Presenting Design

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

The success of an architect lies mainly in how well he or she can present himself or herself. Too often, good designers are lost in cluttered or unprofessional presentation boards. This project will guide readers through graphic techniques that have brought me success during my years as an undergraduate architecture student. This creative project is in the form of a professionally published book divided into sections that focus on what the goals of any presentation should be, how to select and apply typefaces in a professional manner, and how I approach graphic design. In the final section, I will go over compositional techniques, how to select content for boards, and how to avoid complications when printing and presenting a project.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Olon Dotson for advising me on this project and for encouraging me to be bold in my presentation techniques. I would also like to thank all of the studio professors I have had at Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning for pushing me to go beyond the boundaries of every project.

I would like to thank all of my studio colleagues for their support and criticisms throughout my career at Ball State. Their spirit of friendly competition has helped me grow as a designer.
Author’s Statement

The goal of my honors thesis is to explore the important link between architecture and graphic design in the form of a published creative work. In order to be successful, architects must be able to clearly convey their ideas using well developed graphic techniques. These techniques include understanding composition, how to effectively use white space, font choice, and production. Composition, with respect to this project, refers to the proportional relationship between images, diagrams, and text. While there is not necessarily a “golden rule” to composition, there are some tricks that I have figured out that will make a presentation appear more professional. The section on font choice will guide the reader through the process of choosing appropriately professional typefaces, while the production section will provide helpful tips on how to successfully print and present a project.

This project is based on my own experiences in architecture school. Through trial and error, I have arrived at a certain rule set that has brought me a fair amount of success in both competitions and jury presentations. My work is often complemented for its clarity, compositional quality, and emotional impact. I am also well versed in the design workflow and am often asked by professors to guide their students through modeling, rendering, and presentation design software. Because I am leaving for graduate school next year, I approached this honors thesis as a perfect opportunity to provide future students with some of the lessons I have learned.

There were several secondary goals behind this project as well. While this book is intended to help other people, it is also a way for me to better understand my own design process. The only way to truly improve your design abilities is to be introspective and self-critical. This book has allowed me to do this and I believe that I am a better designer as a result.

This creative project has also helped me gain a familiarity with the publishing process. As an architect, I am going to have to be able to sell my ideas professionally. Publishing is central to this goal and this project has helped me to become well-versed in the publication process. I have improved my skills in publishing software and workflow. As a result, I have my first professional book for sale online through the publisher Blurb.
Works Cited


PRESENTING DESIGN

*An architect's guide to effective graphic representation

HANK MEZZA
CONTENTS
Architecture school can be extremely unfair. Try as you may to develop a perfect building, your efforts will undoubtedly end in futility, for there is no objective truth in architectural design. The success or failure of a project lies in how it is presented. Where a generally good design may flounder when poorly represented, a relatively bad one can enjoy moderate success in the hands of a competent graphic designer. While I do not profess to be a great graphic designer, I know good graphic sense when I see it and, unfortunately, it is all too rare in architecture school. With this book, I intend to convey the lessons I have learned through research, trial and error, and observation in the hope that you will come to the same realization that I have: when it comes to graphic design, simpler is not only easier, but better.

Good graphic design does not call attention to itself. It should appear so natural and intuitive in its composition that it fades to the background and lets the work it represents stand out. After all, you are trying to display clarity of architectural concept, not how “zany” your title font is.

Graphic design is not a singular discipline, but a way of life. An understanding of how to clearly and elegantly present ideas is just as vital to personal success and fulfillment as being a good public speaker. While the average person may not consciously acknowledge the presence of good design, their subconscious is acutely affected by it. If this were not the case, then fields such as fashion, advertising, and automotive design would not be as relevant as they are in society. Good graphic design speaks to us and a firm grasp of its basic principles will allow even the most amateur designer to stand out in a field of tactless font choices, unmoving imagery, and overall mediocrity. This is especially true for architects, whose success is driven by aesthetics and clarity.
GOALS
The primary goal of any presentation should be to clearly present your ideas. In the case of a jury presentation, your boards should act as visual aids and allow you to easily reference the concepts you are discussing. Competition boards and gallery presentations are different because you will not be there to defend your concepts. Thus, these kinds of presentations must be able to stand alone and fully express the fundamentals of your project. In both cases, clarity is paramount. The cluttered jury board will confuse both you and your reviewers while the cluttered competition board will incite dizziness and apathy. The effective board emphasizes the strengths of a project and mitigates the weaknesses, so pick and choose what is truly essential for your presentations and be fully willing to ignore rules.

Your presentation should be aesthetically pleasing. Gain a basic understanding of color theory, learn how to create a good rendering, and develop a vast library of good fonts. Nothing is more disappointing than when a good project is lost to ugly colors, pixilation, or unprofessional font choices.

Try to have an emotional impact on the viewer. You will if you strike a chord deep in the subconscious of a juror. This can be achieved through several media. The visual qualities of your renderings can suggest power, serenity, or excitement while a well written design statement can inspire the reader in the same way as a good sermon. Even something as simple as the title can provoke thought and establish a mood for the entire project.

Show your work in the best possible light. While you may have a very intimate understanding of your project, your reviewers will not. Presentation boards are your opportunity to show off your design. Be discerning in what you display and do not be afraid to ask for advice from your peers.
Fonts
Text plays a very important role in any presentation, but should always support rather than overshadow the visual elements on your boards. For this reason, it is essential that you take great care in selecting appropriate fonts for your titles, subtitles, and body text.

When choosing a font, there are several key factors upon which to base your decision. First, pick a font that possesses the right visual qualities. Fonts give character to words and words are how people gain an in-depth understanding of your work. There are two main directions you can go with fonts: serif or sans-serif. A serif font has little feet at the terminations of each letter while a sans-serif does not. Times New Roman is a good example of a serif font, while Helvetica is a good example of a sans-serif font. Due to their dominant use prior to the modernist era, serif fonts are almost always viewed in a more traditional light. Sans-Serif fonts, on the other hand, are more frequently associated with modernism and cleanliness and are valued for their neutral character.

Serif    Sans-Serif

Another important factor to consider is how well the font masses. The easiest fonts to use are ones which, when viewed from afar, take the visual form of solid blocks. This is important for graphic design because it allows the text to anchor itself against a field of images and white space. Text that is not massed well will appear to float awkwardly in front of or behind the rest of your presentation. Well massed text is also much easier to control in gridded layouts and tends to be more readable.

Many designers have a few favorite fonts which make more frequent appearances in their work. Perhaps the most foolproof font ever created
is Helvetica. Helvetica, developed in Switzerland in 1957, has essentially become the western world’s default font. This is because it is simple, clean, and well-massed. The letters in the Helvetica alphabet were designed to fit together in such a way that the white space between characters appears equal and balanced. Thus, words appear to be solidly held in place by the relationship of individual letters. When properly used, Helvetica can fit naturally into almost any presentation and its wide array of thicknesses, styles, and variants make it so versatile that the amateur graphic designer may never have to stray from it.

Helvetica Neue 25 Ultra Light  
Helvetica Neue 35 Thin  
Helvetica Neue 45 Light  
Helvetica Neue 55 Roman  
Helvetica Neue 65 Medium  
Helvetica Neue 75 Bold  
Helvetica Neue 85 Heavy  
Helvetica Neue 95 Black

True mastery over fonts, however, will only exist when you can have a wide range of both sans-serif and serif fonts you feel comfortable using. This takes a lot of trial and error, but can be quite beneficial in helping your work stand out from the rest of the pack. You will find that there are quite a few pleasant fonts pre-loaded onto your computer, but if you want a more diverse collection, there are several free font download sites which contain thousands of both good and bad fonts.
APPROACH
Graphic design is no more complicated than you make it. Start out with determining how you want your building to be understood. What initial impression do you want to make? What do you want the viewer to walk away with? After gaining an understanding of what it is you want to show, start to sketch out quick positive/negative sketches to determine the massing of images and text. The real design, however, begins with the main title image, or "Money Shot". This is the image that will embed a first impression in the mind of the viewer. It should be large, dramatic, and well representative of the major themes of your building. It should not, however, tell the entire story of your project. With the money shot, the goal is to bait the viewer into further investigation of your design. You want to create an experience that conveys the complexities of your ideas and an effective way to do this is to establish a hierarchy. Focus primarily on the moments in your building which possess the most potential for emotional impact.

In choosing the media through which you display your project, you need to figure out how you want your design to be interpreted. If your building is experiential in nature, then you should rely heavily on dramatic spatial renderings. If you want to the viewer to understand the rigorous process you followed to develop your design, then diagrammatic linework is probably the best option. It is important that you play to the strongest aspects of your design approach.

There are several tried and true methods of laying out images. Establishing a grid can be particularly helpful if you find yourself without inspiration. Understand the proportions of the presentation board you are using and divide it as evenly as possible. Use this grid to establish the location of text and set starting points for images and diagrams. It will appear as though you have put more thought into a board layout if things line up and are proportionally related.
Once you place your first image, trace the lines of perspective outward across the entire layout. Use these lines to establish perspective in your remaining images and diagrams. Adding this on top of the grid will add further order and create a sense of movement which will guide the viewer through your presentation.
Presumably, at some point in every project, you will be given a set of deliverables which you are “expected” to present on your board. View these as suggestions rather than requirements. You are the designer so you should take full responsibility for what goes on your boards. If your building is too dynamic to be adequately represented by an elevation, then replace it with something that better suits your needs. If a floorplan is too flat to effectively convey spatial relationships, there are alternatives, such as exploded axonometric diagrams, sections, or countless other illustrative methods. It is almost guaranteed that a creative approach to deliverables will give you an edge over every other project. Do what works best for your project. Some designs might stand to gain from a simple two-dimensional diagram. Mies Van Der Rohe, for example, was quite effective in his use of parti diagrams to show proportional relationships and tectonics.

In board layouts, your most powerful weapon is white space. French composer Claude Debussy once said something to the effect that, “music is the silence between notes.” This is also true in graphic design. White space, or any area on your boards that lacks images, text or diagrams, helps to ground the overall composition and draws special attention to the true content. Dedicating even entire boards to white space or gradients highlights the significance of renderings and frees the layout from the restraints of rectangular dimensions.

A good rule for effectively using white space is to figure out approximately where eye level is for the viewer and cluster your best material in this area. Fading gradually to white from this point will not only make it easier for the viewer to understand your ideas, it will also allow you to put more emphasis on the more important parts of your presentation. White space also gives the eye a rest from what could otherwise be a cluttered presentation and will make your project stand out.
Unless you truly feel that your project warrants it, symmetry is rarely a good tactic for presentation boards. Even setting text boxes slightly off center will add a sense of movement to any composition and will help guide the viewer's eyes over more of your work. A purely symmetrical layout has the tendency to encourage a quick, one directional viewing. One very effective tactic is to imply symmetry without strictly adhering to it. This could mean unevenly arraying content along both sides of a center line.

![Perfect Symmetry](image1)

![Implied Symmetry](image2)

Do not go crazy with text and labels. If you feel that a rendering is unclear and needs explanation, then it is probably a bad rendering and should be replaced with something more useful. Have confidence in the intelligence of the viewer and use labels only to enhance diagrammatic elements on your boards. For example, sections and elevations often need to be explained so the viewer can place them in your building. The best images and diagrams, however, are ones that are so easily readable that they do not need further explanation. Both IKEA and LEGO instruction guides are perfect examples of effective diagramming because they are so
visually clear that they can be understood in every language without the need for a translator.

Body text should be brief, clear, and impactful. The best advice is to avoid talking down to the reader and to not feel as though you have to stoop to their level. Find a happy middle ground and avoid overcomplicating things. Find the simplest words to convey your thoughts. In some cases you will have to resort to jargon, but this is okay as long as your intended audience is familiar with the vocabulary. If you cannot sum up your concepts in a few paragraphs, then maybe that is a sign that you need to simplify your design approach.

When deciding on a title, simpler is again better. Limit your title to as few words as possible and limit your vocabulary to words that can be easily pronounced, understood, or deciphered. A common trend in architecture school is to add parentheses, use unconventional capitalization, and invent alternative spelling all in the hope of torturously extracting every last drop of meaning out of a word. If carefully applied, this technique can be witty, but, too often, it forces the reader to spend more time trying to translate the title than look at actual content. Emphasis can be accomplished through more subtle tactics such as color, style, and font changes. Remember, the title exists to implant an idea. Use your images to represent this idea and your design statement to dive into its meaning and relevance.

If at all possible, try to create a dialogue between your physical model and your boards. If the two possess similar languages, be it color, style, or even orientation, it will be easier for the two to relate to each other. Try to draw from a similar material palette in both your renderings and your model. If wood, for example, plays a prominent role in your renderings, then consider incorporating veneer or plywood into your model or base.
The final stage of the board design process is perhaps the most stressful. Production mode can be fraught with difficulties and can end up being quite costly. To avoid these problems, it is best to make some fundamental decisions at the initiation of the design process. For example, figure out details such as what type of paper you want to print on, what file format best suits your needs, and what day you should aim to have your presentation completed by. Paper type should never be a last minute decision or based on convenience for it can have a dramatic impact on how your presentation is viewed. Glossy paper, for instance, can have the effect of sharpening your images, but can also washout intricate linework. Bond, or non-glossy, paper can make linework stand out beautifully, but you run the risk of oversaturation and darkness in your renderings. Figure out what you are trying to accomplish with your presentation and make a plotting decision accordingly. Make several practice plots to ensure that your colors are correct.

The type of file you print your project from can have a profound influence on the quality of your final product. An Adobe PDF, or Portable Document Format, is by far the most convenient and foolproof file type. All fonts you use are imbedded in the document and the file size can be significantly reduced. Unfortunately, this compression can lead to inaccurate colors and pixelization. An alternative would be to save directly from the program you are using. Most programs will allow you to embed fonts, but this often increases file size.

The final, and perhaps most important, aspect of effective presentation design is time management. Establish and attempt to maintain a schedule that will allow a few days of wiggle room at the end to account for potential obstacles. The worst presentation is one that is incomplete in its exhibition of your ideas. If you feel as though you are running out of time, narrow your focus and make what content you do have as clear
and complete as possible. Do not use content that appears last-minute or tacked on. If you do not have time to adequately complete a given deliverable, do not put it on your boards. Simple will always win as long as it appears professional and thought-through.
EXAMPLES
The following are examples of the author’s own work which exhibit some of the fundamental principles discussed in this book. Along with a textual explanation of the development process, you will be provided with diagrammatic sketches of the methods used. In both presentations, establishment of a grid and the adherence to existing lines of perspective allow for compositional unity. Take special notice of the role that text plays. While it is noticeably present, it does not overwhelm the images and diagrams. These examples are very effective in telling the stories of the buildings they represent. While some deliverables are accentuated, others are consolidated or even ignored. In other words the buildings govern the boards rather than the other way around.

Both examples were conceived in tandem with the buildings they represent. As a result, the overall presentations possess a sense of unity. They are relatively uncomplicated but are effective in conveying ideas.
The goal of this presentation was to encourage a sequential reading of my project. The top board is dedicated entirely to the "moneyshot", which presents the viewer with an eye-level approach to the building. The lines of perspective from the central path are extended over the rest of the boards to both immerse the viewer in the image and establish a pathway for the eyes to pass over the presentation. Simplicity is key in this project as its primary principles lie in formal and experiential exploration. Despite compressing the long list of deliverables into just nine images and diagrams, this presentation was ultimately a success and was chosen as a design competition finalist.
LEVITATION: Perspective
These boards are governed almost entirely by perspective. Lines traced from the vanishing points of the moneystill image are used to establish starting points for both the interior rendering and structural section. The use of color on these boards is very subtle and is used primarily to highlight certain moments. For example, a simple grey to white gradient is used in the place of a photographic sky in all exterior renderings. This creates whitespace, adds emphasis to the actual content of the boards, and allows for more unity across all of the renderings. Linework, such as floorplans, take a backseat to imagery because the building itself is experientially rather than rationally based.
CONCLUSION
Be brave in your approach to Graphic Design. Be wary of absolutes, but respectful of successful precedents. Your goal should never be to fulfill requirements. Instead, you should strive for self-satisfaction. Any lack of confidence will show through to the viewer and will take away from the strengths of your designs. You should be detail oriented, but do not lose sight of the big picture that you want the viewer to walk away with.

Board layout can be one of the easiest parts of a design project. Too often, graphic design is over thought and the results are cluttered, unreadable presentations which lack the power of subtlety. Keep your color palette restrained, your fonts simple, and your composition clean and you will be well on your way to graphic success.

As an architect, you must be a comprehensive designer. Nothing you do should be without purpose. How you present yourself and your ideas will ultimately form the basis for how people will judge you as an individual.