

A classic on the street door

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By Marie Lau



Gentofte's classic enamel signs are also popular on street doors and as house numbers
Durable design with its heart in the right place. Architect and letterpress printer Knud V. Engelhardt's classic design for Gentofte's street signs is now also gaining ground on street doors and as numbers on garden gates.

Since their creation in 1927, the signs with the distinctive letters and the characteristic heart above the "j" have discreetly but unmistakably shown that you are in Gentofte Municipality.

The fact that the classic, simple design is now also seen in private settings, such as on front doors and garden gates, is due to a small company with a big idea.

A Heritage Inspired Idea

In the early 1990s, Nick Brandt, director of the sign company Ramsign, inherited a book about Knud V. Engelhardt from his aunt. When he started to leaf through the old book with the yellowed pages, he was sold:

"I saw how original and genuine a design Knud V. Engelhardt created back then. His design is part of our cultural heritage in Gentofte, which I think we should preserve."

After that, the plan took shape. Knud V. Engelhardt's enamel signs were to be spread, also to private homes, as a product line in its own right. Nick Brandt began a collaboration with the Danish Museum of Art & Design, and based on a photogravure of Knud V. Engelhardt's original drawings, the distinctive lettering for the house numbers was recreated:

"I chose to put the signs into production because I simply couldn't help myself. We put 2,000 house numbers on stock, and it was a great investment. To be honest it never was a big commercial success. But that's not so important to me either. I don't regret it, because it has helped to preserve Knud V. Engelhardt's design in the municipality of Gentofte."

Today, house numbers 1 to 99 are in stock, while special numbers such as "632" or "78A" are made to order.

From Gentofte to the world

The citizens of Gentofte have wanted to embrace this new born classic, says Nick Brandt: "We definitely sell more Knud V. Engelhardt signs in Gentofte Municipality than in the rest of Denmark. But surprisingly the signs are actually sold all over the world, in the UK, Germany, Australia, Japan and the United States. It's awesome to witness what impact good old Knud V. Engelhardt still has. Mind you, we're talking about Danish design from the 1920's".

The design rewarded

For Knud V. Engelhardt himself, the signage for the Gentofte Municipality was an important milestone, this you can read in the book "Knud V. Engelhardt" by Erik Ellegaard Frederiksen:

"It was a point of honour for Engelhardt to come to work for the public sector - especially because he saw it as a chance to get his work out to as many people as possible. So he knocked on the doors of many institutions, and also succeeded in persuading important people to support his ideas."

With the series of street signs, success in public design was assured. And in 1986, the design received the Danish Design Center's "Classic Award" - today known as the Danish Design Award. Gentofte Municipality was praised for first buying the original concept and implementing it throughout the municipality, and then for "maintaining the concept over a number of years, regardless of short-lived changes in taste and fashion". In its reasoning, the jury also stated:

"Engelhardt's typography, signs and sign stands possess a boldness, legibility and quality of appearance that makes them as relevant today as when they were designed."

Original enamel

Unlike Gentofte Municipality, which has now switched to painted aluminium, Ramsign has chosen to stick to the original material, vitreous enamel.

This choice was made because hand-crafted vitreous enamel signs last for over 100 years, unlike other types of signs which have a lifespan of perhaps 10-20 years. Enamel signs do not fade and the paint never peels off. They may be more expensive to buy, but they are cheaper to use because of their long life.

And a classic sign must not only be viable in style, but also in quality, says Nick Brandt: "When the design is as durable as it is, the sign itself should be too."

Enamel signs at home

Read more about Knud V. Engelhardt's designs at www.ramsign.uk

Here you can order vitreous enamel signs with your own name and house number.