Lessons from Singapore and Abroad
Green City Branding in Perspective

Text by Natalie Marie Gulsrud
Illustration by Jooey Lek
Photography as credited and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0
Generic License

From Sydney, Australia's "Sustainable Sydney 2030" campaign, to Vancouver, Canada's "Greenest City 2020" vision, green city brands have become a global tool for municipal leaders to promise a better quality of life, promote sustainable development, and increase their competitive advantage. In Asia, various green city schemes and rankings exist. They include Siemen's *Asian Green City Index*, assessed by The Economist Intelligence Unit, based on a city's environmental performance in a wide range of categories (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011). These green city brands provide a vision of health and resilience for current citizens while also attracting innovative potential residents and businesses to address the environmental problems of the future.

Green city brands have become a popular tool for municipal leaders to promise a better quality of life, mitigate urban environmental pollution, and increase their competitive advantage as an increasingly global economy has led to fierce competition between cities at a national and international level. Cities are actively competing for talent, innovation, and creativity to boost their economies. One way cities achieve a competitive image is through green place branding. Cities worldwide are branding themselves based on their assets. This increasingly includes level and quality of "greenness", for example, in terms of parks and other green spaces.

Singapore has long profiled itself as Asia's "Garden City". Since the early 1960s in its bid for a post-colonial identity, Singapore has actively envisioned itself as a clean and green garden city with the dual intent of "attracting foreign investment while also raising the morale of its citizens" (Lee 2000). The city's green identity has served as a guiding vision of the city's development plan over the past five decades; extensive urban biophysical greening measures have ensured the beautification of the rapidly urbanising infrastructure of the island, in addition to impressing and attracting "first-world" investors with the city's orderly and resort-like atmosphere (Tan, Wang and Sia 2013).

The recognition of Singapore's green city vision is reflected in citizens' and visitors' perceptions of Singapore as a Garden City, with both groups ranking parks and greenery as one of the most important elements to their quality of life and as the "number one" thing that makes the city special (Hui and Wan 2003). The global business community has also eagerly praised Singapore's green reputation, naming Singapore as Asia's greenest city in the *Asian Green City Index* in 2011 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011). Singapore's green growth track record has caused academics and proponents to claim Singapore as a case study of best practices in terms of green urbanism in Asia and abroad (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011; Newman 2010; Tan, Wang and Sia 2013). What started as a green-city vision in the 1960s is now a strongly established green city brand (Koh 2011).

The success of the Garden City brand has not come without alternative views. For instance, the Nature Society of Singapore, a prominent non-government non-profit organisation in Singapore civil society on nature conservancy, wrote a report stating that while it welcomed the creation of Gardens by the Bay, with its vertical garden of "sustainable", concrete, photovoltaicly-lit, musical "Super-trees" and colourful array of exotic plants and flowers, more could be done to make the area more natural (Koh 2011). Moreover, despite the city's expansive vegetative cover, the actual space allocated to residents for recreational purposes in the form of parks and open spaces is behind cities, such as Stockholm, Melbourne, and Seoul (Tan, Wang and Sia 2013).

Singapore's experience with green city branding demonstrates the opportunity and challenges involved with capitalising on a city's green assets. First, green city brands, such as Singapore's "City in a Garden", the most recent iteration of its Garden City brand, profile the biophysical heritage of the city and in this way provide a framework for local citizens and visitors to experience a place. Urban biophysical assets are a unique source of community identity and provide a sense of authenticity and local flavour to tourists and citizens alike.

The city's brand also acts as an agenda for politicians to allocate resources, raising the profile of urban green spaces and forests on the sustainable urban development front. In a time of increasing urban density and decreasing municipal budgets, green spaces and biophysical infrastructure will keep our cities liveable and therefore should be a municipal priority.

Second, current urban decision-making is based on short-term political cycles that are not friendly to the long-term timelines needed to plan for, establish, and manage quality urban green spaces and biophysical assets. Effective place branding schemes, such as Singapore's, provide an opportunity to involve private and citizen actors in the management and maintenance of green spaces, thereby sustaining the long-term stewardship of biophysical assets. Green place brands are an excellent management and stewardship tool for urban green spaces.

Formulating and implementing an inclusive and sustainable green place brand is perhaps one of the foremost challenges for practitioners involved in green city branding. Green place branding is a form of community imaging, drawing on shared historical, political, and cultural knowledge. The sustainability narratives presented in a green brand are by-products of the same historical, political, and cultural discourses found in a community. By framing and presenting selective images of local character, green place brands affirm and reproduce an understanding of local identity both for insiders and outsiders (Moilanen and Rainisto 2009).

One consequence of green place branding is that some ideas of local authenticity are left out of the image-making process (Govers and Go 2003). Sustainability campaigns have also been cited with the power to provide new opportunities for disempowered groups by reshaping urban environments and thereby making them more equitable places (Krueger and Gibbs 2007, 5). The exclusion or inclusion of certain aspects of community identity in green place brands can influence decision-making power and thereby resource allocation. In this sense, green city visioning is a community agenda-setting tool, establishing political and cultural norms. Ensuring that citizens of diverse social and political backgrounds are included in a green place brand can be incredibly challenging.

Drawing on Singapore's experience with green place branding is relevant because place branding is a political strategy based not only on place promotion but authentic place making as well. Authentic

place making is an exercise in understanding the public's perception of a place and thereby including elements of a place that might not initially be seen as marketable but that hold unique value to a certain group or population. But how can municipal green space managers accomplish this?

We can learn from Singapore and other global cities that have actively involved citizens in their green city branding agendas to promote more inclusive governance of their urban green resources.

Lessons from Green Cities
Singapore: City in a Garden
Citizens have actively been involved in Singapore's latest green city vision, City in a Garden. Since 2005, over 600 community gardens have been established throughout the city, giving the public—predominantly retirees and school children—a direct outlet for greening and tending their own gardens. Singapore's National Parks Board supports interested citizens in the organisation and planting of a garden, literally giving citizens the tools to transform their backyards into verdant oases.

My field research in Singapore has shown that citizens involved in the "Community in Bloom" programme develop a newfound sense of ownership of their gardens and neighbourhoods, connecting with the land and their neighbours in unique and meaningful ways. The elderly are reminded of their youth in the act of planting and harvesting vegetables, while school children learn the values of biodiversity

and organic gardening. The social and environmental benefits of Community in Bloom gardens extend beyond the individual, to the brand, affirming Singapore's vision of a City in a Garden.

Melbourne, Australia: Healthy Parks Healthy People
In 1998, Parks Victoria, a statewide organisation overseeing the management of urban, regional, and national parks in the state of Victoria, Australia, crafted the bold and challenging vision to make parks relevant to all citizens of Victoria. Using the slogan, "Healthy Parks Healthy People", a vision aimed at increasing the health of citizens while sustaining the health of parks and open spaces, the managers of Parks Victoria redefined its public image and engaged a broad range of diverse actors to realise this new vision. What started out as a green space marketing campaign turned into a comprehensive branding scheme, achieving alliances with unlikely stakeholders, increasing the public's use of parks, and identifying new funding sources.

Rabbits and other invasive species pose major maintenance challenges for the staff of Parks Victoria. Thus, they reached out to retired farmers living in peri-urban Melbourne to help with managing these species. The farmers, equipped with their tractors, enthusiastically mowed down rabbit burrows on Parks Victoria land, saving the agency money while providing the farmers with an opportunity to socialise and bond. Local health officials took part in the tractor gatherings to provide support for common health problems, such as depression and high blood pressure, that often go

Green place brands are an excellent management and stewardship tool for urban green spaces.

unaddressed among older men. By participating in the maintenance of peri-urban parkland, these men embodied Parks Victoria's "Healthy Parks Healthy People" brand.

This brand has attracted new park users as well as new funding sources for parks. Parks Victoria has partnered the health and community sectors with the help of a local community fund to get urban citizens more active in the parks. Obesity and diabetes are unfortunately on the rise in Australia. Research has shown a strong connection between increased physical and mental well-being and the amount of time spent in natural surroundings such as parks. Through innovative public-private partnerships, Parks Victoria has made parks an important part of the solution to future health and well-being. More than a brand, "Healthy Parks Healthy People" is a community-supported experience.

Copenhagen, Denmark: Eco-Metropolis
Copenhagen has repeatedly been recognised as a city with the one of the highest quality of life. It is also considered to be one of the world's most environmentally friendly cities. These qualities are exemplified in the municipality's vision to become an eco-metropolis and provide a greener city for all citizens. Public-private partnerships, specifically in the clean-tech sector, are at the heart of Copenhagen's approach to green city branding. With a strong focus on eco-innovation, Copenhagen is providing for the green growth that will support the city's future carbon-neutral economy. This green growth will provide for improved citizen access to natural areas in the city.

By 2015, 90 percent of all citizens are expected to live within walking distance of a park, a beach, or a natural area. The city also is working

to develop citizen involvement in the maintenance and care of parks and natural areas in Copenhagen. As the city densifies with over 100,000 new inhabitants expected by 2025, the demands on green areas in Copenhagen will grow. Citizens therefore will play a much more active role in the stewardship of the city's current and future green spaces to ensure the sustainability of the eco-metropolis brand.

Conclusion
Green city brands promise something unique and authentic, but as more and more cities profile themselves as green in an entrepreneurial fashion, the unique characteristics of biodiversity and local identity might get lost on technical solutions to address environmental degradation. Maintaining a strong focus on local citizens throughout the green branding process provides greater potential for inclusive governance and local authenticity, bringing green city visions one step closer to the real thing.

In summary:
• City branding through green space offers new opportunities for green space management.
• Green spaces should be linked to other relevant social concerns, such as global competitiveness, social cohesion, lifestyle changes (and health challenges), and climate change.
• Citizens, already in tune with the local identity of a place, should be actively involved in the visioning and implementation of a green place brand.
• Green spaces provide authenticity to a place brand and are an integral part of the solution to a more environmentally sustainable future and healthier society. They should not be left out of the urban sustainability solution. **CG**

References:
Economist Intelligence Unit. 2011. "Asian Green City Index: Assessing the Environmental Impact of Asia's Major Cities." A research conducted by Economist Intelligence Unit, sponsored by Siemens AG. Munich, Germany: Siemens AG. Accessed June 11, 2013. www.siemens.com/press/pool/de/events/2011/corporate/2011-02-asia/asian-gci-report-e.pdf.

Govers, Robert and Frank M. Go. 2003. "Deconstructing Destination Image in the Information Age." *Information Technology & Tourism* 6: 13–29.

Hui, Tak Kee and David Wan Tai Wai. 2003. "Singapore's Image as a Tourist Destination." *International Journal of Tourism Research* 5: 305-313.

Koh, Buck Song. 2011. *Brand Singapore: How Nation Branding Built Asia's Leading Global City.* Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Business.

Krueger, Rob and David Gibbs. 2007. "Problematizing the Politics of Sustainability." In *The Sustainable Development Paradox: Urban Political Economy In The United States and Europe*, edited by Rob Krueger and David Gibbs, 1-12. New York: The Guilford Press.

Lee, Kuan Yew. 2000. *From Third World to First: Singapore and the Asian Economic Boom.* New York: Harper Collins.

Moilanen, Teemu and Seppo Rainisto. 2009. *How to Brand Nations, Cities, and Destinations: A Planning Book for Place Branding.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Newman, Peter. 2010. "Green Urbanism and its Application to Singapore." *Environment and Urbanization Asia* 1: 149–170.

Tan, Puay Yok, James Wang, and Angelia Sia. 2013. "Perspectives on five decades of urban greening in Singapore." *Cities* 32: 24–32.

1. (Photo "Gardens by the Bay—Singapore, Travel in Singapore May-June 2013": David Berkowitz on www.flickr.com/photos/davidberkowitz/9047580904).

2. Albert Park Lake, Melbourne (Photo "Albert Park Lake": Jessica M. Cross on www.flickr.com/photos/76682361@N00/3169785512).

3. (Photo "Copenhagen cyclists": Mikael Colville-Andersen/ Courtesy of Federation European Cyclists on www.flickr.com/photos/eucyclistsfed/7684688958).