

DESIGNMATTERS

BY JERRY DIETHELM



Cops at the Crossroads

The Gang of 9 makes an ugly, arrogant return

This is intended to be about the way that design intentions connect up with their expressions and the meanings they create. It's about the way that the publicized intentions of our Eugene Police Employees Association impact their constituency, cops at the crossroads where we intersect as a community.

Take the recent posting on the EPEA website featuring Councilor Bonny Bettman. It was of course intentionally designed, and the expression had an unflattering – to say the least – cartoon Bonny, holding a bat, standing next to a clock that was counting down the days, hours and minutes until the end of her “reign of terror.” That was the expression, and now that it has unhappily inserted itself into the world of our experience, it is natural to wonder: What were the intentions of the police union? What does it mean? How does it mean?

Intention

Intentions tell us what things are about. People don't always fully know what they intend. Intentions at beginnings are rarely fully formed or conscious. You make a start, and then matters usually get clearer as you go along. You try to say something or try to make something in order to discover the deeper dimensions of what you are about. You recognize the right expression when it begins to appear. Novelists know this when the characters they are writing about begin to take over their story. I'm not talking about intention in a legal sense as though this were a case in court. Intent is hard to prove, especially when we are asked to interpret the meaning of a visual expression of a clock, a phrase and a caricature. The matter of this website's intent falls into the court of public opinion.

Order in the court

The intent here plainly goes beyond a disagreement with Bonny's political views. It's a striking ad hominem attack on her person. It's about how much they dislike and disrespect her and can't wait to see her go. It's not enough that she has elected to end her term in office. She occupies their mind and symbolizes a liberal view that they despise. She is a hippy witch, an old bat with a bat, a hook-nosed harpy. If they could, they'd kick her down the months until year's end. Kick her in and to the end. Intention isn't just about ideas. It includes anger, malice and meanness seeking form.

Expression

Expression is the how of what matters are about. How aboutness is embodied and expressed. The designed form that it takes.

Part of the expressive power of images, caricatures and poems is their ambiguity and the allusions and associations that they conjure up, the way that they are intended to be read in more than one way. Does the clock running down portray a literal countdown until her end of term, and/or is it a threat that her time is running out? The phrase “the end of her reign of terror” darkens the overall context and adds a disturbing tone to the meaning. Terror and terrorist aren't descriptors today to be thrown around lightly.

Terrorists deserve to be punished, stripped of their rights and killed. Remember, this is coming from the police. Who wants to be on the bad side of the police? You can hear her worrying: Would they hear and answer her call if she were in trouble? Shove a black bag over her head? The return of the Gang of 9 imagery is like fishing in an old wound – it's abuse come home again. Bonny, here, is portrayed as an unattractive and undesirable woman with long black curly hair and sandals. One suspects that she has just told the union to go and clean up their room and they are feeling guilty about the mess.

Meaning

Of course this is all just liberal lather. It was never their intention. They never meant it that way. But the woman ought to know her place – a place that's soon to be out of cop business. What was it Dylan Thomas said? “In the kitchen or in the bedroom or on her way from one to the other.”

Meaning in any design expression, of course, depends heavily on what we bring to the experience. It's true that original intentions are available only to the intenders unless they are explicitly conveyed. We can't help but construct our own meaning out of the repertoire of who we are. Unfortunately in this case the website was dropped into an increasingly visually literate world.

Our former mayor who would be mayor says the website didn't bother him. Jim Torrey, who teaches children to read, couldn't (or wouldn't?) read it, or he would have understood how offensive it is. He missed connecting the police-state-like arrogance with the aggressiveness, boldness and audacity of its public presentation. He was blind to the misogyny of the message. He didn't pick up on its sexist, ethnic or racist overtones. He didn't smell the danger of its threatening tone. He didn't see any need to stand up for the dignity of the City Council.

And this is the person half of Eugene would follow backward to the future?

Jerry Diethelm is a Eugene architect, landscape architect and planning and urban design consultant.

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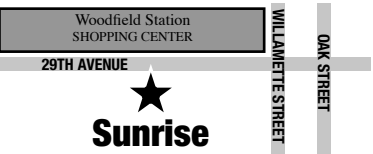
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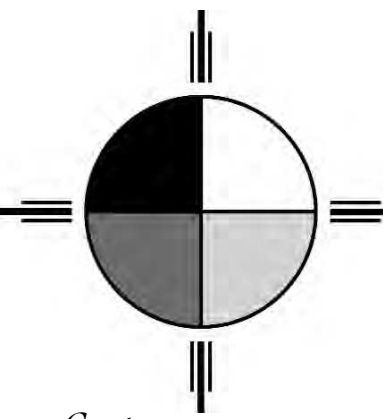
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