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Marketing the unmarketable: Place branding in a postindustrial medium-sized town

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes place branding as a policy intervention in postindustrial small and medium sized towns. We broaden the current and primarily large city focused discussion of place branding in postindustrial locales by examining the re-branding of the former mining town of Heerlen, the Netherlands. The concept of urban imaginaries, or the collection of (historical) representations and narrations of urban space, is used to analyze how place branding strategies are (un)successfully received by target audiences, in particular by different resident groups. While the campaign 'Urban Heerlen' has contributed to a successful cultural regeneration, its contested definition of 'urban' and the application of a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy for regeneration limits its effectiveness in terms of authenticity and inclusivity. We argue that place branding in smaller postindustrial cities might benefit from an explicit recognition of and engagement with the urban imaginaries of residents.

1. Introduction

Local governments have long felt the need to champion and defend the identity and autonomy of their community. Place branding has become a common form of policy intervention in large metropolitan areas in order to attract (even more) investors and tourists to compete in the national and global economy (Andersson, 2014; Boisen et al., 2018; Cleave et al., 2016; Eshuis et al., 2014). In addition, many postindustrial cities have turned to place branding as a means of economic and symbolic reinvention after the decline of industry. An extensive literature documents place marketing in global cities (Colomb, 2012; Lucarelli, 2018), and –to a lesser extent– the re-branding of major postindustrial cities as centers of knowledge and culture (e.g. Boland, 2010; Gómez, 1998). In contrast, research on place branding in smaller cities, and more specifically smaller postindustrial cities is lacking (but see Conolly, 2010; Lazzeroni et al., 2013; Paradis, 2000). Place-branding strategies are often presented as generic solutions that can be adapted to all places, regardless of their size, location, or contemporary and historical context (Andersson, 2014). However, small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) face specific challenges (Bell & Jayne, 2006). Small cities are more vulnerable to population shrinkage and economic shocks, especially towns that were built around a single industry, and have less opportunities to develop along postindustrial paths (Cowell, 2013; James et al.,

2016). In addition, (industrial) decline often results in a sense of marginalization as 'places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; see also Linkon & Russo, 2002), impeding successful regeneration.

We call for a greater focus on postindustrial SMST's, arguing that such places could benefit from place branding in order to improve their future prosperity. At the same time, they are among the trickiest places to execute place-branding strategies successfully (Hankinson, 2001; Lorentzen, 2009). We define place branding as 'a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design' (Zenker & Braun, 2010, p. 5). Following Van Ham (2008, p. 132), we argue that place branding '[...] is not only about selling, products, services, and ideas and gaining market share and attention; it is also about managing identities, loyalty, and reputation'.

Previous case studies suggest that including place-based identities and cultural heritage within branding strategies is crucial to their success (Allingham, 2009), as is imagining the future in ways that involve the local population, who in small cities often form the main target audience of regeneration efforts (Lazzeroni, 2020; Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015). We use the concept of urban imaginaries – collections of (historical) representations and narrations of urban space – to analyze the interplay between place branding as a policy intervention and residents'

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perceptions of and attachments to place. While urban imaginaries may form the basis of branding strategies, they are not the same: urban imaginaries may overlap, interact with, or coexist with city brands (Vanolo, 2017). In the case of stigmatized places, branding efforts may be concentrated on countering and replacing existing negative imaginaries. Contrary to the singular brand that ‘create[s] an image that prioritizes visual appeal over substance, the haves over the have-nots, and the possible over the real’ (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2019, p.3), urban imaginaries are necessarily partial and subjective (Vanolo, 2017). Consequently, we argue that understanding how place branding draws on and seeks to modify existing urban imaginaries is crucial in order to comprehend why certain brands ‘stick’ (Rainisto, 2003; Rinaldi & Beeton, 2015) and others do not.

This paper intends to advance the current knowledge on place branding in the context of postindustrial SMSTs by way of a case study analysis of the former coal-mining city of Heerlen, the Netherlands. We begin with an overview of the literature on place branding as a tool for reimagining urban space, and more specifically as a tool for regenerating postindustrial SMSTs. We then discuss the (de)industrialization of Heerlen and subsequent efforts at urban regeneration following the rapid closure of mining industries in the 1960s and 1970s. We conducted ethnographic research consisting of semi-structured interviews with residents, business owners and policy-makers, analysis of policy documents relating to the regeneration strategy, and participant observation in Heerlen’s city center and more suburban neighborhoods. Our analysis focuses on how the place brand ‘Urban Heerlen’ – which was designed by the local and regional government to combat the city’s persistent negative reputation – aligns with historical and contemporary imaginaries of the city. While the branding campaign has contributed to a semi-successful cultural regeneration, the brand’s interpretation of ‘urban’ misses the mark regarding how residents view their town. Through two counter-narratives, we show that this mismatch is a result of the ambivalent place of the city’s industrial heritage in current policy strategies. Consequently, we argue that explicit recognition of and engagement with a ‘negative’ past is necessary for effective and inclusive place branding.

2. Place branding as tool for re-imagining urban space

While the use of place branding as a component of urban and regional regeneration policies has gained traction over the past years (Andersson, 2014; Eshuis et al., 2014), scholarly definitions of the concept remain scattered. This is due to its multi- and cross-disciplinary nature, but also reflects the fact that place branding is a slippery concept to grasp, tricky to put into action and even more challenging to do so effectively. Generally speaking, place branding is used as a means to change or adapt existing place identities through fashioning new images and associations among residents and outsiders alike (Andersson, 2014; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Place branding includes image construction with the aim to affect how people ‘make sense of places (...) and their mental processes of cognition [in doing so]’ (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 507). However, it also aims to do more: effective place brands function as a linking pin between individual and collective place identity, connecting people’s highly individual attachments to place to a (manufactured) sense of sociocultural belonging (Evans, 2003). The ultimate goal of place branding strategies is the internalization and propagation of the brand by residents, who come to view their city and imagine its future through the lens of marketing scripts (Gotham, 2007).

In order to understand how place brands are imagined, developed, implemented and ultimately received, it is thus necessary to analyze place branding in relation to individual and collective identity formation. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) describe four processes by which effective place branding occurs: expressing, impressing, mirroring and reflecting. Place branding should allow people to express cultural features that for them already form part of the place identity. If brands acknowledge collective cultural understandings of place, they are

experienced as relevant, truthful, and authentic. Furthermore, effective place branding leaves *impressions* on others and informs their perceptions or images of a place while *mirroring* expectations and *reflecting* or reinforcing meanings. A successful place brand balances universal and extra-local appeal – key to all large-scale marketing strategies – with the creation of an image that is recognizably local and specific (Gotham, 2007) and which establishes a connection with the genuine identity of a place (Mommaas, 2002). When a connection to local identity is lacking, place branding is reduced to a single catchy slogan without transformative power.

Constructing effective place branding strategies is easier said than done. Although they often claim to tap into personal conceptions of place (Collins, 2016), most remain top-down strategies determined by local politicians and business elites (Eshuis et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the participation or at least the buy-in of residents is widely understood as necessary to the success of place brands. Stubbs and Warnaby (2015) describe three ways in which residents are involved in place branding activities. Most obviously, residents legitimize place branding through voting on the officials that design and execute such policies. Furthermore, residents can act as ambassadors of the brand and thereby increase its credibility. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, residents themselves often figure prominently in place brands through their characteristics and behavior. For example, the – supposed – lifestyles of local residents are key ingredients in New Orleans marketing slogans such as ‘New Orleans jazz is a way of life for New Orleanians’ (Gotham, 2007, p. 834). In the Australian city of Wollongong, policy officials hoped that its branding as ‘city of culture’ would entice creative professionals to move to the city center, thereby starting a gentrification process – instead, they mostly settled down in northern suburbs (Waitt & Gibson, 2009).

If existing imaginaries of a place are negative, restoring civic pride is an important goal of place branding strategies, yet it need not be the primary goal (Eshuis et al., 2014; Gotham, 2007). When policy goals do not align with residents’ preferences, such strategies quickly become a tale of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (see e.g. Boland, 2010; Hubbard, 1996; Maiello & Pasquelli, 2015), sometimes forming a rallying point for protesters and generating counter-hegemonic narratives (Maiello & Pasquelli, 2015). As Greenberg (2003, p. 413) notes, branding campaigns ‘purposely reveal precious little about the material reality behind the commodity they promote.’ Gotham (2007) recounts this duality in the case of New Orleans, where place branding played an important role in galvanizing support for the rebuilding of the city and the tourist industry following the destruction of hurricane Katrina. The success of the campaign, however, was predicated on the discursive displacement of the city’s less marketable aspects, notably issues of poverty and racial inequality. While such a curated focus provided an attractive image for new income flows, it dampened local activists’ attempts to address issues of social justice and inclusion. He therefore describes the branding effort as ‘a contested and conflictual process of homogenization and diversification’ (p. 823).

3. Deindustrialization and imaginaries of regeneration

The latter half of the twenty-first century witnessed a dramatic decline in employment in manufacturing for the world’s leading economies (Rowthorn & Ramaswamy, 1997). Industrial cities that once dominated the economic landscape faced the disintegration of their ‘illusion of permanence’ (Strangleman et al., 2013, p. 10). Coupled with increased socioeconomic challenges, postindustrial towns and cities also gained reputations as marginal, forgotten and (sometimes) dangerous places (Lloyd, 2010). Representative examples include Detroit, labelled as an obsolescent city and characterized by urban shrinkage (Audirac, 2018, p. 12) or the town of Youngstown, U.S.A., in which the steel industry, once the origin of collective identity and socioeconomic pride, became viewed as dangerous and a source of shame for residents instead (Linkon & Russo, 2002).

Responses to such decline often consist of a reconceptualization of place identity, including new representational strategies (Linkon & Russo, 2002). According to the popular creative class and creative city theories of Florida (2003) and Landry and Bianchini (1995), creative industries are the drivers of economic development following deindustrialization. The dynamics of postindustrial economic competition are 'based less on natural resources, location or past reputation and more on the ability to develop attractive images and symbols and project these effectively' (Landry & Bianchini, 1995, p. 12). Alongside spatial and economic adaptations, culture-led urban regeneration strategies aim for a more wholesale social and cultural transformation, amounting to a dismissal of the 'polluted and blue-collar past for a future in which it was becoming vibrant, stylish, confident, cosmopolitan and innovative' (Hannigan, 2003, p. 354).

Creative class and creative city theories have been heavily criticized on theoretical and methodological grounds, as well as their implications for urban policies and societies (e.g. Bontje & Musterd, 2009; Peck, 2005, 2012; Pratt, 2011; Scott, 2014). Nevertheless, their prescriptions have been readily adopted by urban policy-makers eager to find a 'quick fix' (Hoyman & Faricy, 2009), often involving the physical transformation of former industrial sites into exciting places of culture, entertainment, retail and leisure (Evans, 2003; Lorentzen, 2009; Tallon et al., 2006). Many postindustrial cities such as Manchester and Dortmund made substantial investments in culture and other urban amenities to attract the creative class and realize their ambitions for a prosperous economic future (Van Winden, 2010). Mid-sized and smaller postindustrial cities likewise invested in culture and the 'experience economy', often drawing on their industrial heritage (Allingham, 2009; Waitt & Gibson, 2009). However, although success stories do exist (James et al., 2016), postindustrial towns in decline are not likely candidates for attracting the creative professionals they target (Conolly, 2010).

Analyzing the place branding strategies of postindustrial locales through the lens of the urban imaginary (Greenberg, 2000; Zukin et al., 1998) may provide insights into why some branding strategies 'stick' (Rainisto, 2003; Rinaldi & Beeton, 2015) while others do not. Urban imaginaries are the 'set of meanings about cities that arise in a specific time and cultural space' (Zukin et al., 1998, p. 629). The origins of such imaginaries are manifold and may be found in 'representations drawn from the architecture and street plans of the city, the art produced by its residents, and the images of and discourse on the city as seen, heard, or read in movies, on television, in magazines, and other forms of mass media' (Greenberg, 2000, p. 228). Such representations, which are produced and relived in the minds of those who interact with a place, have material effects on the growth and decline of places (Zukin et al., 1998), not least through influencing policy strategies for regeneration (Hoekstra, 2020). Moreover, the way in which various actors experience and imagine the city – and the opportunities they have to impose their imaginaries on urban space – may differ substantially according to their different positioning in relation to existing axes of inequality (Hoekstra, 2020; Hubbard, 1996; Jensen, 2007). How urban imaginaries relate to place branding is thus (also) a political question, as branding may subsume, but also be in conflict with the experiences and aspirations of different segments of the population. In addition, as noted by Vanolo (2017), the outcomes of branding policies are difficult to predict because branding blurs boundaries between consumption and production, in particular when it comes to the behavior of residents. Consequently, 'even when the act of branding is imposed through top-down processes, the brand itself is always an outcome of relations, negotiations and sometimes even conflicts with local stakeholders' (Vanolo, 2017, p. 21).

4. Case study and methodology

Located in the southeastern periphery of the Netherlands, the town of Heerlen has witnessed significant physical and socioeconomic changes since the start of large-scale coal mining at the beginning of the

20th century. Mining operations brought incredible wealth to the otherwise sparsely populated and agrarian region. However, due to the discovery of natural gas in the north of the Netherlands in 1959 and falling coal prices because of increased foreign competition, the viability of the mining industry in Heerlen declined and between 1965 and 1974 all mine sites were closed.

After the mines closed, the government attempted to realize a rapid economic transformation from heavy industry to tourism and leisure employment, deploying the policy slogan 'from black to green'. In contrast to the mining regions of neighboring countries, like the Rhein-Ruhr region in Germany, virtually all of the mining architecture was demolished. While some new employment was created by relocating government agencies to Heerlen, the former dominance of the mining economy meant a mismatch between knowledge jobs and unskilled workers. This imbalance resulted in a domino effect of socioeconomic problems. Widespread unemployment among residents led to intense drug use, crime, and prostitution (Hermans, 2016). Thanks to its geographical position, Heerlen gained popularity among drug users from across the border and quickly became known as a drug haven and the epicenter of the heroin epidemic in the Netherlands. Unemployment and poverty persisted over the next decades: the town which once held the 20th position on the highest-income municipality list dropped to number 437 in 1975, and 555th in 1994 (www.demijnstreek.net; data from Statistics Netherlands).

Thanks to programs such as 'Operation Heartbeat' (*Operatie Hartslag*) in the early 2000s, which combined repression with preventive measures, the drug problem was largely tackled. The socioeconomic position of Heerlen however continues to lag behind the national average. Labor market participation is under the national average (58.7% versus 66.7% in 2017), unemployment is higher (6% versus 4.9% in 2017), and average incomes are lower (Fig. 1). In addition, Heerlen as well as the surrounding region face population shrinkage: between 1996 and 2019, the population declined by 10%, while in the Netherlands as a whole the population increased by roughly the same percentage (Fig. 2). Shrinkage is perhaps most visible in the number of vacant storefronts, in particular in the city center. While in 2017, the vacancy rate of dwellings stood at 5.4%, the vacancy rate of shops stood at 15.9% (7.1% in the Netherlands).

Furthermore, housing values are consistently below the national average (125,000 Euros in Heerlen in 2017 compared to 216,000 Euros in the Netherlands). Despite vacancies and low house prices, residents in Heerlen and surrounding municipalities still experience a lack of in particular affordable social rental dwellings. This is partly due to housing policies to combat shrinkage, which have prioritized demolition of low quality (and therefore cheap) social rental housing (Hoekstra et al., 2020). In addition, the industrial past is still visible in the spatial structure of contemporary Heerlen: suburban neighborhoods – which were built by the mining companies for their underground workers – show lower livability and concentrations of poverty, revealing enduring segregation between the city center and relatively affluent central neighborhoods and the less wealthy suburbs (Hoekstra, 2020).

The analysis is based on data collected using ethnographic methods, including interviews, participant observation, and analysis of secondary materials such as policy documents and media coverage. This material was collected as part of a larger research project on place-based strategies for regeneration in peripherally located, formerly industrial towns. Between October 2017 and April 2018, the second author conducted 29 interviews with 40 residents, creative professionals, and policy-makers (membership of these groups overlaps as most creative professionals and policy-makers were also residents). Of the 40 respondents, 22 were men and 18 were women. All but one were born in the Netherlands. Around half are 60 years or older, ten are between 40 and 60 years old, and nine are below the age of 40. Half of the respondents can be considered middle class (highly educated, working in white-collar jobs, most were homeowners). The other half are lower educated and/or have a low income or receive welfare benefits, these respondents mostly lived

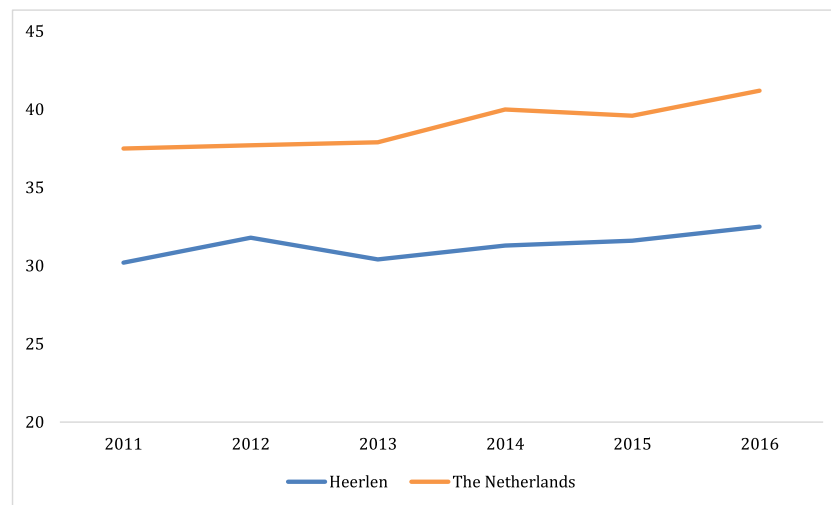


Fig. 1. Average yearly household income (x1,000 Euros) in Heerlen and the Netherlands, 2011–2016

Source: Heerlen in Cijfers, <https://heerlen.incijfers.nl/jive>

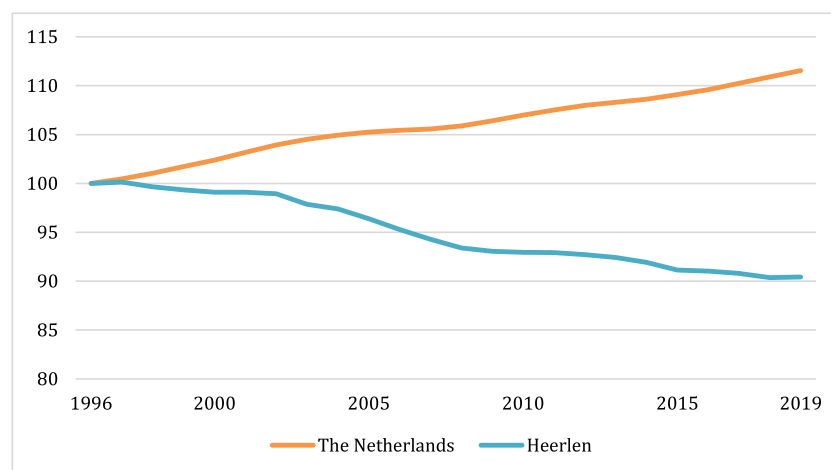


Fig. 2. Population development in Heerlen and the Netherlands, 1996–2019 (index, 1996 = 100)

Note: Population in Heerlen declined from 96,015 (1996) to 86,832 (2019). Population in the Netherlands grew from 15,493,889 (1996) to 17,282,163 (2019). Source: Statistics Netherlands, <https://opendata.cbs.nl>.

in subsidized rental housing.

Respondents were recruited through contacts of the researcher (at least two degrees removed to increase diversity among respondents), snowball sampling, and the distribution of flyers in two suburban neighborhoods in the north of the city. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, most lasted around 60 min. Interview topics included residents' memories of the mines and deindustrialization, their experiences of present-day Heerlen, and their hopes for the town's future. The 'Urban Heerlen' campaign was not a predetermined topic for discussion: respondents mentioned it unprompted – indicating the success of the policy strategy in terms of name recognition, as well as its salience to residents' everyday experience of Heerlen. To explore the origins of the branding campaign, in November 2019 the first author organized a focus group with civil servants overseeing the Urban Heerlen campaign and the restructuring of the city center, including a city councilor, a communication advisor and the program manager. In February 2020, another individual interview with a municipal civil servant was held.

In addition to the interview material, the second author conducted two months of participant observation during February and March 2018, at which time she lived in Heerlen and took part in everyday activities and conversations around the city, as well as attending various

events. Finally, a selection of policy documents and news articles that relate to the Urban Heerlen campaign were analyzed.

5. Making Heerlen 'urban'

The municipality of Heerlen conceived the branding campaign 'Urban Heerlen' in 2015, with the ambition to realize its plans by 2020 (Municipality of Heerlen, 2017). Primarily financed by the provincial and national governments, as well as through European subsidies for disadvantaged regions, the branding campaign falls under an umbrella of regional policies, projects and themes aimed at making the Parkstad ('park city') region – of which Heerlen is the largest town – more attractive to residents, visitors, and businesses. The Urban Heerlen brand seeks to establish a relational identity for the city in two ways: for inhabitants of the Parkstad region as *the* place for shopping, leisure, and urban living, and as a city with a competitive modern edge in comparison to nearby cities like Maastricht and Aachen, that are well-known for their historic town centers.

The 'bid book Urban Heerlen', which is the main policy document that describes the strategy, describes the urban theme using adjectives such as raw, unfinished, experimental, young, and innovative

(Municipality of Heerlen, 2017). In doing so, the brand leans largely on the thesis of cultural regeneration (Florida, 2003; Landry & Bianchini, 1995). More specifically, the characteristics that comprise the definition 'urban' for Heerlen were modeled in great part on the (post)industrial aesthetic of other cities. The local government often invoked a comparison between Heerlen and Detroit when speaking about the brand (see also Hermans, 2016) and hired the Rotterdam-based marketing agency Brand Capital to develop the brand, an unsurprising choice considering Rotterdam's reputation as a successfully revitalized industrial metropolis. Likewise, 'urban' is deliberately rendered in English (instead of the Dutch *stedelijk*) because of its associations with American urban youth culture. The brand was eventually designed by Brand Capital based on three key values that according to the municipality, characterized Heerlen:

We chose the following values: non-elitist, non-conformist and constant change (...) those are the core values of Heerlen that we want to apply everywhere.

(Interview civil servant)

Central to the Urban Heerlen campaign is the division of the city center into four parts, 'urban experience', 'urban heritage', 'urban living' and 'urban culture'. 'Urban culture' and 'urban experience' refer to activities geared primarily towards young people, including the popular radio charity show 'Serious Request' in 2015, the yearly hip hop dance festival 'The Notorious IBE', and Cultura Nova, a month-long cultural festival featuring different events and activities. 'Urban living' primarily refers to a new architecture project called the 'Maankwartier' ('Moon Quarter') that includes upscale retail facilities, a hotel and luxury apartments. In terms of retail, the 'urban' brand is visible in new boutique stores that sell clothes and other items that are more 'edgy' and cannot be found in other regional cities.

The fourth theme, 'urban heritage', is relatively underdeveloped. The city's mining history is hardly given attention and the focus it does receive is primarily negative in tone: 'The mining past is no longer a traumatic experience, but receives its own appreciation in the collective memory of the city, including in the form of a fully-fledged mining museum. Although the mining museum is not located in the center of the city, it can reinforce the tourist appeal of Heerlen's town center' (Municipality of Heerlen, 2017, p. 5). While the mining heritage is seen primarily as a means to draw tourists to the struggling city center, the 'rich Roman history' of the city, including the 'iconic bathhouse' is put center stage in the branding's conception of urban heritage (Municipality of Heerlen, 2017, p. 36). While the language used by policy-makers references famous postindustrial cities such as Detroit and Manchester, creating a similar aesthetic in Heerlen is virtually impossible due to the removal of most industrial architecture following the closure of the mines. However, we suggest that this negligence of the industrial also demonstrates a more central paradox or balancing act in the marketing of postindustrial places: between forgetting the negative associations of the past or enlisting them in a search for urban 'coolness'.

In regards to audience, youth are the primary target group. Nearly every picture in the bid book features people under the age of 25, participating in an active activity, such as cycling, skateboarding, or dancing (Fig. 3). Bright colors and bold prints make up the graphic design. Although not directly stated, policy-makers consciously attempted to influence both the self-image of current residents and correct the impression of outsiders and visitors with the Urban Heerlen campaign. As one civil servant explained:

[Urban Heerlen] will also help I think for the outside world, to make sure that people think 'Oh, Heerlen might not be that bad, maybe we should visit someday'. That's also an underlying idea. And of course it's good if as a city you have an identity that's not fragmented but that forms a whole. Where people can be proud of their city again. That is actually the main idea, at least for now.

The choice of 'urban' as a brand is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is descriptive because it refers to the 'essence' of the city that is seen to be already there, as an employee of Heerlen Mijn Stad ('Heerlen my city'), a foundation that is financially supported by the municipality to promote the city center, explains:

Many people don't agree with the urban brand (...) I think because they feel like they have to be urban now. Whereas it's meant as an observation, we *are* urban, we just have to promote it better.

The descriptive qualities of the brand are further defended by policy-makers, who point out that it was developed in collaboration with a board of local stakeholders, including residents, business owners, event organizers, and students, whereas large real estate companies were deliberately excluded to create a level playing field. In addition, a 'cartopological' company was hired to collect residents' stories and create an artistic-cum-anthropological analysis of the city center.¹ According to the interviewed civil servants, residents recognize themselves in the Urban Heerlen brand:

You can conjure this [brand] up in the town hall, but the nice thing is if people in the city also recognize themselves in it. You see that that's happening and I find that very special.

At the same time, urbanity is used prescriptively to refer to the desired behavior of residents as ambassadors for the brand. For example, the then-mayor of Heerlen stated in an interview with a regional newspaper that "[Residents] will ask 'What is [Urban Heerlen]?' But it is up to us to show that we are [urban]" (Vos, 2018). Local residents thus form one of the main target audiences for the branding strategy, while they are at the same time expected to 'perform' the brand through their characteristics and behavior (Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015).

In the next section, we will present two counter narratives, illustrating how residents actually understand and translate the Urban Heerlen campaign 'in action'. As noted by Hubbard (1996) and Maiello and Pasquinelli (2015), counter narratives to some extent depend on and are made possible by the dominant discourse. While no radical alternative imaginaries were articulated, many respondents distanced themselves from the 'urban' brand in describing their own experiences of the city. Their stories demonstrate how differential experiences of the historical and present-day influence perceptions of official regeneration strategies (Hoekstra, 2020; Jensen, 2007). Residents questioned the use of 'urban' as an accurate and inclusive description of the local identity in Heerlen and drew attention to more problematic aspects of urbanity, including the endurance of poverty and residential segregation in the wake of deindustrialization.

6. Living in 'urban' Heerlen: reception and counter narratives

The interviewed residents were aware of the existence of the 'urban' branding and mostly agreed with the local government's assessment that deindustrialization had ushered in an identity crisis for the city – thus creating the need for a rebranding. Moreover, they were appreciative of the activities and events organized under the 'urban' umbrella. Even if they did not attend events themselves, respondents applauded the efforts made to turn Heerlen into a livelier place.

Yet, resident's perceptions and attachment to the city did not align with the meaning and connotations of 'urban' as it is employed in municipal branding strategies. We argue that residents, while not being wholly negative, perceived the brand as both insufficiently authentic and insufficiently inclusive.

First, not all respondents agreed with the description of Heerlen as 'urban' in the first place. Referring to the difference between Heerlen and other cities, such as Maastricht, residents argued that the

¹ <https://dearhunter.eu/heerlencycentre/>



Fig. 3. Pages from the Urban Heerlen bid book.

municipality should acknowledge that Heerlen more resembles a large village than a ‘proper’ city:

Now everything *has* to be urban (...) but the social climate is more like a village than a city. Heerlen is a collection of (...) miners’ villages that became a patchwork (...) grown together. It’s not like Maastricht where you have a historical city center. Heerlen does not have that. So don’t act like it does. (Tjerk², 26, creative entrepreneur)

Others described Heerlen as ‘not really a city’, ‘an unfinished city’, ‘an ordinary city’, or ‘not really a city city’. These descriptors are not necessarily negative: many respondents, including a few who had moved back to Heerlen after having lived in larger cities, appreciated Heerlen’s small scale, laid-back atmosphere, and ample green spaces. In particular respondents who are originally from Heerlen and have moved back after spending some time in other parts of the country stated that Heerlen is a nice place to raise kids as it’s quiet and green and close to family and friends:

We think Heerlen is, it’s no Amsterdam, but it’s a very quiet neighbourhood and municipality to raise kids (...) it’s small-scale and cosy (...) so we’ve deliberately chosen to settle here and not in [a more urban environment].

(Jasper, 40s, researcher)

Next to a more general rejection of ‘urban’ as a descriptor of Heerlen, respondents also questioned its (implicit) association with dangerous and marginal space. The city-branding campaign frequently employs catchwords such as ‘raw’ and ‘non-conformist’ to refer to the supposed spirit of the city. Rather than conveying a sense of (post)industrial coolness, for residents these catchwords recall the negative reputation Heerlen garnered following the closure of the mines. In contrast with the municipality’s celebration of the city’s ‘rawness’, these residents argue that Heerlen has successfully reinvented itself as an ordinary city without rough edges:

(...) they’re still talking about the time when the addicts were here while it has changed completely. I think the reality is that it’s an

incredibly ordinary city with a lot of possibilities. I think the people who live here are done with that negativity

(Koen, early 50s, graphic designer)

Respondents also commented on the way that the Urban Heerlen campaign was deployed throughout the city center, applying the ‘urban’ label to existing bottom-up initiatives and local traditions and appropriating them in the process:

It seems like everything in Heerlen should be urban and it’s dragged into everything (...) now it’s invented and imposed by politicians, policy-makers and influencers and I don’t think that’s very urban.

(Sarah, late 20s, creative entrepreneur)

One frequently mentioned example of this is the mural route in Heerlen. The murals began with local artists who started painting without permission from the local government. With the introduction of the Urban Heerlen campaign, the murals were co-opted by the municipality who formed a foundation to scout locations and recruit well-known graffiti artists, with the aim of creating an internationally recognized and thematically coherent collection:

It’s mostly the municipality that makes it sound like [they invented it]: urban, the murals. A lot of people simply started doing that (...) and then the municipality said ‘That’s great, let’s call it urban, let’s throw a lot of money at it, let’s invite a bunch of international artists.’ But then (...) local artists don’t get a chance or everything must fit a certain image.

(Lotte, late 20s, graphic designer)

For local artists and creative entrepreneurs, this is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the focus on cultural regeneration means that more money is available, in particular for young residents working in the creative field. For example, both Tjerk and Sarah have received commissions from the municipality as part of the Urban Heerlen campaign. On the other hand, as the quote by Lotte demonstrates, the government may bypass local talent in order to market the city as *already* a hot bed of creativity, instead of stimulating homegrown talent. In addition, the interviewed creative entrepreneurs pointed out that it is the ‘village-y’ characteristics of Heerlen, rather than its supposed urbanity, that they

² Names are pseudonyms.

appreciate: because the creative scene is small, networking is easy and there is not much competition.

Another often mentioned example of the copying and pasting of the 'urban' theme is the winter festival 'Holy Moly'. It was intended to be a modern twist on the more classical Christmas market, including food trucks and containers instead of traditional Christmas stalls. This choice turned out to be unpopular among residents who felt that a Christmas event should not be branded as 'urban':

(...) It had nothing to do with Christmas. They had built some type of container village to keep it closed off and I thought to myself: what's happening now? Heerlen is 'urban' now and containers are a part of that. There were people there that looked around, shook their heads and left.

(Annie, 50s, childcare worker)

Another local classic, the yearly carnival parade, was similarly 'urban' themed, provoking a number of satirical entries (see Fig. 4).

While some respondents argued that the branding of Heerlen as 'raw' and 'urban' misses the mark precisely because they believe that the city has managed to rid itself from the negative legacy of deindustrialization, others objected to the *positive* connotations of the Urban Heerlen marketing because of its contrast with their own everyday life experiences. Especially for respondents living in the suburban former miner neighborhoods in the north of the city – which are on average poorer and experience more livability problems – the contrast between their experience of Heerlen and the image promoted by local government is striking. These respondents frequently described their neighborhoods as rundown, unsafe, or even as ghettos.

While the city center has become safer due to intensified surveillance and extensive policies targeting drug addiction, these problems have been pushed to the suburbs, where they are clearly visible to residents:

Heerlen has a very bad image, as the drug city. We have 164 cameras in the city [center], but the problem has been displaced (...) to the suburbs. The city [center] prospers, [claiming] they are clean and no doubt they are, but the suburbs are overflowing with drugs.

(Robert, 70s, retired)

Consequently, residents of these neighborhoods were critical of the use of municipal funding for projects falling under the Urban Heerlen campaign. These residents argue that lack of affordable housing and quality employment are the main problems facing Heerlen today, and they do not expect that the campaign will address them. In addition, most of the Urban Heerlen projects focus on the city center, which many suburban residents rarely visit. An exception are the murals, which are



Fig. 4. A woman holds a sign reading 'not urban' in local dialect. Source: Heerlen Mijn Stad, February 2018.

also present in suburban neighborhoods, often on buildings scheduled for demolition. However, their presence rather serves as a reminder of what is seen as the municipality's focus on aesthetics rather than actual change:

The money is not always spent on the right things. They've spent a lot of money on an art piece and nobody knows what it's supposed to mean, no sign or nothing. They've flown somebody in from Italy, nobody understands the thing, and that in a miner's neighborhood. That's strange isn't it that they spend so much money on art and nobody is asked whether they want it, and they could've spent the money on other things such as investing in the neighborhoods

(Geert, 60s, retired)

In conclusion, while the Urban Heerlen brand has proven successful in stimulating the cultural regeneration of the city center, and is appreciated as such, the brand does not reflect residents' lived experiences. Some rejected the urban identity based on a different understanding of urbanity, viewing Heerlen as an 'ordinary city' rather than a 'proper' city. 'Urban' for these residents recalled the period of decline after the closing of the mines, which they were happy to have put in the past. In addition, the wholesale application of the brand to virtually all events and initiatives stifled bottom-up creative energy and may alienate residents from beloved local traditions. Furthermore, residents living in the disadvantaged suburbs were critical of the use of funds for projects falling under the urban theme, which posited a positive, new image of Heerlen while disregarding larger fundamental issues within the town. Contrary to the idea that investing in cultural industries and urban amenities will create economic momentum, Heerlen is still economically disadvantaged and continues to face population shrinkage. In fact, the exclusion of major real estate companies in the branding strategy has proven problematic in this regard, as these own most of the buildings in the city center, making it difficult to successfully combat vacancies. If it is not accompanied by more structural investments, branding can only have a limited effect.

7. Discussion and conclusion.

This article utilized the concept of urban imaginaries to understand the use and reception of place branding in a smaller, postindustrial city. While place-branding strategies are often presented as generic solutions that can be adapted to all places (Andersson, 2014), studies show that successful place brands are not only recognizably local but also take into account – and ideally connect with – residents' experiences of and emotions around place (Gotham, 2007; Mommaas, 2002). This dimension of successful place branding poses a challenge in the case of many postindustrial or otherwise 'forgotten' towns. Next to challenges related to the transition to a different economic foundation and – in many cases – population decline and/or selective out-migration, such towns often suffer from a sense of symbolic marginalization (Linkon & Russo, 2002). In these cases, place branding is often embraced as a means of creating a renewed local identity intended to better align with an imagined post-industrial future. Consequently, branding strategies must strike a balance between transcending possible negative associations related to deindustrialization, while also being cognizant of existing imaginaries of place among different resident groups. This balancing act is clearly visible in the branding strategy 'Urban Heerlen', which, while relatively successful, has yet to succeed in creating an authentic and inclusive city identity. Our analysis revealed two explanations for this outcome.

First, the 'urban' label is interpreted by residents as a re-framing of the qualities that the town lacks, such as scale and an attractive historical city center, rather than a substantive identity in its own right. This arguably shows the limits of 'one-size-fits-all' strategies for regeneration. In Heerlen, using the considerably larger post-industrial cities of Detroit and Rotterdam as examples of successful regeneration, while admirably ambitious, missed the mark. The hiring of a marketing agency

from Rotterdam may have brought a refreshing perspective on how Heerlen could re-imagine and reposition itself, but it came at a cost. Employing a local marketing firm, or collaboration between outside and inside talents, would have provided more room for the inclusion of local imaginaries.

As a result, the Urban Heerlen brand may partly express existing cultural features, but does not succeed in informing and reinforcing residents' experience of the city (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). In fact, some respondents rejected urban identity outright and instead proposed alternative imaginaries of Heerlen as an 'ordinary city' or a large village, based on their everyday experiences. Others appreciated the 'urban' brand for some of the new cultural events but resisted the top-down definition of urban as an all-encompassing frame that subsumed both grassroots creativity and local traditions. The murals are a striking example of this: what started as spontaneous and illegal initiatives by local artists was incorporated in the municipal branding strategy. In an effort to market the city, the 'local' murals were outsourced to international artists invited by cities across the globe, instead of encouraging and facilitating local artists to continue their work. Heerlen's promotion of street art as part of its 'urban' brand is a logical result of being inspired by 'creative class' and 'creative city' theories, in which creativity is commodified and institutionalized (Peck, 2005; Hoyman & Faricy, 2009). These findings also show that the Urban Heerlen brand in its current form does not sufficiently allow for a plurality of urban identities and ways of experiencing the city. At the same time, as the 'not urban' carnival sign shows, city brands also generate discussion and counter narratives (Maiello & Pasquinelli, 2015), paradoxically creating room for oppositional voices. In this sense, the Urban Heerlen campaign did have considerable impact.

Second, a potentially more serious – albeit less explicit – critique hinges on the positive associations attached to the 'urban' frame that recall the efforts of similar postindustrial cities to become 'vibrant, stylish, confident, cosmopolitan and innovative' (Hannigan, 2003, p. 354). In contrast to the promise of culture-led regeneration, residents point out enduring unemployment and poverty, as well as spatial inequality stemming from the mining era (Hoekstra et al., 2020). While attracting the creative class as a development strategy has been criticized for fueling segregation and displacement, even by Richard Florida himself (Florida, 2017), here the issue is not so much the attraction of outside knowledge workers but the failure to solve existing inequalities. As noted by Gotham (2007), the success of city branding in 'problematic' places is predicated on softening their negative image. While this may be a successful strategy in terms of increasing urban civic pride (Collins, 2016) and stimulating the tourist industry, it may at the same time take away the political will and often the resources to address underlying problems. The felt need to move on and focus on future possibilities has the potential to distract from certain fundamental problems. It may even work counterproductively, when the need to radically break with the past is overstated, as if the past was only problematic and nothing to be proud of. Naturally, residents experience these issues most acutely. Policy-makers of postindustrial small and medium sized towns would benefit from more inclusive regeneration strategies: keeping their audience and the plurality of collective imaginaries in mind.

In conclusion, we find that while the Urban Heerlen branding strategy has elicited a successful cultural regeneration, its ambivalent and selective engagement with the city's industrial history limits its effectiveness and inclusivity in the eyes of residents. The different perceptions of 'Urban Heerlen' found in this paper are to some extent based on residents' (cultural) class identification as well as geographical positioning (cf. Boland, 2010). It would behoove policy-makers of small and medium-sized towns to break away from place brands based on a uniform conception of local identity, and instead focus on connecting with residents' heterogeneous imaginaries, which are in turn informed by their own positionality. Even in a relatively small town like Heerlen, different parts of local society have different urban imaginaries. Because urban imaginaries are always partial and subjective (Vanolo, 2017),

policy-makers should avoid a (too) singular brand so as to not exclude and further marginalize certain groups in society. This is probably even truer when a brand is chosen that is too different from the experience of the inhabitants. Residents are then asked to 'perform' a brand (Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015) they may not feel comfortable with and from which they receive no clear benefits. While the long-term effects of place branding strategies on the socio-economic and cultural issues faced by smaller postindustrial cities remain to be seen, we argue for the explicit recognition of and engagement with residents' lived experiences, as well as their different perceptions of the city's 'negative' past.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Katherine van Hoose (first author): co-authoring (all sections), data gathering, analysis.

Myrte Hoekstra (second author): co-authoring (all sections), data gathering, analysis, final editing.

Marco Bontje (third author / corresponding author): co-authoring (all sections), final editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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