1935
TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL TYPE
Herbert Bayer

BEGINNING IN THE 1920S, German type reformers sought ways of replacing the national alphabet—the spiky Blackletter—with simplified gothic letters. A leading advocate was Austrian-born Herbert Bayer (1900–1985), who was educated at the Bauhaus in Weimar and later taught at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where, from 1925 to 1928, he was director of the school's department of typography and advertising. During this time, his interests—and the department's emphasis—shifted from lithography and hand-printing to more mechanical processes and more inventive typographic exploration. A devout modernist who was profoundly influenced by the De Stijl movement (1917–1932), Bayer railed against the redundancy of serifs and capital letters, arguing instead for the efficiency of lowercase and the economy of a sans-serif alphabet. His universal alphabet of 1925–1927 emphatically illuminates this argument. In this article, published seven years after the Bauhaus was closed, Bayer—who was at this time living in Nazi Germany—explains the practical conveniences of a typographic system that mirrors the functional requirements of modern life. Here, a renunciation of thick-to-thin strokes is contrasted by a celebration of the purity of geometric form.—JH

One glance at the specimen book of types issued by even an up-to-date printing firm, reveals a collection of the most varied sorts of letters, which as a whole constitute a conglomeration of style of the worst kind. arranged in groups and compared with other expressions of the periods from which they have descended, they remind us that:

today we do not build in gothic, but in our contemporary way.
no longer do we travel on horseback, but in cars, train and planes.
we do not dress in crinolines nowadays, but in a more rational manner.

every period has its own formal and cultural features, expressed in its contemporary habits of life, in its architecture and literature. the same applies to language and writing. we recognize clearly enough that literary forms of past ages do not belong to the present times. a man would make himself ridiculous who insisted on talking today in the manner of the middle ages.

later, we shall see that the type designs of tradition do not respond to the essential requirements of type suitable for use today. we look back upon a long line of development in type design, and we have no intention of criticizing the heritage which now oppresses us. but we have reached a stage when we must decide to break with the past. when we are confronted with a collection of traditional styles we ought to see that we can turn away from the antiquated forms of the middle ages with a clear conscience to the possibilities of designing a new kind of type more suitable to the present and what we can foresee of the future.

in the course of the centuries our language has changed. it has become shorter, sound-changes have taken place, new words have been coined, new concepts have been formed. language itself needs complete reorganization—but this is a tremendous subject. we shall not enter upon it, but limit ourselves to consideration of type-design.

out of the conglomerate mass of type faces, some of which are illustrated, there has emerged, as a last phase, the form of classical roman type, with variations until we arrive at the simplified form without serifs, popularly known as "sans-serif" or "sans." in england the most familiar type of this order is commonly known as "gill sans," after the name of its designer, eric gill. sans-serif type is the child of our period. in form it is in complete harmony with other visible forms and phenomena of modern life. we welcome it as our most modern type. we cannot set about inventing an entirely new form of type, as this would have to be parallel with a radical reorganization of the language. we must remain true to our basic letter-forms, and try to develop them further. classic roman type, the original form of all historical variations of type, must still be our starting point. all the variations of shape have been formed freely according to the style and the calligraphy of the type designer, and it is just this freedom which has been responsible for so many mistakes. geometry, however, gives us the most exact forms. albrecht dürer's endeavours to resolve both the roman and the german gothic type into their constructive basic elements, unfortunately were never carried beyond their experimental stage. the *bayer-type* produced by the berthold type foundry represents a practical attempt to give a modern expression to classical roman type by means of geometrical construction of form. a tremendous amount of reading is done today and there should be no difficulties put in the way of the reader. some things have to be read from afar, and letters must be visible from considerable distances. it is not without reason that oculists use clear cut type faces when testing the state of the patient's eyesight.

much has been written about the legibility of type. oculists can offer no definite proofs, because their experiments are influenced by habits to which patients are accustomed. for example, it is found that old people with bad eyesight often read complicated gothic type more easily than clear roman type, because they are used to the former. but from research, however, it has been concluded that the more the individual letters resemble one another in shape, the less visible is the type. this conclusion may be wrong, as it would be easy to find illegible type-faces in which the individual letters differ very widely from one another, if that be the only consideration. and then where shall we look for harmony of form and the fundamental constructional form of our types? other research has established that whole groups of letters—not single letters, but words—are taken in by the eye at one glance. if we carried this conclusion to its logical end we should have optical word pictures (similar to chinese signs) and no type with separate letters. personally, i believe in the following logical conception: the simpler the shape of the letter, the easier the type is to see, read, and learn. in classic times capital letters (the only letters in use) were drawn with a slate pencil and incised with a chisel. no doubt their form was intimately associated with these tools. lower case developed in the early middle ages from the use of the pen, and therefore inherits the characteristics of handwriting. later, both alphabets adapted themselves, and we observe in all types up to the present the characteristic basic element of the thin up-stroke and the thick down-stroke. these characteristics have preserved themselves up to this day. but do we need such a pretense of precedent at a time when 90 percent of all that is read is either written on a typewriter or printed on a printing press, when handwriting plays only a secondary role, and when type could be much simpler and more consistent in form?

hence, i believe the requirements of a new alphabet are as follows:

geometric foundation of each letter, resulting in a synthetic construction out of a few basic elements. avoidance of all suggestion of a hand-written character, uniform thickness of all parts of the letter, and renunciation of all suggestions of up and down strokes. simplification of form for the sake of legibility (the simpler the optical appearance the easier the comprehension).

a basic form which will suffice for diverse applications so that the same character is adaptable for various functions: printing, typewriting, hand and stencil writing, etc.

these considerations will explain the attempt to design a new type. but why do we write and print with two alphabets? a large *and* a small sign are not necessary for one sound. we do not speak a capital a and a small a.

we need a one-letter type alphabet. it gives us exactly the same result as the mixed type of capitals and lower-case letters, and at the same time is less of a burden to school children, students, professional and business men. it can be written considerably more quickly, especially on the typewriter, where a shift key would be unnecessary. typewriting would therefore be more easily learned. typewriters would be cheaper because of simpler construction. typesetting would be cheaper, type cases smaller; printing establishments would save space. writing and addressing done in offices would be much cheaper. these facts apply with special force in the english language, in which the use of capital letters occurs so infrequently. it seems incomprehensible why such a huge amount of apparatus should be necessary for such little use of capitals. if it is considered necessary to emphasize the beginnings of sentences, this could be done by heavy type or wider spacing. proper names could also be shown in another way, and for the "i" a uniform sign would have to be created. pursuing this thought to its logical conclusion we perceive that the sound of the language ought to be given a systematic optical shape. in order to aim at a simplified type, as against that used today, syllables that frequently recur, and combined sounds (diphthongs, etc. should be given new letter signs).THE CAPITAL LETTERS OF ANCIENT TIMES ARE HARDLY LEGIBLE WHEN THEY ARE FORMED INTO SENTENCES. THEY CANNOT, THEREFORE, BE TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION. there remains only the small letters of our present-day lower case alphabet. this must be the foundation of our one-letter alphabet. and is not a sentence in a one-letter alphabet, which intrinsically possesses a formally compact construction, more harmonious, logically, than a sentence consisting of two alphabets, which completely differ from each other in shape and size?

First published in PM *4, no. 2 (December–January 1939–1940).*