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FROM CONCEPT TO VISUAL NARRATIVE: THE LIBRES FRAMEWORK FOR MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN DESIGN

DO CONCEITO À NARRATIVA VISUAL: O FRAMEWORK LIBRES PARA A CONSTRUÇÃO DE SIGNIFICADO NO DESIGN

DEL CONCEPTO A LA NARRATIVA VISUAL: EL MARCO LIBRES PARA LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE SIGNIFICADO EN EL DISEÑO

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ABSTRACT

The translation of abstract concepts into coherent visual artifacts remains an under-theorized process within design practice. While existing methodologies emphasize stages such as ideation and prototyping, they often overlook the intermediate cognitive and semiotic operations through which meaning is constructed and translated into form. This paper introduces LIBRES, a structured design framework that makes explicit the relationship between conceptual intent and visual execution. Grounded in semiotics, design cognition, and research-through-design perspectives, the framework is organized into five iterative phases: conceptual exploration and decomposition, visual translation, narrative construction, perceptual validation, and iterative refinement. Through this structure, LIBRES enables the systematic externalization of abstract meaning, supports alignment between concept and form, and integrates perceptual evaluation as a continuous component of the design process. A case study demonstrates the applicability of the framework in producing more coherent, intentional, and evaluable visual narratives. The findings suggest that formalizing intermediate stages of design contributes to greater transparency, theoretical grounding, and reproducibility, positioning LIBRES as both a methodological and pedagogical contribution to contemporary visual communication design.

Keywords: Design Methodology. Meaning Construction. Visual Communication. Design Cognition. Semiotics. Research Through Design. Visual Narrative.

RESUMO

A tradução de conceitos abstratos em artefatos visuais coerentes permanece um processo ainda pouco teorizado no campo da prática do design. Embora as metodologias existentes enfatizem etapas como ideação e prototipagem, frequentemente negligenciam as operações cognitivas e semióticas intermediárias por meio das quais o significado é construído e traduzido em forma. Este artigo apresenta o LIBRES, um framework estruturado de design que explicita a relação entre a intenção conceitual e a execução visual. Fundamentado na semiótica, na cognição do design e nas perspectivas de pesquisa através do design (research-through-design), o framework está organizado em cinco fases iterativas: exploração e decomposição conceitual, tradução visual, construção narrativa, validação

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perceptiva e refinamento iterativo. Por meio dessa estrutura, o LIBRES possibilita a externalização sistemática de significados abstratos, favorece o alinhamento entre conceito e forma e integra a avaliação perceptiva como um componente contínuo do processo de design. Um estudo de caso demonstra a aplicabilidade do framework na produção de narrativas visuais mais coerentes, intencionais e avaliáveis. Os resultados sugerem que a formalização das etapas intermediárias do design contribui para maior transparência, fundamentação teórica e reprodutibilidade, posicionando o LIBRES como uma contribuição metodológica e pedagógica para o design contemporâneo da comunicação visual.

Palavras-chave: Metodologia de Design. Construção de Significado. Comunicação Visual. Cognição do Design. Semiótica. Pesquisa através do Design. Narrativa Visual.

RESUMEN

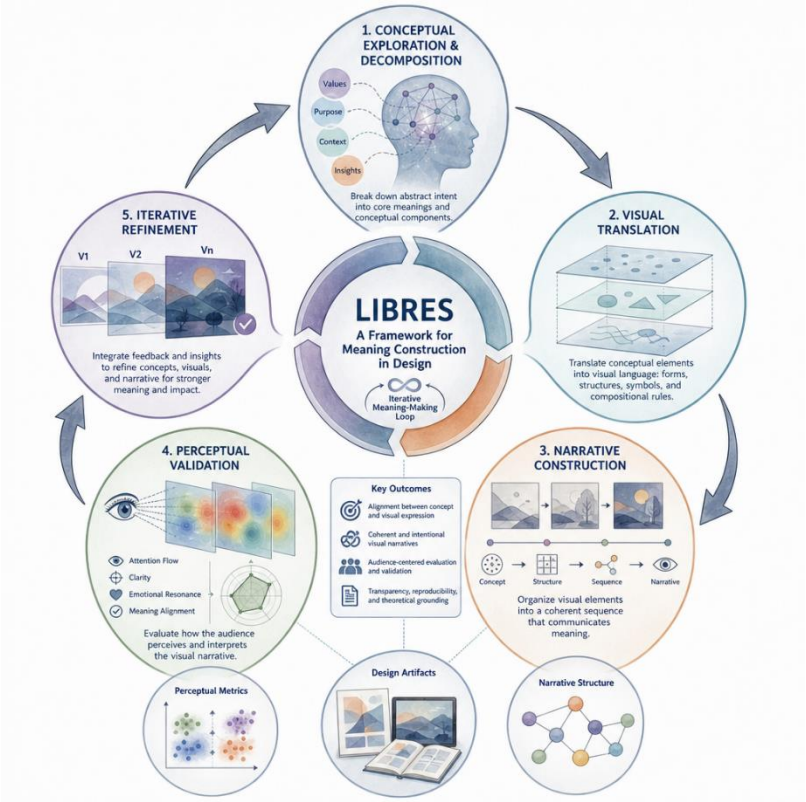
La traducción de conceptos abstractos en artefactos visuales coherentes sigue siendo un proceso insuficientemente teorizado dentro de la práctica del diseño. Aunque las metodologías existentes enfatizan etapas como la ideación y el prototipado, a menudo pasan por alto las operaciones cognitivas y semióticas intermedias mediante las cuales el significado se construye y se traduce en forma. Este artículo presenta LIBRES, un marco estructurado de diseño que explicita la relación entre la intención conceptual y la ejecución visual. Fundamentado en la semiótica, la cognición del diseño y las perspectivas de investigación a través del diseño (research-through-design), el marco se organiza en cinco fases iterativas: exploración y descomposición conceptual, traducción visual, construcción narrativa, validación perceptiva y refinamiento iterativo. A través de esta estructura, LIBRES permite la externalización sistemática del significado abstracto, favorece la alineación entre concepto y forma e integra la evaluación perceptiva como un componente continuo del proceso de diseño. Un estudio de caso demuestra la aplicabilidad del marco en la producción de narrativas visuales más coherentes, intencionales y evaluables. Los hallazgos sugieren que la formalización de las etapas intermedias del diseño contribuye a una mayor transparencia, fundamentación teórica y reproducibilidad, posicionando a LIBRES como una contribución metodológica y pedagógica al diseño contemporáneo de la comunicación visual.

Palabras clave: Metodología del Diseño. Construcción de Significado. Comunicación Visual. Cognición del Diseño. Semiótica. Investigación a través del Diseño. Narrativa Visual.

1 INTRODUCTION

This graphical abstract presents LIBRES, a systematic framework designed for Meaning Construction in Design through an iterative meaning-making loop. The process is structured into five interconnected stages that guide the transition from abstract concepts to validated visual narratives. Illustrae.com was used to create the graphical abstract.

Figure 1



Design operates at the intersection of problem-solving and meaning making. However, the mechanisms through which abstract ideas are transformed into visual artifacts remain largely implicit. In practice, designers often rely on intuition, experience, or precedent, resulting in processes that are difficult to articulate, replicate, or evaluate.

This lack of explicit structure creates a critical gap between conceptual intention and visual output, where meaning may be distorted during translation. In contemporary contexts—particularly those shaped by automated and AI-assisted tools—this gap raises additional concerns regarding authorship, intentionality, and communicative integrity.

This paper introduces LIBRES, a structured methodology designed to address this gap. Rather than constraining creative practice, LIBRES provides a systematic framework that makes explicit the intermediate operations linking concept and form. Grounded in a

humanistic understanding of design as a responsible and reflective act, the methodology aims to support both professional practice and design education.

The objective of this study is to present LIBRES as a transparent, replicable, and theoretically informed methodology for constructing coherent visual narratives.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 DESIGN AS A STRUCTURED YET REFLECTIVE PROCESS

Design has been conceptualized both as a rational problem-solving activity and as a reflective practice. Foundational work by Nigel Cross (2006) positions design as a distinct way of knowing, while Donald Schön (1983) emphasizes the role of reflection-in-action in navigating complex and indeterminate situations.

More recent perspectives within design thinking highlight the importance of problem framing as a generative act rather than a preliminary step. Kees Dorst (2011) argues that the core of design lies in the construction of frames that define both the problem and its possible solutions, while Tim Brown (2008) underscores iterative exploration as central to innovation processes.

LIBRES builds on these perspectives by explicitly structuring the intermediate operations through which abstract ideas are framed, decomposed, and progressively transformed into visual form, thereby extending reflective practice into a traceable and replicable methodological sequence.

2.2 SEMIOTICS AND VISUAL MEANING

Visual communication operates as a system of signs through which meaning is constructed and interpreted. From a semiotic perspective, effective design requires a deliberate alignment between signifiers and the concepts they represent. Klaus Krippendorff (2006) describes this as a “semantic turn” in design, where meaning-making becomes central to the discipline.

Expanding this view, multimodal theory emphasizes that meaning is not conveyed through isolated elements but through the interaction of multiple visual modes. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) argue that visual structuresñsuch as composition, color, and spatial organization—function as grammar that shape interpretation.

Within this context, LIBRES operationalizes semiotic principles by introducing a structured phase of conceptual decomposition followed by a systematic translation into visual variables, making explicit the correspondence between meaning and form.

2.3 PERCEPTION, COGNITION, AND INTERPRETATION IN DESIGN

User perception plays a decisive role in determining communicative effectiveness. However, perception is not a passive reception of visual stimuli but an active process of cognitive construction.

Research in visual cognition demonstrates that individuals interpret visual information through spatial reasoning, pattern recognition, and prior knowledge structures. Barbara Tversky (2011) highlights how visual representations support thinking by externalizing abstract relationships, while Colin Ware (2012) shows that perceptual principles directly influence comprehension and attention.

Despite these insights, perceptual evaluation is often informal in design practice. LIBRES addresses this gap by integrating perceptual validation as a formal and iterative phase, aligning design decisions with both cognitive and experiential responses.

2.4 DESIGN AS RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Contemporary design research increasingly recognizes practice as a form of inquiry. Christopher Frayling (1993) distinguishes between research *into*, *through*, and *for* design, positioning practice-based exploration as a legitimate mode of knowledge generation. Building on this, Ilpo Koskinen et al. (2011) frame design research as a process in which artifacts embody and communicate knowledge.

LIBRES aligns with this perspective by functioning not only as a methodological tool but also as a framework for making design reasoning explicit, traceable, and communicable. In doing so, it contributes to bridging the gap between tacit knowledge and formalized design research.

3 METHODOLOGY: THE LIBRES FRAMEWORK

LIBRES is structured as an iterative methodology composed of five phases that collectively guide the transformation of abstract concepts into visual narratives.

3.1 CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION AND DECOMPOSITION

This phase combines the definition of the core idea with its semantic decomposition. The designer identifies conceptual, emotional, and symbolic dimensions and translates them into structured components.

The aim is to externalize complexity and establish a clear conceptual foundation for subsequent stages.

3.2 VISUAL TRANSLATION

Conceptual components are translated into visual variables, including color, typography, form, and composition. This phase establishes a systematic correspondence between meaning and visual expression.

3.3 NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Visual elements are organized into a coherent structure that guides user interpretation. Hierarchy, rhythm, and spatial relationships are defined to articulate meaning through composition.

3.4 PERCEPTUAL VALIDATION

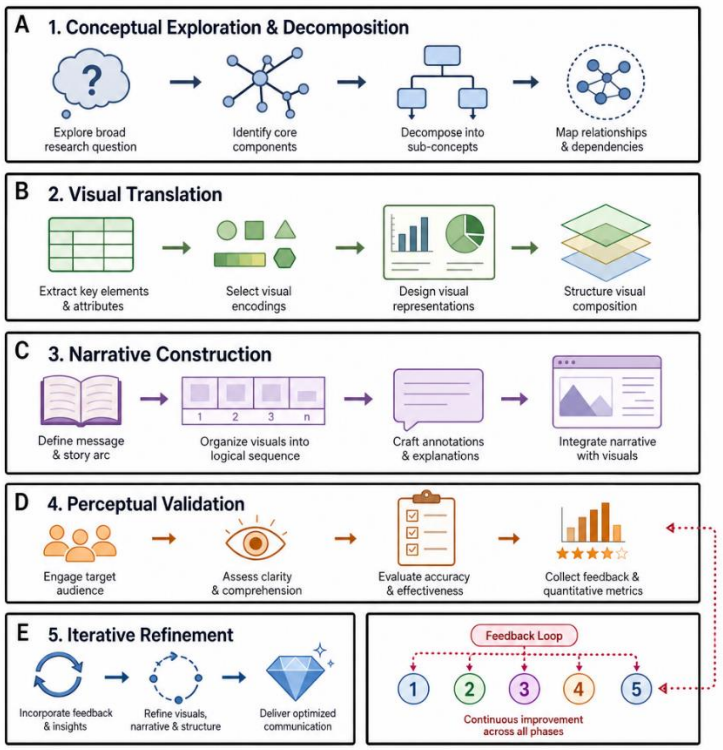
The design is evaluated based on user perception, focusing on clarity, emotional response, and interpretative coherence. Validation operates as an integral and ongoing component of the process.

3.5 ITERATIVE REFINEMENT

Based on validation outcomes, the design is continuously adjusted to improve clarity, reduce ambiguity, and strengthen the alignment between concept and form.

Figure 2

The LIBRES methodological framework for visual narrative construction



The figure illustrates the five-phase structure of the LIBRES methodology, designed to support the systematic translation of abstract concepts into coherent visual narratives. The process is organized into sequential yet interdependent stages (A–E), each representing a key transformation in the design workflow. (A) *Conceptual exploration and decomposition*: the process begins with the identification of a broad research or communication question, followed by the extraction of core components, the decomposition into sub-concepts, and the mapping of relationships and dependencies. (B) *Visual translation*: conceptual elements are transformed into visual variables through the selection of appropriate encodings (e.g., shape, color, and structure), leading to the development of visual representations and compositional systems. (C) *Narrative construction*: visual elements are organized into a coherent sequence, integrating message definition, structural hierarchy, and explanatory components to produce a unified visual narrative. (D) *Perceptual validation*: the design is evaluated through user engagement, assessing clarity, comprehension, and communicative effectiveness, supported by qualitative feedback and quantitative metrics. (E) *Iterative refinement*: insights derived from validation are incorporated to refine visual, narrative, and structural aspects, resulting in an optimized communication output. A continuous feedback loop connects all phases, emphasizing the iterative nature of the methodology and enabling ongoing improvement across the entire design process. Illustrae.com was used to create the Figure 1.

4 CASE STUDY

To explore the applicability of the methodology, LIBRES was applied to the design of a brochure addressing the concept of “freedom” as a multidimensional construct.

The methodology guided each stage of the process, from conceptual structuring to visual execution and evaluation. The application demonstrated improved alignment between conceptual intent and visual outcome, as well as increased coherence in narrative construction.

5 DISCUSSION

LIBRES contributes to design research by formalizing a process that has traditionally been considered tacit, intuitive, and difficult to articulate. By explicitly linking conceptual decomposition with visual translation, the methodology provides a structured mechanism for understanding how meaning is constructed, transformed, and communicated within design practice.

A central contribution of the framework lies in the **operationalization of abstraction**. While existing models of design thinking emphasize ideation and prototyping, they often

underdevelop the intermediate stages through which abstract concepts are structured and translated into form. By integrating conceptual decomposition as a core phase, LIBRES extends the notion of framing proposed by Dorst (2011), enabling designers to systematically externalize and organize complexity before formal execution.

Furthermore, the methodology aligns with research-through-design approaches by making the design process itself a site of knowledge production. Rather than treating outcomes as isolated artifacts, LIBRES structures the reasoning that leads to them, contributing to the transparency and communicability of design decisions (Frayling, 1993; Koskinen et al., 2011).

Another key contribution is the integration of perceptual validation as a continuous and constitutive component of the process. While user-centered design has long emphasized feedback, it is often applied inconsistently or at late stages. By embedding validation within an iterative loop, LIBRES aligns with cognitive research that positions perception as an active and interpretative process (Tversky, 2011; Ware, 2012), ensuring that meaning is not only intended but effectively constructed by users.

Despite these contributions, the study remains limited by its reliance on a single case application. Future research should extend the framework across diverse domains and incorporate quantitative methods—such as eye-tracking or usability metrics—to strengthen empirical validation. Additionally, exploring the interaction between structured methodologies like LIBRES and emerging AI-assisted design practices presents a promising avenue for further investigation.

6 CONCLUSION

LIBRES reframes design as a structured and reflective practice centered on the construction of meaning. By making explicit the intermediate operations between concept and form, the methodology enhances transparency, coherence, and intentionality in visual communication.

Its contribution lies in bridging the gap between theory and practice, offering a framework that is both analytically rigorous and practically applicable. Beyond professional use, LIBRES also provides a valuable pedagogical tool for teaching design as a systematic and evaluable process.

7 DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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