Exploration into New Grid Systems (Patternized Typography)

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Purpose of the study: This study focuses on an ongoing research and production project that is exploring a new and specific grid system. The project began with the design of a modular typeface. Its progress continued into the design of a specific grid and pattern, which then suggested the development of products based on previous designs, as well as further developing specific research on the subject. This paper aims to better explain and represent the project’s general development, methods and social significance.

Method and Characteristics: On one hand, the project aimed to create a new modular font system where all the letters could potentially fit into one ‘containing’ shape and would be consisted of same parts. In contrast, the thinking was such that repetition of text could be treated as a pattern on its own, and perhaps emerge as the most meaningful pattern of all. With these concepts in mind, I began developing a new grid design which bridged the two ideas. The grid is designed by repeating the same so-called ‘containing’ shape over and over again until it becomes a pattern, allowing the user to fill it in with text. With this pattern it is possible to write all letters from the Roman alphabet in lowercase. However, in some cases, letters can be filled out using small caps as well.

When the typeface was originally designed, certain malformations in the letters appeared in order for them to fit in the ‘containing’ shape. Parallel to the design of the font, the shape also went through several changes before reaching its final design, which strove for a balance between the design of letters and the main ‘containing’ shape.

In the first phase of the experiment the grid had many limitations (Fig.1). It could not offer regular equality of spacing between letters, for example, between the letter i and any other

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Fig.1 The grid, early phase  Fig.2 The grid, later phase
letter. This was due to the fact that the letter i could be filled out only in the middle of the ‘containing’ shape, thereby creating an imbalanced space around it. Words containing i appeared inconsistent. Another problem was the non-existent spacing between any two letters, since shapes following one another in the grid had the exact same width. Also, the letters w and m were double-width compared to the rest of the letters of the alphabet. In general, it can be said that the grid in its first phase was very fixed, and needed to become more dynamic and open in order to be more successful.

To improve these abnormalities with one general solution during the latter phase of the designing process, the ‘containing’ shape was repeated once more (Fig.2), overlapping two neighboring shapes, from the middle part of the first to the middle part of the second shape. In this way, the grid’s nature became more complex and, despite detaching itself slightly from being a visible pattern, it gained immensely in terms of functionality. The improved grid now offers new possibilities in letter designs, half-widths, and spacings, as well as more unexpected variety while writing within it. It also suggests new ways of developing itself in the future.

Social significance: By definition, a ‘pattern’, from the French patron, is a theme of recurring events or objects, sometimes referred to as elements of a set. These elements repeat in a predictable manner. A pattern can be a template or model, which can then be used to generate things or parts of a thing, especially if the things that are created have enough in common for the underlying pattern to be inferred, in which case the things are said to exhibit the pattern. According to the above, the described grid can be also considered a type-specific pattern. In order to further engage with this concept, I continued to develop the project by suggesting possible product design prototypes. These could be based on the grid system or exist as visually appealing products, depicting just the pattern.

The first product prototype created was a wallpaper, which can be customized by its users (Fig.5). The wallpaper was also used for the first public presentation of the project, in the form of a short live performance. A series of prototype products followed, containing writable/erasable bags (Fig.3) that tend to be reminders at the same time, T-shirts, wrapping papers and notepads. One other product where the function of this grid can be put to a real test would most likely be in the form of an alphabet practice notebook for children.

A collaborative project: Parallel to the above the project is at the moment entering a new phase, which has followed a small experiment that included other designers attempting to work with the grid. Having received unique results from all who were invited, I decided to conduct a larger collaborative artistic project, helping open up the possibilities for the function and use of this typography experiment. Using this grid as an author design language, I am sending out grid designed notepads to a group of artists, designers and writers, not to mention those people simply keen on carrying a notepad (Fig.4). My future collaborators are expected to fill it out as they see fit and send it back to me. Collaborators are thus divided in two groups: ones who know the grid can be used as a writing system and others who do not. The outcome of this collaboration should both suggest new directions to the grid function and possibly open up the project towards new paths. However, the project itself suggests that it should be applied to already existing typefaces of a similar kind, or support new ones that can be designed on the same system principle.

Conclusion: The need of modularity in the design of the Roman letters can be easily seen in practices such as the so-called order systems. As Chinese characters were built up on the square, Latin letters were designed in accordance with strict principles of construction. Johann Neudorfler, c.1660, constructed some alphabets where the square provided the basis for the letter and was divided in 10 equal parts. Durer also created one alphabet on a simmilar principle. In 1971 in Italy, Olivetti developed an alphabet that consisted of circles of equal size, where the traditional form of some letters had to be modified but not to an extent that lost their legibility. Similar practices as experiments in design can be seen in the work of modernist Wim Crouwel and his celebrated New Alphabet. These kinds of experiments can be further explored and reapplied in contemporary design and possibly lead to new and interesting results.