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READING MINDS: THE BOOK AS A COMMUNICATIONAL SPACE (PRACTICE + PEDAGOGY)

CONTEXT

There is a book design adage that if a book is a success, it's because of the writing and if it's a failure, it's the cover design (Smith, 2002). This puts a considerable amount of pressure on the book designer charged with creating the conditions necessary for the potential reader to "make contact" with the content of a book. Practical limitations, agendas of the various stakeholders in the functional, aesthetic, commercial and critical success of the book, "sensitivities" and expectations of the readership all help delineate the parameters of the visual codes, selected by the designer, which frame the communicational space with which the public interacts.

Book designers research, compile and interpret information that helps them to determine the various formal attributes of the book. What size should it be? What format should it have? What should be the approach to the cover design, the typography, and the structure of the layout? The selected attributes may make certain impressions, on the potential reader, about the nature of the content. These impressions are interpretations of meaning which may create expectations about the character of the book, its content and style of writing. In other words, the formal attributes give the book a certain "visual identity" which is intended to represent to the reading public, in a carefully selected visual language, the "essence" of the author's work.

The interesting thing about books as communicational spaces, is that they are, at the same time, repositories of ideas, vehicles for culture, and cultural artifacts. They function as holders, preservers, and disseminators of knowledge and information. Books, if they are substantial in content,

visually arresting, persuasive, or aesthetically beautiful in form, have a chance of "living a long life" and contributing to the knowledge and enjoyment of people. Jan Tschichold wrote, with respect to book design and typography, "...neither the old style nor a new style matters; quality does" (Tschichold, 1975). If the books endure, they can communicate the quality, or the lack thereof, in aspects of the culture, particularly the visual culture, of the time period in which they were designed, and produced.

The creation of the book as a communicational space could be considered a two step process. Meaning and expectations are created first, when the designer, responding to intrinsic and extrinsic demands, assigns certain formal attributes to the book and second, when members of the reading public interpret those attributes and, as a result, are compelled, or not, to examine the book or to purchase it in order to read it.

What are the intrinsic and extrinsic demands of the book design process that cause the designer to select some components of visual language over others? Many of the decisions concerning the formal attributes of the book are made on the basis of practical limitations such as budget—in my own work for scholarly publishers this often means using a six-by-nine inch vertical format, two-colour cover, paper preselected on the basis of price and availablility, and black ink for the interior. The remaining formal attributes are determined by *reading minds*.

READING YOUR OWN MIND

An inevitable part of the design process is the effect of intrinsic demands —the designer's own cognitive styles and abilities, motivations, personal interests, value systems and ethical standards. These vary considerably. The primary concern of some designers is that their cover designs command attention in bookstore windows or that they "jump off the shelves" and say "buy me"—others are concerned with representing the author's work, and some with creating beauty, balance, and harmony while some

aim to provide an easy and pleasurable reading experience. In the process of designing, the task is filtered through these "wants," "needs," and "ways of knowing" and is interpreted and reinterpreted accordingly.

When designing and when teaching design, I often begin and ask my students to begin with a statement of "the communication need" or goal that can lead to generative ideas which are often, at least initially, intuitive responses to the design task. Even in devising a "statement of need," we filter information through our internal "systems." It is often difficult to frame the task verbally at the beginning of the design process—the subconscious brings up multiple possible directions which may be pursued and developed. The initial idea may come "from within", but always in response to, or framed by, demands that come from "without."

In the process of teaching book design and typography, I intentionally and unintentionally, colour the students' understanding of and approaches to their work through my choices and areas of interest. They learn from Jan Tschichold, for example, that "...incessant carefulness and attention to detail [are] as important a part of book production as careful editing (McLean, 1975).

If designers develop the ability to read and understand their own minds, they may gain insights into their own intuitive, associative and creative processes—their own agendas. Awareness of these processes, through introspection, may make them better able to continue the design work while simultaneously carrying on a focused search in their own worlds of associative connection and responding to extrinsic demands.

READING THE CLIENT'S MIND

The design of a book begins when the publisher or editor briefs the art director or designer about the content. The author may have expressed expectations or opinions about certain aspects of the design. The marketing manager will also likely have contributed ideas, but for entirely different reasons.

In the process of developing a concept, book designers act on behalf of many people: the author, the publisher, the marketing manager, the editor, the production manager and, near the end of the line, the bookseller. Becoming familiar with and being respectful of the content of a book, designers must also take into consideration the interests, expectations, desires, interpretations—the agendas of these stakeholders in the outcome of the design process, while responding to and being in tune with the prevailing trends and visual culture of the time.

"Will this book put the author's work 'on the map?'"

"Will it win a design award?"

"Will it cause the reading public to 'shell out' $39.95 plus tax?"

If designers can communicate with the other stakeholders, verbally and visually in a kind of cross-cultural communication, about their research-based and intuitive responses to the design task, they can negotiate and eventually articulate shared visual codes—codes where a high degree of consensus exists concerning their interpretation.

On the path that leads to the creation of the physical communicational space (the book), an astonishing number of intellectual, emotional, and psychological communicational spaces are created. These shared ideas and revelations are complex.

"The type is good, very 'hip,' but could you make it a bit 'edgier?'"

"No pink. It's written from a feminist perspective. It will give the wrong impression. And no brown...the author hates brown."

"I like it. I really do, but it doesn't say 'sociology' to me."

These negotiations, for better or worse, help shape the designed product. After much description, interrogation and deliberation with the other stockholders, and equipped with various insights, it is possible for designers to approach the "appropriate" and the *other* stakeholders become aware that, in *their* version of the process, the designer's personal agenda is included with the extrinsic demands.

Several approaches may frame and take the communication concept in several directions at once. In an iterative design process, the approach that is selected and the direction that the selected approach will take, may be determined mainly by the manner in which clients can reconcile it with extrinsic demands including the motivations of the designer.

It is difficult to articulate the process through which verbal communications are translated into visual ones. There are no precise answers—the designers' interpretations, attitudes and beliefs along with the communication context will help to determine them. Designers should be aware of the signs, associations, images, thoughts, and metaphors that are put in place during the iterative process and how they are related to the communication task at hand (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Teaching the skills involved in this process is also difficult since it involves "reading" the reactions of people to information and also their interpretations of that information. It is an asset to be a skilful interviewer, listener and observer. I encourage students to scrutinize and analyze the client's written and verbal remarks and to consider the notion that clues, yielding more or less appropriate approaches, can be found in them. Approaches with a strongly subjective or expressive character are invariably more difficult to translate into a form that can be shared with and interpreted by the readers of the book.

When there is a consensus about particular approaches to a design, the concepts selected—the ones that seem to communicate especially well—tend to provide a strong and direct link between the designers' or design students' motivations and the extrinsic demands of the task.

Upon seeing the finished designs for the first time, clients have been known to say, "It's just right. It's exactly what I wanted. How did you know?" We explain to them that we read minds.

READING THE READER'S MIND

The designer explores the communicational terrain, taking various routes, and exploring routes suggested by the stakeholders, until a shared terrain is discovered and an understanding of the task emerges. Only then is an approach chosen and carried out.

Along come the members of the reading public, with all their biases and "sensitivities." The book has been designed. The book exists. The possibility for a communicational space to be created between book and reader exists. Do the potential readers share the established communicational terrain? Do they meet the message? How do they see, understand, and interpret the book?

The first point of contact between book and reader is generally the front cover. In his book *Front Cover: Great Jacket and Cover Designs,* British writer Alan Powers says, "The book cover is the marriage broker, continually driven to seduce and deceive, even if in the most charming and learned ways." (Powers, 2001). This gives the potential reader little credit and fails to take into account that, when scanning book covers on bookstore shelves or in window displays, the average "glance time" is one quarter of a second—not a great deal of time for seduction and deception, let alone interpretation of meaning (Smith, 2002). In that quarter of a second, possibly in a six-by-nine inch space and in two colours, potential readers expect, knowingly or unknowingly, to see something that is visually arresting, meaningful, and in tune with the trends of the time, to get enough of an impression about the content of the book, to enable them to decide whether or not to investigate further and perhaps to "shell out" $39.95 plus tax. Who needs a marriage broker? It is decidedly a "love at first sight" situation.

Although it is possible to delineate approaches aimed at a specific segment of a reading audience and to deal with the notion of "fitness to public" through research, many share the perspective of Scott Richardson,

Art Director of Knopf Canada, Doubleday Canada and Random House who says,

> ...There is no science to this. There's nowhere I can go and find out that if I use this colour, or this image or this type I will sell X number of books. It's not like the advertising business, where they focus-group to death. In the book business, it's guesswork. (Smith, 2002).

Is it guesswork? Or is it considered work by a designer, in collaboration with a group of experts, all of whom have a broad general knowledge and detailed and specific knowledge of the issues involved in the production of a book.

The design of a book *can* be the result of exploration, interaction, and negotiation with the objective of creating a communicational space where the resulting visual attributes of the book "...favour the interpretation of a message in a certain (approximate) predictable direction" (Frascara, 2003) and allow for interpretation by the audience.

CONCLUSION

Author P.L. Travers once said, "A writer is, after all, only half his book. The other half is the reader and from the reader the writer learns" (Simpson, 1988). The book designer learns from both reader and writer and is, perhaps, the glue that binds those two halves together.

Under the best conditions the designer, as a result of reading minds, designs a book that assists the author in putting his or her ideas in contact with readers. The design adds dimensions to the book as a cultural object of "value," as determined by the various stakeholders, and delights the readers along the way. Under the best conditions, the designer has created the book as a communicational space.

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