

The beneficial effect of “no.”

Do you recognise this?
 “Where did they get this from?”
 Pay particular attention to the word ‘they’, which some say means ‘the other’ and others ‘the one’. ‘This’, by the way, in this context means ‘the new logo’.

The logo. It is often associated with the ultimate metaphor, the flapping albatross, the haut-relief chiselled into the temple pediment, as an exponent of some God. Small or big, it doesn't matter, without a logo there is no existence. But does this also apply to the restyle of logos of established brands? Those new, often bland and generative monstrosities that suddenly pop up and disrespectfully drum away their predecessors? Besides, why are good logos so often traded in? Why are carefully constructed identities, for which a 'logo with a face' guaranteed, so quickly replaced?

Back in 2012, the intriguing black booklet with gold print *Logo R.I.P., a commemoration of dead logotypes* by Amsterdam-based The Stone Twins provided some answers. It is a kind of 'Père Lachaise' with decayed logotypes, monuments that irrevocably had to lose out and remain as speechless coryphae in our collective memory. The why often stuns the reader.

Of course, solid new logos, brand & corporate identities are also designed, let that be clear, but the bigger the company or organisation in question, the greyer and more interchangeable they have become. There seems to be fear, which takes many forms, fear of standing out, fear of the consumer, fear of a clear profile (which would not fit a possible takeover or merger) or perhaps

fear of being cancelled? It is a remarkable evolution, because it is common knowledge that a brand or corporate identity, of which the logo is often the face, just serves to stand out from 'the other' or the competitor. But is this still the case? In an economic model managed by shareholders and stock markets, a brand seems to have to be primarily subservient to its lords. But who are these? Is it the consumers or the shareholders? It seems like 'a chicken or the egg' issue, a real brain teaser.

On the other hand, 'innovation' drives social progress, at the level of product, service, organisational quality and so on. Yet what is sold as 'innovation' often turns out to be an alibi for simply more economic growth. Where there is little room for daring, let alone innovative graphic design. Yet there are good examples of brands that have systematically renewed their brand identity with respect for the past. Perhaps because there was a solid reason to do so.

I confronted students from the first undergraduate year of graphic design with this thought through the assignment 'Ready for recovery'. They were asked to look for a logo or brand that fascinated them as a child, adolescent or teenager. They then had to convince their fellow students why this logo or brand needed a refresh or renewal. There were possibly several reasons for this and their answer had to result from a thorough research process. A process in which form analysis was important, but in which positioning and strategy also played a role. The results of this exercise were remarkable and the students quickly realised how important the impact of thoughtful graphic design is.

The increased diversification and professionalisation of strategic, marketing & communication processes have created new professional profiles and centres of excellence in recent decades, which is a positive development. Only, this often resulted in a tight hierarchical decision-making process, with the risk of neglecting horizontal links. This also led to projects of uncontrollable size and complexity, creating noise, ambiguity and superficiality. Too much strategy, too much marketing, too much hot air, so to speak.

British design critic Rick Poynter already described this phenomenon in the essay 'Agency or studio? The Dutch design dilemma' for the 'Dutch Design Yearbook in 2010. It explains how, in the course of the rich history of Dutch design, the organisational structure (from studios to agencies interacting with the increasingly global market) has changed profoundly in one decade. A short quote from the Dutch and idiosyncratic studio 'Experimental Jetset' supports this trend: “We feel that we are now at a point in history where we basically have to go in the other direction. The solution to the problem of the bloated design business lies not in even bigger design 'agencies', but in less marketing.”

After all, image and shape language, colour and typography were only 'allowed' to emerge after endless sessions with various parameters, checked off against many hierarchical bodies. The result: interchangeable design. Perhaps it is therefore time to put things back into their proper context and value, by reappraising the fundamental role of the graphic designer. It may seem contradictory, now that A.I. seems to be taking over the role of designers as well.

But perhaps that is exactly where the friction lies, as perhaps many design studios have forgotten their leading role and allowed themselves to be forced into the role of implementers?

Admittedly, this evolution is not exclusively due to the major influence of consultants & marketers and recently A.I., but it is one of the causes. Whereas during the 1960s to 2000s, individual designers and design studios often had direct contact with their clients, now more actors have come between them, who help set the agenda and often make briefings unnecessarily complex. Perhaps high competitive pressure also created a kind of cold feet that resulted in clear 'formal positioning' being studiously avoided. Furthermore, studios were taken over by larger studios with hardly any room left for, otherwise well-trained, designers. Intuition was inexorably banned and every design, every formal element must be perfectly justified. Not to mention the compelling impact of political correctness. Add the complex decision-making structures and it is clear that any new logo will then be the result of a concatenation of compromises. Design by committee.

On the other hand, there is also such a thing as 'CEO diktat', where everything has to give way to the ego of the CEO in question. I am thinking here of a specific case: a large industrial company called my studio to ask it to 'restyle' their corporate & brand identity (the name of the company was also the brand name). By the way: for the customer, restyling means making minor adjustments, for the design studio it means 'carte blanche'. This is the code, you have to know it. So, a new logo was needed,

according to the CEO. When I inquired about the reason, the latter responded in surprise. "Why a new logo?", I asked again and quite emphatically. "Your current logo is perfect." When, after several meetings, my studio proposed a plan of action, confirming the 'old' logo's existence, the company immediately dropped out and partnered with a major advertising agency. A year and a half later, after solid toil and ditto budget, the agency came up with a new logo. As a result, all production lines were adjusted, as the old logo had to be removed from all moulds. It was a huge, unnecessary and unsustainable investment, which did not bring the crucial objective, namely a coherent corporate identity and communication strategy, any closer. But the CEO was satisfied.

Does anyone ever ask themselves whether all this is so necessary? Aren't concepts like 'integrity' and 'sustainability' too often pushed away by opportunism, egomania and 'business as usual'? Moreover, is it not an illusion to think that a new logo immediately becomes the proverbial flag of a company, which itself has hardly changed? Are the resources allocated for this still justifiable, economically and socially? Are there no other priority needs inside and outside the company or organisation?

You can read this as a kind of plea for more reflection, on the 'necessity of things' and the 'need for renewal', not to be confused with 'the need for more'. Meanwhile, the conviction that 'less' also offers a future is gaining ground. But of course, it is easy to state this from our comfortable 'Western perspective'. Therefore, we can also look at the substantive meaning of 'less'. In the sense of: what do we really need?

Being open to that as a designer gives a sense of freedom, of power too.

Putting this into practice is not obvious. For it seems rather contradictory in this social media age. Yet it can be purifying if we are humble. For every form, every utterance, every medium can be reimagined again and again, as in a perpetual canon, sometimes resulting in minor, sometimes major changes. But only when necessary, i.e. not always right now. That is why, as designers, we should also dare to say 'no'. Deciding not to design is also designing - by acknowledging the existing design. Design by necessity, in other words.

Hugo Puttaert, Spring 2024

Text, based on the article 'A new logo does not make spring', published in Addmagazine #10, 2011.