

Written world. A platform for collective research and creation of signs for public places

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ABSTRACT

Vernacular signs are a valuable aspect of cultural heritage, an essential element in the definition and expression of the identity of a place, and a key factor in its legibility and liveability.

This paper proposes an internet platform as a useful tool for the collective cataloguing and valorisation of this endangered heritage, with the aim of better celebrating, promoting, and preserving its diversity. This platform would not only include an open database of the best signs from everywhere in the world, but would also be a shared space for experimentation on new meanings, forms, and materials for future signs.

The Cumulus conference, *Open Design for E-very-thing*, in Hong Kong, is a great context to share past experiences and fresh ideas with other members of the association, who might be interested in joining the project in different cities worldwide. This would also provide the possibility of meeting individuals and groups, from Hong Kong and elsewhere, that are already working on similar initiatives. The objective during the conference is to create a small group to work on the prototype for the platform and to then apply it as a trial in a few locations.

This platform, which, in this paper, will be referred to as *Written World (WW)*, would be a laboratory for debate and reflection that would open up interesting new perspectives on the protection of the graphic heritage, as well as the processes of research, education, and creation of alternative forms of communication in public spaces.

Keywords: signs, heritage, vernacular

INTRODUCTION

"One of the things I try to show my students is that historical grounding does not exclude being contemporary. The future is not the opposite of the past. I try to get my students to imagine this practice as having roots that go deep and wide into the ground, to be able to build something substantial and durable. Because otherwise it'll blow away in the wind."
(Tobias Frere-Jones, in Kim, 2014, p.145)

Vernacular signage evokes a sense of place and sustains collective memory, however, it is vanishing everywhere and being substituted by global logos and standardised plastic signs. Traditional and distinctive styles, crafts, materials, and techniques, as well as the traces of local history, are disappearing with these old signs (González Riaza, 2011).

This paper proposes a platform, managed by Cumulus members, as a tool for the collective gathering of information on vernacular signs in public spaces from all around the world and a comprehensive cataloguing of those considered as cultural heritage, with the aim of preserve their richness and diversity. There would also be activities for the promotion of the content of the database, as well as the research and creation based on it.

Antecedents

This proposal for a platform is based on the study led by the author for their PHD thesis, as well as on the experience of the many projects and fieldwork designed and conducted by her between 2003 and 2015.

Several of these projects had an interactive site on the Internet as a key element and they were developed with contributions from many users. Signs in public spaces constitute an object of study of such magnitude that to address it collectively was considered, from the beginning, as the best way to go.

The first project was *Written Europe* (WE) a three-year-long collective research project on European graphic heritage and vernacular signs, supported by the Socrates programme of the European Union and conducted between 2003 and 2006.

The partners were four design schools in Amsterdam, Madrid, Prague, and Riga: the Escuela de Arte Número Diez de Madrid, coordinator of the project; the Grafisch Lyceum Amsterdam; Stredni Prumyslove Skoly Graficke of Prague; and the Amatniecibas Vidusskola, from Riga.

A key to the success of this project was its open collaborative website, www.written-europe.org, managed and accessed directly by users at different levels. It was designed to facilitate the participation of all students and teaching staff from four schools in different countries, over three years, each one managing their part of the project, exchanging information and ideas through the web (Figure 1), in a dynamic process of collective research, evaluation, and creation (González Riaza, 2010).

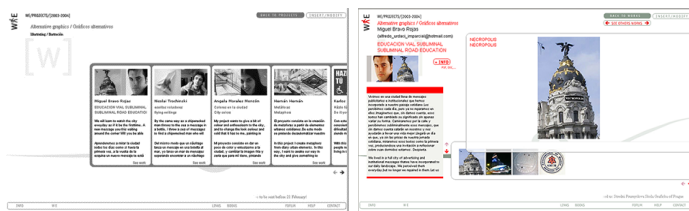


Figure 1. Gallery of projects - *Written Europe* website

The WE website showed the evolution of the project and its results. It had 62,500 visits over three years and many more afterwards, until it was closed. There were 2,500 registered users who shared their work there. It was a pioneering platform, in many ways, and it was one of the reasons why the project was selected as *Success Story*, to be published and presented in Berlin during the launch of the *Lifelong Learning Project* of the European Union, in May 2007.

Many people and groups from outside academia showed interest in the project, which led to the design of another project, open to the participation of everyone: www.ciudad-escrita.org

Ciudad escrita was launched as an open platform with a database and other tools to collect and share information and to promote the creation of better signs for public spaces (Gonzalez Riaza, 2004, 2006a y 2006b). It included activities for the valorisation of signs, such as *Cañas tipográficas* (Figure 2), a virtual and a physical walk around old bars, tabernas, and other old establishments with good vernacular signs, that was designed for the closing ceremony of the II International Typography Congress in Madrid (Gamonal Arroyo, 2011).



Figure 2. *Cañas tipográficas*, a typographic walk in Madrid.

Besides *Written Europe* and *Ciudad Escrita*, the author has designed and coordinated other national and international projects related to signs, public spaces and cultural heritage, such as *Breda ciudad escrita*, for the city of Breda, with the St. Joost Academy, and *Written Lavapiés*, for an old neighbourhood in Madrid. Both projects used a methodology of research and design with several stages: photographic safari, classification of signs into several categories (*local/specific, non-local, global, common*), diagnosis, and, finally, a proposal of intervention.

In *La universidad escrita*, a new typeface was designed from the remaining original Art Deco letterforms in the Faculty of Philology of the Complutense University in Madrid. The aim was to preserve and enhance the university's visual identity.

In *Written Madrid*, new typefaces from Madrid's old storefront signage were designed with the direction of the author and the participation of the Dutch typographer Martin Majoor, alongside other Spanish typographers and designers.

Over two years, the Escuela Superior de Diseño de Madrid contributed to the initiative of the Rijksmuseum, *Rijkstudio: Make your own Masterpiece*, encouraging creation and design using the contents of this new open platform. The projects *Written Madrid*, *Written Breda* and *Rijkstudio* had the support of the Dutch Embassy in Madrid.

Design as Ethno-Tourism, a Collective and Multidisciplinary Design Project on Madrid Public Spaces

Design as Ethno-tourism was an Erasmus Intensive Project, coordinated by the author in Escuela Superior de Diseño de Madrid, in 2012-2013. The other partners were: Chelsea College of Art and Design, from the University of the Arts London; Luca School of Art, from Brussels; the Fine Arts Faculty, from the Complutense University of Madrid; the Fine Arts Faculty, from the University of Oporto; and the Faculty of Architecture, from the Technical University of Crete.

More than 70 students and lecturers from different disciplines met in Madrid for two weeks to study its public spaces and to design for them, together with many collaborators from the city, such as DIMAD, Madrid Designers Association; Intermediae, Space for Contemporary Creation; COAM, the College of Architects; Madrid City Council; and many other local individuals and groups, some from the Red de Arquitecturas Colectivas, such as Basurama or Red de Huertos Urbanos. The local collaborators helped in many ways, including lending

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their work and exhibition spaces, showing participants around the city, and coming to present their work to the students and then giving feedback on their insights and proposals. In this sense, it was a trial run for the collaboration between different stakeholders and the local support system that this paper proposes as a key factor for making change possible.

A vital part of this project was coming to understand and consider the views of local people and the city as a whole. During the first stage of the project, a method of urban ethnography was used, in which, through fieldwork, interviews, direct observation, notes, travel journals, photographs, videos, mind maps, creative writing, and other tools, participants identified keys in the configuration of a neighbourhood or the city, as well as the behaviour of the *natives*, seen through the eyes of a newcomer.

The data collected was subjected to further collective critical interpretation. Finally, multidisciplinary teams developed general, and respectful, recommendations and specific design proposals for each of the chosen sites. Many interesting new insights and ideas arose during these days of very intense work together, as illustrated in Figure 3.



Figures. A part of the previous research and one of the proposals for *Design as Ethnotourism*

A key to this project's success was the possibility of including the views of designers coming to the city from other places, for whom it was much easier to appreciate what was really specific and unique to Madrid, and who were then able to propose ideas and solutions based on the experience of their life elsewhere.

Besides organising similar events in the *Written World* project, with various partners working physically in the same place, a shared Internet platform could also be a virtual meeting *plaza* for sharing different views on vernacular signs and, thus, a multiplier of ideas and resources.

The Written World Proposal

Educational institutions have the duty to raise awareness of the richness and diversity of the cultural heritage, and this includes objects of design and craftsmanship. Cumulus is an ideal arena to discuss this and to find ways of working together on the inventory of this heritage. This initiative proposes to start this inventory with vernacular signage from all around the world, using a platform that will include:

- 1) **Space for record and inventory:** the database structure and fields have been designed to comply with the main international standards, tools, and recommended list of categories for cultural heritage, as well as the necessary specific categories for signs. There is already a complete proposal to be reviewed and adapted by the WW team.
- 2) **Space for research, study, and promotion of the database contents:** through the platform, activities that allow collective analysis and enhancement of the compiled material would be organised, such as walking, bike, bus or virtual sign tours, like *Cañas Tipográficas* (Figure 4); interactive games; apps and educational tools; collective voting and reviews; research projects and comparative studies; and think-tanks. Cumulus conferences could

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be great opportunities for exhibitions, intensive workshops, or photographic safaris.



Figure 4. Images of the typographic walk *Cañas tipográficas*, in Madrid

- 3) **Space of creation:** new and better signs would be designed from the material collected in the database, learning from vernacular signage, like the typefaces that resulted from the *Written Madrid* project (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *La Moderna*, one of the open *Written Madrid* fonts, freely distributed on Neo2 magazine website (Jorge Hernández, 2012).

Written World could have Laboratories for experimental projects on new communication needs, for example, sustainability, poetry, or the specific needs of a community, such as children or disabled people. It could also help to set new guidelines and recommendations for the design of new signs and to identify, promote, and award the best practices of visual communication in public spaces.

The platform will be open to everyone but with different user profiles. Schools of design from all around the world could be the managers and core contributors to the project and Cumulus could be the perfect context to start developing it.

There are many interesting websites showing signs from many places in the world, often using existing tools like Flickr or Pinterest (Frere-Jones, 2014). *Written World* could use these similar tools in some stages, however, one of the key aspects of the project is that the information contained in its database will be selected and authenticated by experts from each partner design school or university, who would be responsible for the quality of the content they share.

Local Support System

Along with the proposal for the platform, other elements for a wider management system will be recommended by *Written World*. Through the community of design schools and universities as coordinators it could be possible to engage many other users in each city and country. Even though education is the basis of this project, in order to make the necessary changes in the streets possible, it would be necessary to develop a local network of different stakeholders, such as local government, associations, specialists in heritage and urban landscape, designers, typographers, art historians, computer engineers, and other professionals, citizens, and visitors. In Madrid, the project *Ciudad escrita* was presented in the inauguration of the new headquarters of dimad, the Madrid Designers Association, the new Central de Diseño in Matadero Madrid (Figure 6).

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Figure 6. Ciudad escrita, in Central de Diseño, Matadero Madrid

The partner schools and universities could help local responsible entities to establish categories of protection and conservation policies for graphic heritage, as well as advising on the relevant signs in each place and as part of conservation and restoration projects. They could also help to collect physical signs and collaborate with a possible Museum of Signs, or similar, in each location, when possible. In some cities there are already museums of signs, like the Buchstaben Museum, in Berlin or Neon Boneyard, in Las Vegas, but collecting the best signs should start as soon as possible, even in the absence of a museum. Suitable alternative spaces could be found, such as inside a university or school of design. There are precedents, such as in Central Saint Martin's Design School, in London, where there is a large collection of signs collected from the streets of the city or *The Montréal Signs Project*, where signs rescued or donated by the owner are exhibited in different exhibition spaces within a university campus.

Education and Research: Environmental Graphic Design

Interest in Environmental Graphic Design is growing worldwide. In recent years, there has been an increase in books written on the subject, events organised, as well as a growing number of lines of research, courses, and undergraduate and graduate programs on the subject. The platform we propose could have a very important educational role and, from it, quality training in this field of design would be encouraged.

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Written World would address the issue of the protection of diversity but also other important subjects related to the meaning and shape of communication in the public spaces. *"The city is in itself a powerful symbol of a complex society"* (Lynch, 1960, p.5). Involved schools could promote and coordinate theses, final projects, and other research and innovation projects. Debate and experimentation, which should be an essential factor in design education, are needed to answer questions like these: How can communication be used in public spaces to improve people's lives? What are the most appropriate styles, materials, and techniques for each place? What kind of messages are allowed and which ones are silenced? Could signs help in understanding the spatial and temporal dimension of a city, telling its history, intensifying the experience and celebration of the shared present, anticipating the future, and facilitating necessary changes?: *"It is when local time, local place, and our own selves are secure that we are ready to face challenge, complexity, vast space, and the enormous future"* (1971, p.89)

Conclusion

This paper is an invitation for Cumulus members to join the *WW Written World* project. It proposes using a shared internet platform for the collective compilation of an inventory of the best vernacular signs worldwide, the promotion of the appreciation and understanding of their value and the creation of better new signs for public places.

The model for *Written World* is the result of the research conducted by the author on heritage management and projects on vernacular signs, as well as further experience and fieldwork related to these subjects. The structure proposed in this model, has been applied to previous projects and tested already. In *WW*, it would be adapted and tested again, together with

partner schools and key stakeholders in their cities.

Written World could be a prototype for similar initiatives in other areas of design within the framework of Cumulus. There is enormous potential in a tool that would allow members of the association to work together online on subjects of common interest between conferences, and could enable unprecedented forms of engagement. It would be possible to use this common platform to share information, insights and innovative proposals, as well as vernacular, solutions from all around the world.

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