

from hfg ulm to munich olympiad
otl aicher and modern information design

This essay sets out to analyse the work of Otl Aicher on the 1972 Olympiad, in Munich, an achievement both as an information system and visual identity. Equally, this essay attempts to briefly analyse Otl Aicher's influence in the Hochschule für Gestaltung ulm, where he was co-founder, director and teacher. Finally, it also discusses some of the aspects of the design philosophy of Aicher and the hfg, and whether it converged to or deviated from the definition of information design.

introduction

The choice for Otl Aicher's work as the subject of this essay is justified by his pioneering aspect and relevance to what is today our understanding of information design.

Naturally, his design practice and theory, as well as the work of those engaged in the hfg, had evolved from, among other things, previous examples or attempts on information design. Experiments on how to convey visual and verbal information, how to transform data into knowledge by means of clear communication, were already seen in the first half of the 19th century, responding to social and economical needs of a progressively industrialised society (Twyman 1998). What mainly differed Aicher and the hfg from past examples are the level consciousness in constructing a set of design methods to tackle communication needs, as opposed to previous pragmatic experiences, and the call for contributions from applied and behavioural sciences and information theory as complementary domains for a design methodology.

These aspects are comparable to Easterby and Zwaga (in Petterson, 2002: 16) view of information design as a discipline that involves multidisciplinary tasks, and also Waller's (1979) definition of the term information design:

... to apply processes of design (that is, planning) to the communication of information (its content and language as well as its form).

Particular views on the history of information design draw attention to evidences in a range of dates and places that may indicate its genesis. Kinross (1895) identifies roots in New Typography and modernism and information revolution overlapped at Ulm. Sless (1996) argues about the interdisciplinary curriculum of the Bauhaus model. In contrast to these views, that have in common post-war periods of a country deficient in economical resources, is Stiff's (2005) example of Willard Cope Brinton's lectures on 'graphic methods for presenting facts' at Harvard University, which was published as homonymous book in 1914. As a hypothesis, Stiff proposes that public information design depends on rich economies and their respective *purchasers of design* to grow.

Whereas possible to regard those as contrasting views, it may be also possible to deduce a set of properties that created in Ulm suitable conditions for developing the theories what would later contribute to information design. Some remarkable aspects regarding modern design tradition and multidisciplinary: The school was initially structured as centre for education in social sciences, art, culture, and politics; Due to Max Bill's influence, most notably, the curriculum moved towards a school of design as a continuation of the Bauhaus¹ Concerning investments and industry demand as preconditions: To build the hfg ulm, financial and material resources were obtained from the Norwegian Fund for European Assistance (North-American aid for West Germany) and the German government and industries (Lindinger 1991).

¹
The name of school reflected the Bauhaus inspiration. *Hochschule für Gestaltung* was the name of the Bauhaus since Dessau.

post-war, pre-design

Otl Aicher's involvement in the HfG project is rooted in his work at the *Volkshochschule*, a school for adult education, founded in Ulm in 1946 (Lindinger 1991). In that period, philosophers, artists and designers, a majority that has been banned from Germany or suffered great losses during the nazi regime, were socially engaged in the reconstruction of a new democracy. Together with Inge-Scholl and Walter Zeischegg, Aicher set out to establish a centre for higher education as a means for social and cultural change and a support for economical reconstruction. In 1947, following meetings with Max Bill in Zurich eventually shaped the initial concept of a school for socio-political studies into a curriculum for a school of design.

Max Bill designed the building and was the rector of the school for the first three years and Otl Aicher became the first instructor of visual communication. There was great expectation that the HfG Ulm would resume the work developed at HfG Dessau, clearly identified in the opening speech given by Max Bill (Bill 1953, in Lindinger 1991):

... we regard art as the highest form of expression in life, and it is our endeavour to organise life as a work of art. [The Bauhaus] had the same objective. We in Ulm are taking matters further, by attaching even more value to the design of objects.

Aicher perspectives on design education, theory and practice were profoundly opposed to the Bauhaus view on art and design. While recognising value in Bauhaus experiences² of synthesis of means, he questioned the effectiveness as a method for clear communication. Aicher opinion was shared by colleagues Walter Zeischegg, Tomàs Maldonado and Hans Gugelot, and although Max Bill's view on design represented a step forward from early Bauhaus spiritualist approach, Aicher (1991) claimed that,

he remained fixated on the Bauhaus as far as we were concerned. He remained an artist and retained a special status for art.

Max Bill played a crucial part shaping on what otherwise may not have been a school of design, but differences on structure of teaching led him to resign and departure from ulm in 1958.

ventures into design for information

Therefore, ideological differences may have been decisive in how the design approach evolved. By removing the artist and promoting the collaboration of design and science, Ulmers stripped meaning out of information and methods for processing information were the predominant when studying the communication process.

In Ulm, design was regarded as a conscious act of shaping information for the society and projects were cooperative endeavours. This model seemed to work correctly in terms

²

Although proposing new visions of designing, the Bauhaus contribution to information design was limited. Even in Dessau, when technology met art, it was still from an essentially artistic ideology, carried on with Max Bill to the first years at Ulm.

of concept, taking into account fields of behavioural and applied sciences, but it was inevitably constrained by inherent limitations of a new experiment that, to a certain extent, derived from previous models of modernity. Attracted by the potential of scientific method, it took some time for Ulmers to become conscious of the limitations imposed by pure rationality and direct transposition of such methods into designing information. In this respect, much was discussed and rethought within the school's years, from 1953 to 1968 and even more afterwards, by their founders and designers in general, aware of the ulm experience (Lindinger et al 1991).

In 1966, Garland (in Garland, 1996) pointed out some of the shortcomings of designing with exclusive preoccupation in the techniques of communication and not communication itself.

The graphic designer [...] is in danger of becoming obsessed with the nature of the techniques and of forgetting the nature of the communication itself: that is, the kind of facts, their meaning and their relationship to one another.

And reminding Ulm, Stiff (2005) wrote:

They talked a different language [...] what they talked was information. They didn't seem to care that Warren Weaver³ had carefully explained that in information theory, information must not be confused with meaning.

However, constant rational questioning, verification and revaluation of one's views was a noticeable aspect shared by Otl Aicher and HfG members and, like the school's curriculum, his ideas of design had also matured to a point where he could recognise limitations. Later, when reflecting on the risk of having merely replaced the constructivism of basic geometric forms for mathematical logic, Aicher (1991) pondered:

... the answers we receive to questions about the world depend on the method we use to formulate the questions.

Realising the duality of the aspiration for universal values and the awareness that 'nothing can be neutral'⁴ (Kinross 1984) seemed a progressive process. The apparent gap between Aicher's broad philosophical background, theories and ideas, and the actual concrete and visible results of his work was a characteristic reflected in several projects developed at the HfG. Probable causes for this gap may be summarised by Waller's (1979) analysis of function in information design:

... the most skilled problem-solver is limited by his knowledge-base. He may be good at balancing, optimising and compromising between conflicting objectives, but his perception of the problem and his repertoire of potential solutions will be limited by the breadth of his interpretation of that experience.

Such limitations at the time do not disprove Aicher or the hfg ulm as references for the discipline in question: the concern

3

A Mathematical Theory of Communication is an influential 1948 article by mathematician Claude E. Shannon. The article was one of the founding works of the field of information theory. Shannon expanded the ideas of this article in a 1963 book with Warren Weaver titled The Mathematical Theory of Communication.

("A Mathematical Theory of Communication - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mathematical_Theory_of_Communication.)

4

... everything comes from somewhere, everything is particular [...] It is in this very particularity that you can see the generality. And also: it is only when you acknowledge your own subjectivity, and know your own standpoint, that you can then reach out to some overarching perspective and to a more general position. (Kinross, Robin. 2005. The claim of reason: a twenty-five year argument about information design. Information Design Journal 13, no. 3: 211-215)

with crisp separation of roles between art and design are also a core definition of information design. As was in Ulm, user and information always come first, not the designer as an artist, nor the design as a means for self-expression.

In 1967, one year before funding ceased and the hfg came to an end, Aicher was officially commissioned⁵ to lead the team of designers responsible for the visual identity of the Olympic Games in Munich, in 1972.

munich 72: background and new concepts

In 1936, political motives behind the organisation of the Olympic Games in Berlin promoted the state using the glamour of the event (Rathgeb 2002). Borrowing formal elements from antiquity, typical of nazi identity, Berlin games innovated decorating the hosting city and using communication technologies, which were subsequently adopted as standards. This ambivalent legacy, of technical merits but hideous political and ideological motives, guided the National Olympic Committee to set forth the goal of being better by discarding 1936 concepts. The Committee expected to develop a concept for the Olympic Games that would set a novel interpretation for the event, thus moving away from the image of previous Olympics in Germany.

For the Committee, sport should not be understood as a reflection of political and economical interests. Alternatively, the focus should be on the sports event and a unified visual identity should allow for an exciting long-lasting experience. Rathgeb (2002) writes that:

The ideal of the 1972 Olympics opposed the theory of a division between work and spare time (sport and leisure).
(...) Instead, leisure should be an area free of purpose.

Some main concerns of the Committee, as reported by Rathgeb (2002):

- nothing should be colossal and emotiveness, but instead: 'playful happiness' (*Spielerische Heiterkeit*) should express the festive character;
- cultural events alongside the games should reinforce its cultural relevance;
- it should be as free as possible from political influence.
- 'The games should be: happy, light, dynamic, not political, neutral, free from ideology and a playful blend of sport and culture'⁶

Creating a new interpretation of the Olympic games through which the current biased image of the country, militaristic disciplined and neoclassical, would be corrected, was Aicher's starting point. Instead of folkloric elements, the visual strategy should be rooted in physical elements, that would still reflect local and cultural environment.

⁵
Aicher's involvement with the Olympics in Munich stemmed much from his advantageous network of personal connections, contacts, and clients.
(Rathgeb, Markus. 2005. Otl Aicher)

⁶
Olympic Committee 1969, Richtlinien und Normen für die visuelle Gestaltung, in Rathgeb 2002

Rathged (2002) describes that:

...typical characteristics, such as mountains, lakes, forests, meadows, the sun and the city of Munich were taken as a starting point to come up with visual elements. [...] it was desirable to create a link between the landscape and the cultural tradition by means of design.

In addition, the project should be able to create a useful image: provide a sense of place reflecting a desirable identity, dealing with varied audience expectations; work as a tool to convey information and create knowledge, enabling planned navigation during the event; provide general consistent view and specific understanding of the games, its meaning and dimension as interpreted by its visitors. The user experience was planned.

the project

Many aspects of the design outline, such as the principle of standardisation, or unity in variety, implies that the strategy used by Aicher developed from the design methods in Ulm. To ensure visual coherency and organisation in all applications, illustrations, typography, and pictograms responded to a detailed grid system. But, instead of a rigid standard model, variety was a precondition for creating a clear and ordered system.

Complexity and scale were also aspects that made the project an early reference in modern information and identity systems. Varied communication needs could be interpreted and tackled by the rules of the design guidelines⁷. This assured systematic development and control of applications in different media types.

The basis of a flexible communication system required standardisation rather than uniformity. Regarding color and typography choices, Aicher claims that:

It was possible with these guidelines to produce a graphic image for the Games that was both well-defined and evocative.

7

The design manual published by the Olympic Committee is also a relevant example of information design. It contained the framework for developing all visual media and allowed designers to work independently, yet producing a coherent visual result.

Using a reduced number of universal elements, Aicher and his team defined variables of the design principle: colour, type and symbol; complemented by the emblem and specific use of photographic depictions⁸.

colour

As Aicher (1989) recalls in *Typographie*,

initially all colours of the spectrum except red could be used.

8

Aicher also introduced an official mascot, Waldi, as part of the visual identity. Waldi was the first Olympic mascot and such practice became a standard since then.

The range was eventually narrowed by observing the environment. The light blue and white of the Alps were interpreted as the colours of Bavaria, therefore chosen as prime colours for the visual identity, and some were chosen

to colour-code specific areas: Light blue for sport and as official colour for the Olympic Committee; green for communication media; orange for technical departments; silver for representative purposes and honors (Rathgeb 2002). Staff uniforms designed by Aicher's team followed this code coherently.

type

Aicher chose for univers as the single typeface for the whole system. As expected, his choice (Aicher, 1991) was somehow justified:

I have worked a lot with Univers. It has probably never been applied as exhaustively or exclusively as by our creative team working on the designs for the Munich Olympic Games. No other script was contemplated for this occasion, and Univers itself was only used in the main body of text, not for the bold cover headlines. [...] Frutiger had introduced a system that did away with the terminological clutter [...] He numerically quantified type and elaborated a listing matrix that cleared up uncertainties once and for all. [...] The styles we chose for the Olympic Games were 45 and 55, and in a few instances 46 or 56.

He believed in univers' modern values, its clearness, objectiveness and systematisation of shapes and weights, which still preserved handwriting qualities such as variation of stroke width.

pictograms

The increasing complexity and modernisation of Germany's main cities after the war and the international, pluri-cultural audience attending to the event demanded special concern with efficient and internationally comprehensible language. The pictogram system developed for the Games meant to answer such need, working as visual complement for verbal information. Setting up a comprehensible vocabulary of symbols for sport activities, transport, communication and services, depended on a systematic approach through which a visual grammar should be created. All symbols were designed using standard graphic elements on a grid formed by sets of equidistant orthogonal lines at 0° and 45°. The system was a successful accomplishment regarding syntax coherence, but rigid obeisance paid to the grid sometimes took its toll and some pictograms were less successful than others.

Such drawbacks are minor if compared to the overall result, but are fundamental to comprehend that not in every aspect Aicher was free of an aesthetic approach over function. Even if that aesthetic was the aftereffect of rational action, it had remained an aesthetic concern to a certain extent, diverging to information design principles.

In the first edition of Information Design Journal, Waller (1979) describes a key aspect of the discipline that is not always contemplated in Aicher's design method:

Rather than view technical excellence as a means to an aesthetically pleasing and correct product, we can see it as just one element of a craftsmanlike approach to communication – an approach in which the purposes and limitations of communicators and their readers direct the designer's objectives.

Together with pictograms, a wayfinding system were developed to indicate directions, places, traffic flow, and services. Later, Aicher expanded the original system of symbols, then used in airports, public buildings and events.

His concerns with generating a comprehensible visual language differed from Otto Neurath, to whom symbols were not to replace verbal language. Aicher's goal was to ultimately develop a language based exclusively on pictorial symbols (Rathgeb 2002).

emblem

After unsatisfactory results from public competition, the National Olympic Committee gave Aicher the task of designing the Games' emblem. Traditionally, Olympic 'logos' derived from local history and tradition of the hosting city, which contradicted 72's driving concept. The emblem, likewise the overall image, should be valid beyond restrictions of place and time. Again, Aicher sought for references in local geography and in sport. Two alternatives were presented and, after a lengthy process, the Strahlenkranz (radiant garland) was rejected, mainly for not being protectable by copyright (Rathgeb 2002). Finally, a new version inspired in Aicher's design was approved. Redesigned by Coordt von Mannstein, the symbol held original concepts, referring to the city's shining sun above the Alps, a flower, a star and the victory laurels (Rathgeb 2007).

photography

Photography was chosen as means of pictorial representation for being regarded as easily comprehended by different cultural groups (Rathgeb 2007). Using a limited number of colours from the visual identity palette, images depicted various sports disciplines, focusing on the practice of the sport, the movement, not the winner. Colours also ensured no specific ethnic group was represented. Through visual synthesis photography was not only informative, but also semantic, adding to the overall identity.

meaning and function

The identity of the 1972 Olympic Games, grew out of information design needs, such as wayfinding systems, identification systems, timetables and catalogues, which demanded a flexible and co-ordinated design. By neglecting revivals of classicism and superficial folkloric symbolism, Aicher established that clear communication was not an ideology for its own sake, but should be interpreted as part of the meaning, as a semantic element of the message.

conclusion

The information system for Olympic Games in Munich was not only Aicher's most successful departure from the formal rules he had established for his designs, but at the same time, it was an example of how such rules aid designing information systems and corporate identity.

Working on ways to combine and display graphical and informational elements according to a set of guidelines has been a most distinguished quality in Aicher designs. The results achieved in 1972 presents an advancement of many of the limitations of some ulm examples and concepts when it comes to designing usable (and meaningful) information. Arranged in several instances, such elements reflected the Olympic Games well-planned, modular and constructive design syntax, from which visual identity emerged naturally, beyond pure functional information.

postscript

One thought to be considered is that the choices for neutrality, for attempts to turn away from the previous traditional folkloric image were successful only as far the limitations of a modern approach, developed from a modern, yet local, perspective of what is neutral and international can concieve. Beyond the contribution to design and information design, Otl Aicher successfully helped changing a worldwide perception of the traditional Germany, by probably replacing it with a different one: the modern Germany. Still, the obvious qualities of this project reflects the image (that is, neutrality, function) commonly associated with german-speaking countries and is, at the same time, widely accepted as modern, timeless and neutral. Possibly more successfully than any manifestation of modernity, was 1972 Olympics design system merged into collective culture and consciousness as efficient universal design.

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