

BRAND IDENTITY DESIGN AND RE-DESIGN BETWEEN RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE: Identity, sustainable identity design and the role of generative grammar

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a term that has widely affected the design industry over the last two decades. It has given the design profession an ethical role in creating more durable and resistant design solutions. Out of this responsibility, this paper questions the position of a timeless identity design between durability and resilience within a recent shift towards generative grammar. An interdisciplinary pattern-matching logic will be conducted to review the literature on sustainability, identity and design in order to develop a theoretical framework. This qualitative approach will be supported by multiple identity design case studies analysis. The resulting analytical framework will serve as a guiding model towards a more sustainable approach in identity design.

I- INTRODUCTION

Identity design is a process of decoding information from a design brief, and compressing them into a form, based on various design principles. The challenge and objective in every identity designed is not merely in fulfilling this step but also in creating an identity that endures. Durability is the ability of a landmark to stand the test of time. Strategically speaking, a brand maintaining the same identity design reflects stability but sometimes a risky

state of non-openness: "Whether a business sees change as good or bad, change will certainly come. If a company's identity refuses to address business change, it becomes more and more irrelevant" (Fischel 2002: 9). On the other hand, while identity re-design echoes progress and success, the frequency of re-designs and the nuance between variation and repetition could also lead to consumers mistrust: "Changing logos is one of the first things brands do in their rebrands and is often the most criticized"¹ (Backer 2014: 4). Durable identity design has proven difficult because durability implies resistance, which is debatable when it comes to designing a subject in constant evolution - the identity of a brand - in an ever-changing context: time. Observing Gap case (Fig. 1) we see unjustifiable small-time intervals between one redesign and the other where two re-designs were even done in the same year. Gap even went back confusingly to the same initial landmark design three times.

Designers are at a decision-making position to provide sustainable solutions. Re-design has proven to offer a temporary solution. Whether the reasons are economic or a changing cycle in fashion, when the precursor design with all its applications are in fact replaced by the new design, the results are unsustainable. In a mass consumption era where things are frequently intentionally

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<https://www.marketingweek.com/2014/09/10/whats-in-a-logo/>

designed to break, are identities also deliberately designed to be replaced after a while? Can we talk of a planned obsolescence in identity design? This comes to further highlight the experimental aspect of the design process at a time where designers struggle to minimize the trial-and-error trait of their activity like never before.

Fig. 1: Gap logo variations



Source:

http://logowi.com/english/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/gap_0.jpg

Out of this background and problematic issue, the research will answer the following questions:

- 1- Is the concept of durability as a component of sustainability applicable to identity design?
- 2- How do designers, control and monitor the right balance between variation and repetition?
- 3- Can generative design give insights to prevent the image/logo from redundancy or be another trend?

Case studies of logos that entered the loop of re-design, in comparison to logos that have been designed following generative design methods will lead to the theoretical replication. Prior to that, it is necessary to develop a theoretical platform by reviewing literature on sustainability, identity and design. As such, this paper studies sustainability in relation to the two constructs: identity as the subject of representation, and design as the method of representation. An interdisciplinary pattern-matching logic within the literature will provide a set of units of analysis from the theoretical framework to enable the cases analysis.

II- LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Problematic issue

We live in a hyper-disposable world. When we think of sustainability as users, resistant and enduring material first come to our minds as a way to minimizing waste caused by maintenance and sometimes by re-design. Resistance, robustness and endurance can in some cases spare sustainability problems where physical quantifiable material is used. Yet, are these features scalable to the area of identity design? As David Pavitt (2000) puts it: “Nearly every company mark ever designed evolved into its finished form” (Wheeler 2009: 11). When we observe sustainability as designers, we see brand re-designs literally stop using any application featuring their old identity. Shell’s 1999 most recent re-design (Fig. 2) is a suitable case. The 1995 design barely resisted for four years. What makes it even more critical, is the minor and unjustifiable visual uplift from the 1995 version; an uplift that most users, whom are eventually the target audience, won’t even notice. In Taleb’s words, it is “distinction without a difference” (Taleb, 2007: 320). It makes us wonder if it was worth all the waste produced by the myriad of design applications on trucks, signages, uniforms, collaterals and many other marketing materials, including manufacturing, packaging, transportation and distribution.

Fig. 2: Shell Logo evolution



Source:

<https://www.shell.fr/about-us/the-shell-brand.html>

On another level, contextual pressures like design trends as well as technological advances play a major role in brands wanting to undertake an identity re-design, with the aim to modernize, manage change, reposition or promote growth (Fishel 2002). When producing an identity design for a certain brand, many

variations of the same sketch are produced by the designer. Out of the pool of these different variations, only one output is selected while all the similar ones are dropped. Looking at the Shell example again, we can “visually” come to the conclusion that, if the same brand asked for a design uplift 10 years later, it is reasonable to take from that same pool another variation and develop it. Yet, would that be ethical? What if the redesign job was requested from a different design group?

Many designers agree that all clients do ask for a timeless identity which stands the test of time. This call for resistance is also witnessed with design practitioners, like Ivan Chermayyef (2000) who claims that a trademark should last beyond the fashion of the time. Furthermore, Alina Wheeler (2009) recommends durability in identity design: “Unlike advertising, which launches a new campaign each year, brand identity needs to endure”. On the other hand, Catharine M. Fishel (2002) argues that a re-design of an identity is that of an inevitable contextual change management: “An identity design should reflect the values and aims of a company as a whole, what drives it, what it believes in and why it exists. It is always evolving, growing, adapting to new circumstances” (Van Nes 2012: 6).

2.2. Sustainability is redesign

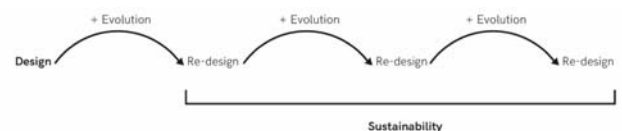
In fact, looking closer, we see that sustainability definition actually enfolds re-design as an evident feature: “sustainability of a system is not just its ability to stay the same, but rather its ability to flourish, which may involve changing, moving location, or evolving in form and function over time. It also means that there is no final state of sustainability, just moments of dynamic equilibrium (Erlhoff and Marshall 2008: 403). Accordingly, re-design must be regarded

not as a threat or something to be avoided but as a typical evolution with respect to the context.

Re-design became a common term in 1978 with Alessandro Mendini, it described the designs referring “to a clearly defined design precursor” (Erlhoff 2008: 329-331). Part of linearity, the new design would inherit the traits and qualities of its parent design to avoid confusion. When we speak of evolution, each re-design is usually based on the design that directly precedes it on a timeline.

As for design, by definition, it is not required to “fulfill”, as much as to “transform existing situations into preferred ones” (Erlhoff 2008: 109). Moreover, continuity must make part of the design as a creative force or else the company image will not be coherent and consistent: “it will never coalesce into a unified whole but will remain a mosaic of unrelated fragments” (Meggs, 1998: 375-377). Re-design is misinterpreted as a reactive process given a “corrective” role, especially because the designers may be creating another problem out of the suggested new solution. While in fact, it is a normal visual evolution: the different re-designs are a feature of sustainability (Fig.3). As such, the origin of the problematic issue is not in a redundant re-design itself but in miscalculation on the initial design’s level in providing the solution which enables it to keep going and be sustained.

Fig. 3: Sustainable equation



Source: Authors

2.3. Insights from different solutions

According to modernist designer Paul Rand (1947) timelessness in identity design is key. Basic geometric shapes, namely circles, triangles and squares are the main components for a timeless logo as being the essence of all shapes (Fig. 4). For him, a logo “cannot survive unless it is designed with the utmost simplicity and restraint.”² He realized that reducing a brandmark to elementary shapes that are *universal*, visually *unique*, and stylistically timeless enable it to be aesthetically and technically functional over a long period of time (Meggs, 1998: 369). Yet, it makes us wonder how the brandscape will look like if all brands adopt the same trend. This implicates visual limitations to the creative output where brands cannot totally own their identity, as Charles Bukowski puts it saying that when everybody is the same, everybody is nobody.

Fig. 4: Paul Rand logo designs: ABC (1962), IBM (1972) and Atlas Crankshaft Corporation (1964)



Source:

<https://stocklogos.com/topic/paul-rands-logos>

In other cases, logos that have an illusion of dynamism are claimed to be a solution to a durable identity image. The redesign of Swisscom³ (Fig. 5) expresses dynamism. This attempt to “bring life” to

the logos naturally represented graphically the dynamism in the business of communication itself.

Fig. 5: Swisscom logo re-design



1997-2007

2007 - ongoing

Source:

http://www.movingbrands.com/?category_name=swisscom-work

However, Irene Van Nes (2012) criticizes this approach stating that logos that express an illusion of movement in general are “nothing more than a moving version of a static logo” (Van Nes, 2012: 7).

Regardless the different solutions, one thing is for sure: Durability reflects a “static” aspect while dynamism reflects a “living” aspect, thus it is believed to be more engaging and adds an extension to the image shelf life. Contemporary brands are aiming for a living character. Between Rand and the illusion of dynamism, come examples of brands like Adidas. The sports brand logo actually consists of three monochrome parallel stripes. These are contrasted by a very elaborate visual language that enables the brand to possess the vibrant character evolving with every new collection. This character seldom makes us notice the static vibes of the geometric logo, needed for the corporate use. Yet, is this method generalizable on all kinds of businesses?

Christopher Alexander (1964) facing the same problematic of stability of form over time, draws the attention of designers to nature’s creation process. He asks: “Given a set of forces, how can we generate a form which will be stable with respect to them?” (Arida 2004: 43). In an article entitled ‘From a set of forces to form’, he states: “All systems, whether they are individual human organisms, or

²

<http://design.uh.edu/~sechung/rand3/biography.html>

³

http://www.movingbrands.com/?category_name=swisscom-work

social systems, or mechanical systems, share the following property: when in certain states, they have inexorable tendencies to seek certain other states” (Alexander 1966: 96).

Alexander (in Arida 2004) and Marks (2012) differentiate between the traditional design process resulting in a dead decorative design, durable only because of a high level of resistance to the context, and the natural form as being in sync with context, thus it can never maintain the same state and be durable. Alexander shifts the problem towards the design process resulting in a misfit between the form and the context. He distinguishes “design” from “form” where natural forms are always driven by natural forces whether they are interior (on the internal structural micro and genetic level) or exterior (on the environmental external macro level). Laura Marks (2012) states that these underlying causes can even be present as a sleeping force, in a “state of latency”, waiting to be unfolded in a future time (Marks, 2012: 151-152). In our case where identity is in question, does the traditional identity design process takes the sleeping forces into consideration? Unless identity is held as a complex system as a starting point, Christopher Alexander’s proposition would not be applicable. Identity is in fact assumed as a system only through the lens of generative design.

Van Nes (2012) compares Generative Design to a cooking recipe with ingredients A, B, C and D. Infinite combinations of the ingredients, give a different taste each time, but all belonging to the same “family” of tastes eventually. Generative design moves the design from the design level to the process level, enabling the form to perform the following:

- 1- Generate complexity
- 2- Self-maintain and self-repair
- 3- Generate novel structures,

behaviors, outcomes or relationships (McCormack, Dorin, Innocent, 2004).

In other words, the formula provides a system, able to be designed and re-designed (sustained) creatively.

III- METHODOLOGY

3.1. The context

Van Nes (2012) sees the changes implied by the context as a kind of positive pressure by which a company is nurtured. Any design role was and still is to achieve the fit between form and context, based on the designer’s conceptualization (Arida 2004). The attention of marketing shifted to experience and to an individual identification with the product as we moved to a mass-customized economy. Identification further highlights the importance of identity. Contextually speaking, I argue that the evolution of marketing towards this human-centered approach (Fig. 6) highly affected the way brands represent their identities (Neumeier, 2003).

Fig. 6: The evolution of marketing timeline / context



Source: Neumeier 2003: 38

“Assuming *history* is generated according to some logic, we only see only the *events*, never the *rules*, but need to *guess how it works*” (Taleb, 2007:58).

The citation reflects both the problematic issue as well as the method. “Guessing” shapes the process giving it a speculative aspect. The problem is re-purposed as not in re-design but in the initial design for not being given the faculty to evolve by the designer.

The method is defined as an interdisciplinary pattern matching process. It is a qualitative approach aiming at minimizing implicit models and

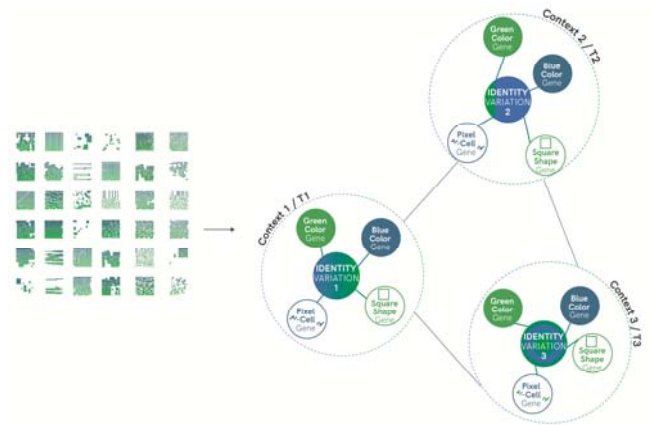
assumptions. Pattern matching involves drawing a link between a predicted pattern that is derived from the theoretical framework, and match it with an observed empirical pattern. The method helps the reader retrace backwards the thought processes of the research and the way the latter reached the results (Sinkovics, 2018).

As such, I will proceed by noting and investigating the interdisciplinary links between different observations and resources: the rule revealed from the patterns, the decentralized model and identity as a complex system. The pattern-matching logic will result in a set of units to be verified in the critical visual analysis of more cases: Contextualizing and juxtaposing case studies of logos that entered the loop of re-design, in comparison to logos that have been designed following generative design methods will lead to the generalizable theoretical insight on designing sustainable identities.

3.2. The decentralized model

Deconstructing the graphic identity of Max Plank (fig. 7), we can see a complex family of symbols from the initial brand's graphic genes generating a set of complex forms with respect to the context. Each form is unique, made of a different combination of the same genes, according to the context.

Fig. 7: Max Plank generative identity – deconstructed model



Source: Van Nes 2012: 185 (adjusted by authors)

Reaching out for a larger theoretical framework, we notice the juxtaposition between the Max Plank generative identity deconstructed model (fig. 7) and an older model: Back in 1960, Paul Baran tackled the problem of how to protect weak telephone communication systems if threatened by a nuclear attack: “He had imagined a way to break one message down into several “message blocks”, route the separate pieces over different routes (telephone lines), and then re-assemble the whole at its destination.” (Beranek, 2000: 63). Baran exposes the fragility of centralized systems built to be robust and resistant and highlighted the survivability of decentralized systems having the agency to bend (Fig. 8).

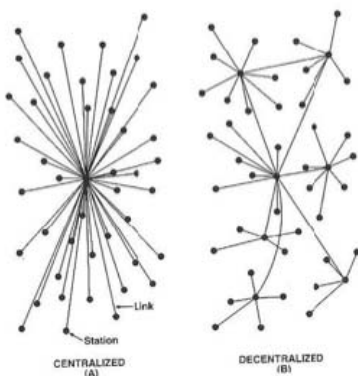
3.3. Identity

Years later, Deleuze (1980) followed the same logic using a biological term to describe identity as a complex system: The rhizome. It features structures formed by non-hierarchical entry and exit points in information interpretation and representation, which enables their survivability. In other words, again, the rhizome owes its resilience to its decentralized multiplicity. According to Deleuze, identity following the rhizome model presents history as an assemblage, a system of attractions with no precise beginning and no precise end; it is always in the middle, between things, an inter-being rather than a being. Furthermore, this process takes the form of a

“becoming” through the synthesis of lines of flight where the concept of a Cartesian system and “predetermined plane with fixed coordinates” does not exist. On the other hand, identity in the traditional paradigm indicates “a same state”.

If Deleuzian identity is decentralized, then, as per the above, it is sustainable. Consequently, if identity in the traditional paradigm is unsustainable, it is because it is centralized: in other words, it is designed to be resistant. When it becomes redundant, it is replaced from the center.

Fig. 8: Network models by Baran similar to the structure of a rhizome by Deleuze



Source:

<http://www.rand.org/about/history/baran.html> (adjusted by authors)

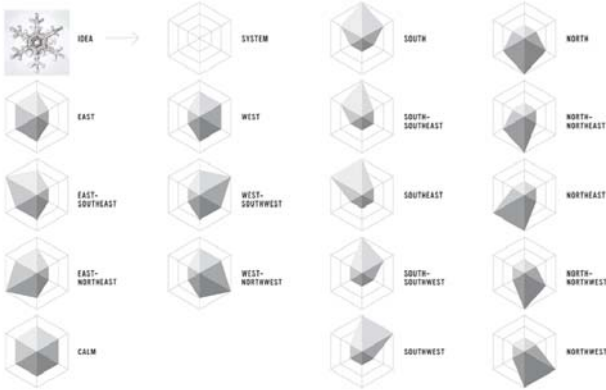
The table here below (Table 1) summarizes the theoretical framework on identity in the centralized model aiming for resistance as a means for sustainability and the decentralized model fostering resilience.

Table 1: Collected units of analysis

	CENTRALIZED MODEL >>> RESISTANCE	DECENTRALIZED MODEL >>> RESILIENCE
Being	x	
Becoming		x
Evolving		x
Discovered	x	
Constructed		x
Emergent		x
Fixed	x	
Ambivalent		x
Methodic		x
Force		x
Organic		x
Seeking other states		x
Saturated	x	
Assemblage		x
Single	x	
Fluid		x
Transforming		x
Moments of dynamic equilibrium		x
A mosaic of unrelated fragments	x	
Holistic		x
Open		x
A boundary	x	
Envision		x
Represent	x	
In Flux		x
In Chunks	x	
Individual		x
Relational / collective		x
Changing same		x
Points of temporary attachment		x
Stable	x	
Nomadic		x
Permanent	x	
Multiple identities	x	
Multiple aspects of the same identity		x
Wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts		x
Intersecting discourses		x
Organism		x
Complex		x
Rhizome		x
Hierarchy	x	
Transmute and reappear		x
Self-regulatory		x
Actualized	x	x
Decorative	x	
Processed		x
Ornamental		x
Infinite		x
Pattern	x	x
Linear	x	
Process		x
Output	x	

3.4. Generative identity case study

Fig. 9: Nordkyn identity



Source: <https://neue.no/work/visit-nordkyn/>

The units of analysis in table 1 will be used for the critical visual analysis of the current case study. Visually speaking, we observe a system of different forms representing Scandinavian Peninsula Nordkyn identity (Fig.9) obeying to the rhizomatic decentralized model. The components fluctuate around the same structure; one has to come back to the structure in order to grasp more variations. Despite the visual complexity presented, these entities constructed from heterogeneous parts seem to have an organized infrastructure, a *rule* able to deliver to the viewer a state of visual sameness, changing but still being recognizable. The form is fed by the weather data as the context, standing for temperature, humidity and the wind direction. The data are provided by the weather station thus they are accurate. The accuracy of the formula calibrates a correct dose of change between the different variations. The identity acting as one complex organism creates a whole generation with a self-regulatory aspect. A bifurcation of the different identity components within the context is able to generate identity facets that transmute and reappear in different forms. The forms that constitute the system are unpredictable yet they are framed by a clear structure.

In order to grasp a full meaning and to have a sense of identification with the brand, one needs to see the whole set. Taking one facet of the identity will make it seem more like a trend, which will require a future need to re-design. However, what we see is a set of real-time identities, where one could easily have preceded or followed the other, even be repetitive, or even totally be removed without affecting the survivability and continuity of the system.

With all of the variations combined the many facets of the same identity combined feature resilience. This results in many choices that fluctuate and change from moment to moment expressing an ambivalent image of relationships, with no sense of hierarchy, just points of temporary attachment. Therefore, all of the visual manifestations of identity fulfill the theory of assemblage: assemblage within the different sub-identities and assemblage as form across context. Furthermore, the evolutionary pressures to change result in one cartography of becoming composed of invisible lines of flights (the weather data) and visible stations (the form) highlight force exercised on the form as the main reason for its creative transformation. The form is thus always in the middle, never individual but always relational and collective. It is between things, an inter-being rather than a being. Thus, no sense of a final and complete image is delivered to the viewer but rather an evolving construction, a multiplicity always in the middle. Identity design built on a decentralized model is sustainable.

3.5. MIT lab identity re-design⁴: Is decentralizing the concept enough?

⁴ <http://new.pentagram.com/2014/10/new-work-mit-media-lab/>

Fig. 10: MIT identity evolution



Source: Adjusted by authors from different sources:

Source1: <http://clipsuper.com/mit-press.html>

Source2: Van Nes 2012: 153

Source 3: http://www.underconsideration.com/brandnew/archives/new_logo_and_identity_for_mit_media_lab_by_pentagram.php#.VwODZXDTY7A

For the occasion of the 25th anniversary of MIT, the landmark was re-designed in 2010 following generative design method creating up to 40,000 permutations of the logo to suit the lab's ever-changing environment. However, only three years later, MIT expressed the need for something more stable. Bierut went back to Muriel Cooper's 1962 Bauhaus style logo. It was enduring; more than 50 years later MIT Press was still using it (Fig. 10). The initial logo was given the flexibility that the beam logos had established. "We wanted them all to feel like they went together," says Bierut⁵. "So someone who was looking at them would sense an underlying DNA that made them all part of a closely knit family." These "glyphs" are static, but you can easily imagine how they could be rearranged.

The MIT Lab identity case study is of a critical importance to this paper. The generatively designed beams shortly replaced show that decentralizing the design concept is not enough. It is

⁵ <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/mit-media-lab-gets-transforming-logo-courtesy-pentagram/>

important to make sure the evolution does not lead to a totally different species. Building the form as a system on a solid structure is key.

3.6. Traditional identity re-design case

Fig. 11: Re-design examples within the contextual chronology



Source: Authors

In reference to Table 1, the traditional identity suggests that an object or subject remains the same as itself under different conditions through time. Looking more in the mechanistic direction, we find that it is based on an either/or identity rationale and it stresses the "one expression of reality". The classical notion of identity suggests that an identity is absolute, fixed and a boundary to be maintained. Identity as such becomes a finite product limited in time and space, designed to be permanent.

Placing the logos within the context of marketing evolution we first note that the graphic expression of the forces exercised by the context came in inexplicable chunks of time. However, the theory of a single enduring identity is graphically contradicted by a contextual need to reposition, modernize, manage change or promote growth. Taking the case of Pepsi for example (Fig.11),

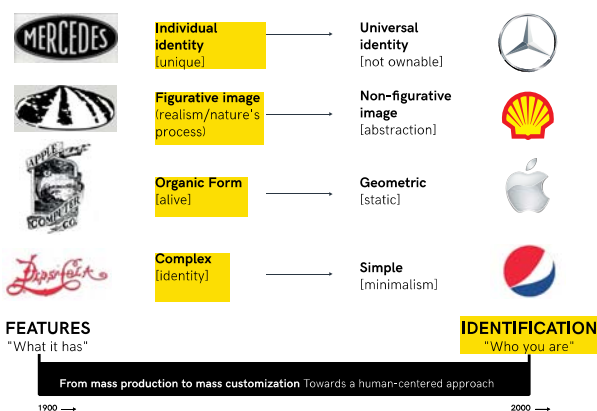
decentralizing its identity design would practically mean adopting all the past variations in the sequence as the current identity. The multiple aspect of the same identity would mean that all the variations, past present and future gathered make the identity of the brand. Yet, visually speaking, we see a misfit between the different permutations and a tendency to visually group the variations regardless the design precursor.

On form

“A complex domain is characterized by the following: there is a great degree of interdependence between its elements, both temporal (a variable depends on its past changes), horizontal (variables depend on one another), and diagonal (variable A depends on the past of variable B). As a result of this interdependence, mechanisms are subjected to positive, reinforcing feedback loops” (Taleb 2007: 358).

Complexity on this timeline is translated in an increased number of re-design operations and their frequency as the timeline evolves from the 1950s onwards: Smaller intervals are noticed between one re-design and the other, yet, the form is less from being complex.

Fig. 12: Observations between first design and most recent re-design



Source: Authors

Paradoxically, the timeline of redesigned logos has shown that the

more we move forward in time, the more the logos are becoming minimal:

Observing this chronological pattern, and comparing the first logo to the most recent in each sequence, we could begin to build a claim that all the case studies head gradually to the same conditions:

- 1- From an individual identity to a universal identity
- 2- From a figurative image to a non-figurative image
- 3- From the form to the code that generates it
- 4- From complexity to simplification
- 5- From the organic to the geometric

This leads to the following formula:

$$\text{Context} + \text{more re-design} = \text{less form} = \text{minimalism} = \text{structure}$$

On context

Opposed to mass production, mass customization as a context is an act of sustainable development. It is a human-centered approach expressed by an individual approach. Only by reversing the pattern that mass customization can celebrate individuality and be expressed graphically through restoring the complexity of form organically (as highlighted in yellow [in figure 12](#)).

This is verifiable through the case of MIT (Fig. 11). The 1962 logo which constituted the structure for the generative brand evolution, visually fits with the recent variations dating 2000 onwards as they all are based on minimal geometric shapes, even though forty years separate them (Fig. 12). As such, no further extension of the brand is possible unless adopting the last version of the logo as the structure, and apply generative methods for future permutations.



Yet, if a 1960 logo can fit with a 2015 logo can we still be talking about trends? The case of MIT and all identities heading to geometrical form informs us that Rand recommendation for a durable logo actually is an expression of minimalism. It is relevant to the limited number of brand genes present on the structure level which will constitute the base of the future forms.

IV- Conclusion (answering the thesis questions)

Speculation shapes many of the cases of identity design and redesign which lack a scalable methodical approach. This results in temporary solutions. Sustainability in identity design is not an option; it is aligned with the design profession ethics. Brand identity re-design is not to be avoided or resisted but to be embraced. Durability as a component of sustainability is irrelevant to the area of identity design, and clients should be aware of that. Durability of form is neither achievable nor sustainable. Instead, durability of structure provides the base for a sustainable form that transcends the here and now.

Contextually speaking, alienating form from context is equivalent to freezing the form in time. Consequently, resistance becomes the only option for survivability. Resistance leads to no redesign and with time, to redundancy.

When designing an identity following the traditional design process, once the brand genes defined, decentralization as a design compression model constitutes a road map for the brand to keep the door open for evolution. For the model to achieve the above, identity should be embraced as a system regardless the business' level of

dynamism. Creating the brand genes and putting them into a minimal structure will enable an open-ended system for future variations. The key is to design as if, one day, the identity might be generatively designed.

On the other hand, when redesigning an identity following the traditional design process, the designer should revert back to the structure and apply the decentralized model in order to make the form evolve while remaining consistent (same species), providing a justifiable evolution. Generative design and traditional identity design are not opposites. Generative design is not a trend, it is a universal thinking process and a mindset. It is also a re-design method that provides insight on how to ensure the right dose between variation and repetition in the traditional identity design. The key is to think generative and act traditional.

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