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Understanding Web Design

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We get better design when we understand our medium. Yet even at this late cultural hour, many people don't understand web design. Among them can be found some of our most distinguished business and cultural leaders, including a few who possess a profound grasp of design—except as it relates to the web.

Some who don't understand web design nevertheless have the job of creating websites or supervising web designers and developers. Others who don't understand web design are nevertheless professionally charged with evaluating it on behalf of the rest of us. Those who understand the least make the most noise. They are the ones leading charges, slamming doors, and throwing money—at all the wrong people and things.

If we want better sites, better work, and better-informed clients, the need to educate begins with us.

Preferring real estate to architecture

It's hard to understand web design when you don't understand the web. And it's hard to understand the web when those who are paid to explain it either don't get it themselves, or are obliged for commercial reasons to suppress some of what they know, emphasizing the Barnumesque over the brilliant.

The news media too often gets it wrong. Too much internet journalism follows the money; too little covers art and ideas. Driven by editors pressured by publishers worried about vanishing advertisers, even journalists who understand the web spend most of their time writing about deals and quoting dealmakers. Many do this even when the statement they're quoting is patently self-serving and ludicrous—like [Zuckerberg's Law](http://valleywag.com/tech/valleyspeak/zuckerbergs-law-once-every-hundred-years-media-changes-320289.php) (<http://valleywag.com/tech/valleyspeak/zuckerbergs-law-once-every-hundred-years-media-changes-320289.php>).

It's not that Zuckerberg's not news; and it's not that business isn't some journalists' beat. But focusing on business to the

exclusion of all else is like reporting on real estate deals while ignoring architecture.

And one tires of the news narrative's one-dimensionalism. In 1994, the web was weird and wild, they told us. In '99 it was a kingmaker; in '01, a bust. In '02, news folk discovered blogs; in '04, perspiring guest bloggers on CNN explained how citizen journalists were reinventing news and democracy and would determine who won that year's presidential election. I forget how that one turned out.

When absurd predictions die ridiculous deaths, nobody resigns from the newsroom, they just throw a new line into the water—like marketers replacing a slogan that tanked. After decades of news commoditization, what's amazing is how many good reporters there still are, and how hard many try to lay accurate information before the public. Sometimes you can almost hear it beneath the roar of the grotesque and the exceptional.

THE SUSTAINABLE CIRCLE OF SELF-REGARD

News media are not the only ones getting it wrong. Professional associations get it wrong every day, and commemorate their wrongness with an annual festival. Each year, advertising and design magazines and professional organizations hold contests for "new media design" judged by the winners of last year's competitions. That they call it "new media design" tells them nothing and you and me everything.

Although there are exceptions, for the most part the creators of winning entries see the web as a vehicle for advertising and marketing campaigns in which the user passively experiences Flash and video content. For the active user, there is gaming—but what you and I think of as active web use is limited to clicking a "Digg this page" button.

The winning sites look fabulous as screen shots in glossy design annuals. When the winners become judges, they reward work like their own. Thus sites that behave like TV and look good between covers continue to be created, and a generation of clients and art directors thinks that stuff is the cream of web design.

DESIGN CRITICS GET IT WRONG, TOO

People who are smart about print can be less bright about the web. Their critical faculties, honed to perfection during the Kerning Wars, smash to bits against the barricades of our profession.

The less sophisticated lament on our behalf that we are stuck with ugly fonts. They wonder aloud how we can enjoy working in a medium that offers us less than absolute control over every atom of the visual experience. What they are secretly asking is whether or not we are real designers. (They suspect that we are not.) But these are the juniors, the design students and future critics. Their opinions are chiefly of interest to their professors, and one prays they have good ones.

More sophisticated critics understand that the web is not print and that limitations are part of every design discipline. Yet even these eggheads will sometimes succumb to fallacious comparatives. (I've [done it myself](http://www.zeldman.com/old/orson.html) (http://www.zeldman.com/old/orson.html), although long ago and strictly for giggles.) Where are the masterpieces of web design, these critics cry. That Google Maps might be as representative of our age as the Mona Lisa was of Leonardo's—and as brilliant, in its way—satisfies many of us as an answer, but might not satisfy the design critic in search of a direct parallel to, oh, I don't know, let's say Milton Glaser's iconic Bob Dylan poster.

Typography, architecture, and web design

The trouble is, web design, although it employs elements of graphic design and illustration, does not map to them. If one must

compare the web to other media, typography would be a better choice. For a web design, like a typeface, is an environment for someone else's expression. Stick around and I'll tell you which site design is like Helvetica.

Architecture (the kind that uses steel and glass and stone) is also an apt comparison—or at least, more apt than poster design. The architect creates planes and grids that facilitate the dynamic behavior of people. Having designed, the architect relinquishes control. Over time, the people who use the building bring out and add to the meaning of the architect's design.

Of course, all comparisons are gnarly by nature. What is the "London Calling" of television? Who is the Jane Austen of automotive design? Madame Butterfly is not less beautiful for having no car chase sequence, peanut butter no less tasty because it cannot dance.

SO WHAT IS WEB DESIGN?

Web design is not book design, it is not poster design, it is not illustration, and the highest achievements of those disciplines are not what web design aims for. Although websites can be delivery systems for games and videos, and although those delivery systems can be lovely to look at, such sites are exemplars of game design and video storytelling, not of web design. So what is web design?

Web design is the creation of digital environments that facilitate and encourage human activity; reflect or adapt to individual voices and content; and change gracefully over time while always retaining their identity.

Let's repeat that, with emphasis:

Web design is the creation of digital environments that facilitate and encourage human activity; reflect or adapt to individual voices and content; and change gracefully over time while always retaining their identity.

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

Great web designs are like great typefaces: some, like [Rosewood](http://www.veer.com/products/typedetail.aspx?image=ADT0003158) (<http://www.veer.com/products/typedetail.aspx?image=ADT0003158>), impose a personality on whatever content is applied to them. Others, like [Helvetica](http://www.veer.com/search/results.aspx?keyword=helvetica&producttype=TYP&pricemodel=RM%2CRF) (<http://www.veer.com/search/results.aspx?keyword=helvetica&producttype=TYP&pricemodel=RM%2CRF>), fade into the background (or try to), magically supporting whatever tone the content provides. (We can argue tomorrow whether Helvetica is really as neutral as water.)

Which web design is like that? For one, Douglas Bowman's white "[Minima](http://ekspeditionist.blogspot.com/) (<http://ekspeditionist.blogspot.com/>)" layout for Blogger, used by literally [millions](http://minimatesttest.blogspot.com/) (<http://minimatesttest.blogspot.com/>) of [writers](http://leukemialetters.blogspot.com/) (<http://leukemialetters.blogspot.com/>)—and it feels like it was designed for [each](http://apartness.blogspot.com/2005/04/elephants-on-34th-street-nyc.html) (<http://apartness.blogspot.com/2005/04/elephants-on-34th-street-nyc.html>) of them [individually](http://weddingdecorator.blogspot.com/2007/09/new-permanent-layout.html) (<http://weddingdecorator.blogspot.com/2007/09/new-permanent-layout.html>). That is great design.

Great web designs are like great buildings. All office buildings, however distinctive, have lobbies and bathrooms and staircases. Websites, too, share commonalities.

Although a great site design is completely individual, it is also a great deal like other site designs that perform similar functions. The same is true of great magazine and newspaper layouts, which differ from banal magazine and newspaper layouts in a hundred subtle details. Few celebrate great magazine layouts, yet millions consciously or unconsciously appreciate them, and nobody laments that they are not posters.

The inexperienced or insufficiently thoughtful designer complains that too many websites use grids, too many sites use

columns, too many sites are “boxy.” Efforts to avoid boxiness have been around since 1995; while occasionally successful, they have most often produced aesthetically wretched and needlessly unusable designs.

The experienced web designer, like the talented newspaper art director, accepts that many projects she works on will have headers and columns and footers. Her job is not to whine about emerging commonalities but to use them to create pages that are distinctive, natural, brand-appropriate, subtly memorable, and quietly but unmistakably engaging.

If she achieves all that and sweats the details, her work will be beautiful. If not everyone appreciates this beauty—if not everyone understands web design—then let us not cry for web design, but for those who cannot see. 🍃

Illustration by [Kevin Cornell](http://alistapart.com/about/kevincornell) (<http://alistapart.com/about/kevincornell>)

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Zeldman publishes [A List Apart](http://alistapart.com/) (<http://alistapart.com/>) and [The Daily Report](http://www.zeldman.com/) (<http://www.zeldman.com/>), cofounded and for several years led [The Web Standards Project](http://www.webstandards.org/) (<http://www.webstandards.org/>), runs [Happy Cog Studios](http://www.happycog.com/) (<http://www.happycog.com/>), wrote [Designing With Web Standards 2nd Ed.](http://www.happycog.com/publish/dwvs/) (<http://www.happycog.com/publish/dwvs/>), and cofounded [An Event Apart](http://www.aneventapart.com/) (<http://www.aneventapart.com/>) with Eric Meyer.

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