

the means by which we find our way. a project in two parts

Regardless of where we live we are both communicators and readers of a visual language that permeates our day to day lives through branding, wayfinding, iconographic motifs, colour and letter-based graphics. To the inhabitants of a city, these man-made visual elements prove to be as potent and grounding as natural landscapes. This visual discourse can sum up entire regions with colloquialism, precisely pinpoint particular locations, form groups by making broad generalisations, reflect the contents of a space literally or be the means by which we find our way.

Any shift from the known to the unfamiliar provides a chance for anxiety. Common to cities all around the world, language, ideological and cultural ghettos exist not only to provide a support network but as places to foster shared values and identities. This need is revealed through graffiti, uniforms, advertisements, tattooing, signage, personalised number plates, ipods, etc.

Change creates a need to re-evaluate our position, to establish a certain element of confidence. A new look for a company may reveal new ownership, the removal of signage may cause an otherwise inhabited space to appear abandoned, a particular icon placed in a window may shift the demographics of the clientele, a particular style may reference a forgotten time and a bilingual greeting on a door may cause those previously left out to feel recognised. However, the addition of a language may cause others to question the state of the neighbourhood.

Unlike the hometowns over which we all reminisce, travelling confronts us with the unfamiliar. We welcome the anxiety of the landmarks that have been reduced to icons on a map on which the lively streets take no more prominence than the mundane ones. Without the knowledge of a language made by letter-forms or characters we respond with what we know: attempts at pronunciation, learned colour-schemes, particular shapes and the kindness of strangers.

The local viewer who relates to the imagery presented on a level of recognition will question the currency and validity of the imagery. To a broader audience, the selection of altered images paired with the originals intends to spark discussion about colloquial visual language and to initiate dialogue about cultural residue – how space and the meaning of words can inform design decisions. As an exhibition, this project adds to the debate about the role that research plays in graphic design professional practice and graphic design's non-commercial function.

The actual language may change, the familiar icons may disappear and perhaps all may be replaced with a subtle joke on the locals. That's the beauty of an evolving visual language in which our literacy sometimes fails us but more often than not sees us through.

THE EXHIBITION

Part One: The project *The means by which we find our way* was born from a desire to bring the wider design world to Hamilton within the context of local surroundings. Paring down an original 100+ photographs, twenty-six images were selected that covered local urban locations: some iconic to New Zealand (ie. corner dairy), others common to most cities (ie. library) and a few that held particularly interesting, if not random, words (ie. havoc). By removing the textual component from the imagery, empty canvases were created; brandless city streets that became all the more generic and less location-specific.

After an initial call for interest, over one hundred and fifty design educators from around the world responded. Each was provided a blank-image along with the 'missing text' and was encouraged to reintegrate the textual content back into the image by placing the text back into what they thought was the original position, working it back in as graffiti, generating new meaning by the organisation of the words

or by including new graphical elements. If the designers were representing a country with multiple languages or were multilingual themselves, they were encouraged to use a translation of the text with or without the English text that was provided.

Part Two: International design educators were asked to submit a response to the following statement: *Describe an experience that, due to an unfamiliar language, knowledge, format, timing or environment, led to a greater level of appreciation or understanding of visual communication.*

The results are a myriad of poignant and sometimes anecdotal travel stories, commentary and remembrances that shed new light on typography and design and how they function.

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For more information about the project and the exhibition, please visit: <http://www.designproject.co.nz/themean>