

About One Striped Rectangle: Jean Widmer and the Centre Pompidou Logo

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Memento Mori

Recently, it came very close to being admitted to the pantheon of defunct logos: the emblem of the Centre Pompidou, conceived in 1977 by Jean Widmer, was almost included in a funerary homage imagined by Declan and Garech Stone (the Stone Twins), whose book *Logo R.I.P.* commemorates 48 visual identities of the twentieth century that have fallen into disuse.¹ Like the BP shield, the Pan Am globe, and the Nazi swastika, Widmer's stripy design—a silhouette of the Centre (built by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers)—might have been given a detailed obituary and a proper "burial." In addition to brief historical accounts, the book features photographs of tombstones, on which each logo appears as having been engraved—thanks to photo retouching software that allows such verisimilitude. These logos, condemned by the movement of history, economic exigencies, or marketing strategies, have thus been given immortality.

Logo R.I.P. highlights the paradox of signs, which are conceived as lasting symbols of an organization or a brand and generally designed to make a strong impression on public consciousness, but are nonetheless fragile, and liable to fade into total oblivion as quickly as they appear. Moreover, this virtual—and anachronistic—cemetery is more than just a happy artifice by which the apt-named Stone Twins offer an unhopd-for immortalization to each fallen logo. The fiction of these carved tombstones effectively places the signs in question into an historical perspective: it attaches them, most unusually, to the epigraphical tradition, the official inscriptions of which have, over the centuries, found a privileged sphere of expression precisely in funerary art.²

The heritage of the modern logo is at once vast and heterogeneous, a mixture of heraldry and identifying marks or signatures of all sorts used in diverse contexts throughout the centuries. The problem of strictly defining and categorizing them remains unresolved. The French word "logotype" was a typographical coinage that designated a set of letters cast in a single block of moveable type. Taking account of this original meaning, hesitation persists today in using the term in specialized literature when referring to signs that don't employ typography.³ The abbreviated

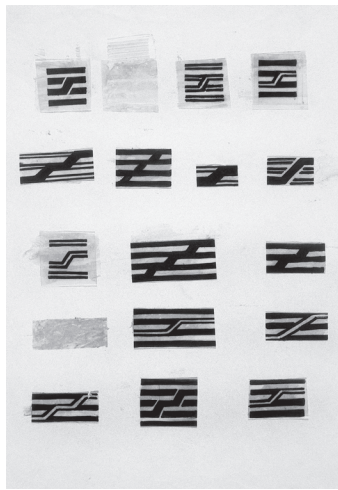


Figure 1

Jean Widmer, Sketches for the Centre Pompidou logo, 1976–1977.

29.7 cm (11.6 in) x 21 cm (8.2 in)

India ink on tracing paper and collage on paper, felt pen and pencil on tracing paper.

Paris: Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

term “logo,” stripped of its suffix and gaining a more general application, has gradually come to designate (in both English and French) any sign, graphic and/or typographic (the two registers often coexisting) that identifies an organization or trademark. This is the usage adopted in the present essay.

The Stone Twins, Irish designers based in Amsterdam, indicate in their book that they had intended to include the Centre Pompidou logo in their selection but had to omit it when it “reappeared after years of inactivity.” We don’t know if the logo’s tombstone would have been shown as neglected and invaded by undergrowth—like that of British Telecom’s flute player—or fresh and flowery like the Reuters Agency’s dotted letter sign, but this anecdote, even if based on a somewhat distorted view of reality, shows the attention paid by foreigners to the singular destiny of the Pompidou logo. The version given by the Stone Twins doesn’t really correspond to the facts: there wasn’t exactly “inactivity” or a “reappearance” of the Centre Pompidou emblem. It was threatened with disappearance at the end of the twentieth century but saved by an effective, notably international campaign. The eventful history of this striped, two-color rectangle thus emerges, after nearly 30 years of existence, as a kind of contemporary saga where aesthetic and ideological stakes have been intertwined.

Far from resting in peace, the logo is still today an integral part of the visual identity of the Centre Pompidou, even though it doesn’t appear systematically on all official communications.⁴ Its use became optional, at the recommendation of “image guidelines” drawn up by the Paris agency Intégral Ruedi Baur et Associés when the Centre reopened in 2000 after a period of major reconstruction. Those guidelines referred to the logo as a *sigle* [initial letter or acronym used as shorthand], just one among many identifying marks.⁵ There are those who would have preferred to see it go: since the reconstruction of the Centre coincided with a new millennium, the elimination of the historic emblem would have marked a new direction. It ultimately survived due to strong pressures from within and without the Centre, but with a less assured position than before. But by delegating decisions regarding its use to those who conceive documents and other graphic objects, the image guidelines nevertheless ensured the logo’s eventual return.⁶

The Necessity of Design

It is appropriate to go back to the creation of the Centre Pompidou emblem to understand the weight it carries today. It is even necessary to begin the story well before its appearance on the scene. In 1974, Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand won the competition to design the graphic image of what was then provisionally called the Centre Beaubourg. Five years earlier, Widmer had been asked by François Barré (associate of François Mathey, the director of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs (UCAD)), to design the graphic

- 1 Declan and Garesh Stone, *Logo R.I.P.: A Commemoration of Dead Logos* (Amsterdam: Bis Publishers, 2003).
- 2 See Armando Petrucci, *Jeux de lettres: Formes et usages de l’inscription en Italie, XIe-XXe siècle* (1986), translated from the Italian by M. Aymard (Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 1993).
- 3 See, for example, Per Mollerup, *Marks of Excellence: The History and Taxonomy of Trademarks* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1997), 109. Mollerup points to an alleged distinction sometimes made between “logotype,” which applies to longer and easily readable brand names, and “logo,” which corresponds to shorter names, acronyms, or abbreviations. He adds, however, that the two terms are often used interchangeably to designate graphic symbols identifying trademarks, including those containing no alphabetical elements.
- 4 On the history of the visual identity of the Centre Pompidou, see Catherine de Smet, “Archéologie d’une identité visuelle,” *Centre Pompidou: trente ans d’histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2007), 472–480.
- 5 On the visual identity conceived by Intégral Ruedi Baur et Associés, see especially Intégral Ruedi Baur et Associés, *00/00/00: Identité Visuelle du Centre Pompidou* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999).
- 6 The new functional signage progressively installed by the Paris agency CL Design in 2007 (to replace what Intégral Ruedi Baur et Associés had conceived) reintroduced various versions of Widmer’s logo—a motif silkscreened onto around 30 glass discs painted red and placed here and there among the paving stones of the piazza in front of the Centre, or on the background of the permanent bulletin boards outside the building and in the hall.

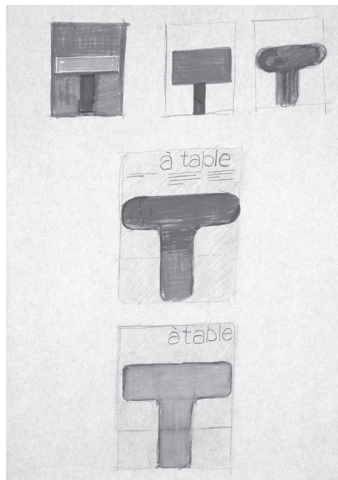


Figure 2 (top)

Jean Widmer

Sketches for the exhibition poster *À table*,

1969. 29.7 cm (11.6 in) x 21 cm (8.2 in)

Felt pen and pencil on paper.

Paris: Musée national d'art moderne –

Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

Figure 3 (bottom)

Jean Widmer

Poster for the *À table* exhibit, CCI, Marsan

Pavilion, 1970. 65 cm (25 in) x 50 cm (19.5 in)

Silkscreen

The CCI logo appears on the left part of the cross of the T.

Paris: Musée national d'art moderne –

Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre Pompidou/J.-C. Planchet

look for the brand new Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI, founded to promote design), of which he was both the co-founder and the head.

The CCI image was actually among the earliest logos that Widmer designed, following two trademarks for ready-to-wear clothes.⁷ His agency went on to create visual images for numerous institutions: in Paris alone, the Musée d'Orsay (with Bruno Monguzzi), the Institut du Monde Arabe, the Jeu de Paume, the Cité de la Musique, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Théâtre de la Colline. Having moved to France in 1953 at age 24, Widmer was originally from the German sector of Switzerland. Trained at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zurich, headed at that time by Johannes Itten, he belonged to a generation that benefited from direct links to the Bauhaus and the New Typography. Widmer worked first in Paris as an apprentice for the Tolmer firm, which specialized in package design. He then became art director for SNIP, an advertising company, then for the Galeries Lafayette (as successor to his compatriot Peter Knapp), and finally for the magazine *Jardin des Modes*. Elsewhere, he gave courses at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, where he would participate in teaching reform from 1960 onward.

Conceived programmatically, the CCI's graphic look marked a turning point in Widmer's career; at a time when he was opening his own agency, this first global institutional image would definitely shape his later activities. But it was equally a turning point in graphic design in France, notably in the public sector, which would henceforth be more attentive to what François Barré called the "necessity of design."⁸ This would be shown in various competitions in the following decades, beginning with that of the Centre Beaubourg.⁹ The logo that Widmer created for the CCI and the graphic system into which it fit exploited a "constructive" repertoire along the lines of Max Bill and Richard-Paul Lohse, based on orthogonal axes, controlled composition, and a restricted visual vocabulary. Thus it helped familiarize the Parisian public with Swiss graphic design, a regulated, objective, measured approach that lent itself to the elaboration of broad-scale visual projects.

The twenty or so posters Widmer created for the CCI between 1969 and 1975 manifested a desire to establish as nonfigurative a relationship as possible with the announced subject of each exhibition, and depended on a pattern determining once and for all the position of the various elements (title, motif, descriptive text).¹⁰ Such rational design was prolonged with the use of a single, sans-serif typeface, Helvetica, emblematic of Swiss know-how and high typographical standards. The oft-used fluorescent colors, which attest to Widmer's interest in Pop Art,¹¹ were also subject to previously established guidelines defining specific shades. The logo itself was made up of geometric forms—a half circle, evoking a C, linked to a smaller square with rounded corners. The result

obviously suggests the letter G: a G for graphic arts but also for *Gestaltung* (German for “giving form to”), a G that triumphantly occupied the covers of the journal of which it was the title, published in Berlin from 1923 to 1926 by El Lissitzky, Werner Graeff, and Hans Richter in the spirit of the Dutch De Stijl movement and Russian Constructivism. When questioned on this subject, however, Widmer denied ever having had such intentions, thus obliging to consider this G—so suited to what the CCI was championing—as a serendipitous slip of the pen.¹²

The mastery that Widmer demonstrated in his conception of a coherent global graphic image for the CCI, which could be adapted in the long run for multiple uses, put him in a privileged position when the embryonic Centre Beaubourg launched an international competition in 1974—a little less than three years before its opening—for the design of its visual identity. Such an operation on so grand a scale was an event in France, in which the CCI directly participated as one of four major institutions—with the Musée National d’Art Moderne (MNAM), the Bibliothèque Publique d’Information (BPI), and the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM)— comprising the future cultural establishment. Indeed, during the previous five years, the CCI had contributed to making the French art scene sensitive to the problematics of design—graphic design in particular. Among exhibitions devoted specifically to that field, it is worth recalling those on the American Push Pin Studio and André François (both 1970), current Swiss graphic design (1971), Roman Cieslewicz (1972), and Dutch graphic designer Willem Sandberg’s work for the Stedelijk Museum (1973), which Sandberg had headed for almost two decades (1945–63). Furthermore, other shows had accorded a sometimes important role to graphic design, placed in a larger context, such as the Olivetti exhibition in 1969 and the “French Design” show in 1971. They were presented in the Marsan Pavilion of the Louvre—the headquarters of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs—or else, for larger installations, in Baltard’s market pavilions at Les Halles (temporarily converted prior to demolition). That was the case in 1970–71 for the exhibition “Collective Spaces: Signage and Furnishings,” which provided a pointed reflection on what was at stake concerning commissions for graphic design on the municipal scale. An important part was devoted to issues of urban signage: an audiovisual display allowed the public to compare the graphic design choices of the subway systems of seven large world cities, and a section was devoted to the exemplary signage system created in Mexico City by a multidisciplinary team led by Lance Wyman for the 1968 Olympic Games.

International Consultation

Several of the designers included in the 1970–71 exhibition were solicited for the 1974 competition. The operation was launched in

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- 7 Logos of Pierre d’Alby and *Vêtements de vacances* (VdeV) in 1963 (Widmer had already designed the title of the magazine *Jardin des Modes* in 1961).
 - 8 François Barré, “La nécessité du design,” *Prisuvente* 25 (January 1970): 4–5. (This issue served as the catalogue for the exhibition organized by CCI: “International Competition of Prisunic-Shell Design.”)
 - 9 See Josée Chapelle and Marsha Emanuel (eds.), *Images d’utilité publique* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988), which features various graphic arts commissions between 1970 and 1980.
 - 10 For a detailed description of the composition of the posters and the CCI logo, see Margo Rouard (ed.), *Jean Widmer: Un écologiste de l’image* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995), 57.
 - 11 See Jean Widmer’s conversation with Philippe Apeloig in the catalogue of the exhibition *Jean Widmer: A Devotion to Modernism*. (New York: Herb Lubalin Study Center of Design and Typography / Cooper Union School of Art, 2003), 38–39.
 - 12 I asked Jean Widmer the question in public at the time of the lecture I gave in his presence at the Centre Pompidou on February 29, 2004.

May with a message sent to about twenty agencies or independent designers, divided fairly equally between French and foreign agencies or designers. The letter sent out by Robert Bordaz, president of the Etablissement Public du Centre Beaubourg (EPCB), pointed out that it was not really a conventional competition but rather a consultation of “qualified experts,” whose opinions were sought to define the Centre’s “image.”¹³ The recipients of the letters were informed of the names and positions of the members of the commission charged with the final decision, namely the president of EPCB and the heads of the four institutions: Pierre Boulez (director of IRCAM), Pontus Hulten (head of the visual arts department), François Mathey (director of CCI), and Jean-Pierre Seguin (director of BPI). The role of Chair was bestowed on Willem Sandberg, who was a particularly appropriate choice due to his double experience as a designer and a former director of a major European museum,¹⁴ as well as being Francophile and fluent in French. A planning schedule indicated the different stages of the work to be carried out in cooperation with the Centre’s teams and the architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers between July 15 1974 (the date of the final selection), and January 1, 1976 (the date set for the public opening of the building). Then the contributions to be supplied by the candidates were set out in detail. In addition to the names of the members of the agencies and of potential associates and professional references, the letter indicated that submissions should include a document explaining the manner of “approaching, treating, and resolving the principal problems of signage for Beaubourg,” as well as a “note on the resources to be deployed.” On the other hand, no design proposal was specifically required, and the visual aspect of the dossier seemed optional: “You may, if you wish, complete this document with an illustration of your conceptions (thus, for example, a proposed ‘Beaubourg label’ or one or more sketches).” Candidates were also given a brief that divided the issue into two “series of problems.” On the one hand, there were questions concerning access to the Centre (not very visible at a distance) and movement inside the building (taken in a very broad sense, from guiding visitors to labeling artworks), and on the other, there were questions concerning the Centre’s “image” and public visibility.

Despite the varied profiles, differing nationalities, and ages of those invited to participate in the competition, all had experience, at different levels and degrees, in the issues addressed by this consultation: the visual identity of a museum or institution and the problematics of signage for public spaces. Perhaps the sole exception was André François, more an illustrator than a designer. He made a joint submission, however, with the agency of Robert Delpire, who, in association with the American Herb Lubalin, had recently led (as his response to the Centre pointed out) “similar investigations for different projects, in particular for the World Trade Center in New York.”

13 This letter, as well as other documents from the EPCB cited in this article relating to the competition, are housed in the archives of the Centre Pompidou.

14 In 1971, Sandberg had been one of the nine members of the jury for the Centre’s architecture competition, which was won by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers.

The list included, for example, designers of the visual image for the Olympics, Lance Wyman (Mexico 1968) and Otl Aicher (Munich 1972). Also solicited was Italian-American designer Massimo Vignelli, a proponent of vast visual branding, who notably designed new signage for New York's subway in 1972. Ivan Chermayeff and Thomas Geismar, meanwhile, were specialists in grand-scale corporate design projects, such as the one their agency conceived for Mobil Oil Company; in 1964 they also created a new visual image for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Dutch designer Wim Crouwel and his Total Design partners were known for both the signage at Schipol Airport (Amsterdam) and publicity materials for the Stedelijk Museum. One of the numerous works that the British designer Alan Fletcher of the Pentagram collective had to his credit was the dotted logo for Reuters Press Agency (mentioned above), with its necessarily international application. His senior colleague, Frederik H. K. Henrion, a pioneer of British corporate design, had published a book on the subject a few years before,¹⁵ while the London firm Wolff-Olins had been recognized as an international specialist in trademark images since its founding in 1965. The Belgian Michel Olyff had been featured in the CCI exhibition thanks to his work on highway signage. Pierre Faucheux, who had spearheaded the graphic renewal of books in France in the late 1940s and was especially well known in the publishing sphere, had also worked on architectural projects and had designed the logo for Paris's Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, as well as various exhibition designs.

Also invited to submit were Marc Piel from Paris (with the ENFI Design firm), Basel-based designer Théo Ballmer (who designed a temporary logo for the Pompidou Centre, consisting of a circle in a square), the naturalized Frenchman Roman Cieslewicz from Poland, and Bob Noorda, a Milanese designer originally from the Netherlands. The designer of the celebrated Univers typeface Adrian Frutiger, then active in Paris (drawing up signage specifications for the new Roissy Airport) made a joint submission with Leen Averink. Finally, Jean Widmer joined up with Ernst Hiestand, his compatriot from Zurich. Some individuals and agencies declined the invitation to submit, such as the French agency Mafia (which lacked the "necessary teams," according to Denise Fayolle in her letter to the committee), Chermayeff and Geismar (who cited a heavy workload and reduced office staff), and Massimo Vignelli. Jacques Lavaux and Michel Bilic (VB Production) had agreed to submit, but did not appear on the final list. In all, fifteen competitors remained in the running.

The dossiers submitted by the candidates were forwarded to four designated committee *rapporteurs*, all involved in the initial conception of the Centre: the architects Dominique Baudry and Henri Bouilhet and the sociologist Claude Pecquet (all three of whom were members of the planning team), as well as François

15 Frederick H. K. Henrion, Alan Parkin, *Design Co-Ordination and Corporate Image* (London: Studio Vista and New York: Reinhold, 1968).

Barré. Engineering chief François Lombard presided over this “technical commission,” which included the Beaubourg architects Piano and Rogers, whose advice was solicited. A duly prepared analysis in the form of a questionnaire guided committee members in their task of paring down and determining numerous aspects for the jury to consider in making its decision. The conclusions of the reporters’ review, however, did not finally agree with the terms of the preliminary guidelines, which were probably unsuited to submissions that were less ample than expected. The optimistic preparatory document betrayed ambitious expectations on the part of EPCB, including graphic proposals (which were nevertheless optional, according to the commissioning letter cited above); we may imagine a certain degree of disappointment with responses that were sometimes a bit undeveloped. So the contents of the submissions were described as “a letter” from Cieslewicz, a “letter and a slide” from André François, and only a “written document” from Frutiger. A note on Wolff-Olins’s submission indicates “no concrete proposals.” Seven of the competitors gave no costs, and nine of them didn’t furnish anything related to “functional signage.” Approaches to the issue of signage generally appeared “good” or even “very good” except for Olyff, Cieslewicz, Frutiger, and François, all of whom received poor marks (“nothing” or “no”) in the categories relating to methodology and implementation. Budgetary estimates were difficult to compare since the number of phases varied from case to case, but Widmer’s seemed the most expensive—1,760,000 francs,¹⁶ a figure that caused the committee to ask whether it included the cost of execution. It appears that the average cost predicted by EPCG had been one million francs, with no compensation allotted for the competition itself.

At its first meeting, the selection committee short-listed five teams: Otl Aicher, Lance Wyman, Alan Fletcher and Theo Crosby, Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand, and Pierre Faucheux. On July 5, Widmer and Hiestand were definitively selected. The official report of the jury’s deliberations stated that “the committee noted the high quality of the dossiers that were submitted to it.” This claim was doubtless mere courtesy, judging by the information already quoted and especially by an article dealing with the competition that appeared in the magazine *CREE*, whose author Gilles de Bure, before describing the level of the presentations as “frankly bad,” stated that “one must say that the average level of analysis and presentation (with very few exceptions) was unusually poor.”¹⁷ This critical evaluation of the results of the competition supplies some information on the contents of some of the proposals.¹⁸ We learn, for example, that Cieslewicz, working with Roland Topor and Fernando Arrabal, proposed a logo based on three combined letters: A for Art, B for Beaubourg, and C for Centre, and that Marc Piel’s approach was very marketing-based. De Bure also reported that many candidates insisted on exploiting audiovisual media,

16 According to the notes concerning costs as indicated by the candidates. The total for that outer cover is also confirmed by the article cited in the following footnote.

17 Gilles de Bure, “Signalétique pour le Centre Georges Pompidou,” *CREE* 36 (August-September 1975): 47–53.

18 There are now no traces of returned documents for the competition in the archives of the Centre or the Musée National d’Art Moderne collection.

employing multiple screens and loudspeakers in accordance with the concept of “machines for communication” being promoted by Piano and Rogers, and that the Dutch designer Wim Crowwel suggested accentuating audio messages so as to facilitate the orientation of visitors, especially the blind. But the article offered a particularly detailed consideration of the descriptive signage designed by Visual Design Association (VDA), a collective structure created by Widmer and Hiestand, which eventually became (without Hiestand) Visual Design. It was now late 1976, about 18 months after the competition. The Centre was no longer called Beaubourg but Georges Pompidou; construction was in full swing, and the VDA team was working on the final touches of its project.

No Logo

The document with which VDA won the competition in 1974 was a thick pad of A3-size photographic paper printed on one side only and tied together with cloth ribbons so that it could be opened and spread out over more than 32 feet. Viewing it therefore required special spatial conditions. The designers wanted to offer the jury an object adapted to simultaneous examination by many individuals, permitting all the members present to read part of the dossier without losing sight of it as a whole. Widmer and Hiestand were surrounded by a solid team, including two Swiss colleagues, Urs Franger (who wrote the text with Hiestand) and Jörg Zintzmeyer, as well as the colorist Jacques Fillacier and two graphic designers, Nicole Sauvage and Robert Krügel. The introduction had been assigned to a museum specialist, the Swiss Jean-Christophe Ammann.

VDA submitted a detailed analysis of the process of gaining admittance to the Centre, and suggested a strong urban signage system based on an identifying color—yellow—with bills posted throughout Paris, signs on the ground near the building, and glowing signs (by artist Piotr Kowalski, among other potential contributors). The façade would be exploited as a surface for information on the Centre’s activities, as the architects had wished. To illustrate their design, Widmer and Hiestand wove a story around two characters, Signor Mazzola, a head technician at a Milanese industrial firm, and Monsieur Hulot, who lived in a French provincial city and was married and a father of three. So the public visibility of the Centre Beaubourg was described in great detail through the eyes of visitors who approached it progressively, from publicity brochures at a travel agency prior to their departure right up to their arrival on the premises.

Among “problems to be resolved,” formulated for the sake of the competitors, the EPCB very baldly asked, “Is a logo required for Beaubourg? If not, what would you recommend?” VDA responded very plainly: no logo, no symbol. On this point, the winners didn’t differ much from the other competitors, who were almost unanimous

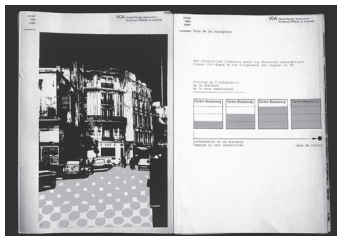
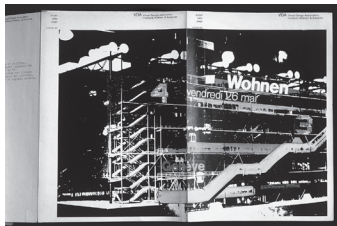
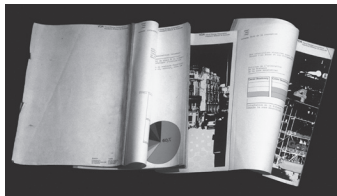


Figure 4 (top)
 Visual Design Association (Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand)
 Proposal submitted for the competition to design the descriptive signage for the Centre Beaubourg. July 1974.
 Accordion-fold document, 42 cm (16.3 in) x 29.7 cm (11.6 in) (closed)
 Jean Widmer Collection, photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

Figure 5 (middle)
 Ibid.

Figure 6 (bottom)
 Ibid.

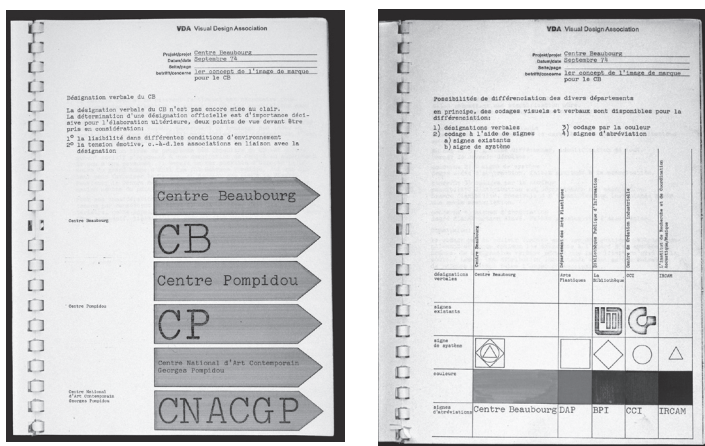
- 19 See Edward K. Carpenter and Martin Fox, *The Best in Environmental Graphics* (The Print Casebooks Series). (Washington DC: RC Publications, 1975); *Environmental Design: Signing and Graphics* (Los Angeles: Security Pacific Bank, 1977); *Graphics on a Large Scale* (Tokyo: Seibundo Shinkosha, 1979); John Follis and Dave Hammer, *Architectural Signing and Graphics* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1979). In France, the Conseil Supérieur de la Création Esthétique Industrielle published a series of studies on architectural signage in various domains—transport, leisure, industrial and hospital areas—between 1974 and 1976.
- 20 Jay Doblin, "Trademark Design," *Dot Zero 2* (1967), reprinted in *Looking Closer 3*, ed. by Michael Bierut, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, and Rick Poynor (New York: Allworth Press, 1999): 180–86.
- 21 The logo for the New York Museum of Modern Art, created in 1964 by Chermayeff and Geismar, which replaced an emblematic signature composed in a modernist alphabet, remained unchanged until the building was extended in 1984. The enlarging and renovating of the museum by the architect Yoshio Taniguchi occasioned new considerations of its graphic image. Invited to propose various types of renovation, the Canadian designer Bruce Mau nonetheless recommended keeping the logo as it was. He suggested, however, redesigning the type, that version of Franklin Gothic having undergone inevitable deformations from typefont to online design throughout successive uses. The typographer Mathew Carter was originally commissioned to redesign a Franklin Gothic typeface more in line with the original conceived in 1902 by Morris Fuller Benton. See Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2003.
- 22 A note addressed to the persons consulted, already cited in the text.

on this subject. Although the issue of descriptive signage was the order of the day, converging with the very fashionable trend of "environmental design,"¹⁹ logos were in a state of crisis. Just six years after May 1968, logos were thought of as a marketing ploy and viewed as ideologically contemptible, totally at odds with the ambition of a public institution with a cultural mission. Even when it came to the image of companies with business goals, the notion of a trademark was the object of lively criticism. Already in 1967, the American designer Jay Doblin had ironically emphasized that in order to learn to read logos it was necessary to know at least 3000 different signs—a task as complex, he pointed out, as familiarizing oneself with Chinese ideograms. Doblin, who had formerly worked with Raymond Loewy and co-founded (with Vignelli, Eckerstrom, and Noorda) the design firm Unimark International two years before, knew what he was talking about. Owning up to his own illiteracy in the matter, he then risked the provocative hypothesis of the total uselessness of such symbols. Total wastes of time and money—rumor had invoices rising to \$100,000—they could even be obstacles to the prestige of the enterprises they were meant to enhance. Concluding his iconoclastic diatribe, Doblin suggested abandoning logos to their fatal perversity and adopting typography instead: "A little Helvetica lower case lettering can get the job done."²⁰ In that spirit, Chermayeff and Geismar had chosen Franklin Gothic for New York's Museum of Modern Art. This American sans serif typeface was designed at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its use in writing the museum's name sufficed to guarantee the museum's visual identity. (The contractions MOMA, and later MoMA, came about only later.)²¹ The solution that VDA proposed followed that trend but with a typeface expressly conceived for the Centre.

The values carried by Piano and Rogers's architectural concept were themselves opposed to any fixed, overly developed image, which would freeze the identity of a project that was entirely vested in circulation, flux, and the transmission of multiple kinds of information. As Gilles de Bure put it in his article, the project should be "kinetic" or nothing at all. Moreover, another difficulty complicated the situation: "Although Beaubourg should have descriptive signage that characterizes it as a totality, it is composed of discrete parts with their own separate identities [MNAM, BPI, IRCAM, CCI]. Over-emphasizing the diversity would be bad in that it would give the public the impression that the Centre was only a conglomeration of heterogeneous activities. On the other hand, a rigorous quasi-military uniformity would conform poorly to the diversity of the Centre. If a logo or symbol is envisioned for the Centre, how should this symbol translate the concept of diversity within unity?"²² Faucheux replied with a composite patchwork logo; VDA proposed a combination of two identifying elements—for unity, a single typeface; and for diversity, a simple color code distinguishing each entity via a specific

Figure 8 (left)
 Visual Design Association (Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand). First concept for the Centre Beaubourg logo, September 1974. Booklet, 29.7 cm (11.6 in) x 21 cm (8.2 in). Paris: Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

Figure 9 (right)
 Ibid.



color. A third element would characterize all publicity material, from signs to letterheads: a verticality of written information.

The matter of the logo, dismissed by VDA, was nonetheless far from being decided. “Opting for a descriptive logo,” claimed the text that VDA submitted for the competition, “would mean fixing Beaubourg in the present moment at the risk of its going out of fashion,” whereas the firm’s recommended solution would “inscribe Beaubourg in history.” In spite of these arguments and the effectiveness of the proposed system that did without a logo, those in charge at EPCB asked Widmer and Hiestand to develop ideas for a possible emblem. In the fall of 1974, VDA presented the results of their recent investigations. Their document (*The 1st Concept of the Trademark Image for the CB*) listed “the possibilities for differentiating among various departments,” which included a set of symbols: a triangle for IRCAM, a circle for CCI, a diamond for the library, and a square for the plastic arts, all geometric forms that could fit together to constitute a single figure. VDA’s objective, however, as Widmer recalls now, was to convince doubters of the pointlessness of such a system, which would be redundant with the color coding. Their persuasion was eminently successful: symbols were dropped from the plan of action, and VDA began work according to its initial proposal.

“The Centre Beaubourg is neither a bank nor an airport nor a grand hotel,” pointed out the document originally sent to the competitors. Even if some details should be refined, they shouldn’t be taken “too far.” The Centre aimed above all to be “at the service of diverse categories of the public (especially the young) interested in intellectual and artistic pursuits.” The signage system and its supports “should be carefully done, precise, and effective” while at the same time appearing “simple and unaffected.” Such were the characteristics of the system developed by Widmer and Hiestand. The typeface, intended to play a unifying role by serving for all channels of communication (internal as well as external), reflected the reality of the day: a typewriter face, which was an appropriate

- 23 When it came to both visual image and descriptive signage, VDA’s recommendations were not faithfully executed. There were numerous reasons for this: the resistance of some departments (which were little inclined to adopt a common graphic vocabulary), logistical difficulties, or again, in the case of signage, problems with the functionality of the system, especially the color coding and the verticality of the inscriptions. Ten months after the opening, an English-language magazine published a critical commentary on the graphic vicissitudes of the Centre Pompidou, Alastair Best’s “Why the People Stay Away from a People’s Culture Center,” *Design* 354 (June 1978): 50–54.
- 24 *L’Express*, January 31–February 6, 1977, 16–26.
- 25 Commission dated November 18, 1976 for a one-time fee of 20,000 francs, including transfer of all rights.
- 26 Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil’s Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric*, translated by Jody Gladding (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991): 5.

choice to embody the notion of communication at that time. VDA turned to a model from IBM that had not yet been marketed, which was then developed by Adrian Frutiger, whose collaborator Hans-Jürg Hunziker would later join the Centre's team so as to insure the existence of an internal graphic arts group able to carry out the VDA project. The typeface was christened with the name of the institution that it represented, and was variously called Beaubourg or CGP. However, an unanticipated event thwarted the use of the character in correspondence: the Centre's contract for the supply of typewriters went to a company other than IBM, an incompatibility that would limit the use of the Beaubourg face to materials printed by outside firms.

In March 1976, VDA produced a *Signage Manual* made up of four independent booklets that described the system and defined the practical rules for different types of orientation, correspondence, documents, and posters. Five colors distinguished the Centre's departments—yellow for administration and activities (such as publicity and publishing), red for the Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM), blue for the CCI, green for the BPI, and purple for IRCAM. The choice of colors was based on the principle of the equal distance separating each one on the color wheel. But since the purple proposed for IRCAM profoundly displeased its director, a different shade was chosen. The three-dimensional signage system and printed materials fulfilled the same criteria—thin vertical bands on which the names of departments or services were inscribed in white against the appropriate color. This was the system that the public encountered after the inauguration in January 1977. A charming joke circulated then, inspired by the reputed difficulty in reading the 90-degree lettering on the panels—a large number of pedestrians were henceforth walking through Paris with heads bent to one side, following a visit to the Centre. The CGP face was used everywhere, from signposts to publications, including the two-line signature of the institution itself—"Centre Georges Pompidou" above "Centre National d'Art et de Culture" in a smaller font, but still no logo.²³

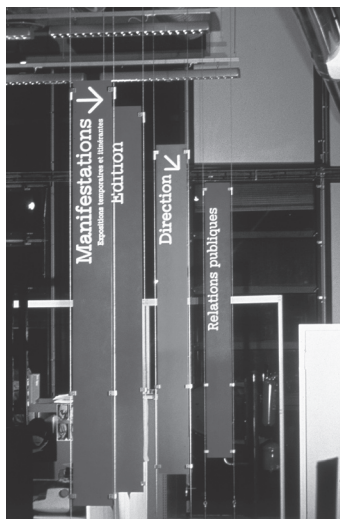
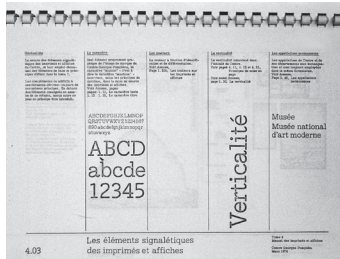


Figure 10 (top)
Visual Design Association (Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand) *Les éléments signalétiques des imprimés et affiches*. (Signage elements for printed matter and posters.) *The last of four volumes of Manuel signalétique* (Signage Manual), March 1976, 21 cm (8.2 in) x 29.7 cm (11.6 in). Paris: Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

Figure 11 (bottom)
Jean Widmer
Signs for the Centre Pompidou, Department of the Centre de création industrielle, 1977.

Stripes

Although the first appearances of the striped emblem were during the Centre's inaugural period, it wasn't yet part of the Centre's visual identity. At the beginning of 1977, it had just been designed and it led an independent, reserved, and confused existence. It was used, for example, in a special issue of *L'Express* devoted to the opening.²⁴ It was reproduced in various places on its own without any connection to other elements of the guidelines. (Those guidelines, for that matter, were closely followed on the letterhead of the stationery with which Secretary General Claude Mollard commissioned Widmer to design an emblem.)²⁵ Indeed, VDA had not yet carried the day, and just a few weeks prior to the opening some people felt that the need for the logo was more pressing than ever. A response wasn't slow in

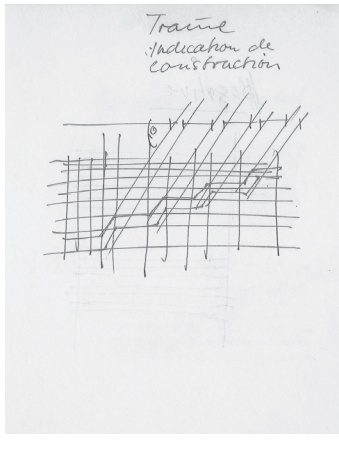
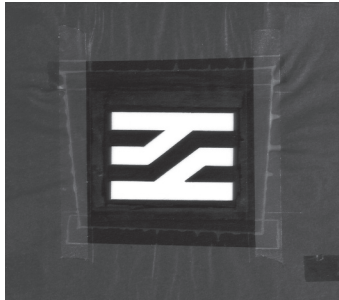


Figure 12 (top)

Jean Widmer

Sketch for the Centre Pompidou logo,
1976-1977

India ink on tracing paper and collage on
paper, 21 cm (8.2 in) x 29.7 cm (11.6 in)

Paris: Musée national d'art moderne –
Centre de création industrielle, photo Centre
Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

Figure 13 (bottom)

Jean Widmer

Sketch for the Centre Pompidou logo, 1976-
1977 21cm (8.2 in) x 14.5 cm (5.6in) (format :
unfolded document : 29.7 cm (22.6 in) x 21
cm 8.2 in)

Ink on paper. Paris: Paris, Musée national d'art
moderne – Centre de création industrielle,
photo Centre Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

coming—eleven stripes of equal width, stacked one above the other, alternately black and white (or other background color) forming a rectangle crossed by a twelfth band that zigzagged from the lower left to the upper right corner. Thus one of the most successful logos and most striking examples of graphic design in France in the second half of the twentieth century was produced for the sake of compromise by a designer who thought it superfluous.

The sketches for this logo, inspired by the building's architecture, testify to research totally in keeping with the Swiss "constructionist" tradition. Widmer took the façade with its escalator as a model but interpreted and simplified it so as to obtain a synthetic visual identity. This visual approach was related to the concrete art trend, particularly the concrete art of Zurich developed in the early 1940s, which had a profound impact on Widmer's education. Once again, we have the principle of an orthogonal grid, an anonymous feel, flat treatment, and the absence of any distinction between the foreground and background, all of which characterized the paintings of Max Bill, Richard Lohse, Verena Loewensberg, and Camille Graeser. However, there was one deviation from concrete orthodoxy: the resulting emblem had a somewhat figurative quality, from which Widmer had nevertheless sought to distance himself. In fact, he had tried to establish the number of horizontal bands not as a representation of the actual levels in the building but as a function of an equilibrium proper to the emblem itself. Pressure on the part of some of those in authority who wanted the logo to reflect the five floors of the building thwarted Widmer's desire for abstraction.

It is worth noting that unlike most architecture-inspired symbols, this one doesn't sketch the outlines or suggest the building's volume. The image was inspired by the façade but remains an open figure without lateral edges, thus manifesting a structure rather than a precisely defined form. In this sense, it calls to mind an heraldic model—the two-color division of the surface into superimposed horizontal bands of the same width, as well as the diagonal band that partially intersects them all, belongs to the geometric vocabulary of coats of arms. Being a striped surface, this logo can support all variations of scale and fulfill its role as a sign devoted to multiple usages. Conceived simultaneously as a functional graphic element (within the distant tradition of heraldry) and, as mentioned above, as a direct heir of concrete art, the Centre's emblem also reflected a more directly contemporary aesthetic. Its stripes connect it to Op Art and make it a "kinetic" sign that alone is able to overcome the paradox of a signature that permanently defines the identity of a constantly evolving place and project.

In his book *The Devil's Cloth*, Michel Pastoureau indicated that "[a] stripe doesn't wait, doesn't stand still." As a dynamic surface structure, it is "in perpetual motion," which is why Pastoureau feels that stripes have always fascinated artists.²⁶ Widmer's logo thus maintains formal affinities with the works of numerous artists,

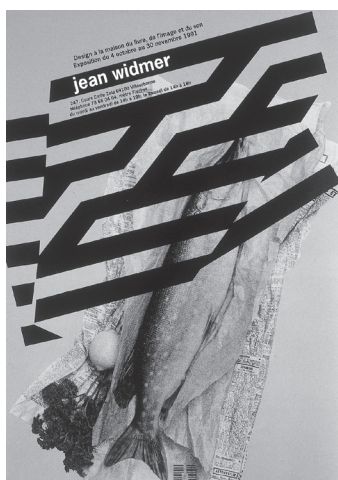
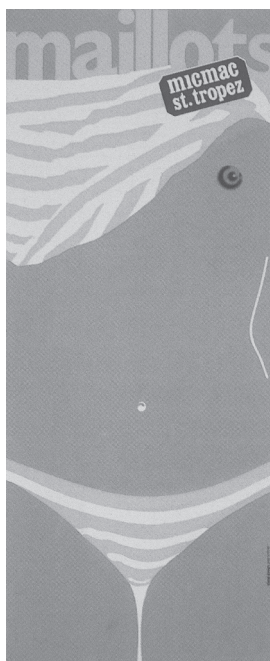


Figure 14 (top)
Jean Widmer
Poster for *micmac* bathing suits, 1976.
Collection Jean Widmer: photo Centre
Pompidou/J.-C. Planchet

Figure 15 (bottom)
Jean Widmer
Poster for the *Jean Widmer* exhibition,
Maison du livre, de l'image et du son,
Villeurbanne, 1991. 70 cm (27.3 in) x 50 cm
(19.5 in)
Collection Jean Widmer : photo Centre
Pompidou/J.-C. Planchet

from Martin Barré and Daniel Buren to Donald Judd, to cite only a few names represented in the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne. A work contemporary with Widmer's logo, *Échelles optométriques* by Raymond Hains (a great lover of stripes, fences, Venetian blinds, and other such bar-codes), even suggests to people fond of unusual experiments what the logo would look like if seen through fluted glass. Stripes recurred in Widmer's productions across the years, and we might even detect a perhaps remote but no less delightful genetic ancestor to the Centre's logo in the rumpled tee-shirt in a 1976 ad for "Mic Mac St. Tropez" bathing suits.

Widmer was personally interested in the potential visual transformation of the Centre's emblem. For his 1991 exhibition at the Maison du Livre et de l'Image in Villeurbanne, he experimented with citing it in three different ways, subjecting it to different operations of fragmentation, partial enlargement, and unusual superimposition. The poster features it in deconstructed form, broken at the ends, plastered over a photo of a dead fish lying on newspaper; the invitation, like the cover of the catalogue, reproduced only some inordinately large sections of it. Only the fame of the logo allowed for such an attack on its formal integrity without imperiling its recognition by the public, and this artificially casual gesture invited viewers to appreciate the evocative power of the sign in question, recognizable even though broken up or cut into pieces. The following year, Widmer again put his logo on display in a similar perspective for a Pompidou Centre exhibition entitled "Manifesto"—thirty years of creativity that drew on the museum's permanent collections. The striped image appeared here as a hasty sketch, drawn on a support that was itself a part of a photographic still life. A stack of irregularly drawn lines formed a limp rectangle, doubly disfigured by the fold of the paper on which it appeared and by the transgressive use of color distinction, not respecting the alternation of stripes, instead creating an unexpected division into left/right. Juxtaposed with works or details of works in the museum's collection—the still life exists in several different versions—the institutional emblem, although present in such a modest, unsolemn, detached self-quotation, directly evokes its participation not only in the thirty creative years in question but also in the Centre's heritage, of which this "Manifesto" presented a kind of retrospective.

A few years later, in 1998, the logo appeared again in distorted form on a printed document—an activist pamphlet—but this time it wasn't Widmer's work. "Don't let the logo go!" was the slogan accompanying the alarmist depiction of the emblematic rectangle falling apart. A triangular "highway danger sign" headed the explanatory text: "We have learned that the logo, the vehicle for the image of the Centre Pompidou, which has carried its reputation worldwide, is threatened with 'rehabilitation'.... The employees, the public, and those who work in the arts are indignant about this outrage.... Join us!" A fax number was provided to which to send



Figure 16
 Jean Widmer
 Generic visual for advertising
 Basic visual design for the *Manifeste* exhibit,
 1992, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, photo
 Centre Pompidou/J.-C. Planchetphoto Centre
 Pompidou/G. Meguerditchian

protests.²⁷ Obviously, the word had gotten out about the efforts of Ruedi Baur to find a new visual emblem for the Centre. There were rumors of a redesign of the logo or even of its total suppression. Some people feared that Jean-Jacques Aillagon, President of the Centre, would more than welcome that idea. So there was an uproar. A logo's age has no importance, Paul Rand, himself the creator of the now imperishable stripes on the IBM emblem, underlined the point: "Quality, not vintage or vanity, is the determining factor."²⁸ Throughout 1999, the press reported this campaign, which also found an echo in the international professional community,²⁹ thanks to the Alliance Graphique Internationale. A great deal of mail opposing the elimination of the celebrated emblem reached the desks of the Minister of Culture Catherine Trautmann and the President of the Centre. Its heritage value, visual quality, and symbolic effectiveness were unanimously invoked. The unpopularity of the project grew because of the absence of transparency in how it was being executed. A graphic arts operation of that magnitude should have required an official public procedure; the designer appointed by the architect to redo the functional signage (part of the budget for renovating the building) suddenly found himself charged with redoing the logo (not part of the initial plan). People were equally astonished that Renzo Piano, legitimately commissioned to renovate a building he co-designed, didn't respect this same principle by placing the logo issue into the hands of the original designers.

Between 1977 and 1998, the original VDA image had already undergone many modifications, and Visual Design hadn't always received the commission to design these different transformations. But Widmer was nevertheless responsible for the evolution of the Centre's signature emblem, which he orchestrated over the years by combining the logo with the CGP typeface.³⁰ Both these elements were officially "preserved" in the proposal ultimately submitted by Intégral Ruedi Baur et Associés, and are today subjected to new rules. The CGP face, initially excluded from internal documents for technical reasons, as mentioned earlier, is henceforth comfortably housed, being the typeface used on almost all of the Centre's computers. The computers are furthermore graced with a reproduction of the emblem as a flag flying in the wind when the screens are in sleep mode. These are minor applications, perhaps, but at least they respond to concerns expressed by staff in the years prior to the reopening in 2000, reflecting an attachment to this visual logo and thus demonstrating its unifying role.

The Centre's external publicity materials henceforth use a very different typeface than CGP,³¹ but often exploit the option of incorporating the logo. Furthermore, the logo has never ceased appearing as the imprint on works published by the Centre. The marked vitality of this symbol thus excluded it from the Stone Twins' graveyard of a book; indeed, it has enjoyed a certain fame in specialized literature, which attests to the international notoriety

justly claimed for it by its defenders during 1998–99.³² Among the reasons for its longevity is its completeness as a sign: at once a portrait (of a remarkable building), an imitation imprint (it looks as though it was made by an inked rubber stamp) and an abstract symbolic image (thanks to highly suitable visual simplification). The future of this striped rectangle, unwanted by its creator and yet admirably conceived, rich in paradoxical and exemplary history, remains open. Whatever the case, it has amply demonstrated its ability to survive.

27 Undated document.

28 Paul Rand, "Logos, Flags, and Escutcheons," *ALGA Journal of Graphic Design* 9:3 (1991), reprinted in *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, ed. By Michael Bierut, William Drentell, Steven Heller, and D. K. Holland (New York: Allworth Press, 1994): 88–90.

29 "Centre Pompidou: le logo à la trappe" *Designfax*, December 14, 1998, p. 1; Brice d'Antras, "Le logotype du Centre Pompidou, est-il obsolète?" *Étapes Graphiques* 47 (January 1999): 66–67; Philippe Quinton, "Changer de logo?" *Étapes Graphiques* 48 (February 1999): 67–69.

30 The CGP typeface has subsequently been through modifications—larger boldface and digitization—conducted under the supervision of Hans-Jürg Hunziker. On this topic, see Catherine de Smet, "Archéologie d'une identité visuelle," *op.cit.*, 476–77.

31 The typeface in question is DIN Engschrift (DIN: Deutscher Industrie Normen, a system of standardization established in Germany in the mid-teens of the twentieth century). The DIN Engschrift face was notably used for the number plates of cars. The visual identity of Espace 315 on the mezzanine of the Centre Pompidou, conceived in 2004 by Frédéric Teschner, exploited a typewriter face distinct from CGP: Prestige Elite.

32 See, for example, Per Mollerup, *op. cit.*, 140; Benoît Helbrunn, *Le Logo* (Paris: PUF, "Que Sais-je?", 2001): 93–95; Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002): 197–198; Alan and Isabella Livingston, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Graphic Design and Designers* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998): 203–204; Anne-Marie Sauvage, "Les arts graphiques," *Arts contemporains 1950–2000* (Paris: Autrement, 210); Roxane Jubert, *Typography and Graphic Design: From Antiquity to the Present* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006): 350; Michel Wlassikoff, *The Story of Graphic Design in France* (Corta Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2005): 242. Aside from the two last works cited, the logo is generally inaccurately dated 1974 instead of 1977.