

Richard Niessen, The Typotectural Suites

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John Gayler

**WEST DEN HAAG
THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS
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The Typotectural Suites (2019) reminds us that language, like architecture, is a construct. Both are assembled of multiple small components in order to serve multiple functions. The role of words, in essence, parallels that of bricks. This observation underlies Niessen's *The Typotectural Suites*, which explores the relationship between letters and spaciousness, and is the latest in an ongoing series of projects conceived as part of his "Palace of Typographic Masonry", an (imaginary) institute dedicated

to the splendour and variety of graphic languages. The fact that *The Typotectural Suites* is being shown at West Den Haag is auspicious, in part as the art centre temporarily inhabits a Marcel Breuer designed building that is the former American embassy to the Netherlands. It is installed in the Alphabetum, which is the former embassy's library. This space is now dedicated to the artistic investigation of formative and formal aspects of language.

Niessen has compiled the content of his project into an evocative, multilayered and polymorphic compendium that presents the information in four distinct formats. These formats encompass large poster-sized templates of ready to cut and paste paper models, panels printed with black and white illustrations and a book for which the architectural historian Tony Côme has contributed illuminating texts. All of these elements augment the presentation's prime focus: a themed and colour-coded set of 3-dimensional paper-based models/sculptures constructed from volumetric letters. Not only do they evoke contemporary architecture in terms of sculptural bearing, the information silkscreened on their surfaces also references the increasingly



frequent use of ornamental texts on buildings. Their display on the forward half of a series of immensely long shelves that project out from bookcases has been well considered, as it simultaneously provides maximum visual access to the models and literally distances them from the Alphabetum's collection of publications.

Only three of the project's four formats—the illustrated panels are the exception—present Niessen's information in its entirety. This material, which encompasses close to fifty examples, has been organized into four thematic categories. The sequence commences with "1. In Search of Lost Figuration," where we meet Letterel who, along with his cat that has j's for legs and v's for ears, live in a letter house in a world full of letters. Typographical approaches to architecture form the focus of "2. A is for Analogy" which juxtaposes Johann David Steingruber's 18th century letter-based plans for baroque palaces with Mike Giant's cover art for *Neighborhoods*, the rock band Blink-182's 2011 album. "3. M for Living in" surveys architecture in the form of words and words in the form of architecture. Its eye-openers include Fortunato Depero's *Book Pavilion* (1927), an example of advertising architecture, and the axonometric drawings of letters Takenobu Igarashi produced in the 1970s. Notable among the games, vernacular roof ornamentation and construction materials considered in "4. Another Letter in the Wall" are Paul Cox's construction game, *Alphabetic Sculptures* (1997), and *Alphabet in Stone*, a typeface designed by Dom Hans van der Laan that is based on Roman carved stone capitals from the first century AD.

The informational nature of *The Typotectural Suites* asks viewers not just to slow down but also to linger in the space. Walking in with one's art antennae activated for a quick three-minute-long scan of the presentation will not provide a good indication of its content. Resolving how the examples relate to each other, both within the bounds of each category and in general, necessitates an investment of time. I recall that I circled each model, frequently backtracking, and then compared the models to each other, to the black and white illustrations and to the large ready to cut and paste templates. The templates are duplicates of the models and show them in their original, two dimensional and pre-assembled state. At one point, in the course of surveying the presentation, I started feeling that I was mentally assembling and disassembling the structures, even seeing text as image and image and text. The process triggered a recollection of a passage by David Malouf: "...reading is itself an interiorising activity, a matter of 'taking things in,' perhaps because language, with its combination of image and rhythm, its appeal to the eye and to the way our bodies move, is continuous with some activity in us that involves, in the most immediate way, both body and mind."¹

But reading also amends our comprehension of the things outside us. That, in part, involves coming to terms with the Alphabetum, a functional, yet dated, information centre, which contradicts the clinical framework of the conventional white cube. The elements of Niessen's project are complemented by being interspersed among the Alphabetum's holdings—books and graphic material—which provide information related to artistic procedures, language, sound, technical devices, architecture and design, that viewers are also free to examine.

It is intriguing that the exhibition takes place in Breuer's building during the Bauhaus centenary. While *The Typotectural Suites* references Josef Albers' masonry relief, *America* (1950), Corbusier's planning

of Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology (1938-1958) and Karel Martens & David Bennewith's alphabetical translation of windows at Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel, much, if not all, of the remaining content is unconnected to the Bauhaus and contravenes the school's reductivist approach. Architect and author Mark Wigley, commenting on the Bauhaus' authoritarian presence, noted: "Almost everything we see is Bauhaus shaped and packaged. And that means we are the victims of the Bauhaus."² Niessen's project suggests much lies beyond the Bauhaus' sphere of influence. In addition to exploring "the borders of readability and the power of the third dimension," as stated in West Den Haag's press release, *The Typotectural Suites* is playful, inventive and informative. It contributes to alleviating the numbing effect of much modern architecture in the mindset. Here, more does seem to be more.

1. David Malouf, quoted in John Ralston Saul, *Equilibrium*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2002), 143.
2. "The Effect." *bauhausWORLD*. DocFilm, Deutsche Welle, November 21, 2019. [On line]: bit.ly/2KXipLO.

John Gayer graduated from the Ontario College of Art, studied art history at the University of Toronto and completed an art conservation degree at Queen's University. In addition to *ESPACE art actuel*, his writing has appeared in *Sculpture Magazine* (USA), *Paper Visual Art Journal* and elsewhere. He is a member of AICA (Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art) and currently divides his time between Finland and the Netherlands.