



Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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Variants & Beauty

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When considering the multitudes of typeface choice on the market, how does one approach the challenge of designing a typeface that is different from the competition? With the abundance of typeface choices, why is there a need for yet another typeface to be designed? These are valid questions when approaching the creative process of typeface design. There is the potential to be as many typefaces as there are people in the world; meaning, the possibilities are endless in the personalities and function of typefaces, and have the potential to grow along with the population.

When approaching typeface design, one has to acknowledge that to design type, is to design language. As the designer of language, there are certain considerations that need to be made when formulating the letterforms: legibility, readability, beauty, form, versatility, and utility. It is no easy feat to design a typeface that is beautiful and practical, and has many applications (headlines, body copy, etc). But to design a typeface that confronts the notions of what beauty and practicality are, along with pushing the unspoken 'rules' of what language should look like, is something altogether different.

How does a type designer approach designing a typeface when there is a gluttonous market of typefaces to begin with? There are thousands of typefaces on the market, all making claims of being "quirky", "nostalgic", or even "adventurous." One approach might be to redesign an

existing typeface, such is the case of Garamond. In existence, is Simoncini, Adobe, Monotype, Berthold, ITC, and Stempel, to name a few iterations and foundries. Not to mention all the derivatives, such as Sabon, and Granjon. Given the choice between the task of redesigning something beautiful and established, or something new and perhaps (ugly?), one might take the latter route and strive for a different set of challenges.

The typeface 'Motorix' answers this approach to typeface development by challenging the rules of form, beauty, and function all the while pushing the limits of what language looks like. The Latin (or Roman) alphabet, as it stands today, has undergone centuries of change and evolution which has resolved itself to current norms in letterform recognition. What will our letterforms look like in another couple of centuries? Will the letter 'A' still look the same? Will there be new letterforms added, or old ones removed? What can the letter 'A' look like? With the typeface 'Motorix', these questions were considered, along with how the expectation of aesthetics, and practicality drive the finished product.

Motorix defies the rules of typical motifs of what is beautiful. The notion of beauty was immediately thrown out in the initial sketch stages of Motorix. Through the manipulation, elongation, and distortion of anatomical typographic parts, Motorix was born. The goal was to not create another Bodoni look-alike, but to stretch the imagination and limits of what language can look like, and questioning what beauty can and cannot be. If something is aesthetically pleasing, does that automatically make it beautiful? What about aesthetically interesting, or alternatively, appalling? Could it still be beautiful? Notions of beauty are a heavily contested subject in the art and design world, with many artists and designers challenging what beauty is in their work. Does Motorix encompass beauty by today's standards? That is for the consumer to decide.

Form follows function, as the principle taught during the 20th century says. Motorix functions because of its form, with letterforms that are interchangeable, and variants creating thousands upon thousands of letter combinations. The letterforms have dynamic, humanistic qualities that elicit a futuristic, musical quality. Upbeat and spunky, and with the click of the mouse to change the 'stylistic set', one can venture into letterform combinations hard to imagine, with infinite possibilities.

To truly embrace the typeface design process, one must look back at the history and origins of language. If we really look back to the beginning, we can view the cave drawings of Lascaux, 20,000 years ago, as a portrayal of early language. Through depictions of large animals, drawn with mineral pigments, ideas were communicated and shared amongst the inhabitants. Fast Forward a few thousand years, and we arrive at 3,000 BC, with the proto-Sinaitic pictogram of an 'ox', a simplified drawing which represented strength, energy and vitality. In Phoenician, this pictogram means '*aleph*', which eventually changes to the Greek '*alpha*'. What were our ancestors trying to say to one another through this ideogram? The same as the inhabitants of Lascaux? The eventual transformation from pictogram to ideogram was a major step in transferring the notion of drawing something, to showing an idea. From there, the letter 'A' goes through a process of simplification, rotation, and eventually the 'horns' of the ox (or the

bottom feet of the 'A' as we now know it) lands itself on its head so to speak. The horns now ground themselves into the earth, with stable footing and we have our modern, Latin letter 'A'.

After years of transformation, what will language look like in a couple hundred years from now? With the way language is currently being used, with the advent of mobile devices and the web, we can see that speed and efficiency take precedence in modern communication. Through the abbreviation of words via SMS messages, and the advent of emoji, will we even need written language at some point? Will we divest to the most basic of communication which goes back to pictograms like that of the Egyptians? Staying with the latest technology, Apple has the addition of an entire emoji 'touch bar' in their latest Macbook Pro. With the tap of a finger, one can access iOS emoji to add to their emails, documents, and messaging. This is also seen on the social network Facebook, who have in recent years, added in emoji to status updates as not only a way to 'like' someone's post, but gives us more options to comment 'wow', or 'sad' via the corresponding emoji. Do we as a society embody the modern-day equivalent of the digital version of Egyptian hieroglyphics?

New words are constantly being added to the Oxford dictionary, as our language changes and evolves. What about new additions to the Latin alphabet? One such (not so new development) is the Interrobang, which was designed back in 1962 by an owner & copywriter from an advertising agency. His intent was to communicate the notion of surprise, and rhetorical questioning, all in one mark. The Interrobang has gained some traction as of late, showing up in new typefaces. There is no keystroke for this character however, and thus must be accessed through the glyphs palette. Will there be a key on our keyboards for this character someday in the near future? What other letterforms or punctuation will appear, or alternatively, disappear?

"As it turns out, there is no such thing as one single, basic, essential, universal, archetypal and pure skeleton of an [a]" says Jens Gelhaar, in his *Compendium of Alphabets: A system of Lettershapes*. This is an interesting notion, as we can all agree upon the general shape of the letter 'A'. There are many variations of the shape, as well as the various types of classification (cursive, serif, sans serif, etc), but we can all agree that the Latin letter 'A' has an apex where two lines join, and a crossbar. How will this letterform evolve over the next 100 years? Will it evolve at all, or will our current Latin language change into something entirely different, such as a pictorial-based language (emoji)?

A modern spin and usage of the Latin language and alphabet can be seen in the ranchers of the 19th Century from the Western and Southwestern regions of the United States (as well as Mexico). These cattlemen utilized branding irons to mark and keep track of their cattle, as well as to prevent thieves from stealing their stock. These brands included letterforms, numerals, and pictograms, but with a spin. Taking the Latin alphabet, but altering it by making variations of each letter to represent 'crazy', 'lazy', 'running', 'walking', 'tumbling' and 'flying' to name a few, these ranchers created their own language. Turning the letter 'A' upside down denoted a 'crazy A', whereas the letter 'A' on its side meant it was a 'lazy A'. Feet were added to letterforms (to denote walking), along with a more cursive-stylized 'script' (which denoted

running) were also incorporated into their wheelhouse of letterforms. There were certain rules to the order in which one would read the brand. Always from top to bottom, outside to inside, and left to right. These 'brands' were a stepping stone for modern day branding, a language that is global, and continues to evolve. The beauty of branding is that it distills the meaning into simple imagery, making a language in itself.

With preconceived notions of what beauty and language should look like in today's society, it is easy to get lost in the form, and lose track of the meaning, or function of typography. Can a typeface challenge the norms of what language looks like, and how we perceive it? What is beauty, and can it inform the viewer to buy a product, give to charity, or see the world differently? The hope, being a type designer (and a designer of language), is that audiences can be reached through language and typography, and an impact is made, be it good, bad, beautiful, or ugly. It will be interesting to see where language will go in the next millennium, and if we as a society end up going full-circle back to the where it all began, using simple drawings to convey meaning.