

FORENSIC DESIGN:

100 QUESTIONS TO ASK

You may find it useful to apply the following questions to any print design that interests you (or to your own work). The questions will help make sense of how and why design is created, and to identify subtle features and trends within design that are often overlooked.

Some questions appear obvious, but deeper examination may yield less obvious answers. Some are unanswerable, but may provoke useful speculation. I hope you'll find that this assessment becomes natural with time and experience. Expand or modify the list to best fit your interests!

WHO/WHAT/WHEN/WHERE/WHY?

01. Who made this?

Is/are the designer(s) well-known? Anonymous? What can you learn about them from the piece?

02. What is the designers' cultural background?

Are their racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, socio-economic, or political ideas reflected? How did these factors affect the acceptance of their work?

03. What art/design background did the designer have?

How is the designers' education and experience reflected? Are they classically trained? Self-taught?

04. Who commissioned the piece?

Who initiated and paid for the piece? Was a client (whether a person or group) involved? How did the designer and client communicate? How did their involvement affect the design?

05. Who else was involved?

Designers rarely produce work in a vacuum. Aside from clients, how did art directors, assistants, typesetters, photographers, illustrators, copywriters, editors, production artists, printers, and even consumers influence the design? Was credit given to those who deserve it?

06. Where and when was it made?

Is it typical (or definitive) of its time and place? If not, how does it differ? Is it designed to evoke a different time or place?

07. What was the goal of the piece?

Was it designed to advertise a product? Convey an idea? Educate? Entertain?

08. What aspirations did the designer have?

How did they see their role? Was it a dream once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, or just another job?

09. Was the designer given free rein, or tight control?

What limitations were in place that they had to overcome? How did limitations shape the design?

10. What was the budget?

What time/money was available to produce the piece, and how efficiently was it used?

11. Who was the target audience?

How was the audience targeted? Does the piece treat its audience with respect? Threaten them? Appeal to their aspirations? Imitate other design that was familiar to them?

12. Was it adapted to other media and formats?

Was it part of a greater system? How did it change when used in different media or formats?

13. How was it distributed?

How did the logistics of distribution dictate the design or production?

INSPIRATION

14. Who/What inspired the design?

Is there an obvious inspiration, either a designer/style or cultural references?

Was the design influenced by current design trends? Or did it purposefully reject them?

Are the inspirations acknowledged? Obvious? Subconscious?

15. Did politics or socio-economic changes affect the design?

16. Did it follow the established form of its time?

17. If not, in what ways was it 'new'?

What did other examples of this type generally look like before this one was made?

18. Is any symbolism used?

(Red/heart for love, Gold for luxury, patriotic symbols/colors, a clenched fist, the cross, etc...)

Is the symbolism instantly recognizable, or more subtle?

19. Does it feature cultural, subcultural, or ethnic references?

Are these cultural references respectful, authentic, and honest, or awkwardly co-opted?

(Appreciation vs. appropriation!)

20. Is it post-modern? a mash-up? making something new of older sources?

Does it awkwardly mix influences, or create something new and interesting?

21. Did this design inspire others?

How? Did the design transcend its original intention? Become a symbol of an era or subculture?

DESIGN EXECUTION

24. How was the design executed?

What processes were used to sketch, mock-up, and compose the piece? Was it hand-drawn? Pasted up? Set in a chase by hand? Done on a computer? What tools/software was used?

25. Are technological limitations exploited rather than avoided?

26. How are the basic elements of design addressed?

This could launch another hundred questions, and we'll touch on some of these in more detail later, but how does the designer use the basic elements of design, such as color, line, shape, texture, space, form, balance, etc.

27. What was the turnaround time?

Was there a hard deadline or schedule? How did the schedule affect the design?

28. What decisions were dictated by production?

How much flexibility did the designer have regarding type, artwork, etc? Were they limited by time or availability?

29. Does the design follow an obvious template or form?

The template can be both the general form of the piece (an LP, a magazine, a book, a poster) AND the specific grid used within that form to create order and balance. Did the designer find a way to break out of, or to exploit, the template or expected form?

PHOTOGRAPHY and ILLUSTRATION

33. What photography or illustration is used?

Was it commissioned? Created by the designer? Selected from a catalog of images? Found? Stolen?

34. What technology was used for photography?

What camera/film was used? Was it an established technology, or cutting edge for its time?

35. Did the designer have a choice?

Were they involved in hiring the photographer or illustrator and art directing them? Were they at the photo shoot? What was their relationship with the photographer or illustrator?

36. How does the artwork fit into the layout?

Was the layout designed around the artwork, or vice versa? How did current technology allow text and image to work together effectively?

37. Is the photography manipulated in any way?

What was possible at the time? How was it done? Were the effects practical or digital?

38. How was the photo or illustration reproduced?

How was it scaled to the proper size and mechanically reproduced? How did mechanical reproduction affect the image?

39. How was color added to a black and white image (or vice versa)

40. Was the photo or illustration cropped effectively?

41. Who or what is represented in the imagery?

Do the people or objects or places reflect the target market or their aspirations?

42. How were other graphic elements provided and used?

What technology was used for logos, borders, textures, colors, and other graphic elements?

43. How did the final form affect the design process?

How did the method of production affect the design? (line screens, resolution, type size, number of colors, etc).

TEXT and LANGUAGE

44. What text was used?

45. What is the purpose of the text?

Is the text informative? Instructional? Entertaining? Persuasive? Fictional? Technical?

46. What language is used?

Is it targeted to speakers of a single language? Multiple languages? Universal?

47. What voice is it written in?

Does the writing style emulate a familiar voice or genre? Is it serious or lighthearted? Friendly or threatening? Straightforward or poetic?

48. What is the lexical and syntactical difficulty?

Is it speaking up or down to the reader? Is it designed to be inviting and inclusive? Are certain groups purposefully or accidentally excluded?

49. How formal is the language?

Is there jargon, slang, or foul language? Is it technical or informal?

50. Is information presented in a well-organized hierarchy?

If not, why? Is it minimal and clear? Purposefully bloated and obtuse?

51. How legible is the text?

Is it well-typeset and cleanly reproduced? Is it purposefully or accidentally hard to read?

52. What is the content of the text?

Is it useful? Gibberish? Is it honest? Purposefully dishonest?

53. How was typography used?

54. How was it typeset?

What type was available to the designer? (Hand lettering/wood type/cold metal type/hot metal type/photo type/typewriter/press type/digital type/other!?)

55. What typefaces were used?

Were they new at the time? Trendy? Traditional? Is the typeface still available? How does the type differ (in detail and in use) than currently-available versions of the same typeface?

56. What's distinctive about the typography?

What can you tell about the typesetting based on the margins and alignment? Type ornaments? Drop caps? Hanging punctuation? How is type hyphenated? Is there a strict baseline grid?

57. Is the type manipulated or distorted? How?

58. Were corrections possible?

How would they be made? Can you detect any mistakes or corrections?

PRINTING

60. Who printed it?

How deeply involved was the printer in the creation of the piece?

61. How was it printed or reproduced?

How many were made? What technology was used? (Offset lithography, screen printing, photocopy, letterpress printing, engraving, stone lithography, woodblock, handmade, etc.)

62. Was the printing type common at the time?

What other options were available? Why was this one chosen? How does it compare to contemporary printing? Modern printing?

63. How many colors were used?

How were varying tones and mixtures of color created? (More on this below)

64. How did prepress affect the design choices and final product?

Prepress, Rubylith, stripping, crop marks, reg marks color bars, etc

65. How does the printing give the piece character?

Is the printing of high or low quality? Are there any interesting mistakes, or visible signs of the printing process? (Hickeys, bad registration, trapping, overprinting)

PAPER/SURFACE

66. What paper (or fabric or other surface) is used?

What is the color, texture, finish, weight? Can you identify the actual manufacturer/product? Was it common at the time?

67. Does the paper (surface) have any other distinctive features?

Is there a deckled edge? A watermark?

68. Is the paper archival or disposable?

Did it meet its original objective? How has it been/will it be affected by time and wear?

69. What's the paper size? Trim size?

Was it a standard size? Cut from a standard press sheet?

70. How is it bound/folded/assembled/framed/presented?

How does the binding or format relate to or support the content?

71. Were different versions made?

Was it reprinted multiple times? Was a limited or first edition made? Was it re-purposed for different uses? How are the versions different?

72. How does the paper work as a component of the design?

Does it seem carefully considered, or an afterthought?

Does it work well for the intended purpose or market?

INK/COLOR

74. How is color/ink used?

What type of ink was used? How many colors? What colors?

75. What color system was used?

Is it process? Spot? Pantone? An older system? What color systems did the printer have at their disposal, and what inks did they keep in stock?

76. How did the designer/printer get the most out of the palette?

Are colors mixed with transparency? Any tricks like a "split fountain" or color substitutions over the course of the run? Was a standard background printed and used for various projects?

77. Does it use expected or unexpected colors?

Does the palette avoid primary colors, or expected thematic colors, perhaps using a dark brown or blue in place of black?

78. What other processes?

Are elements embossed/debossed? Are there die cuts? Was foil used? Are they signed or sequentially numbered, or otherwise customized (digital mail merge?)

LEARNING MORE

80. Why are you aware of this piece?

Who saved it or brought it to your attention? Why is it memorable? Do you have a personal connection to the piece, it's creator, or client?

81. What personal connection do you have to it?

82. What is clever about this piece? What is predictable?

What design, language, and production tricks were used to maximize impact?

83. Is it part of a series?

How does it fit into the series? Is the series of consistent quality? What ties the series together?

Was the series carefully planned from the beginning, or developed as it happened?

84. How did the designer take advantage of changes in technology?

85. Can you detect any mistakes?

Are there typos, "cut corners," production glitches, or forced decisions? Do they lend it character or distract from the overall piece? Were later versions revised?

86. How has the piece aged?

How has time treated the piece, physically and conceptually? Is the aging process part of its charm?

IS THE END RESULT...

90. Innovative?

Was it ahead of its time? Trendsetting? Traditional? Purposefully retro?

91. Accepted?

Was it accepted and embraced by its market? Did public perception change over time?

92. Successful?

Did it fulfill its intended goals?

93. Influential?

Did it reach beyond its goals to become more important than intended?

94. Memorable?

Is it appreciated and remembered within its original context?

Is it appreciated and remembered by the design world?

Is it appreciated and remembered in any unexpected contexts?

95. Timeless?

Does it transcend trends and fashion, or is it very “of its time?”

96. Environmentally aware?

Was the environment taken into consideration for the content, materials, and production?

97. Socially aware?

Is the design considerate of diverse cultures, religions, genders, races, ethnicities, and nationalities?

Did the creators make an effort to be thoughtful and inclusive?

THE BIG QUESTION

100. What did you learn from examining this design that can be applied to your design?

Further consideration:

How does this exercise apply to other media and creative endeavors like...

Digital/web design

Industrial Design

Television/Film

Audio/Music

Fashion

Writing