

2010

## Arabic for Designers by Mourad Boutros

Saad D. Abulhab

*CUNY Office of Library Services*

### How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb\\_pubs](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb_pubs)

 Part of the [Graphic Design Commons](#), and the [Graphics and Human Computer Interfaces Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Abulhab, Saad D. "Arabic for Designers by Mourad Boutros." *Design Issues*. 26. 2(2010): 83-84

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Baruch College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

as a play space for children but its open fountain by Peter Walker and Partners has become a destination for Portland area families who can enjoy the pleasures of the water. On the other hand, the Extreme Park in Louisville, Kentucky, designed by San Francisco architect Stanley Saitowitz in collaboration with professional skateboarders, shows how careful design and revision of municipal liability laws, can create a lively area that attracts adults, teenagers, and children as participants, spectators, and tourists.

Solomon's catalogue of examples is necessarily limited, but it is stronger on examples of playgrounds and play spaces for urban, rather than rural or suburban, areas. While Solomon notes how important community "ownership" is to upkeep and preservation, she concentrates on the role of design in creating visually exciting spaces that can sustain many levels of social involvement. Her faith in design to affect social change gives this book the quality of a scholarly manifesto rather than a handbook. But this is still quite useful. If we read little about how children perceive the playground and its limits, we still come away with the conviction that adults can, and must, reconsider broader implications of the spaces they provide for children to explore.

The rise in childhood obesity in recent years has put new urgency into the design and mission of the playground. As communities in cities and suburbs seek to reinvigorate their children's play spaces, Solomon's book will be indispensable as a cautionary, yet still hopeful, tale of what can be accomplished.

#### Saad D. Abulhab

*Arabic for Designers*

Mourad Boutros

(New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2005)

ISBN: 0976224550, 223 pages,

illustrated, \$34.95 hardback.

*Arabic for Designers* may be a timely and welcomed addition to the fields of Arabic and multilingual graphic design. Many of its well-presented samples eloquently convey an undisputed message for cultural harmony and coexistence. Nevertheless, the book is vague in scope, intellectual identity, and targeted audience. Despite its classic academic textbook-like title, it is "not a how-to book" (15) as it declares. It emphasizes that it is a book "useful for non-Arabic speaking graphic designers" (15) but except for the interesting and witty chapter 3, "The Value of Cultural Knowledge," the book shows page after page of design examples, without even attempting first to clearly identify the Arabic alphabet and detail the visual characteristics of its individual letters. Instead, the message to non-Arabic speaking designers was clear:

designing with Arabic is a "formidable task, requiring specialist knowledge" (59). It does not explain, though, which kind of specialist expertise is needed. Is it that of a linguist or a designer who speaks Arabic? At any rate, many examples that Boutros provides are valuable but only to someone who knows Arabic. Even though its title clearly indicates that it is about Arabic, the book does not state that plainly within its content. On the contrary, using samples of Persian or Urdu calligraphy, it confuses the unaware readers about its language scope. At one point, the book reluctantly advises its readers about a related "delicate issue of the choice of terms: Arabic calligraphy or Islamic calligraphy" (40) but then it keeps them wondering and confused with a simplistic answer: "both are created by human hand" (40).

Chapter 1, "A Historical Overview," was just that: an unfocused historical overview of Latin, Arabic, and even biblical Aramaic which was pushed in supposedly to help illustrate the author unexplained claim about Arabic's "self-imposed typographic isolation" and "fossilization" (31–32). The reader then learns in chapter 2, "Elements of Typography," that Arabic typography is not that isolated after all and a brief history of its development is presented. While discussing Arabic and Latin harmony, Boutros states in contradiction with his previous discussions that "given the rigidity of Latin design, a new system of typographic manipulation is expected on the part of Arabic typography in order to update the cultural aspects" (37). Still he does not explain why Latin is rigid in the first place and if so why Arabic must dance to its tones. The chapter then unexpectedly changes course to define few basic general typography terms, and to offer a brief, non-illustrated, verbal comparison of Arabic and Latin characteristics which inaccurately and confusingly states that in Arabic "eighteen letter shapes are free standing" (45). It is not clear what letter shapes the author was referring to.

Boutros shares generously his prominent years of design experience in chapter 3 which is by far the most useful and interesting chapter, providing undisputable educational value to all audiences. He demonstrates clearly that translating designs and words should not be done in a rigid manner. Multilingual designs and terms should be accurate, flexible, and faithful to their original spirit and themes. Incidentally, I wish the author had followed his own advice when he consistently and incorrectly used the term "Holy Qur'an." Muslims, unlike Christians, never refer to their book (and its script) as holy or sacred. Instead, it is referred to as "Glorious [or Generous] Qur'an" (al-Qur'an al-Kareem). Chapter 4, "The Highs and Lows of Logotype Conversion," dealing with the most popular bread-and-butter Arabic design task today, elaborates further on the general topic and theme of chapter 3. Its discussions clearly demonstrate Boutros' fine design skills, vision, and experience.

Chapter 5, "Case Studies," discusses topics and

design samples that can only be judged by either Arabic or Latin designers but not both. In the “Money Design” case, it is difficult for a reader, unless being Lebanese, to recognize which money notes were the old or the new ones. In any case, the unselected design (maybe the author’s?) reflects anything but Lebanese cultural identity. To be fair, the section about “Basic Arabic” is too involved to be thrown in this chapter or in this review. But one must mention that the author used the term “Basic Arabic” to bundle his and Khattar’s attempts to simplify Arabic typographically without mentioning that this term was never used by either designers and is not an agreed upon term in the Arabic type community, and without mentioning clearly that one of the designs is his. He states further that Khattar’s work in 1947 is “one of the earliest and most significant attempts” while in fact we know of at least two similar attempts in the nineteenth century. Homan Hallock, an American typographer living in New York, designed isolated, one shape, Arabic letters in 1865 (J. F. Coakley, Homan Hallock Punchcutter, *Printing History* 23:45, 2002). Nazim al-Dawlah Mulkuim, Iran’s ambassador to London, had even published a Persian book in 1885 with his isolated letters type design.

The author ends his book with a useful design gallery chapter. However, with 41 percent of the figures shown being only beautiful calligraphy works, the chapter further confirms that this book, in term of audience, scope and identity, dances on many ropes. Boutros, a talented calligrapher and an active type and graphic designer, is apparently not as skilful debating involved philosophical issues. Starting with a notably political and opinionated tone, and coupled with several inaccuracies or contradictions, this book is, somehow, hard to categorize as a textbook or as a reference tool for either Arab or Western designers. It is even hard to judge how readers would witness on its pages the full picture of Arabic design potentiality since it does not consistently state the names and backgrounds behind discussed samples and whether they belong to the author. Yet, despite critical shortcomings, *Arabic for Designers* is an engaging valuable instrument to understand the intricacies and artistry of Arabic and multilingual design.

#### Eric Benson

*Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*

Andrew G. Kirk

(Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2007)

ISBN: 978-070061545-2, 303 pages, illustrated

(photography), \$34.95 hardcover.

#### Counter Culture Green Provides Inspiration for the Current Sustainable Designer

As an environmentalist and designer who feels guilty daily for adoring his potentially hazardous Apple Powerbook,<sup>1</sup> I have asked myself many times, “How can technology better unite with nature?” This question, however, is not without precedent as Stewart Brand and his colleagues posed a similar inquiry in their holistic atlas-sized “magazine,” the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The DIY-themed catalog basked in the notion that “Western Green Consumerism” could mesh cohesively with the American sense of entrepreneurial enthusiasm. To explore this question, *Whole Earth* provided its hungry readers with very optimistic yet practical book reviews, alternative technologies (AT), lists of materials, tools, and how-to guides that aimed at helping inspire the “outlaw designers” of the 1960s and 1970s to explore the idealistic possibility of a better “machine in the garden.”

In his politically very timely 2007 book *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, associate professor Andrew G. Kirk of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas provides a detailed and provocative account of the rise of the Counterculture Environmentalist movement started by, in Kirk’s words, “the revolutionary” *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968. His narrative of the green counterculture movement also artfully examines *Whole Earth*’s fall from the limelight due to Brand’s mental health and the unfortunate 1980s Reaganomics budget cuts. I find Kirk to be most poignant in his analysis of the history of the catalog in his “Epilogue: What Happened to Appropriate Technology?” where he reviews *Whole Earth*’s positive impacts on the present day resurgence of organic foods, renewable energy and sustainable innovation. The author convincingly argues that *Whole Earth* helped start the counterculture environmentalist movement but reflects that this movement still faces “(t) he problem (of) convincing American producers and consumers that there was a common ground between capitalism and environmentalism, nature and culture.” *Counterculture Green* is, for the most part, a chronological recounting of the life of Stewart Brand and his successes and pitfalls as editor of *Whole Earth*. Kirk’s writing is infused with historical accounts and insights into (some from Brand himself) the daily life at *Whole Earth* and its overall connection with the American environmentalist movement of the times. *Counterculture Green* provided a means for me, and most likely for many of its readers, an opportunity to tie together an elusive American environmentalist narrative that rarely gets told outside of news bites about the Sierra Club and Al Gore in contemporary mass media. I found myself, while reading each chapter, feverishly scratching down the names of Brand’s inspirational collaborators, notably Jay Baldwin, Huey Johnson, Dick Raymond, John Perry Barlow (of Grateful Dead fame), R. Crumb, Steve Baer, Paul Hawken, and also his

Copyright of Design Issues is the property of MIT Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.