

PRINT

RDA 2008: New York City

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The design literacy of clients and the general public alike was a recurring concern this year for art director Philippe Apeloig and designer Ronny Quevedo, as it was for many New York designers. The duo challenged that literacy with their event calendars and posters for the French Institute/Alliance Française, a Manhattan-based organization that promotes French culture and programming. Apeloig and Quevedo used playful, colorful compositions of dots — a modern riff on pointillism — as a conceptual device. The layout's unusual design and typography choices don't just unite the campaign, Quevedo says: "We're also educating the reader on how to read our materials."

Point Five Design founding partner Alissa Levin thinks design literacy has vastly improved in recent years, partly because viewers are constant consumers of an increasingly design-savvy internet. Could this mean web design has become a positive influence on print work? "I feel like it has opened up possibilities in print," Levin says. "Perhaps it's because not all the pressure is on the print pieces, so it actually makes more room to try different things."

In the past, clients often hired two different firms for print and web components; Levin finds that it has become much more common to hire the studio to create both, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* did for a redesign of its print edition and website.

Point Five's redesign of *CJR*, completed in 2007, gives the magazine a bold cover format and a minimal, typographically elegant overall design that emphasizes the publication's role as a media watchdog. Also in media, the business-culture magazine *Condé Nast Portfolio* debuted in late April 2007. The cover of its first issue featured a stunning aerial view of a nighttime cityscape, and standout photography and sublime information graphics have remained a centerpiece of the magazine's visual identity. Continuing the minimalist trend in editorial design, design director Robert Priest explains that he and his team were striving for simplicity. "We want to be a lively and energetic magazine in terms of what we present, but there's a certain clean aesthetic that we're going for."

Photography forms the aesthetic DNA of many magazines, among them Newsweek, whose showcase portfolios in 2007 included scenes of Darfur, portraits of the four seasons in Japan, and photographs that revisited 1968's pivotal leaders. Newsweek director of photography Simon Barnett says that Paolo Pellegrin, who took the pictures of Darfur, "is the most accomplished photographer working today who is able to bridge the difficult line between journalism and art. ... [He] is at the leading edge of the new, young photojournalism movement, which has its roots in Italy. The photography is lyrical and operatic, and it is an amazing way to see the world."

Even in a weakening economy, the New York design business was robust in 2007 and through the summer of 2008; studios and design businesses reported hiring numerous freelancers to complete a full docket of work. At book publisher Picador, creative director Henry Sene Yee reports that 2007 was “very creative, not just with me, but with colleagues,” and the same has been true in 2008.

Still, Yee began to worry when he realized that electronic readers such as Amazon's Kindle and Sony's eBook had become enjoyable to use—even to him. “I think it's going to allow people to read even more, but I don't know what my role as a cover designer will be in that e-book future,” he says. One technology that's exciting him, however, is design: related (designrelated.com), a networking site known informally as “MySpace for designers.” Yee has commissioned covers from designers he found on the site, and he praises it as a way of finding artisans working for lesser-known presses outside New York. “They're doing incredible work for these small presses—these high-end concepts and designs that are just beautiful,” he enthuses.

Designing with sustainability in mind continues to be a focus for designers, and, more and more, for clients as well. Suggestions for recycled papers and sustainable printing presses were “always something that we would bring to the table, and often— whether it was cost or something [else]—it was a difficult sell,” says Levin. “Now, it seems like people are really on board and want to know how they can do it and what they can do.” Seth Labenz of Brooklyn-based studio Topos Graphics notes that not everything labeled green is as sustainable as it should be. “We've found or observed that solutions are sometimes motivated by the appearance of being green, as opposed to a true commitment to real change,” he says.

Labenz, with Topos partner Roy Rub, creates consistently avant-garde design that's certainly helping expand design's vocabulary—and its audience's general literacy, too. He's optimistic about design's future possibilities: “It used to be a technique of marketing,” he says, “whereas today, more and more, it is not only that but a vehicle for reflection, knowledge, history, criticism, vision, provocation—a lens for culture but also an embedded, utilitarian tool for discourse and change.” The duo's work, and the work of their fellows throughout New York City, reflects that exhilarating new mandate.