



Summary of the Creative Project In Lieu of Thesis
Presented to the Graduate School of the
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LE CONTEXTE *du Centre*

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/BACKGROUND

From the summer of 1997 until the spring of 1998, I studied, traveled and found employment while enjoying a post-college journey through Europe. After graduating with a degree in Human Services (sociology) with other concentrations in the Fine Arts and French, I set out to transform my education into realized life experience by spending the better part of a year living in Europe, mainly France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Switzerland.



Sanary-sur-Mer, France 1997

To begin I completed an intensive conversational French course at L'Institut de Touraine in Tours, France. From there I set out to improve my French language ability while immersed in French culture. I found that Provence with its connotations of warm sunlight and a relaxed way of life perfectly suited my geographic and spiritual needs. I was fortunate to be invited to live and work at a small YMCA conference centre in Sanary-sur-Mer, located a few blocks from the Mediterranean Sea on the French Riviera.

While at Le Centre Azur I lived in a typical Provençal Farmhouse (Le Mas) and worked in a kitchen, preparing and serving meals to groups ranging in size from 20 to 100. Since very few, if any of my co-workers spoke English, I was forced to employ my spotty-at-best French. I found my colleagues also had a strong penchant for public ridicule. As the mockery was mostly in fun, it provided a clear view into the inner workings of a microcosm resting within one of the most desirable destinations in the world. The fact that I was living and working at Le Centre Azur started my mind racing and my pen moving as I sought to understand just what made this place such an enviable destination.



The French Riviera

I had little training in the specific area of cultural science needed to understand a group of that nature; furthermore, my French was average at best. I kept Le Centre Azur and the lessons learned locked in my head. Therefore, this first study was not of an academic nature.

I have worked as a web designer for nearly seven years. I started at a small web design firm as a salesman and then learned html

and Photoshop from the programmers after hours. In May of 2000, I opened Creative Root, a web design collaborative of designers and programmers located in Orlando, Florida. After three years of professional web design and development it was clear that I could learn technical and book skills yet was lacking in strategic design thinking, process, and methodology. In early 2003, I applied to the graphic design graduate program at the University of Florida and was admitted for the fall of that year.

As I explored topics of research for my graduate education, my thoughts returned to Le Centre Azur. I wondered how I could explore and communicate the unique aspects of the Centre and how it relates to the overall conception of Sanary-sur-Mer. From June 23 to August 20, 2005 I returned to Sanary-sur-Mer to live and work at the conference center, this time armed with improved French language skills, a maturing understanding of ethnography and a strong desire to tell the story of the local culture from the perspective of the staff at Le Centre Azur.



My "office" in Sanary-sur-Mer, France

/RESEARCH QUESTION

This project involves **exploring Internet delivery methods for qualitative research in visual culture**. It strives to engage new thinking in how the technologies of graphic design, video production and web design/development can be used to support visual communication of this research. The content of this project is derived from my investigation and discovery of the ideas, thoughts, and experiences of people living in Sanary-sur-Mer, France. I was interested in exploring: my co-workers at Le Centre Azur, short term locals (or long term tourists) and ex-patriots.

In this project, I pay particular attention to narrative, tangible and intangible communication, and the identity of groups of people living in the region. My primary goal is to communicate a multilayered yet intelligible narrative of the stories collected and the local as well as popular conceptions of Le Centre Azur contextualized within its relationship to Sanary-sur-Mer as told by research subjects.

My primary research question is **“how can a graphic designer investigate, comprehend and appropriately represent a subculture in an intelligible and engaging manner?”**



“Pan-Indians” entertaining in Sanary-sur-Mer, France

/ANTECEDENTS + PRECEDENTS

Numerous designers, in academe and the corporate world, are using methods inspired by and borrowed from ethnographic researchers, most of whom work in the field of cultural anthropology. Forward thinking companies such as IDEO routinely use these methods to create superior products and user experiences. Film makers such as Hillman Curtis, armed with a simple video camera and lighting rig set out to capture the essence of an organization by documenting the people within it. I also have benefited from examining user-centered design research methods employed by Happy Cog (Jeffrey Zeldman) and 37 Signals. These two firms create web experiences based upon exhaustive user testing and research. These examples provide insight into new thinking about design / design research.

It is (hopefully) considered common knowledge that before we can design anything for anyone we must understand whom we are in fact designing for. This is where my creative project began – a quest to understand a subculture through many voices, artifacts, interactions, and experiences and to bring these elements into a cohesive document. In subverting the question “whom are you designing for?” I chose to explore the “whom” before proceeding with the design.

/RESEARCH PROCESS + METHODOLOGY

This project is a continuation of research started in Mexico during the spring of 2004. I was part of an international research course, MIRA: Multimedia Interdisciplinary Research in Anthropology, investigating tourist culture in Playa Del Carmen, Mexico. In this course we learned how to design a research project, explore cultural identity, carry out interviews and discover the practice of visual documentation through multiple viewpoints that integrate design principles with cultural anthropology and ethnographic

methods. This course first exposed me to the practices of ethnographic field research and now these methods greatly influence and inform my work. It was a logical decision to apply this form of research to a place where I had already lived and worked, yet this time I was more informed about the study of people and practices.



A dining room at Le Centre Azur

I began this project by reading books and articles about French customs and cultural practices. I studied reference material about establishing a home and business should one have the desire to permanently live in France. I read travel guidebooks specific to the Riviera and poured over my old photographs and journal entries to be able to compare and document the old and the new. After reading and studying in the United States, I left for France to spend two months in the formal research period of this project. Having been in contact with the administration of Le Centre Azur, I obtained a position for the summer and through this I was able to learn more about the inner workings of the Centre and begin this project.

All research data was collected while living and working at Le Centre Azur in summer 2005. My goal was to immerse myself in the culture of the conference center, filled with tourists from across Europe and I did this by working as a *Stagiare* (trainee). My duties included preparing, serving and clearing during meal times, and working with housekeeping during other times of day.



The French flag



Heat from the dishwasher dries dishtowels

I began the research by asking several questions that emerged from reading about and experiencing the French Riviera first hand:

01. What makes the south of France, Sanary-sur-Mer and Le Centre Azur unique?
02. What are factors that give France, Sanary-sur-Mer and Le Centre Azur a sense of place?
03. What are the thoughts, behaviors and patterns of the people?
04. What are the patterns and practice of everyday life?
05. How does the popular perception of the Riviera compare to that of Le Centre Azur?
06. How do locals, transplants, long-term visitors and tourists view the Riviera and how does that factor into comparisons to Le Centre Azur?

The project methodology was qualitative in nature and my process was generally iterative, meaning non-linear and often times circular. The project consisted of four phases: research and documentation, analysis, design, and dissemination.

RESEARCH: The formal research portion of this project was broken into four stages beginning with fieldwork research of data collection. I took between 3,750 and 4,000 photographs, 20 hours of video footage including personal interviews, made extensive entries in a journal and even collected material artifacts such as posters, pamphlets and other propaganda from the region. I was primarily looking for personal accounts of Le Centre Azur and its relationship to the south of France. I asked research subjects what they considered to be the “essential” elements of the region and then if those elements existed within the confines of Le Centre Azur. I also asked for thoughts about Le Centre Azur, stories about quotidian life, and personal reflections of the region.

Having a camera (still and video) continually present proved to be a concern for some of the staff members. Some simply didn’t want

to be recorded while others wanted to be recorded constantly. I also had trouble making certain that the images I was recording were in fact natural or accurate, rather than people posing or acting for the camera. I wondered if interviewees were simply telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. I was aware that this sometimes happens, particularly since I informed my colleagues and others about the project.

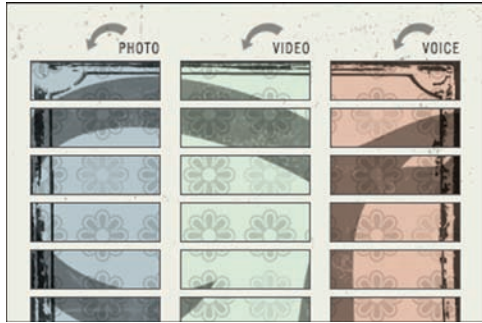


Outdoor food service at Le Centre Azur

ANALYSIS: To begin the analysis stage of the project, the data was categorized with special attention given to relationship discovery while ranking the importance of the various elements. I grouped photographs and categorized video footage based on person, place or activity, and then cross-referenced these. While reviewing and organizing my materials, I searched for patterns and, or more importantly, inconsistencies. These inconsistencies were often a very interesting look into the perceptions held by locals and/or visitors. For example, I was told that Le Centre Azur was not a good model for the south of France because of its ineffective work methods, but also that the region was known for its inability to manage professional pursuits. I then juxtaposed this audio against video sequences and photomontages of people working in regimented ways. This was constructed for the viewer to gather a personal understanding of work practice in the south of France.

EXPLORATION + DESIGN: With all research data collected and categorized, I then decided upon a format that would appropriately communicate the information while also staying congruent with my hypothesis that a subculture can never be fully represented. From my research and fieldwork experiences, I believe that we often create hybrid versions of the truth based upon our unique ways of looking.

This creative project results in an interactive website prompting a visitor to drag and drop (in order to load) an element from three categories, photo, video and voice, in order to construct what I call an “experience”. Once the elements are loaded, the visitor clicks a play button to be taken to the content player. Here they



Close-up of the creative project interface

are shown video, a photomontage and listen to an audio track narrating the experience. Since most of the video is in French, English subtitles are shown at the bottom of the screen.

Narratives have been grouped into ten categories:

01. **FAMILY DINING** – The staff that live and work at Le Centre Azur, meet for lunch and dinner daily. The interactions, dining norms and practices provide insight into the “staff family’s” practices if dealing with each other. The narration of this section revolves around comparisons of Le Centre Azur with a microcosm and the roles that each staff member plays.
02. **LUNCH SERVICE** – This daily event occurs after the staff has eaten lunch. It is a regimented and sometimes even smooth operation. Witnessing the interaction with clients, the clients eating and how the service is executed provided insight into the working practice of the staff. Narration depicts Le Centre Azur as a good example of the stereotyped views of the French work ethic.
03. **RITUALS** – Most all of the tasks one performs at Le Centre Azur are carried out with repetition. This included aspects of service such as placing bread on the tables, filling water pitchers and even smoking. Rituals also deal with the static verses dynamic nature of the seasonal and permanent staff.
04. **THE AFTERMATH** – Nearly every evening the staff gather together outside of *Le Mas* (the staff house), discussing everything from non-present co-workers, difficult clients or simply to recap daily events. When two Germans, a French woman, a French man, an Italian man and an American attempt to communicate in a language foreign to all but the French, cultural and communicative differences are often the source of dispute and then resolution... especially when alcohol is factored in.



Benno preparing to spray the kitchen, thus ending a dinner shift

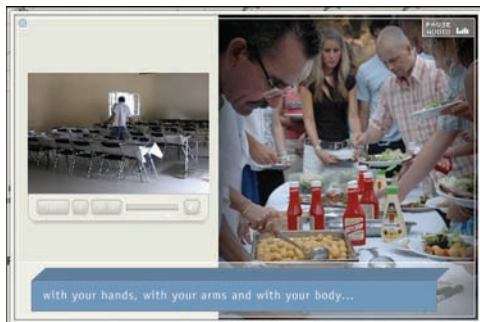
05. VA TE FAIRE – This section is named after saying often expressed when one is annoyed. It literally means, “Go make yourself”. It is a section devoted to Claudio Bruno, as his impact on the rest of the staff is pivotal.
06. OPINIONS – This section examines stereotypes into French behavior with an audio track explaining that some feel the French are known for speaking behind your back. What I found interesting is that by only mentioning the French, the narrator implied that this was a practice unique to the French.
07. EXISTS TO SERVE – A German man living in Paris narrates this section explaining that the south of France exists to serve Parisians.
08. AREA FOLIAGE – Another German tourist narrates this section as he explains the area foliage provides the relaxing atmosphere. He also states that to many Germans, the south of France does not exist in their minds during winter months, as focus is shifted to the alpine areas for winter sports such as skiing / snowboarding.
09. THE SUMMER TAX – A client of Le Centre Azur tells us how the Government (the mayor) raises taxes during the summer months as the deluge of tourists increases. He explains that meals normally costing ten Euros during the winter will be twenty Euros during the summer months.
10. HATE TOURISTS – Continuing from the last section, the narrator states how locals seem to not like the tourists and the taxes that they bring. He defends tourism saying that without it the city (Sanary-sur-Mer) would be without the nice streets and beaches.



Tourists enjoying fireworks on Bastille Day

While visitors are welcome to select three elements from the same group, they are also able to mix the photography, video, and audio elements to create a non-linear experience—one that can confuse, inform, or expand one’s understanding of Le Centre Azur and the French Riviera. The ability to choose serves several purposes for this project. First, it gives 720 possible combinations of experiences to a visitor. When randomly selecting elements a visitor is able to explore alternative narratives that were not expected. They are creating their truth.

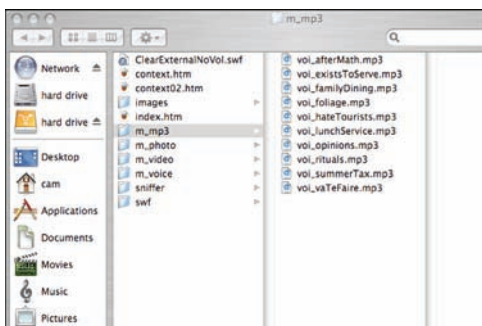
Secondly, by mixing the elements a visitor will have opportunity to see an aspect of the project that was not intended while maintaining a feeling of control and ownership over the experience. This interaction is also metaphorical for the tourist experience and what I consider a strength of the creative project. When website visitors feel that they are in control over the experience, they tend to stay longer and absorb the information with a greater understanding. This is my goal for visitors; for them to explore, learn, and enjoy the experience.



The content delivery screen. Video is on the left, a photo montage is on the right while English subtitles are found in the blue area.

With audio, video and text to read simultaneously playing, the experience is purposefully overwhelming. Although at any time a visitor is free to stop the video, photography, or audio track, the experience has been designed to overwhelm. This is what I feel to be the second most important aspect of the project, the fact that “the other” often blinds us, that a newly experienced culture can leave us puzzled or simply lacking comprehension.

This website has also been designed with scalability in mind. All elements are housed in external files, apart from the main interface software. They are only “called” when a user selects that element meaning that new and/or different research data can be dropped into the system and played with relatively little technical knowledge.



Asset organization

/INTERACTIVE DESIGN + DELIVERY

The interactive nature of this creative project was purposefully designed to address my research question, “how can a graphic designer investigate, comprehend and appropriately represent a subculture in an intelligible and interesting manner?” When a tourist visits any destination, the location comes with a predefined set of options. Tourists are given choices to make based on factors such as guidebooks, tour companies or travel websites. They are making guided decisions. The tourists can only take so many tours and these tours are shaped by the “voice” of the guide. The message of a tour guide is altered twice. First it is altered by their unique perspective and then again by the reception of the tourist. Therefore the truth of the tourists experience is often lost in translation as there is no one truth, no one moment or true experience.



Tourists deciding upon a boat tour

Locating, deciding upon and creating the narratives involved the organization of 4000 photographs, 20 hours of videotape and pages upon pages of journal entries. Once I decide on the ten narratives found the website I had to create naming conventions and organizational systems that permit the easy location of elements for not only ease of design but also the flash-based delivery system. Limitations such as file size, bandwidth, storage and initial loading time were all factors in deciding on an external storage solution. All elements are stored in external folders for two reasons: first this provides an ease of design in that once the interface was completed I could add content as it was produced. Second, this allows for the addition of new elements thus offering scalability.

Unforeseen circumstances above and beyond the scope of technology added challenges to the production of the website experience. Factors such as the common use of slang and idioms added issues in the translation of audio interviews. Also with inconsistent load times, the synchronization of audio mp3 files and the subtitle movies created in flash was a difficult if not impossible task. Finally, the video capabilities of Flash Version 8 made a smooth integration of the video elements with the flash interface, yet this alienates visitors who do not have the Flash 8 plug-in.



Portissol Beach, a ten minute walk from Le Centre Azur



Typical first course of olives, tapenade and bread

/FINDINGS

While researching and documenting this conference center and learning more about the staff that lives and works within it, on the French Riviera, I was able to locate and document an interesting and intimate “snapshot” of the south of France. I found that the south of France is more than a wealthy, celebrity filled playground. The infrastructures of service personal that cater to the tourist industry have stories and histories that provide essential understanding aspects of the area one would never experience as a tourist. Opinions, staff relationships, long term resident and expatriate concerns along with other insights into the area have given me an understanding of the region from the experiences of the research subjects.

/RESEARCH QUESTION FINDINGS

What makes the south of France, Sanary-sur-Mer and Le Centre Azur unique? What are factors that give France, Sanary-sur-Mer and Le Centre Azur a sense of place? What are the thoughts, behaviors and patterns of the people?

Responses to these questions fell into three categories: products (consumables), features or perception. Products were mostly consumables that included olives and tapenade, Pastis, red wine (locally referred to as “pinard”) and bread. Features of the area that respondents spoke about were predominately recreational in nature. They elaborated on the sun and the ocean, with the sun mentioned several times as the source of all that comes from the region. Feelings about the sun were spiritual in nature. Finally, what I found to be a very interesting aspect of the question was discussion about perception of the area. Most everyone spoke of the attitudes, “laissez-faire” and “laissez-tombe”, yet few people could articulate the concepts. From several interviews and some personal research, I found that the first, literally meaning “hands off” refers to the attitude of leaving other people to live their life without intervention. The second literally means, “to let fall” referring to an attitude of not worrying about not only your life or the lives of others.



A Provençal table dressing

What are the patterns and practice of everyday life according to participants?

At Le Centre Azur it was clear that for some the main goal was to get through one's working days unscathed so that the jours a repos (days off) could be enjoyed. For others their goal was to simply get through the day so that an evening on the terrace complete with a drink and cigarette could be enjoyed. The section titled "Rituals" is based on what I found to be a ritualistic nature of life at le Centre Azur. Coffee is always stirred the same way, meals prepared and consumed in the same manner with little to no deviation, drinks prepared, cigarettes smoked, beds made, dishes cleared, floors cleaned... everything was performed with regimented detail all while it felt as if the entire system was on the verge of collapse.



The sidewalk culture of Sanary-sur-Mer, France

How does the popular perception of the Riviera compare to that of Le Centre Azur? How do locals, transplants, long-term visitors and tourists view the Riviera and how does that factor into comparisons to Le Centre Azur?

Lifestyle and work perceptions concerning the south of France can differ greatly from person to person. Yet many European citizens that I spoke to reported a bias that most of the south was a place of glamour, vacation mentality (even for the employees) and unorganized work environments. This was in fact the case with opinions about Le Centre Azur. Most everyone, employee to guest, felt that Le Centre Azur was poorly organized. Popular estimations of the glamorous nature of the Riviera crept into judgments against Le Centre Azur. The "all are welcome" nature of the conference center was in such opposition to how some felt the area "should" be that upon occasion neighbors were known to enter the property and start fistfights with noisy guests.

/PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

I enjoy using a computer to create and am compelled to construct with languages such as HTML, CSS, PHP and ColdFusion. I find poetry in it all. All of these languages are enjoyable to use for purposes such as altruistic communication all the way down to mere profitability. Yet at the heart of this matter is a need to experiment, to discover and to push the limits of technological competency. I am still a kid at heart, one that dreams of being a mad scientist or a great discoverer. The laboratory and frontier are found in a sliver of a screen, in a circuit board and on the Internet, and the natural practical application for web-based technology is in fact communication. In this project I have attempted to bring together a love of technology and design while exploring the human condition. I sense they are very closely related, more so than some may think.



Screenshot of the website interface

I feel that the elegant use of technology can bridge the gap between computer engineering and graphic design. That when applied to cultural research, technology can power and aid in the communication of a multi-vocal investigation of the human condition with greater depth and efficiency. I find beauty in exploring methods for the use of technological competency in order to create work that speaks to viewers with an aesthetic grace. I say “aesthetic” in reference to a sparing use of technology and the craft of a beautifully designed interface. There is great potential for artistry in use of design with technology in order to create an interface that communicates while shaping perception. In this manner I am shaping perception; I am providing the truths for a user’s experience. However, this is not the ultimate goal for this project.

The final step, or fourth dimension of this project, is in permitting a user to form his or her unique perception/experience. I sought to create a vehicle that allows greater reach and latitude in the dissemination of a project, thus relinquishing control from not only the author but also the vehicle. My goal was to give control to the user.

The compulsion driving this project is a need to tell a story (10 or 720, depending on how you look at it) while also allowing users the ability to explore and learn in an experiential environment. Through the use of Macromedia's Flash, I was able to design an interface with the ability to load external elements and then provide the ability for user-defined content. Simply stated, website visitors are able to define their experience. The sophistication of the interface is the inherent ability to load content into the application and then for users to create a unique experience.

By using technology in this style I have constructed an interface that metaphorically mirrors the tourist experience. A tourist (website visitor) is able to explore predefined scenarios, while creating their own truth. As in any tourist situation there is no one truth, no one reality; what exists is the multi-vocal and layered nature of the tourist experience.



The kitchen at Le Centre Azur

/CONCLUSIONS

I found this project to be meaningful to the graphic design field as it serves as a visual research model taking into consideration the associations between social observation / practice, narrative, visual culture and technology. This course of study was designed to make use of several emerging methods of design research to further critical thought within the field and found that the visual research model employed by graphic designers in an ethnographic research method is of vast benefit to the design community.

Even though I am not a formally trained anthropologist or ethnographer, the incorporation of their research tools and methodologies adds an enormous value to our design product. In fine-tuning my sensitivity to recognize and possibly comprehend the signs, symbols and metaphors of a subculture, I am able to produce a design product that hits at the heart of comprehension. Practical examples are found in a corporate logo that has

greater meaning, a website can better communicate to a clients' audience and multimedia production (video or even interactive learning modules) will be tailored for more consistent and clear communication.

The final project is an innovative website that prompts users to simultaneously select three short narratives (one photo montage, one video and one spoken description) to create a non-linear narrative experience. Yet by permitting website visitors to control the three elements of the "experience", in that they can select elements from other narratives, I feel that ownership over the comprehension of the experience is heightened. This freedom of selection is what I feel to be the strongest aspect of the creative project. It factors directly into the actuality that I feel tourist comprehension of other cultures is nearly always guided by their unique lens, personal histories and even worldview.



Plane and train tickets from summer travels

/FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Second round revisions to this creative project include exploring other aspects of Le Centre Azur and additional locations on the Riviera and other regions in France. Eventually having a website that can hold numerous location specific research modules would be a great benefit to the design and anthropology communities as well as to members of the subject communities themselves.

/SELECTED MATERIALS THAT HAVE INFORMED THIS PROJECT

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L-R: Michelle Molier, Natalie Hesse, Claude Holtzman, Francois Seidenbinder, Danielle Gendron, Cameron Thomas, Julian Schweikert, Benno Muchler, Claudio Bruno, Alexandra Bruno and Jacques Viazzi

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/CREATIVE PROJECT WEBSITE + CONTACT INFORMATION

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