Project Overview

In the second year of running our café in Kanazawa, Japan, I found myself at a crossroads. My wife and I had built Café Triangle from the ground up. It being a deeply personal, culture-driven café that celebrated the three sides of our multicultural relationship: my Mexican-American culture, her Japanese culture, and the home we created together. But after nearly two years of working six to seven days a week with no chance of scaling or hiring staff, we were burning out. We weren't failing but we were only surviving. But surviving wasn't enough.

That's when I made a decision that changed the trajectory of my career. I challenged myself to learn web development from scratch, not just theoretically, but with one concrete goal in mind: rebuild our café website by hand, from the ground up. No more Wix templates. No more limitations. Just me, code, and the vision we had for our space.

Every morning, I'd arrive at 4:30 AM to study for five hours before we opened the café. Seven months later, I launched the fully custom-coded site designed with Tailwind CSS, built in Angular, hosted on Netlify, and fully responsive across devices. It featured dark mode, one-touch contact buttons, and support for three languages: English, Japanese, and Spanish.
None of this came from formal training. I had never even heard of UX design when I started. But somehow, almost instinctively, the site reflected everything UX stands for: accessibility, clarity, consistency, and user-centered thinking.

The design was functional and it was personal. Café Triangle wasn't like other trendy minimalist cafés in Japan. **Ours was vibrant, playful, and deeply human**. The site mirrored that identity with bold colors, cultural symbols, and handpicked photography that reflected our space and spirit. From visual tone to layout to interactivity, the entire experience felt like an extension of who we were and what we believed in. **Looking back now, it's clear that this project was the first real expression of me as a UX designer**. I didn't know the terminology yet, but I knew how I wanted users to feel. That intuition became the foundation for everything I've pursued since.

The Problem

Our first website was built using Wix and for the most part it served its purpose during our café's launch, but it quickly revealed a number of critical UX flaws. The most obvious issue was accessibility. Despite being based in Japan, the site was only available in English. It wasn't intentional, it was just a limitation of time and bandwidth as we scrambled to get everything else off the ground. But as time went on, it became a clear friction point.

Japanese customers couldn't easily read the menu or find our operating hours, and we had no support for Spanish speakers either, even though the menu and café concept included Latin American offerings. The site's structure was also static and creatively limited. We didn't have custom contact features, one-touch calling, or even a map integration. It was only plain text and a basic layout. The menu page was particularly problematic. Rather than structured content, we had simply uploaded an image of our printed menu. On smaller screens, it was hard to read; on larger screens, it felt awkward and low-effort. I remember at least a few customers directly commenting that they couldn't easily navigate or understand it, especially on mobile.

Internally, I began to feel frustrated by how uninspired the site was. **I didn't know much about UX at the time, but I knew it didn't feel like "us."** It didn't reflect the vibrancy, personality, or cultural warmth that defined Café Triangle. It was functional at best and forgettable at worst.

At the same time, I began studying other café websites in the region. What I saw surprised me: most were either nonexistent or extremely basic. Few had any mobile optimization. None offered multi-language support. Some didn't even bother listing their hours or location clearly. **I realized there was a real opportunity here to improve our digital presence as much as we continued to improve our physical store.**

That became my quiet design challenge: create something that felt intentional, accessible, and human. Even if we didn't offer reservations or online ordering, our site could still be a warm and welcoming digital front door. One that matched the physical space we had worked so hard to build.

The Solution Part A – Empathize

Long before I started coding the website, I was already doing UX research. I just didn't know it at the time. While preparing our business plan and applying for startup loans, I began studying the café landscape around our location in Kanazawa. **From home, I reviewed dozens of nearby café and restaurant websites (or their absence), documenting what each site included, how the content was structured, and what I found intuitive, confusing, or underwhelming.** I built a research document filled with notes on layout, feature sets, tone, language availability, and visual consistency. Even before touching a line of code, I was thinking critically about how businesses presented themselves online and how users might interact with that information.

Then, once a week, I visited a new café in person. While I didn't conduct formal interviews, I brought a researcher's mindset to each visit. I observed the full experience: how the space felt, how staff greeted customers, how quickly orders arrived, how the menu was presented, how customers navigated the layout, and whether or not there were intentional user flows from entrance to seating to payment. I made notes on small but telling details. Things like bathroom design, pet policy, menu variety, outlet placement, photo rules, even the vibe around studying or staying long.

If I could go back, I'd refine this process by comparing each café's digital presence to their in-person experience. Making sure to check for cohesion and consistency across touchpoints. But even without that step, the insights I gathered were incredibly valuable.

Key Takeaways:

● Most local café websites were basic, static, and single-language (usually Japanese).

● Menu pages often lacked structure or interactivity. Like us, many simply uploaded a scan of their printed menu.
● Few, if any, sites offered mobile responsiveness, quick-contact features, or any sign of UX intent.

● Many cafes offered identical food and drink options which meant, at least to me, that little stood out.

● Some imposed strict rules: no photography, no English menus, no studying. Which especially to travelers or expats created an exclusionary atmosphere we knew we didn't want to replicate.

We saw an opportunity to do things differently and not just physically, but digitally. Our café aimed to be everything those places weren't: warm, inclusive, playful, and cross-cultural. That meant building a website that clearly signaled who we were and who we were for. Especially pet owners, the international community, and curious locals looking for something new. What I didn't realize at the time was that this was empathy work. I was collecting important data but also I was forming a deep understanding of the kind of users we wanted to serve, and the kind of experience we wanted to create for them.

The Solution Part B – Define

While I didn't have formal UX training at the time, my years of customer service and management experience taught me one thing clearly: **if you want to serve people well, you have to think like one of them**.
That mindset guided every design decision I made. I didn't write a formal problem statement or generate a persona map. Yet, throughout the entire process I simply kept asking myself, "*If I were a first-time visitor, what would make my experience easier?*" That single question became the north star for both our café operations and our website redesign.

The most important challenge I wanted to solve was accessibility through language. Our original Wix site was English-only, even though we were based in Japan. The new site made language inclusion non-negotiable. I implemented a one-click language switcher supporting English, Japanese, and Spanish. I believed this to be a digital reflection of the physical menus we printed and kept at the café in all three languages.
The second challenge was communicating our vibe. We wanted people to know instantly that Café Triangle was warm, casual, and inclusive.

That meant showcasing:

● Our pet-friendly atmosphere (which was one of the most defining things about our cafe and actually led to a huge portion of our future sales.)

● Our international menu, featuring hard-to-find items like horchata, tres leches cake, burritos, and chicken & waffles

● Our study-friendly policy, which we highlighted through both the website and our social media channels

Every visual, every content choice, and every UX detail from dark/light mode support to responsive layout to one-touch contact features was designed to reinforce this simple truth: **you're welcome here.**

Looking back, it's clear that even without formal UX tools, I was doing the work. Now I know that I was translating our values into digital form. I was thinking from the user's perspective, reducing friction, and anticipating needs. **That's the heart of UX, even if I didn't yet have the vocabulary for it**.

The Solution Part C – Ideate

Because I wasn't using tools like Figma yet, my ideation process was entirely hands-on and built through code, tested live, and refined in real time. Trial and error became my default workflow. I'd implement a feature, test how it looked and behaved, then refactor or delete it entirely if it didn't feel right. My version of wireframing was building components directly and modifying them until they matched the vision in my head. I started with a clear checklist of what I wanted the site to do:

● A vibrant, image-forward hero section that showcased our best desserts with hover-triggered name and price overlays.

● A fully trilingual language toggle (English, Spanish, Japanese).

● A responsive, filterable menu where users could easily browse drinks, food, and pastries by category.

● Seamless responsiveness across devices.

● One-touch call and contact buttons.

I worked top-down, beginning with the navbar and progressing through the layout page by page. Each section went through at least three major iterations before I landed on the final version. I leaned on Angular for structure (despite its steep learning curve) and Tailwind CSS for design flexibility. Where I lacked experience, I adapted existing solutions which I strongly believe is a normal part of the learning process. Things like an animated multicolor shine navbar or responsive image galleries, modifying open-source components until they became my own.

Throughout the process, I held myself to high standards. I ran constant Lighthouse audits, optimized images for web formats like .webp, limited typography to no more than two fonts, and followed basic color theory principles to guide tone and contrast. I designed for clarity, not just aesthetics. Even without formal UX methods, I was instinctively prioritizing hierarchy, balance, and ease of use. I checked every decision against one guiding question: **Does this make the experience easier or more confusing for the user**? That simple filter helped me stay focused and when I needed a second opinion, I turned to my wife, who offered practical feedback from the lens of both business co-founder and user.

At times, I cut features simply because they were too unstable to implement with Angular's current version. I scrapped sliders and third-party animations that didn't play well with the framework. It wasn't about stacking features. It was about maintaining flow. This phase wasn't about perfection. It was about learning by doing, shaping the site section by section, and slowly developing a UX mindset that blended both user empathy and technical decision-making. Looking back, it was one of the most creatively rewarding periods of my life.

The Solution Part D – Prototype & Build

Once I had a clear vision for what I wanted, I shifted into full execution mode. I built the website using Angular and Tailwind CSS, supplemented with standard CSS where needed. Since the site didn't require a backend, it functioned as a fully static front-end application, fast, focused,

and clean. For multilingual support, I used Angular's ngx-translate library, which allowed me to deliver a seamless language toggle experience in English, Japanese, and Spanish. The site was hosted on Netlify, with the domain purchased through Namecheap.

I structured the codebase with modularity and reusability in mind. Components were broken down by sections such as Navbar, Hero, Footer, MenuPage, MenuCard, etc. Wherever I could, I avoided hardcoding. Instead, I used Angular's structural directives like *ngFor to iterate over data arrays and dynamically render repeatable content. For example, while the menu appeared to display dozens of cards, each category (Food, Dessert, Drinks) used the same underlying component with different data inputs in order to maximize scalability and efficiency. Much of the build phase was driven by continuous iteration and refinement.I wanted the site to work well for its users. That meant frequent refactoring to improve Lighthouse scores, which became a personal benchmark. I optimized for performance, accessibility, SEO.

This included:

● Lazy loading images

● Converting assets to .webp format

● Compressing files

● Removing Google-hosted fonts and self-hosting them for faster load times

● Carefully managing font pairing and limiting the site to two font families for visual consistency

● Using semantic HTML and appropriate ARIA tags
Responsive design was also a top priority. I used Tailwind's breakpoint system to adapt layouts across screen sizes. This meant vertical stacking on mobile, two-column layouts on medium screens, and three or four-column grids for desktops. These adjustments ensured the site felt intentional and easy to navigate no matter the device.

For testing, I gathered informal feedback from friends and family. I asked about ten people to browse the site across various devices and give candid thoughts on usability, navigation clarity, and general impression. Based on their input, I fixed minor spacing issues and resolved a few layout inconsistencies. Nothing major broke but those small adjustments made a big difference in polish.

One technical hurdle I ran into during deployment was a common issue with Netlify and single-page applications: refreshing a page caused a 404 error. I resolved it by setting up a redirect configuration (*_redirects file*) to reroute all requests to index.html, ensuring smooth navigation even when users refreshed or deep-linked to a route. Again, the UX-oriented mindset wanted to ensure users did not experience pain points that could be easily solved.

Of course being human I made mistakes. I truly dropped the ball in tracking post-launch analytics. I didn't install tracking or monitor user behavior closely. That's something I've since learned from and would absolutely include in any future UX or dev project. But even without metrics, the feedback I got was clear: the site was smooth, beautiful, intuitive, and deeply representative of who we were as a business.

Outcome

Once the new Café Triangle website launched, the feedback was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. Friends and family commented on how easy it was to use, how quickly they could find information, and how clearly the design reflected our café's personality. Some noticed the subtle details like the clean layout, the intentional color palette, the fact that it didn't look like every other café website in the area. Others appreciated the small UX touches like the animated "Call Us" and "Get Directions" buttons that made interaction feel obvious and effortless.

When we shared the site on Instagram, where most of our community engagement happened, the response was equally affirming. Multiple people noted that the website "felt like us" and that it captured the same warmth, culture, and playfulness as the space itself. That meant a lot, because that alignment wasn't accidental. **It was the result of careful decisions, made day by day, through many many hours of trial, error, and quiet iteration.**
We even noticed an uptick in new customer phone calls. Several people mentioned that they had found us through the website and called to ask

about offerings. We took this as small signals that the site was doing its job. I didn't have the skills at the time to track analytics or quantify performance, but that didn't matter to me. I knew it was working as a business tool and as a digital embodiment of who we were.

Furthermore, personally, the moment the site went live, hosted on a real domain, coded entirely by me, I knew I had accomplished something major. When we opened our café, I had zero technical skills. I didn't know how to code, how to design, or how to structure a website. I genuinely thought coding was reserved for math geniuses or people with computer science degrees and I was neither. But this project proved otherwise. I showed myself that with discipline, grit, and obsessive curiosity, I could teach myself a skill I once thought impossible.

Even though I didn't fully understand UX as a field back then, I realize now that I was practicing it intuitively the entire time. I constantly asked questions like, "*Is this clear? Would a Japanese user understand this icon? Does this layout make sense across languages?*" It was instinctive. Like my brain was running in **UX mode** without knowing the term for it. Looking back, this project didn't just mark the beginning of my coding journey, **it marked the foundation of what would become a deep, lasting passion for user experience.** I was building something for people. And that's what UX is all about.

Reflection & Lessons Learned

If I were to start this project today, I'd approach it very differently, not because I regret how I did it, but because I now have the tools and perspective to take it even further. Back then, I jumped straight into code. Today, I'd begin with ideation. I'd sketch, wireframe, and prototype. I'd use Figma, build user personas, and apply the design thinking framework to guide decisions more systematically. I'd still trust my intuition because experience and instinct matter but I'd balance that with process. Most importantly, I'd give equal attention to the post-launch phase. When I built the café website, I didn't track analytics or measure user behavior. At the time, just getting it online felt like the finish line. **Now I know: the real work begins after launch. Testing, feedback, iteration, they're all part of the UX process, and they're what turns a good product into a great one**.

This project also gave me a glimpse of my design identity. Even before I formally pivoted to UX, I found myself gravitating toward structure, color, simplicity, and clarity. Traits that still define my design language today. In fact, my current UX portfolio carries the same visual DNA: clean, focused layouts with intentional color and contrast. That design sensibility was born during this project.

Although I didn't officially transition into UX until years later, I can now see that this was the beginning. I wasn't just building a website, I was designing for people. I was asking: Does this make sense to the user? Will they understand this icon? Is this for me or for them? I didn't know the term for it yet, but I was already practicing the core mindset of UX. In the end, this remains the most meaningful project of my life. Not because it was perfect, but because it was mine. I started with zero technical skills. I didn't believe I was smart enough to code. But I worked, learned, and kept going. And I built something real. Something that reflected who we were and what we stood for.

I believe and hope that others agree that UX **isn't just about credentials**. **It's about care, intention, and execution**. If nothing else, this project taught me a truth I'll carry forward in every UX challenge ahead: Hard work beats talent. And good design always puts the user first.