

Design Language

**“The beginning of wisdom is to
call things by their right names.”**

– Chinese Proverb

Design Language

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Introduction



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Design is essentially a private, idiosyncratic affair. Any attempt to write about design must understand that information is never truly meaningful until it has been creatively put to use. But we work in a world of interaction—between teachers and students, between artists and clients, and with our fellow designers. We need to communicate, and in some contexts our ideas are only as good as our ability to share them with others.

In the following pages you'll find reflections on the principles of design as revealed through conventional terminology. The alphabetical listing of 100 keywords provides a familiar, non-hierarchical organization that allows you to move into and around the book. Passages are brief and subjective, using dictionary extracts, etymology and a quotation from literature as tangent points. Each entry includes a list of associated keywords that encourage you to navigate from one idea to the next. This is not a picture book, but you should use it in conjunction with lots of picture books. And trips to the beach, the woods and the circus.

Design Language is a tool made of paper. Like other tools, it will function best when it's been modified to suit your needs, so make notes in the margins, add to the lists, and bend a few pages.

Abstract

abstract (AB-strakt)

- 1 Considered apart from concrete existence
- 2 Not applied or practical; theoretical
- 3 Impersonal, as in attitude or views
- 4 Having an intellectual and affective artistic content that depends solely on intrinsic form rather than on narrative content or pictorial representation
- 5 To take away; remove
- 6 To summarize; epitomize. The concentrated essence of a larger whole

abstractus (Latin) = removed from (concrete reality)

Some people think abstract art means something weird looking; this is incorrect. Weird is easy, but abstract work springs from and must be responsive to, a physical reality.

A brief summary of a written treatise such as a dissertation is called an abstract. It is based on the real thing but is a more concise version, getting immediately at its essential character.

A dominant theme of all forms of art in the twentieth century is alienation. Humankind is seen as removed from Nature, out of touch with inner or animal needs, disconnected from social bonds and lacking a sense of continuity in time. Given all this, is it any wonder that abstract art is a central response?

Abstract art comes from spirit rather than from nature and in this sense abstract art is spiritual and uniquely human. Because abstraction is rooted in humanness as distinct from “American-ness” or “male-ness,” it complements the world unity found in technology and science. A color field painting, for instance, can speak outside the restrictions of language, culture and geography.

SEE:

Content
Distort
Fragment
Transformation

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something.”

– Pablo Picasso

Aesthetics

Aesthetics (asz THET iks)

1 The criticism of taste

2 The sense of the beautiful

3 Having a love of beauty

4 (plural) A branch of philosophy that provides a theory of beauty and the fine arts

aisthētikos (Greek) pertaining to sense perception

In common usage, this refers to the large and general sense of a person's taste. Preferences of color, form, content and scale add up to a person's aesthetic.

Taste, in contrast to aesthetics, is a more superficial description of preferences in art. It generally informs the larger issues, but is a more intuitive, sensual response. Aesthetics, while primarily related to sensory perception, can be trained and informed through intellectual processes such as instruction, dialogue and study.

There is an element of culture and experience in aesthetics. While it is probably true that people all over the world equally enjoy a sunset or a bouquet of flowers, we have different ideas about what tastes good, sounds pleasant, and functions best.

“Written truth is four-dimensional. If we consult it at the wrong time, or read it at the wrong pace, it is as empty and shapeless as a dress on a hook”

– Robert Grudin

SEE:

Abstract	Innovation
Beauty	Originality
Concrete	Synesthesia
Dialogue	Unity
Gestalt	

Anthropomorphic

Anthropomorphic (an-thro-po-MOR-fik)

1 The attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena

(Greek) **anthro** (humankind) + **morph** (form) = of human form. **Biomorphic** is a similar term, but is more general and refers to anything living

Sometimes designers and artists purposely give human characteristics to their forms, making them angry, soothing, terrifying, and so on. Other times these qualities might be brought by a viewer, who unwittingly wants a work to resemble something familiar.

“Attitude” is a slang term that often conveys a similar notion. I might say, for instance, that a football is a basketball with an attitude. A designer might purposely give an object a reference to a specific attribute, either for humor or satire. A chair, for instance, might be given a form that seems to slouch back on itself, reminding us of a person reclining.

“The worlds about us would be desolate except for the worlds within us.”

– Wallace Stevens

SEE:

Abstract
Content
Ergonomics
Motion

Anticipation

Anticipation (an tis e PAY shun)

1 Expectation

2 Foreknowledge, presentiment, intuition

antecipere (Latin) = to take before

“The traveler sees what he sees, the tourist sees what he has come to see.”

– Gilbert K. Chesterton

Anticipation often includes pleasant anxiety, the feeling that something is about to happen. In this context, we anticipate a holiday, a party, or a recommended movie. Visually this is related to completion, the tendency of humans to perceive a larger, more harmonious whole. Through anticipation we “fill the blanks” with information that most satisfies or resolves our immediate need. The pleasure is in satisfying; anticipation allows us to prepare for that pleasure and enjoy the resolution.

Because of the way we have been taught to read, our eyes sweep across a page or a picture from left to right. As we scan, we anticipate reaching the end of a line and jumping to the left to start the next. Because of this we rush past or fail to see elements along the right margin. People who read in other directions have different voids.

We’ve all had occasions when a long-awaited event was less enjoyable than the anticipation. It seems correct that artists, who are, after all, in the business of looking, should help people look ahead.

SEE:

Completion
Dynamic
Emphasis
Gestalt
Integration
Order
Progression

Balance

Balance (BAL enez)

- 1 A weighing device consisting of a horizontal beam with pans of equal weight on each end
- 2 A stable state characterized by cancellation of all forces by equal opposing forces
- 3 A stable mental or psychological state
- 4 Equality of totals in the credit and debit sides of an account

(Latin) bi (double) + lanx (scale) =
having two scales

Our response to balance is intimately linked to our earliest childhood discoveries of our bodies. We instinctively value balance because it is necessary to stand, run, escape. From this primal physical reality we derive our general preference for balance in composition.

Except for brief moments on a roller coaster most people do not want to be off balance. Our sense of balance is so important, in fact, that it is one of the most delicate instruments of our skeletal system. Even a minor ear infection can distort our sense of balance so severely that we are unable to move.

«What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity... something like a good armchair.»

– Walt Kelly

In Taoist thought, balancing is the ultimate power and goal of the universe. The symbol for this is the familiar yin-yang, a circle divided into a black and white half, each side curving to penetrate and yield to the other.

Most of us need balance in the large issues of our lives, things like landscape, architecture, diet, and relationships. Perhaps we look to art and design in the same way we enjoy a roller coaster ride—an opportunity to temporarily suspend our sense of balance in a controlled situation. We know the ride will end, and we know we can turn away from the painting if the lack of stability becomes threatening.

The first requisite for balance is control. It is one thing to relinquish balance knowing you can achieve it again and quite another to be out of balance, adrift or askew.

The Navajo word “hoz-ro” is translated as both beauty and balance. A traditional greeting may be translated as “Go in beauty” or “Walk in balance.” This refers to the subtle relationships of man and nature, physical reality and spirit.

In music, balance might be analogous to a regular beat. While this makes an acceptable foundation upon which to build a melody, it has the possibility of becoming boring. Syncopation is one way to move beyond that.

SEE:

Contrast	Order
Duality	Resolution
Dynamic	Tension
Edge	Unity

Figure/Ground

Beauty

Beauty(byoo tee)

- 1 A pleasing quality associated with harmony form or color; excellence of craftsmanship, truthfulness, originality
- 2 Appearance or sound that arouses a strong, contemplative delight; loveliness
- 3 The feature that is most effective, gratifying or telling.

bellus (Latin) = pretty,
handsome,
fine

Though beauty is subjective and culturally influenced, there seem to be some near universal standards. Shrieking noises are not beautiful, cooing sounds almost always will be. A pattern of dots randomly sprinkled on a surface will probably not offend anyone (it is not ugly) but almost no one would call it beautiful. Rounded curvilinear forms are more likely to be considered beautiful than geometric forms.

Some historical periods have defined the artist's job as the creation of beauty. Others see the artist as capturing rather than creating beauty and others think the arts should be no more concerned with beauty than anything else.

Which is the opposite of beautiful – ugly or plain?

A thing is not beautiful because it is beautiful,
as the he-frog said to the she-frog, it is beautiful
because one likes it.»

– Bruno Munari

SEE:

Balance	Harmony
Confidence	Integrity
Contour	Resolution
Economy	Symmetry
Elegance	Unity

Boundary

Boundary (BOUN dree)

1 The outer limit, the edge of a shape, particularly as it stands in relation to an adjacent form or space

bodina (Latin) = limits; out of bounds means "past the limits"

“To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.”

– Elbert Hubbard

Boundaries separate a “this” from a “that,” and a “here” from a “there.” A frame around a picture separates the image from the space around it. The frame is a boundary.

The visual strength of a boundary depends on its contrast to adjacent elements. A gray frame on a gray wall will not separate a print from its environment as much as a gold frame, for instance.

The boundaries of a two-dimensional composition are established by the edges of the paper, page or canvas. Rather than specific boundaries like these, three-dimensional work activates a volume of space in its immediate vicinity. This intuitively provides a frame of reference. In order to be called a boundary, the space must be relevant to an observer.

We set boundaries in our personal lives to help us control our relationships, jobs, fears and hopes. These boundaries are usually changeable, like sticks we poke in the ground to mark out a playing field.

SEE:

Closure	Figure/Ground
Contrast	Intersection
Composition	Shape
Edge	Tension
	Center

Center

Center (SEN ter)

- 1 **A point equidistant or at an average distance from all points on the outer boundaries**
- 2 **The middle**
- 3 **A point around which something revolves; axis**
- 4 **The part of an object that is surrounded by the rest; core**
- 5 **A place of concentrated activity or influence**
- 6 **A person or object that is the chief object of attention, interest or emotion**
- 7 **The ring circling a bull's eye of a target; a shot within this ring**

kentron (Greek) = sharp point, stationary point of a compass

SEE:

Balance	Pattern
Composition	Sentiment
Economy	Structure
Figure/Ground	Tension
Grid	Unity
Order	Closure

In the traditional “rules” of conventional Western design, the center is considered a static location, and therefore something to be avoided. In other cultural traditions the center is possessed of great power, as for instance in a mandala.

The center of gravity is not necessarily the visual center. It is the specific relationship between an object’s center of gravity and the center of the earth that constitutes stability. This is clearly illustrated in architecture, wrestling or dance.

Clay must be centered on the potter’s wheel before it can be controlled. This is also true of lathe turning. A gearwheel is generally required to be centered, but there are instances where it is precisely the eccentricity that makes it work.

When a person is stable, balanced, and free of stress we call him or her centered. This is the goal of meditation, yoga, t’ai chi and other personal therapies. Eccentric (off center), as applied to personalities, means colorful, unusual, and therefore interesting.

A familiar danger in drawing is to locate early marks dead center on the page, Creating a visual land emotional gravity that is hard to escape. There’s not much happening at the center of a seesaw.

“Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.”

– Kahlil Gibran

Closure

Closure (CLO zher)

- 1 The act of closing or the condition of being closed
- 2 Something that closes or shuts
- 3 A finish; conclusion

clausus (Latin) = enclosed

We have an innate desire to make sense of what we see, and often start by distinguishing “inside” as distinct from “outside”. To achieve this we anticipate and complete a form. By allowing the viewer to complete a form, an artwork establishes a link with the viewer, who becomes part of the process.

() We are more likely to read this form as a circle than as two arcs. The enclosed circle is then assigned a contrasting property, for instance, it is “whiter than” or “closer than” other areas of the page. Like magnets, there is a minimum distance that can be bridged by most viewers. Most people will have trouble “closing” this circle (—).

In relationships we seek an ending (preferably a happy ending) and feel unrest when it doesn't happen. This is an example of our need for resolution. Closure is visual resolution.

“Silence can be an answer.”

– Cynthia Copeland Lewis

SEE:

Anticipation	Order
Gestalt	Pattern
Grid	Resolution
Group	Shape
Join	Unity
Linear	

Collaboration

Collaboration (ko lab e RAY shun)

1 A joint intellectual effort

2 Treasonable cooperation with an enemy

**(Latin) com (with) + laborare (work)
= work together**

To elaborate is to extend an idea; to co-laborate is to do so with partners.

In order for a collaboration to work well, dialogue must be precise throughout the design process. Definitions are clarified before the dialogue begins, with the understanding that the improved quality of the communication will justify time spent in getting the language clear at the outset.

In a sense all artwork is a collaboration between form, materials, workmanship, and content.

The candor essential to proper collaboration is a natural outgrowth of respect between parties. Respect for ideas mandates a level of clarity that does justice to the ideas being presented. If I respect your contribution to a project, I'll persevere until I fully understand what you're thinking. If I want your reaction to my ideas, I'll be certain I've described them accurately.

This kind of dialog, which is inevitable when collaborating with others, can be internalized when working alone. Each of us listens to many voices as we approach a design challenge and we should use the same guidelines of clarity, honesty, and intellectual rigor when we talk to ourselves.

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

– Louis Pasteur

SEE:

Content	Inspiration
Dialogue	Parameters
Dynamic	Sentiment
Emphasis	Symbols
Fragment	Transformation
Icon	

Collage

Collage (kol LAJ)

1 An artistic composition of materials and objects pasted over a surface, often with unifying lines and color

coller (French) = to paste

The collage process provides a quick way to explore issues of composition, figure/ground edges, colors and values. Its temporary arrangements are useful to examine the effects of one element upon those around it.

Sometimes the word includes the notion of randomness. Early collage artists dropped pieces of torn paper and glued them to a larger sheet in exactly the pattern in which they fell.

O. B. Hardison, Jr. makes the point that collage is a fitting art form for a culture like ours, in which images flit across our TV screens and sounds of Muzak and traffic collide all around us.

Collage is frequently used as a verb, referring to the process of arranging and overlapping various parts to create a more powerful effect than these elements have as separate units.

“The heart has eyes which
the brain knows nothing of.”

– Charles H. Perkhurst

SEE:

Balance	Fragment
Composition	Rhythm
Compression	Scale
Contour	Space
Contrast	Structure
Economy	Unity
Figure/Ground	Value

Composition

Composition (kom po ZISH shun)

Though composition requires parts, it cannot be considered except as a whole. Composition is to elements as ingredients are to a recipe. You can't make cookies without flour, butter and sugar, but having those ingredients poured into a bowl is a whole lot different than cookies.

Gestalt psychology as applied to visual phenomena identified the fact that humans see the whole before we see the parts. This would suggest that we have a natural tendency toward completeness or harmony.

There are rules of composition just as there are rules of language. In both cases, these are only useful as starting points. The difference between language (which communicates) and gibberish (which does not) is an adherence to fundamental rules. Conventional spelling, pronunciation, grammar and structure do not make communication good—they only make it possible.

Similarly, in visual language, following rules of composition should be seen as a stepping off point, a minimum standard. Here are a few of the rules of composition:

- avoid placement at dead center
- symmetry tends to promote stability
- diagonals are more active than horizontals
- proximity creates tension
- sameness is frequently boring
- regularity creates rhythm
- contrast exaggerates an effect
- placement in corners creates awkward tension
- arches support weight, inverted arches imply weight
- equal amounts of figure and ground confuse the eye

1 A putting together of parts or elements to form a whole; a combining

2 A short essay; especially one written as a school exercise

3 A settlement by mutual agreement; compromise

The etymological stream traces back to the Latin words *com*, "with," and *ponere*, "to place," which gives us *compound* and *expound*. A second thread leads back to *pose* or *pause*. In the Middle Ages these two words merged to create the sense of "Pause and consider in order to place."

"The arrangements we make are either pleasing or not pleasing. An explanation is not necessary."

– Kenneth Bates

SEE:

Anticipation	Confidence
Completion	Dynamic
Figure/Ground	Gestalt
Positive/Negative	Grid

Compression

Compression (kum PRESH un)

- 1 The actual or implied sense of forces pressing inward**
- 2 The engine cycle during which gas or vapors are compressed**

(Latin) com (together) + premere (to press) = to press together

Probably we relate to this because of the physical reality of our experience—we have all been squeezed into an over-packed car, or tucked tightly into bed. Our notions of compression are probably complex and mixed.

In the visual arts, compression can be used to pack energy into a composition. Like a jack in the box, loaded and ready to spring, a picture plane or sculptural space can be “loaded” with ingredients that press against each other to create an exciting energy.

Time is often compressed when we are enjoying ourselves. “Where did the time go?” Cinematically this is indicated by changing the speed, either a dazzling rush of lights zooming past us or a slow-motion effect to suggest that more than usual has been packed into that time.

In some cases compression is an attempt to concentrate as much as possible into a small space. Brandy was invented when ingenious Dutch merchants thought to get more wine across the English Channel in fewer boats by sending it as concentrate and reconstituting it at its destination. Turned out people enjoyed the concentrate.

“Living is an everyday business.
Coming to life is strange and beautiful.”

– Sister Judith Savard

SEE:

Anthropomorphic
Contrast
Dynamic
Fragment
Interval
Monumentality
Tension

Concrete (kon REET)

- 1 **Relating to an actual, specific thing or instance; not general**
- 2 **Existing in reality or in real experience; perceptible by the senses; real**
- 3 **Formed by the coalescence of separate particles or parts into one mass; solid**

concretus (Latin) = to grow together, harden

In addition to its idea of solid reality, the word concrete carries a suggestion of bluntness as well. Perhaps this is because of our shared experience of falling, at some time in our lives, on a concrete surface. Not only is this real (that could be said of a grassy hillside too); there is something aggressive about the solidness of concrete.

A concrete image can sometimes provide a valuable point of reference. In a world of ambivalence and contradictions, for instance, concrete advice is welcome. In a disorienting visual composition, a concrete element might provide a necessary anchor.

Concrete poetry is a blend of literary and visual communication. It relies on synesthesia to heighten its power as we simultaneously read words and see an image.

When we think of concrete we probably recall its final state—heavy, hard, and massive. We forget that it was once fluid and could register the imprint of whatever touched it.

Opposites: ethereal, vague, enigmatic.

“There is no wisdom like frankness.”

– Benjamin Disraeli

SEE:

Contrast
Density
Economy
Mass
Structure
Transformation
Weight

Confidence

Confidence (KON fi denz)

- 1 Trust in a person or thing
- 2 Something confided, such as a secret
- 3 A feeling of assurance or certainty, especially concerning oneself

confidere (Latin) = com [intensive] + fidere (to trust)

People present themselves through their walk, their stance, and their gestures. In the same way, a line, form or composition conveys confidence or lack of it. We learn about body language through experience. We see a basketball player stride onto the court, erect and relaxed, then watch him successfully play the game. We learn to associate the gestures with the result.

Confidence is not automatically the result of practice and experience, but it's hard to achieve without practice and experience. A lack of confidence can be a handicap. The same is true of an abundance.

One kind of confidence says "I can do this." Another says, "If I can't do this now, I have the ability to learn."

Pride goes before a fall. But without pride you might not be on your feet in the first place.

"They are able because they think they are able."

– Vergil

SEE:

Anthropomorphic
Dialogue
Dynamic
Resolution
Unity

Content

Content (KON tent)

- 1 That which is contained in a receptacle
- 2 Subject matter, as of a speech or document
- 3 The meaning or significance of a literary or artistic work, as distinguished from its form
- 4 Ability to receive and hold; capacity

contentus (Latin) = to contain

This broad term refers to the message, narrative, meaning or subject of a work. The question often asked of artists, “Where do your ideas come from?” is probably referring to content.

At least in modern thinking, it is rare to describe any content as “inappropriate” for an artist. This shifts emphasis to the accuracy and power of what is being conveyed. Whatever you say, say it with clarity and passion in a way that will have the most effective result.

We use the word “contents” to describe what’s inside, as in the contents of a box or the Table of Contents at the beginning of a book.

SEE:

Collaboration	Sentiment
Confidence	Structure
Dialogue	Symbol
Hierarchy	Synesthesia
Icon	

“The truth is more important than the facts.”
– Frank Lloyd Wright