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"Designing Books"

Designing Books: Practice and Theory

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pp. 31-37

Intentionally Blank

Designing books

an introduction to book design, in particular
to book typography

When a book is referred to here, what is meant is the book as an object of use, in the codex form now familiar to us. This definition serves to separate off the concept from, on the one hand, content—the message that is communicated through the medium of the book—and also, on the other hand, from the art object in book form.

Even in this limited sense, the term has more than one meaning. The bookseller, librarian, bookbinder and reader will all understand something a little different by it.

In dealings with printers and bookbinders, the book designer does best to stick to the bookbinder's definition. It is in general use in the printing industry and can be put as follows:

A book consists of a 'block' (a set of pages), which is secured with end-papers in a separately produced binding case: equally so, whether the folded pages of the block are empty or printed, and whether the block is secured by glue or by thread. One could add that paperbacks glued into covers without the use of end-papers are also called books. In English, a distinction between a book and a booklet is often made. A booklet has fewer pages than a book, and will probably be paper-covered rather than case-bound. But one cannot prescribe how, in any particular instance, this distinction should be drawn.

Whether book or booklet, in their many possible variants, the manner of binding and the materials used decisively affect those qualities that go to make up the physical presence of the object.

The question of whether the book is case-bound or not has no bearing on the typography of the thing. Whether the publication is sewn or glued or fan-folded is of more importance; that can influence the size of the back margins.

If for reasons of simplicity, in connection with typographic issues, the term book is used here, then booklets are included too. Then we are using the term as it is often used in ordinary life; e.g. for a 'paperback book'.

The work of the book designer

The book designer is concerned with the following particular matters: format, extent, typography (these three partly determine each other); materials (papers, binding materials); reproduction; printing; finishing.

Here we deal primarily with typography and, within this category, with those matters that are part of what one may call macrotypography.

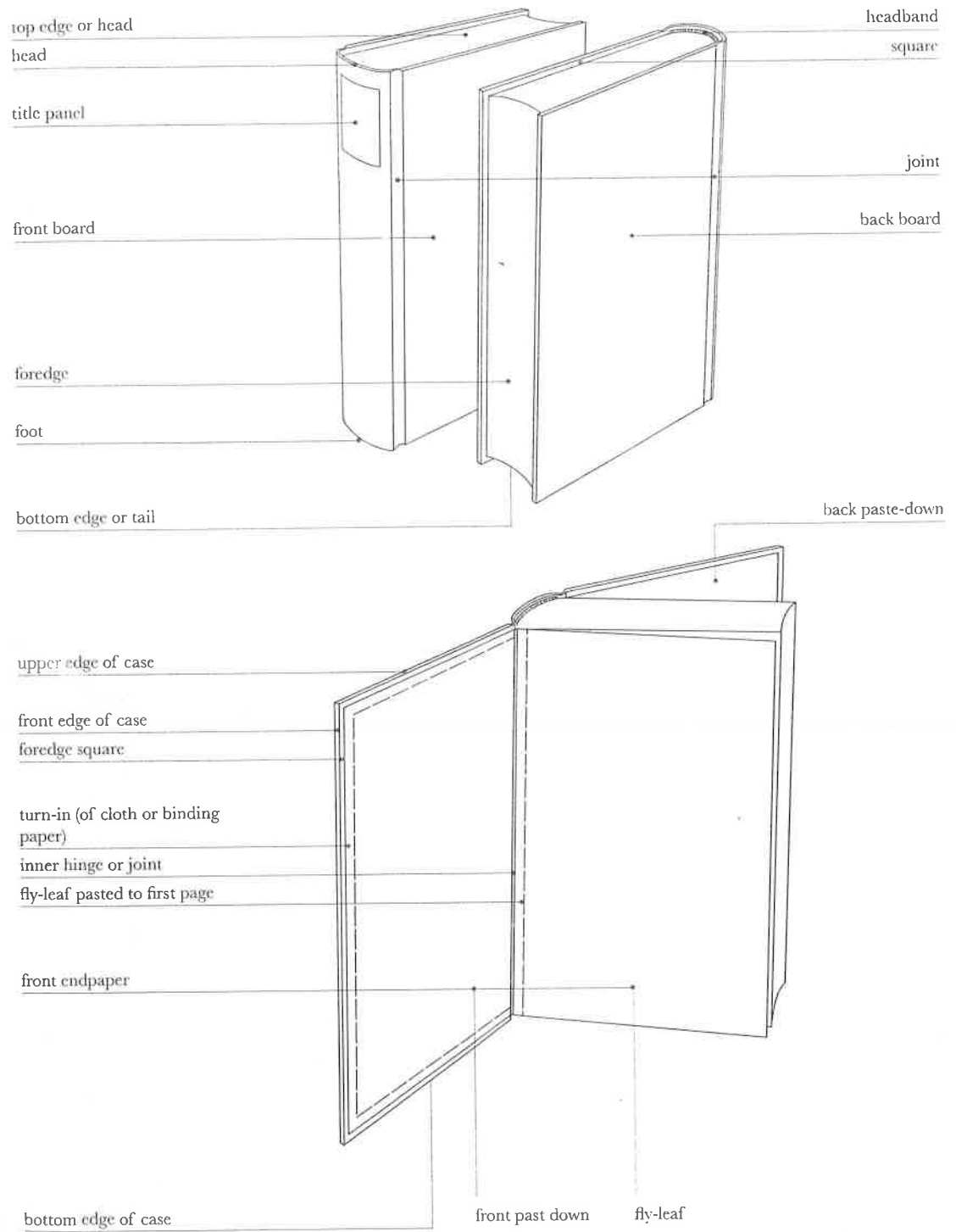
Micro- or detail-typography is concerned with the following: letterforms; letterspace and the word; word-space and the line; space between lines and the column.

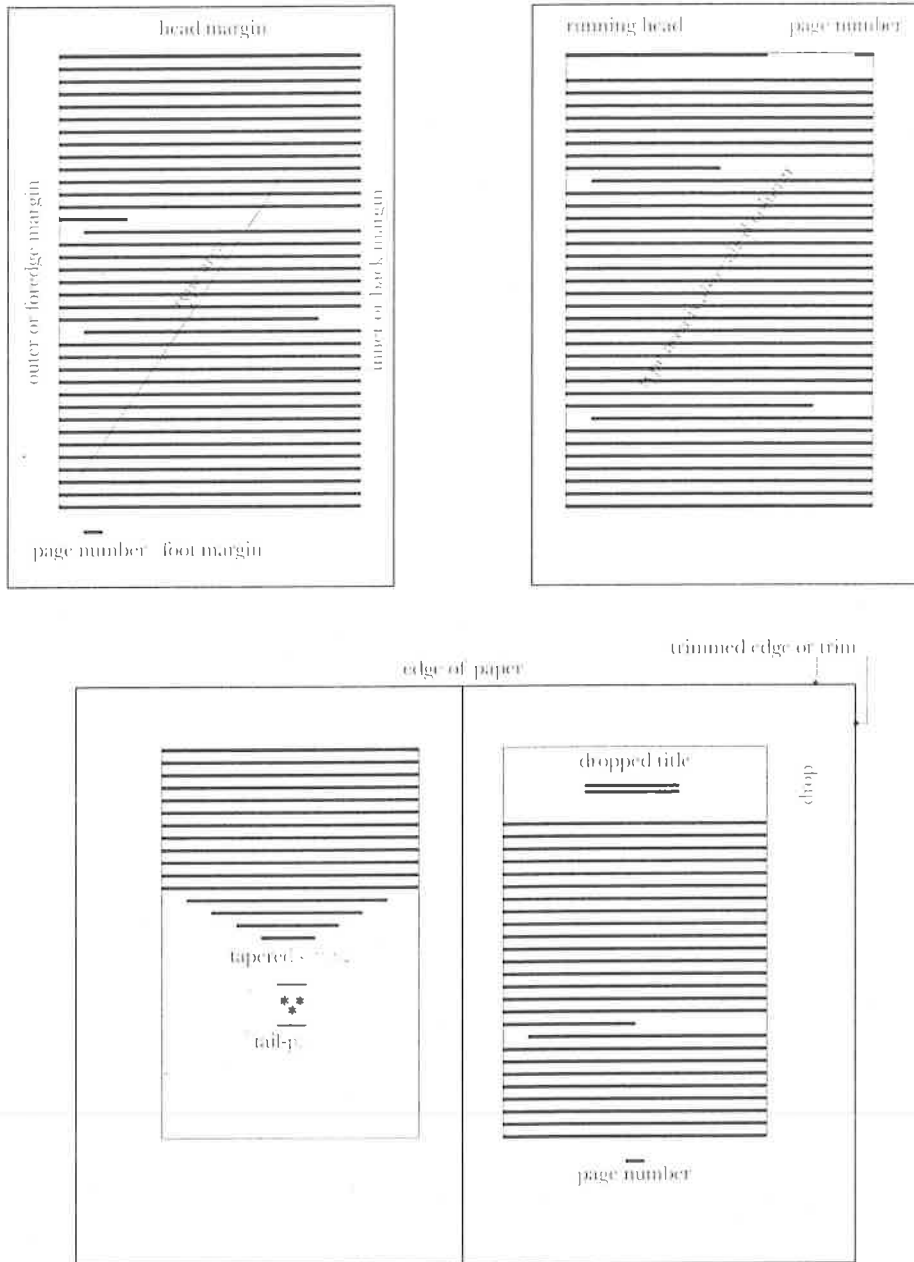
Macrotypography—also called layout—means determining the page format and the size of the text columns and illustrations, also their placing, the organization of the headings and captions, and of all the other typographic elements.

Where in microtypography one breaks with convention at one's peril, it would be wrong to draw up strict rules for the work of book design as it is described here. The pages that follow should be understood in this spirit too.

Some trade terms

In order to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes in production it is important that the designer uses the right terms of the trade.





The technical terms that describe the parts of a page opening come from the days of metal type. Some are still in use now, when text is composed without metal and is printed by offset litho-

graphy. In the English-speaking book trade, measurements are given as height x width and refer—if not otherwise qualified—to the trimmed block of the book.

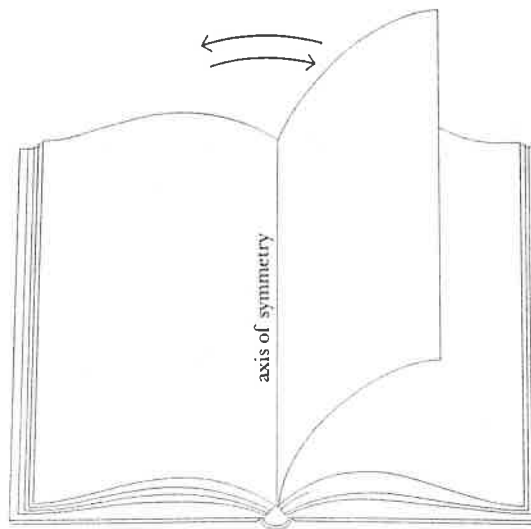
Symmetry, asymmetry and kinetics

When opened, a book shows mirror symmetry. Its axis is the spine, around which the pages are turned. Thus any typographic approach, including an asymmetric one, has always to take account of the symmetry that is inherent in the physical object of a book. The axis of symmetry of the spine is always there; one can certainly work over it, but not deny it. In this respect book typography is essentially different from the typography of single sheets, as in business printing, posters, and so on.

The axis of symmetry is the first important 'given', to which the book designer has to pay attention. The second is the kinetic element that is typical of books: the sense of movement and development, which comes with the turning of the pages.

From a design point of view it is not the single page that is important, but rather the double-page spread: two pages joined together into a unity by the axis of symmetry. The movement of the double-pages, turned over one after another, forces us however to conclude that it is not these double-pages but their totality that should be understood as the final *typographic* unity. (Though this is just one part of the book. These things also contribute to the overall impression that it presents: thickness—the bulk and extent—in relation to the size and proportions of the page, the materials and the manner in which it is bound.)

The succession of double-pages includes the dimension of time. So the job of the book designer is in the widest sense a space-time problem.



Symmetry. See the explanation in 'Book design as a school of thought', pp. 11 ff.

Format and thickness, hand and eye

The book as a usable object is determined by the human hand and the human eye. This establishes the upper and lower limits with respect to format, thickness (extent) and weight. Within these boundaries the format of a book is determined by its purpose or nature, certain traditions or currents of influence that belong to its time, and not least by paper- and printing-press-formats.

Books of pure text, for extended and continuous reading (generally works of literature), normally pose fewer fundamental problems than do books with illustrations. The first should be slim and light and if possible one should be able to hold them in one hand; the second should show the illustrations at an adequate size, and so require a larger format and other proportions. It is harder to find a reasonable format for those works of science, information and school books, for which verbal and visual information are equally important. Nowadays the illustrations (insofar as they are simply there for reference purposes) often occupy an unnecessary amount of space, at the expense of handleability and readability. Some illustrations do not lose their information value if they are reproduced a bit smaller. This holds true particularly for such things as plans, technical drawings and graphic representations.

