



BRANDS

IN A REAL ESTATE WORLD

THE NATURE OF REGENERATION

By Tim Lewis

small back room

Creative solutions since 1977



VOL NUMBER ONE:
FIRST PRINCIPLES

Let's be clear from the start. Small Back Room is a branding agency. Our expertise lies in creating brands that play a pivotal role in regeneration projects. The challenge is that both branding and regeneration are complex subjects, full of jargon and open to individual interpretation. Our aim with this thought piece – the first in a series called **Brands in a Real Estate World** – is to explore the role that brands should play in regeneration, why authenticity is key and why there's so much more to branding than logos and colour palettes.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

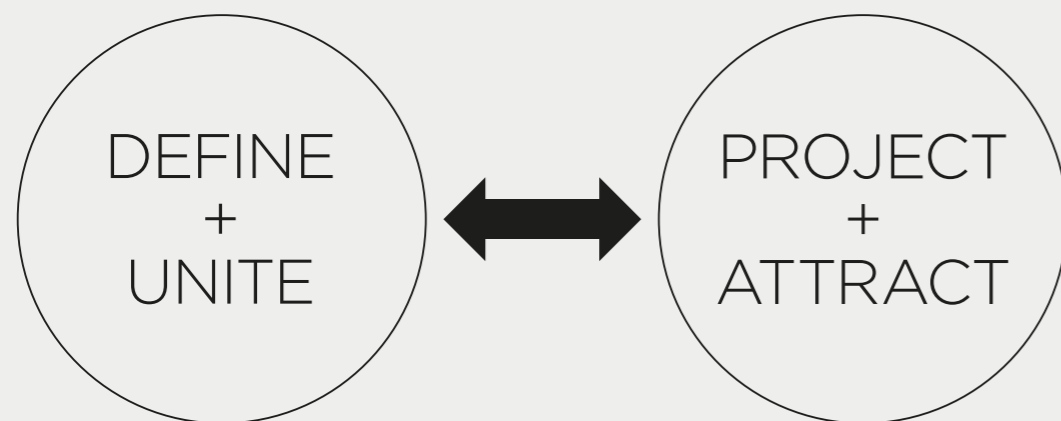
To begin, we researched definitions of regeneration. Interestingly, the first one we found compared urban regeneration to the regenerative processes which occur in nature. What the real estate world does is renew, refresh and grant longevity to places and neighbourhoods, evolving and changing them for the better, thereby improving and sustaining communities. In urban regeneration, natural process has become manmade, and we think that's pretty cool.

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So, where does branding fit in? Well, put simply, a brand is critical to how we create and manage the change that regeneration brings. The more complicated bit is understanding how.

A good place to start is defining the roles of a brand.

We do this by using the following model:



The diagram shows how a successful brand has distinct yet complimentary roles, each is equally important.

Often, too much emphasis is placed on projecting an image of change which is generic or unconnected to the existing place or community – after all, it’s easy to present an image of a great new world. But alone, this won’t create meaningful change. Meaningful change is only created when everyone understands what change really means, and in regeneration, that’s not always easy.

Gentrification is not simply a buzz word; it has become a platform for protest and opposition, which can affect every part of the process. If we are taking a piece of disused land and re-purposing it then this doesn’t always apply. But in the majority of cases regeneration happens within existing communities and places, sometimes creating real physical change and as a consequence upset, so these will need support.

Creating support is not achieved by a new logo, an inventive strapline or clever advertising. It’s achieved by building ownable stories around regeneration. Stories not just about the impending change, but also about why and how it’s happening.

Regeneration projects must create brand stories that take into account the past, present and future of a community. The story must be about how the new is integrated with the existing, and why this is a good thing.

Stories must connect.

Stories are powerful things – we’ve been using them to communicate effectively for over 27,000 years. People react better to stories than to facts. When we hear facts, only two parts of our brain are engaged – the parts that quite literally process language. We’re not suggesting that facts aren’t important, only that stories engage more parts of the brain – senses are activated and we connect and synchronise with the reader.

Stories create emotion and brands are emotional things.

Stories allow the teller to plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into the listener’s brain, which in turn responds by relating what it’s hearing to your existing experience. This means that stories become personal and relevant in our minds as we hear them.

EXAMPLE ONE:
EAST VILLAGE

Let's look at an example. We have led the brand for East Village for over five years. At the beginning we created a core story, which was evidence based but also emotive and it remained consistent in all communication as East Village changed from an Olympic venue to a new neighbourhood. We added different chapters and different slants, but even today, the original story remains at the heart of one of London's most thriving communities.

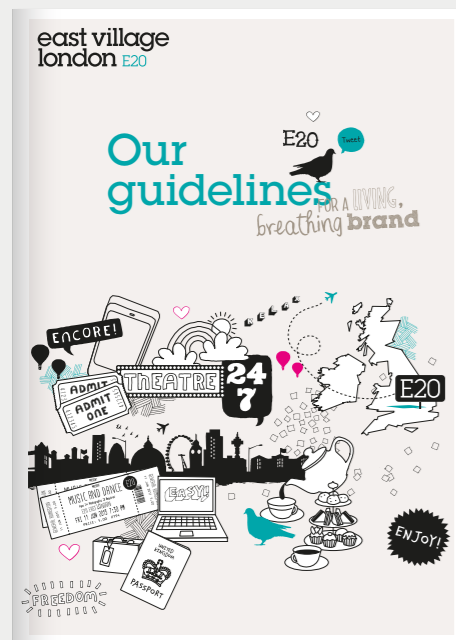
Key to regeneration brand stories is the idea of creating something new that's built on something that already exists. Communicating why this will be attractive to communities.

To achieve this, a regeneration brand story must clearly define and connect the thinking, values and attitudes behind it.

The one thought that guides all regeneration brand stories should be authenticity.

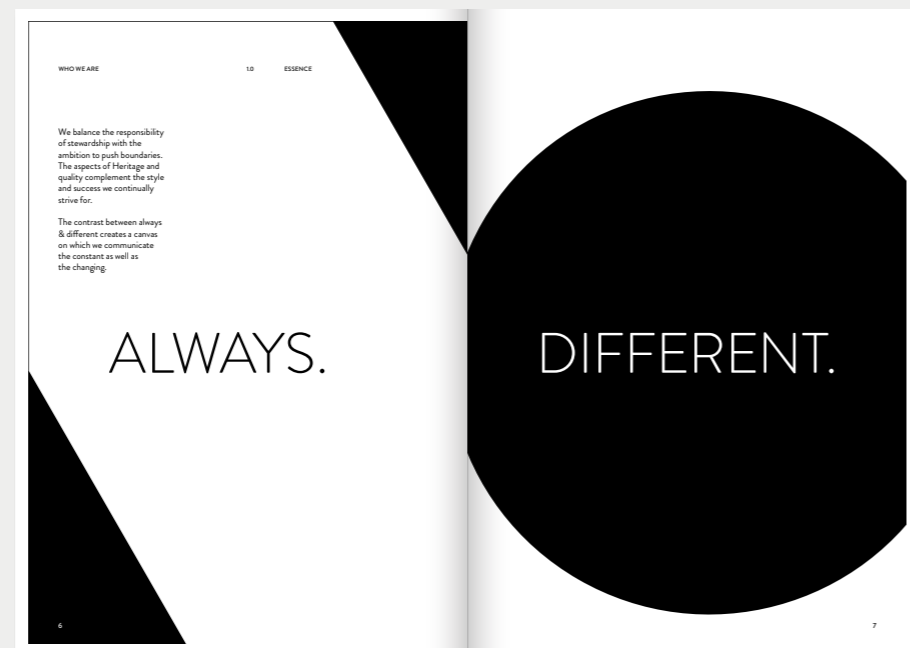
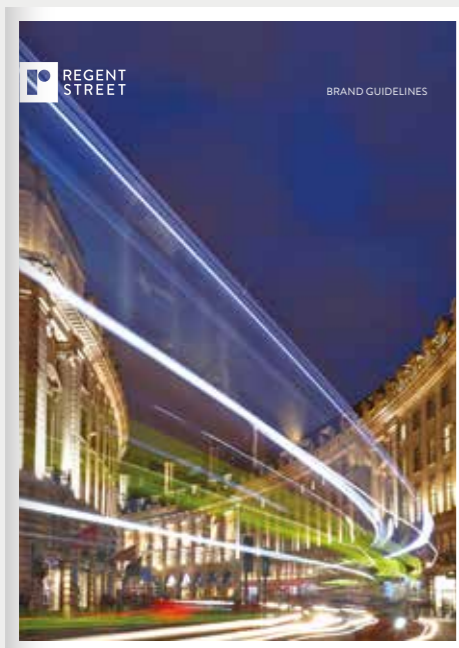
Successful regeneration brands have to think like organisational brands if they are to be effective managers of change.

People buy authenticity. The majority of us love authentic character, and it's this which helps create a marketable sense of place. It's not just about consultation and involving existing communities in planning (that's a given); it's about building a real and relevant narrative built from within the place.



EXAMPLE TWO:
REGENT STREET

Take the following example. We have worked on the Regent Street brand throughout 15 years of development. Our first task was to create a brand essence and associated values. These are still criteria used to make decisions about this ever, evolving destination.



We believe there are three key things that a successful regeneration brand should do:

1. Define the narrative of regeneration – not just the story itself, but how it's embedded, activated and communicated.
2. Be authentic by connecting and representing the past, present and future of the place, and embracing what exists rather than turning their backs on it.
3. Be shaped by their places and markets, but also driven from the inside of the place.

If our brands do these things well and connect people to change through an inclusive narrative, they stand a good chance of gaining community and commercial support.

But getting people to all agree on something as emotive as their living or working community, can be tricky.

Earlier, we established the importance of definition and narrative, but it's important to recognise that creating these things can't be done in isolation.

We are all familiar with the importance of consultation in planning, but how often do we ask about a place's brand, its character and how we can make change fit in? We want the new to fit in with the old, so it must share the spirit of the place and its people.

Engaging with people to understand spirit and culture of an existing place can seem like just another layer of consultation, but if we do it right and local character is reflected back in the overall narrative and the place we create, people will feel a greater sense of ownership, and ownership means support. This is a key principle in the effective management of change.

EXAMPLE THREE:
BOVIS HOMES

To give an example, we worked with **Bovis Homes** on a major development called Stanton Cross that will substantially increase the size of Wellingborough.



Small Back Room worked with Bovis by consulting with the local community and stakeholders, not only on the development, but also to understand the town's brand and how, in turn, the Stanton Cross brand would be part of Wellingborough's overall positioning. This meant that people felt a sense of connection and ownership when the new brand was launched.





OUR PRINCIPLES:

None of this is new thinking. But it is good thinking, and it helps us to establish some key principles in regeneration brand creation.

Win hearts as well as minds... understand and join in with the spirit and character of the place through your narrative and actions, so that people will feel part of, and support change.

Consensus is not just about local people. There will often be a complex stakeholder mix, and while everyone wants what is best for the place, organisational objectives will differ – particularly between the public and private sectors. How to approach this is usually dictated by the situation, but bringing together key stakeholders and getting them to agree on the core aspects of the narrative is essential.

Use change as a rallying point for stakeholders to create strength through consensus and a shared narrative.

Achieving both of these relies on one fundamental question: what are you actually branding?

On the surface, there seems to be two possible answers:

1. The overall place.
2. The change which is happening.

These two are of course related – it's rare for these to exist in isolation, to see one branded without the other. The change we create through regeneration impacts the overall place brand, but in an evolutionary way. If we rush out with a new brand for the overall place before change has happened, we run the risk of creating a false promise which will be difficult to recover from. That's why a narrative is more important than a logo or colour palette. We have to build branding in the right order. A narrative is a flexible, evolving story which can adapt and grow as the positive impacts of regeneration unfold. The aim is to align the regeneration story with the place branding at the right time, so that together they create a stronger overall brand.

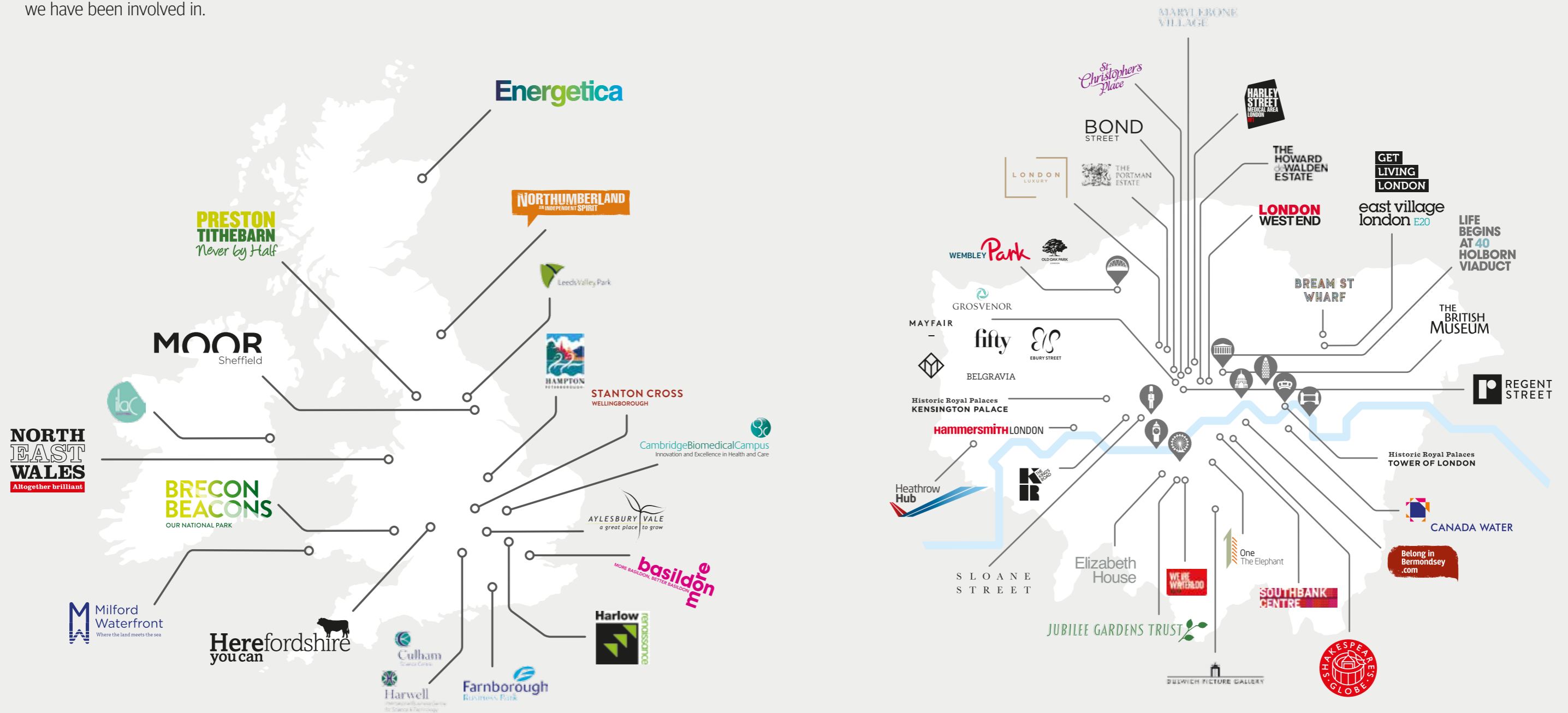
Blend change with place brand at the right time, to create the strongest possible story and attraction.

So, a concluding thought. Urban regeneration not only creates new, man-made things, but revives and sustains natural things. It is complex and multi dimensional, but if we create the right story, and establish authenticity from the inside out, the resulting brand can be key to the process.

In this complex world can you afford not to question your branding approach? Next time we will outline the practical approaches to creating brands, as well as some of the key takeaways from the projects we've been involved in.

the bigger picture

Next time we will begin to outline the practical approaches we take in creating brands and some of the key learning's from the projects we have been involved in.





THANK YOU

small back room

Creative solutions since 1977

5 Wootton Street
London, SE1 8TG
United Kingdom
t: +44 (0)20 7902 7600
smallbackroom.com