

Ben Fehrman-Lee

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DHWANI GARG

I am so excited to talk with you.

BEN FEHRMAN-LEE

I am honored to be included in your thesis in some capacity. Maybe we should start there. I know you want to focus on the interview, but I'm curious about your work, too.

DG

When I emailed you, my thesis was driving towards typeface design more. I had the chance to talk to Christopher because he's my advisor for thesis. I had missing gaps in my own content and my own design. I talked to him about what I think are the missing gaps. It was the same week when you replied to me that you were available.

I enjoy designing books more, like typography plays an important role, how do you typeset, how does it have an impact on the audience. For example, when you flip the book, you just don't look at the content. I just don't look at the content but I also see how type plays as a texture, what kind of type sizes is used in the book. I have made so many books in different capacity. One which is like initial 50 question thesis book which was made from 50 different typefaces. It was a crazy experience. I made 50 questions different pattern from questions marks. I also enjoy working with different type setting skills in my books. I would say I enjoy working with details more.

BEN

Type design as a practice and typography more generally – both require macro and micro attention. So, it's good to know that you like that – not everybody likes to be in the weeds, but I think it's kind of essential as a designer. Obviously it lays a good foundation for really any graphic communication, because it's sort of invisible force in a way. Everybody's day, some way or another starts and ends with typography.

DG

One of the reasons I wanted to interview you is that when I was in my second semester of Spring 2023, your video Columbia University GSAPP had a very big influence on how I structured the books.

BEN

I was really flattered to hear that, probably you are the one person who has watched the video outside the context of the actual lecture, and I am glad it was influential somehow.

BEN It's great and wonderful to hear and that lecture in particular was pretty didactic. This was an audience of architecture , graduate students who had no experience whatsoever in organizing materials. Basically, that whole weekend is set of lectures and workshops for them to start learning or getting feedback even on, you know, in progress, ways in which they're presenting their portfolio or their body of work. So, its a bit of a type one on one or a book one on one course you know, it's like kind of a very, again, kind of kind of didactic, it's kind of prescriptive in a way that like graphic designers might find a little base level and want to kind of push against some of those things.

DG Moving forward, I would like to know about your process and not make it sound like a formal interview. So, the first thing worth asking is also the most obvious: Can you talk a bit about your background and how you got into designing books?

BEN My road to graphic design is a bit more wandering than most. I think I grew up drawing and painting my whole life. I will say I had a big influence in a sort of unforeseen way. I grew up as an only child. So part of that, like creative space, was, I think, afforded by the fact that I had to invent my ways of playing and thinking. I would draw for hours and hours at a time, and I was studying anatomy by the time I was eight or nine. This is a great credit, and thanks to my parents. My mom had a big coffee table set of books, two big volumes in a case. It was like drawings and processes of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, and I would sit and draw what I saw. So, I had a real love and interest in that. It is just that there was never an emphasis.

My dad was an engineer, and my mom worked in finance. It was never an option on that table to even think about. I also grew up in Southern California and the suburbs, where a creative career was not necessarily at the forefront. Parents who were committed to making sure I was focused on academics and that kind of rigor and whatnot. It was always like a hobby and never a possibility of practice. I took an AP studio art class my senior year of high school, and we had an AP Art History program that was exceptional to my junior year. So, there were ways for me to explore that. I went to a very traditional

liberal arts school, where I studied English literature and theology, which is my foundation. At the time, I thought I was going to study human rights law, and literature and philosophy or theology were a good, great foundation for those things. Business schools at the time were taking English majors over anybody else because they could communicate clearly and express and organize in that way. Imagine foundational study to go to grad school. I worked, and I was thinking about a couple of different programs. I studied for that LSAT and just realized, wow, this is a very square peg, round hole situation. My mind doesn't work this way, and I am more creative.

I can credit one friend who sent me a job posting for something. Oh, hey, I thought of you about this, you know, some artistic role at some company. I forgot what exactly, but it was just a moment where I thought of life as being a professional creative. I was making posters, and album covers for my friends at the time. We're all musicians between Los Angeles and San Diego. I decided I would do this, and I ended up applying. I put together a portfolio over the course of about a year, and I applied to a place called Art Center College of Design. I was already 25 when I went to study graphic design and get a BFA at Art Center, and I fast-tracked that because I had already done many prerequisite courses, which was a big immersion. I went there because I knew I had read enough about some institutions.

Simon Johnston was teaching at the Art Center College of Design, and he is a British designer who moved to Los Angeles a couple of decades ago and was a very influential force in the kind of contemporary typography that was part of Octavo. Anyway, it was wonderful to be around him, near him. He was a very humble, gentle, but brilliant presence, and very informative for me regarding typography, but I came to the end of Art Center. I didn't know what kind of designer I wanted to be.

Art Center is a very notoriously kind of high-level production value, comprehensive and systematic thinking. It's industrial, history as an industrial design school, and follows a Bauhaus model where you have a very foundational kind of first year where whatever major you're in, you're able to take some courses around things. Still, you do go in with a really specific portfolio. Hence, you kind of know what you're going to do. I just came out not knowing what kind of designer I wanted to be. It was not until I went to graduate school right after that, pretty much that I fell in love with

publishing with editorial design. Also, the majority of my time work is on branding, frankly, and identities, but I have carved out time to design books and be involved with institutions, museums, galleries, and publishers to do that kind of work. That's really where my love and interest lies.

In summation of this, my interest went from a love of the written word to a love of the visual word. As a literature major all I did and theology, all I did was read and write, read books, read texts, write essays about it, and form opinions. A lot of that has come to bear in many ways, for one, to pay attention to what the more does and then pay attention to what the typography, what meaning the typography carries for that work. It also is great as an asset. To articulate even for branding, you know, writing copy or writing strategy for a client or an organization, and envisioning things for them is helpful. So it's kind of been a funny cyclical thing.

Drawing itself requires focus on the human hand because I learned that at an early age, there's an old adage. If you could draw the human hand, you know, in any way, you can draw anything because it's such a complex form. Drawing and painting really laid a foundation for being able to draw type because understanding sort of figure just form in that's really elemental state. I don't know if I would be doing that if I hadn't been, spending all that time as a kid doing that kind of thing. I'm not sure I would be the kind of designer that would necessarily be into it. But I am. (Laughs) Yeah. That's how I got into graphic design if that's low-end book design.

DG I love what you shared about your journey into graphic design and book design. In my case my parents enrolled me into drawing classes when I was like 4 years old.

I finished my undergraduate studies right at the end of the pandemic, not knowing where I was going. When I came here to Boston University to know what I really wanted to do and also have the option to design and print books using various type systems, I fell in love with it.

BEN I think books to me and it's not a secret there, especially in today's very digital culture for many things. They are a total work of art because it has dimension, volume, sequence, and something cinematic about it. It's both visual and tactile. It's both a static and

time-based medium. There's just something so satisfying and a very complex process. To be honest, it's not, and no book is the same. The work that goes into producing a book, from the authorship to the editing to the designing to the production, is extreme. But you know, it's amazing.

I have books on my shelf designed in the '60s, in the late '80s, the late 1800s, or even in the '70s. Here's this, you know, collection of images and texts that have been preserved, and it's like, it can't get wiped from a website, it's physical, and it can, they can last, and it's got this certain timestamp on it. It will never change outside of that. But every time you come back to it, it might surprise you, so there's a lot that I love about it (Laughs).

It's also about what the materiality communicates to you, which is as important as the typographic arrangement or tone of voice, and it all carries meaning. It all has an attitude, in other words, one can feel very casual and informal and ad hoc, and the other can be a very severe or polished astute kind of thing. They all have these personalities, have their own logic, and are almost a world unto themselves often when done right.

DG Circling back to the point that the physical books have so much value to them. I have a follow-up question for you I'm particularly fond of printing my work on various kinds of paper. It adds a new dimension to the content itself. When collaborating with clients, do you find that you have the freedom to select the type of paper that would best suit the project, or is it typically determined by the publisher and the author?

BEN Oh yes! That is as much as near control as anything else. And indeed, it has to be. So I have binders and books of their Swatch Books, basically like you would have paint chips. The materiality can be wildly different; you can have a difference between them, and some are functionally appropriate. And some are, again, like I said, carrying an attitude.

Suppose you want to have an image section that you want to have vibrant color on. In that case, you might choose to print on a coated sheet because coated sheets preserve and absorb ink differently than an uncoated sheet, and the ink will sit more on top of that coating for a reason, and it helps to elevate the color or bring it

forward. Whereas an uncoated sheet would feel more beautiful and totally in your hands, it absorbs ink a lot more because there's no coating on it. So, the color might not be quite as vibrant. But maybe that's a good thing as you want that soft feeling. It could have a tone to it and it could be pure white.

Yeah, and the client, when I make presentations and proposals, even from early concept phases, there always is attention to that kind of like with this concept comes this kind of materiality, this even binding structure, as it should be from the large categories of whether it's case bound, hardcover, or softcover or it got an exposed spine, it's all about whether it's, you know, maybe all the sheets, all the leaves together are gathered and sort of held together by a band, and it could be some kind of loose that, whether it's a spiral bind, and that sort of character that has to it. So all of those choices are things that are, like, equally, and presented in part and parcel with the layouts and the structure of the content with a typographic voice; it's all just another like element. There's quite a logistic challenge that can also come with that because you were at my brief presentation with Christopher's class.

When We did Narrating the Globe (Fig. I), which was that large-scale, pretty luscious book about architectural books. We had proposed, like, a series of different materials for the front of the spine on the back and when we were getting ready, like quite close, the book had even been printed at this point. And there was getting prepared for binding, but the understand back and said, Oh, my gosh, the paper manufacturer doesn't have this particular, like the snakeskin kind of thing that we were going to use this alligator skin we're going to use for the back, we don't have it in this color. It's nine months out, so that they can produce more. I was like, Oh, my gosh, but I had to completely recalibrate because if you change that, then the other three things had to get changed, too. And so it was actually about chasing down what was available at the time. So you're working with supply; there's a supply chain that's with it, too. It was like, it can be a logistic challenge as much as a design kind of challenge. But yes, that's something that the client looks to you and trusts you, in some ways, to become an expert in that and be sensitive to it. It's definitely as much as the typography or the size of the book. It's all something that contributes to its overall impact quality and attitude.



FIG. I: Narrating the Globe: The Emergence of World Histories of Architecture.

DG When you started to talk about Narrating the Globe I want to congratulate you on receiving the excellent work award from the Tokyo Type Director's Club. The cover showcases a beautiful typographic system with various scales. Could you please share how you developed this system and your choice behind the typeface?

BEN I mean, it's actually not so interesting. As you might imagine, it brings up a good point overall, which is in approaching book design or any project frankly, but something that a colleague of mine once said succinctly, which is a well-researched project that designs itself, in a way.

So with Narrating the Globe, it's a very unusual cover in kind of what I would do typically, or how I would generally approach something. Still, the content of that book, as I said, is all architectural publishing from a very particular timeframe, the mid to late 1800s. And conventionally, title pages were very much set in that sort of way with actually quite a bit of hierarchy listing out in that title page, but like frontispieces, almost, and then, all of the people

who were involved in it, whether it was the author and the publisher, and the date when it was published. So looking at this huge swath of, I don't know, we have maybe 200 plates or something, these images of the actual books that we had photographed, these archival books that we had photographed, and they all had this kind of motif in common, and it came in different forms but it just seemed like a nice notion to treat it was designed to cover as, as a frontispiece, you know, it was just bringing that kind of attitude to the front cover.

It did two things: it echoed the sort of typology, but it also did another thing, featuring the grand multiplicity and collaborative nature of the project because you had three editors and 24 guests, the 24 essays from individuals all over the world. So it says, *Narrating the Globe: The Emergence of World Histories of Architecture* (Fig.I), edited by the three people Petra Brower and Martin Bersani and Christopher Drew Armstrong, and then it says, with tech spy, and it's all the 20, some contributing authors and then published by MIT Press. We just brought all of that stuff onto the cover. It just made for a really beautiful kind of unusual arrangement. It's not unusual because, in contemporary graphic design, which is very splashy or very bold, it just feels a little quieter. And it's intriguing in its own right because it's so kind of strange to our contemporary eyes.

I think that was kind of a nice thing. And, like the publisher, MIT Press was like, well, we never put MIT Press on the cover. It should be on the spine, and we had to fight for that, like, no, this is why we should do this, you know? It was outside of their convention. They just weren't used to it.

DG I liked the typography, it was so elegant and subtle in a way. Honestly, most of my covers for the book are influenced by the typography system that I have inside the book. *Narrating the Globe* has so much value to it on the front cover, in comparison, to what goes in the book. I was really amazed by the type hierarchy.

BEN Well (Laughs), Thank you!
I often think that's not always true, but I think that a typographic-only solution would be very interesting. Of course, you want something splashy, attention-grabbing, that often relies on a heroic image, let's say. But that often puts a lot of pressure on an image. What image is that? In this case, the subject was books so that you

could see the correlation, and it just made sense to sort of echo that, but the other thing is that, you know, an image will often carry other kinds of meaning. And, you know, intended or unintended, typography is a pure graphic form, and pure conveyors of the text or the title don't run that risk. You can inflict a lot into the typography and make for a very, like, powerful, you know, cover.

Another great example I'm thinking of is Simon Johnston, who designed a multi-volume series of the *Catalogue Raisonné* of John Baldessari (Fig. II and III). Simon Johnston echoed Baldessari's kind of strategy of playfulness in a way on the cover. Hence, it looks like this abstract sort of thing. It is the full title, but only with certain letters, and it presents this very graphic, strong thing. Every volume is a different sort of, almost primary color. It's a way that it for artists, you know, sort of comprehensive work, you can't choose just one image to go on a cover for a multi-decade career if someone like John Baldessari, so to see just a typographic cover, echoing a little bit, sort of quality of the artists practice but doing so in just a typographic strong way is like really wonderful. It gets out of the way the content is forward.

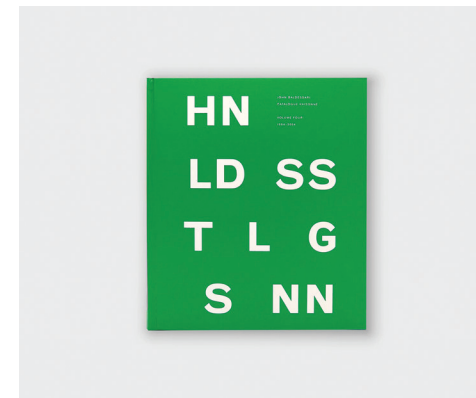


FIG. II: *Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume Four



FIG. III: *Catalogue Raisonné*, Six Volume Set

DG I also think of typography as a form rather than typography as content. So, when I design covers, I like to create patterns with words and letters that directly reflect the content of the book. So, the next question is very important, and I am very much curious I notice a significant emphasis on typography in your work. Could you describe your process for selecting typefaces for content within this context?

BEN What's my process of selecting the type?

DG Yes! You could talk about any example of your work.

BEN I think there are a number of approaches that might be appropriate for any project. So, it's best to start there, but what is the approach?

One might be just attitude, just general attitude, okay, this is an academic text, or it's very fun, it's a transcript of a conversation, it's about a brief essay on an artist's practice, it's an analysis of an architectural wall or architectural studios output, you think about those things, and you say, okay, what's the attitude, then, you know, should it feel quite literary? And classic, in a sense? Should it feel a little more casual and plain-spoken? Should it feel a little antagonistic or provocative? So that's one rubric for evaluations, just attitude; then there might be something like, do I want to reference a context, be it cultural, historical, or regional? Let's say this is about a British artist, and so we want something in the typography, for you to feel, whatever, you know, classically British or this is the work of an artist and avant-garde kind of artists from the 60s. Okay, so I want it to feel or to fight against that. So there's that: What is the context of this content? Then? Then there is, again, even a history, even a more specific subset of that historical like, do I want a typeface that feels like a new contemporary version of like, a really, like classically Venetian or like early Roman type kind of thing? Is there some reference that you want to call to? Now, a lot of these decisions, of course, can be invisible to most people. Still, it gives you parameters and a framework for which to make them and a rationale for which to decide, and sometimes they yield surprising things, or they yield options that you might be a little like, oh, that's not something I would normally go for, but it's surprising.

On top of that, I can circle back to maybe one example I could think about there, but then the other rubric, a third, would be like functionality. You would examine a text and say there's a lot of citation, or there is a lot of the text with a lot of acronyms, or initialisms in it, that the author is referring to, and so I need things like, or, you know, this is going to be a series of 40 essays, you know, and it's a lot. So, a lot of text will only be punctuated by imagery. So I want something very easy to read, and not to get enough personality to keep the eye of the reader engaged, but not too much that it's, like,

difficult to kind of. So how does it feel over long-form, if it's just a brief essay, and you know, in terms of time, someone will sit down and read this in 10-15 minutes so that you can be more playful and expressive? Still, if you have 40 texts, that will take somebody's time. They're going to spend time on this, and they're going to maybe read it over the course of six months or something; you want it to be sort of sensitive to that and not be too aggressive or dictatorial and like, what commands their eye on their attention and then in functionally, like, okay, lots of dates, lots of citations, lots of initialisms, or acronyms, I need a palette that has small caps and old style numerals, it just feels better as you read through, I think. You don't want to be reading tabular numbers, like at the cap height; dates are popping up everywhere, so you have to be sensitive to that. You want something that's of your time but refers to something, that you're not pastiche, but something that refers to something historical, you have to think about all those kinds of parameters and then also, you know, some of it is just a little bit intuition. This feels right, which I have, admittedly, only comes from a lot of experience; I would say I never used to make decisions based on intuition. It was always like a very academic rationale or philosophical underpinning. I think sometimes it's just about what feels right. Works, right? If you're dealing with more technical material, you may want a more sophisticated, sharp voice to come through. I also used to, and I'm not sure that I had totally abided by this anymore, but I used to have a rule that I would only ever use the type that had been designed at least 30 years ago, and part of the reason was, that it's an easy way to askew trends.

DG Oh Wow!

BEN So, if you use something that's currently the hottest, because it's like fashion, frankly, you use something that's at the moment, that's very hot that everybody's using, because it's just, you know, it's fun. It's never been seen before, and it's, well, in five years, it might feel like everything else that was designed for that time and, sometimes, like it hasn't stood the test of time. So you don't know, like, is that going to feel? I mean, I admit that I am always working a little toward a sense of timelessness, too. I don't want anything to feel too of the moment. Because, again, it can fade quite quickly. So making that

selection, something that maybe has been around for 30 years, it's stood the test of time, it's been through a couple of cycles, and it's still, I think there are people who are very dogmatic about this, and I think that there's only a couple of typefaces that ever need to be used and that's obviously not true. We live in a much more pluralistic kind of visual culture at this point. So we can sidestep, but there is something about trusting.

There's a sort of cast of few characters, some kind of like Chris Nolan, directing a film secures a cast of few actors that he's always going to kind of pull from with maybe some surprises because he there's reliant, there's a reliable sort of work ethic there or whatever, there's a reliable kind of person there. So, I do have that kind of, you know, in the pocket where it's always in play, and then there are times when things come up that are quite surprising.

I'm working on a book right now called Magic Architecture, which is a very, very complex, very academic book, frankly, of an unpublished manuscript of an architect from the post-war period who traces the history of human housing from like very early humans up into the like atomic age. It's a strange sort of treaties in a way, but because it has its anthropological quality to it, written by an architect and a kind of interesting moment in time. There is a sort of scientific quality to the text, and it's also zany in a certain way, and like a little perspective, it still felt right to use something akin to, like, old anthropological studies. I'm using a typeface they're called Walbaum, which is an old, like, kind of it's a bit of a modern typeface like, but it's a German modern typeface that was cast and used explicitly for that kind of text for, like anthropological biological studies and textbooks in the 1800s. And it's a, it's a, it's not a fun I wouldn't normally use, but it felt right for this. So here comes a character out of nowhere that I've never used before, and it's got a certain density on the page, which is good because we are printing in both black and silver ink. So, it needs to hold up. The silver ink will be lighter on the page, but it needs to be dark enough and low contrast enough to have a presence on the page. So that's an example of being particular to an attitude and a cultural or historical context that made that decision. Of course, we presented a couple of options to the client, and they just happened to like that for the same reason.

DG As a student right now, I spend more time picking up typefaces than designing books.

BEN Well, that's dangerous (laughs)

DG I believe typeface plays an important role, and I agree that old-style figures blend. I believe when designing a magazine, there is more freedom of creative space in comparison to designing a book. How would you describe your strategy to approaching both?

BEN I should clarify, and I'm not sure if this is obvious, but my full-time day-to-day is consumed as I'm an Associate Design Director at 2x4, which is a much larger consultancy. We do branding, strategy, signage, print and digital. We have long-lasting collaborations with clients as people who work with the brand and help develop a brand over time. Then the book design that I do get to do is sort of, you know, in like, quote, unquote, free times, whatever that is same with type design but the way that I have learned and approached kind of attitude, and form in that role, 2x4 has also impacted how I think about and approach, attitude, and visuals, in language in book design and so like a balcony (Fig. III), for example. And there in Narrating the Globe (Fig. II), to a certain extent, those were times where I was given the freedom to really art direct in a way. Historically, when I've designed books, it's like the content comes to you, and you have to make what you can from it.

In both cases, that's why I'm highlighting the Balcony and Narrating the Globe, as they both were an open dialogue, and Balcony is a magazine. It is infrequently published, but all the content is developed for each issue; we spent a good year probably developing the art direction, I mean, from start to finish of, like, listening to what the editors and the founders wanted balcony to be like to go through the process of like designing the proposals and what the overall concept would be, to actually producing like the website and the first issue and all that kind of stuff that was probably a year-long, at least, subsequently, it's gotten a little faster, because you have some parameters which are established. It was a case with a really interesting proposition of what they called environmental portraits, which is different than an interview. You know, it's not; it's trying to askew that sort of typical format for an artist interview.

It's everything from an artist capturing little phone photos on their bicycle to this is an artist in London on their bike on the way to their studio, in their messy place of the studio, making a sandwich during lunchtime, looking at all of the things that are sort of in fabrication, or whatever. So we have those kinds of photos but we also got to art direct, like the overall sensibility of multiple perspectives, and 3D can still imagery almost like footage. Indeed, we reference some final artists and photographers whose practices are built around this. How can we capture something of this attitude so that each time a new artist is photographed for those environmental portraits, they're captured at ease? We're focusing on gestures, a very unpolished, unvarnished view of them. So, that was a wonderful treat. Now, we're not like a single person photographing everything for the magazine because one interview is in Paris, the other is in Central Park, and the other is in Mexico City. So, people are all over the place, but we have this deck of references that communicates what the overall shoot should be like. When we go through and make selections, what will work in the layouts? I would have never probably approached that. I don't think the same way as I had some of the experiences as I worked with a very different scale and a different scope.



FIG. III: Balcony Magazine

At 2x4 and the kind of art direction that we do, whether it's for like an Italian lighting company, for industrial kind of really sophisticated industrial lighting, to modern, mid-century furniture. That's how diverse the ranges are, but we have to be very adept at providing and creating art direction. So, it has opened my mind and freed my mind in a way that I, as a book designer, solely do books. I don't think I would have approached it the same way it opened up that lens. Narrating the Globe (Fig. I), in fact, doesn't look quite as complicated as the book itself and looks at the visuals, which all feel like documented books. The art direction that I proposed, with a couple of couple of possibilities, had another very different vision, which was like, sort of in situ, at angles, even maybe capturing the apparatus of the process of documenting these in the Canadian Centre for Architecture and a bit more like interactive, a little bit more moody, in terms of its lighting and little more mysterious in a way. Ultimately, it was a good decision because the point of photographing those books was to see them as archival objects in the most clear way possible. It feels like you're looking at a book on the table, but it's printed on the page and the book you're looking at on the table. So there's a nice kind of picture within a picture moment, which is called *Mise en abyme*. It also feels like a book within a book that focuses on the right thing and not too much of this other attitude. Ultimately, they decided so you could appreciate the details. Etching was used in one publication, and then that same etching was repurposed in another publication. So, they want to see those two things side by side. It has to be a photo documentary and very, like, clearer in that sense, but that was another thing, instead of just getting a bunch of illustrations. We sat with the editor and talked through it; we thought, what if we photographed the books themselves? Before we got that, it was a year before he even got started on the actual design of the book; it was half a year, I would say six months. Over the summer, we had to set up all this art direction, and then they photographed the books on-site at the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

Months went by, and there was a lot of back and forth about that, of course, as you can imagine. Not until January of the following year, which was in the summer of January, did the following year actually start laying out the actual book itself and putting those images to use. So again, it was an uncommon circumstance, but

when you have to take advantage of a designer, like I said, most of the time, stuff files get dumped in your lap and a Dropbox file or who knows what it's like.

DG Oh yes (Laughs)

BEN Hey, we're going to make a book out of this. You're like, okay, you know, whereas, when you have real authorship over, like, directing how the imagery could be shot, it becomes a much more enriched experience, and that's been true for balcony, for sure. So, that's a credit to the very important thing in design, which is listening. We had a very long time of listening to the founders and editors, three months, kind of a couple of meetings to understand their vision and how they feel and what they've been thinking of this thing for, like, a year at that point already. So it was up to us to interpret what they wanted and give them back a visual response to that and, like I said, to two particular projects that allowed and brought the foresight to bring a designer in early and talk with us. Rather than like rushing up to a point and saying, Okay, we need to look like and let's make this thing happen now, and no time to actually do that, but like, the luxury of time is really important to allow for that listening to that internalization and then digest it and synthesize it into something that is the visual response to it. I think that is true; as a requisite of any design process, whether it's a book or something else, they're, you have to be a good listener.

DG I agree with you 100%. Always be a good listener.



FIG. IV: Toscana typeface is now known as Matala

BEN As a designer, you have to be completely subservient, and sometimes, they're looking to you for a new way to think about something. But it is very much the social practice of design, which I'm very interested in.

DG When I was going through your work on Instagram and I noticed that you also design typefaces. I can imagine how the Toscana typeface (Fig. IV) would add elegance to the body copy.

BEN Yeah. I happened to rename that one, actually. It's now called Matala (Fig. IV).

DG Is there a connection between the typefaces you choose for book design and those you create yourself? In other words, does one influence the other in terms of style?

BEN Yes. 100%. And that's because there are certain people who are exquisite type designers, and frankly, that's all they have in their life, and the very good ones do that. A few selected are both graphic designers and type designers, and both parts of their practice are equally active. When you're designing a book, and I've done this before, you actually use the type you're working on, and it's a great testing ground because you can see how it's working in real-time. You can make tweaks as you go, at least for preliminary use. I've had stuff they started in, like, 2016, but then I used it in a book in 2020. I went back to it later in 2023. You know, still massaging certain things because you realize it's something that I learned, I think, from someone like Laurenz Brunner, probably one of the best living type designers, if not the best. He always says it's really good to take time and return to the thing over and over again because your attitude and your thoughts about something might change. You might allow time for other influences and whatnot. But I do believe in that and the importance of taking time.

My interest you can glean this a little bit from anything that you see; my interest is primarily in stuff that's usable as text. There are many beautiful displays, ornamental and exaggerated, which are dynamic. But they're only geared for use on posters, for animated contexts, or something like that.

I'm interested in designing fonts that are typically useful in more robust typesetting, like in bookish terms. It's an interesting balance of creating something visually interesting and engaging, which will keep a reader's attention and have some personality to it. Also, it simultaneously has a sense of timelessness and a sense of functionality that isn't so over the top that it's distracting and hard to read. Typefaces typically, I'm working on a super long interest in this period of like French serifs, in transitional typography, transitional kind of serifs that are super beautiful and unique. I'm trying; I've been working for, maybe a year now, trying to synthesize something that feels quite beautiful and unique, but also very, can be functional and sort of literary way and for book typesetting.

Toscana and it's called Matala (Fig. IV) now. I was surprised and posted it as a sketch; it was a concept font. It was just because of a sign I saw while staying in Italy. It was this funny routed version of times; essentially, when you look at the forums, there are a few oddities. Still, it's times three to seven, which is wider, a more robust version of times from Berthold. This is a case where the tool that was used to create the type has an impact on the form of the type, right? So, I had a certain sample set of characters from this metal plaque. It was for an urban architecture firm in this little town called Pistoia. So it was like a small sample set. You can see, okay, that's the radius of the routing tool, and that's how this would affect all of these other things. You're exactly right when you type set it in text. We're going to have those great details when you see it. And it's neatly geometric, but when you typeset in text it looks just like chunky times. It's not so sophisticated, but I was surprised at how many people really liked it for some reason, and I am also surprised that no one's ever done it. Basically, it's like we have rounded sans serifs all the time. We never had any rounded serifs. It's kind of funny, my rounded terminal serif. Yeah, it's a bit of a funny one.

DG

I am also taking a typeface design class. As I am always working on books, I decided to do a revival version of Century Schoolbook Oldstyle. I am designing the type in a way that combines what the actual typeface is and what I love in the typeface that I choose for typesetting the text in the body copy. I am amazed by how challenging is to design typefaces.

BEN

That's good. That's a good model. Frankly, that's how I learned to do type design, and I'm still learning. I mean, you realize that even something that seems new, like it probably comes from somewhere? There's a bit of this tracing that happens over time and is not dissimilar to how music is played and changes over time. The evolution of these things is like you can always trace a person's influence back to something else, and it's quite beautiful to me. The little changes or mutations over time generate something new. You could easily say that with like the blues, as a genre of music or the way that guitar players will improvise and solo. You can trace a certain lineage of people, how they played, and when one person changed that thing, it suddenly started this new way of doing things. Still, really like, the pentatonic blues scale hasn't changed, but it's the way it's played, it's like Western Roman type hasn't changed since, you know, like the sort of Venetian models, but like, the way that it is rendered is always changing. It's because of technology and the actual, just-like, visual culture. And I have learned, sometimes, that's my particular interest in things that have never made the transition from metal to digital contexts. If whether for economic reasons, or more, or, you know, any number of things that like a foundry fell, and its collection was lost, or it was absorbed into something else, or it's been sitting in an archive, and now we have like, these great archives, and we have the tools to do it. I always encourage people interested in type design to look at old stuff that they love and draw it, make a version that will have your sensibility to it, and I've done this. I've probably drawn 30 typefaces that way, and you learn something from each of those to a point where your brain gets trained, and you start to see archetypes and genres. You understand the history and the culture and what makes it fun and distinctly French. I can point out a couple of things that I've seen consistently, and now I can look at stuff and be like, that feels French, even if I don't know what it is, and you certainly develop that sort of sensibility. It influences how you might think about your own when it comes to time, and you want to start trying to make a little tweak; what makes one of those mutations when you want to try and start making something new, but some of it finds your way finds its way into like your own mental catalog. A lot of musicians will talk about that, too. They actually have trouble overcoming what they hear, and they have this catalog in their heads. They have trouble overcoming that a little bit because it's so

distinct in their heads, but I just think it's really important. I don't think you can generate things that are really worthwhile without first understanding where they came from. So draw as much as you can, and that's my encouragement.

DG Thank you for the tips. It is interesting how you explained the two professions in a distinct way. How do you ensure that your own design work remains fresh and avoids redundancy? Is this a concern you actively address in your creative process?

BEN A well-researched project designs itself, and I'm always content and forward. I always approach every project on its own terms. I wouldn't say I might be kidding myself, but I don't think I have a distinctive style per se. I'm in awe or admiration of some of my colleagues who I can. If I see that book, I'm like, oh, that's so and so or that. So I can pick that out, or it's more for identities and branding, where you can pick that out. As I said, I may be deceiving myself, but each project has a bit of an attitude of its own. I don't have a sort of style that I universally apply, which is what I mean to say.

It's nice to have a very quiet design, but sometimes it's important to have a bit more, you know, expression, boldness, and character. I actually don't concern myself so much with how to keep something fresh. As I said, I'm preoccupied with what has what is of this moment, like what is not a pastiche of anything that's come before, but what is the moment but of my own time, but has a sense of timelessness. I'm now especially like, sort of, now that I'm past my sort of like the early earliest phase of my career, I'm trying to think of things that I'll be proud of in the long, long term, and what will amount to a sort of body of a really strong representative body of work. The strongest thing in methodology is approaching it truly with a content-forward approach. It's always important to feel what leverage you have in your control to push and pull against each other, and that avoids things feeling like too much of anything. I don't know if that totally answers your question.

DG Yes, you answered my question. I hope to follow this in my career as I am just starting out. It brings me to my almost last question (laughs). What would you recommend as a few critical factors for designers to consider when working on a type system for a book?

BEN What are critical factors the keep in mind for your typesetting? Like a system for a book?

DG For example, different point sizes and everything.

BEN Well, that's a good question

I often think about it in terms of layers of reading. So perhaps, at first glance, most people are going to pick up a book, but they're flipped through. What is that first layer? It could be a large organization, like section breaks or something like that. They will mostly look at things like the imagery and the captions. At first, it will be the quick flip through, then when they sit down with it. If they're intrigued, they sit down with it and will take more time with it. So, I think of layers of reading, and in that sense, the other thing is it's important to teach your reader how to read. I mentioned that a book is a little world of its own. The system you set up needs to have its logic and organization. So if it's like, the text is always sort of, in this set of the columns, captions are always here. You know, there are always these parameters that you must establish and then follow. Don't set parameters and then break them. It leads me to my next point, which is essentially, don't be afraid to be boring.

Many people approach, especially younger designers, and when I was teaching at Parsons to, you know, the sophomores, it's impossible to get them to just like, two spreads could never be the same. Instead, they were designing a series of posters; it was just like everything was always different. It's like, and the variety will come in the way that the content is presented, you know, images will interrupt text or, you know, sit side by side with them, there will be moments for that, but like, you need to establish that sort of system.

The important parameter related to that is that you need to understand what types of content I am dealing with like I have a primary or a series of texts. They all have different levels of significance, length of content, or whatever. I have functional things like image captions, endnotes, side notes, or footnotes, which are very important to think about and be generous to the reader. The footnotes are really important for a reader to understand this text. If so, the footnotes should be localized to the text, which should be side notes, or, you know, there really should be footnotes happening on that page so the reader can quickly refer to them if they're overly

academic. You don't want to interrupt the body of the text; you want that to be pure; you can always put the end notes at the end of that essay, and that's fine. Captions should always be somewhere close to the imagery, and depending on whether you want the imagery to be pure and unadulterated, maybe the caption should go on to the bottom of the page or just quietly below the image. There are other ways to handle this, but I'm allowed to think about these kinds of ways in which the content needs to be organized and sensitive to the reader and how they will be able to refer to things. If it's a context where it's heavily footnoted, but you don't want to interrupt the text, but you do want to make sure that they're visible, they're not just buried in the text, you might want to pull the footnotes outside of the body of text and use your margins. You might have, again, texts that are a different sort of, almost like, reading paces, like an introduction that you want it to read very quickly, in a way. So you could set it larger, you know, than the essays that are very long and need to take a lot of time to go through. You can think about the word count on a page being related to the time it takes to spend on that page. These are all factors that I think about. How pronounced do you want section breaks to be? Is it really important for there to be, like, strong, either visual or tactile, you know, differences between these things?

That's a great strategy sometimes where if you want to create kind of a signal that there's a break, you put a much heavier paper stock tipped in so that when you're flipping through, it kind of catches your thumb, and you there is a strong physical demarcation of space. As much as it is like a typographic thing, it could be a very quiet thing. It doesn't have to be so pronounced because they're loose thematic associations, but they're not so dramatic but need to be called out. Those are all criteria to keep in mind. Types of content: How you teach your reader how to read the text and where things are organized on a page, and again, don't be afraid to be boring. Then, you determine the layers of reading.

DG Everything you said circles back to this book you designed, Formulation. (Fig. V) The book has been typeset so beautifully. The image captions don't interrupt the images and are placed at the bottom of the page. The most interesting design choice and its elegant kind of way is the page numbers being mirrored in the margins.

BEN Thank you.

DG It brings me to my last question: If you could give your younger self a piece of advice when starting out as an editorial designer, what would it be? (Probably gonna steal and follow it)

BEN Be true to yourself. As a designer, I would say that to myself: try to ignore what you perceive as, you know, good or notable design around you. Avoid trying to avoid dialogue with that, and do what is most natural for you. There was a tendency to fight against myself a little bit when I first came out of school. As I said, I was in awe or admiring other designers like in my program, who had a particular tone of voice, and we're more animated in their graphic design or more fun or playful. I tried to dabble in that, but at the end of the day, I'm not quite that. I'm more like the mean, and there is a bit of a contrast within myself. And I don't think I know the contrast between what feels contemporary and what feels a bit more. It was a bit more classic and quiet in a way, and I fought against that. I was trying to push myself in other directions, and it's good to make yourself uncomfortable. It's good to follow your instincts and follow them through to their most like, elaborate, natural conclusions, whatever they might be. It's important to discover that to do the internal sort of reflection, to know that you have all these influences in your own life. All these things that make you a designer, who you are, either be it from your family, or your particular interest in art history, or the kind of music you listen to, all these things influence, and there's nobody who is like you. So why wouldn't you design the way that you think is most worthwhile designing? And just follow that? That's, I think, my biggest my biggest recommendation.

DG Thank you for giving me such a piece of great advice, and I will try to follow my best 100%.



FIG. V: Formulations: Architecture, Mathematics, Culture.