POST INDUSTRIAL SANS types

Technical and utilitarian sans types for a digital age

By Mark Eastman

With the constant demand in design and advertising for typefaces that reflect a contemporary look, there has been a resurgence of interest in sans serif typefaces. There are a number of innovative new sans designs as well as revivals of vintage sans typefaces. Many of these share a common utilitarian, technical quality that has made them particularly fitting for use in the complex, layered and constantly changing digital age we live in. It is worth looking back at the evolution of sans serif type in order to place post-industrial sans designs in historical context.

Early Sans Designs

Although the first sans design appeared in an 1816 specimen book of William Caslon IV in England, it wasn't until the early part of the 20th century that this style first became widely used. The popularity of sans designs coincided with the development of modernist design ideals emphasized in movements such as the Bauhaus in Germany, De Stijl in The Netherlands and Constructivism in Russia.

Many sans types of the early 20th century set benchmarks for current designs. Some of these faces such as Erbar™, Futura©, and sans faces comprising European "Grotesques" (so named by the English who thought they were ugly) have a strong geometric and industrial emphasis. In Europe the most notable of these were the loose amalgamation of types that formed Akzidenz Grotesk© typefaces (Berthold), which were later standardized. The American counterpart to grotesques were gothics such as the early News Gothic©, Trade Gothic© and ITC Franklin Gothic©. Other sans faces emphasize geometric forms with more classical aspects such as Gill Sans©, FF Scala Sans™ and recently ITC Johnston™, a revival of Edward Johnston's sans types that were developed into signage for the London Underground Railway in 1916.

Swiss Modernism

The post-WWII Swiss modernist movement, which revived and expanded on design ideas from earlier in the century, contributed to the evolution of modern sans typefaces still in wide use today. Helvetica©, originally designed by Max Miedinger, was a reinterpretation of earlier industrial grotesque faces, but designed for increased legibility with more differentiation between horizontal and vertical strokes.

Helvetica, the king of modern industrial sans typefaces, was one of the most widely specified typeface families of the 1960s and '70s. This family was redesigned and expanded as Helvetica Neue® by Linotype in 1983. Despite being loathed at times by designers for its ubiquitous medium weights used on generic packaging in the mid-'80s, Helvetica has become a classic sans. Some of its faces, such as Helvetica Neue Ultra Light, for example, are still synonymous with contemporary elegance in editorial design and advertising, particularly for fashion and style-related contexts.

Humanist: A Kinder and Gentler Sans

There has been a gravitation towards more humanist sans designs: Contemporary sans designs such as Formata®, Frutiger®, Lucida Sans®, Syntax®, Stone Sans® and Myriad® Multiple Master reflect aspects of design with a more informal and organic form characterized by a less hard-edged appearance. Some of these typefaces—such as Hans Meyer's Syntax—were actually based on serif letterforms. A progression of humanistic sans designs has been utilitarian and neo-grotesk sans faces which combine aspects of open readable sans designs with aspects of industrial types as in ITC Officina Sans®, FF Meta® and FF TheSans®.

FF Meta, Utilitarian Milestone

FF Meta Plus™, designed by Erik Spiekermann, represents one of the most significant contemporary sans type families with a distinct utilitarian emphasis. The design of Meta evolved initially from Spiekermann persuading the German Post Office (Deutsche Post) to commission an exclusive typeface to replace the variety of Helvetica fonts from different sources it had been using. At the time (1985) type production was mostly done on large mainframe computers and was expen-

Display Type: FB Interstate designed by Tobias Frere-Jones, 1993–94, Font Bureau, Inc., www.fontbureau.com

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sive as well as time consuming to produce. The purpose of the commissioned type design was to be legible at small sizes, to have a design that was not fashionable or nostalgic, to be compatible on all platforms, efficient in terms of line length, available in several clearly distinguishable weights, unmistakable and characteristic and technologically up to date.

Despite two working versions of test fonts produced through Linotype, the client cancelled the project, deciding to continue using Helvetica. It was speculated that the client may not have been convinced that new digital typefaces would be practical, inexpensive or easily implemented.

The advent of desktop software for font production changed this situation and, in 1989, Spiekermann, with the assistance of Just Van Rossum and Luc(as) de Groot, developed a new typeface based on the drawings of the cancelled Bundespan project for a font to be used exclusively by Spiekermann's design firm Meta. Eventually this typeface, appropriately named Meta, was used as an in-house face for Spiekermann's FontShop International's printed materials and made into a commercially-available font. FF Meta Plus is currently comprised of 39 faces and has been one of the FontShop's best sellers. FF Meta Plus is characterized by a very neutral and organic sans design with a utilitarian feel that is also highly legible. Differentiated stroke widths, angled stroke

Top: Neue Helvetica®, Linotype Design Studio 1983, Max Miedinger, 1957. Helvetica is a registered trademark of Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG Linotype Library GmbH www.LinotypeLibrary.com

Examples of FF Meta Plus® designed by Erik Spiekermann, 1985–98, FontShop International, www.fontshop.com

endings and the highly-unified structure of the typeface contribute to its clear and contemporary form. It is also one of the few sans families that has old style figures in the standard character set faces plus lining figures in its Caps/Small Caps faces.

On the Road Ahead: DIN and FB Interstate

There seems to have been a shift toward using types that have a post-industrial æsthetic, a more stripped-down, technical appearance that conveys utilitarian clarity. Technical industrial-looking types, a throwback to the mechanical era, seem to counter desktop design conventions in the digital age, such as drop shadows and ease of distorting type to "make things fit." Recent digital versions of DIN (German Industrial Standard) fonts that have become more widely used in recent years make Helvetica seem almost decorative by comparison. DIN Scriften™ is a set of four technical sans faces—two regular and two condensed. The DIN fonts were originally created as technical fonts and are widely used in Germany for highway signs. Despite this familiar use, DIN typefaces have been prominently used in graphic design over the last ten years. FF DIN™, designed by Albert Jan-Pool, is a more recent digital addition of a three-weight family with a spare industrial feel that when set as display type in a carefully-designed layout, can convey an elegant, contemporary look. Over the last few years these faces have been extensively used in advertising and editorial. Their bold weight and industrial personality make them well suited for display use and, when properly set, for text.

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(Clockwise from top left) FF DIN™ designed by Albert Jan-Pool 1995, FontShop International, www.fontshop.com

FB Griffith Gothic™ Black, Thin and Bold; FB Interstate™ Bold, Regular Condensed; Black Condensed designed by Tobias Frere-Jones, 1993–94, Font Bureau Inc., www.fontbureau.com

DIN Mittleschrift; DIN Engschrift, Adobe Systems, Inc., www.adobe.com/type **and Linotype GmbH,** www.LinotypeLibrary.com

FB Interstate™, designed by senior Font Bureau type designer Tobias Frere-Jones, is another typeface family following utilitarian industrial themes but with a quirkier, distinctive identity. FB Interstate was initially inspired by Highway Gothic, a rather crude monostroke typeface originally produced by the U.S. Government specifically for road signs. Perhaps the familiarity of these faces is what makes them interesting when used in an unfamiliar context as a digital typeface in current graphic media.

When asked how FB Interstate came about, Frere-Jones said that while in college he was interested in doing a group of typefaces along a theme he called "blue-collar" typefaces. Out of this project came FB Garage Gothic™, based on the type of parking garage tickets and FB Interstate, inspired by the government's Highway Gothic road sign typeface. While researching Interstate, Frere-Jones obtained the government specification on Highway Gothic and found that it had no provisions for optical corrections as most standard typefaces. It has a uniform stroke width throughout and curved characters do not break the baseline and cap height as is normally done to make curved and non-curved characters appear visually to be the same height when set in a line of text.

Frere-Jones also found that some of the character widths, for example the elongated F and more compact than normal M characters, are designed like the characters found in fixed-width typeface designs. However, kerning-like character combination spacing values are listed in the government's technical specifications for this typeface. For FB Interstate Frere-Jones produced a refined version, making optical corrections while maintaining some of the typeface's offbeat

personality that make it so unique. He has also carried out aspects of the design to form a complete family of types that follows the American tradition of gothic families. Frere-Jones says he likes to think of this font as the estranged cousin of some of the early American Gothic typeface families. (A new expanded version of the FB Interstate family of fonts, with twenty new faces including previously unavailable oblique faces, is scheduled to be released as this issue goes to press.)

Frere-Jones has also produced another sans family along a similar utilitarian theme. FB Griffith Gothic™ is a revival sans of Chauncey L. Griffith's 1937 Bell Gothic™ typeface (Linotype). Bell Gothic, with its open form and mechanical nuances designed for increased legibility at small sizes, has been the source of inspiration for a number of avant-garde alternative digital typefaces. Originally Bell Gothic contained a Roman, a Bold and a Black—actually a generic heavy sans known as Gothic No. 12, that was later revised and included with this family. For FB Griffith Gothic, Frere-Jones redrew the typeface true to the original Merganthaler design, faithfully interpreting it throughout a new expanded family of faces.

The bold, frequently geometric forms of these types have a more neutral, post-machine age feel that complements other imagery in unexpected ways. FF Scala Sans is another type design with these qualities, but with a modern interpretation on the geometric clarity of form found in earlier 20th century faces such as Gill Sans and Edward Johnston's London Underground Railway type designs.

Fixed-width Frenzy

Another group of typefaces that has gained popularity for its stripped-down utilitarian appearance has been fixed-width (a.k.a. monospace) sans typewriter faces such as Letter Gothic, Orator and the OCR typefaces. While each of these typefaces are basically sans faces, serifs do appear on a few select characters, such as the cap I, and in Orator

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OCR-A designed by Adrian Frutiger in 1968, Adobe Systems, Inc., www.adobe.com/type

ITC Johnston™ by Dave Farey and Richard Dawson 1999, International Typeface Corporation, www.itcfonts.com. A 3-weight expanded revival of Edward Johnston's original block lettering developed into signage for the London Underground Railway in 1916.

Examples of the Base Monospace™, Base-9™ and Base-12™ typefaces designed by Zuzana Licko 1995–97, Emigre, Inc., www.emigre.com

Letter Gothic Bold, Adobe Systems, Inc., www.adobe.com/type

also on the D and B characters. In recent years these have seen increased use in a variety of media. They have also been used for text and display in annual reports for high-tech firms—perhaps because they physically convey a sense of industrial and post-industrial technology.

Letter Gothic at large display sizes has an unusually spare and quirky industrial look, and some of these characteristics clearly have been the inspiration for a number of unusual and alternative current digital typefaces. OCR-A has the most futuristic look of these faces and conveys a sense of computer type rendered on a screen. It's ironic that in light of their life as typewriter fonts from the mechanical age, these same faces convey a sense of the post-industrial age we live in when used as digital typefaces in current graphic media. The more industrial-looking typewriter fonts, with their uniform strokes and fixed-widths always seem to convey a vernacular documentary quality, a certain honesty that is unique among typefaces. A clever contemporary spin on these fonts is Erik Van Blokland's serif typewriter font FF Trixie™ which recreates the irregular nuances of ribbon-imprinted type from vintage typewriters.

The Base Monospace™, Base-9™ and Base-12™ families (comprised of both sans and serif faces) designed by Zuzana Licko represent some of the most extensive new typeface families with utilitarian emphasis in the realm of fixed-width fonts. The clear and open mechanical form of faces

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4	Avocados	2	Jalapeños
1	Bunch Green Onions	2	Lemons
1/2	Bunch Cilantro	1/2	Teaspoon Salt

Thinly slice green onions including tops. Finely chop cilantro. Halve jalapeños lengthwise (remove seeds and veins) and finely chop. Juice the lemons. Skin and seed the avocados and place in a bowl. Using a fork mash the avocados. Add all other ingredients and mix well. Serve with thick tortilla chips or refried beans and fresh, homemade tortillas.

such as Base 9, for example, show that a sans typeface does not necessarily need to be traditionally kerned in order for it to be both legible and highly readable.

The more one sees these faces in use the more one is curious about how they have become typefaces of choice for certain areas of design. One reason might be because it is becoming increasingly difficult to find sans serif faces that are less familiar within a graphic design context. It's also hard to find complete families of unique sans faces (particularly condensed families) that have a fairly neutral quality as opposed to characteristics that might contradict the context within which they are used. Typewriter fonts are a classic example of designers and art directors reinterpreting familiar things by using them in unexpected ways.

ITC Franklin Gothic® for example, is an extensive family of sans typefaces that has a certain neutral urban clarity that makes it extremely versatile. It's also been frequently used in display for newspaper headlines and in advertising. As a result, some of the bolder weights tend to convey these associations. ITC Franklin Gothic Demi was selected as the typeface for the subtitled portions of the recent film *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace.*

There has frequently been wide debate on the legibility of type, and there is a general consensus that serif text type is usually easier to read. But sans type is increasingly being used for text because of its clean and contemporary appearance. When carefully set, it can be as readable as serif faces. The number and variety of sans designs are constantly evolving and being reinterpreted. Sans type such as these and others that have post-industrial, utilitarian aspects resulting from a combination of mechanical and digital influences, represent another step in the evolution of typographic form. Because of their clarity, readability and versatility, these sans types can be the right tool for the right job. ∎