Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

The Civic Brand: The Power and Responsibility of Place

The Civic Brand: The Power and Responsibility of Place is 204 pages, with five sections and 14 chapters. It also has a foreword, acknowledgments and citations.

Ryan Short is co-founder of CivicBrand, a place-branding consultancy based in Colorado.

This is a book about the power that "place brands" can have—if they are done right. In business, a brand is the name and symbols of a company that creates value in the minds of consumers by reminding them of a corporate promise. Examples: Apple's logo and its promise of quality and good design, Coca-Cola's flowing script and a promise of refreshment, and McDonald's golden arches and the promise of fast, affordable food.



A brand can also create value for a city, Short says, but it can do more. Done right, the process can bring a city together and make it better. This book, then, is about the power of a "civic brand," and what the right way is for creating one.

How can a brand make a city better? A good place brand, Short says, is forward looking—in Short's words, "rooted but also reaching." That is, it points toward what the city wants to be as well as what it already is. If these things make sense to community organizations and citizens embrace the brand, it will build commitment for the city's ambitions.

In this sense, then, a place brand is a civic vision—"a guiding light and North Star that shapes and unites all downstream decisions and projects." But, Short cautions, "it can't be too far out. It can't be unrealistic. It can't be just a pipe dream." It must be "authentic but aspirational."

An example is the Canadian city of Hamilton, Ont., which sees itself as a place for music. Once music became part of the city's brand, he says, local leaders saw numerous ways of enhancing

its musical heritage, from creating music programs in schools to passing a busking ordinance allowing musicians to perform on city sidewalks.

How can you find a brand that will unite a city and give it direction? Short's approach: Spend months talking with people, from top leaders to shoppers in grocery stores, about what makes the city or its region special, while researching local history and culture.

His key questions for citizens: What about this place makes someone want to live here? What would make someone want to open a business here? The aim, he says, is to create "a living, breathing reflection of the people that shape it and offer something they can all see themselves in."

And what will that reflection be? In city after city, Short says, he finds it comes down to two words: "the people." "But you can't stop there," he goes on. "You have to go much deeper to really understand what specifically about the people is special."

This approach, he says, does not *create* brands for places; it *discovers* them. "A brand is already there and we are simply uncovering it or helping communities rediscover it." And because the brand is familiar, it instantly makes sense to people.

What are some examples? Some place brands are organic, a phrase or slogan that locals embrace and visitors value. New York is "the city that never sleeps." People in Austin, Texas say they want to "keep Austin weird," which is a reference to its arts and music scenes and a local culture that's different from other parts of Texas.

Another example is Costa Rica's slogan "Pura Vida," Spanish for pure life or simple life. You see the phrase everywhere in Costa Rica, Short writes, in store windows and business signs, on souvenirs and license plate frames. "People use it as a greeting, and it's what you say when getting your photo made."

It's also an example of what happens when a place brand is embraced by local people. They begin using it in ways no one anticipated. For that reason, Short urges local leaders to make the brand easy for businesses, civic groups and individuals to share.

And why would citizens and businesses start using a local brand? Because most people love their communities, he says, so, "if you give them the tools to share their civic pride in a way that is authentic and can benefit them, they will proudly do so."

If these are things a place brand can do for cities—unite citizens and leaders around a vision and become a way of describing a place that's eagerly shared—how do you design a brand and how do you know if it's a good one?

The best way of settling on a brand is by having many interests involved in the work—"a collective effort," Short says. Again, this means interviewing many people about what they think of their community, but it also means getting many organizations, from city government to the school district, the chamber of commerce to cultural groups, involved in branding decisions.

And beyond: He urges localities to hold quarterly meetings once the brand is designed, so the organizations can talk about how it's being used and see how it is being adapted for different circumstances. Don't be too insistent on the proper ways of using the brand, he says, adding, "We need more champions and fewer gatekeepers."

There are two ways of knowing if a brand is a good one, Short says. As it is being designed, his firm uses what he calls a “triple bottom line” of “people, profit and place.”

The profit part is clear: Will this brand bring more businesses and visitors to the city? The people part also has a test: Does the brand reflect what citizens feel about themselves and will it benefit them? Place is about how the brand reflects the built environment and whether it promotes pride of place.

That can help you design a good brand, Short says. But once designed, how do you know if the brand is accomplishing its aims? You tell by looking at the actions that follow. Are new partnerships to promote the city being formed? Are visitor numbers and economic development inquiries growing? Are local governments passing ordinances or making other changes to advance the brand?

Short has two cautions. The first is not to become fixated on logos and slogans. “Your symbols and logos need to be just that—symbols. They need to simply remind somebody of your brand, not communicate the depth of your brand.” If the logo reminds people of the place and its unique strengths, the way a good corporate logo reminds people of a company’s promises, then it serves its purpose.

His second caution: Branding is not something cities in trouble should take on. If a city cannot repair its infrastructure, keep citizens safe or balance its budget, it must take care of those things first. Only when citizens have confidence in a city and its future are they willing to talk about its brand, Short says.

But when they are, a brand can help guide leaders and unite citizens. “A place brand, when done right, can be the tip of the spear that can lead everything else,” Short writes. “It guides our planning decisions, our investments, our budgets, our priorities, our pride and our stewardship.”

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group discusses *The Civic Brand*, we’ll talk about the value of place brands and the ways Urban Atlanta has viewed itself over the years, from “the city too busy to hate” and “the city in the forest” to “the ATL.”

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Ryan Short's book about the power of place brands and how good ones are found. We and look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **Jan. 6, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307**.

There's more information about this discussion at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website.

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *The Civic Brand*:

- You can purchase a hardcover copy from a local bookstore, such as Virginia-Highland Books.
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the DeKalb County Public Library.