

Graphic Utopia and The Slow City
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A Modest Observation

Everyone agrees—the world is speeding up. The cultural, social, and technological shifts that once took generations now happen in the space of a product lifecycle. 60 years ago there were no highways. 30 years ago there were no Macs. 20 years ago there was no world wide web. 10 years ago there were no iPods. 3 years ago there were no iPhones.

Technological capability really does seem to double every two years. But Moore's Law predicts so much more than just the number of transistors we can cram onto a microchip. The speed and volume of our *cultural* production is increasing just as fast, maybe faster. As cultural consumers, we have so much stuff to, well, consume. It's the union of technology and economics:

Hundreds of TV channels and millions of websites vie for attention. GPS-enabled cars navigate you to Starbucks where you can download the music piped from the ceiling via a convenient, free and co-branded wifi connection. As you pump the gas into your GPS car, peppy people on TV screens report on last night's *American Idol*. Smart phones with personalized ring tones alert you of the daily deal at Amazon.com. Outside, a forest of LCD billboards display a new ad every few seconds based on the psychographic profile of the drivers passing by. And that's all before you even get to work in the morning!

Speed & Volume Society

Ours is the Society of Speed & Volume. We're saturated with media and messages that come and go before we've barely had time to notice. And we're gently encouraged to keep pace or fall behind. *Oh... so you're not on Google Wave yet??*

Speed denies reflection. Volume denies engagement.

With my iPhone and my Pike's Place Roast by my side, I wonder about how to be a thoughtful cultural consumer (and producer) in the wake of this Speed & Volume tsunami.

How have designers responded so far? To "cut through the clutter," we design to shock. To communicate online, we design in bullet points. Now that you can carry around a

zillion songs in your pocket, a good “record cover” is one that reproduces well at 100x100 pixels in iTunes (*so long, Peter Saville!*). Magazines seem quaint to anyone with an RSS reader.

When the number of followers on Ryan Seacrest’s Twitter feed is three times the circulation of *The New York Times Magazine*, designing new Twitter pages suddenly seems like a pretty effective way to connect with an audience. Actually, it sometimes feels like the *only* way. Shocking, pithy, impermanent objects are the *de facto* goals of graphic design in the Speed & Volume Society. Nuance, narrative, subtlety, and permanence are for naïve graduate students and the unemployed.

Asking Questions

Designers are supposed to interpret, translate, and contextualize to make meaning with the objects we design. Nothing against Ryan Seacrest, but are Twitter pages really where we designers want to apply our skills moving forward?

In the wake of the Speed & Volume Society, what kind of meaning do we really want to make?

The Slow City

The Slow City project asks exactly this question of designers. It argues that nuanced, thoughtful, beautiful design can elevate the conversation about cultural production and consumption in a way that moves us past the graphic sound bytes of Speed & Volume. The Slow City isn’t about stopping to smell the roses. It’s about asking designers to think deeply about what we contribute to the cultural milieu, and what we value in design. It doesn’t replace any of our modern cultural or technological detritus, it simply asks for a little space for something nicer. The Slow City is a call to arms for designers who value reflection and nuance, and an invitation for designers stuck in the economics of Speed & Volume.

Here are the values of The Slow City, loosely adapted from *The Slow Design Principles*, by Carolyn Strauss and Alastair Fuad-Luke.

Reveal.

Design that uncovers the often overlooked experiences, histories, and meanings of cultural artifacts. Design that treats storytelling as important as the story itself.

Reflect.

Design that asks us to think. Design that asks questions or instigates new kinds of responses. Design that values contemplation as an end in itself.

Engage.

Design that thrives on the collaboration between designer and audience. Design that rewards the audience's attention with a deeper read.

A Graphic Utopia

The Slow City project will propose a graphic language of “utopia,” suggesting new forms of design that embody the values of *Reflect*, *Reveal* and *Engage*. The Slow City is a second city, a graphic city, a city that exists within, around, and over top of Los Angeles. It establishes a system of visual artifacts that collectively challenge the Speed & Volume Society by playfully subverting its forms, content, and values.

Posters. Billboards. Newspapers. Currency. Signs. Bus Stops. Libraries. All are reimagined. Some solutions could be fantastical. Others could be pragmatic. Collectively, the explorations offer an alternative set of values for designers to consider.

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