

PERSPECTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE ART DIRECTORS GUILD



US \$6.00

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2017
CREATED COVER

The Delights of a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich Working on Suburbicon

by Karen TenEyck, Graphic Designer

In August of 2016, I began working on the dark tragi-comedy *Suburbicon*, written by Joel and Ethan Coen and directed by George Clooney. The film takes place in a 1959 small town and chronicles the story of a hapless man, played by Matt Damon, as his plan for a new unencumbered life goes slowly, but surely, awry. Working with Production Designer Jim Bissell, set decorator Jan Pascale and Art Director Christa Munro, I designed the graphics for the film.

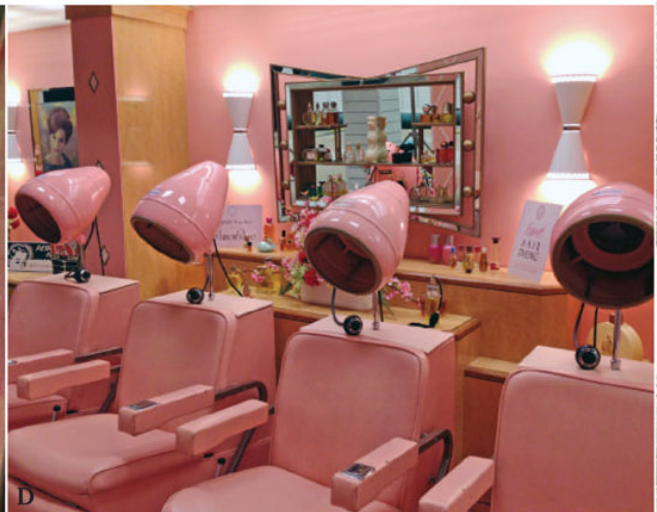
A graphic designer's role.

Graphic designers help explain how the world works, both practically and emotionally. We make street signs and maps that let you know where you are going. We make artwork for home and office that tells you something about the owner. We create commercials that lure you into a store to buy something. We explain what a company is all about with a small symbol and some type. You might not realize it, but we are naturally "all about story." Graphic design is a good bridge to the film world because all advertising and graphic design tells a mini-story with the upmost visual economy.

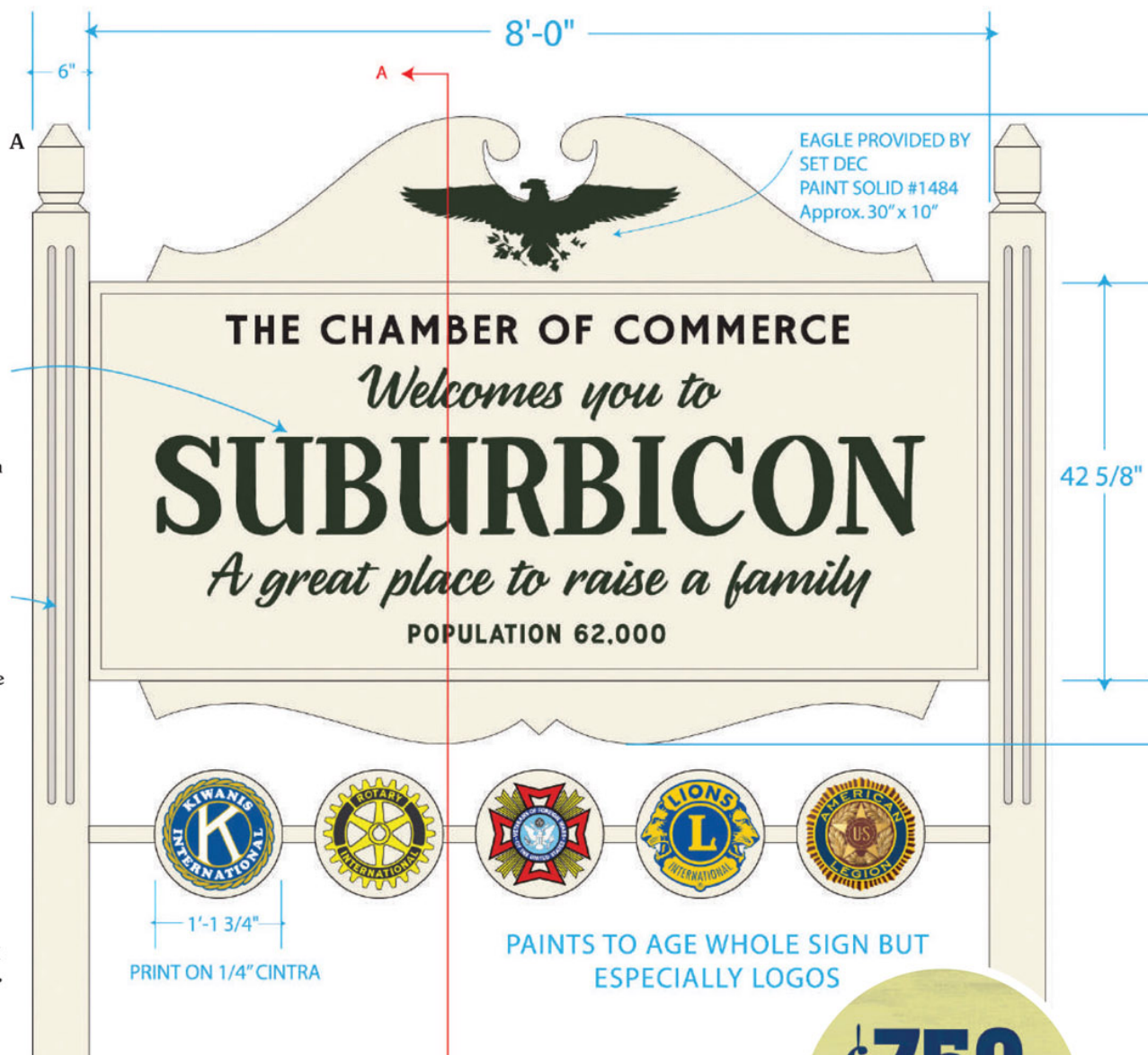
As with my Production Design work in the theatre, when I read a film script, I create a detailed outline of the scenes, looking for the problems, or more euphemistically, "challenges." What are the things that if I don't deal with them upfront, will trip me up down the line? Whether hiring an artist for the freak show

banner-line illustrations in *Water for Elephants*, figuring out the language of the witches in *The Last Witch Hunter*, or studying the different levels of map making needed for Spielberg's *Lincoln*, there is always something. In *Suburbicon*, the 1959 grocery store and the large shopping center really stood out to me. The sheer number of design elements in both those locations was a bit daunting at first, so figuring out how to attack those challenges became my first priority for this project. Sometimes a small part of the film can eat up the majority of your time, but as long as you can get everything else done, it's worth it because it could be the scene that really helps establish a particular period.

As my time in the business has lengthened to over fifteen years, I have started to take responsibility for the Art Direction of the graphics myself, instead of waiting for everything to be handed to me. This means that I have more control over my workload, so things don't bunch up at the last minute, and construction has the time they need to produce the project. With additional information from the Art Director, I am able to work ahead on elements that are known, freeing up time for last-minute ideas that always arise. This may include visiting the locations ahead of time and being on all the technical scouts when everything is laid out by the director. On the scout, I can look for existing signage that needs to be covered and take needed measurements. I can also see the entire scope of the scene and location, which keeps my head in the story. I can then prioritize



A. The welcome sign designed in Adobe Illustrator for the entrance of the SUBURBICON neighborhood in the faux-Chippendale style of the 1950s.
 B. I suggested this billboard to Production Designer Jim Bissell, to highlight the idealism of the period. The house was drawn by Art Director Christa Munro. The artwork was done in Photoshop and Illustrator.
 C. Show cards in the Schramm's window display at the shopping center.
 D. Show cards designed to complement Jan Pascale's perfectly pink beauty salon.
 E. Background pattern, a drapery fabric selected by Jan Pascale, was recreated in Photoshop from a scrap of material and sent to Karen Dutson, of "The Designer Fabric Studio" in Atlanta, for printing.



Suburbicon Estates

JUNIOR EXECUTIVE HOMES



THE "EXECUTIVE"
3 BEDROOMS — 2 BATHS

- ✓ HEAVY COMPOSITE ROOFS
- ✓ HARDWOOD FLOORS
- ✓ 2 and 3 BEDROOMS
- ✓ MODERN KITCHENS
- ✓ LARGE BACKYARDS

A great place for families.

B



"I find it especially fun designing a murder weapon, because the work is often featured, rather than being blurry and in the background."





A. This photo shows the register numbers lead man Brent Rice and I made at the last minute to complete the scene at Karger's Grocery store.

B. A shot of Karger's Grocery when I made my "something's missing" discovery, the Friday before shooting.

C. Product can labels made for Karger's Grocery.

D. Another view of Karger's Grocery. This photo also shows the custom linoleum floor printed for the scene. I did this in Photoshop using a very tiny scrap from the location.

E. "Grocery Specials" posters designed for the exterior of Karger's Grocery store using fonts I developed from old sign-writing books.

F. A close-up of the sign for the pickle display in Karger's Grocery shows the imperfect details of the hand-drawn fonts I designed.

G. One of the many vehicles in the movie, this one at the shopping center. All the bus stop signs across the whole movie were coordinated to work together.

what needs to be done according to the schedule. Another benefit of being on the scout is that I can make suggestions to the Production Designer that might help establish the scene. For example, there is a new home construction site in *Suburbicon* that I thought would benefit from a billboard advertising the idealism of buying a home there. It helped explain what was being built, and was a chance to develop the film's theme of "things are not always what they seem." I always look for opportunities to help clarify the story.

The following outlines just a few of the many graphic projects in this film.

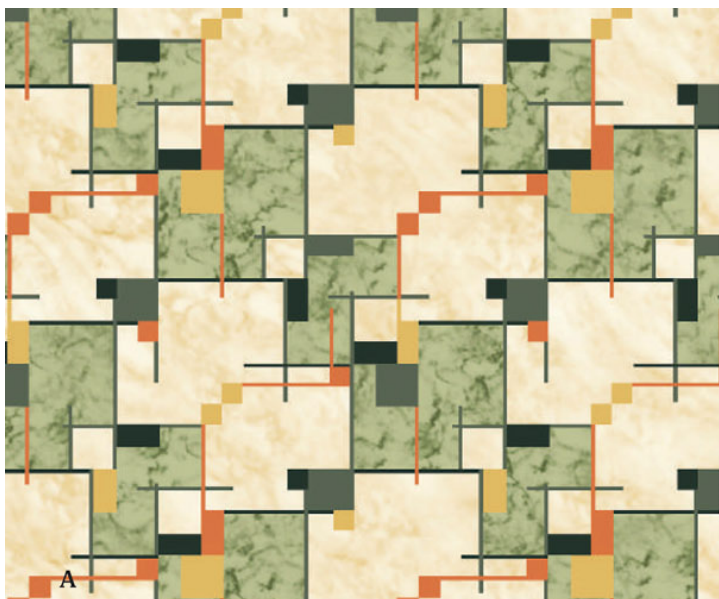
Karger's Grocery.

Grocery stores are filled to the brim with advertising, signage, point-of-purchase displays, and of course, products. Until faced with reproducing one, it is easy to take for granted the complexity and immense number of items that are needed to make it look real. Especially when you cannot buy modern products. We would need to design, rent or reproduce everything.

When designing, I'm looking to make the set look great, not necessarily to show off my skills as a designer. Working with set decorator Jan Pascale, I scoured eBay for labels and boxes that we could reproduce. Luckily, I found someone who was selling period labels for canned goods who had done high-resolution scans that we could use. We bought cereal boxes, cookie containers, displays, bread wrappers and old butter boxes—you name it. I set up a Pinterest page for items to buy as it automatically links to eBay. This meant the entire set decoration department could easily see the purchases. Things poured in from all over the country, every day, to help fill out the grocery store set.

I cleaned up and sized the labels, and Jan's team had them manufactured and put on the cans. Rather than use traditional film resources, it turned out to be cheaper to go to a real food packing plant to have the labels made and adhered. To do this, the cans had to be filled with food so they wouldn't bounce around in the automated machinery, so all the cans in the store, no matter what the label said, were filled with tomatoes. Ten thousand cans of tomatoes, which were later donated to charity.





A. This pattern selected by Jan Pascale and Jim Bissell, was recreated in Illustrator and Photoshop, and printed on linoleum at Astek Wallcoverings.

B. A shot of the Speedy Dry Cleaners window display at the shopping center.

C. A beat-up old restaurant was turned into Tiki Tom's bar, a quintessential style of the 1950s and sixties.

D. In this still from the film, you can see all the killer foods being employed by Julianne Moore's character, Margaret.

E. The finished art for the peanut butter jar provided by property master Matt Cavaliero—one of the 'killer foods.' All the food labels were done in Adobe Illustrator.

F. The finished art for a period milk carton.

A grocery store, of course, also has a lot of signage. These fell roughly into three types: hand-painted 'specials' posters, the main store signs and point-of-purchase displays. For the hand-painted signs, I used a custom set of fonts I have developed from old books on show card writing and signage. Most computer fonts are too perfect and don't have the right quality for a period show, even if the type style is basically correct. I now have a collection of at least fifty fonts for different periods. Like the human hand, no matter how skilled, they are imperfect. A slight wobble here and there, and a little extension at the end of the brush stroke. I believe these little idiosyncrasies make all the difference. I give them a brush stroke effect in Photoshop to make them look as though they are hand-painted, and age them if necessary. You can see examples of this in the pickles sign, the exterior grocery advertising and the counter cards in the perfectly pink beauty parlor. The grocery store section signs were cut from one-inch Gatorfoam and mounted slightly away from the wall to give the space more dimension. Some of the point-of-purchase displays were bought and adapted; others were designed from scratch. All were based on period research.

I showed up on the grocery store set a couple of days before shooting to see what we had accomplished. As I was looking around, I kept thinking something

was missing. We had worked so hard and produced so many things, how could that be? Back at the office later that day, Jan was off working on the next set, but lead man Brent Rice was there. I said, "Let's look at the research. Something doesn't look right to me." And so it was that I noticed I had not designed the numbered cubes at the registers that focus your attention on where to pay. Aha! The signage needed that verticality. So, Brent and I hatched a plan. I would make the numbered cubes over the weekend from foamcore, and he would go to Home Depot to get some poles and metal sockets to hold them up. I printed out the numbers on Monday morning using heavyweight matte paper and wrapped them around the boxes. They were taken to the set and installed right before shooting. It made a huge difference in the space. Even though Jan had done a brilliant job, it just needed that finishing touch. Lesson? —Never be afraid to speak up if your intentions are pure and something seems amiss.

Shopping for the shopping center.

In addition to Karger's, the shopping center was a major player for my time on the movie. An old, beat-up location in North Hollywood was turned into a sparkling display of late 1950s retail design. There were at least eighteen different stores with multiple windows, which had to be decorated with signage, products and show cards. These included a dry cleaner, candy store, photography shop and tiki-bar. There were some that were only seen at a glancing angle, so we used minimal set dressing to identify them. Even though I designed a huge number of elements for the shopping center, as





we got closer to filming, I knew we still didn't have enough, and I began to scour eBay for real signage that we could have shipped in. Traditionally, the set decoration department does this, but everyone was so busy trying to get it done that I pitched in. I don't actually have to design every graphic element in the film. Sometimes period signs are helpful in adding realism to the scene since they are often made using materials that are not common at the studio sign shops—for example, molded plastic, cut metal or carved wood. These types of signs cannot be quickly and inexpensively reproduced, so buying them is sometimes the best option.

New technologies in printing. How to make an old dog with new tricks.

As time goes on, we get further and further away from those 20th-century periods in which we love to tell stories. Existing fabrics and flooring in sufficient quantities are becoming harder and harder to find. Luckily, new technologies are giving us options for reproducing them inexpensively, and so on *Suburbicon*, we printed several custom materials.

Working with Aaron Kirsch at Astek Wallcoverings in Los Angeles, we had linoleum flooring made for the Lodge kitchen based on an authentic 'ancient' Armstrong catalog Jan had bid for fiercely on eBay. Astek provided us with samples in different colors and sizes until we got the correct one for the proportion of the space. For the grocery store, I extrapolated the entire floor pattern from a very small sample found in the location. Astek then printed it on actual linoleum. I will admit I was skeptical, the pattern might seem too busy, but it actually gave the grocery store a certain complication that made it seem fuller. We had three different fabrics printed for the film. An iconic 1950s diamond pattern was done for

the Meyers' living room drapes, using a period fabric sample. We also made the fabric for the Lodge home bedspread and kitchen windows. Karen Dutson of The Designer Fabric Studio printed these in Atlanta. To aid the vendor technically, I provided them with a high-resolution file that had just a single repeat of the fabric on it, and a low-resolution file which demonstrated how the design repeated. Dutson was able to take it from there, without me laying out the entire pattern for the run of the fabric, which likely would have made the file too large to send and possibly eaten my computer alive.

Killer foods. Designing the murder weapon.

Even though it doesn't happen often, I occasionally have the opportunity to design the murder weapon. This was the case with *Suburbicon*, where the killer was trying to get the victim to eat something. Since no product placement deal could ever be struck with an actual company whose product is used to kill someone, we had to design the packaging in the Art Department. The heroine, Margaret, employed a deadly PB&J sandwich to get rid of one of her oppressors. Working with property master Matt Cavaliero, I developed the peanut butter, jelly, bread and medical packaging. You can see them off to the right as Julianne Moore is working with them. I find it especially fun designing a murder weapon, because the work is often featured, rather than being blurry and in the background. OK, I'll admit it. It's sometimes nice when I can point something substantial out to my family. **ADG**



Jim Bissell,
Production Designer
Christa Munro, Art Director
Lauren Polizzi, Jim Truesdale,
Noelle King, Set Designers
Karen TenEyck,
Graphic Designer
Jill Beecher, Illustrator
Michael Gowen,
Assistant Art Director
Mike Truesdale,
Art Department Coordinator
Josh Lopata,
Production Assistant
Jan Pascale, Set Decorator