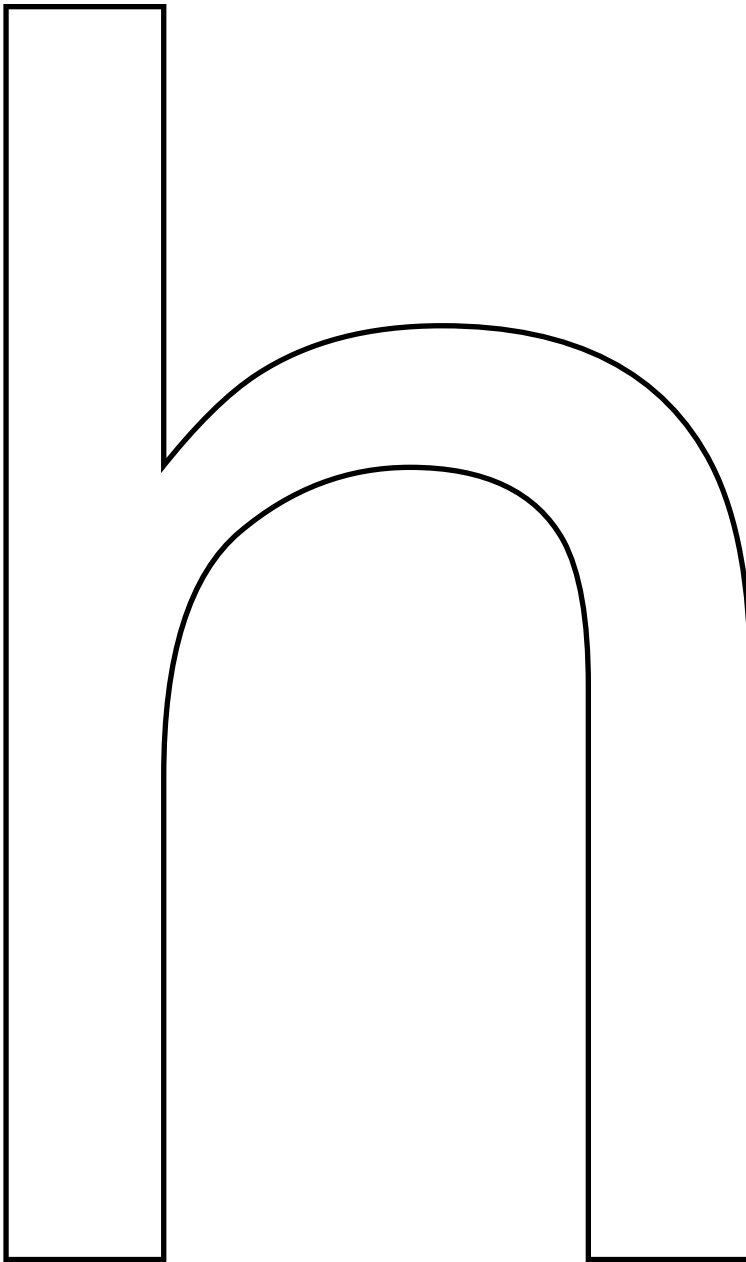
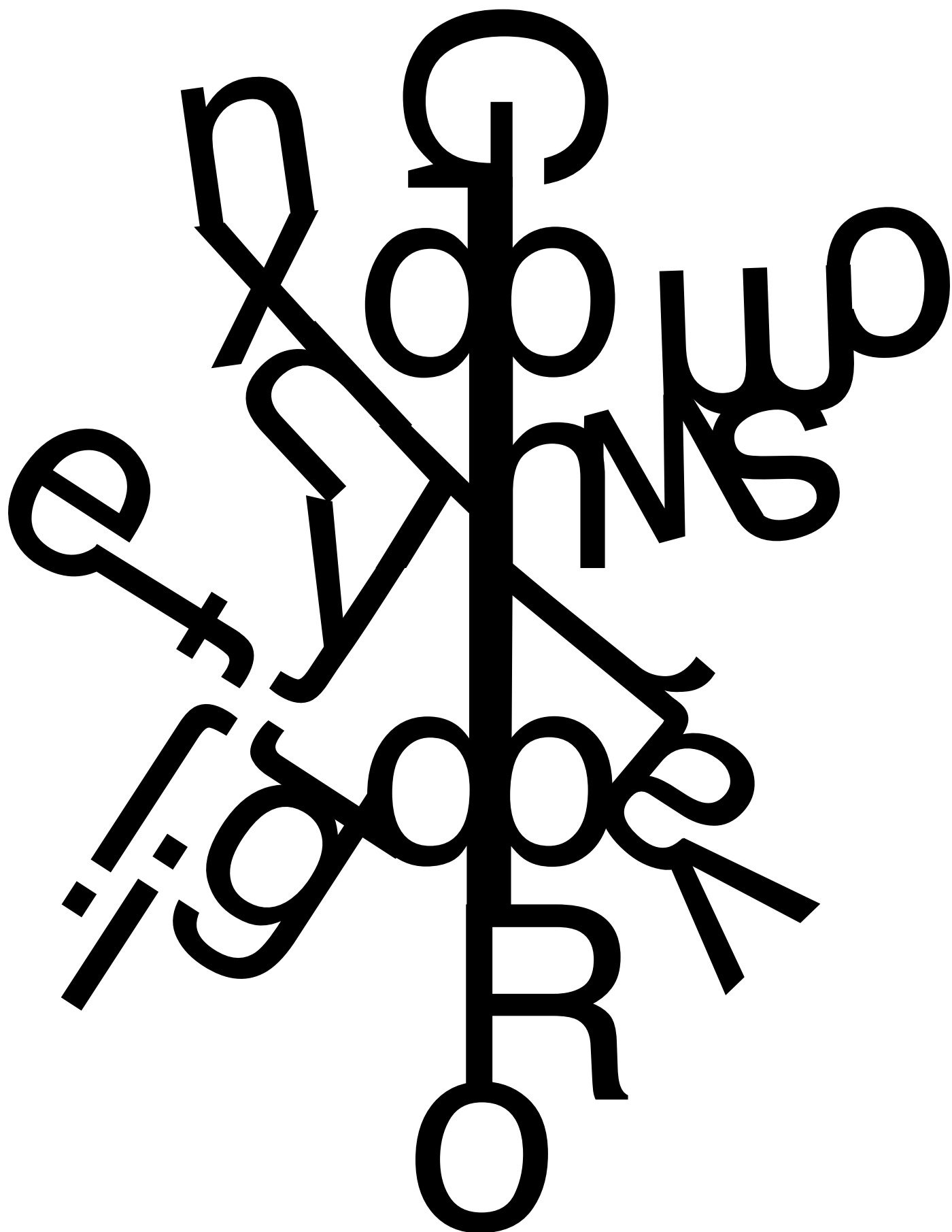


HELEN ANDERSON



Helvetica Park

a typeface landscape designed as if by frederick law olmsted



i n t r o d u c t i o n

Hello. My name is Frederick Law Olmsted, and I have never heard of Helvetica. It is a typeface created some fifty years after my death, and yet there are many things about it that I find compelling. This font embodies some of my most basic design principles. It is simple, almost all distracting features eliminated. It is admirable because it puts utility first and ornament second. The art of Helvetica, just like the art of my landscapes, is to conceal its art.

But Helvetica is not perfect. It is an artifact of civilization and a civilizing artifact. Reading Helvetica may be soothing, but it is not an immersive experience. And so I have embarked on a journey to redesign this medium for transmitting language. My goal has always been to bring together the civilized and the uncivilized. My parks and campuses are the embodiment of this goal: the perfect combination of the wild and the technic. Helvetica is inherently civilized, and so in my new design, I aim to, in certain ways, decivilize it, bringing it back into balance.

What follows is an account of my design process. Helvetica Park may not be quite useful for writing words, but it conveys the ideal psychological experience. Saunter its pathways in your mind and let yourself explore its peaceful mysteries.

evolution **OF A LANDSCAPE**

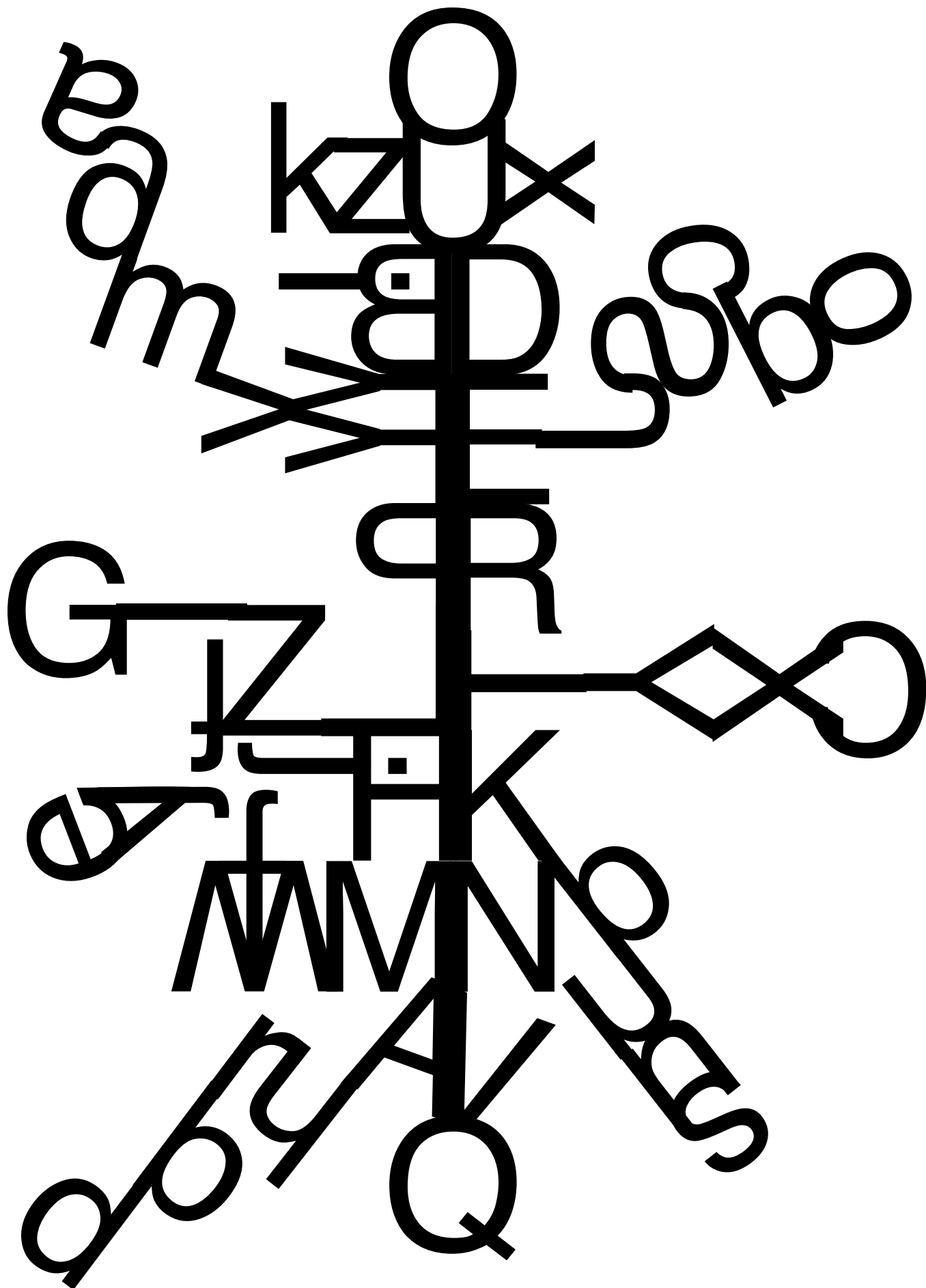
s t a g e o n e

When I worked on Central Park, the most important aspect of its design was “the integrity of the park as a whole.” I remember writing, “The Park throughout is a single work of art, and as such subject to the primary law of every work of art, namely that it shall be framed upon a single, noble motive, to which the design of all the parts, in some more or less subtle way, shall be confluent and helpful” (Barlow 23). Just as we should not think, first and foremost, “of trees, of turf, water, rocks, bridges as things of beauty in themselves,” we should not think of each letter as a thing of beauty or importance in itself, but rather part of a cohesive whole. To stir us from this tired notion of the letters of the alphabet as individuals, my first step in this design was to turn this typeface into a single entity, so that we can see it as a single, beautiful web rather than a set of characters to be pulled apart and rearranged.

a b c d e f g h i j k l m
n o p q r s t u v w x y z
A B C D E F G H I J
K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z

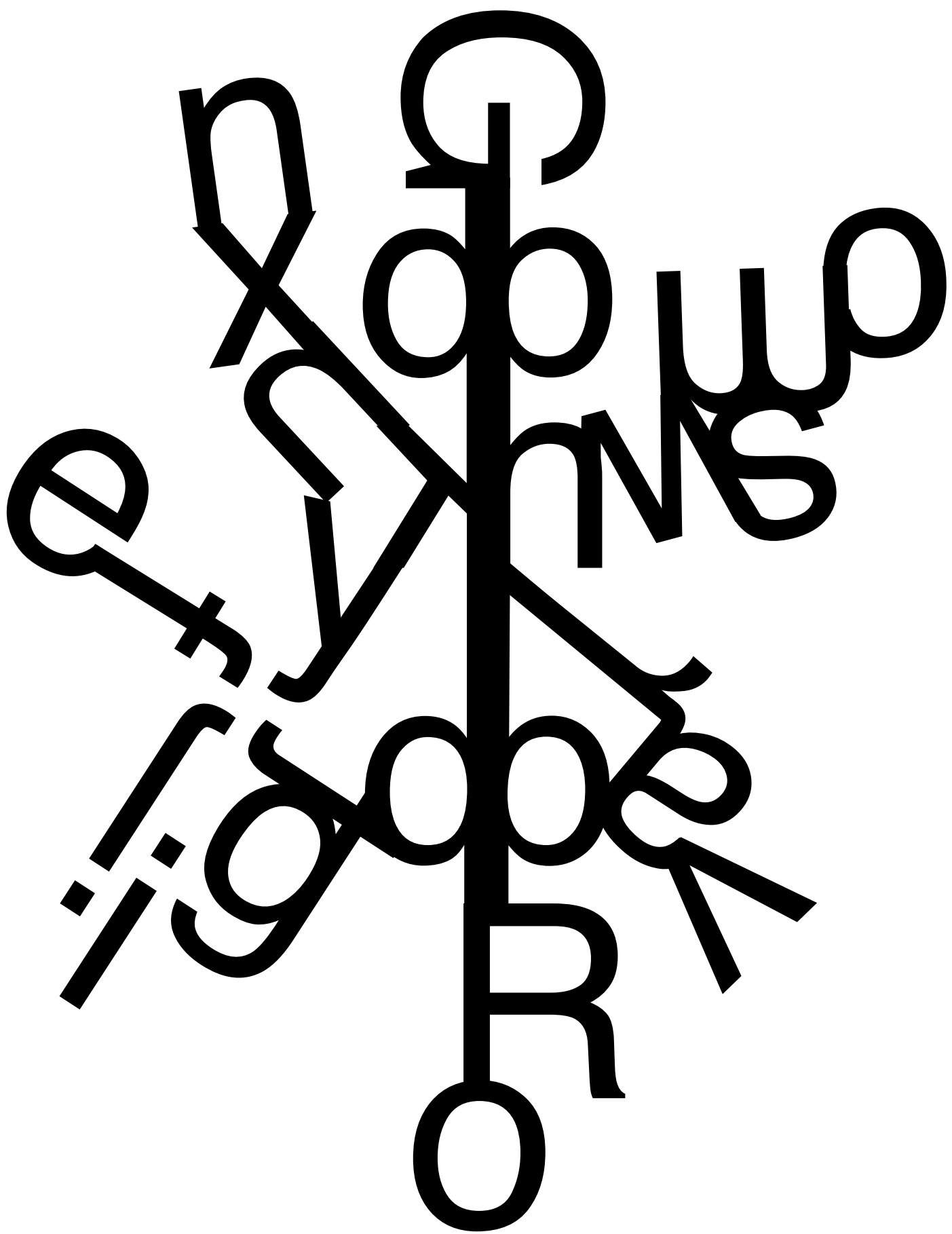
stage two

But when I look at this, I am dissatisfied. These shapes have potential, but they are not arranged correctly. The top left corner contains an excess of loops, while the lines near the bottom are too harsh. I have no qualms about reconfiguring it. The earth is like my clay, and I its sculptor. Though I must be true to the natural character of a place, I am “willing to destroy natural features that were too prominent and interfered with the overall composition and general character of a scene” (Beveridge and Rocheleau 43). For Central Park: “By judiciously clearing away here and planting there, by moving earth to rearrange the land into more pleasing contours, by laying drains and converting swamps into ponds, there would emerge a landscape that was at once naturalistic and picturesque” (Barlow 21). The same is true for my Helvetica. I must rearrange the elements so that they can foster the right balance of sociality and sanctuary (Beveridge and Rocheleau 49). In order to do this, I will use the bold, straight-edged characters to build a central boulevard, a perfect place for congregating and meeting others. But wending away from this central path will be smaller ones, leading to places more isolated and mysterious, for the individual to discover and contemplate.



s t a g e t h r e e

Now, though, this typeface has become so busy and convoluted that I fear I am losing sight of my original goal of simplicity and cohesion. I will eliminate the capital letters because I am told that in the era of new technology, CAPITALS ARE A WAY OF SCREAMING, and I fear that this is much TOO JARRING an effect. The purpose of my landscapes is to create places that will be “to the highest degree tranquilizing” to those who visit them (Kalfus 281). These capital letters are the most extreme, the most civilized, used more to enforce rules and conventions than for meaningful communication. They are like these “attempts to decorate [my] parks with a cake frosting of monumental entrances and archways” (Barlow 8). I made some concessions to the Beaux Arts, because that was the way of the time, but I wanted my parks to seem as natural as possible. (Not all marks of civilization are bad: I will retain G and R because I find their shapes pleasing and their gestures grand.) My final design will retain the structure of the central social boulevard and the more isolated side pathways, but I will cut out extraneous details that distract from the overall form, cutting pieces of the original letters if need be. And with this, I have achieved the typeface I sought to design: a bridge between the social and the solitary, between the familiar and the mysterious, between the civilized and the wild.



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