

# BASIC DESIGN IS INDEED FOR EXPERT

**Anita Rahardja; D. Rio Adiwijaya**

Jurusan Desain Komunikasi Visual, School of Design, BINUS University  
Jln. K.H. Syahdan No. 9, Palmerah, Jakarta Barat 11480  
[anitarahardja@yahoo.com](mailto:anitarahardja@yahoo.com); [dadiwijaya@binus.edu](mailto:dadiwijaya@binus.edu)

## ABSTRACT

*This article would argue that basic design in undergraduate design study is equally significant in both freshmen as well as senior years (when projects of simulated professional practice tend to regard contexts as more significant than visual itself). It will be shown that basic design plays a profound role throughout the whole education setting, from lectures, form-creation process, to design criticism and assessments. It even expands its worth into sphere of professional practice, as long as form analysis and form-making ability are still demanded as a vital part of designer's set of competencies. For how could visual analytic or consideration become less important than e.g. marketing, since designer becomes designer, if and only if he/she has certain competence in visual instead of academic-grade marketing? More after, this brief inquiry employs the method of literary study in conjunction with direct and indirect observation through the internet concerning design education and its practice, followed by critical reflections. The outcome of this study would be a firm recommendation for basic design engagement through the whole education years, since its descriptive-generative functions of visual are yet highly relevant, for they lie at the very core of visual communication design discipline itself.*

**Keywords:** basic design, form, descriptive, creative

## ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini akan berargumen bahwa desain dasar dalam pendidikan desain komunikasi visual strata satu adalah sama pentingnya baik di semester bawah maupun atas (meskipun di yang terakhir ini, simulasi proyek profesional tampak lebih mementingkan konteks dari pada visual itu sendiri). Akan ditunjukkan bahwa desain dasar amat penting dalam kegiatan belajar-mengajar mulai dari perkuliahan, proses kreatif olah bentuk, sampai kritisisme dan penilaian desain baik di semester awal maupun akhir. Bahkan juga sebetulnya sampai ke taraf praktek profesional, sejauh daya analitis dan kreativitas dalam mengolah bentuk (form) tetap menjadi salah satu kompetensi utama yang dapat dituntut dari desainer. Karena bagaimana mungkin analisis atau pertimbangan visual menjadi tidak penting dibanding sebut saja aspek pemasaran, sementara desainer tetaplah desainer, jika dan hanya jika ia punya kompetensi visual, dan bukan strategi pemasaran dalam taraf yang dapat dipertanggung jawabkan secara akademik (mengingat ia adalah sarjana desain, bukan marketing). Metode yang digunakan dalam penulisan ini adalah kajian literatur, ditambah observasi baik langsung maupun melalui media internet terhadap pendidikan dan praktek desain untuk direfleksikan. Hasil yang bisa didapat dari kajian ini adalah saran argumentatif tentang tetap relevannya desain dasar dalam keseluruhan proses pendidikan desain, mengingat fungsi deskriptif- generatif visual yang dimilikinya, menjadi dasar keilmuan desain komunikasi visual itu sendiri.*

**Kata kunci:** desain dasar, bentuk, deskriptif, kreatif

## INTRODUCTION

The main reason behind this brief study is nothing but a case both writers have observed, experienced and discussed with few critical fellows in more than ten years of teaching at design universities. The circumstances could be briefly stated as: there is a common tendency in senior year's education to emphasize more on design value and function in society but overlook the importance of visual-related account. For some reason, it is not a case since the complexity of senior project has expanded into areas of context of visual design e.g. its use in marketing communication, campaign, etc. In other words, visual-related competencies of students should be no longer an issue since freshmen and sophomore classes have had it covered. But for better reason, this logic of "*forgetting basic design is okay for those at higher level*" turns out to be counter-productive. In what respect? In the limitation of student's potentiality to continually improve his/her visual creativity, and in giving articulated argument about its significance. For yet, these competencies are key elements in constituting the basic trait of the discipline of design.

Since creative designer has to be creative in thinking and generating novel visual form, otherwise their role would easily be replaced with stock of templates. Hence, it should be recognized here that the key point of being a designer is not a mere using of pre-existing visual form (formulas) in various contexts of use. Their duty is in some way, invent and reinvent a new one, and it is the one that distinguishes designer from design users. But then we might ask, what is the condition that make designers able to a certain extent, invent novel form? One of the key answers lies in the ability of designer to analyze and think of visual form, formulation or structure, and then afterwards they could connect the form to certain content and context of use. To be able to think visual form in a flowing and eloquent manner, one at least should be accustomed to, or at home with its various concepts, practical wise (know how) and even theoretical wise (know that). It means one should grasp them within practice as well as through language. Therefore the latter suggests that there is should be a certain language, we can say a technical one that deals with form in a conscious manner.

Think what would it be if visual designers, hiding them under inter-disciplinary jargon, merely inquire, think or speak in marketing language just because that field uses design intensively? Whereas the fact is that design alumnus will not certainly become accepted as educated professionals that field either. With preference towards language of others, design discipline risks itself in losing its own professional identity. We are all clearly don't object the fact that every discipline tends to have technical language of its own, not for a bad reason, instead it only signifies some degree of expertise in each particular field.

For example, many companies require employee's medical analysis to be written in technical language of medics just to make sure their employees actually go to them then had their bills remunerated. What if medics don't have language of their own, and instead they speak and think with language of generic marketing, just because medics are also considered "inter-disciplinary" with regards to their need to sell their service too? Would we ever trust them or any other fields without any specific technical language? Are they real medics if they are not used to Latin since classical taxonomy is highly required in their field? Are they real musicians if they merely talk about music that sells like popcorn as we read in tabloids, and never of intricate harmonic structure of a masterpiece? Here we can see that technical discourse have positive things to do with regards of expertise of each particular field. Not to mention the diversity of methods of inquiries that span across those many disciplines where each needs specific language of its own to be able to grasp and develop its own subject matter. We know that it would be impossible to improve medics, music harmony, or algorithmic programming with marketing terms.

This paper seek to solve skeptical attitude about how basic design could still make such significant contribution to the level of simulated professional practice in senior years of design education. Therefore, it would be demonstrated either by way of verbal description or visual examples that various visual properties in basic design are present in any case, either in freshmen or highly advanced professional works. The fact that those properties are ever present and describable should assert themselves as design features that can always be improved in a conscious manner, so does it enrich creativity at any level. And since design concepts are always embodied in visual works, creativity in visual closely related to creativity in concept, from which any contextual use of it may takes advantage. Finally, these describable properties can indeed inform any attempt to criticize and assess visual design works at any level with more clear and articulate manner (e.g. in a form of assessment rubric containing several descriptive properties).

## **Basic Design and Its Brief History**

Within the history of art that spans from 15.000 B.C. to today as mentioned in first chapter of *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs, 1998), many figures from philosophers to artist have tried to offer us descriptive analysis or theoretical account of visual art, which later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century known as aesthetics. Each figure made an effort to provide general account of what constitutes something called art, or to reveal its most basic structure, hence art can be said to have distinct qualities compared to natural things. Thereupon, figures such as Plato and Aristotle from 500 B.C. Classical Greek found out that art bears more or less a resemblance to nature in terms of its very basic constitution. Without focusing on the difference between those two gigantic figures of philosophy whose influence last until today's way of thinking, we may say that the resemblance between artificial and natural things (hence everything) are they both constituted fundamentally by the presence of form and matter. What do these two terms mean? Form is the structure, model or pattern behind everything that is. On the other hand, matter is the raw material in which form itself can takes place or manifests.

For example, marble as a material essence is in itself doesn't contain any shape at all, since marble is only a raw material that bears quality of marble-ness (texture, density, etc). But natural causes had always already formed the marble-ness quality onto something with natural shape such as marble slabs. Conversely in art, it is the artist who brought into the marble new forms such as a horse, a man, or any abstract one. Without such form-giving act from the artist, there will be no such man-made things called art work. Here, we see that form has more priority over matter from the perspective of the artist since he is the one who is responsible for its being. In the case of visual design, it is the designer too who takes charge as form giver into any matter mandated to her/him.

But the question is: are we still, in our age of fiber optics and 40 nanometer processing, conceive art the same way Classical Greek does? The answer would be mostly yes. Bear in mind that classical form and matter distinction is not the only way to conceive artworks, but nature too as mentioned earlier. Indeed scientists believe that there is a structural or formal order called natural law that is hidden behind any behavior of natural things. And it is their task to reveal it. The difference with visual art is that art don't consider form as something that must, and can be exhausted in a rigid, quantitative manner. But the way they both conceive things is based pretty much on the same classical form and matter distinction, that there are structures beyond mere appearances. To further indicate the difference between both affairs, the task of science is to probe deeper into nature through rigorous experimental methods in order to uncover its truer law, from which prediction and control over it might be yielded successfully as in engineering. On the other side, visual artists or designers endeavor with the same experimental attitude, but in an attempt to discover more novel form. Therefore, as plausibly suggested by Klaus Krippendorf, design have much more to do with proposing inexistence yet meaningful artifacts, rather than researching into existing factual world of nature as in science.

Henceforth, in virtue of what we have discussed here, we may promptly look into visual examples in order to reveal some of its describable formal properties. But first, it worth noticing that this concern with visual form as primary means by which design should be understood and practiced, was pioneered by the Bauhaus, a German design and architecture school from around 1920. Then, Bauhaus faculties whose members was many prominent artists and designers at the time, developed one major account on form and materials to be incorporated into their most famous basic course (*Vorkurs*). Freshmen were encouraged to experiment with many materials and medium, with focus on developing receptivity yet creative attitude towards forming them and proposing their possible function for society. Later, this course was developed more profoundly with incorporation of Gestalt theory of perception and semiotics by Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, also a German institution throughout 1950-1960 (Meggs, 1998). Now their legacy is precisely what art and design institution worldwide acknowledge, teach, continue to develop, and practice as basic design. Let's now take a look into some of its features which appear either in freshmen or professionals works, simply due to its very fundamental nature.

## DISCUSSION

### Properties of Form

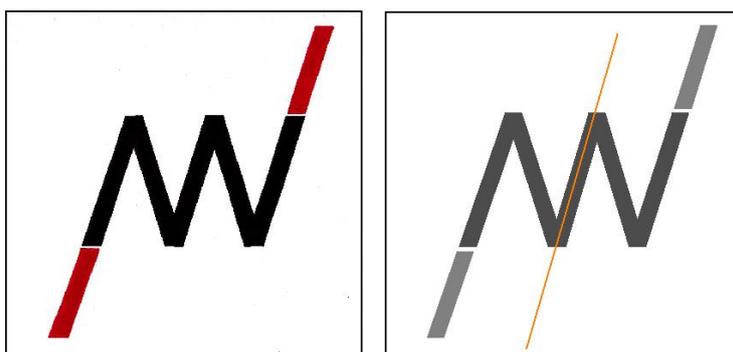


Figure 1 © Monica W



Figure 2 © A. Hoffman

Figure 1 is a work by Monica Winny who was a third semester student of DKV BINUS, and Figure 2 came from Arminn Hoffman (b. 1920), a highly respected designer and educator from Switzerland's Modernist era circa 1920-1960. In them, we could observe and describe a property of form called balance. Visual balance is a designation for certain structural quality which its meaning is comparable to our ordinary use of word balance. It is actually part of our daily life, where any simple activity such as walking or even standing requires it.

Visual balance is created by arranging elements of design in the workspace in the certain manner. Arrangement can be made so that each section of the workspace has the same weight called symmetry as shown in Figure 1. But, often designers intentionally manipulate the placement of the objects so the weight is not evenly distributed which called asymmetry as demonstrated in Figure 2. In functional context such as study in the senior years, balance might be proposed to convey specific kind of meaning such as *steadfast* by employing symmetrical balance and oppositely energetic attitude by employing asymmetrical balance. It is worth imagining whether if students at higher level are no longer aware of such kind of humble visual feature. What is he/she going to propose visually to suit for example some promotional communication needs? Does it fine if he/she says anything goes sir/madam, as long as you give me high grade? Since at the end, designers are still demanded to signify any contextual concern with creative yet coherence visual.

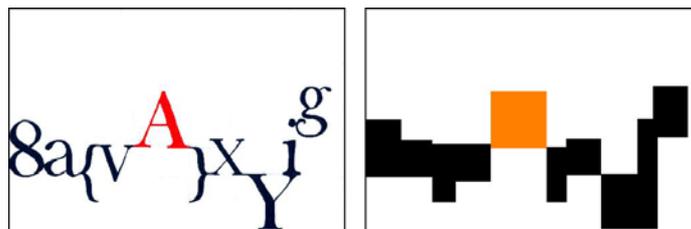


Figure 3 © Gracia A

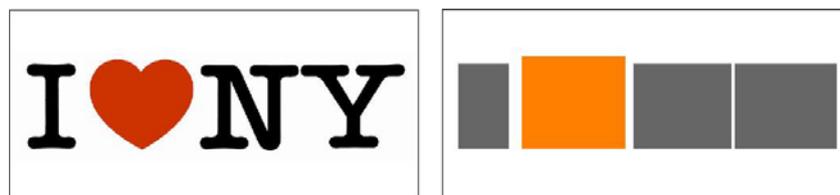


Figure 4 © M. Glaser

Figure 3 came from Gracia Anindita, a second semester student from DKV BINUS. Meanwhile, Figure 4 is from the legendary New York based designer Milton Glaser. Although there is a significant difference of subject matter (what is depicted) and huge disparity in terms of prestige between those two figures, we can notice that both designs show us a formal property known as contrast or emphasis. Contrast occurs when certain element presents itself boldly against the other elements.

By bold, it does not mean that an element should appears bigger than the rest, in fact it can also be small. Bold means that the property of the element should has a significant difference with the others or surroundings. Contrast makes a design more visually engaging, leading people's eyes to a certain part first, then to the other and so on. This also leads to another neighboring but prime feature called visual hierarchy. Moreover, there are practically no limit in ways of achieving contrast as long as designers can maintain their creative yet critical edge through constant exploration, experimentation and discourse.

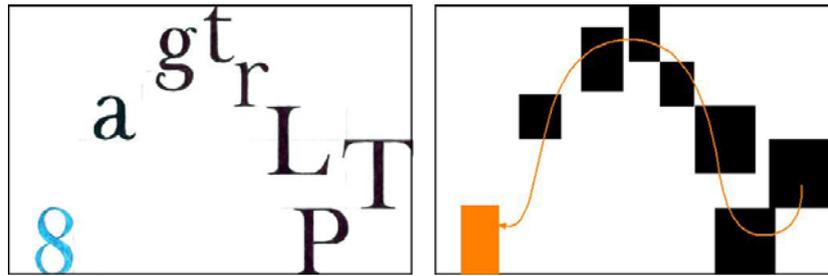


Figure 5 © Wahyu A.



Figure 6 © M. Bierut

Even though two graphics above looks pretty unidentical, actually they both shared a visual property named rhythm. Figure 5 came from Wahyu Ardianingsih who was second semester student of DKV BINUS, and in it we can observe that letterforms are arranged in certain repetitive pattern which suggests a sense of direction and movement. This is one feature of rhythm since repetitive arrangement of elements in itself implies a flow.

The second example (Figure 6) which is the cover of Time periodicals designed by Michael Bierut, a respected associate of Pentagram New York, demonstrates another potential of rhythm. Here we notice that repetitive arrangement of its elements conveys a sense of radiance instead of linear, and also in a textural manner due to numbers of objects involved. But we also notice here, since rhythm involves relatively large number of elements, it inter-relates closely with other compositional properties such as balance which has been discussed earlier, yet also with unity which function is to tie together all the elements in a given workspace into a thematic yet cohesive whole.

Hitherto, basic design is undeniably at work not only in freshmen level, but in the real world practice as shown through examples from professionals brought here. However, in the face of interdisciplinary and complex character of visual communication today, using only basic design as the main way to define the profession is obviously flawed. But to dismiss it as mere tools for freshmen, which no longer important to be engaged seriously at senior level, is indeed weak and unjustifiable. But we suspect that such a case, if there is any, have something to do with the lack of descriptive language about visual form among faculties (formal concepts is the least talked about subject in our local design discourse).

It is only by conscious and collective efforts of faculties to bring basic design's terminology and concepts back into their teaching so we may be able to maintain visual creativity at the highest potentiality. And from the point of view of our whole discussion so far, we could say that basic design is indeed for expert. But it is worth noted here that what we have presented here is far from completely exhausting features of visual form. Nor we have any intention to do it in such a short occasion. There already are plenty of excellent books (most of them of course are imported) which each discusses various formal aspect of design in a great way. What we do want to achieve is simply a sound enough argument for skeptics to reconsider basic design as integral and vital part of the whole design education process. And in the last part of this paper, we want to briefly discuss the potentiality of basic design as indispensable and critical tools for grading too. What we have to do is just simply translating its many features into grading taxonomy.

## CONCLUSION

People who don't have art and design background commonly ask, how do we judge art? How can we give grades to something 'sublime'? Unfortunately, those problems in fact appear in design classes whenever basic visual properties are forgotten or ignored. Since we didn't actually 'grade the sublime thing', but the presence of visual properties we have discussed above. 'Bad' or 'ugly' visual design is strongly related to the absence of balance, emphasis, unity and so on, but the 'good' one shows them. Hence in the classroom situation, many basic design properties can function not only as student's creative tools, but also as a means of discussing or criticizing it and even assessing it.

Moreover, these properties would not at all conflict or incompatible with another aspects of visual design such as its subject matter or what is depicted, its medium, and its context or functional consideration such as who the audiences are, in what occasion it would be displayed, what size, et cetera (Barrett, 2011). But, as demonstrated in examples, these properties of form are 'always there', they are present in 'good' design regardless who made it. So the only reason to dismiss basic visual properties is to dismiss the importance of them from our design concern. Such dismissal would immediately confront us with the question posed earlier in this article: are we educating *visual* communication designers, or just design users? Is visual no longer important since senior years are more concerned with contextual or functional issues? We can never avoid the fact that *designer becomes designer, if and only if he/she has certain competence in creative visual-making*. And surely that enterprise requires technical language of its own.

## REFERENCES

- Barrett, T. (2011). *Making art, form and meaning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Meggs, P. B. (1989). *A history of graphic design* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.