

Pentagram Book Five. Monicelli Press, New York, 1999. 497 pages; b&w and color illustrations.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

Since Pentagram was founded in 1972, it has grown from a collaborative of five designers based in London to a transatlantic firm with additional offices in New York, San Francisco, and Austin. None of the original designers are with the firm any longer and today the work is carried on by a new generation of sixteen partners and their assistants whose talents range across all the design practices from graphics and product design to interiors and architecture.

The original partners, who also brought talents from different practices, published their first book, *Pentagram: The Work of Five Designers*, in 1972. Like the firm's fifth and latest volume, which is under review here, it featured photographs of successful projects preceded by brief descriptions. In *Pentagram Book Five*, we find a collection of fifty projects that range from the redesign of a single residence in New York City to a gigantic entertainment mall in Buenos Aires. The publisher, Monicelli Press, reeling from the enormous sales of an equally hefty volume, Bruce Mau's *S.M.L.XL.*, has allowed Pentagram almost five hundred pages in which to present their recent work, most of which dates from around 1995. The book weighs in at almost five pounds and requires the reader to be in good physical shape to lift it.

The consistently high quality of Pentagram's design activity is impressive. Consider their work for Swatch. It combines packaging, new watches, and the design of the New York showroom which, like Niketown, employs all the latest techniques of entertainment marketing. Or, on a very different note, take their classic designs for the Savoy Group, owner of some of London's oldest and finest hotels - The Berkeley, Claridge's, The Connaught, and The Savoy. At the urban scale, Pentagram identified New York's Fashion Center on Seventh Ave. by planting a Claes Oldenburg-sized button and needle sculpture in front of the building and following that up with street banners and even uniforms for the center's cleaning staff. Their product design includes a long relationship with Britain's Kenwood Appliances as well as a new one with Diba, a company for whom Pentagram created prototype information products of the future. And their graphic expertise can be seen in posters for the Tate Gallery and the Craft Council in England as well as in a gritty street-wise identity program for the Public Theater in New York.

Despite the diversity of these projects, what unifies Pentagram's current design thinking is an emphasis on marketing that was less pronounced in their earliest work. Marketing

language pervades the introductory texts to the projects in *Pentagram Book Five* and the text authors, writers hired by the firm's partners, frequently use the term 'branding' to characterize Pentagram's approach to a client's brief. Whether Pentagram is working with a cultural institution such as the American Museum of Natural History, a business like J.P. Morgan, or even a university such as Kings College London, the designers focus on the marketing orientation of their clients whether they are selling exhibits, financial services, or education.

A big difference between this volume and Pentagram's first one is that the identities of the individual partners are underplayed in order to promote a corporate image. The 1972 book had full-page photographs of the partners along with information about their backgrounds. This made it easy to envision who might have had a leading role in a particular project. In the book under review, it is far more difficult to identify the "voices" of individual designers as there is no indication of what contributions they made to particular projects. Some would argue that the pervasive market atmosphere of the late 1990s makes the issue of a designer's voice moot. But the question should be raised in relation to Pentagram because we are being told a story of their accomplishments and that story should include more information on the roles of individual designers within the firm.

Instead of identifying the projects by team leaders or city offices, even though Randall Rothenberg's introduction describes and praises Pentagram's operating structure of individual teams at great length, the partners have chosen to foreground the work itself. This is done primarily through photographs with the introductory texts describing little of the actual working processes. We thus get no chance to explore the particular characteristics of the New York office, for example, many of whose projects do have a distinctive character as compared to Pentagram projects in other cities. There is a masking of individual and group difference in order to promote the capabilities of the larger firm. While this may serve the ends of client solicitation, it hides aspects of Pentagram that are interesting to the general readers. We are not, in fact, privy to the separate voices of any of the design teams and are obliged to read between the lines (and images) for the more interesting aspects of how design decisions were likely to have been made. As a result of this masking of the designer's voices, the corporate image of Pentagram itself appears somewhat enigmatic. The designers appear ready for hire by anyone and there is no consistency at the corporate level in the kinds of clients Pentagram has worked with. Their rhetoric shifts with the client whether it is the typographic shouting of the Public Theater's "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk," or the nostalgic signage of Celebration, Florida.

The volume, which contains 700 color photographs, is beautifully produced. But it looks and reads more like an annual report than a trade book. The introductory project texts are distinctly uncritical and frequently promote the way Pentagram's interventions improved a client's market performance. In one case, the account of Pentagram's signage program for Celebration, the new Disney town in Orlando, is downright disturbing. While newspapers around the country have featured articles that described the residents' dissension in Celebration resulting from Disney's draconian civic ordinances and its inept management of the town's school, the vapid Pentagram text calls Celebration a "suburban utopia" and characterizes the Disney sensibility as one of "measured wit and large doses of quiet good humor."

Like Mau's *S.M.L.XL*,, this volume is heavily inflated. There are many more pictures than are necessary to describe a project and single images are frequently spread across two pages like a Nieman Marcus layout. The weight and bulk of the book are annoying, particularly in contrast to the thinness of the information provided. While such a lavish presentation may impress a future client, it serves neither the intelligence nor the pocketbook of the interested reader.

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