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Cathedral. Methodological Case Study
Embedded in a Professional History**

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Das Plakat 1953–2023

Identity and Entity: From Part to Cathedral

Methodological Case Study Embedded in a Professional History

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a series of case studies based on an interdisciplinary analysis of student work. It updates themes from a graphic design exhibition held over seventy years ago and integrates them into contemporary visual assignments. The designs, analyzed in relation to the brief's sections, offer a "typographic window" into the students' personal spaces, revealing their habits, preferences, and media consumption patterns. Tactile attitudes and behaviours are filtered through a series and fabric of three-layered pictorial associations embedded in a professional structure, providing a rich basis for representations of contemporary design culture. The methodology employed impacts the epistemology and phenomenology of design while enhancing the efficacy of design processes and practices. The research broadens its scope to encompass the impact of the project on the evolution of design culture and the project's contribution to the formation of a sense of community among university students.

KEYWORDS

Graphic design, Poster, Design method, Identity, Professional history, Design culture

INTRODUCTION: DESIGN HISTORY AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION STONE

In the first decades of the twentieth century, graphic design developed a new way of thinking based on new design principles, which, instead of designing pages according to the traditional and widespread system of proportions that had been defined for several centuries, gradually shifted to pure mathematical proportions, consistent logic, the new science that also influences visuality according to its basic principles, leading to a radical change in the design of printed pages. The principles of different genetics gradually coalesced into a coherent, rational method of graphic design, rewriting the professional toolbox and thus practical working methods as a unified design philosophy. The refined and somewhat “standardized” version of this format later became known as the “*Swiss Typographic Style*” and then – canonized and simplified after its apotheosis – spread worldwide as the “*International Typographic Style*”. The Swiss Typographic Style itself is now a closed phase in the history of the profession, but the principles and methods of graphic design formulated at that time – and the rules that were later subjected to legitimate criticism – are still present in graphic design, although their emphasis and role have of course changed over the past decades.

The tasks in this study are rooted in the classical and canonized era of design graphics. It is here that the interdependent, consistent, and systematic design principles are rooted, and it is here that I explore their application in the contemporary social environment in this collection of case studies based on student work.

A wide range of professional historians, professional designers and educators dealing with design methodology have already researched the results of this period (*Hollis*, 2001, 2006, *Vit*; *Palacio*, 2009, *Meggs*; *Purvis*, 2016) and its artifacts, but personally in this case study – specifically considering the topic of the assignment and adapting it to it – I see it only as a kind of starting point and reference!

A particular source of inspiration for my studies and teaching were those designers who, in addition to their significant work as designers, also left behind important publications as theoreticians, focusing primarily on the presentation of the research-design process that takes place during creation and leads to solutions. (Otl Aicher, Max Bill, Karl Gerstner, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Paul Rand, Jan Tschichold, Massimo Vignelli, Wolfgang Weingart).

The thesis of the study is that the design principles of this period provide an excellent basis for the development of a methodology of image-making with a

contemporary graphic outlook, while at the same time allowing for individual experimentation. This contemporary ethos, which reflects on the predecessors of the profession, is not an isolated phenomenon within the field of design. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, it is a phenomenon that has a broader historical context.

DESIGN AND INTELLIGENCE

This study draws on Nigel Cross's work (*Cross, 2007*), which connects specialized design thinking to the intellectual culture of authentic design. In order to focus the study on three main areas, I have identified three key concepts:

- The epistemology of design, and the ways and forms of design knowledge manifested in students' work, will be the focus of this study.
- The effectiveness of design processes and practices, and the manner in which they are studied.
- The phenomenology of design encompasses the forms and configurations that emerge, their meanings, and the genetic processes that give rise to them.

1953–2023: "A WINDING ROAD FROM THE SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD TO THE CONTEMPORARY"

Following an overview of the relevant literary and methodological background, we will provide a brief description of the specific historical background of the design exercises on which the study is based, as well as an overview of the particular circumstances that have shaped the project over the past seventy years.

...In 1953, the city of Zurich surprised its best designers with an unusual commission. The Kunstgewerbemuseum organised a major international exhibition of posters and, without choosing styles, asked six designers (Hans Falk (1918–2002): P, Warja Honegger-Lavater (1913–2007): L, Adolf Flückiger (1917–1998): A, Gerard Miedinger (1912–1995): K, Celestino Piatto (1922–2007): A, Josef Müller-Brockmann (1914–1996): T) to create a poster, each with the single letter of the German word "PLAKAT" as its main motif. The six graphic designs were juxtaposed to give the exhibition its full title and its title. The information and additional texts advertised on the surfaces were all printed in the Akzidenz Grotesk typeface, in keeping with the prevailing graphic design style of the time – the principles of the Swiss typographic style.



Figure 1. Poster designs for the 1953 exhibition (reading from left to right): with works by Hans Falk, Warja Honegger-Lavater, Adolf Flückiger, Gerard Miedinger, Celestino Piatti and Josef Müller-Brockmann

The pervasive revolution in modern design was coming to an end at this time. (Groys, 2008) and a style based on pure geometric forms and background structure took over from the traditional illustrative and “individualistic” (Hollis, 2006) style. This milestone in the history of the discipline – more than seventy years old – is the basis for the methodological case study that will be presented. This would fit neatly into a collection of graphic design texts, but by modifying – and expanding – the original concept through a translation, we have a contemporary medium that offers an exciting and unique perspective on the ever-changing notions of contemporary identity and entity as revealed through the students’ images.

In this context, we refer here to the translation (Böhringer, 2004) foregrounded by Socrates of turning things upside down or turning things upside down on their feet. To make the still image – this apparently weaker logos – stronger, to make the weaker speech stronger: this is one of the aims of the task. All this in an age where the average university student spends an average of 52 minutes a day (Ahlgren, 2024) browsing TikTok videos. This preferred social media platform has already overtaken Instagram as the ‘classic’ platform for Generation Z users in the US. There is no more exciting and unique position than to stand up in front of listeners and proclaim the power of still images and typography, the ubiquitous potential of “flipped” and repositioned interfaces and motivate everyone to experience a slow, sequential build.

The references in the study, which encompass a diverse range of sources including philosophical works, special education psychodiagnostic literature, and historical texts on the evolution of the profession, illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of the field under examination and the design intelligence that underpins it.



Figure 2. Nóra Dinó: Poster series, components section. A good example of students' solutions that go beyond the brief, showing individual invention and free association. Poster series, each 100x70 cm, Typography II course, 2022/2023.

VISIBILITY OF INTELLIGENCE

In a concise definition, American graphic designer and university professor Lou Danziger states that “*design is intelligence made visible*” (Wheeler, 2018). This definition places emphasis on the concept of intelligence, which plays a pivotal role in numerous facets of graphic design. Indeed, a more comprehensive and nuanced definition of intelligence indicates that a number of key elements are integral to the design process. “*Intelligence is a general mental ability that encompasses reasoning, planning, problem-solving, abstract thinking, comprehension of complex ideas, rapid learning, and the capacity to learn from experience.*” (Gál, 2015). The capacity to make decisions regarding the resolution of problems in the context of planning, to comprehend the intricacies of a visual plan, and to present these in a manner that is both comprehensible and coherent are all areas of intelligence that have been previously identified. The utilisation of a well-parameterised and programmable design sequence can significantly enhance the efficacy of this process, while simultaneously ensuring that the creative mechanism itself remains unpredictable and template-driven.

By using the aforementioned core values, graphic design as a contemporary discipline is both a responsible and effective means of meeting a wide range of societal needs and, beyond that, as a kind of extended methodology for the expression of independent thought. “*A discipline equal to art, not aspiring to art.*” (Goggin, 2014)



STRUCTURE AND CREATIVITY

A contemporary university visual assignment – especially in the field of graphic design and typography – that affects the students’ personal space and thus their identity, should be about both the structure of design – its structural foundations – and the possibilities of creative freedom – modifying and changing themes and individual ways of using tools: ...give students both structure and freedom... (Lorenz, 2024)



Figure 3. – Stage 1. “Component” section. 100x70 cm, Typography II. course, Lilla Bartha, 2023/2024.

The incorporation of subject history into assignments can facilitate the development of a consistent and responsible future design ethos that is aligned with past values. For several years now, I have been increasingly using the terms ‘playground’ and ‘pile-driving’, which can be flexibly varied, instead of the outdated and devalued notion of task. The example set analysed in this paper was compiled from work submitted by first-year undergraduate students in Typography I and II. The series of tasks itself is based on

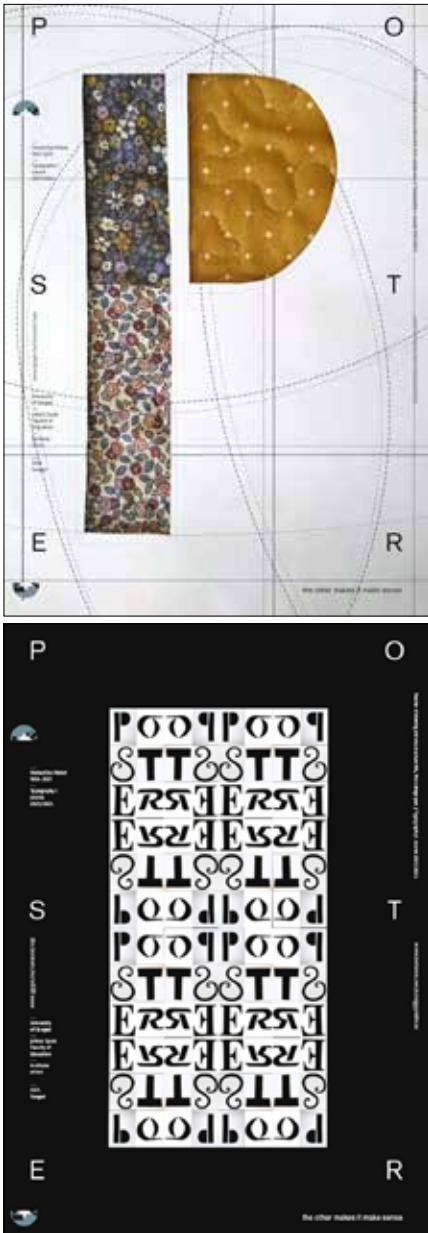


Figure 4. – Stage 2. “Extended Component” section, and Figure 5. – Stage 3. “Image Cathedral” section. 100x70 cm, *Typography II*. course, Luca Berta, 2020/2021.

graphic design and consists of at least three levels of solutions. It begins with the aforementioned exhibition in Zurich in 1953 and its English translation of the six-letter word “Poster”.

THE TASK IN A BRIEF

STAGE I. “COMPONENT” SECTION

Letter stroke – one letter per student – P, O, S, T, E, R, then from this, prepare and document a typographic window on A/4 paper with a photo, then digitally post-process and upload the prepared “letter components” to the common platform.

STAGE II. “EXTENDED COMPONENT”

Further modification of the digital foundations (cropping, resizing, masking, creative processing).

STAGE 3. “IMAGE CATHEDRAL”

From the group kit, everyone can download a unique “Poster” combination and create an experimental work, a “cathedral of images” of letter composition that boldly goes beyond the framework of legibility.

In the course of the project, students will independently research the basics of design history and then use this logical and temporal framework to create a series of solutions, at least three layers of “typography” (at the interface of typography and digital imaging). There are two important elements

to this layering: firstly, the natural use of design history and the resulting time structure, and secondly, but not least, the ability to incorporate and continue this while respecting individual intuition in a group design process. Similarly, as Byung-Chul Han puts it about the relationship between knowledge and information: *“Information is a pornographic form of knowledge. It lacks the intimacy that distinguishes knowledge. There is also a negativity in knowledge, in that it is often fired in the face of resistance. Knowledge has a very different temporal structure. It is stretched between the past and the future. Information, on the other hand, inhabits the smoothed time of the neutral points of the present. Time without event or fate”.* (Han, 2021, trans. A. Gergely A.)



Figure 6. – Stage 2. “Extended Component” section, 100x70 cm, *Typography II. course, Barna Dorottya, 2023/2024.* Instead of strictly implementing the task, the student connected the parts into a series of her own designs, thus giving a new interpretation to the open-ended task sequence.

It is crucial to underscore two pivotal elements that resonate with the words of Byung-Chul Han and the typographic exercises he has presented. Firstly, the significance of intimacy, a commitment based on intrinsic motivation, should be regarded as a crucial internal pillar of any creative process. Secondly, the dynamic interplay between the professional historical past and the student’s current working and living environment is a source of immense inspiration and potential. It will be of interest to observe the manner in which these factors influence typography.

FROM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION TO THE EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Jan Tschichold’s excellent compendium, first published in English in 1991, sums up the complex task of perfect typography in the columns in a rather lyrical tone in the introduction:

“Immaculate typography is certainly the most brittle of all the arts. To create a whole from many petrified, disconnected and given parts, to make this whole appear alive and of a piece – only sculpture in stone approaches the unyielding stiffness of perfect typography. For most people, even impeccable typography does not hold any particular aesthetic appeal. In its inaccessibility, it resembles great music. Under the best of circumstances, it is gratefully, accepted. To remain nameless and without specific appreciation, yet to have been of service to a valuable work and to the small number of visually sensitive readers — this, as a rule, is the only compensation for the long, and indeed neverending, indenture of the typographer.” (Tschichold, 1975/1991)

Since Tschichold’s lengthy essay is on the genre of the book, we can largely agree with most of his above statements, especially in relation to the first and second sections of the task list.

In general, however, our visual arts students are not prepared for a career in typography... More often than not, character design or freelance illustration emerge as career paths alongside ignorance. How can typography and its digital tools be introduced to these students? The answer is both simple and complicated!

The simple way is to open them up to the experimental possibilities of typography! The more complex way: not to impose too many rigid rules, traditional principles and methods – in Tschicholdian terminology – and to free them from the constraints of conformity!

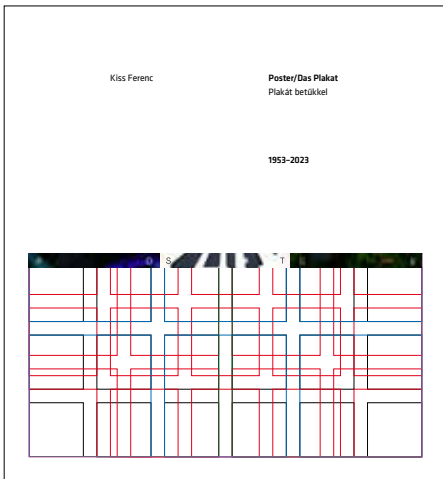


Figure 7. – Ferenc Kiss: Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, cover design, 215x230 mm, 2024.

It is argued that typography, as a medium, can achieve parity with the fine arts by applying its distinct system of principles consistently, rather than simply aspiring to mimic the fine arts. It is evident that this autonomous system of tools is accompanied by a specialised history that is only partially related to the discipline of art history. In this respect, Martha Scotford’s research into the historical canon of graphic design (*Scotford, 1991*) is an exemplary piece of work which elucidates the significance of the analyses that have

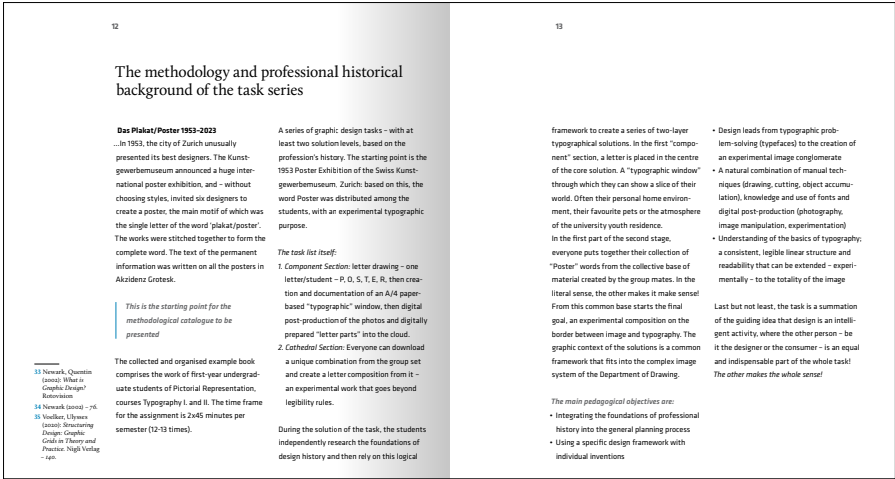


Figure 8. – Ferenc Kiss: *Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, The Stages of the Task, spreads, 215x230 mm, 2024. The methodology of the task series*

been arrived at by bringing together the works of the history of the profession and their analysis.

Among the designers invited to the exhibition *The Poster* of 1953, which can be seen as the starting point of the commission, it is clear that Josef Müller-Brockmann became the most recognised designer not only of his own generation, but also of the entire Swiss typographic style, and the most frequently quoted and published designer in works on the history of the profession.

The analysis of the works of such canonical designers constitutes an indispensable component of university education.

MAIN PEDAGOGICAL OBJECTIVES

The general educational objectives of the design process are: to integrate the basics of the history of the profession into the general design process. Use a defined design framework with individual input. To design components using the problem-solving possibilities of the discipline of typography (typefaces) and then, based on this, to create an experimental pictorial conglomerate. Knowledge and use of manual techniques (drawing, cutting, object accumulation) and typefaces, and a natural combination of digital post-processing (photography, image manipulation, experimentation). An understanding of the basics of typography; a consistent, readable linear structure and legibility that can be extended experimentally to the whole of the image. The acquisition of these

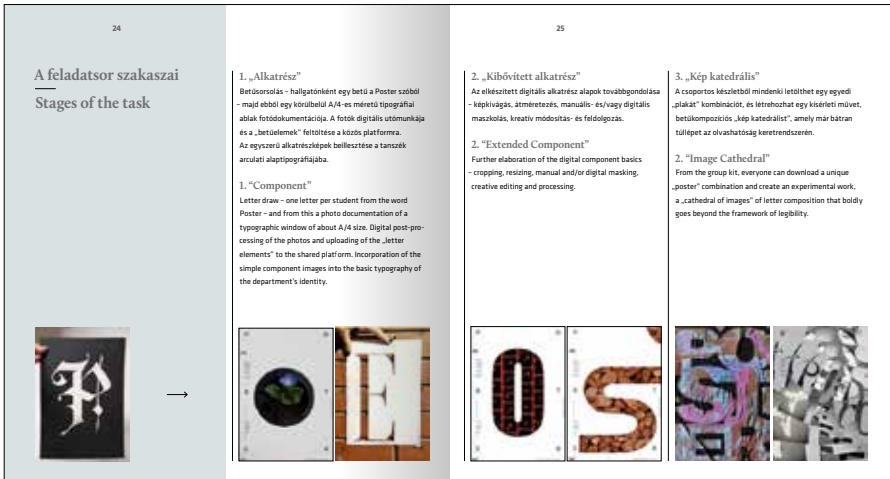


Figure 9. – Ferenc Kiss: *Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, The Stages of the Task, spreads, 215x230 mm, 2024.*

basics will be a natural vehicle for the media content that is part of the student's identity (monitor signs, street tags and graffiti, various media messages, information on the products and packaging they consume) and the tools themselves (digital devices, earphones and headphones as motifs used). (see figure 2).

IDENTITY THROUGH THE MEDIA

The digital photographs taken by the students are, for the most part, of their own personal spaces. These include places of study and training, the immediate surroundings of home and family, their own room, garden, home-town or village, as well as family members or their favourite pet. The images are taken in a manner that is both understandable and natural. In many instances, students request assistance from one another to capture more intricate images. This often involves the use of “hand models” and friends who provide guidance in areas such as lighting and material selection. In addition to their own creative activities (drawing and painting, classical graphic techniques), the documented activities may include a variety of hobbies and other activities. However, it is notable that board games are absent from the documented material. Furthermore, the documented objects may also indirectly refer to addictions to various levels of media as background motifs (mobile phones, computers, headphones and game consoles are often present in photos and illustrations). Additionally, there are implicit and explicit references to

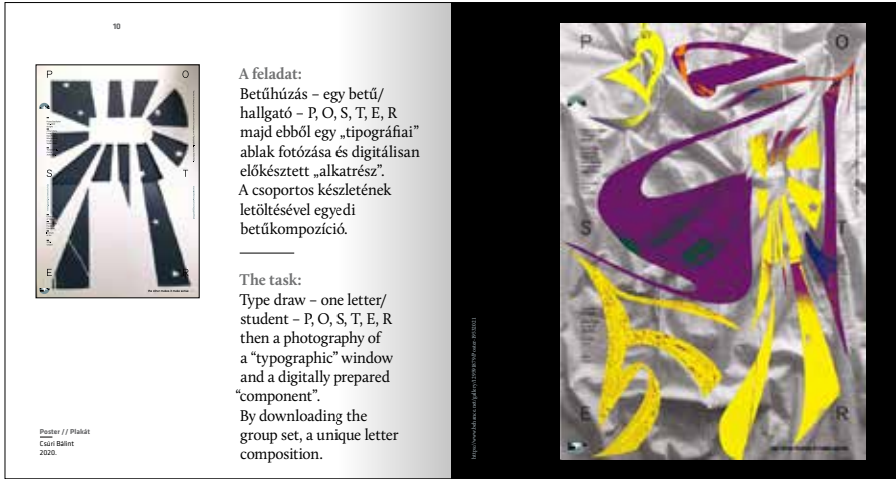


Figure 10. – Ferenc Kiss: *Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, The task, spreads, 215x230 mm, 2024.*

body image issues, conformity and loneliness. In some cases, gender change has also left its mark on the complex fabric of the images, as evidenced by a self-portrait in a ‘conglomerate series’ that has solved the problem.

The task encapsulates the guiding principle that design is an intelligent activity in which the other party – whether the designer or the consumer – plays an equal and indispensable role. If educators can provide students with an appropriate balance of structure and freedom, I believe that we will be able to accelerate our response to the challenges facing the world and respond in a more innovative manner. Furthermore, an active study of the history of the profession will help us to identify future developments in design education.

It is my hope that the students’ work cited in this text has provided sufficient clarification for all parties as to the paraphrased meaning of the quote, originally by Béla Kondor, the renowned Hungarian artist and poet. I am confident that the second example is now comprehensible – the other makes sense!

The design-related student works selected for the study originate from the Department of Drawing and Art History at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Szeged, which is my alma mater, and where I have held the position of lecturer for a decade.

Further works can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.behance.net/sztejgypkdf8a0>.

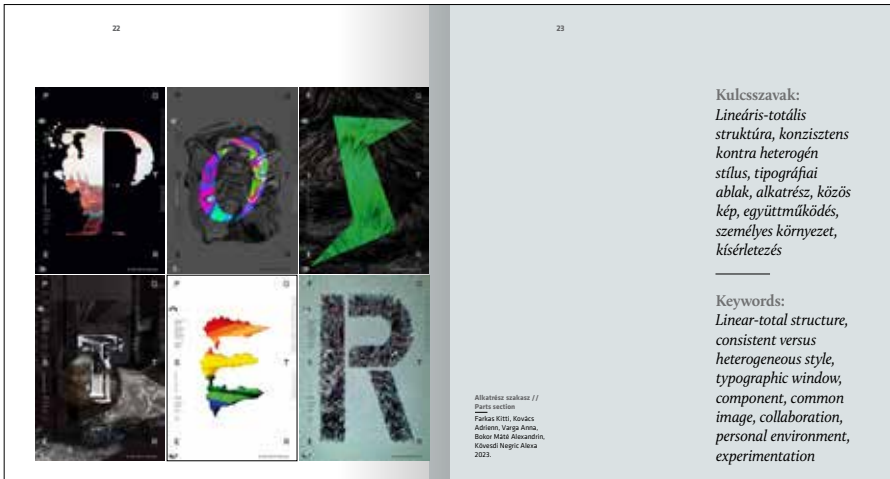


Figure 11. – Ferenc Kiss: *Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, The keywords of the task sequence, spreads 215x230 mm, 2024.*

CONCLUSION

It may be of interest to consider the final lessons of the study, which could be seen as forming a kind of methodological holy trinity. For the sake of convenience, these can be divided into three main groups:

1. *The emergence of graphic design as a distinct profession and its associated historical development*

One significant shortcoming of contemporary Hungarian university education in graphic design is the peripheral position of the theoretical and especially historical roots of design. This is particularly evident at my own institution, where some information can ‘trickle down’ to students during the ineffective and low-yield art history lectures. This information also manifests primarily through classical pictorial works, such as etchings, lithographs, and monotypes, as well as canonised classical graphic works created with these techniques, which are often perceived as a tedious and obligatory core due to the dearth of interiority.

2. *The relationship between historical facts and contemporary approaches to their interpretation*

It is this author’s contention that the moments of revelation and motivation that occur during the process of learning through play represent an indispensable component of the three-level task series. The initial stage allows for consid-

erable scope for individual creativity, while the ultimate outcome is explicitly the experimental aspects of typography. This is attributed to Weingard, who has been described as a “rebel” (Kornatzki, 1983; Junod, Schade, 2016) and a “punk” of typography by the majority of scholars. The objective is to guide students towards this outcome.

A notable divergence between this methodology and Weingard’s is that, in my assessment, this set of typographical tasks does not represent an attempt to partially liberate it from the industrial art context, nor does it constitute a more definitive repositioning of typography within the domain of fine art. This serves to demonstrate that design, in addition to meeting the requirements of consumer society, is also capable of conveying complex and fundamentally individual messages through the use of its tools. This is not within the context of the visual arts, but alongside it, in parallel and on equal terms.

The proposition put forth is that the medium of graphic design should be considered as an equal platform with fine art and other visual arts. Rather than being driven by competition or rivalry, the value of graphic design lies in its capacity to offer layered and colorful solutions to a range of tasks, including the creation of a single logotype, a complex image, or a digital image sequence.

In the contemporary approach, it is evident that the liberation of typography is no longer a matter of debate. Neither the industrial background nor the general need for profit production can overshadow thoughtful and spontane-



Figure 12. – Ferenc Kiss: Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, Stage I. “Component” and Stage II. “Extended Component”, student solutions, spreads 215x230 mm, 2024.

ous forms of self-expression. Typography, the ‘backbone’ of graphic design, provides the appropriate professional tool system for this free form of expression, based on the history of the profession.

3. The relationship between invisible and tactile structure in solving problems and the degree of freedom of solutions

As previously stated, typography is the indispensable “backbone” of graphic design. The other basic element of the majority of visual design works is the grid, which This constituted the primary objective of my doctoral dissertation. The grid is a structure used to discretize any continuum. Using this thesis as a starting point and extending its origins in graphic design, using it as an analytical, system-oriented set of operations, the method can also be applied as a summarising concept for interdisciplinary plans and plan series.

In the case study tasks that form the basis of this article, the grid is present in two distinct statuses:

- on the one hand, the grid functions as a “master page,” providing the formal skeleton and framework of the task. It aligns with the visual identity of the institute and frames the diverse student solutions,
- on the other hand, it serves as a less visible yet tangible professional, historical, and planning methodology itinerary.



Figure 13. – Ferenc Kiss: *Poster/Das Plakat 1953–2023, Some experimental solutions from students, spreads, 215x230 mm, 2024.*



Figure 14. – Stage 3. “Image Cathedral” section. 100x70 cm, Typography II. course, Bogár Johanna Beatrix, 2022/2023.

The natural interplay of these two background structures represent the two milestones that serve as visible and tangible guides to students’ creative and design work. These structures guarantee that individual achievements, which may occasionally be insular or extreme, are duly acknowledged within the context of design education when combined with the appropriate mentoring experience. They could be situated in a prominent and visible location, in close proximity to the books of Josef Müller-Brockmann (*Müller-Brockmann*, 1981) and Wolfgang Weingart (*Weingart*, 2014).

This study aspires to advance the discourse on design education by underscoring the interplay of historical grounding and contemporary innovation.

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