Fat Faces All Around
Lettering and the Festival Style

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The Festival architecture was embellished by a wide range of signs and signals on various typesfaces. In retrospect that seems one of its most distinctive features. Historically, there are two categories of letters on buildings. The first is the inscriptive 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–French alternative to the Central European sans. Gill’s design was based, like Johnston’s, on the classical tradition of Roman inscriptive lettering and so 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 towns. Prominent pioneers of this revival were the poet John Betjeman, the artist Robin Piper and the critic and curator Nicolette Gray. They found a platform at the Architettura Revue in the publishing house of Fisher and Fisher, and in Robert Harley’s specialist periodical Typography.

The pink prizet paper-covered boards of Betjeman’s Ghostly Good Taste, published by Chapman and Hall in 1939, 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 Country Guide, which he edited from 1934, was 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 Ruskin Day.
(The Architectural Press)

Figure 2: John Betjeman, Ghostly Good Taste, Chapman and Hall, London, 1939.)
were in agreement with the consensus in the design community for increased planning control and preservation laws.

In 1938 Nicollie Gray published a book, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Types* (Faber and Faber), which popularized the English vernacular style. Gray was later one of the originators of the Central School of Art's Lettering Unit, and his large typographic work on modernist design remains the standard on the typographic style in relation to architecture.

Gray organized the pioneering exhibition, *Abstract and Concrete*, which included work by continental artists such as Kandinsky, Mies and Mondrian, and their English contemporaries Moore, Piper and Hepworth. Rather surprisingly, he attempted to bring the typographic debate within modernism beyond simplistic functionalism. She was adamant that, in most cases at least, the 'serif' form was the crudest form of letter and represented a bizarre burst of reductiveness. Her argument was proved by the war munitions, which favoured the crudest form of serif as its exemplar of an unambiguous and easily recognized letterform.

Gray hoped that letterforms would be incorporated into the rhetoric of architectural form not only as signpost 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 mechanistic two-dimensional planes.

She commented the folk art quality of these formerly despised letterforms as a communal art pure and simple of any primitive society.

Gray's publishers, Faber and Faber, were leaders in the revival of nineteenth century typefaces for text setting and display, adopting the German face Bulmers for their new books. This cursive letterform, with a light serif, was also popular with the Curwen Press, leaders in typography since 1900. Faber also used Ultra Bodoni (issued in 1928) and Rockwell (issued in 1931), both variants of early nineteenth century type styles, for display usage, which were promoted by Edward McKnight Kauffer through his design work for the leading modernist printers, Lund Humphries.

Writing in 1939 on 'Vocabulary Revisited', Robert Harling attributed the growth in use of nineteenth century type styles to advertising so that 'type styles which the more respectable typographical archaeologists had long thought deservedly dead now saw their rather pleasant ugliness before the staring eyes of lightner.
hearted authentics. 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 'Chino' for Stephenson Blake, a sparkling 'rimmed' letterform 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 1950s 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 building. The appeal to English vernacular style to help orchestrate the crowd was rooted in the happy saucisse trippe, the market garden and the shopkeeper. Lanes on buildings so clearly contribute to the experience of the buildings, the effect has generally been ignored.

The Architectural Review's general expression of these ideas through a graphic language involving photography, illustrations, 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 Tasma partnership formed around the charismatic Toorak-born Berthold Lubetkin, and drew the illustrations for the publication Nu 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 of at the Architectural Review and given mature expression in Cullen's own Typographic published in 1950. Serial

Figure 5


Fat Face Fall around

vision was also used to great effect in Cullen’s articles, “Wesminster Regained” (1947) and “Bankside Regained” (1949).

Survivors: Vernon, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Rausch, a founding document of post-modernism. Cullen himself was able to accept lettering and advertising as part of a visual urban environment and of a popular and populist tradition. Cullen himself drew the cut-out metal letter, based on Thonet Shaded, for the frontage of the Fine for the poster for the Fine Food Centre (1968), and it remains one of the few contemporary examples of lettering in situ.

THE TYPOGRAPHIC PANEL (1951)

Nicole Gray and Gordon Cullen were among the five members of the original Typographic Panel. The chair was Charles Haider, and the other members were Austin Fraser and Gordon Andrews. The panel was responsible for coordinating the lettering site on printed ephemera, advertising and on the South Bank site itself. Cullen was in charge of internal lettering and acted as an advisory capacity.

The panel published a sample book of what it considered suitable letterforms. They chose show types and letterforms, allied to above, which were already part of the design rhetoric of the age. The sample book is full of Egyptian and Roman, in italics and condensed 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 heel letter within this group was cast by Lower and Bacon in 1915 and was immediately referred to as the Lower Egyptian. The eggshell Egyptian was cast by Vincent figure in 1972 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 twentieth century, an extended family of variants in condensed, expanded, shaded and decorated forms.

The basic purpose of the eye-face was to make the letter quite noticeable by offering a larger printing surface for use, rather than by making the letters larger.
FAT FACES ALL AROUND

—an uneconomic and technically difficult process. The fat faces and Egyptians thus combine economy with visual impact and offer a relatively forgivably form for the jobbing printer. In their most exaggerated forms they are almost impossible to read, but are transferred 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 insistent, 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 hindered 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 1953, was that the lettering in 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 forms or the Gill Monotype form, they evince a certain uneasiness or lack of perfection. Writing in the Pevsner Annual for 1953, Pevsner was unequivocal in this praise of the simplification 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 happy, robust letters and the light, transparent architecture of the new technical and engineered structures. This phase was in contrast to the harmonizing tendency identified earlier and associated with the Johnson and Gill sans letters that characterized Art Deco modernism. Pevsner was also encouraged by the variety of more elaborate and decorative script used also by the way that many of the letterforms on buildings were created using type, paint 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-

Figure 4.
Jack Hoare, Letterbox, grey with yellow letter. (The Architectural Press)
The panel was instrumental in commissioning a two-dimensional shaded letterform designed by Philip B. Rydell and launched by the Monotype Corporation in 1957, "giving the impression of a third dimension without employing perspective or shadow effects." It graces the cover of this journal and is in a letter that alludes to both the calligraphic tradition and the sans serif moderns. It was a perfect complement to the dazzling dazzle effect of hunting that was a feature of the Festival site. Indeed, the dazzle effect is central to the reading of these letterforms as abstract architectural elements within the property's facade of mid-century buildings. Noel Carrington, writing in Image and reflecting on the lettering style of the Festival, considered it overblown and questioned its relevance as a more permanent architectural environment, a typical conclusion from the typographic corner. The whole point was for the style to be populistic and slightly exaggerated, even vulgar, without it becoming tawdry or indecent. In any event, he 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-
nicely perfected at the Review. The visualization 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 1931.

The Festival signs were dismantled, along with the rest of the Exhibition, in the autumn of 1931. Hardly any examples survive and there are, outside the most specialised publications, very few photographic records of the Exhibitions that show those favourable aspects mentioned by Penrose in the Tyne Annual for 1935. The Festival style survived in the important contributions that it made to graphic design and exhibition design in Britain throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The graphic epiphany of the Festival allowed the lettering style of the Festival in everyday from the emblem, designed by Abram Games, to the multitude of brochures and souvenirs.

Visual Pleasure and Tonscape — The Legacy of the Festival

Penrose's committees about the success of the Festival, and its national 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 1929. The British version was marked down for being fanny and equivocal in its balance of tradition and modernity. In this fact, arguments prevail to this day and it remains unclear whether the Festival marked an end or a beginning.

The Festival was probably both: an end to the first period of modernism associated with unity, functionalism and monumentality, and a beginning of a period of lighter-spirited, more variegated architecture and design. Indeed, it was 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 wired urbanistic landscape that has become a heritage to, on the one hand, the designers at the head of 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 1931. Lettering and architecture stand out in ever closer juxtaposition and in ever more dense layering. 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 exigencies of the road network and the belief that bigger signs will, necessarily, be clearer. That the Ministry of Transport road letter form is an effective information form has been scientifically established. What a tragedy that it is so egregious and so ubiquitous.

The Festival style became synonymous, for lettering, with the modernist projects for planning and reconstruction. It seems a characteristic of the present era that no consideration is given to the architectural use of lettering by the developers and architects. Is it a concern that is connected out to the tenant? Accordingly, some wonderful modern buildings are disguised by the equivalent of lettering on their facades. The ever from Royal Festival Hall itself at some point has its original dotted high-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 rest retains the authentic style.

It is perhaps a happy coincidence that, fifty years on, Ainsop and Sidler's award-winning Camden Library should remind us of the Festival. Firstly, it echoes the progressive and socially rearticulated spirit of modernism from 1930:51.
secundly, 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 Leon Gallery flanking from the footpath. 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 Nicolle Gray and Gordon Cullen and the spirit of 1951.

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