

## A place for graphic design

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The discipline of Graphic Design has been called into question on more than one occasion, on the grounds that some of the rigour or integrity that is found elsewhere within both fine art and design is somehow missing.

*“Like an over-eager pimply faced younger sibling, graphic design is what architecture never wants to be. Architecture says – experience, space, tactility, drama and eternity. Graphic Design says –Can I help you? Do I look OK? Buy Me! Read me! Eat Me! Drink Me!”*

*Critical Way Finding E Lupton and J Abbott Miller 1997*



**Figura 1** - Reebok posters, Piccadilly Manchester 2005 Steven Sarson

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I would imagine that whilst few architects would argue with those sentiments, few graphic designers would agree that ‘their’ discipline quite so superficial or has any less social significance regarding its application.

More and more examples can be found of ‘site specific’ graphic design and advertising graphics. Just as the consumer has become more sophisticated and has reached some kind of boredom threshold when it comes to advertising, then so have the creative people who produce the stuff. There has always been a strong link between architectural geometry, structure and the more formal elements of typography. Letterforms, for example Roman letterforms share a sense of proportion with Roman columns and other architectural features.

The serif typeface brings this comparison even closer, when we remember the way a chisel, rather than a pencil, pen or mouse, created the original form. The architectural stone-mason, such as the one who features in Thomas Hardy’s novel ‘Jude The Obscure’, was/is a bridge between ‘eternity’ and ‘Can I help you?’, although I suspect ambient advertising and similar kinds of projects are a more contemporary equivalent.

Graphic Design as an extension of early mark making and the painted animals found within the far corners of pre-historic caves, has made a huge contribution to communication and therefore, by association, to the development of knowledge and understanding. The invention of the printing press, significant in itself, opened the door to the creation of, not just accessible information, but also legible information.

In the 21st Century few of us would be able to function without the readability and the sensibility of information. Road signs, labels, text messages and other devices are vital components of our freedom to get around and our ability to communicate this sense of freedom with others.



**Figura 2** - Salford Quays 2005 Steven Sarson

We now have so many choices in terms of how and where we receive our information. In his book ‘Lifestyle (2000) Bruce Mau describes how these same

choices can lead to a possible conflict of interests between the architect and the graphic designer.

*“The imperative of inscribed and inscribable surfaces is now an endless need. In this context nature (what remains of it) is perhaps all we have left that is free from the hostile takeover of space by the logo, by the predatory regime of inscription.”*

*Bruce Mau 'Lifestyle' 2000 (Phaidon)*

Within the urban environment surfaces are everywhere and a walk around any western city will quickly reveal that few opportunities are missed, when it comes to employing them as part of the communication process. It is, I think, difficult to legislate against graffiti, when ‘corporate graffiti’ is everywhere, and shows little sign of abating. Cities are in themselves a brand; a corporate statement and ‘city’ status is not bestowed on every cluster of houses, shops, offices, schools and hospitals. Some place remain towns and others villages; they exist in the second or perhaps the third division, whilst our capital cities, our second cities and our regional centres play in the premier league.



**Figura 3** - Manchester United 2005 Steven Sarson

In doing so cities expose themselves to competition and are forced to participate in marketing campaigns, as well as chase development grants, sports and cultural events, on a national and an international basis. Cities are compelled to play this game and graphic designers, perhaps more so than architects help them to do it. In order to compete a city must first have an identity and whilst this may be assumed using a largely historical reference, most post-industrial centres find themselves in the position of having to rethink and to re-brand.

You can visit parts of Manchester, England and still find reminders of its Victorian heritage. For much of its life, England's second-city has been a centre of engineering and manufacture; it was in this place that Mr Rolls met Mr Royce and where you will find the world's oldest commercial railway line ( Manchester to Liverpool). In 1948 the world's first storage program computer was created at Manchester University and at least one of its two football teams is an internationally recognised brand (Manchester United), one that is now synonymous with the city and global in its appeal.

You would think that Manchester would have no need of an identity crisis and yet it suffers perhaps more than other places, as it jealously guards 'second city' status and survives as a manufactured city, where very little is actually made any more. The same might be said of Porto although here you have the indelible brand association with wine production and possible fewer local challengers.

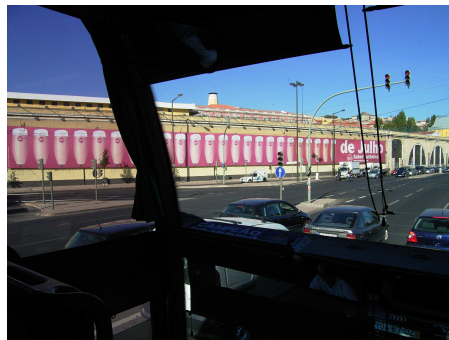


**Figura 4** - Renovated industrial buildings - Ancoats, Manchester 2005 Steven Sarson

*“Why does it need branding? It's a great place that is known worldwide for a variety of reasons, to try and pick a bit out and say “We'll make it that”, is belittling.*

*Ray Makin, Chairman of the Manchester Civic Society*

The sentiments being expressed above are made in response to a number of failed or poor attempts to attach a strap line and/or a logotype to the city, in much the same way that you would brand a chocolate biscuit, for example. There is also a sense that a city, any city, is deserving of greater respect, for its longevity and for its sustainability, than a consumer product; is less of a commodity and is not quite so easily traded. Cities, like Manchester, however, have become exactly that – a consumer brand, in almost every sense. People with ‘transferable skills’, ‘a disposable income’ and the ability to travel are no longer tied to their birthplace (not spiritually and not in a practical sense). The city must therefore sell itself in order to attract business, tourism, students and key workers such as doctors and teachers. Cities are in competition with one another at a local level, a national level and an international level and we are used to seeing cultural and sporting events transform the identity of the familiar urban landscape and turn it into a corporate event, complete with patrons and sponsors, flags, banners, posters and other advertising opportunities.



**Figura 5** - Super Bock advertising poster, Lisbon 2005 Steven Sarson

One obvious example is the Olympic games, and London has recently enjoyed a successful outcome to its marketing campaign by winning the right to host the event in 2012. Manchester, by contrast, woke up to the need for a new image thanks to two remarkable setbacks, during the 1990s. The first setback was to have its Olympic bid rejected by the committee and the second was the detonation of a large bomb by the IRA in 1996. The devastation this caused, both in real terms and also to the Manchester psyche has led to a series of adventurous architectural schemes and to a greater value being placed upon the way people perceive the city. Part of the attempt to change Manchester's identity has been through its graphic image and in 2004 the city employed Peter Saville to act as a kind of ‘creative director’.

Peter Saville was born and educated within the city. He studied Graphic Design at Manchester Polytechnic and became widely known for the artwork he produced for popular bands such as Joy Division and the Happy Mondays. Peter Saville left Manchester quite soon after graduating and throughout his career he has wrestled with the whole concept of graphic design and in particular graphic designers. In recent years Saville has worked for clients such as Givenchy, Stella McCartney, Yohji Yamamoto and has been a partner in the Pentagram group. Although his working methodology has often been brought into question, including famously producing designs after the deadline, few would have questioned this appointment or his credentials to deliver.

One of Peter Saville's main concerns is the lack of quality within many of the more contemporary architectural projects, despite Manchester having a stock of splendid Victorian industrial and institutional architecture.

*"I looked around and wondered why the buildings on the high streets were so bloody awful. Why are the graphics and the identity of everything so inept and clumsy and inadequate? I used to think it was dull but then I saw that it was anachronistic and retarded. We were staggered by how awful it was out there. Every shop we went in, every hotel, every so-called café or bar. Pubs looked like they had not changed for a hundred years."*

*Peter Saville Manchester Evening News January 2004*



**Figura 6** - Market Street, Manchester 2005 Steven Sarson

He could, with a few exceptions, be talking about any city, anywhere in the world and you can see that he places a level of responsibility on the shoulders both of architects and graphic designers. These are the people who shape how our cities look and how they are 'read'. Legibility is a concept that is currently being applied to more than just typography.

*“We have become increasingly aware of the tools of legibility in helping people be able to move more easily, effectively and enjoyably through urban spaces. Legibility helps cities work. It can be argued that it is essential for city prosperity and life.”*

Alan Jago Head of the School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Westminster UK – taken from a paper given at the symposium ‘Design in Urban Spaces’, Macau Polytechnic Institute October 2005.

Peter Saville is a self confessed ‘elitist’ and he has a strong sense of self worth. These are qualities that impact upon his work with Manchester’s image and they have drawn him to make the comparison between Manchester and the ancient Greek city of Athens,

*“We (Manchester) are the original modern city. If we were having this conversation in Athens would anybody say “Do you think this is an important place?” And Manchester is an important place in our modern world. This is the capital of the brand Manchester. This brand value has not even been realised. I want the people of Manchester to have a growing appreciation of what an important place they live in. It is all there in the museums, but it is boring.”*

*Peter Saville ‘Selling the city to the world’ – Manchester Evening News 2004)*

Here is a graphic designer with equally high aspirations for himself and for his client, in this case the city of Manchester. It is hardly surprising that when he was asked to produce a logotype, using a symbolic initial ‘M’, he refused to reveal his design on the grounds that it was going to be used mindlessly on t-shirts and other merchandising, instead of forming part of a carefully considered and equally carefully managed global image strategy. The local press enjoyed reporting that the designer had been paid £50,000 (or around €75,000) for the work; others got hold of the idea that the work didn’t take very long to produce and was bad value for money (3 weeks instead of the 3 months he would usually take on this type of project).

The city, for its part, made matters worse by arranging a launch party, not in Manchester but in Cannes, France. There has to be something quite odd about promoting a city and then choosing anywhere but that city to launch the campaign and inevitably very public questions are asked about whose money is being spent.

*“What’s the point of a logo? London doesn’t have a logo, nor Paris and they seem to be managing. What do you do with one, apart from put it on a balloon and float it above the Town Hall? There is still a debate on how and when it should be used and*

*I don't want to show it without being able to say what it is for, what are its relevant applications. We have to retain its value as an endearing brand."*

*Peter Saville - Manchester Evening News, March 2005*

This single project shows perfectly the way in which design is commissioned with the client either completely unaware of what it is that graphic design actually can do or why the design is need in the first place. Cities (like other clients) feel much safer when they are following in the footsteps of a rival, rather than heading off into uncharted waters. Barcelona is a favourite city for designers to draw inspiration from and to plunder for ideas, whether or not these ideas translate culturally or even geographically. The cloning of cities is the direct result of commercial pressure from major investors and the limitations of our local politicians. In most cities the population casts votes based upon issues other than aesthetics, design and marketing. Perhaps it is a step too far to try to bridge socio/practical needs such as the refuse collection, the schools and the local hospitals, with a global marketing campaign and design strategies.

It would be nice to think that stories such as this one will have a happy ending, in terms of the perceived status and the role of the graphic designer. Certainly Peter Saville enjoys a kind of celebrity status that is on a par with architects such as Norman Foster. Site specific or ambient graphics projects may be more commonplace and architects might be talking in terms of 'legibility', and yet what is actually happening is that a new breed of professionals are claiming the high ground. The UK is awash with people described as 'urban renewal gurus', 'regeneration stylists' and other equally vague titles. These people are essentially property developers. They are speculators who manage to persuade planning offices to redraw the once familiar topography of a city, to re-christen either individual streets, neighbourhoods or entire zones and they are the people who acquire the professional services of architects and graphic designers and give them briefs that erase social problems by re-branding a particular district, or reposition the entire city by re-painting and re-describing the civic property, civic vehicles and civic functions.

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with replacing an old industrial building or two with a new apartment complex and with marketing the scheme through websites, glossy brochures and poster campaigns. Things get a little 'sticky' however when architectural schemes and creative branding mean relocating the existing population; people whose incomes and lifestyles no longer fit the wider brand image are then offered derisory sums of money for their homes and are evicted if they try to delay the 'agreed' removal date. In a democratic society this is graphic design and architecture used as weapons within a process that is very close to 'ethnic cleansing'.

Tom Bloxham is the chairman of one of the UK's most successful developers, Urban Splash. The impact his company has had on the urban environment within



the city of Manchester has led to a client list that extends across the UK and into mainland Europe.

*i) "The Northern Quarter is now beginning to establish itself. I was at the meeting that settled on the name – it might have been anything, but now the idea of the Northern Quarter is established in people's minds as an entity."*

*ii) "Castlefield will be established as the best city living area, and there will be others too."*

*iii) "As people get priced out of the city centre so they are colonising new neighbourhoods. Regeneration like this is a continuous process. The city is a living organism and it is changing all the time."*

*Tom Bloxham, Urban Splash – extracts from an interview, Manchester Evening news 2005*

The problem I have with the first extract (above) is that these titles are generic and are symptomatic of a desire to rewrite history by doing exactly that – rewriting it, redesigning it and giving it a new typeface. This new version of the city usually contains little in the way of integrity and has yet to prove itself as durable as the place that quite possibly owes its existence to a small group of Roman soldiers, in the way that Manchester does. Ask a taxi driver, bus driver to take you there (anywhere); ask somebody in the street for directions and they will not be able to help you. These places only exist on a map that comes with the architectural drawings and the floor plan of your new apartment, they are not as yet 'real' and the space you are buying once belonged to someone else.

The second extract shows how powerful these people have become. When lifestyle rather than logic dictates, then areas go up or down according to property speculation and the creative wit of the marketing people. Castlefield, for example, is at the wrong end of town and very close to deprived areas, infamous for their gang and drug cultures.

The third extract is difficult to argue against but whether the process is truly organic or whether it is almost genetically engineered is another matter. I find it hugely ironic given the fact that people have only recently been attracted back into the city centre, as a more stimulating alternative to life in the middle class suburbs.

My problem is that between them graphic designers and architects have made this particular city (Manchester) more 'user-friendly' than it has been for decades and the neglect that Manchester endured during the latter part of the 20th Century could not have continued unchecked. We are reaching a point in 2005 where the stock of industrial and commercial buildings, that has provided the raw material for the various regeneration schemes, is fast running out and new build schemes are going up everywhere. The key to the commercial success of these schemes is that a football player or a television newsreader or weather-girl moves into the topmost

apartment. Chefs and of designers are also useful people to have around the sales office, but down at pavement level little has changed.

*“Somewhere along the way we lost the knack of cherishing our cities. Cherishing as in loving- the way they do in France, Italy and Spain; washing the streets, weeding the flower beds, sweeping the squares. We cleaned them up in the 1960s, and eliminated what Lowry (LS Lowry painter) used to call “those beautiful black buildings”. Then we let them go. Or rather, in some profound, unconscious way, we abandoned them. We killed our High Streets, you and me.”*

*Phil Griffin (journalist) Manchester Evening news July 2005-11-16*

Victorian cities had a purpose. The mercantile future of a city such as Manchester, and some of its finest institutions, relied on little more than the softness of the local water supply and the ready supply of cotton, from the British Empire. The water is still there, but the British Empire, like others, is long gone. The city now needs to redefine itself again and again. The city (any city) is an event; one that requires promotion and sponsorship, just like a music festival or an athletics meeting. The city needs its marquees, its signage and its paying customers. The city, like a chocolate biscuit, is there to be consumed by those who can afford to pay for it. The city requires graphic designers, as it requires architects. The big question is what is it that these designers are required to do and why?

There is a place for graphic design. Peter Saville has given Manchester a new slogan, ‘original modern’ and whilst his logotype remains under wraps, this new theme at least recognises the historic and the more contemporary achievements of the city. Peter Saville has also managed to identify where this particular city and others has been going wrong. Manchester has concentrated for too long on competition between itself and other UK cities, instead, it should look to cities such as Lille\* or San Diego and as with all second cities it does not serve any purpose to dwell upon the real or the perceived status of the capital, even if that is where you will find most of the architects and the graphic designers.

In 2004, around the same time that Manchester appointed Peter Saville, the London based design firm Wolff Olins produced an identity that was to be applied to an entire country. The identity they produced is intended to reinforce the Liechtenstein ‘brand’ within a ‘global’ marketplace. With this particular project, as with others, a line has been crossed in which ‘brand’ (as in chocolate biscuit, shampoo and the car), city (as in London. Paris and Rome) and country have become one and the same. I am not, as I have said, a political animal, and yet there has to be something disturbing about the process of design (including graphic design) when it is applied to what I have always believed to be largely public space. There is also a thinly veiled arrogance in terms of the ability of a design discipline, namely graphic design, to deliver something ‘real’ and something that will make an essential, if not lasting difference to quality of peoples’ lives. I am almost certain that the same criticism could be levelled at architecture and architects.



**Figura 7** - Liechtenstein brand identity Wolff Olins – press release 2004

*“The new brand brings together the beliefs and values of Liechtenstein as a whole. It is something that everyone can engage with and over time will strengthen the position of the country in the world”.*

*“The brand is designed to resonate with the people of Liechtenstein and in their own sense of Liechtenstein’s past, present and future”.*

*Press Release Wolff Olins July 2005*

In Macau I compared the durable qualities of a brand identity such as Kit Kat with the constant reworking of city themes, such as those you will find in Manchester. In the USA you can buy an edible bra (strawberry flavoured) for around \$3:00. Similarly, you can consume a city, its foods, its drinks, its sight and its sounds – but what price would we put on an edible country and in particular a place where graphic designers could go to melt?

*“\*This paper was written before the urban unrest in France graphically illustrated what can happen when the city lifestyles collide and people cannot identify with the image a city, or the image that an entire country has created for itself. For the time being, at least, parts of France are illegible at street level.”*

*Steven Sarson 2005*