

# Fat Faces All Around

## Lettering and the Festival Style

PAUL RENNIE

THE Festival architecture was embellished by a wide range of signs and signals in various typefaces. In retrospect that seems one of its most distinctive features.

Historically, there are two categories of letters on buildings. The first is the inscriptional letter cut into the fabric of the building, offering the earliest links between lettering and architecture. The second category is of printed and painted signs attached to buildings. The ephemeral nature of such signs and the generally mercantile context of their use have prejudiced historians against them. Festival lettering shows the second category at its most active moment, when a lettering counter-culture came to fruition, leaving an influence that lasted into the 1970s.

### BEFORE THE WAR – SANS EVERYWHERE

The two most famous type faces of the first half of the twentieth century in Britain are Edward Johnston's Railway Type for London Underground of 1916 and Eric Gill's Gill Sans produced for the Monotype Corporation in 1928. Superficially, these types appear to be from the same family of functionalist sanserifs. In reality, their origins point to very different ideas about typographic culture and its relation to architecture.

Johnston's design is so closely associated with the everyday experience of London Transport and is so successful within that context that it remains the most significant contribution of typographic design in relation to architecture in Britain. However, its influence was limited, partly because of London Transport's copyright of the design and also because Monotype's Gill Sans was so visible and widely used. It quickly became the main Anglo-Saxon alternative to the Central European sans. Gill's design was based, like Johnston's, on the classical tradition of Roman inscriptional lettering and its refinement made it suitable for uses other than signage. Yet it was perhaps the ubiquity of the Gill Sans that provoked the stylistic backlash.

### THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

The revival of interest in Victorian ornamental types and fat faces began as a self-consciously antiquarian interest in the fabric of English industrial cities and market towns. Prominent pioneers of this revival were the poet John Betjeman, the artist John Piper and the critic and curator Nicolette Gray. They found a platform at the *Architectural Review* in the publishing house of Faber and Faber, and in Robert Harling's specialist periodical *Typography*.

The pink printed paper-covered boards of Betjeman's *Ghastly Good Taste*, published by Chapman and Hall in 1933, in the pastiche style of Victorian typography, signalled the beginning of a revival of interest in the Victorian style, made more enjoyable by discovering original Victorian metal type in various printers' works. The *Shell County Guides*, which he edited from 1934, were another platform for the spread of these arguments in visual form. The design of the books reflected their interest in buildings of all dates and types. At the same time they

figure 1

Left luggage sign by Milner Gray and Robin Day.

(The Architectural Press)

figure 2

John Betjeman, *Ghastly Good Taste*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1933.

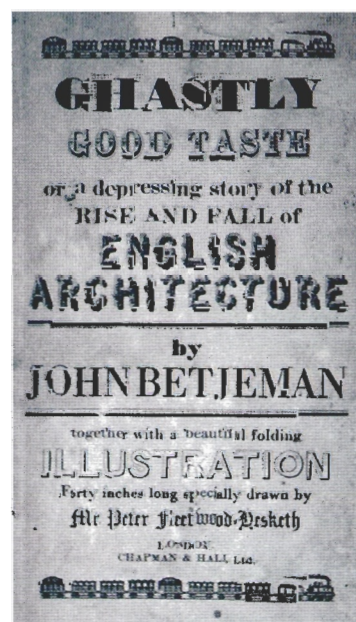
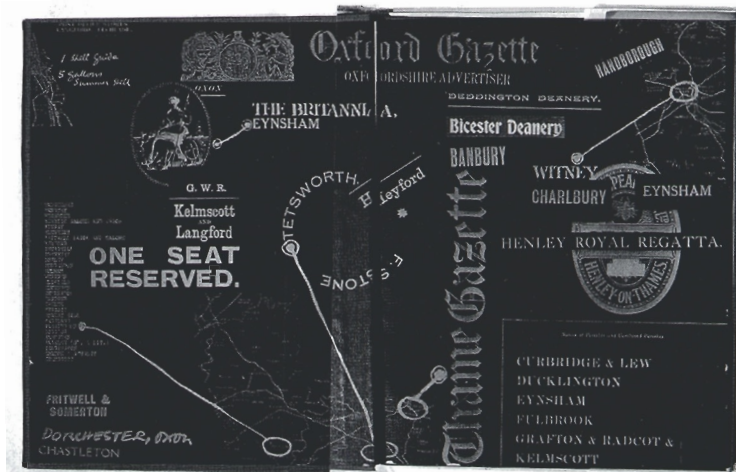


figure 3  
John Piper, endpapers for *Oxfordshire*,  
(*Shell Guide*), B.T. Batsford, London,  
1938.



The image shows the title page of a book. The title is arranged in four curved banners at the top: "NINETEENTH", "CENTURY", "ORNAMENTED", and "TYPES AND TITLE PAGES". Below the title is a small rectangular box containing the publisher's name "FABER & FABER". At the bottom, the author's name "NICOLETTE" is in a banner, followed by "<GRAY>" in a pointed banner. The page is decorated with a vertical column of large, stylized letters on the left and right margins, including "T", "I", "N", "E", "T", "E", "E", "N", "T", "H", "C", "E", "N", "T", "U", "R", "Y", "O", "R", "N", "A", "M", "E", "N", "T", "E", "D", "T", "Y", "P", "E", "S", "A", "N", "D", "T", "I", "T", "L", "E", "P", "A", "G", "E", "S".

**NINETEENTH  
CENTURY  
ORNAMENTED  
TYPES AND  
TITLE PAGES**

**FABER & FABER**

**NICOLETTE  
<GRAY>**

figure 4  
Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century  
Ornamented Types and Title Pages*, Faber  
and Faber, London, 1938.

were in agreement with the consensus in the design community for increased planning control and preservation laws.

In 1938 Nicolette Gray published a book, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Types* (Faber and Faber), which popularised the English vernacular style. Gray was later one of the originators of the Central School of Art's *Lettering Record*, now the largest documentary collection of lettering in the world. She was a member of the Festival's Typographic Panel and her book, *Lettering on Building* (Architectural Press, 1960) remains the standard work on typographic style in relation to architecture.

Gray organised the pioneering exhibition, *Abstract and Concrete*, which had toured Britain in 1936, visiting Oxford, Liverpool, Cambridge and London, and included the work of continental artists such as Kandinsky, Miró and Mondrian, and their English colleagues Moore, Piper and Hepworth. Rather surprisingly, she attempted to move the typographic debate within modernism beyond simplistic functionalism. She was adamant that, in most cases at least, the sans-serif form was the crudest form of letter and represented a blasted heath of reductionism. Her argument was proved by the war ministries, which favoured the crudest form of sans-serif as its exemplar of an unambiguous and easily recognised letterform.

Gray hoped that letterforms would be incorporated into the rhetoric of architectural form, not only as signage for practical purposes but as elements in the surface texture of buildings. This was her argument for the power of suggestion and expression in letters. It was, she thought, especially important given that modern construction and engineering practice were likely to turn the surface of buildings into repetitive and mechanical two-dimensional planes.

She commended the folk art quality of these formerly despised letterforms as 'a communal art as pure as that of any primitive society.'<sup>1</sup>

Gray's publishers, Faber and Faber, were leaders in the revival of nineteenth century typefaces for text setting and display, adopting the German face Walbaum for their modern poets. This crisp letterform, with hairline serifs, was also popular with the Curwen Press, leaders in typography since the 1920s. Faber also used Ultra Bodoni (issued in 1928) and Rockwell (issued in 1930), both variants of early nineteenth century type styles, for display setting, which were promoted by Edward McKnight Kauffer through his design work for the leading modernist printers, Lund Humphries.

Writing in 1939 on 'Victorian Revival', Robert Harling attributed the growth in use of nineteenth century type styles to advertising so that 'types which the more respectable typographical archaeologists had long thought deservedly dead now rear their rather pleasant ugliness before the coveting eyes of lighter-

1. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Types and Title Pages*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1938, p.16.



hearted authorities.<sup>22</sup> Harling also remarked on the way that typefounders such as Stephenson Blake in England, Bauer in Germany and Peignot in France all contributed to the revival by making authentic or revivalist faces available.

As an energetic editor and art director, friendly with artists such as Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden, as well as with Hugh Casson, Harling was an important figure in spreading awareness of lettering and typography both before and after the war. In 1939, he contributed to the Victorian revival himself by designing 'Chisel' for Stephenson Blake, a sparkling 'rimmed' letter form with wedge serifs.

The desire to create a modernist grammar of style that went beyond the functional was at the heart of the *Architectural Review*'s editorial position. This aspect of the project was intellectually distinct from the international style modernism of the 1920s which, whatever its intentions, had found its audience, surprisingly, amongst the aristocracy, country house set and upper bourgeoisie. Later 1930's modernism focused on urban planning and championed the diversity of the crowd rather than the uniformity of the collective as a defining feature of the modern experience and of successful architecture, distinguishing the social reality of towns, cities and buildings rather than just the material presence of buildings. The appeal to English vernacular style to help orchestrate the crowd was rooted in the happy seaside tripper, the market farmer and the shopper. Letters on buildings so clearly contribute to the experience of the building, yet their effect has generally been ignored.

The *Architectural Review* gave visual expression to these ideas through a graphic language involving photography, illustration, typography and different paper stock. An important link between the pre-war magazine and the Festival Typographic Panel was Gordon Cullen, who in 1933 joined the architectural practice of Raymond McGrath. Cullen studied architecture but was soon in demand as a graphic artist, with an attractively loose drawing style that he claimed to have evolved as a synthesis of Paul Nash, Raymond McGrath and Le Corbusier. In 1936 he joined the Tecton partnership formed around the charismatic Russian-born Berthold Lubetkin, and drew the illustrations for the publication *New Architecture* published on the occasion of the MARS Group exhibition, *New Homes for Old*. These illustrations are the first instance of Cullen's distinctive serial vision, later developed into a major part of the post-war graphic style at the *Architectural Review* and given mature expression in Cullen's own *Townscape* published in 1961. Serial

2. Robert Harling, 'Victorian Revival', in R.B. Fishenden, ed., *Penrose Annual*, volume 41, Lund Humphries, London, 1939, p.73.



figure 5  
Gordon Cullen, illustration for 'Waterside New Town, Marlow' in *Architectural Review*, July 1950, special issue by Eric de Maré on 'The Linear National Park', p.61.

vision was also used to great effect in Cullen's articles, 'Westminster Regained' (1947) and 'Bankside Regained' (1949).

Serial vision owes something to the cinematic experience – architectural perspectives are presented from different points of view that describe a trajectory through space and correspond to the experience of how people experience the architectural environment. It was a way of making architectural plans easier to comprehend for the increasingly large numbers of non-architecturally trained committee members involved in the planning and administration of post-war reconstruction. Cullen was always fastidious in including those elements usually read as clutter within the built environment. His interest in supergraphics – signage and advertising – set him apart from many colleagues in planning and prefigured the interests of *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Rauch, a founding document of post-modernism. Cullen himself was able to accept lettering and advertising as part of a vital urban environment and of a popular and popularist tradition. Cullen himself drew the cut-out metal letters, based on Thorne Shaded, for the frontage of the Finsbury Health Centre (1938), and it remains one of the few contemporary examples of lettering in situ.

#### THE TYPOGRAPHIC PANEL (1951)

Nicolette Gray and Gordon Cullen were among the five members of the Festival Typographic Panel. The chair was Charles Hasler, and the other members were Austin Frazer and Gordon Andrews. The panel was responsible for co-ordinating the lettering style on printed ephemera, advertising and on the South Bank site itself. Cullen was in charge of external lettering and acted in an advisory capacity.

The panel published a sample book of what it considered suitable letterforms. They chose those types and letterforms, alluded to above, which were already part of the design rhetoric of the age. The sample book is full of Egyptians and Romans, in italics or condensed or extended forms. Some are presented with exaggerated shaded, or blocked, bodies – giving the letters a thrusting three dimensionality intended to project them off the building or page.

The Egyptian form of letter is a letter with an exaggerated, or emphasised, vertical stroke. The first letter within this group was cast by Bower and Bacon in 1810 and was immediately referred to as fat-face. The eponymous Egyptian was cast by Vincent Figgins in 1817 and is recognised as the first typeface created for the purpose of display in advertising. The progressive exaggeration of the typical characteristics of this type created, throughout the nineteenth century, an extended family of types in condensed, expanded, shaded and decorated forms.

The basic purpose of the fat-face was to make the letter more noticeable by offering a larger printing surface for ink, rather than by making the letters larger

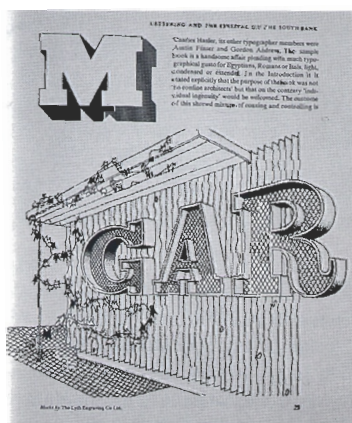
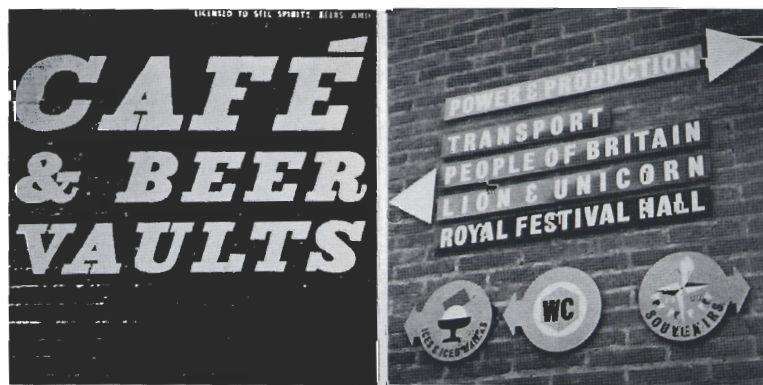


figure 6  
Gordon Cullen, illustrations  
for *A Specimen of Display Letters*,  
(designed for the Festival of  
Britain, 1951) reproduced in  
*Penrose Annual*, 1952, p.29.

figure 7  
(left) Gordon Cullen, Italic  
Egyptian capitals painted on  
side entrance of Turntable  
Café, (right) Milner Gray,  
Condensed Sans serif  
lettering for direction signs.  
(*Architectural Review*, August  
1950, p.121)





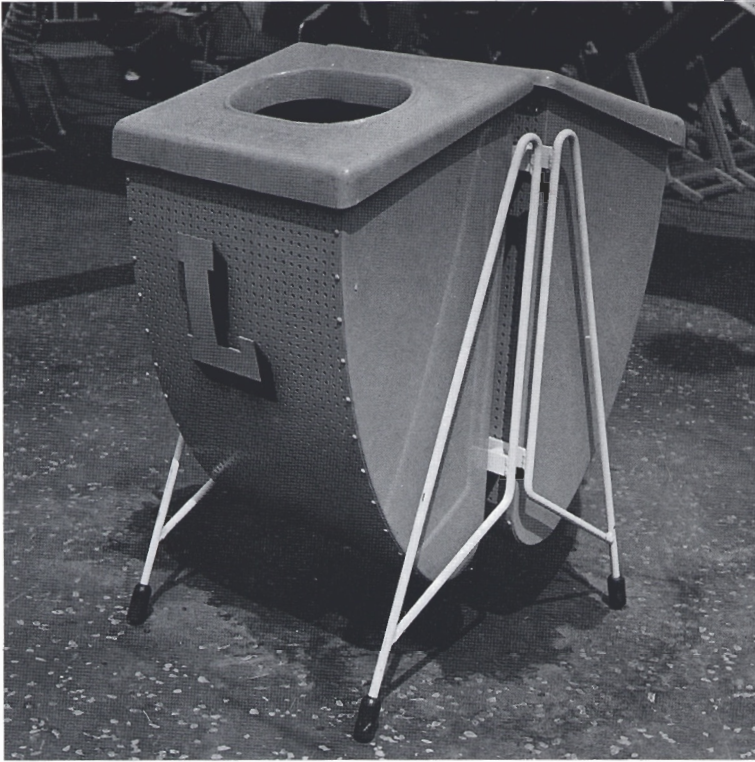


figure 8

Jack Howe, Litterbin, grey with yellow letter. (The Architectural Press)

– an uneconomic and technically difficult process. The fat-faces and Egyptians thus combine economy with visual impact and offer a relatively forgiving form for the jobbing printer. In their most exaggerated forms they are almost impossible to read, but are transformed into powerful symbols that can be understood beyond their immediate context. The letters also articulate and define the space on which they are present, understood as negative space, and therefore combine elements of meaning, symbolic form and abstraction at the same time.

The panel stated explicitly that its purpose was not to confine architects and designers to a fixed group of types and letters, but to encourage individual expression and visual ingenuity. Perhaps they were helped in this by the fact that the Festival site was constructed over a relatively short period of time and that the personnel involved in the project displayed a remarkable unity of purpose, both in training and temperament. The result, as Nikolaus Pevsner remarked in 1952, was that the lettering at the Exhibition was both varied and yet of a character.

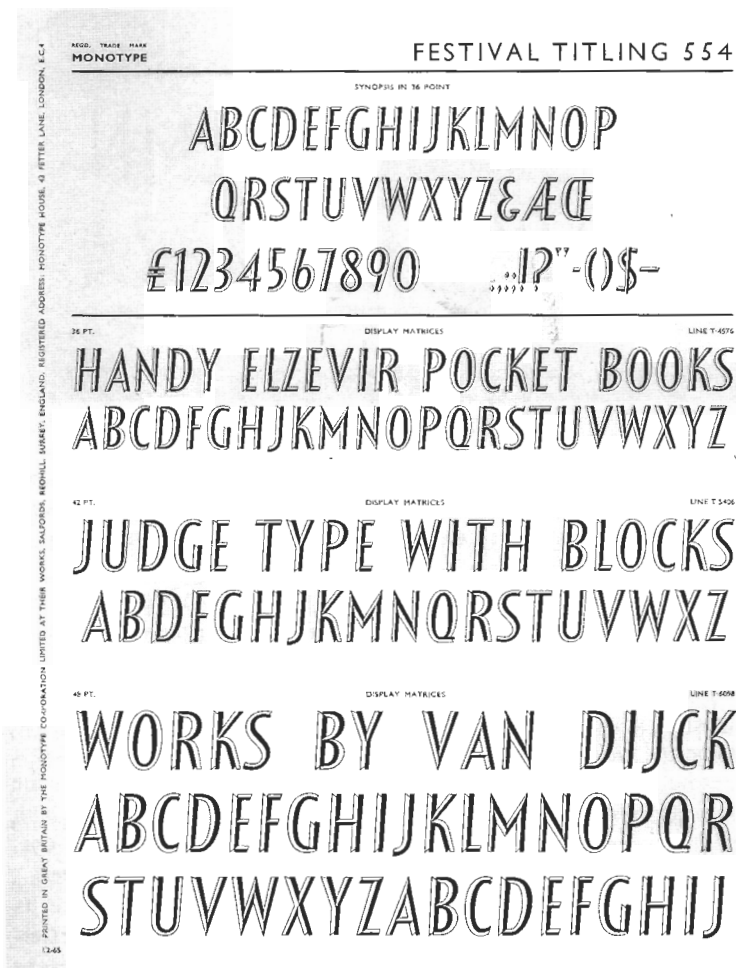
The sans form was not entirely abandoned either. It was encouraged in its earlier nineteenth-century forms precisely because, in contrast to the later German sans fonts or the Gill Monotype form, they evince a certain unevenness or lack of perfection. Writing in the *Penrose Annual* for 1952, Pevsner was unequivocal in this praise of the contribution made by typography to the Festival style. He identified the Festival as beginning a new phase in the history of modernism that would be marked by dramatic contrasts between the heavy, robust letters and the light, transparent architecture of the new technical and engineered structures. This phase was in contrast to the harmonising tendency identified earlier and associated with the Johnston and Gill sans letters that characterised 1930s modernism. Pevsner was also encouraged by the variety of more elaborate and decorative scripts used also by the way that many of the letterforms on buildings were created using teak, perspex and other materials not usually associated with the traditions of shop signage and external lettering. He attributed the overall success of the Exhibition in giving expression to the new eclectic style to the influ-

ence of Gordon Cullen, by then his colleague on the staff of the *Architectural Review* and praised the successful teamwork between architects, designers, typographers and engineers.

#### FESTIVAL TITLING

The Panel was instrumental in commissioning a two-dimensional shaded letter-form designed by Philip Boydell and launched by the Monotype Corporation in 1951, 'giving the impression of a third dimension without employing perspective or shadow effects'. It graces the cover of this journal and is a letter that alludes to both the cut-letter of classical tradition and the sans-serif moderns. It was a perfect complement to the fluttering dazzle effect of bunting that was a feature

figure 9  
Specimen sheet for Monotype Festival  
Titling.



of the Festival sites. Indeed, the dazzle effect is central to the reading of these letterforms as abstract architectural elements within the parquetry facade of mid-century buildings. Noel Carrington, writing in *Design* and reflecting on the lettering style of the Festival, considered it overblown and questioned its relevance to a more permanent architectural environment, a typical comment from the typographic corner. The whole point was for the style to be popularist and slightly exaggerated, even vulgar, without it becoming tawdry or indecent. In any event, his was a lone dissenting voice.

Cullen also illustrated the guide to the Exhibition, and created route maps around the various pavilions that were a simplified form of his serial vision tech-

nique perfected at the Review. The combination and perfect coincidence in style between the physical reality of the Exhibition and the printed, or graphic, representations of it further enhanced its effect on the public imagination. After the Festival the Clarendon types used in this printed material were rediscovered as a quieter alternative to the fat-faces of 1951.

The Festival signs were dismantled, along with the rest of the Exhibition, in the autumn of 1951. Hardly any examples survive and there are, outside the most specialised publications, very few photographic records of the Exhibition that show those favourable aspects mentioned by Pevsner in the *Penrose Annual* for 1952. The Festival style survived in the important contribution that it made to graphic design and exhibition design in Britain throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The graphic ephemera of the Festival shows the lettering style of the Festival in everything from the emblem, designed by Abram Games, to the multitude of brochures and souvenirs.

#### VISUAL PLEASURE AND TOWNSCAPE – THE LEGACY OF THE FESTIVAL

Pevsner's comments about the success of the Festival, and its potential contribution to the future development of modernism beyond functionalism, were quickly followed by murmurs that the architectural style was effete and whimsical. Worse still, the architectural style was identified as having been pioneered at the Milan Fair of 1948. The English version was marked down for being flimsy and equivocal in its balance of tradition and modernity. In fact these arguments persist to this day and it remains unclear whether the Festival marked an end or a beginning.

The Festival was probably both: an end to a first period of modernism associated with unity, functionalism and monumentality, and a beginning of a period of lighter-spirited, more variegated architecture and design. Certainly, it marked the end of a spectacular period of collaboration between artists and technicians. The following years would see changes in design education and management that have tended to separate the activities of architects, planners, typographers and graphic designers.

The brave hope of identifying and creating visual pleasure in the varied vernacular of townscape has become a hostage to, on the one hand, the classicists demanding order and unity; and on the other, those traditionalists who have filled our town centres with faux-Victorian street furniture.

The world has changed enormously since 1951. Lettering and architecture cohabit in ever-closer proximity and in ever more dense layerings. Hardly anyone in 1951 would have predicted the massive impact of road signage on our cities, towns and countryside. This has been made much worse by the extension of the motorway network, and the belief that bigger signs will, necessarily, be clearer. That the Ministry of Transport road letter form is an effective information font has been scientifically established. What a tragedy that it is so artless and so ungracious.

The Festival style became synonymous, for later commentators, with public sector projects for planning and reconstruction. It seems a characteristic of the private sector that no consideration is given to the architectural use of lettering by the developers and architects. It is a concern that is contracted-out to the tenant. Accordingly, some wonderful recent buildings are disfigured by the equivalent of Letraset on their facades. The river front Royal Festival Hall itself at some point lost its original slanted slab-serif Egyptian lettering on the stone-faced upper part, projected forward to give a natural shadow effect, which was replaced by the present sans serif capitals, although the rear retains the authentic style.

It is perhaps a happy coincidence that, fifty years on, Alsop and Störmer's award-winning Peckham Library should remind us of the Festival. Firstly, it echoes the progressive and socially articulated spirit of modernism from 1930–51;

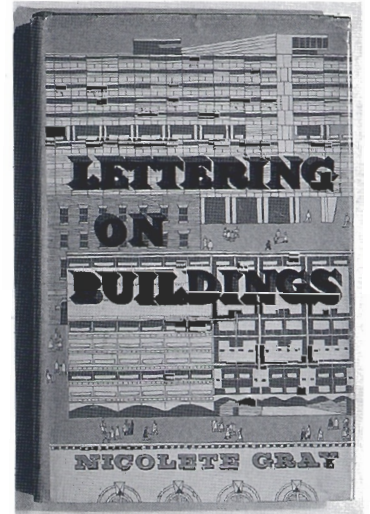


figure 10  
Nicolette Gray, *Lettering on Buildings*, Architectural Press, 1960. (cover design by Gordon Cullen)



secondly, it has reminded us that the public sector and architecture can combine in fruitful partnership, and, lastly, it signals itself to the world by the letters LIBRARY thrusting from the roofline. This acts as both a physical sign and semi-otic portal in reading the building. The public response to the library and especially to the sign, both overwhelmingly positive, are testimony to the prescience of Nicolette Gray and Gordon Cullen and the spirit of 1951.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 'The Exhibition as a Town Builder's Pattern Book', in *Architectural Review*, August 1951.
- Alan Bartram, *The English Lettering Tradition – from 1700 to the Present*, London, Lund Humphries, 1986.
- Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1976.
- John Betjeman, 'A Shell Guide to Typography', in *Typography*, no.2, London, Shenvall Press, Spring 1937.
- Noel Carrington, 'Legibility – South Bank Lettering', in *Design (CO1D)*, no.32, August 1951.
- Barry Curtis, 'One Continuous Interwoven Story', in *Block*, University of Middlesex, 1985.
- Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Types and Title Pages*, London, Faber and Faber, 1938.
- Nicolette Gray, *Lettering on Buildings*, London, Architectural Press, 1960.
- David Gosling, *Gordon Cullen – Visions of Urban Design*, London, Academy Editions, 1996.
- Richard Hollis, 'Building a Graphic Language – The Architectural Review', in *eye*, vol.7, no.28, Summer 1998.
- Justin Howes, *Johnston's Underground Type*, Harrow Weald, Capital Transport, 2000.
- A.F. Johnson, 'Fat Faces – their History, Forms and Use', in *Alphabet and Image*, no.5, September 1947.
- Ruari McLean, 'An Examination of Egyptians', in *Alphabet and Image*, no.1, Spring 1946.
- Denis Megaw, 'Twentieth Century Sans Serif Types', in *Typography*, no.7, Winter 1938.
- James Mosley, 'English Vernacular', in Ruari McLean, ed., *Mottif*, Winter 1963.
- Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Lettering and the Festival on the South Bank', in *Penrose Annual*, vol.46, London, Lund Humphries, 1952.
- John Piper, *Oxfordshire – A Shell Guide*, London, B.T. Batsford, 1938.
- Frances Spalding, 'Nicolette Gray's Promotion of Modern Art', in *Typography Papers*, no.3, University of Reading, 1998.
- James Sutton and Alan Bartram, *An Atlas of Typeforms*, London, Lund Humphries, 1968.
- Michael Twyman, 'Nicolette Gray – a Personal View', in *Typography Papers*, no.3, University of Reading, 1998.



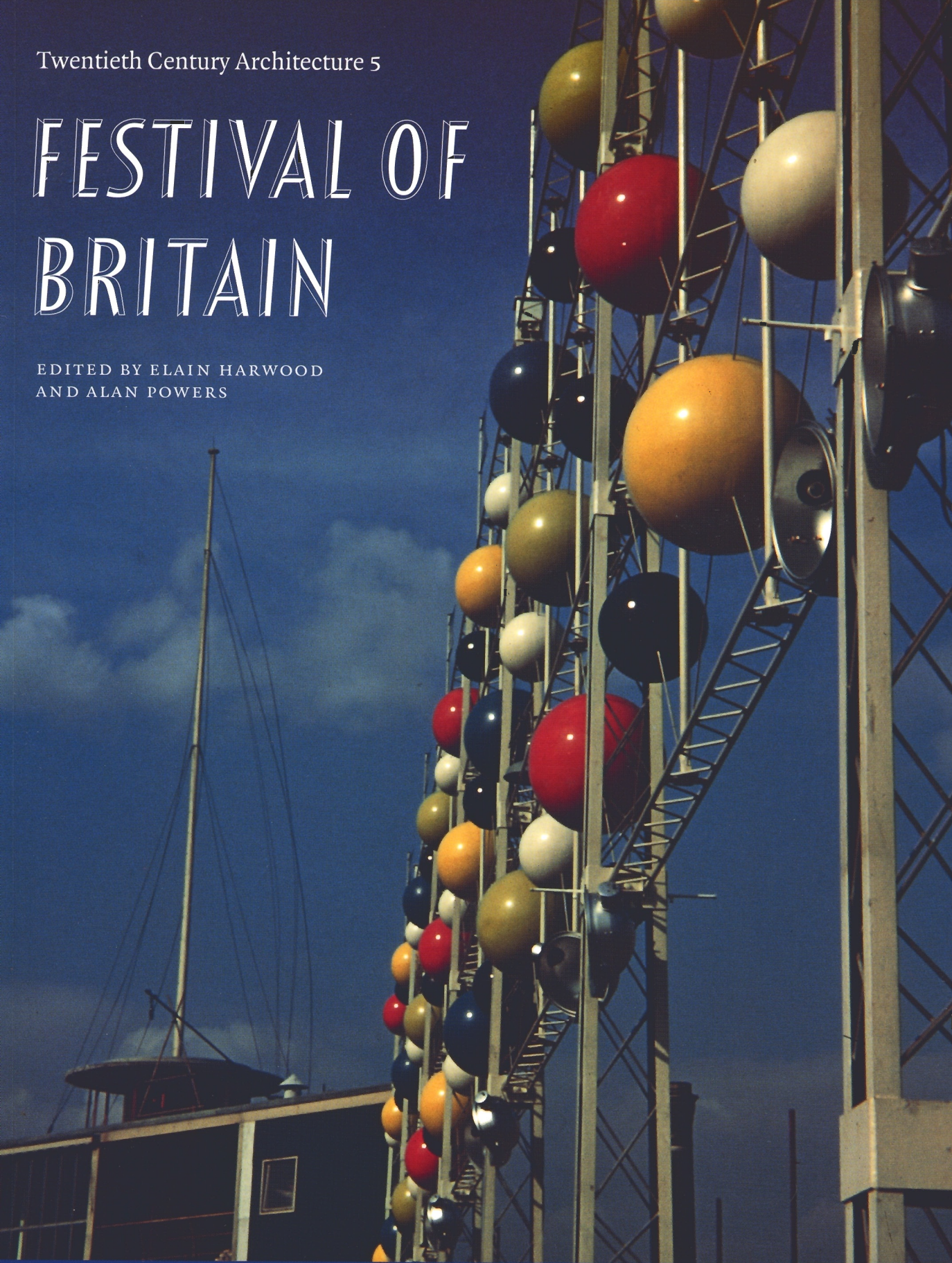




Twentieth Century Architecture 5

# FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN

EDITED BY ELAIN HARWOOD  
AND ALAN POWERS



THE JOURNAL OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIETY