

Abstract

## **Urban hospitality and urban revitalisation: the rebranding of place through leisure consumption in Woolwich, south-east London**

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to analyse the place-branding effects of urban hospitality within urban revitalisation initiatives.

**Background:** Over the past three decades, a growing literature has emerged that reflects on the revitalisation of formerly industrial urban places and spaces (Sieber, 1991; Cowan, 2016). Much of this previous research has related to the transition from previous industrial (production) use of urban space to subsequent leisure, entertainment and hospitality (consumption) uses (Mansfeld, 1992; Lorente, 1996; Mommaas, 2004; Murphy and Boyle, 2006; Bavinton, 2013).

**Research problem:** In the past, these revitalisation initiatives were often top-down urban redevelopment projects (Oc and Tiesdell, 1991; Hall, 1998; Greenberg, 1996) in the service of the urban 'growth machine' (Molotch, 1976). However more recent neo-liberal market-led political economy trends have required an 'urban assemblage'<sup>1</sup> of interests (Farias and Bender, 2012; Jacobs, 2012). Optimistically, organic market forces will result in creative and associated hospitality firms locate their own way to marginalised neighbourhoods (Zukin, 1989). Meanwhile, the rise of digital media marketing encouraged attempts to 'pre-brand' places as fashionably 'cool', 'buzzy', and 'sticky' (Markusen, 1996) before the physical transformations have occurred.

Yet 'buzz' remains a tenuous concept (Storper and Venables, 2004; Drake, 2003) and the alignment of interests is not guaranteed to occur in the pace and locales favourable to revitalisation objectives. Bathelt and Turi (2011:523) articulate 'buzz' as the "*F2F [face to face] encounters and the associated non-verbal cues [that] generate informational and integrational advantages*". Anholt (2006:19) proposes that city brands rely on presence, place, potential, pulse, people and prerequisites. However, until now, surprisingly little formal research has been conducted on how urban place 'buzz' is actually created, compared to the term's wide-spread use in property advertising. This paper seeks to fill that gap specifically in relation to the urban 'buzz' that hospitality may or may not contribute within urban revitalisation.

**Conceptual model:** The present research is underpinned by the theories of the social construction of place (Lefevre, 1991) and social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) through the consumption of symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 1985). These broad sociological theoretical underpinnings are then framed in the context of place branding theory (Morgan et al, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2005) including the use of temporary, pop-up, and 'meanwhile' (TPM) spaces.

**Sample/Context:** The context is the district of Woolwich, south east London. Woolwich is a place

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<sup>1</sup> Urban assemblage theory builds on the concept of 'assemblage' developed by Deleuze, and Guattari (1987) in which the process of arranging and organising parts (actors, territorialities) is considered to determine outcomes rather than existing simply as component parts themselves (De Landa, 2006)

currently in transition from former military industrial use to residential and leisure use. This locale provides a live urban laboratory in which to test the various theories considered in this paper.

**Method:** Geo-tagging (cartographic regression) and visual ethnography were used to identify, catalogue, categorise and analyse the hospitality offer of Woolwich town centre (WTC) and Royal Arsenal Riverside (RAR) pubs, restaurants, cafes, takeaways, lodging, and entertainment.

**Research questions:**

- How do these hospitality offers (re)-present Woolwich as place?
- How do these representations of urban hospitality fit (or not) with the revitalisation project?
- Can TPM space urban hospitality bridge the gap in constructing the new place image?
- How can the hospitality needs and preferences of the existing local (working class, BME) residents be reconciled with the expectations and financial status of newer residents and visitors?

**Key findings/Contribution:** A categorisation of urban hospitality on offer is presented that includes “early adopters”, “ethnic adapters”, and “local stalwarts” amongst others. Temporary, pop-up and ‘meanwhile’ spaces have not been welcomed as enthusiastically by the local authority as they might have been. For entertainment, the local authority preference has been to bring in dominant outside suppliers (e.g. GDIF, Punch Drunk) rather than support growth of local (GLYPT, WGT). Many of the existing older pubs/cafes/takeaways seem resistant to change. This creates a notable division between the older existing (cheaper) local establishment in the town centre compared with the newer (more expensive) restaurants, cafes, pubs on the riverside. A trendy-friendly ethnic ‘food street’ is emerging. Changes in transport over two centuries has left architectural imprints in pubs and (former) hotels that no longer address market needs. Instances of local enterprise and ambition in urban hospitality were found to be thwarted. City branding theory is applied to the local district level, which is particularly relevant given the socio-demographic differences between Woolwich and historic Greenwich even though these two districts are now combined into one administrative political unit.

**Significance/Implications:** The findings are significant in that they represent the first known comprehensive attempt to catalogue and analyse the urban hospitality offer in one of the largest recent riverside redevelopments in London. In light of how dominant the selective representations of urban hospitality are in property advertising and publicity (banners, newspapers etc), this paper fills a significant gap in capturing, analysing and deconstructing the fuller range of hospitality available in this rapidly changing urban milieu.

**Conclusions/Limitations/Further research:** The paper is limited in its supply-side focus. A next step would be to capture demand-side views (residents, visitors) regarding their perceptions of hospitality offer in evolving Woolwich. It would also be useful to conduct interviews with the older and newer hospitality firms themselves to understand better the strategic decision-making.

Keywords: *urban hospitality; place branding; local development; leisure consumption*

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