

The Middle Ground

Development of Graphic Design Through the Combination of Multiple Processes and Methods

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I often find myself working between two poles. I strive to develop formal expressions in the combination of things, and work in such a way that the poles inform each other in every step of the design process. I call this, finding the Middle Ground. Finding a common thread in my work as a designer led me to question whether or not highly developed graphic form can be created by designing between two different ways of thinking and/or working. I also question if revealing this process to the viewer can become the formal graphic expression.

Designing and working in the Middle Ground has provided the inspiration for making and developing case studies such as books, posters, zines and exhibitions, which support my ideas. Up until now I have focused mostly on the application of developing design in the area between the application of systematic graphic elements and chance operation. By merging these two elements I have been able to achieve surprise and serendipity in my work while revealing in the form the process of making.

Creating work which oscillates on a spectrum between two points drives my study and feeds my impulse to organize and interpret information. I am inspired not only by graphic designers, but most often architects. I look to other design disciplines to understand my ideas about my developing method and find they align closely with that of the architect.

Frank Gehry is one such architect. He often relies on intuition and the systems of architectural design to realize his imaginative expressions. He makes decisions based on intuition to create unintelligible built form, but then refers to technology and engineering to justify and realize a building. While designing the Los Angeles Performing Arts Center (fig. 1), featured in the film *Sketches of Frank Gehry*¹, he begins with a scribble which leads to a sculptural study model (fig. 2). The model and sketch are then placed in the hands of the engineer who translates this form structurally. This allows adjustments and changes to be made in order to meet the requirements of structure. After this stage another model is built and Gehry begins sculpting. He cuts and forms the model by using intuition and then returns it to the engineer, creating a back and forth process of form development (fig. 3). This process continues until the architectural form is fully realized.

There is a push and pull between Gehry's creative intuition and his understanding of technology. Pragmatic considerations such as form, space, circulation and structure are all considered in his design process. Starting from an unlikely source allows Gehry to reveal to the inhabitant an understanding of structure and space. The systematic and orderly process is revealed when the chaotic forms are structurally successful. This merging of two methods inspires me to do the same.

The tools of my approach are embedded in my process. Developing graphic form in the Middle Ground begins with the implementation of an organizing structure, for example a grid system or typographic treatment. There must be a way to immediately visually organize my ideas and content. This exercise becomes the first pole. The second pole forms by gathering the content and developing a concept, usually with a chance operation or some other means of collection. This portion of the process is more organic.

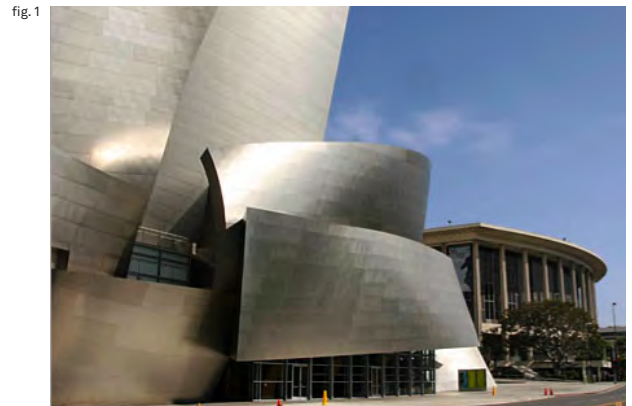


fig.1 The Los Angeles Performing Arts Center, designed by Frank Gehry provides inspiration in terms of process and development of form. The building was created by using the combination of sculpture and engineering methods.

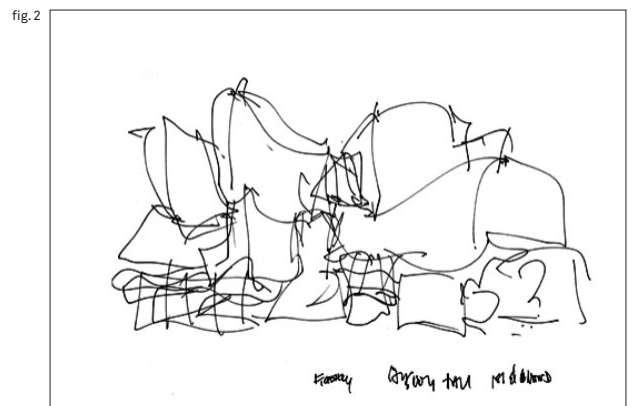


fig.2 A concept sketch for the Los Angeles Performing Arts Center shows an inclination of concept which was further supported by the sketch model, created from the sketch.



fig.3 Intuitive cuts and sculptural moves in the model making process start to shape the form of Gehry's initial sketch concepts. This model was then translated by an engineer, in order to give the building structural integrity. Concepts for programmatic elements, such as form, space and circulation are considerations always present in the process which occurs between Gehry's and the engineer.

(1) [The Sketches of Frank Gehry](#): Dir. Sydney Pollock. American Masters Production Company. LM Media. 2005.

Then the merging of the systematic elements and the content occurs. There is a moment of adjustment and distribution. Back and forth, push and pull, the tension creates the formal expression. The process becomes the design solution.

I have experimented with this process in many design projects. In the **Adaptation of Fit**², I explored two different ways of writing in order to gain content for the graphic expression of a book. I began by using my intuition to extract relevant points from the chapter *Goodness of Fit* in Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*³ (fig. 4). I chose this chapter because I felt it spoke clearly to the ideas and thoughts I was developing in regards to my thesis study. The chapter speaks of how form is created and trusting alternative routes in design, in order to achieve "fit, form and content." By using the excerpts from the chapter as guides I was able to fashion the text to become my own, by adding my own thoughts on the subject of the chapter (fig. 5). Practicing this way of writing enabled me to develop a narrative which supports my ideas about fit, form and content.

I then began again. Still using the Alexander text, I extracted words which appeared before a comma (fig. 6). These words, taken from a moment of pause, formed sentences which developed another narrative and began to fill in the spaces missing from the first writing endeavor. There were now two writing expressions, which supported my thesis ideas. Revealing the writing processes to the viewer through specific typographic treatments supported with imagery, unveiled a richer graphic form, thus visually translating the ideas expressed in the writing.



Goodness of Fit



(fig. 5) Illustrates the typographic treatment which merges my ideas and Alexander's in regards to fit, form, and content. The magenta text represents the excerpts extracted from the chapter, and the black represents my additions and interpretations. The two start to merge and then eventually the Alexander text is removed. This makes the writing my own. The guides are removed and the process is revealed to the reader.

(fig. 6) An example from **Adaptation of Fit**, where the words which appear before a comma are extracted from the text to form the building blocks of a new piece of writing about fit, form and content. The list created from the words starts to develop a framework in which to begin the writing.

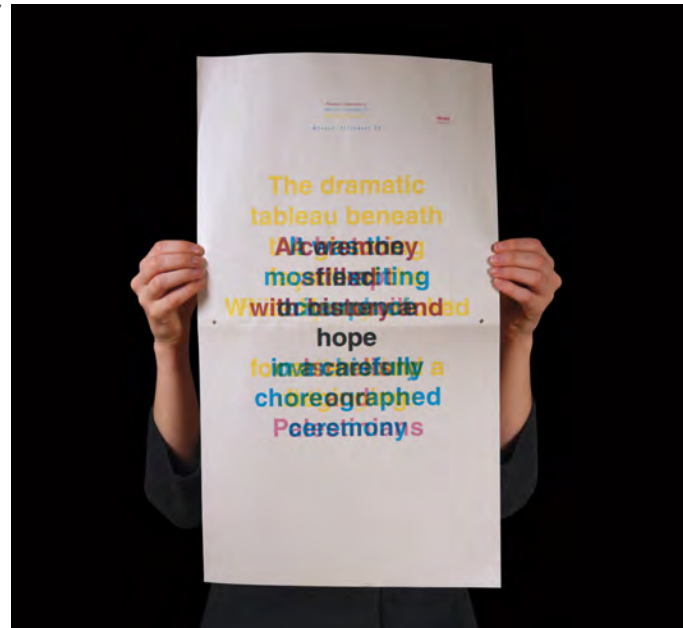
fig. 5



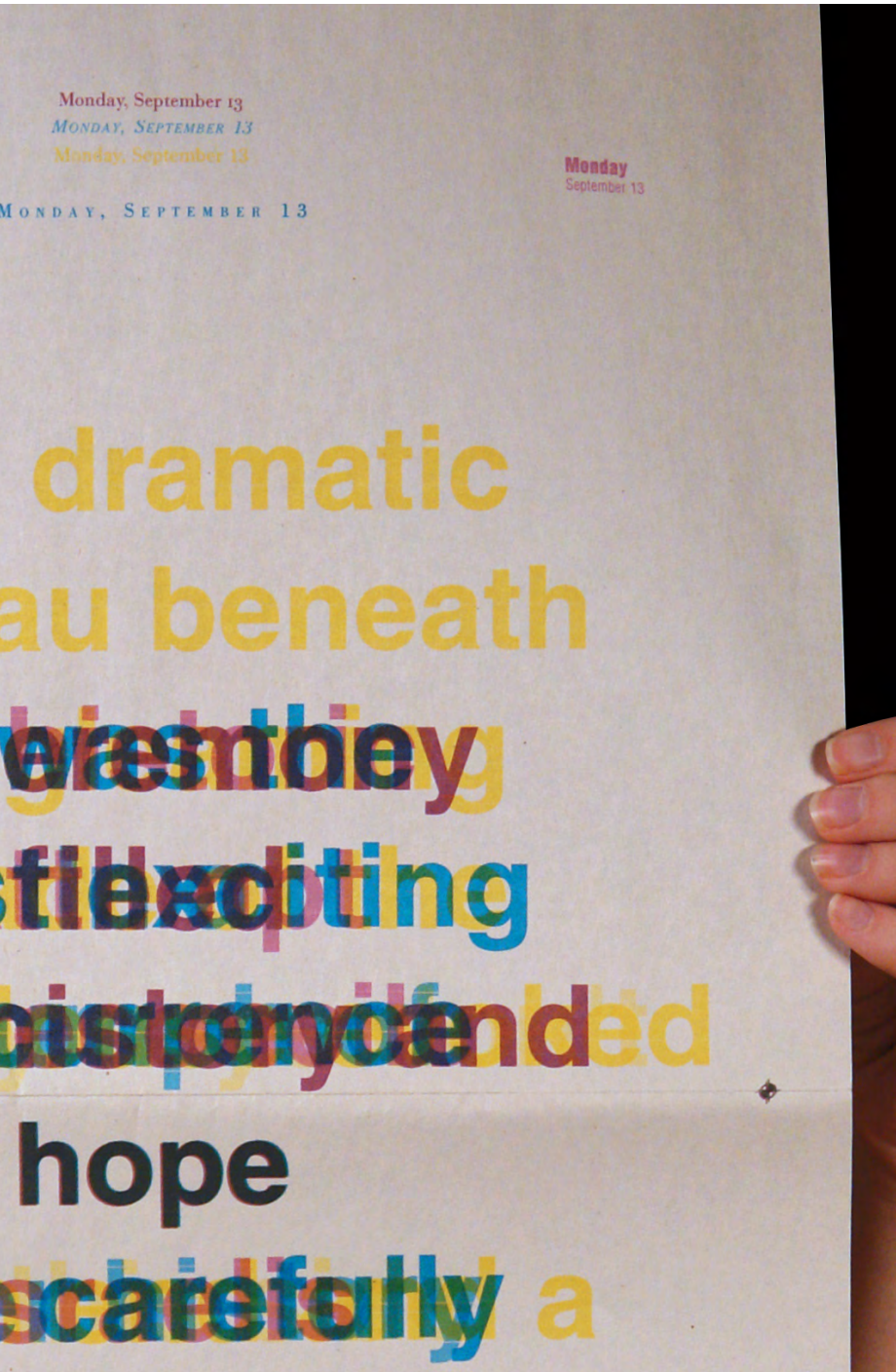
(2) Anne West Writing Workshop: Assignment, Re-Understanding, October 28, 2008.
 (3) Alexander, Christopher: *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Paperback Edition. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA, 1964. (pages 15-27)

A poster series entitled **What Did They Say?** (fig.7) is another experiment of design developing in the Middle Ground. Six different newspapers⁴ from September 13, 1993, running a story about the signing of the Palestinian Peace Accord, provided the content to form a graphic expression. Two different organizational structures were used to reveal the most pertinent information to the viewer. One was the assigning of a specific color to each newspaper, the second was an over-printing system. Over-printing excerpts from each newspaper, in different colors onto a single poster, allowed for the most important messages to show through (fig.8). But what was most interesting was trusting the merge of the two systems, and inviting serendipity in the visual result.

fig.7



(fig. 7) Illustrates the typographic system and the color system working together to reveal the pertinent message from the story being presented. By trusting the over-printing system I was able to find surprise in the form as well as provide the viewer with the most important information. The hierarchies are revealed through the printing process.



(fig. 8) A detailed image of the over-printed poster called "hope" from **What Did They Say?** Dates from the masthead of each newspaper were printed on a newsprint sheet which was scaled to the size of a typical newspaper. The color, typographic treatment and the date, were clues provided for the viewer to know what newspaper was being referenced.

(4) [Boston Globe](#), [Chicago Sun Times](#), [Chicago Tribune](#), [Los Angeles Times](#), [New York Times](#), and [Washington Post](#): Archived Articles from September 14, 1993 (for a stories of events occurring on September 13, 1993.)

Another project, currently in progress, is an exploration of two different ways of retrieving information. **Photo Journey** began by recording a walk from the Graduate Studio of the Rhode Island School of Design, to the school's Nature Lab⁵. Through a regimented recording method, a photograph was taken every 20 paces of the walk, capturing a very structural perception of the journey. The return to the Graduate Studio from the Nature Lab was recorded by photographing randomly during the walk. The position of the camera changed each time an image was taken and provided a more organic way of collecting information (fig.8).

Using this archive of collected material, I would like to place images into two time lapse videos, which will play simultaneously next to each other (fig.9). This will allow the viewer to gather information about the place between the two points. The hope is that the merging of the two videos will create a narrative of surprise which reveals a full expression of the place where the journey exists.

Through the creation of these graphic design studies, which reveal process and in turn create form, I am finding connections and discovering new ways to create a more informed catalogue of design solutions. My hope is that by revealing my process to the viewer, I will be surprised by the form I reveal to myself. Proposing this method of making, to other designers will hopefully spark an interest in method development and foster more informed and visually diverse work.

fig.9

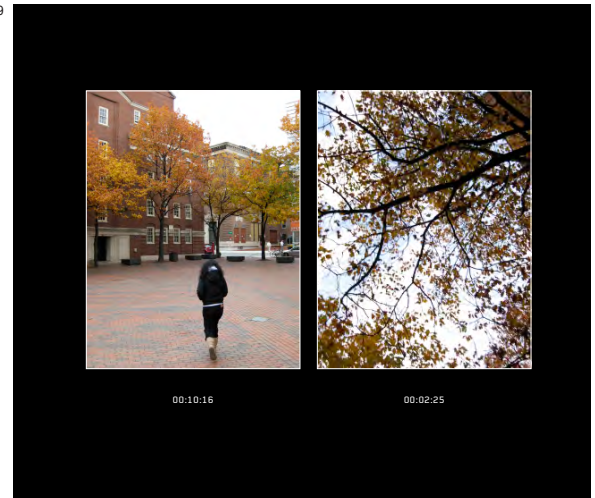


Photo Journey

(5) Rhode Island School of Design Nature Lab: Founded in 1937 by Edna W. Lawrence, the Nature Lab boasts a collection of over 80,000 natural history objects and provides inspiration for students. It is a resource which provides rooms for contemplation and a place to discover.