TYPE

FORM & FUNCTION

A Handbook on the Fundamentals of Typography

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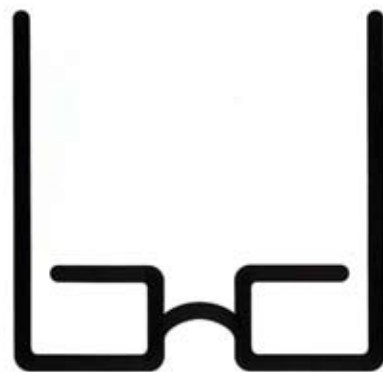
Typography serves as the foundation for the corporate identity **A3 Design** creates: from the BIG Council's ligature to type as image solutions in Goody's Paint and Bryant and Duffey optometry.

COMPOSITION
Words with Amanda Altman / A3 Design

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Q. How important is typography for A3?
Extremely important. Our job is visual communication. Design interprets how viewers react and respond to a message. The right font helps to communicate that message. A very elementary example is using a display font in body copy. You cannot read it. Or using an illustrative, gory, dripping font to typeset "Have a nice day"—it's a contradiction. Designers have to understand typography to effectively communicate with it. How the letterforms relate to each other, how the typography relates to the rest of the design, and how the target market reads the message are all extremely important.

Q. What default typefaces do you use?
We tend to be drawn to classic sans serif fonts: Helvetica, Univers, Trade Gothic, and Franklin Gothic. They are all very different, but similar in that they are easy to read and have huge families to allow for variation in weight, helping with hierarchy. And because of their ambiguity and lack of *style*, they're chameleon fonts in that they take on the style, meaning, and message of the piece. We have come to find that it takes years to master the use of any singular font. We were also fortunate enough to be educated in typography by professors who adopted and taught the Swiss design school of thought: Paul Bowers and Jan Conradi.

Q. How much time do you spend educating clients about typographic fundamentals?
The majority of people couldn't care less about Helvetica or Univers, but I think the majority of my job is educating the client on design in general, and typography on a more detailed level.

A great example is the BIG (Business Innovation and Growth) logo we created. Their previous logo was B-I-G all in one, horribly executed, unbalanced, and illegible form. The client and I talked about the goals for the entrepreneurial group, which included terms such as *growth*, *approachability*, *professionalism*, and *innovation*. After our initial design presentation, I heard comments to the effect of: "It just feels right. I like it, but I don't know why. It makes me smile." So what was it that made the president of this entrepreneurial organization like what she saw? As I explained to her, "It says what you want it to say, without saying it." That's well-executed typography. Everything from the citrus green color palette expressing the dual personality of an entrepreneur, to the approachability of the lowercase, serif font used, to the top of the *g* growing into the dot on the *i*, it all appeals to the market with an instant visual message.

The wood type inherent in the Muzak *Screen Door* promotional calls to mind folksy, small-town music performances.

The visitor information center uses the simplicity of an *i* embedded in a thought balloon to help passersby find answers to their tourism questions. In contrast, the information-dense Walk Charlotte map shows people where they are and where they can go by layering typographic street names into a mapping system.


Designing with type is as much about the macro-aesthetics as it is the micro-aesthetics. Limiting type choices helps create an atmosphere of simplicity. Using regular weights in conjunction with bold weights differentiates one layer of information from another.

Q. Do you start by tinkering with imagery or crafting the message with typography?
All of our projects begin with the typography. We read the content, choose fonts, and then establish hierarchy. United Way's 75th Anniversary program had a ton of copy. Older serif font choices were made to support the concept and for legibility. Then the content was designed into its hierarchal position. We pondered every element and created numerous design options before generating the final product. There are also cases where the font was the inspiration and became the image, such as the *Screen Door* album artwork and the AIGA Communication Arts poster.
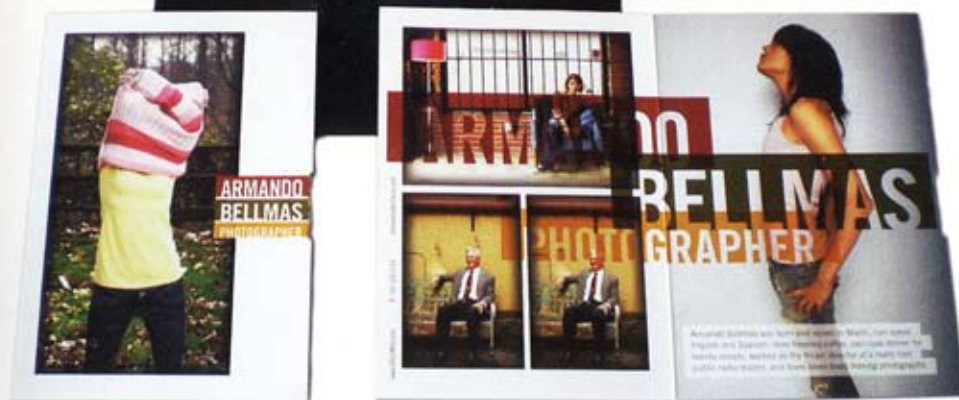
By layering type over image, the Armando Bellmas promotion does double-duty, calling attention to the artist's name without stealing attention from his photography portfolio.

Q. What significance do you place on the grid for your layout/composition?

A heavy one. Our Swiss school of thought has drilled it into our heads that you must establish your grid first. We even start business cards by establishing a grid structure. It helps to easily organize and establish that hierarchy of information. It provides a structure for us to create within and grounds our elements to imaginary anchors so they don't drift off the page. Two books which are a must-have for *any* designer include *Making and Breaking the Grid* by Timothy Samara and *Typographic Design: Form and Communication* by Philip B. Meggs and Rob Carter.

Q. What is the biggest design challenge you face in this new digital environment?

The biggest challenge is educating our clients on the different expertise that is needed to successfully communicate in this environment. We help our clients understand the value in both the design side and programming side, that both sides are different and complicated, and that partnering with specialists in each field will help you to reach your business goals quicker and create lasting equity for your company's name.

Media will keep changing. We will have to learn how new media renders the letterforms, but typography fundamentals will always stay the same.

Q. Given technological shifts with more emphasis being placed on digital text, how do you foresee typography changing?

I like the idea of people being more aware of typography. More people will identify themselves with fonts: taking on a font as part of their online personality or worn as an accessory to their electronic communication. Like any accessory, it could be trashy and gaudy or possibly very elegant and classic. That is cool.