

LOCAL NARRATIVE IN TYPE DESIGN – A STUDENT PROJECT IN ŌTEPOTI / DUNEDIN

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OVERVIEW

The type design project for first-year design students enrolled in Otago Polytechnic's Communication Design programme is an opportunity to understand the anatomy, terminology and classification of type through designing a typeface based on the narratives embedded in our local built environment in Ōtepoti/Dunedin.

Dunedin residents live among, and highly value, the city's unique architectural heritage, its volcanic landscape and its variable climate. These things are the bedrock of Dunedin's culture – a quality that local design company BrandAid has identified and communicated well in the current Dunedin brand strategy for the Dunedin City Council, promoting the city as an authentic, intelligent, intriguing and creative place to be.¹ The gothic font used for the Dunedin brand reflects the city's personality – gritty, raw and individualist. We see ourselves as both traditional and rebellious. It is this communicative power and character that we ask the students to explore in designing their own type, drawing inspiration from their local environment and its distinctive culture.



Figure 1. Dunedin brand logo and marketing strategy, designed by BrandAid.

Typography and history are inextricably linked. Dunedin's Scottish connections and the influential design conventions of the nineteenth and twentieth century are displayed in the impressive architecture that locals walk among and look at every day. Most of us are unaware of the stories of prosperity, scandal, innovation and enterprise that occurred here. While the internet makes engaging with this social history accessible, a field trip into our local built environment makes for a more immersive class experience.

We asked students to photograph examples of historic buildings, their architectural features, vernacular signage and places of interest outside of the main retail precinct. These photographs began an exploration of local storytelling and how it might inform our own design language. This tangible heritage serves as an identifiable marker of time and place.² It reminds us of what has come before – often representing commercial enterprise, small local business, independent shops and people who served as community figures.

Buildings behave in much the same way as artefacts; they have an iconic impact within their landscape and they express technical and aesthetic innovations specific to their era or style. They also communicate stories of people and community – the architects, the occupiers, the tenants, the customers. These are stories that connect our past and present. Many of our students did not grow up in Dunedin, and embedding local history helps them to develop a shared sense of belonging.

According to Chenoa Pettrup of the Asia Pacific Design Library, "We often think of objects and artefacts as ephemera in the lives of people, but it could be said that the opposite is true – people are the ephemera in the lives of objects. The object continues to exist well after the people are gone."³ This insight reflects a shift in emphasis from the technical visual norms we are used to considering when looking at buildings to the social significance and historical relevance of the work, elevating the role narrative plays in design.

In his blog, local archivist and researcher David Murray captures the essence of how students might imagine these social histories, bringing the past to life: "It's all very well looking at the Hallenstein's building in Dowling Street as a good example of Renaissance Revival architecture, but it really comes to life when you imagine the sounds of 22 different brands of sewing machine whirring away, or the commotion as a couple of hundred workers rushed to lunch at precisely 1pm."⁴

DESIGNING A TYPEFACE

Type is often invisible. In this project, we start the process of teaching our students to look at and critically analyse type that is all around them. Noticing type becomes addictive and some students complain that they can't 'not look' at it anymore. The type design project was based on the premise that the more closely you observe, deconstruct and construct letterforms, the more you will learn about the visual logic and optical illusions at play.

The brief was divided into three parts – understanding type, creating type and telling type stories. Preparatory exercises involving letterforms and counterforms helped develop the student's eye for type, learning what letters are inherently difficult or uncomfortable and what compensations need to be made. As designers, we learn the expression, tension and tone that is contained in the geometry of a letterform and how to embellish it with narrative and personality, giving students a hands-on experience of type anatomy and the emotive qualities of type. We question what makes a good typeface and how type is used in context and throughout history.

From this platform, students started designing their own typeface. They followed an analogue-to-digital process – sketching, scanning and redrawing letterforms. Starting with pencil on grid paper is a non-committal way to test what works. Students find the nuances involved unique to their typeface and work hard to problem-solve their way to produce a complete alphabet. They then scanned and redrew the letterforms in Illustrator, mastering bézier curves and the pen tool. Vector fonts give designers a lot of freedom to manipulate individual characters, add colour and textures, and include alternate characters such as ligatures and glyphs. In the final stage, students take their refined forms through a font-creation program and output an OpenType font and then test the proportion, balance and legibility of their font in use. Students learn about kerning type and the difference between the legibility of letters in isolation and as words and sentences – bringing to life type designer Matthew Carter's famous quote, "A typeface is a beautiful collection of letters, not a collection of beautiful letters."⁵

When new typefaces are created, type foundries often design 'specimens' to pitch them to the design community. As an initial step in user-focused design, we asked students to tell the story of their typeface in the form of a "typeescape" – a hybrid term coined from the expressions "type specimen" and "brand stylescape." We wanted students to communicate the unique character of their typeface and the story behind it through a curated collection of type explorations, images, textures and colour.

LOCAL TYPE NARRATIVES

While Dunedin is not a big city, it was New Zealand's first city, and it quickly became a bustling commercial and industrial centre in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. While it contains many iconic buildings with well-known stories – Larnach Castle, Dunedin Railway Station, Speights Brewery, schools, museums and churches – students were urged to look beyond the well-trodden heritage tour to uncover some of the lesser-known stories or to explore the known in new ways.

We found that the most successful projects focused on either the typeface itself (based on the architectural features of the building chosen) or on the narrative told. Student outcomes were a mix of faithful restorations and free interpretations. Three projects illustrate the diversity of responses: one story derived from a visible landmark, another was buried in newspaper archives and the third drew on contemporary vernacular culture.

Emma Buchan based her typeface on the restored Cadbury Fry Hudson building on inner-city Castle Street. The renovation of the façade was the final act made by the company before exiting Dunedin. This building was one of few retained in the area as large-scale demolition got underway to make way for Dunedin's new hospital development.

After extensive research into the evolution of the Cadbury brand and chocolate wrapper design, Emma decided to explore her typeface in a sensual way. She created her original alphabet with melted chocolate, highlighting the ball serif used in the Cadbury logo which dated to the early 1900s. The resulting fluid, imperfect curves and ball serif are the repetitive elements and foundation of her alphabet. In her tactile exploration of her subject, Emma successfully captured the joy every child and visitor to Dunedin will remember when they signed up for a Cadbury tour and left with a bag of goodies clutched in their hand. She created her alphabet on foil, evoking the feel and smell of an unwrapped bar of chocolate.

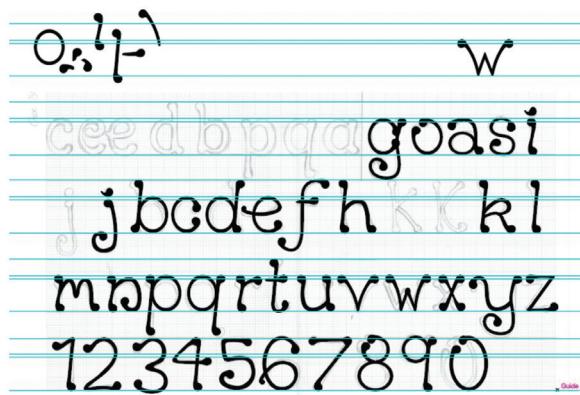
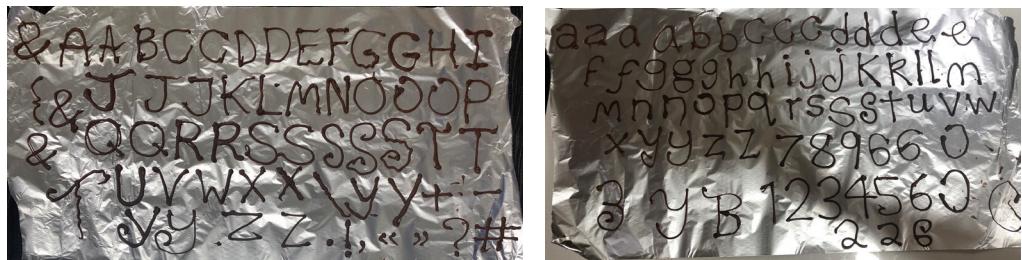


Figure 2. Chocolate Swirl typeface, designed by Emma Buchan.

In contrast, Sophia Hunt explored her typeface in a more research-based, but equally playful manner; exposing a darker side of our local history. Drawing on online articles in *Papers Past* and the Otago Daily Times company archives.⁶ Sophia discovered a significant patch of land next to the railway tunnel that runs alongside the Tunnel Hotel in Port Chalmers. Now covered in scrub, it was once the site of Messrs Clarke & Co., a ship's chandlery. Charles Clarke was captain and owner of the SS *Wainui*, a steamer associated with the Pacific slave trade which operated in the 1860s and 1870s. A larger vessel than most operating in the area, the *Wainui* offered a greater economy of scale in transporting human cargo.

Drawing on reports by naval officers and sailors, historian Scott Hamilton has brought to light the significant role Dunedin played in the Pacific slave trade.⁷ One story recounts how the *Wainui* approached Nukapu Island in the Solomons on 20 September 1871. As the steamer came into view, the locals hurried to fill their canoes with food and other tradeable goods and paddled out to greet it. As the two parties met, the *Wainui* failed to slow, running down the canoes and scattering those aboard. The captain is reported to have directed his crew to pick up a number of the desperate islanders, leaving some to swim back to shore or drown, sailing away with the captives and depleting the already small population of Nukapu. This kidnapping became a defining moment in the Pacific Island slave trade, that provided labour for Peruvian plantations – a dark side of our history that has been largely overlooked.

An old pair of shackles, most likely sold by Clarke & Co's, formed the basis of Sophia's typeface, inspiring the distinctive curvature of her letterforms. She also played on the 'cowboy saloon' mentality she associated with the Tunnel Hotel to create Hinder, a typeface featuring a unique combination of shackles and spurs.

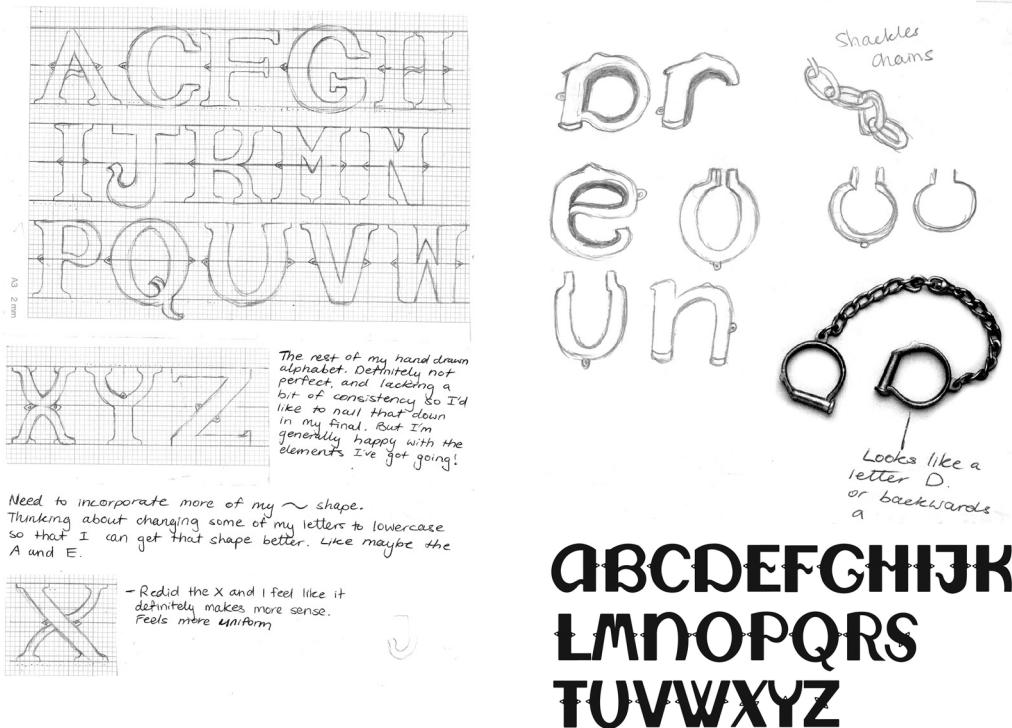


Figure 3. Hinder typeface, designed by Sophia Hunt.

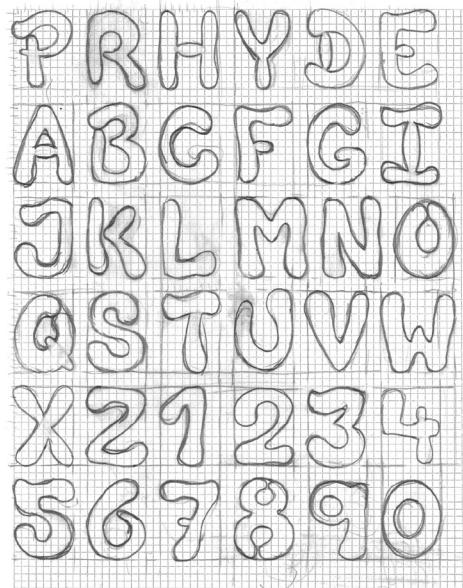


Figure 4. Hyde typeface, designed by Caitlin Easson.

A third example draws on one student's personal experience of living in the tertiary campus precinct. Caitlin Easson chose a well-known story of student flats and student parties. The semiotics of flat signage and naming conventions has been explored extensively by Sarah Gallagher in her book *Scarfie Flats of Dunedin*.⁸ While flat names come and go, they reflect the make-up of the student population and reference the current pop culture (for example, references to *The Simpsons*, Tolkien and Harry Potter). Flat names also speak to the state and quality of housing and living in the area, playing on irony and double entendre (*The Hilton*, *The Fridge*). Poets, authors, musicians and artists have long been inspired by the history and culture unique to the Otago student experience.

Caitlin focused on Hyde Street and its annual keg party, looking at the graffiti style of vernacular signage for flat names such as *Da Church*, *Prhyde*, *Rehab* and *Hydeout* and the thick, hand-drawn lettering of *Mile Hyde*, *Wine at Nine* and *Hyde Seas*. She started out using Indian ink to capture the hand-drawn essence of these signs. Her workbook suggested that it was challenging to follow the rules of typography, given such organic forms, as she sought to find ways of making the contrasting strokes and features repeat.

For students new to typography, vector software and research, this project presented a major learning curve. However, with determined focus, all 45 students produced a useable font. The project helped everyone make the kind of productive connections that are useful for graphic designers, reflecting both on our environment and cultural context – from vernacular forms to hidden stories. Through the project, Dunedin was revealed as a settler city with inspirational material remnants and remarkable social histories.

While buildings are treasured and protected, type design by contrast has become a dispensable fashion. An influx of digital font software has produced a widespread enthusiasm for type-creation by designers, giving everyone access to the same tools and methods of production. Adobe plug-ins support the ability to turn shapes into fonts that can be embedded in any design project. What was once highly valued as a professional craft belonging to typographers has become easy and cheap for any digital creative to access – but with it comes a potential decline in quality and timelessness. In the words of New Zealand typographer Kris Sowersby, of Klim type foundry: "Producing a new typeface is almost trivial – it can be done in a day. But making it feel new in the wider sense, making it feel culturally relevant is the hard part."⁹

CONCLUSION

Through juxtaposing old stories with new technologies, we discovered that we could find, preserve and transform our local stories into typefaces. Our new digital forms gave these stories a moment in the present, and potentially a future. According to Ellen Lupton, typefaces drawn from vernacular sources "build upon a taut yet permeable web of visual literacy, a common language in which elements move in and out of currency, their meaning open to continual revision. The best work transforms the meaning of the old and the ordinary while drawing energy from its tremendous power to communicate."¹⁰ Teaching type design through local storytelling provided a deeper reflective design practice for our students.

As we continue to develop this project, more 'type narratives' will be discovered and interpreted into useable fonts. With this in mind we, as educators, feel the need to begin to digitally archive and share these stories. It is our vision to create a Dunedin online type foundry, primarily for the purpose of teaching and learning. Fonts will be made publicly available for our students to use and potentially for client projects, contributing to and committing to design that articulates and celebrates our local culture.

Through this project, we started students on a journey in which they began to understand the communicative power of design. By elevating the role of narrative, students learned to view and understand their city a little differently, and through a designer's eyes.

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- 5 "Matthew Carter: Type Designer," TED, https://www.ted.com/speakers/matthew_carter.
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- 7 Scott Hamilton, *The Stolen Island – Searching for 'Ata* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2016).
- 8 Sarah Gallagher and Ian Chapman, *Scarfe Flats of Dunedin* (Auckland: Plus One, 2019). See also Dunedin Flat Names Project, <https://dunedinfatnames.co.nz/publications-presentations/>.
- 9 Kris Sowersby, "What is New," blog post, 13 March 2019, <https://klim.co.nz/blog/what-new/>.
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