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VISUAL IDENTITY IS NOT DECORATION

IT IS A SYSTEM OF MEANINGS

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In the popular imagination, graphic design is often reduced to mere aesthetics and superficial embellishments. Modern academic thinking, however, urges us to move away from thinking in terms of 'pretty pictures' and instead treat visual identity as an advanced cognitive, social, and cultural tool.



Silesian Water Centre (hybrid presentation) – Fusion of the letter 'Q' (Quality/Aqua) with an organic shape of a droplet and wave; logomark paired with a full typographic layout based on friendly lowercase lettering | Design: Tomasz Kipka

MORE THAN JUST A LOGO

What exactly is visual identity? Should we understand logos, colours, and fonts solely as a set of graphic elements, or rather as an autonomous language and a system of spatial and symbolic orientation?

'Visual identity is not mere decoration, but a coded narrative about an institution, a city or a brand. When embarking on a design process, you need to decide whether you are operating in the realm of fine art, applied design, public communication, or perhaps identity management strategy. All these spheres overlap', says Tomasz Kipka, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. from the Faculty of Arts and Educational Science of the University of Silesia.

It is important to understand why a logo alone is never enough to create a recognisable and lasting identity. The logo is merely the tip of the iceberg. For the entire visual system to function effectively in the social sphere, it must be rigorously consistent, structurally simple, repeatable and able to evoke appropriate emotions. Above all, however, it must remain in absolute harmony with the authentic values that the institution is meant to represent.

DESIGN THAT LEADS THE WAY

Visual identity is one of the most common examples of applied art. It accompanies us in the visual presentation of projects and events, in the identification of individuals, in the most mundane of places such as bus stops, as well as on packaging, signage, social media, and websites. The question of where art ends and a pragmatic message begins is increasingly losing its relevance, as these two spheres need not be mutually exclusive but can in fact reinforce one another. Well-designed everyday visuals genuinely improve our quality of life.

'The best graphic design is almost invisible. It leads us by the hand through information layouts at railway stations, signage systems in government offices or the virtual space of university websites, as long as it functions flawlessly. We only become painfully and acutely aware of it when it fails – giving rise to chaos, frustration and a sense of disorientation. Art does not need to be confined to sterile art galleries; we encounter this form of applied art at every turn – its most important test takes place in our everyday living spaces, both real and digital', explains the researcher.

PSYCHOLOGY OF ORDER: WHY DO WE TRUST DESIGN?

Trust in well-designed spaces and messages does not come out of nowhere.

'It stems directly from the evolutionary structure of our cognitive apparatus. The human brain processes and decodes images incomparably faster than complex textual messages. Tools such as colour, rhythm, contrast, proportions, and a precise hierarchy of information directly determine our perception of reality – they instil in us a subconscious sense of security and the credibility of a place', explains Tomasz Kipka.

The average person rarely consciously analyses a font or the structure of a logo. They intuitively sense the order, organisation and professionalism of an institution. Colours and proportions influence emotions and decisions. The researcher highlights the destructive power of visual chaos, which can effectively weaken and discredit a message, even when the substantive content behind it is extremely valuable and significant.

VISUAL MIRROR OF IDENTITY

Since an image speaks to who we are, the visual identity of contemporary public institutions or universities can reveal the true nature of an organisation before it is articulated. A visual system acts as a mirror – it communicates to the outside world openness, modernity, tradition, a willingness to experiment, local roots or international elitism, sometimes completely contrary to the intentions of the decision-makers themselves. An outstanding design can bring out and reveal an institution's hidden identity, one of which it is not yet fully aware itself.

'Designing for a university is a complex process: the system must harmoniously blend the solemnity of academic tradition with a modern, dynamic language that will appeal to younger generations. Colour and typography become vehicles for community values, credibility and universal accessibility. The situation becomes complicated due to the fact that the university communicates simultaneously with many different audiences: prospective students, current students, distinguished academics, international partners, the media and the business world. Each of these groups interprets this image through their own set of circumstances', explains Tomasz Kipka.

Therefore, the brand identity must reflect the institution's stature, be approachable, and at the same time be semantically broad enough to coherently integrate autonomous departments, research projects, and events.

ORDER IN THE URBAN JUNGLE

Stepping outside the institution and moving into the macro-scale, we find ourselves in the modern city: a vast, overwhelming visual landscape comprising shop signs, advertisements, murals, road signs, and the aesthetics of public transport. The researcher points out that today's public space is drastically overloaded with stimuli, resulting in visual smog. The role of professional brand identity and urban information systems is to organise and humanise the city, not to add to the noise.

'If a design becomes part of the visual clutter, it means that information architecture has failed. Well-thought-out signage that contributes to spatial order, along with standardised signs, fulfils an important psychosocial function. By helping people orient themselves in the city, it directly influences mental well-being and fosters a sense of pride, attachment, and local belonging among its residents', emphasises the researcher.

ACCESSIBILITY PARADIGM

'Design cannot be focused solely on satisfying the sophisticated needs of those with an "eye for aesthetics"', cautions Tomasz Kipka.

Visual identity in public spaces must remain fully legible to older people, those with visual impairments, neurodiverse individuals, foreign nationals who do not speak the language, as well as any user operating under severe stress, in a hurry, and on a small smartphone screen. The researcher emphasises that a beautiful design which becomes illegible due to an excess of form cannot be considered good – it is simply bad practice. Do the standards resulting from the need to balance aesthetics and accessibility limit the designer's creative freedom?

'On the contrary – they provide a stimulating framework that compels deeper design discipline, resulting in solutions that are both beautiful and as useful as they can be for a highly diverse range of social groups', replies the researcher.

SYSTEMIC SINS. A BRAND BOOK IS NOT ENOUGH

Tomasz Kipka lists randomness, an excess of stimuli, the uncontrolled proliferation of logos, a lack of clear rules, chaotic use of colour, and succumbing to the particular tastes of individuals rather than considering the needs of the target audience – which is diverse and varied – among the most common sins of visual identity in the public sphere. What is interesting is that organisations very often create visual chaos despite having professional brand books. This stems from the fact that implementing and maintaining the system requires ongoing training across the entire institution, not just within the narrow confines of marketing and graphic design departments. Without mechanisms for the effective enforcement of guidelines, any visual identity – even the best – will be quickly diluted by local habits. The passage of time is also a significant factor. Some systems look archaic after a few seasons, while others retain their strength for decades – this depends on their resilience to fleeting trends.

'A good design must be timeless. Rebranding makes sense when it maintains the continuity of identity in an evolutionary way and simultaneously freshens up the image. If it is nothing more than a costly cosmetic change without a deeper strategy, it becomes a mistake. A public institution cannot change its image every season, succumbing to the newest trends, nor can it remain frozen in a bygone era', the researcher points out.

VISUAL SENSITIVITY IN THE AGE OF AI

Visual identity is moving away from paper in favour of screen-based media, animation, apps, augmented reality, and short-form video formats, such as TikTok. The traditional, static logo is slowly losing its monopoly as it gives way to dynamic, flexible and responsive systems that react instantly to the context of use. Contrary to what you might expect, this is not at all about complex animations, but rather about the logical variability of the logo and selecting the best possible versions for a given space. The digital age has already redefined the role of the logo. Generative artificial intelligence is also an inevitable part of this evolution. We are faced with the question of whether AI will be a clever tool supporting designers' craft, or rather an uncritical factory of derivative, mass-produced visual chaos. The answer depends on our knowledge and expertise.

'Instead of focusing solely on mastering new interfaces, we must return to the basics – to cultivating a fundamental visual sensibility. It is precisely the conscious use of colour, rhythm, contrast, proportions and a precise hierarchy of information that directly shapes our perception of reality. The key to the future lies in human consciousness and the strategic management of meaning: technology changes, but the need for a clear, safe and coherent visual code remains constant', concludes the artist-scientist.

University of Silesia (structural analysis) – Evolutionary rebranding showcasing precise adjustment of the mark's geometry. The study illustrates the alignment of structural axes and the guiding line, correction of the wave's counter-space, and optical optimisation | Design: Tomasz Kipka

