Design Democratization

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Feb 28, 2012

I believe we are in an era of design democratization, where everyone has been empowered with the tools they need to create some well designed out-of-the-box design solutions. Products like WordPress (which this site was created in) or SquareSpace,etc., allow everyone to create a web site in minutes, with a pretty terrific range of design options to choose from. And digital printing is getting better all the time. It is like reliving the advent of the Desktop Publishing, where everyone instantly became a designer.

As a young designer I was appalled by the snobbery of the design profession. We had a big name designer lecture at our school once, and I remember him showing slide after slide pictures of ugly consumer products and making fun of them. It would of been funny except that most of the stuff he projected were products we had in the house I grew up in. It was the only stuff my folks could afford. Good design was not available to folks like my parents, yet somehow we all managed to survive this onslaught of bad design and become successful adults.

Fortunately the world has evolved, and good design is now available to everyone at an affordable price. You can walk into Target and buy a Michael Grave's designed ironing board for only $60. Or go to an Ikea and be inundated with affordable, well-designed products.

So why go to a professional designer anymore if there so much available off the shelf?

Because design is not just a pretty face, nor a knee jerk reaction to a need. It's the thoughtful consideration of a set of communication goals, the questioning of the premise of the stated objective, and then a thorough investigation of possible solutions to the challenge. What differentiates us as professionals is our ability to think analytically and strategically about what we are creating, not pigeon holing you into a pre-designed solution.

The process of design requires that you continually question the direction of any potential solution against the objective of the project, that it works within the overall brand strategy, that the hierarchy of messaging achieves the communication goals, and of course that it achieves the overall aesthetic quality that makes it stand out in a crowd.

And with everyone screaming louder and louder, with blogs, and tweets, etc., careful examination of what is being said, and how it is being said, becomes even more critical. As designers and communicators, we bring a level of restraint and discipline to the communications that we create, so that the messages being communicated can be heard over the deafening roar of the crowd. -PK

Tour Guide for the Eye

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Feb 17, 2012

As a visual communications designer and artist I am interested in the relationship between design and fine arts.

On a recent trip to Italy to study painting and sculpture, I was struck by how much the frescos of the 13th century painter Piero della Francesca and the paintings of Caravaggio relate to the work I do as a designer of marketing communications. I know you're thinking "*too much vino rosso for Paulo,*" but hear me out.

These guys were hired guns, charged with communicating (non-verbally I might add) the content of some well-heeled and very influential clients (the Catholic church) who had a specific story to tell about their product (Catholicism) to their target markets (church-going folks). And to do so in some really large spaces, and at times, difficult working conditions.

I admire their work for many reasons, one of which is the strength of the design.

Analysis of a Painting

As a designer trained in a Bauhaus influenced design school (University of Cincinnati), I have always been somewhat of a grid nerd, and love to find the underlying structure of artwork when I go to a museum or an art gallery.

On a recent trip to the MFA here in Boston, I came across one of my favorite paintings, "Pilgrimage in the Roman Campagna" by the 18th century Belgian painter Francois Joseph Navez. This time I took a photo of it so I could analyze its composition and structure.

One of the first things I like to do when looking at a painting, whether it is abstract or representational, is to locate the basic grid structure in relationship to the overall proportion of the canvas. *Figure 1* illustrates the basic grid structure by dividing this canvas in half and thirds. As usual, this reveals some immediate information regarding the construction of the painting.

Figure 1

Right off the bat you can see that Francois has placed key points of tension on each of these grid lines, notably the elbow of the heroine, the juncture of the hands in the middle of the

image, the shoulder of the woman leaning on her elbow and the line of the cane of the man in the front. All of these, and others, anchor the composition in relationship to the overall proportion of the canvas.

Figure 2

In *Figure 2* you can see how he has used a triangular motif in the entire composition, which unifies the foreground and primary characters in this scene, gives the composition a triangular flow, and activates the entire canvas.

But where it get interesting for me is how Francois has used the diagonal counter flow emanating from the lower right and lower left corners to give this painting so much movement while at the same time maintaining a sense of balance and serenity.

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows the diagonal thrust from the lower right upward to the upper left corner. Every point on the canvas is considered in relationship to each other, creating an interconnectedness among all the characters and the canvas. But all this movement from right to left wouldn't work if it wasn't countered by an equal and opposite movement from left to right.

Fgure 4

In *Figure 4* we see this counter movement, which again skillfully creates a series of relationships that enhances the original triangular thrust of the image. And this only gets to the structure of the painting. I think the use of color in this piece is just as effective as the underlying grid in moving your eye around the canvas, and keeping you actively involved in the story Francois was charged with communicating to us.

So what's this got to do with web design?

For me, these compositional and visual techniques are at the core of every design I work on, whether it is a web site or printed brochure. I don't necessarily start with the grid, but it's there as a tool to help guide the relationship of the various elements on the page—text and graphics—and provide the structure that helps guide the viewer in a thoughtful and logical direction. In a sense, that is our job as designers and artists: to act as a tour guide for the eye. -PK

Introducing the "Henny"

As a designer I'm interested in solving problems as artistically as I can, but always with the client's goals and objectives driving the creative process. As a visual artist I'm interested in how design intersects with, and influences, my own personal artistic vision. Occasionally you get a project that marries both the designer and artist inside of you, and this was one of those.

This past summer, **Vehr Communications** of Cincinnati, Ohio contacted me about creating a sculpture for one of their clients, **Henny Penny**. A manufacturer of high quality cooking and food preparation equipment, Henny Penny recently adopted "Henny the hen" into their brand language. They wanted to create a unique and "desk worthy" sculpture that symbolically captured the essence of the hen.

My goal was to create the forms, shapes, and personality in a reductionist style clearly communicating "this is a hen" in a unique and artful way. In a way, it was like a three-dimensional logo project–a perfect marriage of art and design.

The process included a series of conceptual "sketches," including several clay models (click on image to the left to see the presentation). I then sculpted the selected direction in clay and cast it in bronze using the traditional lost wax process.

The initial edition of five bronzes was delivered in October 2015. Henny Penny plans to give them to their most valued customers–CEOs of some of the most successful restaurant chains in the world–as a gesture of gratitude for their loyalty.

"Paul listened actively to understand our objective, asked thought provoking questions, and transformed the shape of a hen into an elegant work of art we affectionately call The Henny. By customizing each Henny with a nameplate on its marble base, we are able to present the sculpture as a personalized thank you to our customers. We are confident they will showcase their Henny in a visible location, helping keep the Henny Penny brand top of mind."

– Alex Morgan, Director, Brand & Strategy

Positively Negative: Part 2

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Jan 8, 2013
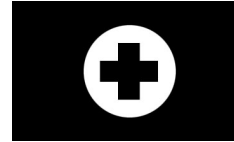
Earlier last year I posted a piece on the use of negative space in design and how much I appreciated it when it's well done.

Recently I hooked up with my good friend the writer Ron MacLean at my favorite local pub Atwood's Tavern. We had the corner spot at the bar and were catching up on things and ordered a second round of beers to go with our burgers. I ordered an Idle Hands Triplication, which arrived in a stylish Belgian tulip-shaped glass. When I tipped it back for my first sip, I noticed their logo design etched into its side. The mark creates the tulip-shaped glass in the negative space created by the two hands, topped off with a wonderfully delicious head of foam dripping down the side of the glass. I put the glass down and sat there admiring this wonderful design, and savoring the excellent taste of a quality brew, and wondered who was the lucky chap that got this design assignment and hit it out of the park.

Turns out it was created by a designer out of England named Joe Leese, who I recently tracked down to share my appreciation of his work. This is what Joe had to say about his process and thoughts behind the design:

"The thinking behind the logo was quite simple—I wanted a nice, clean way to show 'handmade beer,' so a beer glass made of hands was the perfect fit! Originally the logo showed two hands forming a traditional beer tankard shape, which we then decided to swap out for a Belgian style glass to be more in keeping with their beer's heritage. The hands in the logo are actually my own and I spent a fair amount of time trying out different shapes and taking photos in order to get the right look for the logo."

Time well spent I say, old chap!

All of this got me to thinking about why this kind of design is so effective. I did some research and came across an academic abstract on the "Gestalt Principles and Dynamic Symmetry" written by Thomas Detrie, Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University, that provided me with some intellectual background on why we respond to this type of visual imagery. Gestalt Psychology, an early 20th century German school of psychology derived mainly from visual perception, denotes the fact that we make whole images from partial data. It's referred to as the "Closure Principle." In fact, according to Professor Detrie, as much as we seek it, we have a recurrent willingness to delay closure. This is true not only in literature, film and theatre, but also in art and design. Implied line, hide and seek edges, and creative use of negative space, stimulate the eye and keep the viewer engaged with the image. It rewards the viewer by making them an active participant in the work, like in a movie when you can figure out a plot connection or action without being explicitly shown or told by the film maker (see the shower scene in "Psycho" by Alfred Hitchcock). In short, we are hardwired to fill in the blanks to complete the image.

So the next time you're at your local pub, order an Idle Hands Craft Beer. Admire its delightful hoppy flavor made even better by an excellent logo design, and contemplate how the closure principle will be resolved once you have finished your first pint.

-PK

Positively Negative: Part 1

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Mar 18, 2012

I've always been a big fan of the conceptual use of negative space in design. Michael Vanderbly's logo for the California Conservation Center, pictured here to the right, being one of my all-time favorite applications of this design technique. And as witnessed by the number of rip-offs of this that exist, I'm not the only fan of this design slight of hand.

I was recently in the Delta terminal at the Reagan National Airport, enjoying a hot cup of coffee with my wife Lynne and patiently waiting to board our flight back to Boston, when I noticed that the food court was surrounded by a series of posters for the IBM Smarter Planet campaign. Created by Ogilvy Paris, each poster consists of a simple headline set in a slab serif font (Lubalin Graph) with a supporting illustration rendered in a bold and simple graphical style. Each image incorporates a creative and beautifully conceived use of negative space which when combined with the headline creates a smart and memorable poster. What a treat it was to be corralled by this wonderfully executed campaign.

Follow the link below to see a number of these stunning posters and kudos to the designers, writers, and illustrators involved in this project.

-PK

Samples to follow on next page

Now food can tell you how fresh it is.

By tracking food from farm to fork in Norway, IBM is helping reduce the $2 trillion lost to food spoilages every year.
ibm.com/smarterplanet

IBM

Any child can access a first-class education.

IBM helped rural schools in Pike County, Kentucky access the same lessons as high-profile schools, cutting costs by 62%. ibm.com/smarterplanet

IBM

Buildings bring down their own energy costs.

Energy costs and consumption fell over 10% when IBM helped homes in Washington State talk straight to the grid.
ibm.com/smarterplanet

IBM

Shirts can pick a tie for you.

IBM helped a German retailer boost customer satisfaction 15% with dressing rooms that actually suggest accessories.
ibm.com/smarterplanet

IBM

2D or not 2D?

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Feb 3, 2012

Graphic designers, painters, and others who create on paper or canvas, are said to work in a 2-dimensional world. I've never really agreed with that limited view of my craft.

A brochure, a magazine or even an event invitation are all 3-dimensional forms that require the viewer to interact with the piece. They are a sculptural construction that require the same consideration of space and flow as one would expect from a 3D form.

I also think of painting as a 3D form, possibly 4D (if there is such as thing) when you take into consideration the dimensional effects color has on how you view the forms created.

Paint is a solid material that is moved about a canvas in much the same way clay is applied when making a sculpture. The dimensional application of the paint, or mark making, can really influence how one "reads" the painting… how the eye travels across the canvas. Think of the thick application of paint on a Van Gogh painting and the way the sculptural quality of the paint guides your eye around the canvas. Or the brush strokes on a Cezanne masterpiece.

Line, shape, color, texture are the tools 2-dimensional designers/artists work with to create the visual hierarchy, eye tracking, and an emotional connection that transforms a flat surface into a work of art.

-PK

Blue Bucket Brigade

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on May 6, 2012

I love a good grassroots branding story as much as the next guy. Recently I heard a piece on NPR about a group in Russia called the Blue Bucket Brigade that caught my ear.

The story was about a retired cop in Moscow who got fed up with the abuse of one of the most hated symbols of the privileged in Moscow: The flashing blue siren, or *migalka,* which empowers the owner to disregard traffic regulations that everyone else has to obey, and in the process endangering everyone else in the turn. Migalka abusers routinely drive down the wrong side of the street at alarming speeds with little regard for the safety of pedestrians or other drivers. So in protest, Alexei Dozorov, who heads the Moscow branch of the Committee to Protect Drivers' Rights, taped a blue child's bucket on the roof of his car and ignited a popular revolt against the arrogance of state officials, or those with connection and who can afford the £30,000 bribe to acquire a migalka.

These spunky protestors call themselves the "Blue Bucket Brigade" and have held protest throughout Russia, one of the most co-ordinated exhibitions of public anger seen in Russia in recent years. Hundreds of cars with blue buckets taped to their roofs paraded through Moscow and other cities demanding the abolition of Russia's most hated emblem of official privilege and corruption. They have become quite a pain in the "**задница**" to the ruling elite.

Mr. Dozorov's courage, and his effort to motivate citizens to protest through a consistent use of a simple but powerful brand symbol: *A blue bucket*. In response to the protests, Russia's traffic police chief has pledged to investigate illegal migalki amid rumors that businessmen have bought the lights from corrupt officers. Excellent work Comrade Dozorov! -PK

Brand Bonanza

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Apr 5, 2012

I googled "branding" today and came up with over 143 million hits in less than a second! Seems as though everybody and their uncle either does branding or is being branded nowadays. Heck, even my hometown of Cheviot, Ohio recently looked into a rebranding effort. Who would of *thunk* they even had a brand to begin with?

The use of the word branding has certainly changed since I entered the design profession in the early 80s. Then "branding" was associated with products like toothpaste, laundry detergent, or toilet paper. Now everyone has a brand, and a company's brand is so important that it is recognized on the ledger sheets of most Fortune 500 companies. The financial value of Coca Cola brand, for example, is +$71 billion; Google itself is at +$55 billion, which is up $43 billion from 2006.*

Many people think of a company's brand as the logo. But it's much more than that; it's the immediate emotional response that people have when they hear the company name or see the logo.

That emotional response—the brand value—builds up over time and is affected at every touchpoint. Take toilet paper, for example. Starbucks supplies double-ply toilet paper in its rest rooms, and it's been reported that despite being presented with a compelling financial reason to switch from double-ply to single-ply, it stays with double-ply because it's in line with the company's brand values. Talk about your brand touch points!

That's the kind of awareness and attention to detail that we bring to our clients' companies, products and events. Even when our clients aren't household names like Google or Starbucks, their brands matter just the same, if not more, as they have to work even harder to establish brand awareness. And it's not just the big stuff like identities, brochures and web sites – which we love to do – but every touch point along the way, no matter how big or small…*even the toilet paper.*

-PK

* www.interbrand.com

Thoughts on Branding

Posted by paul@kronerdesign.com on Mar 23, 2012

As a kid growing up in Cincinnati, I was a cowboy wanna-be and spent many an afternoon looking at books about the West, dreaming of six-shooters and lassos, and envisioning myself in the cavalry uniform displayed in the back pages of the Sears catalog.

One of the books I remember best was on cattle ranchers and the brand marks they burned into the hindquarters of their herds. There was the Double-R brand, the Lazy-E and Rocking M – I can't remember them all, but I realize now that it was the first logo book I ever saw.

I was drawn to the simplicity of those designs and their importance. Those symbols were serious business. Get caught on a horse with somebody else's brand and you could get a belly full of lead!

I wonder about the designers of those marks. What kind of thought (market research? focus groups?) engendered designs burned into the hide of a horse's ass? Did they ever discover that the selected brand looked just like that of another ranch two days west? Any swooshes? Did the designers wear black? Did they sport goatees?

While no one will ever mistake me for a cowboy, I believe in some way I carry on the aim of those cowboy branders. I'm a hired gun creating distinctive images that communicate the quality and pride of an organization, images that influence the course of a business through visual communication. Without the use of ropes and hot irons.

Those old cowboys would probably get a chuckle out of how far their humble design trade has evolved. From corporate identities to Web site design to sales and marketing collateral – we still call it branding.

-PK