

“ACTIONS, NOT WORDS”: HELSINKI’S CITY BRAND AS A TOOL OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION

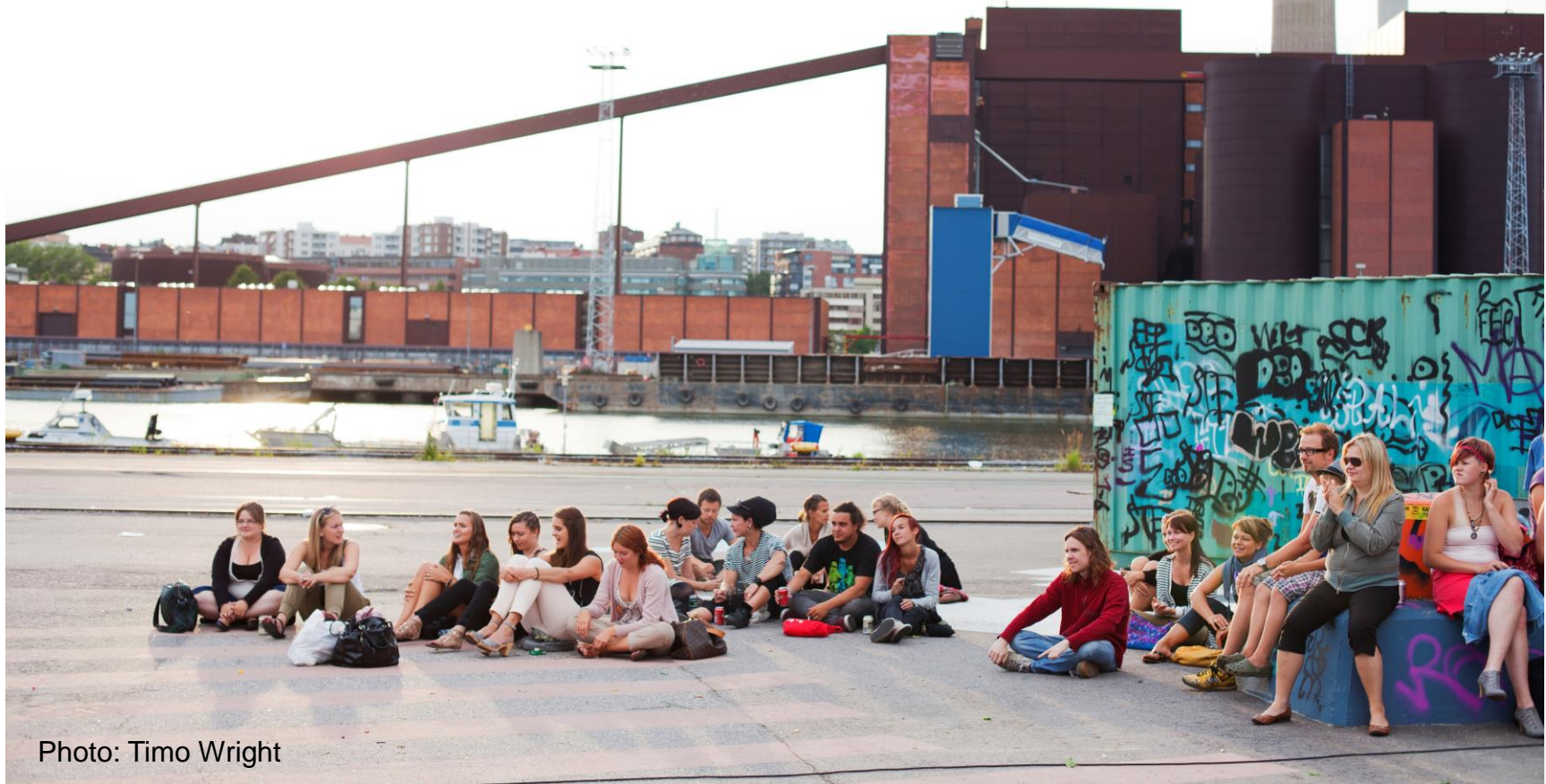


Photo: Timo Wright

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- To elucidate the role of city branding in urban transformation and contribute to research on the “geographies of brands and branding” (Pike 2011).
- Main research question: How is city branding negotiated and acted out in relation to the ongoing transformation of the “entrepreneurial city” (Harvey 1989)?



SITUATING THE STUDY IN RESEARCH LITERATURE

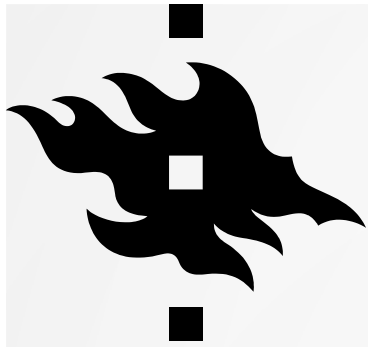
City branding in research literature:

- 1) Differentiation strategy that fosters the competitiveness of cities (e.g. Anholt, 2005; Anttiroiko, 2015).
 - Symbolic representations
 - Discursive practices
- 2) Tool of urban transformation, urban management, and policy-making (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Joo & Seo, 2018; Lucarelli, 2018).
 - Practices "beyond representations"
 - Participatory processes



SITUATING THE STUDY IN RESEARCH LITERATURE

- A shift “from slogan and logotype to action” (Julier, 2011, p. 227)
-> widening of the understanding of city branding.
- Research on process- and action-oriented forms of city branding has departed from discussions on recent conceptualizations of urban entrepreneurialism.
- My aim is to integrate these two sets of literature through the case of Helsinki’s branding exercise.



SITUATING THE STUDY IN RESEARCH LITERATURE

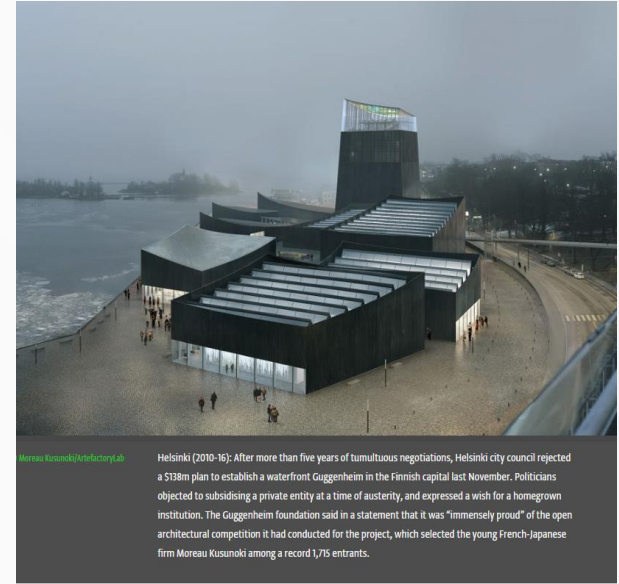
Three stages of urban entrepreneurialism, each with its own spatial scope (Rossi, 2017):

- 1) 1970s–1990s: public–private partnerships after the Fordist-Keynesian crisis (local scale)
- 2) 1990s–early 2000s: global mega-events and brands (“global” scale)
- 3) 2000s: “increased circulation of urban policies and development models”, dissolving of rigidly hierarchical governance models, “entrepreneurialization of the society and the self” (an increasingly multipolar “global” scale)



THE CASE OF HELSINKI

- Participatory "Brand New Helsinki 2020" project in 2015–2016: a new brand concept & marketing strategy
- Aim: *"to highlight the city as a desirable location for both business and living, and help create the buzz that can make Helsinki a more interesting destination for visitors and events"* (Helsinki brand concept 2016)
- Highlights the shift to the second to the third stage of urban entrepreneurialism (Rossi 2017)



Moreau Kusunoki/ArcturysLab

Helsinki (2010-16): After more than five years of tumultuous negotiations, Helsinki city council rejected a 518m plan to establish a waterfront Guggenheim in the Finnish capital last November. Politicians objected to subsidising a private entity at a time of austerity, and expressed a wish for a homegrown institution. The Guggenheim foundation said in a statement that it was "immensely proud" of the open architectural competition it had conducted for the project, which selected the young French-Japanese firm Moreau Kusunoki among a record 1,715 entrants.

www.theartnewspaper.com



www.brandnewhelsinki/2020



THE CASE OF HELSINKI

- *"The Helsinki brand needs actions, not words,"* as the brand is essentially made up of *"shared experiences that happen wherever and whenever we encounter the city"* (Helsinki brand concept 2016)
- Attitude: *"One Hel of an Impact"* / *"Here is the city – use it!"*



<http://www.brandnewhelsinki.fi/2020/en/>





DATA AND METHODS

Data:

1. The documents of the Brand New Helsinki 2020 project (& other relevant policy documents)
2. Interviews of experts involved in the development and implementation of Helsinki's new brand concept
3. Participant observation conducted during excursions organized for the "ambassadors of Helsinki"

Method:

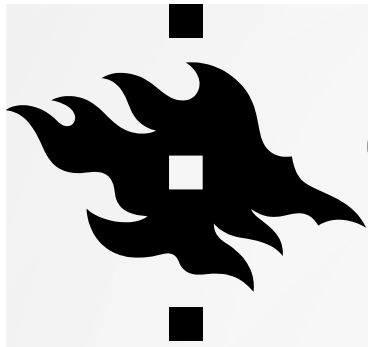
- Data triangulation approach
- Placing multiple perspectives in critical dialogue with each other





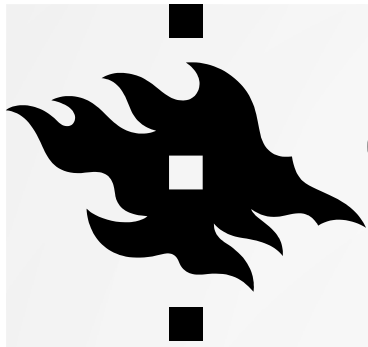
RESULTS

- Four interrelated processes:
 - 1) Civic and stakeholder participation
 - 2) Information sharing
 - 3) Storytelling
 - 4) Production of urban subjects



CIVIC AND STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

- Participatory approaches have drawn together a range of actors to produce visions of a desirable future and means by which it can be reached.
- *Brand New Helsinki 2020* project in 2015–2016.
- Expert interviews, workshops, picture elicitation etc...
- Participation and interaction model 2017
- “City coaches” and “business coaches”

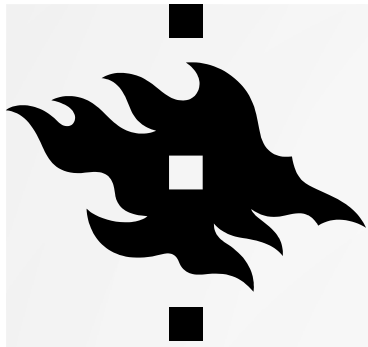


CIVIC AND STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

“... we want to gather together different actors and remove obstacles from the way of actions with impact and generate collective movement. There are many ways of doing this like challenge competitions, idea competitions... and all in all it would be very important within the city organization to facilitate more collaboration across different fields of operation and to see the bigger whole.”

(Interviewee involved in the development and implementation of the brand concept)

-> City branding as a soft space of strategic spatial planning



INFORMATION SHARING

- International networks, benchmarking of "competitors" etc.
- Social and bodily practices
 - Encouraging the employees of the City of Helsinki to communicate more boldly and participate in the reinvention of the city.
 - Training of "ambassadors of Helsinki"; "Helsinki Brand Camp"; workshops; Helsinki ambassadors' excursions etc. between 2016 and 2018



STORYTELLING

- Production of a shared visions of Helsinki's future
- Enhancing and transformative dimensions of city branding (Joo & Seo, 2018).
- Enhancing dimension: *“Helsinki’s setting is well known, but its content is not. Sights and history evoke interest, but do not give enough reasons to come or move to Helsinki. Instead, intangible things are advanced in Helsinki and, because of that, the attractive urban culture, innovative competence clusters and quality of life should be emphasized more than is done now.”* (BnH project description 2016)



STORYTELLING

- Transforming dimension:
 - Urban Imaginary: enabler or platform
 - *“Let’s just go on and try! A change from a city official to an enabler.”* (BnH current state workshop 2016)

The Helsinki brand needs actions, not words. The city is undergoing major transformation, and this transformation needs to be decisively led in the right direction.

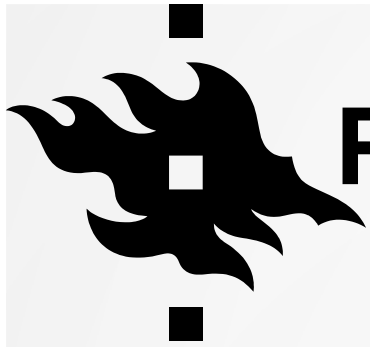
Concrete actions to build the Helsinki of the future include: the removal of unnecessary obstacles that hinder encounters and actions with impact; the unification of marketing communications content and visuals; and the further development of communications about attractive destinations and our start-up ecosystem.

(Helsinki brand concept 2016)



STORYTELLING

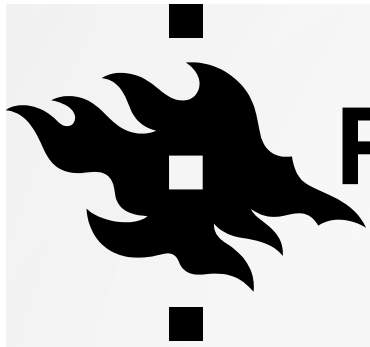
*“I think that the change started [...] when the Design Capital year came and happened. [...] It was six years ago, when the world was quite different. [...] [The design capital year] was a bit like an exploder among the city officials, [because it made them realize] that, **‘wait a minute, experimental culture is pretty okay and we get new ideas through that and everything should not be forbidden’**. [...] This brought a new type of urban development into a context – it was not like, you know, dabbling of hippies, but a million euro project of the city, [...] The city started to recognize its role as sort of an enabler, which to me is a horrible term, but now it is very much present in, say, the city’s strategy. **The city is a platform and an enabler and interesting encounters happen here which generate something new.**” (An interviewee working in the Helsinki Marketing)*



PRODUCTION OF URBAN SUBJECTS

- The imaginary of the city as a “platform” is connected to a notion of an ideal urban subject with an entrepreneurial mindset.
- Individuals’ actions are harnessed for the management of urban future and enhancing (inter)national competitiveness within global networks of cities. -> “Entrepreneurialization of the self” (Rossi 2017).

“More than ever, urban citizenship is built from the ground up, meaning that individuals and communities – as collectives formed by individuals – are becoming the driving forces of development.” (BnH summary of research, 2016)



PRODUCTION OF URBAN SUBJECTS

- Frequent use of the pronoun "we."
- References to "bold experimentation."

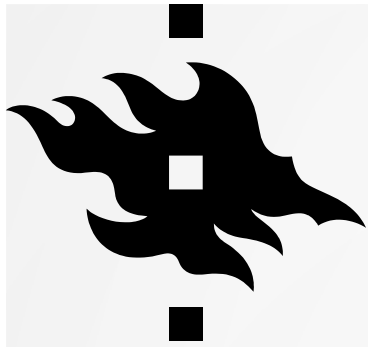
"It is Helsinkians working together that influence the kind of world we will live in tomorrow." (Helsinki brand concept 2016)

"In the future, we want Helsinki to be known for people that boldly experiment and combine new ideas: people that want to positively impact their urban community and change the world for the better." (Helsinki brand concept, 2016)



CONCLUSIONS

- City branding both illustrates and contributes to "the third stage of urban entrepreneurialism" (Rossi, 2017).
 - Dissolving of hierarchical governance structures
 - Producing value through individuals' action and encounters
 - Circulating policies and ideas across administrative and geographical boundaries
- City branding as a (soft) space of strategic spatial planning.
 - Will the new understanding of city branding lead to profound changes in governance and planning?
 - Or will the idea of branding as a tool of urban transformation eventually turn out to be another way of representing and marketing the city as an attractive location?



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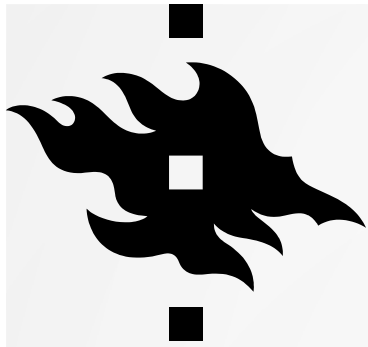
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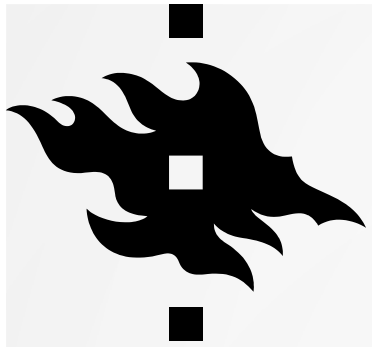
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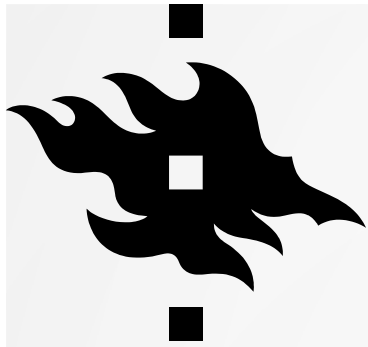
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“For me, that word ‘together’ is somehow problematic. [...] The reality is kind of a patchwork quilt of intersecting and conflicting ideas and things. And that is exactly what I would like it to be. [...] I get the feeling that I definitely do not believe in [those formulations]. That I specifically want to be – even if that makes me a victim of post-capitalist ethos – I want to be an individual. I think it would be cool that it would be transparent who wants and what. If they say ‘we,’ then it should be a specific working group who is that ‘we,’ or whoever has written that. That we here want... that this working group wants this and after that a city dweller can seize on that: ‘Yeah I want the same thing!’ or ‘No, actually I want something different.’ If it is that kind of collective ‘we,’ it’s impossible to react to it.”

(An interviewee involved in urban activism)

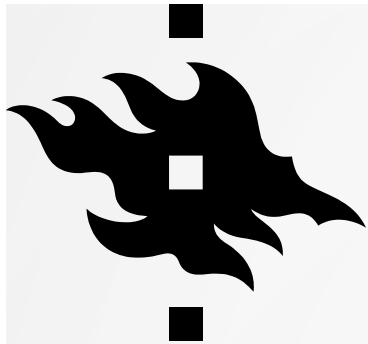


“It is a big principled change that the city marketing will be moved to the Communications Division. [...] That’s when the city brand and the grand narrative surrounding it will become much more multifaceted. [...] After that [the brand] won’t be so closely connected to the economic development. It won’t be like ‘we harness you all to contribute to Helsinki’s economic growth or Helsinki’s business life’. Like, even though [economic development] is an important – and probably the main – motivator here, it excludes quite many people or limits the group of people interested in [the brand]. In a way Communications is a neutral quarter; it does not have the same kind of agenda as the Economic Development, which aims to [...] increase the number of people employed in the private sector in relation to the population.”
(Interviewee 2 involved in the development and implementation of the brand concept)



“I became involved in this branding stuff so that... They probably informed about it from the Economic Development, and traditionally the nature side and business side have been quite far apart and they haven’t had as close collaboration as the nature side has had with, say, the construction or streets and parks or even urban planning [...]. And there were some pretty good baits there concerning nature and especially our project, so I seized them. [...] In this project we have had the intention to communicate, so this was one good way of finding new target groups both within and outside of the city [organization] and to put our project activities in a broader context.”

(Interviewee working in the Urban Environment Division of the City of Helsinki)



People with impact Encounters with impact Actions with impact

Helsinkians are people with the passion to solve meaningful problems and create the world's most advanced everyday life.

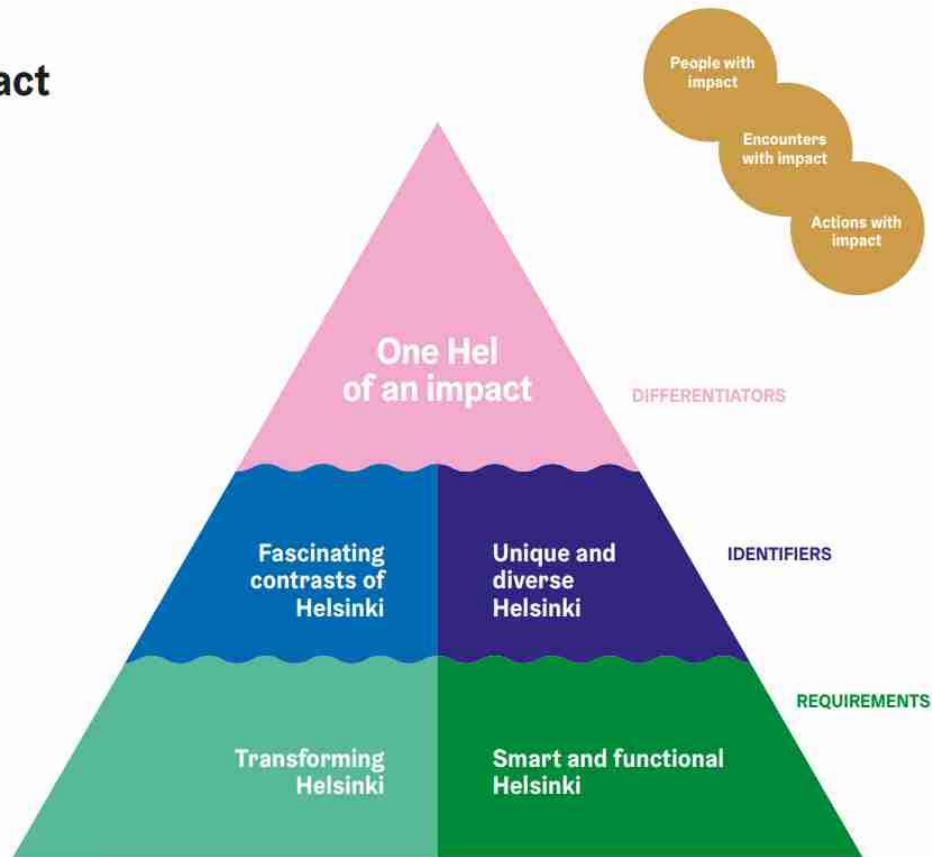
We want to be the most attractive knowledge hub for people and companies that want to make the world a better place. When we positively affect things that matter, we contribute to future well-being.

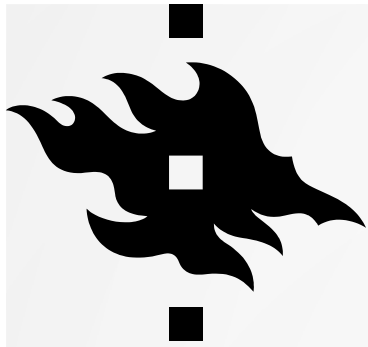
Helsinki offers incredible expertise. We must highlight strengths, grow competence, and encourage more talented people to participate and grow with us.

What is the world's most advanced everyday life?

Everyday life in Helsinki goes smoothly. Helsinki works. Helsinki is known for work-life balance, high education standards, and for its supportive environment for families.

We have solid foundations and the energy left over to create and invent. This makes Helsinki attractive to visitors from near and far.





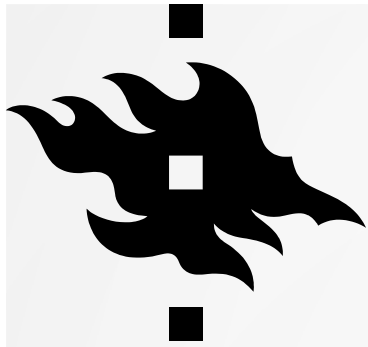
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(An interviewee involved in urban activism)



“And then we get back to there, to the highest level of the working group on branding. Which is it, is it genuinely so that they want to give agency and power of decision downward and horizontally to the sides or is it so that they want to build ‘my city’ the way they want?”

(An interviewee involved in urban activism)



- City branding as a “a social process through which a range of people in diverse institutional relations and positions come together to design plan-making processes and develop contents and strategies for the management of spatial change” (Healey 1997: 5)
- ...and a “soft space” of governance that exists “outside, alongside or in-between the formal statutory scales of government” (Haughton et al. 2013).



Drafts of "Helsinki stories" to be commented:
<http://brandnewhelsinki.fi/en/draft-helsinki-stories/>



- Will the role of the city brand as an overarching process and platform of collaboration strengthen when city branding is moved to the new Communications Division of the City of Helsinki?

“Like, even though [economic development] is an important – and probably the main – motivator here, it excludes quite many people or limits the group of people interested in [the brand]. In a way Communications is a neutral quarter; it does not have the same kind of agenda as the Economic Development [of the Executive Office], which aims to [...] increase the number of people employed in the private sector in relation to the entire population.”

(Interviewee involved in the development and implementation of the brand concept)



- *“Helsinki increasingly understands its role as the creator and enabler of possibilities. Helsinki actively forms partnerships with residents’ organizations and with everyone interested in developing and vitalizing the city. Besides being a service organization, Helsinki is a platform and the world’s most progressive public sector ecosystem.” (Helsinki City Strategy 2017–2021)*