

Julia Nawocka, Jan Nawrocki

Brightening the Night: The Rise, Fall, and Preservation of Polish Neon Signs

Keywords: neon signs, socialist era advertising, neon museums, Polish neon signs, neonisation

Introduction

Neon signs as advertising may not be a perfect idea, bearing in mind contemporary urban challenges, such as light pollution. However, it was not always so. The history of neon signs in Poland dates to the 1920s and 1930s. Their revival came after WW2, during socialism. Their appearance and purpose differed from Western neon signs because of the political and economic situation at the time. Therefore, Polish neon signs spread under the nationalisation of commerce and initially served only for informational purposes (e.g., at railway stations) and for decoration. Later, advertisements for shops and service points also appeared. However, along with them came regulations limiting design freedom, distinguishing most Eastern European neon signs from those in the West. But the story of neon signs is not just about advertising, it is also about cultural and artistic expression, and today, about the preservation of cultural heritage.

Neon signs: From neonisation plans to decline

At the beginning of the socialist era, the designs of Polish neon signs were intentionally simple, with a unified font and devoid of embellishments, reminiscent of the modernist style. In later years, the advertising style underwent rapid changes, with simple designs replaced by intricate font styles, often crafted for specific signs.

Sometimes, bold designs were featured, almost exactly resembling the Western ones that had been criticised in the press. In the 1970s, there was also a transformation in the appearance of neon signs. They evolved from tubes forming the text to letters that were illuminated or filled (Figure 3) (Zieliński & Tarwacka, 2010).

To control the growth of neon signs and stimulate their creation, state advertising companies (such as Reklama) were established in Poland, spearheading the development of municipal 'neonisation' plans. This led to the rapid emergence of neon signs, especially in larger cities, aiming to give them a more modern and metropolitan appearance (Broda-Turczańska, 2016). Some physical copies of the neonisation plans have survived, and one of them is showcased in Bartosz Stępniewski's book 'Łódzkie neony.' It depicts a fragment of the neonisation plan for Piotrkowska Street, the main street of Lodz. Implemented by the 'Reklama' company, the project showcases neon signs that already existed and those that were planned for installation between 1962 and 1965. The plan was detailed, specifying the colours, content and placement of the signs. This example illustrates the role attributed to neonisation plans in designing socialist cityscapes. However, neon signs still did not serve the advertising functions that they did in the West. They were not advertisements but visual symbols, which, in the centrally planned economy that prevailed in Poland at that time, had no chance to advertise various goods and services or spur competition (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Neon signs in Katowice, Poland, in the 1960s



Source: Z. Siemaszko (1966), Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe.

The golden era of Polish neon signs occurred between 1950 and 1970, with designs significantly evolving during this period. However, neon signs then experienced a decline, attributed to factors such as power supply issues and high maintenance costs, primarily due to their low construction quality. In the mid-1970s, neon signs were often turned off due to power outages, although this was purely symbolic since they did not consume significant amounts of electricity. Another factor was the high maintenance cost.

The last reason for the fading of neon signs was purely political. Due to the specific nature of the economy at that time, neon signs often advertised products that could not be purchased in stores, which consequently irritated Polish society. To limit reputational damage, the decision was often made to remove these advertisements. However, now, some are admired as works of art from a bygone era, and due to the trend for retro style, new neon signs styled after the socialist era have begun to appear in cities across the country (Broda-Turczańska, 2016). An example in Lodz is the neon sign of the 'Owoce i Warzywa' (Fruits and Vegetables) café (Figure 2) (Szczepańska, 2022).

Figure 2. Neon sign 'Fruits and Vegetables' café in Lodz, Poland



Source: authors' own archive (2024).

But how do neon signs work? Their name is attributed to the noble gas neon, which is responsible for their distinctive glow. These gas-discharged lamps are gas-filled glass tubes with electrodes that emit high voltage. When the voltage is applied, the gas reacts, causing it to emit light that can be seen by the human eye. The specific gas used in the tubes determines the colour of the light. The most frequently used gases include neon (orange-red), argon (purple), and mercury (green with neon, blue with argon).

Due to their fragile construction, durability is limited, resulting in repeated problems. This frequently led to amusing situations, turning ordinary signs into playful word games. For example, the malfunction at Warszawa Główna station (Warsaw Main Station) (Figure 3) became legendary. When the letter 'Ł' went out, the sign displayed only 'WARSZAWA GÓWNA' ('Warsaw Shit').

Figure 3. Neon sign 'Warsaw Main Station' in Warsaw, Poland



Source: authors' own archive (2024).

The place of neon signs in culture and their preservation

Before delving into the preservation of neon signs, it is essential to consider whether they are part of cultural heritage and if they can be treated as cultural properties according to Polish law and receive legal protection. It is also crucial to

reflect on which categories should be considered in the context of protecting and conserving them. These categories may include historical value, artistic value, design originality, and technical aspects (Broda-Turczańska, 2016).

For many people in Poland, neon signs evoke mixed feelings. Their heyday coincided with a challenging period marked by store supply issues, goods regulation, and political repression, which did not align with the modern, luminous forms of advertising often associated with capitalism (Stępniewski, 2015). Additionally, neon signs advertising luxury goods, unavailable products, or that served as part of socialist propaganda did not contribute to their positive image. However, neon signs can be seen as a trace of history, even if it was a history of challenging times for many Poles.

Nevertheless, they were an integral part of cityscapes, and sometimes they played out as showcases of the artists' and designers' skills (Broda-Turczańska, 2016). The artistic value of neon signs is often discussed in the context of classifying them into one of the two branches of art, i.e. applied art or high art. Indeed, some were designed by recognised artists (Stańczyk, 2023).

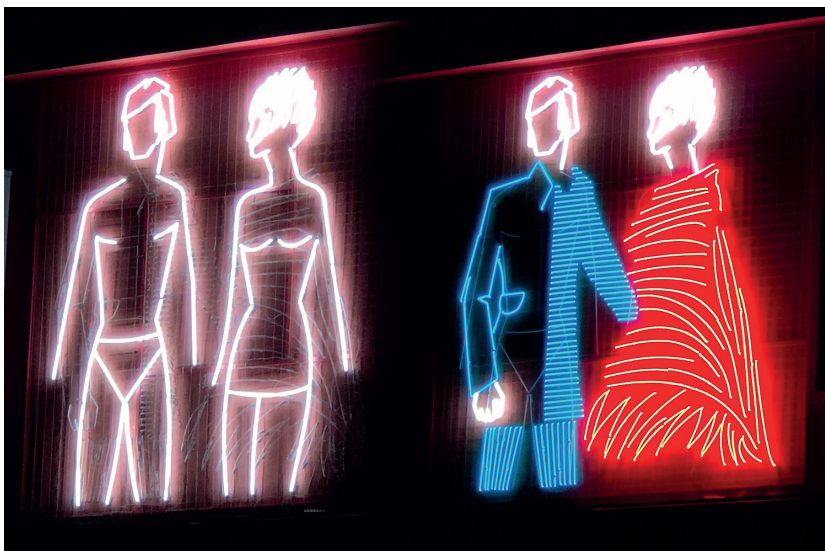
Another dimension that can be considered is the technical value of neon signs. When treating neon signs as merely technical artefacts, the focus is not on the originality of their parts or the repair techniques used; this contrasts with artistic artefacts, where authenticity is a priority. In the case of neon signs, both aspects – the artistic and the technical – coexist, but when it comes to their preservation, one of those solutions must be adopted to maintain their functionality.

In this light, the complexity of neon signs, their function, placement, and technical aspects make their preservation exceptionally challenging. What is more, conservation guidelines do not indicate clearly how historic neon signs should be treated (Broda-Turczańska, 2016).

Can a neon sign be considered cultural property? Examples of listing neon signs as cultural properties exist but are rare and recent. In Poland, it is essential to examine if a neon sign meets the criteria outlined in the Act on the Protection and Care of Cultural Properties (Ustawa, 2003). It defines cultural properties as movable (*zabytki ruchome*) and immovable (*zabytki nieruchome*), specifying that they are a product of human activity associated with a bygone era or event, with its preservation in the public interest due to its historical, artistic, or scientific value

(Ustawa, 2003). Can a neon sign be listed as an individual immovable cultural property? The answer is straightforward: No. However, it can be part of another immovable cultural property, such as the building it is located on (Dankowska, 2017). However, this is rare since neon signs often adorn buildings older than themselves. Thus, protecting neon signs as movable cultural properties is more effective, especially for preserving their nighttime illumination.

Figure 4. Neon sign 'The couple from Central shopping centre' in Lodz, Poland



Source: authors' own archive (2024).

Preserving historic neon signs is easier when ownership is clear. However, not all neon signs have owners. Many were owned by companies or collectives that no longer exist, posing a challenge to preservation. Some institutions in Poland occasionally step in to seek protection for such neon signs, like the one from the 'Albatros' restaurant in Augustów owned by the 'Społem' cooperative (Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Białymstoku, 2020), and 'Cepelia' in Warsaw (Mazowiecki Wojewódzki Konserwator Zabytków, 2021).

Thus, the preservation of neon signs in Polish cities is not straightforward. Not everyone considers them heritage; in fact, many see them as elements of architectural chaos. However, another form of protection, which can be compared to the ex-situ protection of endangered animal species, is neon sign museums.

Figure 5. Neon Museum in Warsaw, Poland



Source: authors' own archive (2024).

Neon sign museums

Neon sign museums play a pivotal role in the preservation of neon signs. They act as custodians and educators, and they create controlled environments that shield neon signs from external factors (such as weather and vandalism), ensuring their longevity. Employing skilled conservationists, these museums undertake the meticulous restoration and maintenance of these luminous cultural artefacts, safeguarding their original brilliance and artistic value. Simultaneously, these museums have an educational mission and tell stories about the cultural significance of neon signs, their evolution as an art form, and their impact on cityscapes. In Poland, two significant initiatives exist, in Warsaw and Wrocław.

The Neon Museum in Warsaw (Figure 5), established in 2005, is Poland's oldest institution of its kind. The collection comprises approximately 100 neon signs and advertising installations. The museum does not collect neon signs that may still be in their original locations. Instead, it cares for those that cannot adorn the places where they originally hung (NeonMuzeum, n.d.). The museum is also involved in organising various campaigns to raise awareness about the beauty and history of neon signs in the city. It gained recognition through initiatives such as the 'Akcja renowacja!'.

Figure 6. Ruska 46 in Wrocław, Poland



Source: authors' own archive (2024).

The Neon Side Wrocław foundation took on the mission of saving and restoring historical illuminated advertisements. Although their efforts date to 2005, it was not until 2014 that a dedicated space emerged, allowing all these historical neon signs to brighten up the cityscape once again. The Ruska46 artistic and cultural initiative in Wrocław (Figure 6) decided to take care of abandoned and neglected neon signs in the city. The location where the neon signs were exhibited was

not chosen randomly; the signs hang in the former headquarters of 'Reklama', mentioned earlier. This organisation not only provides a space for neon signs, but it has also created an online, interactive directory of neon signs where anyone can access basic information about them (Ruska46, n.d.).

Conclusion

Despite facing challenges like political shifts and economic constraints, the evolution and significance of neon signs in Poland from the 1930s to the 1970s showcase their unique cultural and historical value. The post-war modernisation of cityscapes marked the heyday of Polish neon signs. However, factors such as power supply and maintenance costs led to their decline in the mid-1970s. Today, preserving these luminous artefacts is challenging due to their fragility and varied ownership structures. The question of whether neon signs should be considered cultural properties adds complexity to their conservation. Some people view them as a source of architectural chaos, while others see them as cultural heritage. At the same time, neon sign museums, exemplified by the initiatives in Warsaw and Wrocław, have emerged as vital custodians and educators. Considered in this light, neon signs in Poland offer a fascinating window into the country's past, revealing societal changes and artistic expressions.

Bibliography

- Broda-Turczańska, A. (2016). *Neony z czasów PRL-u. Problem wartości, ochrony i ekspozycji*. Niepublikowana praca magisterska. Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński.
- Dankowska, M. (2017). *Ochrona zasoby dóbr kultury współczesnej w dokumentach planistycznych Łodzi – definiowanie zasobu oraz zasad ochrony*. *Ochrona Dziedzictwa Kulturowego*, 3, 7–18. https://doi.org/10.24358/ODK_2017_03_01
- Mazowiecki Wojewódzki Konserwator Zabytków (2021.05.28). Neon 'Cepelii' został wpisany do rejestru zabytków. Accessed: 2024.01.20 Source: <http://mwkz.pl/archiwum-aktualnosci-lista/1427-neon-cepelii-zosta-wpisany-do-rejestru-zabytkow>
- NeonMuzeum (n.d.). *O muzeum*. Accessed 2024.01.15 Source: <http://neonmuzeum.org/o-muzeum>
- Ruska46 (n.d.). Accessed: 2024.01.15 Source: <http://ruska46.pl>
- Szczepeńska, D. (2022.01.09). *Łódzkie neony wczoraj i dziś. Tak wygląda miasto nocą*. Accessed: 2024.01.20 Source: <http://uml.lodz.pl/aktualnosci-lodzpl/artikul-lodzpl/lodzkie-neony-wczoraj-i-dzis-tak-wyglada-miasto-noca-zdjecia-id46703/2022/1/9/>
- Stańczyk, M. (2023.11.24). *Pierwsza w Polsce wystawa poświęcona projektantom warszawskich neonów*. Accessed 2024.01.20 Source: <http://dzieje.pl/dziedzictwo-kulturowe/pierwsza-w-polsce-wystawa-poswiecona-projektantom-warszawskich-neonow>

- Stępniewski B. (2015). Łódzkie neony. Zapomniane perły wzornictwa PRL-u. Łódź: Dom Wydawniczy Księży Młyn.
- Ustawa (2003). Ustawa z dnia 23 lipca 2003 r. o ochronie zabytków i opiece nad zabytkami (t.j. Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 282, 782, 1378).
- Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Białymstoku (2020.11.23). Neon 'Albatros' w rejestrze zabytków! Accessed: 2024.01.20 Source: <http://wuo.z.bialystok.pl/neon-albatros-w-rejestrze-zabytkow/>
- Zieliński, J., & Tarwacka, I. (2010). Neony. Ulotny ornament warszawskiej nocy. Warszawa: Fundacja Hereditas.