



Branding the city through culture: Istanbul, European Capital of Culture 2010¹

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Abstract

As cities compete on an international scale to attract visitors, investors, talented people and inhabitants city branding is gaining much more interest. The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is a city designated by the European Union for a period of one calendar year during which it is given a chance to showcase its cultural life and cultural development. Istanbul (Turkey), one of the most important cities both in the Middle East and Europe, was the ECoC 2010 along with Pécs (Hungary) and Ruhr (Germany). This paper aims to go into the cultural reflections of ECoC 2010 Istanbul with a semiological approach, focusing on the extent to which the city is represented through cultural facilities and events. After looking at the historical and socio-political background of Istanbul, official ECoC Web site and programme book of the city are analyzed. Themes, logos, slogans and the content of the programme are questioned from a critical point of view, with the objective of unveiling the symbolic cultural elements in differentiating city brand. What kinds of associations are based on its urban culture and heritages? Furthermore, the study questions if these cultural elements point the public a specific city portrait drawn by an understanding of culture overlapping with the idea of the authorities holding the political power and dominating the current ideology.

Keywords: City branding, European Capital of Culture, Istanbul, Social Semiotics

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Introduction

Cities for along time have felt the need to differentiate themselves from each other as a result of various political, economical or social objectives. In order for a city to be a good brand, it must possess defining and distinctive characteristics that can readily be identified. Kavaratzis (2005) names various approaches in place branding, and asserts that branding a city through culture and entertainment is one of the interesting and steadily growing trends in this field. The reason why cities depend on culture, leisure and entertainment industries is due to their growing importance within the contemporary economy.

In todays postmodern society individuals seek products and services less for their use value but more for their linking value to satisfy their desire for communities. Consequently, like any brand, city brands then have to serve the person in their individuality and appeal to the group 'togetherness', at the same time. While cities have always been a place of this group togetherness (Cova, 1996 in Kavaratzis, 2004) they may satisfy the needs of their postmodern target publics via created values through arts and culture.

Culture in the form of cultural facilities and events, architecture and urban history plays an important role in forming and sharpening the city image, thus becomes a strategic tool for the ones who are benefiting from the positive reflections of a city brand. Here the word 'positive' has a connotation which can be paraphrased as 'the favorable accents being in the same line with dominant ideology'. Chandler (2001) claims that signs serve ideological functions in defining realities. While defining and contesting the realities of signs, it is possible to understand whose realities are privileged and whose suppressed are. People who are dealing with city branding issues are benefiting from a mega-event such as the 'European Capital of Culture' (ECoC) programme. Istanbul, which is one of the most important cities both in the Middle East and Europe, benefited from this major cultural event in 2010, to reflect its city brand in an appropriate way.

The objective of this study is two-fold. First, the study aims to examine in particular the discourses of culture and the city that seem to be dominant in Istanbul's ECoC bids. Thus the discussion in the first part focuses on the following key aspects:

1. claims about what is distinctive about the city
2. literal representation of the programme (the prominent narrative themes)
3. visual representation of the programme (logo, website banner, photographs)
4. programme content
5. compatibility of the various resources with each other

By digging into these subjects in particular, the study secondly tries to figure out the relationship between the city's culturally based brand and the inherent probable ideology of 'Europeanness'.

The review in this paper is based primarily on a social semiotical analysis of the resources (traditionally called signs) (van Leeuwen, 2005) provided by programme of events book published in the official internet sites of Istanbul. Additionally, there are a number of written sources such as the marketing strategy report, monitoring reports or media reflections of the programmes.

City Branding

The purpose of branding is to achieve consumer perception that will deliver a sustainable competitive advantage (Uztuğ, 2003). According to Anholt (2010) branding is a process that goes on largely in the mind of the consumer- the accumulation of respect and liking for the brand- and cannot be seen as a single technique that directly builds respect or liking (p.10). Kavartzis and Asworth (2005) accept places as brandable products if their intrinsic and distinctive characteristics are understood and a special form of marketing developed which accommodates and utilizes these characteristics (p.510). City branding is an appropriate way to describe and implement city marketing. While the object of city marketing is the city's image, it is actually the starting point for developing the city's brand (Kavartzis, 2004).

City branding refers to the application of branding techniques to geographical locations in the widest sense of the word. It is a young discipline that is attracting attention of not only professionals dealing with communication, marketing and urban issues, but also policy makers and academicians from various fields. City branding concept can be defined as the practice of developing a strategy that underlines the value the place offers to its target

publics, namely residents, workers, employers, investors, tourists and so on. A city brand is its promise of value, a promise that needs to be kept. In branding the city, that 'value' is created, developed and demonstrated through different kinds of actions such as investments, physical and economic plans, attraction programmes, events and communications (Gelder and Allan, 2006).

Kavaratzis (2007) asserts that city branding is attempting to create emotional, mental and psychological associations with the city. A brand is built on a city's existing strengths. These are the visual, economical, psychological and symbolic elements and all the aspects that differentiate a city from the others, it is essential to decide primarily on what kind of a brand a city wants to possess and how it will achieve to create the necessary associations to realize this. There are three main strategies in practice: first various promotional campaigns and visual identity tactics, secondly, the creation of signature buildings as landmarks for the city or taking the advantage of some existing landmarks in the promotional activities and third and the last, designation of various types of events. According to Dinnie (2010) to develop a strong brand, policy makers need to identify a clear set of attributes that a city has. These attributes form the basis for constituting positive audience perceptions.

City branding is an emerging agent for urban socio-economic development. City brands are not only vehicles to broadcast urban identity but also instruments to increase a city's competitive capacity (Seisedos and Vaggione, 2005); today a significant number of cities are involved in processes to create a new brand or regenerate their actual one.

Good products, services, culture, tourism, investments, technology, education, businesses, people, policies, initiatives and events are affected from the positive brand image of a country and they reflect on the image as well (Anholt, 2010). While culture is one of the basic raw materials for a city, in branding a city through culture the strategy is based on accentuating the cultural values that the city offers to its target public. However, as it is with product and service brands the bottom line here also is economic, The process in strategic branding of cities is characterized by complexity and constrained by political dimension (Parkerson and Saunders, 2004).

Culture and the Cities

Culture has a major role in branding a city. The degree of a city's attraction and competitive ability depends on its cultural resources and its developing level of culture. A vibrant cultural life is one of the main prerequisites in branding a city (Zhuangqing, 2010). The use of culture in city marketing and city branding has become one of the major trends recently. The relationship between culture and city marketing stems, mainly, from the dependence of the city's image on the city's cultural past and present and from the reliance of the city's brand on the city's hidden and revealed identities (Kavaratzis, 2011).

The use of culture as an instrument for achieving wider social and economic goals is nowhere more apparent than in cities (Evans, 2001 and Griffiths *et al.* 2003 in Griffiths 2006: 415).

In the current era of globalization, manufacturing decline and place marketing, many cities have turned to culture as a favored means of gaining competitive advantage. Across Europe, North America and elsewhere, cities have embarked on strategies to mobilize their cultural resources to help capture mobile investment, attract high spending visitors, strengthen regional identity, and foster local support for regeneration programmes. (Griffiths, 2006: 416)

It is possible to adapt Anholt's (2007) phrase regarding culture and country to cities:

The cultural aspect of a national image is irreplaceable and uncopyable because it is uniquely linked to the country itself; it is reassuring because it links the country's past with its present; it is enriching because it deals with non-commercial activities; and it is dignifying because it shows the spiritual and intellectual qualities of the country's people and institutions. (p.99)

In contemporary cities culture is, more than ever before, a resource used to foster economic growth. Through creative and cultural activities, events and venues, cities aim attracting new visitors, residents and companies. Therefore, city promotional campaigns have been increasingly focusing on distinctive cultural, leisure, entertainment, and shopping possibilities made available to nowadays 'society of consumers' (Bauman, 2007 in Gonçalves, 2010). As Peter Hall points out,

[c]ulture is now seen as the magic substitute for all the lost factories and warehouses, and as a device that will create a new urban image, making the city more attractive to mobile capital and mobile professional workers. (Hall, 2000: 640 in Gonçalves, 2010)

As a result, cities benefit from numerous aspects of culture in branding themselves to fulfill economic objectives. In such an abstract and yet cruel race, The ECoC title acts for cities as a catalyst and trigger for the branding of a city (Nobili, 2005).

Branding Istanbul through ECoC 2010 Programme

The ECoC programme provided for the title of Capital of Culture to be awarded annually to a city, enabling it to act as a focus for artistic activity, and a showcase of cultural excellence and innovation (Griffiths, 2006). García (2005) asserts that the ECoC started as a rather sanguine EU initiative, the purpose of the programme was to give a cultural dimension to the work of the European Community to celebrate European culture as a means of drawing the community together (p: 843), however in time it has been transformed to a catalyst for cultural regeneration which provokes great expectations in cities. Today ECoC has become a branding instrument; therefore the event is seen as a pathway in branding a city through culture.

The ECoC title was given to Istanbul in 2010, together with two other cities, Pécs and Ruhr. Istanbul was an interesting case with its multiple identities born of its geographical location. It is the largest city in Turkey with a population of 13.1 million. The city is located on the Bosphorus Strait and encompasses the natural harbour known as the Golden Horn, in the northwest of the country. It extends both on the European (Thrace) and on the Asian (Anatolia) sides of the Bosphorus, and is thereby the only metropolis in the world that is situated on two continents. Istanbul is a designated alpha world city deemed to be an important node point in the global economic system. It is also Turkey's largest industrial centre. It employs approximately 20% of Turkey's industrial labor and contributes 38% of Turkey's industrial workspace. The city is the cultural, economic, and financial center of Turkey, as well.

During its long history, Istanbul has served as the capital of the Roman Empire (330–395), the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire (395–1204 and 1261–1453), the Latin Empire (1204–1261), and the Ottoman Empire (1453–1922). When the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, the capital was moved to Ankara, and Constantinople was officially renamed Istanbul. The urban landscape of Istanbul is shaped by many communities. The religion with the largest community of followers is Islam. Religious minorities include Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, Catholic Levantines and Sephardic Jews. The

historic areas of the city were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296962/Istanbul>

Numerous layers of history - Hellenism, Byzantine, Ottoman and modern Turkey- have left their own unique imprint and are still influencing how the city views itself in terms of history. Being in the midst of two continents affects the city identity as well: Being Middle Eastern and European at the same time.

As Palonen (2010) asserts there are discussions over the European character of Turkey and its emigrant population around Europe. Here, there are attempts to contest the common bipolar opposition of the Turkish and the European, and to demonstrate that Istanbul could be valuable as European cultural capital not just as ECoC. Hence, the case of Istanbul is a curious one as this is the chance to celebrate the city as 'European'.

Istanbul was chosen as a cultural center to be promoted through the European Union (EU) for the entire year as a result of the Turkey's political efforts, as well. Since Turkey is not a member of the EU, the programme was interpreted by the Turkish authorities as an opportunity to remind audiences the common historical roots and cultural heritage with the other European countries. The membership bid of Turkey has become a major controversy of the ongoing enlargement of the EU. To accede to the EU, Turkey is required to first successfully complete negotiations with the [European Commission](#) on each of the 35 chapters of the total body of EU law. Afterwards, the member states must unanimously agree on granting Turkey membership to the EU. After a long history of political squabble the accession negotiations were officially launched in 2005. The earliest date that Turkey could enter the EU is projected to be as 2013. Thus, ECoC event is a channel for Turkey to represent itself as *a part of the European culture* through Istanbul brand.

In the new European cultural policy, the new tact was to integrate culture into a strategy of economic and social development and change the international image of the cities (Babkova, 2006). The motivations and objectives of ECoC nomination have varied from city to city, with most cities citing multiple objectives (Palmer, 2004: 13). In general, however, the main concern of the host cities has been to gain economic benefits associated with increased numbers of visitors, image enhancement, urban revitalization and expansion of the creative

industries (Palmer, 2004: 18). ‘European City’ with its ‘European Culture’ is a normative ideal, a place of freedom, for ideas and coming together. Among all the unity and diversity of Europe, culture is like a cohesive and ECoC becomes the tool to create a narrative of ‘common root’ (Palonen, 2010). Within this framework, Istanbul aims to create a city brand reflecting a positive international image through its cultural capacity and stress its Europeanness through visual and literal narratives.

The theme of Istanbul is ‘The most inspiring city in the world’. Clearly, this statement includes an assertion and use of the superlative endorses the argument. The word ‘inspiration’ is related with artistic activities, the city is represented as a Muse³ inspiring artists. Combination of the words has created such a pretentious statement that it reminds us the power of Istanbul being capital city of various empires throughout the history. The hidden message is revealed via the banner in the official internet site of the city (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The historic peninsula silhouette – Istanbul 2010 official web site banner

In the banner, there is an illustration of historical peninsula of Istanbul, including the facet of the Topkapı Palace (once the administrative center of Ottoman Empire), the Süleymaniye Mosque and the Hagia Sophia Mosque (once a Byzantine church which has been the symbol of conquest of Istanbul by Ottomans, now an attraction point being a cultural center and a mosque dating back to the year 360). This photographic illustration has a high degree of modality, that means representation of this scene is not a fiction or a fantasy, but it is a shot from reality. However, except some ships floating on the sea- which indicate modern times-, the illustration does not reflect any specific time. In the visual realization there is nothing

³ Muse is a goddess that inspires a creative artist, especially a poet, (Collins English Dictionary, 2003: 712)

which reflects the city's up-to-date vision. The color palette chosen from cold colors, the tones of blue and grey generate a melancholic, introverted yet depressive atmosphere. It is possible to read the image as highly artistic which has a potential to inspire, however the dominant feeling is not compatible with the soul of ECoC 2010, which is energetic, dynamic, and collaborative.

Actually, Istanbul would like to create a city brand accentuating its European character, via ECoC event. However the connotations of the theme and the only banner (Figure 1) preferred on the opening page of official web site do not overlap with the objective concerning the wish image of the city. This discrepancy is revealed by the ideological dimension of these images lying in what is excluded rather than what is included: dominating image of the minarets reminding Islam and the image of the Palace and Hagia Sophia reminding imperial power, exclusion of any sign of European integration. The same image is printed in the introduction page (p.4) of the programme book, as well.

Cities are positioning themselves as capitals of culture by reproducing the institutionalized look of ECoC. Logos are beneficial as visual tools in this value creation and representation. Figure 2 shows the logo created for Istanbul 2010 ECoC, below.



Figure 2. Istanbul 2010 ECoC Logo

Referring Istanbul, one of the most common visual motifs is bridges, depicted with varying degrees of abstraction. Similarly, in this logo there are three arc shaped connection figures that can be considered as bridges or mosques. However, there are two bridges over the Bosphorus at the time, while there are three arcs in the image, generating a question mark: Is this a forecast of a third bridge over the Bosphorus- which is a point of controversy in today's political agenda-, or stands for something else? The number of the arcs is three, which may

be representing mosques in the historical peninsula. They may probably have a religious or mythological meaning- the holy trinity in Christianity, belief in old Egypt, Alawi belief...etc-, or they could also be representing three monotheistic religions; thus a reference to the religious importance of the city.

Regarding the font size of the words in the logo, the word 'capital' has the biggest size among others. The size refers to the point of emphasis while here it is Istanbul being a kind of 'capital' where the culture or the year stands behind. There seems to be an association – again- with the imperial power of the city being an accustomed capital for various empires throughout the history. Commenting on the color preference, basic tone of the logo is turquoise blue and white; blue is a natural color representing sea and sky, has calming effect. In many cultures blue is significant in religious beliefs. In the logo a specific tone of blue-turquoise- is chosen which has a connotation that the logo not only represents the city of Istanbul but also Turkey as a country. The meaning might be extracted considering the political position of the country not being-but aiming to be- a member of the EU. The color of the logo is a trace that Istanbul is considered as a representative of the whole country against Europe. From the branding perspective, it is the value of Istanbul as representative of the whole country.

The essence of Istanbul's wish image is found in the authorities discourses: Egemen Bağış, Turkey's EU Chief Negotiator told the European Parliament on 2 February 2010 "Awarding Istanbul the title of 'European Capital of Culture' is a great opportunity for Europe to understand Turkey and for Turkey to better understand the EU". He referred to Istanbul as 'a metropolis which was once the capital of the Roman and Byzantine Empires' – without calling the name Ottoman Empire. While he wished to dispel lingering doubts that a large Muslim country would bring terrorism and extremism to Europe <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/istanbul-2010-great-opportunity-eu-understand-turkey>, there seems to be a dilemma or at least an uncoordination between the visual messages given by the Istanbul ECoC agency and the understanding of the authorities holding the governmental power. The authorities' discourse intended for the European audience, excluding the Ottoman roots of the city and accentuating the Roman and Byzantine history, seems as a result of a struggle for not being perceived as 'the other'. This manner might be interpreted as a subliminal defense against the orientalism which is a

‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (Said, 1978:3). According to Edward Said (1978) orientalism is Europe’s manner of acknowledging the East as it’s “Other” – something exotic and romantic, but also dangerous and unknown. Thus, authorities’ Istanbul discourse is reflexively far from a city portrait which belongs to East.

Regarding the consonance of messages communicated by the theme, banner and logo, Istanbul seems to be consistent; however there is a contradiction among these messages accentuating the traditional face of Istanbul citing its history, and the discourse of authorities mentioning the Europeanness of Istanbul, putting forward the points not existing in the visual representation of the programme.

In 2010, Istanbul ECoC agency spent lots of effort in order to organize series of events which were the most visual part of their branding process through culture. The content of the programmes reflect the whole theme and indicate the ideology lying behind. Istanbul had numerous cultural and artistic activities which attracted lots of participants. Table 1 shows the main headlines the city preferred in defining their activities. The clusters are also clues for their understanding of culture and can be read as literal resources.

Table.1 Programme Content of Istanbul ECoCs 2010

	ISTANBUL
E C O C P r o g r a m m e C o n t e n t	Visual Arts
	Music
	Theatre & Performing Arts
	Film Documentary Animation
	Traditional Arts
	Urban Culture
	Education
	Literature
	Cultural Heritage and Museums
	Urban Implementations
	Maritime
	Parallel Activities supported by Istanbul
	Number of projects

Istanbul, as ‘the most inspiring city in the world’ has inspired many people in 2010 and a sum of 589 officially accepted events took place during the ECoC year. One of the most scheduled sections is international relations (number of realized projects is 31). Having a positive image across Europe is important for Istanbul, and the ECoC event was clearly seen as a pathway to realize this target. A distinctive headline is ‘Maritime’, spotlighting Istanbul as a city by the sea and showcasing events in connection with the watersports (such as sailing, rowing, tall ships regatta...etc.). The overall programme is multifaceted and it stresses diversity, respect to the cultural heritage and creativity. Well organized, successful artistic and cultural events strengthen Istanbul brand.

Conclusion

Fierce competition for resources, for business relocation, for foreign investment, for visitors, even residents is evident in today’s world (Kotler *et al.* 1999). Therefore Istanbul tried to reflect and share its cultural heritage through hundreds of events and projects not only to differentiate it from other cities to gain competitive advantage but also tried to reflect its ‘Europeanness’. Public communication materials produced for ECoC scheme were analyzed through a critical lens as to bring the pieces of an ideological puzzle leaning behind the culturally generated city brand. The analysis in this study shows that there is an oscillation between the dominant discourse of the authorities presenting the city excluding the parts that seems to be unpleasant for EU members and the messages in the literal and visual representation of the city in the official ECoC web site.

It is concluded that most of the European countries that are already members of the EU, use the ECoC event in branding their cities as cultural center of attraction for various publics. However, in the case of Istanbul, a city already recognized as a cultural capital for years with its long tradition and a developed infrastructure of cultural tourism, the situation is different; Istanbul brand already has strong cultural dimensions and does not need to re-brand itself through the ECoC event like most of the other nominated cities do. Instead, the event is benefited as a catalyst for receding from the Middle Eastern identity and converging to its European one. The city brand based on ‘European common roots’ narrative is a result of Turkish political standing, endeavoring to be an EU member.

Success of branding depends on the well management of various channels of messages. Depending on the analysis made on the compatibility of the messages it is possible to say that it has been an opportunity for Istanbul to be recognized as a cultural capital *belonging to Europe*. In this paper the communicative performances of Istanbul evaluated focusing on some literal and visual resources, however it is the author's content that the real success of the city regarding its cultural branding efforts will be much more lucid in the future.

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