THE DESIGN PROCESS + BUILDING 'A VISUAL ESSAY' / PROCESS BOOK

The benefit of the design process
When starting a new project, there are steps of the design process to follow that will help you achieve better results. It is very important as a visual artist to develop a working method. Rather than jump right into a graphic software program to try to create a final version, you can save yourself time and energy by first researching the topic, organizing your content, starting with simple sketches and having several rounds of approval on designs.

In most cases a project starts with a brief either from a client/or a professor or a project that you start on your own. This brief in most cases is 'text/content' based. And it is important to tackle that brief in all of the disciplines of 'communication.' Text, images, shape, color, maybe even sound, motion and the spoken word. Most importantly, a brief always contains a set of demands, and a set of 'problems.' Before starting you need to get a good overview on what these problems are.

The best method is to keep a PROCESS BOOK (starting with a choice of either letter format or tabloid sized paper [depending on your printer], and a single sheet binding method [a binder, a folder, paper or binder clips etc.]
At all times your working method needs to give you a clear overview of your research and your (thought)process.

step 1. **DEBRIEFING** / start with *writing*

_design problem and design brief
Read the brief. Dissect it into different parts. What are the parameters, what are the design problems that I need to solve? Rewrite and state the design problem(s) clearly. Explain (in your own words) how you intend to solve it in general terms.

_rich 'picture'
At the beginning of the project place the THEME at the centre. Visually arrange other (key)words/themes around the central one.
Create a typographic diagram.

_analysis
List as many questions as you can about the project you are attempting; What exactly is being asked? What materials can I use? What would be the overall look and feel? What are my 'points of view' towards the subject matter? Who has dealt with this 'problem' before?

_synthesis
Answer the questions in the analysis.

step 2. **RESEARCH** / *gather* material, text [articles] / images / interviews / etc.

The 'rich picture' and the analysis you created in step one will give you a clear idea what material to look for, anything connected to the subject matter you should collect and archive.

research should be done on several levels:

CONTENT: Gather as much knowledge in writing on the subject matter as you can; who wrote about this; what are the different point of views?; what are the pros and cons? / how much can you trust your source material? etc.

IMAGE: What does the subject matter look like?; how have other 'visual artists' visualized the subject matter?; What do you want the subject matter to look like?
Collect images, logos and brands (if applicable), photos of the environments and the users, any other visual material that might spur your understanding and creativity.

_the internet

Google web and Google images will help you to do your first search.
Your (key)words from the 'rich image' you can type in the search engine and it will lead you to tons of material, be precise, try to not drift away from the subject matter, but also don't select too little material. Absolutely make prints of articles and images online that are of your interest.
Make sure you bookmark the pages that you have selected for printing.

_the library

Go to the library and look up information related to your project. The library is a great source for images, since they are larger in format and when scanned the images turn up in higher resolution then images found on the internet. Also much of human culture is not on the web, it is still waiting for you in libraries. Collect anything that could be useful – written work, information diagrams, pictures. Photocopy and write down titles and ISBN numbers and sources.

_personal interviews

Interview people who may be able to help you with your research, both those directly related to your subject matter and occasionally some who are part of a field. Keep in mind that info found on the internet is 'controlled information,' sometimes you need more personal and indepth information. Make sure you note the date, time, name of interviewee, and function/profession (related to your subject matter).

_take photographs

Take photographs of anything that will help you in your research. For example, if you are designing a toy for a very young child you could visit a nursery and take photographs of children using toys and include this in your research section. Besides gathering the factual and the documentary images, also think about a non-literal, more poetic approach of how you can 'visualize' your subject matter, digital photography is a quick medium to do sketches/tests.

step 3. **ORGANIZE YOUR RESEARCH** / *categorize* material, text [articles] / images / interviews / etc.

_design a process book

The most important part of the design process is to be able to organize, select, and order your research material. This is the part where you have to create an overview of the project seen from all different angles; content-wise + visually. It is very important to use your design skills (typography + lay-out) to create a clear overview. The emphasis lies on finding elements that are of 'same-ness.'

Choose a paper format you would like to work with based on your printer (either letter format or tabloid format, either portrait or landscape, and create a simple grid that you can work with, the typeface you choose for this should be very simple and generic).

_categorize research material

For text/articles; read through each article and highlight the parts you find most important. Try to describe what the article is about in a few short sentences, and attach key words to it. This will allow you to 'read between the lines,' and you will be able to find elements that are comparable and and show similarity that at first glance might not have been visible.

Use the key words to group and order, try different categories to match your articles and/or the key words you have used.

Use of typography: Focus on hierarchy, use any simple plain font that has roman, bold, italic. Start with a simple typographic list of article headlines, the description you added, and the key words that you have attached. Once you found a way of organizing this, you can make that list more elaborate. Make sure you are consistent in use of type and type-size.

For found images; Analyze your images, put key words on them and make series; be sure to crop and adjust the images to enhance similarity or to create the feel of a series. Categorize for example into 'facts' / 'documentary' / 'imaginary' / 'poetic' / 'style' / 'color,' etc.

Besides researching 'visual content,' you can also create a 'look-and-feel' page, a mood-board to show what styles you find fitting for your project. (fashion designers and stylists use this method).

Typographic research: think about what kind of text, or subject matter you are dealing with. Is it 'linear' like a novel, is it newspaper clippings, is it online text? It helps to think about the environment in which your subject matter is imbedded. For example, when we deal with a subject matter 'soccer' we can look at the sports section in newspapers, but also do research on type on shirts, logos of sport clubs, designs of athletic shoes, etc. When we deal with an 'environmental' topic we might want to look into science books, reports from laboratories, documentaries on global warming, etc. Make a selection of fonts you find fitting for the subject matter, and create a page that shows your fonts and arguments to defend your choices.

_write conclusions

After every page write a short text of your findings and draw conclusions. Keep in mind that by 'visually organizing' the research, you not only get a clear overview for yourself, but also, visually track your 'train of thought' for others, especially your client.
If you have done this extensive research design and are able to make your research visually clear, then it is within these 'findings' where to find the answers on how to proceed.

step 4. **SPECIFICATION + BRAINSTORMING IDEAS** / *write* down your concepts, test these concepts with visual sketches and approaches.

Creating a story line that combines your research findings, that connects the dots of your studies thus far. Find several ways of approaching your project (as many as possible) and start doing some tests, based on the conclusions you have drawn from your research.
Write specifications, try to describe your specific aims, and make sketches.

_creating ideas + writing specifications + create sketches

In this stage of the design process you might want to check if people can follow your thought process and start a brain storm session with others. Showing others your process book will help to *check* if people understand what you are dealing with, and if your information is organized. If they can understand the information while flipping through your research, they should be informed enough to start a constructive discussion.

The goal of brainstorming is to throw out any and all ideas related to a project, eventually leading to one or several to take further. This is certainly not the time to hold back. Ideas that may seem risky, unrealistic or even downright stupid should be jotted down. Any one of them can lead to your best work.

Write down several concepts with different starting points or angles. Be brief and clear. Try to come up with ideas that are different, that look individual and are imaginative.
Take small steps in developing the visualization of each concept, by slowly improving your 'research sheets.' For example re-shoot the kind of images you find fitting for a concept, or resize a selection from your found images in Photoshop and play with graphic representation (for example make them black/white, duo tone, add a 'fitting' filter, etc).

Concepts + ideas should describe an 'image-system' and a 'typography-system,' both based on the same starting point. They should enhance each other!

_get inspired

Sometimes the quickest way to get creative inspiration for a project is to see what others have done. You're not looking to copy anything, of course, but rather see a concept, color, shape, typeface or any other element that might spark your next great idea.

Visiting museums of all types can be a great source of inspiration.

Take a walk. Sometimes its best to get outside and watch the world... you never know what will spark your imagination.

step 5. **DEVELOPMENT** / *compare* your concepts and visual sketches, check if they still relate to your research and the aims. Make a final choice, start designing.

Usually by this stage you already 'feel' which of your concepts has the most possibilities or shows the most interesting design approaches. If you have trouble judging their quality then check your aims and see if you succeeded in answering them. Create a list of remarks on how you can improve the designs. Choose the best approach!

_design multiple versions

Now that you've done your research, finalized your content and approved some sketches, you can move on to the actual design phases of the graphic design process. While you may knock out the final design in one shot, it's usually a good idea to present at least two versions of a design. This gives you some options and allows you to combine favorite elements from each.

TIP: Be sure to keep even the versions or ideas that you choose NOT to present and that you might not even like at the time in your process book, as you never know when they'll come in handy.

_constant revisions

- Check with others if they understand your designs without having to tell them what your idea or concept behind it is.

- Check if your typography and your images are consistent.

- Check if you are 'complete' in your information, credits and sources etc.

_ Check if your design reflects the brief and if it fits the aims and the specifications.

_final project

_ Check technical details, are your images 300dpi, test your printer, make print tests on different paper stocks. Are all your type sizes legible? Revise again when running into problems. Print end results.