Title:
The names of urban dispossession: a concluding commentary

Abstract:
This concluding commentary discusses some of the ways in which branded renaming reflects conflicts over ownership, authority, property and power. Practices of sponsored renaming and place branding are not monolithic, but this special issue shows that they are deeply rooted within neoliberal urbanism. It should therefore not be surprising that place branding is almost always contested, and often a flashpoint in struggles over urban space.

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The neoliberal city is instantly identifiable simply by looking at a map. Contemporary London, for example, is home to a cable car named after Emirates Airline and is dotted by a network of rentable bicycles and their docking stations emblazoned with the name of the Spanish-based bank Santander. Tourist attractions have names such as the Coca-Cola London Eye and the ArcelorMittal Orbit. Notable entertainment complexes include the O2 Arena, the Kia Oval, and, again, Emirates Stadium. The branded place names immediately signal that powerful corporations and public-private partnerships dominate the city. Soon, basic infrastructure will also carry branded sponsorships. One west London council is already seeking to sell the naming rights to a proposed new bridge over the River Thames (see Pitcher & Hurst, 2019). Corporate names are featured prominently on digital platforms like Google Maps, where the official place names of commercial entities and paid advertisers take precedence over names derived from everyday linguistic practice. The brandscape coexists with other toponymic registers. There are parks and squares named after figures from aristocratic and imperial history, and council buildings and public housing estates with names that invoke British social democracy. But increasingly, the city appears as a constellation of corporate trademarks.

This special issue of *Urban Geography* shows that, in cities as varied as Dubai, San Francisco, Timişoara, and Blenheim, the selling of naming rights is becoming ever more common. Public as well as private organizations are turning to sponsorship deals as a way to raise revenue. It is possible to purchase the names of public facilities, train stations, community centers, parks, bridges, monuments, stadiums, and other places, institutions, and infrastructure. This may seem like a harmless trend with few serious consequences. But the research in this issue demonstrates that place branding reflects the major motif of the neoliberal city: dispossession, in the form of city dwellers stripped of common identifiers, spaces, property, and institutions; governments stripped of their budgets; and cities stripped of their assets. It should therefore not be surprising that place branding is almost always contested, and often a flashpoint in struggles over urban space.

Branded corporate renaming is a specific form of toponymic commodification (Rose-Redwood, Sotoudehnia, & Tretter, this issue; also, see Light & Young, 2015; Medway & Warnaby, 2014), a concept that was developed within the broader literature on critical toponymy (see Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2011; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2010; 2018). Toponymic commodification is made possible by political-economic restructuring that occurs across multiple levels, scales, and territories. As real estate becomes more significant relative to other economic sectors, place names become increasingly useful for marketing and other purposes. But usefulness does not turn something into a commodity. To be made into property that can be traded and circulated, place names also require state action to recognize their legitimacy, regulate their sale, maintain their legal status, inscribe them on maps and official registers, and in some cases sell them directly to willing buyers. Like all instances of commodification, "toponymic capture" (Kearns & Lewis, this issue) is a collaboration between the state and capital in order to take something that had previously been unpriced and unsold and render it into something alienable and capable of generating revenue. In this respect, the selling of naming rights can be seen as a form of enclosure (see May, 2000).

Renaming a place or institution entails the creation of new interests, identities, and goals; it also means severing connections with those of the past. Sponsorship is not really about names. It is about economic relationships between companies and places or institutions, where the company provides funding in exchange for naming rights. The publicity generated by sponsorship deals might serve to launder a corporation's bad reputation or merely to gain name recognition. In any case, naming rights are the preserve of major or sole sponsors, and this establishes a unique kind of relationship. Unlike public funding (which is subject to democratic oversight), and unlike membership support models or even traditional advertising-based funding models (which draw on a combination of a large number of different sponsors), major sponsorship produces asymmetrical dependency. Sponsorships significant enough to include naming rights can lead to conditions where, for the place or organization being funded, the sponsor is too big to defy. In effect, all corporate sponsorships are privatizations to a greater or lesser extent. No matter who or what is listed as an official owner, once a corporate name is attached to a place, the corporation's and the place's interests are for practical purposes intertwined. Corporate reputations must now be respected and protected. Companies can now threaten to withdraw their sponsorship. Sponsored names are not inert labels but usable tools, which is one reason why adopting them enables so much money to flow.

One argument that runs through all of the articles in this issue is that sponsored renaming is not spontaneous or improvised. Instead, it follows established logics of contemporary urban development. To be clear, the valuation of place names is not in itself new. Some commercial names and place names have long functioned as generators of value, to say nothing of their power in political and cultural spheres. And many "heritage names" continue to be valuable today (Vuolteenaho, Wolny, & Puzey, this issue, [insert final page number here]). But what is new is the scale, regularization, and routinization of toponymic commodification; the distinctive spatial projects (see Madden, 2014) and redevelopment patterns in which renaming plays a part; and the establishment of a competitive global market for sponsorship. Toponymic change can be found throughout urban history. But corporate sponsorships and the commodification of naming rights are contemporary, historically specific phenomena.

These studies demonstrate that place branding should not be seen as one monolithic project; at the same time, as a collection of practices, branded renaming is indeed deeply rooted in neoliberal urbanism. The neoliberalization of urban space is its condition of possibility. Only as a result of neoliberal austerity are municipal governments so hollowed out that the sale of naming rights seems like a fiscal lifeline. Only with neoliberal inequality are corporations so emboldened that their owners and strategists think they can override local naming traditions and lay claim to major city landmarks and social spaces. Only neoliberal entrepreneurialism has produced the relationships between the branding industry, the state, and real estate capital that make corporate renaming happen. Only under neoliberal politics do city dwellers expect that their primary mode of incorporation into the urban order is as consumers and therefore see the corporate colonization of their city as unexceptional.

It is no coincidence that these conditions are conducive to practices that coalesce specifically around entertainment and sport (Crețan, this issue; Medway et al., this issue; Vuolteenaho, Wolny, & Puzey, this issue). Neoliberal urbanism emphasizes consumption, experience, spectacle, and culture-led development. Mega-events and festivals are some of the prime vectors of neoliberal policy ideas (Hall, 2006; Waitt, 2008). As a result, in the past few decades, many cities have constructed

new stadiums, music venues, "creative" hubs, nightlife districts, and entertainment complexes. And many of these sites have used renaming as part of their spatial strategy.

Despite its enthusiastic embrace by managers and consultants, these articles also demonstrate that sponsored place branding is no guaranteed source of easy money. The selling of naming rights carries a number of risks. There is the possibility that a corporate sponsor will fall into disrepute; as one of Rose-Redwood, Sotoudehnia, and Tretter interviewees remarks, "You don't know if the company's reputation will change, or how it will change. Look at BP, or Enron. You just don't know what that name will mean in one, five, or ten years" (this issue, [insert final page number here]). There is also a risk that a renamed stadium or sports team will be seen as illegitimate and rejected by the public, as occurred with the football team Poli Timişoara (Creţan, this issue). The potential for a branded neologism to fail to catch on with paying audiences is especially significant within association football, "a game paradoxically known both for its heavyweight commercialism and as a realm of sometimes enthusiastically traditionalist fan cultures" (Vuolteenaho, Wolny, & Puzey, this issue, [insert final page number here]).

It is clear from this research that resistance to renaming and place branding is widespread. Movements mobilize against branded renaming for many reasons. As with other elements of neoliberalism, resistance can manifest in contradictory ways. Sometimes it appears in conservative forms, as with opposition to new names from traditionalist football supporters. Other examples of anti-renaming resistance articulate a more radical politics and build coalitions with groups organizing around, for example, housing, labor, or health. McElroy's (this issue) study of the renaming of San Francisco General Hospital after Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg provides an example of the latter. The movement that emerged in opposition to it brought together nurses, doctors, anti-eviction activists, and others. The renaming of the hospital touched upon multiple expressions of urban inequality in the Bay Area. Not only did it reveal the ambition of the new tech elite to inscribe its names on the cityscape as thoroughly as did the robber barons of late industrial capitalism. It also directly shaped patients' interaction with doctors and nurses. One nurse, for example, reported that as a result of the renaming, patients feared for the security of their medical information (McElroy, this issue, [insert final page number here]). Resisting "the Zuckerberg" became a way to protest tech-industry-fueled gentrification in San Francisco. It drew attention to the racialization of health problems stemming from displacement and housing injustice in the region. And it sought to contest the creeping role of datafication and digital surveillance in everyday life both off- and online. While protest against the renaming of the General did not succeeded in removing the Zuckererg name from the hospital, it did become a way to politicize emerging intersections between technology, philanthropy, inequality, and urban space.

McElroy's analysis of "techno-imperialism" points to some of the forms which urban toponymic struggles are likely to take in the future. As long as urban regions remain marked by public austerity and private luxury, place branding and renaming will continue to be tools used by corporations and governments. Just as sponsorship deals migrated from sports teams to landmarks to infrastructure, we can expect toponymic and semiotic commodification to expand into new realms and new scales, seeping farther into the corners of everyday urban life. As tech capitalists, real estate developers, sports team owners, and other elites seek to cement their place as the new ruling class, they will continue to appropriate, rename, and reinscribe urban space. Tech firms are likely to be central players in this process, due to their wealth,

their urban-centric strategy for office location and recruitment, their predilection for branding and hype, and their leading role in shaping geographical nomenclature. But they are obviously only one part of this story. Capitalism today is strongly oriented towards the redevelopment and revalorization of urban space. This implies the dispossession and displacement of existing populations and uses. In the resulting struggles, there is every reason to think that toponymy will continue to be weaponized.

Ultimately, these conflicts reflect foundational questions about the politics of urban life: Who rules the city? Who decides how urban space will be used and controlled? Place names matter because they are tokens and tools in projects that seek to answer those questions. There is a reason that a city filled with corporate monikers became a common trope in dystopian novels and films. The ubiquity of branded, sponsored names indicates that the city is ruled by corporations, property owners, and their allies. Not all toponymic struggles are created equal, of course. Some have higher stakes than others. But as this special issue demonstrates, in various ways, they all touch upon fundamental issues regarding ownership, authority, property, and power in urban space.

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