

## HED: 35 YEARS OF PENTAGRAM PAPERS

DEK: What began as a way to share personal passions with those outside the firm has become an artifact of the firm's unfettered creativity and inspiration.

Since 1975, a diminutive booklet with a black cover with a thin white rule has arrived periodically in the mailboxes of Pentagram associates, clients and friends. Subject matter has ranged from crop circles to Chairman Mao. From tin tabernacles to souvenir albums. Pentagram Papers are a compilation of ideas, collections, and, in many cases, curiosities that were previously unpublished.

Being one of the oldest and most established design firms, Pentagram's tradition of publishing and distributing the Papers has become a way for the firm to cultivate its creativity and inspirations and share them with others. The Papers have become popular with recipients in and outside the design world. And for the partners, producing an issue is a labor of love that provides a unique opportunity to create something simply for the love of the subject matter.

## HISTORY

In 1975, Pentagram was still a young firm, just three years old. With an eye to the future, Pentagram partners John McConnell and Colin Forbes brainstormed ways to nurture the firm's culture and convey it to others. They wanted to create something more meaningful than the typical self-promotional piece. Rather, they hoped to call attention to what was they found interesting and use this to create a vehicle to convey the firm's unique perspective and personality.

"We wanted something that would help us communicate on a regular basis to non-designers," says McConnell. "These booklets became a way to talk about anything *but* what we do. The design industry makes brochures of their work. We wanted to create a publication that simply said, 'Isn't the world interesting?'"

Pentagram had already done a number of academic publications. [CHECK THIS.] The Pentagram Papers represented the first time they'd created a small-format medium to talk simply about different points of interest. Over the years, Pentagram Papers became a home for topics that had had been largely ignored elsewhere or languished in publishing limbo. Since the first issue, the entire project is best summed up in just over 30 words. The following statement is included in every issue:

"Pentagram Papers will publish examples of curious, entertaining, stimulating, provocative, or occasionally controversial points of view that have come to the attention of, or in some cases are actually originated by, Pentagram."

## CREATIVE PROCESS

In 35 years, 36 issues of the Pentagram Papers have been published. The topics fall into one of four general categories—cultural phenomenon (for instance, Australian rural mailboxes), personal passions (architecture), collections (the American flag) and retrospection (the vanishing slide rule).

There is no agenda or schedule governing the content—each year, the topics evolve organically from whatever happens to be inspiring the partners at the time. Subjects are selected at Pentagram’s biannual partners’ meeting. A partner can submit a topic for consideration by preparing a written background and comps. A vote is taken on the different proposals, and the partner whose idea is selected is responsible for seeing the idea through to completion.

“Probably the most difficult or rigorous part of the process is selling of the idea,” says Kit Hinrichs, a partner in Pentagram’s San Francisco firm. “You need to convince others that your idea is the best, and that they should put money into supporting it.”

While it is the partners who bring the ideas to the table, ideas are culled from a variety of sources. Sometimes, colleagues outside the company bring ideas to the partners. In other instances, Pentagram designers may suggest ideas to the partners.

“The opportunity to take on one of the Pentagram Papers is something that has nothing to do with business itself per se,” says Hinrichs. “Ninety eight percent of what we do is business. This is an opportunity to do something that is just of personal interest.”

But to presume that these Papers are merely a diversion from client work is missing the point. “There’s an assumption that we’re solely business driven,” says Hinrichs. “But design is our business. It’s also our life and what we love to do. I think the main difference between doing the Papers and client work is that we are the clients at that point.”

Aside from the format, few rules govern the design and production of the Papers. Almost all of the volumes are 5-3/4 x 8-1/4 inches in size. All have black covers with a thin white rule. And all are between 24-48 pages long.

“In the early days, there were a lot of debates about format and size,” says McConnell. “Some felt that every issue should be a different size. But I said no—that there was enormous value in repetition of the same size, with the same black-and-white cover. The only thing you could change on the cover was the image in the center, and the interior would be designed to suit the subject. So what you have is a collection.”

Aside from the format and the cover treatment, pretty much anything goes. The partner whose concept is chosen assembles a team to work on the project, comes up with the schedule, and sees through the entire production process. While a comp is presented other partners for review and critique, it’s still up to the partner to make the final call on how to proceed.

“The partner in charge of the project is not just a pair of hands for other others,” says Hinrichs. “We all respect that it is the partner’s vision and allow that to happen.”

## FAVORITE ISSUES

The first issue of the Pentagram Papers was entitled: “ABC: A Dictionary of Graphic Cliches.” A perfect example of a subject that had not yet found a publisher, the idea came from Philip Thompson, a former art school classmate of partner Alan Fletcher. The idea was to take a bunch of different graphic images that had evolved into visual metaphors and present them in a dictionary format. The issue published by Pentagram featured letters A-C—a full version was subsequently published later by Palgrave Macmillan.

Other issues of the Papers were more esoteric. One of the most memorable issues is “Olivier Mourgue’s Little Theater of Design.” The featured subject for this issue was a furniture and set designer living in France who paints miniature sets in watercolor and stages them with various objects, like rocks, feathers and driftwood. He would then create stories to perform on the sets to bring them to life.

Although Mourgue did performances primarily for his own entertainment, he did perform his shows for select others whom he thought might appreciate his work. In 1984, he brought a tiny suitcase full of sets and props to Pentagram’s New York office and held a performance. The partners agreed that this would make perfect material for the Pentagram Papers.

The issue featuring Mourgue includes a brief introduction by the artist, followed by select scenes from his performances. Included are the scenes as the audience seems them, along with behind the scenes shots of Mourgue erecting his stage. The finished piece is charming look at one artist’s creativity for its own sake.

“Olivier doesn’t do this for anyone but himself,” says McConnell. “This theater is his invention and he decides who to show it to. It’s fascinating.”

Another memorable issue was a topic also championed by McConnell. His friend, Michael Glickman, is a “cerealogist”—someone who studies the phenomenon of crop circles. For decades, mysterious crop circles—flattened stalks of grain appearing in different geometric patterns—have appeared in English fields.

“I had been to two lectures on the topic,” says McConnell. “No one knows for sure if they are real or not. People have done fake ones, but they take two weeks to make and you need to do it in the daylight. In reality, they appear overnight, and no one has seen people make them. Some people stay awake all night, watching the fields. It’s really nutty. There is an amazing sense of mathematics to them—amazing skill.” In this issue, the shapes were cataloged and rendered in black-and-white as their pure geometric forms, annotated with where they appeared and a date.

Michael Bierut, a partner in the New York firm, brought “doo-wop” architecture to the table in an issue he produced. He explains, “My wife, Dorothy, had amassed a bunch of pictures of signs in Wildwood, NJ. For fun, I put together a slide show and gave a presentation of the images at one of our partners’ meetings. A few of my partners suggested I do a Pentagram paper about them. I liked the photographs, but didn’t think they were be interesting enough on their own to be published. Then we met a writer, Jon

van Meter, who was working on a story about Wildwood for the *New Yorker* that never saw the light of day. He volunteered to adapt the text for our book. The design is meant to feel more mid-Century modern—sans serif type, candy colors, big inset words, all offsetting the picture section that is the heart of the design.”

#### SELF-PROMOTIONAL ANGLE

Although this popular series of booklets does not overtly promote Pentagram or its work, it has generated a lot of interest. “The Pentagram Papers are a self-promotional tool, no doubt,” says McConnell. “But it is a very soft sell. We barely mention Pentagram. It’s self-promotion in a way that doesn’t look like it.”

Pentagram does do a variety of other self-promotional publications to send out to clients. But the partners have found that it is the Papers that stand out as one of the most memorable. “We’ve found that our clients remember us for the Pentagram Papers, not for the self-promotion pieces,” says Hinrichs. “We’ve found that they have helped us get better, more interested, more culturally informed clients. So, it’s worked for us from a business point of view, but that’s not why we do it.”

Bierut concurs. “I think sometimes that the Pentagram Papers are our most effective marketing tool,” he says. “The Papers are meant to remind people that we’re interested in a lot of different things, and perhaps that makes us more interesting to them. After we send a new edition out, I’ll get calls and notes, no matter what the subject.”

The Papers go out to about 5,000-6000 recipients, mostly clients and industry colleagues. “The feedback has really been amazing,” says Hinrichs. “People look forward to it, call us and tell us when they’ve really enjoyed a particular issue. Told us to make sure to keep them on our list and send the next one. It’s great to see them all on a client’s shelf, stacked up. They have become real collectibles.”

Through the years, the Papers as a collection reflect Pentagram’s evolution as one office of five partners to five offices of 20 partners. “The Papers have evolved as Pentagram has evolved with new partners,” says Hinrichs. “Their content, tone, even their political point of view start to emerge. We take them more seriously now. Before they were just things of interest. Now, as a collective of 20 partners, we want to know what we want to say with them—we have more conscientious choices for content.”

And despite the technical changes that have happened in the past 35 years, Pentagram remains devoted to the printed page. “We do online projects and expand our exposure with blogs and the like,” says Hinrichs. “But we still need the need for certain artifacts. Something about the printed page resonates for all of us.”

Lisa Baggerman Hazen is a Web designer/writer living and working in Chicago who made sure she got on the mailing list. [www.lisahazen.com](http://www.lisahazen.com)

#### SIDEBAR NOTE:

Chronicle Books has published the entire collection of 36 issues of the Pentagram Papers in one volume. Included are reproductions of the originals, but also a detailed description of the origins. Also included is a new Paper created exclusively for the book set inside its back cover. \$60 / [www.chroniclebooks.com](http://www.chroniclebooks.com)

## CAPTIONS

PP1\_img02.tif, PP1\_img04.tif

The first issue of the Pentagram Papers featured a collection of visual metaphors for letters A through C. The curious and provocative resource showed many different design conceits that had superseded their original meaning. The publication of the Papers inspired a full book version that included A through Z.

PP17\_img02.tif, PP17\_img04.tif, PP17\_mao\_opener.tif, PP17\_mao\_buttons.psd

When teaching a class at the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco, one of Kit Hinrichs' students, Jenny Wong, returned from China with a bamboo case filled with Mao buttons. Her father Xue-shi Shen was a designer of Mao buttons during the Cultural revolution. The gift prompted Hinrichs to find more buttons. The topic was eventually turned into a Pentagram Paper.

PP21\_Cover.tif, PP21\_crop\_circle.tif, PP21\_img01.tif

A friend of partner John McConnell introduced him to the fascinating study of crop circles. Both a physical mystery and a design inspiration, these sophisticated shapes were reproduced in the Pentagram Papers as both photographs and black on white graphic shapes.

PP29\_Cover.tif, PP29\_img02.tif, PP29\_img04.tif

London's Savoy hotel was the first fully electric hotel when it opened in 1889. When partner John Rushworth was commissioned to create a new graphic identity for the building, he was struck by the beauty of the lighting fixtures throughout the building. He said, "Despite all the various expansions and refurbishments to the hotel over the years, the lighting stayed more or less the same." The different fixtures were reproduced in this edition.

PP30\_Cover.tif, PP30\_img01.tif, PP30\_img02.tif, PP30\_img03.tif

A slideshow presentation by partner Michael Bierut to partners following a trip through Wildwood, NJ inspired the "Doo-Wop Commercial Architecture" issue. "The design is meant to feel more mid-Century modern: sans-serif type, candy colors, big inset words, all offsetting the picture section that is the heart of the design," says Bierut.

PP12\_img01.tif, PP12\_img03.tif, PP12\_img\_06.tif

One of the most unique issues of Pentagram Papers features Olivier Mourgue, a furniture and set designer who fashions miniature sets to stages tiny performances. He brought his show to Pentagram's New York office, and they immediately knew that they had to feature Mourgue's work in an upcoming issue of the Papers.