

Communication Design: Insights from the Creative Industries (Book Review)

CORAZZO, James <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9542-6551>>

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Book review

Communication Design: Insights from the Creative Industries, Derek Yates and

Jessie Price

First published February 2015 Bloomsbury London, 208 pages, 200 colour

illustrations, paperback ISBN: 9781472531674, £29.99

James Corazzo, Sheffield Hallam University

Graphic Design has always been a discipline that eschews easy definition. A subject that is both everywhere and nowhere. Where consensus occurs, it is often about the discipline's *in-betweenness*: positioned somewhere between client and message, art and commerce or craft and concept. And if the position of the discipline appears blurry then the speed of change only adds to the confusion (and excitement) one encounters trying to make sense of contemporary graphic design: 'I have no idea what graphic design as a descriptor means anymore' said Jonathan Ellery, a graphic designer at Browns, '[t]he area it once inhabited has now become so blurred with other disciplines that a whole new world has opened up' (Ellery quoted in Twemlow 2006).

Anybody charged with making sense of this *whole new world* of graphic design will be confronted with a messy and unfolding terrain where things rarely stay still long enough to map them. This challenging context marks out the ambition of Derek Yates' and Jessie Prices' book *Communication Design: Insights from the Creative Industries*. In it the authors set out to document new forms of emerging practice in graphic design, (or communication design as the authors refer to it) and how these

new forms are being driven by an ensemble of forces including globalization, supercomplexity and rapid technological change, and in the process ‘creating fundamental shifts in the way creative professionals work’ (54). In short, they argue designers (and students) need to develop ‘new skillsets’ that go beyond simply giving form and include the ability to ‘analyse, understand, clarify and define’ (7) and to do so collaboratively.

The authors unpack these ‘new skillsets’ through a combination of historical context, analysis, case studies and practitioner interviews and illustrated by an impressive array of contemporary communication design practice. The book is organized into seven themes: Brand, Experience, Conversation, Participation, Navigation, Advocacy and Critique. Each theme is divided into sections. Taking the Experience theme as an example (itself broken down into motion graphics, environment, play, touch and experiential marketing) it features a diverse range of projects including interactive window displays (AllofUS), design for healthcare environments (Vital Arts heart-warming work for Barts hospital), 2012 Olympic Games Audience Pixels, digital games (UsTwo’s mesmerizing *Monument Valley*), objects that bring digital and physical artefacts together (GFSmith by Field & Sea), cultural outputs exploring potential of print (Container) and experiential marketing (Nike+ system).

The thematic structure provides an opportunity for the engaged reader to identify differences and commonalities in emerging practices. For example, the interplay between digital and analogue and the importance of cross- and interdisciplinary approaches reoccurs throughout out the book and the reader is shown how many of

these projects are often initiated as much through experimentation as they are commissioned through clients.

As a book, *Insights* is exceptionally adept at handling what at first might appear as a set of disparate, and even atypical, communication design projects. By organizing the projects into coherent themes and framing them within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts, Price and Yates make a strong case for how ‘new paradigms’ are increasingly informing the changing role of the communication designer.

To those schooled in traditional segments of practice that have defined graphic design (e.g. packaging, editorial design, web design) the modes of practice featured in *Insights* could represent a bewildering landscape of possibilities. The book consigns terms like ‘editorial design’ and ‘web design’ to the language of the past (surely a good thing). And whilst *Insights* may not be breaking new ground in identifying the significant shifts in the context for communication design practice – many of these ideas are already in circulation – in assembling and curating over 50 examples of projects that show these shifts it makes a valuable contribution.

This strategy is likely to appeal to the book's core audience: undergraduate communication design students. The writing is accessible, energetic and coated with just enough theoretical contexts for it to have significance in higher education. But it should be remarked that *Insights* will have a broader appeal too. It would sit equally well on the Amazon wish lists of further education, undergraduate and postgraduate students and design educators and practitioners. Of course those looking for a

sustained discussion to inform their dissertation and practice will also need to look elsewhere to explore the issues in greater depth but *Insights* acts as a great primer.

Insights is clearly the product of considerable fieldwork and sustained conversations with a number of contemporary practitioners. The authors' enthusiasm and passion for identifying emerging practices is one of the book's strengths, but at times, perhaps also its weakness. Parts of the text seem to resonate with a hyperbole often associated with the brands many of these practitioners have helped shape; projects are not just projects they are 'game-changing projects'. Elsewhere, much is made of how brands forge 'consensual relationships' with audiences, but what we are consenting to and why is not covered.

To be fair, *Insights* does give space to communication design focused on research and cultural production. Although rather than confronting communication design's often paradoxical relationship with the world, as both a tool for change and a tool for sustaining the way things are, the book remains agnostic. Yes it features themes on advocacy and critique, but these are in the minority although in some respects this reflects the current state of the field (or perhaps the clue was in the title 'Insights from the Creative *Industries*').

Although Dunne and Raby, featured in the critique section, have developed a critical practice in an academic context, this appears to be one of relatively few 'academic' contributions to the book. Yet academia continues to make practice-led contributions to the discipline in a range of areas such as design for health and its absence here arguably reinforces the notion of communication design practice existing *outside*

academia. The book also overlooks the contribution of design education. A number of the practitioners featured are themselves graduates of design courses that have challenged dominant forms of practice in the creative industries. This point is implied but perhaps under-acknowledged. The book is, however, explicit that the ‘new skillsets’ required are not always well served by design education, although to talk about design education in such a heterogeneous way is not entirely helpful. These points, however, should be considered in the context of the author’s intentions – to deliver a book that looks at and analyses a broad range of emerging practice. *Insights* is not after all purporting to be an ‘academic’ book or the work of research.

Instead it does an excellent job of making sense of a fast-moving and at times confusing discipline. Perhaps the best way to describe *Insights* is as a wayfinding device to help navigate the landscape of contemporary communication design practice. This makes it more than a useful book; this makes it an important book and one that deserves a space on the shelves’ of communication design students, educators and practitioners.

Reference

Twemlow, A. (2006), *What is Graphic Design For?*, Switzerland: RotoVision.