WEB DESIGN TRENDS

The Road To Good Website Design (2012, Quick Guide)

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1st webdesigner
web design blog

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is for anyone interested in tracking trends over the last couple of years.

This book provides a simple overview of some common themes we have noticed, and some ideas about how to implement them in your own designs.

PREFACE

Trends are nothing new. To a certain extent, even historical periods are trends; they are movements in a particular direction over a certain period of time.

Everything changes, whether it's now or later, spontaneous or spanning a decade. We're funny creatures, us humans, and we strive to find the perfect balance between being sedentary and dynamic. We like it when we have a routine, when everything is how we expect it to be, but at the same time we yearn for change and spontaneity.

Perhaps this is what breathes life into trends: things have been the same for far too long and it's time to do something new. Some will adhere, some will not. Some will follow and some will fall behind.

Expect to see some cool examples of well done websites at the end of each section!

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INTRODUCTION

The web is a living thing and evolves in new, sometimes unexpected, ways.

Part of our job as web designers is to keep up with these changes. It's not just the possibilities that change, it's also the expectations of people who use the web. We can't afford to be stuck in the same mind set for too long and this doesn't concern only the technical side. The visual and user-centric sides of web design are equally affected. We must adapt and maybe even pioneer new ideas that we believe will move everything one step further.

Because it lives and grows, the web also has its own culture and subcultures. These, in turn, give birth to trends which also govern the expectations of the users. The concept becomes all the more fascinating as the web becomes a greater part of our everyday lives, as it influences us and vice-versa.

As soon as you open your mind and accept the fact that things rapidly shift on the internet, you'll be able to go with the flow and become more versatile.

THE FOUR SECTIONS

This book has been divided into four core sections, each with three sub-sections for easier reading. The sections are:

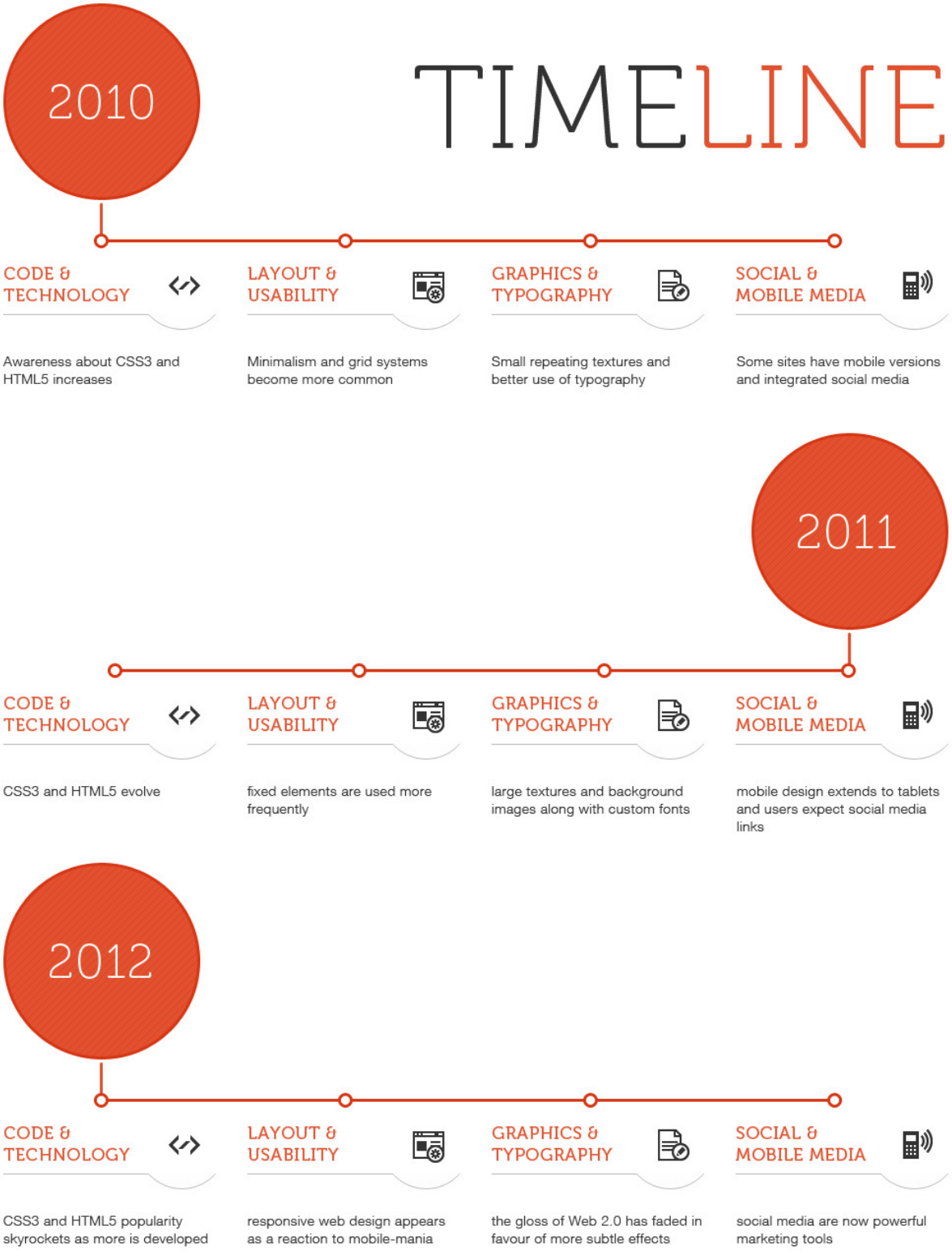
CODE AND TECHNOLOGY – this section concerns the advancement of HTML, CSS and the capabilities of physical technology, without which the trends would evolve at a much slower pace. If it weren't for these advancements we would still be stuck using less than ideal methods to achieve what is now a single line of code.

LAYOUT AND USABILITY – because the web is becoming an increasingly large part of our everyday lives, additional measures have to be taken in order to make our visits as easy, quick and painless as possible.

GRAPHICS AND TYPOGRAPHY – just like artistic movements change in time, so do the aesthetics on the web. Typography has been included here because it has already become more than just text and it can function as both a functional and decorative element.

SOCIAL AND MOBILE MEDIA – it's no mystery that the web has gone mobile and people like to share things on the go, regardless of what type of device they use. We need to adapt our thinking and processes to create designs that are functional and beautiful, regardless of the users screen size.

TIMELINE


2010
TIMELINE
CODE & TECHNOLOGY
Awareness about CSS3 and HTML5 increases
LAYOUT & USABILITY
Minimalism and grid systems become more common
GRAPHICS & TYPOGRAPHY
Small repeating textures and better use of typography
SOCIAL & MOBILE MEDIA
Some sites have mobile versions and integrated social media
2011
CODE & TECHNOLOGY
CSS3 and HTML5 evolve
LAYOUT & USABILITY
fixed elements are used more frequently
GRAPHICS & TYPOGRAPHY
large textures and background images along with custom fonts
SOCIAL & MOBILE MEDIA
mobile design extends to tablets and users expect social media links
2012
CODE & TECHNOLOGY
CSS3 and HTML5 popularity skyrockets as more is developed
LAYOUT & USABILITY
responsive web design appears as a reaction to mobile-mania
GRAPHICS & TYPOGRAPHY
the gloss of Web 2.0 has faded in favour of more subtle effects
SOCIAL & MOBILE MEDIA
social media are now powerful marketing tools

CODE & TECHNOLOGY

CSS 3

CSS3 is the successor to CSS2 and offers a wide array of new and useful tools to make our lives as web designers easier. It eliminates the need for external scripts that add extra polish to a website's design, however not everything is stable or even usable because it's still a work in progress.

Now the question is "what should I use and what should I avoid?" and, naturally, the main factor is cross-browser compatibility. All browsers are at different stages in their development and only support a certain number of CSS3 features. The latest versions of Chrome, Firefox and Safari support around 60% of the stable features, while Internet Explorer 9 lies at just under 40% and Opera stands somewhere in between.

Another thing to remember is the accepted syntax for these new attributes. While the W3C does suggest a certain form, it takes time for the syntax to be standardised, so different prefixes have to be used in order for the respective browser to display everything properly.

Back to the question, CSS3 is split into development modules and the safest bet is to use new properties pertaining to the general layout and visual enhancement of elements. For example, rounded corners are supported in all major browsers, as well as text and box shadows. Many others, such as transitions, transforms and gradients need special prefixes even in the newest versions of browsers and even then, the effect isn't guaranteed.

The best thing to do is to stick to tried and tested methods, unless there are 100% functional alternatives within CSS3. The time will come when all of it will be usable, but we have to be patient.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/freebies/css3-tutorials/

http://lea.verou.me/css3patterns/

HTML 5

In development since 2004, HTML5 still continues to evolve, aiming to bring better semantics within the code itself and more independence from outside APIs when it comes to adding functionality. Just like its sister project, CSS3, its compatibility varies from browser to browser, although it's slightly easier to pinpoint wider areas of functional features.

One of the main points of HTML5 is better semantics, not only to make life easier for the person coding, but also for SEO purposes. Semantics implies new tags that behave just like old-fashioned div tags, but make much more sense as to their purpose. Using them in the recommended fashion makes it easier for a search engine to understand the type of content that goes into a certain area. The code also becomes significantly shorter. Examples of these new tags are header, footer, nav, article and section.

The important thing to realise is that although you assign an id or class to div tags, the names are meaningless to a search engine because they are not reliable. Although it would be very unlikely and completely pointless, someone could name their header as footer, content or grandma if they so pleased, which is why ids and classes are not main criteria when searching for content.
As opposed to other new tags, such as video, audio or canvas, these ones are simply shortened names with no added functionality. This means that they are safe to use because there is next to nothing that can change, and what can be altered is highly unlikely. Video, on the other hand, requires consensus regarding the standardised web format; this is because browsers need to natively play the video file and it is why the format keeps shifting. Although compatible to varying degrees with different browsers, canvas elements, with the help of JavaScript, will be able to take on some of the functionality previously given by Adobe Flash.

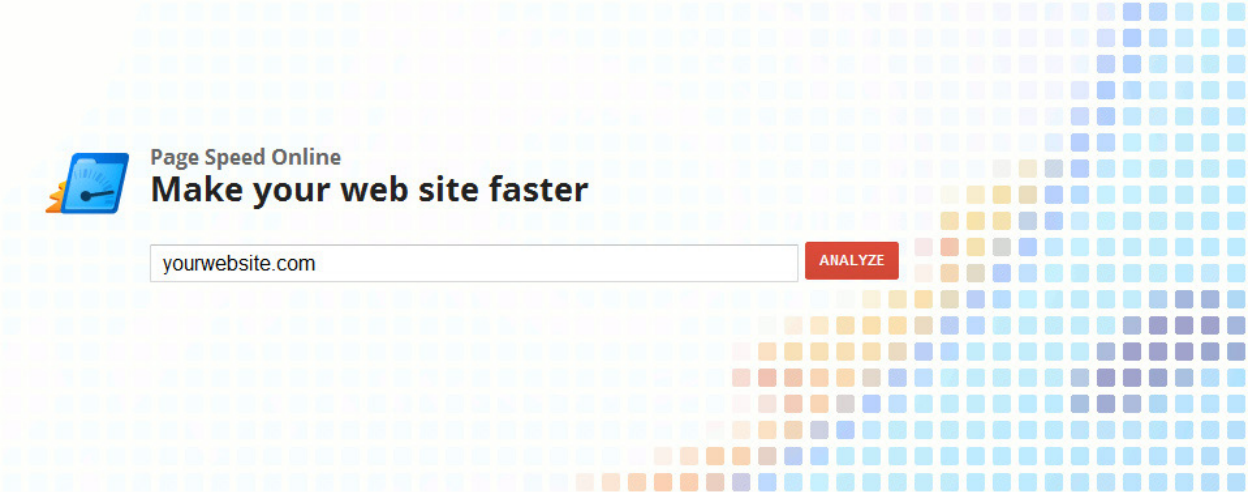
Just as with CSS3, you can still benefit from some of the more basic features until the rest of the features become web standards. Although it will not be visible to users, your job will become less tedious.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/freebies/html5-demos/

http://html5demos.com/

OPTIMISING FOR SPEED



Current technological advances have made it possible for us to enjoy high speed internet connections around the globe. This also means that files which were considered too large for use on the web are now acceptable, giving us greater freedom in what we design.

Many websites now proudly display their content using large images, textures, videos and audio, enhancing the overall experience of a visitor. However, this much freedom makes us prone to overdoing it, stuffing our masterpieces with scripts and heavy images, and this knocks the site back 5 years. In short, we still need to optimise because otherwise speed, a major component of the internet experience, would be at a standstill.

Even code, as described in the above sections, is being optimised to be shorter and easier to process. The use of outside APIs, which take time to download and activate, is being dropped in favour of native browser functionality. We need to be smart about how we implement content and learn not to compromise (because that would mean giving something up), but to find better and intelligent alternatives altogether.

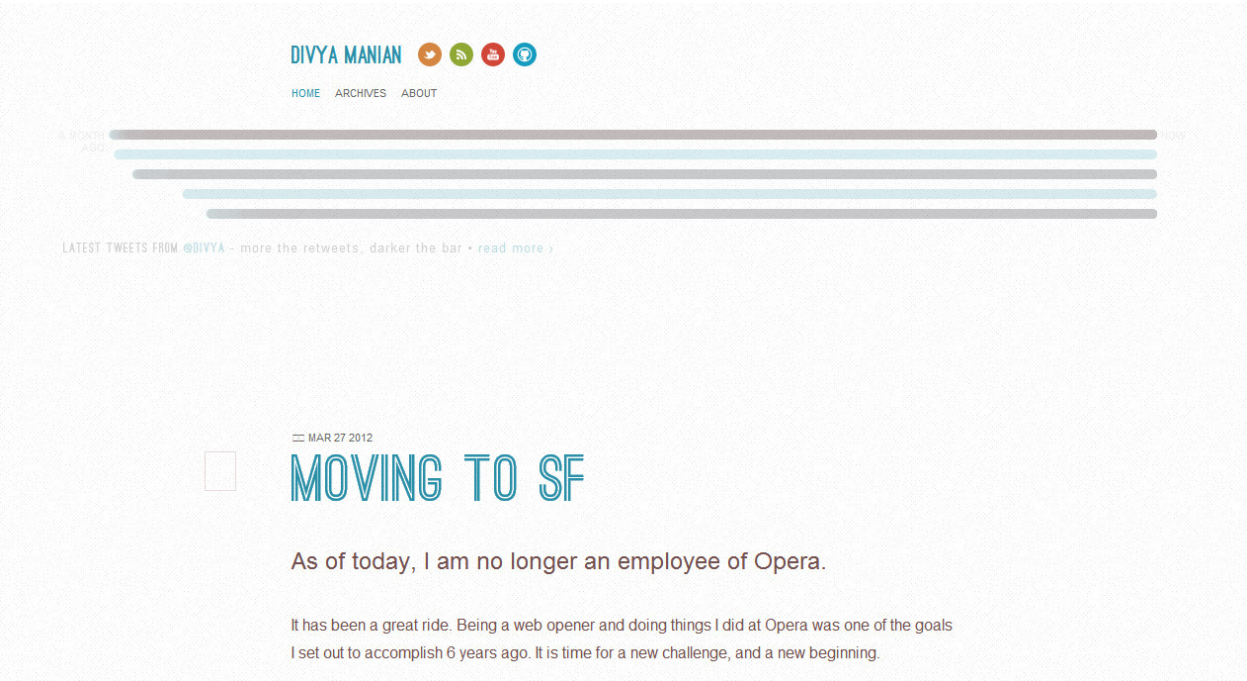
For instance, instead of hosting a video file on your web server, why not use one of the many social networks whose very purpose is streaming? Not only does this reduce the load on the server, but it also adds an extra layer of networking which is highly coveted in this day and age. Why use Flash when what you want can be done using a little bit of JavaScript or even CSS3? Having to send a file to numerous users at the same time will lower the speed for every user accessing your server, but making the user's browser process and render something through code creates a negligible delay.

Remember, don't compromise, use intelligent alternatives.

RESOURCES:

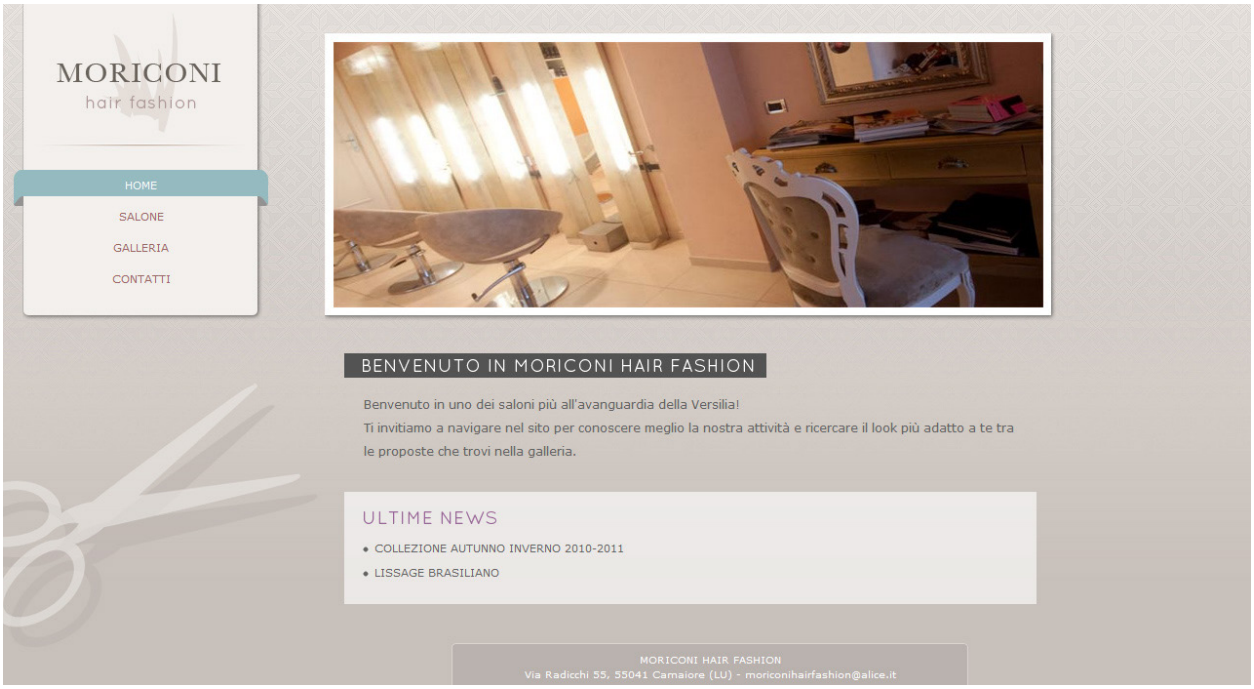
http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/freebies/tools-profiling-websites-speed/

https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/



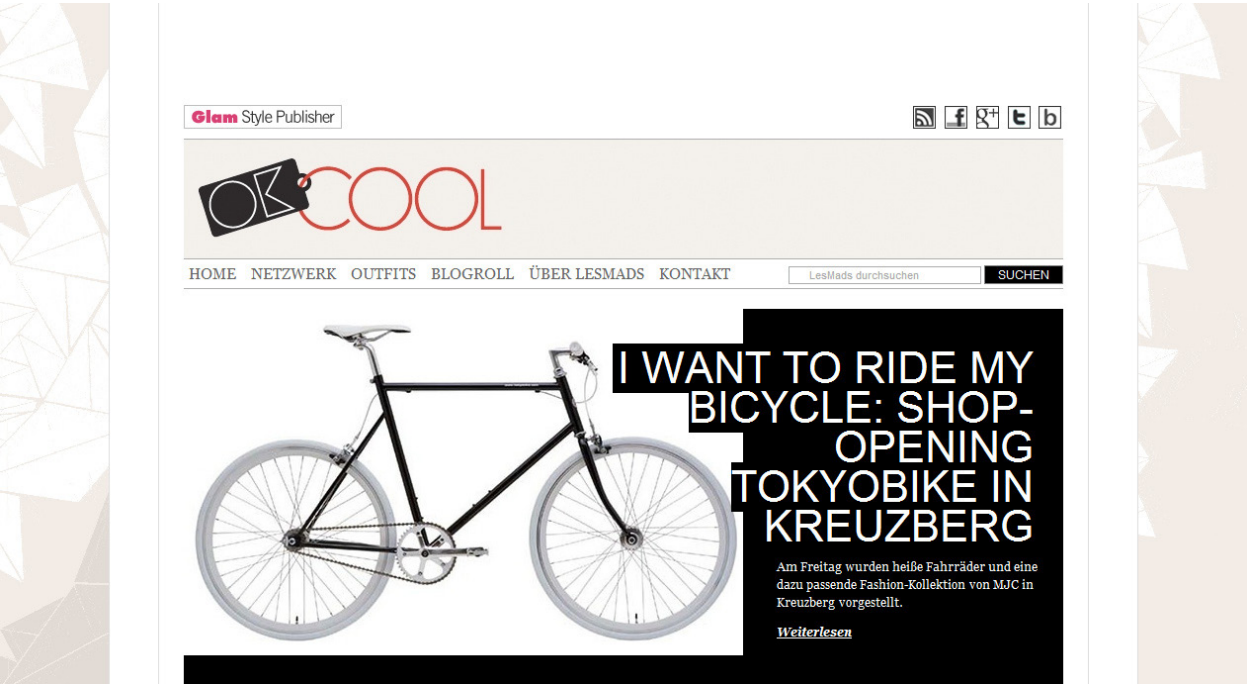
http://nimbupani.com/

http://catcubed.com/



http://www.moriconihairfashion.com/

http://elvery.net/drzax/



http://www.lesmads.de/blogs/okcool/

brucespringsteen.net

LAYOUT & USABILITY

MINIMALISM

Although not exactly unheard of, its popularity has recently reached an all-time high amongst web designers, but its appeal to users has also grown. The timing couldn't have been better, considering that the current ideology is "less is more".

The basis of minimalism rests on the fact that a website (and other mediums as well) should be stripped down to the bare minimum, allowing the user to focus on what's most important without being distracted by other flashy elements. While this may sound easy, more often than not you'll struggle as you decide what's REALLY needed and what's little more than decoration. It's also a tad risky; not choosing what's actually important will result in the wrong message (or worse, no message) being delivered to the target.

Aesthetically, the focus is on the use of lots and lots of negative space that not only lets the content shine, but also doubles as a place to rest your eyes. Nothing is worse than mashed up clutter. Minimalism is also a great way to use typography for emphasis as there is plenty of room to play around with it.

If you think about the logistics, it makes sense that this tendency towards stripping down websites appeals to users: the less stuff on the site, the less you have to worry about. When there are only a few links to click and the point of interest is right in your face, you can let your mind rest for a bit – relax, the website will spoon feed you just what you need.

Of course, minimalism isn't the miracle solution that you can slap on every single project or fall back on when you don't know what the content should be. As they say, there's a time and place for everything; the time is now, but you need to carefully decide the place.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/creating-minimalist-design-makes-designers-better/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/beautiful-examples-minimal-design-inspiration/

GRID SYSTEMS

Slowly, print design has found its way on the web and it's going to stay for a while. Magazine-style websites with narrow columns of text and neatly organised content have been popping up here and there over the past few years; right now they're actually a common sight. What's so special? The answer is in the title: grid systems.

Those familiar with Gestalt's laws should know that our minds organise everything in such a way that it doesn't short-circuit. When looking at something as an ensemble, we subconsciously create continuous lines and shapes because it makes more sense to us. If you draw a circle and erase bits of the outline, you will still see the circle. You are perfectly aware that what you actually see are small arches arranged in a certain fashion, but without focusing, you will see the complete shape.

This is the whole point of using a grid system. Elements that follow the same lines will be more aesthetically pleasing consciously as well as subconsciously, and they will fall better into place. It will be much easier to reorganise and shift things around because everything will fit one way or another. It's also easier for the user to follow the hierarchy of the website when everything is scaled based on the same box.

Of course, the grid can be more complex and use two or even three "base boxes" from which others are derived, but it gets trickier. Simplicity is the safest route.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/web-design-grids-tools/

http://960.gs/

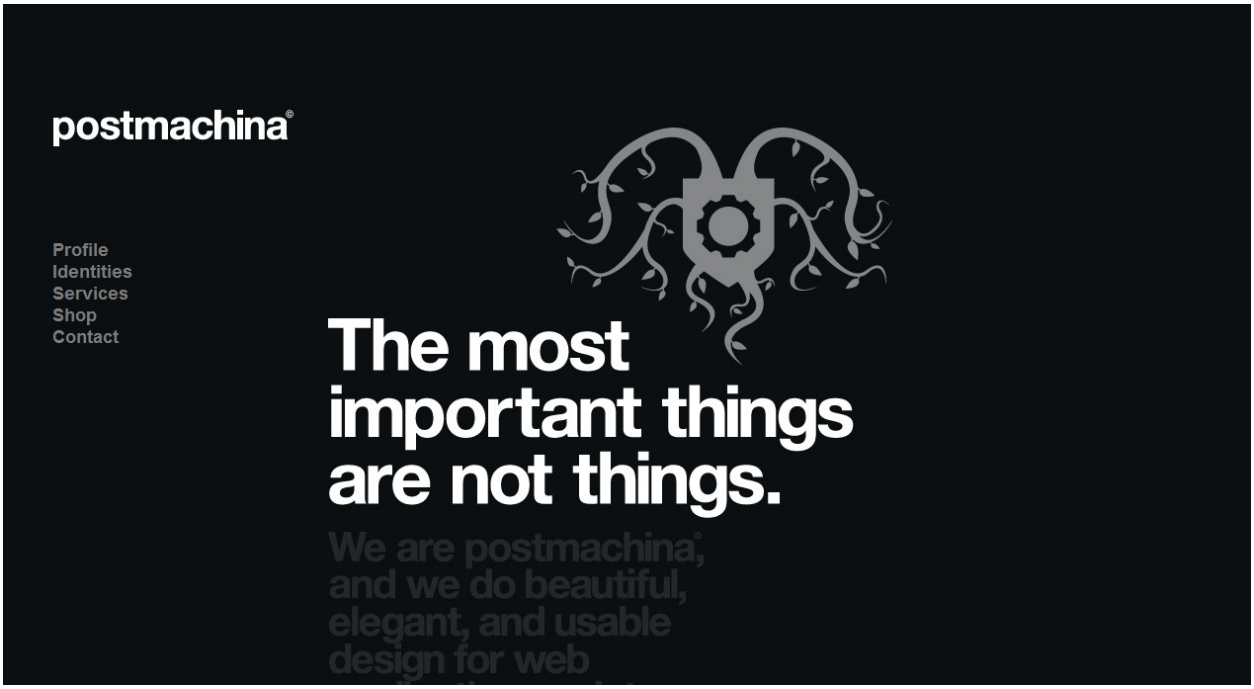
FIXED ELEMENTS

Users are lazy. Web designers are lazy. Everyone is lazy on the internet. We want everything to be as convenient as possible and we don't want to work (ew…) for what many times is entertainment. It's in our nature and even if we don't always actively search for the easy way, we can't help but be happy when something is a snap.

Keeping useful or frequently used elements within reach is what it's all about. Many websites have fixed elements, whether it's just a few buttons or the entire navigation. Let's face it, we hate it when we have to scroll all the way up to click on the next link in the navigation menu or all the way up to the beginning of a long post so we can like or share it.

Although it depends on how the user sets up their mouse, the "three click" rule can be applied to scrolling as well. If you have to flick your mouse wheel three or more times, then you need to consider adding quicker access to what you consider important when you reach the bottom of the page or even section.

By giving quick and easy access to popular functions, the user will feel comfortable enough to keep browsing because they won't ever reach the point where they're tired from simply navigating. However, just like with minimalism, it's important to decide what should be sticky. There shouldn't be a landslide when you scroll down! Not everything is important and if somehow it is, then you're probably looking at the problem from the wrong direction.



http://www.postmachina.com/

http://www.mikeambs.com/

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A software and interaction design company that built great products.

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Read about the people who built Sofa.

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FACEBOOK
More about the acquisition by Facebook in 2011.

ARCHIVE
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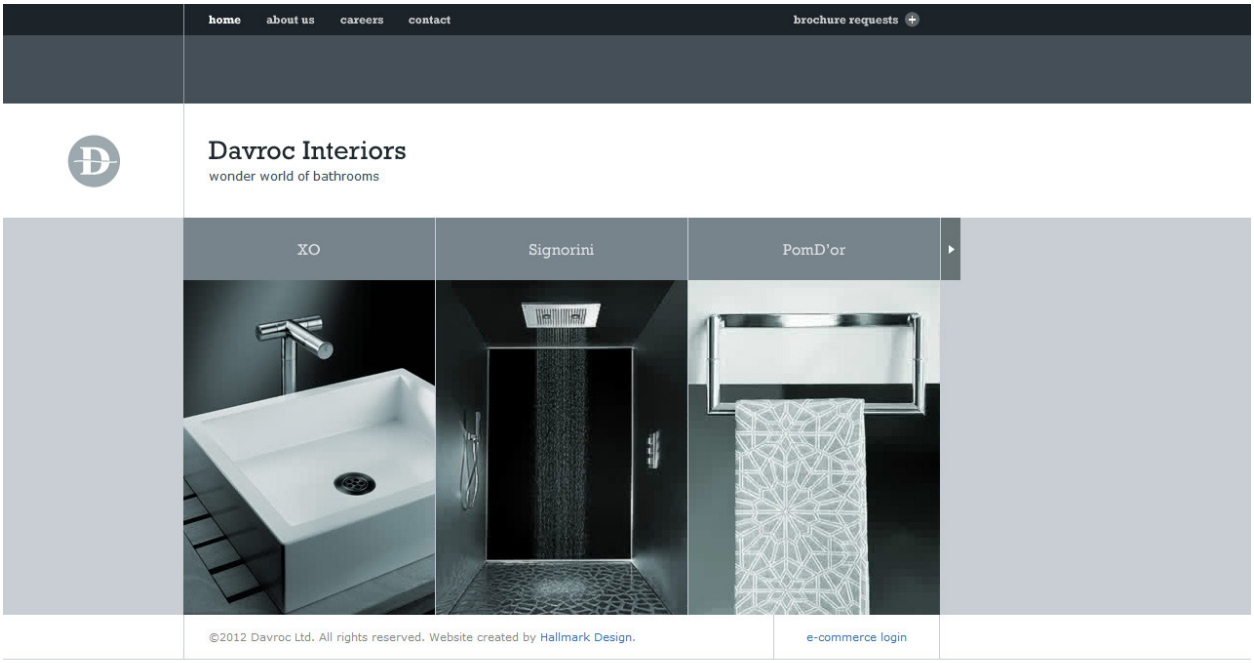
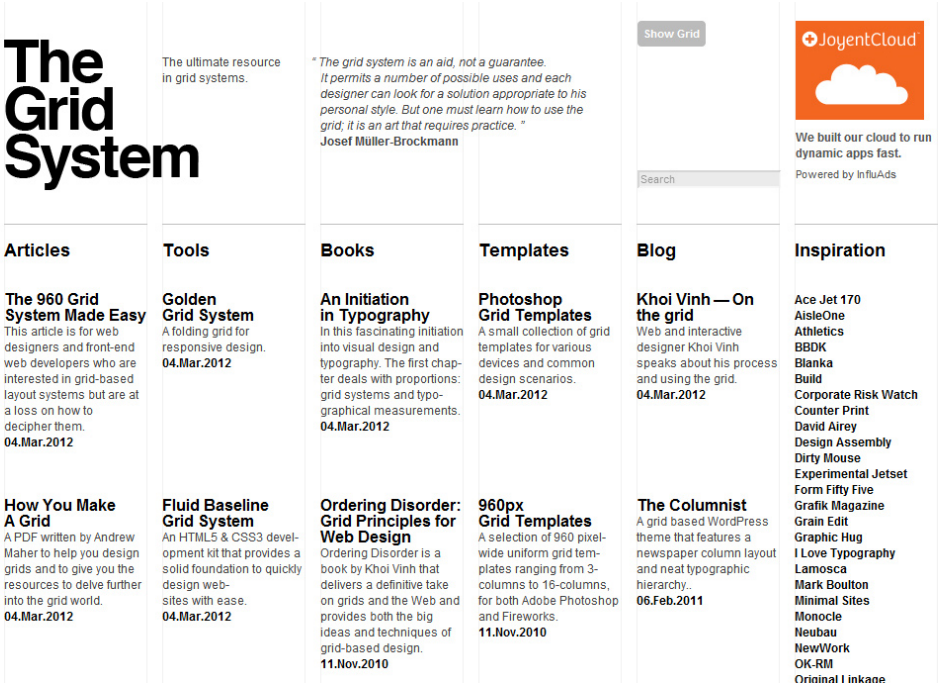
http://skinnyships.com/



http://www.interiors.davroc.co.uk/



http://www.thegridsystem.org/

GRAPHICS & TYPOGRAPHY

TEXTURES

Using textures, even subtle ones, is a great way to add a little extra oomph to a design. The keyword here is "subtle". We're way past the time when super glossy gradients were the most awesome thing anybody had ever seen on a website. The point is to enhance the content or other elements through small additions.

Instead of a flat colour for the navigation, a soft gradient with the same base colour will make it much more appealing. Textures are not limited to backgrounds, but also decorative elements which have the function of separating sections or creating better emphasis and hierarchy. It's perfectly fine to add visuals, but there should be a good reason for it.

It doesn't need to be an image placed in the background. Colours, shadows and highlights also count towards this, and as long as it adds more dimensions to your design, in a broader sense it can be called "texture".

On the topic of colours, our range of choices is now virtually unlimited, despite there being some advantages when it comes to web safe colours. One of them is the fact that they will be displayed properly even if the viewer's screen isn't calibrated. However, limiting ourselves to this very small number of colours would severely reduce our creative options. If we were only to create that would display correctly in the most adverse situations, we would scrap the CSS and make only black and white websites. Instead, now we can make something vibrant without worrying too much about it.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/textures-web-designs-inspiration/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/premium-texture-backgrounds/

TYPOGRAPHY

When it comes to fonts, we don't need to worry about browsers. Instead we have to worry about operating systems! As you probably know, each OS comes with a different bundle of pre-installed typefaces, and only a few of them have equivalents or even close matches, so our choices are again, limited. Or so they were!

There are now many options for embedding custom fonts directly into a website, thus giving us greater freedom without having to think about whether the user will see it or not. It was possible in the past, as well, but the process was clumsy and sometimes unreliable; typography also wasn't as popular as it is today and that may be a reason why the development was not as fast.

As mentioned before, print has influenced the way we design the web and now the use of typography as a central element is quite trendy as well as appealing. It's very common to see emphasis made through the contrast between large, sometimes even very large, text for headings and small body text. Contrast and hierarchy make a fantastic pair because they make it so much easier to know where to look and what to focus on. They need to be together because contrast alone isn't enough.

It's now much easier to give that certain feel to a website and make walls of text less blocky and more interesting to read. Text has become much more than just text.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/big-bold-typography-tips/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/typography-inspiration/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/freebies/fonts-big-headlines/

BIG IMAGES

Using 3 megabyte photos is still out of the question, but splash images that go across the screen are most definitely not! Fast internet speed means that you can show off your content with large, detailed pictures instead of a measly crop-out that doesn't really say anything. A picture is worth a thousand words, but you still have to be able to see it.

A work around this is to use what is called the "cicada effect", which is using several background layers with textures that repeat at different intervals, giving the impression of a single image. This is because the layers will also overlap at different intervals and create the effect. This was named after the cicada that only emerges at certain intervals in order to avoid the periods when their predators usually see an increase in their numbers.

Still, instead of repeating seamless textures, it's common to see single images used as backgrounds, especially with the content moved further down to let it double as a header. You also frequently see sliding galleries on front pages, even if all they do is show news items. They're stylish, dynamic and functional.

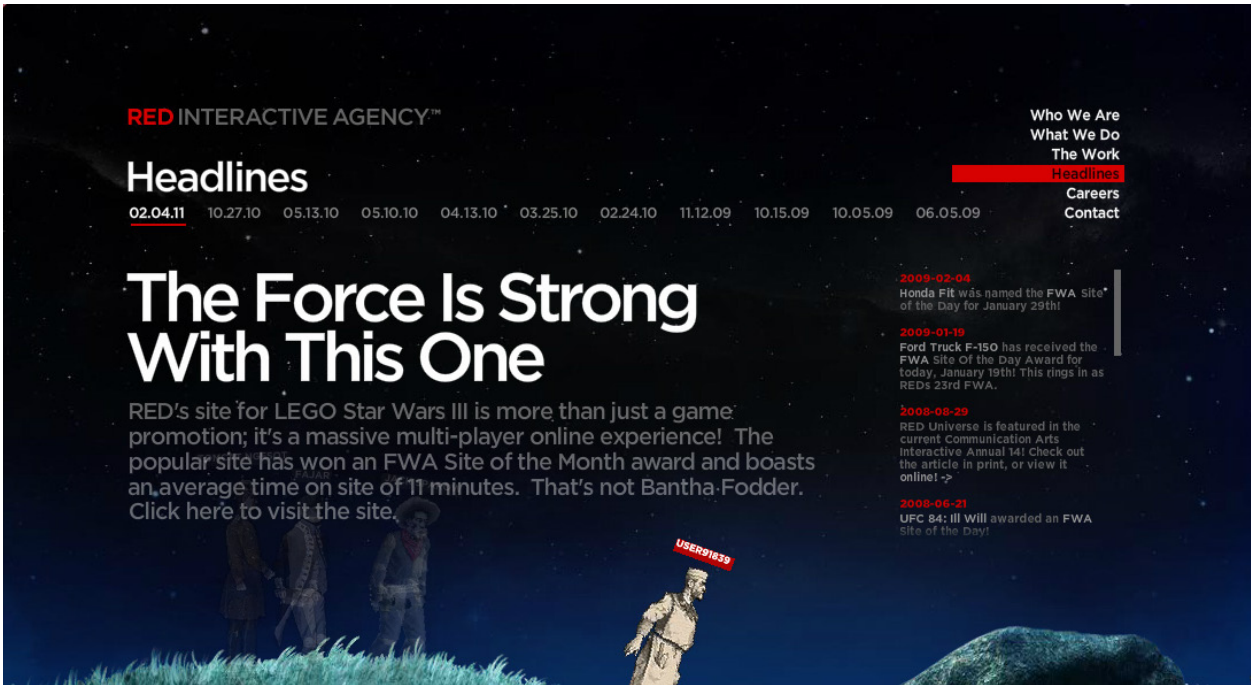
However, an image-heavy site is still image-heavy. Unless its purpose actually is to show large pictures (photographer portfolios, for example), then there should be a limit to how many the site will contain, or they should be scaled down. Alternatively, the user can be shown just a medium-sized thumbnail and only see the full version if he or she actually wants to.

Once again, we shouldn't go overboard. Even if the pictures are so beautiful that they bring tears to your eyes, having to wait even just a second for them to load will probably drive users away and they won't even get the chance to see your masterpieces. If there's no other solution, then you need to be aware of the consequences and devise ways to keep your visitors' attention long enough.

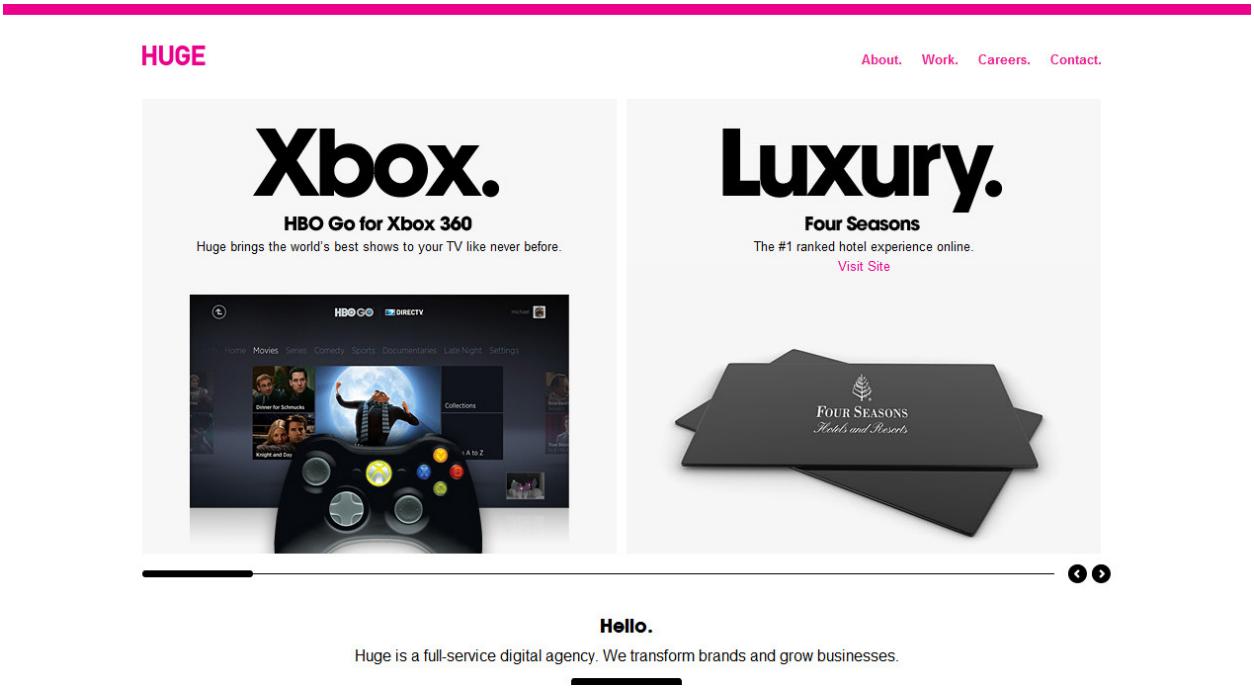
RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/large-photo-background-web-site-designs/

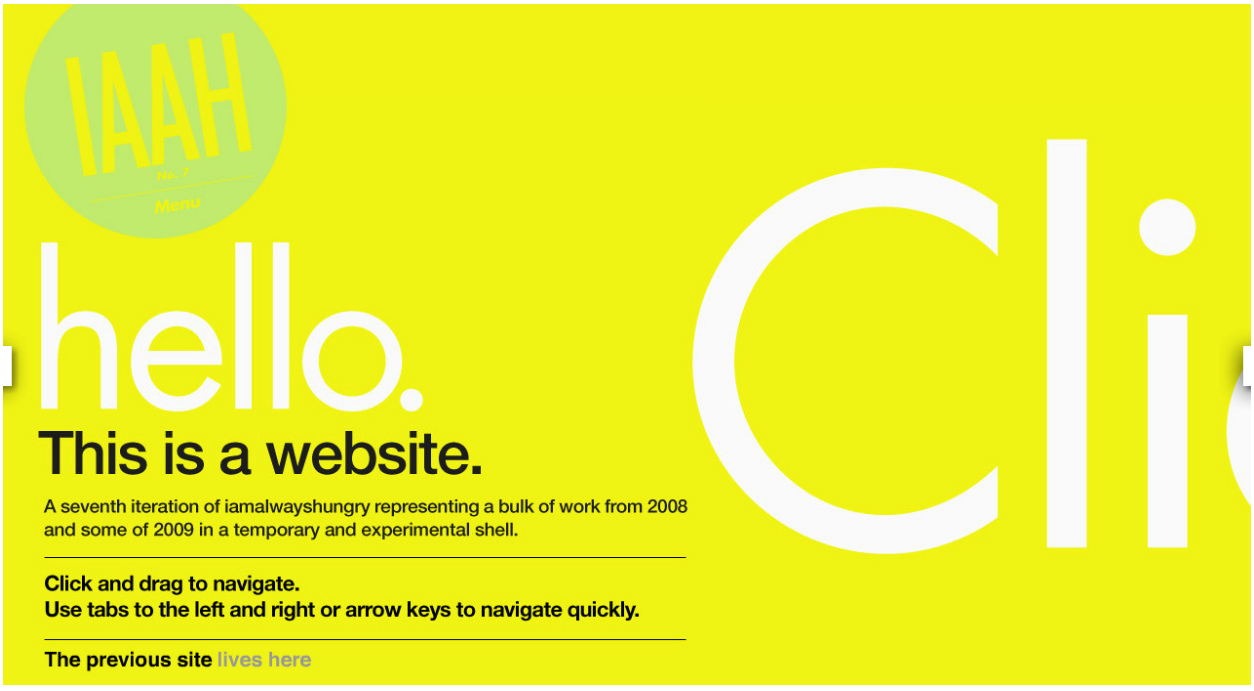
http://www.elysiumburns.com/



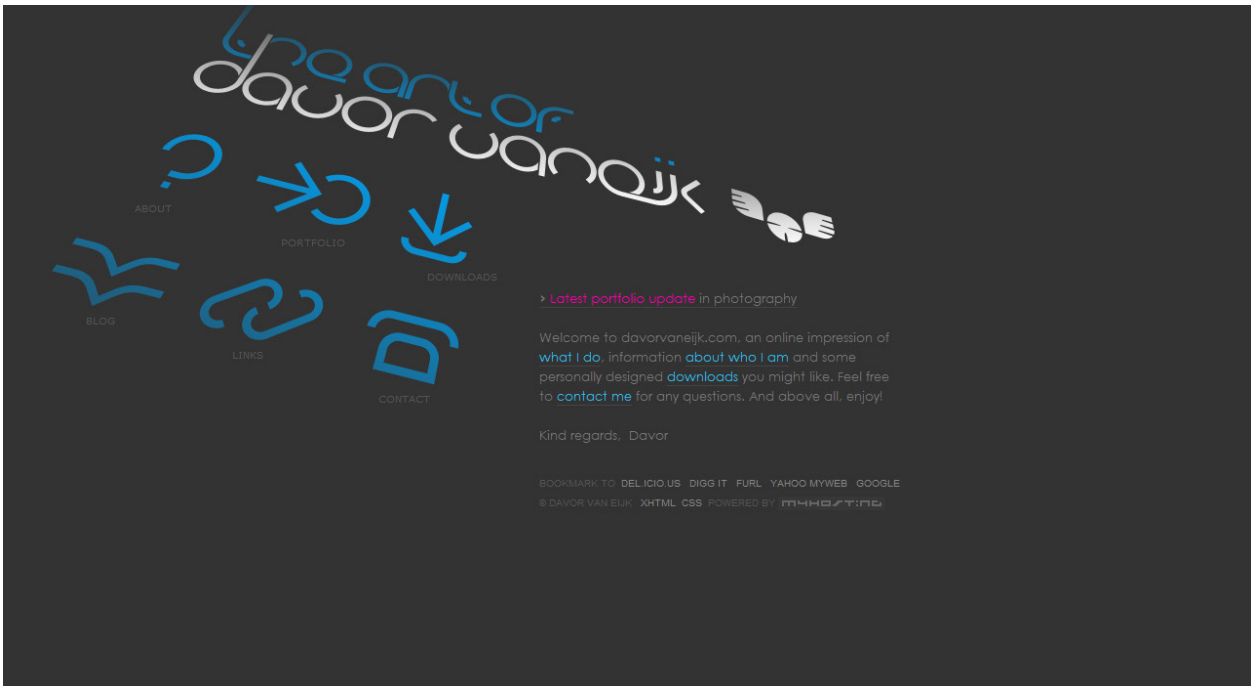
http://www.ff0000.com/



http://www.hugeinc.com/



http://www.iamalwayshungry.com/VERS7/#/INTRO/



http://www.davorvaneijk.com/

gummisig.com

SOCIAL & MOBILE MEDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION

The internet is a social thing. Even if we use it for entertainment, whether it's comment fields, like/dislike buttons or sharing buttons, the element of social interaction is still there. Why this trend of integrating networks into websites? There are several aspects.

Comfort is one of them. If the users don't have to create an account to leave a comment on a post, they will be more likely to comment or leave some sort of input. By using an already existing account, users stay within their comfort zone and even receive notifications so that they can further participate in the discussion.

Activity on a site is great for SEO, so being connected to many social networks will help improve your ranking in searches. Of course, that doesn't mean that you should go crazy and link to every single network there is, but at least the major ones like Facebook and Twitter, and you should still allow the user to share via others, even if you're not using them. Again, the more activity and mentions, the better.

Posting content on other networks lightens the load on the server. There are even some sites that don't use their own commenting system, instead relying on Facebook integration. In a way, it's risky, but the advantages of being spread out on several networks with millions of users severely outweigh the slim chance that one of them will go down. Even if it would crash, it wouldn't take long for it to get fixed.

SOCIAL NETWORK POPULARITY

FEB 2010	
Name	Percent
Twitter	1%
Youtube	15%
Facebook	49%

FEB 2011	
Name	Percent
Twitter	1%
Youtube	19%
Facebook	64%

FEB 2012	
Name	Percent
Twitter	1.5%
Youtube	20%
Facebook	64%
Google +	0.4%

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/social-media-misuse/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/social-media-online-brand/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/freebies/integrate-social-media-your-web-site/

RESPONSIVE WEB DESIGN

We've gone mobile and there's no turning back. With so many devices capable of displaying websites, it's impossible to design specifically for each of them, so it's become important to create flexible sites that can adjust to (almost) any screen size and also function properly on the device.

No matter how flexible you make it, you can't always be sure that it will behave properly on every single small screen device, so the idea is to focus on the most popular, such as iPhones, iPads and gadgets that have somewhat standard resolutions.

The website can resize and rearrange itself naturally, or it can be done with a few scripts. Using only CSS means your only option is to use percentages instead of fixed pixels and you can only stretch or contract elements horizontally, while using scripts lets you transform elements when a non-desktop screen resolution is detected and gives you more room to breathe.

Another important aspect is the code. Some of the interactive functions that you would normally use on a normal website become unusable in this situation. For instance, a smartphone will not be able to detect "hover" events which could have been used to signal clickable elements to the user or to make a dropdown menu.

Navigation is now done with fingers, so there needs to be room for

them. This is crucial when there are clickable items on the page, as the user might accidentally press one of them instead of simply scrolling down. Normally, there should be blank or static space on the right. While still not perfectly defined, this trend will rapidly evolve as everything else that evolves alongside it will add to it, one way or another.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/responsive-design-overview/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/introduction-responsive-web-design/

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/responsive-webdesign-tools-inspiration/

DEFENSIVE WEB DESIGN

No, despite the name, it is not the opposite of responsive web design. In fact, it is an entirely different concept that focuses on the user's actions, rather than cross-device compatibility. Broadly put, it implies predicting the way your website will be used and making sure that errors do not drive the users away.

It goes without saying that not everyone will use the sites we design the way we imagine. Different people have different habits and experience on the web, so you can never be sure. Displaying a default error code will have absolutely no meaning to the average Joe and will most likely result in him navigating away.

Customising error messages by integrating them within the website is a step in this direction. By keeping all of the elements in place and displaying a short description of the problem will help keep your visitors from leaving. It's a way of saying "Oops! There seems to be a glitch but don't worry, it's not your fault" and it's much more reassuring and friendly.

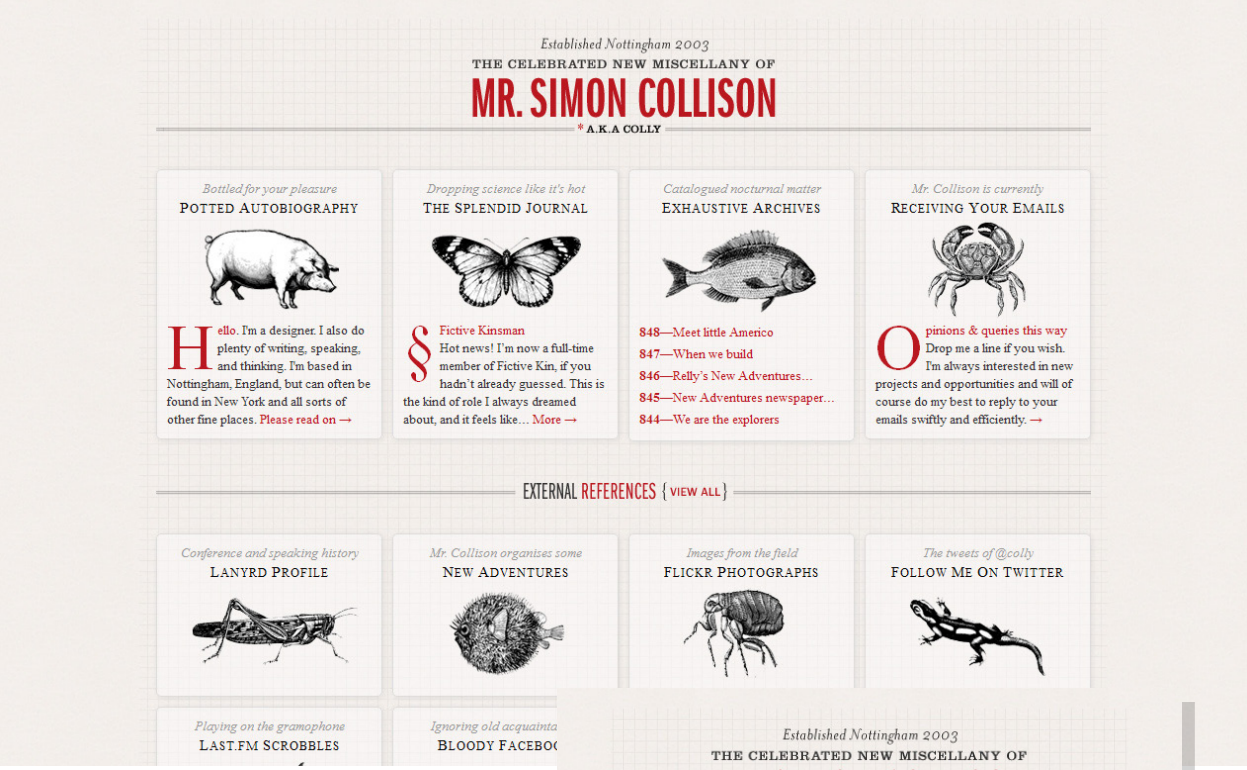
A smart thing to include is the ability of the search box to correct typos or misspellings. When we read, we only check to see if all the letters are there and if the first and last ones are in place, a user will normally not notice the typo and think that there are simply no results for "wes-bites".

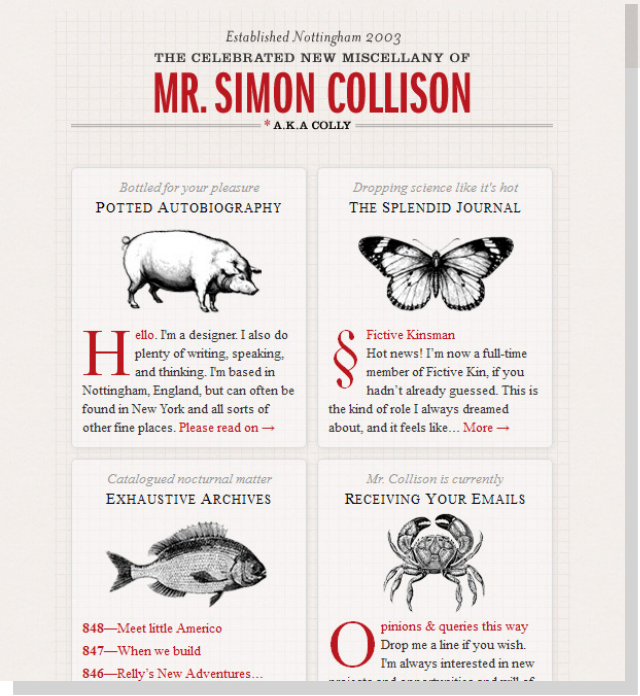
While it is a great tool, too much helpfulness can be just as irritating as complete lack thereof. Letting your users wander around aimlessly is not ok, but neither is adding tooltips on top of tooltips.

RESOURCES:

http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/defensive-web-design/

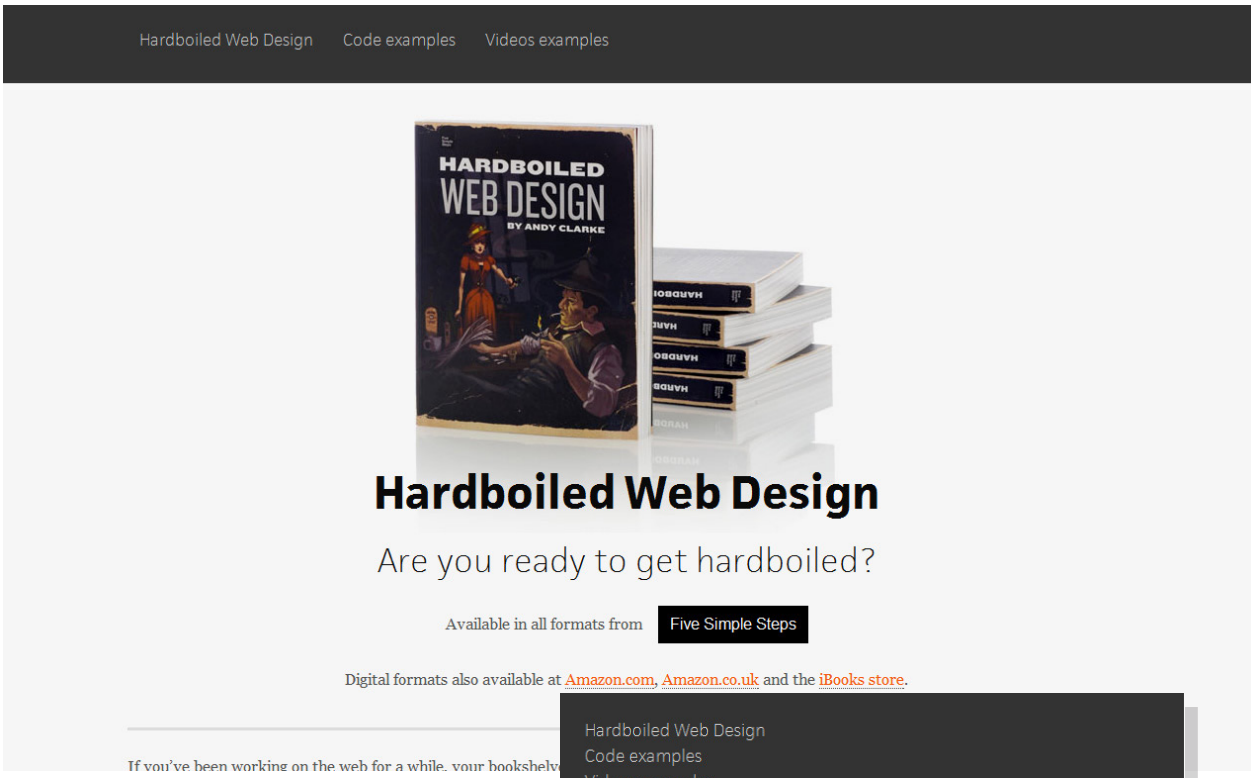
http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/unique-404-error-pages-inspiration/

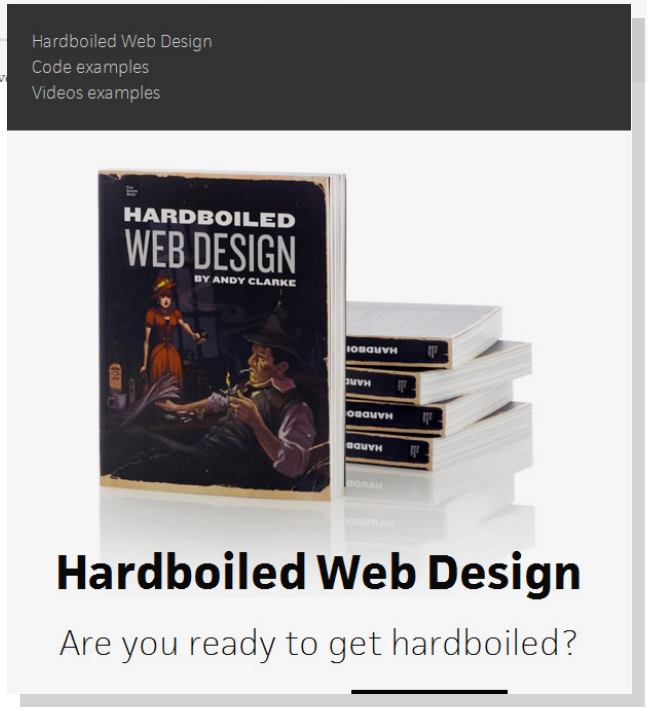




http://colly.com/

http://css-tricks.com/





http://hardboiledwebdesign.com/

http://earthhour.fr/

http://forefathersgroup.com/

CONCLUSION

In the end, we all need to realise that this domain is always going to change, no matter how much we try to stay in our comfort zone. Little by little, new technology will change the way we code and design; new artistic trends will take over and create new expectations.

Just by reading and being aware of the newest styles and the general direction of the web itself is a step towards becoming more open and ready to face these shifts. By knowing the overall movement you can decide yourself which specific area is worth more attention, also based on your affinities.

Now that you've started, there's no turning back!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Costin Găman

I was born in Bucharest, Romania, a bustling and often stressful metropolis which has been, up until recently, my home. I now reside in the quiet city of Aalborg, Denmark. Personally, it is a nice break from two decades of living the life of a sardine (hint: summer, 45°C, crowded bus).

My creative nature has been obvious ever since I was a child. I would sit for hours glued to the TV, watching Cartoon Network and then creating my own representation through drawings, writing or LEGO. At the peak of my LEGO constructor career, I built a functional mini-trébuchet with which I knocked down (and obviously broke) various objects which were innocently placed on shelves.

Until the end of highschool, I was quite keen on programming and even pursued it further to university, but quickly dropped out.

I'm currently focused on graphics, video and web, but I try to be creative in everything that I do. Right now I'm probably lost in thought, pondering absurd but creative ideas.

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