

Composition Properties

Balance

Some sort of visual and psychological equilibrium in a composition often pleases the eye, but should be used only as a starting point for creating compositions. There are two common types of visual balance: Symmetrical and Asymmetrical. Symmetrical balance refers to an even distribution of visual weight on either side of a line or axis or element. Asymmetrical balance is a more tenuous proposition. It relies on factors of tension and emotion. Objects “feel” balanced visually by distributing the elements in a fashion which vary in size and contrast.

Grid Systems

Humans love order... and define life visually in accordance with their known experience. The world or perceived order is reinforced around them in the machine age world. But underlying that supposed order is an underlying chaos that is defined by overlapping hierarchies and symbiotic relationships, where one object cannot exist without the other.

In page layout design the grid system is often relied upon because we see it so often either subconsciously or consciously..... It is a simplification of order that our minds can grasp easily. But... the true measure of design is the interlocking mechanisms that exist below the surface of the grid.

The divine proportion is based loosely on this proposition...but a caveat to repetition still exists... The eye can only be bored for so long before its lids close, and you fade away into delirium.

The grid should be designed using a system of vertical and horizontal lines that help organize and establish relationships between elements in a structure. They can provide a rhythm and sense of consistency guiding the viewer through the development of visual clusters.

The use of a grid is not restricted to a series of lines that create a simple three-column layout or any other common magazine form for that matter. A grid is a flexible system of organization that can consist of vertical and horizontal lines as well as circular and diagonal lines that provide a means of organization that guide information hierarchies and promote flexibility and consistency between multiple pages or screens within the same structure.

Syntax

In grammar syntax is a process which combines words and phrases to create a whole sentence. In design it is a similar process combining a diverse conglomeration of items, elements, or forms to create a new visual language. This syntax reinforces the thematic essence of the copy provided and invites the viewer to explore.

The Rule of Thirds

“Often used by photographers when searching for and defining visual compositions, the rule of thirds suggests a method of organization that helps define focal areas. A focal area guides a person’s visual attention into a region of the composition before them which allows them to rest and feel comfortable. The rule of thirds suggests that when any two-dimensional rectangular or square composition is divided into three sections, both vertically and horizontally, that the four intersecting points inside that rectangle are the points of optimal focus within the particular composition.

There are four potential points of focus in a particular composition, but a hierarchy is typically required to determine which of the areas is the most important area for potential focus within a composition. This rule is not only a good method for developing a composition but also an effective way to measure the balance and stability of an existing composition.

The Use of Typography and Image in Visual Composition Traditionally, the printed word has been dominant and image and illustration has been used to enhance the interpretation of the text. This is still the case in many instances including the design of information structures, but advances in technology and changes in communication theories allow for an inverted relationship as well.

Roland Barthes, in his book *Image Music Text*, states the following:

Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination.” (Meggs 41).

It is one of the responsibilities of an information designer to negotiate a relationship between type and image within a composition. This relationship should remain consistent throughout the composition while reinforcing the organization and hierarchical structures that have been established. Because of the tenuous relationship between text and image the negotiator of this space greatly effects the interpretive meaning of the information. The wrong text with a particular image, or the wrong image with a particular text can have disastrous consequences in the meaning and clarity of the information. Information designers must rely on various tools to control and negotiate the delicate balance between these potent compositional elements.”

Tim Greenzweig: Designer and Author

Juxtaposition

Text and image exist ideally in a symbiotic relationship where they reinforce each other. One cannot live without the other. Juxtaposition is the relationship between the placement of separate elements in a visual composition (Meggs 45). For instance, text that interacts and becomes part of an image can have a more appealing “feel” than if it were placed on the opposite end of the composition which can also be called Fusion.

(Meggs 55). Fusion is the result of combining text and image into one complete element.

Manipulating the letterforms in such a manner as to enhance the meaning through figurative interpretation of the words: Individual letters can be fused with images to enhance their interpretive meaning as well: There are an infinite variety of possible negotiations between type and image, but what separates the higher animals from the amoeba is a well reasoned layout that provides no other solution than a clear unequivocal meaning can present.

Gestalt Theory in Visual Composition

Structure can be clearly evident by an obvious grid system or can be suggested in a hierarchy which guides the viewer’s eye across the page. Whichever method may be utilized, the purpose of good graphic design is to convey a message in as concise a manner as possible in an aesthetically pleasing fashion.

In his book *Type & Image*, Philip Meggs states:

“The designer combines graphic materials-words, pictures, and other graphic elements-to construct a visual communications gestalt. This German word does not have a direct English translation. It means a configuration or structure with properties not derivable from the sum of its individual parts. The designer combines visual signs, symbols, and images into a visual-verbal gestalt that the audience can understand, or The graphic designer is simultaneously message maker and form builder. This complex task involves forming an intricate communications message while building a cohesive composition that gains order and clarity from the relationships between the elements (1). The primary task for the information designer is to give the composition of the information a whole or a gestalt not only on an individual page basis, but also throughout the entire information structure whether in the form of a book, a painting, a web-site, or a CD-ROM. The entirety of the information needs to be taken into account to provide the user with a whole, complete and aesthetic “experience” of the information.”