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# Spatial construction for ideational meaning: An analysis of interior design students' multimodal projects

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**Abstract** | Multimodality is an inter-disciplinary approach that considers communication to be more than just language. Multimodal studies focus mostly on the analysis of two-dimensional printed, digital, and screen production. This paper explores a multimodal pedagogic approach used to teach students to create interior design projects as three-dimensional ensembles, which we reflect upon to contribute to the framework of multimodality. This qualitative research begins with a review of multimodal discourse establishing language as a system of choice, and a relationship between spatial design and language. A case-study of students' multimodal ensembles reveals how the design choices of mode, semiotic resource, modal affordance and inter-semiosis led to students producing rich and inclusive meaning, supporting a reproductive health mandate. An interpretive semiotic framework based on Hallidayan principles of Systemic-functional linguistics is developed for spatial meaning-making analysis for future projects. The findings offer a narrative metalanguage for spatial meaning-making, contributing to broader interior design discourse.

**KEYWORDS | MULTIMODALITY, INTERIOR DESIGN, SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS, HIV/AIDS AWARENESS, GUERRILLA MARKETING**

## 1. Introduction

Multimodality infers that communication and representation is greater than just language, and relies on a multiplicity of modes (visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, etc.) that people use to make meaning and to communicate with each other. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) considers how multimodal ‘texts’ make use of a variety of modes of communication to make meaning within the sociocultural context in which they occur. The aim of MDA is therefore to describe the socially situated semiotic resources that people draw upon for communication (Paltridge, 2012). The four key concepts that provide the basis for all MDA are: Mode, a medium of communication that is culturally shaped over time through its regular use in society; Semiotic resource, a means of meaning-making that display regularity in the way it is used; Modal affordance, what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode, and Inter-semiosis, how modes are arranged (or designed) in a particular context (Bezemer, 2012). Understanding these concepts and their interrelationship is critical in determining how communication functions in any particular time and place, how it is produced and by whom it is produced.

The rapidly developing interest in multimodality studies reflects a shift from discipline specific to thematic structures with inter-disciplinary collaboration becoming increasingly important to address current social challenges, the democratization of knowledge, and to accommodate for emerging new forms of digital communication. Within Multimodality studies there is a stronger correlation between theory and practice with an increased focus on developing solutions to real-world problems across a range of domains, revealing a change of relationship between academia and the wider society (O’Halloran & Smith, 2011).

Currently, the majority of literature focuses on two dimensional forms of multimodal discourse with far less relating to the analysis of three-dimensional and spatial modes of communication (Forceville, 2010; O’Halloran, 2008; Stenglin, 2004), to which this study wishes to contribute. The aim of the paper is to present students’ spatial design proposals that can be seen as rich meaning-making ensembles or ‘texts’, reflecting a set of choices made by the designers through the selection and arrangement of multiple two and three-dimensional semiotic modes, (e.g. text, sounds, colours, images, forms and texture, etc.), within a specific social context. This is done to demonstrate that three-dimensional spatial design (as an interior design practise) can contribute towards multimodality theory. We developed a ‘matrix of choice’ analytical framework based on the Hallidayan principles of functional linguistics. This framework is used to analyse how meaning is made in these spatial modes of communication, designed to raise awareness about HIV, and related social problems.

In this paper, we firstly present an overview of multimodal literature to theoretically position the study. We then present a background to a multimodal pedagogical approach used for the student project, purpose and objectives. Thereafter, we describe the research design and methods developed for analysing the described data, followed by an analysis of selected student’s proposals using an interpretive Systemic-functional linguistic (SFL) framework to

describe how the meaning is made in the student's multimodal ensembles. We conclude with a discussion on the implication for multimodality discourse and its impact on Interior Design studies.

## 2. Multimodality as the theoretical positioning of the study

Multimodality, Multimodal Semiotics and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) are terms used to describe the interdisciplinary approach to the study of language that extends the concept of language beyond the written and spoken word, to include images, symbols, gesture, action, music and sound (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; New London Group, 1996; O'Halloran, 2008). These terms are used to describe the study of any form of communication (media, mode, semiotic resources) other than the perceived dominant forms of written and spoken language (Bezemer, 2012). Multimodality theory draws on a social semiotic approach to language, to deliberate how multiple modes of communication in the form of 'texts' are used to make meaning (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013; Jewitt, et al., 2016; Kress, 2011). Kress (2011, p.36) explains

“...texts, of whatever kind, are the result of the semiotic work of design, and of processes of composition and production. They result in ensembles composed of different modes, resting on the agentive semiotic work of the maker of such texts”

Whom the author is and how the author uses multimodal forms of communication is a key concern of MDA. It is stated that:

“...people use semiotic resources both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them ... in the context of specific social situations and practices” (Van Leeuwen in O'Halloran, n.d., p.2).

According to Jewitt (2009) multimodality theory is formulated upon the following four assumptions:

- Representation and communication always draws on a variety of modes, all of which equally contribute towards meaning-making;
- Each mode of communication realizes different meanings;
- People orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes;
- Semiotic resources are shaped and refined over time by the social conventions specific to the genre, context and time.

Michael O'Toole, who pioneered the development of analytical semiotic models for application in MDA, based his analytical framework on Halliday's theory of SFL, notably *paradigmatic dimension* and *metafunctional dimension*. The principle of *paradigmatic dimension* implies that the user has choice for meaning-making and selects from available options within the environment (Halliday, 2003). Halliday's three metafunctions of language are described as:

- *Ideational or experiential* function, relating to the need for people to make sense about the world around them and within;
- *Interpersonal* function for creating and maintaining relationships;
- *Textual or compositional function*, which acts on how the other two modes are arranged to create a coherent flow of discourse.

### 3. Background to the student project, the brief objectives and modal influences

This annual student project forms part of a larger Curriculum-integration strategy developed by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) in South Africa. The HEAIDS was established as a

“...dedicated national facility to develop and support the HIV mitigation programmes at South Africa’s public Higher Educational Institutions” (HEAIDS, 2012, p.2).

This sexual reproductive health initiative is driven by government policy in response to the alarmingly high rate of HIV/AIDS infections in the region (UNAIDS 2019) and was implemented because “the age group most affected by the pandemic regrettably feed into the workplace and institutions of higher education” (Gobind & Ukpere, 2014, p.355; Shefer, et al., 2012). The University’s Interior Design department’s students regularly participate in this programme, in collaboration with the Institutional Office for HIV & AIDS (IOHA) whose officers are responsible for conducting workshops and educating students about reproductive health and wellness.

The brief outlined the project’s objectives of designing a multimodal spatial intervention that could promote HIV/AIDS awareness, lead the viewer to the various IOHA offices and services, and disseminate information. The specific design requirements required the students to: identify and analyse a suitable location on campus, create an original slogan/message for the appropriate target market (staff and students) using their own popular voices.

The students were encouraged to incorporate into their projects<sup>1</sup> visual and spatial modes of communication used in related, art, design and marketing disciplines namely: exhibition-stand design, installation art, and guerrilla marketing (GM). Some of the similarities between these modes of meaning-making is that they use multi-modalities to stun, attract and engage the viewer, make use of popular and positive catchy message and encourage consumers to disperse the message. They require high levels of creativity (Hutter &

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<sup>1</sup> All work produced by students as part of normal coursework remains the property of the university and therefore permission to use it for academic or marketing purposes is not required.

Hoffman, 2014), imagination and innovation in order to effectively engage consumers (Nufer, 2013) or viewers at a personal and memorable level; make use of the environment and its physical surfaces to convey messages (Gambetti, 2010); are usually temporary installations, and are defined by their ambient conditions.

This strategy adopted for the project brief was intended to produce an outcome that was meant to produce more than just a prototype of a multimodal awareness campaign or to tell a story. The intention here was to get deeper insight into the students' understanding of the pandemic and related social ramifications, allowing them to express themselves, and communicate in ways that might otherwise be inhibited when using more traditional linguistic methods.

The project was conducted in collaboration with IOHA who first workshoped HIV/AIDS-related themes with students and consulted with students during the development of their proposals. For final submission students submitted both two-dimensional documentation, and a three-dimensional scale model of the proposed intervention shown in relation to the existing building structure.

## 4. The research design and methods

This qualitative research design is ontologically interpretive and epistemologically subjective, falling within the constructivist paradigm. The authors present their research bias being facilitators of the student project over several years.

Firstly an initial review of literature is conducted to situate the study within the field of multimodality, and to establish the relationship between spatial design and language. We explore the Hallidayan principles of SFL. These include a) *paradigmatic dimension*, (meaning is choice), elaborated upon in the literature review, and b) *metafunctional dimension*, (ideational, interpersonal and textual/compositional). Halliday's SFL, is an approach to linguistics that considers language as a social semiotic system (Paltridge, 2012). A case study approach is taken to analyse a selection of student's proposals according to an analytical framework developed on Halliday's metafunctions of language.

### 4.1 Data and delimitations

The data analysed includes the scale models, plans and sections of two selected design proposals resulting from the student project (explained to be based on the reproductive health programme). These samples were selected as they successfully illustrated the learning outcomes of the project, and used multiple visual modes of communication. The primary data comprises of photographs of students' three-dimensional scale models (taken by the authors) that represent the existing location and its structural constraints, as well as their proposed installation.

The data included an architectural type floor plan and cross-section, indicating circulation, dimensions and structural components. The data is referred to as proposal 1 and proposal 2. We acknowledge that two-dimensional photos of three-dimensional models are only representations of a proposed spatial intervention. The photographs are taken from a fixed view point, in some cases students digitally superimposed an image of the model into an image of the existing building to create the illusion of a full-size installation.

## 5. Analysis of student projects

On completion of numerous iterations of this project over several years it became apparent that there was a need to develop a more substantial analytical framework, and language that could be used to analyse and describe how the design choices made by the students regarding the selection and arrangement of visual and spatial modes was used to make meaning. The development of a SFL framework could provide a useful aid for future teaching and learning, development of briefs and associated learning outcomes, and evaluation of projects in the interior design studio.

For this we borrowed heavily from O'Toole's analytical semiotic models for application in MDA. O'Toole used the principles of SFL to develop an empirical method for the analysis of various modes of visual meaning-making bringing a "fresh and theoretically powerful social semiotic perspective of systemic functional theory" (O'Halloran & Smith, 2011, p. 5) that could be applied across a wide range of disciplines. Acknowledging that each "domain has its own expertise, and registerial conventions of theory and practice for research and discoursing" (O'Halloran & Smith, 2011, p.5), this approach may be more accessible, and has universal application. O'Toole initially applied this analytical tool to painting and later adapted it for analysing other art forms such as, architecture and sculpture (2011). A further example of its application and development can be seen in O'Halloran (2008) for digitally produced graphics and video screen productions, and Riley (2012) for Fine Art drawings. Formulated on these principles we attempt to develop an analytical framework that can be used to analyse how meaning is made in the students' multimodal proposals. This analytical tool allows one to itemize a multimodal ensemble into smaller components and then describe each according to Halliday's three metafunctions of language, *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *compositional*.

Our developmental framework and two examples of its application are presented below.

*Table 1. This table presents a matrix of choice analytical framework where the Ideational function relates to the designer's understanding of what HIV prevention is in this social context. The Interpersonal function is indicative of the designer's stance and attitude towards HIV prevention and the mood with which it is conveyed to the viewer. The Compositional (or textual) function deals with the arrangement of available visual and spatial devices, or inter-semiosis, by which means the other two functions are realised.*

Design Component	Function		
	Ideational	Interpersonal	Compositional
<b>Textual message</b>	Statistical	Intriguing	Size
	Factual	Intimidating	Colour
	Thematic	Imaginative	Placement
	General /	Speculative	Position
	Targeted	Reflective	Repetition
	Sexual	Commanding	Typography
	Medical	Questioning	Emphasis
	Social	Warning	Word composition
	Cultural	Provoking Playful	Rhyming Tone
<b>Spatial structure</b>	Location	Visual metaphor	Materiality
	Contextual integration	Thematic	Colours + textures
	Placement	Narrative	Dimensionality
	Access	Scenographic	Organic / Geometric
	Formal - ordered Casual - creative	Didactic Degree of transformation Surprising	Layout Circulation Containment Shapes + forms
<b>Additional media</b>	Realistic /	Symbolic	Emphasis
	Abstract	Conceptual	Multi-modal mix -
	Figurative	Suggestive	2D or 3D media
	Metaphoric	Descriptive	Repetition
	Numeric Illustrative	Narrative Hyperbolic	Directionality Placement + size Colour
<b>Intended user engagement</b>	Participation or observation	Level of complexity	Diffusion
	Imposed /	Cooperative	Physical / Virtual
	Voluntary	Competitive	Analogue / Digital
	General /	Physical/Emotional/Cognitive	Degree of interaction
	Targeted	Supplementary / Essential	Privacy Proximity

To create a sequential approach for the analysis of the multimodal design proposals it became necessary to sub-divide the ensembles into smaller design components as listed in the first column in Table 1. It is important to understand that the matrix of choice analytical framework is systemic in nature. This means that the ranges of available choices do not only allow meanings to be negotiated within a single function or restricted to only one component of the multimodal ensemble, but "...allow for the negotiation of meanings



through all functions at all levels”, (Riley, 2012, p.5) . As in any form of multimodal ‘text’, all these functions operate simultaneously.



Figure 1. Proposal 1 - “Stomp out HIV” courtesy Rosetta Mpufu, 2018, © University of Johannesburg. Photograph (by author) of a scale model of a multimodal spatial intervention (colour), placed in relation to an existing building structure (white).

Many student’s conceptual starting point is a slogan, as appears in this case. The target is *general* and the message is *commanding* in its appeal to eliminate HIV. The text is integrated into the structure in two components. ‘Stomp out’ appears as flat cut-out letters attached to the underside of the sole accentuating the action it describes. All the text is emphasised through *colour*, and *placement*, the additional enlarged *size* and three-dimensionality of the letters HIV, make it the focal point, and the topic obvious. The use of irregular and distorted fonts is intended to be reminiscent of a horror movie poster. The implied meaning is that HIV is something evil and needs to be eliminated or ‘squashed like a bug’ under the sole of one’s shoe. The informal *typographical* solution of the text makes it appear less authoritarian to resonate with the target. The IOHA and university logos (as required) are integrated through *size and placement* with reduced significance, giving it institutional endorsement.

This spatial structure’s *location* is an empty entrance foyer space through which most users of the building will have to *circulate*. The central prominent placement will require

pedestrians to walk around the structure, creating forced engagement. The scale is intimidating and indicative of the extent of the problem. The blackness of the sole and exaggerated tread, as on an industrial boot, is both serious and heavy, as is the topic, and articulates the gravity with which it needs to be dealt. The vertical dimension (approx. 3 meters) restricted by the ceiling height creates visibility from a distance, and adds *hyperbolic* meaning to the magnitude of the effort that is required to eliminate HIV. However the 'message' may not be so clearly read from all approaches. The organic black shape of the structure contrasts the monochromatic geometric interior in which it is *contextually integrated*, adding emphasis through its contrasting form. The black glossy reflective surface of the *material* creates a sense of hard, unforgiving edginess. The reflected shape on the floor helps contain the elements and is reminiscent of a shadow of gloom, a big black cloud hanging overhead to be avoided.

There is no additional media used in this ensemble.

The inter-semiosis or composition of modes results in a *visual metaphor* in which the visual and literal meaning correspond seamlessly, creating a clear and coherent multimodal message. The user engagement is both *imposed* and *physical* due to proximity, is intentionally *intimidating* due to scale and colour and strives to create an *emotional* shared spatial experience. The overall message is meant to be uncompromising and *didactic*, demanding that the viewer participates in eliminating HIV.

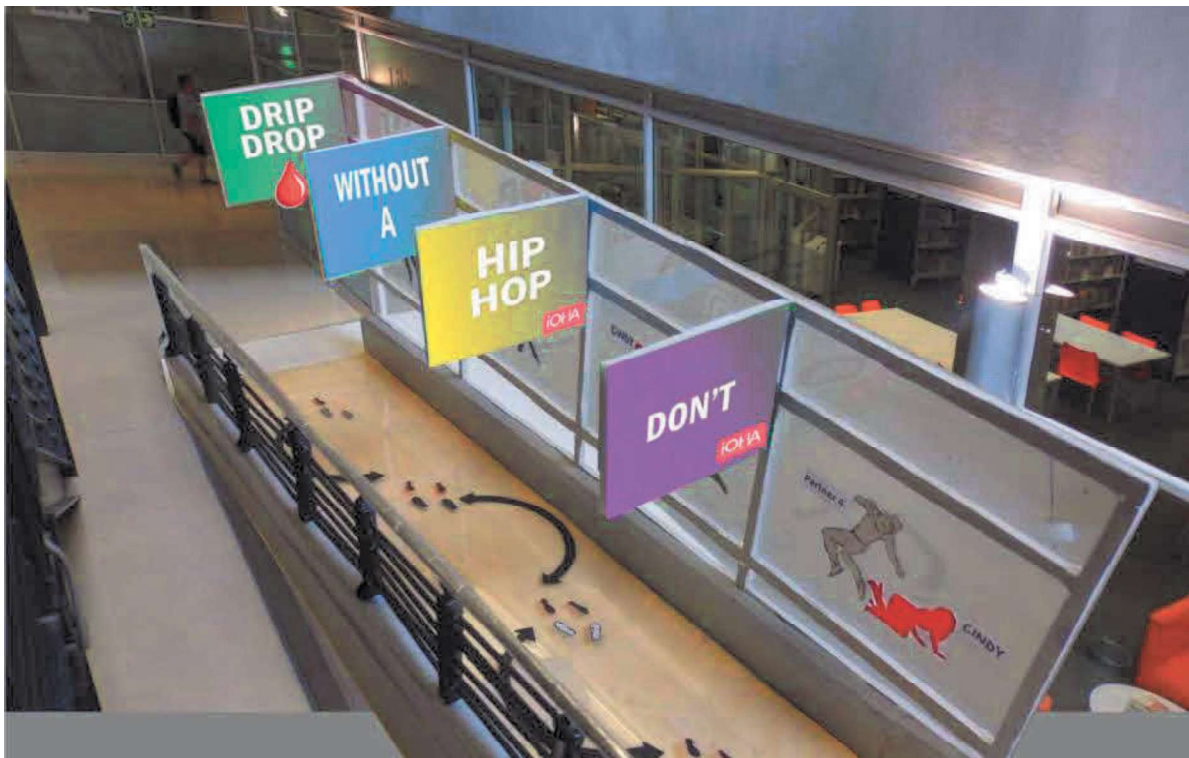


Figure 2. Proposal 2 – “Don’t hip hop without a drip drop” courtesy S. Jacobs, 2016, © University of Johannesburg. Photograph (by author) of a scale model of a multimodal spatial intervention, superimposed onto a visual of the existing space.

The second proposal's message uses wording that has *medical* and *cultural* references. It aims to encourage the viewer to continually do medical HIV/AIDS tests, especially if they regularly change their *sexual* partners. The message seems *playful* and resonates with a particular *culture*, evoking a sense of playfulness, made possible by the *imaginative composition of words*, which rhyme, in a popular *tone*. The *typography* used helps to reinforce the message as a *warning*.

This particular interior ramp is utilitarian, and seldom showcases any design or information, and is *located* next to busy studio environments. It is fully *integrated* into its existing surrounding *context*. This is done with the use of cuboid forms which make up the signage overhead, and 2D symbols, inserted on the wall and floor. The *access* is from two sides, and the repeated message is thus multi - *directional*. The viewer is forced to *circulate* through the space until exiting at the other side, reinforcing the message over time.

The additional media used, includes *two-dimensional* symbols used on the floor (dance routine steps) and wall planes. The first symbols (arrows and footprints) are arranged in a *directional* sequence on the floor, suggesting an experience of entertainment, and instigating feelings of playfulness for the viewer. A set of life-size *figurative* dancing shapes are placed on the wall in *repetition*. They are *suggestive* and *metaphoric* for swapping partners. The repeated female figure in red, is *symbolic* of an infected person spreading the HIV/AIDS to multiple partners. The *repeated* use of the IOHA logo imagery is intended as an official branded reference to a service, thereby *diffusing* the message.

The level of engagement in this proposed intervention is intended to be *observational* (one does not need to participate in any other way). Engagement is *imposed*, as the viewer navigates down the ramp. Engagement is *general* (not targeted to a specific group), and is meant for anyone using the ramp. The experience is *cognitive* and *physical* for the viewer who is engulfed in, and navigates a *complex* set of media.

To conclude, this section presents examples of two narrative analytical descriptions of multimodal spatial texts according to the matrix of choice framework as interpreted individually by each author to demonstrate how it might be used.

## 6. Results and discussion

The research findings are presented as qualitative content analysis in the form of narrative descriptions of the meanings made through the use and arrangement of multiple visual and spatial modes using the matrix of choice analytical framework presented in Table 1. The use of this table (developed from SFL principles) proved a useful tool for describing how the meaning was made in the spatial-interventions analysed above when read as multimodal 'texts'. It provides an alternative method of describing how the design of these ensembles relied on the agentive semiotic work of the student, and encouraged the use of the students' own voice in a creative and expressive manner. Based on our test case we are of the opinion

that this SFL approach can contribute significantly to how we articulate the ways in which meaning is produced. It contributes to the development of a metalanguage used for discoursing the relationship between “material codes of production” and the “production of meaning in a social system” (Drucker, 1998, p.139).

### 6.1 Benefit in contributing to aids awareness and IOHA's mandate

The multimodal HIV/AIDS awareness proposals produced by the students have been well received by other role players within the university who are mandated to implement the institutional policies on sexual reproductive health education and awareness. These projects are executed in close collaboration with IOHA who drive the process. IOHA often showcase these students' proposal at workshops, seminars and conferences as tangible outcomes of the curriculum integration process. They are used as effective multimodal forms of communication that: provoke dialogue, and visually convey rich original messages generated by the students themselves. They are made available to other disciplines to illustrate different perspectives, possibilities and opinions for adopting alternative strategies to addressing the same problem. They also give valuable insight into the students' response to, and understanding of the HIV awareness programme. Unfortunately very few have actually been translated in to full-size installations mostly due to financial constraints and therefore remain principally academic exercises, as the potential impact of the installations cannot be tested.

### 6.2 Benefit to teaching and learning in interior design

This multimodal approach can be valuable in the classroom for the development and analysis of future interior projects. It presents a new method of evaluating and discussing outcomes and contributes to developing the discourse related to spatial design. It also teaches students to design spatial interventions that are more experiential and more inclusive of diverse communities, cultures and values, as they enforce their designs with universal images, symbols and text, other than just using typical interior design elements. The success of the multimodal projects in creating meaning is highly dependent on the students' spatial cognition and technical skills in executing the project. Development of these skills is embedded in most interior programmes, however it needs to be noted that some very good initial concepts never manifest as workable spatial solutions or in acceptable presentation formats.

### 6.3 Broader Implications for interior design

Despite this being a first attempt at using a SFL analytical method, both authors are of the opinion that it could have broader implications for the analysis and reading of multimodal spatial design. This research presents a potential alternative method for analysing meaning-making in built interior installations even though, in this case-study it was applied to scaled models. In practise this could prove a useful approach to determine how visual language

could be implemented in interiors to create meaning, how visual language is shaped by context and culture, and furthermore, it's potential for communication.

## 7. Conclusion

Through the analysis of these three-dimensional and spatial multimodal proposals produced by students as part of a HIV educational programme, it was revealed that interior design has the potential to contribute to the multi-disciplinary nature of multimodality by introducing aspects of spatial design, which is currently not evident in existing literature.

The multimodal approach was of benefit to IOHA allowing students to express their own voices in modes that cut across cultural and language barriers and in turn produce additional insight into IOHA's HIV awareness initiatives.

The further development of multimodal pedagogies is of benefit for interior programmes which rely heavily on visual communication. A deeper understanding of multimodality can benefit students when required to design meaningful multimodal and inclusive spaces to accommodate diverse communities.

This SFL approach and associated tool that the authors created has the potential to be used to also analyse full-scale interior installations with some adaptation to accommodate for the limitations and constraints associated with built installations. It may also support practice-led research and opens up new avenues for research and possible publications in the Interior Design field.

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