

Finding Form in the Middle Ground

When a designer's education begins, they often look to other designers and media for inspiration and guidance. They look for some clue which will enrich their process and help them to develop form. In striving to find a voice the designer develops a method. But what if the development of the method becomes a formal expression? What if the search and process becomes the graphic form?

A study in defining and developing richer graphic form has been the subject and driving force behind the work of designer Jen Magathan, of the Rhode Island School of Design, for some time now. She has used different design endeavors such as books, posters, zines, and exhibitions to explore process and method development, and in doing so has found a way of designing which reveals the process to the viewer and allows them to see the search for graphic form.

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

Although up until now her work has mostly focused on developing form in the area between the application of systematic graphic elements and chance operations, she is now discovering ways to create more informed graphic design of which she calls "The Middle Ground." This "Middle Ground" can be found through merging different design methods. This can mean working between two types of media or two different design concepts. Allowing one to inform the other creates the Middle Ground, and it is where she believes the most conceptually developed graphic design lies.

Magathan says "As a designer I often find myself working between two poles. I strive to find form in the combination of things. I work in such a way that the poles inform each other in every step of the design process. My work often exists on a spectrum between two areas of thought. By merging systematic elements and chance operations I have been able to produce surprises in the formal graphic studies I pursue. Surprise or serendipity is often the over-arching goal in my work."

APPLICATION OF A METHOD

Magathan has begun to use her process as the graphic expression. In her book *The Adaptation of Fit* she uses two different approaches to writing so she may further express her ideas about

the study of the Middle Ground. She began by adapting a chapter of Christopher Alexander's book *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Excerpts from the chapter, *The Goodness of Fit*, provided the systematic building blocks for her to express her ideas on form, fit and context. By using these excerpts as guides she was able to fashion the text to become her own. She states, "By applying this method of writing I was able to develop a cohesive narrative about my ideas of method which were beginning to form. Although the text was choppy and sometimes lacking coherence, the basic ideas were beginning to form, and I had a base on which I could begin fitting the text to meet the needs of my study."

She then began again with a different writing method. Starting once more with the original Alexander text, words which came before a comma were extracted from the chapter and placed into a continuous list. These words, taken from moments of pause, became the words used in new sentences which solidified her ideas about method. A selection of these words began a new form of writing which allowed for a narrative to come from a chance operation. Using the words in the order in which she found them in the chapter, gave her guidelines in the writing. However, the passages which came about where serendipitous.

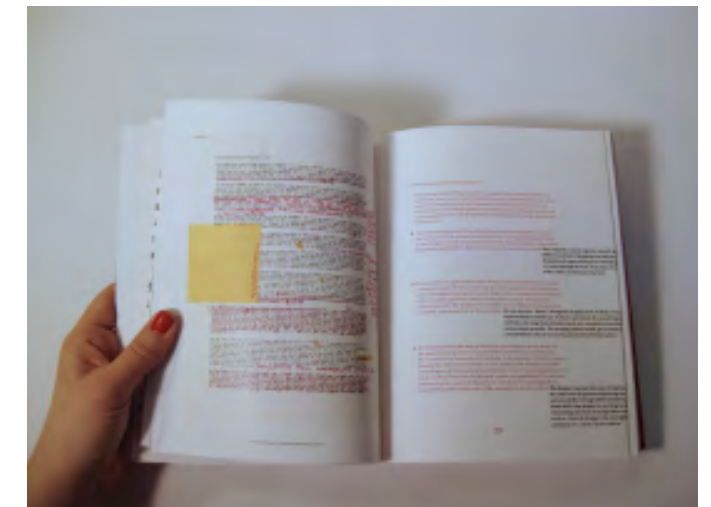
The two pieces of writing which were developed from these two explorations became the subject in the graphic expression of a book. Revealing the process in the writing to the viewer through a typographic exercise revealed a richer graphic form. The middle ground was where the form was found. Revealing process and having it be incorporated into the book system visually translated the ideas embedded in the writing.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Another project designed by Magathan, which further solidifies her ideas about merging of methods and revealing process to

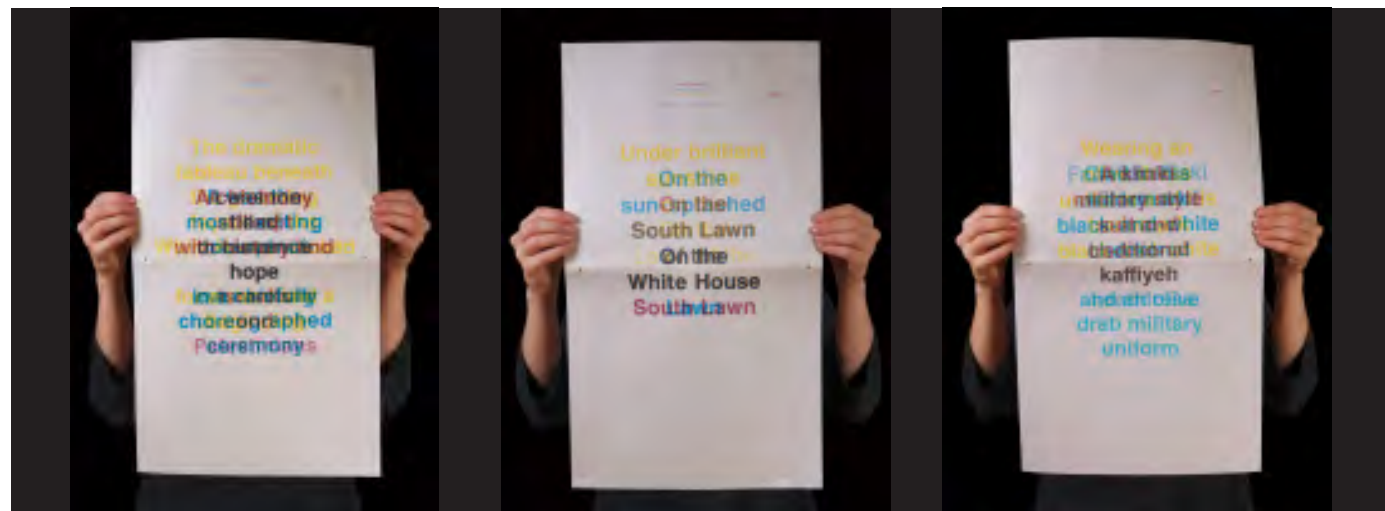


Adaptation of Fit shows the process of creating the document, as the form itself. It is the expression of merging two different writing methods to create content for the graphic form. The process of the designer is the highlighted element.



Typographic treatments showing the "merging" of Magathan's writings and those of Christopher Alexander further explain the designer's ideas about the push and pull between two elements to find the form in the middle. A meeting of the minds forms.





By designating a different color to each of the six publications studied, in *What Did They Say?* and by using an over-printing system along with simple typography, Magathan is trusting a system to create the visual message of the news of the day. The three

posters reveal the common topics discussed in each newspaper. The over-arching feeling of the day, the location and the wardrobe of the participants seem to be the most important themes which are revealed.

the viewer, is a newspaper study titled, *What Did They Say?* The project was developed as a series of posters which became a study in how newspapers across the United States interpret the news. She analyzed six newspaper archives from a specific day, September 13, 1993, which were running a story about the signing of the Palestinian Peace Accord. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Boston Globe*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all covered the story that day. "The story was interpreted in so many ways, but I was able to decipher three major topics from the six different publications." Said Magathan.

She interpreted these topics systematically, through color and typography. The most important messages of the story were made apparent through overprinting excerpts from each paper onto a single poster, thus revealing the most pertinent information for the viewer. The visual outcome was a product of the trust in the printing system, typographic treatment and color application. Allowing the system to govern the outcome of the poster was a chance operation which led to the merging of the visual systems at play in the project. The merging of the systems created the visual expression. The process by which the posters were created was revealed to the viewer and an experience of message clarification was revealed.

MOTIVATION FOR THE MERGE

The key motivation for her course of study is to further clarify a method of designing. Finding a common thread in her work as a designer led her to the question of whether or not highly developed graphic form can be created from designing between two different ways of thinking and working. Studying different media and application of multiple methods to her designs has informed and strengthened her ideas of discovery in "the in between." Systematic approaches to design and chance operation

are elements present in many of her previous endeavors, so they naturally led to this way of thinking and working. These two poles became the points at which her studies began, but finding her way between them has been the inspiration for making, within her developing method.

Through the creation of graphic design studies which reveal her process and in turn create form, she finds connections and discovers new ways to reveal a more informed catalogue of design solutions through the application of the use of the Middle Ground. Through specific formal investigations she reveals a methodology. The process by which she applies this method of working defines her "Middle Ground," and this is where, in her opinion richer and more developed graphic design resides. Magathan goes on to state, "Reveal your process and method to the viewer and you might be surprised by the form you reveal to yourself." 