



# Visible Language

48.2 Design Research Journal

*Special Edition:*

Finding Our Way Through Environmental Communication

**Mike Zender** Editor

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**Shelby Murphy** Designer

**Sheri Cottingim** Circulation Manager

**Merald Wrolstad** Founder

**Website**

visiblelanguagejournal.com

**Postmaster**

Send address changes to:

Sheri Cottingim  
Office of Business Affairs  
College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning  
University of Cincinnati  
PO Box 210016  
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0016  
sheri.cottingim@uc.edu

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Before there was reading there was seeing. Visible Language has been concerned with ideas that help define the unique role and properties of visual communication. A basic premise of the journal has been that created visual form is an autonomous system of expression that must be defined and explored on its own terms. Today more than ever people navigate the world and probe life's meaning through visual language. This journal is devoted to enhancing people's experience through the advancement of research and practice of visual communication.

If you are involved in creating or understanding visual communication in any field, we invite your participation in *Visible Language*. While our scope is broad, our disciplinary application is primarily design. Because sensory experience is foundational in design, research in design is often research in the experience of visual form: how it is made, why it is beautiful, how it functions to help people form meaning. Research from many disciplines sheds light on this experience: neuroscience, cognition, perception, psychology, education, communication, informatics, computer science, library science, linguistics. We welcome articles from these disciplines and more.

Published continuously since 1967, *Visible Language* maintains its policy of having no formal editorial affiliation with any professional organization – this requires the continuing, active cooperation of key investigators and practitioners in all of the disciplines that impinge on the journal's mission as stated above.

cover photography: Patricia Cué

Visible Language journal wishes to thank the following for kindly serving as readers for this special issue on environmental communication.

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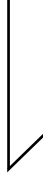
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# On the Wall:

Designers as Agents for Change in Environmental Communication

Patricia Cué

Environmental communication plays a vital role in determining the use of public space through the design of artifacts that connect users to a physical environment and assign meaning to spaces. By strategically establishing order and consistency in environmental communications, designers have significantly contributed to the privatization, commodification, and sanitization of corporatized and privately-owned public spaces that often fail to fulfill their intended use and, most importantly, to generate solutions that are sensitive to the cultural identity, social needs and values of communities. By investigating a particular form of vernacular design applied to hand-painted, large-format murals that advertise music band appearances in Mexico, this project examines the social capital of environmental communication and the dynamics that shape it into a culture-defining medium that connects people and efficiently uses resources in an environment where the forces of regulation and the needs of people are in balance. This article advocates for the practice of environmental design to align with people's needs to facilitate more inclusive, sustainable and socially engaged solutions.

**“Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary.”**

Robert Venturi (Learning from Las Vegas)



Modernism, the Bauhaus, and the International Typographic Style provided the principles upon which contemporary graphic design has been based. The practice and education of this discipline have been largely shaped around the ideal of a universal design style where designers are considered conduits for information, clarity, and order. These principles were essential to developing graphic design as a tool for democracy when the access to information and the elevation of aesthetic and functional qualities in mass production were paramount. Although the context and technology in which today's graphic designers practice have changed dramatically, the paradigm of a universal language of graphic design form has not. Graphic design has asserted itself through the language of modernism by instituting order and uniformity and by consistently applying strict guidelines, order and uniformity on visual communication in the current landscape of globalization, digital communications, and corporate expansion.

Setting a distance between design and everyday life was one of the founding acts of modernism, which posed a divide between the consumer culture and a critical avant-garde (Lupton and Miller, 1996, 158). Consequently, graphic design's practice is largely based in completely eradicating existing solutions—a "before" and "after" approach that particularly disregards vernacular forms or user-generated solutions that may work in spite of their improvised nature and poor aesthetic appearance. "Designers, even more than artists, are battlers against entropy. The designer attempts to create not just aesthetic order, but structural and systematic kinds of order. A vital task, it goes without saying, but taking the long view, often also a doomed, quixotic mission (Poynor, 2004).

In the discipline of environmental design, a designer's task consists of connecting users to a physical environment by assigning meaning and function to spaces and by defining their intended use through clear visuals. Through their skills and strategic alignment with the interests of clients, designers have positioned themselves as one of the most important and credible players in the shaping of corporate and privately-owned public spaces. But the imposition of visual order onto space does not always suit everybody's interests and the appearance of harmony may constrain the use of space or may mask chaos behind the scenes (Franck and Stevens, 2007, 22).

It is the increasing privatization, commodification, and sanitization of corporatized and privately-owned public spaces that often fail to fulfill their intended use (Hou, 2012) that motivates this research. By examining a form of vernacular environmental design, Mexican wall painting for music advertising, or *bardas de baile*, I intend to show how environmental communication and its connection to its social context can transform the

way visual messages are shaped and displayed, thus nurturing truly democratic public spaces. The specific form, use, and meaning of Mexican wall painting for music advertising demonstrates the capacity of individuals and communities to transform urban spaces and how wall painting mediates relations between different community groups. The aim of this paper is to foster a more inclusive, sustainable, and socially engaged environmental communication practice by better aligning design with people's needs and by framing opportunities to contribute in the making of truly accessible and inclusive spaces

**BARDAS DE BAILE**

Wall painting, as an art form or as a means for mass communication, constitutes an important part of Mexico's material and visual culture. Throughout the twentieth century, renowned muralists Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, José Orozco, and Rufino Tamayo used public and private walls to render the scale and drama of their (largely political) artistic visions. Parallel to this art form and with a different purpose, walls in Mexico are a traditional medium for graphic communication when it comes to reaching large audiences with political and social campaigns or with the announcement of popular events such as bands' performances or dances. Bardas de baile or music walls (*figures 1 and 2*) first appeared in the late 1960's, as a response to the increased popularity of music genres from northern Mexico such as grupera, Norteña, banda, ranchera, narcocorrido, and technocumbia, among others. More popular than ever, these bands tour out-of-the-way towns and villages, singing songs of love and loss, full of the trials and tribulations of life north of the border. Bardas de baile are the preferred and most efficient way of announcing the awaited dances.

**Figures 1 and 2**  
In Mexico, Bardas de baile are typographic murals that announce the arrival of popular bands' or local dances through a consistent visual language developed as part of the sign painting tradition.



Music advertisement on bardas (walls) is pervasive throughout rural and suburban Mexico. They have become part of the country's physical and cultural landscape. On cemetery walls, bridges, abandoned houses, roadside buildings and ledges, small businesses, and empty lots, these hand-painted murals are fully integrated into the landscape, amid the ubiquitous cacti,

sprawling vegetation and hanging branches, among the bus shelters, unfinished soccer stands, and vacant warehouses (*figure 3*). These typographic murals are a form of what in Mexico are called *rótulos*, or commercial hand-painted signs.

**Figure 3**  
Driving through rural Mexico, one is struck by the colorful and ubiquitous presence of *Bardas de baile* or music walls on irregularly claimed surfaces.



Traveling by car through central Mexico and implementing an ethnographic approach, I conducted interviews with sign painters, or *rotulistas*, to research their sources, their way of life, and their work practices and completed a thorough photographic documentation of the different styles and venues for these music murals.

*Rotulistas*, or sign painters, have traditionally worked for commercial, political, or, in the case of *bardas de baile*, for entertainment purposes. Before the rise of digital technology and vinyl lettering, these hand-painted signs, or *rótulos*, were the only viable wall-advertising option leading to the birth of a tradition, one that is now practiced throughout Mexico. *Rótulos* have long been popular for their charisma and impact and for being affordable and durable. As well as announcing upcoming dances, *rótulos* advertise electoral candidates, social campaigns for healthcare initiatives, or signal small businesses (restaurants, barbers, hardware shops, etc.). Regarded as guildsmen and artisans, *rotulistas* are proud practitioners of a craft that has been handed down from fathers to sons and, sometimes, to daughters. Young aspiring painters learn from a senior family member or become apprenticed to a master, who then mentors them. *Rotulistas* aren't graffiti artists. There's no tagging, and they are not interested in creative authorship or in following advertising trends; they simply perform a craft that has its own rules and methods. In communicating through a visual language based mostly on typography and letterform design, the uniformity and consistency in design and style among the different *rotulistas* is striking. For these sign painters craft creativity is secondary; it's their pride in a well-executed craft and the tradition that counts (*figures 4 and 5*).

**Figures 4 and 5**

Unlike graffiti, in painting bardas de baile there's no tagging or creative authorship on the part of the sign painters whose mission is to perform a craft with its own rules and methods.



While rotulistas are valued as providers of affordable advertising, what they do is technically illegal. They do not pay rent for the spaces they use, they are not licensed or certified, and they do not write any contracts with clients, yet they operate in a culture that tolerates them for the social and cultural value embedded in their craft.

Through repetition and consistency in their typographic style, bardas de baile have evolved into an iconic representation of the nortena and banda music that characterizes the migration from rural to urban areas and from Mexico to the US. Their typographic formulations, arrangements, and color palettes are immediately associated with the type of events they advertise, thus becoming a form of “vernacular branding.” Despite the changes in how music is produced and marketed and how technology dominates the design and advertising worlds, the rotulistas’ aesthetics and techniques have stayed the same. The tradition they embody has no place for vinyl lettering, global branding, or large format four-color reproduction. In an age that’s clamoring for a global audience, where everything is so intently decentralized and where mass exposure seems to be the collective ultimate goal, rotulistas are proud anachronisms—rooted to their communities and keeping their craft alive.



While these wall paintings address basic commercial communication needs such as showing the featured bands and marking the date and venue of the events (*figure 6*), they also achieve two important goals that make them not only effective in terms of communication but also flexible and open in terms of their use of public space. First the wall paintings express the characteristics and aspirations of the audience in a credible, genuine and empathic manner. Second, they involve the local social network in the distribution of the message.

**Figure 6**  
Bardas de baile address basic commercial communication needs such as marking the date and venue of the events through typographic arrangements that are consistently reproduced by all wall painters.



These painted walls are cultural artifacts with narratives that extend beyond their commercial function through their resonance in the broader context as cultural icons are open and responsive to the complex social networks that emerge in their implementation. The links forged and the dynamics between the event organizers, the wall painters, the owners of property whose walls are painted, the authorities and the community at large connect people in the public and private domains in an ever-growing network where everyone participates and nothing is wasted (*figure 7*).



Culture refers to whatever is distinctive about the way of life of a people, community, nation or social group (Hall, 1997, p. 2). How a culture is perceived is largely determined by how it is presented, thus the important role of graphic design in environmental communication. As cultural readers and interpreters, we look for signs and symbols to help us make sense of the space around us (Hall, 1997, p. 4). In the Mexican rural landscape, bardas de baile are powerful coded symbols that communicate a wealth of cultural information and play a vital role in affirming the visual identity not only of the music they advertise but also of the Mexican contemporary culture of rural-urban and Mexico-US migration (figure 8).

**Figure 8**

In the Mexican rural landscape, bardas de baile play a vital role in affirming the visual identity of the Norteña and banda music as a part of Mexican contemporary culture.



The sign painters use their creativity (always within the same style and tradition) to design logotypes and typographic arrangements that the bands often adopt as their logotype. It is through this design improvisation that the style of the bardas de baile has permeated the visual culture of banda music beyond wall advertisements, thus configuring a visual language that is imitated and applied to posters, CD covers and web sites. Thus bardas de baile, as a form of vernacular branding, constitute a system of representation that confers a specific meaning and validity to the events they advertise through the use of a consistent formal discourse (figures 9—11). Although most Mexicans will admit to “not seeing” the bardas de baile due to their ubiquitous and unchanging presence, they signify their key elements —typographic formulations, arrangements and color palettes—not only as representative of the norteña and banda music that is favored in rural Mexico by a specific social group but also as place-making artifacts that designate meeting points, bus stops, or simple landmarks for orientation.

**Figures 9—11**  
As a form of vernacular branding, bardas de baile confer differentiation and legitimacy to the events they advertise through the use of a consistent visual language.



To announce each dance or concert, a group of rotulistas will be hired to paint fifteen to twenty-five walls, on average, within a ten-mile radius of the host town or village. For each event, sign painters claim public and private surfaces in an irregular and need-based manner; this means for free and often without explicit permission from the owner. Always on the lookout for the most visible walls which may be on highway ledges, underpasses, cemeteries, sidewalks, home façades or abandoned construction sites, the sign painters utilize public and private property on the rural landscape as a canvas for music-related advertising (see *figures 12—14*). In either case authorities will turn a blind eye, or rotulistas will obtain verbal authorization from the property owners in exchange for event tickets or simply as the result of a previously established relationship. This irregular appropriation of surfaces has converted public and private walls into common property that can be claimed by any member of the sign-painter community, occasionally creating territorial conflicts that have prompted tactics such as the whitening and marking of reserved walls with messages and personal signatures or tags (*figure 15*).

**Figures 12—14**  
Surfaces such as highway ledges, underpasses, sidewalks, abandoned constructions or private homes are favored by wall painters for their scale and high visibility.



**Figure 15**  
 The more successful and entrepreneurial wall painters use personal signatures, logotypes, or tags to appropriate walls and prevent territorial conflicts.



Homeowners are surprisingly willing to let rotulistas paint the street-side of their walls, especially if they're in disrepair, as a form of beautification. If the home is in a highly visible area, such as in the village center or by a main highway, it is the prestige of advertising a famous band and being part of an event with great social value that constitutes the currency given that the concerts and dances advertised by these music walls are highly anticipated by everyone in the town and its surrounding villages. Teenagers and singles congregate there to date, to dance, and to meet new people. For couples and families, the dances are a special and affordable, night out.

We cannot simply draw a line between the public and the private; the line must also be drawn across them, through them, linking the two sides of the divide while separating them, canceling the opposition while marking it (Lupton and Miller, 1996, p. 156-157). This permissive attitude towards the use of public and private spaces has allowed for the spontaneous development of a self-organizing network that sustains the bardas de baile as a craft, facilitates an affordable form of advertising for events with high social value in their communities and most importantly, builds a social network where the forces of regulation, design, and the local community are in balance.

As Jeffrey Hou states, "Insurgent public spaces are those created or initiated by citizens and communities, often outside or at the border of regulatory and legal domains. Insurgent public spaces — which might include guerrilla gardens, flash mobs, "third places," street vending, street theater and protests — are created by those who appropriate, reclaim or occupy a particular



space to gather, express opinions and engage in various cultural practices. Indeed, the very idea of insurgent public space argues that the making of public space is not the exclusive domain of institutions; it can involve a broader range of actors — and thus reinforce the fact that “public” is not just an adjective but more broadly an active body of citizens.” (Hou, 2012)

Through the use of bardas de baile to advertise music-related events, the local authority, the sign painters, and the public blur the distinction between the public and the private by reshaping, re-purposing, and collectively owning them.

CONCLUSION



In examining the culture and process behind bardas de baile, it is evident that a rich and complex social network operates behind the use of the private and public spaces that facilitate the existence of this medium and of the rotulistas and their craft. While these wall paintings address basic commercial communication needs, they are also shaped and owned by the needs and aspirations of the local people, thus collaboratively defining visual representation, functionality and use of spaces for their dissemination. In addition to their audience’s participatory nature, we can clearly see in bardas de baile how local visual culture has managed to survive and operate on the margins of mainstream design, digital lettering technology, and digital forms of communication.

This case study demonstrates that public spaces are flexible by nature and that their intended uses are best recognized by users when they are allowed to freely satisfy their needs and thus define them. It shows that when a local network is allowed to manifest itself, the identity and culture of a place flourish. This research and documentation advocate for a participatory framework in environmental communication that allows participants to configure texts, symbols, and materials in ways that keep spaces open for interaction, and propose that such a framework is conducive to creating public spaces that provide breathing space, life, spontaneity, and cultural vitality.

Because designers are taught to focus on visual style over social function, we often overlook the relation of design to institutions of power (Lupton and Miller, 1996, p. 166). The informal appropriation and modification of public and private spaces by sign painters shows a permissive attitude towards the use of public and private spaces that allows for the development of a network that sustains the bardas de baile as a craft, facilitates an affordable form of advertising for events with high social value in their communities, and most importantly, establishes balance between the forces of regulation, design, and the local community.

How can we translate the values and operating modes from this form of environmental design into tangible lessons for designers?

We, as designers, frame a view of the world through the artifacts and representations we produce, and this worldview will be formed and interpreted differently on the basis of cultural experience (Davis, 2012, p. 190). The research on *bardas de baile* aims to demonstrate that, in order to renew their cultural view of contemporary life, designers need to find a place to speak from within culture and not position themselves outside and above it (Lupton and Miller, 1996, 157). This study proposes the creation of collaborative and communal platforms that permit a more participatory and open use of public spaces where the social amalgam of forces define their use and shape their physical aspects. In doing so, this study also advocates for designers to act as agents for social change with the potential to create frameworks that facilitate broad-based practices, strengthen social networks, and enhance local engagement.

Some concrete ways in which designers can foster the flexible and participatory use of public spaces follow:

- Loosen the conventional contexts by establishing new standards of acceptability for the use of public space
- Capitalize and work with what has already spontaneously appeared, with what is already there
- Learn to work with the messy appearances that are often the product of a strong underlying social order
- Develop spatial conditions that inspire people to act and contribute towards collective solutions
- Work with possibility, diversity, controlled anarchy as much as with certainty, homogeneity, and order
- Allow for re-purposing, appropriating, recuperating, and adapting.

Meeting the social challenges of our era will require design practices that are sensitive to vernacular manifestations that operate and solve problems effectively and which represent the aspirations of the people before being aesthetically or formalistically attractive (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, 1977, p. 161). Disarray, deterioration, and chaos are common scenarios in which designers need to tread more slowly, listen better, and act as facilitators and as agents of social change over formal and functional control. It is the making and mobilization of the public as an actively engaged citizenry that will enable a public space to serve as a vehicle for environmental communication and as a building block of our participatory democracy.

## AUTHOR BIO

**Patricia Cué** is a graphic designer whose life and work oscillates between the U.S. and Mexico. She completed her graphic design studies at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico and at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. Cué is associate professor at San Diego State University where she teaches primarily branding and environmental graphic design. Through her work, she explores the ways in which design defines the use and the cultural identity of

public spaces and is inspired by the tradition, colors, and textures in vernacular forms of design. Her work has been featured in Voice AIGA Cross-Cultural Design, Fahrenheit Contemporary Art, TM Typographische Monatsblätter, and more recently in the TV documentary series Sensacional de Diseño Mexicano produced and broadcasted by Once TV Mexico. Her book Mexican Wall Painting: Bardas de Baile was published in August 2013 by Ghost & Company.

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**Overview:**

Visual theorist and design historian Johanna Drucker, in *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing*, defines the digital humanities as “the study of ways of thinking differently about how we know what we know and how the interpretative task of the humanist is redefined in these changed conditions”<sup>1</sup>. Design and the digital humanities connect through critical making practices, centering on human experience and advancing the prevailing expectations of their respective disciplines.

At the convergence of conceptual and material practices<sup>2</sup>, the ongoing development of a framework for critical making offers a means to understand complex relationships between research, scholarship and production. In design, emphasis is placed on innovative notions of what criticism or authorship can be within the context of design-making; in the digital humanities, focus is on innovative notions of what “making” can be as a form of interpretation within the context of conventional scholarly dissemination. The intersection of these two areas presents opportunities to bring form and content together in ways that are practical and theoretical, rhetorical and physical.

Critical making in design is aligned with practices that facilitate innovation and exploration related to technology, materiality and communities. In graphic design — a discipline, a medium, a practice and a tool<sup>3</sup> — “critical practice” has been used to describe a range of activities that position the designer as author, producer, scholar, curator or programmer<sup>4</sup>. These endeavors, whether individual or collaborative, may involve humanistic or scientific inquiry, and move beyond the traditional structure of client-based relationships. From a pedagogical perspective, key components of critical making include “hands-on practice, the processing of enhanced seeing and perception, and contextualized understanding”<sup>5</sup>.

In the digital humanities, critical making distinguishes its practices from traditional forms of humanities scholarship. With an emphasis on tool building, information visualization and digital archiving, the digital humanities merge two seemingly opposing modes of scholarship: reading and making. Critical

making dichotomies of thinking/making, knowing/doing and cognition/embodiment permeate current digital humanities discourse<sup>6</sup> and projects demonstrate a desired interest in building through existing design and development processes. *The Critical Making Zine*<sup>7</sup> uses physical production to publish and distribute a series of essays on technology, society and DIY culture. *Speaking in Code*, an NEH-funded symposium hosted at the Scholar’s Lab in 2013, addressed questions related to “DH code-craft”: tacit knowledge as it relates to the design and development of digital humanities projects<sup>8</sup>.

**Perspectives:**

This special issue of Visible Language investigates critical making at the intersection of design and the digital humanities, which is a site for expanding the role(s) of divergent scholarly and creative work. We invite submissions that address one or more of the following questions:

- What are the theoretical or pragmatic ways to frame critical making in design and/or the digital humanities? Where are the similarities, differences and challenges? How are these advantageous?
- In what ways might design authors and producers connect with the digital humanities? Where or how are digital humanists’ experiences of critical making intersecting with designers? How do these crossover ‘ways of seeing’ impact our scholarly and creative work — and future hybrid practices?
- How might forms of understanding such as speculative design, prototyping or hacking play a role in critical making, and in what ways are these influencing the scope of work in both areas?
- In what ways might design and the digital humanities collaboration be fostered in the studio or classroom? What are some examples of pedagogical approaches to teaching critical making?
- What are the forms these arguments might take as part of this special issue?

Visible Language is a journal that invites evidence-based research. For this issue, we encourage exploratory, creative works that incorporate evidence-based research through critical commentary, traditional analysis, audience responses or participant feedback.

**REFERENCES**

<sup>1</sup> Johanna Drucker. *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Ratto, “Critical Making” in *Open Design Now: Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive*, Bas van Abel et al. (The Netherlands: BIS Publishers, 2011), 202.

**Proposal due:** January 15, 2015

**Abstract acceptance/rejection:** March 15, 2015

**Full papers / works due:** June 15, 2015

**Review period:** June 15 – August 1, 2015

**Review feedback:** August 1, 2015

**Final paper submission:** September 15, 2015

**Anticipated publication:** October 2015

### **Submissions:**

In keeping with the theme of merging form and content, the traditional printed journal will be expanded to include a corresponding online space for interactive and digital work. We invite dialogue on what defines scholarly works in regard to non-traditional forms of writing and disciplinary crossovers. Submissions may include, but are not limited to, case studies, interactive reading experiences, aural and visual works.

Proposals should include a 300-word written abstract and a brief outline to show the structure of your argument. A corresponding visual abstract is strongly encouraged. For digital work, please include a URL or screenshots. Final articles can range from approximately 3–5,000 words.

Please send proposals through January 15, 2015 to Jessica Barness, [jbarness@kent.edu](mailto:jbarness@kent.edu)

### **Open Peer-Review Process:**

Submissions will be reviewed through an open peer-review process. An open peer-review process makes available the submission author's name to the peer-reviewer. Reviewer names and reviews will be published on the Visible Language journal website. Proposals will undergo review; a selection will be shortlisted for development into full-length papers / works and these will also be peer-reviewed prior to publication.

Interested in serving as a peer-reviewer?

Peer-reviewers will be responsible for providing feedback about abstracts and/or final submissions between January – August 2015. If you are interested in serving as a peer-reviewer, please get in touch.

### **Guest Editors:**

**Jessica Barness** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University, where she teaches graphic and interaction design. She holds an MFA in Design from the University of Minnesota with a minor in Writing Studies, and an MA and a BA in Art from the University of Northern Iowa. Barness' research through design investigates theories in social issues, language and interactive technologies. Her work has been exhibited at venues such as Hebei Normal Museum, China and FILE Electronic Language Festival, Brazil, and published in *Communication & Place* and *Currents in Electronic Literacy*. She has also presented research at the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies Conference (2014), SEGDA Academic Summit (2014), AIGA Design Educators Conference (2013) and HASTAC (2013), among others.

**Amy Papaelias** is an Assistant Professor in the Graphic Design program at SUNY New Paltz, teaching courses in web and interaction design, as well as 2D design and visual communication. She holds an MFA in Intermedia Design from SUNY New Paltz and a BA in Cultural Studies from McGill University. Her creative research lies at the intersection of design, culture and technology with specific interests in interactive typography and the digital humanities. She has presented her design work and pedagogy at Theorizing the Web 2014, AIGA Design Educators Conference (2007, 2013), TypeCon (2005, 2007, 2012), UCDA Education Summit (2011) among others. In 2013, she was selected to participate in One Week One Tool, an NEH-funded Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, hosted at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and co-authored a long paper on the experience that was presented at Digital Humanities 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "Graphic Design: Discipline, Medium, Practice, Tool, or Other" (paper presented at counter/point: The 2013 D-Crit Conference, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, May 11, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Albinson, Ian and Rob Giampietro. *Graphic Design: Now in Production* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Rosanne Somerson. "The Art of Critical Making: An Introduction" in *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, ed. Somerson, R. and Hermano, M. (Wiley, 2013), 19.

<sup>6</sup> "Critical Making in the Digital Humanities: an MLA 2014 Special Session Proposal" by Roger T. Whitson, accessed on March 3, 2014. <http://www.rogerwhitson.net/?p=2026>

<sup>7</sup> Critical Making Zine by Garnet Hertz, accessed on March 3, 2014, <http://www.conceptlab.com/criticalmaking/>

<sup>8</sup> Speaking in Code, accessed on June 9, 2014. <http://codespeak.scholarslab.org/>





*Design for Information:  
An Introduction to the Histories,  
Theories, & Best Practices Behind  
Effective Information Visualizations*

**Isabel Meirelles**

Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2013.

For a complementary perspective of this book, please refer to the review written by Aaron Marcus in the *Information Design Journal* 20(3), 296–297

The book is a thorough representation of both the field of information visualization and the research interests of the author, whose focus is on “the theoretical and experimental examination of the fundamentals underlying how information is structured, represented and communicated in different media.”

Beginning by the “big picture,” the book includes an amazing collection of examples, the most thorough I have seen to date in a volume. The author organizes the content according to several categories represented by the titles of the chapters: 1) Hierarchical structures: trees; 2) Relational structures: networks; 3) Temporal structures: timelines and flows; 4) Spatial structures: maps; 5) Spatio-temporal structures; and 6) Textual structures. An appendix, notes, bibliography, contributors list, and index, complete the apparatus of the book.

*Design for information* is an extensive taxonomy of data visualization types, and is “a must” for anybody interested in the work done in the area. Each one of the hundreds of examples is explained and discussed, forming a kind of encyclopedia on the subject. It seems that nothing escaped from the thorough gathering of examples that Meirelles got involved in. The discussions and explanations normally focus on what information is represented and how it is represented.

It is interesting to see as well how many different professional fields use today diagrams to organize and represent information: basic science, applied science,

education, engineering, medicine, technologies, etc. The value of the book is centered on the inclusion of examples of how many different problems are today being confronted by data visualizations, how many historical efforts preceded whatsoever is done today, and how the advent of the computers have allowed the field to explode, handling large data sets as well as dynamic representations.

At the end of the examination of the 224-page volume one becomes curious as to how might these diagrams have performed with the users they were intended for in terms of ease of comprehension; what conclusions could one arrive at from an evaluation of the examples included regarding perceptual and cognitive human factors; or how could a complementary book contribute to the development of best practices. I would not expect that one volume could be so extensive as this one and also cover the field critically. One, however, has to wonder how the super-complex visualizations permitted by computer programs today would perform regarding comprehension, memorization, and use of the information presented. The discussion on perception and cognition is very brief, and it might leave some readers wondering about the assertions made: they are proposed as principles without them being discussed. This topic, as well as Gestalt theory, are not considered during the description of examples. The size of some reproductions is too small to assess their quality as data visualizations, they appear as samples of problems dealt with but not as information in themselves. To compensate for this, the book includes valuable URLs for people interested in seeing in better detail many of the diagrams shown.

While the above could be perceived as a weakness, the strength of the book is its truly amazing array of examples and the rare historical diagrams it offers. It also displays an uncommon erudition, and includes an extensive and useful bibliography. One does not know how long Meirelles took to complete the manuscript, but it feels like a life-time project. These assets, coupled by an excellent production, make it an indispensable publication for whoever can be interested in information visualization.



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Editorial correspondence should be addressed to:

Mike Zender  
Editor, Visible Language  
College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning  
School of Design  
University of Cincinnati  
PO Box 210016  
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0016  
  
Email: [mike.zender@uc.edu](mailto:mike.zender@uc.edu)

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