

PROCESSES OF TOURIST «RE-IMAGENEERING»: ECLIPSE OF VALENCIALOCAL IDENTITY

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Tourist branding is an ongoing construction that creates a representative image for the foreigner. The tourist branding image is a very sensitive issue, in order for it to allow binomial local development-tourism it must contain an affective idea and must also convey the essence of the area.

Nevertheless, converting into virtual heritage the present image of Valencia favors that citizens assume it, neither constructing nor choosing subjective representations of the city. In this way, citizens drift apart from the daily reality and live in a tourist postcard, monopolized by the «City of Arts and Sciences» and local large events.

As far as they are concerned, tourists don't walk through a real city, but along a tourist and audio-visual stage. The break between the cultural image of Valencia and its image as a city-show is the main object of this research, which has analyzed 55 tourist posters to emphasize the tourist image of a city in full change.

Historically, we consider the Regional Exhibition of Valencia (1909) as the first tourist publicity. It consolidates the city's powerful and traditional imagery (Horta, sea, sun, palm trees, Albufera, monumental and ethnological heritage, gastronomy). It was the first precedent of a way of understanding short-term tourism that still continues nowadays.

The slogan «Land of Flowers and Arts» (1920s-1930s) already shows the eternal fight between architectural and picturesque publicity, with all the attributes of July Fairs. At the same time, the National Council of Tourism was favoring the promotion of climate and sea as touristic claims, by means of subtle, synthetic, artistic posters. This is a cultural image that originated in the XIX century.

The publicity of Valencian Society for the Promotion of Tourism prolongs this tourist duality, joined by the Fallas as its most local and festive image (ninots, paella, gunpowder...), directed towards tourists' reception in the 1940s-1950s.

In the 1960s-1970s, the slogan «Valencia, Sun and Colour» is known by its common places of residential development and vulgar gastronomic association. At this point,

Valencia became part of the big set of coastal destinations, which all followed the fashion of residential tourism.

In the 1980s-1990s, Valencia re-discovered its Mediterranean roots through the promotion of its Albufera and its natural resources, but this advance is ruined by a later and much stronger identification with the «sun and beach» touristic product («Holiday all the time»).

Since the beginning of 21st century, the ancient river bed¹ of the Turia has linked its historical center to its natural heritage, to the renewed port («America's Cup») and to the City of Arts and Sciences, in an excessive attempt to include too many tourist products.

Nowadays, Valencia is an exorbitant city-advertisement that «you can't miss» because it is fashionable, a huge thematic park of an eternal local smile, built over grandiloquent projects. Its main precedent can be found in the success of the Regional Exhibition of Valencia (1909). However, the speed of the city's identity change will only be complete when Valencian people agree to identify themselves with it. It is very hard for citizens to identify themselves with an image of the future that has not yet been created.

The City of Arts and Sciences constitute a megalomaniac extravagance, but is it a social construction, a living place? Architecture has played the largest part in the change of direction of Valencia's tourist branding. The result is an strong, all consuming visual product that perhaps overpowers the main tourist attraction of the city itself. We verify that the image of the City of Arts and Sciences is more attractive for its brand and prestige than for the real attributes that the city offers.

Audio-visual Valencia reveals itself as absolutely synonymous to the City of Arts and Sciences, as a global brand that not favors development. Tourism is a creator of new places, and the international image of Valencia has been significantly improved, but only for a tourism which devours standardized products. Cultural break has raised local self esteem, but has allowed Valencia to loose its unique sense of identity. We can see a progressive loss of structures in the city, referents and symbols of heritage in human scale. Nevertheless, tourist branding can be useful to penetrate borders and promote unique territories, effectively conveying their individual characteristics, instead of living in the decorative scenery of a museum.

We are in a process of «re-imageneering» of the city of Valencia, built without answering to a bottom-up strategy, in an act of propaganda derived from political power, thematization and 2.0 environment. The «calatravism» colonization, with its pompous buildings, answers neither to a strategy of uniqueness nor long-term development, which turns citizens into spectators of their tourist panorama. In this way, politicians don't count on citizens' participation, but only on the ephemeral character of the region and an authorized seriousness. The City of Arts and Sciences, instead of becoming a local heritage, is turned into a commonplace of itself. This is a change that needs an agreed thinking of its tourist branding as an internal powerful tool of local development.

1 The ancient river bed of the Turia was drained after the flooding in 1957.