

TYPOGRAPHIC
TOURIST GUIDE
of AMSTERDAM

Bas Jacobs in SAFARI TYPO AMSTERDAM

Based on a documentary by Thomas Sipp

De Buitenkant



PART 1 – SAFARI TYPO AMSTERDAM

Bas Jacobs in

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A TYPOGRAPHIC
TOURIST GUIDE

*Based on a documentary
by Thomas Sipp*

*De Buitenkant
Amsterdam
2017*

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Bas Jacobs in

SAFARI TYPO AMSTERDAM

A Typographic Tourist Guide

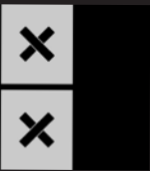
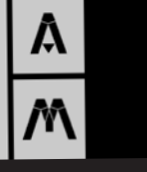
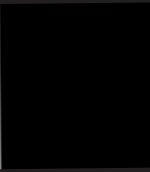
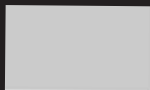
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SAFARI

UNE SÉRIE
DE THOMAS SÖR

TYP
O!





Behind the scenes of the documentary (from left to right: Guillaume Valeix, Nina Bernfeld, Bas Jacobs & Thomas Sipp)



The film crew in an intimate electric tuk tuk on the Reeburg in Amsterdam

PROLOGUE

All public lettering is a souvenir from the past. The words will not only communicate their message, but the letters also reveal something about the time they were born, by whom they were made, and especially why they were made. This typographic tour includes some historical examples which are typical for Amsterdam, and shows you how they relate to their contemporary counterparts.

This book gives an account of a documentary of the same name by the French filmmaker Thomas Sipp. Due to short length of the documentary (just 7 minutes), only a couple of spots of typographic interest have been selected for this tour. Those who cannot wait to extend their typographic experience of Amsterdam will find some more spots in the second part of this book, *Safari Typo Extravaganza*.

Like any city, a visit to Amsterdam can be much more interesting once you skip the Torture Museum or the Hard Rock Cafe and leave local tourist traps for what they are. First of all: you need a bike. Amsterdam is perfect for biking, as it allows you to explore the entire city within one day. This typographic safari will show you more of the city than the coffee shops and red light district your friends have seen last time they were there. It will even reveal new aspects and areas of the city you would have missed otherwise.

The focus of Sipp's documentary is *letters in public space*. Not the signs of commercial activities, not the omnipresent messages of advertising. Also not the words of individuals and underground movements. Because all those letters are very ephemeral. They tell us something about the city of



Film crew (from left to right: Guillaume Valeix, Thomas Sipp, Nina Bernfeld) at work in the Olympic Quarter [in front of barely- oh oh manganese – legible brick lettering]

today, but they probably won't last long. They tell us more about time rather than space. Instead, this tour will show you the letters that are as connected to a city as much as its buildings, and which will be there the next time you visit the city.

Lettering in public space is very different from type applied by graphic designers in their daily practice. The work by graphic designers has a more temporary character, even when it concerns shop windows and sign systems. The most prominent letters in the city are possibly commercial signs that are attached to the store fronts. But all those ugly, plastic illuminated signs and most other commercial pieces of typography can be easily ignored, for the simple fact that they are not interesting enough in terms of shapes, concept or use of material. The more permanent signs in public space are often integrated parts of buildings. It must be noted that those more permanent letterings are mostly not created by graphic designers or typographers, but often by architects, artists or sculptors. Architects simply do not design inconspicuous, harmonic text typefaces. They construct unorthodox geometric and decorated display type that cry for attention. As a result it's the kind of type that dominates public space, and that's the kind of lettering that dominates this short typographic tour.

The three subjects in the first part of this typographic tour (brick lettering & related house numbers, bridge type and shop signs) are illustrated by means of an historical example combined with a contemporary counterpart. The second part of the book offers some of the stories behind the letters, explaining the visual appearance of some prominent letters in Amsterdam.

PART 1

AMSTERDAM SCHOOL & ITS CONTEMPORARIES

Lettering in public space
by architects & artists



WHAT De Dageraad

ADDRESS Burgemeester Tellegenstraat 128

YEAR 1923

DESIGN architect Piet Kramer (& Michel de Klerk)

1A

1 BRICK LETTERING & HOUSE NUMBERS

1A DAGERAAD

1B OLYMPIC QUARTER

De Dageraad is a complex of two symmetrical building blocks, built on the south side of the city centre in 1923. It's an absolute highlight of the interbellum architecture style that dominated the city a century ago. Now called the Amsterdam School, it was a style that encompassed architecture, ornament and typography. You can find buildings created by this architectural movement all over the Netherlands, but in Amsterdam it was a particularly dominant style in many parts of the city. Amsterdam School buildings are characterised by brick constructions with extravagant brickwork. The round and organic forms of the buildings are continued in the integrated sculptures and ornaments, and yes, its letterings as well. This expressive architecture style left its mark on the city as no other, and is therefore the common thread of this short typographic tour.

Because architects also designed the letterings belonging to their buildings, these letters often merge with the building. They are usually constructed with the same bricks used for the rest of the building. Ornament, building and typography are one Gesamtkunstwerk, in which every aspect is equally important. Because the architects drew most of the letters on their building themselves, the result is rather different than, for example, the letters made by contemporary type designers. There are no polished subtleties. Expect to encounter some very expressive, strangely constructed, or flamboyant letter shapes and you can imagine what the architects liked to draw.



↑ Letter shapes have to follow the bricks



↑ Letter shapes can be anything

↓ Over-the-top numbers at De Dageraad, apparently designed without an obvious plan



1A

Bricks are the most important building blocks of the Amsterdam interbellum architecture, so it's logical that the bricks themselves sometimes also define the letter shapes. The T-junction at Burgemeester Tellegenstraat and Pieter Lodewijk Takstraat is a good spot to see how brick lettering should be done, while you can also observe a less successful example. The letters on the eastern corner, about P.L. Tak, could have had any shape the sculptor wanted. There is no relation between the material and the letter shapes. However, high on top of the western corner you can see the letters **DE DAGERAAD** constructed from bricks, embedded in the facade. The design of the letters is defined by the limitations of the shapes of the bricks. Its scale defines the shape of a curve. If the letters would have been bigger or smaller, the curves would have been different. Every element of the lettering, shape, color & weight, depends on the material it's been constructed from. And that's how it should be done. It's hard to make a lettering any better than this.

House numbers are always of minor importance, but they are nice details to love and appreciate. The house numbers of De Dageraad are specifically created for this housing block, and are even more extreme than any other detail of ornament, sculpture, architecture or typography to be found on this building. Perhaps it was the designer's first attempt at drawing the numbers 0-9? Perhaps he was a little out of it? Perhaps it was a deliberate choice? Perhaps it was the intern who had a bad day? Who knows. To be sure, they are gorgeous however you turn them, and they are still as expressive now as when they were designed. If these numbers would be a car, they wouldn't take you far. But oh man, it would be a ride to remember. There is hardly any relation between one number and the other. These numbers



WHAT Forever stoned

ADDRESS Eosstraat / Rheastraat

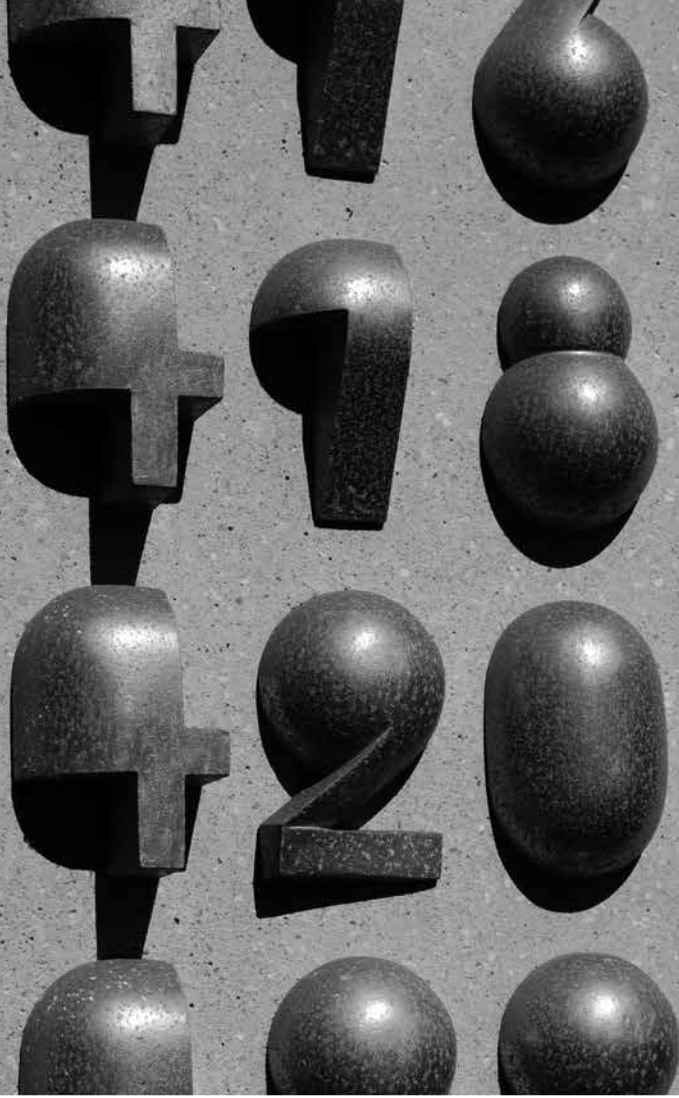
YEAR 2008

DESIGN artist Martijn Sandberg

1B

don't harmonize at all, but their forced marriage adds an extra layer of depth to De Dageraad.

In the second half of the 20th century architects tried to realize buildings in many different styles. Most of them, unfortunately, don't integrate well with the rest of the architecture in Amsterdam. So contemporary architects are confronted with a challenge: how to build a modern housing block in residential areas which blends in nicely with the existing, rather expressive brick buildings of the Amsterdam School? One area in which the spirit of the Amsterdam School has successfully been embedded into contemporary architecture is the Olympic Quarter. At the beginning of this century some 1,000 apartments have been realised just north of the Olympic Stadium. Brick buildings of course, though not as expressive and less detailed than the Amsterdam School buildings. When you walk through Eosstraat you will see that other architectural elements from the past are still in use: embedded brick lettering and custom-made house numbers. The flower boxes on the sidewalk contain geometric letters you probably won't be able to read immediately. The artists created some straightforward letters simply by integrating metal bricks in the brick pattern. No curves, no slants, no modifications, just plain bricks. It's neat. These letter shapes are not revivals, they are not reinterpretations of historical designs. These are contemporary creations that express the same spirit as their historical counterparts. These letters directly bridge a century of tradition in a very personal and modern way. Being completely integrated in the building, these letter forms create a strong visual image and keep the spirit of the Amsterdam School alive. In agreement with De Dageraad, this contemporary building block also includes



WHAT Olympic Quarter house numbers

ADDRESS Eosstraat 420

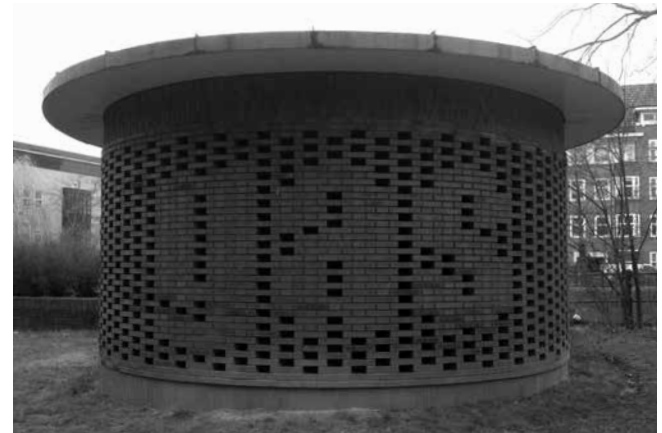
YEAR 2008

DESIGN artist Reinoud Oudshoorn

1B

its own customised house numbers. Each number has its own, individual character, and together they present a bit of a mystery. As exotic and out of space as their historical equivalents, these funky house numbers are definitely a statement and contribute to the individual character of these houses. It is exactly what the Amsterdam School architects also tried to achieve a century ago.

And while you are in the area anyway: do not forget to look at the GAS brick lettering on a small gas station, at the corner of Amstelveenseweg and Afroditekade. This small structure does everything right: the letters reveal the function of the building and are constructed with the same bricks as the rest of the building. But above all: the letter shapes arise from the shape and size of the bricks. Letters follow bricks. These architects not only managed to capture the same spirit as their Amsterdam School colleagues a century ago, but also had the same mastery of their brick letters as their colleagues in the interbellum period. Ten out of ten.



Gas station (2008) by Mulleners + Mulleners architects



2 BRIDGE TYPE

2A KURVERS BRIDGE

2B SPAARNDAMMERBUURT

There are many things that are uncertain in life. Amsterdam has many more bridges than Venice for example, but nobody seems to know exactly how many bridges Amsterdam boasts. Estimates just vary from 600 to 2,000. It probably depends on your definition of a bridge. Does that small span at the golf course count as a bridge too? Once you will explore the city, you'll soon notice that most of these bridges have something in common: they carry identical nameplates. These metal nameplates consistently use the same typeface.

Meanwhile this bridge typeface has been digitised a couple of times, and is therefore regularly applied on posters and other ephemeral signs across the city. The strong association with Amsterdam only increased with the digital existence of this bridge typeface. If you want a text to speak loud and clear that it has to do with Amsterdam, this is the font to use. Graphic designers know how to find their way to this font when they want to add that local Amsterdam voice. Today there is no typeface that beats conveying that typical Amsterdam feeling.

Should art historians still debate among themselves what *the* Amsterdam School typeface is, they can all relax. There isn't a specific typeface that is representative of this architectural style, in the same way as no specific building represents the entire movement. But the letterings made by Anton Kurvers belong to the most successful ones, because he found a proper balance between outspoken, characteris-

WHAT Amsterdam Bridge Type

ADDRESS Reebrug (Reestraat/Prinsengracht)

YEAR 1931

DESIGN anonymous (architect and graphic artist Anton Kurvers?)

2A

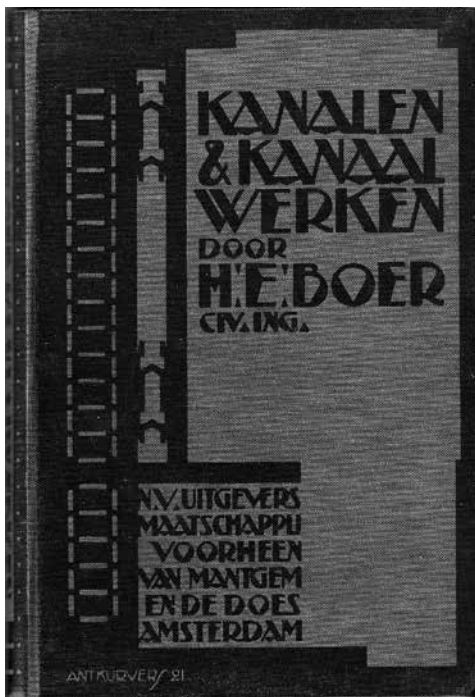
MIRAKELBRUG

PRINSENSLUIJ

REESLUIJ

↑ Examples of nameplates

← Book cover by Anthon Kurvers with a similar prominent construction of the E



tic letter shapes on the one hand, and an equal rhythm and conventional harmony (resulting in better legibility) on the other. His colleagues were less concerned about legibility, and ended up creating more frivolous letter shapes. It may be nice for a specific building, though it is not suitable for extensive information. The bridge letter is a nice example of a distinct letter that is not too peculiar. Therefore this typeface can still be used for a variety of purposes.

Although it's still not 100% sure who designed the most famous Amsterdam School alphabet, it is assumed that Anton Kurvers is the designer of that typeface. There are many similarities between the bridge letters and other lettering by Kurvers, for example on street furniture (*Gemeentegiro*) or book covers (*Kanalen & Kanaalwerken*), so the assumption is pretty safe. Originally educated as an architect, Kurvers was mainly active as a painter, decorator and designer. His alphabets are typical for the Amsterdam School: constructed, kooky and very decorative.

Many bridges in town have a name. If any bridges are still unnamed, it is likely that a name will be invented for them soon by active local history clubs. All named bridges in Amsterdam bear identical nameplates, which were designed around 1930 by the Public Works department where Kurvers served as deputy office manager. More or less identical shapes can be seen on buildings of the same period, there is a strong architectural influence to these bridge letters. Many architects of that time were actively involved publishing magazines (such as H. Th. Wijdeveld's famous *Wendingen*), often designing book jackets or creating other graphic material. Much more than today, drawing letters by hand was an activity architects at the time engaged in. Nowadays architects mostly don't progress beyond scaling



WHAT Railway crossover Westerpark

ADDRESS Westerpark 1

YEAR 2010

DESIGN typographic designer Janno Hahn

2B

Helvetica in their drawings, and don't even wonder about the relationship between the letters and their buildings.

Contemporary architects, designers and sculptors who are designing a new public lettering are facing a challenge. How should that lettering look? A literal copy of historical designs is creative poverty. A modernistic design wouldn't relate to the existing historical environment of Amsterdam. New designs are required that address both issues: they will have to be contemporary creations, but with a certain relation to their historical surroundings. For the by now classic Amsterdam bridge lettering there are numerous contemporary typographic equivalents in the city. For example the SPAARNDAMMERBUURT lettering on the bridge near Westerpark. Being an entrance gate to the Spaarndammer neighbourhood, this lettering does not mention the name of the bridge but welcomes you instead to the district. The lettering is attached to a balustrade at the top of a bridge that functions as an entrance gate to the neighbourhood. The young, local designer Janno Hahn designed these bespoke letters for this location in 2010, 80 years after the archetypal bridge letter had been introduced. Although these fat, metal letters look completely different than the traditional Amsterdam bridge letters, there are enough similarities to consider this piece an appealing successor. The non-parallel strokes in the bulky A reminds us of the E in the Kurvers type for example. Having a voice of its own, this lettering is still maverick enough to fit into Amsterdam's public space. With its own distinctive character, this is another example of a contemporary lettering that continues the local tradition of eccentric display letters on architectural structures. Kudos.

3 SHOP SIGNS

3A TUSCHINSKI

3B FROZEN FOUNTAIN

Can't get enough of lettering? Continue to tour the city by observing shop signs and other letterings on facades. Like any European city, Amsterdam is flooded with commercial signs attached to shop premises which are all clamouring for attention. Almost all of them are made without love, dedication or an eye for detail, focused as they are on bringing across a certain message. Cheap and quickly produced, tiresome to watch, completely uninspired. Typographic plastic junk. Luckily there are also some exceptions.

The Tuschinski theatre, built in 1921, is of itself already an obscure piece of architecture. Not a typical example of the Amsterdam School style, this cinema, with its combination of Art Deco and Jugendstil styles, is a building to worship. Abraham Tuschinski spent a fortune when he asked the young and unknown architect Hijman Louis de Jong to design a movie theatre for townspeople and country folk. Somebody lost his mind while creating the extremely bizarre letters above the main entrance (THEATER TUSCHINSKI). The most interesting piece of lettering of this building, however, is to be seen at the back of the theatre, on Reguliersdwarsstraat. Those *Tuschinski* letters are not designed 2D on paper and then forwarded to a metal company for realisation in 3D. No, these letters were actually designed in 3D. How cool is that? It's certainly something you hardly see nowadays. Mostly material and size don't influence letter shapes at all. But in this case the relieved surfaces directly defined the final shape. The combination of

WHAT back of the Tuschinski theatre

ADDRESS Reguliersdwarsstraat

YEAR 1921

DESIGN architect Hijman Louis de Jong

3A



organic shapes with illogical contrasting elements within the same letters, makes it plausible that the designer didn't have any limitations. It's hard to make letters any more sexy than this.

In the interbellum period, plastics were not yet a mass commodity, but currently it's the standard choice for shop owners when they want to attach a commercial sign store front. This perfectly demonstrates the averageness of craftsmanship throughout almost everything that is currently built or produced in the Netherlands. But if you look carefully, you can still spot some exceptions. For example on Prinsengracht. When the Frozen Fountain, a product and furniture design shop, asked graphic designer René Knip to design their corporate identity, it was a logical choice to add a 3D-lettering in a corresponding style on the facade. The word 'welcome' precedes the company's name in five languages, all available space on the facade has been occupied. These letters, like almost all letters created by René Knip, fuse with the cultural legacy of the city but are still very contemporary. His environmental alphabets all have a strong physical dimension, one which is often absent in commercial signs. As with the Tuschinski letters, these blocky letters don't integrate in the architecture (which is inevitable in this case, as the letters and buildings are centuries apart) but proclaim the outspoken character which I consider typical for Amsterdam. This sign is again a good example of contemporary lettering in public space which nicely merges with the typical spirit of Amsterdam. With respect for the local heritage, these letters have a strong architectonic feeling. Fits perfectly with Amsterdam's vibe.

WHAT Frozen Fountain design shop

ADDRESS Prinsengracht 645

YEAR 2001

DESIGN typographic designer René Knip

3B

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Weidmann

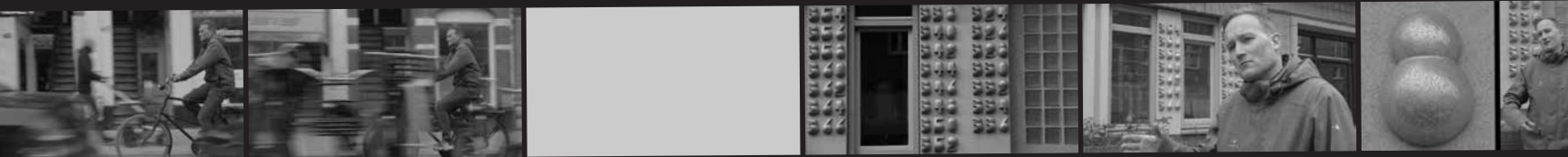
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arte



under
ware



PART 2

LETTERS WITH A STORY

There is more to be seen in letters than the words they form. Are there letterings that reveal things you cannot read?



WHAT *I amsterdam* sign

ADDRESS variable (Museum square)

YEAR 2005

DESIGN KesselsKramer (logo design), Colombo (3D version)

4

4 TYPOGRAPHIC EIFFEL TOWER

We will start this alternative typographic tour with the most famous piece of typography currently in Amsterdam. It's not a personal favourite. On the contrary. But because all your friends have made selfies in front of these letters, we can't ignore this Instagram moment. Most of the local letterings are small-scaled. Amsterdam is not a city known for grand gestures. Amsterdam has no large, landmark buildings like the Sydney Opera House, the Eiffel tower in Paris or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. So how do you show your friends at home you are in Amsterdam? By taking a picture in front of some letters.

Ever wondered how Amsterdam is visualised? Any area of the Netherlands (and the rest of the world) is mostly visualised by a building, a bridge or a landscape. Except for Amsterdam, which is mostly visualised by typography! When you visit a national restaurant website where you first have to select the region, you would have to click on an image of the *I amsterdam* letters to browse the restaurants of the Dutch capital. Maybe the only other letters in the world which have a similar function, are to be found in Los Angeles. Located on top of a hill, the letters HOLLYWOOD are very visible, and became an icon for the city of LA. You would love to take a picture of these letters to show your friends you've been to LA.

So the *I amsterdam* letters are the local Eiffel tower. They were made up by city marketeers, and due to the absence of a prominent building they are commonly embraced by tourists as proof you've been to Amsterdam. This touristic slogan became a tourist attraction by itself, which



Typographic selfie stick terror



says enough about the profundity of the average tourist. Despite its size – the *I amsterdam* sign is 2 meters high and 23 meters long – these large metal letters are moved around from time to time. You can often see, touch and climb them on Museumplein, but they can also turn up at any other major spot in the city. Unlike the famous letters in Los Angeles, these letters are portable. Although the Hollywood letters are much higher (15 meters instead of 2), the *I amsterdam* letters are a lot more popular with tourists because they are always located in a central spot in the city. You won't have to experience a hard time by walking up a dry hill for hours, these letters are patiently waiting for you at your touristic hot spot. Remarkably, both typographic signs, in Los Angeles as well as Amsterdam, were originally only meant to stay for two years maximum, but became (or are gradually becoming, as in the case of Amsterdam) an icon for the city. Feel free to add your own *I amsterdam* selfie to those other 6,000 pictures that are taken in front of it each day.

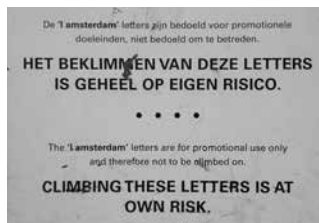
Local citizens, however, have mixed feelings about the sign. It came to existence at a time when most museums in the city were closed, when work in progress for the new underground raised obstacles everywhere, a time when the city could use some extra tourists and extra attention. But meanwhile the number of tourists in the city centre has created a monoculture, and this sign is the ultimate expression of it. In 2015 locals wanted to get rid of the sign by setting it on fire. They did not want city branding anymore, and let the city be itself: a living organism instead of a brand. Giving back the city to the locals by burning down a typographic sign? They didn't succeed. One of the other reasons locals don't embrace this sign may have something to do with its super smooth design. Whereas the Holly-



↑ More typographic selfie stick terror. The inevitable Underware selfie (from left to right: Bas Jacobs, Akiem Helmling, Sami Kortemäki), one of the 6,000 selfies taken in front of the *I amsterdam* letters on 25 March 2016.



↑ Flowers and candles at the farewell party, 23 September 2015. Carried by the sound of a trumpet, a few locals were planning to set the *I amsterdam* letters on fire and usher in a new era for the city.



wood lettering is constructed out of sheets of corrugated material, and breathes a largely do-it-yourself spirit in a vernacular style, the design of the *I amsterdam* sign is in line with the corporate identity of the city. You'll soon find out that this corporate identity is omnipresent. The typeface used for the sign is Avenir Black. Designed by Adrian Frutiger in 1988, it is used for all official communication by the city council. Avenir is the voice of local authority. This sign is not the voice of the people, but the voice of the regents.

If the city council wants its locals to embrace the sign, why don't they ask them to design a new *I amsterdam* sign themselves? A new one every year? And why just one? The biggest advantage of the current *I amsterdam* sign is that it can be easily multiplied. It's not an option for the Hollywood letters or the Eiffel tower. Currently there are already 3 identical *I amsterdam* signs (airport, Museum square, and a travelling version). But if locals were given the opportunity to design their own *I amsterdam* sign, there could be dozens of signs across the city. They might all be different, and be replaced from time to time. There might be hidden beauties among them, it could be the start of many more and richer stories. And who needs a contrived slogan like *I amsterdam* anyway when the sign could just simply say *Amsterdam*. If the city council had guts, it would replace the *I amsterdam* sign which works so well for them with letterings made by their own community. Unfortunately the city is now stuck with this commercial sign. These letters are dull and lifeless. Irrespective of the lively throng of people taking selfies every day, it's still a dead sign. Maybe that is what's currently missing. This sign needs a soul. Even so, nobody has thrown themselves off them in despair, and they have yet to be successfully burnt.



WHAT National Monument

ADDRESS Dam square

YEAR 1956

DESIGN type designer Jan van Krimpen

5

5 THE PERFECTIONIST EMPTY LINE

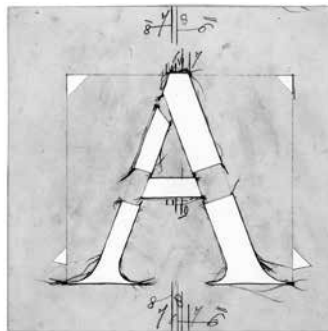
Okay. You've now been confronted with the most unavoidable public lettering. But before we continue, it must be said that spotting public lettering across Amsterdam may be a pleasure for the senses, but less so for the inquisitive mind. Don't expect to find any interesting content to read. The words are either names, descriptions, contemplative poems, or other some text most people fail to understand.

Let's visit another Amsterdam tourist classic, situated right in the middle of the busiest square in town: Dam square. Bypass the tourist queue at Madam Tussauds for now, and look the other way. In the middle of the Dam square you will find a World War II monument, with its eye-catching 22-meter high conical pillar standing in front of a concave wall. This monument is a popular hangout for stoners who cannot read the long text on the wall because the poem is in Dutch. But don't worry, the text is so abstract and contemplative that native Dutch people also don't have a clue what it is about. As said before, public lettering is not meant for the inquisitive mind. Just watch and enjoy.

The lettering by itself is interesting for me personally, because it has been designed by the highly respected type designer Jan van Krimpen. He was known to be the ultimate perfectionist. We (Underware) ourselves are not easily satisfied with our own results, and we don't consider our typefaces good enough easily. But perhaps Jan van Krimpen was even worse in this respect. "A man hard to satisfy." A very gifted type designer, a man of standing, and a perfectionist, he designed an important, permanent inscription at the end of his career at probably the most prominent



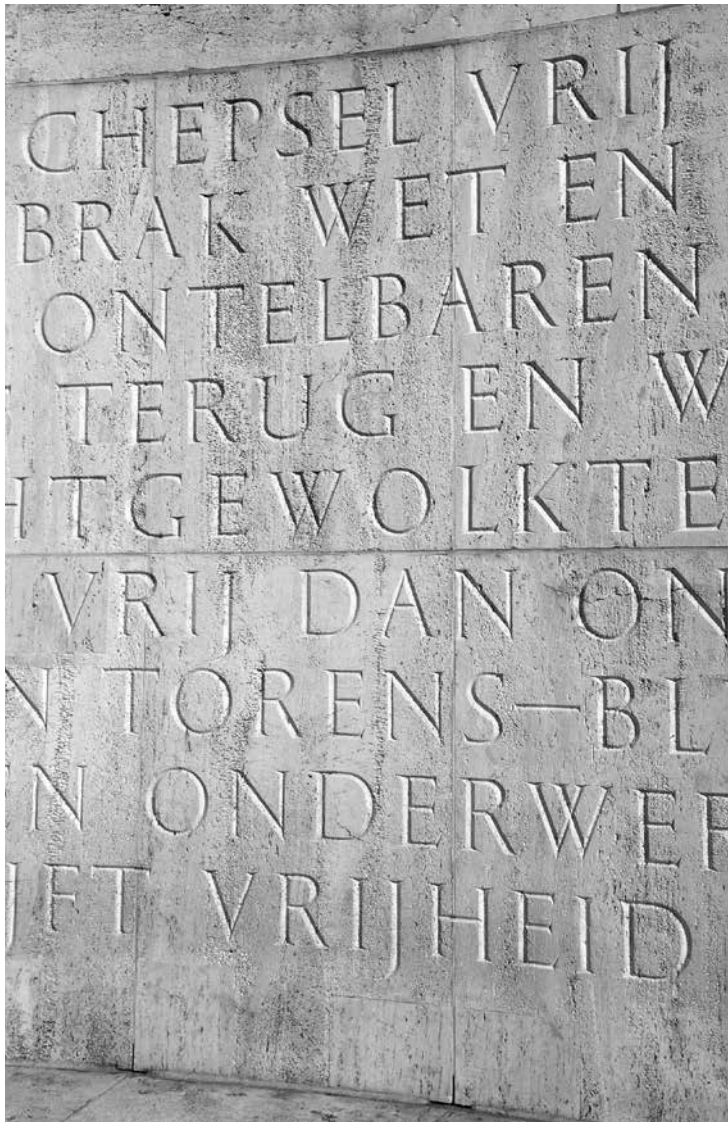
↑ National Monument
on Dam square



Stencil used by →
stonecutter Veldheer

location in Amsterdam. That must be quite something. As a designer van Krimpen, who focused on traditional book typography throughout his career, developed a very strong, personal idiom within the conventional genre of book typefaces. Every typeface he designed can easily be recognised as his own creation. That's quite an achievement in itself, because there is only limited opportunity for individual expression when designing a classic book typeface. Some letters, like the elegant R or the majestic C are typically *van Krimpen*. The most recognisable letter would be his capital S. There is no other type designer in the world who drew an S like this. Almost every S drawn by van Krimpen is a masterpiece.

But now comes the thing which is striking and puzzling at the same time. Although the making of this monument took several years, there was little time to design this large inscription. Jan van Krimpen preferred to design all texts as a whole, as he did for the smaller letterings on this monument. That means designing the complete lettering on a single, very large sheet of paper, to have precise control over spacing and details. He estimated it would take him three months (!) to design the lettering for just this concave wall. I will think of that next time I'm designing a poster on my computer under a tight deadline. Three months for drawing the complete text as a whole, the schedule unfortunately did not allow this. So instead van Krimpen designed all 24 letters for the inscription on a 100% scale, and simultaneously made a much smaller scale model on cardboard to arrange and space the complete text. The stonecutter created stencils based on his drawings, and used those stencils to draw the letters with a pencil on the large stones.



Oh oh, that empty line at the bottom... yep.

The idea of designing a classic layout for a poem quickly arose, making it symmetrical by having five lines of text on the top half as well as five lines on the bottom half. Even though it was Jan van Krimpen himself who suggested asking the Dutch poet Roland Holst to write a poem for the inscription, he may well have come to regret that decision fairly quickly. The poet misunderstood the approximate number of letters he was allowed, thinking that van Krimpen also counted word spaces. Which he hadn't. As a result his text turned out to be much shorter than originally estimated. Only 548 letters instead of the expected 650 to 660 (including word spaces). Suddenly van Krimpen was confronted with a problem to design a perfectly symmetric inscription, but with a much shorter text. He could have enlarged the letters, for example, to compensate the lack of letters, or modify the spacing to still fill the complete wall from top to bottom, or create margins, or come up with another solution. Mais... c'est l'heure de pointe... perhaps he didn't have the time? Also it wasn't very helpful that the architect changed the size of the wall ten months before the unveiling, and still demanded a monumental, symmetric inscription with five lines above as well as below the joint.

Was this the first time in his life van Krimpen accepted a less than perfect result? Now he ended up with 5 lines of text on the top half, and only 4 on the bottom half. Gone is the monumental symmetry. Instead, there is a massive white, empty line at the bottom of the monument. The white line at the bottom shows the inability of one of the greatest type designers of its time. A proof that even the most extreme perfectionists have to make a compromise at some point in their lives. Even when it concerns one of the most prominent works in their career.



WHAT Post-modernistic architrave

ADDRESS Kleine Gartmanplantsoen/Max Euweplein

YEAR 1990

DESIGN architect Kees Spanjers & graphic designer Wim Wandel

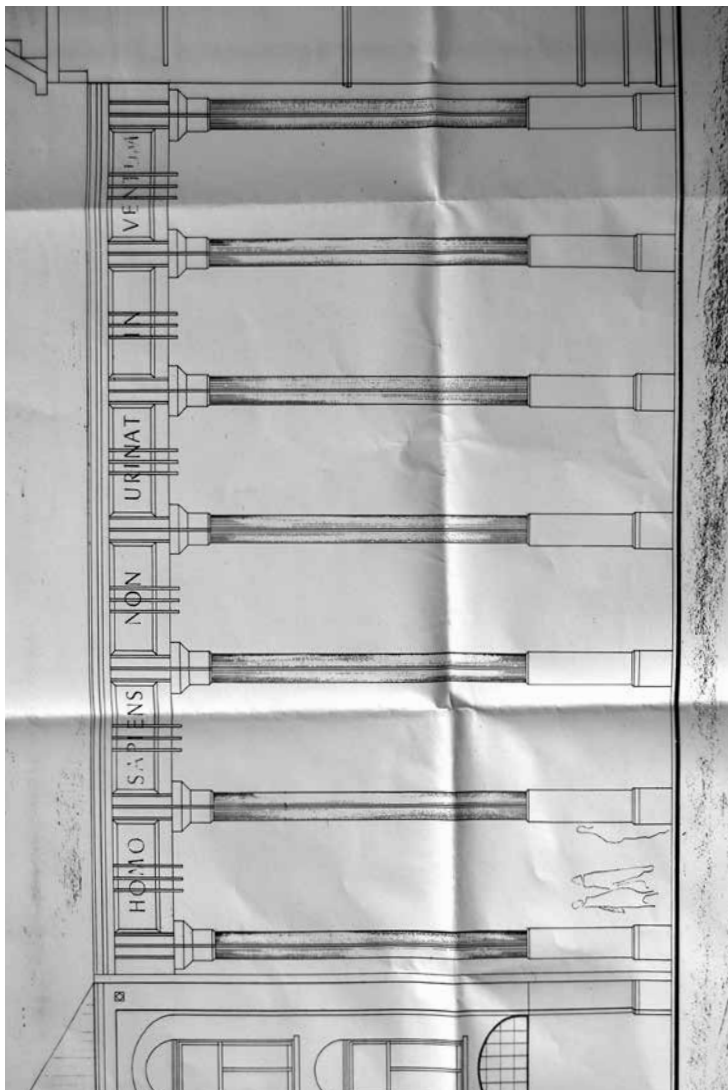
6 WORDS THAT DON'T GIVE A PEE

Nowadays the Max Euwe square is an eclectic mix of several styles and inspirations, it is not difficult to detect its genesis and period of origin. When the architects Kees Spanjers and Pieter Zaanen were asked in the early 1980s to develop a plan for the former prison, they quickly ran into hot political water. The square they imagined, connecting the Kleine Gartmanplantsoen and the Vondelpark, couldn't be realised the way they envisaged. There were five former warden's houses, then squats, that forced them to rethink their plans. In the 1980s there were numerous squats in Amsterdam, including these small houses. The architects actually wanted to tear them down, making the new Max Euwe square visible from the Kleine Gartmanplantsoen. The city council, however, had promised the squatters they could stay. What also played a big role was the fact that some years before, in the late 1970s, a plan to develop an enormous hotel at this top location had been hatched. The massive public protests against these plans increased the determination of the squatters. The long-standing political feud created lot of opposition against the architects. Once the city council had decided that 3 out of the 5 houses had to stay, the architects not only had to change their plans again to make sure the new square wouldn't be hidden from view, but also had to come up with a good solution for the gap which suddenly arose between the remaining houses and the adjacent building. Their solution can still be seen nowadays: a heavy post-modernistic colonnade, which runs parallel to the road. We have not yet reached the times when we will appreciate post-modernistic structures.



These letters in Santa Croce church in Florence served as an inspiration for the Optima typeface

The project architect Kees Spanjers decided that the architrave on top of the colonnade should carry a text. From the very first, drawings of this colonnade contained a Latin text. “Nobody at the city council had the guts to ask what it meant”, according to the architect. The institute that commissioned the project didn’t have a clue what the text was about. The architect didn’t have to think twice about the text. A saying he remembered from his student days neatly expressed the frustration he had experienced during all those years of struggle: *HOMO SAPIENS NON URINAT IN VENTUM*. Together with the graphic designer Wim Wandel, the architect selected a typeface that relates as much to Imperial Roman inscriptions as the design of the post-modernistic colonnade resembles the Trajan column. If you study this new structure from up close, you’ll see there is nothing classical about it. But from a distance it might give the impression of classical antiquity. The Demibold weight of the Optima family has been used, a typeface designed by Herman Zapf in the early 1950s. Clearly inspired by Roman stone carving, its capitals derive from classic Roman capitals. More precisely: they are based on the lettering on the floor of Santa Croce church in Florence. However, they don’t look like or pretend to be Imperial Roman capitals. Optima is classically Roman in proportion, but doesn’t have real serifs. It could be regarded as a contemporary interpretation of a classic style. Maybe that’s why the architect considers the typeface to be in line with his own post-modernistic approach? Optima’s letters have a slight swell at the terminals, leaving a suggestion of a serif. Since its release by Linotype in 1958, the type family has been widely used for a great variety of applications. Nowadays the chances are small that a typeface like Optima



In July 1987 architect Kees Spanjers first introduced a Latin text on the architrave. Here is a detail of that notorious drawing. Because nobody questioned the text, it remained on every drawing in the following years, and was eventually eternalized in concrete.

would be selected for an architrave like this. It is more likely that the popular Trajan would be the obvious choice today, as it is much closer to the classic Roman capitals than Optima. It even has serifs. However, Carol Twombly's Trajan was still too novel when the architect Spanjers and graphic designer Wandel sat together to select a typeface for the Latin text. Why did they select Optima for this occasion? Why not design a more appropriate, bespoke lettering as was the case with the National Monument on Dam square? Or perhaps this ill-defined choice is a fitting expression of the post-modernistic styling of this construction?

If you know your Latin, you also know what the text says: *a wise man doesn't piss into the wind*. It is pseudo-Latin, but it sums up the architect's frustration with regard to the whole process. As he was forced to produce yet another version of the portal, he added this Latin text to give vent to his feelings. As a souvenir for the city, the architect as it were peed over his own design by putting this facetious text on top of his own building. Thirty years after the portal was put in place, Barlaeus grammar school – located across the street – still asks its students to translate this fake Latin text as a grammar exercise. This text, once born from rebelliousness, still has an educational value apparently. It's typical for this era, the 1980s. Not just its design, but also the fact that this text occurs in a prominent place in the city. It's a permanent souvenir of turbulent times, though most people will miss the message. In a country like France, a quote by Descartes would probably have been added to the classical architrave, such as *Cogito ergo sum* or a similar civilized saying. Here, however, the text reads like a student prank. This, too, is Amsterdam.



WHAT Heineken Brouwerij

ADDRESS Stadhouderskade 78

YEAR 1934

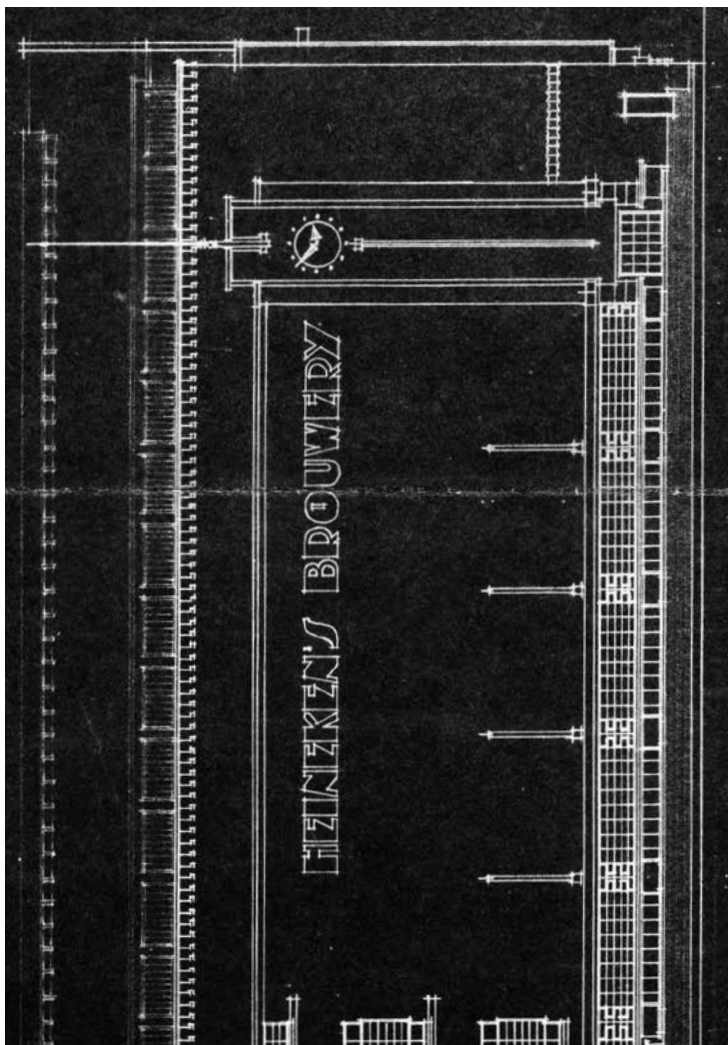
DESIGN architect Bert Johan Ouëndag

7

7 THE VISIONARY WORD SPACE

Gerard Heineken made a smart decision when he moved his brewery to Stadhouderskade – then named Buitensingel – 150 years ago. At the time, Buitensingel was located outside the city. It allowed him to expand his company, and several buildings were erected on the site. The facade of the building which is located at the corner with Ferdinand Bolstraat, made by architect B.J. Ouëndag in 1924-1926, still boasts a large lettering: HEINEKEN BROUWERIJ. The shiny gold metal letters are 1.2 meters high. They are – somewhat bumpy – curved to reflect the sun as well as the company's ambitions. These letters proclaim they are here to stay. And after a century they still shine brightly.

The style of the letters is pretty typical of the time they were drawn. Nowadays historians argue about what constitutes the quintessential Amsterdam School letter. It's only logical, because it doesn't exist. There isn't just one typeface that embodies this versatile architectural style, it would have to be many different typefaces. However, they would all have something in common. They would look rather engineered, and consist of a combination of geometrical, straight lines together with exotic, decorated elements. In that sense, the lettering on this facade isn't typical of the Amsterdam School, rather, it is more representative of the 1920s in general. This facade boasts a rather gentle lettering, containing a modest beauty that still reflects the time in which it was made. Letters like H, E and B have a very high middle bar, their trousers are at half-mast. They reflect contemporary fashion. Yes, these letters have a soul. Oh boy. If they were alive, you would invite them and party all night



The letters on the original drawing are rather different from the actual letters which still exist today. The Amsterdam School style of lettering was dropped in favour of a more conventional style. The E and N changed, the Y was replaced with the Dutch digraph IJ. As it was still common for architects to draw all required letters and numbers themselves at the time, in 1932, it's safe to assume that this lettering was drawn by architect Bert Ouëndag.

long. But what most striking is the extremely large word space between the two words.

In 1954 Gerard's grandson Alfred "Freddy" Heineken went on a six-week holiday to the United States. The time spent in the US changed his life. "I had been able to look into the future. I very much enjoyed the way of life there. I was inspired and enthusiastic about beer. The management team at the time was made up of people who had no direct affinity with advertising. Advertising as such did not yet exist. Sometimes the adverts were made depicting a young lady and a bottle, but that missed the point which was what was happening emotionally. I came straight back from America and had read everything there was to read on the subject. Then I thought: if it works in America, then it will also work here". At the time the company was known as *Heineken's Brewery*. Alfred Heineken wanted the apostrophe & S to be removed. The company trucks carried the lettering *Heineken's Brewery*, which made Alfred Heineken wonder whether they were selling breweries or beer. It took him six years to have his way, but eventually the genitive construction was removed. Next he asked himself: "Is that word beer really necessary? Do people think we are selling Chocomel or Coca-Cola? If we just change it to Heineken we can write it in larger letters."

It must have been towards the end of the 1950s, when 'S had been removed from the facade, at a time when Heineken acknowledged the growing importance of marketing. The brewery shifted from a product-focused to a marketing-focused company, and since that time all their beers carry the label *Heineken* instead of *Bavarian*, *Dortmunder*, *Pilsner*, etc. They were no longer selling a particular beer, they began selling the brand Heineken. It involved chang-



The Heineken brewery, here still with the original 'S, makes a cameo appearance in the documentary at 01:40



The massive word space. 'S' has been removed, but the mounting pins were left on the wall. If you look carefully, you can still see them.



← Product-focused beer label, selling a particular type of beer

→ Brand-focused beer label, selling Heineken.



ing the labels, the lettering on the trucks, and the lettering on the brewery in Amsterdam itself. Removing the 'S' from the exterior of the building was completely in line with this policy change. However, the wide space between the two words that resulted after the 'S' had been removed, was something that hadn't been taken into account. During a thorough cleaning of the facade in 1972, all letters were removed. Not only the bricks were cleaned, but also the letters themselves were restored and freshly gilded. Once reinstalled to the building, the letters were put back in their original position. Of course reinstalling them would have been the right moment to reduce that massive space between the words, and give these words a normal word spacing. It didn't happen. We can only guess why. Now we are left with an extremely large word space, a massive gap. Rather than harp on this 'mistake', however, we should be grateful. Every day this simple space between two words reminds us of an Amsterdam business man who took the American dream to the Netherlands and turned his company into a multinational. At present Heineken is the second largest brewery in the world, it all started, in a way, by removing 'S'. Perhaps this large gap was left on the building on purpose, to remind us that this massive word space symbolises a visionary man.

Une série de

Thomas Sipp

Avec

Bas Jacobs

Avec la voix de

Anaïs Demoustier

Sarah Arnold

**Direction artistique,
story-boards et dessins**

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Damien Gautier

Thomas Leblond

Céline Jobard

Elliott Grunewald

Montage

Guiliano Papcchioli

Musique

Studio Cairos

Tryfonas Vlachopoulos

Jan Vysocky

SAFARI TYPO AMSTERDAM

This book was published to coincide with the launch of the documentary of the same name by Thomas Sipp. His short film was shot in Amsterdam on 24 March 2016 and was released by ARTE France in January 2017. Amsterdam was one of seven cities portrayed during a typographic safari as part of a series by Thomas Sipp.

The number of ideas for a typographic portrait of Amsterdam would have been sufficient to fill at least five documentaries. They have not been realised, however, due to a number of reasons, including an overwhelming shortage of time. This publication is a cheap excuse to squeeze in a couple of killed darlings for an extended typographic experience in Amsterdam.

Other episodes in the
SAFARI TYPO
series by Thomas Sipp

BARCELONA

WITH LAURA MESEGUER

BERLIN

WITH ERIK SPIEKERMANN

LONDON

WITH NADINE CHAHINE

MARSEILLE

WITH TABAS

MONTREAL

WITH ETIENNE AUBERT-BONN

PARIS

WITH DAVID POUILLARD

PARIS

WITH JEAN FRANÇOIS PORCHEZ

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If you love letters, you'll love books as well

Here are a couple of bookstores with interesting publications on design and typography. Amsterdam has many other good bookstores as well. You won't regret visiting them.

Books on typography and design

A Nijhof & Lee *Located at the University of Amsterdam's Special Collections & Allard Pierson Museum.*
Oude Turfmarkt 129
<http://bijzonderecollecties.uva.nl>

B Mendo *Books on graphic design, but also fashion, lifestyle & a lot of photography.*
Berenstraat 11
www.mendo.nl

C Minotaurus *In addition to many books about books, they mostly offer private press publications.*
Sint Antoniesbreestraat 3D
www.boekwinkelminotaurus.nl

Classic Amsterdam bookstores

D Scheltema *5 floors of books. XXL, find pleasant surprises, also second-hand books. Open 7 days/week.*
Rokin 9
www.scheltema.nl

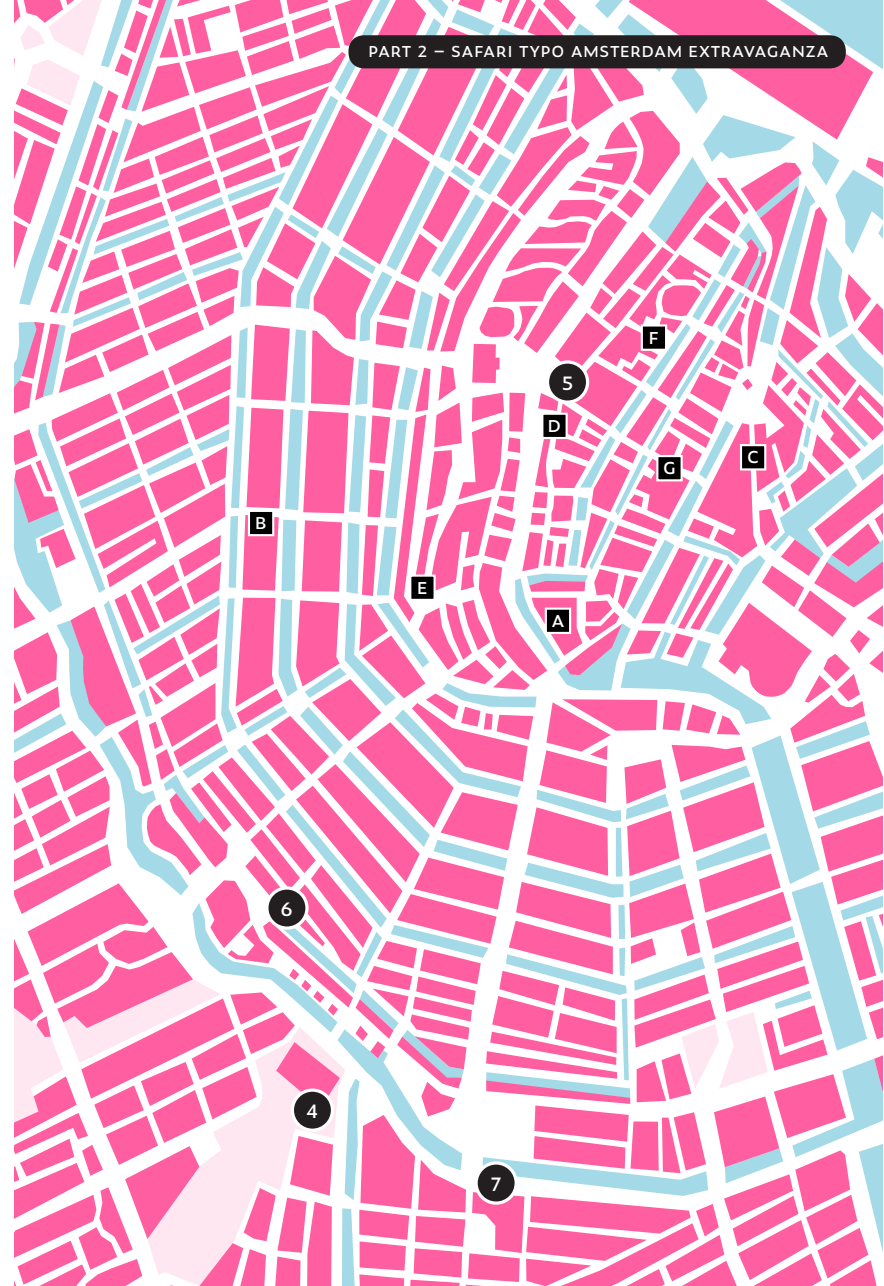
E Athenæum *Large collection of magazines and international newspapers, as well as design books.*
Spui 14
www.athenaeum.nl

F San Seriffe *Insider tip. Keywords: #small #alternative #art Limited opening hours.*
Sint Annenstraat 30
www.san-serriffe.com

Typographic antiquarians

G Antiquariaat Kok *Find antiquarian typography books on the 2nd floor. Ask for permission to use the elevator.*
Oude Hoogstraat 18
<http://kok.nvva.nl>

H Boek & Glas *Outside city centre, nice collection of books about type and typography. Limited opening hours.*
Agatha Dekenstraat 47
www.boekglas.home.xs4all.nl



SAFARI TYPO **AMSTERDAM**

Safari Typo Amsterdam is a brief typographic tour of letters in public space in the Dutch capital, presented by type designer Bas Jacobs. If you're willing to leave the well-trodden touristic paths, let letters guide you across Amsterdam. If you have seen enough touristic traps, or don't want to see them at all, this tour will take you to various parts of the city you would otherwise have missed. Discover how architects, artists and designers left their mark on the city by means of the letters they created on buildings, on bridges, on monuments and elsewhere. This pocket-size book is easy to carry with you as you explore the city. This book is only meant for tourists ready for a mind-expanding experience.

Filmed in Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Based on a documentary by Thomas Sipp

PART 1

AMSTERDAM SCHOOL & ITS CONTEMPORARIES

LETTERING IN PUBLIC SPACE
BY ARCHITECTS & ARTISTS

How did architects leave their typographic mark on the city during the interbellum period, and how do contemporary architects and designers respond to this?

Featuring letter forms by Piet Kramer, Martijn Sandberg, Reinoud Oudshoorn, Anton Kurvers, Janno Hahn, Hijman Louis de Jong & Rene Knip.

PART 2

LETTERS WITH A STORY

THE EXTRAVAGANZA
UNCENSORED TOUR

Can letters tell you a story which you cannot directly read from the letters themselves? The stories behind the letters are as interesting as the letter shapes themselves.

This uncensored safari features letter forms by Adrian Frutiger, Jan van Krimpen, Hermann Zapf & Bert Johan Ouëndag.

*under
ware*