

Can graphic design save your life?

Any design practitioner or educator is likely to tell you that graphic design is a vital, life-saving force. Particularly design that everyone uses, but that goes completely unnoticed. A trite example would be the 30mph road sign, with its superbly translucent design language. Design that shepherds the user so swiftly to its content, it is barely even there. This is design whose impact and success is uncontroversially simple to measure: if the 30mph sign doesn't slow you down, it has failed. Here, Margaret Calvert and Jock Kinner's design has triumphed and we can all relax.

But when archaeologists sift through our relics in an attempt to decipher 21st-century culture, motorway signs won't begin to tell the whole story. They will find a far richer haul in other, more visually chaotic strata. The deliciously appalling visual clamour of both our high streets and our online environments constantly distract, titillate and annoy us in equal measure.

The sheer visual effrontery and artisanal noise of these streets and screens will most accurately portray the overload and non-stop messaging of our time. And this noise will only grow louder, as the twin drivers of globalised and downloaded communication fuel the need for more, and quicker, visual shortcuts.

But how to make sense of it all? How to read the profusion and nuance of shape, colour, text and other visual shorthands besieging us? Here, design training ensures that we will thrive in a far deeper sense, enabling us to decipher the visual overload around us. Only a strong sense of visual literacy will help us decode the accelerating clamour of our times. And the archaeologists will thank us for recognising that only graphic awareness and design education can ensure our adaptation and survival.