

## The double-tongued city<sup>1</sup>

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Stavrakakis (2007) points out that there is a close relation between political representation and spatial representation. With this remark as my starting point, I will discuss Amsterdam as an example of a double-tongued city. Their political and spatial representations are not congruent unless one considers them in light of city branding and a future oriented, utopian discourse. I consider city branding as a means of communicating with two audiences and consequently two goals. The external audience is made up of potential visitors and investors currently absent in the city. The goal is to lure them into the city. The internal audience is made up of actual inhabitants and entrepreneurs of the city. They have to be lured also, but in a different manner: in the end they just have to obey and behave in accordance with the slogan. One slogan, two effects: seduction and discipline.

In city branding, it is common to start with the question: who do we want to have in our city? In my paper I will present some of the narrative strategies Amsterdam uses to both include and exclude and to legitimise these actions. The question I will address is: what are the narrative mechanisms in the Amsterdam city branding and its slogan I amsterdam?

Visitors of the website [www.iamsterdam.com](http://www.iamsterdam.com) read under 'benefits' the answer to their question 'why city marketing'?

### Benefits

Amsterdam will be able to achieve and maintain *a distinctive relevant position* with the *selected target groups* because of city marketing. This will lead to an increase (or maintenance) of the number of visitors or the use of products and services in Amsterdam and surroundings by these *target groups*. The *target groups* for city marketing are *companies, visitors and inhabitants*: both existing and potential, and both national and international.  
(italics mine)

According to Oudenampsen (2007), the drive to make Amsterdam the most attractive available urban experience ('a distinctive relevant position') is accompanied by selective processes of inclusion and exclusion ('selected target groups'). Included will be businesses and residents with spending power, pushed further out of the city will be the less well-educated. Furthermore, residents will have less and less to say about the design and layout of their living environment as businesses have priority in location and required infrastructure. The city administration and urban planning department join forces to reshape the image and identity of Amsterdam as well as its built-up area. Marketing and branding techniques are pivotal in this strategy to design a preferred future, that is: a future in which Amsterdam can compete with other cities in the international knowledge economy. All in all, Amsterdam will operate commercially as what Oudenampsen coins the Entrepreneurial City. Local government is no longer an agora for redistribution, but an organ dedicated to providing services. As it directs itself to the top end of the labour market, it shifts its focus from public good to the city's elites. Who are those elites that are the new focus of the Entrepreneurial City? If we look at the website again, we find only vague descriptions of the new target groups.

### Why Market the City?

Increasing *competition* among European cities has *required* that ever more emphasis is being placed on each city's respective *strengths* in order to *attract desired visitors, businesses and residents*. Amsterdam and the Region intend to *showcase its enterprising, innovative and creative qualities*. These have been the city's strengths for centuries already, making it *distinctive on a global level*.  
(italics mine)

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Vague maybe, but one thing is clear: the target groups are desired for their capacities to showcase Amsterdam's enterprising, innovative and creative qualities. The uncreatives, not so innovatives and less enterprising remain unnamed. It is also interesting to note that the Amsterdam slogan 'I amsterdam' is impossible to translate into Dutch. The contraction 'I am Amsterdam', analogous to 'I am Spartacus', is lost in 'Ik ben Amsterdam', or 'Ik bensterdam'. The city branding is directed to an international audience. On the English website there is information about how to have a say. A link on this site will take you to the municipal website in Dutch. There one can also find information about how to have a say. The English information is more than twenty times the volume of the Dutch information and, whereas the Dutch site is very general (in sum: you can have a say), it contains details about the possibilities.

The strategy is to create a 'we' from many I's and to transform this 'we' into one 'I', a unity speaking with one voice. To achieve this goal, a manifesto has been written by an advertising agency. Below, I will give the full text of this manifesto.

**'I amsterdam' is the motto that creates the brand for *the city and people of Amsterdam*. The I amsterdam Manifesto proclaims the core message behind this motto, and explains the reasons why this message exists.**

### **I amsterdam**

Amsterdam's *promise, diversity and wealth of opportunity* make it an *excellent choice for business, education, visiting and for living*. Amsterdam's *rich heritage and culture*, its *spirit of commerce*, its *innovative infrastructure*, its *liveability* and its *creativity set it apart from other major European cities*. *It's time for Amsterdam to speak out for itself and make its relevance known in a proud, supportive and positive manner*.

Amsterdam has *many advantages for business enterprises* who make use of the *excellent* transport and distribution facilities offered by Schiphol Airport and the Port of Amsterdam. Schiphol Airport has been voted Europe's number 1 airport for passenger services several times in the last decade. International businesses find Amsterdam as a *logical and convenient location* for head offices, business conferences and meetings. Amsterdam is a *tech nerve centre* and home to the AMS-IX (Amsterdam Internet Exchange), Europe's largest Internet hub. Several companies base their European and Global headquarters in Amsterdam including: Heineken, Philips, ABN AMRO, ING, Yamaha, Canon, Mitsubishi, Cisco, Numico and TPG/TNT.

### **We are proud of Amsterdam**

Furthermore, Amsterdam's *creative, intellectual and cultural contributions* are *significant and respected*. With some of Europe's *most important museums*, including The Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh, Amsterdam is a *natural choice* for inspiration. Amsterdam's *tolerance, multicultural neighbourhoods and broad diversity* provide a *fertile environment for creative people*. Amsterdam is also a *leading centre* for the study and development of life sciences with *advanced research facilities and expertise*. *Fashion and industrial design have established Amsterdam as a creative city with a sense of humour and style*.

Amsterdam's *creativity and innovation* combine, of course, in its handling of water and existence below sea level. Every day is a *powerful reminder of Amsterdam's intelligent use of resources*, engineering and technology to provide a *beautiful and functional city surrounded by water*. *Very few cities in the world can mix such global, commercial competitiveness with a centre that is so liveable, compact and accessible*.

### **We are Amsterdam**

Ultimately, Amsterdam's *strongest asset is its people: the people who live here, the people who work here, the people who study here and the people who visit here*. The people of Amsterdam are Amsterdam. The diversity of Amsterdam's business community, the differing backgrounds of its residents and the *wide and innovative perspectives* of its citizens are *the lifeblood of our city*. Therefore *we, the people of Amsterdam, wish to speak for the city of Amsterdam. Amsterdam is our city, and it's time for us proudly to voice our dedication and devotion to Amsterdam*. Through our

*combined efforts, we can fully realize Amsterdam's potential in the areas of commerce, innovation, and creativity, and express the many reasons why we choose Amsterdam: "I choose Amsterdam for business. I choose Amsterdam for education. I choose Amsterdam for inspiration. I choose Amsterdam as my home. I am Amsterdam."*

### **I amsterdam**

*I amsterdam is the motto that creates the brand for the city and people of Amsterdam. In saying or expressing I amsterdam, we demonstrate a clear choice for the city of Amsterdam. I amsterdam shows our pride, our confidence and our dedication. I amsterdam is our personal endorsement for our city. Using I amsterdam, we can show clearly and proudly all the many benefits, opportunities and dimensions of excellence that make Amsterdam our city of choice.*

### **I amsterdam.**

*(Italics mine)*

Note the sequence: first business and commerce, then visitors (and students: education), finally residents. The repetition of 'I amsterdam' reinforces the formulaic rhythm of the text, creating a humming mantra and a proclamation equal to that of the French Revolution:

- 'I amsterdam' is the motto that creates the brand for the city and people of Amsterdam. The I amsterdam Manifesto proclaims the core message behind this motto;
- I amsterdam is the motto that creates the brand for the city and people of Amsterdam. In saying or expressing I amsterdam, we demonstrate a clear choice for the city of Amsterdam. I amsterdam shows our pride, our confidence and our dedication. I amsterdam is our personal endorsement for our city. Using I amsterdam, we can show clearly and proudly all the many benefits, opportunities and dimensions of excellence that make Amsterdam our city of choice.

The first sentence of the final paragraph equals the first sentence of the Manifesto, except for the quotes, making the manifesto circular. Note that the amsterdam of the slogan is without capital. It has become a verb, an active way of being, an identity. Let's take a close look at what this identity is made of.

### ***Business***

- promise, diversity and wealth of opportunity make it an excellent choice for business;
- spirit of commerce, innovative infrastructure set it apart from other major European cities;
- many advantages for business enterprises who make use of the excellent transport and distribution facilities offered by Schiphol Airport and the Port of Amsterdam;
- Schiphol Airport has been voted Europe's number 1 airport for passenger services several times in the last decade;
- international businesses find Amsterdam as a logical and convenient location for head offices, business conferences and meetings;
- a tech nerve centre and home to the AMS-IX, Europe's largest Internet hub;
- several companies base their European and Global headquarters in Amsterdam including: Heineken, Philips, ABN AMRO, ING, Yamaha, Canon, Mitsubishi, Cisco, Numico and TPG/TNT.
- tolerance, multicultural neighbourhoods and broad diversity provide a fertile environment for creative people;
- fashion and industrial design have established Amsterdam as a creative city with a sense of humour and style;
- very few cities in the world can mix such global, commercial competitiveness with a centre that is so liveable, compact and accessible;
- strongest asset is its people: the people who work here, the people;
- the diversity of Amsterdam's business community [is] the lifeblood of our city.

*Through our combined efforts, we can fully realize Amsterdam's potential in the areas of commerce, innovation, and creativity, and express the many reasons why we choose Amsterdam: "I choose Amsterdam for business."*

#### **Visitors and students**

- promise, diversity and wealth of opportunity make it an excellent choice for education, visiting;
- rich heritage and culture, liveability set it apart from other major European cities;
- creative, intellectual and cultural contributions are significant and respected;
- with some of Europe's most important museums, including The Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh, a natural choice for inspiration;
- a leading centre for the study and development of life sciences with advanced research facilities and expertise;
- strongest asset is its people: the people who study here and the people who visit here.

*Through our combined efforts, we can fully realize Amsterdam's potential in the areas of commerce, innovation, and creativity, and express the many reasons why we choose Amsterdam: "I choose Amsterdam for education. I choose Amsterdam for inspiration."*

#### **Citizens**

- promise, diversity and wealth of opportunity make it an excellent choice for living. Amsterdam's liveability and its creativity set it apart from other major European cities;
- tolerance, multicultural neighbourhoods and broad diversity provide a fertile environment for creative people;
- strongest asset is its people: the people who live here;
- the differing backgrounds of its residents and the wide and innovative perspectives of its citizens are the lifeblood of our city.

*Through our combined efforts, we can express the many reasons why we choose Amsterdam: "I choose Amsterdam as my home."*

It is clear from the outset, that business is most prominently addressed in the manifesto, then come visitors and students, and ultimately citizens. Amsterdam is personified; its businesses, residents and citizens are its lifeblood. The phrases "It's time for Amsterdam to speak out for itself [...] Therefore we, the people of Amsterdam, wish to speak for the city of Amsterdam. Amsterdam is our city, and it's time for us proudly to voice our dedication and devotion to Amsterdam. [...] Using I amsterdam, we can show clearly and proudly all the many benefits, opportunities and dimensions of excellence that make Amsterdam our city of choice" might be puzzling. We might wonder whether Amsterdam considers itself an underdog, in the past unjustly the lesser in comparison to other global and major European cities (now in a more proud tone: "set it apart from other major European cities", "some of Europe's most important museums", "Very few cities in the world can mix such global, commercial competitiveness with a centre that is so liveable, compact and accessible."), but now ready to face up to the challenge (promise, opportunity), rising out of the water (symbol of rebirth: "Every day is a powerful reminder of Amsterdam's intelligent use of resources, engineering and technology to provide a beautiful and functional city surrounded by water") and a strong collective identity ("Through our combined efforts, we can fully realize Amsterdam's potential in the areas of commerce, innovation, and creativity"), making it now a logical location for businesses and a natural choice for visitors. Why this underdog position? Is it because Amsterdam is not only known for the proclaimed dimensions in the manifesto? Could it be that Amsterdam is also known for tourists who do not visit its famous museums? Who prefer the red light district and the abundant coffee shops? Is it unjust that Amsterdam used to be known just for that? All in all, these dimensions are not what the local government of Amsterdam is proud of now. Where is the municipality in the manifesto anyway? It has excluded itself from the 'we'. Given that it is the source of the manifesto and the I amsterdam city branding in the first place, we can conclude that the personified city of Amsterdam is indeed its local government. It is a strange day when a government unleashes a revolution on behalf of its citizens.

The same analysis can be made from other texts on the website. The message is that Amsterdam, for its survival, wants to attract and keep the right, desired companies, visitors and inhabitants. Its strategy is to

- need one view of the Amsterdam brand;
- distinguish itself;
- excel;
- be on top of a list;
- point out advantages clearly and univocally;
- emphatically opt for key values.
- shed sufficient light on distinctive characteristics;

For this, Amsterdam needs

- one view of the Amsterdam brand;
- a univocal vision;
- a clear and consistent brand;
- a univocal choice.

Amsterdam is not there yet. First it must lose the old image. This means getting rid of undesired businesses and people. Oudenampsen (2007) compares the new style of city renovation with a yo-yo. During the years previous to the renovations, housing and public space go into decline because no maintenance is done. In the course of planning preparations, much is done to emphasize the problems in the area. When the image is deeply affected, the time is ripe for radical interventions and new plans, pointing out specifically the economic opportunities. SWOT analysis always shows that the location is a strength (a logical location, a natural choice) and the population a weakness – so please wheel in the creative class, but only the successful members. A costly affair such as a city branding campaign is public money spend to attract a more desirable public than the current one.

In his keynote speech on the opening night of the Networks of Design conference, Latour wondered if there was one design that could draw things together, a sign that could show heterogeneity. With 'I amsterdam' Amsterdam tries to establish a unitary symbol/slogan. I like to look at another example, based on the proposition of Roe (1994) that a budget is a narrative. The Brazilian city of Porto Alegre has implemented a truly innovative and revolutionary system to formulate and follow-up the municipal budget change in local government. On the Unesco website we read:

In this system, named as Participative Budget, there are not only technicians and government leaders who, closed in their offices, decide on the collection of taxes and public money spending. It is the population, through a debate and consult process, who defines and decides on amounts of income and expense, as well as where and when the investments will be done, which are the priorities and which are the plans and actions to be developed by the Government. [...] Despite certain technocratic opinions, the popular participation has provided efficient spending, effective where it has to be and with results in public works and actions of great importance for the population. Since its beginning, the projects decided by the Participative Budget represent investments over 700 million dollars, mainly in urban infra-structure and upgrading the quality level of the population. The Participative Budget has also proved that the intention of having effective tools of participation and the commitment of the Government in doing whatever the population decides, is essential to cut the chains and the bureaucratic barriers that separate the society from the State, forming an active and mobilized citizenship. In Porto Alegre, today, the citizens know and decide on public issues, transforming themselves, therefore, in agents of their own future.

My position is that the Porto Alegre case is a far more compelling design that deserves our attention.

## **Literature**

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