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The Social Role of Design on Collaborative Destination Branding:

Creating a new journey, a new story for the Waterfall Way, New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract

This paper suggests that collaborative design can be an effective tool to promote social change. A co-design methodology and the results of its application in branding the Waterfall Way (New South Wales, Australia) as an eco- and nature-based tourism destination are presented as an example. The co-design exercise actively involved stakeholders in all stages of the design process, harnessing local tacit knowledge in relation to communication design, stimulating reflection upon what is special about the places, and consequently reinforcing a sense of belonging and the environmental and cultural conservation of place. The achieved results reflect the involvement and ownership of the community towards the design process. However, the application of a collaborative brand design methodology produced more than just a destination brand that is attractive to visitors, in line with local values, ways of living and the environment. It helped to catalyse a social network around tourism, triggering self-organising activity amongst stakeholders, who started to liaise with each other around the emergent regional identity - represented by the new brand they created together. The Waterfall Way branding process is a good example of social construction of shared understanding in and through design, showing that design exercises can have a significant social impact not only on the final product, but also on the realities of people involved in the process.

Keywords

Destination Branding; Collaborative Process; Social Design; Self Organising Systems; Sustainable Tourism

Destination branding is an area that has been extensively explored by researchers in marketing tourism. Much less work has been done examining design research (Aaker, 1996; Balmer, 2001; Blackett & Russel, 1999; De Chernatony, 2001; Grant, 2002; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006; Landor Associates, 2005; Lury, 2004; Pringle & Thompson, 1999; Randall, 1997). Marketing and tourism researchers, however, appear to overlook the significance of the actual design of the aesthetic material that will

communicate the brand. Visual elements are only part of what a brand is. They represent, however, one of the most important parts of the brand system (Knapp, 2001; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997), as they are normally the first aspects to be perceived by the public.

This paper presents and discusses a methodology for constructing meaning and shared understanding in and through design. This methodology used the actual process of designing the aesthetic elements of the brand to collectively build its broader aspects. These include the brand essence, value and promises as well as future governance, stakeholder ownership and continuing support of the initiative. All these will determine the success and sustainability of the marketing effort.

A collaborative design process can be a powerful social tool to engage communities and stakeholders in a shared effort towards positive change. Through sharing the search for a symbol to represent a place or a region, local people and businesses engage in a contemplative journey through their identities and places. The understanding of who and where they are, and what is special and distinctive about their places, encourage the shaping of shared visions for the future of the area. Change may, then, appear less challenging, more manageable, and more likely to be sustainable for the communities involved in the process.

In this paper we develop this idea through analysing the process of branding a cultural and nature-based tourism destination in northern New South Wales (NSW), Australia, known as the 'Waterfall Way'.

The Waterfall Way encompasses part of the New England Tablelands as well as the adjacent Mid North Coast of NSW (Figure 1). The region is known for its spectacular landscapes, ranging west to east over frosty farmlands, high altitude starry skies, gorges and waterfalls, world heritage national parks and hinterland rivers that run to the long, deserted sub-tropical beaches and protected marine parks of the coast. This extraordinary variety of landscape in a relatively short distance (approximately 250 km) brings with it a significant diversity in climate, wildlife and local people's ways of living. In addition to this, the region is privileged with rich stories concerning Aboriginal culture and pioneering history, as well as collections and festivals of art and music reflecting the painters, poets and scientists who have frequented the region over almost two centuries (Atkinson, Ryan, & Davidson, 2006; Hassall, 2008; Haworth, 2006; Kane, 2007; Menhoffer, 2006; O'Loughlin, van der Lee, & Gill, 2003b; John J. Pigram & King, 1977).

Figure 1 – Waterfall Way, NSW Australia.

The region has been dubbed the Waterfall Way due to the pre-existing name of the road that links the Bellinger Hinterland, up the mountain through to the University town of Armidale, administrative capital of the Tablelands. This is a route which rises over 1400 m from the coast up the Great Escarpment to reach the high plateau of the New England Tablelands. Numerous waterfalls pour over the escarpment and run down the deep gorges through which the rivers reach the sea creating the so-called 'falls country' which has long been a scenic tourist attraction. The land has been traversed over the years by local aboriginal people, pioneer settlers, bushrangers, drovers and timber getters, and later by recreational bushwalkers, cyclists and canoeists from all over the world. Tourism activity in the area, though, has always been scattered and

non-linked. The places along the corridor have usually competed for visitors and businesses.

According to Pigram and King (1977), "A most important aspect of tourism is the 'image' of the travel situation perceived by the visitor or the potential tourist. (…) Tourists' perceptions are more often derived from a variety of external sources and influences. This is where advertising, publicity, and personal advice are fundamental." Morgan Pritchard and Piggot (2002) reinforce this idea stating that "Branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by increasing product parity, substitutability and competition".

A collaborative design methodology, focused on place identity, was chosen to engage local stakeholders in the branding process. It consisted of individual conversations on what is special about each place, and collaborative design sessions, emphasising openness in discussion, input and feedback from community members, even at the most technical stages.

The application of the co-design methodology for the Waterfall Way released significant information as to what kind of tourism stakeholders are prepared to receive and support. It also stimulated a reflection upon what is special about the places, reinforcing a sense of belonging and conservation. Furthermore, the conversational process triggered self-organising activity of businesses, operators and community members linking themselves around the emergent regional identity, represented by the brand they created together. This outcome would probably not have been obtained without the methodology used.

The following sections will briefly present the theoretical framework of the study, describe the collaborative brand design methodology applied in the Waterfall Way, and discuss the methodology in terms of its achievements, challenges and limitations.

Collaborative Destination Branding

The collaborative design methodology outlined in this paper is based on the theory of complex emergence (Holland, 1998; Johnson, 2004) and systems thinking (Checkland, 1999a, 1999b; Jackson, 2003; Stacey, 1993). It proposes an alternative perspective for understanding places and, therefore, the design process itself.

Places are seen as self-organising dynamic and adaptive systems (Johnson, 2004; O'Loughlin, Taboada, & Gill, 2006). This implies that the action of the elements, when reproduced according to a given system's rules can generate an infinite combination of novel patterns of behaviour (Holland, 1998). It also means that the behaviour of the group is more important than the isolated action of its parts.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has created tools for assisting leaders in developing public engagement methodologies. The Association has also published a spectrum for public participation in projects that shows the various levels of involvement (International Association for Public Participation, 2007). Figure 2 displays a spectrum adapted from the IAP2, which shows three milestones in the levels of public engagement.
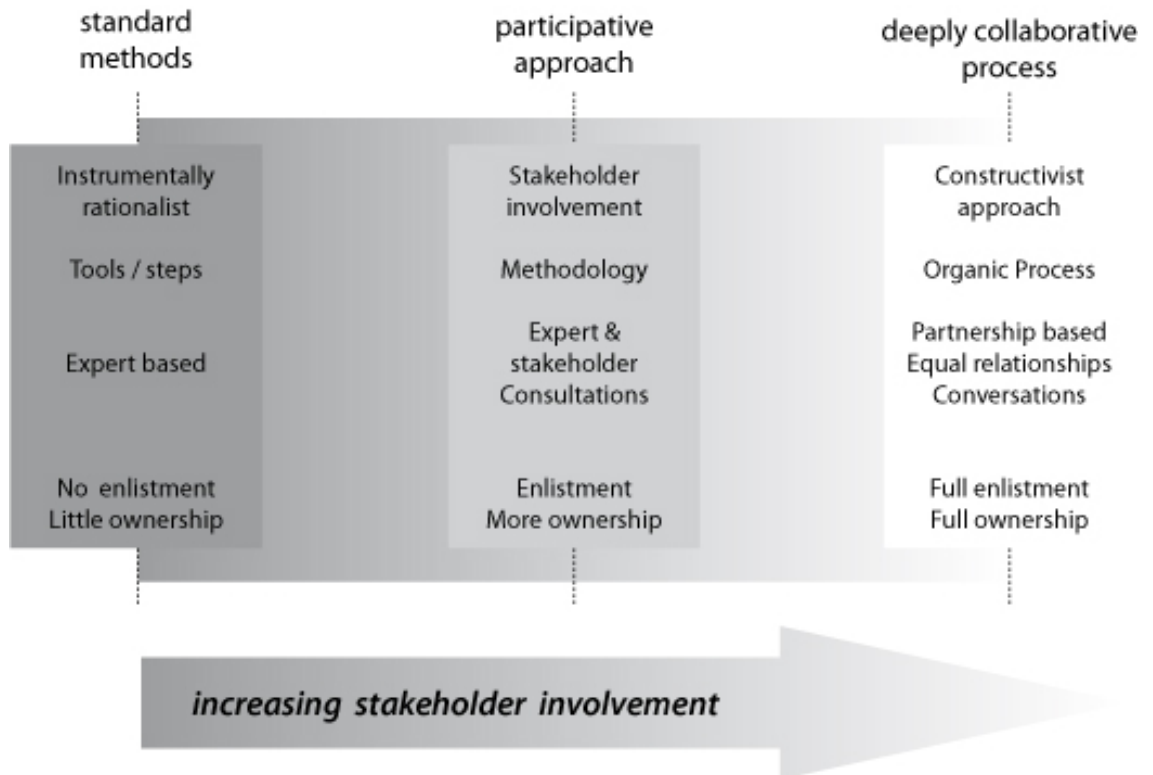
Figure 2 – Stakeholder involvement Spectrum, adapted from IAP2 Consultation Spectrum. First published in (O'Loughlin et al., 2006)

Collaborative approaches have the aim of engaging the public in the decision-making process as deeply as possible. The main difference between this kind of approach and the consultative or participative approaches is that in collaborative processes the decision is made by the public, rather than by the leader or leading group. The term "public" means here the people who will be affected by the consequences of the decisions that are being made. It can refer to a working group or a stakeholder group in a project, or to whole communities in certain places.

Most authors agree on the advantages of undertaking a collaborative methodology in certain situations. Collaborative processes foster ownership of the procedure and its outcomes, empowerment of the group, and legitimacy of the process itself (Bencala et al., 2006; Black et al., 2002; Cole-Edelstein, 2004; Healey, 1997; Herbert, 2005; Hough, 1990; Marzano, 2006; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003; O'Loughlin et al., 2006; Rust, 2004a; Taboada, 2007; Van der Lee, 2000). Another advantage of collaborative decision-making processes is that it can give people the chance to be equally heard. It can reveal both explicit and tacit forms of knowledge (Black et al., 2002; Nonaka & Toyama, 2007; Polanyi, 1967; Rust, 2004a; Senker, 1995). It may, consequently, bring innovation and creative solutions into the project that would probably not be achieved if approaches other than an open one were to be used.

Collaborative approaches are focused on emergent processes (Holland, 1998; Jackson, 2003; Johnson, 2004), and often allow multiple leaders to arise within the group. The leader / facilitator of the process should be ready to allow this to happen, and to stimulate the emergent self-organising activities that will

further the common goal of the group (Allen, 2004; Arthur, 1989; Johnson, 2004; Meppem & Gill, 1998; Nova Science Now, 2007; O'Loughlin et al., 2006; Taboada, 2007).

Collaboration between numerous specialists is inherent to design projects (Simoff & Maher, 2000). The complex systems perspective, when applied to design activity, changes the role of the specialists, to that of a facilitator, harnessing design knowledge from the community of non-designers involved in the project.

If places are regarded as complex emergent systems that have a tendency to self-organise in order to better grow, the use of a similar self-regulating collaborative planning approach seems to be the logical option. The high levels of public involvement activate the system's elements so that they define their own rules of behaviour according to their culture and environment.

Designing an image / brand for a region requires not only knowledge about potential niche markets and visitor expectations, but also intimate knowledge of the destination, its attractions and sensibilities, and local people's expectations for tourism activity and visitors.

Branding a destination is more than simply creating an image for a product. It involves a process of creation of meaning for the places being branded that will impact not only through new tourist activity, but also on the way local people see themselves and their places. For all these reasons the destination branding envisioning process should be publicly driven and based on stakeholder values and shared agreement (Marzano, 2006; Morgan et al., 2003; O'Loughlin et al., 2006; O'Loughlin, van der Lee, & Gill, 2003a; John J.; Pigram & Wahab, 1997).

The collaborative process recognises that a brand does not just create a symbol and image for outsiders; it also affects and creates images for local people in the places being branded. Therefore, involving local people and communities in the brand development process allows them to understand their places and be part of this re-shaping of identity more in line with local characteristics, values and principles than if another kind of process were used.

Branding The Waterfall Way

The diagram in Figure 3 depicts the main phases of the collaborative branding process used in the Waterfall Way.

1 market research	2 place identity research	3 brand workshop	4 graphic design
desktop + 7 regional workshops	one to one conversations across the region	co-design brand concept communication elements	design team + stakeholders
Walcha Guyra Armidale Dorrigo Bellingen Coffs Harbour Nambucca	what's special about your place?	what's the story to tell?	finalise communication tools + develop support tools
≈ 150 people	59 people	21 people	59 people

Figure 3 – Main phases of the collaborative branding process for the Waterfall Way.

The regional brand concept study was the first stage of the collaborative brand design work for the Waterfall Way. It was initiated in October 2006, involving community members and stakeholders from seven local government areas across the region (Walcha, Guyra, Armidale, Dorrigo, Bellingen, Coffs Harbour and Nambucca, see Figure 1). This stage consisted of phases 1 to 3 from the diagram above (Figure 3)

Phase 1: Market Research

The market research was conducted in the form of open community workshops, which were attended by one hundred and twenty four people from the seven places involved. The objective of these meetings was to introduce the goals of the project and to collect information on what kind of potential market (products, promotion, price and consumer) the locals could envision for the region.

At the end of each workshop, the brand development process was presented and attendees were invited to join the study. Seventy-eight people expressed their interest in participating in the brand process. Each of them was contacted and invited for a conversation about their place.

Phase 2: Place Identity Research

This phase consisted of one-to-one conversations about each place across the region. Fifty-nine people were interviewed in different localities between the New England and Coffs Coast. This group involved local council representatives (from the tourism, development and / or marketing areas), tourism association representatives, academics (historians, geographers and social scientists), visiting information centre (VIC) volunteers, Aboriginal artists and representatives, national parks, land owners, accommodation owners (bed & breakfast, farm-stay and motels), tourism operators, bushwalkers, cycling club representatives and some civic community members that were simply curious, or were against the idea of increasing tourist activity in the area and wanted to have their say.

The encounters consisted of informal conversations at a place chosen by the host, in most cases their homes or a preferred local café. The main objective was to engage with stakeholders and community members in order to understand local perceptions of each place throughout the region, the relationship between each of these places and their role in the region as a whole.

All conversations started around one open question: '`What is special about your place?`' The aim at this stage of the research was to create as open an environment as possible, in order to allow for novelty and the unexpected to come out of these conversations (Gadamer, 2004; Shaw, 2002).

These conversations helped build a rich picture of what each place along the way is special for, through the eyes of the people who live in each of these places. They have also proven to be a significant resource of marketing information, not only in regards to each place isolated, but also in relation to how each of these places in the Waterfall Way may connect with the others, offering insights as to how beneficial these links could be and how to make the network operational.

Notes were taken in the form of a draft concept map of ideas, as shown in Figure 4. No specific rule was followed during this manual register. These concept maps, however, were useful in linking up concepts and ideas, in identifying the emphasis some of the themes had during each conversation, and in finding recurrent themes.

The individual conversational maps were then combined to form a Place Identity Map (Figure 5). For each place a report was elaborated containing information gathered and interpreted from the conversations, such as key identity themes, the place identity map, some brand management insights and some product gaps and opportunities identified during the conversations.

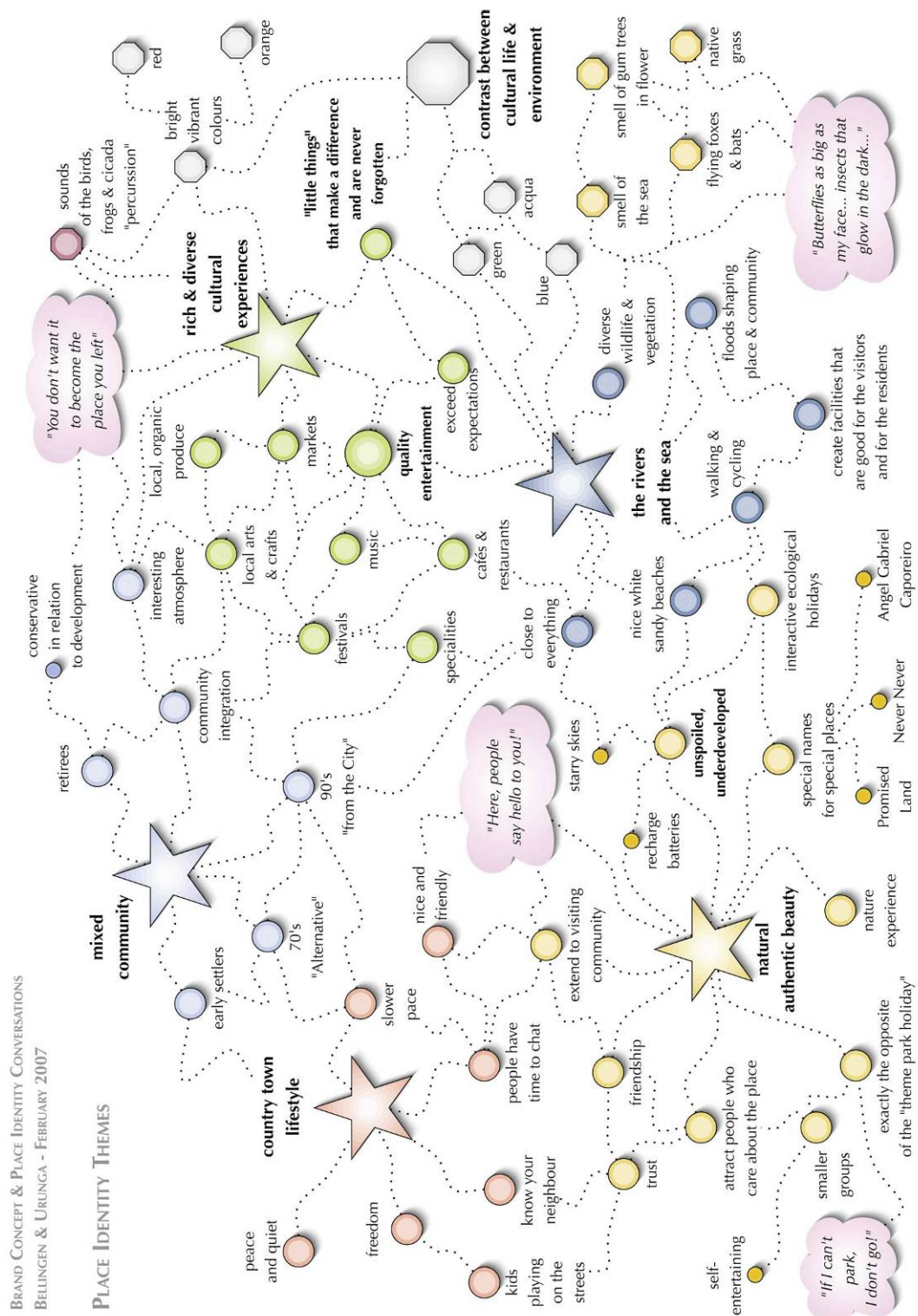Figure 4 – Example of Conversational Map, made on 05 February 2007.

Figure 5 – Concept map displaying the key Place Identity Themes for Bellingen, as a reflection upon the conversations held in this place. This map is part of the Bellingen Place Identity Report (Taboada & O'Loughlin, 2007)

After the maps from each place were finalised, a conflated Regional Identity Map (Figure 6) was elaborated, showing the main findings of this stage of the study: key themes that represent and connect the places in the Waterfall Way region.
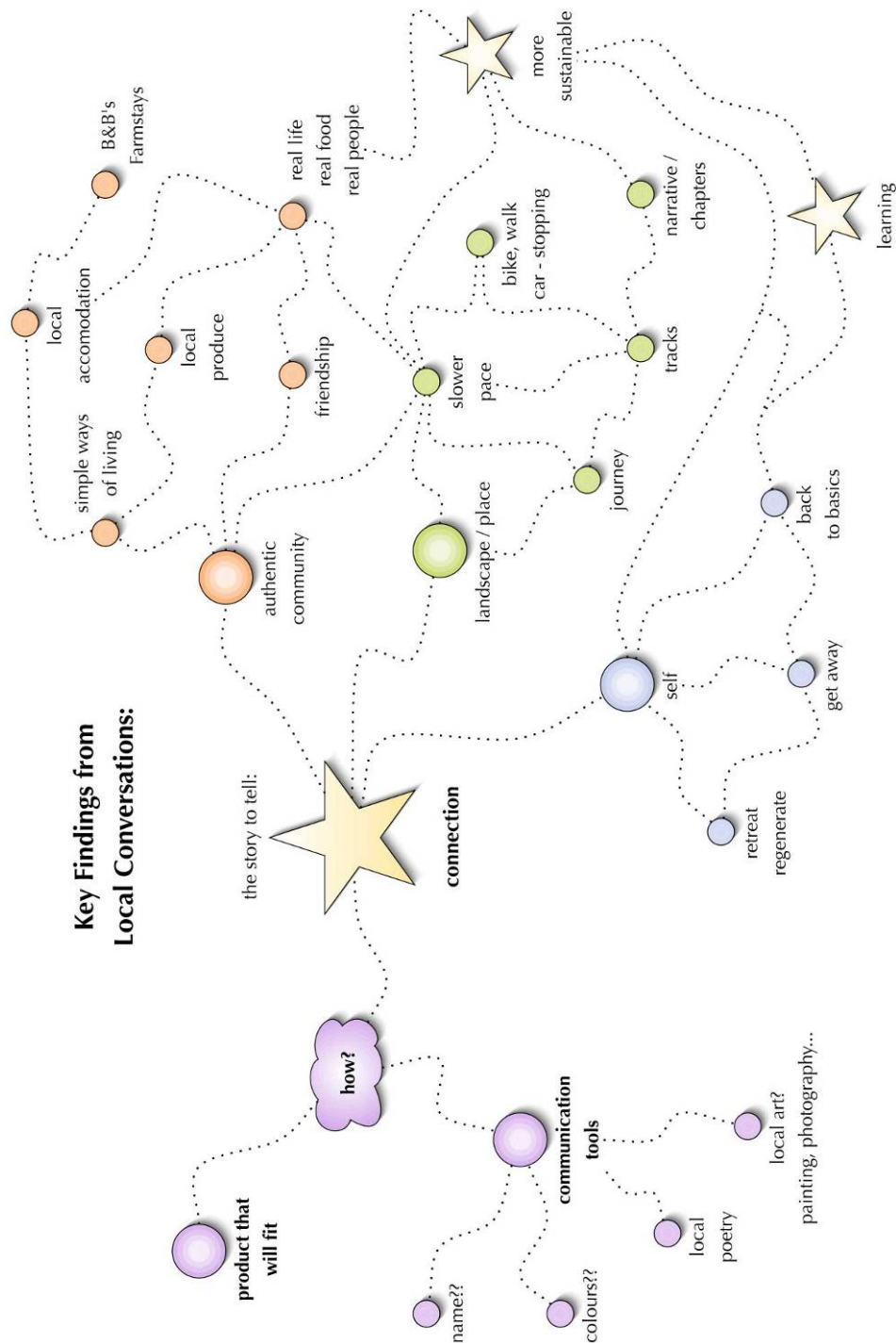
Key Findings from Local Conversations:

B&B's Farmstays

real life
real food
real people

more sustainable

local accomodation

local produce

friendship

bike, walk
car - stopping

narrative / chapters

learning

simple ways of living

slower pace

tracks

authentic community

landscape / place

journey

back to basics

self

get away

the story to tell:

connection

retreat regenerate

how?

communication tools

local art?
painting, photography...

product that will fit

local poetry

name??

colours??

Figure 6 – Regional Identity Map. Containing the key findings from all local conversations

Phase 3: Collaborative Brand Design Workshop

Revealing the identity of each place along the Waterfall Way was an essential step to building the regional brand concept. The idea was to create a branding campaign that is in line with the places and the hosts' lifestyle in

order to attract tourism that will not jeopardise the local economy, environment and culture.

Some of the interviewees and other people who expressed interest in participating further in the brand design process were invited to participate in a Brand Concept Workshop. The aim of this Workshop was to collaboratively design the aesthetic elements of a brand to represent the region as a cultural and nature-based tourism destination.

Nineteen people were present at the workshop, including council tourism and marketing representatives from two of the coastal towns, local Aboriginal representatives, project team members, academics, national parks, VIC volunteers, tourism operators, accommodation and land owners.

During the day, the group engaged specifically in three main activities:

- Working on a shared identity for the destination in relation to all information regarding place and marketing that has been collected through conversations and workshops until now;

- Based on the place's identity, outlining the shared Brand Concept, which represents the set of psychological aspects that surround the brand identity;

- Collectively drafting and/or designing the communication tools such as name, tagline, theme language to be used, symbol(s) (logo), colour schemes, imagery, etc.

The workshop was conducted in an informal conversational atmosphere (Figure 7). To begin, one open question was presented for discussion: **what is the story to be told?** Participants were encouraged to express their ideas on how to portray the region, as a cultural and nature-based tourism destination, in order to attract the desired niche markets.

Figure 7 – Brand Concept discussion during the first day of the Brand Concept Workshop at Mt Hyland Retreat, Dundurrabin, NSW.

Knowledge that emerged from this initial discussion (Figure 8) informed the next stage of the work which focused on collectively designing the concepts of the communication elements such as name, slogan, language, symbol(s) (logo), colour schemes, and imagery to be used to communicate the shared regional identity message.
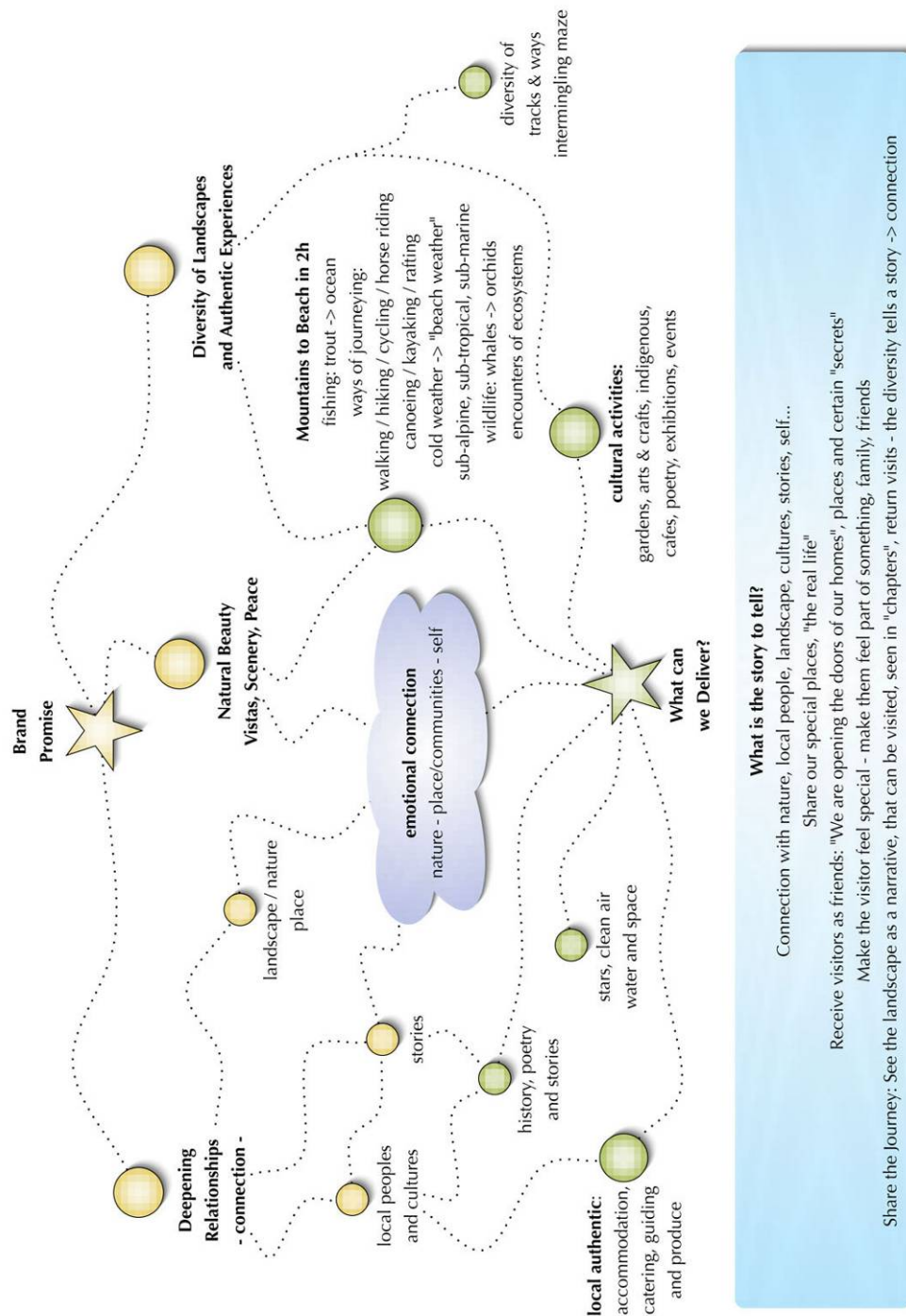
Figure 8 – Brand Concept Map, depicting knowledge emerging from the collaborative brand concept design workshop.

In order to engage the group in thinking visually about the message to be conveyed about the region, a broad collection of publications of different styles, shapes, sizes and colours were presented to the participants who were asked to choose the items they believed would be most suitable to represent the Waterfall Way. One by one, they then presented and justified their choices. In so doing the participants were telling the team which elements – type, colours, style, texture, imagery – they thought would be appropriate to carry the message of the Waterfall Way as cultural and nature-based tourist

destination. Each idea was discussed and registered on the white board (Figure 9), so the group could visualise the full picture of the message they were collectively designing through the exercise.

Figure 9 – Picture of the white board containing the ideas for the communication elements that should compose the Waterfall Way cultural and nature-based tourism destination brand. Brand Concept Workshop, Mt. Hyland, Dundurrabin NSW. 1 May 2007.

This technique proved to be not only effective in terms of the results obtained, but also very pleasant for the participants, according to their later feedback. It harnessed design knowledge that the participants did not realise they had, bringing to the surface innovative ideas which were crucial to the definition of a unique aesthetic brand style to represent the brand.

Furthermore, the fact that the workshop participants themselves designed the communication elements, and enjoyed doing it, increased the level of ownership in relation to the brand promotional material developed later by the graphic design team.

As a result, the group decided that visual communication elements for the Waterfall Way should have a generally soft, crisp and clean feel about it, reflecting the places along the way, the change of altitude, clean air, natural environment and the weather. At the same time, it was decided by the group that a more "natural" feel should be also included in the communication material, such as soft recycled paper and hand-written style text and graphics. The final products should be clean and modern, but at the same time have a "hand made" feel to it.

Phase 4: Graphic Design

After the workshop, the graphic design team maintained frequent communication with the participants of the workshop and other stakeholders.

From this exchange of information, a tagline was chosen for the region: "*Waterfall Way: a new journey, a new story*". This message synthesises the brand identity concept (Figure 8), communicating the idea of travelling slowly, learning about the land and its people, connecting to the places and letting the journey change you.

The graphic design team synthesised the recommendations from the workshop into a logo and other visual communication material. A first set of logos was created and sent to the workshop attendees, who were asked to indicate which of the solutions they thought could best represent the Shared Brand Concept. All comments were taken into consideration and a new logo was developed, which was sent to all participants for approval and final acceptance (Figure 10).

Figure 10 – Waterfall Way: a new journey a new story. Main logo.

The mosaic pattern of the final logo (Figure 10) evokes the diversity of the region, with small pieces combining to form a larger whole, thus satisfactorily symbolising the project's stated objective.

Further promotional material developed to support the brand (Figure 11 to Figure 14) followed the recommendations from the stakeholders. Reaction to the final produced material was generally positive, with people commenting how close the visuals were to their original ideas.
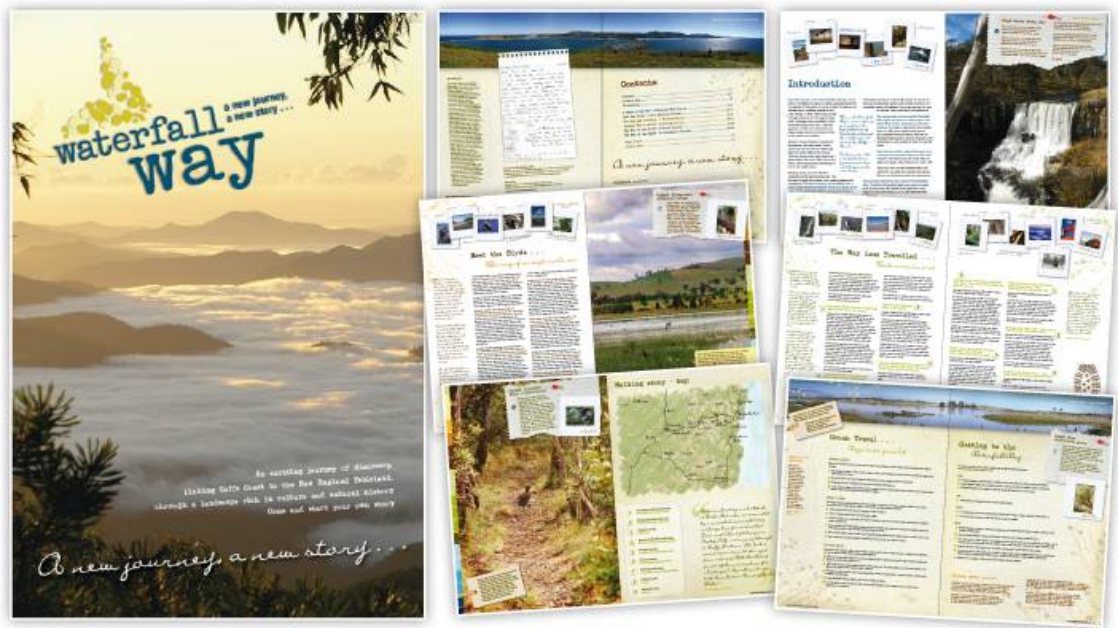
Figure 11 – Waterfall Way Promotional Brochure
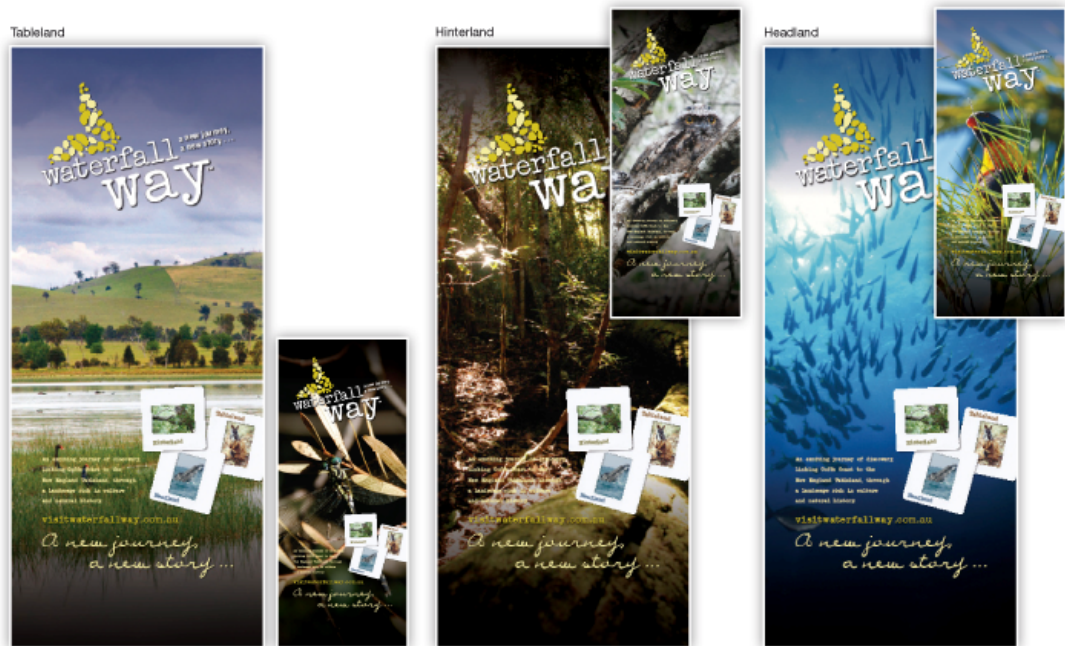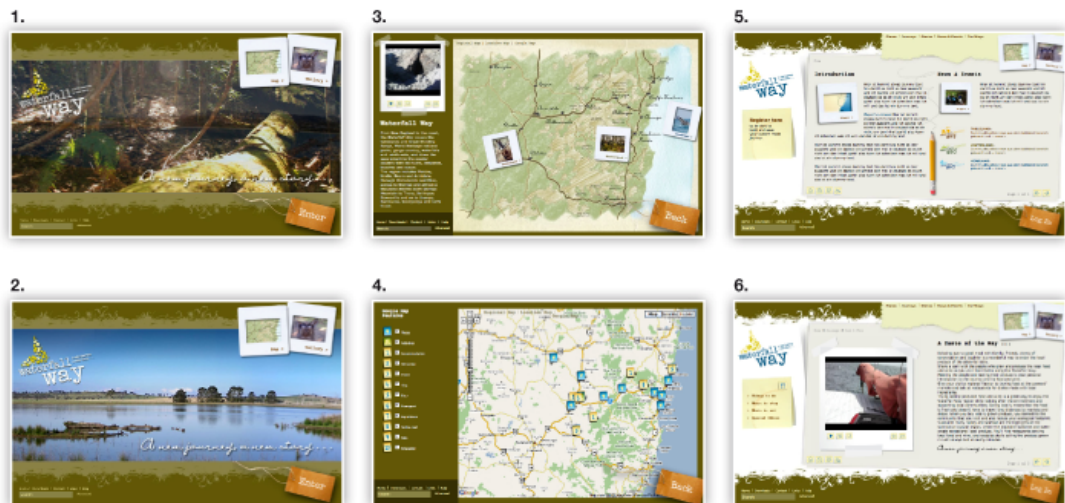

Figure 12 – Promotional postcards and bookmarks

Figure 13 – Promotional banners, "Tableland", "Hinterland" and "Headland" themes.

1: Entrance screen image sequence   2: Entrance screen image sequence
3: Regional map page with movie clips 4: Google map page
5: Introduction page   6: Journey page with movie clips

Figure 14 – Visitors' Website (http://www.visitwaterfallway.com.au)

Discussion

The positive reaction from the participants to the brand design and promotional material facilitated the ultimate objective of the collaborative development process: to catalyse the construction of a shared regional identity / image concept through design.

The co-design exercise stimulated a reflection upon what is special about the places, reinforcing a sense of belonging. It brought out the tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967; Rust, 2004a, 2004b; Senker, 1995) of the people involved in the process in relation to communication design, from people who normally would have no relation to this kind of practice. This conveyed innovation, personality and authenticity to the results, informing and enriching the expert knowledge of the professional graphic designers (Nonaka & Toyama, 2007).

The embedded conversations triggered a self-organising process between businesses, operators and community members generating links among themselves, around the new emergent regional identity, represented by the brand they had created together. These "collateral" outcomes may prove to be the most important aspect of the research. They represent the emergence of a new regional identity expressed by clear and clean graphics that may encourage cooperation in the ongoing management of this newly defined tourist region.

The most significant social consequence of the collaborative design process was the shift of the regional vision from town-centric (Armidale, Walcha, Dorrigo, etc) to region-centric (Walcha to Coffs). The shared identity that emerged was crucial to the elaboration of the brand essence. The name and tag-line chosen for the region: "Waterfall Way: a new journey, a new story..." reflect not only an image to be seen by the visitor but, just as importantly, it reflects a change happening inside the region.

Challenges and limitations

The role of the brand specialist and graphic designers changed significantly during the collaborative brand design. In this kind of interactive process, the decision is made by the group. Therefore, leaders and specialists become catalysers and / or facilitators. They are responsible to engage the group in conversation, to find ways to implement the decision of the group, and to occasionally advocate on behalf of the decision.

For the graphic design team, this meant that instead of researching and conceptualising the brand by themselves, their job during the collaborative process was to facilitate the emergence of aesthetic knowledge from the people involved, and to later faithfully attend to their recommendations and finalise the visual communication material in a way that matched as much as possible the design concepts envisaged by the participants.

This change in roles was one of the challenges faced in applying the collaborative design methodology. Graphic designers, who usually value their freedom to develop their own concepts and ideas, had to learn how to harness creative efforts towards visual solutions from people who generally had little contact with professional graphic design. Keeping the "egos" aside and merely translating concepts that were already decided by a broader group was the hardest job for the team. As a consequence, the development of the logo was seriously delayed.

Processes that have high community interaction are time- and resource-consuming. The public needs time to understand their role in the process. The team needs time to process and work with the large amount of information

collected. Public meetings, workshops and one to one interviews across seven shires cost a lot of money and energy.

Furthermore, catalysing self-organising processes can be a demanding job. It is especially challenging for those who like having things under rigid control. Building trust seems to be the key for dealing with a potentially chaotic environment (Black et al., 2002; della Porta & Diani, 1999; Healey, 1997). During the Waterfall Way branding process, trust-building started in the market research workshops, where it was made clear to the public what would be their level of involvement (Cole-Edelstein, 2004). The one-to-one conversations helped to reinforce the trust between the public and the researchers. Giving back the results for public analysis and comment before proceeding to the next step further strengthened the level of public participation.

Difficulties emerged with the project management committee, not the public. Management teams are used to making their own decisions and to having everything planned and in control. When managing a design process that has high levels of public involvement, however, flexibility is essential. Once it is made clear that the decisions are to be made by the community, the management group role is to accept and facilitate the process. This did not always happen during the branding of the Waterfall Way.

Some other potential problems must be acknowledged. Although the initial market research workshops were open to the general public, naturally the people who attended were the ones who had some kind of interest in the subject to be discussed, thus creating a possible bias in favour of the tourism-friendly members of the local communities. Self-selection for the interviews and the follow-up workshops only increased this bias, as any people who might be against the project, or had no interest in it, were absent. However, the presence of council representatives, who theoretically represent the whole of the civic community, provided a means to correct and balance any potential bias.

Conclusion

Involving disparate communities in design processes is not an easy task. It is time-consuming, hard to manage and certainly does not work in every situation. The higher the level of involvement intended for the project (going right on the spectrum in Figure 1), the sharper these difficulties become. Therefore, it is important to be clear about the level of engagement that the project actually demands (Cole-Edelstein, 2004), the resources available to respond to this kind of approach and if the leadership / specialist group is ready to undertake the upcoming challenges.

However, the power of this kind of collaborative process applied to design activity is that the people involved, as diverse as they are, have the same level of input into the project, if such is their wish. This involvement in design and decision-making leads to reflections upon their own roles in the process of creating and marketing a tourist destination.

The Waterfall Way collaborative exercise demonstrated how the process of design formulation can act as a powerful social tool to develop shared identities in order to envision, initiate and manage change. It also shows that in order to achieve these results there is the need for a significant shift in the

way the design process is understood, and in the role of the designers. The application of a co-design methodology, which actively involved stakeholders in all stages of the design process, can have a significant social impact on the final product as well as on the realities of people(s) involved in the process. Future work can further refine the process and evaluate the brand in terms of its acceptance, recognition and usage by all concerned. The methodology may be applied in other areas of social research, in order to further test the efficacy of collaborative design as a tool to help construct social identity and meaning.

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