

Media sprawl:**Supergraphics redefine the cities we live in.**

by Adam Eeuwens, 11.2004.

Supergraphics are larger-than-life visuals in the form of two-dimensional images and/or typography placed onto three-dimensional structures, with an option to use the fourth dimension of time. By their sheer size they engage the urban space and hijack our senses. A super graphic used well is “an event,” according to German media architect Christian Moeller. “A performance,” adds Dutch media designer Mikon van Gastel. “An in-between space,” US media artist Jennifer Steinkamp calls it. “Immersion,” is the word Mexican designer Rebeca Méndez chooses.

From the static world of print, to the dynamic world of broadcast, to the interactive world of software and networks, technological advances in digital printing, projection technology, computer processor speed and information networks are making the production of oversized images faster, easier, cheaper and bigger. Wide format printing alone had a global output of 270 million square feet in 2002 and is projected to be 435 million square feet in 2006. The result is that large commercial displays are overtaking and redefining our cities in much the same way that billboards and neon lighting have done in the past, a development that boomed in the 50's and 60's mostly without the guidance or approval of (modernist) architects, designers and artists. This time around, they are not at sleep at the wheel and are becoming more actively involved in incorporating super graphics in their designs and our modern age.

Rem Koolhaas and his firm OMA always use Inside Outside designer Petra Blaisse to soften their strict structures with her interior and exterior designs. For the Dutch Embassy she imprinted a floral pattern on large flowing curtains, for the Seattle Library she imprinted the carpet with natural patterns. New York design studio 2x4 made the big format wall prints for OMA's Soho Prada store, and placed the face of Mies van der Rohe prominently on glass windows in the McCormick Tribune Campus Centre in the ITT campus in Chicago.

Architect Thom Mayne of Morphosis engaged Mexican graphic designer Rebeca Méndez to create a 20,000-foot mural for the firm's Tsunami Asian Grill Restaurant in the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas. The mural—graphics printed on flame retardant wallpaper—rose up two levels and had three elaborate folds angling sharply from wall to ceiling and back again, moving from the wide open to more intimate spaces. The mural depicted a Japanese woman wearing various layers of red silk underwater, creating a dream world of dissolving pan-Asian imagery and typography. Though static in print, the interplay of the architecture with the super graphic immerses the visitor in a dynamic realm of animating forces. For a new university student campus recreation center in Cincinnati, Ohio, Morphosis has Méndez working on an elaborate printed mural again.

Supergraphics even have it in them to dematerialize architecture, as media artist Jennifer Steinkamp's “hyper surface architecture”—computer animations and projections—often does. In a spectacular display in Las Vegas at the Fremont Street Experience her light, sound and motion installation “Aria” from 2000 took place 90 feet high, over the length of four city blocks. In the vein of Hunter Thompson's drug addled “Fear and Loathing” the dancing lights and colors become music while the sound turns to a visual rendering. At the 8th Istanbul Biennial in 2003, Steinkamp presented her piece “Eye Catching,” three computer animated trees which she projected on the walls of the historic Yerebatan Cistern, next to two ancient Medusa heads used as column supports in these catacombs. The branches of the trees sway and grow and retreat much like the serpentine hair of Medusa. The addition of these almost photo-realistic trees in the cistern transforms the space to what Steinkamp calls “an in-between state” where the real and the virtual meet and interact in a fluid dance to create new meaning.

Supergraphics were first described in the book “Underground Interiors” (1972) by Norma Skurka and Oberto Gili. Supergraphics, the authors explain, were “born” the same time that pop art, graphic design, and popular culture were borrowing from each other in the mid-60s... “to reassert [our] superiority over the bullying of urban developments and city-center slabs... by plastering them with numbers and gouging them with swaths of color—spirals, circles, murals, numbers, stars, stripes, and whatever else—[our] boundless imagination can dream up to express frustration and mischief.” “Paint is cheap”, they describe, ... “If one doesn't like the results, they can be buried under more coats of solid white. Easy, instant, inexpensive architecture,” was its result.

Thirty years later widely acclaimed media architect Christian Moeller similarly calls the large commercial displays in our cities “a corrupting influence,” the placement of the screens chosen only for the number of passers-by. “All attempts to implement these systems on a satisfactorily architectural scale have so far failed,” he writes, creating “a visual noise” and “a ridiculous and tragic media sprawl.” In this arena, however, working on the scale of the city, Moeller also sees “incredible artistic opportunities.” Where advertising attempts the impossible goal of communication, Moeller’s “goal for the moving image at the architectural scale is the creation of *event*... a time and place for which sensation itself is the content of the composition.” In his excellent book *A Time and Place*, 2004, Moeller describes his media works made between 1991 and 2003. The reader, for the best result, can simultaneously view the works in motion on his web site.

In August 2004, Moeller co-chaired with Benjamin Bratton the 54th annual International Aspen Design Conference, which they titled “Ambient:Interface.” With this theme they argued that computation is transforming one practice into another: cinema into architecture, urban planning into advertising, and super graphics into a new realm of sophistication. The best and brightest in media arts—from John Maeda to Joachim Sauter to Natalie Jeremijenko showcased their work. The most eye catching contemporary super graphic presented was BIX by the Berlin architecture firm realities:united, a permanent light installation acting as a media façade on the Kunsthaus in Graz, Austria.

Another speaker, Mikon van Gastel, creative director of Imaginary Forces in New York, showed a suspended LED curtain his studio designed for BMW Welt Brand Experience and Delivery Centre in Munich, a building by the Austrian architect firm Coop Himmelb(l)au. “It is a grand theatrical display for brand communication on an epic scale,” says van Gastel. He envisions super graphics as an interface... “a skin, all sexy, sensitive, stimulating, porous and alive.” A façade, a building, a block, a city, Van Gastel calls them his stage where all that counts is the performance, or “the performative” that forges connections with the audience, the environment and the context, away from the informational and entertaining, by delivering an atmospheric and sensual experience.” He calls it experience design.

An experience is certainly what the citizens of Moscow underwent when the Dutch design duo Machine and the designer Leonard “Don Leo” van Munster drove a van through their city at night in 2003, beaming “light graffiti” onto statues, walls and apartment buildings from a digital video projector. Former spray-can vandals yet hardly less illegal, the images and typography they projected with their “beam-mobile” are the most profound example of how quickly, simply and effectively super graphics can transform and activate architecture, public space and commercial displays, compared to lethargic process of getting a building built or permits for installations cleared. Perhaps, these supergraphics can truly help us take our cities back.

Files sent:

2 by 4
2 images of ITT

Rebeca Méndez
3 images of Tsunami

Jennifer Steinkamp
Turkey_15eyecatching_2003.tif
Turkey_06eyecatching_2003.tif
FremontStreet_Aria1_2000.tif
ACME_JimmyCarter2_2002.tif
ACME_JimmyCarter1_2002.tif

Imaginary Forces
4 images of BMW Welt

Leonard van Munster
blindpoetry-beammobile.psd