BREAKING INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM:
URBAN BRANDING IN FOUR AMERICAN CITIES

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Abstract

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Urban branding is a multi-billion dollar per year industry with a straightforward goal: to help cities differentiate themselves from other cities. Because cities are in competition with one another for low-cost residents, new investors, and tourists, urban branding is used by local leaders as a political-economic tool to ensure that their city is an attractive destination for these target audiences. However, in practice cities tend to adopt a similar set of branding strategies that make them look not more distinct, but more alike. Although many studies recognize this phenomenon, most of them are purely descriptive and fail to provide an explanation for why cities adopt such similar approaches to urban branding. When an explanation is presented, it is usually couched in macro-structural terms, placing the majority of blame on political and economic forces that leave little room for the agency of groups or individual actors to influence branding decisions. I argue that such explanations are not only insufficient for explaining these similarities but are also hampered by the fact that they cannot account for changes to branding practices if and when they do occur.
This project, through detailed case studies of Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit, argues that the theory of institutional isomorphism provides a more comprehensive explanation for why these and so many other cities approach the practice of urban branding in such similar ways. By looking at the actors working within the organizational field of urban branding, I show that there are mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphic forces that influence these actors to behave in similar ways, that put restrictions on the types of strategies deemed appropriate for use in branding efforts, and that also prevent actors from outside the organizational field from having any real decision-making power when it comes to shaping the direction of a branding campaign. Moreover, I also argue that this theory is superior to previous explanations because it also provides an avenue for organizational change to occur. For instance, the introduction of different mimetic, coercive, or normative forces, such as the citizen-led counter branding campaigns that emerged in Houston and Detroit, can help to breakdown the homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of urban branding, thus leading to the adoption of a wider range of inclusive and community-oriented branding strategies.
for Melissa, Elijah, and Luke
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Traveling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents.


1.1 Prelude

Every year, millions of CitiBank credit card holders receive bills and send payments to an address in the pleasantly-named The Lakes, Nevada. Few, if any, of these customers know, however, that The Lakes doesn’t actually have any lakes, and in fact, it is not really a city at all. In reality, The Lakes is a 40-acre parcel of land that consists solely of CitiBank’s main credit card processing center and an enormous parking lot for its nearly 1,700 employees. Perhaps the most glaring feature that the name of The Lakes hides, however, is that the processing center is not located in a pristine, idyllic location (as its name might suggest), but rather it is located in the desert, right in the heart of Las Vegas—a city well-known for sin and debauchery, which is often jokingly referred to as “Lost Wages.”

Avoiding an association with this negative image of Las Vegas was the main reason for CitiBank’s insistence on the use of the name “The Lakes” rather than “Las Vegas” in the processing center’s mailing address. When CitiBank began looking for a
new location for its credit card processing center in the early 1980s, company executives were enticed by the low corporate tax rate in Nevada, the lack of a state income tax, and the availability of cheap land in one of America’s fastest growing cities. However, they were also leery about the prospect of their customers having to send their monthly credit card payments to an address in a city with such a controversial image and reputation. City leaders in Las Vegas, eager to diversify their local economy and determined to not let the city’s reputation kill the deal, devised an ingenious plan. To get around the use of the name Las Vegas in the mailing address, the city offered to cede the 40-acre parcel of land to CitiBank and convinced the U.S. Postal Service to agree to the creation of two new zip codes specifically for the site, which would be given its own name, The Lakes.\(^1\) With its concerns alleviated, CitiBank decided to move its western processing center to Las Vegas—or technically, to The Lakes (Citi’s city within a city)—thus shielding the business’s image and reputation from that of its real place of operation.\(^2\)

1.2 Introduction

The above anecdote is indicative of the importance of image to today’s cities. However, despite the cleverness of the plan devised by local leaders to bring CitiBank to Las Vegas, cities cannot realistically cede a portion of their land each time they want to bring a new business to town. Instead, it is much easier to create, or in many cases re-create, an image that presents a city in a positive light. Whether a city was a once-thriving manufacturing hub that is now dealing with the effects of deindustrialization; whether it has a service-based economy and is looking to diversify its local industries; or whether it is a nondescript town just looking to ensure its continued economic prosperity and relevance in Calvino’s dust cloud of shapeless cities, it is imperative for cities today to
project an image that will appeal to highly-mobile and increasingly fickle investors, consumers, tourists, businesses, and workers. Although this ultra-competitive economic environment exists at many levels—from the global down to the state, regional, and even the local level—cities are seen as the primary geopolitical site where this competition is being played out. As place branding expert Simon Anholt explains:

In today’s globalized, networked world…cities, the economic and cultural powerhouses of nations, are increasingly the focus of this international competition for funds, talent and fame. This competitive environment is a reality of our times, and how a city stakes out and communicates its distinctive place within it largely decides which cities succeed and which falter in the race for economic prosperity. (CEOs for Cities and Prophet 2006: 2)

This effort by cities to “stake out” and “communicate” their distinctive place in the world has become an industry unto itself in recent decades. “Urban branding,” as it is commonly called, is a multi-billion dollar per year industry with a singular focus: creating differentiation between cities. It is an industry that lives by the motto made famous by former professional tennis player and Las Vegas native Andre Agassi—“image is everything”—and it involves a multitude of actors, including politicians, government bureaucrats, business leaders, professional marketers and advertisers, a variety of image and brand consultants, and, at times, even average citizens. However, while branding a city in order to attract investment and increase tax revenue may be a more practical alternative to giving away land, it is not without its own potentially negative consequences. As this project will demonstrate, despite the thousands or even millions of dollars that a city might spend on branding each year, more often than not these efforts fail to accomplish the main goal of the effort: differentiating the city from its competitors. Moreover, in chapter 2 we will see that branding theorists set out some very specific principles which should be followed for effective branding; however, many cities
fail to follow these criteria. Why is this the case? Why do cities continue to make the same ill-advised branding decisions year after year? And, perhaps more importantly, for those cities that do adopt the suggested branding strategies, why are they willing and able to do so when so many other cities are not? Before addressing these questions, this chapter will first introduce us to the historical antecedents of urban branding and explain how this new industry grew out of these earlier forms of place promotion. Next, I will discuss in greater detail the goals urban branding is meant to accomplish and make an argument for why we—not just scholars, but all citizens—should care about urban branding. Finally, the chapter will conclude by laying out the goals of this project and presenting a summary of what lies ahead in subsequent chapters.

1.3 Selling Cities: Early Place Promotion and the Rise of Urban Branding

Urban branding is a relatively new phenomenon. Its start is generally linked to the creation of the “I Love NY” logo / slogan developed by Milton Glaser in 1977 (see figure 1.1), although urban branding as a field of study only materialized in the early 1980s (de Chernatony 1998; Greenberg 2000). However, Mark Goodwin (1993: 145) notes that “the selling of cities is a process as old as commodification itself,” which, according to David Harvey (1989), began in earnest with the civic boosterism of the Hanseatic League and the Italian city states in medieval Europe. Despite these distant European origins, “place promotion” really came into its own in the United States with the selling of the frontier in the 1800s. Stephen Ward (1998: 9) states that the promotion of frontier settlements was “an episode with no equivalent in long settled Britain or Europe,” as American railroads used their extensive publicity machines to promote new town sites on their lands. Gregory Ashworth and Henk Voogd (1990: 132) concur, noting that “cities in
the United States have what amounts to a tradition of ‘city boosterism’ almost since their foundation as competing pioneer settlements.” Once established, local boosters, which included newspaper editors, businessmen, and groups such as boards of trade, chambers of commerce, and town councils, all “vigorously promoted their towns” by proclaiming and reinforcing a “spirit of progress and enterprise” (Ward 1998: 22).

Figure 1.1: Milton Glaser’s logo / slogan for the “I Love NY” campaign

Whereas frontier-era place promotion was geared toward advertising what new towns and cities could offer to individuals, Progressive Era urban reform and the City Beautiful movement of the late-19th and early-20th centuries changed the focus to how individual citizens, city leaders, and urban planners could work to improve the image and overall aesthetic quality of their cities (Wilson 1994; Peterson 2003). A popular cause that combined civic art, civic pride, and citizenship, the City Beautiful movement was more than an effort at city beautification. A central concern of the movement was the quality of life for citizens, which was addressed through architectural and urban design projects that attempted to benefit the common good, such as great civic building complexes, vast park and recreation systems, and grand boulevards (Peterson 2003). Building on this attention to aesthetic quality, scholars in the 1960s turned to focus
specifically on the “image” of the city. Writers like Kevin Lynch (1960) and Anselm Strauss (1961) sought to understand the various factors that make up the mental image of a city held by both locals and outsiders, and they suggested ways that urban planners could improve the “imageability” of cities through form and design. Like the advocates of the City Beautiful movement before them, these authors understood a city’s image to be intrinsically tied to the built environment. Image was not something that was artificially created and then projected to the world through promotional advertisements; rather, it was the result of how the materiality of the city was viewed and understood from a multitude of unique, individual perspectives.

Yet, this focus on the material image of the city was short-lived. As the post-war period progressed, American cities experienced a host of seemingly contradictory changes that required a new approach to place promotion. First, structural and political changes negatively impacted many formerly thriving local economies, prompting cities to find new and innovative ways of generating economic growth. These structural changes included the shift from a manufacturing- to a service-based economy, as well as advances in communications and other technologies that no longer required industries to locate themselves in or near urban centers. For instance, in the first two decades after World War II, low rents in the urban periphery led to a continuous movement of capital toward the development of suburban areas (Smith 1996). Because of the low rents in urban peripheries, new high-wage service sector jobs could easily locate themselves outside of heavily industrialized urban cores, which were being decimated by deindustrialization (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). As jobs left the urban core, so too did residents. Over the course of the next several decades, many American cities saw their populations dwindle,
in some cases by as much as 50 percent (Gallagher 2010). These economic and residential changes associated with suburbanization often resulted in inner cities composed of an “underclass” of poor, minority, low-wage service workers (Wilson 1980). As wealth, capital, and industry moved out of the inner cities, those who remained were left with minimal job opportunities—often limited to the low-wage service sector—and declining public services. Wilson describes this “vicious circle of metropolitan population change and relocation” in the following manner:

The more revenue lost in income and property taxes from the exodus of a higher-paid labor force and industry, and the more supportive services the increasing numbers of “high cost” citizens demand, the less money there is available for adequate police, education, recreation, and fire protection services; thus the higher costs for deteriorating services simply encourages more industries and people (particularly those economically able to move to the suburbs) to leave. (1980: 115)

This urban decay brought about by structural changes was compounded by the rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s of a political and economic philosophy—neoliberalism—that ushered in an era of strict fiscal reforms, which put even greater pressure on city leaders to find new ways of attracting residents, investors, and tourists who could help shore up the local economy and increase the local tax base (Peterson and Lewis 1986). Perhaps the most damaging effect of these neoliberal reforms was that they served to increase the responsibilities of local governments while at the same time diminishing the available resources to provide needed public services (Hackworth 2007).

The devolution of federal power to state and local levels served to increase pressure on city governments to deal with social problems, yet at the same time one of the primary sources of revenue for cities—money transfers from higher levels of government (Levy 2000)—began to decline. As federal support for cities decreased, local governments were
left to fend for themselves in the growing competition for economic investment (Gottdiener 1987) and faced even greater pressure to come up with new and reliable tax revenue generators (Hackworth 2007). To this end, cities started to become more entrepreneurial in order to avoid budgetary shortfalls (Leitner 1990); they began to ally with businesses to create public-private revenue-generating development projects (Peterson 1981; Kohn 2004); and they even began to behave like businesses (Hackworth 2007), advertising themselves (the product) to potential residents, investors, and tourists (the consumers).

At the same time that these structural and political changes were hurting local urban economies, the acceleration and intensification of globalization ironically helped to reaffirm the importance of cities in the world economy. In the fast-paced, interconnected world of the late-20\textsuperscript{th} century, cities began to be seen as “strategic sites with vast concentrations of resources and infrastructure” which act as key nodes in a global economy that “materializes in concrete processes situated in specific places” (Sassen 1998: 196). However, along with this “placeboundedness” (Sassen 1998) of key components of the global economy, another contradiction emerges: both capital and labor are now more mobile than ever before. This “hypermobility” (Schweickart 2002) of capital and labor has forced city leaders to strategize new ways of making their particular city attractive to these key global actors so that they will choose to locate themselves in their city rather than in a competing municipality.

Taken together, the changes experienced by cities in the postwar period served to weaken the connection between an urban image and the materiality of the built environment.\textsuperscript{4} Rather than rely on an image which had in many cases been sullied by
these changes, many cities began to project an image not of what they currently are, but of what they aspire to be. Taking their cues from 1960s-era marketing techniques that were used to promote the images of politicians without referencing their specific policy preferences, city boosters began to realize that an urban image could be artificially created and did not necessarily have to be connected to the built environment (Ashworth and Voogd 1990). This marriage of crafted images and place promotion gave rise to what is known today as urban branding—a practice where commercial marketing techniques are applied to cities; where the urban image is manipulated into a “brand”; and where a concern with aesthetic quality, urban form, and quality of life factors has been replaced with a new goal: finding ways to make the city appealing to those who can help the city’s bottom line.

1.4 The Goal of Urban Branding: Sustaining Economic Growth

Every city has unique characteristics, from its specific history and traditions to its distinctive forms of cuisine, art, architecture, music, and politics. In other words, it is local residents and their culture that truly sets a city apart from its competitors. Thus, we might expect that an industry built on the premise of showcasing differentiation between cities would utilize culture, and urban branding does indeed have a strong cultural component. Numerous scholars examine the urban branding process in relation to the “cultural city” (Evans 2003), “cultural industries” (O’Connor, Lovatt, Banks, and Raffo 2009), “cultural spaces” (Holmes and Beebeejaun 2007), “cultural policy” (Ellmeier and Rásky 1998; García 2004), “culturally led urban development” (Miles 2005), and “cultural development strategies and urban revitalization” (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007). Yet, while these authors recognize urban branding as a process involving
the “deliberate manipulation of culture in an effort to enhance the appeal and interest of places” (Philo and Kearns 1993: 3), the majority of scholars also note that urban branding is, in reality, “a marriage of culture and commerce” (Evans 2003: 435), wherein “urban cultural policies remain second to the rationale of more ambitious and easy-to-monitor economic development strategies” (Garcia 2004: 324). Thus, despite its strong cultural component, urban branding is also inextricably tied to the political-economic goals of city leaders.

In examining these political-economic goals, it is important to recognize that a city is more than just an agglomeration of people, buildings, and roads. Instead, it is a complex entity, akin to a living organism, which can both grow and decay, and it is in constant competition with other cities for its own survival. In the minds of many local leaders, in order to compete successfully in today’s global economy, it is believed that a city must continue to achieve economic growth. While this may not necessarily be true, this mindset can often be seen in the rhetoric used by local politicians, and it has also been evidenced in scholarly work, such as in Harvey Molotch’s work on urban growth machines (Molotch 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987). In order to accomplish this goal of achieving and sustaining economic growth in an increasingly competitive environment, a city must find ways to make itself appear especially attractive to specific groups of people, including residents, investors, and tourists, all of whom can make a positive impact on a local economy.

An influx of new capital from investors and an inflow of tourist dollars are both generally regarded to result in a net economic benefit to a local economy. Even with the use of tax abatements and other economic incentives that may be initially offered to investors, each of which may cost local governments in the short term, the long term benefits of new investment
almost always outweigh these short term costs. Tourist dollars, on the other hand, help a local economy in both the private sector (through retail spending at local businesses) and in the public sector (through sales, entertainment, and hotel taxes), and tourists do not require nearly the level of expenditure on public services as do local residents, thus providing cities with a positive benefit-to-cost ratio (Goldman, Nakazawa, and Taylor 1995). When it comes to attracting new residents, however, ensuring a positive contribution to the local economy is not so straightforward.

For instance, city leaders often make a distinction between low and high cost residents: low cost being those individuals who provide a net gain to public revenues, high cost being those who consume more in social services than they contribute through taxes and user charges on public services. In their effort to attract low cost residents, many city leaders across the country have adopted Richard Florida’s creative class theory, which claims that “creativity is the driving force of economic growth” (Florida 2002: ix; see also Florida 2005). According to Florida, the creative class is made up of individuals in “knowledge intensive” occupations, such as scientists, engineers, health care professionals, and business managers, as well as individuals involved in “design, education, arts, music, and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or creative content” (2002: 8). While the merits of Florida’s creative class theory are widely debated (see criticisms by Malanga 2004; Nathan 2007; and Bures 2012), city leaders continue to vigorously pursue the creative class in their branding efforts. As will be shown in the next chapter, however, although Florida’s recommendations for how to attract creative types tend to mesh well with branding theory in general, most cities fail to follow these recommendations and actually do the exact opposite of what Florida and branding theorists recommend. Providing an answer to why this is the case is one of the driving goals of this project.
1.5 Why Should We Care About Urban Branding?

Urban branding presents us with an interesting puzzle. It is a process that, in theory, will help to distinguish cities from one another by highlighting their unique characteristics, with the ultimate aim of presenting an appealing image to investors, tourists, and low-cost residents. However, in practice, cities that use urban branding rarely achieve the distinction they are looking for. Rather than follow the recommended strategies put forth by leading place-branding theorists, cities instead rely on strategies that repeatedly fail to produce positive results and oftentimes make cities look not more distinct, but more alike. Providing an answer for why this is the case is important for the future of urban branding and for its usefulness in helping to achieve the political-economic goals of local leaders. If the disconnect between theory and practice can be resolved, then urban branding may indeed become a useful tool for achieving economic growth. However, if there is no viable way to reconcile urban branding theory with its practice, then knowing this can allow city leaders to seek out other tools that will hopefully do a better job of helping them achieve their goals.

While analyzing this puzzle may produce useful results for those involved in the field of urban branding and in local government, this study is also important on a more general level. As noted above, it is the inhabitants and their local culture that account for the real uniqueness of a city. Thus, in any attempt to showcase the distinct qualities of a place, it would make sense to utilize the local community by involving citizens in the branding process and by displaying their local culture in any brand-promotion efforts. However, this is rarely the case in practice. As later chapters will show, most branding efforts are managed in a top-down fashion, utilizing the “expert knowledge” of
politicians, bureaucrats, business executives, and advertising professionals (many of whom are not even local, but are brought in from other cities to share their marketing expertise) rather than the on-the-ground knowledge of local citizens. Involving local residents in branding efforts is also important because they are regarded as being the best ambassadors for their cities. For instance, Balakrishnan (2008) argues that the true drivers of a brand are citizens themselves, and thus locals must buy into and be willing to promote the brand in order for any urban branding effort to truly be successful. Thus, given that urban branding is a process that, in theory, should welcome and encourage citizen involvement, this project will use urban branding as a lens through which to examine local democratic participation. By looking at the level of citizen participation in the urban branding process, we can perhaps learn more about the possibilities for—and the limits to—democratic participation more generally in American cities today.

1.6 Goals of the Project

This project was born out of a desire to address a deficiency found in the current urban branding literature—namely, the lack of a suitable explanation for the apparent disconnect between the theory and the practice of urban branding. As the next chapter will demonstrate, most empirical studies on the practice of urban branding present cities as all adopting a similar set of branding strategies. This similarity in branding practices is then explained by pointing to macro-structural factors that in essence force cities to adopt this limited set of strategies in order to compete with other cities and accomplish their goals. However, as later chapters will show, while similarities do abound, some variation in branding practices does indeed exist. Thus, a primary goal of this project is to provide evidence of this variation, and then offer an alternative explanation that does a better job
of accounting for the similarities, but that is also flexible enough to explain the
differences found in the practice of urban branding. By focusing on the mechanisms
responsible for institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of urban
branding, I will show that while there are strong mimetic, coercive, and normative forces
guiding cities in a similar direction, these same forces can also be used to breakdown
institutional isomorphism and enable organizational change, thus opening the door for the
adoption of a wider range and more inclusive types of branding strategies.

Another goal of this project will be to place greater attention on the opinions and
actions of local citizens with regard to the branding of their cities than has been provided
in previous studies. As the next chapter will show, urban branding theorists make a strong
case for both the inclusion of local citizens in brand decision-making processes, as well
as for the participation of local citizens in brand-creation and brand-promotion efforts.
However, to date the majority of empirical studies on urban branding fail to engage this
connection between the local community and official urban branding efforts. It is
generally assumed that citizens would want to participate if given the chance, but the
question is never asked: do citizens actually care about how their city is branded? If the
answer is no, then calling for more participatory branding strategies may not be the best
way forward. This study addresses this oversight by presenting survey evidence from
community organizations that 1) shows how local residents view current urban branding
efforts, 2) sheds light on the relationship between citizens and the actors and
organizations responsible for official branding efforts, and 3) reveals interesting insights
into the opinions and ideas that ordinary citizens have regarding how their city should be
branded. Moreover, this project will also present detailed accounts of how citizen efforts
to take urban branding into their own hands have had real and important effects on the
direction of official urban branding efforts.

In addition to providing evidence for the importance of citizen involvement in
urban branding efforts, another goal will be to offer suggestions for how citizen
participation can be increased. I will argue that the narrow conceptualization of urban
branding held by current decision makers is due to institutional isomorphism present
within the organizational field of urban branding, and that such a narrow understanding
of the practice creates a disconnect between those actors who knowingly make branding
decisions and those who, through their everyday actions, unknowingly contribute to a
city’s image and reputation. Because of this narrow conceptualization, I contend that
urban branding will continue to fail in achieving the goals that city leaders hope this
practice will help them accomplish until the practice is reformed in a way that allows for
the adoption of more community-oriented and participatory branding strategies. The final
section of this project will provide some suggestions for tangible steps that can be taken
to bring about these reforms and thus avoid a continuation of the largely unsuccessful
attempts at urban branding that continue to be carried out today.

Finally, an overarching goal of this project is to bring together two sets of
literature that, up to this point, have been largely distinct. By approaching the topic of
urban branding from a sociological perspective, I believe there are important insights to
be learned that can inform both literatures. For instance, by drawing on the theory of
institutional isomorphism to help explain the homogenization of actions and the non-
responsive tendencies of actors involved in the urban branding process, I simultaneously
aim to contribute to the ongoing theory-building effort among institutionalist scholars to
address various mechanisms of organizational change. Additionally, by investigating the relationship between citizen participation in local politics and the structure of urban power relations, I not only hope to provide a better understanding of the urban branding process, but also hope to build a bridge between the sociological subfields of organizational institutionalism and political sociology.

1.7 Project Overview

To accomplish the goals listed above, I draw on qualitative data to present case studies of urban branding in four American cities: Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit. The case studies themselves were undertaken over a two year period, from the summer of 2011 through the fall of 2013. In order to get an insider’s look at the decision-making process when it comes to crafting and marketing a city’s brand, 52 interviews were conducted across the four cities with actors who are currently involved in official branding efforts. To gauge the level of community involvement in official branding efforts, a 10 question survey was sent to all community organizations located in each city’s greater metropolitan area. The survey asked for each organization’s opinion on past and current branding efforts, inquired as to whether anyone from the organization had ever been invited to participate or had ever volunteered to participate in official branding efforts, as well as asked each organization to list the features of their city that were most appealing and that should be promoted in the city’s brand.5 Finally, a case history of each city’s involvement with the practice of urban branding was constructed by researching newspapers, websites, and blogs; reviewing internal documents provided by organizations involved in urban branding efforts; and analyzing branding materials themselves, which included print, radio, television, and Internet ads; press releases;
flyers, pamphlets, and tourism magazines; brand websites; social media activity; and promotional paraphernalia (bumper stickers, buttons, clothing, etc.).

Before looking at urban branding efforts in each of these cities, chapter 2 will first review how scholars have theorized urban branding and then examine how previous empirical studies have contributed to our understanding of the apparent disconnect between these theories and urban branding in practice. Next, the current macro-structural explanation for this disconnect will be examined, and I will offer an alternative theory by exploring the literature on the urban power debate. After making the case that institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of urban branding is responsible for the similarities found in the practice of urban branding, I will show how the mechanisms responsible for institutional isomorphism can also help to explain the variation that occurs when certain cities adopt branding strategies that are more inclusive of citizen voices and that seek to highlight unique aspects of a city’s local culture. I will argue that while mimetic, coercive, and normative forces often encourage institutional isomorphism, each of these forces can also enable organizational change, thus helping to break institutional isomorphism once it is already in place.

Chapter 3 begins by investigating the various factors that should lead to the adoption of different branding strategies in our case study cities. After discussing how the four case study cities were selected, I then use these factors to develop some expectations for what particular branding strategies we should expect to find in our examination of the urban branding practices of each city. From here, the bulk of the chapter will provide detailed case studies of the history of urban branding in Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit. Evidence will be presented from each city showing that, despite our
expectations that some sort of variation in branding practices should be observed, in fact all four cities use a strikingly similar set of branding strategies to carry out their urban branding efforts.

Chapter 4 then aims to explain this lack of variation by drawing on the sociological theory of institutional isomorphism and its associated mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that are responsible for the similarities observed within the organizational field of urban branding in each city. From here the chapter turns to look at the results of surveys conducted with community organizations in each city—results which show that citizens do care about urban branding, that they do want to be involved in the urban branding process, and, perhaps most importantly, that the strategies used in individual urban branding campaigns could potentially look much different if local citizens were allowed to participate in official branding efforts. Chapter 5 then builds off the insights of these survey results and shows two specific instances where citizens have taken it upon themselves to change the direction of their city’s urban branding efforts. After detailing the citizen-led counter branding campaigns that took place in Houston and Detroit, I then argue that these efforts were successful in helping to breakdown the institutional isomorphism that had characterized official branding efforts in those cities up to that point. The chapter concludes by looking at why these citizen-led counter campaigns materialized in Houston and Detroit but not in Las Vegas or Orlando. Finally, chapter 6 will recap the major contributions of this project and will provide some directions for future research. I conclude by laying out some suggestions for how cities can move forward in a way that will make urban branding a process that is both more inclusive of local citizens and a more useful tool for achieving local political-economic goals.
1.8 Notes

1 Before this deal was struck, The Lakes was simply the name of a two-square-mile neighborhood in the western part of Las Vegas, which was built around the man-made lake known as Lake Sahara. The name The Lakes is still used to refer to the neighborhood today; however, the mailing address of “The Lakes, Nevada” only applies to the 40-acre parcel of land containing CitiBank’s processing center. The mailing address for the rest of the neighborhood continues to be Las Vegas, Nevada.

2 Anecdote told by interviewee 1. See also Rothman 2002: xvi-xvii.


4 Although the urban image created by contemporary urban branding may not be intrinsically tied to the built environment as it was during the Progressive Era and up through the late-20th century, aspects of the built environment continue to be important to current urban branding efforts. The main difference between earlier eras of place promotion and contemporary urban branding is that, whereas the attention to form and design in earlier eras led development projects that were meant to benefit the common good, current branding efforts tend to manipulate the built environment through consumption-driven megaprojects that typically only benefit a small segment of society and often fail to address the real needs of local citizens.

5 See Appendix for details about the survey procedure used along with an example of survey questions and response choices.
CHAPTER 2

URBAN BRANDING, INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM,
AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city’s name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off. The suburbs they drove me through were no different from the others, with the same little greenish and yellowish houses. Following the same signs we swung around the same flower beds in the same squares. The downtown streets displayed goods, packages, signs that had not changed at all. [...] Why come to Trude? I asked myself. And I already wanted to leave. “You can resume your flight whenever you like,” they said to me, “but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes.”


2.1 Introduction

Italo Calvino’s description of the fictional city of Trude represents a nightmare scenario for today’s city leaders and the ultimate challenge for someone involved in urban branding. Although we may have not reached the point of a “world covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end,” it is hard to argue that American cities have not experienced at least some degree of homogenization in recent decades. From the steel and glass towers that define our modern skylines, to the multilane highways that cut like scars across the urban landscape, to the mega-malls, big-box stores, and chain retailers and eateries that can be found in every major city across the
country, Calvino’s Trude just might mirror our present reality more than we would like to admit. Yet, despite this increasing homogenization, all cities still have specific characteristics that help to set them apart from other cities, including unique forms of art, architecture, food, music, and politics, as well as distinct local histories and traditions. In urban America today, city leaders utilize the practice of urban branding to try and highlight these unique characteristics of their cities in order to distinguish themselves from competing cities. By helping to differentiate a city from its competitors, urban branding is seen as an important political-economic tool that can help city leaders in their goal of attracting low-cost residents, new investors, and tourists, all of whom are viewed as important assets in sustaining local economic growth.

Given that all cities are unique in some way, achieving differentiation should presumably be an easy task. Yet, as this and later chapters will illustrate, there appears to be a major disconnect between the theory behind urban branding and the way that it is put into practice. Cities across the country and around the world are collectively spending billions of dollars on urban branding every year, yet most fail to achieve the differentiation from other cities that they intend to create. This chapter will help to answer why this is the case. First, however, the chapter will begin by introducing the concept of urban branding, the theory behind it, and how other scholars have assessed its practice to date. The chapter will then critique the dominant macro-structural theory that is typically used to explain the disconnect between urban branding theory and practice. I will next engage the long-standing urban power debate and offer institutional isomorphism as an alternative explanation to help explain why cities are failing to exhibit their unique qualities and are instead adopting strategies that end up exacerbating the
homogenizing forces that urban branding is intended to combat. I will also argue that a focus on the mechanisms that drive institutional isomorphism is a more useful approach than previous theories because it not only helps to explain the similarities found across space and time in the practice of urban branding, but it is also flexible enough to help explain variation in branding practices when it does occur. I will conclude the chapter by arguing that while there are indeed mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that help explain the isomorphic tendencies found within the organizational field of urban branding, these same mechanisms can also help to break institutional isomorphism once it is already firmly in place. This can lead organizations in new and exciting directions where the practice of urban branding can become a process that is more inclusive of local citizens, that truly highlights the unique attributes of a city, and that in the end is a more useful tool for achieving the political-economic goals of local leaders.

2.2 The Theory behind Urban Branding

In the late 20th century, as American cities began their entrepreneurial turn (Leitner 1990), multiple “how to” guides began to appear with the purpose of instructing cities on how best to market their urban product to potential new consumers. Much of the advice in these urban branding manuals comes directly from the marketing world, which has once again changed the way we think about cities. Whereas the City Beautiful movement helped switch the focus from “what the city can do for me” to “what I can do for my city,” and whereas theorists in the 1960s helped to focus our attention specifically on the image (or rather, the multiple and diverse images) of the city, urban branding has served to move the focus away from a concentration on the “image” of the city and toward a focus on the “city-as-brand.”
Of the multiple pieces of advice found in these branding guides, perhaps the most basic adage is that a city needs to create and promote a brand that highlights its unique qualities in order to effectively differentiate itself from its competition. Such advice is taken straight from the literature on consumer product branding, wherein the primary role of a brand is to “identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors” (Aaker 1991: 7). In an attempt to apply this brand-logic to cities, Sun-Young Park and James Petrick (2006: 263) first comment on the benefit of developing an “emotional link” with potential “customers” of the urban product, and then advise cities to define their unique identity by “differentiating one’s destination from competitors.” Likewise, Roger Bennett and Sharmila Savani (2003: 70) define the urban brand as “a multidimensional assortment of functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements that collectively generate a unique set of associations in the public mind.”

Once city leaders decide to undertake an urban brand campaign, the literature points to three key factors that must be taken into account in order for the brand to be successful: 1) choosing which actors will be involved in the brand-creation and promotion process; 2) deciding what strategies will be used to both create and convey the brand; and 3) determining how specific the content of the brand will be. With respect to the actors involved, city leaders are encouraged to foster community participation in the process of both developing and implementing the brand. As Beatriz García (2004: 324) explains, “the emphasis must lie in providing a platform for the local communities, including both the average citizen, authorities and specialist agencies, to express their views and expectations and survey the decision-making process. The ultimate objective is
to retain ‘local control,’ forging a ‘local identity’ and ‘sense of place,’” in order to “avoid the feeling of alienation, misrepresentation and lack of ownership” that comes with a top-down process led by marketing specialists and government bureaucrats. In addition, developing a unique brand is seen as especially dependent upon getting the input of local residents, for they are the one component that truly sets a community apart from its competition. For instance, Jeff Swystun, Global Director of the international marketing firm Interbrand, suggests that urban branding is actually a misnomer, and that it’s actually about people branding: “It’s about branding the people that represent the region because there are actually very few differentiators that you can hang your hat on from a geographic basis…it’s the people who populate [the place] that [make] it unique” (quoted in Balakrishnan 2008: 77).

Moreover, a city that develops its brand by encouraging community involvement is expected to benefit not only from the ability to draw on the distinctiveness of its citizenry, but also from the sense of brand ownership that will be felt by local residents. By helping to create the brand, community members will be more likely to promote the brand, thus improving its overall effectiveness. As Jolanta Ruzinskaite and Angela Lee (2010: 135) attest, “people need to recognize the brand of the place where they live or work, so [they] can support and possibly inform the world about it.” With regard to its effect on tourism, Melodena Balakrishnan (2008) also notes that by starting with the people of the city, their feeling of pride and their knowledge of the place will help to create a positive association for visitors with the destination.

In addition to local residents, urban branding guides suggest that other local stakeholders should also be involved in the branding process. Such stakeholders can
include chambers of commerce, community development agencies, private sector organizations, or any type of local special interest group that may have some stake in how the city is promoted to the outside world (Greenwell 1982; Ashworth and Voogd 1990; Trueman, Klemm, and Giroud 2004). Yet, despite this general call for the input of multiple voices, some authors do point out the necessity of a clearly established leadership position from which one organization can coordinate the wide range of efforts undertaken by others to help create and promote the urban brand. Thus, although a multiple stakeholder approach is needed to ensure the uniqueness of one’s brand, some sort of top-down guidance may also need to be incorporated into the process in order to coordinate the complexities of the overall branding effort (Greenwell 1982).

When it comes to the strategies used to brand a city, two different types are mentioned: those strategies that are used to help create the brand, and those strategies that are used to advertise the brand to potential consumers. Strategies aimed at brand creation often share the concern for urban form and design held by those who previously focused on the image of the city. For example, design issues are critical in many urban branding projects, ranging from new development to historic preservation and adaptive re-use, as well as projects involving landscaping, signage, park development, and street furnishing (Wagner 1982). Moreover, Bennett and Savani (2003: 73) note that an urban branding effort might “devote as much attention to removing graffiti, laying flower beds and refurbishing façades as it does to advertising (publicly financed) conversions of old warehouses into cheap business premises.” Other brand-creation strategies include flagship development projects (e.g., a new sports stadium), flamboyant architectural and urban design statements (e.g., a new opera house or museum designed by a world
renowned architect), cultural and sporting spectacles (e.g., hosting the Super Bowl), trade fairs, public art displays, as well as subsidies and tax breaks for new investment projects (Ward 1998).

In contrast, the strategies used to advertise and sell the brand have less to do with form and design and everything to do with marketing and effective product placement. Thus, logo creation, the development of catchy slogans and eye-catching imagery, multiple forms of advertisement, and effective public relations are seen as the backbone of a successful urban branding campaign (Ward 1998; Bennett and Savani 2003). To ensure success, a heavy dose of market research is required as well, first in order to identify how the city is currently viewed by potential consumers, and second to make sure that the brand being conveyed is appropriate for its target audience. This concern with pitching the right brand to the right audience leads into the third critical factor that must be taken into account by urban branding practitioners: the specificity of the brand itself.

One of the key debates in the urban branding guides is whether cities should focus on creating a single brand or multiple brands. Especially when multiple stakeholders are invited to participate in the brand-creation process, it is almost inevitable that the brand preferred by one group of stakeholders (say, local residents) will be unsuitable for others (such as the business community). Furthermore, when the brand is advertised to potential consumers, a single brand may not resonate with the multiple types of consumer (residents, investors, and tourists) to which the city is trying to appeal. One possible solution to this problem is to create multiple brands and promote the city by using multiple branding campaigns. Some authors claim that this is the only logical way for a
city to proceed, as the complexities that exist within the makeup of a city, combined with the multiple audiences trying to be reached, make it impossible to achieve the clarity implicit in a single brand (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000). Authors who follow this line of thinking also note that even if a city does attempt to develop a single brand, it will have to be so generic that “it will inevitably fail, as it will isolate a significant proportion of its target audience through its vagueness” (Fan 2006: 10).

Yet, there are those on the other side of the argument who claim that the use of multiple brands may be just as troublesome as relying on a single brand. For instance, Andrew Fretter (1993: 173) points out that although multiple brands “may not cause too great a problem if the target markets are different for each campaign, it can lead to confusion where audiences overlap.” To avoid this possibility of brand confusion, scholars who argue for the creation of a single brand recommend a “coordination of effort” by government agencies and other urban branding practitioners and call for “the elimination, to the extent possible, of conflicting messages issued by them” (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002: 306). Thus, these authors argue that if recipients receive one clear message they are more likely to both believe it and to be attracted by it. Furthermore, they note that it is a misconception to believe that “the more voices there are, the louder and more potent the message,” for unless they are all saying the same thing in a coordinated manner, more harm than good can be done when a city attempts to sell itself with multiple brands (Fretter 1993: 172).
2.3 Evaluating the Practice of Urban Branding

Despite some disagreement in the literature regarding the number and scope of brands that cities should adopt, the recommendations detailed above would appear to provide a solid foundation for cities to begin their process of brand creation and promotion. But how have cities fared in following these recommendations? For an answer we can turn to the growing number of single-city case studies and multi-city comparative works that evaluate the actual practice of urban branding. Whereas some scholars have looked at urban branding as it has occurred in places as far afield as Cairns, Australia (Merrilees, Miller, Herington, and Smith 2007) and Dubai (Balakrishnan 2008), the vast majority of studies look at the branding efforts of cities in the United States and Western Europe. Much of this literature focuses on what is termed “the Bilbao effect,” which looks at how cultural flagship projects, such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, have impacted the image of European cities trying to brand themselves as “cultural capitals” (Gómez 1998; Plaza 1999; McNeill 2000). Another major focal point in relation to European cities includes a variety of studies looking at how declining manufacturing centers in the United Kingdom are trying to “rebrand” themselves in various ways.\(^3\) Other topics covered in works dealing with European cities include individual case studies of the urban branding process, such as Mihalis Kavaratzis and Gregory Ashworth’s (2007) study of Amsterdam, along with broader surveys of particular themes within the urban branding literature, such as Max Nathan’s (2007) testing of the creative class\(^4\) approach to branding as practiced in several cities in the United Kingdom.
For studies focusing on American cities, individual case studies have been conducted on Mayor Coleman Young’s endeavor to rebrand Detroit through ambitious physical capital projects (Neill 1995); the attempt by city leaders in Atlanta, in preparation for the 1992 Olympic Games, to distance the city from its racist past and project an image of a city that embraces multiculturalism (Rutheiser 1996); and the efforts of local government agencies in New Orleans to use urban branding to recapture the city’s tourist base in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Gotham 2007). Comparative works looking at American cities have also been presented, including Briavel Holcomb’s (1993) investigation of the rebranding of former manufacturing centers such as Pittsburgh and Cleveland; Miriam Greenberg’s (2000) look at the evolving brands of Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New York; and Carl Grodach and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris’ (2007) survey of the preferred branding strategies used by directors of cultural affairs in twenty-nine U.S. cities. In addition, some cross-national studies exist that compare the branding strategies of American and European cities, such as Bennett and Savani’s (2003) look at the branding of city districts in Boston, London, and Copenhagen, along with John Gold and Margaret Gold’s (2008) study of how cities such as Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Barcelona have used the Olympic Games as a means to improve their local brands through urban regeneration.

Given these specific looks at how urban branding has transpired in various cities, along with several other more general critiques of how urban branding has been put into practice, what do these studies tell us about the actors involved, the strategies used, and the specificity of the brands used by cities seeking to differentiate themselves from their competition? Taking these concerns in reverse order, we see that cities overwhelmingly
prefer to market themselves as a single brand rather than as a variety of different brands aimed at specific audiences. Of the cities mentioned above, the only one that is not associated with a single brand is Dubai, and so far this move has not met with much success. According to Balakrishnan (2008), Dubai’s branding campaign has been duly criticized, first because it lacks an identifiable logo or symbol, and second because the city is now associated with too many vague and confusing images.

For the majority of urban branding campaigns examined in the literature, the projection of a single brand is most often accomplished through the strategy of marketing the city with a creative tagline or a catchy slogan. While multiple forms of advertising are used to promote the brand—including television, Internet, and magazine ads, along with billboards and posters, all of which can incorporate written statements as well as visual images of the city—the inclusion of a tagline or slogan is believed to help unify the marketing effort and is relied upon as the one part of the ad that marketers hope the audience will remember. Although not much attention is given to analyzing the effectiveness of taglines and slogans and their ability to sell the brand, authors like Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2007) do note that taglines and slogans are usually created without much, if any, input from local residents, and thus they often end up misrepresenting the core values and local culture of the city.

With regard to the strategies employed to help create the brand, the ones that are actually used by cities tend to be a small subset of the diverse range of strategies proposed in the how-to guides to urban branding. Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) organize these strategies into three categories, which they term “entrepreneurial strategies,” “creative class strategies,” and “progressive strategies.” Entrepreneurial
strategies are those that most clearly pursue a proactive, market-driven approach guided by purely economic objectives; creative class strategies seek to shape the brand around the provision of quality of life and recreational amenities; and progressive strategies are those that follow a more grassroots and neighborhood-based approach (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007: 352). As the case studies in the literature show, although some cities may experiment with creative class and progressive strategies from time to time, entrepreneurial strategies are by far the dominant approach used in the creation of urban brands.

Within their entrepreneurial focus, cities often strive to create their brand through public-private partnerships that result in the development of new consumption-promoting private spaces, including shopping districts, festival marketplaces, sports arenas, and other themed entertainment environments (Gottdiener 1997; Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007; Dieterich-Ward 2009). Additionally, many cities, especially in Europe,\(^5\) have developed a proclivity for using culture as a means of creating their unique urban brand. For instance, Jan Brown (2007) notes that the government of the United Kingdom has identified culture as the key to urban regeneration, while Graeme Evans (2003: 417) writes that “the designation of the cultural city and the use of the arts and entertainment as tools in urban regeneration is now a universal phenomenon which has accelerated in the era of the ‘city of renewal.’”

Given that local culture is often cited in the urban branding how-to guides as being the main attribute that makes a city unique, a focus on culture has the potential to result in the creation of a brand that does truly differentiate a city from its competition. Moreover, because spending on arts and culture is predominantly local, it does not tend to
flow out of the area, meaning that artists and art subsidies can actually boost economic growth in cities (Markusen 2006). Supporting the local arts can also pay an “artistic dividend,” as artists’ work can enhance design, production, and marketing in other sectors, as well as catalyze innovation elsewhere in the local economy. However, despite the proclamations of local leaders that they are “capitalizing on their traditional assets—art and culture—to revive their downtowns …[by] turning to museums, performing arts centers, theaters, opera houses, and concert halls to spur economic growth” (National Building Museum 1998), much of the literature is actually quite critical of this cultural turn in urban branding.

This criticism of cultural branding stems from the fact that rather than actually supporting the already-existing local arts and culture scene, cultural branding as it is practiced in most cities relies on creating new cultural forms through the construction of large-scale, flagship development projects whose main objective is to stimulate consumption. In fact, cultural branding often faces strong opposition from local artists and the local artistic community (Miles 2005), as flagship cultural projects are typically catered to elites, and culture-led regeneration efforts end up having little positive effect on local residents (National Building Museum 1998; Evans 2003; Grodach and Loukaitou- Sideris 2007). Examples of specific case studies where this criticism is voiced can be seen in Kirsten Holmes and Yasminah Beebejaun’s (2007) questioning of whether the cultural life of the Basque Country might not have been better served by investing money into local arts and artists rather than into the Bilbao Guggenheim, as well as in Sharon Zukin’s (1995) analysis of cultural-led redevelopment in New York City, which argues that the “culture” in branding tends to be “Culture”—the traditional
high arts of the Metropolitan Museum or the avant-gardism of the Museum of Modern Art.

Finally, with respect to the actors involved in the practice of urban branding, a major theme that appears time and again in the literature is the top-down nature of the overall branding process. For instance, in reference to the predominant strategy of cultural branding discussed above, Chris Philo and Gerry Kearns (1993: 11) point to “an urban-based bourgeoisie…[that] has continued to manipulate cultural resources in a dual attempt to command ‘other peoples’ both beyond and within the city,” while García (2004: 317) notes that “the approach to cultural development in cities tends to be biased towards the instrumental ends of those in charge, be it city leaders, urban planners and/or related specialist agencies.” Taking a look at specific cases of urban branding, María Gómez (1998: 111) shows that Glasgow’s effort was led by both “prominent figures in the city” and “local business elites,” while Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2007) criticize the city of Amsterdam for using a marketing agency to develop the city’s logo, slogan, and overall direction of its branding campaign rather than getting input from local residents. Moreover, in their comparative study of the actors involved in the process of logo creation in dozens of cities across the United States and Canada, Carmen Blain, Stuart Levy, and J.R. Ritchie (2005) note that the presidents and marketing managers of destination management organizations (such as convention and visitors bureaus) were the most influential actors, while local stakeholders were the least involved in the design of destination logos.

As these evaluations of actual urban branding efforts show, there is a clear disconnect between what is recommended in the theoretical how-to guides and what
actually takes place in the practice of urban branding. The how-to guides stress the need for local, stakeholder involvement (with some form of top-down leadership to steer the overall branding process); give a wide-array of strategies for how to create and promote a brand; and offer two distinct approaches (a single brand versus multiple brands) for how specific the brand should be. Yet, in practice, urban branding seems to be strictly a top-down process, with little to no involvement of the actual community members whose city is being branded; branding campaigns use only a small subset of the recommended strategies for brand creation and promotion—that subset being the reliance on taglines and slogans to advertise cultural flagship and physical regeneration projects whose primary aim is to encourage consumption and that have little connection to local artists or to the local history and culture of a community; and the vast majority of cities promote themselves by using a single brand rather than attempting to create multiple brands aimed at individual target audiences.

2.4 Explaining the Disconnect between Urban Branding Theory and Practice

The disconnect between the theory and practice of urban branding poses an interesting contradiction: in a process meant to highlight a city’s unique attributes and make it stand out from the crowd, in practice urban branding campaigns themselves suffer from a lack of differentiation, which results in the creation of non-distinct brands that cause cities to continue to look very much alike. This contradiction, of course, is not lost in the literature. Plenty of critics have noticed the puzzling fact that cities are more often than not losing their distinctiveness in their search for distinction. One of the causes for this lack of distinction that many authors point to is the bland and generic way that cities advertise themselves to the world. For example, Guy Julier (2005: 872) notes that
cities as varied as Singapore, Brisbane, and Birmingham all describe themselves as “dynamic,” “cosmopolitan,” and “diverse,” while Johannesburg and Manchester are both “vibrant.” At the same time, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Johannesburg are also advertised as being “cultural,” while Santo Domingo and Brisbane are both “sophisticated.” Although all of these claims may be true, they are not necessarily memorable, nor do they accomplish the goal of setting one city apart from the others that are using the exact same terms to describe themselves. Furthermore, although taglines and slogans are supposed to be the most catchy and memorable part of a branding campaign, these also tend to be very generic and often fail in their goal of distinguishing one city from another. As Fretter (1993: 171) points out, a survey of city taglines and slogans reveals that “almost everywhere is described as the centre of England, the United States or Europe…[and] everywhere has a track record of success and has excellent communications, as well as a skilled and adaptable workforce with a high quality of life.”

Moreover, critics also note the similarities in the strategies used and the actors involved when cities embark on the process of creating their supposedly unique brands. For instance, Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) are quite critical of the serial reproduction of cultural development from city to city, while Ivan Turok (2004) laments the fact that in their attempt to be distinctive, cities have a tendency to imitate other places by promoting the same initiatives and using the same strategies as those used in other cities. Holcomb (1993: 141) also criticizes the attempted rebranding of former manufacturing centers, stating that they “replicate the same images, amenities, and potentials,” while Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2007: 24) explain cities’ lack of distinctiveness by focusing on the top-down nature of their branding campaigns and
recommend that city leaders give additional attention to the city’s residents and make stronger efforts to encourage their participation in both brand creation and promotion.

As these examples show, it is clear that many authors recognize the disconnect between urban branding theory and practice; yet, much of the discussion of this disconnect is of a descriptive rather than an explanatory nature. For those who do attempt to give an explanation, the focus generally tends to be on the economic motives driving the process and the structure of the capitalist system within which all cities must operate. For instance, in seeking to explain the limited range of strategies that cities use to construct and promote their brands, this macro-structural explanation suggests that, because urban branding is first and foremost a political-economic endeavor, cities are in fact limited by the demands of the capitalist system in how they can brand themselves in a way that will still meet their political-economic goals. Douglas Kellner (1995) and Mark Gottdiener (1997) both draw on this approach to explain the similarities found in urban branding strategies, each of them focusing on the profit-motive, which forces cities to “conform to the common denominator of tastes” (Gottdiener 1997: 152), thus resulting in the “production of lowest common denominator artifacts that will not offend mass audiences and that will attract a maximum number of customers” (Kellner 1995: 16).

This explanation also helps to underscore why cities focus on a single brand that will hopefully appeal to all audiences rather than multiple (and perhaps conflicting) brands for individual target audiences.

Regarding the limited number of actors involved in the creation of an urban brand, this approach argues that operating within the complexities of the capitalist system requires expert knowledge and concentrated leadership, both of which inherently limit the
involvement of a wide range of actors. The incorporation of too many stakeholder voices is thus believed to be not only an obstacle to getting a branding campaign up and running, but also an impediment to its ultimate success. For instance, Park and Petrick’s (2006) interviews with executives in charge of branding campaigns reveal that their greatest challenge is finding ways to create a coherent brand out of the multiple interests held by various stakeholders. Similarly, Blain, Levy, and Ritchie’s (2005: 334) survey of destination marketing organization executives shows that those in charge of urban branding efforts believe that inviting citizens to participate results in “too many competing forces…to result in a politically feasible, all-inclusive logo design process” (much less a successful, full-fledged urban branding campaign).

On the one hand, this approach is indeed correct in pointing out the links between urban branding and the demands of global capitalism. For instance, it is not surprising that urban brands rely heavily on marketing strategies and tend to favor private, consumption-related spaces over public spaces, especially given that the primary motivation behind branding is sustaining economic growth. On the other hand, however, this approach cannot adequately explain why cities prefer to create new, large-scale, flagship cultural development projects instead of promoting the already-existing local arts and culture scene (which, as Markusen (2006) points out, can have positive economic benefits and can pay “artistic dividends” even without directly stimulating consumption); nor can this approach explain why cities tend to completely ignore the creation and promotion of public spaces as part of their branding campaigns, even though such spaces can add to the aesthetic value of cities (thus heightening their appeal to tourists), as well as help promote a sense of community (thus appealing to potential new residents).
Furthermore, with respect to the limited range of actors involved, this macro-structural explanation argues that the demands of capitalism encourage a top-down approach to brand creation and promotion due to the fact that any attempt at incorporating multiple voices would be politically unfeasible and would result in an incoherent and generic brand. However, even if the similarities of urban branding strategies were purely due to the structural demands of capitalism, we might still expect cities with different cultural, economic, and demographic profiles to allow for the incorporation of a range of various actors. The “demands of capitalism” would not necessarily prevent local residents or community groups from participating in the process of creating and promoting their local brand. Even if the final decisions regarding which strategies are the most appropriate for achieving local goals are made in a top-down manner, unconventional or alternative strategies could still be presented by local stakeholders only to be dismissed in the final decision-making process.

Finally, the macro-structural approach cannot account for cities’ continued engagement with the practice of urban branding. For instance, as the case studies of urban branding show, the vague brands and lack of distinction between cities that currently plague the practice are in large part due to the very fact that a top-down approach is the method of choice for organizing branding campaigns. Thus, if it is true that top-down and bottom-up approaches are both incapable of creating unique brands, then this begs the question: why are cities bothering to brand themselves at all? Moreover, in addition to the fact that it cannot explain cities’ continued use of the practice, the macro-structural approach also cannot explain why some cities are able to change course and adopt alternative strategies. As the case studies in later chapters will show, although similarities
dominate the urban branding landscape, there are some cities that have broken the mold and have adopted the types of strategies recommended in the branding literature. But if macro-structures and the demands of capitalism are indeed the determining factors in shaping what branding decisions can be made, then this theory leaves us wondering why these cities are able to go against the grain and take a different approach. After all, they operate in the same capitalist system that is supposedly causing other cities to all adopt a similar course of action. Thus, this macro-structural explanation’s inability to account for change or for cities’ continued engagement with urban branding, along with its insufficient explanation for the limited range of actors involved and strategies used in the branding process, calls for an alternative explanation that can better account for the similarities (and differences) found in the practice of urban branding.

2.5 In Search of an Alternative Explanation

One of the primary reasons the macro-structural explanation is insufficient for explaining the current landscape of urban branding is that it fails to adequately take into account an essential component of social and political life—power. Although this explanation does give power to the structure of the capitalist system, in that it is the structure that dictates the actions of individuals who operate within it, it is too deterministic and too quickly dismisses of the agency of actors who operate within the system. Moreover, the macro-structural explanation argues against citizen participation in the branding process, even though such participation is cited by branding theorists as being one of the most important factors leading to a successful branding campaign. In search of a more tenable theory, in this section I turn to a different set of literature: the urban power debate, found mainly in the fields of political science and political
sociology. In doing so, I seek to provide insight into the relationship between citizen participation in local politics and the structure of urban power relations, as well as how this relationship impacts the organization of urban branding campaigns. After briefly discussing the role of the individual citizen in local politics, I will first consider arguments on both sides of the urban power debate that attempt to explain which actors exercise power at the local level, and then argue for a synthesis of the various elite and pluralist approaches—a synthesis which I believe can be found by taking an institutional approach to the study of urban branding.

2.5.1 Local Self-Government and the Role of the Citizen

What role should the individual citizen play in local government in a democracy such as the United States, and what avenues do people have for affecting change in their communities? Today we often think of political participation as being dominated by a single activity: voting. Yet, while voter turnout in local elections is usually much lower than in national elections, “it is at the local level that forms of political participation other than voting are concentrated” (Lowndes 1995: 166, original emphasis). In fact, it is at the local level where citizens are most likely to come into contact with government officials and political institutions (Yates 1978), as well as where they are most likely to participate in the “formulation, passage and implementation of public policies” (Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992: 16). With this in mind, the role of the citizen in local government can perhaps best be conceptualized as exercising one’s right “to be involved in the processes of government—to express views, to have them listened to, to be informed of decisions and the reasons behind them, to criticize and complain” (Lowndes 1995: 165).
Of course, not all citizens will choose to fulfill their civic role. However, for those that do, the question then becomes: are citizens able to exercise their role successfully? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to the organization and distribution of power in local communities. In theory, if there is a wide distribution of power in a local setting, then citizens should have a good opportunity of fulfilling their role in local government. On the other hand, if power is concentrated in the hands of the few, then citizens will likely find it harder to have their voices heard and are less likely to have any effect on local policy decisions that affect their lives or the lives of their neighbors. For years, scholars have investigated this very issue by describing the organization of power in cities and analyzing how different distributions of power affect citizen participation in local government. These studies have resulted in an “urban power debate,” mainly between elite theorists and pluralists, although other theoretical approaches have also contributed to the discussion, as will be discussed below.

2.5.2 The Urban Power Debate: Elitism vs. Pluralism

The study of power is not limited to urban settings, but is rather a broad subfield within political sociology and political science that investigates how power operates and instantiates itself on various micro and macro levels, including within individuals, groups, organizations, states, and even global systems. Likewise, neither “elitism” nor “pluralism” constitutes a singular theory focused solely on urban politics. In fact, with respect to elitist approaches to power, Alan Harding (1995) notes that there are at least three distinct theoretical approaches that look at the role of elites within various realms of social life. For our purposes, however, I will concentrate my focus on the most recent “critical elitist” approach, which came to prominence in the 1950s with the publishing of
Floyd Hunter’s *Community Power Structure* (1953) and C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* (1956). For Mills, the dominance of elites is not a normative good or a technocratic necessity, but rather the product of a “historical trend” wherein democratic institutions “surrendered sovereignty to a mainly unelected power elite” of political, business, and military leaders (Harding 1995: 37). While Mills’ approach places the focus on the supremacy of elites in society more broadly, it was Hunter’s study of the political decision-making process in Atlanta, Georgia, that turned the focus of the elitist approach to the local level. According to Hunter’s findings, although institutions and formal associations play a role in the execution of public policy, the “formulation of policy often takes place outside these formalized groupings” and is ultimately in the hands of a business-led elite wherein “economic interests are dominant” (Hunter 1953: 82). In helping us to understand the similarities in the decision-making processes related to urban branding, the elitist approach to power focuses our attention onto a group of people “sharing sufficient amounts of a unique resource (be it social standing, monetary resources, crucial information and skills, or a strategic position in society) and possessing mutually compatible goals and perceptions [who] exercise a preemptive degree of control over the policy outcomes […] in the] political arena” (Waste 1987: 45). At the local level, according to Hunter, the group that holds this preemptive degree of control over the policymaking process is members of the business community. Thus, from an elitist perspective of urban power, the similarities in urban branding practices are not so much due to the structure of the capitalist system, but rather to the concentration of power within the hands of the most prominent players within that system: local business leaders.
However, as the case studies presented in later chapters will show, local business leaders are not always in agreement. For instance, in Las Vegas, one of the biggest struggles over the direction of the city’s branding has taken place between two distinct groups of business leaders: those in the tourism industry and those in non-tourism related industries. This disagreement between business elites suggests that power in urban settings may be more in line with the pluralist arguments of Hunter’s early critics such as Robert Dahl (1961), Nelson Polsby (1963), and Raymond Wolfinger (1973). Arguing against Hunter’s finding that Atlanta had a highly stratified power structure, these early pluralist scholars sought to show, through their own urban case study of New Haven, Connecticut, that power in American cities was more dispersed than the elite theorists claimed it to be. For instance, even though Dahl does concede that the pluralist city is stratified to some extent, in that there is, “as in other political systems, a small stratum of individuals [who are] much more highly involved in political thought, discussion, and action than the rest of the population” (1961: 90), pluralists note that when power needs to be exercised, it is “dispersed amongst [these individuals] over time and over different issues” in such a manner that one cannot categorize them as a single, coherent group of elites (Wolman and Goldsmith 1992: 13).

Unlike Hunter’s or Mills’ notion that a small group of elites is responsible for all policy decisions in the local arena, pluralists show that, depending on the issue, citizen groups ranging from churches, labor unions, civil rights organizations, general civic organizations, business groups, neighborhood groups, and a wide variety of other interest groups can all help to shape policy outcomes within communities. Thus, from a pluralist perspective, we would expect the process of urban branding to resemble something more
along the lines of the inclusive approach called for in the branding literature rather than the exclusive and top-down style of decision making that we see in the actual practice of urban branding today.

Based on what we have seen in the literature focusing on the practice of urban branding, the elite argument for the organization of power, while not ideal, seems to provide a superior explanation to the pluralist approach, at least as it relates to this specific policy area. However, before dismissing the pluralist argument altogether, we must consider the possibility that power is dispersed but that ordinary citizens are either uninformed or perhaps just don’t care that much about urban branding decisions. If this is the case, then perhaps there are avenues open for citizen participation that are simply not being utilized. If we look to the responses from our survey of community groups in each of our four cities, however, we see that this does not appear to be the case. The results of these surveys show that citizens are more often than not aware of local branding campaigns but that they are rarely asked to participate. Moreover, when seeking to voluntarily assist in the branding process, community groups are more often than not rebuffed by those organizations and individuals who are running their particular city’s branding campaign.7

Thus, the pluralist explanation for the organization of local power does not seem to work, at least in the case of the decision-making process as it relates to urban branding. Various types of community groups certainly exist in our case study cities, and members of these groups display at least a basic knowledge of their city’s branding campaign and express an interest in having a say in how their city is promoted to the outside world. However, branding decisions are still executed in a very top-down manner, which hardly
resembles the dispersed power structure argued for by pluralists. This, combined with the fact that the elitist argument is not ideal (given the fact that there is not a coherent group of business elites in each city), suggests that the organization of power at the local level—at least as it relates to urban branding—is more complicated than either of these two arguments would lead us to believe.

2.5.3 The Urban Power Debate: Competitive Elitism

While ardent pluralists and elite theorists still exist, the urban power debate has evolved in recent decades with many scholars recognizing the merits of each approach. For instance, authors like Wolman and Goldsmith (1992) and Judge (1995) note that despite their different theoretical and methodological approaches, both elitists and pluralists acknowledge that some people wield more power than others in urban politics, and thus what the two sides are really arguing over is not the existence of elites, but rather the number of elites. Arguments such as this have advanced the debate and brought about new variations of each approach, including neo-elitism, neo-pluralism, hyper-pluralism, stratified-pluralism, and bounded-pluralism. Some scholars have even attempted a synthesis of the two approaches, believing that urban politics is not purely elitist or pluralist, but should more aptly be described as “competitive elitism” (Judge 1995: 31).

Within this new perspective of competitive elitism, authors like Harvey Molotch argue that we should not be so much concerned with who holds power in local settings, but rather with how a particular overriding goal of local decision makers influences their actions and forges a consensus among otherwise dissimilar groups. According to Molotch, this powerful overriding goal is growth:
The desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites, however split they might be on other issues, and that a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among important people in a given locale—at least insofar as they have any important local goals at all.… The means of achieving this growth, of setting off this chain of phenomena, constitute the central issue for those serious people who care about their locality and who have the resources to make their caring felt as a political force. The city is, for those who count, a growth machine. (1976: 310)

Unlike the earlier elitist and pluralist approaches, which placed most of their focus on the agency of local actors, the growth machine thesis seeks to find a middle ground in the structure versus agency debate by taking into account both the agency of local actors and the larger socioeconomic structures that act to constrain this agency. According to Molotch (1976, 1988), the major constraint on the agency of elite actors who might otherwise oppose one another is the need for cities to achieve constant economic growth within the capitalist system. By rectifying some of the problems of the original elitist approach to urban power, Molotch’s growth machine thesis brings us closer to an understanding of how the urban branding decision process operates, as it allows for competition between various groups of elites over how to meet a shared overriding goal of achieving economic growth.

While this variation of the elite approach to the organization of urban power brings us closer to an explanation of why all cities seem to have such similarities in their branding approaches, this theory shares one major drawback with the macro-structural approach: it leaves little to no room for change to occur. For instance, even though the growth machine thesis acknowledges that there are many actors involved in the decision-making process for various policies, it continues to stress the elite nature of urban politics, thus leaving little chance for an inclusive, citizen-oriented approach to urban branding. However, a different strand of competitive elitism—regime theory—builds on
the notion that a growth elite exists, but also expands upon many of the central tenets of Molotch’s thesis, thus bringing us one step closer to a theory that can explain both the similarities and the differences that are seen in urban branding today.

Like the growth machine thesis, regime theory recognizes the complexity of local politics, in that even with the presence of a growth elite, there are many other individuals, organizations, and institutions that play key roles in local decision making processes. Moreover, like the growth machine thesis, regime theory draws heavily on neo-Marxist studies of urban politics, which argue that “power should be conceptualized ‘systematically,’ and that business exercises a privileged position in governmental decision making” (Judge, Stoker, and Wolman 1995: 6). In essence, regime theory argues that there is a governing alliance composed of local public officials and land-based business interests who work in tandem to promote a policy agenda that is strongly oriented toward achieving economic growth (Imboscio 1997: xv, 10).

Yet, despite its similarities to the growth machine thesis, which itself derives from and expands upon earlier elitist approaches, regime theory “takes as its starting point many of the concerns of ‘neo-pluralists’ … It is concerned about the limits to effective democratic politics … [and it] shares the ‘neo-pluralist’ concern with the fragmentation and complexity of governmental decision making” (Stoker 1995: 56-57). Regime theory explicitly complicates the urban political scene and highlights the complexity and fragmentation of local politics. In short, regime theory argues that “politics matters”—systemic power may impose constraints on individual actions, but local leaders still exercise a considerable degree of relative autonomy (Stoker 1995: 56). As it relates to
urban branding decisions, this relative autonomy of local leaders provides a possible avenue for change that is not found in the theories we have discussed up to this point.

However, even regime theory is not without its critics. For some scholars, while it may be superior to other strands of competitive elitism, regime theory is still deficient in that it cannot tell the whole story of how local leaders make policy decisions. As H.V. Savitch and John Clayton Thomas show in their conclusion to *Big City Politics in Transition* (1991), although regime theorists often speak as though there is only one type of regime that is dominant in all cities, in fact different types of regimes rule in different cities. They identify at least four different regime types: 1) pluralist regimes, which have strong political leaders but a mix of diffuse and competitive private interests; 2) elitist regimes, which have weak political leaders but a strong and cohesive group of business leaders; 3) corporatist regimes, which have strong political leaders who set their own agenda along with a unified business elite; and 4) hyperpluralist regimes, which have weak political and business leaders, neither of which is strong enough to guide the local political economy (Savitch and Thomas 1991: 248). Thus, while the competitive elitism approach brings us closer to an understanding of how urban branding decision are made, the growth machine thesis still cannot adequately account for the changes we see in certain cities due to its insistence on the power of elites, while the presence of multiple regime types shows that, although regime theory provides an avenue for change to occur, it is not able to adequately account for the similarities we see across most cities.

As this discussion of the urban power debate has shown, many useful insights can be drawn from the perspectives of elitism, pluralism, and competitive elitism that get us closer to an understanding of how the policy decision-making process works in relation
to urban branding. However, even the competitive elitism approaches have their flaws and still leave us without an adequate theory that can explain both why there are so many similarities in urban branding practices and why some cities have shown the ability to change. To address this dilemma, I argue that we must learn from the insights of the urban power debate, but we must also move beyond the way urban politics is currently studied. As Allensworth (1975) notes, decision making processes can differ depending on the structure of local government; thus, by focusing only on who makes decisions (for example, elites or a plurality of actors), we miss a key component of the policy process. To account for why decisions are made in the manner that they are, we also need to look at the institutional arrangements of how power is structured within a community. Furthermore, looking only at official policies crafted by local elected leaders may be insufficient for gaining a full understanding of some policy decisions due to “the proliferation of non-elected bodies, particularly in the local economic development field, and the continual movement of functions between levels of government” (Pickvance 1995: 271). This is especially true in the case of urban branding campaigns, where some of the key influencers of branding decisions can be individuals or groups who may not even reside in the city or take part in its local politics, but who still have an interest in how the city will ultimately be depicted through its brand. In the next section I will detail how an institutional approach to the study of urban politics can move us beyond the limitations of elitist, pluralist, and competitive elitist approaches and toward a better understanding of the decision-making processes related to urban branding.
2.5.4 The Institutional Approach

Like the competitive elitism approaches, an institutional approach acknowledges both the agency of actors as well as the structural factors that constrain this agency; however, it is also a more comprehensive approach, which takes into account exogenous factors that may influence agency but that originate outside of formal government or economic structures. Thus, in comparison to the elitist, pluralist, and competitive elitist approaches, I argue that an institutional approach to the organization of power within communities can provide a more thorough explanation for both the similarities and differences found in the practice of urban branding.

When using an institutional framework to analyze the organization and distribution of power as it relates to urban branding, it is useful to first consider the environment in which these power relations take place. This environment is often referred to as an organizational “field,” which, according to W. Richard Scott, is defined as “the existence of a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field” (1994: 207-208). With respect to the practice of urban branding, the organizational field would include actors and organizations such as local elected officials (such as mayors and city council members); local government agencies (such as convention and visitors bureaus) and bureaucrats (such as city planners); local private and/or public-private organizations (such as chambers of commerce, community development councils, or pro-growth coalitions); and local (as well as non-local) specialist agencies and their staffs (such as marketing and branding specialists). By looking at the actors and organizations that are typically associated with
urban branding, I argue that the similarities found in urban branding practices are a direct result of their taking place within this “highly structured organizational field,” which “provide[s] a context in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture, and output” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 147).

In order to explain why this homogeneity exists within the organizational field of urban branding, I draw on the notion of “institutional isomorphism” as developed by Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell in their 1983 article “The Iron Cage Revisited.” According to DiMaggio and Powell, this homogeneity is due to three separate but interrelated isomorphic forces: mimetic, coercive, and normative. Taking each of these in turn, these authors first describe mimetic isomorphism by stating that uncertainty is “a powerful force that encourages imitation…when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations” (1983: 151). Thus, from this perspective, it should come as no surprise that cities—especially those that are just embarking on a branding campaign and are uncertain as to which strategies will work best—tend to model their strategies on what they see going on in other cities. Furthermore, DiMaggio and Powell note that “the wider the population of personnel employed by, or customers served by, an organization, the stronger the pressure felt by the organization to provide the programs and services offered by other organizations. Thus, either a skilled labor force or a broad customer base may encourage mimetic isomorphism” (1983: 151). This point is especially relevant to urban branding, as cities are aiming to “serve” not only their current customers (local residents and investors) but also new customers (residents, investors, and tourists); thus,
their customer base is extremely broad, making them prime candidates to engage in mimetic isomorphism. Roger Bennett and Sharmila Savani’s cross-national study of the branding of city districts bears this point out, as “interviewees in six of the nine units reported (without prompt) that they formally monitored the progress of place rebranding activities in other cities and/or foreign countries in order to obtain ideas” (2003: 78).

Next, DiMaggio and Powell describe coercive isomorphism as those similarities that result “from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function” (1983: 150). With respect to urban branding, we can see coercive isomorphism at work in the heightened responsibilities placed on local governments coupled with the declining fiscal support from higher levels of government (Levy 2000; Hackworth 2007), which together have placed great pressure on local governments to act in a more entrepreneurial fashion in order to avoid budgetary shortfalls (Leitner 1990). Furthermore, Frank Webster’s (2001) attention to the ideological roots of particular branding practices is a prime example of the cultural expectations in society that contribute to similarities between cities in their brand outputs. According to Webster:

[the ideological environment of urban branding] presents us with a route which all cities must follow…[this route] is a neo-liberal reality to which all players must accede before they start considering policy options. That is, it is presupposed that we adjust to a market order which operates on a global scale [and] is systematic in that its principles (profitability, ability to pay, private ownership, de-regulation and the rest) are applied just about everywhere. (2001: 23)

Similarly, Chris Philo and Gerry Kearns blame the ideology of “‘New Right’ individualism” for the homogeneity to be found in urban branding practices, claiming that this ideology “in no way sanctions a tolerance let alone a celebration of diversity,
then, whether we are thinking about people, places or whatever: and the practice of selling places may even generate sameness and blandness despite its appearance of bringing geographical difference into the fold of contemporary economic and political discourse” (1993: 21).

Finally, perhaps the most important form of institutional isomorphism as it relates to urban branding is normative isomorphism, which refers to the professionalization of actors within the organizational field. As DiMaggio and Powell note, “while various kinds of professionals within an organization may differ from one another, they exhibit much similarity to their professional counterparts in other organizations” (1983: 152), due in part to their level and particular type of formal education, as well as to their participation in professional networks. This type of isomorphism is particularly useful for understanding why the range of actors within the organizational field of urban branding is so narrow and why “outsiders,” such as local residents and community groups, are not invited to participate in the creation or promotion of their city’s urban brand. As DiMaggio and Powell point out, this homogeneity of actors is achieved and perpetuated through the filtering of personnel, which “occurs through the hiring of individuals from firms within the same industry; through the recruitment of fast-track staff from a narrow range of training institutions; through common promotion practices, such as always hiring top executives from financial or legal departments; and from skill-level requirements for particular jobs” (1983: 152).

Thinking back to our discussion of elitist versus pluralist approaches to the study of power, the use of normative institutional isomorphism to explain the narrow range of actors allowed to participate in the urban branding process shares much in common with
earlier elitist approaches. Recognizing the presence of normative institutional isomorphism helps us to understand how a practice like urban branding can be initiated and carried out by such a small group of actors, which, as noted above, typically includes only government personnel, local business leaders, and members of specialist agencies, such as marketing firms. The filtering of personnel associated with urban branding is due in large part to the elite nature of the actors within the organizational field. For instance, professional marketers and branding experts only attain their positions after many years of educational training, while chambers of commerce, community development councils, and pro-growth coalitions are largely made up of members from the local business community (Kleniewski 1984). Regarding local government agencies and officials, Molotch notes that, because of its need to function as a growth machine, the city “draws a special sort of person into its politics,” wherein “those who come to the forefront of local government (and those to whom they are directly responsive)…are not statistically representative of the local population as a whole, nor even representative of the social classes which produce them” (1976: 317-18). According to Molotch, these growth elites are “hegemonic” within the local realm, and their dominance can be felt “across a wide array of political, economic, and cultural institutions” (1988: 42)—including, as argued here, within the organizational field of urban branding.

While institutional approaches have been used by numerous authors to help explain the “homogeneity in structure, culture, and output” that is found in various realms of the social world, not all institutional approaches focus on these three isomorphic forces in particular. For instance, John Boli-Bennett and John Meyer (1978, 1980) use an institutional approach in arguing that the expanding institutional structure of
differentiated childhood in national constitutions diffuses around the world precisely as ideology, rather than as a direct reflection of social organization, and that the rapidity of this diffusion arises from the increasing integration of the world stratification system and the relative homogeneity of its standards of value. Similarly, Meyer, along with David Kamens and Aaron Benavot (1992), and again with Francisco Ramirez and Yasemin Soysal (1992), uses an institutional approach to argue against the mainstream claim that the expansion of schooling is a solution to societal-level problems, arguing instead that mass schooling is a product of the Western- (and subsequently the world-) model of the organization of sovereignty (the modern state) and the organization of society as composed of individuals (the modern nation). Various other authors have used institutional approaches to help explain the “ubiquitous rise of economists” in national governments (Markoff and Montecinos 1993), the similarities in the design and implementation of peacekeeping operations (Paris 2003), the rapid diffusion of science as a social authority and general cultural model (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, and Schofer 2003), and the formation of a world environmental regime (Meyer, Frank, Hironaka, Schofer, and Tuma 1997; Frank 1999; Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000; Schofer and Hironaka 2005).

Examples of scholars who do explicitly make use of mimetic, coercive, and normative forms of institutional isomorphism include Sarah Babb (2003, 2007), who in her work detailing the “organizational slippage” of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) explains the organization’s deviation from its embedded liberal roots and subsequent adoption of the neoliberal paradigm by drawing on three factors: organizational models or templates available in the Fund’s policy environment (mimetic
isomorphism), coercive pressure emanating from more powerful interests and organizations (coercive isomorphism), and the norms and values of its members (normative isomorphism). In a similar manner, Robin Broad (2006) uses these three forms of institutional isomorphism to help explain the “art of paradigm maintenance” within the World Bank’s Development Economics Vice-Presidency, wherein genuine debate and alternative hypotheses regarding trade and globalization issues are undermined in favor of the confirmation of a priori neoliberal hypotheses that favor trade integration.

2.5.5 Organizational Change

But what about our need to explain variation when it does occur? While the concept of institutional isomorphism provides us with the best explanation for why most urban branding practices are so similar, I argue that it is superior to elitist, pluralist, and competitive elitist approaches because it can also account for variation. This may seem an odd claim to make at first, given the widespread criticism of institutional theory for its inability to account for change due to its strict focus on explaining “the persistence and the homogeneity of phenomena” (Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott 2002: 45; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1991). However, since the early 1990s, institutionalist scholars have turned their focus toward linking the “distinctive power of institutional arguments,” which rest “on their explicit recognition of conformity rooted in the taken-for-granted aspects of social practices,” with various mechanisms that drive organizational change (see, for instance, Fligstein 1991; Clemens and Cook 1999; and Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott 2002). In so doing, scholars have pointed to factors such as exogenous shocks and various learning and diffusion processes that link the legitimation and social reproduction
aspects of institutionalism with instances of organizational change. Thus, I argue that by looking closely at the mechanisms that cause institutional isomorphism, we can not only explain homogeneity across organizations, but these same mechanisms also provide an avenue for explaining organizational change as well. This is due to the fact that, as Powell explains, “each form of constraint is, in varying ways, also a form of enablement” (1991: 194). Thus, while mimetic, coercive, and normative pressures can cause and reinforce institutionalization, these same pressures can also be used to break isomorphic tendencies and foster organizational change.

The fact that the same mechanism can be both a constraint on an organization or a form of enablement also helps to explain an apparent contradiction in the organizational change literature, with some authors arguing that external shocks and coercive pressures lead to a tightening of control within an organization (thus reinforcing institutionalization) (Pfeffer 1981: 323-24), while others argue that organizational change is largely externally induced (Zald and Berger 1978; Kahn 1982; Jepperson 1991; Fligstein 1991; Davis, McAdam, Scott, and Zald 2005). From this point of view, coercive forces, such as cultural pressures, governmental coercion, and demands emanating from social movements, may initially cause organizations to insulate and buffer themselves from these external pressures; however, there does appear to be a tipping point at which these pressures become so great that the organization, for its own self-preservation, must change. With regard to mimetic forces, the uncertainly regarding how best to accomplish organizational goals does indeed cause organizations to model themselves on other organizations. However, once one organization breaks the mold and forges a different path, other organizations may be just as likely to imitate this alternative approach as they
are to adopt the standard strategies and practices already in place in other similar organizations. Finally, the normative pressures within an organizational field that promote isomorphism can be subject to disruption if “the boundaries of organizational fields are murky or penetrated by members of other fields” (Powell 1991: 195). Thus, while the professionalization of actors within an organizational field may be a constraint on change, the incorporation of new actors from the periphery of the field or from outside sources can lead to innovative new approaches and strategies for accomplishing organizational goals.

2.6 Conclusion

In the chapters that follow, I will test the usefulness of this institutional approach for explaining the similarities found within the practice of urban branding, as well as for explaining why organizational change has occurred in certain instances. By looking at the history of urban branding in Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit, I will argue that the similarities found in the branding practices of these cities are a direct result of the mimetic, coercive, and normative pressures felt within the organizational field of urban branding. However, while these cities adopted similar strategies for the majority of their branding histories, in recent years there have been citizen challenges to official branding efforts in Houston and Detroit that have been able to break these isomorphic bonds. An examination of these citizen efforts to take urban branding into their own hands will reveal how these counter campaigns ultimately influenced and changed the direction of official urban branding efforts and will also explain why these counter campaigns emerged in Houston and Detroit but not in Las Vegas or Orlando.
2.7 Notes

1 Exact figures showing the total revenues spent on urban branding worldwide or even within the United States could not be located. However, one can get a sense of the exorbitant amount of money spent on branding by looking at some examples from our case study cities. For instance, Detroit spent $9 million on its highly successful 2011 “Born of Fire” television ad featuring local rapper Eminem, while its latest campaign, “Detroit: America’s Great Comeback City,” has an advertising budget of $1.6 million. Dwarfing these numbers are the $5 million that Houston budgeted in 1997 to promote its then-brand “Houston: Expect the Unexpected,” the $30 million that Opportunity Houston pledged to raise in 2006 for a 10-year advertising campaign aimed at convincing businesses to relocate to the Houston area, or the more than $75 million that the city of Houston has spent advertising itself over the past 40 years. Yet, even Houston’s numbers are modest compared to the $68 million that Orlando budgeted in 2006 for a two-year campaign to advertise its newest slogan, “Orlando: Built for Families, Made for Memories.” However, none of these cities comes close to matching Las Vegas, which spends more money advertising itself than any other city in the world. For instance, the advertising budget for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) has averaged almost $86 million annually over the past decade (2005 to 2014), and since the release of its famous slogan “What Happens Here, Stays Here” in 2003, the LVCVA has spent nearly $1 billion promoting the city’s brand.


4 Creative class strategies seek to shape a city’s brand around the provision of quality of life and recreational amenities in order to appeal to members of the “creative class.” For more on the creative class approach to urban branding, see Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007).

5 American cities use culture to create their brands as well; however, Europe has a longer and more developed tradition of “cultural branding,” and the practices used in certain European cities have been used as models throughout Europe and in other regions of the world. Such modeling is often referred to as “the Bilbao effect,” which, as discussed above, is a reference to the branding of Bilbao, Spain as a “European cultural capital” through the construction of its famed Guggenheim Museum, designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry.

6 Harding’s other two theoretical approaches looking at the role of elites are the technocratic approach of Max Weber (1958) and the normative approach, which dates back at least as far as Plato (1878), but is now most often associated with early-modern elite theorists of the Italian school, such as Gaetano Mosca (1939 [1896]), Robert Michels (1958 [1915]), and Vilfredo Pareto (1966).

7 See chapter 4 for a detailed breakdown of these survey results.
CHAPTER 3

BRANDING SIMILARITIES IN FOUR AMERICAN CITIES

All these beauties will already be familiar to the visitor, who has seen them also in other cities.

-- Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities (1974: 7)

3.1 Introduction

This project is based on the premise that urban branding has a major flaw: it fails in its primary goal of differentiating cities from one another. The literature on urban branding supports this supposition and points to a particularly narrow range of branding strategies adopted across cities as the reason for this lack of differentiation. In order to better understand why cities utilize such a narrow range of branding strategies, this chapter will look in detail at the branding practices of four American cities: Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit. I begin the chapter by looking at several factors that should, theoretically, influence the types of branding strategies used in a particular city. I will then discuss my selection of cases, examine each case study city in relation to the factors expected to determine urban branding strategies, and argue that if variation in branding strategies across cities does exist, we should witness it in this set of cities. Next, I will clarify exactly what I mean by a branding “strategy” and will break down the specific components of the practice of urban branding that will be analyzed in the remainder of the chapter. From here I will look at these specific components of branding in each case study.
city and will show that Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit all follow the same narrow set of branding strategies that is used in countless other cities. Through an examination of the branding practices of these four cities, this chapter will also show how each one provides a concrete example of one of the many problems that can plague cities when they restrict themselves to utilizing such a narrow set of branding strategies.

3.2 Factors that Should Lead to the Adoption of Different Branding Strategies

As we saw in the first two chapters, current literature suggests that cities engage with the practice of urban branding to differentiate themselves from competing cities in order to attract low-cost residents, investors, and tourists, all as part of an overall effort to achieve and sustain economic growth. However, there is not much theorizing in this literature regarding the specificities of exactly why or how cities choose to engage the practice of urban branding. In this section, I address this question by looking at what I call the “push” factors that are responsible for motivating city leaders to initiate an urban branding campaign. Next, I will explore the “pull” factors that, once a campaign is started, can influence the direction of the campaign and the specific branding strategies that are used. Taken together, I argue that different cities should adopt different sets of branding strategies based on the specific goals (or push factors) of each campaign and the specific pressures (or pull factors) placed on decision makers by individuals or groups who have a stake in how their city is ultimately branded.

3.2.1 Push Factors

The first set of factors that can influence a city’s chosen branding strategies are those that push it to engage in the practice of urban branding in the first place. These
factors relate to the overall goals city leaders have for what they hope branding will help them accomplish. Because urban branding at its core is about creating and projecting a certain type of image, we can begin by looking at how a city’s current image affects its decision to engage the process of urban branding. While the end goal of branding may be to help a city achieve economic growth, there are various ways this can be achieved. For instance, branding can be used to help repair a city’s bad reputation by redefining or transforming its current image. Alternatively, branding can also be used to enhance and reinforce a city’s positive popular image. Thus, the current state of a city’s image not only pushes local leaders to engage the practice of urban branding, but these different reasons for utilizing the practice I argue are also factors that influence the specific set of branding strategies that will be used to achieve local goals. Thus, a city that is associated with urban decay, high crime, and rampant poverty might adopt one set of branding strategies in order to redefine or transform its negative image, while a city known for its rapid population growth and booming economy might engage a completely different set of strategies in order to enhance and reinforce its positive image. Additionally, other unique sets of strategies might be adopted by cities that choose to use branding as a way to recapture an image that used to be associated with it, or by those that partake in urban branding to create a positive image if there is not already a clear or well-defined image already in place.

A city’s reason for utilizing branding can be expected to affect its branding strategies in two specific ways. First, cities that already have a positive image—be it one they are seeking to “enhance/reinforce” or one they are attempting to “recapture”—might be expected to place more emphasis on simply promoting this existing image rather than
engaging in various brand-creation strategies. On the other hand, cities that are seeking to “redefine/transform” their image or cities that are attempting to “create” a new image may be more likely to engage in brand-creation strategies, which could include the actual physical construction of new infrastructure and cultural artifacts. The other way that branding strategies can be expected to differ between these types of cities is related to who is involved in the branding process. Cities with a positive image already in place most likely do not want to jeopardize that image and thus may take a cautious, top-down approach, putting their trust in the “expertise” of branding professionals to promote their image. On the other hand, cities looking to change their image or create an entirely new image have, in a sense, nothing to lose, and thus may prove to be open to a more bottom-up approach that encourages citizen participation in the brand decision-making process.

Another push factor related to a city’s reason for branding that could lead it to adopt a unique set of branding strategies is the target audience for its brand. While all cities might ideally want to attract low-cost residents, investors, and tourists, in reality, certain cities may choose to focus on only one or two of these target groups. This being the case, it makes intuitive sense that although their end goal might be the same—economic growth—cities aiming to attract different target groups may also adopt different strategies to accomplish their goals. Moreover, even within groups of cities that may be utilizing branding for the same reason, if these cities have different target audiences for their brand, then they can be expected to adopt different branding strategies as well. For instance, even if two cities are both seeking to redefine or transform their current image, if one of them places its sole emphasis on attracting tourists, it may be more likely to pursue entrepreneurial, market-driven branding strategies than its
counterpart, which may place its focus on attracting residents, thus pursuing more
creative-class (i.e. quality of life-oriented) or progressive (i.e. grassroots, community-
oriented) branding strategies. Meanwhile, another city that sets its sights on attracting all
three target groups may be more apt to experiment with all of these different branding
strategies.¹

3.2.2 Pull Factors

Once a city embarks on an urban branding campaign, the direction of that
campaign can be influenced or pulled in different directions by various individuals and/or
groups who have a vested interest in how their city is promoted to the outside world. This
being the case, the pressures placed on local decision makers by these various
stakeholders act as pull factors that help to shape the number and type of branding
strategies used in any particular branding campaign. Although there are a multitude of
pull factors that could affect a city’s chosen set of branding strategies, the factors
considered here are those that I believe are most likely to have a measurable influence on
which branding strategies are ultimately used in a branding campaign. These include: the
strength of a city’s tourism industry relative to other local industries; the relative strength
of labor unions within a community; the religiosity of a community; the rate of in-
migration into a city; the average level of education attained by local residents; median
family income; and the prevalence of community organizations in a city.

Taking a look at each of these factors in turn, we see that in cities whose local
economies are dependent on the tourism industry,² urban branding is seen as a
particularly important and necessary tool for promoting a unique image that will stick in
the minds of individuals, thus encouraging past tourists to want to return and luring
potential tourists to an exciting new destination. This, of course, does not mean that urban branding is unimportant for cities that are not reliant on the tourism industry. However, the unique importance of urban branding for helping to maintain the strength of the tourism industry in these tourism-oriented cities does mean that we might expect the particular branding strategies used in these cities to differ from the strategies used in cities that are less tourism-dependent.

To see why this is the case, we can think back to the discussion in chapter 2 about what causes isomorphism to occur in an organizational field. Because of their need to maintain a strong tourism industry, coercive and mimetic isomorphic forces are likely to be strong in cities that are dependent on tourism. These cities are likely to be under great pressure from actors within the local tourism industry to adopt a certain accepted set of branding strategies, and they may also be more likely to look to other tourism-dependent cities for examples of successful branding. This, again, does not mean that non-tourism-dependent cities do not face coercive pressures from actors within their own dominant local industries. However, the connection between urban branding and, say, the auto industry in Detroit or the oil and gas industry in Houston, is not expected to be as strong as the link between urban branding and the tourism industry in cities like Las Vegas or Orlando. While coercive and even mimetic pressures are bound to exist in non-tourism-dependent cities, the relatively weak nature of these pressures as they relate to choosing particular urban branding strategies means that these cities can be thought of as having more freedom to experiment, to innovate, and to take risks in their branding when compared to tourism-dependent cities.
Groups with specific political, social, or cultural interests within a community may also influence the particular branding strategies used in a branding campaign. For instance, cities with a strong labor union presence may be able to counteract the push by the business community for the adoption of entrepreneurial, market-driven branding strategies and instead may influence brand decision makers to adopt more progressive, community-oriented branding strategies. A similar effect may be felt in cities that are relatively more religious than other municipalities. For instance, the relative religiosity of different communities may impact what kinds of branding strategies are used to attract similar target audiences. Thus, a more religious community may seek to attract residents by focusing on quality-of-life factors, while a less religious community may reach out to potential new residents by leaning more heavily on consumer-oriented aspects of its local culture.

Finally, various factors related to levels of civicness or the level of political activity within a community can also impact a city’s chosen branding strategies. One such factor is the rate of in-migration to a city. Previous studies (Griswold and Wright 2004) have shown that transplants to a city, rather than diluting the local culture or becoming less politically active, actually are more apt to learn about and foster local culture and identity. Using the overall rate of population change in a city as a rough estimate of in-migration, we can therefore expect residents in cities with relatively higher population growth rates to place more pressure on local leaders to adopt quality-of-life and community-oriented branding strategies. Two other factors that could lead to the adoption of more community-based branding strategies are median family income and levels of educational attainment. The long-established link between socioeconomic status
and political participation allows us to predict that residents in cities with relatively higher scores on these two factors may be more politically active and community-minded and thus more likely to pressure local decision makers to adopt these types of strategies. Finally, by using the relative prevalence of community organizations in a city as a proxy for the level of civicness in a community, we can also predict that cities with more community groups per 100,000 members of the population will be more likely to adopt creative class and progressive strategies than their less-civically-minded counterparts.

To better understand how these pull factors might actually shape the adoption of particular branding strategies, we can imagine a couple of hypothetical scenarios. For instance, members of the local business community in one city may pressure local decision makers to adopt branding strategies that will help strengthen a dominant local industry, while business leaders in another community may feel that a single industry is carrying too much of the burden of maintaining the strength of the local economy, and therefore may pressure local decision makers to adopt branding strategies that will help promote economic diversification. At the same time, local decision makers may also be feeling pressure from community groups to utilize certain particular branding strategies. For example, one city may have a wealth of civically-minded and politically-active residents who push for citizen involvement in the branding process and the promotion of a brand that highlights unique attributes of the local community and its culture. On the other hand, another city may have a population that is more transient, that is less politically engaged, and that puts little to no pressure on local decision makers to brand their city in any particular way. Given that these pressures from different actors and interest groups can influence the range and types of branding strategies utilized in a
particular city—even in cases where the initial push factors that motivated cities to engage the practice of urban branding are the same—these pull factors should give us added confidence that, with an appropriate selection of cases, we should be able to locate variation in the branding strategies of different cities, if any variation does indeed exist.

3.3 Case Selection and Expectations for Branding Strategies

When choosing which cities to focus on for the case studies that follow, it was important to take into account the various push and pull factors discussed above in order to ensure that the set of cities chosen provided a high probability for demonstrating variation in the branding strategies used by different cities. This way, if our chosen cities are found to indeed resemble one another in terms of their preferred branding strategies, then we can be fairly certain that these same branding strategies would also be found if we were to look at cities that had similar push and pull factors. The universe of cities from which our case studies were chosen included all metropolitan areas in the United States with a population of at least a million people. Because the organizational dynamics of social and political life can vary greatly between small towns and large cities, I limited my selection of cases to large metropolitan areas. Moreover, although a cross-national study would undoubtedly provide many useful insights into the various idiosyncrasies of urban branding that may cross national borders or be determined by factors at the national level, limiting the sample of cases to cities within the United States also has its benefits. For instance, a single-nation study holds constant any national-level factors, thus allowing one to better understand how more localized actors and processes determine the shape of urban branding. Finally, by selecting well-known, high profile cities such as Las
Vegas, Orlando, Detroit, and Houston, it is hoped that readers will find the study to be not only useful, but intrinsically interesting as well.

Using the various push and pull factors discussed in the previous section, we can begin to investigate our case study cities and formulate some hypotheses for what we might expect the range of branding strategies to look like in each city. Starting with the push factor of how a city’s current image affects its decision to utilize urban branding, we can see that each case study city initially engaged urban branding for different reasons. Orlando and Las Vegas both have very positive popular images, even if the latter city’s does bring with it a bit of controversy from time to time. Both cities are associated with the dominant themes of fantasy and escapism: Orlando for the entire family, Las Vegas just for the adults. When thinking of Orlando, one thinks about escaping from work with the kids; when thinking of Las Vegas, one thinks about escaping from work and the kids. For Orlando, the decision to use urban branding was simply a way to “enhance/reinforce” this already strong, family-friendly image. For Las Vegas, however, the decision to utilize urban branding came after the failure of its attempt to also present itself as a family-friendly destination. When local hotel/casinos failed in their attempt to appeal to families during the 1990s, Las Vegas utilized urban branding starting in the early 2000s to “recapture” its adult-oriented, “Sin City” image that had worked so well for it in the past. At the opposite end of the spectrum from Orlando and Las Vegas is Detroit—a city that has engaged urban branding in order to “redefine/transform” its current image. Aside from being known as the home to the American auto industry, the popular image of Detroit is one of poverty, crime, racial tension, and urban decay (Neill 1995). This image is perpetuated by the news media, which only seems to shine the spotlight on Detroit in
its darkest moments, such as when the federal government was called on to bail out the “Big 3” American auto makers in 2008, when the city itself filed for bankruptcy protection in 2013, or when the city notoriously claims its annual spot as one of America’s most dangerous cities. This negative image is also reinforced by the entertainment industry, which often portrays Detroit in television shows and movies as a downtrodden, dirty, crime-ridden city. Because of this sullied image, Detroit in a sense has nothing to lose by taking some risks in its branding, and thus we might expect Detroit to adopt some unconventional strategies, to utilize a wider range of brand-creation and brand-promotion strategies, and to be open to engaging the community in its attempt to revitalize its image. On the other hand, because of their aversion to tarnishing their already positive popular images, we might expect Orlando and Las Vegas to each take a more conservative approach of sticking to a smaller set of brand-promotion strategies that are implemented by branding or marketing professionals.

And then there is Houston. Although it is the fourth largest city in America, the city does not have much in the way of a popular image—either positive or negative. The famous phrase “Houston, we have a problem” is appropriate for the current state of Houston’s image: it doesn’t really have one, and that is a problem. If the ultimate goal is to attract people to your city, having no image means you are virtually invisible to outsiders, which is almost as bad as having a negative image to overcome. Thus, Houston has used urban branding to try to “create” an image of itself that will connect with outsiders and make the city appealing to those who might otherwise overlook it. This means that, with regard to its branding strategies, we might expect Houston to fall somewhere in between Detroit on the one hand and Orlando and Las Vegas on the other:
because it has no positive image to uphold, Houston has less to lose than Orlando or Las Vegas if brand decision makers there choose to adopt some unconventional branding strategies and involve the community in the branding process, but they may also not be quite as open to alternative strategies or community involvement as their counterparts in Detroit, for they don’t want to risk a potential branding disaster that could create a negative image where one did not previously exist.

If we next look at the target audiences that each city is looking to attract, we see that while all of our cities want to attract all target groups, some cities place more emphasis on some groups than they place on others. Starting with Las Vegas, this city places a high degree of emphasis on attracting tourists and investors, as it focuses its brand on appealing to tourists to sustain its dominant tourism industry but also hopes to appeal to new investors that might be able to help diversify its local economy. Attracting new residents is not a major priority for the city, which has been (and continues to be, despite the recent Great Recession from 2007-2009) one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Orlando is also a rapidly growing city with little need to attract new residents, and, like Las Vegas, it also places a high priority on attracting tourists to sustain its dominant tourism industry. However, its focus on attracting new investment is somewhat less of a priority than in Las Vegas where there is a more vocal call to diversify the local economy.

Houston, with its highly diversified and strong economy, its growing population, and its low dependence on tourism, wants to appeal to all audiences, but does not necessarily place a special emphasis on attracting any one particular target group. On the other hand, Detroit also equally emphasizes all three groups, but in comparison to
Houston, exhibits a greater sense of urgency that its brand will appeal to low-cost residents, investors, and tourists alike. Detroit is a shrinking city with a declining dominant industry and thus sees branding as an important way to change its image in the minds of potential new residents and investors. Moreover, while the city is not a major tourist destination, in interviews local leaders expressed that they still place a high priority on attracting tourists, for they feel that if they can just get people to come to Detroit and see what it has to offer, they can begin to overcome the negative stereotypes that dominate the current image of their city.

Moving on to the pull factors, table 3.1 displays how each city ranks on the various actors and interests who may seek to influence the types of branding strategies chosen by local decision makers. It should be noted here that the presence of any one particular pull factor merely represents the likelihood that an actor or group will exert pressure on local decision makers to adopt particular branding strategies. However, it does not guarantee that a particular group will exert such pressure, nor does it guarantee that such pressures will be effective in influencing the ultimate decisions made with regard to which branding strategies are ultimately used. For instance, Las Vegas and Detroit both have relatively high rates of unionization, which would suggest that there would be pressure exerted on local leaders to adopt more community-oriented branding strategies in each city. However, the tourism industry, which advocates for more market-driven branding strategies, is much stronger in Las Vegas than it is in Detroit, and thus the pressure supplied by unions may be effective in Detroit but be cancelled out by the pressure exerted by the tourism industry in Las Vegas.
TABLE 3.1
PULL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EACH CASE STUDY CITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative strength of tourism industry</th>
<th>Las Vegas</th>
<th>Orlando</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
<th>Houston</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relative strength of tourism industry</td>
<td>Dominant tourism industry</td>
<td>Dominant tourism industry</td>
<td>Weak tourism industry</td>
<td>Weak tourism industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unionization rate&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious adherence rate&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of population change (2000-2010)&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>-25.0%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment (% with BA or higher)&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median family income&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>$57,471</td>
<td>$40,143</td>
<td>$33,640</td>
<td>$40,172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organizations per 100,000 residents&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Hirsch and Macpherson 2012; <sup>2</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com); <sup>3</sup> U.S. Census (www.census.gov); <sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2007; <sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2007; <sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia of Associations 2010.

Nevertheless, we can make some predictions based on these pull factors about what types of pressures we might expect local decision makers to face when deciding on particular branding strategies. First, Las Vegas and Orlando should face significant pressure from their local tourism industries to adopt strategies that will continue to uphold and reinforce their industry as the dominant economic force in each community. This pressure should serve to limit the range of strategies adopted to those that are market-driven and consumer-oriented. At the same time, if we rank each city from 1-4 on the various factors related to the civinerness and political activism of its citizens, Orlando ranks as having the most civically-minded and politically active residents, while Las Vegans rank second, Houstonians third, and Detroiters fourth. Based on these factors
(rate of population change, educational attainment, median family income, and the prevalence of community organizations), we should expect citizens in Orlando and Las Vegas to place the greatest pressure on local leaders to adopt quality-of-life and community-oriented branding strategies, while leaders in Houston and Detroit should face less pressure to do the same. Finally, Las Vegas and Detroit also have high unionization rates in comparison to Orlando and Houston, while Detroit and Houston have populations that are more religiously-adherent than are those in Las Vegas and Orlando. Thus, leaders in Detroit are likely to face pressure from both unions and religious groups, Las Vegas and Houston should face pressure from only one of these groups, and Orlando should face little pressure from either.

When we look at the push and pull factors taken together, we see that each of these cities faces an interesting mix of potential pressures that could have the effect of influencing local leaders to adopt a wide range of unique and different branding strategies. The pull factors associated with the goals and target audiences for Las Vegas and Orlando should serve to limit the range of strategies adopted, as should the pressure exerted by each city’s dominant tourism industry. However, Las Vegas and Orlando are also more likely than Houston or Detroit to face citizen pressure to adopt more community-oriented branding strategies. These competing pressures thus open up a wide range of potential branding strategies to choose from, and an attempt by local leaders to satisfy the demands of these various stakeholders should result in the utilization of a range of market-driven, quality-of-life, and community-oriented branding strategies.

On the other hand, the push factors in Houston and Detroit suggested that each of these cities would be more open to utilizing a diverse range of strategies from the start, as
they are each seeking to reach the widest range of target audiences and as both have a
great deal of creative freedom in their individual attempts to transform or create their
image. The pull factors in each of these cities suggest that they will face less community
pressure to adopt community-oriented branding strategies; however, leaders in these
cities will also not face the same pressures as their counterparts in Las Vegas or Orlando
to limit their range of strategies, as they do not have a dominant tourism industry
pressuring them to only pursue branding strategies that are purely market-driven. Thus,
while the push and pull factors may have opposite effects in Detroit and Houston than
they are expected to have in Las Vegas and Orlando, all four cities have the potential to
be cities where a wide and diverse range of branding strategies are adopted. Thus, if any
variation in branding practices does exist between cities, we should have a very good
chance of witnessing it in this selection of cities.

3.4 Analyzing the Branding Strategies of the Case Study Cities

So far we have discussed the practice of urban branding in terms of a range of
strategies and different types of strategies. But how exactly do we go about analyzing the
strategies that cities use? And perhaps more importantly, what exactly do we mean when
we say cities are using similar or different strategies? On the one hand, defining a city’s
brand, discovering how it is created, and locating who is responsible for its
implementation are difficult tasks, given that there are a multitude of decisions made and
actions taken every day by city leaders, local citizens, and even outsiders that have an
effect on a city’s image. For instance, outsiders—such as the mass media and the
entertainment industry—can affect how a city is perceived through how they choose to
portray it in news reports, on television, and in film. Citizens of a city also contribute to
their city’s image in various ways. A city’s crime rate, the level of community involvement in local neighborhoods, and the perceived friendliness of a city all affect how outsiders view the city, and each of these factors is largely determined by the everyday decisions made by local citizens.

While all of these actions affect the image of a city, they are not necessarily branding decisions. If we remember from chapter 1, the phenomenon of urban branding came about as a way for city leaders to help generate revenue and boost their local economy by highlighting various characteristics of their city that would prove attractive to low-cost residents, investors, and tourists. With this in mind, we can define a branding decision as a *deliberate action on the part of city leaders, or those working with or on behalf of city leaders, to shape a city’s image in a specific way that will be attractive to specific target groups*. Thus, the examples of decisions made by outsiders and by local residents given above, while they do affect a city’s image, should not be considered branding decisions. Differentiating these types of actions from the deliberate actions meant to shape a city’s image is largely a matter of intent. For instance, a city council that has a year-end budget surplus may choose to lower taxes for the following year, but this simple budgetary decision would not necessarily be characterized as a branding strategy. However, a city council that deliberately creates and promotes tax abatements or special tax rates meant to encourage new investment can be seen as intentionally taking a specific action meant to attract a specific target group, and thus this action would be categorized as a branding strategy. Similarly, the decision to approve a building permit for a new shopping center would not be considered a branding strategy, but rezoning a particular parcel of land to allow for the construction of a new stadium, or a partnership
between local government and a developer to build a new themed shopping and entertainment district, would both be seen as strategies aimed at enhancing the city’s brand and image.

Determining intent with regard to the many decisions that are made each day by elected officials, government bureaucrats, or their partner agencies and organizations is not a simple task. In some instances it is easy to determine whether a particular decision should be categorized as a branding strategy, such as when a convention and visitors bureau releases a print ad or television commercial that promotes the city using an official slogan. Other actions, however, are less obvious, and thus I adopt a conservative approach and only consider decisions to be branding strategies if some sort of verification can be provided that the action was indeed intended to contribute to the city’s brand and enhance its overall image. In such instances, verification was made either through verbal confirmation in personal interviews or through public statements where public officials or their partner agencies or organizations acknowledged the intent of a specific action.

In the case studies that follow, I analyze the branding strategies of each particular city by asking three questions based on the two different aspects of the branding process: brand creation and brand promotion. The three questions are:

1) “what” is created? / “what” is promoted?

2) “how” is the brand created? / “how” is the brand promoted?

3) “who” is creating the brand? / “who” is promoting the brand?

At first glance it may seem counterintuitive to ask these questions about both aspects of the branding process. For instance, one would assume that if something is created for the brand then it would also be promoted, but as we will see, this is not always the case.
Parsing these questions out for each aspect of the branding process will allow us to better understand why such discrepancies exist within a particular city’s branding efforts. In the sections that follow, I will ask each of these questions in relation to the branding practices of Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit and will show that, despite our expectations that we should witness a range of different branding strategies in each city, in fact, each of these cities follows a fairly standard formula and utilizes a comparatively narrow range of brand-creation and brand-promotion strategies.

3.4.1 Las Vegas

When talking to anyone involved with the practice of urban branding, one quickly realizes that Las Vegas is held up as the gold standard of how a successful branding campaign should take place. Unlike many cities that are in search of an identity, Las Vegas has long been known as the city of sin—a place where adults can escape to indulge in activities they would not normally engage in during their everyday lives. Despite this well-defined image, Las Vegas actually only began actively branding itself in the year 2000. Up through the 1980s, the “Sin City” image of Las Vegas basically sold itself. The local chamber of commerce did engage in some promotion of the city as early as 1944, but for the most part Las Vegas was simply known as the gaming and “entertainment capital of the world.” However, by the 1990s, circumstances had changed, and Las Vegas found itself for the first time in need of an image change in order to maintain its spot as the top tourist destination in the United States.

In 1988, the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act meant that Las Vegas, Reno, and Atlantic City no longer held a monopoly on being the only legitimate destinations for gambling in the United States. As Indian casinos grew in popularity in the
early 1990s, Las Vegas found itself reinventing itself as a family-friendly destination. A number of large, themed resorts opened up on the Strip in the 1990s, including the Luxor, Excalibur, Treasure Island, New York New York, Monte Carlo, and the MGM Grand. Interestingly, during this “family friendly” phase, promotion of the new image was done largely by the resorts themselves, along with the national media, which, according to one interviewee, was “fascinated” with how the city was reinventing itself and, through its news coverage, helped the new image take off. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA)—the organization that leads the city’s branding campaign today—never actively promoted the city as a family-friendly destination.

Although the family-friendly image did not hurt tourist numbers, it did not help them either. In fact, it had no net effect on the number of tourists in the under-21 demographic. This, combined with the fact that by the end of the 1990s gambling was legal in 48 of the 50 states, caused the LVCVA in 1999 to commission R&R Partners, a local advertising firm, to conduct market research to “discover” the brand of Las Vegas. The results of this research, which was conducted in major cities across the country, including Los Angeles, Phoenix, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, and New York, as well as internationally in Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and the United Kingdom, showed that what people associated with Las Vegas was more than gambling and entertainment—the city was, for them, really about freedom. According to one interviewee from R&R, “freedom was the key, especially adult freedom. The city is seen as an empowerer—an enabler for people to be whatever they want to be. It is not the hardware (the casinos, etc.), but the experience that Las Vegas offers; the experience of being free from life in the city where they live.”
Based on these findings, in the fall of 2000 R&R and the LVCVA launched their first joint branding campaign—“freedom party”—aimed at, in a sense, bringing the city’s image back to its roots. The campaign, which ran from the fall of 2000 through the November 2001 special election, featured a fictional electoral candidate—Brock Wilder—and his “Vegas Freedom Party,” which drove home the message that “Las Vegas represents the one thing that people need and desire most in life: total, unadulterated and unabashed freedom” (PR Newswire 2000). Although the campaign was showing signs of success, the LVCVA’s attempt to “recapture” the Las Vegas brand hit a snag with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the attacks, it was critical to “find a way to give people permission to have fun again.” The result was a new campaign with a slogan that would catapult Las Vegas into the upper echelon of branding success. Test marketed in 2002 and finally released in 2003, the new campaign was based on a simple premise: tell “Las Vegas stories,” but always leave out a few details, which are filled in with the phrase, “what happens here, stays here.” Considered to be one of the most quoted (and misquoted), most awarded, most talked about, and most iconic ad campaigns ever, “what happens here, stays here” is still used today, and has spawned numerous spinoff campaigns (such as “Only Vegas” and “Your Vegas Is Showing”) based on the premise that Las Vegas is the one place where you are free to do whatever you want, and no one ever has to know. According to R&R CEO Billy Vassiliadis, the slogan was successful because it reinforced the old meaning of Las Vegas as a place of freedom, fantasy, and escapism: “you can come here, be yourself, and nobody will stop you unless it’s illegal” (McCarthy 2005).
For the most part, the branding of Las Vegas has been one dimensional. The huge success of the city’s slogan and its associated television, print, and online ads has meant that other strategies have not really been needed to accomplish the goal of luring tourists back to Sin City. But if we recall, tourists are not the only target audience that Las Vegas hopes to attract. Especially in the wake of the Great Recession in the late 2000s, the long-held desire by some community members to diversify the local economy has gained traction amongst local leaders. Diversification is even being called for by many casino executives—who for so long feared that the city’s image would suffer if gaming was not the main player in town—as they recognize that diversification will “take the pressure off of them as the main industry responsible for maintaining the local economy.”

To attract new investment, the city has engaged in a number of entrepreneurial and creative class brand-creation strategies to try and expand the city’s brand beyond what is offered downtown and on the Strip. There is a strong push to raise money and public support for a new downtown sports arena that local leaders hope will lure a professional NBA franchise to the city. Local leaders believe that having a professional sports team will further legitimize Las Vegas as a major metropolitan area that is safe for all types of investment, not just investment into the tourism industry. A major effort has also gone into revitalizing downtown Las Vegas, with the construction of the Smith Center for the Performing Arts (a public/private joint venture) and the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health (designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry), along with a downtown beautification project, which includes new bike lanes, artistic streetscapes, and an increased tree canopy over city streets. Most of these efforts—new arenas, performing arts centers, and flagship architectural endeavors (see figure 3.1)—are prime examples of
the entrepreneurial and creative class brand-creation strategies adopted in countless other cities, where money is poured into new consumer-oriented, high-art venues that do not necessarily distinguish one city from another, but rather keep them on par with their competitors.

![Figure 3.1: Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, designed by Frank Gehry](image)

Las Vegas may be upheld as an example of successful branding, but it also provides a prime example of the disconnect that can occur between the two aspects of urban branding. The few brand-creation strategies that are pursued are largely the work of elected leaders (the mayor and the city council) and their partners in the private sector, while the brand-promotion strategies are carried out by the LVCVA and its go-to ad agency R&R. While city leaders want to utilize branding to accomplish two goals—attracting new investment and supporting the tourism industry—they have in essence placed the face of the brand in the hands of an organization tasked with only one of these goals. To accomplish its mission of promoting the city for conventions and tourism, the LVCVA simply needed to “recapture” the image of Las Vegas that had worked so well
for it in the past. Aside from a new slogan and some creative advertising, nothing needed to be created—the brand was already there, ready to be promoted. Thus, while city leaders engage in brand-creation strategies to enhance the city’s culture to make it appealing to investors, the LVCVA sticks to promoting the adult-oriented image of the city that tourists continue to find so appealing. Although new features like the proposed arena, a state-of-the-art performing arts center, and an iconic Frank Gehry-designed architectural showpiece might appeal to some tourists, the LVCVA is simply “not interested in promoting Las Vegas as a cultural city.” As one interviewee from the LVCVA noted, “the day the research tells us that our customers care about local culture, that’s when we’ll promote it.”

This disconnect also suggests that we should be careful when trying to label a city as a branding success or failure. Obviously the “what happens here, stays here” campaign has been a success for the Las Vegas tourism industry, and the slogan itself has become part of our popular culture. However, the city’s efforts to accomplish its other goal of attracting investment have been overshadowed by the promotion of the city’s adult-oriented image. As we saw in the opening anecdote in chapter 1, which discussed the city’s efforts back in the 1980s to bring CitiBank to Las Vegas, non-tourism-related businesses are often hesitant to associate themselves with the city because of its sinful image. Thus, from the perspective of making the city attractive to new investors, the continued promotion of this image via the city’s popular slogan has actually been counterproductive. According to a panel survey of outside business leaders, the “anything goes” attitude promoted by the city’s slogan does not appeal to those in the non-gaming world of business. In fact, the consensus from these business leaders was that the slogan’s
“risqué themes are ‘repulsive’ and have damaged the city’s growing reputation as a leading business travel market” (Jones 2003). One panelist expressed concerns that “the advertisement program that’s in the market right now is probably not the most-effective message to send into the business sector,” while another raised a more personal dilemma, stating “‘what happens here, stays here’…when I leave my home, what does that say to my wife? What does it say to anyone else’s spouse? … I think it’s kind of repulsive. You’re pushing the wrong message. … You have so many positive things. Why sell the dark side?” (Jones 2003).

This sentiment is echoed by Somer Hollingsworth, the former President and CEO of the Nevada Development Authority, the organization tasked with recruiting new businesses to the Las Vegas area. According to Hollingsworth, fighting against the city’s popular image is “a huge challenge…‘what happens here, stays here’ is my biggest deterrent.” Thus, while Las Vegas may be the gold standard for urban branding when it comes to tourism, by placing the responsibility for promoting the city’s brand in the hands of the LVCVA, the city shows itself as a prime example of how the reliance on a single brand can alienate certain target groups and prevent a city from accomplishing all of the goals it hopes branding will help it achieve.

### 3.4.2 Orlando

Of the four case study cities under consideration, Orlando is the one that provides perhaps the best example of how earlier forms of place promotion differ from present day urban branding. Distinguishing the two is often not an easy task, given that many of the tactics and strategies are the same. For instance, during the City Beautiful Movement in the early 1900s, a beautification project was undertaken to make the city more
aesthetically pleasing, and a local contest was held to replace the city’s existing slogan of “The Phenomenal City.” Drawing on the larger movement popular at the time, the winning slogan was “The City Beautiful,” which has remained the motto of Orlando for over 100 years (Orlando City News 2008). As we saw with Las Vegas, beautification projects are still undertaken, and slogans are an important—if not the most important—part of current urban branding campaigns. However, as we will see with Orlando, in the context of urban branding, slogans can take on a life of their own, often losing their connection to the city they are meant to promote.

Unlike Las Vegas, Orlando was not built up around the tourism industry. First incorporated in 1875, it has only been since the construction of Walt Disney World in 1971 that Orlando has made its claim to fame as a top family tourist destination. Thus, while the tourism industry has been a boon to the local economy and has resulted in rapid population growth in the metropolitan area in recent decades, the city of Orlando was well established, with many non-tourism related industries, well before its latest tourism phase. Because of this history, local leaders in Orlando have different goals from leaders in Las Vegas, despite their shared status as “tourist metropolises” (Gladstone 1998).

Whereas Las Vegas wants to diversify its economy to help ease the tourism industry’s burden of carrying the entire weight of the local economy on its shoulders, leaders in Orlando want to “create a separation between the city and Disney.”22 As one interviewee noted, “Orlando is a great place to do business, and the city isn’t taken as seriously as it should be…being under the shadow of Disney is a big factor in that.”23 Those in local government and in the non-tourism business community realize the importance of the tourism industry to the local economy, but simply want Orlando to be known as more
than a “tourist town.” In the words of another interviewee, “I’d like Orlando to showcase its quality of life and emerging urban mindset… the city can easily showcase ‘the other side’ to tourism without rejecting it…it is a tragedy that almost 50 million people visit Orlando each year but most of them have no idea Orlando even has a downtown.”

To showcase the “real” Orlando without rejecting the tourism industry, Orlando has engaged in several brand-creation strategies to raise the profile of the city. In 2006, the city government partnered with private industry to announce its “triple crown for downtown,” which included the construction of the Amway Center (a new arena for the city’s NBA franchise, the Orlando Magic), a new performing arts center, and renovations to the city’s stadium, the Citrus Bowl. Describing downtown Orlando as undergoing a “renaissance,” Mayor Buddy Dyer and Orange County Mayor Richard T. Crotty touted the benefits of the billion-dollar project, stating that the new facilities would make downtown a “world-class urban center.” They noted that the projects would bring “big results for the region’s economy and quality of life,” predicting that “the three projects would raise downtown’s stature, bring jobs and employers to Central Florida and help pump millions into the local economy” (Schlueb and Damron 2006). On top of these projects, in 2010 city officials approved plans for the construction of the Creative Village on 68 acres of city-owned land where the old Amway Arena used to stand. The Creative Village aims to further enhance downtown Orlando by creating “a hip neighborhood with a mix of college kids, Facebook-generation urbanites, high-tech companies and educational institutions,” which will include 1,500 units of mixed-income housing, 500,000 square feet of educational space, 1,000,000 square feet of office and “creative” space, 150,000 square feet of commercial space, and 150-200 hotel rooms (Schlueb 2010).
Again, as was the case with the brand-creation strategies adopted in Las Vegas, we see that Orlando’s attempt to appeal to new investors relies on market-driven and creative-class branding strategies, both of which focus on building new structures, including flagship architectural projects, rather than on more community-oriented strategies that might promote the current business-friendly climate or quality-of-life aspects already offered by the city. When it comes to promoting the city’s brand, we see more similarities to Las Vegas, in that these efforts are once again carried out by the city’s convention and visitors bureau, Visit Orlando. The problem for Orlando is different than that faced by Las Vegas, however, where the message conveyed in that city’s tourism brand worked against the city’s efforts of trying to raise its profile to appeal to investors in industries other than tourism. For Orlando, being a family-friendly destination is actually seen as being good for tourism and business, as it shows the city as a welcoming place for new investors and their families, not to mention new employees and their families who will be needed to fill the jobs created by new investment. The problem Orlando faces is that most of Visit Orlando’s branding efforts have gone into making sure that its brand-promotion products are appealing rather than focusing on making sure that the city of Orlando itself is an attractive destination for its target audiences. And because Visit Orlando’s primary focus is on conventions and tourism, the little glimpses we do get of the city are not of the “real” Orlando, but of the already well-known tourist destinations located in the greater metropolitan area.

As noted earlier in this section, Orlando provides a great example of how contemporary urban branding is different from earlier eras of place promotion. Perhaps the best example of how this is the case is in the way that the city’s brand-promotion
efforts have placed more emphasis on making brand-promotion products appealing rather than highlighting the unique characteristics of the actual city. The primary strategy Visit Orlando has used to market Orlando’s family-friendly brand has been through the use of slogans, which are accompanied in print and other visual ad campaigns by logos, color schemes, and carefully controlled photo or video elements meant to reinforce the overall brand theme. It is here where we also see our first glimpse of how the professionalization of urban branding and a reliance on “expert” knowledge outweighs the opinions and pressures placed on brand decision makers by members of the local community. This disconnect between citizen opinions and the direction of a city’s brand can clearly be seen in the response of locals to the slogan, “Orlando: Built for families. Made for memories.”

The “Built for families. Made for memories” campaign was the first national campaign undertaken by Visit Orlando, and its two-year budget of $68 million dwarfed the $20 million spent on regional ads in the previous two years. Although the campaign was led by Visit Orlando, the creative vision behind the slogan did not originate within the organization, but rather was provided by the Atlanta-based ad agency WestWayne. Much like the branding efforts undertaken in Las Vegas, this campaign, which began in 2006, focused on the experience that Orlando could offer to visitors. According to John Sierota, senior vice president of WestWayne, the goal of the campaign was not to “sell an Orlando vacation as a product, but to sell it as an experience…to focus on the emotional benefits of an Orlando vacation” (Elliott 2007). Because its focus was solely on attracting tourists, the ads were created for the visitor, from the visitor’s own perspective. Visual images contained in the ads concentrated on the area’s theme parks and were focused
around the theme of creating memories for the entire family. Making a direct reference to Las Vegas’s slogan, Orange County Mayor Richard T. Crotty explained that whereas what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, “what happens in Orlando stays in your family’s memories forever” (Elliott 2007).

While a visitor-oriented approach makes sense for a campaign focused on attracting tourists, it was noted in chapter 1 that the best ambassadors for a city are still the local citizens themselves. And citizens of Orlando—if they knew about this campaign at all—were not overly pleased with it. This point came up in one of my interviews with a local journalist from the Orlando Sentinel, who stated that “unlike Vegas, I don’t think most Orlandoans even know what these slogans are. They air in markets far away, so we rarely if ever see them. And they never seem to catch on the way ‘what happens in Vegas’ does.”

When the Sentinel presented an article on the new slogan and asked local readers to voice their opinions, there were a smattering of positive reviews that were in support of the city’s family-friendly image, but most responses were highly critical of the slogan, its vague nature, and its disconnect from the reality of the “real” Orlando. For example, one reader, again playing off the Las Vegas slogan, responded to the new Orlando slogan by asking, “What happens in Orlando…No, really, what happens in Orlando?” (Maxwell 2006). Another one of my interviewees, a leader in Orlando’s growing arts community, noted that “locals don’t like that Orlando is known just for its theme parks, and that’s what this slogan reinforces. They want the world to know that their community has more to offer.”

And, while not making a direct reference to the city’s official marketing efforts, Ashley Ripley, a Marketing and Brand Coordinator for the Orlando-based ad firm BigEye Creative, wrote a blog piece in 2012 lamenting the
fact that outsiders never get a picture of what Orlando is really like. As Ripley writes in her piece, “saying you live in Orlando immediately gets some sort of Disney comment. I always feel the need to correct people and inform them that Disney is in fact in Kissimmee not Orlando and then I encourage them to come see the ‘real’ Orlando” (Ripley 2012).

After running its two year course, Visit Orlando switched gears in 2009 and offered up a new campaign with a new slogan, “Orlando Makes Me Smile.” Despite initially being seen as a failure, with tourism in Orlando dropping to a six-year low in the year of the slogan’s release (Maxwell 2014), the slogan is still used today as the city’s main promotional tool. Although this slogan actually has great potential for fostering community involvement (one can easily imagine random local citizens being featured in print ads or television commercials offering up what it is about their city that makes them smile), again the official branding campaign takes an outsider perspective. Ads for the campaign typically feature one smiling member of a vacationing family (“the Head”), with “photo bubbles” and a short headline explaining why the person is smiling (see figure 3.2). The “Head” is always a visitor, the photos are almost exclusively theme park settings, and according to Visit Orlando’s brand guidelines, the headlines are always “a combination of two adjectives and one adjective phrase that together describe the kind of smile ‘the Head’ is experiencing” (Visit Orlando 2013).

Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with a marketing campaign aimed at tourists, especially when it is led by the city’s agency responsible for promoting tourism. In fact, it was not shocking at all to hear one of my interviewees from Visit Orlando say, “we are who we are and we’re going to market to our strengths.” Even the reliance on a
slogan and featuring photos of the area’s theme parks in ads does not by itself make this a bad attempt at urban branding. Instead, Visit Orlando’s current and previous branding campaigns warrant criticism for never actually promoting anything unique about the city of Orlando, its people, or its culture. In its attempt to maintain a consistent brand message that will be attractive to tourists, Visit Orlando has in many ways become a marketing extension of Disney and Universal rather than an agency dedicated to highlighting all that the city of Orlando has to offer. With “Orlando Makes Me Smile,” Visit Orlando has produced a marketing campaign that to a large extent is more concerned with ensuring
that the brand itself and the tools used to promote it (such as the print ad displayed in figure 3.2 above) are appealing rather than the city that they are supposed to be promoting. In a 40 page document outlining their brand guidelines, Visit Orlando dedicates just a single page to activities one can do in the actual city of Orlando. However, none of these activities are ever featured in the ads created for the campaign. On the other hand, there are entire multi-page sections of the branding guidelines dedicated to minute details about the look and feel of the ads, including specific guidelines for logo placement in print ads; the appropriate color palette, typography, and photo style that should be used; and an entire page dedicated to keywords to support the brand, such as “vibrant,” “creative,” “memorable,” “world-class,” and “friendly” (Visit Orlando 2013). While all of these words may be true of Orlando, they do nothing to highlight what is unique about the city and could be used to describe virtually any other major city across the country. And while photo style, typography, and color palettes are important parts of presenting a unified marketing effort, the amount of focus placed on these elements of the brand (to the detriment of fostering any sort of connection with the community or highlighting anything unique about the city of Orlando itself) is a striking example not only of how urban branding has moved beyond simple place promotion, but also of how the current practice of urban branding has lost sight of its intended goal: to effectively differentiate a city from its competitors by highlighting what makes it truly unique.

3.4.3 Houston

Unlike Las Vegas and Orlando, which each have a positive image that they are seeking to recapture or reinforce through their urban branding, Houston is a city that has
struggled with its image for much of its history (Schadewald 1996). Although it is the home to the American oil and gas industries, boasts the largest medical center in the world, and serves as a major trade center with the country’s second largest port, Houston has yet to truly define itself in the minds of most outsiders. According to Stephen Klineberg of Rice University, “Houston is invisible…People don’t know about Houston. They don’t think of Houston” (quoted in Snyder 2006). This sentiment is echoed in surveys of both young college-educated workers and more seasoned CEOs, neither of which listed Houston among the 20 U.S. cities they would most or least like to call home. Thus, despite Houston’s continued population growth and expanding local economy, Klineberg notes that “the great challenge for Houston’s positioning itself for prosperity in the 21st century is to transform itself into a destination of choice, a place where people who can live anywhere will say, ‘I want to live in Houston’” (Klineberg 2010).

Since the mid-1970s, Houston has been actively attacking its image problem, mainly through the use of slogans and catchphrases that are meant to strike a chord with and leave a positive lasting impression on outsiders. Throughout its history, the city has had no less than 25 nicknames or slogans, some of which have been unofficial, but most of which were intentionally crafted by local leaders to improve the city’s image. Examples of some of these nicknames and slogans include the 19th century monikers “Bayou City” and “Magnolia City,” the mid-20th century creations “Baghdad on the Bayou,” “Space City,” and “The Golden Buckle on the Sunbelt,” and the more recent slogans “Heavenly Houston,” “Clutch City,” “H-Town,” “Just Say Houston,” and “You’ll Think the World of This City.” Some slogans, such as “Space City,” have gone through different incarnations as well, starting out in 1967 as simply “Space City,” but later being
modified in 1997 to “Space City: A Space of Infinite Possibilities,” and again in 2002 to “Space City USA: Who Says the Sky’s the Limit?”

If we look at the era in which local leaders were trying not just to promote but to actually “brand” Houston, we see that nearly all of these slogans were created as brand-promotion tools by the city’s tourism agency, the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau (GHCVB). One of the Bureau’s first forays into branding came in 1990 when the slogan “Houston’s Hot” was released during the city’s hosting of that summer’s Economic Summit. According to GHCVB officials, the slogan was meant as “an attempt to bolster confidence about the city’s economic recovery” after its down years during the 1980s (Associated Press 1992). Despite this intended message, the slogan received criticism leading up to the 1992 Republican National Convention, which was to be held in Houston that August. Local leaders lamented the fact that “Houston’s Hot” drew attention to the city’s long, hot, and humid summers (Roth 1992), and thus this slogan was replaced in 1992 with a new one: “Houston: So Much More to Explore.” In addition to avoiding an unintentional reminder of the city’s weather, this new slogan was meant “to counteract the pervasive notion…that Houston is a boring and dangerous place” (Associated Press 1992).

After the Bureau released another short-lived slogan (“Houston: The Real Texas”) in 1996, a city-sponsored commission—the Houston Image Group—was formed in 1997 to come up with a more effective branding campaign. Led by Elyse Lanier (the wife of Houston’s then mayor, Bob Lanier), the Houston Image Group was a public-private partnership that spent upwards of $5 million from 1997 to 2002 promoting the city using its own slogan, “Houston: Expect the Unexpected” (Houston Press 1997; Schadewald
1997; *Houston Business Journal* 2002). After 2002, the “Expect the Unexpected” campaign was handed over to the GHCVB, but the slogan did not last, and has long since been replaced.

Despite the money and effort put into these campaigns, Houston has been woefully unsuccessful in finding a slogan that makes the city appealing to outsiders. According to Jordy Tollett, past president of the GHCVB, the Bureau has spent “in excess of $75 million in the past 30 years on image campaigns, and we keep coming back and saying, ‘Well, that didn’t work’” (Kaplan 2004). One of the most embarrassing moments for the city came during the “Expect the Unexpected” campaign, when the Houston Image Group spent $500,000 to run an ad in *Time* magazine that included a scratch-off sweepstakes game and an entry form to win a trip to Houston. According to an article in the *Houston Chronicle* (Kaplan 2004), only one person among 4 million *Time* subscribers claimed one of the 33 prizes offered in the scratch-off game, and the Image Group did not receive a single entry for the trip to Houston, a fact that prompted one of my interviewees to quip, “expect the unexpected indeed!”

But slogans are not the only branding strategy that Houston has used to try to improve its image. According to Podagrosi:

In response to economic downturn in the mid-1980s, and in pursuit of developing a service-oriented economy (high-tech industries and specialized services), Houston’s leaders recognized the need to change the city’s image. In addition, with the proven success of downtown revitalization in cities such as Portland, Seattle, and Denver, inner-city renewal became an important element of Houston’s new growth strategy. Downtown revitalization was thus seen as both a method for remarketing the city and attracting new investment. (2005: 2)

This downtown revitalization effort was first targeted at attracting investment in high-tech industries and specialized services, but by the early 2000s downtown revitalization
was seen as necessary for promoting Houston as a desirable destination for tourists and conventioneers as well (Twardowski and Twardowski 2005). The form that Houston’s downtown revitalization took is in many ways very similar to the brand-creation strategies that we have already witnessed in Las Vegas and Orlando. For instance, similar to how Orlando is seeking to create a “hip neighborhood” for “Facebook-generation urbanites” through the construction of its downtown Creative Village, several lower-income neighborhoods around downtown Houston, such as the city’s Third Ward, are being “upgraded” through a process of gentrification that replaces traditional “shotgun style” houses (figure 3.3) with new upscale townhouses (figure 3.4).32

Other improvement projects to downtown Houston include a $165 million renovation and expansion of the George R. Brown Convention Center that was completed in 2001, making it now one of the ten largest convention centers in the country. Keeping in step with nearly every other major city across the country, Houston has also

![Image of Shotgun-style houses in Houston’s Third Ward](image_url)

Figure 3.3: Shotgun-style houses in Houston’s Third Ward
constructed new state-of-the-art sports venues for its professional baseball, football, basketball, and soccer franchises. The Houston Astros’ new stadium, Minute Maid Park, was completed in 2000 for a price tag of $265 million; the new home of the Houston Texans, Reliant Stadium (recently renamed NRG Stadium), was completed in 2002 for $450 million; a new arena for the Houston Rockets, the Toyota Center, was completed in 2003 for $175 million; and the BBVA Compass Center, a new stadium for the Houston Dynamo, was completed in 2012 for a comparatively modest $95 million. These projects, when combined with a new $300 million light rail system, have resulted in more than $2.5 billion in public and private funds being spent on creative-class and consumer-driven brand-creation projects in the last 15 years to make downtown Houston an attractive destination for investors, conventioneers, tourists, and low-cost residents.

As was the case in Las Vegas and Orlando, the actors responsible for these brand-creation projects in Houston are not the same as those responsible for promoting the city’s brand. The billions of dollars in brand-creation projects have been financed through...
private funds and public grants approved by the city and county government. Moreover, the initiative to undertake these projects often comes from elected officials, again working in concert with various industries in the private sector. On the other hand, while the “Houston: Expect the Unexpected” campaign was started by the government-sponsored Houston Image Group, the vast majority of the city’s promotion is carried out by the independent, tourism-focused GHCVB (and, as noted earlier, even the Image Group’s campaign was eventually handed over to the GHCVB).

Like many other cities, Houston does have an organization dedicated specifically to recruiting businesses and new investment; however, this group, the Greater Houston Partnership (GHP), does not view its work in terms of urban branding. According to one of the GHP’s marketing executives, “the GHP promotes numbers and data in order to highlight the business climate of Houston. We do not want to be part of a civic branding campaign. We leave that up to other groups.” Thus, just as we saw in our two previous cities, the official promotional efforts for Houston’s brand are left up to its tourism agency, the GHCVB. And, even though the GHCVB’s mission is to promote the city for conventioneers and tourists, it welcomes the opportunity to be the public face of the city. In fact, Greg Ortale, the President and CEO of the Bureau, even wants to change the name of the organization to “Houston City Marketing,” noting, “we want to be the people who take and put a handle on the product; the product is Houston, and we’re going to take it everywhere, and we’re going to sell it to anybody” (Ortale 2009).

The problems with Houston’s attempts at urban branding can in many ways be attributed to the fact that its brand-promotion efforts are handled solely by the GHCVB, and to the fact that Houston, just like Las Vegas and Orlando, focuses more on creating
new cultural icons and catchy slogans than on promoting anything unique that the city already has to offer. For instance, when discussing the city’s renovation and expansion of its convention center, one of my interviewees summed up the problem with the city’s brand-creation strategies in the following way:

No one is really winning. As each city builds more and more convention space, convention attendance is not really growing…this kind of mirrors the branding exercise as a whole, as each city tries to out-do its competitors in new quality of life features to appeal to the creative class, yet since everyone else is doing it, no one really stands out as being unique.\(^34\)

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee who noted that “Houston always tries to copy the best attributes of other cities while ignoring its own.”\(^35\) With regard to how the city promotes itself, one member of the local Better Business Bureau told me that he was “frustrated that the local ‘leadership’ really kind of ‘prostitutes’ itself rather than being self-satisfied with what our real value as a city is…Houston tries too hard to be a tourist city when that is not our strong suit.”\(^36\) Another interviewee who works closely with the GHP shared this same opinion, noting:

The GHCVB handles the city’s branding, and I think that is at the core of the failures. Houston is simply not a tourist town, and trying to brand us like one is a mistake. Houston’s strength is livability and its weakness is tourism. For Houston to have a successful brand, it needs to sell how great it is to live here, not to visit here.\(^37\)

Finally, perhaps the biggest reason for Houston’s lack of branding success is the fact that, again, like Las Vegas and Orlando, there is a disconnect between the brand and the community itself. In addition to failing to promote anything unique about the local culture, Houstonians are also not involved in any of the decision-making processes related to how the city will be branded. As one of my interviewees noted, “The vast majority of people know nothing about any efforts to market Houston. It is growing now by default. Its economy is improving by default.”\(^38\) Echoing a point made in the branding
literature, another interviewee makes the point that “Houston’s brand never sticks. For a brand to work there has to be a connection to identity. Citizens have to get behind the idea and promote the city with the brand in mind.”³⁹ A similar point is made by a final interviewee, who had his own vocabulary for the ideal branding process, referring to it as a “reinforcing loop.” In order for the loop to work, “A city has to examine itself and determine what makes it unique, then promote that uniqueness. Focusing on what makes us unique impacts how locals feel about themselves, and so they’ll do things to reinforce that self-image. This local reinforcement is I think just as important, if not more important, than the image provided to outsiders.”⁴⁰ Whereas for the bulk of its branding history this loop has been broken, there is now a renewed hope that urban branding can be successful in Houston. As we will see in chapter 5, frustration with the continued failure of official branding attempts has prompted some locals to take the task of branding the city into their own hands, a move that has finally opened the eyes of local leaders to the fact that local citizens should probably be involved in the creation and promotion of their city’s brand.

3.4.4 Detroit

Of the four cities under consideration in this study, the one that is undoubtedly most in need of the potential benefits that come along with a successful urban branding campaign is Detroit. Unlike the first three cities, Detroit is using urban branding as a means of reinventing and transforming its current image. Detroit’s troubles are well-documented in the national media and include white flight to the suburbs, urban decay, and high crime. Urban Detroit today has roughly one-third the population it had at its peak in the 1950s, nearly 80 percent of jobs in the metropolitan area are located more
than 10 miles from downtown (the highest percentage in the country), the unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent, and the homicide rate is the highest it has been in 40 years (White 2005; Gallagher 2010; Recinto 2013). Moreover, in 2003 a federal judge placed Detroit’s police department under a federal watchdog, in 2009 the state took over the city’s school system, and in 2013 the city—operating with a $380 million budget deficit and carrying upwards of $17 billion in long term debt—filed for bankruptcy protection (Gallagher 2010; Aschoff 2013; Williams 2013). When stories like these are what help outsiders form an opinion about your city, suffice it to say that “the drumbeat of less-than-positive news that hits the airways periodically about Detroit really does stand as a barrier to a growing economy” (Stewart 2008).

But Detroit’s problems are not new. In his book *Detroit: A Biography*, Scott Martelle details the city’s precipitous decline starting in the 1950s, with the 1967 riot simply solidifying the city’s image as “out of control” (Martelle 2012). Urban affairs analyst Aaron Renn also notes that Detroit’s problems are “unique, deep, and longstanding,” while noted urban planner Pete Saunders adds that these problems stem largely from the city’s “lack of attention to creating a pleasant built environment” (Renn 2009a, Saunders 2012). In her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs gives a similar criticism to that offered by Saunders, when she writes of Detroit’s built environment, “virtually all of urban Detroit is as weak on vitality and diversity as the Bronx. It is ring superimposed upon ring of failed gray belts. Even Detroit’s downtown itself cannot produce a respectable amount of diversity. It is dispirited and dull, and almost deserted by seven o’clock of an evening” (Jacobs 1961: 150). Also published in 1961, the *Time* magazine article “Decline in Detroit” opens with
a similar theme, noting that “if ever a city stood as a symbol of the dynamic U.S. economy, it was Detroit. It was not pretty. It was, in fact, a combination of the grey and the garish: its downtown area was a warren of dingy, twisting streets; the used-car lots along Livernois Avenue raised an aurora of neon. But Detroit cared less about how it looked than about what it did.”

One of the first efforts to improve Detroit’s less-than-stellar built environment came in 1973 with the election of Coleman Young, the city’s first black mayor. Young’s focus was on changing Detroit’s “garish” and “dingy” image into one of a sophisticated, modern, world-class city. While the idea of “urban branding” was still a few years off, Young’s strategy of “reimaging” Detroit through major development projects closely mirrors the entrepreneurial, market-driven and creative-class, quality-of-life brand-creation strategies that are so common in cities today. With a focus on rebuilding downtown Detroit, Young’s first flagship project, the Renaissance Center, was undertaken in coordination with the private, non-profit development organization Detroit Renaissance Inc. Opened in 1977, the “RenCen” is actually seven interconnected skyscrapers that includes a hotel, office space, and an entertainment complex complete with shops, restaurants, clubs, and a movie theater (see figure 3.5). Despite an eventual falling out between Detroit Renaissance Inc. and Mayor Young, “the image-conscious blue ribbon megaproject continued to be the hallmark of Young’s development strategy” throughout his time as mayor, which ended in 1994 (Neill 1995: 646). Other projects completed during Young’s tenure include two additional downtown skyscrapers (the Madden Building and One Detroit Center, each heavily funded by public subsidy), the Detroit People Mover, a restoration of the Fox Theater, and the construction of Joe Louis Arena.
Figure 3.5: The Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit

Although the focus of the mayor’s reimagining campaign during this time period was on new infrastructure projects that would raise the profile of the city, some promotion of these projects was done as well. The Detroit Chamber of Commerce did some marketing of the “Renaissance City” during the mid-1970s, and in 1984 the slogan “Do it in Detroit” was adopted, mainly in an effort to encourage people from the suburbs to shop and dine downtown. Moreover, in 1988 the state of Michigan sponsored a $1 million branding campaign to help “blur the distinction between city and suburbs by promoting the concept of ‘Greater Detroit’ as a ‘world technology center’” (Neill 1995: 648). Despite these efforts, Mayor Young’s attempt to transform Detroit’s image was, in the end, unsuccessful. According to Neill, the failure of Young’s reimagining campaign was due in large part to “the overly opportunistic nature of the development agenda and the absence of a managed image campaign” (1995: 649). On this first point, Neill notes that the mayor’s flagship development projects could not hide the deeper structural issues that continued to plague the city, such as continued deindustrialization and racial polarization. On the second point, despite the early efforts of the city’s chamber of
commerce and the later efforts of the state to promote a new image of Detroit, after the 1987 publication of a Strategic Plan for the city that identified image as “a crucial issue needing remedial action,” not one city agency stepped forward to take on this basic public relations function (Neill 1995: 649).

While Mayor Young’s efforts to transform the image of Detroit mirrored some of the brand-creation strategies used today, it was not until the late 1990s that local leaders in Detroit really started to think about the city’s image in terms of a “brand.” And, just as we have seen in our other cities, when seeking to promote its brand, the agency tasked to do so in Detroit was the city’s tourism agency, the Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau (DMCVB), and its preferred promotional strategy has been the adoption of slogans and logos. The first slogan adopted, “It’s a great time in Detroit,” was unveiled in 1998 and was meant to shed a flattering light on the city. Reflecting upon this early campaign ten years later, Jim Townsend, Executive Director of the Tourism Economic Development Council at the DMCVB, admitted, “that was an overly ambitious claim to make about our community…and it wasn’t a very clear or differentiating slogan” (quoted in Stewart 2008).

In an effort to present a more “honest view” of the city than in its previous marketing attempts, the DMCVB revealed a new campaign in 2007 to help reinvent Detroit’s tattered brand. This campaign would be highlighted by a new nickname for the city—“the D,” along with a new “D” logo (see figure 3.6) featured above “five strengths that best set [Detroit] apart from other cities”: cars, culture, gaming, music, and sports (PR Newswire 2007). Although this new brand identity was created by the DMCVB, the brand was meant to appeal to not only tourists, but also residents and investors, by
presenting Detroit as a “cool” city. According to Larry Alexander, president and CEO of the DMCVB:

the brand identity … provides the entire community with a common understanding and frame of reference to understand and communicate a unified message about metro Detroit…[it] establishes a story about the region that we plan to use to its full potential to contribute to a measurable increase in tourism, and it can also have business-to-business applications. It offers a tremendous opportunity to also showcase metro Detroit as an attractive place to live and work. (PR Newswire 2007)

Figure 3.6: “The D” logo

In one way, this branding campaign shows that the DMCVB has learned from its past mistakes, and the mistakes made by other cities, of relying solely on a catchy slogan in its promotional efforts. For instance, while the “D. Cars, Culture, Gaming, Music, Sports” identity is meant to “reinforce the assets that define Detroit’s ‘cool,’” the Bureau decided against using a slogan as part of its branding campaign. As Alexander correctly points out, “the role of a slogan in spurring tourism is overestimated…with the exception
of Las Vegas, destination slogans are rarely memorable or representative of the area’s tourism product. We will use a variety of words and images to consistently convey metro Detroit’s brand story” (PR Newswire 2007). While it is true that most slogans are not memorable and do not accurately portray the uniqueness of a city, one must question how the “D” campaign is really that much different. A string of five individual words is not any more memorable than five or ten words strung together into a slogan, and with the exception of “cars” and perhaps “music,” none of the five words is necessarily associated more with Detroit than with any other city. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that in its press release announcing the new campaign, the DMCVB specifies that it is “Vegas-style gaming” that is one of the attributes that supposedly makes Detroit so unique (PR Newswire 2007, my emphasis).

While the DMCVB should be given credit for at least recognizing that a mere slogan is not sufficient, the bigger problem with Detroit’s branding campaigns and its previous reimagining efforts is that they have never been grounded in reality and have avoided addressing the real issues that are responsible for Detroit’s poor popular image. As Renn (2013b) points out:

[Detroit has consistently] chased conventional wisdom approaches and fad of the month type endeavors ranging from constructing the fortress-like Renaissance Center to the People Mover to former Gov. Jennifer Granholm’s “Cool Cities” program, none of which did anything but generate hype. What they all had in common is a transfusion of subsidies to the city (and taking on debt) rather than building a consensus around addressing the real issues.

Renn also notes that none of Detroit’s image-transforming efforts have ever spoken to the true character and needs of the city, stating, “even if you get some people to sip lattes by the light rail on Woodward like they do in Portland, this isn’t going to change the civic trajectory” (Renn 2012a). This disconnect from the real needs of the city can be seen in
Detroit’s latest brand-creation efforts as well. Rather than seeking to improve the city’s image by placing a greater focus on public safety, job creation programs, or neighborhood revitalization projects, city leaders instead dedicated tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer funds to a new convention center project and to the construction of two new downtown stadiums: Comerica Park, which opened in 2000 and Ford Field, which was completed in 2002. The city also bought and razed hundreds of houses to create a new 189-acre development park meant to attract new companies to the city. The problem, however, according to one local journalist, “is that only one building has been developed in the park, and the rest of the site remains awesomely empty” (Gallagher 2010: 25-26).

According to Gallagher, the disconnect between Detroit’s reality and how it attempts to present itself to the world through its branding efforts is that local leaders “tout a fantasy version of the city’s comeback—repopulating the city’s vast empty spaces, returning downtown to the shopping mecca it once was, and so forth. That ship sailed a long time ago” (2010: 1). This idea of a “comeback” for Detroit is echoed by other critics as well, such as one local filmmaker who notes that Detroit is “the most nostalgic place in America” (Ewing 2013), along with Renn, who states that Detroit’s reimagining efforts seem “predicated on a ‘comeback’ vision for Detroit seeking to recreate some semblance of former glory” (Renn 2012a).

When talking with people from community organizations in Detroit, it is clear that local citizens recognize this disconnect between what Detroit needs to do to revitalize its image and what is has tried to do for so long with such little success. For instance, one interviewee noted that it “may not be sexy,” but focusing on the basics is
important because it allows the city to set achievable goals and “get results.” Another interviewee also talked about focusing on “the basics,” such as using public funds to make downtown safe and livable rather than build “megaprojects” like the new stadiums. When asked whether he thought these megaprojects might still be beneficial in attracting tourists to downtown, this individual noted that he “knows lots of people who have visited Detroit,” and not one of them “came here to go to a ballgame.” Still another interviewee talked about how if local leaders really wanted to revitalize downtown, they would make it “livable.”

As these comments make clear, people in Detroit know that their city has some major problems that can’t be hidden by slogans, logos, or fancy new development projects. Neill notes that by neglecting to address “the problems and concerns of the city’s neighbourhoods,” Detroit’s efforts to rebrand itself have resulted in “a collection of image-conscious physical capital projects surreally floating free amidst a human capital wasteland” (1995: 645, 648). Detroit today is a city where four out of every ten street lights don’t work; the city’s police force is 40 percent smaller than it was a decade ago; response times for emergency services are almost an hour, or five times longer than the national average; and almost 70 percent of the parks have been closed in the past five years (Recinto 2013; Wall Street Journal 2013). Detroit still has one of the worst, if not the worst, racial divides between city and suburbs in the country, and the mass exodus of people from urban Detroit has left the city with nearly 80,000 abandoned homes,
businesses, and other structures. Perhaps the best synopsis of Detroit’s predicament is
given by Neill, who writes that “the central problem facing those who would give the city
a better image is simply that the monster is real” (1995: 649). Accepting this fact, and
demonstrating a willingness to focus on the basics rather than trying to hit a homerun
with a new logo or iconic piece of architecture, are what will ultimately allow Detroit to
begin the process of rebuilding its image. And while the city still has a long way to go, as
we will see in chapter 5, just like in Houston, citizens have started to take matters into
their own hands when it comes to transforming the image of their city, and there are signs
that city leaders may finally be getting the message that branding can be a more
successful endeavor if local citizens are allowed to participate in official branding efforts.

3.5 Reflecting on the Branding Strategies of the Case Study Cities

Previous studies of the practice of urban branding demonstrate that despite their
different histories and cultural offerings, cities tend to use very similar strategies when
attempting to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Despite choosing cities that
had various combinations of push and pull factors, which I hypothesized should have
revealed differences in the branding strategies of these four cities, the analysis in the
previous section shows that Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Detroit are no different than
other cities that rely on a very small range of brand-creation and brand-promotion
strategies. Each of these cities in essence maintains the branding status quo that can be
found in countless cities across the country: brands are created with little to no community
involvement; brand-creation efforts are dominated by market-driven, consumer-oriented
entrepreneurial and creative-class strategies; and brand-promotion efforts rely almost
exclusively on slogans to sell the city to one key target group—tourists.
If we revisit the “what,” “how,” and “why” questions that were posed earlier about each aspect of the branding process (see table 3.2), we see that with respect to brand creation, the focus in each of these cities was on creating consumer-oriented and/or flagship cultural artifacts that materialized in the form of megaprojects like the Renaissance Center in Detroit, new or proposed sports stadiums in all four cities, iconic architectural structures like the Frank Gehry-designed Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas, and new upscale neighborhoods like the Creative Village in Orlando and the gentrified portions of Houston’s Third Ward. In each city, these brand-creation strategies were conceived and carried out by elected officials—namely by mayors and city councils—almost always in partnership with the private sector. However, there was also a disconnect in each city with regard to its brand-creation and brand-promotion strategies, with the brand-promotion efforts being entrusted to each city’s convention and visitors bureau (CVB). This disconnect not only created a separation between who was carrying out the different aspects of the branding process, but it more importantly resulted in the promotion of a brand that in most cases failed to take into account the brand-creation strategies that were being simultaneously undertaken. Instead, each city’s CVB and its go-to ad agency focused its efforts solely on attracting tourists (Detroit being the sole exception) through the creation of an idea about the city that was conveyed through the use of slogans and logos.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with these strategies, they represent a limited set of the available options open to cities when creating and promoting their brands. For instance, rather than razing dilapidated neighborhoods and spending millions of dollars on constructing new multi-use skyscrapers, shopping districts, and
TABLE 3.2
SUMMARY OF BRANDING STRATEGIES USED IN CASE STUDY CITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Brand creation</th>
<th>Brand promotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“What” is created / promoted?</td>
<td>Consumer-oriented and/or flagship cultural artifacts</td>
<td>An idea about the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How” is it created / promoted?</td>
<td>Creation of new infrastructure (skyscrapers, stadiums, iconic architectural pieces, upscale/gentrified neighborhoods)</td>
<td>Slogans and logos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Who” is creating / promoting the brand?</td>
<td>Elected officials and private sector partners</td>
<td>Convention and visitors bureaus and “expert” ad agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

entertainment venues, cities could instead channel that money into grant programs for homeowners and small business owners to help revitalize poorer neighborhoods. Alternatively, they could spend that money on ensuring that public services are delivered efficiently and effectively. Or, cities could finance beautification efforts and public art projects, both of which would contribute to the livability of each city and would likely help foster pride among citizens and give them a sense of ownership over the brand.

Instead of trying to enhance their brand by creating new architectural showpieces or spending millions of dollars to develop a catchy new slogan, cities could instead focus on showcasing aspects of their local culture that truly make them unique. And instead of relying on the expertise of professional marketers and the wisdom of elected officials, cities could instead invite members of the local community to participate in the brand decision-making process, which would help citizens feel a connection to the brand and give them a reason to promote it.
In addition to confirming that similarities in branding practices do exist, the above analysis of urban branding in each city also shows us how these similarities create additional problems for cities that prevent them from achieving the goals they set out to achieve through the use of branding in the first place. For instance, as we saw in Las Vegas, the “what happens here, stays here” promotional campaign has been very successful for tourism. However, the lack of coordination between elected officials and their brand-creation efforts and the LVCVA and its brand-promotion efforts has meant that the image delivered to the world is one of Las Vegas being an adult playground rather than a city that is a good place to call home or a legitimate place for non-tourism industries to invest their money. This situation makes it extremely difficult for the city to achieve its goal of trying to diversify its economy by attracting non-tourism-related investment. A different problem showed itself in Orlando, where we saw how a city’s brand can become disconnected from the city it is meant to help. Here, Visit Orlando’s mission of attracting tourists by highlighting the city’s nearby theme parks caused the organization’s acute focus on making sure that its brand and its brand-promotion tools were appealing caused it to lose sight of actually promoting anything truly unique about the people or the culture of Orlando.

While Las Vegas and Orlando each had a fairly positive image to build on, Houston demonstrated how the current practice of urban branding makes it extremely difficult for a city with no image to discover one through branding. The city’s brand-creation efforts—including the gentrification of the Third Ward and the construction of new convention space and new sports stadiums—have perhaps kept the city on par with its competitors, but they have not effectively differentiated the city in any meaningful
Likewise, none of the numerous slogans that have been tried over the years to promote Houston as a cool, or rather a “hot,” city have ever panned out. I argue that the main reason for the failure of Houston’s branding efforts over the years stems from the continued reliance on a top-down formula in which branding decisions are made by “experts” in the field instead of a more bottom-up approach in which everyday citizens are invited to participate and help craft and promote a brand that truly exemplifies the unique attributes of their city.

Finally, Detroit shows us how it is nearly impossible to transform or reinvent one’s brand if a city’s branding strategies are completely divorced from the reality of what is happening on the ground. The image-conscious development projects during the Coleman Young era sought to present Detroit as a city of wealth, power, and importance, but these projects could not mask the underlying economic and social problems that continued to exacerbate the city’s slow decline. Moreover, the city’s more recent brand-creation strategies and the DMCVB’s promotional campaigns have so far been unsuccessful, in large part because they funnel money away from addressing basic issues like public safety and livability in favor of the construction of megaprojects like new stadiums and the creation of promotional campaigns that fail to highlight the truly unique aspects of the city.

In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the organizational field of urban branding to highlight who the major players are in the brand decision-making processes in each city. Here I will argue that the similarities in each city’s branding strategies, along with the associated problems with each city’s branding efforts, are due to the presence of institutional isomorphism within the organization field of urban branding. By looking at
the mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that prevent cities from adopting a wider range of branding strategies, I will present an explanation that, when compared to current explanations, can more fully account for why pressures from local stakeholders, different target audiences for a campaign, and different reasons for participating in the practice of urban branding are not resulting in the utilization of a wider range of branding strategies. This chapter will then look closely at the idea that community participation is needed for an urban branding campaign to be successful. I will present survey data which shows that despite not being invited to participate in the branding process, citizens in each case study city do desire to be included and have distinctly different ideas from local leaders about what kind of image of their city should be promoted by the brand.
3.6 Notes

1 See chapter 2, section 2.3 for more detail on each of these types of branding strategies. See also Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007.

2 Gladstone identifies two unique types of tourism-oriented cities: “leisure cities,” which are those with “employment in entertainment and recreation services 30% to 150% greater than the national average,” and “tourist metropolises,” which are those cities with “more than triple the national average of employment in tourism related industries” (1998: 6-7).

3 For example, when unveiling its “what happens here, stays here” branding campaign, which was set to debut at Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003, the NFL refused to allow the city to run the new television ads during the game because the league did not want to be associated with a campaign that promoted such a brazen and risqué image of the city. According to one of my interviewees (Interviewee 6) at R&R Partners, the advertising firm responsible for creating the ads, the controversy surrounding the ads actually created more buzz and brought more attention to the new campaign than they expected the ads to generate had they simply been shown during the game.

4 It is important to note here that this attempt at transforming the city’s image into one of a family-friendly destination was not an official branding effort led by the city. Instead, promotion of the family-friendly image was an effort by local hotel/casinos to appeal to a wider audience at a time when they were in danger of losing their market share to Indian casinos after the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988.

5 While no one is really calling for a return to promoting Las Vegas as a family-friendly destination, as we will see later in this chapter, the city’s popular image of adult-focused fantasy and escapism that is captured in its famous slogan “what happens here, stays here” is not universally accepted by locals or even by outsiders as the best possible image that the city should be conveying to the outside world.

6 Examples of such less-than-stellar portrayals of Detroit in popular media include Beverly Hills Cop, a film which opposes a cop from Detroit who plays fast and loose with the rules against the straight-laced and by-the-book police detectives of Beverly Hills; the film RoboCop, a dystopian portrayal of a crime-ridden future Detroit; Eminem’s film 8 Mile, a rap-drama that deals with issues of race and class in inner-city Detroit; the short-lived television series Detroit 1-8-7, a crime drama whose title blatantly associates Detroit with murder; and the AMC series Low Winter Sun, which has been described by one critic as a “bleak cop drama that uses Detroit as an apocalyptic open-air amphitheater” (Poniewozik 2013). Detroit has been used as the setting in other popular media, but in most cases it is just that—a setting—and the city is not prominently featured either visually, thematically, or even by name. For more on the representation of Detroit in popular media see Detroit Digital 2013.

7 The label “shrinking city” refers only to population decline in the city of Detroit. From its highest population of around 1.85 million in 1950, the city of Detroit today is home to only around 700,000 residents. In contrast, the population of metropolitan Detroit has continued to grow in the post-war period, from 3.7 million residents in 1950 to around 5.2 million today. Although metropolitan area growth rates are important, given that some branding efforts are coordinated over multiple political districts, when referencing population growth or decline in this project, my focus will only be on the population of core cities within a larger metropolitan area. I chose to limit my focus to these core cities because of the fact that it is the political-economic goals of city governments that are typically the driving force behind the initiation of urban branding campaigns. For example, while the metropolitan area may continue to grow in population due to suburbanization, the declining population of the urban core may prompt city leaders to start a branding campaign to highlight the benefits of living in the city with the purpose of luring residents back from the suburbs.
Interviewees 29, 32, and 35 all expressed the sentiment that tourism could be an important means of overcoming Detroit’s negative popular image.

Interviewee 36.

Interviewee 6.

According to research conducted by the city’s go-to ad firm, R&R Partners, before the family-friendly image phase, 10% of visitors were under the age of 21; during the 1990s (the height of the phase), 10% of visitors were under 21; and still today, only around 10% of visitors are under 21. Because this attempt to change the city’s image to attract families had no net effect, one of my interviewees stated that the LVCVA simply no longer has any interest in attracting the under-21 market (Interviewee 36).

Interviewee 6.

Interviewee 6.

The slogan “what happens here, stays here” has been quoted numerous times in movies and television shows, but often with the wording slightly changed to read, “what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” The misquoted phrase is used so often in popular culture that the LVCVA itself now uses the misquoted phrase, rather than the original wording of the slogan, on its website and in some of its advertising for the city.

Interviewee 8.

Attracting an NBA franchise to Las Vegas has been a top priority for the husband and wife team of Oscar and Carolyn Goodman, respectively the former and current mayor of Las Vegas. Shortly after becoming mayor, Carolyn Goodman, when asked about her commitment to building a new arena, given that her husband had tried unsuccessfully for 12 years to garner any interest from an NBA franchise, responded, “rest assured, I want an NBA team in our city as much as my husband did and have committed to doing that” (Toplikar 2012).

The city does have an agency—the Nevada Development Authority (NDA)—which is tasked with promoting the city for the purpose of attracting new investment. However, the disparity in how much funding the NDA receives compared to the LVCVA suggests that the city is comfortable with the LVCVA being the primary organization responsible for promoting its brand. For example, the NDA has an advertising budget of $1.2 million per year; the LVCVA’s research budget alone is between $7-8 million per year and its advertising budget for 2014 was over $92 million.

Interviewee 10.

Interviewee 37.

According to Sauer (2006), the slogan was credited with helping Las Vegas host a record 38.5 million visitors in 2005.

Interviewee 8.

Interviewee 34.

Interviewee 38.

Interviewee 41. A very similar sentiment was expressed by Interviewee 39.
Referring to the non-tourism aspects of the city as the “real” Orlando was a common theme among interviewees.

Interviewee 13.

Interviewee 16.

Interviewee 15.

Interviewee 5. See also Snyder 2006.

See Gattis 2006 and Kaplan 2004, each of whom has compiled a list of Houston’s nicknames and slogans used over the years.

Interviewee 40.

See Podagrosi 2005 for an examination of how the “revitalization” and “upgrading” of Houston’s downtown has displaced the city’s marginalized populations.

Interviewee 3.

Interviewee 2.

Interviewee 42.

Interviewee 11.

Interviewee 2.

Interviewee 21.

Interviewee 43.

Interviewee 44.

Interviewee 47.

Interviewee 45.

Interviewee 48.
EXPLAINING BRANDING SIMILARITIES AND REVEALING CITIZEN ATTITUDES TOWARD OFFICIAL BRANDING CAMPAIGNS

The city displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea.


### 4.1 Introduction

Like Calvino’s camel driver and sailor, whose different perspectives shape the way they each view the city, so too is our view of the city shaped by the perspective from which branding decisions are made. As the case histories presented in chapter 3 showed, there is a great deal of similarity in the branding practices of different cities—even in those cities where we would most expect differences to occur. This chapter argues that these similarities are due to the limited range of actors involved in the brand decision-making process, which inevitably narrows the perspective from which branding decisions are made. While the common explanation for why cities adopt similar branding practices focuses on macro-structural factors and the demands of capitalism, this chapter presents a more nuanced explanation that looks at the main actors in the organizational field of urban branding and the different economic, political, social, and cultural pressures placed upon these actors that cause them to act in a certain way. I argue that there are mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that 1) homogenize the actions of actors and organizations
working within the organizational field of urban branding, and 2) give these actors and organizations a sense of autonomy that causes/allows them to act in a non-responsive manner to the various pressures placed upon them from outside of the organizational field. I argue that these isomorphic tendencies within the organizational field of urban branding are the primary reason so many cities adopt such a limited and similar range of branding strategies; however, I also argue that these homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism can be broken if different types of mimetic, coercive, or normative forces are introduced that can cause actors to behave in new and different ways.

After detailing how institutional isomorphism manifests itself within the organizational field of urban branding, the second part of this chapter shifts our focus and begins to look at urban branding from a new perspective—that of the local citizen. Although citizen participation in the urban branding process is theorized to be necessary for optimizing a city’s brand, current branding practices largely neglect to take into account the opinions and ideas of local citizens. Is this because citizens simply don’t care about urban branding, or do current decision makers intentionally leave citizens out of the decision-making process? Drawing on survey evidence collected from community organizations in each case study city, this chapter shows that citizens in each city do in fact care about how their city is branded, they do want to be involved in making branding decisions, and, perhaps most importantly, their ideas for how their city should be branded are often quite different from the brand-creation and brand-promotion strategies currently used in most official branding campaigns.
4.2 Institutional Isomorphism within the Organizational Field of Urban Branding

In order to understand why cities adopt such similar branding practices, I argue that we first need to look at the actors involved in making decisions with regard to each aspect of urban branding: brand creation and brand promotion. As we saw in chapter 3, in each case study city the vast majority of decisions dealing with brand creation were made by elected officials (such as mayors and city council members), while decisions regarding brand promotion were made almost exclusively by each city’s convention and visitors bureau (CVB). Rather than look at these groups separately, however, I argue that we should instead see them as distinct parts of a larger group of actors who all have a similar end goal: creating a brand that will help accomplish their city’s political-economic goals. Drawing on DiMaggio and Powell’s ideas presented earlier in chapter 2, we can conceptualize this likeminded group of actors as operating within an “organizational field,” which they define as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 148). In this case, the “service” or “product” being produced is the city’s official brand. Conceptualizing the actors involved in each city’s brand decision-making processes in this way is useful for understanding why cities adopt similar branding practices because, as DiMaggio and Powell point out, “highly structured organizational fields provide a context in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture, and output” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 147).
But the organizational field of urban branding consists of more than just elected officials and employees of local CVBs. For example, in Las Vegas, the construction of the Smith Center for the Performing Arts was made possible by the efforts of the mayor and the city council, as well as through private funding from the Donald W. Reynolds foundation and the creative vision of four non-local design partners (David M. Schwarz Architects, Fisher Dachs Associates, Akustiks, and HKS Architects). Likewise, for the city’s brand promotion efforts, although the LVCVA is officially the agency responsible for marketing the city, much of the credit for Las Vegas’s successful tourism brand has to go to the local ad firm R&R Partners. But even here, while R&R came up with the slogan “what happens here, stays here,” a “high-priced New York director” and production crew were brought in to bring their own creative vision to the television commercials for the campaign.

In the other case study cities we see more of the same: brand creation projects involving both public and private actors and brand promotion efforts that are often farmed out to local and non-local advertising agencies, brand consultants, and image experts. For instance, in Orlando, a major private partner in the city’s new Creative Village is the Banc of America Community Development Corporation, while the city’s brand promotion efforts are spearheaded by WestWayne, an Atlanta-based advertising firm; in Houston, all of the city’s new stadiums were designed by the international architectural firm HOK Sport (renamed Populous in 2009), while the job of designing new slogans for the city has been given to multiple advertising firms over the years, including Fogarty & Klein and Bates Southwest; and in Detroit, much of the decision-making power behind its brand creation projects is held by the Detroit Economic Growth
Corporation, while the DMCVB’s “D. Cars, Culture, Gaming, Music, Sports” campaign was developed in cooperation with San Francisco-based Applied Storytelling, Inc.

While all of these actors work to contribute to the ultimate goal of developing a successful brand for a particular city, decision-making power is not shared equally amongst them, and they do not necessarily make up a coherent group of elites. At the same time, while there is a range of different types of actors working together, this range does not come close to approximating a pluralistic conception of urban power relations. Instead, I argue that the bulk of decision-making power within the organizational field of urban branding is held by a select group of actors. These main power holders—elected leaders and local CVBs—effectively control the size and scope of the organizational field by relinquishing some of their power to other actors (such as advertising agencies, private sector investors, architects and designers, image consultants, etc.) who they invite into the organizational field. However, I also argue that the type of actors invited to join the organizational field, along with the types of strategies that all of the actors within the organizational field are able to utilize, are influenced by different mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphic forces. These forces act to constrain the types of actors invited into the organizational field, as well as limit the types of strategies available to be used by these actors. These constraints ultimately result in the creation of brands that are ineffective in helping to accomplish the political-economic goals of city leaders.

4.2.1 Mimetic Isomorphic Forces

Uncertainty is perhaps the biggest stumbling block to effective urban branding today. Because urban branding is a relatively new phenomenon, and given the fact that most cities have little experience in developing branding campaigns, those in charge of
implementing a new campaign are often left wondering where to begin. According to DiMaggio and Powell, this uncertainty encourages imitation, for “when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations” (1983: 151). These mimetic forces influence brand creation by forcing cities to, in essence, “keep up with the Joneses.” For example, one of the ways that cities gain prestige today is by being able to showcase the newest, biggest, and most innovative architectural masterpiece or infrastructure project. While they may consciously know that competing cities are embarking on the same types of projects, city leaders often feel compelled to finance new stadiums, consumer-oriented entertainment complexes, or architecturally-innovative skyscrapers or other structures simply as a way to not be left behind in this race to the top. Tackling these major projects almost always requires private sector funding and top design talent, which brings corporate partners and non-local architectural and design firms into the organizational field.

Many of my interviewees readily admitted that they look to their competitors to see what they are doing, both in terms of brand creation,\textsuperscript{2} but especially when it comes to brand promotion.\textsuperscript{3} In several of my interviews, within a couple of minutes the interviewee had already mentioned the success of Las Vegas’s “what happens here, stays here” slogan. Although Las Vegas was not the first city to adopt a slogan, many interviewees looked to Las Vegas as the model example of what they hoped their city could achieve when it came to promoting their own brand. Looking to successful examples of brand promotion is largely driven again by the uncertainty most cities have of how to effectively promote their brand. There is only so much one can say or display
in a 30-second television commercial or even a full page print advertisement. Thus, cities see the successful slogan of Las Vegas or the successful “I Love NY” logo and use these as models for their own brand promotion efforts.

4.2.2 Coercive Isomorphic Forces

According to DiMaggio and Powell, coercive isomorphic forces are those that result from “both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function” (1983: 150). It is here that we see the effects of the “forces of capitalism” that are so often used in the literature as the only factor shaping urban branding decision-making processes. Although I argue that the forces of capitalism are not the sole determining factor, they should not be dismissed, for they do have real and limiting effects on the types of strategies that decision makers feel they can use to accomplish their goals. The need for local leaders to display to their constituents that the local economy is not only stable, but also growing, causes leaders to focus on brand creation projects that will appeal to the widest possible audience and generate the most revenue. Thus, it should not be surprising that consumer-oriented brand creation projects (which are often generic in theme and mirror similar projects in other cities) often win out over alternatives, such as support for local artists or preserving and enhancing local cultural artifacts, both of which may appeal to a smaller audience and generate less income for the city, even though they may do a better job of differentiating a city from its competitors.

Other coercive pressures include cuts in funding from higher levels of government, which, as we saw in chapter 1, force local leaders to act in an
entrepreneurial manner to find ways to make up for this lost revenue. Such funding cuts mainly impact brand-creation efforts, as local leaders partner with private industry to create the mass-appeal type of projects discussed above. However, funding sources also affect brand-promotion efforts as well. As noted earlier, the majority of brand promotion is carried out by local CVBs, which have as their mission to promote the city in a way that will appeal to conventioneers and tourists. But aside from this mission, CVBs are almost always funded by some sort of hotel or tourism tax that is levied on visitors to the city. Thus, even if elected leaders place the responsibility for promoting the city’s brand in the hands of the CVB with the hope that it will expand its mission and work to promote all aspects of the city to all audiences, CVBs will still tend to concentrate on attracting the convention and tourist market because that is where their main source of funding comes from. This very point came up in some of my interviews in Las Vegas and Orlando. For instance, a member of the LVCVA noted that their target audience (tourists) did not care about the local culture and thus there was no “financial incentive” for them to promote it. Moreover, a member of Visit Orlando told me that while they work with the local chamber of commerce and the local economic development commission to make sure their branding does not conflict with those organizations’ goals, they are at heart a tourism organization. As this individual made clear, “60 percent of our budget comes from the room tax, so our objective is to make sure those rooms are filled.”

In Las Vegas and Orlando especially, the tourism industry asserts its influence not only through the funding of CVBs, but also through having a direct say in how these organizations operate on a daily basis. Visit Orlando is a trade association with 1,200 corporate members, but from conversations with employees and simply by viewing their
brand-promotion products, it is apparent that the major tourism players (e.g. Disney, Universal, etc.) have an undue influence regarding what will be showcased and how it will be promoted. For instance, one interviewee at Visit Orlando noted that there is a marketing committee consisting of “Disney, Universal, and others” within the organization that must approve a campaign before it is rolled out, and that because most images appearing in their branding efforts are of the local theme parks, Disney and Universal have to approve how these images are used before they can be incorporated into official brand-promotion products.6 In Las Vegas, the LVCVA is unique from most CVBs in that it is not a membership organization. Instead, the LVCVA is a quasi-governmental agency, still funded by a room tax, but governed by a 14 member board of directors. The board of directors includes eight representatives from Clark County, the city of Las Vegas, and surrounding cities, and six representatives from the private sector. Although these private sector board members are supposed to represent both “the hotel industry and general business interest” (LVCVA 2014), five of the six members represent the local hotel and gaming industry, while only one represents the more encompassing realm of “general business interest.” Moreover, two of my interviewees, one a local journalist and the other a local historian, each stated that it is a well-known fact locally that the “casinos are really in charge [of the LVCVA],”7 and that the LVCVA is in essence a “publicly funded marketing arm of the casino industry.”8

4.2.3 Normative Isomorphic Forces

The final type of isomorphic force influencing those working in the organizational field of urban branding comes in the form of normative pressures. These pressures stem primarily from professionalization, the filtering of personnel within specific
organizations, and “the growth and elaboration of professional networks that span organizations” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 152). For instance, all of the mayors of our case study cities are members of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. This conference holds meetings twice a year where mayors from across the country gather to discuss policies and share ideas and information. Panel sessions at meetings have included urban branding related topics, such as “Marketing and Branding Your City,” while the economic research arm of the conference, the Council on Metro Economies and the New American City, works on “cutting edge issues that will define the New American City,” including “the use of technology in re-branding cities, the role of globally competitive infrastructure, and innovative public-private partnerships” (U.S. Conference of Mayors 2014).

Other professional networking opportunities include the annual conference for those working in the destination marketing field, which includes employees of the LVCVA, Visit Orlando, the GHCVB, and the DMCVB. Members from each of these organizations attend the Destination Marketing Association International’s annual convention, which provides them with an opportunity to network, to share ideas, and to learn what others in their field are doing with regard to creating and promoting their respective urban brands. Additionally, representatives from each city’s CVB attend dozens of other tourism-related conferences and conventions each year in order to network with those in the industry. According to one Visit Orlando employee, their organization is represented at over 200 conferences each year, wherein they not only provide a presence for their city, but also have the opportunity to interact with and observe best practices from other CVBs that are also in attendance.
While interacting with and learning from similar organizations and individuals results in the rapid diffusion of current urban branding models, perhaps even more important to the isomorphic tendencies seen in the field of urban branding are the professionalization and filtering of personnel within organizations. One of my interviewees was not shy about referring to her colleagues as an “incestuous group,” noting that individuals who work on and lead city marketing campaigns tend to “all move around from city to city” in order to put their expertise on the subject to good use. When asked about the background of employees working at each CVB, the general response from my interviewees was that most employees had worked in tourism or marketing before. One Visit Orlando employee noted that “we are a big organization, so we want the best and the brightest and those who have experience doing this kind of work.” Some CVB interviewees also admitted to preferring job candidates who had done similar work for other cities over qualified but less experienced local candidates.

This preference for “expertise” in the field of branding and marketing over knowledge of the local community and culture is also seen in the farming out of key branding tasks to other professionals. Despite the fact that the majority of CVB employees have backgrounds in communications or marketing, all of the CVBs in this study sought out the expertise of top local advertising firms or even non-local ad agencies to help them craft their brand image. In addition to moving from city to city to share their expertise, the “incestuous” nature of those working in the industry can also be seen by the large number of individuals who at one time worked for major ad agencies and who now work directly for the CVB (or vice versa). These connections reinforce the relationships between these top firms and the CVB, which oftentimes leaves out smaller, innovative,
and more locally-connected ad agencies (such as the Houston-based ad firm ttweak, whose role in Houston’s counter branding campaign will be discussed in chapter 5).

Taken together, the mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphic forces operating within the organizational field of urban branding serve to limit the available actors and strategies that could be used to create and promote urban brands. The main decision makers within the organizational field of urban branding—elected leaders and CVBs—do relinquish some of their decision-making power and enter into partnerships with various other organizations. However, the various pressures on these main decision makers cause them to limit these partnerships to a select group of actors, as well as limit the types of strategies that are deemed appropriate for creating and promoting their brand. In the end, the institutional isomorphism present within the organizational field of urban branding serves to limit the perspective from which branding decisions are made. By leaving local citizens out of the branding process, current decision makers are failing to utilize the very actors whose ideas and support could be critical to solving many of the current problems associated with urban branding as it is practiced today.

4.3 Citizen Attitudes toward Current Branding Efforts

Up to this point, I have shown that urban branding is in many ways a top-down, exclusive process, which in most cases results in brands that cannot live up to the lofty goals city leaders hope branding will help them achieve. To remedy this situation, I argue that the organizational field of urban branding needs to expand; new actors need to be brought into the decision-making process, specifically members of the local community who can bring a new perspective by sharing what they feel is unique about their city that might be of interest to outsiders. By widening the perspective from which branding
decisions are made, citizens will also find it easier to claim ownership over the brand, thus making it more likely that they will help to promote the brand as well. However, while the current method of creating and promoting brands may not be ideal, working to make the process more inclusive may be a difficult and fruitless endeavor if citizens simply do not care about how their city is branded and promoted to the outside world. To gauge how informed citizens are about their city’s current branding efforts and to understand their level of interest in the process, I conducted a survey of all community organizations in each case study city. As the results of this survey show, citizens not only care about how their city is branded, but their level of interest and the specific ideas they have about how their city should be branded both lend credence to the notion that branding outcomes can be improved if ordinary citizens are allowed to participate in the brand decision-making process.

Because limited resources prevented a full scale community-wide survey in each city, I instead surveyed all organizations listed in the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State, and Local Organizations* for each of my case study cities. This resource is a comprehensive list of all nonprofit membership organizations that operate within each city, including trade and professional associations; social welfare and public affairs organizations; labor unions; fraternal and patriotic organizations; religious, sports, and hobby groups; and various other cultural, educational, and special-interest community groups. Table 4.1 gives a breakdown of the total number of groups operating in each city, the total number of surveys distributed, the number of responses received, and the survey response rates for each city.\textsuperscript{13}
TABLE 4.1
SURVEY SUMMARY STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>Surveys Distributed</th>
<th>Responses Received</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>1,025</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>1,068</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey asked 10 multiple choice questions that attempted to 1) gauge the responding organization’s awareness of, and opinion on, their city’s past and current branding campaigns; 2) see if the organization had been invited to participate or had voluntarily tried to participate in branding efforts; and 3) discover what aspects of their city these organizations would include in their city’s brand. Starting with point 1, we see in table 4.2 that a vast majority of community organizations are indeed familiar with their city’s urban branding efforts. Although they may not be highly versed in the details of their city’s branding campaign or know the specific goals that branding efforts are meant to accomplish, most groups are aware that some sort of branding efforts are being undertaken by city leaders.

In figure 4.1, we see that not only are community organizations aware of their city’s branding efforts, but at least 85 percent of respondents in each city felt they knew enough about these efforts to offer an opinion on them. When asked on 5-point scale from “completely satisfied” to “completely dissatisfied” about their level of satisfaction with current branding efforts, the most frequent response in three of our four cities was “somewhat dissatisfied.” The one exception was Las Vegas, where the most frequent response was “somewhat satisfied.” In Orlando, Houston, and Detroit, the second most
TABLE 4.2

FAMILIARITY WITH CURRENT URBAN BRANDING EFFORTS\(^\text{15}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Familiar with city’s branding efforts</th>
<th>Unaware of city’s branding efforts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas(n=139)</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando (n=205)</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston (n=422)</td>
<td>330</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78.2%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit (n=356)</td>
<td>297</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>83.4%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* 1 Responses and percentages listed may not equate to the total number of responses received as some respondents failed to provide an answer to this question.

Note: 1 = completely satisfied; 2 = somewhat satisfied; 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 4 = somewhat dissatisfied; 5 = completely dissatisfied; 6 = no opinion.

Figure 4.1: Level of satisfaction with current branding efforts\(^\text{16}\)
popular response was “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” which could be an indication that many organizations in these cities know about local branding efforts but not enough to have a strong opinion one way or the other. In Las Vegas, this neutral response was not chosen very frequently, with the second most popular response being “somewhat dissatisfied.” This is likely a result of the high visibility of Las Vegas’s branding efforts and the popularity of its “what happens here, stays here” slogan within popular culture. As table 4.1 showed, not a single respondent in Las Vegas indicated that it was unaware of the city’s branding efforts. This high visibility of the Las Vegas brand resulted in over 85 percent of respondents having a definite opinion one way or the other, with a majority of organizations (55 percent) exhibiting a favorable opinion towards the city’s branding efforts. However, while it is much smaller than in the other three cities, there is still a sizable portion of the Las Vegas community (nearly 1 in 3 organizations) that is dissatisfied with how their city currently chooses to promote itself to the outside world.

To get a better sense of how much citizens know about local branding efforts and to better understand their opinions on these efforts, survey question 5 asked each respondent to rate how effective they believed branding efforts had been at attracting different target audiences to their city (see table 4.3). In addition, this question also asked respondents to rate how effective local branding efforts had been at fostering civic pride within the local community. Because a brand that fosters civic pride should forge a connection with citizens and give them a sense of ownership over the brand, a city that scores high on this portion of the question should face less citizen opposition to current branding efforts than a city that receives a low score.
TABLE 4.3

PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT URBAN BRANDING EFFORTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brand appeals to target audience</th>
<th>Brand fosters civic pride</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Investors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas (n=139)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful / No effect</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando (n=205)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful / No effect</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston (n=422)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful / No effect</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit (n=356)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful / No effect</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 Responses and percentages listed may not equate to the total number of responses received as some respondents failed to provide an answer to this question. A few respondents also provided only partial answers (e.g. providing their opinion on the brand’s effectiveness for appealing to tourists and fostering civic pride but failing to provide a response for the residents and investors categories).

Looking at table 4.3, we see that citizens in Las Vegas seem pretty in tune with the problems associated with the Las Vegas brand. Only a third of respondents believe the city’s branding efforts have been successful at attracting residents, slightly more (37 percent) believe the brand has been successful at attracting new investors, but nearly all respondents agree that the Las Vegas brand has been a major success in attracting tourists. Moreover, despite the racy and at times controversial image promoted by the city, Las Vegas again stands out as the one city in our group of case studies where a majority of citizens feel that local branding efforts have helped to foster a sense of civic pride within the local community.
In Orlando, where the main goal of branding efforts is to attract tourists, we see that, like in Las Vegas, a large majority (nearly 93 percent) of citizens feel these efforts have been largely successful. However, unlike in Las Vegas, citizens in Orlando exhibit more belief in the effectiveness of their city’s brand in attracting residents and investors, which should not be too surprising given Orlando’s non-controversial, family-friendly image. Still, while the numbers for these two categories are higher than they are for Las Vegas, there is nearly a 50/50 split amongst Orlando residents when it comes to how they rate the effectiveness of their brand for attracting residents and investors. Orlando also diverges from its tourism-oriented counterpart when it comes to the effectiveness of its brand in fostering civic pride. Less than a third of responding organizations feel that the Orlando brand makes citizens feel proud of their city, which could be due to the lack of visibility of branding efforts locally, or to a sense of inferiority when it comes to Orlando’s branding efforts compared to those of its tourism rival, Las Vegas.¹⁸

Looking at the responses given by organizations in Houston, we again see a nearly 50/50 split regarding the effectiveness of that city’s branding efforts at attracting residents and investors, with slightly more people feeling the brand has been unsuccessful or has had no effect on attracting residents and slightly more feeling the brand has been successful at attracting investors. For the other two categories—attracting tourists and fostering civic pride—the numbers are a bit more skewed. Less than a third of Houstonians believe their city’s brand has been successful at attracting tourists, while a majority of respondents (55 percent) feel that local branding efforts have failed to foster civic pride. Finally, the numbers for Detroit show that a majority of citizens in that city feel that their branding efforts have failed on all accounts. More than 60 percent of
respondents believe that the Detroit brand has been unsuccessful or has had no effect on attracting any of the three target groups or at fostering civic pride.

Because previous studies of the branding process and the case histories presented in chapter 3 both characterize urban branding as an exclusive, largely top-down process with little to no community involvement, survey question 2 sought to gauge how much local officials actually attempt to reach out to the community to elicit citizen participation in the brand decision-making process. As table 4.4 shows, although the majority of organizations (at least 75 percent in each city) were not asked to participate, there were still a sizable number of groups that actually were sought out and invited to participate in branding efforts. The number of organizations invited to participate ranged from 26 each in Las Vegas and Orlando to 79 in Houston and 86 in Detroit. While still a small percentage of all community organizations active in each city, considering the coordination and cooperation needed to come to any sort of decision when multiple stakeholders or parties are involved, the fact that dozens of community organizations were invited to participate in branding efforts in each city seems to contradict the notion that urban branding is an exclusive process.

While it cannot be denied that a great deal of coordination and cooperation is needed to make decisions when so many actors are involved, the prospect that urban branding is really an inclusive rather than an exclusive process seems to diminish if we look a little closer at the actual types of organizations being invited to participate (see table 4.5). Given the types of actors that we know normally make up the organizational field of urban branding, I divided the community organizations in each city into two categories: “growth-oriented organizations” and “all other organizations.” Growth-
TABLE 4.4
INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN URBAN BRANDING EFFORTS$^{19}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Invited to participate</th>
<th>Not invited to participate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=139)</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=205)</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=422)</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=356)</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emergent oriented organizations include chambers of commerce, trade and tourism organizations (e.g. CVBs), and trade, business, and commercial organizations, which are the three types of groups listed in the Encyclopedia of Associations that most closely approximate the actors we know to be important decision makers in the urban branding process.

TABLE 4.5
TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS INVITED TO PARTICIPATE$^{20}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Growth-oriented organizations</th>
<th>All other organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=26)</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=26)</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=79)</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=86)</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we see in table 4.5, the majority of organizations invited to participate in official branding efforts are indeed growth-oriented organizations.$^{21}$ While this diminishes the notion that urban branding is an inclusive process, there are still a handful
of community organizations in each city in the “all other organizations” category that have also been invited to participate in the branding process. However, urban branding as it is currently practiced again looks more exclusive than inclusive if we look at how it involves these two different types of organizations. Although some organizations in the “all other organizations” category are indeed invited to participate, these organizations are less involved in the actual brand decision-making process than are their growth-oriented counterparts. As table 4.6 demonstrates, while nearly all of the invited community organizations (both growth-oriented and all other organizations) were asked to help promote the brand, at least 70 percent of growth-oriented organizations in each city were asked to provide feedback on current branding efforts and were asked to offer input regarding how the brand could be improved. In contrast, only 36 percent of all other organizations were asked for similar input in Houston, with this percentage diminishing for each of our other cities, all the way down to zero organizations being asked for this type of input in Orlando.

Inviting community organizations to participate in branding efforts, however, is not the only way that urban branding can be judged an inclusive or exclusive process. Although the community organizations in the “all other organizations” category are given a relatively minor role when they are invited to participate, these types of organizations can still seek out a larger decision-making role in their city’s branding efforts by volunteering to participate, actively sharing their ideas and opinions, and pressuring decision makers to adopt various branding strategies. These actions are indicative of some of the pull factors discussed in chapter 3 that were hypothesized to potentially lead to variation in the branding strategies used in different cities. If we look at table 4.7, we
TABLE 4.6
WAYS ORGANIZATIONS WERE ASKED TO PARTICIPATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization was asked to help promote current brand</th>
<th>Organization was asked to provide feedback on current branding efforts and/or asked to offer ways to improve current brand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-oriented orgs.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other orgs.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-oriented orgs.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other orgs.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-oriented orgs.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other orgs.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-oriented orgs.</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other orgs.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

see that while the percentages are not large, there are a fair number of groups that have voluntarily attempted to get involved in their city’s urban branding efforts. In fact, in each city, more groups have tried to participate voluntarily than have been invited to participate by local officials.

TABLE 4.7
VOLUNTARY ATTEMPTS TO PARTICIPATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volunteered to participate</th>
<th>Did not volunteer to participate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=139)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=205)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=422)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=356)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Responses and percentages listed do not equate to the total number of responses received as some respondents failed to provide an answer to this question.
However, as table 4.8 shows, these pressures placed on decision makers via voluntary attempts at participation do not usually get a warm response. In all of our cities, more than two-thirds of voluntary attempts to participate in official branding efforts were met with either no response from local officials or with an acknowledgment of the offer to participate but no directions for how the organization could get involved. This type of response (or non-response) from local officials is a clear example of how current actors and organizations involved in urban branding act autonomously in relation to actors from outside the organizational field who might have a stake in how a city is branded, thus reinforcing the notion that urban branding, at least as it is currently practiced, is an exclusive rather than an inclusive process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Acknowledgement of offer but no directions for how to participate</th>
<th>Acknowledgement of offer and helpful directions for how to participate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=46)</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=33)</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=86)</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=94)</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of growth-oriented organizations, most community organizations are not invited to participate in local urban branding efforts; those that are invited to participate are not asked to provide any real decision-making input; and those
that place any sort of pressure on decision makers by voluntarily attempting to get involved in local branding efforts are more often than not given the cold shoulder by local officials. Yet, while much of the citizen dismay with current branding efforts could very well be due to their lack of incorporation into the brand decision-making process, another possible source of dissatisfaction could be that citizens do not like the content of the brand that is being used to promote their city. To discover if this is indeed the case, question 7 on each city’s survey asked respondents to choose which aspects of their city they feel would be most effective in helping to market and promote their city to outsiders. The current brand-creation strategies used in each city were offered as answer choices, as were alternative features that could be used to construct and/or promote a brand. Such alternative features include less consumer-oriented aspects of the city, such as medical and educational facilities, local geographic features, and local history and culture (see figure 4.2).

As figure 4.2 demonstrates, whereas current branding efforts focus on a limited set of local features, survey respondents were pretty consistent in choosing a wide variety of urban characteristics that they would use to create and promote their city’s brand. In Las Vegas, current brand-creation efforts focus largely on building new fine-arts facilities (like the Smith Center) and garnering support for a new sports arena, while brand-promotion efforts focus almost exclusively on entertainment and shopping venues (e.g. the Strip culture of indulgent consumerism). However, while at least half of all survey respondents believed these to be important features to be included in the Las Vegas brand, local geographic features (such as the city’s proximity to the surrounding mountains and nearby Lake Mead) and the city’s local culture were cited just as often, if not more often, than entertainment and shopping venues and efforts to build a new arena.
Figure 4.2: Urban characteristics that citizens would use to brand their city

Las Vegas

1. Entertainment and shopping venues
2. Museums and fine-arts facilities
3. Medical and educational facilities
4. Building a new sports stadium or arena
5. Facts and figures on the local economy
6. Local geography
7. Local culture

Note: Red columns indicate characteristics featured in current branding efforts. Y-axis represents the number of organizations choosing each response.

Orlando

1. Theme parks
2. Museums and fine-arts facilities
3. Medical and educational facilities
4. Sports and entertainment venues
5. Downtown redevelopment projects
6. Facts and figures on the local economy
7. Local culture

Note: Red columns indicate characteristics featured in current branding efforts. Y-axis represents the number of organizations choosing each response.

Houston

1. Sports, entertainment, and shopping venues
2. Museums and fine-arts facilities
3. Medical and educational facilities
4. Downtown redevelopment efforts
5. Facts and figures on the local economy
6. Local geography
7. Local culture

Note: Red columns indicate characteristics featured in current branding efforts. Y-axis represents the number of organizations choosing each response.

Detroit

1. Entertainment and shopping venues
2. Museums and fine-arts facilities
3. Medical and educational facilities
4. Sports venues
5. Local geography
6. Ability to host major events
7. Local culture

Note: Red columns indicate characteristics featured in current branding efforts. Y-axis represents the number of organizations choosing each response.

Figure 4.2: Urban characteristics that citizens would use to brand their city.
In Orlando, the city’s medical and educational facilities were chosen by over 90 percent of respondents as an important feature that should be included in the city’s brand, making it the most frequently chosen local feature, even eclipsing the area’s local theme parks in importance to survey respondents. And while theme parks and sports and entertainment venues were deemed to be key features that should be promoted for the city, local culture was again high on the list, with over 70 percent of respondents noting that they believed the city’s culture was a feature that would prove effective in future urban branding efforts. In Houston, every aspect of the city listed as an answer choice was selected by at least 55 percent of respondents, showing once again that local citizens believe current branding strategies should be expanded to include features not currently being included in the city’s brand. Much the same can be said of Detroit, where every urban characteristic offered for inclusion in branding efforts was chosen by at least 56 percent of respondents. Detroit was also the one city where local culture was by far the most popular feature chosen by respondents, with over 83 percent of respondents choosing this as an important feature to include in branding efforts.

If we take a closer look at how current branding strategies compare to possible alternative branding strategies, we see in table 4.9 that local citizens overwhelmingly prefer strategies that would include a wide range of local features. Even in Las Vegas, the city where citizens seemed to be the most satisfied with current branding efforts, only 9.4 percent of respondents preferred a branding strategy that would continue to use only the currently-highlighted features of the city. In the other three cities, well over 90 percent of all respondents prefer branding strategies that would expand the set of features used to promote the city to outsiders.
TABLE 4.9

URBAN CHARACTERISTICS CITIZENS WOULD USE IN BRANDING EFFORTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Currently-highlighted features only</th>
<th>Other features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas (n=139)</td>
<td>13 (9.4%)</td>
<td>120 (86.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando (n=205)</td>
<td>7 (3.4%)</td>
<td>195 (95.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston (n=422)</td>
<td>22 (5.2%)</td>
<td>398 (94.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit (n=356)</td>
<td>5 (1.4%)</td>
<td>347 (97.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Responses and percentages listed do not equate to the total number of responses received as some respondents failed to provide an answer to this question.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter focused our attention on the different perspectives from which branding decisions can be made. The first part of the chapter showed that the similarities in branding practices identified in chapter 3 stem from the narrow perspective of those actors who currently make up the organizational field of urban branding. However, this narrow perspective exists not because current decision makers make up a coherent group of elites; instead, decision makers are simply actors operating within an organizational field, albeit one that is rife with mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that shape both who these main decision makers invite into the organizational field, as well as the types of strategies that are deemed viable for creating and promoting urban brands. The second part of the chapter transitioned to a new perspective—that of the local citizen, an actor who is more often than not left out of current branding decisions. Through surveys of local community organizations in each city, we saw that not only are citizens aware of
current branding efforts, but they are also more often than not dissatisfied with these efforts. Moreover, when compared to the small handful of local characteristics that are currently used in brand creation and brand promotion efforts, survey results also show that citizens prefer branding strategies that showcase a much wider range of their city’s features.

In chapter 5, we will try to deduce exactly what these citizen attitudes mean for the practice of urban branding going forward. The survey results show that citizens are definitely bothered by certain aspects of the current urban branding process, but do these results simply represent an idle frustration that is too weak to alter the decision-making status quo? Or have citizens found ways to mobilize and work together to promote change in the form of more inclusive counter campaigns that rival current urban branding efforts? As the next chapter will show, although a certain level of dissatisfaction with the current urban branding process exists in all four case study cities, citizen-led counter campaigns have only arisen in Houston and Detroit. Thus, in addition to exploring these counter campaigns—looking at how they began and how they sought to challenge official branding efforts—a main goal of chapter 5 will be to understand why they arose in Houston and Detroit but not in Las Vegas or Orlando. Finally, this chapter will also look to uncover whether these counter campaigns were able to break the homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of urban branding and bring about any sort of noticeable and meaningful change in official branding efforts.
4.5 Notes

1 Interviewee 6.

2 Interviewee 15.

3 Interviewees 2, 3, 13, 35, and 38. See also Maxwell 2006.

4 Interviewee 37.

5 Interviewee 49.

6 Interviewee 15.

7 Interviewee 10.

8 Interviewee 9.

9 Interviewee 15.

10 Interviewee 3.

11 Interviewee 15.

12 Interviewees 37 and 49.

13 See Appendix for details on the specific procedures used to conduct these surveys.

14 See Appendix for an example of the questions and response choices used in the surveys.

15 Table 4.2 was constructed from responses to question 1 on each city’s respective survey. “Familiarity with city’s branding efforts” is a composite of response choices 1 and 2, while “Unaware of city’s branding efforts” is drawn from response choice 3.

16 Figure 4.1 was constructed from responses to question 6 on each city’s respective survey.

17 Table 4.3 was constructed from responses to question 5 on each city’s respective survey.

18 According to one of my interviewees (Interviewee 13), there is not a great sense of brand awareness in Orlando. As this person stated, “unlike Vegas, I don’t think most Orlandoans even know what our slogan is. The commercials air in markets far away…so we rarely see them.” This same interviewee also noted that part of the problem is that Orlando has changed its slogan multiple times and can’t find the “magic” that Las Vegas has found with its slogan. In his words, “our slogans never seem to catch on the way ‘what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas’ did.”

19 Table 4.4 was constructed from responses to question 2 on each city’s respective survey. “Invited to participate” is a composite of response choices 1-7 (1-6 for Houston), while “Not invited to participate” is drawn from response choice 8 (7 for Houston).

20 The Encyclopedia of Associations divides organizations into 18 different categories (see Appendix, table A.1). I collapsed these 18 categories down to 5 based on similarities in the goals and/or membership bases of various organizations (see Appendix, table A.2). These five revised categories are 1) social, cultural, and leisure organizations; 2) growth-oriented organizations; 3) special interest organizations; 4) labor organizations; and 5) other organizations. In table 4.5, “Growth-oriented
organizations” represents organizations in category 2, while “All other organizations” is a composite representing all organizations contained in categories 1, 3, 4, and 5.

21 It would obviously be redundant for the agency heading up branding efforts to invite itself to participate. Thus, given that the “growth-oriented organizations” category includes CVBs, the main agency known to conduct the branding efforts in each city (the LVCVA, Visit Orlando, the GHCVB, and the DMCVB) is not included in the numbers presented in tables 4.4 or 4.5.

22 Table 4.6 was constructed from responses to question 3 on each city’s respective survey. “Organization was asked to help promote current brand” is drawn from response choice 5 (and 6 when applicable), while “Organization was asked to provide feedback on current branding efforts and/or asked to offer ways to improve current brand” is a composite of response choices 1-4 (and 6 when applicable).

23 Several factors could be responsible for why more organizations have not tried to get involved in their city’s urban branding efforts. For one, the organization itself may simply have no interest in getting involved in urban branding efforts, not because they don’t care about the issue, but simply because the issue is not part of the organization’s overall mission. Some organizations may welcome the opportunity to be involved, but simply do not know enough about the issue to know the appropriate person or local agency to contact to volunteer their involvement. Finally, other organizations may want to be involved, but are discouraged from even attempting to volunteer their time or ideas because they feel their participation will not be welcomed by local officials. In such cases, there may still be a latent interest in urban branding on the part of local citizens that, while not observable here, may show itself in other forms (see chapter 5).

24 Table 4.7 was constructed from responses to question 8 on each city’s respective survey. “Volunteered to participate” is a composite of response choices 1-7 (1-6 for Houston), while “Did not volunteer to participate” is drawn from response choice 8 (7 for Houston).

25 Table 4.8 was constructed from responses to question 10 on each city’s respective survey. “No response” is drawn from response choice 1; “Acknowledgement of offer, but no directions for how to participate” is drawn from response choice 2; and “Acknowledgement of offer, and helpful directions for how to participate” is drawn from response choice 4. Response choice 3 (“acknowledgement of offer, but asked to participate in a different way than we wanted to”) was not selected by any respondents. Only two respondents selected response choice 5 (“other”), but the written comments to each of these responses indicated that one was closest to response choice 2 and the other closest to response choice 4, and thus these responses were changed and are reflected accordingly in the table.

26 Figure 4.2 was constructed from responses to question 7 on each city’s respective survey.

27 Table 4.9 was constructed from responses to question 7 on each city’s respective survey. The category “Currently-highlighted features only” was created by tallying completed surveys that only marked one or all of the following responses: 1, 2, and/or 4 (Las Vegas); 1, 2, 4, and/or 5 (Orlando); 1, 2, and/or 4 (Houston); and 1, 2, and/or 4 (Detroit). This category represents the characteristics of each city currently being featured in branding campaigns (e.g. sports stadiums, theme parks, fine-arts facilities, and other consumer-oriented entertainment venues). The category “Other features” was created by tallying completed surveys that included at least one response choice not included in the “Currently-highlighted features only” category. This “Other features” category represents survey respondents who may approve of the currently-highlighted features but who would prefer other aspects of the city be showcased as well. Thus, a respondent listed in this category may be okay with creating and promoting consumer-oriented venues but would also like to see the brand expanded to include aspects of the local culture, the local economy, local geographic features, etc.
CHAPTER 5

BREAKING INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM:
CITIZEN-LED COUNTER BRANDING CAMPAIGNS

The city must never be confused with the words that describe it.


5.1 Introduction

From what has been presented thus far, the future of urban branding looks rather bleak. Cities continue to use the same narrow set of branding strategies time and again, hoping to distinguish themselves from the crowd, but almost always failing to do so effectively. Citizens often feel no connection with their city’s brand, are rarely asked to participate in official branding efforts, and are on the whole dissatisfied with the scope and direction of current branding campaigns. In the last chapter I argued that it is the homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of urban branding that are largely responsible for these negative side-effects of what are otherwise well-intentioned branding efforts. Given the non-responsiveness of decision makers to community pressures and the voluntary attempts by local citizens to participate in branding efforts, a key question presents itself: can institutional isomorphism ever be broken through the actions of local citizens?
In this chapter I will argue that the answer is yes, so long as citizens can find a way to counter the mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphic forces already acting on individuals operating within the organizational field of urban branding. More specifically, this chapter will look at the potential that is created for official urban branding efforts to change course when citizens decide to take matters into their own hands and undertake their own urban branding efforts. By participating in unofficial urban branding campaigns, citizens can provide successful examples of alternative branding strategies that can serve as a mimetic force to bring about change in official branding efforts. Turning once again to our case study cities, this chapter will look at how citizen-led counter branding campaigns in Houston and Detroit have helped to shape (or re-shape) the actions of local decision-makers. By looking at the real changes that are occurring in some official branding efforts, the chapter concludes by showing that these citizen actions are indeed capable of breaking the institutional isomorphism that currently characterizes the organizational field of urban branding.

5.2 Citizen Action: Counter Campaigns in Houston and Detroit

When citizens are unhappy with their city’s branding efforts, two possible avenues present themselves: they can resign themselves to the status quo, or they can act to try to effect change. As chapter 4 showed, in most cases in which citizens tried to act by engaging directly with those responsible for official branding efforts, their efforts were largely ignored. In two of our case study cities, however, citizens were not deterred by these rebuffs, but instead continued to act. Because they were not allowed to offer input into official branding efforts, citizens in Houston and Detroit launched their own counter campaigns in an effort to present a more honest picture to the world of what their
particular city was all about. In Houston, this counter campaign was primarily focused on promoting the city in a new way. Houstonians tend to be proud of their city and the direction in which it is heading, but feel that their city is not showcased to the world in the most effective manner. Thus, the counter campaign in Houston was in many ways a direct challenge to the marketing efforts of the GHCVB. On the other hand, Detroit’s counter campaign was less focused on challenging the DMCVB’s promotion of the city and more about finding ways to improve conditions on the ground (e.g. brand-creation efforts), as well as discovering unique and innovative ways to promote their city in a more positive light (e.g. brand-promotion efforts).

5.2.1 Houston

If we recall from chapter 3, Houston has spent tens of millions of dollars over the past few decades trying repeatedly to come up with a memorable slogan that suitably defines what the city is all about. Summing up a city in a single phrase, however, is nearly impossible for any city to do. Yet, this failure to find an encompassing slogan is not the reason so many Houstonians chose to participate in an unofficial counter branding campaign for the city. Instead, as one of my interviewees explained, back in the early 2000s, Houstonians “definitely had a self-esteem problem. This was mainly due to the city’s portrayal in the national media and to the fact that it found itself at or near the top of several dubious lists, like America’s fattest city, America’s smoggiest city, etc.” Local journalist Catherine Matusow (2007) concurs, noting that at that time, Houstonians were “awash in shame-based thinking, having internalized the country’s skewed image of their home…[they] walked around with chips on their shoulders, feeling not proud but insecure about their city.” It was this notion of outsiders having a “skewed image” of
Houston that initially inspired the counter campaign’s co-founders, David Thompson and Randy Twaddle, to embark on their unofficial branding effort. According to Thompson:

We thought, [Houston] is just so horribly perceived on the outside, and so misunderstood, people just have no idea the level of sophistication in this town and how permeable it is, and how it’s one of the few places it just doesn’t matter what family you’re born into, you can do anything you want, and just on and on, the diversity, and none of that is being manifested from an external communications point of view. And we were like, man, it would be so great to have a real campaign, an authentic campaign for the city. We both felt the campaign needed to acknowledge other peoples’ perceptions of us…so Randy’s like, yeah, the campaign should say it’s hot, it’s humid, we’ve got traffic, but it’s worth it because we’ve got great restaurants, incredible museums, and that sort of thing, And I’m like, yeah, Houston, it’s worth it. And that’s the way it began.³

At first glance, the “Houston. It’s Worth It” (or HIWI, for short) counter campaign does not appear to be much different than previous promotional attempts for the city—after all, it is just another in a long list of attempted slogans. However, the perspective from which this slogan arises and the goal it seeks to attain are much different from the official slogans crafted by city’s convention and visitors bureau. For instance, Thompson and Twaddle—two artists who formed the multi-disciplinary, strategic communications and design consultancy “ttweak” in 1998 with the goal of bringing a “cultural perspective to corporate, political, and non-profit enterprises” (ttweak 2014a)—see the HIWI campaign as an authentic branding effort that pushes back against the “propaganda” that typically emanates from convention and visitors bureaus (ttweak 2007). Moreover, for Thompson and Twaddle, the HIWI campaign itself is much more than a slogan. First, the campaign differs from past branding efforts in that it is completely reliant on the input of Houstonians for its success. Described by The New York Times as a “guerilla-style branding offensive” (Romero 2004), HIWI’s intent is “to create a vehicle for which people can express their reasons for liking Houston despite the
hardships” (Kaplan 2004). According to Thompson and Twaddle, the HIWI campaign is an attempt to “understand ourselves and not be defensive about it and have some fun with it... Acknowledging the city’s problems in a humorous way demonstrates self-confidence. Houstonians, not slogans alone, are the city’s best advocates” (Kaplan 2004). Another way that HIWI sets itself apart from past branding efforts is that it acknowledges outsider perceptions about the city. As Thompson noted in our interview, “a city cannot promote itself without first knowing itself,” and thus the entire HIWI campaign is based on a self-awareness of the city’s many afflictions—20 of them, to be exact (see figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: HIWI mug listing Houston’s 20 afflictions

The idea of acknowledging Houston’s afflictions and stating why the city is still “worth it” came to Thompson and Twaddle in the summer of 2004, when a friend of theirs asked them to contribute a comment to a story she was writing on the perception of Texas with President George W. Bush in office. This got the two talking about the
perception of Houston and of the many afflictions that plagued the city but were never acknowledged in official branding efforts. Having compiled a list of 20 afflictions over the ensuing weekend, Thompson and Twaddle created a simple web movie with black background and white text that flashed the 20 afflictions on the screen and ended with a series of shots stating, “Houston. It’s Worth It. Tell us why. www.houstonitsworthit.com.”

This web movie was then emailed to around 100 of their friends and colleagues around Houston, and according to Thompson, “it just went viral. We had pushed a button. We asked the question in a way that, we gave people permission to communicate and say why they love their city.” In its heyday, the website, which was set up as a simple blog, was getting 10,000 hits per day. But perhaps more importantly, Thompson notes,

```
The people were entering why Houston was worth it like crazy. Initially the responses were so eloquent, and so good, we had to reprogram the site, because we had a character limit, and people wanted to write. And some of them were missives. Really poetic, and empirical, and experiential. And they were so much better at explaining what Houston was like than some stupid marketing person. And it was in the aggregate of those that you really started to understand what the city is truly like.
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Having received thousands of text submissions telling them why Houston was worth it, in 2006 Thompson and Twaddle partnered with the Houston Center for Photography to create an open call exhibition “in which Houstonians were asked to submit their personal photographs (as opposed to the stock imagery typically seen in convention bureau-type propaganda) relating to life in Houston” (ttweak 2014c). Over 600 image submissions were received, and all of them were hung in an exhibition that mimicked the city of Houston’s unique no zoning policy, with images randomly interspersed with the original text quotes telling why Houston is worth it. The weekend exhibition broke all of the Houston Center for Photography’s attendance records, and, as
Thompson proudly boasts, “it is still talked about to this day as one of the best shows ever hung in Houston.” For Thompson, however, the greatest success of the exhibition was not the attendance records, but the fact that it was an opportunity for Houstonians to share their love for their city. As he explains, “You could walk in this room, it was only 1,500 square feet or so, a very small gallery, and in one place, in 15 minutes, you could understand Houston, Texas. And it’s all Houstonians. One-hundred percent of the content was by Houstonians.”

The culmination of the HIWI campaign came in 2007 with the publication of a book containing hundreds of the photographs and quotes that both showed and told why Houston is worth it. Despite the campaign’s unofficial status, the HIWI books are now used “very extensively for recruiting for the city, especially by human resources people and real estate agents.” The book is already in its third printing, and bookstores, the convention center, and even the GHCVB have “bought them in the hundreds” (Houston Chronicle 2007). The success of the campaign itself has garnered attention from media outlets across the country, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Boston Globe, NPR’s “Talk of the Nation,” and NBC’s “Saturday Today Show” (ttweak 2007). Yet, despite these accolades, perhaps the greatest success the campaign can claim is that it has given Houstonians a much needed outlet to push back against outsiders’ negative stereotypes and express their own love for their city. While Houston may have its afflictions, the HIWI campaign has allowed residents to “gush over the low cost of living, authentic local restaurants, diversity, world-class museums, endless opportunity and generosity of the people” (Falkenberg 2007). In their own words, Houstonians describe their city as a “meritocracy”; a city with a “live-and-let-live environment” where
“everyone comes to belong” (ttweak 2007: 182, 289); a city that is “transparent, permeable, and full of opportunity”12; a city whose best asset is its “openness”13; a city that is characterized by “friendliness, hospitality, entrepreneurial energy, minimal regulations (including no zoning), open-mindedness, diversity, social mobility, optimism, and charity.”14 Houston is a city that in the past may have had a self-esteem problem, but today, thanks at least in part to the HIWI campaign, it is a city “with a great deal of local pride. The attitude of the national media doesn’t really bother people anymore.”15

5.2.2 Detroit

Given the success of the HIWI campaign, Thompson and Twaddle have been contacted by numerous cities across the country asking for permission to do their own “it’s worth it” campaign. Their typical response is “no,” not because they don’t want to hand over their slogan to another city, but rather because they feel that the campaign simply wouldn’t work, as most cities do not have the same negative reputation that Houston had when the HIWI campaign began. As Thompson bluntly states, “Your city doesn’t have a reputation for being a shithole…of course it’s worth it. It’s Santa-fucking-Barbara” (quoted in Matusow 2014). The one city to which Thompson and Twaddle did grant the rights to use the “it’s worth it” verbiage, however, was Detroit.

One of the reasons Thompson and Twaddle said yes to “Detroit: It’s Worth It” (or DIWI for short) is because, like their own grassroots effort in Houston, the interested party in Detroit was not the DMCVB, but rather a local teacher. They also felt that a DIWI campaign could be successful because, at the time they were contacted, Detroit was in economic turmoil and receiving a lot of negative attention from the national media. With their permission having been granted, this local Detroit teacher took
Thompson and Twaddle’s slogan and spearheaded her own DIWI campaign by producing a calendar showing why Detroit is worth it. However, unlike HIWI, the DIWI campaign was short-lived. As Thompson related in our interview:

I’ll never forget, it’s one of the most sad, heartbreaking conversations I’ve ever had...I was talking to her on the phone one day, and she went “agh!” and I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that right then while she was talking to me, she walked outside and all of the tires on her car had been split. And I said, “Is it worth it?” And she died laughing! But it just broke my heart, because that’s what we were talking about, Detroit being worth it, and then she walked out of her elementary school and all of her tires were slashed.16

This episode, and the fact that it prevented the DIWI campaign from gaining traction in the same way that HIWI did, may at first make us think that perhaps citizens in Detroit feel that their city is *not* worth it after all. However, although DIWI did not catch on, residents in Detroit have found plenty of other ways to show their passion for their city and their desire to influence and take control of Detroit’s image.

Unlike Houston, where citizen action was mobilized primarily to carry out a promotional effort for the city, in Detroit citizens have not only taken it upon themselves to promote a more positive image of their city, but they are also actively working to revitalize their city through on-the-ground efforts to build a better Detroit. These efforts, while significant, have yet to fully dispel the many myths and overblown stereotypes about Detroit. As urban critic Aaron Renn (2013a) points out, in many ways Detroit still serves as “America’s movie screen, onto which outsiders project their own pre-conceived identities and fears.” However, Renn (2011) also notes that “a message is getting out nevertheless,” that “today, for those seeking out an alternative vision of urban success, with new and innovative ideas about what the city of tomorrow should be, Detroit may offer the ultimate arena.”
In many ways, the message that is getting out about Detroit is similar to the message that Houstonians offer about their city—that is, it is a city of openness and opportunity. However, whereas in Houston many attribute these characteristics to a “libertarian” attitude and a “hands off” style of government, in Detroit it is the ineptitude of local government that has turned the city into what many are calling the “new American frontier.” In fact, when reading or talking to people about what is taking place on the ground in Detroit, one cannot help but hear about the “do it yourself spirit,” the “American pioneer spirit,” or the “frontier ethic of self-reliance” that defines the attitude of Detroiters today. Because of the inability of local government to adequately address citizen concerns, residents of Detroit have adopted the stance that “if you want something done, you often have to do it yourself here” (Josar 2009). Rather than see this as a negative, however, Detroiters have embraced this frontier ethos and have made it the foundation of a new image of their city that is so far proving to be rather successful.

For instance, Detroit’s frontier image is very attractive to “artists and other cultural creatives” who are “attracted by the freedom to do what they want without excessive interference from the city” (Renn 2011). Others note that Detroit is “a massive laboratory for urban theorists, developers, and boosters alike,” that Detroit has the most potential of any American city as a “proving ground for new solutions” to urban problems (Ryzik 2010), and that “no other city in America offers so vast a canvas for new thinking as Detroit” (Gallagher 2010). Moreover, Renn points out that while no one should desire a local government that has been as corrupt and ineffective as Detroit’s has been over recent decades, the fact that Detroit’s government is so ineffective has actually spawned some positive side-effects. For instance, he notes that “much of the South Side
of Chicago has Detroit-like characteristics, but the techniques of renewal in Detroit won’t work there because they are likely against code and would be shut down the minute someone complained” (Renn 2011). Furthermore,

in most cities, municipal government can’t stop drug dealing and violence, but it can keep people with creative ideas out. Not in Detroit. In Detroit, if you want to do something, you just go do it. Maybe someone will eventually get around to shutting you down, or maybe not. It’s a sort of anarchy in a good way as well as a bad one. Perhaps that overstates the case. You can’t do anything, but it is certainly easier to make things happen there than in most places because the hand of government weighs less heavily. (Renn 2009c, original emphasis)

While the lack of effective governing institutions has led to this image of Detroit as the new American frontier, perhaps the most important outcome has been that the situation has not led Detroiters to adopt an attitude of self-serving individualism, but rather has resulted in a strong sense of camaraderie, cooperation, and community. As one critic put it, Detroiters seem to have “taken the attitude that the world is against them and rallied behind that idea to make Detroit their cause” (Kageyama 2011: 171). This sentiment was echoed in a 2009 New York Times article on the cooperative spirit, rather than the cutthroat competitiveness, that has come to define Detroit’s recent entrepreneurial flourish. As the author of this article writes:

Maybe it’s that adage that nothing brings a community closer than having a common enemy. For the restaurateurs, the residents, the urban farmers and the community activists now working to reshape the city, the enemy is Detroit’s own reputation. They know they will succeed only if they are a part of a larger, collective success…and so they’re working together to make it happen. (Barlow 2009)

Thus, to accompany their frontier ethos, Detroiters also seem to be operating by the old adage that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” As one local filmmaker notes, “startups that would be competitors on paper are helping each other with everything from permits to suppliers to marketing” (Proulx 2012). One particular area where this mindset of “our
political institutions have failed so let’s work together as a community to build a better Detroit” can be seen is in the city’s local arts scene.

Detroit’s ineffective governing institutions have created a situation where there is far more artistic freedom in Detroit than in other large American cities. Because of this, both local and international artists—attracted by the city’s “blank-canvass vibe” (Raven 2009), are flocking to Detroit and “are already leveraging Detroit’s complex textures and landscapes to their own surreal ends” (Barlow 2009). But within this artistic movement, there is present the notion that the goal is not just art for art’s sake, but rather there is a larger focus on art for Detroit’s sake. Perhaps the prime example of this community-focused art is Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project. Originally started in 1986, the Heidelberg Project has been described as an “off-the-wall community art project/revitalization effort” (Crain 2007) that has appropriated several blocks of Detroit’s near east side, transforming abandoned houses and their surroundings into an open-air community art project composed of a collection of murals, knick-knacks, shoes, coins, pie tins, stuffed animals, doors, cars, boats, signs, and even repurposed trash (see figure 5.2). On its website, the Heidelberg Project describes its mission as:

Using art to provoke thought, promote discussion, inspire action, and heal communities…It’s about taking a stand to save forgotten neighborhoods. It’s about helping people think outside the box and it’s about offering solutions…Our mission is to inspire people to appreciate and use artistic expression to enrich their lives and to improve the social and economic health of their greater community. (Heidelberg Project 2014)

According to Crain, “in a way, [the Heidelberg Project] is the most public kind of public space: the kind where the planned social infrastructure failed, and the people moved in, did what they do, and created something really useful” (2007, original emphasis). The usefulness of the project, according to Crain, is that it “teaches people who live and have
grown up in desolate surroundings how they can change the public spaces that make up their neighborhood and how this change can affect them. It serves as an inspiration and a source of hope.”

Figure 5.2: Images of the Heidelberg Project

Another example of how Detroiters are taking matters into their own hands to improve their local conditions and their image can be seen in the city’s nascent urban farming movement. Back in 2010, a story on the NBC program Dateline focused on the food crisis in Detroit, further perpetuating the negative popular image of Detroit as a city
characterized by urban decay. An excerpt from the *Dateline* story read as follows: “There are more than 400 liquor stores in Detroit. But if you want to buy food, good luck. In the entire 140 square miles of the city, there are no Krogers, no Safeways, only eight supermarkets, and they’re discount stores” (quoted in Griffioen 2011). What this doom and gloom story fails to mention, however, is that in the absence of major chain grocery stores, “a diverse system of food options has risen to take their place, and the tired old narrative that Detroit has nowhere to shop for groceries needs to be replaced by a more complex truth: with a diversity of options ranging from the dismal to the sublime, Detroit may be one of the most interesting places in America to shop for food” (Griffioen 2011).

With an ample supply of open land within the urban core, Detroit has quickly become a national leader in the urban farming movement. Whereas urban farming is seen as a novelty in most big cities, in Detroit small-scale farming has actually become a viable part of the urban food system (Griffioen 2011). According to a 2009 article in the *Toronto Star*, Detroit has become “ground zero for North America’s local food movement...driving around the city, you can see everything that will make up your dinner...here, a locavore doesn’t eat food that’s travelled 100 kilometres. She eats food that’s travelled 10” (Porter 2009). In 2008, the international organization Urban Farming chose Detroit as the site for its headquarters because it was the most agriculturally promising of the fourteen cities in five countries where the organization operates (Dowie 2009). Detroit is also home to the nationally acclaimed Earthworks Urban Farm and Hantz Farms, there are hundreds of gardens in the city’s urban farming network, and there are community groups like the Detroit Agricultural Network and Keep Growing Detroit that sponsor programs like Grown in Detroit, which encourages residents to
patronize restaurants and food sellers who source fresh local fruits and vegetables, and which have the ultimate goal of “cultivating a food sovereign Detroit” (Keep Growing Detroit 2014).

While the sourcing of local food can be seen as simply a necessary response to the lack of chain supermarkets in the city, many of Detroit’s urban farmers see their work as part of a larger movement of “food justice.” As Malik Yakini, a leader in the city’s urban farming movement states, “we’re not just into farming. We’re into community self-determination,” or the notion that “the community reaps both the nutritional and financial rewards of the food it buys” (quoted in Renn 2011). Through these urban farming efforts, Detroiters are not only addressing a practical problem of providing ample food for the city’s population; by drawing on their frontier ethos and spirit of cooperation, Detroiters are positioning themselves “to become the world’s first one hundred percent food self-sufficient city” (Dowie 2009), which at the same time is helping to reinforce the new narrative of Detroit as a city of opportunity, innovative thinking, and unique solutions to urban problems.

Although the efforts discussed above are helping to reshape Detroit’s tattered brand, it is still difficult to overcome the long-held stereotypes that continue to define Detroit as a city filled with racial tension, crime, poverty, and urban decay. This is especially true because, while some of these negative images may be overblown, they do have their basis in reality, whether it is historical or ongoing. Thus, in addition to working on projects on the ground to help improve both the conditions and the image of Detroit, many Detroiters have also adopted the do-it-yourself attitude and have found unique ways to promote this new image of Detroit to the outside world. One example of this is
the work of Paul Schutt and Brian Boyle, who founded the Detroit-based Issue Media Group in 2005. According to Schutt,

Traditional media has become obsessed with loss—murder, crime, job loss, scandal. These are the stories that they repeat over and over…but my friends and I were growing companies, starting businesses, developing properties and the like, and we never got the coverage in the newspaper or the business journal. So we thought we would cover that side of the community. We filled that gap in coverage. (quoted in Kageyama 2011: 131)

Schutt and Boyle filled the gap in coverage by launching their online publication *Model D*, which is a weekly magazine focusing on “real stories about real people doing really cool stuff…stories about growth and development and the people who make it happen in the region” (Kageyama 2011: 131).

In addition to publications like *Model D*, perhaps the most innovative way Detroiter have gone about trying to tell the story of what is really going on in their city to the outside world is through independent filmmaking. One of these local filmmakers, Erik Proulx, is shooting a documentary entitled *Lemonade: Detroit*, which seeks to “sensationalize hope as much as Michael Moore sensationalizes poverty and despair” (Kurlyandchik 2010). In his film, Proulx aims to show a side of Detroit often ignored by the mass media: its entrepreneurialism, its vibrant arts culture, and its resiliency “that is unlike any other city on Earth” (Proulx 2011). Proulx’s film is the perfect encapsulation of what is taking place on the ground in Detroit, as it showcases the city’s “perfect mix of grit and talent and risk that breed innovation”; it is a visual representation of how “entrepreneurs are bucking the long-held practice of me-first cut-throat success, turning instead to rising the tide for everyone’s combined success…hipsters and fortune 500 CEOs, the homeless and the wealthy, the artists and the suits…they all sit together at the same table of reinvention” (Proulx 2011).
The desire to see and tell the story of people actually living in Detroit is also the catalyst for the film *Street Fighting Man* by filmmaker Andrew James. According to James, “the film is our attempt to paint an honest portrait of a community that’s trying to survive, and also trying to improve things for themselves...I decided that I wanted to focus on people who are trying to make a difference, not just on ‘Oh, look how bad it is’” (quoted in Kurlyandchik 2010). Similar positive portrayals of what locals are doing to build a better Detroit can be seen in a number of other films, among them *Detroit Lives*, *Grown in Detroit*, *Burn*, and *Detroit Hustles Harder*. Heidi Ewing, the filmmaker responsible for *Detroit Hustles Harder*, explains that the goal of her film and others like it is to add some much-needed nuance to the overall narrative of the city. According to Ewing, “I think a lot of the reporting on Detroit is tired, and it’s all very similar. A lot of times you see empty buildings with somebody standing in front of them explaining them...[this film is] about people interacting on the street level from the perspective of the people who live here” (quoted in Kurlyandchik 2010).

Despite these efforts by citizens of Detroit to reshape the image of their city through their on-the-ground efforts to build and promote a better city, Detroit still has a long way to go to dispel the strong narratives of urban decay that continue to define the city in the media and in American popular culture. The efforts of citizens to rebrand their city are not made any easier, of course, when calamitous events continue to plague the city, such as in 2013 when Detroit became the largest municipal bankruptcy case in U.S. history. However, the important point for our purpose is that citizens are not sitting idly by—they are taking action to do all that they can to brand their city in a more appealing light. And while the ultimate outcome of these efforts remains to be seen, one thing is
certain: the efforts of Detroiter have, as Renn (2011) persuasively notes, “created an aspirational narrative of success in Detroit that other Americans might imagine themselves being a part of. If that starts to attract people in sufficient numbers to reverse core city population decline, Detroit could be at the start of the long road back.”

5.3 Breaking Institutional Isomorphism

The “Houston. It’s Worth It” campaign and the willingness of residents in Detroit to embrace a frontier ethos and actively work to build and promote a better city for themselves and their fellow citizens can be viewed as success stories for the simple fact that they got people interested and involved in helping to improve the image of their respective cities. However, our focus throughout this project has been on official branding efforts and the institutional isomorphism that, I argue, has kept these official efforts from embracing and adopting the very grassroots, community-oriented strategies that characterize these citizen-led counter branding campaigns. Thus, for our purposes, the key question becomes: have these counter campaigns had any impact on official branding efforts? Have these grassroots movements served as a mimetic force that offers those in charge of official branding efforts a successful, alternative example of how urban branding can be carried out? Stated simply: can citizen action help to break institutional isomorphism?

Taking each city in turn, we see that in Houston the HIWI campaign was not welcomed with open arms by the GHCVB and those individuals responsible for the city’s official branding efforts. Jordy Tollett, the president and CEO of the GHCVB at the time, took to the newspapers and publicly criticized HIWI for being a negative campaign that “only plays into the hands of Houston’s critics who unfairly stereotype the city” (Kaplan
Tollett is quoted as telling the *Houston Chronicle*, “when persuading prospective convention groups to visit the city, the last thing I want to do is bring up roaches” (Kaplan 2004). He also publicly called for Thompson and Twaddle to leave town, stating that they were only causing further damage to the city’s reputation. When asked by the *Houston Chronicle* to comment on Tollett’s personal attack and criticism of their campaign, Thompson and Twaddle fired back, explaining that “if it were truly a negative campaign, it would be Houston. It’s NOT worth it.”

Reflecting on these early days of the campaign in 2004, Thompson states rather bluntly, “the CVB went ape shit on us. They hated us. And there was a war. …they locked us out of the airports and said that if merchants bought HIWI gear they would no longer be able to purchase official city gear… And we loved it, because it just fed [HIWI] more and more.”

By 2007, the HIWI campaign showed no signs of slowing down or going away. The HIWI book was fresh off the presses, and the campaign had garnered national attention for being such a successful grassroots, unofficial marketing effort for the city. And while they were not quick to admit it, the GHCVB had taken notice. In early 2007, the city’s convention and visitors bureau embarked on a new branding campaign to market Houston to Houstonians. This new campaign, entitled “MyHouston,” was touted as a seismic shift in the direction of the city’s branding efforts, as slogans would be set aside “in favor of a more personal pitch” (Associated Press 2008). In describing the direction of the new campaign, Holly Clapham-Rosenow, the GHCVB’s vice president of marketing, explained that MyHouston would feature “authentic communication that was unsolicited, unscripted and contained real words and real expressions” from people that “knew our city” (quoted in Bucci 2011).
These and other statements about the MyHouston campaign sound strikingly similar to how Thompson and Twaddle described their rationale for, and means of carrying out, the HIWI campaign. For instance, the GHCVB expressed concern “that Houstonians lack pride in their sprawling urban metropolis,” and thus the MyHouston campaign would be an attempt to get Houstonians to be proud of their city again (Falkenberg 2007; see also Ortale 2009). Moreover, Clapham-Rosenow seemingly takes the words right out of Thompson’s mouth when she used his notion that “a city cannot promote itself without first knowing itself” to tell the Houston Chronicle, “We feel it’s important to start inside and work out because if you don’t have pride in yourself and you don’t have pride in your surroundings, we can never convince people to come” (quoted in Falkenberg 2007). Whether it was because they were embarrassed by their earlier criticism of HIWI or because they did not want to admit that they were a couple of years late to the party, the GHCVB continued to ignore their new campaign’s many parallels with HIWI. For instance, after the MyHouston campaign had achieved its own accolades from the national media, Clapham-Rosenow was so bold as to offer the following advice to other cities: “Follow your own path, even if that means going it alone at first. Don’t be afraid to do something that the majority doesn’t get or understand at the beginning. If you know your path, you’ll be able to know what you need to do. And those naysayers will be the first ones to jump on board at the end” (quoted in Bucci 2011). Perhaps she failed to see the irony in the fact that the path the GHCVB was following was not their own, but rather that laid down years before by Thompson and Twaddle, or that the GHCVB was in fact the loudest naysayer of the HIWI campaign to begin with, and it was the one “jumping on board” and appropriating the ideas of Thompson and Twaddle for its own ends.
Despite the fact that the GHCVB failed to give credit where credit was due, it is clear that the HIWI campaign served as a mimetic force that helped to breakdown the institutional isomorphism that had for so long prevented local decision makers from expanding their range of branding strategies. The popular response to Thompson and Twaddle’s call for Houstonians to tell them and show them why Houston is worth it, the national recognition that their counter campaign received, and the longevity of HIWI all showed the GHCVB that a grassroots, community-oriented branding campaign could serve as a viable alternative to the standard practice of relying on marketing and branding experts to craft a new slogan every couple of years.

When compared to past official branding efforts, MyHouston undoubtedly adopts a unique approach that is more in line with the recommended branding strategies touted in the “how-to” guides discussed in chapter 2. However, despite its calls for unsolicited, authentic communication from people who know the city, MyHouston is not quite the grassroots effort that it initially claims to be. While it is true that the testimonials presented in the ads for the campaign are unscripted, unrehearsed, and participants are not paid to participate, the individuals who are telling their stories of why they love Houston are not your typical Houstonians. Instead, the campaign relies on “high profile,” “notable” Houstonians to tell their stories—i.e., celebrities (Bucci 2011). Over 30 local celebrities have participated in the campaign, including former heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman, former NBA star Yao Ming, Grammy-winning recording artist and actress Beyoncé, and former President George H.W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush. Moreover, the choice of where to publicize the campaign is also less than democratic. Rather than plaster these testimonials on bus stops, billboards, or even in the
local paper—places where all Houstonians would be likely to see them—the GHCVB instead chose to kick off their campaign by running their ads in the high-end publication *Houston Modern Luxury Magazine*. Thus, despite HIWI’s obvious influence, the MyHouston campaign shows us that while a mimetic force can indeed help to break down institutional isomorphism by opening up new possibilities for adopting alternative branding strategies, it also shows us that changing the thought processes of local decision makers is not something that can be achieved overnight.

Contrary to the reaction received by HIWI in Houston, Detroit’s grassroots movement to reclaim the city’s image and build a better Detroit was initially met with little to no opposition from city leaders. Whether this was due to the fact that Detroit’s counter branding movement was not a direct challenge aimed at the DMCVB’s “The D” campaign, or whether it was simply because Detroit’s political institutions were in so much turmoil that they could not offer a response, the lack of any formidable opposition to citizens “going it alone” in their bid to improve the conditions and the image of their city only served to further reinforce the frontier ethos that was driving the movement. More important than this initial non-response from city leaders, however, is the fact that despite—or perhaps because of—the continued decline of the city’s political institutions, the mayor’s office eventually found itself drawing on the community-oriented nature and cooperative spirit of its citizens as it turned to the people of Detroit for help in envisioning a plan for the city’s future.

The election of Dave Bing in 2009 as Mayor of Detroit signaled a turning point in how local leaders responded to citizens working to improve their city. Unlike previous administrations that sought to quash community-building efforts (for instance, Coleman
Young’s decision to demolish part of the Heidelberg Project in 1991, and Dennis Archer’s demolition of even more of the community art project in 1999) that they believed interfered with their efforts to raise the profile of the city via major development projects (Gallagher 2010: 108), the Bing administration turned to the people of Detroit for help and inspiration. As Russell (2011) writes, Bing “issued an open invitation: anyone with a proposal, plan, theory—a notion, even—is welcome to try to save his crumbling city.” And while Bing may not have been able to save his city from bankruptcy in the short term, his ambitious Detroit Works Project may provide the key to the city’s long-term recovery and success.

The Detroit Works Project is not a typical 5 or 10 year plan that most cities devise to help guide their economic development and community redevelopment efforts. A highly detailed plan organized around the six themes of economic growth, land use, city systems, neighborhood revitalization, physical assets, and civic engagement, Cheyfitz (2011) describes the project as “the most sweeping overhaul ever attempted of a major American city,” while others note that the project is unique in that it eschews high-profile development projects meant to create wide-scale change in favor of small-scale, community-based efforts aimed at revitalizing the city starting at the neighborhood level (Sands 2012; DetroitWiki 2012). What really makes the project unique, however, is the level of community engagement in the project and in the crafting of its final framework, entitled “Detroit Future City.”

The project’s community engagement efforts include “community conversations,” which have taken the form of planned meetings held in community centers across the city, as well as interactions between project staff and citizens in more informal settings,
such as grocery stores and barber shops. Students from the University of Detroit Mercy’s Master of Community Development program have helped organize the project’s community engagement efforts, working in concert with the Detroit Collaborative Design Center and dozens of local community organizations. In all, it is estimated that over 30,000 conversations have taken place between Detroit Works Project staff members and local residents (Woods 2013). One of my interviewees from a local community group noted that his group liked the direction of the project and hoped that its engagement efforts would lead to more trust and a closer working relationship between residents and city leaders.

Another important part of the project’s community engagement efforts comes in the form of an oral history project entitled “Detroit Stories.” Just like the local filmmakers who are seeking to tell the stories of the “real Detroit,” this oral history project asks residents to “set the story straight” by writing a letter that talks about the true identity of Detroit. As stated on the Detroit Works Project website:

> It always seems that there is one Detroit that gets media attention. It is a perspective we know well: an empty and blighted City; a crumbling City; a lawless and unsafe City. Though we understand that our City has a lot of work ahead of us, we also understand this image of a broken City that needs to be fixed is a thin two-dimensional viewpoint. There are wonderful things occurring in Detroit. **Our greatest asset is the people of Detroit. So we are looking to you, the people of Detroit to…SET THE STORY STRAIGHT.** (Detroit Works Project 2013, original emphasis)

This influence of the community building efforts of local citizens and their desire to change the current narrative about their city can also be seen in the latest official brand-promotion efforts being carried out by the DMCVB. After the “the D” campaign, the DMCVB went nearly five years without a significant marketing effort for the city. In 2013, however, the organization launched a new “testimonial based” campaign entitled
“Detroit, America’s Great Comeback City” that will feature “real local people in very Detroit settings” (Walsh 2013a, 2013b). In partnership with the local ad agency SMZ, the DMCVB is following the lead of local filmmakers and the Detroit Works Project’s oral history project by focusing on the people of Detroit and letting them tell the world why their city is great. After all, says Jamie Michelson, president of SMZ, “cities can make comebacks, but people make cities” (Walsh 2013a; Welch 2013). This notion of a “comeback city” has not been without its critics, however. For instance, Renn (2012a) worries that the comeback vision is rooted in an attempt to “recreate some semblance of former glory” that may be completely unrealistic in a shrinking city like Detroit.²⁵ Nevertheless, the very fact that the DMCVB is looking to local residents to tell their stories and be the ones featured in their ads for the campaign, combined with the fact that the Detroit Works Project has engaged in a massive community engagement effort in its bid to develop a strategic framework for ensuring the future success of the city, are both testimony to the positive impact of the actions of local residents. By following a frontier ethos, local residents have undoubtedly impacted official branding efforts, which have moved away from a reliance on high profile development projects and the use of generic slogans to the adoption of more community-based, citizen-oriented branding strategies.

5.4 Counter Campaigns: Why They Emerge and Why They Are Successful

In an essay comparing and contrasting the different political and social policies adopted in Houston and Detroit in the post-war period, Mario Loyola (2011) writes: “In the degree of collusion between business and government, in the power of labor unions, in the method of economic development, in the burden of taxation and regulation, in the tolerance for diversity—in all these ways and more, the two cities stand as diametric
opposites in the choices a society can make.” So what is it then about these two cities in particular that sparked citizens to take on the task of branding their respective cities, and why did similar grassroots branding efforts not emerge in Las Vegas or Orlando?

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin an investigation of why citizens choose to mount a challenge to official branding efforts is to look at the level of dissatisfaction that residents have regarding their city’s current brand. If we refer back to figure 4.1 in chapter 4, we can see that residents in Houston and Detroit do indeed exhibit a great deal of dissatisfaction with current branding efforts. However, the levels of dissatisfaction in these two cities does not differ greatly from the level of dissatisfaction present in Orlando; and, even in the case of Las Vegas, although residents there do have a more favorable opinion of their official brand compared to the other three cities, nearly 1 in 3 organizations in Las Vegas still express a negative opinion toward the city’s brand. Thus, the fact that there is a sizeable opposition to official branding efforts in each case study city, combined with the fact that social movement theorists today consider collective grievances to be “necessary but insufficient causes of collection action” (McVeigh 2009: 33), indicates that simple opposition to current branding efforts does not explain why residents in some cities choose to mount their own counter branding campaigns.

Another possible explanation could be that residents of Houston and Detroit are more civic-oriented than their counterparts in Las Vegas and Orlando, and thus they are more likely to act upon their grievances. Las Vegas is known to be one of the most transient communities in the country (Botkin 2014), and some of my interviewees believed this is one reason that “people are just not very politically active here; there is no real sense of community. Most people who live here, this is not their hometown. People
seem to care more about what goes on where they came from than about what is happening here."26 Another interviewee noted that like Las Vegas, Orlando is a “newer” city, meaning that the city itself does not have as much history or tradition as older cities like Houston and Detroit.27 Due to their rapid population growth in recent decades, this interviewee believes that the majority of residents in Las Vegas and Orlando simply do not have the “historical roots” in their city that residents in other cities have, and thus this could possibly account for the lack of civic engagement found in these two communities.28

However, while these statements may all be true, they are negated by the fact that Houston itself has had a major population boom in recent decades. Although some residents may have familial roots in the city, this influx of new residents means that most Houstonians should be just as detached from their community as residents in Orlando and Las Vegas, if the theory posited above is correct. Moreover, some of the people who are most active in Detroit’s on-the-ground effort to turn the city’s image around are not longtime residents, but transplants from other cities who were attracted to Detroit by the city’s frontier ethos and the cultural and economic opportunities available there.29 Other common measures that would tend to support civicness or more political involvement on the part of residents also do not separate Houston and Detroit from Las Vegas and Orlando. For instance, as we saw in chapter 3 (see table 3.1), on some measures, such as level of educational attainment, we would expect residents in Houston and Orlando to be more civically engaged than residents in Las Vegas and Detroit, while on other measures, like the prevalence of community organizations in a city, we would expect Orlando and Detroit to lead the way in political engagement over Las Vegas and Houston. Thus, by
looking at almost any measure that is commonly used to predict levels of civic or political engagement in a community, there is nothing that definitively sets Houston and Detroit as a pair apart from Las Vegas and Orlando.

Looking at another possible explanation, this one drawn from social movement theory, we see that the presence of resources also cannot adequately explain why only residents in Houston and Detroit chose to participate in counter branding campaigns. According to resource mobilization theory, people will only band together to express grievances collectively if there are adequate resources present that allow them to engage in such a collective endeavor (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983). Thus, we might hypothesize that while residents in Las Vegas and Orlando are dissatisfied with current official branding efforts, perhaps there are simply not enough available resources in these cities to bring people together to effectively mount a counter branding campaign.

If we view a counter campaign as a creative endeavor that requires some degree of artistic acumen, then some of my interview data give support to the idea that the availability of resources played an important role in the emergence of counter campaigns in Houston and Detroit as well as in the absence of such counter campaigns in Las Vegas and Orlando. For instance, according to the leader of central Florida’s largest arts and culture consortium, “Orlando is by far the smallest arts scene of all the cities I’ve worked in; it’s considerably smaller and less sophisticated than arts scenes in other cities of its size.” This same interviewee also noted that Houston is becoming one of the country’s “art capitals,” and of the four cities under consideration in this study, it “by far has the most sophisticated and supportive arts scene.” Another interviewee noted that while Las Vegas is trying to foster a downtown arts district, this is still in its early stages, and
overall, the city does a better job of supporting “the corporate arts” (meaning the stage shows at the various resorts on The Strip) than it does of supporting local artists.\textsuperscript{32}

However, this theory loses traction when we turn to Detroit, where “the local arts council has gone bust three times.”\textsuperscript{33} And, as noted earlier in the chapter, previous mayoral administrations in Detroit have actually worked against the community-building efforts of local artists, having twice torn down parts of the Heidelberg Project in order to support what were believed to be more economically viable development projects.

Although an influx of artists into the city is helping to drive the creative vision of Detroit’s changing image, the artistic flourish in the city seems to be based more on the perseverance and opportunistic nature of individual artists who view the city as a blank slate where they can make their mark, rather than on the notion that Detroit is a place where they will be supported by an already-established and thriving arts scene.

Even if we step back from a focus on artistic resources and focus on more general organizational resources, we see that Houston’s counter branding campaign really did not require many resources at all to achieve success. The initial cost to get the campaign off the ground—in terms of money, time, effort, and even artistic skill—was not great. HIWI was in essence started by two guys who made a very basic 30-second film, emailed it to a group of friends, and watched their idea go viral. Moreover, the presence of resources did not play a large role in determining whether or not residents could participate in the counter branding campaign, as participation only required text and/or image submissions to the HIWI website. In both Houston and Detroit, the start of each city’s counter branding efforts and subsequent citizen participation in each counter campaign really had more to do with the willingness of individuals to get involved and a belief that one’s
efforts would not be stymied or result in undue harm to the participant. In other words, a political opportunity presented itself, and citizens in each city used it to their advantage.

According to political opportunity theory, collective grievances are most likely to be expressed when the political context provides an opening for people to mobilize (Tarrow 1994). In relation to urban branding, this would mean that we should expect counter campaigns to arise when the institutions responsible for official branding efforts lose legitimacy or lack the power to keep counter campaigns at bay. This could mean that, as in the case of Detroit, there is a real political vacuum where people see an opportunity to act; however, this political opportunity could also arise due to the perceived strength (or weakness) of the organizations responsible for branding. For instance, in Houston, the GHCVB was not stripped of its power and did not relinquish its role as the official promoter for the city; however, the fact that the organization was continually ineffective in carrying out this role contributed to an eventual eroding of its legitimacy in the eyes of local residents. This lack of legitimacy created a political opening that, once a critical mass of opposition was reached, allowed the HIWI counter campaign to directly challenge the GHCVB and serve as an alternative model for how an urban branding campaign could be carried out.

This perceived weakness of the GHCVB and its subsequent loss of legitimacy can be seen in the fact that, when Thompson and Twaddle first brainstormed their idea for HIWI, they stopped to ask themselves: “Whose permission do we need to do this? Do we have to call someone?” The fact that they felt comfortable moving forward with their counter campaign without obtaining permission from local officials shows that they were not fearful of suffering any negative consequences as a result of continuing on with their
campaign. As noted above, the reaction of local officials in Houston to the HIWI campaign was less than welcoming, but Thompson and Twaddle were correct in assuming that the GHCVB did not have the political clout to prevent HIWI from moving forward and mounting a challenge to its own official branding efforts.

Whether any CVB would have the political capital necessary to block a counter campaign that posed a direct challenge to its official branding efforts is open to debate; however, the important point here is that Thompson and Twaddle were confident in pursuing their counter campaign because they perceived the GHCVB to be a weak organization. This scenario can be countered by looking at a city like Las Vegas, where the LVCVA is viewed in a completely different light. Due in part to its massive budget and its close ties to the gaming industry, the LVCVA is viewed as one of the most powerful political organizations in the city. Multiple interviewees expressed sentiments that were strikingly similar, noting that it would be “foolish” or “unwise” to even think of challenging the LVCVA, because it would simply be impossible to mount a challenge that would have any chance of being effective. Even organizations like the Nevada Development Authority, which is tasked with marketing the city to the business community, feel compelled to follow the LVCVA’s lead in how it will promote the city, as they simply do not have the budget or the political support to carry out a campaign that would be effective in challenging the LVCVA’s dominant narrative.

Much the same can be said for the perceived power of Visit Orlando. Here again multiple interviewees noted that, due to the close ties between Visit Orlando and the major power players in town—e.g., Disney, Universal, etc.—there was simply no reason to even try to compete. This was again due not only to the large operating budgets of
Visit Orlando and the entertainment companies themselves, but also because of the political support that Visit Orlando received from these economic drivers in the community. Thus, unlike the real political vacuum in Detroit or the perceived weakness of the GHCVB in Houston—both of which presented a political opportunity for local residents to express their dissatisfaction with official branding efforts by offering up their own grassroots counter campaigns—the strength of the LVCVA and Visit Orlando have so far prevented such a political opening that would allow for a successful counter campaign to emerge in either Las Vegas or Orlando.

5.5 Conclusion

The cases of Houston and Detroit demonstrate that the institutional isomorphism responsible for limiting the available branding strategies utilized by cities is not unalterable. Although there are often strong mimetic, coercive, and normative forces driving decision makers to adopt a narrow range of branding strategies that are very similar to those adopted in other cities, the presence of new and different mimetic, coercive, or normative forces can help to break institutional isomorphism, thus opening up the possibility for the adoption of a wider array of branding strategies, as well as the incorporation of new actors into the branding process. This chapter, which focused on the counter branding campaigns led by ordinary citizens in Houston and Detroit, showed us examples of mimetic forces that helped to break down the homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism in those two cities.

In Houston, the HIWI campaign was not only an alternative way to promote the city’s brand, but it also served as an example of how a more community-based branding strategy could be successful. The impact that this counter campaign had on official
branding efforts can be seen in how the GHCVB’s MyHouston campaign clearly emulates many of the community-oriented strategies and principles that served as the foundation for HIWI. In Detroit, the efforts of local citizens provided an example not only of alternative ways to promote a brand, but also of how to create or rebuild a brand from the bottom up. The combination of unsuccessful marketing efforts to promote the city, a history of failed brand-creation efforts that focused on large-scale development projects, and a power vacuum created by an ever-weakening municipal government, forced citizens in Detroit to adopt a go-it-alone, frontier ethos that saw citizens working together to rebuild their community through small but sustained efforts at the neighborhood level. Local independent filmmakers then sought to tell the world about this other side of Detroit through documentaries that focused on the individual efforts of local residents to make a positive difference in their city. Just as the HIWI campaign did in Houston, the efforts of local citizens to create and promote a new narrative about Detroit served as an example that was ultimately imitated by both the mayor’s office (in its Detroit Works Project) and by the DMCVB (in its testimonial-based “comeback city” campaign).

Although these examples show that new mimetic forces can break down institutional isomorphism, they do not demonstrate how coercive or normative forces can work to do the same. For an example of how a coercive force could work to inhibit rather than encourage institutional isomorphism, we can imagine a case wherein a local government or a local official, of their own accord, adopts or promotes a new policy that aims to broaden the scope of current strategies used in official branding efforts. Such an example can actually be seen in Orlando, where the mayor, Buddy Dyer, brought in a
consultant with the aim of teaching local community, business, and government leaders how to foster more civic pride among Orlando residents.⁴⁹ Although this effort had some success in getting residents to share why they loved Orlando, unlike Houston’s HIWI campaign, it never influenced the direction of the official brand-promotion efforts being led by Visit Orlando. Even though this was a purposeful act on the part of a local government official to shape the Orlando narrative in a more community-focused direction, I argue that the power of Visit Orlando and its tourism-based private partners prevented a political opportunity from opening up that would have allowed this more community-oriented narrative to shape official branding efforts. However, what this example does show is that had this scenario unfolded in a more varied city, where the power of one dominant industry does not preclude both the formation of a critical mass of opposition and the political opportunity for this opposition to be expressed, then it is quite possible to imagine such a coercive force having a positive impact on breaking the homogenizing and non-responsive tendencies of institutional isomorphism, thus opening up new possibilities for alternative directions in official branding efforts.

Finally, because by definition normative forces are associated with the background, training, professionalization, and networking of individuals within a particular organizational field, this type of force may be least likely to result in a breakdown of the institutional isomorphism that currently defines the organizational field of urban branding. However, such change from within is, I argue, not out of the realm of possibility. If mimetic, or even coercive, forces begin to have real effects on changing the direction of official branding efforts in cities across the country, then the “incestuous nature” of the actors working within the organizational field of urban branding could
result in individuals taking what they have learned from one city’s efforts and implementing these lessons learned in another city. For instance, if an individual who worked on the GHCVB’s MyHouston campaign moved to Denver and began working for that city’s CVB, then it is quite possible that the knowledge this individual gained from their time in Houston would be shared with and might ultimately influence the direction of Denver’s brand-promotion efforts. Thus, as it currently stands, the notion of “learning from within” an organization is undoubtedly one of the strongest forces helping to limit the scope of branding strategies utilized by cities; however, once a handful of cities figure out how to break the bonds of institutional isomorphism and free themselves from this restrictive mindset, then the normative forces associated with the professionalization of individuals and the dissemination of insider knowledge within the organizational field of urban branding may actually be one the most likely ways cities will begin to adopt new and different types of branding strategies in the future.
5.6 Notes

1 This was a sentiment expressed by a number of my interviewees, but especially by interviewees 2, 4, 11, and 43.

2 Interviewee 2.

3 Interviewee 4.

4 Interviewee 4.

5 This original web movie can be viewed at http://ttweak.squarespace.com/casestudieshiwi3 (ttweak 2014b).

6 Interviewee 4.

7 Interviewee 4.

8 In addition to referring to the work of convention and visitors bureaus as “propaganda,” the opening lines of the open call show us yet another example of how the HIWI campaign sought to distance itself from the official promotional efforts led by the GHCVB; they read: “Houston. It’s Worth It. Show Us Why. (because the convention and visitors bureau hasn’t)” (ttweak 2014c).

9 Interviewee 4.

10 Interviewee 4.

11 Interviewee 44.

12 Interviewee 4.

13 Interviewee 5.

14 Interviewee 2.

15 Interviewee 2.

16 Interviewee 4.

17 Interviewee 2.

18 See Raven 2009; Renn 2009b; Ryzik 2010; and Renn 2011.


20 Interviewee 4.

21 Interviewee 4.

22 Because of the uncoordinated nature of how Detroit’s citizens began adopting the frontier ethos, it is difficult to determine exactly when this “movement” of citizens actively seeking to build a better Detroit and present a more positive image of their city to the world began. In my interviews, the general
sense is that the movement is about a decade old, which would put its beginning somewhere around 2005, though the real popularity and spread of the movement is thought to have hit its stride around 2010.

23 Interviewee 32.

24 Interviewee 46.

25 See also Renn 2008, 2012b.

26 Interviewee 50. A similar sentiment was expressed by interviewee 16 in reference to Orlando.

27 Dates of settlement and incorporation for each city are as follows: Detroit (founded in 1701, incorporated in 1806); Houston (founded in 1836, incorporated in 1837); Orlando (founded in 1875, incorporated in 1885); Las Vegas (founded in 1905, incorporated in 1911).

28 Interviewee 41.

29 The idea that a city’s advocates and boosters do not have to be locally born, life-long residents but can be transplants from elsewhere is supported by Griswold and Wright (2004), who argue that rather than diluting the local culture or becoming less politically active, new residents are actually more likely to learn about and foster local culture and identity than their homegrown counterparts.

30 Interviewee 16.

31 Interviewee 16.

32 Interviewee 10.

33 Interviewee 16.

34 Interviewee 4.

35 In FY2014, the LVCVA had an operating budget of over $267 million. Its research fund alone, which totals between $7-8 million, is larger than the total operating budget of most CVBs across the country.

36 Interviewees 8, 9, and 10.

37 In a very real expression of its political power, the LVCVA is widely viewed as being responsible for the forced removal of Somer Hollingsworth from his position as president and CEO of the Nevada Development Authority. Hollingsworth, who, in his words, was forced to use some “unique marketing approaches” due to his meager $1.2 million advertising budget, was heavily criticized for these approaches, which in essence strayed too far from the LVCVA’s own strategies for marketing the city. Details of this controversy and Hollingsworth’s demotion were obtained from interviewees 7, 8, and 9.

38 Interviewees 16 and 17.

39 See Baratelli 2011 for more details on this effort, which was dubbed the “I Love Orlando” campaign.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears.


6.1 Introduction

Cities engage with the practice of urban branding for many reasons. Some cities rely on a brand to showcase themselves as a tourist destination, others as a good place to do business, and still others as a good place to live. Many even hope that urban branding can help them accomplish more than one of these goals, if not all three of them simultaneously. To tackle this feat, cities can follow two courses of action. First, they can create something new. In this practice of brand creation, local leaders commission new development projects with the hopes of raising the profile of their city above that of their competition. Yet, while the range of different types of brand-creation projects is wide in theory, in practice cities tend to focus on a handful of expensive, consumer-oriented, and cultural flagship projects like stadiums, mixed-use skyscrapers, entertainment districts, and high-art venues. It is thought that by having the newest, biggest, and brightest development project, a city can set itself apart from other cities. However, when all cities are following this same line of thinking and focusing on the same small range of projects,
no particular city is bound to spend much time at the top before being eclipsed by an even newer, bigger, and brighter project in another city.

The second course of action cities can take is to market and advertise what they already have. Because all cities have something unique to offer—be it their local history, traditions, music, cuisine, art, politics, etc.—even the most superficially mundane city should theoretically be able to find some way to set itself apart even without engaging in new brand-creation projects. However, in most instances of brand promotion, cities again follow similar patterns. Rather than promote aspects of the local culture that truly make them unique, cities tend to instead promote a generic consumer culture that can be found in nearly any city across the country. Moreover, brand-promotion efforts often are completely detached from the physical and cultural attributes a city has to offer, and instead rely on slogans to create a lasting image of the city in the minds of its target audience. However, just as cities relied on a small range of particular projects in their brand-creation efforts, they tend to gravitate toward the use of a handful of particular keywords when creating a slogan, words such as “dynamic,” “cosmopolitan,” “diverse,” “vibrant,” “cultural,” and “sophisticated.” And, while all of these descriptors may be true in any one particular case, when all cities are describing themselves in the same way, these slogans end up projecting a generic image of a city, thus failing to achieve the goal of differentiating it from its competition.

6.2 Contributions to the Literature and Directions for Future Research

This project began with a simple goal in mind: to provide an answer for why cities seem to be branding themselves in such similar ways when the basic idea behind urban branding is to differentiate a city from its competitors. Although the urban
branding literature is full of studies that highlight cities’ use of similar branding strategies, most of these studies are purely descriptive and fail to provide an explanation for why cities have such similar approaches to urban branding. When an explanation is presented, it is usually couched in macro-structural terms, placing the majority of blame on political and economic forces that leave little room for the agency of groups or individual actors to influence branding decisions. I argued that such explanations, while useful for helping us to better understand similarities in branding practices, are hampered by the fact that they cannot account for changes to branding practices if and when they do occur, especially if these changes are observed in some cities but not in others.

Unsatisfied with this standard explanation, the goal of this project actually became twofold: to provide an explanation that could not only account for why similarities in branding practices occur, but that could also explain why and how some cities have experienced changes in their branding practices while others have not. Thus, a primary contribution of this research was to bring the literature on institutionalism into the study of urban branding and to argue that the theory of institutional isomorphism provides a more comprehensive explanation for why so many cities approach the practice of urban branding in such similar ways. By looking at the specific actors working within the organizational field of urban branding, I showed that there are mimetic, coercive, and normative forces that influence these actors to behave in similar ways, that put restrictions on the types of strategies deemed appropriate for use in brand-creation and brand-promotion efforts, and that also prevent actors from outside the organizational field from having any real decision-making power when it comes to shaping the direction of a branding campaign.
A second contribution of this research is that it participates in the ongoing theory-building effort within the literature on institutionalism to address mechanisms of organizational change. Thus, I argued that explaining the similarities in branding practices in terms of institutional isomorphism is superior to any previous explanation because this theory also provides an avenue for organizational change to occur. Put simply, if the institutional isomorphism responsible for these similarities is caused by certain mimetic, coercive, and normative forces, then there could potentially be other forces that, under the right circumstances, might influence actors in different ways and lead to the adoption of a more diverse range of branding strategies.

By looking at citizen-led counter branding campaigns in Houston and Detroit, I argued that these grassroots branding efforts provided models that ultimately influenced how the organizations responsible for official branding efforts managed their own campaigns. Although mimetic processes are discussed in the institutional literature as instances of organizations modeling themselves on other like-organizations in the face of uncertainty, I extended this notion of a mimetic force and argued that a model for organizational behavior does not necessarily have to come from other similar organizations. In the case of urban branding, the “uncertainty” in question that would have the effect of causing an organization to model itself on another organization is figuring out how to achieve the goal of creating an effective branding campaign that conveys an intended message to an intended target audience. Indeed, the primary organizations in question in Houston and Detroit—the GHCVB and the DMCVB—for years did in fact model themselves on other similar organizations in other cities, which was a major cause of the isomorphism present in the official branding campaigns of these
cities. However, I argue that the citizen-led efforts in Houston and Detroit had the same end-goal of delivering a particular message to a particular audience, and their success in achieving this goal provided at least one possible answer to the uncertainty faced by official organizations trying to achieve this same goal. Thus, while their form and structures may not be similar, the fact that these grassroots campaigns were able to provide an answer for the uncertainty faced by the GHCVB and the DMCVB meant that they could also serve as a model for how these organizations could modify their own behaviors and decision-making processes. This finding could potentially have important implications for how we study organizational behavior and understand organizational change. By expanding our scope of influencing factors beyond entities of similar form and structure—i.e., beyond other formal organizations—we provide ourselves the opportunity to better understand the full range of influencing factors that help shape the actions of formal organizations.

Finally, a third contribution of this research is that it helps to build a bridge between various sub-literatures within sociology, namely between organizational institutionalism, urban sociology, and political sociology. Compared to previous studies, this project approaches urban branding from a new point of view; that is, its focus is squarely on the organizational dynamics of power at the local level rather than on more macro-level political and economic factors. By focusing on the relationship between citizen participation in local politics and the structure of urban power relations, we can not only get a clearer picture of how decision-making power is concentrated within specific formal organizations, but we can also see exactly when these concentrations of power are most likely to be challenged by local citizens. Drawing on social movement
theory, I argue that, at least in the case of urban branding, the presence of grievances and organizational resources alone are not sufficient to mount a successful challenge against those in charge of official branding efforts. Instead, a political opportunity must present itself—whether it be an actual decline in organizational power (as was the case in Detroit) or simply a perceived lack of legitimacy of a branding organization (as was the case in Houston)—before grassroots challenges to official branding efforts will occur.

Despite the contributions this research provides to the study of urban branding, to the literature on institutionalism and organization change, and to field of sociology more generally, there is still much to be gained from future work in this area. First, the theories used and the conclusions drawn in this study can be further tested by undertaking a longitudinal study that continues to monitor the official urban branding efforts in these four case study cities. As noted in chapter 5, while Houston and Detroit’s citizen-led counter branding campaigns have influenced the official branding efforts of each city, these official efforts are still in the early stages of a transition from an exclusive, top-down style of decision making to a more community-oriented and participatory form of urban branding. Thus, important questions still remain: Will this transition continue, or will brand decision makers revert to a reliance on expert advice and the implementation of standard practices rather than invite further community participation and experiment with new branding strategies? Additionally, how successful will the current attempts at more participatory official branding efforts really be? If these efforts are successful at getting the community involved and instilling more civic pride in local residents, but fail to accomplish the political-economic goals that branding is ultimately meant to address, will these citizen-oriented branding strategies be maintained? Finally, will we ever
witness a change in the branding practices of Las Vegas or Orlando, and if so, will the mechanisms of change argued for in this project prove valid, or will some other factor be responsible for this change?

Another line of possible inquiry that relates to testing the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn in this project would be to look at the official branding strategies used in cities that present different combinations of the push and pull factors used to compare and contrast cities in this study. One such city that would be an interesting case study is New Orleans. At first glance, we might expect New Orleans to follow a similar pattern to other tourist metropolises like Las Vegas and Orlando. However, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the city also found itself dealing with some of the same political-economic turmoil that plagues Detroit. In many ways, citizen actions in New Orleans actually mirror those of residents in Detroit and Houston more than those in Las Vegas or Orlando. For instance, Kageyama (2011: 180) draws a strong comparison between the wave of “young, socially minded, community building entrepreneurs” who have been at the heart of both Detroit’s and New Orleans’s rebuilding and rebranding efforts. Moreover, the “Dear New Orleans” campaign is a brand-promotion effort that asks local citizens to write “love notes” to the city on their hands, photograph their efforts, and then share them with others online. This campaign shares many similarities with the “Houston. It’s Worth It” campaign, in that both campaigns are at once allowing citizens to share why they love their city while also combating many of the negative stereotypes that are held by outsiders. An in-depth study of the official branding efforts of New Orleans could help to shed light on whether these citizen-led rebuilding efforts and brand-promotion efforts have influenced the city’s
official brand, as they have in Detroit and Houston, or whether the powerful interests of
the city’s tourism industry have precluded any change from taking place, as has been the
case in Las Vegas and Orlando. Furthermore, if the city’s official branding efforts are
more in line with these tourism-oriented cities, New Orleans could help us to answer
further questions, such as: Why did citizens in New Orleans decide to mobilize and carry
out citizen-led branding efforts if there was no political opportunity present that would
allow them to effectively influence official branding efforts? Did residents perceive a
political opportunity that simply wasn’t there?

Another useful line of inquiry for gaining a better understanding of the motivating
factors that cause local branding organizations to adopt a more community-oriented
approach would be to look at cities that willingly invite local residents to participate in
their official urban branding efforts. One such city that would be an intriguing case study
is Baltimore. Since the mid-2000s, the Baltimore Area Convention & Visitors
Association (BACVA) has hosted a website\(^2\) where local residents can submit photos and
videos that express what Baltimore means to them. While there are a few local celebrities
who have contributed to the website, the vast majority of submissions are from ordinary
Baltimoreans. An inquiry into the origins of this community-based, official branding
effort could help to answer several important questions, such as: Was there any grassroots
branding effort already underway in Baltimore that led to the official adoption of this
participatory branding strategy? Did the BACVA model its efforts on any other city, such
as Houston’s “MyHouston” campaign? And, if the answer to both of these questions is
“no,” then what exactly was the motivating factor that led the BACVA to reach out to
local citizens and involve them in their official branding efforts? If there was not a
mimetic force responsible for shaping Baltimore’s citizen-oriented campaign, were there any coercive or normative forces that, rather than leading to a homogenization of action and non-responsiveness on the part of decision makers, instead lead them to adopt the unique strategy of involving the local citizenry in the city’s official urban branding campaign?

6.3 Improving Future Urban Branding Efforts

While brand creation and brand promotion and both important parts of a city’s overall branding efforts, most of the time, effort, and money that cities dedicate to urban branding does fall on the side of brand promotion. Although the budget of any one particular brand-creation project may dwarf a city’s annual advertising and marketing budget, these projects are often (though not always) thought of in terms of more general economic development efforts that will have a secondary benefit of helping a city’s brand. On the other hand, funding for brand-promotion efforts are specifically earmarked for the purpose of advertising the city’s brand. And because most convention and visitors bureaus are the de facto advertising entity for cities, they logically seem like the organization that should take on the role of brand promoter for the city. While most cities do have organizations other than CVBs that aim to promote the city, these other organizations often have a more limited target audience. For instance, a local chamber of commerce may promote a city, but only to those in the business community. And while CVBs do have a specific target audience in mind—tourists—unlike the business community, which only consists of a subset of the larger population, anyone and everyone is a potential tourist, and thus CVBs are seen as having the greatest potential to distribute a city’s brand message to the widest possible audience.
The problem with CVBs leading urban branding campaigns is that, although they are promoting the city to all people, they are still limited by their guiding principle of advertising the city to promote the local tourism industry. Thus, while much of the criticism of the current state of urban branding may be leveled at CVBs, the fault really lies with city leaders who expect CVBs to accomplish tasks that are beyond the scope of their organizational mission. For instance, in Las Vegas, the LVCVA does a fantastic job of ensuring that the city is a top tourist destination; however, its controversial advertising methods and risqué brand for the city have worked against another goal that city leaders hoped urban branding would help them accomplish: attracting new forms of investment and achieving economic diversification. Similarly, in Houston, the GHCVB spent millions of dollars over several decades trying to use traditional tourism marketing strategies to create an appealing brand for the city. However, because Houston is not a major tourist destination, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. What Houston really needed branding to accomplish was to counteract the negative stereotypes held by outsiders about the city, but this did not happen until the citizen-led “Houston. It’s Worth It” counter branding campaign presented the GHCVB with a successful model that demonstrated the effectiveness of alternative branding strategies and the usefulness of incorporating actors from outside the traditional organizational field of urban branding.

Given the influence that citizen-led efforts have had on the official branding campaigns of Houston and Detroit, a first step in helping to improve the effectiveness of current urban branding efforts would be to find ways of fostering more cooperation and interaction between CVBs and the general public. Again, the problem is not that CVBs don’t have the tools to effectively promote an urban brand; rather, it is that they are being
asked to approach urban branding from an unfamiliar perspective and accomplish goals that are not part of their traditional organizational mission. As the examples of Houston and Detroit presented in chapter 5 demonstrate, while official branding efforts still have plenty of room for improvement, the CVBs in these cities are doing a much better job of accomplishing all of the goals local leaders want urban branding to accomplish, thanks to their new approach to the process that has been informed by a wide range of citizen perspectives and alternative branding strategies.

Although this cooperation between citizens and CVBs is a step in the right direction, it still does not address the larger issue of CVBs being tasked with carrying out a branding campaign meant to accomplish anything more than promoting the local tourism industry. If local leaders really want branding to help sell their city to new residents and new investors, then the responsibility for accomplishing these goals needs to be shared by other organizations that are specifically tasked with reaching these intended audiences. This, of course, makes managing a cohesive branding campaign much more complicated. When multiple organizations are promoting a brand to different audiences, it is much harder to maintain a consistent brand message. This is one of the basic dilemmas associated with the practice of urban branding, and one of the main reasons cities tend to place all of their brand-promotion efforts in the hands of their CVBs. Choosing this course of action indicates that city leaders assume it would be more difficult to coordinate a multi-organizational branding campaign than it would be for the CVB to figure out how to convey an appropriate brand message to groups that are not their traditional audience.
As this project and previous studies have shown, however, CVBs have not had much success in effectively managing urban branding campaigns meant for multiple target audiences. Thus, while the task may prove daunting, urban branding efforts may have a better chance of being successful if they are undertaken in a more piecemeal but coordinated manner. One way of managing multi-organizational branding efforts would be for a city to have a brand manager or a chief image officer who is responsible for coordinating all brand-creation and brand-promotion efforts. This idea was actually discussed in a roundtable of local leaders in Houston in 2002 (Houston Business Journal 2002). Although the position never came to fruition in Houston, instituting a brand manager or chief image officer could prove to be a useful move for cities wishing to carry out a more targeted branding effort. A brand manager could help to coordinate branding efforts by ensuring that a consistent message is maintained across the multiple organizations involved, and could help to ensure that citizen participation remains a key element of all branding efforts. Moreover, a coordinated, multi-organizational approach could help to prevent the institutional isomorphism that currently plagues most urban branding efforts today, as it would expand the organizational field of urban branding by increasing the number and types of actors, organizations, and influences involved in the urban branding process.

A final move that could be made to improve urban branding moving forward would be to reconceptualize our way of thinking about urban brands altogether. The first step would be for city leaders to start relying less on “expert” advice and instead begin inviting local citizens to participate in the urban branding process. In doing so, local leaders will benefit from the ideas and opinions of those who know their city best. This
democratization of the urban branding process may prove to be a messy endeavor, but by giving locals a voice in how their city is presented to the outside world, they are at the same time given a sense of ownership over the brand, which will have the added benefit of encouraging them to promote the brand as well. Another positive step would be for those involved in brand decision-making processes to place their focus on what already exists, on their city’s current positive attributes, and on the uniqueness of their local culture, rather than on creating something new and cool (be it a development project or a catchy slogan). By doing this, urban branding may finally become the useful tool that helps local leaders create the differentiation from their competitors that they have long hoped it would help them achieve. Finally, local leaders would be wise to start thinking of urban branding as a long-term rather than as a short-term process. A city’s brand can be molded to varying degrees in the present, but people’s image and conceptualization of a city is a complex mélange of fact and fiction that is shaped by the city’s representation in popular culture as well as people’s own understanding of current and historic local events. Brand-creation and brand-promotion efforts can help to present a city in a positive light, but they cannot automatically hide or erase the current reputation of a city. Thus, urban branding efforts should be long-term in scope, with an aim of improving the overall image and reputation of a city, rather than creating a façade that attempts to hide the bad that inevitably accompanies the good of what a city has to offer.
6.4 Notes

1 This campaign was started in 2009 by local resident Robert Fogarty. Photographs of the “love notes” written by local citizens to the City of New Orleans can be viewed on the campaign’s Facebook page, www.facebook.com/dearneworleans.

APPENDIX

A.1 Survey Procedure

Community organizations surveyed for this project were drawn from the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State, and Local Organizations*, which provides a comprehensive listing of all nonprofit membership organizations that operate in each city. Because the survey respondent is an organization rather than an individual, it is possible for a respondent to be physically located in a nearby suburb, town, or unincorporated area but still represent the core city or have members who live in or work in the core city. For instance, the Las Vegas branch of the Rosicrucian Order is actually located in the neighboring city of Henderson, NV; the Orlando Lawyers Chapter of the Federalist Society of Law and Public Policy Studies is located in nearby Winter Park, FL; the Houston Millennium Lions Club is located in Sugar Land, TX; and the Detroit Medical Society is located in the nearby suburb of Southfield, MI. Thus, all organizations located in the wider metropolitan area for each core city were considered when choosing the universe of cases from which a sample of community organizations was to be drawn. In total, the universe of cases included 2,971 organizations (345 in Las Vegas, 533 in Orlando, 1,025 in Houston, and 1,068 in Detroit).

The *Encyclopedia of Associations* divides its listing of community organizations into 18 separate categories. Because of the small overall number of organizations in cities like Las Vegas and Orlando, and due to the specificity of some of the categorizations,
some categories were left with only a handful of organizations. Thus, to get a clearer sense of which types of organizations shared similarities or differences in their responses to certain survey questions, I grouped the 18 categories of organizations into 5 larger categories based on the goals and/or membership base of each type of organization. The original categorization of organizations can be seen in table A.1, while my categorization is provided in table A.2.

**TABLE A.1**

**ORIGINAL CATEGORIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Organizations by City</th>
<th>Las Vegas</th>
<th>Orlando</th>
<th>Houston</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic and Sports Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chambers of Commerce / Trade and Tourism Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Technological, and Natural and Social Sciences Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental and Agricultural Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan Clubs</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternal, Nationality, and Ethnic Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek and Non-Greek Letter Societies, Associations, and Federations</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Medical Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobby and Avocational Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Unions, Associations, and Federations</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal, Governmental, Public Administration, and Military Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Affairs Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Welfare Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade, Business, and Commercial Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans’, Hereditary, and Patriotic Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Organizations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>345</strong></td>
<td><strong>533</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,025</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,068</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE A.2

**REVISED CATEGORIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Organizations by City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social, Culture, and Leisure Organizations</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes: Athletic and Sports Organizations; Cultural Organizations; Environmental and Agricultural Organizations; Fan Clubs; Fraternal, Nationality, and Ethnic Organizations; Hobby and Avocational Organizations; Public Affairs Organizations; Religious Organizations; Social Welfare Organizations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-Oriented Organizations</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes: Chambers of Commerce / Trade and Tourism Organizations; Trade, Business, and Commercial Organizations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Interest Organizations</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes: Educational Organizations; Engineering, Technological, and Natural and Social Sciences Organizations; Health and Medical Organizations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Organizations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes: Labor Unions, Associations, and Federations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Organizations</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes: Greek and Non-Greek Letter Societies, Associations, and Federations; Legal, Governmental, Public Administration, and Military Organizations; Veterans’, Hereditary, and Patriotic Organizations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Organizations</strong></td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even with this revised categorization, the number of groups included in each category is still rather small (for instance, only 6 of the 20 groupings of organizations across the four cities have over 200 cases from which to draw a sample). Thus, to include as many organizations as possible, I used the entire universe of cases as my sample. Because of time and monetary constraints, the primary survey method used was an email inviting each organization to participate. Although the *Encyclopedia of Associations* gives contact information for each organization, an email address is not always provided.
In such cases, an Internet search for the organization was conducted to find a valid email address. In total, 2,033 email addresses were located to which survey invitations were sent (233 in Las Vegas, 383 in Orlando, 630 in Houston, and 787 in Detroit). If no response was received after sending the initial email inviting the organization to participate, a follow up email was sent within two weeks. After four weeks with no response, a follow up phone call was made to each organization. If an organization agreed to participate but failed to then fill out the survey, a reminder email was sent after one month and, if necessary, a reminder phone call was made after six weeks.

The number of completed surveys received and the corresponding response rates were as follows: Las Vegas (139, or 59.7%); Orlando (205, or 53.5%); Houston (422, or 67.0%); and Detroit (356, or 45.2%). Out of the 2,033 survey invitations sent, only 32 organizations responded but then refused to participate. In almost all of these cases, the group in question was located in an outlying area of the metropolitan region and the organization felt that it was either not qualified to comment on, or did not feel comfortable expressing an opinion about, the urban branding efforts of the core city.

Most completed surveys were received after the initial invitation to participate. Follow up emails and phone calls increased response rates slightly, but not significantly. Several possible explanations exist for the inability to elicit higher response rates. In some cases, organizations may have been absorbed into another group. For instance, the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Associations* lists the East Orlando Chamber of Commerce as a stand-alone organization, but by the time my invitation to participate was sent, this group had become part of the larger Metro Orlando Chamber of Commerce. Other groups may have a state or regional focus but are still listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*
because their headquarters is located in one of the case study cities. In other cases, these 
state or regionally focused groups do not have a permanent headquarters, and the address 
listed is that of the group director or chair, a position which may change on an annual 
basis. Thus, a group listed as a Houston organization in the 2010 edition of the 
Encyclopedia of Associations may be listed as a Dallas organization in the 2012 edition 
and as an Austin organization in the 2014 edition. In some cases, an organization may be 
located in the metropolitan region but, like those groups who refused to participate, may 
feel they are too far removed geographically from the core city to have an opinion on the 
city’s urban branding efforts. Finally, some groups may still have an active email address 
in existence but the group itself may have disbanded or become inactive since 2010.

A.2 Sample Survey Questions and Response Choices

The survey itself asked 10 multiple choice questions that were meant to 1) gauge 
the responding organization’s awareness of, and opinion on, their city’s past and current 
branding campaigns; 2) see if the organization had been invited to participate or had 
voluntarily tried to participate in branding efforts; and 3) discover what aspects of their 
city these organizations would include in a branding campaign. Survey questions and 
responses choices were kept consistent for each city, although slight variations in the 
wording of each were necessary to tailor the survey to each particular city. The questions 
and response choices used for survey participants in Houston are provided as an example 
below.
Survey Questions

1. How familiar is your organization with Houston’s current efforts to market and promote the city regionally, nationally, and internationally?

   _____ We are very familiar with current efforts to market and promote the city
   _____ We have heard about current efforts, but are not familiar with the details
   _____ We were unaware that there are current efforts to market and promote the city

2. Have you or a representative of your organization ever been contacted by any of the following organizations, agencies, or officials and asked by them to participate in efforts to market and promote the Houston area? (please check all that apply):

   _____ The mayor of Houston
   _____ The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau
   _____ The Greater Houston Partnership
   _____ A marketing/advertising agency
   _____ An image or urban branding consultant
   _____ Other (please specify) _________________________
   _____ My organization has not been contacted by anyone regarding this issue

3. If your organization has been asked to participate in efforts to market and promote the Houston area, which of the following options were you given for ways to participate? (please check all that apply):

   _____ I was asked for my organization’s opinion on Houston’s image and reputation
   _____ I was asked to provide feedback on current efforts to market and promote the city
   _____ I was asked for suggestions of ways to improve current marketing and promotion efforts
   _____ I was asked to share my favorite and least favorite characteristics of the city
   _____ I was asked to use word of mouth advertising to help market and promote the city
   _____ Other (please specify) _________________________
   _____ Not applicable

4. If your organization has been asked to participate in efforts to market and promote the Houston area, in which of the following ways did your organization actually participate? (please check all that apply):

   _____ We provided our opinion on Houston’s image and reputation
   _____ We provided feedback on current efforts to market and promote the city
   _____ We provided suggestions of ways to improve current marketing and promotion efforts
   _____ We shared our favorite and least favorite characteristics of the city
   _____ We used/are using word of mouth advertising to help market and promote the city
   _____ Other (please specify) _________________________
   _____ Not applicable
5. Please rate how effective you believe efforts to market and promote Houston have been in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
<th>No effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attracting new residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracting new businesses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracting tourists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering local civic pride</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Overall, how satisfied is your organization with the efforts of city leaders to market and promote Houston regionally, nationally, and internationally?

   - Completely satisfied
   - Somewhat satisfied
   - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
   - Somewhat dissatisfied
   - Completely dissatisfied
   - No opinion

7. Which of the following features of the Houston area does your organization believe would be most effective in helping to market and promote the city? (please check all that apply):

   - Sports, entertainment, and shopping venues (Reliant Stadium, NASA, the Galleria)
   - Museums, music halls, and other fine-arts facilities
   - Medical and educational facilities (Texas Medical Center, local universities)
   - Downtown redevelopment efforts
   - Facts and figures on the local economy
   - Local geography (the bayous, proximity to the coast)
   - Local culture (restaurants, local artists, historic buildings, local history)
   - All of the above
   - None of the above
   - Other (please specify) _________________________

8. Have you or a representative of your organization ever voluntarily contacted any of the following organizations, agencies, or officials to offer your participation in efforts to market and promote the Houston area? (please check all that apply):

   - The mayor of Houston
   - The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau
   - The Greater Houston Partnership
   - A marketing/advertising agency
   - An image or urban branding consultant
   - Other (please specify) _________________________
   - My organization has not contacted anyone regarding this issue
9. If you or a representative of your organization have voluntarily offered to participate in efforts to market and promote the Houston area, why did you want to participate? (please check all that apply):

____ To offer an opinion on Houston’s image and reputation
____ To provide feedback on current efforts to market and promote the city
____ To offer suggestions of ways to improve current marketing and promotion efforts
____ To share our favorite and least favorite characteristics of the city
____ To find out how we could help market and promote the city
____ Other (please specify) _________________________
____ Not applicable

10. If you or a representative of your organization have voluntarily offered to participate in efforts to market and promote the Houston area, how was your initiative greeted by local officials?

____ No response from local officials
____ Acknowledgement of offer to participate, but no directions for how to get involved
____ Acknowledgement of offer, but asked to participate in a different way than we wanted to
____ Acknowledgement of offer, and helpful directions for how to get involved
____ Other (please specify) _________________________
____ Not applicable
BIBLIOGRAPHY


