

The Designer as Author: Reading the City of Signs— *Istanbul: Revealed or Mystified?* Gérard Mermoz

Acknowledgment

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1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Picador, 1979) [1st Italian edition: *Le Città Invisibili*, Torino: Einaudi, 1972].

2 Gérard Mermoz was Senior Research Fellow in Typography at the London College of Communication (formerly the London College of Printing). For a discussion of the graphic designer as reader: Bruce Mau, "Gérard Mermoz: In Conversation," *Baseline* 43 (Winter 2003): 33–36.

3 Rudy Vander Lans, "Introduction," *Émigré* 64 (Winter 2003): 9.

4 The concept of critical design, central to the City of Signs project, argues for the development of a *critical* attitude—in the face of economic and other constraints—as an intrinsic part of the design process. My concern in this project is to emphasize that designers should not just be critical when defining their *socio-cultural* or *political objectives*, but also about the *languages* and *methodologies* we resort to, and consider the *epistemological implications* of specific design choices and communication strategies. Ultimately, my concerns are about the relations between graphic design and knowledge; treating graphic design not just as a communication tool, but as an instrument for the production and communication of knowledge. This presupposes evolving new forms of collaboration between graphic design and other disciplines: the arts, architecture, music, literature, and the human sciences.... The preoccupations of the

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—*Cities and Signs* 1

For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city, which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name.

—*Cities and Names* 5

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)¹

Part One: Context

In April 2003, six designers from the London College of Printing led by Gérard Mermoz spent two weeks in Istanbul, working on a project which set out to *redefine graphic design as research, and the graphic designer as reader*.²

Viewed against the ongoing debate on "the designer as author"—recently revived in a special issue of *Émigré* which, "after about ten issues or so filled with visual and aural indulgences... felt it was time to return to publishing design criticism and theory."³ The "City of Signs" experiment is particularly relevant because it moves the graphic design debate away from polemics, and onto the concrete ground of "critical design practice."⁴

One problem with much of the graphic design debate, as it stands, is that it remains at the level of general principles: styles, tastes, and ideologies; fertile ground for polemics, but short on *analyses* of graphic language and on *critical evaluations* of communication strategies. The problem extends well beyond the good or bad will of the protagonists, and is a direct consequence of the methodologies extant in the field.

My own attempts at raising the intellectual level of the typographic debate, in semiological terms⁵ seem to have exceeded the terms of reference designers and commentators were prepared to adopt and use in that debate, reduced to a series of claims and counterclaims, locked in an unproductive dualism between traditionalists and avant-gardists. This lack, or low level, of *semiological engagement*

with the design process—both within education, design criticism, and in professional practice—is, in my view, largely responsible for the generic level of the debate, and for the limited range of issues raised, compared with discussions in architecture, literature, film, or fine art.

A first step out of this situation requires that we stop commiserating about the low level of the graphic design debate, and do something “concrete” about it. Revamping old slogans such as “first things first” is not enough, and can be counterproductive—especially when it detracts from other initiatives developed elsewhere to address these issues. As experience has shown, it also can alienate many people, and lull supporters into a state of complacency. More important, these expressions of self-righteousness unwittingly keep the debate anchored within the same, narrow terms of reference; couched in the same “uncritical” language which they aspire to transcend.

This is precisely what we tried to avert, in the City of Signs project; where, away from polemics, we set out to test the capacity of design to operate as research and, in the process, extend our role both as readers and as authors; working not in autonomy, but in collaboration with other disciplines. If autonomy is desirable with respect to commercial and other material constraints, we should acknowledge that the graphic designer lacks the tools, the methodologies, and the knowledge bases he/she needs to achieve the status of “author” within the broader fields of research and aesthetics.

By “aesthetic,” I do not mean concerns about “seductive forms” and/or naive “self-expression” (the alleged attributes of “graphic experimentation,” from Neville Brody to David Carson), but the complex set of possibilities which arise from the purposeful interaction between forms, ideas, and signs, and their interpretation.

The time has come to stop using the words “art” (as in the expression “Graphic design is not ‘art!’”) and “aesthetics” superficially—as if they represented a fundamental threat to *information* and *communication design*—and start acknowledging (and learn from) the complexity of the processes and situations they address, as well as their relevance to graphic design theory and practice.

The recent theorizing within fine art of a “relational aesthetics” by Nicolas Bourriaud is particularly relevant for those of us intent on opening up the field of *graphic action* on the basis of more ambitious agendas.⁶ Particularly relevant is Bourriaud’s redefinition of “form” as the site of “possible encounters”—as “a face summoning me to dialogue with it”; in the process connecting me with “other formations, artistic or otherwise.” Bourriaud’s observation that “Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world,

footnote 4 continued

graphic design industry and the organization of the graphic design curriculum in art schools and universities worldwide are such that we cannot expect them to facilitate this epistemological design shift without first undertaking radical transformations and changes in direction.

5 Gérard Mermoz, “Masks on Hire: In Search of Typographic Histories,” *Visible Language* [special issue on the theme: Critical Histories of Graphic Design, Part 1: Critiques] 28:3 (1995): 261–284; “Le corps du texte: pour une théorie multifonctionnelle de la typographie,” *Communication et Langue* 105 (September 1995): 105–115; “On Typographic Reference,” *Émigré* 36 (1995): no pagination; “On Typographic Communication,” paper read at GRAFILL, the annual conference of ‘Norske grafiske designere og illustratører,’ Oslo, published, in Norwegian as “Typografisk Kommunikasjon,” *Visuelt* 4 (1997): 18–21; *The ‘Body of the Text’: Typographic Interface and Interactive Reading*, (*Acts of the Symposium Labile Ordningen*, Hamburg, 1997): 188–198; “Deconstruction and the Typography of Books,” *Baseline* 25 (1998): 41–44; and “Esthétiques Graphiques,” *Encyclopédie de la chose imprimée (du papier à l’écran)*, Paris, Retz (1999): 70–88; “On Typographic Signification,” *Hyphe* (Winter 2003): 19–26.

6 Gérard Mermoz, “Graphic Design Education: Towards More Ambitious Agendas” in *Becoming Designers*, E. Dudley & S. Mailing, eds. (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 151–158; and Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2000) [1st French edition: 1998].

giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum,” is particularly useful because it redefines the status of the work from that of an autonomous object and authorial statement expressing and embodying the artist’s truth, to that of an open platform onto which artist and public negotiate possibilities of meaning and being. As Bourriaud put it, “Someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees fit.”⁷ Far from corrupting graphic designers, engaging with art and aesthetics in my view is essential if graphic design is to achieve a state of intellectual maturity, and expand both its field of operation and its critical capability as an agent in the production of knowledge, alongside art.

My critique is directed both to graphic design practices and to “critical” writings; which, in the process of setting up well-meaning agendas, contribute to the preservation of the status quo. They do so by holding onto an old language of *polemics*—grounded in values of style, self-expression, and political correctness⁸—instead of developing a “critical language” capable of addressing the terms and the processes of graphic design practice at *micro levels*. What is most urgently needed is a sophisticated, critical semiology of graphic design and typography, along with an opening up of the graphic design debate to relevant issues raised outside of graphic design, where more complex “problématiques” are developed with the help of sophisticated methodologies across the arts, literature, and the human sciences.

Drawing from semiological theories and their applications in the arts and culture will enable graphic designers to make design choices on a broader and more far-reaching (deeper) basis than currently is possible; locked as the profession is between free, intuitive improvisation and the rigorous application of “proven” rules. The graphic semiotics I am advocating stands within the broader semiotic field outlined by Peirce, Saussure, Morris, Volosinov, Eco, and others; encompassing all forms of communication across media and contexts. Today, as ideas and media practices flow between fields, crossing discipline boundaries, more than ever we need to call upon new and increasingly diversified forms of knowledge, according to the tasks at hand. This, in turn, requires that we broaden our knowledge base and develop new forms of collaborations.

For there is little point in publishing, as “critical” writings, texts which elude the rich complexity of graphic language, and neglect to consider the infinite subtlety of the processes involved in reading, viewing, and interpretation. Compensating with common sense, forceful assertiveness, and a patent neglect of analytical tools appropriate to the tasks at hand is a clear sign of “intellectual immaturity.” It would be far more productive if the subject of *graphic authorship*, superficially debated in/by the profession, was addressed in terms of its specifics; highlighting how specific designs work, at the levels of their graphical, semiotic, and ideological dimensions.⁹

7 N. Bourriaud, *ibid.*, 21–24.

8 “Rant” was the theme of *Émigré* 64 (Winter 2003), a symptom of the complacency with which some graphic designers and commentators prefer to air their feelings in public, in preference to generating “ideas” in the pursuit of “alternative agendas.”

Pedagogically, this would require educating future designers to appreciate the fact that the specificity of a graphic design solution is not perceptible by looking at the form from the outside, but by focusing on its invisible information structure and on the functional interaction between its graphic elements. This only can be achieved within a conceptual framework, and with a critical design language capable of directing the working of graphic signs towards specific ends. This would not remove formal ambiguity from the graphic design equation, but would reinstate it with a greater sense of purpose, and to greater effect. Thus, the expression “it looks good,” as a widespread mark of design appreciation, should be acknowledged for what it is: a “retinal” perversity and serious mark of illiteracy, and a sign of impoverishment of design by one-dimensional styling. Beyond fads and fashions, design literacy, in my mind, refers to the capacity of the designer to infer the mental processes and the theoretical basis of the design choices which led to a given design, as well as the capacity to consider their implications in terms of how they might implement a reference, and how it might be interpreted in the viewing/reading process.

In the absence of a specific critical language capable of addressing graphic design at micro level—in all the variety of its functions—we are now in a situation where designers’ “alibis” mask the incapacity of designs to implement designer’ claims and intentions in the design itself.

Leading the City of Signs project has taught me that expecting in-depth, critical self-evaluations from graphic designers (and artists, for that matter) not used to, as we are, examining and questioning our work in complex semiological terms can be a problem. This is due as much to a lack of vocabulary and methodology as to a marked reluctance to challenge our own “assumptions,” and a propensity to treat our design “works” as extensions of the self, rather than as relative (perfectible) design propositions resulting from a critical reflection on the means and the effects of graphic communication.

Part Two: The City of Signs Project

The City of Signs project (www.research.linst.ac.uk/cityofsigns) was set up as a residency/lab, in collaboration with Istanbul Bilgi University.

Objectives: The project emphasizes the discrete power of form and design to complement text-based academic research in raising issues about the city differently, and in promoting a critical dialogue across disciplines; in this instance, around the urban: the built and lived-in environment. This is quite different from those approaches in graphic design which, from Neville Brody to David Carson, have interpreted experimentation as a combination of formal play and self-expression. It’s also different from the superficial stylistic borrowings from science and other disciplines denounced

9 For a discussion of working “at the level of the text,” see Bruce Mau, “Gérard Mermoz: In Conversation,” *Baseline* 43: 33–36.

by Jessica Helfand and William Drentell in “Wonders Revealed Design and Faux Science.”¹⁰ Our ambitious aim in this project was to open up perspectives for interdisciplinary dialogues with people and places, and for creative media interventions in and about urban space, through a strategic development of media representations.

Inspired by methodologies borrowed from Action Research, we planned our field work as a series of interventions, anticipating that our photo-, text-, sound-, and object-based gathering of data would take the form of “propositions” directed towards the production of “insights.”

Methodology (1): The Designer as Reader/Author

Stepping out of the commercial mode, we exchanged the task of merely relaying clients’ messages (what graphic designers allegedly do for a living) for those more typical of freelance researchers and authors.

The title of the project “Reading the City of Signs: Istanbul: Revealed or Mystified?” was ironic because, although we wished to avoid tourist stereotypes and the seduction of the picturesque, we were aware of the difficulties involved in escaping tourist trappings and overriding our own assumptions—cultural and methodological.

To sharpen and extend our analytical tools in preparation for our fieldwork, we drew concepts and insights from history, travel writing, semiotics, sociology, ecology, and art and design theory—as well as from architecture, music, sound art, and literature. The methodology of “action research” provided a flexible framework which enabled us to monitor our progress with respect to our aims and objectives, and the situation encountered on the ground.

During our visit, we did not focus on the beauty spots identified by tourist guides, but on aspects of the City that related to the research interests we had developed during the months preceding our visit.

The issues we addressed, individually and collectively, during the two weeks of our field work included: the disproportionate emphasis we placed on the visual, coupled with an invitation to rediscover the neglected world of sounds—neutralized, as it is, by background music (Goldwater, *Sight Unseen* and Mermoz, *Sonic Postcards from Istanbul*); our simplistic assumptions about the experiences of the visually impaired (Juliane Otterbach, *Going, Blind...*); our oblivious attitude towards the waste we generate through mass consumption and unsustainable packaging (Rucklidge, *Discarded Values*); the gradual reduction of the City to familiar stereotypes which replace—not just in foreign visitors’ minds [Duben, *What Is a Turk?*], but for all those who aspire to become global consumers—the rich pluralism written in the fabric of the city, its people and its history; and, alongside these stereotypes, the spread of decay—in old buildings (www.xurban.com) caught between urban regenera-

10 Jessica Helfand and William Drentell, “Wonders Revealed Design and Faux Science,” *Émigré* 64: 73–82.

tion (the creation of amenities such as roads, housing, schools, hospitals, universities, etc.) and the preservation a multicultural historical heritage; and retaining a sense of identity against the leveling effect of globalization.¹¹

The sum of these interventions does not attempt to present a unified picture of the city, but discrete responses to specific aspects, which, in the current phase of the project, amount to a collection of “fragments.” From these fragments, new questions and strategies will emerge, in the spirit of action research, leading to new propositions and dialogue around an extended agenda.¹²

Methodology (2): “Field Work”: Averting Epistemological Obstacles

With its historical legacy, Istanbul—where East and West have met over the centuries in a clash of values, cultures, and religions; but where, today, multiple cultures, languages, and traditions combine into a potentially rich mosaic—seemed an ideal location to respond to the challenge set by Italo Calvino, in *Invisible Cities* (1972).

In an age of “global consumer tourism”—amidst a revival of religious and political fundamentalisms—Calvino’s book is of particular relevance because it invites us to distrust the masks through which a city presents itself to her potential visitors, as well as to her own citizens. “The city should never be confused with the discourse which describes it,” notes Calvino, warning us not to conflate reality and representations: “The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things...”¹³ an observation which echoes the endless “chain of signifiers” theorized by Peircean semiotics; whereby, in the process of interpretation, a sign triggers off another sign which, in turn, calls for another, and so forth ad infinitum.

But other epistemological obstacles threatened our enterprise: the danger of becoming the City’s own text, in the process of our own readings: “Your gaze scans the street as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting X. you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.” (Cities and Signs 1).¹⁴

Unlike the standardized “sights” and “manufactured experiences” of tourism, the “city of signs” is not one but many; encompassing as many perspectives and circumstances as there are readers: “For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city, which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name.” (Cities and Names 5)¹⁵

Calvino’s warnings, we felt, did not solely apply to the discourses we encountered in Istanbul (the City as Signs), but also to those we produced; for we do not claim to present the “truth” of the City; only “readings” designed to encourage an ongoing reflec-

11 For full-color illustrations of projects and designers statements, see Gérard Mermoz, “Reading the City of Signs: Istanbul: Revealed or Mystified?” *Baseline* 44 (Summer 2004): 37–44.

A full color version of *Istanbul Diary* is to be published in the next issue of *Hyphen*. Copies of *Time Lines*, the catalogue of the City of Signs project at Aksanat, is available from: aysegul.coskun

12 *Handbook of Action Research*, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, eds. (London: Sage, 2001). Although the action research models developed and tested by Peter Reason and his colleagues at Bath University do not deal specifically with art and design practices, some of the methodological requirements advocated in their position papers (www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/papers.htm) bear relevance to, and can be usefully imported and tested within, the field of an expanded (critical) graphic design practice. For us, however, awareness of the necessity for a constant self-examination of the “design as research tool/process”—at every stage and on a cyclic basis, to minimize the negative effect of unquestioned assumptions—first came from literature, in the form of the epistemological warnings we encountered in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (quoted above).

13 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*: 51 and 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 15.

15 *Ibid.*, 99–100.

tion about history, culture, communities, identities, progress, and consumerism; in the wake of globalization; and about the concepts which mediate our experiences. We also wish to raise questions about the role of “representations” across art and design. In so doing, we hope to provide a basis for progressive and constructive exchanges.

Projects

In Istanbul, we spent ten days finding our way; observing, discussing, recording, and documenting our impressions; and reflecting about our experiences. The material we collected (photographs, sounds, words, objects, images, etc.) provided the material from which we began to articulate our respective “readings” of the City and to reflect, simultaneously, about the working of signs within the media we adopted to formulate our propositions. We used this material to stage and test our initial hypothesis: “What contributions could graphic designers *working as authors* make, in dialogue and in collaboration with neighboring disciplines?”

Instigated in a collaboration with the Istanbul Institute for the Blind, Juliana Otterbach’s project to explore the City, guided by visually impaired Istanbulites, invites us to question our assumptions about how the visually impaired might experience the City, bringing their experience into focus, from general indifference (in the margins of society) into public consciousness. Her project revealed that those who are either marginalized or underestimated in their intellectual or experiential capacities, appreciate the same sites, and enjoy the same “sense of place,” albeit with different sensory emphases. In this project, photography and sound recordings provided tools to address the issues, rather than finished graphic artifacts.

Joanna Rucklidge’s plastic archaeology highlighted some of the problems posed by the combined effects of mass production and consumption, and the absence of efficient refuse collection and recycling strategies. The problem is not intrinsic to Istanbul, since all large metropolises are threatened to succumb under the weight of their domestic and industrial waste. The project, however, offers a concrete basis for developing—in collaboration with the Municipality—a campaign of awareness for people, industrialists, and the waste disposal units’ managers.

Behind the superficial façade of modernity, manifest in the intensive building activities throughout the City, the x-urban collective reminds us, in *City of Ruins*, that the City has been and remains “under siege,” and its territory contested: by the poor, who reclaim unused plots to set up “overnight homes” (*gecekondu*), which the state, unable to cope with the chronic shortage of housing, is forced to accept; and by property developers, who have contributed to disfigure the skyline with unauthorized buildings tolerated as part of a deregulated situation, economic ambitions, and corruption.

What Is a Turk? by Ipek Duben, confronts us with a series of gross Western stereotypes which, although partially selected, induce us to reflect about the ideological basis through which imperialism and colonial powers have justified their enterprises, at the level of everyday language, and through the development of stereotypes.

The ghostly black and white photographs, taken by Graham Goldwater with a pinhole camera, which required long exposure times (between three and six minutes each), present ordinary everyday realities, from which all moving objects have disappeared or been reduced to a blur. Listening to the sound tracks, recorded during the same exposure time, brings back these invisible elements as audible traces, inducing us to reconstruct the scene and reflect about the discrete characteristics of audio and visual stimuli, and to challenge the dominance of visual values in our perception and mental construction of reality.

In *Sonic Postcards from Istanbul*, I looked for alternative ways of representing the City with sounds, transposing a *problématique* of typographic reference into the world of sound design.¹⁶

Discarding the picturesque sounds easily identifiable and commonly associated with the City—by its inhabitants and by visitors alike (the call to prayers, the cry of street sellers, exotic music, fog horns on the Bosphorus mixed with the sound of seagulls, etc.)—I began by reexamining the concept of “sonic object” theorized by Pierre Schaeffer, then set up the conditions under which the sound of a human voice, in resonance with the sound of architecture, might conjure up an image of the City. The result was *Laughter*—involving a child of six telling a story with the sound of her own laughter in the acoustically rich underground space of a Byzantine cistern. This piece later was developed as a sound/type/photo installation at ZKM, Karlsruhe.¹⁷

The most recent exhibition of the City of Signs project, at Aksanat, Istanbul, was opened by a photo-typographic exhibit entitled “Istanbul Diary,” inviting visitors to view the City through the experiences and reflections of a foreign traveler.

Clusters of cinematically montaged images and texts raised issues about histories, cultures and identities. An allegorical approach to photography, alongside more illustrative uses, and typographic interventions “at the level of the text” (rather than at that of its ergonomic presentation), shifted the emphasis away from retinal visibility and towards elaborating appropriate graphic forms and structures capable of meeting the demands of specific literary genres, and of enhancing the rhetoric of the text.¹⁸

16 “On Typographic Reference,” *Émigré* 36 (1995): no pagination.

17 *Laughter*, sonic work published on CD in *Earshot* 4 (December 2003), a journal of the UK and Ireland sound community. “In Name/Voice of the other ...” in: “Call Me Istanbul ist mein Name, Kunst, und irbane Visionen einer Metapolis,” *ZKM*, Karlsruhe (2004):88–91 (in German) and <http://hosting.zkm.de/istanbul/e/mermoz> (in English). See also “Istanbul Diary” in *Soundscape* 5:1 (Spring-Summer 2004): 23–25.

18 *Time Lines*, Exhibition Catalogue; Aksanat, Istanbul; December 2004.

Semiographics: From “Work” to “Proposition”

The images, sounds, and texts produced during our fieldwork were structured and edited into individual “propositions” about the City or, more precisely, about our attitudes and perceptions of the City: two of us “insiders” (Duben and Incirlioglu), five “outsiders” (Goldwater, Mermoz, Otterbach, Rucklidge, and Wright), and one “in between” (Cepoglu). Although great care was taken in the presentation of the material, our propositions are not to be treated as beautiful artifacts—as art or design *objects*. However seductive it becomes, for us, *form* always is a means of generating *insights*.

I use the word “insight” in preference to “knowledge,” because knowledge presupposes a systematic organization of facts and propositions. Initially, by their very nature, our interventions aim to generate insights. However, in the long term, these insights may, in combination with other methodologies, develop into forms of knowledge oriented towards action.

Our direct engagement with forms and signs (graphic signs, in the broadest sense of the term: typo, photo, and phonographic)—through an applied graphic semiotics—is part of our plan to theorize the graphic design field as the sum of semiological processes through which signs relay information as representation, expression, and communication; oriented towards a process of interpretation which opens onto concrete action. This is a discrete feature of the City of Signs project, which aims to explore the capacity of art and design to extend into both research and action. Unlike in conventional, academic, text-based research; we formulate propositions, which are deliberately not explicit so that—through a degree of ambiguity, and via the detour of a complex aesthetic-semiotic engagement with form and media—we invite readers to extrapolate from our propositions, rather than to accept or reject readymade conclusions. This “semiographic” strategy presents knowledge in the making; in the form of “open” propositions, rather than knowledge as a *fait accompli*.

By inviting viewers and readers to engage with the rhetoric of our “texts” / propositions, and with the specificity of the media used—in particular, the relations and differences between pictorial evidence and that provided by other media (sound or text)—we depart from traditional forms of academic enquiry, in their marked reluctance to address the effect of their own rhetoric in the production of knowledge. For us, however, form and rhetoric are not to be demonized but valorized, semiologically, if they are to enhance communication. We consider them an intrinsic part of the process through which we structure our perception and our ideas; and externalize them as graphic “texts,” offering them for “reading” and interpretation. Without rhetoric, there would be nothing left to see, hear, say, read, and ponder over; except, perhaps, for a mythical crystal goblet of “pure” ideology.

The Lab

The City of Signs project exists as a network of activities centered around the concept of the “lab.” The City of Signs lab is concerned with the development of fieldwork involving: research, dialogues, design activities (making concrete propositions, evaluations, adjustments, and changes of direction), exhibitions, publications, seminars, etc. along a cyclical axis. The focus of the City of Sign lab is the City, in all its aspects.

The lab is committed to extending the role of graphic designers and artists in society by putting the “critical dimension” back into graphic design—working at the micro levels of a graphic semiotics—and by promoting two lines of action: the artist/designer as author/reader and the author/reader as artist/designer.

Towards an Evaluation

Although the images of Istanbul that emerged from our first encounters with the City differ somewhat from the versions presented in tourist guides and other promotional materials, our intention was not to produce alternative “pictures” of the City but, more appropriately, to develop alternative modes of approach through the strategic use of graphic media. Our concern was twofold: to avoid stereotypes and the seduction of the picturesque, and to consider how a critical and creative use of media might open up different perspectives about the City.

Before we went to Istanbul, I had imagined that our findings could, in an ideal world, be used to design alternative public information material—books, posters, signage, tourist brochures, guides, and postcards—which may, in the long run, help to modify people’s attitudes. But we do not live in an ideal world, and the pressures of globalization, for which “alternative”—as defined by Istanbul’s *Time Out Magazine* and by the global elites of the City—essentially means “aspirational” in consumerist terms. Promoting Istanbul as the “cool,” “in” place, and “flavor of the month” for “global” cultural tourists may be too strong, considering the fact that the City and its “Europeanized” inhabitants are caught in the ideological bubble of globalization.

Today, Istanbul continues to offer visitors opportunities to experience an exotic/orientalist cultural “dépaysement” [East meets West], we should not forget that, as Harbison pointed out, “Perhaps in all cities the past so overbalances the present that they are more dead than alive; certainly the one which inspire pilgrimage and far-fetched love are the deadest, where one goes for the remains not the activity;”¹⁹ nor should we lose sight of that, in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, minorities suffered violence, unfair taxes, expropriations, forced expatriation, and, in the case of the Armenians, ethnic cleansing.

19 Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

Since, for foreign travelers, the cultural richness of the City owes more to the legacy of its past—threatened as it is by the opportunistic, short-term goals of those responsible for its economic revival—than to the insights of those who hold the powers and ride the economic and political waves. History remains an important guide in the City of Signs.

By engaging Istanbul in non-consumerist ways, striving to avert clichés and the seduction of the picturesque, we experienced the vulnerability of the myth, as well as the vanishing traces of the City’s multicultural past, slowly eroded by the proliferation of bars, restaurants, shops, and galleries; which replace tradition with the seductive values of global consumerism. Our residency in Istanbul reminded us that traveling is, above all, a fact-finding exercise involving ourselves. Focusing on the signs through which the City manifests itself, in the spirit of Calvino, led us to challenge our assumptions about history, culture, and identity.

Extending the work begun in *Istanbul Diary*, the next phase of the City of Signs project, entitled *Monuments*, will focus on the fate of minorities in Turkey and explore, in collaboration with the Turkish government, mutually acceptable ways—acceptable both to Turkey and Europe—of rewriting history. It will do so in such a way as to bring out the collective responsibilities of all those involved in the forced redesign of the map of the Middle East; and in the little-publicized “massacres” of Muslim civilians, Assyrians, and Nestorians; and in the contested Armenian genocide. The series *Monuments* refers to the symbolic space in which contested histories may be rewritten—and graphically reinscribed in public consciousness—to elicit, from us all, a collective sense of shared responsibility.

This is an ambitious design project, but in keeping with the initial intellectual and artistic ambitions of the City of Signs project: to reinstate the designer as author.

Acknowledgement

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