

VISUAL RHETORIC IN CITY BRANDING: THE CASE OF TIMISOARA ECOC 2023

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Abstract: This paper attempts to pinpoint the importance of visual rhetoric in the city branding of Timisoara as European Capital of Culture in 2023. Visual artifacts related to Timisoara ECoC 2023 can enhance or hinder the urban branding. The image of Timisoara includes a rich cultural, industrial and civic heritage component, with a strong visual dimension. Urban spaces can develop via marketing of destination and place branding, and, in the process, visual rhetoric can prove an essential branding tool in the promotion of the spirit of Timisoara. The European Capital of Culture could have supported the city of Timisoara in rebranding as not only multicultural, open, and inclusive, but also creative, smart, and sustainable. The analysis of visual artifacts related to Timisoara ECoC 2023 reveals an insufficient, mediocre branding performance.

Keywords: Visual Rhetoric, City Branding, Destination Marketing, Timisoara, ECoC

1. Introduction

Today cities all over the world are trying to build the best possible images of themselves. City branding consists in image management through strategic innovation and coordinated policies, allowing differentiation from the competitors, and bringing economic and symbolic value.

City branding is a relatively new concept, adopted to help cities to build distinctive identities, to engage citizens, and to entice visitors and entrepreneurs. It is defined as a multidimensional construct, consisting of functional, emotional, relational, and strategic elements that collectively generate a unique set of associations in the minds of relevant audiences and stakeholders.

City branding is an instance of place branding and, also a special component of destination marketing. A place brand constitutes a network of associations in consumers mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural composite expressions of a place and its stakeholders. Destination marketing employs promotional tools in a coordinated manner, for improving external impression of a city or a region, with the aim of encouraging tourism, attracting qualified talents, and developing the business and creative sectors. These marketing tools should include a strong visual component. Visual marketing rhetoric offers the potential to influence image creation, reputation, and culture, conveying meanings symbolically and figuratively. Visual rhetoric in city branding employs the most effective devices for persuasion, through creation of meanings and construction of arguments, competitive identities, urban imaginaries and narratives, and shared rhetorical visions. The essence of the city brand concept is a connected, comprehensive, and contemporary narrative.

2. City branding and ECoC

City branding is the process of rhetorical selection (inclusion and exclusion of various elements) that elaborates or highlights some aspects and ways of understanding a city and, at the same time, obscures or downplays others (Stevenson, 2020: 269). City branding is about building a unified, distinctive, and updated urban identity (narratives, archetypes, imaginaries etc.), revealing a significant *genius loci* and aligning various perceptions. This distinctive city brand identity emerges from a specific connection of city resources and a creative use of the brand narrative.

There are differences between city and corporate branding, but the techniques they use are often similar (Dinnie, 2011: 4). City brand management includes promotional activities, image/reputation operations, and community-building projects. There are four aspects of city brands: identity, image, purpose, and equity (Anholt, 2007: 5). Brand identity constitutes the officially projected perception using a central concept distinctively expressed visually and verbally (logo, slogan, and articulation of all these elements). Brand image represents the aggregated perceptions of the audience, mental associations, memories, and expectations. Brand identity and image can be aligned, different, or even opposed. Brand purpose refers to the shared values and goals of a community, creating a unique spirit (*genius loci*). Brand equity reflects the acquired reputation through a composite of identity, image, and purpose.

City branding is a pull marketing strategy which becomes increasingly important in city diplomacy. A strong city brand can be developed through a clear set of attributes which can generate positive perceptions of the city across multiple audiences (Dinnie, 2011: 5). The main challenge for a city brand is the creation of a compelling and coherent 'umbrella' brand, covering different areas and addressing various target audiences. The main targets can be city residents, potential investors, tourists, and different stakeholders. It is also important to build an adequate brand architecture with various incorporated sub-brands, which must fit the overall structure and brandscape, however eclectic these might be (Stevenson, 2020: 271). City brands comprise six dimensions integrated in a hexagon: presence (international reputation), place (physical attributes), potential (economic and educational opportunities), pulse (dynamic urban lifestyle), people (inhabitant's attitudes and behaviors), and prerequisites (basic qualities of the city) (Anholt, 2007: 59-61).

A strong competitive advantage can also be created using existing resources for a distinctive positioning (Govers & Go, 2009: 49). A great emphasis of city branding is placed on creative industries as catalysts of cultural, economic, and technological development (Dinnie, 2011: 4). Another important brand dimension is sustainability, understood as a viable research-based development strategy, with specific objectives.

City brand is a non-tangible complex asset, a competitive advantage and a promise of quality or value, which needs to be communicated to various audiences. A compelling visual identity is an important component of the brand, which differentiates the place, based on a creative concept, encompassing all the visible aspects of the brand in an immediately recognizable image. The brand must be understood beyond its logo (logos can attract the spotlight so powerfully that the more strategic side of city branding often remains overshadowed and underestimated). So, from a strictly visual communication perspective, the real challenge is to go beyond logos and promote more outstanding city

imagery, a better visual culture when representing the cities, engaging audiences and local creatives in the challenge.

Cultural heritage and contemporary culture are recognized as main identity elements of cities and as important assets because of their relations to economic development, tourism, and social cohesion. A vibrant cultural life is considered as an essential requirement in city branding campaigns (Dinnie, 2011: 4). Different types of events (shows, festivals, exhibitions, holydays, etc.) are associated with branding and rebranding processes. The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is one of these major events aimed to enhance the international profile of cities through culture (Stevenson, 2014: 122). ECoC is selected and organized through political decisions, it takes a long pre-event preparation, and it is subject to competitive bidding. ECoC can have major economic and social impacts on a city, not only on its cultural infrastructure and local art scene but also on its brand image.

The European City of Culture was launched in 1985 by the Council of Ministers on the initiative of the Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri and in 1999 has become European Capital of Culture (ECoC). ECoC represents a major city branding/rebranding and positioning/repositioning opportunity, with an emphasis on everyday culture, citizen participation and education. Its double emphasis, on the local and the transnational level is intended to cultivate simultaneously the European dimension and the city community balances the national level, as designated hosting place of the event. ECoC can contribute to urban regeneration and revitalization, to consolidation of the city image and to development of the creative and cultural environment (Campbell & O'Brien, 2020: 277). However, the management and the implementation of the program is decisive in the success or failure (from contradictory results to unequivocal fiascos).

3. Visual rhetoric and city branding

Visual rhetoric can be understood both as a visual artifact and as a perspective on the study of visual objects. In the first sense, it is a product created by individual or collective rhetors with a communicative purpose (visual discourse), using rhetorical *loci* and arguments to evoke/represent beliefs, values, and ideological assumptions. In the second, it is a perspective (visual analysis) used by scholars focusing on the symbolic processes by which images perform communication (Foss, 2005: 143). Rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is a critical-analytical tool or a way of approaching visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images. It is a particular way of viewing images – a set of conceptual lenses through which visual images become comprehensible as rhetorical phenomena (Foss, 2005: 145).

Visual rhetoric is a type of textual analysis (where text is broadly considered as any situated communicative event or object that have identifiable meaning(s) and can be interpreted from different perspectives), concerned with multimodal artifacts, such as buildings, interior design, traffic signs, concerts, photos, exhibitions, films, posters, advertisements, videos, clothes, statues, paintings, and other (pure or hybrid) visual genres, and explores what they communicate and how they construct meaning, the intended audience, and the perceived persuasive strategies. Visual rhetoric covers three dimensions of cultural artifacts: the symbolic interaction, the human intervention (deliberate choices about color, form, composition, media, size and so on); and the

presence of a real or ideal audience (Patton, 2020: 128). Visual rhetoric can be used to analyze the nature and the function of the artifact, and to evaluate the event or object (Patton, 2020: 129-130). The purpose of a visual artifact (the communicative intention of the creator) is different from its function (the message processing of the audience). Behind the visual artifacts there are specific social and cultural beliefs, representations, and values. Therefore, visual rhetoric explores the persuasive devices, the context, and the impact of the artifacts, using three approaches: abductive (epistemic hunch), inductive (from artifact to theory), or deductive (from theory to artifact). There are three main perspectives of visual rhetoric: persuasive, ideological, and cognitive (Ott & Dickinson, 2009: 393-399).

Visual rhetoric extends the scope of the classical art of persuasion. On the one hand, the persuasive canons, strategies, and techniques of classical rhetoric also apply on visual artifacts; on the other hand, these traditional conceptual devices are somewhat limitative and inadequate, calling for new theoretical grounds, as the scope of contemporary discursive forms, modes, and types has expanded enormously (Kenney & Scott, 2003: 44; Rampley, 2005: 135). Images and visual artifacts are inherently polysemic, carry complex meanings, and are processed differently than verbal discourse.

Visual arguments are persuasive devices used in various contexts and aiming specific interpretations of the audience (Mielczarek, 2021: 256), through one or several modes of meaning creation: flag, demonstration, metaphor, symbol, and archetype. Visual flags attract audience attention through impressive elements of design. Visual demonstrations display images as instructions or proofs. Visual metaphors express claims through analogy. Visual symbols represent ideas or perspectives using culturally specific iconic artifacts. Lastly, visual archetypes are readily recognizable pictorial condensations of cultural myths and narratives.

Visual figures usually are condensed iconic arguments. Among the most frequent visual rhetorical figures are antithesis, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, metonymy, personification, pun, and synecdoche, but there can be used almost all rhetorical figures in visual forms (Fullaondo, 2022: 26).

Moreover, contemporary rhetorical theory must attune to a new challenge to its rich tradition: the material things as active agents and the rhetoricity of things and spaces (the nonhuman turn). Things as embodiments of rhetorical actions provide presence, evidence, and affordances. Through rhetoric, things generate communities, practices, and worldviews.

Visual rhetoric in urban branding introduces cities to people and influences their knowledge and beliefs, mostly via some visual landmarks and systems of cues. It can create a sense of immersive familiarity even though individuals have never visited or experienced the place and give shape and meaning to the anticipation of travelling experiences. In this regard, city branding and marketing campaigns attempt to express something true and essential about the represented urban areas. The cityscape strengthens the urban brand both in aesthetic and functional terms, through interventions such as spatial expansion, inversion, and intensification, and also via design reconfiguration, negotiation, and adaptation (Bonenberg, 2018: 109).

The visual component is a powerful anticipator, motivator, and attractor for international cultural travel. However, neither visual nor verbal communication of city

brands are substitutes for strategic management (Govers & Go, 2009: 51; Vanolo, 2017: 29). However, the visual dimension of the brand identity is memorable and communicates instantaneously. One of the most frequently used elements of visual identity of city brands is the logo. From a visual rhetoric perspective, logos can create presence, deliver substance, or convey references (Helmann & Switzer, 2016: 48). These three categories are not mutually exclusive, since they can combine or overlap, but one is dominant. An adequate logo expresses the essence of the brand, generating awareness, creating recognition, and positioning the city. The logo should also be the brand promise. Logos create and represent symbolically communities, using various rhetorical devices, especially metaphors or metonymies.

4. Analyses of TM 2023 ECoC-related visual artifacts

As we discussed earlier, visual rhetoric plays an important role in city branding. The visual artifacts I will analyze, to go beyond random cues, vague suspicions, and intuitive responses, can be best understood using a visual rhetorical perspective. I will analyze three evocative visual artifacts using the visual rhetorical perspective.

First, the rhetorical situation: Timisoara won the title of European Capital of Culture in 2016, for 2021. In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was postponed to 2023. Timisoara has a strong, organically established image: a *genius loci* (the spirit of Timisoara), a former free imperial city, "Little Viena", a creative, smart, innovative, industrial, and multicultural city, pioneering in technical areas and in various musical and artistic genres, the city where the Romanian Revolution started in December 1989, with the image of the Opera House front as a visual symbol and so on. Any attempt to rebrand the city of Timisoara must build on the existing tangible and non-tangible assets, otherwise it would result in a confusing or conflicting identity, hardly appropriate as a destination magnet. However, despite its many stories, the city does not provide an overarching, coherent, and compelling story (Angelescu, 2023: 162).

The kairotic moment for a strong city branding was Timisoara 2023 European Capital of Culture. The cultural program was structured around the concept of a transformative European journey, comprising three main themes: people, places, and connections, with the Power Station as the capacity building central node and with stations (large programs focusing on expanding and diversifying audiences) and trails (smaller programs aiming to deepen the relationships among cultural operators and their engaged audiences). The empowering yet patronizing slogan of TM 2023 ECoC was: 'Shine your light! Light up your city!'

The first studied artifact is the official logo. The TM 2023 ECoC logo was one of the major city brand identifiers, having the aim of generating awareness and acknowledgement, reinforcing the urban image, and evoking positive perceptions of the city. At the best, the impact of the logo should be able to resonate to different stakeholders, summarizing the most distinguishable assets of the city.

The main element of visual identity of TM2023 ECoC is the logo, which is completely different from the city coat of arms. There can be identified several rhetorical figures in this alphanumeric logotype. The first one is an exaggerated antithesis, implying the absence of previous culture and promising an imminent shining cultural life. The antithesis is twofold: chromatic (black vs. white contrast) and compositional (the solar symbol is positioned above the baseline, where the numbers are). The font of the logo (Helvetica) is a common, versatile, widely used sans serif typeface in consumer culture, also associated with hipster urban lifestyle (Aiello & Parry, 2020: 219). The yellow

background emphasizes the message, as this solar colour evokes gold and light, being a divine, royal and noble symbol. The figure of antithesis is realized through a visual parenthesis, creating asymmetrical balance. The main persuasive strategy is rhetorical ethos, suggesting an emancipatory stance, showcased by the upward movement and the chromatic dynamic.



Figure 1. The official logo of Timișoara 2023 – European Capital of Culture

The pathos is activated by creating presence. The logo creates presence by form and contrast and also conveys reference to the year of the ECoC. The dominant dimension is represented by presence. On the visual stimulation level, the ascending logo organization is dynamic and engaging.

The rhetorical logos is based on the cognitive metaphor as a condensed analogy or abstraction of sun as a symbol of knowledge and rationality. The main argument of the logo is visual metaphor, suggesting evolution of the city of Timișoara and its inhabitants through the light of culture. This unwarranted argument is implying that no traces of culture existed before and

now the sun of culture will shine. The logo plays on abstraction suggesting Europeanness. The circle is the symbol of perfection, cyclicity, and time.

Even if the TM2023 ECoC logo has its merits, it is unable to communicate the most valuable assets of the city. The logo is bland, conventional, and generic, without any evocative force.

The urban installation The Nursery. 1306 plants for Timișoara has been a temporary 10 month vertical modular structure with six levels, using layers of vegetation integrated within a towering metal scaffolding placed in the center of Timișoara (Victory Square). The installation was created as a collaboration of MAIO Architects Barcelona, Timișoara Branch of the Romanian Order of Architects, Studio Nomadic and Studio Peisaj from Timișoara.

The purpose of the artifact is to redefine the public space through a civic intervention and to promote nature into the cityscape.

From the ground level (low angle shot), we can see it as huge, imposing, creating an impression of force or superiority. From inside the tower, the public space is redefined, diminished or “tamed”. In terms of rhetorical intertextuality, it is an allusion of the Babel tower, a vegetal/metallic totemic object or the ancient Gardens of Babylon. In terms of material rhetoric, it is a postmodern bricolage and assemblage.

The artifact has several functions: visual advocacy for a sustainable city (*ethos*); metaphorical community center (*logos*); and emerging site for participation in city life (*pathos*).

The rhetorical *pathos* also plays on kairotic paradox (nostalgia mixed with eco-futurism) and dialogism between past and future, ephemeral and permanent, stability and change. Enargia emphasizes the visual presence of the artifact.

Rhetorical *ethos*, concerning the visual *persona* of the tower, is that of a firm but also fresh mediator between individuals and the city. From a dramatic rhetorical perspective, the Nursery can be seen either as a scene or an agent. The structure borrows *ethos* from the adjacent place and buildings. The Nursery initiates a rhetorical transformation by proposing a different, involved, and conscious persona for each individual participant. This also implies that the inhabitants of Timisoara are currently passive and inert, so an intervention of this kind is needed.

However, the installation intrudes on the urban center, creating a visual conflict by obfuscating a powerful city identifier, the iconic building of the Opera House, a symbol of the Romanian Revolution, and destabilizes the place visual flow.

Visual repetition identified in the artifact belongs to rhetorical *logos* and is realized through the duplication of the elements of the tower, creating symmetry, equilibrium, and rhythm through a pattern of precision and luxuriance. Visual symbol is the main argument here. The tower is the symbol of world axis, connecting the terrestrial and the celestial. The plants signify the solar energy, life, and growth. The metal is a symbol of cosmic energy. The four sides of the tower signify the square, the cross, the cardinal points and the seasons, totality and universality. The six levels of the structure signify the opposition between the creature and the creator, the ambivalence of tendencies toward good and evil.

The Nursery constituted a public gathering place, both for deliberation, and for celebration, as a civic rhetorical space, a material artifact creating community through collective rituals and, therefore, demonstrating rhetorical agency. Transforming the city center from a transit space into a leisure area can be considered a polemical move, attacking the *statu quo* and promoting a new perspective.

The affordances of the tower as a material artifact and visual tool altered the viewers' visual practices and their perceptions of the city. This assemblage not only afforded the visual consumption of the city, but also enabled engagement through a new way of becoming for visitors and residents alike, creating new communities. The immediate



Figure 2. Installation The Nursery. 1306 plants for Timisoara

audience of the artifact was that of bystanders, but the implied audience is composed of citizens and visitors as change agents.

The Nursery promoted an ecological ideology, aligning human and material elements in an ongoing process for altering perception and suggesting elevation through participation, beyond mere visual consumption. The epideictic rhetoric of the artifact is revealed by the created worldview and, at the same time, the sustainability frame develops a deliberative stance. This ideology requires audience members to construct themselves as ecological, future-oriented, active participants.

Even if the artifact integrated all the three main themes of city branding (people, places, and connections) it was not particularly compelling. The transient structure of the Nursery. 1306 plants for Timisoara has been controversial or even detrimental to the city brand.



Figure 3. Sculpture The Middle Way by Bogdan Rata

The monumental itinerant sculpture The Middle Way, realized in 2014 by the artist Bogdan Rata from Timisoara is a 3.6 m red hand, made from polystyrene, acrylic, synthetic resin, metal, and paint, has been exposed, at the invitation of the National Museum of Banat, on the Maria Theresia Bastion, a former fortification wall and a strong city identifier.

The rhetorical purpose of the artifact was to emphasize the idea of multicultural identity based on the equilibrium of opposites (good/evil, life/death, left/right), creating a connection with the other European cities where the sculpture was previously exposed.

The artifact has several functions: to raise cultural awareness, to create a vision of collective plural but unified identity, and to reconcile the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the physical dimensions of the existence, the fictional and the real.

The main rhetorical strategy belongs to pathos and is accomplished by visual hyperbole and synecdoche. The hyperbole is used to amplify the message and serves as an interpellation device of the audience. The synecdoche represents hand as human body, suggesting the significance of active unity. There is also a visual ambiguity: the red fused

hands suggest a flame, the sacred symbol of vital energy. The sculpture employs an allusion to the praying hands of Albrecht Dürer, therefore marking the epideictic nature of the artifact. The materiality of the artifact conveys rhetorical presence (*enargia*). The colour of the artifact, red, is the fundamental symbol of life, blood, love, associated with force and fire, inciting to or igniting action.

The ethotic rhetoricity of the artifact derives from the agentic persona. The artifact simultaneously suggests and performs rhetorical agency. The positioning of the sculpture commands attention of the viewers, proclaims salience and induces reverence. The sculpture's *ethos* is also enhanced by the spatial proximity of the Maria Theresia Bastion as a scene, which creates a distinct kairotic ecology. The relationship between the two elements (the scene and the agent) is not one of integration, but of dissension. The artifact hints at the interactions and intricacies of public and private spaces in terms of inclusion and exclusion and at the complex dynamic between tradition and innovation.

The main argument of the artifact (*logos*) is visual archetype, using a symbol familiar to audience. The hand is the symbol of agency, power, and domination and the close fingers attest convergence. Both hands signify polarity, but united they signify harmony. The merged hands signify unity derived from duality, the fusion of interiority and exteriority (*ego* and *alter*), forming a new identity. The vertical orientation of the composition suggests progress, determination, and vitality. Visual rhetoric of the sculpture articulates a cognitive attitude, based on different perspectives from which the artifact can be perceived. The visual medium of sculpture adds monumentality and materiality to the rhetorical discourse.

This is another example of failed branding attempt. The placement of the sculpture was also invasive and unsuitable, generating visual conflict between the scene and the agent.

5. Conclusions

Urban brands represent mandatory requirements for contemporary competitive markets, for improving external image with the goal of attracting tourists, talents, and entrepreneurs. City branding redefines the public space using similar techniques to corporate branding. The most challenging task for city branding is to create a compelling and unified concept, covering different areas and addressing various audiences.

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) represents a major city branding/rebranding and positioning/repositioning opportunity.

Visual rhetoric has a significant impact on city branding through the construction of a competitive urban identity. Visual rhetoric in urban branding introduces cities to people and influences their knowledge and beliefs.

The three visual rhetoric artifacts studied in this paper have had a doubtful contribution to the city branding. The city of Timisoara has, at best, an improvised, inconsistent, incongruous brand, and, at worst, a conflicting, incoherent, disconnected brand, both perspectives being identifiable in the studied artifacts.

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