

FOLCH STUDIO

52

Strategic Narrative Design



(Cover picture)

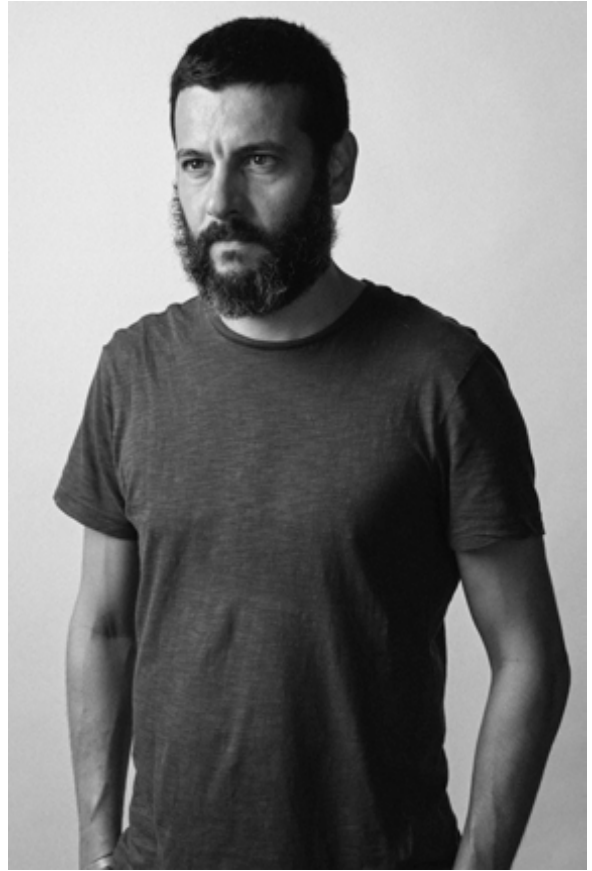
**Eldorado: Preserving nature
by unveiling its beauty
through insightful stories.**

FOLCH STUDIO

DESIGN FRIENDS



Albert Folch



Rafa Martinez

Marketing is dead,
all hail to strategic
narratives.

It's now old news that the media landscape has completely been upended by the emergence of social media and consumer's increasing savviness in reading between the lines. Brands and institutions need to dig deeper and stay ahead of the game if they want to retain their relevance in this ever-shifting environment. Folch studio, known for its avant-garde editorial design creations like *Odiseo* and *Eldorado*, has evolved from the mere title of a design studio, into one that is at the forefront of strategic narrative design. Afsaneh Angelina Rafii in conversation with Albert Folch and Rafa Martinez finds out what that means exactly.

You call yourself a narrative business design studio. Can you talk about what that means?

There are three concepts that we think define our activity as a studio. Effective communication which involves the coordination of a series of elements capable of generating empathy, emotion, interest, desire, and curiosity. In order to reach this point, it is important to understand the complexity of the challenge, to form a synthesis of narrative and design, and to incorporate economic resources.

Taking design in a broader sense (business design, design thinking, graphic design, content design) as the baseline, we strategically rethink the series of elements and tools that communication involves, creating something effective, meaningful and disruptive, so that audiences, prescriptors and clients sit up and listen. Often the base, narrative or content is just as important as the shape, design and environment and vice versa. Therefore, narrative and design always go hand-in-hand and should be in perfect harmony.

The key is to be clear about the communication goals and the way

we will execute them, as well as the economic viability of any activity, from the beginning. So, whatever we do, we do without losing sight of the strategic aims and business objectives of those who hire us or decide to work with us.

Can you talk a little bit more about the importance of the strategic narrative aspect? Is it important for you to be able to pull elements out of the history of a brand, for example? I suppose sometimes history could get in the way of strategic goals.

After having made decisions in design for others, we realised that the content was often as important as the design itself, or even more so in some instances. That is why we decided to make decisions according to both content (story) and shape (design) and strike a balance between speech depth and design. At that point it all became more strategic. Unlike branded content – which sometimes means doing anything in order to generate reputation, linking content to the brand and that's it –, strategic brand narrative lets us create a story in the medium and long term, where each element helps place a brand, product or service in a certain position and informs how it is perceived.

Have you ever had to sort of create a narrative from scratch? Create elements that you wanted the public to focus on, not relying on brand history or legacy?

In some cases, we worked with long established traditional brands that needed support in generating a narrative that worked according to their essence and core values. In others, we developed a new one from the beginning. This means, first defining the positioning and strategy, then generating a story, content, and a design according to that positioning and strategy.

What are the challenges when your viewers and consumers are increasingly sophisticated in their power of discernment, where every individual has almost become a walking brand through social media? Does that make it more difficult to “sell” the sort of narrative that you want? (I am just thinking here about the backlash of the Gillette ad, a lot of people bought into it, others used it to do a deep-dive into their attack of the brand)

We cannot confuse narrative with advertising or marketing. A narrative appeals to people's values, interests,

Barcelona Design Week 2017: A campaign for Barcelona Design Week 2017, dedicated to the notion of transformation.

Everything has changed. Physical reality no longer matters; conceptualism is rising over capitalism; institutions, countries, cities, and brands have turned into perceptions; we are both spectators and media; and the patterns of consumption are changing. In communication as in any other field, we need to understand what's happening and to be able to transform accordingly. When we were commissioned for the campaign we couldn't help questioning the role of design itself: not as something decorative, but as a tool for transformation. This is how our campaign was born: six portraits, modelled in plasticine, of six game-changing personalities who died in 2016 – a metaphor for the power of design to shape reality.



“For us, it is not an intellectual approach but a strategic one. When you realise that your brand is a media platform, it automatically changes the way that your communication is defined.”



Betevé: A transversal rebrand with a place branding approach.

When you set out to rebrand a television channel, you need to ask yourself a couple of questions. For the rebranding of Barcelona Televisió, we were only asked to do a graphic exercise but it would have been a pointless maquillage. Here's what we did instead: besides rebranding, we set a new strategy, changed the name into betevé, and generated a brand-new visual image for Barcelona. Betevé had to embody a contemporary perception of the city. A city is a concept, forever being defined. And we had the opportunity to redefine ours by showing the other side of the coin, the imperfect one. We cast a different light on every neighbourhood, showing the city in all its everyday glory.

The focus of the launch campaign wasn't to show betevé's shiny new identity, but its new role as a contemporary media platform for the city. Rosalía was the perfect embodiment of this idea: traditional yet experimental, Barcelonian but open to the world, incredibly talented, successful, young, game-changing. We created an audiovisual piece that delves into her life, her music and her vision, depicting her not only as a rising star, but as a citizen.





Ecosistema de Diseño Español: A digital blueprint for the Spanish design industry.

People tend to see design as an industry that is closer to art than to business. Everyone understands marketing as the promotion of a business or its products because it has a measurable impact. Marketeers talk in numbers. The economic impact of design, on the other hand, is much more difficult to measure. Our challenge, therefore, was to measure and define the economic impact of design – how it adds value to a company or, in this case, a country. As the spanish design sector continues to grow at lightening speed, so too does its global reputation and contribution to the country's economy. In light of this, the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, BCD (Barcelona Centro de Diseño) and READ (Red Española de Asociaciones de Diseño) decided to collaborate to develop a map offering a 360° vision of Spain's design industry. They made an open call for the development of a graphic identity, logo design and digital platform for data collection and the visualization of results.



or beliefs, generating empathy from an audience towards a particular brand. In this sense, we believe marketing and sometimes advertising belong to the past. Marketing in particular plays to a logic that does not relate to or understand the actual moment. The problem is, many companies focus all their communication and often their sales on the marketing department. The context (that is, the empowerment of the audiences with extensive access to information; audiences that now look for specific content according to their interests; the emergence of social media, the filter bubble and the prescription as a mechanism of reference among users; the need to speak plainly, using raw, more direct, language) has changed the paradigm and marketing now represents an old-fashioned model. Marketing is spam. Generating communication that is both memorable and empathic is key. Brand narrative is brand journalism, or when design meets journalism.

What would you say are the essential elements in creating a successful strategy for a brand?

An intelligent interlocutor, who is able to see beyond marketing and the

commercial network, a budget according to their vision and expectations, and enough time to accomplish and develop it conveniently. In fact, there is no single strategy or magic formula. In communication we should not look only for efficiency, but effectiveness, and this sometimes means doing things in a different way, a way that is surprising and relevant, so that communication can keep generating attention and interest over and over again. We know a bunch of big companies that though they were efficient in their processes, eventually failed as they were not able to be nimble, to reinvent themselves and to remain relevant.

You also coined “liquid branding”, underlining that “Identity has gone beyond the traditional graphic, visual system and is now more fragmented than ever. The liquid branding concept is the freedom for a brand’s visual identity to be flexible. Today, every brand needs to be present in a multiplicity of channels, devices, and applications, both online and offline. Brands need to be resilient, to follow a transmedia approach that can naturally adapt to changing factors, allowing them to reinvent themselves and attract attention through creative thinking.”

It’s a very cerebral, almost intellectual approach to design and branding. It feels like you have to create a real-life persona around a brand nowadays.

Brands should understand that nowadays they have become media. It is no longer just about reaching clients, they have to think in terms of specific audiences, editorial positioning, environments, treatment of content, etc. Thinking that branding deals exclusively with forming a single graphic identity, and then taking that identity and adapting it to different media, is obsolete. The best branding is good content: content which strategically generates certain perceptions and builds the cognitive universe of the brand that one desires, without the need for concrete formats.

For us, it is not an intellectual approach but a strategic one. When you realise that your brand is a media platform, it automatically changes the way that your communication is defined.

As a studio, why did you feel the need to create separate entities to promote your distinct services, from Artifact, Insights to White Horse?

It's simple. First, we immediately noticed that once you know something or someone, it is difficult to imagine them under a different light. Introducing our audience to the idea that Folch was a production company as well as an agency seemed harder than releasing a new brand with that positioning. The second reason was because you can provide a new brand or business with its own legal personality so it can think and work in a new, freer and more independent way. In this sense, linking each of these brands to Folch and its established discipline felt like we would be limiting its potential.

It's interesting because you really detail each one of your projects on your website, you take the reader on a journey through your thought-process and the design process, but it also requires a lot of work. Why did you opt for such a detailed approach?

For a long time, we did interesting things and only communicated the final result. We realised that people were asking about what we had shared and ignored other aspects of our work, such as the more important and more strategic aspects. We decided to start taking a risk, explaining the process

and other details that could help people better understand the development, our personality and our world. This has brought us several opportunities and has been inspiring for some people. It's something we feel proud of. It is a good way to generate a clearer idea and it's useful in terms of coining new concepts. Social media is useful at the periphery of communication, but a certain degree of discursive depth is required for a website.

In the work you did for Fundación Arquia, you chose a very specific narrative path. In design, there is always an element of storytelling, but you took that to another level in this particular project. Can you talk to us about that? What were the challenges and what were the goals that you set for yourself from the onset? Did the Fundación give you any specific direction or did they really give you carte blanche?

We like to have some freedom of thought and action. We prefer creating a new framework for each project. Little by little brands identify us not only as an interesting partner that can generate a story or a design for them, but also as a studio that can build them

a new framework and communicative positioning, one that is influential, useful and relevant. We are amazed by the number of companies working in communication that, when it comes to the crunch, are not able to provide this.

In the SwitchMed campaign, where you presented several eco-friendly and sustainable businesses from North Africa and the Middle East, it was important for you to apply a journalistic approach. I am interested to know what that really means to you. Especially in the context of trying to create brand awareness or sympathy for a brand. In journalism (however much that may not be true in today's landscape) there is this notion that it needs to be objective, factual and almost unemotional. But what you are doing here is creating a relationship between the consumer (or viewer) and a brand. And that relationship's foundation is the emotion that was provoked in the consumer/viewer.

The first time they got in touch with us they were very worried, saying that the institution's information and communication were boring – but we thought it was quite the opposite. It was simply a matter of steering away from the institution, and instead

Odiseo: Seeking seduction through bodies and abstraction, a unique vision on eroticism.

Created to generate influence in the fields of art, fashion and independent publishing, Odiseo strives for intellectual seduction. It offers a different vision on erotism, going beyond genders and stereotypes, seeking seduction through bodies, abstraction, ideas, and concepts. More of a book than a magazine, Odiseo is a hybrid, designed to be treasured. Beyond the visual experience, Odiseo shouts out the unseen: it is contradictory, mysterious, intellectual and intuitive.



DOiY Gallery: Taking DOiY into new creative fields through collaboration with emerging artists.

DOiY had the potential to go beyond homeware design. So we proposed a new direction – to become an influential reference in a wider array of creative disciplines. Artists from different fields were given a carte blanche to interpret the brand's products in a personal way. This gave new meaning to the objects, bringing them into a new reality, reaching a wider audience and elevating the brand into a more artistic, abstract realm.





“Often the base, narrative or content is just as important as the shape, design and environment and vice versa. Therefore, narrative and design always go hand-in-hand and should be in perfect harmony.”



MARQL: A complete identity for the new archaeological museum of Lanzarote.

The great villa, now known as the archaeological museum of Lanzarote (Museo Arqueológico de Lanzarote) was bought by the city council five years ago and has been under construction until its official opening late last year. Originally a doctor's residence, it had become an iconic building and was ready to be opened to the public. Based on the archaeological excavation site, we created a modular grid to contain all the information, both print and digital, adding two typefaces and a natural colour palette. Coherently unified through the cut-out shapes of different archaeological finds, we created an imagery to complete the graphic system. The importance lay in the objects, their shapes and details.



giving life to the results as the cornerstone of all communication. Institutions often focus too much on communicating their mission, core values, goals, etc., and they forget their audience and what that audience is interested in. The struggle to generate the right perception. We try not to ignore that. With SwitchMed we tried to give something that was very corporate a bit of brand journalism.

At some point you took up the challenge of quantifying how much design adds value to a business. It was also an essential selling point for you as a studio, I suppose, because beyond the visual story you can give to a brand, you can say to them, look employing us will add this much value to your brand. Especially when traditionalist businesses (though I cannot imagine they make up much of your clientele) need to overcome their reticence in investing in design. How did you go about doing that and were you surprised by the results you found?

We always try to improve the economic results and business of our clients. We believe it is important to make it clear that marketing is often

centred around sales in the short term. Focusing on commercialisation and sales can have a negative effect on the perception of the brand and its products and services. Business strategy goes beyond that. It looks at the medium and long term, the brand's values, as well as the value of its products and services. In short, we are talking about business in capital letters and not of profits, sales or KPIs... all of these create short term financial "success", but do not affect the medium and long term progress of a business. Omitting or forgetting the wider picture or the business dimension is the reason why big brands and businesses have succumbed and disappeared.

In your year-long speculative design course at ELISAVA school, you asked students to design for imaginary countries. You asked them to imagine new realities and prepare for alternative worlds. This, especially in the context of a post-truth world. It's quite an interesting concept. Of course, sometimes it seems it is easier to find solutions and concepts when you have the luxury to start with a clean slate, rather than to try and mend existing models. What insights did you gain

from this experience as a studio, and did it somehow shape the way you try and tackle problems and challenges within the current model?

Setting out these scenarios and working with the students allows us to see how they think, not just how they carry out a project. They first conceptualise and outline a scenario and afterwards they decide how to tackle it shape-wise. For us it is very rewarding to see how they respond to these situations, they enrich our own thinking, it is a win-win. When they finish the Master, they are ready to get into the dynamics of our type of work; in many cases they start an internship and later on we hire them. Our education system is failing, not only in terms of teaching models (which are in many cases old-fashioned) but also in the categorisation of knowledge. To provide a useful solution to any communication challenge you need to understand the complexity of the different environments (design, content, strategy, production). Our goal is linking these dots between the different disciplines to create a more in-depth understanding. In many cases, the way students and clients formulate questions is geared to a classic model, one that does not really

take into account real-life scenarios. For us, the key is to educate in a more contemporary way, but also to rethink the way we formulate questions. Pure design thinking.

You have worked on such a large range of projects and a broad spectrum in terms of types of clients. What kinds of projects are the most exciting to you and why? Which do you find more challenging?

You can always learn something, even from failed projects. This is key. A successful or interesting project does not depend on the brand, the budget or the freedom as much as the ability to link you to the next project or the upcoming challenge.

With everything that you have going on, are you still as passionate about designing editorial projects, magazines as you were when you were first building the story of your studio?

Documentary is the new magazine. An Instagram account could be a magazine. Most of our work is editorial. We do not have the feeling that we are not working on editorial projects anymore. The format has simply changed.

I have to say that in the context of our collective realisation of a climate breakdown, a project like Eldorado makes me slightly melancholic. But I also find it extremely relevant. It's a project that allows people not only to connect to the beauties of a place but to its history and its meaning to different people. Maybe that's what it takes to give people more of a desire to preserve their planet.

Eldorado connects us to the essential. Eldorado speaks to us and about us like no other project. We felt the need to connect our job to nature, something that had not been done before, all our messages and imagery were excessively urban. But creative thinking does not emerge from the pavement but from nature. Eldorado has recently taken the leap into a new era: the documentary. You cannot preserve or defend what you do not love or know. We think that to portray certain stories and landscapes in an interesting and beautiful way will help raise awareness and could potentially help solve various environmental challenges. Over the last few months this idea has been developed and soon we will jump from this project to produce a

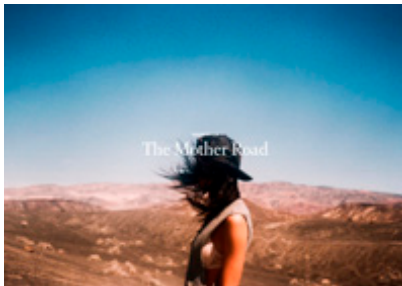
series of documentaries via Eldorado within this framework. We'll see what happens...

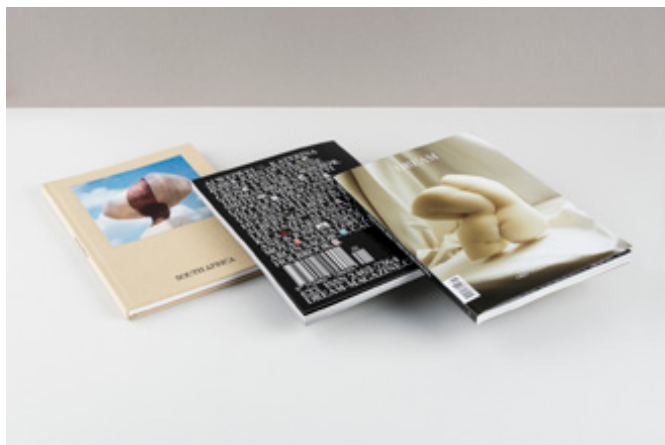
Growth seems to be a constant for you as a studio, you are always evolving. What are some of your goals going forward?

Evolving means always being relevant in both shape and base. Being useful and loyal to ourselves and our roots. Growing across different territories, environments, businesses and projects, building meaning and logic from these projects to allow us to keep growing and doing what we love with a certain freedom of spirit.

Eldorado: Preserving nature by unveiling its beauty through insightful stories.

Every place or country has so many stories to be uncovered. Gathering diverse visions and creative travel narratives from around the world, we focus on the only thing that makes a journey unique: the eyes of the traveler. Created to be a guiding light for the Modern Escapism movement, Eldorado links creativity and art with nature, and casts a post-modern, post-tourism light on places and countries.







Dream: A conversation about curation, conceptualisation and the love of objects.

What makes us treasure certain objects and degrade others? How does one express oneself artistically through volume and materiality? Featuring contributions from renowned and emerging artists and created as a means of self-promotion by photographer Txema Yeste and set designer Cristina Ramos, Dream is a magazine devoted to the love of objects. So the magazine itself had to be a beautiful object too.



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