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# **The Lyon Parc Auto Case Study : A Polysensorial Approach**

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## **Abstract**

For over fifteen years, Lyon Parc Auto has been building parking buildings which are designed as services to male and female motorists, and not only as simple car storage towers. These car parks, designed by pluri-disciplinary teams (structural architects, interior architects, artists, graphic designers – signposting specialists, environmental designers), with a polysensorial approach, are visited today by specialists from the world over, have been awarded the “grand Prix Européen du Design” (European Design Award), and are used as an example in the “D.Day, design today” exposition at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris. The objective of this communication is twofold: to present the reasons behind the success of these innovative projects and to deconstruct the model of reception and of the user that these projects implicitly integrate. The theoretical contributions will essentially come from the sociology of practices which integrate a methodology stemming from sociosemiotics.

**Key words :** practices, sociology, semiotics, art, emotion, design, communication, parking’s identity relooking

## **Introduction**

Innovative practices require that we, researchers, question ourselves as to our ability to analyse and understand them. The main objective of this article is to give an account of an exchange between a communication professional and a researcher in Sciences of Information and Communication, in order to analyse the reasons behind the success of a communication project which integrates design.

The redefinition of the identity of parking buildings in the city of Lyon (semi-public company Lyon Parc Auto : LPA) through design enabled the transformation of the type of relationship that is usually established between users and this type of place. Traditionally, car parks are considered, throughout the world, as anxiety-causing and not very appealing, ordinary but unsightly. The objective of LPA’s project, by rethinking these spaces, was to not only transform the emotions evoked by them, but also and as a result, transform the very image of this urban function incarnated by the LPA company.

An analysis of the environmental design and of the signposting of the LPA car parks will be carried out by crossing the main theories stemming from the sociology of users with the methodological tools used in sociosemiotics. In this way, we will be able to clearly measure the changes which have taken place in the relationship with car parks, thanks to work on the visual identity and the design of the LPA environment. It should be noted that this work on the physical aspects of the car parks was accompanied by training measures for the staff in customer relations and regular information to the press, to inhabitants of the area and to opinion leaders.

### **Case study**

At the beginning of the 90's, the city of Lyon decided to entrust LPA with the construction of new parking buildings. The Communiquez group (specialised in public communication, identity and design) thus carried out an ethnographic field survey to observe the way in which motorists felt about the existing car parks, and to understand "the reasons" behind the car parks' mediocre image. The results of this study assisted the elaboration of a guiding document setting out the requirements from which would be designed a new generation of car parks (treatment of spaces for pedestrian and vehicle circulation, signposting, light, welcome and security,...), for which Georges Verney-Carron (President of Art/Entreprise, a company within Communiquez group) would be in charge of the artistic leadership.

The principle of the work was to form pluri-disciplinary teams, bringing together, alongside structural architects, an interior architect - Jean-Michel Wilmotte - and a graphic designer-signpost specialist -Yan D. Pennor's - , who would design together the graphic charter outlining the common identity for all the car parks, and a guest artist invited to work on a car park by car park basis, for "in situ" work (like Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Mat Mullican, François Morellet, Marin Kasimir...)

As this team worked together on the interior scenography from the beginning stages of each project, the design and artistic dimensions of these car parks were not simply a fleeting lick of polish on the surface but, on the contrary, totally interwoven into the durable work of the structural architects.

With this work bringing together art, architecture and design, LPA opened the way for the car parks to be experienced in a different way, designed as real entrance ways in a human-sized city.

**(see photos - series A - in the Annex)**



In the context of this communication, we are going to focus our analysis on the elements of LPA's design and signposting so as to highlight their roles in the redefinition of the representations that individuals might have concerning:

- car parking buildings,
- their use (which is to say the thoughts and emotions resulting from immersion in a car park or, more precisely, the different actions and interactions taking place in a car park.)
- the image that LPA receives in return, or in other terms, the image of the user according to LPA.

### **The basis of LPA identity through design:**

#### **Wilmotte's interior architecture, Pennor's' signposting**

Jean Michel Wilmotte, architect, town planner, designer, is internationally renowned and works all over the world. His agency has developed the concept of "*interior architecture within cities*", a new approach to the treatment of urban spaces which concerns surface coating (floors, walls and facades), planting, lighting, urban furniture and transport.

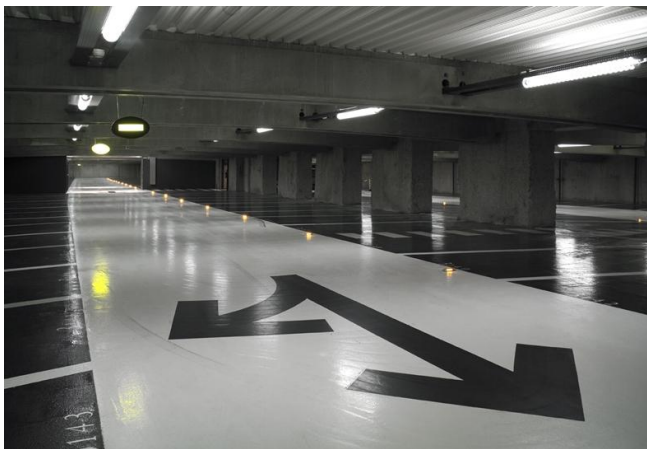
According to Jean-Michel Wilmotte, "*People, the city, the movement in the streets, the swaying of a tree, the space explored to the rhythm of walking: this is the first task, the work site to discover, whether it be New York, Paris, Le Puy-en-Velay, Beyrouth, Tokyo, Seoul. For an architect it's always the same essential frame: the space to decipher*"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Jean-Michel Wilmotte, on the Internet home page of his agency : <http://www.wilmotte.com/pge/homepage/>

For LPA, “Jean-Michel Wilmotte’s scenography deliberately played the harmony and softness card, without being completely free of a certain rigorousness. The indirect lighting, the transparency of the walls are accentuated by the geometry of the structures treated in black and by the dull grey of the dividing walls. Here, the glass, the metal, the bare concrete come together to carry the image of modernity of Lyon Parc Auto through their own contemporary resonance. He brings back the memory of these places, by drawing for example the arches of the interior helix of the Celestins echoing Italian style theatre”<sup>2</sup>.

**(see photos - series B - in the Annex)**



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lyon-parc-auto.com/fr/sensible/sb.html>



F. Dagonet rightly reminds us of the lexical closeness of the term "design" with the French term "dessein", which means "project" or "programme". Design is indeed at the service of a company project whose mission is to propose a new scenario of use to its clients.

Furthermore, the term « design » also refers to « dessin » [drawing] which, according to Dagonet, "*gives importance to the reshaping and the distribution of elements*" (Dagonet, 2005 : 46). Moreover, the visual identity of LPA (which is essentially expressed through signposting applications) was reworked by the graphic designer Yan D. Pennor's.

Yan D. Pennor's claims to be a meticulous craftsman. He became internationally known as a typographer for renowned companies and institutions such as Sofitel and Larousse. He also designs objects, furniture and luxury product lines. He has worked for Laguiole, Pierre Hermé, Fauchon and many others.

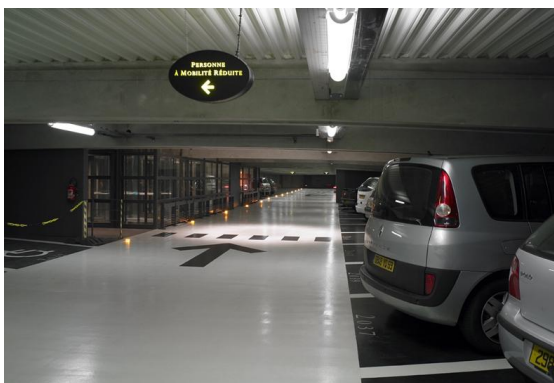
Yan D Pennor's reshapes and redistributes elements which carry meaning, the meaning which will be attributed to the company. In this respect, it is indeed "*the combination of invented and retrieved signs, born from a stroke and/or colour which best characterise the work of Pennor's*" (Heilbrunn, 2005 : 86).

For LPA, "*deliberately minimal, the sign markings designed by Yan D. Pennor's is free of all superfluous signs. It is content to accompany a path which is already coherent by its design. Carriers of image for Lyon Parc Auto, elegance and rigorousness mark the signs and the typography. Information is presented in two ways: in yellow on a black background for motorists, in black on a yellow background for pedestrians*"<sup>3</sup>.

**(see photos - series C - in the Annex)**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lyon-parc-auto.com/fr/sensible/sb.html>.



## Theoretical issues

The values for use are the fruit of an immersion in a pluri-semiotic space, which will generate emotions then representations (Blandin, 2002). The sense attributed to a place, arising from an activity, here that of parking, is deeply embodied in a practice. This type of acknowledgement is rich in theoretical consequences as it deconstructs the cybernetics notion of the interpretation process. Representations are the fruit of an activity which not only involves cognition but also the emotions and physical actions produced in an environment.



In the continuation of cybernetics, such as is developed by cognitivism, representations are abstract and logical units that it is possible to extract from their context of production. Representations are made up of symbols, defined as formal elements which refer to the real world by a relationship of equivalence. Cognition amounts to an activity of treating these symbols. Interpretation is the activity of finding the middle ground between the representations of objects in the world and their references. Cognition is an activity of treating the information from the representations. Cognition is a mental and reasonable activity. Finally, reception can be reduced to a simple activity of treating a space of symbolic representation.

Indeed, recent research in neurosciences (Petit, 1999, Petitot, 2003, Berthoz, 1997) and in semiotics (Landowski, 2004, Fontanille, 2004) reintegrated into the sociology of uses (Blandin, 2002) allows us to revisit these post-cybernetic notions of the way in which things make sense to us. Any symbolic interpretation activity of a space or pluri-semiotic action is fundamentally embodied in a practice which appeals to emotions. Any activity of appropriating artefacts (machines, instruments, etc.) is carried out in and by their use. Any activity of receiving a place, a space, is immersive in the sense where it involves a user in his/her entirety (physical and mental).

Meaning, as a system of values attributed by a place, is the product of a real-life experience which is both cognitive (thoughts), physical (the movement generated by the use) and above all emotional (all the positive and negative emotions which result from this use). These emotions give meaning to a theatrical space, giving it value. Moreover, the emotions experienced during the visit generate an overall feeling of identity which will be attributed to the place.

More precisely, from the entrance to the exit of a car park, the user will repeat scenarios of action which will appeal to him/her in a polysensorial manner (look, move, smell, listen, etc.). Each action which makes up the use of the car park and its artefacts (take the ticket at the entrance, find a space for the vehicle, park, continue on foot, look for the lift, go up the stairs, go out, then, later on, pay the car park attendants or at an automatic machine, find the car, drive to the exit, go out) will thus generate thoughts and emotions which will either add to or not the image of the car parks, those of LPA company, and especially the image that the user has according to LPA.

It is therefore a matter of understanding how, by reworking the design of a place, it is possible to change the values and the emotions generally attributed to this type of place. From a semiotic point of view, it is a question of developing a semiotic of the mark. The places touch the users, leaving impressions which are mental, emotional and sensorial. This process constructs the meaning which will be attributed to the place. From a methodological point of view, this implies describing in detail the characteristics on an expression level of the theatrical measure and of the signposting in order to understand in a heuristic manner what they can generate on a contents level (in the form of thoughts or emotions).

## **Methodology**

### **Methodology of analysing the signposting**

The visual identity of an institution or of a brand is structured most of the time on three levels<sup>4</sup> :

- The level of discursive expression, where the manner in which the visual identity presents itself in a certain form to the client/user shows itself and will be analysed. This level takes into consideration the visual codes of the time, the production techniques of the image and the constraints or advantages of the representation supports. Colours, shapes, their topology and their vectorialisation make up this level of expression.
- The content level, where the meaning that will be attributed to the institution by the means of the expression of its visual identity is thought out. This meaning will be reconstructed by the receiver by the act of reception including the emotions which will be associated. By interpreting the expression, the receiver builds him/herself a representation of the institution and above all of the manner that it conceives relationships. The visual identity thus implies a conception of the client, a model of

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<sup>4</sup> We will use, in this article, a simplified version of the analysis model of visual identity, put together from the writing of semioticiens such as R. Barthes, U. Eco, J.M. Floch, L. Hjemslev, F. Saint-Martin, reappropriated by Heilbrunn and Hetzel in Sciences de Gestion/Marketing.

the user: his/her personality, cognitive especially emotional structure, style of relationships with the institution and its services.

- The axiological level, where the values of the institution in a system of oppositions and complementarities (often represented as a semiotic square) can be revealed. This level allows the main principles, which feed the institution's action towards its clients via the act of buying services, to be highlighted. This level can be summarised in the form of promises of added value, values promising to be acquired through the act of consuming (Baudrillard, 1968).

This three level model only has a heuristic and explicative value. It doesn't claim to describe the path of elaboration followed by the designers, nor the real interpretative path of the users/clients.

### **Methodology of analysing the environmental design**

As far as the theatrical design or environment design are concerned, it is the different actions or interactions (manipulate, see, hear, move, find bearings, smell, etc.) with or without a car, in the LPA car parks which will provide the user with a new image of a car parking building, of its use, of LPA and above all of the image that LPA has of its clients. Moreover, the environment design provides an embodied identity, an identity in relation, in action and in emotion for LPA.

Beyond the design conceived to facilitate the different processes of action and interaction carried out in a car parking building, the scenography work for these car parks clearly had the objective of transforming the representations and especially the emotions usually associated with this type of place and its practices (Thomas, 2006). Leaving the not very reassuring, anxiety-causing, unsightly dimension behind, the new car parks would have to generate feelings of attractiveness, well-being, confidence, and harmony so as to render their use more pleasant and efficient.

Indeed, the postulate is that the energy lost in difficult manoeuvres or complicated actions (during the different phases which characterise the use of a car parking building), in the

negative emotions resulting from an anxiety-causing atmosphere, disturb the use of a car park and as a consequence deteriorate the image of the company which manages it.

The objective was thus for the designers to facilitate and to improve the different actions and interactions taking place in the car park (circulate, find bearings, wander, park) but also the emotions generated from the sensorial appeals in this place (odours, sounds, lights, ...) and thus to not only make this activity ergonomic but also more harmonious, giving the image of a place which is respected by the users.

Better again, the feeling of well-being and of harmony is the product of the balance between thoughts, emotions and actions generated by the use of the place, of an artefact, of an instrument (Berthoz, 1997). If there are too many emotions, the thoughts and actions risk being disturbed. If there is too much physical effort (to park) or intellectual effort (for example orientation or memorisation) required, the action will be hindered. The purpose of a car park's use is to allow the user to free his/her thoughts so that (s)he can dedicate his/her time to the reasons why (s)he came to park in this area (shopping or business for example). All actions will be more efficient if they are made « routine » by an accompaniment throughout the client's course (the role of signposting), and if his/her thoughts are not disturbed by negative emotions (the role of lighting and the attractiveness of the place) or too complex manoeuvres (the role of ergonomics). The objective of the design of the car parks is to avoid losing energy in the manoeuvres and long and difficult actions, time consuming and likely to trigger stress and annoyance: take a ticket, find a lift, park the car, find it again, etc...

## **Analysis**

In this last part, our intention is to analyse the graphic and environmental identity of the new LPA car parks. It is a matter of artificially deconstructing the interpretation process as it was thought out by the project team, while resorting to a methodology stemming from the semiotics of impression (Fontanille, Landowski) and of the sociology of uses. In other terms, our aim is to understand the reasons for which the signposting combined with the design of the Lyon car parking buildings allowed the image of LPA to be transformed through work on

modifying the thoughts, emotions and actions which are normally generated in this type of place.

### A. Yann D Pennor's' signposting

To analyse the added value of Yann D Pennor's' signpostings we have compared his propositions with classic examples from the highway code. We are going to successively analyse the expression level (colours, shapes, topology, vectorialisation) then the content level (of which the guiding principles, the main values define LPA's identity).

Expression level	Highway code	Pennor's signposting
Colours	Blue, red and white Chromatic opposition	Golden yellow and black Chromatic opposition
Shapes	Basic geometrical shapes, standard typography and icons	Streamlined (oval) and re-dimensioned geometrical shapes, redesigned typography and icons
Topology	Logic of overlapping shapes of balanced proportions	Logic of overlapping shapes to reinvent a new balance
Vectorialisation	Static shapes	Dynamic shapes
Content level		
Colours	Universe of the law and the State's authority	Universe of elegance, sobriety and luminosity
Shapes and	Reason, coldness and	Creativity, passion and

combinations	authority	relationship Sensitivity, attractiveness and humanity
Emotions	Few emotions suggested	Attractive feelings suggested
Principles	The Ministry at the service of equipment	LPA at the service of the user, central preoccupation not the building but its use
Promise		Facilitate and make the use of the car park appealing again

## B. Jean-Michel Wilmotte's environmental design

In order to analyse the work of JM Wilmotte, we have compared a classic “car park” building with the car park conceived by a designer. During the different actions which characterise the use of such a place, we are going to highlight how the work of a designer allowed the modification of the emotions usually generated by the different actions carried out in the car park (from the entrance to the exit of the car park in a car).

Sensorial functions	Classic « car park »	Wilmotte's environmental design
<b>See</b>	Concrete walls without comfort and numerous	Alternation and complementarity between

	pillars which prevent view, disturb the act of parking, and let imagine a hidden stranger	rough, concrete and slabs of concrete, number of pillars reduced
	Opaque lift doors, narrow stairs	Transparent doors, wide pedestrian walkways
	Direct and uniform lighting	Indirect light (less shadow) and adjusted light (intuitive signposting at pedestrian exits)
<b>Hear</b>	The car parks are often « screechy » and resonant	Acoustic soundproofing work through ground paint and music
<b>Smell</b>	Bad odours	Deodorising then reodorising
<b>Orientate, Circulate</b>	To park: spaces on a right angle to the circulation To find the space again: Several criteria to memorise To move on foot: signposting display necessary	To park: spaces on an angle facilitating the manoeuvres and dictating, when leaving, the direction of the circulation` To find the space again: A single criteria to memorise To move on foot: Minimal signposting, intuitive orientation
<b>Suggested</b>		

emotions		
<b>See</b>	Unappealing and anxiety-causing concrete, storage place	The car park is a pleasant place where it is possible to experience aesthetic emotions
	Pillars: prevent view, fear of a hidden person, fear of scratching the car	Few pillars: reassuring
	Opaque doors: anxiety-causing	Transparent doors: reassuring
	Direct light: aggressive	Indirect light: comfort, softness, intimate
<b>Hear</b>	Disagreeable and stressful noise	Reduced noise and music: reassuring
<b>Smell</b>	Bad odours: disagreeable and repulsive	Neutral odours
<b>Orientate, Circulate</b>	Difficult and distressing	Facilitated by the light and ground markings: natural and reassuring

## Conclusion

In a slightly artificial manner, we separated for the analysis the signposting and design work although the two elements were thought out as completely interconnected. The design is at the signposting's service, indeed *is* even, at times, signposting, in the sense that it indicates a direction, a path, or even a drawing, a life project within the car park. For example, the accentuated lighting at the pedestrian exits compared to that at the parking spaces naturally



orientates, without cognitive overloading or anxiety, the user towards the exits. The angled parking spaces intrinsically dictate the direction of the circulation and reduce the amount of signposting.

A conception methodology placing the user and his/her parking practices at the heart of preoccupations was applied upstream with success by the actors of a project of rethinking of Lyon car parks. The design work combined with the signposting made the latter less visible lighter but more intuitive. This considerably modified the emotions and representations usually associated with this type of urban function. Freeing thoughts by facilitating the actions carried out in a car parking building; generating a feeling of balance and harmony by combining more pleasant auditory, olfactory, visual and corporal sensations than in a classic “car park”, participate in a feeling of respect for the user. LPA, by expressing this respect, induces an ethic model of the user which could only have direct consequences on its own company image. In this way, LPA built, by combining ethics and aesthetics, an identity, that of an institution which places human values at the heart of its preoccupations. Emotions and aesthetic feelings, considered in most projects to be pointless as not very profitable, have completely found their place here to show that profitability can also occur through clients’ physical, psychic and emotional comfort.

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