A grassroots research approach for branding urban districts

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Abstract

Purpose – To produce effective urban district branding strategies, the factors impacting its unique characteristics and identity must be examined first. The purpose of this paper is to present a bottom-up participatory process for uncovering the identity of an urban district to ensure that its community goals and future branding are consistent and genuine.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines a recently completed grassroots effort that was used to uncover key physical, economic and cultural resources of the Southwest Raleigh district. Interdisciplinary methods, including surveys, interviews, mapping and economic analysis, were used to reveal how residents and businesses perceived the district’s identity.

Findings – The study revealed strong connections between a growing economy and factors related to liveability and identity, such as walkability, proximity, connectivity and availability of amenities. It provided a framework for communities to understand the forces of change that may influence the urban identity and potential branding strategies that would align with growing creative district goals.

Practical implications – Analyzing and evaluating the factors involved in the district’s identity, including diversified economies, demographics and urban qualities, is essential to the creation of an authentic brand that aligns with community perceptions.

Social implications – A research strategy is necessary to uncover the identity of a growing city. This requires a thorough assessment of its unique, localized characteristics, including the perceptions of its residents and businesses.

Originality/value – This paper and its outcomes can inform future in-depth investigations using similar comprehensive and bottom-up approaches for uncovering perceptions and urban identity in support of growing creative economies.

Keywords Branding, Urban identity, Creative district, Grassroots, Mid-size cities

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Rapidly growing mid-size cities in the USA are often characterized by an increase in innovation, knowledge base and creativity. Millennials are moving into these cities in increasing numbers in order to find a lower cost of living and easier commute, with a more approachable, family-oriented version of the urban lifestyle that sent many to larger cities in previous years (Sisson, 2018; Brazeal, 2018). Communities also recognize the advantage in bringing young innovative business people back home, knowing that home-grown talent can be quite effective in spurring growth in mid-size cities (Schigel, 2017).

As a result of these shifting demographics, a number of cities are attempting to promote themselves by publicizing their competitive advantage and marketable characteristics that contribute to quality of life and economic development. However, many cities or urban districts are investing in branding strategies that utilize top-down vision and interests for the enhancement of their local economy. This top-down approach to brand development has often resulted in a more fragmented urban image that can hinder the long-term appeal for innovative businesses and young talent in such cities (Wiedman et al., 2012). It is wise to consider that a brand must be both truthful and authentic, and, as Cuypers (2016) notes, it
should align with local businesses and residents so that it can “serve as a catalyst for storytelling rather than an obstruction.” Indeed, the efforts of top-down place branding that do not emerge from an authentic and holistic investigation of the community’s identity have had a remarkably high failure rate (North, 2014).

In order to produce an effective branding strategy that contributes to the development of livable urban communities, the factors that impact their unique characteristics and identity must be uncovered and analyzed. The advantages in creating a successful brand are undeniable for attracting investors, growth and talent, and for boosting the pride and support of its residents. However, successful urban branding strategies must accomplish various prerequisite investigations, such as bringing all the city stakeholders together for consultation, including officials, investors, businesses and residents, starting at the very beginning of the process of brand development (North, 2014). It is remarkable that most businesses try to brand their new products by describing how unique and superior they are, yet urban districts or cities often merely replicate a brand that has been used in other “cool” or successful communities (Renn, 2019). However, this brand and the image created may not be the best representation of their own communities.

A branding strategy that is predicated on a thorough and holistic study of a community’s identity is particularly necessary for rapidly growing mid-size cities such as Raleigh, North Carolina. Over the last decade, the city of Raleigh has been undergoing a new period of significant development and growth (Bennett, 2017). On a percentage basis, Raleigh had the fourth fastest growth rate within the USA, according to a study completed in 2017, and was projected to repeat that growth rate in the following years (Sharf, 2018). Within the ranks of mid-size cities, Raleigh was also within the top five US cities with the fastest-growing resident incomes from 2015 to 2016 (Sharf, 2018). Despite the transformation of the overall city, however, this change has not been evenly distributed across districts and neighborhoods within the city, and has therefore resulted in differences or vagueness of perceptions of identity and urban qualities, as well as uneven rates of growth and economic success.

This is particularly true for the southwest quadrant of Raleigh. Southwest Raleigh represents an important district in the greater Raleigh community and is an emerging creative center as a result of the ongoing economic growth and cultural identity in the area. The population in the southwest district has roughly doubled over the last 40 years, increasing from 73,310 in 1970 to 147,453 in 2010. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, the population increased from 123,719 to 147,453, representing a 19 percent increase. This district is located within the Research Triangle region and has several major secondary education institutions, entertainment options and an array of diverse local businesses. The district includes historic neighborhoods that offer a variety of housing styles, sizes, ages and prices to its current residents. However, many of the existing qualities in the district are not well known and might therefore generate perceptions of the district as being unaffordable, fragmented or disconnected with no strong identity, even as others see it as a creative district that promotes entrepreneurial start-ups and has a diverse population and culture to attract young entrepreneurs.

As the southwest district rapidly grew and evolved, city officials and community leaders began to explore a branding strategy. They realized, however, that understanding the perceptions of the district’s qualities and its overall identity would be an essential prerequisite before creating a branding strategy focused on sustaining a high standard of livability that would be authentic and compelling to current and future residents, business owners and visitors to the area. It was therefore decided that a framework that would help to uncover the multi-layered factors that impact perceptions about Southwest Raleigh was crucial in order to determine opportunities and challenges that affect emerging creative and knowledge-based economies and development of an authentic district identity.
This paper examines a process and framework that responds to the realization that a bottom-up and broad-scoped effort is necessary to “uncover” the urban identity of a rapidly growing and changing district before any attempt is made to brand and shape the district’s future, especially for an emerging creative and knowledge-based economy. This process and framework can also be a model of community-based participatory research and collaboration between a city, a higher education institution, and the local community.

This study asks the questions – How can the unique characteristics of a rapidly growing urban district like Southwest Raleigh and its neighborhoods be identified and preserved while still motivating more economic development in support of the city’s growth? Which assets contribute to its identity? How do its residents and businesses perceive these assets? Is it possible to guard against debilitating misperceptions about the district?

In order to set the stage for proposing a process and framework aimed at uncovering an urban district identity and supporting branding strategies, this paper first examines a few terms and concepts that will help in formulating that framework. Subsequently, the specific case of Southwest Raleigh district is presented as an example of a bottom-up participatory research process and framework that was used to identify unique district assets and characteristics revealing the perceptions of residents and businesses.

2. Terminology and concepts

2.1 Urban identity

One of the foundational works examining people–place relationships was written by Marc Fried (1963) describing former residents’ feelings of attachment or displacement when leaving the urban district of West End in Boston, MA. In the work, he suggested that the relationship between people and physical locations, later described in terms such as place identity, sense of place, and place attachment, are fundamental to human functioning. “Place,” when used as a part of place attachment or place identity, means a defined geographical space that has acquired meaning as a result of a person’s interaction with the space (Speller, 2000). A “Psychology of Place” is developed in a person as a product of physical attributes, human conceptions and activities related to that place (Canter, 1977; Proshansky, 1978). This idea of a people–place relationship was described by Stokols and Shumaker (1981) as a “transactional view of settings” emphasizing the interdependent relationships between people and their environment. Place attachment refers to the psychological and social connections people feel with certain places, such as their homes or their neighborhoods, and place identity has been shown to be related to increased levels of stability, livability, well-being, social cohesion and resilience (Lewicka, 2008).

Each city has a unique identity generally composed of identifiable and memorable formal attributes, which create the image of the city (Oktay, 2017). Oktay (2017) notes that the most powerful elements contributing to the identity of a city are natural environment, social-cultural environment, identifiable quarters, public spaces and landmarks. The meaning attached to these attributes by the users of the city also contributes to the formation of a strong urban identity (Oktay and Bala, 2015). Some of the earliest investigations into the elements that contribute to the distinctive identity or people–place relationships were successfully applied to urban districts (Lynch, 1960; Fried, 1963). Understanding people’s perceptions and sense of identity is a critical issue for cities or parts of the city, such as districts, as they transform and grow. The process of investigating the urban identity and perceptions of an urban community is an essential prerequisite to developing an authentic and useful brand.

2.2 Developing an urban brand

“Brand” is an impression perceived in a person’s mind of a product, place or service, and it is the sum of all tangible and intangible elements, psychological and sociological features
Branding, mainly developed from marketing strategies, is more commonly used for city marketing and promotion by linking identity with projected and perceived images through communication and experience (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Ooi (2011, p. 56) lists three standard parameters for top-down branding: first, city brands always present only positive aspects of a community; second, city brands aim to change existing public perceptions; and, third, that a brand is the identity statement for the city and therefore should present the truthful story and uniqueness of the place. Several paradoxes arise from these parameters of top-down branding. Cities are constantly evolving and changing their identity, and therefore an urban brand must be updated continuously to stay relevant. Paradoxically, this process often leads to cities becoming more alike rather than more unique as officials follow and learn from other urban success stories. Additionally, a branding message that may resonate with outsiders may have no value or truth to locals, or vice versa. For example, many cities market themselves by promoting their hipster coffee shops, microbreweries, bike lanes, creative-class members, start-ups, intimations of a fashion scene, farm-to-table restaurants, new downtown streetcars (Renn, 2019) as representations of the overall city but this does not represent the reality for various districts or areas that exist in cities. Hence, there is a constant paradox in the tension between top-down and bottom-up city branding. Branding literature tends to emphasize the importance of taking the interests of all stakeholders into account (Ooi, 2011). Respecting the needs and desires of community stakeholders is critical to ensure a successful, ethical and resilient branding campaign. A city brand must incorporate the different interests in society, but to accomplish this, the brand must be investigated and supported from the grassroots (Ooi, 2011, p. 58), yet still focus on the overall needs, cultural values and objectives of the community as representations of their identities.

2.3 Creative and knowledge-based economies as drivers of urban development

The concept of a “creative economy” pertains to the potential socio-economic benefits of activities dealing with knowledge, information and creativity (Howkins, 2013; Farmakis, 2014). A creative economy hinges on the industries that are at the intersection of technology, culture, arts and business. With the primary force being creativity, this business sector is of course focused on products and services bearing creative content, cultural value and market objectives (Newbiggin, 2010). These creative businesses typically include disciplines like architecture, advertising, software, arts and crafts, film/video, music, fashion, performing arts, publishing, gaming, etc. (Farmakis, 2014). The United Nations Institute for Training and Research describes a creative economy as a potent and transformative force for socio-economic development and a singular dynamic sector of the world’s economy. A creative economy occurs at the interwoven edge between socio-economics, technology and culture (www.unitar.org/ksa/what-creative-economy). One of the most transformative values of a creative economy is that its goods and services are resilient because they rely on skills, ideas, knowledge and the ability to recognize and adapt to new opportunities.

Successful creative districts in US cities have a number of things in common. These districts tend to have a diverse population, both in race and ethnicity, as well as economic status, age, skill or experience and national origins (Hospers, 2003, pp. 149-153). Creative districts tend to form around universities, where industries can benefit from research, new patents and knowledge exchange. They promote entrepreneurial start-ups, and therefore must have adequate infrastructure, including a diverse housing and commercial stock to meet the needs of younger entrepreneurs. To make these districts attractive to creative individuals, they need a variety of recreational and lifestyle amenities, including easy access to museums, performing arts, sports, parks, restaurants and shopping. In short, creative districts are places where creative people can live, learn, work and play.
Powell and Snellman (2004, p. 199) define the term “knowledge economy” as production and services founded on “knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, as well as rapid obsolescence.” The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development further defines the term as a way to describe “trends in advanced economies towards greater dependence on knowledge, information and high skill levels, and the increasing need for ready access to all of these by the business and public sectors” (OECD, 2005). Certainly, one of the central ingredients of a knowledge economy is the increased importance placed on intellectual capacity and potential rather than merely on natural resources, physical inputs or means of production. Beyond simply having the necessary ingredients of intellectual capacity and potential, an urban community must also have its knowledgeable population in proximity in order to provide the conditions for constant and direct interaction (Malecki, 2002; Wiedmann et al., 2012, p. 45). Jane Jacobs (1969) describes the need for a diverse and creative population to make a knowledge economy successful. But an essential condition for a creative urban environment is also to provide every possible opportunity for the inhabitants to meet other people on the street serendipitously, exchange knowledge, consider new ideas and, thus, enable innovation (Hospers, 2003, p. 150; Jacobs, 1969).

Recent urban history indicates that a knowledge economy is a fairly typical occurrence, yet, not every city or urban community that demonstrates a knowledge economy will become a “Creative District” (Hospers, 2003, p. 144). In fact, it would be extremely difficult for local governments to plan for knowledge, creativity and innovation from scratch. However, local governments can increase the chance that a creative economy or creative urban districts can develop by supplying the necessary underlying conditions and supportive framework. Hospers (2003, p. 149) suggests several common ingredients of a successful creative district; concentration, or a critical mass of knowledgeable and innovative people and resources; a diversity of people, skills and background; and what Hospers refers to as instability, or the acceptance of change and innovation.

It is therefore important to uncover the identity of a rapidly growing city or urban district to ensure that its underlying qualities cohere with efforts to support and encourage an emerging creative and knowledge-based economy or branding strategy. The next section will review the Uncovering Southwest Raleigh (USWR) project as an example of a process and framework that was used to reveal multi-layered factors that may impact perceptions about a growing and rapidly changing district in the City of Raleigh, North Carolina.

3. A conceptual approach and methodology
3.1 Uncovering Southwest Raleigh (USWR)

The Southwest Raleigh district has been characterized by constant growth and change. As residential development continues to fill in the remaining spaces between institutions, the district has reached its boundaries of outward growth adding more residents. Although its history has consisted of rapid growth and change, this change has centered around the historical anchors that define the identity of this area. The district represents an important part of the greater Raleigh community and is an emerging center in its own right. The district began as huge plantation estates and woodlands. Its ample space, proximity to the original city, and access to transportation has made it ideal for ambitious projects such as museums, hospital complexes, office buildings, higher education campuses, shopping areas, parks, greenways and so on. Throughout its history Southwest Raleigh has been marked by these large scale and enthusiastic projects. It houses the first art museum built with public funds, a center of American Modern Architecture, and some of Raleigh’s finest streetcar suburbs. Since its rapid expansion after the Second World War, NC State University has driven much of the economic growth and cultural identity in the area. The transition from an industrial economy to a creative and knowledge-based economy is marked by the conversion of old industrial
buildings into condominiums and shops. Southwest Raleigh has important historic neighborhoods such as Method and Oberlin Village, which continue to anchor new growth and development. Southwest Raleigh also continues to add recreational and cultural investments, such as the North Carolina Museum of Art park, Dix Park development, new hotel buildings, restaurants, businesses and mid-rise residential condos.

As the district continues to evolve, community leaders’ interest in branding, supporting and enhancing the district’s future as the “Capital City's Creative District” has also increased. However, before that brand could be applied, a comprehensive, holistic grassroots investigation had to be completed following a framework that would focus on the overall perceptions, objectives and identity of the district.

The USWR project conducted by interdisciplinary researchers from NC State University, City of Raleigh and the local community included three primary goals. The first goal was to measure existing perceptions about Southwest Raleigh in order to understand the past, current and future conditions influencing the change in the area. The study uncovered how the district had evolved, what the key physical, economic and cultural resources were, and how the residents, business owners and non-residents living, working and visiting the area perceived the district, and its evolving identity. The second goal was to set a baseline and create a database of assets in order to understand whether the forces of changes – such as rapid growth and competitive economic/business development – were influencing the district identity or not, and how this influence was occurring. The third goal was to set a pathway for continuing the effort in branding by providing a framework for stakeholders and community leaders to understand the forces of change that influence the identity of the Southwest Raleigh district.

In order to produce a framework and strategies that can serve as a basis for understanding the identity of an area, a process needed to be considered beyond the sole examination of the physical environment incorporating an analysis of demographics, economics and perceptions of the local community. The second part of the approach was to engage the residents and business communities across many neighborhoods and areas of Southwest Raleigh. In total, the research team was able to attend 19 neighborhood and community meetings, two large public forums in which collected data and feedback were received from residents, and meetings with several community organizations and pre-planned events. The third step was to examine a considerable quantity of existing data from a number of both public and private sources. The fourth and final component of this research effort was to examine, interpret and triangulate all these accumulated data from a multidisciplinary standpoint. The brief summary presented in the “Findings” section of this paper is thus the result of this interdisciplinary process.

4. Methods
A grassroots strategy and methodologies were targeted that could thoroughly investigate perceptions and historical issues existing in the district. These methodologies included intensive interviews, community meetings, an online community survey of residents, an online survey of Southwest Raleigh businesses and community work sessions. Further GIS mapping and various databases were also used to analyze socio-economic trends in the area.

4.1 Interviews and surveys
As part of the USWR project, sets of open-ended interviews were conducted with both businesses and residents living in the area. These interviews used structured questions and allowed for extended follow-up responses. Interviews were conducted over several months, and, then, results were cleaned, processed and coded using a multidisciplinary review and assessment framework. Results of the interview process helped to create both the content and organization of the residential and business surveys. In addition to the
interviews, the USWR research team held several large community work sessions, including researchers, city staffers, community leaders and residents. During these work sessions, groups of six to ten attendees were seated at large tables, with a researcher to coordinate and memorialize the process. Activities included discussions about SWOT analysis, the character of both Southwest Raleigh as a whole and individual neighborhoods within the district. Each group drew on top of a large map showing community assets and how they travel within the district, indicating locations and routes for homes, schools, grocery stores, parks and so on.

An online residential survey garnered 758 total responses \((n = 758)\) as a convenience sample questionnaire promoted by neighborhood organizations, churches, businesses and city leaders. The survey was structured on a routing, or skip-logic basis, that directed users to questions specific to their situation. For example, a respondent that answered yes to “do you live in Southwest Raleigh” would receive questions about their neighborhood location and length of time in residence. The survey instrument contained approximately 40 questions depending on how participants were routed. Multi-item place identity and place attachment psychological scales were also included in the survey (Buckner, 1988; Lalli, 1992; Pretty et al., 2003). Question formats included multiple-choice, yes/no, five-item Likert scale and open format. After several months, the online residential and business surveys were closed and the response data was analyzed using SPSS statistical analysis. Answers to open-ended questions were also cleaned and coded before analysis.

The online business survey had 138 responses \((n = 138)\) during a several month open period with a convenience sample of business owners from Southwest Raleigh. The business survey had approximately 49 questions concerning demographics, business typology, length of operation, available suppliers, workforce and hiring practices, and advantages or challenges with their business location in Southwest Raleigh. The questions were formatted in multiple-choice, Likert scale, yes/no or open format.

### 4.2 Demographics and economics methodology

This data collection phase focused on the assessment of the demographic and economic aspects of Southwest Raleigh, as well as an in-depth market analysis of the area that helped to determine its strengths and weaknesses in attracting creative people and businesses to the district. For the economic and demographic analysis, data sources included GeoLytics Neighborhood Change Database (NCBD, 2018), decennial Census data and the American Community Survey data from 2006 to 2010. A number of web services were also accessed to provide demographic and market information, including ESRI’s Business Analyst and Social Explorer. For the industry and market analysis, the National Establishment Time Series Database (Walls, 2007) and ReferenceUSA’s Business Database were used to calculate economic trends and industry composition and to complete an up-to-date business inventory for the Southwest Raleigh District. Various analytical tools were also used throughout this study.

### 4.3 GIS mapping

A goal set by the USWR process was to develop a pathway for continuing the effort into the future, and to accomplish this goal, it was necessary to establish a baseline dataset. This process began by rigorously assembling census data at both the block and tract levels, as well as GIS map data for the entire area. Where possible, historic map data were examined as further evidence of the morphological patterns, proximities, connections, key assets and neighborhood information. The demographic and economic assessment also set a baseline for future research into economic and real estate analysis, transportation infrastructure and an ongoing development chronology.
5. Findings and discussion

After two years of collecting and processing the data, the findings were presented to city officials, community stakeholders and residents of Southwest Raleigh for feedback. The following sections present a brief overview of the findings, with a particular focus on the results of efforts to identify and preserve the unique characteristics and assets of Southwest Raleigh. As noted earlier, city officials and community leaders realized that understanding the perceptions of the district’s qualities and its overall identity would be essential in order to be compelling and authentic to residents, business owners and visitors as branding strategies were explored. This section is organized first by strengths and weaknesses, followed by a discussion of neighborhood-specific findings in the district.

5.1 Strengths

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the community survey questions about what respondents considered to be the best features of Southwest Raleigh. Although some of the top features cited did vary between the business and community surveys, one of the clearest outcomes from the surveys, interviews and mapping activities was the importance of location, proximity and access within Southwest Raleigh (19.7 percent community survey; 29.7 percent business survey). Certainly, access, location and proximity are valuable attributes for any business, but they are also prime ingredients for a knowledge economy and creative district (Malecki, 2002; Wiedmann et al., 2012; Jacobs, 1969). Important points of access and proximity included downtown Raleigh, The Research Triangle Park (RTP), RDU Airport and the higher education campuses of NC State University, Meredith College, and Peace College. The idea of a
collaborative, innovative environment creating connections to higher education campuses in a modern economy were stressed primarily in the business survey but was also mentioned in the community survey and meetings. The map of Raleigh in Figure 2, overlaid with 5-, 10- and 15-min travel times, illustrates that Southwest Raleigh is close to most major destinations, particularly downtown, RTP and RDU Airport. The value of connectedness was also of primary importance (29.7 percent) to the business survey respondents.

The next two most common responses to the best feature questions in the community survey, green (16.6 percent) and diversity of shopping and restaurants (15.1 percent), also showed up among top responses in the business survey (green 12.5 percent; diverse 9.4 percent). Both residents and business owners consistently mentioned parks, greenways, a mature urban forest, lakes, street trees, campuses and the arboretum as major assets in Southwest Raleigh.

Southwest Raleigh is a particularly diverse community across several categories, including ethnicity, culture, age, skill levels, and other demographic characteristics. The USWR research also found a significant and growing degree of morphological diversity in the transect between urban density and rural openness. The district varied widely between mid-rise buildings on small blocks at one end of the scale, to open agricultural fields at the other. The chart in Figure 3 shows the degree to which various resources were available in Southwest Raleigh according to survey respondents. Diversity in the type and variety of services, resources, housing, neighborhoods and retail showed strength in the district. However, some of the characteristics typically needed to encourage a burgeoning “Creative
District” (Hospers, 2003, p. 150; Jacobs, 1969) were less available than others in Southwest Raleigh. As noted earlier, areas seeking to attract creative and innovative individuals need a variety of recreational and lifestyle amenities, including easy access to museums, performing arts, sports, parks, restaurants and shopping.

The chart in Figure 3 shows that population diversity, banking services, rental options for housing and choices of family-friendly neighborhoods were mostly seen as good or excellent by survey respondents. Interestingly, some of the same strengths that were seen in choice of housing, food, or retail also showed up as challenges for the district. Triangulating the data from community meetings and GIS mapping helped to clarify that a resource showing up as both a strength and a challenge might be related to a resource being enough in quantity, but insufficient in choice. For example, respondents noted the abundance of one- or two-bedroom homes and rentals, especially near the university, yet there is little choice in larger homes or rental units in family-friendly neighborhoods. The other discrepancy concerning a resource being listed as both a strength and a challenge had to do with the location, quality or wide-spread access to that resource.

The “Best Features” chart in Figure 1 from the community and business surveys also highlights the campuses of NC State University and Meredith College as contributing to a strong sense of community. Access and proximity to institutions of higher learning are essential elements to both knowledge economies and the development of creative districts. During local meetings, it also became clear that sense of community was a particularly important asset to preserve within each individual neighborhood in the district. Availability of arts and culture, entertainment, and walkability, were also included in the best features list, and these are all important assets for a growing creative district.

5.2 Challenges
The following section provides a brief summary of the findings that were seen as challenges to community stakeholders in Southwest Raleigh. When the goal of participatory community research is to uncover the authentic identity of an urban district, sometimes the most important findings show us what is “missing” or “misperceived.” Efforts to support a growing creative district in Southwest Raleigh by supplying the necessary underlying conditions and supportive framework (Hospers, 2003, p. 149) required knowledge about what ingredients were missing from the district. Uncovering those missing conditions could help to avoid the high failure rate in branding efforts that North (2014) warned against.
Figure 4 lists some of the most critical challenges listed by Southwest Raleigh residents through the community survey. The first three themes were traffic safety, cleaning up and revitalizing the district, and trying to encourage more retail and dining to the area. Given the importance of providing sufficient amenities to the area to engender continued growth and development, our first task was to uncover why the lack of retail, dining and grocery stores was listed as a challenge even though it was listed as a strength in Figure 1. After a careful examination of map data, interviews as well as the neighborhood work sessions, it became clear that lack of retail and food supply assets was a consequence of not having those businesses evenly distributed throughout the district and insufficient choice in, for example, healthy food suppliers within walking distance to certain neighborhoods.

Figure 5 illustrates the availability of grocery stores in the district, with red circles showing half-mile walking distance buffers around each store. Indeed, looking at the blow up, a number of areas were discovered that were not served by any grocery store nearby – not even a convenience store. Looking at the dark green lines indicating sidewalks, this situation was made even more acute where people had to walk in the street to get to the grocery store. This appeared to be a classic example of a “food desert,” or “food swamp” – areas where the only food available in proximity is neither nutritious or healthy. This was certainly a challenge that community leaders and city officials could improve to encourage district growth and development in the future, especially if supporting a creative district is a primary goal.
Walkability was also listed in Figure 4 as a challenge, followed by the need for more housing choice, more sense of community, and more green spaces. As with the challenges of access to retail and food, insufficient walkability, green space and sense of community also showed up as both strengths and challenges. On deeper examination, it was found that some of the challenges were in fact the desire for more of something that was already considered a strength, like green space. By comparing locations of respondents and the challenges listed by them, it was found that sometimes concerns were simply misperceptions by people living outside of a neighborhood or outside of the district entirely. One example of the latter was outsiders’ perceptions about income levels inside the neighborhoods surrounding the university.

Not all the stakeholder perceptions identified in the various survey instruments and interviews were borne out after triangulating the data. One of the challenges offered by people living outside of Southwest Raleigh was the misperception of limited income within the district, particularly in areas of rental properties near the university campuses. However, after triangulating the data, it became apparent that although neighborhoods with a predominance of students do often show up in census data as having limited spending potential, it does not represent the whole picture. The true buying power of students, particularly undergraduates, is often a combination of both theirs and their parents’ income, but only by looking at combined incomes, across the districts of both the student and their parents, could a true picture of buying power emerge.

During the process of uncovering resident and business perceptions, the research team was simultaneously creating a database of community assets, allowing for the later triangulation of findings to help interpret the source of community perceptions, as well as develop actionable items that could improve both strengths and challenges. This asset database was also seen as a goal of USWR, to set a baseline in order to understand how the forces of changes were influencing the district identity over time.

Figure 6 illustrates the industrial mix existing in the Southwest district at the time that the USWR Economic Analysis was conducted. The horizontal bars show how employment

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**Sources:** ReferenceUSA business database; Bureau of Labor Statistics
in individual business sectors in Southwest Raleigh compared to what should have been expected for any given urban area according to the national average – the “National Quotient” shown as the vertical gray bars. Perceptions of “Strengths” that were revealed by the community and business surveys in areas such as education, professional and technical services, arts, entertainment and recreation were all closely parallel what is seen in the chart. In fact, these categories of employment were up to two and one-half times what should have been expected according to the national quotient in those categories. The categories of accommodation and retail trade are only about half the national quotient, which supports the idea that these services should be increased in the community.

One of the perceptions uncovered in both the community and business surveys was a need for more choice and variety in housing. After examining the economic analysis and mapping data, it was clear why the need for more housing choice was a challenge. Some neighborhoods were heavily weighted toward rentals, while others are almost completely single-family homes. Both the business and community surveys also noted the lack of choice in other housing types, such as townhomes or family-oriented rentals. Some of this might have been due to concentrated areas of only one type of housing, or perhaps not enough variety or choice, particularly in size and cost. As part of the USWR effort, perceptions uncovered in the surveys were reviewed, or triangulated, using other research tactics and databases. In the case of limitations and quantities of housing, the census/GIS mapping data did indeed support these perceptions.

Of critical importance in the findings was the perception that the district is a “Community of Neighborhoods” that are unique unto themselves. Some well-known neighborhoods, such as the University Park and Method Neighborhoods, share many of the positive features of the district in terms of sense of community, connectedness, greenness, walkability and overall access to diverse amenities and destinations in Southwest Raleigh, such as retail and restaurants. Some neighborhoods, such as Renaissance Park, are conveniently located for access to amenities such as NC State University, downtown, and recreational features. However, the survey respondents from some neighborhoods also frequently felt isolated, with no walkability to anywhere outside the neighborhood itself and a lack of transportation alternatives. There is an apparent dichotomy of opinion about feelings of being both proximate to important city features, yet feeling isolated.

It was also revealed that there were large areas that might be considered as “non-neighborhoods.” These included the areas predominated by student rental housing, green spaces, state-owned land and the campus of NC State University – which was in a sense a neighborhood unto itself. Beyond these areas where residents did not seem to identify with a specific neighborhood, it was also necessary to address the challenge of reaching southwest Raleigh residents that are transient or less visible.

5.3 Urban identity

At the outset of this paper, the critical need for uncovering an urban identity before developing a supportive branding strategy for any rapidly growing city was discussed. A part of the effort to uncover the urban identity of Southwest Raleigh involved the use of a multi-method triangulated research strategy. Incorporating place attachment and place identity psychological scales (Buckner, 1988; Pretty et al., 2003) into such a strategy allowed the cross-comparison of findings, and potential for corroboration or explanation of associated variables. This is especially relevant when considering the interconnected perceptions of community research participants in a growing urban district such as Southwest Raleigh. An important component of the USWR strategy was the inclusion of a 12-item Urban Identity Scale (UIS) included within the community survey. The UIS, shown in Figure 7, provided the opportunity to compare composite values of the UIS scale to other physical, social, and demographic variables addressed in specific questions from the community survey – e.g. ethnicity of the respondent, or
availability of grocery stores. Once the mean values of each of the questions in the UIS were
derived (see Figure 7), a single composite value of the UIS was calculated to compare to other
variables in the survey responses. Multivariate regression models were also run to compare the
composite UIS value to a number of other variables derived from the community survey.
The first regression model looked at the composite UIS number compared to other variables
from the district as a whole. A composite value was calculated for all survey respondents on
questions such as availability of grocery stores. Then a regression model was run comparing
the UIS to those same question responses but limited to the neighborhood level (see Figure 7). In
other words, the composite UIS value derived from a single neighborhood was compared to
other variables, but only from responses from that same neighborhood.

The nine variables listed in Figure 7, including availability of grocery stores, entertainment opportunities, diverse population and ease of travel, explained approximately 62 percent of the variation in place identity (UIS) at the scale of an individual neighborhood. Variables such as whether the respondents were born in that neighborhood or respondents’ ages are common variables associated with place identity. However, entertainment venues, proximity, a diverse population and a family-friendly environment were important relationships influencing urban identity, and well-matched to other findings such as “Best Features” responses presented in Figure 1.
6. Conclusion

Branding and promoting a growing urban district requires a clear understanding of its distinct identity by assessing its unique, localized characteristics including the perceptions and experiences of its community groups, residents and business owners. Analyzing and evaluating all the factors, including diversified economies, demographics and urban qualities is an essential prerequisite to the creation of an authentic brand of a city or an individual district within that city that aligns with perceptions of its residents and businesses.

This paper focused on the USWR project to review and evaluate how grassroots participatory research efforts were able to uncover key physical, economic, social and cultural assets of the Southwest Raleigh district, and how residents, business owners and visitors perceived its identity. The USWR project also set a baseline process engaging residents and business owners and creating a database of assets in order to understand the extent of the influence of rapid growth and economic development efforts on the district identity. Using a range of interdisciplinary research methods, the USWR effort provided a framework for stakeholders and community leaders to understand the forces of change that influence the urban identity of the district.

Key features and assets were mentioned by most residents and businesses: proximity and connectivity to assets, such as parks, greenways and campuses, and access to diverse amenities, such as restaurants, shops and entertainment. Residents had very strong attachment to their neighborhoods and to the Southwest Raleigh district as a whole. Each of these features are key elements in support of creative and knowledge-based economies. Many neighborhoods located in Southwest Raleigh are considered stable and active, though more development is desired that will provide opportunities for food and dining, retail and other commercial development, interconnected transportation, as well as improved and updated housing stock with more variety in cost and type.

There was concern for the degree to which ongoing development activities throughout the district would impact the character of the neighborhoods and the overall quality of life. Existing residents chose to live in Southwest Raleigh because of its socio-economic and demographic diversity, as well as the strength and unique character of its neighborhoods. In general, there is both an old and a new Southwest Raleigh that is transitioning in many ways but is poised to take advantage of “smart development,” with room for growth and a great deal to build upon. Overall, the study revealed that Southwest Raleigh as a whole was perceived as connected, accessible, green and diverse. It is a community of neighborhoods, experiencing economic growth with a strong sense of identity.

The USWR findings showed that a strong district identity formed from unique built, natural and socio-cultural environmental qualities would support the conditions usually required for a creative or knowledge-based economy. In order to encourage and promote the authentic identity of the Southwest Raleigh district, future efforts should continue to focus on the perceptions and objectives of its residents, such as:

- promoting diverse, resilient and dynamic neighborhoods that retain their eclectic mix of demographics and housing stock;
- providing strong and equal access to amenities for living, shopping, entertainment and schools;
- creating opportunities and venues to engage and connect residents, businesses, neighborhood groups, etc.;
- enhancing walkability of the district by connecting/adding sidewalks and developing bike pathways; and
- preserving and integrating nature into future developments.
In order to address the growing interest in branding strategies for growing cities, more authentic experiences and shared values of its residents, businesses and stakeholders should be studied and promoted rather than simply adopting generic brands and strategies that so many other American cities have pursued. As the USWR process showed, it is also sometimes necessary to examine a specific urban district rather than focusing on the city as a whole. Future research is needed to better understand the various associations between liveability and diverse economies by analyzing and assessing the factors that impact the formation of urban identity and related perceptions. Comprehensive investigations should be implemented using a transdisciplinary and bottom-up approach, such as the USWR process considered in this paper, prior to adopting branding strategies.

References
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Further reading

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