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THE VISUAL LANGUAGES OF A CITY

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In abolishing the feudal system, the bourgeois revolution also abolished the symbolical language of heraldry, which represented in an easy and simple manner the structure of society. It could even show visually the profession and social class of people. Neo-humanism, with its philological, verbal culture was unable to create new visual languages. To a certain extent one could call it anti-visual.

We witness nowadays the evolution of new visual language, especially in the fields of traffic and commercial initiative. Names and verbal explanations of behaviour take the form of visual signs. In publicity the importance of visual symbols is also obvious.

The city is the place where this development occurs. The city is not a complete and closed social system, like a factory, where the behaviour of everyone is fixed in advance: the basic feature of a city is the variety of supply - the opportunity to choose. The various units which compose it only have light contacts, hence the need for a special effort of communication.

Newspapers first appeared in cities. The majority of traffic signs to traffic in the cities. In cities grew the poster, the shop-window, the neon ads.

Up to now artists have only busied themselves with a few aspects of this new visual language, especially in the field of publicity. They haven't considered it as a whole. It is true that only lately have the elements of this language been studied with research into the theory of signs and social and sociological psychology. Only now are science and technology concerned with problems of information and communication.

Thanks to these new findings it will be possible to make a systematic study of the new visual languages; especially in the cities. In fields like traffic such studies are urgent.

The present state of traffic signs cannot be considered final. We are in a transitional stage. Besides the need for new signs it is indispensable to undertake a systematic revision of the ones in use. The basic task is probably to make traffic signs so typical that they won't run the risk of being obscured by advertisements in the street. The development of a greater of road signs should aim at reducing as far as possible the number of traffic regulations and restrictions, which end up by being ignored; and to employ a permanent visual commentary, which is already partly being done on roadways. It is not to be hoped that an evolution in street and road building might one day make traffic signs superfluous. Furthermore, the huge development of traffic already shows the necessity of marking off more visibly the privileged users of traffic - public services, etc. We also must consider the growing danger of accidents.

Visual symbols have not only the advantage of being understood at once: they are equally useful in translating into visual terms the multiplicity of institutions of a city. All these offices governmental and municipal offices, private or semi-private institutions, etc. - are bound to cause confusion, which could be avoided or reduced through the adoption of a system of colours and signs. Shorter words or new words could also stand in place of names, etc. In every case the visual language is better and more rapidly understood.

It is more difficult to interfere in private economy and its outdoor advertising. But in various cities advertising is already regulated by law, with the object of suppressing chaos without depriving modern cities of their already indispensable neon signs, posters, etc. The aim of such regulations is not to forbid but to advise in a positive manner. The way cities look nowadays is largely determined by advertisements. That's why publicity firms must have systematic directives in their work.

The present stage in the development of the visual languages in cities till allows the setting up of fixed and invariable patterns. Some of the fields are just being opened now. In other fields one can create a richer and better grammar. That's the only way to organize and simplify the present overwhelming mass of information and so to reduce the waste that communication is suffering from.

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