It sounds like a really good idea: take a famous American graduate design school and commission a fashion magazine to do a special review catalogue. Absolutely Fabulous meets the Ivy League. Now let everyone in the school get a single page in alphabetical order, no ranking, no hierarchy, just a catalogue of the school. The aim is to make a brand. Here the claims are big, and comfortable. The school becomes a talisman of the school%

“With time this project could really become something, but perhaps only by allowing Tank Fashion to move beyond the book as object, and instead invade the space of architecture, which may reveal a more unusual view of what goes on in that famous Harvard Yard.”

Most architecture and design schools have become acutely aware of the need to publish. Not just for that inevitable research profile, but to showcase projects and events in a seductive and collectible format that becomes a talisman of the school brand. Here the claims are big, and

The school describes the aim as: “productive juxtapositions, which we hope will provide the basis for new forms of transdisciplinary practice in the years ahead.”

The cover has been dispensed with as a necessity and irrelevant encumbrance to the contemporary book. Instead naked pages and sticky bindings are all exposed. Shimmering silver page trims glimmer and reflect back at you, contrasting with the open binding behind. Put it on your shelves and you can’t find it: deliberately nameless. I confess I checked to see if my copy had not been wilfully benefitted of its cover in transit. No. It was a design statement. Just like the decision to print on only the right hand pages in Volume I. Two pages together, were considered distracting and information overload, and so the left hand pages are left blank, with only a fine grid and a Zen like silence to the left visual field. While I know Marshall McLuhan recommended that we should read only left hand pages to limit the input, and leave space to think, here it feels like a missed opportunity.

The strength of the work also seems to come from the book’s design. “With time this project could really become something, but perhaps only by allowing Tank Fashion to move beyond the book as object, and instead invade the space of architecture, which may reveal a more unusual view of what goes on in that famous Harvard Yard.”

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A VIEW ON HARVARD GSD: VOLUME I AND VOLUME II Tankbooks

...
Mostafavi has described the publications as ‘an experiment’, which should of course be welcomed. It is just that in a design school, part of this ‘experiment’ needs to be channelled through the medium of communication.

Tank have a lot to bring to this collaboration, and have produced remarkable publications on culture and fashion over the years. Some of their first publications combined diverse material in a stunning almost cinematic way, where there was a strong emphasis on architecture and fashion in a broad cultural exploration. But their striking visual approach has become more muted here, perhaps due to not being able to work with the source material to create a richer and more meaningful dialogue of layout and sequence. If you really want to understand something of the work that goes on in the Harvard studios then this does give some glimpses of it. But StudioWorks is still the best place to look. The strands are clear, and the studios distinctively described in it.

The age of the book is still with us and no matter how we try to disguise them by making them ever more contrived and fetishized, they can still help inform, move and entertain us. With time this project could really become something, but perhaps only by allowing Tank Fashion to move beyond the book as object, and instead invade the space of architecture, which may reveal a more unusual view of what goes on in that famous Harvard Yard.

Paul Clarke

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