Cover Page

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Epilogue: Reflections on Practice

This section is a short story. Though there are many more questions left that I would like to study, now it is the time to stop, look back, and reflect on this journey. The story begins in 1997. I was 19 and studying at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. I was not a great graphic designer and during that term, I had seriously considered changing majors. The only reason I stayed was the Arabic typography course. In it, we were introduced to the beauty of Arabic calligraphy and the wealth of variation that its styles carried. The course instructor was famed calligrapher and art critic Samir Sayegh. He is a pioneer of the Kufi revival, and in that course, we debated the future of Arabic typography, and what style one were to design in. My love for type design began with a small drawing of the letter Nun, and I was soon set on my career path.

Fast forward to a decade later, and I was the Arabic Specialist at Linotype GmbH in Germany. Though a dream job in many aspects, it was not enough. The question of typeface legibility is one that comes up on a regular basis. The design skills and instincts are there, but the strength of conviction is not enough when one is decreeing that thousands and millions of people are reading in what one believes is better for them. That level of exposure brings with it the weight of responsibility. Technological breakthroughs had completely changed the landscape of Arabic typography. The field of design was suddenly very wide open, and the question of what to design continued to present itself. And so in 2007 I started this research.

It is not often that a typeface designer takes on legibility research. That is very much in the realms of psycholinguistics. Design education does not venture into experimental psychology, nor does it wander into the avenues of statistics, variables, and null hypotheses. In a way, design is a process of trial and error, with time being the final judge. Psychology is a domain more interested in cause and effect, and relationships that can be tested now, rather than in the future. But there is much to learn in the intersection of these two fields: the sensitivity of visual perception meeting with the inquisitive objectivity of the disinterested observer. As designers, we have benefitted from color theories of perception, so why not apply the scientific method in order to answer the questions that we grapple with every day?

And so this research began, but as is often the case, the more I read, the less I knew. There is so much more to find out. The reading process comes so naturally to us that it is deceptive in its simplicity. As adults, we have been reading for so many years that we have forgotten how difficult it is to internalize that process. There is much to learn from reading and eye movement research, and it makes all the difference when we sit down to talk about design.

In the final year of this research study, I was discussing with a colleague a typeface that had very narrow word spaces. My first comment came out in design-speak: "The word spaces are too narrow." This is my designer instinct speaking, but convictions

aside, the persuasion power is not very strong. My second comment was more solid: "Research has shown that when the word space is doubled, reading speed improves, and a clear word space is very important because it helps in the programming of saccades." Knowledge in such a case is more powerful, and infinitely more beneficial, than belief.

There have been several highlights in these past five years, two of which are special: the design of Afandem and the experiment in Beirut. The design of the Afandem typeface system was a design challenge unlike any that I had faced before. There was no other Arabic typeface system that I could look at for reference; the Dynamic version was a challenge to draw. That level of elegance and fluidity of motion is difficult to achieve. I have to admit, that prior to Afandem, I was not fond of that style of typefaces. Too conservative, too old, I thought. Afandem changed that. The design of Afandem Dynamic was enchanting and I so loved the design, that it changed my views regarding the benefits of simplicity of design. There is beauty that shines through, and there is a time and place for different styles of design. In the quest for speed of reading, we should not forget to stop, every once in a while, to appreciate the view.

The experiment in Beirut was another highlight. I am a designer by education and profession, not a psychologist. Designing the experiment set-up and actually going through with it were of a difficulty level beyond any that I had ever encountered. Those weeks in Beirut marked a turning a point in me as well; I was suddenly a designer-turned-psychologist.

If being a designer is a state-of-being that colors the way one sees the world, then experimental psychology is a state-of-mind, one that is forever asking, challenging, and testing. I do not doubt that this research has forever changed the way I address design, and I expect that it has also changed the way I live my life.