Development of a curriculum for expanded sign design practice

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Abstract

• This paper describes research conducted to develop a set of competencies from which a sign design course may be developed rooted in an understanding of contemporary sign design practice.
• 25 design competencies were developed following an analysis of
  – Sign design practice
    • Case studies and interview studies
  – Education of sign designers
  – Analysis of the situation with regard to signage in Amman, The proposed curriculum has arisen out of an argument suggesting that regulation alone will not reduce visual clutter, and that sign designers need to play a proactive role in creating effective commercial signage which is in keeping with local culture, environment and regulations. For this, sign designers need to be equipped with a wider range of skills than those taught in graphic design.
• The competencies were validated by an expert panel of academics and practitioners
• The resultant competencies encompass a mixture of elements drawn from design research and practice, management and graphic design.
Motivation for the research

• As a graphic design practitioner, resident an lecturer in Amman, Essam was concerned about the abundance of, and effects of unregulated signage in Amman.

• Although this had been studied before by Abu – Ghazze (1996 and 1997), the solutions proffered did not embrace the need to consider the extent to which education of designers equipped them to work in a complex, demanding environment.

• Essam, himself a lecturer in graphic design saw an opportunity to enhance the training of future practitioners in this domain.
A residential district which has become a commercial district showing a plethora of signs
The effects of unregulated signage

• Unregulated signage has mostly detrimental effects. It
  – is a source of visual pollution
  – may damage buildings it is attached to
  – may be confusing
  – may lead escalation in advertising (as one business seeks to increase its dominance)
  – may lead to road accidents
  – may lead to a loss of prestige and income to an area
Who is responsible?

• Many stakeholders
  – The owners of business premises or the commissioner of the signer
  – The regulators and enforcement bodes
  – The designers
Research aims and objectives

• To propose new ways in which the design of commercial signage in Amman could be improved.
  – To understand the shortcomings of current commercial signage in Amman.
  – To understand the current and future role of graphic designers in creating commercial signs.
  – To evaluate the extent to which current training equips graphic designers for a career in commercial sign design.
  – To propose a set of competencies that future graphic designer working in this market will need and from which new courses could be developed.
Unregulated signage in Amman
Initial observations

• Although the research commenced in 2006, its course was influenced by the introduction of new set of regulations in the Municipality which sought to address the location, quantity and size of commercial signs

• The development and enforcement of the regulation was undertaken with little stakeholder consultation

• Some improvements were seen, but the regulations were implemented quickly, with little analysis of effects, or time given for people to adjust
  – Loss of income of certain businesses
  – Unsightly buildings
  – Work arounds
Before and after removal of signage
Results of visual analysis in Amman

- The model seeks to represent the type of knowledge sign designers need to draw on to develop a commercial sign for a particular location

- This model was populated through further case studies
Case study 1: McDonalds’ adaptation of signage to local environment

- A photographic, cross cultural survey of McDonald's restaurant signage confirmed that even within tightly controlled franchises, sign designers need to work within the boundaries of the site, the architectural heritage and comply with planning regulations.

- Failure to understand and take notice of such issues can produce unattractive signage which does little to enhance the urban environment.
Case study 2: Development of new corporate signage in Coventry

- Interviews with designers, local authority, commissioners, manufacturers and users highlighted
  - The role of sign designers, from initial consultation through to erection of signs,
  - The relationship between the designers and different agencies (such as Corporate Affairs, the sigh manufacturers and local council: planning department),
  - The importance of the research and analysis mechanism, such as the understanding of human factors in architectural environment, the buildings’ style and function, materials to be used, and finally regulations,
  - Perception of the resultant signage by the university population (e.g. its function and ability to communicate the university mission statement).
Conclusions from Case Studies

- Designers
  - should be aware of the impact of commercial signage can on different user groups,
  - Need to not only fulfil the client’s needs but also to accommodate local practice and to be in harmony with the architecture and local environment.

- A sign which simply promotes the client’s wishes (to attract attention to the retail outlet) may well become a source of visual clutter.

- The design of a sign or signage system needs specialised skills and knowledge in sign design, as well as
  - utilisation of graphic design principles to improve the place identity and ensure that the space has its own content
  - skills in problem solving, the relevance of sign regulations, the properties of material, the visual impact of scale,
  - competency in the application of the latest multimedia technology.
Undergraduate training

• Interviews with practicing sign designers in Jordan showed that current training may not equip them for practise in commercial sign design
• In particular, they felt a gap in knowledge in relation to
  – materials,
  – sign production,
  – regulations,
  – history of signage,
  – awareness of environmental issues,
  – sense of space and place (architecture).
Teaching of sign designers

- Interviews with lecturers in Jordan and UK were conducted to establish the extent to which sign design was included in current graphic design curricular.
- Examination of current design teaching showed a lack of specialised, detailed training in sign design in both countries.
- As a result, designers entering the market place may have little understanding of the skills and techniques central to the design of effective and aesthetically pleasing signage.
## Summary of differences between the two countries

### A comparison between the UK and Jordan design institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>- Insufficient time to teach everything that graduates should know for professional career</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Conceptual thinking</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- UK Art and Design Benchmark statement</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Team work</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Professional Bodies</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Cultural and social issues</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Modularised system of educational units (Credits)</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Commercial and industrial context</strong></td>
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<td>Term system, 3 years course</td>
<td><strong>- Diagnostic approach not dogmatic approach</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Multi activities undertaken by graphic designers</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Focus on students as individual</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Multicultural, multi religious and multi gendered</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Develop student self confidence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>- Higher Education Accreditation Commission</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>- Modularised system of educational units (Hours) semester system, 4 years course</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>- Culture and Religion</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Curriculum is treated as a body of knowledge to be transmitted, not as an attempt to achieve outcomes ends in a product (student)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Insufficient time to teach everything that graduates should know for professional career</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Studio practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Courses that support practicality and equip students with required skills</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Seminar group</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Project based</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Research</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Replacement</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Critique and analysis practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Objective and subjective modes</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Presentation</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Developing a portfolio</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Self Assessment</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Conceptual projects</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Brainstorming</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Idea orientation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Not taught as a module or course</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- It is taught as part of Typography, Information design and Branding</strong></td>
<td><strong>- It is part of modules that includes Advertising design, mostly involved in designing the sign content (product, service, corporate identity)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Could be a student or a tutor design brief, for individual or a group</strong></td>
<td><strong>- Sign design require extra competencies in addition to graphic design competencies</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Projects require research that supports students in gaining skills needed</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- Sign design require extra competencies in addition to graphic design competencies</strong></td>
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Conclusions to interviews

- Students may lack the knowledge and skills relating to signage.
- The development of designated and specialised teaching in sign design, will equip sign designers to design and situate signage appropriately within the urban environment.
- This could be offered as part of an existing graphic design course, or as separate training in industry.

A first step in developing such a course is to understand the underlying competencies which need to be taught.
Creating a set of competencies to develop a sign design course

- Delphi method was used
- An international panel of 27 academics and practitioners had 3 rounds of voting to reach consensus on competencies on which a sign design course could be based
- The three rounds of scoring resulted in a set of 25 competencies, additional to those already taught in graphic design courses.
The final competencies

- Environmental factors
- Urban Design and Architecture
- Environmental Graphic Design Principles
- Sign Making
- Sign Regulations
- Elements of Planning
- Digital Photography
- Techniques and Materials
- Applied Understanding of...
  - Site
  - Architecture
  - Environment
  - Human Behaviour
  - Medium
  - Culture
  - Design
- Sign Design Software
- Commercial Printing Process Techniques
- Computer Aided Equipment and High Technology
- Drawing
- Research
- Visual Literacy
- Visual Thinking
- Cognitive Studies
- History of Art and Design
- Typography and Its Legitimacy

Coventry University

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centre of excellence for product and automotive design
The competencies were grouped into 5 categories

1. **Knowledge** including the history of sign design, regulations and the theory of Environmental Graphic Design.

2. **Comprehension** with particular focus on the properties of sustainable materials and the manufacturing process from a brief to installation. Exploring both old and new techniques.

3. **Collaboration and Application** including how to fulfil a design brief and the clients’ stated and unstated needs, through the process of planning and designing a signage system.

4. **Analysis and Synthesis:** Develop skills by exploration, visual thinking (visual literacy and user literacy) and aspects of typographic design to articulate the relationship between the visual and literal considering issues of visual and linguistic vocabulary (e.g. symbolism, semiotics) to identify effective solutions using text and image.

5. **Evaluation:** Understanding the accessibility issues and environmental aspects in terms of Jordan’s time, space and place and human factors in the architectural environment.
Conclusions

- Current sign designers, practicing in Jordan may not have sufficient skills to develop effective, aesthetically pleasing signage which balances the needs of the client, the environmental context and the regulatory bodies.
- A weakness has been identified in the education of graphic designer who wish to become sign designers.
- This gap may be filled by developing designated and specialised teaching in sign design.
- Such teaching may be offered as part of existing graphic design courses, or as separate training in the industry.
- The final set of competencies will be used to develop undergraduate training material to address this gap.
For more information, please get in contact with Essam......
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References