# Neighborhood Reputations and Place Branding: Why do they Matter?

Dr. Ishita Chordia[1]

**Neighborhood reputations** are collective understandings about a place based on the stories people tell about it; they are effectively the lens through which places are understood.[2] Reputations are powerful- they influence whether households and businesses choose to move into—or remain in—an area. Reputations can also impact the quality of available services, attract or deter investors, and guide the decisions of developers, real estate agents, and lending institutions in allocating resources. Even residents' employment prospects can be shaped by how their neighborhood is perceived relative to other neighborhoods.[3]

Neighborhood reputations can develop through many channels, including direct personal experiences, information shared by friends and family, as well as the media.[4] Negative portrayals of a neighborhood can lead to **stigma** when perceptions of a place become negative enough to encourage avoidance.[5] Studies show that racial and ethnic composition is the most consistent predictor of a neighborhood's reputation, followed by income.[6],[7] In fact, sociologist Robert Sampson finds that neighborhoods with signs of disorder (e.g. graffiti, public drinking, fighting) are especially prone to developing stigma, and that the neighborhoods that are perceived as most disorderly are the ones with the highest populations of Black men rather than the neighborhoods with the highest level of actual disorderly behavior.[8]

Stigma is especially harmful because it can become a "self-fulfilling prophecy".[9] Negative neighborhood reputations motivate residents to relocate and can snowball leading to higher concentrations of poverty and further population decline. In fact, Sampson found that a neighborhood's reputation in 1995 was a stronger predictor of poverty in 2000 than almost any other factor, including the neighborhood's poverty

---

[1] Thank you to David Edwards and the City of Atlanta "Afternoon Grind" participants for edits, feedback, and thought-provoking discussion which significantly improved this piece.

[2] Brown-Saracino, Japonica, and Jeffrey Nathaniel Parker. "'What is up with my sisters? Where are you? 'The origins and consequences of lesbian-friendly place reputations for LBQ migrants." *Sexualities* 20.7 (2017): 835-874.

3 Stuart, Forrest, et al. "Where do neighbourhood reputations come from? Analysing Chicago community areas using a systematic neighbourhood reputation score, 1985–2020." Urban Studies 62.8 (2025): 1669-1690.

[4] Evans, Megan, and Barrett A. Lee. "Neighborhood reputations as symbolic and stratifying mechanisms in the urban hierarchy." *Sociology compass* 14.10 (2020): 1-15.

[5] Wacquant, Loïc. "Territorial stigmatization in the age of advanced marginality." *Thesis eleven* 91.1 (2007): 66-77.

[6] Besbris, M., Faber, J. M., Rich, P., & Sharkey, P. (2018). The geography of stigma: Experimental methods to identify the penalty of place. In S. M. Gaddis (Ed.), Audit studies: Behind the scenes with theory, method, and nuance (pp. 159–177). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International.

[7] Hwang, J., & Sampson, R. J. (2014). Divergent pathways of gentrification: Racial inequality and the social order of renewal in Chicago neighborhoods. American Sociological Review, 79(4), 726–751.

[8] Sampson, Robert J., and Stephen W. Raudenbush. "Seeing disorder: Neighborhood stigma and the social construction of "broken windows"." *Social psychology quarterly* 67.4 (2004): 319-342.

[9] Sampson, Robert J. *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. University of Chicago press, 2012.

level in 1995 itself.[10] Conversely, positive reputations can also become self-fulfilling prophecies, attracting residents, investments, and businesses. Thus neighborhood reputations, once established, can be difficult to reverse.

The City of Atlanta has launched the *Achieving Fairness of Place* plan, a neighborhood revitalization effort focused on improving conditions in seven historically distressed neighborhoods in the city.[11] These neighborhoods have long histories of disinvestment that have perpetuated poor socio-economic outcomes and contributed to negative reputations. A section of the English Avenue neighborhood known as "the Bluffs", for example, is infamous throughout the city as a blighted and high crime area despite the neighborhood's rich history (e.g. it was once home to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).[12] Over time, the negative reputations have contributed to vacant housing and population decline. To transform these neighborhoods into healthy and inclusive places, the neighborhoods need to attract residents, businesses, and investment. The policy question is thus: *what strategies can stigmatized neighborhoods use to improve their reputations?*

One promising strategy to counteract negative reputations is branding. **Place branding** is a strategic process of building a reputation, often to attract investments and residents.[13,14] Place branding is distinct from traditional branding because a place is *living;* residents create and re-create the place every day and thus any branding strategy must start and end with the residents to ensure that the stories and narratives are an accurate reflection of the place. *Place Brand Observer* and *City Nation Place* are two organizations that provide guidelines to practitioners interested in place branding. City Nation Place describes three components of managing a place brand: *placemaking, place marketing, and place brand identity.*[15]

1. **Placemaking:** placemaking is the set of investments you make to increase the attractiveness of the place. This includes, for example, investments in public spaces, cultural events, or public transit. The City of Atlanta is currently making catalytic investments in housing, education, health, parks & recreation, economic development and transportation in the seven target neighborhoods and research has shown that the de-concentration of poverty and the creation of mixed-income communities alongside broader revitalization processes of redesigning public spaces and the promotion of new developments can contribute to an improved reputation.[16,17] Without

---

[10] Sampson, Robert J. *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. University of Chicago press, 2012.
[11] Center for Urban Research. "The Atlanta Case." *https://urbanresearch.iac.gatech.edu/neighborhood-flourishing/atlanta-case*. 2025.
[12] "Re-branding The Bluff and English Avenue in the ATL." 11 Alive News (Atlanta), December 22, 2011. Retrieved September 1, 2025. https://archive.ph/20130116035313/http://www.11alive.com/news/article/218478/3/Re-Branding-The-Bluff-And-English-Ave-In-The-ATL
[13] Greenberg, Miriam. *Branding New York: How a city in crisis was sold to the world*. Routledge, 2009.
[14] "Defining Place Branding." *City Nation Place.* February 4th, 2025. https://www.citynationplace.com/defining-place-branding. Accessed September 2, 2025.
[15] "Defining Place Branding." *City Nation Place.* February 4th, 2025. https://www.citynationplace.com/defining-place-branding. Accessed September 2, 2025.
[16]Arthurson, Kathy. "Mixed tenure communities and the effects on neighbourhood reputation and stigma: Residents' experiences from within." *Cities* 35 (2013): 432-438.
[17]Norris, Michelle, Michael Byrne, and Anna Carnegie. "Combatting stigmatisation of social housing neighbourhoods in Dublin, Ireland." *International Journal of Housing Policy* 19.2 (2019): 254-266.

placemaking activities, image-change strategies—such as hosting large-scale public events or running media campaigns—may be insufficient to reduce stigmatization.[18] At the same time, stigmatization can also serve as a rationale for "fixing" an area and research has shown a direct relationship between the stigmatization of place and the process of gentrification, which can displace residents and exacerbate inequities.[19] Hence placemaking efforts need to occur alongside residents, not to them.

2. **Place brand identity:** the brand identity is the set of values and attributes that reflect the essence of the place. The tools that help communicate this identity include brand guidelines, icons, slogans, and other components of a visual identity. Examples of effective place branding includes the work of Visit Philadelphia which has built the city's brand around the history that the American Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia. The brand identity builds on that legacy by describing Philadelphia as the birthplace of democracy *as well as* the birthplace of the ideals that challenge discrimination. This ties the past with the future and provides reasons to celebrate history and tackle controversial issues in a way that is tied to the ethos of the place and helps the city develop a reputation of being welcoming to all types of people.[20] Philadelphia provides one example of how Atlanta's target neighborhoods can leverage their history in a branding effort.

3. **Place marketing:** this includes the initiatives and campaigns used to build awareness of the place. These are distinct communication bursts that attract talent, visitors, investments and increase exposure to the place. Place marketing, when it is done without resident engagement can serve as a form of erasure of a neighborhood's history, culture, and identity and spark outrage. In 2017, for instance, real-estate brokers in the historically Black New York neighborhood of Harlem sparked backlash when they tried to rebrand its south end as "SoHa", reminiscent of the affluent, largely White neighborhood of SoHo in lower Manhattan.[21] Often, place marketing seeks to remake a reputation around Whiteness in an effort to counteract race-based stigmas.[22] While this strategy can be effective at changing reputations, research shows that the benefits are limited to White residents with little spillover to Black residents; instead this strategy can further marginalize Black residents and segregate the neighborhood.[23] The overarching goal of the

---

[18] Norris, Michelle, Michael Byrne, and Anna Carnegie. "Combatting stigmatisation of social housing neighbourhoods in Dublin, Ireland." *International Journal of Housing Policy* 19.2 (2019): 254-266.
[19] Kallin, Hamish, and Tom Slater. "Activating territorial stigma: gentrifying marginality on Edinburgh's periphery." *Environment and planning A* 46.6 (2014): 1351-1368.
[20] "Six Lessons in Socially Conscious Place Branding." *City Nation Place*. September 12, 2024. https://www.citynationplace.com/six-lessons-in-socially-conscious-place-branding?account_created=1. Accessed September 2, 2025.
[21] Goldberg, Barbara. "Move to rename Harlem sparks outrage over erasing black history." *Reuters*. June 26, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/new-york-harlem/move-to-rename-harlem-sparks-outrage-over-erasing-black-history-idUKL1N1JN0CL/. Accessed September 11, 2025.
[22] Hohle, Randolph. "Rusty gardens: stigma and the making of a new place reputation in Buffalo, New York." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 11.2 (2023): 193-219.
[23] Hohle, Randolph. "Rusty gardens: stigma and the making of a new place reputation in Buffalo, New York." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 11.2 (2023): 193-219.

*Achieving Fairness of Place* plan is to reduce race and class-based inequities. Hence any marketing strategy that does not represent Black residents' values is likely to fail.[24]

Stigmatized neighborhoods require branding strategies to change negative reputations, but effective branding requires prioritizing a community's aspirations, its diverse interests, and the ongoing engagement of residents. Too often cities use public participation simply to placate opposition and leave participants with the sense that they have been heard.[25] An alternative approach called **participatory branding** aims to center residents needs rather than the needs of the market. This approach includes outreach to major stakeholders and in-depth interviews and focus groups with residents; the goal is to generate a greater sense of ownership amongst those who will be directly impacted by a branding project.[26] Led by neighborhood associations and neighborhood working groups, target neighborhoods in the City of Atlanta can leverage a participatory branding approach to ensure any branding strategy reflects the actual experiences, values, and desires of residents.

[24] Bonakdar, Ahmad, and Ivonne Audirac. "City branding and the link to urban planning: Theories, practices, and challenges." *Journal of Planning Literature* 35.2 (2020): 147-160.
[25] Bonakdar, Ahmad, and Ivonne Audirac. "City branding and the link to urban planning: Theories, practices, and challenges." *Journal of Planning Literature* 35.2 (2020): 147-160.
[26] Kavaratzis, Mihalis, and Ares Kalandides. "Rethinking the place brand: the interactive formation of place brands and the role of participatory place branding." *Environment and Planning A* 47.6 (2015): 1368-1382.