

Designers and Non-Designers: Visual Diversity and Inclusiveness in Graphic Design

Let's face it: we designers don't like it when non-designers design, or think they do. Like all professionals, we are experts in what we do, and we hold our work to the highest standards. We have spent years honing our skills and worked hard for recognition. Is it surprising we feel disrespected when architects, sign makers, printers, or even CEOs try their hand at our work? And if that wasn't enough, we feel frustrated and defeated when faced with the fact that our designs degenerate and that we can't live in a perfectly designed world.

Despite those opening gripes, my presentation is not about how to expand our practice or about how to prevent clients from taking the initiative on designing their own printed collateral pieces. On the contrary, I will be talking about why and how we need to let go and learn to integrate non-designers into our practice. My reflections are open-ended and do not pretend to give quick and immediate answers. I will show you work in process and some conclusions I've reached through my research and teaching.

When I talk about non-designers, I am referring to two groups of individuals, both of which have little or no formal design education. The first group refers to vernacular designers — sign painters, street artists, illustrators, printers, and artisans — who practice a specific form of design that can be representative of a place or a culture. They work with traditional tools and techniques and are cultural repositories of identity, tradition, and history. The second group consists of white-collar professionals such as software engineers, public relations staff, marketers, and administrators who, unlike the first group, have full access to the tools and vocabulary of professional design. Their responsibility is to design for the (primarily corporate) community they serve.

When design and production split during the Industrial Revolution, and the *Bauhaus* (1920) and the *International Typographic Style* (1940) gave us a set of principles upon which contemporary graphic design was to be based, there was a promise of a utopian world where we designers could deliver quality, functionality, and aesthetics to all, and where design was to be a vehicle for social change and cultural revitalization. Till now, the practice and education of our discipline have largely been based on these ideals of a universal design style, with designers acting as conduits of information, clarity, and order. At a time when the access to information and the elevation of aesthetic and functional qualities in mass production were paramount, these principles were essential to developing graphic design as a tool for democracy.

Although times have changed, our design paradigms haven't. By asserting the power of graphic design through a universal style that takes pride in uniformity and consistency, and by replacing "intelligent problem solving" with the expensive, the fashionable, the "cool," designers have retreated to some self-built ivory tower. We now take great pride in the magic of the "before and after," wiping out whatever was designed before us to worship the promise of the new, "our new." This practice has resulted in an enormous imbalance between the cultural/vernacular and corporate/professional forms of design.

The uniformity that this practice has brought to visual culture threatens the richness and diversity of vernacular design, and the sustainability of a model where non-designers are equipped with the basic skills to solve their own communication challenges. As the technology and the context in which we practice change, today's designers need to be more open, flexible, and empathic. In this new globalized world, we need a keen understanding of people, cultures, and belief systems. And we need to teach our students skills and perspectives we haven't traditionally taught.

How can the collaboration between designers and non-designers become more balanced? By coming up with design solutions that are:

1. sustainable
2. owned by their audiences and users
3. participatory
4. flexible
5. ever changing

These are the five essential elements I'll be addressing next.

I want now to focus on the central issue of my presentation. I propose a framework or design methodology that fosters cultural sustainability and visual diversity through ethnographic field research, audience participation, and the reinterpretation of vernacular forms. Through shared and decentralized design solutions, designers can act as conduits of diversity and cultural sustainability.

Integrating the Vernacular: A Case Study

Since 2006 I have been studying and documenting rural Mexican music murals, or *rótulos*, meaning commercial hand-painted street signs. I chose to work with this subculture not only because it represents an untouched vernacular design form, but because over time I became fascinated by the evident similarities between the *rotulistas* (sign painters) and professional designers. (They each have a client-based practice, and they each use a consistent form of graphic language and a specific set of tools and techniques.) In documenting this form of design, I have examined the “membrane” separating local cultural/vernacular and prevalent corporate/professional forms of graphic design.

Rótulos advertise upcoming music concerts in local villages, featuring *música grupera* (Mexican folk music) bands from genres such as *norteño* (Mexican country), *cumbia*, *ranchera*, tropical, and techno. They cover the walls of cemeteries, empty plots of land, abandoned houses, sides of ledges, and other un-reclaimed public spaces. Their imposing size and chromatic intensity have become an integral part of the physical and cultural landscape of rural Mexico.

Field ethnography is a qualitative research method that produces a detailed, in-depth observation of people's behavior, beliefs, and preferences by observing and interacting with them in a natural environment. This method has enabled me to gain a deep understanding of the *rotulistas'* practice, tradition, and way of life. Their craft is a form of traditional guild, where the skills and techniques are passed from master to apprentice or from parents to children. They pay no rent nor obtain government authorization for using public spaces, but operate through an informal and territorial distribution of walls that is “tolerated” by the authorities and by property owners. They provide a form of fast, cheap, and effective advertising for a very popular form of entertainment.

Personal Explorations

In exploring opportunities for cross-pollination between the language of the *rotulistas* and my own culturally eclectic design practice (I am Mexican, but went through the graduate program at the Basel School of Design), I developed the following self-authored experimental projects.

1. “A Better Life”

Understanding

Typographic exploration that re-creates/emulates the techniques and forms of the *rotulistas* using analogous tools and materials (laser prints, tracing paper, serigraphy).

2. “Para Español Marque Dos”

Reinterpreting

Large format typographic sign inspired by the forms, colors, and techniques of the music murals using digital technology and commercial sign materials. The graphic language used aims to “brand” the voice and presence of Latinos in the US.

3. San Diego Latino Film Festival

Representative

Poster proposal that aims to represent Latino culture in the US in a sensitive, ethical, and non-cliché manner.

In the classroom

In my teaching, the fields of branding and visual identity systems have been perfect for developing a methodology that more broadly tests the hypothesis and findings of my research. Through the participation of non-designers in the design process, students have been able to go beyond the constraints of their individual worldviews and reach solutions that are more diverse and sustainable.

Over the past two years, my students have designed identity programs for nonprofit groups that are related to their own cultural background, family, or subculture. Utilizing ethnographic research and a methodology that integrates audiences, users, and clients as active participants in the design process, the students have expanded their aesthetics and developed a deeper understanding of audiences. Being fully immersed in their chosen group’s daily workings taught the students to balance their concepts with the group’s needs, challenges, and complexities.

The different communities associated with each group participated as culture clusters, contributing their own practices, graphic language, and collective wisdom to the design process. As a result of these projects, students developed shared, decentralized solutions that produced real and sustainable designs.

Methodology

Based on my personal research and on the experiences of working with nonprofit groups in the classroom, I have devised the following guidelines for integrating non-designers and vernacular design into my students’ design process:

1. Allow students to choose groups they identify with or are a part of;
2. Employ ethnography methods to gain empathy, awareness, and understanding of the group: participate in activities, visit regularly, volunteer, conduct interviews, observe;
3. Study the organization as a subculture with its own vernacular language;
4. Develop creative concepts in conjunction with the client or audience through a participatory activity where the client/user contributes to the design;
5. Recognize that user/client participation is the priority; aesthetics come second;
6. Integrate the client’s current functional concepts and content;
7. Consider maintenance and sustainability: the client needs to be able to reproduce the new design solutions with available technology and resources.

Conclusion

Coming into contact with vernacular forms of design and bringing non-designers into the design process fosters the development of shared, decentralized, and sustainable design solutions that promote and sustain local and cultural identity in the face of a global, uniform language of design.

An ethnographic approach to understanding vernacular forms of design as well as the needs and practices of non-designers provides a platform from which graphic designers can:

1. Reinvigorate tradition and enrich the language of design by reinterpreting vernacular design,

2. Reinstate cultural identity through informed, sensitive, and ethical forms of representation;
3. Foster diversity and sustainability by involving audiences in the design process.