Urban Signage Design: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract. An urban sign is a polycode text, a visual media message created by a combination of different codes: verbal, architectural, compositional, graphic (including font), color, pictorial. Being one of the urgent issues of modern urban planning, urban signage design as part of the urban environment design requires an interdisciplinary approach. In addition to fundamental knowledge in the field of architecture and graphic design, one needs to possess legal knowledge (for legal regulation of design works, for distinguishing between a sign and an advertising structure), as well as linguistic knowledge (for the development of the verbal component of the sign and the polycode text). The article analyzes the attempts to regulate the urban design of Moscow, Vladivostok and Saratov. This analysis has revealed that while creating the city's design code in order to preserve the historical appearance of the city and to combat kitsch and "visual noise", experts give separate consideration to the visual and sociocultural aspect of urban signage, however, they often ignore its legal and linguistic aspects. The article suggests a comprehensive solution to the problem at the stage of developing design projects of urban signs in line with the original design code established for each city.

1. Introduction
An urban sign is an important element of urban design, the visual appearance of the city as an organized spatial structure. Our interpretation of the very concept of design is broader than the classical "creative activity aimed at the formation of the objective environment surrounding people" [1], and also includes the result of this activity. Since an urban sign is a polycode text, a visual media message created by a combination of various codes – verbal, architectural, compositional, graphic (including font), color, graphic, photic, etc. – the study of urban design problems is possible only on an interdisciplinary basis. The term Urbanonym is also used to refer to the name of a commercial enterprise located on an urban sign.

Modern specialists position the approach to design not only as that to art, but also as a technical practice involving the physical organization of buildings and spaces, towards a civic purpose [2]. Having considered successively the change of concepts and styles of urban design, H. Bahrainy and A. Bakhtiar emphasize the importance of an integrative approach to urban environment design, which should include all aspects of urban design – substantive, as well as procedural [3]. For the processing and analysis of urban signage design, contentious scientific methods of observation and comparison, as well as linguistic methods of semantic and contextual analysis of urbanonyms were used. For the analysis and interpretation of urbanonyms as commercial names, the methods developed by legal expertology were used [4]. Most of the material analyzed in the article is made of Russian names containing their original spelling in Cyrillic characters, their transliteration and translation are given in brackets, e.g. Дай назва! (Dai pyat’ – ‘give me a high five!’).

2. Problems of urban signage design
2.1 Current understanding of urban design problems
Since the sign of a commercial enterprise is an element of urban design, it is necessary to identify common problems of modern urban design and different approaches to its analysis. The state of the urban environment is considered from the viewpoints of producers, regulators, and users of the built environment [5], linguists [6], philosophers and landscape design specialists. The development of the city as a phenomenon of the cultural landscape is reflected in its planning structure, the location of its main functional areas, the nature of its streets, while the task of the design is to structure the urban space so that it is adapted to the person's interests [7]. N. Bauer and L. Shabatura defend the principles of humanity and harmony, creativity and communicability as integral components of urban design [8].

The issues of identifying contemporary trends in the design of certain cities of the world are at the center of attention of several authors. For instance, the article by M. Carmona is devoted to the study of theoretical and practical principles of designing the historical part of London [9]. R. Gale writes about the combination of Christian and Muslim elements in the design of Birmingham [10]; N. Meseneva reflects on the significance of design in preserving the historical environment of Vladivostok [11]; the formation of the regional design of the Gorno-Altaiask environment in the context of traditional culture becomes the subject of a study by G.F. Tereshchenko [12]. A number of studies are devoted to the analysis of the design of individual parts of the city, e.g., a case study of the revitalized industrial area of Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which presents an example of a hybridized local and global identity [13]. A monograph by R. Mantho [14] focuses on the design of urban streets in their interrelation with consideration of climatic, cultural, social and economic factors. The definition of urban design in value terms allows the authors A. J. F. Chiaradia, L. Sieh, F. Pimmer to point out these two features: "urban design is configurational... urban designing is a political activity, as well as a configuration-making one, so designers themselves need to develop their judgement skills to be effective" [15]. Rightfully emphasizing that urban environment design can be considered in various aspects (technological, co-scale, ecological, ergonomic and philosophic), T. Mitrokhina [16] fails to take into account another three aspects, which are the most important for the design of urban signage, – linguistic, legal and aesthetic.

The linguistic aspect is represented in the research by E. Kara-Murza [17], E. Remchukova, T. Sokolova, L. Zamletdinova [18], [19], N. Mikhail'yukova [20]. Let us emphasize that linguists view a sign as a mix of the verbal, informative component with the graphic one, while architects confine themselves to analyzing the graphic component of urban design. For example, V. Eroshkin examines the role of pictography in the visual space of a modern city, defines the main means of the artistic and graphic pictogram language [21], but does not produce an integrative analysis of the polycode character of urban design.

The new interdisciplinary area, naming examination, connects the linguistic and legal aspects of the study of commercial urbanonyms, in particular, it reveals urban signage design problems [22].

2.2. Regulation of urban signage design

Criticism of urban environment design is primarily associated with the violation of the historical appearance of the city, when bright and often tasteless signs overlap the elements of architectural decor and disrupt the harmony of the city's historical development. In addition, many cities are marked by a visual congestion of the facades of houses: a large number of multi-colored, multi-format, multi-style signs and billboards become not an attractive but a distracting factor. All this led domestic specialists, following foreign ones, to the need to develop design codes.

The design code of the city is a system of rules, requirements and restrictions for the formation, maintenance and development of an integral architectural and artistic urban environment, which comprises the external surfaces of buildings and structures, the urban landscape, elements of improvement, navigation, information and advertising. Inside this holistic system, it is expedient to identify a subsystem, the design code of signs, regulating their sizes, installation, color scheme, etc.

2.2.1. Signage design problems of Moscow. In 2013, Artemy Lebedev's studio, commissioned by the Committee for Architecture and Urban Planning of Moscow, in conjunction with the Main Architecture and Planning Department of the Moscow Committee for Architecture developed the architectural and artistic concept of placing advertising and information structures for eleven central
streets of the city and compiled the corresponding guidance [23]. The document regulates the sizes and types of signs, features of their attachment, etc., but ignores the content of signage. The design and linguistic parameters include rigid definition of the "choice of outline", prohibition of the so-called "distortion of letters", of the blending of uppercase and lowercase letters, of free brush fonts, which, in our opinion, are creative methods of creating a commercial name. The design code thus restricts the freedom of creativity of rights holders of commercial objects.

One can not but agree with the authors who recommend that "the font must obey the architecture and convincingly fit into it" [23], as well as with the fact that in Moscow, one often comes across kitsch on signs, which disfigures the city. The laconic sign of the Moscow store of the famous Dutch brand ROOMERS with one polycode element – the keyhole in the letter O (Figure 1) looks much more successful than the stylistically failing and anti-aesthetic neologism of the pharmacy store Εκα/ονιάμα (Eka/onyama), represented by a blend of bright colors (Figure 2).

However, it is also important to take into account other criteria, especially the type of the urban object: the recommendations to use a strict and straight "noble" font with mandatory serifs are not suitable for the sign of a children's cafe, e.g., Птицы и Пчёлы (Ptitsy i pchely – ‘Birds and Bees’) (italics with curls); Дом Оранжевой Коровы (Dom oranghevoi Korovy – ‘Orange Cow’s House’) (multicolored and different-sized "jumping" letters), the store Мосье Башмаков (‘Monsieur Bashmakov’) (multicolored letters), the name of the housing estate МОНАКОВО (MONAKOVO) from the name of the principality of Monaco and the exclamatory particle ВО! (VO!), which means ‘high quality’, accompanied by a nonverbal component – a princely crown. The name of the baby store Мода:скарррпп (Modagaskarrrr) is creative due to the substitution of the letter A by O, as a result of which the first part can be read as Мода (moda–‘fashion’), and to the reduplication rrr, which is an imitation of roaring. Thus, the allusion to the popular cartoon has become semiotically meaningful.

Another creative naming model is the use of popular phraseological units in unusual graphics: Дай пять! (Dai pyat’ – ‘Give me a high five!’, a form of familiar greeting, literally, 'slapping someone on the open palm'), for a manicure salon (Figure 3).
The sign of the *Cook'kareku* cafe (Figure 4) exists on legal grounds as a legally protected service sign. **Naming examination has proved that** this name realizes the right to freedom of the rightholder's verbal creativity: the combined designation includes a pictorial element in the form of a stylized frying pan with two triangles arranged in the shape of a bird's open beak, black on a yellow background. On the frying pan, one can see a fried egg. Under the pictorial element, there is the verbal element *Cook kareku*, written in bold black letters of the Latin alphabet. This element consists of the element *Cook*, which is an English word that can be transliterated as *Kyk* in Russian, and the element *kareku*, which has no semantic meaning. Phonetically, the verbal element *Cook'kareku* imitates the sound produced by a rooster, according to the Russian perception (the English version of this sound is known as *cock-a-doodle-do*).

The name of the shop *Быстро* (*Bukhni*) is argotic appeal for drinking (‘Have a drink!’). Such scandalous names cause a negative reaction of the majority of citizens and become the subject of controversy in the Federal Antimonopoly Service and in the media. **Naming examination can facilitate objective consideration of controversial urbanonyms [24].**

2.2.2. **Signage design problems of Saratov and Izhevsk.** Following the example of Moscow, other cities also began the development of design codes. The Strelka KB Consulting Agency developed the document "Design Code: Rules of Placing Signage in the City of Saratov" [25], which clearly lists the requirements and methodical recommendations for placing signs and information, as well as the rules for their formatting. Although it contains a legal component (indicates the legal status of urbanonyms: company name, trademark and service mark, commercial designation), the prohibitions themselves imposed by this document do not have legal force, as they contradict the legislation of the Russian Federation. Therefore, the city attorney spoke out in defense of the rights of entrepreneurs [26]. It turned out that the rule of "not competing in signs" (including not using jobbing fonts) brought about a decrease in the revenue of cafes in Saratov, which had changed their bright and creative urbanonyms for stricter and more uniform ones [27].

On February 15, 2018, the authorities of the city of Izhevsk, the capital of Udmurtia, approved a design code that defines the rules for the design of all elements of the facades of buildings [28]. When developing the regulations, the experience of Artemy Lebedev's studio and the Strelka KB Consulting Agency was used. However, the introduction of new rules also infringes the rights of entrepreneurs, harming their business.

2.2.3. **Signage design problems of Vladivostok.** The study by N. Meseneva and N. Milova is devoted to the problem of creating a comfortable visual environment of the city. The authors analyze the color palette of the urban environment of Vladivostok's historical center, emphasizing the aggressive visual fields created by outdoor advertising and the coloring of signage. They propose to correct mistakes in the design of the urban environment [29], but do not take into account different aspects of the problem. 88% of the interviewed respondents negatively assess the unfavorable practice of placing stores and offices in the first floors of buildings, which forms a continuous tape of advertising signs that are combined neither stylistically nor compositionally [30]. A. Ivanova analyzes the gastronomic landscape of the Far Eastern cities, where hipster cafes and posh restaurants, as well as roadside "pit stop" fast food places intertwine [31]. According to A. Ivanova, in 2017 Vladivostok had as many as 757 catering establishments. The analysis in the framework of the architectural and socio-cultural approach to the issue of the signage of cafes and restaurants seems significant for the interdisciplinary solution of the problem of the design code of urbanonyms. In particular, the thesis according to which since 2010 the economy of impressions and the hospitality industry (friendly city) have been replacing consumption economy seems important to us for developing a design code, not for any city, but for a specific city with an original architectural appearance and traditions.

It should be noted as a positive phenomenon that that Vladivostok experts did not follow the path of copying the design code of Moscow and other cities, but developed their own Rules for the Territorial Development of Vladivostok and Artemovsk City Districts, Settlements of the Nadezhdinsky and Shkotovsky municipalities of Primorsky Krai [32], approved by the Administration.
of Primorsky Krai on June 15, 2016 (268-pa). However, this document gives no attention to the informative component of signage. Although paragraph 2.6.2. contains requirements for the compliance of the aesthetic characteristics of signs with the style of the object where they are placed, the aesthetic component refers only to the external appearance of signage, according to world design traditions (see., e.g., [33]). Meanwhile, the aesthetics of the word is no less important than that of architecture, graphics and color.

The approach of the architect and designer A. Ivanova to the analysis of the gastronomic spaces of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok can be used as a basis for a comprehensive analysis of urban signage and complemented by linguistic and legal aspects. For instance, in addition to the fact that “Barxat (Barkhat – ‘Velvet’) and Moonshine form a witty elegant duet, working on the contrast of interior solutions, color schemes and gender stereotypes” [31], it should be pointed out that both urbanonyms are commercial designations, that is, they are not subject to mandatory registration and do not undergo a Rospatent examination. Both are polycodes symbols, but with different degrees of combination of codes: the name Barxat (Figure 5) is formed by a symmetrical combination of letters of the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, written in an original font (which contradicts the recommendations of the design code of most Russian cities, but is not regulated by the Primorsky Krai Rules). We would like to note that such graphics correspond to the concept of the place and harmoniously fits into the urban landscape.

![Figure 5. Barxat (Barkhat) cafe sign.](image)

The name Moonshine (Figure 6) contains paralinguistic components: a picture (the image of the moon, clarifying the semantics of the first part of the title, or the image of a corkscrew, dividing the name into two parts and indicating the type of establishment, a bar). This element, like the symmetrical obscuration of the part of the letters “O” in the first part of the title, is necessary for the legal protection of the commercial designation, which can not be confusingly similar to the registered protected trademark and service mark MOONSHINE. The copyright holder of the latter is Stillhouse LLC, a Delaware Limited Liability Company, 11555 N. Meridian Street, Suite 301, Carmel, IN, 46032, United States of America (US) [34].

![Figure 6. Two types of the MOONSHINE sign.](image)

We note that these signs violate the aforementioned Rules, according to which "placing of signage containing photographs, graphic images of people, animals, equipment, clothes, etc. (except for the image of the trademark, service mark)” is prohibited (para. 2.6.18). This paragraph of the Rules...
excludes the possibility of using polycode signage with a pictographic component, which infringes the rights of entrepreneurs. Therefore, this prohibition is universally violated, for example, the sign of the popular pelmeni place Ложки-Плошки (Lozki-ploshki – ‘Spoons and Bowls’) contains graphic elements – convex images of wooden rolling pins. Graphic images also accompany the verbal element on the signs of the cafe МИРИНЭ (MIRINE), the anti-cafe Третье место (Tret’e mesto – ‘The Third Place’), the tea parlor ХЛОПОК (Khlopok – ‘Cotton’), the bars BILLY’S PUB, DUBLIN IRISH PUB (with shields in the ornament of clover shamrocks, and bagpipes on the sign), the restaurants ТРИ БОГАТЫРЯ (Tri bogatyrya – ‘Three Bogatys’) (a painting by V. Vasnetsov), Восточная жемчужина (Vostochnaya zhemchuzhina – ‘Oriental pearl’) (an image of a pearl in an eastern ornament), Сытый Горыныч (Sytyi Gorynych – ‘Full Gorynych’), Панда (‘Panda’) and many others.

A creative mixture of pictorial and letter codes on the sign of the jazz club Контрабанда (Kontrabanda – ‘Contrasband’) provides for the individualization of the commercial urbanonym (Figure 7).

![Figure 7. Kontrabanda cafe sign.](image1)

![Figure 8. PORTCAFE sign.](image2)

The replacement of the letters in the urbanonym PORTCAFE (Figure 8) underscores the originality of the place which serves modern Far Eastern cuisine, a fusion of diverse and often contradictory gastronomic cultures.

In these and similar cases, naming examination can help to protect the rights of the owners of the commercial designation and justify the right to place it on the urban sign, while simultaneously protecting the residents’ rights to a comfortable environment.

### 3. Conclusion
A well-organized urban environment contributes to the economic and cultural development of the city, the preservation of its identity and the assertion of its positive image not only in Russia, but also in the world urban space. In order to successfully solve the problems of urban signage design in the context of urban environment design of each particular city, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary. Representation the commercial name on a sign of involves a collision of interests of rightholders, city authorities and residents. The solution to the problems described in the article touches upon economic, political, ecological, cultural and aesthetic aspects that can not be considered in isolation. Therefore, at the stage of developing a design project for a commercial enterprise’s sign as a polycode text all the components – architectural, artistic, linguistic, sociocultural, aesthetic and legal – must be taken into account in order to achieve a reasonable balance.

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