Tourist Signs: the literal inscription of the city in the physical and virtual landscape

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses an urban element increasingly present in the city's landscape: signs implanted in the physical space that identify the place where they are located. Despite being widely spread, this urban element still does not find an objective classification about its characterization as signage, street furniture, urban sculpture, or others, which this study intends to answer. In turn, it is important to connect this urban element with new demands for public space and city landscapes from the 2000s on. We can verify how these signs are integrated into urban marketing strategies, helping to promote tourism and also strongly linking people, places and landscapes in social networks. From the methodological point of view, this work relies on a systematic literature review and on secondary sources that complement the construction of a theoretical basis, proposing the designation of Tourist Signs. The conclusion is that they are key pieces for the understanding of the city in current times with varied appropriations that are made from them, expanding the meanings of the real and virtual public space with the expansion of globalization and social media.


1 INTRODUCTION

The city is one of the fundamental attractions in the choice of tourist destinations. When a tourist knows, previously, about the historical and social aspects of a city, they create an imaginary of the place to be visited and make their decision to travel. Even before the existence of structured tourism as we know it today, this attraction to the city has always existed, in an effective and imaginary way, as described by Italo Calvino and Edgar Allan Poe.

With the tourism massification in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, travel and tourism became accessible to a large portion of the population and new forms of commercialization and consumption have arisen, such as low-cost airlines and shared hosting. These have existed since the 1990s and were intensified in the last decade through digital platforms that integrate travelers, guests and places in several countries. This phenomenon, a characteristic of the New Information and Communication Technologies, has expanded tourism through social networks, and “the media world has become the main channel for marketing, which relates photography as the attraction and persuasion of a destination. Due to these facts, the social network has become a competitive differential in the Market”. (PERINOTTO et al., 2020, p.7).

Thus, we realize that social networks have become allies of tourism today and cities have become a kind of product of great value, whose commercialization depends on marketing actions that promote them as a brand and attract tourists with consumer potential - of material and symbolic goods. Urban tourism has today a representative importance in the economy of several countries, in Dubai, for example, a decade ago, the oil activity in the country corresponded to more than 85% of the national GDP. Currently, due to intensive investments in the diversification of activities, oil represents less than 30%, while the tourism sector represents 5% of GDP (INVESTSP, 2020).

The partnership between tourism and the city, which has been promoting numerous redevelopments in central, obsolete and/or expanding urban areas with a view to commercial exploitation, must be analyzed with caution. In a dramatized society (DEBORD, 1992) there are warning signs of financial risks and harmful social impacts, such as gentrification through
overvaluation and consequent transformation of the city for an external public to the detriment of local inhabitants (ARANTES, 2000).

On the positive aspect, projects and tourism support the diversity and circulation of knowledge and diffusion of unique cultural offers, previously more restricted. In this aspect “the physical qualities and characteristics of the city should be related to the attributes of the identity and structure of the mental image” (PEREIRA, 2002, p.56) so that the image that the city wants to show to its visitors is real and attractive. Certainly, tourism and the city are very wide and complex theoretical entities that, when articulated together, multiply their possibilities of understanding. With so many social modifications going on in the contemporary world that are increasingly accelerated, the stimulation of the user immersed in permanent mobility, from the end of the 20th century, has transformed the city into an environment of general and unlimited connection, with the intense use of technology and communication networks as a significant part of everyday life, creating a space that is influenced and influences new social practices.

Within this context of competition for tourists, as well as, the creation of a city image and the intense use of technology and mass communication networks, the “tourist signs”, as we call them (MENDES, 2021), become increasingly present in urban landscapes, since it is a way for cities to expand their presence on the Internet. The tourist, when visiting a place, takes pictures and shares them in their social networks, attracting visibility and new visitors to a place. These urban elements, spread in various spots around the world, (CREUS, 1996) can be seen in person or through social networks. Due to their strong media appeal, they have become a trend on social networks (Instagrammable spaces).

From this context, this article analyzes this new urban element that has been asserting itself in the public spaces of several cities. In large capitals, it helps to promote urban tourism, to connect people, places and landscapes with meanings that are re-signified through the dissemination of images in social networks. The methodology of this study relies on a systematic literature review with research in secondary sources that complement the construction of theoretical background for a theme that (yet) is little discussed in cultural studies, in the arts, and in the field of design. Finally, the naming of this urban furniture itself is discussed, which is not consensual in the literature, and public space and urban landscape are highlighted as important topics of discussion in contemporaneity.

2 THE IDEA OF PLACE FOR TOURISM AND URBAN SPACE

The growing competition for tourist destinations and its reflexes are a subject for analysis. For Sánchez (2001), this production of space is both objective and subjective, since capitalism can enhance economic efficiency and territorial reorganization. In this way, space also takes shape through representations and images, which explains the importance that city marketing has been acquiring as an instrument of urban policies. The excessive commercialization of cities can lead to serious urban problems, such as the rising cost of the region and its consequent gentrification. For Otília Arantes (2000), this “commodification” of the city through “culturalist approaches” and policies of image-making assimilated in urban projects, are nothing more than ideological representations of domination strategies.
As a product, place image has acquired an increasingly important role in recent tourism, as it promises a travel experience associated with the destination, being heavily loaded with symbolic meanings, serving as lifestyle statements and elements of individual identity construction. Kislali H, Kavaratzis M and Saren M. (2019) state that image is considered a crucial element in city marketing since they help differentiate a place and reaffirm the importance of destination image for a locality as part of so-called “city branding”. According to Sarquis and Ikeda (2007), branding is a brand management process focused on service offerings, as a tool that allows a separation between a brand and its positioning.

It is worth noting that the city is made up not only of physical spaces and structures, but also of intangible social elements, and as such, the brand must be developed not only in a rational manner, with logical characteristics, but must also be able to convey emotions and values, without losing the essence of the place (MUÑIZ MARTINEZ, 2012, p.377).

The fact that tourism activity is, above all, a social practice and that the space is its main object of consumption, differentiates them from other economic or productive activities (CRUZ, 2006). Complementing this idea, it is known that urban space is not the only type of territory where tourism is practiced, but, according to Yázigi (2003) it is certainly the most important since to get to know a civilization, it is the place for the excellence of social and cultural encounter since it concentrates the largest portion of the world population. Urban centers are attractive because of the large volume of activities available in a relatively compact environment. The components of urban tourism are not exclusive to large urban centers, with most activities coming from smaller cities, culminating in competition among them. Therefore, the stimulus to the development of the activity is not justified only by tourism itself, but by all the meaning that encompasses the image that the city intends to project, and most importantly, the impacts on the economy and the social life of the inhabitants.

3 TOURIST SIGNS: CONCEPTUAL MEANINGS FOR AN URBAN ELEMENT

Increasingly, the urban space is set up through networks, whether physical, symbolic, cultural, political, economic or media (LEMOS, 2007). Besides these, the contemporary way of life and technology have changed the form of socialization among people with consequences in the public space, especially in the way we interact and experience it. Through the media and social networks, space is perceived and experienced in many ways. For Sontag (2004, p.35), in summary, “Today, everything exists to end in a photograph”. Social media have potentiated this fact mainly by the system of circulation of images, amplifying the visual treatments of things, places and people to be photographed and potentially posted.

In tourism, this act of photographing has stepped up, since contemporary tourists are also collectors of photographs, having them as a kind of souvenir, a record of moments and touristic hotspots. For Andrade and Oliveira (2018, p.351), “these moments have migrated from home bookshelves, from paintings and picture frames to computer screens and mobile devices, enabling greater visibility to this experience”. In this sense, the image of a place plays an important role in tourism, as it binds strong symbolic meanings, becoming a crucial element in city marketing.
In parallel to this context, we come across an urban element that has been gaining ground in the urban spaces of different cities around the world, the tourist signs. It is worth mentioning that the use of the term Tourist sign in this research refers to these numerous urban elements that exist in the streets and tourist city spots, since a precise term to refer to them has not yet been identified.

This fact can be observed in the articles that are frequently reported by the media and in different media, which approach the tourist signs, naming them at times as signs, other times as tourist signs, or even as monuments. As in social media, this theme is addressed in the academic environment, however, in a much smaller volume of publications. After reviewing the literature, some of the most common names are highlighted, primarily in Portuguese, but also in English, French, Spanish, and Dutch.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Letras / El rotulo</td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Le logo; Les lettresgéantes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Letters</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Tourist Signs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Letreiros turísticos</td>
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Source: Prepared by the authors, 2021.

In Portuguese, Giese, Costa and Colchete Filho (2020) when quoting the sign #cidadeolímpica, installed at the time of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, name it as a sculpture. In turn, Martinez (2018, p.3) refers to the sign of Amsterdam city as an itinerant monument while noting that it attracts tourists, reinforces identity, and encourages the residents themselves to photograph and experience it. Andrade and Oliveira (2018), meanwhile, refer to this urban element as signs and city signs and make a historical construction of its emergence in the second decade of the 21st century, driven by the symbolic logic of digital social networks, especially in the photographic practice of travellers who are Instagram users.

Aseguiolaza (2017), when conducting a comparative evaluation of the city marketing of three European cities, Bilbao, Edinburgh, and Amsterdam, refers to the tourist signs of Amsterdam and Lyon as “letters”, being an example of the use of the term in Spanish. In French, in the Métro newspaper (2018), during a report about the Amsterdam sign, the terms “le logo” (the logo) and “Les lettres géantes” (the giant letters) were used. The official website of the city of Amsterdam, written in Dutch, refers to its iconic and precursor tourist sign as “Letters”, (AMSTERDAM, 2021). In English, the term often used is tourist signs and “Hollywood’s biggest name”, as we note in the publication about the Hollywood Sign, titled “The saga of the sign: the rise, run and restoration of Hollywood’s biggest name”. (HOLLYWOOD SIGN TRUST, 2018).

With this brief survey, we provide an overview of how tourist signs can be referred to in works from other countries, but emphasizing that these are not consolidated definitions, as it happens in Brazil. Martinez (2008) analyzes how monuments, urban furniture, and public art all lost, in the 1960s and 1970s, the connotation of art and object of contemplation to get closer to the users, which places the human being as sculpture and giving the public space a free and
adaptive space. In this paper, she refers to the Amsterdam sign as a monument and cities as one of these urban elements that came closer to the users.

This way, tourist signs become efficient marketing tactics for places to exist in the digital world, through the power of their symbolism. In this regard, the act of photographing and posting these photos on social networks, practised by tourists, helps places to spread to the world. This trend of large-scale sign construction may have its origin in the early 20th century, in the year 1923, when the Hollywood sign was created to encourage the purchase of land in the area, so the original sign read “Hollywoodland”. Over time, the sign gained the charisma of the population and was eventually maintained by the city, and became a symbol of Hollywood and a tourist spot to visit (HOLLYWOOD SIGN TRUST, 2018).

Another urban element that played an important role in this process of creating and implementing tourist signs was the “Love” symbol, created by the artist Robert Indiana, originally as a Christmas card for MOMA in 1964, but which in 1970 was transformed into a polychrome aluminium sculpture measuring 3.65 X 3.65 X 1.82 meters. The original sculpture was installed in New York the same year and is now on display at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. (ROBERT INDIANA, 2021).

Regarding tourist signs, as we know them today, we can highlight the Amsterdam sign, built in 2004, which was the pioneer in this trend of city marketing, attracting visitors from all over the world. The sign was part of a strategic marketing plan carried out for the city in 2004, with the desire to improve Amsterdam’s attractiveness to the local and international public and to readjust the city’s image. According to the plan, this new image of Amsterdam aims to showcase the benefits and opportunities available in the city. (AMSTERDAM, 2020).

Figure 1 – Hollywoodland Sign

In Brazil, this trend is gaining strength: all 26 state capitals plus the Federal District and other cities in the countryside have already implemented some type of tourist sign. These tourist signs are inserted in strategic points and started to incorporate the list of points to be visited, seeking to translate in their shapes and colors the identity of their cities.

From the point of view of the tourist sign design, there are some striking features. The first one is the scale. It is noted that most tourist signs are on the pedestrian scale, with the possibility of varying their size, but without escaping this standard. Another striking feature is the use of bright colors in the letters or the use of white. The location also follows a certain intention. This is due to their implantation in open public places of easy access to the population.

The adoption of the term tourist sign reveals broader meanings for the initial purpose of these urban elements to attract tourists and visitors to key places in a given city: with the name of the city written on an object, the city thus graphically represented expands its influence, when, through photos on social networks, its perception expands - as does the discussion about the naming possibilities of this urban element.

4 THE COMPLEX UNIVERSE OF URBAN ELEMENTS FOR THE ART, DESIGN AND LANDSCAPE

With the possibilities of real-virtual interaction between humans and landscape, creating meanings and appropriations of space, tourist signs become contemporary inscriptions in the landscape that require further discussion. However, their role in the formulation of new possibilities for understanding the image of the city is clear, whether for immediate personal consumption or for association with events that are already part of some form of collective memory.

More recently, processes to strengthen the image of cities through so-called city branding have incorporated tourist signs. In many cities, they seem to have been installed only for the novelty they represent. When they are reimplanted in public space, through the literal inscription of the city’s name, they mark their presence in social networks and become fixed in the collective memory.

How do we conceptualize urban signs? If their terminology already requires care, conceptually, then the boundaries become even more fluid. Are tourist signs artistic objects? In most cases, they are not born of an artistic process but subsequently become art through
appropriation. Are they design objects? In the majority of instances, they are not thought and produced as such. Are they urban furnishings, only, pieces of composition of the public and landscape space?

Creus (1996) has already caused a stir to the qualities of urban furniture that have more complex functions than simply furnishing the city, indicating the term “urban elements” as more appropriate to refer to this complex set of functional, and also artistic, objects that are spread throughout cities. The term urban furniture, however, does not lose its perception and meaning in the literature, much less for current use, but it opens, precisely, new considerations and ways of understanding these elements. Knauss (1998) and Colchete Filho (2003) identify the potential generator of images from examples of urban elements, which can be furniture, monuments and architecture and adopt the term “urban imaginary” to refer to examples that go beyond their initial function and use, and become identities for a place and/or community. Some are emblematic examples for cities, such as Christ the Redeemer for Rio de Janeiro, the Statue of Liberty for New York, or telephone booths for London.

With the introduction of digital technologies into everyday life and the opening up of a virtual reality accessible to urban dwellers contemporary everyday life has been driven in part by the phenomenon of virtualization of large areas of our lives. According to Navárez and Carmona (2018), the use of these technologies has caused the emergence of images of the city that are beyond the material city. Thus, tourist signs become examples of images and perceptions that multiply in the imagination of a global population. For Colchete Filho (2003) even if public spaces present cultural symbolisms, they can develop new identities before the manifestations of new events. In this way, the identity of a city becomes changeable, and the strengthening of the city’s identity is a resource present in many contemporary urban reforms.

Therefore, analyzing the composition of places, whether concrete or symbolic, is an essential factor in the processes of understanding public spaces and urban landscapes for the high aggregate potential in several urban elements that become collective references. Such urban elements that are installed in the streets and parks of cities must be seen and installed with attention - which does not prevent spontaneous manifestations, certainly. But the results of these actions are a fundamental matter for discussion, due to their importance in terms of the identity of the public space, as they can and should respond to the needs and desires of the citizens, contributing to qualitatively expanding the forms of socialization in the city.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this paper, we have tried to highlight how the changes in and around the contemporary urban space have intensified with the globalization of the last four decades. The media have enhanced most of these changes through the image circulation system, expanding the visual culture and the habit of diffusing instant images of people, objects, and places in photographs available in a virtual environment. To complement this idea, tourist activity has been increasingly present in the daily life of cities, whose consumption is enhanced by marketing actions that promote the city as a brand and attract consumers in the form of tourists.

The urban elements we call tourist signs are a simple example of how urban furniture, city, tourism, and collective memory can be associated with discussing contemporary urban
space. We found out that there is no agreement on the conceptual definition or terminology for this urban element, so the most appropriate was to name it a “tourist sign”, because these elements are composed by the spelling of the names of the cities they refer to or where they are inserted and because these elements are intended to attract the attention of tourists and local visitors. The discussion is open, as is the difficulty in finding data on how many tourist signs are produced, what their objectives were, sponsorships, authorizations for installation, and even their very materiality (material used, constructive aspects, weight, etc.).

Finally, we noted that tourist signs have similar physical characteristics, following a pattern among them, that favors assimilation by the population, but still, they seek to create their own identity to differentiate themselves from others through the use of colors, symbols, and original fonts. This is an idea of power in these many tourist signs in contemporary society: the power of the city, of the name, of the inscription in the urban space, as a way to communicate more than the name and the place, but the landscape re-signified by their presence - in the physical and virtual world, of social networks. Thus, tourist signs are, each in their own way, key pieces for the understanding of the city in current times by the varied appropriations that are made from them, which holds something extremely unique amidst so many elements that are produced and installed in very different cities geographically and culturally.

6 REFERENCES


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