

ISSN 2508-7878



2025 KISD International Conference at Ningbo
February 22-23, 2025

Co-evolution | 共進化 | 공진화

Place brand as an object of urban space : the case of Russia

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keywords : city attraction, graphic sculpture, place brand identity, Russian urban space

Abstract

The physical and symbolic presence of a place brand in the urban space is realized in the actual form of a graphic sculpture, which becomes a modern urban landmark. In Russia this phenomenon has been systematically developed in the form of graphic sculptures I♥(...) installed in most Russian megacities, large, medium and small cities. Graphic sculpture I♥(...) developed in several design types and identified in 2022–2024 has been formed a new sustainable symbolic and communicative pattern of urban environment.

Place branding is a relevant tool for building and promoting local and global identity for cities, regions and entire countries around the world. Place branding is characterized by complexity and multidimensionality, encompassing different orientations and system elements, which Simon Anholt has succinctly described using the “hexagon” of national and city brands (Anholt, 2007). Several communication paradigms can be identified as the theoretical basis of place branding: cybernetic, sociocultural and semiotic (Craig, 1999). However, the place brand exists simultaneously as a brand identification and representation of the place (in the form of a graphic image), as a symbolic object in the communication and media space, and as a physical object in the urban space. The object of the urban environment that fulfils the function of a place marker in both physical and media space is a graphic sculpture. As part of the city brand system, it can be analyzed based on the semiotic approach developed by different researchers (Yoon, 2010).

Graphic sculpture as a new object of urban space

Place branding expresses a pragmatic approach to the construction of city identity, considering a place in the optics of global marketing as a cultural product of consumption. As such, branding generates certain positive and negative sociocultural effects. A critical stance towards global branding describes its integration into public space in terms of “occupation” and “privatization” (Klein, 1999). Branding is able to qualitatively modify the cultural landscape, which is a combination and interaction of anthropogenic factors and natural qualities. Reeman M. Rehan distinguishes historical buildings, iconic

architecture, public spaces, parks, landmarks, and modern streets as units of the urban environment structure (Rehan, 2014). An important element of modern public space is also the images replicated in the media, logos, slogans, etc.

One of the “flagship” examples of brand diffusion in urban space is the rebranding of Amsterdam, where graphic sculptures of Amsterdam were installed next to historical landmarks. This practice has been disseminated in the branding of Lyon and Pula (Gorgorova, 2019). The graphic structure is part of the media content that shapes the image of a place. For example, the graphic sculpture of Seoul acts as a popular element in the media representation of the Republic of Korea and the visual design of news for media related to the city (I•SEOUL•U..., 2016).

Graphic sculpture, as a material object and brand bearer, becomes a landmark in the system of the city's visual and iconic environment, its semantic content and perception, forming its “own” set of meanings. At the same time, the semantic appeal of a landmark can dominate the visual one (Dong, Qin, (eds), 2020). Graphic sculpture means/signifies more than it shows. There is a relationship between the realized need to produce place identity and the interventions in the urban and cultural landscape that mediate the everyday life of urban communities (Aiello, 2021). Graphic sculpture has a direct impact on the cultural and historical landscape in its semantic, symbolic, communicative and media dimensions. Applied to the urban environment, graphic sculpture, in a broader sense, any object that is part of a place brand, is characterized by interactivity (communicative), aggressiveness and invasiveness.

The dynamics of place branding and its focus on everyday life do not allow it to become part of the historical heritage of the place. Graphic sculpture expresses a position of modernity and novelty that is attractive not only to a significant part of society, but also to the subjects of urban management, who largely determine cultural policy. As Rehan notes, “the city must always appear new and active”. To achieve this, urban life and urban spaces, such as the central square, should be built around branding objectives, i.e. “branded” (Rehan, 2014: 229). Such a positive and generally apologetic approach to the place branding, which excludes concerns about the privatization and commodification of public space, has now become dominant in the market for intellectual services in the creative industries, both for developers and their clients.

The case of Russia: I♥(...)

The branding of the city and the symbolic filling of urban space with the help of graphic sculpture was actively developed in Russia in the form of the installation of the object I♥Moscow (I Love Moscow) within the reconstruction of Gorky Park in 2013. On a structural and plastic level, the graphic sculpture I♥Moscow refers to Milton Glaser's iconic logo I♥NY (I Love New York) in the form of a “rebus” of letters, an abbreviation of the city's name and a graphic heart symbol, created in the late 1970s as part of a tourism promotion campaign (Dinnie, 2011: 132–133). After Moscow, the graphic sculpture I♥(...) was installed as a tourist attraction in a wide variety of Russian cities, including cities with millions of inhabitants, large, large and small cities and towns.

The author's 2022–2023 study analyzed 58 I♥(...) objects in 47 Russian cities (Rodkin, 2023). The inductive coding procedure identified the graphic sculpture (its presence/absence), the type of construction and the material from which it was made. The context to which each object was related was identified as a variable: the location and the background landscape (square, street, promenade, park, office building, etc.). The study showed that three types of design were the most common:

- 1) block font with graphic elements in the form of a heart sign and a tick, the name of the city is placed diagonally (usually cut out) on the tick;

2) block font without a graphic element in the form of a tick, the name of the city is placed above the heart sign;

3) linear font, the name of the city is written in a line, including the heart sign.

All three (and especially the first two) types of design solutions are a common, stable and universal visual and symbolic pattern of the physical and media landscape of the modern Russian cities <Figure>. In some cities, several solutions or objects are found simultaneously. For example, two types of graphic sculptures or even three types at once. Solutions in the form of abbreviations (for example, St. Petersburg — SP♥ and Novosibirsk — I♥NSK) are less common. In some cities one can meet modifications related to the use of different materials with the help of which the inscription or its elements are made. Differences in used materials, fonts, compositional solutions, as well as minor constructive modifications in general do not affect the general conceptual solution and perception of graphic sculpture as a single visual and iconic pattern. Graphic sculpture has become a systemic element of urban identity throughout Russia, for small towns that do not have the appropriate resources and competences in the field of place branding it is a working template and a “constructor” for solving communicative tasks. This is the duality of the I♥(...) pattern: brand identification is unified, but it is perceived in each city as unique, inherent to that place and reflecting its essence.



<Figure> Various types of graphic sculptures I♥(...) in cities and regions of Russia: 1) Moscow, Kyzyl,

Pskov, Nizhny Novgorod; 2) Solikamsk, Sonkovo, Rostov Veliky, Dzerzhynka; 3) Omsk, Derbent, Ufa, Vologda (collected on public sources)

In Russian practice, graphic sculpture often acts as a “substitute” for the city's unique visual identity, or exists in parallel with it. If the graphic sculpture is not included in the system of the city's brand identity, it becomes a separate and independent element of the city's representation. Even if some graphic sculptures are dismantled or replaced, they continue to be present in the media space, for example in the form of user-generated content.

The problem is that graphic sculpture is not just a static element of the urban landscape or a passive object of the viewer's perception, it creates the conditions for a whole range of communicative interactions. Graphic sculpture provokes lively human reactions and responses, the analysis of which shows their positive nature. This reaction is a direct prerequisite for the creation of the city's tourist attractiveness. The graphic sculpture becomes a point of attraction, a meeting place, an entourage for photographs and city selfies, which constitute one of the most important sources of content created by citizens and tourists, as well as an object of media research. The nature of the official and unofficial photographs of the graphic sculptures is also positive, the media content is not destructive or critical.

Summary

Graphic sculpture was problematized as an invasive object (Rodkin, 2023). The notion of invasiveness, taken from the fields of medicine and microbiology, emphasizes the impact that the 'penetration' and spread of a brand has on the cultural and historical landscape. The communicative invasiveness of the graphic sculpture I♥(...) is related to the destruction of established symbolic boundaries and the invasion of physical and media space by the place brand and any other communicative system. At the same time, communicative invasiveness can be contrasted with the notion of inclusiveness as a fundamentally different cultural strategy and way of mastering space. Urban and cultural environments exhibit a rather high degree of inclusiveness, i.e. the ability to include and integrate heterogeneous objects and the “fields” they create in the form of social, communicative and cultural practices and relations. Graphic sculpture, as a tool of representation, sociocultural and brand communication of the place, extends and updates the structure of public space.

The typology of graphic sculpture I♥(...) identified in 2022–2023 shows stability. In the period 2023–2024 (and the beginning of 2025), no new designs or basic forms of placement of graphic sculptures in urban space appeared in Russian cities. The Russian experience is an example of a systemic constructivist approach to the formation of modern place identity, which contributes to the development of the theory and practice of place branding, place identity and urban sociocultural practices.

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