Week 9 unit: critique

Reflection

One of the great things about this course is that it is so easy to find inspiration and open-source material to further your knowledge and understanding of what makes a good website and how to achieve it. The main place I’ve discovered great websites is on awwwards.com which, by definition is meant to contain the best sites out there, as voted for by design and developer experts.

The way I’ve looked for inspiration is by searching for the type of site which is likely to contain the sorts of elements and effects I’m trying to achieve. In week 6 while working on my version of a classmate’s project I came across a new challenge which I had to find a solution for. I needed to find a way to build a permanent sidebar containing navigation icons. There were quite a few different things going on (e.g. lining up the icons, floating them, adding a hover action) and I had to find code to cover all of the things I was trying to achieve. One of the websites I looked at to see how their code worked was <https://edwin-europe.com> which won Site of the Day on 24th June. I also liked the <http://weaintplastic.com/> site and from there I went onto Melanie Daveid’s portfolio (<http://melaniedaveid.com/>). For my own project I looked at quite a few sites which contain galleries and while some were very impressive and beautifully designed to showcase their skills (e.g. <http://www.paulineosmont.com/>) their coding was quite advanced and too complex for my current level.

Design process-wise I certainly found it easier when I was working on my classmate’s project. I think because it was possible to keep it simple and clean, as opposed to working on a site for myself, as I have been for the past 10 weeks which gets more and more complicated as more content and ideas for what to include pop into your head.

Another issue I had, further down the road, was just getting bored and a bit uninspired by my own project. This is another of the reasons it was good to work on someone else’s brief for a couple of weeks. This is also why I’ve decided to switch to a new project for my final two weeks. On reflection, I think the project I chose was too personal and it was tough to detach myself and think of myself as the client.

I had to start making my project responsive from the start, pretty much, since I was working on it at home as well as at work (in my spare time) on two different-sized screens. It seemed fairly intuitive therefore to express sizes and the relationship between elements in terms of percentages. What’s interesting, but logical, is that the font size should remain above a certain minimum for accessibility reasons. Obviously there are parts of the site that can’t keep shrinking indefinitely or they won’t be legible anymore.

Reviews

Group 1

<https://medium.com/>

Layout: The home page is very simple and clean: a white column on the left containing the headlines, hero images (for some) and teaser intros from articles posted in chronological order (these load ‘infinitely’ as you scroll down); pale grey column on the right enabling to find articles by topic and below that featuring the top 10 articles. Running across the top is a white bar containing the title of the website as a word mark and three navigation prompts on the left, then a search box, a call to action button prompting to “write a story”, a notification icon and a profile thumbnail (or sign up button if you’re not logged on). The nav bar is in fact two navs: one with elements floated left and the other with elements floated right. The rationale seems to be about putting the articles at the forefront of what the website is about, while making it clear that you are encouraged to submit your own content and comments. On the mobile and iPad the elements are all there, just stacked up neatly with the articles taking up most of the width of the page.

Typography: The fonts are black or grey with the occasional hyperlink in green. Most titles and links are sans-serif ("jaf-bernino-sans","Lucida Grande","Lucida Sans Unicode","Lucida Sans",Geneva,Verdana,sans-serif;) but the body of the article/story is in a serif font ("freight-text-pro",Georgia,Cambria,"Times New Roman",Times,serif) to make it more legible. Significantly, the name of the site is also in serif font so that it stands out from the other titles.

Navigation: The navigation prompts, as mentioned, are clearly marked at the top of the screen. The nav bar at the top remains the same whether on the HOME, TOP STORIES or BOOKMARKS page but the anchor tag is in bold and underlined to indicate which page you’re on. The navigation is quite intuitive and it’s obvious where to click on to get to the article or to browse for others. Once you’ve clicked into an article the left nav reduces to just the initial of the wordmark to take you back to the homepage. The right nav remains so that you can search for other articles and see that you’re still logged in.

Overall flow: The simplicity of the site makes it quite straightforward to get to grips with navigation. The design is very much pared down to avoid distracting from the main purpose which is to read and engage with articles and their authors.

My conclusions: I’m finding it hard to find any negative points about Medium from an aesthetic, IA or UX point of view. I liked it so much I signed up.

Group 2

<http://www.spectrumpowderworks.com/>

Layout: The homepage is set to a boxy landscape layout, even when viewed on a smaller screen (iPhone or iPad). There isn’t any attempt at centering the title in the header or the navigation items in the footer. If it’s by choice it’s unclear what it adds to the effect. I general it looks very busy since there are four images in the middle which take up most of the space which expand when hovered over. On hovering a title and subtitle come up for each image prompting a call to action to find out more. The four titles don’t relate to the seven navigation items in the footer, which is confusing. The first of the four images is titled ‘About us’ and takes you to another page on the site which still has the title in the header taking you back to the homepage, the nav in the footer and then also a menu listing more items on the right of the screen. Some of these items are the same as the ones in the footer (e.g. “tech info”). Back to the homepage, selecting either of the other 4 images takes you offsite to a photo gallery displaying the type of metalwork painting they do.

Typography: Apart from the title it looks like one sans serif font has been used throughout, either in uppercase or in lowercase. Generally the titles are uppercase and the rest of the text and links are lowercase. This means that the text has no capitalizing at the beginning of each sentence. There’s quite a lot of text so this added to the fact it’s a sans typeface with not enough colour contrast to the background means it’s quite hard to read. The centering/lack of padding issue appears a few times which gives the impression of an unprofessional site.

Navigation: As mentioned, the IA of the site is confusing. There’s a lot of information that’s useful but looks like it’s added in as an afterthought (e.g. the pricing) and additional pages which don’t work or don’t contain anything. The same information (including the gallery photos hosted offsite) could be displayed in a more linear and logical way.

Overall flow: The overall impression is of a dated and highly textured website. The design probably pre-dates the rise of mobile web navigation. They appear to be still in business so I would guess most of their trade is through word of mouth and local knowledge.