World Towns Agreement
A Research Informed Commentary

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In discussing his home city of Lisbon, novelist and Nobel Laureate José Saramago (2012, p.4) states:

*"What we know of places is how we coincide with them over a certain period of time in the spaces they occupy. The place was there, the person appeared, then the person left, the place continued, the place having made the person, the person having transformed the place"**

In developing 'a Public-Private-Social Vision for Urban Centres', participants at the World Towns Leadership Summit, accept that people make places, and vice versa. This commentary considers each overarching principle of the World Towns Agreement and how it is underpinned by academic evidence, undertaken by researchers affiliated to the Institute of Place Management, based at Manchester Metropolitan University

* Saramago, J. (2010). The Notebook. London & New York: Verso

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Overarching principle 1: The unique identity of place

Places are complex and, in many ways, kaleidoscopic entities, with a multitude of different facets, depending on the perspective from which they are observed (Warnaby, 2009). Indeed, each place is unique: a result of features such as its morphology and topography, built environment, population, history, economic and social activities, etc. (Warnaby, 2009). Communicating this uniqueness, to differentiate (or even delineate) a locale is a crucial aspect of place management, and also place marketing/branding activities (Kalandides, 2011; Skinner, 2011; Warnaby & Medway, 2013). The nature of the urban place 'product' being managed and marketed can be changed (Parker, Ntounis, Quin & Millington, 2016), with input from numerous place stakeholders (Le Feuvre, Medway, Warnaby, Ward and Goatman, 2016), thereby incorporating a plurality of perspectives (Warnaby & Medway 2013). Indeed, the place 'product' is, arguably, 'co-created' by all those individuals, groups and institutions located therein (Warnaby & Medway, 2013, 2015), and appropriate processes need to be put in place to facilitate this (Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015).

Important activities include developing a vision for the place (Warnaby, Bennison, Davies and Hughes, 2002), in which as many stakeholders as possible can share. However, the inherent complexity of places, as noted above, will lead to alternative voices articulating their particular points of view and creating competing narratives of the place (Henshaw, Medway, Warnaby and Perkins, 2016; Koeck and Warnaby, 2015). Thus, we need to recognise that there is always more than one way to enable the creation of a vibrant and successful place. We must also appreciate that everyone has their own personal perception of a place. Therefore, **we should amend this overarching principle to read the unique *identities* of place** to ensure we do not fall into the trap of thinking place identity is fixed, objective and never contested (Kalandides, 2011).

Overarching principle 2: Local economies

An urban place incorporates numerous land uses and economic activities, which require effective management if comparative advantage is to be achieved. In their pursuit of local economic development, individual places need to focus on managing and promoting those assets that constitute strengths and possible opportunities into the future. For example, given the importance of retailing to many local urban economies (Bennison, Warnaby & Pal, 2010), managing and promoting this urban activity is crucial (Warnaby et al., 2002; Warnaby, Bennison & Davies, 2005a, 2005b). Moreover, the development of differentiated retail activities, such as local markets (Hallsworth, Ntounis, Parker & Quin, 2015; Warnaby, 2013) and also a focus on the experiential aspects of urban retail destinations (Oakes and Warnaby, 2011; Warnaby, 2009) offer opportunities for developing competitive advantage in this regard. In addition, the role of specific neighbourhoods in creating place distinctiveness should not be ignored (Bennison, Warnaby & Medway, 2007; Kalandides & Vaiou, 2012).

If places are going to fulfill their potential, then the importance of sharing knowledge, insights and information across all relevant stakeholders (an issue considered in more detail in Overarching Principle 3) is an important facilitating factor (Parker, Ntounis, Quin and Grime, 2014). Nevertheless, economic 'success' will be affected by a multitude of factors, the majority of which are outside of a location's control (Parker et al., 2016). Therefore, local economies should be understood in comparative terms. To achieve this overarching principle **local leaders need to become much more adept in gathering and interpreting data and using this evidence to make much more locally-relevant (but globally astute) decisions** (Millington, Ntounis, Parker and Quin, 2015).

Overarching principle 3: Governance and citizenship

The multiplicity of potential urban stakeholders has been acknowledged above, and the existence of strong structures and networks for the effective management and marketing of places is imperative (Coca-Stefaniak, Parker, Quin & Rinaldi, 2009; Warnaby, Alexander and Medway, 1998), including processes for performance measurement (Hogg, Medway & Warnaby, 2004, 2007). Actor interaction within these networks can be both formal and informal, and can be ongoing, or more ad hoc as circumstances (or specific management/marketing initiatives) dictate - (see Warnaby et al., 2002, 2005a). Within these networks, effective working between public, private and voluntary sector actors is important (Le Feuvre et al., 2016). The inclusivity and openness of these networks is critical to their success, with relevant stakeholders contributing appropriately (Medway, Alexander, Bennison & Warnaby, 1999; Medway, Warnaby, Bennison & Alexander 2000), and avoiding the problem of free-riding (Forsberg, Medway & Warnaby, 1999). However, to achieve this guiding principle **stakeholders will require training, education, guidance and support to be able to participate as effectively as possible** (Byrom, Parker & Harris, 2002; Hudson-Davies & Parker, 2002; Parker & Anthony-Winter, 2003).

Overarching principle 4: Environments

The environment within which urban management initiatives operate is an important factor influencing their efficacy (Parker et al., 2016). Also, the quality of the urban built environment is important in retail success (De Nisco and Warnaby, 2013, 2014) and place differentiation (Warnaby, 2009). As noted above, towns exist in a somewhat competitive context as they compete for public funds, economic activity, and tourists, etc. However, the environment within a specific place influences perceptions of its economic and social vitality (see Medway, Parker & Roper, 2016; Parker, Roper & Medway, 2015; Roper & Parker, 2013, with specific reference to litter). For many people, 'the environment' is very local – it is the availability of greenspace or the quality and cleanliness of public space – which is intrinsically linked to people's perceptions of crime and safety and their wellbeing (Medway, Parker and Roper, 2016). Therefore, this overarching principle is **an opportunity to focus on 'ordinary placemaking' (Millington and Kyte, 2016)** impacting on the everyday lived experiences of millions of people who reside in, work in or visit our towns (Edensor and Millington, in press).

As implied in the quotation from José Saramago, which begins this commentary, as individuals and institutions, we pass through places. What we need to ensure is that, for the period we live and/or work in urban places, our stewardship of them is as responsible as possible. This can be accomplished inter alia by effective management, which in turn can be informed by research. At the Institute of Place Management we undertake world-leading research specifically for the people that serve places. From interrogating the overarching principles articulated within the World Towns Agreement using our own research, **we are confident the principles are both significant and robust**. They stand-up to academic scrutiny and, collectively, they can strengthen the position, understanding and narrative of urban centres, around the world.

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