The direction of wayfinding.
From the identification of a place
to the expression of its meaning

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Abstract

The aim of this Ph.D. research is to study wayfinding systems, in relation to contemporary urban public spaces not considering them with their main function of orienting people towards a destination in a predefined environment but considering them as a tool of communication able to establish and reinforce a sense of belonging of the user to the place. This research situates itself at the intersection of three main disciplinary fields – graphic design, urban planning and social sciences - that I explored, in relation to wayfinding in urban public spaces, through a narrative literature review process. Through this process, while observing how widely have been studied the primary function of wayfinding, I highlighted a gap in the current studies about the involvement of wayfinding systems in the improvement of the perception of a place. As this Ph.D. research is a research for design, the aim is to define better conceptual and operational tools that could enable wayfinding designers to succeed in designing a wayfinding system.

Author keywords

Wayfinding, Communication design, Semiotics, Urban planning, Public space

Introduction

This Ph.D. research aims to study wayfinding systems (Lynch, 1960; Arthur & Passini, 1992), in relation to contemporary urban public spaces (Carmona 2003; Gehl, 2011; Manzini, 2021), not considering them with their main function of orienting people towards a destination in a predefined environment but considering them as a tool of communication able to establish and reinforce a sense of belonging of the user to the place (Lynch, 1960). This research situates itself at the intersection of three main disciplinary fields – graphic design, urban planning and social sciences - that I explored, in relation to wayfinding in urban public spaces, through a narrative literature review process. Through this process, while observing how widely have been studied the primary function of wayfinding, I highlighted a gap in the current studies that led me to the identification of the research questions, objectives and methodology that I will explore in the next paragraphs.

Wayfinding, public space and its identity: a review

Wayfinding is a field of work that situates itself at the intersection of several disciplines. The term has been first coined by Kevin Lynch in 1960 (Lynch, 1960) and used in relation to the architectural and urban planning fields. It was then extended to the design field, which is also involved in the wayfinding activity both from a product design perspective and from a graphic design perspective (Calori, 2015; Gibson & Pullman, 2009) in designing both the physical and digital signs and their content through a design activity that has been defined as wayshowing (Mollerup, 2005). Aside from the design and planning areas, wayfinding also tackles other fields of study, related to the social sciences area. Psychology, anthropology and semiotics are just some of the disciplines involved when studying the human behavior of orientation in space. From this perspective, it is possible to define the wayfinding activity as a problem-solving activity of any person who needs to find his/her destination in an environment, that for the aim of this research is an urban environment. From this perspective, it is possible to say that wayfinding systems are those systems of signs that assist people when dealing with the activity of finding the right way. While they help the orientation process of each user in a complex environment, they have a role in constructing the users' mental image of a place (Golledge, 1999) and in helping them in understanding the structure of the surrounding environment, evoking an already-known image in the observer, a quality that has been defined as the imageability of a place (Lynch, 1960). This recall can help people in applying a well-known model to an unknown place, enabling the orientation and at the same time conveying a sort of familiarity of each user to that place. Wayfinding systems are designed to help a plurality of users, different from each other both for the physical features and for the way of use of the space. Wayfinding systems in fact are not only for inexpert or occasional users of a place but also for frequent users that are already aware of the space in which they navigate. Even these kinds of users need to find the way to their destination. The difference between them and inexpert users is that they focus more on the executive phase, rather than on the decisional one (Arthur & Passini, 1992), and it is right in this step of the process that wayfinding systems are a useful tool. There might be situations in which a wayfinding system is not used by a user to reach his destination, but even if it only has the function of background environmental graphics, a well-designed wayfinding system can talk to the people, establishing a connection and a positive perception of the space itself. Wayfinding systems are, in fact, part of a communication process about a place (Zin-

gale, 2012), but working on a place, from the communication design perspective, often means working on its identity. The concept of brand identity, usually used for companies or institutions, in the last years has been widely applied to places and cities, to make them recognizable in the tourist market and to let them communicate their own way of being to the rest of the world (Parente, 2014). Being mainly a marketing process, the creation of this identity takes place through a top-down process, that is usually guided by economic opportunities and driven by the local stakeholders (Parente, 2014), that, in order to construct a strong territorial brand, usually focus on the main positive characteristics, reinforcing them while undermining the others (Baur, 2013). This process of reduction, from a multiplicity to a singularity, is related to the concept of identity in general terms and not only in relation to the brand identity and the territory but in this case is even more clear that a representation of the identity that recognizes an incisive role for the otherness, removes strength from the identity in question (Remotti, 1996). Moreover, the urban place is something in constant change, a text assuming a semiotic perspective (Volli, 2005), that evolves through time thanks to the interactions and connections of all the animate and inanimate entities present on a territory each of which has its own characteristics. From this point of view, it is possible to see how shaping an identity, reducing this complex and living multiplicity to a fixed singularity would inevitably leave something behind. Apart from the communicative dimension, this process makes us question the way in which a territory, in particular a shared space, is approached, conceived and transformed through this process of top-down creation of an identity, in opposition to the way in which the same territory is perceived by the citizens themselves (Baur, 2013). Communicating the cultural multiplicity could be a point of strength also to reinforce the sense of belonging of each of those entities to the territory of which they are part. To do that, I decided to take into account the chances offered by wayfinding systems, as communication tools with a strong link with the space and a grounded presence on the territory, that for these reasons could be a successful instrument to express the plurality of a place rather than the singular identity, and with it reinforce the people's connection with the place itself.

Research gap and research questions

Given the previous understanding, a point that seems to be missing in the current literature about this topic is the way in which a wayfinding system can be the expression of a cultural multiplicity of an urban public place and reinforce their sense of belonging to the place.

This gap is the one on which I focused to develop the following research questions:

» Given the need for an urban public place to express itself in its plurality is there a way in which a wayfinding system, as a tool to perceive and interpret the place, can have a role in this process?
» And if so, how can a wayfinding designer succeed in this purpose, while designing a wayfinding system for an urban area?

Objectives

Being this Ph.D. research a research for design (Manzini, 2015), the aim is to define some better conceptual and operational tools that could enable wayfinding designers to succeed in designing an efficient wayfinding system. The objectives to be pursued through the different steps of the methodological phase are the following: to define those design tools and other tools that design can borrow from other disciplines, which are more suitable to understand first and express later the plurality of a place. To do that I decided to explore a possible methodology that for its characteristics seemed to be very suitable for this purpose, even if it has not been very much used in the wayfinding field yet: ethnosemiotics.

The methodology: ethnosemiotics

Ethnosemiotics has been first introduced by Algirdas Julien Greimas during the Seventies. In the analytical dictionary that he curated, along with Joseph Courtés (Greimas & Courtès, 1979), we can find a first definition of the term, even if not in relation to our field of action, the urban environment. In general terms, as stated by the word itself, ethnosemiotics connects the two disciplines of ethnography and semiotics. It applies the instruments proper of the semiotic discipline to the ethnographic method of observation. This combination has a substantial impact on the understanding of the possible connections between the actors and the objects of the study analyzed while building the inner structure of the observed phenomenon (Accardo, Liborio, Marsciani, 2015; Donatiello & Mazzarino, 2017; Lancioni & Marsciani, 2007). Because of these features, ethnosemiotics methodology is particularly suitable for research in design (Galofaro, 2020) even if it is not still recognized as a valuable tool when researching about orientation in space. The purpose of this research is to investigate the possibility of using the chosen methodology when dealing with wayfinding design, for its interdisciplinary approach. To do that I explored the several steps that this methodology offers. Starting with the first activities of collection of data from the outside to then moving to the observation on the field through site inspections comprising of several activities: taking notes, shooting pictures, recording sounds and interviewing and interacting with the people. All the information collected should be then organized, classified and compared, to then end up in a consistent analysis of the area with the aim to achieve some first understandings of the studied area, able to highlight its plurality, its controversies and the inner needs of its inhabitants.

Further steps and possible developments

From these first understandings is possible to say that the ethnosemiotics methodology seems to be particularly suitable for wayfinding designers when dealing with public space, not only for its ability to study and interpret a given phenomenon but also for its ability to explore the possible relations occurring among the different actors on the territory. Starting by highlighting steps, methods and tools, the further possible developments of this research are to focus on their transfer from one discipline to the other, in order to explore the possibility to implement the tools of the ethnosemiotics methodology within the professional activity of wayfinding designers.

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