

Branding, Crisis, and Utopia

Representing New York in the Age of Bloomberg

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On November 3, 2009, New York City mayor and multibillionaire media magnate Michael Bloomberg narrowly won reelection to his third term in office. The circumstances of his reelection were controversial: in order to run for a third term, Bloomberg used his political and financial muscle to pressure the city council to overturn a popular term limits law. When in 2001 previous mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to use the 9/11 terrorist attacks to justify remaining in office, Bloomberg, then in his first run for mayor, vociferously supported term limits. Yet in 2009, Bloomberg cited another crisis—the Wall Street financial collapse—to justify his own third-term bid, arguing that “a leader of his business acumen” was needed to keep the city on track (Honan 2008). This reversal cost him support across the political spectrum (Edroso 2008; Siegel 2008). Complicating these claims was the fact that Bloomberg’s personal and political fortunes as founder of Bloomberg LP and as a prodevelopment mayor were intimately tied to Wall Street and New York real estate, the two industries that many argued precipitated the economic crisis (Brash 2010; Barbaro and Chen 2009).

But perhaps the most controversial aspect of his reelection was the astounding amount of money Bloomberg spent on the campaign. Drawing on a personal fortune of \$16 billion, Bloomberg spent \$108 million, or more than \$200 per vote, surpassing his publicly financed opponent William Thompson by a rate of twelve to one (“World’s Billionaires” 2009; NYC Campaign Finance Board 2009a, 2009b). Not only did this figure shatter previous records for municipal races; it was the most ever spent in a self-financed campaign, at any level, in United States history (Barbaro 2009c).¹

Notably, the bulk of this amount, some 85 percent, was spent on marketing, advertising, and branding—a striking figure given Bloomberg’s status as an incumbent with universal name recognition.

News reports eventually uncovered the impetus for such exorbitant spending. Bloomberg’s extensive internal polling operations had revealed a growing backlash against him among the city’s majority nonwhite, non-wealthy, and Democratic voters. To counter this, Bloomberg hired consultants with a record of “attack-dog politics,”² who effectively developed a two-tiered branding strategy. The “campaign on the surface” involved advertising across every major media platform, combining utopian, postcrisis scenes of New Yorkers coming together alongside portrayals of Bloomberg as a populist figure and pragmatic “self-made man” with the smarts to get the city back on its feet. Meanwhile, the “campaign that really mattered” was conducted behind the scenes, ensuring that “through money and muscle...Mr. Bloomberg faced no serious obstacle to winning a third term” (Barbaro 2009b). The latter effort was dubbed the “Powell Doctrine”: a “sky-is-the-limit ethos” on spending combined with an “intimidating...even brutal” mix of political threats and financial incentives. The effect was to scare off the opposition, silence potential critics, and depress voter turnout in opposition districts.³ This underground campaign was an ingenious, if ruthless, form of branding: “Sell the inevitability” of a Bloomberg victory, and blanket the media with the message that “opposition was futile” (Barbaro 2009b). The strategy was a remarkable success. It was not until November 4, 2009, the day after Bloomberg eked out a victory of less than five percent rather than the “blowout” so many predicted, that the realization dawned on the pundits and the press: the “King of New York” was “no longer invincible”—and indeed, never had been (Powell and Bosman 2009).

Bloomberg’s reelection campaign provides insight into the intersection between branding and political power, one that is becoming more prevalent in cities and regions around the world. It suggests that branding is not only, or even mainly, a matter of generating publicity, as older forms of urban and political boosterism once were. Rather, branding may be seen as a broader social formation, one in which an emphasis on image and media integration is tied to the extension of market priorities into new social and political realms. We can see the symbolic/material dualism of branding in Bloomberg’s canny combination of media and marketing with political and economic muscle: overturning term limits and exerting financial and politi-

cal pressure to reshape the electoral map. Significantly, these branding strategies were deployed during a period of financial crisis. Bloomberg saw the opportunity for the “creative destruction” of existing political and economic arrangements that moments of crisis often generate—opportunities that have catalyzed “neoliberal,” or market-oriented, forms of restructuring over the last four decades (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). Meanwhile, his branding campaign sheds light on the cultural dimension of this creative destruction. Bloomberg’s market-oriented platform was narrated through postcrisis, utopian imaginaries of urban solidarity and community, effectively humanizing the private sector while privatizing many aspects of city operations.

Political and marketing campaigns are brief, intensified examples of branding in times of crisis. Yet they should also be seen as manifestations of a phenomenon with deeper structural and cultural roots and ramifications. In this chapter, I seek to trace out the latter, using the period of Bloomberg-era New York City as my case study. Long a global media and marketing capital, New York is also a city that since the 1970s has been at the forefront of urban branding initiatives (Greenberg 2008). Meanwhile, in the post-9/11 period, Mayor Bloomberg became a leading figure in the move to political branding for a new generation of “CEO-politicians.” This chapter will first theorize the co-evolution of urban and political branding and the strategies of representation and restructuring that both employ. I then explore the dominant ideological framework of this branding, namely the appeal to postcrisis, utopian desire. Finally, I turn to an empirical analysis of recent branding campaigns, drawing on interviews with leading figures in the Bloomberg administration.⁴ I focus on three areas of innovation in these rebranding initiatives: the development of marketing infrastructures and technologies; the globalization of the city’s image; and the integration of urban branding into internal political governance.

The Co-Evolution of Urban and Political Branding

The origins of contemporary branding may be traced to the onset of economic crisis in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was then that corporations based in Western industrialized nations faced a combination of pressures—including global competition, recession, and the critique of the consumer rights movement—that pushed them to embrace a new form of valorization and self-preservation, called at the time “reputational capital” (Arvidsson

2004; Greenberg 2008; see also the introduction to this volume).⁵ At the same time, the attempt to quantify, and ultimately produce, this new form of symbolic capital expanded from the private to the public sector. In the midst of recession and ongoing fiscal crisis, cities and regions began to brand themselves as business- and tourist-friendly global capitals. Much like the model of corporate branding upon which this process was based, the new urban branding entailed a two-pronged approach, combining marketing and image-making, on the one hand, with political and economic restructuring, austerity measures and pro-business reforms, on the other (Greenberg 2008). These practices helped shape, and were shaped by, the rise of the “neoliberal city,” and with this, “entrepreneurial” forms of urban governance (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Hackworth 2006; Harvey 2001). In conjunction with this market-oriented shift, branding practices enabled the more thorough commodification of the city’s symbolic as well as material assets.

Urban branding also altered the interconnected spheres of “promotional culture” in profound ways (Wernick 1991). In essence, urban brands created a powerful place-based promotional umbrella that could extend to other commercial entities—from corporations and industries based or doing business in the city; to products produced in or associated with the place; to movies, television programs, and magazines shot on location; to individual celebrities or entrepreneurs living and working within its borders (Molotch 2003: chapter 6). Branding coalitions, meanwhile, sought to exploit the secondary media coverage, “brand extensions,” and actual “cobranding” that came about through the representation of the city via these commercial entities (Keller and Aaker 1992; Chang 2009).⁶

Since the 1990s, politicians have sought to take advantage of this urban brand umbrella. Aspiring and sitting mayors in particular have begun to brand themselves in association with the branded images of their cities in an effort to mobilize citizens as voters and constituents. This shift towards urban and political branding is part of a broader “postparty” and “post-machine” trend in urban politics around the world, through which the political party and its patronage-based machinery no longer hold sufficient power to sway elections and govern effectively (Pasotti 2009). In place of old voter-mobilization governance models, political branding has arisen as a putatively fairer system that emphasizes the figure and “vision” of the individual candidate or official and this individual’s capacity to efficiently manage the “business” of the city.

The branding of cities and their politicians are now integrally intertwined, with an urban brand influencing the marketability and image of the mayor, and the branding of the mayor influencing the image and marketability of the city. This conjunction speaks to the ongoing merging of public and private spheres. In 1970s New York City, branding was introduced by private sector-led coalitions based outside City Hall, working in concert with entrepreneurial city and state officials and temporary crisis regimes. Today, by contrast, the branding of New York is centrally managed by a “CEO-mayor,” in concert with private sector leaders working inside City Hall, with the goal of furthering both the city’s and their own political and economic interests. Such privatization, it is argued, provides a crucial tactical and competitive advantage in times of crisis, when the national and global position of the city is challenged. In a context of increasing market deregulation and volatility, in which crises of various types—fiscal, environmental, security, housing, etc.—occur with greater frequency and impact, this centralized branding regime becomes a kind of rapid response system for gauging and building support, internally and externally, for the city and its leadership. Yet this powerful and profitable new strategy also raises old questions, long central to urban sociology and political science: who governs, and who benefits from, this branded city?

Branding, Crisis, and Utopia

In the neoliberal era, urban brands and branded politicians assist local governing strategies, becoming the most publicly visible aspect of an increasingly privatized restructuring process. This strategy has been particularly useful in periods of crisis, which, by producing profound ruptures in the social system, provoke widespread contestation over the future direction of the city. It is during these periods that brands play their most active role: presenting an imagined consensus that transcends class, race, and neighborhood. In so doing, branding campaigns aim to soothe the trauma of crisis, legitimize new leadership, as well as aestheticize and distract critical attention from highly politicized processes of urban recovery and rebuilding. I propose two interrelated ways of conceptualizing this ideological power. One applies Fredric Jameson’s theory of the “utopian aspect of mass culture” (Jameson 1992); the second draws on the expanding field of “crisis communications,” specifically the “rhetorical approach” to management and branding in times of crisis (Millar and Heath 2004). These approaches

allow us to consider the cultural dimensions and historical and political contexts in which branding campaigns most often arise.

Jameson's theory, from his 1979 essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," argues against the Frankfurt School model of mass culture. Rather than "empty distraction or 'mere' false consciousness," the ideological aspect of mass culture should be seen, at its root, as utopian. He describes this utopian dimension as that which conveys "our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived" (Jameson 1992: 34). This fantasy entails the "optical illusion of social harmony," the "ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order," and "the ineradicable drive towards collectivity" and social solidarity (26, 27, 34). But, he cautions, it is commonly used as a "fantasy bribe," for which empty consumerism is exchanged.

While Jameson doesn't mention it explicitly, the context of crisis is highly relevant to his theory, developed as it was in reference to popular films of the 1970s. By design, crisis-era branding is saturated with utopian themes. The aspirations of targeted groups are researched and responded to by marketing consultants, designers, brand managers, and experts in "crisis communications" who collectively craft these campaigns. Indeed, it might be argued that crisis communications is the *Ur-form* of contemporary brand management, as corporations, cities, and political figures become acutely aware of the need for branding when their image and reputation are most at risk. Crisis communications emerged as a specialization within the fields of brand management and public relations in the late 1980s, prompted by the economic crisis of 1989–1992, a rash of corporate scandals, and the pressures of responding to criticism within the new Internet and cable TV-driven "24-hour news cycle."⁷ Leaders in the field argue that effective communications can "[make] crisis an opportunity rather than a calamity," generating "positive outcomes" like renewed customer/constituent loyalty and economic growth (Ulmer, Sellner, and Seeger 2007: 3–4).

The notion of crisis-as-opportunity has been seized upon in another, less publicized sense. High profile rebranding campaigns have almost invariably been accompanied "behind the scenes" by new ways of doing business through political and economic restructuring. In the case of urban and political branding this has entailed policies that spur real estate development and attract tourism and corporate relocation while cutting public spending, minimizing public oversight, and privatizing public space. This sets up the highly contradictory dynamic that Jameson warned us against, in which pro-

jections of social solidarity obscure and help reproduce processes of social exclusion.

Rebranding New York City Post 9/11 and the Wall Street Crisis

From 1975, when fiscal crisis pushed the city to the edge of bankruptcy; to 2001, when the attacks of 9/11 sent its economy into a tailspin; to 2008, when its financial firms set off a global financial meltdown, New York has loomed large in the history of urban crisis. The city's stature reflects three main factors: the scale of New York's financial industries, and thus the outsized impact of crisis on the local, national, and global economy; the city's role in the public imagination—dominant in the 1970s, and still prevalent today—as an untamed “asphalt jungle” and “ungovernable city”; and the power of the city's own local media industry to broadcast spectacular images of local crisis around the world. In the context of an image-sensitive global economy, New York has become trapped in a dynamic of image crisis followed by renewed and intensified calls for rebranding.

New York's first branding effort was launched in the mid-1970s by public-private partnerships in response to the city's epic fiscal and image crisis. High-profile tourism campaigns like I♥NY became the publicly visible, populist face of a more controversial process of pro-business economic restructuring (Greenberg 2008). This process has evolved considerably in contemporary New York City, during the period bracketed by the crises of 9/11 and the current Wall Street-led economic collapse. Under the business model of the Bloomberg administration, profound efforts to transform the image and political economy of the city have been undertaken in concert with campaigns by powerful public private partnerships. More than any mayor in New York history, Bloomberg has sought to take “direct coordinated custody of [the city's] image,” and to transform this image into a global brand (Bloomberg 2003).

As he did at Bloomberg LP, the Mayor has “vertically integrated” the city's marketing operations, creating a complex hierarchy that controls all aspects of the production and distribution of the brand. This involved hiring the best and the brightest from Wall Street, Madison Avenue and the New York design world, and taking the job of branding New York “in house.” In the 1970s, the main groups in the branding coalition were public-private partnerships and state agencies that were independent of and operated out-

side City Hall. Under Bloomberg, the campaigns are created by public-private partnerships appointed and overseen by the Mayor's office. These partnerships include, primarily, the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYC EDC), which is charged with stimulating business development for the city through corporate retention and attraction, and NYC & Co, the city's official tourism marketing arm.⁸ Both the NYC EDC and NYC & Co operate as "quasigovernmental agencies," funded largely through public monies though free from public oversight. In the aftermath of 9/11, and during his first two terms in office, Bloomberg enlarged these agencies in both size and purview: increasing their funding, expanding their operations, and hiring an upper tier of management that enables both agencies to work directly with the mayor's office at the cabinet level.⁹ This restructuring made possible a degree of brand integration for both external and internal political operations that is unprecedented in New York City history, and that is testing the outer limits of what urban branding can accomplish for the city and for the mayor.

The political elevation of these agencies challenges notions of democratic governance. While funded largely by taxpayers, these agencies are primarily beholden to their powerful corporate clients, including some of the city's—and the world's—biggest real estate developers, credit card companies, media conglomerates, hotel chains, and financial firms. Mayor Bloomberg, a longtime member of the city's corporate elite, was himself a board member of these same partnerships prior to assuming office. The elevated political status of these partnerships represents a new degree of political access and influence by powerful business interests.

Three major shifts underlie the Bloomberg-era transformation of the New York brand. The first is the establishment of the organizational base, including technological infrastructure and professional capacity, used to rebrand the city on a global scale. The restructuring and retooling of NYC & Co and NYC EDC have enabled this shift, as I will detail below. The second shift is in the redesign of the representational universe of the city's brand post 9/11. Moving away from more generic city marketing campaigns, branding agencies developed a two-pronged approach: targeting tourists, recent transplants, and locals with utopian images of "authentic New York," an inclusive city of grittiness, creativity, and diversity, while targeting real estate developers, buyers, and businesses with utopian images of "luxury New York," an exclusive city of elite residences, high finance, and high-end consumption. The final shift is in the use of branding as a tool of internal

political governance. “NYC,” the city’s first official brand logo, and www.nyc.gov, the city’s revamped website, now provide a common corporate identity and customer service link for all 126 city agencies, projecting a image of City Hall’s transparency, accessibility, and efficiency to residents and visitors alike. As we shall see, these three interrelated shifts also underlie the mayor’s own carefully crafted political brand, and were central strategies in his costly bid for a third term.

City as Business: Infrastructure, Expertise, and Technology

Over the past eight years, the Bloomberg administration has quietly and expertly constructed a massive new branding apparatus under the aegis of City Hall and modeled it on a vertically integrated, global corporation. The administration has restructured agencies and created new ones; staffed these agencies with professionals from the private sector; ensured that the efforts of these agencies are guided by strategic planning and market research; and integrated all of this via Bloomberg LP’s hallmark, state-of-the-art computer terminals, commonly known as “The Bloomberg.” As an NYC & Co senior marketing official emphasized, “Bloomberg is a master at creating brands and an extraordinary businessperson. He really knew that if you’re going to do the best that you can do for the city—and *that is his goal*—you have to create the city in the likes of how you would create a successful business...” (NYC & Co interview).¹⁰

At NYC EDC, this restructuring took place internally and outside the public gaze. This is not surprising for this famously opaque organization, which was created in the 1970s to develop private channels through which to stimulate economic activity. Nonetheless, Bloomberg’s impact on the scope of such operations has been profound. It entailed hiring an entirely new “C-Suite” of upper management (chief executive, financial, and marketing officers) to guide the city’s development priorities. Unlike the previously varied corporate backgrounds of EDC leadership, almost all of these new managers came from investment banking, primarily from powerful firms like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan. It entailed spinning off the EDC’s small business unit, which has become a fully public city agency, so as to focus on deals with big business. It also involved a “5-Borough Economic Opportunity Plan” through which some 80 different pieces of city-owned property would be redeveloped. This scale of urban development has not been seen since the post-WWII era of Robert Moses—though, in its

push towards privatization and high end development, it is distinct from the mainly public aims of that earlier period.

Along with this restructuring of the EDC came a new approach to marketing the agency and its activities. The position of Senior VP of Marketing and Communications (SVP) was created, for which a seasoned marketing executive with an extensive background in corporate brand management was hired. The SVP's first tasks were to rebrand the agency as "NYC EDC." This involved the creation of a main brand logo and tagline, the creation of some twenty "sub-brands" to market commercial enterprises on city-owned properties, the hiring of new design staff, and the construction of a state-of-the-art website via the creation of a new interactive media department. These efforts were necessary to communicate the greatly enlarged scope and ambitions of the EDC's development operations under Mayor Bloomberg. They were also essential to SVP's job of reaching an expanded audience. Previously, EDC communications were basic and targeted at one main, albeit segmented, audience: the local and global business community. Now, in an indication of the expanded economic and political role of the agency, EDC's brand campaigns were also targeted to agency employees themselves, as well as elected officials, businesses, and the residents of New York City.

The other epicenter of restructuring was NYC & Co, previously the city's tourism marketing arm. In 2003, with his pursuit of the 2012 Olympic Games as a cornerstone of his post 9/11 plan for economic recovery, Bloomberg created two new marketing groups: NYC Big Events and NYC Marketing. In 2006, in a highly publicized move, he merged these two groups with the city's tourism marketing arm and moved the entire operation to large, new midtown offices (NYC & Co 2006). Bloomberg doubled NYC & Co's city funding to \$22.5 million—more than five times what the agency received under the previous administration of Mayor Giuliani. This largesse diluted the funds from member dues from sixty percent to ten percent of the total and, for the first time in the agency's history, shifted control of the city's promotional efforts from travel and tourism industry leaders to the mayor's office itself (McGeehan 2007). Finally, the mayor placed two veteran advertising executives with backgrounds managing some of the world's biggest luxury brands—including Godiva chocolates, Remy Martin cognac, and Cunard cruises—in the newly created positions of Chief Executive Officer and Chief Marketing Officer, respectively (McGeehan 2007). Now, for the first time, NYC & Co had the organizational structure,

funds, and expertise to operate as a full-fledged marketing department for the city.

With the aid of the global branding firm Wolff Olins, NYC & Co began operations by creating the city's first official "corporate identity," or logo: three heavyset block letters spelling "NYC." The logo was conceptualized as an "open frame" to be filled with New York's diverse people and infinite forms of cultural expression. To oversee the filling of this frame, the agency hired a new Senior Vice President and Creative Director, a young Yale University graduate in fine arts and a brilliant designer in his own right. Previously this kind of design work was outsourced—as with the commissioning of Milton Glaser to design the I♥NY logo in 1977. Now, in an indication of how seriously culture was taken as an economic engine, an in-house designer was put in charge of maintaining the aesthetic sensibility, pop cultural relevance, and "brand essence" of everything produced by the agency in the name of "NYC."

The notion that New York City's cultural diversity and expression had economic value expanded far beyond the design of a logo. As the mayor indicated in his 2003 State of the City Speech, New York's "cultural attractions" constituted a "competitive advantage" that the city should "imaginatively, aggressively, and relentlessly market" in order to "win us attention from businesses around the world" and "realize additional city revenues immediately" (Bloomberg 2003). His goal in creating the position of Chief Marketing Officer in 2003 was to do precisely this: sell the image and culture of New York—its skyline and landmarks, its famous movies and songs—to corporations interested in co-sponsorship and partnership deals, product and advertising placement, cobranding and naming rights. Once NYC Marketing was folded into NYC & Co in 2006, this branding initiative merged with traditional tourism and convention marketing, transforming NYC & Co from a marketer into a media maker and revenue-generating arm of city government.

The final stage of restructuring involved the creation of ten distinct departments, modeled along the lines of a professional marketing firm. The new Media Department expanded beyond the production of brochures and guides to launch a full service website, complete with original content, updated hourly, written and photographed by an in-house staff of thirty, and translated into nine different languages by another staff of five. In this way the site could compete with established online guides like *Time Out NY* and *New York* magazine. It also enabled the Advertising Department to sell ad-

vertising space on the site. Behind the scenes, a new Partnerships Department was put in charge of cobranding and partnering opportunities with external companies that benefit from the tourist and convention trade—from global billboard display companies to credit card companies. The Entertainment Department was charged with pursuing product placement opportunities, seeing that New York City and its logo were shown prominently and positively in television and films. As the NYC & Co official explained, “We just treat the [NYC] brand how other brands are treated. If [a TV show is] going to put an Apple [brand] computer on someone’s desk—why shouldn’t someone say something about NYC?”

The economic advantage of these massive restructuring efforts were clear. NYC & Co leveraged the \$22.5 million it receives from the city to earn some \$35 million through direct revenues and partnerships, saving taxpayer dollars. When combined with member dues, the NYC & Co budget now approaches \$60 million, a 500 percent increase over the budget of just a decade ago (NYC & Co interview). It also places New York in the top three among city marketing agencies nationally and exceeds the marketing budgets for the entire states of Florida (\$33.6 million) and California (\$50 million). For the NYC & Co official, however, these national comparisons are not the point: “How do you compete against Dubai, which has a budget of \$273 million? That’s where our heads are at” (NYC & Co interview).

Luxury and Diversity: Representations of the New Urban Brand

In the year following the attacks of September 11, 2001—the first year of Bloomberg’s first term—New York City was branded as a patriotic destination. Advertisements, events, and conventions—notably the Republican National Convention of 2004—directly referenced the disaster, highlighted the city’s triumphant strength and ability to rise again, and invited tourists and conventioneers to demonstrate their loyalty by coming to New York City, visiting Ground Zero, and shopping (Greenberg 2003). Studies from market research firms and crisis communications consultants, however, taught the Bloomberg administration that this rhetorical strategy was wearing thin amongst the city’s most valued demographic: wealthy business travelers and corporations considering relocation (Wirthlin 2002; Shifflet 2001–2002). Even an oblique reference to patriotic symbols, let alone direct mention of the events of 9/11, made New York City appear “desperate,” and repelled

affluent travelers (Wirthlin 2002). It was time for the city to “move on” and show that it was back to “business as usual.” NYC & Co and NYC EDC were enlisted to achieve this goal, targeting different segments of the city’s desired consumer base—tourists and corporations, respectively—and repositioning New York City as a distinctive commodity in the global urban marketplace.

This Is NYC

The city’s first official brand campaign, “This Is NYC,” was designed in 2006 by the London-based branding firm Wolff Olins. The campaign was then adopted in-house by a newly assembled creative team. The hiring of cutting-edge designers in a period of crisis has its precedent in 1977, when New York State, on the brink of default, hired the advertising agency Wells, Rich, Greene and pop-art graphic designer Milton Glaser to create the I♥NY campaign. In both cases the goal was to harness avant-garde promotional culture to demonstrate the city’s youthful vigor and still healthy business climate. In the Wolff Olins campaign, the designers emphasized the uniqueness and diversity of New Yorkers:

There’s only one New York City. But within that one city are five boroughs, approximately 191 neighborhoods, nearly a million buildings and over 8.2 million people. Each individual has their own New York. Within the mind of every single New Yorker resides a different version of New York City. It’s a city loved in 138 different languages and viewed through an almost infinite mix of cultures, ideologies, and ways of life. Everyone living side by side. This kaleidoscopic quality is one of the greatest things about this city. It’s the very thing we love. But it also makes it difficult to represent. There is no one symbol, no one logo or brand that means New York City to everyone (Wolff Olins 2007).

Indeed, the very impossibility of isolating a single image of New York became the conceit of the campaign:

Wolff Olins made sturdy letterforms that are thick, rugged—a little on the tough side—just like a New Yorker. The mark is durable and will represent New York for a long time. And the mark functions as a window into infinite complexity. Imagine what you’d see peering in a typical masonry façade—perhaps a fashion designer, a recording engineer or someone crusading for social justice. Like a window this symbol can reveal images of every culture, profession and activity of this city. The NYC brand is a transparent pane of glass that offers a view of real New Yorkers and real NYC neighborhoods. It’s a venue for the very ideas that make NYC strong—8 million brands (Wolff Olins 2007).

The campaign celebrated New York's "urbanity," "diversity," even its iconoclasm and historic "crusading for social justice" through a montage of faces and cultural practices. In this way the campaign embodied the urban-centered utopian desires of this charged period; a period during which the very possibility of modern urban existence seemed under threat. Making the subtlest possible reference to 9/11, the shape of the letters and slant of the campaign emphasized the city's "sturdiness," "toughness," "ruggedness," and "durability," responding with attitude and solidarity to the trauma of that event while putting it squarely in the past. The bulky letterforms were then filled with race- and class-diverse snapshots of "authentic" New York-specific references—including hotdog salesmen, designer shoes, hip hop performers, and fashion models.¹¹



Figure 6.1 (left) The NYC logo, designed by Wolff Olins for NYC & Co in 2006. The bulky letterform evokes a tough, postcrisis New York attitude.

Figure 6.2 (right) The logo is used as a frame to contain images of urban diversity.

A short commercial created for the "This is New York City" campaign used similar montage techniques, juxtaposing historical periods and pieces of New York geography. With the soundtrack of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A-Train" in the background, recently landed tourists—a white American mother and daughter—look out their cab window at a Manhattan skyline that has been transformed through animation into bobbing lipsticks, ice-cream cones, and Ferris wheels. Jazz-era jubilance is further invoked through clips of the Rockettes dancing and saxophone players swinging atop midtown spires while biplanes circle overhead. Borrowing the emotional charge of the Harlem Renaissance while keeping safe distance from its critical edge, the montage seemed to exorcise the ghosts of the city under attack, turning New York City from a terrorist haven into a shoppers' paradise once again.

The other key element of this representational strategy was to extend the brand through what the senior NYC & Co official referred to as “perception-changing big events,” and the free, secondary media coverage such events receive by being covered as news and entertainment across the media spectrum (NYC & Co interview). First events are carefully chosen that will challenge “negative” perceptions of NYC held by important demographics of visitors and/or locals, and that will strategically push the NYC brand in a more “positive” direction. Then the NYC & Co and NYC EDC spend large sums to court, host, and market these events—which now number in the hundreds annually. Examples include the Republican National Convention of 2004 and the Latin Grammys and Country Music Awards, both held in New York for the first time in 2005. This strategy was also behind the multimillion-dollar and ultimately failed effort to bring the 2012 Olympics to New York City.

A similar, “perception-changing” approach was launched to respond to the current Wall Street-led economic crisis and its impact on New York’s image. The frontline of attack is an ingenious low-budget, offer-filled program called “New York: The Real Deal,” which features *Sesame Street* characters atop tour buses. This was combined with a citywide celebration of the 40th Anniversary of *Sesame Street*, replete with the naming of a street and a holiday after the show, a limited-edition DVD box set, a new “Google doodle,” and coverage by all major news outlets (NYC & Co 2009). As the NYC & Co official explained:

Essentially we’re saying, “This is not just the city of Bernard Madoff.” So you have Big Bird. While it doesn’t say “everyone is not Bernie Madoff”—who could do that?—you say: “We’re a family friendly environment. Look at the ambassadors of the city.” It opens up the dialogue, the narrative to a new audience. Wrong would be to have a luxury campaign at this time. Right would be to have a family friendly, offer-driven program.

Luxury City

In contrast to the funky, family-friendly diversity of “This is NYC” and “New York: The Real Deal,” the Bloomberg administration’s approach to overall economic development was branded through a backstage business marketing campaign. Led by the mayor in coordination with the NYC EDC, the campaign was based on a research report by corporate consulting firm McKinsey and Co.¹² The report identified “high-impact industries and functions within industries” that the city should and could successfully at-

tract to New York—namely finance, information technologies, biotechnology, and media—all of which were high margin/high value-added industries. These industries, the report stated, “should be in New York City” and were “ripe for the picking” but would not be enticed on the basis of price. Rather, target marketing should emphasize class-specific perks: the city’s highly skilled labor pool, high quality education, as well as high-end cultural and lifestyle amenities for the professional and executive class (Brash 2010).

“Exclusive” and class-specific branding strategies were therefore adopted to spur business development in New York—strategies that seemed diametrically opposed to the city’s populist tourism marketing celebrating

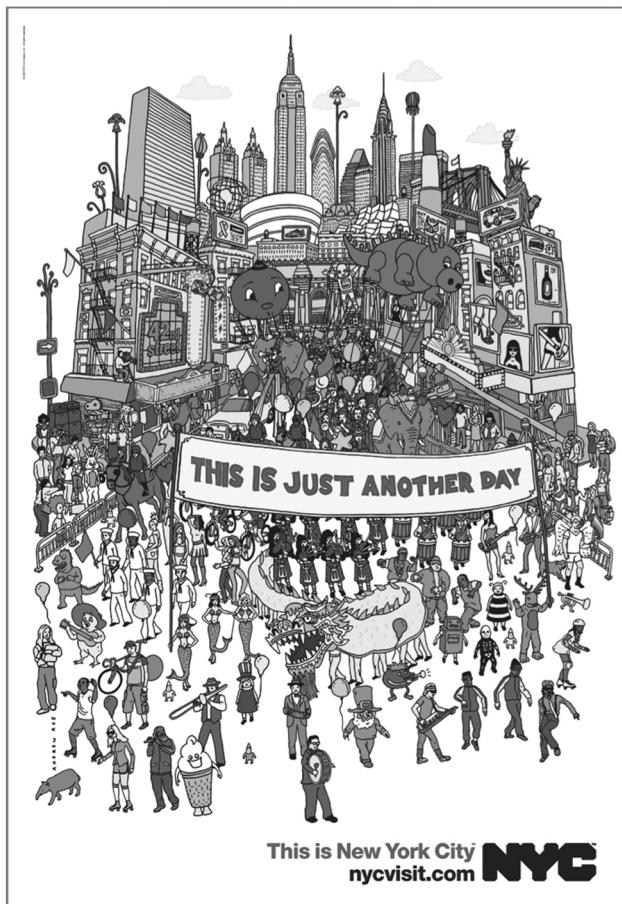


Figure 6.3 The “This is New York City” campaign. A utopian vision of creativity, diversity and harmony set against a reimagined New York skyline.

its “diversity.” The strategy was announced in a January 2003 Economic Development Summit, a private, invitation-only event. The summit was attended by the mayor and “100 of the city’s top businesspeople and civic leaders,” and chaired by Robert Rubin, former secretary of the treasury under President Clinton, and then-chairman of Citigroup (Cardwell 2003). Bloomberg used the summit to assure his audience that his experience as a CEO had shaped his approach to both economic and urban development policy: “I’ve spent my career thinking about the strategies that institutions in the private sector should pursue... and the more I learn about this institution of New York City, the more I see the ways in which it needs to think like a private company...New York City is never going to be the lowest priced place to do business; it is just the most efficient place to do business. You have to get value for the money that you’re going to spend.” The ideal target was affluent workers and employers who would be able to take advantage of this high value/high cost environment. “If New York is a business, it isn’t Wal-Mart—it isn’t trying to be the lowest-priced product in the market. It’s a high-end product, maybe even a luxury product.”

The Luxury City campaign exploited the fact that global elites could pay a premium to live and work in one of the most expensive cities on earth. It was also part of a broader development agenda to build a physical city that appealed to these global elites, by attracting high-end retailers, hotels, stadiums, and residential towers. Ultimately, this agenda promised to thoroughly transform the face of New York City in a decade, much as the efforts of the public authorities did under Robert Moses in the three decades following WWII.

The Luxury City approach has been tested since the 2008 economic and image crisis. When pressed, the mayor acknowledges he is an advocate of classical “trickle-down” regressive taxation, and against raising income taxes for the city’s highest earners: “A very small percentage of people do account for a big part of our income,” he said on March 6, 2009, during his weekly radio show. “The first rule of taxation is...you can’t tax too much those that can move.” Ultimately, the luxury city should be maintained by raising taxes on middle and lower-income New Yorkers, if necessary by raising the sales tax. “You know, the yelling and screaming about the rich—we want rich from around this country to move here. We love the rich people” (Lisberg 2009).¹³

The Promise of Transparency: Neoliberal Governance and the Branded City

The final shift occasioned by the use of urban branding in Bloomberg-era New York is in the realm of governance. The city is not only branded externally, as a place to be consumed by tourists, but also internally, as a product to be consumed by its own residents, as the legitimacy of the Bloomberg administration is reinforced by the political branding of Bloomberg as mayor. Mirroring his enormously successful corporate branding strategy at Bloomberg LP, Bloomberg cobrands his “product” with his own personal brand to mobilize support, whether in the form of new customers or new votes. This approach has served Bloomberg well in both the corporate and the governmental setting. It has helped him coordinate highly complex organizations and to associate himself with the myriad benefits these organizations produce—Bloomberg terminals, Bloomberg News, Bloomberg LP, and now New York City government. It is connected in the public eye with his other highly publicized corporate management practices and technologies, including corporate training for civil servants; statistical, “results-based” performance reports and targets; and most famously, the transfer of the open, “bullpen” layout of his corporate offices, and of Wall Street trading floors, to City Hall.¹⁴ It is embodied by the multi-tiered, “merit-based” pay structure—to which he contributes massive bonuses and charitable donations out of his own pocket to provide added incentives to his inner circle (Barbaro 2009a).¹⁵ In addition, Bloomberg has advanced a model of effective governance linked to technological proficiency and customer service, incorporating Bloomberg terminals into hundreds of city offices, introducing a “311” phone help line, and overhauling the city’s official website, www.nyc.gov.¹⁶ Collectively, these practices and technologies have been popularly embraced, serving to legitimize the import of corporate culture into the public sector. The new model sees constituents as consumers rather than clients and promises them access to, and efficient delivery of, high quality services and information—as long as they vote to keep this governance model in place.

As with the urban brand targeted at consumers, this political brand is crafted “in-house” through the work of the Mayor’s own branding apparatus: his communications office—which arranges the frequent interviews with the mayor in the “bullpen”—as well as NYC EDC and NYC & Co. Rather than feature the mayor explicitly in their promotions, these firms helped

create an overarching brand umbrella, encompassing government agencies and urban development projects, and enabling them all to speak with a “unified voice.” It also promotes the idea of “transparency” and “built-in accountability” (NYC & Co interview). In this framework, the mayor’s leadership role as pragmatic, technocratic CEO-mayor is implicit.

As an indication of how integrated these external and internal branding strategies are, the senior official at NYC & Co informed me that the unification of governmental messaging was actually a leading motivation behind the creation of “NYC”—the corporate identity associated with the city’s break-through post-9/11 tourism marketing campaign:

The *real* mission [behind “NYC”]—and we were with City Hall when we were discussing this and why this was so important—is that it’s the sum of the parts speaking stronger, bigger, better than all the individual parts. So when you see a van going out to help the homeless and it says “NYC,” you understand that that is laddering up to the bigger initiatives that are working on behalf of the city, and all the way up to the mayor. And taxpayers can understand where their dollars are going to. And it feels like there is a plan in place, and not just that you don’t know what’s happening. And there is a lot of pride in that (NYC & Co interview).

Integrating all aspects of city government behind a common identity has not been without conflict. Some of the 126 city agencies have resisted replacing their old logo with “NYC”—much as they have resisted other aspects of neoliberal restructuring under the Bloomberg administration.¹⁷ The NYC & Co official sees such resistance as somewhat irrational: “they think it’s important to have their own identity” and don’t want to be “oppressed” by the new “*Uber*-brand.” The official has arrived at a compromise of sorts, one drawn from her experience managing brands for corporate clients like AT&T and FedEx: the creation of “sub-brands” within the “major brand.” Thus some agencies may have personal logos redesigned to more easily connect with the overarching NYC logo. Eventually, however, the goal is to move all agencies under the NYC umbrella: “It’s just a process of education, conversation, and working slowly over the coming years.” Increasingly, they and the mayor hope, branding will penetrate and link all aspects of urban governance.

Like NYC & Co, NYC EDC has also undertaken the complicated task of developing an urban brand that doubles as a tool of political governance. Here, too, it has done so in the name of promoting the “transparency” of the agency. Under the leadership of its SVP, a sleek, modern “NYC EDC” logo replaced the cumbersome “New York City Economic Development Corporation” insignia, launching a new “NYC: Make It Here” campaign

targeting global corporations. The new identity is distinct in look and feel from the bulky and gritty “NYC” campaign, and operates outside of it. (NYC EDC, a public-private partnership, is not counted among the 126 city agencies, and has not been asked to adopt the NYC logo.) Nonetheless, the political aim of the two campaigns is remarkably similar. As underscored by their common embrace of the colloquial “NYC” abbreviation, both emphasize transparency and accessibility for their target audiences in the private sector, as well as the wider benefits to local residents of the work that they do. As a senior EDC official explains, this was key to countering a common perception of the agency’s elite orientation:

When I first came here, we redesigned our whole look and feel, because we looked very bankerish and very exclusionary and very like a “Big Black Hole” kind of company. And what we tried to do was to become a lot more transparent and business friendly and invite people to understand more about what we do and why it was beneficial. The Corporation was doing so many incredible things, and nobody really knew about it. I think partly this was the strategy way back when, that nobody *needed* to know a whole lot about what we did. And anybody that needed to know were [real estate] developers and already knew us. But we are so broad in everything we do that if people don’t know us, and what we do, they don’t have a sense that the city’s under good control and good things are happening. Meanwhile, the media takes lots of cracks at all the projects, and it’s really a one-way dialogue. So we try to make sure that people understand that the development that’s being done by the city and by the mayor benefits *everybody* (EDC interview).



Figure 6.4 (left) “NYC” also promotes the Bloomberg association to local residents.

Figure 6.5 (right) “NYC” (in a different font) used for the mayor’s reelection bid, bringing with it the symbolic capital of the broader campaign.

The EDC official's description reinforces the point made by the official at NYC & Co: a new mode of communication and representation was necessary to coordinate and legitimate a new mode of governance under Mayor Bloomberg. In this case, the aim was to help sell and oversee the physical and economic redevelopment of New York City through the Mayor's 5-Borough Plan and its corollary, long-range PlaNYC. These plans, as noted above, overlapped with the expanded 5-borough tourism marketing effort and became pillars in Bloomberg's recent, 5-borough reelection campaign, dubbed "Mike NYC." Unprecedented in scale and scope, these efforts have led to the redevelopment of 80 pieces of city-owned or city-claimed property, including the 125th Street and the Essex Street Markets in Manhattan, Atlantic Yards and Coney Island in Brooklyn, Yankee Stadium and the Hunt's Point Market in the Bronx, Long Island City and Willets Point in Queens, and Fresh Kills in Staten Island.

Meanwhile, these projects have met with organized resistance from neighborhood groups opposed to an element common to most of them: the transformation of previously working class, mixed-use neighborhoods into market-rate real estate development, generally for the purpose of building shopping malls, high-end retail strips, entertainment destinations, and/or central business districts, with the effect of evicting or pricing out current residents and businesses. Thus, a major new job for the creative department at NYC EDC is to use project-specific campaigns to confront political opposition. This has entailed a "huge effort," connecting marketing with business development, and coordinated by the Deputy Mayor of Development (NYC & Co interview). Together, this group has created some 80 new sub-brands for individual neighborhoods targeted for redevelopment as well as hundreds of "pitchbooks" designed for each of the businesses that will have to move out. These books contain utopian renderings of the greener and more affluent future affected communities will enjoy, along with information on how to move out and where to move to. As an EDC official from the creative department explained:

All of these companies have to move. It's very controversial. So we make these pitchbooks, and we go around to all of these businesses, giving them all of these options of where they could move their business. Nobody wants to move, but eventually they are going to have to move anyway. This helps make people visualize it, and makes it easier.

In an indication of the political lengths to which such branding has gone, these pitchbooks have been given to paid lobbyists to sell particularly con-

troversial developments—e.g., Willets Point, Long Island City, and Coney Island—to local elected officials. The New York City Conflict of Interest Board halted this practice in August of 2009, pointing out that the use of public funds for lobbying purposes is illegal (Rivera 2009; “Bloomberg and Developers” 2009).¹⁸

As the 2009 election revealed, political branding has its limits when it comes to actually swaying voters. New Yorkers were divided over numerous moves Bloomberg made—e.g., his autocratic style, his multimillion-dollar campaign spending, and his overthrow of a popular mandate on term limits—all of which undermine the “transparent” image of his administration and threaten to undermine his brand.

Nonetheless, it seems that such branding carries with it a significant “return on investment” for the politicians themselves. By contributing to Bloomberg’s overall “brand value” as both CEO and mayor, it has been argued that his time in office has added value to the Bloomberg LP brand, and in so doing, fueled the growth of Bloomberg’s personal fortune, which is based in his 85 percent share of stock in Bloomberg LP (Loomis 2007). In eight years after taking office, this fortune was quadrupled from \$4 billion to \$16 billion, making him the city’s wealthiest man in New York City and the 17th wealthiest person in the world (“World’s Billionaires” 2009).

Bloomberg has not been alone in his good fortune. The number of billionaires in the city has doubled during his tenure, as Wall Street profits have continued to climb alongside recession, “jobless recovery,” and the significant increase in the ranks of New York City’s poor and low income population, particularly among people of color (Fiscal Policy Institute 2009). Bloomberg-era political and urban branding has helped reproduce and legitimize this class divide. One of the major effects of Bloomberg’s political brand has been to represent the meritocratic basis of wealth and corporate profit, the technical superiority of corporate culture, and the natural, even necessary connection of elites to political power. Urban branding helps reinforce these notions, producing the city itself as an engine of wealth, profit, and pleasure-seeking.



Figures 6.6 (this page) and 6.7 (next page) NYC EDC promotes 5-Borough Economic Development Initiatives in 2007. Most involve transforming working class/industrial neighborhoods into market-rate residential, shopping and business districts.

Transforming New York City

Greenpoint



Existing



Future

Flushing



Existing



Future

Fresh Kills



Existing



Future

Conclusion

How are we to understand the contradictory discourse contained within New York's new brand? What broader implications does such branding have for cities? I argue that it serves to reinforce a utopian urban imaginary that has emerged globally in the neoliberal period. The utopian notion of governance, as well as of the city itself, is as a transparent consumer democracy that is postclass, postrace, and postpolitical party. The new Utopia is a cosmopolitan capital and a creative city in which divisions are based solely on lifestyle choice, consumer niche, and neighborhood vibe. It is also a resilient city, able to weather grime, crime, and terrorist attacks, to say nothing of the inevitable ups and downs of the stock market. These portrayals reinforce, and are reinforced by, the rebranded image of urban politicians, as evident in Bloomberg's efforts to position himself as a technocratic yet down-to-earth CEO-mayor. "Behind the scenes," other branding strategies are at work to restructure and privatize city agencies, expand market-rate development across the five boroughs, and aggregate power.

Such representations, however contradictory, resonate with popular fears in the midst of crisis, as well as profound desires for authentic and inclusive urban experience, a safe and healthy urban environment, democratic participation in urban politics, and affordable urban space. In short, they help us imagine the "right to the city" to which so many aspire. Embedded within the broader social formation of the neoliberal city, however, urban and political brands may accomplish the opposite of this dream, reproducing the uneven class politics of urban restructuring. The scale and pace of market-rate, "luxury" real estate development under Bloomberg, alongside regressive tax policies that favor businesses and "workers that can move," have led to increasing dependence on volatile and crisis-prone industries like finance and real estate and helped to produce a city with the most unequal incomes and highest levels of unemployment in the nation. Successive waves of gentrification and increases in the cost of living have pushed out mixed-use, working class districts—from Harlem to Willets Point to downtown Brooklyn. Ironically, these neighborhoods have historically been the true home of the grittiness, resilience, and ethnic, racial, and class diversity celebrated in the "This is NYC" campaign. While that campaign represents the utopian fantasy of the city's branding effort, Luxury City is a more accurate representation of the material and ideological transformation of the city and its power structure during the Bloomberg era.

Notes

1. Added to his previous two record-setting campaign budgets, the total amount Bloomberg spent on winning public office came to \$250 million.
2. Consultants included Howard Wolfson, who ran Hillary Clinton's notoriously aggressive presidential campaign, and Bradley Tusk, the Deputy Governor in charge of communications for Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, until the latter was arrested on federal corruption charges.
3. Campaign pressure was successfully exerted on an extremely wide range of individuals and groups—from local community organizations and non-profits to popular Democratic Congressman Anthony Weiner, who dropped out of the race; to President Obama himself, who, according to the *Times* exposé, agreed to not overtly support Bloomberg's Democratic challenger.
4. I conducted in-depth interviews with a number of key figures, including senior marketing officials at both NYC EDC (interviews conducted on 27 July 2009) and NYC & Co (interviews conducted on August 20, 2009).
5. Of particular significance is the work of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White. See Greenberg (2008).
6. “Brand extension” refers to situations where the urban brand is attached to the corporate brand through advertising campaigns; in “cobranding,” the city joins forces institutionally with corporations in the planning and production of joint branding campaigns.
7. Some note that an “essential” precedent was set by the “rapid response capability” pioneered by the 1992 Clinton–Gore campaign and refined during Bill Clinton’s eight years under attack by his political adversaries while in the White House.
8. The NYC EDC was originally called the New York City Office of Economic Development (OED), and was created in 1976 by then Mayor Abraham Beame in response to the fiscal crisis. The Convention and Visitors’ Bureau was created in 1934, along with thousands of CVBs created in the 1930s cities across the country to stimulate commerce during the Depression.
9. The context of 9/11 was central to this shift in another way: both groups were integral to the creation of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the private sector-led group that drove the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan from 2002–2006.
10. In making this comment, the CMO referenced a Bloomberg quote from a *New Yorker* article that had come out the week prior to the interview. See McGrath (2009).
11. On the desire for a cross-class New York authenticity, see Zukin (2009).
12. See Alper (2002) and Bloomberg (2003). For an excellent discussion on this report, see Brash (2010).
13. Bloomberg added: “People say, ‘Oh, well, you know, if the income were redistributed throughout the system more fairly’... I don’t know what fair means. You can argue that if you make more money, you deserve more money.”
14. A cursory search for references to the “Bloomberg bullpen” calls up tens of thousands of academic and journalistic articles. For the first reference to this, see Nagourney (2001). As the article notes: “The open configuration [of the bullpen] has become a symbol of Mr. Bloomberg’s management style in the corporate world.”
15. In addition to providing bonuses in the hundreds of thousands to staffers, Bloomberg donated over \$1 million to his deputy mayor Patricia Harris’ alma mater in her name.

16. See, e.g., Gimein (2002) and Lowry (2007).
17. An example is the Board of Education, which has resisted reforms such as school rankings and merit pay for teachers along with the new corporate identity.
18. The case that has gotten the most press attention is that of former Queens borough president Claire Shulman, who received \$250,000 from NYC EDC to lobby city council to endorse the transformation of Willets Point, an industrial area in Queens, into a corporate office park.

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