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Advertising Billboards Are A Source Of Pollution And Landscape Transformation In Beautiful Lomé, Togo

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Abstract

Landscaping is one of the factors that makes a space attractive. This research, which identified, quantified, and analyzed 259 signs along the stretch of road between the GTA intersection and the junctions with Boulevard du 13 Janvier in Lomé, reveals a predominance of commercial advertising (54.44%), followed by road signs (20.08%) and informational signs (18.15%). This heavy commercialization of public space, manifested in aggressive strategies at major intersections and crossings through a high density of advertising displays, detracts from the aesthetic appeal and transforms the urban landscape of Lomé, a city that has always been a model of West African cities.

This visual saturation not only compromises road safety by creating unavoidable focal points but also distorts the civic function of public spaces by constituting visual nuisances on multiple scales. This study reveals a management deficit and a failure to take into account urban planning regulations.To this end, it is imperative to rebalance public urban space along roads and thoroughfares through appropriate uses, limitations on building sizes, and taxation proportional to the areas affected. Reclaiming shared urban spaces is therefore essential to guaranteeing urban functions, quality of life, safety, aesthetics, and the democratic right to the city.

Keywords: *Lomé; advertising billboards; road; visual pollution; road safety.*

Introduction

The urban landscape constitutes one dimension of the urban experience and the juxtaposition of urban functions. It influences not only the aesthetics of cities but also the behaviors, quality of life, and safety of users (Išoraitė et al., 2023; Kucharikova & Simko, 2017; Surana, 2022) . In recent decades, the landscape environment of expanding African agglomerations has undergone rapid transformations, characterized by the explosion of external advertising. This blatant commodification of public space raises profound questions about the techniques for balancing economic development, urban regulation, the preservation of the living environment, and the right to the city (Nowghabi & Talebzadeh, 2019) .

Authors have reported, based on an analysis of data from the Advertising Standards Authority (BVP), that outdoor advertising represents a major economic stake, but its unregulated development can lead to negative externalities, particularly in terms of visual pollution and road safety (BVP, 2020; Cumapa et al., 2025; Kucharikova & Simko, 2017) . The World Health Organization (WHO) has also identified distracted driving, as well as aggressive (or harmful) advertising, as a contributing factor to the risk of road accidents worldwide (Montserrat, 2006 and Desîlets , 2013).

In Togo, particularly in the city of Lomé, urban and economic growth has been accompanied by a pronounced proliferation of advertising billboards along major roads, intersections, and high-traffic crossings. Although Law No. 2020-001 of January 7, 2020, concerning the press and communication code, provides guidelines for regulating advertising displays, its implementation and enforcement are subject to challenges in practice (Ministry of Communication, 2020 ; Dossavi, 2023) .

This research, undertaken within this framework, aims to diagnose the use of urban advertising and visual pollution along the road between the Togolese Insurance Group (GTA) intersection and the junctions with Boulevard du 13 Janvier. Through a methodical analysis of 259 identified advertising displays, this manuscript seeks to answer several questions, including: What is the informational and safety impact of the identified signage? What are the spatial strategies employed in the installation of

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advertising and road signage? Finally, to what extent does the observed configuration comply with current urban planning and landscaping regulations?

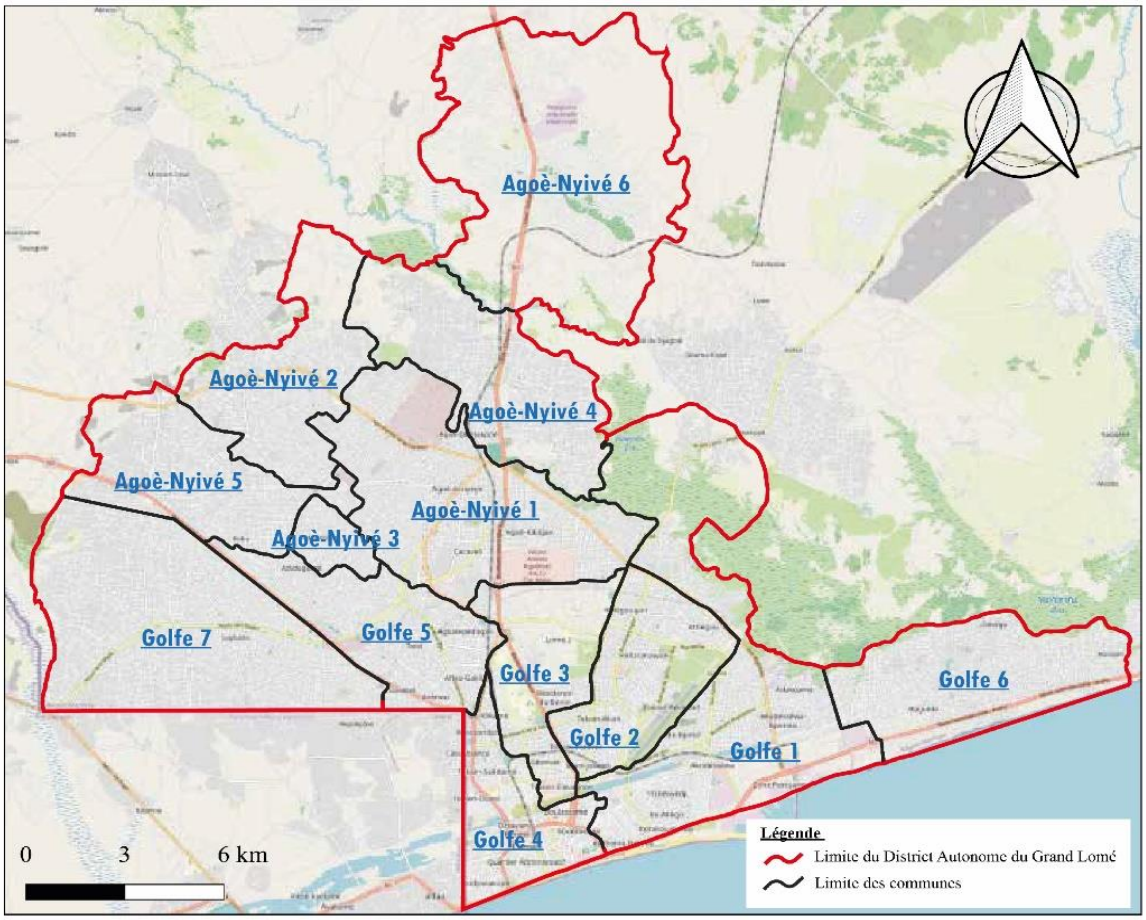
Through a systemic methodological approach focused on density and the physical features of the signs, this article offers a more than objective basis for critical reflection on the issues of quality of public spaces and safety, fluidity, and aesthetics within Lomé.

Materials and methods

Study framework

The city of Lomé is located in the far southwest of Togo, stretching along the Atlantic coast. It comprises 152 districts, administratively divided into two prefectures: Agoè-Nyivé and Golfe (Blakime et al., 2024). Since Law No. 2019-006 of June 26, 2019, concerning decentralization, the city of Lomé has become the Autonomous District of Greater Lomé, a territorial collectivity with special status, covering an area of over 300 km² · The city enjoys a sub-equatorial climate with average annual rainfall of 864 mm, an average temperature of 27.4°C, and a population of 2,188,376 (Sombroek and Sims , 2024). There are four (4) seasons: a major dry season from November to March, a major rainy season from March to July, a minor dry season from July to September and a minor rainy season from September to November.

Figure 1: Map of the Greater Lomé Autonomous District (DAGL)

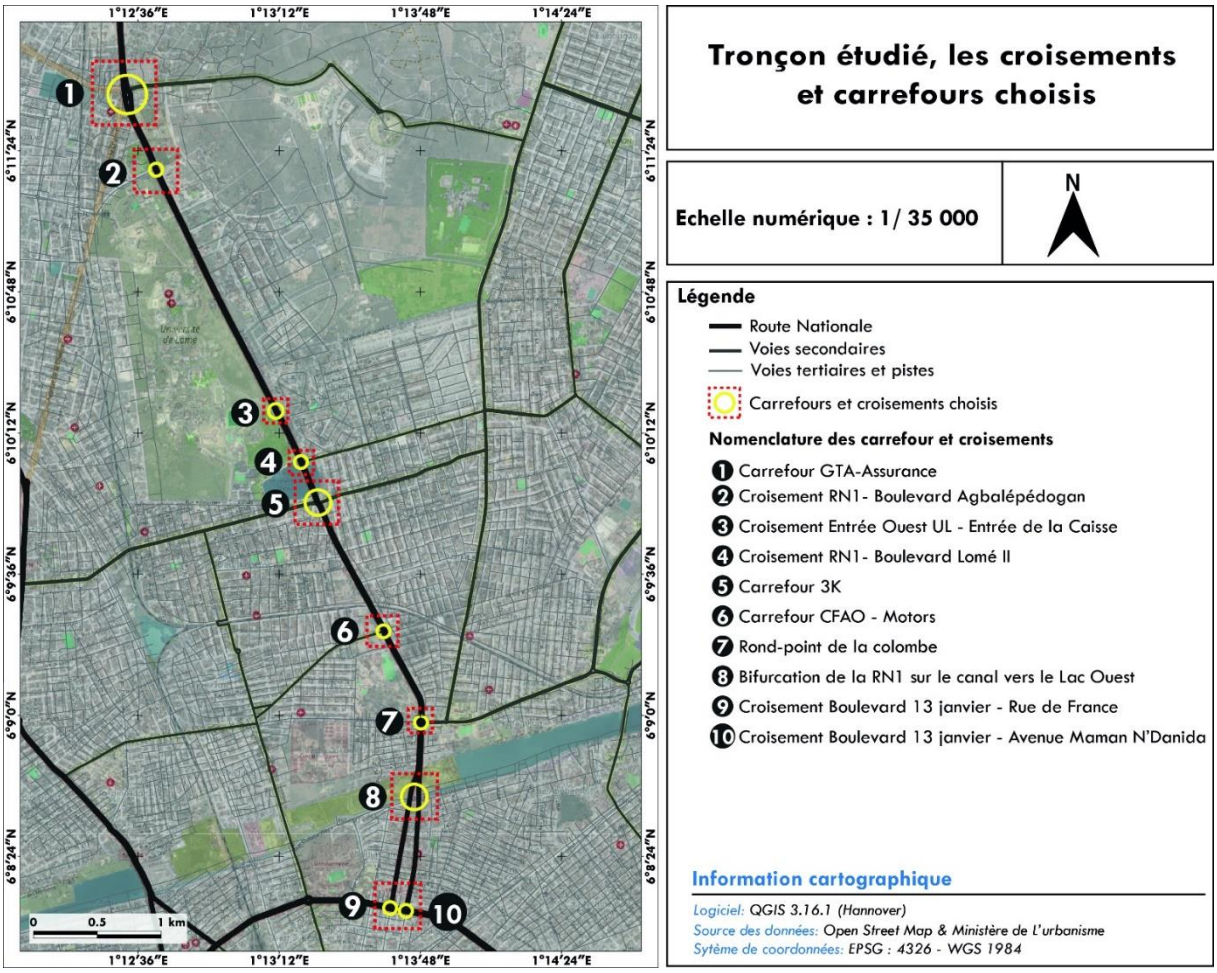


Source: Hassane MAHAMAT HEMCHI

Study segment

The section of road covered by this study is 6.07 km long. It begins at the GTA intersection and ends at the intersection with Boulevard du 13 Janvier. The study involved identifying the total number of advertising billboards on both sides of the roadway (see Figure 1). This section was chosen because of its significant daily traffic volume in urban areas between the city center and the hinterland to the north. It also marks the beginning of National Route 1, which connects the northern districts to downtown Lomé.

Figure 1: Study section (GTA axis-Boulevard du 13 janvier)



Source: Hassane MAHAMAT HEMCHI

Tools and methods used

This study relied on a set of tools enabling the precise collection of the necessary data to successfully complete this work. The observation equipment consisted of digital measurement and recording tools. For dimensional measurements, a laser measuring device was used to measure the surface areas of the panels. The geolocation of the 259 devices was carried out using GPS (Garmin Montana). To ensure the standardization of observations, a structured survey guide was developed, including themes related to the physical and functional characteristics of the panels. All of this data was consolidated in a digital Excel 2019 database, which allowed us to illustrate the findings with tables to identify and quantify the parameters of the phenomenon under study.

The methodology employed here is based on a direct and systematic observation approach. Sampling targeted precisely ten (10) strategic intersections and crossings along the main axis of National Route No. 1 (Figure 1). The strategic nature of these intersections and crossings is defined according to their importance within the city's road network, their capacity in terms of traffic flow, and their representativeness of the functional urban dynamics of polycentric centers . The inventory of advertising displays followed a standardized procedure, where each site underwent a comprehensive census of all billboards within a 100-meter radius of the intersection or crossing. This distance allows us to assess the landscape, visual appeal, informational value, and, above all, functional diversity.

The analysis of the collected data combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. From a quantitative perspective, descriptive statistics allowed for the determination of frequencies, percentages, and distributions of the variables studied regarding the placement and arrangement of billboards along the studied traffic routes. The classification of billboards according to function resulted in five (5) categories of advertising:

- ✓ Commercial advertising;
- ✓ Road signs;
- ✓ Information of public utility;
- ✓ Indication of location of activity or equipment;
- ✓ Devices without an identifiable function that are planned and/or abandoned.

The typology of advertising panel configurations was also based on the orientation of the devices in relation to the road, which defines the number of active faces of the advertising installations, namely:

- ✓ Monofacial: device with one active surface;
- ✓ Bifacial: device with two active faces;
- ✓ Trifacial: device with three active faces.

The qualitative approach, for its part, incorporated a spatial analysis of the sign placements, examining the positioning strategies deployed by service providers or clients to capture the attention of road users. A visual analysis based on photographs made it possible to assess the perceptual impact of the different configurations and sizes of the identified devices. Similarly, measurements of visibility angles and perception distances were also taken into account to strengthen the analysis.

Finally, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data made it possible to guarantee the quality of the interpretations for the standardization of the process which generally guarantees the reproducibility of the study in other comparable urban centers and on other traffic axes within the city of Lomé in particular.

Results

Analysis of the collected data identified 259 devices; this finding allowed for the creation of a precise profile of the installations, both quantitative and qualitative, of the visual environment at the various intersections and crossings visited along this 6.07 km long main thoroughfare. The results reveal a clear dominance of commercial advertising, creating an overloaded and unbalanced visual landscape within the urban environment.

Distribution of panels by functional nature

The distribution of advertising panels according to their function reveals a significant imbalance. Out of a total of 259 panels identified, commercial advertising promoting food, beverages, building materials, cars, etc., accounts for 54.44%, while informational panels from vocational training institutions, public health services, road safety organizations, etc., represent only 18.15%. These figures indicate a high level of commercialization of the public urban landscape. Signs indicating the location of places and areas without advertising appear to be minority components, representing densities of 5.41% and 1.93%, respectively.

Finally, regulatory road signs, including traffic lights, directional signs, speed limits, maximum authorized weights, etc., represent 20.08% of the signage landscape (see Table 1). However, it should be noted that these devices are negligible in size compared to advertising billboards, which are often excessively large and sometimes so high as to obscure road traffic signs. This glaring imbalance indicates a significant encroachment of commercial and private advertising on public space. This tends to relegate essential information and signage, which are crucial for road safety, to the background, not to mention the urban landscape itself.

Table 1: Overall distribution of signs by type of information displayed

Function	**Percentage**
Indicator	5.41%
Information	18.15%
Commercial advertising	54.44%
No function	1.93%
Signage	20.08%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Analysis of the density of signage at selected intersections and crossings reveals that, of all the signs surveyed, the GTA intersection has 26.25%, followed by the 3K intersection with 17.37%, the CFAO Motors intersection with 13.51%, and the intersection of National Route 1 and Agbalepedogan Avenue with 11.20%. Among the less frequent signs, the intersection between National Route 1 and Boulevard de Lomé II has the highest percentage at 10.42%, followed by the intersection at the entrance to the University with 8.11%, the Colombe intersection with 5.02% (13 units), the junction of the national highway over the Bè Canal with 4.63%, and 3.47% for the intersections between Boulevard du 13 Janvier and Rue de France and Avenue Maman N'Danida (see table no. 2).

Table 2: Density of signs per intersection and crossing

Places	**Percentage**
Carrefour 3K	17.37%
Carrefour Colombe	5.02%
The intersections between Boulevard du 13 Janvier with Rue de France and Avenue Maman N' Danida	3.47%
Canal intersection and junction towards Dekon	4.63%
Crossing of CFAO Motors (SOTED)	13.51%
Agbalépedogan road	11.20%
Carrefour GTA	26.25%
Intersection of RN1 and Boulevard Lomé II	10.42%
Intersection of RN1 - entrance to the University of Lomé	8.11%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Panel layout according to configurations

An examination of the sign configuration reveals an intensive occupancy strategy aimed at maximizing sign exposure at major intersections and crossings along the city's main thoroughfares. We identified bifacial, monofacial, trifacial, and unconfigured signs (see Table 3) along the section of the case study.

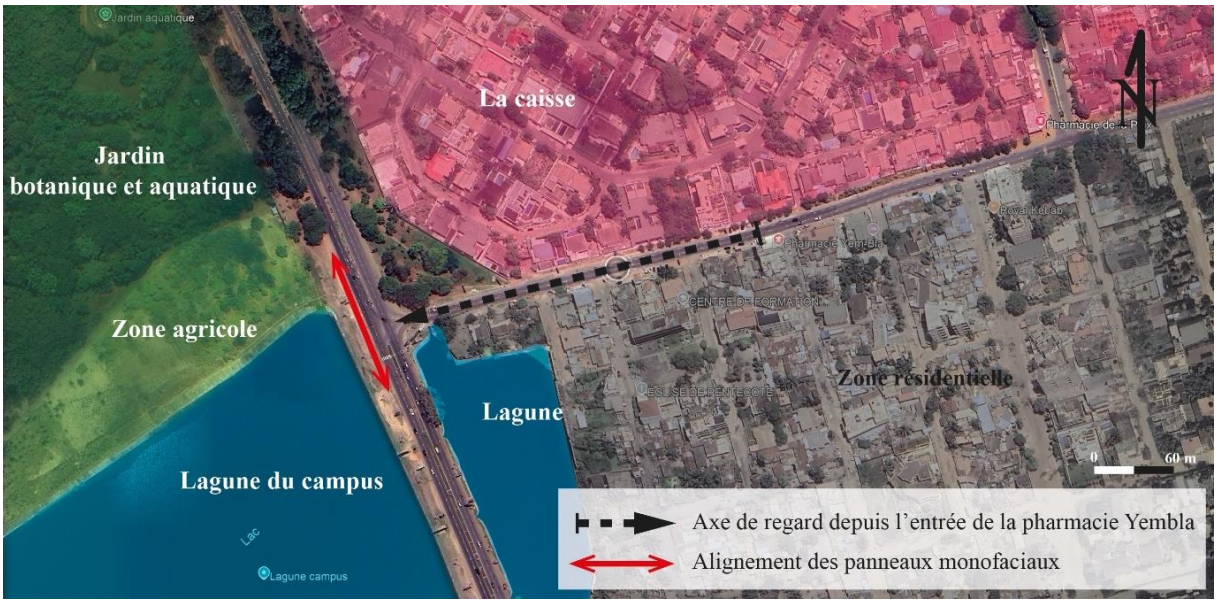
Table 3: Distribution of panels by facade type

Type of panels	**Percentage**
Bifacial	17.76%
Monofacial	79.15%
None (without specific configuration)	1.93%
Trifacial	1.16%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3 shows us what each type of sign represents; over 79% of the signs are single-sided (**Figure 1 and Figure 2**), often arranged along the street alignment, without even considering the openings of the building facades or the accessibility of the surrounding properties, in order to attract attention along the entire traffic axis. This is the case with the alignment of this model at the intersection of Boulevard Eyadema and Boulevard de Lomé II. This alignment of signs directly catches the eye from over 250 meters away; it is an example of a viewpoint noticeable from the Yem-bla pharmacy . Hence the problem of compatibility between traffic lights and advertising signs placed perpendicular to the main street (see Figure 2), which distract road users.

Figure 2: Layout illustration



Source: Hassane MAHAMAT HEMCHI

Figure 3: Alignment of single-sided panels

Source: Hassane MAHAMAT HEMCHI

Furthermore, bifacial billboards (**Figure 3)** represent 17.76% of the identified devices. These allow for bidirectional exposure, thus saturating the visual space of drivers regardless of their direction of travel along the road. Regarding the trifacial configuration (**Figure 4)** , only 1.16% of billboards were identified, but with their exceptional size of 120 m², these advertising giants become major and highly aggressive visual focal points.

Figure 4: Bifacial model

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Figure 5: Trifacial model

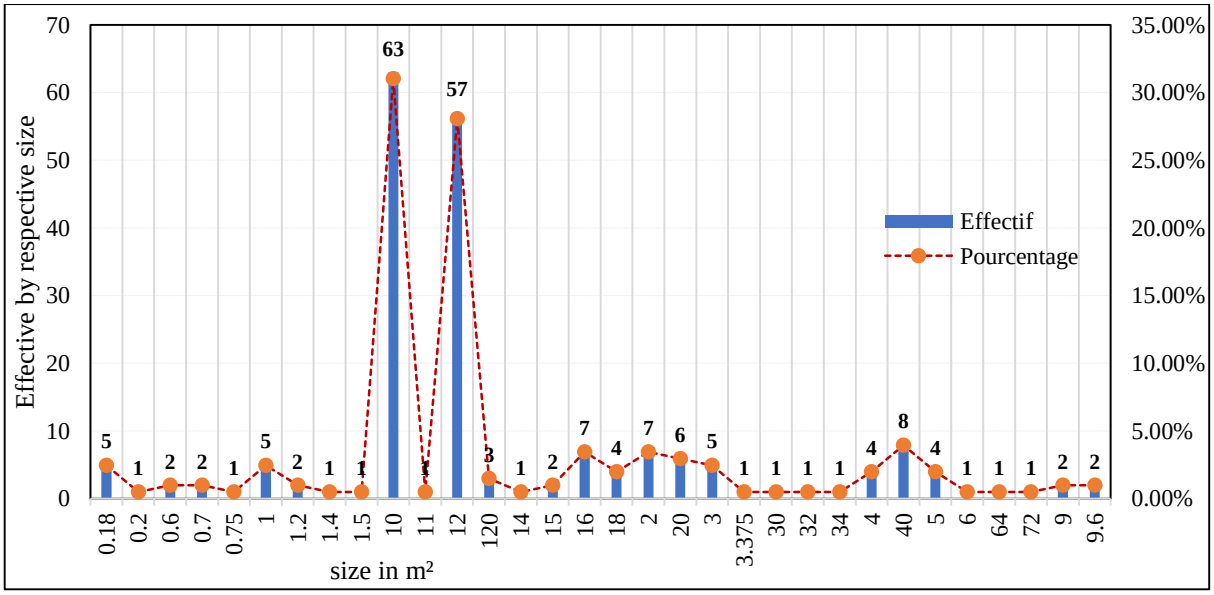
Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The strategy of installing advertising panels, which aims to maximize the attractiveness of traffic flow to passengers and drivers regardless of the driver's direction of travel, creates a visual framing effect for users. This is particularly aggressive, not to say polluting, because these devices inevitably capture the gaze. It also demonstrates a near-systematic desire to occupy space from all angles and limits visual impact for users (motorists, motorcyclists, and pedestrians). This is to say nothing of the landscape or urban aesthetics demanded by landscape architects and urban planners.

Distribution of advertising panel sizes

The analysis of the distribution and/or dimensional arrangement of the panels, as presented in **Figure 6** , reveals a standardization structured around formats and a very wide variability with some extremes. This configuration reflects the logic of visual impact, economics, and regulations, to the detriment of the city's image and the quality of life of its inhabitants.

Figure 6: Distribution of the sizes of the advertising panels surveyed



Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The distribution of advertising panel sizes is not random. It shows a significant concentration around specific models, indicating a standardized manufacturing process adapted to the city of Lomé. As the graph above shows, the 10 m² and 12 m² panels alone represent approximately three-fifths of the total, specifically 59.11%, 31.03%, and 28.08% respectively, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Distribution of panels by surface area

Panel size (m²)	Percentage (%)
12	28.08%
10	31.03%
Total	59.11%

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

10m² and 12m² billboards are either standard industrial construction sizes in the city of Lomé or the most affordable in terms of cost-to-visibility ratio, possibly even exceeding regulatory constraints, as evidenced by their presence along the city's main thoroughfares. Beyond these standard sizes, the landscape of size distribution remains highly uneven. A wide range of values is also observed, from the smallest billboards of 0.18m², representing 2.46%, to the largest structures of 72m² (0.49%) and 120m² (1.48% of the total number of advertising billboards) (see Figure 6). This distribution confirms the existence of two approaches, indicating marketing strategies that combine broad coverage through standard formats with a strong visibility impact through the giant billboards that capitalism, if not globalization, imposes on developing cities.

This wide variety of advertising billboards has implications for the visual pollution of the city's urban landscape. Large billboards of 40m² or more, although not very dense along the RN1 highway, have a disproportionate visual impact on the horizon. Their sheer size at intersections and crossroads tends to create unavoidable focal points for the eye, while also contributing significantly to the visual clutter of the open landscape. Conversely, the proliferation of standard sizes, such as 10m² and 12m², contributes to a more subtle visual effect, while smaller formats appear as mere scribbles on a human scale. This also has implications for the destruction of the urban landscape and for obscuring road signs, which serve as essential landmarks for driving in urban areas.

Figure 7: Landscape of the 3K intersection

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Regulatory framework governing the installation of advertising panels

The placement of posters in public areas in the Republic of Togo is governed by the law regulating permanent and temporary installations. This legislation ensures respect for and preservation of the visual landscape and the environment. This law, or legal framework, is based on fundamental texts and is evolving towards a strengthening mechanism to address the challenges observed throughout the national territory. The current legal basis is Law No. 2020-001 of January 7, 2020, concerning the Press and Communication Code. Article 80 of this law stipulates that the distributor of one or more advertisements is required to declare them to either the town hall or the prefecture of their domicile or official residence. This provision therefore imposes a prior declaration obligation, even though it does not explicitly specify the technical, aesthetic, and environmental standards relating to the display of the advertisement itself.

Aware of the drawbacks of the proliferation of posters in the urban landscape, as detailed in this document, the Togolese government has initiated a modernization of the framework through a draft bill focused on regulating advertising throughout the country. This draft bill has been under review by the Council of Ministers since February 2023. The text aims to define precise rules for advertising communication for professionals in the sector, as well as to harmonize practices with issues of protecting the population's living environment, the common good, and the urban landscape.

However, the implementation of this new legal framework, expected to address the current and glaring imbalances revealed by field surveys—particularly the appropriation of visual space by advertising billboards—remains a priority for city officials. Stricter regulations could allow for better control of the size, density, and placement of these structures, while also offering an opportunity to limit visual clutter, rebalance the signage landscape, and guarantee the safety and quality of the urban environment for all residents.

Discussion

The results of this research reveal the appropriation of public space by commercial advertising. This phenomenon goes beyond a simple quantitative analysis of advertising displays to illustrate fundamental issues concerning the quality of the urban environment in the city of Lomé. The following discussion interprets these results in light of the concepts of public space, the urban commons, road safety, pollution, landscape aesthetics, urban governance, and the right to the city.

The predominance of commercial advertising billboards, at 54.44%, profoundly alters the nature of public space along the main urban thoroughfares of Lomé. These billboards are not only giant commercial infrastructures but also technical supports for network development, aesthetics, and urban planning (Simard, 2019) . However, the results demonstrate that private interests have taken precedence over the public interest, which Don Mitchell (2003) calls a "sale of public space" (Mitchell, 2003; Self, 2004; Simard, 2019) . This commercialization of the urban landscape is all the more problematic because it occurs by replacing essential urban functions. Road signs represent 20.08% and public utility information 18.15%. These latter elements are relegated to the background in an environment saturated with commercial messages. This discrepancy implicitly calls into question the ability of public authorities to preserve the democratic characteristics of shared spaces in urban areas. However, the public domain, like easements, should be places where citizenship, urbanity and social cohesion are exercised (Lefebvre, 1968; Gibout , 2009) .

According to Belimane (2019), the strategy of occupying major intersections and crossings through the massive use of double-sided signs accounts for 17.76%, generating visual saturation in both directions of traffic lanes and raising major road safety concerns (Cumapa et al., 2025; Lemercier & Cellier, 2008) . Similarly, the WHO (2018) recognizes that visual distractions are also a cause of road accidents. Therefore, the placement of signs in the immediate vicinity of major intersections and crossings, such as giant billboards that tend to create unavoidable focal points, represents a proven risk factor (Delhomme, 2021; NASTO, 1997) . This finding is all the more concerning given that the intersections highlighted in this study, such as the GTA (26.25%) and 3K (17.37%), are by definition potential conflict zones between road users and require special attention. It has been demonstrated that the presence of advertising units specifically designed to inevitably attract attention directly contradicts safety concerns (Bergeron, 1997 and NASTO, 1997) .

The distribution of advertising units by size typology highlights a twofold threat to urban aesthetics. First, the need for standardization of 10 and 12 m² billboards, which alone account for 59.11% of the total, creates what this research describes as a "watermarked visual effect," a kind of permanent visual background haze. Second, so-called giant billboards of 72 m² and 120 m², which stand out as disruptive elements in the landscape along the route, pollute and transform the space. This twofold threat perfectly illustrates the concept of "visual pollution" developed in **The Conservation of European***. Cities* mentioned by Cumapa et al., (2025). This is why these authors were already denouncing the corrupting effects of outdoor advertising on the quality of the urban environment. The proliferation of these devices without standards or regulations contributes to what Kevin Lynch would have once described as a loss of legibility in the aesthetics of the territory (Lynch, 1960) .

The discrepancy between the disregard for regulations and the reality observed on the ground reveals a rather deep-seated problem in the governance of urban public spaces. The verbatim statement that « some owners of these advertising panels have permits [...] but others do not demonstrates the non-application of the law governing these structures, thus undermining the government's efforts toward the commodification of public spaces. This discrepancy is hardly unique to the city of Lomé. As Jaglin (2005) notes in his analyses of urban governance in Africa, the regulation of public spaces in this part of the world very often encounters challenges related to institutional capacity and territorial control (Giraut, 2009) . The aforementioned draft law of 2023 represents an opportunity, but its effectiveness will depend on the implementation and monitoring mechanisms that will accompany it to guarantee the "Lomé the beautiful" label as one of the exemplary cities in the sub-region.

In light of these observations, several avenues for improvement can be explored. First, strict zoning regulations could be considered to prohibit all advertising in the immediate vicinity of roads, traffic signs, and major thoroughfares. Second, a clear limitation on the size of large, aggressive advertising displays is essential. Finally, the introduction of a tax proportional to the surface area occupied, with revenues allocated to the maintenance and beautification of public spaces, remains a necessity, a responsibility shared between operators, managers, and citizens.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the seriousness of the encroachment of commercial advertising on certain roads in the city of Lomé. The examination of 259 advertising displays revealed a profoundly unbalanced visual landscape, where commercial interests overshadow the civic and safety functions of public space use. The finding is unequivocal: commercial advertising, or at least billboards, representing 141 out of the 259 identified displays, obstructs the view of the horizon along the main traffic arteries. This practice is organized through imposing spatial strategies, concentrating advertisements near major intersections and crossings with heavy traffic flow. The use of double-sided billboards (17.76%) and extreme formats, reaching a combined surface area of 120 m², creates sensory overload that is detrimental to driver safety, the quality of life, and the aesthetics of the urban landscape. Beyond mere quantitative observations, this research has demonstrated how this near-intensive occupation of public spaces is subject to multi-scalar visual pollution, the distortion of the civic functions of shared spaces to the detriment of private profits, aggressive advertising that compromises road safety for users, and the shortcomings in the management of urban commons. This well-illustrated and documented finding calls for firm political responses and urgent, immediate corrective measures. A rebalancing is essential for the use of urban commons, balancing commercial imperatives with the requirements of public safety, a harmonious living environment, the preservation of shared spaces, and the right to the city.

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