This Typeface

Is Changing Your Life

The quest for a clean public restroom is usually in vain. We assume a restroom to be dirty and disease-ridden, and settle for what we have to. Occasionally, though, I've found a restroom that, before I'd even entered, I've assumed with relief was not dirty but clean. I realize that it was a restroom sign, with its modern, Teflon-smooth letters spelling "women," that led me to expect a clean toilet. Although it was surely no different from any other toilet, I thought it had to be more sanitary. It was similar to the way an attractively packaged cleansing cream, like Helena Rubinstein's "Deep Cleanser," could convince me that what was inside was the best of all possible creams. It was those same clean, modern letters on the package.

These letters seem to be everywhere. They tell us "This is a dial tone first phone," this box is for "U.S. Mail," and to "Enjoy" Coke, "It's the real thing."

Along with NBC's well-publicized logo change, the lettering used on all NBC-produced programs and printed material is being converted to the exact same style.

This lettering style, or typeface, is graphically renovating or coordinating everything from newspapers (including *The Village Voice* logo) to "new towns" to multinational corporations.

The typeface is called Helvetica. From more than 9000 widely varying typefaces, a few "modern" ones have become designers' favorites.

But Helvetica is by far the most popular and biggest selling typeface in the last 10 years.

It comes in a variety of widths, weights, and spacing arrangements. The basic form is Helvetica Medium, and it seems "most itself" in lowercase letters.

The "signs of the times" can be found on the literal signs of the times. The use of Helvetica on so many of them expresses our need for security, for visual proof—if nothing else—that the world's machinery still runs. Subliminally, the perfect balance of push and pull in Helvetica characters reassures us that the problems threatening to spill over are being contained.

Helvetica was designed by a Swiss, Max Meidenger, and first produced by the Haas Typefoundry in 1957. Haas says it was designed specifically for the Swiss market ("Helvetica" means Swiss), and was intended to be a "perfectly neutral typeface without any overly individual forms and without personal idiosyncrasies."

Helvetica is a "sans serif," as it lacks the little extra strokes, called serifs, at the end of its letters' main strokes. Since serifs lead the eye from one letter to the next, they are supposedly more legible, particularly for small print. But the difference is minimal for most sign size letters, and many designers say they use Helvetica precisely because it's so easy to read. As Ed Benguiat, a leading typeface designer and the art director of Photo Lettering, Inc., says, "You don't read the word, you read power. . . . For that one or two-word display message, for buckeye and force, you use sans serif."

But why is Helvetica the most popular of the sans serifs? "It's beautiful," said Benguiat. "It's a pure letter."

Other designers describe Helvetica as "contemporary," "easy to read," "no-nonsense," "neutral," and even "cold." The first word that comes to their lips, though, is "clean."

It is not surprising, then, that when Walter Kacik redesigned New York City's garbage trucks in 1968 he used Helvetica. The trucks are all white except for one word, which is in black, lowercase Helvetica: "sanitation." Photographs of them were exhibited at the Louvre and at the Museum of Modern Art. Kacik chose Helvetica, he said, "because it was the best of the sans serifs and it didn't detract from the

kind of purity we wanted." The result was that "people trusted these trucks."

Indeed, cleanliness implies trust. We've been brought up to associate the two ("I'm clean, officer.") and their opposites ("You dirty, rotten, two-timing dame!").

Cleaning up images is the main business of some marketing and design firms. Probably the most influential of them is Lippincott and Margulies (L&M). It is not an advertising agency; it bills itself as a "pioneer in the science of corporate identity."

Finding a corporation's identity almost always means redesigning its graphics. (Occasionally a name change itself is in order—L&M gave us such newspeak sounds as Amtrak, Pathmark, Cominco, and Uniroyal.)

In its own brochures (in Helvetica), L&M denies that it offers "face-lifts" or "standardized solutions." It claims to work from the inside out. Considering the expense to its clients ("Coca-Cola spent over a million dollars for the little squiggle," a former L&M executive said), its soundproof-room confidentiality, and its scientific bent, L&M might be regarded as a corporate shrink.

L&M's list of more than 500 identity-seeking clients includes: American Motors, General Motors, Chrysler, Exxon, Amtrak, Chase Manhattan, First National City Corporation, Bowery Savings Bank, Chemical Bank, American Express, U.S. Steel, ITT, the Internal Revenue Service, the New York Stock Exchange, RCA, NBC, MGM, J. C. Penney, Coca-Cola, and Con Ed.

Only a few of these companies, such as Amtrak or Con Ed, use Helvetica for the logo itself—a logo is almost obliged to be unique and most are specially designed. But as a supporting typeface (and, in most cases, *the* supporting typeface) on everything from annual reports to cardboard boxes, nearly every one of the companies listed above uses some form of Helvetica.

For instance, "Coca-Cola" is distinctive, but Helvetica says "It's the real thing." The new American Express logo is specially drawn, but everything else is in Helvetica. (And when non-Roman alphabets like Chinese cannot take direct Helvetica letters, they will be drawn as closely as possible to it.)

L&M vice-president in charge of design, Ray Poelvoorde, said Helvetica "already has sort of become an unofficial standard." Asked if using such a pervasive typeface wouldn't undermine the costly corporate identity, he said, "You're offering a very nice courtesy to the general public who is bombarded with many messages and symbols every day. And for a company not well-known, to ask the public to memorize more symbols . . . is fantasy."

But if he is right, then the companies that are remembered, that are finding their identities, are doing so by looking more and more alike—almost like one big corporation. A unilook for Unicorp.

Some designers do think Helvetica is overused. Some are even bored with it. But few believe that it is a mere fad. Most companies choose Helvetica in the first place because they expect it to remain contemporary for quite a while. And most companies cannot afford more than one identity change. This is especially true for New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Since 1967, the MTA has been gradually standardizing its graphics from about a dozen typefaces to a combination of Helvetica and Standard Medium. (The two are almost identical, but the latter was more available to the MTA.)

In contrast to the subway's filth and potential for violence, the cleanly and crisply lettered signs lend a sense of authority. They assure us that the train will come and diminish the chaos created by the graffiti-scrawled walls. (It's no accident that the designer of Norman Mailer's "The Faith of Graffiti" branded the book's covers with Helvetica.) The subway-sign renovation alone, less than a quarter complete, is conservatively estimated to cost from $500,000 to a million dollars.

This MTA graphic system was originated by Massimo Vignelli, who founded, and has since left, an appropriately named design firm, Unimark International, with Walter Kacik, the man who revamped the garbage trucks. Vignelli created Bloomingdale's logo and, more recently, the graphics, in Helvetica, for the Washington, D.C., Metro, still under construction. He thinks Helvetica is not merely a fad but that it can be used faddishly. "As good as it is when used properly, it

becomes very bad looking when used badly," as, he suggested, in a wedding invitation.

What is its proper usage? "All kinds of signage are fine." In fact, a system of "symbol signs," with supporting Helvetica letters, intended to replace the numerous sign systems around the world, has been devised by Vignelli and other leading designers. (The design committee is headed by Thomas Geismar, whose firm, Chermayeff & Geismar, is L&M's chief competitor for the corporate identity market.)

Symbol signs are simple silhouetted pictures that act as signs: a knife and fork will mean restaurant; a question mark, an information booth. The symbols are scheduled to be tested at various terminals in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, Virginia, and the state of Florida this summer. Helvetica is already used at airports such as Seattle, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Kennedy, but the symbol system might usher it into other transportation facilities.

The symbols will often need lettered support, but, in deference to varying cultural styles, the system's guideline manual does not recommend any one typeface. When other cultures shop around for a typeface, however, they will probably be influenced by the example used throughout the manual itself, one deemed "legible, aesthetic, and compatible" with the symbols: Helvetica.

The U.S. Department of Transportation, which commissioned the system, will ask other federal agencies and state governments to adopt it. Then, in order to become an official standard, the symbols will be submitted to two standardization organizations (the American National Standards Institute and the International Organization for Standardization), which certify and promote standards in everything from abbreviations to industrial parts. Helvetica, riding the back of a symbol, might pass through a well-guarded standards stronghold.

Meanwhile, it already headlines all publications of the Departments of Labor and Agriculture. It's also the only standard style for the U.S. Post Office. With an eagle it appears on the new mailbox stickers saying "U.S. Mail" and "Air Mail."

Governments and corporations rely on Helvetica partly because it makes them appear neutral and efficient, partly because its smoothness makes them seem human.

This chic, friendly aspect of the typeface bothers one designer. James Wines, co-director of SITE (Sculpture in the Environment) and a Pulitzer Prize winner for graphics (the category has since been discontinued), said about Helvetica, "It represents an update authority. Not old government, but new government." He goes further: "Helvetica is part of a psychological enslavement. It's a subconscious plot: getting people to do, think, say what you want them to. . . . It *assumes* you accept some system. It means it's predetermined that you're on their route, that it's not casually happening to you."

Helvetica signs ease us not only through building corridors, but through mental corridors. Ready for any mistaken move in a modern maze, a sign greets us at the point of decision, a mental bell rings in recognition, and down we go through the right chute! A slick-looking sign lubricates our grooves of thought and taste, making the product whose name it bears easier to accept. After transforming ugly garbage trucks into slick sanitation vehicles, Walter Kacik should know when he says, "Helvetica enhances things that normally wouldn't work."

It serves to tone down potentially offensive messages: "Littering is filthy and selfish so don't do it!" And Lenny Bruce's autobiography is packaged in Helvetica.

Helvetica skims across all categories of products and places to stamp them "sanitized," "neutralized," and "authorized." Cleanly trimmed of all excess until only an instant modern classic remains, its labels seem to say, "To look further is in vain." As Vignelli said, "What you see is different from what you perceive. You see Helvetica and you perceive order." With more unusual lettering, "you perceive fantasy."

Fantasy and a well-ordered society have always been at odds. And, as James Wines says, by designing fantasy out of our society, we are headed in a dangerous direction. "Our world is a designed extension of service," he said. "Other worlds are an aesthetic extension of spirit."

The writing's on the wall.

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