assistant web developer

Meet: Larry. It has been two years since Larry became Scott’s assistant. During this time, he has imagined three possible reasons as to why he was ‘the chosen one’ to assist Scott. Firstly, because of his desire to steer away from WordPress software; secondly, because of his undamaged eagerness to learn; or perhaps thirdly, because of his confident, yet compliant nature. A fourth, more appealing theory has been running through Larry’s mind lately: his portfolio, and within this portfolio a project—Web Development and Design for ZipSpace.

ZipSpace is a newish museum in Amsterdam that emerged during the pandemic from the founders’ mutual urge to systematically archive important graphic design moments within the history of local graphic design production. The six founders, Jeroen, Mees, Yara, Arie, Mila, and Luuk, all have a mutual affinity for projects developed by the same graphic design masters, which they considered as a solid selection to represent their taste. These historical footprints marking successful publications, flyers, scarves, and posters were planned to be hung, pasted, and screened on the white walls of their soon-to-be permanent collection. The permanent collection, so the founders claimed, would attract the audience they wanted to establish. I think they wanted to attract the audience they could get money from.

It’s clear to us now that having a well-defined position embedded within cultural history was only one aspect of ZipSpace’s over-all mission. Yes, preserving what they thought must be remembered through public exposure of their institutional taste was important. However, they thought, its reproduction was even more of the essence. That’s why they came up with Plateform—a hosting and curating experiment designed as a series of temporary exhibitions, featuring the works of emerging graphic designers, made visible for various audiences.

More than seeing it as an opportunity to build their independent curating practices, the founders saw Plateform as a tool to give the emerging designers institutional recognition they lacked in the first few years of their graphic design careers. This humble intention made Larry feel represented, and subsequently less lonely on the designer market. The collaboration could then, perhaps, provide him with a feeling of belonging, he thought. So, *I am honored,* he said.

ZipSpace, from their side, did not find it crucial to inform Larry about their secret mission to preserve the traditional role of the graphic designer.[[1]](#footnote-1) Communicating what their public mission statement was, and how much they were willing to pay for a website, should have been, in their opinion, enough for Larry to feel like he was a part of something important. Moreover, they believed that their opposition to the emergence of hybrid times, in which new publication formats are produced and the traditional role of a graphic designer is questioned, should not necessarily be put on the table.

All of this went smoothly, as Larry was content with how much—or, how little—he knew. With a goal to build a simple and witty website that represented a stable version of their currently *fluid* identity, he got to work.

As a graphic designer turned web developer, he was experienced enough to know that one core question welcoming the user to the website could solve the puzzle of abstraction which most institutions suffer from in the online sphere. Most core questions of institutions are found on their *About*-page, above or below the paragraphs which describe their history.

For Larry, situating this information on that particular page was considered a bad User Experience move. He didn’t like to waste the user’s time, nor make them read through a text they didn’t have the attention span for. On top of that, Larry thought, the serious tone of history dominates the tone of the core question which, if isolated, would make the user ponder its answer—perhaps in a light manner.

Keeping this in mind made him bold in his concepts. As a bold graphic designer, the first step of his development was to muse over the question at hand. During his second meeting with ZipSpace, he challenged the main team to formulate their core question. Without one, he said, he wouldn’t be able to continue working. ZipSpace had no objections regarding the idea and instantly came up with:

[‘What *is* graphic design and what else *can* it be?’]

Larry was surprised with their speed and submission; he even felt a slightly betrayed. For a split second, he started flirting with the idea of reviving the ideas he dreamt of realizing in his spare time, but never dared to execute during his commissioned work. What if he started building a website in reverse order: starting from the aesthetics and working his way back to the grid? What if he skipped the gradient this time? What if he copied Facebook’s design and changed the class names of HTML elements?

Larry knew that doing so could result in the discontinuation of his graphic recognition, which was the main reason why ZipSpace hired him. Were he to question the core structure of the website, he’d start questioning everything: why cyan is often the third color he chooses after black and white, why he won’t be content until all digital containers fit exactly on the grid, why 404 is the last page he designs, or why he often refuses to apply animations across his websites.

He has better things to do than doubt his practice, he thought.

ZipSpace’s compliance concerning the core question helped Larry to immediately visualize how the website was going to look, sound, and be read. Without further ado, his first to-do list was written:

Set up WordPress CMS environment. Connect to the database. Build architecture…

Architecture:

Homepage,

About page,

News page,

Archive page,

Shop page(?)

…~~\*Build Architecture\*~~

Setting up the default digital environment before analyzing the delivered content always helped our Larry shrink his analytical mind while scanning through the texts, jpegs, audio, and pdf files provided. Having the web skeleton ready made him realize instantly where certain files must be placed, leaving him with more time to fine-tune the files he actually wanted to see published on the website.

In the end, Larry didn’t listen to the more experimental heart that was beating rapidly in his chest. Remembering the lessons from the collaboration with ZipSpace made him feel happy about taking the road often travelled during the process, for the less travelled one would have led to not getting hired as an assistant. It would have led to unnecessary complaining about the lack of alternative web topographies which—no matter how necessary for the ultimate creative process—would only scare the clients away. It would have led to a greater sadness than the one he’s been feeling lately.

Today, with Larry being just an assistant, he worries about what makes him feel *less urgent* in the field.[[2]](#footnote-2) What is it? Is it his compliant nature? And, even though he’s eternally grateful for having access to Scott’s private CMS software, what, he wonders, makes the software different than WordPress, besides a prettier interface?

1. ‘A graphic designer is a professional within the graphic design and graphic arts industry who assembles together images, typography, or motion graphics to create a piece of design. A graphic designer creates the graphics primarily for published, printed, or electronic media, such as brochures and advertising. They are also sometimes responsible for typesetting, illustration, user interfaces. A core responsibility of the designer's job is to present information in a way that is both accessible and memorable.’ — Clara Pasteau according to Wikipedia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Perhaps the deepest differences emanate from differences in the ultimate user of the program. Almost invariably, the sole intended user of an amateur’s program is the amateur himself, whereas the professional is writing programs which other people will use. To be sure, the professional oftentimes finds himself writing a program for his own use—to generate test data or to evaluate the performance of an untried algorithm, to name but two instances. And, indeed, when doing this kind of work, the professional commonly slips into amateurish practices. But the main thrust of his work is directed toward use of the program by other people, and this simple fact conditions his work in a number of way.’ — Gerald Weinberg, *The Psychology of Computer Programming* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)