

Alice Speaks to Cheshire Cat - Where is Metro Phoenix Going as a Place?

By Mark Stapp, executive director of the Master of Real Estate Development program, W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, March 24, 2014.

"I don't like to say I have given my life to art. I prefer to say art has given me my life."
Frank Stella

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where--' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

'--so long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation.

'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'

A logo is a graphic representation of a brand. Logo designs are intended to evoke a brand's promise: the benefits and experiences consumers expect from the service or product. So, what does the logo of Phoenix say about who we are?

Since the logo for the city of Phoenix is a mythical bird rising from the ashes, what should the world expect from our city? Interpreted positively, we could argue that the phoenix promises resurrection, new life. But what does that say about where we are going? Viewed through the lens of history, the phoenix represents a city prey to cycles of boom and bust – we keep rising from the ashes. We offer cheap land, affordable housing and a business friendly environment, but we are also highly susceptible to economic downturns, which reduce us to figurative ash over and over again. Do we want to be a town whose best promise is that it will get up after inevitably and repeatedly crumbling to the ground?

Setting aside graphic design, the most compelling question our city faces is a business issue. If we were a business we would be trying to define our brand and then crafting a brand promise. But from an economic development perspective I don't think we have a unified brand or brand promise that can be used to create the public policies that will guide our development into a fully mature metro area. We can build a strong brand, but what do we want it to be? Are we a commodity or a community?

An emerging development theory argues that in advanced economies, growth stems less from the acquisition of capital and more from innovation and new ideas. This idea has been part of the discussion in Phoenix but little is done in a comprehensive way to define a vision leverages Arizona's potential to become a center for innovation and new ideas.

The kind of workforce needed in an economy focused on innovation and new ideas is a workforce that demands a dynamic and culturally diverse place that values art and culture, promotes social responsibility and enables social interaction in interesting spaces. Phoenix is a young, growing metro area, but what strikes me about the city is its *lack* of support for arts and culture, and how hard it is to create distinctive, interesting places.

The Brookings Institute hosted a program last year that focused on arts as an underlying principle for the development of advanced economies. The approach depends on civic leadership who influence an array of policy goals, including economic development, urban revitalization, revenue generation, tourism, accessibility and participation, diversity, education, and youth development. Support for the production, distribution, and infrastructure of the arts is critical to success in tourism, attracting business interests, economic development, and quality of life issues. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) encourages a better and stronger understanding of this partnership as well as a reasoned study of and understanding of the inputs and benefits.

So, as we work toward revising our local general plans, defining economic development programs, establishing budgets and determining incentives for attracting and keeping business, we would do well to heed the Brookings study. We should keep our brand and brand promise in mind. Let's rebuild our brand as a place where people want to be - not just a cheap place to do business. Let's create a place where people *expect* to find arts, culture, educational superiority and interesting places. Art and culture will make Phoenix lively. A destination. A hub. A place energized by new ideas, a place where people want to come and stay, a place culture dominates not just cheap land, homes and sunshine.

Let's learn from Alice, and not just go wherever we can.

For more information, call (480) 965-8517, e-mail Mark.Stapp@asu.edu, or visit <http://wpcarey.asu.edu/master-real-estate>.