Letter Graphics in the Facade of a Building – Composition and Message

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Abstract. The paper discusses art and communication in architecture. Façade graphics, alongside their compositional and aesthetical qualities, may also contain visual elements that are part of a message. One of the ways of sending such a message is by incorporation of letters. The article looks at preliminary research on the form and content of messages contained within façade graphics. The author analyses the objective of placing letter graphics on a façade, and how they relate to the information and message that are given. An important part of the analysis is the examination of the applied artistic means tied to the meaning, and how they relate to the building’s structure. This phenomenon was examined based on eight buildings constructed over the past two decades. In each of them, graphical techniques of digital and screen printing were used. The majority of them are located in Europe, and due to the global nature of artistic phenomena, there is no limited smaller area of research.

1. Introduction
The paper discusses art and communication in architecture. It describes preliminary research on the content of messages displayed on façade graphics and how they are written or encoded. The analysis focuses on the form in which the message is given, as well as the applied artistic means tied to the content and their relation to the building’s structure. The research material was divided based on the articulation in the façade. The following groups were distinguished: creating a figurative image, integration of lettering graphics with the building’s compositional arrangement, graphic arrangements made up of text, text arrangement made up of letters, uniform texture made up of a text, abstract letter shapes, creating notation based on a code, lettering symbols.

2. Aims and Scope of Analysis
The aims of this article are as follows:
- Devising a typology of lettering graphics articulation in façades;
- Examining the characteristics of lettering graphics placed in glass elevations;
- Examining relations between the spatial and functional structure of the image;
- Examining various forms of communication.
Eight selected architectural structures were analysed, in which lettering graphics play a key role in the artistic concept of the elevation. The structures were built over the past two decades. Most of them are located in Europe, and due to the global nature of artistic phenomena, there is no limited smaller area of research. The description of each of the projects contains information on its characteristic features, background and motives behind its creation, and the compositional link with the architectural structure they are part of, as well as an analysis of the form and content of the message.
3. The Analytical Part

3.1. Creating a figurative image

One of the ways of making an image with the support of lettering graphics is using text as a texture that creates a figurative image. The text on glass acts as raw material, a factor thanks to which the image can materialise.

An example of such solution can be seen in the New Parkland Hospital in Dallas (Figure 1a). Variety has been added to the building’s monumental and diverse body with a glass façade covered with a large image. It is made up of text containing names of people who participated in the construction of the hospital (Figure 1b), donors and funders, without whom the construction would not have been possible. Written with enamels of varying degree of transparency, the text is arranged in such a way so that it creates a shape of a partially visible tree. This image constitutes the main decorative feature of the building. It is a reference to the park were the original building of the Parkland Hospital was located [1]. The image also has a symbolic meaning that refers to today’s reality. Its monumental façade emphasises the entrance, and is a characteristic feature that separates the building’s body from the surroundings as well as an important landmark. The ornament functions as a factor that visually materialises the glass partition, and controls the integration of spaces on both sides of the glazing. The fact that this site is so prominent highlights the significance of the image and shows how important each of the names written on the glass is. The use of names for compositional and artistic purposes in an image has a symbolic meaning, showing the value of acting together and at the same time appreciating the role of an individual in the creative process.

![Figure 1. New Parkland Hospital, Dallas, USA (HDR & Corgan, 2010), a) view of the facade from outside, b) details of the glass coating from inside, source: [2] Dip-Tech, Ferro Company.](image)

3.2. Integration of lettering graphics with the building’s compositional arrangement

Aesthetic work may be done on lettering graphics to merge the text with the elevation’s compositional divisions. This will result in a graphical structure that is visually organised.

An example of this can be seen on the Veenman printing house in Ede, the Netherlands. The building has a sprawling structure, with a patio inside it, and in terms of its functions can be divided into two separate parts: the printing area that includes a necessary warehouse, and the office area [3]. The elevation, due to the building’s shape, is set horizontally, which is highlighted by the concrete plinth and a line of windows in that plinth (Figure 2a). Glass cladding covered with printed graphics has been put over a section of the upstairs area. The transparent glass of the façade reveals thermal...
insulation that provide background to the lettering graphics (Figure 2b). The graphics of the cladding have been incorporated into the compositional strategy of the entire building. Subtle vertical divisions have been created in the elevation by displacement of rectangular shapes. This makes the building visually shorter. The rectangular shapes with letters inside them add variety as well as a unique contemporary character to the flat elevation. Light is reflected off the white background, making the building visible from a long distance. The letters in the rectangular sections are taken verbatim from passages of the poem *Maskerade* by the Dutch poet K. Schippers [4].

![Figure 2. Veenman Printer, Ede, the Netherlands (Karel Martens [5], Neutelings Riedijk Architecten, 2002), a) view from a distance, b) compositional arrangement of the facade, photos by Maarten Helle.](image)

3.3. Graphic arrangements made up of text
A natural way of using lettering graphics is to incorporate a line of text as a repeated graphic arrangement that will provide a texture.

This has been used in the façade of the SUVA office in Basel, Switzerland. A new part was added to the 1950s building with a glass façade that integrates both parts and gives them a coherent modern character. The glass layer is moved away from the actual wall of the building. The glazing consists of horizontal strips of glass with three different optical and physical properties (Figure 3a). On each storey, glass panels are covered with screen print graphics that go to the sill; while above — level with the windows — the glass is transparent. Over the windows strip, there are panels made of insulating prism glass [6], which are part of the sunlight protection system. The panels covered with screen print graphics are computer-controlled. The graphics consist of repeated lines of the company’s logo. The letters used are small caps and their size is small (Figures 3b and 3c). The purpose of the text is informational, and it is part of the company’s image creation strategy and the process of it building its identity. The repeated small text can only be read when one moves close to the façade. The graphical image strengthens the identification of the architectural space.
3.4. Text arrangement made up of letters
Double encoding and creation of monumental letter designs composed of smaller letters is a precedent in lettering graphics.

Metropole is an eight-storey office building located along a boulevard in Ørestad that connects an underground station with a university campus. The ground floor is taken up by shops and cafés. There is an atrium that joins the floors and provides easy access to the external area from every workplace. The perception of the printed image shifts depending on the lighting and weather conditions, as the type, intensity and angle of light change. The building has been covered in its entirety with façade glass with a screen print design put on it. The whole elevation surface is covered with huge letters (Figure 4a), the graphics of which are based on a screen.

3.5. Uniform texture made up of a text
Creating a uniform texture that is made up of a text is one of the simplest graphical operations enabling placement of letter motifs in façades.
One of the projects that incorporates this method is the building of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. It is a four-storey building with a rectangular plan. Most of it is covered with glass on which the print screen technique was used. The façade consists of a toughened glass layer covered with an image. Glass panels are placed vertically and are at an angle relative to the face of the elevation (Figure 5a). Two basic variants of the image had been designed. In the glazing sections, the function of which is to allow in the light, a subtle pattern is used made of massive letters encircled by a thin white line. The print has been applied on colourless transparent glass. The other method is to create a negative version. Arrangements of encircled letters making up a uniform structure are placed against a white background (Figure 5b). The monochromatic print constitutes a composition of Hebrew and Latin letters that make up the word po-lin, the meaning of which in Hebrew is ‘rest here’ [7]. The glass façade removed from the elevation proper acts as the second skin for the building, and designates the buffer space that has both an aesthetic as well as protective function. Glass panels situated at an angle to the face of the wall make the glazing seem more plastic, add order to it, and integrate the elevation. The delicate monochromatic print constitutes a subtle veil to cover the elevation proper that is behind the glazing. The image on glass significantly affects how the area on the outside is perceived and controls the light going into the interior. As far as the meaning of the graphics is concerned, a multidimensional metaphor is used that also leaves room for individual interpretation [8]. The word po-lin repeated many times is symbolic and sentimental, recalling the distant past of Jews and the origins of their settlement in Poland.

![Figure 5. Museum of Polish Jews, Warsaw, Poland (Klementyna Jankiewicz, Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Oy Architects, 2013) a) view from the south-east, b) texture of the facade, photos by the author.](image)

3.6. **Abstract letter shapes**

Using processed lettering graphics indirectly in creating the message is an artistic undertaking.

An example of this way of creating an image can be seen in the façade of the University Library in Cottbus. It is fully glazed. The elevation is composed of two separated glass layers. A glass façade, with panels spot fixed to the steel structure, has been added to the façade glazing that is made using the classic aluminium post and beam system. Both layers are covered with a single-sided print in the form of a delicate white screen. Glass panels with prints create a buffer space to protect the building against excessive temperature fluctuations and overheating of rooms under intensive sunlight. The white opaque print on the outside provides matting effect and reduces reflections on the glass. The
print layers overlap, creating a texture that from a distance resembles writing (Figure 6a). The shape of the graphics stems from the outline of overlapping alphabet systems that come from different language groups [9]. The resulting image accurately fills the glass surface, resembling a huge graffiti (Figure 6b). The glazing, combined with the irregular body of the building, ensures that the structure stands out in the surrounding area [10] and is a landmark within the town. From far away the print can be seen clearly as a lettering pattern, and is a contemporary interpretation of lettering graphics, a type of code. The graphics work as a kind of contemporary ornament; they provide a reference to the building’s purpose, and inspire to look for meanings. They give the building its unique character.

Figure 6. The Cottbus Technical University Library, Germany (Herzog & de Meuron, 2004), a) building view from a distance, b) Façade seen from 5 meters away, photos by the author.

3.7. Creating notation based on a code
The use of antique writing in the façade of a modern building seems to be a precedent.

This approach to images and lettering graphics can be seen in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Munich. The elevation has been covered with glass in its entirety. Glass layers, designed using different techniques, were used in that process. The south elevation is constituted by a moving entrance portal (Figure 7a), in which huge glazing was installed. The composition, which forms the sign of the cross [11], is made up of two paint layers. In both these layers, a nail motif is used as a repeated element (Figure 7b). In the external layer, its function is to make up the composition, namely the sign of the cross, while at the same time adding density to the glazing’s texture in selected spots. In the internal layer, the nail was used to compose cuneiform writing. The image in this layer is made of square frames that are separated from the uniform ultramarine background. A quote from The Passion According to St John (18–20) is included in the glazing [12]. The fact that the image on the glazing is made up of geometrical modules and is set on a square gives order to the building’s spatial composition. Squares are a recurring theme throughout the work as its smallest compositional element in which each letter of the cuneiform writing is enclosed; they are visible in the mullion and panel divisions. The composition of the glazing reflects the complex symbolism of the image. The multidimensionality of the glazing’s imagery was created in the context of broad links from opposing relations [13]. One of the artistic measures was the creation of a code in which the use of a nail as the basic unit that forms the cuneiform writing is symbolic and metaphorical. The image cannot be read directly, but has to be seen as anointed with meaning. In this case, it is important to look at the graphics’ symbolism, rather than the direct reading of the text.
3.8. Lettering symbols
The placement of patterns and lettering symbols in a façade may determine the context in which an architectural structure exists.

An example of a project like this is the building of the Inholland University in Rotterdam. In the south-eastern part of the complex, vertical rectangular divisions of the windows have been filled with panes covered with print (Figure 8a). The multiplied graphics form a complex composition made up of elongated graphical signs, processed mathematical and chemical formulas (Figure 8a). On the surface of the entire elevation, a two-layer white and ultramarine screen print has been applied, with the white layer put in the foreground of the composition. Lettering motifs form a texture. Narrow vertical divisions of this part of the glazing are highlighted with light-coloured structural elements of the glass façade. Irregularly placed, elongated vertical rectangles, made of glass covered with screen print, have been joined into vertically positioned strips. The combination of printed glass panels and colourless glass creates a mosaic, seen from afar, set on a façade as irregular smudges. In the Inholland University complex, printed glass highlights and boosts the dynamics of a complex spatial composition. It enriches the arrangement by adding aesthetic and compositional values, such as texture and colour, which in combination with linear values form a well-balanced composition. The façade is displayed from the side of the station and the local train line. It sends a clear message about the building’s purpose, and acts as a decorative texture being part of the composition that covers the façade.
Figure 8. Inholland University building complex, Rotterdam (Erick van Egeraat, 2008), view from the south-east side: a) view from the city railway station, b) close-up of the glazing from the south-east side, lettering motifs, source: photo by the author.

4. Results and discussion

The gathered research material confirms that motifs based on lettering graphics are used in a number of ways in façades. Lettering motifs, being part of the arrangement, have a decorative as well as compositional function in relation to the building’s external shape. The meaning of the text plays an important role in the design.

4.1. Composition

In the examples used in the analysis, a direct link was observed between lettering graphics and the building’s compositional arrangement and shape. In buildings fully covered with façade graphics, lettering arrangements:

- Add variety to the simple shape of a building (3.40);
- Highlight the building’s form with the letter shapes (3.6);
- Create visual reduction in the composition of a building, e.g. by visually shortening the façade (3.2);
- Provide texture used to fill graphic arrangements that play out in the building’s façade (3.5, 3.8). In buildings partially covered with façade graphics, lettering arrangements act as an element that highlight key surfaces of the façade, or separate important areas such as the entrance area (3.1, 3.7).

In the analysed examples, the following strategies of forming lettering graphics were observed:

- Decrease of letter size, visible only in direct contact with the façade (3.1, 3.3);
- Linear multiplication (3.2, 3.3, 3.4);
- Surface multiplication – texture creation (3.5, 3.7, 3.8);
- Breaking down of text into letters (3.1);
- Using foreign languages (3.5, 3.6, 3.7).

The above operations, related to both form and meaning, are the same ones that result in making the meaning of a text unclear.

Lettering graphics may be used to create texture that will then be used to make a figurative image. The value in such image might be coming from the text in which enamels of differing transparency levels were used (3.1).
4.2. Message
Lettering ornaments are usually used to create information connected with the building’s purpose. They are applied in glazing that is meant to highlight functional connection with literary fiction (3.2), present a religious text (3.7), or be a reference to lettering symbols (3.8).

Quotes in the native or foreign language are applied on the glazing. The use of a text written in a foreign language may be treated as a type of coding. In the described projects, the following were observed:
- The use of antique writing – cuneiform writing (3.7);
- Overlapping of writing styles from various cultures (3.6);
- Hebrew writing was used to make a reference to the building’s purpose (3.5).

Reference to a text in a foreign language has a symbolic and metaphysical meaning. In particular cases, whether the writing can be read is not of primary importance, rather the focus is on its symbolism and reference to the history of the building.

Text and lettering motifs play an important role in creating a company’s image, brand awareness and identification of the architectural space, especially in projects where lettering graphics have been tied to the compositional features of the façade. In such cases, several different strategies bring desired results:
- Using a multiplication of the company’s name (3.3, 3.4);
- Using large lettering symbols (3.2, 3.4);
- Reference to historical symbolism (3.5);
- Paying tribute to people who contributed to the creation or development of the company (3.1) and helped build the sense of community.

5. Conclusion
The buildings described in this paper provide examples of lettering graphics used in façades. Lettering motifs have a visual significance as part of the compositional arrangement in combination with the building’s external shape.

In buildings fully covered with façade graphics, lettering arrangements are part of the aesthetic and compositional strategy of forming the façade. Image on glass adds variety, and highlights the building’s form by visually correcting the façade’s composition. Lettering graphics may be used in the form of texture that fills graphical arrangements present in the façade. In building’s partly covered with façade graphics, lettering arrangements act as decoration that emphasises key surfaces in the façade or separates important areas such as the entrance area.

The layer responsible for meaning completes the compositional role of the lettering ornament used in the facade. Lettering graphics are used to create information related to the purpose of the building. The text used in the façade may have a symbolic meaning, often referring to lettering patterns, signs or quotations. An interesting phenomenon that has been observed are formal procedures related to the image, which have a compositional and artistic significance, but also make the text less readable.

The text on the façade contributes to the making of the company’s image and branding – improving its brand awareness. Lettering motifs are important in the creation of an identity for an architectural space as well as its identification.

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