# Design and co-creation in place branding: the case of Porto Alegre

*Design e co-criação no place branding:*
*o caso de Porto Alegre*

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**Abstract:** There are many complexity elements in a place branding project. Among those are the conceptualization of a brand that expresses the local identity, the consensus among stakeholders, and the participation of residents. Nevertheless, designers master a set of skills to deal with complex problems. This paper aims to show, from the case study of the city of Porto Alegre (Brazil), how design can activate the collective participation of stakeholders and residents in a place branding process. The project 'O que marca Porto Alegre?' arose from a Rio Grande do Sul regional initiative, from the *Associação Brasileira das Empresas de Design — ABEDESIGN-RS* [Brazilian Association of Design Companies], with the aim of constructing a local brand that would recover the citizens' pride and bring action guidelines to Porto Alegre. The proposal emerged from three principles: voluntary protagonism, collective authorship, and communal property. It had the participation of the municipality, academia, business and civil society and it mobilized over 40 design studios, organized in six teams around a collective creation. As a result, by means of co-creation, a project was developed integrating multidisciplinary teams, stakeholders, and citizens around a common goal.

**Keywords**: place branding, co-creation, stakeholders, design, identity

**Resumo:** Existem diversos pontos de complexidade num projeto de place branding. Entre eles, a conceituação de uma marca que expresse a identidade local, o consenso entre *stakeholders* e a participação dos residentes. Por outro lado, designers dominam um conjunto de habilidades para lidar com problemas complexos. Este artigo pretende mostrar, a partir do caso de estudo da cidade Porto Alegre (Brasil), de que forma o design pode ativar a participação coletiva com *stakeholders* e residentes em um processo de place branding. O projeto "O que marca Porto Alegre?" nasceu de uma iniciativa da regional sul-rio-grandense da Associação Brasileira das Empresas de Design (ABEDESIGN-RS) com o objetivo de construir uma marca local que resgatasse o orgulho dos cidadãos e trouxesse diretrizes de ações para Porto Alegre. A proposta partiu de três premissas: protagonismo voluntário, autoria coletiva e propriedade comunitária. Contou com participação da prefeitura, dos meios académicos, empresarial e civil, e mobilizou mais de 40 estúdios de design, organizados em seis equipas, em torno de uma criação coletiva. Como resultado, por meio da co-criação desenvolveu-se um projeto que integrou equipas multidisciplinares, *stakeholders* e cidadãos em torno de um propósito em comum.

**Palavras-chave**: place branding, co-criação, stakeholders, design, identidade

# 1. Introduction

Place branding is a tool to identify vocations, potentiate identities, and strengthen places. It is a complex and multidisciplinary concept that requires involving people and promoting collaboration and protagonism to construct a *de facto* place-brand (Esteves, 2016).

Complexity is present in place branding in several aspects. According to Cardoso (2012, p. 25), 'complexity here means a system composed of many elements, layers, and structures, whose interrelationships continuously condition and redefine the functioning of the whole.'[1]

A point of complexity much discussed in place branding is the question of the participation of residents and stakeholders during the process, in order to create authentic and

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1      Author's translation

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consensual brands (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Braun et al., 2013; Esteves, 2016; Hereźniak, 2017; Kavaratzis, 2012; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

They must participate in the conceptualization of the brand, which is an integration between culture, identity, and the image of the place, in an interconnected process of expressions, impressions, mirroring, and reflection (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Another issue of complexity is the process of conceptualizing a brand to express the identity of the territory (Campelo et al., 2014; Esteves, 2016; Parente, 2014), carrying the sense of belonging of residents.

Place brands, therefore, can be defined as complex social constructions in which different organizations are co-creators (Lucarelli, 2018) and which should be treated with a systemic and multidisciplinary vision (Esteves, 2016).

Within this vision, where participatory, inclusive, and co-creative methods can be applied, design can make an important contribution by bringing effective solutions to complex place branding issues.

This paper intends, through the case study of Porto Alegre, to answer the following question: how can design activate collective participation with stakeholders and residents in a place branding process?

Based on the Rio Grande do Sul regional initiative of the Brazilian Association of Design Companies (ABEDESIGN-RS), more than 40 designers came together to create a brand with the objective of bringing new guidelines and strengthening the municipality of Porto Alegre. It was an innovative project, conceived and conducted by designers, where all were volunteers and the authorship was collective, which had the participation of residents and stakeholders. The project also involved co-creative processes for both the strategic and creative stages.

## 2. Place branding, design, and co-creation

### 2.1. Complexity in place branding

Place branding is a complex, multifaceted, dynamic, and participatory process (Ntounis & Kavaratzis, 2017), composed of an understanding of the multiple contexts and dimensions of a place, involving interaction between different audiences (Lucarelli, 2018).

According to Parente (2014), among the points of complexity are the definition of the identity of a territory (strategy), the control of the actions of different stakeholders (performance), and the monitoring of perception and reputation (satisfaction). It is a difficult process to be carried out without approval and sharing of objectives.

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The place branding process, when participatory, can inspire residents to engage in public discussions and consultations about the future of their city, and is vital to the strategy of the territory and to building a brand with purpose and long-term vision (Ntounis & Kavaratzis, 2017).

A place brand elaborated with co-creation and community representation results in a dynamic, authentic, and collective essence. Therefore, a bottom-up approach must be adopted in order to have a sense of belonging, authenticity, stakeholder commitment, and brand sustainability (Aitken & Campelo, 2011), in addition to providing qualified information, validating hypotheses and concepts, and promoting a sense of place and pride (Esteves, 2016, p. 261).

## 2.2. Design for a complex world

The activity of design has changed over the years, 'not because of taste or fashion or volubility, but because the world has changed — structurally and permanently'[2] (Cardoso, 2012, p. 225,226).

According to Buchanan (1992), design has the power to conceive, plan, and manufacture products that serve human beings in the realization of their individual and collective goals. The point is that the meaning of the 'product' has changed over the years, as have issues related to the practice of design.

Thus, Buchanan presents the evolution of design in four orders according to its complexity and the changing nature of the products developed.

The first is focused on '**symbols**.' These are symbolic and visual communications, which include traditional graphic design work. It covers the communication of information in various media and materials.

The second, industrial design, arose from the manufacture of tangible physical artefacts — the material '**objects**.' It is related to the form and function of everyday products. According to Cardoso (2012), design was born in the industrial era, with the purpose of improving products, previously produced by hand, making them attractive and efficient.

Migrating to the most intangible field, Buchanan describes the third order of '**action**' oriented design. It is about developing experiences, activities, or services, which influence the interaction and the way human beings relate to each other.

The fourth order of design, finally, is that of '**thinking**.' It is the design of complex systems or environments to live, work, play and learn.

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It is important to point out that these four areas are interconnected. Symbols, objects, actions, and thoughts merge into design practice.

Jones (2014) also categorizes the evolution of design in four stages with respect to the increasing challenges of complexity. The last stage, design 4.0, is related to social transformation and has methods and skills to deal with complex social problems, relating to stakeholders, whether they are members of an industry, a community, or citizens, in contexts of any scale.

Also according to Jones (2018), the product or object of design can be a strategy, political agreements, operational concepts, or plans developed with stakeholders using methods to achieve a common sense or a shared understanding.

According to Sanders and Stappers (2008), designers are no longer designing products for users. They are designing future experiences of people, communities, and cultures. They are designing to meet people's 'purposes.' Consequently, new disciplines of design have begun to emerge, such as interaction design, service design, and transformation design. The latter is the latest, and combines participatory design methods with user-and stakeholder-oriented processes, originating from a systemic thinking.

Another important discipline is strategic design. For Mozota (2011), design has become increasingly more strategic in the sense of value creation, thus becoming an essential competence not only for companies, but also for institutions, cities, and countries. Mozota (2006) also states that strategic design has four essential powers: 1) as **differentiator**, generating competitive advantage, 2) as **integrator,** leading and integrating teams and bringing innovation, 3) as **transformer** creating change, and 4) as **good business**, bringing more value to the brand.

All these emerging design disciplines are changing what, how, and who does the design (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

## 2.3 The role of design in place branding

In the context of a territory, designers can contribute in many ways. More specifically, within place branding, design has a relevant contribution in the strategy, design, and implementation of local brands, as well as in the development of products, actions, services, and experiences that will support the brand strategy.

Maffei and Villari (2006) define the action of design in the territory as an activity whose objective is to promote systemic processes of innovation (social, economic, and technological), taking as a starting point the particularities of the local resources (material and immaterial) through different specialties and with different action focus (social, economic, cultural, etc.).

The action of designers in a territory refers to three different levels: 1) relationship level, where relationships with the community are built; 2) strategic design level, to define

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strategies; 3) artefact level (product-system definition), to concretize strategies in products, services, and experiences (Maffei & Villari, 2006).

Design has a systemic approach and is capable of designing innovative solutions, besides placing the community at the centre of the project, bringing a participatory perspective (Parente & Sedini, 2017). This concept, community centred design, acts in a collective and collaborative way, creating links, exchanging experiences and information, and promoting dialogues within and outside the community (Maffei & Villari, 2006).


## 2.4. Co-creation in place branding


The concept of co-creation has different aspects and meanings.

From the organizational perspective, co-creation has become a widely used term to describe a change in the thinking of companies as a definer of value for a more participatory process in which people and organizations generate and develop meaning together (Ind & Coates, 2013). Co-creation, therefore, is the offering of an interaction environment in which its audiences can have an active dialogue and co-construct personalised experiences generating problem solving, innovation, and value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

From the design point of view, it is possible to define co-creation as a collective creative action, shared between two or more people. Another widely used term, which is often confused with co-creation is co-design, which is also related to collective creation but occurs specifically within a design process bringing designers and non-designers together (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Both originated in the 1970s from the participatory design introduced by the Collective Resource Approach, an innovative Scandinavian approach where workers participated in design processes (Kraft & Bansler, 1994).

The concept of co-creation includes a wide range of participatory design practices and decision-making processes with stakeholders and users. These practices have evolved from original forms of collaboration as participatory design to newer forms such as sprints and laboratories (P. Jones, 2018).

According to Parente (2014), to be efficient, place branding needs to be aligned with long-term strategic actions, as well as creating participatory connections between different stakeholders, including residents. Therefore, the inclusion of community co-creation processes in place branding is fundamental (Esteves, 2016). Currently, the diffusion of digital technologies and social networks is contributing to increase and disseminate actions of co-creation and participatory design, facilitating the collective creation of urban identity (Parente, 2014).

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### 3. Case study: *O que marca Porto Alegre?*

### 3.1. Methodology

In order to answer the question 'How can design activate collective participation with stakeholders and residents in a place branding process?,' this paper used the case study methodology, which 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context' (Yin, 2001, p. 32).

In this context, the study was based on the place branding case developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where information was collected from multiple sources, such as interviews with the project coordinator, reports, and photographic records.

The case study method intends to observe and analyse in depth 'how' and 'why' a phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2001). Thus, it aimed to understand what the process of building the Porto Alegre brand was like and how designers participated throughout the process, as well as the reason for co-creative processes taking place.

### 3.2. Context and objectives

In 2017, Porto Alegre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was suffering the impacts of the economic recession, as were many Brazilian cities. Business closures, unemployment, lack of prospects, loss of talent.

As a consequence, the design sector was largely affected. Aiming to reverse this negative scenario, ABEDESIGN-RS met to think about alternatives to the issue.

ABEDESIGN — the Brazilian Association of Design Companies — founded in 2005, aims to expand the market of design services, valuing the activity and its benefits for society and the development of the country. The association currently has nine regional offices, among them the regional office of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), which act as dissemination hubs, as well as generating local initiatives (ABEDESIGN, 2020).

As a result of the ABEDESIGN-RS meetings, the project '*O que marca Porto Alegre?*'[3] was launched on May 19, 2017. This is a place branding proposal with the aim of giving more visibility to the design sector and bringing benefits to the city and its community. A project

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3    The title of the project, '*O que marca Porto Alegre?*' suggests a wordplay that is difficult to translate directly. *Marca* means both what *marks* it, or makes it unique, as well as *brand*.

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conceived, conducted, and carried out by designers to rescue the pride of the residents, attract visitors, and foster investments.

Based on the question 'How do we want Porto Alegre to be recognized by us and the world?,' the project was planned to achieve the following objectives: 1) to define a clear positioning for Porto Alegre to be recognized by its own citizens and the world; 2) to define a brand platform with drivers that inspire actions for the city, based on this positioning, and 3) to create a contemporary and distinctive visual identity for the city.

An intrinsic and striking feature of this project is its collaborative and participative nature, having its implementation based on three fundamental premises: 1) **voluntary protagonism**: the absence remuneration for participants; 2) **collective authorship**: all participants acting as co-creators; and 3) **community ownership**: the result would be donated to the city of Porto Alegre and could not be claimed by any of its authors, public or private bodies.

Besides the planning, strategy, and creation of the visual identity, designers were responsible for the articulation with other entities, companies, and associations, seeking support for the project.

In 2018, the ABEDESIGN-RS started the contact with the *Aliança pela Inovação* [Alliance for Innovation], an initiative of the universities UFRGS, PUC-RS and Unisinos, with the aim of enhancing the environment for innovation, knowledge, and entrepreneurship in Porto Alegre. Later, in 2019, the *Aliança pela Inovação* expanded its scope and became part of the *Pacto Alegre* movement, together with the city hall and 80 other public and private entities and civil society.

*Pacto Alegre* is an articulation movement for transforming projects, creating conditions for the city to become a pole of innovation, attraction of investments and entrepreneurship. It has six macro challenges, among them, 'image of the city,' which aims to promote the image of an innovative city. To achieve this macro challenge, several projects were presented in a workshop, including '*O que marca Porto Alegre*?' After a vote among the participants, the ABEDESIGN-RS project was the winner and formalized its connection with the *Pacto Alegre*, getting the support of stakeholders from the political, academic, and business milieu of the city, thus gaining more articulation, relevance, and visibility.

### 3.3. Processes and steps

The project '*O que marca Porto Alegre?*' was structured by designers from the associated companies of the ABEDESIGN-RS, and counted on the creation and implementation of an own methodology, composed of diverse co-creative processes. It comprised of four stages as follows.

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### 3.3.1. Research

Throughout the project, research was carried out with the aim of capturing, analysing and understanding the structural elements of the city's identity.

1) *Desk research by themes*: after the project launch, study groups were created with designers associated with the ABEDESIGN-RS, who carried out a desk research, collecting and systematising information on the following themes: economic activities, cartography, events, history and vocations, icons, projects and initiatives, natural resources. These themes were selected to provide input on the tangible and intangible aspects that make up the identity of Porto Alegre. The groups also collected information on place branding, seeking benchmarks in the world.

2) *Image and attributes research*: using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, a survey was conducted to understand the context, the main attributes, and the perceived image of Porto Alegre. Affective memories, the relationship with the present, and the perspective of the future of the participants were investigated to thus capture the feelings of the interviewees regarding the vocation and uniqueness of the city. The qualitative survey was conducted from December 2017 to March 2018 through 14 in-depth interviews with opinion formers in the city, composed of seven men and seven women, aged between 24 and 68, from different social classes. The quantitative survey was conducted between March 1 and 12, 2018, using electronic forms. Two hundred residents from 55 different neighbourhoods attended to it.

3) *Digital Listening*: held from July 12 to 31, 2019, covering a total of 1545 respondents among residents, former residents, and *lovers* (city fans) using the quantitative survey method with online application. Based on a questionnaire with nine questions designed with a universal language and accessible to the most different public profiles, the aim was to understand how the participants associated the future of the city with visual elements such as images, shapes, colours, lines, and movements.

### 3.3.2. Perception workshop

On July 12, 2019, a workshop was held with more than 120 residents with diverse profiles from 40 different neighbourhoods, with the aim of answering the following question: 'How do we want Porto Alegre to be recognized by us and the world?' In the selection of the participants there was a concern with the highest representation of all, that is, a diversified profile prevailing inclusion and diversity. The workshop took place one morning at UNISINOS and was attended by ABEDESIGN-RS affiliated designers and supporters of the city hall and *Pacto Alegre*. As a dynamic activity, participants were distributed in 10 tables, assisted by 10 facilitators, respectively, who led the co-creation process (Figure 1).

In order to extract perceptions about the present, the past, and the future of the city,

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participants were guided to answer the following questions: What was good in the past? What would be incredible in the future? What is very nice about today? What sentence defines Porto Alegre? What does it represent in the city?

After the workshop, a report with the main insights was prepared, which was used in the following phase.
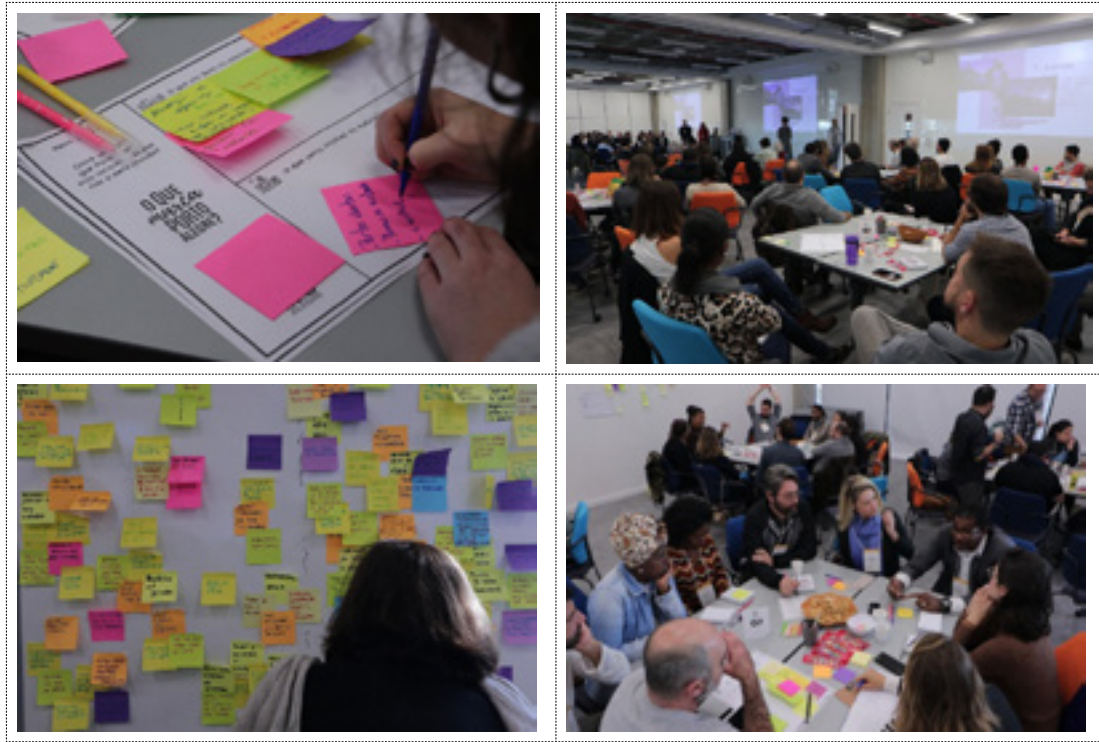


**Figure 1**
Images from the perception workshop. Source: ABEDESIGN-RS

### 3.3.3. Strategy sprint

On September 2, 3, and 4, 2019 another co-creative dynamic took place: the strategy sprint, with the aim of defining the brand's strategic guidelines, including the platform and the pillars. Members of the ABEDESIGN-RS and members of *Pacto Alegre* participated, thus forming a multidisciplinary team. A place branding methodology specially developed by the ABEDESIGN-RS was applied for this project, in which participants had to describe and then highlight the most representative elements of a Convergence Matrix composed of four essential areas: city, people (residents/visitors/business), places of the world (benchmarks), and trends. As a result, the brand platform was defined including five strategic pillars: 1) collaboration and inclusion; 2) innovation and entrepreneurship; 3) nature and circularity; 4) integral health and quality of life; and 5) art and culture.

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### 3.3.4. Creative squads

After the definition of the platform and the strategic pillars, in August 2019 the phase of development of the visual identity for the project began, again through a co-creative process. Overall, more than 40 design studios participated, including non-members of the ABEDE-SIGN-RS, who met in six creative hubs. Each hub had to present at least one proposal for the visual and verbal concept that best translated the strategic pillars. In the end, 11 proposals were submitted that went through a selection process. There was a vote among the participants of the hubs and invited companies to elect six options. These six finalists were sent to a national jury composed of eight invited designers from the national ABEDESIGN, to choose three options according to the following criteria: semantics, versatility, uniqueness, reproducibility, and validity. On November 28, 2019, three finalist projects were announced, but still needing adjustments based on the jury's recommendations. To make the final changes, the creative hubs were restructured into a different group composition from the previous stage, thus emphasizing the premise of co-creation and collective authorship of the project. Finally, three visual identity options were finalized in January 2020.

### 3.4. Next stages

The dissemination of the project '*O que marca Porto Alegre*?' for the population was scheduled for March 26, 2020, on the 248th anniversary of the city of Porto Alegre. As an instrument of participation and civil engagement, the 'public listening' was planned for the choice of the visual identity of the brand. Through social networks, the population could 'give a like' in their preferred option, among the three options presented. It was also planned to advertise it in various media, with the support of the city hall and the *Pacto Alegre*. However, exactly in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the launch was postponed, still without a defined date. At the moment, meetings between the ABEDESIGN-RS and the stakeholders of the *Pacto Alegre* continue to be planned in order to continue the strategic planning for the brand, as well as to define actions to strengthen the territory, within the scope of place branding.

### 4. Conclusion

Designers master a set of skills that allow them to conduct challenging and complex processes. Place branding, in turn, is a complex and multidisciplinary process and design intervention can occur at various stages and in different ways.

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For example, designers can contribute to solve critical points of place branding by acting in the relationship spheres with the community and stakeholders, in the definition and implementation of strategies and in the design of products, services, and experiences.

Many design processes are co-creative by nature, and in the case of place branding for Porto Alegre, co-creation was highlighted as an essential tool to achieve its goals and fulfil the premises of voluntary protagonism, collective authorship and community property.

Co-creative methods were applied in three key steps: 1) perception workshop — to capture true insights from the community and understand its needs; 2) strategy sprint — to align ideas and concepts between multidisciplinary teams and stakeholders; and 3) creative hub — to guide collective authorship among designers, resulting in the creation of a visual identity that would tangibly convey the strategic pillars.

We conclude that, as occurred in the place branding process for Porto Alegre, design can effectively play a key role in activating collective participation with stakeholders and residents, discovering the city's vocations, valuing the culture and identity of the place and developing in its residents a sense of purpose, pride, and belonging.

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