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Neighborhood branding and residents' engagement: evidences from NoLo - in Milan - to TomTom - in Istanbul[2]

Introduction

City branding and place marketing strategies have become key factors in generating cultural and economic development worldwide as practical tools to create attractive urban images in cities. Cities have been increasing their effort to attract creative people, creative industries, investors, inhabitants, tourists, daily users, and consumers. Creating and establishing a city brand on the global creativity map requires combining arts, culture, technology, and entertainment. Therefore, cultural events, festivals, landmark buildings, and social life have critical roles in this branding process. Many authors have underlined the significant risk of city branding, stressing the phenomenon of gentrification related to the housing market, the expulsion of the most vulnerable residents from the city, and the negative effect of over-tourism. However, a recent tendency is a shift from city to neighborhood branding that, operating at the local level, tends to reproduce and redefine the macro-dynamics on a smaller scale.

This paper will explore the creation of a neighborhood brand in two areas; the NoLo district in Milan and the Tomtom district in Istanbul. Both are more than a neighborhood with their cultural events, art galleries, designers, and social networks, and they are in the process of rapid growth and transformation. They are located in the city center and close to the urban megaproject areas. Within five years, the whole NoLo district has been affected by a massive change, led by a cohesive and young group of residents who decided to invest energies in reinventing this area. On the other hand, the creative cluster at Tomtom started as a real estate investment firm's effort to revitalize the neighborhood to create a new cultural center in Istanbul. These events created momentum in bringing together different neighborhood actors and constructing a neighborhood branding process.

The paper aims to investigate how the leap in scale from city branding to neighborhood branding translates into the inhabitants' real life and the place's regeneration process. Furthermore, the research aims to understand whether the presence of an efficient and consolidated structure of bottom-up activism is sufficient, in itself, to avoid the risk of gentrification that often occurs in some city branding processes, not sufficiently integrated into the local neighborhood dimension.

1. From city branding to neighborhood branding

Remaining competitive is a mantra for planners and urban developers investing in cities. The new millennium has been driven by the idea that cities need to develop entrepreneurial strategies to foster local growth (Harvey Mirowski, 2007; Brenner Theodore, 2002) and to set the conditions by which territories could constantly compete with each other. Part of the literature has insisted on the idea that the competition must be played on the level of attracting new lifeblood. In a neoliberal frame, this means new and international investors and companies as well as new populations such as tourists, new citizens, and qualified human capital – so-called talents (Zenker, Eggers, Farsky, 2013; Bayliss, 2007). Based upon Florida's triple T model (2002), cities, to become more global and attractive, had to attract the creative class by providing soft and hard urban conditions, and city branding is one of the means with which this can be showcased. A large part of the debate has revealed that this approach

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has exacerbated urban inequality both in social terms by creating severe forms of poverty and racial segregation (Gotham 2007; Boland 2013) and in spatial terms by creating forms of physical and cultural commodification (Zukin 1996, 2002) generating the process of gentrification (Zukin, 1987; Lees, Slater, Wyly, 2013).

In other words, city branding has become the (in)visible hand that has boosted territorial competitiveness and fostered urban attractiveness. The image of the city, which according to Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009), depends on the effective definition, communication, and management, is one of the main factors that influences a city's competitiveness (Darchen Tremblay, 2010), and investing on it has been seen to pave the way to success.

However, the term brand has never been neutral; Bastos and Levy (2012) stressed that the etymology of the term brand indicates the act of marking materially and metaphorically something to identify and show its possession. The term "brand" originated in a Germanic word meaning "to burn", which also has negative implications. Branding the cattle with the fire helps the breeders to identify them, but at the same time, produces an indelible scar. In the same vein, branding the city creates extraordinary light and, simultaneously, a multitude of shadows that have been deeply explored. In the first place, one of the limits of the place branding debate is that it is deeply embedded into the corporate branding framework, as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005, p. 191) argue, the place brand should be treated as "the whole entity of the place products, in order to achieve consistency of the messages sent". In this way, the city's complexity (as heterogeneity and diversity) dissolves into uniformity and homologation. In particular, city branding tends to reduce place identity to essentially a single-faceted image created directly as a result of urban design interventions (Bonakdar Audirac, 2020). The phrase 'place branding,' which refers to the 'forging of associations' between a location and some desired attributes that resonate with specific target audiences, has become more common in practice-oriented literature. Physical interventions in the city's landscape and communication tactics that pick specific components of local 'identity,' 'history,' and 'culture' can be used to produce the 'forging of associations' (Colomb, 2013). In other words, it might help to obscure the real city through a monolithic urban imaginary made for consumerism purposes (Greenberg, 2000).

Besides, depending on the scale of intervention it might be difficult to develop a place identity which arose from below, through the local community. In fact, the place might be on different territorial scales: place marketing has become commonplace in countries, regions, and cities. Moreover, different scales might imply and trigger different branding strategies and outcomes. Developing, for example, a country's place branding might help to overcome stereotypes and increase the country's reputation, which might be helpful to attract international investors or develop the tourism sector. In particular, the GMI Nation Brands Index designed by Anholt (2002) measures the power and appeal of a nation's brand image. Indeed, using the hexagon model - formed by six dimensions; tourism, culture and heritage, people, export, governance and investment, and immigration - "consumers", around the world see the character and personality of the brand. Differently, it could be the promotion of a regional branding which might help to forge new regional identity in transnational territories (Pedersen, 2004). In both cases, however, the process of creating a place identity is the outcome of a top-down approach that rarely involves the community's voice. The large part of the literature on place branding is particularly focused on the city scale, and this depends in part on the relevant role that cities have in urban competition and in part, as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) argue, this territorial size seems to be more suitable for applying successful techniques for promoting place branding. The Authors, in particular, identify three different assets upon which to build up city branding: identify famous and prestigious individuals that have been born, live or work in the city - personality branding-, giving attention to icon buildings, and thirdly, highlighting events and festivals that are particularly important for the city. In this way, the place's image that might come up will be more closely related to the citizens.

Very recently, however, a limited number of publications have been produced that paid particular attention to a smaller scale of interventions: the neighborhood. It can be argued that this new small-scale approach to place branding might depend on different factors. First of all, neighborhoods are increasingly gaining importance in urban competitions, both in terms of supporting and leading the

urban attractiveness and competing with each other in boosting the housing markets. Cities are increasingly a mosaic of attractive neighborhoods that create their own image and brand. This is nothing new under the sun; neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village in New York or Soho in London have existed for several decades. What is relatively recent is the multiplication of these neighborhoods across the cities. The list of neighborhoods under a gentrification process in almost all cities is getting longer and longer. Indeed, in large part, gentrifiers are staunch advocates of neighborhood branding, particularly in growing cities where the place of consumption has superseded the place of production (Bonakdar, Audirac 2020), endorsed by governmental strategies to intervene in the urban political-economic arena.

Secondly, a larger number of academics and policymakers are increasingly aware that place branding can no longer be understood as devised to support predetermined economic goals but should also include a social dimension (Johansson Cornebise, 2010). In this perspective, the neighborhood scale might be more suitable for the involvement of the local community in branding creation. Thirdly, but not less significant, a smaller scale might be more favorable to meet citizens' participation in building the image of the territory. In place branding, specific local cultures, histories, identities, and aesthetics are picked, sanitized, commodified, and promoted for consumption by target groups such as tourists or high-income locals. The gentrification literature has demonstrated that this process may have severe effects on the locations and social groups involved, as it can result in a loss of authenticity or outright displacement (Colomb, 2013).

There is a growing possibility that branding manipulates the place's culture, history, and social meaning and supports the economic and financial interests of urban elite (Hannigan, 2003). Citizens' participation at the local level is seen as a counterattack to fight against the process of gentrification, city brandification, and other strategies to sell the city. Under the slogan "small is better than big", place branding is rescaling at the neighborhood level to reinvent itself in a more social prospective: more concerned with diversity, more attentive towards local history and culture, more aware of urban complexity.

Understanding if this is only a process of scaling down or a paradigm shift is crucial. As Johansson and Cornebise (2010) have argued, neighborhood branding might encounter the risk of reproducing similar neo-liberal dynamics at a micro-level, and it might undermine the right to the city (Lefevre, 1968) under the guise of locals' participation. Many local actors in almost all cities are working in co-creating a particular atmosphere and performing a neighborhood 'vibe'. Two different, though not opposite, forces are operating to change the image of the neighborhood: one force is more related to the creative and cultural industry, such as the opening of new shops and activities (especially related to the food industry and leisure), and promoting events and cultural performance, the other force is more focused in reclaiming communal gardens, rehabilitating public spaces, creating good opportunities and services. It is unclear if this synergic force is opening a pathway for the re-democratization of the city after a long period of neoliberal urban capitalism or if it's speeding up this process.

2. Methods

In light of the theoretical frame, the paper aims to study the dynamics and mechanisms activated at the neighborhood level to reshape the image of the place, revitalize the local economy, and transform the urban fabric.

Montgomery (2003) has pointed out that neighborhood can be studied by analyzing three main dimensions:

- the economic activities (which includes, for example, the extent and variety of cultural venues and events, presence of an evening economy, including cafe culture)
- the built environment (which includes, for example, fine-grain urban morphology, variety and adaptability of building stock, and the permeability of streetscape)

- the meaning (which includes, for example, important meeting and gathering spaces, area identity, and imagery knowledgeability).

These three dimensions can be seen as the starting point from which the two fieldworks have taken off and then can be used as the skeleton to present the result of the comparative research.

The fieldwork (and TomTom, which started in 2017) is based on ongoing research conducted through a mixed approach, using both qualitative and quantitative investigating tools. On the one hand, institutional documents and data have been consulted. On the other hand, qualitative research has been developed, built on the basis of participatory observation and interviews made with significant qualified witnesses (in particular, residents, real estate, commerce and local associations enterprises in the neighborhoods).

In the case of Tomtom, the fieldwork started in 2017 with the data collection, observations, and mapping studies. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, was conducted in the following years with 30 design studios and art galleries that have moved to Tomtom in the last decade. The age range of the interviewees varies between 25 and 50, and the gender distribution is approximately equal. More specific, in-depth interviews were done with artists such as architects, ceramic artists, fashion designers, antique dealers, and art galleries that have moved in the last years, recently established, or gone out of business. These interviews were held in three separate temporal phases; the first was in September 2018, following the start of the Tomtom Designhood Project; the second was in August 2019, and the last was in June 2021. In the first two periods of study, the interviewees answered questions such as: how long they have been in this neighborhood; where they moved from; why they chose this neighborhood; their predictions about Tomtom for the next five years. In 2021, the neighborhood was revisited. This time, owners of newly opened design shops in the neighborhood and designers who are still there were interviewed again.

In the case of NoLo, the fieldwork has started in 2018 and, as well as for Tomtom, the temporal dimension played a central role for the development of a diachronic analysis, based on the progressive evolution of the perception of the place with respect to different temporal phases, compared to each other. The first research phase has been developed in 2018, with a fieldwork that led to the elaboration of 32 interviews[3]. The following phases have been developed from September to December over three academic years (2019-2020; 2020-2021; 2021-2022), leading to the definition of 80 more interviews[4] and surveys.

The temporal analysis has clearly revealed the importance and intensity of changes that NoLo has gone through in the last 4 years. The fieldwork has been developed involving different kind of actors, mainly related to inhabitants and third sector, non profit and voluntary associations (among them, Giranolo, Off Campus and others).

With regard to the different associations, the main research tool used to investigate their actions and perspectives of the place has been the focus group, useful to involve at the same time different actors. Regarding the inhabitants of the NoLo district, the main tools used for the research have been the semi-structured interviews and the surveys, submitted to several social groups: among them, the old and historical inhabitants of the place, the foreign inhabitants, kinds of city users as for example tourists coming from different Countries, the Lgbtq+ community living in NoLo or frequenting the place, homeowners and tenants, non-resident students between 18 and 30 years old.

Among the many covered topics through surveys and interviews, there have been questions regarding the perception of residents before and after tourism development, the presence and perception of services in the area, its level of hospitality and attractiveness, the different perceptions of borders and the different identities of the wider area of NoLo, the different levels of satisfaction with life, regarding the relationship with the place and its inhabitants, the different phases of transformation, regeneration and gentrification of the place.

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[3] This first phase of research was conducted by F.A. Gavezzotti and developed with an ad hoc Master's Dissertation.

[4] These interviews have been conducted during the Urban Marketing study course of the university Milano Bicocca.

The surveys have been developed using the Web survey (CAWI – Computer Assisted Web Interview) method, based on questionnaires provided to the respondent with a link, in a panel, or a website and disseminated electronically. Some of the surveys, mainly focused on foreign people and on tourists, have been written in five different languages (Italian, English, French, German and Chinese). To this end, the access to the closed Facebook group of *NoLo residents Social District* has been a fundamental tool that allowed to reach a wider and more specific user base (the total respondents were 312 people). Furthermore, a significant opportunity concerned the collaboration with *RadioNoLo,* the official radio of the neighborhood.

3. NoLo TomTom: the creation of new identities

The two investigated neighborhoods have been going through a process of renaming. The process of labeling a place is strongly connected with creating a new identity. However, the creation of a new identity, as it has been argued, might risk manipulating the culture, history, and social meaning of the place. It would be naive to say that residents' engagement might solve the problem; probably, it might instead reduce the risks. However, reconstructing the process that has led to the new name might help to understand how this new identity is shared within the local community.
The area now acknowledged as NoLo (Figure 1) was historically affected by a significant industrial development, which has led to considerable demographic and residential growth due to the migratory waves of workers from all over Italy. In the 1930s, this part of the city was thus characterized by workers' houses, railing and small factories, warehouses and restaurants, artisan workshops, and recreational clubs. In the second half of the 1960s, this Milanese neighborhood strengthened its identity as a working-class neighborhood, hosting new migratory flow from east and south of Italy in new public housing. In the last twenty years, new migratory flows from non-European countries (35% of the total residents, Istat, 2011) led to a radical change, creating a melting pot of cultures that today represents, at the same time, one of the characterizing elements of the area but also the cause of increasing perceptions of fear, danger, and insecurity among its historical inhabitants. The same happens with children, as demonstrated by the 30 and over nationalities coexisting in the same school located within the *Trotter* park, which has become a significant cohesion place in the area.

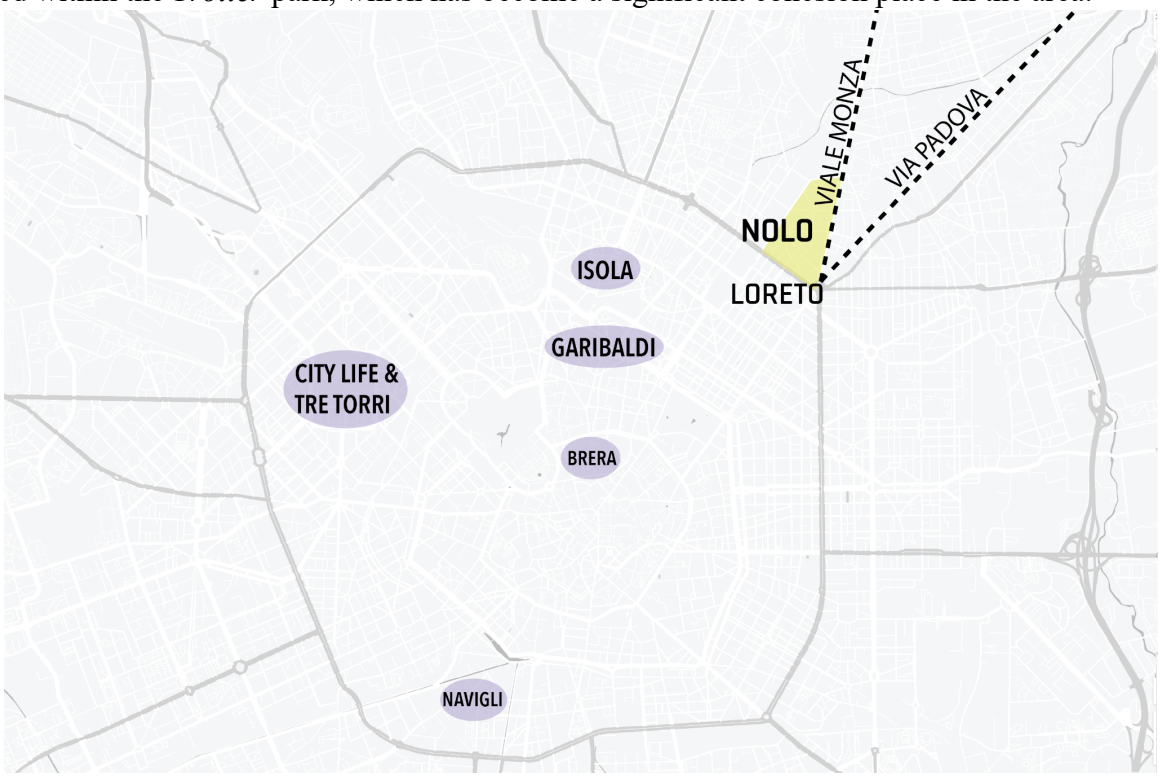

Figure 1: The location of NoLo in Milan

The process of deindustrialization, together with the different migration waves, has caused the consequent collapse in residential prices. However, the significant architectural value of the area and the strategic location, close to the city center and very well connected, have contributed to activating a gentrification process. In fact, the area has gradually begun to attract new categories of inhabitants, including young students, artists, hipsters belonging to the creative class, turning the area into a fertile ground for developing innovative projects and events.

> «The change of clients is due to the fact that many rental contracts belonging to foreign residents have now expired without being renewed. So real estate agencies have started to renew all the empty apartments, sending or renting them especially to employees working downtown. NoLo, for them, is a convenient area because they can reach the center of Milan very quickly. The preferred target of inhabitants is thus made by young people of 25-30 years old, with 60% of the gay community» (NoLo, commerce, 2018).

As a result, in five years, the entire district has undergone a massive change, initiated spontaneously, going from an anonymous suburb to one of the trendiest neighborhoods in Milan, ideally responding to the emerging "City of 15 minutes" that, based on functional and relational proximity, allows to generate social relations, producing shared identities and communities (Manzini CeinarMariotti, 2021).

This social, economic, and physical transformation that has occurred has been marked and supported by the creation of a new name: NoLo, an Acronym for "North of Loreto". In 2012 the name NoLo was invented by a group of architects of the area, hence the definition in English "NOrth of LOreto", coined for fun in the wake of the SoHo (South of Houston Street) district of New York and becoming in 2016 a recognized label, until its official approval on 2019 with the PGT (Piano di Governo del Territorio). Due to its innovative solid charge and the ongoing urban regeneration process, NoLo has begun to attract the attention of the media, showing itself as a multi-ethnic and inclusive place, as well as a reference point for the Milanese nightlife and the LGBTQ+ community, counting the presence of numerous gay-friendly clubs.

In the case of Tomtom (Figure 2), the neighborhood branding process, although being the outcome of real estate-led gentrification work, is in practice strongly connected to its historical background, cultural richness, and being a point of attraction from the past to the present. This neighborhood takes its name from the Tomtom Kaptan Mosque, built by Tomtom Mehmet Kaptan in 1592. The neighborhood's name, formerly called "Tomtom Kaptan", was later used only as "Tomtom". Instead of creating a new name in this neighborhood, as in NoLo, the investors introduced the neighborhood's own name as a strategic tool for urban regeneration. This strategy strengthened the idea of a comeback of the neighborhood, which the project aimed to return to its lively old days, by a real estate company. The investors and creative community of Tomtom have been involved in promoting the branding process, thus reinforcing and consolidating reclaiming the neighborhood's name.

Figure 2: The location of Tomtom in Istanbul

The different strategies used to name the place might be connected with the different socioeconomic backgrounds of the area. Tomtom is located in Beyoğlu, one of Istanbul's most historical and touristic spots. It has hosted many embassies, consulates, churches, monasteries, foreign schools, hotels, and buildings as the first examples of European-style apartment buildings. Considering the population of this district, it is seen that Italians, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, and a small number of Turks lived here in the past. In the 19th century, in parallel with the modernization of Istanbul, businesses, shops, and banks began to take place in Galata and Beyoğlu. Due to the population increase observed in Beyoğlu during this period, housing shortages and land prices increased. This situation caused the Muslims to move to other places, and as a result, non-Muslims started to settle in Beyoğlu. During this period, the wealthiest neighborhood in Beyoğlu was Tomtom, where Europeans lived. Since the 19th century, a rich social and cultural life began to develop in Beyoğlu; coffee houses, casinos, and restaurants were opened; performances such as theater and concerts and entertainment such as invitations and balls were organized. The rich social and cultural life that Beyoğlu offers and the "modern" atmosphere have gradually changed due to various social, political, and economic reasons. First of all, in the 1950s, the non-Muslim population living here went abroad for various reasons, and the collapse began in this district. Thus, the days when Beyoğlu was a center of commerce, art, and culture were long gone. As the attractiveness of Istiklal Street decreased, the population structure of the neighborhoods started to change completely. By the 1980s, ways to eliminate this collapse began to be sought, and efforts were made to make this place a center of trade, art, and culture again.

The branding process, in this case, was linked to the restoration of many historical buildings in the area by the Krea Real Estate company and putting them into use with various functions such as luxury residences, event spaces, design stores, and pop-up galleries. This company had done a project, Tomtom Designhood, which initially started as a real estate investment project when Krea Group invested in 2013. Then it evolved into creative neighborhood projects such as Marais in Paris and Soho in London with the discovery of the region's creative potential. The chairman of this real estate company, expressed the project with these words;

> «When we started investing five years ago [2013], the neighborhood was full of old, run-down, abandoned buildings. (..). We have come to this day by collecting 17 buildings one by one around three different courtyards» (Tomtom, real estate, 2017).

In the last decade, Tomtom Designhood has held multidisciplinary design events and invited everyone to come and discover this creative area through pop-up events, food, drink, and art and design exhibitions.

3.1. Symbolic dimension and conflict

The first dimension identified by Montgomery (2003) as a strategic tool in order to analyze a neighborhood is related to the "meaning" of the place and its identity.
For its particular history, the rhetoric of naming the place with the acronym NoLo has played a central role in the construction of landmark images associated with the area, transforming its own name into a strategic tool for urban regeneration. Today several projects developed in the neighborhood are named after "NoLo", such as the BienNoLo Design Event project, the neighborhood voice RadioNoLo, and the university project Off Campus NoLo. Tomtom also has a similar process to turn into a brand. In recent years the name "Tomtom" is mainly used in the projects, building names, and design events held in the neighborhood, such as the Tomtom Designhood project, Design on Tomtom Street event, Tomtom Red, Tomtom Corners, and Tomtom Suites buildings to recreate itself as a desirable place due to investments. Furthermore, it is widely promoted by designers and real estate investors on social media.
With this approach, it becomes crucial to define the borders. Identity expectations, perceptions, and sense of belonging might differ from street to street within the same neighborhood, and invisible lines might divide the area into different parts. In the case of NoLo (Figure 3), the neighborhood's core is shaped like a "diamond"[5] and a more significant extension[6]. These territorial delimitations identify two different worlds that travel at two different speeds, inhabited by different populations, one more wealthy and the other socially weaker: "In NoLo, there is a part called NoLo Malibù, beautiful, liveable, prettier, where many clubs have opened, and a certain positive and cool image of the place has settled in; on the other side of Viale Monza, from Via Pietro Crespi to Via Padova, there is NoLo Beirut, where such image doesn't exist." (NoLo, commerce, 2021). Viale Padova, in fact, is highly multi-ethnic and characterized by a strong identity, hardly comparable to that of NoLo, considered the beating heart of the neighborhood:

> «There are two contrasting visions: Via Padova on the one side and NoLo on the other. At NoLo, there are cultural and creative activities and designers. While Viale Padova is also known for integration problems, urban conflicts, etc. Some inhabitants of Via Padova say: "why should we get together with those of NoLo, who do not need anything; it is Via Padova that most needs help; we cannot waste our energies; we should work just on Via Padova» (NoLo, commerce; 2018).

This dimension causes evident consequences on the perception of social and spatial exclusion concerning specific parts of the city and social categories. The strict division between the two parts is also clearly evident through the associations active in the area, such as those of traders, one for Viale Monza and one for Viale Padova, rather than the initiatives of social streets, divided between the "NoLo Social District" and "Via Padova Viva". According to some interpretations, such a duality could represent a risk for the strength of the neighborhood brand, based on a conflictual vision on "what is NoLo" and "what is out of NoLo". Anyway, this paper argues that such a duality, showing a plural dimension of different identities and representing more social forces active in the area, should instead be considered as an opportunity for the neighborhood, countering a simplified approach of the city branding who sees complexity not as an asset but as a threat.

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[5] The Diamond is centered in Piazza Morbegno, between Brianza Avenue for the south, the railway tracks for the west and the north part, and Leoncavallo Street for the eastern boundaries.
[6] It includes Viale Monza to the west and Viale Padova to the east, reaching the Martiri della Libertà and Cimiano park to the north.

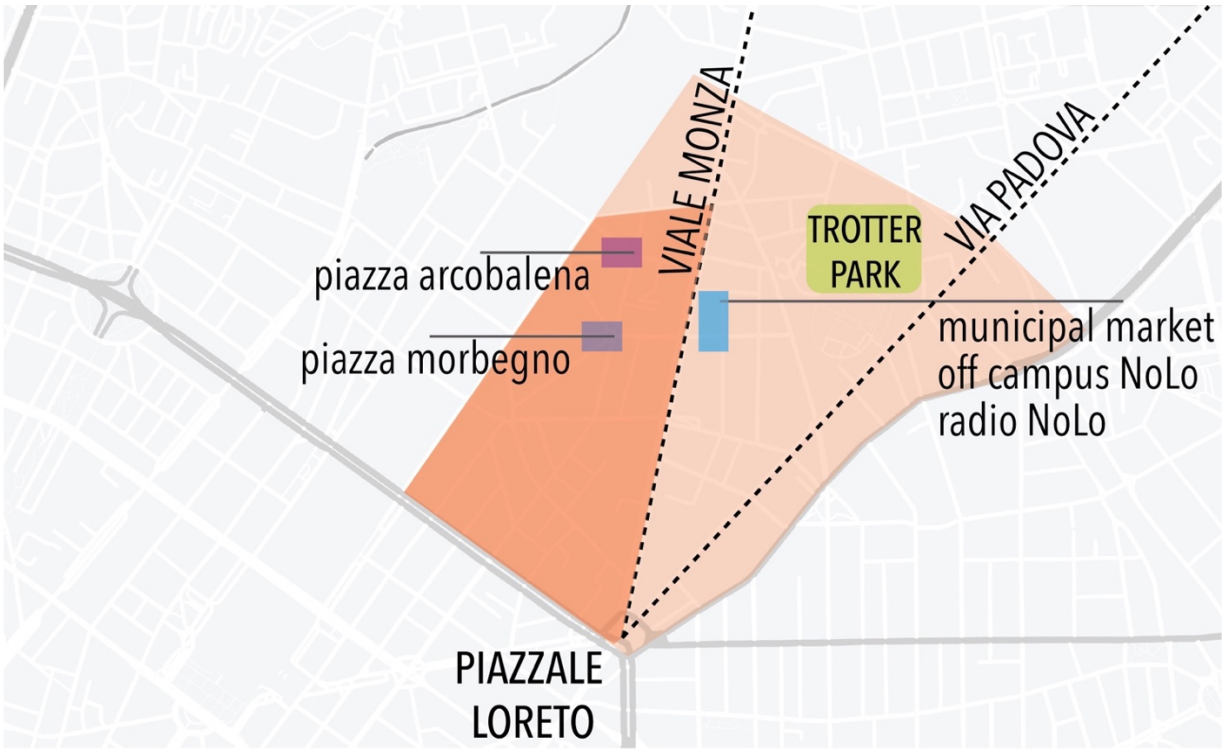

Figure 3: The case of NoLo

The case of NoLo shows how the rhetoric of a place could be subjected to over-narration phenomena, with the consequent risk of losing control between the vocation and the characteristic identity of the place, as well demonstrated by some “symbolic places" of the area, such as Piazza Spoleto, now renamed as Piazza Arcobalena. As for “NoLo”, the name Arcobalena is charged with symbolic meanings, from the symbol of the whale (Balena), the logo of the district, to the reference to multiple colors (Arco- for the rainbow) and therefore to diversity in its multiple dimensions. As part of the “Open Squares” municipal project, the Arcobalena square was transformed in 2019 from a dangerous unregulated crossroads into a pedestrian area, a meeting place to encourage social connections, with ping pong tables and benches and colors. A similar story has happened with the outer surface of the Tomtom Corner (Figure 4) building, which was used as one of the event venues and was being renovated according to the event's theme. In this way, it became pretty remarkable for both event participants and the residents. However, as Tomtom Corner was designed as a new living center within the scope of the Tomtom Designhood Project, it was demolished in 2019 and, therefore could not continue to be used for activities and social connections. Then, they started to use the Tomtom Red building for different events, special promotions, and invitations in fashion, art, gourmet, culture, and music in 2016, after the restoration process was completed. It is located at the entrance of Tomtom Kaptan Street, a public street located in front of the Italian High School. This street was also used as a public event area.

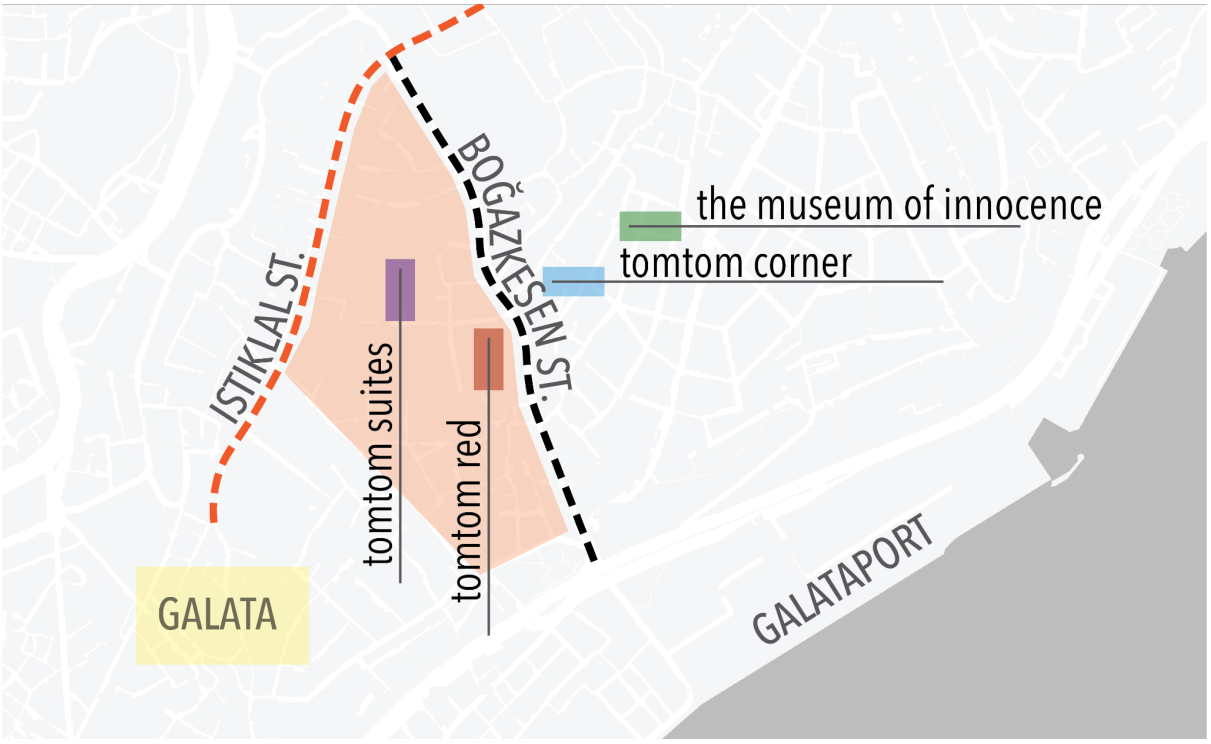

Figure 4: The case of Tomtom

In addition to the substantial symbolic value of the square in NoLo, inhabited in different ways by different populations, piazza Arcobalena also represents a place of contrasting tensions, passing from an "attractive" to a conflicting place. While NoLo represents a place where attractiveness risks becoming the main cause of the crisis, taking a problematic drift to control, Tomtom had similar challenges at the beginning of the branding process. Because it was open to everyone, anyone could enter the Tomtom Corners building and participate in the events without control. Thanks to this strategy, they could announce Tomtom as a new brand. Nevertheless, since 2018, ticket sales have started participating in these events. Moreover, as a result, the number of participants in the events decreased as well, as the inclusive spirit of the neighborhood started to fade. Various individuals and institutions have criticized these design events, which were put forward with the idea of "accessible art for everyone", due to the purchasing tickets to visit the exhibition.

> «Suddenly everybody must come to have a beer in Piazza Morbegno, which is happening in many other parts of the city». (NoLo, Commerce, 2018).

As clearly emerged from the participatory observation and interviews in both cases, this tension is expressed in the different use of the public spaces, related to the different moments of the day and the different populations that pass through it. Each of them gives different meanings to the place, directly related to the sense of belonging and community dimension. During the day, the places are experienced by families - due to the presence of the schools – as well as by workers and traders, offering opportunities for exchange, mutual knowledge and interaction between different inhabitants and cultures and also generating a spillover effect of expansion of the phenomenon to surrounding areas. In the evening and at night, however, the square becomes the hub of the nightlife and the central point of aggregation and meeting, also causing negative effects that could be compared, in some way, to these related to over-tourism risks. In Tomtom, there are no such squares or nightclubs open at night, like in NoLo. However, in the case of Tomtom, it is possible to talk about a more serious risk of over-tourism. Since Tomtom is the strongest pedestrian connection between Galataport and Taksim - Istiklal Street, almost all tourists commuting between these two areas pass through Tomtom. With the completion of the Galataport project in 2021, cruise ships started to dock at the pier. For example, the capacity of a cruise ship arriving in April 2022 is more than five thousand. Moreover, more than 200 cruise ships are scheduled to arrive at the port annually. Considering that Galataport is only a 10-

minute walk from Tomtom, it is inevitable that Tomtom will soon face the danger of over-tourism, like NoLo or even more.

3.2. Economic Dimensions: from regeneration to gentrification

Montgomery (2003) highlighted the second dimension for investigating a neighborhood regarding its economic activities, including the extent and variety of cultural venues, events, presence of an evening economy, café, culture and more.
In this regard, the urban transformation of NoLo was perceived in a very different way by the various social actors involved: the interviews, in fact, highlighted how a large part of the residents previously settled in the neighborhood, as well as non-resident workers, experienced these transformations as a positive process of urban regeneration (except for some complaints about excessive night-time disorder); for the inhabitants who settled later, this transformation would have represented, instead, the beginning of a complicated and exclusive process of widespread gentrification, caused by an initial settlement of a new creative class, followed by a relative increase in places of consumption, an increase in the price of real estate set by real estate agents and the subsequent establishment of a new class of wealthier inhabitants. As emerged from some interviews, many "aspiring inhabitants" who work in the neighborhood and who have tried to rent a house following its transformation have not been able to find affordable houses for rent due to the rapid increase in the cost of living housing and the consequent expulsion of the most vulnerable residents.

> «NoLo, for me, represents a concern because those who started did not imagine that it would come to this, and I fear that NoLo will become more and more like Paris» (NoLo, enterprise, 2018).

Some people also denounced the perception of a change in the settled population of NoLo in recent years, characterized by younger inhabitants and a higher percentage of Italians. None of the foreign residents interviewed, in fact, settled after the neighborhood transformation, which became more expensive and less accessible, especially to the category of immigrants. The residential gentrification process is also the cause of severe changes in the urban fabric of the place: an example is the ex-factory Giovanni Cova amp in Via Popoli Uniti, a space of extreme architectural value that, following the transformation process of the neighborhood, was demolished by the owner for the construction of new residences, certainly more profitable.
In recent years, especially after the announcement of megaprojects and investments, Tomtom has shown signs of early-stage gentrification by comparatively cheap real estate values and its proximity to main touristic spots in Istanbul. In the interviews held at Tomtom, it was determined that various social groups interpreted this transformation process differently. The current Tomtom neighborhood appears as a complex area with traces of the past and the creative class that moved here with the investments and transformation process in recent years. The effects of the urban transformation and renewal processes carried out recently, especially around the district within the borders of Beyoğlu, such as Galata and Cihangir, spread to Tomtom. The residents who could not hold on in these gentrified neighborhoods saw this area as a place of refuge. In 2004, with the government's announcement of the Galataport Project, a vast price hike was seen in the real estate in this neighborhood and its immediate surroundings. While this situation generally results in gentrification in urban spaces undergoing renewal or transformation in many districts of Istanbul, an unusual process can be observed here. With an interesting paradox in the face of rising real estate prices due to the urban renewal process, neighborhood residents have managed to hold on to the neighborhood while they were expected to be excluded from the area. One of the reasons for this situation can be interpreted as the continuity of a strong neighborhood culture in this area, especially in Tophane, dating back to the Ottoman period. In addition, another reason can be explained by the fact that the neighborhood's people are property owners, not tenants. The residents, whose properties are valued

by the rising real estate prices in the neighborhood, want to keep their properties; the constant appreciation of their property is adequate.
It is possible to explain this situation because the old residents were not separated from the elite/bohemian people coming from outside. With the tensions that started due to this, several cultural, ethnic, and class space sharing problems emerged between the old and new residents in the neighborhood. In this process, the residents reacted to the art galleries opened in this area and to the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and there were even events that required police intervention during the opening events of some art galleries.
In Nolo, from the commercial point of view, the commercial structure of the place reflects the social changes taking place, where various African, Asian, and South American communities and shops offer an international and multi-ethnic dimension, with products from all over the world. At the same time, however, a progressive change in commercial activities occurs, where the Egyptian baker, the Middle Eastern pastry shop, the Chinese tailoring, and the kebab seller are joined by the emergence of new design shops, art galleries, cafes, showrooms, etc. Some traditional commercial services are transformed into trendy "concept stores", where instead of clothes, "sensory experiences" are sold; instead of flowers or bicycles, both are also sold in pairs, promoting alternative lifestyles and consumption, which become new builders of community, in particular for the "young creative" classes (Ley, 1996). The transformation of the real estate market is thus directly linked to a commercial-led gentrification process (Zukin *et al.*, 2009). In this context, buzzwords such as "creativity" and "social community" become central tools of urban "attractivity", able to activate new regeneration programs and relaunch new territorial marketing policies.

3.3. Between urban policies and micro-projects

Finally, the third and last dimension pointed out by Montgomery (2003) is related to the neighborhood's built environment. To this proposal, the process of urban regeneration that has transformed the image of NoLo in the last ten years represents an exciting case study as it started almost entirely through the bottom-up activism of its inhabitants, especially young people attracted by low rents and a lively atmosphere. Starting from a rooted proactive associational fabric of informal groups, a driving element has been the creation of the online platform known as NoLo Social District, an enlarged Social Street born in 2017 that today has over 11,000 subscribers, which defines NoLo as an open, inclusive place, based on social cohesion and solidarity, creating connections and new relationships between the inhabitants.

> «Behind the Facebook community, there are also people who actually forge relationships in a very genuine, authentic way and, actually, I like this area very much because it feels like living in the countryside. I am from Milan and I have always suffered from not even knowing the name of my neighbor. Here you greet everyone and we also help a lot in opening the business, even similar businesses have never been antagonistic but have always been very careful to help». (NoLo, commerce, 2018).

Through NoLo Social District, multiple locally-based micro-projects, proximity initiatives, and participating processes such as enhancement of festivals, cultural events, and design events coming from local actors, cultural associations as well as individual entrepreneurs have been activated. Such events are hosted in different abandoned spaces (factories, workshops, warehouses) that have now turned into shops, venues for events, and innovative "third places", defining a transition from online virtual knowledge to an offline physical human dimension.
Among them, WeMi, an urban project spread across the city for local welfare with a base also in NoLo, aimed at enhancing human relationships and local resources; the "diffused neighborhood concierge", developed on an example of a Parisian newsstand aimed to offer useful services to the inhabitants and developed in NoLo through several bars, restaurants, markets that offer different services; the "spesa sospesa" a voluntary initiative aimed at helping the most fragile families by

offering a weekly shopping with products coming from the Municipal Market in viale Monza 54; "Radio NoLo" a non-profit neighborhood radio born in 2017, hosting also the project "Neighborhood vocabulary", which organizes discussions between different social and professional actors on key words central for the neighborhood, such as space, decay, sense of belonging, memory, in order to trigger concrete transformative actions for the neighborhood through co-design fiction; more events are added, such as neighborhood gardens, night bike rides, neighborhood breakfasts, open-air cinema, GiraNoLo (a group that organizes guided tours), "NoLo for kids" and more. At the base of these dynamic realities are key winning elements such as the proximity dimension, density, and diversity of activities. A number of such bottom-up projects have been submitted to municipal calls becoming collaboration agreements (patti di collaborazione), participatory budgets (bilanci partecipativi), or district plans (piano dei quartieri).
To such spontaneous realities, more structured interventions are added, such as "NoLo Off Campus", a container of activities born in 2018 to strengthen the presence of the Politecnico in the city of Milan, offer skills for the territories, activate collaborations with local realities and multidisciplinary partnerships with other universities.
One of the main reasons Tomtom has become so popular and has gained brand value and increased rental prices in recent years is that there have been speculative discourses about Galataport and Tomtom Designhood Projects. The most important feature of the district is that it hosts the dock where the city carried out the shipping trade with Europe throughout history. For many years, it has been discussed what functions will be given to the historical Galata Port and the area it surrounds, how to use the area in line with the principles of public interest, and how and by whom the actors here will be shaped.
According to the results of the interviews, the negative results of this bottom-up process, which can be described as different from NoLo's, can be seen. This branding process takes place at Tomtom in an elitist and restrictive manner, completely under investors' control, affecting upper-class users and tourists. The designers in the neighborhood complain about this situation; they especially mention the lack of public support:

> «Tomtom Designhood project was performing well, but they commercialized it a lot; of course, they moved in a different direction. This went beyond social purpose. Therefore, they could no longer achieve the old efficiency. They started selling tickets and raised rents. I advised them to involve the municipality and open a place for designers who cannot afford to rent a place. However, it didn't happen; unfortunately, Beyoğlu Municipality did not show enough care. The first two years were good, yes. It has also brought us good relations commercially. Then, unfortunately, it crashed. What is the purpose of Krea now? They aim to be able to sell the residences they created at Tomtom» (Tomtom, commerce, 2021).

NoLo, however, is also placed in a central urban area of Milan directly related to wider urban regeneration dynamics, defined by a Program Agreement signed in 2017 among the Municipality of Milan, the Lombardy Region, the Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane Group for the redevelopment of the seven disused railway yards existing in Milan (Farini, Porta Romana, Porta Genova, Greco-Breda, Lambrate, Rogoredo, San Cristoforo), which together cover an area of 1 million and 250 thousand square meters, of which about 200 thousand will maintain their railway function. This is Milan's most extensive urban regeneration plan for the next 20 years and one of the most significant projects to regenerate and enhance the territory in Italy and Europe. One of such railway yards is close to NoLo (Greco-Breda) and its development will thus directly influence the neighborhood. Another significant project that will play a central role in the further transformation of NoLo, coming from "Reinventing cities", the international call launched by the Municipality of Milan together with "C40" for urban regeneration in a sustainable way, will be the transformation of the nearby Piazzale Loreto, the most chaotic traffic hub in the city that will become a green square, the symbol of the 2026 Olympic Milan. The 2030 Territorial Governance Plan (PGT) also focuses on enhancing the polycentricity of the city, through various tools, including that of "Tactical urbanism", aimed at transforming the public space

into a place really belonging to its inhabitants through a new shared dimension, promoting cheap, fast, temporary and easy to implement interventions.
Nevertheless, the boundaries between bottom-up and top-down approaches are still not always clear and sometimes controversial:

> «There is no doubt that this NoLo thing has brought back a vision of attractiveness and positivity to the neighborhood. However, this has also represented a threat for some: someone arrives and puts a new name on a territory by dropping content from above as if it were an invasion» (NoLo, local association, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The paper has explored specific urban dynamics on a lower scale: the one of the neighborhood. Tomtom in Istanbul and NoLo in Milan, as well as many other identifying urban areas of the new millennium, have, in a brief period, undergone rapid growth and impacted urban transformation causing an increasing cost of living, as well as significant changes in the commercial structure of the areas. A central aspect of micro-level neighborhood branding that emerged through the comparison of the two different case studies, is related to the critical tension existing between two opposite forces working simultaneously: from the one side, the existence of small-scale projects, usually promoted by local actors through the typically bottom-up process; from the other side, the role played on the local contexts by large-scale urban strategic projects, embedded into broader top-down dynamics. Both cases analyzed showed how this constant tension in constructing a new brand for a place has actively contributed to creating and consolidating new local identities and new narratives that have rapidly and deeply consolidated in both areas. In symbolic terms, this transformation has meant the creation of new storytelling, often built on new rhetoric of the place. At the same time, the research has shown how the presence of structured activism, built on an almost entirely bottom-up participatory process, couldn't avoid raising the risk of destructive gentrification processes currently occurring in both neighborhoods.
From a theoretical point of view, this study aims to determine whether a well-organized bottom-up activism structure is sufficient in and of itself to prevent the risk of gentrification that frequently arises in city branding processes that do not sufficiently take into account the local neighborhood dimension. Because gentrification is not just a housing issue but a process in which new investors change the social class and, therefore, the character of the neighborhood. For this reason, it is necessary to think about this re-identification process of neighborhoods beyond their geographical and political roles. Vital capital forces such as big companies or real estate offices impact the branding process of neighborhoods. However, this should not cause the role of local people in the neighborhood to be overlooked. Different social groups are active cultural and economic actors that must be considered in this branding process.
For further research, the necessity of prioritizing the demands of the local people with a participatory and inclusive approach should be prioritized. In this way, the branding process will be more vital, and therefore, the positive feedback in the neighborhood will increase.

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