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Title

Place Branding and Cross-Cultural Visual Communication
How do the theories and practices of Place Branding inform our understanding of Cross-Cultural Visual Communication Design?

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Abstract
In a globalised environment, visual communication designers are now required to understand their audience’s needs, values and unique methods of communication, creating a new focus on the recipient. In a cross-cultural design context, the visual communication also needs to appeal to a broad range of stakeholders and multiple recipients who hold a strong emotional investment in the message being sent. Our understanding of the complexities of designing in this environment can be informed by recent developments in the research of place branding where the focus is on the increased possibility for failure, the strong potential for criticism and the issues associated with a broad range of stakeholders.

The outcomes of this connection are explored further in a case study involving eight countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, Qatar, United States of America and Zimbabwe. More than 140 student and lecturer participants reviewed a student driven cross-cultural visual communication project that produced over 560 designs. The increased potential for failure and strong, emotional criticism raised questions about the role of images and symbols in cross-cultural visual communication. The impact these have on the reception of the design, challenge our views on the use of stereotypical imagery. This paper will discuss the movement towards designing visual images that are generic and lacking in cultural representation presenting the view that stereotypical imagery is important to the recipient who relies on these cultural references to effectively read the message.

Keywords
Cross-cultural, visual communication, place branding, images, stereotypes.
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1. Cross-cultural Visual Communication Design

“Working on assignments aimed at cultures other than their own.”
Henry Steiner (Steiner & Haas, 1995, p.ix)

“To some people, it means working directly for clients across international cultural borders, possibly in collaboration with foreign designers, or it may simply be an opportunity for a sociable and stimulating professional exchange among peers.”
Linda Cooper Bowen (Bowen, 2005, p.130)

“A movement within the design community characterized by a general recognition and respect for ‘otherness’.”
Steven Rigley, coordinator of the Glasglow School of Art (Bowen, 2005, p.133)
1.1 Introduction

Although the aim of visual communication is to communicate successfully and efficiently, “graphic designers have the unenviable task of balancing their visions with what others are likely to make of them” (Richardson, 1999, p.189). Visual communication designers are now required to understand their audiences, their needs, their values and their unique methods of communication. No longer can designers rely on the mass communication methods for all of the visual communication problems they face. Instead they must consider the receiver and use their differences and diversities to enrich the message being delivered. “As professional designers, we have developed an effective body of theory, method, and form to deal with both the sender and message. Now we must do the same for the receiver component of the communications equation.” (McCoy, 2006, p.203)

Cross-cultural visual communication design is one area in visual communication that has emphasized the need to focus on the recipient. Defined as working for clients across international cultural borders (Bowen, 2005), Henry Steiner offers the clearest definition when he states that cross-cultural visual communication is when designers work on projects aimed at cultures other than their own (Steiner & Haas, 1995). In this discipline there becomes a greater possibility for the perception and interpretation of the communication to appear as different from what is intended. The visual communication has a need to appeal to a broad range of stakeholders and multiple recipients who hold a strong emotional investment in the message being sent. As a result there exists an increased potential for debate, dissent, conflict and miscommunication.

The central focus of this paper is to question the role of images and symbols in cross-cultural visual communication design and the impact these have on the reception of the design. To assist in this process, the researcher will reflect on the emerging theories and practices of place branding and the attention place branding places on the views of the recipient. This paper will discuss the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games logo, demonstrating that this logo uses culturally stereotypical images that were initially quite controversial but have now been commended. A new identity for Auckland, however, does not use culturally iconic imagery and yet has created similar controversy. The paper will then reflect on the findings of a case study involving a large cross-cultural visual communication design project demonstrating that recipients favour a cultural connection to their message or the communication becomes ineffective and disregarded. Design theories suggest we need to create and maintain a cultural construct to achieve effective communication in a globalized market, yet the result of this study demonstrates that, although recipients of the communication
prefer a cultural connection, place branding designs in particular do not provide this in their identity designs.

1.2 Place Branding

Place branding aims to create the cultural identity for a place. It is a form of branding that must extend across cultural divides. There often becomes an emotional engagement and investment in place and cultural identity creation, with multiple stakeholders at a local, national and international level involved in the process. Preconceived views of how a nation or a place should be visually represented may exist and if the image presented is not closely aligned to the recipients understanding, the image will be challenged or even rejected.

It is very difficult to create a single image to define a place and challenges will arise in creating an appropriate representation. For instance, Arquitecto Pedro Ramirez Vázquez, President of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XIX Olympiad claims that when it comes to designing an identity for the host country of an Olympic Games, “of least importance was the Olympic competition; the records fade away, but the image of a country does not” (Rivas & Sarhandi, 2001, p.74). The project becomes an enormous responsibility of providing an image that satisfies the world, as well as solves the internal issues of communication. “Culturally, logistically, politically and aesthetically it is more complex than ‘selling’ anything” (Rivas & Sarhandi, 2001, p.74).

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games identity program embodied many of the issues associated with cross-cultural visual communication and place branding. It was required to be effective across many cultures, be seen to successfully represent a national identity, be supported by many stakeholders and create unity for a large-scale event.

Sydney Olympic Logo Design (Wheeler, 2006, p.41)

With a large number of stakeholders believing they have a right to respond to the design solution
of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games identity program, controversy was always going to ensue. The image created was of the Sydney Opera House represented in the Olympic flame carried by an athlete. The athlete was depicted using the iconic image of a boomerang, with an image of the sun representing the head. Responses to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games identity program varied with comments ranging from wonderful to corny. Some enjoyed the dynamic quality of the logo, the use of colour and the mixture of Australia’s white culture and Indigenous culture; the sails of the Opera House, the boomerangs and the sun.

Views that expressed an unfavorable response ranged from considering the new design to be ‘corny’, difficult to read, confused with too many disparate elements, and ‘fussy’. The federal president of the Australian Labour Party (ALP) at that time, Mr Barry Jones, thought the logo looked pretty dreadful. “I am at a loss to know why it appealed so much to the judges. It is a collection of clichés” (Weekes, 1996, p.3). One representative of the Indigenous community, aboriginal activist Michael Mansell, expressed the view that “Australian sports officials have no right to use indigenous symbols. Aborigines should boycott the logo and associated products” (Dasey, 1996, p.3). In the same article, Ric Birch, Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) artistic director took a more pragmatic view when he stated, “the thing about Australia is that we’ve go 17 million people with 17 million different opinions” (Dasey, 1996, p.3).

A number of years down the track, the Sydney Olympic logo is now considered a large factor in a successful marketing campaign. For all of the controversy and public outcry, considerations of the use of clichés and stereotypes, the logo is now thought to be representational of our unique culture. Graham Hankinson (2007) felt that the logo helped build a positive reputation that has been sustained well beyond the event. Where initially there is controversy, this eventually fades and the identity has become a commonly accepted cultural moment in the history of Sydney and Australia.

Faced with a similar issue of creating an identity for their city, Auckland launched the new visual identity program, ‘Brand Auckland’. Strongly supported by the website www.brandauckland.com, it is explained that “this brand plays a pivotal role in telling Auckland’s story, creating recognition, relevance and understanding that this is a place where ideas and new technologies really come to life” and “visually, it speaks volumes about our many cultures, our vibrancy and our spirited progress - don't you think?” The website argues the reasons to unite and support the concept and calls on all stakeholders to announce loudly and proudly the benefits of Auckland. It explains that the process of creating an identity for Auckland is a journey, the development of a reputation that can be left in the hands of others or created together. It states clearly on the home page “brands
are not about the technology. They’re about inspiration. It’s about leading and it’s about
dreaming big.”

City of Auckland logo and design applications (AucklandPlus, 2009)

As opposed to design solution for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games identity, the new logo created
for Auckland does not contain any stereotypical Auckland landmarks or features. The website
clearly directs recipients to endorse the visual solution as a representation of the many cultures
of Auckland, yet from a design perspective, there is not a direct reference to these cultures
in the graphic identity. With a lack of visual connection specifically associated with Auckland,
the symbol could be easily used in a campaign for America or Argentina. The design has become
a generic design solution and an identity that will require stakeholders to support and build the
emotional connection with the brand as it is being used.

It may have been considered that the design for Auckland does not contain components that could
cause controversy or isolate any stakeholders, or there is nothing in the identity that could be
deemed offensive. Yet, similarly to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games identity program,
controversy has surrounded the launch of Brand Auckland. Described as "A.palling", "laughable
rubbish" and like a "pair of disgustingly ragged jean shorts", former Auckland City Mayor Dick
Hubbard thought the logo “symbolised a city that is "frayed at the edges" and predicted it would
become the butt of jokes” (Orsman, 2008). Since its introduction over a year ago, however, Brand
Auckland is starting to gather positive feedback. AucklandPlus chairman Michael Barnett says
there is no question the logo is gaining acceptance. He feels the logo has given the city the opportunity to represent Auckland and all of its opportunities under the umbrella of a single coherent, consistent identity.

Generic design solutions are commonly appearing in the international arena. The logo created for Belfast is another example of a design solution that could be applied to locations other than Belfast such as Brussels, Broome or even a town in Central Victoria, Australia, Bendigo. In considering the diversity of the receiver, the message is diluted to a safe, common design. The adjectives used to describe places have also become common and generic and often include words such as ‘dynamic’, ‘vibrant’ and ‘inspiring’.

City of Belfast logo and design applications (Council, 2009)

1.3 Stereotypes

The review of place branding demonstrates two distinct approaches to the use of images in the development of design solutions. The first contains images that are stereotypical to the culture of a region and the second avoids using stereotypes. Controversy existed with both design approaches.

“Traditionally, researchers in cross-cultural communication and management hold that to facilitate cross-cultural communication, people from different cultures should avoid stereotyping” (Lee, Jussim, & McCauley, 1995, p.162). This is not possible as humans, when they come across a culture that is different from their own, use stereotyping as a basic means of managing the complexities of that culture. Human’s selective attention leads them to casting stereotypes on people we meet or places we visit, allowing us to make assumptions quickly and efficiently so we can move on to
other matters of importance. Stereotypes are never true of every group member and using stereotypes is always open to the potential for unfair and inaccurate interpretation.

In an online creative forum defining the role of stereotypes in design, Steven Heller (2005a), discusses that it depends on the stereotype being used as to the success or failure of the communication. He believes stereotypes are a useful marketing tool that can be appealing and beneficial in the right context. If designers feel their work is beginning to create stereotypes, promote stereotypes or being used by others to create stereotypes, they should not be used. Designers should look at the use of stereotypes as simplistic and wrong, “unless, of course, the stereotypes don’t hurt. Many of those that will play themselves out.” Steven Heller, in a similar discussion in Design Forum (2005b), explains that “context is everything”. Stereotypes are created and enjoyed in many environments but the right venue is essential or the creation will cause controversy, or at worst, be considered a very bad idea.

The image of a country or place, however, may not be able to reflect reality. Historical and stereotypical imagery may obscure present day notions. Negative images may be accurate and a true reflection of the current climate yet may damage the general perceptions of the nation. While positive and negative images are endlessly represented in popular culture, there is often little control of the external portrayals of a nation.

If the domestic population or other domestic stakeholders disagree with the representation used in a communication strategy, they cannot be expected to ‘live the brand’ and endorse the image. It is important that the local community and stakeholders have participation in the process of creating a place identity. The design solution must endeavour to reflect a representation that can be endorsed by all of the stakeholders.

2. Cross-cultural Visual Communication Case Study

2.1 Methodology

To explore this further, the complexities of cross-cultural visual communication and creating the visual representations of a community were the focus of a cross-cultural design exchange project. Eight countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, Qatar, United States of America and Zimbabwe participated in the project with over 560 designs submitted and reviewed by over 140 student and lecturer participants.
University level Visual Communication students were chosen to be the subjects for this study. University students are in the process of learning to identify, describe and discuss design characteristics and have the ability to articulate their responses to those characteristics. They also demonstrate an element of interest in the area of cross-cultural visual communication as it relates directly to their chosen profession. The University environment indicated an ability to offer the available resources for viewing the work and time to participate in the two stages of the project.

The sample selection of design students was obtained through the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda) Education Network (IEN). This database has been established for the purpose of encouraging interaction between international Universities and their students. An email requesting expressions of interest was sent to a number of the lecturers who had indicated their willingness to participate in cross-cultural design exchange projects. Eight countries responded and suggested they would have from six to forty students able to undertake the brief.

There were two stages to the design project:

1. **Design stage**: This involved the creation of a series of four postcards designing a visual image to reflect the recipient's ‘sense of community’. Students were required to design one postcard for each of the participating countries in their group.

2. **Review stages**: Postcards were collated and returned to the target country for review. The review process involved the collection of questionnaire responses, email correspondence, discussion group transcripts as well as personal notes reflecting on the postcards designed for the target country.

Students were asked to comment on four different questions:

a) Can you determine the origin of the designer?

b) Does this design contain stereotypes?

c) Do you think this design is successful in communicating the given topic, ‘Sense of Community’?

d) Can you indicate which top ten design solutions you like?

Each country presented its own unique sample of design solutions and correspondence and a case study methodology was followed due to the diversity of the information that was supplied by the broad range of sources. Notes and memos were documented and a data bank of observations led to patterns in results. Most commonly cited design solutions and multiple measures of the same phenomenon were recorded determining the similarities in opinions. Patterns were based on repeated observations or consistencies in both quantitative and qualitative data and generalizations were established in the findings.
2.2 Results and Discussion

Collating of images and the findings of the review process demonstrated a number of key patterns, four of which will be presented below.

2.2.1 Theme 1
Design solutions that contained images representing heritage, natural features, streetscape, events, architecture and facilities all faired poorly in the evaluation process. These images were strongly considered as stereotypical images.

Brazilian submission for South Africa.

Brazilian submission for Australia
2.2.2 Theme 2
The majority of submissions cited as successful in communicating the topic ‘sense of community’ were also considered to contain stereotypes. In the case of the Australian submissions, participants cited the design solution that created a humorous exchange as the most appealing design solutions. In the South African submissions, the South African recipients cited images that were seen to represent the South African ‘sense of community’ as peaceful and with unity as those that were most appealing.
Brazilian submission for Australia

Mexican submission for South Africa
2.2.3 Theme 3

The images cited as ‘liked’ were often contradictory in whether the recipients thought they contained stereotypical images or they did not. The following design submissions were cited as ‘liked’ by participants of each country yet there was an element of uncertainty as to whether the pantone swatches used in the concept were a stereotype. Approximately half of the participants in each country considered that pantone swatches as a stereotype and half of the participants considered they were not.
2.2.4 Theme 4

Postcard submissions that did not contain stereotypes were often rejected because they did not resonate any connection with the recipient. The following design submissions were considered too abstract by all of the participants irrespective of country.
Brazilian submission for Australia

Brazilian submission for Mexico
3. Conclusion

The design solutions present in the cross-cultural design project demonstrated a number of key themes. It was indicated in the findings that without stereotypes the visual communication strategy was considered abstract and not able to communicate the given topic of ‘sense of community’, and stereotypes were valid in promoting a visual connection with the recipient. If a design submission was considered successful, the presence of stereotypes was not discussed. If a submission was considered unsuccessful, the presence of stereotypes was articulated as to the reason why that submission was not liked. The same stereotypical images appeared in the design submissions that were cited by the majority of participants as ‘liked’ or ‘not liked’ submissions.

Place branding literature informs visual communicators that not everyone is going to be happy. It shows us that generic design solutions are developing as a result of the complexity and diversity of the stakeholders and audiences. The strategies to create a successful visual communication come from the support and application of the identity, not the visual identity itself. The outcomes of the cross-cultural design project look further into the responses of the recipient when it demonstrates that using stereotypes assists in creating that connection between the recipient and the message as long as the images are presented in a new and interesting way, are non offensive and, quite often,
represent an image of how the recipient wishes to be seen. The patterns in the responses demonstrated that without stereotypes the visual design solution might not connect with audience.

The familiarity, recognition, interpretability and connection that can be developed with visual stereotypes assist in creating that emotional connection with the recipient. It becomes the role of the designer to negotiate the existing attachment people have to their cultural icons and develop a new and interesting relationship to successfully communicate to their chosen audience. Rather than avoiding stereotypes and assuming all stereotypes are ‘bad’, designers need to consider the receiver and use their differences and diversities to enrich the message we send.

It is the researchers view that culture and cultural assets should not be eliminated from the design process in an attempt to keep all of the stakeholders happy. Controversy will exist when the topic of communication must appeal to a broad range of vocal recipients. With patience and time, clear communication and participation from all stakeholders, cultural aspects of a community can and should be enjoyed in cross-cultural visual communication strategies.

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