

Graphic Design: A Practice in Search of Theory

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Recent issues of this journal have been designed by graphic designers who, in the process, have exposed many of the ideas and traditions related to the presentation of visible language. This issue explores the research and education supporting the development of graphic designers.

Graphic designers function as visual interpreters, converting communication concepts into visible words and images. The act of interpretation is not always obvious or direct for the designer skillfully focuses attention, insists on visual remembrance of a word or image, alters the rhythm of information delivery, or otherwise uses the potential character of the visual space and the mark-making activity to develop an appropriate pattern for the communication idea. The activity combines the practical considerations of reproduction in a specific medium, an analysis of the communication skills of the target audience, as well as creative, insightful visual translation and aesthetic refinement. In a sense, the designer is to the visual word what an elocutionist is to the spoken word. Both help us to capture the structural and feeling dimensions of a message; they articulate the message; they improve the accessibility and memorability of information.

The Issue

Over the past two years, I have conducted an international research census of design schools for **Visible Language** in order to find out the character of the research effort as well as learn about specific projects. The content of this issue is the result of that census and is in my judgment the most interesting and provocative work discovered. With this special issue, **Visible Language** becomes a resource for educators and professionals alike, who are interested in coming to an understanding of design as an emerging discipline, and in tapping the intellectual resources of those who are contributing to this enterprise.

Our immediate goal is to encourage wider exchange of information about current communication projects among design programs worldwide. Our long-range goal is the development of a design research literature in much the same way that a reading research literature has been developed.

While there is a wealth of scientific study on our reaction to visible language (in psychology, linguistics, anthropology), the crucial role of the designer in our conception of visible language including its generation and application has yet to be adequately organized and understood.

Of the many codes used by graphic designers—photograph, diagram, drawing, ideogram, or typography—typography has the most explicit discipline. The visual variables such as size and space, face and weight, and methods for organization can be clearly delineated.¹ The larger issues of legibility, symbolic appropriateness, or meaning are more objectively available for scrutiny; the tension between meaning and form is apparent. Typography, because of its very nature, could provide the model for organizing more general research in graphic design. For these reasons, the bringing of research and theory to this journal, honing it to show application, makes sense.

A common thread runs through much of this issue: the attempt to objectify the process of graphic design and to subject the results to analysis. This runs directly counter to traditional practice which continues to be a pragmatic operation based on seat-of-the-pants intuitive solution. Designers are increasingly confronted with more complex problems whose impact on society is substantial. Recognition of this complexity produces a need for a more objective understanding of the design activity in the expectation that such an understanding will enhance the designer's performance.

The communication activity contains many variables. Identification of common patterns or similarities among problems rather than limiting and stereotyping solutions could, in fact, support its reverse; an expansion of solution or a more specifically creative one. If the structure of the activity can be revealed, we can then alter and amend the rules; they become subject to our control, even our whims; we can invent new rules; we are in control of the process rather than blindly following an unquestioned tradition.

1

One of the best expositions of the visual variables found in visible language is Karl Gerstner's book, **A Compendium for Literates**, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1974.

2

Jay Doblin, "Part 1.: A Theoretical model for design evaluation."

Industrial Design, January/February 1979, pp. 40-44.

3

The ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) conference in Chicago, during the summer of 1978, dealt with methods for evaluating graphic design using a case study approach.

In a recent issue of *Industrial Design* magazine, Jay Doblin describes three levels of design activity: the practical, elemental, and theoretical. He compares these to the development of a profession, where the profession begins when substantial theory has been generated. While design is not a profession in the formal sense, there is increasing recognition that research exists which supports the generation of theory. According to Doblin, this theory is emerging in bits and pieces; its fragmented form demanding organization.²

The pure research being slowly integrated into design school curricula has been generated by psychologists, sociologists, and computer scientists. Pure research for most designers is an alien concept because they are involved in a field that demands pragmatic performance. On the other hand, increasing numbers of designers find that applied research—that which is necessary to solve a specific problem or to evaluate a potential solution—is increasingly becoming a factor in their environment.³

It is only in the very recent past that some university design programs have begun to integrate the results of pure research into the program of study. The difficulty in using research and theory from another discipline is that someone sensitive to both the specific research and to design must make a translation; must find the significance in the research and the fit to design. Another recent educational objective is to prepare student designers to deal with an objective evaluation of design performance. It is interesting to note that while the environment within which design must perform is becoming more precise, few design programs encourage the undergraduate designer to engage in even limited research activities in order to become exposed to this more rigorous means of obtaining information or exploring alternatives.

What is presented in this special issue are fragments of theory as well as interesting pieces of research. In order to see relationships among the articles and census items, they are categorized according to whether they represent theory (either borrowed or original), research (developed in a fairly academic sense), or visual experiment (explorations in extending the language or the state-of-the-art). Key words further support closer identification of the ideas.

Graphic design education is a synthetic operation; it draws its content and concepts from diverse disciplines. The first two articles trade on existing theory; the authors see value in playing design off against an existing struc-

ture. Thomas Ockerse and Hans van Dijk have developed at the Rhode Island School of Design a semiotic approach to graphic design. Semiotic theory uncovers the process of generating and reading symbols. The students use this structure to analyze communication problems and to move beyond concepts of visual surface control into those of content and meaning. David Stuhr deals exclusively with visual form concepts using classical symmetry theory as the structure. In it he finds a basis for organizing form-making activities in the explicit elements and relationships and their interplay with specific rules.

An original theory of Robert Manning joins form and content as he discusses a method for analyzing communication in terms of its order, graphic, and literal dimensions. While the theory owes a debt to Charles Osgood (semantic differential technique) and Jay Doblin (who was among the first to use this technique in design analysis) it emerges largely from the author's experience as a designer and educator.

The Royal College of Art's Graphic Information Unit is a unique on-going research enterprise in graphic design. Linda Reynolds relates the history of this organization together with a synopsis of two recent research projects.

The census items culled from the international study provide at a glance some interesting work in progress or recently concluded. They demonstrate the diversity of the research effort. The census items are isolated only if we fail to look for the connections. Steven Skaggs' visual experiments with video transformation of typographic elements can be viewed in juxtaposition with the Graphic Information Unit's technical research on typographic organization for information display on video. Charles Bigelow's generation of new characters for the presentation of native American language can be examined in relationship to Constance White's analysis of existing experimental alphabets. Roger Remington's Sign Game is a look at a large and pervasive environmental problem in terms of increasing human understanding and altering behavior. This can be paired with Aaron Marcus' Visualizing Global Interdependencies. The work of Jerry Kuypers and his student are squarely in the best tradition of exploring visual alternatives.

The editors see the presentation of these census items as an on-going event through which individuals may make contact with projects or researchers at other schools involved in addressing similar questions. The very last pages are an on-going survey which we urge you to return to us.

Many graduate students do substantial research in order to develop a thesis. For the most part, this work is unknown except to the sponsoring institution or by word-of-mouth. **Visible Language** is interested in recognizing this work and making it accessible. Graduate student theses are represented in the census items toward the end of the journal. A survey form immediately follows this section. Its function is to obtain current information concerning theses dealing with visible language.

Another survey page requests information concerning the development and emphasis of university courses in typography or visible language. We are interested in publishing innovative class projects—in sharing ideas and objectives as they relate to design education.

It is evident from the results of the first census and its generation of contents for this issue that research and theory in graphic design is in its infancy. There is not widespread recognition of the need to develop a structure for understanding graphic design. Design educators appear to be committed to maintaining the state of the art. They may entertain new technology but for the most part they are not examining the changing pattern of communication within the culture. They are not questioning basic assumptions, looking for pattern, or generating new information. An issue such as this one should stimulate interest in serious investigation into research and theory as it relates to graphic design.

The practice of graphic design is moving from isolated solutions to visual systems. Dramatic changes in the communication environment—such as increased computer use, the availability of in-house typography, and visual production systems—have pragmatically altered the context of design. But the need for a more integrated understanding of graphic design revolves around the complexity of the communication task, the number of variables which are part of a communication. There are methods for dealing with complexity but in a hunger for simplicity and quick resolution of problems, many designers move visual elements around on the surface, clutch a tradition that is tentative at best, and in the long run avoid the deeper more complex issues that begin to define the communication process.

Visual systems increase the designer's impact on society at the same time it uses the designer's time efficiently allowing a more creative, innovative approach to the specific communication problem. But if the designer is capable of analyzing a communication problem only in terms of its surface organization or production technique, then there has been a fundamental failure in his preparation as a designer. Identifying and isolating the symbolic reference possibilities, the inherent possibilities and limitations of different communication codes, together with the development of visual metaphor become an approach to communication that goes beyond surface concerns into the substance and function of communication itself.

If we succeed in beginning to integrate some research and theory, it will be because enough students, faculty, and professional designers have the curiosity, the tenacity, maybe even the audacity to look for the connections that deeply identify the structure of graphic design.