

# Semiotically Speaking - July 2022

## 1. Introduction

WHY do we prefer that logo to this one for our business? WHY does that house feel more luxurious or attractive? Why is yellow and black becoming more popular amongst modern brands? What is that humour type trending on Tik-Tok? What does the Z symbol mean?

If you want to get intelligent and robust answers to those questions then ask a semiotician.

A Semi – WHAT?!? I hear you ask...

## 2. What is Semiotics?

Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning – it is from the Greek word, SEMION meaning sign.

Yes, Dan Brown coined the word *symbolology*. And no, that's a not a real word. But semiotics IS a real word and real subject. It is taught in universities as part of the Humanities or the Social Sciences. It has dedicated conferences and journals. It is also used by the most ambitious and progressive brands and marketing people to gain a competitive advantage.

How? By turning cultural patterns into brand strategy. Let me explain.

Semiotics is a technique rooted in academia based on the premise that we make most of our purchase decisions based on the subconscious, intangible aspects of brands that activate associative thinking. We know from neuro metrics research that brand value and power is created through embedding the right connotations at all layers of the brand architecture. Semioticians study the signs and cues we process every day without conscious thought from Coca-Cola's ribbon to Apple's bitten apple motif; symbols that wordlessly tell stories and build their power in our mind. Semioticians bring out these patterns and significance for our benefit.

This shows the power of a semiotic analysis as we are reading meanings into the visual details or visual texts packed with a lot of data - that data is cultural (we go into culture a bit more below); and it is not just lodged in any one of our heads – it's a shared resource - and this what we are doing unconsciously all the time, when deciding which product to buy in store we scan the cover as a proxy for what we believe that the contents might content – it HAS an influence on us - but we only make this conscious when we are doing this semiotic analysis...

If you imagine you come across the following book cover, it is a book by someone called semiotics, which we know now is the study of signs, but what do we think the book will cover? We don't just judge it by the title but by everything that appears in the frame – the orange colour, the hexagonal pattern, the use of iconography, all of this conveys the sort of meanings the expect to find within the book. If a brand is a promise of a product experience, then as consumers we use shortcuts to make up our minds about: and these are visual signs and cues.



We might expect this book to cover visual culture and also emphasis on emotional design and UX research. Congratulations – you are already doing semiotics! And it is also a good demonstration of the fact that humans DO go about 'judging a book by its cover' all the time

A semiotician is dedicated to analysing and reverse engineering every detail of a brand touch point – whether embedded in ambient design or TikTok videos and to interpret what it is likely to mean to a broad audience and because semioticians are immersed in visual and consumer culture can tell you what the design means – why this colour is clichéd and probably isn't right for this brand, so semiotics practitioners can advise on what is most appropriate for the brand, how to stand out in unimaginative categories and how best to resonate with changing culture. Semioticians predict what meanings will work and how and why so you can do brand strategy based on non-arbitrary creativity – every creative decision is justified and thought through.

### **3. Semiotic Added Value**

Semiotics is also now thriving as a strategic tool brought on board by the most ambitious and progressive clients in the world of brands and marketing. At an MRS (Market Research Society) conference taking place in the UK this year senior marketing and insight figures from big influential brands such as Unilever, BBC, Sky, Costa Coffee, Reckitt Benckiser and GSK Healthcare presented and waxed lyrical about how they were using semiotics in their business – case studies that helped them better connect with consumers, segment their brands, avoid perpetuating stereotypes or prepare their businesses in advance for difficult cultural change.

Why do these brands use semiotics? Well, because it gives them competitive advantage.

Creative Semiotics has helped brands like the BBC understand how to close the gap between their classic comedy and the humour used on the internet and more popular with youth



Creative Semiotics has helped brands such as Napolina understand what to change in their packaging to up their premium credentials by incorporating more regional provenance



Creative Semiotics has helped BMW Mini to incorporate Britishness into their brand in a way that would support the price positioning and not fall into cliché

Semiotics is a methodology ready to help brands better understand the messages they are unwittingly putting out about themselves so they can better connect with their audiences

#### 4. Relevance to LDN Collective



You are probably wondering what all this might have to do with the LDN Collective.

Well, can you answer this simple question?

*What is the difference between a space and a place?*

Well, you might have a number of answers to that... But place is about the elements that makes any space unique, the architecture, the smells, the people, but also the experiences that are triggered by the art, the music, the poetry of the place makes it less prosaic! The answer is the latter is *meaningful* for a group of people. And the key word is meaning. And this sums up the placemaking challenge. From the semiotic perspective, place makers seek to enhance the symbolic value of a place and its appeal via making it more meaningful.

A principle of semiotics is that it is often easier to think about something by thinking about what it is NOT. So what all developments want to get away from is the idea of Non Places.

*“Non-place or nonplace is a neologism coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé to refer to anthropological spaces of transience where human beings remain anonymous, that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as “places” in an anthropological definition.”*

These could be typified by airports, shopping malls and other functional, transient spaces. These are not the sort of spaces that stick in the memory unless for some unlucky reason!

## 5. What is Culture?



This brings us to the word culture. Whilst it is bandied about as a buzzword – it tends to be used quite vaguely too. Raymond Williams, the cultural theorist said the word culture was one of the very hardest words in the English language to define. It comes from Kultur, from the German, High Romanticism, and is about the outflow of feeling, was set against the French word of ‘civilisation’, much more institutional. In the UK at a certain point it came to become synonymous with an appreciation of aesthetics, high arts and was associated with elitism and intellectual snobbery. At another remove culture is synonymous with sub-cultures and internet niches and the long tail and with content. We are also told the direction of culture is shaped by the influencers within it. Where does this leave us with the word culture?

When we think about cultures we think about cultural traits and how they interact in terms of inter-cultural communication. Names like Hofstede and Trompenaars then come to mind. We consider high and low context, individualism, collective, power distance or uncertainty avoidance. We are told Israelis are direct communicators, Japanese more allusive in their communicators and the British are too polite to be honest, the Dutch too honest to be polite!

So where does this leave us? Well, more confused than ever, perhaps! How can culture help us to communicate more effectively? – how do we crack the code to see that with more clarity.

Well, semiotics is a matter of codes. When you hear the word code you might be thinking again ‘the Da Vinci Code’. That’s just more *symbolology*! Codes are simply patterns that can be found in certain visual cultures or contexts. Codes can be visual (like a certain aesthetic), narrative (like certain stories) or linguistic (like slang or vernacular), or behavioural (like modes of behaviour). Codes are usually culture specific and they bind people together in shared cultural norms. Codes are used by brands as short cuts to meanings. Some codes can be nationally specific – so British humour would be an example of such a broad-based code or *kawaii* of ‘cuteness’ in Japan. But culture is complex and contains countless such codes, including sub-cultural codes. Hip-hop culture for instance has its own codes of expression, in language, sound and visual. Hip-hop artists will talk about place in a way that is very different from that of a local historian for instance. It is the richness of these codes that create culture. Also, culture is never static and semiotics studies the way codes wax and wane and change over time. The emergent codes are what clients are after in order to better influence culture. Semiotics helps brands to update their core meanings so they can become more resonant. Because semiotics is the study of meaning in culture it closes the gap between what brand owners THINK they are communicating and what they are actually communicating to their stakeholders. Cultural codes are an intermediating force or entity between the two of them.

## **6. How Semiotics can Help**

LDN Collective is in the business of creating strong place making brands. The mission of the Collective is to “tackle built environment issues from every angle”. We know that the need for placemaking is increasing and that a large part of that need comes from the desire to create place brands. ‘Destination branding’ and ‘soft power’ are areas which have long been established where brand thinking and thus semiotics are well established, but not in bulk of the domestic building industry outside the semiotic heartland markets of France and Italy. \*In France for example semiotics has been used in order to help for instance integrate new plots

of land into the urban environment for big state entities such as railway network SNCF and the Paris Metro RATP. It has also been used to inform the development of mall amenities.\*

While it is clearly growing, it would be fair to say that brand awareness in the construction and building sectors lags behind other sectors. As a Japanese colleague working for a huge brand in the hospitality sector bemoaned, for a variety of reasons, it is often the case that the branding for developments is often seen as an afterthought. As placemakers however we all understand that the brand should influence and be baked into the infrastructure of the new build and not just be confined to the glitzy and clichéd wrapper slapped on at the last minute. There are some organisations who want to do things differently. LDN Collective for example has already brought semiotics thinking into upstream planning for Clarion whose objective is “to be seen to be leading the agenda on placemaking, design, social value and environmental impact”. This is where semiotics can play a key role, leading and advising on the key decisions about branding, name, logo, design programme for the more progressive organisations who take place making seriously to ensure the meanings are correct and communication will work.

### **Distinctive Positioning**

Semiotics helps brands to create unique, ownable visual equities. This is how brands grow.

Housing developments in the UK tend to be stereotyped into one of two camps. Either they are what we’ve termed ‘prison block chic’ with all the snobbery that entails or they’re swish developments that lack soul and humanity come across as ‘non places’ and are condemned by the pejorative label gentrification. We believe that for Clarion to truly champion thought leadership in the area of social housing we need to avoid these both clichés and create something more compelling. This is a major issue for new builds, how to not look like ‘just another development’. We conducted such an analysis for the Hill Group for Clapham Park.



We conducted a forensic semiotic analysis of the implicit communication lodged in the (naming, infographics, user imagery, copy text, storytelling), in comparable developments, to ensure Clapham Park is distinctive to positively stand out for a competitive advantage.

We don't just want to avoid being a non-place – but to create a coveted and liveable place. At London Collective we believe this area is ripe for disruption: and to gain competitive edge by making these sites both progressive and inclusive.

### **Symbolic value**

Avoiding commodification is the aim of all brands in order to justify the price premium that the brand name commands and in order to ensure sustainable demand and future profits. From the semiotic perspective this means contributing to and shoring up symbolic value.

There is a parallel here with luxury branding. In recent years, we have seen luxury brands appropriating art to demonstrate cultural capital as well as to signify aesthetic appreciation. The setting up of the Cartier Foundation, Swarovski, Louis Vuitton Foundations is one facet of this. Another would be launching of special editions and brand collaborations Gucci and Jeff Koons for instance and Louis Vuitton and Takeshi Murakami, for instance. Luxury brands are borrowing the 'aura' and unique vision of the artist and the spiritual purity that brings in order to stave off the associations with rampant consumerism and materialism and fakery.

Luxury is an extreme example but we need to consider how to use these principles for LDN.

### **Place Branding**

You're probably wondering how semiotics relates to urban planning and the built environment. Well, whilst this is still a relatively small part of my practice I love this example of a co-branding exercise in 2020 which shows the power of symbolism within the urban environment. PlayStation teamed up with London Underground for the launch of the PS5 and replaced the London Underground roundel with Playstation's trademark button symbols. There is a visual wit and ambient art feel in the juxtaposition; the fact that Playstation is embedding itself, literally, in the London skyline, gives great kudos and cultural capital to the brand itself. London Underground then also benefits from the associated cachet and exposure.





The Olympics is obviously also a classic example of place branding.

In the Olympics, since 1992 Barcelona the cultural content in the opening ceremony and the Cultural Olympiad is a massive part of what is left in the minds associated with the Olympics

A semiotic analysis of Summer Olympics Games opening ceremonies since 1980 has shown that the organisers use certain broad visual and cultural codes in the narrative in order to appeal to a global audience but also signal pride to members of the host city and the nation. These ceremonies are double coded so can this be applied to planning developments too.

### **Development Naming**

Semiotics is not just about the imagery but also about language. Brand names are hugely important in anchoring meaning. The brand name gives a place an identity and helps you understand a bit more about the sorts of people the space is effectively intended for.

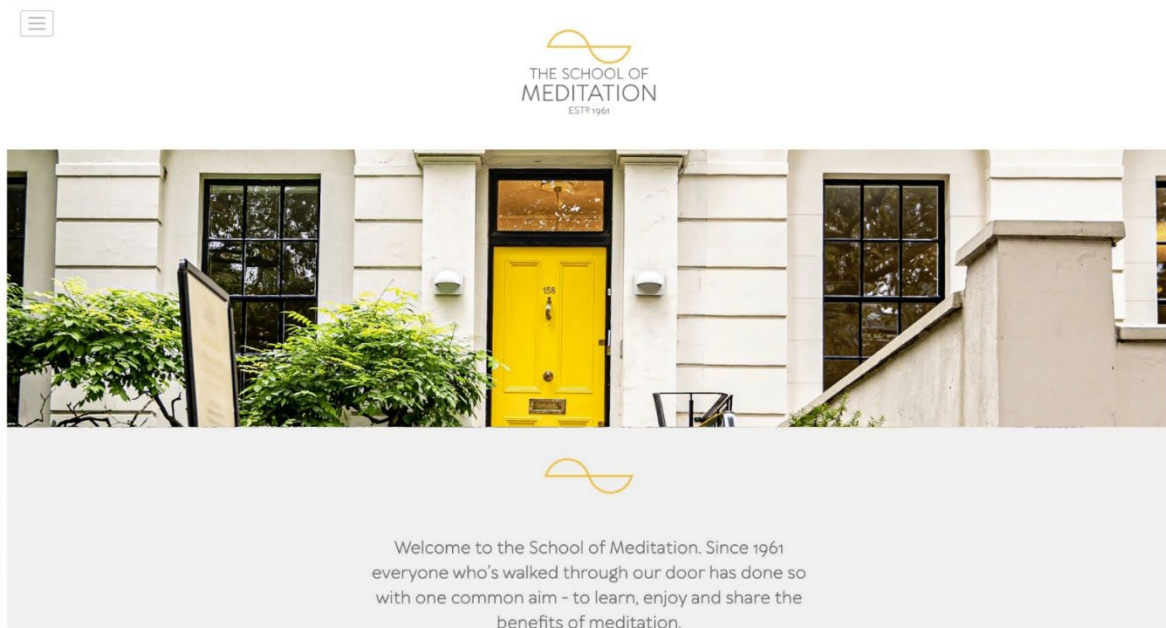
There are many different sorts of name that carries different sorts of connotations. There suggestive names, like Aviva, mythological names like Opium and highly descriptive and portmanteau names like TripAdvisor. Naming can signal the mindset and attitude of the developer. Fish Island and Elephant Park can for instance. Development names that pull in heritage elements or local folklore infuse the new development the spirit of historical events.

### **Sócio Economic Cues**

New developments unavoidably bring in considerations of class and disparities of wealth.



More recently Creative Semiotics did some work for the School of Meditation in West London who wanted to appeal to a wider demographic within their catchment area, the income and racially diverse borough of Kensington and Chelsea. We pointed out that the use of an imposing Georgian house was likely to be off-putting to swathes of their chosen demographic as it connoted imposing wealth and exclusivity. We also highlighted some of the absences in what they were showing (no non white faces) in an area which is characterised by some of the worse extremes of wealth and economic distribution and where exclusionary codes signal whiteness. The rebrand softened the image and changed the depiction of the building, with a wider shot including more trees to focus less on the stolidity of build and grand historicist features. Instead they featured more the windows which then connoted a greater openness.



The Head of Marketing at School of Meditation wrote of the semiotic intervention: “it was extremely helpful as it enabled us to form a deeper understanding of how SoM’s brand, images, premises, geographical location, and its overwhelmingly white and older membership will be experienced by people from non-white, non-British and non-affluent backgrounds.” He has since reported that by reviewing their subscription data over the last 6 months using a mix of anecdotal evidence and by looking at the names of those registering for courses and classes, a definite positive trend can be seen in the diversity of people engaging with SoM

With most development projects there is a strong need to mix balancing maximising sales values alongside maximising a sense of locality and of social cohesion. This unavoidably brings in aspects of socio-economics and the hidden tension that exists between aspiration and community. Semiotics helps here via sensitivity to the soft signals that convey who this is for!'

### **Urban Design Branding**

Semiotics holds as fundamental that EVERYTHING communicates and this goes also for the ways in which even the somewhat or apparently innocuous design aspects can have impact.

We were recently commissioned to use semiotics to support Hill Group to become the JV partner for MTVH for the massive Clapham Park development. Part of this was in dissecting and doing a SWOT analysis of the existing branding work to show them the potential but also the pitfalls in the work. The strapline that we analysed from Clapham Park, ‘global village with deep roots’ was striving to achieve this balance– but we also need to consider for them how to avoid cliché or euphemism so as to avoid skepticism or cynicism among key stakeholders.



The circular motif and benday dots are friendly and connote a positive idea of community and togetherness – so it’s a good fit for post-Covid sensibilities. But once you start to develop something that needs to take into consideration the needs of the specific local community, such a motif should be invested with more meaning so as not to look superficial and clichéd.

Every time you show user imagery and cast people to appear, you will implicitly position the way your audience perceives who you are and what you stand for. In this case, when it is a mixed use or social housing development, the imagery will convey socio-economic cues that will peg the price range, and perceptions of how aspirational and affordable a place will be.

The same goes for patterning. A lot of development branding conveys sense of random, and cacophonous which can come across as ill thought out, derivative and even patronising, it is also not rooted in anything local to the area . Brand livery can demonstrate design literacy, but what do you use? Benday dots mean something different from etching style – different chronological references and consequently different cultural values. Using patterning from certain cultural traditions can signal cosmopolitan but also can be accused of appropriation. Working out what you want to convey and which visual elements best do that is a semiotic task. Non–arbitrary creativity is very important here and is so often overlooked in this area.

## **7. The Trouble with Cultural Placemaking**

The Future City run a webinar at LDN Collective in February 2022 focused on the burgeoning placemaking area showing that many commercial interests are converging on this area but it still a Wild West within this area and with many different paradigms and approaches and some confusion on the part of clients. Mark Davy from Future City remarked: “As a Collective we want to have a position on place making no one as of yet has stood back from what is going on because it is happening so quickly and there are so many component parts...”. Nevertheless, one definition from Sherry Dobbin struck a chord: which is the following:

*“Cultural Placemaking intentionally leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community’s interest, whilst driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that builds the character and quality of place”*

What I thought was most interesting was the increasing involvement of marketing and brand consultancies in this area, the increasing application of cultural strategy in the positioning of places, cities and destinations and how classic brand strategy is being applied. It might be said, that the intangible aspects of these new places and destinations (their cultural districts, artistic attractions, and music venues boosting the sense of cultural capital) are to the fore. Founder Max Farrell has highlighted cultural strategy as one way of thinking about place making. Semiotics would endorse this and give tangible thoughts to it. In fact, a pioneering book by 2 brand experts Douglas Holt and Cameron – (which is suffused with words like code and ideology and cultural capital) shows how brands use codes to build top cultural strategies. Semiotics can definitely help crafting cultural strategies using the tools already outlined above.

## **8. Conclusions on Semiotics**

In summary, semiotics is a complex sounding word that makes culture simpler. A semiotic analysis of place making initiatives and development branding can help create stronger, more creative, distinctive and interesting brands, that better connect places to their communities.

- Screening core brand features: naming, logos, design motifs
- Bringing cultural strategy to bear in the development of place
- Matching art and music activities to a place’s cultural heritage
- Ensuring future cultural, identity and ideological sensitivities
- Creative and imaginative thinking to challenge orthodoxies

Semiotics can add more rigour and insight to the cultural strategy offering of LDN Collective. Semiotics brings rich frameworks for understanding how to ensure proposed developments have soul, uniqueness and that the communication at launch is culturally resonant. It also gives confidence to agency partners by unifying development teams around non-arbitrary and justifiable creative objectives for the build and for the sales, investment communications. Whilst there is significant confusion still over what placemaking and it remains an evolving inter-disciplinary framework which requires many other disciplines to understand it semiotics – with its insight around cultural factors and sensitivity to creativity can play a key role in this.

## RESOURCES FOR FINDING OUT MORE ABOUT SEMIOTICS

### Blogs:

*Tokyo Games Opening Ceremony: Subdued but Beautiful* (Olympics Place Branding)

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/tokyo-olympic-games-opening-ceremony-subdued-beautiful-chris-arning/>

*Something and Nothing: A Lightly Sparkling Semiotic Analysis* (Forensic Pack Analysis)

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/something-nothing-lightly-sparkling-semiotic-analysis-chris-arning/>

*Pattern Finding in Semiotics Projects* (Range of Commercial Projects I work on)

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/pattern-finding-semiotic-projects-chris-arning/>

Chris Arning writing for Creative Culture: *What is Culture? Key Determinant of Behaviour*

<https://creativecultureint.com/insights/whitepaper/what-is-culture-insights-into-a-key-driver-of-behaviour/>

### Videos:

Chris Arning on Marketing Meet Up: *Semiotics What It Is & Why it Matters for Marketers*

<https://themarketingmeetup.com/events/semiotics-for-marketers>

Sixty Seconds of Semiotics: Racism as a Semiotic Problem

<https://vimeo.com/438691569>

Chris Arning appearance on GB News Breakfast Show with Eamonn Holmes: 09.03.2022

<https://vimeo.com/703881847>

### Education:

Enroll on Chris's course *How to Do Semiotics in Seven Weeks*:

<https://www.creativesemiotics.co.uk/course3.html>

Promo for Chris's course *How to Do Semiotics in Seven Weeks*:

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/531813363>