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Queens professor leads effort to establish Charlotte-centric symbols for public use

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St. Louis has its Gateway Arch. San Francisco has The Golden Gate Bridge. And Los Angeles has the “Hollywood” sign that rests high in the hills above the city. These landmarks are immediately recognizable images for their cities.

Charlotte, on the other hand, is lacking graphic imagery that is as universally recognized. Yes, we have Niki de Saint Phalle’s “Firebird” sculpture; and city government’s “Queen’s crown,” used by Charlotte government in signs around town, is known by many residents, but leave the city and the image draws blank stares.

Enter infographic designer and Queens University assistant professor of design Mike Wirth, who is leading an effort to create, refine and make available images to represent Charlotte.

Professional designers and his design class at Queens are developing wordless symbols that cover a spectrum of categories including geographic landmarks, iconic Charlotte buildings, structures and even unique attributes, such as our southern hospitality and our fondness for food trucks. The images are being made available for public use and have already generated interest from Charlotte Center City Partners and others who look to the imagery to help market the city.

The project, known as “Iconic Charlotte,” began in May when Wirth, together with the local chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, led an “Iconathon” design brainstorming workshop under the auspices of the international organization and the inspiration behind Wirth’s goals, The Noun Project.

“I wanted to use the talents of the local design community to perform a civic service project and make our work available for anyone in the community,” said Wirth. “The Noun Project is a global repository and storehouse for thousands of images designed by graphic artists and individuals from around the world. The images are made available at little or no charge for use by the public.”

Wirth took the 60 or so icons designed in the three-hour session, brought them to his undergraduate design class at Queens, and asked his students to refine the designs they think best represent Charlotte and to create their own. He is assembling a set of the best 25 images and sending them to the Noun Project for

- More information

The Noun Project:
<http://thenounproject.com/>.

Mike Wirth Art:
<http://www.mikewirthart.com/>.



review against its specific design and technical requirements and to ultimately be posted for use on their site under a city of Charlotte tab.

His goal is to share imagery representing aspects of Charlotte and make them available for use in commercial/promotional applications.

“Local businesses, municipal governments, tourism officials, even sports teams are potential users of these icons,” said Wirth. “Once they are posted online at the Noun Project they are available free for use with attribution or for a very small fee to use without attribution. The money is split between the designer and the Noun Project.”

Tom Murray, CEO of the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, said he didn’t feel there was one single image that best represented Charlotte.

“Our campaign in marketing Charlotte is ‘Charlotte’s Got-A-Lot’; and depending on who we are trying to reach there may be many images that best connect,” said Murray who noted their marketing brochures have featured “Firebird,” the NASCAR Hall of Fame, The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art and many other familiar landmarks.

Murray said he was aware of the icon project and supported anything that helped keep a focus on Charlotte/Mecklenburg tourism.

Communicating concepts

Whitney Bowers, 22, is a senior and new media design major at Queens University. She is a student in Wirth’s class working on a design that featured a boxy truck in motion. The image of a hamburger was emblazoned on the side of the truck.

“Food Truck Friday has become a well-attended and well-received event in Charlotte creating a lot of buzz,” said Bowers, “I like having an image that represents this as a happening.”

Other images being worked on by his class include The Charlotte Gold Rush Trolley, The Hearst Tower with its iconic art deco design, Charlotte Motor Speedway, the Billy Graham Library and even an image suggesting we are a city of transplants – arrows in the familiar Queens Crown suggest movement and come back into the crown from various directions.

Wirth said images can be effective in communicating entire concepts where language can be a barrier. Often communities that host large international events such as the Olympics or major transportation hubs such as international airports use iconography to depict restroom locations, where emergency help can be found, food vendors, money exchanges and a host of other important services.

“We are seeing the usage of iconography dramatically increasing given the sheer amount and speed of information put forward for people to consume,” said Wirth, who noted one of his goals was to raise awareness and interest in the utility of infographics.

Noun Project co-founder Edward Boatman noted in a recent interview that the expanding number of symbols on the site is being used by architects, designers and businesses around the globe. He said: “This is all about use for civic good.”



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