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***Urban Branding as Strategic
Planning Tool for Adaptive
Spatial Developments in
Shrinking Riga. Element of
Temporality***

Current neoliberal practices in urban developments in former Soviet Riga, where architecture represents private values more than public ones, demonstrate a misguided and blurry vision for development as Riga city has admitted that its urban planning and development documentation has been too vague and liberal (RDPAD 2014, Kušķis 2015).

The city management has not successfully formulated an explicit development strategy and provided controlled and supervised steps for strategy implementation. Riga dropped considerably behind its Baltic neighbors in terms of real estate development and has lost more than a decade if compared (Colliers, 2021; Vanags, 2022; Balgalis, 2022; Krasnopjorovs, 2023; Vilciņa, 2023), which has contributed significantly to urban fragmentation and seclusion of Riga. The same statement has been recently repeated and strengthened by the State Audit Office, where the Authority concludes that Riga city real estate management and planning policy is without any strategic management and results (LR VK, 2021). As follows, Mārtiņš Vanags, head of the NIAA, claims that the city's inability to communicate its goals and negotiations with investors is one of the main reasons for the lag in real estate development (Vanags, 2022; Krasnopjorovs, 2023).

The importance of a robust urban development strategy and the necessity for its control becomes even more evident when a comparison is made on the amount of property owned by the city, where Riga has comparatively small ownership of urban areas, which is around 22 – 25% of cities area (Delna, 2007). In contrast, Helsinki, the capital of Finland, owns 70% of the city's municipal area (UN, 2021). Simply put, Riga needs more supervision of the real estate market for its long-term development as the liberal laissez-faire approach has not worked so far.

Moreover, another critically critical situation is that Riga is a shrinking city—one of the fastest-shrinking areas worldwide—with a decreasing population (DevelopmentAid,

2023). Therefore, the continuous prospect of growth as the only way for further development and evolution of the urban environment should be reviewed and considered. The idea of zero growth or even decline has yet to be considered thoroughly by communities' planning staff, and our planning response should be firmly adjusted to actual realities. However, the current paradigm is that the real estate developers that invest in Riga develop areas and functional programs that are seemingly beneficial from their point of view, neglecting the city's acute needs. Developments within the city are blinded by their strive for speed and acquiring any superficial result. Multiple and comprehensive urban layers that affect the spatial and social image (in its broadest sense) are either ignored or skillfully played with by those few who care to pay attention.

From a global capitalist perspective, one can observe that cities and regions worldwide are competing and, therefore, trying to strengthen their public image by integrating nonphysical factors such as culture, atmosphere, social aspects, and even feelings. They highlight the unique qualities by drafting a solid branding strategy and a clear set of steps for its implementation. When the issues of urban branding and shrinkage are put together, they point out the urgent need to adapt and transform the city development documentation into a roadmap with flexible targets to respond to emerging challenges.

Changing a place's brand and promoting it through temporality is a complicated and challenging field of discussion. As put by the scholar Adriana Campelo, who is mainly working on place branding, consumer behavior, and the use of urban branding for economic development and urban regeneration, many aspects of urban branding are still underexplored, while the practitioners and administrators are still striving to find the right fit for its successful implementation in cities (Campelo, 2017). However, it is essential to understand that cities and spatial environments each have

their unique brand, and as Papadopoulos (2002) mentioned, these brands already exist in consumer minds.

Additionally, urban shrinkage should be a growing concern in Riga's case, as shrinking cities are particularly vulnerable to growing territorial disparities. Most population projections and scenarios indicate that Europe's total population will decline (Pallagst et al., 2022). If we consider that several city development documentations could be more specific, urban management becomes a pressing global and especially local issue. For Riga, a city with a shrinking population since 1991 (CSP, 2022), it is necessary to adapt its urban environment flexibly and experiment with spaces and programs to test actual needs. Strategic urban branding can contribute to the economic value of cities and places, where temporality provides experimental character.

A system is necessary to manage limited resources and control spatial and programmatic emergences on an urban scale. Urban branding, therefore, holds immense significance for shrinking cities. Shrinking cities such as Riga face unique challenges, including population decline, economic disinvestment, vacant properties, and declining infrastructure. Urban branding emerges as a crucial strategy to counter these challenges.

F. Kaefer, the founder of The Place Brand Observer – an international project that researches urban brands, connects this issue with the practice to transform the project into the largest source of data and theory about urban branding. When summarizing interviews with leading experts in his publication, *An Insider's Guide to Place Branding* (2021), he makes the following remarks on the meaning of urban branding: Firstly, urban branding is about the community and spatial expressions, and it can define spatial values, identity, and strategic spatial vision of the future. Furthermore, urban branding can attract the talent and capital needed to nurture and develop a place's identity and merge it with

future spatial ambitions. Thirdly -and this is only recently getting attention in urban branding theory– it can maintain the legacy of the space. All other aspects, such as communication campaigns, advertisements, and short videos in the public space, have nothing to do with urban branding and are best referred to as urban marketing.

Urban branding is a holistic approach that engages civic society and other relevant actors who can contribute to a prosperous and shared future to attract investment, foster civic pride, strengthen sustainable tourism, intrigue talent, and inspire community engagement. By taking temporality into account, or in other words, acknowledging that social and natural forces constantly transform the built environment and that nothing is timeless, urban branding paves the way for step-by-step, realistic, and democratic progress. By crafting a compelling identity, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment, and managing socio-spatial resources, it is possible to foster growth and development. Urban branding offers a path forward in the face of shrinking populations and economic challenges. Rather than being a not a one-size-fits-all solution, urban branding can produce a versatile strategy that can be tailored to each city's unique characteristics and aspirations. By harnessing the power of branding, shrinking cities can redefine their narrative, reinvigorate their economies, and once again become vibrant, resilient, and attractive places to live, work, and invest.