Opening the Locker: Constructing the Design Identity

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Graphic design is a powerful yet often overlooked medium to enhance, strengthen, and amplify communication. Given the varied and unique content of this book, I knew my part would be a tricky but vitally important component. When I was brought in on this project it was well beyond the conceptual stage and near full maturity and completion. As such my creative connection had to be created rather than naturally developed alongside the structural framework guiding the work. I read through the available material and listened to the project collaborators’ descriptions with attentive interest in order to gain a creative foothold. Slowly, the artistic and visual organization began to materialize.

The first draft was, admittedly, somewhat plain and derived from a traditional outlook on book design and layout. Some of this was simply trying to arrange larger details—typefaces, leading, margins, etc.—before approaching the more intimate details for each chapter. Some of this was also an uncertainty of the collaborators’ expectations and already formed visions of the final product. The first draft was met with helpful critique and more insight into the aesthetic. Sometimes, when a client is unable to express their envisioned visual outcome, it helps to show them what they don’t want so as to reveal what they do want. Armed with new creative direction I continued development.

What stood out from the first critique was identifying this book as an artist’s book. Though it contains much academic discourse, there were also more loosely created
elements like the fictionalized journal entries. The amalgamation of different works with inherently different voices and perspectives was an artistic problem that called for a difficult solution: to bring a visual identity to each chapter individually and emphasize its unique influence in the project but also to unite them into a cohesive whole.

I decided to use the traditional book elements as the consistencies to establish \( \textit{unity} \) creating master page templates to ensure identical placement when desired. Running headers on each page appear in the same position, typeface, and color, only changing in name to indicate which chapter is open. Chapter openings have a consistent design with number, name, and author appearing in the same position and typeface no matter that chapter’s content.

Iconography created within the closed system of the project help identify the type of information and perspective presented in each.

Each chapter is denoted by one of three symbols: the padlock, the microphone, or the book. I created this iconography in effort identify the type of information found within that chapter as well as add another element of consistency in layout despite the different types of information appearing in each chapter. The padlock refers to academic related content, as it is researched, “locked-in” material. The microphone
represents creative perspective on the project structure, indicating recorded material. It was inspired by the idea of StenoLink recording audio, but symbolizes any recording, both visual and audio, related to our fictionalized hoard. The book symbol indicates the information is about the making of the book or project, not a structured part of the project itself, like this chapter. These symbols appear on almost every page reminding the audience of the type of content as well creating visual consistency.

The color red is also a major unifying element. I chose red boldly contrasted with white and black as a reflection of civic infrastructure and gender neutrality. Red equally became a strong visual component, which emboldened the content’s tone, as well as a complementary detail to enhance but not overpower. Considering the intricacies of the project, it is this spectrum of utility which makes red a befitting color choice. Along with stylized, “flat” iconography and other design elements, the contrasting red, white, and black
palette offer simple, informative content through artistic form.

Within each chapter I tailored the design to match the nature of its context. Scholarly papers feature less ornamentation and consistency among themselves as compared to other chapters. Hints of red appear in emphasizing long quotes, superscript text, and chapter divisions if applicable. The text is a traditional serif, black typeface. The focus of these parts is academic conjecture and historical framework; therefore they do not require and are not complemented by excessive creative decoration. They need an authoritative tone not only to reflect their content but to provide visual distinction with the more creative chapters.

The fictionalized journal entries/narratives proved to be
the most difficult creating an identity. Set in the future, it required imagining just how archaeologists and scientists might take notes because surely simple pen and paper will likely be, if not phased out, secondary to a more technologically advanced option. Conceived was StenoLink, an app which dictates your vocal recordings into digital format for storage or later revision. I took “steno,” referring to the art of writing and shortening dictation and added “link” to establish a bridge to a more technologically fluent and dependent community. Beyond this basic idea was that the operator could then attach in other files as needed, export entries, start new collections, etc. To visually communicate this, I constructed a layout which gives the illusion of reading the entries directly from the StenoLink interface, seeing the documents in raw format just as the archaeologist Dr. X would. I added basic command, viewing, and navigation “buttons.” Keeping in mind that this would ultimately appear in a
paper-printed book I chose to not attempt a photo-realistic screen shot of the app on a digital device but rather suggest it with the elements included in the final version, also mirroring the “flat” illustration style used elsewhere in the book.

Writings about the making of the project were another type of voice in this project calling for their own visual identity still contained within the whole. Karie Edward’s chapter was about her creative process in executing the photography accompanying the project. I decided it, along with this one, should reflect conceptual process with a highly creative and expressive visual organization.

I created large representational illustrations to break up the flow of text and page balance. Highlighted content appears with red emphasis and sometimes in larger and/or bolder size. The typeface is a modern sans serif to break further from academic parts and ends with the padlock symbol unlocked in representation of revealing or “unlocking” the creative process behind creating the South Station Hoard.

About halfway through the design of this book it occurred to me that each chapter was
like a locker itself, opening to reveal its contents to a reader or curious mind, and, though grouped with similar others, contains a unique identity within. Each section invokes curiosity and a sense of exploration in delving farther into the project. Such varied content really gives the reader an uncertainty of what’s coming next: reflective of unlocking a mystery locker. I changed all the “chapter” text to “lockers” and decided an additional visual was needed to make the connection. I created an abstract locker with an opened door within a column of eight: one for each “chapter.” At each “chapter” beginning, the chronologically appropriate locker in the column opens to reveal its contents. Continuing this idea, along the bottom of the pages are eight small boxes to represent the “chapters.” Starting from the outside moving inward, the filled in box indicates the numeric “chapter” within the book.

The creative graphic design process can sometimes be difficult to write about even if you are the designer. There is reasoning behind every decision—no detail is left without deliberate intention of its existence—but there are so many of these made throughout the process that to go back at the end to explain beyond large concepts is often not easy. Frequently one idea quickly inspires another and still
another and so on that so far down the visually creative line it is nearly impossible to trace back to the original inspiring thought. I have tried to give insight into my own creative process here with this book and visually organizing the material in an artistic yet functional aesthetic, but undoubtedly some details have been overlooked. For those left still curious about design decisions I do apologize. For those who are not, you may be pleased I am at my final words. Though challenged in conceptualizing and creating the look of this project, I am pleased with the results and hope it has done artistic justice to the dedicated work of the project collaborators.