

## **Wolfgang Homola: Designing a typeface for a signage system: a case study**

This paper presents a typeface designed for a signage and wayfinding system. It explains why it was deemed necessary to design this typeface, and it points out some of the considerations that informed the design of the signage system and of the typeface used in the signage system.

Designers rarely have the opportunity to work on a signage and wayfinding system at the same time as architects are developing their own ideas about the interior design of a building – often by the time designers are called in it is already too late to make the signage system an integral part of the whole design. But due to the foresighted thinking of its client, the Vienna-based design studio *Bohatsch und Partner* found almost ideal conditions when they were commissioned to design the signage system for the AK.

### **The client, the brief and the requirements of the signage system:**

The AK, as *Arbeiterkammer* is often abbreviated (its English translation being *Chamber of Labour*), is an institution that represents the interests of around three million workers and employees in Austria. The AK gives free legal advice to workers and employees when they are facing problems with their employers and on unemployment insurance and social security. In some instances, for example in legal cases that might set a precedent for workers' rights, the AK supplies advocates for free representation in court. Moreover, the AK works closely together with trade unions, and it acts as a think-tank for pro-labour economic politics. The AK also is engaged in the protection of consumers and in activities promoting gender equality.

The building of the AK in Vienna (Figure 1) was built in the style of 1950ies modernism, and this does not really come as a surprise, because historically, during the first half of the 20th century in Europe, there was a quite close relation between modernist design and architecture on one hand and left-wing politics on the other. The AK, being rooted in the Labour movement, is quite aware of this connection and heritage, so when it became necessary to renovate and expand the building, the architects had to work quite carefully to both preserve the original character of the building and to meet the requirements of the present users of the building.

Similar care had to be taken when it came to the design of the signage and wayfinding system. The Vienna-based design studio *Bohatsch und Partner* was entrusted with this

project after winning an invited competition. My role in his project was a double one: I was part of the design team that worked on the design of the signage system (the art director for this project was Walter Bohatsch, the design team comprised Andreas Soller, Julia Krauth and myself), and I also designed the typeface that was used in this signage system – so, this project allowed me to switch between the role of the user of a typeface and the role of the designer of a typeface.

There were two main requirements that the design of the signage system had to meet: First, we had to find a way to make sure that the signage system would be in line with the original character of the building; to be more specific, there were original cast metal letters from the 1950ies in the staircase (Figure 2) which the AK wanted to preserve. So, the challenge was to make sure that these metal letters would fit together with the typeface used in the signage system. Secondly, we had to find a way to efficiently guide the different user groups that are visiting the building. To sum it up, there were specific aesthetic requirements that were based in the values and the history of the AK as an organisation that represents workers and their rights, and there were functional requirements present in any wayfinding system (but always with different results, as every building has its own structure and different user groups).

### **Type design process:**

After a few tests (comparing these metal letters with a few test words set in existing typefaces) it soon became clear to us that the only way to ensure that the typeface for the signage system would go together with the lettering of in the staircase was to design a new typeface, especially for this signage system. Since I had some experience in designing typefaces – thus I was quite happy to take on this task to design this typeface.

The first step was to scan in all the cast metal letters used throughout the whole building. These letters were grouped, according to size and formal attributes. It turned out that some cast metal letters were added on later (because these letters had a different design), so these had to be discarded. The selection of the remaining ones served as a model for the design of the upper case, even if some letters were missing and some interpretation was necessary (Figure 3).

For the lower case letters, however, I had to start from scratch. To ensure consistency throughout the entire typeface, the design of the lower case letters follows the same geometric style present in the upper case (figure 4) – but in order to make the typeface look as if it was based entirely on geometric forms, some optical corrections were of course necessary.

Type design is about balancing shapes and counter-shapes. In a design concept in which utmost reduction to essential shapes is paramount, rhythm is indeed crucial. By designing a system of letter shapes that are interrelated and by carefully balancing the white space within the letters with the white space between the letters, it is possible to create a lively texture, even for the rather limited and rigid concept of geometric sans serif typefaces.

In order to make the typeface look fresher and more contemporary than most of the traditional geometric sans-serif-typefaces, there are corners at the junction where the curve hits the vertical stem. As a result of this, the counters (e.g. in *b*, *d*, *p* and *q*) are asymmetrical and therefore more dynamic (figure 5). The typeface also has a rather large x-height, so it is still legible at small sizes or from a big distance.

### **The signage system:**

There are three different user groups that visit the building. The first group – the vast majority of people coming into this building – consists of workers and employees who are seeking consultation. Usually, more than 60,000 people seek legal advice at the AK every year. The second group is visitors of the library of the AK (*AK Bibliothek*), and the third group is visitors who already have an appointment – these visitors need to get their swipe card at the porter's lodge in order to get access to the floors. In the site plan on the ground floor, the respective areas for these three user groups are marked in different colours: those areas accessible without any restrictions are in colours (yellow is for the workers seeking consultation and red is for the users of the library), whereas those areas requiring a swipe card are kept in grey. Access ways are highlighted (figure 6).

The workers and employees who are seeking consultation need to go to the reception desk in the main hall in order to register. There they will be asked to wait in one of the three areas marked with A, B and C until they are called in for individual consultation. Glass panels, hanging from the ceiling, carry three-dimensional letters, making these three areas are easy to find (figure 7). An arrow on these glass panels points directly into the corridor that leads into the offices where the consultations are taking place. Since the workers and employees are often under serious pressure (probably they just lost their jobs, or they haven't been paid for a while or the company they used to work for just went bankrupt), a simple no-nonsense approach to the design of the glass panels seemed appropriate. In the back of the main hall, a bright red wall indicates the way to the library (*Bibliothek*). The AK library specialises in social and economic sciences, in politics, history and philosophy, with a special focus on feminism and worker's movement.

From the first to the sixth floor, the signage system for the visitors who have an appointment is basically the same. A main direction sign is suspended from the ceiling; perpendicular to it, you can find on the wall a secondary direction sign featuring a site plan (figure 8). From there, the visitors are guided along long corridors that extend to the left and to the right.

The letters were laser-cut from foil and then mounted on the carrier material. Blued steel was used as carrier material for the direction signs in the respective floors and for the site plan in the entrance hall. The mounting system lends a light and free-floating impression to the (actually quite heavy) steel panels. The typeface was used throughout the whole building. It was also used to number the parking-slots in the basement of the building. In this case, it was painted directly on asphalt, using templates.

### **Soleil, a sans-serif typeface family**

Even after the design of the signage system was completed, work on the typeface continued. Since the typeface worked quite well also in body text – as I was surprised to see when checking test printouts during the type design process – I expanded the typeface into a family with six weights. It was released by TypeTogether about a year ago (figure 9). The typeface, entitled *Soleil*, has since then already been used in book design and corporate design projects.

### **Acknowledgement:**

Original architecture of the building (1957 – 1960): Franz Mörth, Heinrich Vana, Alexis Franken; renovation and expansion of the building: NMPB Architects; signage system: Bohatsch und Partner (art direction: Walter Bohatsch; design: Walter Bohatsch, Wolfgang Homola, Julia Krauth, Andreas Soller); typeface design: Wolfgang Homola; photography: Andreas Soller, Franz Ebner, Wolfgang Homola

### **References:**

Wolfgang Homola: 'A new typeface for a new signage system', in: *TYPO. Typography, Graphic Design, Visual Communication*, No 41, 2010, pp 52–57 [www.typo.cz/en]

Online sources:

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbeiterkammer>

<http://www.arbeiterkammer.at/online/the-chamber-of-labour-6183.html#E239772>

<http://bohatschundpartner.at/>



Figure 1: The building of the AK (*Arbeiterkammer*) in Vienna, Austria (photo: Franz Ebner)



Figure 2: Original cast metal letters from the 1950ies in the staircase (photo: Andreas Soller)



Figure 3: Original cast metal letters (left) as models for the design of the upper case (right)



Figure 4: Drawings for the lower case (photo: Wolfgang Homola)



Figure 5: Asymmetrical counters (in *b*, *d*, *p* and *q*)





Figure 6: A detail of the site plan in the entrance hall (photo: Andreas Soller)



Figure 7: The main hall, with glass panels hanging from the ceiling (photo: Franz Ebner)



Figure 8: Secondary direction sign featuring a site plan (photo: Franz Ebner)

**Soleil** ☼ ☼ ☼ ☼

## Hamburgefonts

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzß 0123456789

• Light • Regular • Book • **Semi Bold** • **Bold** • **Extra Bold** •

The quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog. Yo, Juan Gallo de Andrada, escribano de Cámara del Rey nuestro señor, de los que residen en su Consejo, certifico y doy fe que, habiendo visto por los señores dél un libro intitulado El ingenioso hidalgo de la Mancha, compuesto

Figure 9: *Soleil*, a geometric typeface family