

**Modes
of Criticism 5**
Design Systems

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Brave New Alps
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Demystification
Committee





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Graphic Design Systems, and the Systems of Graphic Design

Francisco Laranjo

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Within graphic design, the concept of systems is profoundly rooted in form. When a term such as system is invoked, it is normally related to macro and micro-typography, involving book design and typesetting, but also addressing type design or parametric typefaces. Branding and signage are two other domains which nearly claim exclusivity of the use of the word ‘systems’ in relation to graphic design. A key example of this is the influential book *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* (1981) by Swiss designer Josef Müller-Brockmann. More than structures of organisation of form, this book shapes a mathematical, delusional and purist way of thinking. With the use of the grid as an ordering system, Müller-Brockmann argues that a “design which is objective, committed to the common weal, well composed and refined constitutes the basis of democratic behaviour.” (Müller-Brockmann, 1981, p. 10) He makes a case for the universal validity of grid systems, claiming that the systematic use of strict formal principles produces directness and intelligibility, which he suggests are vital in sociopolitical life. This position is a political choice. One that is driven and enforced by form, rapidly reproducible and scalable, and with damaging consequences by his reductive definition of democracy. By letting mathematical form define democracy as a controlling system, Müller-Brockmann strives for neutrality and a common good. Such sweeping levelling overlooks privilege, under-representation, marginalisation, difference. It excludes plurality. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2009) argues that a pluralist democracy should legitimise conflict,

division, and antagonism. And for such democracy to exist, “no social agent should be able to claim any mastery of the foundation of society” (Mouffe, 2009, p. 21). In other words, Müller-Brockmann’s system of organisation of form shapes a way of thinking—a consistent formal system at the cost of difference. His definition of systemic form reproduces a limited definition of democracy. The illusion of universality and objectivity coming from a specific historic and geopolitical context is exported worldwide to the present day and still applied with the same conviction, or simply as eternally marketable style, with multiple reincarnations. These are not design systems of universal validity. They are systems of oppressive deception.

Display Systems

Rita González, a design lecturer from Colombia, had only been teaching for three years when a series of circumstances, and some openness from senior management, promoted her to head of department. Despite likely finding structural opposition, she didn’t lose time, unhappy with design education in the country and a toxic system that feeds an industry that invariably invests all the time polishing and displaying the surface. Rita knows social media hasn’t radically changed designers’ lives. But Instagram has changed graphic design forever. Launched in 2010, after Facebook and Twitter, Instagram developed and further potentiated a culture of display. For graphic design, it was love at first sight: an opportunity to merge the personal—even the intimate—with the professional and public through relentless, seductive, profitable, addictive, self-branding normality. What initially appeared to be a platform to share photos, revealed itself as a form of life, providing data and ad revenue to thousands of corporations, while designing designers before they even enter design education.

Through repetition and imposed fear of exclusion, branding is automatically taught to children from a young age, maximised by the use of mobile devices. Before reaching high school, students have have formed a conception of branding, particularly self-branding, influencing and shaping also all definitions of *identity*. It’s all just a game. Playful. Enjoyable. Totalising. A never-ending cycle of branding, advertising and revenue-generation. Branding is gamification. Like the popular videogame *Fortnite*, Instagram is not a matter of sharing, displaying or gloating, but of survival.

When Instagram copied Snapchat’s core functionality of posting temporary images and videos—a beaming live feed of a grand narrative—it massified personal reality shows. With this functionality, which is inherently built into to the platform’s business model, Instagram’s true achievement is making everyone believe in the singularity and originality of each of its users’ *stories*. Instagram (read Facebook, its owner) effectively controls and shapes the desires and expectations of consumption through data management as a business system. Designers post what they eat, crop the photos, boost the colour levels and apply the most appropriate filter to make it look ‘professional’—a meaningless word in the age of instant professionalism. Designers post what they bought, where they are going, where they were and are, providing revenue to invisible shareholders. Posing as design practice is inevitable.

On the first day of the term, Rita deactivated the Wi-Fi on campus—if students wanted to use internet, they would need to go to an Ethernet-connected computer in the library. A small gesture, she knows, but it would make a lot of people uncomfortable. The new 5G network had just been installed in Bogotá, despite protests against the refusal by local authorities to survey the risks to public health. Dark studio, students lit up their phone screens—there’s no Wi-Fi—what’s happening? With a serious tone, Rita introduced herself to the new class: “Not having Instagram is not existing. If it was not

posted, it never happened. Designers must follow friends out of loyalty and like acquaintances' posts out of courtesy. And PR. Always. One *like* is a window of opportunity, and no window can be left untapped. Accordingly, every time a designer is mentioned is an opportunity to broadcast that mention, the equivalent of a visual echo, which only social media allows with the kind of quantity and short time intervals our desire for attention demands. Social media capital is a relevance greeting card, a decision-making factor in our limited attention-span. To make things worse, graphic design is amnesiac. Instagram accelerates this to new levels. The discipline's capacity to remember history is proportional to our patience to scroll down or swipe up. We may get to see what has been tagged, suggested or related recently—properly categorised for algorithmic exploitation. The rest is forgotten, uncategorised, lost, data-less information that is immediately ignored and classified as trifling. Instagram provides designers comfort and anxiety in equal measure. Soothing, stunning, stressful.” “Welcome everyone”, she continued, “things are going to change around here!”.

Ranking Systems

An Instagram video is trending: “I felt like—I just wanted a little bit of a break. I’m always on it. I feel I would wake up in the morning and I would look at it first thing. I would go to bed, and it was the last thing that I would look at. It just, I felt a little too dependent on it. I kind of wanted to take a minute; it’s a detox. I’ll be back! I’ll come back.”, said socialite Kendall Jenner to the TV Presenter Ellen DeGeneres in 2016. It’s a lot of competition. And competition is synonym of design. Neri Smith, a graphic designer/ visual artist/ information architect knows this all too well.

She wakes up, barely opening her eyes and taps on Instagram: are there notifications? What’s happening? It’s 7am and there are already so many stories she’s missing.

With effort, she checks a few: some friends, some partners, some colleagues, some jealousy. Her eyes begin to focus: “They did what? Oh, that’s a nice photo! He’s where? Soooo lucky.” She can’t believe it. It’s enough to make her jump out of bed and quickly eat some mango yoghurt that was left in the fridge. Phone sitting next to her bowl, she swipes up, then a bit down, up again. It feels like checking the news, but better, somewhere between pleasure, teasing and sadness of what’s going on in the world—some family, too—a good mix of what she likes to see. She curated her feed well, it’s a lot of work, and it pays off. It’s an investment in the future. Time for a quick bit of yoga.

A suggested account brightens up the screen: @dezeen? Follow. Three more show up next to it: @designboom, @digital_archive, @swissposters. Follow, follow, follow. It’s time to take a shower and get dressed. Steamed bathroom, lavender smell, but it’s still possible to see that notifications are appearing on the screen. It’s too far to see what it is. The tap is turned off. It was just just @biennale.design.graphique that liked one of her photos and @itsnicethat that started a live feed—“got to turn off this thing”; Neri thought she did but it keeps appearing anyway. So annoying! Someone is tinkering with this, surely!

She’s on her way to work. If it wasn’t for Instagram, she would be bored to death. But she still is, although it doesn’t feel like it. Swipe up, swipe up, down, stop, zoom in, and up again. New follower: @newstudiostudio, nice clean type, branding studio, possible future employer. Follow back. Another account is suggested: @thedesigblacklist. She reads the bio: “Minimalist detox. A curated collection of design inspiration.” Photographed work with 45° angle, a good selection of printed stuff in black and white. And inspiration is always good. We can’t have enough inspiration. Follow. Is she following too many people at 2,231K? Maybe it’s a bit desperate, a bit embarrassing. She should unfollow a few accounts, do a clean up of

abandoned handles or things she doesn't like anymore. Below 2K would be cooler. Maybe later, not now. This constant pressure is so draining, it's like a design ranking race. We have design stars with more than 150K followers, the very famous with 20K+ followers, the established designers with 5–10K followers, the rising designers with 3–5K and all the rest with less than 1K, they're just not good enough. Seriously, who wants to succeed in design with less than 1K?

Toilet breaks are great to check Instagram. During work hours Neri is too busy to catch up with friends' stories, which drives her insane at times. And at work, it's not good to be always looking at her phone—even if discretely under the table during meetings. Wow, @jessicavwalsh just launched @andwalsh. The photos to kick-start the studio are cool, done in a photo studio and a good amount of Photoshop, polished, vivid, dramatic. Cats! @cats_of_instagram is a guilty pleasure. So is @uglydesign. Share. Send. @clippingsdesign? Why not? Follow. An email notification slides from the top down: it's from Social Digger, luring Neri into buying followers to grow her business and profile online. It's only \$98 for 10K followers instead of the usual \$115.99 USD. Tempting. And in her circle of friends, many are over 4K and she doesn't want to slip in their estimation. She wasn't paying attention and the meeting continued. Lunch break is here, a moment to swipe up and tap incessantly while the other hand holds the fork. The salad looks too good. A photo from the top will make sure her group of friends know she's living a healthy life and slowly enjoying her lunch break. Selects her favourite filter, increases the saturation and another 'moment' is uploaded to her story while geotagging the bar. The phone needs to be charged with just 54% battery left. Lunch is over, back to work.

Award Systems

Marielle Silva is a design student at the university where Rita González teaches. Every year, she has to participate in design

competitions as part of the curriculum. Her tutors say it's good for students to have an experience of the real world, with real deadlines and real jurors, experienced people with awards and successful studios who spend some time looking at what they've done. And that it's a shot at professional life—a contact, a reference, a mention, an email, perhaps even a job offer? Competition brief after brief, many students spend their whole education allured by awards, targeting medals and recognition by their peers, effectively nourishing a design ethos which reverberates across the discipline, mainly through social media, producing an inward-looking industry of disposable time, work, and citizenship. The following year there's always more.

Two awards fight for hegemony in design education: D&AD and the Red Dot Awards. These are followed by ISTD (International Society of Typographic Designers) and The Design Museum. Graphis and the European Design Awards are then joined by dozens of other trying to outshine each other, attract sponsorship, raise and push profiles in galas, award ceremonies and networking cocktails. To complement these, there are elite clubs such as AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale), which despite AGI Open (a series of mainly portfolio talks by a selection of members) promote the kind of closed, inward-looking, swanky shoulder-rubbing get-togethers that many designers aspire to as a lifetime-achievement award, a yearned ticket to eternal design stardom. With expensive, glossy tomes spread on desks in the university's studio, it is no wonder Marielle is both distant but seduced by the publications produced every year by these institutions. Departments encourage and pay for students to participate in these competitions, displaying certificates on corridor walls as badges of merit. It is the feeding of a vicious system which sees academia merge with and be subservient to the market, corporations and institutional political interests.

In 2018, Marielle's group of friends chose the D&AD brief set by the sportswear brand Adidas in collaboration with H+K Strategies. The brief talked profusely about 'change' – a catchword in early 21st century – saying that Adidas “is driven by helping athletes make a difference in their game, their lives and the world.” Rita is annoyed that this is still the dominant educational model at her university. And she is furious that, predictably, a brief like this adopts the typical capitalist approach of demanding that yet another product, brand service or campaign is created. Directed at a 17–25 age group, the brief asked “What can Adidas do for or with them to improve the fabric of their city?” This brief reinforces a design system that teaches students that social and political phenomena can only be addressed through a consumable, branded product, surveillance capitalism and submission to corporations. And nearly every project at school has at least one brand attached to it in some form. “It's not design education, it's *branducation*”, said Rita in a recent departmental meeting. To Marielle, this is obvious in the wording of the brief: “Show how people will experience it, how it could scale and spread, and all the media, channels and touchpoints that could be relevant. What different social platforms or formats could you use, and how would content be tailored to each?” It continues: “Adidas wants to see big, bold ambition, clearly grounded in reality”. The bouquet is complete with the following message: “Don't get political. Stay true to the brand tone of voice.”

In that same year, Amazon equipped every classroom of her university with Alexa. The students did not feel too comfortable with an object always listening to what they say. But it was useful to order consumables and for the games of design trivia they played every once in a while, and for the lectures of design history. Marielle, Andrea, Pedro and Letizia were fed up with generic information, with Wikipedia lectures and lack of representation. Always the same references, always the same authors from the same places, the same canon,

always the same marginalisation. Together, they've hacked their studio's device and collectively built a new database and algorithms for the fellow students to see and edit. “What's an influencer?”, they asked with a smirk. Alexa now replied: “Denomination used in the late 2010s to describe people who use social media as self-centred representation of click-capitalism, seeing every blink of an eye as an opportunity for mass consumerism.” A strangely pitched sound followed: “Reminder: I'm built by schoolchildren in China” and “Attention, this product needs an official Amazon update, please return to factory settings and visit Amazon.com for details.” The IT technicians would surely just ask senior management to ask for a replacement, but during any lunch break they could hack it again. However, their small but most meaningful gesture was to collectively mobilise themselves and force the school's management to remove all these devices from the classrooms.

Another group of friends chose a brief that aimed to address loneliness and elderly people. Marielle enjoyed the typographic illustrations of the campaign her friends did in response to the brief—typography that was slightly hard to read, twisted as if it was photocopied while gently moving the printed page. It was a variable font that aimed to convey depressive moods and isolation, with a coded application that allowed different parameters to generate multiple outputs. White type on black background, the large-scale posters filled metro stations in well-lit renders. They also made an app that allowed people to experience the poster in augmented reality, in which type would move, hypnotic as it was dropping out of the poster in an infinite loop and providing a phone number for people to seek help. Marielle thought it was impressive but useless. Why do posters in the first place? And an app, to elderly people? With fancy animated type? Why is design and all its typical production even needed? How much would this campaign cost?

Wouldn't the money be better spent in a community centre? Which institutions and people are already working on this for decades? Did they bother to learn? The posters were on brand, a cohesive visual language rolled out to multiple media. And that's the most important for the award juries. She knows this wouldn't even be questioned by them, lacking the nuanced, in-depth knowledge that would allow them to make politically and socially-informed judgments. It's irrelevant. What matters is the gold, silver and bronze for the amazing augmented reality. It will enter in the media echo chamber until the sound slowly fades. The future of design is not being built by sharing or cooperation or solidarity, but competition. By outrunning, outshining and outburning each other.

Alternative Systems

The seduction of systematic form, constant production, social media showcasing and competition sustain the infrastructure that defines graphic design. It shapes an industry that thrives in auto-pilot towards self-destruction, surrendered to the economic system in which it operates: capitalism. They are not just cogs in the machine. They are the foundations of a system. One that capitalises on the *netflixisation* of design, that is, the categorisation of everything through uniformisation disguised as tailored-made content. The pressure of belonging, being accepted and innovative are merged through an empire of algorithms that flatten designers' spheres of human activity into a convincingly self-indulgent, homogenous grand narrative. More than good or bad, happy or sad, this is presented as inevitable.

Design is production. It is unconceivable that to design can mean to undo, to dismantle, to destroy, to retreat. In *Conceptual Design – A Polemic* (1977), published in the context of the conference *Design for Need – The Social Contribution of Design* (1976), Brian Smith makes a case against design conferences and short-sighted good intentions: "We get into our planes and boats and trains full of enthusiasm – 'I'm going

to Change Design'; 'I'm going Design for peoples' Needs.' And on the way back, when boredom has set in, when the weight of papers has pressed us firmly back into our comfy chairs, we see that really we went as voyeurs. The meaning of the words changed, the cube flipped, and we listened to people talking about how design was changing, and how design is for peoples' needs, which we already knew, but fooled ourselves that we had not come to be told yet again." (Smith, 1977, p. 108) This was at a time when there weren't so many flashing screens with animations, apps, tote bags, t-shirts, banners, posters, flags, badges, pencils, pens and premium notebooks for hundreds of design events per month in several points of the globe. And here we are. Again.

Within architectural practice, there are examples in which architects chose not to design as a design act. One notorious case is that of Jean Phillippe Vassal and Anne Lacaton, who in 1996, were commissioned to renovate and embellish the Square Léon Aucoc in the city of Bordeaux, France. To the architecture duo, the square was fine as it was, surrounded with sober façades of well-designed collective public housing. Apart from minor maintenance work, nothing else was done. There was no need for up-to-date benches or lamps, or a fashionable gesture that may have been common practice at the time. In design, examples like this are rare. To the question "What should designers do?", Brian Smith answers: "apart from a few special cases, they should stop designing – at least under the present terms of reference. To the people designing doorknobs, cars, hairdriers, radios, packages, chairs, beds, and tractors and bandages, we should say 'STOP – THE ONES WE'VE GOT WILL DO'. You've been so clever, such good designers, that nearly everything we make and use is just about good enough now, considering all these other problems we've got." (Smith, 1977, p. 111) In graphic design discourse, Jeffery Keedy provocatively argues in *Hysteria*™ (2001) that "ironically, designers can make their biggest social and

political impact by not designing. After all, someone designs most of our ecological, social, and cultural nightmares before they are unleashed on the world.” (Keedy, 2003, p. 208) In 2011, when the *Occupy Movement* started gaining international attention, a version of the logo of London’s Underground was being occasionally used. Soon after people were prevented from using it, a competition to find a new one was held, with designer Jonathan Barnbrook’s proposal being chosen through a public vote. Even for a progressive socio-political movement, competition and production is invariably the answer. Design, in its most immediate and *unprofessional* form, was already in use: hand-drawn basic signage, announcements and a variety of visual approaches to meet the needs of self-organisation and day-to-day activities. The movement didn’t need a logo. In fact, the inexistence of one reflected its diversity, and made it difficult to be ‘branded’ and categorised, which contributed to its powerfulness.

The systems on which design operates are fundamentally and hypnotically flawed. They don’t *just* need improvement. They don’t *just* need resistance. They need complete change. Systemic change normally happens as an ultimatum, democracy in its multiple variations, protests and demonstrations, a directive from a global or continental institution. It usually takes place when there seems to be no other option. Designers, and the systems they sustain and validate, are in the business of future-making. They love to shine and also like to churn out stunningly attractive visions of the future on a daily basis, as if they were just another entry in their portfolio. The time for manifestos is out, and for *just* good intentions, too. If designers don’t think about and practice design at the level of systems and put politics at the core of what they do—with climate crisis, fascism, racism, xenophobia—when we realise that we don’t have any other option, there will be no future at all.

Colophon

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Within graphic design, the concept of systems is profoundly rooted in form. Starting from a series of design research residencies in the context of the Porto Design Biennale, this volume proposes a variety of perspectives—social, cultural, political—to challenge this deeply engrained tradition.



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