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# Visual Grammar of Street Signage in Delhi

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**Design Research Seminar**

Visual Communication

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Project Guide

**IDC School of Design**

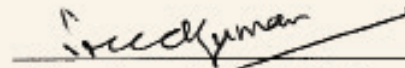
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

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## Approval Sheet

This Design Research Seminar project **“Visual Grammar of Street Signage in Delhi”** by Rishabh Pandey (15625 0006) is approved as a partial fulfillment of requirements of a post-graduate M.Des. Degree in Visual Communication at Industrial Design Centre (now IDC School of Design), Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

  
↑ Signature of Prof. G. V. Sreekumar

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## Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my idea in my own words and where other ideas or words have been included, I have adequately selected and referred the original source. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misinterpreted or fabricated or falsified any ideas / data / facts / sources in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources that have not been properly cited, or from whom proper permission has not been sought.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rishabh Pandey', written over a horizontal line.

↑ Signature of Rishabh Pandey

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## Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people:

**Prof. G. V. Sreekumar**, my guide for understanding me as well as my work and giving me the opportunity to work on this project. This project would not have been possible without his initiative on the subject at IDC.

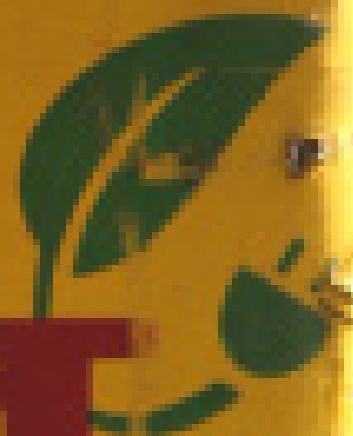
**Swati Sharma, Nikhil Tangaria, Ashish K. Thakur, Ritu Singh and Nitesh Rana** for their interest and support in the project.

My family and friends from childhood as well as the people

who have interacted with me for some quality time—I believe we live a shared life therefore, they all share my progress.



# उड़ान





## Abstract

This report showcases the existing hand painted street signs in the areas of Delhi and nearby and the finesse in painting letters achieved by sign board painters through years of practice in different scripts and styles.

It also attempts to shed a light on how globalization and brand communication affected the writing styles in present times.





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## Introduction

India is a country of many languages and cultures. There are 29 states with their unique visual culture and in order for someone to communicate with the people in a certain part of India, the message needs to be communicated in a way that touched the Indian without touching them.

On the foot-steps of Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, wall paint became cheaper. In year 1866, Sherwin-Williams at the US invented a paint that could be used from the tin without any preparation.

Following it, the World War II caused a shortage of linseed oil therefore, artificial resins or alkyds were invented which were very cheap and easy to make. They also held the color well and lasted for long time.

This made sign board painting one of the most popular ways to spread a message in written form to the mass overtaking the previously preferred method of a 'nukkar-natak' in India.

The sign board painters in India started practicing various scripts as they were getting

commissioned to paint letters and images by national brands, governmental schemes, political parties and even small business to target people based on specific regions. This encouraged the painters to incorporate expressive visual styles not only to attract attention but also to give a unique identity to their works which they believe they own as a “fine artist” does. Nowadays, we can find examples of hand painted signs with a signature next to the commission referring a “sign board painter” as a “painter” or an “artist”.

This art of letter painting that these painters enjoyed creating and chose to create for the rest of their lives is now facing a threat caused by the advancement of

cheap digital printing and piracy of fonts. Very few are in India who truly understand the value of a hand painted sign and spends money on it while the majority gets its work done on a flex made cheaply by a DTP operator who tries to create similar effects in the graphics which are unique characteristics found in the work of a sign board painter.

## The Art of Letter Painting: Legacy of Hand Painted Signs

The visual style not only varies through painters but also through regions.

From the local political slogans to famous Bollywood posters, India has seen hand painted letters in all sizes and colors. The tradition of letter painting was usually passed on through generations. The visual style not only varies through painters but also through regions. While most of the signage would be in bright colors to attract attention, it would have some indigenous quirk depending on the village, city or state the painter belongs to and is commissioned for hence they played a key role in defining the identity of a urban or rural landscape.

The advancements of technology in digital printing has affected the market of sign-board painters. The juice shops which once commissioned the sign board painters are now getting flex made in no time through DTP operators. Though the DTP operators try to copy and attempt to create almost similar visual styles of sign board painters, they fail on achieving the similar quality of aesthetics.

Shop owners who have been in the business for a long time are mostly the ones who understand that hand painted signs last

longer than a digital flex and  
don't fade out in the sun.

Nowadays a few educated  
type enthusiasts in India have  
taken a step towards educating  
others about how the art of  
letter painting has been shaping  
the culture of a place and how  
important it is to preserve this  
dying art.

# **SIGNAGE IN DELHI**

## **SHOWCASE & ANALYSIS**

## Street and Directional Signage

Directional signage are mainly a unite of information of a place with an arrow to suggest its direction. While mainly the arrows are flat filled-in, sometimes they are decorated or made in unique way.





### Opposite

The red painted arrow is going below the text, highlighting the important information for a viewer standing at a distance.



### Above left

A small flat black coloured arrow maintaining the high contrast at the last works perfectly in a narrow street as this was painted.

### Above right

The red painted triangular part on the right joining with the yellow rectangle itself works as an arrow in this case.



#### Above

In this case the painter did not include an arrow as the sign was fixed above the way leading inside.



#### Above right

In order to highlight the street and to save space the painter broke the arrow in two parts and inserted text. We perceive the arrow as continuous because of the similarity of rectangular shape and white color.



### Above

The color combination is used in such a way that it highlights the shop name the most. The Devanagari letter forms are condensed, rational and have great consistency.



### Above centre

The artist painted both doors the same in case one door is closed at a time.



### Above right

Interestingly both "HP" and the arrow below are painted with red paint informing that the shop has been shifted to the opposite side.



#### Above

Another example where the association of colors does not seem to be a randomly taken decision.



#### Above right

The Devanagari letter forms are again condensed to incorporate more text in the available size.



### Above

The job of an artist in making.



### Above right

Combination of red and green together creates a high contrast which is balanced here with usage of more green and writing as less as possible in red paint.

## Shop Fronts

These brightly colored shop fronts are from the streets of Old Delhi. Latin only shop fronts are common nowadays but the examples of bilingual signage still exists.





### Opposite

Caught the brightly colored ready-to-go “pan-shop” on a weekend. The red with green and yellow with blue high contrast combinations are visible here. The image of a green “pan-leaf” gives a visual clue for the viewer.



### Above

Another example of condensed letter forms in black on yellow background. Here, the painter has used white paint additionally to give the title a 3D look.

### Above right

Round serifs—a rare visual style is in display here!



#### Above

The decoration in the title of shop is truly one of a kind.

#### Opposite

This is huge signage I found near Old Delhi fixed on a closed shop. The condensed Latin letter forms are perfect to put a graphic designer in awe.





### Above

The three color style can be seen all across India. The Devanagari letter forms are well constructed. Since this is a pure vegetarian restaurant I wonder if using green paint instead of blue ever occurred to the painter?



#### Above

However the Indian painter might not be familiar with the history of art and design, this is an example of modern aesthetics which was started in Europe and is popularly known as Swiss design.



#### Above right

The painter consciously painted condensed and regular forms of Latin alphabets with respect to the available space. The geometric letter forms go well with the kind of shop.

## Bilingual Signage

With globalization, bilingual signage have become important for the shop owners in India. Foreigners often visit Delhi as it is the capital of India and also attracts tourists coming to see the famous monuments. Bilingual signs help in finding a common ground for communication when in need.





## Opposite

An attempt in matching the grey of Devanagari with Latin can be seen in the example.



## Above

While the names of items are written in Devanagari script, their quantity is mentioned in Latin script. Usage of bullet points and separator is also notable apart from the decoration in text.

**Above right**

The effect of globalization and therefore, use of Hinglish is visible here. Though the painter could have written Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) as ऊ.प्र. as it should be but he wrote it as यू.पी.!



#### Above

Round serifs in Latin and unique decoration in the Devanagari letter forms are visible.



#### Above right

The painter tried creating similar decorative forms in both Latin and Devanagari letter forms.



#### Above

A rare bilingual sign which is not featuring Latin script.



#### Above centre

Letter forms in Devanagari script are wider than that of Latin script therefore, the text in Latin looks more condensed when written next to same text in Devanagari.



#### Above right

The choice of incorporating a bit of free hand style for a post-box seems interesting but was it a conscious decision.



#### Above

Gurmukhi letter forms are similar to Devanagari letter forms, it can only be seen in Punjabi localities as the number of people who know the language well are far less in comparison with Hindi or English.



#### Above right

An old signage for a school entrance featuring Latin and Urdu scripts.



#### Above left and right

This is another great example showing the finesse and perfection achieved by a sign board painter. At the time, capturing both the signs kept next to each other in one frame was not possible.



### Above

Availability of drinking water in Delhi is a problem. The painter used bold and big letter sizes so that it is visible from distance. The amount is painted larger so that it doesn't cause a confusion later on.

### Above right

The use of free hand style and additional decoration created with different visual elements goes well with the beliefs of a proud hard working owner.



### Opposite

The painter used various styles and colors to highlight information and tried to create a visual order in a chaotic composition.

तारकोल, तारफेल्ड, APP मेम्बरेन  
प्लास्टिक फ़ैल्ड, WRAPPING-COAT, फाईबर मैश  
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## Text and Images

Very often sign board painters paint additional images to give a visual clue to what the signage is informing about.





### Above and opposite

Not all sign board painters are as skilled as others therefore, the quality in painting a images varies. Compare the quality of visuals from the image on the opposite page to the images on this page.



### Above and right

Examples of sign board incorporating both text and images.



### Above and right

Examples of sign board incorporating both text and images.

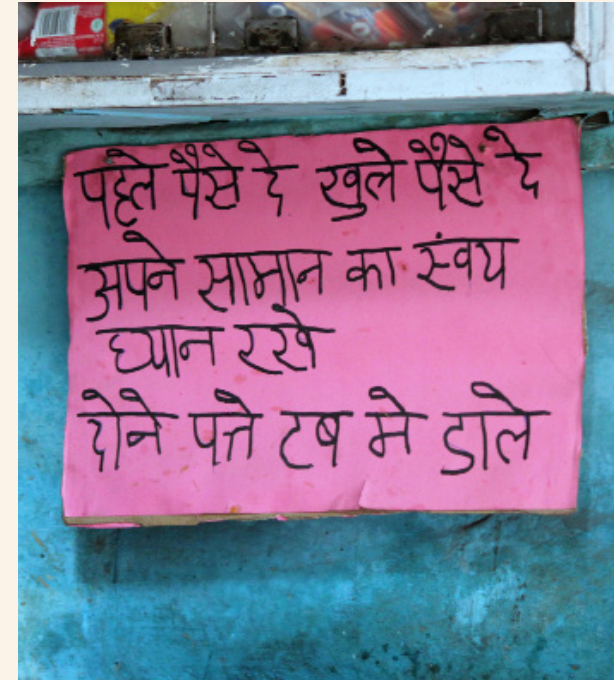
## Free Hand Signage

Free hand signs are often made by the owners themselves. Though people also commission sign board painters for some expressive work.



### Above

Example of a most probably commissioned sign displayed at a shop front.



### Above right

Example of a self written signs on a paper displayed at a shop front.



#### Above

Example of a commissioned sign on a door in Saket area.



#### Above centre

Example of a commissioned sign by a local seller.



#### Above right

The simple form of the Indian Rupee Symbol allowed this modification on a signage displayed at a local shop and it still is recognizable.

## Interview with Aurangjeb Sign Board Painter

Aurangjeb is from Haldaur, Uttar Pradesh. Though his family had faced financial crisis and for the time he worked as labourer, this could not stop him from finding his passion for creativity and technical work. Whenever he got time, he would draw pictures taking references from the newspaper and soon was known to locals for his skills in painting though he hadn't painted commercially yet.

One day in 1995, while he was working as a labour at a doctor's house, he asked if Aurangjeb also could write as well as he paints?

Aurangjeb replied affirmative though he didn't know the technical side of sign painting at the time and the doctor gave him the content to write. Aurangjeb practiced writing it on the wall by 3 AM in the night, came back in the morning and painted it finally. The doctor saw it and praised him for his good work. This was the first wall that Aurangjeb painted as a commercial painter and boosted his confidence. The doctor then ordered the labourers that they should find another boy for the labour work, he will do all my painting work from now onwards. Aurangjeb

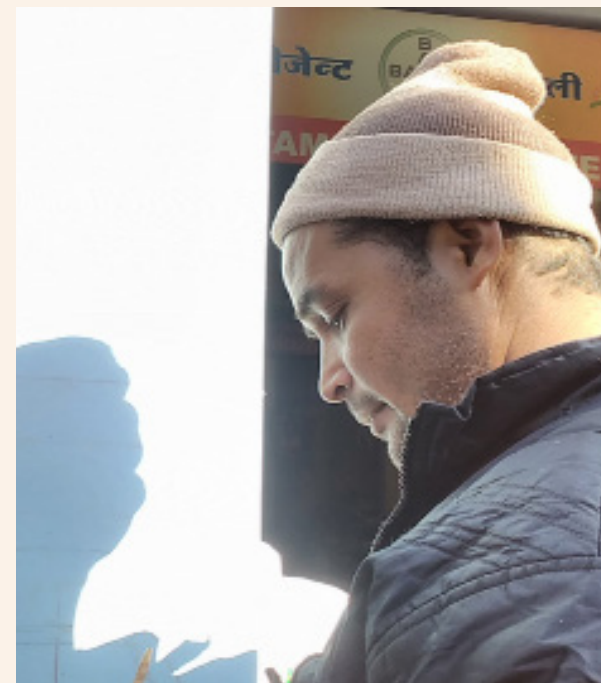
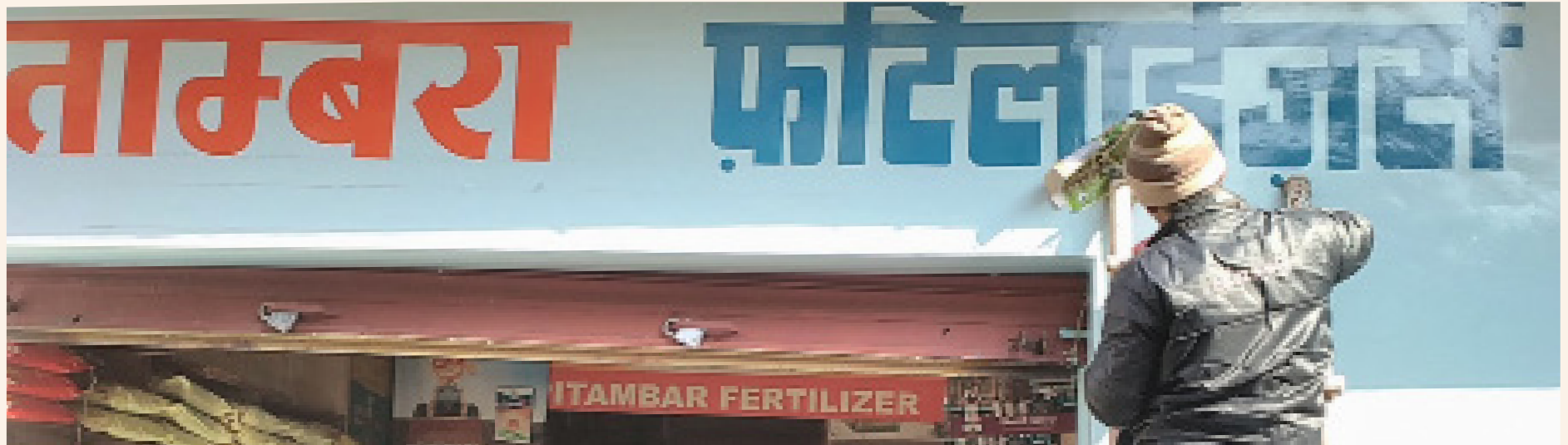


Photo by Ashish Kumar



received 15 Rs. for finishing one wall at the time in which he says that the color required for the work cost 5 Rs and the rest 10 Rs was his profit. This way he would daily earn around 25 Rs. The next day, he finished 5 walls for which he got 75 Rs costing him 25 Rs for color. The profit he received was 50 Rs earning more than the “Rajke” (professional painters) whose daily earning was 45 Rs.

Seeing the profit, Aurangjeb decided to study the technical side of the work looking towards his drawing books from school for answers. The next year he got into the 9th standard where he found Geometric Art book and he didn't look back. He mastered the graphical aspects and now he can write on any given surface at any size.



### Above

Aurangjeb starts making a grid by touching a tread dipped in "geru" on the surface.



### Above centre

Once the basic grid is done, he starts drawing letter forms roughly based on the grid directly on the surface.



### Above right

After finishing the rough drawing, he chooses a brush and dips it in a color of choice. After deciding how much color he need on the brush, he would start painting free hand on given the surface.



### Above

If taking a support seems required, he would let his little finger rest on the surface and guide the hand to achieve the desired forms.

While studying in C. D. Inter College, his drawing teacher encouraged him to take apprenticeship under a painter but his poor financial background could not support it. He then decided to work the day as a labour and evening as a painter. The money he would earn was all spent in art books so that he could study further. Aurangjeb passed the examination of High School and Intermediate with double drawing—Geometrical Drawing and Painting subjects and wished to pursue a Master's degree in Drawing.

He says the only reason he was able to cross the professional painters in his area was because he started creating new visual grammars. He self-taught himself

the aspects of visual ergonomics by questioning the impact of a multi-colored work, the distance a viewer would look from and the size of letter forms.

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If we think it concerns us,  
we read everything.

Erik Spiekermann

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