

Making promise visible through design: the case of the City of Vienna place brand

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to review two fundamental concepts of the doctrine of corporate identity pioneer Wally Olins: the corporate brand as a "promise" and the effectiveness of brand architecture to make it visible. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Olin's passing, we propose to vindicate the figure of one of the most influential theorists and practitioners in the field of organizational strategy and design. The paper investigates the concept of "promise" from a philosophical and anthropological perspective. Specifically, it takes as a framework of interpretation the philosophy inaugurated by José Ortega y Gasset and continued by Julián Marías for the understanding of human life and communities. The theory of brand architecture as a visual solution to imagine the structure and relationships of an organization is also reviewed. Finally, these concepts are verified based on a branding case developed by the consulting firm Saffron for the City of Vienna. The analyzed case reveals the benefits of clarifying a common promise in the face of an identity problem, as well as the effectiveness of brand architecture to manifest it symbolically.

Keywords: Branding, Corporate identity, Design, Philosophy, Place Branding, Wally Olins.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2024 marks the tenth anniversary of the passing of Wally Olins, one of the pioneers of reflection on organizational identity and design. To vindicate his figure and his legacy, we rescue two of his most luminous ideas: the idea that a brand, beyond a logo or a visual system, is the enactment of a promise; and the theory of brand architecture as a way to make visible and intelligible the elements and relationships that articulate an organization. Veterans of corporate identity will discover in our title a tribute to one of the seminal works in the field. It is *Corporate Identity: Making Business Strategy Visible Through Design*, published by Olins in 1989. Its fundamental thesis is that design symbolizes the promise that a community, a company or an institution makes to its audiences.

To review this intuition, we will investigate the role that promises play in organizations, and their link with the notions of purpose and mission, widely developed in the field of corporate communication. We will deepen this concept from a philosophical perspective, explaining the anthropological meaning of promises in the life of communities. Finally, we will verify these notions in a case study developed by the brand consultancy Saffron for the City of Vienna. A work that pivoted around the need to clarify the promise that united all areas and departments of the city council.

1. CORPORATE BRANDS AS 'PROMISES'

Wally Olins held the idea that the identity of an organization is not built through a prefabricated image or a well-designed logo, but arises from a promise that guides its evolution and development. For Olins, this promise takes the form of purpose, and in it lies its *raison d'être* and its essence, and it is on this basis that the organization's culture, values and personality must be defined. In this sense, the identity of a company is not something that can be artificially manufactured, but must be discovered and expressed through its purpose and mission: "(...) when an organization has a clear idea about itself, what its business is, what its priorities are, how it wants to conduct itself, how it wants to be perceived, its identity falls fairly easily into place" (Olins, 1979, p. 215).

Clarity in the mission, priorities or the way in which it wants to be perceived, makes a company develop coherence in all its manifestations such as design, product, architecture or services. One of the decisive dimensions Olins stresses is the fact that a clear identity has an impact on the way in which audiences understand a company.

The word "promise" comes from the Latin *promissum*, which in turn is derived from the verb *promittere* meaning "to send forward". The underlying idea is that a promise is a statement in which one pledges to do something in the future. This notion has some relationship to other words such as *purpose* and *mission*. A purpose is an intention or an objective that is pursued, and a mission is a task that is given to someone for a particular purpose. Academia, the professional world, and consulting began in the 1980s to recognize the need for organizations to clearly formulate their mission (Alegre et al., 2018). The mission statement reveals what the organization should be doing and why it exists, and specifies what its mission is (Thompson & Strickland, 1980).

An organization's mission statement includes three elements: the vision and mission statement, a self-definition, and the philosophy and values (Braun et al., 2012). First, the vision tells us how the organization envisions itself in the future. This claim is concretized in specific objectives to which its members can aspire. Secondly, in the mission, the organization identifies itself with a series of commitments, whether related to its external and internal audiences or to the population in general. Thirdly, the philosophy and values determine a guide for behavior and orient decision-making.

The mission statement can have two effects, depending on whether its impact is observed internally or externally. Internally, it is argued that the mission helps to stimulate the members of the organization and to align them with the objectives. Externally, it is stressed that its importance lies in strengthening the image and relations with external audiences (Klemm et al., 1991).

A stumbling block that the idea of mission has encountered, and has been pointed out from both the professional and academic worlds, is how to ensure that its declaration is not a well-intentioned idea that does not end up permeating the organization. Cardona and Rey (2008) have proposed a system based on Management by Missions, whose central element is the importance of each member and department of a company participating in the overall mission. It is a concretization of the mission in participated missions.

Another common objection to the idea of mission as an idea that aligns all employees or members is the risk of excessive uniformity and the problem this poses for diversity or plurality. What happens if a member of the organization does not fully share the values it

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promulgates? Is it essential that personal values coincide with those of the organization? Some authors argue that sharing the one ultimate purpose is sufficient (Ortiz & Sarrión, 2018).

It has been stated that the purpose of an organization rarely changes. Precisely, according to Ellsworth, if it is well defined, it offers a permanence that endows stability and continuity even in periods of strategic change. Since the purpose is never completely fulfilled, it can be an antidote to complacency and a stimulus for improvement (Ellsworth, 2002).

Finally, we should not overlook something that has been emphasized by academics from the very beginning. The proliferation of corporate statements by companies about their mission, vision or values, far from differentiating one from another, quickly became very uniform (Berg & Gagliardi, 1985). The statements sometimes seem to respond more to what society assumes to be acceptable or desirable values and ideals than to "genuine expressions of the fundamental identity" of a company (Van Rekom, 1997).

In any case, the possibility of projecting oneself into the future and the formulation of a purpose is like a bridge that unites people who are part of the same organization. While instincts, particular interests and diversity of motivations can divide, purpose unifies (Annweiler, 2018).

2. THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CAUSE OF THE ACT OF PROMISING

The act of promising - as well as having a purpose or a mission in life - is a human faculty, which we similarly attribute to organizations as entities with personality. It is therefore necessary to investigate the meaning of promise and purpose in human life in order to justify their presence in the world of organizations. An exercise that is rarely done: the world of business and organizations need to use symbolically notions that come from the field of philosophy, such as purpose or identity. To this end, we rely on one of the philosophical traditions that has best illuminated the question of the human being: the *Escuela de Madrid*, which began with Ortega y Gasset and has among its exponents philosophers such as Julián Marías and María Zambrano. This tradition has proven useful for a philosophical interpretation of elements of contemporary culture, such as corporate branding (Urquía, 2023).

To understand the meaning of the promise in human life, we must first describe how it unfolds through a phenomenological description. Human life involves an encounter between the self and its surroundings. It is not made once and for all, but life presents itself to man as a task to be accomplished (Ortega & Gasset, 1984). The environment is presented to him as a circumstance. It has not only a physical character, but is also formed by other realities such as beliefs, uses, ideas or customs present in an era or context. Life, therefore, is a dynamic task between the person and his circumstance.

One of the essential features of circumstance is unreality. Namely, that which is not yet, but may become, and which is still in the region of the imaginable, possible or desirable. Access to it is through the imagination. The human being, being both in reality and in unreality, inevitably looks to the future on the basis of pretensions, projects, illusions or ideals.

The dynamic character of the person can be explained on the basis of two complementary categories: the *installation* and the *vector*. The installation refers to the series of conditionings to which we have referred, in which the human being discovers himself and from which he projects and executes his vital projects. At the same time, as a vector, life is oriented towards

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circumstance and towards the future. Like an arc, life is tensioned and oriented. The play of installation and vector makes the biographical form of human life and communities emerge (Marías, 1987).

As life develops between what already exists and what can become, the need to establish projects emerges. We anticipate the future with more or less detailed projects, which may be an intuition or a very clear and defined idea. In this anticipation, the human being makes promises: both to himself and to others. But the human being does not live in solitude: he is in solidarity with others around common projects. This is how companies, universities, non-profit institutions, etc. flourish. These human communities are born out of collective aspirations that give meaning to the whole. We cannot understand why something is customary within a human community, or why something is preferred, if we do not pay attention to what that community aspires to as a project. Each member of a community lives in his or her particular biography the collective pretension through a scheme of participation that Marías (1965) characterizes as a diversification of roles. Individual versions of the collective pretension, he argues, can be more or less rigid, more or less varied.

Moreover, collective pretension can take the form of belief or idea. In the first sense, it has social existence and pre-stresses society towards an end. In the second sense, it acquires mental form at the moment it is formulated and promulgated. Participation then takes on a more active character. The first is not formulated, but it is lived. The second is formulated, acquires clarity but can also be discussed and questioned. Moreover, its modality can range from a slogan to a truly shared enterprise.

In conclusion, the root of the existence of companies, organizations and institutions of various kinds is the experience that life is not presented to human beings as something finished and already accomplished, but, on the contrary, it is presented to them as a task. For this adventure that consists of living, personal projects must be established, such as friendship or affection. But also, in solidarity with others, he undertakes projects of a social nature, be they companies or other institutions. Here we find the reason for the orientation towards the future. The fact that life is not finished, but has to be made, implies that it unfolds at the same time between what exists and what can become.

The role of promises in human and collective life operates in the same way as ideals. According to the philosopher López Quintás (2009), these are not objectives to be fulfilled as if they were a goal, but are rather driving ideas that impel and orient action in one direction. On the contrary, if a promise is not fulfilled, it triggers disenchantment. This is how the philosopher María Zambrano (2013) put it when referring to the pain we can experience when we realize that what we expected from a person is not fulfilled: "When we feel our neighbor as a person, we always expect from him and consequently, one of the greatest pains that life brings us is to witness the sinking or falsification of that promise".

3. BRAND ARCHITECTURE: MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE

One of Olins' main contributions to the study and understanding of corporate personality, and one of the most important links between purpose and design, is *brand architecture*. This defines and manifests the roles, relationships and hierarchies between the sub-brands of the same organization around a shared promise. Olins establishes a classification of the different possibilities in which a brand structure can occur. This classification of companies according to their structure is systematically introduced first in the aforementioned *Corporate Identity*

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(1989), and continues until his latest publication Wally Olins: *The brand handbook* (2008). As we have already seen, corporate identity is not reduced to a cosmetic and therefore superficial task. Rather, the design elements - the logo, the color palette and the other assets - play the role of revealing an invisible reality: the way in which a company is organized, which can embrace different products, services, subsidiaries, etc. (Olins, 1989).

An organization's brand architecture can take three main forms or schemes: monolithic, endorsement and brand identity. In the first, monolithic identity is considered when the parent brand is omnipresent in all the products, services, subsidiaries or subdivisions that compose it. The advantage of this type of architecture is that it gives consistency to the organization, and audiences can quickly identify the values and attributes of the parent brand in everything it does. The main disadvantage, however, is that if one of the parts is affected in terms of its image, this can spill over to the company as a whole.

Secondly, there is the issue of endorsed brands. This is common when an organization has taken over brands that were previously independent, for example through acquisitions. Also when there are products, services or subsidiaries within an organization that have a particular personality, even though they are part of a larger system. In this case, there is a transfer of attributes and values, both from the parent brand to the sub-brands and vice versa.

Thirdly, there is brand identity. In this model, the organization is "hidden" behind the small brands, especially in the eyes of the end consumer. It is visible, however, to other stakeholders or publics such as investors, suppliers or other companies. It is very common in the mass consumer sector, where each product or service must be clearly identified in relation to the need it satisfies. In this model, there is no direct transfer of attributes and values between the parent brand and the sub-brands, and possible crises that may affect the sub-brands are not so serious for the parent brand.

Whenever Olins presents the brand architecture of an organization, he uses the schematic form. A schema is the visualization of information that aims to "present to the eyes and understanding those realities -factual or imagined, past, present or future- that are not directly accessible to our senses. But which are" (Costa, 2020). Thus, the design of the logo and colors as well as the assets of the different applications are a fundamental tool to represent the structure and organization of a company and its different brands. To understand who we are as an organization is, among other things, to have a clear understanding of how the different elements that make up a system are related. In short, brand architecture allows organizations to make visible what is invisible: the elements that make it up, the relationships that are established and the promise that unites them.

4. THE CASE OF THE CITY OF VIENNA PLACE BRAND

We will now present a case study to bring the above categories of brand promise and brand architecture into play. We will do so through a project developed by the brand consultancy Saffron for the City of Vienna. The brand consultancy Saffron was founded by Wally Olins in 2001 together with Jacob Benbunan. For the development of this case study, we were assisted by designer Gabor Schreier, creative director of Saffron and responsible for the project. This case study reveals how the lack of a common purpose - the clarification of the brand promise - triggers a messy and chaotic visual identity. We will also look at the importance of brand architecture as a design solution to guide an organization around a common purpose.

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Vienna, and those who relate to the city, should be the main reason why the City Council works and makes sense.

This claim developed into the idea of achieving the highest standards of quality of life for the majority of people in matters such as the environment, free education, healthcare or access to housing, acting on a human scale and with people in mind. This idea would become the motto for everything the City Council communicated and manifested.

In order for the City Council to have an idea shared by all its members, the consultant conducted interviews and workshops with the workers of the different departments and departments. From the results obtained, the main objective of the City Council identified by citizens and municipal workers was distilled. This process involved setting aside the differences between the different municipal areas and departments in order to find something common. The goal of this process was to define a shared purpose for all parts of the City Council, so that they could stop seeing themselves as disconnected or independent entities.

4.4. Design solution

The design exercise carried out by Saffron for Vienna, following the formulation of a shared promise, was the design of a new brand architecture. As we have seen, the challenge they faced was to be able to clearly communicate how the main City Hall brand related to the different sub-brands that depended on it, as well as to find the promise that unified them all. The proliferation of councils, departments and municipal areas had generated an incoherent and disorderly mosaic of visual identities. The solution was to transform an architecture based on brand identity - which had emerged spontaneously - into an almost monolithic architecture.

First, as a brand architecture exercise, the consultancy proposed a system of four orbits around the central brand. The departments, activities and departments were positioned in each of the orbits according to the greater or lesser distance from the center. The process they followed resulted in most of the brands that orbited around the central brand of the City Council joining the parent brand, to the point of becoming a more monolithic than an endorsee system.

The new brand architecture was to represent the unity and clarity of the municipal organization. The City Hall thus became the center of all the realities that it housed and that were presented in a dispersed manner. The new monolithic model thus helped to reduce visual noise and show the citizen a single face (Figure 2).

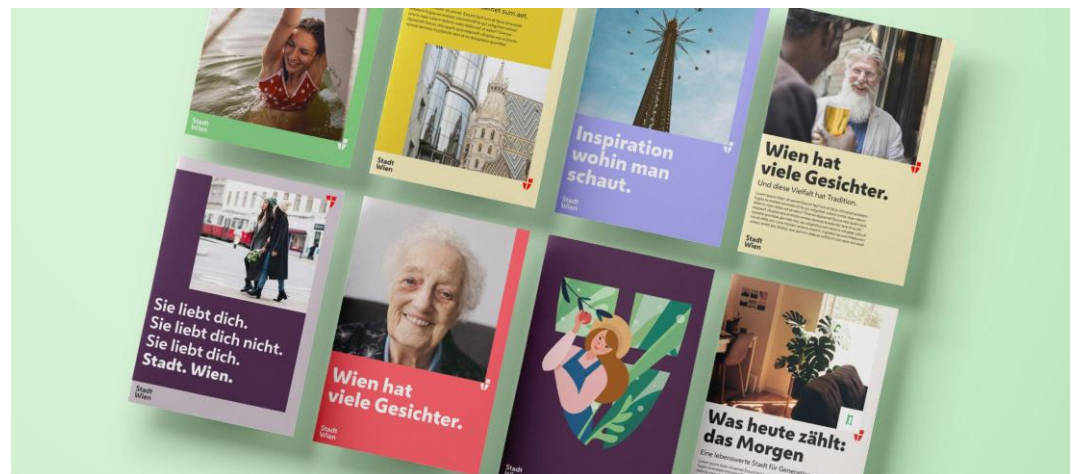


Figure 2. Source: Saffron Brand Consultants.

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In this rebranding project, the city's history played an important role, insofar as the new design could not be absolutely disruptive. On the contrary, it had to preserve certain elements. Obviously, the name had to be preserved, but also the coat of arms, which is the very symbol of the brand of the City Hall and the city. The coat of arms, although with slight variations, remained, and was one of the elements on which the visual system was developed.

Based on the coat of arms, Saffron designed a visual system that adapts to the different communication needs or presence of the City Hall. The project was completed with the design of a specific typography, which was baptized with Wiener Melange, in reference to the Viennese latte (Figure 3). Saffron considered it important for the city to have its own typeface, so that whenever the City Council spoke through its departments or areas, it would be easily identifiable. This typography was designed by the studio Dalton Maag. Both the ornamental style of the historic buildings and the functionality of the city's signage were elements of inspiration.

Wien hat eine neue Schrift: Die Wiener Melange.

Figure 3. Source: Saffron Brand Consultants.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Wally Olin's' doctrine is still valid in his eagerness to unite strategy, corporate identity and design. Specifically, his conviction that design cannot solve per se a problem of identity crisis, but rather that visual solutions reveal a deeper and in principle evident reality: the clarity or absence of a clear purpose and the structure and relationships that operate within an organization.

We have been able to verify from the field of philosophical anthropology the meaning and importance of promises in human and community life. Especially, we have verified the effectiveness of the *Escuela de Madrid* (with philosophers such as José Ortega y Gasset, Julián Marias or Maria Zambrano) to justify philosophically the need for companies and institutions to clarify their mission and purpose. The identity of an organization depends on a promise enacted in a manner analogous to the way a person's identity develops on the basis of the projects and pretensions he or she pursues. The act of promising emerges from the need of human beings to orient their lives with respect to the future. Similarly, organizations need to formulate a clear purpose and promise to guide and unify the daily efforts of their members.

On the other hand, the theory of brand architecture appears as an appropriate strategy to make the invisible visible. Just as schemas present past, future, factual or possible realities to

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understanding, brand architecture reveals the way in which the elements of an organization are organized around a common purpose.

In the project developed by Saffron for the City of Vienna, we were able to verify the three functions that Braun et al. (2012) attribute to clarity in the shared mission: it is a way of aligning objectives, especially when it comes to coordinating elements as different as may be the departments or departments of a city council. Secondly, placing the "citizen at the center" engages all employees. Thirdly, it implies a code of behavior and conduct. We also found, following Klemm et al (1991), that the shared mission has internal and external effects. Not only did the branding project align the employees of the municipality, but it also had a positive impact for Vienna's citizens and audiences. Finally, the project succeeded in getting the mission to be participated in by all councils and departments, as suggested by Cardona & Rey (2008), looking for what united them over differences (Ellsworth, 2002).

In short, the case studied here can arouse the interest of designers, managers and philosophers in the phenomenon of promises as a source of identity for organizations, as well as vindicate the figure of Wally Olins as a professional and integrating theorist capable of explaining the power of design to make the invisible visible and intelligible.

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There are no conflicts of interest involved in this article.

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