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## **Urban Infotracks: International Symposium**

"Mobility characterizes urban life. Traffic signs and information boards are increasingly dominating public space. Simultaneously, urban orientation, and technical navigation are becoming more and more important. What does that mean for the perception of signs, boards, and routes in the city?"

These observations and questions were introduced at an international symposium which was held on September 21st, 2006 in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. The Europäische Haus der Stadtkultur e.V. cooperated with the Nederlands Architectuur Instituut Rotterdam (Nai) and The Lighthouse Glasgow in conceptualizing this international symposium, inviting speakers from three different countries, discussing experiences, and exchanging ideas.

In the first session of the symposium, Gerry Grams, architect and City Design Advisor at the City Council of Glasgow, Minke Themans, graphic designer from Rotterdam, and Detlev Bruckhoff, architect and urban guide from the Ruhr area took the audience on photographic tours through their home towns. These city voyages were followed by a second session presenting different visions, solutions, and practical experiences. The audience was introduced into Scottish projects by Ross Hunter, partner at the graphic design office Graven Images in Glasgow, a set of valuable Dutch experiences by Paul Mijksenaar, head of the information design Bureau Mijksenaar in Rotterdam and some projects by the German graphic designer and architect Andreas Uebele. The concluding third session, a discussion with all speakers, tied together the tri-national insights and identified problems, concerns, and questions that all three countries need to address.

## **Signage in Our Cities**

### *Cluttering Everywhere*

Gerry Grams took us on a walk from his home to his office in the city center of Glasgow. His investigative walk opened with his perception of a large number of signs and objects in the public realm. What at first seemed very specific to Glasgow surprisingly also characterized Rotterdam as well. Minke Themans took us from her studio in the city center of Rotterdam back to her home. While we were very much in Rotterdam, we recognized many situations we saw in Glasgow. When changing the perspective from pedestrian to car driver, from walkable inner city environments to regional distances, we expected the Ruhr area to be different. However, what Detlev Bruckhoff's trip through the Ruhr area revealed felt like a logical continuation to the previous tours. Whether Scotland, the Netherlands, or Germany, the urban realm suffers from an overload of visual information and is cluttered with an array of signs and objects.

### *One Sign unlike the Other*

The photographic journeys through Glasgow, Rotterdam and the Ruhr area illustrated the variety of visual information hemming our streets and paths: there are formal and informal signs, there are enduring and temporary signs, there are private and public signs, there are visually standardized signs and individual 'pieces of art', there are signs on signposts and those fixed to small urban objects. The list goes on and on. It does not only give an overview of the variety of existing signs, but indicates that discussing and dealing with signs is not a minor detail. It neither should be dealt with by a single city agency nor a graphic designer only. The multiplicity of signs, their characteristics, and their importance, in some cases, to daily living require an interdisciplinary discourse.

### **Questions Raised**

What consequences does the visual cluttering have? Is there a need for regulating the 'wild' growing of signs? When walking along Glasgow's or Rotterdam's streets or driving through the Ruhr area there is an immediate desire to limit this overflow of information. A more detailed discussion, however, raises different issues to be considered:

#### *How many signs can be read?*

How many signs can be read by a pedestrian or a car driver? Detlev Bruckhoff mentioned that a driver needs up to two seconds to read a street sign. On a typically cluttered intersection a driver would have to spend ten valuable seconds of his attention just to find his directions. Or does Minke Themans' assumption apply that people manage "to see what they need to see"?

#### *Is there a lack of coordination?*

Not only the quantity of signs seems to be problematic, but also their lack of coordination and organization. Who is responsible for coordinating visual information in a city? If a city agency is in charge, do they follow a comprehensive concept or do they respond to individual requests? Paul Mijksenaar talks about the beginning of his work in New York City and explained "their solution was to put up more signs and more signs and more signs. So it ended up in being a contradictory mess" (Brown cites Mijksenaar 2001).

#### *How much diversity is wanted?*

If signs are allowed to be as diverse as a city then how much state or even international regulation and standardization of signage is necessary? Do signs have to look like? Is local coloring important, especially in times when cities need to emphasize their individual identity? Ross Hunter summarized: "Signs are an essential part of a city's diversity and essential to what characterizes the urban environment."

### *Whose interests do they address?*

The diversity of interests that make a city a vibrant place presents a challenge in supposedly 'little' urban details like street signs. Like in all city and urban planning projects a variety of interests need to be addressed and need to be mediated. Noticing the large amount of advertising signs and the creativity with which marketing experts explore new locations and surfaces show that commercial and public interests coexist. They may differ or even compete. Even within the wide range of public and communal interests, different agencies or advocates are competing for city users' attention.

### **Issues Discussed**

Although signs occur as details in the urban space, they are part of the complex system 'city'. Signage in the city is neither just serving technical requirements nor the product of a traffic engineer. It is an important element of the urban realm that needs to be discussed in the context of the multiple interests effecting the city, by various disciplines engaged in planning and designing the urban space, and as distinct part of the city that leaves a lasting impression on its visual appearance and its reputation. Therefore, the discussion on signage in cities cannot be limited to questions of how many signs, or what colour and size need to be put up and where.

### *Different Interests Compete*

The discourse has to recognize the city as a competitive place in which different interests are competing for attention. Looking at the various new sites and surfaces that were taken over by advertising signs recently it is obvious that marketing experts are very creative. They constantly find new niches and manage to increase the potential for new attention.

Ross Hunter states that "the marketing perspective tends to oversimplify the issues that make a city" and he emphasizes that the urban environment is more complex. Paul Mijksenaar has a similar motivation for his work and explains that his "appreciation of signage is based on awareness of its social importance rather than the desire for commercialisation" (Mijksenaar 2003).

### *Guiding and helping to understand*

Despite their guiding functions, signs should encourage the user to understand his environment, to become aware of the layout and the topography of a city, to see landmark buildings and orient himself alongside them. Instead of signposting every detail, visual information in the city should help to differentiate various parts of a city and to support the user in perceiving and understanding his environment.

### *Architecture to be more specific*

Following a similar notion Paul Mijksenaar argues for architecture to be more specific. The city user should be encouraged to develop his own orientation. If the urban environment should imply guiding functions, architecture should follow the same approach. He describes architects as "natural enemies

of signage designers, as they all fear the visual cluttering of their buildings. Architects think that their buildings should speak for themselves." Mijksenaar would understand the architects' pleas if they would create readable, understandable buildings. Not only are rooms like restrooms often difficult to find, but buildings are often designed in ways that even entrances are difficult to detect. The idea of designing the environment in such a way that the user can orient himself applies to the urban realm as well as to single buildings.

#### *Orientation and way finding systems*

Although similar concerns need to be addressed in architecture and urban design, the private space differs from the public realm. Direction-giving signage needs to meet fewer requirements in private buildings than in the public environments.

In between a private office building and the public city space are locations like airports and train stations. These highly frequented public buildings with their overall density of visual information ask for carefully developed orientation systems. Mijksenaar refers to a survey on airport users that shows that the "satisfaction level is heavily dependent on the supply of information" (Mijksenaar 2003). The idea and approach of welcoming people, taking away their anxiety, and giving them a feeling of home are concerns that should guide the signage discussion in our cities as well.

### **Conclusions**

#### *Interdisciplinary Exchange*

The more you investigate signs in the city, the more you understand that signs are a crucial part of the urban environment. They cannot be designed, planned, discussed, or treated as merely details. They need to be addressed in their complex context. They need to be understood as objects within a range of conflicting interests. Hence, they need to be acknowledged as an interdisciplinary responsibility of urban planners, architects, and designers.

#### *A "fresh" look is necessary*

One of the first and most important steps in improving the visual information in our cities is to gain a "fresh" perspective. One of the biggest obstacles to improving the urban environment is the problem of familiarity. Richard S. Wurman sees the biggest challenge of "designing signs is taking a fresh look at everyday life. Like most problems it suffers from the disease of familiarity". (Brown cites Wurman 2001).

This is exactly what the International Symposium Urban Infotracks wanted to achieve: to gain a fresh look at our cities, to start an interdisciplinary exchange, and to raise questions that should be discussed further. Although Paul Mijksenaar calls "modern life with its mystifying array of signs and instructions a continuous intelligent test" (Brown cites Mijksenaar 2001) we should accept the challenge and continue discussing signage in our cities.

## **Bibliography**

Patricia L. Brown. "A ray of hope for travelers following signs." in: New York Times. June 7, 2001.

Paul Mijksenaar. "Sign of the times." in: Airport World. Volume 8. Issue 4. August / September 2003

Richard S. Wurman. Information Anxiety 2. Macmillan. 2001

## **Speakers at the symposium**

Gerry Grams, architect, City Design Advisor, City Council, Glasgow

Minke Themans, graphic designer, Rotterdam

Detlev Bruckhoff, architect and urban guide, Bochum

Ross Hunter, graphic designer, Graven Images, Glasgow

Andreas Uebele, graphic designer and architect, Dusseldorf / Stuttgart

Paul Mijksenaar, information designer, Bureau Mijksenaar, Rotterdam / New York City

Heike Nehl, graphic designer, Moniteurs, Berlin