

**GRAPHIC DESIGN**

**THE NEW BASICS**

**ELLEN LUPTON AND JENNIFER COLE PHILLIPS**

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**For Maryland Institute College of Art**

**Book Design**

Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips

**Contributing Faculty**

Ken Barber  
Kimberly Bost  
Jeremy Botts  
Corinne Botz  
Bernard Canniffe  
Nancy Froehlich  
Ellen Lupton  
Al Maskeroni  
Ryan McCabe  
Abbott Miller  
Jennifer Cole Phillips  
James Ravel  
Zvezdana Rogic  
Nolen Strals  
Mike Weikert  
Bruce Willen  
Yeohyun Ahn

**Visiting Artists**

Marian Bantjes  
Nicholas Blechman  
Alicia Cheng  
Peter Cho  
Malcolm Grear  
David Plunkert  
C. E. B. Reas  
Paul Sahre  
Jan van Toorn  
Rick Valicenti

**For Princeton Architectural Press**

**Editor**

Clare Jacobson

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Lee, Laurie Manfra, Katharine Myers, Lauren  
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# Foreword

*Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips*

How do designers get ideas? Some places they look are design annuals and monographs, searching for clever combinations of forms, fonts, and colors to inspire their projects. For students and professionals who want to dig deeper into how form works, this book shows how to build richness and complexity around simple relationships. We created this book because we didn't see anything like it available for today's students and young designers: a concise, visually inspiring guide to two-dimensional design.

As educators with decades of combined experience in graduate and undergraduate teaching, we have witnessed the design world change and change again in response to new technologies. When we were students ourselves in the 1980s, classic books such as Armin Hofmann's *Graphic Design Manual* (published in 1965) had begun to lose their relevance within the restless and shifting design scene. Postmodernism was on the rise, and abstract design exercises seemed out of step with the current interest in appropriation and historicism.

During the 1990s, design educators became caught in the pressure to teach (and learn) software, and many of us struggled to balance technical skills with visual and critical thinking. Form sometimes got lost along the way, as design methodologies moved away from universal visual concepts toward a more anthropological understanding of design as a constantly changing flow of cultural sensibilities.

This book addresses the gap between software and visual thinking. By focusing on form, we have re-embraced the Bauhaus tradition and the pioneering work of the great formal design educators, from Armin Hofmann to some of our own teachers, including Malcolm Grear. We believe that a common ground of visual principles connects designers across history and around the globe.

We initiated this project in 2005, after stepping back and noticing that our students were not at ease building concepts abstractly. Although they were adept at working and reworking pop-culture vocabularies, they were less comfortable manipulating scale, rhythm, color, hierarchy, grids, and diagrammatic relationships.

In this book, you won't see exercises or demonstrations involving parody or cultural critique—not that there is anything wrong with those lines of inquiry. Designers and educators will always build personal meaning and social content into their work. With this book we chose to focus, however, on design's formal structures.

This is a book for students and emerging designers, and it is illustrated primarily with student work, produced within graduate and undergraduate design studios. Our school, Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), became our laboratory. Numerous faculty and scores of students participated in our brave experiment over a two-year period. The work that emerged is varied and diverse, reflecting an organic range of skill levels and sensibilities. Unless otherwise noted, all the student examples were generated in the context of MICA's courses; a few projects originate from schools we visited or where our own graduate students are teaching.

Our student contributors come from China, India, Japan, Korea, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Seattle, Minneapolis, Baltimore, rural Pennsylvania, and many other places. The book was manufactured in China and published with Princeton Architectural Press in New York City.

This book was thus created in a global context. The work presented within its pages is energized by the diverse backgrounds of its producers, whose creativity is shaped by their cultural identities as well as by their unique life experiences. A common thread that draws all these people together in one place is design.

The majority of student work featured here comes from the course we teach together at MICA, the Graphic Design MFA Studio. Our MFA program's first publishing venture was the book *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself* (2006), directed at general readers who want to use design in their own lives. Currently underway is a guide to independent publishing, along with other titles devoted to expanding access to and the understanding of design processes.

The current volume, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, marks the launch of MICA's Center for Design Thinking, an umbrella for organizing the college's diverse efforts in the area of practical design research. In addition to publishing books about design, the Center for Design Thinking will organize conferences and educational events to help build the design discourse while creating invaluable opportunities for MICA's students and faculty.

To complement the student work featured in this project, we have selected key examples from contemporary professional practice. These works demonstrate experimental, visually rich design approaches conducted at the highest possible level.

Many of the designers featured, including Marian Bantjes, Alicia Cheng, Peter Cho, Malcolm Grear, David Plunkert, C. E. B. Reas, Paul Sahre, Rick Valicenti, and Jan van Toorn, have worked with our students as visiting artists at MICA. Some conducted special workshops whose results are included in this volume.

*Graphic Design: The New Basics* lays out the elements of a visual language whose forms are employed by individuals, institutions, and locales that are increasingly connected in a global society. We hope the book will inspire more thought and creativity.

## Acknowledgments

My work creating this book constituted my degree project in the Doctorate in Communication Design program at the University of Baltimore. I thank my advisors, Stuart Moulthrop, Sean Carton, and Amy Pointer. I also thank my colleagues at MICA, including Fred Lazarus, President; Ray Allen, Provost; Leslie King Hammond, Dean of Graduate Studies; and my longtime friend and collaborator, Jennifer Cole Phillips. Special thanks go to the dozens of students whose work enlivens these pages.

Editor Clare Jacobson and the team at Princeton Architectural Press helped make the book real.

My whole family is an inspiration, especially my parents Bill, Shirley, Mary Jane, and Ken; my children Jay and Ruby; my sisters Julia and Michelle; and my husband Abbott.

*Ellen Lupton*

My contribution to this book is dedicated to Malcolm Grear, my lifelong mentor and dear friend.

The culture at MICA is a joy in which to work, thanks in large part to the vision and support of our President, Fred Lazarus; Provost, Ray Allen; and Graduate Dean, Leslie King Hammond; together with our savvy and talented faculty colleagues. Deep respect and thanks go to our students—especially the GD MFA group—for their courage and contributions. This book exudes their energy.

I hold heartfelt gratitude for my friend and close collaborator, Ellen Lupton, for her generosity and grace.

I thank my family, especially my parents Ann and Jack and my sisters Lanie and Jodie, for their spirit, humor, and love. Last and most, love to my Blue Weimaraner, Stone, for almost always being by my side.

*Jennifer Cole Phillips*

Ellen Lupton

The idea of searching out a shared framework in which to invent and organize visual content dates back to the origins of modern graphic design. In the 1920s, institutions such as the Bauhaus in Germany explored design as a universal, perceptually based “language of vision,” a concept that continues to shape design education today around the world.

This book reflects on that vital tradition in light of profound shifts in technology and global social life. Whereas the Bauhaus promoted rational solutions through planning and standardization, designers and artists today are drawn to idiosyncrasy, customization, and sublime accidents as well as to standards and norms. The modernist preference for reduced, simplified forms now coexists with a desire to build systems that yield unexpected results. Today, the impure, the contaminated, and the hybrid hold as much allure as forms that are sleek and perfected. Visual thinkers often seek to spin out intricate results from simple rules or concepts rather than reduce an image or idea to its simplest parts.

**The Bauhaus Legacy** In the 1920s, faculty at the Bauhaus and other schools analyzed form in terms of basic geometric elements. They believed this language would be understandable to everyone, grounded in the universal instrument of the eye.

Bauhaus faculty pursued this idea from different points of view. Wassily Kandinsky called for the creation of a “dictionary of elements” and a universal visual “grammar” in his Bauhaus textbook *Point and Line to Plane*. His colleague László Moholy-Nagy sought to uncover a rational vocabulary ratified by a shared society and a common humanity. Courses taught by Josef Albers emphasized systematic thinking over personal intuition, objectivity over emotion.

Albers and Moholy-Nagy forged the use of new media and new materials. They saw that art and design were being transformed by technology—photography, film, and mass production. And yet their ideas remained profoundly humanistic, always asserting the role of the individual over the absolute authority of any system or method. Design, they argued, is never reducible to its function or to a technical description.

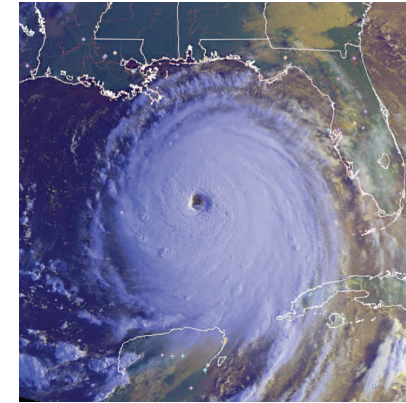
Since the 1940s, numerous educators have refined and expanded on the Bauhaus approach, from Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes at the New Bauhaus in Chicago; to Johannes Itten, Max Bill, and Gui Bonsiepe at the Ulm School in Germany; to Emil Ruder and Armin Hofmann in Switzerland; to the “new typographies” of Wolfgang Weingart, Dan Friedman, and Katherine McCoy in Switzerland and the United States. Each of these revolutionary educators articulated structural approaches to design from distinct and original perspectives.

Some of them also engaged in the postmodern rejection of universal communication. According to postmodernism, which emerged in the 1960s, it is futile to look for inherent meaning in an image or object because people will bring their own cultural biases and personal experiences to the process of interpretation. As postmodernism itself became a dominant ideology in the 1980s and '90s, in both the academy and in the marketplace, the design process got mired in the act of referencing cultural styles or tailoring messages to narrowly defined communities.

**The New Basics** Designers at the Bauhaus believed not only in a universal way of *describing* visual form, but also in its universal *significance*. Reacting against that belief, postmodernism discredited formal experiment as a primary component of thinking and making in the visual arts. Formal study was considered to be tainted by its link to universalistic ideologies. This book recognizes a difference between description and interpretation, between a potentially universal language of making and the universality of meaning.

Today, software designers have realized the Bauhaus goal of describing (but not interpreting) the language of vision in a universal way. Software organizes visual material into menus of properties, parameters, filters, and so on, creating tools that are universal in their social ubiquity, cross-disciplinarity, and descriptive power. Photoshop, for example, is a systematic study of the features of an image (its contrast, size, color model, and so on). InDesign and QuarkXpress are structural explorations of typography: they are software machines for controlling leading, alignment, spacing, and column structures as well as image placement and page layout.

In the aftermath of the Bauhaus, textbooks of basic design have returned again and again to elements such as point, line, plane, texture, and color, organized by principles of scale, contrast, movement, rhythm, and balance. This book revisits those concepts as well as looking at some of the new universals emerging today.



**Transparency and Layers** The Google Earth interface allows users to manipulate the transparency of overlays placed over satellite photographs of Earth. Here, Hurricane Katrina hovers over the Gulf Coast of the U.S. Storm: University of Wisconsin, Madison Cooperative Institute for Meteorological Satellite Studies, 2005. Composite: Jack Gondela.

What are these emerging universals? What is new in basic design? Consider, for example, transparency—a concept explored in this book. Transparency is a condition in which two or more surfaces or substances are visible through each other. We constantly experience transparency in the physical environment: from water, glass, and smoke to venetian blinds, slatted fences, and perforated screens. Graphic designers across the modern period have worked with transparency, but never more so than today, when transparency can be instantly manipulated with commonly used tools.

What does transparency *mean*? Transparency can be used to construct thematic relationships. For example, compressing two pictures into a single space can suggest a conflict or synthesis of ideas (East/West, male/female, old/new). Designers also employ transparency as a compositional (rather than thematic) device, using it to soften edges, establish emphasis, separate competing elements, and so on.

Transparency is crucial to the vocabulary of film and motion-based media. In place of a straight cut, an animator or editor diminishes the opacity of an image over time (fade to black) or mixes two semitransparent images (cross dissolve). Such transitions affect

a film’s rhythm and style. They also modulate, in subtle ways, the message or content of the work. Although viewers rarely stop to interpret these transitions, a video editor or animator understands them as part of the basic language of moving images.

Layering is another universal concept with rising importance. Physical printing processes use layers (ink on paper), and so do software interfaces (from layered Photoshop files to sound or motion timelines).

Transparency and layering have always been at play in the graphic arts. In today’s context, what makes them new again is their omnipresent accessibility through software. Powerful digital tools are commonly available to professional artists and designers but also to children, amateurs, and tinkerers of every stripe. Their language has become universal.

Software tools provide models of visual media, but they don’t tell us what to make or what to say. It is the designer’s task to produce works that are relevant to living situations (audience, context, program, brief, site) and to deliver meaningful messages and rich, embodied experiences. Each producer animates design’s core structures from his or her own place in the world.

Jennifer Cole Phillips

Even the most robust visual language is useless without the ability to engage it in a living context. While this book centers around formal structure and experiment, some opening thoughts on process and problem solving are appropriate here, as we hope readers will reach not only for more accomplished form, but for form that resonates with fresh meaning.

Before the Macintosh, solving graphic design problems meant outsourcing at nearly every stage of the way: manuscripts were sent to a typesetter; photographs—selected from contact sheets—were printed at a lab and corrected by a retoucher; and finished artwork was the job of a paste-up artist, who sliced and cemented type and images onto boards. This protocol slowed down the work process and required designers to plan each step methodically.

By contrast, powerful, off-the-shelf software now allows designers and users of all ilk to endlessly edit their work in the comfort of a personal or professional workspace.

Yet, as these digital technologies afford greater freedom and convenience, they also require ongoing education and upkeep. This recurring learning curve, added to already overloaded schedules, often cuts short the creative window for concept development and formal experimentation.

In the college context, students arrive ever more digitally facile. Acculturated by iPods, Playstations, and PowerBooks, design students command the technical savvy that used to take years to build. Being plugged in, however, has not always profited creative thinking.

Too often, the temptation to turn directly to the computer precludes deeper levels of research and ideation—the distillation zone that unfolds beyond the average appetite for testing the waters and exploring alternatives. People, places, thoughts, and things become familiar through repeated exposure. It stands to reason, then, that initial ideas and, typically, the top tiers of a Google search turn up only cursory results that are often tired and trite.

Getting to more interesting territory requires the perseverance to sift, sort, and assimilate subjects and solutions until a fresh spark emerges and takes hold.

**Visual Thinking** Ubiquitous access to image editing and design software, together with zealous media inculcation on all things design, has created a tidal wave of design makers outside our profession. Indeed, in our previous book, *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself*, we extolled the virtues of learning and making, arguing that people acquire pleasure, knowledge, and power by engaging with design at all levels.

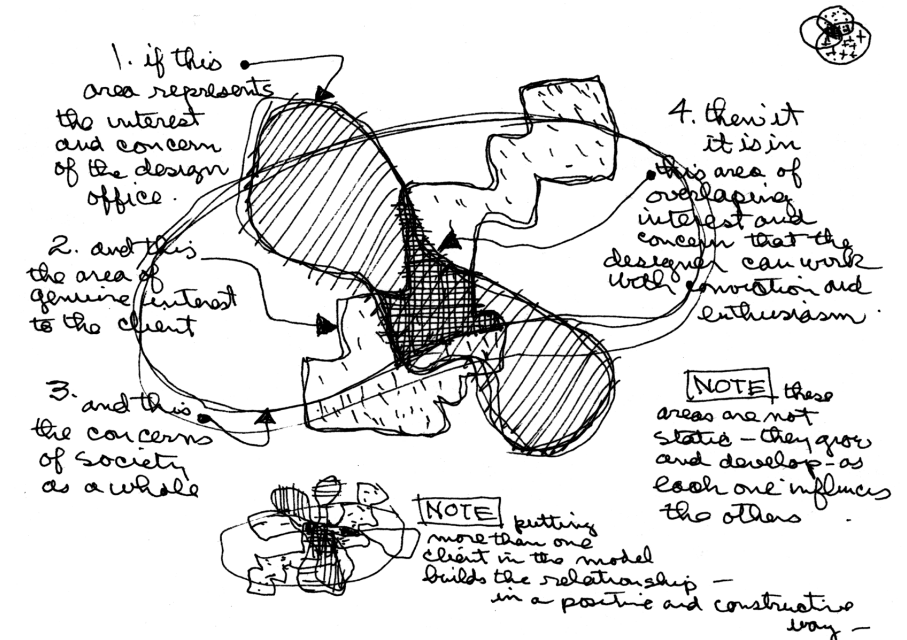
With this volume we shift the climate of the conversation. Instead of skimming the surface, we dig deeper. Rather than issuing instructions, we frame problems and suggest possibilities. Inside, you will find many examples, by students and professionals, that balance and blend idiosyncrasy with formal discipline.

Rather than focus on practical problems such as how to design a book, brochure, logo, or website, this book encourages readers to experiment with the visual language of design. By “experiment,” we mean the process of examining a form, material, or process in a methodical yet open-ended way. To experiment is to isolate elements of an operation, limiting some variables in order to better study others. An experiment asks a question or tests a hypothesis whose answer is not known in advance.

Choose your corner, pick away at it carefully, intensely and to the best of your ability and that way you might change the world. Charles Eames

The book is organized around some of the formal elements and phenomena of design. In practice, those components mix and overlap, as they do in the examples shown throughout the book. By focusing attention on particular aspects of visual form, we encourage readers to recognize the forces at play behind strong graphic solutions. Likewise, while a dictionary studies specific words in isolation, those words come alive in the active context of writing and speaking.

Filtered through formal and conceptual experimentation, design thinking fuses a shared discipline with organic interpretation.



**Diagramming Process** Charles Eames drew this diagram to explain the design process as achieving a point where the needs and interests of the client, the designer, and society as a whole overlap. Charles Eames, 1969, for the exhibition “What is Design” at the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris, France. ©2007 Eames Office LLC.