Robert L. Peters, FGDC

Identity Matters

You only get one chance to make a first impression

Cube3 specializes in the design, planning, and construction of contemporary residential developments that appeal to a design-savvy audience. Gary Domoney, art director; Octavo Design (Fitzroy, Australia), design firm.

N-Allo is one of Belgium's leading customer contact centers, which employs "young, dynamic, and motivated people." Frank Andries, designer; Frank Andries Design (Antwerp, Belgium), design firm.

The brief was to create a spiritual and humble logo, suitable for a yoga instructor. Einar Gylfason, designer; Ó! (Reykjavík, Iceland), design firm.

We live in uncertain times of political, social and economic instability. Information overload, overwhelming change, a threatened ecology and staggering social imbalance threaten our individual sense of identity and well-being. Around the globe, wealth, health, knowledge and technological progress are not shared equally—the awareness of these gaps, along with discernment of the underlying global inequities that cause them, have never been more apparent.

Massive data storage capabilities now outstrip human ability to access information and distill knowledge. Vertical specialization, in ever-narrower terms of reference, is a phenomenon affecting all professions—graphic design not excepted. At the same time, real-time connectivity with others around the planet has become a reality thanks to technological advances such as the Internet, interactive media and increased ease of travel.

Culture vs. monoculture

Identity lies at the very core of culture, and it is the key to our understanding of self. Culture encompasses language, traditions, beliefs, morals, laws, social behavior and the art of a community. Understanding culture is imperative in avoiding identity crisis and rootlessness—and it's a prerequisite for the effective shaping of identities and communication. Yet, everywhere in our shrinking world, we can witness increased homogenization, erosion of indigenous culture, the emergence of non-places (uniform airports, generic shopping malls) and the advancement of what some theorists are calling "serial monotony." Are globalization, free-trade agreements, digital technology, the Internet and increased mobility to blame? Ironically, all have contributed to both the loss of individual and collective identity, and at the same time, have literally "brought the world to our doorstep" along with the myriad of opportunities this presents for designers around the globe.

Aware of the advancing threat of monoculture, can the world's identity designers help conserve and revive those things that make human culture distinct and unique? Can we mine the historical depth of individuality and breadth of multiculturalism to bring new gems of identity to light? Is there still time to avoid losing our sense of who we are, where we've come from, where we belong and why these distinctions are so important?

Corporatism and branding

More than half of the world's top one hundred economies are now corporations (not nations, as one might think). Ninety-nine of the top one hundred companies are headquartered in industrialized nations—of the 63,000 transnational corporations now operating worldwide, more than three quarters are based in North America, Europe and Japan. The majority of these highly successful corporations enjoy identities developed by talented designers—nevertheless, there is a growing debate within the worldwide design community about the dual (and sometimes conflicting) role that design plays, both in creating wealth and in serving society through the building of culture.

In 2000, Naomi Klein described the brand backlash against unbridled consumerism in her widely-read book, *No Logo:* "The corporate hunger to homogenize our communities and monopolize public expression is creating a wave of public resistance…" she wrote, documenting the reclaiming of public spaces and the revolt against corporate power. Many empathized with Klein's attack on "the brand bullies," and with Joel Balkan's depiction (in his recent book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit*

and Power) of corporations as "soulless leviathans—uncaring, impersonal, and immoral," that are "using branding to create unique and attractive personalities for themselves." It's hard to dismiss the almost daily reports of small-town wars against "big-box retailers" (Wal-Mart, et al.), culture jamming, brand-busting, and the growth of "hacktivism" and "digilantes," as an ever more informed populace joins the fight of "citizenship vs. consumerism." Not a new topic, really—Victor Papanek predicted the "Coca-colonization" and "Disneyfication" of the entire planet a full generation ago.

Over-branded planet?

So, are we headed for total brand saturation? Will we even know if and when we've become overwhelmed? Human beings around the world are subject to ever more invasive and coercive advertising—in schools, hospitals, doctor's offices, movie theaters, airport lounges, scenic lookouts, washrooms, elevators, on the Internet, on cell phones, on fruit, on public garbage cans, on bus wraps and in e-mail spam. In Canada (where I am writing this), the average citizen experiences more than 16,000 "brand encounters" in the average day, according to statistics from a leading management consultancy (based on my own observations, I would guess this to also be an average in other so-called "developed" nations). Think about it—if you sleep an average of eight hours per day, you and I are each subjected to one thousand brand impressions per hour!

Corporate persona

The most effective identities tend to be highly visual, graphically striking, intellectually or emotionally engaging and memorable—though they may take a myriad of forms. Some, such as Coca-Cola's dynamic ribbon device, Michelin's pneumatic-bodied Bibendum and Shell's shell, have been with us for more than a century—today they are recognized in every corner of the world. Some are loaded with symbolism, such as Apple's metaphoric nibbled fruit, and others are engaging because they act as a blank canvas for the viewer's imagination. Others are context dependent—BMW's advancing split-radiator grille is familiar in rear-view mirrors, the three stripes of adidas are established on sports pitches, and Pizza Hut's characteristic red roof calls out to the hungry throughout the consumer world. Still others, such as Milka Chocolate's distinctive lilac color and Harley-Davidson's trademarked motorcycle engine sound, are dependent on technological advances in media.

Without question, the culture of the viewer and the context of the encounter both play a strong role in the cognitive decoding and understanding of identities—the blue beret of United Nations peace-keepers (and its meaning) may be instantly recognizable in Sarajevo or the Golan Heights, yet could easily be mistaken as a fashion statement on a London high street. Depending upon the eye of the beholder, beauty and function can both be found in the simplest of form, as well as in the most ornate of iterations.

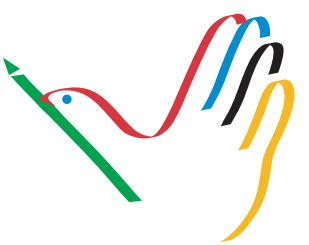
Defining identity

Around the world, there is considerable debate (healthy disagreement) within the field of semiotics and design practice over a definitive taxonomy for identity—in part because of the vastly varying contexts (developed versus developing world, diverse cultural influences, differing linguistic form), and in part because design's lexicology is still in its developmental adolescence. This said, it is useful to at least attempt some definitions and common terms of reference.

Defining identity itself is less problematic than attempting to sort out the varied vocabulary design practitioners use to describe their trade. Identity comes in many different shapes and forms, but always carries with it the double function of signifying differentiation, as well as relationship. Regardless of language or semantic nuance, the former indicates singular character, is about the state of being oneself (and not another) and remaining distinctive under different conditions; the latter centers on kinship, oneness and likeness. Identification, then, is the act or instance of identifying—both to differentiate and to relate.

Graphic Design: Design is the application of intent. Graphic design is the process by which visual identification, visual communication and the display of visual information takes form in a planned manner. As the developed world has moved from smokestacks to information-based societies, the role of design has moved rapidly into the forefront of market economies. Beginning with analysis, the design process involves envisioning and creating solutions, and then

The client is a small theater group with children as its main audience. The brief was to create a playful logo that could be used over time as the group developed. Kjetil Vatne (Bergen, Norway), designer.



UNESCO's world campaign Freedom of Expression, Press, and Democracy called for a corporate identity for global use. Helmut Langer, designer; Helmut Langer Design (Cologne, Germany), design firm.

Pikitup, Johannesburg's aptly named waste-management utility, needed an engaging visual identity that would be readily understood and accepted by the city's citizens. Roy Clucas, designer; Roy Clucas Design Process (Johannesburg, South Africa), design firm.

Luch (meaning "ray") is a family-owned movie theater showing classic, modern and documentary films. The challenge was to design a logo that would correspond to the constructivist style of the movie theater's architecture. Alexander Petrakov (Moscow, Russia), designer.

Et-Savon mestarikokit, an association of the province's best chefs, aims to promote regional cuisine culture through what the designer describes as "chefs for better food." Kari Piippo, designer; Kari Piippo oy (Mikkeli, Finland), design firm.

This logo is designed for a small production house of poetry CDs. The significance of the magpie as a symbol was described as "taking the best, shiniest poems and producing them on CD for listeners." Susan Colberg, designer; Colberg Design (Edmonton, Canada), design firm.

bringing these solutions to life.

Graphic design is finally coming of age. Born in the last century of mother Art and father Commerce (and therefore named "Commercial Art" in its infancy), graphic design has developed a sense of its own identity, along with an understanding of its role and responsibilities relative to society. No longer content with being the whipping boy of marketing, graphic design has evolved into a true profession and has adopted all that comes with professionalism—best practice models, codes of ethics, certification standards and considered criticism. The International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) estimates that there are now more than 1.1 million professional graphic designers practicing around the world.

Logo and Logotype: The term "logo" is a short form for "logotype" or "logogram," from the Greek *logos*, meaning word or speech. Chinese ideographic characters or "ideograms" are good examples of logograms—symbols that directly represent ideas or objects. The interchangeable terms often act as synonyms for graphic trademarks, and they are widely (and inconsistently) used around the world to describe symbols, emblems, monograms and visual phenomena or other graphic devices used to represent or symbolize a product, service or entity.

Corporate Identity: The terms "corporate identity," "CI" and "identity system" evolved during the mid-twentieth century as constructs to control trade dress and the use of trademarks. CI became the discipline through which all visible manifestations were designed as a coherent whole, creating a "corporate persona" and expressing the very raison d'être of an organization (the German word *Erscheinungsbild* provides a particularly apt descriptor for CI, literally translated as "appearance image").

"Corporate culture" refers to the philosophy, values, policies, behavior and so on, that together constitute the unique style of a company. "Corporate image," on the other hand, can be seen as the sum impression that the policies, practices, traits, projections, personnel and operations of a corporation impart—to employees, stakeholders, customers, vendors and the general public. Ultimately, corporate identity represents both what a company is, and in relation to others, what it is not. Unlike branding (which is usually associated with products) corporate identity is about organizational definition and projection.

Brand and Branding: Branding, as in the marking of livestock by means of a burning iron, has been practiced for at least 5,000 years. "Brands" and "branding" are all the buzz today, particularly in North America and the corporate world run by MBA graduates. Brands have been variously defined as "an indelible impression," "a gut feeling or understanding about a product, service or company," and "a user promise," to list but a few—they typically involve symbolic attributes, and as such, they are also vulnerable to fashion.

Many consultants swear by brands and brand management—others swear at the word, seeing it as the latest term de jour of the marketing world and a "shallow hyper-moniker" that overstates its promise (perhaps to compensate for the surface traits the word brings to mind). The foundation of a brand is a trust relationship, reinforced when positive experience consistently meets or exceeds expectations. Brands can also act as *noms de guerre* or pseudonyms for less recognizable corporate origins, though in most cases brands imply a product-based relationship.

In an increasingly virtual world, "brand equity" can grow to become one of an organization's greatest assets, often providing the best return on investment—Coca-Cola's brand value alone has been pegged at USD $70 billion, representing more than 60% of the giant corporation's market capitalization.

Trademarks: Trademarks are traceable throughout recorded history—today's visual language of identification descends from historical precedents such as Egyptian cattle marks from 3000 B.C., two-millennium-old royal monograms, incised ceramic *graffiti* found on antique Greek vases, Medieval stonemasons' signs, guild marks and European printers' marks of the fifteenth century—to name a few. Various definitions exist for trademarks—a common denominator is the proprietary intent of identification, commercial use and definitive distinction from competitors.

Idem et idem

Again and again, consistent repetition is the key

to perceptual penetration and to an identity achieving the desired share of mind and recognition. With the name as a cornerstone, and with the CI, brand, house style or signature as the mnemonic building blocks, cohesive application of an identity takes shape as outlined in the "blueprint" of graphic identity standards or guidelines. Typically, these standards address the identity's iteration and applications across the broadest imaginable range of media and audience experiences. The value of consistency cannot be overstated, and it's fair to say that the world's most recognizable identities rely far more on their repeated and cohesive visibility than on brilliance of concept or finessing of the identity's graphic form.

Global inspiration

Graphic designers have given shape to the identities of the corporations, organizations, locations, events, products and services that fill our lives, regardless of where we live. Breaking through today's media barrage requires identities and visual communications that are uniquely tailored, relevant, memorable and well managed—failure to connect with an audience or to stand out just adds to the level of noise. A wide-ranging world-view and accessing a wide range of inspirational sources can help to avoid inbred traits through a broadening of the identity genre's gene pool. Stuck for inspiration? Bored with local vernacular? Try an infusion of cultural diversity and rich, multicultural originality—explore the global repertoire of linguistic and visual abbreviations, names, acronyms, indices, icons, signatures, found marks, flags, heraldic images, geometric figures, diagrams, signs, metaphoric motifs, rhetorical devices, mythology, the arts, nature, nonfigurative and pictorial symbols that form the world's knowledge base.

A shrinking world (with widened opportunities for graphic designers) calls for extended vision, a broadened understanding of "the other," and an increased respect for differences.

Challenges and opportunities

Corporate identity has been defined as the domain of Modernism—and many credit the Modern movement and its distilled focus on formal Minimalism with creating the common denominators and requisite conditions for globalization. Postmodernists might argue that Modernism's leitmotiv of "less is more" brought the world a poverty of diversity, a narrowing of visual language and a doctrine of diminished vernacular (in part through its imposition of Euro-centrism). In today's world of ideas though, everything goes. Even as globalism removes old barriers, we can observe the creation of new tribes—intimate, understandable groups with their own identifying characteristics.

Information, ideas and communication are the new currency in today's virtual world. In this age of ideas, graphic designers play an increasingly vital role in creating economic success, shaping communities and forming culture. Clearly, designers have real power—we also bear considerable responsibility for how things are consumed, how people are depicted, how media are deployed and, ultimately, what form the future will take. The practice of past decades to homogenize, monopolize and dominate markets is being questioned and reexamined—can design become more holistic, inclusive, sensitive, eclectic, empowering and sustainable? Are we working with respect to diverse cultures and their vibrant differences? Can we still make useful contributions to humankind's collective visual vocabulary?

Graphic design ignites passion, identifies, informs, clarifies, inspires and communicates in our interconnected, interdependent, real-time world. Identity has to do with what lies within and with intrinsic qualities—if that's the case, are we satisfied with the qualities and values of graphic design as a profession? Never has there been a greater need for designers to dig deep, to exercise whole-brain thinking skills, to understand patterns of inter-connectivity, to join peer networks, to collaborate with other experts and to leverage the multi-perspective advantages of teamwork. How best to proceed, and to succeed? Help break down divisive barriers, embrace pluralism, raise the bar for civilization—and above all, further the characteristics that matter in making us truly human beings. **CA**

Editor's note: This article draws from Robert L. Peters's new book Worldwide Identity *to be released by Rockport Publishers in October 2005. The book aims to be "a stimulating source of inspiration, reflection, and learning" and "an international snapshot of excellence in identity design"—it features over 300 identities from 40 ICOGRADA member countries.*

Identity for an annual cultural festival incorporates both Arabic and Latin alphabets, using calligraphy and typography, to establish "a cultural, festive feel." Leila Musfy, art director; Leila Musfy/Nisreen Fayad, designers; Samir Sayegh, arabic calligrapher; Taketwo [Designhaus] (Beirut, Lebanon), design firm.

Premios Lucas (the Lucas Award) for the best Cuban music video clips is an annual ceremony. Liber Lannes (Havana, Cuba), designer/art director.

Logo for an annual literary prize, "De Jonge Jury" (the young jury), for the best Dutch youth book chosen by young readers. Hans Strijbos, designer; ankerxstrijbos (Utrecht, Netherlands), design firm.