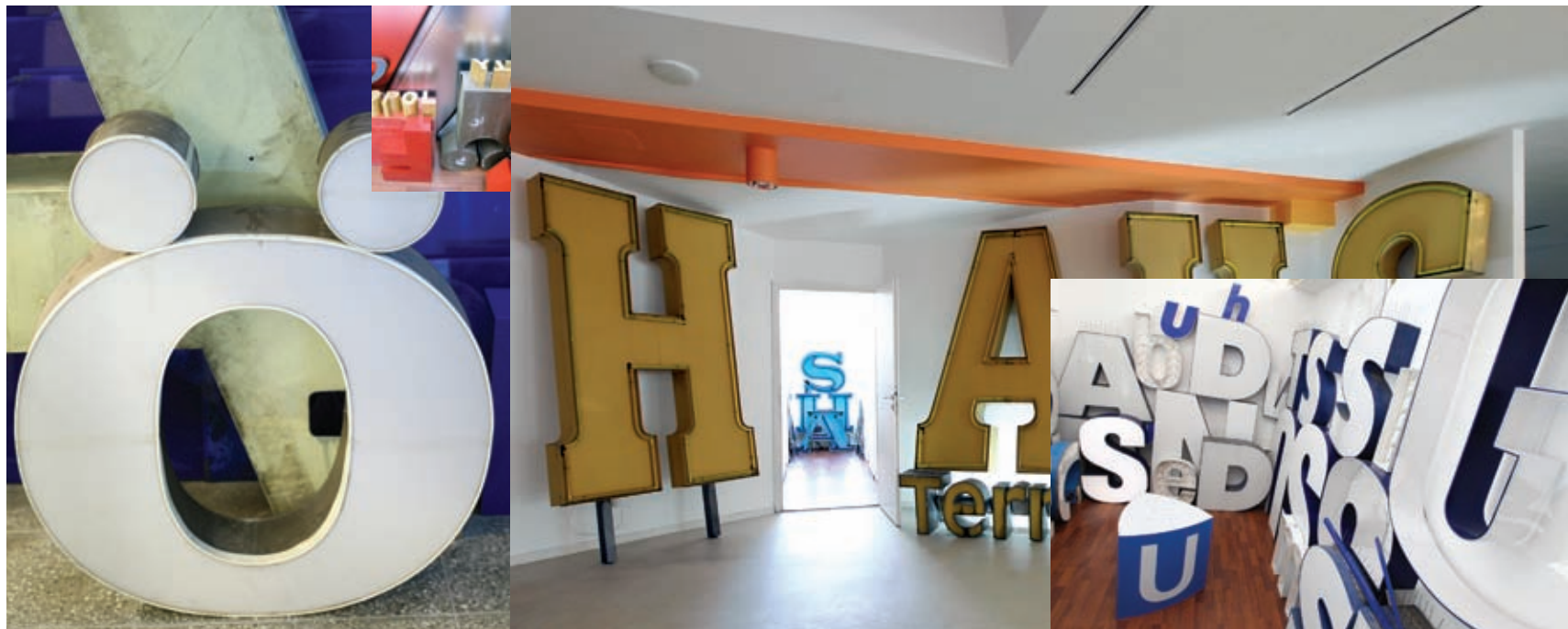


# From Calibri to Century Gothic

*Berlin's Museum of Forgotten Letters is devoted to rescuing abandoned typefaces and fonts from scrapheaps, skips and derelict buildings. house visited its headquarters...*

By Flora King



**For some people**, an A is just an A; the first letter in the Roman alphabet, or an upside-down V with a line across the middle. For one Berlin-based communications designer, however, letters hold a greater significance. For Barbara Dechant they are beautiful, elegant entities, endlessly diverse and each in possession of their own distinct character. “Letters are the building blocks of all communication,” says the typography enthusiast and co-founder of Berlin’s Buchstabenmuseum, or Museum of Letters, Characters and Typefaces. “They stand at the interface between written and visual culture. They flow together, they carry images. Letters can be funny or joyful or sad.”

After a childhood spent drawing slogans on school textbooks, Dechant began to scour rubbish dumps for discarded letters and shop signs, re-housing them in her own front room. Her personal collection soon outgrew the apartment, and it was while working as a freelance designer that she met Anja Schulze, a press officer at the Berlin City Museum, and the idea for a Museum of Forgotten Letters was born. Dechant was saddened by the disappearance of quality crafted, artisanal signs from Berlin’s streets, while Schulze’s dream was to manage her own exhibition. So, for the love of typography and through a marriage of interests, the museum came into being – first as a small non-profit organisation

with appointment-only viewings, later as a bigger showroom on Karl-Liebknecht-Straße.

In its fifth year, the museum is now open three days a week, and attracts anyone from font-fascinated designers, typographers and graffiti artists to children, academic theorists and literacy-learning groups. Its stated aim is “the preservation and documentation of letters, regardless of culture, language and font systems” and preservation is a key word. While this age of rapid digital innovation has seen the demise of regional signage, the rise of the corporate logo and the homogenisation of urban landscapes, the museum’s objective is to salvage old comrades from the cityscape that would otherwise have been consigned to the scrapheap, and in doing so document visual aspects of the 20th century.

Exhibits on display range from thimble-sized letters to bulky characters stretching up to three metres in length, and include signs for the fabled West Berlin Café Adler, the East German Radio building, East Berlin’s main train station, and even the ‘E’ that flew towards the screen from the cinema marquee in Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*. Others – like a 1940s leather-shop sign – are more obscure, but equally evocative in their recollection of a lost decade or forgotten pocket of Berlin life. In order to find new typographic treasures Dechant and Schulze are dedicated street walkers. They



are continuously on the lookout for businesses that have closed or changed names, zigzagging across town to rescue signs and relying on a network of friends and fellow letter-lovers to tip them off.

It wasn't until the museum recently moved to its bigger premises that the founders were eligible to apply for government funding. Prior to this, Dechant and Schulze had relied solely on donation and, without an acquisitions budget, never paid anything to procure a sign. For one particular treasure, however, an aquarium shop sign affixed to a concrete wall in the borough of Friedrichshain, the girls made a rare exception. Knowing that the blue neon Zierfische letters, complete with bubble-like yellow fish logo, had become not just a local landmark but favourite hit on photo-sharing website Flickr – and therefore likely to attract other buyers – Dechant went in to fundraising overdrive. Following an exuberant re-housing of the sign in their showroom, a designer got in touch to say he'd drawn the original sketches for it in the '70s, and gave them to the museum as a gift.

Although part of the magic of the Buchstabenmuseum, says Dechant, is in the releasing of letters from their previous contexts, and in their meaning as signifiers beyond any material embodiment, she is also interested in the stories behind the signs, the recollections attached to them, and in people like the Zierfische

designer willing to step forward with more information. Visitors often come to the museum and, when a particular sign triggers a memory, re-tell very personal experiences. One man remembered a café where he met his first lover, and another lady the toy shop where she was taken on her birthday as a child. With more funding in place, Dechant hopes to attach old sketches, photographs or film footage to more of the signs, developing an archive of historical material.

Preserving an already mammoth collection of signs from Berlin and beyond, Dechant and Schulze's treasure-hunting shows no sign of deceleration. On the contrary, their search perimeters are expanding, and other signs they dream of acquiring are the ZWEIFEL letters from the rooftop of the Palast der Republik, neon outrages from Las Vegas, and various characters from across Poland, Russia and Asia. The museum was founded not just for sentimentality's sake, after all, but to celebrate letters, to raise awareness of the art of typography, to recycle old media, to document history and to address the global issue of digitalisation. What began as a hobby for Barbara Dechant has grown into a cultural mission.

[www.buchstabenmuseum.de](http://www.buchstabenmuseum.de)