The Zen of CSS Design: Visual Enlightenment for the Web
by Dave Shea and Molly E. Holzschlag
Reviewed by John Davey

Almost any list of references to websites about cascading style sheets (CSS), including the resources page of the PACS CSS Workshop, http://www.jadavey.net/PACS_CSS/, will include a link to css Zen Garden: The Beauty in CSS Design, http://www.csszengarden.com/. The premise of the site is simple. Webmaster Dave Shea posted a plain HTML document and challenged users to style it without changing any of the tags. The execution of that idea was not simple, though--it took a fine sense of web design concepts and a lot of forethought to tag the page with the hooks that designers would need.

The result was stunning. The site quickly developed into a varied collection of creative designs that stretch the envelope of CSS, but within the bounds of valid coding. As of this writing, there are 645 submissions in the site's archive, an outstanding example of creativity and online collaboration.

The project has yielded so much material that it is difficult to take it all in. And it takes a keen eye to parse the stylesheets and understand how the designs were created. Dave Shea and co-author Molly Holzschlag have performed a fine service to the web design community by compiling a review of thirty-six of the submissions into a well-organized guide to advanced design techniques.

The Zen of CSS Design is divided into seven chapters. The first is a brief but informed review of the development of web standards, leading to the idea of the Zen Garden site. The book then moves into Laying the Foundation, an outline of the Zen Garden HTML source. There are some honest critiques of Shea's own HTML, proving that even the best can find ways to improve. This section is valuable in itself to understanding that a good CSS page starts with solid HTML, a point that is often lost on new designers. (I recently saw a post on a chat board where the writer wanted good sources for learning CSS, her plan being to pick up HTML as she went along. I suggested she reverse the order of her studying.)

The next five chapters cover design, layout, imagery, typography, and special effects. Each chapter takes six submissions to Zen Garden and analyzes the techniques each designer used to create the styles, in the process expounding on different web design issues. The commentaries vary in detail. The review of Night Drive (#064) was particularly informative as a step by step analysis, and that makes sense as it is one of author Dave Shea's contribution. Other reviews are more general, but for most of us, they are all are more instructional than just reviewing the source would be.

Throughout the book the authors give their insights into issues that challenge web designers all the time, such as font sizing (they suggest that three methods are reliable, each with pros and cons), web-safe colors (generally not important any more) and fixed versus elastic design (your call, but they give you some good advice). An unexpected bonus is a section on Photoshop techniques that Dave Shea used in Coastal Breeze (#013).

Most important for getting to this level of web design are image replacement techniques, and the authors give a nice rundown of the current methods. I knew about this idea and had actually wondered how to do it. This book is a very good starting point.

The final chapter is called Reconstruction. Again, it uses six sites as examples, but this time goes step by step through the development of the style sheets. It can be difficult to see how effects were created just by looking at the source, and this section shows how the code was brought along from start to finish. The individual images used by each designer are shown by themselves so that readers can see the raw graphic material that was then incorporated into the design. This touch is particularly helpful, and the chapter gives a good picture of how image replacement techniques work.

There are insights that one might not pick up from just looking through the Zen Garden website. I did not realize, for instance, that some of the submissions render differently in different browsers, usually as a result of designers having to deal with the peculiarities of Internet Explorer. It was remarkable to discover that Egor Kloos' Gemination site (#062) has two completely different renderings. Open it in Firefox and then in Explorer to see the difference. Easier yet, open it in Netscape 8 and use that browser's dual-engine design to switch between IE and Mozilla. One style sheet, two different pages!

One of the best things about this book is in fact the attention to cross-browser design. The inconsistency of current CSS support can be daunting, but it helps to know that even high-level designers are struggling with the problem. And it's great that this community is willing to share its solutions, giving the rest of us an idea of the possibilities that exist within the limitations we have to deal with.

Throughout the book, there is sidebar material that is a veritable encyclopedia of CSS resources on the web. One could just run through the sidebars and get an excellent education. The Closing Thoughts section is another valuable resource, with additional web references plus a nice "Crib Sheet" of solutions to common problems. And the index got me right to topics when I wanted to go back and check them again.

A comment should be made on the book itself. As befits a design book, this one is beautifully done. The graphics are nicely reproduced, and the type and page arrangement are attractive as well as effective. If there is such a thing as a coffee table book for computer jocks, this is it.

Some details on some sites might be too small to be seen well in the book. In those cases, the site needs to be pulled up. Probably the best way to use this book is to do just that--prop it next to a computer and open each site as you go along.

This book is not for CSS beginners. My own choice is Callihan, Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) By Example (Que 2002) . And despite its broad coverage, The Zen of CSS Design is not a general CSS reference. Meyer, Cascading Style Sheets, The Definitive Guide, 2d Edition (O'Reilly 2004) is probably the classic in that regard. But just as the CSS Zen Garden site is unique and belongs in every list of bookmarks, The Zen of CSS Design is itself unique and belongs on every web designer's bookshelf.

There is a revolution going on in web design. This book is its manifesto.

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