



Peter Palazzo

THE RAGGED RIGHT INTERVIEW
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Peter Palazzo

Peter Palazzo, the editorial art director who redesigned The New York Herald Tribune in 1963 and helped start a genre that he called journalistic design, died on January 30, 2005, in Glens Falls, New York, three days before his 79th birthday. Tony Sutton's interview with him is reprinted from the July 1995 issue of the tabloid magazine Ragged Right and is republished here as a tribute to Palazzo

I'M in a small, but comfortable, 11th-floor office in midtown Manhattan. Type samples are scattered on the sofa and coffee table; page proofs and tearsheets are pinned haphazardly to the walls. Lounging in the midst of the chaos, feet resting on a small desk, is Peter Palazzo, the graying genius who single-handedly changed the face of newspaper design 30 years ago with an elegant and avant-garde restyling of the New York Herald Tribune. Simultaneously, he helped spark the birth of the contemporary city magazine with his design of New York., the newspaper's trendsetting weekly supplement.

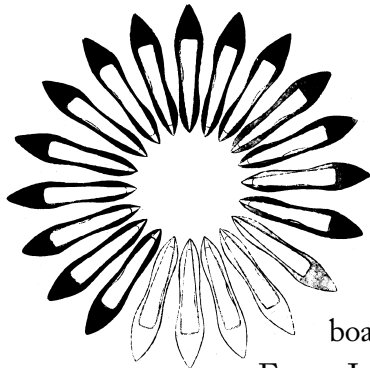
What's more, he launched an unknown artist called Andrew Warhol onto the New York advertising scene 10 years earlier. While most people hope for just 15 minutes of fame, the remarkable Peter Palazzo has been in the graphic spotlight for his work in advertising and publication design for the past 30 years.

Now, after developing a bold new design format for an ambitious but short-lived Sunday edition of the New York Post, he's devoting his energies to the crafting new headline type



for the Cleveland (Ohio) Plain Dealer. “Ideally, every newspaper should have its own typeface,” he declares, as he shows me some of the refinements he’s making to Palazzo News Book, the typeface that bears his name. There’s no better way of creating an identity for a publication. In 1920, most U.S. newspapers used Bodoni for their headlines, so they all looked pretty much the same. Technological advances now give us the capacity of generating unique typefaces to match the precise look we are seeking.” And that, he adds passionately, is perhaps the most exciting thing that’s happened to newspapers since they discovered how to print color in register.

“Cleveland is a good example of the way newspapers lost typographical direction in the days since hot metal typesetting. For 30 years, The Plain Dealer’s heads were set in Cheltenham, one of the classic turn-of-the-century faces designed by Bertram Goodhue, but the purity of the original design disintegrated after it was expanded photographically during the time of photosetting.”



BUT let’s stop this becoming a full-bloodied discussion about The Plain Dealer. The newspaper waited 152 years for its own unique typeface, so I can wait a few more minutes before hearing the story behind its development. There are other – dare I suggest, more interesting – things I want to know. Let’s start at the beginning ...

“After graduating from high school, my first, short-lived job was in a boat parts foundry on Staten Island. Then, after two years in the Army Air Force, I returned to Cooper Union, where I majored in advertising but also received much training in fine arts and abstract design. My first graphics job was in the art studio of a print shop that specialized in theatrical work – from flyers to three-sheet posters printed from woodtype. This hands-on experience of all aspects of typesetting and printing has been beneficial right through my career.

“I moved on to work for Amerika, a pre-Cold War magazine produced by the State Department. We sent Amerika to Russia in exchange for a Russian magazine circulated in this country. I was art director of the Arabic version for a time, which was great fun because I was working in the abstract, not knowing what the words meant. Then I did a stint at Quick, a TV Guide-sized news magazine.”

From there, Palazzo freelanced until his first big break, as art director for the New York

shoe chain I. Miller, a post that gave him an opportunity to do “big, bold and brassy kick-ass advertising in a medium – newspapers – where it was rarely seen. Newspaper ads were poor; in fact, most were terrible. So, I reasoned, what could be better than someone buying me big blocks of space and letting me do whatever I wanted?”

The following two years were rewarding for the company, which vastly increased its sales, and for Palazzo, who earned international acclaim for an advertising campaign that was described by *Woman’s Wear Daily*, bible of the fashion industry, as “unique in the history of retailing.”

“While creative director at Miller, I introduced Andy Warhol to the art world. At the time, he was an unknown freelance illustrator, who I had used during my time with *Amerika*, and he had done some shoe illustrations for other magazines. He had an interesting technique that I felt I could adapt to make big and dramatic black-and-white advertising, so I put him on contract for a couple of years. He did hundreds of drawings for me – all of which I threw out before he became famous in the 1960s.

“I must confess that I didn’t think much of his art, but he had smarts. He had to, because he couldn’t think and couldn’t talk. When he became well known, he would just sit there and smirk. People thought he was thinking humongous things, but I don’t think so. Anyway, he was very amicable; he’d do whatever you wanted. At first we didn’t let him sign his art, but then we thought it looked chic to have a signature on our ads. Even then, before he became famous, he was good at self-publicity and used to frame his shoe illustrations and give them to all the fashion ladies. Then he took what he had learned from the graphics world and became an icon of the ’60s. Incredible.”

After producing more award-winning advertising design as creative director at Henri Bendel’s department store, Palazzo found himself, in 1963, on the editorial side of newspapers – at the *New York Herald Tribune*, one of six dailies circulating in the city. An illustrious daily founded in 1835 by Horace Greeley, the *Tribune* was on its last legs, languishing in the long, dark shadow cast by the rival *New York Times*. The paper was fighting for its life, and owner Jock Whitney was prepared to do anything that might reverse its rapidly declining fortunes.

“I was freelancing for a small agency at the time,” says Palazzo, “when the newspaper’s



advertising agency suggested to the management of the Tribune that they ought to do something about the look of the paper. They found me because of my work for Miller and Bendel and my previous magazine work, and introduced me to editor Jim Bellows.

“During our discussions, I knew I needed to work on the paper at the same level as the editors on each section of the newspaper. They and the managing editor had traditional territorial rights and didn’t like the idea of having some advertising agency squirt coming in and telling them how to do their jobs. I was in my early 30s, and these guys all seemed to have been there a thousand years. The editors were make-up people as well, laying out their own pages, and to have some young artist come and tell them what to do with their pages was unthinkable. I knew there would be a problem if I were not on a par with them, so Jim named me design editor. When I started to develop a dummy of how each page should look, I found another obstacle: I didn’t think I had the expertise to make journalistic judgments on the content of the page, so I went back to Bellows and told him, ‘Everything I touch, whether it’s the size of a headline, the crop of a picture or the placement of a story, is a journalistic decision that is out of my realm.’ That was solved by working on the project side-by-side with an editor – two disciplines together.”

REFORMATTING the Sunday Tribune was chaotic, not at all like the orderly, structured way in which most modern newspapers approach change. “The paper was in a very sorry state; its advertising revenue was plunging, although it still sold almost 400,000 copies a week. No one had the slightest idea what they wanted the paper to look like, but all were desperate for increased circulation. There was no research; they had not even got to a point where they knew what audience they were seeking. Faced with that marketing void, we had to make our own decisions, and our guess was that the only audience available was the younger readers of The New York Times, who would be attracted by our politically moderate editorial stance.

“That, in fact, was the reason I chose Caslon as the headline typeface. I thought it immediately gave the paper a more credible, more upscale image, as well as being more friendly, more contemporary and more readable than Bodoni, which we had used for years.” At this point, Palazzo explains how he made slides of a much-loved expletive in the two typefaces and projected them onto a wall in the boardroom to show the impact of Caslon. “They were instantly convinced of the soundness of my choice,” he says, adding that the



management of The Tribune was receptive to any form of graphic change because they had tried everything else and very little was at stake anymore – they were one step from doomsday.”

Palazzo’s background in advertising had an immediate impact. The Tribune’s internal politics were much like those of every newspaper: The advertising and editorial departments saw each other as one step short of Satan. “Understandably, I didn’t have that problem and could communicate easily with the advertising manager, so I persuaded him that editorial should be more involved in the planning of the newspaper’s advertising feature sections. Traditionally, these were the domain of the advertising department, which passed dummies to the editorial staff, who just filled in the gaps with boring wire copy.

“I persuaded the ad manager to give us the same space and let us design the next magazine – on travel – ad layout and all. My theory was simple: If you produce a product that works for the reader, with good stories and decent illustrations, it would be more effective than the dismal stuff we had been doing. Well, it was a revelation and the advertising agencies were blown away by the professionalism.

“The development of New York [the vehicle that launched writer Tom Wolfe and the concept of ‘new journalism’] as a weekly gravure magazine inserted into the Sunday paper was an extension of this same vision. I was part of a group of editors who wanted to grab all the service stuff, TV schedules, movie and theater reviews, and package it together. There was a big debate as to whether New York was the right place for this material, but my advertising experience helped me to see the advertisers’ point of view as well as that of the readers. I told the editors that New York magazine was going to hang around all week, so if we included the TV schedules and other stuff. it would be a great medium to sell to advertisers. And that’s what happened. The response was so good that the guys in the advertising department started smiling for the first time in 20 years.”

The relaunch of the Sunday Tribune toward the end of 1963 certainly created an impact on Manhattan, but it took time to germinate because the new look was so radical.

There was another reason: “Although the reaction to Book Week, another new magazine insert introduced at the relaunch, and New York magazine was immensely positive, especially from the big retail advertisers, readers were not immediately sure what was happening in the newspaper. They were totally unprepared for the disappearance of the little

control of the magazine after a bitter fight with Rupert Murdoch.

While the radical new look of the Sunday Tribune drew a mixed response from readers, it was a breath of fresh air to an industry that was on the verge of huge technological change from hot metal to computerized typesetting and from letterpress to offset printing.

“Until then, most newspaper editors’ idea of page design began and ended with the question, ‘Where shall we put the picture?’” wrote Richard Kluger in *The Paper: The Life And Death Of The New York Herald Tribune* (Knopf), his biography of the newspaper, “The new Sunday Tribune was conceived as a graphic totality, rendered with the precision of superior magazine advertising design. Each page reflected what the *Columbia Journalism Review*, in a favorable assessment of the restyled paper, called ‘painstaking packaging.’ Type was massed and set off by white space almost scandalously generous for newsprint pages to create what the newly-hired design editor Peter Palazzo called ‘an environment of visibility.’”

Looking back 30 years, Palazzo remembers how the magazine-like front pages of each of the four Sunday sections evolved. “I wanted to treat the section fronts in such a way that our writers could produce better pieces, and we could generate a better presentation of that work. It turned out well. We got the stories a couple of days in advance, which gave us time to commission decent illustrations or photographs.

“The new section fronts stemmed from a graphic need, and then the editors decided we should be doing a better writing job as well. We knew we had to be different if we were to survive. That’s why we opted for a wide, five-column format instead of the normal eight narrow columns used by our rivals. We wanted to be noticed. Unfortunately, as usual, we didn’t bother to tell our readers what we were doing so quite a few of them were surprised.”

One incident sums up the confusion created by the new format, says Palazzo. “The very first of our new Sunday front pages contained a piece by former President Eisenhower. But we used such a huge illustration that a lot of people called thinking he had died because the only time you’d normally use such a large picture on the front page was when the president had died!

Book Week, introduced in the relaunched paper, with a design that matched that of New York, was another success. Steve Heller, now art director of *The New York Times Book Review*, summed up the impact of Palazzo’s impact on this section when he wrote, 10 years after the paper’s death, in the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*: “Palazzo’s Book World was not only typographically handsome – even to the untutored eye – but more important, he rejected *The (New York) Times’s* bland visual diet of famous works of art and stock authors’

photographs for provocative illustrations by contemporary illustrators. These drawings, photo-illustrations and what we now call conceptual spots were entry points to otherwise dense articles. They synthesized, galvanized and made complex ideas accessible, and their wit communicated a sense of fun.”

Heller described New York magazine as another publishing revelation. “What differentiated New York from the other Sunday magazines was a marriage of editorial and visual ideas without precedent in newspaper supplements. It was the birth not only of the ‘new journalism’ but of a new graphic journalism ... I remember one cover image showing a stark closeup of an every-day parking meter. It was so New York, so simple, so memorable.”

Accolades, however, don’t pay the bills. The Tribune folded less than three years later, killed by one last labor dispute, and was merged with two other failing papers into the World-Journal-Tribune. That merger lasted eight months, and then the New York newspaper scene was reduced to the three dailies that survive today. “The closure of the paper wasn’t a surprise because we’d been hit by a succession of strikes that prevented publication of the city’s newspapers. The management held out during the last strike because they knew they couldn’t survive if they met the union demands. The Times, however, was in a much stronger position so it settled and won the market. And that was that. I went back to freelancing, helped by the amount of publicity I had gained from the Tribune.”

AFTER a false start as partner in a New York advertising agency, Palazzo found a niche as perhaps the first of America’s celebrated newspaper design consultants, restyling the Providence Journal, Winnipeg Tribune and Edmonton Journal, while also finding time for photography, magazines, advertising and graphics, including architectural design. At various times during this period, he worked on major projects for all of New York’s leading dailies, including an attempt by the Daily News to publish a serious afternoon edition, which didn’t survive the prototype stage.

Then, 12 years after the death of the Herald Tribune, along came another controversial design project, at the Chicago Daily News. It’s still a prickly subject, especially when the interviewer mentions “thick black rules ...”

“I know you want to get to the thick black rules, but wait,” he says, glowering. “I’ll get to

them in a moment. I got a bad rap for the Daily News because it folded within a few months of its relaunch, and the design was innovative. People put the two together and then they blamed me, although they didn't know the details of the closure. Well, the truth is that the Daily News should have folded in 1976, two years before it finally expired.

"Jim Hoge, the editor, got a year's grace to turn the paper around and a little cash to help him do it. He had made a lot of very positive editorial changes and wanted to make dramatic changes to the look of the paper to pursue a younger, more upscale audience. But that's almost impossible unless you've got five years and unlimited cash. We had neither, we were hoping for a miracle.

"I produced about a dozen prototypes and showed them to the editorial committee, which decided to proceed with one of the more radical ones. After the relaunch and the initial shock got out of their system, the readers began to accept the new look, and we thought it just might work. Anyway, Marshall Field, the owner, decided to kill it just a few months later. Why should he sink more cash in it? He already owned the Sun-Times, one of the other major Chicago papers.

"Now we can talk about the thick black vertical rules. I introduced them to break the page into smaller units to help the readers get through the pages. But, initially, they had a negative effect, especially when they broke the flow of the stories and readers had to jump across the rules to continue. But I think that with time they would have adjusted to reading up and around them. People also complained about getting ink on their hands and clothes, which was a problem we tried to resolve by cutting the thickness of the rules down from 6pt to 3pt, which I thought looked fine."

Despite the reaction to the 6pt vertical rules, Palazzo was confident that the paper could have survived and prospered. "Generally speaking, the reception was good, but the interesting thing about this project is that our focus groups reinforced exactly what we hoped would happen – they said the new Daily News would appeal to younger readers. Anyway, Field thought differently. The Daily News folded and my newspaper reputation flattened out, so that for a time no one would come near me because everyone said my avant-garde work had killed two major newspapers. That's not true, of course, but that's what people thought. After that, I did whatever came my way. Newspapers, including the Vancouver Sun and the Herald-News of New Jersey, came along every now and then, and I did some stuff for The Boston Globe, but I wasn't really pushing for the work.

"Until I started producing new typefaces for The Plain Dealer, I had a very low profile in



newspapers for quite a while, although I was involved in a couple of very interesting tabloid projects in that period. The most recent was the packaging of an upscale Sunday edition of the New York Post that included color travel and book review supplements, while still trying to retain the blue-collar visual identity of the daily edition. It was well received but, due to financial miscalculations, was published only for a few months.

“I believe tabloid is the format of the future; it’s a terrific vehicle for newspapers, and the real potential is in the serious, upscale category, which has not been exploited this side of the Atlantic, although it works remarkably well in Europe. Change will probably come when there is a tabloid launch the magnitude of USA Today.

“It almost happened with a project I was involved in just before the launch of USA Today. CBS Publications planned an upscale tabloid, called 7 Days, to be marketed against the weekly supermarket tabs, and we had just got past the prototype stage when it was aborted.”

Palazzo has no regrets about missing the USA Today revolution. “I saw it coming, and

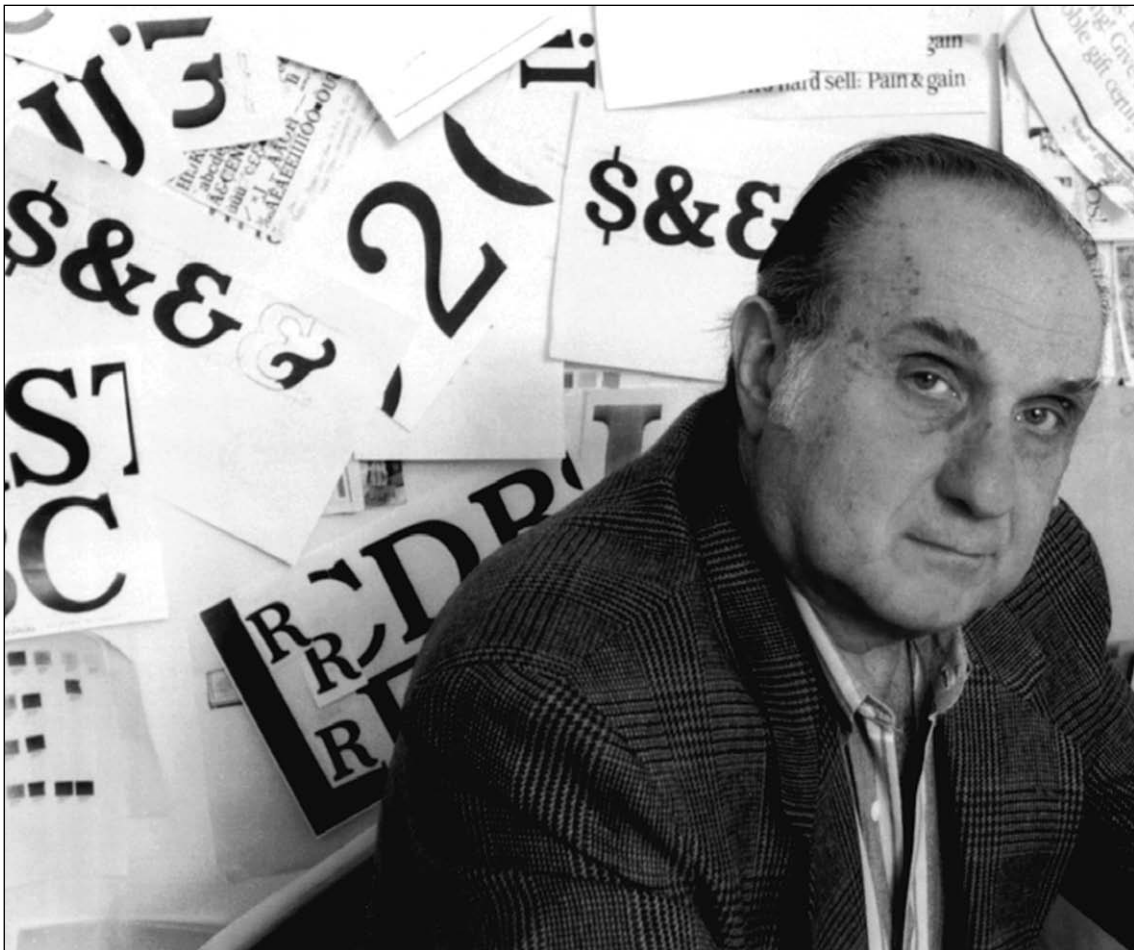
when it hit the streets, I realized that they were finally doing what we set out to achieve with the Chicago Daily News. Newspapers were reaching out, and there has seemed to be a new sense of direction in the last 15 years. But I don't think the potential for improvement has nearly been met."

ALTHOUGH the '80s were thin years for Palazzo's newspaper talents, magazine publishers certainly took advantage of his talents, most notably Forbes, for which he did a graphic overhaul and created covers for several years. He also did format design and/or covers for Psychology Today, Family Circle, Video Review and many other magazines. But now he's returned to the newspaper mainstream, designing new headline typefaces – named after their creator – at Cleveland. I ask why the newspaper would want to go to the trouble of having a personal typeface when PostScript technology has made so many fonts available. He gives me a painful look and explains: "Yes, there are a lot of faces available, but most are not suitable for newspaper work. The real problem is to find a type that has the overall feel and image you're seeking. It must read easily and have the width and x-height you need, and it must work in the weights that are best for your format, as well as the press capability. I challenge you to find the typeface that fits one's precise requirements anywhere in the world. You can't."

When I point out that most papers find a way around that by working with what's available, he sighs and gently explains, "But that's what we've been doing for 100 years. We don't have to anymore. We're free. And," he adds, "that's the first time you've been speechless since we began. Type is nothing more than a conveyor of information. Poor typography is a stumbling block. You want to be able to make the words as readable and enticing as possible. So it's worth spending as much as it takes to get the type absolutely right.

"Let me put it another way: In a newspaper, on any given day, things change – pictures, headlines, stories. The only thing that doesn't change is the type. And that remains constant 365 days a year for 10 to 20 years. If you're using a typeface that doesn't function, you have repeated a mistake millions of times. If, on the other hand, the type functions in a positive way, you have that same type working for you millions of times. Isn't that worth the effort?"

There's only one answer to that question. And you don't need Peter Palazzo to tell you what it is.



Peter Palazzo 1926-2005

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