Branding Space: Deliberate Formations in Beginning Design

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Abstract. Arguably, ambiance in our culture is created in large by architecture and media. The former consumes us as we inhabit spaces both interior and exterior, allowing physical and material constraints — and the programmatic functions they permit — to create ambiance. The latter, media, inhabits *us* as we consume *it*. It creates or perhaps manipulates an ambiance within our minds. Through signage, television, and the internet we have graphic design flooding our brains via advertising and marketing: emotionally directing our decisions, telling us to buy this or invest in that. Analogous to material and physical choices that create the ambiance of architecture, we can blame branding strategies and the practices thereof for the strength and power that they give media to create ambiance. While students use branding strategies to assist themselves in creating ambiance through architecture, they are becoming grounded in a process that compels them to carry out objectives and promises made. Ultimately, this undertone of the pedagogical approach is what they can take forward as they embark on more complex projects, where timely decisions must coincide with a singular message and clear vision.

1 Introduction

Architecture and branding can physically and psychologically enforce ambiance upon its receiver. They can both be large and small, inanimate and animate, quiet and loud, and with a similar capacity to persuade, dictate, and influence. While both branding and architecture fall under creative disciplines, they are traditionally different in their outcomes or output medium, and perhaps their means to an end. Architecture imposes an ambiance through external factors, where branding attacks from within and aims to reach internally to impose or suggest ambiance. While the merging of the two is growing ever closer as media and materiality become integrated and as we navigate space in digital, virtual, and actual realms, this paper focuses on fundamental principles of branding that infiltrate architecture design studios.

Admittedly, as a professor of architecture, when speaking of branding in this paper it is in more of a general nature—closer to how the general public may understand it, yet, with the help of research as noted within, but ultimately, architecture is the primary source of study. These architecture studio topics are not about creating architecture that supports a

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brand, yet it looks into the process of branding and aims to parallel it in design studios in an attempt to harness the influential ambiance that branding inherently strategically creates.

Branding strategies that tend to be successful are so because they adhere strictly to a singular message—a promise—to the public. Bob Ulrich, CEO of Target states that "At the heart of the strategy is our commitment to delight our guests…This is our 'expect more. Pay less' brand promise."[1] In general, this brand promise becomes something internal that the user accepts as truth, and subsequently the user forms a bond that self-creates an associated ambiance. Branding through media has incredible power to dictate and influence. Successful architecture does, too, hence the exercise to parallel these approaches in architecture education. Beginning architectural design students often struggle with finding their own process as they embark on semester-long studio projects. Why not leverage the processes in which companies express and carry-out their commitments to the public through successful branding strategies? After all, university students may be much more aware of the influence—though not the processes behind them—that media and branding have on their everyday lives versus that of the influence of architecture. If a tried-and-true branding process can focus students on a common goal, message, and promise of their design project, then they can begin with a platform that can assist as a checks-and-balances system for which to create deliberate formations, and in the meantime create remarkable spaces.

At a superficial level, the creative processes related to problem-solving for clients in both architecture and branding industries are quite similar: they involve gathering a vast amount of information, sorting it per priorities as necessary, defining an objective, iterating resolutions, and releasing solutions. A pivotal point is in "defining an objective" and this point of departure related to the processes is closely related in the emphasis of language. Words are paramount in carefully crafting a descriptive experience that defines a brand. They become the cerebral link from message to ambiance—both media-defined ambiance and self-defined ambiance. Often times these words are not stated or printed, yet they are operating psychologically to govern the output message. A brief quote from "Designing Brand Identity" by Alina Wheeler: "Brand is not what you say it is. It's what *they* say it is." (credited to Marty Neumeier, The Brand Gap) [1]. Here the power is given to the consumer and their words (relative to an experience) equal truth.

To understand that words can work to quarterback a result is where an architectural pedagogy steps in. It is through the generation of carefully chosen words—more accurately, verbs and adjectives—that students are tasked with defining a deliberate experience through architectural intervention. Void of a product to brand, they must generate words that can begin to brand a space: to create a defined, intentional ambiance. These adjectives are translated into formal models that merge with physical site constructs, where emphasis is more on experiential engagement than programmatic constraints (see Fig. 1). These words can then assist in creating a coherent 'language' that the architecture speaks fluently.
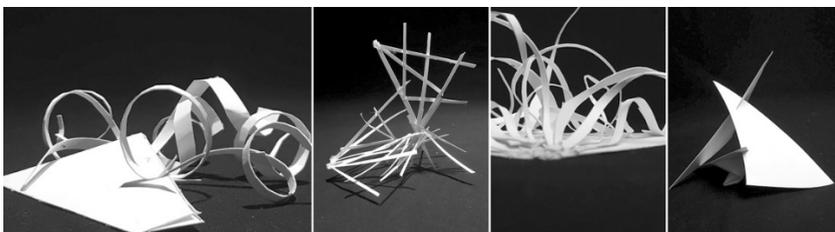

Fig. 1. A student's study models depicting various words inspired by a project site visit; still devoid of context and scale. Left to right the words indicate *romantic, wild, boundless,* and *hidden* (B. Dolgas).

Decision-making for students becomes manageable as they consistently seek to obey their project's defined language on all scales. This "branded" space is defined by decisions that are submissive to an overall experience: the orientation of form, the shape of a roof, the placement of windows, the details of a railing—all seek to adhere to the "brand". Figure 2 showcases a beginning design student's final project, where even the representation (the process of "release") is accountable for upholding the defined promise.

Fig. 2. A student's final rendering upholds the branding strategy used in defining its spatial construct through form, composition, vantage point, surrounding environment and context (J. Leone).

1.1 Basic Branding Principles followed

Branding strategies and ideals have been observed, albeit on a perhaps superficial level and through the lens of a proposed architectural pedagogy. These have come from various sources, and more pointedly a tried and true reference in its fifth edition: "Designing Brand Identity," by Alina Wheeler. [1]

Some brief parallels included in the resource to the process used in the architectural studio can be seen in the brand's clarifying strategy: *Overview and Market Research* (parallel "gather"), *Narrowing and Market Auditing* (parallel "sorting"), *Positioning, and Naming* (parallel Define). Next, there is *Design Identity,* which encompasses subtitles such as *look and feel, color, more color, typography*, etc., and this parallels the more concise phase of "Shape" within the architecture studio's process.

The last of the categories in Wheeler's resource called *Creating Touchpoints* parallels the concise "Release" portion of the architecture studio. This phase, however, admittedly, deserves the breadth of attention that Wheeler proposes in her book that moves beyond that of the pedagogical architecture studio. It supports the idea that "presentation" or "release" of your creation can take on many forms and methods, yet in this paper, many of those other topics are still under-explored as they relate to the pedagogy of an architecture studio.

2   The Studio

2.1 Process

The branding process used to outline the studio semester consisted of a cycle that is not unlike a typical architectural process; though this paper looks at it under the lens of a branding strategy revealed by the principal of an internationally-recognized design firm that focuses on brand campaigns and promotions. The first part of the process is to *gather*. This involves heavy research into client history, previous branding if applicable, the client's target audience, avenues and mediums of communication, external influences that may impact current and future trends, etc. Step two is to *sort* everything that has been gathered, and to consider what is the single greatest challenge, opportunity or message for the client/brand [community/user]? Step three is to *define* the brand platform—this is not a slogan or saying, but the statement from which all aspects of your brand must answer back to, and yes, this is where the descriptive term lies. In a single statement, the brand is to be simplified into one phrase: "Brand X is [insert verb or adjective here]." That term deserves careful consideration along with word association exercises and emotional investment before being finalized. See Figure 3 for an example where the descriptive word "romantic" helped to steer a student's desired output in conveying an experiential site visit. Author of "A Branded World," Michael Levine, also reinforces this step as paramount in conceiving a clear, realistic brand identity: "These promises, which should be written down in the simplest language possible and distributed on a regular basis to every employee of the company, are covenant made to the public." [2] Once this pivotal endeavor has been realized, then *shape* can take place in Step four. This is where creativity and design take place in an effort to support and promote the brand platform. Step five is to *release*. The branding process is more than graphic design relating to a project. It is a holistic strategy that comprises everything including, but not limited to font type, commercials, and timing in which to engage and to *release* to the public. The promise or defined message should emerge through the presentation and communication of the student project.

Fig. 3. A student's early representation of the site's atmosphere conveying the adjective: "romantic". (B. Dolgas)

2.2 The Studio Assignments

Experimenting with the notion of following the branding process outlined above takes place in second-year design studios dedicated to both landscape and urban conditions (perhaps further study can focus on insights found in these distinct contexts). Rather than promote the word "branding" for fear of direct relation to advertisement and product associations, the pedagogical strategy was to task students with creating intentional and deliberate experiences that were rooted *in* and rooting *for* specific word descriptors. And similar to the phases of a branding process—and as mentioned above, the studio followed the process related to creating architectural outcomes: *Gather, Sort, Define, Shape, Release.*

Concentrating on language and words and word-associations is a central focus for marketing and branding strategies. Therefore, assigning such words in the context of second-year design studios became the main catalyst in attempting to reinvent the architectural process for this studio assignment. Focusing on both verbs and adjectives, the words were translated into study models that were, at first, devoid of context and scale, yet gradually became introduced and rooted in the projects' physical site. The introduction of such words, however, does not happen until Step 3: Define. Those words have to be inspired by relevant research (Step 1: Gather) that has been sorted into various layers that expose various (and sometimes personal) hierarchies (Step 2: Sort). Once information becomes organized, the designer can begin to make those important design decisions that put forth a proposal and defined project goal (again, Step 3: Define). When putting forth such provocative and branded "atmospheres", language can help communicate a desired outcome.

Words, however, cannot do it alone. Step 4: Shape must come in and give form to spaces that uphold such atmospheric desires. While second-year studios often miss the opportunity to dive into details of their project for various reasons (including a heavy emphasis on schematic design), this strategy remains in hopes that design decisions made-and not yet made—in the *shape* phase of Step 4 will continue to be in response to the project identity (adjective) as defined in Step 3. For example, if the sole identity/word that had been narrowed down from the *Gathering, Sorting* and *Defining* stages resulted in *romantic,* ask: can your project--form, materials, handrail details, etc.—support that identity? Can they strive to?

Even as the project approaches Step 5: Release*,* ask "how can even the presentation of the project reinforce the identity of *romantic?"* See Figure 4 for an example of a student's final architectural section drawings (often merely technical) meant to convey the term *romantic.* Here the student strives to use graphics alone to evoke a feeling of romanticism as it relates to her provocative intervention in a landscape. Just as brands perpetually communicate a message, so does architecture and the make-up of architecture. It is a challenging predicament both to communicate architecture and to communicate *through* architecture; yet to have a singular identity platform can prove to be a reliable basis or starting point from which to aim to communicate.
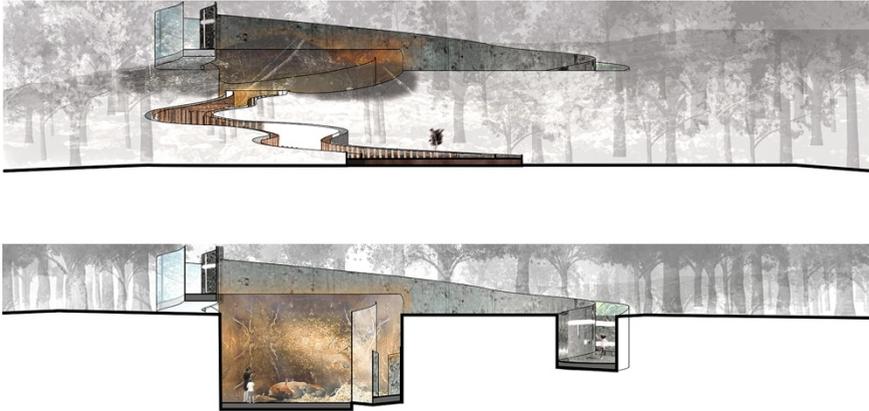
Fig. 4. A student's final sectional representation of their design proposal upholding the notion of "romantic" in both presentation and form.

3 After-thoughts

There may still exist a question as to whether the students are creating "Branded Space" as the title suggests, but it is clear that by following (or paralleling) a rigorous, creative, user-centered process such as that of a branding process, the students are making deliberate decisions that inform creative spatial constructs rooted in meaning. Project decisions involving superficial and spatial complexities, formal volumes, entry, thresholds, furniture and even presentation drawings can all be supported by a clear, defined [brand] identity while also performing their unique functions.

The comparison between branding and architecture is increasingly intriguing, as much of 'space' is become increasingly virtual, artificial, and digital—a prime home for all that is graphic and branding. In Wheeler's book "Designing Brand Identity", there is a side quote from Paul Pearson, Managing Partner for a prominent branding agency, in which the term *brands* can be seamlessly replaced for the word *architecture* (having to do with the physical, built environment as discussed in this paper) and carry the same, coherent meaning and definition [1]:

> *Brands* [Architecture] *can amplify engagement and solidify positive impressions by carefully considering the customers' journey, and by seeing the interplay between physical sensory experiences and compelling digital experiences.*

This quote begins to immerse itself into a virtual yet physical and spatial world, all the more relating the two hierarchical topics together. This begs the question as to whether or not, in fact, the output medium of branding and architecture will be vastly different in the future.

References

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