Rebranding the City: The Case of Eindhoven

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The aim of this paper is to analyze how corporations can influence city brands against the background of the shift from an industrialized to a post-industrialized city. A city is the constant result of dialogue between planners, designers and users. Especially large corporations and institutions often have a lot of influence on urban development. The case of Eindhoven is a clear example of this. The rise of this city is inextricably connected with the flourishing of electronics giant Philips, founded in Eindhoven in 1891. Although Eindhoven was not built and operated by Philips, the company’s impact was huge. By the end of the thirties Philips provided work to more than 20,000 employees, and Eindhoven became the City of Light. Even in their latter years, end of the sixties, the amount of Philips employees had doubled within Eindhoven and risen to 99,000 in the Netherlands and 367,000 worldwide. Because of the de-industrialization that started in the seventies, Philips was no longer the dominant employer of the city and the brand of Eindhoven as the City of Light slowly extinguished. Since then a search for a new brand started and different brands passed in review.

After a short introduction, the paper starts with literature on branding in general and city branding in particular. Just like products, cities can be branded to achieve a combination of economic and symbolic ends if the right forms of communication are pursued. City branding is developing as a necessary strategy to achieve competitive advantage in order to attract globally mobile resources, mainly consumers (e.g. tourists), financial capital (investment) and certain specific target groups (e.g. knowledge workers). Furthermore city branding can be applied to achieve community development, reinforcement of local identity and identification of the citizens with their city. As the image is an important aspect of the city brand the paper discusses a theoretical model proposed by Kavaratzis (2004) which distinguishes three types of communications of the city image. With respect to this model it is stated that it is not the brand image which is communicated it is rather the brand identity which is communicated by positioning of the brand. The result of this communication process leads to a certain brand image. The case of Eindhoven is then explained to show the impact of both the rise of Philips and the de-industrialization that followed after their manufacturing activities were being off-shored. It shows that the influence of the company was more far reaching, than just through the presence of its corporate real estate. The presence of Philips was felt within the economical, physical and social domain. A short database analysis shows that the de-industrialization process is not only visible in Eindhoven, but also currently ongoing in many other Dutch cities. The last section of this paper returns its focus on Eindhoven, describing the actual discussion on branding in Eindhoven and the communication forms used to pursue this brand. Over the years the image of Eindhoven as the city of light has blurred due to the diminishing influence of Philips in Eindhoven. Several new slogans and images came into fashion in which “Brainport Eindhoven” seems to be the most lasting as it is embedded within the
historical industrial context of the city. Since its positioning started, many programs and initiatives are set up which implicitly attempt to propagate and strengthen the image of the brand “Brainport Eindhoven”. The paper ascertains from the theoretical model discussed before whether “Brainport Eindhoven” is the most suitable brand for the city of Eindhoven.

As the Eindhoven case has shown, in the industrial era the image of cities emerged spontaneously, mainly through primary communication. Through the extensions of landscape and infrastructure, organisational structures and behaviour of different stakeholders, people acquired a certain image in their head that stuck. The rise of a large company like Philips could have a big contribution in this image, because of its involvement in the daily life of so many stakeholders. In the post-industrial society however, the growing interest in more formal and directed communication to purposely position a city made the branding process more complicated. Local governments and other institutions try to communicate the identity that they see fit for their city through so-called secondary communication but the analysis of Eindhoven shows that this might take more effort than expected. So far it is unclear, whether it is primary or secondary communication that has the most effect. In Eindhoven it seems that the primary communication aspects, which often still bare the marks of the past, interfere with the secondary communication that the authorities so eagerly try to get into the people’s heads. Also, the secondary communication efforts seem to be aimed more at attracting future organisations and inhabitants and therefore miss the large mass of current inhabitants that form such an important stakeholder.