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# Urban typography and cultural memory: A literature review in support of a design-led approach to heritage and preservation

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**Abstract:** Typography has increasingly been recognised as a valuable lens for cultural and urban analysis. This literature review extends such perspectives by examining how design-led approaches can support the documentation, reinterpretation, and revitalization of urban letterforms as cultural heritage. Drawing on typographic studies, geosemiotics, and design research, it focuses on urban typography — *typographic landscapes* — understood as spatial and multimodal carriers of memory, identity, and cultural value. While existing scholarship has explored the semiotic and aesthetic dimensions of typography in the urban environment, and some have proposed design-led interventions, connections between theory and practice remain open to further development. The review synthesises interdisciplinary literature, clarifies key terminology, and establishes a conceptual foundation for a practice-based inquiry. It argues that typography, beyond its communicative role, contributes to the material and mnemonic fabric of cities, and that design can support the preservation and reactivation of these typographic forms in response to ongoing urban change.

**Keywords:** Urban typography, Cultural memory, Design-led research, Heritage preservation

## 1. Introduction

This paper brings together constructive literature in support of a design-led inquiry into typographic heritage in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this paper, “design-led enquiry” refers to inquiry conducted through design practice where knowledge is generated through iterative making and “reflection-in-action” in situ; in Schön’s (2013) terms, practitioners become “researcher[s] in the practice context” (p. 68), constructing understanding through a reflective “conversation with the situation” as it “talks back” (p.79). The focus of our design-led inquiry is urban typography in the context of cultural transformation requiring a critical



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appreciation, re-evaluation and reclamation of design in light of the power dynamics (e.g. between municipal regulation and informal inscription; corporate branding and local identity; colonial/settler naming among others). Here we refer to the colonial past of Aotearoa New Zealand and the context surrounding its historic buildings. Despite its application within colonisation (employed in marking authority and claiming territory,) typography holds a key role in “shaping the visual fabric of a cityscape and its dynamics” (Kumar, et al., 2025, p. 2769) and is increasingly recognised as an important analytical lens within cultural and urban studies (Haughan, 2012). Building on the work of Bollini (2023) and Harland (2024), we engage in a growing interest in how design-led practices can drive new approaches for documenting, reinterpreting, and revitalising typography as cultural heritage that extend beyond conventional urban planning interventions, regulations, and strategies. In doing so, this review consolidates existing knowledge on the role of typography within the material, mnemonic, and semiotic fabric of cityscapes.

Urban change and the repurposing of buildings inevitably impact access to, presence and visibility of visual attributes that communicate and regulate experiences of place. A key visual attribute of built environments is the typography applied in signage and façades. As design components of 'built heritage' the materiality of signage — whether carved in stone, moulded in concrete, painted on wood, cast in metal, or printed on vinyl — determines durability and visibility, and therefore whether it endures to be considered a form of heritage. The concept of “absence heritage” serves to account for unrealised heritage opportunities when objects or structures have become absent “purely by accident”, “purposefully erased,” “forgotten or destroyed” (James-Williamson et al., 2024, p. 1). Despite dealing with a history that is not comprehensive, but rather a reduced or curated sample, there is still wisdom to be gained from past practices as they can inform sustainable modern practices of design and connect communities to history of place and spaces. In making this point, we do, however, recognise shifts in heritage practices beyond, as Pye (2008) argues, simply curating and displaying collections of artefacts, toward expectations of accessibility for education *and* pleasure (p. 113). In parallel, recent scholarship has noted that heritage, memorialisation, and design are intrinsically linked by their shared concern with representation in the public realm (Harland et al., 2022). Accordingly, studies on design preservation and typography digitalisation hold potential for creating opportunities for applications, use as restorative practices.

Across the literature, urban typography is understood not merely as a functional or aesthetic component of graphic design, but as an artefact embedded in cultural memory and historical layers. Existing scholarship spans typographic studies, multimodality, urban visual culture, and practice-led investigations such as typeface design and digital archiving. In doing so, challenges arise in attempting to combine the multiplicity of disciplinary terms and their uses. Concepts and terms such as “urban graphic heritage” (Harland, 2024), “architectural typography” (Bartram, 1975), and “typographic landscapes” (Gouveia et al., 2007) are used variably across design, heritage, and urban studies, often without mutual reference. Across the literature, these concepts are applied inconsistently, making conceptual clarification an important theme in scholarly discussions of how typography functions in the public realm as a spatial, communicative, and cultural form.

By drawing together literature on precedent knowledge in design, the semiotic role of typography in place-making, and practice-led methods for cultural preservation, this review provides a conceptual grounding for research inquiries that not only seek to document typographic heritage but also to reactivate it as a design-led contribution to inclusive and critically engaged urban futures.

This review contributes to design research by (1) clarifying a fragmented conceptual vocabulary around typographic heritage, (2) synthesising semiotic and heritage frameworks with practice-led preservation methods, and (3) positioning typographic heritage as a consequential site for “design for a better world” debates and initiatives.

## 2. A conceptual framework

In the literature, typographic heritage is framed through interdisciplinary perspectives spanning design research, typographic studies, urban semiotics, and heritage discourse, among others. This produces two related but yet analytically distinct levels of terminology. The first names *typographic phenomena* in the urban environment (e.g., architectural typography, vernacular typography, typographic landscapes), each of which centres letterforms as the primary object of study. The second frames typography within broader representational ecologies of the city, most notably “urban graphic heritage” (Harland, 2024), which encompasses a wider array of graphic traces (images, symbols, material markings, and designed surfaces) of which typography is one component. Distinguishing these levels clarifies how typographic heritage can be analysed both as a specific design practice and as part of wider graphic memory in place.

### 2.1 Framework for analysis and design

The concepts below reflect the principal ways in which scholars have theorised and categorised typographic forms in urban environments. They also clarify how terminology is used across design, heritage, and urban studies, enabling a more consistent and analytically coherent understanding.

#### Architectural typography

Architectural typography refers to the use of lettering as an “integral part of the architecture” (Bartram, 1975, p. 7). It includes inscriptions, lettering, and signage incorporated into buildings and public spaces — carved, cast, painted, or inset in the masonry of façades — serving both functional and expressive purposes. These elements are distinguished from ephemera by their material permanence and spatial embeddedness.

Architectural typography operates not only as text but as part of the architectural language of the city, contributing to its collective memory and urban identity (Hosseini Askari et al., 2014). Related terms include **architectonic typography**: permanent inscriptions or building-mounted lettering; **architectural lettering**: typography designed to complement architectural form (Bartram, 1975; Gray, 1960; Kinneir, 1980), and **architectonic epigraphs**: signatures of architects or builders engraved on façades (Farias, 2021; Gouveia et al., 2013), which have been analysed in terms of their position, alignment, and letterforms to reveal patterns of authorship and architectural language.

As Shinde & Tewari (2024) have argued: “the historical evolution of typography can be traced through the diverse array of scripts and styles found in different architectural contexts worldwide” (p. 2063). As Laube and Widrig (2016) observe, industrialisation multiplied the ‘speaking layers’ of symbols that overlay architecture, fundamentally changing how communication operates in urban space, a dynamic equally evident in the accumulation and erosion of typographic traces.

### **Vernacular typography**

Vernacular typography refers to locally made or adapted letterforms that emerge from everyday practices within specific communities. These forms — often handmade, improvised, or shaped by local craft traditions, express the cultural and social specificity of place. As Banham (2017) notes, “the life of a city can be viewed through its letterforms, and more specifically, the most public of all typography, its signage,” emphasising how everyday signs contribute to urban character and collective memory.

They represent everyday authorship, and document the evolving relationship between graphic expression, craft, and locality. In Aotearoa, for example, signage and branding at the New Zealand Māori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua employ the *Hae Whakarewa* typeface. A vernacular typeface steeped in Māori knowledge that is deeply rooted in *te taiao* (natural environment) and, in the words of designer Stacy Gordine, a “sense of connection to our history, our present, and where we’re heading” (Emery, 2025).

### **Typographic landscapes**

The term *typographic landscapes* describes the ensemble of typographic elements, such as letters, numbers, and signs, that form part of the city’s visual language. These range from permanent architectural inscriptions to ephemeral signage and act as key contributors to the semiotic and cultural identity of cities.

*Typographic Landscapes* can be classified into categories such as architectonic, memorial, commercial, and involuntary forms, illustrating the spectrum from permanence to transience (Gouveia et al., 2007; Silva Gouveia et al., 2009). Both architectural and vernacular typography contribute to these landscapes, which are inherently multimodal and dynamic, reflecting layers of social, historical, and cultural meaning. Typography functions as a cultural agent by encoding historical, geographical, and sociocultural values into visual form, helping to preserve and communicate the identity of place. Dixon (2003) discusses the capacity of public lettering to shape identity and belonging within the cities’ environment.

## **2.2 Multimodality and geosemiotics**

Meaning in urban lettering arises from the interaction of typographic form, material, spatial placement, and social practice. Multimodality offers a framework for design to map and consider the way multiple modes of communication: visual design, spatial organisation, material texture, and language combine to produce meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). As an approach, multimodality expands consideration beyond the semantic function of the text, to focus on how textual meaning is structured, positioned, composed and embodied.

As Lemke (1995) explains, typography constitutes “meaningful, culturally and historically specific patterns of co-deployment of semiotic resources in a community” (p. 85) that permit us to explore “basic differences in the presentation, and experiential meaning gleaned from the respective contexts of typographic modality” (Pescatore Frisk & Pauwels, 2019, p. 8).

In this sense, architectural typography is not read solely as text but as a multimodal artefact whose meaning is shaped by its material presence, spatial arrangement, and the cultural frameworks through which it is interpreted. A clear example is found in the Louxor Palais du Cinéma (1921) in Paris, whose façade integrates gilded, geometric letterforms spelling “LOUXOR” into its Egyptian Revival architecture (Fili, 2015). The typography operates across multiple modes: its material presence; its spatial arrangement aligns with the building’s symmetrical ornamentation, reinforcing architectural rhythm; and its cultural associations evoke the early twentieth-century fascination with Egyptology and cinematic spectacle. Meaning arises not simply from the linguistic content of the word but from this interaction of form, material, and context, through which the façade communicates identity, style, and historical imagination.

Geosemiotics, introduced by Scollon & Scollon (2003), extends this understanding by analysing how signs derive social meaning from their physical placement and interaction with the built environment. It highlights the indexical relationship between signs and the social practices surrounding them, e.g. how a word carved in stone or painted on a façade signals both ownership and belonging. Hamid (2015) identifies three key attributes in the study of geosemiotics: (1) ‘interaction order,’ referring to the “social relationship between the actors and the spaces” (e.g. interpersonal distances); (2) ‘visual semiotics,’ accounting for the visual representations and meanings in space (e.g. represented & interactive participants) and (3) ‘place semiotics’ incorporating the “contributed meanings from semiotic systems that exist in the spaces” (p. 22). In recent design-led interpretations, this approach connects typographic artefacts to local identity and memory, showing how graphic heritage operates as an anchored system of meaning embedded in place (Harland, 2024; Pan et al., 2022).

Together, multimodality and geosemiotics provide a foundation for analysing architectural typography as situated design discourse; a form of communication that is materially embedded, spatially anchored, and socially negotiated.

### *2.3 Heritage, memory, and identity*

When examining urban typology in any context, the objects of consideration will contain a layer that reflects “remains of the past in the present” (James-Williamson et al., 2024, p. 1). Urban graphical spaces can constitute either an “organically developed designscape over time” or formal development can instigate a more planned makeover (Barnes & Harland, 2025, p. 290). Both scenarios require consideration of heritage, memory, and identity as interrelated concepts.

Dovetailing with the application of multimodality, as a branch of social semiotics, the application of ‘cultural memory,’ recognises the overlapping cumulative experiences of the material and visual culture of a community or place. As Rahman (2019) argues, collective memory in the context of urban typography is “not an abstract category of thought ... it exists in the relationship between the urban fabric of the city and the urbanites. Here we can

interpret that any individual building form is less important than the way the urban subjects construct and are constructed by the architectures (or ‘artifacts’) they collect around them” (p. 213). As Huerta (2010) has compellingly argued, urban typography is a semiotic resource that enables us to “reinterpret the patrimonial fabric of cities” (p. 72). Incorporated within a “typographic way of knowing” (Banham, 2019) is the recognition that place identity emanates from identity being rooted in everyday life, including the places we frequent. This, in part, is attributable to “the meanings and values symbolised by place features” (Hull et al., 1994, p. 110). As such this proposes a need to examine the relationships between “place identity of a place and people’s place identity” (Peng et al., 2020) distinguishing between devices used to define a space and the degree to which individuals identify with the identity imposed via distinctive character of urban environments through their typographic and visual language.

## 2.4 Design-led knowledge

Within design research, precedent knowledge refers to the way designers draw insight from existing artefacts, environments, and practices to inform new work (Boling et al., 2024). It acknowledges that design operates through continual reference: observing, selecting, and reinterpreting prior examples. In this context, precedents take the form of typographic artefacts found in architectural and urban contexts: façades, inscriptions, and signage that reveal the visual, material, and social dimensions of design across time.

In the context of urban graphic heritage, precedent knowledge provides both an analytical and generative framework. Studies by Harland (2020; 2024) and colleagues (Harland & Barnes, 2022) demonstrate how recording and interpreting physical traces can yield new understandings of the relationships among design, place, and memory. When these traces are examined through design practice (e.g. mapping, typeface revival, photography, or digital reconstruction), they become resources for both historical research and creative speculation. Practice thus operates not only as documentation but as a mode of inquiry that reveals the communicative and cultural agency of typography in the city.

The *Typographic Landscapes* project (in Portuguese, *paisagens tipográficas*) is a line of research developed by Priscila Farias, which exemplifies how design practice generates and organises precedent knowledge (Farias, n.d., 2015, 2017, 2021). Through photographic surveys, categorisation systems, and digital archives, these projects transform local typographic traces into reusable research resources (Farias et al., 2023; Gouveia et al., 2007, 2013). Their methods of documentation and classification function as design-led epistemic tools that bridge observation and creative reinterpretation. This approach is useful to record and preserve cultural memory and typographic heritage within urban contexts.

## 2.5 Conceptual synthesis

Across the reviewed literature, typography is conceptualised as a multimodal, spatial, and interpretive system through which urban identity and memory are communicated. It integrates the preceding concepts into five analytical dimensions:

Dimension	Focus of analysis	Analytic outcome
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Material	Form, medium, durability, decay	Typology of fabrication techniques and conservation challenges
Spatial	Placement, visibility, movement	Geosemiotic mapping of signage in context
Cultural	Memory, identity, representation	Critical understanding of heritage as social process
Discursive	Vocabulary and categorisation	Stable analytic language across disciplines
Design-led	Documentation, revival, prototyping	Preservation and reinterpretation as design knowledge

Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how existing scholarship analyses typography as both evidence and discourse, material traces through which urban identities are made, contested, and remembered.

### 3. Examples of practice-led preservation

The following examples are explored as sites of knowledge production rather than mere descriptive cases. They demonstrate how design-led practices construct interpretive frameworks for understanding typographic heritage, thereby contributing to debates about place, memory, and visual culture within design research.

This section spotlights instances where designers and type practitioners engage with letterforms and signs as seeds for creative reinterpretation, documentation, and cultural storytelling. These cases reveal the range of processes through which typographic heritage is engaged and transformed in practice.

#### 3.1 Typeface design

Together, these cases demonstrate the role of practice-led type design in preserving and reinterpreting cultural memory.

Font designers have encountered inspiration from historical signage found on public structures (buildings, bridges, monuments). Some contemporary typefaces created from historical signage or vernacular typographic signs include Carol Twombly's (1989) *Trajan* typeface based on the inscription on Trajan's Column in Rome. Twombly used a full-sized rubbing of the Roman *capitalis monumentalis*, and drew the characters first by hand, and later on the computer with a vector-based application (Stock-Allen, 2016). *Gotham* by Tobias Frere-Jones (2000) is a typeface with letterforms inspired by examples of New York architectural signs of the mid-twentieth century. Frere-Jones stated his motivation was "to preserve those old pieces of New York that could be wiped out before they're appreciated. Having grown up here, I was always fond of the 'old' New York and its lettering" (Tobias Frere-Jones. *Gotham. 2000* | MoMA, n.d.). Finally, *Brutal Types* (2025) presents a collection of display fonts inspired by the letterforms created by designers and architects associated with the interwar Dutch avant-garde. The process involved photographing façades, commemorative plaques, and tombstones throughout the Netherlands, as well as archival book covers, to extract and digitise a set of fifty typefaces ("Introducing Brutal Types," 2025). Such examples, among many others, illustrate how historical typographic artefacts

embedded in built heritage, often overlooked in contemporary type design, can be reinterpreted through digital practice to engage with visual culture, craft, and memory.



Figure 1 Thurgood Marshall monument in Annapolis, Maryland (1996) uses the Trajan font for its inscription “Equal Justice Under Law”. Photo credit: Rachael Voorhees / Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

### 3.1.1 Aotearoa New Zealand typeface design as cultural preservation

#### ***Hokotohu* by Kris Sowersby**

A clear example of typography as cultural heritage is *Hokotohu*, a bespoke typeface designed by Kris Sowersby (Klim Type Foundry) in 2007 for the Hokotehi Moriori Trust identity, with collaboration from Charlie Ward. Hokotehi represents Moriori people, the descendants of Rongomaiwhenua and Rongomaitere on the islands of Rēkohu and Rangihau (Chatham Islands), Aotearoa New Zealand. The typeface’s serifs are modelled on Rākau momori — ancestral carvings (or bruising) incised into living kōpi trees that continue to bear spiritual and historical significance (Klim Type Foundry · Hokotohu Custom Fonts, n.d.). The project was developed through design-led practice translating this Indigenous visual tradition into digital letterforms, showing design as a tool of cultural reclamation. *Hokotohu* materialises the intersection of design practice and cultural memory. It reclaims Moriori visual heritage within a post-colonial context, addressing power and representation by privileging Indigenous forms of knowledge.

It exemplifies how design-led processes can act as a form of heritage preservation and reinterpretation, aligning with scholarship that frames typography as a multimodal and socially situated artefact embedded within place, identity, and history.

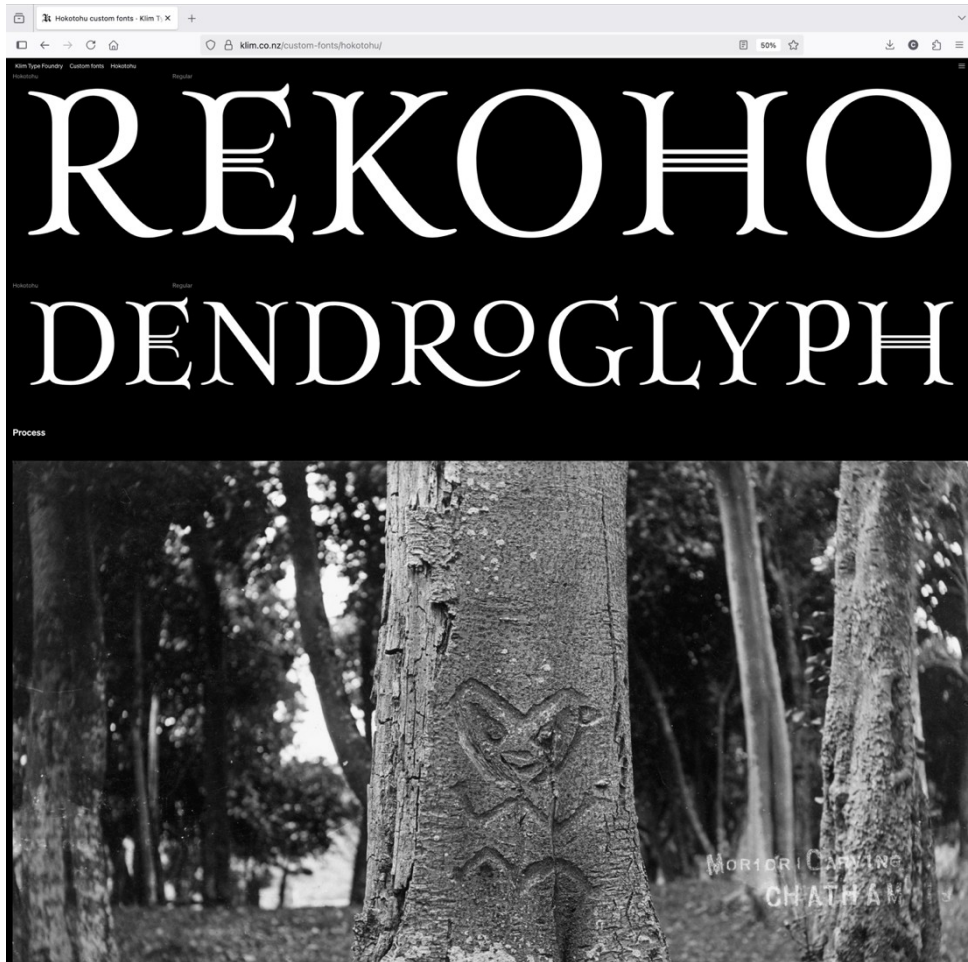


Figure 2 *Hokotohu* Typeface. Screenshot from Klim Type Foundry website <https://klim.co.nz/custom-fonts/hokotohu/>

### **Alistair McCready's fonts from ANZ monuments: *Obelisk*, *Kahu*, *Pukeahu***

A further example of design-led engagement with typographic heritage in Aotearoa New Zealand is the work of type designer Alistair McCready, whose practice centres on reviving and interpreting letterforms embedded in memorial architecture. Motivated by a commitment to empowering stories of the past through design, McCready has developed a series of typefaces: *Obelisk* (2015), *Kahu* (2017), and *Pukeahu* (2021), that draw directly from commemorative stone inscriptions. *Obelisk* references the hand-cut granite plaques and slabs of the early colonial era, translating chisel-cut forms into digital typography (Obelisk Typeface | Best Awards, n.d.). *Kahu* is derived from the lettering of ANZAC war memorials across Aotearoa, combining the proportions of classical Roman inscriptions with qualities reminiscent of twentieth-century revivals such as Gill's Perpetua and Porchez's Le Monde (Kahu, n.d.). *Pukeahu* takes its cues from the foundation stone of the former Dominion Museum in Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in central Wellington, embedding its material and historical specificity into a contemporary display typeface (Type as Monument | Best Awards, n.d.). Collectively, these projects demonstrate how typographic design can function as a mode of cultural analysis and preservation: by attending to the material, commemorative, and ideological dimensions of public inscriptions, these fonts exemplify

how design practice can reinterpret built heritage and contribute to the visual continuity of collective memory in the present.

Typeface design serves as a reflection of visual culture and can help preserve typographic heritage by adapting historical letterforms for contemporary use. However, other design-led practices play essential complementary roles in this process. Visual archives, databases, books, exhibitions, and media outcomes such as films or videos document and reinterpret cultural traces through curatorial and visual narratives. Together, these approaches broaden the vision for preservation, where design acts as both a means of memory output and a form of creative inquiry.

### 3.2 Publications and books with city type collections

Books such as *The city in letters: typography on Amsterdam architecture* by Maarten Helle (Ellenbroek, 2009), *Characters* by Stephen Banham (2017), and the urban sign series on beautiful signs in different cities: *La Grafica Della Strada* (2014), *Graphique de la Rue: The Signs of Paris* (2015) and *Gràfica de les Rambles* (2017) by Louise Fili demonstrate how editorial design and photography function as instruments of cultural preservation. Through careful curation, composition, and documentation, these publications transform everyday lettering into cultural artefacts, making visible the relationship between typography, architecture, and urban memory. By translating ephemeral signage into durable visual narratives, they extend the role of the book beyond representation — turning it into a designed archive that invites new ways of seeing and remembering a city.

In particular, Banham (2017) frames the designer as a kind of “typographic archaeologist,” proposing a way of seeing urban lettering in which ageing signs act as cultural markers of place, memory, and everyday storytelling. Beyond representing urban letterforms, these books operate as curatorial devices: they select and classify typographic traces, stabilising ephemera into durable archives and proposing implicit criteria for what is ‘worth remembering’, eventually becoming a portable heritage interface that circulates local typographic memory into design practice, education, and civic narratives.

Comparable initiatives in Kilkenny, Valencia, and Bilbao (Gomez, 2007; Gràffica, 2024; Maher Ring, 2023) show how typographic heritage work gains rigour when it shifts from collecting “interesting signs” to methods of audit, participation, and cultural narration. Kilkenny’s photographic audit develops a pilot methodology through appraisal criteria and database template that is applied to a defined set of shopfronts, in order to produce a typology capable of informing future council policy on signage. The project explicitly frames vernacular letterforms as an overlooked heritage category, arguing that, while prior studies have examined typographic form and classification, the heritage significance of shopfront lettering has rarely been addressed (Maher Ring, 2023).

Valencia’s *TiposQueImportan* operates differently, yet complements this approach: it frames “urban graphic heritage” as a lived and participatory domain crowdsourcing documentation while cultivating public literacy and local pride in neighbourhood letterforms (Gràffica, 2024). Bilbao’s typographic reading of commercial signage treats *rótulos* as “living memory”, using them to interpret historical and social change in the urban landscape (Gomez, 2007). Together, these typographic heritage initiatives extend “documentation” into a broader

design-research repertoire, combining audit, typology, participation, and cultural narration to stabilise ephemera into archives, arguments, and, at times, policy-relevant evidence.

### 3.3 Websites for databases and case collection

Digital platforms represent an increasingly important form of practice-led preservation, transforming fieldwork and documentation into accessible, structured, and publicly searchable archives. Unlike print or static catalogues, these websites function as dynamic interfaces that support ongoing data collection, comparative analysis, and the long-term visibility of typographic and urban graphic heritage. Their value aligns closely with this paper's objectives: supporting preservation through documentation, enabling comparative analysis across sites, and creating opportunities for the reactivation of typographic memory in contemporary contexts.

The *Letters from Santa Marta* project in Venice demonstrates how web design and digital cataloguing can operate as forms of heritage preservation. Beyond recording typographic artefacts, the project translates fieldwork into an open digital archive, making inscriptions and photographic surveys accessible as part of a living visual database. This positions web and interface design as integral components of the preservation process, transforming documentation into an interactive resource that supports public engagement, research, and future reinterpretation (Lessing et al., 2020).

More broadly, the *Typographic Landscapes* framework developed by Farias, Gouveia and collaborators (Farias, 2021; Gouveia et al., 2007) demonstrates how design-led practices such as websites and digital archives can systematise precedent knowledge across multiple cities. Using structured categorisation systems, epigraphic recording, and geolocated image databases, the *Typescapes* platform has generated open-access collections for São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, London, Cali, and Venice (Farias, n.d.). By presenting typographic traces as comparable datasets rather than isolated artefacts, the website supports both analytical study and creative reinterpretation, illustrating how digital infrastructures can preserve the social, historical, and spatial meanings embedded in urban letterforms.

A related example outside the typographic sphere further demonstrates how websites can shift from a communication tool to an archival artefact. The *HfG-Archiv Ulm Online* project (Short et al., 2021) began as a platform for disseminating information about the Archive of the Ulm School of Design, but over time accumulated into a structured record of activities, events, publications, and institutional updates; effectively extending the Archive's tangible and intangible holdings into a digital trace. This aligns with Ernst and Parikka's (2013) argument that the Internet can operate as an archive, shaping what is retained, retrievable, and legible as cultural memory. Its virtual components operate as extensions of the physical collection, enabling remote access to historically significant material that would otherwise remain restricted. Drawing on navigational metaphors such as Winograd's (1997) "locomotion" and Maldonado's (1992) argument that virtual models support knowledge acquisition, the project shows how websites can mediate complex design histories through interactive, spatialised interfaces. Although not focused specifically on typography, this case underscores the broader role of digital platforms in preserving and disseminating design heritage and offers conceptual parallels for typographic archives.

Together, these projects show how websites operate as multimodal, design-led tools that expand the scope of typographic heritage and memory preservation. They bridge field documentation, archival practice, and public engagement, offering models for how digital platforms might support future design-led research in Aotearoa New Zealand.

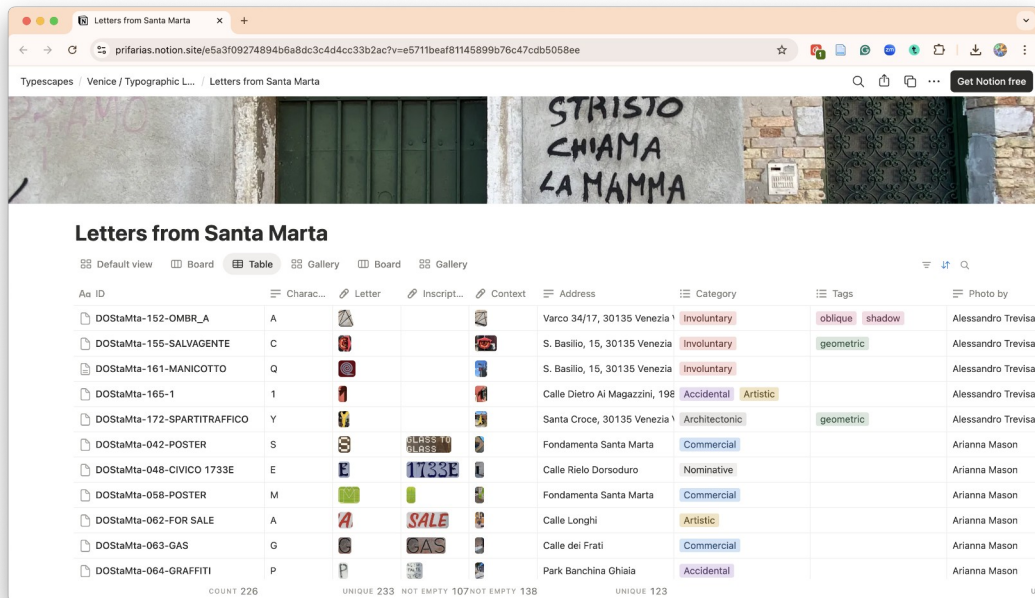


Figure 3 *Typescapes* website, as part of the *Typographic Landscapes* framework uses organisation of data collected through tables with the different cases, which can help analyse, select, sort, etc. An open platform that allows the translation of fieldwork into a public access archive.

### 3.4 Mobile and AR interfaces for engaging with urban heritage

Design-led explorations of mobile and augmented reality (AR) interfaces are also emerging as tools for engaging with cultural, intangible and landscape heritage. The *phygital* mobile application *Bolzano-Bozen Typescape AR app* proposed by Bollini and Mastroianni in their *Typographic Topology / Topographic Typography* project (2023) presents a proof-of-concept prototype that uses AR to visualise historical lettering, archigraphies and commercial signs within their original urban locations. Developed as an experimental geobased-visual and logical information extension of Farias's research on graphic memory and typographic landscapes, the project integrates archival photographs, field documentation, and geolocated signage into a situated interface that overlays typographic remnants onto the contemporary streetscape. Rather than generating new content, the project functions as an interpretive layer that reveals the social, linguistic, and cultural sedimentation embedded in the city's lettered surfaces. As a speculative design-led application, it demonstrates how interaction design can support public engagement with typographic heritage by making otherwise overlooked graphic traces visible, navigable, and accessible within everyday urban experience.

Together, these cases show how design practice contributes to understanding and preserving typographic heritage through multiple modes: revival, documentation, curation, and situated digital interpretation. Across typeface design, editorial archives, visual

storytelling, online databases, and speculative AR interfaces, design-led work consistently reveals typography as a material and cultural trace through which urban histories are accessed and reinterpreted. Rather than proposing unified methods, this body of practice demonstrates the breadth of approaches available for engaging with memory and heritage within the public realm. As a corpus, these examples highlight how practice-based design contributes to heritage discourse by making urban letterforms legible as evidence, narrative, and situated experience.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article has offered an account of scholarly engagement with urban typography as a multimodal carrier of identity and cultural value. Across the literature, architectural and vernacular letterforms emerge as more than functional or aesthetic features; they act as mediators of memory, identity, and social history within the built environment. Despite growing recognition of typography's significance in urban visual culture, its role within heritage discourse remains conceptually fragmented and under-theorised.

By synthesising perspectives from design, semiotics, and heritage studies, this review highlights the value of interpreting typography through multimodal and geosemiotic frameworks that recognise its spatial and communicative agency. Such approaches extend design research beyond formal analysis toward a critical understanding of how typographic artefacts operate as situated discourses, anchored in place, history, and social meaning. Work on urban graphic heritage reinforces this perspective. In Harland's account (2020), heritage is treated as a process of interpretation that depends on which traces are observed, recorded, and valued. Lettering, inscriptions, and signs in the city mediate collective memory by making social and cultural histories visible in everyday environments. They are not static remnants but active agents that participate in the visual continuity and transformation of place. As Harland (2024) shows, attention to physical traces reveals the civic, social, and economic processes through which cities evolve. Each typographic layer carries fragments of earlier identities while contributing to new ones, turning the urban surface into a palimpsest of graphic expression; the loss or replacement of such lettering changes how a city remembers itself.

Within this framework, heritage is understood critically, not as neutral preservation but as a selective process shaped by institutional and historical values. Decisions about which graphic forms are retained or removed influence how cultural identity is represented in the public realm (Harland, 2020). A design-led perspective extends this by developing methods to document, reinterpret, and reactivate typographic traces so they continue to communicate meaning in contemporary contexts (Pan et al., 2022). Typography therefore, functions as a cultural mediator, linking memory, identity, and design practice within the ongoing transformation of urban environments.

The review also identifies an emerging convergence between heritage theory and design-led practice, where documentation, revival, and reinterpretation of typographic traces serve as modes of cultural inquiry. This convergence points toward a more integrated design epistemology, one that treats typographic heritage as both subject and method: a way of reading and reimagining the city through its lettered surfaces. Ultimately, this synthesis

contributes to the historical and critical discourse of design research by revealing how typography functions as a material record of cultural transformation and as a speculative resource for envisioning plural urban futures. In doing so, it positions typographic heritage as a consequential site of design knowledge, linking interpretation, preservation, and reactivation within the ongoing transformation of urban environments.

#### 4.1 Limitations and future research directions

This review is intentionally selective, aiming to consolidate key concepts rather than to provide an exhaustive survey of every region, script, or platform. Consequently, certain typographic histories and community initiatives (especially those outside formal academic or institutional networks) may be under-represented.

Another limitation is the ever-changing nature of the subject itself. Urban letterforms are frequently transformed by redevelopment, regulations, weathering, and shifts in commercial use. As a result, published accounts and digital archives might fall short as heritage records.

Future research should build on this foundation by examining multilingual and multiscript environments, employing mixed methods that combine geosemiotic analysis with archival research and interviews, and critically evaluating digital platforms as heritage systems. This includes investigating how metadata, curation, and participation influence what is recognised and valued as typographic heritage. Design-led interventions such as archives, exhibitions, films, and revival projects would benefit from assessment of both their cultural impact and ethical implications, especially where heritage discourse overlaps with commodification or exclusion.

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