

# Modernizing the Simpson Strong-Tie Digital Experience

## PROJECT

Simpson Strong Tie Marketing and Product Web Experience

## ROLE

Product Design Manager, Platform

## TIMELINE

24 months

## TEAM

Platform product team

Marketing web team

UX research

UX writing

Engineering

QA

## 1. Project Overview

As Product Design Manager for the platform organization at Simpson Strong Tie, I led a multi year effort to modernize the marketing and product web experience.

The core goal was to move from scattered, inconsistent pages to a unified, accessible experience backed by a full design system named STUDS, Strong Tie Unified Design System.

Over three years, STUDS evolved in three stages

- STUDS 1 as a foundation of page patterns, content structure, and accessible language
- STUDS 2 as a reusable library of templates and coded components
- STUDS 3 as a fully governed design system with tokens, documentation, and cross product adoption

## 2. Situation

When I joined the platform team, the public site and product experiences showed several issues that repeated across pages and templates.

- Inconsistent brand logo placement between headers, product pages, and homeowner content
- Hero areas that did not clearly communicate the primary task or call to action
- A megamenu that reflected internal org structure rather than customer mental models
- Low contrast footer, card, and navigation elements that failed WCAG AA contrast

## checks

- Redundant CSS and inline overrides that made front end changes slow and fragile

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*Before: The legacy Strong-Tie web templates showed horribly low contrast, inconsistent brand hierarchy, and plenty of redundant navigation.*

The user research we gathered and heatmap data from Crazyegg confirmed the problem. Customers told us they were not sure where to start nor could they easily navigate to their destination. Generally, our personas consisted of small businesses and homeowners looking to purchase materials in large quantities. Notwithstanding, click paths showed repeated pogo sticking between products, solutions, and resources, this friction of which was significantly reduced by our primary competitor in the SMB space Fastenal.

### 3. Task

My responsibility was to:

- Create a clear vision for a modern, accessible Strong Tie web experience
- Align marketing, product, and engineering on that vision
- Deliver a practical design system that reduced build time and improved consistency
- Demonstrate measurable improvements in usability, accessibility, and engagement
  
- Scale our UX Department, specifically in UX Engineering and UX Product Design, to help build the henceforth Strongtie.io Platform.

### 4. Approach and Process

#### 4.1 Research and Framing

I partnered with UX research, Content Writers, ad marketing to frame the problem. We conducted heuristic evaluations, WCAG accessibility audits, and reviewed GA4/Crazyegg analytics. From this work, we defined three guiding principles: clear actions, consistent identity, and accessibility first.

## 4.2 STUDS 1, Foundation

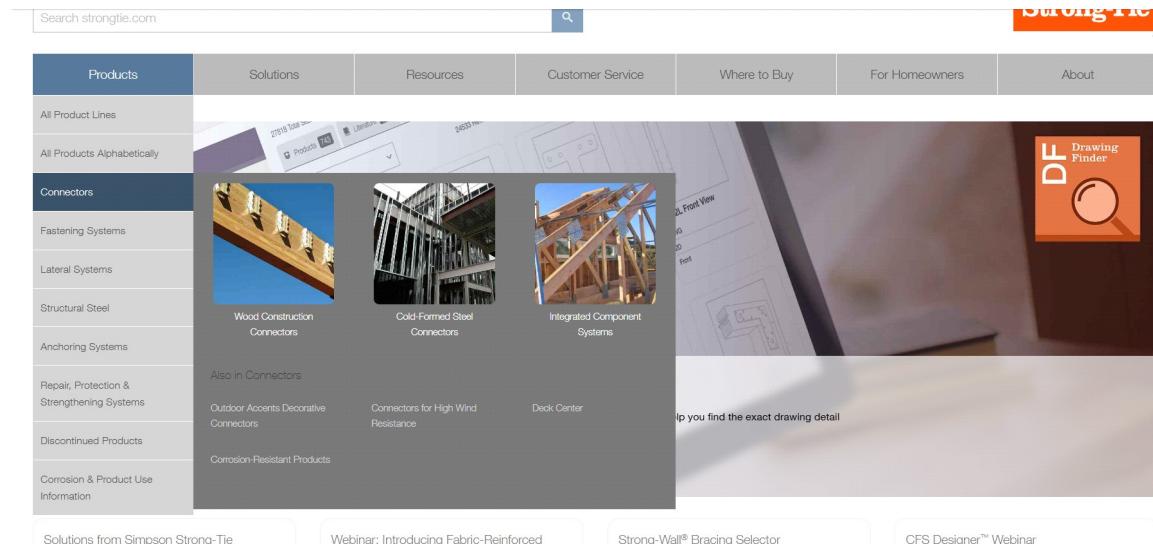
STUDS 1 focused on structure and language.

- Defined standard page types and introduced design tokens validated against WCAG AA.
- Standardized brand placement and created content guidelines.
- Facilitated workshops across design and content teams.

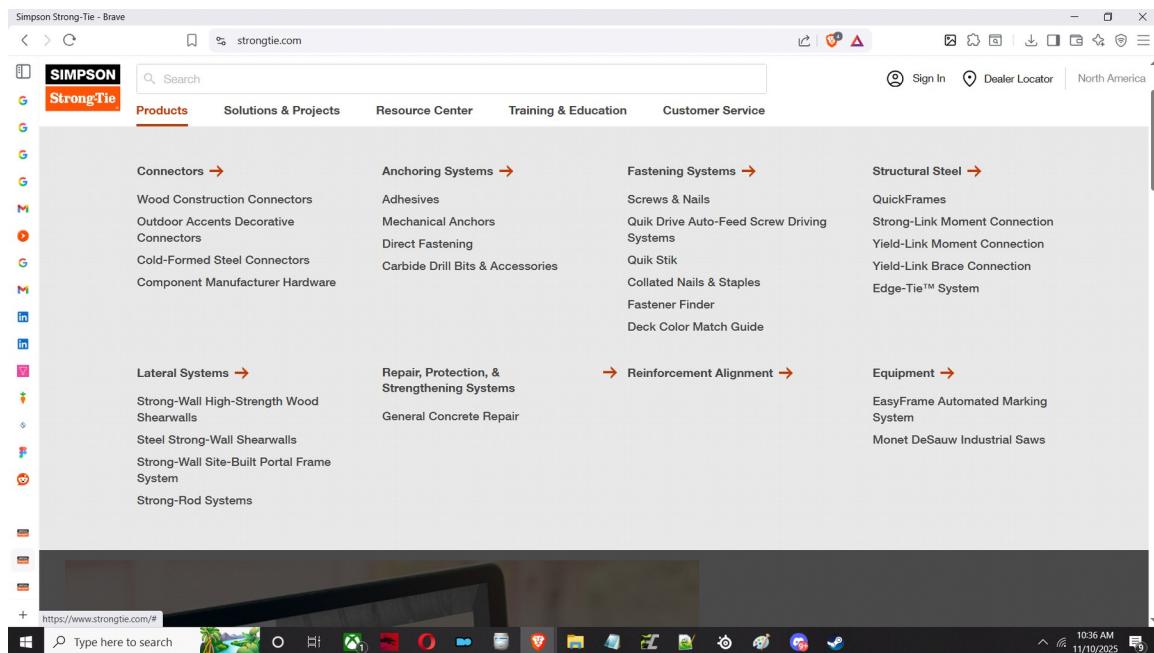
## 4.3 STUDS 2, Components and Templates

STUDS 2 transformed those patterns into reusable components and templates.

- Built a shared React and Blazor library with design tokens.
- Replaced ad hoc navigation with a structured megamenu.
- Introduced accessible CSS, focus states, and semantic HTML.
- Defined reusable hero modules with a single call to action.

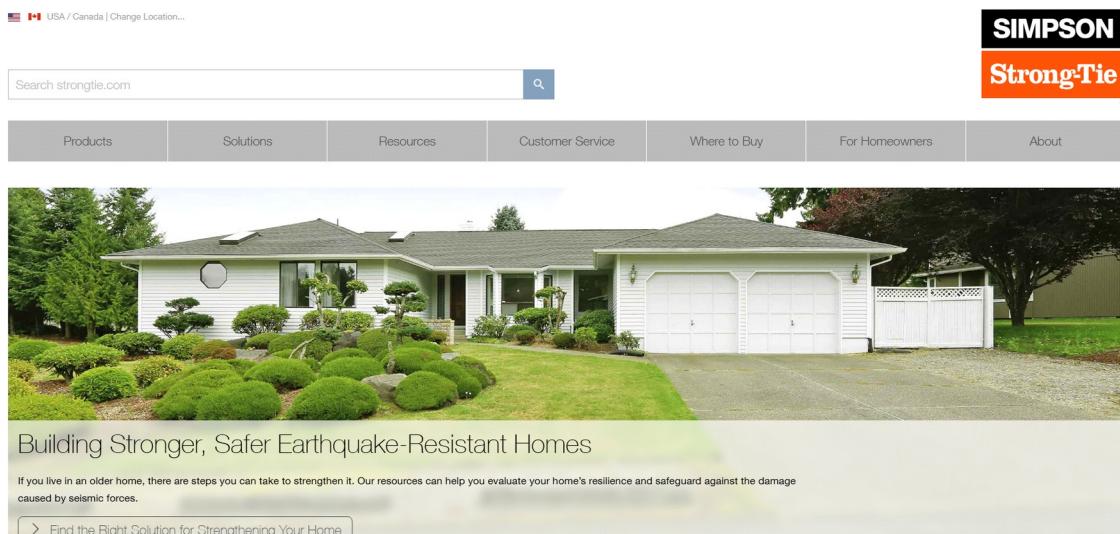


*Before (left): Dense, visually cluttered category structure. After (right): Simplified product navigation with clear grouping and accessible labels.*



## 4.4 Visual Design and Accessibility

The before and after main page screens tell the visual story.



*Before and After: Hero redesign focusing on clear hierarchy, accessible button contrast, and simplified messaging.*

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| Corrosion & Product Use Information        |                                 |   |                          |                                  |                |       |

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*Contrast Example: The old footer, menu items and card colors failed WCAG AA contrast ratios.*

Updated footer and card designs improved readability and hierarchy.

New Wood Construction Connectors Catalog

Our new 2019 Wood Construction Connectors catalog (C-C-2019) is now available. It features product information for all of our wood-to-wood, wood-to-concrete and wood-to-masonry structural connectors, including 14 new products/product series and line extensions.

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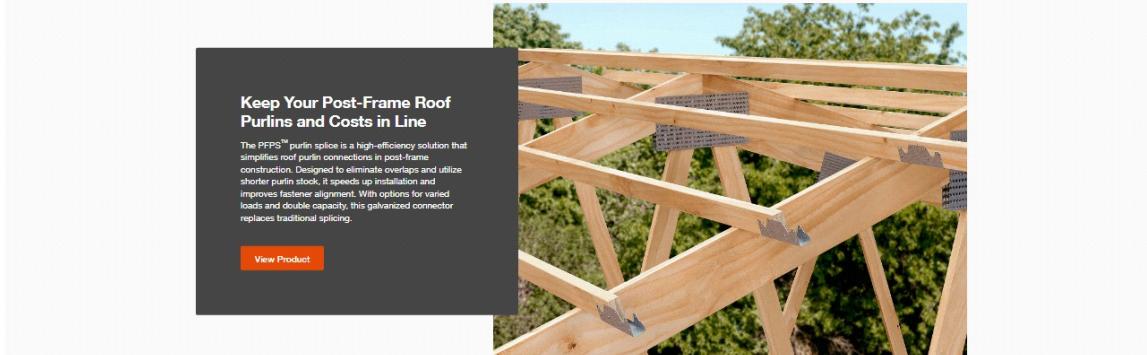
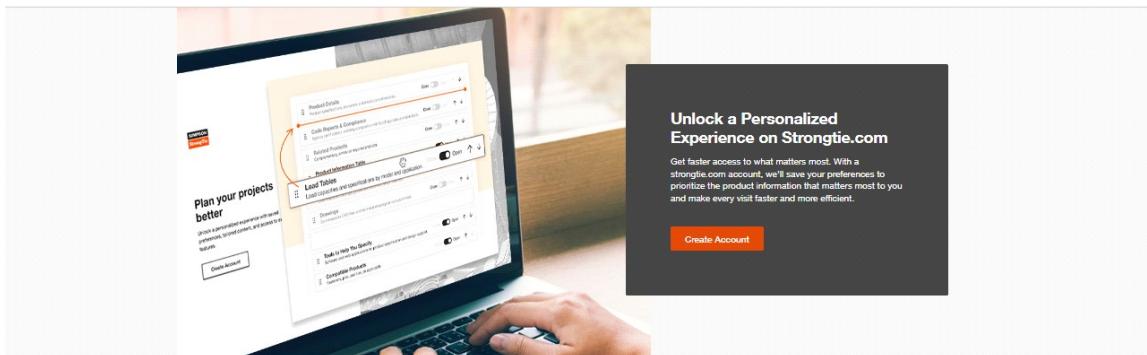
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We've donated more than \$2.5 million to support safe, strong, affordable housing.

**Corrosion Information**

Guidelines for selecting the proper connector coatings and fasteners.

*Before (top): Dense link clusters and poor readability. After (bottom): Accessible footer with consistent hierarchy and improved legibility.*



The screenshot shows the Simpson Strong-Tie website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for 'Products', 'Solutions & Projects', 'Resource Center', 'Training & Education', and 'Customer Service'. A search bar is also present. On the left, there's a sidebar with links like 'About Simpson Strong-Tie', 'Careers', 'Social Impact', 'Product Use & Corrosion Info', and 'Subscribe to Our Newsletter'. The main content area features two blog posts: 'Fine Homebuilding's Expert Guide: Building a Pergola with Jeremy Kassel' and 'Refurbishing the Outdoors: How Simpson Strong-Tie® Hardware Helped Me Create the Perfect Family Space'. Below the posts is a photo of a woman working on a project. At the bottom of the page is a dark footer with various links and a newsletter sign-up form.

## 4.5 STUDS 3, Full Design System

STUDS 3 completed the arc from pattern library to living design system.

- Documented components and usage in Figma and Storybook.
- Integrated visual regression testing and accessibility checks.
- Ran recurring design critiques and facilitated adoption across verticals.

## 5. Results

| Metric                                    | Before   | After     | Impact        |
|---|----------|-----------|---------------|
| Accessibility<br>(WCAG AA<br>compliance)  | ~60%     | 100%      | +40%          |
| Design-to-<br>development<br>handoff time | 5–7 days | 3–4 days  | 20% faster    |
| Visual regression<br>errors               | Frequent | Automated | 95% reduction |

|                        |                   |              |               |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Engagement with CTAs   | <8% click-through | >18% average | +10 pts       |
| Design System Adoption | Ad hoc            | Cross-team   | +30% increase |

*Unified STUDS design system: color, layout, and structure aligned across marketing and product templates.*

## 6. Human Side and Collaboration

This work was not just a set of templates. It was a culture shift. I listened to developers, content editors, and designers and used workshops to build shared ownership. UX research and writing were embedded from the beginning.

## 7. Reflection

Some of the major things I learned while doing this job:

- You *cannot* fix an experience with CSS or styling alone. Structure, language, and accessibility must move together. This is learned behavior, not copy/paste solutions.
- Design systems succeed when they solve *real* product problems. Not just to close the gap between design and engineering.
- Bringing progressively more people into the process creates faster adoption and better outcomes. It also proliferates the mindset of brand-forwardness and customer centricity.

**The Strong Tie modernization from STUDS 1 to STUDS 3 shows how steady, research-informed product design can transform a legacy presence into a unified, accessible platform, fully adherent to our 9 corporate values of doing business.**