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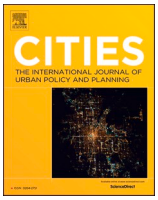

Losing and restoring a place's identity: an historical analysis of Colchester's place brand through the lens of the useable past

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the changeable useability of heritage sites within place branding. This case study of Colchester provides a longitudinal historical analysis of the impact of post-war modernity to recent ideals of pride in place and shows how the useability of historical sites changes. Colchester saw the destruction of much of its historic landscape but has now reengaged with heritage as it continues to rebrand itself as an historic urban environment. Through an historical analysis, this article shows how themes of paternalism and collaboration have impacted the use of heritage in how they present themselves to residents and visitors. The analysis follows the themes of the useable past theory to explore how it can be applied to heritage and urban studies. An understanding of the useability of heritage creates more opportunities for collaboration within urban environments, local authorities, and communities.

1. Introduction

Every town and city has a link to the past (Reynolds et al., 2024). Yet our understanding of how the past and the historical landscape can be effectively used in place branding is limited. As Pendlebury and Porfyriou (2017) have argued, heritage serves many purposes in urban regeneration and research suggests that ignoring heritage has a detrimental impact on image and identity (Amin, 2018). In the place branding context, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2011) have argued that heritage continues to have resonance. Yet, place branding research has traditionally focused on places forming new identities based on post-industrial economic environments (Bradley et al., 2002). Kaefer (2021) discusses place branding as being inevitably future-oriented, contrary to While's (2006, p. 2416) argument that, 'an unwanted legacy (heritage) in one era turns out to be a valued social and economic asset [in another]'.

Whereas place branding research has examined modernism in historic town centres in the post-war period and branding in post-industrial towns (Asprogerakas & Mountanea, 2020; Vanhoose et al., 2021), little has been done regarding why historic places lose their identity and how this can be reclaimed for present and future purposes (Ashworth, 2016; Li et al., 2021). This article aims to address this imbalance to show how place identity has been negatively impacted, but also highlight the importance of the past in contemporary place branding. Often, when research has been concerned with the interconnectivity between heritage place branding, it has focused on portraying branding as a synergistic instrument alongside top-down strategic planning initiatives and spatial governance processes that necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the cultural landscape (Porter, 2020; Van Assche et al., 2019). Therefore, this article uses an historical approach to connect place branding and urban history approaches to show how and why the useability of heritage in branding continuously shifts and fluctuates throughout time and space to help inform future policy analysis and decision-making.

Successful place branding approaches have been concerned with identity recognition via place associations and the creation of a prominent place image (Boisen et al., 2018), based on a place's unique anchors and characteristics (Swain et al., 2024). To this end, the use of heritage has become an important interlocutor between notions of symbolic value and place branding associations (Michelson & Paadam, 2016). For example, Pedeliento and Kavaratzis (2019) have shown that place brands are molded by the intrinsic tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, such as the past, buildings, culture, geography, language and people. This is evident by research by Boland (2008) who demonstrated how the construction of Liverpool's image was shaped by historical events and processes, which defined the perception and image of the city. Hassen and Giovanardi (2018) demonstrated how Leicester's image was defined by its post-industrial image that could not compete with

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Nottingham's historical story. They ask the question 'as to how prominent British history should be in the future development of the Leicester brand' (ibid. p.50). This question, however, needs to be broken up to differentiate between local and national histories; expanded to include towns across the UK; to help us identify the useable pasts in place branding; and showcase how the useability of a place image changes over time.

There is little understanding in academic and policy research of how and why the useability of heritage and the past within place branding fluctuates throughout time. Rather work focuses on the immediate economic and social benefits of heritage (Historic England, 2014, 2020); but rarely explains why useability shifts. Aceska and Mitroi (2021) have argued that heritage professionals do not understand how their decisions regarding heritage affect and continue to impact people and places across the EU. Scott et al. (2020) have suggested that historic branding has been conducted by local authorities who mobilise heritage narratives as a form of top-down place branding, and how these can become part of a 'selling the city' discourse that stifles citizen engagement and local pride. However, Jain et al. (2022) argue that successful heritage-oriented place branding is developed at the intersection of history, geography and community meanings regarding place image and identity. This article helps to increase our understanding on the relationship between heritage, culture and place from the 'individuals' sense-making and sense giving vis-à-vis the place' (Jain et al., 2022: p. 83), and builds upon Pendlebury et al., 2014 on post-war reconstruction to highlight how the theory of the useable past explains the useability of heritage in the branding of place throughout time.

The article uses an historical approach to explore the usability of heritage in place. It will focus its attention upon archival, primary sources which allow us to show that the notion of 'useability' changes over time. In general, history has often been misconstrued in policy work, as either just descriptive, fact collecting or story telling (Berridge, 2018). However, an historical approach will allow examination of the debates, issues, and development of heritage in post-war England and will help us understand the importance of heritage for pride in place, as it resonates with themes of how people find meaning in the landscape throughout time (Borsay, 2023).

2. Useable past theory

This article proposes that the useable past theory (Sunstein, 1995), helps us understand why the useability of heritage in place branding shifts over time. Useability is defined by individuals, authorities, or communities within places and provides collective and individual meaning within the urban and rural landscape. As stated by Sewell (2024), useable pasts, in the context of tourism and branding, are those which are locally owned, embedded in the landscape and told through mythical stories. This article focuses its attention on how tangible heritage sites and their intangible histories have become useful for historic towns as they attempt to reclaim their identity and brand. This useability is not just official but also is rooted in unofficial and organic channels, as heritage exists and is sustained through the 'acts of people' (Evans & Willcocks, 2022, p.6). This article argues that useable pasts allow room for reinterpretation of brands in different periods and places; they are shapeable and easily molded and modernised for contemporary audiences. Heritage sites are crucial in this discussion as they are storeholders of the past and help communities understand the changing world around them, whether that be political, social, or environmental.

The useable past theory expands upon Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) work which has identified that successful brands reflect local culture, express local understandings, and mirror the expectations and impressions of visitors. The useable past provides a place for both meaning and purpose for residents, communities, and local government, and brings an appreciation of what Giovanardi (2012) calls as 'sord factors', linking together tangible and intangible aspects of heritage that can be used by planners and government in the promotion of place image and branding. As Medway and Warnaby (2008) note, brands need to be managed, and an understanding of useable pasts will help authorities and residents collaborate to mould and shape their brand to meet contemporary needs. This useable nature of branding is evident in, 'former industrial cities seeking a new role in the contemporary global economy, particularly in terms of transforming themselves from centres of production to centres of consumption (ibid, p. 642). Therefore, an increased awareness of the useable nature of heritage, the past and branding highlights the role of internal stakeholders (Michael, 2023) and creates space for collaboration, which leads to greater success in town rebranding (Daldanise, 2020).

This concept of the useable past has been noted in heritage and urban studies. Alexander and Hamilton (2016) have examined how the historic environment is used in place rebranding. Studies have examined the importance of historic sites in tourist approaches (Calvi & Hover, 2022). Asprogerakas and Mountanea (2020) have demonstrated how industrial heritage forms part of a coherent identity that helps develop place branding narratives to empower post-industrial towns in the region of Ruhr. Fauveaud and Esposito (2021) have noted how different generations engage with history and heritage, whilst Muzaini and Minca (2018) have highlighted the benefits of research into heritage from below. Chen (2023) has shown how stories within sites are often selective and that there is a need for local, indigenous voices to be heard to help disrupt colonial narratives. Furthermore, Pelkonen (2023) has argued that we need to further explore the idea of the useable past regarding the built environment. The article, therefore, explores the useable past in relation to place branding. It examines the relationship between themes of place governance, such as paternalism, collaboration and pride, and the useable past to explore how this relationship affects themes of local ownership within place branding, as shown in Fig. 1. As such, the framework is examined through critical aspects of place branding literature, focusing mainly on the ignorance of the past in contemporary branding initiatives (Dinnie, 2010). (See Fig. 2).

3. Situating place branding and local ownership through the useable past

3.1. Is place branding disempowering residents?

Cleave and Arku (2017) have posited that place branding, when

Fig. 1. Themes that affect the useable past in place branding

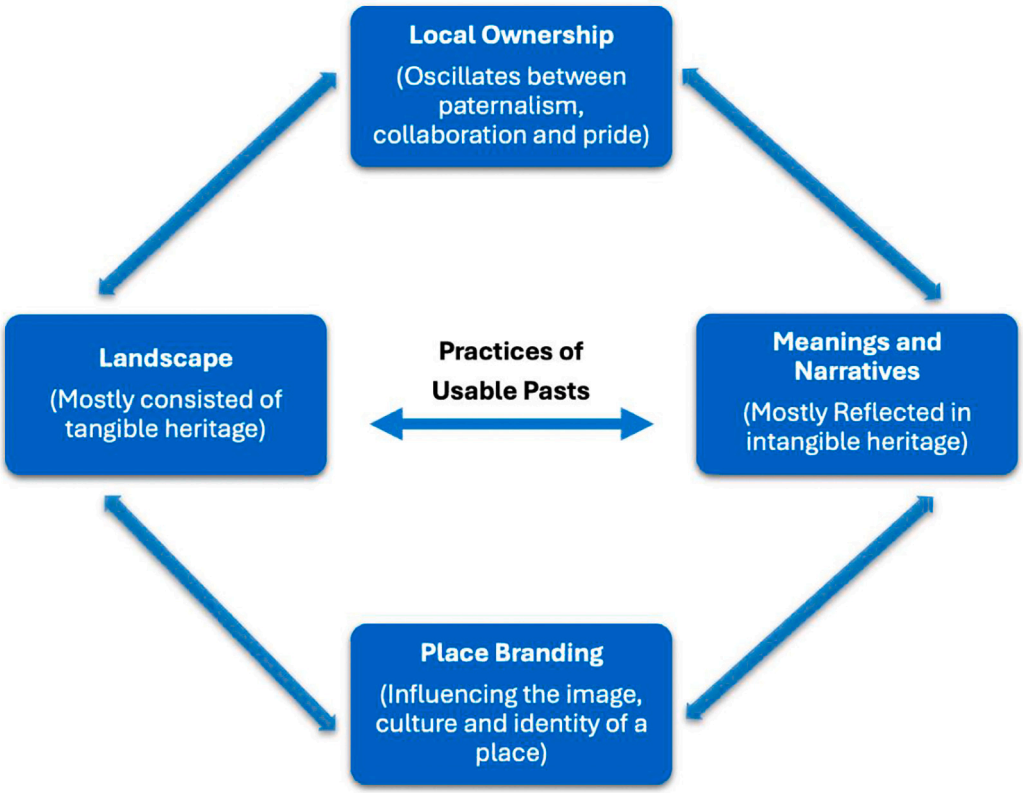

Fig. 2. Useable past theory.

viewed as an outcomes-based place management strategy, is mainly concerned with quantifying the influence of place branding policies in target markets' perceptions and relationships with a particular place. While this is a common practice, place branding when implemented from this lens does not guarantee efficiencies, successes, or decision-making outcomes that can make a difference in the life of local citizens in an area (Cleave & Arku, 2017). Consequently, the implementation of a place branding strategy with the presumption that can address the problems of a place and can mitigate negative externalities for the citizens of that area can be understood as a paternalistic place branding approach.

Such an approach signifies a presupposition of experts in power, which often means that the needs of residents are often ignored and local ownership and useability decreases. In this sense, place branding can become an (im)political exercise (Lucarelli, 2018) whereby the process of 'politicking' (Pasquinelli, 2014) can lead to weak participation and motivation to cooperate by the local community, and/or to the erosion of any attempt by local communities to co-create or own the subsequent place brand (Lucarelli, 2018). For example, in the medieval city of Rhodes, place branding processes are integrated within the management of the UNESCO World Heritage site, but are implemented strictly in a top-down manner by the local and national authorities. This paternalistic decision-making model bypasses important stakeholders, such as residents and archaeologists tasked with the daily preservation of the monument, thus imposing a top-down rigid narrative of commodification, heritagisation, and touristification that deprives locals from their sense of place (Kanellopoulou et al., 2024).

It is important to highlight that such empowerment can also be disguised in bottom-up place branding processes, whereby certain local groups can promote specific agendas via enacting 'superficial participative involvement for community consensus' (Gerosa & Tartari, 2024, p. 395). This selective empowerment was evident in the rebranding of the NoLo district in Milan, where the multiethnic working class identity of the neighbourhood was swapped for an artistic and creative one that resembled creative districts in other parts of the world. This created estrangement with the imposed place brand and a loss of 'original historical authenticity and everyday [place] identity' (Gerosa & Tartari, 2024, p. 388).

3.2. *The collaborative nature of place branding*

Collaboration implies that residents and stakeholders are actively involved to ensure that the needs of the community are met, which arguably increases local ownership and pride in place, and in turn increases useability (Copus et al., 2017). In place branding, collaborative and participatory processes are commonplace and actually encouraged to genuinely legitimise the place branding process via broad participation and the sharing of meanings, ideas and narratives about the place from multiple stakeholders, including local residents (Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). Whereas this is a complex ordeal that is dependent on multiple stakeholders' views of the brand, the dynamism of doing place branding in this manner necessitates collaboration and brings forward a lot of characteristics of network and collaborative governance that may enhance participation (Källström & Ripoll González, 2025). A common denominator for a successful collaborative place branding strategy therefore relies on the 'perceived value of the brand for stakeholders and the degree of identification with place' (Ripoll Gonzalez et al., 2024), and in finding innovative ways to build connections and share local knowledge that heighten people's 'sense of being a member of a local and connected community' (Reynolds, 2023, p. 572).

In the context of heritage place branding, a strong understanding of the meaning and symbolic value of a place (Heard et al., 2023) can help create a successful place brand and promote pride within local communities (Bramwell & Sharman, 2020). The role of collaborative urban governance is crucial as it can influence useability over time and ensure that heritage sites and the histories within them will remain useable for communities via participatory place branding approaches (Kefford,

2021; Preece, 2020). However, the tensions of collaboration need to be addressed and managed by encouraging the use of differing opinions and narratives across multiple timeframes (Reynolds et al., 2024) that can supplement established place narratives based on past events that have fostered continuity and collective experience throughout a place's chronology (Herzfeld, 1991). It is important therefore to ensure that collaboration brings forward people's memorable cultural lived experiences that can make them fully involved in the place branding process (Eshuis & Ripoll González, 2025; Jain et al., 2022).

3.3. Fostering pride through place branding

Furthermore, an important aspect of place branding is concerned with developing a positive perceived image that can promote a sense of internal pride and belonging within the locality (Ginesta et al., 2024). Fostering pride as part of place interventions is inherently related with the notion of 'civic pride', which broadly encompasses the shared positive values, behaviours and identities of the local community as a whole (Wilson et al., 2023). According to Morrison (2016), civic pride is predominantly an emotional concept that is likely to be felt by people who have a stake in the city, thus highlighting the importance of engagement activities to secure a 'local buy-in'. As such, the tangible and intangible infrastructure and purpose of heritage sites carry strong meanings and symbolic values (Heard et al., 2023) that can help create a successful place brand and promote pride within local communities (Bramwell & Sharman, 2020). In many cases, including residents' feelings and emotions allows for a clearer articulation of community identity (Eshuis et al., 2014) in the place branding strategy, and also paves the way towards future potential exploitation of a place's heritage resources (Giovanardi, 2011). In some cases, however, reframing pride in attributes and qualities that a place lacks can lead to failure in creating a relevant local identity (VanHoose et al., 2021). In this respect, articulating and mobilising people's accurate feelings for a place's civic sphere necessitates an inside-out place branding approach (Boisen et al., 2018), which expresses citizens' 'intimately social, cultural, political and 'everyday" emotions of place within broader structural processes and contexts within a range of different scales (Collins, 2019, p. 390).

This literature review highlights various governing factors which affect the useability of the past in place branding strategies, and how they can create tensions within different stakeholders responsible for (co)-creating the place brand. The literature also showcases the role of heritage on the everyday place branding experiences for local communities, and how the usability of heritage fluctuates amidst social, economic, and environmental issues within towns. It is evident that paternalistic modes of place branding can be implemented to promote a commodified present image, which often clashes with context-dependent narratives of the past that are either ostracized from present agendas, or relegated to mere storytelling (Gerosa & Tartari, 2024; Lichrou et al., 2017). Therefore, this article addresses a gap in the literature by providing an interdisciplinary and historical analysis of the useability of heritage in town rebranding by exploring useable pasts in relation to place branding.

4. Context and research design

To further examine the themes that influence local ownership of place branding over time, this article uses historical analysis, which includes qualitative and archival methods. This longitudinal approach to place branding is often overlooked or dismissed. However, as Golder (2000) argued, historical analysis produces scientific knowledge that is useful, and is not just a narrative of the past. Historical analysis gives us access to sources, such as council minutes and diaries within local archives which are otherwise inaccessible. Golder (2000, p. 168) further states that, 'although the historical method is not suited for all research questions, it is capable of producing empirical generalizations in areas in which other methods cannot.' Its ability to examine longitudinal issues is of great benefit to urban studies to help us examine how our places adapt and change over time (see Ward, 1998).

Employing a historical methodology allows us to focus on events from 1945 to the present to gain an historical perspective of a place's changing brand, further enhancing the theory of the useable past. This has involved the use of a variety of data sources which provide us with first-hand accounts, such as council and various society minutes, personal letters, guidebooks and newspaper articles found in the Essex Archive and British Newspaper Archive, as well as online sources from contemporary newspapers and websites and the Colchester Archaeological Trust. This material was analysed through themes uncovered during the literature review; i.e. that paternalism, collaboration and pride have wide impacts on the useability of the past. These thematic frames (Schönach, 2017) capture different experiences of local ownership through tangible and intangible interpretations of heritage and historical narratives, and how these were engrained in the place brand of Colchester in particular moments of time.

The Essex Archive was selected due to nature of the research question which focused attention upon the city of Colchester, located in the county of Essex, and allowed detailed and precise analysis of council and various society minutes from 1945 to the present alongside letters and diaries. The British Newspaper archive provided a broader search of the interaction between the council and different societies and individuals throughout the twentieth century, but also allowed in-depth analysis of local papers, for example, the Colchester Gazette, which focused attention on local affairs. Both archives also had a rich selection of material which covered the broad time frame, ensuring continuity and balance across the period. To allow focused analysis over the time frame, particular societies such as the Civic Society and the Essex Archaeological and History society were identified as particular organisations of interest due to their advocacy of heritage and they provided a constant throughout the period, alongside the council. Historical research involves some degree of selectivity (Thies, 2002), therefore, to limit selection bias, further evidence was found via focusing on moments, such as the destruction of St. Nicholas, or by using keywords; the names of historic sites, or histories such as the Civil War to find evidence of debate or collaboration of various different actors within the branding of the city; this for example drew attention to letters or diaries where people expressed their thoughts or actions. In essence, this evidence allowed analysis of the aims and motivations of different actors in this period to understand the impact, either paternalism, collaboration or pride has on place branding in different times and situations. Therefore, these archival sources were used to highlight the different social and political aspects which affected place branding from 1945 and to highlight how the historical environment increased in importance as collaboration in the town increased.

Colchester, a city located in Essex, England, is used as a case study as an exemplar of how a city with a rich historic urban environment, (such as the Castle, the Abbey Gate, the Priory and the Roman wall) has used the past within its place branding. Colchester is one of the cities in the United Kingdom, which has deep connections with the Roman, Medieval and the British Civil War of the seventeenth century and was noted as one of the key historic locations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside places such as Chester and Oxford, who constructed their brand around their historic landscape (Rothera, 2017; Sweet, 1997). However, in the post second world war period, unlike many other historic locations, Colchester changed its focus to centre on modernity, retail outlets and shopping centres rather than preserving and using heritage. However, in recent years, there has been a boom in the perception and use of the historic environment as towns in the UK have once again engaged with historic branding. Preservation of the historic environment resurfaced by the 1980s and 90s coincided with a rising interest in town rebranding (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000). More recently, the introduction of Heritage Action Zones by the UK government highlights a desire to devolve heritage use to local communities once again (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022). Colchester is a city which encompasses

a rich history and has been affected by the various changes in British culture and planning thought in the twentieth century, making it an ideal case study to examine the changing 'useability' of heritage and the past in place branding.

5. Findings

5.1. Paternalism

Traditionally, the historic environment was a central aspect of Colchester's brand. Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, organisations, corporations, local stakeholders and residents were all involved in the construction of Colchester's brand (Sewell, 2024). Historic buildings were crucial in the marketisation of Colchester as a tourist destination, for example railway guides from the nineteenth century and Benham's guides in the middle of the twentieth century depict a focus on historic sites (Benham, 1947; Truscott, 1851). These places incorporated shared stories of the towns past, from the Roman occupation to the Siege of 1648. Historic locations had, since the advent of the railway, been held in high regard; for example, the Castle, which was adapted into a museum in 1860, was rumoured to of interest to American buyers who wanted to purchase the Castle and move it to America, the offer was unsurprisingly swiftly rejected (Sign of the times, 1917).

However, attitudes towards the historic environment and historic brand shifted when themes of governmental paternalism and centralisation had begun to emerge in the pre-war period. In 1912, the local parish of St. Botolph decided to entrust the ruins to the Charity Commission who then suggested to his parish that the building should come under the Ancient Monuments Act of 1882. This meant that the state took responsibility of preserving and maintaining the site (Correspondence and papers concerning excavation and preservation of St Botolph's Priory ruins). This led to an admission charge being levied on those who visited the site. Interestingly the charge to the priory was only for outsiders and that, the 'Inhabitants of the Borough of Colchester will be admitted free,' as were 'soldiers in uniform' from any location (Parish papers, 1915). National control of local historic sites began the eventual decline of community involvement in heritage.

This centralised approach accelerated in the post war period, municipal government went into decline and the usability of heritage in town identity was affected. Modernity shaped paternalistic thinking and triumphed as local elites and entrepreneurs were removed from local authorities and replaced by planners. They found little value of heritage and the histories stored within as they promoted Colchester as a modern and retail destination. This led to the destruction of these sites in favour of new buildings and relief roads in the city. St. Nicholas was pulled down in 1953 due to Ecclesiastical pressure as the land had a higher value if it was vacant (Minutes of Town Planning Committee, 1947–1956). Although rejected, an application was made to demolition the majority of Holy Trinity, which was a Saxon church in the centre of the new retail centre (Council Town Minutes May 69 to March 74, n.d.). The Roman Wall was also disowned by the local authority (Ministry of Works, 1952: Ancient Monument Architects: Colchester Castle. Essex. Advisory Services).

Paternalism and the unwavering belief in progress and modernity ensured Colchester moved away from its historic branding to one of modernity and retail. This is evident in Colchester's construction of a new shopping centre in the centre of the historic town, in the 1970s (Essex Archaeological News, 1976, p. 6), and the construction of Southway in the 1970s, which although meant to be the southern bypass for the town, had ensured that the town centre and residential housing was separated. This construction saw the demolition of many historic buildings and ensured that the historic landmark of St. John's Abbey Gate was cut off from the town centre, ensuring its gradual decline in popular identity (Ashdown-Hill, 2009, p. 28). Minutes of the Town Development Committee stated that, 'the Minister should be requested to exclude from the list, when made, 39 properties which are either affected by the Inner Relief Road proposals for which planning consent has already been received' (Borough of Colchester: Minutes of the Town Development Committee From 21st May 1969 to 19th, 1974). As ideas to develop the town emerged some people did suggest that Colchester Castle should also be knocked down. These ideas were even reported in the National Press. In 1962, the Daily Mail reported that the Castle could be removed in favour for a car park (Daily Mail, 1962, p. 11). The swift rejection of the scheme reflected the continued useability and high value placed on Colchester Castle by its political leaders who were keen in selling the town. The benefits, on this occasion, of owning heritage outweighed the desire to 'modernise'.

Moreover, unofficial sites of heritage were also under threat in this period. For example, the archaeological society noted,

[a] small Town Hall was proposed in Colchester, which would have involved the demolition of a line of old shops standing on the site of the medieval market. This Society alerted the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission to secure a spot listing. These buildings will now be retained in a less destructive development of the site.

The Council wanted to remove these old shops to bring in modern facilities but faced stuff rejection from local societies. Groups such as the Civic Society had a strong support, including sponsorships from the local newspaper, and included influential figures such as the Bishop for Colchester and Albert Sloman who was the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex (Colchester Civic Society: Minutes of AGM and Exec. 1976–1994, 1998–2004).

This 'non-useable' nature of historic sites created tension with local residents who still found value and meaning in Colchester's historic brand. One local newspaper reported,

Colchester has an embarrassment of historical riches…Colchester's answer, it would seem, is to ignore absolutely priceless assets which other towns, not only in England, but anywhere on the continent, would give their eye-teeth to possess (The Roman Remains ignored, 1971).

In 1985, for example, Ken Mabbitt had written a poem which deployed references to Colchester's 1648 siege to lament the destruction of a 30-ft section of the Roman Wall to build a service road for the Culver Shopping Precinct in Colchester, and the society reused it in reference to the most recent destruction to enforce the point (Essex Archaeological News, 1998, p. 6). The move for Colchester towards retail severely impacted local identity in Colchester. However, towns and cities pursued new brands based around this fascination of a 'monochrome strip of global and national chains' as highlighted by The New Economic Foundation which reported that towns were increasingly losing their identities (New Economics Foundation, 2004, p.2). Evidently it is clear that community groups were actively involved in attempts to preserve and protect heritage sites that were under threat as these sites and histories were still extremely useable for them. Local planners and developers appeared to be against residents and shows why distrust between government and communities grew throughout this period (Cairns & Harris, 2011). Unsurprisingly, residents of Colchester made comparisons to the destruction of the town in 1648 which shows how some locals viewed Colchester's urban development in this period.

Residents were increasingly shut-off from the historic environment. Many landmarks were given over to the Office of Works in the twentieth century as communities felt they could no longer afford the day to day running costs of the sites. The Office of Works, which would be the forerunner to organisations such as History of St Botolph's priory, Colchester, 2023, ensured that these places of national interest were preserved, but in doing so they often excluded residents. In a letter written in 1969 by a local vicar, it is evident that the paternalistic control over these historic landscapes meant that they were closed off from community use. When the Rev. Murray attempted to stage a play in ruins of St. Botolph's priory, they reminded him that 'permission must be obtained from this office before the ruins are put to any use other than for their viewing by the general public and certain conditions agreed' (Ministry of Public Buildings and Works to the Rev. W G Murray, n.d.).

Access to heritage, alongside its destruction were heavily affected by themes of paternalism and centralisation that ran through central and local government. As heritage was deemed to be unusable, tensions between community groups and local/national government grew as access to these sites was increasingly restricted.

Centralised, and paternalistic approaches had transformed Colchester's image as it was sold as a modern, retail destination, where its historic image and the historic environment were no longer useable. This was embraced by some in the community, who were in favour of modernity over heritage. Local councillor, Jo Edwards stated the need that, 'St. Botolph's should be opened up' and made more accessible for residents and visitors' in an attempt to restore the broken connection. However, it was noted that the local traders believed the run-down area was because of lack of parking (Council Town Minutes May 69 to March 74). There was a genuine belief that the car was the way to bring economic prosperity to an urban area and so for some in Colchester, these once-cherished historic landmarks were in the way of progress. The growing disconnect that began at the start of the century with national ownership, caused by centralisation and paternalism, affected how some locals saw and interacted with the sites. It also affected other forms of heritage, historical displays in the local Castle Park decreased in size and popularity as noted by Howard Brooks (1997, 76). Heritage was deemed an hinderance, and importantly, Colchester's heritage was unusable for place branding and so became almost non-existent in this period.

5.2. Increasing collaboration

However, in general, local societies had some success in halting demolition of historic sites, which has been of great benefit for contemporary branding strategies. The Dutch Quarter was preserved, Holy Trinity was saved, and historical events were still ongoing (Colchester Civic Society, 2023). However, these societies were often fighting against local government and town planners to stem the tide of modernisation and to preserve the historic image of the town. The late 1980s saw a national shift in approach. The increased 'useability' of heritage came from a growth in nostalgia, as well as an education tool and a financial resource, as is evident by the creation of History of St Botolph's priory, Colchester, 2023 (Boniface, 1995; Lang, 1999). This affected local places and as Colchester attempted to re-brand itself, successful conservation attempts re-emerged. However, it was local groups who took the lead and acquired local heritage sites to repurpose them. St Mary at the Wall was acquired by the local theatre in 1980 when it closed due to a decline in church attendance. This site held historic significance as its tower had been demolished by a cannon ball in the Siege of Colchester. Therefore, when an application was made by the Mercury theatre to use the site, questions were raised and asked by local history groups to find out what would be done to the site. After it was found that the rectory was to be used as a Theatre Annex, it received the support of the local Civic society (Colchester Civic Society: Minutes of AGM and Exec. 1976–1994, 1998–2004).

In the 1990's, local government followed the lead of local societies and increasingly grew in understanding of the useability of heritage in urban design, branding and community cohesion, worked to ensure that heritage was more visible and accessible for residents and visitors alike. The growing popularity of Heritage Days in the town also point to the fact that interest in the historic environment was growing (ibid.) Originally ran by the local Civic Society, it demonstrates that this interest was led by residents of the town who cared for and found meaning in heritage. However, themes of paternalism remained, as is evident when the local authority of Colchester saw the growing popularity of historic sites and the impact the local community were having and took over the running of the Heritage Day events (ibid.) The Society was concerned however, that sites such as the Roman Wall were not covered by the day (ibid.) Nonetheless, in more recent years increasing collaboration has led to local experts, tour guides, and historians giving tours of the town's historic attractions and landmarks (Visit Colchester). In 2004, after many years of questioning, reports and pressure from local community groups, the Council decided to help restore the Roman Wall. This highlights a changing attitude to historic sites in and around Colchester. The Roman heritage became an important focal point for local tourism. By April, £50,000 had been allocated by the Council. For this repair they were expected to allocate another £100,000 (Colchester Civic Society, 1976–1994, 1998–2004). This repair work of the wall highlights how the Council's attitude towards the wall had shifted. This was taken further by the Council who have made use of the Roman Wall to promote the town as a tourist destination. In 2019 an interview with a local paper, the Council leader Mark Cory on the Better Colchester campaign (2019) stated, 'We are working with partners to light up our stunning Castle and a stretch of the Roman wall at Balkerne Gate.'

Heritage became an essential part of Colchester's rebranding (Hasan & Imrul, 2014; Misiura, 2006). For example, the Priory site had been acquired by Colchester council with the help from History of St Botolph's priory, Colchester, 2023 to create a pleasant and peaceful area of open public space for the local populace to use (Colchester Archeological trust, 1990). The Castle was used to present the town to visitors and became it an intrinsic part of Colchester re-emerging historic and international image. Jane Knight wrote, 'as well as a museum, the castle houses long-drop lavatories and the widest staircase of any European castle' (Knight, 2011). The museum was revamped by the council to display local heritage for visitors to Colchester. New displays were created, and the story of Colchester was the focus. In his museum guide written in 1997, Peter Berridge (1997) wrote that, 'New displays created in the 1990s use the extensive collections to present the story of Colchester region from the earliest evidence of human habitation in Essex to the great siege of Colchester during the English Civil War in 1648.' Heritage had become essential to the place's identity, Mark Cory stated in 2019 that, 'When many people think about Colchester they think about our Castle' (Council leader Mark Cory on the Better Colchester campaign, 2019). The city reinvented itself, the local, unique and useable histories found in the heritage sites have been reimagined for contemporary audiences. One tourist site stated, 'The largest Norman Keep in the country, almost 1,000 years old, and with a place to play in Colchester's history dating back to Roman times, and through to the Civil War' (Essex Historic Buildings, 2019). Colchester had identified the histories which not just mattered locally, but those which were nationally popular.

The local authority used the pasts embedded within heritage, to brand Colchester nationally, focusing on the town's historical beginning with the Romans and end with the Civil War. In the local paper from Colchester Borough Council, 2019, the Council noted that **'Liverpool Street Station is to be invaded by Romans this month to promote Colchester as an exciting visitor destination'**). This was alongside a picture of a Roman centurion with the words 'Start Your Roman Invasion' (ibid). Heritage is an intrinsic part of this re-emerging historic identity, in the picture of the advertisement, there is the backdrop of the Castle. The useability of the Roman and Norman past in Colchester has meant that sites in and around the town are predominately accessed through these stories. They provided the city a space to tell stories which it can celebrate.

This collaborative approach moved the town away from place selling and promotion (merely getting the attention of chosen target audiences) to place marketing and branding strategies (managing the place product and place image holistically, with the input of local identity) (Boisen et al., 2018) and highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement and partnerships. The rebranding of Colchester worked because all aspects of society, the local authority, residents, community groups and local businesses found the stories within the historic sites useable. The History and Siege House, n.d., which was renovated by local entrepreneurs referenced events of 1648 on their website, stating that, 'two days later the Parliamentarians took back control of the East Bridge when they stormed the castle, killing the Royalist Commanders by firing squad' (Siege House, 2020). The site has red circles depicting where

bullets from the 1648 siege hit the building, linking in with the historic story of the tragedy of the town. However, local businesses also promote the local heritage sites online as part of their individual business strategies (Removals to Colchester, 2019).

Local community groups were crucial in the presentation of the Roman Wall. For example, in 2010, a group called the 'Friends of Colchester Wall' was formed (Friends of Colchester Roman Wall, 2019). Their stated aim was to celebrate 'the most obvious feature of our town's Roman heritage – the Wall (ibid.) The society erected history boards about the wall on the old gates and different sections of the wall that tell stories about Colchester's history. Residents were prominent in telling the history of their town through tours (Guided Walk - The Siege of Colchester, 2020). The website states, 'Colchester was Britain's first city, and is now its newest after regaining city status in 2022. With a story stretching back over 2000 years, join one of our official city guides on a guided walk and explore the dramatic events that have shaped the city, from the destruction of Roman Camulodunum to the Civil War Siege of 1648 and beyond' (ibid). The focus on this tour looked at the buildings of the new city and how the history could still be seen in the sites. However, it does not mean that paternalism does not still affect the heritage landscape in towns and cities. Attempts are still ongoing to diffuse paternalistic methods as shown by Smith and Waterton (2013). Nonetheless, when communities are actively involved with the heritage around them, themes of pride, identity and meaning emerge.

Local societies and place partnerships have also been intrinsically important in the plans to restore and conserve the water tower, Jumbo (North Essex Heritage, 2024). North Essex Heritage have leased the tower for 150 years and won an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund to complete this project. Run by residents, they have worked closely with the Civic Society and the local council to ensure that there is local support, with the aim of boosting local pride and tourism to the city centre (ibid.) Alongside this, the local BID has been actively involved in the promotion of Colchester's heritage. For example, they have installed new 'wayfinding artwork' on one of the main shopping streets in the city centre, Sir Isaac's Walk. This was created by local artist Ben Coode-Adams (Colchester BID, 2023). As part of the BID's marketing strategy to help encourage visitors to the city, heritage and Colchester's story played an important role (Colchester BID, 2023). Other work, led by the council, intends to open Holy Trinity to the community to help find new uses for the historic site and ambitions to promote the Roman Circus to the public and methods to ensure heritage sites are visible and accessible for residents and visitors demonstrates how important the historic environment has become for town identity, image, and pride (Holy Trinity Church, 2023; Roman Circus, 2023).

In 2022 Colchester was made a modern city as part of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations. But this time, the town's approach to modernity was different, rather than redevelop, the town used the past and heritage to advertise its modern appeal, stating on the front page of the Visit Colchester homepage that, 'we're not all about the past. 21st Century Colchester is also a thriving, modern destination with first class visitor attractions, and cultural sites, as well as fantastic places to eat, drink and shop' (Visit Colchester, n.d.). Heritage has become a vital anchor and part of a way Colchester has branded and managed itself in the twenty-first century. Colchester successfully modernised the past and this was because of active collaboration; local societies and the authority worked together which led to an organic engagement with Colchester's useable pasts.

5.3. Pride in place

This understanding of the useability of Colchester's pasts in urban design and branding have ensured that heritage has been involved in recent discussions about the UK government's policy on pride in place (Department of Levelling Up and Communities, 2022). There are more "embodied" notions of place brands in the minds of people and the useable past is important in this. Heritage sites are the storeholders of these useable pasts and provide people an attachment to the places they live or visit (Dobson, 2022; Tuan, 2011). Interestingly, a survey conducted in 2022, highlighted that heritage sites, according to local pride, ranked above local pubs and football clubs/sports teams (The Policy Institute, 2022). Communities had always found meaning in heritage and so, increased collaboration, local involvement, and identifiable useable pasts have ensured that these sites are useable in attempts to boost local pride in a place. The title of the local council paper is the *Centurion*. The logo of the Council is that of a Roman Centurions head. It has tried to promote a local identity, one rooted in Roman Heritage, using certain landmarks to strengthen it. Colchester's new slogan 'Britain's First City' is a reminder that at the heart of local identity is the city's history. A brief analysis of Colchester's strategic plan for the town and the management plan for the Roman Circus highlights that heritage is at the centre of local policy decision making (Colchester Borough Council, 2020; 2019).

Both tangible and intangible heritage have become intrinsically important as their useability has been recognised in how they help foster emotions and develop a pride in place (Madgin, 2021). Between 2011 and 2019 the Sealed Knot staged a re-enactment of the Civil War in Castle Park every year in August (Colchester Castle Park, 2022). In 2018 they organised a fund-raising event for the local hospice called *Invasion Colchester 1648*, which was a two-day event that involved around 150 volunteers re-enacting the local siege in Castle Park. Linking an historical event with sci-fi and fictional 'invasions', most notably of 'superheroes' who took over the shopping centre re-imagined as a fantasy world demonstrates how adaptable heritage and the past can be in bringing people into the centre of the town (Palmer, 2018). In 2023, Colchester, to celebrate its new city status, held numerous festivals and performances in and around the Castle to publicly present its story (Colchester Medieval Fayre, n.d.). These historic festivals demonstrate how the city has fully bought into its historic identity, and shows intangible heritage, such as performing history, has become relatively popular. In a period where 'pride in place' has become an important contemporary topic (Dobson, 2022), heritage's useable status has only increased to the levels that were evident in the nineteenth century. Colchester provides us as an example of how towns can successfully navigate the useability of heritage and branding by modernising the past. However, one critique of Colchester's strategy of using the past, is that the stories which have been used in its rebranding do little to encourage critique and the sharing of new histories and stories (Reynolds et al., 2024), rather they rely on many of the same stories which existed in the nineteenth century, albeit with different and modern interpretations. This lack of engagement with newer and diverse histories means that, although there has been greater collaboration within the town regarding its image, there is more work to be done to ensure that the city truly represents local inhabitants.

6. Useable past theory in policy discussion

In the decades in which modernism, paternalism and planning became dominant (1950s–1970s) paternalism often restricted access to the past for residents. This paternalism has left lasting impacts upon the city as most of the heritage which was destroyed was unrecoverable, or made inaccessible. However, collaboration between the local authority, resident associations, business improvement districts and civic societies, has been key to ensuring that heritage sites have come to the fore again, to successfully reinvent the city as a modern but historic location. For example, the local Business Improvement District work in local branding (Colchester BID, 2024); the local Civic Society impetus in engaging with heritage projects, from planning to street naming and heritage open days (Colchester Civic Society, n.d) and other organisations such as North Essex Heritage Trust which have been involved in restoring the Jumbo Water Tower (North Essex Heritage, 2025). This collaboration around the useable past has allowed Colchester to reinvent and reimagine itself, through the stories and histories found within the material culture; and

although more work needs to be done, it has helped the city to build of the past for the needs of the present day (Reynolds et al., 2024).

Therefore, the historical analysis of Colchester has allowed us to examine the themes which affect the useable nature of heritage in place branding (Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018) such as paternalism, collaboration and pride. The above figure demonstrates how the useable past theory facilitates effective place branding via expressing, reflecting and mirroring heritage practices that cement or change local values (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). It also builds upon Lucarelli's (2018) argument that urban policies concerned with place branding should attempt to facilitate shared ownership and community-based approaches to forge a common place identity, from which successful place brands can emerge. To this end, local ownership facilitates and makes use of the local landscape and narratives within the urban landscape, which can then be translated, reflected, and expressed in the place.

However, this article has also demonstrated that the practices of the useable past reflect the tensions and co-ordination between intangible and tangible heritage in the creation of a successful brand. As shown by Reynolds et al. (2024), collaboration which engages with the themes of the useable past encourages debate and critique, showcasing difference and pushes for positive change. When these practices are built upon and facilitated by collaboration, the practices of the useable past promote meaning, community and identity. But this article has shown that, when paternalism and centralisation interfere in the useable past, the practices include a variety of protests, whether that is through letters, poems or demonstrations. Paternalistic practices of the useable past also create tensions when pasts are forgotten and ignored and when others are promoted by top-down initiatives. In this regard, building upon community's place realities that stem from narratives of the usable past can facilitate community buy-in and participation, akin to a bottom-up place branding approach rather than a disenchanting top-down one (Lichrou et al., 2017). Therefore, this article proposes that collaborative practices should ensure that the useable past is sedimented, where different histories are adjacent to one another, and rather than competing, they are made accessible and relevant so that different communities and individuals can access them (Lloyd & Moore, 2015) to encourage debate and critique alongside celebration and positivity (Reynolds et al., 2024).

The article has also demonstrated that the useable past in place centers around certain distinct sites of heritage and specific stories which have remained consistent with those from the nineteenth century (Sewell, 2024). However, what is interesting is the rise of modernity and 'new histories' in the city from the 1950s onwards. Schofield (2005) has shown how places are often unfamiliar with twentieth century heritage, and Nilson and Thorell (2018) have discussed that modern forms of heritage are just not recognised in places as historic. This is not to say that some places, such as Budapest do not engage with modern forms of heritage (Kádár & Klaniczay, 2022), but in many historic places like Colchester, constructions such as post-war bus station are pulled down, and many of these sites have not held the same prestige as much older sites (Colchester's Queen Street Bus Station, 2023). It highlights the difficulty that newer forms of heritage have in historic locations such as Colchester or York. This article suggests that the useable past is often one that is several generations removed; and that more recent histories struggle to remain relevant for audiences. Throughout this period, modernity was not considered to be part of the preservation and historical debate. Yet, these issues are not new. When examining nineteenth century Colchester; sites such as Jumbo were detested due to their 'modern' look and were threatened with removal (Denney, 2002). That distance from its construction has helped it now become an important historical site (Balkerne Tower Trust, 2023).

In essence, this research has highlighted that the themes affecting the useability of the past found in the literature have historical roots. What is interesting is that it appears that we are going full circle with how we consider and manage heritage and place branding. Fig. 3 attempts to zoom out of the typical place branding cycle (understood here as a back-and-forth between public, private, and voluntary sectors of how a place

Fig. 3. The place branding cycle through the theory of the useable past.

brand will be incorporated), and the roles that stakeholders in urban governance assume when making decisions about long-term initiatives (Cleave and Arku, 2020). Instead, the figure accentuates the role of informal stakeholders with local ownership when place brands are altered without consultation or are replaced to fit national narratives or specific economic agendas (Gerosa & Tartari, 2024; Kanellopoulou et al., 2024; Lucarelli, 2018; Pasquinelli, 2014). It is a reminder that historians and historical analysis are important when we think about a place's relationship to its image. The figure also highlights how heritage narratives can become dissonant (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), not only due to the multiplicity of narratives of the past in the same place (Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018) or the conflicting nature of narratives of present and past (Briana, 2022), but also from governing bodies controlling the past. The focus of our paper is in the last point, which in essence reproduces the useable pasts cycle.

Historians need to be actively engaged in policy work regarding heritage and pride in place. As Green (2016) states, historians need to bring their distinctive modes of analysis into the policymaking process. Berridge (2018, p.379) has argued that historical analysis can provide 'an overview of the complexity of policy issues and their change over time.' This analysis helps us to understand, for example, why a town's image changes and how it has been managed before. It helps us think about questions about how we can stop the continuous cycle of destruction and preservation of heritage sites and how we can manage the past in place branding. The answer may well be in the historical concept of modernising the past, as demonstrated by the management of Colchester's brand in recent years. Historical analysis will help contemporary place branding adapt for future audiences.

Policies, both nationally and locally, should have a greater understanding of the useability of heritage and the past in place branding alongside the meanings and emotions they provide for communities (Madgin, 2021). In addition, policy makers should be aware of the interconnected relationship between the useability of heritage and the useability of a place's image, which needs to be continuously managed (Medway & Warnaby, 2008). Paternalism often ignored the useable nature of heritage and the past, and this has led to top-down methods regarding both planning and branding which have created barriers between communities and local heritage, between residents and councils and between residents and a place's image, which have all resulted in higher levels of distrust (Belabas, 2023). For example, as the town

authorities were determined of making Colchester a modern retail centre, community groups, civic societies and residents were fighting to preserve 'historic' Colchester. However, collaborative techniques should engage with the useability of heritage and the useable past; as they allow reinterpretation and can be shaped and molded to meet the needs of residents, visitors, authorities to create a useable image for a place. Collaboration has allowed Colchester, for example, to modernise the past to ensure that the city is a modern attraction but at the heart of its modernity, is the past. Although more work needs to be done in Colchester to allow new and diverse histories to emerge, collaborative methods have brought together communities, councils, and organisations to remove barriers and create a greater sense of pride. In essence, the useability of heritage, branding and the past are intrinsically linked; and an engagement with the useable past theory by policy makers has the possibility of building trust within urban areas, as local government and stakeholders collaborate to find, shape and manage meaning and purpose.

7. Conclusion

This article has shown that the theory of the useable past aids us in understanding how place branding shifts over time. It also has highlighted that the successful rebranding of places occurs when authorities, communities and local stakeholders collaborate and engage with their historic environment. It provides insights to how historic locations are created, that successful historic towns have accessed and deployed their useable pasts in collaboration with residents and stakeholders. It has also shown how useability fluctuates and the themes which affect it, helping us understand why the useability of heritage, the past and branding changes throughout time. Understanding these concepts can help towns make the most of their heritage, build successful brands and develop trust and relations between local government and stakeholders.

Steady decline of the local authority, and rise of centralisation, paternalism and planning ensured that local heritage and history, which had meaning for local communities, was side-lined in favour of modernity, which only increased the levels of distrust. Paternalism had a negative impact with how towns engaged with their local historic sites and useable pasts, where ownership of the past was taken away from the community (Sewell, 2024). More importantly, local communities have been pivotal in the revitalisation of heritage sites in local areas. It adds to our understanding about the development and importance of community groups in the use of historic locations (Fouseki & Nicolau, 2018) and furthers Houghton and Stevens' (2011) argument that stakeholders need to be at the centre of city branding initiatives. This article also adds to the methodology of analysing heritage and communities, using a rich array of archival sources.

Therefore, this approach has allowed us to see how important the past is for branding places in the United Kingdom. Focusing on a rich case study of Colchester has allowed us to trace place branding practices based on the city's historical past. Whereas such an approach may be restrictive in its application to every historical place, further analysis of place branding history will help us understand what makes a past useable (or even unuseable) in contemporary place branding strategies. Regardless, the framework introduced can be adapted for historical periods, which we encourage urban scholars to adapt. For example, useable past theory can help us understand how aspects of modernity can be added to place history and how these fluctuate based on the period's characteristics and themes. Furthermore, work that focuses around the use of heritage throughout the last few centuries to trace community involvement could help us understand how to adapt town and heritage strategies in the present. In addition, future research needs to explore ways of bringing recent heritage into historic brands and explore ways of how different communities can be involved around the notion of useable pasts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Michael Sewell: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nikos Ntounis:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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