

# CITIES OF SIGNS

learning the logic of urban spaces



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## Introduction

# The Logic of the Now

The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Nothing is as it seems in the urban landscapes of our contemporary world. Towering images of airbrushed promise rise from every corner. Elusive détournements find overlaid (but usually temporary) refuge on authorised surfaces. Prescriptions on how to travel, eat, live and have fun confront at the slightest opportunity, whilst directives on where to walk, talk and *be* hint at the underlying sanctions present in those spaces we encounter. This is the contemporary city; a space of signs and symbolism at once rich and prescriptive, ideal and imagined. A space of visually broadcast pronouncements, transmitted from the fronts of billboards, traffic signs, itinerant graffiti and similar other public communiqué, all made meaningful in acts of interpretation engaged in by those who read and consume the messages sent.

The mediated messages of signs—of *who* we are, who we *might* be—find purpose in the urban streetscape. The promises they contain read according to who it is we want to be, who it is we can be. Meanings produced as we negotiate our urban habitats conflate with larger cultural assumptions. The signscape reflects back to us ourselves as it reveals the logics of our culture. In the communicative interplay that occurs between us, the sign and those shadier intentions that exist behind them, we see the rules of the game. Here is where the cultural logic of a space forms and makes itself apparent. Here is where those deep desires of our collective union find expression and interpretation. Here is where we learn about ourselves and the conditions by which we must operate.

The variously pragmatic or directive intent of the sign does not matter so much as its interpreted purpose. It is how the sign comes to gain meaning as

an interlocutor of deeper cultural intentions that is important. The sign provides the context upon which the interplay of social communication occurs. As a site that exposes the deepest values of our societies (and one in which we are inculcated as readers whether we realise it or not) the sign exerts an intent and purpose that goes beyond any direct, immediately recognizable ‘message’ alone. A traffic sign does more than simply direct traffic flows. An advertising billboard does more than simply market a product. An act of graffiti does more than simply *détourné* an authorised surface. These signs also point to deeper cultural logics. They say something of the very parameters by which a space and its peoples are ordered and function.

Signs do this through the everyday mediation of meanings. As ubiquitous elements of contemporary cities, they stand as fundamental and ‘ordinary’ markers of urban landscapes. The very *everyday-ness* they carry brings them into unquestioned contact with their consumers; that is, any street-going viewer who happens to cross them. We might find ourselves variously entertained or outraged by the messages they contain, but rarely question the existence of the sign itself. As core components of the mass-communication apparatus of our global world, there is little to be considered *extraordinary* in the presence of a sign. It is as much a part of urban streetscape as the street itself, and from this basis at least, is a largely accepted aspect of the contemporary city.<sup>1</sup>

But this ordinarieness shouldn’t be confused as incapacity. As much as it might be that the cities of our world are shaped around the road-ways and transportation networks of our oil-powered industrialism, it is via signage that these spaces come to be understood and convey meaning. This is a visual-symbolic era, with signs authorising the practices of urban space according to their visual form. Signs configure the symbolic ordering of the urban space as a *cultured* space; ordering its interpretive limits and framing the gaze of the interpreting viewer. The sign is a site upon which something might be learned through the visual encounter it provokes. They are active enculturators, speaking of the ways of culture, the limits of acceptability and the nature and sensibilities of a space. For this reason, they must be noticed—this is where culture manifests, is made meaningful and finds transmission.

It doesn’t matter that the promises made by signage are often inflated,

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<sup>1</sup> This normality extends in some instances to the urban space being defined precisely by its signs; to the point that in some cases, such as Times Square or Las Vegas, the very identity of the urban space is *the* sign. Signs in these cases become a little extraordinary because they are indeed so ordinary—but it is the *amount*, and not the signs themselves, that makes these urban spaces that little bit extraordinary.

hyper-real and fantastic. This is not the point. We as viewers, in the sort of way that Barthes (1972) notes, accept these contrivances (and perhaps come to expect them). This is the nature of the interplay; the fantastical hyper-reality of the sign doesn't need to translate into reality. All the sign need do is point to our hopes and desires, fears and anguishes, to do its job. Signs speak symbolically of what is *underneath*; they point to the cultural *id* that we know is there, but which we symbolically obfuscate. Ignoring the sign isn't an option; the logic of the sign has been established already in the consciousness of the viewer. We know what the imagery says long before the sign is even crafted, before it casts its view over the world. It has to make sense; its meanings are already formed in the cultural logic that powers the sign's creation. The sign is merely the manifestation of something culturally much deeper.

Even the most benign of signs hints at the ways we understand our social world and move to structure it (and ourselves). Signs carry the purpose of those individuals or groups that put them in place, and must be viewed as core elements of the communication apparatus of urban space. Of course, different signs will carry different purposes, and will mean different things to different people, but within that range of interpretive possibilities, and from the multitude of purposes the *sign-as-communication artifact* might carry, something can be understood about the nature of the space in which the sign makes its appearance. Signs provide a tangible form upon which the deep workings of culture might be explored.

It is from this basis that this book draws its motivation.