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## Typographic Dialogues: Local-Global

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### Custom Typeface as a Written Voice of the University

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**Abstract:** The word dialogue is a written or verbal exchange between two persons. In literary work, the purpose of a dialogue is adding authenticity and enjoyment. The work becomes more convincing and the person's view on the particular subject is presented. Likewise literary, typeface is never only a monologue. Letters combined into words and paragraphs are used for communication and exchange of the written voice. The purpose of developing a custom typeface is to present the voice of a client throughout the letter shapes. As part of the celebration for the hundred years of the University of Ljubljana a custom typeface was commissioned. The voice of the developed typeface shares the institution's free spirit: knowledge, creativity, diversity and belonging. High performing font works harmonically in big sizes, long readings and supports the identity system in an efficient way.

**Key words:** *custom typeface, typeface design, letter shapes, Slovenian typography, university, identity system, type family, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.*

#### 1. Introduction

The initiative for development of the custom typeface for University of Ljubljana was made as the celebration of a hundred years of its establishment. Development of this typeface initiated with the question: How to present the voice of institutions with letters? As the oldest and largest higher education and scientific research institution of Slovenia, the University carries out activities involving scientific research, education, art, expertise (Pejovnik, 2012). For the past hundred years, University of Ljubljana has been pursuing excellence with high quality, and so it has been contributing to the national identity in various ways. The typeface as part of the University's identity shall clearly present the

values and importance of the institution. The anniversary is presenting significant impact on typeface's design directions. In addition, commissioned typeface should function well in a variety of mediums from multifunctional use of University identity system, formal communication, student information, way-finding, academic and scientific articles.

## 2. Research

### 2.1 Slovenia

Slovenia is a small country located at the crossroads of main European cultural and trade routes. Historically, the territory of Slovenia had been a part of many different states, such as: the Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, the Republic of Venice, the Illyrian Provinces, Austro-Hungarian Empire and Yugoslavia (Orožen Adamič, 2004). The University of Ljubljana was founded right after the first world war, with the fall of Austro-Hungarian Empire. As Slovenia achieved independence from the empire, the founding of the University became possible in December 1919. Establishment of the University offered public education and provided Slovenian people a sense of independence, belonging, equal opportunities and solidarity (Repe, 2019). Aforementioned values set the foundation for design of a type family.



Figure.1 Postcard University of Ljubljana, around 1920, The Digital Library of Slovenia - dLib.si.

### 2.2 Slovenian Typography

Firstly, we analysed the important waves of an art movement influencing Slovenian letter-shapes. Research was focused on the period of University's establishment - the turn of the 20th century. The aim was to find very limited, yet unique letter forms presenting the heritage of Slovenian typography. In Slovenia, there were no independent type foundries producing metal type, therefore the majority of movable type were brought from Austria and Italy. Nevertheless, artists and architects were taking care of the editorial designs, books and magazines. For example, design of initials, vignettes, decorations, illustrations

and lettering. Artists were exploring the letter shapes and thus influenced the Slovenian typography. At the time of the University's establishment, the declining movement - art nouveau was manifested as organic and expressive shapes. Afterwards, innovative and radical avant-garde proposed more constructive and linear shapes which resulted as the contrary style to the above mentioned secession. Typography and forms of the letters were following the dominant art movements - art nouveau and avant-garde, which at the same time presented the foundations for style directions of typeface.



Figure.2 Engraved street signage, Ljubljana 2020. Old part of Ljubljana uses diverse street signage which was a reference for some of the letter shapes.



Figure.3 Hand lettering, Jože Plečnik, around 1920, archived at Jože Plečnik's House. Hand lettering made by of Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik, one of the most important Slovenian architets. The letters are influenced by art nouveau.

### 2.3 Workshop

We prepared the workshop accordingly with the UL design studio to gain their deeper overview of the University's identity system. The goal of the workshop was to better understand the design elements that evoke University's values. It allowed us to develop a common language with the design team and understand typographic goals and requirements of type family as a system. We established possible design directions and set the base for potential font style. The scope of the character range was set and technical font specifications were discussed to coincide with the future technological trends.

### 3. Typeface development

Research and workshop with graphic designers positively contributed to the overview of the system the typeface is going to take a part of. In order to convey the historic factors of the previous century, we suggested the design features should evoke qualities such as dignity, belonging, heritage and creativity.

#### 3.1 Dignity

Human dignity seems the fundamental value for the base of the development. The style direction of the typeface was influenced by Gill Sans, a humanist sans-serif typeface developed at the beginning of the 20th century. Gill Sans was commissioned as the competitor of the German geometric sans style faces (Tracy, 2003). Vertically cut terminals give the typeface human character, presenting human rights and equal possibilities. Those details of terminals look classic and modern at the same time, even more if presented as a formal-informal voice.



Figure.4 Dignity as humanistic style, vertical and horizontal terminals.

#### 3.2 Heritage

Roman proportions of uppercase characters are referencing the rich history of the city. Ljubljana was built on the roots of Roman city Emona from 100 years BC. The features presenting diverse heritage are also shown in the style of the typeface, hybrid of geometric and humanist sans. Geometric forms are in line with the avant-garde art movement in the University's early years of the establishment. Better understanding of the history can contribute to the awareness of the present and future as well. Letter shapes,

interwoven by the Slovenian art heritage are leaning on Slovenian past and at the same time being a base for a present design and future usage.



Figure.5 Heritage as roman proportions, geometric and humanistic shapes and recognizable forms.

### 3.3 Belonging

We found the value belonging as determining feature of the identity system. Referencing the students, as a representative part of the University, we developed some recognisable features to evoke the memorability of the typeface. Belonging is presented with recognisable national variants of glyphs J, K and R. Special focus was put on the combination of the letters 'L' and 'J'. The combination is commonly used in Slavic languages, especially Slovenian and Croatian. Evenmore, this combination is used in an important word - Ljubljana. Set in uppercase letters, it forms an unpleasant large amount of white space, commonly mistaken by the letter 'U'. For this reason, we proposed an alternative shape 'J.ss01', contextual alternative when 'J' follows the letter 'L'. Another feature, vertically cut diagonals of 'k', 'K' and 'R' correspond to the recognizable lettering of the most important slovenian architect, Jože Plečnik. Thoughtful features and forms are the characteristics that present the local authenticity and could be well presented as the high quality and excellence in the global environment.



Figure.6 Belonging as recognisable shapes 'K', 'R', 'G' and combination 'L J'.

### 3.4 Creativity

Geometrical bowls, generous x-height and open counter shapes stand for academic freedom of staff and students, especially the freedom of creativity. In a sense of a design, creativity is well interpreted within the italic forms. Basic shape of lowercase 'n', which is in professional terms set as the base for other italic shapes, shows an uncommon solution

of terminating a vertical stroke. Usually, stroke finishes in an upward direction, it rarely finishes on the baseline in the cursive movement. Special focus was put on the letter 'k', where the diagonal line does not touch the stem. Character set includes some alternative shapes for glyphs in roman and italic style. The font family speaks Central European languages and covers the character range of 220 languages. It is compact and efficient with four weights, Light, Regular, Medium and Bold, each weight is represented with the italics and optimized for print and digital media. Corresponding with the weight, character set includes a set of icons which could be used for University signage and wayfinding - from toilets to classroom.



Figure.7 Creativity as italic terminals, stylistic shapes, contextual alternates and icons.



Figure.8 Typeface Univerza Sans used in book Freedom of the Spirit, Božo Repe.

#### 4. Conclusions

Each typeface and language has its own uniqueness and distinctness, and Univerza Sans is definitely one of them. Some combinations of letters together are more prone to be written in Slovenia than in other countries, which we try to show the world by developing and evolving out typefaces and thereby encourage dialogue with the world. The voice of

developed typeface shares the institution's free spirit: knowledge, creativity, diversity and belonging. Typeface reflects the past of the institution and shares a unified voice of the future. High performing font works harmonically in big sizes, in long reading and supports the identity system in an efficient way. Versatile family has an impact on the University's communication with a single and unified voice. A small country like Slovenia can be presented and can contribute to the global world with a responsible design attitude. Design of a small nation can be presented with uniqueness, diversity and sense of ethnicity and quality. We believe Univerza Sans reaches a good result in our attempt to balance a dialog between tradition and novelty, and thus stimulate the kinship with the institution.

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