

## Opponent's Review of the Habilitation Thesis

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For decades, graphic designers have sought to answer the question, *How a good design should look like?* The 20th century has provided a wide range of manifestos, theories, and visual solutions that crystalized in styles and dogmas. Postmodern waves have brought personal expressions and emotions, and in the 21st century, another question enters the scene: *What should a designer be?* Professional identity takes a central position both in the title and the annotation of Juraj Blaško's habilitation work. All of his designs can be viewed as a study of this issue.

Juraj Blaško works mainly in three areas — publication design, exhibition design, and visual identity. Many projects (e.g. exhibitions and events), require to move back and forth between all of them. However, this movement is not about the technical adaptation of graphic elements for different media. Juraj Blaško takes on different roles as a designer, uses different strategies, and changes his professional mission according to the context.

The first area — publication design — seems to be the most complicated one. Juraj Blaško works with books, catalogues, periodicals on fine art, photography, design, and architecture. In such publications, an author communicates his/her idea through the physical object; a photograph is taken to represent this object; a curator, art critic, or journalist verbalizes a concept; a designer works with photographs, texts, and other elements to create a visual story; a reader (who may have seen the originals or not) combines the puzzle elements into the final message. In this process, who is the author and who is the reader? In most of the cases, all five belong to the same professional discourse, so they complete each other. On the one hand, Juraj Blaško coordinates the information, but on the other — he almost dissolves into the project.

It must be noted that the designer's 'invisibility' in these publications is not to be taken as neutrality. Designers of the 50s and 60s, who were looking for a style that would be free from any style, developed a particular visual vocabulary. Today, we can recognize their graphic language as a strong statement that is far from invisible. The paradox is — what was meant to be neutral ended up as a distinctive cliché. Juraj Blaško engages himself deeply into each publication's topic, and because all of them are unique, his publications designs are unique as well.



Unlike the books and magazines that we read while holding in our hands, exhibition posters and installations are to be seen from a distance. With his designs, Juraj Blaško competes for the potential viewer's attention in a dense urban landscape as well as in a 'mediascape'. His task is to analyze the content, select the most important message, and make it a powerful visual statement. To grab the viewers and make them stay, he must use a much louder voice. Juraj Blaško does not seek self-expression, he aligns his design with the concept of the exhibition. In many cases, two or more designers are involved in the process, so he has to adjust to other voices as well.

Among the visual identity projects, The Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava stands out. Its simple and clear structures allow flexibility within a single framework. Juraj Blaško's interest in complex design programs led him to challenge the inconsistency of governmental visual communication and lack of coordination among the state bodies. His attempt to solve this problem was both a professional and a political statement. As Bruse Mau puts it: *it's not about the world of design; it's about the design of the world*. Juraj Blaško's concept was not accepted, but the discussion around it made the change possible. Today the Slovak Government's identity looks much more consistent than it used to be five years ago.

For Juraj Blaško, design is a tool of social transformations. He is a co-founder of The Union of Graphic Designers in Slovakia, juror of professional competitions. He is actively present in the media. He comments extensively on the professional issues with a hope to develop broader visual literacy. His projects get wide media coverage too. Juraj Blaško's work is recognized within professional circles of Slovakia and abroad. His teaching position at The Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava as well as lecturing abroad allows him to share the experience and to experiment beyond the established boundaries.

After careful consideration and based on the reasons above, I am fully convinced that Mgr. art. Juraj Blaško fulfills the habilitation criteria and should be awarded the title of Docent in the study field 2.2.6 Design.

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