



Opening Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
A TypI 2011 Conference
Reykjavík
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Dear designers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

For me this is indeed a pleasant and unusual occasion and even a personal landmark, because although I have been President for fifteen years, this is certainly the first time I have been asked to make a speech dedicated to a single letter of the alphabet. My secretary commented that delivering speeches of this kind could provide interesting opportunities in the coming years, due to the length of the Icelandic alphabet, which contains 32 letters. In addition, it was unlikely that a Head of State had before now delivered an opening address to a conference dedicated to a single letter.

Iceland is in many ways a good location for your deliberations due to the impressive growth that we are experiencing in the visual arts, especially in graphics, textile and industrial design. A new design museum has been inaugurated and in my annual visits to the graduation exhibitions at our Academy of the Arts I have witnessed great interest and creativity among our young generation.

Type design is a truly fascinating field with its wide-ranging history, stretching from inscriptions on Greek temples and Roman coins to the modern iPad or Kindle. In technique, it spans the corresponding range from working with a chisel to engineering the fonts we take for granted in our computers, calling them forth by means of a mouse and keyboard. And in all ages, design has had to serve the twin considerations of utility and artistic appeal.

A well-designed typeface is a great blessing in our modern working environment. It provides good readability and thus brings relief for our

eyes; and at the same time, as we are constantly exposed to texts and types in our surroundings, good design may enhance beauty in our everyday experience.

Your conference brings a very interesting additional aspect to the arena. With the contemporary prevalence of English, characters that are not included in the English alphabet have become a curious and important aspect of linguistic and national identity.

When we see an o-umlaut (ö) in a text, we quickly recognize that it could be in German, Hungarian, Turkish, Swedish or Icelandic – or even in some other languages, such as Norwegian or Danish. But when we see an esszet (ß) we can be pretty sure that what we're looking at is German. A language blessed both with an eth (ð) and a thorn (þ) is, of course our beautiful mother tongue, Icelandic. However, the fact that we share these two letters with Anglo Saxon or Old English is a reminder of our heritage and the fact that a thousand years ago, letters and languages were very different from what they are now; Icelanders were then just about to replace the pagan Viking runes by the Christian Roman alphabet.

For a modern society, possessing exclusive and beautiful characters like the ð and þ is, admittedly, a mixed blessing, perhaps a little bit like having a separate language, spoken by relatively few or very few people. We can wear our ð and þ with pride and use them as emblems of independence and diversity. But we certainly run into situations where the keyboard does not recognize them, where no one speaks our language or the operating system even grinds to a halt because of our out-of-the-ordinary localization. We often find people, especially in international organizations, who tend to despair about the cost of translations.

Nonetheless, these special characters are an asset, one more voice in the great choir of human languages – and, as you certainly know, a marvellous opportunity for good design.

To conclude, I should like to welcome you warmly to Iceland. I hope that during your days here you will have fruitful deliberations and an opportunity to enjoy some of the admirable Icelandic works of design on display both in the centre of Reykjavík and in many locations outside the city.

It is an honour for us to host your conference and I hope that you will be inspired by what Iceland has to offer, by our unique natural environment, by the multiple contrasts of colour and light, by the visual stimulus of the interaction of the mountains and the sea, by the ever-changing weather, by a northern world which proves every day that, when it came to Iceland, the Almighty was, and still is, in a very creative mood.