

# DEFINING THE ESSENCE OF PLACE: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOP A BRANDED MANUFACTURING WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the collaborative efforts of a team of design educators and manufacturing engineers who developed a branded environment for an expanding automotive manufacturing plant. A participatory approach was used to ensure that the design of the space could address both the functional workflow and emotional expectations of a diverse group of end-users and stakeholders. This case study is an example of a corporate-sponsored project in which the initial phase was conducted utilizing different tools as “innovation lenses” to foster team communication, shared understanding and content development. The objective was to define the brand platform early on in the process and use it to guide the design of all aspects of the physical environment, including spatial organization, user journey, interior architecture, and graphic communication.

**Keywords: Branded Environment, Branding, Participatory Design Process, Industry Collaboration**

## 1. CONTEXT

Design is playing an increasing role in crafting the experiences of our everyday lives. Designers are moving beyond defining physical and digital products to designing holistic emotional experiences delivered by a product, service, message, or space (Poggenpohl 2009, Stickdorn and Schneider 2012). Brand is a promise about who a company is and what offers and benefits it delivers. Experience design uses brand as a compass for identifying differentiated value and experience (Newberry 2014). Companies spend billions of dollars to promote their brands through different channels such as advertising, packaging, web marketing and retail environments. Environmental branding, or ‘Brandscaping’, (Riewoldt 2001) turns a brand into a three-dimensional multi-sensory experience. Companies like Apple, Nike, Swatch, etc. have crafted the customer’s journey through retail spaces to deliver memorable experiences in the quest to develop brand loyalty. Regardless of design, places and buildings embody cultural meaning and symbolize history, values and relationships (Perolini 2011, Butterworth 2000). With such influence, physical space is a

natural medium for communicating a message through a variety of physiological, social and emotional channels. The highly visual nature of a space can act much like packaging in presenting a brand in three dimensions. Size, shape, scale color, texture and materiality all influence perception. Physical spaces have the added ability to further impact perception through an immersive, sensory experience.

More recently, the idea of branding workspaces has been recognized as a strategy to immerse people in the organization's philosophy. According to brand design consultancy Ologie, branded workspaces can create alignment, inspire and inform internal and external audiences by reinforcing a common sense of purpose among employees by illustrating the company's story and bringing the company's beliefs to life. This can be achieved by providing meaningful history (where the brand came from) to outlining a vision (where the brand is going).

Designers recognize the strategic role that a well-designed "branded workplace" can play in an organization and can also determine the scope of a project. For potential clients, this can be challenging given the common association between brand and basic visual communication touchpoints like brand marks, advertising and signage systems. Most people who visit branded environments can easily recognize some of the visual elements that are playing a role in communicating a brand. When the "visit" is engaging, delightful and memorable, the individually designed elements become invisible. When the overall experience is seamless, it successfully addresses both the functional (intellectual) and emotional expectations of the visitors. This is the primary goal of the designers, but designing seamless experiences makes design work less evident. It is difficult to explain what designers do and how, and it is also difficult to communicate the complexity and scope of a branding program. This paper presents an example of how a shared understanding of branding and branded environments were achieved and how a brand concept was developed utilizing a participatory approach where diverse stakeholders played an active role in defining the outcome.

## 2. UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

In 2000, a global manufacturing company and one of the largest universities in the United States embarked upon a leading university-industry partnership. This effort represents a bilateral collaboration that supports initiatives in education, research and public service to positively impact the transportation industry. This effort has afforded both organizations the ability to engage in diverse projects from lightweight materials to safety and wellness research. Because of the nature of the industry, most collaboration occurs between highly technical units. One of the areas of interest in this partnership is product development and product design, but it has been understood as a function of the College of Engineering. Expertise in Industrial Design has been sought for several small projects but because the discipline resides in a different college, the technical units are less familiar with the Department of Design and the specifics of the different design practices. Nevertheless, an Industrial Design faculty member was approached to participate in an exciting opportunity that involved the design of specialized workstations that were unique to a new manufacturing facility for a mid-engine sports car. The company was looking for something

unique to the facility that would inspire employees and visitors. To the industrial designer, the project seemed to be the beginning of several efforts related to a “branded manufacturing environment” and quickly realized that the scope of the project involved defining a brand concept for the facility. It was also clear that the manufacturing company already had an identity in terms of values and that defining a brand, a branded space and branded workstations would involve a diverse team of stakeholders from the manufacturing company as well as a diverse team of designers including Industrial, Interior and Visual Communication Design. The faculty member identified two additional experts from the Department of Design to represent each of the disciplines needed and requested participation from a diverse team of engineering, management and marketing experts from the manufacturing company.

### 3. APPROACH

The first task for the university team was to communicate the complexity and scope of a full branding program as well as the expertise of the design disciplines. The second task was to find out what would drive the essence of the new manufacturing facility. An additional challenge for the university team was to introduce a subject that involves a “soft” aspect of design. Feelings, perceptions, aspirations and desires are not a common language in highly technical environments. The functional component of a branding program is not hard to convey and define collectively but the emotional component can be more difficult to communicate and define in a group setting. However, one important characteristic of this particular manufacturing company is a keen understanding of their customer's emotional responses (i.e. physical and psychological) to the properties and characteristics of their product. The university team needed to tap into that aspect of the corporate mindset and to assist the industry team in visualizing what those physical, functional and emotional responses meant to their new facility.

The university team recognized that in order to achieve success, a participatory strategy was necessary, so they designed two workshops that would support cross-disciplinary exchange. This strategy would be a way for the university team to incorporate industry stakeholders earlier in the process. It would also allow the engineers and managers to understand how designers work and how the company could potentially engage with the Department of Design for future projects.

Additionally, the workshops were conceived as engaging activities where visualization, group discussions and assignments would support a collective effort towards mutual understanding and agreement in terms of defining a cohesive brand vision for the new facility. A powerful technique utilized during the activities was the use of metaphors in order to allow participants to uncover the rational and emotional impressions of their perceived branded environments through associations, comparison or resemblance. It also allowed the university team to discover the internal strategy, concerns and overall spirit and culture of the company.

## 4. PROCESS

The two design workshops were designed to take place during two 4-hour periods and two weeks apart. The sessions took place off site and attended by ten to fifteen industry team members. Due to scheduling conflicts, not all participants from workshop one were able to attend workshop two but were able to contribute through the homework assignments. For that reason, new team members from the industry team joined workshop two.

The first workshop introduced the industry team to the disciplines of design as well as to the subject of Branding. The goal was to apply a brand design development model to identify audience segments for the new facility, capture value proposition attributes, and develop brand personality traits. The second workshop presented the results from the first workshop and homework assignments. The goal of the second workshop was to facilitate discussion and achieve mutual agreement. It also served as a basis to develop a brand essence and brand promise statement, compose desired brand experience, establish preliminary design principles, and propose design applications. This allowed the university team to identify opportunities for potential collaboration that encompassed the three design disciplines. The next steps were to summarize all activities into a brand program that could later serve as the basis for the design of branded manufacturing facility as well as future workstations, marks, signage systems, etc.

### 4.1 WORKSHOP 1: DISCOVERY

The format of the first workshop was structured in three parts: I) a broad view on design practices and design processes; II) an overview of brand design definitions and brand development; III) gain insights into the stakeholders' perceived values and brand attributes for the new manufacturing facility.

#### 4.1.1 DESIGN PRACTICES AND DESIGN PROCESSES

The university team introduced the industry team to a branded design experience approach that included five core principles (Gobé 2007, Kolko 2014, Stickdorn and Schneider 2012, Wheeler 2012): PARTICIPATION, HOLISTIC VIEWPOINT, USER-CENTERED, RELEVANCE, and DELIGHT. The introduction of these principles inspired the teams to engage the workshop activities with open-mindedness and broader perspectives.

Because design value is best created in networks of collaboration rather than in traditional silos of expertise (Kolko 2014, Poggenpohl 2009), a fundamental part of PARTICIPATION is to develop a shared understanding. The HOLISTIC VIEWPOINT perspective motivated the industry teams to frame the opportunity space from a broader perspective and multiple scales. The USER-CENTERED design approach was emphasized to identify multiple audience segments and gain empathic perspectives of their thoughts, feelings, and needs. This deep level of understanding is essential to DELIGHT the audience through emotional engagement with the space. "Delight is ultimately about evoking positive emotion throughout the customer journey by going beyond customer expectations in delivering awesome product experiences that people want to tell the world about" ("Catalyst" 2013). Experiences are

what users have when they are exploring the branded environment, and also what they would recall afterwards (Lockwood 2009, Newbery and Farnham 2013). Touchpoints play a role in the design applications of a brand that users come in contact with (Wheeler 2012). Consideration of the RELEVANCE of touchpoints is a critical process for delivering both tangible functions and emotional benefits.

The university team then presented an overview of the design practices of industrial, visual communication, environmental/interior and interaction design including definitions and best practice examples of both professional and student projects. This overview provided the industry team with a better understanding of the role each discipline can play in the design of branded experiences through integration of objects, messages, spaces, and narratives. It also informed them of the diverse opportunities for future collaboration between the organizations.

#### 4.1.2 BRAND DESIGN DEFINITIONS AND A BRAND DEVELOPMENT

The second part of workshop 1 focused on the topic of branding and branded environment. A brand definition from Ologie resonated with both teams—“A brand is more than a name, a logo or catchy jingle. It’s the way a company looks, acts and speaks. It is the essence of a company. It is everything about it. Including its products and services, its vision and people, and how it communicates to customers and to employees. And when a company lives up to its brand, consumers visibly and emotionally connect with the company.” Several benchmark brands, like Apple, Starbucks and BASF (Figure 1), were identified as inspiration for quality and consistent brand experience cycles. The experience cycle frames the interaction between the producer (of the brand) and the customer in terms of an on-going relationship (Dubberly and Evenson 2007).



Figure 1: Experience Cycle: Apple Computer, Starbucks Coffee, and BASF

By giving these definitions and examples, the industry team was able to associate attributes such as *Perception*, *Aspiration*, *Differentiation*, *Promise*, *Value* and *Benefit* with Brand. They were able to understand that a Branded Environment is an extension of the organization’s brand. Place branding consultant Bill Baker defines it as “the totality of thoughts, feelings, and expectations that people hold about a location. It’s the reputation and the enduring essence of the place and represents its distinctive promise of value, providing it with a competitive edge.” (Baker 2012)

In order to develop a brand for the new facility, the university team introduced a tool called the brand pyramid (Figure 2). The main components of the brand pyramid were tailored to fit the context of the audience and the scope of the process. The base of the pyramid is 'Knowing your *Target Audience*': to whom your brand strategic equity is differentiating, relevant and meaningful. The next level, The *Benefit Attributes* component, includes the functional (thinking) and emotional (feeling) aspects that derive from the value proposition: what your brand offers.

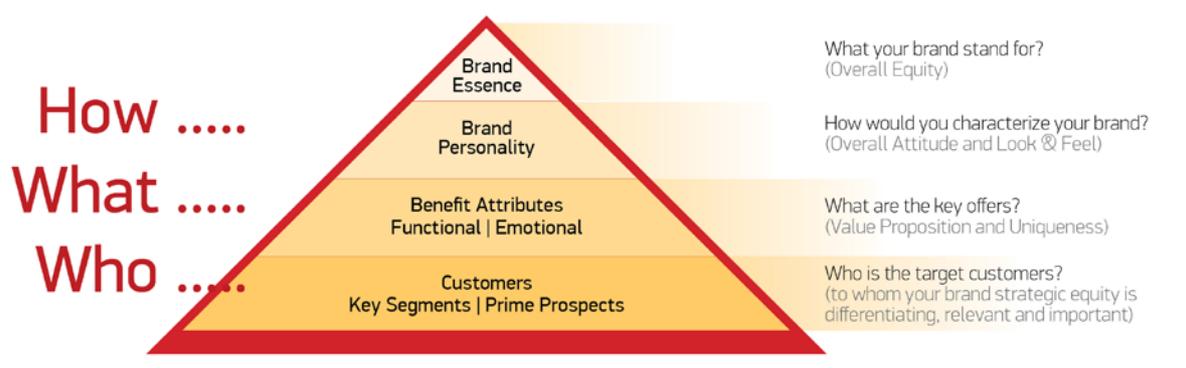


Figure 2: A brand development tool: Brand Pyramid

The *Brand Personality* component encompasses the overall attitude and 'look & feel' of the brand expression: how would you characterize your brand. At the top of the pyramid is the *Brand Essence* component signifying the distillation of a brand's promise into the simplest possible terms: what your brand stands for. A *Brand Essence* may or may not function as a tagline. The Walt Disney Company was used as an example; the company tagline is "Where Dreams Come True" and its Brand Essence is "Family Magic". The *Brand Essence* is the DNA code, the basic building block that informs and holds together all brand experiences and messages (Baker 2012).

This tool was used as the basis for identifying the perceived and desired brand actions and experiences for the new facility. This workshop segment concluded with questions to the audience asking, "What is your Promise? What is your Message? What is your Story?" These questions aimed to uncover the current perceptions of the facility and the desired attributes that the brand needed to engage with in the future.

#### 4.1.3 GAINING INSIGHTS

The industry team members, who were also part of the audience of this new workplace, were introduced to three structured methods which guided them to answer these questions by focusing on 1) Who do you (and also your customers) think you are? 2) Who do you want to become? 3) Who are you most likely to become? The first activity asked each participant to write, in fifteen minutes' time, as many short descriptive attributes about their perceived experiences of the organization by starting each phrase either with "I think" or with "I feel". The goal of this exercise was to allow the participants to share their perceptions of the branded environment from both intellectual and emotional levels. The second activity asked them to describe their perceived value of the new manufacturing facility. The third activity was adapted from metaphor elicitation (Zaltman 2008) and metaphorical description (Gobé

2001). These techniques can be particularly effective in revealing the unconscious thoughts and feelings of the participants. Each industry team member received a brand character worksheet (Figure 3) asking if the branded environment (facility) were a person, who would it be and why. By using metaphors the team members were able interpret what they perceive in the world around them. Metaphors can bring to the surface thoughts that would otherwise go unspoken (Batey 2008).

BRAND CHARACTER				
<h2>Personality (desired)</h2> <p>The character you convey must be an accurate reflection of your company's vision, mission, values, and promise.</p>				
<p><b>Metaphorical Description: If "Your Brand" were a . . .</b></p>				
Place	Publication	Person	Color	Consumer Brand
<p>Describe Why . . .</p>				

THE ELEMENTS OF A BRAND: Brand Person	
<b>LOOKS</b>	How the person appears.
<b>BEHAVIOR</b>	What the person says and how the person acts. Where the person goes. Who the person hangs out with.
<b>PERSONALITY</b>	Describes the type of person.
<b>BENEFITS</b>	Functional and Emotional promises the person offers.
<b>BELIEFS &amp; VALUES</b>	Foundation of the person.
<b>REASONS TO BELIEVE</b>	Specific things which make others believe in the brand person.
<b>UNIQUENESS</b>	What makes the person different from others.
<b>ESSENCE</b>	The one core value that defines everything the person does.

Figure 3: A brand development tool: Brand Characteristic Worksheet (adapted from *Emotional Design*, Gobé 2001; *Brand Person*, Wong, 2005)

By using these techniques the university team was able to efficiently gather insights on the industry team members' perceptions and emotional connections to the organization. The final segment of this workshop focused on the introduction of the five primary emotional drivers (Figure 4) that reflect the perceived brand personalities of most corporations. Brand practitioner Marc Gobé believes that these emotional drivers connect the emotional identity of a corporation or a product with people's aspirations, meeting their subconscious desires to achieve more fulfilling lives. He describes these emotional states as: 1) Our drive for hope and engagement: citizenship, 2) Our drive to escape: freedom, 3) Our drive to achieve glamour: status, 4) Our drive for conviviality: social harmony, 5) Our drive to be secure: trust (Gobé 2007). Additional case examples of segmenting brands from an emotional perspective were presented to the industry team to inspire them in identifying desired brand personalities and to motivate them to use the emotions elicited by the metaphors to develop brand narratives and essence statements.

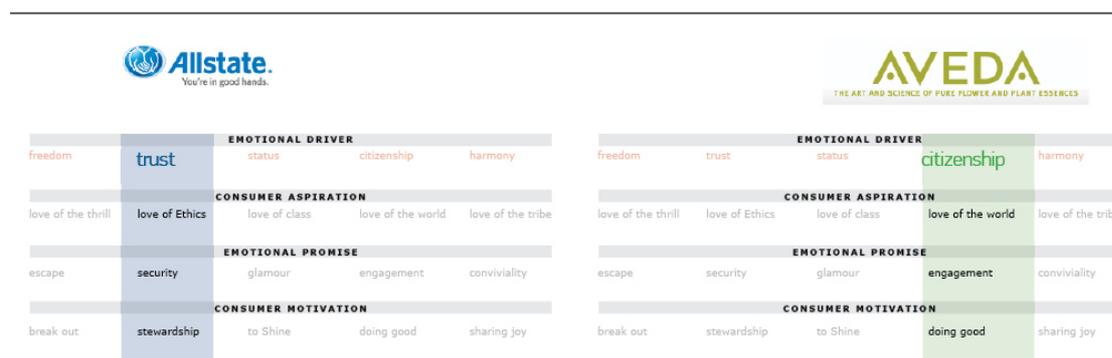


Figure 4: Brand Segmentation from an emotional perspective (adapted from *Emotional Drivers*, Gobé 2007)



An in-depth discussion of target audience was conducted to set the stage for the user journeys proposed by the university team to bring the holistic brand experience to life. The three audience segments identified were the *Associates* who work at the facility, the *Experts* who partner with the company, and the *General Public*. A collection of touchpoints for these three segments was used to illustrate user journeys (Figure 7). Different sets of touchpoints were categorized to associate with the physical, behavioral, and sensorial experience of the place for each audience type: 1) the *Associates*: Pride of Belonging, Connect & Recharge, Inspiration & Information, Mastery & Creation, Dynamic Workflow, Collaborative Technology, Collaborative Workspaces; 2) the *Experts*: A Place for People and Technology, Inspiration & Connection, Knowledge & Partnership; 3) the *General Public*: Welcoming Entrance, Inventive Immersion, Orientation & Direction, Active Messaging, Inspiration & Learning, Interactive & Engaging, Brand Narrative. This activity allowed the industry team to connect abstract and intangible brand components to specific and tangible touchpoint applications.



Figure 7: Audience segments' User Journeys

A set of design principles was developed to articulate the desired characteristics and communication of the brand with clarity, consistency, and effectiveness. These design principles were translated into visual design guides to inspire and direct future design concept development. The university team outlined a list of relevant touchpoints organized by design disciplines (Industrial, Interior, Visual Communication and Interaction Design) that effectively support and deliver brand qualities (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Design Principles, Visual Design Guide, and Proposed Touchpoints

The outcomes of the second workshop helped the teams to develop a brand essence and brand promise statement, compose desired user journeys, establish preliminary design principles, and propose design touchpoints. Visual references and descriptive attributes were strategically constructed to allow the industry team to visualize how the desired brand

experience could be communicated through the interior and architectural components of the manufacturing workplace, and supported the development and application of a graphic identity system.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The workshops' outcomes provided clear directions for brand message and design development. They established the value of a branded environment as an effective medium ("Three Dimensional Branding" 2007) for communicating the unique qualities of product and service, humanizing the innovative technologies, reflecting the fundamental attributes of the community, defining corporate culture, enhancing brand identity, and expressing the spirit of place.

Following the workshops, the industry team requested support with the design and development of the new facility. Direct engagement with the industry team in the workshops allowed the interior designer to understand what was expected of the work environment across multiple levels: functional and aesthetic, physical and emotional. Image and visual design guides produced in the workshops fueled a visual sense-making process to contextualize the meaning behind the brand values, philosophy and essence into spatial precedents. These images were then used as part of the design collaboration with the client during the schematic and design development phases of the project, providing a common language for discussion and evaluation.

Brand principles and attributes became guidelines for the in-depth creation of the space. The brand design principles helped to unify a complex program of diverse functions including: a manufacturing plant, engineering offices, conference spaces, guest lobby, café and various clerical and industrial support spaces. Brand attributes informed the interior design scheme along with an awareness and understanding of the needs of the end-users at multiple points in the experience journey. The design concept was interpreted into tangible and intangible touchpoints and drivers of experience, including spatial organization, circulation flows, experience mapping, and the selection of color, materials and furniture. The set of values and core principles developed during the workshops were applied to every aspect of the manufacturing facility's development. This facility represented a group within the larger corporation and the collaboration with the university team empowered the team to define a unique identity within the larger corporation. The branded environment provided the group with a sense of ownership that further enhanced teamwork.

For the university team this partnership enabled members to recognize the significance of their individual areas of expertise. It allowed them to build a shared understanding of the design disciplines involved, their relationship to brand experience and the definition of the essence of place. This process also allowed them to develop empathy for each other's domains as well as for those of the industry team.

The ideas and methods presented in this paper illustrate the potential for the application of brand design principles in ever-widening contexts, such as large scale manufacturing organizations and environments as described here. This case study serves as an example for

how design educators can engage and collaborate with industry to further advance the development and practice and application of the many disciplines of design.

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