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Exploring interpretation as a creative strategy within type design

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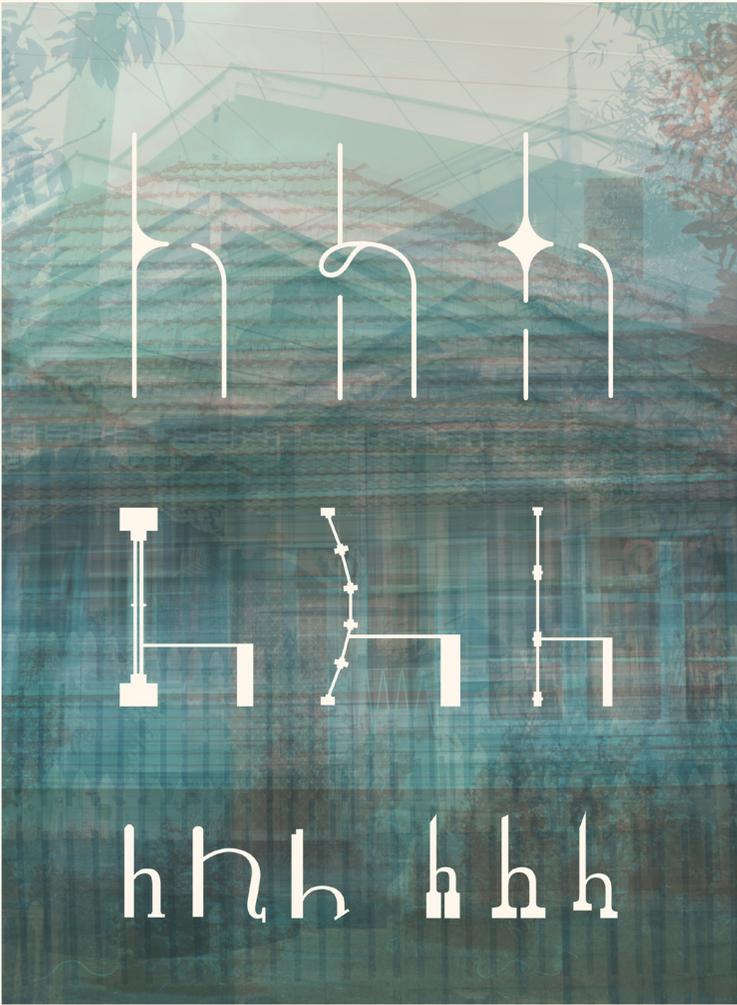
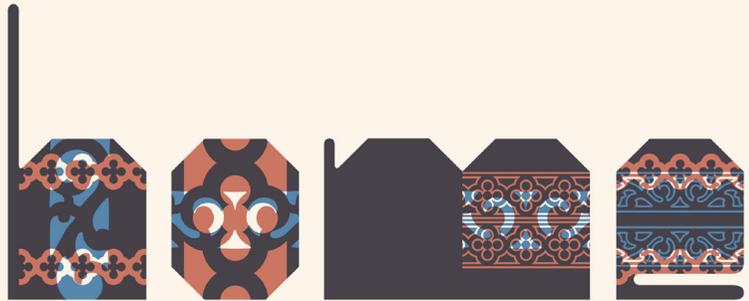
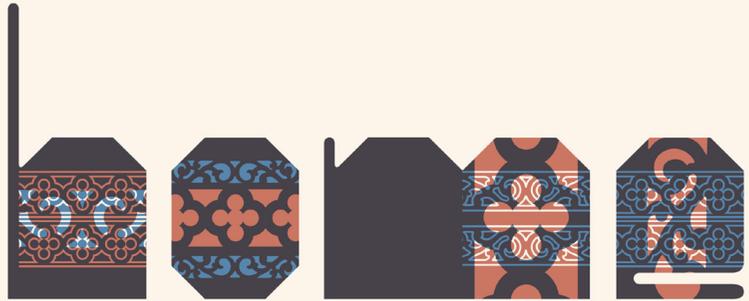
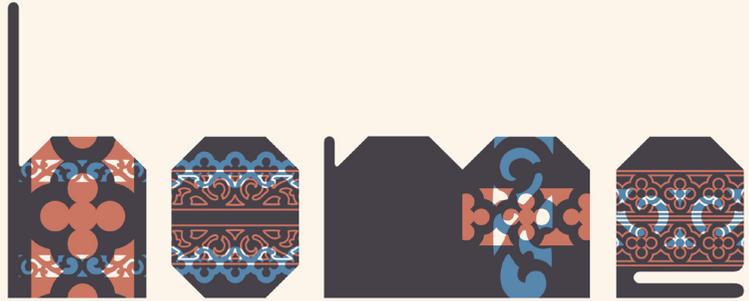
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Abstract: This paper describes an investigation into interpretation as an alternative approach for developing type design concepts. My practice-based project explored different interpretive strategies, with the intention of identifying a framework to provide structure to the initial stages of type design. It also aimed to create a set of interpretive type design processes that were generative and flexible.

The key interpretive strategy I drew on was conceptual metaphor theory. Metaphors can aid understanding by structuring a complex process in terms of a simpler, often physical or spatial, experience. I used two metaphors for linguistic translation to reframe and develop two interpretive type design processes, called Neighbourhood (transfer) and Build (assimilation). I used these to translate aspects of selected New Zealand suburban architecture (single-bay villa, Californian bungalow and state house) into letterforms. The outcomes were communicated through two sets of artefacts, including process publications, prototypefaces and design guidelines. The processes were then extended into an introductory type design assignment for undergraduate students.

This paper reflects on whether interpretive processes can expand existing idea generation options for type designers and act as a learning tool. It also highlights the potential of conceptual metaphor theory as a framework for reviewing and developing design processes.

Keywords: Type design; Creative strategy; Interpretation; Translation; Conceptual metaphor theory; Graphic design education.





Research aims & context

Every designer about to create a typeface has to start somewhere. Karen Cheng (2005, p. 8) suggests that, “In some ways, the most difficult part of the design process is finding the initial inspiration to make a font. The vast number of existing typefaces (last estimated at 50-60,000 in 1996) can be intimidating, especially for the novice designer.” Traditionally designers draw inspiration from historical type reference, technical developments or commercial requirements. This project explores an alternative approach, where interpretation is the generative source for typeface concepts and designs.

There is no industry standard or ‘ideal’ process for creating a typeface so designers develop their own individual strategies. The early stages of the creative process in type design are not well documented or analysed. Numerous resources discuss letterform details and provide technical instructions for font production. There are also case studies outlining the design process used to create a particular typeface. These can offer insight into a designer’s creative strategy, but since it’s often quite intuitive it can be difficult for other designers to access or adapt. Overall there seemed to be a lack of coherent strategies to assist designers through the process of identifying a source of inspiration and manifesting it into type design.

One resource that does provide a clear framework and guidelines is *Typecooker*, by Erik van Blokland (2004-12). It uses the creative strategy of setting restrictions for the designer to work within. It generates type-drawing exercises based on specific parameters for selected aspects of type, such as contrast amount and stroke ending. The designer is given unusual combinations of these criteria that can act as inspiration for type concepts. *Typecooker* demonstrates the potential of restriction as a creative strategy, while this project aims to explore the possibilities of interpretation.

I chose to explore interpretation for several reasons. Charles L. Owen (2010, p. 3) suggests that, “Simply asking the question, ‘How could these components work together?’ is often enough to open highly productive trains of thought to be able to contemplate completely new vistas”. My research aimed to investigate the generative energy found in the movement between two fields. I hoped that asking ‘what if this becomes that?’ could prove to be a productive strategy within type design. I also wanted to develop a previous research interest in the relationship between type and place. Jonathan Barnbrook (2014) says starting a typeface comes through “observing the world and trying to put a bit of that world into my work”. I wanted to try to formalise interpretation and processes to interpret the material world into type.

I found several contemporary type designs that appeared to use interpretation as a generative strategy. Some designers found letterforms within existing objects and built typefaces, like Paul Elliman's *Bits Alfabet*¹. Others used images of objects to create the letters, as shown by Monique Goosens' *Hair Type*². These methods created engaging results but I decided to explore options outside of found forms and pictorial type. I was initially concerned with developing processes that produced typefaces with a more abstract connection to their source material. As the project developed I was also intrigued by examples of more complex processes. PLMD studio tracked the driving of a new Toyota car and adapted its movement into letterforms for their *iQ font*³. The *Typeface*⁴ interface by Mary Huang attempted to map elements of the human face in real time, with the letterform features changing in response to facial expressions. *Matryoshka*⁵ by Peter Brugger interpreted Russian wooden dolls by offering a range of weights that allow the user to nest versions of the same letter within itself. These examples seemed to show potential for interpreting diverse aspects of the source material; like action, motion or experience.

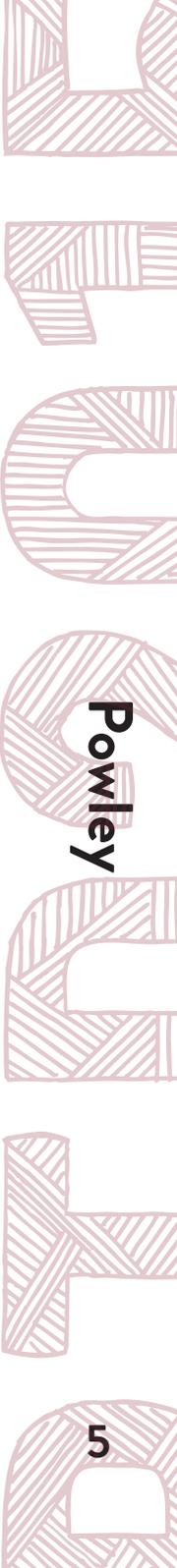
Overall, interpretation as a creative strategy seemed worthy of investigation. Neidderer (2007) says, "The creative use of research for developing a new reality is quite unlike the understanding of traditional (scientific) research in that it investigates what could be rather than what is" (pp. 8). This project explores "what could be" through developing an

alternative approach to designing type. It hoped to identify a coherent framework for understanding interpretation within type design and to produce clear and engaging interpretive type design processes.

Research process

I began by choosing architecture as my source material for interpretation into type. Jonathan Barnbrook (2014) said some of his motivation for creating type came from, "wanting to directly express my own environment ... to get back to the idea of what was unique about where I came from." I decided to translate three New Zealand suburban houses (single-bay villa, Californian bungalow and state house) as they were the dominant domestic houses found in Auckland's suburbs before 1970. They also each represent a shift in New Zealand's societal values, influences and lifestyles.

This project went through four research phases, each of which explored a particular interpretive strategy and produced a range of interpretive type design processes and prototypefaces. Schön (1983, p. 63) says that when a designer cannot convert a difficult situation into a manageable problem, "he may construct a new way of setting the problem – a new frame which, in what I shall call a 'frame experiment,' he tries to impose on the situation". Each of my four phases can be viewed as one of these "frame-testing" experiments. In each phase I was trying to extend the notion of



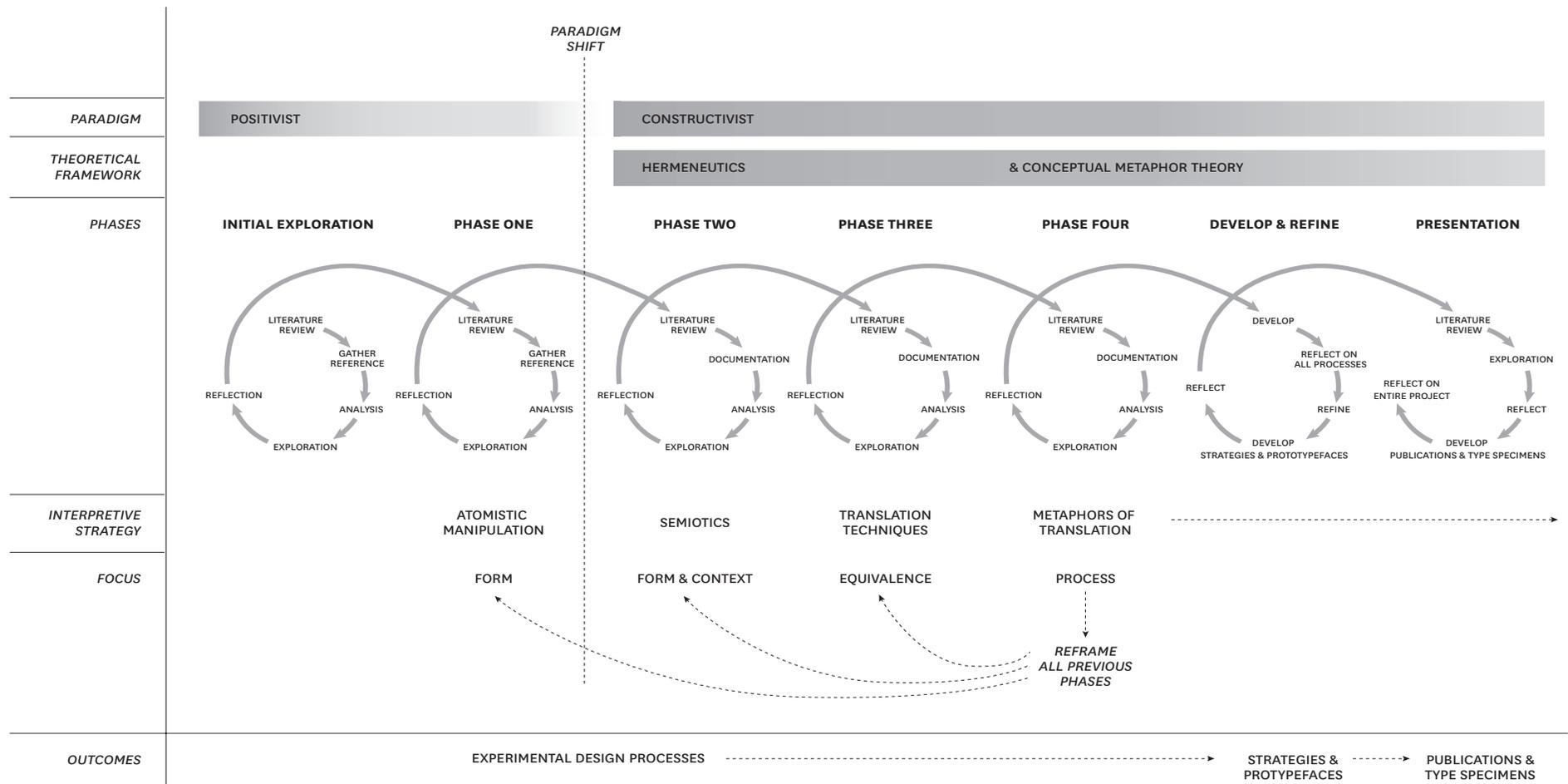


Figure 1. Diagram of all research phases.



what interpretation could be in a type design context. I worked through a set of defined research methods and actively explored ideas through design. At the end of each phase I reflected on the relative success of the interpretive strategy and determined a set of questions for the next phase.

Phase 1: Atomistic manipulation

I started my project with assumptions around the value of a positivist paradigm for research. This guided my intention of finding a single, logical process for translating architectural form into type.

Through my design experiments I realised Architecture: Form, Space, & Order (Ching 1975/2007) had potential as an analytical framework. Several of the reviewed formal elements could act as an analysis point for the comparative analysis of key forms across the three different buildings. The graphic forms this generated could then inspire letterform elements.

On reflection this process seemed limited in its exploration of interpretation. It was mechanical in structure and I struggled to create a satisfactory outcome when the options felt exponential. So I decided that, rather than develop a single process based on the manipulation of elemental forms, I would open up the research inquiry to explore a range of interpretive strategies for translating architecture into type.

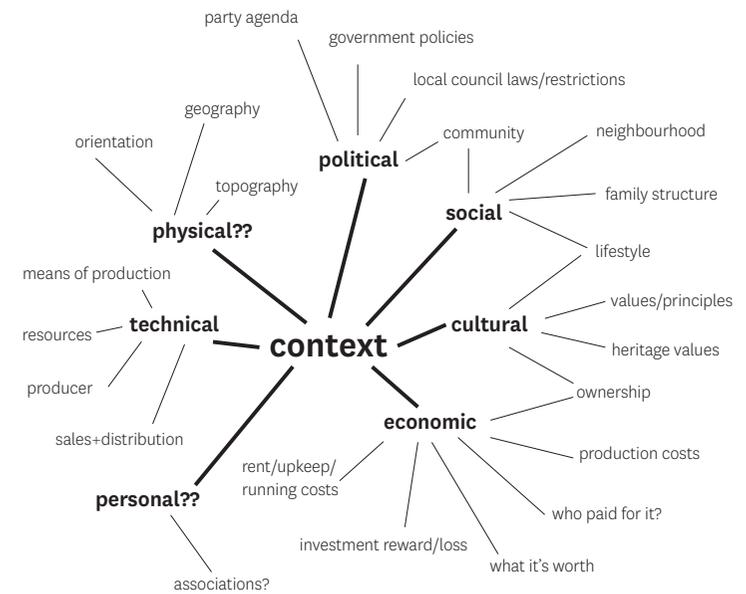
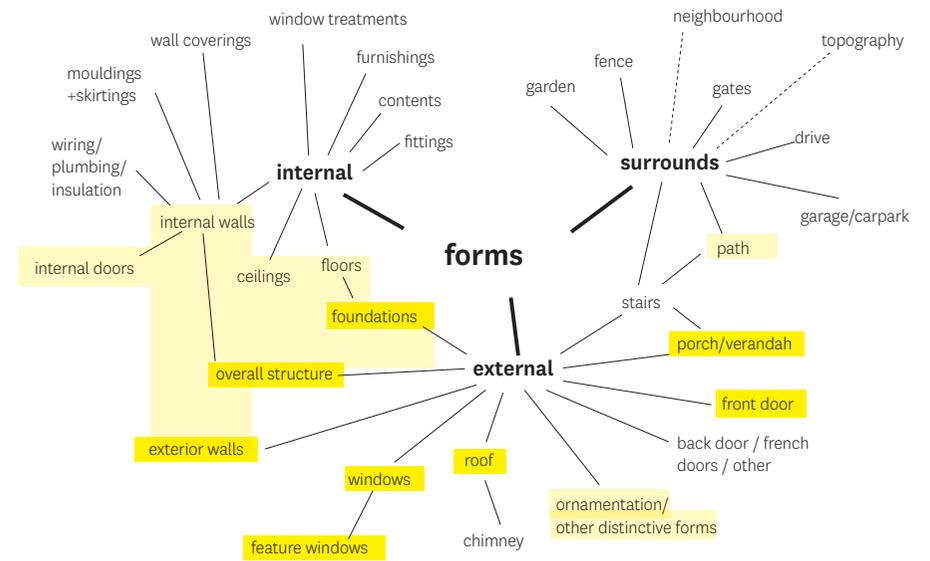


Figure 5. Diagrams mapping formal and contextual elements.

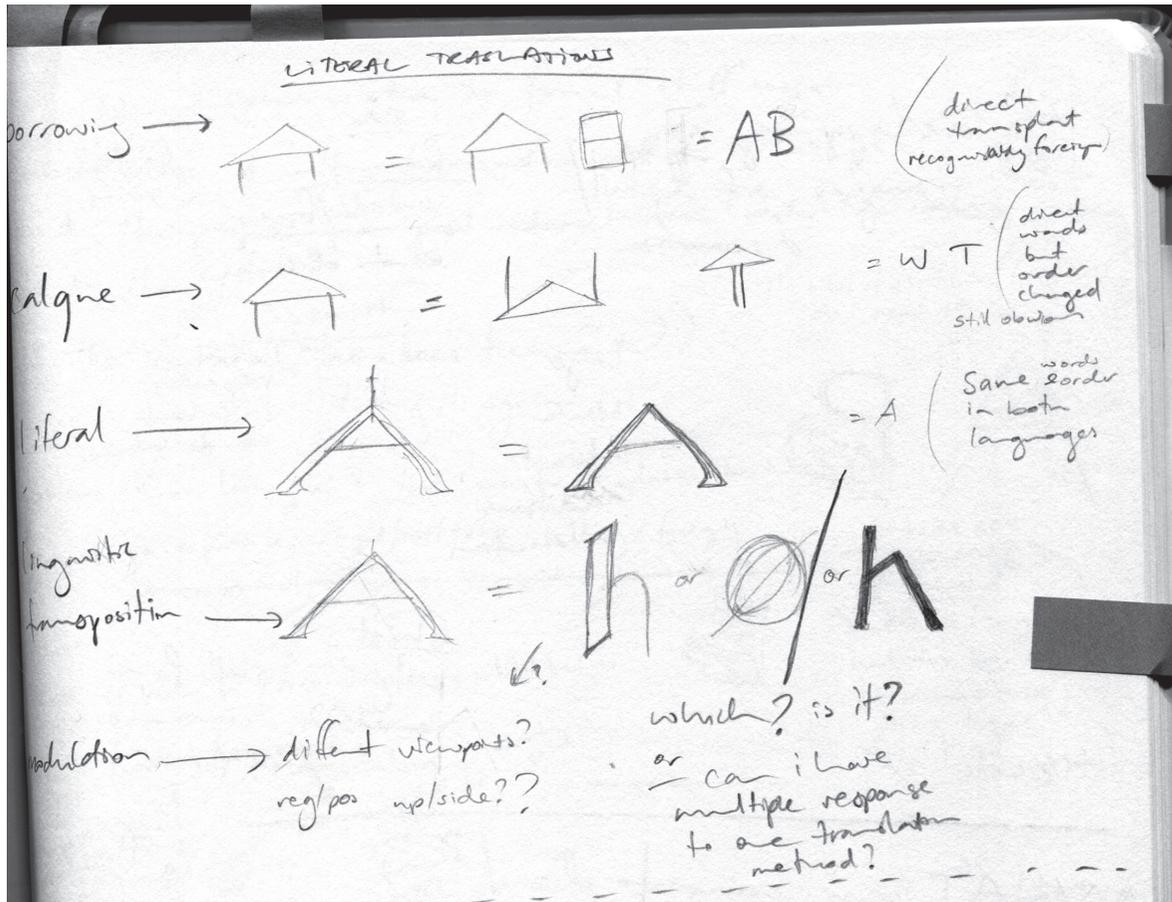


Figure 6. Experimentation referring to: borrowing, calque, literal transposition, linguistic transposition, modulation, pragmatic translation, adaptation or cultural transposition (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958/1995 cited Hatim and Munday 2004).

Phase 2: Semiotics

I started searching for another interpretive strategy, one that could offer a range of ways to understand, and therefore interpret, architecture. I explored semiotics, in particular Pierce's (1868) On a new list of categories. I was pleased that this second phase of research produced a second experimental design strategy that extended my research beyond being positivist and mechanical. However, I was worried about the theoretical basis of my two processes. I started out inspired by the three

layers of Pierce's categories but had ended up with a clear form/context dichotomy. In practice, I found it hard to separate context from form and struggled to transfer any sense of meaning or experience without an associated transfer of form. I started to question the dichotomy and wondered if another framework could support multiple interpretive pathways. I reconsidered my intentions and realised that I had been focussing on how to analyse the architecture, but I wondered what would happen if I looked at the translation process itself?

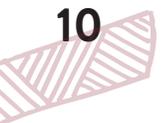
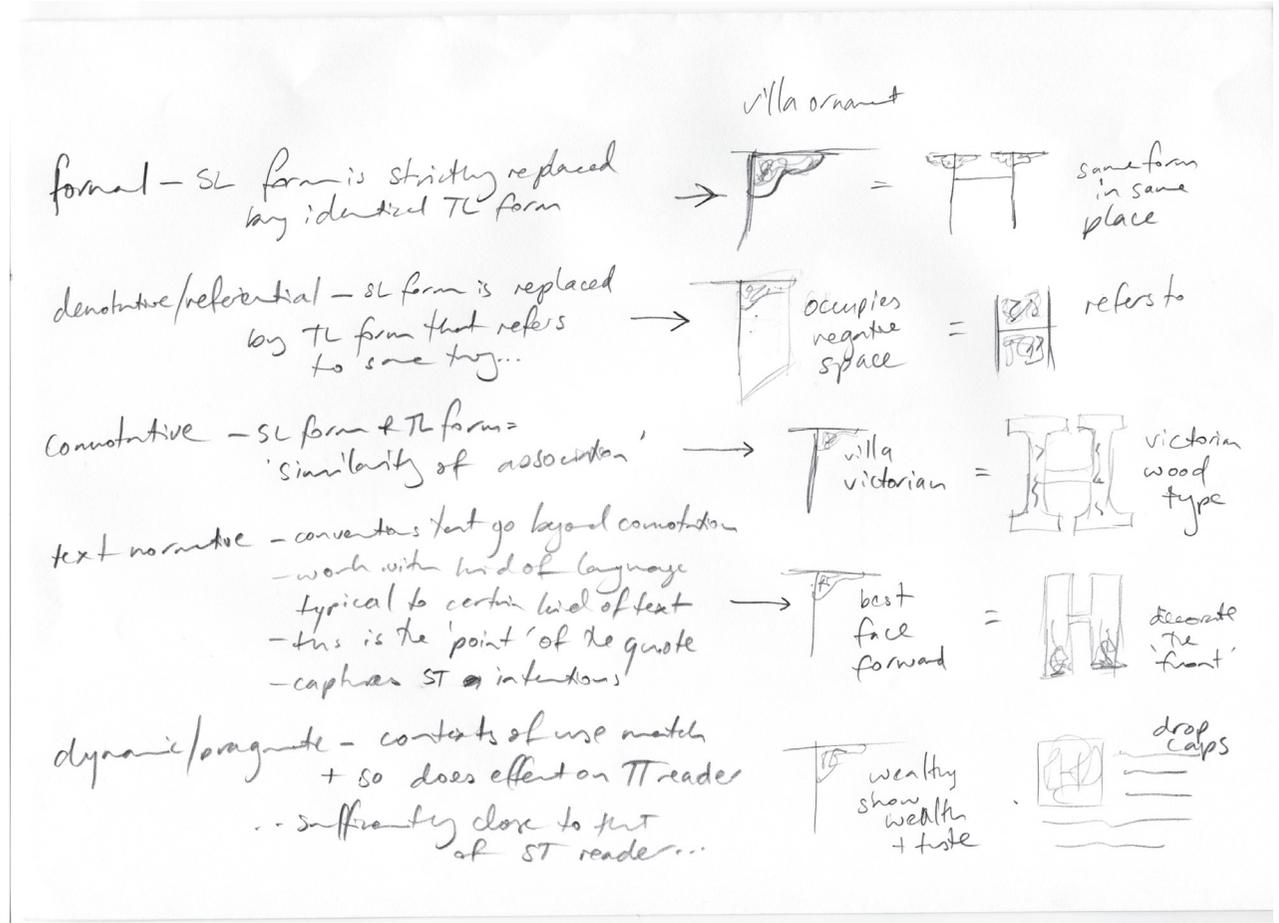


Figure 7. Experimentation referring to: formal, denotative/referential, connotative, text-normative and dynamic/pragmatic equivalences (Kollers 1979, 1976/89 cited Munday 2001)



Phase 3: Translation techniques

In this phase I explored whether translation studies could offer structures or strategies that could be adapted into interpreting architecture into type. I read texts that dealt with the translation processes, rather than practical guides on specific languages. Two stood out from the literature review. The seven methods of translation, developed by Vinay and Darbelnet

(1958/1995 cited Hatim and Munday 2004) reviewed techniques to apply when working on a difficult translation. The second set was Koller's (1979, 1976/89 cited Munday 2001) five frameworks of equivalence.

Overall, I found the specific translation techniques too linguistically focussed to be transferable to design. The experiments in this phase

were not productive so I decided to move my attention up from practical techniques to more theoretical concerns.

Phase 4: Metaphors of translation

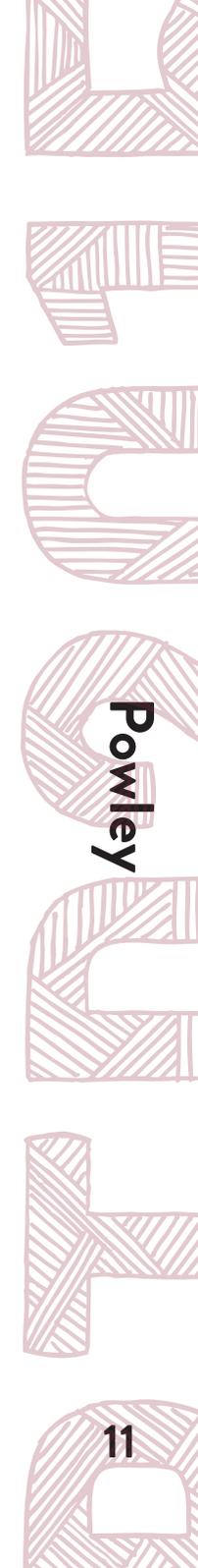
I began looking for a translation-related theory that could act as a

Metaphorical mapping	Model of communication	Relation between ST and TT	Translators' tendencies
TRANSFER	Coding - decoding	Partial identity	Search for semantic equivalents Disregard of pragmatic elements Focus on micro-strategies
FOOTSTEPS	Inference	Similarity	Imitation of the ST as macrostrategy Avoidance of changes
ACTION	Inference	Depends on goal	Elaboration of macrostrategies Account of pragmatic aspects Adaptation to target audience
ASSIMILATION REINCARNATION	Inference/ empathy	Difference	Changes with respect to ST Adaptation to target audience
PROJECTION	Inference/ empathy	Depends on view hypothesized	Attention to different points of view

Figure 8. Summary of hypotheses (Martín de León 2010, p. 104) ST = source text / TT = target text.

framework for multiple interpretive processes. Metaphorical Models of Translation (Martín de León 2010), provides an overview of several frequently applied metaphors of translation. The description of these conceptual metaphors and “their implicit assumptions about communication and translation” (Martín de León 2010, p. 82) form the basis of the author’s hypotheses about how each metaphor might influence the translator’s process and outcomes. The metaphors mainly used physical actions as a reference for understanding the complex process of translating. Since they were discussing the process at a metaphorical level I could instantly see how to adapt them to a design situation.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 124) suggest that, “Metaphorical definitions can give us a handle on things and experiences we had already categorized, or they may lead us to a recategorization”. The idea that the metaphorical concepts someone brings to the translation process can affect how they went about doing that translation transformed my understanding of my previous research. I became aware of the preconceptions influencing my choice of interpretive strategies and guiding my design translations.



This new theoretical framework allowed me to completely re-frame my previous exploration and reconcile my different type design processes.

Research artefacts

Once I had identified metaphors of translation as my final interpretive strategy, I selected the ‘transfer’ and ‘assimilation’ metaphors as the focus for two interpretive type design processes. The final phase of the project worked through a full-scale test of each process.

Neighbourhood (transfer)

The *Neighbourhood* process works within a transfer metaphor where a form is broken down into basic elements that are then moved across and recoded into the new form. “The transfer metaphor can be described as a mapping from the domain of movement onto the domain of translation, according to which to translate is to carry objects from one place to another” (Martín de León 2010, p. 82).

I have used *Neighbourhood* to create four prototypefaces, each with three ‘weights’ based on my three different kinds of house. The process started by selecting a combination of architectural features that were decoded through comparative analysis, using the same set of architectural analysis points. The extracted elements were then transferred and recoded the same way into letterform components. Therefore the Villa, Bungalow



Figure 9. *Neighbourhood*: prototypeface poster.

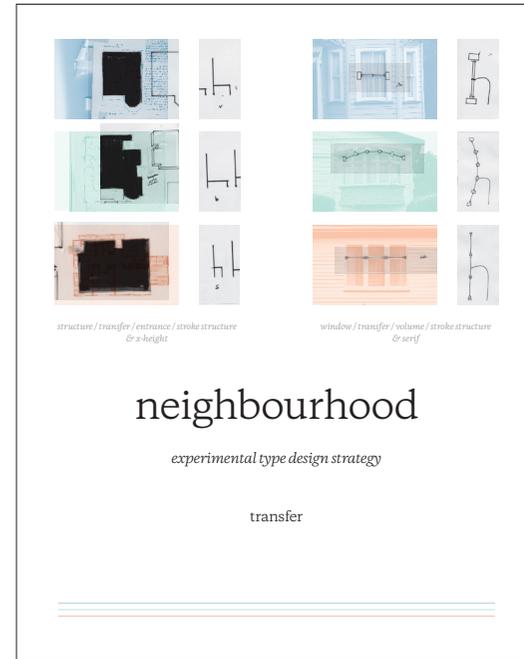
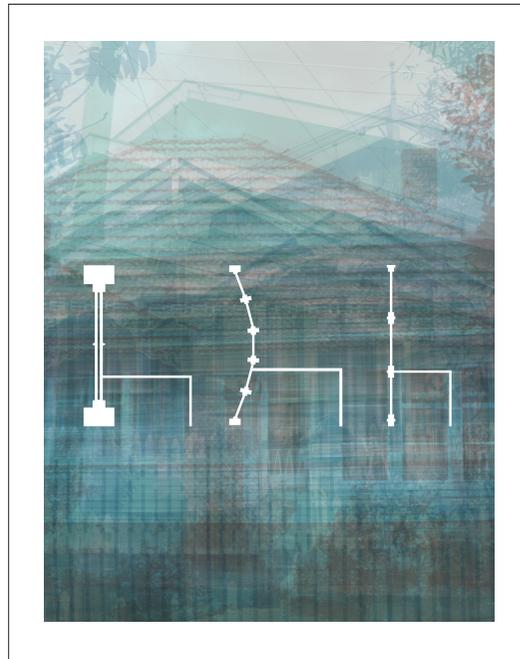
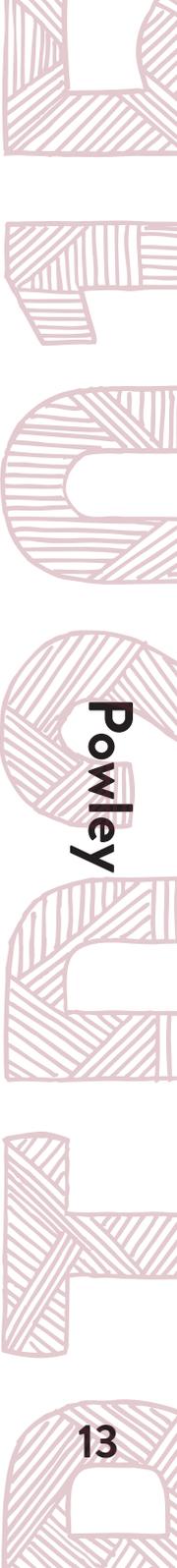


Figure 10. Neighbourhood: plan print guidelines and card inserts. Photos: Yoon Tae Kim.



Figure 11. Neighbourhood: process publication. Photos: Yoon Tae Kim.



and State 'weight' of each prototypeface share the same recipe for their development, but are as visually varied as the three houses used as source material.

Build (Assimilation)

The *Build* process works with the assimilation metaphor of translation, which suggests that, “when imitating someone, we do not limit ourselves to mechanically follow his/her movements, but we live an experience similar to that of our model; ... we put ourselves in his/her place.” (Martín de León 2010, p. 98). This process produced a prototypeface which has variable elements that allow the user to experience a decision making process similar to that of the house owner.

For this strategy I selected one New Zealand suburban house – the single-bay villa. They “illustrated vividly the feelings of that social group about its own confidence, prosperity, and perhaps surprisingly to us now, the individual expression of its members” (Stewart 1992, p. 18). Villas were, “kitset houses ... where a basic plan was supplied by the owner, builder or the catalogue could be clothed in any of the optional extras illustrated”

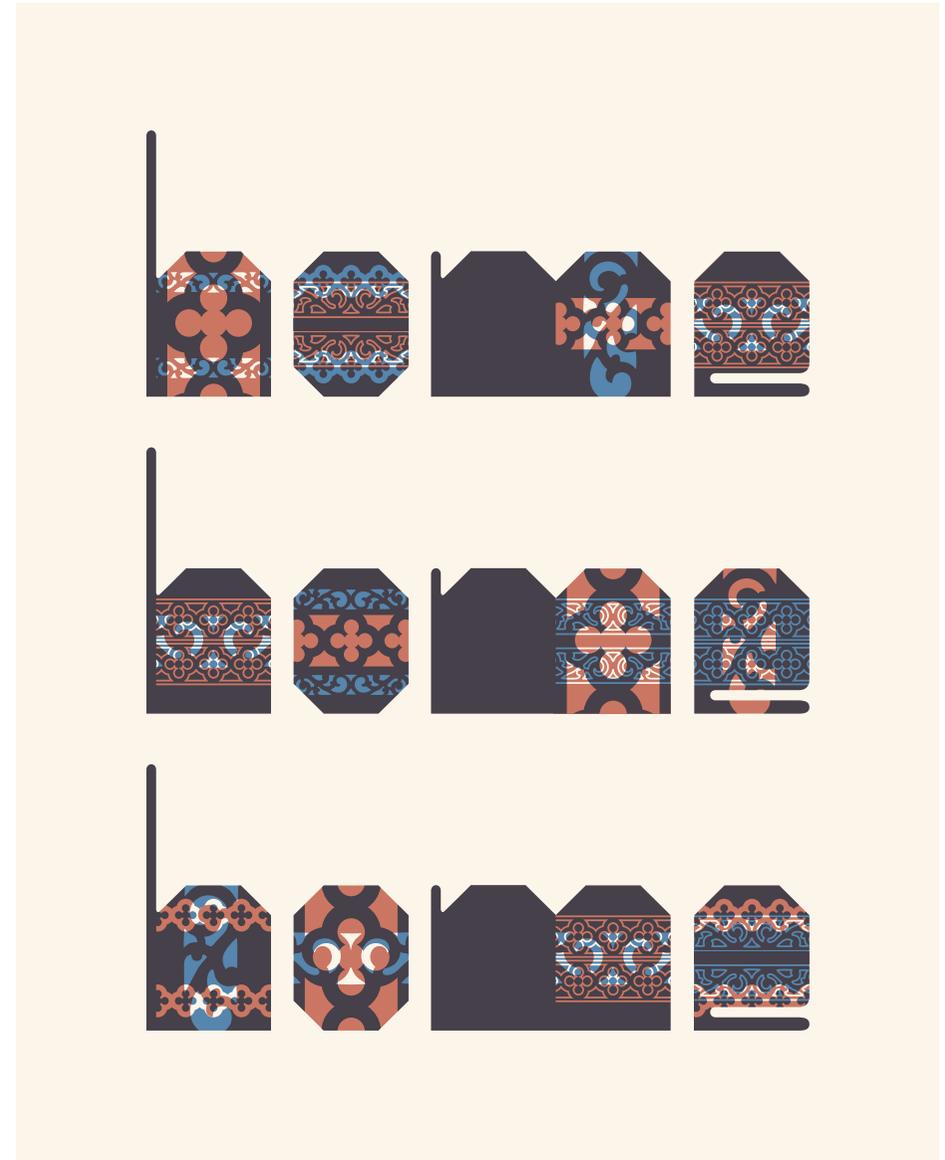


Figure 12. *Build*: prototypeface poster.

(Salmond 1986, p. 89). I created a single prototypeface where the user can select from eight decorative fonts; four Italianate and four gothic. They can layer letterforms with different patterns to produce individual combinations. This experience relates to that of a house owner selecting ornamentation to decorate their villa.

Communication

I created two sets of printed material to present the processes, one each for *Neighbourhood* and *Build*. Both sets included a large-format poster with type specimens, a workbook publication and process guidelines presented as a fold out plan print with card inserts. These were designed to work

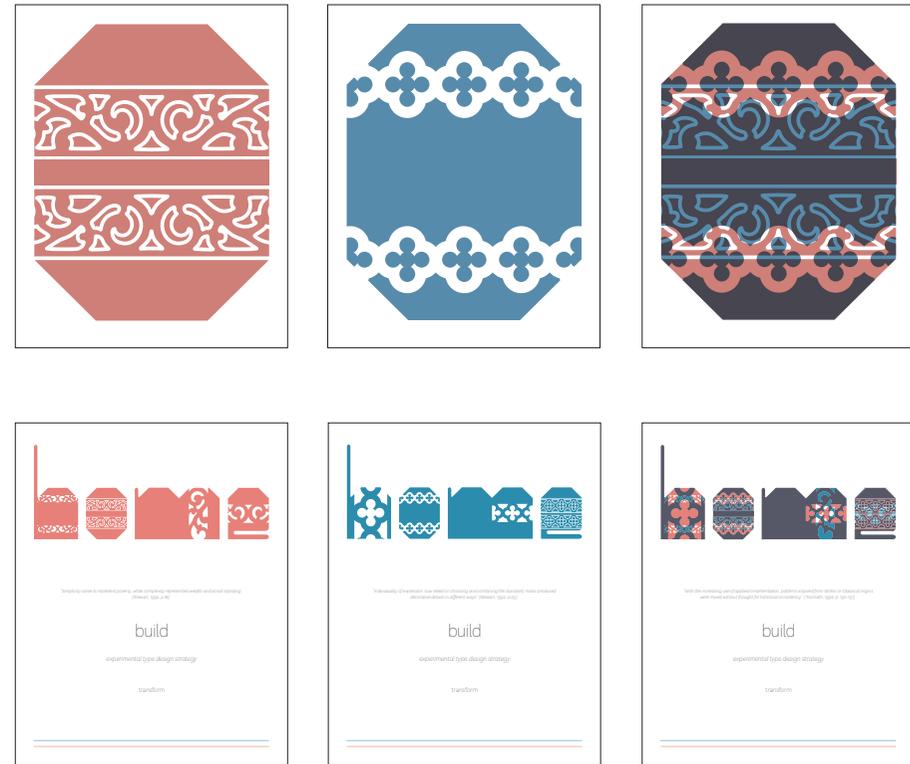


Figure 13 (above). *Build*: plan print guidelines. Photos: Yoon Tae Kim.

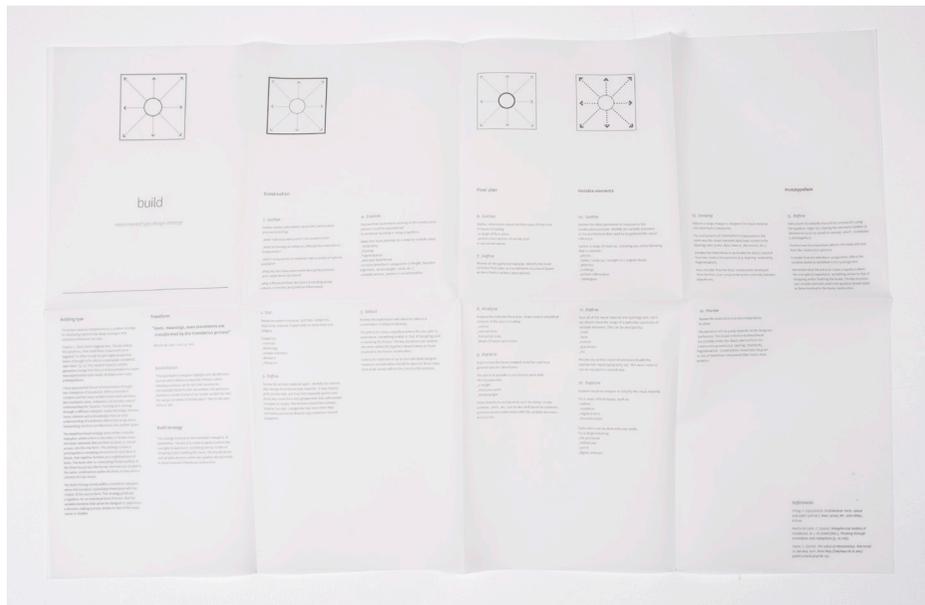


Figure 14 (left). *Build*: card inserts. Photos: Yoon Tae Kim.



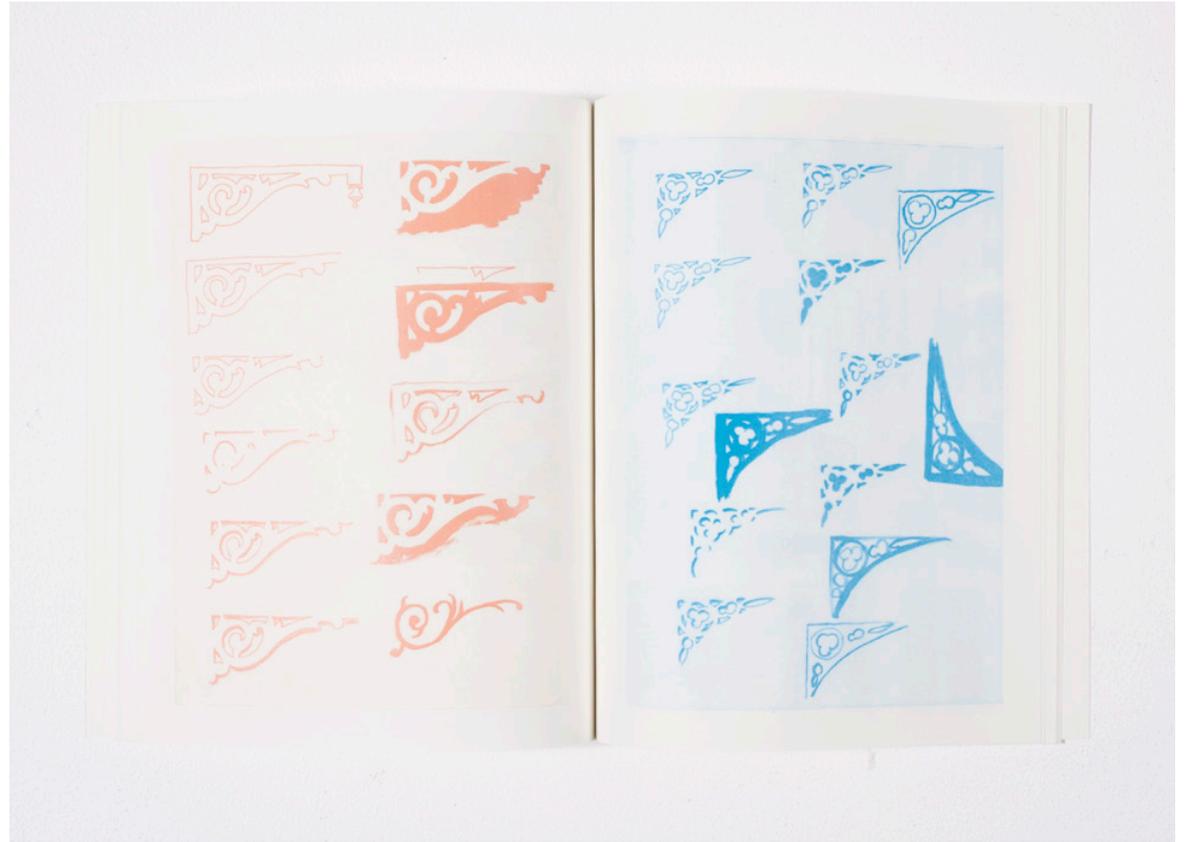


Figure 15. *Build*: process publication. Photos: Yoon Tae Kim.

as a coherent whole to communicate the interpretive strategy, relevant metaphors and resulting interpretive type design processes in an exhibition situation. Designers wanting to try the interpretive type design processes can also take the guidelines away.

Extension: teaching tool

Soon after developing these processes I had the opportunity to teach an introductory type design class to undergraduate graphic design students. I was curious to see if a guided approach to the initial stages of type design would help engage students that had not created typefaces before. Previously this course had involved creating a pictorial font and both the students and other faculty had expressed a desire to delve deeper into letterform development. I was also keen to test the *Neighbourhood* and *Build* processes to see how flexible they were. I wanted to test whether other designers could follow the guidelines and adapt them to work with their selected source material and their own approach to design.

In class I ran through the anatomy of letterforms, looked at consistency within a typeface, provided relevant contemporary type design examples and worked through basic technical skills. I also provided each student with a publication including my guidelines and examples. I reviewed my prototypefaces and explained each step of both processes. The assignment

asked them to select their own source material and use either process to create their own prototypefaces. They had 40 hours for this assignment; with 16 hours contact time over six classes.

The assignment produced a wide range of student experiences and outcomes. Some students fully engaged with the process and enjoyed it, while others really struggled to work within a structured process. Student feedback included, “I think it was a very creative way for how to look at creating letterforms and I did find it interesting but I was quite bogged down by the process of getting there” (Anon 2014). And “I found this process annoying, however I think this is because it involves a different way of thinking, something I am not used to. I think the exercise is very successful in terms of creating a new typeface and following it produces good results” (Anon 2014). The more successful students really responded to the conceptual metaphor of the process they chose. This meant they adapted the analysis points and transferred a wide range of elements for *Neighbourhood*, or they really unpacked the experience of creating their object for *Build*.

Reflections

Overall I felt my project successfully explored interpretation as a creative strategy within type design and responded to most of my research aims. The metaphors of translation described by Martín de León (2010),

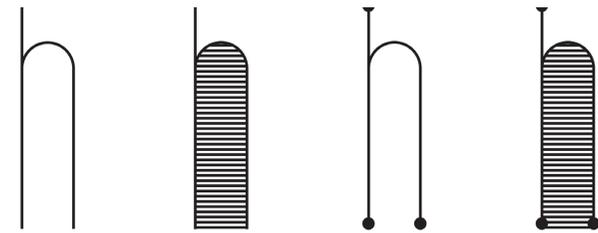
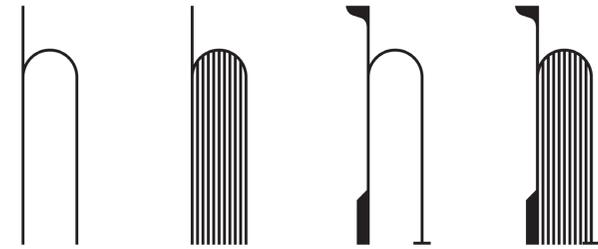




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Figure 16. Student prototypeface designed using Neighbourhood.
Source material: BMW and Audi car headlights. © Paul Phanoulas.



F O R T Y 8



Figure 17. Student prototypeface designed using Build. Source material: the process of restoring a vintage car. Source and type relationships: Main letterform structure – 1948 Ford car chassis / Two serifs – different wing mirror options / Two linear infills – bonnet grill options / Experience – as when restoring a car, the typeface user can choose and combine available parts. © Harrison Sarsfield.

provided a coherent framework for developing two interpretive type design processes. These are flexible and generative, as demonstrated by my own and my students prototypefaces. Beyond those immediate requirements they raise some other interesting points for reflection.

Interpretive type design processes

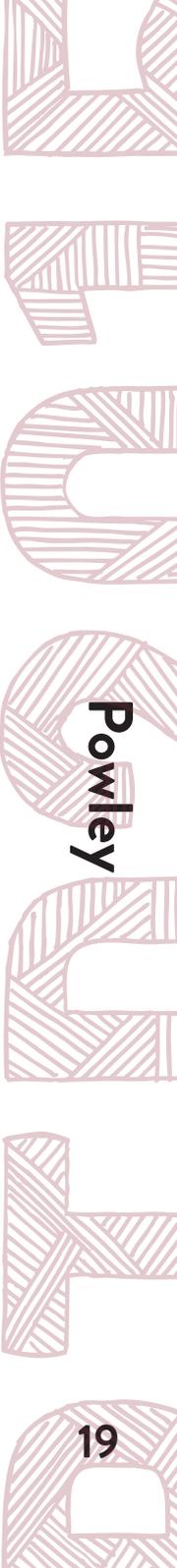
An interpretive approach to type design can provide space for both an experimental process and unexpected outcomes. It can be a challenging but invigorating experience to hand some control over to an open-ended process and allow it to unfold. However, one negative aspect of the Neighbourhood process is the potential to get lost in the options available. The designer still needs to apply a rigorous editing eye.

The designer can also explore how apparent they want the source material to be within the type outcome. If they are directly linked then the audience may make links to the source object, and potentially its connotations. However there is a risk of the source forms dominating the type and causing aesthetic or legibility issues. A more obtuse level of connection could make the processes seem pointless, but the intention is to provide a starting point and an alternative process, not to dictate the outcomes.

The letterform elements generated through the processes may not themselves be experimental, but they do have a unique relationship with their source material. The Build process has the ability to reflect

an aspect of experience, such as action, decision-making or motion. By analysing different versions of the same object and interpreting them into various 'weights' of type, Neighbourhood can also reflect something of the correspondences and variables found in the material world. These relationships can be conceptually satisfying, but it could also be a commercially relevant feature of the processes. Either process could be used to interpret something of value to a brand through a bespoke typeface.

The processes I created drew on the 'transfer' and 'assimilation' metaphors of translation outlined by Martín de León (2010). She also discussed other metaphors, including: 'footsteps' and 'target' (Martín de León 2010, p. 104). The timeframe of my research project meant I couldn't thoroughly develop these into type design processes. However, initial experimentation indicated that these could be developed further. 'Footsteps' could involve following the tracks of the source material and creating visually similar forms. The aims within the 'target' process would be defined by the intended context for using the typeface; the format or where it would be viewed.





Teaching type design

Taking an interpretive approach to teaching introductory type design has its benefits and pitfalls.

Giving students the chance to select their own source material can draw students into a project that may otherwise seem quite daunting. Working with something of personal interest can provide an initial spark of energy and sustain a student's interest. There's also no reason for them not to get started, as source material is everywhere. Looking at something other than existing type examples for inspiration may also extend student work beyond the latest trends or purely referential outcomes. However, by working with processes that choose not to focus on existing type designs, the students might not develop an awareness of the historical or material contexts of the forms they create.

While overarching metaphors can make interpretation easy to understand, the means of analysing the source material needs to be made clear and flexible. My original Neighbourhood process should have provided visual examples of each comparative analysis point and more encouragement to edit and mix analysis options. The Build process needed clearer instructions on how to map the contextual information and identify the key themes that could drive the concept for a typeface. I have since updated the guidelines for both processes, but consider them to open to further

improvements. I have also included student work examples to demonstrate how the processes work with other source material.

Students also need to be encouraged to find a balance between the analysis and the letterform development stages within both processes. I was concerned whether analysing and drawing the source objects was a productive use of time within the assignment. However student feedback included comments like, "It was good to draw parts of the object first before actually drawing the letter. It was then really easy to develop the letters..." (Anon 2014). On reflection, I think that being pushed into drawing from the start of the project makes the students more conscious of detail and form. The comparative analysis across three variations of an object in Neighbourhood also encourages students to see subtle differences. Several students suggested they had, "learnt to look more carefully and in different ways" (Anon 2014). However, there is potential for the processes to become lopsided – with too much focus on the source material and not enough focus on the type outcomes. In particular, the students need to develop a reasonable level of awareness of letterform elements and how characters relate to each other. Without this they may not know how to realise their formal elements or concepts into type outcomes.

Conceptual metaphor theory

One of the revealing discoveries for me was how conceptual metaphor theory could relate to design practice. The idea that metaphors are more than a linguistic form – they are a means of structuring our conceptual systems, which “affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 146). Therefore if a designer brings a particular metaphor to their understanding of a project it can influence their design process. This realisation prompted me to review the metaphors that were unconsciously affecting my goals for the project and guiding my design strategies. By opening up a deeper understanding of what may be influencing a designer’s process, conceptual metaphor theory could increase a designer’s awareness of their practice.

Within my research metaphors helped make a complex situation coherent, not only for myself, but also for my students and other designers who might want to use my type design strategies. A framework, like the translation metaphors I worked with, can make embarking on a creative process easier. Overall, conceptual metaphor theory shows potential for further research and application within design.

Notes

¹ <http://www.sortby.org/project/16/>

² <http://www.moniquegoossens.com/Typography-Hair-Type>

³ <http://vimeo.com/5233789>

⁴ <http://www.rhymeandreasoncreative.com/portfolio/index.php?project=typeface>

⁵ <http://www.typographyserved.com/gallery/Matryoshka/681459>

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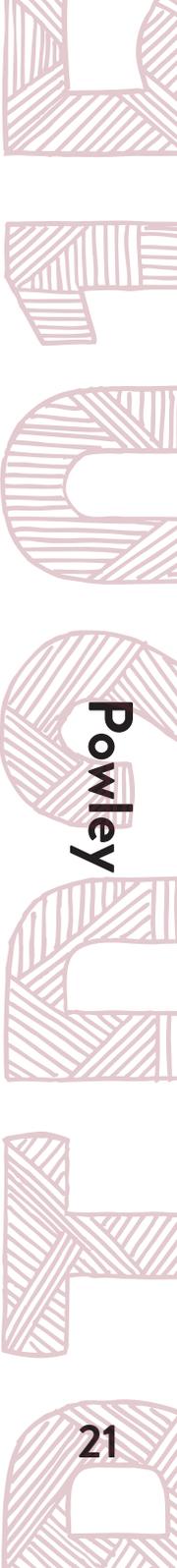
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