Engaging complexity through collaborative brand design

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Abstract

In this research we used inductive reasoning through design to understand how stakeholders in the Waterfall Way (New South Wales, Australia) perceive the relationships between themselves and the place they live in. This paper describes a collaborative design methodology used to release information about local identities, which guided the regional brand exercise. The methodology is explicit about the uncertainties and complexities of the design process and of its reception system. As such, it aims to engage with local stakeholders and experts in order to help elicit tacit knowledge and identify system patterns and trends that would possibly not be visible if a top-down expert-based process was used. Through collective design, local people were drawn together in search for a symbol to represent the meaning attached to their places/region in relation to sustainable tourism activity.

Keywords

This paper describes how collaborative design can be used as a tool to acknowledge and engage the complexities of place branding for tourism destinations. In this research, we used inductive reasoning through a collaborative design methodology to help release information about local identities, perceptions and expectations of stakeholders in relation to tourism and how it should be promoted. In the approach we describe below we are explicit about the uncertainties included in the design process (e.g. uncertainty about a client's cognitive model to successfully brand a product) and also about the complexities of the design process and of its reception system, i.e. conflicting interests about what should tourism should bring to the places as well as the numerous relationships between the branding process and how potential visitors perceive it and choose a destination based on it. It seems to us that a methodology that aims to engage graphic designers with stakeholders and experts involved in branding destinations, hosting tourists and tourist activities can provide advances in design research. We argue that our methodology provides results that would possibly not be visible if a top-down expert-based process was used.

The main challenge of creating a brand for the Waterfall Way lied in harnessing an identity to represent a destination that does not naturally sees itself as one. The sole creation of a symbol would not necessarily help bring this identity to surface, hence the need to engage locals in thinking about their places, perceptions and expectations, and

about how their lives are connected to the others (peoples and localities) along the region. We believe that the active involvement of locals into the brand design process allowed the elicitation of a regional identity that is grounded into actions and interactions, rather than simply dependant on an isolated symbol to represent them to the outside world, as suggested by Anholt (2008).

Thus, the objective of this paper is to describe a collaborative methodology that is focused on active stakeholder engagement in the design process. We also discuss the methodology in terms of the local knowledge and the conceptual regional identity it helped release. To do this we first sketch the geographical and historical conditions of the Waterfall Way in order to contextualise prospects on how the collaborative design approach was applied. Then we present the theoretical background, followed by the description of the design process, the results it produced, and a reflection about the advantages and limits of our methodology. It is outside the scope of this study to analyse the design outcomes in relation to the efficiency of their application. Further research is needed in order to survey and evaluate the current situation of the tourism activity in the Waterfall Way region, and how it is related to the collaborative brand design work.

Geographical and Historical Setting

The Waterfall Way is located between the New England Tablelands and the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales, Australia (Figure 1). It is known for its variety of landscapes set in a relatively short distance (approximately 250 km), showcasing significant diversity in climate, wildlife and culture. In addition, the region is privileged with rich stories concerning indigenous 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; O'Loughlin, van der Lee, & Gill, 2003a, 2003b; Pigram & King, 1977).

The area is called "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. 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. While tourism activity exists in the area, it has always been scattered and disparate, with the places along the corridor usually competing for visitors and business (O'Loughlin, et al., 2003a, 2003b; Pigram & King, 1977).
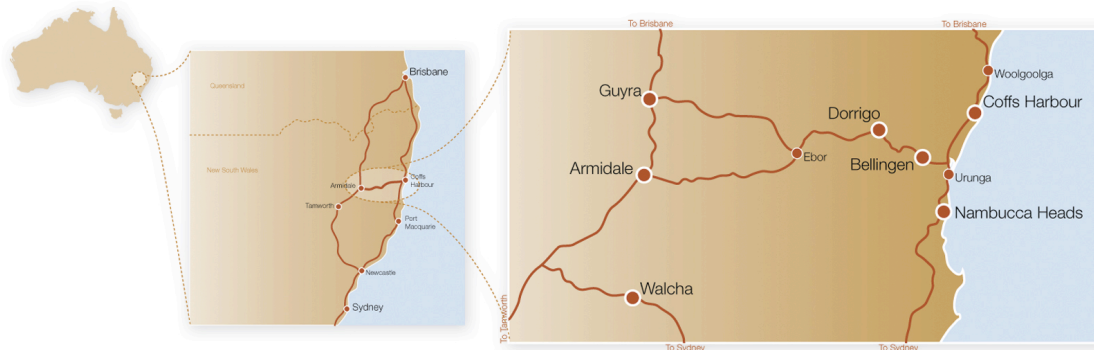
Figure 1 – Location map of the Waterfall Way, NSW, Australia (Taboada, 2009).

Local initiatives have emerged along the years envisioning an increase in tourism activity that could bring new economic possibilities to the communities in the area. In 2002 an initiative to build a long distance walking track along the Waterfall Way was identified as a way of unleashing the tourism potential of the region. In response to this initiative, a Concept Plan and Feasibility Study were developed at the time in a partnership between the New England Ecotourism Society and the University of New England. Among other strategic recommendations, these studies pointed out the need to create a shared regional destination brand to represent and promote the whole region as one, instead of promoting parts of it as it has been traditionally done (O'Loughlin, et al., 2003a, 2003b; O'Loughlin, van der Lee, & Gill, 2004).

Branding a destination is more than simply creating an image for a product (Anholt, 2008; Anholt & Hildreth, 2005; Marzano, 2006; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002, 2003; Pike, 2005). It involves a process of creating meaning for the place/places being branded; meaning that will impinge on the place not only through the new tourist activity that it may bring, but also on the way local people act and see themselves and their places (Hough, 1990; Taboada, 2009; Taboada, Haworth, & Spence, 2008). A new symbol alone for the Waterfall Way is not able to change its reputation. It requires, proper institutions, policies and collective actions to create a new place image in the minds of the outsiders (Anholt, 2008).

Therefore, in accordance with Morgan (2002, 2003), Pike (2005) and Marzano (2006), destination brands should start from inside out, rather than the opposite. Local people should be the drivers and owners of the strategic solutions created during the process so that the new "brand" can be in line with and support their actions and ways of living, resulting in collective will to change actions and ways of living in order to support the newly created brand.

Theoretical Background

What Morgan et al. (2002) describe as the challenges of branding places (multiple stakeholders, little management control and destinations being normally under-developed identities) can, in fact, be seen as points of advantage if we understand places/destinations as complex emergent systems with flow-on effects on the governance systems of the region. Through this perspective, the multiplicity and diversity of stakeholders can enhance the capacity of interpretation and understanding about the place; "little management control" may open doors for self-organising actions to emerge, and "underdeveloped identities" can be a good blank canvas to bring people together around catalysing a latent regional identity.

The background theories we use in this research are complex emergence (Holland, 1998; Johnson, 2004; Nova Science Now, 2007) and systems thinking (Ackoff, 1960; Angyal, 1941; Capra, 1982; Checkland, 1999; Jackson, 2003; Senge, 1990; Stacey, 1993) where a "system" is defined as a complex whole that emerges from interactions between its parts through networks of relationships.

The theory of complex emergent systems can be used to explore the dynamics of place and to describe the growth, development and change cycles of towns, cities, or regions. Systems tools can be applied to develop planning/designing methodologies that

consider the local identity system as a whole, reflect this identity, and draw upon the self-organising characteristics of the place to implement small changes that can have broad, long-term positive impacts (Innes & Booher, 1999; Johnson, 2004; O'Loughlin, Taboada, & Gill, 2006).

Complex emergence and systems thinking approaches emphasise that actions within a system are not necessarily coordinated by a leader or leadership group (transformational leaders may be key factors in catalysing emergence). Rather, they unfold from the actions of individuals who follow certain system embedded rules of behaviour, normally defined by survival / instinctive needs (physical or social). "Individuals and like communities observe, inform each other and develop adaptive responses; they swarm, re-think and cluster", to form their own individual identities (O'Loughlin, et al., 2006). These identities will reflect on the system behaviour as a whole and will determine the kind of interactions the system will attract as well as its evolutionary pathway.

Additionally, complexity theory is concerned with uncertainties rather than certainties in the systems' behaviour. These views engage with our postmodernist approach where we acknowledge that there are multiple interpretations of the world and that not much can be predicted in the long-term (Capra, 2002; Castells, 1997; Crotty, 1998; Gadamer, 2004; Healey, 1997; Searle, 2005).

Designers create and deliver their designs into this complex setting. Destination branding, the focus of this paper, has specific demands and challenges that differ from branding other kinds of products, and that reinforces its complex character. (Anholt, 2008; Morgan, et al., 2002, 2003; Taboada, 2009). It deals directly with the systems' physical and social structures, and with the interactions within the place being branded. Efforts have been made to accommodate the complexities of places into destination brand design (Marzano, 2006; Morgan, et al., 2002, 2003; O'Loughlin, et al., 2006; Pigram & King, 1977; Taboada, 2007; Taboada, et al., 2008). Most of which involve broadening the participation of local stakeholders into the branding process.

This study understands places and tourism as complex systems that involve a broad range of agents and meanings attached to them, deeply interacting with each other to create tourism experiences (Bosselman, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1999; Burns & Novelli, 2007; Jafari, 2000; Pigram & King, 1977; Robinson, 1999; Shaw & Williams, 2004). Thus, the process for developing a promotional image for a destination should take into consideration these critical interactions. Figure 2 depicts the dynamics of destination branding, showing the interactions between the hosts (who live at the place and deal with the positive and negative impacts of tourism, and build the reputation of the place) and the visitors (who are attracted by what the place communicates, and create images of their own about what it really is).

It is important to acknowledge the multiple interactions of tourism destination and the impacts its communication system has upon the host communities. These dynamics will determine if the messages released from the place genuinely reflect local values, vision, and parts of the place identity that the locals wish to reveal to visitors. At the same time, through acknowledging the complexities of place it is more likely that the actions of hosts will support and reinforce the brand messages, helping to construct a reputation for the place, rather than having businesses just applying (sometimes struggling to apply) an "empty" new symbol (Anholt, 2008, Pike, 2005 #308).

Figure 2 – The dynamics of destination branding. From (Taboada, et al., 2008).

The role of inductive reasoning in our methodology

The methodology described in this paper used design as a tool to stimulate inductive reasoning to conjecture how stakeholders perceive their place system individually and collectively. Inductive reasoning means that when we, humans, face complex problems, rather than looking for solutions that thoroughly consider all the possibilities in the system, we deal with these overwhelming amounts of information by intuitively simplifying the problem. We naturally search for patterns and "we simplify the problem by using these to construct temporary internal models or hypotheses or schemata [that are simple enough] to work with" (Arthur, 1994). We then use these internal conjectures to "fill in the gaps" of knowledge we don't have or things we don't understand about the problem. Subsequently, we try to find a solution based on the information we can recognise or induce from what we can observe.

In other words, instead of creating and thoroughly testing all possible variable of a hypothesis, and then generalising the answers, through inductive reasoning we unconsciously observe the world and consider what patterns emerge from those observed situations, and how can specific solutions be found. Therefore, inductive reasoning is highly context dependant and considers the fact that we never understand each and every aspect of a certain problem, but what we can do is deal with the parts, interactions and patterns we are able to reason.

This may seem contradictory to the systems approach that suggest that problems should be tackled holistically rather than through dividing it into parts. However, the individual maps we collected from participants enabled us to create a broader (and more holistic) map that can provide a better representation of the system (Özesmi & Özesmi, 2004). Mapping individual perceptions of patterns and interactions can help us deal with the overwhelming feeling of the whole at the same time as it makes us acknowledge the unknown.

In our methodology the design process was used as an instrument to help find patterns

that are easier to identify and tackle strategically. In other words, the action of designing the strategy and the visual communication material for the Waterfall Way brand helped simplify the broader complex problem of understanding the region's identity. It worked as a "translation" tool that helped stakeholders make sense of their thoughts and feelings about the place system.

In the next session we briefly explain the methodology, show some of the achieved results and interpretations of patterns and interactions in relation to the places identities and to the final brand and visual communication concepts.

The collaborative design process

The branding of the Waterfall Way involved seven local shires and consisted of public workshops, one-to-one interviews, and collaborative design workshops where participants were invited to share local stories, personal views and opinions as well as to actively contribute to the brand design itself. The process can be explained in three stages: the elicitation of the local identities, the conceptualisation of the regional brand, and the delivery / implementation of the created strategies.

Eliciting local identities

This phase consisted of public workshops and one-to-one interviews. The workshops aimed to collect market information in relation to the local tourism opportunities, existing businesses and gaps. Approximately one hundred and fifty people attended the workshops and all of them were invited to take part in the branding process through the one-to-one interviews. A total of fifty-nine people from across the area were interviewed.

The interviews were unstructured (and we refer to them as 'conversations' in the remainder of the manuscript) and the starting point was the open question: 'What is special about your place?'. This question led the conversations into other reflections and considerations about the places, especially in relation to tourism activity and the positive and negative impacts it may bring to the region.

The conversations were conceptually mapped in a way that themes, ideas, opinions and the links between them were registered as they were mentioned. For each locality, the conversation maps were conflated according to common key ideas and themes and a new map was created that represented elements of the identity of each place according to the conversations. Figure 3 depicts one of these place identity maps.

PLACE IDENTITY THEMES

"it's an ever-changing kaleidoscope!"

"you go and stay and meet the locals, that's part of the experience"

"there's always something in the sky"

"Silence... in stereo!"

"What I like about Dorrigo is that there is a lot more to it than just what's oyour face."

"the Dorrigo area is the melting pot of the tropical and the temperate coming together"

white
shadows
spectacular cloud formations
seasons
not as hot as the coast
not as cold as the tablelands
green
lush & fresh
electric storms
weather
lyrebirds, magpies, kookaburras
"rolling" mist
rain
smell of the forest after rain
wet / fungi
sounds of the birds & frogs
glow
light
landscape
rainforests
huge variety of bird species
bird counting competition
farms
farmers catering for small groups showcasing day farm work
ranges mountains
edge
birdwatching
local organic produce
clear night skies
wildlife & vegetation diversity
close to the sea
local cafés, restaurants and accom.
visitors re-evaluate their "city" lifestyles
clean air
blue
relaxing & reflexive
discovery
unique local experiences
make people feel special
no glamour shops that can be found everywhere
drama club
country dances
quietness
natural "ambience"
keep it clean and pristine
show visitors when they ask
welcoming
lifestyle
simplicity
preserving the place
"secret" places
people have time to chat
freedom
resistance to change
welcome people who "care", who have interest
tidy & friendly
country town
history/ heritage
"old fashioned" protocols
how to balance tourism activity and local lifestyle?
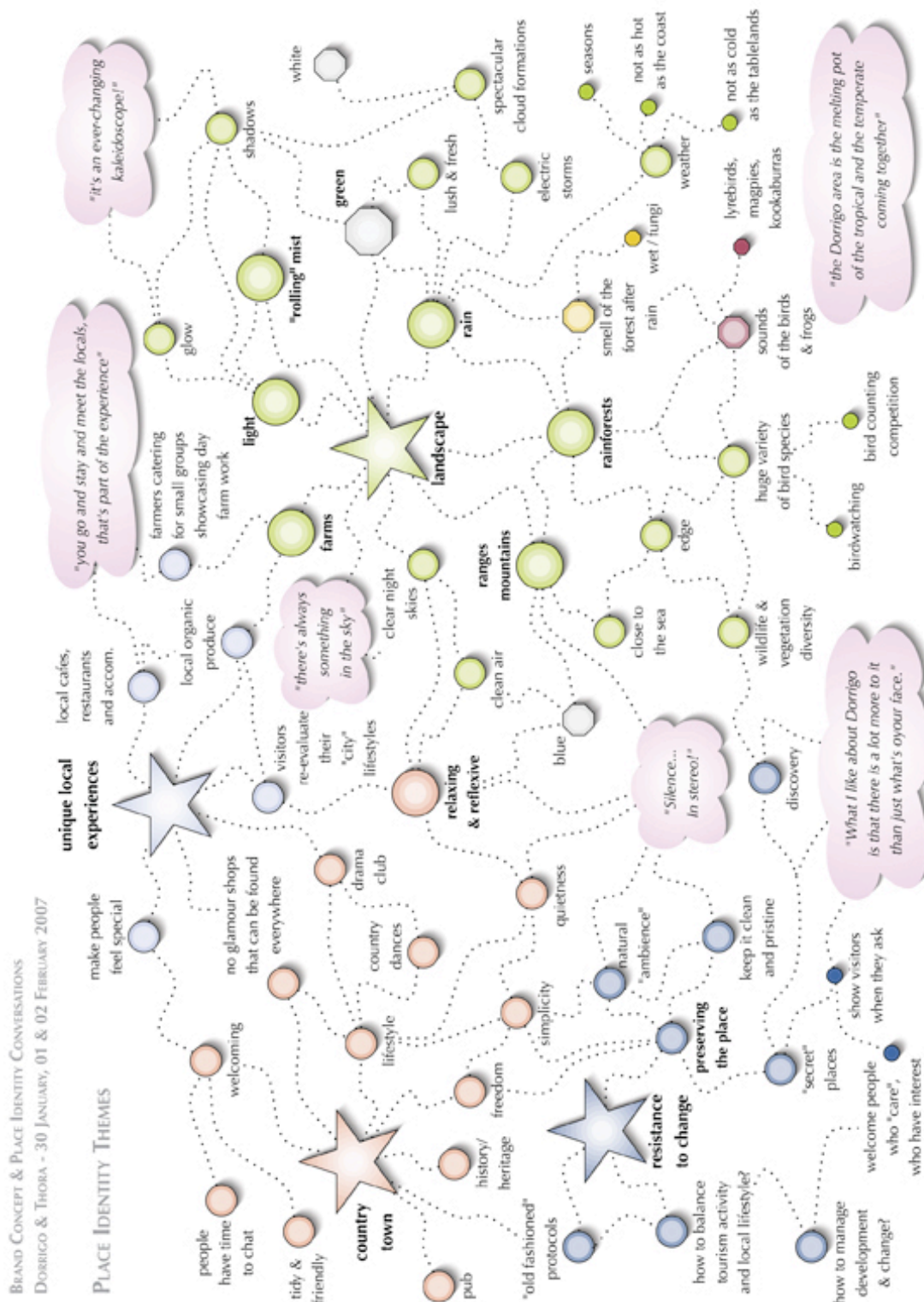how to manage development & change?
pub

Figure 3 – Place Identity concept map created for Dorrigo, based on eleven one-to-one conversations with local farmers, dwellers and business owners.

Concept mapping was used to reason the information collected during the conversations. The maps were used as a model for tackling the complexities of local identities by representing ideas on the same 'plan' (a board or piece of paper). As such the insights from different people are seen equally and the interconnections between them become clear. Additionally, through visually mapping the conversations using a phenomenological approach, the feelings and impressions expressed during the interview were captured in a richer systems map, showing the interactions between concepts and the emergence of certain key themes.

At the end of the one-to-one interviews, Place Identity Reports based on the concept maps were produced and sent back to stakeholders for feedback.

Identifying a Regional Brand Concept

Nineteen people from the broader group of stakeholders were selected to participate in a two-day workshop for the consolidation of the regional identity concept. Participants were community members, tourism business owners, government representatives, academics, as well as design and marketing experts. The aim of the workshop was to collaboratively design the brand concept for the region, to create the visual communication tools for the brand (name, slogan, logo, etc.), and to outline the brand principles, ethos, and management strategies.

Despite the strong presence and informative collaboration of the experts in the workshop, their opinions concerning the creation of the brand had the same weight as the ones from all other participants. Experts and lay participants had to express their opinions in a way that all could understand, thus promoting clear and open discussions. Along with brainstorming and group concept mapping, the following approach was used to elicit information in regards to how the region looks and feels like:

A broad collection of existing publications and promotional materials of different styles, formats and colours was presented to the group in order to engage them in thinking visually about the message that needed to be conveyed for the region. They were asked to choose the items they believed would be most suitable to represent the Waterfall Way. One by one, the participants presented and justified their choices. In so doing they were indirectly telling the team which elements – type, colours, style, texture, imagery – they thought would be appropriate to carry the message of the Waterfall Way as an eco- and nature-based tourism destination. Each idea was discussed and registered on the white board, so the group could visualise the full picture of the message they were collectively designing through the exercise.

This exercise helped participants visualise and express abstract ideas and concepts that they were not used to verbalise. It allowed for them to use different channels to communicate their ideas, which were compared to inputs brought in by the broader group of stakeholders through the previous interactions with the researchers.

Later, the group engaged on the discussions around the brand principles, the regional charter that would inform the management of the brand, and some rules of behaviour for local tourism operators and visitors. The same group involved in the creation of the shared brand concept designed the brand principles and management strategies. During this part of the work the participants drafted a document describing the shared agreement on brand principles, a proposed governance structure and some management strategies.

The one-to-one conversations and workshops made it possible to collect information about people's perception of the area. At the same time, it stimulated reflection upon what is special about the places, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging. Feedback and communications between the smaller working team and the broader stakeholder group were constant and remained an essential element of trust among the participants (Figure 4). The collective process helped elicit tacit knowledge (similarly to findings from (Dray, Perez, LePage, d'Aquino, & White, 2006; Polanyi, 1967; Rust, 2004a, 2004b; Senker, 1995)), in relation to communication design and promotional strategies, from people who would not normally be involved in these practices.
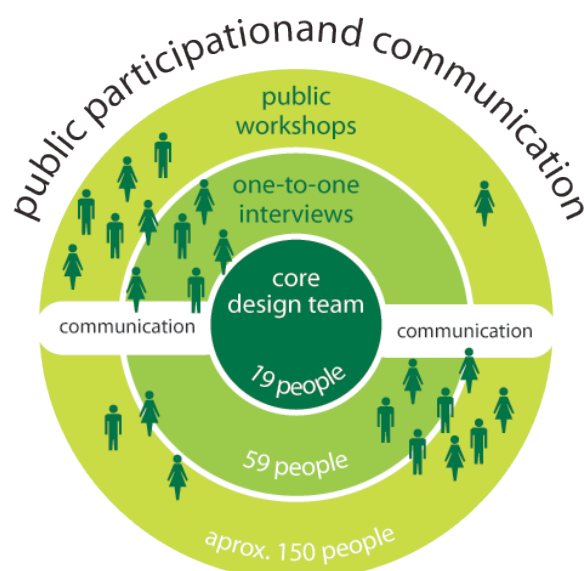

Figure 4 – Scheme of public participation and communication flow during the Waterfall Way collaborative brand design process.

The collective work undertaken during the workshop helped reinforce the identity concepts initiated during the conversations by locking into a communication strategy that intends to synthesise the essence of the destination system as a whole. Table 1 outlines a summary of concepts and ideas, and how they developed from the initial conversations to the final brand concept and visual apparatus. This demonstrates the inductive reasoning in relation to the elicitation of the regional identity.

Key ideas from conversations (identity concepts)	Brand concepts from co-design workshop (image / promise)	Translation into "tangible" aesthetic elements (communication)
Diversity	**Connection**	
Diversity of landscapes	Connection with changing landscapes and environments	Contrasting combination of colours and type
Distinctive local cultures	Connection with local people,	Welcoming, familiar tone

	cultures and arts	Stories and quotes from locals
	Receiving visitors as friends	Poetic language
The "small town" atmosphere and natural beauty of the region works as an antidote to everyday city life	Connection with nature and self, through the journey	'Hand made' tracing style
		Recycled paper, matt, soft, natural feel
		Use of white space
Travelling slowly, journeying		
"Waterfall Way: a new journey, a new story"		

Table 1 – A synthesis of the collective reasoning process: from broad identity concepts to tangible communication elements.

Implementing the brand strategies

After the strategies and visual elements of the brand were finalised, the Waterfall Way brand was presented to the public on 8 February 2008, in a specially organised event in Dorrigo. After the launch, public workshops were organised across the region in order to present the brand and all the prepared material to the local people, tourism operators and business owners who would be interested in joining the Waterfall Way sustainable tourism network. At the workshops the brand was presented and explained in detail, including its features, possibilities and rules of use. A promotional pack was given to the attendees, which contained promotional material and the Waterfall Way Sustainable Tourism Toolbox (consisting of three booklets with support information about business development, marketing, communication activities, and the specifications of use of the Waterfall Way brand. Toolkits can be accessed via the Waterfall Way Operators Website: http://www.waterfallwaytourism.com).

Discussion

This study shows that a focus shift in brand development from an external perspective to an internal perspective is possible, and that, consequently, it requires not only the traditional market knowledge regarding consumers niche markets and what goes on the minds and hearts of potential visitors, but also the knowledge of the destination itself, its attractions and sensibilities, and its peoples' cultures, hopes and expectations in relation to tourism activity and to the visitors that are coming to their places.

The impact of the collaborative methodology in the construction of a new region and in the decision-making process

The collaborative design methodology helped initiate thinking, among locals, of how multiple places along the Waterfall Way area can be understood as one. Through acknowledging the complexities of the task, the collaborative approach encouraged the shared construction of meaning in relation to the places and stimulated the rise of one potential single identity for the region. The use of our methodology enabled the creation of opportunities for stakeholders to reconcile information, expectations and place identity issues among themselves, confirming that place identity is socially created through conversation (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000).

Engaging multiple stakeholders in the creation of knowledge – the actual development of the visual and strategic components of the brand – with sometimes divergent points of

view enriches and consolidates a regional identity that becomes more coherent in relation to expectations from hosts as well as tourists. Our research was effective to better understand people's perceptions about their places, about the possible unified tourist destination, and about the role of tourism in the region. Therefore, we opine that the act of collectively designing worked well as a tool to engage the complexities of place branding and of combining diverse people, backgrounds and expectations into one potential regional vision. An applied outcome of our research was the regional brand itself.

This kind of process can be a good alternative for planning in rather complex transdisciplinary areas, such as tourism, as it allows for different views to be acknowledged, perceived and taken into consideration. Our research also reinforced the fact that not all information can be known, and that, as humans, we naturally simplify, organise and recognise patterns of behaviour. In the end decisions are made based on what we know about the system as well as on the regional social networks where information flows. Through engaging multiple stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, we increase the chances knowing more about the system, building more interactions and creative connections, and therefore, being able to make better informed decisions. Including interested parties also promotes ownership and helps spread the information around the region. This is probably a useful way to catalyse emergence about solutions to issues related to tourism and regional planning.

On another perspective, the search for a symbol naturally engages one in reflection about self, or about what that symbol is to represent. Collectively searching for a symbol to represent their social group induces people into reflective conversations about who they are, what matters, what they want to communicate about themselves, and what are their roles in building the identity of the group they are in. These reflections are an expression of inductive reasoning in relation to your own "complex" self, or, place, as is the focus of our study.

During the work, participants learned by doing. Learning happened at a reflective and reflexive level. Reflection means that participants learned from each other, acquiring information and experience from outside. Being reflexive means that they learned from themselves by becoming conscious of knowledge they did not realise they had, while trying to express and explain them to the others. Experts and researchers learned about the places and the participants during the workshops and interviews. This dynamics helped create a level of tolerance that allowed for informed decisions to be made based on agreement and shared understanding, rather than consensus.

The collaborative design process also originated some challenges such as the change of roles of the designers, and the dealing with multiple mental models involved in the decision-making process. The role of the brand specialist and graphic designers changed significantly as most of the decisions were to be made by the group instead of an expert (e.g. graphic designers, planners). Consequently, leaders and experts became catalysers, interpreters and/or facilitators, rather than making the final decisions as is usually expected from them. This turned out to be one of the main challenges in applying the collaborative design methodology, as the graphic design team was disempowered to a certain degree.

If on the one hand some power was taken from the designers, on the other hand the close interactions with stakeholders gave another dimension to their work. Instead of designing the brand <u>for</u> the locals, the team designed the brand <u>with them.</u> As expressed by Rust (2004a), this kind of direct hands-on research allows users to "feed directly into

designers' thinking and feed their tacit understanding of the people they are designing for". The change of roles helped the designers explore a more holistic view of the effects of their work on the region and its people.

Another challenge encountered during the application of the methodology was the fact that, in order for the collaborative approach to flow genuinely, the management of the design process needed to rely less on control, and more on facilitating the emergence of multiple local leaders. As a consequence, the process of making decisions changed: instead of having a single person or expert group deciding on design solutions, there was a large group of empowered stakeholders making decisions.

Our methodology was effective in understanding how participants perceived the Waterfall Way as a regional tourist destination at the same time as showing what the important links are to make it work according to tourist hosts' expectations. The design of the regional brand was a consequence of this understanding and an applied outcome of our research. The openness and flexibility of our approach comes at the expense of long periods of training to draw the concept maps during the conversations and subjective interpretations of the interviewer about how the interviewee's cognitions are perceived. Other approaches, such as the use of multi-step fuzzy cognitive mapping (Özesmi & Özesmi, 2004), qualitative modelling (Dambacher, Luh, HW, & Rossignol, 2003; Levins, 1974, 1988; Puccia & Levins, 1985) may be used along with our approach, in future research where they can all be combined and compared.

Conclusions

The main conclusions of our research are summarised as follows:

Collaborative design proved to be efficient and to facilitate real solutions in terms of the brand concept design. It is an example of inductive reasoning being used through design to tackle the issues of planning for sustainable tourism. Furthermore, by understanding destinations as complex emergent systems, we acknowledge that there are uncertainties in the "picture" provided by the conceptual identity design, and that decisions need to be made based on what we know and are able to understand about the system under a certain context.

Involving stakeholders in the design processes is not an easy task. It is time-consuming, hard to manage and highly context dependent. However, the power of this kind of collaborative process applied to brand design is the collaboration between lay people and experts in the design and decision-making processes. This collaboration led to reflections upon their own roles in the process of creating and marketing a tourist destination. The impact from this kind of collective work can be perceived on the final product as well as on the realities of people involved in the process.

Future work is needed to evaluate the brand in terms of its acceptance, recognition and usage by all concerned. The methodology can be further refined and may be applied in other areas of social research, in order to continue testing the efficacy of collaborative design as a tool to help engage complexity in constructing social identity and meaning.

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