

# STRIKING THE EYE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH WIM CROUWEL

By Patrick Burgoyne 10/07/2007

Dutch designer Wim Crouwel’s New Alphabet type was devised with no curves or diagonal lines – in 1967. Throughout this month, we have been following the activities of design studio Build. On 28 June, Michael and Nicola Place, who make up Build, travelled to Dublin for a screening of Helvetica, followed by a panel discussion and talk by Wim Crouwel. The following morning Build caught up with Crouwel to conduct the following interview for CR...



### Wim Crouwel’s awards

- *H.N. Wermanprijs*
- *Frans Duwaerprijs*
- *Piet Zwart Prize*
- *Anton-Stankowski-Preis*
- *BKVB Funds Oeuvre Award*
- *Gerrit Noordzij Prize*

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We were in Dublin for Candy’s SweetTalk 24 event, where Mr Crouwel had given an engaging, hour-long presentation – a potted history of his work and thinking – which was then followed by the Dublin screening of Helvetica – the film. The inevitable bar-stint followed [not with Mr Crouwel, we might add, who quite sensibly and quietly went back to his hotel] so when we turned up late for our meeting the next morning, well, it must have all seemed so predictable. In fact, we had turned up early for the meeting, just at the wrong hotel. So, we finally managed to catch up, 40 minutes late; we were extremely apologetic, he was extremely understanding...

### Interview:

**Michael:** Looking at your work, I always think it’s so incredible; the form, the typefaces, the layout. It’s very influential and yet we are seeing this out of context from the time it was created. At the time, did it seem shocking or was it accepted by those around as just good design, or were people quite indifferent?

*“It was an amount of luck, we had the right clients who embraced this sort of thinking”*

Wim: It was an amount of luck, we had the right clients who embraced this sort of thinking – mainly the director [of the Van Abbemuseum, and then of the Stedelijk Museum] who was a great and long term client. We met through my art school in Southern Holland [Groningen] where I was teaching in 1954 (up until then I was painting, I didn’t really know what to do) – the head of the school knew the director – and six months after I had started teaching I got a phone call, which was the beginning of a long relationship with him. He wanted to represent artwork with a more advanced way of thinking that reflected what was happening with Modern Art. We were very interested in the abstract at that time. He was very supportive, as I dealt with him directly, and he dealt with the curators, who always wanted to have a say in the way their shows were promoted or represented. I just dealt with him, and he was very supportive of my ideas, as they fitted with the ideas of abstract painting, so my ideas were really quite accepted.



**Michael:** How did the public perceive your work?

Wim: Well, the general public, I don’t really know. But the interested public were very receptive to it. I was often invited to talk and the public that came to these talks were very accepting. In 1952 I had met a Swiss designer whilst working for an exhibition design company in and between ’52-’54 we worked together on large-scale projects encompassing art, architecture and design, our aim, to ‘redefine the visual world’. From this came an institute which translates as ‘The Foundation of Good Living’, which produced a magazine promoting good interiors and therefore good living. It was a different direction for interiors, promoting a new, functional aesthetic, so even then there was a sense of promoting new thinking, new ways of looking at the world. In 1955 I met Kho Liang Ie who was an interior designer and we worked very well together, later setting up Designstudio.

**Michael:** You mentioned that luck has played a part in your success – that the director of the Stedelijk being a patron of what you did really helped to break the work to a wider audience and had you not met him that things could have been very different...

Wim: Yes, he definitely understood the value of good design, that design should reflect the [new] thinking of the time. He had a law background but