Travel as Divine [Design] Inspiration

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Since the terror of 9/11, many Americans have cut back their traveling, opting to stay close to home. This is unfortunate for many reasons, and it is especially regrettable for artists and designers, for whom travel has been a great source of inspiration. In our complex information age, surrounded by pictures and words, art and graphic design have become the universal language. What better way to understand the chaos of the world, in an effort to make order out of it, then to experience it firsthand?

Introduction

Since the terror of 9/11, many Americans have cut back their traveling, opting to stay close to home. This is unfortunate for many reasons, and it is especially regrettable for artists and designers, for whom travel has been a great source of inspiration. In our complex information age, surrounded by pictures and words, art and graphic design have become the universal language. What better way to understand the chaos of the world, in an effort to make order out of it, then to experience it firsthand? The awakening of the senses to new surroundings, the feelings of displacement when far from home, and the long quiet hours of travel between destinations have provided centuries of designers with thoughts and images awaiting placement on the printed page.

While I am tolerably certain that Vadislav Nijinski and Leon Bakst did not absolutely need to go to Greece to respectively choreograph and design the Ancient Greek themed 1911 ballet Afternoon of a Faun, I'm sure it helped. What is more, I expect that they enjoyed it too. And while the IRS probably (in its wisdom) would have frowned upon them trying to deduct it as a business expense (had they been 1990s Americans), it is true that travel is one of the best methods for any type of artist to get inspiration (author unknown, 2002).

Other examples include the powerful airplane and railway images popularized by post-cubist (or ‘deco’) modernists like A.M. Cassandre, and the vast array of posters that have for decades adorned the mosaic walls of the London Underground. According to French philosopher Montaigne’s 16th century travel journal (Van Den Abbeele, 1992), the main thing is not “to measure how many feet there are in Santa Rotunda, and how much the face of Nero on some old ruins is bigger than it is on some medallion; but what is important is to rub and polish your brains by contact with those of others.” Without firsthand experience in transportation difficulties, some of the most inspired information designs, such as Beck’s first London Underground map, would not have proved so useful.

From my first trip to Europe as a student of art and design at age 20, to my most significant relocation from the U.S. east coast to the west ten years later, documentation of sight, sound and smell has been every bit a part of the journey as securing a roof over my head. Early sketch/scrapbooks warehouse the printed ephemera collected in cities, from museums, to bars, to tattoo parlors, and from islands and small rural towns. Equipping oneself with a good camera, most seasoned travelers would agree, is as important as taking along aspirin. But, for artists and designers, the pencil, x-acto knife, and glue-stick may be just as essential for capturing the wide range of visual stimulus.
The Travel Object

The thrust of many journeys is typically cultural and artistic awareness. In my own travel journals, museum ticket stubs often outnumber all other items. However, one will also find sketches of architectural details, notes on word translations into English, and even ‘tacky’ bar promotions. Certainly I am not the only person who finds it all equally fascinating; and, of course, not only in ‘good’ design can one find inspiration. There is a charm in the vernacular design; the commonplace graphic forms, such as matchbook covers, and unskilled commercial illustration and printing tell a lot about a place. The cut-and-paste photocopies promoting youth hostels handed to backpackers as they step off the train may even have a captivating quality for some. It is so often in the tired, confusing moments of travel that the most memorable events take place, and it is these trite mementos that help us recall it all once we are home. One must not overlook the power of everyday objects to evoke memory and emotion.

“My clenched hand inside my coat pocket discovers a smooth, rounded stone left there from my summer vacation on the shores of Eastern Lake Superior. The beaches of Lake Superior are rocky and cobbled with billions of wave-worn stones, which are so plentiful that they soon become unremarkable to the eye. But months later, walking over the flat and gray-green Indiana landscape with its applique of utility poles, highway signage, and concrete interstates; the stone seems different. I remember giving little thought to the billions of stones months ago, using them more for target practice against breaking waves than as a rosary prompting quiet reflections. Yet the stone from my coat pocket has become an unique object compelling examination” (Repp, 1995).

Travel—even just thinking about it stimulates our minds with ideas and images. The tangible, physical elements of a journey may not appear in design, but subconsciously forms and influences emerge. In a logotype design I created for Meridian, a women’s international travel network, the Oxford typeface was selected largely for its formal properties, specifically, the capital ‘M’ integrated well with linear elements denoting the globe. When it was further researched to appear in Rob Carter’s Working with Computer Type 2 (RotoVision 1996), it was brought to our attention that the typeface, similar to Caroline miniscules, has a strong association with the medieval period and maritime travel. The prototype for three-dimensional signage also emerged as a weather-vane-like form, initially arising out of formal decisions and without conscious thought of its relation to direction and travel.

One’s own experiences can lead to unique solutions to everyday design problems, such as travel guides. So many of my own journeys were full of foot-travel that I quickly learned the value of light, compact guides. In addition, idle time spent in train stations or airports was more amusing when spent playing games with others, rather than reading to one-self. These two observations fused into a concept for a proposed travel guide in the form of a deck of cards. A pictogram in the place of the suit denotes the content found on the card. For example, an international money symbol leads the viewer to the card with currency exchange rates; a telephone symbol marks the cards that carry common conversational phrases in the diverse languages of the countries included in the guide; etc. The deck of cards itself acts as a symbol on one level, representing play, chance, and risk, and appealing in this way to spontaneous travelers.

Personal travel experiences can lead us to consider many new issues. Visiting foreign lands without a working knowledge of the languages spoken is always challenging, and leads to a dependency on pictographic signs. My graduate thesis project, Toward the Universal, was focused on the question of universality in signs and symbols.
The modern shift toward symbols is an inevitable outcome of several trends: the desire of exporting nations to sell goods in many countries without redesign, of cities to accommodate foreign tourists, and of computer manufacturers to make computers “user friendly” for all who use them. Some scholars maintain that certain symbols are commonly understood and possess similar meanings across diverse situations, in extremely distinct cultural and societal systems, and even unique historical eras. Among language scholars outside of the discipline of visual communications, the study of universal symbols often falls under the head of the archetype. An archetype can be said to exist when an image appears in different contexts, through different media, by different sources for different ends, and in diverse generations and eras (Bracy, 1997).

This investigation certainly has an applied value in visual communications of today, for example, in the design of transportation symbols utilized in international airports or train stations.

It was not until my decision to relocate from one side of the United States to the other that travel itself surpassed the role of influence or inspiration and became the content itself of many personal design projects. Those who have a permanent place in my address book know that I never miss an opportunity to design a postcard (a travel-related artifact). It is a medium that has transcended banal vacation sentiments like ‘wish you were here’, and one that still excites its’ receiver. For me, it has been the best format to employ for moving announcements and other such long-distance correspondence. But it was for a 2000 exhibition that my most personal and conceptual piece arose from the need to express what this cross-country journey had meant to me.

This both theoretical and practical project consisted of three parts: The physical journey was represented by a map denoting the driving route, on which was montaged a collection of printed ephemera and objects from the places visited along the way. The psychological journey was represented by objective documentation of weather and distance traveled, while subjective responses to terrain changes were translated into paint on miniature canvases. From Virginia, through the Southwest, and into California in July, both the earth and sky colors changed in dramatic ways. The third, and most pragmatic, component was a series of typographic / photographic juxtapositions, labeled with appropriate Pantone colors, to show how this research could be applied to technological tools and processes for print production. From a drink stirrer to mixing the right hue of blue for the sky, to the choice of typeface and color swatch, I attempted to address the question of how, in many different ways, a journey can be documented. Also, I examined how theoretical and personal research and experience can be integrated into applied visual problem-solving methodologies.

The Language of Travel

Design educators everywhere are sure to understand the value in discussing design in analogous terms from other disciplines. Music, for example, has long served well in the discourse of art (composition, rhythm, harmony, dissonance, etc.). Travel, too, shares some of the vocabulary of design, and thus can serve as a learning tool. In addition to their symbolic, communicative lives, forms have an optical life. All forms, whether photographic or typographic, contain energy, and the way in which they are arranged on a page creates energy. The center of a form is located where the horizontal and vertical axes intersect, and it’s implied direction or the motion implied by its positioning, causes a viewer’s eye to travel over the page. Forms and their distinguishing properties are the landmarks, while empty space is the restful park area, just as in an urban setting.
For design educator and author Kenneth Hiebert, drawing from the built environment proves to be a valuable tool for students (Hiebert, 1998). “The street is a rhythm of signs—visual street language. It is a rhythm of people in motion, of vehicles, signs, buildings, lighting,—and sounds. Staccato-legato, loud-soft, formal-casual. Contrasting features make the hot and cold of the street.” When we find our way through the built environment, we speak of navigation and orientation, subjects of much discourse by urban planners and environmental graphic designers alike. And when one experiences a work of graphic design, the same visual cues are necessary: how one arrives at, enters, and moves around within a piece dictates what information they gather from the experience. Of course, when learning interactive design for web-sites or cd-roms, the language of way-finding becomes even more literal.

Travel as Metaphor

“When one thinks of travel, one most often thinks of the interest and excitement that comes from seeing exotic places and cultures. Likewise, the application of the metaphor of travel to thought conjures up the image of an innovative mind that explores new ways of looking at things or which opens up new horizons” (Van Den Abbeele, 1992). While I do not pretend to have a complete explanation for the hold travel has on my imagination, I will continue to search for it as long as I continue to travel. I satisfy my need for thinking about travel by integrating it into course projects. My graphic design students have responded to a number of design problems with refreshing and sometimes surprising solutions when ‘journey’ or travel is the context.

While some students document recent trips, one student responded to a postcard series project by visually translating entries in her dream journal. She tested the limits of her software knowledge in this introductory technical course, by recreating the journeys through surreal landscapes of her imagination. Another student chose a micro approach, focusing on the journey of an inanimate object as it is acted upon by others. A dislodged VW hubcap, when hit by another vehicle, rolls to the beach, where a dog and dog owner experiment with substituting it for their Frisbee, sending the hubcap into the ocean, where it sinks to the depths with sharks. The obvious application of such a sequence of events to time-based media, such as animation or video, is yet another justification for students exploring journeys in the classroom.

At a conference I attended in San Francisco, I was delighted by California College of Arts and Crafts’ Professor Lucille Tenazas’ presentation. One of her successful student projects involved assigning a finite time or distance for the student to travel from home, purposefully heading a direction rarely traveled. The students’ documentation—verbal, typographic, photographic, etc.—expressed their fear of the unknown, their unease with displacement from the familiar, and most importantly, the awakening of their senses and powers of observation. It might be said that what affects travelers profoundly about a foreign place is not so much finding or not finding familiar things, but not finding them in the familiar place.

Whether it is the rarely visited neighboring town, or the opposite side of globe, exposure to new stimuli is at the root of everyday growth and inspiration, especially for designers. In short, we need to get out there and see the world—we never know where our next great idea is lurking!
References


