THE DIFFERENCE IS IN THE DETAIL
the potential of detail as a place branding tool and its impact upon our perceptions and responses.

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for the forgotten potential of detail in creating a sense of place, calling for a review of the design and treatment of detailing in public spaces, and its role in urban environments.

The study introduces the importance of detail in forming our perceptions, and subsequently, its effect on our behaviour in public spaces and urban environs. Arguing that the combination of details has the potential to create or destroy a sense of ownership and territory, the paper questions how they could be better used to build civic pride amongst residents and visitors. This text also considers how those who create and manage public realm environments could learn from attitudes to detail commonly seen in other areas of design practice, such as product, interior and communication design. It looks to approaches that underpin corporate brands, and proposes that a similarly focussed attention to detail could help better define the unique character of a city or place. It also acknowledges the charm of 'random' details, and highlights that a balance must be sought between unplanned and controlled detail.

KEYWORDS

Public Space, Sensory Design, Perception, Use, Place Branding, Detai

1, DEFINING DETAIL:
DIFFERENTIATING PLACE AND THE EFFECT ON OUR PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

On the 29th August 2005, Hurricane Katrina all but eradicated the city of New Orleans. The sudden destruction wrecked lives and the material environment, and brought a huge blow to the city's world famous richness of character. Beyond the immediate tragedy and relief efforts, one of the biggest issues remains in rebuilding the deep-rooted personality, or identity, of the place. It's clear that New Orleans' charm is not going to be easy to recreate. Allen Eskew, of local architecture and urban design firm Eskew, Dumez and Ripple shares the concerns of many: "There is a difference between the postcard presentation of New Orleans and the real soul of city. The tourism business is our largest industry. It uses the character and fabric of the city as its platform, but I'm fearful that in our rush to re-establish the tourism business the authentic spirit of the place will be lost" (Metropolis, 2005). The city's unique character was the key to its long standing popularity. But if it's to regain its attractiveness to tourists, how will it now distinguish itself from any other destination?

Defining the term 'detail'

Specifically, what do we mean by the term detail? A scene in Jacques Tati's cult film, Playtime (1967), provides a clue. It shows an American tourist on holiday in Paris, who, upon visiting a new hi-rise building, a symbol of the 'modern city', is entranced by a series of travel posters marketing foreign destinations. Each poster promotes its respective city with an image of hi-rise building, almost identical to the one she visits. The only distinction between each poster lies in specific details; a double-decker bus in one, or a palm tree in another. The scene may be intended as ironic, but raises the question, what makes London, different to Cairo, and yet again to Paris? The difference between these cities lies in the details.

Such cities and regions aim to differentiate themselves, finding their unique selling point in order to compete in a hugely competitive world-wide market. Yet, every city shares roads, cars, crowds and buildings in common. What differentiates one place from another are the details that define these structures; the 'clothes' a place is dressed in, perhaps more than its 'physique'. Upon taking a walk though a London street, we might encounter the crunch of leaves under foot, a whiff of bacon from the local greasy spoon, a newly painted door. Such textures, sounds, smells and visual elements come together to inform our perceptions of an environment, and thus our sense of place. By contrast, more architecturally 'significant' features of our cities such as the height of the buildings, the length of the street, or the layout of the road, don't communicate with us so strongly.

Certain collective perceptions are well defined and are carried beyond the city. Why are Paris and Rome considered romantic, or New York dynamic and enigmatic? Could traffic horns, billowing steam and fast-food smells support that perception? Think of stereotypical London and you think of details; bowler hats, red post boxes, double-decker buses, pea soup fog.

It is the seemingly small elements, the apparently insignificant details, which are of great importance in informing how we feel about an environment. They combine to develop our attitudes towards a place, subsequently affecting our emotional connections and our behavioural responses to it. The details are our points of contact to help us decide how we feel about an environment, whether we like it and whether we decide to stay there any longer.

Detail is not the form of a city, nor the shape of a building, the layout of the streets, or the facilities available to an area. Rather, we understand detail as the language a place uses, the perfume it wears, the way it carries and communicates itself. In short, detail is how a physical environment manifests its character. In the same way we change our personal attire to suit the event, so urban details can change for different occasions. We make assumptions and alter our behaviour according to a person's dress and language. Similarly, details of place influence both our first impressions and our long-term relation with a built environment.

What are the individual elements and features that come together to create a place's sense of character? Perhaps the width of a boulevard sidewalk; a pattern on a building façade; a piece of street signage; the sound of birdsong every morning outside a window; a paving material in a particular colour and finish; a boarded up café; a stray shopping trolley; a can in the gutter. These elements form part of a long list of contributing factors

It would also be a mistake to define detail solely by size; it could cover an area as small as a grate or as large as the surface material for an entire public square. More important than size, in measuring detail, is the level of attention paid to it. In the Image of the City, Kevin Lynch (1960) cites landmarks as a way of navigating and perceiving the urban environment, which "in scale can vary considerably." He describes these 'points of reference' as standing out for their 'uniqueness'; for example, an interesting doorbell proves a highly noticeable landmark as it sits at eye-level, and is in contrast to its surroundings.

Why details work;
how details affect our perceptions

The form of these details (sounds, smells, textures etc) provides a clue as to how our environments establish relationships with us, as 'users' of those spaces, and thus affect our perceptions.

A guidance document published following US Military research on interior environments states that "People respond to the environment based upon their perception, cognition and spatial behaviour… (and that)… perception of the environment, in its most strict sense, refers to the process of becoming aware of space by the acquisition of information through the sensation of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste." (US Army Corps of Engineers,1997)

While these comments were intended for design of interior environments, could it be justifiably argued that the human brain reacts so differently when we enter exterior environments?

A recent article in Viewpoint (Tong, 2005) a trends and brands futures magazine, argues that "modern brands will have to appeal to all five senses in order to compete." It introduces Martin Lindstrom's term, '5D Branding' to highlight the consumption choices we make based on sensorial experiences of detail: the clunk of a BMW car door; the smooth and luxurious opening of a Chanel makeup compact or the patented crunch of Kellogg's cereals, developed by professional sound engineers (Tong, 2005). All play a large part in the way these products instil particular values within our minds.

The article cites researcher Erik du Plessis, author of The Advertised Mind, to explain how this works: "When you see something it is processed from the rear of the brain toward the frontal lobes, which is where your rational processing takes place… As this process of interpretation sweeps past the limbic system it will react if there is an emotional component to the developing operation… This emotional component of the interpretation then sets the background against which the observation is interpreted. This means you need to know how you feel about something before you know what you think of it" (Tong, 2005).

Details communicate to us at a level so subtle as to become little more than the trigger, or the code, to which our emotive and cognitive systems react. As such we often remember their messages more strongly than their form. This communication is so effective because it links our senses to memory, and culturally learned interpretations of situations, in a way that larger elements of the city cannot. "The designer sees the whole building – the clean verticals, the horizontals" … "and so on. The person sitting on the plaza may be quite unaware of such matters. He is more apt to be looking in the other direction: not up at buildings, but what is going on at eye level" (Whyte, 1980). We build a larger picture in our minds through the myriad of detail information we take in.

Although we absorb sensations separately – of smell, of texture, colour sound, shape, language etc – we mentally recombine them to create a perception of a place. Lynch (1960) describes how "Our perception is not continuous, but rather, partial, fragmented, mixed with other concerns. Nearly all the senses are in action and the imagination is the combination of these."

However, linked to the sensations that we feel are culturally learnt codes, to which we bring our own interpretation of the message. To some, a fence suggests privacy; to others that there is something to hide. A police siren may suggest danger and crime, or be seen as a sign that someone is at work to keep the streets safe. Graffiti is often viewed as vandalism, but also fills and sells many a hardback art book, and in the same act can bring a place into public consciousness. Our interpretation of such codes differ based on our backgrounds, previous experiences and familiarity with a place.

Donald Norman (1995) writes on how this reliance on memory and learned codes of sensation also helps us define how we relate to a place. Speaking of objects he states that "True, long lasting emotional feelings take time to develop: they come from sustained interaction. Surface appearance and behavioural utility play relatively minor roles. Instead what matters is the history of interaction, the associations … and the memories they evoke." He identifies that the most cherished things are not always beautiful, but argues that, whatever the aesthetic, the designer should understand that the impact of their labours will always depend on the contextual and personal connections made. In the case of popular kitsch "keepsakes", which might merit little artistic value or be considered sentimental, Norman highlights a dictionary definition of "sentimental" as "resulting from or coloured by emotion rather than reason or realism". "Emotion rather than realism" he says "– well, yes, that is precisely the point". His case refers us to an example, expanded upon below, of reading the text of a book and coming away with the gist of the story rather than every letter of the script. Alluding to Lindstorm and Whyte, Norman reminds us further that details serve as catalysts linked to other impressions and feelings.

The link between senses, memory, emotion and perception is not only well documented, but is increasingly developed into brand experiences. Yet, as Mirko Zardini, (2005) in Sense of the City, highlights, "At the moment when sensory marketing, purveyors of the experience economy, and the practice of multi-sensory design" … "seem to be devoting so much attention to sensorial experience, it is paradoxical to find that the urban environment remains untouched by this sort of consideration." Where are the 'sensory' experiences in our public spaces?

2, THE DANGER OF IGNORING DETAIL; HOW LACK OF DETAIL CAN DESTROY A SENSE OF PLACE.

It's clear that the role of detail in creating identity of place is oft-overlooked. In terms of planning and design, a view is commonly taken of a city or region as a whole, and it can be difficult to maintain the conceptual ideal from masterplan through to the 'nitty gritty' end of the scale. These details are at times treated as inconsequential; the leftovers that are rushed or culled when the money runs out.

In the case of New Orleans, the delicate balance of porch fronted houses, heady heat and deep blues created a charged atmosphere that took over 300 years to develop; there was no-where quite like it. It's clear that a simple recipe of new buildings won't suffice. To truly recapture the city's identity, to put the soul back in, the challenge is to design-in the emotive qualities.

While New Orleans now has the chance to start from scratch, it's rare that details are given the opportunity to be considered as parts of a greater whole. Almost by their very nature they emerge over years, combining a mish-mash of individual interventions, public works, and unexpected repairs, changes and events. In many cases this has led to city authorities feeling consciously out of control of their details, and in the UK many councils are now attempting to remove "clutter" to clean up their town's image. In London, the Mayor's Architecture and Urbanism Unit (2005) cite typical problems in the public realm as including "spaces that are cluttered with too much and poorly coordinated street furniture."

In the same way that details can be ignored in our streets, their potential to determine the character of a place is often given little attention when it comes to city marketing. There is much criticism of this field in its failing to effectively distinguish one place from another. Charles Landry (2000) describes this 'formula thinking': "City Marketing is concerned with identity and distinctiveness, yet common formulae emerge from urban publicity. If you replaced one city name by another you would not know the difference." He sees "a need to broaden the talent base for marketing and to bring in historians, anthropologists, cultural geographers etc. who can think more deeply and originally. The place marketing world is dominated by product specialists who have good tips or formulas yet rarely understand the complexity of the city."

3, LEARNING FROM ELSEWHERE: HOW CREATORS OF PUBLIC SPACES CAN LEARN FROM ATTITUDES TO DETAIL COMMON IN OTHER AREAS OF DESIGN PRACTICE

There are many aspects of public space design and city marketing that would benefit from the levels of attention to detail found in other fields. A crude summary of other design disciplines would be that graphic designers use detail to communicate the right tone of voice and improve understanding, interior designers use detail to create mood and a sense of ownership, and product designers to create emotional links and improve usability.

Detail and legibility

In creating a typeface, a type designer will spend many hours perfecting the correct 'bowl' and 'counter' of an 'e', or adjusting the space between each letter. On the surface, these details are seemingly imperceptible and insignificant to the reader, but actually have a huge impact on the legibility and character of a typeface. This in turn affects what is being communicated and how it is received – how much is read before the reader tires of a text, for example.

The process of mentally combining details to form a perception is akin to reading; urban designers often refer to the 'legibility' of a city; "the ease with which its parts may be recognised and can be organised into a coherent pattern" (Lynch, 1960). We organise such 'letters' into patterns, the result being recognisable 'words'. Yet once we have read a book we can often recount the story and how it made us feel, but not necessarily the specific words that came together to construct that story. In a similar way, we may be able to recount our mental image or emotion of a place. However, it's rare that we are able to dissect the separate details that joined together to form this image.

Landry (2000) describes this skill as "urban literacy", citing that it "helps us to recognize the invisible walls of urban ghettos and feel the lack of social capital. With this skill one can read the implied threats of how people look at you. It provides implicit knowledge on how you can sniff out the cheaper restaurants or the alternative district. Perhaps a whiff of incense or a gothic look, a bike shop, a bookshop specialising in green issues, the vegetarian café, an artist studio complex." Paying as much attention to the details in our urban environment, as a type designer does to their work, could have a huge impact on the legibility of our cities.

Detail, territory and ownership

We're accustomed to using ornamental aspects of detail in interior spaces, most evidently in our homes. Patterned wallpaper, plants, cornices, furniture; all of these elements can be considered details, long used by society to create a sense of ownership and to make a house, a home. They

allow us to take control of our space, and reflect our identity through it. This is regardless of the structure itself; ornament and decoration act as a way to distinguish a two bedroom terrace from the two bedroom terrace next door. Even the most minimal of decoration contains a level of attention to detail we're now unaccustomed to seeing in the street; a photo frame here, a textured cushion there. What are the urban equivalents?

The use of traditionally interior and private elements to create a sense of ownership has been studied in exterior spaces. William H. Whyte (1980) encouraged the use of 'moveable seating' in his study, *The social life of small urban spaces*. Whether a seat is fixed or movable is an important detail, that can change the atmosphere and use of a place. He asserts that such moveable "Chairs enlarge choice" … "They are a declaration of autonomy, to oneself, and rather satisfying." In relinquishing control of the position of seating to us, the users, we are able to create some sort of territory and ownership of the space. Whether that be placing the seat in or out of the sun, next to friends, or alone in a quiet corner; just as in our own house, *we choose*. Successful examples can be seen in Paris' Jardin de Luxembourg, or New York's Bryant Park, in which three thousand moveable chairs have helped in the transformation the park from a "no-go-zone" to a well-used lunch spot. (Wikipedia, 2006)

The majority of solutions engineered for the street environment today are far more 'minimal' than the most chic architect could conceive of. But in this case the starkness is often determined by economic means. The ongoing surge to keep public costs down sees our materials minimalised, our poles pared down and our streets straightened. A series of grilles, gates and lampposts adorning a property of the Victorian era, were often interwoven with ornament and 'craftsmanship' that would elude characteristics of 'quality' or 'class' to passers-by. Yet the default specification for equivalent elements in street contexts today, seem to be poor retro references to the same era, or the most 'democratic' solution, consciously evading any allusion to ornament. What we are left with has become a series of straight grilles and gates, adorning our streets with the 'prison aesthetic', finished to purely functional or health and safety specification.

In 2003, industrial designer Leandro Lattes published a small, dense book, *While Stocks Last*, as an archive of "visual reference to Madrid's urban details that are fast disappearing" (2003). His concern and inspiration for the work, is embedded in the title. Over ten years he witnessed the best considered examples of the city's shop facades, window displays, metal grilles, doorways, handles, signs, directories, intercoms and more, being gradually replaced thanks to ongoing refurbishments on large and small scales. He describes how "from an initial sensation of chaos, various relationships between the pieces become apparent" … "the appreciation of use of specific materials,

which are characteristic of a given industrial period" … "many of these objects have become iconographic details of Madrid that are fast disappearing" (Lattes, 2003). As a visual documentation of elements never to be seen again, the book presents itself as a lament for the loss of attention to detail during city renovations. However, the designer perhaps forgets, in his sorrow, that we are still creative, and can achieve such standards again in new and more exciting ways if we choose to. Yet to assume we can ignore the role of ornamental detail, without impacting on the perception, feelings and use of those citizens or 'users' in our environments is precarious, to say the least.

## Details as emotive, cognitive and behavioural catalysts

"Only the subject desires, only the object seduces" (Baudrillard, 1999)

As consumers, we're regularly seduced by objects in a way in which we can easily fail to recognise. We become subtly drawn into a relationship, sometimes to the point of obsession, with whatever we consume, or 'desire'. In a paper entitled 'White Worship' Laura Gonzalez (2005) unravels the success of Apple's ubiquitous iPod. She highlights the role of the detail of this product, now the metonym for an mp3 player, writing that "no object is more ubiquitous. The smoothness of its design, is unblemished and, particularly the touch of its controls" … "contribute to its triumph." She insists that for a product to be valued, even loved, by its users, high-spec functions and market-leading performance are not enough. It is the finishing touches that have made this mp3 player such a seductive object and such a commercial success.

Most public places (our 'objects') are still far from offering the level of intimacy with the 'subject' that Baudrillard identifies, and even less in danger of engendering obsessions between person and place. We need to take heed of how the relationship between user and object works, and what the 'seducers' might be (and equally, the repellents) in the context of our built surroundings.

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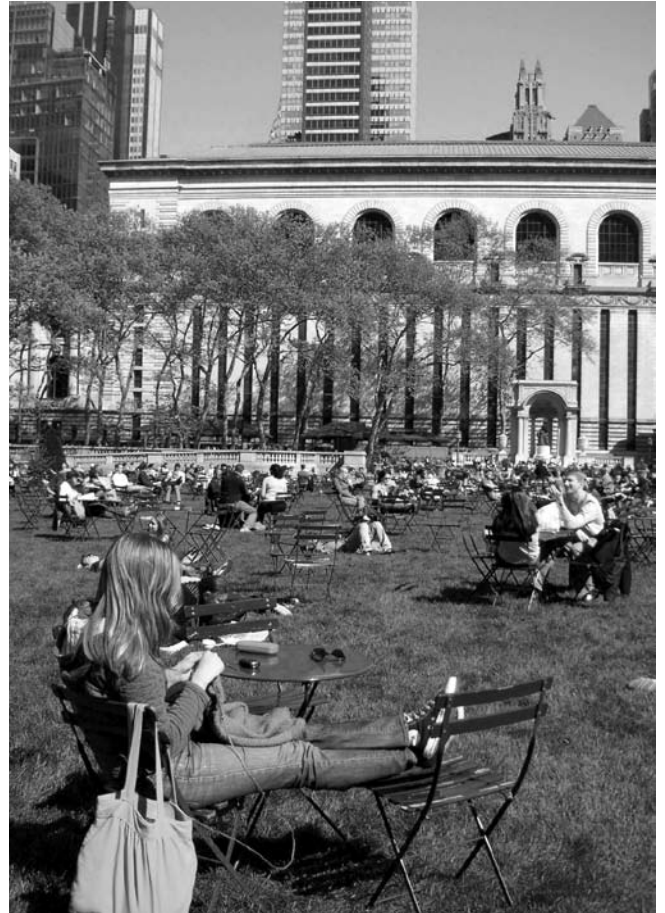
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1 Who says this stand is only for bikes?

2 The success brought by detail lies not in the provision of the seat, but in its mobilty. Bryant Park, New York City.

Photo Laura Goldsmith.

3&4 Quality and craftsmanship

...versus fortress aesthetic

Applying the learning

How can the existing expertise evident in other design disciplines be applied to public spaces in order to strengthen our relationships with a place, and change our perceptions of it? Positive examples of this application exist on a variety of scales:

Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Solid Poetry

Industrial designers, Susanne Happle and Frederik Molenschot, developed the concept of "Solid Poetry" in Eindhoven; concrete paving that appears fairly standard when dry, but reveals leaf patterns when wet. The detail of imprints left on the concrete pavement by leaves carried off by the wind acted as inspiration. "Smells, colours, surfaces – everything's different when it's raining" (Frame, 2006). Holland is renowned for its dull weather, which is not generally seen as a marketing point. But rather than denouncing or ignoring an intrinsic part of what characterises Eindhoven, the tiles highlight this element, turning a potentially negative point into a benefit and adding character. The city's clothes literally change as the weather does.

Helsinki, Finland: City of Light

A city subject to very long dark periods during 5 months of the year, has played upon its reputation through focus on detail. Its image was negative "thought of as 'cold' 'distant' 'unknown' 'gloomy' 'and 'mysterious'. Yet over a period of years the city has converted its reputation: "Light is a new Helsinki brand name" (Landry, 2000).

Charles Landry (2000) helped to conceive the Forces of Light festival in the city, describing the "snowflakes, aurora borealis, lights on gravestones, candle parades," plus numerous other Finnish traditions as building up a picture of the city which could be promoted and celebrated. "The festival is a fixture in the yearly calendar and was a central component of Helsinki's European City of Culture programme in 2000. It has encouraged City officials and private businesses to think about light, its power and impact in innovative ways" (Landry, 2000).

The concept was followed through to elements of public space design and intervention: "The original concept saw lights fanning out from the central station square, and involved lantern projects and parades spreading in from the suburbs to link, through the symbolism of light, the different parts of the city." (Landry, 2000).

London, England:
A Public Realm Strategy for the city

The Mayor's Architecture and Urbanism unit in London is developing a public realm strategy that focuses on three scales. The first level, entitled 'Every Detail', advocates "small-scale interventions everywhere, starting with 5 simple things which would include, for example, the use of the same colour paint for all metal work" (2005).

As part of this strategy, Transport for London, working with the A+UU, recently published a streetscape guidance document (Architecture and Urbanism unit, 2005) encouraging "consistency in textures and colours to create calm, simple and well-designed streets for people. Each element of the streetscape – street furniture, lighting, footway and carriageway surfaces and cycle and bus lanes to name a few – are considered in detail."

The redevelopment of Kensington High Street has been one of the most successful applications of this strategy, with the aim of reducing clutter, accident rates and creating an "elegant and contemporary feel" (The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2005) "Measures included cladding the street with high quality materials such as York stone, removing kerbs at junctions, reducing the number of street signs and – contrary to conventional wisdom on road safety – removing most of the guard railings"(CABE, 2006). The latest accident figures show that casualties have been reduced by 47% (CABE, 2006).

4, THE IMPORTANCE OF SPONTANEOUS DETAILS; HOW DOING NOTHING CAN THE BEST WAY TO MAINTAIN A PLACE'S CHARACTER

These are all strong examples of how detail has been carefully considered in the public realm with subsequent effects on perception. However, much of a place's character is formed through unplanned and spontaneous details.

William H. Whyte (1980) recognised their value, believing that "Some of the most felicitous spaces, are leftovers, niches, odds and ends of space that by happy accident work very well for people. At 57th Street and Madison Avenue in New York there is a bank with two window ledges. They're low enough for sitting and are recessed enough to provide wind protection, There is sun all day, a parade of passers-by, and at the corner a vendor sitting squeezing fresh orange juice. It is a splendid urban place."

Public environments would benefit from deeper thinking as to how their respective elements contribute to the relationships they set up with us, their consumers. So for those involved in the creation and maintenance of urban contexts, the challenge is not only to find appropriate uses and specifications where interventions are being made, but equally to understand how combinations of 'found' and 'incidental' details may have as much impact upon our experience of place as those that are intentionally built-in.

Equally, details designed by architects for one function can be re-appropriated by users for another purpose, and bring a new popularity to a place. Plaza dels Angels, the square situated in-front of MACBA, Barcelona's

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5 Re-appropriating space in Plaza dels Angels, Barcelona.

6 Pedestrian-friendly openness through well-chosen materials and paring back clutter, High Street Kensington, London.

7 Greater interaction through adaptable objects; Whilst orginally conceived as a base for a series of flagpoles, this marble slab in a Barcelona square is now popular as a communal seat. Plaza del Merce, Barcelona.

museum of contemporary art, is a world famous mecca for skateboarders, bringing what could otherwise be a fairly empty plaza to life. A combination of high quality paving materials and a variety of inclines, whilst not the architect's original intention, has proved perfect for skaters.

Iain Borden (1998) has studied the details that attract skateboarders to particular spaces. "By focusing only on certain elements (ledges, walls, banks, rails) of the building, skateboarders deny architecture's existence as a discrete three-dimensional indivisible thing, knowable only as a totality, and treat it instead as a set of floating, detached, physical elements isolated from each other." For example, a particular school in Ipswich, UK, is reknowned by skaters not for its architecture, but for its handrails. "While many conceive of cities as comprehensive urban plans, monuments or grands projets, skateboarding suggests that cities can be thought of as series of micro-spaces."

To the same end, perhaps London, in its desire to leave a post 2012 Olympic legacy of sport, needs to consider how a simple line painted on a wall can at times turn a decaying space into a well used soccer pitch. A very simple, user implemented intervention can change our attitudes towards a place. "What seduces more? A whisper or a shout? Generally, a whisper" (Gobé, 2001).

5, REFLECTING DETAILS THROUGH PLACE BRANDING

One of the key challenges for place brands is co-ordination between perception and reality; "Does the brand fit with its environment?" (Frost, 2004). Although by no means the only contributing factor, details help to create that environment. But how can their potential to affect the way we feel about an environment be coordinated to fit within a place brand?

A number of approaches underpin corporate and consumer brands. Graphic design, interior and environmental design, and industrial design are all essential components, representing commercial brands in the form of visual identity, environmental branding and product development. Such brands are adept at influencing our emotions, and build sensorial elements into their campaigns in order to win over consumers and clients (akin to Baudrillard's 'seductive objects').

If detail can be used to create a sense of ownership within a private context, could it also be used to create a sense of civic pride and ownership amongst residents of a street or visitors to a district? Equally, could detail be used to create different moods within public spaces; to make a cemetery feel calm, to make hospital grounds feel comforting, to make a transport system feel clean and efficient?

Faced with the problem of bad odours, the Regie Autonome des Transports Parisiens (RATP) set up an odour nuisance treatment team in 1993. "Once the most obtrusively bad

odours were eliminated, the metro was to camouflage the rest with a good smell. The technical department responsible for cleaning the metro introduced a fragrance evocative of the 'smell of clean' into the solution used to clean the floors of the metro system's underground stations and terminals. The fragrance enhanced the sense of cleanliness by improving the overall perception of the environment" (Zardini ed., 2005).

Details can be used in our surroundings to support a place brand, or build a chosen collective impression, but that does not make the process easy. Places are not as easily controlled and developed as companies or commercial products. Unlike product branding, place branding is rarely under the control of a central authority, while details in our urban environment are implemented by various public and private bodies.

Magne Supphellen, professor at the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration in Bergen, explains, "In principle, [product] and place branding is the same" (Frost, 2004). However, "It is far more difficult to obtain a fully integrated communication mix in place branding" (Frost, 2004). Whereas products can be modified, improved, re-launched or re-positioned, "places do not have most of these choices. Their image problems may be founded in structural problems that take years to fix" (Frost, 2004).

In this respect, the flexibility and relatively lower cost of modifying details could provide a powerful short-term solution to the image problems of an area. The nature of details makes an easier change or update than whole buildings or urban forms. They act as variables, which, in different combinations, create different overall impacts. Change the seating in a square and it may encourage more social interaction. Change the positioning or style of a sign in the street and people might find their way more easily and feel they know the place sooner. Change the intensity and colour of the lighting in a dark street and it is perceived as safer.

A city can change its outfit to great effect. Indeed, Barcelona's city council has used this notion to directly build a place brand. The 'Barcelona Posa't Guapa' or 'Barcelona make yourself pretty' campaign for restoring facades, is "one of the most important contributors to Barcelona's new image," and while a "genuine attempt to restore buildings and civic pride, it can also be interpreted as a sophisticated re-imaging strategy" (Smith, 2005).

This ability to change is reflective of the very nature of a city. Joe Perello (2006), New York City's Chief Marketing Officer appreciates that, "New York isn't a bottle of soda, it's a living breathing place that changes everyday." The cities dynamism gives rise to the 'spontaneous' or 'unplanned' detail that is so important. As Leandro Lattes (2003) identified, it is the accidental mix of details, layered through years than can truly enrich a place's characteristics.

These perceptions can then come together to form a place brand. Wally Ollins explains how some nations can develop strong brands in an almost spontaneous manner. "India has emerged in the last five years in terms of perceptions in a quite different way from the way it was perceived ten or fifteen years ago" ... "It was spirituality and poverty, and now it's software; it's highly educated people" ... "None of this is managed. It's all spontaneous" (Frost, 2004). Just as brand guidelines require a certain amount of flexibility, in applying a place branding strategy to the physical city, we must be mindful not to over-control or over-coordinate the spontaneous detail of the place.

There is real charm and beauty in random, spontaneous and effortless detail. A balance must be sought for a natural coordination of designed detail, and the unplanned and uncoordinated; the unknowing character-building elements of urban design.

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THE DIFFERENCE IS IN THE DETAIL
the potential of detail as a place branding tool and
its impact upon our perceptions and responses.

Rosanna Vitiello & Marcus Willcocks