

martin kace

FOUNDER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR, EMPAX

By Steven Heller

Empax is a not-for-profit branding, design, and interactive firm that specializes in doing work for cause-related clients. Founded in 2003 in New York by Martin Kace, the former CEO of Joe Boxer, Empax was a natural extension of Kace's then-budding career in public diplomacy. Asked by Yossi Beilin, the visionary Israeli politician and architect of the Geneva Accord on Israeli-Palestinian Peace, to become his representative in the U.S. advocating the Accord, Kace, who holds two graduate degrees in psychology, advised Beilin to treat the Accord as a brand—to build a design strategy and “license” it to existing peace groups. Beilin was enthusiastic about the idea, but others around him thought fundraising should be at the heart of the U.S. operation. Since Kace's skills in that area were negligible, he felt it best to resign and throw himself into Empax. Kace explains that Empax's name is a conflation of “empowering” with the Latin word “pax,” for peace. Today, Empax has expanded beyond peace-related projects to include everything from disability rights to environmental concerns; at the behest of Israeli President Shimon Peres, it's currently launching an initiative to brand “green” in Israel, called Clean-Tech. In this interview, Kace explains the roots of Empax and the current program to promote “green” awareness through branding and design in one of the powder-keg regions of the Middle East.



Logo (left) and poster for The Blue|Green Initiative. ART DIRECTION/DESIGN: Empax/Pentagram; CONCEPT: Martin Kace.

HELLER: You didn't come from a design background. What gave you the confidence to start a design and branding firm? **KACE:** Although I've designed a couple of identities for clients, I'm actually a design enabler or animator. I've crowned myself as creative director at Empax, but in this respect I also work in a narrow range, making decisions based solely on the effectiveness of the work created by the six designers on staff. **HELLER:** How important is design to your projects? **KACE:** There is no element more important than design in my projects. My work has as its starting point the notion that text can only take one so far. In the cause-related world, we often have to convince our clients of the critical importance of design, and they are most often a tough audience for that idea—at least at the beginning. **HELLER:** How did this initiative to brand “green” in Israel develop? **KACE:** In 2007, Empax built the website for Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection. Although my thinking on the massive adoption of “green,” which we

call “clean,” is very different from Gore's, we're known for giving the issue a lot of time and research. This led to my being invited to deliver the keynote address this spring at “Environment 2020,” Israel's major environmental conference. My talk, which centered on developing a specific Israeli language for the environment, came to Peres's attention, and I was charged with creating a language guide for him for speaking on the issue. **HELLER:** What constitutes this language? **KACE:** The language is very specific and quite free of ideology. We must recognize that “green” has its roots in the hippie movement, which had gotten strong, but very limited, adoption in America. That is even more the case in Israel, where “green” is an import. I believe it to be a handicap here in the U.S.; “green” is simply much too pretty and clever. In the Israeli case, we do away with terms like “future,” “our children and their children,” “greenhouse gasses,” and “alternative sources of energy.” We use “by the year 20—,” “us,” “waste,” and “free

energy” in their steads. **HELLER:** But design is as important as language, if not more so? **KACE:** Design is where everything begins. A critical piece of our process is giving lots of thought to who or what stands in the way of the client’s ability to provide their services and reach their stakeholders. When considering this, we think solely in visual terms: Should our visuals transcend, confront, or ignore the “enemy?” Visuals frame issues and approaches more effectively than text. After all, our aim is to circumvent sensorial and critical censors and to get right to the heart of the matter. **HELLER:** Do you see the same design language working for Israelis and Palestinians? **KACE:** I see the same language, but different dialects. The land is shared, the sunlight is the same, the basic diet is very similar, but many archetypes are different and must be addressed separately. **HELLER:** But given the strife in the area, what are the themes that will engage the populace? Is this a brand for survival? **KACE:** Survival is certainly at the heart of the issue. But that concept does not ring true with many very important parts of Israeli society, namely Israeli Arabs, the ultra-Orthodox, and the Russian immigrant community. Special language—verbal and visual—is needed to address these communities, and we are working with counterpart organizations in each of these segments of Israeli society. The conflict also plays a key role in that a clean Israel will help Israelis work out the pervasive feeling that many have of just being renters of their country, not owners. We are trying to contribute to creating a product that will be sought after by Palestine, once that state is finally established. The environmental issue should be apolitical, after all. **HELLER:** There must be incredible political obstacles. How do you expect to overcome them? **KACE:** Ironically, that’s one of the easier issues. Environmental consciousness has exploded in Israel, and



everyone seems to want a piece of the issue. Bearing this in mind, our magic ingredient is the Israeli army. In preliminary talks with senior officers, the Israel Defense Forces are highly enthusiastic about finding ways to participate in what is, in fact, the goal of making Israel the cleanest industrialized nation on earth. **HELLER:** Prior to this, Empax attempted to brand coexistence with the Palestinians. You hired Paula Scher to develop a color-coded mark that would compete with the “orange” adopted by those who opposed Israel’s withdrawal of settlements from the Gaza Strip. How did that work out? **KACE:** Paula Scher had designed a magnificent logo for that effort, and I’ll always be in her debt for it, signifying in the most simple and focused way “Israel—Palestine—Border.” We called it “The Blue|Green Initiative.” I ended up using it for a public campaign in Israel to simply test how a self-understood graphic symbol, with little to no text, aside from some applications in which we added the word “Majority,” could garner public attention and adherence. It was doing quite well; in fact, we had acquired 8,000 unsolicited volunteers in Israel to distribute bumper stickers, banners, and the like. The plan was to then bring it over to the Palestinian side, which would operate separately from the Israeli side. As I was beginning to talk with Palestinian leaders, however, Hamas was elected and all went dark for the campaign. **HELLER:** Can you affect policy through graphic means, or is this just a futile exercise? **KACE:** I’ve learned from the Blue|Green project that visual messages do the work on the heart, complementing textual messages more addressed

Website for the Alliance for Climate Protection. ART DIRECTORS/ DESIGNERS: Jessica Honikman, Ehud Tal, Fred Truman; CONCEPT: Martin Kace.

to the mind. The central challenge, in my view, is that of distribution. That is where so many valiant design efforts for the common good have failed. T-shirts and pins can only go so far; it is participation through the web that is the least explored of developing authorship among stakeholders. To achieve massive buy-in, user experience must be at the very heart of the design effort. That’s why I believe that design for the public good should be open source, where designers show their work and accept advice from the public at large, exploiting the wisdom of crowds. **HELLER:** But can policy be changed? **KACE:** Graphic design is a communications driver. If communication and participation efforts succeed, policy changes naturally flow from that. So the short answer is yes, policy can be affected through graphic means, but aiming straight at the policy bulls-eye doesn’t work; only constituents do. **HELLER:** What, then, will be the cornerstone of your branding campaign? And do you think this will really have a palpable impact on policy? **KACE:** The cornerstone is a carefully communicated state of emergency. Israelis are at their finest when presented with challenges of this type, and the technology and brainpower are certainly there to lead the country to cleanest-nation status. Again, policy-wise, we’re doing a work-around, asking only that legislation add teeth to a number of on-the-ground projects. Currently, cabinet ministers and Knesset members are falling all over themselves to take part in the national effort. **HELLER:** Do the Israelis embrace your ideas, or are you just another well-meaning intruder? **KACE:** I lived in Israel during my formative years, and have remained connected there. My Hebrew is fluent. Being American also adds a twist of prestige. Israel is probably the only country left in the world that perceives us that way. That said, I’m astounded by the degree of acceptance I’ve found there. ■