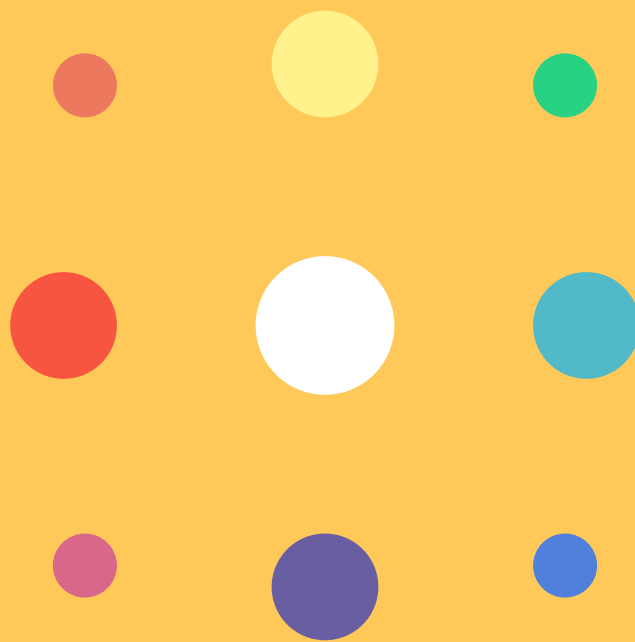


Elegant Web UI Design Techniques: Flat Design & Colors



Elegant Web UI Design Techniques:
Flat Design & Colors

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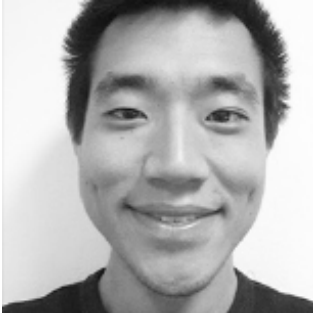
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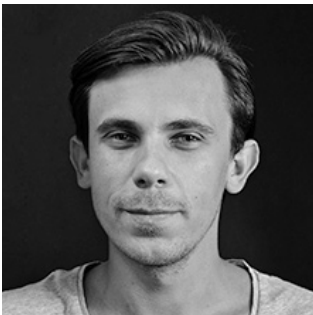
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A Retrospective and Futurespective Look at Colors on the Web

Color is common to every website. While the way designers use color changes dramatically based on trends and time periods, we are definitely designing in the decade of vibrant color.

Red, orange, pink and bright green, blue and purple have become the focal point of web design projects across a variety of industries. Designers are pairing bright color choices in a way that was almost taboo a few years ago and even straying from the website color choices dictated by company branding.



Photo credits: [QED Group](#)

The result is a beautiful rainbow of bright, energetic and fun color that, when used well, provides [emotional direction for the design](#) and visually emphasizes on-screen text and graphics. This fearless color scheme isn't for everyone, but the trend is versatile enough where almost any designer can take advantage of using vibrant color – from a full page design with a magenta background to kelly green lettering in a black and white design framework.

“Stealing” From Fashion and Interior Design

The color of the world around us is one of the strongest influences on our choices in web design. In fact, cues from fashion and interior design seem to have an even stronger influence on color trends across all aspects of design.

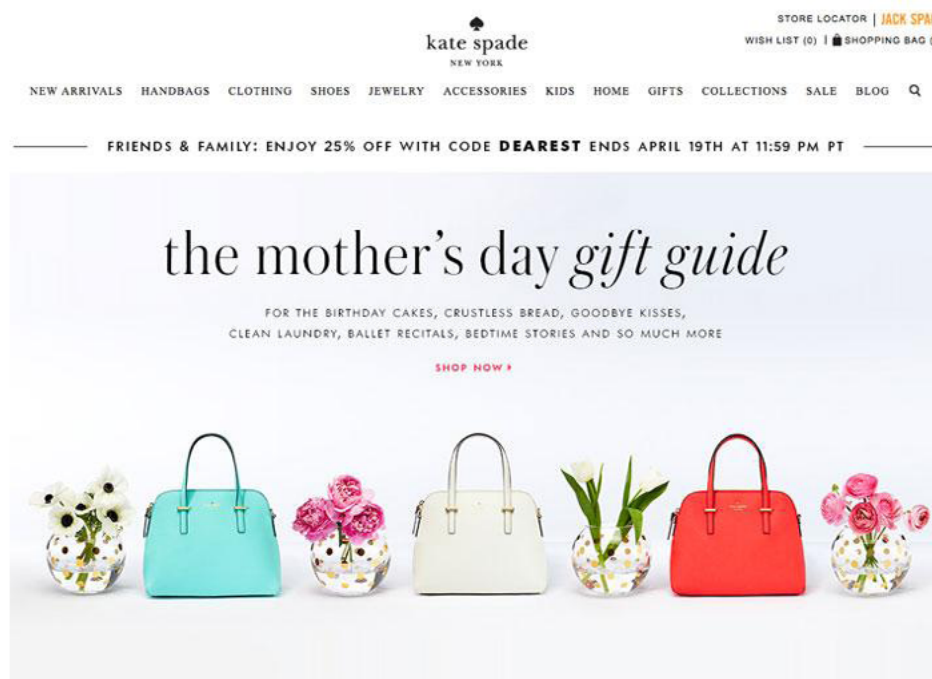


Photo credit: <http://www.katespade.com/>

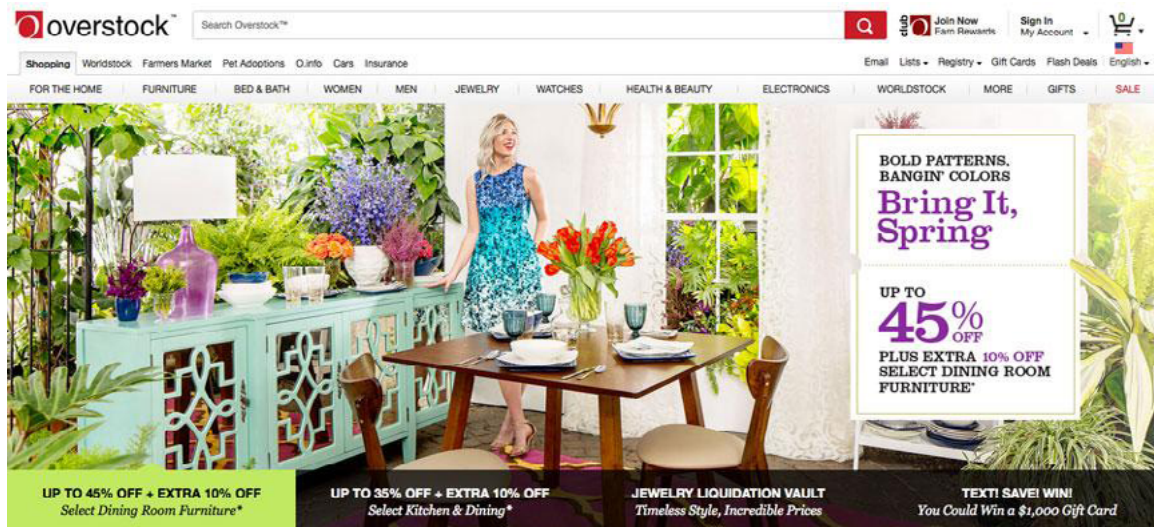


Photo credit: <http://www.overstock.com/>

If you look to the runway and through pages of fashion magazines, color is everywhere. Neons, bold prints and black and white with color accents are the height of fashion. From skirts to bags to polos and even hair extensions, color blocking (with a pair of bright hues) is near universal. When it comes to your home, color is also a bold choice from wall colors to the cushions on patio furniture.

How color is used in the physical world translates to the digital world as well. As described in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, the goal of all design is to connect with the user – the more relatable the presentation, the likelier (and stronger) the emotional connection. Color trends in the real world and in digital projects are inexplicably linked for this reason – as long as color is a popular trend overall, it will live on for website designers as well.

Flat Color Palettes

Two major developments ushered in the emergence of vibrant color in web UI design – high definition displays and the popularity of flat design. While flat design likely played the stronger role in expanding the use of color, the technology behind it made the rich hues feasible.

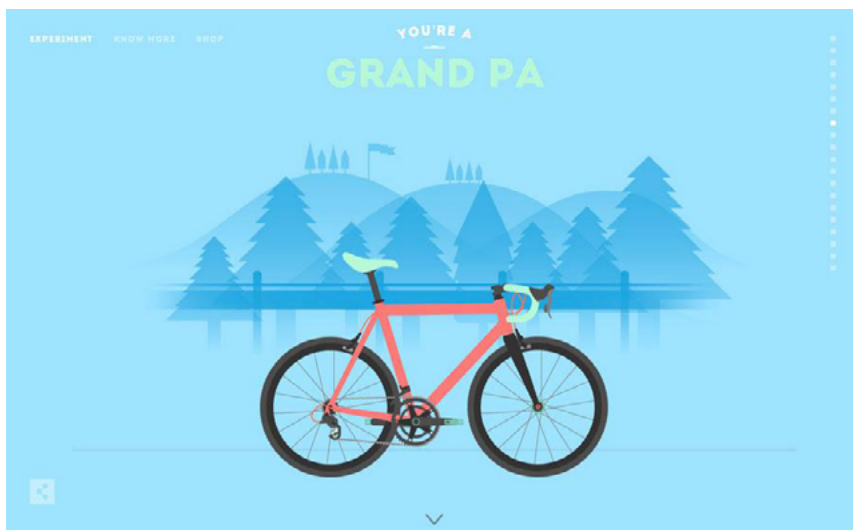


Photo credit: <http://cyclemon.com/>

With more pixels per inch on screens, the digital rainbow has greatly expanded to suit our maturing taste in design aesthetics. Monitors of every size, from desktop displays to the iPhone – can actually render all the color options designers use today.

Designers used to worry about [web safe colors](#) (there were just 216 of them) so that all users could see exactly what the designer intended. That concept is dead and buried – [W3Schools](#) surveyed users in 2014 and found that more than 98% of users had devices capable of displaying millions of colors, removing technology as a barrier to the creativity of color trends.

Around the same time [Retina](#) and other high definition displays gained popularity, flat design (a trend that is still going strong and [evolving](#)) roared onto the scene. One of the key components of the trend was the abundance of bright color. And while flat outlines were not for everyone, many of the color choices and emotions users felt when interacting with these hues were highly desirable

Flat colors have evolved and toned down as they adapted to a variety of other projects. These bright, deeply saturated hues are often seen in color palettes that include one to three colors (rather than the expansive palettes associated with flat design) or to create a strong accent, contrasting element or focal point.

Monotone Color Schemes

One of the most popular ways to use vibrant color, monotone color palettes use a single color with a mixture of tints and tones to create a unified yet nuanced visual design.

Vibrant color lends itself to monotone palettes because it allows the designer to use a bold, maybe even unconventional color without trying to match it to other colors. As we all know from the complementary, analogous, and triadic color schemes discussed in [Web Design for the Human Eye](#), choosing multiple colors is one of the most surprisingly complex yet impactful decisions for the web.



Photo credit: <http://www.linequality.com/>

Look at Line Quality, above, as an example.

Lime green is not the easier color to pair tastefully with others, but here the dominance of the color in combination with an image of a Muppet icon in the same hue creates a highly dramatic visual effect. Because the background and foreground image are all one color, the remaining elements such as the crisp white lettering, the company logo, minimalist navigation and the call-to-action [ghost button](#) are still easy to find on the screen even though they are visually muted in comparison.

Monotone color schemes are one of the easiest and most effective ways to use a lot of color without falling into the design trap or creating a site that feels chaotic (a common issue with vibrantly colored web interfaces). This type of color scheme also allows a company to use colors in ways that might live outside of their traditional branding without worry of matching or issues with [readability](#).

High Contrast Color

Vibrant color is core to the [minimalist design trend](#) as well. Pops of color provide emphasis and points of entry in stripped-down designs that might otherwise be lacking.

High contrast refers to any color that is very different from the background. In a minimalist context, you're likely to see any form of color with high saturation against a black, white or gray canvas. Points of great contrast become the visual center of the design, telling users where to look at what to do in a framework that may otherwise be too simple.



Photo credit: <http://hega.tv/#/home>

[Hega](#) uses color only for a button in a minimalist design framework, which immediately draws the user's attention where the designer wants. Because the touch of color contrasts with the white background and black image, the "Case Studies" button clearly communicates a call to action without explicitly urge the user to click.



Photo credit: <http://www.studiostylistik.ca/>

Studio Stylistik uses that same concept with strategic teal lettering, buttons and even the jacket on the model for emphasis against a dark background. By using the same color applied in different points that form a zig-zag formation, the site retains a unified look while leading our eyes to each point of interest highlighted in teal.

As you can see, vibrant color isn't useful just for calling out a single element on the page – you can also create a natural vertical rhythm by repeating in moderation according to the human scanning patterns we described in *Web Design for the Human Eye*.



Photo credit: <http://www.moresleep.net/>

Bold color works so well because it is, by comparison, a complete opposite of the starkness of minimalist design. [More Sleep](#), above, uses color brilliantly against a dark background. The coral red is easy to read and draws attention to the words on the screen first and the image behind it afterward.

The thick red line beneath the headline creates visual balance, which is extremely important considering that red [communicates passion and even violence](#). Again, this is why color can be so tricky: apply too much too strongly, and your design immediately crosses the emotional spectrum and becomes loud and overbearing.

Common Color Associations

When it comes to bold color, it is important to consider a little more than just aesthetics.

Designers need to think about meanings and cultural associations that are connected to certain hues. While these common feelings are not always set in stone, they should be part of the conversation when talking about color for a design project.

Let's examine some common color associations:

- **Pink:** Romance, youth, confidence, sensitivity
- **Red:** Love, passion, danger, urgency
- **Yellow:** Fun, optimism, happiness, caution

- **Orange:** Warmth, ambition, enthusiasm, creativity
- **Green:** Nature, luck, growth, safety
- **Blue:** Harmony, tranquility, trust, honor
- **Purple:** Wealth, power, spirituality, calmness

Thinking Beyond the Present

As the overall design trends start to swing back into outlines that are less flat, color will do the same. Bright, bold color will stick around and work more as an element on its own, rather than as a supporting piece of another trend.

Designers will return to using some techniques that have fallen out of fashion (such as gradients) and make them captivating again with bright color.



Photo credit: <http://www.impossible-bureau.com/>

The Impossible Bureau (above) does a beautiful job of this. The site pairs a dark, minimal framework with a hover state featuring a

bright purple to pink to orange gradient. Expect to see more designers experiment in this way and use bright gradients for user interface elements or as background patterns.

[Zample+me](#) (below) uses that same concept with a full-screen bright colored background gradient.

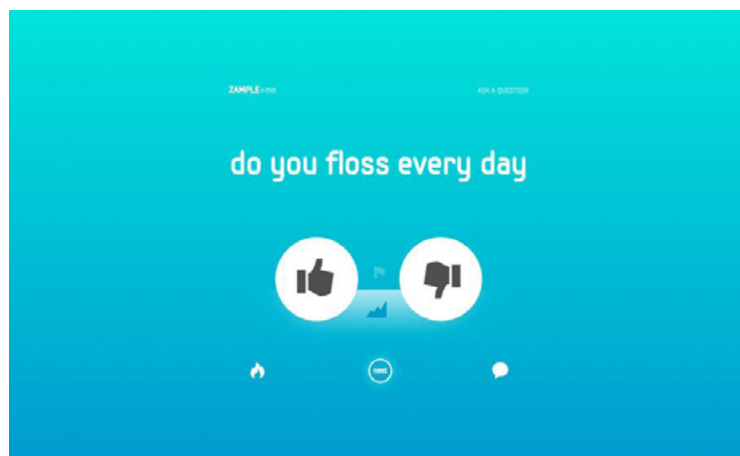


Photo credit: <http://zample.me/do-you-floss-every-day>



Photo credit: <http://www.patrickcsy.com/everything-design/>

Bold color is already beginning to emerge as the dominant visual for website design. When combined with [bold typography](#), bright color creates a stunning visual for websites that do not feature many images or illustrations. Two simple elements work together to create an even more powerful aesthetic.

Bold color is a technique with lasting power for a variety of design styles. Vibrant hues are attention-grabbing and can add a touch of modern flair to almost any design style.

5 Free Resources and Tools

1. **Color Wheel Primer:** The color wheel is the starting point for all color theory. This primer, designed for interior design, explains how to expertly think about color.
2. **ColourLovers:** Create color palettes or glean inspiration from other designers.
3. **Create a Monochromatic Color Scheme:** Adobe Color is one of the most impressive tools out there, including the monochromatic color option. Pick a single color and the tool will help you create a great monochrome palette.
4. **“An Introduction to Color Theory for Web Designers” by Tuts+:** Color theory is more than just creating a great palette. It about pairing hues and readability and understanding and connecting with users. This primer is a great starting point for those looking to expanding their knowledge of color.
5. **Pantone Color of the Year:** The design world’s color authority picks a trendy new color each year and has a ton of other color tools.

Complementary Color Design Techniques

While many trends and techniques in web design come and go, one that remains constant is color. It is one of the basic principles of all design theory and a tool that contributes to an overall aesthetic and provides user interaction cues.



Photo credit: Species in Pieces

Color trends change, but vibrant color choices are a design element that stand the test of time. Bright color choices contribute to and work with the design itself to help provide valuable user experiences.

Color Blocking and Hover

Two vibrant color patterns that emerged thanks to other trends (particularly flat design and [card-style interfaces](#)) are color blocking and colored hover states.

As the names suggest, color blocks refers to dividing content into a grid and applying different colors to create a card-like mosaic. Colored hover states are also quite straightforward – as you mouse over each block of content, the color changes to provide visual feedback to users.

While you can apply the techniques independently (shown below in the great color blocking in the sites for [Wrist](#) and [Play Dot To](#)), you'll actually see the techniques used together quite often.

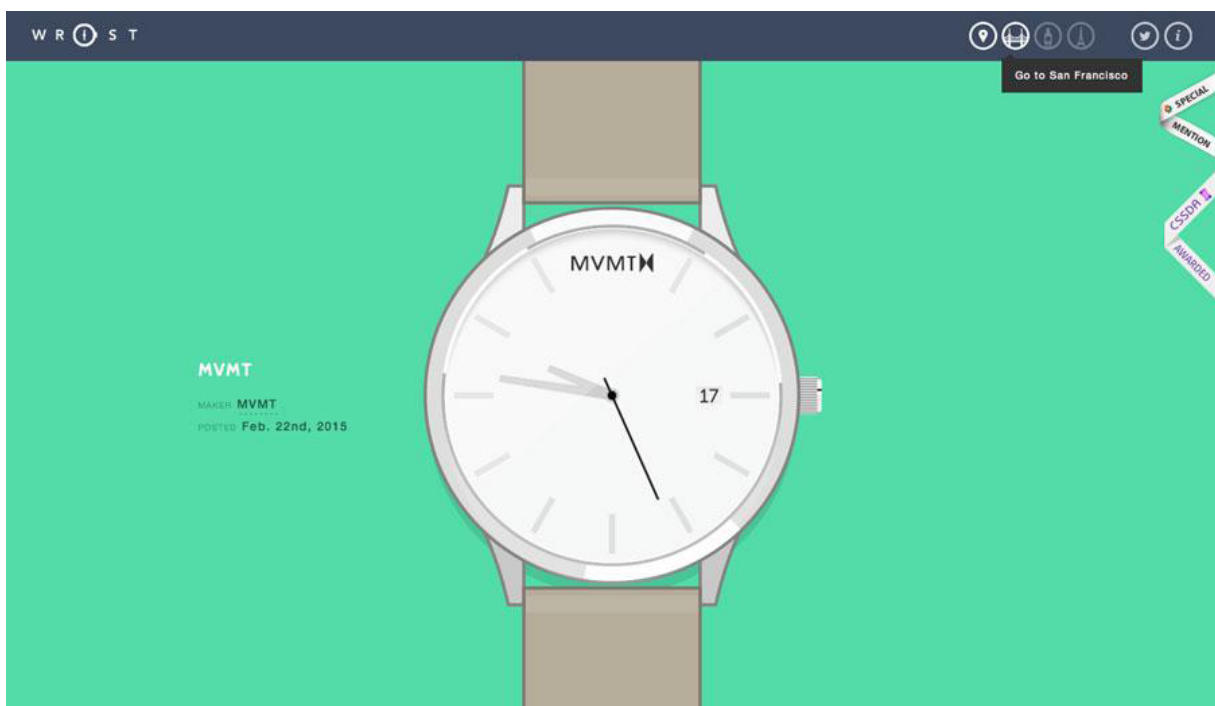


Photo credit: <http://www.wrist.im/>

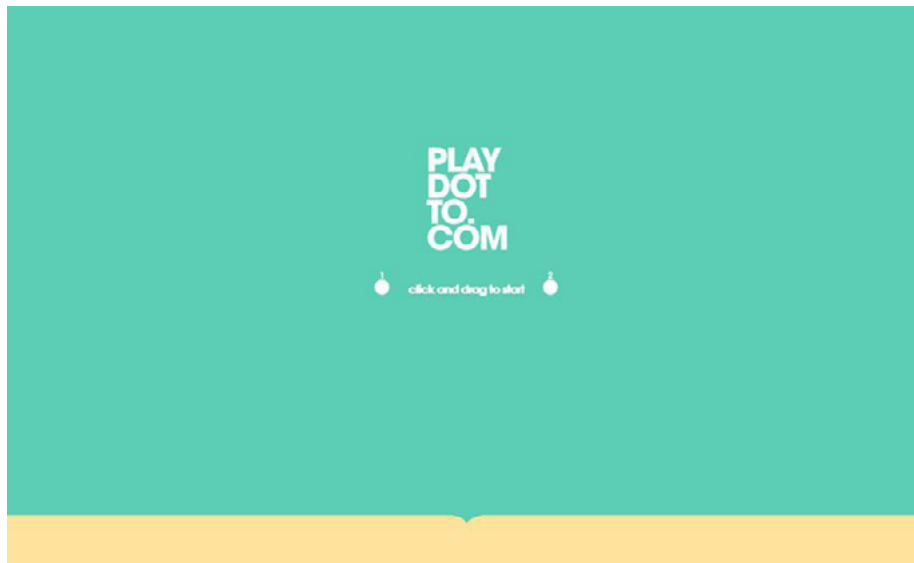


Photo credit: <http://play-dot-to.com/>

Column Five Media and PFD (below) are excellent examples of how bold color pairs well with user interface tools, such as hover states, linking and animated effects. Each site features a somewhat card-style design with hover effects as the user moves from block to block. While Column Five uses color primarily for hover, PFD also uses color blocking to highlight individual blocks within the design that also include hover animation.

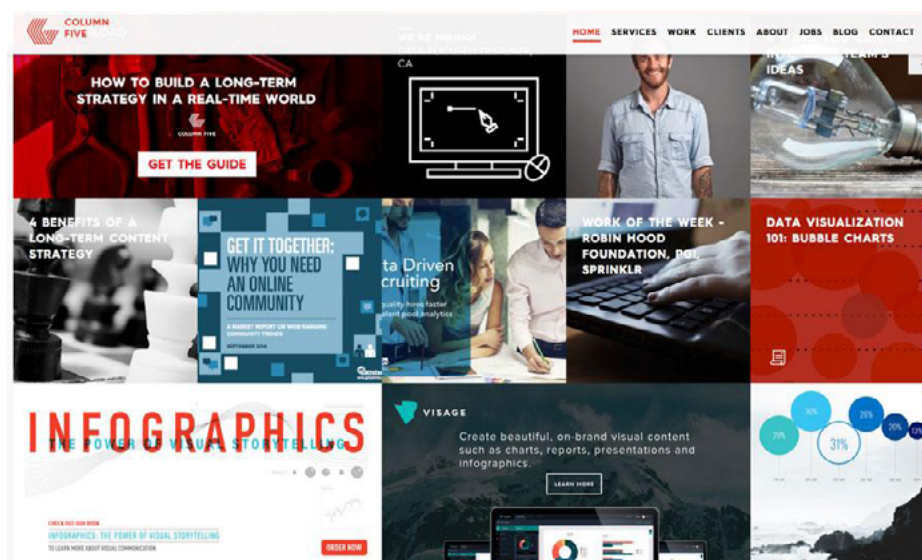


Photo credit: <http://www.columnfivemedia.com/>

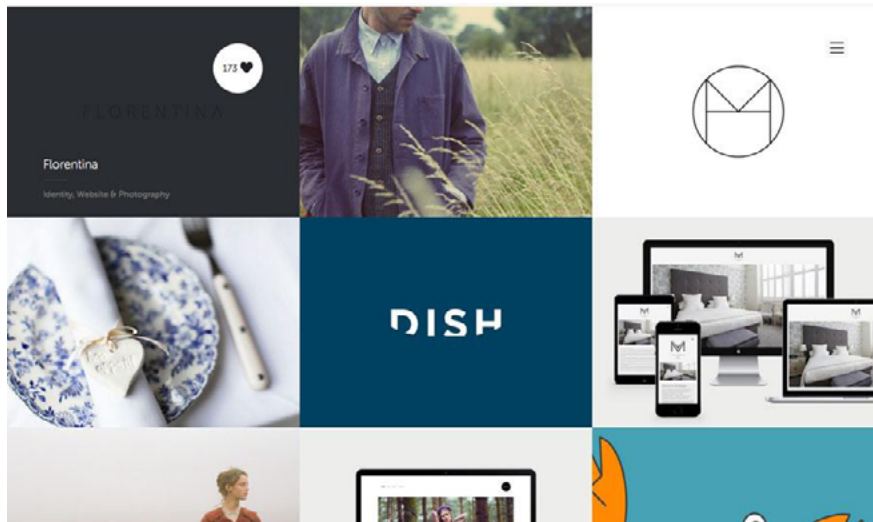


Photo credit: <http://madebypfd.com/>

As you can probably tell, user interaction is the primary motivation behind combining color blocks with colored hover states.

Color doesn't just help users visually distinguish different types of content. When used as a tool for interaction design, animated color is one of the fastest ways to give users a simultaneous feeling of control and delight when engaging with content. Considering [Maslow's hierarchy of design needs](#), any visual treatment that instantly improves usability and adds personality is a powerful tool in your arsenal.

Pairing Color and Texture

Textures were once reserved for more neutral backgrounds, but designers are pairing bold hues with subtle effects for stunning experiences. As other trends begin to circle back to the use of more subtle effects – like what is happening with [Flat Design 2.0](#) – color will also evolve.

There are two ways to think about vibrant color and texture:

1. As part of an overall background or image
2. As a subtle accent to a background or image



Photo credit: <http://ryankeiser.net/>

Ryan Keiser's website uses texture and vibrant color together as a dominant background effect.

The grid pattern in the yellow-green canvas offsets what could have ended up as a chaotic color choice. The texture adds more interest and a certain softness to the color that makes it easier read. Bright blue and pink accents (including hover states for links) strengthens the overall message – this designer will bring your vision to life with boldness and color.

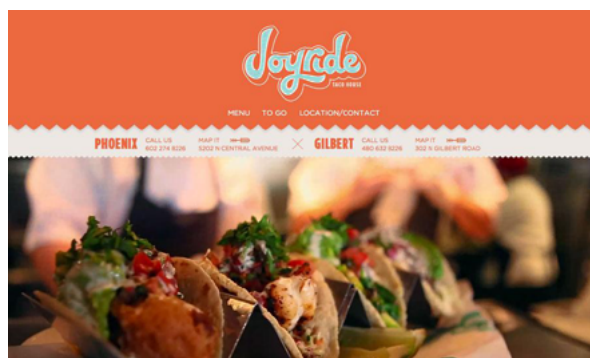


Photo credit: <http://joyridetacohouse.com/>

Joyride Taco House combines bold and engaging color with subtle textures.

Between the main header and the contact information, a shadow creates a bit of depth and separation – but what really stands out is the blue-green line art texture in the lettering. The logo texture is engaging, light and fun. The combination of colors (orange and the blue-green) are certainly unexpected, but they perfectly reflect the hip yet casual vibe of the restaurant.

How to Use Vibrant Color

Vibrant color is a design technique that complements many different design styles. If nothing else, this trend has certainly expanded the creative ex businesses and website owners who may have previously preferred the safe templated look of most plug-and-play site themes.

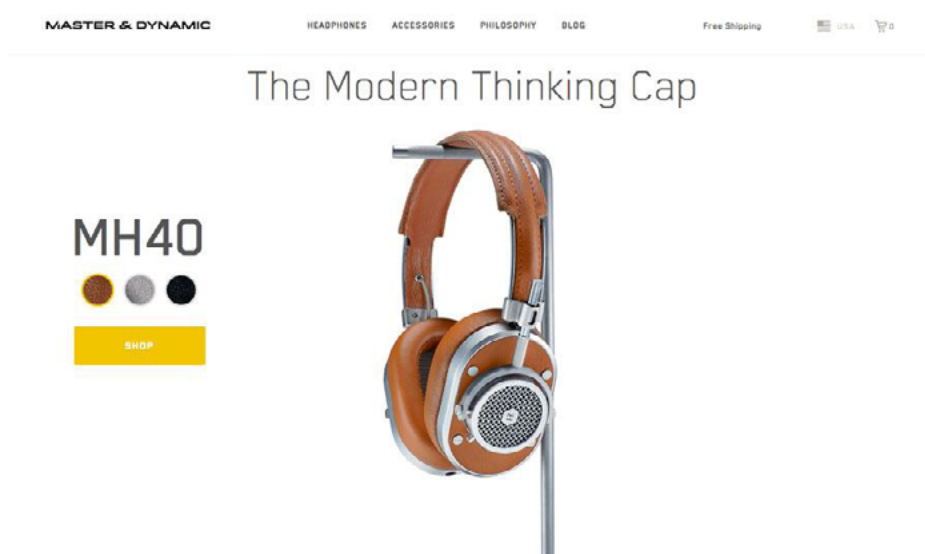


Photo credit: <http://www.masterdynamic.com/>

The trend started with websites for more creative fields and groups – designers, agencies, music and art – but is gaining popularity for news, weather and health sites as well. Bright color is also finding a place in e-commerce, where black and white was the standard for a long time.

What's different about the vibrant color trend of 2015 is in its ability to balance fun and professionalism.

Brands now use colors in a strategic way that is lighthearted yet still reliable and trustworthy. Brands are not forgoing their identities to just create a trendy website because designers are using dramatic color in concert with existing elements.

Here are three ways to make it work:

1. Backgrounds and text

Vibrant color is a great tool for helping important or key words stand out from the background.

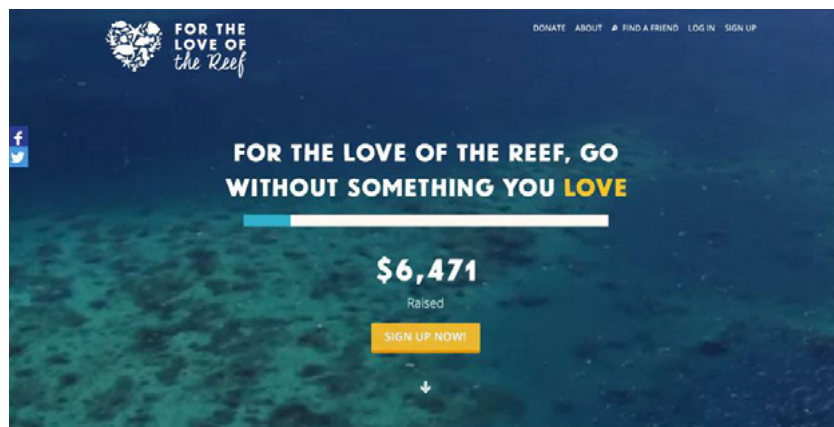


Photo credit: <https://fortheloveof.org.au/#/>

Bright colors, especially against dark backgrounds, provide just the right amount of contrast to draw in the eye. [For the Love of the Reef](#), below, uses color only for “LOVE” and the call to action button, which creates a clever yet subtle association between the two (no doubt intended to improve conversions).

2. Buttons and UI elements

Bright color is a fun way to bring attention to buttons and calls to action.

Consider a color that contrasts dramatically with everything else on your site for the most impact. [Mijlo](#), below, does a great job by pairing buttons in bright orange against the product being sold, a cream-colored bag. Everything on the site is muted in color except action elements, making it easy for users to know what they are supposed to do on the site.

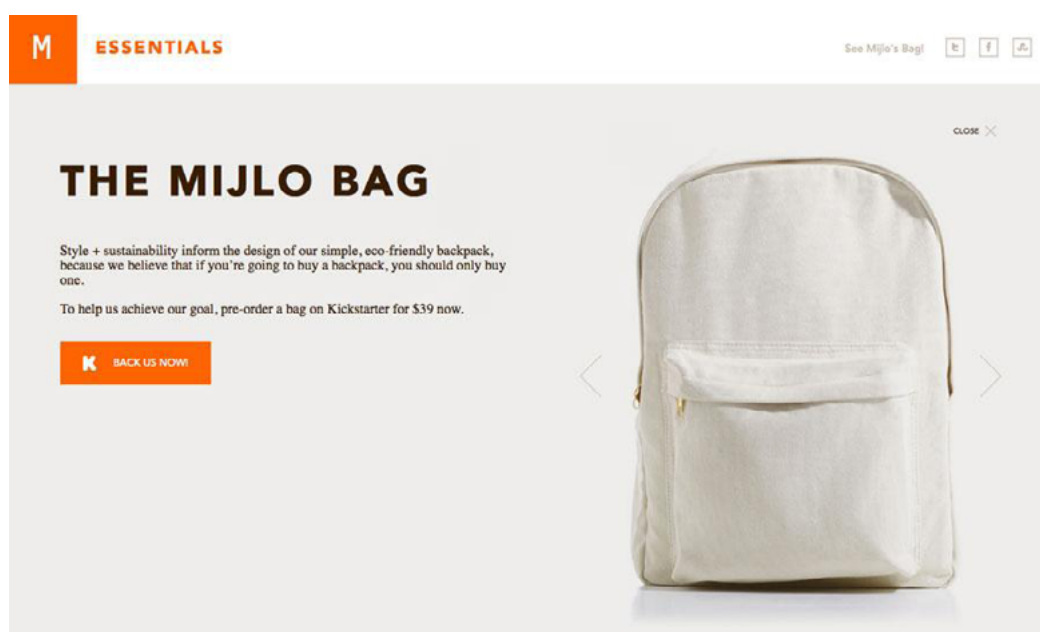


Photo credit: <http://essentials.mijlo.com/>

3. Navigation and menus

Color is a great tool when it comes to helping users navigate information-heavy websites. [Coloured Lines](#), below, uses rainbow-like colors to highlight navigation through a site which contains a large number of content sections.

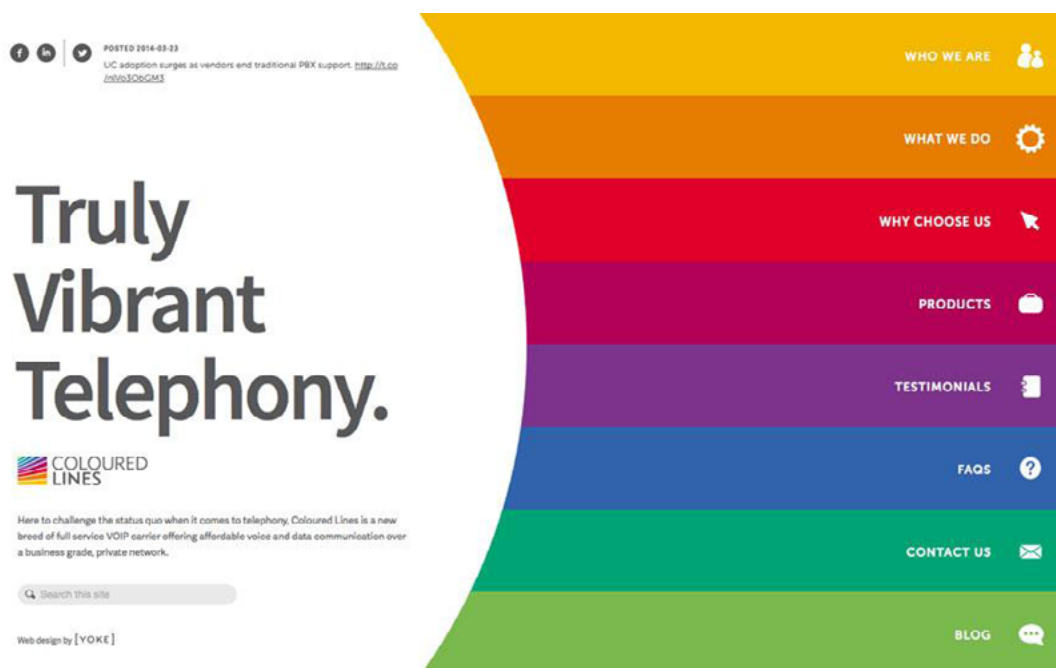


Photo credit: <http://colouredlines.com.au/>

Bright color cues are also popular in [parallax-scrolling effects](#) to create clearly defined sections of content in an otherwise uninterrupted top-down linear flow.

With each color scheme representing a different section, these color guides allow designers to adapt pure-storytelling parallax sites to support more structured content (which is helpful in presenting different calls-to-action without distracting from the narrative power).

Thinking Beyond the Present

Color can be used in a number of ways, from thinking about colors in images, in buttons of user interface tools or as a background. What's nice about bold color is that it adds an extra dimension to almost any project. The use of bold and vibrant color will continue to evolve as more designers play with it.

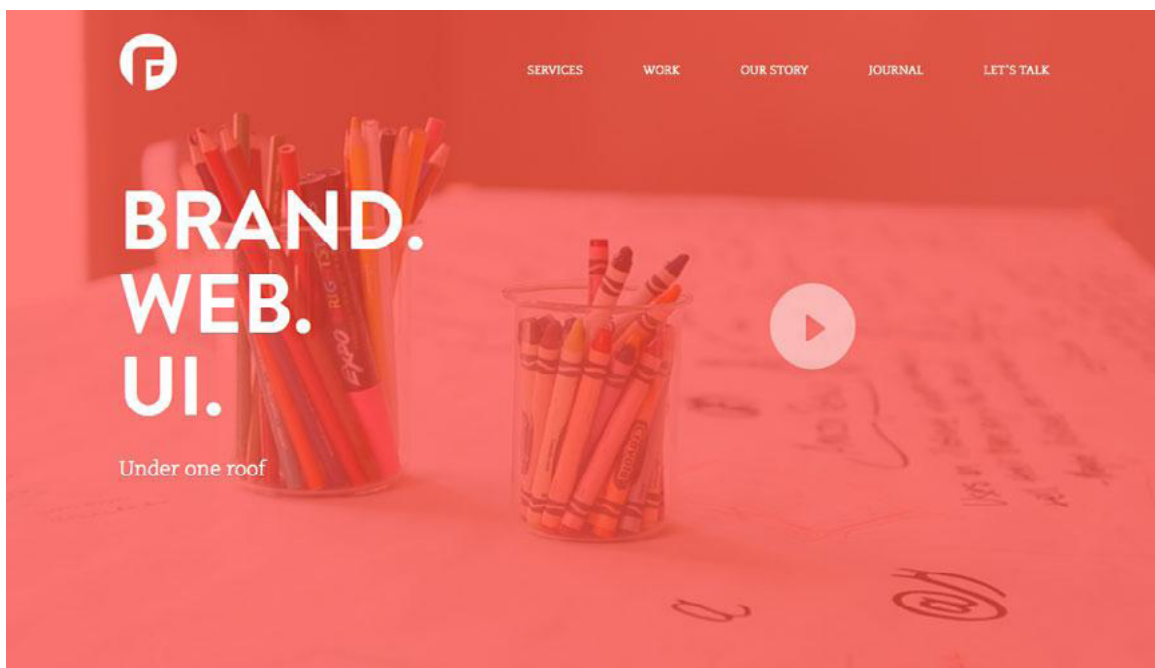


Photo credit: <http://focuslabllc.com/>

Bright color layered over images or video backgrounds is a bold way to have the best of both worlds. Bright color is interesting and creates an emotional connection, while an image or video helps further engage the user.

More sites are using this technique, such as [Focus Lab](#), above, and this will only rise in popularity as hi resolution images and vibrant color continue to dominate the web design landscape.

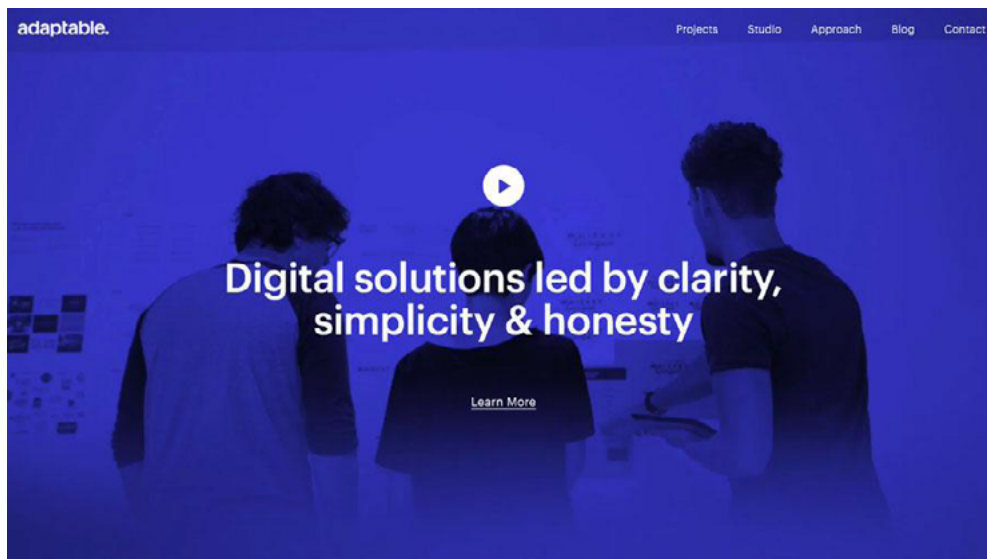


Photo credit: <http://weareadaptable.com/>

Interesting colors will continue to find their way into website projects. Designers will branch out from more traditional and primary hues to colors with deeper, bolder and even brighter designs. [Digital Agency Birmingham](#) is doing this with the deep bluish purple color overlay on the home page. As you scroll through the color is used for other accents as well, and the color is so distinct that it serves as a focal point on its own.



Photo credit: <http://www.loungelizard.com/>

Instead of only focusing on single hues, more projects will take on a styled color palette that mirrors popular culture. Examples include color styles that look like popular filters from the social media sharing site Instagram or colors that when combined have a vintage or period look and feel. [Lounge Lizard](#) does this with the green tones in the main image as well as an orangish accent. The site uses bold color choices will creating an “old school” feel.

Using vibrant color is a great way to add visual emphasis and user interaction cues in website design projects. Color ties together the design story and usability, giving a project complete user appeal.

5 Free Resources and Tools

1. [How to Use CSS Hover Effect in Color](#): Create your own nifty hover state with a color change option with a simple tutorial.
2. [Tint UI](#): This color picker provides color codes for a variety of hues based on trends, including flat, material and by brand such as Twitter or Microsoft.
3. [Text on Background](#): Compare background and text color combinations before you plan your website color palette.
4. [How to Add a Hue Filter in Photoshop](#): This tutorial helps you create a great color overlay that you can use on images, like some of the ones seen in the examples above.

5. **Color Website Design Gallery from Awwwards:** Using a lot of color can be intimidating. Find some inspiration from this gallery of websites doing it well.

Exploring the Evolution of the Flat Design Revolution

One of the biggest trends of the 2010s is still evolving today. Flat design, which started to gain momentum in 2013, is still currently one of the most used – and talked about – techniques in web design.

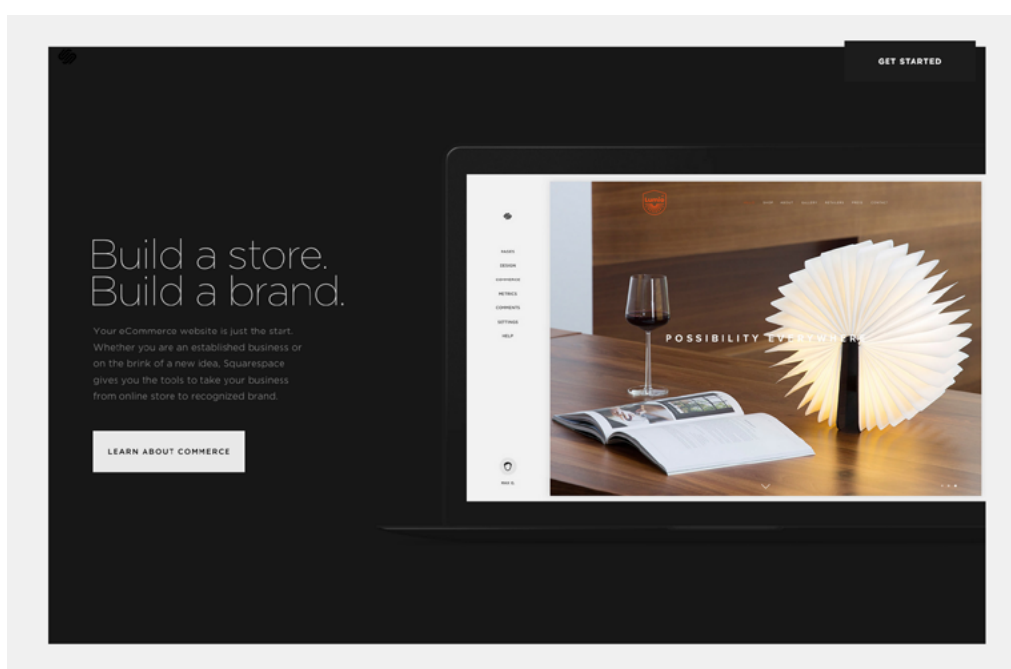


Photo credit: [Squarespace](#)

But how has it sustained itself for so long? What is it about flat design that attracts designers and developers? And how has it dominated the industry in so short a time?

The Appeal of Flat Design

The benefits of flat design are written right on the surface. Take a good, long, look at a flat UI and you'll really start to appreciate how what you see is what you get.

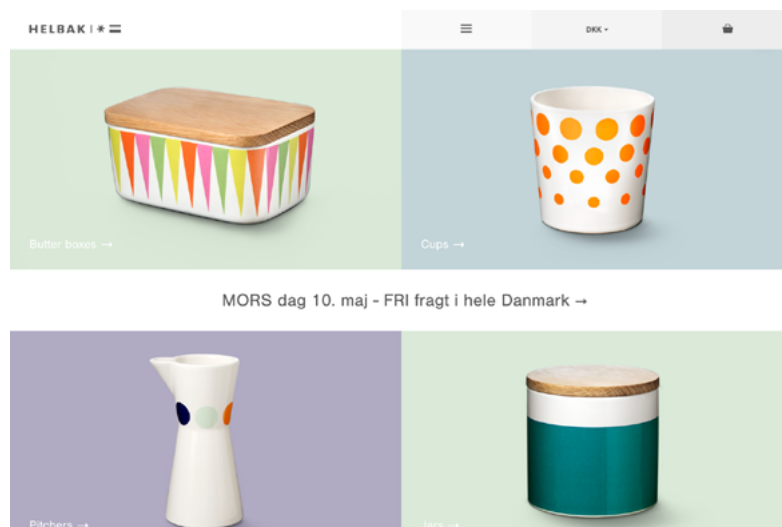


Photo credit: [Helbak](#)

For example, as shown by the Danish home goods retailer [Helbak](#) (above), flat design gives users exactly what they want and need: the content. In this case, there's only enough navigation for someone to browse products, while the rest of the interface dedicates itself to high-resolution product images. Set against a grid of muted colors, the interface is meticulously organized yet visually interesting.

In fact, the three main reasons flat design is thriving today are:

1. **It's simple and intuitive** – As modern technology (both software and hardware) strives for simpler learning curves, simple interfaces feel like a very natural means to that end. Like we described

in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, removing unnecessary clutter and sticking with the basics allows users to focus on their tasks and experiences, which themselves are becoming more involved.

2. **It's perfect for responsive and adaptive design** – Because flat design is naturally minimalist and grid-dependent, the content easily shifts whether you're working with an adaptive framework (one design per device) or a responsive framework (one design that shifts based on device). Less items on screen also means less data to process on the back-end, which speeds up load times for all devices.
3. **Self-perpetuating popularity** – No one admits to following the crowd, but when all the big players in web design are doing something similar, the smaller players are going to take notice and do the same. While this wave will crest at some point, flat design is built upon enough solid usability principles that it will certainly reincarnate (to a certain degree) in whatever new design philosophy strikes next.

So that explains the why of flat design's success, but how can we account for the how?

The Evolution of Flat Design

While flat design seemed to almost take the design community overnight, it's certainly taken some time to evolve. Early showcases of flat design were incredibly flat with a desire to lose all of the skin of the previous [skeuomorphic era](#), but today's flat design is starting to include more touches of flair and ornamentation (and not just for the sake of aesthetics).

Enter “Almost Flat” or “[Flat 2.0](#),” as coined by designer Ryan Allen.

“Flat 2.0 is an evolution, not a revolution,” Allen wrote. “Where flat design was a radical departure from the rampant skeuomorphism of days gone by, Flat 2.0 is a playful branch off the flat tree. Flat design is the Christmas tree, Flat 2.0 is the ornaments and candy canes. And presents. No tinsel though, that stuff is a mess to clean up.”



Photo credits: Left image- iPhone iOS 6. Manesh Mohan. Creative Commons. Rotated and cropped from original.

Photo credits: Right image- iPhone 6 Apps. Microservios Geek Crew. Creative Commons. Rotated and cropped from original.

You can see the evolution in a number of other places as well.

When Apple adopted flat design for its interfaces [starting with iOS 7](#), the look was not quite as flat as one might have expected. Before the release, as flat design and minimalism were seeing a resurgence, many speculated about the “flatness” the interface would include. While it was nothing like the previous hardcore skeuomorphic iOS look, there were hints of shadows and other elements that were not considered completely flat, as you can see from the comparison above. That’s where the “almost flat” idea originated.

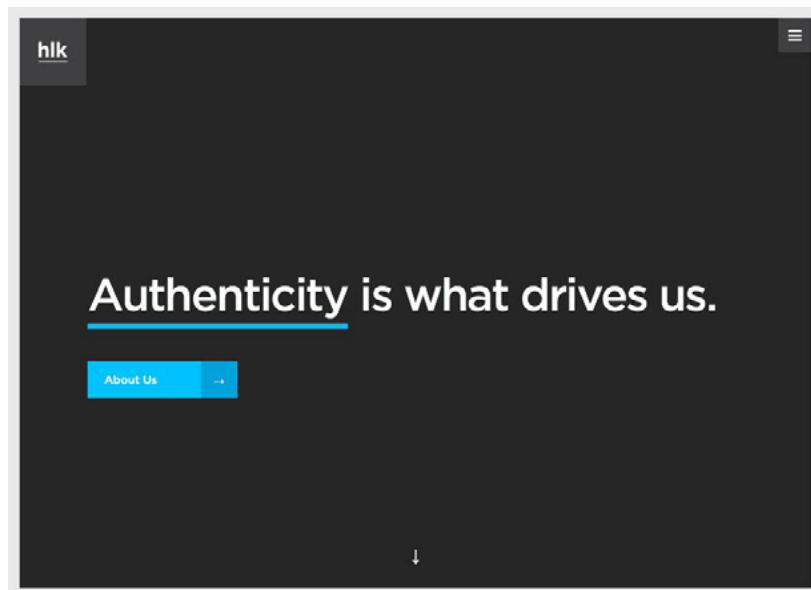


Photo credits: <http://hlkagency.com/>

Most of the flat design being created right now is more in that style. There are hints of shadows, colors that did not fit the rules of flat and typography choices that break the ideals of an entirely flat design. This evolution is why flat design continues to stick with the web design community: it evolves well and into a number of [different design patterns](#).

You can almost see the evolution in the three examples below – like watching a monkey learn to walk upright and lose its hair.

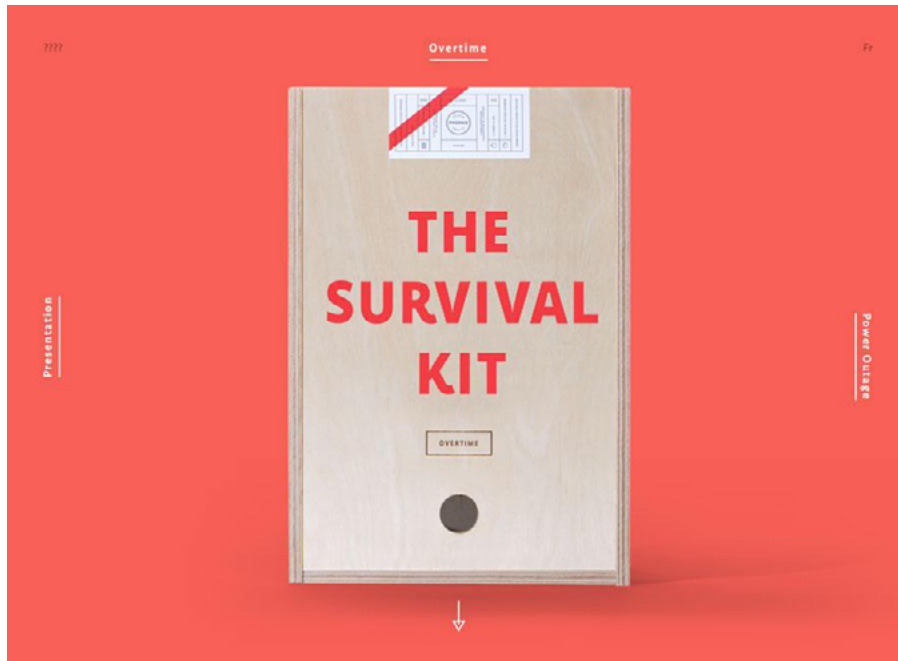


Photo credits: <http://agencysurvivalkit.com/>

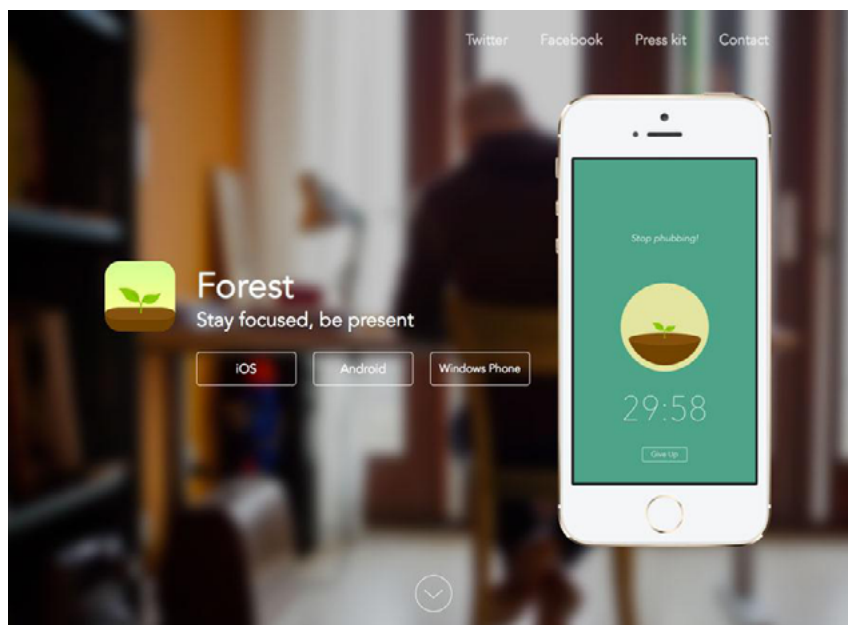


Photo credits: <http://www.forestapp.cc/>

The first (HLK Agency) is distinctly modular and clean. The second (Agency Survival Kit) includes small hints of shading, shadows, and

even texture with its envelope image. The third (Forest App site) incorporates completely flat elements with fearless touches of realism (the background photo in particular).

Compared to the [skeuomorphic craze](#) of 2010-2011, flat design 2.0 is a much more restrained yet confident design aesthetic. The design philosophy incorporates just enough minimalism for clear visual hierarchy, but isn't afraid to layer on some realistic effects to improve the [affordances](#) of the interface.

Of course, the issue with skeuomorphism wasn't in its design philosophy (in fact, we think slight touches of real-world familiarity improve usability) but in the execution. Most sites of the early 2010s era tried too hard, reflecting the real world as much as possible simply because it was the hip thing to do. Flat design was certainly just as guilty of its own indulgence (remember how heavily-gridded sites were [all the rage](#) around 2012?), but now it's at least developing into a far more mature look and feel.

Material Design: The Ultimate Form of Flat Design 2.0?

Material design is perhaps the most interesting embodiment of flat design 2.0.

All you need to do, actually, is just take a look at the meticulously documented [design principles](#).

Google's Material Design is rooted in three design virtues:

1. Visual cues should be grounded in reality
2. Basic design theory prevails in visuals
3. All motion should have meaning

These ideas are quite similar to the ideas behind flat design with two major differences: greater focus on motion/animation and layering of design elements. This makes material design sound a lot like [Flat 2.0](#).

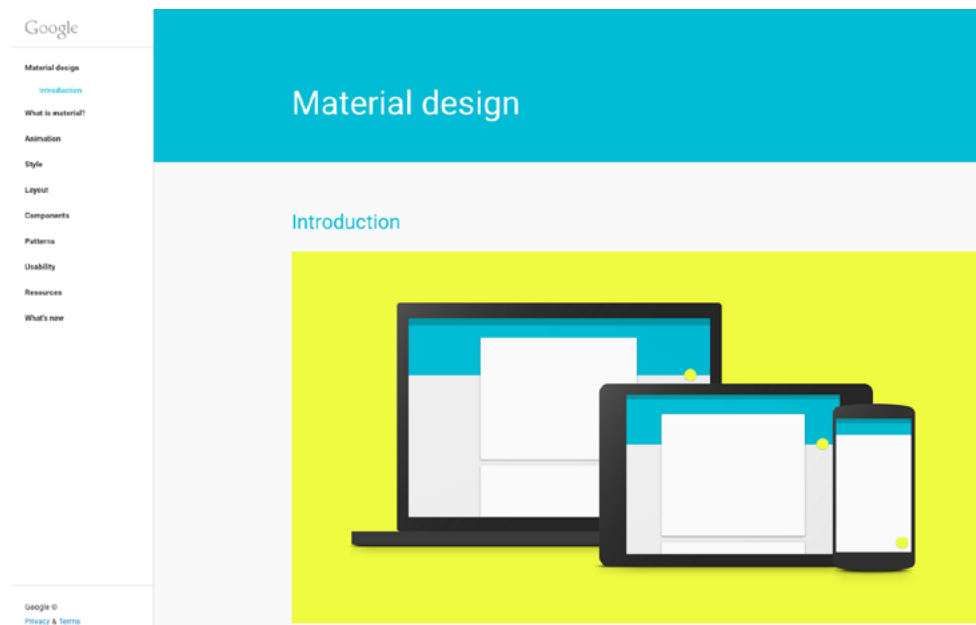


Photo credit: [Google Material Design Principles](#)

It's easy to argue that flat and material design are incredibly similar or vastly different (some of the roots lie in the Apple versus Android debate.)

What we do know is both concepts share similar visual traits – color, shapes and overall structure. Some of the difference (especially Material Design's paper-like layering) lies in the root of the concepts.

Material design is documented and focused, while flat design has evolved almost onto itself. There's no doubt, however, that flat design certainly influences Material Design when you consider the bold images, crisp edges, and vibrant look and feel common to both methods.

Material design, if anything, takes a more practical stance than traditional flat design. By allowing for element layering along the Z-axis, it retains the visual maturity of flat design while being just skeuomorphic enough to communicate [affordances](#) to the user.

Flat design arose as the antithetical reaction against skeuomorphism. Material design, on the other hand, arose as an ecosystem made up of the best parts of flat design with an added dimension of physics.

Conclusion

When you consider the spirit behind flat design (visual simplicity) and skeuomorphism (visual familiarity), you find that both concepts can certainly co-exist. The tricky part, as recent years and the future will certainly prove, is finding the perfect balance between the two.

Material design is undoubtedly an evolution of flat design, but the design philosophy is still mostly reflected through Google's web properties and Android apps. If flat design inspired material design, then it will be especially interesting to see how material design will influence the design languages to come.

10 Free Resources and Tools

1. **Flat UI Colors:** All the hues and color codes you need to create a flat-style color palette.
2. **“The Ultimate Guide to Flat Design” from Webdesigner Depot:** This collection of UI kits, icons, tools, fonts, WordPress themes and more will help you create a web design with flat concepts in a snap.
3. **Flat Design 2.0:** See if you can spot the subtle differences between a design that is purely flat and one of the more evolved flat patterns. Then think about each style and which one you use more often.
4. **Flat Design Website Inspiration from Awwwards:** New sites are being added daily using flat design concepts; the gallery shows the emergence of almost flat as well.
5. **Flat UI Typography:** A fun combination of typefaces and usage to help you see how a font will look before using it in a flat design scheme. (Phrases in the examples are cards from the UX Drinking Game.)
6. **Google Material Design Guide:** Get the ins and outs of the concept and design language that the web giant is implementing across its brands in Google’s “living document.”
7. **“The History of Flat Design: How Efficiency and Minimalism Turned the Digital World Flat” by The Next Web:** Concepts of

the design aesthetic have fairly deep roots that go beyond website design.

8. **Create a Long Shadow Tutorial:** There's no need to buy an icon pack; most designers can build a long shadow icon in just a few minutes using these tips.
9. **50 Flat Icon Sets:** Whether you download the sets for use or just inspiration, Digital Synopsis created a roundup of 50 sets that are free to use or peruse.
10. **25 Flat Device Mockups:** Flat can be fun to use in other ways to, these mockups are a nice way to showcase an app or site design with an unexpected design flair.

Deconstructing Modern Flat Design

Despite its sudden popularity, flat design is not just some fly-by-night trend. It's a substantial approach to web design that's rooted in practicality, and necessity. The balance between aesthetics and usability reflected in [flat design 2.0](#) demonstrates that the principles behind the philosophy have true staying power.

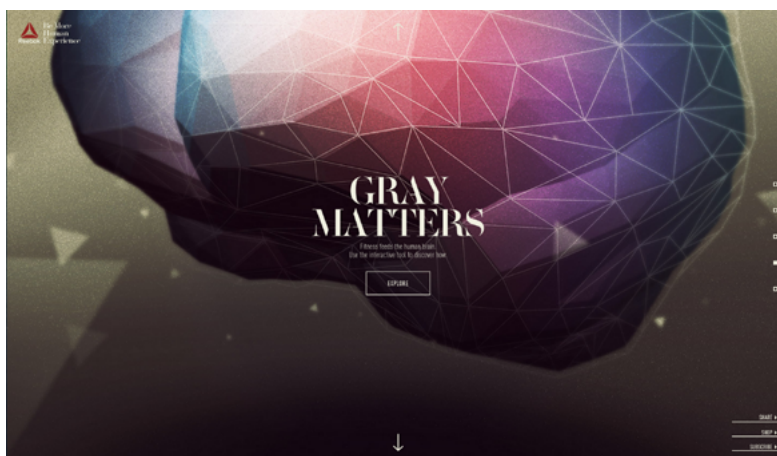


Photo credit: [Reebok](#)

But how does it work? What gives it its magic? In this piece, we're going to crack the face of flat design and see what makes it tick. We'll analyze the core techniques and explore which techniques will carry over into the future.

What's Inside the Flat Design Toolbox

The roots of flat design can be traced to a number of different influences. From [Swiss or international design](#) to minimalism, flat design borrows old techniques from a number of different styles while simultaneously creating new ones.

We've isolated five tools or techniques that have been closely connected to flat design principles – individual trends birthed from the greater trend.

1. Long Shadows

Most commonly used on smaller UI elements such as buttons, [long shadows](#) are created with a color tone that extends beyond a graphic illustration inside of a box.

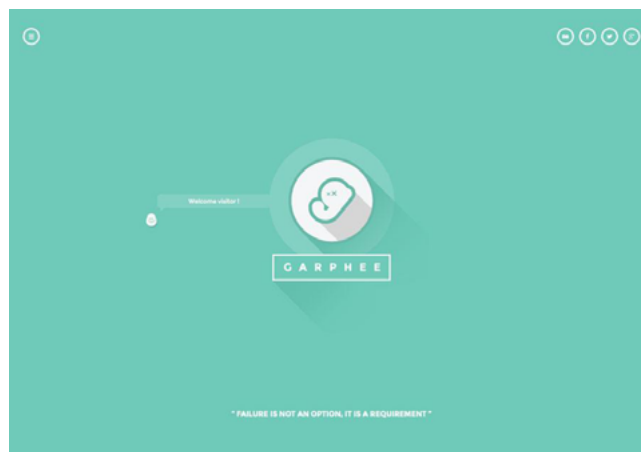


Photo credits: <http://www.razvangofoeanu.com/#the-g>

The shadow is often wide and positioned at a 45-degree angle with hard edges that are easy to identify. Applied in moderation, long shadows add depth and emphasis to otherwise flat elements.

However, this long shadow trend is lately starting to fade away in favor of subtler shadows. Keep an eye out for shorter shadows in the future.

2. Bright Color Palettes

One of the more fun things that has come from flat design is a re-emergence of color, specifically bright and bold color. Designers are using fun, vibrant hues in more ways than ever before.

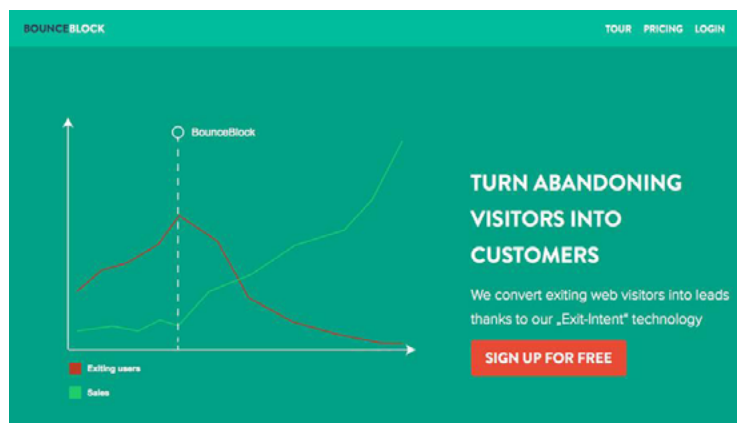


Photo credits: <http://www.bounceblock.com/>

In fact, some designers have even created a [set of websites](#) of their own devoted to these visual patterns.

3. Simple Typography

[Flat typography](#) is not just the use of Helvetica.

Rather, it is the idea of a typeface that is simple and easy to read, which means commonly sans serif and contains a uniform stroke width. What's great about flat typography is that it really brought the focus on lettering back into the reading experience.

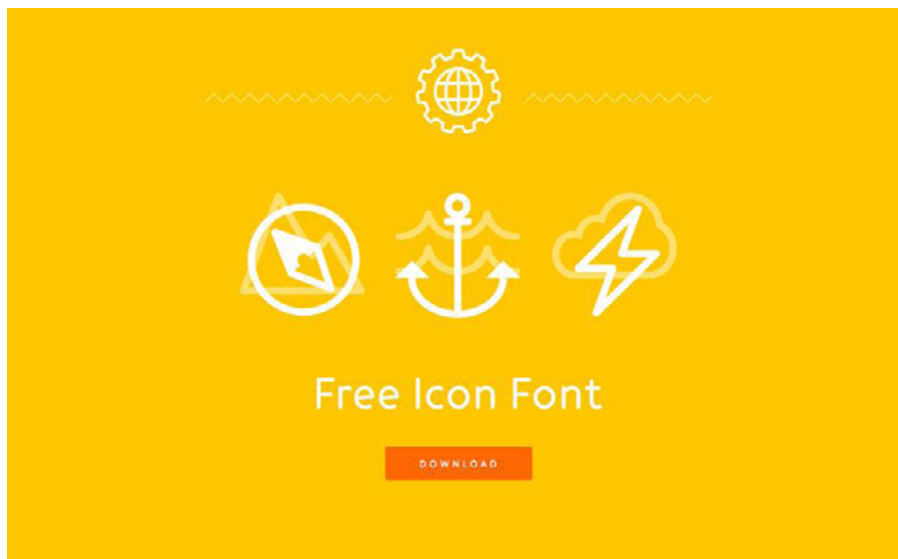


Photo credits: <http://icon-works.com/>

While type is an artform in itself, the purpose for most designers is to create something that users can read. Flat typography encourages designers to think more carefully about any and all type selections. Even serif typefaces have evolved with simpler letterforms becoming the norm.

4. Ghost Buttons

Designed as a transparent, yet clickable, element, ghost buttons provide a visual interaction cue without obstructing the UI design.

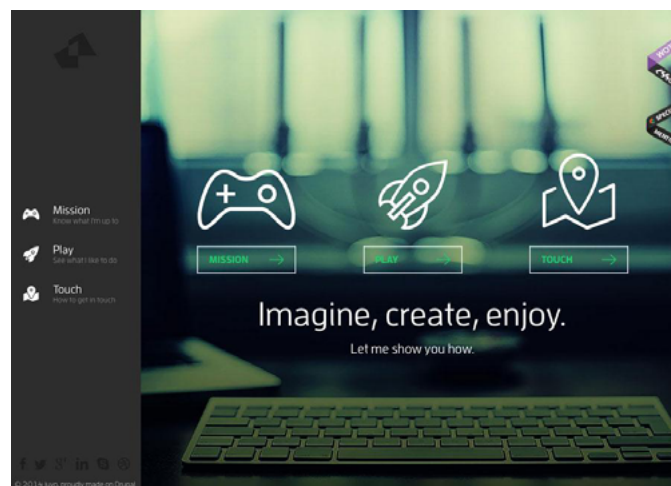


Photo credits: <http://www.iuvo.si/>

Because a [ghost button](#) is essentially an outline and does not look like an obvious button, it allows the background to share the focus. The ghost button first emerged against design patterns with high-color backgrounds, and has since evolved to work with images and a number of other elements. These simple buttons often include crisp typography that fits the flat aesthetic, which works particularly well when paired with minimalism.

5. Minimalism

Flat design is innately minimal. After all, when the design isn't meant to resemble a real-life counterpart (e.g., a notebook app looking like a notebook), you strip away a lot of extraneous texture.

All that's left is the content framed by colors, gradients, shadows, shapes, and other visual subtleties. Flat design, in essence, forces designers to be more creative by saying less – designing [from the content outward](#), instead of fitting the content inside of a photo-realistic framework.

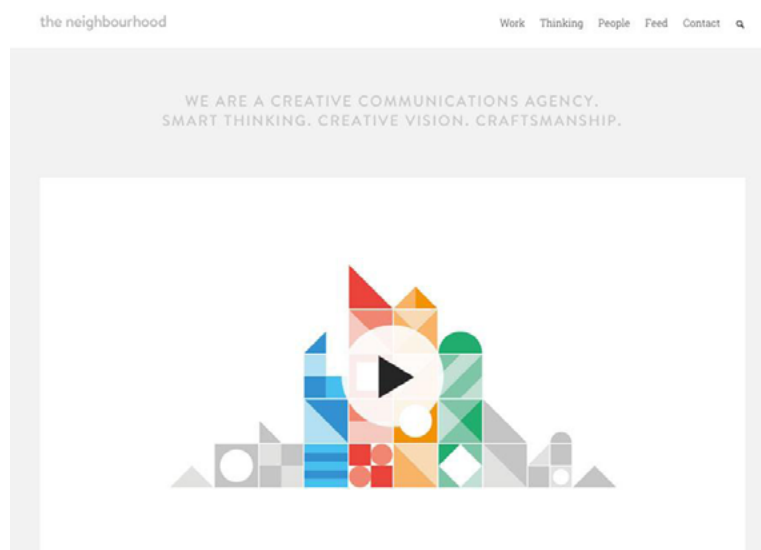


Photo credits: <http://www.the-neighbourhood.com/>

The concept of minimalism isn't new, but it's become popular recently for its clean aesthetic and site performance benefits (such as reduction in page load times). This rebirth started with flat design and the use of a bright-colored background with a simple design and evolved into a more simple design surrounded by plenty of white space.

Thinking Beyond the Present

The earliest flat design concepts fit into a very distinct box that was clearly identifiable and lacked many characteristics of other trends or design concepts. But that's changing rapidly as designers are mixing flat concepts with other trendy interfaces and design languages.

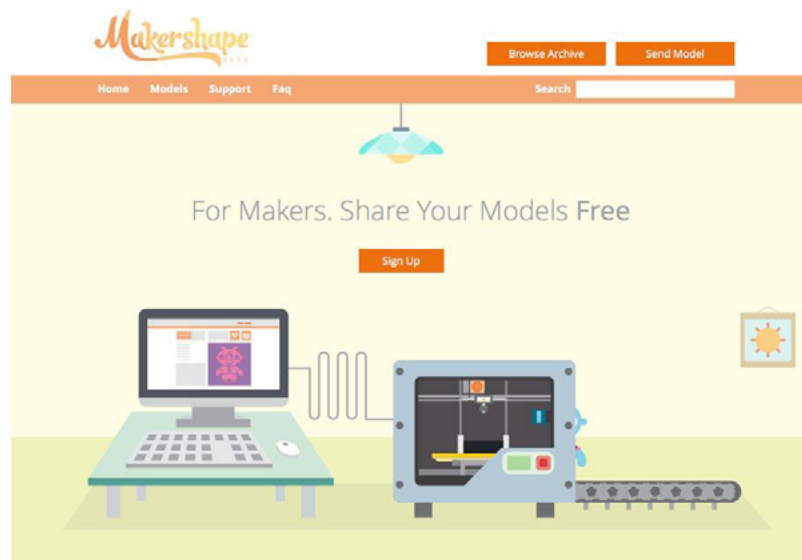


Photo credits: <http://www.makershape.com/en/>

While flat design seemed to almost take the design community overnight, it's certainly taken some time to evolve. Early showcases of flat design were incredibly flat with a desire to lose all of the skin of

the previous [skeumorphic era](#), but today's flat design is starting to include more touches of flair and ornamentation (and not just for the sake of aesthetics).

Enter “Almost Flat” or “[Flat 2.0](#),” (also known as almost-flat) as coined by designer Ryan Allen.

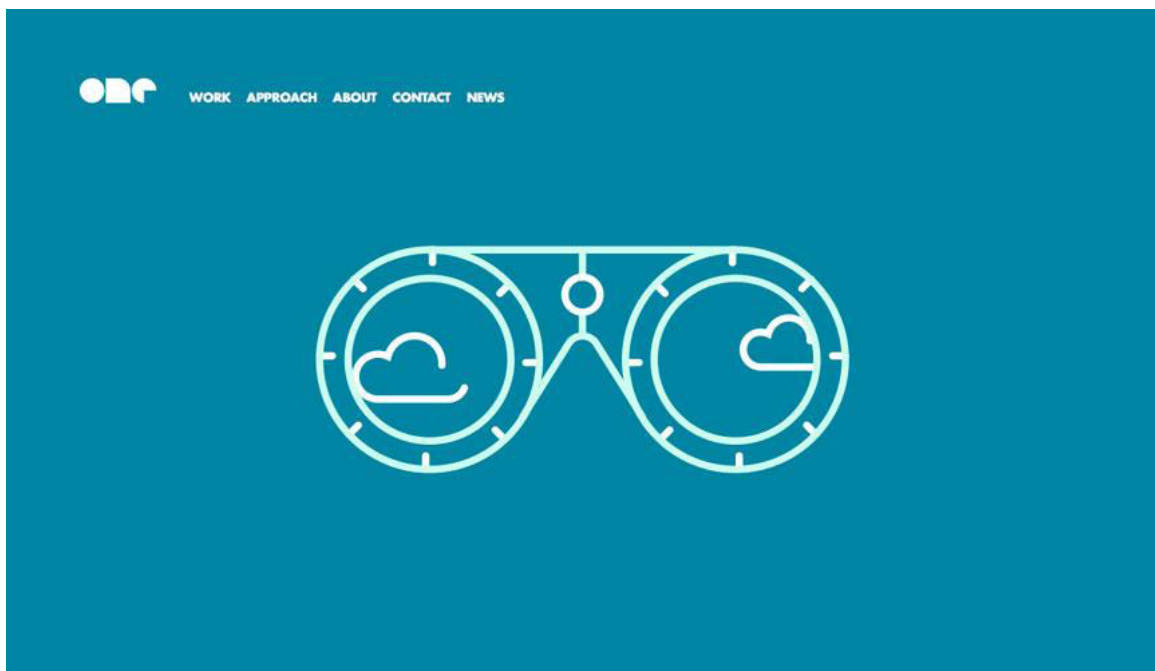


Photo credits: <http://onedesigncompany.com/>

Some of the most beautiful examples of almost-flat design work within the scope of websites that use [parallax scrolling](#) to help users navigate from idea to idea one “screen” at a time.

Canal TP does a great job of mixing concepts in an almost-flat aesthetic that uses simple features such as type and color with animation and parallax scrolling. This mix of design tactics helps remove some of the over-simplicity of flat design to make it more practical and usable for sites with more complex content.

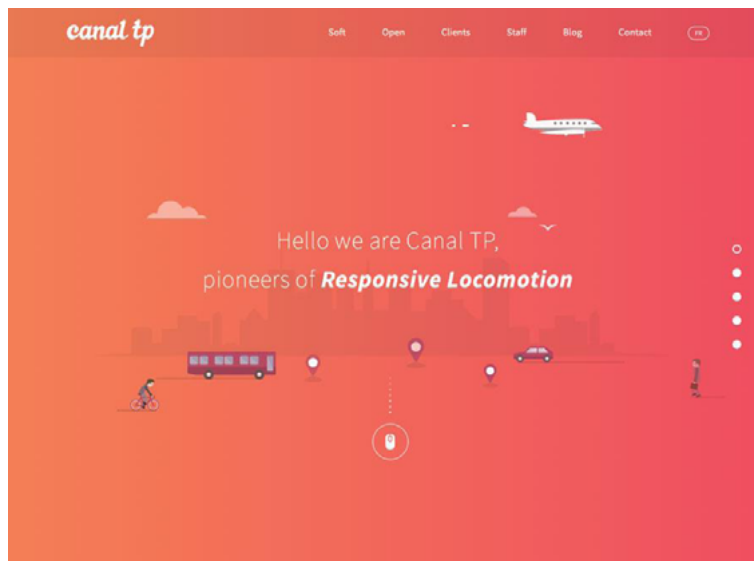


Photo credits: <http://www.canaltp.fr/>

In the future, flat design won't die, it will just become more advanced as new animations and interactions help it adapt to content-heavy sites. We know that content-first design is gaining traction (as it rightfully should), and flat design is the perfect canvas for its expression.

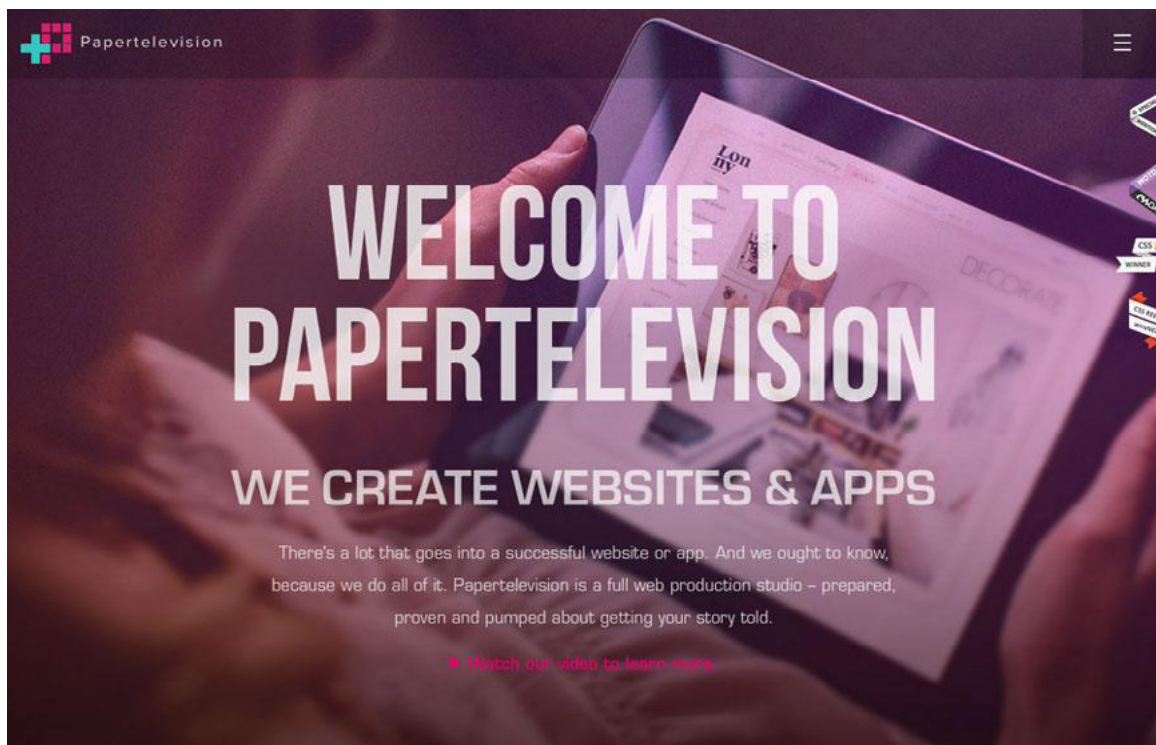


Photo credits: <http://www.papertelevision.com/>

Web design is following a reliable track of usability; every button, click or tap needs a purpose and a clear visual cue so that users will act (and interact) with a website. More importantly, UI tools and elements need an almost universal visual, so that a user knows what to do regardless of device or page. These minute design elements will become even more streamlined in look and feel as designers refine flat design's icon aesthetic.

Just look at the emergence of the hamburger icon for collapsible navigation – whether you [agree with its use or not](#), there's no doubt that the simple set of lines now lives as a familiar symbol for across-the-board submenu interaction.



<http://www.emilianobarri.com/>

Flat will also continue to evolve to incorporate more images.

Many of the flat or almost flat sites hitting the web today include photos, something very few early flat sites had. Flat-style colors and typography paired with great images reflect hints of a flat aesthetic

that is comfortable with itself – it doesn't need to replace photos with clever icons purely for the sake of looking creatively modern.

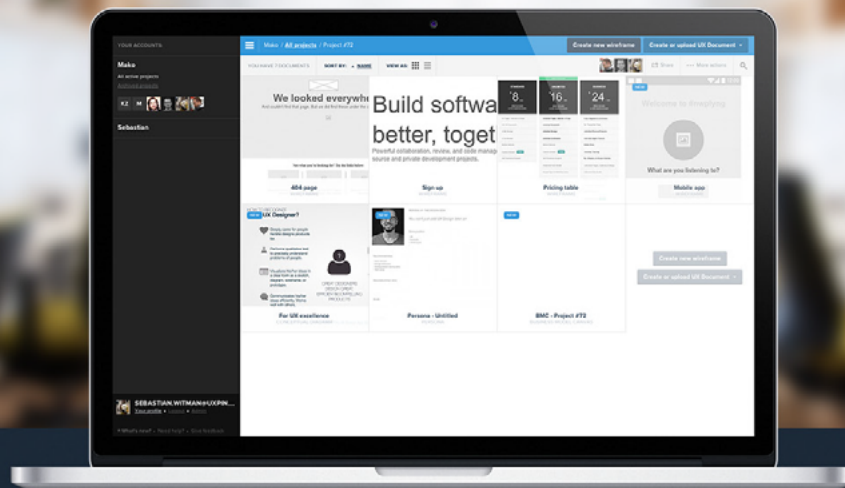
For example, the almost-flat style for Emiliano Barri, above, uses depth and images for the main visual in concert with flat elements, navigation and typography. The result is a visual hybrid that is simple, modern, and very usable.

As designer Wells Riley suggests, remember to always look at your design [through the lens of usefulness and usability](#). Aesthetics are just another tool in design, whose real purpose is solving user problems.

Conclusion

Flat design is not an all-or-nothing practice. It's individual components can be used as well on their own as they can part of the greater system. Flat design lends itself to merging and complementing other methods, so flat hybrids are not only feasible, they're sometimes recommended (for example, a site with too much content to fit in a traditional flat design scheme).

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