

THE NATURE OF DESIGN: THE HUMAN TOUCH

by richard dowdy

All creatures that exist in our world, including humans, are of a design, as are plants and minerals, down to the most miniscule particles of matter. Nature’s design is one of function.

We, on the other hand, can create designs that are purely decorative, without a designated function, that produce emotional and intellectual reactions. The concept that form follows function is a principle of architecture and industrial design. In many ways, form following function is an inherent building block of nature. The same concept is also found in graphic design, and with the talent and intelligence borne by natural ability and training, a skilled designer can create meaningful and lasting work that speaks effectively to its audience.

A human body has more than 74 trillion cells—but how does their design correlate to their role in our existence? Each cell has a specific duty that together makes us what we are, how we act, react and ultimately, live and breathe. Simply put, it is the Grand Design and we are stardust.

The concept of a Grand Design in nature is based upon the theory that complex organisms have evolved through evolutionary trial and error. The same corollary can be tailored to express the graphic designer’s trail to a completed design through similar trial and error. A designer’s toolbox parallels nature, with many of the same basic principles: symmetry, pattern, texture, contrast, color and repetition among them. A graphic designer makes instinctive or deliberate creative choices based upon education, environment, attitude and intelligence, which form definite relationships.

Ultimately, a designer’s work is the result of many facets, combining cultural influences, artistic ability and intellectual decisions. Though graphic design may mirror nature, it is the human touch we apply that makes it unique.



Repetition/Overlapping

The use of recurring elements and styles to create visual consistency is known as repetition. When repetitive objects are overlapped, a sense of depth can be achieved.



Positive/Negative Space

When foreground and background are in balance, an optical illusion can result, as positive and negative elements vie for prominence. Positive space is where shapes and forms exist; negative space is the empty space around shapes and forms.



Focal Point

The location in a design to which other elements draw attention is the focal point. When multiple design items are used, a focal point is the first step in creating an organizational design hierarchy.



Texture

The feeling and consistency of the surface of an object in nature defines texture, which is described by qualities such as soft, rough or smooth. In design it is achieved through purely visual elements like color and pattern or by choice of paper or printed surface.



Pattern

Objects or visual motifs that repeat at consistent intervals form a pattern. Designers often use patterns as a background element to generate visual interest.



Detail

When visual emphasis is focused on a part to create clarity and show distinctive facets, detail is revealed. Detail not only imbues an element with importance, but also helps reveal its qualities over simpler areas in the design.



Symmetry

The occurrence of mirrored, identical features along a central axis is known as symmetry. It is the simplest and most fundamental way of achieving balance in a design.



Symbol

A symbol is an abstract shape or mark that represents an idea or concept. The worth of a symbol is drawn from a common understanding of the mark's meaning amongst large groups of people.



Color

In nature, color is determined by the hue of light reflected by an object. In design, a color is chosen by its immense capacity to create mood and feeling.



Fibonacci numbers

A mathematical sequence known as nature's numbering system, can be seen as a pattern of growth: from the petals on a flower, to the spirals of a shell. Likewise, designers must consider mathematical principles to ensure cohesiveness in their work.



Contrast

Determined by the visual difference between two elements, drastic contrast can be created by altering color, size and shape. In design, contrast is often a focal point.



Originality

An object is original when it contains qualities that set it apart from others that exist or have come before. Originality in design is innovative; in nature it means that any given object is truly unique.



The Human Touch

In the digital age, graphic design has progressed to where computers and software can virtually take the pencil from the artist's hand and do much of the work. We must never lose sight of the importance of the human element—either through the inherent talent and expertise of the artist or the interaction between designers and client. Like the pencil, pen and brush, the computer is a tool. However, we must not lose sight of the one element that can never be replaced—the human touch.