

## Chapter 3: Defining Graphic Design Concepts

---

### **?** What to understand about this chapter:

- Ideas are seeds that have the ability to grow into a full design concept.
  - A design concept is the mechanism through which an audience understands a communication.
  - Concepts tie all the elements of a project together to support each other, including words, images, ideas, formats, and context.
- 

For graphic designers, nearly every project has the same request: Create something great out of next to nothing. In addition, we're asked to design within a limited amount of space, for an audience that has little or no time.

So what next? Experienced designers know. No matter what the project is (from a magazine spread to a motion design clip), a plan will be required—one that integrates the parts (type and image, content and context, sketches and ideas) into an effective whole. This plan is a kind of glue that we call a graphic design concept.

### **Growing Ideas into Concepts**

Ideas are seeds that get planted into a project. Alone, they're abstract sparks of creativity that lack specific relevance. But when ideas are brought into an overall framework of a design assignment, they become activated with the potential to grow into a full concept.

At the start of a project graphic designers put themselves on a path toward developing ideas. Researching the project's subject and sketching out thoughts into visual form is the way to go. One example of a pure idea, jotted down after research in a sketch, might be an image that conveys a complex subject in a more simple and direct way. That image, and the possible associations it engenders to explain the subject, is an idea.

Another example might be an idea based on pure structure. The realization that by breaking information up into digestible bits on the page in a grid pattern, because it somehow makes sense in relationship to the project's subject, is in fact an idea. But an image or a grid isn't enough on its own to carry a communication. In short, these ideas need more integrated connections with other elements to gain the most power.

Ideas for a theater poster might follow along this way: A description of the play reveals a basic premise—the contest between good and evil. The designer begins to develop ideas from this premise. One that stands out is the notion of “duality”—a paraphrasing of the dual state of good and evil.

Duality is an abstract thought, but it multiplies the thinking about good and evil and the graphic possibilities are increased. One of these possibilities may grow into a full concept and so the designer's initial sketches around this idea are important. They will serve as a foundation for more refined ideas.

In essence, what the designer is searching for are devices that can be further engineered into full concepts. Images that suggest contrast, black and white, ying/yang, are all explored within the idea of duality. Again, as elements by themselves they are too abstract. But fused with the theme of the performance's content, they become applicable.

An angel's wing and devil's tail get sketched out. The idea of “top and bottom” are documented because the format relates to both duality and the Western notion of heaven and hell. As these ideas roll around (on paper, monitor, and in the designer's head), the play's title and any supplemental information get fed in. Typeface, color, and overall form are explored next with the intention that the parts will work off each other. As the parts tie together, a visual and mental bridge between the play's content and the intended viewer is built. In effect, a strong concept is being realized.

 Quote: “A thought is an idea in transit.”—Pythagoras (582 BC–497 BC)

## Design Vignette: Joseph Roberts



JR\_1 Joseph Roberts

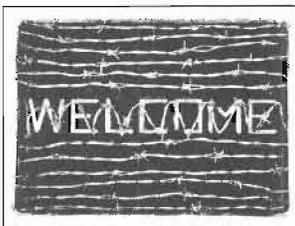
Joseph Roberts is Professor of Communications Design and former Chair of the BFA program in Graphic Design, Illustration and Advertising at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. He was also president of Klauber & Roberts, a graphic and exhibit design corporation in New York City, and art director of the Philmont Software Mill, a computer consulting firm in Philmont, NY.

### **How do you teach graphic design concept?**

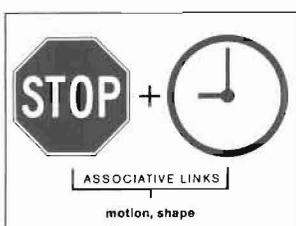
By sophomore year, when students begin taking design classes, they learn that they have to create work that communicates a specific message. In class critiques, the focus shifts from the pure aesthetics of foundation, where they only needed to express themselves, to an emphasis on moving messages. They discover that it's the ultimate goal of graphic design, and that all the elements they use in a design including ideas, forms, typography, etc. all relate to a total package embracing a concept. A famous Pratt student, Paul Rand, wrote about this years ago—that a concept is an integrated product that needs to be both beautiful AND useful. Without the ability to think conceptually, it's impossible to solve most of the projects that come up in class, or out in the field.

### **So where do students begin—what ideas stand out?**

Projects that develop an understanding of contrast, both psychologically and physically, tend to produce the most outstanding pieces. One presented a welcome mat covered in barbed wire (fig. 2). Another involved a clock whose face was a stop sign (fig. 3). These raw and basic ideas carry something more with them for the viewer: The mat says “come in,” yet warns you to “go away;” the clock moves, yet signals stop. The montage prods the viewer to respond in a kind of addition (1+1) so they can't help but add up. The surprise is that the answer is more:  $1 + 1 = 3$ . In other words, they've forced someone to think.



JR\_2 Student work, Pratt Institute. 1999.



JR\_3

### **Is there a value in forcing the viewer to think?**

When a designer can cause more than just a reaction, and takes us to a point where there is a returned response, then a solid communication is made. The opposite would be to have a picture of a rose, and to put the word “rose” under it. Nothing happens. Now imagine putting the word “crap” underneath and think of how someone’s brain would respond—the setup causes meaning to be created. Within the confines of a design problem, this is an effective way to get people engaged, and to remember.

### **Are there other mediums besides visual ones?**

We can’t see, hear, touch, taste or smell without visualizing mental imagery. I think of Robert Frost’s poem, “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening.” That short piece of writing holds an album full of images. But I like to mix up all the senses and mediums in these early classes. As a variation to the montage assignment, I ask students convey an idea by creating a physical montage (contrasting elements that have an associative link). They have to cover their project until it is revealed, but by watching each face respond, you can actually see an idea hit their brain. Visual aesthetics matter very little in relation to the idea conveyed in the mind. But, of course, the final presentation of the concept must be well crafted to speed the communication.

### **How do you bring this approach to *real* design projects?**

Well, we don’t think of designers creating concepts for radio ads, but that doesn’t mean they can’t. I assign a 30-second spot for New York’s Water Taxi, and as research, I actually require them to go. The setup for a contrasting montage to take place is the same, except that students work with sounds. What says “water” and what says “taxi?” The solution begins there—the only visuals are the ones created in the audience’s mind. It’s good training for the real world, especially when they find they have to communicate a message for a company or service that doesn’t have any product that can be visualized (an insurance company for example). Designers will understand how to develop ideas into concepts that speak. And part of that speaking will come from the viewer.

### Understanding a Concept

We begin to understand concepts from an early age. We are conditioned by the fables and fairy tales read to us. The narratives are linear in structure (beginning, middle and end), contain a basic plot (characters and story), and share a social knowledge in the form of an underlying moral (“the route to take” or “the lesson learned”).

Graphic design concepts rely on the same conventions. The concepts designers create are a kind of mechanism for the viewer. Essentially, concepts set themselves up to say things like: “This is a book’s jacket design. It references and interprets the material you’ll read inside;” or, “this is a logo whose face symbolizes the spirit of a company or service;” etc. The primary intention of a concept is to help make material more understandable, and in a sense, we “read between the lines” within this mechanism in order to “get it.”

The literacy poster (fig. 3.1) sets itself up this way. The image is positioned not just to be seen, but to be read—to be interpreted like a short story. As we view this poster we immediately see the design concept in action. Here, a young child uses an unplugged television set as a chair. The compounding factor, the point that gives the communication a twist, is that the child is also holding a book. The first layer of the communication is obvious—that reading can be introduced at an early age. We “read between the lines” in understanding that the TV is being used as a subservient chair, and that reading comes first. Minimal type on the poster emphasizes a humorous irony as well—that the reading of images conveys this communication. All of this coordinates into an effective poster.

An alternate literacy poster (fig. 3.2) within the same series approaches the issue from another angle. Here, only type is used. Enlarged from the page of a book, the four-letter anagram of “dare dear, read” appeals for literacy in a straightforward, and “in-your-face” kind of way. The concept is completely integrated, its typeface, size, content, and playfulness of letters is consistent in its simplicity and presentation.



3.1 John Bielenberg. *Literacy* poster. 1997.

dare  
dear,  
read

3.2 Paula Scher. *Literacy* poster. 1997.

### Concepts Go Further

Graphic design concepts try harder, and go further. They usually communicate more and can, in fact, actually teach the viewer something beyond the stated and obvious.

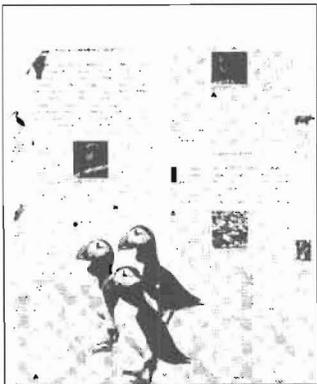


3.3 Pentagram. *National Audubon Society 1995 Annual Report.*

Fully considered concepts have this ability because they integrate many levels and layers of information together with imagination and intelligence. If the Audubon Society asked for the design of a cover and interior of a brochure on birds and the environment, chances are the designer wouldn't just center a photograph or illustration of birds and use the default computer typeface throughout the piece. Instead, that designer would try to make an integrated connection between birds and their relation to the environment. Sky, air, land, flight, and other relationships would all come into the fold of the exploration. The choice of typeface and even the layout would help in communicate those qualities that speak of birds and their environment in a thoughtful way.

The interior would relate to the cover in spirit. Its pacing and organization would reinforce the overall concept. In this way, graphic design is helping not only to make information understandable, but to allow the reader to feel the information in a tactile way as well.

The design of an annual report created for the National Audubon Society does this with "Birds, Wildlife, and Habitat" (fig. 3.3–3.4). A review of the year's financials is the main point of this piece, yet it captures the spirit of the organization. Its expansive layouts are teeming with information, color illustrations and photographs that hold the reader's interest. The concept conveys the feeling of playful, but serious, notation.



3.4 Pentagram. *National Audubon Society 1995 Annual Report.*

🕒 Quote: "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor."  
—Aristotle

### Metaphoric Concepts

When we explain a thought or make a description to someone, we tend to paraphrase from as many angles as it takes until that person understands. For a chaotic event, we'll say: "there were people all over the place," and include, "no one knew where to go." We might then finish with phrase, "the place was a zoo." Slipping in the word "zoo" is an example of using a metaphor—it's an everyday tool we use to help others understand

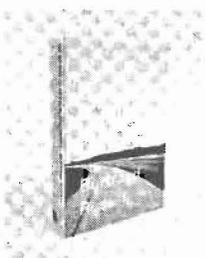


3.6 Dana Shields. *Chronicle Books*. 1992.

with a new and possibly broader perspective. Graphic designers use metaphors to communicate with too, except that the metaphors are visual rather than verbal.

When an image is used in place of another, the very act of replacement loads it with meaning. In other words, the context an image is set within brings new or alternate interpretations of it. Chronicle Books uses a pair of eye-glasses (fig. 3.5) to identify itself. The glasses in the context of a publisher's identity becomes a metaphor for positive adjectives such as "clarity" and "vision."

An additional benefit in using metaphors within concepts is the inherent shock value they bring. The unexpectedness of an image, slipped in place of another, gets the attention of a squeaky wheel. The viewer might also be entertained by a new, "cool" and alternative approach. As seen in chapter 2, Dada artist, Marcel Duchamp, used the effect when he entitled his flipped urinal as *Fountain* (fig. 2.26). The metaphor expressed a very complex concept revolving around found art. Graphic designers understand the expressive power metaphors have as well, especially when a design needs to shout from the shelf, wall, or screen.



3.6 Paul Sahre. *The History of Western Philosophy*. Photographer: Jason Fulford. Publisher: Scribner. 2003.

The cover of Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* (fig. 3.6) was revitalized through the use of a single metaphor. The subject itself is quite dense and designing a new cover made for a difficult project. The designer could have opted for a "safe" cover, using the reproduction of a Renaissance oil painting that spoke of history, academics and Western civilization. Instead, a more challenging direction was taken—its result, rich yet surprisingly simple.

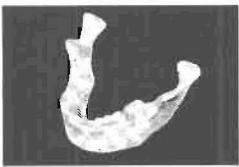
The image of a winding road is used as a metaphor. But how can the metaphor of "road" tackle such a complex subject? The shared meaning between a road and Western philosophy is a start. A lonely, curved road suggests a potentially hazardous venture, the final destination never really in sight. One could say that Western philosophy shares the same uncertainties. The austere typeface and layout compound the empty appearance of this cover, yet when read together with the image, a depth-of-meaning and personality are created.

## 💡 Ideas: Persuasive Visual Languages

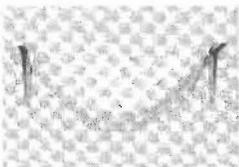
**Metaphors** are part of the visual language used in graphic design. We substitute one thing for another based on a resemblance of form, function, or meaning. The point is to help move a message along to the reader. Within the category of metaphor sit two related ideas. **Metonymys** describe closely related object as a replacement for something else. Even a concept that has a similar understanding can be used, for example, a hand that metaphorically says hello, can also be used as a metonymy to represent all of humanity. **Synecdoche** is the replacement of a part to represent the whole, or vice versa. The same hand, used as a synecdoche, can be understood to signify the entire body. [PURPOSE TO PRACTICE: Understanding mechanisms like visual metaphor build our communication muscles in both the sketch/idea creation phase of our problem-solving process, and our presentation/verbal phase when show work to a client.]

### Montage

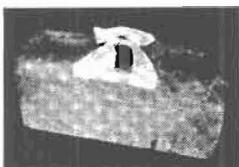
Metaphoric concepts can be created by piecing together disparate elements into a single image called a *montage*. Artists first created the word in the 1920s to better describe the seamless techniques that film and photography offered. Proponents included Man Ray and John Heartfield (see chapter 2)—they used jarring juxtapositions to present surreal views of the world. They also extended the way that ideas could be presented in a simple way. [PURPOSE TO PRACTICE: Montages generally involves no more than two images—three gets a bit confusing in conveying an idea.]



3.7a John Armstrong. Jawbone with jellybean set in place. 2007.



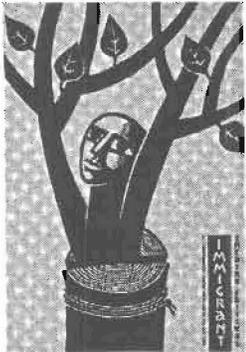
3.7b Max Pitegoff. Shelf brackets with draping fabric. 2007.



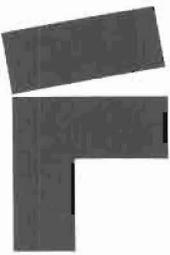
3.7a-c Tamar Meir. Cinderblock with plastic handles. 2007.

Montages looked simple, but their reading had depth. And for graphic designers, montage became an important tool to communicate with. What's always surprising about montages is that they are a contrast of elements which don't seem to belong together. But the elements share an associative link that binds them like glue. The result is an unexpected composite that generates unique meaning. Once noticed by the viewer, this meaning is more likely going to be conveyed, and remembered.

The montages created as part of a student exercise (fig. 3.7A–3.7C) each have an



3.7 Luba Lukova. *Immigrant Theater Festival*. 1997.



3.8 Woody Pirtle. *Fine Line Features*. 1991.



3.9 Artist unknown. *Kodak Easyshare camera*. 2003.



3.10 Michael Bierut and Lisa Anderson. *Speaking Volumes*, Mohawk Paper. 1996.

idea to them which initiates a psychological response from the viewer. A jellybean set in place of a tooth, a set of shelf brackets holding draped fabric, and a concrete block with weak plastic handles start to communicate ideas. When applied to specific problems, they can help visualize ideas, and in fact, say loads.

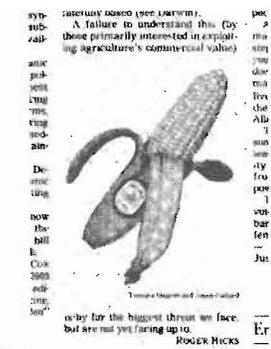
The design concept for the Immigrant Theater Festival poster (fig. 3.7) montages two related metaphors into an effective whole. The tree is used to represent the idea of culture, and a tree limb, in the shape of a person, is used to represent an immigrant. The viewer understands what's being communicated—that an immigrant can grow with a new culture and shouldn't be regarded as alien and separate from that culture. The form the poster takes, its minimal colors and hand-drawn typeface, add to the concept by bringing a human touch.

Logos also use metaphors to convey concepts. The logo for the film studio Fine Line Features (fig. 3.8) was created by combining the image of a filmmaker's clapperboard with the initial letterform of the company into a single composition. The clapperboard metaphor (clapped down at the beginning of the filming of a shot) calls to mind the craft of directing which directly relates to the film company's "indie" flavor. Fusing the two elements resulted in a strong, ingenious and appropriate symbol.

Advertisements in everyday publications use this montaged approach. For a Kodak camera ad (fig. 3.9) the clapperboard metaphor is used, but here, it's montaged with the actual product. The meaning conveyed is that with the camera, you can create your own movies. The simplicity of this ad is strategic because its message and form suggests that the camera is simple to use.

Another example of fusing two images together is a brochure cover for Mohawk Paper company (fig. 3.10). The title—*Speaking Volumes: The World of the Book* uses a montage of books and a globe-stand. The bordered typography supports the idea, evoking an atlas-type language. The compact combination begins to take on the quality of a unique symbol. Montages have that capacity.

The act of interpreting a subject to the point that a unique symbol appears effortless when successful. However, montages are sometimes difficult to create. Many combina-



3.11 Tamara Shopsin and Jason Fulford. *The New York Times*. 2005.

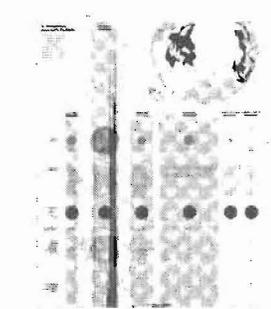
tions are attempted until the fusion speaks. To supplement a letter sent to *The New York Times* (fig. 3.11), a banana and cob of corn were montaged to offer an anecdote about genetically altered foods. It may have taken only one try, or it may have taken many fruits and vegetables until this one made the perfect fit. The two elongated shapes most likely determined the best visualization of the idea.

### Analytic Concepts

Just as metaphoric concepts rely on an audience interpreting meaning in a design, analytic concepts rely more on the audience recognizing treatments and relationships. The use of form, line, color, and texture have a considerable role when developing analytic concepts. So do abstract properties and systems such as material, structure and alignment, pacing, and flow. They all become a part of an analytic language that an audience is able to make sense of, and gain information from.

The simple act of holding one thing up next to another (finding similarities, dissimilarities, and relationships) is an analytic process that builds meaning. When a designer decides to focus on an analytic approach toward developing a concept, the act of “referring to” something takes precedence over the creation of new meaning, as image-based metaphors do. Analytic concepts tend to convey information in order to be more easily digested by an audience. They’re less open-ended and more succinct than metaphoric concepts.

Perhaps the most direct application of an analytic concept is when its applied to information design. The creation of charts, graphs, and maps require the analysis and structural organization of data. The newspaper chart titled *In Perspective: America’s Conflicts* (fig. 3.12) represents a system of connections and interrelations between technology, cost, and casualties of war, cross-referenced against where each war was fought. The visualization makes it easy to see that as technology advances, casualties and cost fall. But what coordinates this analytic concept into something especially effective is that the overlay of distinctive dots, lines, bars, typography, and color coding has a military feel



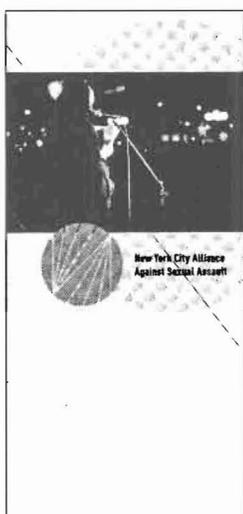
3.12 Matthew Ericson, Farhana Hossain. *The New York Times*.



3.13 Wes Kull. *Per Diem* (Student Project). 2006



3.14 Willi Kunz. *Columbia School of Architecture* lecture series.



3.15 Scott Santoro. *New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault*. Visual identity and brochure. 2008.

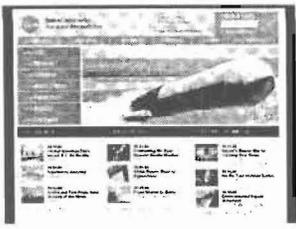
about it. The information, and precise visual language, work hand-in-hand.

There are many ways analytic concepts take form: A shape derived from nature is adopted as input to create a new design; a construction is borrowed and brought into a new and different context; a series of alignments bring consistency and rational sense to a subject. Structure, materials, alignments, pacing, and other formal properties and systems all play a part. In the project titled *Per Diem* (fig. 3.13), the main image, that of a paper receipt, was used as a structural element to hold data. *Per diem* is defined as a daily allowance, usually for living expenses, while away from one's home. The student juxtaposed his summer receipts for travel, food, movie tickets, etc. with the same for a semester at college. The shape morphs and bends while it compares and contrasts information.

For the Columbia School of Architecture poster (fig. 3.14) an analytic concept conveyed informational relationships, but was used in a very promotional way. Here the poster announces a program on architecture, urban planning, and preservation that takes place in, and studies, two cities—New York and Paris. The program itself is about comparing the two cities, so making the poster's comparison of two street grids becomes significant. Juxtaposing grid-like New York City streets with organically-winding Parisian streets is something the students would actually study. The circular arrows, city names, and ocean-like shape amplify the concept. The typeface and alignments speak an architectural language that coordinates with the subject and focus.

Analytic concepts rely on individual parts all working together toward the success of the whole piece. In fact, the parts are subordinate to the whole (see gestalt, chapter 9). Metaphoric concepts have these same requirements, but they tend to rely heavily on the basic idea being translated. As discussed, the brochure cover for Mohawk Paper company (fig. 3.9), uses the books inside a globe-stand as an idea constructed to hold a dominant role in the design. The map-like form of the typography and page layout takes more of a supportive role.

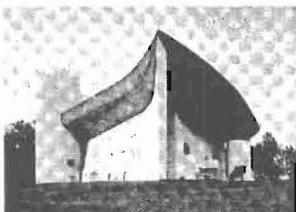
A symbol for The New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault logo (fig. 3.15) uses an abstraction to analytically represent this non-profit group. The breadth and reach of the alliance (hospitals, clinics, and help centers) is translated as a solid circle with



3.16 NASA. Web site.

radiating lines that are focused and interconnected, just as the organization is. The goal, of preventing sexual violence and limiting its destabilizing effects, is further visualized through collateral material. The spirit of the Alliance’s identity is reinforced by the weaving of symbol, photo, line, and text together into a unified composition.

Web sites are inclined to rely on analytic approaches because their nature is more navigational than interpretative. We literally browse through sections by clicking, and this action becomes a driving force. For NASA.gov (fig. 3.16) an analytic concept is very appropriate. Its technological subject is based on objective observations and verifiable facts. Metaphoric interpretations don’t have as much relevance. The photographs and illustrations that convey the wonder of space exploration sit within an orderly structure. It’s the site’s personality—organized and controlled, but not banal.



3.17 Le Corbusier. *Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Ronchamp, France.* 1950–55.

Quote: “A thought is an idea in transit.”—Pythagoras (582 BC–497 BC)

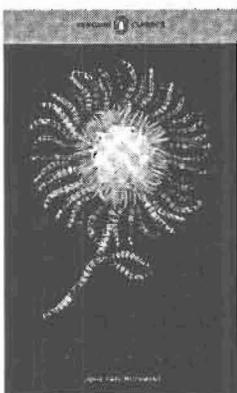
Ideas: The Visual Analogy of Le Corbusier

Le Corbusier’s Pilgrimage Chapel Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp (fig. 3.17) is a beautiful example of visual analogy. Le Corbusier wrote, “the shell of a crab picked up on Long Island in 1946 is lying on my drawing board. It will become the roof of the chapel.” And in fact, it did. The shape also suggests praying hands and a nun’s cowl, and these analogies reinforce the appropriateness of the form to the project and subject.

### Overlapping Concepts

Overlap happens in normal conversation when we use verbal metaphors, hand gestures, and tone of voice to communicate. We’ll bleed all these acts together as layers. With graphic design solutions, the overlap can result in an increased richness of meaning. Metaphoric and analytic concepts will overlap each other, especially when design problems require complex solutions.

Many of the examples of work shown in this chapter have multiple layers to them. *The History of Western Philosophy* (fig. 3.5) uses metaphor with austere analytic



3.18 Nick Wilton. *Cooper Union student project.* 2005.

treatment to great success. The metaphoric approach stand out, but underneath lies the analytic way it was handled by the designer.

Just the opposite is true in a student’s book cover project (fig.3.18) for Huysmans’ book *Against Nature*. An analytic concept first surfaces—a simple flower represents the subject of “nature.” The centered image and typography are of the time period the book was written (1884), and its orange petals relate to the orange band that defines the Penguin series of books.

But on closer examination an overlap becomes apparent. The flower transforms into something surreal—the ordinary becomes strange. The flower is created entirely out of maggots. The metaphor is perfect—it characterizes the principal figure in the book, Des Esseintes, an eccentric and depraved aesthete who’s bored with the excesses of his Parisian lifestyle. His obsession with exotic flowers and perfumes makes the image especially relevant.

Knowing how to recognize and apply conceptual approaches brings a deliberate and effective depth to design communications. A metaphoric approach might be chosen for a book jacket. But on the other hand, an analytic approach might be used for a pharmaceutical company’s packaging project. A book’s jacket might need image-based expression that’s more open to interpretation just as packaging might need a purely typographic layout and structural system. In both cases the goal is to communicate information, not diminish it. Finding the most appropriate approach, and how they might overlap, is an added quality a designer can bring to a project.



3.19 James Victore (Designer);  
Silas Rhodes (Creative Director).  
Poster for the School of Visual  
Arts. 2003.

### Meta Concepts

Metaphoric, analytic concepts, and their overlap have an objective—to solve design problems by communicating to a public audience. Meta concepts do the same, but there’s another aspect to them—a kind of self-reference— that can be thought of as a double coding within the work. These *meta concepts* as we call them are created to satisfy a design problem, and, in addition, connect with fellow designers. The message might have



3.20 John Bielenberg. *Virtual Telemetrix*. 2006.



3.21 Shawn Wolfe. *Live Twice the life in Half the Time!*, poster. 1999



3.22 Barbara Glauber. *Beautiful Suffering*, catalog cover. 2007

aself-parodying effect, and exist mostly as visual conversation about communication itself, but it does operate as a way for the field to evolve.

A meta concept can also be the driving force of a design. The SVA poster (fig. 3.19) is an example of a meta concept. The poster’s objective is to promote the school to a young audience. They are pasted onto subway walls, but arrive “pre-graffitied.” This is deliberate, serving double-duty. First, the design celebrates the public, and yet illegal, act of self-expression—graffiti-tagging—which is particular to big cities. But the poster also diffuses the advertising aspect of itself by doing this. It’s making fun of itself, and the more hand-written quotes and drawings added to it, the better. They only add to the connection of SVA with the city, and expression.

Designs like the SVA poster are important to the profession. They examine graphic design’s role by incorporate questions about how we communicate, especially to fine and applied artists within a very public, and especially urban setting.

A meta concept is also in mind in the creation of a project series under the pseudonym Virtual Telemetrix, Inc. (VT), (fig. 3.20). Here, a direct satirizing of the practice of graphic design and corporate America is made. *Stuff* is designed to parody annual reports and other communication vehicles—in effect, the role of the designer in contemporary culture itself is questioned. After reviewing the project, the question comes up: Do we, as designers, design a lot of stuff (like annual reports) because they simply have to be designed each year?

Shawn Wolfe’s “Beatkit” (fig. 3.21) advertises a nonsense product that has no function and doesn’t even really exist. His *Remover Installer* does, however, do it’s job of slowing the viewer down long enough to understand that they’ve become part of the anti-branding shenanigan within a culture gone mad with consumerism.

In the cover of a catalog for Williams College Museum of Art (fig. 3.22) plays with the context of a newspaper photo to explain the exhibit through a meta concept. The exhibit itself questions how troubling images of pain, presented every day through the media, can become aestheticized (Abu Ghraib prison, etc.). The flip—what brings this cover into meta territory, is how the image of a human thumb is also contained within

the frame's edge. Someone is pictured holding the catalog that the viewer would be holding—the thumb is part of the design. In fact, anyone holding the catalog would perceive their own thumb as the pictured thumb—the viewer becomes integrated into the discussion of how everyone is a participant in this disturbing condition.

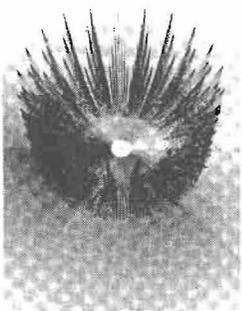
### The Evolution of Concepts

Imagine a 21st century design appearing in 1890? How would the work be perceived? Strange for sure. But also ineffective as a communication—it would simply be too distant for its audience to relate to. A hairstyle, a reference to a celebrity, or a shape that suggests media tools such as a computer mouse or monitor would have a disconnect with its reader. The metaphors and analogies an audience makes sense of determine how we communicate as graphic designers.

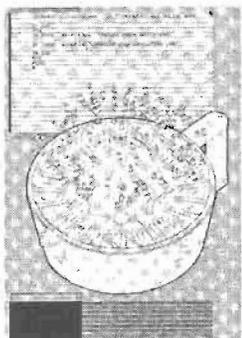
On the same note, asking a graphic designer from 1920 to create a concept for a 21st century audience would be as ridiculous as asking a 15th century painter to create an abstract painting. Concepts get created and understood through the context of time and cultural exposure. Metaphors get acknowledged to the point where they become completely folded into our everyday language and psyche. Words such as “daybreak” or “rainbow” are an example. They began as conceptual constructions—the metaphor of a day “breaking” over the horizon or the rain “bowing” into a colorful shape.

And concepts keep evolving. We find new ways to explain information, and we do it by building off the shoulders of existing language, metaphors and analogies. Paul Sahre’s “road” metaphor, Luba Lukova’s “immigrant” montage, and Willi Kunz’s “grid” analogy are brilliant because they all create new information—new metaphors, constructions and connections.

We also see it in the work of multi-specialists like John Maeda of MIT Media Lab. A page from a promotional brochure (fig. 3.23) blends his vision of programming with artistic concerns. As a new aesthetic grammar develops, its ability to speak with a depth of meaning will be linked to the conceptual connections it makes with the viewer. It’s a job that writers, programmers, poets, artists, and designers alike will increasingly share.



3.23 John Maeda. Page from a promotional brochure for Gilbert Paper’s “Realm.” 1998



3.24 Martin Woodtli, Invitation card for a *Logicaland* lecture. 2007.



3.25 Henryk Tomaszewski, Poster for an exhibit of Henry Moore sculptures. 1959.



3.26 Kuba Sowiński, Poster for an exhibition *Dealing With Consumption*. 2005.

💡 Ideas: Martin Woodtli, Designer, Zurich, Switzerland

“The invitation for logicaland (fig. 3.24) was to announce a lecture about Logicaland—an online study for visualizing our world’s complex economical, political and social systems. Logicaland tries to engage people into strategies of raising human sensibility and responsibility within the global networked society. I looked for an image that wasn’t a typical symbol for resources and social problems (like north and south or rich and poor). The juicer was a good metaphor for resource division and exploitation—the diodes represent game participants. I knew the symbolism wasn’t so easily understandable, but on the other hand, the card was for a specialized audience so I took it as an opportunity to doing something unusual and specific.”

➔ Sidebar: Jacek Mrowczyk, co-founder and editor, 2+3D magazine, Krakow, Poland  
Polish Poster Design: A Conceptual Approach

Poland is very much known for its posters and among the most influential poster designers was Henryk Tomaszewski (1914–2005). A poster created for Henry Moore’s exhibition (fig. 3.25) in 1959 is especially reflective of his approach. Simple in form, using only cut pieces of paper and one solid color, Tomaszewski was able to reflect the natural spirit of Moore’s sculptures, and express himself in a very unassuming way. His many pupils, young designers from all parts of the world, studied under his supervision at Warsaw’s Academy of Fine Arts. He became known as the “father” of the Polish poster school.

Today, Polish posters are no longer the independent medium they once were and have become part of larger identity projects. A young generation of designers are finding their own way within this scene. One in particular, Kuba Sowiński (born in 1973), has incorporated an approach of combining an intellectual understanding of the subject with contemporary typography and form. His poster, *Dealing With Consumption* (fig. 3.26), is an excellent example, created for an exhibition of work by fellow industrial designers. The poster had the requirement of coordinating with other formats and media (catalogue, invitation, advertising, web site, etc.), and the worm as motif was one that could be easily applied in a consistent way.

But the eating worm as a metaphor for consumption has another reference point—the worm can also be perceived as a larva with the ability to transform into a butterfly. The connection brings added depth and suggests hope for a better way for industrial designers to apply their talent. The typeface Dead History by Scott Makela compounded the effect.

Sowiński, and many other young Polish designers, uphold the tradition of including conceptual metaphor and formal richness in their work. Past masters like Tomaszewski established the conceptual approach, and the work continues to evolve.

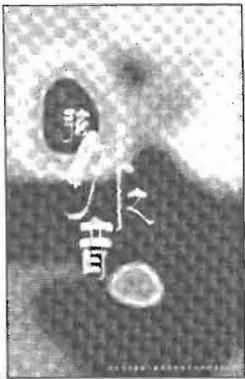
🗨️ Quote: “Designers who design like machines will be replaced by machines. It is not the digital but the intuitive, not the measurable but the poetic, not the mechanical but the sensual, which humanize design.” —Katherine McCoy

➡️ Sidebar: Saki Mafundikwa, Founder/Director, Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts (ZIVA), Harare, Zimbabwe (fig. 3.27)



3.27 Filmfestival poster. Tatenda Gomo (2nd and final year, Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts, Harare, Zimbabwe, Afrika) Class: Graphic Design 2. 2006. This poster was done at the request of the annual “International Images Film Festival for Women” a local initiative by Zimbabwean Women film makers. Ziva students have created the poster for this festival since its inception 4 years ago.

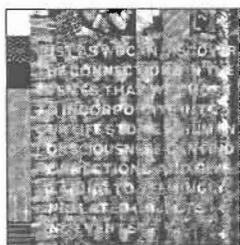
Graphic Design is problem solving; therefore, defining any graphic design concept is finding the perfect solution to the problem presented. Getting this through to my students is no easy task—I encourage much research and sketching—they prefer jumping on the computer and “playing around until something comes up.” Graphic Design is a very “new” area of study in my country and most designers are more used to aping concepts from the west than coming up with solutions that are fresh and “theirs.” As a result, one of the main requirements for most projects I give is that it be “African” in general and Zimbabwean in particular. “Cast your buckets where you are,” I admonish them. This is no easy task since there are no precedents—as is the case in the west where one can claim inspiration by masters like Paul Rand and Armin Hofmann or David Carson and Neville Brody. Instead, I encourage them to look at nature since we are so well-endowed with fantastic flora, fauna, and a breath-taking landscape making Zimbabwe one of the most beautiful countries on the continent. It’s a double-edged sword since most parents would rather their kids become “good” designers (meaning their work should look as “western” as possible) so that they can find work more easily, rather than have a portfo-



3.28 Liu Junliang, Poster for a chordophone concert. 2004.



3.29 Liu Junliang, *Live Harmoniously*. Advertisement advocating a shouldering of environmental concerns with economic development. 2005.



3.30 Jessica Sheeran. *Motion poster* (student project).

The designer's intent was to consider how context alters our perception—an example of the “odd and not so odd connection,” “play” and the process of “distillation.” In this piece, created for a large projection on a plasma or LCD screen, the top images combine with the left-side patterns and typography to create a synthesis. As the typography refreshes, new combinations are created.

lio full of experimental stuff. Our task is to strike a balance, thereby fostering a thirst for experimentation in our students. We are further handicapped by the fact that ours is only a two-year program which doesn't give the students the time needed to implement the theory learned into practice, but we do the best we can.

➔ Sidebar: Xu Guiying, Instructor of Graphic Design, Dahongying Vocational Technical College, Zhejiang, China (fig. 3.28–3.29)

When I teach, I often ask my students: “Why does a design look ugly, or chaotic, or vulgar?” I will then explain that the most important reason involves cadence—a balanced and rhythmic flow. Graphic design is a kind of art, and just like all good artworks there is a common characteristic—all have a beautiful cadence. I encourage students to look, and to listen, to other fields within the arts when they are searching for ideas; they should consider how a work moves from fast to slow, from close to sparse, from big to small, from noisy to quiet. It is a way to both see and feel design.

Chinese designers and artists alike also use another angle to solve problems. This involves what's called subaudition. With subaudition, an understanding is supplied, but not necessarily expressed. It is a “reading between the lines,” and you find it especially in traditional Chinese painting. In graphic design, a solution might not be so clear or concrete, but when subaudition is included as an aspect of the work, one is almost forced to think. To me, cadence and subaudition are a perfect compliment to each other and a beautiful way to work as a graphic designer.

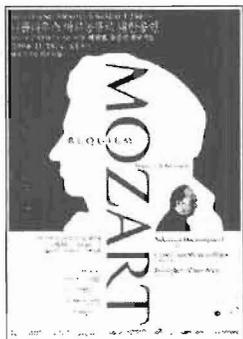
➔ Sidebar: Professor Doug Kisor, Chair, Graphic Design Department, Graphic + Media Design, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, Michigan (fig. 3.30)

At one level, a graphic design concept is such a curious and simple thing. It relies on an idea. But really, it's even more about how an idea becomes manifest.

There is a desire to embody essential qualities in a communication, provoking a tricky process of distillation and connotation. And yet, a concept is fully realized only



3.31 SangHoon Park, YoungSup Shin: Senior branding project for OrangeLove, a fictitious company that helps shy, young adults find romantic relationships. 2006



3.32 Professor Inyoung Choi. Poster for the 250th Anniversary Mozart Concert in Seoul, Korea. The profiles of Mozart and conductor, Nikolaus Harnoncourt reflect a similar pairing of Western and Korean typefaces.

when odd, and not-so-odd, connections are made. The negotiation gains substance as the interrelationship of elements is appraised. Through this process meaning is synthesized into a summary vocabulary of expression. These choices are then measured against a frame of goals and specific objectives.

And still, as I think about this beginning, what is missing? Play. I love designing because it's fun. Each project is its own unique game. There are questions, patterns and connection within the interrelated elements we work with, and they occur in the most unlikely places. When you open a secret door to something unexpected (hidden in a word, an image, your head, a hairball) you can sense the connection. Listening and translating the familiar—and not so familiar—within this cyclical interplay of elements is the fun, the play, the idea.

➔ Sidebar: Professor Inyoung Choi, Ph.D., Department of Graphic & Package Design, Hanyang University, South Korea (fig. 3.31–3.32)

Based on my teaching experience in the United States and Korea, I have found that the greatest challenge for me as an instructor is to teach design students not only how to get ideas and develop concepts, but also how to translate them into forms. I believe this is a common challenge for students and instructors from all over the world.

A unique concept, based on an everyday pool of ideas, can be the most effective action to work from. My teaching method is very simple. First, understand the client, their target audience, the society and culture they are part of, and their ethics. Second, develop an analytical strategy based on extensive research and approach it with a quantitative methodology. Third, translate the information into visual form with the understanding that design styles of the past might affect how the content is perceived.

In a way, everyone is a designer because we all have been taught to understand visual communications. But trained graphic designers can help people to understand even better and this is what makes our field so important.