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What are the visual communication requirements of a built environment?

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This paper explores an aspect of the Built Environment that is part of our everyday lives, yet often goes unnoticed. It is something that is not far away from any vista. It often appears frivolous, and yet can be a matter of life or death. It is very much a part of how people interact with environments on a local, intermediate and global scale — interaction that requires highly sophisticated, and at times, quite basic design solutions. It is a subject rooted in communication, yet is subjected to the everyday forces faced by the established Built Environment professions. In short *Visual Communication in the Built Environment* is a complex subject, and attempts to understand it, and about why and how it happens, are fragmented.

Background to the research

The research has been undertaken during the early stages of a research degree at the School of Built Environment, The University of Nottingham. The topic evolved from a number of professional observations and concerns that developed in the late 1990s about the overall impact that Visual Communication, in the form of words and images, had on the Built Environment. Prior to this study, the author worked as a professional Graphic Designer in London between 1986–2001, the latter part of which was spent working on a number of collaborative Graphic Design/Urban Design projects for the design of pedestrian sign schemes in Greenwich, London; the City of Canterbury; the City of Westminster; Walthamstow; and Liverpool. Consequently, there is an underlying interest in the relationship between Graphic Design and Urban Design, and the processes and products of those respective subjects. This features prominently in the following text, the structure of which attempts to follow the four elements of theoretical research: what? how? why? who-where-when?

The initial research question spans a broader set of wide ranging questions that evolved directly from the authors professional practice experience. In no particular order these are characterized as follows:



- (a) What are the essential and non-essential Visual Communication requirements of an urban environment?
- (b) What roles, if any, do the Built Environment professions play in this?
- (c) How do 'signs and symbols' inform, direct and persuade people?
- (d) How is Visual Communication integrated into the physical quality of buildings, streets, and the public realm in general?
- (e) What impact does land-use and population density have?
- (f) What are the requirements of transportation systems?
- (g) Can we determine commercial needs?
- (h) How does Visual Communication contribute to the proliferation of street clutter?
- (i) To what extent should we consider the needs of public utilities?
- (j) What demands are made by tourism, conservation, and regeneration?
- (k) To what extent do we consider the functioning of the Built Environment, and its changing communication requirements, over time?
- (l) Who has control at local, national and international level?
- (m) How can we better relate communication theory, and audience considerations?

These questions are diverse and from the outset it has not been the intention to answer any of them directly, but to formulate a focal point for further enquiry and examine the potential for a closer relationship between Graphic Design and Urban Design. That said it is the holistic view that is the primary motivation, and a desire to explore some key issues where common concerns might offer opportunity for further exploration. With this in mind, the aims of this paper are as follows:

- (i) to briefly contextualise the research topic;
- (ii) to identify the key subject areas that define the topic;
- (iii) to explore the potential for interdisciplinary design practice;
- (iv) to formulate an academic framework that enables further investigation.

What is this paper addressing

As recently as August this year, a national newspaper in the UK featured a whole page dedicated to the proliferation of signs, forty eight in total, found along a single mile of a country road, in an area of outstanding natural beauty. This may not be a surprise to some of you, who may be aware that this has been a concern in the UK for some time, highlighted in the UK by English Heritage and their *Save our Streets* campaign, and in the case of this article, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England feature prominently.

And yet, we can date serious concerns about this back to the mid-1970s, and the *City Signs and Lights* report prepared for the Boston Redevelopment Authority and The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development by Stephen Carr and the Architects and Planners, Ashley/Myer/Smith. I will come back to this later.



This is part of a much bigger phenomenon, which I am calling here *Visual Communication in the Built Environment*. My concerns are similar to those expressed in the *City Signs and Lights* report, (which focused on Environmental Information Systems), but extend beyond transport issues, and may be more appropriately described as an interest in environmental *communication* systems. These concerns are more holistic in the sense that the Built Environment clearly needs Visual Communication in order to function, but there would seem to be very little research into how and why Visual Communication in the Built Environment happens.

The hypothesis outlined in this paper is that a better understanding of this phenomenon may lie in the relationship between Graphic Design and Urban Design, and initial investigation into these respective fields has informed much of the early research. This is what I wish to discuss here in more detail.

However, that is not to suggest that Graphic Design, and Urban Design, have been neglected as lines of enquiry. Arthur and Passini, in their work on wayfinding (1992), clearly foreground Graphic Design as a critical subject in their work, and Carr's report in 1973 features many Graphic Design problems and solutions, and used Kevin Lynch as their Urban Design consultant. But, Arthur and Passini saw the critical relationship as being between Architecture and Graphic Design. And yet they openly acknowledge that teaching wayfinding to architects is 'virtually impossible' (1992, p. 16).

Consequently, we have to question whether the field of architecture, or planning and engineering, is the right location to deal with important concerns of Visual Communication, and recognise that the field of Graphic Design, and Urban Design, have developed considerably since the time Carr's report was produced — a time when Urban Design was in its infancy. In light of the fact that there is still much criticism, and numerous examples to be found with respect to the quality of Visual Communication in the Built Environment, we must seriously question how Visual Communication in the Built Environment happens, in order to better educate the Built Environment professions, Urban Designers, and Graphic Designers.

How and why can Graphic Design and Urban Design improve Visual Communication in the Built Environment?

To answer this question we must first understand what Graphic Design and Urban Design are. Both could be described as professions on the basis that there is a clearly definable level of professional practice, but as part of the broader field of design, they continue to be emerging disciplines. Nevertheless, they are more widely recognisable now than, say, twenty years ago. Both subjects grew out of the Twentieth Century from much longer standing traditions. We know that Graphic Design evolved from the unification of print, illustration, photography and typography (Livingstone and Livingstone, 2003, p. 90), and that Urban Design replaced Civic Design, drawing on the traditions of the established Built Environmental professions: architecture, landscape architecture, city planning and civil engineering (Lang, 2005, p. xxi, p. 394).

But, what is Graphic Design? In the *Dictionary of Graphic Design and Designers*, Alan and Isabella Livingstone use straightforward terms to describe Graphic Design as the 'generic term for the activity of combining typography, illustration, photography and printing for the purposes of persuasion, information and instruction'



(2003, p. 90). Although now outdated, this description encapsulates the subject as it has been most commonly practiced, but the work of the Graphic Designer has not been limited to one medium (print)—their work has extended to exhibitions, signage, motion graphics and more recently the virtual landscape of websites and CD-Rom, to name a few. We also now know that there is more to the purpose of Graphic Design than persuasion, information and instruction and Barnard asks us to reconsider the functions of Graphic Design as information; persuasion; decoration; magic; metalinguistic and phatic (2005, pp. 13–18). Notwithstanding the need for updated definitions of Graphic Design, what is at the heart of Graphic Design practice is an integrative process that brings together a wide range of theory and practice for the purpose of *Visual Communication*. In his book *Pioneers of Modern Graphic Design*, Jeremy Aynsley attempts to capture this association:

‘Visual Communication is an inextricable part of human history. It has existed as long as there has been the need to make marks or leave traces, to communicate through signs and symbols rather than the spoken word. In contemporary society the activity of organizing signs and symbols, or words and images, for public exchange is recognized as Graphic Design – a specialist area of the broader field of design’ (2001, p. 6).

Nevertheless, we should be careful to assume that Visual Communication happens only because of Graphic Design (it is as much a term used in Visual Art). In essence, Graphic Design best describes a process that Ellen Lupton suggests is about ‘how things are made’ – not usually covered by Graphic Design scholarship (Heller & Petit, 1998, pp. 117–131).

And, what is Urban Design? There are a number of definitions of Urban Design, varying in size and complexity. An accessible but open explanation is ‘everything you can see out of the window’ (Tibbalds, cited by Carmona, Heath, Oc and Tiesdell, 2003, p. 5). Even shorter, is Cowan’s ‘the art of making places’, cited in *The value of Urban Design* (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment [CABE] & Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions [DETR], 2001, p.18). A more comprehensive definition reads ‘the art of relating: STRUCTURES [*sic*] to one another and to their NATURAL SETTING to serve CONTEMPORARY LIVING’ (Lang, 1994, [citing Clarence Stein writing in 1955], p. ix) [author’s capitalisation]. Furthermore, UK Central Government defines the scope of the subject in its Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPG1), stating:

‘Urban Design should be taken to mean the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and the streets, squares, parks and waterways and other spaces which make up the public domain; the nature and quality of the public domain itself; the relationship of one part of a village, town or city with other parts; and the patterns of movement and activity which are thereby established: in short, the complex relationships between all the elements of built and unbuilt space’. (CABE & DETR, 2001, pp. 18).

Adding to this, in his book *Urban Design: A Typology of Procedures and Products*, Jon Lang brings to our attention what he considers to be one of the finest descriptions by Llewellyn-Davies, which concludes with it being



‘about creating vision for the deploying of the skills and resources to realise that vision’ (2005, p. 6).

The impact of Visual Communication in the Built Environment is global, and has had a profound effect on several key geographic disciplines: population; settlement; urbanisation; manufacturing industry; service industry; transport and trade; and world development. For example, many settlements, such as Paris in France, or Carlisle in the UK, began as key decision-making points; transport and trade facilitates migration; retail environments inform people about the shopping experience. Any form of Visual Communication, and its function in the Built Environment – directional signs at an airport, road markings and traffic signals at a pedestrian crossing, shop fascias fronting onto a high street, even hand-written notices on market stalls – exists solely as a result of people interacting with environments, one of the fundamental aspects of Geography.

These examples are simplifications of numerous *interactions*, representing complex human needs facilitated through Visual Communication. In many situations we have become reliant on such facilitation through mediation, and this determines how well or not so well behaviour settings succeed. Indeed, some would cease to function without Visual Communication, and the process of facilitation varies in scope, scale, complexity and spatial-temporal factors.

To illustrate this, in 2005 the BBC televised a programme *How art made the world*, giving considerable emphasis to aspects of the research topic discussed here. The series writer and presenter, Dr Nigel Spivey (a lecturer in Classics at Cambridge University) chose to focus a two-minute sequence at the beginning of the second programme in his series, *The Day Pictures Were Born*, to illustrate what life would be like without Visual Communication in the Built Environment, or more specifically, the consciously designed messages that help us find our way around. He stated that our ‘reading’ of signs, text, symbols and advertising in the Built Environment is something we ‘utterly depend on in our lives’ (Spivey, 2005). The sequence gave a startling impression of how the functioning of the Built Environment is dependant on a design discipline not always directly associated with the urban environment: Graphic Design.

Graphic Design and Urban Design both emerged as professions in the twentieth century to describe an *integrated* and *integrative* design process. Respectively, we have seen how this drew from highly specialised fields of activity that were limited in their ability to meet the changing needs of industry, commerce, culture and society. Subsequently, Graphic Design grew out of an art and craft tradition to establish itself as a fundamental social and economic force in an industrial age, and Urban Design became the replacement for, and extension to, the more limited remit of Civic Design (Carmona et al, 2003, p. 3), and the limitations of architecture and city planning (Lang, 2005, p. xxi). Nevertheless, Graphic Designers are concerned with a design process that results in Visual Communication. Combine this to a concern about the ‘gaps’ in the thinking of Built Environment professionals, and the scale and vision of Urban Design thinking, and it would seem a closer relationship between the two might produce better Visual Communication in the Built Environment.

Furthermore, having briefly looked at some descriptions of graphic design and urban design, the American Graphic Designer, Milton Glaser, (talking after nearly half a century in practice), advises us that ‘it’s very



important when you talk about [graphic] design to realise that it is so highly segmented today in terms of objectives and activities that there's no general definition that applies to the whole field' (Heller & Petit, 1998, pp. 149–155). This poses difficult questions about the future of the discipline, and Steven Heller outlines the various attempts to make sense of the subject.

'In the absence of a critical Graphic Design vocabulary, various models (based on -isms -ologies, and -otics) have been adapted from academia and journalism, running the gamut from scholarly exegesis to investigative profile. This includes commentaries, manifestoes, reviews, editorials, and reportage. Many are highly opinionated, though not all are entirely subjective. Most speak of passions, though some are curiously dispassionate. Some attack, others defend. A few are wise' (Bierut, Drentell, Heller and Holland, 1997, p. 1).

Given this, how does one try and define the subject. Should we even try? How does one teach Graphic Design in the Twenty First century? What are the important and defining topics, and in what proportion? Is typography more, or less, important than illustration? What are the relevant technical skills? It is not helpful to this discussion that similar to other design disciplines that are fundamentally collaborative, Graphic Design suffers from claims that, on one hand, it can be described as *everything* that is constructed through a process of integrating words and images, but on the other, it can equally be seen as *nothing*. Abbot Miller demonstrates this when he describes it as 'a meta-language that can be used to magnify, obscure, dramatize, or re-direct words and images. It's not inherently anything at all, but pure potential' (Fiell and Fiell, 2003, p. 404).

At this point it is worth briefly cross-referencing with Urban Design, as there are similarities with respect to attempts at definitions. Carmona et al (2003, p. 5) outline that it is often easier to define Urban Design in terms of what it is not, and that it is both more and less than those subjects that it interfaces with. They go on to say 'relational definitions (i.e. those that define something in relation to something else)' can be useful and that Urban Design 'encompasses and sometimes subsumes a number of disciplines and activities'. Perhaps most significant is their acknowledgement that establishing boundaries for the subject is unhelpful when the 'identification, clarification and debate of central beliefs and activities' that encapsulate the 'heart or core' is really needed. The same can be said about Graphic Design. It will therefore be useful to consider what the critical domains are that link the past, present and future of Graphic Design, and consider models that are by nature inclusive. Unfortunately there is not sufficient time here to include my research on the matter, though I believe we can model the subject, and will explore this another time.

Historical, cultural, multi- and cross-disciplinary interests

Historically, during the second half of the Twentieth Century, some Graphic Designers took a close interest in Visual Communication in the Built Environment, and how Graphic Design plays its part. In the post-war years British Typographer and Graphic Designer, Herbert Spencer, regularly featured articles and photographs in his visual arts publication *Typographica* (1949–1967) about seemingly mundane themes like arrows in the road, graffiti, and visual essays, documenting such experiences as a 20 mile journey between Marble Arch in Central London the Heathrow Airport (then London Airport) (Poyner. 2002, pp. 61–98). This



publication continues to be a source of inspiration to contemporary writers on Graphic Design, and Graphic Designers. In the early 1990s the design critic Rick Poyner founded *Eye*, the International Review of Graphic Design, using *Typographica* as its main inspiration, which has featured articles about Graphic Design for the national road network signs in the UK, designed by Jock Kinneir and Margaret Calvert, (featured in a Public Realm special issue, No. 34, Vol. 9, 1999) and more recently the retracing the footsteps of Nicolette Gray who documented the 'graphic character of Lisbon' in the early 1960s (No. 54, Vol. 14, 2004). From a creative perspective, a typeface designed by Jake Tilson in 2003, *Nizioleto*, based on letterforms used for a system of toponymy in Venice, (hand-painted and stencilled onto white washed rectangles to identify place names and house numbers), would seem to be a directly inspired by some of the articles featured *Typographica*.

Furthermore, in her book *Mixing Messages: Contemporary Graphic Design in America* (published in conjunction with an exhibition at the National Design Museum, New York) Ellen Lupton features a wide-ranging set of formal and informal examples of Visual Communication in the Built Environment, and confirms that 'urban public space is a stage for viewing the field of Graphic Design in its diversity (1996, pp. 15-27). She suggests 'the street is a microcosm of what Graphic Design is, a medium that gets mobilized by many different parts of society, from major corporations to activists and local music groups and theatres' (Heller & Petit, 1998, pp. 117-131).

More specifically, the Twentieth Century saw the development of specialist multidisciplinary design activities such as *Sign Design*, now an established professional discipline in the developed world, having its own societies such as *The Sign Design Society* in the UK. *Sign Design* demonstrates the design process as being multi-disciplinary, utilising graphic, product, architectural, and Urban Design skills, as well as the work of engineers, sign manufacturers and occasionally, sculptors. Notably, there is an increasing number of books that offer wide-ranging examples of *Sign Design* (sometimes called *urban graphics*, *urban identities* or a host of other descriptors), and many cities have invested substantially in urban sign systems that include information for maps, mapping strategies, transit systems – even typefaces that are exclusively designed for use in one city and usually named as such (e.g. Bristol Transit, Sheffield Sans).

At the turn of the millennium, interest in *Visual Communication in the Built Environment* has been emerging through an holistic appreciation of the Built Environment, and as part of much urban regeneration that is taking place. In some cases, the work of Graphic Designers and particularly their expertise in signage has led the regeneration process. Guy Julier brings this to our attention in *The Culture of Design*. 'In Barcelona from 1980 onwards, the socialist city council set about a radical urban regeneration, first of its metro system but also of its parks and plazas. Signage for its public transportation system installed a greater feeling of order and structure to the city chaos' (2000, p. 126).

And, since 2000, the UK design newspaper *Design Week* has featured many news articles featuring Graphic Design, ranging from improvements to London's South-Bank signage; transport signage on the London Underground; space navigation in London's art galleries; the public art project in Morecambe, *A flock of words*; interactive digital technology in retail and public space signage in Edinburgh; city branding for the London



Olympic bid, and the cities of Rotterdam and Leeds; design in NHS hospitals; the colonisation of public space and guerrilla graphics; and integrated street furniture and communication media; to name a few.

There is also an emerging academic interest in cross-disciplinary activity that foregrounds communication issues in the context of the city. For example, in 2003 the Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands attempted to stimulate research into the city as a communication platform through the project ‘Authoring the city: urban space as a communication platform and communication device’

(www.charlesnypels.nl/authoring.html). They identified a defined set of concerns that aspired to predict city design in the future; communication platforms and devices; use of new technology; information flows; commercial and non-commercial intent; flexibility; amongst other issues. Furthermore, during 2005, they invited submissions for a second multi-disciplinary design project to start in January 2006. *Logo Parc*, is part of a construction project at the Zuidas, Amsterdam that intends to ‘unite architecture, communication design and three-dimensional design’.

Similarly, in the UK, The Leeds School of Contemporary Art and Graphic Design at Leeds Metropolitan University hosted ‘LSx—Leeds Unknown Symposium’ (24–28 October 2005), based around a project which focused on areas where ‘urban planning, information and media technologies and Graphic Design overlap.’ These projects bring together a diverse set of design activities that impact on the Built Environment from very different perspectives.

Concerns about aspects of Visual Communication in the Built Environment

Possibly the most comprehensive study of Visual Communication in the Built Environment can be found in the report mentioned earlier, Stephen Carr’s *City Signs and Lights: A Policy Study* (1973). The report aimed to make recommendations about ‘public policy for the design and control of a small but critical set of information sources in the environment: outdoor signs, lights and other information devices’ (p. 2), and considers their function, described by the term they authored as ‘environmental information systems’. The impetus for the report is clear.

‘The streets of any large city relay thousands of conflicting visual messages. Red lights blink to regulate traffic and to attract us to the local bar. Arrows point out routes; they also flash for the nearest hot dog stand. Private messages are stamped on the face of the city with little concern for anything more than competitive advantage. Even street lights add to confusion by their unleashed glare’ (p. 2)

This comprehensive study, yet to be fully examined by the author, explains that ‘the report deals principally with one-way transmission of messages – from sender to receiver. Signs and lights do not ‘communicate’ with people in the usual sense of exchange; rather they inform people about rules, activities, and occurrences of various kinds’ (p. 3). In considering ‘communication’ as being too broad a definition, it would seem we are now overrun with ‘environmental information systems’ in our towns and cities, and rural areas. These systems still prove ineffectual in parts. If newspaper reports in the UK are to be believed, we now seek to replace



twenty miles per hour with speed cameras, and more signs (Webster, 2006, pp. 1–2). It may be that this is as much to do with over-zealous implementation and little concern for the actual Visual Communication needs of individual behaviour settings, and I suspect, the sociology of crime and rule breaking.

As suggested, Visual Communication in the Built Environment has been an interest for Graphic Designers for some time, and although Graphic Designers have made their own significant contribution to the functioning of the Built Environment, in general the role and concerns of the Graphic Designer have been predominantly aesthetic and documentary. Presently, non-Graphic Designers, who have concerns well beyond the historical and aesthetic, are undertaking analysis about the impact Visual Communication is having on the functioning of the Built Environment. Some of these people are Urban Designers, and some are from other disciplines. Moreover, they are engaging in critical debate about the use of Visual Communication in the urban environment. For example, the use of traffic signals, road markings, and signs in general, on and around the carriageway. Writing in the *Guardian Newspaper* supplement, *G2*, the Urban Designer Ben Hamilton-Baillie expressed his frustration and confusion as to ‘... why the endless clutter of traffic signs, signals, road markings, kerbs, bollards and barriers have conspired to make all the varied, distinctive towns and villages across the country look exactly the same’ and that ‘there is precious little research to suggest that such expensive bits of kit give us these assumed benefits’ (p. 7). This concern is shared by others, and English Heritage argue for more public consultation about the process that has led to the cluttering-up of streets, similar to the process through which building proposals are exposed. Much of this is being brought into question based on research in Holland by Hans Monderman, about how the employment of communication devices by traffic engineers is increasing ‘the risk of accidents by absolving drivers from having to use their intelligence and engage with their surroundings’ (Hamilton-Baillie & Jones, 2005, pp. 39–47).

We might conclude that part of the problem is that traffic signs and directional signs (and public art) tend to be grouped together as part of street furniture (Carmona et al, 2003, p. 161.) and is governed by the same principles (Llewelyn-Davies, 2000, pp.102). When signs are singled out, more often than not the focus remains on the physical quality of the structure that supports them, and the setting (Llewelyn-Davies, 2000. pp.104), and not on communication value, or what might be identified as the manifest function. When the manifest function is championed, it is usually part of an already rigid process that requires little communication design thinking, and more about following procedures. This can be seen in the City of Nottingham’s *Streetscape Design Manual* which encourages a limited set of principles relating specifically to statutory signage, recommending five basic questions – the first of which is ‘What message are we trying to convey?’ (p. 32). Perhaps more alarming, is the manual’s boast about the removal of an estimated ten thousand sign plates that simply state *No waiting at any time* (p. 13).

Graphic Design as Urban Design.

The physical nature of many forms of Visual Communication in the Built Environment leads us to consider Graphic Design as contributing to the creation of city form, and is very much part of the Built Environment. For example, the report published in 2005 by the *New Economic Foundation*, entitled *Clone Town Britain* uses, almost entirely, images of the high street featuring branded fascias. Here, it is Graphic Design that is the key



representational element in the cloning argument. Take the fascias away, and would the architecture alone have as much impact on the mind, considering how advertising focuses on reinforcing the graphics across a range of media.

Moreover, in reference to earlier descriptions of Urban Design, and especially that by Jon Lang, if we take it that a structure is a building, or other objects constructed from several parts, then we can determine that a small structure such as a signpost, is an element for consideration by the Urban Designer as much as a building. Equally, if an object is 'a material thing that can be seen and touched' (Oxford Compact English Dictionary, 2003) then this must include all material objects that make up the Built Environment, including all physical representations of Graphic Design in the natural setting, serving contemporary living. What could be more representative of an object serving contemporary living than road markings, a shop fascia, or an advertisement, for that matter?

If Carmona et al (2003, pp. 5) are right about identifying the importance of what is at the core of Urban Design, it would be difficult to exclude Visual Communication/Graphic Design from this, in whatever medium, from any of the descriptions of Urban Design mentioned earlier. This suggests that Graphic Design is close to the heart of Urban Design, and arguably places Visual Communication and Graphic Design as a central belief in Urban Design thinking. If Urban Design is to fulfil its intention as being the 'integrative (i.e. joined-up) and integrating activity' (Carmona et al, 2003, p. vi.) it aspires to be, it may be that Graphic Design has an important role to play.

Some shared objectives

Urban Design is concerned with a range of ideas, practices and theories that also pre-occupy Built Environment professionals. One of the key ideas to emerge for Built Environment professionals over the last half century is what Kevin Lynch refers to as *legibility*, or the apparent clarity of the cityscape. *Legibility* is a familiar term to both the Urban Designer and the Graphic Designer, having the same meaning, but in different contexts. For the Urban Designer, Lynch asserts it is about 'the ease with which the parts [of a cityscape] can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern' (1960, pp. 2–3). For the Graphic Designer legibility is also about visual clarity, but usually of text – size, choice of typeface, contrast, and character spacing (Butler, Holden and Lidwell, 2003, p. 124), though the term may also be used in relation to illustration and photography. Although Lynch is concerned primarily with visual form in cities, and our cognitive abilities to map that form, we have seen that Graphic Design now plays in significant role in contributing to that form.

With regard to the design of buildings, there was a time when 'architecture provided clearly identifiable entries to buildings, often giving them fine and appropriate lettering as well' (Mijksenaar, 1997, p. 8). It would seem this is not now always the case. An environment that is not legible presents a considerable challenge to the Graphic Designer, in aiding legibility – perhaps an impossible challenge. Similarly, legible environments present a different challenge, and by default could result in less visual clutter created by over-signing. Even so, when Lynch talks about legible environments, such as 'an image useful for making an exit requires the recognition of a door as a distinct entity, of its spatial relation to the observer, and its meaning as a hole for



getting out' (Lynch. 1960, p. 8), how many of us require an endorsement that the door will lead to where one might want to go (such as in a darkened cinema).

Canterbury city centre might fit the description of legibility well. No matter where you are in the city centre, it doesn't take long to orientate yourself around the spire of the cathedral. Though that is not to say Canterbury does not need pedestrian signs. It does. A metropolitan city such as London is a different matter. Its scale for one thing means it can only ever be considered in parts – some more legible than others, much completely illegible. In either location, people need help identifying where they are, they need information and instruction about how to move from one place to another, and often need persuading that a place is safe to inhabit. It is debateable if this *need* that people have, is catered for by the various environmental professions.

The legible city is a desirable thought, but is it possible for an environment to be so legible that it has no need for the precarious devices Lynch warns against (1960, pp.11)? The ability to read a city, whereby navigation is one of the principle benefits, might have been enhanced by the quality of civic design in the past, and location of important public buildings such as a cathedral, or city walls. But with the interest in legibility today in cities, this would seem to be exceptional in recent times. However, the objective here is not to create a hierarchy of importance between the design of environments, and how we then inform people about how to use them. One is dependant on the other and might therefore be better seen as a single domain.

The problem exists in the void, or 'gaps' between the 'tight boundaries' that surround a fragmented set of professional disciplines (Carmona et al., 2003, pp. 12–14). The concern for poor quality public realm – recognised in the 1960s as a something that stimulated the birth of Urban Design – has been mirrored by the growth of Graphic Design, as we have come to rely even more on direct and mediated forms of Visual Communication. Furthermore, the wayfinding devices referred to by Lynch, and Arthur and Passini, concentrate primarily on the *information* function of Graphic Design, and do not consider other functions of Graphic Design, such as *persuasion, decoration, magic, metalinguistic and phatic* (Barnard, 2005, pp. 14–16).

Summary and conclusions

This research has attempted to highlight some of key theoretical and practical issues that relate to the broad research question *What are the Visual Communication requirements of a Built Environment?* The approach has been wide-ranging and varied with the intention that a distinctive viewpoint will emerge that might offer some valuable observations alongside those already existing. Though the subject relates to broader Geographic concerns, past and current observations come from many perspectives, including Graphic Design. Urban Design and the Built Environment Professions, Visual Art, Media Studies, Communication Studies, even the Classics. Geography places the research in a global context and has at its heart a concern for 'the character of places' (Waugh, 1995, p. 6) and links directly to more contemporary subjects such as Urban Design through a shared interest, for example, in land-use patterns.

Due to the author's design experience, this study has focused primarily on two design disciplines, Graphic Design and Urban Design. Urban Design is primarily concerned with the creation of urban environments for



people to interact with, and we have seen how this interaction, is facilitated by Graphic Design, at the heart of which is communication (Barnard, 2005, p. 5). In contrast to Geography, Urban Design and Graphic Design are emerging disciplines, and are directly linked through newer disciplines such as *Wayfinding* or more recently, *Wayshowing* (Mollerup 2005). It has emerged that poor Urban Design cannot be compensated for by good Graphic Design, and vice-versa, and research work in mainland Europe is revealing that often those responsible for Visual Communication in the Built Environment are often ignorant of the true impact of their work.

This paper demonstrates that a holistic and multi-disciplined approach is needed when considering the question more deeply. It recommends that and a closer working relationship between Graphic Design and Urban Design (and not necessarily with the more traditional Built Environment professionals), is preferred. Both share an approach that is integrative, and not bound by any longstanding traditions, and when considering the functions of a Built Environment; communication; economic; cognitive; and display (Lang, 1995, pp. 168–180); alongside those of Graphic Design: information; persuasion; entertainment; magic; metalinguistic and phatic (Barnard, 2005, pp. 13–18), it would seem the that as creative disciplines, Graphic Design and Urban Design are well matched.

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