



Branding Kristianstad: a case of rebranding and stakeholder engagement

Lisa Källström¹ · Per Siljeklint¹

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Abstract

Kristianstad is today in the process of implementing its third place brand in less than 20 years. The purpose of this case study is to describe Kristianstad's place branding journey with a special focus on the place stakeholders and their involvement and engagement—a case of both rebranding and participatory place branding. The case study describes Kristianstad's three distinct branding initiatives, with focus on their initiators, engagement and implementation. It is based on a collaboration with Kristianstad municipality and a descriptive approach was employed. Empirical materials were collected through interviews and active participation in workshops and meetings. The case describes Kristianstad's place branding journey and illustrates how place stakeholders' previous involvement and experiences influence their behaviours and perceptions of the current place brand as well as the continuing place branding process. The three main takeaways are: past experiences matter; it matters where the place brand initiative comes from; and engagement matters more than profile. Kristianstad municipality's place branding journey shows the difficulties with rebranding a place, more specifically highlighting place stakeholders' engagement over time.

Keywords Case study · Place rebranding · Place stakeholders · Stakeholder engagement · Place ambassadorship

Background

I'm a little, ehh, fatigued as I've been involved in the process for a very long time ... It's evident that I'm biased by having been in the process before and I am also concerned by the fact that it's taking such long time. Of course, you don't see things with completely fresh eyes when you're influenced by your past experiences. I bring some luggage from what we came up with the last time and ask myself: Have you come up with something different than before? (A businessman in Kristianstad, reflecting on his participation in a place branding workshop)

Kristianstad is located in southern Sweden and is a fairly typical Swedish municipality, in terms of size and rankings

by residents, for example. Municipalities in Sweden are responsible for providing a significant proportion of all public services and have a great deal of freedom to organize their activities (Persson 2010). Sweden, as is also the case with the other Nordic countries, has a well-developed democratic system and a systematic approach to citizen participation has evolved with a focus on developing a better working democracy. Kristianstad has around 85,000 inhabitants, around 40,000 of whom live in the city centre. Kristianstad is the largest city in the north-eastern part of the region, and is a commercial city. It is also a university city, with 14,000 students currently studying at Kristianstad University. The city is for example well known for its wetlands which are a biosphere reserve.

The aim of this case study is to describe Kristianstad's efforts and challenges to develop and implement a place brand, with special focus on the place stakeholders' involvement and engagement. The place branding projects introduced in this case differ both in terms of initiators and in terms of how stakeholders are involved and engaged, and thus the case is an example of participatory place branding, a growing research field within place branding (e.g. Kavaratzis 2012; Braun et al. 2013; Källström and Siljeklint 2021).

✉ Lisa Källström
Lisa.Kallstrom@hkr.se
Per Siljeklint
Per.Siljeklint@hkr.se

¹ Kristianstad University, 291 88 Kristianstad, Sweden



Kristianstad is today in the process of implementing its third place brand in less than 20 years. Therefore, the case also describes an example of rebranding, common in practice but rare in studies on place branding (Hakala et al. 2020). As illustrated in the quote above, in this case previous engagements and perceptions are highly present and are influencing place stakeholders' behaviours and perceptions of the place brand as well as the current place branding process.

The case of Kristianstad shows the difficulties with rebranding a place and the importance of place stakeholders' engagement and illustrates an extensive place branding journey, stretching over almost 20 years. Before we introduce the case and Kristianstad's place branding journey, key concepts relevant for this case as well as the methodological approach will be introduced. We will then introduce the three place branding initiatives in Kristianstad, with focus on the place brand platform, the initiators and the place branding process with its involvement of place stakeholders. Thereafter, the three initiatives are summarized and compared and focus is turned to how the rebranding context and previous engagements have influenced stakeholders' behaviours and perceptions. Lastly, conclusions are presented with key takeaways which may be helpful to place brand managers elsewhere.

Key concepts

This case study provides a practical example of participatory place branding. Place branding is increasingly seen as a collective exercise in which various stakeholders together form the place brand, in contrast to being viewed as a managerial or consultant's task (Kavaratzis 2012). As a consequence, participatory place branding is a growing research stream which addresses the involvement of place stakeholders in place branding through participatory methods (Kavaratzis 2012; Källström and Siljeklint 2021; Lichrou et al. 2017). As participation is oriented to increasing input for decisions it becomes important to make the process broadly accessible to and representative of the general public and Aitken and Campelo (2011) stress the importance of a "bottom-up approach" when developing a place brand. Zenker and Erfgen (2014) have introduced a participatory place branding approach where residents are involved beyond merely measuring their associations with their place and actually given the power to influence to content and the goals of branding as well as being involved in the implementation of the place brand. By involving stakeholders in the place branding process in this way, the general quality and effectiveness of place branding can be improved (Kavaratzis 2012; Klijn et al. 2012), the reputation of the place can be enhanced (Klijn and Edelenbos 2012) and the democratic legitimacy strengthened (Kavaratzis 2012).

This case study is also an example of rebranding a place. Rebranding refers to the change between an initially

formulated brand and a new formulation (see Merrilees and Miller 2008). There are few studies on place rebranding, however, Hakalea et al. (2020) found that rebranding a place actually can encourage the residents to become more like owners of the place brand, if the residents are invited to the rebranding process.

Methodological approach

The current paper is a case study and as the aim is to describe Kristianstad's efforts and challenges to develop and implement a place brand, with special focus on the place stakeholders' involvement and engagement, a descriptive approach is employed. The case study is partly based on a collaboration between the authors and Kristianstad municipality. More concretely, one of the authors belongs to a reference group for the brand place since 2021 and a joint research project was also conducted during 2022 which focused on place stakeholders' perceptions of the place brand Kristianstad. The collaboration has facilitated discussions and regular updates about the development of a place brand for Kristianstad as well as enabled collection of empirical material at several occasions in form of observations at meetings and two workshops with invited place stakeholders. Additionally, nine interviews with workshop participants and place stakeholders have been conducted.¹ The interviews gave the stakeholders the opportunity to reflect on the process and on their own and others' perceptions of the place brand. This empirical material is complemented by secondary data and documents from the public archives concerning e.g. *Spirit of Food* and *The Orange City*.

Kristianstad's place branding journey

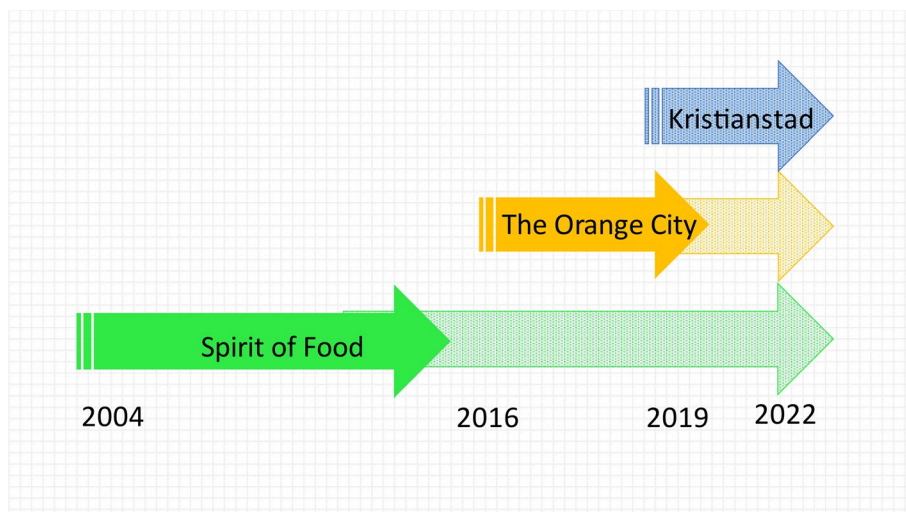
Many municipalities in Sweden started showing an interest in place marketing in the late 1990s, and in the early 2000s Kristianstad municipality began to explore the idea of developing a place brand also for Kristianstad. The place brand *Spirit of Food* was developed by the municipality and launched in 2004. However, the general lack of positive public response and engagement made the municipality transform *Spirit of Food* into a profile for the food sector in the region.

As the need for a place brand in Kristianstad persisted a new initiative was taken around 2014–2015. This time the initiative did not come from the municipality; rather, it grew organically as more and more organizations and place

¹ The interviews were conducted by Carl T. Neldemo and Albert Östman during their thesis work at Kristianstad University. The authors recognize and are thankful for their contribution.



Fig. 1 The place branding journey of Kristianstad



stakeholders gathered around the idea of a new place brand. In 2016 a non-profit organization was created to manage the idea and develop the place brand which by this time had been given the name *The Orange City* [in Swedish: *Orangea staden*]. In 2019 Kristianstad municipality identified a need to develop communication materials about Kristianstad and the question about a place brand again rose within the municipal organization. An agreement was made with the non-profit organization *The Orange City* to take ownership of that place brand and to develop it further under the leadership of the municipality. However, politicians and public officials are not happy about the current orientation of the place brand *The Orange City*. The municipality has therefore started to develop a new place brand, simply referred to as *Kristianstad*. Figure 1 illustrates Kristianstad’s place branding journey with three distinct but overlapping initiatives, all three of which today co-exist.

The first place branding initiative: Spirit of Food (2004–)

Spirit of Food refers to Kristianstad as a place with special feeling for food. The focus on food comes from the area having some of the best farmland in the country. Every day almost every person living in Sweden eats something that comes from Kristianstad, and food from the area is exported to many other places in the world. *Spirit of Food* emphasizes that “a joy for food”, “a zest for life” and “enjoyment” are key words that describe Kristianstad, at the same time as it refers to the region’s long tradition of cultivation, breeding and processing of food. The profile is intended to combine old traditions with innovative thinking and inspiration from around the world (Kristianstad municipality 2022b).

The initiative to develop the *Spirit of Food* brand emerged in the municipal organization in the early 2000s and became an important municipal investment at this

Fig. 2 The logo of Spirit of Food



time. The idea was to profile Kristianstad as Sweden’s centre for food and drink and in 2004, when *Spirit of Food* was launched, it was communicated that *the profile contains the values we choose to highlight and develop to market the brand Kristianstad* (Kristianstad municipality 2005a). The logo for the brand is presented in Fig. 2. At this time different long-term objectives for the place brand initiative existed, such as attracting companies to move to the municipality and become leaders in certain areas of research; but also, having a range of top class restaurants, and the country’s best food in schools.

Spirit of Food was said to represent Kristianstad as a whole and as a geographical place, and businesses and organizations were encouraged to use the profile in their communication. In a summer letter from the municipality in June 2005 the head of business development writes:

The work to profile Kristianstad is in full swing. So far, about 40 companies and associations have registered as users of Spirit of Food. Some have also chosen to register their own unique colour combination of the logo. Now during the summer, the marketing



of our municipality will take place in conjunction with various events. (Kristianstad municipal, 2005b).

The launch of *Spirit of Food* attracted a lot of attention in the media and among different interest groups. Even if there were stakeholders that appreciated the initiative, there were more critical voices heard. The initiative was criticized from the start, both for not being relevant and for not involving key place stakeholders in the place branding process. An external evaluation (Geobrand 2008; Norra Skåne 2008) of *Spirit of Food* in 2008 stated that *the local media has been so decidedly negative about Spirit of Food has contributed to the widespread scepticism*. (Geobrand 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, the participants in the external evaluation expressed that they perceived the project as an entirely municipal project, fully controlled and executed by public officials and politicians. The municipality was also criticized for not putting enough effort into developing *Spirit of Food* after the brand's initial launch.

Spirit of Food still exists even if it has not become the place brand it was first intended to be. It is today described as a profile for the municipality under which they collaborate with businesses, the university and other organizations to strengthen the area's agricultural and food clusters and advertise the region's food culture. The argument for the relevance of *Spirit of Food* has been updated and today the municipality's webpage states (Kristianstad municipality, 2022b), *The purpose of making the Spirit of Food profile visible is to contribute to growth and strengthen the food cluster that exists within the municipality*.

The second place branding initiative: The Orange City (2016–)

The Orange City is a place brand developed to emphasize and communicate all the highlights of Kristianstad. For example, it highlights that Kristianstad is close to everything—the sea, nature, culture and the European continent—and that this proximity makes it easy to live in Kristianstad. Furthermore, Kristianstad is described as a trading city with a rich cultural life and positive pulse. The city and its inhabitants, it says, should be proud to be part of Greater Copenhagen, and of our biosphere reserve, our extensive food industry, and that we are a gateway to the famous Österlen region. *The Orange City* brand is meant to convey the idea of gathering around. This branding campaign should be seen, not as short-term but, rather, as a long-term commitment to connect people and tie things together and characterize Kristianstad as a whole (Den Orange Staden 2022).

The brand originally got its name from the colour of a popular and successful handball team, but today it is said that the colour should above all signal warmth and friendliness. Around 2014–2015 the notion of “an orange city”



Fig. 3 The logo of The Orange City

started to develop and grow. A press release from May 2015, announcing an “orange weekend”, states:

Our message is “Ours is an orange city”, a city with heart, passion and commitment. There are many of us who are passionate about Kristianstad's city centre and the municipality's fantastic community life, and we welcome everyone to participate in the celebration all weekend. Put on something orange and see you in town!

During this weekend the city was decked out in orange, with orange decorations in roundabouts, on buses and trains, and in window displays in the city centre. The event was sponsored by the city centre organization, the trade association, a bank, a local paint shop, and the handball team as well as Kristianstad municipality. The weekend is an example of how key stakeholders in Kristianstad observed the togetherness and positive energy at the handball games and wanted to take advantage of this by creating something that extended beyond the world of sports.

In 2016 it was announced that a non-profit organization, sharing the name of the emerging place brand *The Orange City*, had been created to manage the idea and the place brand and to connect different stakeholders. The board consisted of key actors and local profiles, who all felt the need for a place brand to strengthen the place Kristianstad. During 2017 the organization *The Orange City* arranged several workshops which involved over 100 local actors in leading positions with the goal to develop the place brand platform. A platform was developed, including the logo presented in Fig. 3, and a brand personality expressed in terms of *Warm, Friendly, Welcoming!* [in Swedish: *Varm, Vänlig, Välkommande!*] (Myrdall Bratt Partners 2017). The goal of the organization was, and still is, to develop Kristianstad into a healthy, safe and vibrant city, today and for many generations to come. The mission is to get existing actors to cooperate and to make what is already good in Kristianstad even better. The collective idea is strong and principally the trust in and support of the process and the brand seem to be



grounded in established, strong relationships. It is emphasized that everyone who lives or works in Kristianstad is the heart of the city and thereby has an important part in creating the brand *The Orange City* (Den Orangea Staden 2022).

The third place branding initiative: Kristianstad (2019–)

Kristianstad is a place brand intended to build a common story about the place Kristianstad. The communication materials include a visual brand platform but they also include key words and narratives that can be used when talking about and describing the place. Kristianstad is described in the following way in this material (Kristianstad municipality, 2022a):

On the surface, we offer miles of sandy beaches, lovely sea bathing, distinctive wetlands and lakes. Beneath the surface lies a completely different world. At our location, unique groundwater is collected in Northern Europe's largest groundwater reservoir. So, underground we have a large lake with clean, good water. It's very cool. The proximity to the water means that we actually see water (pretty much) everywhere we turn.

Water in different forms is therefore seen as the unique place characteristic that ought to be used as a defining feature of the place brand. According to the place brand *Kristianstad*, key words for Kristianstad should be *Creative, Proud, Welcoming!* [in Swedish: *Kreativ, Stolt, Välkommande!*].

This place branding initiative can be traced back to 2019 when Kristianstad municipality identified a need to develop communication materials about Kristianstad and a small group of public officials were given this assignment by the municipal director and leading politicians. One of the main reasons behind the identified need for renewal was a survey that showed that Kristianstad was in the bottom range concerning awareness and attractiveness, compared with other, similar municipalities in Sweden. As already outlined above, an agreement was made with the non-profit organization The Orange City for the municipality to take ownership of the place brand; however, already from start the intention was to develop something new. "Orange" was seen as a vague and inexplicit focus and the brand was perceived to exclude the countryside by its focus on the "city". The municipality wanted to develop something that better included the entire municipality and that better highlighted the image and unique features of the place, which was believed to be the water. The municipality contracted two different marketing agencies to help in the process. One produced a movie about Kristianstad and the other produced a new graphic profile including a new logotype and colour palette for the place, as presented in Fig. 4. The place brand handbook that has been



Fig. 4 The logotype of Kristianstad (left) and the colour palette (right)

developed is intended to be free to use for everyone who has a need to communicate about Kristianstad.

At the turn of 2021–2022 the municipality felt ready to move on to implementation. They formed an internal focus group consisting of public officials and an external group of four people who worked as a reference group, the goal being to finalize and implement the place brand. The external reference group soon emphasized the need to engage a wide variety of place stakeholders in order to succeed with the implementation. Consequently, the municipality extended an invitation to a large group of place stakeholders, many of whom had been involved in the development of the place brand *The Orange City* a few years previously, to participate in a workshop about the place brand *Kristianstad*. In the invitation you could read: *Welcome to a workshop where together we find new ways to market our place even better. We do it best together!* However, the interest in participation was low. The initial invitation was for three workshops; however, because of lack of interest only one workshop could be held. There was limited contact with key place stakeholders and the history of difficulties to develop a successful place brand may also have contributed to the difficulty to attract participants.




At the workshop that did take place, 20 people participated, the majority of whom were public officials. The place brand handbook including the new graphic design and logotype was introduced and the movie about Kristianstad was shown. Most of the participants had been involved in the place branding process, but for some, it was the first time they came in contact with the new brand. Both positive and critical voices were heard about the brand. The municipality collected new input and invited the same people to attend another workshop a few months later. Only eight people turned up. The place brand handbook is now available on the municipality's webpage and the municipality has used the profile in some communication; however, currently the implementation of the brand is limited to this.

Where are we now?

The present case illustrates an extensive place branding journey lasting many years and including three different attempts to develop a place brand for Kristianstad. The place brand initiatives in this case differ in terms of content but also in terms of initiators and stakeholder engagement (for



Table 1 Summary of the three place branding initiatives

Place brand/aspects			
Who was the initiator?	The municipality (i.e. top-down)	Key place stakeholders (i.e. bottom-up)	The municipality (i.e. top-down)
How much stakeholder engagement was there?	Not prioritized	Extensive engagement	Limited engagement
What was the initial response from stakeholders?	Criticism	Mostly supportive	Low interest, and fatigue

a summary, see Table 1). Two of the initiatives, the first and the third, were taken by Kristianstad municipality and were characterized by top-down approaches, where a few decision makers to a large extent controlled and influenced how things were done. Consequently, neither of these initiatives has been associated with any substantial stakeholder engagement. In the first initiative, *Spirit of Food*, public engagement was not prioritized while in the third initiative, *Kristianstad*, the involvement came late and resulted in low engagement as the attempt to engage place stakeholders was met by a lack of interest and a general feeling of fatigue. However, the current case also includes an example of a bottom-up approach to place branding: the second initiative, *The Orange City*, was initiated by key place stakeholders in Kristianstad. The engagement of stakeholders was relatively extensive, both in terms of the number of people involved in the process to develop the place brand and in terms of implementation, i.e. how the brand has since been used.

The overall initial responses and engagement from place stakeholders have shifted between the three initiatives. Even if both praise and criticism have been directed to all the place brands, a difference in general opinion can be acknowledged. The first initiative, *Spirit of Food*, was widely criticized, while the last, *Kristianstad*, was mostly met with silence and disinterest. The second initiative, *The Orange City*, triggered a mostly supportive response among the general public although critical voices questioned its relevance beyond the city centre.

Today the three place brands co-exist but have taken fairly different directions. *Spirit of Food* has evolved and is no longer regarded as a place brand but, rather, as a distinct profile for the food sector in the region. *The Orange City* still functions as a place brand and the non-profit organization sharing the name of the place brand is still active, pending the municipality's handling of the matter. The latest place branding attempt, *Kristianstad*, has resulted in a place brand handbook that is available on the municipality's webpage (Kristianstad municipality 2022a). Further implementation is currently under discussion.

The case is not merely a story of three different place branding initiatives; it is also a story of how previous initiatives affect later ones and of the difficulties with rebranding. The case shows how previous experiences and engagements influence participants' current behaviours and perceptions. As an example, the second initiative, *The Orange City*, partly grew from dissatisfaction with the lack of a functioning place brand. Experiences from *Spirit of Food* and the negative consequences of its top-down approach contributed to the open place branding process used in developing *The Orange City*.

Interviews conducted with place stakeholders who attended the last workshop for the place brand *Kristianstad* clearly showed how past experiences and engagements influenced their current perceptions. A strong sense of fatigue was observed and some interviewees even expressed resignation. A local profile who has followed and been engaged in the 20-year-long place branding journey expressed:

I have been to many workshops that are about strengthening and developing Kristianstad's place brand, so there was nothing new ...

Furthermore, in the third (and current) initiative to develop a place brand for Kristianstad, past initiatives were regularly referred to in discussions and the new initiative was compared with previous initiatives and processes. A concrete example of this is how Kristianstad as a food producer came up during the last workshop for the place brand *Kristianstad*, as did the brand personality of *The Orange City*, "Warm, Friendly, Welcoming!" In the interviews, the place stakeholders themselves also expressed how previous involvement affected their current perceptions, as exemplified in the quote in the Background section of this paper.

In an interview with one of the main initiators of *The Orange City*, the disappointment was evident, and clearly connected to past experiences and engagement:

There is a disappointment in Kristianstad municipality, partly because it has taken so long and partly because



it has been so difficult for them to receive and accept ideas. They have persisted to redo so much themselves, of the work we had already done.

Key takeaways

Kristianstad's place branding journey illustrates some of the difficulties and dilemmas in place branding. It also illustrates the importance of place stakeholders' engagement. The current case is an example of both rebranding and participatory place branding as it illustrates how previous engagements and experiences of past place brands influence stakeholders' engagement and perceptions of both the branding process and the place brand. The case leaves us with three key takeaways in terms of what matters in the case of Kristianstad branding.

Firstly, *past experiences matter*. It has become evident, in Kristianstad, that place stakeholders do not easily forget and that they tend to hold on to old initiatives. In attempts to rebrand the place, the coordinators came to learn the hard way that the paper wasn't blank to start with as people recurrently referred to past initiatives. In small places such as Kristianstad, many of the place stakeholders are the same people, year after year, and they show up in different constellations and in different forums. This means that stakeholders' previous knowledge and experiences have to be taken seriously. Past experiences mean that people have to re-learn and assimilate to new initiatives, which takes time and energy. As an example, some residents in Kristianstad today still have a relationship with *Spirit of Food* as a place brand and refer to it in conversations about place branding, even if the municipality today says it is a profile and not a place brand.

Secondly, *it matters where the place brand initiative comes from*. In the current case we have shown how the top-down initiatives have struggled to get engagement and acceptance. The brand *Spirit of Food* was criticized for being a solely municipal product (Geobrand 2008) and the brand *Kristianstad* is currently struggling with its implementation, as the municipality is having a hard time to get its message out and to get people involved. In this case the bottom-up initiative *The Orange City*, which was initiated by key place stakeholders and which to a large degree grew organically, has in general experienced more support and engagement, even if the focus of the brand has been criticized.

Thirdly, *engagement matters more than profile*. In Kristianstad it seems to be less important who has the best slogan or profile; instead, engagement based on trust and good relationships is what appears to be decisive for successful implementation of a place brand. The leading politicians and public officials in Kristianstad may be right that the

focus on water in the place brand Kristianstad is the best profile for the municipality; however, their evident struggle to develop engagement for the brand overshadows the place brand profile and platform. In this case there is a clear difficulty to re-engage place stakeholders and it is evident how not appreciating previous contributions has in some cases killed engagement.

The three brands *Spirit of Food*, *The Orange City* and *Kristianstad* today co-exist in Kristianstad. Still, there are critical voices claiming that Kristianstad does not have *any* place brand and that the need to develop a strong place brand remains. Despite a complicated place branding journey, residents and business owners still express warm feelings for their city and municipality. The many positive relationships in Kristianstad and among key place stakeholders, e.g. notably in the initiative of *The Orange City*, seem to have counterbalanced the negativity and contributed to the remaining wish to develop a strong place brand for Kristianstad. Most of the stakeholders participating in different workshops and in interviews identify themselves as place ambassadors and see themselves as having an important role in determining the reputation of Kristianstad and the municipality's future. The place stakeholders and their engagement will most likely play a decisive role in continuous rebranding efforts and in the development of a place brand for Kristianstad.

Suggestions for future research

As this paper is written as a case study, its contribution is to provide a practical example with several key takeaways. Reviewing the case through a theoretical lens, one might observe different issues. The case could for example be analysed using the service-dominant logic (see, e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2008) as a theoretical starting point, which would put emphasis on co-creation, but also on the co-destruction of value in a place rebranding process (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). The case could also be analysed and reviewed from a leadership perspective investigating the process in terms of relations, communication and trust (see, e.g., Edmondson and Roloff 2008) as a theoretical starting point.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Lisa Källström is a senior lecturer and researcher in business administration, mainly in the field of marketing and place management, at the Faculty of Business at Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden. Her primary research interests lie in value co-creation in the context of place, stakeholder involvement in the work of government, and participatory place branding.

Per Siljeklint is a lecturer and researcher in business administration, mainly in the field of marketing management and organizational development, at the Faculty of Business at Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden. His primary research interests are in change management, design thinking, and organizational development.

