

# *‘Welcome signs’ in public space: separation and identity*

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The main purpose of this paper is to present researches on the ‘welcome signs’ as a symbolic elements in territorial representation, which have at least two meanings: symbolic disclosing identity of a particular place and spatial being an element of certain public space. Therefore, the second objective is to define the value of such visual signs in branding strategy of a place.

**Methodology/approach** – The research take advantage of the content analysis of signs to make conclusions referring to the communications process and place marketing concepts.

**Findings** – ‘Welcome signs’ are symbolic installations, which are kind of testimonials about particular places. Apart from the role of identification, information and advertising, these signs have also aesthetic significance as well as they are spatial forms of territorial division.

**Practical implications** – The ‘welcome signs’ are made in intuitive ways by the legitimate authorities, so the examination of them and building a model of their content and design might be very beneficial and helpful for LGU.

**Originality** – So far, welcome signs have not been particularly the subjects of marketing, social or political researches.

**Key words:** place marketing; visual identity; signage; public space

## Resumen

### **'Signos de bienvenida' en el espacio público: separación e identidad.**

Propósito: el propósito principal de este artículo es presentar investigaciones sobre los "signos de bienvenida" como elementos simbólicos en la representación territorial, que tienen al menos dos significados: identidad simbólica reveladora de un lugar en particular y el espacio es un elemento de cierto ritmo público. Por lo tanto, el segundo objetivo es definir el valor de dichos signos visuales en la estrategia de marca de un lugar.

Metodología / enfoque: la investigación aprovecha el análisis de contenido de los signos para hacer conclusiones que se refieren al proceso de comunicación y colocar conceptos de marketing.

Hallazgos: los "signos de bienvenida" son instalaciones simbólicas, que son testimonios de lugares específicos. Además del papel de la identificación, la información y la publicidad, estos signos también tienen un significado estético y son formas espaciales de división territorial.

Implicaciones prácticas: las "señales de bienvenida" están hechas de manera intuitiva por las autoridades legítimas, por lo que su examen y la construcción de un modelo de su contenido y diseño podrían ser muy beneficiosos y útiles para la LGU.

Originalidad: hasta ahora, los signos de bienvenida no han sido particularmente los temas de las investigaciones de mercadeo, sociales o políticas.

**Palabras clave:** comercialización del lugar; identidad visual; señalización espacio público

## Resum

### **'Signes de benvinguda' a l'espai públic: separació i identitat**

Propòsit: l'objectiu principal d'aquest article és presentar investigacions sobre els "signes de benvinguda" com a elements simbòlics de la representació territorial, que tenen almenys dos significats: la identitat simbòlica de la divulgació d'un lloc determinat i el fet de ser un element d'un cert ritme públic. Per tant, el segon objectiu és definir el valor d'aquests signes visuals en l'estratègia de marca d'un lloc.

Metodologia / enfocament: la investigació aprofita l'anàlisi de contingut dels signes per fer conclusions referents al procés de comunicació i als conceptes de màrqueting.

Les troballes: les "senyals de benvinguda" són instal·lacions simbòliques, que són testimonials sobre llocs concrets. A més del paper de la identificació, la informació i la publicitat, aquests signes també tenen significat estètic, així com formes espacials de divisió territorial.

Implicacions pràctiques: les "senyals de benvinguda" es fan de forma intuïtiva per part de les autoritats legítimes, de manera que l'examen i la creació d'un model del seu contingut i disseny poden ser molt beneficiosos i útils per a la LGU.

Originalitat: fins ara, els signes de benvinguda no han estat especialment els temes de màrqueting, investigacions socials o polítiques.

**Paraules clau:** màrqueting de llocs; identitat visual; senyalització; espai públic

## Background of the research problem

Authors of the article have been conducting a research project on the visual identity of Polish provinces, poviats (counties), cities and municipalities for several years. A dozen of the peer-reviewed articles and one book have been the result of this project. As many other research projects, this one also points out to the need for further analysis and initially outlined tracks. One of them is the presence and functioning of variety visual signs in the public space<sup>1</sup>.

One of the characteristic manifestations of such occurrence is the so-called ‘welcome signs’. The authors adopt the following definition:

Welcome sign is standing on the border of the region (province, land, etc.), county, rural commune or city a spatial object with the coat of arms, name and often also the welcome formula. Mostly, it is a metal plaque with a colourful coat, but there are also occasionally artistic constructions made of wood, stone and other materials<sup>2</sup>.

As the definition indicates, these are fixed objects and therefore, in accordance with the Polish law, to set them a building permit is required. The relevant act treats their construction as “an installation of the advertising construction (structure)”<sup>3</sup>. The literature on this issue as well as the authors’ observation during empirical researches allow making a conclusion that they are very common in Poland<sup>4</sup>. Experts and guide publications<sup>5</sup> confirm such an opinion. The authors have collected more than 100 cases of such installations in different Local Government Units (LGU) in Poland.

Empirical studies on visual signs in the public space concentrate rather on spatial informational purpose of the ‘welcome signs’ than on intentionally promotion of a particular place<sup>6</sup>.

Concluding one may point the following functions of such signs:

- welcoming (what is explained in the ‘welcome sign’ definition)
- advertising (what is included in the law)
- informational (this objective is mostly analyzed in the literature on the graphic

1.- Anna Adamus-Matuszyńska and Piotr Dzik, *Tożsamość wizualna polskich województw, miast i powiatów. Identyfikacja, prezentacja, znaczenie*, Katowice, Toruń: ASP w Katowicach, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2017, 341-343.

2.- Alfred Znamierowski, *Heraldyka i weksylologia*. Warszawa: Arkady, 2017, 468-469.

3.- Cf. Ustawa „prawo budowlane” („Construction law” act) Dz.U. 1994 nr 89 poz. 414, art. 3, point 3, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19940890414>

4.- Znamierowski, *Heraldyka*, 469

5.- Karolina Goźlińska ed., *Biblioteka wizerunku miasta. Część 1 – miejskie powitanie*, Warszawa, AMS, 2013.

6.- Per Mollerup, *Wayshowing>Wayfinding. Basic & Interactive* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2013). Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: Mit Press, 1960)

design and urban planner).

Practice as well as the law and guide publications presents a coherent and unambiguous position of a welcome sign in the public space, perceiving a promotional installation as having a significant role in marketing communication<sup>7</sup>. These signs are built predominantly to present the advantages of places to which they invite. Therefore, it seems necessary to scrutinize this phenomenon from a different than informative point of view and make an attempt to propose a theoretical framework for such an analysis.

## Research questions and methodology

The article is exploratory; its objective is to contribute to the discussion about the role and significance of ‘welcome signs’ in public space as visual symbols of a particular place and spatial elements in a certain public space.

The research questions are as follows:

- Do ‘welcome signs’ act as invitation to visit and invest in the particular territory or rather make a segregation of one place from another?
- How to interpret the content of welcome signs? What the content of a given ‘welcome sign’ communicates to a recipient?

The paper follows a conceptual approach by transferring semiology and cultural anthropology concepts to the idea of place branding<sup>8</sup>. Authors assume, that such installation defines the meaning of a territory and is a two-element phenomenon: a symbolic sign itself and an object (construction).

The authors of the study used the content analysis as a research method. Its application requires the following procedure<sup>9</sup> (Rose, 2010, p. 83 – 99):

- a. finding images<sup>10</sup>
- b. devising categories for coding
- c. coding images
- d. analysing the results.

7.- Grzegorz Kiszluk, „Witacz jako wizytówka”, in *Biblioteka wizerunku miasta*, 17-18

8.- Semiology is an accepted theoretical approach in graphic design, including designing the identity of place brands. See: Per Mollerup, *Marks of Excellence* (London: Phaidon Press, 2013) 77-78 and 86-87

9.- Gillian Rose, (2010), *Interpretacja materiałów wizualnych. Krytyczna metodologia badań nad wizualnością*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, p 83 – 99.

10.- *Image* in the Gillian Rose book has different meaning than in Polish language. In her analysis *image* means a visual picture.



The sample chosen for the analysis is neither representative nor purposeful due to lack of developed collection of all ‘welcome signs’ exhibited in the public space in Poland. The authors decided to prepare only a set of exemplary signs guided by the variety of contained elements as a criterion for selection.

## Theoretical framework

The authors as a starting point consider the communication process where observer is able to notice the ‘welcome sign’ when the visiting - for many different reasons - a certain place. Here one can refer to mechanism known as implicit learning, the process when people learn unintentionally and without clear articulation what they are learning in a given moment<sup>11</sup>. However, the concept of implicit learning is still being developed some of experiments stress that it is involve in developing base-rate sensitivity from experience in perceptual classification<sup>12</sup>.

Assuming the mechanism of implicit learning it is still crucial to ask what are the relationships between senders’ expressions and receivers’ impressions<sup>13</sup> in the process of recognizing the ‘welcome sign’.

*“Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer—with great adaptability and in the light of his own purposes—selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process. Thus the image of a given reality may vary significantly between different observers”* (Lynch, 1999, p. 7)

Referring to the communication process one should analyze profounder the objectives of senders. In the discussed issue it means to the intention of administrative bodies or local governments that are responsible for places promotion and at the same time for ‘welcome signs’ as symbols of the particular territory.

*“Place is something more than abstract location. It is made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour.”* (Norberg-Schultz, 1979, p. 6.) *“The city is a product of those who design and build its buildings. Cities are shaped by as much ideas as by things”.* (Sudjic, 2017, p. 39.)

11.- Axel Cleeremans, A. (1993). *Mechanisms of implicit learning: A connectionist model of sequence processing*. MIT Press, Cambridge, USA.

12.- Andrew J. Wismer, Corey J. Bohil (2017), *Base-rate sensitivity through implicit learning*. „PLOS One”, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179256>

13.- Eric Maigret, *Socjologia komunikacji i mediów*. Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2012, p. 160 – 182; Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1994, p. 78; Schmitt B., Simonson A. (1997), *Estetyka w marketingu. Strategiczne zarządzanie markami, tożsamością i wizerunkiem firmy*, Wydawnictwo Profesjonalnej Szkoły Biznesu, Kraków, p. 252 – 253

In the case of place they are mostly rulers who do design and building placed in public space. So, analyzing that issue one must investigate the intention and the strategic process of marketing communication of places<sup>14</sup>. Visual identity is an important component of the city or region's brand identity and should be created in the following strategic process<sup>15</sup>:

- Conducting research,
- Clarifying strategy,
- Designing identity,
- Creating touchpoints
- Managing assets.

As branding literature states the image of place is a key element in postmodern reality and the process of brand building is significant in competition between geographical areas<sup>16</sup>. The authors analyzing strategic documents of local and regional governments in Poland as well as data coming from the previous researches conclude that those administrative bodies exclusively prepare 'welcome signs'. This is why the appropriate question – following the thoughts of Pierre Bourdieu<sup>17</sup> - is: how do these visual signs legitimise the political authorities?

Concluding - in the technical sense - 'welcome sign' is one of the designing touch points in the public space which support the image that a community wants to portray, and to regulate standards to protect public safety<sup>18</sup>. And in such a way it is also one of the signs of authorities that represent community and the place itself. The 'welcome signs' purpose is to support the identity that a community and its authority want to expose and at the same time to build the image that regulates recipients' attitudes and behavior towards that place<sup>19</sup>.

14.- Kotler Ph., Haider D.H., Rein I. (1993), *Marketing Places. Attracting Investment, Industry, and Tourism to Cities, States and Nations*, The Free Press, Nowy Jork.

15.- Alina Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity. An essential guide for the whole branding team* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2018), 120-207. Similar stages are described in other books on brand identity design. Cf. Wally Olins, *Wally Olins: The Brand Handbook* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008)

16.- Jordi de San Eugenio vela, Joan Nogue, Robert Govers, *Visual landscape as a key element of place branding*. „Journal of Place Management and Development”, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, 23 – 44.

17.- Pierre Bourdieu (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 166 (Bourdieu writes: *Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality*). See also: Agnieszka Ogonowska (2004), *Przemoc ikoniczna. Zarys wykładu*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, Kraków;

18.- Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity*, 176

19.- Mollerup, *Wayshoving>Wayfinfing*, 14



## “Welcome signs’ presentation<sup>20</sup>

The signs were chosen due to the authors’ personal experiences. The collection of signs was established during the research on logo of the Polish towns. During this research authors noticed the vast diversity of logo presentation on the ‘welcome signs’. The below list of signs is a subjective authors’ choice, the only criteria was that one welcome sign differs from the others in the sense of shape, colours and form<sup>21</sup>. The authors treat the list of the presented welcome signs like a preliminary and exemplary tool for developing forms of representations<sup>22</sup> typical for the territorial logos. The logo content description and explanation was taken from the visual identity documents, if only such a document exists.



### 1. Lubelskie region.

The photo presents the ‘Welcome sign’ on the border of the region that practices in marketing activities the regional logo.

It does not consist of any promotional offer. The slogan suggests broad-spectrum attractiveness of the region with the recommendation in the slogan to “Taste the life”.

Here one may notice that the region presents itself in a very general way.

The logo itself is open for interpretation. The slogan suggests taking advantage of the region.

The ‘welcome sign’ reveals the respect of the region for visitors allowing them to take what they expect and find.

20.- Note: According to the Polish law, it does not require the authors’ permission to distribute the works (*opus*) that are permanently displayed on public roads, streets, placards or gardens. Cf. Ustawa o prawie autorskim (“Author’s Law” act) Dz.U. 1994 Nr 24 poz. 83, article 33.

<http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19940240083>. All photos: Piotr Dzik (a co-author)

21.- Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity*, 23

22.- Mollerup, *Marks of Excellence*



### 3. Mysłków (A town in the Silesian Region).

In the logo one may find an element of the town identity which refers to generally understood tourism resources. The symbol of trilobite signifies the region as typical for the Jurassic geological period.

The ‘welcome sign’ clearly shows the town connections with the pre-historic time. It does not speak about the town itself, but about natural environment where it is located.

There is also slogan visible on the construction (“Develops possibilities”) that suggests what one may find in the town.

The main identity values presented on the construction are the distant past and promises of the present.



### 2. Świętokrzyskie region.

A sign consists of two elements: the region visual identity (logo) and one of the specific tourist attractions (JuraPark Bałtów – the first dinosaur park in Poland). This is an example of public-private cooperation. The owner of the ‘welcome sign’ – Swietokrzyskie LGU – endorses the private brand.

The ‘welcome sign’ indicates a particular offer validated by the regional brand.





#### 4. Czeladź (A town in the Silesia region).

The ‘welcome sign’ takes advantage of two symbols: the coat of arms (at the top of the construction) and logo (at the bottom of the construction). It performs – in such a way – at least two additional functions: administrative (the coat of arms) and destination (the logo). It is also an ambiguous message that symbolizes the authority (coats of arms) and marketing offer (town logo).

Here one may notice how the LGU tries to express its power.



#### 5. Gryfice (A town in the Western Pomerania region).

The ‘welcome sign’ refers to partner cities exposing their coats of arms. The sign discloses also Gryfice coat of arms next to the town logo.

At the top of the construction there is the town logo, which consists of slogan convincing that the place is a ‘safe haven’.

The town offer is strengthened by the presence of the partner towns.

The main identity values presented on the construction are power and cooperation offer that are presented by both the logo and slogan.



#### 6. Legnica (A town in the Lower Silesia region).

The construction is much bigger than many others, and in such a way it stresses the role of its force. It clearly demonstrates the town wants to make an impression on visitors. Logo is visible from a long distance.

The main identity values presented on the construction are power and impressiveness



### 7. Stawatyzcze (A town in the Lubelskie region, border with Belarus).

The 'welcome sign' consists of greetings in three languages. It clearly emphasizes the border of the region and at the same time- the country. Here one may notice that it plays the symbol of border.

It also consists of the coat of arms.

The sign discloses the LGU power with clearly articulated invitation to visit.



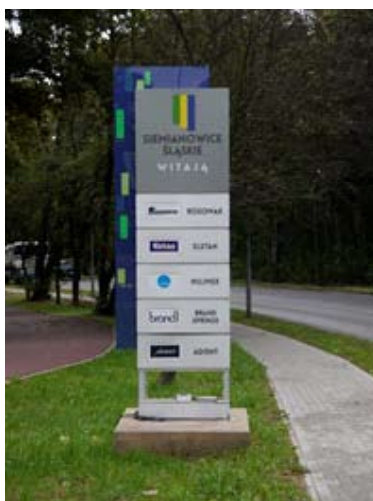
### 8. Chorzów (A town in the Upper Silesia).

Tagline is written in Silesian dialect, not in the Polish language.

Below the coat of arms and the tagline there is the logo of the Silesian University and the statement that Chorzów is a university town.

It means that authority of the town wants to disclose its identity by the regional dialect and prestigious educational institution. Similar welcome signs with statement presented in regional dialect "ine" may find in Pomerania Region

The University endorses the quality of the city.



### 9. Siemianowice Śląskie (A town in the Upper Silesia)

The welcome sign construction was set up by the public-private partnership. The 'welcome sign' consist of the town logo and five corporate logos that one may conclude the town is proud of. Such a symbol represents the business location.

The main identity values presented on the construction are power (coat of arms) and promises (logos of business units).



### 10. Legionowo (A town in the Mazovia Region)

The 'welcome sign' symbolizes town attractiveness as being friendly for bikers.

This sign is mostly addressed to citizens specially because it is placed next to the railway station.



### 11. The Włodawski County in the Lubelskie Region.

The 'welcome sign' differs from the others because:

- it is a sign for the county in which the town Włodawa is included
- it clearly discloses the touristic attraction of the county
- at the bottom there is information about the sources of funds.

The main identity value presented on the construction is the touristic attraction of the county that has been supported by public funds.

It should be noticed that above presentation concerns only a few cases, which have been chosen, referring to only one criteria – one construction should present other elements than the others. The authors are concerned about their subjectivity of the choice, although this analysis is the starting point for further examination. Generalising the presentation one may make a rough estimate from a visual examination of the chosen cases. Firstly, the four of 11 cases disclose coats of arms, which are traditional symbols of power. Secondly, the six constructions focus on the attraction of the place. One of them (Lubelskie Region) is broadly open for visitors suggesting them to take the region's advantages for their pleasure. Two of them (Chorzów and Siemianowice) focus on institutions placed in the towns. One of the chosen list (Gryfice) builds its image referring to the cooperation with international partners.

Concluding, each of the constructions is different. It is very difficult to build any model of how contents and forms of 'welcome signs' have been created and constructed. There are neither rules nor any theory that would guide the LGU in building 'welcome signs'. This is why one may state the points in more general forms. They are constructed to show noticeable borders of the territory that is governed by the particular authorities.

## Preliminary findings

‘Welcome signs’ are symbolic installations, which are kind of testimonials about particular places. Apart from the role of identification, information and advertising, these signs have also aesthetic significance as well as they are spatial forms of territorial division. Hans Belting stated that the public presentation of the coat of arms (shield) is a sign of state and defined the limits of the rule of the family or municipal authorities<sup>23</sup>. The authors of the paper put forward the thesis that currently such a role is played by a ‘welcome sign’. Therefore, it is merely a welcome or an invitation – it is an indication – “our power begins from here”. Its functions is broader than marketing or branding implication, because it discloses the power of local authorities, who are decision makers in this matter.

The ‘welcome signs’ want to present the attractiveness of the place in a very specific way. Some of them focus on a particular attractiveness not necessarily different than the other places, some present general attractiveness with the suggestion a visitor may choose. Two of the presented signs emphasize the endorsement as important policy of identity system. Another feature noticed in the chosen ‘welcome signs’ is traditionally connected with marketing purposes. So, some of constructions try to meet the promotional objectives.

It is already beyond the discussion that the brand concept can be applied to places (regions, cities, municipalities, etc.)<sup>24</sup>. Without going into definitive disputes regarding the concept of brand<sup>25</sup>, one can assume that, (following David Gibbs):

*For the most of the last century ‘brand’ meant the image of a product in the market – the kind of psychological disposition it generated in people through its definition and reputation and its visual representation by a trademark or brandmark<sup>26</sup>*

Considering the implicit learning issue it seems that local authority rather present its power not attractions of the places the represent. The analyzed constructions demonstrate learning without explicit knowledge, because explicit information is not provided. Apart from one the example of Legionowo, where the ‘welcome sign’ is openly addressed to citizens using bicycles, the other do not consist the content that would supply information about the place. They rather symbolize borders and power

23.- Hans Belting, *Antropologia obrazu. Szkice do nauki o obrazie*, trans. Mariusz Bryl (Kraków: Universitas 2012), 146

24.- Renaud Vuignier „Place branding & place marketing 1976-2016: A multidisciplinary literature review,” *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 14, issue 4 (Dec. 2017), 469

25.- Jean-Noël Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management. Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term* (London & Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2008), Leslie de Chernatony, Malcolm McDonald, Elaine Wallace, *Creating Powerful Brands* (London: Routledge, 2013)

26.- David Gibbs, „See how you feel,” in Angus Hyland and Steven Bateman, *Symbol. The reference guide to abstract and figurative trademarks* (London: Laurence King, 2014), 9



of particular authorities and community.

The authors understand that making generalization is not proper referring to such a poor list of signs, however it should be noticed that the ‘welcome signs’ may have three main objectives:

- to disclose territorial identity, its genius loci
- to construct reality by showing where particular power starts and finishes to convey promises pointing attractiveness of the place.

## Discussion and further research

The paper concerns the place brand identity and its presence in the public space in a specific way. The image of the brand created (or not) by a ‘welcome sign’ seems to be a recognizable direction of future research. In particular, it seems noteworthy whether different target groups (for example, residents, tourists or investors) notice the existence of ‘welcome signs’ at all, and if so, what opinion they keep about them. Further studies have to address the question whether these constructions supply implicit information or explicit instructions to the recipients.

Secondly, to make above suggested scrutiny (statistical studies), one should first gather a possible complete collection of these signs and later build a model of taxonomy with their functions and relationship with the recipients as well as stakeholders.

Thirdly, research on intentions of authorities, which are responsible for the ‘welcome signs’ (empirical studies), may bring scholars to more profoundly ascertained interpretations about political role of such constructions. There is, however, another theoretical alternative based on the presented cases. There is growing evidence in the field of social influence studies and role of images in the contemporary world, that authorities try to take advantage of every visual possibility to show where their power starts.

One of the purposes to build ‘welcome signs’ is branding or marketing, further research should concentrate on impact if them on marketing practice.

Last suggestion for further research is connected with design analysis. Nowadays design is a symbol of visual reality, this is why graphic designers together with social psychologist would analyze how such constructions are noticed by the audience and how they should be properly formally designed.

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