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Katherine Hepworth – Yes we can: Barack Obama, graphic design and liberal democratic process

Posted By info@re-public On July 10, 2008 @ 15:06 In participatory design | 1 Comment

[1] The love affair between design and liberal democratic politics is perhaps nowhere more evident in the world today than in the campaigning for the United States' presidential election. The coverage of the races for both the election and the presidential candidate nomination for the National Democratic Party has been marked by significant local and international interest in the visual language employed by Barack Obama's campaign. The winning effect of a sophisticated branding campaign incorporating graphic design on a level not seen before in American politics has not only had first time voters in thrall, but has charmed the

mainstream and design press too.

In a bid for the presidency that is all about difference from the political norm, graphic design has been used in a unique way for an election campaign. It has been treated as a serious campaigning tool and given consideration beyond the usual piecemeal window dressing. The evidence of this can be seen throughout the campaign materials, from the smallest details to the omnipresent 'O' logo. The Obama logo is a conscious departure from the staid aesthetics of typical candidate logos, but is kept from frivolousness by the use of the traditional red, white and blue (albeit using a chirpier blue than is the norm). The logo shows a rising sun and the American flag as a path over the horizon, reflecting the approach to governance that Obama, a constitutional law expert, could be expected to take: a new beginning dawning from reflection on America's founding ideals.

The campaign typography demonstrates similar thought and restraint featuring, as it does, the controlled but elegant, all-American Gotham typeface. Typography, the way in which typefaces are selected and used, has phenomenal power of influence over any written communication. If ill-considered as in, say, the average word processing document, it can hinder a message. If well thought out it can add significant weight to the written word, supporting its meaning through countless small details that communicate subliminally but are ultimately effective. Sender LLC, Obama's branding consultancy, know this. The well-chosen Gotham reflects the candidate's values through its physical attributes and pedigree, an effect only heightened by the refined and staggeringly consistent way it has been applied to all campaign materials, even to the placards held by supporters at his rallies. The suitability of the typeface is even more remarkable when the hundreds of similar typefaces are considered, the overwhelming majority of which have their origins in 1940s old Europe. Stephen Heller, a respected graphic design commentator, has noted that the consistency [2] of brand message achieved by the Obama campaign has rarely been seen in commercial enterprise, let alone in the far less design savvy world of political campaigning.

The typeface and the logo have been combined to happy effect in the highly customised campaign materials that are re-designed from state to state. Attendees of Obama rallies <u>receive button badges</u> ^[3], a fact which in itself is not so groundbreaking. The point of difference is that each variation contains a beautifully crafted piece of typography where the state's initials crafted to be in perfect harmony with the Obama logo. The effect is one of considered localisation; the campaign belongs here, Obama belongs here, we (the campaign and yourself) are in union.

Supporting the Obama campaign from another, equally considered angle, are the studied street credentials of the <u>'Obama: Yes We Can' video</u> [4], a designerly ambient promotion par excellence. In the video a disparate group of high profile celebrities recite words from one of Obama's famously rousing speeches. The section of the speech used is essentially about overcoming entrenched cynicism with hope. The celebrities who participate are not immediately recognisable as linked in any way beyond, presumably, their support for Obama and their belief in his message. In a country infatuated with stardom and founded squarely on hope this heady mix of fame and Founding Fathers is powerful stuff, indeed.



Photo 1 - Stills from the promotional video 'Yes We Can'.

This level of integration between graphic design and campaign strategy is new in political campaigning. In comparison, the design strategies of the other presidential candidates look and, more importantly, feel decidedly bereft. The advantage gained by integrating graphic design to such an extent is an emotional one, it gives the Obama campaign an immediacy, what design anthropologist Dori Tunstall [6] might call tangibility, bringing him close enough to the electorate that they can identify with him, and, if they so choose, can engage with the campaign. This emotional advantage brought about by effective use of design is important for more than just attracting new voters, or giving Obama a warm feeling when he goes to sleep at night. It is central to his ability to raise huge amounts of campaign funds from an enormous number of small-time donors and, in a race for the Democratic nomination in which the policies of the two candidates have seemed indistinguishable, it has given him an engaging point of difference.

In order to communicate just how different the use of design is in the Obama campaign, it is helpful to look at the standard approach, as used by the campaigns of John McCain and Hilary Clinton. For these, the only other two serious contenders for party nominations, design is considered in the typical way for a political campaign, that is, as a necessary evil. Communicating the campaign message is typically seen as the role of experts in politics: the candidate, scriptwriters, policy makers and strategists. The graphic designer is used to create a 'look' for this message, keeping within certain style boundaries, and applying it to a myriad of campaign materials. Campaign staffers expect the overall effect produced by these designed materials to be only skin deep because in this model design is viewed as activity that merely facilitates form, completely separate from the content, from what is seen as the actual message.

What typical campaigns strive for when using design in this way is the development of a distinctly political aesthetic. The electorate knows it when it sees it: smiling faces on billboards, television advertisements playing out worst case scenarios, one-colour pamphlets given out at polling booths by the thousands. The imagery may change as may the colours and party affiliations, but it is instantly recognisable. It is not a case so much of what is done in these campaigns as what is not done: no tertiary colours, no typographic consideration, no image treatments, and no serious attempts at visual cohesion. The overwhelming effect of the dominant political aesthetic would make the eyes of even the most hardened political hack glaze over in boredom — the opposite effect to that of the Obama campaign.

This usual approach, however, has one powerful advantage; it provides the candidate with legitimacy. Each campaign reinforces the dominant visual political aesthetic in the hope it will help present their candidate as a legitimate presidential contender. By keeping the campaign's overall visual appearance within the certain confines, the various designed campaign materials firstly tell

voters that the candidate is a legitimate contender and then only secondly, if at all, do they communicate the campaign message. Although the words printed on the materials speak a message, often the design, or lack of design consideration contradict that message in many small ways. The end result is one of at best, confusion and at worst, alienation. With such mixed messages being broadcast through all media channels during campaigning it is no wonder elections often inspire widespread apathy in the general public.

But what has this to do with the nature of design, or liberal democracy for that matter? The way design has been used throughout the Obama campaign demonstrates a fundamentally different understanding of how graphic design can serve political campaigning, and in turn, what design is for. The design-integrated approach taken by the Obama campaign demonstrates an intimate understanding of the significance of perception and the power of graphic design to shape it. In the campaign the message is communicated through both content and form equally because of an implicit understanding of how form can also be content. The designed materials exude the campaign message from every tiny detail, making an impression that reaches far beyond vote getting. The tangibility of this campaign has inspired many thousands of new voters to register but more importantly has raised awareness about the democratic process itself.

In the effectiveness of this political campaign there is a lesson for the practise of liberal democracy. Democratic countries, founded on the ideal of equality, aspire to equity in their public policy. But with democracy comes extraordinary amounts of paperwork, and the rights of citizens are consequently most often experienced as an abstract theoretical concern rather than as a tangible things or useful knowledge. Even finding out about the most basic of government services soon becomes a perverse game of information finding that excludes people with poor sight, those who are not fluent in the official national language and anyone without the patience of a saint. As the work of the Centre for Urban Pedagogy demonstrates, this need not be the case. The Centre selects graphic designers to work with policy makers [7] to present the intricacies of various policies to the public in a way that provides detail but is not intimidating. Such work is only one of limitless ways in which graphic design can be used to increase citizens' experiences of liberal democracy. If graphic design can play such a central role in exciting people about a political candidate, it can almost certainly be used to enhance liberal democratic process.

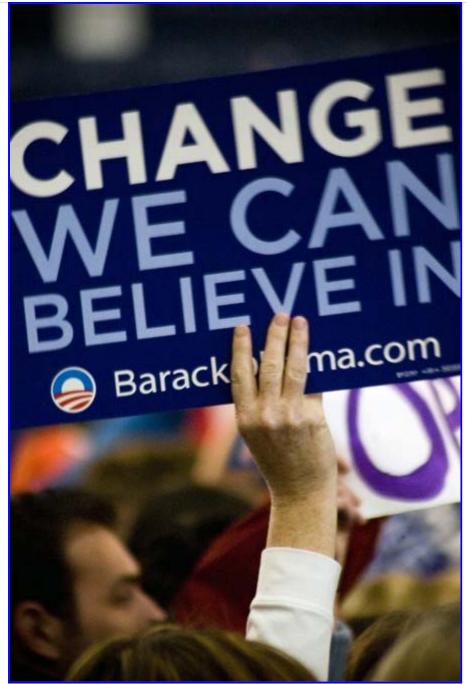
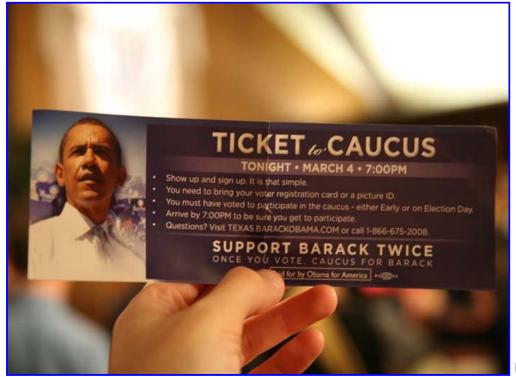


Photo 2 – Placard featuring the Gotham typeface at a rally in Nashua, New Hampshire.



Photo 3 – Varied but consistent campaign placards at a rally in Sumter, South Carolina.



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Photo 4 – An Obama campaign flyer handed out at the Texas Democratic Caucus demonstrating beautiful typography, including the Gotham typeface.

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- [2] has noted that the consistency: http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/02/to-the-letter-born/
- [3] receive button badges: http://www.re-public.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/obama-logo-on-badges.jpg
- [4] 'Obama: Yes We Can' video: http://www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc/
- [5] Image: http://www.re-public.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/obama-yes-we-can-video.jpg
- [6] design anthropologist Dori Tunstall: http://dori3.typepad.com/
- [7] selects graphic designers to work with policy makers:

http://www.anothercupdevelopment.org/projects

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