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From Signage to Civic Identity: a Theoretical Framework for Visual Communication in Post-Conflict Urban Space

ABSTRACT

Environmental graphic design is often approached through orientation, legibility, and the organization of spatial information. However, in post-conflict urban contexts, everyday visual communication may carry meanings beyond functional wayfinding: it may communicate memory, authority, belonging, exclusion, care, or neglect. This paper aims to develop a theoretical framework for understanding environmental graphic design and everyday visual communication as functional, symbolic, material, and civic layers of urban space, with particular reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper uses a critical literature review and conceptual synthesis, connecting environmental graphic design, wayfinding, semiotics, place identity, civic design, and post-conflict urban studies. Six analytical lenses are proposed: functional legibility, graphic and material coherence, semiotic meaning, place identity and affective experience, post-conflict fragmentation, and civic care. These lenses position signs, street names, memorial plaques, commercial graphics, informal markings, scripts, typographic systems, and material conditions as part of the broader public realm. The paper argues that visual communication in post-conflict urban space should be understood not only as a navigational or graphic-design issue, but as something concerning architectural and urban design, and which is equally connected to identity, dignity, memory, belonging, and civic experience.

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KEY WORDS
Environmental graphic design, wayfinding, civic identity, post-conflict urban space, visual communication

1. Introduction

Environmental graphic design (EGD) is conventionally approached through orientation, legibility, and the organization of spatial information (Gibson, 2009; Bigat, 2024). Signage systems, maps, and wayfinding hierarchies are typically treated as technical solutions to the problem of helping users move efficiently through built environments. In post-conflict urban contexts, however, everyday visual communication may carry meanings that exceed this functional register. Signs, street names, memorial plaques, commercial graphics, and even informal or unauthorized markings can communicate memory, authority, belonging, exclusion, care, or neglect (Rossi, 1984; D'Avanzo & Zingale, 2023). This is particularly evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country whose urban space continues to bear the visible and symbolic traces of the 1992–1995 war, of earlier socialist-era urban development, and of a fragmented post-Dayton institutional structure (Walasek & Carlton, 2015; Aulić & Kalinić, 2016; Hadžić, 2021).

This paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding environmental graphic design and everyday visual communication as functional, symbolic, material, and civic layers of urban space, with particular refer-

ence to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than treating wayfinding and signage as isolated technical or aesthetic concerns, the paper positions them within a broader disciplinary conversation that includes environmental graphic design, wayfinding theory, semiotics, place identity, civic design, and post-conflict urban studies.

The premise underlying this framework is that urban space is not a neutral physical setting but a layered system of meaning. Aldo Rossi's (1984) reading of the city as a locus of collective memory positions buildings, monuments, and recognizable urban elements as carriers of historical and social significance beyond their immediate function. Harold Proshansky's (1978) concept of place identity complements this by locating that significance in the individual's psychological relationship to the physical environment. More recent scholarship on urban identity (Umar, Winarso & Kustiwan, 2024; Ziyaee, 2018) clarifies that identity in this sense is neither purely material nor purely subjective, but emerges from the interaction of physical form, cultural meaning, social practice, and perception. Writing from a regional design perspective, Ognjeka Finci (2009) extends this argument to the scale of everyday urban elements (e.g. signage, street furniture, and visual communication) arguing that their condition and coherence contribute directly to the humanization, or dehumanization, of urban space.

If urban space carries memory, shapes identity, and communicates social value at this scale, then the visual elements embedded within it (e.g. signs, typography, plaques, materials, commercial graphics, informal markings) cannot be treated as merely practical or decorative additions to the city. This is the starting premise for the theoretical framework developed here

1.1. Problem and Research Gap

Existing literature addresses parts of this relationship without adequately connecting them. Wayfinding and EGD literature offers robust tools for analyzing legibility, hierarchy, and orientation (Gibson, 2009; Bigat, 2024), but typically frames users as navigators moving efficiently between points, without accounting for why visual coherence might matter emotionally, symbolically, or civically. Literature on place identity and environmental psychology (Proshansky, 1978; Ziyaee, 2018) explains how people form emotional and identity-based relationships with the built environment, but does not typically address how everyday graphic elements, as distinct from architecture, participate in that process. Semiotic literature interprets visual communication as a system of meaning, but is rarely brought into contact with the wayfinding literature's technical vocabulary of legibility and hierarchy. Post-conflict and post-socialist urban studies on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Walasek & Carlton, 2015; Aulić & Kalinić, 2016; Hadžić, 2021; Djurasović & Knieling, 2015; Aceska, 2013; Vučetić, 2004) document institutional fragmentation, contested memory, and weak shared civic identity in considerable detail, but the role of everyday visual communication within this condition remains largely unaddressed. Civic design literature (Kaasa, Bingham-Hall & Pietrostefani, 2016; de Kreek et al., 2024; Srinivas & Staszowski, 2018) raises important cautions about the political limits of design intervention, but is rarely brought into dialogue with EGD or wayfinding theory at all.

The gap this paper addresses, then, is not an absence of literature in any one of these fields, but their limited interconnection. Everyday visual communication elements in post-conflict Bosnian cities remain under-theorized as an intersection of symbolic meaning, material condition, and civic experience. Individual elements (e.g. signage, typography, script choice, the physical condition of a plaque or sign) are often treated as secondary design details, despite their potential to shape how public space is read, experienced, and emotionally interpreted.

1.2. Aim

This paper aims to develop an integrated theoretical framework, structured around six analytical lenses that positions visual communication as a functional, symbolic, material, and civic layer of post-conflict urban space:

- functional legibility
- graphic and material coherence
- semiotic meaning
- place identity and affective experience
- post-conflict fragmentation
- civic care

The framework is conceptual and interpretive in nature: it identifies the dimensions along which visual communication in post-conflict urban space should be read, rather than specifying measurable design parameters.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a critical literature review and conceptual synthesis methodology, rather than an empirical or case-study design. This choice follows from the nature of the research problem: before visual communication in a specific post-conflict urban setting can be productively analyzed empirically, the conceptual vocabulary for doing so needs to be assembled from fields that do not customarily address one another.

The review draws on international and regional literature across five interconnected bodies of work: (1) environmental graphic design and wayfinding theory; (2) semiotics and typography as applied to public space; (3) place identity and environmental psychology; (4) post-conflict and post-socialist urban studies specific to Bosnia and Herzegovina; and (5) civic design theory and its critiques.

Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings, selected for their direct relevance to the relationship between visual communication, urban space, and civic experience.

The synthesis method is thematic rather than statistical: literature from each field is read against the others to identify where arguments converge, diverge, or leave gaps unaddressed. The output is not a dataset but an integrated theoretical framework: six analytical lenses treated not as separate categories but as interdependent tools. This framework is intended as the theoretical foundation for a subsequent empirical case-study application, rather than as a finding to be tested within this paper itself.

It should be stated explicitly that the framework developed in this paper is conceptual and interpretive rather than operational. Its purpose is to identify and organize the dimensions along which visual communication in post-conflict urban space should be read (functional, material, semiotic, affective, political, and civic), not to specify measurable design parameters such as legibility distances, typographic scale, color or contrast specifications, or material standards.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Functional Legibility

Wayfinding and EGD literature provides the technical starting point for analyzing visual communication as a coordinated system rather than a collection of isolated graphic elements. Finci (2009) argues that visual communication systems should be coordinated, readable, and integrated with their surrounding urban environment rather than treated as secondary additions; her critique of visual clutter and insufficient public information is directly applicable to cities where formal, informal, and commercial signage overlap without coordination, a condition common across urban Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bigat (2024) frames guidance and signing systems as a form of informational design, emphasizing coherent, user-oriented systems organized around key decision points rather than ad-hoc additions. Gibson's (2009) practical wayfinding framework specifies measurable criteria: hierarchy, typographic legibility, visibility, color contrast, mapping, sign placement, and integration with surrounding architecture, offering a vocabulary for evaluating the functional legibility of visual communication systems.

Ganoti and Laskari (2023) extend this beyond pure technical orientation, arguing that EGD contributes to the aesthetic and psychological experience of the city, not only to functional navigation. Even so, conventional wayfinding literature retains a significant limitation for the purposes of this framework: it tends to portray users primarily as navigators moving efficiently between points, which does not explain why visual coherence might matter in an emotional, symbolic, or civic register. D'Avanzo and Zingale (2023) address this directly by reframing "wayfinding" as "placefinding": orientation understood not merely as the efficient delivery of spatial information, but as a process through which people recognize their position within a larger urban narrative involving place, alterity, and identity. This reframing is the conceptual bridge that allows functional legibility to be read alongside the more symbolic and affective lenses developed below.

3.2. Graphic and Material Coherence

Where functional legibility concerns whether a system helps users navigate, graphic and material coherence concerns the physical and formal qualities of that system: typography, color, scale, placement, materiality, physical condition, durability, and relationship to architecture. Finci's (2009) typology of urban visual communication is useful here: she distinguishes three functional groups (traffic, information, advertising) and two formal types (standardized/conventional versus creative communication). This typology allows overlapping systems (such as official traffic and information signage, commercial advertising, tourist information, murals, and memorial plaques) to be read as distinct but co-present layers within the same urban visual field, rather than as a single undifferentiated mass of signage.

Material condition carries particular weight in post-conflict and post-socialist urban settings, where inconsistent maintenance, overlapping institutional authority, and uneven investment produce visibly uneven coherence across a city's visual communication systems. A faded, damaged, or improvised sign communicates something different about maintenance, authority, and care than a coordinated and well-maintained one, independent of the information each conveys. This lens therefore treats the material condition of graphic elements as itself communicative, not merely as a matter of aesthetics or upkeep.

3.3. Semiotic Meaning

Semiotics provides the interpretive tool for reading a city's visual communication as a system of signs through which meaning is produced, circulated, and contested, rather than as a neutral information layer. Rossi's (1984) understanding of the city as a carrier of collective memory extends naturally to everyday graphic elements (street signs, shop signs, plaques, and typographic systems) which, though minor in comparison to architecture, participate in the ongoing production of place narratives. Read alongside D'Avanzo and Zingale's (2023) placefinding concept, the city's

graphic layer must be understood both functionally and semiotically: it organizes movement while simultaneously functioning as a cultural and civic text.

Typography occupies a particularly important position within this lens because it is functional and expressive simultaneously. Beyond conveying information, typographic choices convey tone, institutional authority, informality, commercial pressure, local character, and cultural specificity; the condition, scale, material, and placement of lettering can suggest whether a system is coordinated or improvised, maintained or neglected, inclusive or exclusive. This is heightened in multilingual and multiscript contexts: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Latin and Cyrillic scripts and the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages carry official recognition, script and language choice in public space can exceed communicative function and become a marker of cultural affiliation or symbolic and political meaning. Finci's (2009) typology, introduced above, further supports this lens by allowing standardized, commercial, civic, and creative communication systems to be distinguished and read against one another within the same urban field.

3.4. Place Identity and Affective Experience

Place-identity theory supplies the psychological register through which the preceding lenses connect to lived experience. Proshansky (1978) argues that the physical environment forms part of self-identity, since people develop emotional and cognitive relationships with the places they inhabit. Read alongside Umar, Winarso and Kustiwan's (2024) distinction between the identity of, in, and for urban space, this allows urban identity to be understood as operating simultaneously at the level of a city's visible character and at the level of residents' lived attachment to, or distance from, that same environment. Ziyaee's (2018) matrix for assessing urban identity through cultural landscapes offers a methodological bridge from these theoretical positions toward the visible and material: it validates visual mapping, typological analysis, and semiotic interpretation as legitimate techniques for investigating civic experience, without claiming that visual communication alone produces civic identity.

Finci's (2009) discussion of urban furniture and visual communication as contributing to a city's "aroma" (i.e. the collective usability, intimacy, recognizability, and human character of a place) supports the claim that affective urban experience is shaped as much by ordinary, small-scale elements as by architectural or planning decisions at a larger scale. Whether a public space reads as cared for, neglected, coherent, fragmented, welcoming, or indifferent is communicated substantially through these ordinary elements, which residents encounter daily and which the preceding two lenses (functional legibility and graphic/material coherence) describe in more technical terms.

3.5. Post-Conflict Fragmentation

Bosnia and Herzegovina's urban space cannot be read independently of its post-conflict and post-socialist condition. Walasek and Carlton's (2015) account of the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage during the 1992–1995 war demonstrates that the built environment and its symbolic markers were direct targets precisely because architecture, monuments, and cultural landscapes carried meanings of identity and coexistence. What is preserved, destroyed, rebuilt, marked, or left neglected in the years since continues to determine which histories and identities remain visible in public space.

This symbolic instability is reinforced institutionally. Aulić and Kalinić (2016) show how the post-Dayton consociational political structure (in which power is formally shared among constituent peoples) produces fragmented governance and weak accountability across administrative levels. Hadžić (2021) characterizes the resulting post-war condition as one of weak shared civic nationalism, low social capital, and the absence of a common civic project. For visual communication specifically, this matters because coherent signage and wayfinding depend on coordination, maintenance, regulation, and shared civic intention; where authority is fragmented, graphic systems tend to fragment correspondingly, through inconsistent signage, uneven maintenance, overlapping institutional messages, and competing symbolic narratives.

Urban regeneration literature on Bosnian cities complicates any purely negative reading of this fragmentation. Djurasović and Knieling (2015) show that post-war urban development in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been shaped less by a consistently integrated planning vision than by post-socialist transformation, wartime division, and project-based intervention, helping explain visual disorder as the visible result of broader planning discontinuity rather than an isolated design failure. At the same time, Martinović and Ifko's (2018) study of industrial heritage regeneration in Mostar demonstrates that some urban sites can be reframed as shared civic resources, particularly where regeneration is pursued through inclusive narratives attentive to the social dimension of sustainability. Together, these accounts suggest that fragmentation and the potential for renewed shared meaning coexist within the same urban condition.

This fragmentation is also social rather than purely institutional or infrastructural. For example, Aceska's (2013) study of "us and them" distinctions in post-war Mostar shows that everyday urban space is read through social and symbolic divisions that exceed official ethno-national categories: distinctions between long-term residents and newcomers, competing claims to local belonging, and locally specific forms of attachment. Vučetić (2004) similarly shows that identity boundaries in Bosnia are reproduced through ordinary cultural practices, not only through formal politics. Signs, let-

tering, informal graphics, commercial displays, and memorial markers are plausible sites for this same kind of everyday boundary-making, recognition, or shared belonging, even though this specific connection remains underexplored in the literature reviewed here.

3.6. Civic Care and the Limits of Design Intervention

The final lens addresses how design intervention relates to civic identity, and cautions against overstating what design can achieve. Kaasa, Bingham-Hall and Pietrostefani (2016) argue that design is never politically neutral, since it shapes whose interests and needs become materialized in public systems; signage and wayfinding, from this perspective, are design decisions capable of influencing visibility, access, recognition, and the symbolic character of urban space, not neutral technical improvements. De Kreek et al. (2024) extend this by arguing that meaningful civic design depends on collaboration, sustained institutional relationships, and continuity with local communities, rather than the production of discrete objects or services — implying that graphic coherence alone is insufficient; effective visual communication also depends on maintenance, governance, and institutional accountability.

More critical perspectives caution that design intervention can be redirected toward unintended ends. Srinivas and Staszowski (2018) argue that because civic design operates within political and institutional processes, it is neither neutral nor automatically emancipatory: its outcomes can be co-opted or subverted regardless of original intent. Pupavac (2006), writing specifically on post-conflict cultural reconstruction in Bosnia, cautions against treating culture as a fixed object to be externally managed or repaired. Together, these sources raise pointed questions for any proposed visual-communication framework: who controls the system, whose identity is represented, which forms of public expression are legitimized, and whether "care," once formalized, risks becoming a form of branding or regulatory control.

Finci (2009) and Boer (2023) add a further caution from the opposite direction: excessive standardization carries its own risks. Finci argues that modern urbanization and globalization can produce a homogenous visual language that weakens local distinctiveness, while Boer's concept of the "smooth city" describes an extreme version of this outcome, in which public space becomes increasingly regulated, visually controlled, and optimized in ways that erase informality, friction, and non-normative uses of the city. Taken together, these perspectives establish a productive tension for the framework proposed here: visual communication needs sufficient coherence to support orientation and dignity, but should not be standardized to the point of erasing informal and locally specific expressions of place. This tension positions any design implications of the framework as speculative and analytical rather than corrective: i.e. a way of making civic care more visible and legible, not a claim that improved signage can resolve institutional fragmentation or contested memory.

4. Toward and Integrated Theoretical Framework

Each of the six lenses developed above addresses part of the relationship between visual communication, urban space, and civic experience, but no single lens accounts for it adequately alone. Wayfinding and EGD literature is strongest when visual communication is treated as a practical navigational system, but does not explain its emotional or civic significance. Place-identity literature explains how residents form identity-based relationships with the physical environment, but does not typically address how everyday graphic elements participate in that process. Semiotics enables the interpretation of visual communication as meaning-bearing, while post-conflict and post-socialist urban studies explain how memory, institutional fragmentation, and contested narratives shape the urban environment within which that meaning is produced. Civic design literature complicates the picture further by insisting that design cannot be read as politically neutral, nor as a substitute for structural or institutional change.

The framework proposed here connects these fields around a central claim: everyday visual communication in post-conflict Bosnian urban space should be analyzed as a functional, symbolic, material, and civic layer of that space simultaneously, rather than as belonging to any one of these registers exclusively. It is functional because signs, wayfinding systems, and typographic systems shape orientation and legibility (3.1). It is material because scale, condition, placement, and durability shape the city's visible character independently of informational content (3.2). It is symbolic because these same elements communicate memory, identity, authority, inclusion, and neglect (3.3), a meaning further shaped by place attachment (3.4) and by the specific post-conflict conditions of fragmented memory and institutional authority in Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.5). And it is civic because the presence, coordination, and maintenance of visual communication participates in how residents may experience public space as cared for, fragmented, dignified, indifferent, or hostile, while remaining subject to the political limits on design intervention identified in 3.6.

These six lenses (functional legibility, graphic and material coherence, semiotic meaning, place identity and affective experience, post-conflict fragmentation, and civic care) are proposed not as independent analytical categories to be applied separately, but as interdependent tools. Applied together, they allow a single visual

element, such as a street sign, a memorial plaque, a commercial façade, to be read simultaneously as a navigational aid, a material object in a particular state of repair, a sign within a semiotic system, a contributor to place attachment, a symptom of institutional fragmentation, and a potential site of civic care or neglect. As a conceptual rather than operational framework, these lenses provide categories of interpretation, not measurable design criteria; specifying such criteria for a given urban site is left to future empirical work.

5. Discussion: Contribution to Graphic Design and Visual Communication

Within architecture and urban design, frameworks for reading the public realm typically privilege large-scale spatial and planning decisions. The framework proposed here contributes a complementary position specific to the concerns of graphic engineering and design: it argues that the graphic layer of the city (signage, typography, lettering, commercial graphics, informal markings, and their material condition) is not a secondary or purely aesthetic layer of urban space, but a primary site through which civic identity, dignity, and belonging are materialized and experienced.

For EGD and wayfinding practice specifically, this framework carries several implications. First, decisions conventionally treated as purely technical, e.g. typeface selection, material specification, sign placement, maintenance scheduling, carry civic and symbolic weight, particularly in multiscript and multilingual public space, where such decisions can signal inclusion, neutrality, or exclusion regardless of design intent. Second, graphic and material coherence should be pursued critically rather than as an end in itself: the "smooth city" caution (Boer, 2023) implies that a fully standardized, homogenized visual communication system may achieve legibility while eroding the local specificity and informal expression that also contribute to place attachment. Third, and most directly relevant to designers working in post-conflict contexts, the framework positions design intervention as necessarily partial: visual communication can make civic care, memory, and coherence more visible, but cannot resolve the institutional fragmentation or contested memory that produced their absence in the first place. This framing is intended to support a more self-aware and modest practice of environmental graphic design in divided or post-conflict societies, distinct from approaches that treat signage improvement as a solution to deeper civic or political conditions.

This paper's contribution is deliberately confined to the theoretical framework itself. Testing these six lenses against a specific urban site (mapping how functional legibility, material coherence, semiotic meaning, place identity, post-conflict fragmentation, and civic care interact within a particular Bosnian city's visual landscape) is the task of a subsequent empirical study. The present paper establishes the conceptual foundation that such a study requires, and makes that foundation available to the wider GRID community working at the intersection of graphic design, environmental graphic design, and the public realm.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that visual communication in post-conflict urban space (and in Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically) should be understood not only as a navigational or graphic-design concern, but as a functional, symbolic, material, and civic layer of the built environment, connected to identity, dignity, memory, belonging, and civic experience. The research gap addressed here is not an absence of relevant literature, but the limited interconnection between fields that each address part of this relationship: wayfinding and EGD, semiotics, place identity and environmental psychology, post-conflict and post-socialist urban studies, and civic design theory.

The six analytical lenses proposed (i.e. functional legibility, graphic and material coherence, semiotic meaning, place identity and affective experience, post-conflict fragmentation, and civic care) are offered as interdependent tools rather than separate categories, forming an integrated theoretical framework through which everyday visual communication elements can be read simultaneously across these registers. For the discipline of graphic engineering and design, this framework repositions signage, typography, and everyday visual communication as constitutive of the public realm rather than secondary to it, with particular relevance for designers working in divided or post-conflict societies. Because the framework is conceptual rather than operational, it does not itself supply design parameters; translating its six lenses into measurable criteria, and testing them against specific urban sites and visual landscapes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, remains the task of future research.

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