

# Profile Pentagram Design

Edited by Susan Yelavich



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# The Culture(s) of Pentagram

*by Susan Yelavich*





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*Above: The international partners' meeting,  
New York, November 2003.*



PENTAGRAM HAS ALWAYS TAKEN CARE to carve its name into the woodwork of design ('s nascent) history. Its partners have produced no less than six publications about the firm since its inception in 1972—roughly one every five years. However, this book is a departure. Instead of a singular self-portrait, it offers a gallery of profiles. Hence, the parenthetical, verging-on-heretical *s* in the title of this essay.

As much as *Profile* may be read as nineteen egos gone wild, the book represents an evolution in the particular persona that is Pentagram. By embracing the premise of the serial portrait over a singular silhouette, Pentagram is once again stretching, flexing its considerable design muscle, getting ready for its next sprint into the new millennium. There is a recognition that clients and colleagues, as well as mentees, students, and historians of design, will benefit enormously from a sharper understanding of the commonalities that bind and the idiosyncrasies that inflect the character of Pentagram.

It is true that Pentagram's very existence is predicated on the idea of collaborative interdisciplinary practice, with an all-for-one-and-one-for-all esprit de corps. That hasn't changed. But as the firm has evolved, it is also true that, depending on which side of the Atlantic or, for that matter, which coast of the States one views them from, Pentagram looks and feels subtly different. Moreover, as in any family that perpetuates its lines of succession so carefully, there

are distinct generational characteristics that enrich the gene pool: the quiet middle children promoted (versus recruited) to partnership, the young Turks eager to insinuate new ideas, and the steadfast minders of the shop.

Staying with the metaphor of choice, we may come to understand Pentagram a bit better if we think of its nature as comprising dominant and recessive qualities. If you ask the insiders—the partners—they'll say that the dominant conviction is that Pentagram is about ideas. Looking in from the outside, what seems most dominant is that Pentagram is held together by respect for one another's ideas, however you interpret the word "idea," be it a pithy, succinct solution, a strategy for achieving it, or the formal invention it has spawned. Pentagram operates on a system of mutual respect (and affection) that isn't burdened with the entanglements of love. In the parlance of design, it works precisely because there is no strong party line on aesthetics. Content is king. Pentagram's most senior partner, John McConnell, observes, "We may be 'polemic averse,' but we are idea rich." A sentiment refracted back by one of the newest partners, Abbott Miller: "You can only add to the mixture; you can't shape it or censor it. That's the problem of democracy." And, it goes without saying, its virtue.

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*Opposite: Pentagram's London office.*







Pentagram may have an allergy to theory, but it is steeped in a utopian ideal, albeit a decidedly capitalist utopia of catholic tastes. As Colin Forbes, one of the founding fathers, declaimed in his Pentagram constitution, "The idea of equality goes back to our first company, Fletcher/Forbes/Gill, where the three partners decided on equal equity and equal incomes. However, each partner's profitability was openly declared, which contributed to a competitive element."<sup>1</sup>

Equality is the operative idea: All partners practice, maintaining their own studios and staff. As John Rushworth says, they all "keep their hands dirty." All partners share in the tasks of running the show—whether it's squaring accounts or producing a product—like this one. And it is in this respect, in the rotating of "corporate" responsibilities, that one gets a sense of communal roots deeper than Forbes's economics. A sense of the social, even socialist, ethos that marked the late '60s and early '70s—the climate in which Pentagram germinated.

Pentagram became the grown-up ideal of the commune that every college student since the '60s has fantasized would save them from the alienation of soul-stripping work. Grown-up because they admit and court the realpolitik of commerce; ideal because they truly believe in design's potency

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*Opposite: Pentagram's New York office.*

to modulate the alienating aspects of commerce, shunned not just in the free-love era but also back in the day of their bohemian Bauhaus grandparents. (Indeed, there's a doctoral thesis waiting to be written about the Pentagram's place in the history of craft-based utopian communities.)

Pentagram operates in contrast to those agents of change who deploy extreme tactics, those necessary social catalysts who, in their urgency, thrive on the fringe and work in the margins. Like every community, design has its share of provocateurs, whether testing limits with hermetic work or legitimately breaking new ground. They are the kind of people who are comfortable being uncomfortable. Pentagram is plainly, even proudly, not. Pentagram's partners are constitutionally too congenial, collegial, and, philosophically, too patient. (Michael Bierut claims he suffers from a "crippling politeness." His riposte to manifesto is footnoted reason.<sup>2</sup>) Suspicious of the ephemeral nature of style, Pentagram partners prefer to take the long view and see the world through a wide-angle lens. Tiny projects for small groups of people don't hold their interest. Too much work for too little impact—and no doubt, too little compensation (unless it's pro bono work, estimated to represent a significant 10 to 15 percent of Pentagram's practice).

However, Pentagram's commitment to projects of scale has a social dimension of its own. Virtually

all of the partners are committed populists who, not coincidentally, hail from middle- and working-class backgrounds themselves. Implicit in their worldview: Life should be better for everyone, and everyone should be included in the conversation.

There is a tacit acceptance of the modernist agenda of well-being through design. It is evident in the formal qualities of much of the work. Even so, faith in the ameliorating aspect of design is a matter of degree. Tactically, some partners feel that Pentagram's best way of affecting culture at large is within the confines of client-driven projects. Others, without discounting that possibility, would like to transcend traditional practice. The appeal of civic works, of their possibilities in the next phase of Pentagram's maturity, seems particularly American. Kit Hinrichs would like to figure out a way to tackle the shoddy, tilt-up architecture of cheesy hotels surrounding US airports. Lisa Strausfeld would like to make the figures of campaign finance more graphic, more transparent; she'd like to see better data sets on cancer and the environment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a more international caste of concerns on the other side of the Atlantic. Rushworth wonders about "the extent to which Pentagram can counter global conformity." The challenge being that many of their clients contribute to that numbing matrix.

They may have found part of the solution in their own culture. The predominantly Anglo-Saxon London office has become increasingly heterogeneous with relatively recent additions of Lorenzo Apicella, Fernando Gutiérrez, and Angus Hyland (though they've yet to hire a female partner). And in June of 2003, Justus Oehler set up Pentagram Berlin, forwarding Pentagram's ambitions to expand its practice and his own interests in negotiating cultural borders.

Another kind of utopian frame of reference that crops up frequently is religion, though it is more common in the US where there's perhaps less reserve about personal revelations. Conversations (and this book's essays) are peppered with ecclesiastical references. Confused former altar boy Bierut cited their "Torah" of criteria for partnership. Jim Biber, the architect, likened Pentagram to a Quaker meetinghouse, where everyone speaks out (and is outspoken). Lowell Williams referred to Pentagram's partners and teams as "pastors and churches in one religion." (Scher is apparently religious only about reading the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*. With no thoughts to the hereafter, unfazed by existential angst, she lives completely in the present.)

By now the transposition of such metaphors into the realm of visual culture at large is familiar: the museum as temple, the last place of meditation, and



so on. That may account in part for the liberal use of religious references, but in the context of Pentagram, the linguistic cues all point to an unusual reverence for the bonds of professional marriage. Divorce is relatively rare. The strength of the relationships at Pentagram is such that the partners are remarkably direct with one another. None of the usual subterfuge endemic to conventional institutional culture is necessary. They're not afraid to "grow by fight," according to Scher. What Williams calls a "well-armored ego" is prerequisite Pentagram gear, and wit, the weapon of choice.

Verbal thrust-and-parry rises to an art in the UK, where the religion is the word. (Colin Forbes famously claimed that, at Pentagram, "an idea isn't an idea unless it can be explained over the phone.") Here, pieties are suspect, and "club" substitutes for "church" in frank self-appraisal. There is an overlay of irony, a "nod and wink," says Angus Hyland of the London office's *modus operandi*. Rushworth gauges new members in terms of whether they're "clubbable." Fernando talks about the security that comes of inheriting a way of doing things, and yet he is aware of the constant testing that infuses that culture: Competitive humor is inseparable from competitive work. Skillful repartee—getting there first—is considered a mark of intelligence.

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*Opposite: Pentagram's Austin office*

Though when it comes to the work of design, Daniel Weil says, "We don't need to share our thoughts...there's an extracorporeal dimension to Pentagram." (He must sometimes wish that to be literally true, given how often he flies to New York to work with Michael Gericke and other partners.) That comfort with intuitive exchange versus argumentative debate filters into Pentagram UK's public persona as well. It tends to listen more than it pronounces. The London office is host to regular public events. Its Notting Hill gallery and office serve as a venue for exhibitions and lectures, whereas the New York partners, in particular, are regular contributors to professional journals and familiar voices on the lecture circuit. London's Lorenzo Apicella acknowledges a certain reticence about being "overly promotional," noting a residual aversion to selling in the UK. Woody Pirtle, by turn, envies his London partners' exhibition opportunities.

Maintaining relevance within the design community is, of course, a relative affair. David Hillman thinks about it less in peripherals and more in terms of practice, musing that graphic design may not be the mainstay of Pentagram in ten years' time, citing the recent explosion of small consultancies. Charting a trajectory of design, however, has not been the central preoccupation of Pentagram. They are adamant that they progress through the addition of new partners, whether into the realm of technology

with Bob Brunner or into editorial waters with DJ Stout. Though it may be tempting to read the appointment of digital mediologist Lisa Strausfeld as a calculated act of futurism, at Pentagram, professional chemistry counts for more than crystal-ball analysis. Even Justus Oehler's move to Berlin was his personal choice, not a corporate move to gain better access to Eastern European markets.

Pentagram's continued act of faith in its philosophy of growth through partners (vs. five-year plans) coincides with the current reprise of the larger notion of authorship. In a recent *New York Times Book Review*, Sven Birkerts writes, "Reading...the new book by Harold Bloom celebrating the cult of genius, I wonder if we might not be seeing signs of revolt against the long dominance of 'theory' in the literary arena, an attempt...to return the artist to mythic centrality and to reinvigorate old assumptions about hierarchies of excellence."<sup>3</sup>

Substitute "design" for "literary" and you get the picture. And, if Birkerts is right, this may be Pentagram's next moment. From its beginnings, by virtue of its partner/author structure, Pentagram has been impervious to any unifying "theory." It was built and continues to prosper on tacit understandings. "Ideas," Pentagram's self-professed stock-in-trade, are not theories.

To embroider on McConnell, design today is theory weak but opportunity rich. We've just come

through the end of the conflict between the modern and the postmodern, between a stagnating, exclusive monotheism and a promiscuous polytheism, dissolved in irrelevance. As a result, there is a greater interest in the personal, a less constipated view of what it means to be contemporary, to be relevant. Pentagram, by nature, is poised to flourish in this climate. Designers are free to mine history deeply—the postmodern legacy—and constrained to internalize their findings, not just identify them—the modern legacy. Furthermore, out of a growing understanding that design did not spring *sui generis* from the Industrial Revolution, there has been an explosion of new resources, a deepening of memory. Just how, and through whom, Pentagram chooses to mine the expanding universe of possibilities will ultimately assure the design firm's relevance.

1. Colin Forbes, "Transition," 1992.

2. Bierut responded to *Adbusters'* "First Things First Manifesto" (a document written and signed by graphic designers advocating practicing in service to an explicitly social agenda) point by point in his piece "A Manifesto with Ten Footnotes," published in the March/April 2000 issue of *I.D. Magazine*.

3. Excerpted from Birkerts's review of William Gaddis's last book, *Agapé Agapé*: "Parting Shots," *New York Times Book Review*, October 6, 2002. Birkerts's personal opinion is that any reinvigoration of hierarchies of excellence is actually doomed.