SIGN RESEARCH FOUNDATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TYPOGRAPHY, PLACEMAKING AND SIGNS

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Great strides have been made in the use of type in our environment. The future of typography may seem limitless and unbound.

But things aren't so clear; increased legibility research has led to more effective typefaces—but also more restrictive regulations. Digital signage offers dynamic type, but in some transportation systems, rather than prompting creativity, it has led to greater standardization.

Understanding where we're headed begins with a closer look at where we are and where we've been. "Typography, Placemaking and Signs," a four-part white paper series penned by Craig Berger and produced by the Sign Research Foundation, does just that. It includes: The History of Typography and Place; Best Practices in the Environment; Typography within ADA and Egress Codes; and Typographical Case Studies. It also features reading lists for further exploration in each section.

> **The designers and fabricators who are successful in this environment must be adept at not only the manipulation of a complex design family, but also how it can be integrated into materials, architecture and technology."**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

ENVIRONMENTAL TYPOGRAPHY MAY BE A NATURAL OUTGROWTH OF THE DESIRE FOR PEOPLE TO EXPLORE AND COMPREHEND THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

■ With the invention of metal stamps and stencils, the ancient Romans pushed type from parchment to the urban environment. Metal stamps led to watermarks and coin currency, and stencils led to the consistent creation of type on posters, signs and carved landmarks.

■ The Industrial Revolution brought new tools that expanded printing—just in time for promotion and advertisement of mass-produced items. For most wayfinding functions, consistency is the all-encompassing attribute for good typographic design. That not only means using the same typeface, but also size, letter spacing, character spacing, position, location, luminescence and a dozen other factors. Increasing desire for legibility stemmed from the introduction of the automobile and related road signs, in addition to the appeal of corporate and product brand identity.

■ Software innovations led to fonts that could be scaled to all sizes without losing clarity.

2

TO SUCCESSFULLY CARRY A MESSAGE THAT RESONATES, TYPOGRAPHY MUST BE SUCCESSFUL ON ITS OWN AS WELL AS INTEGRATED INTO A COMPLETE AND EFFECTIVE OVERALL DESIGN.

■ Cognitive research has explored the way we use visual graphics to understand the world around us, moving through detection (when a sign is first seen); discrimination (when the sign is differentiated from similar elements in its environment); identity (when the sign's message is first understood); and orientation (when we learn how it fits into a system of similar messages and signs).

■ Most of the research on effective typography in the environment has been in the area of vehicular signs.

■ Legibility can be impacted by negative space; letter height; open counterforms (the space inside the letters); uppercase and lowercase; serif vs. sans serif; lighting and tactility.

■ Dynamic signs also have best practices in legibility including scrolling; flipping and fading; and flashing. Studies have shown that changing menu boards increase detection as much as 30% with commensurate sales increases.

3

CASE STUDIES

INCREASES IN LEGIBILITY RESEARCH HAVE CREATED MORE EFFECTIVE TYPEFACES BUT HAVE ALSO LED TO MORE RESTRICTIVE DESIGN CODES.

- Codes and regulations typically come from three sources: standards bodies, federal mandates and enforcement organizations.

- "Harmonization" of the national and international guidelines with the ADA administered by the Justice Department has made interpretation and enforcement much easier, but has made change much slower.

- Egress codes have produced a confusing array of guidelines on both the national and state level, impacting standards for symbol or type; address systems; and more.

- The ADA has tight standards for signs, but they're generally not related to egress signs, as egress signs have their own standards. Determining where the two meet has created even greater confusion, particularly in regard to maps and stairwell signage.

Historic Projects

Bauhaus Projects, Germany: In the 1920s and 1930s, Herbert Bayer's creative typography set the tone for Bauhaus communications. His work included the all-lowercase Universal font.

1968 Olympic Games, Mexico City, Mexico: Designer Lance Wyman developed special symbols that reflected the Olympic spirit and traditional language; the work extended to signs and parks.

India Basin Industrial Park, San Francisco, California: In 1970, Michael Manwaring explored the architectural and placemaking power of dimensional "supergraphics."

Identity

Crate and Barrel and CB2: Multiple firms worked with an in-house design team to help create an iconic brand around type rather than icons. From the 1960s to today, it drives all guidelines.

University of Phoenix Stadium, Phoenix, Arizona: Modernism of sculptural forms and materials collides with integrated typography into architecture through materials and lighting.

Federal Center South, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Seattle, Washington: Type is inlaid in wood floors and walls, etched into glass, cut through metal and carved into granite, allowing visitors to feel and experience the typography.

Wayfinding

Virtua Hospital, Marlton, New Jersey: The hospital's messaging—while still adhering to ADA requirements—effectively uses hierarchy of scale, color contrast and material.

NPR Headquarters, Washington D.C.: From room numbers that "vibrate" with color to notification screens throughout the building, the type reflects the free flow of information.

Miami Beach, Florida: The design process used research to link typography, identity and legibility to create a program that defines the unique character of the area.

Exhibition

Pencils to Pixels: Monotype and Lippincott's 2013 travelling exhibition celebrated 100 years of typeface design and innovation—and was itself a beautiful teaching tool.

Read the Full Report: Typography, Placemaking and Signs www.signresearch.org/typography

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