2013

Arabic Typography Play

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ARABIC TYPOGRAPHY PLAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Design, Visual Communications
Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2013

Sarah Alfalah

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Graphic Design
Kuwait University, January 2010
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I believe that spoken and written languages are verbal and visual expressions of cultures. Language is used to convey and sustain values and the belief system of people. Arabic is a language of complexity and formal beauty that is being disregarded and pushed away by its own native speakers. It is losing its value in the Arab world. In other words it is dying.

Both the written and spoken language is being affected. As the world is interchanging, integrating, and becoming closer, there has been a strong impact on many societies, threatening their original culture. Arab cultures are abandoning the rich tradition of the Arabic language to universalize communication.

My thesis investigates the relationships between typography as both a visual form of language and play as a mechanism to help children become more familiar and intimate with their native language.
Play is the highest stage of the child’s development...
the purest the most spiritual product of man at this stage, and it is at once the prefiguration and imitation of the total human life—of the inner, secret, natural, joy, freedom, satisfaction, repose within and without, peace with the world.

—Friedrich Froebel, 1826. 30
I was born and raised in Kuwait. Arabic is my native language, but I was taught written and spoken English at an early age. When I moved to the United States to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in Design/Visual Communication, adapting myself to the use of the English language was not an obstacle. However, it drew my attention to a real problem, which is; my infrequent use of Arabic, especially in writing. Being far away from home opened my eyes to a larger problem. I started replacing my everyday mother language with English in my written communications, for example in my note books, to do lists and text messages. People, surrounding me started posing questions, asking me whether I brainstorm or think in Arabic or English? Then it hit me! I quickly realized that I am not really using my Arabic language as much as I should. The English language grew on me, to a point where I shared my written thoughts almost exclusively in English. It had become my prominent language of expression.

As I progressed as a designer, my sense of responsibility towards the Arabic language started to increase. Having the ability to control the language used in visual communication pushed me toward emphasizing my use of Arabic in design in order to sustain it. The past two years of graduate school have offered me the chance to holistically experiment and explore methods to investigate my culture and language through visual communication, specifically typography.

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In a course during my first semester, I was assigned by Professor Steven Hoskins to visualize a set of data. My ultimate goal was to use this project as a way to introduce the faculty and my peers to my country and myself. I collected data about Kuwait and delved into the population's demographics and psychographics.

I utilized a range of physical material to visualize the data, such as papers with different textures and shades of white. I used an outline of the Kuwaiti map, using different cuts and shapes to convey different demographic attributes in Kuwait.
In another course during my second semester, Professor Rob Carter assigned us to select an indigenous culture for which we have an affinity for and conduct research about its origin, traditions, and history. I continued my interest in experimenting and exploring my own culture through design, therefore I chose to study an indigenous culture of weaving in Kuwait, known as Sadu weaving.

Sadu weaving is a historical weaving heritage of the Arabian Peninsula. Bedouin women practiced traditional weaving as a means of reflecting the ideals of their culture using patterns and designs to illustrate the nomadic lifestyle and the desert environment.

My study is documented in a field book form where I analyzed and observed Sadu weaving closely. I have conducted different studies of the ritual of weaving using different tactile materials.
**AL SADU**

Traditional term used by the Bedouin of Kuwait to denote the weaving process, the woven objects, and the horizontal loom itself.

**NATTU**

Kuwait traditions; Creative Expression of a culture.
Following the sadu weaving investigation, I worked on designing a monument commemorating the indigenous culture. The monument is a large-scale of a pattern that is widely used in the traditional sadu weaving. My intent for this monument was to transform the sadu weaving from a very traditional weaving style using very specific materials derived from the desert environment, to a new context using new materials that fit in today’s modern weaving trends.
Language is an important component of culture. It allows individuals to communicate with one another within a specific geographic location, and to establish a unique identity. “Language is the key issue for the societies’ identities. The Arab identity is always open to other cultures.”

Arabic language is losing its place in the Arab world. As the world is becoming increasingly multicultural and interconnected, Arab cultures are abandoning the rich tradition of the Arabic language to universalize communication.

The driving force behind the deterioration of Arabic language and its native-speaking societies is globalization. The increased rate of travel, and the emergence of the Internet are essential factors, as well. The introduction of English to children is becoming more important to parents than Arabic, as it is deemed more useful for the child to acquire it as a universal language. Unfortunately, parents are not aware of the negative significance of this problem. They are raising and encouraging their children to become fluent in English to compete on the global stage, while not really considering the impact this has on their children’s native Arabic language. Also, the ability to communicate fluently in spoken and written English is considered highly prestigious.

The advancement of information and communication technologies has created negative impacts on the Arabic language as well. With the rise of the digital age and the devices used to support it, the Arabic written language has mutated from its original form. New communication devices and software were designed solely with the language of their manufacturers, usually English, in mind. The Arabic language was rarely an option. With this problem and with the need for using these new technologies to communicate, Arabic speakers started creating their own language of communication within the limitations of the devices, specifically the Western keyboard. A new written language, informally called Arabish, emerged, using Latin written characters to make phonetic representations of Arabic words. Despite the development of software that enables multi-language usage, Arabish still became the most commonly used method of informal written language among youth in the Arab world.
Arabish is the use of Roman characters in pronouncing Arabic phonetically.
Above are examples of the use of Arabic, Arabish, and English in text messages.
An example of the use of Arabish on Facebook.
The Arabic problem extends throughout most of the Arab region. A Lebanese poet, Suzanne Talkhouk, established an association, “Fiil Amr” (“Act Now!”), to address this problem. The association started a prominent campaign to protect Arabic language. In different areas of Lebanon, Arabic letters were placed on the floor mimicking a crime scene. The letters were surrounded by security perimeter tape that read, “don’t kill your language.”
As the problem of the disappearance of the Arabic language expands, designers from the Arab world are addressing it in various creative ways. One approach is to build bridges between western and eastern cultures connecting both, but with the aim of not losing a significant aspect of any culture. The Typographic Matchmaking in the City project is a design research project directed by Huda AbiFares, a typographer, graphic designer, researcher and writer. A collaboration between 15 Dutch and Arab designers with different backgrounds and cultures. The aim of this project is to investigate and find new approaches for combining multiple languages and displaying them in public spaces. “This project shows the important role that design can play in initiating cultural change, assimilation and integration—by simply using our daily basic communication mode: the written word.”

The Typographic Matchmaking in the City project encourages designers to elevate the written language from its original context, into a larger and more interactive context. Bringing the written language to life through different design approaches helps in building a stronger relationship with the language.
Another approach to this problem has been taken by Kashida, a Lebanese product design and furniture line inspired entirely by Arabic letterforms. The ‘kashida’ is a technical term in Arabic script, meaning the elongated line that bridges two Arabic letters in a single word. Driven by the mission of bridging between Arabic script and product design, Kashida was born. The company’s aim is to expand the use of Arabic language from only a written and spoken language into three-dimensional forms that live with its speakers in their home. With globalization, foreign imported goods and products became more dominant in the culture. As a result of globalization, Arabian homes have incorporated many foreign architectural forms and products, radically changing their surroundings. Living in a conflict between your own culture and the culture that is being exposed to you can be conflicting at times. Therefore designers at Kashida became aware of this epidemic and are attempting to bring the Arab’s culture into life through surrounding Arabs by their own culture.
As I am interested in the change and transformation of language through communication, I am also interested in the visual transformation of Arabic letterforms. Therefore, I documented the melting process of letterforms from solid to liquid forms as a way of visualizing the transformation of language.
The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters. Arabic writing is cursive, almost all the letters in a word are connected and, therefore, the shape of letter changes accordingly. Each letter has four different shapes depending on whether it is at the beginning, middle, or end of a word.

The Alphabets Pocket Book is a book design initiative to introduce Arabic alphabets to non-Arabic speakers. It consists of 30 cards, 28 letter cards, a title card, and a colophon. Each card shows the Arabic letter, its closest English equivalent, its transliteration, and an example of its use.

The interactive nature of the book allows individuals to explore each letter's relationship with other letters. By taking letters out of their pockets and arranging them differently, individuals start to build new relationships between different letters in an attempt to form new meanings and words.
ب Baa
B /bat

أ Aif
A /ago
Students in an introductory typography class, who are just being introduced to the anatomy of Roman alphabets, are developing a new understanding of familiar letterforms. In a workshop, I introduced briefly the structure, forms, and writing mechanism of Arabic, and gave them the alphabets as an inspiration to design an 8.5”x5.5” card. I was eager to document their perceptions of Arabic typography. I was curious to see how students would work with typography as shapes instead of letterforms with specific meanings as part of a language. The results of their interpretation of Arabic letterforms as shapes were very inspiring, and fascinating.
The formal character shapes composition of Square Kufic, a very simplified rectangular style calligraphy, is reminiscent of the classic video game Tetris. This experiment combines Square Kufic typography in the context of a Tetris-style game space, in order to create an informal method of introducing Arabic vocabulary to both Arabic speakers and non-speakers. The game has Arabic and English versions targeting different audiences.

While playing Arabic Tetris, a word appears at the top of the game interface and the player’s mission is to imitate the word through rotating and moving the blocks that appear to complete the word on a baseline. The player can control the level of complexity through increasing the speed of the letters appearing. The higher the speed, the more points the player receives. When solving a word in the Arabic version of the game, a box appears with synonyms of the word solved. This helps the player to enrich his/her Arabic vocabulary. While in the English version, the translation and transliteration of the word appear to introduce new Arabic words to non-Arabic speakers.
While trying to learn Arabic calligraphy, I have come across the repetition of several strokes in many letters such as letter Dal, Ba, Ra, Fa, and many other letters. Using this concept of repetition to deconstruct each Arabic alphabet into as little shapes that can be used as building blocks to construct all the 28 Arabic characters. It turns out this can be accomplished using only 11 blocks. The abstraction and the geometric forms of the blocks encourage a user, either a child or adult, to be creative and create forms that exist outside the prescribed set. Inspired by Froebel’s Gifts, the Arabic Building Blocks, is an open ended toy that aims to make a child more intimate and familiar with Arabic letterforms, but also to encourage creativity through interpreting and building the letters, either by following the instructions or by figuring out new connections and arrangements.

Because the blocks have a limited number of pieces and shapes, it only allowed children to form letters.
Above and right are photos of the blocks being used by a 12 year-old, nine year-old, and four year-old children.
The 'plaque découpée universelle', was invented by Joseph A. David in 1876 as an open method for working with type. I became fascinated by the idea of a stencil that can guide the writing of the entire alphabet, numbers, and symbols from simple shapes. Adopting the same approach, I have developed a stencil with 13 shapes that would guide a child and an adult to find ways of connecting the shapes to form Arabic letters, words, and possibly form sentences. The open nature of the shapes invites the child to also use it not only as a writing tool, but also as a drawing tool.

This stencil was delivered to Arabic and non-Arabic speaking adults and children as a way of investigating its use without giving any specific instructions.
Above are photos of a six-year-old child interacting with the Arabic Stencil.
Above are images of college students interacting with the stencil.

Left is a final outcome of a 20 year-old student. It is a combination of the word “waves” in Arabic and a visual representation of the waves.
Above and left are interactions of a 26 year-old Graphic Designer with the Arabic Typography Stencil.
A final outcome of a 24 year old non-native Arabic speaker.
The word is "Lucia".
People's interaction with the Arabic Typography Stencil at the MFA show.
People's interaction with the Arabic Typography Stencil at the MFA show.
The following pages are studies I have explored, using children playing with materials as methods of engagement and communication that appeal to both children and adults.
In collaboration with Cassie Hester.
I came to graduate school with the aim of working closely with my culture through design. At first, not knowing precisely what to tackle helped me to explore different aspects of my culture. Working with various tactile materials in my first year encouraged me to explore my studies far away from digital methodologies and directed me to focus more on developing my hand skills through working with a range of materials.

I believe the success of this thesis and its experiments is in measuring the success of the projects with the targeted audience. The Alphabetical Building Blocks and the Arabic Typography Stencils are targeting children from the ages 5 to 10. These are the ages where they start to learn to write in school. By having these playful alphabet toys children can practice and work closely with the language outside the traditional teaching methods that are practiced in most schools. While this is the ideal situation and required parameters to experiment with the success of the projects, being away from my audience was a challenge to measure the success of the projects. However, this challenge encouraged me to widen my audience and experiment with my projects with both Arabic and non-Arabic speaking adults.

Throughout grad school, I have tested my projects on individuals rather than a group of people. At the MFA show, I was eager to observe people’s interaction with my projects in a public space. I was interested in the communication, and collaboration between people to form an outcome. And by imposing open-ended playing tools, I helped in creating public dialogues between people that I believe enrich the learning experience.

Working on designing interactive material that requires input from people to give results has always been a fear to me. Being a designer, I have always had the control on the final outcome of the project I am working on. I had the authority to choose the most appropriate outcome that satisfies my client and me. However, while working on my thesis projects, I experienced a new process of design that demanded an input from an audience to measure its success. By designing open-ended interactive toys, I had less authority on the outcome. I became a facilitator to new visual forms rather than a creator.

In the future, I wish to continue experimenting with the creative projects I have created in the past two years with my targeted audience in Kuwait. This will allow me to measure their success and improve them. Also, I am interested in the role of graphic design in children’s education and I hope to develop a body of research with creative projects that is based on more intensive and solid child education theories.
Endnotes


4. Lepeska, *Qatari Professor Urges Massive Effort to Prevent Death of Arabic.*


   Friedrich Fröbel, a German educationalist, who started the concept of Kindergarten as a new system for child education. He invented a set of toys that he called “The Gifts” which are the first educational toys in the world. His gifts represent a sophisticated approach to child development through using very simply materials and shapes. “The Gifts” are designed to be materials for a self-directed activity a child would preform.

*Typographic Matchmaking in the City* is a collaborative design research project between Dutch and Arab designers. The aim of the project is to bring cultures together through typography to prove the initiative design have over changing cultures.


Lady Allen of Hurtwood offered design guidelines for play spaces for children in her book. She illustrated imaginative and real playing experiments executed by many designers in order to provide clear guidelines for designing more successful play spaces. Her book was inspirational to understand how children interact with objects to perform play.


*Inventing Kindergarten* was a reference for Froebel’s concepts and theories about childhood education. It covers his theory behind the invention of Kindergarten and the concepts behind “The Gifts” he designed for children.


This book covers the development of play throughout history. It is a source of individuals and projects that contributed to the development of play design for children.


A Qatari Professor, Abbas Al Tonsi, talks about the value of Arabic language in the Middle East. He also criticize the current use of English language and suggest better ways of integrating new languages without sacrificing one of them.


This of all Munari’s book was the most inspirational. It highlights his thoughts about design and mundane objects. One of the subjects he covered in his book is children’s books.


In her book, Altaf collected various creative crafts that were practiced in Kuwait as a way of expressing the culture. Some of the crafts include the Sadu weaving, traditional costumes making, and wooden boats building.


Dr Marzook Basher Binmarzook, of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, describes the problem the Middle East is facing with the domination of the English language.
Acknowledgment

I owe my deepest gratitude to my committee Matt Woolman, Roy McElvey, and Pamela Taylor for their guidance, expertise, and patience through this thesis process.

I wish to thank John Malinoski, Rob Carter, Steven Hoskins, Sandy Wheeler, John DeMao, and David Shields for introducing me to new challenges, and reforming my definition of graphic design.

Thank you to my classmates, especially Lucia Weilein for her constant support, and patience to learn Arabic! James Walker and Cassie Hester for being my friends.

Thank you to Daeyah Tayeb for always being there.

A huge thanks to Yousef Salem and Khaled AlNajdi for being my mentors.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for all their love and support.