

The Seventh Commandment

By Erik Spiekermann

The tribute, robbery and theft of authorship, have blurred boundaries in the design practice.

We've had two break-ins at our office recently. Surprisingly, nothing was ever stolen. At least nothing that we could see. We have no idea whether any data was secretly lifted from the server or ideas copied from the print-outs on the walls. If it was the case, how would we measure the damage and report it to the insurance?

It can be flattering to find work that has been influenced by your own work. There is, however, a thin line in our business between copying, adapting, imitating, or just being inspired. And let's face it: hardly any project requires invention, because most clients feel more comfortable with something tested.

Occasionally, thieves deliver themselves inadvertently. I have seen lots of portfolios, where someone claimed authorship without justification. Large projects always need more than one designer, plus a host of other trades, be they programmers, typesetters, project managers or interns. And all of these can claim a part in the project. But that doesn't mean they alone were "the designer".

Whenever I show a project I speak of "us". And it makes me proud to hear people mention the work we did together. As long as they speak the truth. It should be easy: show the project, explain what your role was and give credit to the agency or studio who you worked for at the time, whether employed or as a freelancer. Don't forget: potential clients or employers know that it is easy to copy and paste a complete portfolio.

What surprises me most is the stupidity: people show me projects that I worked on and they didn't, or they use versions of fonts that were never publicly available. And if they don't send their portfolios directly to me, I see it when judging competitions or visiting friends' studios. This is a small business. And we do talk about applicants for jobs.

Claiming other people's work is not bad style, it is theft. And being deliberately unclear about the exact authorship is not modest, but dishonest. Intellectual property is what we create. And taking that from a designer is not flattery by imitation, but a crime.

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