

Ideopolis: Knowledge City-Regions

Distinctiveness and Cities –
Beyond 'Find and Replace' Economic Development?



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1. Distinctiveness and successful cities

There is an apparent contradiction in the UK's urban policy. On the one hand, powers are being devolved locally, with cities and regions increasingly (if not fully) responsible for their own policy. But alongside this move towards difference, there is a wide literature describing a process of homogenisation. Our town centres are described as becoming 'clone towns', home only to chain stores and identical to centres elsewhere¹. New houses built to respond to growing populations are being built in uniform fashion, with little or no attention paid to local style or context². And the response from local authorities has often been seen as weak, with the increasing decentralisation of powers being rewarded with economic development strategies that are uncannily similar to one another³. In short, rather than develop distinctively, there is a danger that cities are using 'find and replace': the name of the city is changed, but the strategy remains the same. Strategies which are apparently successful in one place are replicated in other, quite different situations.

This picture contrasts with the most successful cities. These tend to be distinctive, with unique identities, niche economic sectors and individual characters. By using those features which distinguish them from their blander rivals, they can potentially attract people and companies, become nicer places to live, add value to their products and – often crucially – attract attention to themselves and their local governments⁴. Cities – by this logic – should aim to be distinctive.

However, distinctiveness is a complicated idea. It can be enormously beneficial, but must be used with care. Here, we argue for two conceptions which should be considered together. At its most base level it is about highlighting differences between towns, cities or other areas. A city might be distinctive because of the niche shops, iconic or distinctive architecture, specialised firms or cohesive identity. Distinctive cities build a brand and sell it. But this form of distinctiveness as advertising can be limited – a narrow drive for 'niche' shopping, for example, or some nice public art.

So equally important is a second dimension, where distinctiveness is about **recognising difference** and working with the factors that makes every place unique and distinct from other places. It is not always clear how this should be done as the route to distinctiveness varies according to local circumstances (this is one of main

¹ New Economics Foundation (2004) *Clone Town Britain: The loss of local identity on the nation's high streets*, London: NEF

² Stephen Bayley (2007) 'Lets start thinking outside the box', *The Observer*, 15.7.2007

³ NESTA (2007) 'Innovation in UK Cities', *NESTA Policy Briefing*

⁴ Ivan Turok (2004) 'The Distinctive City: "Quality" as a Source of Competitive Advantage', Paper Presented at the LSE Resurgent City Conference, September 2004

arguments of this paper) but it might include reflecting local styles in buildings or developing strategies which reflect the unique position of each place. Without an awareness of local context, cities run the risk of a 'find and replace' approach to urban development.

Cities are increasingly fighting for distinctiveness – operating with strategies designed to separate themselves from other places and develop their own individual brand. But they often follow only the first meaning of distinctiveness – the advertising – without embedding their ideas in a genuine assessment of their context and local place. Hiring a cutting edge architect is easy; making a statement which reflects and improves the character of the city is less so. And there is a real risk that – if they continue to ignore their local context – cities will waste a considerable amount of money for little real gain.

This paper

The role of this paper is to elaborate and develop the concept of distinctiveness, looking at how it has been used in the past and how it can be used by policymakers in the future. It builds on the research developed during The Work Foundation's Ideopolis project, alongside academic work in the area – notably produced by Ivan Turok⁵. Other work has seen distinctiveness as a branding idea, or set out the 'strategic assets' through which it can be achieved. This paper takes a broader conception of distinctiveness and looks at ways it can be used – both as an idea to help in marketing the city as a spur to change the practical realities of a city. Distinctiveness implies differentiation but – if this is to work – it implies appropriateness. Distinctiveness can be an important method of urban renewal if conducted in a way which stimulates or represents some form of genuine transformation in the city itself, or a policy which recognises the uniqueness of each place.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two attempts to define distinctiveness, while recognising the problems inherent in the term. Sections three to five tries to identify the three most important sub-categories of distinctiveness strategies. These three sub-categories are clearly interrelated, but the broad distinction can be made between:

- **Functional distinctiveness** – which relates to building a distinct functional niche within an urban or economic system;

⁵ Ivan Turok (2004) *ibid*

- **Physical distinctiveness** – which relates to the physical transformation of the city, and;
- **Intangible distinctiveness** – which relates to the perception of residents and non-residents of the city.

Section six outlines some broad guidelines for how policy in this area can be developed, while avoiding the homogenisation of distinctiveness strategies. Section six concludes by looking at the problems inherent in these strategies and the contradictions in applying the term.

2. What distinctiveness is and why it matters

Distinctiveness is about those factors – tangible or intangible, economic or social – that make one city stand out from the others. It is an increasingly prominent term, and distinctiveness strategies are increasingly being used – promoted by local authorities and regional development agencies desperate for a new idea to improve their city⁶.

Ivan Turok⁷ has surveyed the literature around distinctiveness. He points to a body of work which identifies ‘differentiation’ as a strength for cities: ‘the basic proposition is that, by developing unique strengths, original knowledge and creative capabilities that are difficult for other places to replicate, cities can build competitiveness on the basis of ‘non-price’ or quality-based advantages, rather than the cost or availability of local resources’. Perhaps the most important idea in this literature is that it seeks to move cities away from direct price competition – it offers a way of avoiding the race to the bottom, and an advantage for city authorities aiming to promote high value products. The idea, in short, is that your city is special and by recognising this you can make your products special as well.

So distinctiveness should be about rooting economic activity to a particular locality, increasing the value of the content it produces, and building value through creating more attractive and cohesive places for both locals and tourists. This is not to say that this view is without conceptual and practical problems, which will become clearer through this paper.

Similar arguments have been made by other commentators. Charles Landry, for example, has argued that: ‘Cities have always sought to distinguish themselves, whether through particular local products, services or other specialisms, or by having the best cathedral or the biggest castle.’⁸ But the benefits are wider than this. They may include the attraction of skilled workers and businesses – people moving to areas where they might want to live.

Distinctiveness and the Ideopolis framework

The concept of distinctiveness was identified as one of nine interrelated drivers of knowledge based economic growth in successful cities in the ‘Ideopolis: Knowledge City-Region’ project⁹. This defined the term as: ‘a distinctive offer for knowledge

⁶ Sunderland even proclaims itself ‘A City with a Difference’

⁷ Ivan Turok (2004) *ibid*, pp: 2

⁸ Charles Landry (2004) *Riding the Rapids: Urban Life in an Age of Complexity*, London: RIBA/CABE

⁹ An Ideopolis: Knowledge City-Region is a vision of a sustainable knowledge intensive city that drives growth in the wider city-region. It is a framework of nine drivers that The Work Foundation developed during a yearlong research project, using literature reviews, data analysis and fourteen UK and international case studies (the final report and full case studies can be downloaded from <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/products/ideopolis.aspx>)

intensive businesses and workers who are considering investing, working and living in the city, supported by diverse cultural and leisure facilities'. But the report did not develop this finding significantly.

The nine Ideopolis drivers are:

1. **Creating the physical knowledge city** – having the architecture and accommodation that knowledge intensive businesses and workers require.
2. **Building on what's there** – recognising the city's existing strengths and weaknesses and playing to these.
3. **'Diverse specialisation'** – having a diverse range of economic specialisms for which the city is known.
4. **High skill organisations** – organisations that rely on the 'high road' to productivity through high quality jobs and highly skilled people.
5. **Vibrant education sector** embedded in community and economy – one or more universities linking closely with the city and businesses.
6. **Distinctive 'knowledge city' offer** – distinctive offer for knowledge intensive businesses and workers who are considering investing, working and living in the city supported by diverse cultural and leisure facilities.
7. **Leveraging strong connectivity** within and outside the city-region – good communications infrastructure combined with quick links both within the city and to other cities via air, road and rail.
8. **Strong leadership** around a knowledge city vision, supported by networks and partnerships.
9. **Investing in communities** – investing in strategies to ensure the benefits of knowledge intensity are experienced by the whole community.

This report focuses on three of these drivers which are particularly closely related: path dependency, diverse specialisation and quality of life. Together with distinctiveness, these factors provide the theoretical background from which this paper is derived.

The idea behind building on what's there is that local economies are – to a considerable degree – path dependent, with the economic history of a city having a

profound influence on its future. This happens in a variety of ways, including the skills base in the city, the transport links or the reputation. For cities now, this means that understanding their history and working with it, rather than continually trying to reinvent their economic base, allows cities to perform.

There are many reasons why building on what is there is important for distinctiveness. By recognising that history is important in creating the distinctiveness of a local area local strengths are built on rather than ignored.

And there is further support for this finding from theories of New Economic Geography. These have suggested that untraded interdependencies – spillover effects between similar firms – are increasingly important in the knowledge economy. In particular, sectors such as financial services, creative sectors or sectors reliant on ‘clustering’ dependent on sharing of ‘tacit knowledge – knowledge which is hard to codify and is often passed best through human contact. Locating near to other firms is one of the best ways of achieving these spillover effects This knowledge sharing makes a company located near other such companies more efficient, and makes those companies which are located in a particular place better performing. In the long term this means there is often considerable path dependency in knowledge industries – these ‘spillover’ effects mean that the industries are likely to remain in place in the longer term, barring external events.

This does not imply that a city with a history of economic decline is destined for more. It just means that such a city would have to recognise that they may not be able to stimulate development in economic sectors which are dependent on these knowledge spillovers. A second key idea is **diverse specialisation**. We found that, for a city to succeed, it needed to develop specialisms in a number of industries. Specialisation is important because this is the way modern, internationally traded industries often work. Diversity is important because no area should be reliant on a single industry and because there may be some pay offs to diversity in the industrial mix.

There is some theoretical support for this finding, derived in part from the work on value chains and the increased specialisation of the economy. This starts with the assumption that firms which specialise in different parts of the production process will be able to produce at a lower unit cost, for reasons of economies of scale and

flexibility. Different parts of the process are traded to create the finished product, and, as transport costs fall, it is possible for different parts of the country (or world) to specialise in different parts of the value chain.

There are also significant problems associated with overspecialisation. Industrial diversity is vital for the ongoing success of cities. Sheffield, for example, prospered at first because of the vertically integrated model: the entire city was reliant on the steel industry, raw materials were produced nearby, processed locally and exported as the finished product. But the town was prone to recessions and fluctuations in the demand for steel. As the global market integrated, steel became relatively expensive when produced from Sheffield, and the number of people employed in production dropped. It is unsurprising that studies have found that diversity of local economies can mitigate the effects of economic shocks¹⁰.

A final important factor is quality of life. This has already been elaborated on in a paper reviewing the literature on quality of life in cities¹¹. We found that quality of life matters, and that the most important factors people looked for in quality of life were 'hygiene' factors – clean streets, low crime and public services. But several factors which might be seen as distinctiveness were also highlighted. These include 'green spaces', 'scenic quality of the area' and 'atmosphere or buzz'. While these were not the most important factors, they were very important.

Distinctiveness in the knowledge economy

Distinctiveness has maintained – or even increased – its importance in the knowledge economy for several reasons. Not least of these is that affluence has led to a shift from the pure material value of items to 'sign' value within Western economies. People will place more emphasis on consumption, for which they have more time, and on 'sign' value or factors beyond purely functional consumption. An increasing element of consumption is geared towards 'experience', as shown by the increasing prominence of the creative industries¹². Similarly, intangibles – such as branding and intellectual assets – are increasingly important.

¹⁰ Koen Frenken, Frank Van Oort and Thijs Verburg (2007) 'Related Variety, Unrelated Variety and Regional Economic Growth', *Regional Studies*, 41 (5), 685-697

¹¹ Neil Lee (2005) 'A Review of Quality of Life Indicators', available from: <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/products/publications/azpublications/ideopolisknowledgeworkingpaperareviewofqualityoflifeindicators.aspx>

¹² Will Hutton et al. (2007) *Staying Ahead: The Economic Performance of the Creative Industries*, London: HMSO/DCMS

This has some implications for cities. The intangible nature of an urban centre may attract visitors, but may also entice people to stay. The 'brand associated' in a particular place may also be seen as a positive asset for firms who may choose to locate in certain areas. One part of this intangible or sign value is reflecting through differentiation. A distinctive city builds a better 'brand', gets noticed and appears more appropriate. While this was always important for cities for a privileged elite (London, for example, developed as a fashionable capital of consumption in the 19th century¹³), it may have become more important for cities. Its importance should not be overstated, and the subjectivity of brand may be a problem.

The second reason distinctiveness is important may be due to the importance of 'knowledge' in the economy. The most efficient means of transmission of this knowledge is through proximity – face-to-face contact, networking events and other geographical spillovers. There is considerable evidence for the increasing importance of place and face-to-face contact, with Peter Hall, for example, pointing out that over the past twenty five years long-distance business travel has increased at a faster rate than trade¹⁴. In this respect, place becomes more important for knowledge workers.

And, finally, there is some evidence that these 'knowledge workers' have increased choice of where to work, and so increased mobility. While hype around 'flexible working' and labour mobility is overstated, and even knowledge workers cannot locate anywhere, there is some evidence that they are more likely to be part of a global or national labour market, and are more likely to have a range of job offers in a variety of places. For the individual city, this makes their distinctiveness more important both from a perspective of advertising to these workers, to entice them to live there, and also for those businesses which are mobile, but also, it will be argued later, from a perspective of retention.

¹³ Roy Porter (2000) *London: A Social History*, London: Penguin

¹⁴ Peter Hall (1998) *Cities in Civilisation*, Oxford: Blackwell

3. Functional distinctiveness

Cities serve economic and social functions as part of an urban system. This provides a useful way to conceptualise distinctiveness. While it is wrong to classify cities as homogenous and unified agents (as opposed to complex groups of independent actors), categorising cities as serving functions such as this as part of a wider urban system can be useful. The following section identifies ways in which functional distinctiveness as a concept can be used. This section first sketches out the idea of distinctiveness in an urban system before addressing the role of the local economy in this. It then turns to the role of the creative and cultural sector and, finally, the role of amenities and retail.

- Functional distinctiveness.
- Economic specialisation.
- Amenities and retail.

Functional distinctiveness in the urban system

The Ideopolis project looked, in part, at the different functions undertaken by cities in the knowledge economy. Cities are not independent entities¹⁵, but perform a range of functions in a broader spatial economy. The rough logic of how cities develop might work is something like this. In agricultural economies, cities and towns worked as sites of markets, leisure activities and the location of control functions. Economic actors – producers, such as farmers, or consumers, such as people shopping for goods – used the city as an area of social and economic exchange. The city was important because it was where relatively specialised goods could be bought, and where markets could take place efficiently with a relatively large number of actors.

As the population has become increasingly urbanised and simultaneously richer, and as real transport costs (and times) have fallen, the role of cities has changed. Specialisation has increased, with cities serving wider markets and specialisation increasing between as well as within cities. Flows between cities – be they of people, goods or ideas – are of increasing importance. For cities, working on a distinctive niche as part of the system may be important.

One study looking at these issues is the Polynet study of the South East of England, led by Peter Hall¹⁶. They identified the functional interrelations between different urban centres in the region. While the area is dominated by London, beyond this it is

¹⁵ Paul Cheshire et al. (2004) 'Cities are not isolated states', *Research Papers in Environmental and Spatial Analysis*, 91, London School of Economics

¹⁶ Available from: www.polynet.org.uk

relatively functionally polycentric, with different cities and towns offering different services. Places such as Reading are home to firms which benefit from some proximity to the centre of London, but which are not reliant on immediate access to the centre. Other firms may have preferences for locations which allow their staff to live in suburban areas of small towns.

The Ideopolis case studies reflect this. Three case studies looked at the relations between Brighton, Watford and Cambridge with London. Each of these three places performs a different function in their relationship with the capital, and their functions have been interestingly path dependent. Watford, historically a transport interchange, has used this advantage to build strengths in the distribution of goods and the distribution of people – it is both a local shopping centre and a commuter centre to London¹⁷. Brighton was historically an attractive coastal town where the Royal Pavilion was the summer holiday home of the Prince Regent, it maintains its position as a town of consumption – a popular location for weekend breaks, with some interesting diverse shopping facilities and a strong cultural sector. Finally, Cambridge has historically developed as an intellectual centre. It has built on this position and spun off a variety of highly successful high-tech firms which have underpinned its economic success. All three cities have strong functional links and large numbers of commuters to London (and, in some cases, vice-versa).

This provides a strong rationale for cities collaborating with each other in their economic development plans. But it also provides a case for recognising the position of each city in this system – its economic success will depend on the cities around it in addition to its own competitive package. The success of economic development plans depends, in part, by the contents (and success) of the plans of areas around them. This, in part, is recognised by regional spatial strategies, but there are still examples of city authorities competing against each other for mobile investment, rather than recognising their economic distinctiveness in the urban system and competing for investment based on that.

Even without the above analysis, it is axiomatic that cities are a diverse group. This has led to some authors, such as Paul Hildreth, developing stylised typologies of cities, isolating the functions they serve¹⁸. These are well covered elsewhere, but the

¹⁷ Only around a quarter of the population both live and work in Watford. See our Watford Case Study at: <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/products/ideocasestudies.aspx>

¹⁸ Paul Hildreth (2006) 'Roles and Potential of English Medium Sized Cities: A Discussion Paper', *SURF*

economic functions which cities perform – and how these cities can be distinguished from one another, remains a vital question.

**Economic
distinctiveness:
Geographical
position
and diverse
specialisation**

At a relatively local level, cities are distinct economically – strategies should reflect this form of distinctiveness. The first consideration for a city is its geographical position relative to others. The Polynet study was one example of this – the cluster of towns and cities around London would have little success if their economic development plans were limited to direct attempts to match London for scale and size. Moving an entire bank from the City of London to Reading may be futile – there are reasons why the firm will find it worthwhile to locate in the centre (agglomeration economies), but a back office firm might take advantage of the package of proximity and cost savings offered by nearby cities.

With the position clear, there is a decision to be made around the industry which the city may choose to specialise in. Local government has only limited control, but there are ways in which economic development can be stimulated. The agglomeration economies which were cited earlier, while implying that it may be difficult to attract firms in some areas, also imply that a critical mass may be important – once it is developed, other firms will be attracted. The idea here is that a group of close firms can benefit from untraded interdependencies – such as wide and deep labour pools and specialised suppliers – that provide external economies of scale for the firm locating in that city.

In some cases then, it may be possible for a city to develop a specialisation, but this is (and should be) dependent on the will of the market and the advantages of the place. The key role may be for the city to provide appropriate infrastructure, although direct subsidies should be avoided (and may prove counterproductive). The arguments around agglomeration economies and path dependency are two reasons why this might be important. The development of a distinctive economic niche can provide an important source of comparative advantage.

This does not imply that more specialised cities are always more successful. Jane Jacobs¹⁹ famously argued that diversity is actually more productive, as it allows a creative and different approach to problem solving, collaboration between disciplines can promote innovation. This problem was addressed by Edward Glaeser²⁰ et al. in a

¹⁹ Jane Jacobs (1961) *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*, New York: Random

²⁰ Edward Glaeser et al. (1992) 'Growth in Cities', *Journal of Political Economy*, 100 (61), 1126-1152

seminal paper. Taking on the consensus – which argued that specialisation was good for urban growth – he finds that diversity was important²¹.

Economic distinctiveness will often need to build on the historical economic development of a city, as the Ideopolis work found. The city government must establish what the strengths of the city are and where it can fit in the economy. This means the local economic development institutions looking at building on local strengths and, importantly, assessing the real chances of success of any economic development plan. A biotechnology centre located far from a university and with a poorly educated population would have little chance of success.

Amenities and retail

The creative and cultural sector is linked into the role of amenities and retail in the branding and functioning of cities. Cities are increasingly functioning as places of consumption as well as production. This argument has been well made by Glaeser, Kolko and Saiz²². They see the ‘consumer city’ – a city rich in consumer amenities, such as great shops and good aesthetics and a physical setting, as increasingly important.

This form of distinctiveness has gained prominence amongst policymakers recently, with increasing concerns about the dominant market position of chain supermarkets and ‘high street shops’. The argument has been made most forcefully by the New Economics Foundation. In the report *Clone Town Britain*²³ they present evidence for the decline in local shops – one fifth of these local facilities had been lost in the period 1995-2000. They argue that this has considerable repercussions, and threatens local communities. Local and individual facilities provide the ‘glue’ that keeps communities together, and sustains local economies.

There is clearly some truth in this argument, but it is less clear than it might appear. People like shopping in supermarkets (that, to some extent, is why they do). They are convenient (for those with cars) and often cheaper, which makes them particularly valuable for some (not all) people on low incomes. Without reflecting these opinions, this argument may well be characterised as a snobbish concern for the middle classes.

²¹ It is for these reasons that we argued for ‘Diverse Specialisation’ – specialisation in a diverse range of industries

²² Edward Glaeser, Jed Kolko and Albert Saiz (2001) ‘Consumer City’, *Journal of Economic Geography*, 1, 27-50

²³ New Economics Foundation (2004) *Clone Town Britain: The Loss of Local Identity on the Nations High Streets*. Available from: www.neweconomics.org

During the Ideopolis project, however, we found considerable evidence for thriving communities which were diverse, distinctive and interesting. Clone towns can work, but in some areas the distinctive alternative can work better (often when there is a healthy mix of supermarkets and independents).

In Morningside, Edinburgh, an affluent community live in tenement blocks and so sustain a high population density. They also sustain a high level of spending, and the size of the shops created under the flats provides a home for the vibrant range of shops. Some sell interesting, if expensive groceries. Others sell items that may not otherwise make the mass market (fur coats for dogs, for example).

Manchester's Canal Street provides a second example – and one where diversity and distinctiveness were very much behind the success of the area. In the mid-1990s the area built a reputation as an openly gay-friendly part of the city, with a range of clubs and bars catering for a mainly gay market. The bars were almost entirely independent, and run by local entrepreneurs. In the late 1990s, the Slug and Lettuce chain opened a bar on the street, to widespread local dismay. A boycott was launched by customers who wanted to keep the area distinctive, and the chain was later forced to move out²⁴. It was clear that here the distinctiveness was the strength of the area, and one which residents were loath to lose.

Both these examples show areas where something different from the usual supermarkets and chain bars have been offered, and they have both succeeded. A distinctive local economy can produce a cohesive local economy, with a range of local shops feeding in their profits to local people. But what they both have is some relatively affluent clientele. Is this distinctiveness important, and within reach of, normal people?

It is important to recognise the limitations of such a strategy – these are often designed to appeal to niche or very local markets. There is still considerable mileage to be gained by cities from pursuing the large shopping centre, or chain store solution. While the success of these shopping centres have often been criticised for producing dependence on cars and for hollowing out the city centre. However, some of the arguments against the large shopping centres are based on snobbishness. For many people, chain stores are bad things because of the connotations of inclusion;

²⁴ See our case study of Manchester, available at:
<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/products/ideocasestudies.aspx>

exclusive, 'distinctive' stores are seen as good. While entertaining, this is no basis for policy.

These major shopping centres actually do, to some extent, reflect the application of distinctiveness. Some ensure they take on a diverse range of tenants to avoid their spaces being full of mobile phone shops or whichever market happen to be the most popular or profitable at the time. A successful city may have a balance of convenient chain stores and independent, quirky shops and locally embedded convenience stores. All of these are important, but the structure of ownership in most British city centres does not always allow this. Where there is a single landlord, they can (and do) legislate to ensure the shopping centre maintains a balance of firms. Without this unifying framework, there is a danger that shopping centres become poor quality and bland.

4. Physical distinctiveness

The second area of distinctiveness this paper will deal with is more tangible, the physical environment of the city. In this case, the policies are more classical, and are often the side effect of other factors (such as affluence or demonstrations of military power). The role of the history of a city is also important. Three broad areas of physical distinctiveness are discussed here:

- Iconic structures.
- The role of history.
- The built environment.

Icons

Creating a striking physical environment of the city is one of the most common strategies for distinctiveness²⁵. Much recent attention has focused on 'iconic structures', buildings or public art that act as signposts for people within the city²⁶ but also draw attention to the city. The most common example is the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, but other examples include the Gherkin in London or the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. The idea is not new, although some people claim that it has become more important.

All these structures are designed for more than their obvious purpose, and all personify the prevailing values of the age. To generalise, traditionally these structures were about control, be it religious (Lincoln Cathedral), military (the Tower of London), regal (Versailles) or political (The White House). In the earlier parts of the 20th century, these included monuments to science and technology (the Atomium in Brussels, the BT Tower). It would be interesting to conduct an analysis of many of the models of today, which are monuments to art (the Guggenheim, the Tate), consumerism (Selfridges in Birmingham) and commerce (St Mary's Axe, Canary Wharf).

There are many criticisms of these buildings, and there are problems with the use of iconic structures to build distinctiveness. The first common problem is that a building that is more 'unique' may be built subsequently in a different city. There has been a continual race to build the world's tallest building, a title which was held, for a long time, by the Pyramids of Giza. But these were outgrown by Lincoln cathedral, a series of continental churches and, more recently, a cluster of South East Asian cities vying for the title. Recently, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur held the title for only

²⁵ Ivan Turok (2004) 'The Distinctive City: "Quality" as a Source of Competitive Advantage', Paper Presented at the LSE Resurgent City Conference, September 2004

²⁶ Joseph Rykwert (2000) *The Seduction of Place: The History and Future of the City*, Oxford: OUP

six years before being overtaken by Taipei 101 in Taiwan. The Burj Dubai will be completed sometime around 2008 and is believed to be even taller.

A second problem is that iconic structures may not maintain their uniqueness for long. There is a long history of plagiarism in architecture, ranging from a Victorian attempt to build a rival Eiffel Tower near Wembley to the more recent building of a familiar, gherkin shaped building, the Torre Agbar, in Barcelona.

Thirdly, different perceptions of public buildings or art mean an icon to one person may mean something different to another. One example being the continued vandalism of Donald Dewar's statue in Glasgow²⁷. While finally, there is also the obvious danger of an expensive investment in an icon coming to nothing. The Angel of the North was considerably more famous than the Angel of the South, which is made of wickerwork but no doubt seemed an equally good idea at the time.

Given these problems, it is unsurprising that there has been considerable criticism of the architectural style of many of these developments. Graeme Evans has put it nicely, describing these developments as: 'Karaoke architecture where it is not important how well you can sing, but that you do it with verve and gusto.'²⁸ The 1960s were full of examples of iconic or signature buildings which proved to be short lived and were hated in later years, but were popular at the time because they chimed with the conventional wisdom. There is a real danger that, by littering the nation's cities with expensive but badly designed buildings, specifically placed in prominent locations and designed to draw attention to themselves, these may prove irritating in the least for future generations.

The role of history

Harder to replicate is the historic built environment. Jacobs argued forcefully for the preservation of old buildings, forcefully insisting that: 'Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them'²⁹. This case is perhaps overstated, but there is a clear role in the maintenance of some older structures. For Jacobs, this was in part about diversity of uses – she noted that some organisations are likely to be based in older buildings while others (such as supermarkets) are not. Old, stand alone buildings also serve as landmarks, rooting people to a locality and helping to develop a sense of place.

²⁷ Joanne Sharp, Vanda Pollock and Ronan Paddison (2005) 'Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration', *Urban Studies*, 42, 5/6, 1001-1023

²⁸ Graeme Evans (2003) *Hard Branding the Cultural City: From Prado to Prada*, *IJURR*, 27 (2), 417-40

²⁹ Jane Jacobs (1961) *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, New York: Random, pp. 200

Beyond this, people find older architecture attractive, and it gives a sense of history to a place. For Charles Landry: 'Historic cities have in-built advantages, they have textured layers of history and built remains to work with in projecting their uniqueness and specialness'³⁰. This argument is half about the age of the buildings and it is half about the attractiveness of the buildings; the two are unified as people see age as attractive, and as the more attractive and distinctive buildings are often those that survive.

Decisions made in the past now benefit certain cities enormously. We found that cities which developed a civic pride and built attractive, well maintained and high quality buildings benefited in the future. One of the most pertinent examples is Edinburgh, which is justly famous for the high quality of its built environment. It is lucky in that it has a striking location and a well-preserved old town of attractive buildings. The old town's distinctive style is in part due to the luck of the early constraints of the settlement pattern, a desire to build near the castle on the available high land leading to a relatively high density residential centre. The old town happened, in large part, by accident. But the Edinburgh New Town was planned. It was developed in an attempt to quell the slow exodus of Nobles and Merchants who were moving to London, the development of spacious and attractive houses around squares and boulevards making the city sufficiently attractive to keep them there. Today, the New Town provides a similar function, being an attractive place to live for a range of highly qualified people, keeping them in the city and ensuring the success of the economy.

The lesson of Edinburgh New Town implies that decisions made now can have potentially important consequences for a city in the long run. By making investments in the built environment now, the city can gain in the future, architecture being an important legacy from the past to the future. The current system, based around short-term cost, rather than legacy, may be prejudicing this for the future. The overheated housing market means developers can compete on availability rather than quality. An emphasis on show-off design can detract from overall quality³¹.

The built environment

It seems clear that the success of a stand-alone iconic building in transforming a city is, at best, limited. While there have been some examples of success, the only sustained success achieved through this sort of differentiation strategy has come from high quality developments which cover a large proportion of the population – although an iconic building may be a catalyst for this.

³⁰ Charles Landry (2000) *The Creative City – A Guide for Urban Innovators*, London: Earthscan, pp. 118

³¹ Ivan Turok (2004) *Ibid*

Given this, it is perhaps surprising that a strategy of poor quality housing with one 'iconic' structure is being followed by some developers. Jonathan Glancey has expressed contempt for the alternative – mass poor quality housing with the occasional 'iconic' development. He describes the potential for new developments in the South East: 'Ever more cul-de-sac housing estates linked together by raging arterial roads lined with chain stores – with a bit of swooping-roofed architectural fantasia sculpted in between'³².

Several of the cities we looked at showed a more holistic, less flashy way of developing an architectural distinctiveness. Cambridge, for example, is riddled with attractive buildings – historic colleges dominate much of the city centre. While there are some highlights, such as Trinity College Library, the overall city is not dominated by one 'iconic' structure. Instead, it is known for general attractiveness and the quality of the built environment.

There are further ways of improving the quality of the built environment. In Watford, the Green Hart programme is linking artists with new building developments at the planning stage. Working with developers, the artists will integrate public art into developments. This will build distinctiveness, providing landmarks in new developments which have otherwise been described as bland.

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment³³ (CABE) have recognised this. In their report on public spaces, they highlight the benefits of good quality public space:

- Increased property prices, as people place a premium on attractive areas.
- Benefits for business, from being cited in attractive areas.
- A higher local tax take, derived from the increased attractiveness of the area.

They also identify a range of less economic benefits, including the health benefits from walking in well designed areas and crime which well-designed public space can abate. But while the benefits of building 'quality' are clear, how you define quality (and so build it) is less so.

³² Jonathan Glancey (2004) 'Home Truths', *The Guardian*, 25th September 2004

³³ CABE (2004) *The Value of Public Space*, available from: www.cabe.org.uk

5. Intangible distinctiveness

Iconic structures, a high quality built environment and some forms of economic specialisation have the ultimate goal of building a distinctive image, developing intangible distinctiveness. This section outlines three further ways of doing so – signature events and sport, image marketing and branding and the creative and cultural sector. It then argues that such actions are insufficient for a distinctiveness strategy.

Signature events

Sports events provide a short term, tangible effect on the city, but the longer term effect is often one that changes the image of the city. Events are used to develop the brand of a city, get it noticed and help it stand out. But the most effective events are those that galvanise local people behind a shared vision or identity. The classic example of the use of events is Glasgow. In the mid 1980s it was an example of post-industrial decline with the decline of heavy manufacturing industry. There were sustained and heavy job losses: total employment fell from almost 560,000 in 1950 to only 380,000 by 1991. Manufacturing was hit hardest, with 90% of the job losses in this sector alone³⁴.

It became clear that the city government needed to take action to reverse this trend by changing its image and presenting a new – distinctive – niche for itself. It chose to build on historic strengths in cultural industries. In 1990, the city was designated the European Capital of Culture – an international flagship event of which it took full advantage. Buildings were cleaned, new public art was installed and an ambitious programme of events was launched. Glasgow moved from being a place you lived if you wanted to, to being a place where people actively wanted to live. It developed a distinctiveness based around a positive model of creative sector regeneration and used a springboard event to regenerate itself.

There are few events with the international impact of the Capital of Culture. Smaller, more local events can have a significant impact as well. There are a host of local events with some impact, such as the Hay Literary Festival, and a few locally specific international events such as the Edinburgh Festival or the Cannes Film Festival. Most cities cannot compete at such a level.

Sport

Most of the truly global events available to a city relate to sport. Sport provides a rich seam of catalytic events – although by their nature they tend to be ephemeral. Lisbon

³⁴ See Ideopolis Glasgow Case Study – available from www.theworkfoundation.com/research

has used the European football championships to brand itself as a modern, European city. Cardiff's regeneration has been reinforced by the success of the Millennium stadium.

A sports team bearing the name of a city may be more permanent, although the success as a branding exercise fluctuates with the success of the team. Manchester is world famous as the home of Manchester United – one interviewee in the city argued that this had put Manchester on the map. Foreign visitors might not know where the city was, or what it was like, but they assumed that a great football team must be in a great city. So sport can build outside name recognition for a city – an example may be to compare the international recognition of the city of Hull (population 240,000, very little recent football success) with Blackburn (population 140,000, but a premiership team). This exercise works best with football fans.

Of course, sporting events are linked with two other forms of distinctiveness. Intangible distinctiveness through civic pride can be developed through famous sporting clubs. Before the Guggenheim, Bilbao was famous for the unity of its football fans and the club's policy of only accepting Basque players.

The failures of such events are obviously less visible than the successes. But it is clear that these attempts at differentiation can be negative. Sheffield provides a salutary example of the failure of a project like this. It held the world student games in 1991, an event which was less high profile than expected and one which left the city in some debt. Similarly, do these events genuinely reach local people, or are they just cosmetic exercises?

City pride and identity

Focusing on the distinctiveness of a place can help it develop an individual civic pride and identity. The distinctiveness can give an identity to local people, who appreciate their difference. This shared common identity impacts on the functioning of the city – civic pride makes people more likely to be actively engaged in the city, less likely to want to move and may reduce rates of crime and vandalism.

Tristan Hunt has documented how entrepreneurial local government in Victorian cities worked to create a form of civic pride³⁵. This pride enticed participation in the cities communal activities, building social capital and encouraging local businessmen to get involved in, for example, government and local philanthropy.

³⁵ Tristram Hunt (2005) *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian City*, London: Phoenix

The Ideopolis research showed this happening in several places. Outsiders often see Watford as a dull, indistinct place, while locals argued it was this outside perception which helped to reinforce their own civic pride. In Manchester, the distinctiveness of the city's art scene meant that people – regardless of whether they were from the city – identified with the place, were likely to want to stay, work and spend their money in the city.

The creative and cultural sector

The creative industry provides an important factor in distinguishing cities from one another. It can offer the impression of 'quality of life' and raise the profile of cities. The creative and cultural sector can have either brazen or more subtle effects on a place. The brazen effects may include the identification of a place with a single industry, attracting people who are interested in that (whether or not they are interested in an individual provider).

An example of such conspicuous distinctiveness is Hay-on-Wye. This small town in the Brecon Beacons is home to an annual book festival, which draws up to 150,000 people to the town for a week of events in early summer. Given the town's population, only 1500, the effect is fairly dramatic. The town has developed a thriving bookselling industry, far outlasting the short-lived festival. 40 bookshops, and the reputation given by the festival, prove a lasting attraction for tourists.

More recently, these purely economic arguments have been looked at alongside a set of subsidiary arguments, closely related to branding.

Brighton and Hove is a classic example, with the city having built on its historic role as a 'fun' place to be. The city has used its transport links to London, and distinctive atmosphere to develop a 'quirky' reputation. The creative sector is strong in the city and has been part of this success. Initiatives such as 'creative Brighton', the Brighton Festival and private initiatives such as Fatboy Slim have proved important in developing a distinctive identity for the city.

But is this sustainable? There is some evidence that where arts have been used for regeneration, a colony of artists has merely made the area acceptable for cutting edge office development, which has given way to normal office accommodation (an example is the City Fringe of London)³⁶.

³⁶ Grame Evans and Phyllida Shaw (2004) *The Contribution of Culture to Regeneration in the UK: A Report to the DCMS*. Available from: www.culture.gov.uk

Image, marketing and branding

Distinctiveness may merely be a matter of image, but for distinctiveness to be used as a realistic strategy it must be founded on some genuine uniqueness or difference. This argument has been made before. Briavel Holcomb, for example, argues that successful place marketing requires also improving the product (the city)³⁷. Marketing with no underlying improvement or sound basis is likely to fail.

The classic example of a successful image change strategy is the example of Glasgow, in an image development campaign which included those events which were detailed above. In 1983, Glasgow was still performing poorly – the victim of post-industrial decline. Seizing on the results of a poll which suggested that more people smiled in Glasgow, the city council launched into the ‘Glasgow’s (S)miles Better’ campaign. While there was considerable opposition from community groups, the campaign was – generally – regarded as a success, not so much for the campaign itself, but for the accompanying changes to the built environment of Glasgow. While the marketers were dreaming up their appalling slogan, the council’s workmen were cleaning the stained Victorian buildings of the city centre.

³⁷ Briavel Holcomb (1993) ‘Revisioning Place: De – and Re – constructing the Image of the Industrial City, in Philo, C and Kearns, G (eds.) *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*, Oxford: Pergamon, 133-144

6. Policy for distinctiveness: Beyond 'find and replace'

There are many forms of distinctiveness – it is not a specific solution, but a general idea for cities to consider. However, one of the important tensions in distinctiveness policy remains – can every city retain a distinctive niche? Simply following a recipe list of factors – arts, iconic structures – would be impossible, and would entirely miss the point and would create a bland group of identikit, show off towns.

Instead, the Ideopolis framework can be used to derive a range of wider, national and sub-national policy conclusions about building distinctiveness. It is important that these policies learn from the experience of other cities, rather than giving exact recipes to be followed. This is why principles, rather than policies, are given here. The aim should be to move beyond the current situation which often presents near identical urban strategies, the only difference being that the 'find and replace' function has been used to change the name of one city to that of another. Many cities are successful in this, but there are important lessons for those which are less so.

The timescale of these events is also salient. Some of these policies, such as events, may succeed in the short run. Those around building quality, however, may require a far longer period of time in which to work, but may prove far more important in the longer term. However, these are not always recognised given short-term electoral cycles, meaning that in some cases these principles may appear unfeasible. This is unfortunate, but not inevitable.

With this context in mind, the following presents a set of wider principles from which distinctiveness strategies should build.

Avoid territorial competition

One of the main arguments of this paper is that cities should avoid territorial competition. Territorial competition occurs when cities try to outbid each other for territorially mobile investment, offering – for example – subsidised office facilities for firms willing to move into an area. If several cities are doing this, it can be wasteful overall as they are effectively subsidising firms³⁸.

There is a risk that distinctiveness strategies, if clumsily applied, may fail this test. In particular, strategies around developing iconic architecture run the risk of being short lived and replaced by other strategies. Competition is good when it leads to innovation

³⁸ See Paul Cheshire and Ian Gordon (1998) 'Territorial Competition: Some Lessons for Policy', *The Annals of Regional Science*, 32 (3), 321-346

and new ideas; not when it leads to local authorities competing for the biggest building, most expensive public art or largest shopping centre and the development of one facility devalues the investment made by another place. It is likely that this territorial competition will still continue, but that it could be reduced – and RDA's might have a role in ensuring local authorities are kept informed about activities in their region and elsewhere.

Know your place and collaborate

The Ideopolis: Knowledge City-Region highlighted the different functions undertaken by places within a city region. The relationships between Watford, Cambridge and Brighton were highlighted earlier. This raises questions of the functional interrelations between different cities. Some may choose to provide consumer services for residents and act as a dormitory town – in these cases, the policy maker needs to be in a position to recognise the limitations of that position – to work to increase employment in that town might be more expensive than improving transport links to a nearby town with a surfeit of jobs³⁹.

So cities must know their place relative to other cities. Glasgow and Edinburgh, for example, specialise in different parts of the financial services industry – the front office functions are often in Edinburgh, the back office functions in Glasgow. They both gain from the critical mass provided by this arrangement, for either to attempt to build on the other's functions would be pointless. Collaboration is more important.

Decentralisation and local capacity

Recently, the major trend in spatial governance has been increased devolution of power to the level of the city or region. This trend to decentralisation is seen as more efficient. It will allow services to be targeted for local need, allow innovative solutions to develop at a local level and evolve best before being applied at a wider level.

This trend is underpinned by the idea of distinctiveness, and remains perhaps the single most important principle behind it. It has positive implications for distinctiveness in two major ways:

1. It allows policy to be more appropriate to the local area, recognising the distinctiveness of each place.
2. It allows greater deviation in terms of policies which take place at the local level, helping develop distinctiveness.

³⁹ See Jones et al. (2006) *Enabling Cities in the Knowledge Economy*, available from: <http://www.comunities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503895>

Decentralisation and the building of effective, appropriate local leadership should help develop further on the distinctive aspects of local places.

In practice, however, these two criteria are often subverted. While local policies should recognise that local authorities often have neither the time nor finance to come up with a truly appropriate and innovative measure. Instead they copy initiatives which have been used in different places. There are too many development strategies revolving around biotechnology, or learning best practice from other places. It is the development of genuine local autonomy, derived from resources and capacity that will undermine the success of the distinctiveness strategies which have been identified.

One city with the capacity and the inclination is London, which has set up the Design for London multi-agency unit to coordinate and enhance the quality of urban design in the capital. Their remit includes creating innovation in design while remaining faithful to the 'unique character, complexity and charm' of the city. This provides an interesting – if resource intensive – model which may be adapted for other cities⁴⁰.

**Build on
what's there**

Similarly, cities must build on their existing distinctiveness – they must know what is there and develop with these assets. This does not mean avoiding change, but rather using what you have. Sheffield suffered after the decline of the Steel industry, but the industry has rebounded to become an important part of the city's economy, albeit with less employment but with more steel produced. Rather than let the industry decline to nothing, the city has moved up the value chain in an industry in which they have a reputation, a history and the skills and knowledge to do well.

**Quality not
gimmicks**

It is also apparent that the truly successful differentiation strategies are those which have involved actual development in the city centre. Many of our historic cities were enhanced by a high quality development, and are known for this. Bath, for example, was redeveloped in Georgian times and the elegance of the city still attracts visitors. This housing reflects a local style, are built in local stone and have – with time – become part of the local identity. Bath has developed as a distinct city.

**Use events,
icons and
identity as a
catalyst**

Caution is needed with some of the more speculative distinctiveness strategies – such as iconic structures or events. It is not that these cannot be used to differentiate the city – the experience of Bilbao suggests that they can be.

⁴⁰ See: <http://www.designforlondon.gov.uk>

But they must be used as a catalyst for the underlying regeneration of the city. In Bilbao, for example, the building of the Guggenheim was accompanied by the redevelopment of the airport and a new metro system. In Glasgow, the branding strategy was accompanied by the extensive cleaning of the city centre and wholesale efforts at regeneration. The key is having a plan about how the event or icon will be used over the short, medium and long term, and how it fits into wider strategies to regenerate and increase the economic success of a city.

7. Conclusion

As this paper has argued, distinctiveness is a complex but important idea. It is implicit in many economic development and urban planning strategies. And it is – generally – a good thing, with local identity important for communities.

But it is clear from this that distinctiveness is not without its problems. In the first place, it needs to be taken beyond marketing. Creating a new city brand, without paying attention to the underlying reality of living somewhere, is superficial and likely to fail.

But marketing remains important, even if it would be unnecessary in a perfect world. In particular, it can be vital to signpost change in the city to the local and wider community. It can serve to change negative perceptions of a city. But marketing – whether through adverts or iconic buildings – can only achieve so much. Cities such as Manchester are becoming interested in a slightly different approach, with a focus on developing an ‘image’ based on events, festivals and other activities, rather than a more transient ‘brand’ based around a single strapline. This, they argue, is a more grounded way of communicating Manchester’s distinctiveness.

Second, and related, there is a problem of territorial competition – cities competing to develop the most up to date, largest or most outrageous buildings – to attract territorially mobile investment rather than developing indigenous strengths. This strategy represents a gamble from which only a few cities can win in the long run. Distinctiveness should instead be about knowing a city’s place in the spatial economy, building on existing strengths, character and identity in a manner which is appropriate.

Third, if we accept greater differentiation then we may have to accept greater inequality. As different plans have different outcomes, differentiation may lead to widening growth rates. Acceptance of this (and exploration of the consequences) is important.

Finally, while distinctiveness is important, it is not the answer to all a city’s problems. Cities are increasingly trying to differentiate themselves, and these strategies are often successful. But only when considered alongside other factors - such as jobs, healthcare and crime – which are important to the city.

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