

INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME¹

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1. “Small cities with big dreams”

“How can small cities make an impact in a globalizing world dominated by ‘world cities’ and urban development strategies aimed at increasing agglomeration?” This question, posed in the blurb of Greg Richards and Lian Duif’s (2019) seminal volume *Small Cities with Big Dreams. Creative Placemaking and Branding Strategies*, was a source of inspiration for the international conference “Multimodal Promotional Strategies in Place and Cultural Heritage Branding: Case studies and best practices”, held at the University of Udine (Gorizia Campus) on December 11-12, 2023. The conference – organized by the *Research Lab on Strategic Communication and New Media* at the Dept. of Languages, Literatures, Communication, Education and Social Studies (DILL) with the financial support of the Fondazione Carigo and Consorzio Universitario di Gorizia and under the patronage of the Municipality of Gorizia – was part of the GO!2025 initiatives promoting Nova Gorica and Gorizia as “the borderless European Capital of Culture” (henceforth, ECoC, see <https://www.go2025.eu/en>).

The creative concept underlying Nova Gorica and Gorizia’s candidacy as ECoC 2025 underscores its being “a transnational European city, a place where people and ideas are treasured and respected regardless of their cultural, national, linguistic or any other background” (GECT GO 2020, p. 3). In its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, the Council of Europe defines the latter as “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures [...that] aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices [...] while fostering integration and social cohesion” (CM[2008]30, p. 9). While intercultural dialogue is fundamental for the development of relationships between people, countries and cultures in general, it becomes all the more crucial in a border area like Gorizia. Hence, the Nova Gorica-Gorizia ECoC 2025 project is an

¹ Although the present Introduction is a collaborative effort and reflects the views of both authors, Nicoletta Vasta wrote Sections 1 and 2.1 while Pietro Manzella wrote Sections 2.2 and 3.

opportunity for intercultural inclusion, as well as a tool for strengthening the sense of belonging to a shared European identity. Intercultural dialogue sustains cohesion and inclusion and is also an instrument of mediation and reconciliation, as it prevents social fragmentation by promoting equity, human dignity, and the pursuit of the common good. The actions to be undertaken to foster civic engagement have to be aimed at enhancing social cohesion and inclusion. Moreover, the ECoC status represents a unique opportunity for *place branding* through the synergic interplay of various activities aimed at forging and enhancing Nova Gorica and Gorizia's shared identity and image, which will be promoted among, and communicated to, multiple internal and external stakeholders.

Among those activities, fostering tourism is certainly of paramount importance. Tourism is a global industry which has been massively penetrated by digital technologies and the internet and which affects even the most remote areas of the world, thus offering opportunities to study interpersonal and cross-community relations alongside international and intercultural relations and contacts (Jaworski, Pritchard 2005).² As the designation of an ECoC has shifted from big European cities to smaller ones, it seems to us that the two key strategies small cities have to enact if they wish to brand themselves as attractive *glocal*³ destinations for cultural tourism should be:

- developing institutional collaboration (and extending it to the regions surrounding the small city in question) in the co-creation, as a territorial network, of events and projects, to be consistently pursued through a single institutional website (in our case, <https://www.go2025.eu/en>); and
- ‘positioning’ the small city’s distinctive brand identity against competitors by triggering the psychological leveraging process through *storytelling* (see, e.g., Qualizza 2017; Vasta 2020) – in J. Bruner’s (1990, p. 47) definition, whereby “storytelling [...] develops as an unfinished process in which causes are identified, links are forged, predictions are risked, and the exceptional is linked with the ordinary”. This is achieved

² Although most studies investigating the relationship between technology and tourism tend to emphasize the affordances of digital connections, viz. in co-creating the city (see e.g. Marques and Borba 2017) and in underscoring the role of tourists as *prosumers* (as defined in Toffler 1980, p. 292 *et passim*), some critical discourse analysis (CDA)-inspired, ‘take-a-break-from-technology’-oriented studies (e.g. Li, Pearce and Low 2018) have questioned the idea that technology is beneficial *per se* to the tourist industry.

³ The literature on multimodal and web-mediated discourse analysis of *glocalization* strategies in promotional texts, including those aimed at cultural heritage branding, is burgeoning: to mention just a few titles, see, e.g., Campagna 2007; Fairclough 2006; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010, 2014; Maci 2007, 2012, 2017; Manca 2016; Paganoni 2015; Pawels 2012; Thurlow and Jaworski 2011; Turra 2020.

by drawing on individual related stories building up a recurrent narrative, or “Intertextual Thematic Formation” (Lemke 1988),⁴ in itself linked to master (or transhistorical) narratives, i.e. narratives embedded in a specific narrative system drawing on recognizable myths and archetypes deeply embedded in a particular culture (Vasta 2023, p. 52; see also Bhabha’s 1994, p. 145 notion of the “production of nation as narration”); these master narratives, however, are not fixed, but can be adapted creatively to changing times and, as such, resonate with different communities (see Andò, Leonzi 2014, viz. Ch. 1).

In passing, E.M. Bruner (2005, viz. pp. 19-27) distinguishes three types of narrative concerning the tourist’s experience and calling into play vital constructs for discourse analysts and ethnographers of communication, such as agency, contested narratives and the tourist gaze:

- *pretour narratives*, i.e. the imagined journey when tourists are exploring their options for travelling and are gathering information; in the current authors’ opinion, these narratives draw on the master narratives inscribed in the global tourist community of practice’s *habitus* (in Bourdieu’s sense, 1990, pp. 52-65), marketed online by the local authorities, tour operators or tour guides, and, more recently, new tourism and hospitality “curators”, like travel consultants and destination marketing organizers and bloggers, and thus reflecting the growing trend towards re-intermediation in the form of collecting, selecting, displaying and contextualizing (Richards 2024, p. 28);
- the lived, extraordinary *experience on tour*, on the grounds of which tourists reshape and personalize the pretour narratives; and
- *posttour narratives*, recounting the journey and related experiences, which “are never finished, for, with each retelling, the circumstances, the audience, and the situation of the narrator change, providing the opportunity for novel understandings and novel narratives to arise” (E.M. Bruner 2005, p. 27).

Even more importantly, the crucial step required to amplify the voice of a relatively unknown city is by creatively engaging one’s stakeholders – first and foremost one’s citizens as a community of advocates and/or brand ambassadors – in *storytelling* and *storylistening* (Scholes, Clutterbuck 1998; Qualizza 2017, pp. 69-70) concerning individual lived experiences and their interpretations; selecting, showcasing and raising awareness about the most interesting tangible and intangible features of, and master narratives about,

⁴ In Lemke’s (1988, p. 30, 32) definition, ITFs are common systems of semantic relations to speak of the same things in the same manner, i.e. “a community’s recurrent *said*s and *done*s [...] as well as its semiotic resources for saying and doing”; see also Coccetta, this volume.

the destination will meet this requirement, ultimately bringing in more tourists and business. In the case of Nova Gorica-Gorizia 2025, one such master narrative is subsumed by the adjective “borderless” in the slogan “GO borderless”, recalling the need for civilized societies to build bridges, not walls, between neighbouring communities. This master narrative tells a tale of, and (re-)establishes an emotional bond between, the two cities, its citizens and the values subsumed by their shared historical heritage, despite different political, economic and institutional systems, while reconciling tradition and innovation, past and future.

As Jaworski and Thurlow (2010, p. 256) effectively point out, “tourism is a past master at recontextualization, lifting the everyday into the realm of the fantastical, transforming the banal into the exotic, and converting use-value into exchange-value”. A brand, including a town or city, cannot be restricted to offering goods and services, but must result from the strategic harmonization of a number of factors – including those pertaining to its economic, political and media systems – and must be enriched by emotional values represented symbolically, both verbally and visually, so as to project a multi-faceted, yet distinctive and consistent image:

The ultimate goods purchased by tourists during their travels are images, lifestyles, memories, and their narrative enactments. Material goods such as souvenirs and other artefacts, not unlike snippets of language formulae brought back from foreign trips, are themselves (re-)packaged and promoted as useful props in the enactment of these performances, and they serve as an extension of the tourist gaze. (Jaworski, Thurlow 2010, p. 257)

In this process of recontextualization and re-enactment of the tourist performance (Jaworski, Thurlow 2014), it is vital to recall, however cursorily, the fundamental distinction between *space*, a physical entity combining mobility and trajectories, and *place*, a philosophical entity ‘constructed’ through living, telling and inhabiting (Tuan 1979; Qualizza 2017, p. 69):

As location, place is one unit among other units to which it is linked by a circulation net; the analysis of location is subsumed under the geographer’s concept and analysis of space. Place, however, has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity, a ‘special ensemble’ (Lukermann, 1964, p. 70); it has a history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning. (Tuan 1979, p. 387)

Thus, *place branding* is to be construed in contingent and dynamic terms – i.e., in a constant, productive dialogue with the historical and sociocultural context a place is associated with and not simply in terms of its perceived

image –, as well as in strategic terms – i.e., in its potential to construct competitive identity (Anholt 2007) and to act as a countermeasure to massive globalization processes (see also Vasta 2020, pp. 7-8) by mediating between the global and the local (E.M. Bruner 2005, p. 12). Borrowing Richards' words (2024, p. 27, *emphasis added*),

Cities use curation to highlight particular “urban scenes” and develop “experiencescapes”, adding new meanings to places. [...] Following the principles of stylistic innovation, [...] curators do not produce experiences, but frame and disseminate them through *creative sensing, stylistic orchestration and synchronization of producers and consumers*.

It is precisely the “multimodal orchestration” (Kress 2010; Bezemer, Kress 2016; see Footnote 5) of unique stories and extraordinary experiences that constitutes the main focus of this volume, as the following Sections illustrate.

2. The return of ‘places’

2.1 Multimodal/multisensorial practices and transmedia storytelling

According to Thurlow and Jaworski (2011, p. 286),

Language scholars and academics working in the interdisciplinary field of critical tourism studies have often had to justify their scholarly interests to those unable to see beyond their own personal experience of tourism as a frivolous and recreational activity.

The same authors (Jaworski, Thurlow 2010, p. 255) advocate for “a sociolinguistics or discourse analysis that is better able to account for the hybrid, the trans-local, the spectacular, the idiosyncratic, the creative, and the multimodal”: against this backdrop, the contributions collected in this volume, inspired by the above-mentioned international conference on multimodal promotional strategies in place and cultural heritage branding, bring together cultural tourism studies, multimodal analyses of individual case studies and corpus-driven studies, critical analyses and educational applications of integrated semiotic modes, also embracing extended reality, virtual reality and augmented reality technologies. The object of investigation is a range of promotional digital genres (such as thematic videos, institutional websites, virtual maps and tours, and the like) constructing, construing and constituting the dialectic relationship between culture, place and text (Fairclough 1995, 2006).

This is all the more relevant in a material world where “every human action is a process of selection among many semiotic systems which are

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always in a kind of dialectal dialogicality with each other” (Scollon, Scollon 2003, p. xii) and where new communication technologies have an ever-increasing impact on social interactions and discourses themselves (Scollon, Le Vine 2004): not only is all discourse multimodal (e.g. Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2021; Kress 2010), but multimodal meaning-making (and, more specifically, “multimodal orchestration”⁵) is particularly important for the critical discourse analysis of multisensorial experiences (van Leeuwen 2004, pp. 15-17). The latter include those related to tourism-oriented experiential marketing (Schmitt 1999, 2010, 2011), where experience is divided into 5 dimensions: sensory experience, emotional experience, action experience, thinking experience and associative experience. In Schmitt’s view (2010, p. 71), “ordinary experiences occur as part of everyday life; they are routine and result, to a degree, from passive stimulation. Extraordinary experiences are more active, intense, and stylized” and “experience providers”, such as visual identity, communication, product presence, web sites, and service, are used to create different types of customer experiences.⁶

In these respects, it is also useful to recall Bitner’s (1992) notion of *servicescape* – or “how the built environment (i.e., the manmade, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment) [...] affects both consumers and employees in service organizations” (Bitner 1992, p. 58) and is used as a tangible organizational resource. In describing the dimensions of the servicescape, Bitner notes that

A complex mix of environmental features constitute the servicescape and influence internal responses and behaviors. Specifically, the dimensions of the physical surroundings include all of the objective physical factors that can be controlled [...] to enhance (or constrain) employee and customer actions. Those factors include an endless list of possibilities, such as lighting, color, signage, textures, quality of materials, style of furnishings, layout, wall decor, temperature, and so on (Bitner 1992, p. 65)

– all elements which multimodal and multisensorial communicative practices and analyses take into due account and which, in the context of providing intangible services like that of a journey or cultural trip, concur with

⁵ By “multimodal orchestration”, Kress (2010, p. 162) defines “the process of *assembling/organizing/designing* a plurality of signs into a particular configuration to form a coherent arrangement”, with an emphasis on the ‘semiotic harmony’ of the resultant *ensemble*, and their ‘aptness’ to “meet the rhetor’s [or text organizer’s] interests. [...] *Orchestrations* and the resultant *ensembles* can be organized in *space* and they can be organized in *time*, in *sequence*, in *process*, in *motion*”. See also Bezemer and Kress (2016, p. 28 *et passim*, *emphasis original*).

⁶ For a review of the literature on experiential marketing, see Tian (2022). For its applications to tourism-related marketing, see, e.g., Rather (2020).

storytelling to form *experiencescapes* (Mei *et al.* 2020), which favour consumer engagement.

The potential for storytelling through the convergence of different media and multisensorial practices requires some reflection on the elusive notion of *transmedia storytelling* (see Jenkins 2003, 2006)⁷ in relation to those of *transmedia traversals* and *transmedia identities* (Lemke 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2013, 2014, 2023): first of all, in Gambarato's view, transmedia storytelling refers to

integrated media experiences that occur amongst a variety of platforms. A transmedia narrative tells altogether *one big pervasive story*, attracting audience engagement. It is not about offering the same content in different media platforms, but it is the *worldbuilding experience*, unfolding content and generating the possibilities for the story to *evolve with new and pertinent content*. (Gambarato 2013, p. 82, *emphasis added*)

In this perspective, the reader will find more than one chapter in this volume viewing *place branding* in terms of mythical and/or “remediated” (Bolter, Grusin 1999; Iedema 2003) narratives and multimodal/multisensorial meaning-making practices that re-cast, re-invent and re-actualize stories relating reality to the world of imagination and vice-versa, enacting in discourse Lemke's crucial notion of *traversal*:

The defining characteristic of a traversal is that it makes meaning across boundaries: between media, genres, sites, institutions, contexts. It may and usually does extend across multiple timescales as well: minutes, hours, days, years. (Lemke 2013, p. 16)

– which entails that

The media are shaping us, and we are determining what shapes the media must take to do so. Agency here is distributed over vast networks of producers, marketers, consumer/interpreters, and media themselves. As in any such complex dynamical system, new qualitative phenomena are emergent, whether they are new social identities, new cultural imaginative-worlds, or new marketing strategies such as transmedia franchises. (Lemke 2013, p. 24)

Against such a complex kaleidoscope, the interdisciplinary perspective adopted in this volume is a springboard for further research that takes up

⁷ See also: Andò and Leonzi 2014; Ciancia (2015, p. 131) on “the rising importance of multi-channel structures that completely change the role of the audience, allowing the development of widespread creativity through the collaborative creation and the collective consumption of narrative worlds”; Gambarato (2013) for interesting insights into the differences between *transmedia storytelling*, *cross-media* and *multimedia*.

Jaworski and Thurlow's above-mentioned call for a paradigmatic shift in discourse analysis.

2.2 Sustainability-related issues

The integration of multimodal promotional strategies in cultural heritage branding aligns closely with the principles of sustainability – a contested concept (Manzella 2023, p. 101) that must be framed positively through a balanced approach to economic growth, environmental preservation, and social equity. In this context, numerous informative and educational resources – often multimodal in nature – target non-expert citizens, particularly younger generations, and have been employed to sensitize them to global challenges such as environmental sustainability (Zollo 2024, p. 185). By utilizing diverse communication platforms, including digital media, interactive technologies, and traditional outreach methods, these strategies enhance the visibility and accessibility of cultural and historical destinations. Hypertexts and interactive websites, for example, rely on a broad spectrum of multimodal resources to offer potential tourists an immersive experience of a country and its culture (Turra 2020, p. 256).

Moreover, a strong emphasis on the authentic representation of local traditions in branding fosters feelings of belonging and community involvement. The dissemination and celebration of local traditions are linked to social sustainability, as they can enhance local pride and attachment to place (Irimiás *et al.* 2024, p. 2). Arguably, sustainable tourism ensures the development of local communities and natural environments, while promoting human welfare and public participation in decision-making (Adamus-Matuszyńska *et al.* 2021, p. 2). This participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership among local populations, strengthening social cohesion and empowering communities to act as stewards of their cultural heritage. Sustainable branding practices also encourage visitors to respect local customs and reduce activities that may degrade the physical or cultural environment of heritage sites.

Crucially, multimodal promotional strategies can embed sustainable development goals into the broader master narrative of cultural heritage conservation, which must also address the need to re-scale urban narratives in response to the rise of unprecedented global economies and the increasing competition between cities to attract residents, investments, and tourists (Paganoni 2015, p. 102). Highlighting the importance of conservation, responsible tourism, and intergenerational equity resonates with contemporary audiences, who are increasingly conscious of their environmental impact. By aligning cultural promotion with these global values, these strategies help to foster a tourism model that prioritizes long-

term conservation over short-term exploitation. Thus, the intersection of multimodal promotional strategies and cultural heritage branding offers a powerful framework for achieving sustainability by harmonizing cultural heritage conservation, community empowerment, and ecological responsibility.

3. Multimodal Narratives: Exploring Place, Space, and Identity in the Digital Age

In an era characterised by rapid globalization and escalating competition among urban centres, the need to preserve cultural diversity while fostering innovation has never been more pressing. Cities, both large and small, are confronted with complex challenges: maintaining a unique, recognizable identity, attracting investment, and promoting community engagement within a landscape increasingly shaped by global trends. This collection of studies examines the transformative potential of creativity, multimodal technologies, and inclusive practices in addressing these challenges, offering a rich tapestry of insights into the evolving interplay of place, space, and identity.

Central to this exploration is the redefinition of ‘place’ and ‘space’ in the digital age, which encompasses both physical and virtual environments as dynamic portals connecting the past and present. These spaces, whether represented by a city square, an artefact, or an immersive digital experience, act as systems of information and memory, enabling individuals and communities to navigate their histories while shaping their futures. Alongside this is an unwavering commitment to intercultural dialogue and inclusive practices, which celebrate the value of diversity – individual and collective memories, local traditions, and cultural narratives – ensuring their preservation against the homogenizing pressures of globalization.

Greg Richards sets the tone for this volume with his comprehensive examination of the role of creativity in the urban development of smaller cities. He introduces the “Middleground” framework – a conceptual space where local resources, creative industries, and institutional networks intersect – highlighting how events and cultural initiatives act as vital catalysts for community engagement and economic renewal. Richards positions these initiatives as portals to urban identity, enabling smaller cities to “borrow size” and amplify their presence within global networks. Through insightful case studies from the Netherlands and Luxembourg, he illustrates how cross-border collaborations create synergies that preserve diversity while positioning smaller cities as dynamic contributors to broader urban development. His analysis underscores the importance of collaborative

leadership in fostering shared visions that harness the power of creativity and local heritage.

Francesca Coccetta extends this discussion through her analysis of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) initiative, focusing on its impact on urban identity and cultural narratives. Her multimodal discourse analysis of 60 promotional videos reveals how these media serve as virtual spaces – doorways to a city’s past and aspirations. These transmedia representations function not only as marketing tools but also as vehicles for cultural expression, preserving local identity while situating it within a broader European context. Coccetta’s findings emphasize the value of storytelling in resisting the homogenizing effects of globalization, offering powerful lessons for urban revitalization and cultural tourism.

Deirdre Kantz and Anthony Baldry explore the intersection of tourism, technology, and marketing through a detailed investigation of wine glossaries and augmented reality (AR) wine labels. These tools, once merely informative, have evolved into immersive storytelling devices that connect consumers to the rich traditions and histories behind wine culture. An AR wine label becomes a portal, enabling individuals to engage with the craftsmanship and cultural narratives embedded within the product. Kantz and Baldry highlight the role of these innovations in fostering deeper consumer engagement and promoting intercultural dialogue, illustrating the broader educational spin-offs of digital marketing practices.

In a complementary exploration, Anthony Baldry and Davide Taibi focus on the transformative effects of augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) in tourism and education. Their work centres on the development of structured pathways in serious games, which enable users to virtually explore cultural and historical sites. These pathways, accessed through digital interfaces such as icons on buildings or AR markers, create immersive experiences that bridge the past and present, enriching the understanding of heritage. Their approach emphasizes collaboration, encouraging educators, students, and tourists to engage with cultural narratives in ways that sustain shared memory and community ownership.

Cristina Arizzi’s analysis offers illuminating insights into the case study of the Museum of the Sea (MUMA) in Milazzo, Sicily, where storytelling and digital technologies converge to address pressing ecological challenges. Triggered by the tragic story of Siso, a sperm whale whose death due to marine pollution became a symbol of environmental degradation, MUMA transforms the traditional museum model into an ecomuseum. Through virtual and augmented reality experiences, MUMA engages visitors, particularly children, in interactive journeys that promote ecological consciousness and marine conservation. Arizzi positions the museum as a portal connecting visitors to both local traditions and global environmental

concerns, demonstrating how grassroots initiatives can foster sustainability and redefine cultural tourism.

Antonina Dattolo and Elena Rocco expand the discussion of inclusivity through their innovative *Talking Maps* project, which reimagines cultural heritage as a participatory and accessible experience. These multimodal maps serve as virtual spaces that bring cultural narratives to life for diverse audiences, including individuals with cognitive or linguistic impairments. By engaging communities in the storytelling process, the project ensures that local traditions are preserved and celebrated, promoting intercultural dialogue and shared ownership of heritage. Dattolo and Rocco's work exemplifies the transformative power of inclusive design in preserving diversity while making cultural heritage accessible to all.

Elisa Perego and Piergiorgio Trevisan highlight the role of audio description (AD) as both a tool for accessibility and a resource for education. By transforming paintings, films, and other visual media into richly descriptive narratives, AD opens a portal for visually impaired individuals to experience cultural artefacts in meaningful ways. The authors demonstrate how AD can also serve as an innovative pedagogical tool in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, equipping students with linguistic and critical thinking skills while raising awareness on the accessibility issue. This dual focus on inclusivity and education underscores the broader societal impact of AD in creating more equitable cultural spaces.

Finally, Pietro Manzella investigates the role of extended reality (XR) technologies in promoting sustainable tourism, focusing on the *GO GREEN* project in Italy's Gorizia province. Through immersive digital experiences, such as narrative itineraries facilitated by XR headsets and goggles, the project connects audiences to the Collio region's cultural, historical, and natural heritage. Manzella's analysis highlights the significance of multimodal communication in fostering sustainability narratives and engaging younger audiences. By positioning youth as innovators and active participants, the project demonstrates how virtual spaces can drive environmental education and intercultural dialogue, creating new pathways for sustainable tourism.

Together, the contributions in this volume illuminate how creativity, technology, and inclusivity can redefine the ways people engage with urban spaces, cultural heritage, and educational practices. These works underscore the importance of bridging the past and present, preserving diversity, and fostering collaboration to navigate the challenges of globalization. By presenting cutting-edge research and real-world applications, this collection is intended as a resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners striving to create a more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally vibrant future.

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