BOOK REVIEW

Imaginative communities: admired cities, regions and countries by Robert Govers

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In this insightful, sharp, and timely book, Robert Govers (re)situates place branding to the realm of reputation management, beyond short-lived interventions using marketing and advertising techniques. In a hyper-connected world, as Govers argues, 'many of us are still looking for a sense of belonging (identity), authenticity, and stability and safety. Building a community and its reputation […] might be therefore more relevant than ever' (p. 14). Govers applies Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities*, originally employed to reflect on civic pride to articulate how the local can be globally relevant by encouraging communities to use 'their imagination in order to envisage and accomplish creative, unconventional, original, inventive, and—most importantly—uniquely local projects, events, infrastructures, or policies that reinforce the community and the way it is perceived by outsiders' (p. 17). Govers continues a scholarly trend inviting place branding academics and practitioners to 'think in imaginative ways' (Jansen 2008) to face current and future global and local challenges. Gover's book invites the reader to reflect on the many aspirations of places and on how their vision and values get communicated, beyond logos, marketing slogans, and advertorials, through innovative and bold actions that elevate the pride of the local community, from the inside out. As such, the book resituates place branding practice from a promotional activity to a non-commercial social and cultural strategy based on community engagement, encompassing many important aspects of the lives of our communities beyond economic imperatives, including social inclusion, sustainability, or quality of life.

Through a series of wide-ranging examples of successful cases, Govers moves beyond a critique of existing top-down approaches to developing place brands through flashy logos and slogans and provides a step by step simple guide to investing in the imaginative capabilities of place communities to drive authentic and distinctive place identities that can help places shine in the world's spotlight. The title itself thus constitutes a clear indication of the author's attempt to disentangle place branding from well-established marketing practice, to look beyond the possibilities of the application of marketing concepts to places and reflect on the need to escape the constraints of pervasive economic development rationales and accountability towards building creative and inclusive communities. Govers has poured into the volume his wealth of experience to argue the case for an alternative, braver, and more innovative approach to building community reputations from the ground up. He provides illustrations of useful and meaningful interventions that led to unique achievements, and stronger reputations, continuing a trend marked by 'actors' involvement, imaginative creation of a regional imagery and emergence of collective enthusiasm and spirit' (Berg 2000 in Pasquinelli 2013).

The book witfully interweaves the past, present, and future of place branding, and convincingly articulates a more *imaginative* way forward inviting readers (particularly place leaders) to gather the courage to jump into unchartered territory to find what makes places unique. Govers strategically avoids confusing, fuzzy, or contested terminology and jargon (Boisen et al. 2017) to lay in simple terms what communities need to engage in and collaborate to achieve long-term positive reputations based on their unique place identities

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(Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015). Admired communities, Govers argues, have a strong sense of belonging and purpose, they are bold and innovative but, most importantly, are focused on strengthening the *local*.

This succinct book is structured in eight chapters and contains 158 pages. Chapter one provides a short introduction followed by Chapter two that draws on Anholt's Good Country Index and Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index© to describe how admired communities share a strong sense of identity, belonging, and comradeship facilitating a 'sense of direction and local culture, often linked to moral virture and universal human goals' (p. 23), and emphasises how elusive, dynamic, versatile, and contested identities can be, requiring a balance between 'global relevance and authentic community distinctiveness'. Chapter three defines imagination as 'the ability to construct mental visions of alternative realities based on information about current events and past experiences, perceptions and beliefs stored in memory' (p. 45); a courageous and collaborative community task that requires leaders to transition to a facilitator role. This chapter introduces the importance of matching community values to universal values, engaging and connecting both online and offline using Bhutan's National Happiness Index and Estonia's 'digital republic' as examples. Chapter four emphasises how important a common purpose is for imaginative communities, and the need to focus on creating the actions and experiences that underpin positive perceptions in the minds of others, leading to strong reputations. The examples of Dubai's Palm Island, Finland's own emojis, and The Hague city as a centre for peace show how imaginative actions can set the media agenda. Chapter Five then provides the conceptual framework for communities to build their identities and manage perceptions and reputation. This chapter questions the use of media to *improve* reputations, emphasises the difference between reputation (hard to change, linked awareness, collective, aggregation or individual images) and image (individual perceptions) and explains how communities are often experienced through word of mouth and thus virtually imagined. Govers explains how beliefs, associations and ultimately networks of *schemas* (p. 78), marked by personal characteristics, as well as social and cultural backgrounds, make up place images and exposes the challenges in measuring these concepts through examples such as the Anholt-Gfk Roper Nation Brands Index™. Chapter Six reflects on reputation management beyond communications and explains how changing people's existing beliefs in a hyper-connected world requires 'action communication' (p. 95), more *doing* than *saying*. Only imaginative interventions can help communicate a strong identity. Govers draws from agenda-setting and media framing theories to argue that communities can indeed co-create their identities using technology creatively, highlighting Tourism Queenland's best job in the world campaign as a practical example.

Chapter Seven explains how communities are experienced by others and Chapter 8 brings it all together to remind the reader how communities become *imaginative*.

The book is testament to Gover's extensive knowledge, since it provides examples from the western world, but also from emerging nations and urban centres, assisting a comprehensive picture of how *imaginative communities* can yield positive reputations and build stronger place brands. Its engaging prose and supporting case illustrations makes it an excellent read for those who find themselves interested in the topic and also for those more seasoned, as the book can support initial understanding of key concepts and engagement in deep reflections on the suitability of current conceptualizations and practice of place branding, including scoping the many possibilities still to be explored, in other words *imagined* (Anderson 2006). Although Govers provides ample examples of how user generated content through social media and media framing can indeed *make* communities, it perhaps falls short of acknowledging the challenges inherent in everyday organic, horizontal, and decentralised communication through social media, often leading to counter-branding and resulting in negative effects for local communities.

As I finish the last pages I reflect on Gover's almost prophetic account of a continuously redefined future of places subject to the complexities and changes of a globalised world and requiring, more than ever, everyone's imagination to succeed. Govers did not anticipate the world crisis that followed the COVID-19 global pandemic, but he provides plenty of examples of how places constantly project their best selves through times of abundance, but also in times of crisis and transformation. This book will serve as a great thought-provoking strategic thinking tool for practitioners as well as a roadmap for place communities of any form and shape willing to build a vision and invest in a reality that supports their desired reputation and image. The impressive range of examples provided illustrating *imaginative places* and *imaginative actions* by different stakeholders across the globe makes for an excellent read for all marketing and branding specialists, planners, policymakers, and public administrators but also for community leaders, citizens and all those wanting to learn more about the potential of place branding as a tool to build strong and successful communities.

References

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Dr Laura Ripoll González has expertise in the fields of public administration, place branding and sustainable regional development. Laura is intersted in stakeholder engagement dynamics and governance in place branding As Postdoctoral Marie Curie fellow, Dr Ripoll Gonzalez is currently leading the project BRANDSUS [brandsus.eu] using mixed methods (quantitative survey methodology and action research) to study citizen participation in place branding processes to inform governance models for sustainable regional development.