

## Diseño Shakespear 50 years. Clarity, hearing, and tenacity

[www.shakespearweb.com](http://www.shakespearweb.com)

"The aim of any creative designer, is not to give the client what he thinks he wants, but what he never even dreamt he wanted"

Alan Fletcher. The Compendium. London, UK: Phaidon 1993, 122

How many attributes are necessary to define the work of Diseño Shakespear?

Concise and precise; simple, but not bare; effective, but with good sense of humor; and present, present, present, everywhere in Argentina. And also clear, yes: clear.

Clarity does not come from the form but from the idea. The idea, for instance, of separating the street names signs from the walls, and take them to the edge of the sidewalk, as they did with the Buenos Aires street signage project. The idea of separating the directional arrows from the words in the same project. The idea of noticing that a maternity hospital was not meant for sad and sick people, but for young people beaming with health and joy. The idea of play that turns the Temaikén Park logo into a typographic dance. The idea of the small heart inside the big heart for the Maternity and Infancy section of the Durand Hospital in Buenos Aires... Ask the Shakespears for a sign system, and you will also get a witty identity and a tone of voice. Here is where the idea comes to make a significant difference.



The idea, the idea, always the idea. The idea that guides the design effort and organizes the public space without exaggerating the presence of the signs, but that, as well, enriches that space. Nevertheless, the signs are almost invisible: they seem to be there like natural events; they seem to have always been there; they seem to have always been as they are.

Also hearing, yes, hearing: the designer's hearing. The signs are invisible because – as Ronald recently said – “the ear is at work.” The ear to catch the voice of the people, as in the case of the “Subte.” This is rescued daily language. The code is natural. Nobody says “I am going to take the Subterráneos de Buenos Aires.” Not even the “subterráneo.” Or the “Metrovías” (the brand name). People take the “subte.”

Subte. Everybody travels in the “subte” in Buenos Aires.

[http://www.fd2s.com/clients/fd2s/SEGDesign\\_Shakespear.pdf](http://www.fd2s.com/clients/fd2s/SEGDesign_Shakespear.pdf)

The Boca Juniors Stadium is another interesting instance of taking advantage of existing codes, and amplifying

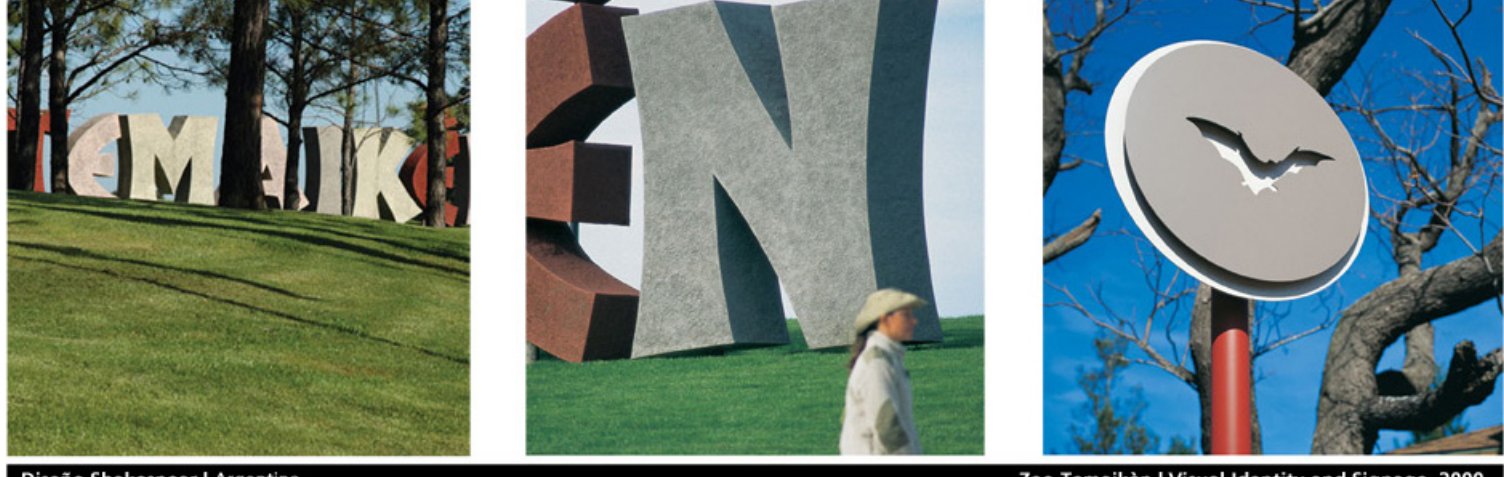


them: the stadium takes the colors and the pattern of the club's shirt. The stadium is shirt, and the shirt becomes stadium. Reciprocal games that reinforce the power of the sign, and extend it to empower the fans. Every fan wearing the shirt is wearing the stadium. Same happens with the brand. BOCA instead CABJ. People's voice is Boca.

And then also (and before, and always), tenacity. Maybe Ronald learned it playing soccer, and passed it on to his sons Lorenzo and Juan, now partners in Diseño Shakespear. Lorenzo is a machine, a machine of ideas, stamina and efficiency. Maybe he got some or much of his superb design and management skills during his time in the London office of Pentagram. Maybe he developed his self-reliance during his time in Chile, setting up office there for a while. Maybe he just digests everything around him in a self-feeding way; from Alan Fletcher to a good Argentine steak, from playing with his father as a child to working alongside him, from listening to wild music, to reading with sensitivity and insight. If one reads Lorenzo's CV, one pictures a design superstar in his mid 50s living in the super-industrialized North. But he's 40, and works in Buenos Aires, a delightful city, but not an easy market for a significant design practice.

And then there is Juan: a rock; a rock-bed for the studio. He directs the industrial design area in Diseño Shakespear. He has the stability of the person that understands the importance of materials, processes, business, and people in the designer's task. The third dimension is his turf. Trained partly at the University of Buenos Aires, and mostly in the forge of design practice with Ronald and Lorenzo, Juan has designed and directed projects of large scale that would make many senior designers shiver. However, he, at 34, is a powerhouse of ideas and production capacity.

Diseño Shakespear is pure energy, hard headed tenacity. Tenacity to really make things, and make them well,

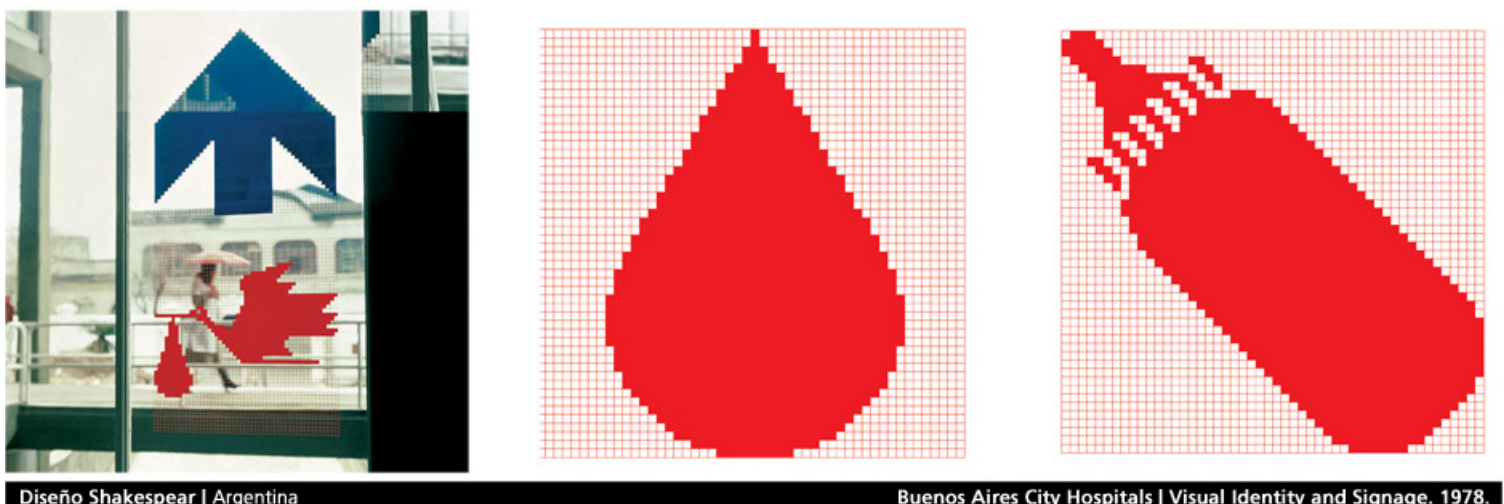


despite the logistical, financial and technical difficulties of a semi-developed environment, as well as the commonly found human blindness, egotism, incompetence and sheer ill-will to be found everywhere... Alan Fletcher once said that it is generally assumed that the main problem of the designer is the generation of creative ideas. He said that such assumption was wrong, that the main problem of the designer is to overcome the obstacles and make those ideas come true. Fletcher was a dear friend and a mentor for the Shakespears, so they know this very well, and make sure that their ideas come true.

[http://blog.vcu.edu/gdes/2007/04/design\\_workshop\\_ronald\\_shakesp.html](http://blog.vcu.edu/gdes/2007/04/design_workshop_ronald_shakesp.html)

But when one refers to Argentina as a difficult environment, it is necessary to provide some illustrations for foreigners. When I left Argentina to come to Canada in 1976, inflation was 500% per year, oscillating between 19 and 38% per month. Printers' estimates were only good for 48 hours. Estimating the cost of jobs for clients required impossible strategic skills, political and economical knowledge, and a huge nose to assess the future. Getting paid, was just as difficult. I was working as a free-lance graphic designer, and it was a challenge not to ruin myself. In a situation like this, how does one run a studio, with a bunch of employees to pay at the end of the month? Diseño Shakespear did it. Downsizing, outsourcing, strategizing, you name it, they did it. And got better at it. Then, in 1981, the national economy collapsed. Industries went belly-up thanks to the most destructive economic policy in the Argentine history to that point, masterminded by the military government of the time: a fictitiously high value for the Argentine currency, paired with the lowering of import taxes to a ridiculous minimum. The consequence? Destruction of the textile, electrodomeotics and automotive industries, since everybody was traveling and buying goods abroad, from electrodomeotics in Miami to Mercedes and BMWs in Germany. How can a large design studio survive without a local industry? Diseño Shakespear managed. Don't ask me how.

Then came the “golden '90s” another period based on a false wealth that lasted about ten years, based on the



selling of the exploitation of all natural resources and State services. One might think that under those conditions it should have been easy to run a design studio, since everyone had money, big money, big money. But, smelling the cash, the big international studios moved in. Now the fight was to hold the fort against huge design organizations with great experience and an up-to-date know-how backed up by vast information and financial resources. Diseño Shakespear survived, and I think this made it even stronger. Suddenly, the 2001 economic collapse struck. Money evaporated, the currency was devalued overnight to one third, the banks closed, personal savings were frozen, accounts in foreign currency disappeared, and Diseño Shakespear became stronger. Many skills are indispensable to survive 50 years in that climate, that more than a climate is a forge, but to grow? That's a miracle. It is a miracle based on great design skills, but however great Diseño Shakespear can be as a design company, the truly unmatchable qualities are its exceptional management savvy, and its superhuman stamina.

I left Argentina because I was not able to survive, let alone to grow, in that environment, even though I was only 36. I wanted to keep on learning how things work, and could not do it there. The Shakespears chose to stay. They are makers, builders, and wanted to do their job there, come what may. Many times people told me that I had a lot of courage to leave as I did. I really think one needed lots of courage to stay.

Shortly after I arrived at the University of Alberta, I had a coffee with a couple of colleagues, who were complaining about having to teach 18 hours a week. I had to control my laughter. I was so happy to have to teach only 18 hours a week! In Buenos Aires I was teaching 24, and then I worked other 24 as a designer. But my 48-hour week did not prevent me from independent study and field research, as I did during my last two years in Argentina. Nevertheless, money was really tight. Learning and developing financial security were close to impossible. For me, this was unsustainable. But the Shakespears stayed, swam against the current, driven by some mysteriously tenacious genes, and are now without a doubt the most important design studio in the region.

In sum, this is the Diseño Shakespear brand: clear and strong ideas, shaped into large pieces of enameled metal, acrylic, concrete, glass, wood, and steel, fixed in public spaces and making them speak – in large scale – the daily language of the public.

Clarity, hearing and tenacity. Management skills and superhuman stamina. And also charm, yes, the charm of the signs that live with the people and speak their language.

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