

Illuminated Advertising in Europe

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Abstract

Illuminated advertising appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. Consisting of incandescent lights and later luminescent neon tubes, its emergence took place in pace with transatlantic circulation. After the blackout for World War Two, not all cities experienced the same rebirth of commercial lighting. The longstanding suspicion of public authorities increased with oil crises, and this questioning is still largely tangible today, giving European cities a singular advertising appearance.

Article

Illuminated advertising was born at the end of the nineteenth century in major Western cities, at a time when electricity was still rare and expensive. It came about through rapid industrialization and urbanization, the development of new lighting technologies, and the nocturnal appropriation of the city by crowds. These rapidly growing cities, which often concentrated political power and economic strength, embodied modernity.

New York was the cradle of this new form of advertising, and largely inspired the first installations made in Europe with incandescent lights. The arrival of luminescent neon tubes inversed the direction of these transatlantic exchanges, renewing metropolitan cityscapes. These tubes were developed by the chemist Georges Claude, who in 1912, went into partnership with a Parisian illuminated advertising company, the *Établissements Paz et Silva*. The first unit was installed on the roof of a building on the boulevard Haussmann in Paris. Claude continued to promote their expansion, and in 1915 began to use his patents throughout the world, and especially in the United States, where he used the same strategy as in the French capital. He began by founding *Neon Claude Light Inc.* in 1924, and then collaborated with the *Strauss* company to install an advertisement at the corner of 45th Street and Broadway.

In Europe, the transformation was rapid. Major northern cities were the first ones targeted. Neon was installed in Belgium, and then made a discreet entrance in Holland beginning in 1922. Three years later, *Odol*, *Clyama* cigarettes, and *Philips* were among the primary advertisers. In the busiest locations, neon took its place aside traditional incandescent advertisements, as shown by period photographs. Other sources also demonstrate the development of neon in Northern Europe, and of the circulation of analytic reports regarding neon in Europe. For instance, London County Council archives reveal that in 1925, London firefighters organized a trip to Amsterdam to study these installations and the measures put in place to prevent fires.

The expansion of neon also reached the south of the continent. In December 1923, the first advertisements were installed in Lisbon for *Colgate*, *Royal typewriters*, and *Fiat automobiles*. In Italy, neon appeared for the first time in Turin, extolling the aperitif *Cinzano*. Furthermore, in 1935, Claude's company signed an agreement for the use of its licenses by the Madrid company *Electrodo*, and the following year with the Milanese company *Fabbriche Neon*.

This interwar period was the apex of European illuminated advertising, with every capital having a plaza or boulevard dedicated to this new form of communication. Piccadilly Circus in London, place de Brouckère in Brussels, or Potsdamer Platz in Berlin twinkled at nightfall with brand names from sectors as varied as luxury goods, alcohol, and food. Advertisements were considered a manifestation of modernity at the time. For instance, during its Berlin in Lights festival in October 1928, the city engaged in a celebration, —as material as it was metaphoric—of everything linking light and progress: window lighting, lighting for public buildings, and of course illuminated advertising were honoured. The Citroën advertisement on the Eiffel Tower between 1925 and 1934 was the high point of this enthusiasm, even if it did prompt some protest. This advertisement, which was launched as part of the Arts décoratifs exhibition, included 650,000 incandescent lights, and at the time was the largest in the world. Emblematic of a certain vision of modernity, it bears witness to a bygone era when illuminated advertising was still accepted in Europe.

World War Two created divergences among major cities in this regard. After the blackout imposed by the war, cities such as London quickly saw the return of commercial lighting, unlike Paris, where this was more gradual due to new and more restrictive regulations. With regard to Eastern Europe, which was under Soviet influence, illuminated advertising was seen as a form of Americanization and thus forbidden. Despite this diversity, the same dynamic of suspicion on the part of public authorities with regard to neon swept across Europe. This suspicion was already quite old, and increased during the oil crises, as most countries agreed to limit how long advertisements could be illuminated. For instance, in a televised speech in November 1973, French Prime Minister Pierre Messmer announced his decision to forbid illuminated advertising, along with the lighting of shop windows or unoccupied offices, between 10:00 pm and 7:00 am. In Sweden, the measures were even more radical, as lighted signs had to remain turned off for three months. This crisis, coupled with the emergence of ecological concerns, affected all countries, and provided the opportunity for more concrete unity among the members of the Fédération européenne de l'enseigne et de la publicité lumineuse, which was created in 1966. This organization arose from the desire of various national associations that, despite being exposed to different local and national regulation, shared a similar concern in the face of rising restrictions.

This questioning of illuminated advertising is still tangible today, where we see a considerable difference between the major cities of the Gulf and the Far East on the one hand, who make it a sign of their modernity, and European capitals on the other, characterized by a profound disengagement. The advertisements in Piccadilly Circus, today numbering six, were three times as numerous a few decades ago, when they covered three sections of the plaza and stretched east to the facade of the London Pavillion. In place de Brouckère in Brussels, only a single screen for Coca Cola evokes the 1970s, when the plaza was dotted with colorful, blinking advertisements. In Paris as well, illuminated advertising has left the *grands boulevards* and the Champs-Élysées for the environs of the *boulevard périphérique*, notably between the porte Maillot in the northwest and the porte de la Chapelle in the north—on either side of what professionals have nicknamed “Executive’s Road” in reference to the CEOs of foreign companies who travel along it to Roissy airport.

Whereas Times Square has now been enshrined—some speak of a “Disneyfication” —Europe is characterized by the decline of such advertising due to regulation that is deliberately more restrictive. As a source of energy waste and pollution, it is considered harmful for the city and its image. These lights, deemed aggressive, have been replaced by the gentle illumination adorning the most attractive features of streets and monuments. Emphasis on the city’s cultural heritage and architecture was combined with a gradual banning of illuminated advertising within the city. Illuminated advertising in Europe has therefore had its day. Nevertheless, European companies remain among the leaders in this now-global market. This is particularly the case for the DÉFI-group, which was founded in France in 1977, and was among the first to set up operations in Moscow and

Beijing.

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