

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 Gandhi 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 Depart-

ment 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 unicas 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 Yacoub 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.

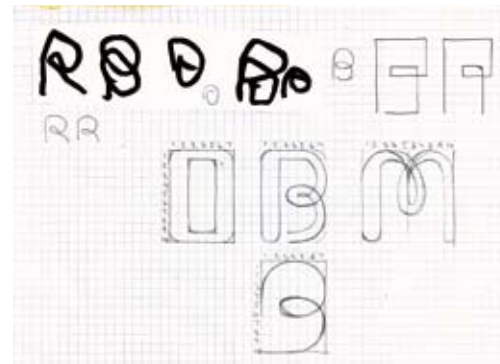
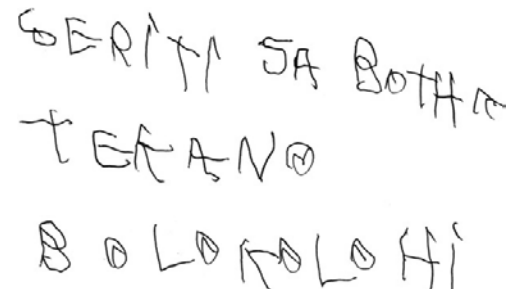
A final source of reference collated by Walker was the many applications of numerals spread across the precinct. Differing colours, forms, textures and surfaces presented a visual kaleidoscope of contrasts. Hand-painted 'stencil' numbers that marked the doors to the prison cells evoked a different tone 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



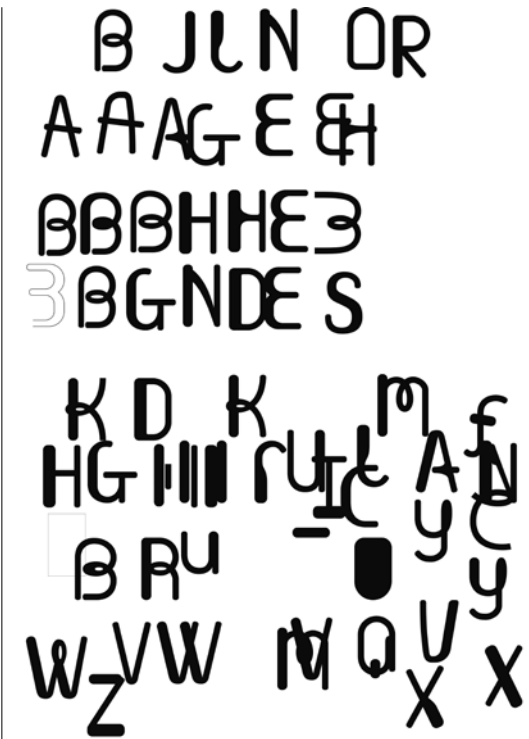
Figure 4: Selected references that constituted the primary basis for design development



Figures 5 & 6: The letter B and its reference

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 Jacob, and the decision to use letterforms with varying letter stroke widths in a unicas 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 Jacob's writing. The letter's principle characteristics were then applied to similar letters



Figures 7 & 8: Sequence of design development

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 purposefully 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

EBBETHGNDUO
 DLLEHGOK JJ
 AAAARRff fM
 YXUffKPN
 BEffGGHIK
 NOPRTUWX
 ABCDEFGHIJK
 LMNOPQRSTU
 VWXYZ G TE

Figure 9: Sequence of design development

QQQQ
 QQQQ QQ

Figure 10: Refinements and adjustments to accommodate laser cutting

A B C D E F G H I
 j k l m n o p q r
 s t u v w x y z
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 . , " ' - ? ! & ()

Figure 11: The final design of the typeface

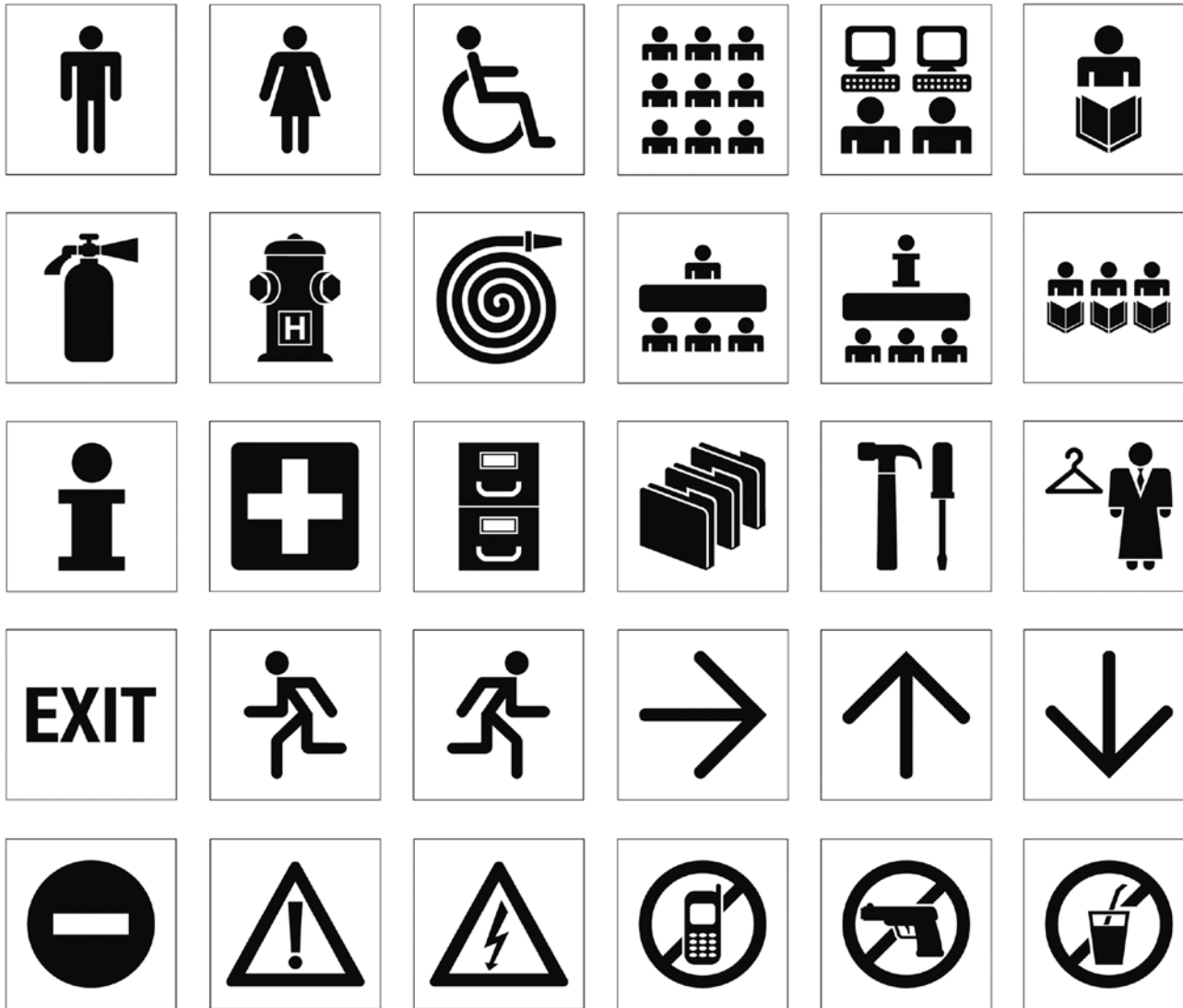


Figure 12: Wayfinding icons

CHIEF JUSTICE ARTHUR CHASKALSON

AUDITORIUM



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