places to reside, work locally, work remotely, study, retire, visit or invest. The responses were assessed across 45 different attributes relevant to the dimensions, with domestic responses filtered to yield accurate foreign perceptions.

Public spaces reinforce city brands

Far more than public spaces lifted London, New York and Paris to the top of the index. And yet people can look to those cities for inspiration when leveraging placemaking in their municipalities, says Brand Finance place branding director Konrad Jagodzinski.

"Place branding and placemaking, though distinct in their processes and immediate objectives, are interconnected in shaping a city's identity, perceptions and brand experience," he says, further delineating placemaking as "a tactical tool focused on physical spaces and how they foster community engagement, create business opportunities and increase touristic appeal."

"In many cases, [physical spaces] do reinforce a city's character and brand narrative. Place branding encompasses far more than just a city's physical characteristics; it is a strategic approach to managing a place – shaping both its reality and perceptions. It has an impact on how residents and external stakeholders perceive the city's identity, tourism offering, potential for business and investment and the overall quality of life it offers," he says.

Jagodzinski says of the seven attribute groupings used in the ranking, public space design most substantially impacts the "Culture & Heritage," "Sustainability & Transport," and "Liveability" considerations. For example, the presence of well-planned public museums, art galleries, theatres and music venues obviously up the score for cultural favourability. Green spaces, transportation infrastructure and environmentally conscious projects positively impact sustainability perceptions. And while

the impact is less direct on other attribute groupings, they have the potential to influence a city's perception across them all, he adds.

Strong brands guide effective placemaking

Ideally, a city should have a well-defined city brand to which governments and private investors should align their public development since the physical aspects of a place are where the abstract elements of its brand take a concrete form, Jagodzinski says.

"They translate a city's identity, values and narrative into a tangible experience. Well-designed public spaces can become tangible expressions of the city brand, serving as real-life evidence of the brand promises and values," he says.

For example, London's brand strength transcends its public spaces to its deep historical heritage and cultural wealth along with its promotion of core values that include diversity, inclusivity and innovation. Meanwhile, it also ranks third globally for museums, galleries, theatres and music venues – and fourth for its architecture.

Jagodzinski also points to new placemaking successes there, including the dramatic transformation of King's Cross, a former historic industrial area that is now a lively, attractive mixed-use destination.

"This transformation blends heritage with modern architecture and innovative public space design, enhancing London's reputation as a forward-thinking global city," he says.

Another example he cites is sixth-ranked Singapore, which has aligned its brand identity of "The Garden City" with its Gardens by the Bay development, which features dramatic, innovative architecture and sustainable design.

Singapore's ranking is "marked by the strongest global perceptions as an ideal hub for startups,

	CITY BRAND	COUNTRY	SCORE
1	London	UK	84.6
2	New York	USA	83.0
3	Paris	France	79.7
4	Los Angeles	USA	78.6
5	Sydney	Australia	77.9
6	Singapore	Singapore	77.5
7	Tokyo	Japan	77.0
8	San Francisco	USA	76.3
9	Dubai	UAE	75.8
10	Amsterdam	Netherlands	75.7
11	Miami	USA	73.7
12	Toronto	Canada	73.3
13	Barcelona	Spain	73.2
14	Rome	Italy	72.5
15	Chicago	USA	72.2
16	Melbourne	Australia	72.1
17	Zurich	Switzerland	72.0
18	Berlin	Germany	71.8
19	Milan	Italy	71.5
20	Boston	USA	71.0

Top 20 best city brands from the Brand Finance City Index 2023

Image credit: Chris Wood / Repurposed gas holders and canal locks at Kings Cross

The "supertrees" tower over Gardens by the Bay, Singapore
Image credit: Wikipedia Creative Commons: Shiny Things
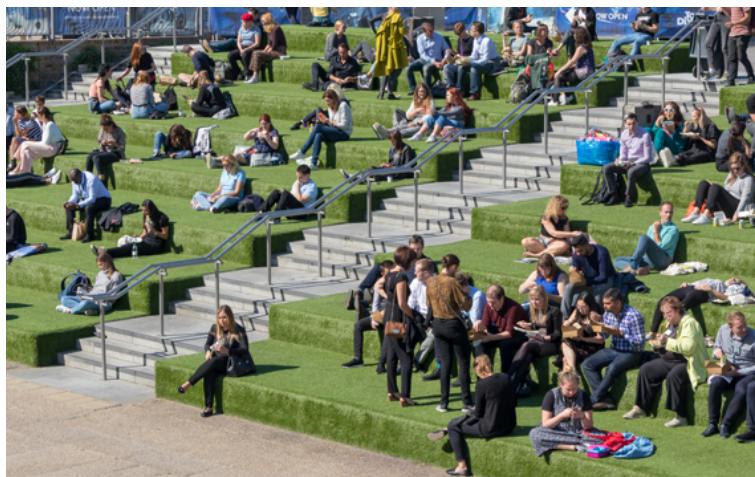
Pegasus Trail, Design - 100 Architects (Shanghai) Co., Ltd.
Photography - Rex Zou

"The synergy between place branding and placemaking can be also beneficial in fostering a sense of ownership and pride among its residents"

innovations and its dedication to cleanliness and sustainability," Jagodzinski says. "Gardens by the Bay, as an emblem of Singapore's innovation and eco-consciousness, plays one of the key roles in reinforcing those perceptions."

Innovative public spaces improve city brands

Conversely, cities that need more solutions for urban expansion, public transportation, green spaces, recreational areas and cultural hubs will experience a negative impact on overall brand perception. In addition, while iconic landmarks can help cities build an important foundation for familiarity, that alone doesn't differentiate a place enough to compete with others that check all the boxes across the other brand pillars, Jagodzinski says.

As in the case of Singapore's Gardens by the Bay, these developments are most impactful when they do both.

That's central to the mission of Shanghai-based landscape architecture studio 100architects. From its home base and a new office in Dubai, the firm delivers projects worldwide focused on street architecture and urban interventions, "generating solutions that encourage the occurrence of joyful social dynamics."

The studio's boldly creative style has brought an undeniable wow factor to projects since its founding in 2013 by Marcial Jesús, who leads the firm today.

He says his team rarely receives exact brand cues to follow, largely because the clients have already considered that when choosing to align their brands with the studio's distinct style. Instead, clients typically challenge them to bring their unique design approach to specific community and space objectives. And the rest takes care of itself.

"We don't work with any agency that does branding. We are architects in the most traditional way. At the same time, our projects surely impact our clients' identity and positioning. Whether it's a temporary installation, a permanent installation belonging to the landscape architecture realm or a metropolitan park, our strong design lines, design decisions and design colours aim to create a strong identity. We help the developer, retail operator, municipality or government to stand out within the market," he says.

How public space design helps establish brands

100architects' Shanghai home base is the third most populated city in the world with over 30 million residents. While the city ranked 54th on the index, ambitious placemaking projects are happening there and throughout China, especially in rapidly developing areas that have only become population centres in recent years.

Jesús says many of their projects in China focus on designing spaces that ultimately help these new urban centres differentiate themselves. It's not classical landscape architecture where design focuses on elegant alignment with a space's existing character, but "injecting identity into places that do not have one," he says.

Perhaps not the newest example and yet a place more people know is Shanghai's Pudong New Area. Over the last 30 years, the district has grown from mostly rural, agricultural land into the city's vibrant business and economic centre. Many billions of yuan have gone into the district's infrastructure and urban renewal projects, especially toward a concept Shanghai introduced in 2016. The approach focuses on building infrastructure to support "15-min-radius community life circles" so it would only take that amount of time for people to walk to key destinations for work, education, health care, entertainment, sports, recreation and leisure.

The district's Lujiazui Finance & Trade Zone development entity engaged 100architects for a project in front of the Jinyang L Site Mall, giving them a goal of engaging people of all ages who visit or live in the neighbourhood. The studio designed

"[Place branding] has an impact on how residents and external stakeholders perceive the city's identity, tourism offering, potential for business and investment and the overall quality of life it offers"

主要游戏设备
Main Playstructure

绿化
Greenery

树池座椅
Lounge Seating

摇马
Spring

老年人活动设施
Elderly equipment

洗手池
Hand Sink

沙坑游戏区
Sunken Playground

蹦床
Trampoline

路灯
Lighting Feature

运动区
Sport Core

地面游戏
Floor Game

乒乓球桌
Ping-Pong

象棋桌
Chinese Chess

休憩区
Seating
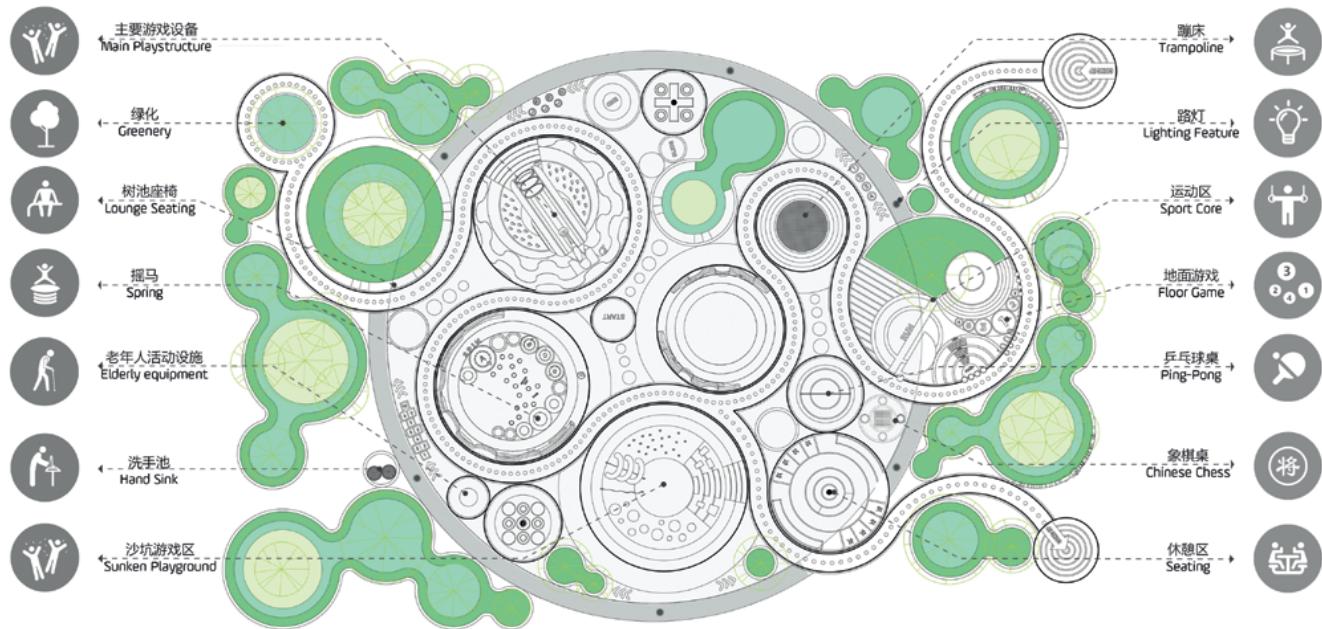
The Nest, Design - 100 Architects (Shanghai) Co., Ltd.
Photography - Rex Zou

Me: An ad? What? Me? What do I say?

Alter ego: I don't know! How about "We're an award-winning branding and design agency?"

Me: But everybody says that. There must be something more compelling than that?

Alter ego: Okay then, how about "We're an award-winning branding and design agency, helping to transform clients' businesses?"

Me: Ooh, I see what you did there! I like the link with Transform. Very good. But it's still a bit dry. We're not dry are we?

Alter ego: Good grief no! Okay, I've got it... "We create those penny drop moments that connect with your audience."

Me: Is there something about how we do that? Can we include something about our audaciousness?

Alter ego: Hmm. I guess so. "Kimpton Creative – audacious creativity that chimes with your audience."

Me: Nah. Too wanky.

Alter ego: Argghh! Make your mind up! I thought clarity of thought was your strong point?

Me: It is, we'll get there, we just need to push it around a bit more. Tell you what, I'll pop to the loo, that always helps.

Alter ego: Okay, while you're there, I'll think again.

...Two minutes later...

Me: Aha! See, always works, I've got it. What we need is some proof that what we do works.

Alter ego: Okay.......... Do we have any?

Me: Of course we do! What about when we increased visitor footfall by 46% in one year?

Alter ego: Oh yeah. What have we got that's more about profits?

Me: Umm... we helped increase a property company's profits from £10.8m to £98m in two years.

Alter ego: Oh yes. That's pretty powerful. How much did we get paid for that? But how on earth do we get that into a sentence about us?

Me: Good question. Maybe something like: "We effect change that will boost your fortunes."

Alter ego: Interesting double entendre there. I like it.

Me: Who's going to be looking at this book anyway?

Alter ego: Well, mainly our competitors I guess.

Me: What!? Oh FFS!

Alter ego: Calm down. It's bound to be read by normal people as well.

Me: Okay, well anyway, this is an awards book. Does that give us any clues?

Alter ego: I know: how about "We're an award-winning branding and design agency?"

Me: Perfect!

Kimpton Creative... We're an award-winning branding and design agency.

kimpton

kimptoncreative.com

Lollipop Street,
Design - 100 Architects
(Shanghai) Co., Ltd.

Photography - Rex Zou

Lollipop Street, which pops with colour and whimsy and includes a thoughtful path that weaves through different play challenges geared to a wide range of age groups. True to its name, it features giant candy-inspired objects, urban furniture and play structures. It promotes community connection, leisure and fun while creating an experientially satisfying and visually iconic landmark.

A couple of other transformative public space projects the studio completed in China include the Pegasus Trail playscape in Chongqing for the Dong Yuan Dichan Properties development company, and in Chengdu, The Nest and The Other Nest, for the New Hope Group.

A roadmap to enhancing city brands

Certainly, placemaking has a part to play in the bigger picture of building a city's brand power. The best way to do it, Jagodzinski reiterates, is to consider it as one tactic within the process. He suggests cities start with a thorough self-evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, cultural heritage and infrastructure. Next, conduct comprehensive national and international research to gauge perception, cross-referencing against data collected about local perceptions.

With those insights, cities can analyse the data to identify behavioural drivers, then set priorities by aligning their best attributes with target audiences' motivations and perceptions. In turn, those priorities will inform the development of a central brand idea, which should be done in collaboration with community stakeholders – citizens, businesses and cultural leaders.

"Last but not least, urban planning in general – as well as developing individual public spaces in a way that is rooted in a coherent place branding strategy, can enhance a city's reputation and attractiveness across multiple dimensions, contributing to its global image and ultimately boosting economic growth," he says. "The synergy between place branding and placemaking can be also beneficial in fostering a sense of ownership and pride among its residents, which is a great foundation for place brand advocacy."