



ART IMITATING LIFE . . . IMITATING ART by Michael Doret

In the fall of 2008, I had four font designs under my vest, and I was ready to embark on a fifth. But I was beset with a case of “writer’s block”, and was in need of some small seed of inspiration to help me past it. One day, while driving north on Fairfax, I happened to glance over at one of LA’s landmark eating establishments—Canter’s Delicatessen. You really can’t miss it. Canter’s is one of those places that has not one, not two, but three competing neon signs, each in a different style, and each probably added at different times.



But in the frame of mind that I was in, it was just one of them that spoke to me, its letterforms suggesting to me that they might be a viable direction for a typeface that nobody had yet successfully attempted. It was the “Canter’s” neon lettering atop what appeared to be a theater marquee that jugged out over the Fairfax sidewalk.

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I have since learned that what I was looking at had, in fact, been the marquee for the Esquire Theater until it was taken over and converted to a restaurant by Canter's in 1953.

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Perhaps it was that mid century marquee vibe that called out to me, but at any rate I saw something in the straight up and down script that I liked, and that somehow I thought I'd be able to extrapolate into a font. Or it may have been only that it was in that

classic neon channel letter form that was so familiar to me growing up in Brooklyn, suggestive of anything and everything that I loved about the place.

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Canter's

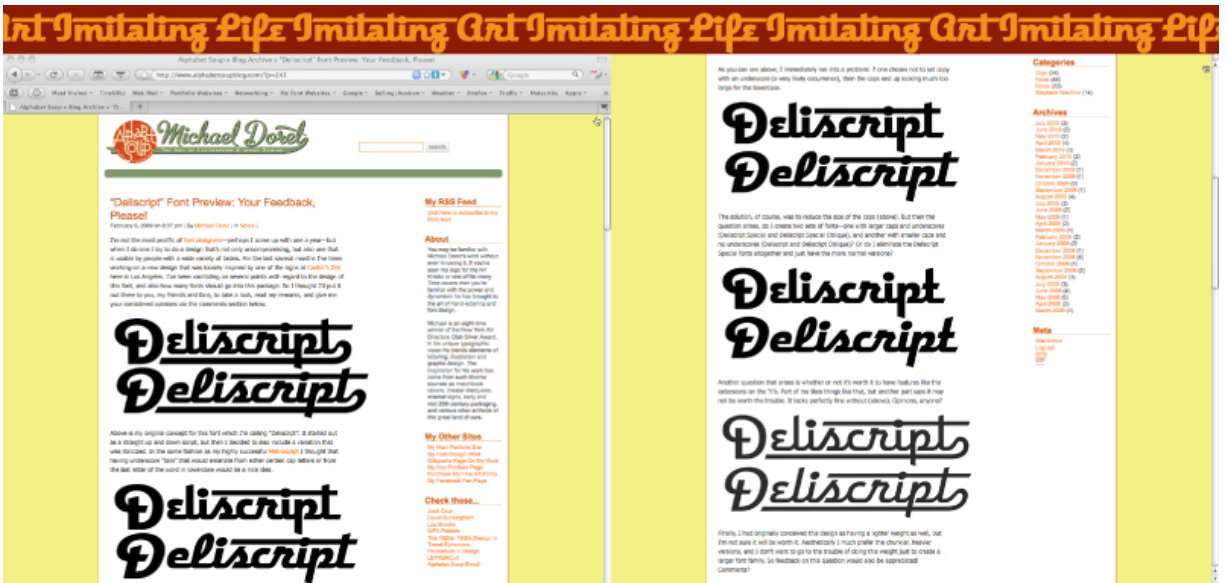


So moving forward, I decided that I'd try to adapt what I saw into a font design which, if successful, I'd call "Deliscript" as a kind of homage to Canter's. I started out by doing some very rough drawings of how I'd need to adapt the forms.

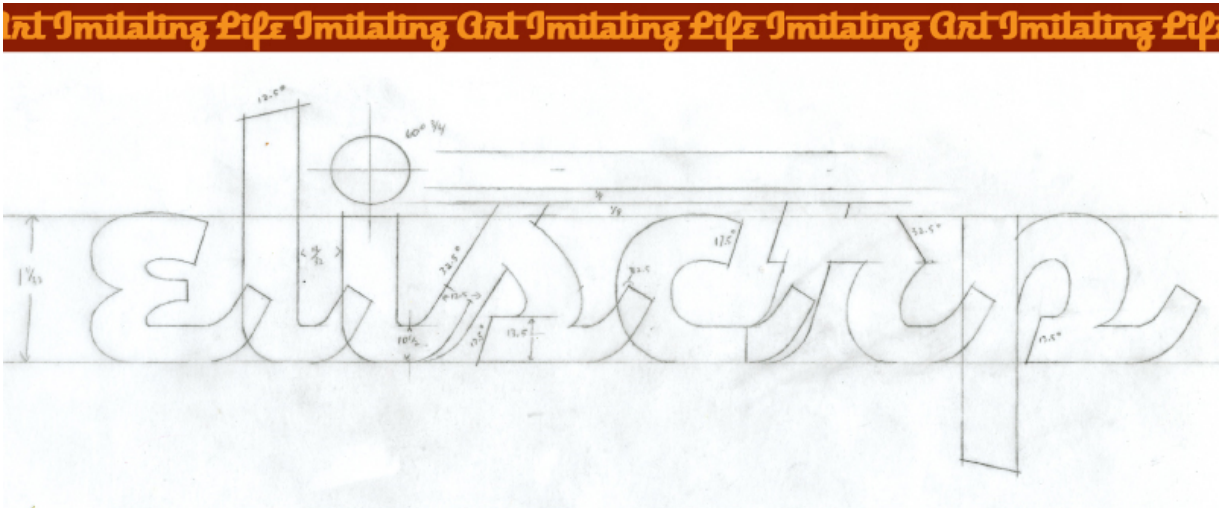
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The caps were the hardest to try to pin down. I really had nothing to go by, not caring at all for the cap "C" in the actual signage. So I invented cap forms for what I felt would go with the lowercase aesthetic.



I had already begun blogging about my design work by that point, and because I felt stumped at several points in the design, I posted a few development sketches on my blog, soliciting opinions. I got a bunch of responses—several of which were actually quite helpful.



So then I set to work finalizing all the forms and trying to figure out how this typeface would actually work. My project took quite a bit longer than I anticipated—it seemed to grow and multiply before my eyes. In addition to throwing in an italicized or “Slant” version, I decided to add several variable length “tails”, similar to what I had done in “Metroscript”, and I also decided to try to do something that hadn’t been done before in a font—adding variable length crossbars which could be extended outward in either direction from the lower case “t”.

When the font was finally completed I did several more blog posts on it, giving a little more background, and mentioning the Canter’s connection.

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Deliscript

AND

Deliscript Slant

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z &
a b b c c d d e e f f f f g g h h i i j j k k l l m m n n o o o p p q q
r r r r s s s t t u u u u v v v w w w w x x x y y z z z z
% % ° 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 \$ C £ f € ¥ ¹²³ ¼ ½ ¾ /

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z &
a a b b c c d d e e f f f f g g h h i i j j k k l l l l m m n n o o o
p p q q r r r r s s s t t u u u u v v v w w w w x x x y y z z z z
% % ° 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 \$ C £ f € ¥ ¹²³ ¼ ½ ¾ /

The two completed fonts contained almost 800 glyphs each. They were, by far, my most ambitious type designs yet. Above is just a small sampling of the character sets.

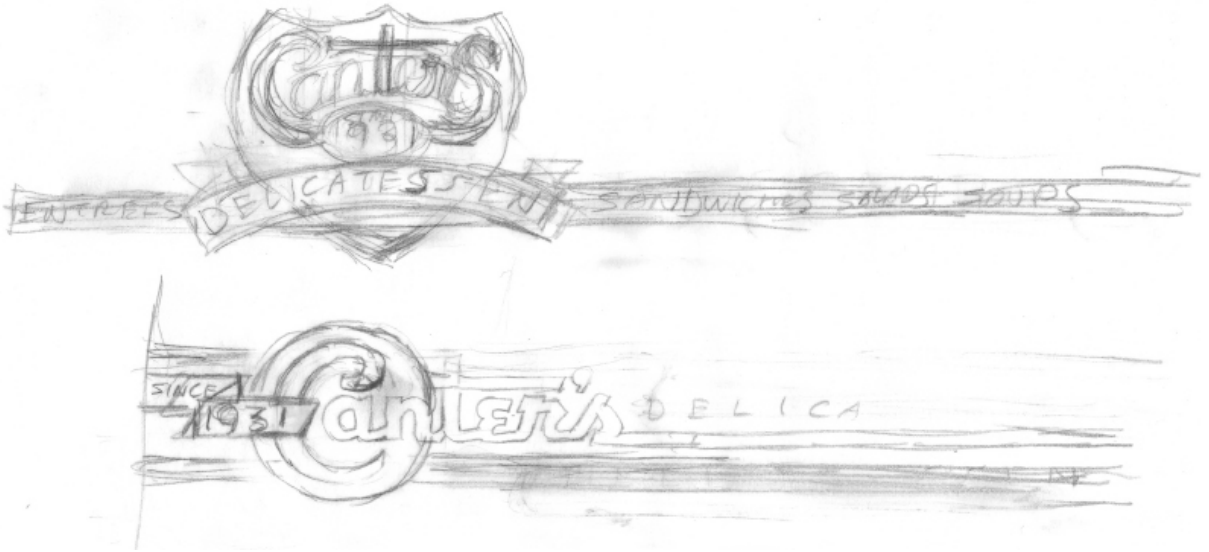
In January 2010 two things pertaining to Deliscript happened at almost precisely the same time. The first one was that I learned that Deliscript was a winner in the Type Director's Club font design competition "TDC² 2010". That in itself was a great source of pride for me, but the second one really blew me away: a few days later I got a call from a young woman asking me about Deliscript and if I had designed it. I subsequently found out she was a member of the Canter family, asking if I would be interested in the possibility of working on a project for the restaurant which was, at that moment, kind of a secret. It turned out that her name was Bonnie Bloomgarden, and she was the great-granddaughter of Canter's founder Ben Canter. That's when I started thinking "OK, this is kind of odd". The project, I was to find out several days later when we met, was to design the graphics for a gourmet food truck that Bonnie wanted to create as an adjunct to the restaurant.

What was interesting about this whole thing was that by blogging about the font and my inspirations for it, I had set wheels in motion that would eventually bring my work to the attention of one of the youngest and most creative members of the Canter family. She and her sister Dena had Googled "Canter's Deli" and "Font" hoping to find an interesting font that they could use to design their truck. What they found was my blog where I had written about Deliscript and how their restaurant's neon sign had served as my initial inspiration. But she realized that rather than just purchasing Deliscript and trying to design the truck themselves, that they might achieve better results by actually hiring the designer who had found inspiration in their signage. This actually went counter to the usual route taken by Canter's in the past, which was more of a do-it-yourself attitude (as evidenced

by the multiple competing signs in front of the restaurant). Bonnie didn't go along with the conventional wisdom that anybody with a PC could now be a designer, and that there actually is value to hiring a professional.

So in a strange and serendipitous way, my Deliscript font design project had come full circle, turning back on itself and inspiring the folks at Canter's—whose sign had been the original source of my own inspiration. And what was interesting to me was that this whole scenario could not have happened without the magic of the internet and search engines.

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The graphics on trucks these days are not painted on, but rather they're printed on a flexible vinyl film which is applied to trucks and conforms to their contours. Generally I'm not crazy about how most of these "wrapped" trucks look—they're usually way too busy for my taste. So I decided to try to design this truck as if it were going to be done the old-fashioned way—as a paint job by a sign painter.

At first I proposed doing the design on a white truck, but Bonnie felt that that didn't have the requisite "deli" feel to it, so I came up with a color scheme that I felt reflected what she was looking for. She had approached me because of Deliscript, so I felt that it would go without saying that I would use the font for the dominant graphic elements on the truck.

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I took some photos of a white truck similar to the one that was going to be used for Canter's, photoshopped off any extraneous graphics, and then used that as a template for my proposed design. I ended up setting all the letters in "Canter's" in Deliscript—except the "C", which I created from scratch. In addition, the lowercase "a" in Deliscript Upright is a two story "a" which didn't match the old neon signage, so I borrowed the "a" from Deliscript Slant, and skewed it backwards until it matched the Upright font.

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Another interesting facet to this project was that I decided that the truck needed something a little bit more to happen on the service side. I thought about the walking neon baker that sits atop the entrance to Canter's bakery and felt that something like that would make a nice "mascot" icon on the service side door. I tried to redraw the baker graphically, but felt that its look wasn't that appealing, and didn't fit in well with the rest of the truck graphics. Rummaging through my collection of old matchbooks, I found one with the image of a walking chef carrying a platter whose attitude I really liked.

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So I redrew him, trying to make him conform as closely as possible to the pose of the Canter's baker. Adding some wavy steam lines emanating from his platter, and wafting back across the truck, I now felt that he fit in.

After completing art of the front, back and two sides of the truck in Adobe Illustrator, the next stage was to get it printed on vinyl film and applied to the truck. Getting the art printed and the truck wrapped properly was probably the most difficult and frustrating part of this project. The company that leases the trucks is called Road Stoves, and part of the deal was that we work with SignQuest, a company that specializes in large scale printing and vehicle wraps. There was no accurate template to work with because of all the slight differences between all the Road Stoves trucks—it seemed as if no two of their trucks were alike, and nobody knew the specific truck that would be assigned to Canter's until they were ready to wrap—an interesting Catch 22. So I could only create art which conformed to some very approximate dimensions, and had to rely on the expertise of the folks at SignQuest to make any necessary adjustments for scaling or otherwise. Well that proved to be easier said than done. It seemed as if SignQuest had never really been put to the test by a professional designer—in fact they were usually given the job of creating the art with which they wrapped most of their trucks. Sitting down with them in preparation for the printing, I was kind of surprised to see how casually they scaled and treated the vector art that I had so carefully prepared—moving things around by a kind of "guesstimation". This was slightly horrifying to a designer like myself who is plagued with a minor case of OCD. But the "proof was in the pudding", as they say.

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Let's just say that I'm glad that I was there when their wrapper started applying the film to the truck, since they were not accustomed to precision work. In the end though, they did a passable job. Some of the graphics ended up not exactly in their optimal positions—especially on the service side—but I have to admit, it's a very difficult job to get this right, and in the end the truck looked pretty good. Here are some views of the final product:

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When I started my Deliscript project I couldn't have foreseen how it could have triggered this series of serendipitous events. What started out as my source of inspiration spun around, did a 360, and found me as their source. One project morphed into the other and the lines of demarcation for me got blurred. In my opinion the whole ended up being more than the sum of its parts, and I became more proud of them both together than I could ever have been about either of them individually.