



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.<sup>9</sup> 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 variegated 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



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,<sup>10</sup> 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



Figures 17 & 18: Interior identification signage

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> Much of this work is approached through processes of social documentation and bricolage.<sup>14</sup>

### 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 'maggie 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, mate-

rials 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,<sup>15</sup> 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 steel sheet 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 *lalfabhethi*, *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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