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## Moving Pictures - Advertising, Traffic and Cityscape

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## Moving Pictures - Advertising, Traffic and Cityscape

*Pasi Kolhonen*

### Abstract

There are two major factors responsible for the way contemporary cities look the way they do. One is the ever-increasing volume of traffic, and the other is the present commercial culture which manifests itself most visibly through advertising. This paper deals with the effects of advertising in a city environment; the main focus is on advertising linked to traffic. Nowadays we have become so accustomed to advertising that it sometimes is actually hard to recognize just how much is around. Spaces without some form of advertisements are becoming progressively fewer in today's Western cities. The city-dweller's field of vision is dominated by commerce. Public transportation is a prime example of this condition. Contemporary advertising techniques have made it possible to turn cars, trains, trucks, busses and planes into moving billboards. The commercial culture produces cities which are dominated by something I call "economist's aesthetics."

### Key Words

advertising, cityscape, traffic, public transportation

### 1. Introduction

*"Did you really think that floors and pavements are only made for walking?"*

*"Did you really think that windows are only made for looking at the views?"*

*"Did you really think that buildings are only made for living and working?"*

*"Did you really think that trucks only carry the cargo loaded inside them?"*

*"Did you really think that public transport only takes passengers from A to B?"*

*"Did you really think that passenger cars and vans are too small for displaying impressive advertising graphics?"*

These quotes have been taken from a product catalogue of 3M, a multinational company which produces, among other things, large-scale adhesive posters for advertisements.<sup>[1]</sup> In my view the quotes reveal much about the attitudes that arise when someone is creating an advertisement for an urban setting.

Of course we can imagine numerous uses for all the things that the catalogue speaks about, but what it actually suggests is that they all have become usable surfaces for advertising. In fact, what the text is saying is that it would actually be naive not to use windows, cars and trucks for advertising; that this would be an opportunity missed for making a profit. For example, if you transform your own car into a moving advertisement, it becomes useful in more ways than just being everyday transport. Now it is carrying a message and selling something.

In this article I will demonstrate with pictures some of the impact advertising has on our cities. I deal here with the present situation, the city as I see it today. However, nothing in our culture actually indicates that the growing volume of advertising will slow down in the near future. It seems that there are more and more posters and new forms of advertising appearing on the streets daily. In this light it can be argued that advertising is gradually starting to dominate the visual cityscape, perhaps even more than we would like to admit.

## 2. Cityscape

In the following series of pictures I hope to show just how many images, texts and signs we can find in our everyday environment, most of which are advertisements.



The first picture of the pair shows an ordinary view of the centre of Helsinki, while in the second picture of the same view, everything apart from the advertisements, signs, or logos has been removed. All that remains is the blanket of advertising that covers the entire city. The cityscape -- our picture of the city -- is rapidly becoming a city of pictures. An ever-increasing share of our field of vision has been sold for advertising. The city has been efficiently draped in posters and advertisements. The two-dimensional graphics of

the advertisement sometimes gain the upper hand over the three-dimensional cityscape. We rarely notice it in its full scale, but it is a constant presence in our everyday lives.

Similar pictures can be taken in almost any Western city. Here is an example from New York.



In my view these computer-generated pictures reveal much more than just the vast number of advertisements and signs in the city streets. They can also be seen as an example of the difficulties in our everyday perception of the city space. Seeing advertisements in the streets is such a common phenomenon that we rarely pay any attention to it. How is it possible to look at a city and not really see something this obvious? The reaction I usually get when I show these pictures to people is, "Why haven't I noticed this before?"

The Finnish researcher Janne Seppänen introduces three different methods of hiding things in his book, *Katseen voima (The Power of Vision; title translated by author)*.<sup>[2]</sup> The first one is to simply remove the objects from our sight, by burying them in the ground, for example. Of course this is not the answer when it comes to advertising. Advertisements are certainly not hidden, but quite the opposite.

The second method that Seppänen proposes applies much better to advertising. You can hide an object in the middle of other objects that are similar to it. It is very difficult to find a specific straw in a big haystack. Even though advertising always strives to stand out from its background and other advertisements, the advertising environment is visually very uniform. When there are enough individual elements that all want to stand out from their background and each other, they eventually all blend into one homogeneous whole.

". . . the commonplace remains exclusive, for it is so familiar that it passes unobserved," writes Italian art critic Germano Celant.<sup>[3]</sup> The ordinary does not appear to us, unless it is set against the extraordinary.

The third method of hiding things requires the most skill, but apparently it is also the most effective. It is possible to place an object in such an obvious place that it actually turns into part of that place's visual appearance. In a way it becomes invisible.<sup>[4]</sup> Even though advertising in a city setting is always visible, it is not generally considered very important. For example, there is very little emphasis, if any, on dealing with advertising in architectural studies. At least I have no recollection of advertising ever being mentioned while I studied architecture at Helsinki University of Technology.

It is traditionally thought that the city structure consists only of permanent elements: houses, streets and squares. Compared to them, advertising has an inconstant character. Even though it is always present, at the same time it is always temporary and can be changed any time. Only in selected places do advertisements actually make up city space so that they are considered an important visual element of that place: for example, Times Square in New York and the Shinjuku area in Tokyo.



Even though an individual advertisement might catch our eye from time to time, we are not very good at seeing the overall visual influence advertising has in our cities. In Ulrich Neisser's view, seeing, hearing and feeling are all activities that require skills. They

develop in time and are always dependent on past experiences. In short, perception is not something given to us at birth; it is something learned. [5] Even seeing the advertising wallpaper that covers most of the Western cities can be learned. But why should we learn this? Would we not be better off not seeing it?

Whether we like it or not, advertising is an essential part of the visual reality that prevails in contemporary cities. At the same time, it is one of the most unifying visual elements that can be found in almost any Western city. Very many multinational companies advertise their products using similar campaigns all over the world. Sometimes it is enough just to translate the text of the advertisement into the local language. However, many advertisements rely so much on the pictures that no interpretation is necessary. I believe it would be an oversight not to acknowledge such common international visual phenomena.

### 3. Traffic and Advertising

I wrote earlier that even though advertisements have become a significant part of the visual street setting, it is very common not to be actively aware of them. This is even more evident when we consider moving advertisements that are posted on cars, busses and trucks.

I am not sure if pictures on cars should even be regarded categorically as part of the visual landscape of the city but, like street advertisements, they are always there. They are becoming bigger and bolder by the day. Ten years ago it would have seemed absurd to cover bus windows with stickers, but now it is an everyday practice.



As mentioned in the 3M advertisement, it is possible to transform almost any car, boat or airplane into a moving advertisement. Most of the trucks making day to day deliveries to shops now have large pictures pasted to their sides.



Busses, trains and trams are like moving billboards with regularly changing posters.



In Tokyo, for example, it is possible to see big trucks with no cargo driving around town. Their only purpose is to be seen in crowded areas with their huge backlit posters.



A company that manufactures a small city car called *Smart* has created something new in the field of car advertising. If it feels too troublesome to change vinyl stickers on the side of the car, why not change the side panels? This car has removable plastic body panels that can be replaced. Furthermore, it attracts attention in the street because it is so small and cute. All this has made *Smart* very popular among small businesses that now realize that they too have an opportunity to advertise in the streets.



City advertising is mainly for people on the move. Their mobility, combined with advertising, has a major role in forming the visual cityscape. The positioning advertising in the cities is directly related to the movement of people. Advertisements are always in places where they have the most viewers, where the most people pass by. Therefore, different transportation devices and transit spaces linked with traffic are the most sought after advertising spaces. The same applies to subway stations and bus stops, which seem to be the only places in the city where people stand with nothing to do but



wait and look at the advertisements. These non-places have become an important setting for contemporary living[6] and such places are Usually thoroughly covered with advertisements. Sometimes they have no visual character apart from the one provided by advertisers, and that identity seems to be the same wherever you go in the world.

Advertising is not just limited to the exterior. Advertising inside public transportation is very cost effective. It is easy to target an advertisement at a person who you know will be virtually motionless for a long time. A small correctly positioned message will reach a large audience, who sometimes have no chance to look away.



#### 4. The Speed / Scale Theory

Apart from car stickers, movement and traffic also have other effects on the visual advertising in cities. In the late 1960s, the architect Robert Venturi analyzed the relations of physical speed and the scale of signs and billboards in different environments.[7] Venturi's point was that the size of signs and advertisements is in direct relation to the speed at which they are being passed. The faster we go, the bigger the sign.

Venturi used different kinds of commercial environment as examples. First was the Oriental bazaar where everybody walks. Cars are not present. Communication between people is always face to face. You can see and touch the products that are for sale. Apart from occasional price tags on products, advertisements are absent.

In the traditional Main Street, cars and pedestrians go side by side. Now, face-to-face contact between the customer and the vendor is not usual. The number of advertisements rises. You are no longer able to touch the products; they are placed behind display windows. On a freeway or in a city like Las Vegas that is totally dependent on cars for transport; people no longer meet each other naturally. You no longer see the product. All you see is the image of the product on a huge billboard. In such an environment the features of a bazaar or main street can only be found inside malls.

Venturi's analysis of the relations of speed and the size of roadside billboards is still mostly valid and seems reasonable after 30 years. However, things no longer fall so neatly into place. Enormous billboards and advertisements that, according to Venturi should be located only alongside freeways, have also found their way into city centers.



The speed/scale theory did not take in account that in the field of advertising, if something is technically and financially possible, it eventually will be done. At least it will be tried out for effect.

These building-sized images are one indication of our inability to really see advertisements as part of our everyday urban environment. However, it would be wrong to say that these freeway graphics do not belong in the city just because they have not been part of it for very long. The cityscape -- our picture of the city -- is fast becoming a city of pictures. An ever-increasing share of our field of vision has been sold for advertising. The city has been efficiently draped in posters and advertisements. and city

dwellers do not usually seem to mind them.



The cityscape of today consists of an increasing number of two-dimensional images, and sometimes the actual buildings become visually less important than the pictures they carry. The appearance of building-sized posters does not automatically mean that the city as we know it is under crisis. The crisis is in our understanding of the contemporary city that consists increasingly of two-dimensional images.

### 5. Economist's Aesthetics

It is almost impossible to avoid advertising in today's cities. It is hard to find urban space where there is no advertising in one form or another. Commercially oriented culture produces a certain kind of visual aesthetic and advertisements are the most visible part of that aesthetic. I will use the term "economist's aesthetics" to describe the contemporary state of things that occurs when all visible surfaces are considered potential advertising spaces.

The term "economist's aesthetics" is derived from the term "engineer's aesthetics" that the architect Le Corbusier used in his 1923 book *Vers une Architecture*.<sup>[8]</sup> Le Corbusier admired the work of engineers who, unlike architects of that time, did not care about the style or decoration of buildings but were able to resolve structural problems in a purely rational way. In Le Corbusier's view, this resulted automatically in simple and beautiful forms: "The engineer, inspired by the law of economy and governed by mathematical calculation, puts us in accord with universal law. He achieves harmony."<sup>[9]</sup>

Le Corbusier's engineer's aesthetics always included economic considerations and always resulted in pure white walls. Nowadays, advertising is seen as an essential part of the working economy. Today, those white walls would be covered with advertising. In the logic of economist's aesthetics, a wall without advertisements is a missed opportunity for making money: actually an expense item. The engineer's aesthetics is being matched, or in truth eclipsed, by

the economist's aesthetics, an extremely functional and economical style of building covered in advertising billboards and logos.

The development of cars in the early 1900s was the ultimate manifestation of engineer's aesthetics for Le Corbusier. When designing a car, the engineers had to study and test every last piece of it before starting production. The car served as an example for general improvement in all fields of modern culture.<sup>[10]</sup>

The development of cars today can also be used to describe economist's aesthetics. Take as one example of the culmination of our contemporary engineering skills, the formula one racing car. Under all that advertising there is a model example of engineer's aesthetics. However, without the advertisements, these cars would not even exist. In this view, the advertisements are not just something that has been added to the cars but are the very thing that makes them move. The cars that Le Corbusier displayed had no advertisements; in his eyes these cars were functional. The functionality of a racing car is not just to go fast and win races but mainly to provide visibility for the sponsor. It could be argued that the same holds for the building industry; one way or another the financier's logo will always be on display. Here, the aesthetics of mobility means economist's aesthetics.

In my view, economist's aesthetics is gradually taking over everywhere. If we look at city buildings purely in the terms of economist's aesthetics, there are two different ways of perceiving them. First, the buildings are big and it is easy to paste large posters on them. Buildings can be used as gigantic billboards without making any major modifications to them.

Second, buildings can be seen as advertisements themselves. Usually the most ambitious architecture makes a very identifiable trademark or brand for its owner. This can be seen in the case of recent art museums (the Kiasma in Helsinki by Steven Holl and the Guggenheim in Bilbao by Frank Gehry) and the flagship stores for the fashion company Prada (New York by OMA and Tokyo by Herzog & De Meuron). The same goes for numerous buildings that are being published in the international architectural magazines. In many cases, an interesting architectural form is being used as part of its owner's public image. A building that can not be covered with advertisements is being used in another way in the commercial realm. This results in a situation where almost every building in the city can be seen as some form of advertisement.

Economist's aesthetics also places architects, city planners and designers in a new position. They are no longer just resolving the given problem in a merely functional and eye-pleasing way. In addition to all this they have also become image-builders for their clients. The present situation, where the marks of the economist's aesthetics can be seen in every city, demands a new sensibility towards advertising and commercial culture. It seems that advertising is something we are not about to escape. In reality, nowadays we have to accept at least some advertising in our living environment. The best we can do is to try to understand its mechanics and its visual and social effects and to make informed decisions when we are developing our cities.

## Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> 3M, *Scotchprint Graphics* (Espoo: Suomen 3M Oy

Merkintätuotteet, 2000); Product catalogue; quote translated by the author.

[2] Seppänen Janne, *Katseen voima* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2001).

[3] Celant Germano, *The Course of the Knife*, trans. Meg Shore (Milano: Edizioni Electa SpA, 1986) pp. 11-12.

[4] Seppänen Janne, *Katseen voima* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2001) p. 31.

[5] Neisser Ulric, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (W. H. Freeman and Co, 1976).

[6] Augè Marc, *Non-Places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995) pp. 77-78.

[7] Venturi, Robert & Denise Scott Brown & Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1972) pp. 10-13.

[8] Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederic Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1931/1986).

[9] Le Corbusier, *ibid.*, p. 12.

[10] Le Corbusier, *ibid.*, pp. 133-148.

All pictures by the author.

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