

History in Focus

The Redesign of the AHR

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When Mark Bradley first took on the editorship of the *AHR* in 2021, one of the more fundamental changes he immediately tackled was a redesign of the look of the journal itself. The first such major redesign in more than 50 years, and I would venture to say the most thorough and thoughtful rethinking of the journal's form and function in the entirety of its long history. To accomplish this complex task, the *AHR* engaged the firm, Pure + Applied, to work through the conceptual and practical elements of rethinking the journal's design to better fit its vision for a more capacious and engaged approach to history. And if you imagine this all boiled down to little more than a template reshuffle or a few new boilerplate fonts, think again. Here's Mark's conversation about the process with Pure + Applied designers Paul Carlos and Urshula Barbour.

Mark Bradley

For the *AHR* project, in what it seemed like the central challenges to you going into that, and you know, is there a manifestation in design form, that a solution to one of those challenges took?

Paul Carlos

Every project is different in what solutions you come up with or are, sort of, bespoke to that project. For *AHR*, at least the goal was like, how can we make this more contemporary or relevant?

Urshula Barbour

Or appear that—to send that signal.

Paul Carlos

Yeah, mhm.

Urshula Barbour

It doesn't mean that it's not, right? But a lot is in appearances, right? So—

Paul Carlos

Right, yeah. And then so you know, and one of the things that attracted us was, you know, the History Lab, right, like your invention, I don't know what to—how else to call it.

Paul and Mark chuckle.

You know, and that's what made this version of *AHR* different. And using that as the sort of impetus for, "Alright let's rethink the cover, because of the History Lab. Let's make the History Lab look different from the rest of the journal and have that be a key content and visual element within the, within the publication." And so, in thinking about the design, obviously, it still has to be the same page count, the same size, then that—then where is the space where we—where you can do something different or have it be considered differently. And so it's the cover, and then how we design the History Lab, and then, but obviously, you know, through typography, and just cleaning up the design of the publication.

Urshula Barbour

You know, what our process often is, and it was with *AHR*, is that Paul would select a number of typefaces to choose from set pages, and then we would review them and say, "Okay, so what's easier on the eye? What makes me want to linger on the words longer? And then when you sort of back it off slightly, does it look like it fits into the category of scholarship and serious and all of those things?" So first, does it work? And then does it feel like it's the right kind of look to the, to the characters and the type themselves, right? Because a lot of things will work, that doesn't necessarily mean it, it's telegraphing or signaling an appropriateness for the type of content that it's conveying.

Mark Bradley

I mean, one of the things that was kind of most fun in the process, I think, on our side was earlier on when you were showing us, I'm thinking about the articles more, you know, it could look like this, it could look like this, it can look like that. And what I remember was, you know, it was often the same type, but it just—the spacing was different, or the weight of it was different. And it was just for me to realize, like the intricacy of it at that level. You know, whereas I think the outside person like me, who doesn't know that much about it thinks, "well, it could be Helvetica, or it could be Bakersfield." But then you come to realize, like, no, that's not actually at all what the choices are when you're kind of down to it. And I—for me, I just really enjoyed that part of it a lot.

Urshula Barbour

Mark, I think you pick up on something important, which is the—I mean, it could be the typeface choice or it could be the space between lines, the leading, or it could be how tightly something's tracked in. Again, I don't know if the average reader picks up on this. But for us when we're looking at something and it's been, the types being tracked in too tightly or the leading is insufficient, it either looks rushed or it looks harried or it, or it telegraph's that maybe somebody wasn't able to take time with it, that it's disposable, that it's not as serious. Again, we may read into a lot more—kind of put values on things that other folks don't. But regardless of that, you know, there are still rules that make setting type easier for people to read, easier for them to linger on and hopefully retain the information, and arrangements of pages, where you're always more likely to maybe move to, right? And so you're less likely to miss something or more likely to understand that it's important to look at and read. That, that all go into it and figure into it, whether or not readers are necessarily all that aware of it.

Paul Carlos

I think it's also back to empathy. Like, there's just ways of spacing type that is easier to read for the reader. And obviously, the review is, you know, 300 pages of a lot of reading, if you were to read it from cover to cover.

Urshula Barbour

Yes, right.

Paul Carlos

And you really want the text to be inviting to read and not just there because it has to be there.

Urshula Barbour

Right.

Paul Carlos

Actually, one thing I forgot to mention, and I don't think we've ever brought it up in the meetings was that the choice of the typefaces were also, for me, like a, sort of a fun thing that I like to inject into, into designs. The headline type, or the logo, *American Historical Review*, is set in the typeface Canela, which is designed by a Mexican designer. The text space, the body copy, is designed by a New Zealand designer. And the san serif, which is called Freight, is designed by an African American designer. And so this idea that, well what is American, you know?

Mark Bradley

Yeah.

Paul Carlos

And this idea that typography is, you know, a European or, you know, strictly Western thing is, you know, it's sort of imbued in the the typefaces that leave—

Urshula Barbour

Laced, laced throughout. Yeah.

Paul Carlos

Yeah, yes.

Mark Bradley

I think that's really fascinating: who it is behind it. Because that's another thing people just don't think about. And, and again, the fact that our typeface is global, you know, that, that speaks in important ways to what we're trying to do, but unless we tell people, they don't know, you know?

Paul Carlos

Yeah, definitely.

Mark Bradley

Well, you know, with what you were doing for us, the lab is the space that didn't exist before, right? So you know, in a sense that's where you have the most freedom, because we had no idea, like, how that space would work. And there's a very definite sensibility about how you, kind of carried that through. So how did you get—you know, it's a three quarter column, and then there's a quarter column. And like, that's the really simple way of saying it. But like, how did you get there? And what, what was the sort of intentionality there? And what influences were you borrowing from, to think about that?

Paul Carlos

Well, I think we wanted that space still to be part of the review, and not just like, a completely different space altogether, you know, so it's, it's still using the same typefaces. But, you know, much like, you know, as a metaphor, it's like, it's like a different cut of a suit, so to speak. You know, instead of like it being this buttoned up suit, it's a little bit more contemporary, and obviously less symmetrical, obviously, compared to the rest of the, of the review. And then, you know, adding the footnotes to the margins, as opposed to, you know, having at the bottom. You

know, we sort of played with this idea of like, the margins are just as important as, you know, the, the main text itself, and obviously, you know, the idea that it would have more pictures or can contain more pictures also helps with the thinking behind it.

Urshula Barbour

And I think some of these things, and it touches on the cover design. So, one of the parameters or one of the challenges is, at least once you've done film or video or some kind of design with motion or that for whatever reason is not static, you perhaps look with different eyes upon revisiting design or, or a journal or book that is static. Thinking about ways you can suggest to readers or users that there is motion or there is activity. For instance, with the approach to the cover. This journal is a manifestation of a kind of interaction, right? And while it might seem static and it might seem kind of fixed, in many ways it's not. Like, obviously if somebody's reading or thinking about it or revisiting it or referring to it, that whole swirl of sort of mental space or blobs or activities around it are all—is all sort of like living, moving life to, to what we think of as a fixed object. So where one can suggest in this case, like with the cover that we were thinking that the dialogue or the interplay or the vibrancy of the imagery on the cover and whether it overlaps or how it overlaps with the title will all signal each time the reader receives it, that there was activity and there was action. That it's not fixed. It's not slotting something into a rectangle because it fit. But there's a, there's kind of a give and take. And again, it is fixed, of course, it's not moving. But, but there are indications of work and activity that happened and thought, and how those—that interplay works, right?

Paul Carlos

Yeah, I mean, for instance, on the "Smells in History," you know, how do we make it apparent with the heart, that candle shaped like a heart, you know, that's the sort of, like, object or the transmitter of the smell. And so that's why we wanted to make sure that that was foregrounded, and not just something that's in the background behind the title of the, of the review, like, we want to make sure that that gets pulled out. And that's why we play with trompe-l'œil space of the candle or the object being in front of the, the type. You know, we always wanted to do that with, you know, some of the, I think, earlier versions that we showed on the cover. So it becomes more of like a visual challenge now, like, can we actually keep doing this for the other covers? You know, how can we play with space? How can we make sure that the work or the image is always foregrounded? And that—you know, it's always going to be *American Historical Review*, that's a given. But we also want to make sure that the cover and the image stands out.

Urshula Barbour

Right, that that kind of lockup or technique can, can work going forward. So there's always some kind of dialogue. Like the, if you thought about it literally, the text is getting inserted into the image, right? Or the image is wrapping around the text if you took it the other way. So it is sort of *AHR* getting into the imagery, as captured on the cover.

Mark Bradley

Yeah, that helps me understand—I get it's like, sometimes you see things, but you don't really have the words to say what's going on. But they do feel like they're moving.

Paul Carlos

Well, it feels like something has been considered.

Urshula Barbour

Yes.

Paul Carlos

You know, and I think that's an important thing to convey to a reader.

Mark Bradley

Do you think, retrospectively, that that's what you did? Or before the very first one was designed, did you think to yourself, "that's what I want to try to do. And so that's what I'm playing around with." Or is it not like that, it's just kind of like, a tug back and forth, and all of a sudden, this emerges, so you can turn it around, and that emerges, or...?

Paul Carlos

I think, I think the thinking evolves, you know, obviously, a back and forth with the client and the reactions that you might get. I remember the first set, like we wanted to just say *AHR*, because that's how everyone says it, right?

Mark Bradley

Yeah.

Paul Carlos

It's, we hardly say, you know, "the *American Historical Review*." And that's how we even got to, like, getting rid of the "the" on the title.

Mark Bradley

Right.

You know, this, this idea that, one is, what is appropriate for the publication, and then, two, what can we do with the text or the type that can signal something that there's a new thinking behind this review. It's great to have these discussions with clients. And I think it brought us back to like, how we worked in magazines and just this, this idea that, you know, you can—

Urshula Barbour

It's a collaborative team.

Paul Carlos

Yeah, it is, it's really not just us the designers giving the design. It's, it's really us thinking through the different issues and different pros and cons of certain designs together.

Urshula Barbour

And I think also nice that it's serious scholarship that, that we were able to engage with, with this, and figure out how to work with it, in it, around it. And as Paul says, this sort of months-long process of working through it, I think that's something that we really relish.

Paul Carlos

Yeah, and we also didn't want this to be like this thing that just landed.

Paul chuckles.

You know, I think it has to, like, evolve from the people who actually work on it, and, like, you know, rethink the publication as opposed to, you know, "Here's the thing and it's done. It's new, you have to accept it." You know?

Urshula Barbour

Yes. Yeah. Because you're ultimately the one that's living with it, breathing life into it, and keeping it alive.

Mark Bradley

I mean, we were fortunate in two ways, I think. I mean, one is, generally, with scholarly journals do not hire designers to rethink them.

Urshula Barbour

Right.

Mark Bradley

That, the, you know, the OUP has four templates and you pick one or you know that—and we had some resources that allowed us to be able to do that. And I think that was just fortunate for us. And I can't really be critical that other journals don't do it because you know, there is money, right? And money matters in these kinds of things. But you could still have the money to spend, and not necessarily be in a relationship with a designer that necessarily was working, and certainly one that didn't work, you know? I mean, this one worked just so well. Right? And I think the fact that there were younger people on your team, who sometimes you know, you were saying, "Yeah, they really liked that, everybody just liked this." Like, that was really helpful for us. Because I mean, part of this is that for the journal to keep working in the space that it's working, it's early-career and mid-career people who have to keep moving with it, or it won't have a life. And there's a larger danger about scholarly journals in this regard, you know, period. Right? It's just, this one's looked, you know, they all have looked a lot the same for a long time. And they can't keep doing that, I don't think. It's still kind of nerve-wracking to like, say, "Well, okay, we're gonna make a bet on trying this thing." And, you know, some of these things we may be right about, some of them we might not be right about. Some people are gonna be happy, some aren't gonna be. Like, there's gonna be all of that, right? But you got to give it a shot, right? And it's just, it felt like, you know, working with you all, we just had a really great partner in trying to like, give it the best shot that we could give it, you know. That has like, way more to do with it than the money. The money enabled us to be in a space where we could do it, but it was really all about working with you all that let it go in the way in which it did.

Urshula Barbour

Thank you again, for the privilege of being able to work on it.

Paul Carlos

Yeah, thank you.

Daniel Story

That was *AHR* editor Mark Bradley, in conversation with Pure + Applied founding designers Paul Carlos and Urshula Barbour. They discussed their collaboration with the *AHR* to conceptualize and implement the journal's first major redesign in over 50 years. You can peruse the new design for yourself, starting with the March 2022 issue. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review*, in partnership with the American Historical

Association, and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. You can learn more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. Stay safe, and see you next time.