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Symbolism and Concept in Design: Lessons from Crafting the Alanya University Logo for Architecture Students

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Abstract

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Designing a logo for a university demands a forward-looking perspective, balancing institutional identity with local heritage. This study examines the strategic process of logo development for Alanya University, employing feasibility studies, search conferences, and focus group findings. Preliminary research entailed scanning existing university logos in Turkey for best practices, emphasising simplicity, distinctiveness, and scalability across diverse media. Drawing upon Alanya's natural environment, the final colour palette symbolises the region's multifaceted character, whilst geometric elements reference local historical motifs like the Seljuki star. Futura, a modernist font, was carefully chosen to convey professionalism and inclusivity, aligning with the institution's mission and values. The result is a flexible logo that resonates with staff, students, and the broader community, imparting a warm yet globally relevant image. This merges cultural authenticity with contemporary design principles.

Keywords: Logo Design, University Branding, Visual Identity, Institutional Identity, Graphic Design.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, universities are increasingly compelled to articulate a distinctive identity that resonates across cultural, social and digital spheres. Visual identity—anchored by a well-crafted logo—acts as the most immediate and memorable signal of that identity, encapsulating institutional mission, core values and future aspirations in a single emblem (Japutra et al., 2016). For newly founded institutions, this task is particularly critical. Lacking an established reputation or alumni network, a start-up university must rely on symbolic communication to announce its presence, inspire stakeholder confidence and project an image of credibility and longevity (Wu & Cheong, 2021). Yet logo design within academia is not merely an exercise in graphic flair; it is a strategic endeavour underpinned by branding theory, semiotics and stakeholder psychology (Nguyen, 2019).

Alanya University's founding in 2011 offered a fertile context for examining how symbolism and concept can be synthesised to forge a compelling institutional mark. Situated on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, Alanya is distinguished by a layered cultural heritage, ranging from Hellenistic fortifications to Seljuki architectural motifs. The university's logo had to honour this patrimony whilst signalling a progressive, globally minded ethos. Reconciling those imperatives required an evidence-driven creative process: a foresight-oriented feasibility study established baseline expectations; search conferences elicited stakeholder narratives; and focus groups refined visual preferences into actionable design briefs. Such an approach aligns with best practice in university branding, where inclusive, participatory processes help transform abstract values into recognisable design language (Sakıcı & Ayan, 2012).

The literature emphasises three enduring principles that guided this endeavour. First, simplicity and differentiation are paramount. Overly ornate or trend-bound emblems risk rapid obsolescence and poor legibility when scaled across the

proliferating touchpoints of contemporary media (Japutra et al., 2016). Second, semiotic appropriateness—what Wu and Cheong (2021) describe as “the fit between signifier and institutional narrative”—ensures that symbolic elements reinforce, rather than obscure, the university’s pedagogical focus and social mission. Third, timelessness and scalability future-proof the logo, preserving consistency amid institutional growth and technological change (Nguyen, 2019).

Against this theoretical backdrop, the Alanya University design team drew inspiration from the region’s kaleidoscopic natural palette, embedding hues evocative of sunlit coastline, fertile hinterland and citrus groves. Colour, long acknowledged as a powerful cue for emotional and cultural association, can heighten stakeholder attachment when it mirrors local identity (Shahbaz, 2020). The geometric chassis of the emblem—a constellation of nested squares—references the eight-point Seljuki star, a historic ornamental motif formed by superimposed squares and celebrated for its symbolism of harmony and eternity (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). This subtle homage weaves the university into the broader tapestry of Anatolian architecture, signalling respect for place while avoiding pastiche.

Typography further amplifies the logo’s conceptual message. The choice of Futura, a modernist sans-serif devised by Bauhaus-trained Paul Renner, conveys functional clarity, internationalism and egalitarianism—values consonant with the university’s stated commitment to inclusive, forward-looking education (Aziz Amen 2017; Aziz Amen and Ahmad NIA 2021; Aziz Amen and Nia 2018). Typeface selection is rarely neutral: research shows that letterform characteristics can influence perceptions of institutional seriousness, accessibility and prestige (Wu & Cheong, 2021). By pairing a Bauhaus-rooted font with regionally grounded iconography, the design bridges global and local discourses, exemplifying what Zaffran and Whitfield (2014) term “glocal branding”.

Equally important is the conceptual layering beneath the visual surface. Through careful manipulation of negative space the initials A, H, E and P—referring to “Alanya Hamdullah Emin Paşa”—are subtly embedded within the icon. This hidden narrative device not only rewards close inspection but also invites continuous discovery, fostering an affective bond between viewer and brand. Cognitive psychology suggests that such “aha-moments” can increase memory retention and emotional valence, thereby strengthening brand commitment (Japutra et al., 2016).

In sum, the Alanya University logo represents far more than a decorative badge; it is a meticulously crafted synthesis of semiotics, regional storytelling and stakeholder-centred strategy. By foregrounding simplicity, cultural resonance and modernist clarity, the design exemplifies an approach that can guide architecture students in their own practice of concept-driven design. Moreover, the case study enriches the discourse on higher-education branding by demonstrating how rigorous research methods—feasibility studies, focus groups and iterative prototyping—translate abstract institutional ideals into a coherent, versatile visual identity (Sakıcı & Ayan, 2012; Shahbaz, 2020). The following sections detail this process, offering lessons applicable to educators, designers and administrators seeking to harness the power of symbolism in shaping university image and stakeholder allegiance.

Methodology

Existing universities’ logos in Turkey have been scanned and compared with the criteria listed above. Priority is assigned to clean lines, minimalism, and geometric shapes for a contemporary feel.

Cultural, historical and stylistic features of the city of Alanya have been searched, in which the university was to be established. The idea and expected orientation of the university is concluded based on findings from the realized search conference and focus group outcomes, as well as from the Feasibility Study and Strategy documents. Preliminary drafts have been discussed with designers. Consecutively the final design is presented to the Board of Trustees for approval.

At the same time a modern font is selected, namely “Futura” (Paul Renner, 1937) which is fitting the logo style. Paul Renner is from Bauhaus Design School and modernist [Appendix 1 and 2].

Simplified versions of the logo are worked for small-scale applications (e.g., social media icons or URL icons).

Setting the Criteria

A university logo should be simple, meaningful, and versatile while staying true to the values and heritage. It should work across various mediums and sustainable for the future.

Ten key principles to follow when designing a university logo based on graphic design approaches are as follows [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]:

The logo must be as simple as possible

- The logo is expected to be simple, easily recognizable and differentiable from similar logos. Complex designs may lose impact and can create technical difficulties to reproduce on various media. A clean and direct design ensures the logo remains clear at all sizes and platforms.

Relevance and Uniqueness

- The logo must reflect the university's values, mission, and academic focus. History and culture of location should be considered and reflected to the logo, as well as the expected orientation in academia. Modern and innovative elements would contribute to the contemporary image of the university.

- The logo should differ from other universities' logos. It needs to be distinctive and easily recognizable among other universities.

Timelessness

- Graphic design styles come and go, but a university logo should be designed to last for decades, avoiding trendy or fashionable design elements.

Scalability

- The logo must work across a wide range of sizes and formats, from banners to web pages, from large scale signs to small scale letterheads and staff business cards. It should be legible and distinct on all of them.

Color Palette

- The colors should be representative for the university's identity. Colors can be selected from local natural environment and features. Nature-inspired elements (e.g., trees, mountains, or rivers) are preferred since the university is to be known for its location.

Versatility

- The logo should be adaptable to various media and formats, including print, digital, and merchandise. This means it should work in both full color and black-and-white, and should maintain its integrity in different contexts.

Symbolism

- Incorporating symbols or icons relevant to the city's (in which the university is located) heritage and university's mission can give the logo a sense of identity and uniqueness. This could include local landmarks, academic symbols or abstract reflections of knowledge and progress.

Typography

- The choice of font is crucial. It should be professional and consistent with the university's adopted general style, like dynamism. In a new university it should be modern and clean.

Community and Inclusivity

- The logo should reflect a sense of community, inviting all students, faculty, and staff to identify with it. The design should feel inclusive and giving the message that the institution welcomes diversity and promotes collaboration.

Use of Space

- Proper use of negative space is important in logo design. It can help create a balanced, harmonious design that is not cluttered or overwhelming. Thoughtful placement of elements allows for a clean and effective design.
- The logo should reflect robustness of the institution and indicate a strong structure.

Results

The initials [A], [H], [E], [P] of the university's name "Alanya Hamdullah Emin Pasha" has been embedded as hidden in graphic design of the logo resulting in a deeper narrative.

Color palette from nature have been used to symbolise Alanya's multiple natural features and seasons for different tourism types and local agricultural produces, giving the message that Alanya and the university are colorful, dynamic and energetic.

Squares represent symmetry, balance and long lasting. The logo contains in total 12 squares. The square form has a regional importance because of Selcuki star shape, representing Seljuki Empire to which Alanya belonged, is composed of two coinciding squares [7].

This logo is in official use since 2011 and the response from academic staff, students and public seems to be positive.



Figure 1. Seljuki star shape

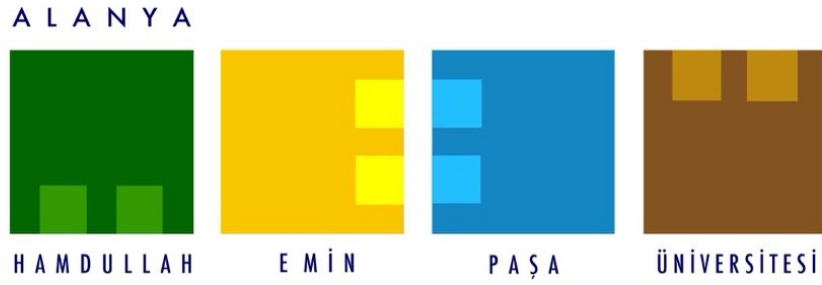


Figure 2. A preliminary trial.

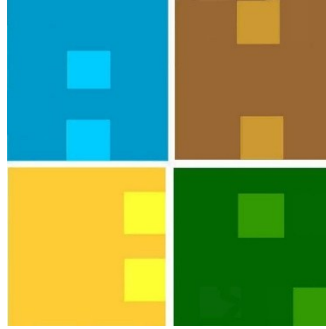


Figure 3. Final version of the logo, designed by Erol Sayın, vectorized by Dr. Emin Toksöz.

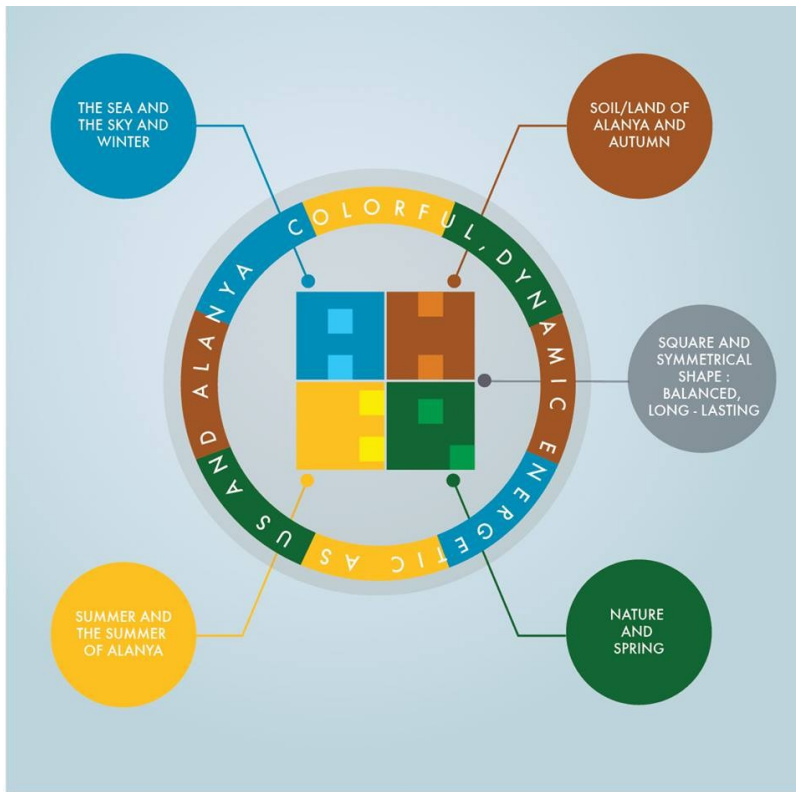


Figure 4. Logo explanations.

Conclusion

The design research for Alanya University's emblem confirms that a rigorously structured, concept-driven methodology can translate an emergent institution's mission and cultural milieu into a clear, enduring visual identity. Drawing sequentially on feasibility studies, participatory workshops and iterative prototyping, the project distilled stakeholder aspirations into three interlocking design choices: a regionally inspired chromatic palette, a Seljuki-derived geometric chassis and the modernist legibility of the Futura typeface. The completed mark operates simultaneously as a badge of credibility and a pedagogical exemplar, demonstrating to architecture students how disciplined symbolism and formal reduction can coexist, heightening memorability and fostering affective attachment among staff, learners and the wider community.

Notwithstanding these strengths, the study's evaluation was limited to short-term perceptions within the university's immediate network. Longitudinal, mixed-methods testing—tracking prospective-student interest, alumni loyalty and international collaborations—would clarify the emblem's broader impact on institutional equity and reach. Comparative analyses across Turkish universities could further refine best-practice guidelines on integrating local motifs into globally intelligible forms. Even so, the Alanya University case validates the premise that participatory, evidence-led design can reconcile heritage and modernity, positioning graphic identity as both strategic communication and a catalyst for reflective design thinking.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest

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Appendix: Selected Font



Futura:
Alanya ALANYA
Hamdullah Emin Paşa Üniversitesi

Futura Bold:
Alanya ALANYA
Hamdullah Emin Paşa Üniversitesi