Emphasis

Closely related to the idea of unity is the concept of emphasis or dominance. Rather than focusing on the various elements of a design fitting together, emphasis is about making a particular feature draw the viewer's attention. When you design a web page layout, often you'll identify an item in the content, or the layout itself, that you want to stand out. Perhaps it's a button for users to press, or an error message for them to read. One method of achieving such emphasis is by making that element into a focal point. A **focal point** is any element on a page that draws the viewer's eye, rather than just being part of the page as a whole or blending in with its surroundings. As with unity, there are a few tried-and-true methods of achieving a focal point.

Placement

Although the constraints of practical web design do not often allow for it, the direct center of a composition is the point at which users look first, and is typically the strongest location for producing emphasis. The further from the center an element is, the less likely it will be noticed first. On the Web, the top-left corner of the page also tends to demand a lot of attention for those of us who read from left to right (remember that many languages, like Hebrew and Arabic, are read from right to left) and scan a page from top to bottom.

Continuance

The idea behind **continuance** or **flow** is that when our eyes start moving in one direction, they tend to continue along that path until a more dominant feature comes along. Figure 1.20 demonstrates this effect. Even though the bottom splotch is bigger and so tends to catch your eye first, your brain can't help but go "Hey, looky there, an arrow!" Soon enough, you'll find yourself staring at the smaller object.

Figure 1.20. Continuance and placement: creating emphasis

Continuance is one of the most common methods that web designers use to unify a layout. By default, the left edge of headings, copy, and images placed on a web page form a vertical line down the left side of a page before any styling is applied. A simple way to make additional use of this concept is to align elements to the lines of your grid. This creates multiple lines of continuance for your visitors' eyes to follow down the page.

Isolation

In the same way that proximity helps us create unity in a design, isolation promotes emphasis. An item that stands out from its surroundings will tend to demand attention. Even though he's sad to be apart from his buddies, the isolated monkey in Figure 1.21 stands out as a focal point on the page.

Figure 1.21. Isolation: a sad monkey

Contrast

Contrast is defined as the juxtaposition of dissimilar graphic elements, and is the most common method used to create emphasis in a layout. The concept is simple: the greater the difference between a graphic element and its surroundings, the more that element will stand out. Contrast can be created using differences in color (which I'll discuss in more detail in Chapter 2), size, and shape. Take a look at the Twitter home page in Figure 1.22.

Figure 1.22. Twitter: using orange for contrast

If there's a singular link or button you want your visitors to click on in a page, it's known as a **call to action**. When you look at the preceding layout, what first grabs your attention? For me, it's the

Sign Up button in the right column. It's the only place on the page that uses those bright orange and yellow colors, and the text is much bigger than the Search and Sign In buttons. By placing it in a block that crosses over that trending topics bar, it has plenty of continuance, isolation, and contrast. Twitter really wants you to click that button, so it's creating as much emphasis as possible to ensure its call to action is effective.

Proportion

Another interesting way of creating emphasis in a composition is through the use of proportion. Proportion is a principle of design that has to do with differences in the scale of objects. If we place an object in an environment that's of smaller scale than the object itself, that object will appear larger than it does in real life, and vice versa. This difference in proportion draws viewers' attention to the object, as it seems out of place in that context.

In Figure 1.23, I've taken our sad, isolated monkey and superimposed him over the skyline of Manhattan to prove my point. Between the sharp contrast in color and the difference in proportion, your brain immediately says, "Hey, this isn't quite right," and you're left staring at the monkey until you force yourself to look away.

Figure 1.23. Proportion: a monkey in Manhattan

This principle works for miniaturization as well. Take a look at the BeerCamp event website[13] in Figure 1.24, designed by David DeSandro. The first element you probably notice is the massive BeerCamp headline. From here, though, my eye jumps straight to the arrow and into the row of

[13] http://sxsw.beercamp.com/

buildings. This is due to both continuance and eye-catching use of proportion. For those interested in the possibilities of CSS3, I should point out that no images are used to create what you see here.

Figure 1.24. BeerCamp: a tiny piece of SXSW history

Creating emphasis in your design isn't just the key to making your call to action stand out. It's also how we move a viewer's eyes across the page. By giving elements a descending level of emphasis, you can suggest an order for visitors to follow. If you keep this in mind as you build your sites, you can echo the emphasis you create with semantic HTML markup and CSS. For instance, by matching `h1` to `h6` headline tags with a respective level of visual emphasis, you can provide a similar view of what's visually important in the page to search engines and vision-impaired visitors.

Next, we'll look at some well-tested examples of designs from which you can work.

Bread-and-butter Layouts

Most of what we've talked about thus far has been design theory. Theory's helpful, but it can only take us so far towards understanding why some ideas work—and others don't—in a website's design. In my opinion, examples and practice are much more valuable. Most academic graphic design programs include a curriculum that's rich in art history and fine art. These classes provide a great foundation for an understanding of graphic design from an art perspective, but they do little to prepare you for the specific challenges you encounter when you take your designs to the Web.

Pablo Picasso once said, "I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it." While I like to take that approach when designing a new website, it's important first to know what you can do. When you look out across the Internet, you can see that the possibilities for layout are endless. Depending on the goals of the site, though, only a few of those possibilities make good design sense. That's why we see certain configurations of identity, navigation, and content over and over again.

In this section, we'll talk about the three most common layouts, and explore some of their advantages and disadvantages.

Left-column Navigation

Regardless of whether we're talking about liquid or fixed-width layout design, the left-column navigation format is a time-honored standard. The layout of the Porsche site,[14] pictured in Figure 1.25, is a classic example of this configuration. Many sites that fit into this mold don't necessarily use the left column as the main navigation block—sometimes you'll see the navigation along the top of the page—but they still divide the layout below the header into a narrow (one-third or less) left column and a wide right column. It's like a security blanket, or that comfortable shirt with holes in the armpits that you wear once a week—even though it drives your spouse crazy. For those reasons, a layout featuring left-column navigation is a safe choice for most projects.

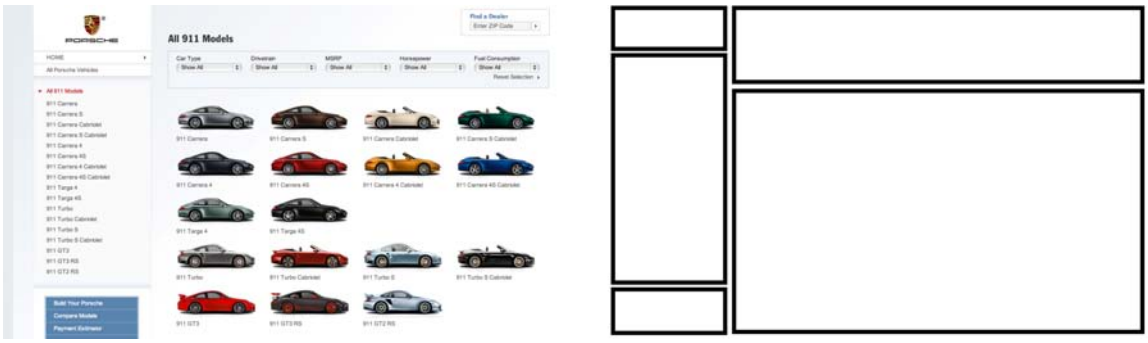

Figure 1.25. Left-column navigation at Porsche

The downside to sites that use left-column navigation is that they can appear to lack creativity. It's been done so many times, in so many ways, over so many years that they tend to look the same. That's not to say you should avoid using a left-column navigation layout. At a guess, I'd say that 75% of the sites I've designed have a secondary left-column navigation, but I do try to mix it up a little when I can.

Speaking of mixing it up, how about picking that left column up and sticking it on the other side of the content? Then you'd have a right-column navigation layout.

[14] http://www.porsche.com/usa/models/911/

Right-column Navigation

If you're going to restrict your main content to one side of the page, it's more widespread these days to push it to the left, placing navigation, advertising, and subsidiary content on the right. This is an especially common configuration for news sites, social networks, and websites with expansive navigation schemes that are unable to be contained within a simple top navigation. BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina[15] is an example of such a site. It features several different layouts and color schemes for each section. The screenshot you see in Figure 1.26 is a fourth-level page—that is, it's four clicks away from the front page. By keeping the secondary navigation on the right, it stays out of the way of visitors who, if they're this deep already, are looking for some very specific content.

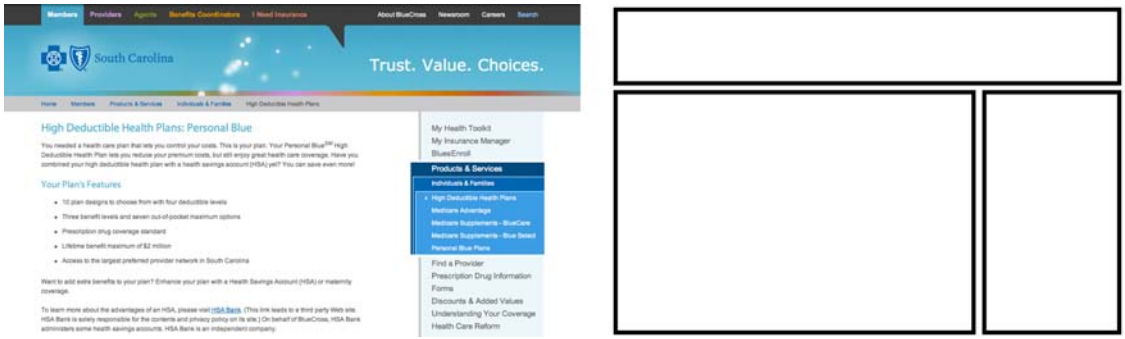

Figure 1.26. Right-column navigation at BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina

Ultimately, the decision on whether to put a navigation column on the left or the right is a judgment call that's really about the amount and type of content you have to organize. If it's a simple site that doesn't require any secondary navigation, consider a narrow, column-less layout. Good design is often more about what you leave out than what you put in. If you do need a secondary column, just remember that the content is what your visitors are there for … and more and more, they're looking for it on the left.

Three-column Navigation

The typical three-column layout has a wide center column flanked by two diminutive navigational columns. The ThinkGeek[16] store shown in Figure 1.27 is an example of this web page layout staple. Although three columns may be necessary on pages that have a ton of navigation, short bits of content, or advertising to display, whitespace is essential if we're to keep a layout from appearing cluttered.

[15] http://www.southcarolinablues.com/
[16] http://www.thinkgeek.com/

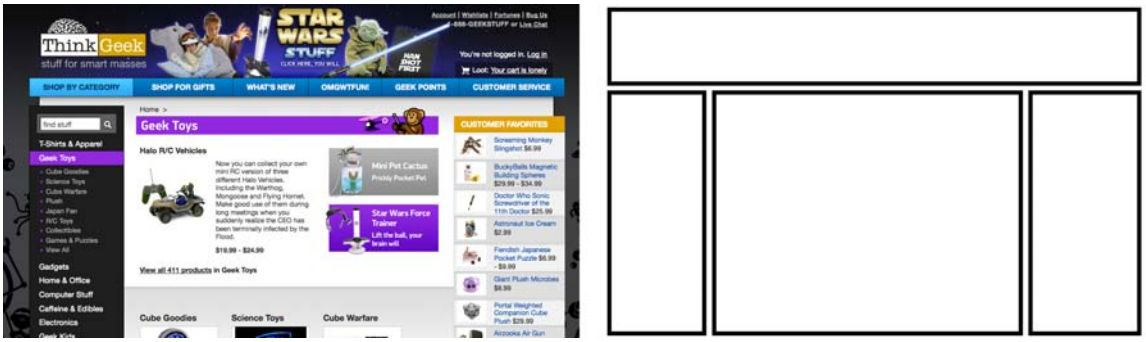

Figure 1.27. Three-column navigation at ThinkGeek

Finding Inspiration

Just because the left-column, right-column, and three-column layout configurations are the bread and butter of most web page designs, there's no need to feel confined to these layouts. A plethora—yes, a plethora—of design showcase and design pattern sites have been created to feature new and innovative ideas that might help you think outside the box, including the following (just to name a few):

Unmatched Style at http://unmatchedstyle.com/

There are a ton of great CSS galleries out there. Unmatched Style is more selective than others, and the video podcasts and interviews are usually interesting as well.

CSS Drive at http://cssdrive.com/

Like Unmatched Style, CSS Drive is a CSS gallery. What makes this one special is that they do a good job of categorizing featured sites by color schemes and layout.

Design Meltdown at http://designmeltdown.com/

From 2005-2009, Patrick McNeil collected and cataloged thousands of interested web designs. He has published two books, and the Design Meltdown site continues to be a great source of inspiration.

Pattern Tap at http://patterntap.com/

Unlike the first three examples, Pattern Tap is a gallery of interface patterns rather than entire websites. Here you'll find collections of navigation styles, contact forms, pagination, tabs, and more.

Yahoo Design Pattern Library at http://developer.yahoo.com/ypatterns/

Similar to Pattern Tap, but with far fewer examples and variations, the Yahoo Design Pattern Library is a great place to learn about standard user interface elements.

Using a Morgue File

I know what you're thinking: "Great, I have a bunch of galleries and pattern libraries to look at—now what?" One of the most useful tips my first graphic design professor taught me was to create a **morgue file** whenever I was collecting inspiration for a large project. The concept is fairly simple: if you're doing an illustration or marketing project that involves trains, you clip out and print up anything you can find that might give you inspiration and keep it all in a folder. It helps with your current project, and should you ever need to do another project involving trains, you'll have lots of inspiration on hand.

The morgue file idea slipped my mind until a few years ago. I found myself looking for a site I'd seen in a gallery site that I liked, but of which I was unable to remember the name or address. Sure it's great to have access to lots of great inspiration resources, but they useless if you can't find the specific example you're looking for. That was when I started my own digital morgue file. Lately, I've been using an application called LittleSnapper[17] for Mac that allows me to create a screenshot of part of the screen, or even a whole web page (no more scroll, snap, scroll, snap). LittleSnapper also lets you give each snapshot a name, and tags to make them easy to find later. Of course, no matter what operating system you prefer, there are plenty of ways to take a snapshot for your morgue file. Having a repository of website designs that I can look at has been a handy resource on countless occasions when I've been searching for inspiration.

Capture a Screenshot for Your Own Morgue File

1. Select the browser window that's displaying the page you wish to save as a screenshot.
2. Copy a screenshot of the browser window to your clipboard:
   - On a PC, press **Alt**+**Print Screen** or use the native Snipping Tool (Windows Vista or 7) to grab a section of the screen.
   - On a Mac, press **Shift**+**Command**+**4**, then **Space** to turn the cursor into a camera. Then, hold down **Ctrl**, and click on the browser window.
3. At this point, you should have a screenshot of the browser window in your clipboard. Open a new document in your favorite graphics program or document editor, and paste in the screenshot.
4. Save your image or document.

[17] http://www.realmacsoftware.com/littlesnapper/

Fresh Trends

If you're feeling so overwhelmed by the above resources that even to contemplate starting a morgue file for inspiration is beyond you, take a few minutes to browse through those sites. Look past the colors and textures to the boxes that make up the layout, and try to identify standard ideas and design trends. By doing this, I've started to notice a few trends that seem to be emerging in website layouts.

Navigationless Magazine Style

If you're reading this paragraph, I'm guessing you probably didn't arrive via the table of contents. On the Web, we tend to be a lot more goal-oriented and consume information in bits and pieces. Site navigation allows us to be quick, efficient … and erratic. What if you don't want your visitors skipping to another page? What if the information you need to convey is best consumed as a whole, like a book or magazine article? If that's the case, why include navigation at all? That's the approach that *Design Informer*[18] takes with each of its art-directed articles. Other than a tiny Design Informer logo in the header graphic, there are no site navigation links on each article's page until you reach the comments section in the footer. A trend from one website, you ask? Take a look at the other examples in Figure 1.28, from *The Bold Italic*[19] and *52 Weeks of UX*.[20]

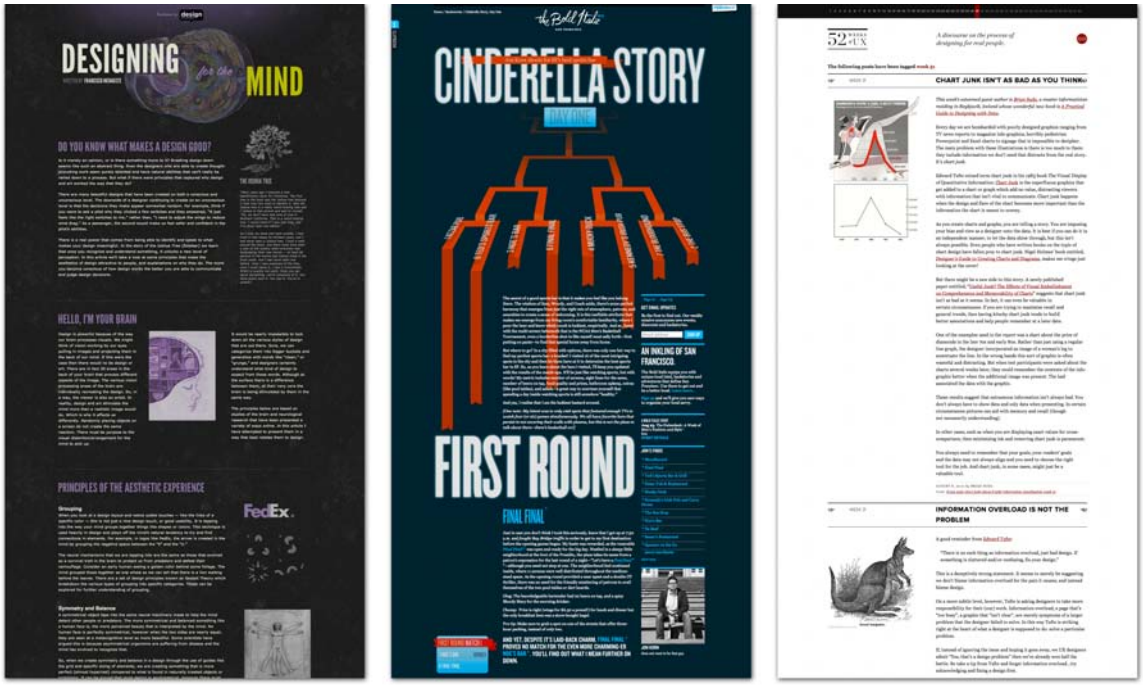

Figure 1.28. Not much navigation going on here, just great uninterrupted content

[18] http://designinformer.com/
[19] http://theboldditalic.com/
[20] http://52weeksofux.com/

Expansive Footers

This one is less of a trend and more an ongoing phenomenon. I featured expansive footers in the first edition of this book, and these continue to grow today, both in size and in the types of information people are putting in them. Rather than using the footer for just essential links and a copyright notice, many sites are utilizing this once-neglected piece of page real estate to include contact information, expanded site navigation, and social media content. Although putting a site's main navigational element at the bottom of the page is a bad idea, including "bonus" navigation and content in that space is an obvious solution. A great example of this trend is the FortySeven Media-designed Show & Tell Consignment Sale.[21]

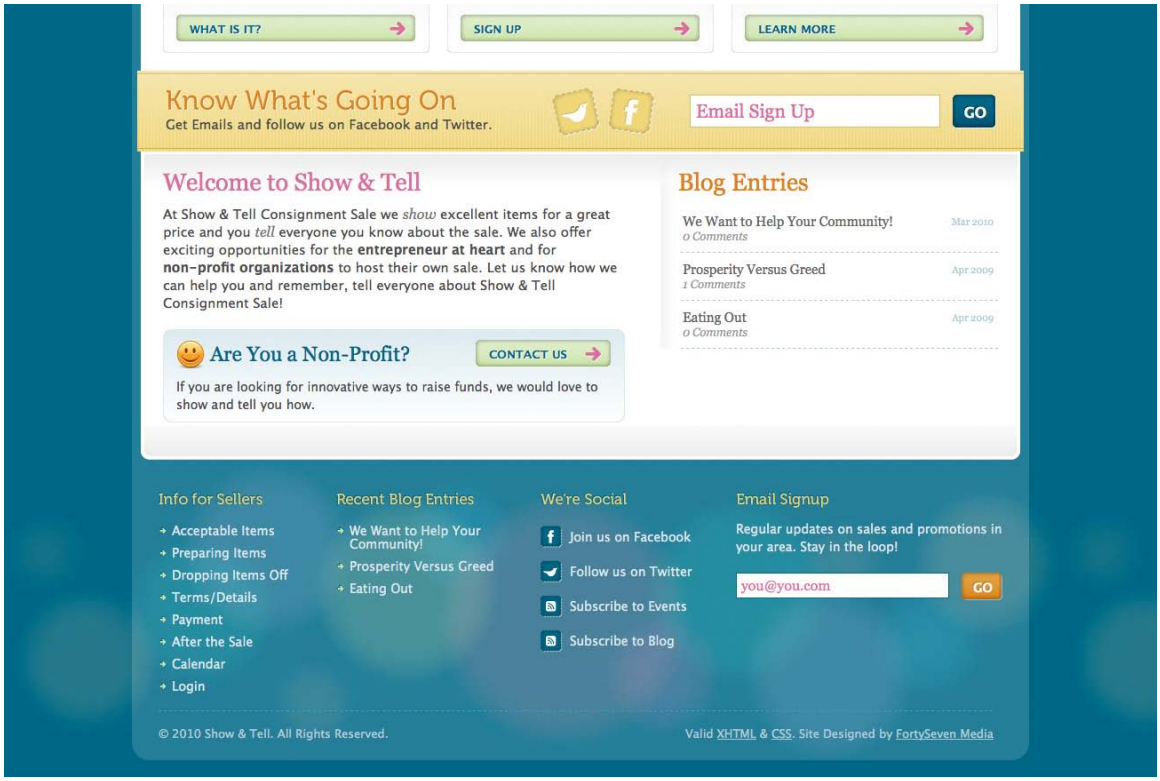

Figure 1.29. Presenting extra content in the footer at Show & Tell Consignment Sale

See also:

- Mozilla at http://mozilla.org/
- Creamy CSS at http://creamycss.com/
- And yes, even http://sitepoint.com/

[21] http://showandtellsale.com

Bare-bones Minimalism

Similar to the navigationless magazine style and quite contrary to the expansive footer concept, many sites are removing a lot of the standard web content fare. Minimalist design is all about reducing your design down to the most essential elements. In Figure 1.30, Analog Coop[22] accomplishes this by reducing its copy to a single, fun-to-read page. For Kha Hoang,[23] being a minimalist is having a home page with simply a list of portfolio links, a quote on design, and some contact info. It's an easy concept to apply: just go through each element of each page and ask yourself what it's adding to your website. If you're without an answer, toss it out.

Figure 1.30. Two flavors of minimalism: the Analog Coop and the portfolio of Kha Hoang

Minimalism isn't a new design trend by any stretch of the imagination—even on the Web. In the art world, the minimalist movement of the 1960s and '70s was a reaction against the overly self-expressive era of abstract expressionism. Similarly, the recent explosion in minimalism and single-page designs on the Web is a reaction against the overly interactive Web 2.0 era. It's an attempt at balancing out the hustle and bustle of social media with the equivalent to a peaceful café or quiet art gallery.

See also:

- Brand New at http://www.underconsideration.com/brandnew/
- Sage Media at http://www.sagemediari.com/

Resizing: Fixed, Fluid, or Responsive Layouts

Back when we were drawing our first layout blocks with pencil and paper, I explained that the outer rectangle we were designing within was the containing block. In print design, the containing block is a physical object like a business card or a billboard. On the Web, our container is the browser

[22] http://analog.coop/
[23] http://khahoang.com/

window. Should the design fill the browser window, or should it have a set width? This decision is one that has plagued web designers for hundreds, if not thousands of years—all the way back to the days when we used tables and **spacer.gif** files to lay out web page content. Okay, maybe not thousands of years ago, but this is a long-standing debate nonetheless.

Fixed Width

If you've started your layout with the 960 Grid System that I talked about earlier, chances are you're working toward a **fixed-width** layout. These designs are wrapped with a `div` that's given a pixel-based width (say, 960 pixels), and centered within the `body` tag using `margin:0 auto;`. If the browser window is wider than 960 pixels, you'll see the `body` element's background to the left and right of the container; and if it's narrower, you'll have a horizontal scrollbar. Fixed-width layouts are easier to design for—and maintain—because you're essentially building exactly what you design in Photoshop. Figure 1.31 shows a similar layout structure as fixed and as fluid in the same width of browser space.

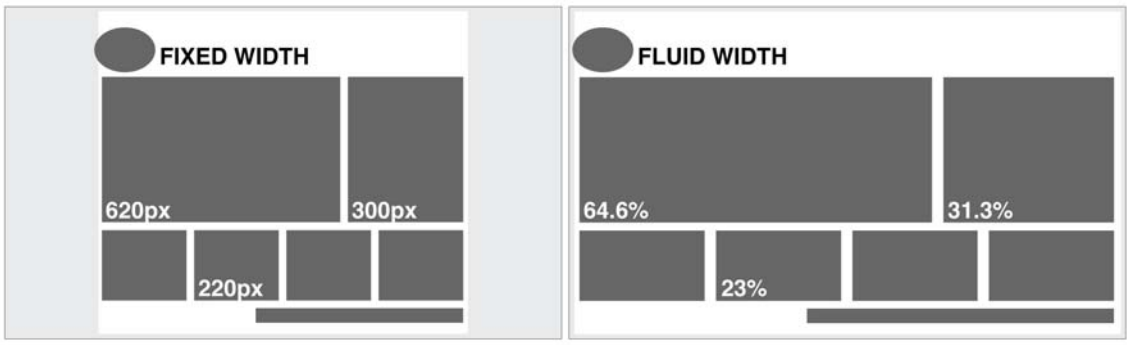

Figure 1.31. Fixed and fluid—or crunchy and squishy if you prefer

Fluid Width

A **fluid** or **liquid** layout is designed with percentage-based widths, so that the container stretches when you resize the browser window. These take more thought to plan, as you have to foresee problems that might occur at every possible width. Sometimes pixel-width columns are mixed with percentage-based columns in a fluid layout, but the idea is to show the user as much horizontal content as will fit on their screen. Typically, fluid layouts take advantage of the `min-width` and `max-width` properties of CSS, ensuring the container doesn't become ridiculously narrow or wide.

One reason some designers reject fluid layouts is because they think it impedes them using a grid to create their designs. There are several resources available for designing fluid layouts on a grid, including a fluid adaptation of the 960 Grid System.[24] Ultimately, though, the decision to use one type of layout over the other should really be determined by the target audience, and the accessib-

[24] http://www.designinfluences.com/fluid960gs/

ility goals of each individual website. The pros and cons of each layout type are fairly well-defined, as Table 1.1 shows.

Table 1.1. Fixed versus liquid layouts: the pros and cons

	Pros	Cons
Fixed width	■ gives designer more control over how an image floated within the content will look ■ allows for planned whitespace ■ improves readability with narrower text blocks	■ can appear dwarfed in large browser windows ■ takes control away from the user
Liquid width	■ adapts to most screen resolutions and devices ■ reduces user scrolling	■ challenging to read when text is spanning a wide distance ■ harder to execute successfully ■ limits or imposes on whitespace

With these pros and cons in mind, I've designed more fixed-width layouts than liquid. I like having control over how the content will display, and working with the background space. On the flip side, I sometimes enjoy the challenges that liquid layouts bring to the table. But, regardless of personal preferences, it's important to put the needs of your client first. If you're deciding on the width of a fixed-width layout, you have to think about the audience for which you're designing, and create a layout that meets the needs of those users.

An Alternative: Responsive Layouts

It's been said that for every rule, there's an exception. That's usually true in the web world, and designers have come up with many variants and hybrids of fixed-width and fluid-width layout structures. I've seen articles recently that list up to ten different layout types. For the purpose of this chapter, however, most of those could be categorized as either fixed or fluid. One recent *A List Apart* article, though, introduced a novel layout type that I think we'll be seeing a lot more of. The article was titled "Responsive Web Design"[25] and it was written by Ethan Marcotte.

Rather than repeat the entire article here, I highly recommend that you check it out. If I had to name this layout technique myself, I would call it the Omnipotent Mercury Morphing Methodology, but that's probably why I didn't come up with it. The idea is that as the mobile market makes browser window widths more and more inconsistent, the need for our layouts to be fluid and adapt to different widths is increasingly vital. The technique takes advantage of some fancy fluid scaling and

[25] http://www.alistapart.com/articles/responsive-web-design/

CSS3 media queries to completely change the layout as it hits certain width thresholds. Figure 1.32 shows screenshots of Ethan's example at three different browser widths.

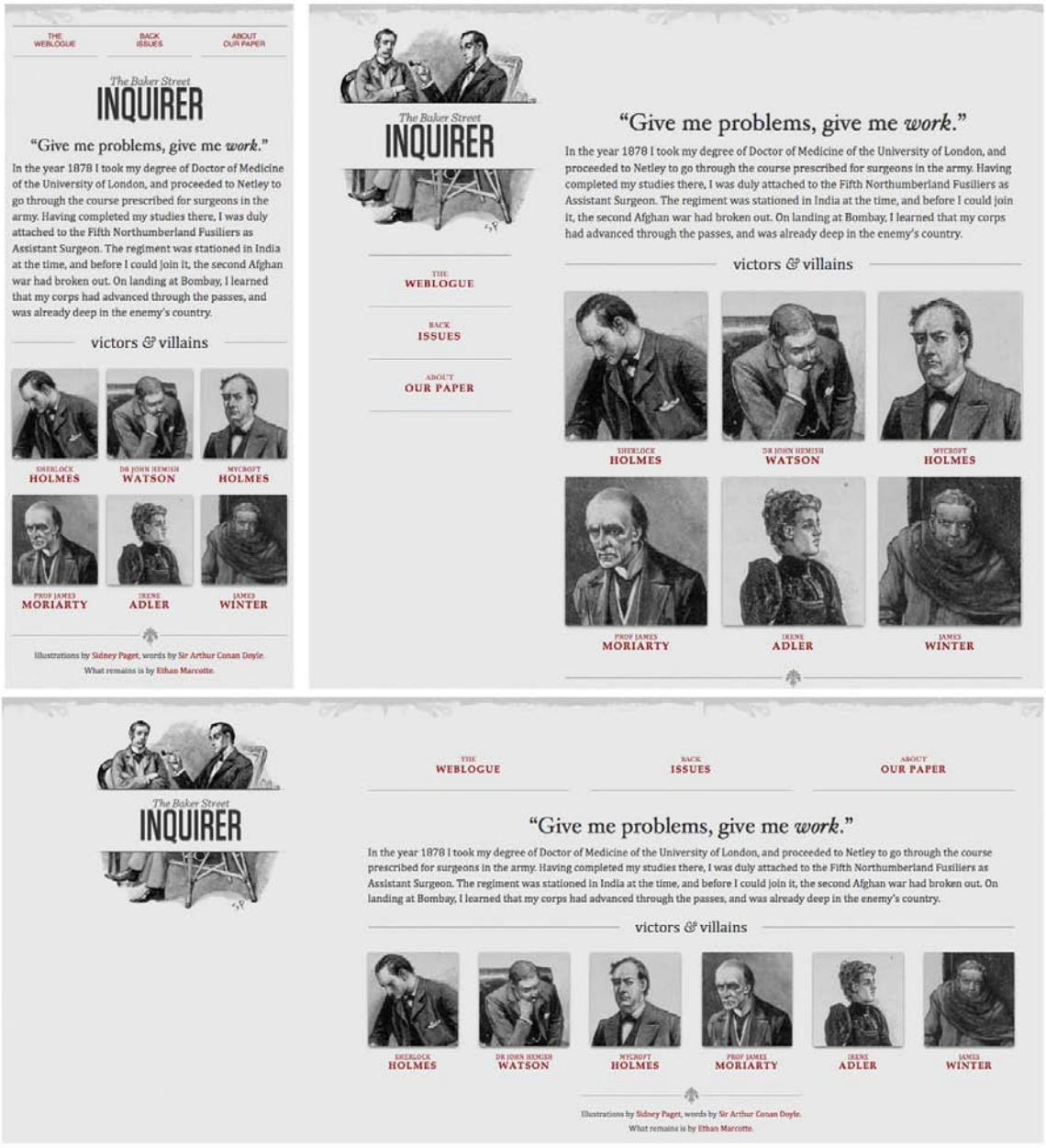

Figure 1.32. A layout that adapts to mobile, desktop, and JumboTron

Ethan's responsive web design (or Omnipotent Mercury Morphing Methodology) is a great solution to a problem we've yet to discuss: screen resolutions.

Screen Resolution

In comparison to the fixed-versus-fluid debate, the argument about designing for particular screen resolutions has been quite tame these past few years. When designers say that a site is designed, or optimized, for a particular screen resolution, they're actually talking about the resolution of the viewer's monitor. In the past, the screen resolution debate was focused on whether our designs should still accommodate monitor resolutions of 800x600 without displaying a horizontal scrollbar.

Screen Resolution

According to W3Schools' screen resolution statistics,[26] in January 2010, 1% of web users had their screens set to 800×600 pixels (down from 4% in 2009), 20% had their resolutions set at 1024×768 pixels (down from 36%), and a whopping 76% of visitors had a resolution higher than 1024×768. Figure 1.33 illustrates these trends.

These days, it's a given assumption that desktop browsers display at least 1024×768. Even the majority of netbook computers have a 1024×600 or higher resolution. For that reason, 960px has become the *de facto* width for most web design projects. With W3Schools reporting the growth of users with resolutions greater than 1024, you'd think we'd be looking to push the standard width past 960, but there are a couple of reasons why this probably won't happen. First, most users with larger monitors still keep their browser window set less than 1024px wide, so they can see other applications they have running. The other reason is line length. If a line of text is too long, it becomes less readable. Therefore, a wider default layout width would really only allow us to add more columns.

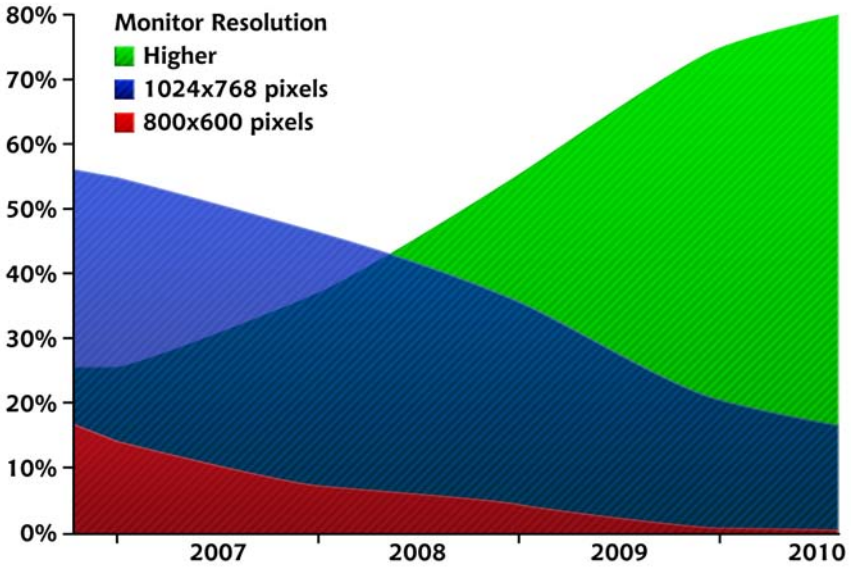

Figure 1.33. W3Schools' screen resolution statistics

[26] http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_display.asp

Although desktop browser statistics like those provided by W3Schools justify our use of 960px layouts, they ignore a major segment of the web browsing population: mobile users. Citing the same article I mentioned earlier about responsive web design, mobile browsing is expected to outpace desktop-based access within three to five years. As mobile screen resolutions increase and mobile browsers catch up to their desktop cousins, it's safe to say that your website design will be readable in modern mobile devices. You should still include popular mobile devices in your browser testing, though; if we're struggling to make the sites we design look right in IE7, shouldn't we be checking them on mobile browsers as well?

Taking the increase in mobile usage a bit more seriously, a greater amount of websites are providing mobile-optimized versions of their sites; this, of course, means that more and more clients will be demanding mobile-optimized sites as well. This used to be a complicated task, dealing with mobile-specific languages like WML and awful, inept browsers like Blackberry's old RIM OS.

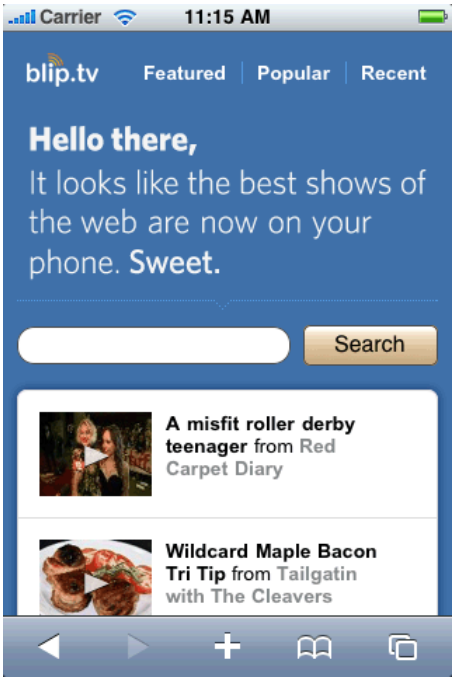

Figure 1.34. Blip.tv on iOS (as seen on http://cssiphone.com)

Fortunately, designing a mobile-optimized site today is mostly about revamping your layout to work on mobile screens while possibly leveraging some of the bonus features of the OS to make it shine. Covering the technical details of designing a mobile-optimized site is outside the scope of this book, but the layout principles and design theory discussed in the rest of the chapter still apply. At the end of the day, no matter what you're designing, the needs of your client and their target audience should be the driving force behind your decisions.

Application: Southern Savers

Often, much of what we do as designers is subconscious. We can usually tell you on a choice-by-choice basis why we made specific decisions, but it doesn't come naturally to verbalize the procedures we follow. Sometimes the best way to explain how to apply graphic design principles is by walking through the design process of an actual client website.

Enter: Southern Savers,[27] a real web design project for a real client. In June of 2008, Jenny Martin started Southern Savers on Blogger.com to share the best grocery deals she found with her friends. After a few short months, the site grew too big for Blogger and her husband James migrated it to a self-hosted WordPress install. Neither Jenny nor James had any design experience, so they purchased a WordPress theme, created a header graphic, and Jenny carried on blogging. A little over two years since starting out, the site now receives over three million hits a month and has over 60,000 fans on Facebook—all with the basic design template you see here in Figure 1.35.

Figure 1.35. The old Southern Savers design

[27] http://www.southernsavers.com/

Jenny knew a redesign was long overdue, and hired the rock-star design agency Squared Eye[28] to do the job. Being a friend of Jenny and of Matthew Smith of Squared Eye, it's been interesting to see the design process unfold from both the client and agency perspective. I knew that following this process through each chapter of this book would be insightful for you as well, and am extremely grateful that both Jenny and Matthew agreed to let me use the project as an example.

Getting Started

Usually, clients have specific ideas about what their site should look like and how it should work. Depending on the client, these preconceptions can either help or hinder the design process—more often, the latter. However, on this project, Squared Eye was given free rein to completely redesign and rebrand the site. Matthew knew it was important that he and his team not only understand how the website worked, but who the Southern Savers visitors were and why they were there. Freelance web strategist Emily Smith, the information architect for the project, explains, "Before design could start, we went through a discovery phase to find out what the goals were. We also went to one of Jenny's Couponing 101 workshops and talked to attendees. We evaluated how recurring visitors use the site—watching over their shoulders, talking about what features and functionality they depend on, and observing how they navigate."

User Testing

This is a term for the activity Emily describes as "watching over their shoulders." Monitoring actual user behavior before and after a redesign is a good way to gauge its success. A great DIY tool for user testing is Silverback.[29]

Taking what they learned from their time with Jenny and her website users, Emily and the rest of the Squared Eye team went back to their shared working space. "We mapped out the personalities that were currently using the site, and broke them down into actual personas," Matthew said. From there they started exploring how to organize the information on the site, so that new users and regulars alike could find what they were looking for.

[28] http://squaredeye.com/
[29] http://silverbackapp.com/