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Design Education: Tools for Critical Living

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Design Education: Tools for Critical Living

Introduction

Dubai is considered the emerging urban prototype: car-oriented and post-industrial, a decentralized city in which everything is recent. Once stable aspects of tradition in the UAE are transforming amidst swift urban development and influences from large expatriate communities. The graphic design profession has been imported from abroad, along with foreign idioms that saturate the visual environment. Dubai's compressed development has circumvented the evolution of visual language systems beyond the iconic. This is evident in the work of design students who struggle with contextualizing signifying elements germane to their circumstance.

Beyond the language of generic catchphrases and stock-imagery, future designers need a formal and intellectual toolset to comprehend the existing dynamic, elusive, and fantastic environment. Most importantly, they must experience the activity of design as responsive to local culture. At the American University of Sharjah (AUS), in order to initiate critical practice, we assign projects that examine visual communication through; *identification*, *deconstruction*, and *impression*. Identification involves the collection and categorization of familiar design outcomes: publications, ads, retail signs, etc. Deconstruction extracts semantic associations from a collection of mundane objects; focusing on identifying the potential of objects to function as signs. Impression requires a visual and verbal response to the experienced environment. The projects allow students to experience the relationship between form/format, content/container, practice/context. In a place known for its lack of permanence, such activities help students fix aspects of their environment, generating a narrative history about tangible design outcomes. Instead of a generic language of anonymity, students gain abilities to construct visual languages of significance and specificity.

Production vs. Evolution of Place

Offering high-quality infrastructure, expatriate-friendly policies, and a tax-free economy, Dubai has quickly become the region's leading business center and a popular tourist destination. A fast growing city, and a claimed champion of the world's construction activity, it has been home to thousands of cranes supporting its ambitious developments. To maintain the status of a global metropolis, the city has sought to captivate outsiders with a series of sensational projects: the sailboat-shaped seven-star hotel, an indoor ski-slope, artificial islands, and the world's tallest skyscraper¹. The value of these constructions exists not only in their environment, but rather in the emblematic image they project. Dubai aspires to build an

iconic skyline that will carry it into the world of images and memorable postcards.

The dichotomy presented in the title of this section intends not to imply that ‘place production’ is essentially inauthentic. A place is always produced. To quote Frank Gohlke: “...places, like landscapes, do not occur naturally; they are artifacts.”² Venice was a production, but it was also a culmination and investment of common needs and practices in a specific place at a specific time, in a specific form and composition. Dubai lacks the patience to develop such needs and practices. Much like Dubai’s architectural boom does not allow for a retention or adaptation of traditional local building techniques³, its rapid growth and transient character do not allow for a locally significant visual vocabulary to evolve. “Place has something to do with memory. The evidence of the actions of human beings in a specific locale constitutes a physical version of memory.”⁴ In Dubai, references are not durable enough to stand the test of time in which to become signifying elements of communicative value. This is different from the postmodern condition of loose signs, in which meaning can be re-assigned, appropriated, manipulated; in Dubai, meaning is not established from the outset. Instead of dealing with the present and the consequences of current action, the focus is always placed on the deferred impact—the affect—not the effect. The distinction is between making a physical impact on a space rather than a psychic impact with a space.

The focus on the development of an iconic skyline has concentrated design practices in the architectural and engineering professions responsible for the built environment. Apart from calligraphy, which is tied more closely to decorative Islamic art, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) lack a tradition of graphic design practice. However, recent demands of a vibrant commercial market in Dubai have prompted active design practices in branding, advertising, publishing, and TV broadcasting. As result of fluctuations in infrastructure, landmarks and population, the visual environment is disorienting. It is saturated with awkward appropriations of foreign idioms, superficial representations of the traditional culture, or aspirational content that conveys no references to tangible qualities of a specific place. Designed communication resorts to vague notions of exclusivity, luxury, and timelessness, with billboards offering slogans such as “*history rising*”, “*delivering individuality*”, or “*add life to life*” (see fig. 1).

Design Education For The Ephemeral City

The danger Dubai faces is not one of “loosing identity”, a simplistic diagnosis commonly prescribed to regions subject to foreign influence or experiencing transition. At stake is the ability of a population to produce and evolve their own cultural discourse. The alternative is to educate designers to *participate* in their own cultural production rather than *spectate*—to assume an active role versus a passive one. Although much of the workforce is still imported, there now exist a number of schools in the UAE that

educate prospective design professionals who will increasingly participate in the local practice. While teaching within the Visual Communication Program of the College of Architecture, Art and Design, American University of Sharjah, we have observed the following key challenges in working with students:

- Students struggle to contextualize their work in time or place. They demonstrate little ability to identify and analyze where design activity has resulted in a specific form, product, outcome or message.
- Students often fail to see the semantic potential in objects, images, events, or phenomena. As a result, they struggle to create work of communicative significance and clarity.

Curricular And Pedagogical Framework

The curricular structure and the pedagogical approach of the Visual Communication Program addresses design education through three related levels: the syntactic (the level of form), the semantic (the level of meaning) and the pragmatic (the level of function). These aspects of communication are never treated as distinct entities in design studio, as all are in simultaneous operation. Further, students are tied to the responsibility that observations of their own design activity can result in knowledge. Students begin by learning that they themselves can generate form with specific meaning for a specific audience (even if only the audience of classmates) on the very first day of class. The challenge is to reveal this responsibility as not insurmountable, but endemic to design practice worldwide. While this approach may seem true of many design schools, its special relevance in the Gulf cannot be underestimated since students following secondary education possess limited ability to deconstruct the way in which communication happens.

The projects selected for discussion in this paper gradually increase in complexity; from the identification of designed outcomes, to the creation/participation in a potential system of signs. In their final year of study, students are expected to generate a visual language in response to experiencing a local site using each of the discussed projects as groundwork for research methodology, formal activity and critique.

Identification: Collection of Designed Outcomes

In the second-year studio projects, students manipulate spatial relationships in typographic structure and composition as well as develop strategies to integrate typographic and image-based form. At this stage, they are able to establish basic information hierarchies and control typographic form at the level of letter, word, sentence, paragraph and page. In addition to the largely craft-oriented learning outcomes is a semester-long syntactic project—*Collection*—that requires students to observe, record, and categorize aspects of visual culture within their environment (see fig. 2). The aim is to raise students' familiarity

with the existing local/regional graphic design practice by collecting material such as business cards, flyers, retail signage, magazine covers, advertising campaigns, food packaging, etc.

By introducing systems of categorization students experience how particular relationships within their collection are, or are not present, depending on the chosen ordering method. It allows for comparison of artifacts according to location, time in history, or audience demographics. For example, a student may discover shared color schemes used in design of packaging for organic cereal products, or identify differences in typeface choice for a lawyer's business card versus that of a restaurant owner. The process reveals conditions specific to design practice in the region. Students begin to identify the challenges of managing typographic relationships between the Arabic and Latin scripts or problems occurring in translation among various languages represented in the UAE: Urdu, Hindi, Farsi, Tagalog, French, English and Arabic. They observe how designers navigate the constraints of political correctness, cultural sensitivity, and censorship.

The project allows students to begin contextualizing the existing local design practice and possible existing codes of signification. Particularly important is the interaction with location, with neighborhood, and the specifics of seemingly mundane aspects of visual communication. Collections of actual design material across media and format escapes "life in the magazines" that are presented by foreign trade publications. While publications are important as part of a larger professional discourse, our aim is to demonstrate that what is in front of them has substance and significance beyond anything they might find outside of their immediate frame of reference.

Deconstruction: Visible Signs

The third-year studio design course investigates the relationship between visual form, content, and context. The projects foreground the vocabulary used in communication construction, introducing students to the study of signs and symbols, their use and interpretation. The goal is for students to begin to perceive the inherent meaning in form and employ it towards communicative ends. During the semester-long project entitled *Visible Signs*, running parallel to typical studio activity, students collect and document objects from their immediate environment. The task is to extract/generate a list of potential sets of meaning for each documented object (see fig. 3). The list extends beyond the literal to also include connotative and associative references to an object. Most students use photography as a documentation method, but may also collect and include elements from magazines, newspapers, TV-stills, or related sources.

The outcome of this project is an A5 size book that contains image documents presented with a list of

semantic interpretations. The goal is not to generate as many examples as possible but to seek and document compelling examples of signs that communicate complex, perhaps conflicting sets of ideas. In the process, students gain awareness of the way signs operate within their visual environment. They are encouraged to develop extensive lists of words and not be concerned with utter accuracy of interpretation, thereby admitting to the flexible nature of meaning⁵. This reiterates the basic lesson that design decisions are never right or wrong, but simply closer or farther away from communicative clarity. The listing of connotations and associations is a way for students to seek their own limits in terms of interpretative skill. It demands observation as an objective viewer, but also imagination as a subjective experience, or what Roland Barthes calls “punctum”⁶. Although focused on photography, his *Camera Lucida* provides insight here to push the discussion beyond the basics of denotation and connotation and acknowledge the subjective (or emotional) elements inherent in interaction with signs.

Impression: Local Identity

The idea of local visual identity and culture has become contentious; it has been made obsolete by the reach of consistent global marketing and shallow appropriations of vernacular form. Instead of requesting from students to define their local identity, a senior year project entitled *Locale* seeks to develop strategies, processes and forms that embrace a more responsive and expressive notion of what an identity could be in today’s visual culture. The project begins as a process of experiencing a specific location assigned to take students outside of their daily social and physical milieu. The sites included such places as a construction zone, a highway interchange in Sharjah, and an urban market area in Dubai populated by workers from as far away as Egypt and India. Students were expected to both engage the site, and allow it to affect them by their participation in, or observation of, its visual manifestation. A variety of methods and media were used to document what was experienced at each location. A series of studio critiques reviewed the experienced environment through image, footage, recording and found object—but also questioned the methodology of collection (fig. 4).

A design process began as an analysis of what was accumulated, not what had been assumed about the site. In a sense, fieldwork for designers in this instance shares more with anthropology and ethnography than with mid-century notions of design practice. Before any interpretations of what was important to the site could be made, students were asked to account for their selections from the site by opening up to a discussion of the means of collection. How was the material gathered? The development of an identity of place was initiated not with aspiration, but with the confrontation of the material and experiential realities of the place in question. In the UAE, having students deal with the reality of a place is an opportunity to be critical in the most positive sense of the word. What is necessary and unique about this place? Such an approach circumvents a descent into the visual and verbal clichés of generic catchphrases and stock-

imagery that line the highways between Emirates.

The outcomes of the project embodied central themes across both print and time-based work; transformation, movement, and transience (see figs 5–7). The inconsistency of each site in Sharjah, and Dubai’s constantly evolving infrastructure, gave students the challenge of attempting to fix their sites in time. The process of refinement involved the identification of behaviors and activities within sites. In place of trying to designate a static identity, students embraced constant change as an aspect of identity itself. In a place that accepts accelerated development as daily reality, the imposition of rigid processes and identities to express and communicate such a reality not only seems forced, but unjust. This senior project experience elucidates the difficulties of contemporary design practice in a studio environment that condenses previous design experiences into an opportunity to establish a process to observe, reflect and articulate what one’s environment might actually be about, and how it might be coalesced temporarily, into visual form.

The series of projects offered in this paper as a case study within a larger curricular sequence is a means to afford students the opportunity to build a toolset for dealing with the provisional present in a way that is responsive, responsible, and contextual. It is not about importing foreign perspectives—rather, it’s about learning to establish perspective itself as a means to initiate design activity.

Conclusion: Means to Ends

The friction between design education as a vocational vehicle and the larger discourse on design education as an introduction to cultural production is foregrounded in the UAE as larger efforts of planning, logistics, communication strategy and marketing implementation are imported by firms and agencies with a global reach and perspective. It has never been our role to suggest a contrarian stance against such activity, but rather to allow students the opportunity to build tools of observation, to record and annotate the dynamic play of meaning in their visual culture. The ability to reveal and unearth the productive forces that result in the contemporary landscape of media communications seems a necessary step towards an awareness of self and other, of native and imported—not to establish preference, but to establish difference and the potential of making decisions within a rich network of available visual material. Efforts to educate designers in such a context should reveal the tides of messaging to provide students a chance to be critical of images and constructed narratives presented to them and decide what they will contribute to, and what they will choose to alter or ignore. The curriculum at AUS is an attempt to establish a proposal for a design practice of communicative indeterminacy, of potential that begins and ends with the world as it appears out the front door.

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- 1 Amir Berbic, "Oasis Lost: Design in Dubai and the Imperative of Strategic Planning," *Print*, March/April 2005, p. 35-36.
 - 2 Gohlke, Frank. *Thoughts on Landscape: Collected Writings and Interviews*. Tucson, AZ: Hol Art, 2009. 210.
 - 3 Brian Ackley, "Permanent Vacation: Making Someplace out of No-place," *Bidoun*, Spring/Summer 2005.
 - 4 Gohlke, Frank. *Thoughts on Landscape: Collected Writings and Interviews*. Tucson, AZ: Hol Art, 2009. 210.
 - 5 Crow, David. *Visible Signs*. Crans-pres-Celigny, Switzerland: AVA, 2003. 36.
 - 6 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. 23-28.

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Fig. 1. Billboard on Sheikh Zayed Road in Dubai promoting the construction of *Burj Dubai* (now known as *Burj Khalifa*).



Fig. 2. *Collection*—sample book spread by Aisha Nafisi.

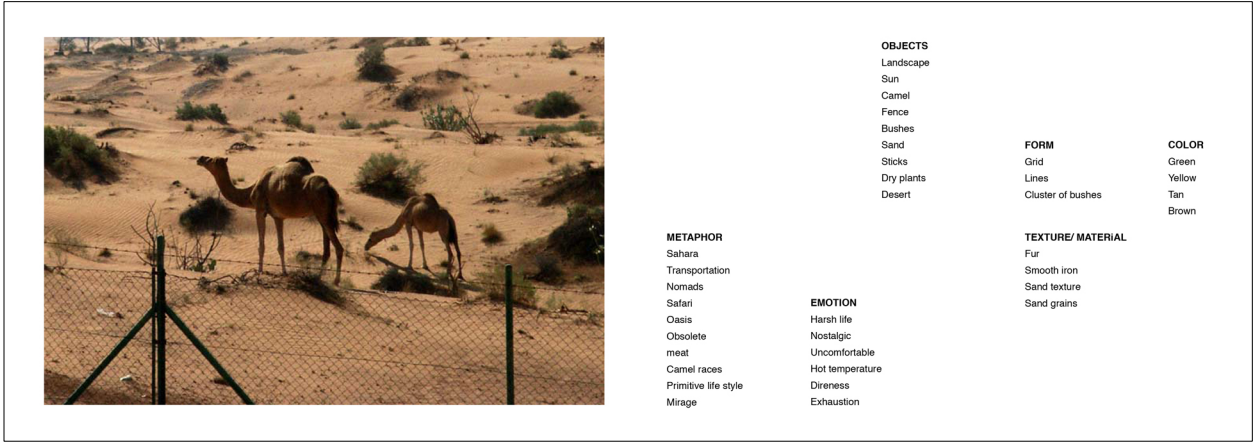


Fig. 3. *Visible Signs*—sample book spread, by Hadeel xxxxx



Fig. 4. *Locale*—composite of photographic recordings from Al Diyafa road in Dubai, by Nour Shihabi.

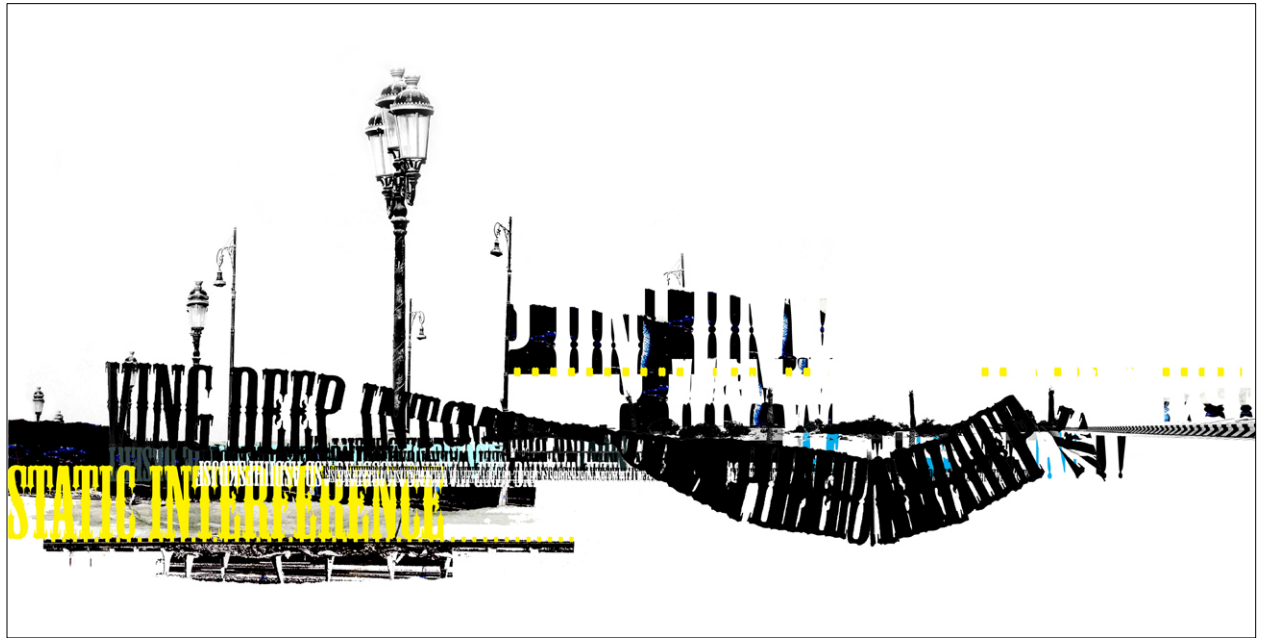


Fig 5. *Locale*—poster by Nazima Ahmad.



Fig. 6. *Locale*—poster by Hala Al Joude.



Fig. 7. *Locale*—poster by Maria Al Daoudi.