THE CONCEPT OF RESPONSIVE WEB DESIGN

Ethan Marcotte wrote an introductory article about the approach, "Responsive Web Design," for A List Apart. It stems from the notion of responsive architectural design, whereby a room or space automatically adjusts to the number and flow of people within it:

"Recently, an emergent discipline called "responsive architecture" has begun asking how physical spaces can respond to the presence of people passing through them. Through a combination of embedded robotics and tensile materials, architects are experimenting with art installations and wall structures that bend, flex, and expand as crowds approach them. Motion sensors can be paired with climate control systems to adjust a room's temperature and ambient lighting as it fills with people. Companies have already produced "smart glass technology" that can automatically become opaque when a room's occupants reach a certain density threshold, giving them an additional layer of privacy."

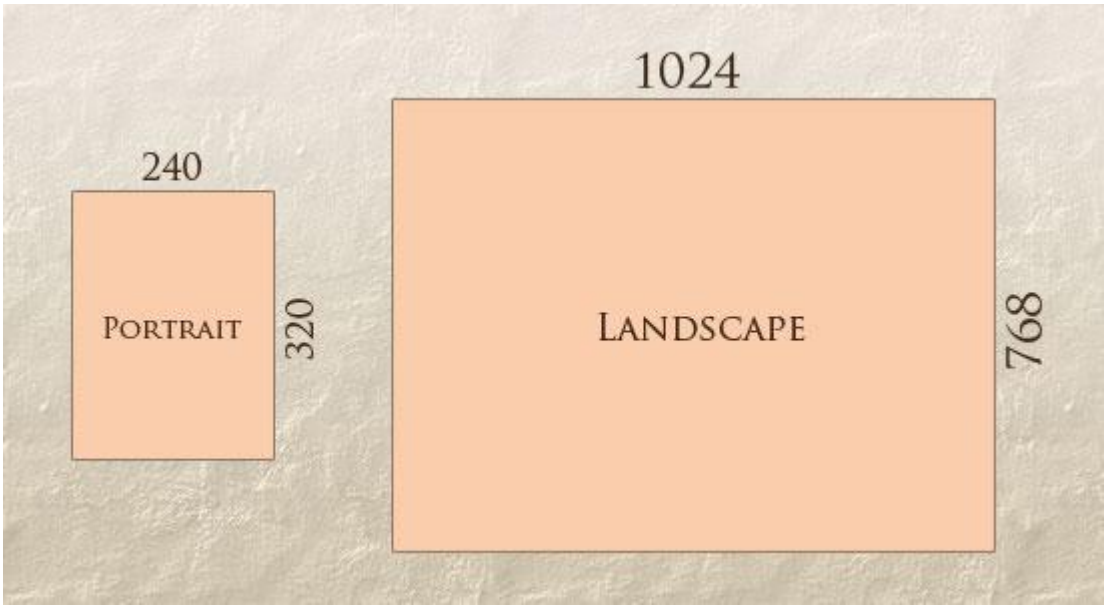
Transplant this discipline onto Web design, and we have a similar yet whole new idea. Why should we create a custom Web design for each group of users; after all, architects don't design a building for each group size and type that passes through it? Like responsive architecture, Web design should automatically adjust. It shouldn't require countless custom-made solutions for each new category of users.

Obviously, we can't use motion sensors and robotics to accomplish this the way a building would. Responsive Web design requires a more abstract way of thinking. However, some ideas are already being practiced: fluid layouts, media queries and scripts that can reformat Web pages and mark-up effortlessly (or *automatically*).

But responsive Web design is **not only about adjustable screen resolutions and automatically resizable images**, but rather about a whole new way of thinking about design. Let's talk about all of these features, plus additional ideas in the making.

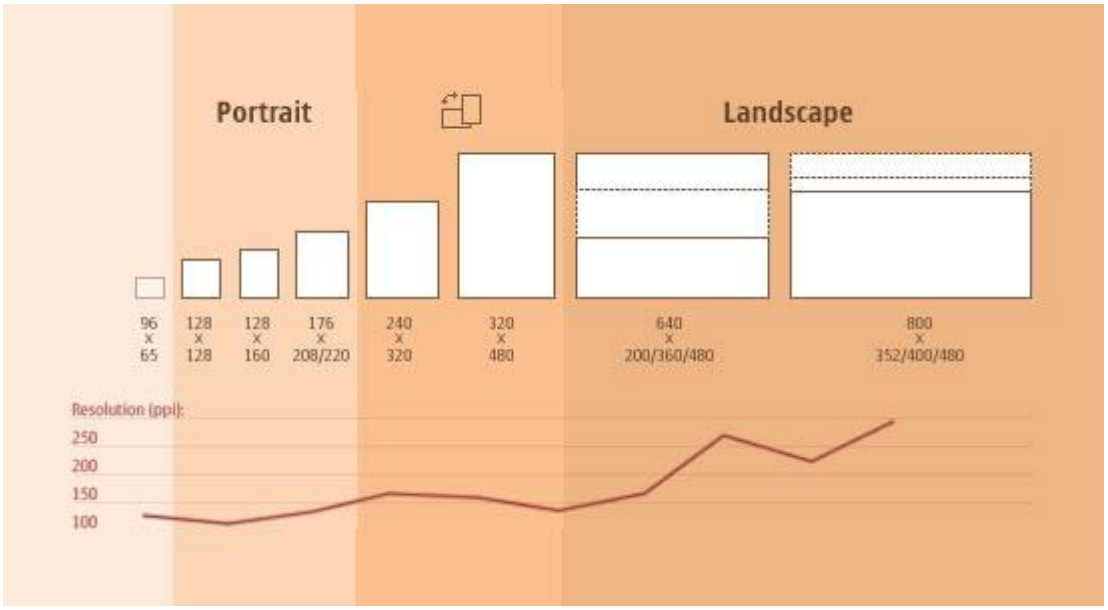
ADJUSTING SCREEN RESOLUTION

With more devices come varying screen resolutions, definitions and orientations. New devices with new screen sizes are being developed every day, and each of these devices may be able to handle variations in size, functionality and even color. Some are in landscape, others in portrait, still others even completely square. As we know from the rising popularity of the iPhone, iPad and advanced smartphones, many new devices are able to switch from portrait to landscape at the user's whim. How is one to design for these situations?



In addition to designing for both landscape and portrait (and enabling those orientations to possibly switch in an instant upon page load), we must consider the hundreds of different screen sizes. Yes, it is possible to group them into major categories, design for each of them, and make each design as flexible as necessary. But that can be overwhelming, and who knows what the usage figures will be in five years? Besides, many users do not maximize their browsers, which itself leaves far too much room for variety among screen sizes.

Morten Hjerde and a few of his colleagues identified statistics on about 400 devices sold between 2005 and 2008. Below are some of the most common:



Since then even more devices have come out. It's obvious that we can't keep creating custom solutions for each one. So, how do we deal with the situation?

PART OF THE SOLUTION: FLEXIBLE EVERYTHING

A few years ago, when flexible layouts were almost a "luxury" for websites, the only things that were flexible in a design were the layout columns (structural elements) and the text. Images could easily break layouts, and even flexible structural elements broke a layout's form when pushed enough. Flexible designs weren't really that flexible; they could give or take a few hundred pixels, but they often couldn't adjust from a large computer screen to a netbook.

Now we can make things more flexible. Images can be automatically adjusted, and we have workarounds so that layouts never break (although they may become squished and illegible in the process). While it's not a complete fix, the solution gives us far more options. It's perfect for devices that switch from portrait orientation to landscape in an instant or for when users switch from a large computer screen to an iPad.

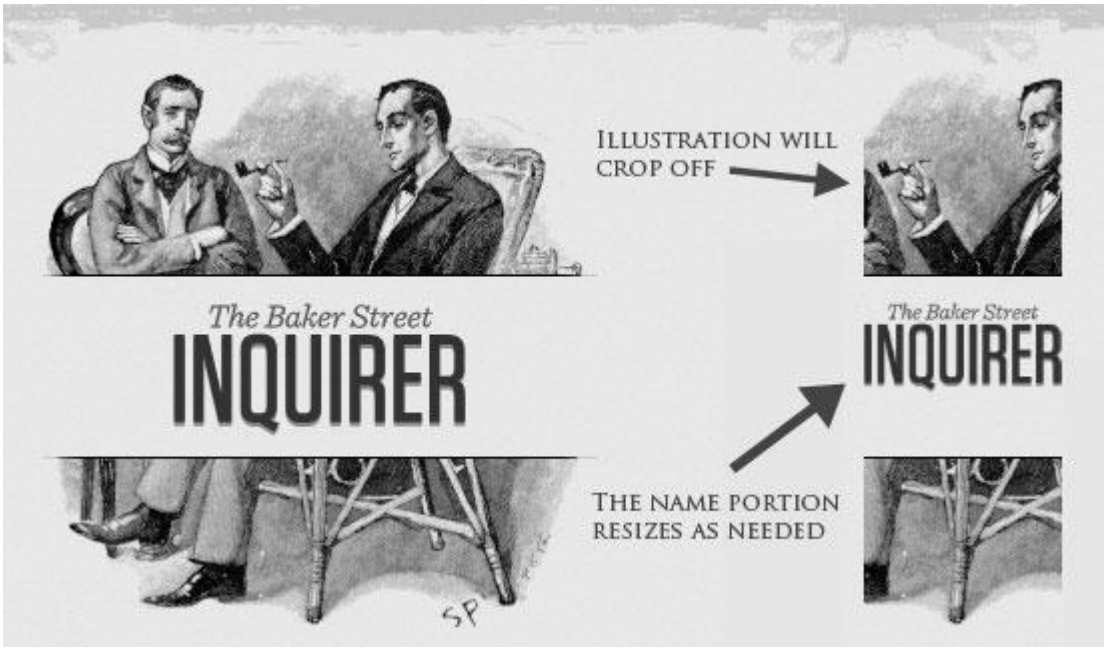
In Ethan Marcotte's article, he created a sample Web design that features this better flexible layout:

The entire design is a lovely mix of fluid grids, fluid images and smart mark-up where needed. Creating fluid grids is fairly common practice, and there are a number of techniques for creating fluid images:

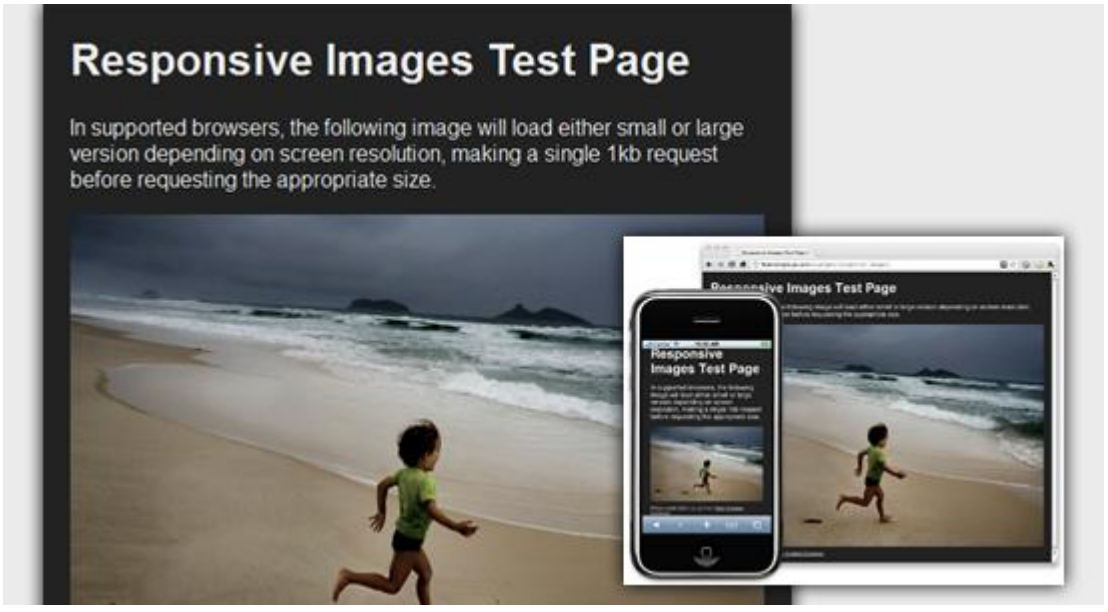
- Hiding and Revealing Portions of Images
- Creating Sliding Composite Images
- Foreground Images That Scale With the Layout

For more information on creating fluid websites, be sure to look at the book "Flexible Web Design: Creating Liquid and Elastic Layouts with CSS" by Zoe Mickley Gillenwater, and download the sample chapter "Creating Flexible Images." In addition, Zoe provides the following extensive list of tutorials, resources, inspiration and best practices on creating flexible grids and layouts: "Essential Resources for Creating Liquid and Elastic Layouts."

While from a technical perspective this is all easily possible, it’s not just about plugging these features in and being done. Look at the logo in this design, for example:



If resized too small, the image would appear to be of low quality, but keeping the name of the website visible and not cropping it off was important. So, the image is divided into two: one (of the illustration) set as a background, to be cropped and to maintain its size, and the other (of the name) resized proportionally.



.

www.smashingmagazine.com