

Mutable Text

~ the Interplay of Urban Graphics and Architectural Surfaces ~

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INTRODUCTION

Within the urban context, graphics are dependent upon the architectural surface for their display and are, by various means, integrated into its very character, materiality and structure. As my primary intention is to discuss the interrelationship of urban graphics and architecture, it is necessary that some background and definition be given to the former. By graphics, I mean the organization, content and effect of both text and image and their cumulative ability to signify, influence and impact our physical and social relationships to our surroundings.

Philip Meggs, a Professor of Communication Arts and Design has offered, in various tomes, a thorough and comprehensible analysis of graphics and graphic design. In *Type & Image, the language of graphic design*, he sheds light on the subject, an often illusory and abstract set of concepts. "Although all the visual arts share properties of either two-or three-dimensional space, graphic space has a special character born from its communicative function. Perhaps the most important thing graphic design does is give communications resonance, richness of tone that heightens the expressive power of the page (surface). It transcends the dry conveyance of information, intensifies the message, and enriches the audience's experience."¹ This "communicative function" is what gives historical significance to a society's desire to tell the story of a people, event or place. "Graphic design has a synergistic relationship with the social milieu in which it occurs. It is shaped and formed by its culture. In turn, it helps shape and form the culture. It is neither an art nor a science; rather, it is a hybrid form of public communication that calls upon its practitioners to be visual editors, graphic inventors, and form builders."²

The compositional and plastic form of the graphic has reflected the public awareness and experience of local and universal social conditions throughout the centuries. Most notably, architectural surfaces have been the tableau on which pertinent histories, identities and cultural values are recorded. With this additional layer of graphic legibility buildings, and the built environment, have played an active role in generating greater meaning beyond the bricks and mortar of facade and threshold. It has allowed architecture to become the mediator between the perceived static impenetrability of permanence and the mutable, interpretive qualities

of imagination and information. "Graphic design flourishes when cultures invest in the aesthetics of public experience and when a society understands that the resonance from how things are said is as important as what is said."³

The stories, depicted with both text and image, are ingrained in the both the psychological and physical context of the city and, as such, effect our general knowledge and recognition of it. Their graphic content has come to represent the overall quality of the built environment at multiple scales, namely: the object, the building and the urban fabric. Overtime, building technology has played an important part in determining the physical state of the graphic and its relative integration into architectural surfaces. The extent to which these surfaces have come to define the social mentality of a specific time and place can be illustrated in three primary categories: the Permanent, the Temporary, and the Mutable. Each in its own way describes the interplay between the graphic, its built form and the cultural values that infuse it with meaning. A fourth category, the Implied is present in each.

Permanent

Relief/Inscriptions
Index/Signage

Temporary

Graffiti/Postings
Murals/Billboards

Mutable

Virtual/Digital
Permeable

Implied

Narrative/Anecdotal
Memory

THE PERMANENT

As early civilizations developed, it was necessary to make a transition from the impermanence of an audible or spoken language to a more permanent method of communication. Pictorial imagery, representing relationships between objects and figures, gave visual presence to events previous or yet to occur. As well, alphabets, consisting of a series of abstract and interchangeable symbols, created the ability to transmit knowledge indirectly; from one person to another or from one generation to another. Writing and pictorial imagery became the "graphic counterpart" to speech, procuring the concept and acceptance of a past and a future. As speech is limited by "the fallibility of human memory and an immediacy of expression", the stories inhabiting the cultural identity of societies are often lost.⁴ "The invention of writing brought people the luster of civilization and made it possible to preserve hard-won knowledge, experiences, and thoughts."⁵

Before the invention of paper, progressive societies inscribed their respective graphic languages on the solid surfaces of monuments, temples and tombs—recording deification, governance, sporting events and mythology. "Early visual language included: *pictographs*, elemental pictures representing objects; *ideograms*, which signify concepts or ideas rather than specific objects; and *petroglyphs*, which are carved into rock. From these simple origins, cultures have evolved collective and complex systems of signs and symbols that enable its members to communicate."⁶ This desire to communicate beyond the present, immortalizing significant ideologies and events for existing and future generations to observe, has transformed into various and more abstract means and methods of *reading* and *navigating* contemporary space.

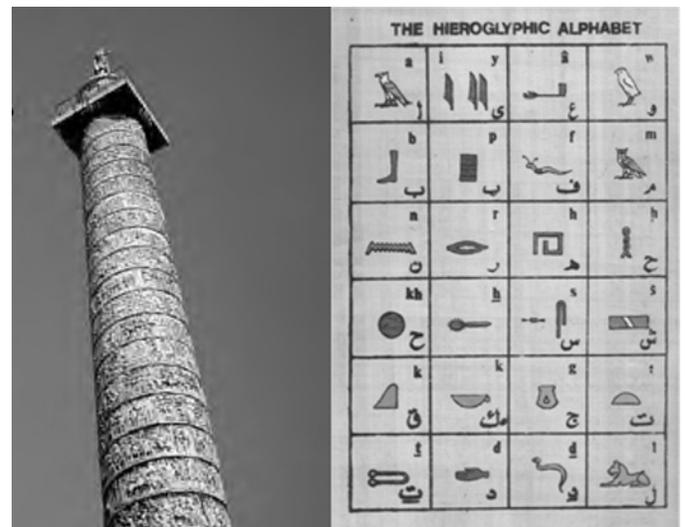


Fig. 1. Hieroglyphics.

In the contemporary city, the permanent initiation of the *pictograph*, *ideogram* and *petroglyph* form an *index*—a visual devise that orients one to its organizational code. Abstracted symbols on street signs, the system of numbers and letters addressing specific locations and inscriptions denoting the owner, designer or date of origin of an edifice, become navigational mechanisms. Each has a role in determining to the relative placement of structures and spaces in the urban network—acting as referential keys, distance markers and prescriptive patterns. The address, the marquee and the inscription are static, informative and passive in nature, while the traffic signal, stop sign and detour are active and directive. The *index* is non-preferential in this way, acknowledging the city's positive and negative spatial conditions, its vertical and horizontal surfaces, circulation zones and scenographic elements. As a whole, the *index* forms a visual library, allowing the population to make sense out of the chaos of individual and collective occurrences by generating the gestalt of

the overall city structure. Concurrently, one catalogs the evolution of the city through repetitive and occasional movements—observing and responding to constants with reference to its ever-changing configurations.



Fig. 2. Street Signage.

The permanent nature of the graphic, in the form of the *index*, creates a figural model, shaping one's understanding of a complex three-dimensional environment. It illuminates the cultural value for a comprehensible set of identifiers that offer specific and general views, orientations, reference points and relationships of the parts in and amongst the whole.

THE TEMPORARY

Graffiti, postings, murals and billboards are temporary forms of urban graphics. They offer a fleeting glimpse into the mentality and attitudes of a fractionalized society at a specific point in time. Exposing an undercurrent of social commentary they add a more provocative layer to the architectural surface of the city. The plywood construction site perimeter, the concrete highway underpass and the corrugated shudders of the newsstand become the public forum from which to initiate discussion and reaction.

Through the process of assimilation, the social milieu imbeds an "environmental meaning" into the overall surroundings, represented by the interplay of the temporary graphic and the fragments of the city infrastructure. Kim Dovey suggests that, "... environmental meaning is generated at least as much by social process as by built form, that meaning grows through interaction in everyday life as well as being anchored in built form. One of the strengths of a phenomenological approach is that it is neither dominated by nor excludes aesthetics from its domain. It does not detach aesthetics from social life but treats it as an important and integral part of the everyday life world."⁷

With controversial and sometimes humorous candor, the temporary graphic cajoles and provokes the status quo into action, exposing a contrary reality to the

accepted, authoritative and conformist concerns of the unquestioned society. Most often unauthorized, they distinguish the unspoken divisions amongst neighborhoods and districts unearthing the economic and social strata. To this extent, they ensure a multifaceted and perhaps, 'fair-market' set of messages and imagery. "The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."⁸

Vernacular, in the sense that they are formed by indigenous, reproducible and available methods, these displays give voice to a population otherwise unable to afford conventional means of media and advertisement. "When Walter Benjamin (in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) discussed the reproducibility of images, he pointed out that the loss of their exchange value, their "aura," made them interchangeable, and that in an age of pure information the only thing that counted was the "shock"—the shock of images, their surprise factor. This shock factor was what allowed an image to stand out: moreover it was also characteristic of our contemporary condition and of the dangers of life in the modern metropolis. These dangers resulted in constant anxiety about finding oneself in a world in which everything was insignificant and gratuitous."⁹ These sorts of interventions form a counterpoint, incorporating the "shock" value necessary to the growth of the culture, the form of the context and the power of experience. "Architecture is not about the conditions of design but about the design of conditions that will dislocate the most traditional and regressive aspects of our society and simultaneously reorganize these elements in the most liberating way, so that our experience becomes the experience of events organized and strategized through architecture."¹⁰ In this sense, the architectural surface once again is used to project the attitudes, intentions and ideologies of the broader culture, as it questions, transitions and adapts within its inevitable evolution.

Each form of temporary graphic represents a bubbling up of information, typically repressed by the general population. The messages are brilliant, brash and indicative of the tastes and talents of the individual. They question the authority of ownership and disturb the expectation of cleanliness and order. The existence and validity of the *public* realm is challenged by these messages. "The term "public" signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. ... it is related to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together."¹¹



Fig. 3. Postings — Graffiti-Exhibits.

THE MUTABLE

Emerging technologies have released the previously static nature of the urban graphic from its imbedded or inscribed form. Where once words signified the specificity of a particular time and place, they have become *mutable*—explicating a cultural preference for the dissolution of material and spatial permanence. The implementation and perception of what I will refer to as ‘mutable text’, can be interpreted as a reflection of

cultural values manifest in new approaches to architectural design. New technologies have allowed the mastery of fluidity, through the mechanics of its application, innovation and structural integration. Where once it was necessary to surmise the meaning of the message by sewing together bits and fragments, the fluidity of mutable text fills in the blanks.

Bernard Tschumi suggests that “... technology is inextricably linked to our contemporary condition: to say that society is now about media and mediation makes us aware that the direction taken by technology is less the domination of nature through technology than the development of information and the construction of the world as a set of images. In the words of the French writer, philosopher, and architect Paul Virilio, “we are not dealing anymore with the technology of construction, but with the construction of technology.”¹² The construction of the mutable graphic within the digital framework has allowed it to become progressively distinct from the identity of a building and discreet from its function or inner workings. As such, buildings have been transformed into virtual billboards, displaying advertisements and visual references. The collage of text and image are perceived as permeable, temporal and transformative against the otherwise static nature of the built environment. Images and text dissolve and transform, one into another, providing a visual interplay between the message and the structure of the building supporting it. The translucent and ever-changing nature of the surface has determined a new architectural language, transcribing an overlay or veil of information—eclipsing the once recognizable for the potential impact of spectacle and consumption.

In the contemporary city, the media has become the primary influence on the perceived visuality of the urban graphic. It calls attention to a myriad of subjects and products on which the consumer society relies. The graphic infuses our psyches by way of a phenomenal experience by heightening intellectual curiosity through ethereal evocation. Methodically composed, they attempt an overall continuity and a gestalt of fragmented urban conditions, connections and contexts.

Mutable text alludes to the relationship between a *real* condition manufactured in the digital realm and an existing *reality* still outside of it. Subsequently, a dichotomy persists between an integrated and detached perception of the context. Momentarily one is absorbed by the message and simultaneously reminded of its physical inaccessibility. A dual condition exists whereby, on the one hand, our values may be seen to influence a particular production of technology and, on



Fig. 4. Toys "R" Us—New York City.

the other, the capacity of new technologies, both virtual and structural, illustrate and expose our values.

In distinguishing between the cities of the past: the *Traditional* and *Modern* cities, and the *Contemporary* city or the "City of Spectacle," Christine Boyer describes the impact of the media on the city and its new role in the consumer society. "The new technologies of cultural production and consumption have saturated the City of Spectacle with an array of images. The art of selling now dominates urban space, turning it into a new marketplace for architectural styles and fashionable lives. If highly adaptable production techniques can create products and services upon demand, then consumer tastes must be constantly manipulated to desire whatever is new. Images become aestheticized commodities representing livable cities for sale, placing products in lifestyle stage sets, turning museum exhibitions and cultural entertainments into events for corporate enhancement."¹³

The passerby is called to attention not only by the formal character of an urban condition, but by the messages floating and shifting within it. One's memory thus is tapped in a multi-dimensional manner. The surface reminds one of a place by way of an event, its code and its graphic quality, color and lightness. "Simulated environments, the spreading out of designed milieus, posed and theatrically staged compositions, the blown-up chromolithographs of billboards and mesmerizing advertisements dazzle in front of our eyes as pure visual displays. Through simulations we manipulate space and time, traveling nostalgically backward through historic reconstructions, projecting our vision forward in futuristic travel adventures."¹⁴ The resultant liberation from the specific to the all encompassing may be viewed as a commentary or representation of a shift in how 'buildings' are regarded. Materiality and technology have merged in such ways that edges and

surfaces are indistinguishable. A more cognitive experience or perception of the city has been the result. "Our contemporary encyclopedia of illusionary forms and historical imagery seems to be a gigantic list of entries, constantly being rearranged in odd juxtapositions, fantastic compositions, and imaginary associations as if we were manipulating pattern languages and sets of serial imagery."¹⁵ Mutable text thus encourages the passing of time in order to 'commemorate' the city's significance. As well, it marks moments along a continuum, revealing, generating and transforming our memories of them.

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Notes

- ¹ Philip Meggs. *Type & Image, the language of graphic design*. Van Nostrand Reinhold. New York. 1992. Introduction viii.

² Ibid. p. 188.

³ Ibid. p. 188.

⁴ Philip Meggs. *A History of Graphic Design*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New York. 1998. p. 4.

⁵ Ibid. p. 4.

⁶ Philip Meggs. *Type & Image, the language of graphic design*. Van Nostrand Reinhold. New York. 1992. p. 4.

⁷ Kim Dovey. *Place, Ideology and Power*. *Transitions* 35. p. 36.

⁸ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1958. p. 12.

⁹ Bernard Tschumi. *Architecture and Disjunction*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 1998. p. 246.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 259.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1958. p. 5.

¹² Bernard Tschumi. *Architecture and Disjunction*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 1998. p. 245.

¹³ M. Christine Boyer. *The City of Collective Memory*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 1996. p. 65.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 47.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 48.