

‘The house of our dreams’: A decade of advertisements in building magazines

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Abstract

The article discusses the creation of the imagery about the ideal house around the year 2000 in Greece as it was promoted mainly by the visual message of advertisements for building materials in two technical magazines.

The two-fold analysis is based on the questioning of a) the construction stage and building work the advertised products are used to and b) the processes used for the construction of the representational meaning in advertisements. The authors claim that the gradual augmentation and eventually prevalence of symbolic processes based on metaphor in the advertisements of the above mentioned period reflect social processes and cultural values concerning the critical issue of building and housing.

Keywords: print advertisements, representational meaning, social semiotics, technical magazines

Introduction

The article is part of a broader research on the construction of visual meaning in print ads for building materials conducted by the Architecture Department of Democritus University of Thrace (2012-2103). Raw data came out of a research entitled ‘A decade of print advertisement in building magazines (‘Bulletin’ of the Technical Chamber of Greece’ and ‘Building’ from 1996 to 2004)’ in the frame of the course ‘Lecture - Introduction to Architectural Research’ conducted under the supervision of the authors.

The present article focuses on the categories of products that were advertised in the two magazines during a period of almost ten years, four years before and after 2000, and the visual processes that were used for the construction of the representational meaning in the ads, in order to discern the image of contemporary residential building that is being implied by the advertisements. Kress & van Leeuwen’s ‘Grammar of visual design’ (2006) was used for the analysis of the visual message of the advertisements.

The beginning of the new millennium (2000) was chosen in order to discern the trends of the advertising market around two major milestones for Greece, the integration of Greece to the Euro Unitarian Zone and the undertaking of the Olympic Games from Greece. At the same time, the announcement of a Value Added Tax on buildings in the following years, along with a package of economic measures that provided liquidity to the housing market provoked an inflation of the construction of new buildings.

The theoretical and ideological background of the present article relies on Gillian Dyer’s perspective that advertising, apart from being a means for promoting and increasing the demand for the consumption of goods and services, at the same time ‘tries to manipulate people into buying a way of life as well as goods’ (2009[1982],

p.4). Advertising keeps the atmosphere 'suitably consumptive', as J.K. Galbraith states (Galbraith, 1970).

A quick overview of the development of advertising

The following brief overview discusses the development of advertising from 'conventional recommendation to contemporary examples of persuasion and propaganda' (Dyer, 2009 [1982], p.12).

Print advertising actually appeared in the 17th century in Britain and was associated with the circulation of the newspapers, which apart from information about foreign news, shipping timetables, etc., also contained announcements from merchants and booksellers, like the contemporary advertisements, confined to particular sections of the journals. The abolition of the advertising tax in Britain in the mid-19th century contributed to an increase in the volume and quantity of advertising in newspapers. At the same time, advertisers used additional ways to promote products, such as playbills published in theaters, billpostings, and street posters. At the end of the 19th century the 'art' of the writer-advertiser emerged along with new techniques for promotional advertising.

At that time, advertisements –even illustrated ones– proliferated at all pages of the newspapers in Britain and the USA as a result of a variety of reasons either of technical or socio-economic nature, such as, the abolition of the single column rule by the newspaper editors that provided more space for advertisement, the development of technical issues that enabled more eye-catching ads and the independence of advertising agencies from newspapers that concluded to larger and more scientific advertising campaigns.

In the early 20th century, advertising became a vehicle for the elimination of small family businesses by big corporations in a non-stop battle of centralization of the commercial competition and the distribution of market shares among large enterprises. However, and despite the fact that newspapers were increasingly getting financially more dependent on advertising, most editors refused to provide information to advertisers about their circulation, information that would lead to a better control of the advertised material by the producers and the distributors of advertising.

At the end of the First World War and alongside with the big increase of the industrial production that followed, the massive and continuous consumption was propagated as a patriotic duty of the citizens/consumers in the USA (Dyer, 2009 [1982]), transforming, thus the industry to the fundamental social protection figure in dispense of other more collective forms of action, such as political, trade union and social organizations.

At the mid 1940s as a result of the explosive spread of the media (newspapers, women's / children / family / specialized magazines, radio and television) and the 'affluent' (Galbraith, 1970) society that followed the Second World War, advertising proliferated and succeeded in producing massive campaigns on a national and international scale.

After the 1950s radio and mainly television gained the biggest part of advertising at the expense of the print ads, resulting to a significant loss of income for national newspapers which struggled to survive. Many newspapers adopted a type of advertising that was associated to the news, mainly in their editorial items, which approached the same issues as the advertised products (Curran, 1978). News became the supplement or the complimentary framework for the commercial promoting of goods and services.

By the end of the century, advertising evolved as the main sponsor of newspapers, imposing thus an ‘indirect’ control (Dyer, 1982, 54) mainly by inflicting the material covered by the press and implicitly controlling the way that it is covered (Dyer, 1982, 55). The freedom of the press has been usurped by the promiscuity of the advertisers. Modern advertising is based on large, multi-faceted and long-term sociological surveys of opinion and behavior, fostering standards of inconspicuous intervention, social mediation, cultural values and specific language. Advertising uses the means of the real world to create an imaginary one. As Dyer points out ‘the success of advertising depends not on its logical propositions, but on the kinds of fantasies it offers. The world of ads is a dream where people and objects are taken out of their material context and given new, symbolic meanings on hoardings or on the screen where they become signs’ (Dyer, 2009 [1982], p.152).

The following chapter presents a classification of products according to the building works they are used to, in order to discern whether they focus on one or more construction stages before and after the year 2000.

Construction stages and building materials

Residential buildings like all building constructions in Greece and elsewhere comprise four consecutive stages of construction: A) Structure, B) Building works, C) Completion works and D) Equipment.

A number of combined or interrelated building works that are completed by means of specific building materials can be discerned in every stage. Table 1 presents a selection of the eleven (11) categories of building materials that are necessary for the completion of every construction work taken into consideration in the present research. For methodological reasons, all products needed for earthworks, foundations and insulation below grade were left aside.

Table 1. Construction stages, construction works and types of building products

Stage	Construction works	Types of building products
A) Structure	Earthworks	
	Foundations	
	Insulation below grade	
	Bearing structure - Scaffolding	Ready-mixed concrete / steel reinforcements, profiles, grids / prefabricated molds
B) Building works	Infill walls	(B1) bricks / tiles
	Insulation	(B2) Insulation materials
	Stairs/elevators	(B3) prefabricated stairs
C) Completion works	Finishing	(C1) tiles / marble / wooden floors
	Doors windows frames	(C2) prefabricated frames
	Electro-mechanical installations	(C3) Equipment for cooling and heating, pipes / cables
	Finishing coating/ mortars	(C4) ready plasters / paints / varnish
D) Equipment	Health facilities	(D1) furniture and parts for kitchens/ toilets
	HVAC	(D2) Taps/switches/ accessories
	Lawn/surrounding spaces	(D3) pools/garden equipment

Representational meaning in print advertisements – The framework of the analysis

The analysis of the visual message in the advertisements of the sample was based on Kress and van Leeuwen's methodological framework (2006), which applied the Hallidayan model for the three metafunctions of language (the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual) (Halliday, 1985) to visual communication. They approached images from a social semiotic perspective. According to Kress and van Leeuwen 'visual structures do not simply reproduce the structures of 'reality'. [...], they are shaped by the interests of the social institutions within which the images are produced, circulated and read, and as such they are ideological (2006: 47).

In the 'Grammar of visual design' Kress and van Leeuwen proposed a descriptive framework assigning representational, interpersonal and compositional meaning to images and other forms of visual communication. Apart from representing the world (the Ideational metafunction), every image has to project 'the relations between the producer, the viewer and the object represented (the Interpersonal metafunction) and has the capacity to form texts (the textual metafunction) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 43). As Royce states, the Ideational metafunction is about 'meaning in the sense of content' (2007, p.65). The representational meaning depends on the Represented Participants (RP) and the processes they are involved in. Visual features that create interpersonal meanings have to do with the way a RP is addressed to the viewer, the size of the frame, the perspective, the horizontal and the vertical angle. Finally, the meaning of the composition relates the representational and the interactive meaning through Information value, Salience and Framing (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.177).

As the article focuses mainly on the representational meanings in print ads, a more detailed presentation of the ideational metafunction with examples from the ads of the sample follows. Representational meaning is created through visual representations that can be either narrative or conceptual. Narrative processes present 'unfolding actions and events, processes of change and transitory spatial arrangements' (Kress, 2006: 79) by means of vectors, which may be formed by bodies, lines, tools, glances or in any other way. Their presence is the sine qua non characteristic of a narrative structure, as they present the directionality of an action. Narrative processes can be either action or reactional. In the former case images have either only one participant (the Actor) where the vector comes from, or a Goal (meaning the participant where the vector is directed to). Reactional processes are composed of Reactors (the participant from whom the vector comes from) and Phenomena (the participant to whom the vector is pointing).



Image 1. Narrative processes

The print ad that appeared in ‘Building’ is composed of two parts. The lower part contains the brand name and the logo accompanied by an informational text. The flipper of an anthropomorphised seal is pointing to the text like a vector.

The upper part consists of a comic strip deployed in three horizontal panels. Vectors coming out of the head of the two Eskimos (the Reactors) form a thought balloon (the Phenomenon) with the image of the house of their dreams. Their facial expression indicates the impossibility of their thought. In the second panel, the hand of the male Eskimo is embracing the woman; the most visible vector is formed by the tool that is being held by the seal while working on the roof of their igloo. The third panel duplicates the first, only this time, the couple is happy and the vectors point to a thought balloon containing the symbol of a heart. ‘Macon’ can make the impossible possible’.

Conceptual processes represent participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence. They can be classificational, analytic or symbolic

a) Classificational processes

Classificational processes are those who relate participants to each other in terms of a ‘kind of’ relation forming a taxonomy. In such cases, ‘one set of participants will play the role of Subordinates with respect to at least one other participant, the Superordinate’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 79)



Image 2. Classificational processes

In the above advertisement for paint and varnish products the visual structure is represented by a ‘covert taxonomy’. An arrangement of paint boxes plays the role of the Subordinates, representing the variety of products offered by the brand who is the Superordinate. The paint boxes as Subordinates are placed in equal distance from each other, having the same size and the same orientation towards the horizontal and the vertical axe (they are placed in four centered columns, each one containing three products). There is no depth in the composition and the angle is frontal and objective. Three distinct colours are used in the composition: light grey in the background, which is plain and natural, black colour for the wording and the name brand in the text and bright blue for most of the boxes, the down framing and the slogan used in the advertisement. Wording between boxes is of almost the same size for each participant. The advertised products and the name brand are clearly visible and legible, with brighter colours than those used for the slogan the rest informational text. Empty space between the columns provides a rather strong framing in the composition.

Participants are presented de-conceptualized in a symmetrical composition which promotes the equivalence between all subordinates.

b) Analytic processes

In a visual composition of Analytic structure, Participants are related in terms of a whole (the Carrier)/parts (a number of Possessive Attributes) structure ((Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.87).



Image 3. Analytic processes

Analytic structures are used in the above advertisement presenting a new product for hinged aluminum systems for doors and windows. In inclusive analytic processes, like the one used here, the possessive attributes are contained within the Carrier, taking part of its space (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.96). The new product of the brand (the Carrier) holds the larger part of the ad. Its possessive attributes, indicated by the colored numbers, are included in the Carrier visually and appear once again in the left part of the ad followed by an informational text. Although the Carrier is well defined, it is not the same for its possessive attributes. Specific parts of the product, meaning the new patent features, are presented in detail; all other parts are left blank. The product is presented in the form and coloring (black and white scale) of a technical drawing with plain background, reinforcing thus the artificiality of the picture and inviting for a more scrutinized view of the Carrier's possessive attributes. Bright, vivid coloring is only used for the possessive attributes of the Carrier, attracting thus the viewer's gaze. A detailed presentation of the features of the fourth attribute appears in the bottom area of the ad (the three images in a symmetric composition) transforming thus this possessive attribute to a Carrier with respect to them. The brand name, the name of the company and the slogan of the advertisement are clearly indicated by means of a diversified, enlarged font and color contrast.

c) Symbolic processes

In symbolic images RPs are important for what they mean (Harrison, 2003, p.51). There can either be two participants, the Carrier and the Symbolic Attribute (Symbolic Attribute), or just one Participant, where the meaning is created through other characteristics of the picture such as coloring, lighting etc (Kress, 2006) (Symbolic Suggestive).



Image 4. Symbolic processes

Symbolic structures, especially Symbolic Suggestive processes, are used in the above advertisement for a plastic floor mat. The two images are placed in an imaginary central, vertical axis. The one on top prevails due to its size and the close shot which addresses the viewer at an intimate distance. The frontal angle engages the viewer to involve, the image is shallow with gentle, warm and earthy tones. Apart from the background, which is plain, two more levels can be discerned, the child foot is in the foreground and the palms that gently surround and protect it, providing the value of softness and protection. Thus, the symbolic attribute of the protection is being transferred to the Carrier, the product.

The smaller image is much more impersonal, taken from a very long shot and the gaze of the viewer is directed to the floor with the plastic mat with bright earthy colours, which is the advertised product (the Carrier), than to the RRs.

The Carrier is placed in the middle of the composition as a mediator between the ideal, which is the notion of the protection and ecology provided by the top image, and the real, meaning the informational text alongside with the possessive attributes of the Carrier presented by means of coloured tiles in the bottom of the advertisement. The brand name and the name of the company are encased in colour boxes, especially the green colour of the product implying its ecological nature.

Research Methodology

Research questions

In order to discern the image of residential building that is being implied by the advertisements for building materials in the 'Building' and 'Bulletin' magazines from 1996 to 2004, the present study addressed the following research questions:

- i) Which categories of products were advertised in 'Bulletin' and 'Building' magazines before and after the year 2000?
- ii) Which visual processes were used for the creation of the representational meaning in print ads that appeared in the same magazines during the same period?

The sample of the research

The sample of the present study consisted of all the advertisements of building materials that appeared in the 'Bulletin' and 'Building' magazines from January 1996 to December 2004, with the exception of those smaller than A4 size, and the advertisements about dry construction systems (e.g. plasterboard) which, although abounding during this period, are not usually used in residential buildings. The two specific magazines were chosen due to their different addressees. 'Bulletin' is the official magazine of the Technical Chamber of Greece, distributed free of charge to the contracted experts, mainly engineers, whereas 'Building' is a three monthly issued magazine bought by a wider audience, experts or not, looking for design choices.

Six hundred forty three (643) advertisements constituted the sample of the research.

More specifically,

-283 ads appeared in the 116 issues of the weekly magazine 'Bulletin'

-360 ads appeared in the 76 issues of the monthly magazine 'Building'

Any additional background or frame coming out from the layout used by the magazines was removed by means of a photo-realistic program in order to have the original form of every advertisement.

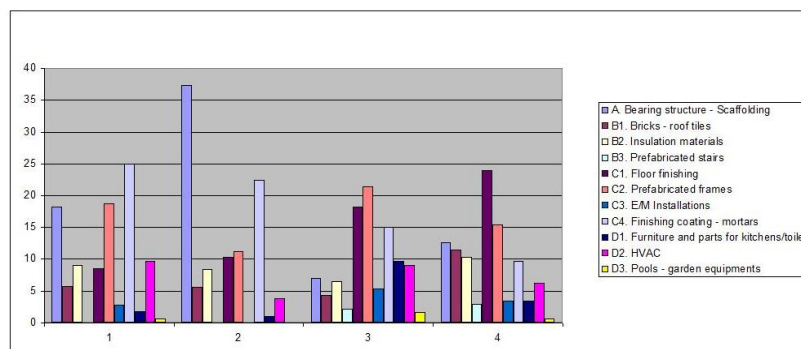
At first, all advertised products were classified in eleven (11) groups of distinct building works and construction stages. Subsequently, ads were classified according to their ideational meaning -their visual structures of representation- as narrative or conceptual. Due to the large amount of conceptual representations in the ads of the sample, they were further sub-classified as classificational, analytic or symbolic.

The categories of advertised products and the stages of construction they are associated with were the variables of the analysis, along with the processes used for the visual structure of the representational meaning in the sample. Data for advertisement in each magazine during two distinct periods (before and after 2000) are presented in form of relative-frequency distributions.

Results

Data are presented quantitatively in the three following tables. The various parameters of analysis (types of building materials, stages of construction and processes of representational meaning) are presented in percentages in the vertical axis. On the horizontal axis the above mentioned distinctions are presented in four time periods for the each magazine. 1. 'Bulletin', from 1996 to 1999. 2. 'Bulletin' from 2000 to 2004. 3. 'Building', from 1996-1999 4. 'Building' from 2000 to 2004

Table 2. Categories of building materials advertised in both magazines in two time periods



As shown in Table 2, the larger part of the building materials advertised in 'Bulletin' during the first period concerns finishing coating and mortars (25%), prefabricated frames (18 ~ 19%) and components of the bearing structure (18 ~ 19%), whereas insulation materials, floor finishing and HVAC appear in relatively smaller shares (<10%). At the same time, in 'Building' prefabricated frames (21,5%), floor finishing (~18%) and finishing coating (15%) hold the larger parts of the advertising; a smaller share, less than (<10%) in each case, is held by furniture and parts for kitchen/toilet and by HVAC.

The distributions of advertising during the first period are indicative of the different targets and audiences of the two magazines. As the 'Bulletin' is distributed free of charge to expert engineers, the advertisement is of explanatory nature and mainly focuses on specific technical issues. 'Building' is purchased by professional engineers / designers of residential buildings, but also by a broader audience interested in buying or repairing their home, so advertisements are mainly of a decorative nature and focuses on materials for interior or exterior design.

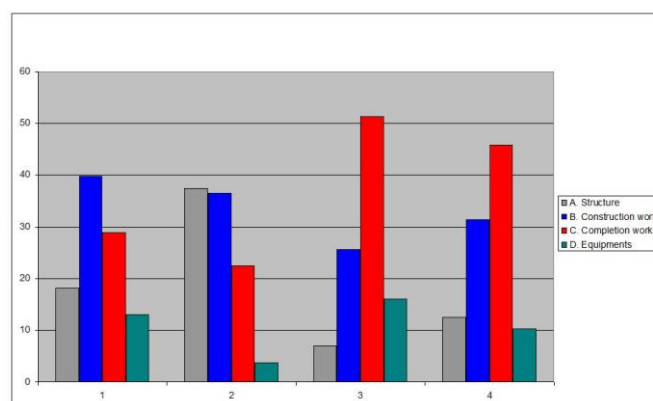
During the second period, advertisements in the 'Bulletin' are mostly about technological materials. The share of advertised products concerning components of the bearing structure radically augments up to 37,4%, advertisements for finishing coating still hold a large proportion of 21,4% followed by floor finishing, frames and insulation material (~ 10%).

Similarly, the distribution of advertisements in 'Building' (2000-04) confirms that a high share of advertisements is hold by materials for floor finishing (24%), while smaller shares appear for frames (15.4%), finishing coating (15%) and components of the bearing structure, bricks and insulation materials (> 10%). That is, the decorative parts retain their shares, while simultaneously (due to the overall increase of the amount of advertisements) there is an increase in the proportion of basic construction products.

During the second time period (2000 – 2004), the intensity of advertisements concerning parts of the bearing structure coincides with the efforts of the domestic cement and metal plants to compete with the market of imported products.

It is also worth mentioning that despite the distinct targets and interests of the two magazines, the very low to zero shares of advertisement concerning luxury and decorative products confirm their basically technical orientation. This fact is better displayed in the distribution of advertisements in the general construction stages that follows.

Table 3. Advertisements concerning the building stages of a construction

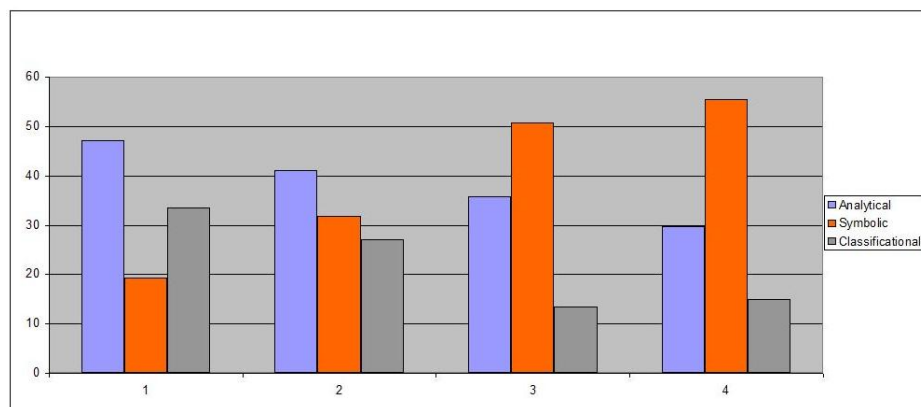


Data in Table 3 show that advertisements in ‘Bulletin’ during the first period concern mostly the ‘hard’ part of construction, followed by products for the completion works, while in ‘Building’ mainly products for completion works are being advertised. From 2000 to 2004, the larger share of advertisement in ‘Bulletin’ concerns products for the bearing structure (duplication of the share from 18, 2 to 77, 4%), while advertisements of products for the ‘hard’ work and the completion works still hold an important share of the advertised market (though in lower levels); advertisement for equipment products is further limited (from 13,2% to 3,7%). At the same time, although products for completion works and for the ‘hard’ part of the construction retain their advertising percentage in ‘Building’, products for parts of the bearing structure and for equipment products each hold a share of almost 10% of the advertisement market, although they contribute largely to the overall cost of a construction.

However, the overall evaluation either in terms of the temporal distribution of the sampled advertisements in the two magazines or of the type of construction stage did not lead to the identification of a clear substantial section on the consuming patterns of the Greek society around the year 2000. This development, in fact the visualization of its ideological garment, appears clearly in the processes of representation of the visual message in print advertisements about building.

As narrative representations were found only in 20% of the sample, the article focuses solely on the distribution of conceptual representations in the two magazines during the two time periods (four years before and four after 2000).

Table 4. Conceptual representations in print advertisements appearing in ‘Bulletin’ and ‘Building’ from 1996 to 2004



1. Bulletin 1996-1999 2. Bulletin 2000-2004 3. Building 1996-1999 4. Building 2000-2004

Table 4 presents the distribution of the conceptual processes used for the representation of visual meaning in print advertisements appearing in the two magazines during a period of eight years (1996-2004). From 1996 to 1999, the visual meaning in the print ads in the ‘Bulletin’ is mainly made by means of analytic processes (47,2%), followed by classificational processes (33,5%). Apparently, the advertisers acknowledge the fact that ‘Bulletin’ is addressed solely to a specialized audience. On the contrary, visual meaning in the ads that appear in ‘Building’ during the same period is mostly made through symbolic representation processes (50,8%).

However, during the second period (2000-04), the predominance of the symbolic processes is indisputable. A significant increase of nearly 50% is recorded in 'Bulletin', whereas print ads with a visual message through other kinds of conceptual processes diminishes (analytic processes fall from 47,1% to 41,1%, classificational processes from 33,5% to 27%) At the same time, in 'Building' over 55% of the ads with conceptual representations of the visual message are made through symbolic processes at the expense primarily of the analytical procedures (from 35.8 to 29.75% in 'Building'). The amount of classificatory processes remains almost the same (13-15%). According to the data, during the second period, although the advertised products mainly remain the same and refer to technical information (measurements, reviews, specifications), there is a clear tendency toward symbolic processes for the representation of the visual message in advertisements appearing in building magazines.

Conclusions

According to Table 3, advertisements in 'Bulletin' concern mainly products for building, reinforcement and protection of the bearing structure and the walls of a building, whereas ads in 'Building' focus mostly on products concerning interior and exterior design. This diversification is easy to explain considering the specific character of each magazine and the audience they are addressed to. 'Bulletin', which was initially dominated by ads where the visual meaning was mainly based on analytical procedures, is addressed to a specialized audience of subscribers. On the other hand, 'Building,' where the visual meaning of the print ads is mostly shaped by symbolic procedures, is addressed to a wider range of buyers, combining both commercial and consuming trends (table 4). This well established distinction about the identity and the possible addressees of the two magazines advertisers know best. The increase of symbolic processes for the representation of visual meaning in print advertisements during the second period (2000-2004) in both magazines, as shown in Table 4, could suggest a trend in advertising to move away from rational, critical thinking.

Symbolic structures are made by means of metaphors, ensuring thus a shift of interest from the real to the symbolic and the imaginary; the advertised product acts as the mediator in this procedure.

While the enduring dominance of symbolic processes is easily explicable in 'Building' due to the wider audience it is addressed to, which is in search for options for design, as they imagine of buying a lifestyle; the decline of the analytical processes in 'Bulletin' reveals that the tendency for another, idealized lifestyle is generalized even in a magazine promoting technical information for expert engineers during the period from 2000 to 2004.

'Another world is possible...' for everyone under the condition of buying the product. As the most important feature in symbolic processes are the participants (objects of persons) that materialize the symbolic attribute relation, the advertised product itself is not even be in the centre of a symbolic visual representation. Thus, the participant transfers his/her symbolic identity to the advertised product, making it thus part of his imaginary world that is offered as a set to the viewer.

The densification and finally the prevalence of symbolic processes in print ads of the past decade are revealing of the social processes and the cultural values that were traded around the critical issue of building on the milestone of 2000. The dominance of metaphor, meaning the transposition of the message from the real to an imaginary

world, even for a long standing product such as housing, shows that long before the onset of the crisis on the construction sector, questioning on the implementation of offer was replaced by the pursue of the growth of the demand. A demand made of the dream that was integrated in the quest of an imaginary lifestyle.

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