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Urban branding and place as a quality product: innovations in the urban experience

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Urban branding and place as a quality product: innovations in the urban experience

Abstract

The experience of a place may become an integral part of a product experience. The enhancement of products (Splendiani et al (2013) "assumes a meaning which goes beyond the simple sale of material goods. It covers the supply of complex experiences (...) enriched by intangible elements capable to stimulate and involve the sensory and experiential component of consumption. It deals with attracting people to the places where local products are made by inserting the products in the most extensive offers covering the entire territorial system of reference" The experience may also be used for the spectacolarisation of a place and its commercialisation, as in the case of "brandscapes" (Klingman, 2007). In this case it is important not to clone every place every where because they could inevitably resemble each other without be able to really engage the people who move into them (Lehtovouri, 2010).

Purpose
Starting from these premises, the aim of the paper is illustrating the role of experience in urban regeneration projects and to explore how the experience of high quality product luxury places can be sustainable with existent place identity or new place identity to be suitably created.

Methodology approach
The methodology approach is based on: a wide bibliography and internet research based on the main terms connected to the topics of the paper, including: experience, place identity, quality product, regeneration; on case studies – even though not illustrated – concerning places of interest for the research topics, such as: Hafencity in Hamburg, the Albert Dock in Liverpool, Abondaibarra area in Bilbao.

Findings
The planning of places of quality product cannot be separated from interpretation of the territory as a cultural system resulting from an ensemble of historical, economic, and social processes. In such a system, the contribution of the cultural factor must be considered propulsive, not only for its qualitative meaning, but also and especially for the role of '*trait d'union*' of a number of actions taken to protect and enhance places.

Originality/value
The increasing importance of the use of experience in the urban regeneration process, is leading cities to be involved in constructing suitable images and symbols of their transformed areas in order to meet the new trends, also according with luxurious ones. Even though globalisation is one of the main dangers in innovative itineraries, the proper planning of quality architecture and public spaces could prevent it by creating a suitable mix between innovation and culture.

Introduction

Place identity is a complex notion which can be related to different questions, and which is changing according to new needs and uses of places (Sepe, 2013a).

H.M. Proshansky & al. (1983) links the various kinds of relationships between people and their experiences: "Thus, place identity is the result of a constant, and often subconscious negotiation between individuals and the potpourri of experiences, objects, and even idealised places they encounter during their lives".

In this regard, M. Southworth and D. Ruggeri (2010) point out that D. Stokols and S.A. Schumaker (1981) coined the term "social imageability", which derives from the shared meanings generated by the involvement of individuals with a place. This term leads to the concept of place attachment.

"Researching the effects on identity of displacement and detachment from familiar places, sociologist M. Milligan has identified what she calls "locational socialisation", through which one's active involvement with a place generates shared meanings (1998; 2003, p. 383).

M. Southworth and D. Ruggeri (2010) observe that "Place significance may also result from historic or political events. But places with strong public identity need not have strong visual identity. While strong visual form is not essential for identity, it can provide a framework for attaching meanings. Place identity has greatest power when visual form, individual and social meaning come together. According to K. Lynch (1960), "...sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace". M. Castells (1997, p.60) proposes that urban movements are based on three factors combined in different ways: "urban demands on living conditions and collective consumption; the affirmation of local cultural identity; and the conquest of local political autonomy and citizen participation. Different movements combined these three sets of goals in various proportions, and the outcomes of their efforts were equally diversified. Yet, in many instances, regardless of the explicit achievements of the movement's participants, but for the community at large. And not only during the lifespan of the movement (usually brief), but in the collective memory of the locality. Indeed, (...) this production of meaning is an essential component of cities, throughout history, as the built environment, and its meaning, is constructed through a conflictive process between the interests and values of opposing social actors".

These various definitions suggest, as observed by M. Southworth and D. Ruggeri (2010), that this concept "should be thought of as a gradient that includes several dimensions and should be as complex as the processes at play in every neighbourhood. It should account for aesthetic appeal and imageability, but be expanded to include social considerations, the discourses and meanings that are shared by community members". This means that other more nuanced definitions of place identity may be identified. "It can be found by looking at a range of places, from the historic downtowns of our cities to the everyday landscapes of suburbia, using a variety of methods, including physical form analysis, observations, interviews and other sociological methods. This new definition should consider the need for memorable and imageable environments, expressions of shared social values, new forms of non-place communities, and the multiple mechanisms by which meanings are embedded and communicated in the landscape".

In this sense, the key role of experience helps to link place identity with both personal emotions and the territorial system. Therefore, the experience of a place where the high quality product is suitably related to the place identity is able to create memorable prestigious places.

The increasing importance of the use of experience in urban regeneration and the design of contemporary places is inducing cities to engage in constructing suitable images and symbols of their transformed areas in order to match the new trends, also high quality ones (Hudders, Pandelaere, Vyncke, 2013). As O.B. Jensen (2007) states: "The idea is understood to involve selective storytelling, or attempts to re-imagine the city (Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003). It has to do with

coining concepts and articulating difference and identity. Seen in this light, urban branding is evocative storytelling aimed at educating its recipients to 'see the city in a particular way'. However, branding for identity construction also means branding for alterity construction (Czarniawska, 2002)".

The experience of a place may thus become an integral part of a product experience. The enhancement of products (Splendiani & al. 2013) "assumes a meaning which goes beyond the simple sale of material goods. It covers the supply of complex experiences enriched by intangible elements capable to stimulate and involve the sensory and experiential component of consumption. It deals with attracting people to the places where local products are made by inserting the products in the most extensive offers covering the entire territorial system of reference".

The experience may also be used for the spectacularisation of a place and its commercialisation, as in the case of "brandscapes" (Klingman, 2007). In this case it is important not to clone places in the same form everywhere because they inevitably come to resemble each other without being able really to engage the people who move into them (Lehtovouri, 2010).

In this regard, prestigious places are places where luxury appears and is ready to be consumed in specific forms; places characterised by elements (architectures, urban furniture, etc.) able to evoke in their users the perception of a sophisticated atmosphere and a high-quality standard of living.

Starting from these premises, the aim of this paper is to propose two main forms of the possible experience of luxury places: innovative paths, and high-quality product paths (Ache & Ilmonen, 2010). In both cases, respect for place identity is crucial. In order to introduce these topics, the paper will illustrate the definitions of both place identity and experience in their broad meanings. Luxury, in the multiple forms in which it is expressed, constitutes for its user a special object/product/service which is difficult to obtain. Current users are becoming more and more choosy and exigent about both, the product they buy and the experience of buying, what surrounds the product acquired. For this reason, high quality product factories are changing in accordance with new needs, sometimes transforming the existing place identity. The last section will draw the conclusions.

Creating experience

Kolb (1984; 1971) defines learning as the "continuing education of the individual." Learning benefits from various connections created among education, work, and personal development. The individual thus acquires a "system of skills through experiential methodologies, which lead to the development of educational goals adhering to the real world of work." Experiential learning is a modality of learning which is based on experience, understood in its cognitive and sensory senses. By experimenting with situations, tasks and roles, the subjects, as active protagonists, use their expertise to pursue their goals. In the field of economic studies, "experiential" acquires a more extensive meaning. From the 1980s onwards, three periods can be distinguished in which distinctive patterns of consumer behaviour in terms of experience evolved. The term "experiential" was introduced in

1982 "as an approach that focuses on the symbolic, aesthetic and hedonistic nature of consumption, and which is based on the conception of the experience of consumption as an activity aimed at searching for amusements and sensations" (Capitello & al., 2012). It was later shown that the rational and emotional component can coexist with and influence the degree of satisfaction, introducing an experiential vision in the consumer. Recognition of the importance of variables such as the emotions that bring pleasure and the need actually to use a given product, as well as the action of purchasing itself, became important components of product design. As R. Capitello & al. (2012) note, new concepts were introduced, such as "shopping experience" (Falk & Campbell, 1997; Rieunier, 2002), "Internet shopping experience" (Menon and Kahn, 2002), and "customer experience aimed at creating competitive value". In the 2000s, new studies on customer experience have proposed a holistic experience combining the customer and the company's offer so as to yield the optimal experience in the gaining of knowledge and in product buying. While this approach can give a company a significant competitive advantage, it requires an especially thorough study of the offer in terms of experience. It also requires the company to be able to differentiate its offer to meet different needs; this leads to customisation and an increase in time and costs compared to traditional offer designs. Decisive factors in this regard are, besides the quality and reputation of the product being offered, the attractiveness of the place and the functionality of its services, and intangible values such as tradition and the hospitality of the population (Capitello & al., 2012). Place experience thus becomes an integral part of the product experience. The enhancement of products (Splendiani, 2013) acquires a meaning that goes beyond the simple sale of material goods. It extends to the supplying of complex experiences enriched by intangible elements capable of stimulating and involving the sensory and experiential component of consumption. Place experience has to do with attracting people to the places where local products are made by including products in a more generalised offer addressed to the entire target area. The overall supply does not consist just of single products; rather, it consists of a system where one or more enterprises, local institutions, or entertainment facilities promote a new image of the area. Demand thus turns into demand for experiences, and this, in turn, requires appropriate hosting structures.

The construction of a local system to support experiential activities requires the definition of appropriate network modalities. A study by S. Splendiani & al. (2013), although it actually deals with the promotion of local products, outlines a pattern? that can be extended to other types of cultural "products".

As M. Montella explains (2009), "In the case of local systems for the promotion of local products, the most appropriate organisational models present "variable geometry", according to different thresholds of efficiency and effectiveness that characterise different kinds of internal processes to the network".

Two methods of network construction can be identified. One is characterised by a bottom-up logic of organisation consisting in the convergence of different actors on a shared idea of task management

with a view to carrying out a common project. The second method is mainly top-down; the construction of the system provides a governing body that manages the aggregation of the different actors and planned activities, and is expected to last over time (Golinelli, 2000).

The purpose of the resulting supply system is to make the user no longer a passive subject of standardised economy, but rather an active subject involved in the production and consumption processes, as well as being able to create value. The concept of value is also extended to local stakeholders, who contribute to construction of the network. Value is thus "created jointly between the parties involved (...) transcending the boundaries between functions and specialised disciplines and taking a holistic view that, at the district level, implies a marketing network where there are no buyers and sellers, but partners who exchange resources to carry out jointly interdependent activities aimed at the preparation of experiences" (Splendiani, 2013). The "exhibition" of experience has an operative potential in supporting the development of creative forces. This approach originates with Florida, who argues that the more cities are able to seem attractive to the creative class of workers and managers in the various economic sectors such as art, design, fashion and advanced technologies services, the greater the likelihood that those cities can successfully face the challenges of competition among cities imposed by globalisation (Florida, 2002; 2005; Landry, 2008; Sepe, 2014; 2013b). Indeed, the creative city is a city able not only to attract creative people from outside but also to create an attractive environment – comprising culture, excellence, luxury and quality – in which creative people can find many stimuli to express themselves. In this case, both tangible and intangible capitals become necessary to contribute and develop these places. In particular, luxury becomes an element of excellence, and excellence is translated into richness of territory in the sense of a cultural resource. In the creative milieu, clusters and districts capable of strengthening the cultural urban structure can be developed (Carta, 2007; Florida, 2005).

Quality products and places: *The value of luxury*

Luxury, in the multiple forms in which it is expressed, constitutes for its user a special object/element/service which is difficult to obtain.

This value of luxury is the basis of many commercial strategies which change according to whether the good is a globalised or quality-handcrafted product. Whilst in the former case, the marketing strategy is entrusted to the brand and is usually similar in all places, in the latter it is expressed through the specificity of the product, and use will be made of an image which differs according to the typicality of the place (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; Roberts & Armitage, 2015; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

In both cases, factories which produce these products conduct detailed research on how decline their presence in a particular place and on how present their products. In the case of a globalised brand, it is easy to find places where more than one brand is present: malls, commercial boulevards and streets, luxury districts, airports (Morandi & Paris, 2015). It is possible to recognise these places

because, usually, they are the display of several brands; and due to the high quality goods commercialised, the retail spaces are located in buildings and places which possess a good architectonic, or at least building, quality.

Urban furniture, the general state of conservation of the buildings which host these brands, and shop windows are in harmony with the excellence of the goods which they have to promote. The differences which can be observed are a certain standardisation of outlets, malls and airports; and greater care for aesthetical details in luxury streets or commercial districts.

In the case of globalised products, even though these are not commercialised in the places where they are manufactured, the most successful of them are those connected to the history, culture and tradition of the territory of commercialisation. Illustration of the history of the brand, with images recalling its creation and process of industrialization, together with the illustration of products – in particular the "icons" – connected to the local environment related to it in various ways (architecture, urban furniture and/or other products of excellence) is a linkage between the tradition and innovation of luxury understood as a product of the place's culture.

As regards high-quality handcrafted products, these are usually commercialised singly or in thematic routes: for instance, wine districts, goldsmiths streets, etc.

In any case, albeit in various ways, high quality brands try to create in consumers an emotion, image or illusion which goes beyond the purchase of the product. In the case of the globalised product, the main illusion is that of being part of the luxury world in which people use these goods on a daily basis. As said, the place which hosts those brands will present urban furniture, shop windows and billboards where the person who ideally uses these products is represented: for instance, an actress or a celebrity, who in turn drives a luxury car or flies business class, etc.
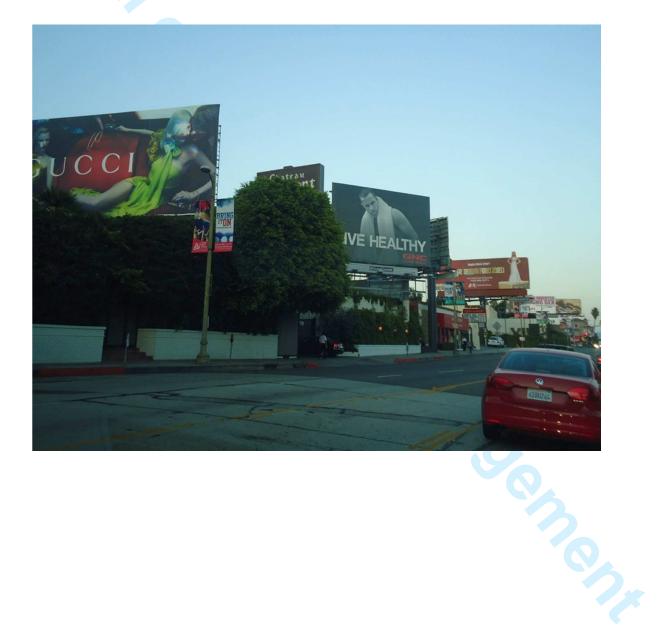
Enhancement of the place's identity is in this case stronger when the quality of the architecture and in general of the place is associated with the particularity – although globalised – of the product. It is more difficult for this to happen in malls, which are often characterised by standardisation, although this aspect has been changing in recent years, with archistars called to design multifunctional urban containers with a mix of retail and leisure (Rabbiosi, 2013). There follow descriptions of these different kinds of paths.

New places for shopping

In the contemporary city, in parallel with the traditional places of socialisation (squares, main streets, etc.), there have arisen urban structures which vary in size, quality and shape but have in common the aim of favouring a prolonged use substitutive of that of public spaces.

These urban or extra-urban structures reflect the new combinations of functions which are arising to satisfy the needs of different categories of users. Among these, three main categories can be identified. The first comprises shopping malls, outlets of high quality brands, and multi-screen cinemas where the functions – including entertainment – are mainly connected with shopping. The

second includes airports, railway stations and motorways. This group is characterised by mobility and transport functions connected with shopping as well. The prevalent scheme in shopping centres is constituted by the shopping structure, a huge parking facility, and other connected amenities (Mello, 2002). Because the parking facility allows people to arrive easily and stop for a long time, it plays a fundamental role in the success of these structures.

Figs 1-4: Los Angeles, Sunset boulevard and Rodeo Drive, typical luxury areas (photos by the author)

Furthermore, some outlets and shopping malls are increasingly taking features from theme parks, giving rise to a new mix which is both scenic and functional. As S. Mills (1998) has said, "The Mall of America in Minnesota already seems to have taken the shopping experience to levels that could have embarrassed even Walt Disney. Is this shopping with entertainment or a theme park with massive purchasing opportunities?".

In addition to these facilities, multi-screen cinemas have become predominant, replacing the single-screen cinemas. Function often prevails over shape, and the presence of parking, even though not observable in all these structures, is an important element of success. Most of the multi-screen cinemas are located within shopping centres or villages created by the big film production companies.

Furthermore, a more recent generation of multicontainers is emerging. These are above all commercial – often with high quality products – or tourist-commercial extra-urban spaces equipped with large-capacity parking areas and where several functions (which include cinema and high quality products shopping) able to satisfy numerous needs at the same time are linked but do not represent any one in particular (Torres, 2000). Referring to the phenomenon of "bundled" urban

environments, S. Graham & S. Marvin (2001) have pointed out that "invented street systems within shopping malls, theme parks and urban resorts, often with strong tie-ins to leading sports, media and entertainment multi-nationals (Disney, Time-Warner, Sony, Nike, etc...)," have been created in order to "exploit merchandising spin-offs. Such developments cover increasingly large footprints and developers attempt to bundle together the maximum number of "synergistic" uses within a single complex - retailing, cinemas, IMAX screens, sports facilities, restaurants, hotels, entertainment facilities, casinos, simulated historic scenes, virtual reality complexes, museums, zoos, bowling alleys, artificial ski slopes, etc..".

Airports and railway stations become places where people spend time not only waiting for departure but also shopping, meeting people, working and engaging in various activities. Often, above all in airports, there are many shops with high quality products brands. These places are designed more and more to offer a variety of facilities in order to attract people per se and not just those that intend to travel (for example, the new KLIA 2 in Kuala Lumpur).

The increasingly frequent, large-scale use of spaces by greatly increased flows of people has generated a process of global competition among cities which involves concentration and specialisation in enhancing attractiveness to large masses of people. These are the places on which competition among cities, as well as economic and social interests, will be increasingly focused (Sorkin, 1999; Torres, 2000). As M. Crang (1998, p.128) pointed out, "although enclosed environments have multiplied, there has also been a renaissance of the city in all parts of the city itself as an arena of consumption". One of the reasons is a process of urban regeneration which is transforming deindustrialised areas into new spaces of consumption. Different kinds of places have emerged, including new waterfronts – such as Hafencity in Hamburg, the Albert Dock in Liverpool, Arabianranta in Helsinki, Abondaibarra in Bilbao, to cite some examples in European cities (Sepe, 2009). In these cases, the waterfront's transformation with new emblematic architectures and urban spaces designed by "archistars" are the starting points for revitalisation of not only the image of the area in question but also the whole city. The new buildings and public spaces become the brand of the new areas, as in the case of the Guggenheim museum of Bilbao, the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, and so on, and the attractiveness of the city is often – but not always – related to the establishment of high quality products brands.

In other cases, the transformation is more focused on the regeneration area: "What were once landscapes of labour become landscapes of leisure; former docks and factory sites become arts centres, are renovated for accommodation or form the sites for new festivals" (...) In Manhattan, S. Zukin (1982) identified this with the return to the city by "professionals", often in creative or media industries, taking up living in the lofts of SoHo. Conflicts can emerge over the different meanings groups ascribe to urban areas - over both residential and commercial development. Thus, London's Spitalfields Market redevelopment produced diverging views on whether the market should be kept as a local facility, an updated national market or as a tourist attraction".

The importance of emotions

The second type of prestigious place is that the one related to paths for experiencing quality products. The aim of the organisation of experiential paths is to raise awareness among the inhabitants of a given place, and to promote an area innovatively through its quality products and cultural values.

Prime examples of experiential paths are "typical paths.". These are intended to promote local high-quality products with an emphasis on the experiential dimension and the resources offered by the area of which they are an expression. The purpose of typical paths is to present a product and thereby reap social and symbolic benefits.

The paths centred on the experience of high-quality typical products are examples of negotiation among the various forms of exploitation of the resources of an area, creating places of excellence and distinctiveness. They are also important opportunities for the development of disadvantaged and marginalized areas because they can catalyse the interest of institutions, producers, and inhabitants in joint projects. The actors involved, motivated by the idea of addressing what they have to offer to a broader context of users, strive to build a network of relationships with manufacturers and other entities participating in the initiative to promote an area. The success of the strategy depends on the willingness and ability to coordinate of individual producers. Their synergy can yield real added value and open up experiential vistas (Nocifora & al.., 2011; Splendiani & al., 2013). Ongoing initiatives throughout Europe, including some in Trentino in North Italy, are prime examples of this approach, demonstrating how these routes are capable of raising interest. Websites on high-quality wine trails provide detailed information on the different approachs of an area and its products, enabling the user to decide on the type of experience being offered to him or her.

The experiential component of an itinerary with high-quality products has been studied more recently by architects and planners who, in the wake of K. Lynch (1960), have developed theories on the perception of place. As reported in a study by M.M. Degen & G. Rose (2012), the English agenda has given considerable attention to the quality of urban design, the assumption being that it arises directly from people's place experience: "a good design can help to create lively places with a distinctive character, streets and public spaces that are safe, accessible, pleasant to use and at human scale, and places that inspire a positive atmosphere, thanks to the imagination and sensitivity of the designers" (DETR / CABE, 2000). The authors also stress the importance of urban transformations of the built environment as a reflection not only of political, economic and cultural changes, but also of the "everyday experience that people have of the urban space". The senses are part of people's everyday lives; and the sensory experience acquired in a place makes us remember it in a more or less pleasant and distinctive way (Lefebvre, 1991).

Urban studies research generally shows that, increasingly, the goal of project action in the urban space is to alter the experience of that space for its residents. Urban environments are increasingly

designed to be distinctive, so as to create memorable sensory experiences for the people who use them. Even people who visit ordinary urban centres can describe a number of emotional experiences concerning those places based on one or the other of the five senses. These experiences may differ greatly from one place to another, and they may also vary in relation to factors such as the use of vehicles or the experience of a place on foot. The sensory experience of the products may also be used to spectacularise a place and commercialise it, as in the case of "brandscapes" (Klingman, 2007).

To complete the experience of a place and its urban environment, we need, as N. Seremetakis claims (1994), to resort to acts of memory. Recalling how a place appeared different in the past relates to a given environment in its current form, but it also connects with what it looked like in the past. When a neighbourhood is perceived as being similar to any other town centre or shopping mall, it is defined as a "type" rather than a unique urban environment. As E. Eizenberg argues (2010), "the continual remembrance of other places and previous visits to the same place, both assimilates a person into the experienced place and constantly makes reference to other places elsewhere" (Degen, DeSilvey & Rose, 2008).

Conclusion

The paper has shown two main ways in which it is possible to experience prestigious places: innovative paths and high quality local product paths. While in the former case the quality of the architecture and urban design are fundamental factors in order to obtain non-globalised places, in the latter, the focus is on quality of the product and illustration of the artisanal process or realization. In all the cases, both respect for place identity and the quality of spaces and buildings contribute strongly to the liveability and prestige of the area.

The construction of experience starts with the bottom-up or top-down creation of networks. While in the former case, a combination of businesses, stakeholders, institutions arises to allow the participation of different actors at all stages of the process, in the latter case the creation takes place by decision of a network which conveys interests, actors and economies.

This is important in determining the new representation of places and districts is the role of communication – deriving both from media and participation processes. Citizens and inhabitants perceive high quality products districts and places in different ways according to their involvement in the field. Therefore, working in different ways in construction of these places, or in the *luxury machine* and so is being a protagonist of it (purchasing or living in a quality environment) is an important factor of success of the operation, On the other hand, these may represent an element of conflict for the inhabitants if they are not involved in organisation of the place or in the interest of these kinds of goods. Tourists and visitors are in general satisfied in using and experiencing these places because they are only their consumers and beneficiaries. Indeed, more and more travel agencies organise tours devoted solely to visiting luxury districts or local product itineraries also in

the framework of cruises; and the organisation of suitable paths has become a factor in a city's quality and competitiveness.

It is also vital to understand the previous and coexisting images of those areas. As M. Greenberg (2000) observes, "the branding strategy, in a complex manner, bears witness to the way in which the 'word city' is overlaying the 'built city'. In a dynamic process of socio-spatial dialectics (Richardson & Jensen, 2003), the city becomes the frame upon which its physical surface is inscribed with new ways of playing the global competitive game. At the same time the city is represented in images, texts and logos and is thus embedded in a certain logic specific to the urban intervention".

E-commerce growth is slower than the traditional retail for luxury goods, because these require a stronger physical and perceptive contact with the object by the user. To this end, although many international commercial chains of luxury goods are studying strategies to recreate the special atmosphere needed to sell and purchase these products, the sale of these goods *in situ* is currently more successful. This advantage is attributed to the places of selling, and for this reason their organisation – both urban and aesthetic – must be designed suitably, contrasting aggressive marketing actions aimed only at rapidly achieving commercial objectives.

Furthermore, the planning of prestigious places cannot be separated from interpretation of the territory as a cultural system resulting from an ensemble of historical, economic, and social processes. In such a system, the contribution of the cultural factor must be considered propulsive, not only for its qualitative meaning, but also and especially for the role of '*trait d'union*' of a number of actions taken to protect and enhance places. Even though globalisation is one of the main dangers in innovative itineraries, the proper planning of quality architecture and public spaces could prevent it by creating a suitable mix between innovation and culture.

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Urban branding and place as a quality product: innovations in the urban experience

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Figs 1-4: Los Angeles, Sunset boulevard and Rodeo Drive, typical luxury areas (photos by the author)

Urban branding and place as a quality product: innovations in the urban experience

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