

Neon signs in urban space, yesterday and today. A case study based on Lublin

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Abstract: During the communist era, neon signs were something Poland could boast of. At that time, the streets were drowning in luminous advertising, which was impossible not to notice. Recent years have brought disastrous quality of urban advertising and the prevailing arbitrariness has contributed to the degeneration of urban spaces. Colourful neon signs once prevailed in Polish streets, serving as a model example of advertising whose impact was crucial in the perception of urban space. Today, neon signs are considered works of art, and the most valuable achievement of Polish 20th century design, which we can mainly admire today in museums. In the last decade, we have been reminded of their existence and efforts have been made to save them and return them to urban spaces. The purpose of the article is to draw attention to the extraordinary value of neon signs as an important building block of urban space and to highlight their artistic and social functions. The undertaken research includes material on neon signs from the communist era as well as those newly designed, based on the city of Lublin.

Keywords: the space of the place, neon signs, illuminated advertising, design

Introduction

The impulse for writing this article was a desire to draw attention to the aesthetic and artistic value of neon signs, which, once extinguished and dismantled, are beginning to return to the streets of Polish cities in a new guise. The reappearance of neon signs represents a trend that few are now opting for. They are not used solely, as signage or advertising, but are an element of art woven into the cityscape that delights passers-by with their unusual form, aesthetics, colour and finesse.

Neon sign, once popularly known as the discharge lamp, was discovered in 1910 by Frenchman Georges Claude and first used in outdoor advertising in the early 20th century [1]. The first neon sign used commercially lit up the facade of a hair salon in Paris. However, it did not gain much recognition at the time, probably due to its high price. The outbreak of World War I thwarted any possible development of neon signs in Europe. It was only after World War I that neon signs became popular in Paris, Berlin and the United States. Mostly associated with the United States, where the nocturnal scenery of the metropolises of Las Vegas, Chicago or New York became an icon of the American lifestyle. All over the world, they were used to create colourful pictures and advertising signs that illuminated the streets of the cities. In the 1920s, neon was first used for non-advertising purposes by the painter and designer Sonja Delaunay [2].

In 1929, the first neon sign in Poland appeared in Warsaw, lighting up the city streets in an unusual way. Over time, more and more were added. Unfortunately, the destruction after the Second World War was so great that no neon signs survived. The streets were dark and grey and the capital no longer resembled a typical European city. In order to spruce up the capital, the communists allowed new trends in art in 1956. This let artists express themselves, which contributed to the creation of a state-owned advertising company. It embarked on the mass design of neon signs, which played both informative and decorative roles. There were neon signs distinguished by finesse and modern lettering with a simple message such as *florist's* or *library* [3]. From the

beginning of the appearance of neon signs in Poland, it was popular to create them on request, which significantly affected the originality of the design, just like when making posters and typography [2]. Neon signs peaked in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, where they were mainly used in outdoor advertising and effectively lit up dark streets devastated by war [4]. Many of them had extremely sophisticated forms, were true works of applied art, and were permanently inscribed in the landscape of Polish cities.

The twilight of neon technology came with the economic collapse in the 1980s, the introduction of economic freedom and the development of other outdoor advertising techniques. The end of the neon era came after 1989 when they were identified with the old regime [4]. They were considered unnecessary, so they were dismantled *en masse* and ended up in warehouses or on scrapheaps. The political and economic crisis contributed to a lack of interest in the city's infrastructure and the once extinguished neon signs were of little, if any, interest to anyone. Imperceptibly, neon signs disappeared from urban spaces and were replaced by cheaper LED signs from China [5].

For more than 100 years, the neon production process has remained virtually unchanged. A heat-shaped glass tube is filled with a noble gas – mostly neon (hence the name) – and then fitted with electrodes and partly coated with dark paint. The luminous colours depended on the composition of the gas, the colour of the glass and the use of a suitable fluorescent agent [6]. In the past, the neon material was imported from abroad. The first ones were very high quality, but the others were much worse because they were often made from different leftovers. Maintenance was also difficult when some letters stopped lighting up or the electricity had failed [5]. The design of a neon advertisement consisted of three stages: artistic design, electronics and construction. The artistry of the design depended largely on the virtuosity of the glazier, who was able to create works of art. The work on the advertisement included building condition survey and then application of the art design in the form of a sketch. The neon sign not only had to convey the content well, but also fit in with the building and neighbouring advertisements, and be visible both day and night. The advertisement could not stand out against the background of the building, but needed to work harmoniously with it. Of utmost importance was the typeface, colour scheme and selected lettering underlays, which ensured the proper legibility of the neon. The colour of the lettering was not random, but often assigned to a particular industry (red – butcher's, purple – jeweller's, green – greengrocers', white or blue – public buildings). Neon signs were designed to be lightweight, aesthetically pleasing and compatible with the architectural surroundings [7].

The fluorescent tube, from which neon signs were made, is a simple source of light that also became a medium of art thanks to the knowledge, curiosity and creativity of the artists. Neon as an artistic material opened up a new way of expressing creativity and inspired a whole new genre of art "luminism", while the gas that filled it paved the way for new types of lighting in the 20th century. The history and functions of neon signs as an art medium show how many alternative arts have influenced the world, where the word, as part of the social experience, creates an appropriate artistic theme and becomes a vehicle for personal expression [8].

Neon signs in city spaces used to be a sign of modernity and elegance, and their warm light gave Polish cities a unique charm. Currently, they have made a fashion come-back and new ones are appearing. After many years, their artistic value was recognised, as a way of aesthetic and original advertising. Neon signs make spaces unique, especially when passers-by are able to recognise a specific sign of a specific place in them. It is text-based *art*, it is signs that are not just decoration, but carry social value and hidden creative potential [9]. Neon signs were once a symbol of the urban life of the time, but now they give a particular place the mark of elitism.

Objectives and scope of the study

The purpose of this article is to analyse the main design trends of neon signs from the 1960s and 1970s in the Lublin area and contrast them with their current situation. For the purpose of this article, an archival search was conducted at the Department of Bibliography and Knowledge of the Lublin Region at the Hieronim Łopaciński Library in Lublin and the NN Theatre's Multimedia Library. The basis of the study was a comparative analysis of the neon signs that once lit up Lublin's streets and those currently functioning in the urban space from technical, artistic and social perspectives.

Research status

The topic of neon signs in urban space globally has received little attention in scientific articles. One of the most comprehensive publications attributed to this issue is *Hong Kong Neon Sign Artworks — Vol. 1 Restaurant* by Sze Hang Kwok [10]. The scientist and his Information Design Lab team researched and described from an aesthetic point of view the design of visual communication based on observation and analysis of 218 restaurant neon signs. The book is one of an ongoing research projects on neon signs located in Hong Kong and Singapore. The topic of neon signs was described in his article, *Precarity and Enterprising Selves: The Resemiotization of Neon Language Objects*, by Andre Joseph Thenga [11], who focused on neon signs as vehicles of movement. Another interesting publication on the importance of neon as a value of light and contribution to the art world is *Neon & Luminescence: The Illuminated Meme* [8] by DeBord, Scherrie, and Visual Art Intermediate Grade. On the subject of neon design criticism, Peter A. Hall wrote in his book *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture, and Design* [12]. A unique history of neon from novelty to decline was presented by Carolyn L Kane in her publication *Neon visions: from techno-optimism to urban vice* [13], in which she shows the importance of neon signs to urban visual cultures on the basis of light and color.

The issue of Warsaw neon signs is discussed in his publication *The only such Museum in Poland – The Neon Museum* [14] by Zygmunt Jagodziński. He focused mainly on the removal of old neon signs, the lack of respect of these *works of art* by the city authorities and their preservation. The problem of Warsaw's neon advertisements from the time of the People's Republic of Poland's rescue and exhibition of neon signs in museums was addressed by Agnieszka Balcerzak in an article entitled *The Charm of the PRL. Memory Culture, (Post) Socialist Nostalgia and Historical Tourism in Poland* [15].

No scientific articles dealing with neon problems in the Lublin area were found. However, a survey of the Lublin press made it possible to find many valuable newspaper articles dealing with the subject, which were very useful while writing this article.

The importance of neon signs

Neon signs were once part of the landscape of major cities like Paris, London, Hong Kong and New York. They were a sign of modernity and elegance, and their warm light gave cities a unique charm. They functioned as symbols of urban modernity [16], becoming part of the visual culture and global cityscape [17]. They lit up the signs of restaurants, hotels or pharmacies, drawing attention and lingering in the minds of passers-by.

Many years ago, French engineer Georges Claude saw the potential of the nature of gases, which was used to produce advertising media, called neon signs. Their appeal lay in their ability to create the art of sign design, different and so unique that they became urban landmarks. They were described as a *living flame, a symbol of energy and ingenuity* used to express *a sense of well-being* [18]. In the course of time, neon signs could no longer be found only on city streets, but became an artistic medium, which was also used in their works by artists, i.e. (Tracey Emin, Olivia Steele, Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman) who created real works of art out of them.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, luminous neon signs paved the way for multi-screen aesthetics, setting trends in metropolises around the world. Neon boomed, as a symbol of glamour and modern progress. After the great popularity of neon signs in the United States and France less than 10 years after Poland regained its independence, neon signs came to Warsaw. The first signboard was designed for the Habermusch and Schiele brewery, which depicted a bottle and colloquially known as the *Philips neon sign* [19]. The new technology revolutionised the handmade storefront market of the time by illuminating street tracts. Over time, the illuminated advertising became more sophisticated and surprising. Neon signs were placed on the facades of hotels and restaurants, high-rise buildings and historical buildings. They were mainly used for pharmacy, confectionery and jewellery services. In the late 1930s, neon signs were attached to almost every building, regardless of the type of activity and the size of the premises.

In the post-war period, neon signs were a significant accent in the skyline of war-ravaged cities. In the 1930s, they were considered unnecessary and were often seen as antagonistic to the socialist system. In 1933, Warsaw approved regulations governing store windows and street advertising. According to them, illuminated advertisements were to be designed so as not to detract from the appearance of the facades of houses and streets.

Care was taken to make them safe for traffic – flickering light (but not intermittent light) and the colour red were banned as harmful to the eyes [2]. The end of the 1950s was declared the time of *the great neonisation campaign*, where prominent architects (i.e., Eleonora Sekrecka, Zygmunt Stępiński) and visual artists designed advertisements for entire buildings and street sequences. Neon signs served the purpose of prestige and the transmission of information, and were characterised by artistic freedom, freshness and variety. At the time, yellow and red were used for neon signs with complex shapes, while simple ones were meant to glow blue or purple. Contrasts of yellow-black, white-green or white-red were used for greater visibility. The colour blue, on the other hand, was avoided for neon signs placed on the roofs of buildings and in gastronomy. Only white, light blue and light purple were used for historic buildings and sites, maintaining a uniform style for the entire street. When designing the neon letters, the artists followed the principle that block letters were used only for rooftop advertisements, while those with finer shapes were left for the facades of buildings. The content was always intended to be short and concise. The neon signs owed their lightness to the use of an openwork structure and an appropriately chosen backing background [15]. After Stalin's death in 1956, the *thaw* came and neon signs once again graced the city's streets. At the time, they served to revitalise the city's dead spaces. At the time, neon signs were designed by well-known artists from the Polish Poster School (Jan Mucharski, Jan Bogusławski, Bohdan Gniewiewski, Tadeusz Rogowski, Maksymilian Krzyżanowski, Zbigniew Labes, Marek Brudnicki, Stefan Bernaciński or Ryszard Lech). They created the most iconic signs that began to function, as logos, some of which still function today. This period has been called *the golden age of Polish neon*. The 1970s brought mass production of neon signs, which introduced a bureaucratic mess to state control, which until then had watched over the character and appearance of illuminated ads. The economic crisis in the 1980s and the extinction of neon signs ended their splendour. At the time, many of them disappeared from the streets or fell into disrepair as they were associated with the socialist period, with only a few remained on city streets.

Once neon signs were an attempt to realise the dream of economic and business catching up with the West. They expressed the longing for all that is new and worldly. They were a symbol of the pursuit of modernity, where colourful, flashing commercials were to surpass Western culture. That is why they were designed with great attention to detail and the craftsmanship of the workmanship was evident in every small element. The design of neon signs from the applied arts became a quintessence of aesthetics and art, and the technique in which they were executed was a symbol of modernity and technological progress. In the course of time, however, the usual illuminated signs and inscriptions were supplanted by glowing images and lettering in almost all the rainbow colours, the form of which could take previously unimaginable shapes and sizes. Over time, however, it was discarded in favour of cheaper and more efficient illuminated, plastic, fluorescent elements, LED substitutes.

In recent years neon signs have again become an *objet de désir*. This is favoured by Polish design from the 50s and 60s. It turned out that the design rules have not changed significantly over the decades. The chemical processes have remained the same and the equipment used, apart from the use of a better material, is not significantly different from those used 30 to 40 years ago. Nowadays, old, large neon signs are hard to find on the streets of Polish cities, but new ones are added year after year, which stand out from the mass of other advertising. Their reappearance in the streets of the cities creates a metropolitan atmosphere through their elegance, aesthetics, functionality and exceptional design.

Neon Museums have been set up in many Polish cities to document, store and display the saved neon signs as well as their restoration at their original locations. The attempt to reinstate the neon signs in the places where they were originally located helps to preserve the memory of the city and strengthen the identity of future generations of residents [20].

Lublin Neon Lights (yesterday and today)

Today, there have been no continuous illuminated signs on the streets of Lublin since 1989. Even those that can be found today had to be renovated and were temporarily dismantled. The neon lights of the People's Republic of Poland illuminated Lublin's main artery, Krakowskie Przedmieście, giving the city a metropolitan touch. They were systematically introduced into the streets in accordance with a development plan imposed from above. They were designed at once for a whole row of buildings or several blocks. They delighted with

their originality and unique craftsmanship. They were often located above the main entrance to restaurants, hotels or shops to attract the attention of passers-by. They were lit up even when the store was out of stock and the shelves were empty. Some original examples include a cup and the kettle with rising steam mounted above a shop with household appliances, or a ball falling into a basket above a sports shop [21]. The neon signs ordered at that time were often large and expensive, but they were financed by the city. On the roof of one of the townhouses on the corner of Żwirki i Wigury Street and Krakowskie Przedmieście Street was the neon *Lubgal* sign. It showed a boy and a girl with blocks around them glowing as if children were throwing them at each other. At the corner of Krakowskie Przedmieście Street and Osterwa Street (now Kapucyńska Street) above the entrance of one of the shops was a large neon *Słodycze* [Sweets] sign. Across the street you could see the characteristic white neon *Chemia* [Chemicals] and *Rybny* [Fishmonger's], which was popular at the time. In the neighbourhood there was an iconic sports shop, which occupied one of the houses on the corner with the inscription *Sport* and a flickering orange basketball. It flickered on and off, so it seemed as if someone was throwing a ball into a basket. On Lipowa Street there were eye-catching, rhythmically extinguishing and illuminating neon letters with the inscription *Sam spożywczy* [Self-service grocery store] and a huge inscription on the roof reading *PZU ubezpiecza ciebie i twoje mienie* [PZU insures you and your property]. There was also an interesting neon sign that glowed as if a man was greeting passers-by [5].

In the last decade, the old style of lighting has begun to be appreciated and there has been a gradual return to neon signs. Since the beginning of the 20th century, in Lublin there were more than 300 of them including 30 before the Second World War. During the People's Republic of Poland, the presence of neon signs testified to the modernity of the city. Currently in the space of Lublin we can find a former neon sign remaining from the cult cinema *Kosmos*. The post-war modernist building, on which it was once located, was recommissioned a few years ago for an apartment building and the distinctive *Kosmos* neon sign was destined to disappear along with it. It is linked to the inseparable history of cinema [22] of the 1960s, a flagship of the city and a symbol of good and modern architecture. In the 1970s the cinema was very modern for the time, as it had a panoramic screen, the largest number of seats and was one of the first cinemas in Lublin with Dolby Digital sound. In the 1980s and 1990s, the cinema began to decline. After unsuccessful attempts to rent and sell, it was finally decided to demolish it. In 2012, the new owner planned a commercial building on the site. At the request of the citizens and the city administration, the inscription *Kosmos* was saved and handed over to the city administration. Thanks to the initiative of the European Foundation for Urban Culture [Europejska Fundacja Kultury Miejskiej], it underwent renovation, undertaken by Adam Brus. Although the neon sign, which had been on the building for 50 years, was in very poor condition, it was possible to preserve the original holes for the electrodes, which made it easier to install, and to recreate the exact colour in which the neon sign had once shone. [23] In the situation faced by the neon sign of the *Kosmos* cinema – the demolition of the building – the city authorities decided that it would be temporarily placed on the building of the Labyrinth Gallery [Galeria Labirynt] on Popieluski Street where it could be admired there in all its glory from 2013 to this day. [Fig.1] Today the inscription no longer serves its original function, as its role vanished along with the demolition of the cinema building, but the new location provides a reminder. For many residents, the cinema was an integral part of their lives, so preserving its memory is part of local history.

In 2013, a neon sign was commissioned with the slogan *All My City In*, which was the title of the *Brain Damage Gallery* exhibition. Two years later, a neon sign *Lublin Metro* was produced for the exhibition of the Lublin metro, designed by Michał Lewkowicz. Unfortunately, both neon signs were stolen and can no longer be admired in the urban space [24]. In the Lublin area we can currently find a very interesting neon sign of the Lublin café *Zielony Talerzyk*, by Jarosław Kozyra, *Szybka setka* bar, with an animated glass, designed by Michał Lewkowicz (Endiesonix.net), a neon sign of ice-cream *Bosko* or bakery *W Chlebaku*. Recently, in Lublin on Zam-ojska Street there was also a neon sign promoting the typical Lublin term *Brejdaki* (meaning brothers) [Fig. 1]. It symbolises brothers and sisters and at the same time refers to mutual respect, regardless of origin or religion. Tomasz Pieńczak's neon sign was selected and hung in the city, the only one among 13 in a NeonArt competition that was crowned with an exhibition at the Meeting of Cultures Centre [25]. Another interesting neon sign hangs above the student canteen at Langiewicza Street with the inscription *Trójka*. [Fig.1] The place refers to the famous canteen number 3, which has served the academic community of the UMCS since the 1970s. What remains in memory of those who visited the canteen in those years, is not only the smell of the food being served, but also the distinctive neon inscription placed on the building. There was a great excitement

in 2017 over the plans to put up two neon signs in Lublin, *Szacun na mieście* [Respect in the city] and *Szacun na dzielnii* [Respect in the Neighbourhood] on the railroad overpass above Droga Męczenników Majdanka. After all, for a while there was only one *Szacunek na mieście*, with fading, every now and then selected letters, that we can no longer admire nowadays. The inscription was created in honour of the district, stood out and quickly became a trademark of the city. Another interesting neon project by Jakub Stępień was created during last year's *NeonArt* Festival, which follows the name and history of Żmigród – the medieval hill in the Lublin castle complex and today one of the streets in the city centre. The graphic design is a stylised letter alluding to representations of mythical vipers or dragons was intended to draw attention to the history of this place [Żmigród literally means “the town of the viper”, and in Old Polish – “the town of the dragon” – trans.]. The author of the neon sign wanted it to become a signpost that invites visitors to explore the place and a source of pride for the street's residents.

Today, on the facade of the Centre for Culture [Centrum Kultury, CK] at Peowiaków Street, we can admire a neon bust of the Greek god Apollo [Fig. 1] with a baseball cap by Joanna Dudoń. The project won a competition for a neon sign for the facade of the Centre for Culture. The author wanted to capture the history of the building, its essence and function. Conceptually, the neon symbolises seriousness and solemnity, presented with humour and grotesque. The design easily and simply comments on contemporary, postmodern and critical perceptions of reality [26]. On the same building, next to the main entrance, there is a second neon sign with the inscription *Centrum Kultury*. The simple, elegant letters, illuminated with white light, perfectly match the character and role of the building as well as the architecture itself. Since 2020, on the building of the UMCS Chatka Żaka Academic Culture and Media Centre a new neon sign has been displayed: *Chatka Żaka* by Agnieszka Dudek. In the new edition, it visually ties in with the era of modernism and at the same time follows current trends.

The above situation of the Lublin neon signs shows that only a few of them have been rescued, restored and installed in the new urban space. The rest of the survivors were sent to a museum or warehouse.



Fig. 1. Neon signs currently functioning in the area of the city of Lublin: *Kosmos*, *BrejdaKI*, *Trójka*, *Apollo*. Phot. by author.

In Lublin a few years ago, the *NeonArt*, community *Lublin Neons* was founded on Facebook, which saw neon signs as works of art and took steps to save them and spread knowledge about them. Another important project related to neon signs was undertaken by the and Studio of Socially Engaged Art “Rewiry” [Pracownia Sztuki Zaangażowanej Społecznie – Rewiry], Cultural Education Association and the Centre for Culture in Lublin – which ran the project *NeonArt – Festival for Art and Design of Neon Advertising*. This project is unique in Poland and in the world, involving 18 artists who designed neon signs for the city of Lublin. Some of the best Polish artists of typography, graphics, illustration and design were invited to join the project: Edgard Bąk, Katarzyna Bogucka, Patryk Hardziej, Senna Collective (Piotr Jakoweńko, Agata Korba, Sebastian Kucharuk, Natalia Romik), Michał Lewkowicz, Michał Loba, Olek Modzelewski, Tomasz Pieńczak, Jacek Rudzki, Paweł Ryżko, Konrad Smolarski, Studio Full Metal Jacket (Jerzy Gruchot, Wojciech Koss) and Studio UVMW (Robert Mendel, Jacek Walesiak, Edgar Bąk, Katarzyna Bogucka). The result of their creative work was the creation of 13 neon signs, some of which were displayed in the urban space and all of which were displayed in the exhibition at the Centre for the Meeting of Cultures in Lublin.

Nowadays, one will not find large, artistically rich, elegant neon signs with sublime shapes that illuminate the urban space and are reminiscent of those from earlier times. Unfortunately, they were largely *bombarded* with a plenty of cheap advertising signs that disfigure the historic houses of the city. However, there are also brand new neon signs, perhaps not as big and magnificent as those years ago, but so original and unusual that they stand out from the rest and create a whole new space.

Results

In the 1950s and 1960s, neon signs were considered an important element in shaping the urban landscape. Their designs were commissioned to outstanding visual artists who were willing to show off the synthesis skills required to work with a medium such as a tube of gas. They were designed by renowned Polish designers and architects such as Tadeusz Kryszak, Piotr Młodożeniec, Eryk Lipiński, Tadeusz Gronowski and many, many others [24]. Earlier neon signs showed a high degree of exquisite typography and design. They had both an informative and a decorative function. In a strong and dynamic way, they attracted the attention of customers. They offered a good view regardless of the time of a day and weather conditions. They promoted brands of different products and services in an original and decorative way. They were distinguished by their colouring and their unique shape, which was due to the fact that they were made to the buyer's special order. Each project had to be large, magnificent and monumental. Even small shops had big neon signs back then, and that was not surprising. The process of making neon sign was very laborious and sometimes lasted up to three years, as in addition to the actual project, it was also examined how it would harmonise with the existing architecture and other neon signs in the neighbourhood. Every project used to be different; everything was painted on paper, and then it was art. The entire advertisement consisted of three basic documents – art, construction and electrical planning.

The above study on Lublin's neon signs [Tab. 1] shows that its main location was in the city centre, Krakowskie Przedmieście. The situation is similar with the new designs, only a few of which are located outside the centre. In the past, neon signs were hung on a building's facade, above the main entrance or on the roof in the form of monumental capital letters. Most often they were in the form of inscriptions compiled from large block letters, in which the tubes were used either as a compact filling for the letters or to highlight them [Fig. 2]. At that time, a unique neon advertising style was created, in which humorous graphic elements were often merged with finesse lettering. Written letters were often introduced alongside the block letters, whose typeface was invented by visual artists. The font designs of that time were so refined and original that they resembled an ornament, which astonished passers-by.

Table 1. Summary and comparison of selected neon signs of the old days and newly designed ones in the Lublin area

Neon's name	Place	Author of the design	Colour scheme	Characteristic features
<i>Kosmos Cinema</i>	Leszczyńskiego Street currently Popiełuszki Street – The Labyrinth Gallery Building	Unknown; restored by Adam Burs	blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cinema's own name • handwritten font, italics • font design and colour refers to the function of the building
<i>Lublinianka Hotel, currently Grand Hotel</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	blue / white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • name of the Lublinianka Hotel placed on the facade, handwritten font • large block letters Hotel placed on the roof of the building
<i>Europa Hotel, formerly European Hotel</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • name of the Europa Hotel • simple, block, large letters placed on the roof
<i>Poczta Polska</i> [Polish Post Office]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • large inscription of Poczta Polska placed on the roof simple, printed letters • two smaller neon signs Poczta placed on the facade

Neon's name	Place	Author of the design	Colour scheme	Characteristic features
<i>PKO</i> [Polska Kasa Oszczędnościowa; Polish Savings Bank]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • large inscription of <i>PKO Twoja Kasa Oszczędnościowa</i> [PKO – your savings bank] enclosed in a rectangle placed on the roof of the building, aligned • simple, light font • printed letters
<i>Lubgal Company</i>	Żwirki Wigury Street	Unknown	white / different colours of spikes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a boy and a girl with scattered coloured blocks that lit up and went out in different sequence • the neon sign gave the impression of being animated • placed on the roof
<i>Stodycze</i> [Sweets]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Stodycze</i> placed above the main entrance • font design and colour related to the function of the building
<i>Chemia</i> [Chemicals]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Chemia</i> placed above the entrance • font design and colour related to the function of the building
<i>Ryby</i> [Fishmonger's]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Ryby</i> placed above the entrance, advertising a fish store • font design and colour related to the function of the building
<i>Sport</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Sport</i> advertising sports store • additionally protruding from the facade colourful Olympic circles referring to the activity carried out
<i>Chatka Żaka</i> [Chatka Żaka Academic Culture and Media Centre]	Akademicka Street Above the main entrance on the facade	Agnieszka Dudek	white letters on a black background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Chatka Żaka</i> placed on the main facade of the building • light, printed letters on a dark background • font related to type of business
<i>Totalizator Sportowy</i> [Sports Lottery]	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • printed capital letters with inscription <i>Totalizator Sportowy</i> placed on the facade of the building

Neon's name	Place	Author of the design	Colour scheme	Characteristic features
<i>Zielony Talerzyk</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Jarosław Koziara	white, one of the letters in green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> restaurant name Zielony Talerzyk placed above the main entrance letters with an interesting cut cutlery referring to the type of business conducted one letter in green in the shape of the plate
<i>Szybka setka</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Michał Lewkowicz	white inscription, blue glass graphic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pub name Szybka setka placed above the main entrance and in the interior handwritten font, light referring to the type of business conducted
<i>PixDrzwi</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście Street	Unknown	red, yellow, green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> premises name PixDrzwi particular letters in different colours (blue, green, red) font design and colour related to the type of business conducted
<i>Brejdaki</i>	Zamojska Street, side street	Tomasz Pieńczak	white – blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> blue inscription of Brejdaki placed on the side elevation of the building printed letters in addition, above the inscription there are two identical figures of brothers in white
<i>Szacunek na mieście</i> [Respect in the city]	Droga Męczenników Majdanka	Szymon Pietrusiewicz	white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> large white inscription of Szacunek na mieście placed on the railroad overpass handwritten font referring to the proclaimed slogan
<i>Żmigród</i>	Żmigród Street	Jakub Stępień	green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> green ethnographic sign referring to a viper and dragon placed on the side elevation of the building the project refers to the former function of the Żmigród district

Neon's name	Place	Author of the design	Colour scheme	Characteristic features
<i>Centrum Kultury</i> [Centre for Culture]	Peowiaków Street, facade at main entrance	Unknown	white with a black border at the back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, placed on the left side above the main entrance • individual letters of the inscription go from top to bottom • printed light letters on a dark background • printed font, simple referring to the function of the building and architecture
<i>Apollo</i>	Peowiaków Street from Hempel Street	Joanna Duboń Krzysztof Chiel	blue and white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neon sign of Apollo placed on the side of the building in red with a blue baseball cap on his head • the design relates to the function of the building
<i>Dom Handlowy Rusalka</i> [Water Nymph Trading House]	Thisiscreative Company	Unknown	blue and white	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of Dom Handlowy placed on the facade above the main entrance • in addition, a blue graphic of a dancing water nymph Rusalka girl projecting above the facade
<i>Bosko</i>	Krakowskie Przedmieście	Unknown	blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ice-cream shop's own name Bosko • handwritten font • inscription placed above the main entrance
<i>Włoski Koper</i>	above the entrance Nadbystrzycka Street	Unknown	yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • large inscription of Włoski Koper placed above the main entrance • large single handwritten letters
<i>Lublin</i>	Raławicka Street interior of CSK Lublin	Piotr Hajdziej	blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of Lublin • light, handwritten font
<i>Trójka</i>	UMCS Student Canteen, Akademicka Street	Unknown	blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inscription of <i>Trójka</i> placed above the main entrance and from the sides of the building • handwritten font, initial letter capitalised • inscription is the name of the canteen

The design process for neon signs was often long and tedious. The projects were designed for whole streets or adjoining venues to ensure a uniform and aesthetic appearance. They were designed by well-known artists of the time, visual artists and architects, which ensured their uniqueness and non-repeatability. These were mostly inscriptions in different layouts and original fonts. Neon inscriptions often appeared in one colour,

alongside which there were graphic constructions protruding over the facade, with the same patterns and people who were often animated (individual elements flashed on and off in a certain order, which created an illusion of motion). They were placed almost on each building, often advertising products that were in fact unavailable. Their impact against the grey of the People's Republic of Poland was unparalleled, giving beauty and incredible splendour to the streets where they were located. They glowed in pure, pleasant colours, which today cannot be replicated.



Fig. 2. Photographs of Lublin's neon signs from the 1960s and 1970s by Wojciech Turzyński

Nowadays, there are no neon signs from the old days in the area of Lublin that would remain at their original location. Today, their main role is not to advertise a product or service, but embellish and complete the space in which they are placed. In recent years, several newly designed neon signs have appeared, both outside and inside buildings [Fig. 3]. However, these neon signs are not as big and glamorous as in former times. They are increasingly seldom designed by artists and visual artists, more often by advertising companies. In the past, neon signs were only made of solid steel structures, which are no longer usable. The fixtures themselves were also different, as they required special constructions to secure them. Today, glass, which is the most important raw material for neon sign production, is also expensive. As a result, few entrepreneurs invest in them. Newly designed neon signs are often made in just one colour. The font is designed by hand and adapted to the type of business being conducted. We no longer find animated neon in the Lublin area, with individual elements that would glow in a different order and set the image in motion. There are currently few neon advertising signs in the city, but those that do exist stand out from the crowd of other ads and grab the attention of the passers-by.



Fig. 3. Neon signs currently in Lublin. Photographs by the author

The former neon signs were artistically more magnificent than those currently operating in urban spaces. They were focused mainly on visual impact and not on sales efficiency. Neon tubes provided a better visual effect, which once brightened up the gloomy lives of the inhabitants. Neon lights were above all a kind of visual pleasure for the eyes and a balm for the soul, whereby the sparkling street offered an unforgettable experience.

Summary

Once upon a time, illuminated advertisements were an expression of a strong trend in Polish design in the 1950s and 1960s, where a kind of interplay between typography and typewriting was invented by artists for the needs of particular cities. With impressive freedom, the neon designers used both block and font letters to create compositions that matched the scale and style of a building's facade. In the past, neon signs served primarily an informative and decorative function rather than advertising, and their art went far beyond the usual schemes. Properly chosen colours, composition, size, detailing and the impressive sizes of the signs would entice visitors to visit modest, often obscure places. The neon designers understood that creativity in art requires knowledge and curiosity, not just skills, and so they focused on the right composition with existing architecture and neighbouring neon signs. Neon light is the least invasive and at the same time the most effective way to attract attention. It is the easiest way to transform a natural landscape into a sculptural landscape that represents a different shape of the environment. Light art uses mainly written text that communicates with the environment. Adhering to the principles of composition, feeling and aesthetics, neon signs enjoy a growing interest once again.

After many years of absence, the special value of neon signs in the urban space as an element of visual image culture has been acknowledged. They appear more and more frequently in contemporary art galleries and museums as elements of art and history. Their unique creativity potential, originality and high standards of execution were appreciated. Their important role in the design of cities and their preservation as cultural heritage has been recognised. All of this has contributed to a growing interest in *saving* old neon signs and designing new ones over the past ten years. Warsaw is home to the largest Museum of Neon Signs, which holds about 200 neon signs from all over Poland in its collection. Visitors can see and feel how much buildings and streets have gained from neon lighting. In many other cities as well as in Lublin, initiatives arose to reinstall neon signs where they were originally located or to install new ones. The aim is to preserve the memory of the city and strengthen the identity of the next generations of residents.

Interest in neon signs in Lublin is slowly returning, and is already well developed in the larger cities. Owners of pubs, cafés or pastry shops are increasingly investing in stylish neon signs. Nowadays, anyone can own one. It is not only advertising or a form of lighting, but above all personalises and decorates the room where it is located. Neon is characterised by a form of identification and marking of a place, symbolizing a trend that is the quintessence of all urbanity, the epitome of elegance and fragility compared to the concrete buildings on which it is installed [27]. The main feature of the neon signs is the fact that they belong to a certain place. They are an integral part of the building on which they are located, together with the surrounding landscape. Irrespective of their function, the neon signs do not exist without their background, which is the quintessence of the assumptions of the designer and architect, creating a harmonious whole. Neon lights shape the character of a building, a street and even an entire city, making it lively and active even at night.

The presented information and examples clearly show that neon signs played an important role both for the building on which they were placed and for the community of the city where they were located. Therefore, any action to protect, preserve and make them accessible to the public is of the utmost importance. Although the former neon signs were not designed for exhibition in a museum (they lose their lightness and charm), today this is how they can be mainly admired. Just a few return to the facades of the buildings and can be seen outdoors from a reasonable distance. The return of neon signs to the streets of Polish cities can be a step towards changing the urban space, taking a certain path of development and bringing a breath of fresh air to the urban space.

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Neony w przestrzeni miejskiej, wczoraj i dziś. Studium przypadku na przykładzie Lublina

Streszczenie: W okresie PRL-u neony były czymś, czym Polska mogła się pochwalić. Wówczas ulice tonęły w świetlistej reklamie, obok której nie sposób było przejść obojętnie. Ostatnie lata przyniosły fatalną, jakość reklamy miejskiej a panująca w tym zakresie samowola, przyczyniła się do degeneracji przestrzeni miast. Kolorowe neony niegdyś dominowały na polskich ulicach, stanowiąc wzorowy przykład reklamy, której wpływ miał zasadnicze znaczenie w odbiorze przestrzeni miejskiej. Obecnie neony uważane są za dzieła sztuki, i najcenniejszy dorobek polskiego, designu XX wieku, który głównie możemy podziwiać dziś w muzeach. W ostatnim dziesięcioleciu przypomniano sobie o ich istnieniu i podjęto działania polegające na ich ratowaniu i ponownego umieszczania w przestrzeni miejskiej. Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na niezwykłą wartość neonów, jako istotnego elementu budującego przestrzeń miejską oraz podkreślenia ich funkcji artystycznych i społecznych. Podjęte badania objęły materiał dotyczący neonów z czasów PRL-u jak również tych nowo projektowanych na przykładzie miasta Lublina.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń miejsca, neony, reklama świetlna, design
