

GRAPHIC DESIGN in URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Robert Harland



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Graphic Design in Urban Environments

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To my parents, who took me to live on the other side of the world.

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Preface

What are the visual communication requirements of a built environment? How do urban places function through graphic objects? Why is this so little understood by built environment professionals? In this book, I explore these questions through the perspective of graphic design as urban design.

By examining a number of historical and theoretical approaches, including those from graphic design historians, urban theorists and semioticians, the book exposes the difficulties with inter-disciplinary discourse about the topic. After outlining the basis of an argument, I analyse this through four key approaches: history, imageability, pattern and representamen. Each of these is supported by empirical case studies that utilize material from a photographic collection I have developed over the past decade.

Through super-imposing a graphic design perspective onto established units of urban design analysis, as well as less formal environments, *Graphic Design in Urban Environments* will look at the way graphic design functions as a layer of urban design, thus contributing to the way cities work.

This book not only fills a gap between the concerns of graphic communication and urban development, it also links the smaller concerns of type design with the larger ambitions of urban design through the inter-relationship of a type–typographic–graphic–urban continuum. In doing so, a framework is offered for thinking about micro–meso–macrographic urban interventions.

There are many who have supported and inspired the ideas presented here, not least the many scholars referred to in the text. I am particularly grateful to those mentioned in the acknowledgements.

Robert Harland

Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of many influences. I am indebted to those who taught me, notably Chris Timings at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham where I studied Information Graphics between 1983 and 1986, and Tim Heath at the University of Nottingham where I undertook a part-time PhD in Architecture (Social Sciences) between 2004 and 2010. The title of this book negotiates the relationship between these two formative experiences, and although it disseminates much of the exploratory thinking from my doctoral studies, it stems from early exposure to the relationship between signs and cities (exemplified by Chris's design for the City of Westminster street nameplate) featured in this book.

In between these two educational experiences, and before starting my own practice, I worked in the design consultancy sector as a practising graphic designer where I learned about the systematic rigour required for corporate identity and signage design for large organizations such as Land Rover. For that experience I must thank David Pearce and Amanda Tatham. During my time in professional design practice, and before beginning an academic career, I teamed up with the architects and urban designers Mick Timpson and Sue Manley and learned first-hand how other design professionals functioned when working with municipalities. It was at this interface with local authority clients that questions began to emerge relating to the visual communication requirements of a built environment. This stimulated a move into academia to pursue academic research and has since guided my research interests.

In academia, various colleagues have supported my research interests in a field not blessed with many qualified PhD holders. These included Rob Kettell at the University of Derby and Judith Mottram at Nottingham Trent University and, more recently, Marsha Meskimmon at Loughborough University. In doing their jobs well, they encouraged and allowed me time to cultivate a research agenda. Malcolm Barnard and Marion Arnold also deserve a special mention as colleagues who invited me to divulge many of the ideas in this book as part of a Visual Culture module we taught between 2010 and 2015. Cecilia Maria Loschiavo dos Santos at the University of São Paulo has also been an invaluable collaborator for exploring wider cross-cultural design matters.

The relationship between the key concepts discussed in the book have thus developed over a decade (and more) leading up to publication. Aside from very helpful comments made by reviewers of the book's first manuscript, the content also benefits

from urban design scholars who displayed great patience and support in reviewing an earlier journal article that *Graphic Design in Urban Environments* expands. Hence, this book is derived in part from an article published in the *Journal of Urban Design* in July 2015 (© Taylor and Francis, available at: www.tandfonline.com/DOI:10.1080/13574809.2015.1031211).

Finally, on a personal note, my wife Maria and children Gina and Leo deserve a special mention. They have waited for me on numerous occasions when I needed time to take that one last photograph.

1

Introduction

'The streets, the people, the buildings, and the changing scenes do not come already labeled.'

STRAUSS 1961: 12

An everyday occurrence

On Sunday mornings between September and May in England, thousands of parents watch their children play football for one of the 55,000 teams registered with the Football Association. According to the Football Foundation's website (www.footballfoundation.org.uk) a minority of parents are 'aggressive, sarcastic and disrespectful' towards the referee, those running the line, the opposition team and their manager. To curb their enthusiasm, parents are required to stand behind a barrier usually running the length of the pitch about two metres away from the edge of the playing area. This is a temporary structure comprising a dozen or so metre-high plastic pegs or triangular banners hammered into the ground ten metres apart, linked by a strip of bright rope or fabric repeating the word 'Respect' along its length.

The barrier is an example of a product that privileges communication over materiality through graphic affect, meaning the message is more powerful than the physical structure. This book is about such everyday objects that impact on human behaviour in the urban environment. Throughout, these are treated as the products of graphic design in the broad sense: they are graphic interventions in pursuit of improved circumstances in an ensemble of people and place. The aim of this book is to identify the scope, explain the reasons and analyse the impact of graphic design in the urban environment, and to locate it within urban design.

Who is this book for?

This book is written to appeal to the two disciplinary perspectives of graphic and urban design. In higher education, the former is usually associated with art and design, while

the latter is allied to the training of built environment professionals such as architecture, landscape architecture, city planning and civil engineering. In bridging the gap between the two, the book will primarily appeal to students of design wanting to accommodate the two perspectives in their work.

Most of the book will appeal to undergraduate students because the intensity of design discipline teaching in graphic design or architecture means that inter-disciplinary thinking in these fields is difficult to fully grasp until postgraduate level. Deviations in the text that consider perspectives from geography, communication studies and philosophy will serve as basic introductions to shared concepts between different disciplines. For example, graphicacy in geography is little known by graphic design teachers and students, yet there is much overlap and complementary knowledge between these fields in areas such as typography.

As the book is about everyday things that we each experience as pedestrians, cyclists, motorists, tourists, commuters, and sport enthusiasts – or any interaction we have with cities – there is a case for the book having wider appeal. In this sense it may be a useful resource for anyone who is conscious of their role in shaping cities. This is a long list: 'politicians in central government and on local councils; civil servants; business people; accountants; engineers; property and estate agents; investors; organisers of arts events and festivals; creators of public art and those who commission it; fire and crime prevention officers; managers of leisure facilities; tour operators; health service planners; education policy makers; transport operators; promoters of economic development; and the members and managers of a wide variety of quangos, statutory organizations, agencies and community groups, politicians, entrepreneurs, policy makers' (Cowan 1997: 16).

Origin, bias and approach

When graphic designers speak of how graphic design is part of the urban fabric the association between graphic design and urban public space stops at the point where more in-depth understanding of the built environment is needed. Extending this acknowledged relationship is a key motivation for this book at a time when urban settlement is at the forefront of human concerns.

Not since the 1950s has a graphic design perspective been so needed. Then, Herbert Spencer pioneered a modernist approach to looking at urban graphics through the environmental photography of the city vernacular with a 'graphic eye' (Poyner 2002: 62). This happened at the dawn of the unprecedented expansion of cities that we are only now beginning to grasp. Despite Spencer's work documenting the visual landscape and haphazard graphic language of the street there have been concentrated partial perspectives emphasizing the graphic landscape, but no comprehensive attempt to integrate a graphic design perspective with an urban design agenda. This book expands on Spencer's work using the same medium of the camera as a documentary device coupled with an open mind about what graphic form in the urban context might be. For example, the squiggle



FIGURE 1.1 *Graphic attributes at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (London, UK, 2015). Both of these ‘squiggles’ elaborate on the most fundamental of graphic mark making properties in the simple use of line.*

on the front cover of this book that defines the visual appearance of a fountain at London’s Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and the adjacent ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture by Anish Kapoor, are both justified in the pages that follow as displaying graphic attributes.

This book also benefits from the author’s perspective gained in professional practice during the 1990s through design work on a number of signage and place identity projects, in collaboration with architects and urban designers. At a time when Bristol’s Legible City scheme in the UK set wayfinding standards, since copied in other cities such as Liverpool and London, good and not so good examples of graphic design became easier to locate and compare. Poor quality objects in some urban contexts that failed to satisfy basic requirements such as the legibility of letterforms stood out as being sub-standard. For example, Figure 1.2 displays how typography is used to variable effect on two fingerposts, a basic item of street furniture.

Attention to typography is one of the underpinning attributes of this book’s structure, which is predisposed towards the relationship between four ascending design fields: type design, typographic design, graphic design and urban design. An association



FIGURE 1.2 *Pedestrian signs in Derby (left) and Liverpool (right) (Derby 2014 and Liverpool 2008, UK).*

The recessed white lettering on the Derby fingerpost is partly obscured by shadow compared to the more legible Liverpool scheme.

between them is emphasized to structure the ensuing arguments. Defining each of these in their own right has not been a priority, but understanding the relationship between them has. Particular emphasis has been given to graphic design and expanding on what that may mean beyond its relationship to type and typographic design in the context of urban design. For example, graffiti is one of the most instantaneous ways graphic communication smears the built environment with iconography, but it is neither type nor typographic design. Hence, this book spans four key areas of design practice, as shown in the relationship depicted in Figure 1.3. This positions graphic design as a layer of urban design at an intermediate level between the detailed concerns of type and typographic design (also layers), but within the magnitude of urban design.

A fingerpost sign that incorporates typographic, pictographic and idiographic images into a structure to orientate pedestrians is a relatively simple object. It is therefore surprising why, in the twenty-first century, poor quality examples persist. These examples demonstrate how the design of a typeface, how it is arranged, how it integrates with other graphic devices such as an arrow or a map, contributes to the functioning – or malfunctioning – of a city. This is plain to see (or not, if you are partially sighted). The object-to-object and object-to-space relationship is clear, and should be reinforced by the citing of such things. But the physical scale of type, typographic and graphic design on a fingerpost is comparatively small in the urban context. A more suitably scaled example of the type–typographic–graphic–urban design continuum is exemplified in a project in an English seaside resort. Blackpool’s *Comedy Carpet* was created by the artist Gordon Young in collaboration with the graphic design company Why Not Associates. It is a 2,200m² work of art commemorating the town’s comedy heritage using more than 160,000 granite letters set in concrete. In this work we see the blend of art and graphic design (this relationship is further explained in Chapter 2) in a £2.6m project within an urban setting, making a significant contribution to Blackpool Council’s multi-million pound regeneration of the seafront. See Figure 1.4.