

**Designing Diversity:
The Visual Identity of the
*Cité nationale de l'histoire
de l'immigration* (National
Museum of Immigration)**

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EURODIV PAPER 56.2007

DECEMBER 2007

KTHC - Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital

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This batch of papers has been presented at the Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”

Designing Diversity: The Visual Identity of the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (National Museum of Immigration)

Summary

The corporate or 'visual' identity of a public institution is often the primary way it establishes a presence in the public sphere. This paper draws on observation and interviews to explore the development of the corporate identity of the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*, a new French national museum of immigration, opened in October 2007. The museum is intended to generate a more inclusive notion of French national identity, displacing long-standing assumptions both about ethnic homogeneity. In producing outcomes the graphic designers worked through many of the issues confronted by the French nation-state, notably the synthesis between the universal and the particular. Drawing on theories of multiculturalism and political philosophy, including the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, this paper presents a reading of the vision of cultural diversity embodied by the corporate identity, within a framework that respects the designers' insistence on graphic design as ethnographic practice.

Keywords: Graphic Design, Corporate Identity, National Identity, Material Culture, France

JEL classification: Z13, Z19

I wish to thank Pete Jeffs, Ratiba Kheniche and Fanny Servole for their assistance in the preparation of this paper

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Designing Diversity: the Visual Identity of the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (national museum of immigration)

The corporate or 'visual' identity of a public institution is the primary way it establishes a presence in the public sphere. A corporate logo acts as symbolic vector for an institution's values and aspirations. In addition to a semiotic analysis, studying the conditions of production of an identity – the modes of collaboration between designers and the institution – can reveal a great deal about how its values are conceived, produced and negotiated internally before being packaged for public consumption.

This paper will present a case study of the development of the visual identity of the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (CNHI), the new national museum of immigration in France, opening in Paris this month (September). It is based on fieldwork conducted in France between April 2006 and March 2007 in the context of a PhD thesis exploring the attempt to reconfigure national identity in the new institution. If design is the process by which an institution's abstract ideas acquire material form, making them available for public dissemination, then an analysis of the design of the visual identity can illuminate the working-through of broader tensions in the new institution, for example between conflicting narratives of integration and diversity. Moreover, the visual identity has a double function: it is both the manifestation of a particular vision of society and the primary agent for the enactment of this re-visioning in French society. As such it sheds light not just on how cultural diversity is currently conceived by the public authorities in France and but also on the nature of the collective self-understanding they hope to forge in the future.

After briefly setting out the museum project and the context of debates about cultural diversity in France I will proceed to a discussion of the visual identity itself, drawing on interview and observation data to show how it was developed in close collaboration with the institution.

Finally I will argue that despite reworking the tensions between singularity and plurality integral to French republicanism in a very sophisticated way, the visual identity perpetuates certain exclusions, representative of wider omissions in the CNHI project, which may in the medium to long term act to impede the development of a genuinely post-colonial post-racist society.

The CNHI project: between unity and pluralism

In addition to the national museum of the history of immigration, the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*, which opened its doors to the public in October 2007, will also include performance and community space and a research centre. The new institution is intended to act directly on French collective self-representations; its supporters hope that by displaying the contribution of immigrants to the construction of the modern nation the CNHI will generate a public re-imagining of what it means to be French, displacing long-standing assumptions of ethnic homogeneity in favour of the acceptance of greater cultural diversity. It is housed in the *Palais de la Porte dorée*, a sizeable public building on the south-east fringe of Paris, originally built for the 1931 colonial exhibition as a permanent museum of the colonies, a choice which aroused significant controversy. Whilst a first planning report was commissioned by the socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 2001, the project was only given the go-ahead in 2003 by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and President Chirac. Since the election of President Sarkozy in April 2007 the institution has fallen under the joint control of four ministries: Culture, Education, Research and the newly created and highly controversial Ministry for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development. Whilst its statutes are intended to guarantee the institution considerable editorial autonomy, it should from this brief

overview be evident the extent to which this is a highly politicized project that cuts to the heart of long-standing debates about what it means to be French in a globalized, interdependent world.¹

Traditionally, analyses of French national identity have focused on the competing pulls of a centralizing Jacobin universalism and the reality of regional, ethnic and religious diversity. Contemporary French social and cultural policy often seems to pull in both directions at once, oscillating between the celebration of diversity and a quasi-neurotic obsession with conformity to ‘republican values’ of which President Sarkozy’s decision in May 2007 to create a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity is perhaps the most flagrant recent manifestation (Van Eeckhout 2007). It is precisely this tension that is played out in the creation of the *Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration* and to which the visual identity gives form.

Designing diversity: towards a visual identity

From the outset the CNHI has been described as a ‘producer of culture and of signs’ (Comité interministériel à l’intégration 2003).² It is unsurprising therefore that the development of the institution’s visual identity, the most public and prominent of all its ‘signs’, was one of the principal activities during the preparation stage. The length of the design process – approximately eighteen months - is comparable to the time allocated to the preparation of the permanent exhibition, giving some measure of the project’s importance. If the project took so long it was because it involved a sustained process of reflection on the part of both the designers and their institutional partners.

For the designers, the development of a visual identity is a dialogic process. In an ideal situation the work of the designer is to provide the institution with a visual language with which to communicate its vision, based on the information the institutional partners provide, to the point

¹ For more information see <<http://www.histoire-immigration.fr>>.

² See also ‘Les missions’, <<http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/index.php?lg=fr&nav=280&flash=0>>, accessed 04/04/2007. All translations from French are my own unless otherwise mentioned.

where the visual identity becomes inseparable from the ‘content’ or mission of the institution. In the introduction to the ‘charter’ delivered to the CNHI in book form in September 2006 the designers cite Christian Bernard, the director of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Geneva: ‘[The graphic identity of an institution] renders [the institution] legible at the same time as it helps it to take shape, to become clear, to structure and to organize itself’ (Christian Bernard, cited in Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 4). In this respect the work of the graphic designer can be compared to the work of the social scientist: for Latour it is the social scientist’s ‘duty’ to ‘grant [the actors] back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of’ i.e. to provide them with a language in which to grasp their own experience (Latour 2005: 11). This is a comparison actively encouraged by Jeffs and Legendre who have dubbed their working methodology ‘*ethnographisme*’ (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 7).³ This approach reflects trends in design practice more generally, and in particular a recent turn towards ‘human-centered’ design (Buchanan 2001) placing the emphasis on the client as co-creator (Sanders 2006). For designers this entails adopting the role of facilitators, empowering ‘stakeholders’ to express their own vision. The extent to which the design was the product of a mutual engagement is evident in the following reflections at a small public presentation from the member of the CNHI primarily responsible for liaising with the designers:

When we first launched the competition for the visual identity we were really at the start of the project [...] so there were a lot of things that were not ... it was the start of a process of a reflection, a process relatively closed. And in fact, the fact of meeting the designers, it was they above all [...] who enabled us to identify and prioritize the guiding principles (éléments moteurs) of the Cité, which was just emerging. It was... it was very positive for us. It gave us an outside perspective and enabled us to reinvigorate our thinking about the project.

³ ‘*Graphisme*’ is the French for graphic design.

The original design brief set certain conditions that would clearly have aligned the project with national-republican discourse. In particular a red-white-blue colour scheme was prescribed for the logo. Jeffs and Legendre rejected this vision in favour of a scheme exploring the relationship of the singular individual to the community. There is little doubt that prior to receiving Jeffs and Legendre's winning entry the *Cité* team had not conceived its mission in terms of exploring the singular-plural dichotomy. How then did this concept emerge? In the preparatory stages Jeffs and Legendre submitted the documentary material provided by the CNHI to detailed analysis, but they also worked intuitively, developing their work in the areas that touched them most. Their proposal began unconventionally, almost in the form of a graphic novel, with Legendre recounting his own family's story: his wife's parents' arrival in France as refugees, his own parents' backgrounds, their subsequent experience as cosmopolitan, transnational citizens (the family is now resident in Chicago) (Jeffs & Legendre 2005). The insistence on individual narrative chimed both with the *Cité*'s own ambitions that individuals should 'appropriate' the institution and the new historical narrative for themselves.⁴ The concern for telling stories can also be seen as part of the ethical imperative characteristic of the 'human-centered' design process. Jeffs and Legendre have stated: 'we continually question the direct or indirect consequences of our visual production in an increasingly normative world in which it is easier to speak of masses than of individuals' (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 6). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that these two concerns – the designers' desire to contest processes of homogenization and the *Cité*'s concern for simultaneously drawing out and weaving together individual experiences – should crystallize around the tension between the singular and the plural.

⁴ 'The project can only succeed if each visitor identifies intimately with the life stories. It is a question of using the museography to transform the great events of a common history into a form of individual feeling' (Toubon 2004: 17).

In the second phase of the design project these concepts were explored separately: Legendre began work on what they termed the ‘human project’, whilst Jeffs worked on the ‘picto project’. The ‘human project’ resulted in the production of the basic logo, a unifying symbol that signifies humankind more than the individual. Nevertheless, in retaining the form of the human body it continues to ground the institution in personal experience, notably through evoking the irreducible singularity of corporeality (Nancy 1996: 37). One of the strengths of the ‘word/image’ is its polysemy, its ability to allow multiple readings to coexist. The ‘word/image’ expresses simultaneously:

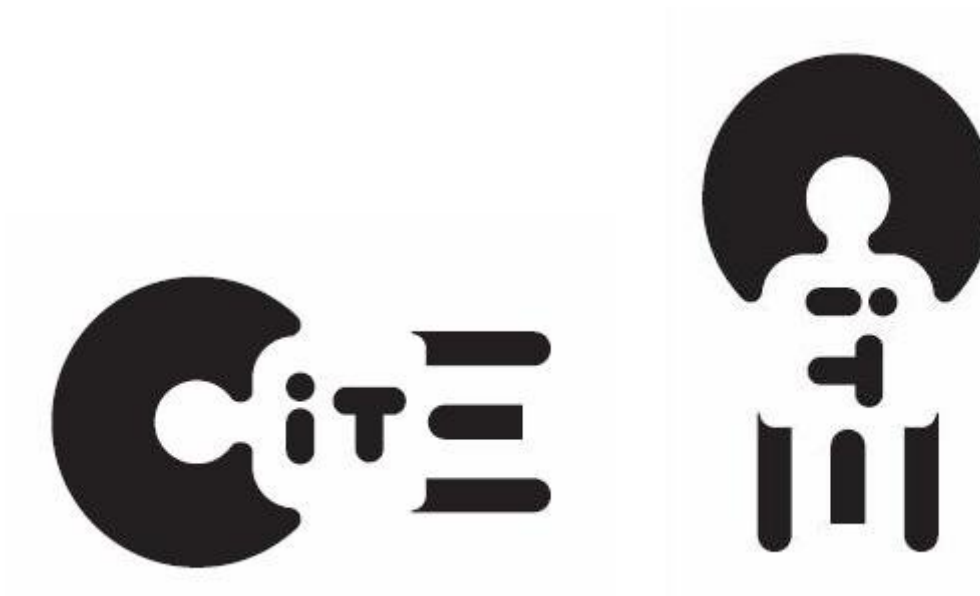


Figure 1: the word/image from the ‘human project’ at two different rotations. From (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 22). All images © *Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration* and reproduced with permission.

- Through the globe that constitutes the ‘head’, openness, the agora or forum, a space for listening and for asking questions, the globe, inclusion, centre (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 16-7)
- The individual, the immigrant, the man, the actor, you, me – and potentially also, synecdochically, any configuration of these as a group (18-9).

- Through the shape of the 'E'/legs echoing the columns of a temple façade: *Cité*, museum, institution, stability, foundations, place (20-1).
- A key and hence an invitation, a symbol of hospitality (22-3).

Legendre's word/image is however somewhat ambivalent: whilst it places the individual at the heart of the *Cité* the reductive quality of the sign makes it a totalizing symbol, subject to the criticisms often leveled at universalist discourse (that it is domineering, assimilationist and oppressive with regard to cultural difference).

If the 'human project' signified unity and singularity, the 'picto' project expressed diversity and particularity. The 'picto project' consisted of a series of pictograms which in combination provides the basis of a visual language for representing the population of France:

1.5- *Les pictogrammes*

Le projet est basé sur un système graphique qui symbolise la pluralité de la société par une trame de pictogrammes. Ces pictogrammes symbolisent la société française dans sa diversité.



Figure 2: the pictogramme map of France. From (Jeffer & Legendre 2006: 32).

The pictograms were divided into four families: peoples, traces, geometric signs and operators. Some of the geometric signs function as visual signifiers, such as the cross or the star of David. However, this aspect is blurred by their visual proximity in the linguistic system to other signs, such as the five-point star or the plus sign. The elements of the system can be combined to form instances of *parole*, in the Saussurian sense:

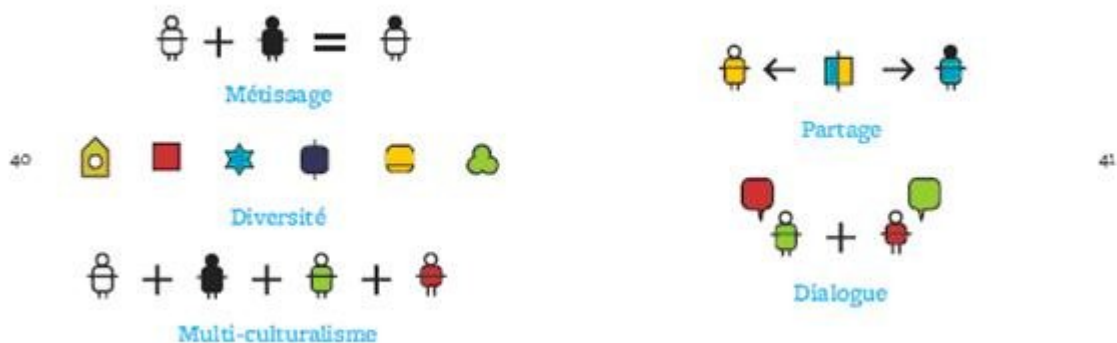


Figure 3: *parole* units for hybridity/mixing, diversity, multiculturalism, sharing and dialogue (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 40-1).

This capacity to form combinations helps to deflect potential criticism that the picto system promotes a radical republican individualism in which the public sphere is composed solely of the accumulation of citizens stripped of other affiliations. It is important also to be wary of the celebration of a homogenized pluralism, which can act to put a gloss on inequality and injustice.⁵

In addition, the construction of the speech or *parole* units from the pictograms reminds us that all signifying systems are relational and dependent for their meaning on Derridean *différance*.

⁵ As Barthes notes in his reading of the exhibition, ‘La Grande famille des hommes’ (Barthes 1957: 161-4). Thomas Hylland Eriksen has also drawn attention recently to the extent to which the celebration of cultural diversity erases can disguise the continued significance of class in structuring contemporary European societies (Hylland Eriksen 2006).

One of the values of the picto project is that in its hybridity (part language / part visual metonym) it encourages us to apply a deconstructivist reading to its metonymical referent, the population of France. In philosophy this challenge has been most fully explored by the social constructivism of Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues for the impossibility of thinking singular being outside of a relation of difference i.e. outside of a plurality, a perspective which contributes to undermining the Republican concept of the individual-as-m Monad (Nancy 2004: 16). In Nancy's view, philosophy has traditionally understood the problem of community as subordinate to the question of ontology, and yet in order to think the problem of being it is necessary to think the relation to the other: 'being *with* is the the problem most essential problem of being' (*'l'être avec est le problème le plus propre de l'être'*) (Nancy 1996: 52). The potential implications of Nancy's thought for communities, and specifically French collective identity have been explored by Jane Hiddleston. In her view, following Nancy's insights, 'what is frequently perceived as the single national paradigm should [...] be replaced with a broader understanding of the nation as the coexistence of different subjectivities, participating in various collective groups whose specificity can be considered at the same time as their dialogue with others' (Hiddleston 2002: 82). The concept of the community as internally differentiated and shifting has significant consequences for theories of 'integration'. As Rogers Brubaker has argued, sociologists no longer understand assimilation⁶ as the transition from one homogeneous unit (i.e. discrete culture) to another; rather it involves 'a shift from one mode of heterogeneity – one distribution of properties – to another mode of heterogeneity, that is, to a distribution of properties more similar to the distribution prevailing in some reference population' (Brubaker 2001: 543). The picto project, in offering up the possibility for multiple combinations whilst simultaneously highlighting the relational quality of both language and being, makes this heterogeneity manifest, thereby contributing to

⁶ Brubaker here uses assimilation in the American sense, which corresponds more closely to the French notion of integration. In France, the idea of 'assimilation' is heavily tainted by colonial policy.

dismantling the monolithic framework of national-republican belonging in France, with ‘integration’ as the impossible horizon described above.

For the competition in September 2005 the designers worked separately and presented a reversible book containing both projects. The designers were awarded the contract on the condition that they reconcile the two. The eventual synthesis took two forms. Firstly, the designers developed a method to superimpose the logo on to the pictogram background:



Figure 2: a poster design for the CNHI, showing the superposition of the ‘human project’ on the ‘picto project’ (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 115).

This basic form restores to the logo its contractual, communal dimension by drawing out its constitutive multiplicity. Second, a synthesis was achieved through the development of a colour scheme based on an exploration of tone-mixing across and through the colour wheel (Jeffs &

Legendre 2006: 45-63). The final outcome of the design process, the ‘charter’, was not seen as a rule-book but rather as an invitation to the *Cité*’s own graphic designers to explore the possibilities it offers: ‘The task of the user of this document is to maintain a spirit of inquiry, to reinvent the relationship between *singular* and *plural* and to pursue the graphic project with ambition and passion’ (Jeffs & Legendre 2006: 9). Indeed, whilst the visual identity is presented and conceived in terms of a synthesis between singular and plural, I would argue that the resolution of bipolarity is not in fact its primary feature. Rather, its most interesting attribute is its capacity for continual reinvention in a democratic framework (that is, beyond the designers’ control). In setting the binary in motion the visual identity achieves a stimulating synthesis, not so much between the two terms of the binary, but rather between harmonious stability and a playful, searching restlessness.

Conclusion: inclusions and exclusions

Whilst a combination of the dialogic design process and the concept of a flexible ‘charter’ might lead one to believe that the final outcome must come close to achieving the total correspondence between client and design to which human-centered design aspires, in practice Jeffs explained that the designers did not so much materialize an existing (if latent) self-understanding as open up a ‘third space’ where both parties could communicate and the *Cité* could explore its identity. On the one hand this process of exploration appears to have produced a shift away from the idea of community bounded by republican citizenship towards a more mobile, relational concept of the collectivity allowing for multiple forms of identification on the heterogeneous model suggested by Brubaker. However, the metaphor of the ‘third space’ is also in some ways an admission of a failure to create the perfect match between form and concept to which the designers aspired. The singular-plural dichotomy that structures the visual identity is not just the material expression of some institutional ‘essence’, it also stands in the place of

silences or points of discomfort. For if Jeffs and Legendre were unhappy with the nationalist overtones of the initial brief, they observed that the institutional actors were ill at ease discussing the colonial heritage of the Republic and the contested past and avoided exploring these topics in the design process. The consequence is a visual identity that, whilst constituting a significant step towards a more sophisticated and inclusive vision of collective identity, is nevertheless cut free from the past and devoid of historical references: the new visual manifestation of the Republic makes invisible as much as it displays. In brief, the atemporal celebration of diversity displaces a history of the relations of dominance that have both thrived on and promoted racism and rendered an institution like the CNHI necessary. In creating this outcome the designers have arguably been true to their ethnographic intentions – they are silent where their client would also be silent – but we are left to question the extent to which the CNHI can really achieve its aim of creating the diverse, inclusive and unified society the designers have striven to make visible without fully coming to terms with the legacy of oppression and exclusion.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Pete Jeffs, Ratiba Kheniche and Fanny Servole for their assistance in the preparation of this paper.

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