
I'm still here. Some thoughts on design education and the "real world"

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Q: How well do you feel the program prepared you to face the "real world"? Or not?

A: I'm not sure ... [sigh]... I came back here!

The Graphic Design Program at AUB is celebrating its 20th anniversary and I realize that I have been here for 17 out of the 20 years! That leaves me with very few years spent in the "real world," as the design discipline likes to call the professional world outside the walls of academia.

Some may think I am one of those romantics who cannot face the reality of the world. I say, the reality of the profession as I encountered it did not suit the conception I had of the potential of graphic design.

*There must be some way out of here*², I said to myself at some point early in my career as a graphic designer.

Twenty years ago, the emerging graphic design profession in Lebanon was widely perceived as a lucrative tool in the service of the market economy and consumerism. Within this dominant framework, the ethical dictums of the profession demanded a neutral agent in a presumably value-free process

of service provision, where technical expertise

and aesthetic competencies are sought and, at best, rewarded for "stylistic innovation."

It took me some time to figure a *way out* of the limitations and misconceptions of a profession obsessed with form-making and market profits, too often at the expense of the "real" it claims to embody. And it took some more time to find a *way into* an alternative design framework, one that involves critical enquiry as a basis for its conceptual undertaking. I set out to argue for another definition of graphic design that endorses, as a condition for its practice, debate and meaningful exchanges in the public sphere.

My concern was, and remains, how to reconceive of the field of graphic design within critical paradigms, reflexive processes, and emancipatory motives. If graphic design did not hold within it that potential, I would have long ago abandoned it. This is the motivation that has kept me "here" in academia, not as an escape from the "real world," but as a way to produce an effect on it, alter it, and hopefully induce change.

This introspection about the very definition of graphic design has characterized my academic involvement as a researcher and teacher. It echoes across a number of courses I have taught over the years at AUB, from design studios to graphic design history and theory courses. Perhaps my first encounter with the challenge of questioning the dominant formalist and market-driven definitions of graphic design in the classroom was in the first studio syllabus I was assigned to develop when I began teaching.

*Education in images means a confrontation with citizenship: critical inquiry and debate.*³

When I heard Gerard Paris Clavel making his claim for a counter-model in art and design education, little did I know that a few years later these words would find their place on the syllabus of my course. And that his speech, along with the proceedings of the *Design Beyond Design* conference, which I attended as a graduate student at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in 1997, would become reading material for my students, as well as for my colleagues and me at AUB.

What I found compelling in Clavel's speech was the possibility it offered me, and perhaps others, to challenge prevailing conceptions of graphic design from within the field. His statement reverses the dominant role of images in design education from tools that lure audiences into consuming brands, products, and lifestyles in an increasingly competitive global market and image-saturated world to tools through which a design student begins to think, question, and act responsibly on his or her role in society.

Motivated by the very possibility of another kind of design practice, I initiated the course now known by at least twelve generations of graduates as Design in the Community. Thanks to the enthusiasm of students and colleagues who co-taught it, the studio developed over the years as a laboratory of ideas and experimentation in alternative models of design education, endorsing a graphic design practice that worked in the service of the public sphere. While the claim for such a counter-model is an increasingly urgent necessity within the design discipline at large, it no doubt finds particular and immediate relevance within the context of Lebanon (and the region), where notions of citizenship are largely undermined by the politics of neo-liberalism, sectarianism, and age-old repressive regimes.

Design in the Community invites students to engage in society, where their practice as designers gets closely linked to their own connections to places, people, and communities. In this course, graphic design is approached as a signifying practice and as a form of cultural production. It is critically

1 From my response to the initial questionnaire sent to graduates on the occasion of the Graphic Design Program's 20th anniversary.

2 Taken from Bob Dylan's song "All Along the Watchtower," 1967.

3 Gerard Paris Clavel, "Everything is Possible." In *Design Beyond Design*, ed. Jan van Toorn (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, 1998), 96-103.

Designing the greatest awareness campaign does not stop people from smoking! Such work needs to be coupled with action, and with advocacy plans that could lead to new policies.

examined in its communicative potential within particular social contexts and political realities. This design lens enables a methodological rethinking of the separation between form and content, and questions the common misconception that form-making is a value-free creative process. To engage in graphic design as a cultural practice is to first recognize that form-making is an equally signifying process, to realize its semiotic capacity in the circulation of meanings, values, and discourses that mediate social life.

The studio provokes students to challenge their understanding of form and content and revisit their symbiotic, complex relationships through the communication process. It opens with basic graphic explorations of meaning production through word and image associations, coupled with discussions on the theories of representation. And it closes with more complex visual articulation of information as in the case of the final project, which involves designing maps. Here, the classical distinction between form and content collapses together with the idea of visual representation as a transparent/innocent vista onto the “real.”

The projects enable students to employ their graphic design skills to publicly raise issues of communal concern. Most relevant here are two main projects: awareness campaigns and public interventions. In either case, students are asked to first identify issues of concern to them, based on their own individual experiences, interests, and encounters, and then to see how these intersect with the concerns of others in their community. At all times, the process involves close observation of their daily environment, research, and interactions with people, as well as raising questions, overcoming preconceptions, and, finally, sharing findings in the studio and debating positions.

Over the past twelve years, several issues have been frequently raised by the students: local environmental hazards, heritage preservation, drug and substance abuse, socially-prescribed gender roles and sexuality, and discriminatory laws and practices against women, among other marginalized social groups in Lebanon. For many students, some issues were a revelation, even though these have affected the larger part of the local population. For others, it was necessary to overcome the barriers that prevented them from speaking about social issues classified as taboo, and to begin to unpack the complexity of the problems at hand. And for quite a few who resisted this process of immersion, there came a gradual realization about the importance of the work. Designing an awareness campaign on AIDS, for instance, was meaningless if the locality, context, and public in which it was to be expressed were not taken into account.

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In the awareness campaign project, students are encouraged to collaborate with local NGOs or activist groups that are working on similar issues, not only to gain information about their campaign subject, but to actually have a critical sense of the problem on the ground (Who is working on what? What approach do they take? What are the obstacles? etc.). Often this close collaboration has resulted in students' designs being adopted by the organizations, which eventually chose to print and diffuse their campaign locally. Likewise, in the public intervention project, students often hurry to actually make it "for real," even if we only had asked for a simulation. An important learning experience in such projects is that students take their work beyond the limitations of the classroom, the judgment of their peers, and the recognition and evaluation of their instructors. They learn to listen to the comments of a public, beyond those of designers for whom the communication, in fact, matters most. Of course, this did not always take place so smoothly!

The public intervention project brought about other kinds of concerns by the students that dealt more

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directly with everyday urban life and the definition of public spaces in general. These focused mostly on the lack of public services provided by the state and the state's laissez-faire attitude⁴ towards private practices that infringe on people's basic rights as citizens. While some issues raised in this project are persistent and indicative of the severed notions of civic rights and responsibilities in Lebanon, other, perhaps more pronounced, dissenting voices were symptomatic of the unfolding political events in the country. The rigidifying of ideological/sectarian boundaries and concomitant hostilities that have shaken and divided the country, at least since 2005, have not evaded debate in the studio and critique through poignant graphic interventions⁵.

As students formulated their commentaries and intervened in the city, they became more aware of the meaning their voices could have in the public realm as well as of what potential readerships and reactions their interventions might engender. They also began to realize what it means to position, question, and negotiate their own private or individual interests in relation to those of others, the heterogeneous communities of people, who share a public space.

The ability to mark the city with their voice by way of their graphic design skills empowered students to act on the very structures that dismissed them as rightful citizens. However, as much as this studio lends agency to graphic designers as active members of their communities, it also became necessary to undo the romantic assumption that design and designers alone could change the world. Designing the greatest awareness campaign does not stop people from smoking! Such work needs to be coupled with action and with advocacy plans that can lead to new policies. Design needs politics in order to effect any change in society, and designers need to collaborate with others and immerse themselves in realities outside those of their own profession. A poster on a wall (real or virtual) does not mobilize, unless it has a public, a community of people who share the concerns expressed therein.

I can see now, with great pride, that the design approach provided in this course has motivated AUB students to adopt its methods at other moments in their studies and in their careers as designers. This is evident from the samples of projects contained in this book.

Today, this critical framework for graphic design practice is no longer new and perhaps no longer "alternative," at least not as it was 12 years ago in Beirut and elsewhere. I say this gladly as I see this approach becoming slowly integrated into the discipline of graphic design and its discourse, as well as into academic curricula and even into professional practice. When we first started this course in the spring of 2000, there were very few references to consult other than *Design Beyond Design* and the *First Things First Manifesto*, which was reissued in that year by the newly emerging *Adbusters* magazine. Today, simply googling "design for social change" or "design activism" gives you a host of entries: books, conferences, professional and academic workshops, etc.

In Lebanon, leading advertising and design agencies have become increasingly invested in designing public awareness campaigns, sometimes with reduced fees or as in-kind services for local organizations. Beirut just recently witnessed a multidisciplinary design workshop with the aim of "designing for change" in conjunction with the city's first Design Week initiative⁶. The graphic design field is, after all, changing. What is certain is that there are more discernible efforts worldwide in that direction.

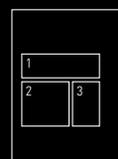
Q: How have I prepared my students for the "real world"?

A: I have brought the complexities of the "real world" into the design studio.

⁴ Read also "corrupt attitude."

⁵ See my contribution in "Beirut and its Dwellers: The Security Map," eds. M. Fawaz et al. Special 32-page addendum to *al-Akhbar* daily newspaper, May 2011.

⁶ The workshop was organized by Desmeem in the Spring of 2012, an initiative of the newly founded MENA Design Research Center. For more info, consult: <http://www.desmeem.com/>.



- 1 | Intervention**
Roubina Tutunjian,
2011
- 2 | Intervention**
Hamed Sinno,
2010
- 3 | Intervention**
Gloria Tahhan,
2010



Zeina Maasri is an Associate Professor of Graphic Design at the American University of Beirut and a practicing designer. Stemming from her interest in the intersection of graphic design and politics, Maasri has been involved in a long-term research project on Lebanese political posters. In addition to a number of articles she has written on the subject, her study has resulted in a critically acclaimed book, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: IB Tauris, 2009). She also curated a related travelling exhibition and conceived the online counterpart of the project as an open archival resource.

Her areas of graphic design practice include publication design and different forms of self-initiated and collaborative cultural/political resistance projects. Maasri has edited and art directed with Anja Lutz *Greetings From Beirut* (Berlin: Shift! 2003). She co-edited and designed *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation and Mind the Gap, 2002). She was art director and a member of the editorial board of *Zawaya*, a periodical on emerging cultural production in the Arab World (Beirut 2001-2007).

Zeina's work has been widely published and exhibited in different international venues. She was awarded "The Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2005" for the design of *Territoire Méditerranée* in collaboration with Mathieu Christie.