

Update

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2005

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SWISS RIFFS An American's observations of real-life Swiss design **PAGE 13**





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An American in Switzerland



David McCreery shoots a self-portrait during a bike ride around Lake Geneva at a field that overlooks the lake and the Alps.

About the author

David McCreery is a designer and photojournalist from South Haven, Mich. He plans to live in Geneva for two years. His previous European adventures include helping Mario Garcia on redesign projects in Berlin and Amsterdam, plus taking pictures for Rolling Stone in Germany. His e-mail is mccreer4@egr.msu.edu, his Web site is <http://www.davidm.net> and his astrological sign is Aries.

Finding the country's personality through design

Story and photos by David McCreery

Four months ago, I left Washington, D.C. for Geneva, Switzerland to put my visual journalism skills to work at the United Nations. As an SND member, I'd be lying if I said I didn't pay attention to design in my new country.

Swiss design can be elegant, but it is rarely loud or flashy. It's more frequently clean and quiet, the kind that hides in the background. In the club of global design, Swiss style is content on being a wallflower.

In *Pure Design*, Mario Garcia writes, "there are Bodoni towns and Helvetica towns. Relate your

[type] selection to the culture of the publication's home."

What is the logical choice for Switzerland? If there's any doubt, look at the coins. There it is clearly written: Confederatio Helvetica. While Helvetica is not the sole typeface here, it is a favorite in a country that leans towards the sans serif.

Full disclosure: in a previous SND Update piece, I was critical of the overuse of Helvetica's standard and bold weights. My opinion has not changed. I find Tobias Frere-Jones' Whitney to be a fresh and elegant alternative.

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Money

The Swiss are not on the Euro, even though the design of the Euro notes seems more at home than the Swiss Francs. The Swiss paper money is bright and gaudy. I can't prove it, but I suspect their artist might have a fetish for Hawaiian shirts.

It's actually a compliment to say that Swiss money is designed for people with bad vision. Each note has a distinctive color: yellow for 10, red for 20, green for 50, blue for 100. The denominations also get progressively larger in physical size.

Even the blind are not left behind, due to raised geometric symbols on the money.



Stewart

Someone can tell the difference between a 10 and a 20, by feeling the raised circle and raised square.

On a side note, I'm convinced that the Swiss are closet Star Trek fans and that it's actually Patrick Stewart on the 10 franc notes.



Coins

The Swiss coins aren't as well designed as their paper counterparts. They're too similar and it's hard to tell what is what. The 50 cent piece and 10 cent piece are almost identical in size. Only the 5 cent piece is a different metal than the other coins.





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Executed orders

Display criteria

Ordinary payments

Beneficiary	Text	Currency	Amount	Date	Account
SERVICES INDUSTRIELS DE	EB COLLECT. ORD.	CHF	67.80	09.06.2005	8.40Y

UBS Bank

UBS bank does its best to impart iron-clad security towards its customers' money. Online banking requires a James Bond style calculator that doubles as a security code generator.

The bank truly deserves credit for a similarly iron-clad corporate graphic identity system. Every sheet of paper issued by them exudes meticulous design: paperwork to open an account, business cards, even bank statements.

Very few banks in the world bother to typeset their statements with care. A statement from UBS could show a three franc balance but still have "class." Like all other UBS items, it's typeset using a custom cut of Bodoni for headings, with Frutiger light and bold for agate.

Naked capitalism

A naked man riding an eagle adorns the art-deco downtown Geneva office of UBS Bank. It's unclear what the marketing message is supposed to be. Should customers be more inclined to trust a naked man with their life savings? More importantly, where will the naked man keep their money?

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Trains

SBB, the Swiss national railroad, uses Helvetica Neue almost exclusively in its printed collateral.

What's more noteworthy is that they provide a well-designed ticket buying experience. Even as a native

Anglophone, it's easy to go into a train station and quickly hit the rails.

At Cornavin, Geneva's main station, there are self-service kiosks to search the European rail timetable and print out schedules.

Ticket machines are generously placed throughout the station. They have easy to use touch screen menus and allow purchases with a credit or debit card.

One of the best parts of the ticket machines is that they print business card size tickets. They fit perfectly into a plastic folder that comes with the half-price rail passes--keeping everything organized for the conductor's inspection.





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Chocolate

Upon arrival in Geneva, binging on Swiss chocolate seemed like a good way to assimilate into the local culture. Some grocery stores have thirty feet or more of display space for their selection of chocolate bars. As opposed to trying them one by one, a Swiss girl recommended the Migros store brand bars as her favorite.

The chocolate is great, but the packaging falls short of its cocoa contemporaries. It's clear that Migros is trying to differentiate its bars as a discount brand, but it misses the mark. The packaging looks dated and low-brow. It doesn't suggest value, it suggests not being able to afford something better.

As a national retailer, it could learn from Target Stores in the USA. Migros has the potential to create something more contemporary and dignified with their branding.

The solution would possibly make their products look more "Swiss" by toning things down--possibly using their store colors of green and orange as accents instead of primary colors.

Locally, there's a great example of this: the Swiss subsidiary of European mobile carrier Orange. Their main branding is their name "Orange" rendered in bright orange Helvetica light on a solid black background. It's possibly the most attractive branding in Switzerland.

It's your turn!

Do you have a real world design experience to share? Whether it's from your far-flung travels or right in your backyard, we'd like to hear about it. Send your stories and photos to denisereagan@mac.com.