Method Experimentation on Display Typeface Design Based on Visual Cultural Artifacts

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Abstract: Typefaces are a hallmark of human civilization, similar to other cultural artifacts. A typeface's visual properties may have the opportunity to express things other than what word or sentence the typeface is used to visualize. By having a typeface that adopts the visual properties of a cultural artifact, a typeface may be able to represent and create a cultural association towards a certain culture. To experiment on the possibilities of this notion, the author designs an experiment to test a design method with students from the Experimental Typography class on Universitas Pelita Harapan. The result was 18 typefaces that were designed within the class that tried to emulate certain visual characteristics of a cultural and vernacular artifact. For this paper, the author had selected three display typefaces to be discussed further on. From this study, the author concluded that the possibilities of the method used to designing a typeface based on visual cultural artifacts may have the potential to be used properly in a design project.

Keywords: typeface design, display, vernacular, cultural

1. Introduction

When we discuss typography, we seldom discuss typefaces as part of it. While typography had seen various forms throughout the advancement of technological industry (Hananto, 2020b), at its core, typography remains more or less the same. This shows how typography had some sort of permanence, which is somewhat reassuring for many people who dedicate their lives to the study and craft of typography.

The next question would be why does typography have that permanent principle quality? The answer may stem from the fact that typography is closely related to writing and visible language, which had always been part of society and civilization throughout the years (Meggs & Purvis, 2012). People need language, and language needs the be recorded,

hence the importance of writing and the craft of arranging visible language, known as typography.

While the basic art and craft of typography remain similar across history and vast cultures, there are some unique attempts or approaches made by various groups. These unique and localized approaches, which are often called vernacular, enrichen the understanding of language and typography itself. While vernacular is not a term closely associated with typography, but the term vernacular typography had begun to grow to showcase how each community and civilization had represented and recorded their identity using writing and typography. This notion inspires more studies and practices towards vernacular and typography. To introduce this idea to students, the author teaches the idea of vernacular and typography and researches the result of the teachings that had been conducted.

This research is conducted in the experimental typography class of Universitas Pelita Harapan's Visual Communication Design department. 18 groups of students attend the class. Each student is tasked to do research on a certain group and to discover a vernacular that will be used as a basis for the typeface design. From the 18 groups of students, this paper will showcase and discuss 3 typefaces from 3 groups that the author had guided throughout the research and design process. This study is part of the author's classroom action research on typography in the university. The classroom action research was conducted to develop a method for designing a display typeface design based on visual cultural artifacts that may be used to teach the students on typeface design methods and typography in general.

2. Vernacular & Typography

Vernacular can be understood as the unique language or dialect of a group of people (Finizola, Coutinho, & Cavalcanti, 2014). Vernacular can also be understood as the uniqueness and characteristics that are found in a group of people outside of language itself. In architecture, vernacular architecture refers to the specific material and methods that are unique to the people or location (Edwards, 2011). In graphic design, vernacular can be identified when designs in a certain group or location embody certain characteristics that are uniquely found among them (Heller & Anderson, 2016). In typography, vernacular typography is often more tricky as it is too transparent and ordinary for the people (Hao, 2018).

The idea to understand and to preserve a vernacular can be seen as an attempt to preserve the identity of a group of people, or objects, that share that vernacular (Heller & Anderson, 2016). Understanding something vernacular and implementing it in a design is

one part of preserving identity while reshaping the identity into something more tangible and understandable; in the context of this study, the new shape of the vernacular is the display typefaces.

The display typefaces that are designed based on a vernacular are different that vernacular typography or vernacular typefaces. Vernacular typeface or typography is something that is naturally done by groups of people that can be categorized as unique and special; in this study, the students are tasked to design a display typeface that embodies the characteristics of other vernacular artifacts, other than typography.

3. Methods

This study is part of a classroom action research conducted by the author. In the case of typeface design, this research is on its second cycle. The first cycle was conducted in the previous year to produce a design method. In the second cycle, the author aims to test a design method proposed that would be used as a teaching framework in class. The classroom action research is research that positions the teacher as researcher, studies the classroom situation as part of the research, publishes the result for other teachers to learn (Sukardi, 2015). The diagram of the research method conducted by the author can be seen in Figure 1.

First Cycle

Second Cycle

Planning ⟶ Implementation & Observation ⟶ Reflection

Designing the research

Preparing materials & assignments for students in class

The students conduct the display type design using the design method prepared by the author.

The author studies the result of the design conducted by the students.

The author reflects on the overall research cycle.
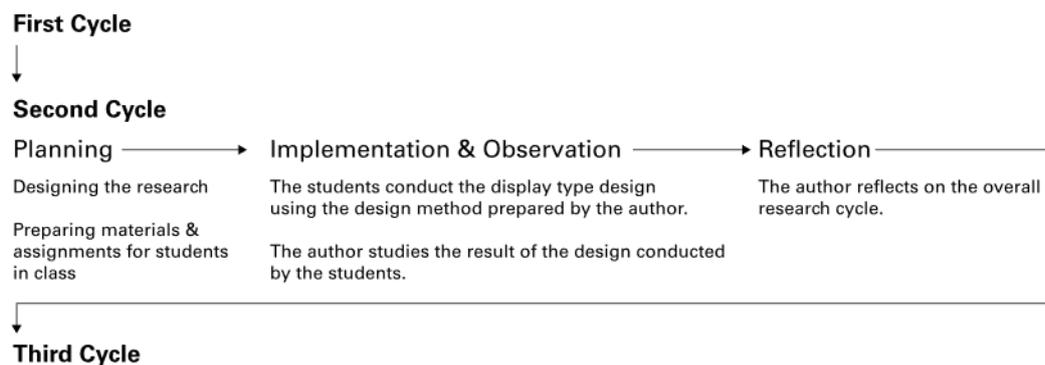
Third Cycle

Figure.1 Diagram of the Research Method

Based on the design results of the first cycle (Hananto, 2020a), the author designs the research for the second cycle and also the lesson plan for the class. The students are tasked to design a display typeface based on the method from the author's first cycle. The results of the design are then studied as part of the research.

The design method for the typeface design for the students is based on adaptations of several design methodologies (Karjaluoto, 2013; Landa, 2011; Martin & Hanington, 2012) that were simplified and categorized into three phases (Hananto, Leoni, & Wong, 2020):

1. pre-design phase, which focuses on studies before the design or visualization phase.

2. design phase, which focuses on visualizing and designing the intended design object.

3. post design phase, which focuses on all activities after the design phase is completed.

Figure 2 shows the design method that the students used to design the display typefaces for the research.
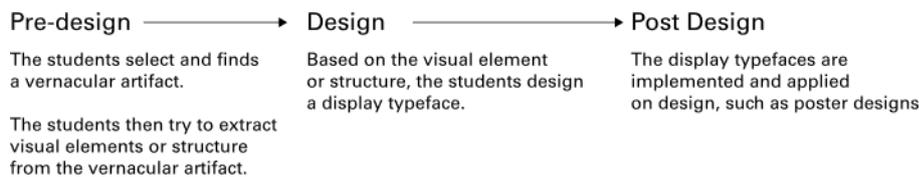

Figure.2 Diagram of the Design Method used by the students

The students are asked to select a vernacular source (group of people within a certain location or period). After they select a vernacular source, the students try to identify a vernacular artifact. The artifact is then studied and visual elements or structures were extracted from the artifact. The students are then tasked to design a display typeface based on the visual element or structure that were extracted. After the typeface is finished, the students were asked to design a poster and type specimen to 'test' the designs.

4. Results & Discussions
Manatiang Typeface

The first typeface that will be discussed in this paper is called Manatiang, which derives from "Manatiang Piriang", the unique way the people in Padang bring the food to the table of the customers (Karnadi, Suliang, & Mulia, 2021). The people who serve the food in the Padang restaurant can bring many stacks of plates by arranging them diagonally (Figure 3). These arrangements and way of bringing food to the table is something vernacular for the people of Padang as in Indonesia, we only see this way of bringing plates in a Padang restaurant (Sikumbang, 2020).

Figure.3 Image of plates that were references for the Manatiang Typeface. Source: https://www.boombastis.com/keunikan-rumah-makan-padang/115606

From the Manatiang, the students studied various imagery of people doing the "Manatiang Piriang" and later extracted visual characteristics as a base for their typeface designs: trapezoid shape, from how the plates looked from the side. The students then experiment on various sizes and shapes of the trapezoid as a module to build a custom typeface, which later is called "Manatiang Typeface" (Figure 4).

Figure.4 Specimen of Manatiang Typeface

Malangka Typeface

The second Typeface is called "Malangka", which is a display typeface based on "Tongkonan", vernacular architecture from Toraja. In Toraja, "Tongkonan" represents more than just a house, it is used as the center of their social life, such as for socializing, cultural ceremony, and also discussions on how to govern within their tribe (Michi, 2018). The design of a "Tongkonan" is also unique as it also features a unique roof, features empty spaces, and is also structured to anticipate the rainfall in Toraja (Sir, 2015; Stephany, 2009).

Figure.5 Toraja's House Structure. Source: (Sir, 2015)

The main design idea for the "Malangka" typeface is the structure of the house, which is translated into defining the x-height and ascender of the typeface (Sujanto, Agatha, Calvin, & Alfandri, 2021). Various visual properties from the architecture, such as the shape of the foundation stones and pillars, the arch and curve of the roof, and also the stairs, are implemented on the typeface to provide a more characterized look for the typeface (Figure 6).

Figure.6 Specimen of Malangka Typeface

Singkawang Typeface

The third typeface is the "Singkawang Typeface" which is designed by implementing various symbols found in Singkawang, one trade and mining city in West Borneo (Aurelia, Rahman, Susanto, & Vincent, 2021). Singkawang started as a small city, yet the various activities in Singkawang transformed the city into a melting pot for various cultures. Although diverse, Singkawang had good tolerance between different races and religions, especially the Chinese descendants with their Buddhist religion, and the non-Chinese descendants with their Islam beliefs. The tolerance and harmony between people in Singkawang formed a plurality that has become a normal part of the lives of the people in Singkawang. By defining and extracting the various symbols related to the diverse religions

of the peoples in Singkawang, this group of students attempts to design a typeface that represents the plurality in Singkawang as the concept of their design.

Figure.7 Moodboard of References that were used for the Singkawang Typeface Design. Source: (Aurelia et al., 2021)

The Singkawang Typeface is designed by creating various strokes for the typeface based on the symbols of diverse religions from Figure 7. The team defined the stem, diagonal stem, bar, bowl, and terminal for the typefaces, and started to design the typeface using the pre-defined strokes (Figure 8).
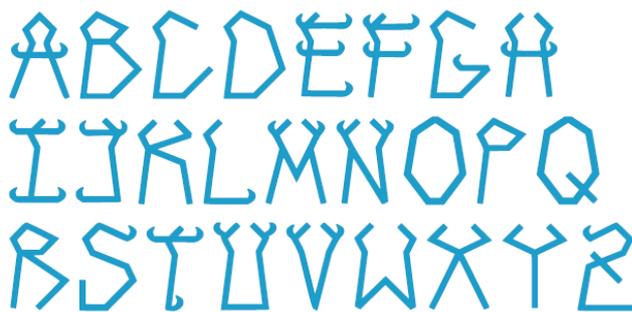

Figure.8 Specimen of Singkawang Typeface

Discussions

The three typefaces discussed in this paper, Manatiang, Malangka, and Singkawang, follow a simple design method but varies on which aspect that becomes the source, the way the source is extracted, and how the extracted visual is used to design a typeface. A summary of each typeface can be seen in Table 1.

Typeface	Source	Extraction	Visualization Method

Manatiang	The plates are used in "Manatiang Piriang", a vernacular object.	A visual module	The module is transformed into a grid to build the typeface.
Malangka	The "Tongkonan" house, a vernacular object (architecture).	A visual structure, various visual features.	The visual structure is used to define the proportion of x-height and ascender of the typeface. The visual features are used to create a distinct look of the typeface.
Singkawang	Buddhist and Islam religious symbols are abstracted, a vernacular concept.	Various visual shapes and strokes.	The strokes are used as stem, diagonal stem, bar, bowl, and terminal of the typeface.

Table.1 Summary on the Three Typefaces

From the three typefaces, we can see that a single design method can be used quite differently to yield different designs. As a learning experience, this design process can be concluded as a success as each group of students can produce different typefaces, each with a different approach and different outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This study concluded that the second cycle of the classroom action research was a success, as it shows that the method and reference used to teach the students were successful for the students to create their typefaces. Each typeface has its features that can be seen and be traced back on why the feature is there. Each typeface also has its visual concerns that can be further addressed and revised, but if we see the three typefaces as a prototype that is a result of a study, the result can be considered sufficient.

As mentioned firsthand, the understanding of how cultures' identity can be preserved in graphic instruments, such as typefaces, can be a strong drive and motivation for designers to explore the idea of designing typefaces. This can also shift how people see typefaces, not as mere writing tools, but also as a representation of ideas and identities. While this study focuses on experimenting with a certain design method as part of teaching, the author believes that the result of the learning experience for the students is far richer.

If possible, the author aims to further study how the design method may be used on different vernacular ideas and concepts in future classes as part of the authors' classroom action research. The author hopes to create varying frameworks of design based on the design projects that had been done on the second cycle of the research so that future cycles may be more efficient while more explorative on designing typefaces.

Acknowledgment

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