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Use of the semantics of typography in architectural design education

Selay Yurtkuran^a, Gözde Kırılı^a, Yavuz Taneli^{a*}

^a*Uludag University, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Architecture, Bursa, Turkey*

Abstract

Visual representation of architectural products and processes has consistently attracted the interest of design researchers and educators. Composing these visual materials into a striking and harmonious presentation is a creative design problem itself. This study describes a Basic Design Studio exercise that explores the boundaries of practice in representing visual material through the semantics of typography. Using only typography, students rephrased a ‘transparent’ scene of the built environment they themselves photographed. A subsequent analysis revealed that the exercise was effective in transposing the semantics of the selected visual using typography.

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* Yavuz Taneli Tel.: +90-224-294-2144; fax: +90-224-280-8558.

E-mail address: yavuz@uludag.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Architectural design education is based on design studio courses. Design studios require an environment that fosters creativity and experiential learning. The main objective of design studios is to give the students required skills for creative problem solving and critical thinking. Studio participants interact with facilitators as well as other students throughout the design process which improves their communication skills and group working capabilities. Schön (1985) describes the architectural studio as a prototype of ‘education for artistry and problem-setting’. The design studio environment is a place for students to learn both about designing and about learning to design (Schön 1985).

Basic Design is a course in which Schön’s description of the design studio environment holds. The course broadly encompasses fundamentals of design theory in general, as well as the creativity process in particular. In addition to the wide range of theoretical and methodological issues of design, architectural presentation theory is also covered.

Architectural presentation that engages with visuals of the final product as well as the design process has always been of interest to design researchers and educators. The visuals of the proposed final product are usually structured as models, sketches, 3D computer generated images, hand drawn perspectives, schemas, diagrams, project reports, and computer animated videos. How to compose these visual materials into an eye-catching and harmonious presentation is a creative design problem for the designer.

Most institutions providing architectural education teach architectural presentation techniques in their curriculum in a separate course or as a subject of a related course. These courses usually cover theoretical topics of graphic design basics such as, the concept of layout, typography, and communication fundamentals. The theory based teaching approach may or may not result in students successfully gaining solid presentation skills. Nonetheless, the process of designing a presentation is a very promising and entertaining way for students to learn how to create and design. Although often omitted in architectural education, typography has great potential as a practical tool for teaching a number of desired presentation and design skills.

Harkins (2010) provides a succinct description of typography as “the art or craft of arranging letters and words.” He elaborates; *‘typography also allows for the arrangement of letters and words (along with other visual matter) to be reassembled and replicated as few or as many times as is necessitated by the demands of what is to be communicated (the content)’*. (Harkins 2010, p.14)

Although text is a meaningful entity by itself, that meaning can change in the way its pieces are combined and composed. In other words, the meaning of text is dependent on how textual material is structured. The semantic value of text in architectural presentation cannot be underestimated. However, the semantics of the textual material itself; in this case the semantics of letters and the typographic characters usually slips designers’ minds. Letters actually have a subject matter of their own and this assumption might have a dramatic educational potential in terms of understanding the process of design. Cullen (2012) defines typography as a process, and a sophisticated craft, making language visible. Designers form language with type, and consequently words gain life and power. Typography has semantic and aesthetic functions. Type that serves both roles simultaneously can be considered successful (Cullen, 2012, p.12).

The Basic Design Studio considers text and typography as a vital component for representing ideas and the design product itself. Additionally, letters, typographic characters, and typography are potential educational tools in terms of understanding the process of design and creativity. Leeuwen (2006) suggests that typography can be interpreted as a semiotic mode that is systematic, and multimodal. Therefore, typography is not just textual, but possesses ideational and interpersonal meaning (Leeuwen 2006). Emphasizing multimodality, Nørgaard (2009) identifies a restricted focus on word-meaning in literary criticism that ignores the semiotic potential of typography. Thus, the authors suggest that typography and its material can be instrumental in translating and visually rephrasing images such as photos of the built environment and abstract compositions. A design exercise that utilizes the multimodal characteristics of typography is described below.

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