Arts and Culture

How Designers Are Building an Image for Richmond's Newest Art Museum

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By Brent Baldwin

With the approach of its October opening, Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art needed a logo that would turn heads.

Museum officials wanted something befitting a major arts center that they hope will be a crown jewel not only for Richmond, but also the mid-Atlantic region — with a national footprint.

So they hired university alumnus John Paolini, who works as partner and executive director of strategy for Sullivan, a brand engagement company in New York, to develop a logo and identity system.

They also brought on Rob Ventura, an assistant professor in the interior design department. He worked with student group MoB, aka Middle of Broad, to design an eye-catching wrap for the smaller ICA headquarters building at 818 W. Broad St., raising awareness on a pedestrian scale.

We talked with both of them about their goals and the challenges involved.

Style: **When I see the logo as a casual observer, the first word that pops into my head is modern. It seems like a bold and interesting choice to half the logo, or mark. What was the reasoning behind this?**

Paolini: I think that's an astute observation. As we embarked on the logo and identity development project, we gave ourselves a few areas to research and explore. One was understanding how logos have been made historically for art institutions and museums — especially knowing [this building] was done by such a prestigious architect, and knowing the building will really become an icon for Richmond and VCU.

We uncovered there was already a range of ICAs — one in Boston, one in London — so we knew this had to reflect a modern posture and contemporary view.

A lot of times logos tend to be emblematic of buildings themselves, especially when it's a cool building. Sydney Opera House is a classic example. We said we wanted to celebrate not just what's happening inside, but build an icon that represented the potential of everything that was going to happen.

Museums like the [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts] are about collections that have been established. The ICA is about uncharted art expression not yet fully endorsed in the world. VMFA might have glass art from [Dale] Chihuly, the ICA might have three most potent, emerging glass artists — so there's this interesting dialogue.

To take it a layer deeper, the way Steven Holl designed the gallery spaces, the way they interact, you have this interesting potential for dialogue. That's a super conceptual point of

view on why we didn't want the letters to be complete, so that they felt they always had someplace to go — that they were incomplete in many ways, like the notion of art itself.

We had this great quote by Joe Seipel, former dean of VCU Arts, that "art never goes in a straight line." It's always an evolving dialogue and that's what the ICA is really about. In those letterforms, the feeling of it references the architecture but is not overtly mimicking it. Part of it really is the color story — instead of borrowing from the university's colors, we wanted a color story called ignition, that pink to purple, so it always feels like it's alive, and on fire, and has energy to it.

Rob, what were the challenges in wrapping the smaller headquarters, which really jumps out on Broad, thanks to the color.

Ventura: The project for the ICA offices started with the students — they did some preliminary ideas for wraps. The biggest problem was we were deferring to the building and after a while we realized the building is an anomaly — it's the wrong scale. Windows and doors don't obey the urban conditions, the materials don't fit with the buildings on Broad around it.

So that gave us license to say, let's let the identity consume the building. Let's allow the needs of the brand identity, which has great elegance, energy and dynamism, to overtake the building. It's right next to the Depot, a great classical formal structure with civic scale, so you have to bring your A-game to be a complement. There are lots of students walking by, but really it's a car context. Holl talks about the nearby intersection where 60,000 cars drive by every day. To perceive the building you can't be fussy, you have to be bold and assertive.

Paolini: From the lens of how we create a flexible identity system that can work seamlessly with VCU identity and live on its own, we built the [logo] system so there are a number of modules, if you will. There's the core module, the symbol. You have the horizontal line treatment of VCU with its typographic elements, a variety of signatures that can be used in different media and scales, down to scaled versions that are a badge that can be used in merchandising. So there had to be enough flexibility so that the identity always stays crisp and the identification is telegraphic.

How do you gauge success for something like this?

Ventura: Whenever you design something you hope people will have a response. The worst response is meh. But people are reacting to this with genuine happiness. There's not a lot of pink on campus. People are rallying around this, which is exciting and indicative of the success of the system. ... When I look on social media, for example, I see people dancing in front of it. A band that came to Balliceaux took a photo in front of it. It's almost like it's become a thing to do. On a sunny day, the pink with the blue sky looking up, it doesn't get any better than that.

The best rules of the game allow structure but also improvisation within it, and I think this system does that really, really well. It maintains a strong visual recognition, it's not watered-

down. Whenever the ICA logo or system is visible in Richmond context, it jumps out at me, that ignition ingredient. I wouldn't associate that with any other brand. I couldn't imagine the ICA without it now.