Plečnik Typeface
Designed on the Basis of Hand Drawn Letters by Jože Plečnik from the Archive Collection.

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Abstract: Plečnik is a typeface, designed on the basis of research of the archive collection of hand drawn letters by Jože Plečnik. The most renowned Slovene architect is best known for his architectural works, but his influence on Slovene typography is somewhat less accentuated. A detailed research into the architect’s life, his works and his teaching principles has led to the creation of a typeface that is not just a mere digitalisation of Plečnik’s sketches. The typeface reflects the way in which the designers perceive Plečnik through letter forms in relation to current trends in design.

Key words: Plečnik, typeface, type design, architecture, Slovenia, sketches, archive, typography

1 Plečnik’s Typographic Style

Jože Plečnik, the most renowned Slovene architect, is best known for his architectural works, but his influence on Slovene typography is somewhat less accentuated. Plečnik not only created the typography of numerous inscriptions on tombstones, monuments and building façades, but also the graphic and typographic design of a myriad of diverse publications. Based on a detailed research of his life, his works and his teaching principles, a new typeface has been defined and designed, which is not just a digitalisation of his sketches, but a reflection of current design trends, with roots in the shapes of Plečnik’s letters.

Plečnik is the most notable Slovene architect who greatly influenced the formation of Slovene identity - he left a strong mark on the Slovene capital, Ljubljana and, in addition to his architectural and urban planning projects, he also made a significant contribution to the development of Slovene typography. Although his typographic contribution is somewhat side-lined compared to his architectural works, it can be argued that he also
had a profound influence on Slovene typography. The scope of his work is clearly evident in the letterforms he developed for inscriptions on tombstones and monuments, as well as in his various design works, book decorations and other printed materials.

As the division of Habsburg rule became more and more visible at the beginning of the twentieth century, a distinctive Slovene typography developed in Slovene art alongside the idea of new nations, resisting the dominant Austrian and Italian styles. If we consider Plečnik’s architecture as a distinctive Slovene national style, we can similarly speak of a distinctive style of Slovene type, which he influenced with his elaborately planned letterforms. As with his architecture, his letterforms are an imaginative combination of classicism and modernism, but if one looks closely, one can also detect a hint of Art Nouveau in his letters. In terms of their utility, Plečnik’s sketches of letters and inscriptions are universal and even transcend individual artistic styles and periods.

2. Influence of Historical Styles

Plečnik’s trajectory towards a career as an architect began with his university studies in Vienna, where he studied under the auspices of the renowned Viennese architect Otto Wagner, and later worked in his architectural studio. In his earliest independent projects, we can see the influence of his environment and the use of typographic elements of the Art Nouveau style, although his letters, in their boldness and freedom, somehow resist the ‘proper’ Art Nouveau letters, despite their organic character and expressiveness.

The basis is Art Nouveau, but Plečnik transformed the letters in his own way - but by no means naively, which could be easily attributed to the Art Nouveau typographic style in general. The style of Plečnik’s ‘typographic Art Nouveau’ is deliberate, and the typefaces work well as a coherent whole. The concavity of the basic shapes gives the letters a touch of humanism, which contributes to the folksiness of the inscriptions and initials, designed in the Art Nouveau style. The designed forms are very bold, intricately shaped and unified. Plečnik respected the idea of Art Nouveau, but he also thoughtfully countered it.

After completing his studies in Vienna in 1898, Plečnik went on a trip to Italy, and in the period after that we can already see a strong influence of classicism in his design. His horizons were also broadened by his relocation from Vienna to Prague in 1911, when another aspect of architecture opened up to him: that of teaching. His teaching principles were mainly based on classicism and Greek antiquity, but folk art also played an important role. For example, in the renovation of the Prague Castle, he used symbols of democracy and freedom and also drew symbolism from national tradition.

On the basis of Plečnik’s works from the period of his life in Prague (1911 - 1921) and later in Ljubljana (1921 - 1957), parallels with classicism can also be found in his letters. We can presume that Plečnik was in a certain sense a self-taught typographer, and that his values, which followed Semper’s theory and were rooted in architecture as an art, were his main guiding principle. As with his architecture, his letterforms are classically composed of three distinct layers. The first layer consists of elementary shapes based on the square, rectangle and circle, the proportion of the letters is classical (two widths are used: a square and a half of a square), round letter shapes are drawn on the basis of a circle; in the second layer, these elementary shapes are assembled into a meaningful body
of letters; in the third layer, we see Plečnik’s boldness, breaking away from the strict rules of classicism, defying, breaking the rules and creating his own. Plečnik added a guise to the classical forms, which still gives the letters a unique, contemporary character today.

3 Development of the Plečnik Typeface

A typeface is a set of characters that are rarely used separately, but are instead assembled into words, sentences and texts as a unified whole. Plečnik is a typeface that defines recognisable letterforms created by architect’s own hand, however, it was the overall aspect of the design that was even more important; the set that would reflect Plečnik’s personality.

3.1 Archive Collection of the Plečnik House

The development of the Plečnik typeface began with an examination of the extensive Plečnik House archive, where the original typographic sketches drawn by the architect for his works are held. Most of the inscriptions that Plečnik envisaged for façades, tombstones, book covers, etc., are set in capital letters, which is why the development started with majuscules.

![Figure 1. Archive collection (photography from Type Salon’s archive)](image)

3.2 Sketches and Digitalisation

The development of the typeface thus began with the selection of originals from the archives for the purpose of sketching. The designers remain committed to ‘analogue’ sketching as part of the design process, because it allows them to see the detail and variety of design directions and makes it easier to reach decisions on further development. It is also worth emphasising that the detailed rendering of the letters was not merely a reproduction of Plečnik’s originals, but rather involved an understanding of Plečnik’s approach to the design of the individual parameters and details of the letters.
The transfer of sketches to the digital environment requires a considerable amount of patience and detailed drawing of curves. Digitalisation usually begins with the creation of minuscules, but in this case the majuscules were drawn first.

![Sketching](photography from Type Salon's archive)

![Digitalization](photography from Type Salon's archive)

### 3.3 Typographic Style

The most important parameter in the majuscules design of the Plecnik typeface reflects the use of classical elements and forms in the architect’s works. Classical in typographic language means the proportion between the widths of the majuscules, reflecting the letterforms of Trajan’s Column from the period of Ancient Rome. If we examine the widths of these letterforms in more detail, we see that most of them have two widths - a square and a half of a square. This proportion is called the classical proportion and in our case it is a distinctive feature of the Plecnik typeface. Other typographic features of the...
new typeface include geometric shapes, sans serif stroke endings, a humanist style of terminals and low or barely noticeable contrast in the thickening of the strokes.

Figure 3. Typographical style: sans serif terminals, classical proportions, vertically cut terminals.

Figure 4. Circular round shapes

Figure 5. Diagonal joints.
Figure 6. Humanist style: terminals are cut vertically.

4 Plecnik Typeface

4.1 Distinctive shapes

The unique characteristics of the Plecnik typeface are hidden in the details. From Plečnik’s sketches we can observe that he often aligned the horizontals of the letter ‘E’ along the right vertical, and the newly designed Plecnik typeface contains an even bolder form, where the horizontal is extended to the right. The diagonals of the letter ‘K’ also meet somewhat unusually in the centre of the main vertical stroke, but they are aligned vertically on the right-hand side. The distinctive feature of the letter ‘M’ (in the upper left part) is repeated several times in Plečnik’s sketches, and in the typeface such a detail can also be found in the letters ‘A’ and ‘W’. The upper round shape of the letter ‘S’ gives a sense of imbalance, which is linked to a recognisable Art Nouveau element, thus also showing the artistic style of the period in which Plečnik was creating.

Figure 6. Plecnik typeface

The parameters and features designed for majuscules are also applied to minuscules and digits, so that the other characters in the set also take up the full width or half of a square. It is important to emphasise that Plečnik mostly used capital letters, majuscules,
in his works, so the design decisions for the rest of the set are mainly based on reference typefaces of the time, such as Gill Sans, Kabel and Futura. The letters ‘a’ and ‘s’ follow the characteristics of the letter ‘S’ with their shorter instroke, while ‘e’ is remarkable for its unusually short outstroke. The long transverse strokes of the letters ‘f’ and ‘t’ follow the length of the central horizontal of the letter ‘E’.

4.2 Two Variants

Plečnik’s duality and boldness are shown in the typeface with two variants - a combination of classical and modern (display) typographic styles. The style of the classical variant is geometric sans with no noticeable thickening in the width of the strokes, and the forms are based on the traditional principles of classicism, paying respect to tradition. These features were the basis from which the display style was created. This is derived from the shape of Plečnik’s columns, which widen with height – the so-called vertical growth or thickening of the basic stroke towards the top. The resulting variant is even more unique and perhaps even more Plečnik-like.

Figure 8. Plecnik typeface, 4 weights and Display style.

5. Conclusion

From the initial architectural plan to the final details on the building, Plečnik planned his projects in a holistic and careful manner, paying attention to the inscriptions; which follow a unified concept and create a thoughtfully designed finished unit. Inscriptions on monuments, book typesetting, book covers, architectural plan elements, ex-libris, additions in the form of ornaments, initials - these are also among Plečnik’s prolific works, which had a strong influence on Slovene typography. The newly created typeface represents a typographic legacy and contributes to the development of Slovene typography as a distinctive visual representation of the Slovene language. Plecnik typeface is available on the Type Salon website (www.type-salon.com) and is suitable for use in both print and digital environments.