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Co-ordinated design policy and the shift from one-off designs to comprehensive design systems

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During the late 1940s and early 1950s a small group of designers embraced the concept of 'design coordination' in an attempt to unify the visual output of their clients. This shift in emphasis – favouring order over expression – represented a tipping point in the professionalisation of graphic design in Britain, helping to transform designers from individual commercial artists into business practitioners working predominantly in groups.

1. From one to many

Immediately after the Second World War, designers in Britain began to seize upon a concept that had been explored only fleetingly up to this point. This was the idea that by co-ordinating multiple designs to 'sing from the same hymn sheet', clients could gain a competitive advantage over rival businesses and organisations. Central to this approach was the concept of recognisability, i.e. if all of the products and activities of one organisation can be easily recognised as belonging to them, then the 'cumulative impression' of these varied products and activities will far outweigh their individual value.¹

Up to this time there had been an over-reliance on the role of the trademark as a co-ordinating device. But designers now began to consider a far wider gamut of visual tools to demarcate this cumulative relationship. Alongside the trademark, the colour scheme and typographic palette chosen to represent the organisation became critical new components. A third, more ambiguous component, that eluded codification, was what might be described as a palette of visual language; this could typically include patterns, borders and other graphic marking to be associated with the organisation.² These components together comprised what was described in Britain at the time as a 'house style'. This term came from the printing and publishing industries, where the 'rules', or 'style of the house' referred to the particular way in which a publisher or printer produced its work (Unwin 1926: 8).

¹ 'Cumulative impression' was a phrase used by Beatrice Warde to describe the effect gained by standardising the typography of the London and North Eastern Railway (Warde 1933: 8).

² Journalist and designer Alec Davis played a critical role in championing design co-ordination within the pages of various magazines and journals; in particular the Council of Industrial Design's monthly title *Design*. In November 1956 a special issue of the magazine was produced dedicated to the subject of 'House Style'. In it, Davis proposed five 'Factors in house style': colour, pattern, borders, trademarks and symbols, and lettering (1956).

In this paper I will explore the techniques and methods used to plan, implement and control house styles. I adopt the term 'design co-ordination' to describe the technique used to align numerous designs into one coherent, unified whole. The term derives from FHK Henrion and Alan Parkin's seminal text, 'Design Coordination and Corporate Image' (1967),³ which is thought to be the first book dedicated to the subject of visual identity.⁴

The technique of design co-ordination spans the fledgling development of visual identity as a professional activity. Right from the early British notion of 'house style'; through the rhetoric of 'corporate identity' that emanated from North America in the 1960s; up to today's dominant terminology of 'branding'. Throughout these phraseological developments the concept of 'co-ordinating' a number of designs remained, and continues to remain, a methodological constant. I argue that the phenomenon of design co-ordination was far more significant to the development of design as a profession than the canonical examples of early twentieth century corporate identity valorised by design historians.

These so-called pioneers (AEG, Olivetti, London Transport, CCA) often appear in design history surveys like a roll-call of who is who.⁵ But whilst there may be some unity of design in these canonical examples, it wasn't until the 1950s that the technique of design co-ordination really found ground.

In looking at the approaches used to co-ordinate multiple designs, I am distancing myself from the existing debates around representation and perceptions of organisational identity. For this reason I have purposely shied away from the term 'corporate image' – as found in the title of the aforementioned book – as it has been used to refer to the audience perception of an organisation.⁶ Whilst there is an abundance of literature in the field that focusses on the notion of identity, the subject of co-ordination has been largely neglected as a serious area of study. In this paper I will demonstrate how a more thorough understanding of the methodological developments within design co-ordination can provide insight into shifts away from making and towards planning within the graphic design profession.

³ Henrion and Parkin explain that the title of their book was 'chosen to describe the activity which creates a house style' (1967: dustjacket).

⁴ Henrion claims as much in *The Image of a Company* (Bos 1990).

⁵ For example, see Balmer & Greyser (2003: 40).

⁶ Henrion and Parkin define corporate image as 'the totality of pictures or ideas or reputations of a corporation in the minds of the people who come into contact with it' (1967: 7).

2. Non-methodical methods in design co-ordination

The way in which design work was commonly conceived in Britain changed significantly in the aftermath of the Second World War. Whilst in pre-war, designers and commercial artists tended to survive on a series of one-off commissions; in the subsequent period, there began a slow, but definite transition towards 'design programmes'. These programmes, or house styles, comprised of multiple design items conceived simultaneously as part of a comprehensive visual identity system. But these new design systems would require a careful planning and rationalisation process that would draw designers away from the making tasks that they were truly comfortable with.

Towards the beginning of the century attempts were made by so-called 'patrons of the arts' to raise the standards of art and design in British business. Among these individuals were Jack Beddington at Shell, Colin Anderson at the Orient Steam Navigation Company, and most famously Frank Pick at London Transport. Nikolaus Pevsner described Pick as 'the greatest patron of the arts whom this century has so far produced in England and indeed the ideal patron of our age' (1968: 209). Whilst these individuals had a significant effect on the over-riding standard of design in their respective organisations, the role of design co-ordination within their work remains questionable. London Transport has arguably become the most heavily cited example of early visual identity work in Britain, being widely considered the first visual identity scheme of its kind. Design historians have praised Pick's ability to bring unity to a disparate organisation, laying particular focus on the role of Edward Johnston's block-letter alphabet as a co-ordinating visual force.⁷ In order to establish the historical 'seeds' of design co-ordination methodology it is worth considering the methods in which Pick and Johnston operated.

Whilst it is undoubtable that Johnston's lettering takes a central co-ordinating role in the organisation's visual identity today, this was not his intention when the alphabet was designed. There is various evidence that suggests Johnston's lettering was never conceived as a co-ordinating force; but instead, that it was created for one particular usage, namely to appear printed on posters at one inch tall (Howes 2000: 41; Banks 1994: 16). Whether Pick had intended Johnston to create a co-ordinating typeface remains unclear. He did seemingly want to unify the complex transport system he had taken command of – it had its origins in a number of smaller rivals and this led it to appear like a disparate collection of separate operations, rather than one coherent network.⁸ The evidence presented here suggests that if Pick did commission a co-ordinating typeface from Johnston, perhaps he simply chose the wrong man. Johnston himself was strongly opposed to mechanical reproduction and as a calligrapher he saw each letter as

⁷ For example Saler claims 'Pick commissioned Johnston to design a special typeface that would be used to imbue the system with a coherent visual identity'. (1999: 43)

⁸ Forty, referring to Pick, claims that 'it was from him rather than anyone else that the vision of the unified and perfect transport system seems to have come' (1979: 114).

an individual creation. This was in strong contrast to the demands of typeface design, where letters are treated akin to modular components, appropriate for repeated usage within the context of any permutation of surrounding letterforms (Banks 1994: 38). As such, Johnston was not the best placed candidate to create a systematic and flexible alphabet that could be reproduced at various sizes, in numerous materials and in different contexts.

Colin Banks suggests that the alphabet that Johnston created may have become universally used purely as a matter of default (Banks 1994: 26). For once it was designed, the alphabet seems to have been immediately regarded as having been designed for 'all purposes'. Not just for use in print at one inch tall, as originally intended; but also for example on signage made of glass or enamelled iron (Howes 2000: 42). The fact that the lettering actually worked on anything other than posters was extremely fortuitous, as whatever the intentions of the original design, this allowed the organisation to apply the resulting alphabet to a diverse range of forms and materials. And so it was that the typeface resulting from Johnston's alphabet design became a key component of a co-ordinated design policy, but most significantly, it did not come about through a planned act of design co-ordination on his part, but instead by a rather circumstantial series of events.

Lets consider the wider context of London Transport's visual identity for a moment. Describing the design style of London Transport in 1946, Norbert Dutton explained that: 'It is effort, not accident, which has developed the idiom.' But just two sentences later, he goes on to suggest that the 'unifying principle' behind the idiom was: 'so subtle as to have escaped the conscious perception even of those designers who have been most closely concerned in its application' (1946: 98). This seems a remarkable contradiction; if the designers concerned with applying the idiom were unaware of it, this suggests it was in fact altogether unintended. Kempers has suggested that Pick's was a personal policy, distinct from the institutionalised design policies that followed later (Bakker, 2009: 25). Perhaps there is an assumption here that Pick was silently orchestrating his band of designers around his own carefully planned personal intentions. But this seems like no way to implement a comprehensive design policy.

3. Systematic methods in design co-ordination

In stark contrast to London Transport, the methodological approach of Henrion Design Associates (HDA) presents a very different narrative about the way in which designers could engage with the process of co-ordinating design. In the 1967/8 yearbook of the Design and Industries Association, Henrion and his employee Alan Parkin, formalised many of their design methods in a text titled 'Systematic Methods in Design Co-ordination' (1968). Their interest in design methodology reflects the thriving development of the design methods movement in 1960s Britain.⁹

⁹ The first design methods conference at Imperial College, London helped to launch the movement in 1962. In 1965 the Council of Industrial Design published Bruce Archer's text 'Systematic Methods for Designers' (1965) – note the similarity to the title of Henrion and Parkin's text.

Henrion and Parkin's text begins: 'Every designer knows the creative and administrative problems of designing even a single item. But when a task involves hundreds or even thousands of items then the difficulties multiply enormously and a new approach must be defined and achieved' (1968: 33). They go on to claim that the complexity of the vast design co-ordination programmes under their charge couldn't possibly be dealt with by traditional intuitive methods, suggesting that new techniques had to be developed and applied from outside the field of design. Interestingly, Parkin came from a background outside of design, graduating with a degree in Moral Sciences from Cambridge University. Henrion's background was more artistic, having developed stature as one of the top poster artists of the 1940s. In this respect Parkin was seemingly a scientific foil for Henrion, his interest in mathematics and cybernetic theory were in part what inspired Henrion to employ him, for he was not a conventionally trained designer.¹⁰

In the interwar period Henrion had plied his trade as a lone commercial artist bringing a fluid and intuitive approach to his ideas-based posters and other jobbing design work. This was a dramatic contrast to his work after the war, where he became the leader of an international graphic design business, developing a far more systematic and scientific design methodology through his company's work for clients such as KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Blue Circle Cement and British European Airways. Although the transformation in his career was pronounced, the playful and intuitive designer of the early years didn't completely disappear and can still be seen in the lecture posters he designed later in his life. Nevertheless, Henrion's career path does highlight a paradigmatic shift within the design profession, away from the 'authentic voice' of the maker,¹¹ and towards the rational and objective voice of the planner.

The 'new techniques' that he and Parkin described in their article would 'apply less to the actual design stages, than to pre-design assembling of information and formulation of design requirements, and to design planning, progressing, and implementation' (1968: 34). The four key methods that Henrion and Parkin explored were: making a survey, information storage and retrieval, formulating a brief, and planning and estimating for design developments. Many of the techniques they developed were effectively analytical tools designed to leverage a more thorough understanding of the vast range of items under their command (they mention in passing 5,000 Post Office items under one scheme). These included bespoke indexing systems that would allow HDA to cross reference any one design item with another. This enabled them to understand patterns in the information they were dealing with, allowing them to organise individual items together in groups. Another such tool was a 'specially constructed' display stand that would allow them to collate together hundreds of images that represented the various design items of an organisation. This would allow them to compare all the vehicles used by one organisation. Alternatively they could rotate a single panel of the

¹⁰ Interview with Alan Parkin, 13 December 2011.

¹¹ Tony Heward writes of the 'authentic voice' of modernism as opposed to the 'adopted voice' of post-modernism in which only the imitation or the recycling of ideas is possible (1999).

display to compare and contrast a range of vehicles with a range of stationery, for example. Alongside these physical design co-ordination tools they developed a range of complimentary project management solutions, which although rudimentary, give a clear insight into the complexity of the design processes they were attempting to control.

Many of the techniques that Henrion and Parkin explored in *Systematic Methods in Design Co-ordination* find strong parallels with another burgeoning field; that of design management. In the pages of the monthly title *Design*, Michael Farr took a leading role in championing the importance of this area, stating that 'Design is a unique factor in competition. Skilful management of designers and designing, therefore, becomes imperative' (Farr, 1965: 39). But Farr saw design management as a function to be fulfilled by a non-designer, claiming that 'if designers are good at designing they should not have the time to spare to manage the ramifications of their design projects, regardless of whether or not they are also good managers' (Farr, 1965: 38). But in the case of HDA, it was Henrion who remained at the helm of the firm, overseeing day-to-day operations and presenting himself as the figurehead through which all decisions were channeled.¹²

4. Conclusion

Milner Gray, of the influential British design group Design Research Unit claimed that: *Designers and manufacturers have been unable or unwilling to come to terms with the implications of machine production. The difference between designing for production by hand and by machine is that one is a process of making while the other is a process of planning* (1949: 10).

Henrion typifies this shift in emphasis from making to planning within the graphic design field. Although in effect he was never simply a maker or a planner, the trajectory of his career indicates a pivotal turn away from distinctly intuitive and artistic means, towards more technocratic methods in which the visual identity manual became the ultimate instrument of control. Whereas Frank Pick's personal design policy for London Transport produced design that became more-or-less co-ordinated through good fortune or even a matter of default; the policies that Henrion advocated used design co-ordination as a rigorously planned marketing tool that could provide a competitive advantage for clients along with economic stability for designers. Commissions for design co-ordination programmes went far beyond the piece-meal provision of a one-off design commission, often providing retainer agreements that could last over a number of decades. This enabled commercial artists like Henrion to establish graphic design as a tenable profession of its own, independent of the inter-related disciplines that commercial artists were previously dependent upon, such as advertising and printing.

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¹² Interview with Alan Parkin, 13 December 2011.

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