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Q&A

How did you become involved in doing research?

I was unsure if research could be applied to a project outside of the sciences, but my Honors advisor, Dr. Anne Dotter, encouraged me to look into it.

Ever since my first design class, I've been fascinated with typography and the endless amount of detail that goes into creating a cohesive set of letters. The subtle differences in letter drawings can convey unique subliminal ideas; text can seem professional, comical, chic, or angry depending on the typeface that a designer chooses.

With that in mind, I wanted to try my hand at creating my own typeface during my semester abroad in Trier, Germany. I knew that other designers had created typefaces inspired by specific places or objects, and I wanted to challenge myself to create a unique interpretation of my city within the limitations of a typeface.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

My research process is very different from the creative process I take for designing. Though I try to manage my design process into steps, I change my mind frequently and allow myself to explore many different concepts and mediums before settling on a final piece. The research process has been much more streamlined. I have one clear goal for my research and a fairly simple path for solving that problem.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

I love the moments when a solution suddenly appears. Like when a letter suddenly feels right, or I read a quote that helps me understand. Pure inspiration. As cheesy as it sounds, learning something new or finding sudden clarity is so worth all of the preparation that goes into that one moment.

Type in Trier: The Relationship between Letters and the Oldest City in Germany

A. Claire Zimmerman

INTRODUCTION

There are countless elements that make a city unique. The people, language, location, climate, architecture, customs and currency of a city all contribute to the experience of being in a place. Even the kinds of letters, or fonts, which are used in a city can add to its individuality. Is it possible to draw one font that could encapsulate all of the type that is used in a city? Even further, can a typeface translate the collective feeling of

being in a city, in its letterforms?

This is a particularly difficult task.

Type designers must try to create an expressive shape that is still recognizable as part of the alphabet.

There are only so many ways to manipulate a letter, and many of those manipulations are of the slightest detail. It is not unheard of though, and designers like Tobias Frere-Jones and Susan Kare have successfully translated the characteristics of a city to clear letterforms. Frere-Jones

designed the typeface Gotham using inspiration from lettering on New York City skyscrapers, and Kare created Monaco, Chicago and Geneva for Apple computers in the 80s. Here lies my task: to describe the feeling of a place in a sublime typeface design. My research is inspired by the location of my semester abroad in Trier, Germany. When finished, the typeface will not only be an expression of a time and place, but a tool for communication.

BACKGROUND AND INSPIRATION

A typeface is a set of letters drawn in a similar style and used for print or digital text. The letters in a particular typeface have been standardized so that they can appear the same in any application. The beginning of our contemporary definition of a typeface dates back to the creation of movable type. Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of movable type, transformed the world of reading and communication by allowing printers to set individual letters on a printing press. Before movable type, printers created woodcut blocks for a single page. The new, more malleable system allowed for a faster, cheaper means of printing and the spread of information throughout the West. Gutenberg's invention changed the way we treat and design typography.ⁱ

Today, one encounters typefaces not only in printed materials, but on the internet, mobile devices and various computer programs. There are multiple classifications for these typefaces based on the characteristics of their stroke width, style and shape. The most basic



Figure 1: An example of type with and without serifs.

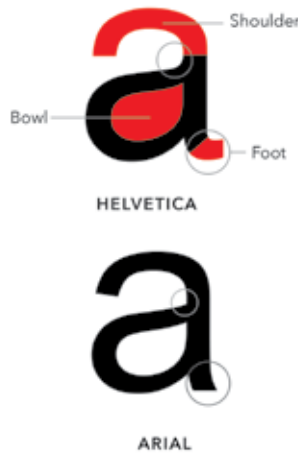


Figure 2: The slight differences between Arial and Helvetica.

distinction is between serif and sans serif typefaces (Fig. 1). Serif typefaces are characterized by a small projection at the end of a stroke. Sans-serif type does not have any added projections.

Within these categories, there are specific details that differentiate one typeface from another. For instance, Arial and Helvetica may look similar from far away, but close up they use different angles and curves (Fig. 2). In Helvetica's lowercase "a," the angle between the bowl and the shoulder is a smooth curve. In Arial this same angle is sharp and pointed. The foot on Helvetica is a small 90-degree angle with curved lines. Arial's foot does not make a big angle, but gradually veers to the right.

Though these characteristics may seem insignificant, even the smallest details contribute to how we understand words. For instance, most scholarly articles are set in Times New Roman, Baskerville or Garamond because they are legible, professional and do not distract from the content of an essay. If a scholar sets his or her proposal in

Comic Sans, the article would seem immature and silly. In this example, it is evident that the way a letter is drawn plays a role in our perception of words themselves. In all, the work of a type designer requires intense and thoughtful attention to detail.

But how does a typeface contribute to a city, you ask? Each city has its own unique history, climate and culture, and the type both adds to and reflects that. The lettering for the Paris Metro, for instance, is a recognizable part of the city. The signage was designed in 1900 by architect and furniture designer Hector Guimard. Guimard was inspired by the Art Nouveau movement and took cues from natural forms for his typeface.

ⁱⁱ While the Paris metro type is quirky and organic, the typeface for the New York Subway is stark and neutral. Since the late 1960s, the New York City Subway has used Helvetica and Akzidenz-Grotesk in its signage. That year the city undertook the massive project of simplifying the way-finding system used for its maps and signs. Bob Noorda and Massimo Vignelli provided a uniform way-finding for the subway system.ⁱⁱⁱ In both New York and Paris, the type for the subway system speaks to the uniqueness of the city. This is just one way that type can be specific to a place.

Other experienced typographers have explored this idea of fonts relating to a city. For example, the studio of Hoefler & Frere-Jones created the font Gotham based on type on buildings in Manhattan. These letters were created by engineers and architects as labels for buildings. Though the letters co-founder Tobias Frere-Jones found are not part of a specific typeface, they reflect the style of the 1930s and 40s. He collected hundreds of photos of these letters and used them as the basis for his drawings.^{iv}

GOTHAM

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee
Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk
Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp
Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu
Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

Figure 3: The complete alphabet for Gotham.

Gotham is an assimilation of these examples, and directly reflects the city of its origin (Fig 3).

CREATIVE PROCESS

My research follows the example of Hoefler & Frere-Jones mentioned above (and is still incomplete because my semester in Germany is not yet over). Just as the designer found typography in Manhattan from which he based his font, I use found typography for my preliminary sketches. Below is a brief outline of my process.

- Study Trier's history, lifestyle and visual characteristics.
- Collect inspirational type that epitomizes the feeling of living in Trier.
- Sketch letters by hand and try to find the appropriate proportions, style and weight for the letters in the phrase "hamburgerfonts," a standard phrase used by type designers to test how the letters read and look next to each other.^v
- Refine and finish letters in Adobe Illustrator until they work as a cohesive set.
- Create usable typeface that others can download and use with the program FontLab.

RESULTS

1. Understanding Trier

Trier is the oldest city in Germany, founded by Augustus in 16 B.C. At one time, it was the capital of the Roman Empire, and some Roman ruins still remain today. The city is situated on the most Western

side of Germany, a 30 minute drive away from Luxembourg. The Mosel River runs through the city from North to South.

The lifestyle in Trier is still characterized by its history and geography. The architecture of the town center retains an old world charm; pastel buildings with ornate window frames are set close together on cobblestone streets (Fig. 4). The population is largely Catholic, and Easter holidays are public days off.



Figure 4: The Trier town square on a busy Friday.

There are also few stores open on Sunday, a religious day of rest. In addition, the river seems to create a relaxed lifestyle in the city. It is popular to barbecue and drink beer along the banks of the Mosel River. One might see tour boats and kayaks float down the river while people stroll or exercise on the adjacent walking path (Fig. 5). Classes are less strenuous than in the United States, and restaurant service takes its time.



Figure 5: A view of Trier and the Mosel River from above.

2. Collecting Inspiration

Before beginning my classes in Trier, I took time to visit other notable European cities. The type in each city varied greatly from one to the next. The more I took pictures, the more I realized that the type used for street signs and building markers most often reflected the feeling of the place.

For instance, in Valencia, Spain, the house numbers are colorful, floral and ornamental (Fig. 6). Those characteristics are also visible in the downtown plaza (Fig. 7). This pattern continues for the following images. In Copenhagen, the street sign type looks condensed and friendly, just like the buildings along the city's famous Nyhavn Canal (Fig. 8, 9). In Bruges, the sewer covers have an elaborate, traditional letter "b" in the center (Fig. 10). The Bruges Town Hall shares this medieval, ornate aesthetic (Fig. 11). Lastly, in Gimmelwald, Switzerland, a chalet displays unique lettering that matches the quaint, organic feeling of the small mountainside town (Fig. 12,13). Taking pictures outside of Trier adds another spectrum to my research.

With this understanding of where to find type in the city, I looked for unique type on the streets and buildings in Trier. On one town outing, I noticed lettering on the side of a café in the town square (Fig. 14). The text reads (in Latin): "Ante Romam Treviris Stetit Annis Mille Trecentis. Perstet et Aeterna pace froator. Amen." (Translation: "1300 years before Rome was Trier / May it continue to consist, eternal peace to rejoice"). The building is called the Steip, nicknamed the "Red House," and acted as a meeting place, courthouse and inn in the late 17th century. The original building was destroyed in a bombing during WWII, but it was so important to the city that it was reconstructed and opened anew in 1970.^{vi}

Figure 6:
A house
number in
Valencia,
Spain.



Figure 7: A city
garden in the
heart of Valencia.



Figure 8:
A street
marker in
Copenhagen,
Denmark.



Figure 9:
Nyhavn Canal
in Copenhagen,
Denmark.



Figure 10:
A sewer
pipe cover
in Bruges,
Belgium.



Figure 11:
The Bruges
Town Hall.



Figure 13: A view
of Gimmelwald
in the Swiss Alps.



Figure 12: Type
on a chalet in
Gimmelwald,
Switzerland.



Figure 14: An
inscription on
the Red House
in the Trier
town square.





Figure 15: A building marker on a house in Trier, Germany.



Figure 16: A detail of a fountain inscription.

The lettering epitomizes the description of Trier from my research: historic, relaxed and friendly. The lines are thin and flowing, peaceful. The “R” has an extended flourish. There are even playful swirling additions to the “A” and “P.” The serifs help to make the type feel traditional. The lowercase “a” looks unbalanced, but its awkwardness is charming. The type as a whole has a unique character that differentiates itself from other cities.

3. Sketching

This Steip type, plus a few photos from a nearby fountain and house (Fig. 15.16), serve as the basis for my letterforms. Pieces that felt unique, like the “a,” “e,” “R,” and “i” are evident in my sketches (Fig. 17). My goal is to take these antique letterforms and translate them into a typeface that would be clear and even enough for contemporary use.

With the inspiration that I have already gathered, I can now translate their quirks to other letterforms

(Fig. 18). The wavy crossbar in the capital “A” takes inspiration from the lowercase “e.” The top point, or apex, of the “A” borrows from the split top of the lowercase “i.” I will continue to draw the rest of the alphabet with an attention to these details. The rest of my process will follow as I have already mentioned, from drawn letters, to the computer, to working font file. Once the typeface is a working tool, I can test how it works in applications. I would like to see the font applied to a proposal of the branding for Trier itself. I can showcase my letters on business cards and pamphlets that advertise for the city.

CURRENT CONCLUSION

The most important element of my letters, in the end, is that they create the feeling of being in Trier. In *Metro Letters*, Deborah Littlejohn boils down how to create a successful place-inspired typeface: “No matter how strong the concept, how well drawn the letterforms, how exciting the technology, the most important criteria for making a decision about type as a representative of a city has to be concerned with how the type feels.”^{vii}

I was worried that during my process, I wouldn’t be able to tell if the letters had the quality I was looking for, that I wouldn’t be able to translate a feeling into a form. This has not been the case thus far, though, and when the right letter comes up, it is clear. It seems the more I draw letters, the more I can see the personality that certain proportions and widths create. The type has a face, as its name implies, that either fits the character of Trier or doesn’t. By the end of my time here, I hope to have a complete alphabet, including accent marks and punctuation.



Figure 17: Sketches for the first letters of the typeface.



Figure 18: An explanation of the details in the Trier inspired typeface.

Trier
Germany

Figure 19: Final version of font.

References

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^{iv} "Gotham." Hoefler & Co. *Typography.com*. Web. 29 Oct. 2014.

^v Heller, Steven and Philip B. Meggs. *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*. New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2001. 26. Print.

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