

Between Compromise and Integrity in Design Practice

Shubham Mehra

I. Introduction

The following text is a collection of thoughts, reflections, comparisons and speculations by which I inspect my design practice so far through the scope of compromise. It is an interesting idea, usually seen negatively and associated with a loss or risk, but one where I propose there is a lot of value to it when seen in retrospect within the context of learning.

So why compromise of all things? Shouldn't I be looking at formulating the ideals I should strive for, or the things that I chase as a dream within my design career? This focus on compromise is merely a way of highlighting an aspect of my process, and how it brings me closer to my goals. Albeit in a stretched-out manner, where the progress is very gradual and has various setbacks. So, in a way, I *am* formulating the ideals I strive for, but this is about the sequence of how I arrive at them.

I believe that in my short design career so far, one of the biggest contributors in defining my working ethos and principles has been this element of 'risk'. Especially since I have found myself constantly making new (short term) goals. There is always a feeling of taking a leap into the unknown while embarking into a new direction. It is also that some part of me, the Indian part of me, wants to find intermediate value in things I could produce by *Jugaad*. Jugaad is a notion; or an action; or the method of hacking a solution. Being able to find a way to solve a task within resources more limited than required for the task. Something I will address further on in the text.

I am also looking for a fruitful way to evaluate my compromises by reflecting on previous projects, where I may have misjudged exactly where my compromises would have landed me at the end of the project. Or what oversight I went into these projects with. I am finding myself in a new space writing about this, but there is nothing new about the thought itself, since there is always a moment of evaluation at the end of a project, and a self-critical assessment that follows, and surely this feeling of 'what if' lingers on. This is a way of educating myself through experience of losses and accidental wins.

In addition, I want to identify my position on where I stand here between the virtues of the creative: the one who is unrelenting and stands their ground with full faith in their own vision or the one who is willing to make small sacrifices to move into new territories and evolving their stance along the way.

I also aim to find or generate a framework where I can assess upcoming projects through this compromise-lens, and how can I prepare myself contractually and mentally to take on projects where there is significant interest on my end, but that I also take into account all the possible pitfalls and potential losses that could arise through the work process. In essence, how do I prepare better for the future with an experience in compromising.

To explore this in a sufficient way, I propose a loose interpretation of the term compromise, as there are already a few different impressions that arise on the mention of the term. Perhaps I will find that there is more to it than a purely sacrificial connotation.

II. In the pursuit of...

“When you are in a creative endeavour, in that wonderful fever ‘My God, I’m on to something!’ and so on...happiness doesn’t enter it. You are ready to suffer...Happiness for me is an unethical category. And also, we don’t really want to get what we think that we want.”

—Slavoj Žižek

While I do not necessarily agree on the point where happiness is something unethical, I rather think that our notion of it doesn't usually account for the difficult process we go through in order to achieve it. And it is during this process that we are significantly engaged with our creative endeavour. When we arrive at our goal, we are happy that we overcame something, but the happiness is short-lived, and we realign to find a new goal. This is a thought that I personally relate to.

Since completing my bachelor's diploma, my own goals and interests have constantly shifted, marked not by what would make me happy, but rather what was making me restless. Initially, I was restless about the lack of avenues for my own development within the local design market. This led me to immigrating. Where I *was* able to see an avenue for personal progress, and some other positives came along with it too. After a while, I was not satisfied only being a designer working in the interests of businesses and not for the public, which is what led me to my next goal. Then came another dissatisfaction and the whole cycle repeats.

What was happening to me was that I was evolving both as a designer and a person, forming my ideas in the process of reaching goals, not actually at the point when I reached them. That space was left for reflection. It is within the reflection that I have been able to evaluate better the impact on myself and my practice rather than the amount of fulfilment I had, since my criteria would be now slightly different to what I assumed at the beginning of the project.

It is by looking at this process of evaluation, and the experience of projects that resulted significantly different to my initial expectations, that I find the use of analysing compromise useful.

But I also want to step a bit further back and assess in what other ways I deal with compromise, and how it affects my mindset, because after all—it is this mindset that I hope manifests itself through the work that I do. There are certain social implications that come with being a compromising person, and quite a contrasting position to that of an uncompromising creative person. The position of whom I find mythical and almost unavailable to me.

III. What risks are worth taking?

As I mentioned in the introduction, the risks I have taken in projects have largely defined the kind of work I do and don't do. Or at the least, has made me more cautious in that regard.

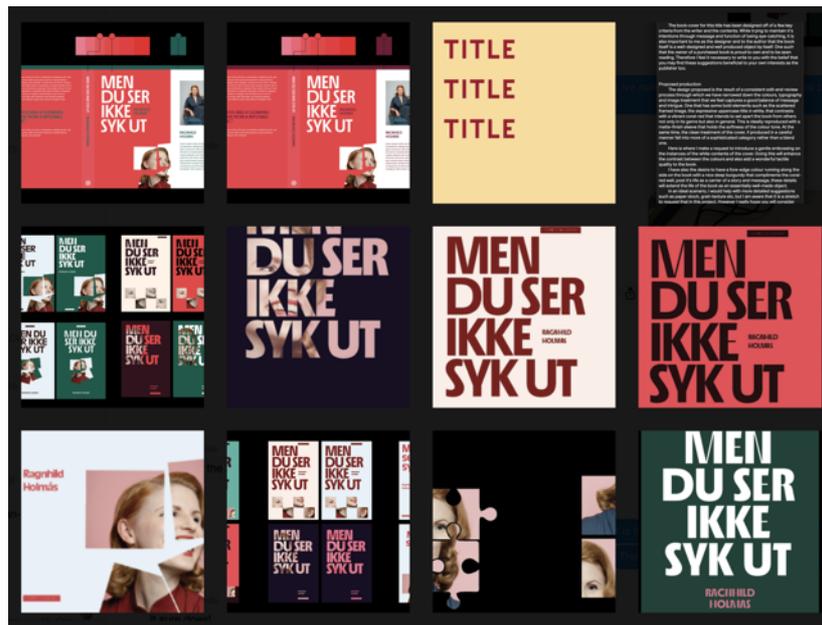
An example of this was a project I did towards the end of 2019. I had been really eager to get involved with book covers, but being in a new environment, and without a body of work that placed me well to receive such work, I knew I'd have to take a pragmatic route into a project in order to make my first steps.

I had the possibility to design a book cover for a lady who'd written about her medical condition. Following the success of her Instagram account, a big publishing house gave her a book deal. There was a lot of promise, but not much pay. In fact, the pay was considerably lesser than I would've hoped for, however, it was the only opportunity I had to step into the world of book cover design.

I agreed to do it, thinking that the compromise I was making was the low pay. In my mind, I had enough belief in my abilities that I could produce a striking cover to make my mark on a title that would be distributed in large quantities. Which it definitely was. However, I had significant oversight in many crucial aspects that came with my lack of experience in this field.

To begin with, I did not make a suitable contract. Here I dug the biggest ditch for myself to fall into, not covering my back, not listing the hours I would put in or the changes I was willing to make. Eventually these things would come back to hurt me. During the process, I had been seriously invested in a clever solution, to portray the title with wit, something a bit hidden but still understood. I wanted to bring the client onto my wavelength. However, I was quickly reminded that this book was 'in the mainstream' so that any unusual artistic approaches were not likely to cut it. I worked with colours, test printing every new idea and comparing with another, and a good selection of typefaces that I spent hours narrowing down on. It had started to feel somewhere along this route that I was working a lot on details that were not particularly evident to my client, but I stuck to it since I believed that it was the kind of attention I should be giving to my work regardless.

In the end, I delivered a design that I was not particularly proud of, but that I felt was an acceptable attempt, where at least my client was pleased with the result. Although this was not a design that by any means I would have hoped for at the beginning of the task, as it did not really capture the message as I wished to present it, and that I had allowed my client to have too much influence over the decision making in the process.



• Far too many options laid out to the client, rather than picking out my two preferred ones, for instance.

Following this I had realised that I had complicated things further for myself by not making any clauses that protected the design I would hand over. A terrible error. A few weeks later, I received a message from a very happy client that the test prints had been done in Denmark, and that a copy was being delivered to me shortly. I was a little proud, that after all, I had finally designed a book cover, but the delivery came with more heartbreak.

There had been further changes to the design I delivered. A rookie mistake, and no contracted agreement that protected me in this scenario. A different type weight, a different colour...the result was not a far cry from what I had sent over, but it definitely washed away some decisions that I had made using my own judgement, that were eventually

overruled. Needless to say, I had terribly overlooked many aspects of this assignment, and as I reflected on it, the real weight of the compromise struck me.



•The final design came as a surprise. A heavier treatment on the typography, changes to the setting on the spine of the book, and a different shade of red on the cover.

Not only had I sold myself cheap, but I had also ended up with a book cover that did not do my interests any favours. Sure, I had a very pleased client, who sold a lot of books and found herself top of the shelves within a few weeks, but this is not what brought me joy. Seeing a design that I was proud of, and that my client too should have been proud of, would have meant more for me. This came as a learning lesson, and one I certainly would account for moving forward.

If I were to think about it idealistically, I would have had a few dialogues on the directness of the message and have an agreement on the tone-of-voice of the cover. The rest would be up to my creative discretion. Details that I care for would be in my jurisdiction: use of photography, typographic detail, production of the print...that sort of thing. But it seems this is difficult to demand from the client.

IV. Controlled adjustments

Alongside my interest in printed work such as book covers, I had also longed for some collaboration with the more urban, physical world. Somehow, I wanted to work as a graphic designer that influenced public spaces. This seemed like such a daunting task, but luckily, I had approached this new field in a much more pragmatic manner.

Completely understanding that I did not have sufficient knowledge about the world of urban planning and placemaking, I decided to engage my interest by arranging some talks with designers and urban actors that do work with this and put this subject into a design context. After a few rounds of this a few things were established: First, I had become acquainted with those working in this field as professionals, and in return they knew of my interest in it too. Secondly, I had familiarized myself with the ways graphic designers could position themselves in urban projects.

Here I found myself in a much more grounded starting point than I was before starting book cover designing. The difference also was that I would have a clearer

picture of what could go wrong based on my experience with the book cover project.

I proposed myself as a volunteer into a temporary rehabilitation project being undertaken by a few social actors like urban architects, furniture designers and local activists. The project's goal was to temporarily upgrade an area in Oslo that was seen as unsafe and 'shady' by the local residents, especially those with children. A lot of the project work was factored in as voluntary work through various youth and activist organizations.

It is here that I was prepared to propose myself as a visual communicator who would *aid* the rehabilitation process and provide input where there could be new value added to the project with the goal of placemaking. One of those I approached was a designer who I had previously invited for a placemaking talk, so my interest was not difficult to convey. He also received my proposal well, admittedly, he was also pleased that I would do it as a volunteer. Albeit a volunteer with more influence on the project. Everyone likes free things.

The project was already underway as I was introduced to the rest of the team developing a concept for the area. At first, I sensed some skepticism amongst the urban designers, who felt that my introduction would warrant a variation from their thought process, and I also quickly realized that there was a very real possibility of stepping on some toes if I tried to impose myself too much. After all, they were the experts in this setup. So, I adapted into a more reactive role, where I could propose alternatives into details and additions to existing plans rather than proposing plans altogether. This was an adjustment that came as a reality check but also didn't take away much from my enthusiasm since I did not have a clear vision while entering into the project.

Up until this point, my graphic design process had been largely individual. That is, I was responsible for conceptualizing and reproducing the designs, in a relatively solo format. I have had collaborators in the past, but not where the collaboration drove the result of the design. This is what was different with the project. As a premise of having a low budget and high availability of volunteers, the project was setup in a way that the 'design' was essentially the creation of certain parameters that would in turn generate

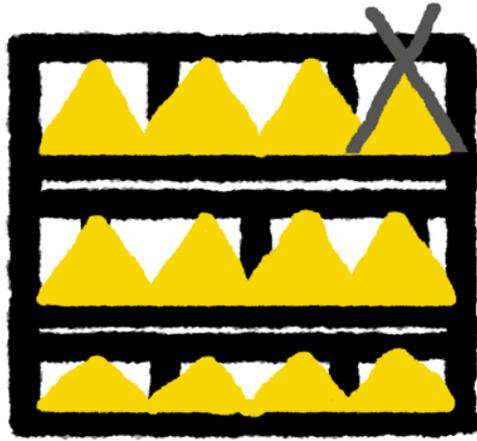
design through the participation of volunteers. Very much like preparing rules that would lead to a solution rather than just ideating and creating. Here I gave up significant creative control over the result but learnt (and put into practice) a vital new technique of designing. New to me, that is.

The area was meant to include a few elements such as a marked-out zone to establish a 'space' that was meant to invite families with children, a seating area, a running track for kids and some new plants. This had to be split into a route established by the urban designers, the seating created by the architects and the rest was a matter of paintwork. I was tasked with creating a pattern that was somehow 'local' and vibrant. But I needed to create something that was not only achievable in a short time frame but also something achievable with the available skilled force.

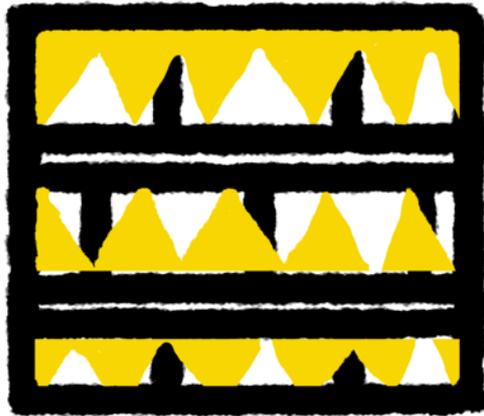
Eventually the criteria I had set for myself was that the design must be (i) reproduced using simple materials (ii) within the ability of non-designers and craftsmen to produce (iii) embrace the imperfect expression and condition of the place (iv) have room for simple variations.



- I. Pre-existing divisions in the flooring, that could act as natural guides.



2. The pattern would comprise of simple triangles, that could be drawn by the volunteers using a string and chalk, filling in the triangles with yellow paint.



3. Allow room for error and the volunteers to alter the triangles as they go, to create more variation and a more informal pattern.



• *The pattern making in progress.*

The result was interesting. It was not an outcome of a pre-determined vision that was based on strict grids and precise shapes, but something that unfolded along the way. This was a big difference in approach, where it involved the idea of designing in a *socially responsive* way. In one of the discussions I had with associate professor Maziar Raein, he described what this term meant. He explains that socially responsive design is one where attributes such as participation, engagement, inclusion of stakeholders, value identification (not just value generation) are on the forefront. It also highlights two different lines of thought that he sees dividing the graphic design practice. Top-down versus bottom-up. One which is a more centralized production (what I practiced while designing the book cover) and one which is more holistic and empathetic (what socially responsive design deals with).

This empathetic social understanding of the range between the client's and user's mindsets makes the designer a good mediator and can awaken the spirit of looking for potential in different places.

Maziar also extends a quote from Victor Papanek's *The Green Imperative*, where Papanek says that good design practice "informs, reforms and gives form" where Maziar adds "it also *performs*". As is more evident in socially responsive design, according to him.

This discussion also extends into the methods proposed by Karl Gerstner with his idea of programming for solutions. Not as those demonstrated in *Designing Programmes* (1964), where the act of programming is centered around a tool (such as the Zwicky box), that generates various outcomes for many solutions in a multitude of situations. But rather as those demonstrated in his MoMA catalogue, where the programming is a way of setting up parameters for a variety in result in a particular situation. Which was a similar approach used to arrive at the pattern below in my project.



• *The ready pattern.*

Following the positive reception of my approach to the pattern solution, I was given more room to influence other details such as introducing symbols into the area that gave more value to the space. I proposed that since we were aiming to give the area a more positive outlook, we should highlight the things that are interesting or useful about it, and that these things could be expressed through icons on the flooring.



• *Icons highlighting the facilities in the area, such as the bus terminal nearby*



• *Signage stencil, custom-made to fit the profile of the location.*

Furthermore, I could also extend these icons into a more fictional direction and incorporate some symbols associated with videogames into the running track meant for the kids. This was to engage the kids more in this renovated space and encourage them to use their imagination.

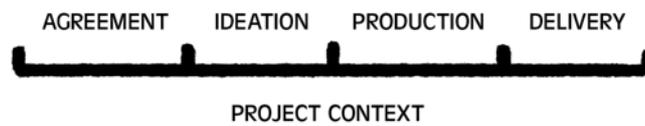
Eventually, I was also given the green light to produce a sign stencil with the name of the area that would be traced in various spots to highlight the identity of the place. This is where I was able to return to a more typical centralized work-process, where I create a design based off of the available references such as color, patterns, shapes and develop a style of icons and typography that suited the project best, reproducing it by myself.

V. Reflection and learnings

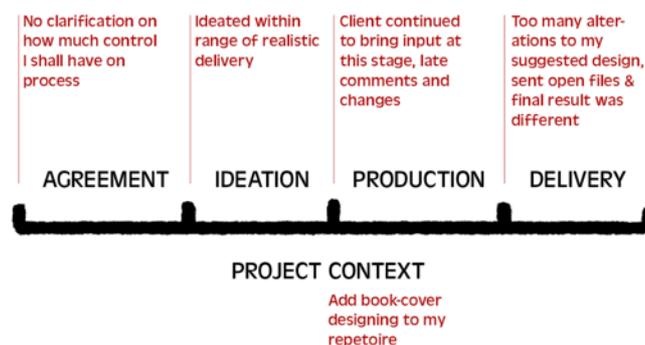
Although these examples are quite different, these two projects highlighted to me how the approach to compromise affected my experience with both processes and outcomes. Even though the premise was quite different, the fact that they were both interesting fields that I wished to enter into was of equal importance to me.

However, it was interesting to break it down into stages and discover what moments I allowed a certain amount of control to be taken away from my process and at what points I was able to retain it. This really highlighted other areas of design methods than the ones I thought were more central to *my* process.

To break down how I look at a standard run-through of a project, I see four significant stages, all bearing a certain amount of weight in influencing the final result. Broadly put, they are:



When re-assessing the book cover design project, I realized that once the project context was established, the agreement phase was where I should have been clear about the reasons *why* I was willing to take a low-paid job and what was in it for me. I should have, in other words, protected my integrity at this point. The agreement is a solid foundation to find a point where you and your client can meet certain expectations from one another while maintaining the best interest of the project outcome. Further that, I failed to be clear about the process that would follow and given the limited pay and time, it would have been beneficial to spell out that the client's involvement should be limited and in *what ways* it would be entertained at all. How this impacted the rest of the project:



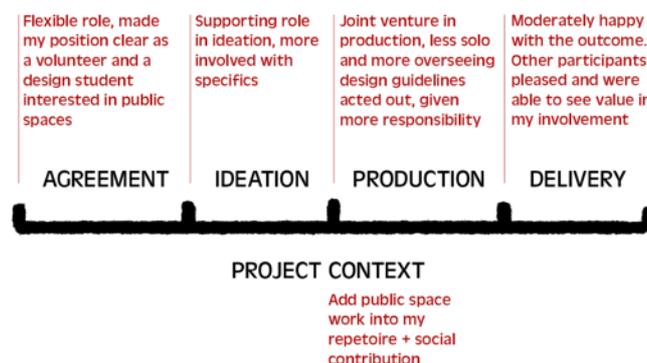
Across various stages I was allowing more influence than what I felt comfortable with. Slowly allowing the creative control to lose from my grip and deteriorating my interest in the project.

An interesting insight I received in relation to client influence was from Prof. Andreas Berg. He mentioned that a colleague of his dealt with this insidious external influence on a creative process in a sensible way. They introduced

concepts to the client on a very rough, badly sketched-out level and communicated the idea. Following this, they told the client that if there were any significant inputs on the work, they would be considered only at that stage, following which they would have an agreement on the design/illustration that would be made. This allowed for the client to make their crucial points, without getting in the way of the significant creative work. Of course, there is no guarantee that all clients adhere or approve this format, but perhaps this approach would have compensated for a few losses I allowed for.

Going back to the second example, where I experienced a more fulfilling outcome, albeit a bit foreign to my own taste. Here the agreement made was a very cautious one, where my role was voluntary but still adaptable. Since the project context was heavier towards personal development and gaining exposure into a new field while also being involved in a social rehabilitation process, the process was less demanding of my own design process. Rather, it relied on my ability to react to constraints that may arise along the project.

These constraints could be indicated by someone else on the project or proposed by me. As is clear, the evaluation of this project is quite another theme as my motivation and intentions going into the project were clear and measured, the absence of the monetary value also made it purely social and educational for me. The assessment looked something like this:



There was still a compromise here (my creative process), but through the experience of the assignment I came to see it more as an *investment*.

VI. A Maturing Process

In a conversation with my old colleague, Henrik Fjeldberg, who I also see as a mentor, this term came up: a maturing process. He was referring to how UX design is going through a phase which book design went through a long time ago. There was a significant period of time where rules were still being constructed for print, no one had the 'right' ways of designing editorial work right from the start.

So, albeit there were certainly typesetters who wished to impose their creativity from the beginning, it was more important to find solutions that made book-making a viable craft that solved certain issues and made the format function as intended. So, it was necessary that those creatives familiarized themselves with all the essentials before they could truly push the creatives boundaries of the format as we do today.

Graphic designers are often conflicted working on UX projects, at least I have been. There is so little room for creativity, and so much focus on following 'best practices' which must be agreed upon by the community of UX designers and enthusiasts. But the reality is that it is still a young stream of design and these practices are helping it last as a functioning tool as originally intended.

Why I picked up on this term is also because I started to relate to it in some other ways. I am, as mentioned earlier, constantly on the lookout for new ways of incorporating graphic design into new situations. If I talk about something such as book cover design, then sure, the line of work has of course lived through centuries, it is *me* who hasn't matured *my* craft of it. But when I look at graphic design in public spaces, it is still a mystery to many that it even has any importance there (unfortunately), and so here it is the line of work itself that must go through the maturing process, and I can choose to participate in it.

This is why I mention earlier that I saw my experience in the second project as an investment. I buy into the idea, based on my experience, that graphic design does bring value into the renovation of public spaces. But I need to be a

part of the dialogue of its value being recognized and appreciated.

On a personal level, where does this maturing process take me? It helps me develop my understanding of the subject certainly, but also that it helps me formulate my principles and values within that field of work. It also allows me to find ways of incorporating a new insight into my design practice as a whole.

One such principle is that I find my role as a designer crucial to social discourse. I am a social actor with the access to the platform of communication, everyone within the graphic design profession has this access. This maturing process allows me to solidify my position in the social sphere and to contribute to projects where my work is useful in the public domain.

VII. Adjustment or investment

What I keep returning to is that there are really different ways of looking at these setbacks that I call compromises. Most often, and it is very often, when faced with the possibility of having to let go of creative control in situations where we want to have it, we tend to see it as a loss. That is very normal I believe. It is not different to how we wish that others saw things the same as us, and very often as individuals we feel that the way we see things is of course the right way. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I have never experienced that to be the case.

In a pluralist society like the one we live in, there is no absolute 'correct'. There is no one version of a truth, there is plenty of nuance. Every time we are exposed to new information or a new experience, we compare it with our pre-existing notions about that information or experience and then form an opinion about it. I could be convinced that something I haven't considered before is better or I could be introduced to something that I completely reject too. It is this process that is essentially reminding us that our own beliefs and values change with exposure to new ones.

In professional terms, there is this nuance. But there is also another risk: I want to work with people who want to

give me creative ownership. I don't want to end up in another project going back and forth on matters of taste and references. I want to be seen as a specialist.

Henrik tells me that this trust from a client doesn't come easy. People are different, and so are their expectations. Sometimes you can have a project where you've managed to hustle more control on the creative project from start to finish, a very gratifying process and let's say, a result you're very pleased with. But the client felt excluded all along, did not understand the small details you are proud of, and then, they don't return as customers. It is important to establish a relationship with the customer, where you entrust each other with responsibility of the success of the project and a longer work alliance where the creative ownership is earned. It is possible that on the back of one successful project as described here, there can be a reputation to be built on.

This is what allows a little more room, a bigger likelihood that new clients come in with a clearer idea of what you are capable of as a designer. On the back of a healthy client partnership, I could produce some good quality work, that I aspire to do more of. But there is also the chance that I will actually do more of such work, since I have successfully met my client's needs and that project itself becomes an endorsement of my capabilities.

VIII. Why am I open to exploring compromise?

If you ever walk around the streets of India, you start noticing things put together in unconventional ways. Many people don't have the means to produce things they need, but they find creative solutions to producing them anyway. This is the *Jugaad* I mention at the beginning of the text, where being resourceful is a must, not a choice. A commonplace phenomenon, where solutions are *hacked*.

I think I have this inherent need to prove to myself that I too am capable of finding intermediate problem-solving capability, albeit not an ideal solution, but a solution to a problem, nonetheless. It is also a way of learning on-the-go. Perhaps for other designers it is more important to find

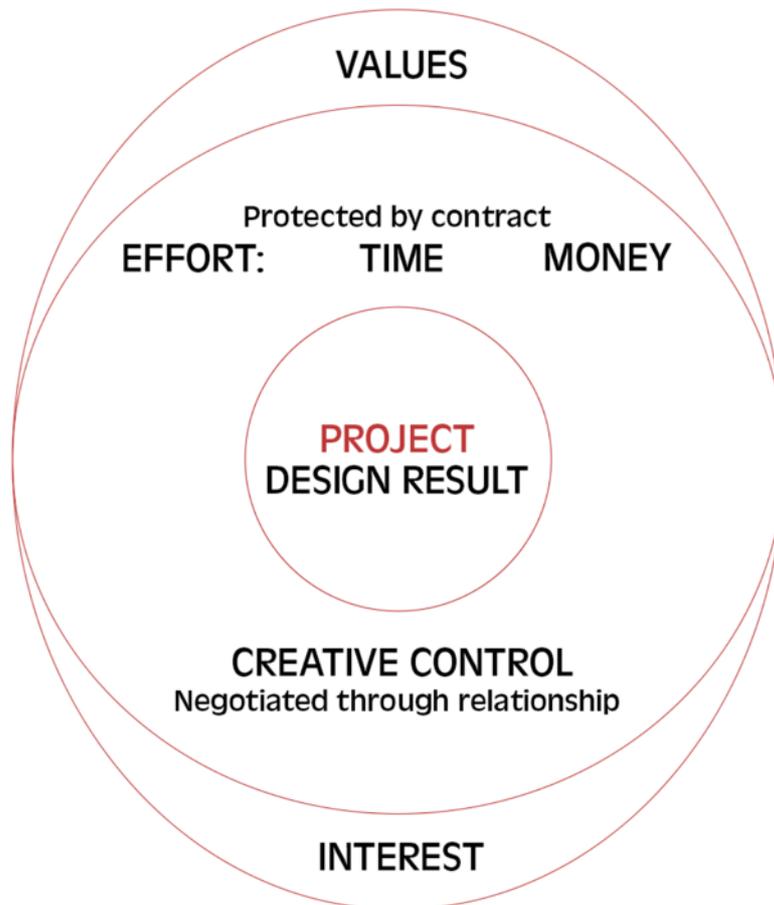
consistency within a specialization. Which I personally find a very narrow scope for a graphic designer. It is quite difficult for me to understand how a majority of graphic designers I've met are content working repetitively on branding, websites or books as though there were no other way of them putting their design abilities to good effect. Perhaps it's likely that their compromises are fewer, and their working ways are defined much sooner.

In my case, I am driven by new possibilities. This goes back to my goals being quite short-term oriented. This is why I use the idea of making some sort of 'deal' with the challenge, letting go of some control in order to learn and give informed contributions. All in the hope to come out with more grounded understanding of different contexts of graphic design use, it is a way of being really more connected with the real world.

Moreover, it is also a trait. It is a way of correspondence with others, a way of being considerate. Since this is a value that I believe is important to carry personally, it is also one I wish to bring into my professional life. It is not too idealistic, as I think it is important to convey this idea to the other invested parties too. That is, letting the client or the collaborator know what understandings need to be established and where there is a 'win' for each one involved. I think a majority of creatives would aspire to reflect their values through their practice and this is no different to me.

IX. Evaluating a compromise

As touched upon before, the evaluation of each compromise depends on the context of the project. It is a matter of what aspect of the project was subjected to a sacrifice, risk, adjustment. It can be about the creative control, the values or the fulfilment of an idea. So, it is essentially what balance I end up finding between the three and then assessing it with more pragmatic measures such as time, effort and money. All with the final result of a project at the heart of it. Some are more formalized and proposed clearly, the others are solidified with a rapport and strong relationship with the client. As illustrated below:



The starting position is important. Emotionally, I aim to only work on projects that align with my values or fall into an area of potential work that interests me. Following which, I need to protect my professional working terms, which are covered by a solid contract, the bare minimum. These terms allow me to put in the effort I'd ideally put into my work, so that I am providing a fair service. But for it to be fair, the money being paid should bear relation to the amount of time I put into it.

On the other hand, there is creative control. This is the signature of my work and of the client's ambition. Naturally, the creative person in the agreement (myself) assumes responsibility. But it comes at the cost of the client's financial/entrepreneurial initiative. This is not to be overlooked; therefore, it is important to communicate to them what my strengths are and why it is in their own interest to hand the control to me as the designer. As I learnt, this rapport can lead to a shining endorsement of my abilities as a designer!

I anticipate that this is a gradual process through which I am able to answer to myself, what kind of designer I am. A kind of practice built upon principles, that are reflected in my nature outside of being a designer as well. Over a period of time less naïve, less complacent and a better scout of prospective clients and collaborators. This is a way for me to work towards my integrity as a designer, an iterative process not for others but for myself, as I keep updating the 'about me' section of my portfolio.

X. In closing

In relation to my previous theory writing, I have inspected the moral dilemma with Fascism and how I link that into design and ethics. On the surface for me, there is no dilemma, it is simply an incompatible ideology that has no regard of the free human nature. However, grudgingly I found some things that can be learned from it. Specially around the communication of the objectives.

We as designers, at least designers working for clients, love to work with clear definitions and concrete goals. We like clients who know what they want, as it makes our operations easier. However, we can take objection to the principles, and intentions behind a brief. This is a little dialogue between values in creativity and production. And so, this idea of an internal struggle, a reluctance to accept something, is one I visit with this text again.

Now I don't propose anything new. I am not proposing anything to anyone. I am the reader, and this is a clarification. I merely am observing how I have been learning, in practical terms. I don't apply any design methodology as much as I evaluate myself as a decision-making designer. Every designer does it in their own way and has different barriers that they do not wish to cross, so in that way it may be both natural and yet unique to each. It is not so much about design-thinking as it is about pragmatically approaching my self-interests.

To return to the quote about happiness by Žižek; I am motivated by a challenge, and I have the desire to overcome it, because I know that the success will give me some happiness. But setting myself up for always succeeding, is

not practical. If my ability to overcome an obstacle becomes easier, it means my challenge is weaker, and that means that it excites me less to succeed. I know for sure that my attitude on this very idea is temporary and likely to evolve as I make more mistakes and discoveries.

Reading list & references

- Žižek, S. (2012, June 25). *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Interesting?* [Video]. Big Think.
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U88jj6PSD7w&ab_channel=BigThink
- Raein, M. (2012, September 1). *Socially Responsive Design*. Interview by Jones & Lundebye. Connecting the Dots. <http://connecting.thedots.nl/socially-responsive-design/>
- Papanek, V. J. (1995). *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World*. Thames & Hudson.
- Gerstner, K. (1964). *Karl Gerstner: Designing Programmes*. Lars Müller Publishers.