A historical survey of Unimark International and its effect on graphic design in the United States

by

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Preface

When discussing modernism in architecture, Mies van der Rohe is upheld as the leading figure. At this point, a discussion of modernism in graphic design in the United States has not reached such a specific consensus. In fact, what is understood as modernism in graphic design does not even have a single label. Known as International Modernism to some, and International Typographic Style to others, it is sometimes simply called Swiss design. Several corporations are cited as being in the forefront of adapting modern design for their graphic communications, some individuals are mentioned, but no design firms have been strongly connected with the movement in the United States.

Historical research in graphic design is a relatively new field, not yet completely and systematically covered. At this point, research has concentrated primarily on the masters of the Bauhaus and other European schools; historical documentation of design in the United States has been spotty. It will take years of detailed study before all the gaps are filled and the designers and design firms deserving recognition are fully documented.

In general, design research lags behind because design has not been seen as an independent area of investigation. Most commonly, graphic design has been associated with architecture or with the fine arts. In

the United States, design as a distinct creative field did not gain importance until the 1950s, and the relatively few researchers interested in design usually have preferred to work in earlier periods. This thesis attempts to partly redress the scarcity of research on the 1960s by focusing on Unimark International, one of the major design firms of the period.

Information was first gathered by conducting a search for printed material, then by mailing a questionnaire to a select group of former Unimark employees. However, the majority of information came from interviews, either in person or by phone. While realizing that a research approach primarily utilizing oral history has inherent potential for biased and self-serving interpretations of actual situations, by asking similar questions to each individual, facts and judgments were corroborated.

I gratefully acknowledge the help and encouragement of my committee members: Roger E. Baer, Dr. Evan R. Firestone and Dr. James T. Emmerson. I also express thanks to the former Unimark International designers who graciously gave me their time and answered my numerous questions. Their generosity in sharing knowledge and their enthusiastic support of my efforts has made this thesis possible.

Introduction

In the United States prior to the 1950s, advertising and marketing received more emphasis than design. This emphasis can be understood in terms of an intrinsic American attitude originating with the founding of the country. The United States was formed on principals of equality for all individuals; with hard work and dedication, anyone could lead a good life. The principal of equality was often very different from reality, but it did have long lasting effects. First, on an individual level, the ethic that advocated hard work left arts as a frill only to be pursued during leisure time. A general exposure to and understanding of the arts was not established as part of our culture.

Second, as the country became more industrialized, companies realized the potential of marketing to large audiences. Significant profits meant aiming communications at the broadest segment of the population, which ruled out elitist approaches. While marketing strategies which relied on the underlying concept of the equality of the masses were successful, they did not encourage strong design.

Advertising, which aimed to the lowest common denominator for the broadest possible market, also had to strive to set one company apart from another. As a result, marketing has been of primary importance to the American business world, and advertising

continually jumped from one new look to another. With the dependence on marketing, the idea of a systematic, overall approach to design did not widely catch on in this country until the 1950s. In addition, once good design did begin to gain importance, the population was not educated to know the difference.

On the whole, good design has been better understood, appreciated and more sought in Europe than in the United States. In general, the populations of western Europe were comfortable with the idea of differences between people in status, education and employment. Differentiation between peoples encouraged a segmentation of markets, targeting specific audiences rather than the broad population. With segmented markets, products were produced on a smaller scale and high quality craftsmanship was more attainable.

These two situations, the mass marketing of the United States and the limited production and attention to craftsmanship of Europe, became intertwined in the sixties as international communications and the idea of a global village developed. Suddenly European audiences accustomed to segmentation were being assaulted with mass marketing, while in this country the reliance on advertising gimmicks was being challenged by the introduction of overall design principals. How to marry these two seemingly opposing views?

Designers in the United States and in Europe found many different forums to discuss these and other design concerns. The International

Design Conference in Aspen was formed in part to deal with these subjects. Other organizations with local or regional chapters, such as the Society of Typographic Arts (STA) and The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), also provided avenues of communciation. Designers were brought together from around the world and their ideas were presented and published.

Out of this background rose a group of designers determined to marry the conflicting elements into a powerful whole. Thus Unimark International arrived on the scene, a design firm based in the United States, with offices abroad and designers from all over the world. Combining the ideas of marketing research with systematic design, and connecting the world in one international design approach, Unimark earned an important place in design history.

Chapter 1 - How Unimark Began

Unimark International began in Chicago in 1965. The founders were Ralph Eckerstrom, Herbert Bayer, Massimo Vignelli, Larry Klein, James Fogelman and Bob Noorda. Within a few months, Robert Moldafsky came on board as the marketing arm and Wally Gutches joined as the business manager. The founders of Unimark had diverse backgrounds but shared one strong view: they were all deeply committed to design, and had a great deal of creative talent to back up that commitment.

The ideas that ultimately were put into practice at Unimark existed for some time before implementation by the firm. These ideas, which originated with a number of people, included: combining marketing and design within the same organization; establishing an international firm to take advantage of the best design in the world; refining communications; and educating the American market. Design was to be approached by applying systems and concepts beyond individual whims.

To understand the foundation of Unimark International requires a brief digression into the history of Container Corporation of America, a Chicago based packaging materials company. The connection is indirect, but in many ways Container is responsible for the startup of Unimark. Largely through the leadership of Walter Paepcke, Container

had a reputation going back to the1930s for a commitment to design excellence. Paepcke was equally committed to design outside of his firm, and over the years was influential in bringing good design, known designers, and important design educators to this country. In 1950 he founded the International Design Conference in Aspen which became a valuable outlet for designers to exchange thoughts on their work.

Paepcke decided with Egbert Jacobsen, who was the head of the design department, to hire Herbert Bayer to develop Container's design program. Bayer came to Container in 1940. In 1956 he hired Ralph Eckerstrom as Design Director for Container. During his tenure at Container, Eckerstrom initiated a yearly program to bring in outstanding foreign designers. He also was involved with the Aspen Design Conference and at one point served on the Aspen board of directors with James Fogelman, a designer with Ciba. His involvement with the Chicago chapter of STA brought him into contact with Larry Klein, who had his own design office in the city.

Meanwhile Jay Doblin, the director of the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), brought Massimo Vignelli over from Milan, Italy with a fellowship to teach in the design program at IIT. Doblin, who was a friend of Eckerstrom's, also arranged for Vignelli to work at Container part-time after school. There Vignelli became good friends with Eckerstrom and they worked and talked

together for two years. In 1960, Vignelli returned to Milan and spent the next five years in a design partnership with Bob Noorda.

The last two contacts also came through Eckerstrom. Wally Gutches had been a plant manager for Container Corporation for many years. Robert Moldafsky was a former classmate of Eckerstrom's at the University of Illinois and remained a good friend. He was involved with marketing at Sara Lee before joining Unimark.

A change in Container Corporation's management provided the start-up incentive for Unimark. The new management, which took over after Walter Paepcke's death in 1960, didn't retain the same level of commitment to design. Despite their lack of enthusiasm for design, the management promoted Eckerstrom to Director of Design, Advertising, Public Relations and Marketing. That promotion was followed almost immediately with his dismissal by the president. Eckerstrom was told design was taking too much time in the company and there was a need to get back to the basics of business.

Massimo Vignelli had returned to Milan, but continued to be interested in the design scene in the United States. As Vignelli tells it, "In the fall of 1964, my wife and I decided to take a vacation and go to Chicago. The first thing I did when I landed was call Container Corporation and ask for Ralph Eckerstrom, and they told me he is no longer with us. I knew he was very ambitious and if anything he wanted to become nothing less than president of his own company, so

I called him at home and we got together" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview).

An ambitious man, Eckerstrom luckily had been thinking about other options. After being fired by Container, Larry Klein invited Eckerstrom to share office space while deciding what to do next. What happened next was a meeting with Vignelli and a decision to ". . . set up an international company where we put together all the best talents around the world in terms of design, so that each one could benefit from the archives, a common archives of shared materials, and have more impact on clients" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). Eckerstrom also felt that marketing needed to be stressed as part of the overall design concept.

Eckerstrom and Vignelli spent the next few weeks talking to other designers. Vignelli started by traveling to New York to meet with Ivan Chermayeff and Tom Geismar, then to London for a meeting with Allan Fletcher and Colin Forbes. Neither of these groups were interested in joining the venture; the firm of Chermayeff and Geismar already was established. Allan Fletcher said their business was getting started, was doing well, and they saw no reason for changing. Then Vignelli returned to Milan and spoke with Bob Noorda. "Okay, why don't we do this international organization for design, and we do it with Ralph Eckerstrom in Chicago, and the two of us over here, and other people around the world?" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview).

Noorda agreed with the concept.

Meanwhile Eckerstrom was equally busy discussing ideas for the new design firm with people around the United States. He spoke with Herbert Bayer, Larry Klein and James Fogelman among others. These three, along with Eckerstrom, Vignelli and Noorda, became the founding partners of Unimark. Eckerstrom was named president and the others received equal billing as vice presidents.

Coming up with a name presented an interesting problem. "Eckerstrom, Bayer, Vignelli, Klein, Fogelman and Noorda" was obviously unwieldy, so developing a name was the first order of business for the design problem solvers. Jim Fogelman suggested Unimarket. The others thought that sounded too much like supermarket which suggested connotations of being "the K-Mart of design". That name evolved into Unimark International.

Although choosing a name had presented some problems, there were few doubts about the direction for the new company. In keeping with the team approach, each of the six founders invested equally in the firm at the beginning. The goal was to have a team approach that operated internationally. Design, broadly defined, included graphics, interiors, packaging, and product design. Design was to be systematic, developed by means of sound principles rather than heavy reliance on intuition. Marketing research was to be a part of the design process.

Chapter 2 - The Growth Years at Unimark, 1965-1970

A variety of factors made the 1960s perfect for Unimark's formation, especially in the United States. Increasing ease of global communications made the U.S. more sensitive and more interested in what was happening in other parts of the world. The timing was ideal for bringing European design ideas to the U.S. and combining those aesthetic principles with American marketing ingenuity. Second, increasing social awareness and activism by citizens fueled the optimistic and idealistic views of the Unimark founders. Finally, one of the greatest economic growth periods in American history occurred from the 1950s into the 1960s. This economic growth provided a fertile atmosphere for the creation of large design firms such as Unimark International.

During its years in business, Unimark had many offices around the world. The firm often proceeded by acquiring a large account to anchor a local office while pursuing other clients. Detroit, with the connection to Ford Motor Company, San Francisco with Memorex and Cleveland with Halle Bros. Department Store were all examples of these types of offices. The idea worked fine in the beginning, but the overhead of maintaining so many office spaces, not to mention the people, became a real liability to the company over time.

Unimark's main headquarters were located in Chicago although the location changed several times following the growth and decline of

the company. Ralph Eckerstrom was overall president of the company and headed the Chicago office. The very first office, used while Unimark was being formed, was on the corner of Wacker and Monroe. From that small space Unimark moved to 120 South Riverside, which was headquarters during the greatest years. In 1974 headquarters were moved to 2 North Riverside, the penthouse of the old Daily News Building.

At its peak, the Chicago office employed about 60 people. Chicago was organized with a strong team approach. Rather than having a single design director coordinating the work, the reliance was on executive designers such as Harri Boller, John Greiner and John Dolby. Boller described Chicago as the bread and butter office, working primarily with systems and signage projects. "Financially it supported the New York office to some degree," he said. "The New York office did a lot of real high impact work which didn't always pay well but got the name Unimark around, which was the idea, I suppose. The best and most exciting work was not done in Chicago" (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview).

In New York, it was James Fogelman's idea to start out at the top, so Unimark rented 2,000 square feet in the Seagram's Building. Initially Fogelman had planned to run the office, but other commitments prevented him from taking charge. Eckerstrom and Moldafsky pursuaded Massimo and Lella Vignelli to move to New York

and run the office. Massimo Vignelli became the design director and Wally Gutches ran the administrative side of the operation.

Starting in the Seagrams' Building was a brilliant strategy for the new company. It was a prestigious building symbolic of class and architectural modernism. Michael Donovan, who started as a junior designer in the New York office, thought clients that selected Unimark were looking for something special. "You'd have to be pretty out-to-lunch as a client to walk into the Seagrams Building, get in an elevator and go up to the Unimark space and expect Corinthian columns. . . .They were predisposed to a fresher approach, a sort of European approach" (Donovan, New York, NY, telephone interview).

It was not long before Unimark outgrew that space, so offices were moved to 410 East 62nd. New York employed about fifteen to twenty people at its peak. Many of the attention-getting projects were done by this office. The corporate headquarters for Pirelli, exhibition designs for Panasonic and British Leyland's Jaguar division, recommendations for the New York Transit Authority, and signage for the Washington Metro are examples of the work developed by the New York office.

Other American offices over the years were in Cleveland, San Francisco, Denver and Detroit. The Detroit office had to open practically overnight when Unimark was awarded the Ford account in 1965. Unimark rented five rooms in a hotel and designers were sent downtown to get drafting tables, t-squares and other necessary

supplies. The hotel remained local headquarters for a few weeks until permanent space was constructed.

Internationally, the main Unimark office was run by Bob Noorda in Milan, Italy. His Milan office has continued to operate under the Unimark name long after the company's end. In 1970, Unimark opened an office in London. Jan von Holstein was in charge of the London office and Peter van Delft left New York to become senior designer there. At one point, designers from Johannesburg, South Africa came to New York and liked the office. They wanted to open a Unimark office in South Africa, so one was set up in exactly the same style. The Johannesburg office folded in the early seventies due to South Africa's worsening political situation.

There also was a small office in Melbourne, Australia from 1966 through 1967, and in the mid-seventies an office was opened in Copenhagen, Denmark. That office only lasted a few weeks, in part because of the untimely death of the Danish designer who was coordinating the setup. Some of the Unimark designers jokingly said it lasted only long enough for a great grand opening party.

Unimark was in the forefront as International Modernism made inroads into American design. International Modernism was not immediately accepted by American clients, but Unimark was not alone in urging acceptance of the new and systematic approach. Robert Moldafsky noted that other design firms also were shifting to modernism, citing Lippincott and Margulies as an example. "They were

really the first ones to work with corporate identity in the broader sense, so they opened the door," he said. "The only thing that they did though was all the graphic systems; I think what Unimark did was take it to the next level and say graphics is just part of what people see about you. It's got to be your product, it's got to be environment, it's got to be all the elements that go beyond just the graphic impression" (Moldafsky, Chicago, IL, interview).

The concept of modern design was characterized by organization and the use of systematic approaches. A grid system formed the underlying structure for most projects. The message was usually presented by sans serif typefaces. Unimark wanted to remove the arbitrariness from the design process. Vignelli said, "For a certain amount of time we concentrated all our efforts in establishing this kind of a language in this country. It was fun, because by having all these offices and all this work we could really spread the gospel of functional graphic design" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview).

Logic as a part of the design solution helped in gaining client acceptance. David Law explained the idea of logic was convincing to business people, "but then you can go on to that next step and say even beyond the logic this has much more aesthetic presence, it has more character, it has more dignity, it has more sense of purpose, it has more lasting quality. It's based on the classic ideas of logic and not just this logic that's of the moment or trend" (Law, New York, NY, interview). This type of explanation made presentations clearly

understandable for non-design people, and helped sell the modern style.

Another integral part of the Unimark experience was the emphasis on a world-wide design view. Many of the company's design ideas originated in European design schools although the United States was the main project focus. Despite the concentration of offices in the United States, Unimark had offices and projects around the world and the company leaders traveled extensively to coordinate these projects. Many of the leading designers were European, contributing to the global flavor of the company.

Unimark also was interested in firsts; being among the first in the United States to practice international modernism, to use Helvetica, to develop grid structures as the basis for design. The idea of being first inevitably led to experimentation. New products were developed, such as a cigarette filter by Jay Doblin, or a furniture grouping, Modulo 3, by the Milan designers. New design ideas in packaging graphics were tried, such as gradated backgrounds and type on an angle; approaches that have since become commonplace. Harri Boller remembered early experiments with computer pagination, which didn't come into common usage until the mid-1980s.

Another Unimark idea concerned the importance of the working environment. Part of Unimark's overall corporate statement involved the carefully designed office whenever possible. The general design of Unimark offices, implemented around the world except in Milan,

was the joint product of Lella and Massimo Vignelli. The Milan office had more of an old world tradition, operating out of the spacious rooms of an old palazzo.

The offices were done strictly in black and white which, new in the late 1960s, is now common. Jay Doblin, Katherine McCoy, Michael Donovan and others have commented on the impressiveness and beauty of the spaces, particularly in New York. The New York office had a very long central hallway leading from the reception area to the design area. At the end of the hallway was a calendar of giant Helvetica numerals which were changed every day. A date in eight foot tall Helvetica numbers made a bold and unforgettable statement to anyone entering the space.

The people at Unimark strived to set themselves apart visually from other design firms. In the New York office, that meant the entire staff wore white lab coats. Vignelli explained he brought the idea for the white uniforms from Italy. "In Italy we were always wearing white smocks; it gave a sense of unity. I like it - the same as in a hospital; the sense of clean, of order, discipline and unity. The whole place looked very impressive, like a clinic almost. People over here tend to be sloppy in their outfits, sporty or whatever it is" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). Considering the free atmosphere of the mid-sixties, walking into an office with the whole staff in uniform attracted notice.

Vignelli said, "Then [in the sixties] it was even more important to try to flatten out what could be subjectivity and bring forward discipline. It was important for us to convey immediately to the person who came in our office a sense of where he is and who we are, and if he doesn't find it congenial, much better to find it out then than hoping we'd be changing to please him" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview).

The use of sans serif typefaces also characterized the design philosophy at Unimark. Partly because of the emphasis on signage, typography was taken very seriously. Unimark designers felt sans serif faces were appropriate for many projects because they represented pure communication without emotional connotations. Of the sans serif faces, Helvetica was the most widely adapted. Helvetica was developed in Switzerland in 1957 and was a revelation in the United States, though not available in this country until 1967.

Eckerstrom, Vignelli and Doblin held long discussions on typography. As Eckerstrom said, "You have to remember the time period. Advertising and other selling communications at that time were very disorganized. In my opinion it was so disorganized that it was wasted and not communicative. So we decided we were going to clean up U.S. communications. . . . We were going to simplify the message by simplifying the type" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). The type they decided to concentrate on was Helvetica. As a

consequence, the company had a major impact on the use of Helvetica in the United States.

Vignelli said, "I was waiting for that typeface when it came out here. I learned how to use it in Milan and I knew how . . . to get the most out of it in terms of scale, relationships in terms of grids, because I knew grids" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). Other European designers within the firm also were trained with sans serif faces and were eager to use them. At that time, typography was a strong part of a European design curriculum and those designers developed a strong typographic sensibility. Several Unimark employees jokingly said that they thought Unimark had the largest collection of Helvetica press type in the United States.

One of the first opportunities to implement Helvetica came with Unimark's assignment for Alcoa in 1966. In an attempt to clarify Alcoa's corporate image, the Unimark design team specified Helvetica as the corporate typeface. Five separate advertising agencies were working for Alcoa at the time, and they were not pleased by that decision. "The agencies were furious", Eckerstrom said. "We had a big meeting in New York and they said you can't do it. We can't find enough of this stuff around, and you're insisting on this overwhelming kind of idea and it doesn't fit with Alcoa. We said yes it does and Alcoa had agreed with us. . ." (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). With that decision, several type houses in Pittsburgh were forced to

order Helvetica fonts or lose their Alcoa-related business. From that point, Helvetica became more readily available in the United States.

While Unimark relied heavily upon Helvetica, it was not the only typeface used, and love of it was not unanimous within the firm. Harri Boller, with a background in type design from Basel, Switzerland, liked Helvetica but was partial to Univers and sometimes specified that face for his projects. "They didn't like it particularly but there was nothing saying you had to use Helvetica," he said (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview).

Eckerstrom explained Helvetica was used "when a message had to be read quickly without any extraneous design involvement - and that doesn't mean I don't like serif, because I think the serif faces are beautiful. Each message requires its own presentation" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). Unimark designers didn't specify sans serif exclusively; Baskerville, Garamond and Bodoni were also commonly used.

Marketing was an important part of the design process at Unimark, and Robert Moldafsky was a nearly perfect choice as senior marketing executive for Unimark. Armed with an undergraduate degree in industrial design, he was a designer before gradually shifting into management, then into the merchandising, promotion and planning aspects of business at Sara Lee.

Moldafsky joined Unimark "partly as communicator, partly conscience of the consumer in terms of the acceptability of design. It

all goes back to the basic idea that we started with," he said. "The idea of communications. . . .That was really a very important thing, and so much of what was going on at the time was aesthetic, not really communicative, and I think that's what sold them [the clients] on Unimark. They bought the idea that what we were doing was not just making pretty things, but they were going to communicate something to the consumer out there" (Moldafsky, Chicago, IL, interview).

Moldafsky had a difficult job; he not only had to convince business executives of the importance of design, but he also had to convince designers of the necessity of marketing. Sometimes persuading the designers was the more difficult task. "Challenge within a company is a good part of any business," Moldafsky said. "If everybody thought the same then obviously some people aren't necessary. By having some conflicting ideas that have to be verified, substantiated, argued about, it strengthens the end result. . . . Designers sometimes weren't used to doing that. As an ex-designer, I knew that" (Moldafsky, Chicago, IL, interview).

The marketing staff was based in Chicago but traveled as needed to the other offices. Moldafsky attended presentations and helped realign creative solutions to strengthen their marketing aspects. Because of his design background, if he came into a project first, he could also suggest design approaches. The relationship between

marketing and design wasn't always smooth, but over time it resulted in excellent work, which was the untimate Unimark goal.

Because of the immense size of many Unimark projects, much of the work created at Unimark was done in teams. Work was usually credited to the team and to Unimark rather than to individual designers. Though the team approach was common throughout Unimark, the degree of equality on the teams varied between offices.

The Chicago office had very talented designers but no one designer had overwhelming control, so projects were spread around within the office. Marketing was stressed in the Chicago office more than in the others, so a marketing person was usually part of the project team. The project team in Chicago also included production staff. Production people, rather than junior designers, did the majority of the mechanical work.

In New York, important projects were often sketched as thumb-nails by Vignelli, then scaled to size and finalized by junior designers. The Milan office was even more rigidly structured than New York, with an old-world master-apprentice approach. In Milan the senior designers detailed all work on tissues, which were then passed to a junior designer for execution. After traveling from the Chicago office to spend some time in Milan, Ron Coates felt, "they had young people working there for the honor of working in that office, who were hoping one day to get recognition or establish enough of a name that

they would be able to move up or move to another place" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

In some ways the Unimark designers, both junior and senior, seemed to be cut from the same mold. Sharing strong beliefs in the appropriateness of international modernism for design, Unimark designers also shared personality traits. A pattern emerged of literate, assertive, highly creative people. Personal confidence and a tendency toward perfectionism helped bring forth tremendous success in design solutions, but also caused stress through intense peer pressure within the working group. The intense atmosphere within the Unimark offices tended to "weed out" the less strong personalities, though the competition within the offices was usually on a friendly level.

Unimark kept a watchful eye on the design world and on the competition, but rarely hired designers from competing firms. Because of Unimark's reputation for having excellent designers from around the world, there were usually more applications than jobs to fill. In hiring, the managers looked for creative people who were willing to work hard to advance the company's name as well as their own.

To maintain the established design approach, Unimark's top management carefully recruited senior designers, often from Europe. Vignelli and Noorda provided important connections to Europe, especially to Italy. Eckerstrom had contacts in Scandinavia. He had

presented a lecture series there and made the arrangements to bring a group of Scandinavian designers and students to the Aspen design conference in the early sixties.

For senior hiring decisions, the top managers worked jointly, or consulted with one another about the appropriateness of a certain person. Herbert Bayer, as an advisor and board member of the company, became involved in hiring decisions. He had suggested bringing Rene Weiss in from Germany as a highly skilled product designer. Once a part of Unimark, Weiss always was consulted before any product designer was hired.

Expo 67 in Montreal, Canada, provided one source of design talent. Many European designers were a part of the Expo team and were unemployed at its completion. Several chose to join Unimark International. Wally Gutches flew to Montreal to interview designers, hiring Gerhard Dorrie for the New York office, and Peter Teubner and Harri Boller for Chicago. After an initial interview in Montreal, the designers were flown to various Unimark offices in the United States. This was an impressive display of prestige for potential recruits; paid travel for interviews was unusual in the design world at that time.

Junior designers were selected by local offices, always with the intention of hiring people who could be trained in modern design philosophy. At that time, many of the junior designers from the United States had a less formal design education than the Europeans,

but still Unimark looked for those young people who were open minded about modern design. From the management point of view, training young designers was another way to spread the concepts of international modernism.

Particularly among junior and entry level designers, Unimark International developed a different name. To them it was "Unimark University", a place where they could participate in good design work, learn from leading professionals, and gain access to books, magazines and other archival material not generally accessible at the time. Despite Unimark's reputation for hard work, long hours and relatively low pay, there were frequent opportunities to discuss and critique design and the design world, which was encouraged.

Katherine McCoy considered Unimark to be her equivalent of graduate school. She was hired as a junior designer in Detroit immediately after receiving a BA in Industrial Design. McCoy said, "I was so fortunate because I came out of a very weak academic situation. . . it [Unimark] set the direction for my career. We discussed ideas, theories, ethics, history, current design trends - everything - from one designer to another. We took the time to question our work and try new directions; something rare in a busy professional office" (McCoy, Bloomfield Hills, MI, telephone interview).

Ron Coates, based in the Chicago office, agreed with McCoy's description. "You were surrounded by such great professionals with

such diverse views. It must have been what is was like years back for artists or poets who hung out in Paris," he said (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

Traveling between offices was common for senior members of Unimark, especially as the company was being established. Eckerstrom or Vignelli often appeared in local offices before major presentations. Vignelli said, "The thing was, in terms of design, the more the whole thing was growing, the more I was involved in everything because I was in charge of design for the entire corporation and all the offices. . . During the first year I was going back and forth from Milan to New York and any other place to make presentations. . ." (Vignelli, New York, NY, personal interview).

Designers occasionally were shared between offices as their particular design expertise was needed. Senior and junior designers traveled either to meet temporary demands or to complete projects on location. Harri Boller, from the Chicago office, was a typical example. Because of his strengths in developing grids and signage systems, he worked with the Ford account in Detroit for several weeks. He flew at company expense to Detroit on Monday, returning to Chicago on Friday afternoon. Ron Coates also traveled from Chicago. He went to Milan to provide extra help on the contract for the Sao Paulo subway, and from there followed the project to Brazil.

Communication between the offices was constant among upper management, but rather informal on the whole. On occasion, Vignelli

or Eckerstrom appeared in one of the offices to show slides and samples of other company work, but often junior designers weren't aware of projects being done by other Unimark offices until they saw an article in one of the design publications.

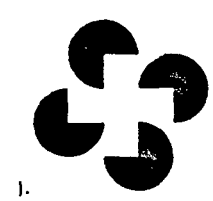
Unimark concentrated less on internal communications than on communicating with the outside design world and the general public. This occurred in several ways. The senior people often wrote articles and gave interviews. In addition to using its design staff to enhance its image, Unimark also hired a public relations person. Another way Unimark presented itself was by creating a publication, Dot Zero, as a controlled information vehicle for the company. Dot Zero, Unimark's voice to the design community, is discussed at length in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 - An Overview of Significant Unimark Projects

In keeping with a broad view of design, Unimark concentrated on large-scale, multifaceted, multi-year projects, relying less than most studios on the normal "bread and butter" piecemeal assignments of the design industry. Over the years, many of the world's leading corporations hired the design firm. Unimark's involvement varied; while specific projects were the norm, on occasion their design expertise also was requested for general consulting.

Complex projects involving more than straight two-dimensional graphic design were typical. Many commissions involved corporate identification, including trademarks, stationary and vehicle signage, implementation manuals and display procedures. Product and package design, exhibit design and promotional programs were also common Unimark projects. The following three pages show some examples of Unimark projects, providing visual reference for the modern design approach. As was common in most modern design, "personal expression and eccentric solutions were minimalized or rejected in favor of a more universal and scientific approach to design problem solving" (Meggs, 1983, p.379). From deceptively simple trademarks to complex packaging, Unimark solutions were bold, disciplined and direct.

The Unimark managers were idealistic. They viewed design as a way to better the world and provide an aesthetically pleasing order to



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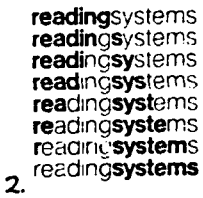

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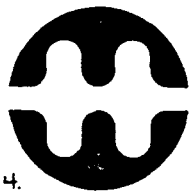

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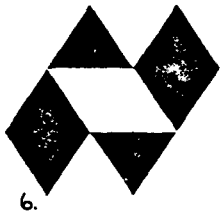

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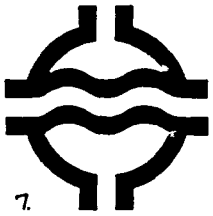

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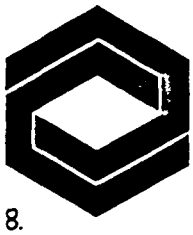

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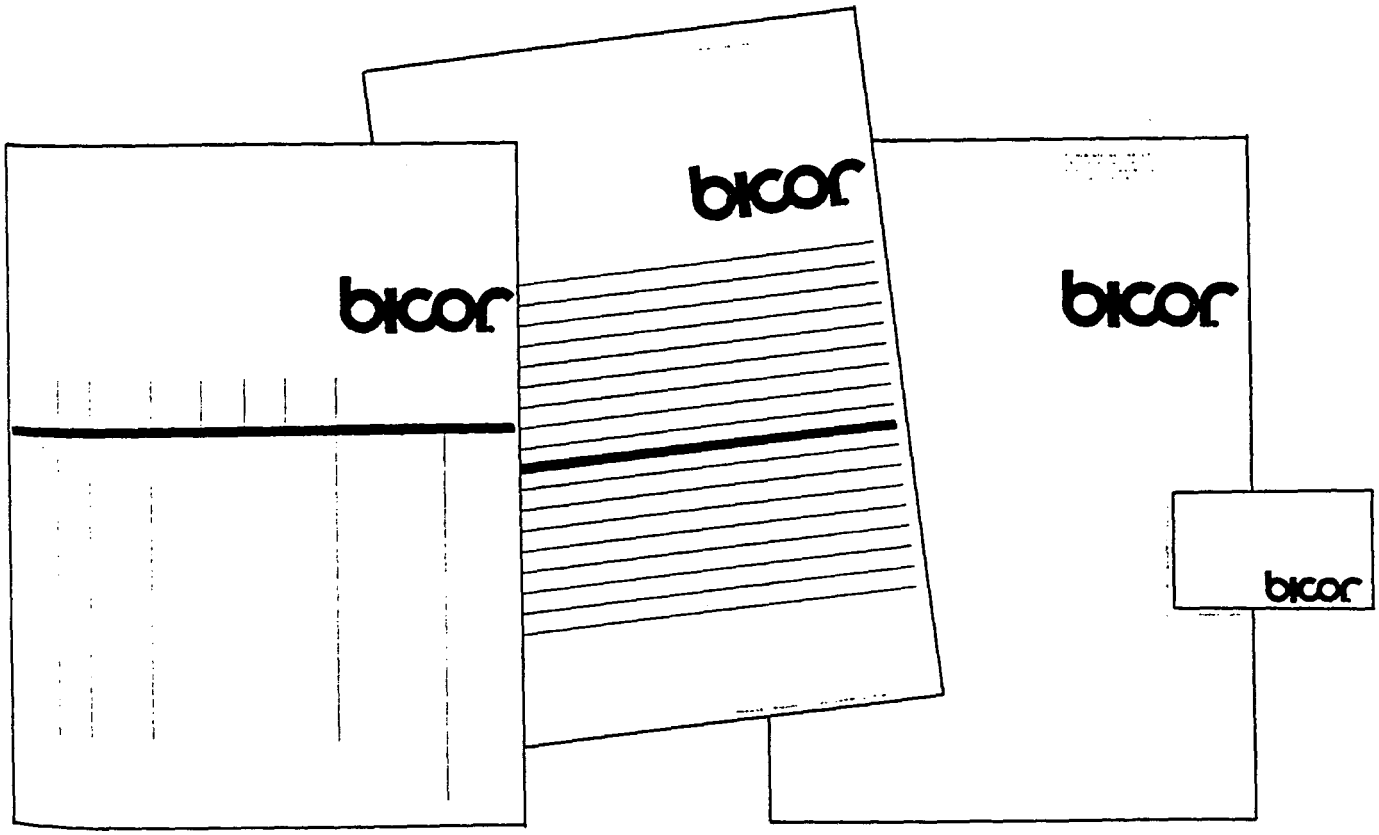
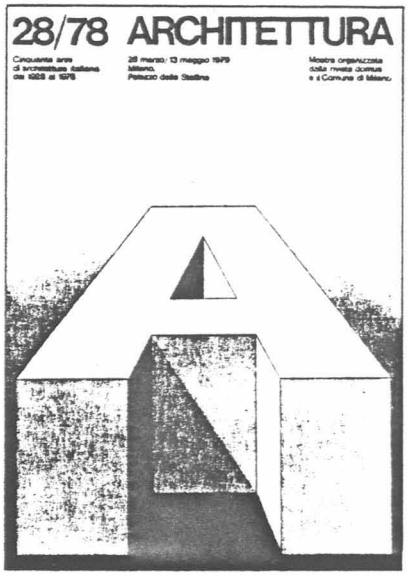
Many trademarks were developed by the Unimark designers, including the examples shown to the left.

1. Northwestern University-McGaw Medical Center, Chicago, IL, by Harri Boller
2. Scott, Foresman and Company, Chicago, IL, by Harri Boller
3. Parke, Davis & Co., Chicago, IL, by Harri Boller
4. Hulletts Ltd., Durban, South Africa, by John Rieben
5. Mondi Valley Paper Company, Durban, South Africa, by John Rieben
6. Horters Ltd., Johannesburg, South Africa, by John Rieben
7. Cochiti Indian Reservation, Cochiti, NM, by John Rieben
8. Vantage Home Builders, Denver, CO, by John Rieben

Top: Detergent package for La Rinascente-Upim, Design from the Milan office.

Bottom: Letterhead and business forms for Brother International Corp., makers of household appliances. Designed by Giulio Cittato.





Above: Poster celebrating 50 years of architecture in Italy. Designed by Bob Noorda.
Below: Package design by Harri Boller.

society. This was particularly true in the United States, where order and discipline seemed lacking. James K. Fogleman said, "The present day visual chaos is perhaps a symbol of our freedom and vitality, but a very dubious one. . . . We must bring discipline into our visual environment as we strive to bring it into all other phases of our living" (Print, 1968, p.95).

Despite their idealism, Unimark managers realized the United States government could not be counted on to bring visual order to the environment. Fogleman remarked ". . . a great amount of the responsibility falls upon the shoulders of industry. We can be thankful for an ever-increasing number of corporations who are making a conscious effort, not only for their own benefit but with an awareness of their social responsibility, to beautify their landscapes, business installations, and set examples which will have far-reaching effects. . ." (Print, 1968, p.95).

Ambitious and opinionated, it made sense that Unimark worked with aggressive, future-oriented companies. In the United States, Gillette, Alcoa, Standard Oil of Indiana, Memorex, American Airlines, JCPenney, Dayton Hudson and Panasonic were among the leading Unimark clients. The American offices also worked with Ford and Volvo on programs intended to cross political borders. In the European offices of Unimark, La Rinascente department stores, Olivetti, Tupperware of Australia, Rank Xerox and Sao Paulo, Brazil's mass transit system form an equally impressive client roster.

Unimark had an on-going relationship with New York City. Ron Coates talked about Unimark's involvement: "Here's Unimark, here's this glamorous company, and there was a glamorous mayor of New York, so you can imagine the kind of marriage that had to be. . . . They were going to make a big city work, and they were fixing everything" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview). Revising the signage for the subway system of the Metropolitan Transit Authority was a major project; creating a new color scheme for the Staten Island Ferry and analyzing street furniture within the city were other Unimark projects. Using 53rd Street for a pilot study of street furniture, Unimark intended to eliminate clutter and misleading and redundant information. This project provided Michael Donovan's introduction to Unimark. At the time a graduate student at Parsons School of Design, he joined four other students in measuring and charting 53rd Street from the East to Hudson Rivers.

The details pertaining to each Unimark project are beyond the scope of this thesis. For a clearer understanding of client relationships and design development, two specific projects for Ford Motor Company and JCPenney are viewed in depth. A third area, that of mass transportation, provides a look into Unimark's involvement with the subway systems of Milan, New York and Sao Paulo, and the bus system in Denver. Finally, Dot Zero provides tangible evidence of Unimark's idealistic views on the role of design in the world.

These projects provide an overview of Unimark's design expertise and illustrate its shrewd analysis of marketing needs. Each project

had unique demands and Unimark devised its strategy accordingly, realizing that communication occurs on different levels. With the Ford account the primary consideration was pleasing the client and creating an almost subliminal message about the company. From there, Unimark moved into projects such as the JCPenney and mass transit programs, where the focus shifted to communicating with consumers and creating an objective public message. Finally, Unimark was able to reach an idealized goal, creating Dot Zero to present private ideas to the professional design world.

Winning the Ford account put Unimark in business, setting the course for the company's growth and reputation. Ford wanted a new corporate identity for world-wide implementation, and chose several design firms to interview for that project. With the exception of Unimark, each team gave a high-powered presentation. The main competitors for the account ended the sales pitch with slides of their homes, with fancy Lincolns and Fords parked in each driveway. In contrast, Eckerstrom was low-key in his introduction of Unimark. He spoke of the individuals designing at Unimark and the lofty goals of the new firm. He used the joint archives to show slides of work from Unimark designers around the world.

Ford announced they wanted to visit the Unimark offices, and scheduled dates to visit both the Chicago and New York offices. Unimark intended to present an image of an active and busy firm, but had only three or four people employed in the Chicago office at that

time. Eckerstrom devised a creative if somewhat deceptive strategy. He asked his design friends to bring their current projects to the Unimark office on the scheduled date. When the Ford officials arrived, the office overflowed with working designers busy on a variety of projects. The same thing happened in New York.

The final strategy involved avoiding of fancy wining and dining for Ford executives. In contrast to the competitors, Unimark took their potential client to hamburger joints, sticking with a hard-working, down-home approach to the end. It worked. Ford became a Unimark client. After landing the account, Eckerstrom confessed the ruse in office staffing, but the Ford people laughed. They had known about it all along.

The Ford account was of such tremendous scale it justified opening an office in Detroit. There was a wide variety of work for the account; everything from world-wide dealer signage programs to simply planning equipment arrangements at the farm implement dealerships. The variety of design decisions made the project complex, as did the variation in funding for the proposed changes. Although new signage was meant for world-wide implementation, the small dealerships were individually footing the bills for their spaces. Unimark had to develop a method to tie each dealership inexpensively into the whole, using color and whenever possible, architecture to fit dealerships into the corporate identity program.

Part of Unimark's approach was to display the equipment attractively. David Law said "I can remember being out there in the

blazing sun with some of the prototypes, driving these big combines and grass cutters. It really made a difference. It transformed [dealerships] from this junk yard of equipment into something that really looked professional" (Law, New York, NY, interview).

While part of the Unimark team investigated dealerships and drove combines, others worked on more traditional design problems. Harri Boller flew from Chicago to develop a grid system for the program. Grids were still fairly new to the American design vocabulary and Boller mystified junior designers in the office by quietly drawing little boxes for days on end to develop a flexible system appropriate for Ford. Everyone on the Ford project worked for days on end. In traditional Unimark fashion, designers worked seven days a week and twelve to fifteen hours a day. The scale of the projects, the deadlines and peer pressure required dedication and long hours, which also met the approval of the client.

The Ford project, financially and in recognition, catapulted Unimark into the forefront of American design. The relationship, while not without frustrations, was mutually beneficial as Unimark accurately pinpointed the need to satisfy the client in an aesthetically organized fashion. Ron Coates, during his stay in Brazil with another Unimark project, saw a Ford dealership from the taxi window, implemented exactly as Unimark had suggested. There were many other Unimark successes to follow.

The success of the Ford project gave Unimark a reputation for the ability to handle complex projects. The company's ongoing successes

with transportation systems was equally as important. Changing from a primarily client-centered orientation to a focus on customer communications, Unimark designed a subway system for Sao Paulo Brazil, developed signage in New York City and Washington, D.C., and worked with identity systems for the city of Denver.

These projects exemplified Unimark's abilities to accurately pinpoint changes in societal needs. Robert Moldafsky noted that in the early seventies, in part because of the oil embargo, governments increasingly supported transportation systems. "The money has been freed for use in mass transportation, and there's a lot of it going to the cities," he said (McDermott, 1975, p.83).

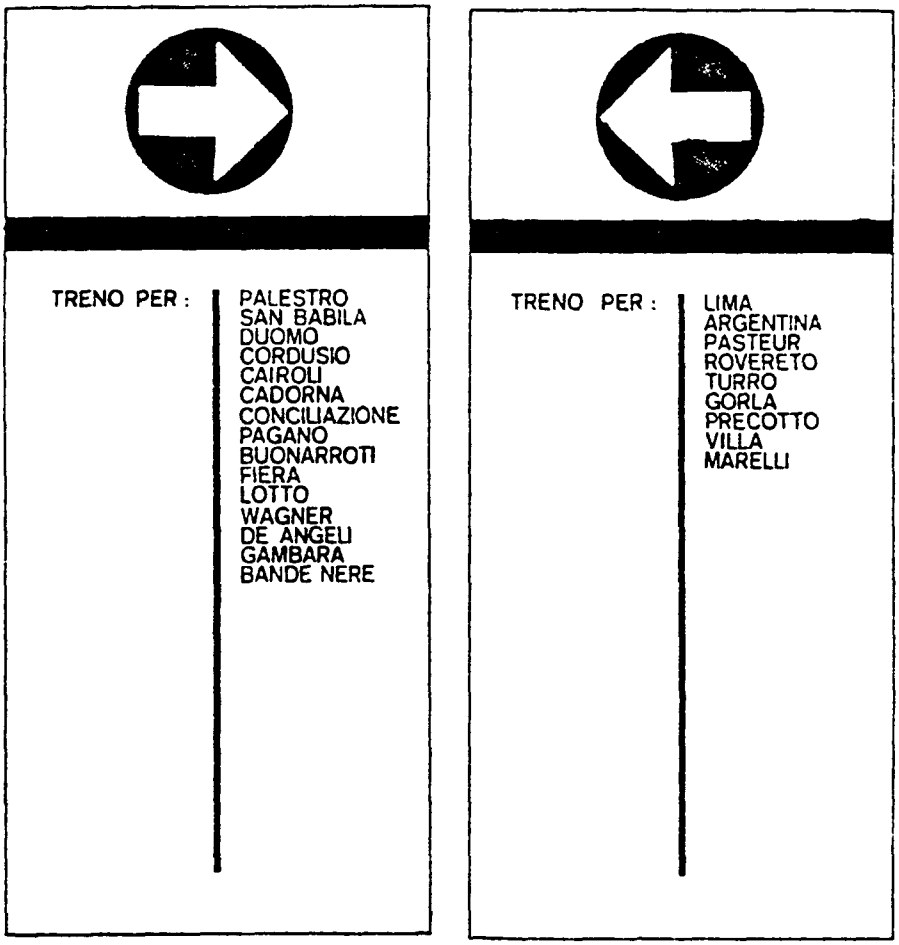
Bob Noorda provided Unimark's credentials for mass transit projects. Before joining Unimark, he designed subway graphics for the new subway in Milan which opened about 1965. The system was hailed for its pleasing environments that "exemplified a single, unified approach to the problem of people-flow -- a problem which can be broken down into two areas: the function of the system, and the environmental surroundings of the individual human beings who use it. . . . The Metropolitana Milanese is distinguished by a graphics system that is both efficient and esthetically satisfying" (Plumb, 1965, p.17).

Noorda said, "we made a legibility study on two typefaces: one condensed and commonly used in Italy for signage and one ordinary sans-serif typeface. My objective in this comparison was to prove

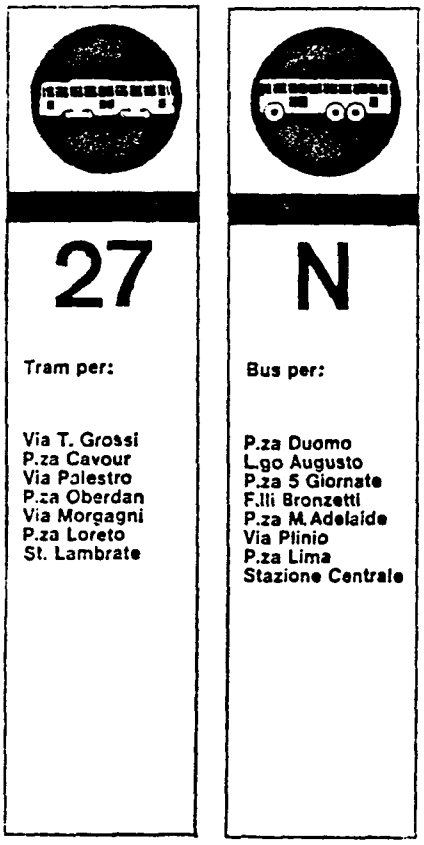
that the commonly used typeface was impractical for this type of signage. . ." (Dot Zero 5, 1968, p.38). Noorda developed a new typeface, a modified Grotesk, suited for subway use where most signage is seen at an angle and often from high speeds. The letterforms have a large x-height for easy readibility, with short ascenders and descenders. The flexible system uses wide letter and word spacing for signs read from the train and tighter spacing for maps and directional panels read from a standstill. Station names appear in caps with less critical information in lower case. Visual excitement is created by bold color use and each of the four train lines is designated by a different color. Bands of color indicate train routes and highlight the station names; colored arrows direct passengers to entrances and exits.

Left: Legibility comparison of condensed typeface common in Italian signage and the new typeface developed by Noorda for the Milan subway.

The condensed face is less readable, particularly when viewed from an angle.

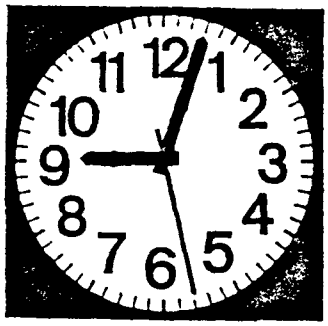


Above: Panels indicating the way to trains in the Metropolitana Milanese. Designed by Bob Noorda.



Left: Panels at station exits indicating bus and tram routes for the Metropolitana Milanese, designed by Bob Noorda

Below: Station clock for the Metropolitana Milanese, designed by Bob Noorda

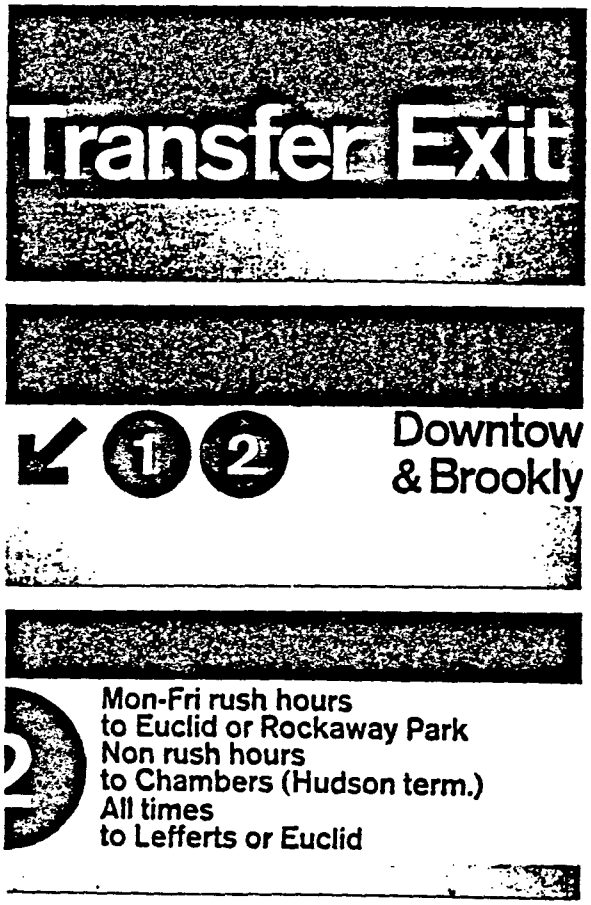


The Milan project is functional and consistent without becoming mundane. Careful analysis of communication needs allowed Noorda to reduce messages to the bare essentials and produce a signage system with a sleek and timeless quality. There is a sense of visual simplicity and order despite the innate complexity of the subway system.

International admiration of Noorda's Milan work brought Unimark into the New York City subway in 1966. By 1965, that system badly needed improvement and was shunned by most residents except as a last resort. "The subway system has long since lost whatever

elements of beauty or charm it may once have possessed. Today's subway confronts the user with a profusion of ugly, haphazardly placed signs and other forms of communication. It also confronts him with directions that are frequently confusing and contradictory. . ." (Plumb, 1965, p.14).

Realizing the need for improvement, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York commissioned Unimark for a study of the subways. Bob Noorda was flown from Milan and spent weeks traveling the system. Eckerstrom said, "He traveled that damn subway and



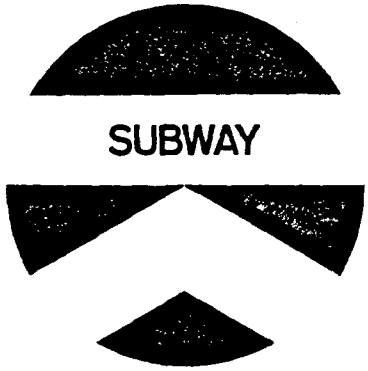
Examples of New York subway signage. Designed by Bob Noorda and Massimo Vignelli.

analyzed every aspect of it, which is what a designer had to do. He didn't leave anything to chance; he spent so much time there I called him 'The Mole'" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

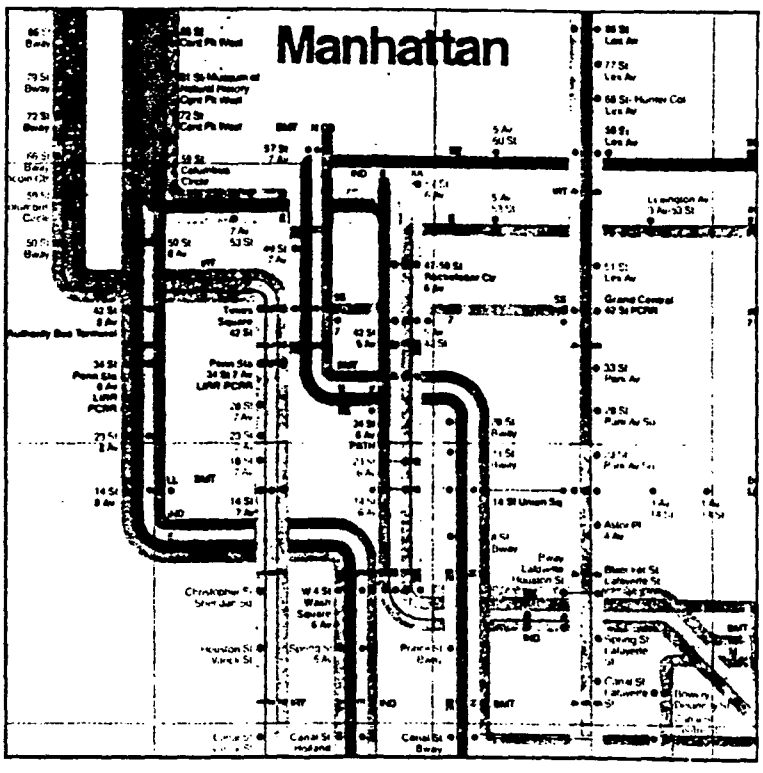
Noorda developed Unimark's basic proposal and Vignelli, by this time transplanted permanently to New York, added finishing touches. The two designers proposed to clarify the system by eliminating redundant and confusing signage. Reducing clutter and upgrading and coordinating standards helped lessen negative impressions for subway users. Maps in both New York and Milan were diagrammatic, with strong visual connections to Henry C. Beck's highly successful 1933 map for the London Underground.

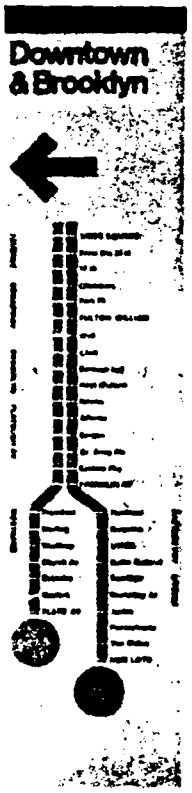
Unfortunately, limited finances and a lack of clear communication between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and Unimark lessened the effectiveness of the relationship. Lacking money for a complete manual of design recommendations, the Authority neglected to mention a need for a working document. They took the Unimark recommendations into their own sign shop for execution without fully understanding the proposal. Unimark was not allowed to inspect the progress, and the final result was disappointing.

In comparison to Milan, the New York signage fell short for several reasons. The New York system was larger and more complex, it was also older than Milan's, making it more difficult to streamline communications. The Transit Authority hesitated to rely fully on Unimark; consequently while the design proposals were partially



Above left: The old symbol for the New York Transit Authority was updated
Above right: The updated symbol designed by Unimark International. It would be applied to all trains, signage and printed matter
Below left: Updated version of New York Manhattan subway map
Below right: Updated version of mezzanine signage





adopted, not all the old signage was removed. The result was a continuation of visual clutter.

Sans serif type was again used, though in New York designers chose Helvetica Medium for most signage. All communications were in upper and lower case, size changes established the hierarchy. The New York signage lacked the flowing elegance of Milan because of the heavier type weight and tighter spacing. Milan also used color more effectively, integrating it with the type to present a single inseparable message. In New York, color often was placed in separate bands above the type, becoming as much a decorative element as a communicative device. Still, the work was a great improvement over existing signage and though not fully implemented, it did make the subway more usable.

Vignelli felt the Transit Authority was overly sensitive to public response in implementing subway signage. "The wrong approach is to do it on a democratic basis," he said. "There can be no democracy in something like this. It should be done in terms of imposition. There should be studies beforehand, but the moment the proposal is presented, there should no longer be anything to test. Transportation is a service, not a consumer product; there is nothing to test. . . . People who apply these things without understanding the entire concept can very easily ruin it" (Lahr, 1968, p.53).

Unimark continued to design mass transit programs, and was hired in the early seventies by Sao Paulo, Brazil. Again Bob Noorda

coordinated the Unimark solution, which was distinguished from earlier transit projects by the critical role of marketing. The non-European culture and a generally poorer standard of living added new dimensions to the designer's task. Robert Muldofsky remembered it was a very complex problem. Sao Paulo was a huge city desperately in need of a system for quickly moving large numbers of people. Brazil had no subways; a woefully inadequate bus system provided the only semblance of mass transit. The rural peasant backgrounds of many people and a high degree of illiteracy compounded the problem and new technology was generally greeted with suspicion in the developing country.

The design aspects of the project involved a track lighting system, street furniture and both plain and illuminated signage. Handrails, benches and waste containers were designed and integrated into the system. Communicating the appropriateness and usefulness of the subway was critical to its success, and Unimark rose to the challenge.

Moldafsky said, "We had to develop a system to get these people used to the idea of going underground . . . of going down on escalators, which they had never done before, and traveling on a train which they had never done before. It was a very serious problem not only to develop the program but then to get them to use it. We built an escalator above ground to get them to go up and down and get used to the novelty of it. Then we recommended they offer free rides, so the first three months all the rides were free" (Moldafsky, Chicago, IL, interview).

Success was not instantaneous for all Unimark projects, evidenced by the difficulties in creating an identity for Denver's public transportation system, Regional Transportation of Denver (RTD). Unimark suggested a dual identity for the buses, using "The Ride" as the public image and connecting it with an RTD symbol representing the system's identity. A successful solution for that symbol alluded the design team, so the design director threw open the project, inviting everyone in the office to submit sketches. Evan Eckerstrom, Ralph's son, who was production manager at the time, proposed the winning design. He remembered "at that point the design people got totally offended, so I ended up taking over that job. . . . Having done that, I started working on accounts and I just basically shifted from production manager to designer" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

With many years of business, it was inevitable that some design programs had less than successful endings. Unimark worked on a project for Trailways, and suggested a daisy on the side of the buses as an indication of friendship and friendliness. Daisies were chosen because they were native plants common in the countryside all around the United States, and they were instantly recognizable. Unfortunately, when Unimark presented the proposal to Trailways, a senior manager vetoed the idea on the grounds that his wife didn't like daisies. Trailways management suggested roses, which didn't have the same connotations from Unimark's standpoint. Trailways insisted and Unimark quit the account.

The relationship with JCPenney was more successful. The retail firm was founded with the ideals of integrity, straightforwardness, and concern for customers. Unimark's Chicago office worked closely with a committee from JCPenney to develop the corporate identity program reflecting those attitudes. Jay Doblin headed the design team, which included Harri Boller, Steve Dunne, Dale Fahnstrom, David Law and Philip Seefeld.

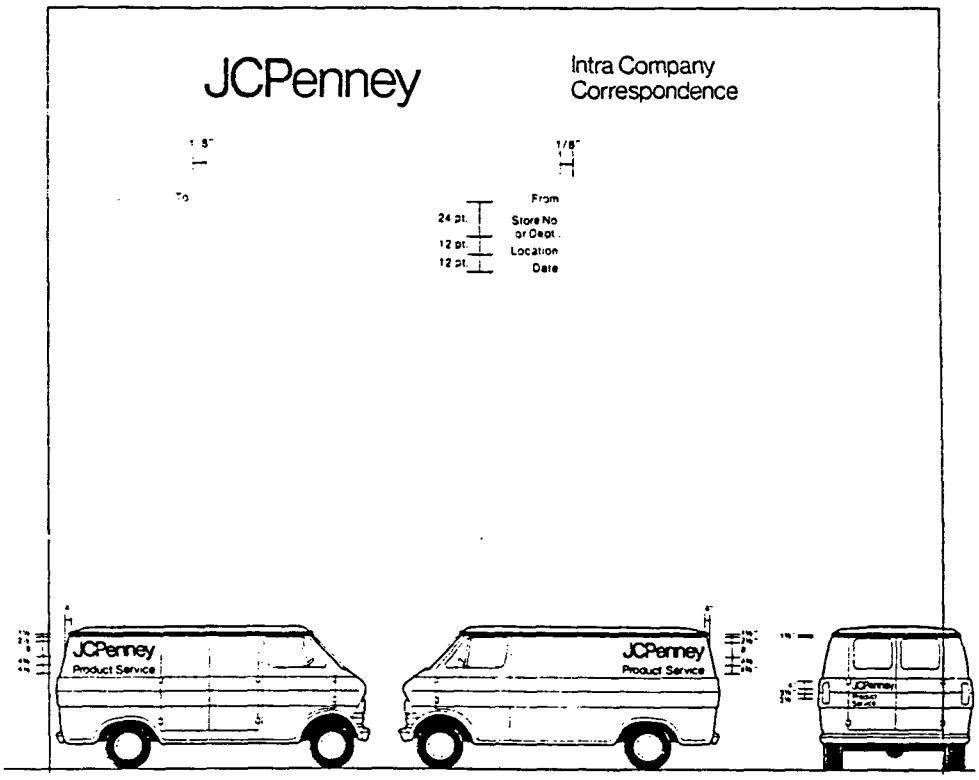
It was Unimark's experience with complex projects that brought them to JCPenney's attention. Robert Smith, the company's manager of product development and design, said "leading design groups were screened to see which would be the best one to work with us. We had to find a firm with a broad scope, one which would understand our complex needs - everything from architecture and packaging to advertising and corporate design" (Stevens, 1974, p.56).

JCPenney

JCPenney

Top left: The old Penneys logo

Below left: The new JCPenney logotype designed by Unimark. Shown are standard weight and light weight versions. The logotype is also available in heavy weight, and in outline.



Above: Illustration of intra-company correspondence layout from Stationery Design manual.

Unimark specified Helvetica as the corporate typeface and used it in redeveloping the JCPenney logo. They established formats for promotional as well as corporate use and introduced a system to allow decisions to be made on a corporate scale, rather than leaving design decisions to individual locations. This added unity to the rapidly growing chain and helped insure consistent quality in graphics from store to store.

David Law worked on the JCPenney account while at Unimark, and continued to work with them after leaving Unimark. His dedication to presenting a quality program was typical of Unimark designers. JCPenney "offered me a job to come and put the packaging program together inside the company," Law said, "since I had done most of the work on it at Unimark. . . . At that time, the last place in the world any designer would want to be caught at was working at JCPenney. I swore up and down there was no reason that people shouldn't want to work there in the same way a good young graphic designer would want to work at Ciba-Geigy - to have the quality of reputation in retail that Ciba-Geigy had in pharmeceuticals. It finally did when I left there. . . I remember being delighted that as students were running around looking [for positions], with their lists the schools put together, we were at the top of every school's list" (Law, New York, NY, interview).

"JCPenney is the only retailer of its type to have undertaken such a comprehensive scheme. . . . Beyond its obvious impact on the general public, the business community, and the company's own employees, Smith feels that the desire for consistency in visual impressions and high standards of graphic design has even filtered down to influence seemingly unimportant aspects of the company's communications such as the quality of the photographs in the mail order catalog" (Stevens, 1974, p.61). Implementing a program of this scale was slow and costly, but JCPenney was committed to following Unimark's expert advice.

The new design program was practical, visually simple and straightforward, almost to the point of dullness. The rigid modern approach and the constant appearance of Helvetica Medium seemed too emotionless to be appropriate for the allure of retail sales. Shower curtains, distributor caps and binoculars came in similarly styled packages with flush left Helvetica labels. While Unimark's intentions to organize and clarify JCPenney's program were valid, it seems like they could have created a more distinctive visual presentation. One commentator remarked, "It is disappointing that a company with such solid, turn-of-the-century American beginnings couldn't have settled on a less overworked typeface and a more original graphic idea, one which would have brought to mind in some way its individuality and old-fashioned roots as well as its reputations for plain dealing. . ." (Stevens, 1974, p.61).

Unimark usually avoided obvious solutions and strict categorizations in solving problems, as evidenced by the creation of Dot Zero. The periodical was one of the most unique, although short-lived, of Unimark's undertakings. Broadly aimed at the design world, the periodical counted architects, planners and engineers as well as graphic designers among its readers. Printed by offset lithography, the interior was black and white, with a two-color cover. Along with standard articles, concrete poetry and experimental, manipulated images also were included.

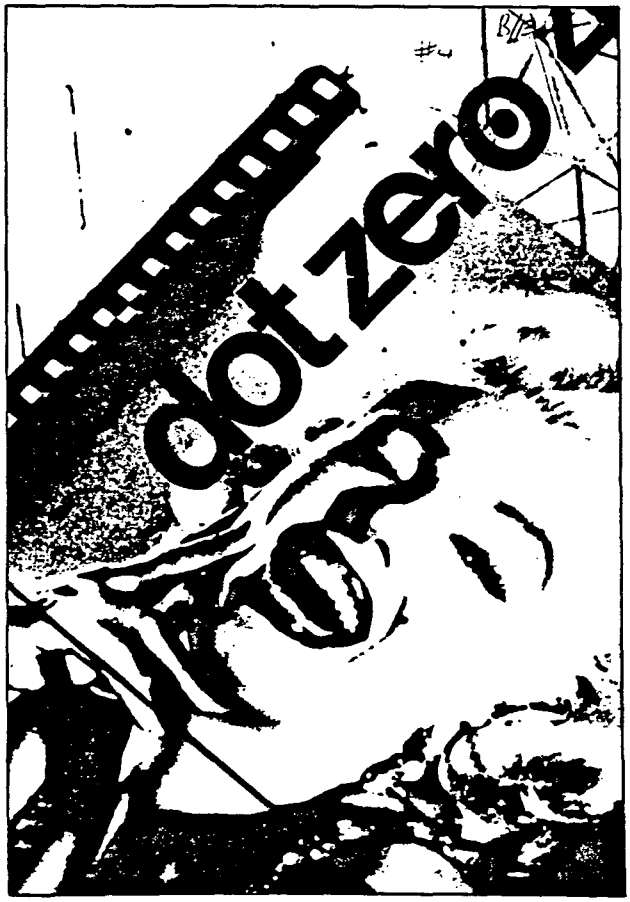
The grid structure for this magazine was developed by Massimo Vignelli, and Jay Doblin and Mildred Constantine were on the editorial

board. Other staff members of Unimark contributed writing, design and production work. The magazine, with a circulation of about 18,000, was put out jointly with the sponsorship of Finch Pruyn and Company, a paper company based in Glens Falls, New York.

Vignelli reminisced about the magazine. "It was the best magazine. The idea was to have a magazine as a platform for the ideas we were trying to put forth to society. So we did this magazine which still has a lot of respect. It was very good, it wasn't flashy - it was just like us" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). The periodical was devoted to layouts, graphic design, exhibition ideas and other aspects of communication arts. Some issues were devoted to a broad range of topics, others were thematic. Issue number three focused on graphics in mass communications, number four concentrated on Expo 67 and transportation graphics was the theme for the last issue.

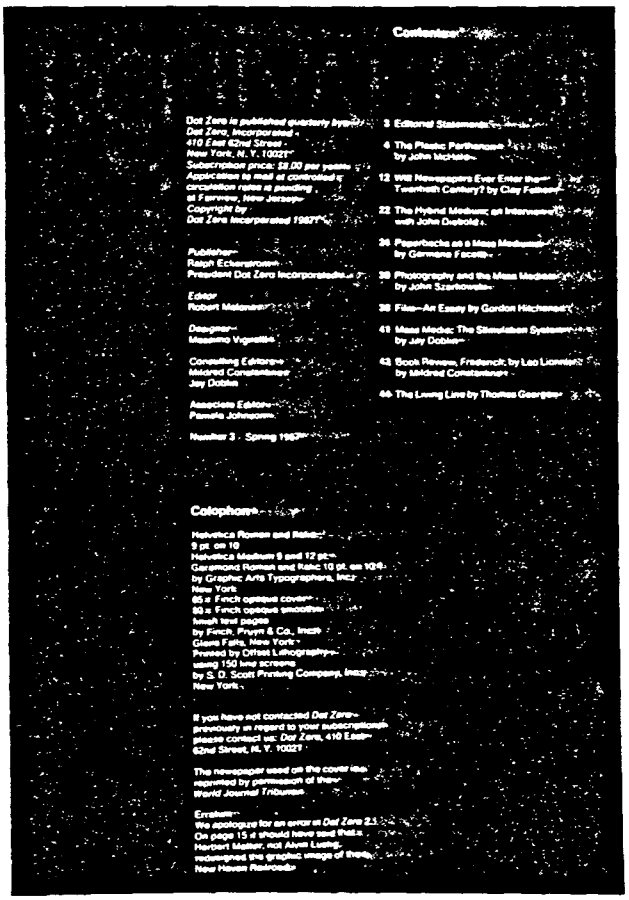
There were only five issues published because Finch Pruyn decided not to support it anymore, said Doblin. Also, it was at the time when the office was breaking down. Eckerstrom was even more blunt. "It was a hell of a publication, but we were losing our shirts. I suppose we could have had someone else come in to help support it financially. I don't think we'd have lost control, but I think there was just too much going on. It was peripheral and not a fundamental part of Unimark, although looking back, it should have been. Looking back, it's easier. I want to reinstitute it someday" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

Dot Zero had a flexible two or three column grid that occasionally turned broadside or to a 45 degree angle to express the contents of a particular article. White space was generous, and images were large and were often cropped by one or more page edges. Type varied from

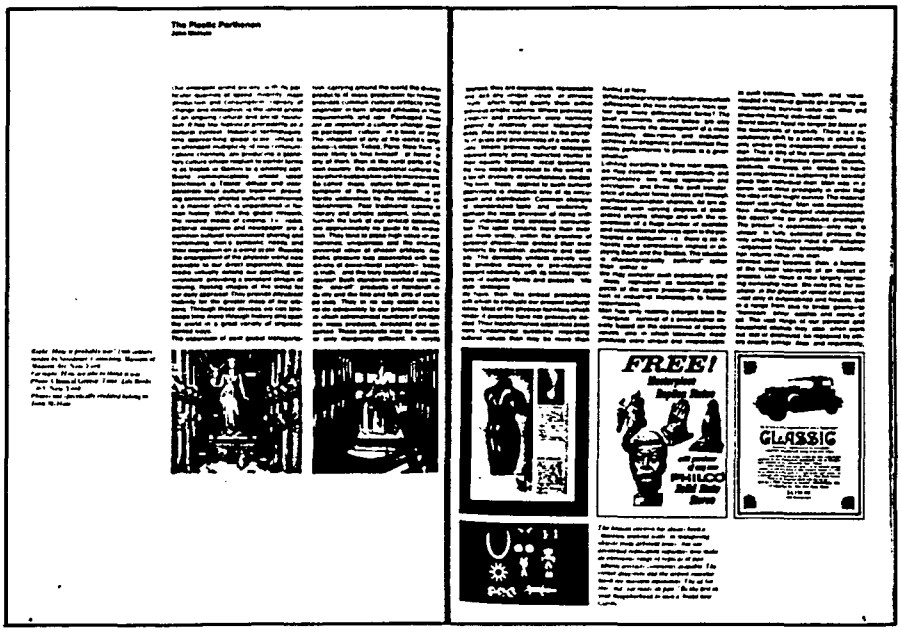


Above: Front cover for Dot Zero 4. Image was balck and white, with type added in second color. The covers of the magazine often provided visual clues to the interior organization and projected a sense of liveliness and excitement despite the lack of full color.

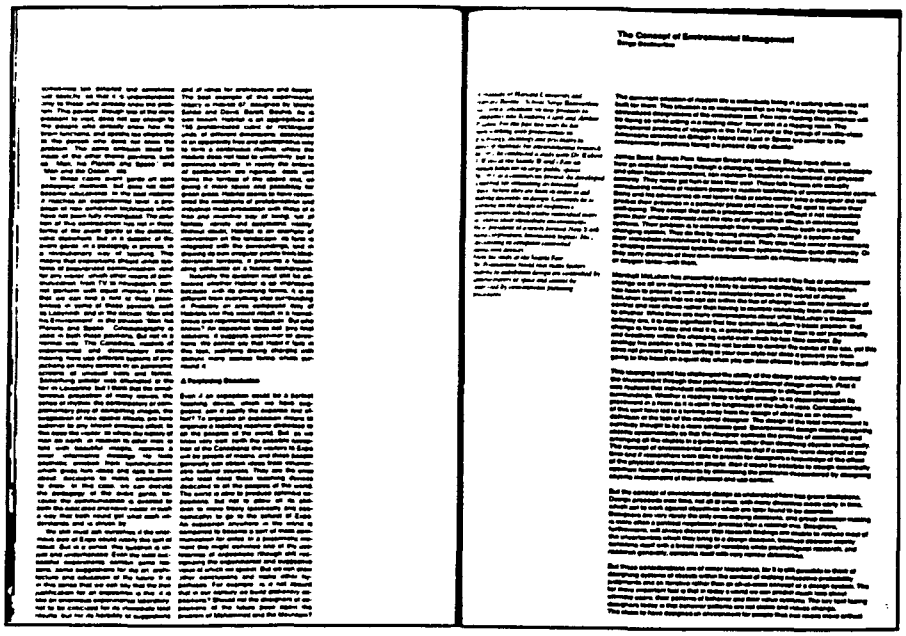
justified to flush left, with article heads in the same size as the text, but in bold weight. The overall subtlety of the periodical and the playfulness of unexpected changes from page to page made it a visually stimulating publication.

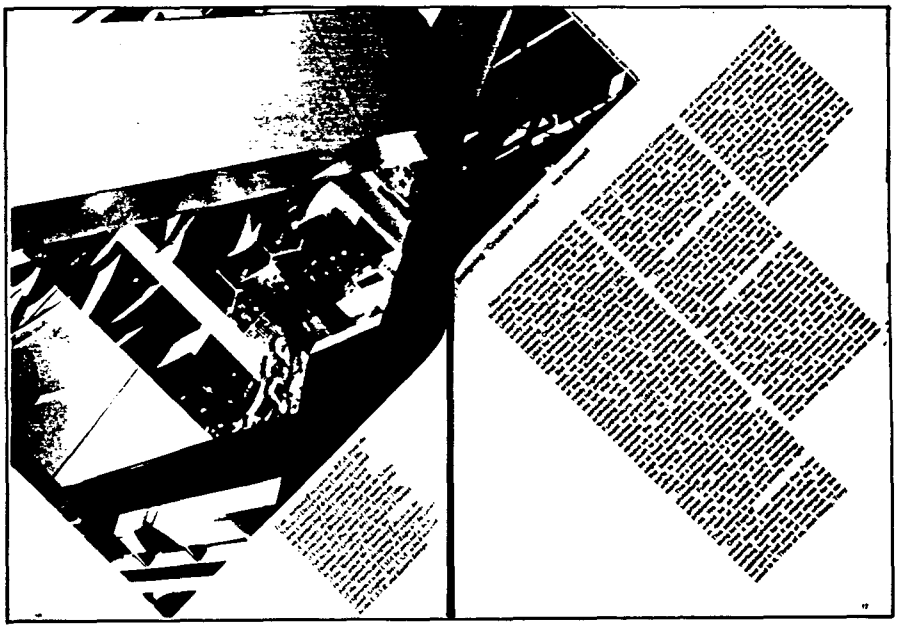


Above: Contents page for Dot Zero 3. The use of reverse type is striking and adds an unusual emphasis to the page.



Above: Interior spread from Dot Zero 3, showing one way to integrate imagery into the grid.
Below: Interior spread from Dot Zero 4. Despite a strong sense of order, there is great variety in this spread. Particularly interesting is the switch from justified to flush left type, and from narrow to wide columns, providing visual separation between articles.





Above: Interior spread from Dot Zero 4. An example of the alterations to the standard grid that provide extra interest to the interior. The angle established on the cover, (see page 52) was carried into this article.

Chapter 4 - Unimark in Decline, 1971-1979

Ironically, many of the traits that fueled Unimark's growth also contributed to its downfall. Idealism and optimism were untempered by pragmatic business sense, and as economic growth slowed Unimark found itself trapped in a downward spiral. Difficulties with clients and inexperience in management led to increasing financial pressure on the company. Overexpansion was one costly and crucial mistake.

The widespread prosperity during Unimark's growth years caused the Unimark founders to unwittingly overextend the company by opening many small offices around the U.S. In Europe, the excellent transportation connections between countries allowed Bob Noorda to work around the continent from his Milan office. But at that time in the United States, transportation was not as well structured and therefore clients preferred dealing with a local office. Ron Coates mentioned that design business wasn't usually conducted outside a local area until Federal Express began. After the advent of Federal Express in 1973, clients became more willing to use firms from outside the region. Still, design work, especially the systems and identity programs, required a great amount of day to day contact. Clients often wanted a great deal of hand-holding and reassurance, so proximity remained an important consideration.

After experiencing two decades of economic growth in the United States, no one predicted the economic downturn of the early

seventies. The slide into a recession hit Unimark hard. In particular the oil embargo dealt a major blow to the automotive industry and snowballed into a severe economic crisis throughout the Midwest. It was unfortunate that Unimark had its corporate headquarters in Chicago, the center of the Midwest "rustbelt".

Many companies dealt with the situation by consolidating and downsizing their operations. Coates said, "Unimark already had itself extended into other areas due to a time and a client concern. But times had changed . . . Unimark just didn't have the big picture. The pity is I've always thought, had Unimark been in Asia, they might have picked up from the Asian market and been able to survive, because at that time the U.S. market was shrinking and the Japanese were expanding and thinking big picture" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview). Like many corporations in the sixties and early seventies, Unimark chose to expand in Europe, overlooking the possibilities to the East.

Unimark was not the only firm caught by surprise. Many corporations, including major Unimark clients, were equally unprepared to meet the new economic situation. Some of the clients neared financial ruin, management changed, or companies merged or were sold, and Unimark was negatively affected. In several instances, with Memorex, with the Denver Olympics, with the city of New York, Unimark produced work and received little or no payment. Coates said, "I'm sure they don't regret the work - it was good work. But it would have helped financially, timing-wise, to have gotten paid on

those things. . . . I think they would have been able to maneuver a little better if they had had those funds" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

Along with the general downturn of the United States economy, changing client expectations caused problems for Unimark. Unimark was an unknown entity in the very beginning. To some extent, working with Unimark became trendy as people recognized the firm's approach was distinctly different from what they were used to seeing. Jay Doblin said, "they didn't know what we were doing. All they thought was it was looking like hot new design, and it was. We had groups that decided it was a little too high-brow, a little too futuristic for them, but most of them bought it. We told them this is the way the world is headed and if you want to be 'with it' you've got to do this. They bought that by droves" (Doblin, Chicago, IL, telephone interview).

A continual problem was that historically the American scene had been dominated by advertising agencies. Clients were used to advertising agencies, where last minute projects and new approaches on short notice were the norm. Unimark was doing a different type of creative work and clients often didn't realize the difference. Sometimes that created problems. Ron Coates said, "Doing a single page ad is one thing but how do you do a major corporate identity in that kind of time frame? The problem in the U.S. was partially the client didn't understand how long it took to do some of this stuff. Unfortunately the Unimark management, even though they'd get time

where they could, usually had a very aggressive, can-do attitude" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

David Law cited the Ford account as an example. Although he admitted that much of the pressure at Unimark came from within as a result of that "can-do" attitude, outside factors contributed to the company's problems. He said, "Ford would call up at maybe six o'clock and say we've got to make a big presentation for so and so. All the stationary has got to be changed and you know, have all new drawings for the sign program, etc." (Law, New York, NY, interview). Although the Unimark management tried to be supportive of the designers, the in-grained behavior and demanding attitude on the part of the clients was hard to alter.

Gradually clients did develop a sense of expectation, viewing Unimark as synonymous with a modern design approach. Unfortunately, with that initial acceptance, the problems of landing clients for certain types of work became even more difficult. Unimark became so strongly connected with corporate identity programs that it was hard to attract clients for anything else. In the mid-seventies, as Unimark attempted to move into other areas, they again met with client resistance.

The reliance on corporate identity created some internal dissatisfaction among the staff. Some designers tired of working on multiple identity programs, which took years to complete. Starting a new identity program was exciting, if a bit overwhelming, but as the

newness wore off and the hard work and long hours continued, it was sometimes difficult to stay creatively challenged as a designer.

The emotional stimulation and creative motivation was high in all the offices, but long hours wore people down. In Detroit the staff of about fifteen people often worked seven days a week, for twelve to fifteen hours a day. Detroit was not the only office in that situation. In Chicago, Steve Eckerstrom, another of Ralph's sons, said "there was one period of time where I think I worked sixty or seventy days straight with no time off" (Steve Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

In competing for the prestigious projects, Unimark was willing to throw people and vast amounts of resources into the work. In hiring Unimark to complete a project, the client companies were paying tremendous fees for that aggressive approach, but the large fees didn't translate into large salaries for the Unimark employees. Unimark spent vast sums courting their clients (the approach to Ford notwithstanding) and also in producing the work. Photographs, mockups of exhibits or packaging, market analysis and other project-related expenses absorbed much of the fees. As a result, low salaries were often a topic of employee discontent.

Katherine McCoy, for instance, was not well paid as a junior designer in Detroit. She often worked sixty to eighty hour weeks with no overtime compensation. McCoy felt payment was not strictly confined to salary, but also came through the opportunity to be a part of Unimark. There was creative satisfaction at being able to develop

the best possible work and knowing the management was supportive. Interaction with other Unimark employees was another important selling point. "They were able to attract really excellent designers," she said. "Europeans first of all because European designers are still not paid as well, and European salaries in general are lower than here, so it looked very good to them. It was just the best place there was to work" (McCoy, Bloomfield Hills, MI, telephone interview).

Still, the sense of dedication and the challenge of excellent work wasn't enough to sustain designers indefinitely. Hard feelings sometimes resulted from the lack of monetary benefits. David Law, who also worked in the Detroit office, said "I worked there five years and probably put in enough hours to have actually worked there ten. I think most of us felt taken advantage of; the pay wasn't based on fourteen hour days. The pay was pretty minimal. . . . We knew that we were working 80 or 90 or 100 hour weeks and they were billing the clients when we put in 90 hours, but we were paid for 35 hours a week. We felt somewhat taken advantage of. We all worked like crazy so why not work for ourselves and try and generate our own money?" (Law, New York, NY, interview).

The other side of the problem for designers was viewing the spending habits of the top executives. Entertaining clients and regular traveling between offices was expensive. Some of the designers viewed management's spending habits as further reason to leave Unimark; why not try to get more financial paybacks elsewhere

and reap the obvious benefits of moving up in position? The irony was that Unimark won points in hiring people by spending a lot of money to bring them into the company, then failed to provide incentives to keep them there.

Long hours and low pay resulted in tremendous turnover, which in turn caused hardships for those who remained. David Law remembered one point when the entire staff walked into the manager's office and threatened to quit out of frustration with the tight deadlines on the Ford account. Unfortunately, Unimark's leaders weren't as adept at handling the business aspects of the firm as well as they did the design.

A great amount of work was developed but never produced because of the high standards within Unimark. The designers would prepare a presentation and Eckerstrom or Doblin or Vignelli would come in and reject it for not meeting their design expectations. Even in an eleventh-hour situation, the company leaders weren't afraid to reject work. The Volvo account provides a good example.

Unimark was developing a whole dealership for Volvo inside the MGM Grand Ballroom in Las Vegas with a time frame of just weeks for the project. Ron Coates said, "It all got done. . . . It was an unbelievable volume of creativity, but what was staggering was the stuff that ended up on the floor, the fact that given the short time, we'd present stuff and Ralph would throw it away. That was a lot of faith on his part I think" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

Coates was somewhat awed by Ralph Eckerstrom's willingness to start projects over. "He had more riding on some of these things than I did," he said. "He knew they were damn good but I guess he thought we could do better and knew somehow we'd get it done. In today's marketplace people will really hang you on a missed deadline and they did then too, but I don't think they ever missed one. Not in my tenure anyway" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview).

Evan Eckerstrom felt that an obsession with perfection was one of the downfalls of Unimark. "There was very much a concentration on getting the work done to a standard as opposed to necessarily being profitable," he said. "Toward the very end we didn't always look at the bottom line, actually never looked at the bottom line I think is what it amounted to" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

The many projects presented to clients that did not make it beyond the initial proposal stage was another frustration for the designers. Unimark seemed to have a continual problem with this. "It was not the flashy commercial approach they were used to seeing as desirable," said Katherine McCoy. "The idea that it would be functional and it would speak of quality - these were not corporate values in the U.S. in the mid-sixties and it was just not the way corporations were used to thinking. . . .The corporations had a hard time keeping faith beyond the proposal stage. Quite often they lost their resolve or their convictions beyond the basic concept presentation" (McCoy, Bloomfield Hills, MI, telephone interview). For

a variety of reasons, often because of sheer expense, many projects never got implemented.

Client implementation was one area where some of the competition seemed to do a better job. One example was Lippincott and Margulies, who would send one of their vice presidents into the client company to make sure a job got implemented correctly. It prevented infighting and provided a project leader who perfectly understood the needs of the new project. While Unimark paid attention to other firms as competitors on a project basis, it might have helped to analyze their regular structural workings as well.

Not having to fight a strong advertising agency tradition made the situation in Europe completely different. The Milan office was more likely to build on-going relationships with clients, producing day-to-day communications along with large programs. In the United States, it was more common for Unimark to be hired on a single project basis. At that time in the U.S., most large corporations did not understand that design could be an important part of their business, and they resisted a steady relationship with a design firm.

Differences in operating style from the Milan office to the offices in the United States showed up on the ledger sheets as well as in project listings. Milan relied on long-term relationships for steady income, spreading out payments over the length of a continuing contract. The income from regular work helped support other projects, often corporate identity or product design. Over the long

run, the Milan office made more money from its clients because they produced more work. That contrasted with the offices in the U.S., where few clients had Unimark on retainer. Instead, Unimark was usually hired and paid on a per-project basis, making long-term financial planning nearly impossible.

The ongoing relationships developed with European clients again related to historical differences in the role of design in society. Steve Eckerstrom felt that the foreign accounts had a better sense of what design was all about and many Unimark designers agreed with his assessment. In the United States, the clean lines of the modern style often weren't understood or appreciated. Coates said "We were trying to get away from the engineers and sell style, good looking design and freshness. In a sense, maybe part of the ploy is if you do it fast, they don't have time to kill it. Hit them hard, hit them fast before they have a chance to think" (Coates, Chicago, IL, interview). Unimark spent more time for client education than they had intended, but still had mixed success.

Many of the problems plaguing Unimark in the mid-seventies were related to management decision-making. Previously, in a growing economic climate, everyday management decisions weren't as critical; the strength of the general economy overcame inexperienced management. But Unimark discovered when economic growth slowed that appropriate management decisions became crucial. Unfortunately, most of the managers at Unimark were designers and marketing

specialists who lacked training in business management, and the company suffered accordingly.

Unimark founders enthusiastically pursued ventures that fit their idealistic view of design with little regard for financial repercussions. There was a continuing interest in new technology including computer-supported design. Unimark was one of the very early experimenters in that area. Several Unimark designers cooperated with Charles Owen, a professor at the Institute of Design at IIT, in developing computer pagination. Evan Eckerstrom remembered that there was a computer link in the Chicago office, and "it was so developmental, so speculative. . . that the billing charges were just immense and it couldn't be rebilled" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

Another area was furniture manufacturing in Milan. Unimark developed a system called Modular 3 and licensed it to be manufactured in Italy. "I don't think the investment ever really paid off," said Evan Eckerstrom. "The company was sold and has been sold twice since then" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

Although poor financial judgment internally didn't help the situation, the biggest financial problems came from clients. Some clients faltered during the economic crisis and Unimark received little if any reimbursement for their design work. Smarter use of lawyers might have been helpful, but the economic slide happened so quickly that Unimark was caught unprepared.

The other financial problem was more a frustration for the office heads away from Chicago. Massimo Vignelli explained, "The financial structure was such that all the profit, all the money, went into Chicago and then Chicago would pay salaries around the country. That meant basically every office was just like a branch to Chicago" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). Vignelli and Fogelman wanted to have each office set up as a profit center to allow more individual control, but many of the people in the Chicago office resisted that idea. Despite those types of disagreements, the executives were quick to agree on one thing: there was no dishonesty, no one stealing more than his share. Unimark was an honest, if not always profitable company.

Ralph Eckerstrom admitted that Unimark had problems, and took responsibility for some of them. One area was in having so many offices. If he could go back and start over, Eckerstrom said "I would not have set up these various offices around the world. . . .Having individual offices was really more my idea, though that was part of the concept. It worked very well for a while, but the economics of that were just too tough" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). The company grew and extended bases to meet immediate demands, but a long-term plan of organization was never realized.

Shuttling numerous designers back and forth between offices was exciting but unsettling. Harri Boller from Chicago to Detroit, Michael Donovan from New York to Chicago, Steve Dunne from Cleveland to

New York, the list goes on. All the movement was not particularly conducive to regular productivity. Being at Unimark was described by one designer as like being in a creative explosion.

The people who gave Unimark its strength ultimately contributed to its downfall. Strong personalities and strong opinions characterized everyone at Unimark. Michael Donovan said, "I think its very difficult to hold together a group of creative people because they have a tendency to be iconoclastic, harder to corral and organize and order, and get everyone marching in the same direction" (Donovan, New York, NY, telephone interview).

Ralph Eckerstrom often took a creative back seat to Vignelli, despite his own long involvement with design. While Vignelli provided design leadership, Eckerstrom provided general motivation and guidance. "He's superb at approaching things from a very high level, with some very grand ideas and philosophies," said Evan Eckerstrom. "One of his great strengths was fighting for these ideas and insisting they be carried out" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

David Law worked closely with all the leaders over his tenure at Unimark, and added descriptions of Massimo Vignelli and Jay Doblin to Evan Eckerstrom's comments. "Massimo can do anything with a pen and pencil -- anything. A lot of people need other tools, but Massimo expresses his intellect with pen and pencil. Jay does it differently. Jay does it verbally. He expresses his intellect through all the facts

and figures, charts and analysis. Verbal description, research, marketing data . . . a really different kind of approach than Massimo's drawings" (Law, New York, NY, interview).

Because Vignelli often was publicized as the design leader for the firm, his leaving Unimark provoked a crisis. Vignelli left for a mixture of reasons; he felt strongly about the individualized profit centers because he saw that as a way to further expand Unimark's impact. He felt the international prospects should be pushed further, rather than retrenching in the United States. He felt waste was getting excessive both in terms of office supplies and materials, and in terms of entertaining. Vignelli's main dissatisfactions were aimed at Chicago, where he felt too many people had too much power in the company without having an understanding of the whole operation. With his continual travels, he felt he had a better perspective on the company and on the world of design.

Despite the advantages constant travel offered in terms of an overall perspective, it was very stressful. "I was getting tired of going around the world. . . . When you have to go all the time it begins to take a toll," said Vignelli. "I got sick one time and was in bed for a week with a stiff neck. It gave me a lot of time to focus without distractions. When they called me on Sunday and asked how I felt, I said I was fine. Then they said, you know this week we've got this we've got that, . . . I said I don't give a damn what we've got anymore. I couldn't care less and as a matter of fact, I'm pulling out now. On

Monday I pulled out. Ralph called . . . then he came to New York and it was hard because we're very good friends. The more we talked I wanted to go back -- back into Unimark. But I decided it was best that I was sticking to my first feeling. That was it" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview).

Massimo and Lella Vignelli resigned from Unimark and opened their own design firm in New York. It left a leadership gap in Unimark right at the time the economic crunch hit, and between the two circumstances, Unimark was severely wounded. Within a few months, the New York office was closed. In a short period of time, other offices closed and Unimark was left only with offices in Chicago and Milan.

Vignelli said he did not intend to cause a breakdown by leaving, he simply felt the time was right to go on his own. Michael Donovan became a close personal friend with the Vignellis while at Unimark, and remembered making plans for a short trip to Europe in 1971. Donovan said, "Before I left . . . Massimo and Lella came to me and said, just so you won't be surprised, when you come back we probably won't be here. When I came back they were no longer with Unimark; Unimark was changing. . . . I would say at it's high point the office had maybe thirty-five people; it was probably down to fifteen" (Donovan, New York, NY, telephone interview). Other managers were brought into the New York office, but there wasn't a complete trust and

understanding from either side. Designers were leaving all offices, not just the New York office.

Harri Boller felt all the offices were affected when Vignelli left. "Massimo left Unimark, I think in 1971. As he left, things changed," said Boller. "I think when he left it started declining. The New York office was gone, which always produced the high visibility work under the Unimark name" (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview). The visibility, the publicity, the awards benefited all Unimark designers, and it hurt to lose the recognition.

Unimark had experienced phenomenal growth from its formation through 1969. In 1970 ". . . growth flattened out but the Unimark mentality was still in a growth pattern. Everybody was gung-ho and wanted to conquer the world. . . . The person who probably should have been more aware of the dangers was Wally Gutches. Wally was the executive vice president in charge of the financial aspects," said Daniel Wefler (Wefler, Chicago,IL, interview). Eugene Ryan was hired in 1970 to straighten out the books for the year; Wefler said by the time Ryan finished that process, Unimark's loss for the year was a million dollars.

Once the financial difficulty was apparent, Unimark attempted to bring it under control, but a gradual erosion continued. In 1971, company lawyers recommended Chapter 11 for financial relief. Wefler said "Ralph absolutely did not want to do that; he felt it would be very damaging for the business. But the lawyers kept saying, look,

this is a little business and companies go in Chapter 11 every day and you never hear about it. I guess where they miscalculated . . . Unimark might have been a small company in the universe of companies but in its field it was large and very visible. . . . Chapter 11 was handled beautifully. Agreements were made with all the creditors before it ever went into Chapter 11 . . . it was only in about 30 days, which was almost a record" (Wefler, Chicago, IL, interview). Eckerstrom's fears were correct; although the bankruptcy eased financial pressures, the negative publicity was widespread.

Unimark tried to retrench in Chicago and continue operations but everything seemed stacked against success. "The overall effect in the office was to lead to a lot of instability and people leaving. Most were leaving, fewer coming," said Evan Eckerstrom. "We had to consolidate; we actually occupied half the space [in Chicago] we had occupied before. . . . There was a lot of movement and it was really frustrating" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

Ralph Eckerstrom said "the senior officers at Unimark saw what was going on and there was no way we could sustain. We had to pay off these debts . . . and there was no way to keep the whole thing together, although we did try. Using Chicago as a base, we tried" (Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). Unimark declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy again in 1975 as the interest on debts became overwhelming. Operating for the last few years under the name Unimark International: A Division of Dot Zero, the restructuring gave a

last chance to clear up debts and continue operations. Projects continued to come in, but Unimark kept gradually shrinking. At the end, people left because in trying to satisfy debts, payroll wasn't being met.

In 1977, Unimark received its last large project, developing signs for the Northeast rail corridor and the historic railway stations for the Federal Railway Administration and the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. "At this point the staff had probably dropped to about ten people," said Evan Eckerstrom. "The job was of long duration, about eighteen months. At the very end of the job I was literally the last employee, with a couple of young architects to help me with drawings. That was in about 1979" (Evan Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview).

Chapter 5 - Unimark's Importance in Design History

At the time Unimark developed, the United States was the world's undisputed industrial leader and attitudes were changing as people wrestled with concepts of social conscience and social responsibility. "There was a real wave of optimism and change [in the U.S.] that was shared by a number of people at Unimark," said Steve Eckerstrom. "They felt that somehow all of this work they were doing would make the world a better place. That you could somehow create a good design and install it perfectly or develop it perfectly and you would add to the quality of people's lives" (Steve Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). The Unimark designers were strongly dedicated and committed to excellence. David Law felt " you knew there were very few people that were good enough designers to be considered as an employee at Unimark. You wanted to give it your best shot and prove you could do really good work" (Law, New York, NY, interview).

"One way you can measure the influence of Unimark is by how many people claim that heritage and even expand upon their role there," said Steve Eckerstrom (Steve Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). If nothing else, Unimark had a strong effect on design in the United States through sheer numbers. When Unimark formed, there were not many design offices in this country and very few of Unimark's stature. Massimo Vignelli said "within a couple years, we became the largest one in the world, employing 160 to 200, something like that. I think

it was close to 500 at the largest" (Vignelli, New York, NY, interview). Considering that few designers remained with the firm for more than four years, it is not surprising Unimark had a major effect on design by training a new generation of designers.

As Unimark retrenched and faded from prominence, it generated many small design firms. "It mushroomed," said Harri Boller (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview). Robert Moldafsky and Ralph Eckerstrom remembered trying to count spin-off firms and coming up with about forty names. Among the most prestigious was Design Planning Group, formed in Chicago in 1974 by Harri Boller, Dale Fahnstrom, David Law, Philip Seefeld and Peter Teubner. Jay Doblin shared office space with the group and served as a project consultant. "[At Design Planning Group] we were trying to compensate for the craziness at Unimark, so we were going to all be Indians; there weren't going to be any chiefs," said David Law. "That didn't work either. Everyone wanted to be a chief" (Law, New York, NY, interview). Harri Boller agreed with that assessment, adding "you need some kind of structure . . . we didn't have a businessman at Design Planning Group. That was the problem with Unimark too -- there was not really a good businessman" (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview).

Other former Unimark designers either developed their own firms or became influential within existing design offices. Massimo Vignelli, John Rieben, Theodore Peterson, Vance Jonson and Michael Donovan all established successful new firms in the United States.

Philip Seefeld joined Landor Associates in San Francisco, becoming a vice president for marketing. Virginia MacIntosh was hired by Raychem in Menlo Park, and Marjorie Katz joined Aramus to become a creative director. Among those striking out as freelancers were Ina Wijtvliet, John Greiner, Peter Teubner and Rene Weiss. Some shifted focus, like Francois Robert. He moved from graphic design into photography after leaving Unimark and has since become a prominant photographer in Chicago.

Beyond the continuing successes of the Unimark designers, the firm itself deserves recognition for its position at the forefront of American design. Michael Donovan discussed Unimark's contributions, saying, "I think Unimark was one of half a dozen design firms, maybe not even that many, that organized themselves along sort of a European tradition where they really valued . . . the idea of good design. Everyone says that [good design is important] but I think time will prove Unimark, Lippencott and Margulies, Chermayeff and Geismar, Pentagram and maybe another three or four firms were absolutely in the forefront of bringing good design to American corporations" (Donovan, New York, NY, telephone interview).

"Unimark represented modernism in graphics and products," said Jay Doblin. "It was the first major design organization that ever devoted itself entirely to modernism at the commercial level" (Doblin, Chicago, IL, telephone interview). Introducing a language of expression based on logical objective approaches was part of

Unimark's modernism. Unimark concentrated on problem solving rather than simply providing decorative surfaces. Using underlying grids, the clean lines of Helvetica and simple and bold color schemes focused concentration on the message rather than on presentation.

Sometimes Unimark approaches were copied, but the designers generally took that in stride. David Law said, "If you consider that imitation is one of the best forms of flattery, evidently a lot of people thought Unimark was doing okay stuff because it sure started having quite an influence" (Law, New York, NY, interview). Some stiff competition came from former Unimark designers who put their Unimark training solidly to use in problem solving and developing successful design.

Other competition came at a less sophisticated level, as others attempted to imitate Unimark's modern approach without understanding the process or developing the visual sensitivity of Unimark designers. Using Helvetica was one area where imitators often fell short of the original. "Unimark really introduced Helvetica but then every two bit design outfit in the country was slapping it on everything, with awful spacing and none of the attention to detail," complained Steve Eckerstrom (Steve Eckerstrom, Chicago, IL, interview). Harri Boller agreed, citing Massimo Vignelli's sensitive and successful use of tight letterspacing with Helvetica. "If you look at his work it is all the same, still that tight spacing," said Boller. "What we didn't do, and what became big fashion was this touching

letter business. Also practically no leading was used. Helvetica in particular was kind of degraded, done as gray areas; legibility didn't matter" (Boller, Chicago, IL, interview).

There was a lack of visual sophistication in the United States when Unimark began working with modern design. Unimark was important for its role in design education, both for practising professionals and for the general public. Insisting that a designer was a visual problem solver, and that good design made good business sense were new ideas in the corporate world. Also innovative was the belief that designers and design firms could be multi-faceted, capable of designing a wide variety of needs.

Unimark stood apart from competitors not only because of its work but also because of the emphasis on providing a total communications package combining marketing and aesthetics. "It all goes back to the basic idea we started with -- the idea of communications. All the things we did were really a form of communicating . . . either in a selling mode or an aesthetic mode or a creative mode," said Robert Moldafsky. "That was very important and that's what sold the clients on Unimark. American Airlines, Ford, Volvo and all those bought the idea that what we were doing was not just making pretty things, but we were communicating something to the consumer" (Moldafsky, Chicago, IL, interview). The combinations of marketing people with designers had not been done before, and Unimark was successful with that approach not just in the United States but on an international

level. Now, twenty years after Unimark started, the idea of good design making good business sense has become commonplace.

Unimark helped to popularize International Modernism, and established corporate identity systems as a major area of design practice. Interdisciplinary design and team approaches were also important contributions by the firm. The dedication to good design characterized Unimark from its beginning and earned the company a respected position in design history.

Appendix A - A Partial Listing of Unimark Designers

Barron, Roger - designer in the London office.

Bayer, Herbert - served as a senior consultant to Unimark while retaining his own practice. He is now deceased.

Boeri, Mario - designer and business manager in the Milan office. He is still with Noorda's Unimark office.

Boller, Harri - previously with Paul Arthur Associates, Montreal, to work on Expo 67. He spent five years with Unimark, 1969-1974 in Chicago before leaving to help found Design Planning Group. Now a partner with Boller/Coates/Spadaro Ltd. in Chicago.

Branham, Richard - worked in the Chicago office. Collaborated with Harri Boller on experiments in computer design. Now at the University of Kansas Department of Design, Lawrence, Kansas.

Bunton, Marijke - designer in the Johannesburg office.

Cioppa, Carol - worked as an interior designer in the New York office.

Cioppa, Robert - an architect briefly associated with the New York office in the mid 60s.

Cittato, Guilio - came from La Rinascente Upim in Italy to work as a designer in the Chicago office. He was with Unimark and Container Corporation from 1965 to 1970 and returned to Italy in 1974.

Coates, Ronald - joined as a junior design in 1971 after graduating from University of Cincinnati. He worked in the Chicago and Milan offices before leaving about 1975 to help found Boller Coates Robert. Now a partner with Boller/Coates/Spadaro Ltd. in Chicago.

Constantine, Mildred - served on the editorial board of Dot Zero. She was associated with the Museum of Modern Art in New York for many years and is currently an author and consultant specializing in American crafts.

Doblin, Jay - Director of IIT Institute of Design. He joined Unimark as senior vice president based in the Chicago office. He was also a consulting editor for Dot Zero. He established Jay Doblin and Associates Limited in Chicago in 1972 and continues to be associated with that firm.

Dolby, John - designer in the Chicago office.

Donovan, Michael - joined in 1969 after completing graduate studies at Parsons School of Design. An environmental designer, he worked in the New York office until about 1972. Now a partner with Donovan and Green in New York.

Dorrie, Gerhard - joined Unimark after completing work on Expo 67 in Montreal in the late 60s. He was based in the New York office during his short tenure with Unimark, leaving to start his own firm.

Dunne, Stephen - headed the Cleveland office, when it closed he moved to Chicago. In 1971 he went to New York to take over after Vignelli's departure. He is now deceased.

Eckerstrom, Evan - worked with Unimark from 1969 until 1979. He began as production staff, eventually switching over to design. He worked in the New York, London and Chicago offices. He is currently with the Association of Professional Design Firms in Chicago.

Eckerstrom, Ralph - previously with Container Corporation, he became president and founder of Unimark and also headed the Chicago office. After closing Unimark, he was associated with Mobium, a division of RR Donnelly in Chicago until his retirement.

Eckerstrom, Steve - based in Chicago, he joined Unimark as a freelance writer in 1974.

Fahnstrom, Dale - based in the Chicago office, he worked on the JCPenney account. He left Unimark to help found Design Planning Group about 1974. He is now at Illinois Institute of Technology, Department of Design, in Chicago.

Fogleman, James, K. - one of the original founders, formerly with Ciba Corporation. He ran the New York office in cooperation with Massimo Vignelli. He is now in Chatham, Massachusetts.

Ford, Allan - worked in the Detroit office as a representative on the Ford Motor account, then moved to the New York office.

Geurts, Arie J. - designer in the Johannesburg office.

Gregorietti, Salvatore - worked for Rinascente Advertising Department and for Massimo Vignelli before joining the Milan office in 1965. Worked on Dreher beer and Agip Petroli corporate image programs, and designed the Pirelli Sapsa trademark.

Greiner, John - executive designer in the Chicago office. Now with Greiner Design Associates in Chicago.

Grobler, Andre - designer in the Johannesburg office.

Gutches, Wally - came from Container Corporation to act as business manager in Chicago and then in New York. He is now deceased.

Jennings, Simon - designer in London, working on the Volvo account.

Jonson, Vance - executive designer in the New York office. He also served as a contributing editor to Communication Arts. He is now a partner with a New York design firm.

Kacik, Walter - designer in the early days of the New York office. He left to form his own design firm in New York.

Katz, Marjorie - graphic designer in the New York office, now Creative Director at Aramus.

Klein, Larry - established Klein/Wassman in 1960 in Chicago and in 1965 became a cofounder of Unimark and the first designer in the Chicago office. He left Unimark to re-form his own business in 1966. Currently he has authored a new text on exhibit design.

Kovak, Ron - graphic designer at Unimark, now with Mobium Design in Chicago.

Law, David B. - started in the Detroit office about 1966, then moved to Chicago. He left about 1974 to help found Design Planning Group. He is now senior vice president with Vignelli Associates in New York.

Leydon, Arthur - worked with Unimark in the United States briefly before returning to Australia to run the Melbourne office.

MacIntosh, Virginia - head of production in New York office. She is now at Raychem, Menlo Park, CA.

McCoy, Katherine - after graduating from Michigan State University in 1967, she joined Unimark as a junior designer in Detroit until 1968. She is now a partner in McCoy & McCoy Associates and is co-chair of the design department at Cranbrook Academy or Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

McFarland, Fred - associated with Unimark in its infancy through his office in Palo Alto, California.

Mead, Emory - account manager and designer based in Detroit, then in Chicago.

Mirenzi, Franco - designer in the Milan office, working on furniture and package designs. Co-designed "Modulo 3" office furniture with Bob Noorda.

Moldafsky, Robert - came from Sara Lee to join Unimark as senior vice president and a division manager in Chicago. He is now a vice president at AIMS Corporation (Association of Independent Marketing Services) in Chicago.

Neill, James - designer in the Chicago office. He is now with PrinsKoeller in Chicago.

Nittner, Thomas - came from Total Design, Amsterdam, to join the New York office.

Noorda, Bob - co-founder and head of European design operations. Based in Milan, he was formerly Art Director for Pirelli Company in Milan. He continues to had Unimark in Milan.

Oehler, Norbert - worked on the New York Transit Authority subway map in 1972.

Owen, Charles - Professor of design at the Institute of Design at IIT. He served as a consultant on Unimark's experiments with computer design.

Peterson, Theodore - a vice president who joined about 1965. He was Design Director in Detroit, then in Chicago until leaving the firm about 1974. He now heads Peterson Associates in Hinsdale, Illinois.

Pringle, William - executive designer in the New York office.

Rieben, John R. - former manager of design at Container Corporation, he was with Unimark from 1969 through 1972. He was Director of Design in Johannesburg, South Africa and in Denver.

Ritter, Richard - designer, now heading Richard P. Ritter Inc. in Berwyn, Pennsylvania.

Robb, Robert - designer in the Chicago and San Francisco offices.

Robert, Francois - joined the Chicago office about 1974. He is now a professional photographer in Chicago.

Ryan, Eugene - a financial manager brought into the Chicago office about 1971.

Seeben, Patricia - formerly with Container Corporation, she became a vice president in the Chicago office. She managed the slide archives for the company, and served as "pinch hitter" moving between offices as needed. She is now with Mobium Design in Chicago.

Seefeld, Philip - worked in the JCPenney design team in Chicago before leaving to help found Design Planning Group. He is now with Landor Associates in San Francisco.

Selke, David - industrial designer based in the Chicago office in the late 1970s.

Scrima, Louis - industrial designer in the New York office in the late 60s. He came to Unimark from Pratt.

Smith, Grant - designer, now a partner with Agnew Moyer Smith Inc. in Pittsburgh.

Spadaro, Tony - worked in the Chicago office. He is now a partner with Boller/Coates/Spadaro Ltd. in Chicago.

Tabet, Antonio - designer in the Milan office.

Teubner, Peter - formerly with Total Design, Amsterdam, and then with Expo 67, he joined the New York office.

Van Delft, Peter - senior designer in New York, then in London office.

von Holstein, Jan - ran Unimark's London office.

Vignelli, Lella - joined Unimark in Milan in 1965, shortly after became executive designer for interior design in the New York office. She left in 1971 to co-found Vignelli Associates with her husband, Massimo.

Vignelli, Massimo - co-founder, Director & Senior Vice President for Design, based in the New York office from 1965 to 1971. He also designed Dot Zero. He left in 1971 to co-found Vignelli Associates in New York.

Watson, Thomas - former manager with N.W. Ayer. He joined Unimark's Chicago office about 1971 in a sales position. He left Unimark about 1975.

Wefler, Daniel - one of business managers in Chicago. He is now president of the Association of Professional Design Firms in Chicago.

Weible, Heinz - designer in the Johannesburg office.

Weiss, Rene - came from Bonn, West Germany to head the product design area in Chicago.

Wijtvleit, Ine - formerly with Total Design, Amsterdam before being recruited by Unimark in 1969. She left Unimark in 1970 and is now a freelance designer in New York.

Appendix B - Listing of Unimark Offices

American offices:

- Chicago - 1965 through 1979
- Cleveland - 1966
- Denver - 1967 through 1971
- Detroit - 1965 through 1968, then in reduced size until 1970
- New York - 1965 through 1972
- San Francisco - 1967 through 1972

Overseas offices:

- Copenhagen, Denmark - 1967
- Johannesburg, South Africa - 1967 through 1971
- London, England - 1970 through 1971
- Melbourne, Australia - 1966 through 1967
- Milan, Italy - began in 1965; still operating under the Unimark name

Appendix C - Division of Personnel Between Offices

Chicago
R. Eckerstrom (head)
H. Boller
R. Branham
G. Cittato
R. Coates
J. Doblin
J. Dolby
E. Eckerstrom
D. Fahnstrom
J. Greiner
W. Gutches
L. Klein
D. Law
E. Mead
R. Moldafsky
J. Neill
T. Peterson
F. Robert
P. Seeben
P. Seefeld
D. Selke
T. Spadaro
D. Wefler
R. Weiss

New York
M. Vignelli (head)
J. Fogleman (head)
C. Cioppa
M. Donovan
G. Dorrie
E. Eckerstrom
S. Dunne
W. Gutches (head)
V. Jonson
M. Katz
V. MacIntosh
T. Nittner
N. Oehler
W. Pringle
L. Scrima
P. Teubner
P. van Delft
L. Vignelli
I. Wijtvleit

Milan
B. Noorda (head)
M. Boeri
S. Gregorietti
F. Mirenzi
A. Tabet

London
J. von Holstein (head)
R. Barron
E. Eckerstrom
S. Jennings
P. Van Delft

Johannesburg
J. Rieben (head)
M. Bunton
A. Geurts
A. Grobler

Melbourne
A. Leydon (head)

Cleveland
S. Dunne (head)

Denver
J. Rieben (head)

Detroit
T. Peterson (head)
D. Law
K. McCoy
E. Mead

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