

Oxford Brookes University  
School of Built Environment  
Joint Centre for Urban Design

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**EVALUATING COMMERCIAL SIGNS IN HISTORIC  
STREETSCAPES:**  
the Effects of the Control of Advertising and Signage on User's Sense of  
Environmental Quality.

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## Abstract

The subject of this study is the visual damage caused by commercial signs in historic city centres, and its effects on user perception and evaluation of these places. The research problem concerns the lack of a general approach to guide and control commercial signs in historic city centres, based on the perception and evaluation of users from different urban contexts. The aim of this study is to identify those aspects related to the operation of commercial signage controls and physical characteristics of commercial signs and buildings that should be taken into account in the development of a general commercial signage approach. This general approach can help national, regional, and local authorities of different urban contexts design and implement commercial signage controls.

This research begins with the development of a theoretical and conceptual framework by analysing concepts related to (i) visual quality and user perception and evaluation of the built environment, (ii) formal and symbolic factors linked to the streetscape that influence aesthetic judgments, and (iii) non-physical variables related to the operation of commercial signage controls, such as consumer culture, city centre management, marketing the city and urban tourism, and by reviewing current commercial signage approaches adopted in different urban contexts. The empirical investigation explores user perception and evaluation of commercial signage controls in three different historic city centres. The Environment Behavioural research field, a multiple method survey design, and a multiple case study approach are adopted. The combination of documentation review and archival records, systematic observations of physical characteristics of commercial streets, questionnaires, interviews, and focus group proved to be efficient to answer the research questions and achieve the research aim. The city of Oxford in England, and the cities of Gramado and Pelotas in Brazil were selected as case studies.

One of the main conclusions of this research is the definition of a series of aspects related to the operation of commercial signage controls and the physical characteristics of commercial signs and buildings that need to be taken into account in the development of a general commercial signage approach. This study also identifies common patterns of perception and evaluation among individuals from different urban contexts and user groups (lay people and professionals). A possible future stage of research in this topic can be the application of the same methodology in other case studies to verify whether the same universal views found here will be verified. If the findings of this Ph.D. research can be found consistently between users from other urban contexts, then urban design principles that incorporate user perception and evaluation of commercial signage controls and historic city centres can be addressed as theoretical concepts to combat visual pollution in historic cities across the world.

**Key-words:** perception, evaluation, commercial signs, historic city centres, visual pollution.

## **Presentations and publications of the results of this Thesis**

### 1. PRESENTATIONS

#### **07<sup>th</sup> June 2005**

The partial results of this Thesis were presented at “21<sup>st</sup> National Week of Natural Landscape and Built Environment” in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This event was held from 05<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> June 2005 by the City Council of Porto Alegre at Eco Exposição, Armazém A5 do Cais do Porto. Title of presentation: *Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: How to Analyse this Issue.*

#### **18<sup>th</sup> July 2005**

The partial results of this Thesis were presented at the Municipal Centre of Culture of Gramado by the invitation of the City Council of Gramado, Brazil. Title of presentation: *Commercial Signage in Historic and Tourist Sites: How to Avoid Visual Pollution.*

#### **10<sup>th</sup> August 2005**

The partial results of this Thesis were presented at the Department of Planning of the City Council of Pelotas, Brazil, by the invitation of this City Council. Title of presentation: *How to Control Commercial Signage in the Historic City Centre of Pelotas.*

#### **4<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

The results of this Thesis were presented at “the 2<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the Association of Brazilian Research Students in United Kingdom (ABEP-UK)”. It was held by ABEP-UK at the Institute of Education, London, England. Title of presentation: *Visual Pollution in Historic Cities: an Increasing Problem.*

#### **8<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

The results of this Thesis were presented at “the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Research Student Conference of Oxford Brookes University”. It was held by the School of Built Environment of Oxford Brookes University at the Research Centre, BG01. Title of presentation: *Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Theoretical Concepts to Develop Commercial Signage Controls in Different Cultural Contexts.*

#### **13<sup>th</sup> September 2006**

The results of this Thesis were presented at “19<sup>th</sup> IAPS, International Conference: Environment, Health and Sustainable Development”. It was held from 11 to 16 September 2006 by IAPS at Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt. Title of presentation: *Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Theoretical Concepts to Develop Commercial Signage Controls in Different Cultural Contexts.*

#### **21<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

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### 2. PUBLICATIONS

1. Portella, A. A. (2006a). Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Theoretical Concepts to Develop Commercial Signage Controls in Different Cultural Contexts. In: *Book of Abstracts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Research Student Conference of Oxford Brookes University.* (pp.12-13).

Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

2. Portella, A. A. (2006b). Visual Pollution in Historic Cities: an Increasing Problem. In: *Book of Abstracts of the 2rd Conference of the Association of Brazilian Research Students in United Kingdom (ABEP-UK)*. [Electronic Version]. London: ABEP-RU.

3. Portella, A. A. & Reeve, A. R. (2006). Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Theoretical Concepts to Develop Commercial Signage Controls in Different Cultural Contexts. In: *Books of Abstracts of 19th IAPS, International Conference: Environment, Health and Sustainable Development*. (p.201). Alexandria: IAPS.

4. Portella, A. A. (2007). Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Operation of Commercial Signage Controls and User Perception and Evaluation of Commercial Historic City Centres. In: *Book of Abstracts of the 4rd Annual Research Student Conference of Oxford Brookes University*. (p.12). Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

### 3. AWARD

1. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2006 the researcher's presentation of the results of this Thesis was awarded as one of the best presentations of "the 3rd Annual Research Student Conference of Oxford Brookes University" held by the School of Built Environment. Title of presentation: *Visual Pollution in Historic City Centres: Theoretical Concepts to Develop Commercial Signage Controls in Different Cultural Contexts*.

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