

THE VIGNELLI CANON

Part One
The Intangibles

Semantics
Syntactics
Pragmatics
Discipline
Appropriateness
Ambiguity
Design is One
Visual Power
Intellectual Elegance
Timelessness
Responsibility
Equity

Semantics

I have always said that there are three aspects in Design that are important to me: Semantic, Syntactic and Pragmatic.

Let's examine them one at the time.

Semantics, for me, is the search of the meaning of whatever we have to design.

The very first thing that I do whenever I start a new assignment in any form of design, graphic, product, exhibition or interior is to search for the meaning of it. That may start with research on the history of the subject to better understand the nature of the project and to find the most appropriate direction for the development of a new design.

Depending on the subject the search can take many directions. It could be a search for more information about the Company, the Product, the Market Position of the subject, the Competition, its Destination, the final user, or indeed, about the real meaning of the subject and its semantic roots.

It is extremely important for a satisfactory result of any design to spend time on the search of the accurate and essential meanings, investigate their complexities, learn about their ambiguities, understand the context of use to better define the parameters within which we will have to operate. In addition to that it is useful to follow our intuition and our diagnostic ability to funnel the research and arrive to a rather conscious definition of the problem at hand.

Semantics are what will provide the real bases for a correct inception of projects, regardless of what they may be. Semantics eventually become an essential part of the designer's being, a crucial component of the natural process of design, and the obvious point of departure for designing.

Semantics will also indicate the most appropriate form for that particular subject that we can interpret or transform according to our intentions. However, it is important to distill the essence of

the semantic search through a complex process, most of which is intuitive, to infuse the design with all the required cognitive inputs, effortlessly and in the most natural way possible. It is as in music, when we hear the final sound, without knowing all the processes through which the composer has gone before reaching the final result. Design without semantics is shallow and meaningless but, unfortunately it is also ubiquitous, and that is why it is so important that young designers train themselves to start the design process in the correct way- the only way that can most enrich their design.

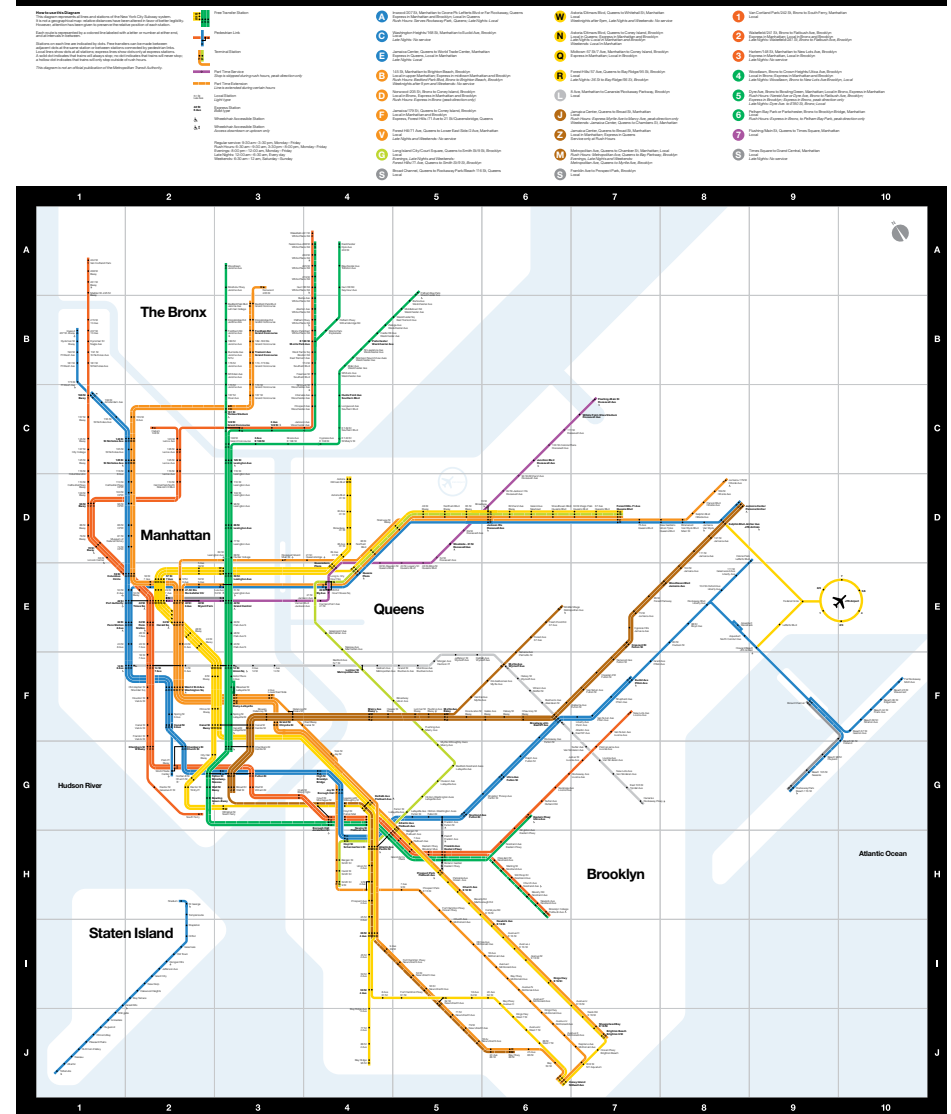
Semantics, in design, means to understand the subject in all its aspects; to relate the subject to the sender and the receiver in such a way that it makes sense to both. It means to design something that has a meaning, that is not arbitrary, that has a reason for being, something in which every detail carries the meaning or has a precise purpose aimed at a precise target. How often we see design that has no meaning: stripes and swash of color splashed across pages for no reason whatsoever. Well, they are either meaningless or incredibly vulgar or criminal when done on purpose. Unfortunately, there are designers and marketing people who intentionally look down on the consumer with the notion that vulgarity has a definite appeal to the masses, and therefore they supply the market with a continuous flow of crude and vulgar design. I consider this action criminal since it is producing visual pollution that is degrading our environment just like all other types of pollution. Not all forms of vernacular communication are necessarily vulgar, although very often that is the case. Vulgarity implies a blatant intention of a form of expression that purposely ignores and bypasses any form of established culture. In our contemporary world it becomes increasingly more difficult to find honest forms of vernacular communication as once existed in the pre-industrial world.

Syntactics

Mies, my great mentor said: "God is in the details." That is the essence of syntax: the discipline that controls the proper use of grammar in the construction of phrases and the articulation of a language, Design. The syntax of design is provided by many components in the nature of the project. In graphic design, for instance, they are the overall structure, the grid, the typefaces, the text and headlines, the illustrations, etc. The consistency of a design is provided by the appropriate relationship of the various syntactical elements of the project: how type relates to grids and images from page to page throughout the whole project. Or, how type sizes relate to each other. Or, how pictures relate to each other and how the parts relate to the whole. There are ways to achieve all this that are correct, as there are others that are incorrect, and should be avoided. Syntactic consistency is of paramount importance in graphic design as it is in all human endeavors. Grids are one of the several tools helping designers to achieve syntactical consistency in graphic design.

New York City Subway Diagram

2008



Pragmatics

Whatever we do, if not understood, fails to communicate and is wasted effort. We design things which we think are semantically correct and syntactically consistent but if, at the point of fruition, no one understands the result, or the meaning of all that effort, the entire work is useless. Sometimes it may need some explanation but it is better when not necessary. Any artifact should stand by itself in all its clarity. Otherwise, something really important has been missed. The final look of anything is the by-product of the clarity (or lack of it) during its design phase. It is important to understand the starting point and all assumptions of any project to fully comprehend the final result and measure its efficiency. Clarity of intent will translate in to clarity of result and that is of paramount importance in Design. Confused, complicated designs reveal an equally confused and complicated mind. We love complexities but hate complications!

Having said this, I must add that we like Design to be forceful. We do not like limpy design. We like Design to be intellectually elegant - that means elegance of the mind, not one of manners, elegance that is the opposite of vulgarity. We like Design to be beyond fashionable modes and temporary fads. We like Design to be as timeless as possible. We despise the culture of obsolescence. We feel the moral imperative of designing things that will last for a long time.

It is with this set of values that we approach Design everyday, regardless of what it may be: two or three dimensional, large or small, rich or poor. Design is One!

