Emanuela Bonini Lessing argues against the idea that every organization can build its own corporate identity, and that the same applies to public administration. She believes that there is more to this process than informing people about the characteristics of the organization. Bonini Lessing asks: why should the city opt for this artificial form of communication?

There are basically two reasons: to influence the public’s and its own perception of itself, and to control its local community’s way of life. The traditional relationship between local public institutions and their users mostly takes place in the city itself, as was clearly expressed in the communication strategies of the London Underground railway system introduced at the end of the 19th century. City institutions used this kind of communication to address and control citizens before the ‘Internet era’. These were largely composed of people residing in the city who in the majority of cases were accustomed to spending almost their entire life in the same stable social and hierarchical configuration.

Explicit persuasive communication strategies played limited roles in public design as strict rituals, traditions and attitudes regulated social behavior. The preferable domain of persuasive communication lay in private and commercial fields such as advertising, as F.H.K Henrion and Alan Parkin maintained.

Today ‘variable’ or ‘kinetic’ or ‘smart’ corporate design programs are the result of a new kind of creative design process: the designer stands for the input of criteria and conditions. In contrast, the final shaping of visual identity is left to computerized imaging devices, to the interference of users or to the co-creation of other designers. At the same time brand strategies and design management increasingly substitute traditional coordination models within design programs. Today both smart visual identities and branding are largely used in the commercial field. Yet as London-based brand consultant Wolf Olins states, branding practice is invading new communication fields such as nation branding and non-profit organizations.

For these reasons it is hard to believe that the hierarchical, communicational model mentioned above, which is ideally meant to produce a unitary image of the city, still corresponds to the city today. At present there are urban environments in which information design applied to traditional corporate design strategies can still coherently mirror society.

Bristol Legible City is an interesting case because graphic design is used both as a tool for developing and visualizing the design process itself and at the same time for the unitary final output. This strategy was then adopted by cities like Sheffield, Southampton and Newcastle. At any rate, none of these places are real metropolises.

In cities such as Amsterdam and Berlin we can observe two different kinds of communication typologies: next to an informative and traditionally corporate-oriented communication, another persuasive, seductive communication strategy linked to advertising logics is emerging. These cities have started using communication strategies that are similar to those of commercial brands and products. They try to absorb within the city those who are physically excluded yet longing to become a part of it as well as those who live inside its borders but are actually ‘external’ or rather foreigners (for example multi-ethnic groups who face complicated integration processes). This gave birth to ‘I Amsterdam’ and ‘Be Berlin’. The city is appealing to everyone and everyone is supposed to feel included in the city’s administrative policies.

The direction of such strategies is based on personal emotions and therefore seems to welcome and include feelings in the communication of the city.
Traditional approaches to corporate design will possibly disappear or will be transformed in their aims, tools and actors. A bottom-up communication approach would facilitate giving voice to the different individuals and groups of citizens more democratically. It could also provide just-in-time reactions to the specific needs of any group of people.

Will public administrations realize the necessity of reshaping current decision-making processes and welcome authentic participative practices? Will it be possible to face the task of urban communication as a playful, changeable mosaic, network or bundle of multiple opportunities?

to a greater extent than what corporate identity could perform or allow. Yet it still preserves a hierarchical and paternalistic attitude toward citizens. Within this bureaucratic machine the opportunities for citizens to express their identity, to draw and design their aspirations or frustrations are very rare.

Given that present day metropolises are geographically undefined, sociologically unstable and composed of a great variety of users with very different cultural backgrounds, would it not be better expressed by metamorphic visual models than corporate identity or advertising strategies? Would not the ‘variable’, ‘kinetic’, ‘smart’ identity building process better mirror the essence of the city?

In recent years a number of experiences based on interactive design concepts have begun a new phase by introducing a gradually more participative and horizontal relationship among all stakeholders in city communication processes. This is precisely what MIT’s WikiCity lab is currently researching: ‘How can a city perform as an open-source real-time system?’ The final representation of the city would no longer be controlled by the city administration or be a creative matter left to the designer. Most likely it would be a continuous stream of time-based stratified representations of information traces drawn by the users in relation to their subjective attitudes and choices.

Today interactive design applications within the field of city communication are quite precisely circumscribed by time and space and generally relate to specific performances or temporary exhibitions. The question is, if and how they can be turned into communication infrastructure and provider for an entire city and its citizens.