What Lies Beneath

I've completed another submission to the CSS Zen garden this week called *What Lies Beneath.* Submitting work to the site has been fun, since it can be almost entirely self-indulgent and completed in a relatively short time-space. It's a rewarding project on many levels and I would encourage any graphic designer competent with CSS to try working out a solution and submitting it.

Working on What Lies Beneath.

After reading Douglas Bowman's account of the process he went through to create his CSS Zen Garden entry *Golden Mean,* I thought it would good to give a short account myself of the work behind *What Lies Beneath.*

The process that Douglas describes is a valuable read for any designer and no doubt familiar to anyone who has attended a design school. Part of the motivation behind developing a process like this for yourself is to provide a standardized, efficient method of completing design work - contrary to what people might think, design is not so much about inspiration as it is about punching the time clock. That's not to say that inspiration and creativity aren't central to the work, but rather that a process can provide a designer with a solid foundation for arriving at a creative solution. In short - you don't wait around for the light bulb to suddenly turn on - you instead begin a methodical and determined search for the switch.

Having said that, *What Lies Beneath* did not really come about though such a process - it was instead the result of exploration and happy accidents.

I started out thinking about a second CZG submission in terms of both vague structural ideas like horizontal scrolling and a less boxy appearance, and vague visual ideas like a much dirtier, noisier overall appearance and darker tones. I also thought it would be fun to continue playing around with the garden metaphor.

My first idea along these lines also came from a desire to document my neighborhood here in Harlem as a part of the project. This fit the bill in a number of ways - it's a pretty scruffy place, and yet it has a number of beautiful areas and a rich history. As well, small neighborhood gardens have played a vital role in helping to rebuild many blocks and restore pride in the community.

I spent a morning shooting both normal and panoramic digital photographs around the neighborhood and began working with them in Photoshop later on. They didn't really turn out as I'd hoped, but as I was experimenting with a long panoramic image of Morningside Park at the top of a layout, combined with a photograph of a weathered traffic light box that I had colorized and heavily distressed as a background, I was struck with how it resembled a cross section of the earth beneath the surface of a park.

This was immediately more appealing metaphorically, and from here is was a matter of simplifying the less important parts of the layout like the grass and sky at the top, for which I found freeware patterns on the web. I then began filling in some of the cast of characters that live beneath the ground - the tin can that I took from my recycling bin and shot on my desk, a worm from a web image, and ants from another web image that were repeated into an ant-farm-like arrangement.

The most interesting character, the star-nosed mole, came out of an IM brainstorming conversation with my brother. The mole was a recurring puppet character in a Canadian TV show from the 80s called The Frantics - a small joke for those in the know. A star-nosed mole from a Frantics-related comic featuring

Mr. Canoehead is shown at right (I'd love to find a TV capture of the actual puppet EDIT: found one [here](#) on a page of Four on the Floor video clips in "dawn of the internet" resolution - it's from a song called ["It's a Rodent"](#))

The typeface for the titles and headlines is Trade Gothic, chosen mostly because I wanted a good-looking condensed sans-serif that wouldn't compete with the richer background images. The type is stressed using noise filters and pencil scratching on layer masks. The body type is Verdana, chosen for its ubiquity.

From here it was relatively simple to cut up the images and complete the CSS layout. The page is a little bandwidth heavy - the background dirt is a 800 x 700 px JPEG that weighs in at a heavily compressed 70k. I would have preferred to make the layout more flexible by floating the columns of text and using PNGs for the backgrounds, but that was not possible due to poor PNG support in Internet Explorer 6 compounded by the fact that PNGs with alpha channels can easily be double the file size of JPEGs. The easiest way to complete the layout was to use absolute positioning and JPEGs for the images. There's really nothing spectacular or innovative about it - it's the simplest CSS imaginable, and it should be noted that it could easily be accomplished with tables as well, if that were necessary.

Obviously a project like the Zen Garden allows for more latitude in usability - and because there is not a client per se, one can work to satisfy one's own aesthetic sense - much simpler than working with a demanding client. While I tried to insure that the page survives type zooming and is generally easy to follow and read, I don't think I would use such a large and inflexible layout for a more serious project. Horizontal scrolling is unexpected for the less experienced user as well, and has to be approached with care. But because the Zen Garden is a project aimed at promoting the diversity and flexibility of CSS based design, it can accommodate more adventurous layouts as examples of experimentation, or even what *not* to do, if nothing else.