

# THE VIGNELLI CANON

## Scale



The notion of scale is an essential element of the design vocabulary. In the previous paragraph I have given some examples of the meaning of scale in graphic design. Scale is the most appropriate size of an object in its natural context. However, it can be manipulated to achieve particular expression in a particular context - actually by being purposely out of scale. To master the notion of scale is a lifelong search that involves interpretation of functions, both tangible and intangible, physical, and psychological. Scale applies to everything. It can be right or it can be wrong; it can be appropriate or inappropriate; too big or too small for the task at hand. In design the issue of scale is continuously present and we have to master it regardless of the subject because it doesn't allow mistakes.

The choice of the proper material, its thickness, its texture, its color, its weight, its sound, its temperature - every detail assails our senses and provokes a response. Therefore, we must be in control of it because by choosing the most appropriate one to convey our message we succeed in our intent. Design means to be in control of every detail and scale is one of the most relevant ones. And so is its opposite, when it is deliberately chosen. An example which comes to mind is the sculptures by Claus Oldenburg where the transformation of scale in a particular context gives power and life to the object.

Manipulation of scale implies knowledge and full awareness of the meaning of scale.



## Texture

Light is the master of form and texture. It is by mastering light that we can achieve the expression of any artifact. The basic qualities of reflection or absorption of light are the elements to play with in designing any kind of object. A glass will reveal its color when light passes through it, or will be trapped inside of it if the surface has been etched, engraved, or treated with some texture.

A silver object, when polished, reflects light and when engraved, will trap the light. Any shiny surface reflects light, any dull surface absorbs light, and this is true for any material including paper. A polished material has completely different and sometimes opposite connotations from a matte surface, a wide spectrum ranging from rich to poor, from opulent to restrained. Texture has an infinite range of tactile or visual experiences and it is essential for designers to sharpen their perception in order to articulate and master the media. It is through the choice of materials and their finishes that we articulate the shape of an object to express its content, to celebrate its appropriateness, to reveal its soul.

Texture and color in a mutually supporting dialogue define any creative artifact - anything waiting for us to decode its inner secrets and thereby enrich our perception and transfer it to whatever we choose.



## Color

Most of the time we use color as a Signifier, or as an Identifier. Generally speaking we do not use color in a pictorial manner. Therefore, we tend to prefer a primary palette of Red, Blue, and Yellow. This may seem restrictive. This doesn't mean that we do not like colors or that we are not sensitive to them.

It merely means that most of the time we like to use color to convey a specific message, therefore, we tend to use it more as symbol or as an identifier. This is particularly true in Corporate Identity Programs where Chromotype becomes the Identifier along with the Logotype or other devices (morphotypes, phonotypes etc.)

We have used the entire spectrum of colors to express moods, feelings, passions, connotations and more. Color is a very important element in the formulation of our projects, but, as we do with typefaces, we have limited and articulated our palette to express the message in the clearest and most understandable way. There are times for strong primary colors and times for subtle pastel colors; there are times for just black and white; and times where rich browns and hearty colors work more appropriately to the task at hand. Appropriateness is one of the rules we use in choosing colors knowing how effective it can be to use the right color at the right time.



## Layouts

Any kind of publication has different layout requirements. However, it is inevitable that the layouts reflect the interpretation of the designer. Most publications are composed of text, images and captions and the task of the designer is to sift through the images to select those which best portray the essence of the content and possess the quality of becoming an icon.

An icon is an image that expresses its content in the most memorable way.

Once again, in designing any kind of publication the most helpful device is the grid.

Once the outside margins are established (I tend to like narrow margins to increase the tension) the basic grid should be devised according to the nature of the publication: 2, 3 or 4 columns for a book or a brochure, 6 or more, for a newspaper.

Once the number of vertical divisions are decided the next step is horizontal divisions which will provide the number of modules per page.

Again 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 or more, according to the variety need of the publication. In defining the grid, one has to keep in mind what kind of visual material will comprise the layout.

For square pictures a square grid may be better than a rectangular one, well suited for rectangular images. Or, if the publication has a consistent variety of the two formats, one could design a double grid accommodating both situations.

Or, otherwise, when appropriate, crop the picture to follow the grid.

It is important to remember that many devices are available to make layouts exciting. The purpose of the grid is to provide consistency to the layouts, but not necessarily excitement - which will be provided by the sum of all the elements in the design. Outlined images, line drawings, and bold initials, can add sparks to the page as a variety of other devices. Great designs can be achieved without the use of the grid, but the grid is a very useful tool to guarantee results.

Ultimately the most important device is the management of the white space in the layouts. It is the white space that makes the layout sing. Bad layouts have no space left for breathing - every little space covered by a cacophony of type-sizes, images, and screaming titles.

For literary books the margins follow a different set of considerations, ranging from the position of the thumbs - when holding the book - to an overall shape of the text column, or to the need of providing space for side notations (either by the author or by the reader). Some considerations are practical others are aesthetic. We have designed all kind of books covering a variety of needs and situations. It is important that proper attention is given even to small details, such as to design the most appropriate margins for that publication. Every detail is important to achieve the final look of a publication.

I have applied these basic rules to an endless list of publications, from brochures to annual reports, from books to encyclopedias, from magazines to newspapers, from programs to posters and I still do it with pretty good results.

## Sequence

If sifting the images is the first task in the process of publication, the sequence of layouts is definitively the next one.

A publication, whether a magazine, a book, a brochure, or even a tabloid is a cinematic object where turning of the pages is an integral part of the reading experience. A publication is simultaneously the static experience of a spread and the cinematic experience of a sequence of pages. Therefore, we attribute great importance to this detail of the layout process. We like the layouts to be forceful. We do not like limpy layouts with little pictures spreaded around the pages - some bleeding here, some bleeding there in a casual way. We tend to like a form of layout that almost disappears to the eyes of the reader. We would say that if you see the layout, it is probably a bad layout!

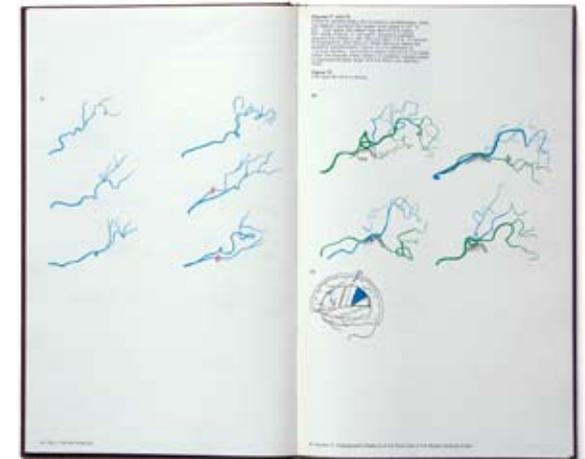
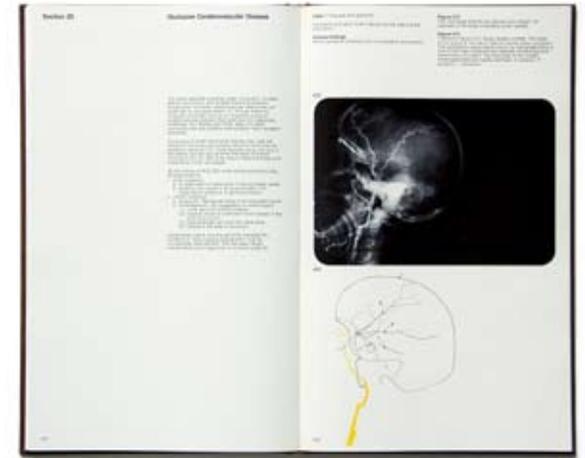
The book layout we tend to favor is a very simple format of a page of text beside a picture on a full bleed page, followed by a full bleed picture spread, followed by a page with a full bleed picture facing a white page with a picture - either on the center or upper right corner.

A simple format gives rewarding results when the basic sequence is articulated in a way that is not repetitive. Actually the nature of the publication will help to overcome the monotony of this approach. We would rather see this sort of neutral approach than the obtrusive assault of many layouts, but, then again, there should be room for everyone in the creative process.



## White Space

I often say that in typography the white space is more important than the black of the type. The white space on the printed page is the correspondent of space in architecture. In both situations space is what qualifies the context. Naturally, the organization of information needs a structure to hold together, but one should not underestimate the importance of white space to better define the hierarchy of every component. White space, non only separates the different parts of the message but helps to position the message in the context of the page. Tight margins establish a tension between text, images and the edges of the page. Wider margins deflate the tension and bring about a certain level of serenity to the page. Tight type setting transforms words into lines just as loose type settings transform words in to dots. Decreasing or increasing the letter spacing (kerning) confers very distinctive character and expression to the words. All this is space manipulation and it is this device that is used in layouts to achieve a desired expression. The relationship between the size of type and the space around it is one of the most delicate and precious elements of a composition. I must say that the masterful handling of white space on a printed page is perhaps the most peculiar attribute of American graphic design. Just like space is the protagonist in Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture. Somehow, it relates to the epic grandeur of the American landscapes. For many artists white space is the essential element of the composition. It is the fundamental qualifier and protagonist of the image. Almost all the great American graphic designers have used white space as the significant silence to better hear their message loud and clear. Such is indeed the power of the white space.



## **Conclusion**

Throughout our creative lives we have sifted through everything to select what we thought best. We sifted through materials to find those for which we have the closest affinity. We sifted through colors, textures, typefaces, images, and gradually we built a vocabulary of materials and experiences that enable us to express our solutions to given problems - our interpretations of reality.

It is imperative to develop your own vocabulary of your own language - a language that attempts to be as objective as possible, knowing very well that even objectivity is subjective.

I love systems and despise happenstance.

I love ambiguity because, for me, ambiguity means plurality of meanings. I love contradiction because it keeps things moving, preventing them from assuming a frozen meaning, or becoming a monument to immobility.

As much as I love things in flux, I love them within a frame of reference - a consistent reassurance that at least and at last I am the one responsible for every detail.

And that is why I love Design.