AN ALLIANCE OF STYLE, SITUATION AND CONTENT

The design of a typeface for South Africa's Constitutional Court

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One of the most striking features on approaching the Constitutional Court located on Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, is the typographic application directly above the main public entrance. Bold, colourful, friendly and almost playful, the typography announces the identity of the building in the 11 official languages of the country. Unlike the formal and classical identification signage associated with many public law buildings in South Africa, this typeface signals an alternative set of core values and references. In keeping with the ideas informing the conceptual development of Constitution Hill, the typeface and signage are an example of a contemporary civic-based project that draws on South Africa's political history and strives to encapsulate and mirror its democratic aspirations.

This article contextualises the typographic project, chronicles the type design process and offers some observations and comments on the design outcome. To this end it briefly considers the thinking underpinning the notion of Constitution Hill and the Constitutional Court. It goes on to track the design of the typeface from inception to application and relates both the design process and the typeface to broader streams of typographic thinking and activity. The article draws heavily from conversations with the designer Garth Walker and from Walker's personal notes, his photographic documentation of the Constitution Hill precinct, and the working drafts that mark the development of the final type design.[1] The underlying intention of the article is to make a contribution to initiatives that endeavour to compile a local archive that serves as an historical record of South African design and, at the same time, provides a means for reflection on current design practice in the country.

CONSTITUTION HILL

Constitution Hill is a major inner-city regeneration project accommodating a mixed-use precinct located on the Old Fort prison complex that borders on Braamfontein and Hillbrow in Johannesburg. The precinct is home to the new Constitutional Court. The Court serves as an anchor to the old prison buildings that are in various stages of renovation and development as components of a set of heritage sites and museums, exhibition and performance venues, offices, tourist facilities and a small commercial enclave. It is envisaged that the total project will reach completion by the end of 2006 (www.constitutionhill.org.za). The transformation of a derelict prison site into the symbol of a democratic society, an exemplary preservation and restoration initiative and a prime tourist destination provides a narrative of an encompassing vision, imagination and design innovation.

The Old Fort complex originated as a high-security prison to control *uitlanders*[2] who were drawn to the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) by the discovery and lucrative development of the Witwatersrand gold fields. Built in 1893 on the instructions of President Paul Kruger, it was turned into a military fort after the Jameson Raid of 1896. It continued to function as a military installation during the South African War (1899-1902) until the British occupied Johannesburg in 1900. In 1902 the Fort reverted to serving as a prison facility under the management of the Johannesburg Public Works Department. From 1902 to 1983, when all prisoners were transferred to the newly constructed Diepkloof prison, the facility progressively expanded to include an assortment of prison buildings. In 1904, the Native Gaol was built to accommodate black male prisoners; White male prisoners were held in the original Fort. A Women's Prison for black and white female inmates was added in 1910 and the

Awaiting Trial Block for black males in 1928. Administration buildings were also systematically erected to manage the expanding prison population. Following the 1948 elections and the subsequent implementation of apartheid laws by the Nationalist government, the Fort complex became a detention facility for increasing numbers of 'political' prisoners (www.constitutionhill.org.za).

From the time of its establishment until its closure in 1983, the four prisons of the Fort complex have incarcerated an array of infamous and famous inmates. In fact, South Africa's political history can easily be tracked through the list of names of people who were detained for attempting to question or overthrow the political order of the day. Mahatma Ghandi and the followers of his passive resistance campaign were held there in the early twentieth century. Political dissidents and activists of a variety of persuasions include striking white mine workers, General Christiaan de Wet and his fellow opponents to South Africa's involvement in the First World War and members of the Ossewa Brandwag who opposed national involvement in the Second World War. African National Congress and Pan African Congress activists and stalwarts like Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe were all interned in the Fort prisons. Add to this list the scores of ordinary black citizens who were jailed for contraventions of the 'pass' laws and to whom the Old Fort prison complex signified a reign of fear and injustice.

After the closure of the prison facilities in 1983 and until the commencement of the urban renewal project in 2001, various proposals were considered for the use of the complex. The initial idea to lease the Fort to the Prisons Department for transformation into a prison services museum never materialised, neither did a range of other proposals for its use. In 1988 the Security Department of the Johannesburg City Council started to utilise the Women's Jail, sections of the Awaiting Trial Block and the Native Gaol. Finally in 1993, the Rand Light Infantry took occupation of the Fort and managed the premises until 2004. Despite the presence of these tenants little was done to the upkeep of the buildings and premises. The complex progressively became run down and derelict and a shelter to vagrants. In 1995, when President Nelson Mandela inaugurated South Africa's first Constitutional Court, the members of the Court chose the Old Fort complex as the location for a new constitutional court building. The choice was based primarily on the site's historical and symbolic importance, along with its physical accessibility and prominent urban situation on the edge of downtown Johannesburg. The strategic position of the Old Fort complex allows the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Johannesburg to intersect. It overlooks both the industrial south and the leafy northern suburbs and borders on the high-density suburb of Hillbrow and the administration centre of Braamfontein.

In contrast to the authoritarian and imposing attitudes adopted by other prominent public buildings of the colonial and the subsequent apartheid era,[3] the Constitution Hill complex is intended to be a vibrant metropolitan space. The Constitution Hill complex thus breaks radically with an historical aesthetic that expresses the authority of the colonial nation state or of the bureaucratic apartheid-state. It chooses to rather provide a freely accessible public space that encourages broad and multi-leveled engagements through which the key ideas of participation and responsive dialogue may be fostered. The precinct is thus completely open and a number of thoroughfares allow for easy connections to all points on the Hill and for fluid movement from the adjacent suburbs. The Constitutional Court itself is similarly open and accessible and democratic values have been actualised here on a number of levels. As a series of public spaces the Court environment engenders a variety of dialogues that signal a new system of justice. In its final form, the building visibly and graphically expresses and acknowledges historical circumstances and inclusive cultural inspirations. The Court was erected on the site of the demolished prison administration buildings and Awaiting Trial Block and materials from the latter have been incorporated into the final building. The building houses a great diversity of artworks and crafts that serve as the recognition and representation of the diverse talent and forms of art prevalent in the country.

Democratic values and participative decision-making informed every step of the design and construction processes. All 11 Constitutional Court judges were actively involved in the choice of the site and this set the tone for the rest of the project (Walker [sa]; *Number Four. The making of Constitution Hill* 2006). They decided that a public competition that encouraged maximum public participation would be the most appropriate and democratic way to approach the design and development of the site. The competition was open to all individuals and institutions locally and internationally, irrespective of whether they were registered architects.[4] The design brief specifications pointed to a Court building that was welcoming to all people, stylistically restrained and elegant, but marked by a presence and

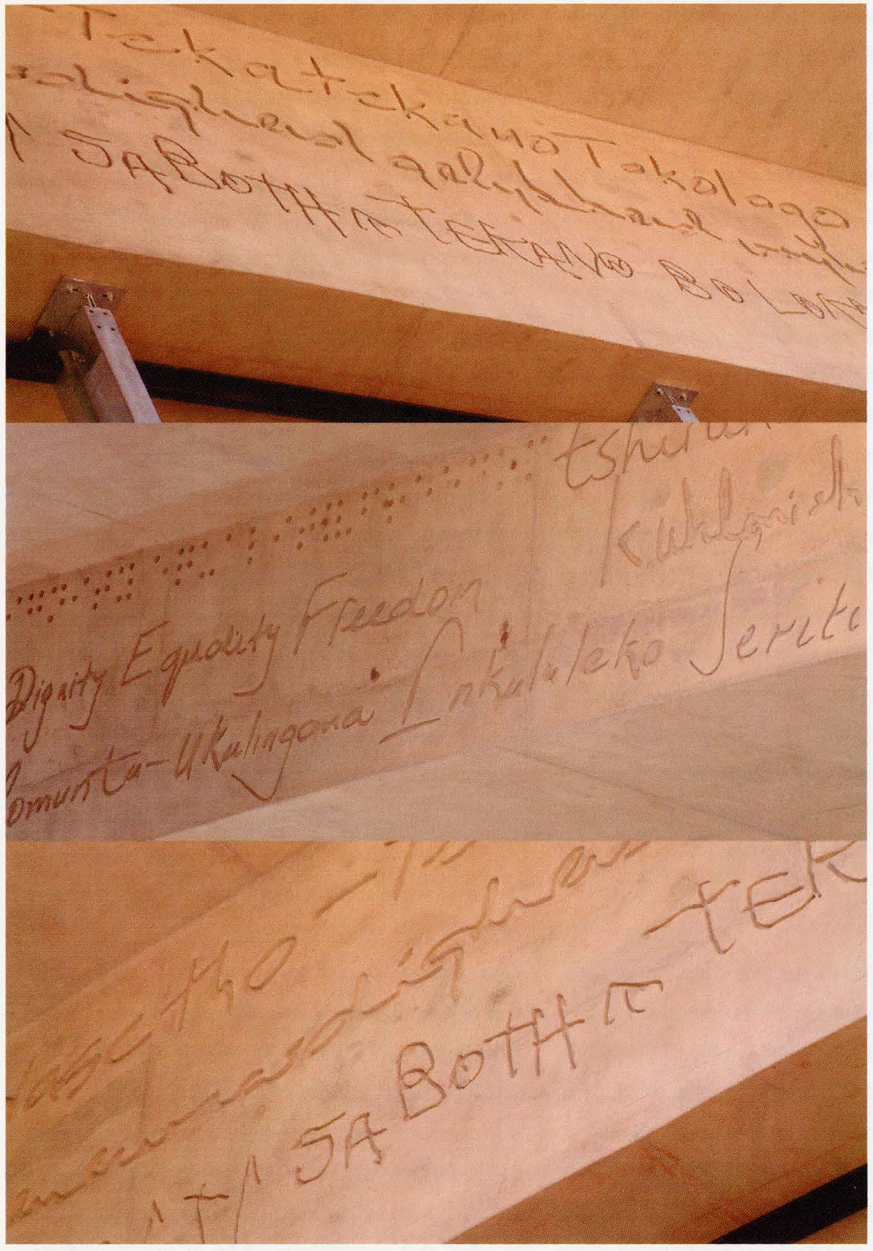


Figure 1: Judges' handwriting inscribed on the architrave

character that was identifiably South African (*Number Four. The making of Constitution Hill* 2006:067-068).[5]

In keeping with democratic processes, every aspect of the building's interior and exterior detail was put out to public tender. From the design of the carpets, to light fittings and furniture, invitations for proposals were open to all relevant industries. The design of public signage for use throughout the Court building and the greater Constitution Hill precinct was commissioned from Garth Walker of Orange Juice Design in Durban. Walker's mandate was to design a typeface and associated public signage for the Constitutional Court of South Africa acknowledging the ethos in which the complex had been conceptualised. The directive from his clients (the justices of the court) was for a 'unique font that "related to the citizens of our nation"' (Walker [sa]).

A UNIQUE TYPEFACE

Walker was commissioned to design the typeface and signage fairly late in the construction of the Court building. When he arrived on the precinct in November 2003, the Court building was 85 per cent completed and the remainder of the precinct was in a state of demolition and restoration. Buildings were shuttered and piles of debris were strewn around, leaving many areas on site difficult to access. The brief, compiled in association with the architects, specified that the type design had to support the context and sentiment of the architectural concept and its associated processes (Walker [sa]). Thus in form and connotation the typeface and signage should be humanistic, not authoritarian or monumental. It also needed to be highly legible to accommodate the varying levels of literacy in the country, as well as easy and practical to fabricate.[6] Walker was given a period of six weeks to complete the project (Walker [sa]; 2005).

Design directions and inspirations

The design of the typeface, named *Son of Sam*,[7] is inspired by both incidental and official letterforms found on the site and documented by Walker in the commencing stages of the design project. His initial and guiding thoughts to the design may be summarised in four points. The design of the typeface had to indicate utmost respect for the site and its history. It should be a 'democratic' font based on the typography that could be salvaged from the Old Fort complex. It should include mixed letterforms (in the words of the designer, 'a fruit salad ... just like South Africa'). Finally, a unicase font would aid legibility and ease of reading, and thus accommodate varying levels of literacy (Walker [sa]).

Walker ([sa]; 2005) commenced the project by familiarising himself with the history of the site, paying particular attention to archival material, historical photographs and previous national symbols and heraldry that had marked the political identity and functions of the site at various times. He then compiled an extensive photographic record of all existing letterforms and typographic applications in the buildings and on the precinct itself – including sidewalk trader signage, prison wayfinding signs, wall graffiti, numerals, road traffic signs, municipal street signs and so on. He was thus able to assemble a vast array of visual material of great stylistic and connotative diversity.

Figures 2 & 3: Montage of graffiti and lettering from across the precinct

The three primary locations that finally proved most fruitful in providing source material for the final design of the typeface were the cast concrete architrave above the main public entrance to the Court building, the prison cells in the Fort and the prison administration buildings. These locations serendipitously completed a symbolic circle as all the lettering documented originally derived from the judges, the prisoners and their gaolers respectively. In its own way, each set of lettering signified some human dimension and conveyed the intimate personal connection of the lettering and/or writer to a particular time and circumstance. A fourth source of reference that intrigued the designer was the stylistic range of numerals found in various places on the precinct.

The cast concrete architrave above the main entrance displays the opening line of the new constitution inscribed by the 11 court judges in the 11 official languages of the country and in Braille. Walker [sa] found the characters of the 'poorly handwritten' line in South Sotho by Justice Zakeria Yacoob who is visually impaired, particularly appealing. He was determined at the outset that it had to be incorporated in some way in the final typeface design.

The Old Fort building yielded an interesting diversity of visual material. Military signage left by the Rand Light Infantry, vestiges of manufacturers' marks, a plaque from 1896 indicating the ranks and responsibilities of ZAR functionaries all recalled the formal and official presence of political entities at various times in the history of the Fort. In contrast, the graffiti scratched into the walls of the prison cells presented spontaneous marks that expressed a range of emotions from despair to humour and optimism. All the lettering was intergral to the history of the buildings and the people who had occupied it.

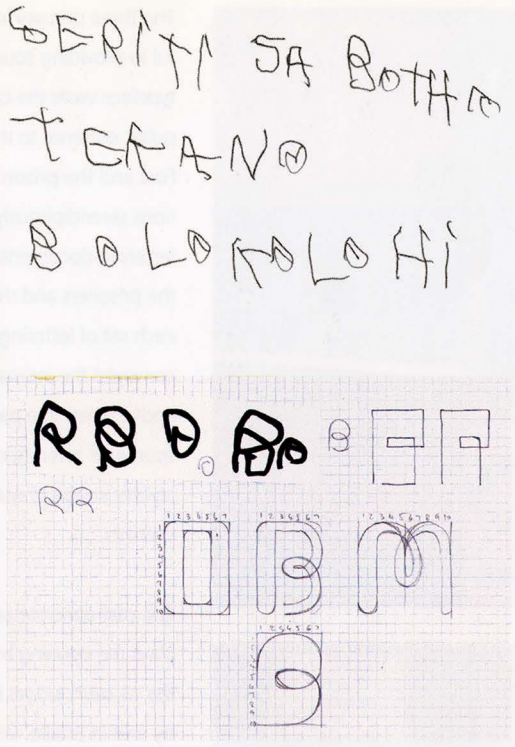
The third location, the Administration Building, provided a source of reference that conveyed a different narrative to the prisoners' cells. The typography of the 'official' voice of the prison authorities and the informal notices scrawled onto odd and convenient surfaces identify functional responsibilities. Political posters, advertisements, lettering generated by the prison guards on notice boards and recreational signs in the prison wardens' offices speak of a system with its privileged positions of access, education and authority when compared to the lettering generated by the prisoners. Yet even here, the hierarchy of the social and political system with its differing levels of education and status can be discerned in the typographic and handwritten samples.

A final source of reference collated by Walker was the many applications of numerals spread across the precinct. Differing colours, forms, textures and surfaces presented a visual kaleidoscope of contrasts. Hand-painted 'stencil' numbers that marked the doors to the prison cells evoked a different tone to the commonly used smooth silk-screened boards. This variety of materials, production technologies and styles provided useful graphic statements that could be incorporated into final design solutions.

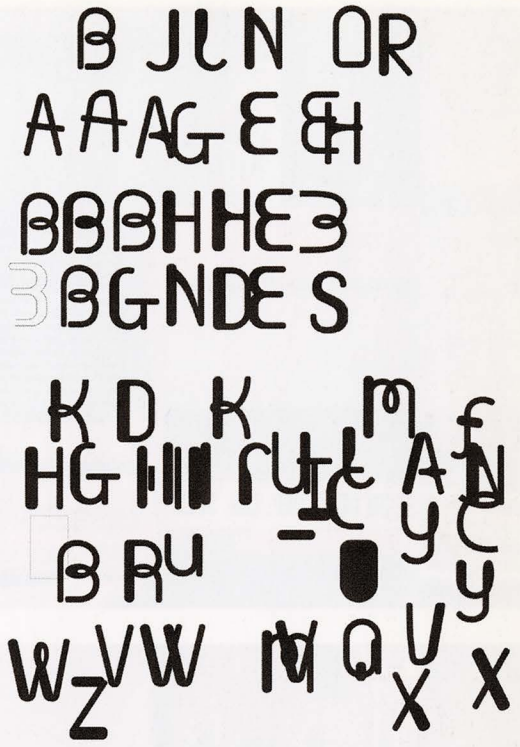
Design development and applications

Although fascinating in provenance and interesting in their links to history, the range of lettering and forms bore no common typographic thread. The first task faced by the

Figure 4: Selected references that constituted the primary basis for design development



Figures 5 & 6: The letter B and its reference



Figures 7 & 8: Sequence of design development

designer once he returned to his studio, was to isolate the lettering that appeared to offer some potential for development and then to select the letterforms that might prove useful. This delimited series of unrelated letters and numerals from the precinct, the architrave lettering of visually impaired Justice Jacoob, and the decision to use letterforms with varying letter stroke widths in a unicase font provided the primary building blocks for the typeface (Walker [sa]; 2005).

The starting point for design development was crafting the letter B taken from Justice Jacoob's writing. The letter's principle characteristics were then applied to similar letters that use a curly, cursive construction in their written form, for instance, the letters M, W and Y. Following this, the letter A was drafted with its form based on the 'Son of Sam' graffiti and its pronounced letter strokes. Letter by letter all 26 letters were systematically matched to appropriate and key characteristics of specific letters identified in the purposively selected sample of reference material. Each letter was then refined to firstly arrive at a stylistically coherent alphabet and, secondly to adapt the letter for laser cutting of the master template. This involved ensuring that the counters or centres of letters such as B, O, P, Q, R and so on, would not drop out of the template.[8]

Figure 9: Sequence of design development

Figure 10: Refinements and adjustments to accommodate laser cutting

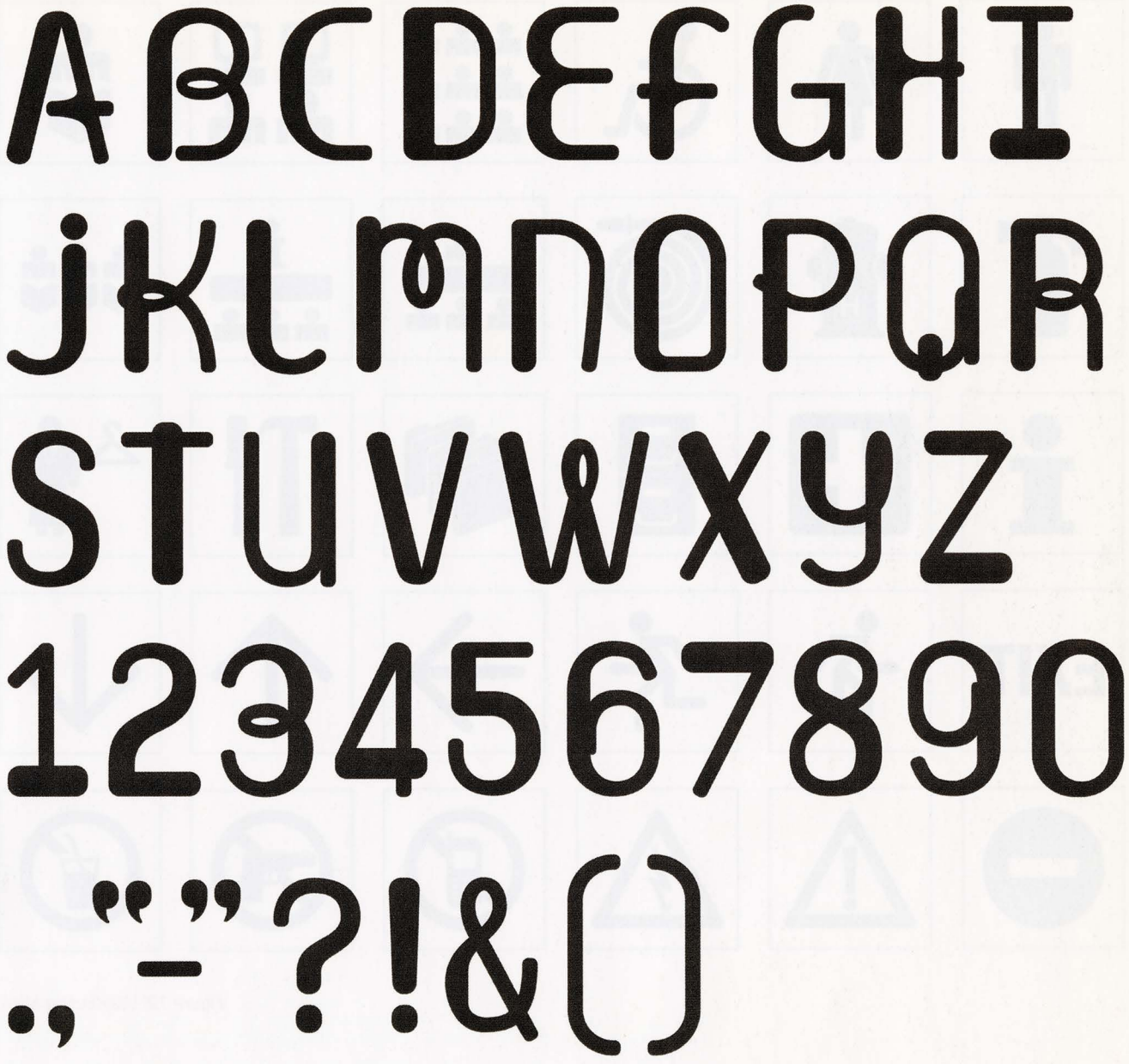


Figure 11: The final design of the typeface

Figure 12: Wayfinding icons

Figures 13 & 14: Designer's mock-ups used to test technical aspects of typeface applications

Two sets of numerals were developed. One set of numerals is an extension to the alphabet and the other set is based on the stenciled prison cell numbers. The project was completed with the design of wayfinding signage. According to Walker (2005), the system is an extension of the typeface and based on international signage icons. Walker was only commissioned to design the font up to the artwork stage. He then handed Macromedia Freehand artwork to the architects who were responsible for the total production and installation of the signage (Walker 2005).

Walker has succeeded in taking an idiosyncratic and eclectic collection of letterforms and endowing them with sufficient common features to achieve harmony. The typeface is intrinsically humanistic, reminiscent of handwritten forms or a calligraphic script with its characteristic expressive and decorative line. The typeface is informal, congenial and friendly. Individual and unexpected traits and oddities reinforce its lack of strict

Figures 15: The first application of the typeface as court signage

geometry and regimentation. In this sense, the typeface succeeds admirably in meeting the brief specifications. It breaks with the stereotypical typefaces that have traditionally been associated with the gravity of official domains, yet it still manages to convey a sense of dignity and decorum. As a secondary signifier, the design signals a change in the inherited symbolism of the South African legal order. The final design dovetails well with Walker's personal crusade to explore, advocate and develop a new visual language rooted in the African tradition and based on visual inspiration from the streets and townships of South Africa. It is thus not surprising that the typeface design evidences common stylistic features and tropes when compared to many of his other typefaces, for example hand crafted qualities, informality and vernacular quotations.[9] Surprising, though, is the generic quality of the wayfinding icons which had the potential to be more specific. Although the signage icons acknowledge some of the characteristics of the typeface, for instance letter stroke widths, the system remains very close to standard international icons.

The first application of the typeface was in the creation of entrance signage to the Court for the opening of the building by President Thabo Mbeki on 27 April 2004. The letters on the façade are three-dimensional and individually cut from acrylic and the words 'Constitutional Court' appear in the 11 official languages of the country in four of the colours of the South African flag (red, green, blue and yellow). Each individual language receives equal typographic treatment reinforcing an affiliation with the new democratic order. On first impression, the typography presents an integrated texture adding another layer of symbolic value towards the ideals of inclusivity and reconciliation. The remainder of the signage system was introduced throughout the building across a period of three months after the official opening of the Court.

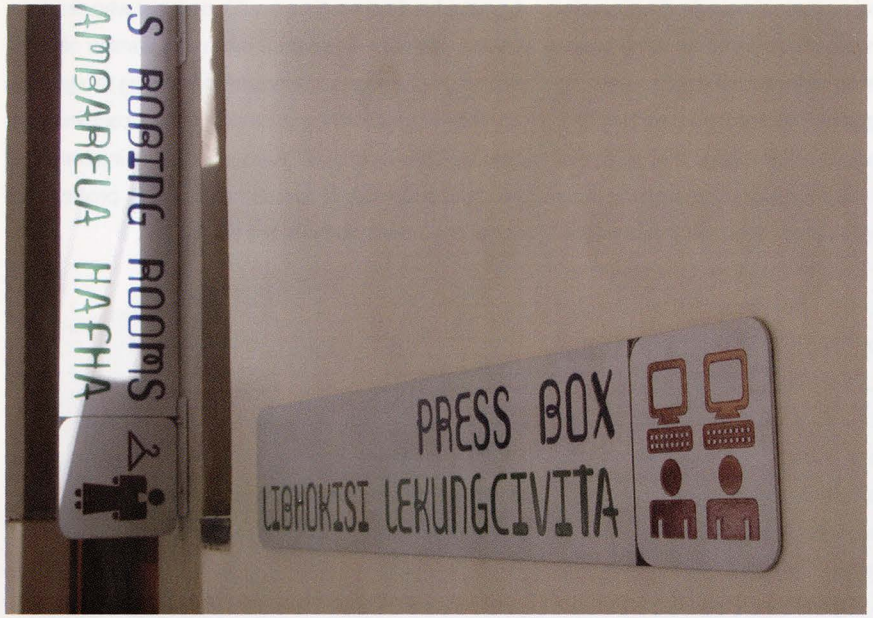
The acid test of a typeface design is not only in the individual structure and proportion of the letters, but the letter fit and how successfully the letters configure and combine in words and lines. To the tutored eye the letter and word spacing of the application of the typeface, on both the exterior and interior signage, are uncomfortably wide. In

Figure 16: The first application of the typeface as court signage

fairness to the design, problems with word and letter spacing highlight the possibilities and limitations of the technology and materials used to manufacture and install the signage. They also point to the aesthetic and perceptual sensitivity required for achieving the flexible, functional and pleasing use of a typeface. Walker (2006) regrets that he was not involved in the execution and applications of the typeface as he thinks that more could have been done in the physical execution of the signage. He recounts what he terms 'an amusing African fairy tale' of how the typography on the entrance façade had to be taken down after the official opening ceremony to correct spelling errors and then re-hung. As a result, a number of holes in the concrete façade may still be seen on close examination.

Indeed, the typography on the entrance façade most clearly demonstrates that the contribution of an experienced typographic designer could have improved the functionality and aesthetics of the exterior signage. While the rationale for equal typographic treatment for each of the official languages is clear, it is difficult to comprehend the varigated use of the four colours for the lettering or the right alignment of the 11 lines of type – neither of which contribute to ease of reading. Paradoxically the use of four colours has resulted in the emphasis of some languages and the de-emphasis of others. Tighter word and letter spacing could have facilitated ease of reading. Neither is a block of 11 consecutive lines of type in a display face spaced equidistantly conducive to readability. It would appear that overt symbolic values were given preference over the functional typographic principles that are based in the alignment, spacing, ordering and shaping of type.

The decision to limit the design to a display typeface and to use the typeface solely for external and interior signage of the Court building has resulted in restricted possibilities for integration and continuity with other typographic applications used by the Court or for further extensions to the typeface. The Court logo incorporates a conservative and classical serif typeface and Court correspondence and communication materials follow a similar conventional approach. The typography and signage on the precinct and in other buildings in the complex as a whole are an



Figures 17 & 18: Interior identification signage

example of stereotypical corporate sans serif signage. This lack of typographic continuity and compatibility could be viewed in the same light as the critique leveled at the conglomeration of artistic finishes contained in the Court building that exhibit varying degrees of visual sophistication and integration.

OTHER CONNECTIONS

The design of the typeface presents an interesting case study in its relationship to the Constitution Hill project. The design specifications for the project conveyed the receptiveness of the judges, as design clients, to new and fresh ideas in legal architecture and urban design and their willingness to break with precedent and tradition. The resultant design solutions demonstrate the value of innovative and experimental approaches. They remind us anew how design is inspired by cultural, historical, political and technological circumstances, but also how design is able to exert a social influence and convey very specific political messages. These are ideas that find easy acceptance and understanding amongst designers, but which perhaps need to be made explicit to a general public.

Reception, public awareness and education

The extent to which the typeface for the Constitutional Court is perceived or understood by the public as a 'democratic typeface ... related to the citizens of our nation' (Walker [sa]), or how legible they find it, is open to speculation as very little has appeared in the popular media with regard to its reception. Neither has much been written about the commission and development of the typeface. Garth Walker has made a number of presentations to national and international design audiences,[10] but any other local coverage has been sparse. In contrast, the ideas underpinning the Constitutional Court and Constitution Hill have received wide coverage in academic publications and popular media. Initiatives to encourage public involvement and public acceptance have been launched by project teams who have leveraged opportunities to make the idea of the democratic concrete through an explanation of processes, the revelation of symbolic meanings and community dialogue. Through these initiatives, the historical heritage and the contemporary ethos of Constitution Hill have been promoted to ordinary South Africans and to international tourists and visitors alike.

This approach is similar to that adopted by a number of international civic projects that encompass the relationship of type and urban identity and where typography has been used to create a unique connotation that refers to a specific time, place or values. Well-documented and critical discussions offer comprehensive and revealing accounts of the brief, research, design process, judging and reception accompanying projects of this nature. Good examples are the modular type design for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Cullen 2001), the typefaces for the University of Sheffield identity that draw strongly on local typographic history (Baines & Dixon 2005), and the Twin Cities Design Celebration project that sought to communicate the special character of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St Paul (Littlejohn 2005). Interviews with designers, submissions, judges' comments and critique, competition

procedures and development processes for the final solutions all provide a behind-the-scene understanding for profession audiences and as a means of public education.

The secondary goals driving both the Walker Art Center typographic project and the Twin Cities project, were education and a desire to engage the public's awareness and appreciation of design and typography. The ideas underpinning the typefaces, the details of their design and their ultimate uses are cogently described with the intention of helping an audience understand the conceptual and technical realities of type design in the digital age (Cullen 2001). Deborah Littlejohn (2005:3) contends that conceptual exercises and the messy process of research and development are essential aspects of design that are often overlooked in favour of presentations that focus on the final design form. She states that '[t]hese early processes, particularly as practiced in graphic design, are rarely granted the reflection and critique they deserve – much less the documentation that goes beyond the formulaic, pictorial narratives of most contemporary design and typography publications'. She suggests that public understanding of the design process and the specific meanings conveyed by typefaces and typography are critical considerations for public acceptance of civic projects. The manner in which a typeface is able to promote an idea by evoking the mood, style or core values and a particular set of circumstances need to be made transparent and accessible to public audiences.[11]

Ideas related to public understanding of typography are echoed by linguists and semioticians who suggest a much broader insertion of typographic study into a range of professional and academic domains than has traditionally been the case. Theo van Leeuwen (2005) and Hartmut Stöckl (2005) suggest that theoreticians have belatedly come to realise the crucial communicative role of typography and they point to systematic attempts that are being undertaken to incorporate a more comprehensive and penetrating consideration of typography into academic teaching and discourses.[12] While theorists acknowledge that designers possess an intimate understanding of typography, they suggest that the manner in which designers articulate this knowledge has tended to remain intuitive and experiential. Both Van Leeuwen (2005) and Stöckl (2005) advocate the explication of more principled frameworks for the examination and clarification of typography based on semiotic theory: 'Systematic thinking about the semiotic nature of typography can help to underpin and guide the didactic reworking and popularization of a body of knowledge which up to now has been used by professionals mainly as a prescriptive check list and not as a tool for the enablement of the typographically semi-literate' (Stöckl 2005:213).

Van Leeuwen (2005:142) contends that there are three important reasons for an explicit semiotics of typography. Firstly, in its movement from a traditional craft-based ethos to one of innovation, typography provides an appropriate site for the study of semiotic change. Secondly, as typography has assumed a more prominent role in social communication, understanding and appreciation of its functions need to be enhanced. Finally, digital technology has removed typographic expression from the hands of a trained elite and made it freely accessible to everyone, suggesting that everyone should be empowered to use typography to maximum communicative benefit. These statements echo the maturing of advances in technology and global media that are delivering a new landscape for typographic activity and for type design. In the professional design domain digital technology has conflated the roles of graphic designer and type designer. Walker [sa] declares that he is 'not a typographer. I am simply a graphic designer who designers useless typefaces' – a position taken by a number of South African graphic designers who are contributing to a growing portfolio of South African type designs that combine technological innovation with 'African' ideas and inspirations.[13] Much of this work is approached through processes of social documentation and bricolage.[14]

Typographic anthropology and archaeology

Social documentation as an inspiration for typographic design is not new. Robert Brownjohn, a pre-eminent designer from the 1960s, compiled an extraordinary record of the typographic street environment of London during the 1950s and 60s (King 2005). His photographs show how random aspects like weather, wit, accident, lack of judgement, bad taste, poor spelling, and repetition are able to provide the components of unique and animated streetscapes. As Emily King's monograph eloquently shows, these ideas permeated Brownjohn's thinking and echoed visually in his mainstream designs. American designer Ed Fella captures the technological development of print production through the integration of vernacular typographic applications found on jobbing printing, photocopies and the popular use of transfer lettering into his designs. Fella's work not only comments on print technology, he has also 'produced a body of experimental typography that strongly influenced typeface design in the 1990s' (Lupton 2004:28). In a similar vein, contemporary American designer Chip Kidd collects and borrows visual images and found objects and makes something new out of them when deemed appropriate to a project (Vienne 2003). Kidd refers to this way of working as his 'magpie method'. This milieu

and attitude typifies the manner in which Garth Walker and many of his fellow South African designers approach their work.

Walker has been particularly concerned to compile a comprehensive record of the vernacular typographic environment as the basis for a South African visual language that is reflective of its own historical and cultural space. While his social documentation and subsequent work captures the richness, peculiarities and spontaneity of popular urban typography in a opportunistic manner, the last five years have seen more formal and structured initiatives to recover and document African writing and symbolic systems. Zaki Mafundikwa's *Afrikan Alphabets* (2004) documents and describes 20 African writing and symbolic systems (pictographs, mnemonic devices, syllabaries and alphabets) in the form of a personal journey and narrative about African graphic identity through the lens of African culture and aesthetic sensibilities. The narrative attempts to recover and position indigenous graphic representations as complete, coherent and functional writing systems and to place them within a wider context of African societies, history and geography.

Piers Carey expands this dialogue in a master's dissertation entitled *African graphic systems* (2004). The dissertation identifies and classifies both linguistic and non-linguistic indigenous graphic systems. The classification is based on home language or the cultural grouping of producers rather than following a colonial division dictated by geographic boundaries. The research enabled Carey to identify references to, or examples of, over 80 linguistic/cultural groupings throughout the continent that collectively contain several thousand individual characters and symbols. Factors such as modes of meaning, cultural assumptions and uses, materials and media, and original conditions of production are offered as reasons why indigenous systems have been neglected and to explain fundamental differences between Western and African concepts and approaches to graphic communication. Carey (2005) emphasises the academic benefits of a regional history of graphic design and the recovery of African writing systems, but also points to the functional and practical value of such an endeavour. He suggests that the predominance of English, the Roman alphabet, print and electronic technology coupled to Western aesthetics and values have resulted in what he terms a 'global predatory monoculture' (Carey 2005). This poses a threat to the survival of indigenous languages and their associated graphic systems. Furthermore 'fringe' populations who do not have access to this monoculture are disadvantaged in that communication messages directed at them are likely to be incomprehensible and ineffective. Carey points to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa as a prime example of how critical it is for indigenous graphic systems to be preserved, understood and utilised by local designers. This is essential for devising educational and informative messages that must be accepted and acted upon by traditional communities most severely affected by the disease.

FINAL COMMENTS

The underlying sentiment in the conception of Constitution Hill is to symbolically convey and physically signal the political transformation of South Africa. In keeping with this sentiment, democratic ideals have been articulated in various ways. These include the idea of an experiential environment that enacts and invites interaction and mirrors democratic values in manifest form as well as the implementation of participative processes and decision making. Although the type design project was Walker's sole responsibility, he was favourably impressed with the working relationships that developed between himself and his clients (the architects and Constitutional Court judges). He credits the unproblematic unfolding of the type project on the establishment of meaningful engagement across professional and disciplinary boundaries, mutual respect for professional and technical ability and the willingness of individuals to enter into responsive dialogue (Walker [sa]; 2005). Yet the applications of the typeface which excluded input from the type designer, and the failure to promote public understanding of the type design, would seem to suggest that ideas of participation, consultation and dialogue were fairly limited.

One can only speculate on the assumptions and reasons for not tasking the designer with the fabrication and installation of the signage. Nevertheless, this situation allows a number of issues of some import to design practice to come to the fore, two are mentioned here. As demonstrated by the applications of the typeface, a multilingual society simultaneously poses political and functional dimensions for typographic consideration. This is a problem that South African designers will increasingly have to grapple with. How to engage and balance these dimensions are matters seldom raised in professional forums or in discussions of a South African design identity. Secondly, although the emergence of a digital visual culture has been accompanied by an increased visibility for type and typography, there still appears to be insufficient appreciation of the expressive qualities of typography by non-specialists. The inclusion of typographic expertise in the production and application phase of the signage project could have enabled solutions that more fully exploit the formal and connotative values of distinctive typography.

The above observation is reinforced by Van Leeuwen's (2005) comments that there is poor public understanding of how to engage with typography and little insight into how typography creates meaning. The process of social documentation that inspired the design of Walker's typeface and the typeface's metaphoric potential, in addition to its historical and political connotations, present an ideal opportunity to expand public awareness and understanding of the social relevance of type and typography. It seems a pity that this opportunity has not been capitalised on, given the typeface's prominent position at the entrance to the Court and its potentially broad exposure to a vast array of South African citizens.

On a more positive note, the typeface is widely regarded as a distinctive and successful design in its own right. Whether it may be comfortably sited within the broader ideals underpinning the design of the Constitution Hill project has been a matter of some debate in the design fraternity (Walker 2006). Comments and feedback received by the designer indicate that the typeface is viewed by some as a design based on personal preferences and an extension of an approach prevalent in his body of work, rather than a considered attempt to fully answer to the brief specifications (Walker 2006). This raises the question of the extent to which an idea or identity can be made explicitly and visually manifest given the tension between the specificity of a typeface and the arbitrariness of language. Ultimately the meaning of Walker's typeface is narrowed down by the specific context in which it is used. Van Leeuwen (2005: 39) explains that 'connotations come about through the "import" of signs into a specific domain where they have hitherto not formed part of the accepted, conventional repertoire. Their meanings are then formed by the associations that exist, within the domain *into* which the signs are imported, with the domain *from* which they are imported'.

Seen from a broader perspective, Garth Walker's typeface design for the Constitutional Court may be viewed as emblematic of the shift in mindset and design manifestations that have occurred in South African design over the last 15 years. Walker has been at the forefront of the relationship between design and the forging of a new national identity. To this end, he has assembled a fascinating and comprehensive photographic record of the vernacular typographic environment visible in likely and unlikely (for example, cemeteries) urban situations. Naïve hyphenation, hand writing, accidental juxtapositions, serendipitous elements and unusual production techniques that are so typical of the untutored and expressive qualities of street and popular typographic manifestations have fueled his exploration of a contemporary South African visual language. Vibrant, humorous, unconventional, frivolous and sometimes irreverent traces from Walker's social documentation re-appear in his refined type designs and logotypes encapsulating a celebration of local culture that embodies the ideals of difference and variety so central to a post-apartheid culture.

Walker's quest to creatively explore and define what type and typography should mean within the South African context and how they might be engaged with, is increasing being supported by more structured and deeper explorations of typographic manifestations and how meanings become attached to them. The development of a systematic review and compilation of African writing systems and their positioning within their own local environments and circumstances of production and reception are making significant contributions to the writing of a regional and African design history. These endeavours, in conjunction with other chronological and comprehensive overviews of South African design,[15] promise the start of a powerful and telling social and political narrative of this country.

NOTES

1 The author is indebted to Garth Walker and would like to thank him for his generosity and willingness to enter into numerous conversations and in providing access to his notes and photographic documentation, without which this article would not have been possible.

2 A term used for foreigners in the ZAR before the South African War and applied especially to English speaking residents (Branford 1987).

3 A prime historical example is the Union Buildings designed by Sir Herbert Baker in 1911/12 to form part of a neo-classical acropolis overlooking Pretoria from Meintjieskop. Likewise, the Voortrekker Monument, designed by Gerard Moerdijk, commands a remote, towering and imposing position over the Pretoria cityscape and its distant surrounds.

4 This method of commissioning has been adopted by the Johannesburg Public Works Department and other state agencies. It is seen as an alternative and more democratic approach to the design of public sites and buildings *(Number Four. The making of Constitution Hill* 2006).

5 The proposal presented by OMM Design Workshop and Urban Solution was finally chosen as the winning entry.

6 The brief indicated that applications of the typeface would be fabricated from a laser cut steelsheet or aluminum template. One of the implications of this production method is that applications are confined to monospacing.

7 Walker [sa] was struck by the graffiti 'son of sam now son of hope' scratched onto one of prison cell walls. He felt that it conveyed a message indicative of a dire situation transformed into one of aspiration and redemption.

8 The final application and production of interior signage did not employ the laser cut stencil as initially prescribed in the design brief. Rather, more direct printing methods like silkscreening were used.

9 See *i-jusi* Number 11 (2000) and Number 15 (2001) that display examples of typefaces designed by Garth Walker.

10 Walker also visually documented the design and development of the typeface from his personal perspective and compiled this into a self-produced pictorial book entitled *The face of a nation*. Only ten copies of the book were produced and presented to selected recipients as gifts.

11 Both the Twin Cities and the Walker Art Center projects are significant not only for their engagement with concepts of identity, but because they clearly demonstrate the intersection of digital capacity, typographic tradition and contemporary idea. For instance, LettError's entry for the Twin Cities project proposed a type system that responds to data changes, like the weather, using software written by the designers (Littlejohn 2005). Matthew Carter's typeface for the Walker Art Center works as a straight font in default mode with multiple personalities encoded as optional extras. Options include five 'snap-on' serifs and horizontal over- and underlines that bend the letterforms. The options respond to the ideas of inflection, mutability and tones of voice and facilitate a polyphonic voice for the institution with which to address its multiple audiences and convey its multidisciplinary mission (Cullen 2001).

12 For instance, *Visual Communication* 4(2), 2005, is devoted entirely to typography.

13 The Sacred Nipple Type Foundry's on-line catalogue displays a wide range of typefaces by South African type designers. Typefaces designed by Brode Vosloo such as Ialfabhethi, Izulu, MrCVJoint, PleinStr, and ShoeRepairs are good examples of type designs based on ideas of cultural representivity.

14 Bricolage is a method of borrowing and appropriating fragments of socio-cultural bits of meaning and re-working them into a new collective concept. Foch (2000) presents a useful account of bricolage and industrial semiotics as a fundamental approach to understanding contemporary design and typography.

15 See, for instance, Lange (2005) for a brief overview of South African graphic design.

All visual material courtesy of designer Garth Walker.

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