

2013 AIGA Design Educators Conference. *Education: Looking to our Future*

Title: **After Babel: visualizing the territories of graphic design.**

*Abstract*

Many of us have been taught to consider the ‘history’ of graphic design as essentially linear, a series of ‘ages’ that conform to a process of maturity. Being reborn as ‘graphic design’ in the ferment of modernism allowed commercial or ‘applied’ art to finally break free from any lingering connection to the ‘dark arts’ and the feudal world of printing. And so western graphic design progressed through early professional conquests and a postmodern identity crisis before finally arriving into the digital, globalised arena of Bourriaud’s *Altermodern*. This paper begins by describing a series of student-led seminars that aimed to introduce both graphic design history and the professional and philosophical context it now operates within. The author reflects upon the difficulties of adopting the linear model when considering contemporary practice, arguing that such a simplified, narrow summary is flawed and unable to fully represent the complex landscape of practice that graduates actually enter.

As an alternative, the author will consider how graphic design might be represented in more inclusive terms, accommodating complex and multivariate factors shaped over time by shifting ideologies, technologies and professional contexts. Attempting to represent these through the symbol system of a map the author seeks to acknowledge an organic, complex arrangement of ‘regions’ that reveal the histories, habits, values and traits of the ‘peoples’ and ‘tribes’ that co-exist, sometimes peacefully within the wider graphic landscape. The author will argue that a more inclusive perspective is now critical to accommodate professional and cultural diversity and help design educators break free from the loop of outdated and meaningless arguments that so easily distract and confuse. Accepting such a picture could, for some, lead to a reconsideration of delivery, a shift from institution-centred, tool/task orientated timetables towards a pluralistic, culturally sensitive, student-centred model that reflects the differing forms of intent and intelligence that operate in the design community. To be truly effective such a model would need to acknowledge and articulate through the curriculum differing forms of practice that can be found in the professional arena. The author will reflect upon a subsequent restructuring of delivery that has followed this thinking and propose that such a model is well suited to the needs of future reflective practitioners.

**Keywords:** *Graphic Design, History, Canon, Mapping, Curriculum, Learning*

## **After Babel: visualizing the territories of graphic design.**

*I have no idea what graphic design as a descriptor means anymore. The area it once inhabited has now become so blurred with other disciplines that a whole new world has opened up.* Jonathan Ellery (Twemlow 2006)

### *1.1: Lines*

The ideas discussed in this paper have their roots in a simple strategy adopted by the author and a colleague to raise awareness within an undergraduate student group of both the history of graphic design and the expanded professional and philosophical contexts within which it now operates.

A weekly slot had been created in the timetable for four or five students to each deliver a short talk on a designer or company that they had chosen from a list prepared by the tutors. The need for these talks was confirmed in the first week where a sign-up sheet that included Piet Zwart and Jan Tschichold was assumed to be advertising visiting speakers.

The first term – which intended to introduce key historical figures and movements – was easy to plan, conforming to familiar routes detailed by Meggs (Meggs 1983) and Hollis (Hollis 1994). The aim was to inform students where graphic design had actually come from, how it had emerged from printing and commercial art to be seen as a distinct profession, how modernist pioneers had laid the foundations for innovations in communication design, identity and advertising, and how design was used for propaganda and protest as well as for profit. It charted the influence of successive ‘schools’ and introduced a cast of designers that many of the students had never heard of. Within a few short weeks the focus shifted to more familiar names and the influence of digital technology and postmodernism, the challenge to modernist assumptions regarding communication, the emergence of designers as entrepreneurs, authors and celebrities.

By comparison, the second term – which introduced current practice – was more difficult to plan. The intention was to present a broad spectrum, a ‘freeze-frame’ capturing differing approaches and organizational structures, a blend of those working in the corporate and cultural sectors, the established design consultancies and the rising stars. (*figure 1*) Whereas the first term was relatively ordered and followed a linear, almost chronological order, this second term snatched at a crowded, chaotic and ever-changing scene. Graphic designers were now writing, making film, returning to screen-printing and letterpress, creating software and even handing over ‘design decisions’ to their audience. By necessity, the student research moved from books in the school library and into the design press and a host of websites, blogs and portals. Discussions now regularly featured a questioning of the term ‘graphic designer’ which now seemed antiquated and limiting. Weren’t graphic designers now merely ‘designers’? And wasn’t everyone a designer anyway? Could a trained artist or illustrator also be a graphic designer? If so, what was the value of studying graphics?

Now finding itself in the globalised, highly connected world of Bourriaud’s *altermodern* (Bourriaud 2009) it seemed that ‘graphic design’ had finally arrived at some form of dénouement. Many designers were now borrowing from the model of the artist as *semionaut* (Bourriaud 2002a) ‘inventing trajectories between signs’, imagining ‘the links and likely relations between disparate sites’ (Bourriaud 2002b). Here the designer was less concerned with the brief or a specific final outcome, but focused instead upon identifying possible connections for the temporal creation of ‘micro-utopias’ (Parrinder, Davis 2006) forging paths or facilitating discourse and relationship within specific events. Perhaps this confirmed, as Blauvelt suggested, a shift into a whole new paradigm: a third great phase of design that followed modernist syntactic and postmodern semantic exploration with pragmatic or ‘relational’ innovation (Blauvelt 2008). Not surprisingly the responses to Blauvelt’s post on *Design Observer* confirmed a wider growing sense of confusion around what the term ‘graphic design’ now stood for.

### *1.2: Shapes and patterns*

Perhaps part of the problem is that we have been taught to look for lines. As Martha Scotford suggests, this could be one of the legacies of an education modeled upon art

history (Scotford 1991). We find comfort in the linear optimism of ‘progress’ believing that this is maintained by the canonizing of key works and individuals. As an educator, the author’s initial response to these second term presentations was to look for such a line, a sense of direction or commonality to hold on to. Yet there was no evident sign of one. Perhaps this would come later? With the benefit of hindsight a future generation of design writers and connoisseurs would make sense of this moment and identify the key works and the true pioneers as they forged the continued path of progress.

In the first term presentations the reliance upon what may be considered to be the graphic design canon led to the nagging suspicion that we were succumbing to a ‘speed-reading’ of history shaped by heroes, who were almost entirely white, western and male. Furthermore the focus upon quality and upon ‘epochs’ or periods of innovation was somehow narrowing the bigger picture, reducing graphic designers to a herd that had abandoned fashion and editorial in the eighties to dally with French literary theory before finding DIY and ‘responsible’ design. Whilst the second term may have presented a confusing picture of contemporary practice, it was one that confirmed that there were also many designers quietly getting on with their work in the familiar, less glamorous territories of identity, branding and publishing.

So maybe there was another way to make sense of this complexity, to look for the ‘shapes’ and ‘patterns’ of practice rather than ‘lines’ of progress? The most obvious method would be group according to the final outcomes – posters, books, identities and websites. This might be helpful in identifying specialists, trends and innovations but could easily neglect to consider the context in which they were produced. Another possibility would be to follow Richard Hollis’s example and seek to identify national variations in practice (Hollis 1994), yet this becomes difficult in an increasingly globalised world. A more balanced picture could be found by listing what the designer actually designs ‘for’ and Alice Twemlow offers an encouraging and exhaustive list of graphic design’s contribution to society whilst warning against the drift into cataloguing every ‘effect and item’(Twemlow 2006). In contrast Adrian Shaughnessy concurs with Vignelli that ultimately there are only two kinds of graphic designer: the structured designer ‘rooted in

history and semiotics and problem solving’ and the ‘emotional designer’ who is ‘more rooted in the liberal arts – painting, figurative arts, advertising, trends, and fashions’ (Shaughnessy 2006). Yet this simple distinction seems flawed when it separates the worlds of advertising and fashion from their essential connections with history and semiotics. And what of the designer whose practice is embedded in a particular process, such as programming or letterpress?

Some of the most interesting insights began to emerge when attention was shifted from the *effect*, or final product, and onto the original *intent*. In most cases a project or brief is framed within an arrangement that usually – although not always exclusively – comprises the designer, the client and the means of production. On the evidence of talks in both terms, the balance of this three-point arrangement is rarely equal but contingent upon the subtle, often tacit expectations and understandings that bring the three together. A client might choose a designer for a particular approach or specialism. Designers might seek a client for their profile, the freedom they might grant, or their money. Framed within this arrangement, the actual brief is comparatively benign, subject to interpretation and influence from where the ‘dominant focus’ lies. (*figure 2*).

For example, many designers – particularly those working in identity, branding and advertising – would primarily describe themselves as ‘problem solvers’. Here the client may be the ‘dominant focus’ since they have a specific need and the designer is expected to find a solution using appropriate media. The language used reflects this: ideas are ‘working’ or ‘not working’; ‘on’ or ‘off-brief’ and because there are ‘problems’ there are also ‘solutions’. The designer’s ego, sense of individuality or personal ‘style’ can be problematic in this area because the focus is firmly upon the client and solving their particular problem.

In contrast there are other designers who choose to assert a stronger presence in their work. This could be in the use of a signature style or approach, or in the subjective interpretation of content (Rock 1998). Examples would include Kim Hiorthøy, Jonathan Barnbrook, Ed Fella and Marion Bantjes. This area also includes projects in which the

designer has effectively become their own client, generating personal content often for entrepreneurial ventures.

Finally there are projects where the focus is neither upon the client nor the designer, but upon process and for graphic designers this may be various forms of printing, coding or aspects of typography. Spiekermann (Pipes 2001) identifies a clear distinction between typographic designers who ‘work from the word up’ and graphic designers who work ‘from the picture down’. Within this area there are designers who design typefaces and those who only use existing fonts, those who work with highly personal styles and those who seek to be anonymous. What unites them all is a primary focus upon typography.

*(figure 3)*

However, attempts to place individuals and companies in each area confirm that this simple three-point structure lacked the sophistication to express the subtle variations in each. For example within typography there were the deep ideological differences revealed in conflicts between Tschichold and Bill, and Crouwel and Van Toorn. Many ‘client-focused’ designers had raised objections to the values operating in advertising and branding through the *First Thing First* Manifesto of 1964. And then there are the powerful forces of intent that remain largely hidden, for instance when a designer works for a client but subconsciously may be driven to achieve valuable peer approval in the form of awards.

Such subtle nuances can be lost when history is presented as a progressive sequence of causal leaps, when the focus is purely upon qualitative judgments rather than a broader concern for inclusion. As Andrew Blauvelt (Blauvelt 1994) has noted, to consider the complex influences that shape practice inevitably leads towards the notion of multiple *histories* of graphic design. This resonates with Steve Baker’s call for graphic design history to be considered in feminine, spatial terms exploring poetry and metaphor (Baker 1994). His reference to the ‘gendered sign’ of embroidery seems particularly pertinent if we were to consider these histories as woven within a complex fabric. So could the spatial

aspect be somehow visualized and could the process of visualization facilitate deeper understanding?

### *1.3: Trees, rhizomes and maps*

One familiar form of visualization is the genealogical family tree, with core ideas or values providing the main ancestral body with related individuals, ideas and artifacts branching out in chronological sequence. Yet the tree is essentially a centralized, hierarchical model and is unable to account for the interaction or relationship between individuals other than through the sharing of the one common root. In *Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information* Manuel Lima (Lima 2011) charts the shift away from the phylogenetic tree towards the adoption of ‘network thinking’ as a means not only to represent but also to explore relationships. Lima offers a multitude of complex visualizations to support: network interconnections revealed in ‘elliptical implosions’, ‘radial convergences’ and ‘centralized bursts’. The value of such models is in the revealing of patterns, such as global access to political blogs or journal paper citations. Yet one could argue that this is achieved at the expense of metaphor and allegory.

Lima also refers to Christopher Alexander’s *A City is not a Tree* (Alexander 1966) and specifically to the model of the ‘semi-lattice’. Here Alexander demonstrates how various sets overlap within urban settings, creating non-hierarchical, non-symmetric arrangement: a ‘complex fabric’, which Alexander claims to be the ‘structure of living things’. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) consider the rhizome as a kind of map, which fits neatly with Alexander’s identification of living things co-existing and overlapping within a structure. (figure 4). The model of the map underpins the emerging practice of sociomapping, which attempts to accommodate ‘fuzzy sets’ of graded, non-binary memberships<sup>2</sup> in the evaluation of group and team dynamics.

Could graphic design be conceptualized in cartographic terms? Certainly Gestalt principles of similarity and proximity could be used to infer relationships, the passage of time or the growth of a community around an idea or a particular individual. Similarly

winding roads, highways, bridges and dams all carry associated concepts that could articulate particular periods in history, innovation and change.

Within this arrangement areas of ‘dominant focus’ could be distinct – rather like continents – large enough to hold great diversity. A ‘client-centered’ continent – shaped by the deep geological forces of sales and responsibility – would be home to the ‘ideas men’ of the New York School but also ‘citizen designers’ and those working in art direction and publishing (*figure 5*). A ‘designer-centered’ continent would be divided into a multitude of regional passions, convictions and obsessions whilst a ‘process-centered’ continent would reveal the historic/geographic split between printing and typography well as areas ‘discovered’ by the pioneers of modern typography (*figures 6*), open-source coding and interaction design. These separate domains could function as regions, separated not by distinct physical boundaries, but similar to the graded, non-binary, fuzzy sets that feature in sociomapping. As in physical geography these may be evidenced in the distribution of particular dialects and customs.

Clearly any move from the written, linear and chronological towards the visual, non-linear and organic requires careful scholarship, a fact quickly confirmed in the attempts to begin such a map. The distribution of individuals into specific ‘continents’ is followed by the difficult task of setting comparative distances and identifying key lines of communication. Certain individuals, ideas and influences ‘travel’ and would therefore need to be represented in more than one continent and sometimes the space between designer, client and process is not always clear, representing the kind of overlap identified in Alexander’s semi-lattice. However the shift of focus from final artifacts and linear history presents an opportunity to acknowledge those from outside of the canon including non-western designers, women designers, street artists etc.

Evidently without the kind of hard data utilized in sociomapping such a project can only ever be interpretive, like early forms of cartography drawn with crude instruments and based upon the accounts of travelers. Such a map cannot aspire to replace the book, however, set within such a ‘non-linear, pluralist environment where conclusions are

unlikely and all is deemed a work in progress' (Hardy 2006) the speculative mapping of a world of 'interconnected differences' seems to offer a dynamic and inclusive means of communicating both contemporary practice and roots within history. As Beck reassuringly reminds, the purpose of such a model is not to detail exactly any 'pre-existing reality' but merely to facilitate a 'working understanding' of reality to suit the purposes of the task (Beck 1993), which is, in this case, to create a critical framework with which to discuss graphic design history. Furthermore, the recognition and allocation of space to the many tribes, values and language codes within professional practice is by nature an inclusive process, dependent upon the suspension of judgment. Such a model provides the structural framework to dismantle many of the prejudicial, cyclical arguments concerning the definition of what a graphic design actually is or should be. Freed from an insistent focus upon 'the client' and 'the problem', a designer can justifiably function as an interpreter, a facilitator and an author. Radical calls for responsible 'citizen designers' are accommodated, but only as part of a broader picture that also acknowledges personal, occasionally indulgent practice

### *2.1: The map and the curriculum*

To embrace the conceptual model of graphic design as territories immediately invokes a challenge to design educators. The differing forms of graphic design practice demand an uneven distribution of sensibilities, perceptions and abilities required to survive and thrive in each particular region. Here the concept of multiple intelligences, pioneered by Howard Gardner, seems particularly relevant<sup>2</sup>. Defining an intelligence as a 'biopsychological potential of our species to process certain kinds of information in certain kinds of way' Gardner draws distinction with learning styles, which focuses upon the manner in which an individual may engage with materials. (Gardner 2012)

Gardner's emphasis upon both the individuation of learning and the pluralisation of modes of delivery resonates with the model of a liberal arts education, where students can choose and combine from a variety of disciplines from the broad spectrum of arts, science and philosophy. Yet one could argue that a pluralistic model could equally find expression specifically within the discipline of graphic design where varying forms of practice surely

demand differing balances of verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical and visual/spatial ‘intelligences’? For example, the balance of skills and intelligences required to structure a complex online guide to healthcare would not be so useful when generating concepts to sell trainers, the sensibilities required in music packaging are different to those in environmental signage, and ‘citizen designers’ would be greatly disadvantaged without strong interpersonal intelligence. Process-oriented designers, particularly those engaged with letterpress and screen-printing will no doubt draw from a balance of bodily-kinesthetic and spatial intelligence, but since they work with words and patterns may also utilize aspects of linguistic intelligence. As a consequence, it seems increasingly futile to consider the existence of any one ‘design process’, only as Lawson concludes, certain commonalities within all designers (Lawson 2006).

To educators working with limited resources on vastly overcrowded programs this highly complex picture presents a daunting challenge. And so when attempting to create a suitable learning environment to prepare students for contemporary practice, it is tempting to abandon ‘disciplines’ and boundaries to allow the student to find their own personal ‘narrative’. Yet Beck warns that in the quest to democratize education we should not ‘dismantle all structures in the hope that something happens’ but rather to seek areas of commonality and continuity and create ‘structures that offer support’ (Beck 1993). It is the author’s belief that the acknowledgement of differing areas of focus within graphic design practice provides the foundation for such a structure. However to adopt this requires a shift in thinking.

For some institutions there is a pressing need to loosen or restructure the curriculum, to move away from tool/task-oriented deliveries creating standardized, modular outcomes towards something more contextually sensitive and discursive. ‘Graphic design’ can no longer be ‘taught’ as a singular activity with a defined sequence of professional maneuvers leading to pre-determined outcomes. To prosper in an increasingly globalised world, future designers will need to be comfortable and conversant with professional plurality and able to embrace value conflicts, ambiguities and constant change. To engage

with this may be uncomfortable, but it offers the potential for deeper learning. (Light, Cox & Calkins 2009)

## *2.2: Navigation*

For the author and colleague, working within the comparative luxury of a small, studio-based non-modular course this has required only a simple adjustment: replacing the singular and staggered delivery of varied briefs to all 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students with three optional routes based upon the areas of dominant focus as outlined earlier. To inform choice, the differing requirements and responses in each route is made explicit in the wording of the briefs and learning outcomes. Students may choose to remain on one route throughout the year or move between the three, consequently resolving any conflict of ‘breadth versus depth’ becomes the responsibility of the student.

Obviously one of key aim of the educator is to identify any points where the student arrives at what is referred to as ‘flow’: a deeper sense of immersion and satisfaction that signifies that the student is engaged in a task that is right for them (Goleman 1996). For some students this has been evident when they have been given the time to resolve complex problems in the design of a book, for others this has come when a tight deadline demands rapid idea generation. Since this simple observation points to both their own balance of ‘intelligences’ and where they might fit in the extended landscape of professional practice, it is helpful in assessment and shaping a ‘personal curriculum’.

This model benefits the student in two key ways. Firstly it offers the opportunity for greater focus towards the area of employment that they would seek to enter. Secondly it presents the opportunity for discussion and comparison. Mixing the crit groups extends the learning environment beyond one of mere transferability and into the deeper, ongoing dialogues of genuine reflective practice.

Having operated within this model for four years the author would acknowledge a necessary increase in administration and occasional difficulties in shifting focus whilst working in mixed groups. Also the three-point structure is clearly vulnerable to

solidifying into a subtle form of dogma and needs always to be open to challenge and revision. However these seem to be acceptable challenges in the attempt to create a richer learning environment, one that truly acknowledges the vast and complex arena that the student will enter into.

*Notes:*

1. Developed by Dr Radvan Bahbouh, Sociomapping uses the model of a map to visualize and evaluate data. It is particularly popular in analyzing group dynamics with teams and social groups.  
<http://www.sociomap.com/en/info/>  
<http://www.lauriate.com/tools/sociomapping/>  
<http://team.sociomap.com/>
2. A full and detailed account of Howard Gardner's work within this field can be found on his website: <http://howardgardner.com/multiple-intelligences>. Gardner's list of intelligences comprises: logical-mathematical; spatial; linguistic; bodily-kinesthetic; musical; interpersonal; intrapersonal; naturalistic. The possibility of an additional, 'existential' intelligence has also been considered by Gardner.

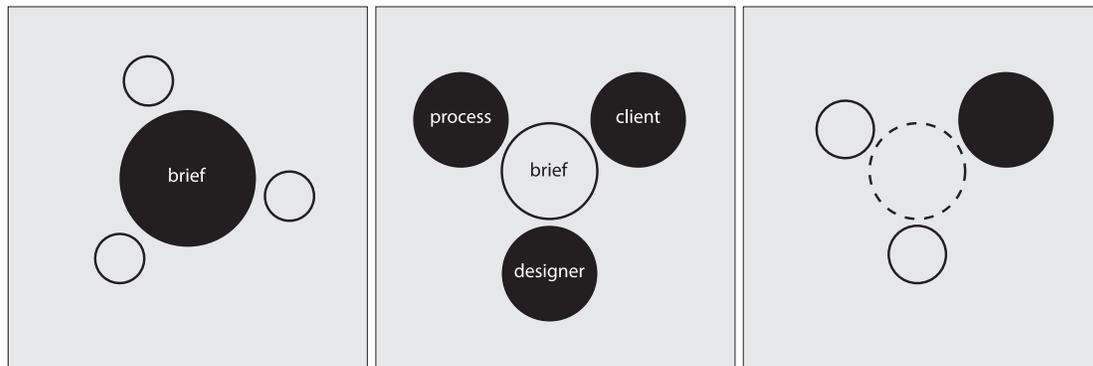
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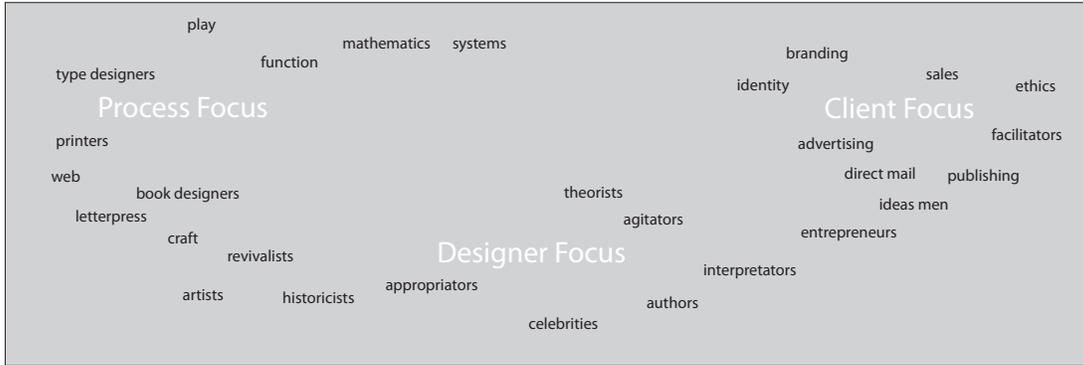
Figures

Term 1	Term 2
<p>El Lissitzky John Heartfield Piet Zwart Alexander Rodchenko AM Cassandre Ladislav Sutnar Jan Tschichold Max Bill Abram Games Paul Rand Bruno Munari Alexei Brodovitch Anthony Froshaug Otl Aicher</p> <p>Wim Crouwel Jan Van Toorn Herb Lubalin Milton Glaser Saul Bass Robert Brownjohn Emil Ruder Karl Gerstner Wolfgang Weingart April Greiman Paula Scher Tibor Kalman Barney Bubbles Peter Saville</p>	<p>Made Thought Daniel Eatock Lewis Moberly Muller+Hess Allofus Sam Winston ICO Design Kerr Noble Thomas Matthews Shepherd Fairey Browns KesselsKramer LUST Graphical House</p> <p>Wolf Olins Kim Hiorthoy Farrow The Partners A2/SW/HK Experimental Jetset The Heads of State Graphic Thought Facility Pentagram Steven Byram Universal Everything Landor Frantisek Storm Le Gun</p>

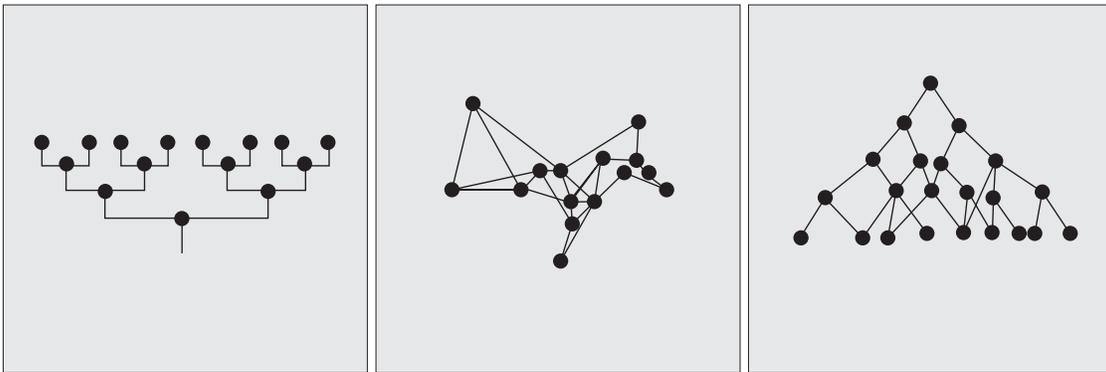
**Figure 1.** The designers and companies featured in talks for terms 1 and 2. Term 1 (left) focusing upon key historical figures and term 2 (right) introducing contemporary practice. Academic year 2007/8.



**Figure 2.** In most cases a 'project' or 'brief' is framed within an arrangement that usually comprises the designer, the client and the means of production. Framed within this arrangement, the actual brief is comparatively benign, subject to interpretation and influence from where the 'dominant focus' lies.



**Figure 3.** Charting the diversity within each area of focus.



**Figure 4.** (left) The hierarchical tree model. (centre) In contrast the rhizome is non-hierarchical and offers multiple entry points (right) The semi-lattice, which according to Christopher Alexander occurs as a collection of sets, ‘if and only when two overlapping sets belong to the collection, then the set of elements common to both also belong to the collection’.



**Figure 5.** (left) Some of the design activities found within the client-focus domain. (centre) Location of publishing and art direction within a notional client-focus ‘continent’. (right) Preliminary attempt to group key figures into strands or ‘sets’ without creating hierarchy through relative size and weight.



**Figure 6.** Speculative mapping suggesting the deployment - predominantly by Swiss designers - of modernist design principles into the new area of identity systems and information design.