Environmental Graphic Design
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In the last three decades the field of environmental graphic design has emerged as the integration of the communications and architecture professions. Practitioners are creating not only a visual language but a full sensory experience that orients users to a space and may reflect a distinct image or theme.

In the postmodern era there has been a backlash against anonymous and disorienting spaces. Both building users and owners seek a return to distinctive public space that is at once easy to recognize and easy to navigate. Environmental graphic designers design architectural elements that visually define facilities, and they often offer related services such as development of promotional materials and publications. Sculpture, landscaping elements, fixtures, walkways, and signage are examples of the types of three-dimensional architectural elements that may be produced. Publications and promotional materials that reflect the facility’s identity—including brochures, Web sites, uniforms, stationery, multimedia presentations, custom wallpaper, packaging, reports, newsletters, and user manuals—often are part of the package of services that environmental graphic design firms offer their clients.

Environmental graphic design traces its routes to traditional architecture, where differentiated forms combined with decorative building elements gave each facility instant recognition. But even during the modern era there were examples of architects whose expressive architecture effectively communicated a sense of spatial orientation to the user. Best known among these are Charles and Ray Eames, the husband-and-wife team known for their World’s Fair exhibits.

A more recent example is Frank Gehry, who tells a story in each of his projects through a unique use of building forms and communication. Robert Venturi designs buildings that are themselves environmental graphics, as exemplified by the Seattle Art Museum, where the name of the museum is cast in concrete a full story tall on the facade. The trend toward more expressive architecture was further validated when the Disney Corporation began to hire world-class architects to design buildings that are not amusement parks but which reflect the company’s highly creative, visual, and animated image. Robert A. M. Stern’s Disney animation building in Los Angeles is an example now being studied by many other firms seeking to express a distinct corporate image in their structures.

The entertainment and retail industries—from theme parks to video games and the Internet—bombard the public with sophisticated visual imagery, so that increasingly complex sensory stimulation is required in public spaces. The line between promotion and architecture is becoming blurred, and the ability to deliver a combination of graphic design and brand communication within architecture is a high-value service that has tremendous market growth potential. Opportunities for connecting people to a place are being expanded through interactive, dynamic, real-time communications. Tactile, audio, and even olfactory elements are in the toolboxes of some environmental designers seeking to provide “experience management.”

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CLIENT NEEDS

While all clients need to be concerned with image and public communications, clients vary in their knowledge of these issues. Some clients want one-stop shopping—they want firms that can be the architects of their overall image, not just of their buildings. These clients will expect their architects to work closely with their marketing firms, or in some cases to offer creative services similar to those provided by these firms.

Retail and entertainment clients are particularly aware of the need to create a strong visual theme and brand identity to attract customers. Nike is a good example of a retail manufacturing company that understood early on the value of coordination of corporate design, store design, advertising, and product image to strongly communicate the company and its market position. Banana Republic is another example of a retail corporation that uses environmental graphic design for storytelling—integrating their environment, product and packaging very effectively. In the entertainment industry, sports arenas and theme parks are very strong markets at present. These facilities must accommodate large crowds, and cir-
clear and direct signage and well-designed walkways are essential, but these functional concerns must be expressed in a way that makes the facility fun. Government agencies and developers have similar concerns about efficient crowd circulation in design of major public facilities such as airport or transit terminals and mixed-use environments, including shopping destinations.

Savvy corporate and institutional clients also see their facilities as part of the total public communications package they use to reach their customers and investors, and to attract employees. For example, in health care institutions, clients are concerned about communicating the image of comfort and quality of care, as well as creating space that will be memorable, enjoyable, and easy to navigate. Hospitality industry clients have similar concerns. Corporate clients want to use their facilities as a tool for achieving their strategic goals, from sales to recruitment.

On the other hand, many clients do not explicitly link environmental graphic design with other market communications. In these cases the architect will need to gauge whether to try to interest the client in a broader and more integrated scope of work. For example, developers may require only basic signage, marking, and directional systems for speculative or leased facilities and be unwilling to invest in other facilities enhancements. On the other hand, many clients with small or medium-size businesses may lack sophisticated market communications programs but be receptive to suggestions regarding how they can cost-effectively enhance their business image by adding environmental enhancements and integrating the look and feel of their facilities with their marketing materials.

Environmental design services also are increasingly in demand for civic and urban design projects. Existing businesses often pool resources to create a shopping district and require design services to create streetscape elements to visually tie the community together. Urban revitalization projects may involve unification of old and new development, enhancement of a waterfront or other community attraction, and improvement of pedestrian and vehicular circulation and parking.

Many clients need environmental graphic design services simply to correct problems with existing facilities. For example, the existing signage may need to be replaced because it is worn, because the building has been reorganized, or because circulation patterns have changed. Or a group of office building owners may want to make it easier for people to find their buildings or to circulate among them in order to attract more tenants.

Many architecture firms have graphic design departments that offer signage and graphic design services. These firms may team with environmental graphic design consulting firms for projects with a more complex scope of work. Both types of firms may subcontract to graphic design consultants who specialize in publications design, writers, Web design specialists, and sign fabricators, and also may compete with these types of firms to some degree. Some signage companies offer limited graphic design services, but most choose not to compete with their primary customers, who are architects, developers, and environmental designers.

Environmental design services are integrally related to programming, building design, interior and landscape design services. Each environmental design project includes production of a design document or construction package and involvement in the construction administration for the installation of the environmental design elements. Photography, model construction, and postoccupancy evaluation are other related services.

**Skills**

Two distinct skills sets are required in order to produce both the three-dimensional architectural elements and the two-dimensional marketing materials involved in the full scope of environmental graphic design services. Artistic ability is the common denominator for the two.

Architectural training is a good basic background for an environmental graphic designer involved in design of architectural elements. In fact, some architecture schools now offer complete curricula in environmental graphic design. Others evolve into the environmental graphic design field from careers as graphic, theater, or industrial designers or as fine artists. Strong design skills (composition, form, color, scale, texture, ability to visualize three-dimensional space, etc.) are important. Artistic ability, particularly good drawing skills, is essential so that the designer can easily express various visual concepts and options.
Technical knowledge is required, including the ability to read architectural drawings, familiarity with structural engineering principles, an understanding of building materials, and familiarity with codes and standards requirements. The environmental graphic designer also must understand how people move through and perceive space, which requires a knowledge of human factors including visual and lighting requirements, color perception, behavioral psychology, and universal design principles. Understanding symbolism and multilingual needs is essential. Familiarity with the ADA and its signage regulations is mandatory. Excellent communications and interpersonal skills are required, as the environmental graphic designer often has to negotiate with both the client and the rest of the design team to achieve a satisfactory design solution. The Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD) is a good resource for determining the standards in the field and obtaining professional referrals.

Environmental graphic designers normally work closely with architects, landscape architects, structural engineers, interior designers, and lighting designers. The work of model builders is very important in developing an understanding of how the environmental design elements will work contextually. Traditionally models were fabricated from plastic and wood; now some computer experts are highly skilled at creating animated illustrations and models.

Sign fabricators contribute detailed knowledge of building materials, fabrication techniques, and methods for signage. In fact, the detailed working drawings for sign fabrication are normally completed by the fabricator.

A good reference list of artists and artisans is one of the most important resources that an environmental graphic design firm has to offer. Illustrators, colorists, metal and glass artisans, sculptors, and painters can create a custom product to realize any creative vision—but you have to know where to find them and how to use their talent most effectively.

Traditionally architecture firms were not involved in publications design, but now more and more firms are hiring graphic designers or developing strategic alliances with graphic design consultants to meet the client’s need for “one-stop shopping.” Graphic artists combine artistic and design capability with knowledge of typography, layout, printing and production techniques, and computer-based drawing and layout programs. Graphic designers can create a layout for either print or electronic (Web) media, but actual creation of Web sites is a separate skill involving specialized (but not particularly complex) computer programming knowledge. Design skill levels among graphic artists vary tremendously, as do compensation levels. At the most junior level are those with knowledge of layout programs who are able to produce very basic publications such as newsletters and technical reports or proposals.

More senior graphic designers with artistic skill and substantial publications experience are required for handling the complexities of publications such as multicolor sales brochures, magazines, advertisements, and the like. These designers often collaborate with writers, illustrators, and photographers, or use stock photography combined with typographic design and creative page layout to create high-impact publications. The best graphic designers have an in-depth knowledge of printing and production to ensure quality in the final product.

Other specialists that may be required to produce market communications materials include video producers, audiovisual production specialists (who create slide shows and electronic or interactive presentations), and exhibit fabricators.

Basic equipment needed for an environmental graphic design practice includes illustration, drawing, and desktop layout software, as well as good computer, printer, and scanning equipment.

**PROCESS**

Scope of work in the environmental graphic design field can vary immensely. There is a vast difference in projects requiring basic, traditional signage and directional design services (wayfinding) versus those requiring a full range of environmental design and market communications services. In either category scope is further determined by the size and complexity of the building facilities, the level of quality or custom design desired, and turnaround times.

The teaming approach will reflect these differences in scope. For basic traditional services, an environmental graphic designer and a sign fabricator may be able to handle the work. For full-scale services on larger projects, a dozen or more team members may be required.

The work approach also varies with the scope and complexity of the project. The
most basic traditional services for a small office building, for example, might involve design of a sign to identify the site or the building on approach, and a building directory for the lobby. The approach for this straightforward project would involve designing the sign and the directory (including specification of materials, colors, size, and location) and making sure the products meet standards for legibility and permanency, are ADA-compliant, and conform to all applicable building codes (particularly structural or fire codes). Coordination with the building designer, building owner, and building operations staff is required. After approval of the design, the environmental graphic designer must arrange for fabrication of the sign and directory and supervise their installation.

Projects involving a fuller scope of services where the client wants the environmental design to involve innovative elements that reflect an image, spirit, or theme are phased in sequences that mirror the building design process, with some variations. Major phases include programming, conceptual design, schematic design, design development, construction documentation, bidding and negotiation, shop drawings, and construction administration.

**Programming.** In the programming phase, the environmental graphic design team determines the client’s objectives and mission as they relate to the facilities project. Research may be required to understand the specific needs of the building users or audience. As a result of programming investigations, the quantity of signs and other architectural elements that will be required in order to achieve the project objectives can be estimated.

**Conceptual design.** Loose sketches and/or models are developed to explore the potential for elements that might fulfill the stated project objectives.

**Schematic design.** A selected concept is further developed and detailed. Computer illustrations or more complex models may be developed to assist in viewing the environmental graphic design elements in context.

**Design development.** The design of the environmental design elements is refined and documented so that it is biddable and billable.

**Bidding process.** The environmental graphic designer ordinarily oversees the bidding process for fabrication of the architectural elements, and advises on the selection of fabricators.

**Shop drawings.** Selected fabricators usually develop the detailed shop drawings for signs and other elements because they alone have the expertise to know the best way of constructing these very customized architectural elements. The environmental graphic design consultant reviews the shop drawings and coordinates their review with any other disciplines, such as structural engineering.

**Construction administration.** Oversight of fabrication and installation is the final step in most environmental graphic design projects.

Usual deliverables for three-dimensional elements include a programming report; conceptual drawings or models; schematic drawings, models, or animations; a design document for bidding; shop drawings; and the completed installed architectural elements. Where development of marketing materials is involved, usual deliverables are the preliminary design concepts, draft layouts, final layouts and production of artwork for reproduction, and finally the fully produced publication.
The AIA provides a contract document designed especially for alternative architectural services.

**B102–2007, Standard Form of Agreement Between Owner and Architect without a Predefined Scope of Architect’s Services.**

AIA Document B102–2007 is a standard form of agreement between owner and architect that contains terms and conditions and compensation details. B102–2007 does not include a scope of architect’s services, which must be inserted in Article 1 or attached as an exhibit. Special terms and conditions that modify the agreement may be included in Article 8.

The separation of the scope of services from the owner/architect agreement allows users the freedom to append alternative scopes of services.


For more information about AIA Contract Documents, visit [www.aia.org/contractdocs/about](http://www.aia.org/contractdocs/about)

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