Exploring The Components And Possibilities Of Environmental Graphic Design

In cities, we are constantly presented with signals that inform communication between the environment and the people who interact with it. Wayfinding systems which include maps and signs help to direct people to nearby destinations while address numbers exist to aid navigation in larger urban areas. Public art can create a connection between an environment's history and unique characteristics while other ephemeral elements such as tourism brochures and event signage provide cities with an opportunity to create distinct city identifications. These visual elements along with many others make up the field of Environmental Graphic Design. Environmental Graphic Design (EGD) is a design discipline that merges graphic, architectural, landscape, industrial, and interior design in order to enhance the image of a location. It generally focuses on three distinct factors of a location. Identification aids to distinguish an area from alternative locations; navigation uses local and surrounding elements to create a system which people can use to find a destination; and interpretation, a collection of information about the environment pieced together to describe its context in the broader scope of society. Together these components, when put to use, enhance “the clarity and legibility of a cityscape” and possess the power to shape the way it is perceived (Lynch, 1960, p.4).

Origins and Purpose of EGD

The roots of Design can be traced back centuries. Humans made marks on cave walls with the intent to communicate information visually. This communication imbued these marks with meaning and they became a shared language among the people who made and understood them. As such, environmental graphic design, or EGD, which can be defined as the graphic communication of information in the built environment, can be seen as one of the world’s oldest professions. Not too dissimilar to the way we adorn our environments today, design is used to tell a story, to communicate an idea. This has only gotten more complex over time as our surroundings can now challenge us to ask ourselves Where are you heading? What are you looking for? Where are you now? Who are we? Who are you? EGD, which is sometimes described as ‘experiential design’, is described as the act of “designing everyday surroundings in a way that can engage people with the space.” (Alscher, 2020) We can trace the beginnings of this more strategic method of design to the 20th century. The industrial revolution, which saw enormous growth in developments like public transport, manufacturing, and urban expansion, led to more advanced techniques in graphic design to meet the need to communicate information throughout the surrounding world.

During this time, graphic design was already making its mark on the world and establishing itself as a profession along with urban planning and architecture. It was through the combination of these three disciplines and the need during this time for improvements in visual communication that environmental graphic design was born. “The boundaries between the two disciplines were clearly delineated until graphic design and architecture began to merge in the mid-twentieth century, with considerable influence from other fields such as industrial design and urban planning. This merger has come to be called the environmental graphic design” (Berger, 2005, p.10).

With the exclusion of only a few key figures, environmental graphic designers didn't become known as specialists until after WWII. "As developments, complexes, transportation systems, and superhighways proliferated, the need for graphic design consultation became apparent" (Berger, 2005, p.15). The need grew for wayfinding systems in cities to help visitors and residents navigate dense urban environments and transportation systems. Public areas were benefitting from sculptures, murals, and graphic identities by generating a sense of desire and individuality in selected spaces. Another boom of development experiences in the 1980s saw even higher demand for professionals in the area of graphic design. "The urban scene was soon transformed by bustling themed marketplaces and stores, grandiose corporate headquarters, and new or improved zoos, botanical gardens, and museums" (Berger, 2005, p.15). This growth in desire for well-designed civic spaces called for a refined approach to EGD work, to not only make the cities spaces desirable and functional but also to give each area its own unique identity. During this period EGD began to flourish and attain an appreciation for its ability to unite the functional aspects of visual communication with the architectural disciplines of the built world.

The current market for environmental graphic designers is still in high demand today but the profession has a much broader range of challenges and demands. In a broad generalization, they are concerned with "enhancing a person's relationship and understanding to the environment they are in" (Moscardo, et al. 2007, p.4). This group of designers works to identify a place so that it is distinguishable from other similar places. This could possibly be through forms of design such as, monument signage, a logotype, thematic banners for an event or perhaps a piece of public art. Another task of an environmental graphic designer which is highly valued in large urban spaces is creating directional sign elements that help people to navigate complex places. This task, better known as wayfinding, has a number of variables to consider. Questions like who is the user and what are their potential destinations are just a couple of the starting points for this assessment. One of the more unique challenges for an Environmental Graphic Designer to overcome is finding a way to supply contextual information about the experience along the way. Using interpretive visual elements, designers can present "information about a place, object, or event that enhances a visitor's appreciation, understanding, and enjoyment" (Moscardo, et al. 2007, p.3). design elements such as public art, timelines, and historic markers, are just some examples of how this can be done. These different requirements within the discipline; navigation, identification, and interpretation, can invoke a positive connection between the user and the environment to create a more effortless and meaningful experience.

Exploring the Components of Environmental Graphic Design

Navigational sign elements and wayfinding is some of the most functional components of EGD. Its purpose is to help the user find what they are looking for; whether that is the bathroom, a meeting room inside a building or a specific location in the area. It's a designer's job to determine a navigational plan that points to all destinations while taking into consideration, the physical structure of chosen space and the objectives of its users. Once the destinations are understood, a series of signage can be created to enable multiple layers of navigation. For instance, when considering an urban setting, a system may be implemented that takes into consideration, navigation on both a pedestrian and vehicular level. Vehicular wayfinding systems are generally produced at a larger scale and are placed in the most visually accessible locations for drivers to allow easy understanding of vehicular traffic patterns. Readability and

repetition allow for an easier and more controlled user experience. Pedestrian wayfinding can serve to direct users from their location to nearby destinations on foot. These signs are produced at a smaller scale and their locations are more integrated into the environment so that they are accessible to the user if needed but do not exist to control their movements. (Eg. Maps) This balance between a user's need for control or freedom when navigating an environment can establish a sense of security through creating a comfortable framework. As Kevin Lynch stated in his research work, “An ordered environment is good as it provides an accessible framework for one to organize activities, beliefs, and knowledge” (Lynch, 1960, p.4).

Identification sign elements regularly serve as the landmark greeting to a place. They work to communicate the semiotics of a location’s identity through a variety of elements in their design form. “The anticipation of entry and the fulfillment of arrival can be among the most dramatic aspects of place interpretation” (Fleming, 2007, p.228). Identification design helps to establish expectations in an environment. Their primary function is to introduce and reveal a location by portraying all of the existing qualities that belong to it as well as showcasing unique qualities that differentiate it from other areas. (Mollerup, 2005 p.109). Because of this, identification elements may take on many forms. For instance, a landmark sign may be found at the entry point of a city to extend a brief, easy to interpret the message. In contrast to this, a public art installation could be used to provide a more complex and interpretive identification that forces viewers to deliberate and find their own meaning. Sometimes the message can become quite elaborate in its semantic representations. Typographic treatment, materials used for construction, and even the physical form itself can communicate a lot of subconscious characteristics about a place. An example of this, the “LOVE” letters in Philadelphia or the “I (heart) NY” logo in New York City are both iconic identifications that allow for various levels of interpretation through their design. The imagery of these identities activates a curiosity about the place and also elicits some sort of an emotional response. In Dublin, the Spire acts as a form of semiotic, visual identity that is recognizable worldwide. It is a recognizable feature on much of Dublin and Irelands tourism branding. (Alscher, 2020) On a much smaller but equally valuable scale, Cork’s ‘Design POP Festival’ has its own visual identity. Its uses of the above-mentioned design strategies establish expectations for visitors and showcase the cities unique identity as a “hub for creativity”. In order to create an effective identity, it’s important to understand the function of the space you are designing for, the activities that take place within it, the culture of those who occupy it, and the boundaries it uses to separate itself from other spaces. It may be appropriate to reference a historical moment in one instance, while other times it might be better to celebrate a current characteristic. It’s only with informed research into the past and present, that careful judgment can be made to give an appropriate identity to a place.

Interpretive graphics allow for a narrative to be attached to a place. This provides an opportunity to create a message that provokes thought, creates relationships and reveals something new to their viewer. “Quite often they take on the role of a tour guide or teacher” (Moscardo, et al. 2007, p.3). Similar to identification components, they can take shape depending on the information they're trying to communicate. In an urban space, one of its most common functions is to act as a historic marker. Often, appearing as plaques, engravings, or other forms of didactic communication. In more short-term solutions, they could appear as public installations, art or exhibitions. This type of interpretation can sometimes be uninteresting and difficult for most to engage with. The content may lack relevance to current society and could also be suffering from little or no supporting visuals. Today, however, Interpretive graphics have started to acquire more interest from the public. Good interpretation needs to evoke personal and

emotional connections with a location. The core component to an effective interpretive element is creating a memorable narrative that enriches the site. It's crucial to have a thorough understanding of the site and the users when developing a narrative. Building on the existing knowledge and mental associations of potential users are two tactics that help ensure the content will remain engaging. Interactive components can engage the user in the learning experience by making them active participants in it. Interactivity adds an element of fun and intrigue and therefore provides a memorable experience back to the user. Presentation of information can also affect the success of an interpretive element. Complex photo-montages and smartly crafted juxtapositions can stir interest and even controversy in a place. An overall theme threaded through multiple elements can create an experience that begins to mimic a museum. Ultimately the goal is to provide a framework that educates viewers enough to construct their own feelings and beliefs about a place.

Exploring the Possibilities of Environmental Graphic Design

As segregated neighborhoods begin to redevelop, there is a range of improvements that an environmental graphic design can provide that can help to improve the perception of the neighborhood. Robert Fleming believes environmental graphics are capable "of humanizing the essential elements of a cityscape" (Fleming, 2007, p. 21). However, in order for this to happen, the unique qualities of a place must be understood and used to the advantage of the place. taking a 'one-size fits all' approach with the design strategy can create an underwhelming feeling of sameness that reduces the impact of the environment and results in a sense of anonymity. Through in-depth research and community engagement, this can be avoided and extended efforts made to understand the qualities of a place are greatly beneficial. Ruedi Baur states that "In a world where everything is tending towards resemblance, the extraordinary — or at least the appropriately different — is acquiring great value. Creating places that are unique, unreplicable, and therefore contextualized could be the great challenge for towns and cities of our times" (Mollerup, 2005, p.304). New design strategies have recently been implemented allowing designers to focus more on the design of the experience can create enabling designers of all disciplines to realize more human-centered approaches in their work. Andrew Blauvelt of Design Observer writes that "Lately, I've sensed that we're in the third phase of modern design, what I sometimes call its 'ethnographic turn.' We've seen periods of great formal experimentation, exploring the visual vocabulary of modernism. We've seen periods focused on the meaning-making of design, its content, symbolism, and narrative potential. For me, this new phase is preoccupied with designs effects, beyond its status as an object, and beyond the "authorship" or intentions of designers" (Blauvelt, 2007). The practice of research in design often involves a focused investigation that informs the action of design. This tends to involve qualitative research targeted at exposing the 'why' behind a design problem. Often these research tactics are based around the strategy of Ethnography. Ethnography is a "research method based on observing people in their natural environment rather than in a formal research setting" (Blauvelt, 2007). Its objective is to understand the aspect in question through the perspective of the chosen community being studied. For example, to understand why a neighborhood is highly segregated, a researcher would first need to understand the culture of the people who live in the area. Factors such as the physical infrastructure, the beliefs of those who live in it as opposed to those who do not, it's history and its range of citizens, would be just a few of the key elements to realize. This type of research is capable of informing all aspects of the design process; from understanding the appropriate construction materials for a significant element to realizing the ability to create effective messages that communicate to the intended

audience.

Conclusion

The components of environmental graphic design provide an open framework for accessibility. When these tools are combined into a system, they can work together to create a cohesive experience of all of the aspects that make up a place. The audience may be enticed to explore an area through a wisely crafted identification. They can be taught more about a neighborhood's culture and people through a series of interpretive graphics. In addition, an easy-to-use navigation structure can allow them to comfortably explore unknown places. A well-designed sign system becomes an integrated part of the environment. It feels just as much a part of the space as the buildings and streets that surround it. Robert Fleming said that "Trail systems, interpretive panels, and placemaking public art have rarely been connected" (Fleming, 2007, p.222). Furthermore, he goes on to state that "when assessing the city, in the various levels of public art, landmarks and other elements that form the characteristics of a place, there's a missed opportunity to enhance the meaning of these objects through a larger connected story. Many placemakers remain isolated objects in space. Their effect could be more pronounced if architects and urban designers sought to relate them in effect to create a choreography of meanings" (Fleming, 2007, p.10). When looking to segregated cities the idea of creating a system shows potential in two different ways. First, it gives a cohesive feel to a segregated environment, providing a system of information tools that help users to navigate and inform. Secondly and more importantly, a system approach offers the opportunity to be expanded into other neighborhoods across the city. Growing a system into a city-wide experience creates a network that can make each place feel cohesive and at the same time promote the characteristics that make them unique.