

stop the urbanity:

the marriage of architecture & typography

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“**T**ypography and graphic design share the same theoretical base as architecture.” For a graphic designer who accepted the Modernist principle of the unity of the arts, given that they arise from the same mindset and occupy the same visual landscape, the new architecture of Lower Manhattan stumps me. At Ground Zero, the 7 World Trade Center corporate Tower #1 by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) has nearly topped out and has secured its first tenant; Tower #2, just announced, will be by British architect Norman Foster, designer of the controversial Swiss Re London tower shaped like a steel pickle, and Santiago Calatrava’s soaring white glass bird for the WTC Transportation Hub, is set to fly by 2009. What is comparable to all this development in graphic design and typography? Is there a unity of the arts in the post-Post-Modern era?

Early Modern theorists stressed the oneness of style: Le Corbusier said in 1923, “Style is a unity of principles animating all the work of an epoch, the result of a state of

mind that has its own special character. Our own epoch is determining, day by day, its own style.” Gropius went further in recognizing, “the common citizenship of all forms of creative work and their logical interdependence on one another in the modern world.” Alvin Lustig, whose early death deprived Yale of a serious design theorist, hoped for “the kind of relationship that existed in earlier periods between objects the great symbolic spark that jumped between a candle stick, a Gothic cathedral, or a tapestry.” So, today, where is that spark? Is there any resemblance, or any “interdependence,” among designers of buildings and designers of pages and letterforms?

In his 1928 manifesto of the modern spirit in typography, *The New Typography*, Jan Tschichold named Adolf Loos, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier as architects expressing the spirit of modernism. In this interesting work, he advised German printers to achieve the modern spirit by rejecting old style faces and using the non-descript sans serifs in the type case, such as Venus. But

Madeleine Vionnet's
Wedding ensemble (1929).



the modern impulse stirred in designers, and new sans serifs appeared. The types of Jakob Erbar (Erbar, 1926), especially Paul Renner (Futura, 1927) and Rudolf Koch (Kabel, 1927) became widely popular from their first appearance.

Of the same structure

Graphic design repeats in miniature what architecture does monumentally. In my new book, *Forms in Modernism; A Visual Set. The Unity of Typography, Architecture and the Design Arts*, I pair similar approaches in the treatment of form by architects and designers. Early in the 20th century, the stripped Looshaus building in Vienna and sans serifs revealed a turn from ornament to abbreviated or abstracted bases the bones of the letter. Further, Tschichold claimed asymmetry as the logical order of text resulting from its hierarchy and function. In posters and book design, sans serif type, photography, rules, and bars replaced fleurons and ornaments, illustrations, borders and centered type. Bold and big, using all the page and its white space, this practice of asymmetrical composition became a key principle in modern graphic design, proselytized by the Bauhaus as well.

Madeleine and Mies

In *Forms of Modernism*, I show that fashion and furniture move in the same spirit of a period on the personal scale. Such design is part of the visual landscape, or visual set of the early modern period. Madeleine Vionnet and Mies van der Rohe both rejected axial



Mies van der Rohe's
Barcelona Pavilion (1929).

symmetry and centrality. Mies exhibited his now iconic Barcelona pavilion in 1929, and the same year, Vionnet showed her wedding dress. The garment revealed its construction in the metallic cord seams which followed the fabric around the body to gather in an asymmetric focus on the left hip. Vionnet didn't study Mies; she sent her assistants to the Louvre to draw Greek drapery. There's no causal connection, influence or even awareness of each other's work. (Even to fantasize about a meeting between them is alarming. One can only speculate that they might both have served the same rich clients.) But by 1929, both had discarded tradition in favor of a new spirit. And both used luxurious materials: Mies, marble and onyx; Vionnet, ivory silk panne velvet; allowing the elegance of the materials — their intrinsic refinement and proportions — to work. In American modernism, typography followed architecture. We pay little attention to the typography



Left: The Empire State Building

Right: Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Lever House



in our cities that dress up everything from storefronts and street signs to train stations and office buildings. Architects and urban planners, too, spend little time as to what kind of typefaces are to be used to adorn their design.

Tower before type

The Empire State Building in New York City had been constructed in record time at the start of the 1930s. The American Type Founders issued an elongated, condensed titling face called Empire, named after the icon. Huxley Vertical type and Slimline type also appeared; both letterforms were elongated to the maximum and condensed to narrow, anorexic stems — skyscrapers as type. This period exaggerated thinness and tallness, and models and stars showed how it looked on the human figure.

Tall buildings evolved and became New York's ubiquitous corporate-style architecture, with Helvetica type emerging as their counterpart in the 1950s. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill has designed much of the New York landscape since its iconic Lever House of 1951:

- ▷ 1960: Union Carbide headquarter at 270 Park Avenue, Manhattan
- ▷ 1964: Chase Manhattan Plaza at 28 Liberty Street, New York City
- ▷ 1967: HSBC Bank Building at 140 Broadway, New York City
- ▷ 1976: Citicorp Center at 153 East 53rd Street, Queens

101 Barclay Street (1983), a white building immediately to the north of 7 World Trade Center, is identified by modest brass titling over the main entrance. Together, the two SOM buildings, 7 World Trade Center and 101 Barclay Street, occupy a massive stretch of glass. To their south will be Tower 2 by Foster and the WTC Hub of Calatrava. What will be their graphic counterparts?

Modern concerns

Foster's London Millennium Tower takes its shape from environmental goals: admitting natural light and fresh air, conserving energy. Its tapering form minimizes gusts of wind, often problematic around city skyscrapers (the original WTC plaza was non-navigable, if one remembers). The aerodynamic form permits staggered light wells to open vistas between floors, as well as move fresh air upward and warm air outward.

Social concerns such as housing, so central to early modern thinking, have become people concerns again, but more

empathetically. Santiago Calatrava says of his World Transportation Hub's wing-like forms, "The building is built with steel, glass, and light. They will all be equal building material — the light will arrive at the platform, and visitors will feel like they are arriving in a great place, a welcoming place." He showed he could do this in the 2004 Athens Olympic Stadium Complex. In contrast, Le Corbusier planned to screen tenants to admit those worthy of living in his Marseille apartment building.

The art of typography in urban spaces

The union of type and architecture does exist. The Cal Trans building in Los Angeles, California, designed by Thom Mayne, incorporated the building's address in a stunning projection of huge numbers into the facade. "Human experience and mode of living take on the material and spatial forms. Typography in our urban space, too, reflects the unique character of the space and people who live there," said Rintaro Shimohama, one of the three directors of the NORAMOJI Project.

Catching the strays

Japan-based NORAMOJI Project knows how much typography in urban settings matter. Paying attention to fonts that appear in storefronts in old neighborhoods



Neighborhood typefaces found in Japan by NORAMOJI. Many of these typefaces were "made by shop owners and non-designers".

in Japan, they especially have a care for fonts that are handmade, unique, and imperfect — Made by shop owners and non-designers. "They might not be that sophisticated, but they each have their own charm and uniqueness," Naoki Nishimura, one of the directors, says. They name these charming yet neglected typographies scattered around "noramoji". In Japanese, "Nora" means "stray" and "Moji" means "text" — thus, NORA-MOJI means a stray font (just like a dog and cat!), indicating a minor, unofficial font that does not have an official title or usage.

Typography archaeologists

The noramoji hunters had studied graphic design in a Japanese art school and were already interested in typography, especially old styles they saw in the city where they lived. Gradually, they started taking photos of them and analyzing their pattern in a mission to preserve these old neglected fonts in cities. They then reproduce them as open source typeface

“The shape of texts, and its usages, show the character of people and their place.”

Project NORAMOJI
creates typefaces
based on urban
type found in
Japanese cities.



that is available to everyone for use. They weren't interested in, or at least conscious about, the urban space where these fonts "live". But, they knew in which neighborhoods they most likely find good interesting fonts with personalities. They have frequently visited Asakusa, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Tokyo, for instance. "We are interested in the texture of these typographies, which accompany the buildings and its environments — their materials, characters, and feelings," said Shinya Wakaoka, one of the three directors of the project.

Interesting neighborhoods have interesting text in their spaces

The majority of the noramoji happen to be from the post-war period. They represent certain characters that are specific to the era, Shimohama says. "Black markets that are created in a post-war era resulted in many subsequent small businesses. The storefront and posters they created back then have completely different characters compared to the mass-produced, streamlined typefaces that are created by marketing/advertisement companies today."

"Architecture and its buildings reflect how people live and use the space. In a similar manner, people use texts to communicate and convey their messages. The shape of

texts, and its usages, show the character of people and their place. They could be subjective and personal." Thus, by observing the typographies, they can also detect the character of the place.

The effects of globalization

All the big cities everywhere in the world, not only in Japan, are becoming homogenized due to globalization. The modes of expression, including typography, are becoming standardized too. "Interesting, unique neighborhoods tend to have interesting texts and their unique variations. The standardization of cities are shown in the standardization of its texts, too," says Nishimura.

The world's tallest building is being built in the Kingdom of Dubai. There, new museums, commercial buildings, government structures, and condominiums come from Gehry, Gwathmey, Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, and other globally celebrated architects. New typefaces and new versions of old typefaces are available: from Emigre Linotype, Monotype, and Hoefler, to Manfred, Phil, Markus, Tobias, or Adobe. Globalization leaves the neat concept of unity of style in shambles.

Or perhaps it has been transformed into something more complex, more profound than we now can see. We can't identify it

because it is too close. However, a lettering style, the typeface of logos and signage do not deserve its neglect, as they cover a considerable amount of urban surfaces. When you exit from an airport and get on a taxi to downtown in a foreign country, it hits you that you are on a foreign land when you start seeing how the signs, storefronts, and advertisements are written that are not familiar to you. You would recognize the iconic Helvetica letters in a New York subway station, or the illuminated neon street signs in Hong Kong. They, too, contribute to shaping the city's identities as much as the other factors like urban infrastructure and architectural types.

Lessons for architects

The NORAMOJI Project has published their first book in 2017. Their goal is to invite more people to get lost in this charming world of texts in our cities. All the profits are given to the owner of the storefront signs, helping the fonts survive and find their new homes.

Urban typography might not be their expertise, but architects and city planners might have a lot to learn from it. A good typeface creates an emotional response in relation to the message it is conveying, and good typography creates a sense of place, invoking history, reflecting changing lifestyles and trends, and influencing people's behavior. Some architects even dislike the usages of posters and signs on the surface of their design. Yet, it might be time to acknowledge the importance of typography as an essential factor in our cities.

Can someone see the common spark? ◆



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