MEDIUM/FORMAT

A medium is a mode or system of communication that extends our ability to exchange meaning. It determines the means through which we craft messages. Film, drawing, offset printing, photography, cartoons, and typography are media. Media are distributed through formats. A format is the material form, layout, or presentation of information within the medium. Brochures, magazines, websites, and posters are all formats.

As our work and lives increasingly depend on electronic channels, the dominance of print media and formats changes. Designers must consider an ever-expanding set of options with a wide array of characteristics and affordances. Digital screens, for example, range in size from tiny watches to jumbo stadium displays and populate devices as diverse as mobile music players, automobile dashboards, refrigerators, and the sides of buildings. And if we imagine all the purposes these screens serve, who uses them, and for how long, we realize how complicated

the designer's tasks are.

A medium is a material means for transmitting information via a channel. Historically, media for communicating the written word ranged from typography carved in stone or clay and ink applied to papyrus, linen, or paper with a brush, pen, or raised metal type. Today we have e-ink, as well as LCD screen displays—the unit is the pixel, not the stroke. Increasingly, designers create messages that travel through multiple media, presenting the challenge to choose forms that adapt well to an array of technological constraints. Colors that read well in print may vibrate on screen or get washed out in bright sunlight. Ideas that require the motion capabilities of electronic media may not translate well in print applications.

We attach meaning to the use of particular media. Our choice to write a letter by hand rather than in email is viewed as significant. We expect objectivity in journalistic photography and emotional persuasion in television advertising. These expectations build over time through our experience in culture and they

influence how we approach similar media presentations in the future.

A comic book orients reading in a way that is particular to that medium. Scenes and actions are divided into frames and released over time. When the gutters between frames are missing, we don't misread the scene as one in which everyone speaks at the same time, but instead, understand it as an evolving conversation. This orientation to the depiction of time and space is inherent in the medium and through experience we deploy the appropriate interpretive behavior, regardless of the specific content of any single comic.

The medium of cartography also has characteristic ways of orienting our interpretation that are repeated from map to map, regardless of the geography depicted. A grid of coordinates and a corresponding index locate specific points on a flattened landscape. On the other hand, an isometric map allows us to see the highs and lows of the built landscape to predict what might block our view from a particular location (Figure 4.13). Google Maps offers a variety of

viewpoints, including street-level photography and zooming between views. In all cases, these are orienting conventions that are characteristic of the medium (Figure 4.14). They tell us what behavior is required for interpretation and we make choices among them depending on our specific needs for wayfinding.

Formats are the physical structures through which a medium delivers its communication to audiences. The medium of offset printing, for example, can be used to create publications in many different formats: 4" × 9" accordion-folded brochures; 8½" × 11" letterheads; 18" × 24" posters, and so forth. Formats orient us both to their use and to the structure of information. We know books are organized in chapters so we expect a change in content when there is a chapter break. The binding tells us that sequence matters. Multi-panel brochures are less clear. Do we read one panel at a time as it unfolds, or are we to open all panels and read one side of the printed sheet and then the other? Loose cards in a sleeve seem to indicate no specific sequence in reading and content that varies from card to card.

The resolution sizes of computer screens, flat-screen monitors, and digital projectors suggest using a standard proportional relationship in formatting media presentations for projection (for example, 1024 × 768 or 1280 × 800 pixels). Internet browsers determine how much readers see on the screen without scrolling, however, the majority of online communication today is formatted first for mobile phone screens, then adapted for tablets or desktop computers. Google made the decision to privilege sites configured for cell phones in the order of its search engine listings. As technology and cultural practices change, so do the dominant formats for information.

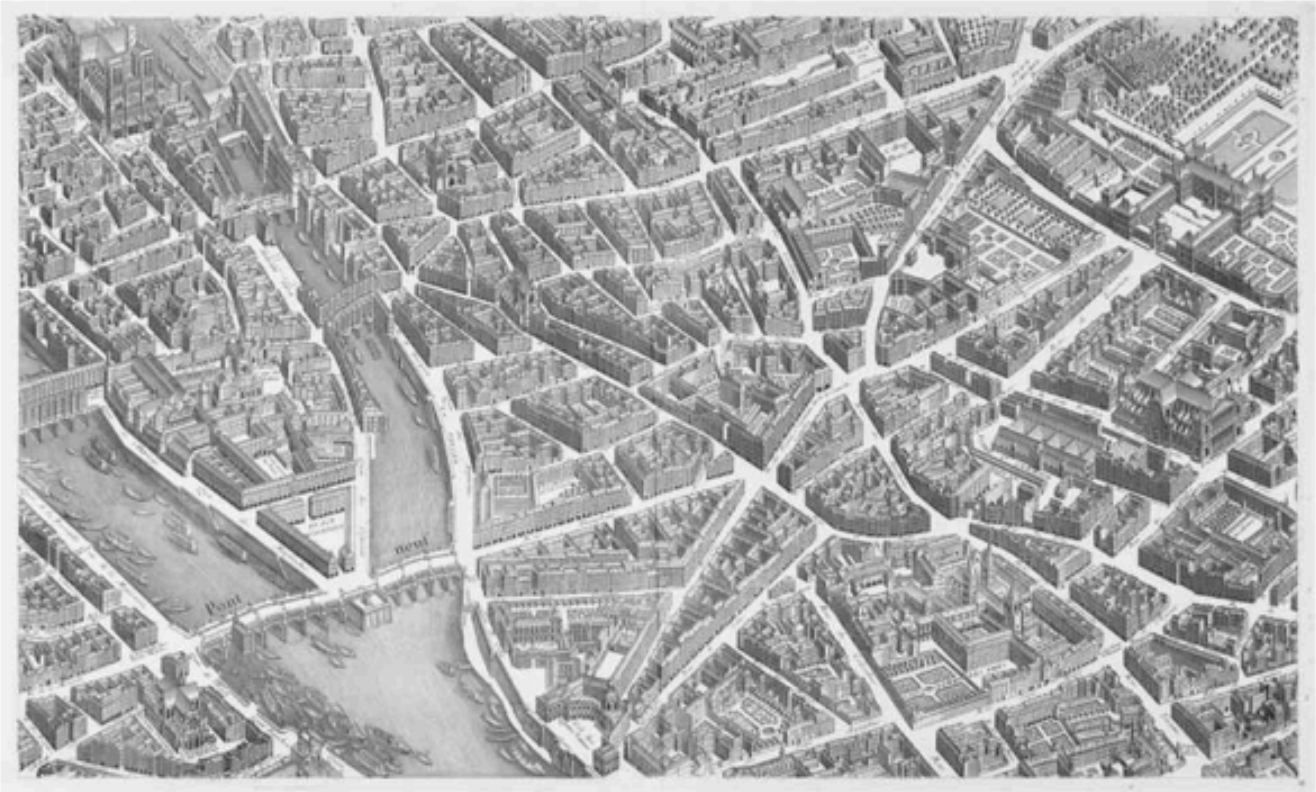

Figure 4.13
Turgot map of Paris, 1739 Michel-Etienne Turgot, Louis Bretez
Turgot, chief of the municipality of Paris, asked Bretez to draw a faithful plan of Paris and its suburbs to promote the city. The resulting isometric map was remarkably detailed and showed a pedestrian what the view was likely to be from any place in the city.

Beyond the content of communication, therefore, media have certain characteristics that influence how audiences approach interpretation. Our cultural experiences orient us to what interaction with a

medium will be like; we don't expect sound from printed books but we know electronic text can "talk." Formats vary and also guide interpretation. We know that reading a book releases ideas over time in a way that a poster does not. These cues allow us to focus on content, not on the method of delivery.

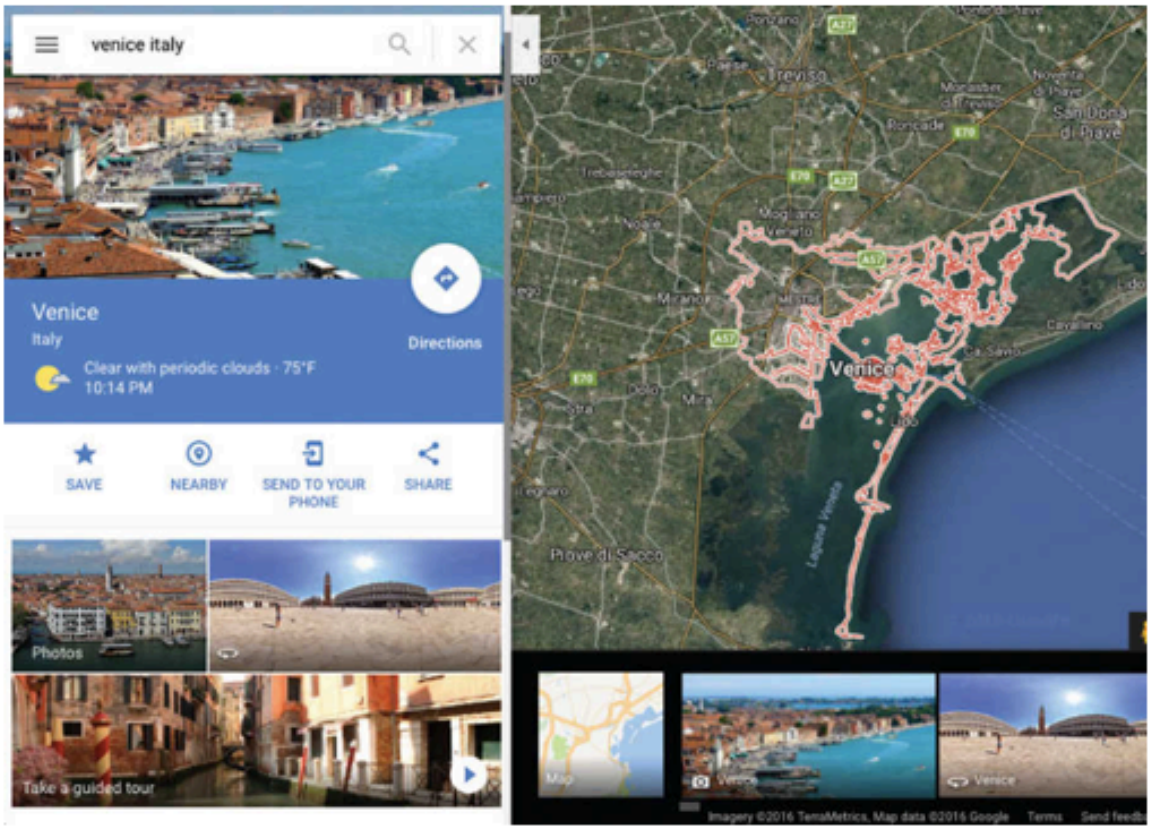

Figure 4.14
Google Maps

Google offers many ways to view a city, combining still photography, videos, and cartography with graphic

notations. As digital technology advances, it collapses traditional media.