Wim Crouwel, a moderntist as well as a contemporary graphic designer

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Introduction: The purpose of this text is to overview the influence that the work of graphic designer Wim Crouwel has had on graphic designers from different younger generations, whether they have been oriented pro or against the establishment of the modernist movement. This explains the universality of the power and the ever-freshness that the work of Wim Crouwel has had over five decades, crossing the borders of design movements and ideologies.

Born in Groningen, educated at the Minerva Academy and the evening course of typography at Ivkno in Amsterdam, in 1963 Wim Crouwel became the founding member and ideological leader of Total design. In 1967, at the age of thirty nine, Wim Crouwel was already a prominent Dutch graphic designer with an established international career, when he designed the ‘new alphabet’. Even though he continually dealt with letters in his work, Crouwel never considered himself a designer or typefaces. The Quadrat Print of the new alphabet testifies the above as its subtitles on the cover state ‘a possibility for the new development’ i.e. ‘an introduction for a programmed typography’.

The New Alphabet was ‘a new typeface, better suited than most traditional types, to a systems of composition based on cathode-ray tubes’. Crouwel’s subtractive processes are based on a principle driven by strong visual abstraction. The ‘New Alphabet’ ignores the basic perceptiveness principles where the use of minimal lettering material does not necessarily imply a maximum, or even a normal, legibility. Crouwel’s case is more a question of respecting the structural norm at the grounds of the shapes, in a logic of analogy, while being rather indifferent to the traditional legibility criteria.

Crouwel’s work was always undoubtedly oriented towards progress and new developments and this might be the reason why his personality and work has been of extreme impression to generations of designers which were not necessarily engaged in the modernist movement. Crouwel’s interest in ‘the new’ and in the future has kept him open minded and involved in collaborations with designers of younger generations.

Octavo, an avant-guarde a design publication, designed by 8vo, a London based design studio, was published only in 8 issues, between 1986 and 1992. 8vo had invited Crouwel for a contribution to Octavo 5 in 1988, after reading his interview where he made a reference to Octavo, as he was a subscriber from issue 1. His contribution to Octavo 5 was an article on the tradition of lowercase letters in the Netherlands with a title ‘Lowercase in the Dutch Lowlands’. A year later he contacted Octavo again with the aim to invite them to work for him as a client, while he was a Director of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In the opinion of Hamish Muir of Octavo ‘Crouwel’s work transcends all the ‘isms’ and elevates itself to a level that defies categorization’. As for technology, Hamish Muir of Octavo refers to Wim Crouwel as someone who embraces technology in his work in a very transparent way asking himself ‘What can I do with this?’ instead of ‘What will this make me do?’.
The Designers Republic, a graphic design unit from Sheffield, active from the mid 1980s till 2008, lists Crouwel as one of their main influences as well. As The Designers Republic’s was always searching for an utopian designed future, founder Ian Anderson says ‘We worked to understand and plot what and where this future may be, we printed out abstract consumerist poetry, we wrote a global slang for the common man…only to discover that Wim Crouwel had been there first’.

A contemporary graphic design studio Experimental Jetset from The Netherlands, says Crouwel’s design is literally in their blood. The books they used at school, the telephone book, the stamps: they grew up in a landscape designed by Crouwel and his contemporaries. As Experimental Jetset have the above as their background, they do believe that they were in a sense shaped by the environment that Crouwel created for them in their youth.

For designer Michael C. Place of Build, Crouwel is most fascinating for his moving forward and looking into the future. Biblioteque state that what fascinates them most about Crouwel’s work is that it still looks futuristic event though it was designed long before they were born. For designer Karel Martens there seem to be a few unforgettable moments connected to Wim Crouwel in The Netherlands. One is his provocative approach while creating the new phonebook without any capitals, another is his attempt to teach the general public how to read his ‘new alphabet’.

**Conclusion:** Apart from being logical, economic, beautiful and communicative, Wim Crouwels’ graphic design work is extraordinarily marked by timelessness. His open-mindedness and interest in the new has kept him in collaboration with the generations which didn’t necessarily feel the need of creating or following the same rules as Crouwels’ generation did. As he states, everyone is a child of their time and surrounding, which means that graphic designers should activate them selves in accordance to their environment and social issues. Having this in mind, it can be stated that Crouwel has been capable of doing this through the period of five decades, and has marked the past as much as he marks the future of design.