

DESIGN BASICS



THE ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Basic visual structures that can be combined together in unlimited variations.

Space

Space refers to the overall area occupied by the design and the areas allocated to other elements within the total design area. *Positive space* is one occupied by active elements such as type and pictorials. It is the space in which visual activity occurs and important information is conveyed.

Negative space surrounds positive elements and may be thought of as the background. The viewer's mind is required to digest less information when her eyes are over negative space but that does not mean that negative space is white. It does not even mean it is blank. In this context, the term white space is used in the same way the term white noise is used to describe radio static or the din of conversations in a restaurant. White noise has sound and is part of the total environment. The sound may even have patterns such as words, but we don't pay attention to them. The white noise is simply part of the background. In the same way, negative space is background of the visual piece. It may be any color or even patterned and textured.



Negative space can be present within active elements. For instance, the space around letters in a text block or the sky in a photo of a scenic location is a negative space. In fact, the same space may be positive or negative depending on what is next to it. That's because negative space is not defined by its appearance but rather by its relative importance in terms of information conveyed. Consider the classic optical illusion on the left: at first glance you may see an urn shape is positive and the space around it is negative. On the other hand you may see the profiles of two faces, making the profiles positive and the urn shape negative.

Designers consider the distribution of positive and negative space carefully. They want to make it easy for the viewer to see the things that are important while creating a pleasing pattern off both positive and negative areas. A design is generally considered more visually pleasing when areas of negative space are distributed throughout the total design space rather than when it is concentrated in one or two locations.

Typography

From the visual perspective exclusive of any meaning that the letters of any alphabet carry when they are grouped to words, letterforms are familiar and comfortable shapes. We learn to recognize them as part of earliest learning experiences. Although the basic shapes of letters, numbers and other symbols associated with printed language is static, there are thousands of variation in style. The term, *typeface*, is used generically to denote an alphabet having a particular style. More technically, it can mean a *category*

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of alphabets having several common characteristics, a *type family* which is composed of several alphabets having a similar style or even an individual member of a type family called a *font*.

Designers spend a lot of time considering which typeface to use. They know that not only does the choice they make affect how and how easily the words can be read but also that it affects the whole mood of the piece and the tone of voice the words convey. Designers have to be sensitive to subtle emotional responses viewers will have to certain typefaces. Sometimes a well-designed type can be used in place of an image, communicating both verbally and visually.

Pictorials

Photographs and or illustrations are pictorial elements of designed pieces. These images are often the reason that causes the viewer to pause and read the message of the piece. Visual images are generally remembered longer than printed words. Together with typographic elements, they provide the bulk of the information provided in the designed piece. While typography can create and affect the mood of the design, imagery is an even more powerful force in doing so. It can create humor, drama, tranquility or frenetic energy. It can attract, provoke, stimulate and provide a frame of reference. It can take the viewer anywhere on earth and far beyond it, into fantasies and dreams, an even inside the human body. It can mirror reality, enhance reality, create new realities or take the viewer away from reality.

Computer technology has dramatically changed the world of pictorials in recent years giving designers and illustrators a whole new range of visual styles and special effects. The content as well as the appearance of photographic imagery can be manipulated.

Graphics

Graphic elements do not convey information to the same degree as type and pictorial images but they are very important nonetheless. Graphic elements include such things as borders, rules, color blocks, ornaments, bullets and special design effects such as embossments and die cuts which add texture to the printed page. Graphic elements define boundaries, emphasize other elements, help the viewer's eye move around the page. They can be used to achieve balance and unity in the design. They can also create greater viewer involvement.



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THE INGREDIENTS OF DESIGN

The following five design ingredients govern what each element will look like. The appearance of the elements individually and in combination affects the overall mood and character of the design. This, in turn, can affect the viewer's receptiveness to the message. Decisions about the appearance of the elements in your designs should be made carefully and with thoughtful consideration of how the viewer may respond to what he/she sees.

Size

Consider the size of each element. Do you want to use an extreme closeup of a detail or do you want to show an object smaller so that it appears more distant to the viewer? Do you want the headline type to be so huge it becomes the dominant element of the designed piece or do you want to make it relatively small to create a more subtle, sophisticated look? You may want to use size to make one element more prominent than others.



You may want to show objects out of scale to make a point. In most instances, viewers are bright enough to understand what is real and what is not. They suspend disbelief when they see different scales in a design because they are rational enough to separate the message from imagery. Nobody who sees an ad with people holding wrist watches as tall as themselves to be that way in reality. It doesn't take much to figure out that the scale discrepancy allows the viewer to see both the detail of the product and that it is intended as a dressy watch consistent with the attire of the models. From the designer's perspective, however, showing human scale watches is a novel, attention-getting approach to the problem showing the product in context and in detail in the same ad.

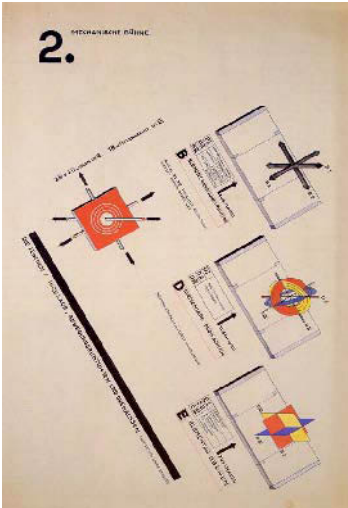
Shape

You will want to make conscious decisions about all sorts of shapes: letters of the alphabet, headline units, copy blocks, objects in pictorials, negative shapes created by the positioning of elements within the space.

Shapes add both mood and visual interest to design. Generally speaking, angular shapes have an air of formality and look somewhat mechanical/technical. Flowing curves are more organic and relaxed. The tall, thin, angular shapes of the letterforms convey the aura of elegance. The text itself forms a unit as well. Visually, it is another picture as well as a group of words.

Irregular shapes tend to be more visually interesting than symmetrical ones. For that reason, designs with a picture of a box or a can slapped in the middle of the page are visually boring. What about Absolute vodka, you say? That's a symmetrical shape slapped in the middle of the page. True but that's precisely what the advertiser is selling, the shape of the bottle. Besides, the bottle shape isn't the only thing going on in Absolute ads. The bottle shape is always secondary to some other visual device.

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Negative space in a design forms a shape as well. As you design, try to become more conscious of the space around other elements. Designers strive to create visual interest in both the positive and negative shapes on a page.

Line

Similar to shapes, the use of lines affects mood and interest. Look at two different line drawings. One has a quick, energetic spontaneity about it while the other has a slow, flowing gracefulness.

Lines as graphic elements perform a variety of functions. They can surround and stabilize a design when used as borders. They can move the eye from place to place on the page and they can be used to balance other elements. You will need to make conscious decisions about both the character and placement of lines.

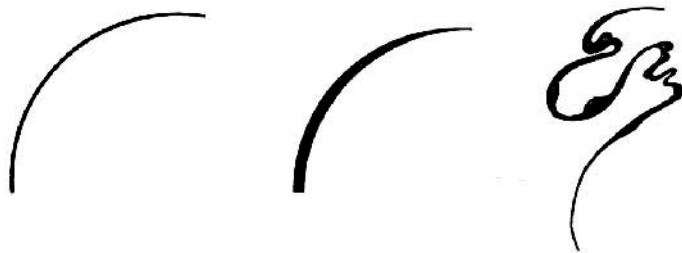
Patterns & Texture

The function of patterns and textures is very much the same as the function of lines. They add interest to design when used in pictorial images.



Color

Color as an ingredient of design is considered so important as to merit a separate section for discussion.



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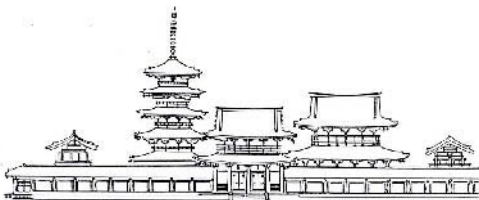
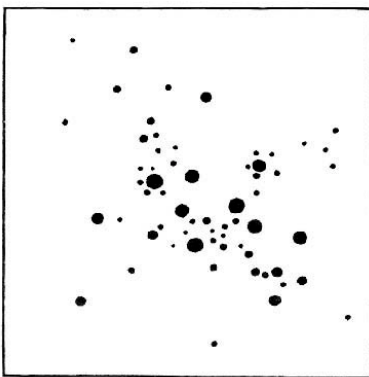
DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Once the appearance of the individual elements is determined, they must be arranged within the space in an appealing manner, one that encourages the viewer to see all that there is. The principles that govern the arrangement of elements in design are the same as those in fine art. While it is possible to defy one or more principles and still make the design work but this should only be done purposefully and for a good reason because successful examples are few and far between.

Balance

The arrangement of the elements must create an overall sense of balance within the design. Balance refers to the distribution of visual weight within the space. The visual weight of an element is determined by its lightness or darkness. Dark elements are visually heavier than light ones. The size of the element does not determine its weight. A relatively large area of a light color may be required to balance a small area of a dark one. The importance of balance is that the viewer's eye gravitates toward the heaviest part of the design and may not reach important elements having lighter weight. To cur a design that is top, bottom or side heavy, one can:

1. Add some visual weight to the lighter part with a line or bolder type for instance.
2. Reduce the size of the heavier element.
3. Move the heavier element closer to the center of the page.
4. Lighten the heavy element by changing its color or integrating it with a light colored element.



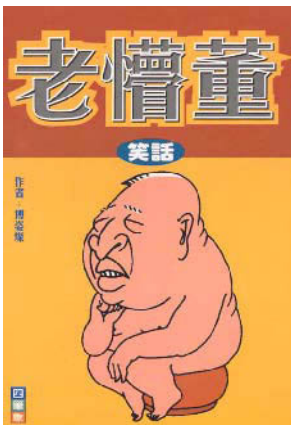
12.5.
Horyu-ji Temple Compound, Nara, Japan;
originally A.D. 607.

Proportion

Students sometimes confuse the concept of scale, whether or not two objects in a design are accurately sized in relation to each other, in other words shown in the same or different scales, with the concept of proportion. Proportion refers to the overall division of space among the elements. When the total design space is divided into thirds and fifths, or is allocated in according to elements in those units, the proportions will be pleasing to the eye.

About the only proportion that is not pleasing to the eye is a division of space into halves or allocation of space to elements in a 50:50 ratio. There are exceptions of course such as for reasons of creating repetition of unity. Here are just a few examples of how space might be allocated to achieve pleasing proportions:

1. About 3/5 of the total space occupied by positive elements and 2/5 allocated to negative space.
2. About 2/3 of the space allocated to positive elements is occupied by pictorials and 1/3 is occupied by type.
3. A small pictorial element is 2/5 the size of a large one.
4. A headline occupies 2/3 of the space occupied by typographic elements and the body occupies 1/3.



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Unity

In a unified design, all the elements work together as a whole. No element can be moved or modified significantly without harming the overall impression of the design. A well-designed piece needs to possess two forms of unity. Logical unity is present when all the elements convey the same easy-to-grasp message. The headline and the body copy must relate directly and immediately to each other. When the headline talked about apples and the body text is about oranges, the piece lacks logical unity. It also would be lacking when the headline and text talk about one thing but the pictorial shows something else. For instance text that talks about orange juice does not relate to a pictorial of a bowl filled with different kinds of fruit.



Not only must the elements relate to each other logically but also the viewer needs to arrive at the desired conclusion logically. After carefully researching the subject, one knows more than a first-time viewer. It is easy to assume that the viewer knows more than he or she actually does and leap to a conclusion without supporting it adequately. Important information is often left out when one tries to be clever or provocative. Creativity is fine; just make sure that all of the important information is included. Try to view the designed piece the way your target will. Better yet, get the opinion of someone who hasn't seen or read it yet, preferably someone who does not have to live with you and will give you an honest appraisal.



Visual unity means that the elements relate to each other visually in terms of both style and placement on the page. The style of type should be compatible with the tone of the pictorials, which, in turn should be compatible with the voice of the copy. When elements are positioned so as to create a visual relationship, it is also easier for the viewer's eye to flow from element to element or from element group to element group. Four devices are often used to create visual unity:



1. *Repetition.* When two or more elements have approximately the same size and shape, a visual relationship is created. Color can add to the obviousness of the repetition.
2. *Proximity.* Proximity, quite simply means nearness. A viewer will easily associate two or more elements placed closer to each other than to another element or group of elements. When two elements overlap, a proximity relationship is created automatically.
3. *Contouring.* It is not unusual in a design to see a copy that follows a shape of another object. Take an example of a copy that surrounds and repeats the outline of a photo of car. The text outline of the car is the negative of the positive outline in the photo. The elements have a common contour.
4. *Alignment.* An axis may be a real or imaginary line that cuts through the design vertically, horizontally or diagonally. When two or more elements are attached to the same axis, an alignment relationship is created. An ad may have one, two, or even three axes. If too many axes are used however, the relationship will be destroyed and the elements will look like they have been placed randomly.

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Emphasis

A good design will have one element or part of an element that slightly dominates all the others. This is called emphasis or focus or focal point. It is likely to be the first thing that the viewer will notice and it will be the beginning point of the path his or her eye will travel as it circulates around the page. Without an emphasis, the viewer's eye will jump randomly among the elements of the page. This makes it both confusing and irritating.

Overemphasis. The designer must take care to assure that the dominant element does not overwhelm the others. If an element is overtly prominent, the viewer's eye may freeze on or keep returning to that point without exploring the other elements. In this case, the dominant element has become more of a distraction than a part of the design. *Misplaced emphasis.* Another occasion when emphasis creates distraction is when it is irrelevant to the message. If the irrelevant element arouses viewer's curiosity but the rest of the designed piece is unrelated, he/she will feel tricked, confused or disappointed resulting in a negative attitude toward the work.



Direction

The path that the viewer's eye traces as it moves around the page is called its direction. The same concept is sometimes called sequence referring to the order in which the viewer sees each element. A good designer consciously controls the viewer's eye to a large degree. Line and color are two of the device often used to control eye movement. When the same color appears in three different locations forming a triangular pattern, the viewer's eye is likely to move in the same way.

A line is always easy for the eye to follow. It may be a linear graphic element or the contour of an element. It does not need to be a straight line in order for the viewer's eye to follow it. The easiest eye path to follow is a vertical line from the top to the bottom of the page but it can make for a boring arrangement of elements. Another familiar path is a Z that moves from left to right at the top, then diagonally back to the left, then left to right again at the bottom. That's the way most newspaper pages are laid out. To become sensitive to eye paths in designs, look at few and think about what strikes you first as well as the order in which it is drawn to other elements. Were there any on which you had difficulty resting your eyes?

Continuity

The final principle that guides the arrangement of elements applies to a series of communication pieces that work together (like individual ads in an ad campaign). All individual pieces must have visual continuity. Continuity is created by using the same group of visual themes in all pieces so that the viewer knows instantly that they belong together. In the case of an ad campaign, each ad must be different enough to convey that each is a separate ad. One of the best way to assure there will be continuity in a series is to use the same visual format, then vary the color scheme, pictorial and copy. Two aspects that should remain consistent throughout the series are the typeface, the position and the color of the logo. Beyond that, there is a lot of room for creativity even within the same format.

