

Design Foundations

Building Blocks of Creativity

Elements, Principles, and Why They Are Not Decoration



INSTRUCTOR

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SESSION 1

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

01

Distinguish between **design elements** and design principles

02

Define and recognize five core elements: line, shape, space, texture, and value

03

Identify and apply seven principles: balance, contrast, emphasis, alignment, repetition, unity, and scale

04

Connect specific visual choices to marketing and brand outcomes

05

Evaluate real campaign examples using **design vocabulary**

Why Design Matters in Marketing

"Design is not about making things look good. It is about making communication work."

- First impressions form in fractions of a second. Visual structure drives them before copy is even read.
- Higher aesthetic quality increases perceived credibility even when content is unchanged.

(Robins & Holmes, 2008; NNg)

- Marketing students approve campaigns and interpret performance. Design literacy is a professional skill.

PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

The degree to which an audience judges a source or brand as trustworthy based on available cues, including visual design.

AESTHETIC-USABILITY EFFECT

The tendency to perceive more aesthetically designed interfaces as easier to use, even before interacting with them.



What brands do you trust on sight, before you read anything?

Design as a Language

THE VOCABULARY

Elements

The visible raw materials of design

- 01 Line
- 02 Shape
- 03 Space / Negative Space
- 04 Texture
- 05 Value

THE GRAMMAR

Principles

The organizing logic that makes elements work

- 01 Balance
- 02 Contrast
- 03 Emphasis
- 04 Alignment
- 05 Repetition / Rhythm
- 06 Unity
- 07 Scale / Proportion



VISUAL HIERARCHY

The arrangement of design elements so some parts are perceived before others, guiding the viewer's attention in a deliberate sequence.

Elements + Principles: Three Analogies



Food

Elements are the ingredients: flour, salt, sugar, oil.

Principles are the recipe logic: what gets emphasized, balanced, repeated, contrasted.

Strong ingredients plus a bad recipe is still bad.



Architecture

Elements are bricks, beams, glass, and empty space.

Principles are the structural rules: stability, flow, and focal points.

Beautiful materials do not make a stable structure.



Language

Elements are vocabulary: the words themselves.

Principles are syntax: the rules that make sentences clear.

Know every word. Still write a confusing sentence.

SECTION 1

The Elements

The visible raw materials of design

Line · Shape · Space / Negative Space · Texture · Value

Line

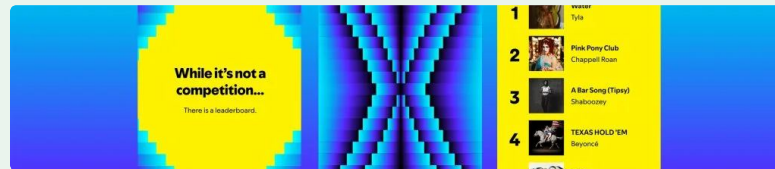
- A visible path: straight, curved, thick, thin, sharp, hand-drawn, or implied
- Controls eye movement, pace, mood, and attention flow
- Can create urgency, precision, softness, disruption, or confidence depending on its quality
- In branding, line can become a signature device recognizable across packaging, social, ads, and environments

ATTENTION FLOW

The sequence in which a viewer's eye moves through a composition.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Spotify Wrapped 2024

Tubular, looping ribbon-like lines create kinetic energy and motion across shareable assets.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



London 2012 Olympics Logo (Wolff Olins)

Jagged, fractured line energy created visual irritation rather than invitation.

Shape

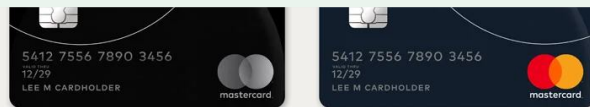
- A visible form with a boundary: geometric, organic, symmetrical, or irregular
- Helps viewers categorize what they see before they read anything
- Circles suggest inclusivity. Rectangles suggest stability. Organic shapes suggest the human or expressive.
- Repeated shapes become memory cues: the shortcut to brand recognition

BRAND RECOGNITION

The ability of an audience to identify a brand from its visual cues alone, including shape, color, and form, without needing to read the name.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Mastercard 2016 (Pentagram)

Two overlapping circles, simplified to pure geometry. 81% spontaneous recognition without a wordmark.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Gap 2010

Tiny gradient box felt generic and unanchored. Reversed within one week after public backlash.

Think Like a Marketer

You are the marketing director for a new premium coffee brand. Your designer presents two directions: one with sharp, angular forms, the other with smooth, rounded curves, using the same typeface and color palette. Your target customer wants quality, warmth, and ritual. Which direction do you recommend, and how would you justify it using design language?

Think Like a Marketer

Rounded, flowing curves align with warmth and ritual; angular shapes signal energy or precision, which fits technology or sports but conflicts with comfort. Justify the formal choice by what the audience expects to feel, not what the designer prefers. Credit responses that name the emotional quality the shape communicates.

Space / Negative Space

- The area around, between, and within visual elements
- Empty space is not wasted space. It separates, groups, clarifies, and creates breathing room.
- Crowded layouts feel frantic or cheap. Spacious layouts signal premium quality.
- Negative space is always active. It can form a secondary meaning whether designed intentionally or not.

NEGATIVE SPACE

The "empty" area that helps important parts stand out, relate, or form a secondary meaning.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

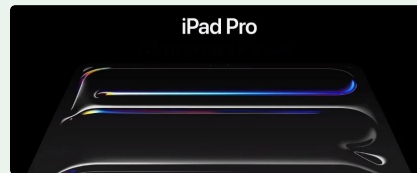
• GOOD EXAMPLE



FedEx Logo

Hidden arrow in negative space, not drawn but perceived.

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Apple Product Pages

Space around hero images makes products feel premium.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Tropicana 2009

Removed shelf cues. Consumers couldn't differentiate. Pulled within weeks.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Office of Government Commerce, 2008

Negative space created an unintended secondary image when rotated.

ACTIVITY

🕒 5–6 minutes • Pair-and-share

What's Doing the Work?

- 1 Look at the brand example on screen (FedEx, Mastercard, Tropicana, or Spotify Wrapped)
- 2 Identify which element is most active: **line, shape, space, texture, or value?**
- 3 Be ready to say: what would change if that element were removed or weakened?



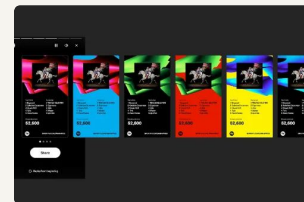
FedEx



Mastercard 2016



Tropicana 2009



Spotify Wrapped 2024

"Name the element doing the most work: explain what the design would lose without it."

Texture

- The visual suggestion of how something might feel: grain, fabric, hand-drawn lines, or smooth surfaces
- Signals craft, naturalness, playfulness, heritage, indulgence, or premium quality
- Marketing communicates qualities people can't physically touch. Texture becomes a sensory proxy.

DISCUSSION

Which brand you interact with most feels the most "handmade"? Why?

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

GOOD EXAMPLE



Chobani Creations 2023

Illustrated ingredients and swash-like forms reflect the same craft as the food itself.

GOOD EXAMPLE



Mailchimp (COLLINS)

Hand-drawn, imperfect illustration makes a software brand feel approachable in a category of polished sameness.

CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Apple "Crush" 2024

Flattened, textureless surfaces stripped the tactile qualities the ad was destroying, which read as cold rather than clever.

Value

- How light or dark something appears: not color itself, but the contrast between brightness and shadow
- Creates depth, focus, readability, and drama. Weak value structure produces muddy, unreadable results.
- Minimum contrast ratios matter for accessibility. W3C specifies 4.5:1 for standard body text.
- Billboards, shelf, and fast-scrolling digital contexts all depend on strong value contrast for legibility at speed.



QUICK TEST

GRAYSCALE TEST

If the design still communicates clearly when all color is removed, the value structure is doing its job.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Apple iPod Silhouette Campaign

Black silhouettes on saturated grounds: maximum contrast, instantly legible at speed and distance.

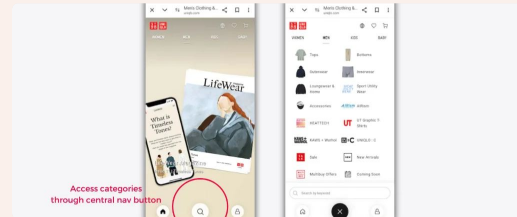
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Apple "Shot on iPhone"

Strong light-dark photography does the persuasive work without added design clutter.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



UNIQLO 2024 Redesign

Low value separation between interface layers left navigation and editorial competing at the same brightness.

SECTION 2

The Principles

Organizing logic: the grammar that makes elements work together

Balance · Contrast · Emphasis · Alignment · Repetition / Rhythm · Unity · Scale / Proportion

PRINCIPLE 1

Balance

- Distribution of visual weight so a composition feels intentional, not lopsided

Symmetrical

Mirror-image

Asymmetrical

Balanced + dynamic

Radial

From center point

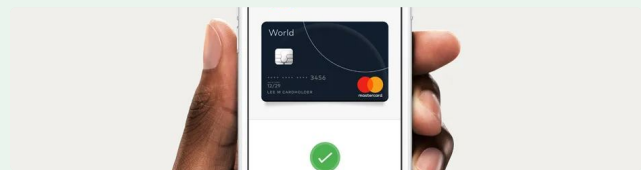
- Modern marketing favors asymmetrical balance: dynamism without chaos
- Balanced designs feel composed, credible, and easier to process
- Visual weight is not determined by physical size alone: darkness, isolation, and contrast can make a small element feel heavier than a large pale one.

VISUAL WEIGHT

The perceived heaviness of an element: determined by size, darkness, texture, density, and position, not literal mass.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Mastercard 2016

Two circles create a formally stable center of gravity while implying connection and motion.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Jaguar "Copy Nothing" 2024

Visual weight favored abstract fashion imagery over product anchoring: message destabilized.

Contrast

- The visible difference between things: light/dark, big/small, smooth/rough, simple/complex
- Without contrast, everything competes equally and nothing stands out
- Closely tied to emphasis, hierarchy, and accessibility
- Contrast is not only aesthetic. It determines who can use a design at all.

CONTRAST RATIO (W3C STANDARD)

A numerical measure of luminance difference between two colors. W3C requires minimum **4.5:1** for standard body text to meet accessibility standards.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

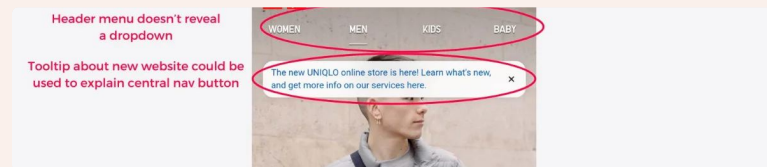
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Spotify Wrapped 2024

Bright grounds, dark type, aggressive formal differences: stops thumbs in fast-scrolling contexts.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



UNIQLO 2024 Redesign

Contrast between navigation and editorial too weak: "a serious accessibility miss." (Fresh Egg)

Think Like a Marketer

A food startup's granola packaging has a busy background, text in multiple colors, and the brand name in a small script font in the corner. After one month, shelf pickup is below forecast. A designer recommends removing 60% of visual elements and doubling whitespace around the brand name. What is your recommendation, and which design principles support it?

Think Like a Marketer

The design breaks contrast, emphasis, space, and balance simultaneously: no dominant element, brand name buried, crowding signals cheap, too many competing visual weights. Reduction is a strategic decision, not an aesthetic one. Credit responses that name specific principles rather than simply saying the design looks cleaner.

Emphasis

- The deliberate act of making one thing stand out as the focal point
- Created through: size, space, contrast, placement, texture, and value
- Without emphasis, viewers have to guess what to look at first, and they often don't bother
- Whatever a viewer sees first becomes the de facto focal point, so the real question is whether that was your intention.

FOCAL POINT

The single element a viewer's eye is most strongly drawn to first: created through deliberate use of size, contrast, placement, or space.

QUICK TEST

THE ONE-SECOND TEST

When I glance for one second: what do I notice first? And is that the right thing?

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

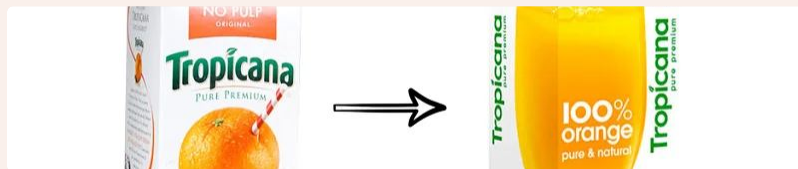
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Apple "Shot on iPhone"

The image is the message. Emphasis lands on photographic proof, not product claims.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Tropicana 2009

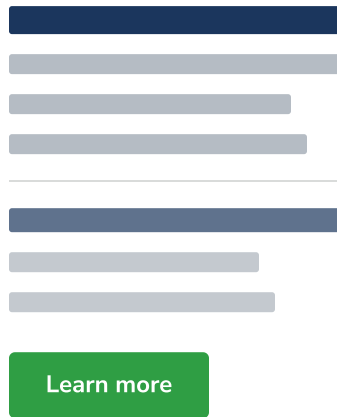
De-emphasized the most useful shelf cue (orange with straw). Consumers couldn't find their variety. Sales dropped.

Alignment

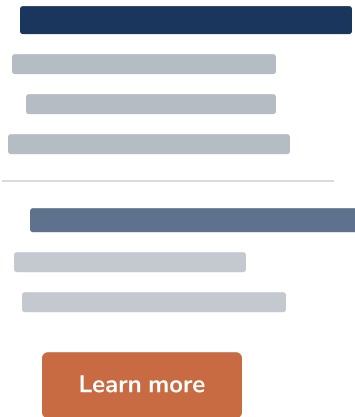
- Placing elements so they line up in a deliberate, orderly relationship
- Good alignment is often invisible. It simply makes work feel clean and intentional.
- Poor alignment creates subtle friction even when viewers can't fully explain what feels off
- One of the fastest visual markers of professionalism

ALIGNMENT IN ACTION · CLASSROOM DEMO

ALIGNED



MISALIGNED



Examples: Apple Product Pages (aligned) · UNIQLO 2024 · Sonos App 2024 (misaligned)

Repetition / Rhythm

- Repetition: using the same visual features more than once. Rhythm: the pattern or pace it creates as the eye moves.
- In branding, repetition is how separate assets still feel like one brand across touchpoints

TOUCHPOINTS

Every moment a customer interacts with a brand: packaging, ads, websites, social, storefronts, uniforms, service.

BRAND EQUITY

The commercial and perceptual value a brand holds based on recognition, trust, and associations built over time.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Spotify Wrapped 2024

Repeated line motifs and compositional energy make dozens of distinct assets feel like one campaign.

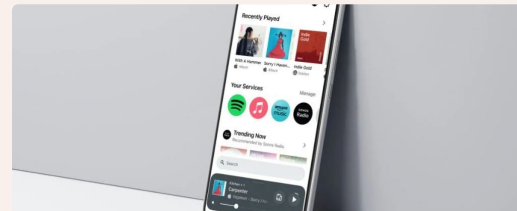
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Oatly (Forsman & Bodenfors)

Bold, repeated brand voice and layout logic makes the carton itself feel like an ad.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Sonos App 2024

The redesign broke repeated patterns users had learned, so familiar actions no longer appeared in familiar places.

Think Like a Marketer

A digital ad for a retail shoe brand has five messages at equal visual weight: "Free Shipping," "New Arrivals," "Sale Ends Sunday," "Shop Now," and "Join Our Loyalty Program." The marketing manager says all five are equally important priorities. Using emphasis, contrast, and alignment: what is the core design problem, and what would you recommend?

Think Like a Marketer

Five messages at equal weight means the viewer has no guided path. "Sale Ends Sunday" creates urgency; "Shop Now" drives the primary action; the others drop to secondary scale. The fix is establishing a clear first, second, and third tier of hierarchy.

PRINCIPLE 6

Unity

- The sense that all parts of a design belong together
- Unity does not mean sameness. It means recognizable belonging. Contrast and variation can coexist with unity.
- Consumers encounter sets of assets over time. Unity is what makes those sets feel like one brand.
- A coherent brand system is the practical output of unity: the documented rules that make consistent execution reproducible.

BRAND SYSTEM

The complete set of visual rules and components: logo, color, type, imagery, layout, that define how a brand looks across all touchpoints.

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

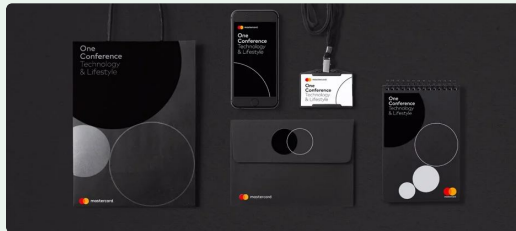
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Burger King 2021 (JKR)

Extended across packaging, menus, uniforms, and digital: a unified identity and experience.

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Mastercard 2016 (Pentagram)

Single brand system built from geometry and color as core tools: recognizable without the name.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Gap 2010

The new mark shared no visual logic with the existing brand system, so nothing about it felt like Gap.

PRINCIPLE 7

Scale / Proportion

- **Scale:** the size of something relative to the whole
- **Proportion:** the size relationship among parts
- Larger elements are typically perceived as more important. Scale controls dominance and visual hierarchy.
- Wrong proportion can distort value signals or destabilize legibility

QUICK TEST

SCALE QUICK TEST

What is biggest here, and why?

EXAMPLES IN THE WILD

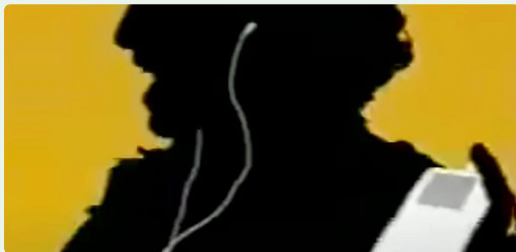
• GOOD EXAMPLE



Burger King 2021

Rounded forms scale from small packaging to large environmental graphics. Relationships stay readable at any size.

• GOOD EXAMPLE



Apple iPod Silhouette Campaign

Oversized device and earbuds relative to the human figure: the product symbol dominated memory.

• CAUTIONARY EXAMPLE



Tropicana 2009

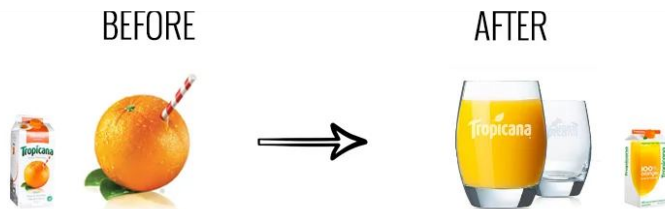
The relationship between logo size and flavor indicator changed, which removed the size cue shoppers used to find their variety.

When Systems Break vs. When They Hold

Most real-world design failures are system failures: multiple principles breaking at once

SYSTEM FAILURE

Tropicana 2009



- **SPACE:** No longer supported quick shelf identification
- **EMPHASIS:** Shifted away from the most recognizable cue
- **UNITY:** New design felt disconnected from heritage
- **PROPORTION:** Logo/flavor indicator relationship changed

Result: Consumer confusion, backlash, reversal within weeks

SYSTEM SUCCESS

Burger King 2021



- **SHAPE:** Made the brand feel edible
- **TEXTURE:** Made food feel less synthetic
- **REPETITION:** Drove recognition across all touchpoints
- **UNITY:** Extended across packaging, menus, uniforms, digital

Result: Industry recognition and coherent brand experience

Think Like a Marketer

A regional bank wants a major brand refresh: dark blue and serif type out, bright yellow, a geometric sans-serif, and hand-drawn illustrations in. The internal team is split between modernization and trust risk. Which formal choices carry the most risk, and what would you test before approving?

Think Like a Marketer

The highest-risk choices are shape (logo form carries years of financial trust), value (yellow creates legibility problems at small sizes), and texture (hand-drawn illustration may conflict with the seriousness the category requires). Test recognition with current customers in grayscale and on mobile. The Twitter-to-X rebrand is the reference warning: erasing built visual equity can cost more than any modernization gains.

When Everything Works Together

Spotify Wrapped 2024: every element and principle serving the same purpose simultaneously

SYSTEM SUCCESS

Spotify Wrapped 2024

[IMAGE — Spotify Wrapped 2024 key visual — Spotify Newsroom, December 2024]

- **LINE:** Ribbon-like forms guide the eye and create kinetic energy across shareable formats
- **VALUE:** Maximum contrast between saturated grounds and dark type ensures legibility at scroll speed
- **CONTRAST:** Aggressive formal differences stop thumbs in fast-scrolling social contexts
- **REPETITION:** Consistent motifs make dozens of distinct assets feel like one campaign
- **EMPHASIS:** Personal listening data as the hero drives immediate emotional recognition
- **UNITY:** Every formal choice serves one narrative: "your year in music"

Result: Turned individual listening data into a shareable cultural event

WHY THIS WORKS AS A TEACHING CASE

No single element or principle makes Wrapped successful. The campaign works because each formal decision reinforces every other. Remove the high-contrast value structure and the line energy loses its legibility. Remove the repetition and the campaign loses its coherence. These dependencies are the lesson.

SOURCES

Spotify Newsroom, December 2024

It's Nice That, December 2024

Four Patterns That Repeat

Across every case study in this session, the same lessons keep appearing

01

Good design creates clarity before decoration

Every successful example in this session, including FedEx, Mastercard, and Spotify Wrapped, solves a clarity problem before pursuing a visual one. Every failure added complexity without solving one.

02

Small visual decisions change perceived professionalism and trust

Alignment, value structure, and spacing signal credibility before a single word is read. These are not cosmetic choices. They are trust signals.

03

Principles rarely operate alone

Tropicana didn't fail because of one principle. It failed because space, emphasis, unity, and proportion all broke simultaneously. Success and failure are usually systemic.

04

Justify design decisions strategically, not just aesthetically

"It looks better" is not a professional argument. "This increases shelf retrieval" is. The vocabulary from this session exists to make that shift possible.

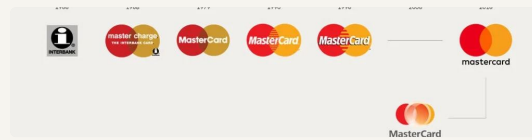
Brand Audit

- 1 Think of a brand you interact with regularly: any product, app, package, or retail environment
- 2 Name at least two principles from today's session that you can see working in that brand
- 3 Name one principle the brand does poorly or inconsistently

EXAMPLE BRANDS TO AUDIT



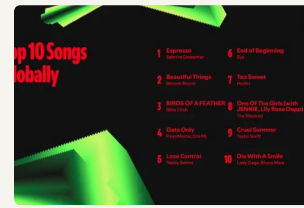
FedEx



Mastercard 2016



Tropicana 2009



Spotify Wrapped 2024

"Which principles hold the brand together, and where does the system break down?"

Questions Worth Arguing About

Optional class discussion or review prompts

Gap's logo reversed in less than one week. Was that a design problem, a change-management problem, or both?

Apple's Crush ad was visually striking. Why can a design be formally memorable and still strategically wrong?

Why do Apple and Mastercard gain from simplification when Gap and Tropicana do not?

What You Now Have Language For

FIVE ELEMENTS

Line · Shape · Space · Texture · Value

The visible raw materials of design

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

Balance · Contrast · Emphasis · Alignment

Repetition · Unity · Scale

The organizing logic that makes elements work

Design decisions are strategic, not decorative: they affect attention, trust, recognition, and conversion.

VOCABULARY BUILT TODAY

Perceived Credibility

Contrast Ratio

Aesthetic-Usability Effect

Focal Point

Visual Hierarchy

Touchpoints

Attention Flow

Brand Equity

Negative Space

Brand System

Visual Weight

Brand Recognition

THREE QUESTIONS TO TAKE FORWARD

"What is dominant here, and should it be?"

"What does this feel like before I read anything?"

"Would this system hold across ten different touchpoints?"

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DESIGN DECISIONS

"This increases retrieval on shelf."

"This reduces cognitive load."

"This makes the CTA dominant."

"This weakens trust by making the interface harder to decode."

Sources + Additional Reading

ACADEMIC / RESEARCH

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RECOMMENDED BOOKS

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Poulin, R. *The Language of Graphic Design* (AIGA)

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