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Web UI Trends Present & Future

The Elegance of Minimalism

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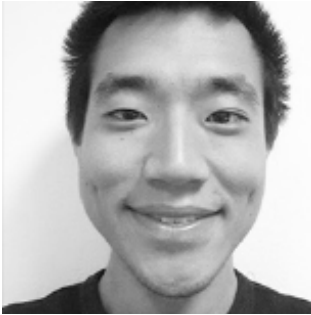
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Thinking Minimally

Minimalism is one of the most enduring trends in web design given its timeless elegance and clear presentation of content. While cycles of popularity come and go, the design technique is a classic and lasting visual philosophy for designers across all mediums including web design.

Although the current minimalism trend is centered around [negative space](#) and black lettering – the core of minimalism – it is not a technique that is unique to web design. [Roots of minimalism](#) in design can be traced to the early 1900s as print designer Lucian Bernhard pioneered a simpler design language.

What's most interesting about the trend, however, is how it seems to glide through time. Designers of every era find themselves connected to a minimalist trend of some fashion, including the minimalism explosion of 2015.

“Less is more.”

Those three little words are the simplest definition of minimalism. The spirit of minimal web design is to create a high impact, impressive visual website without a lot of bells and whistles.

Minimalism in web design is the purest form of sculpture through subtraction – perfection is achieved not when there’s nothing more to add, but when there’s nothing more you can take away.

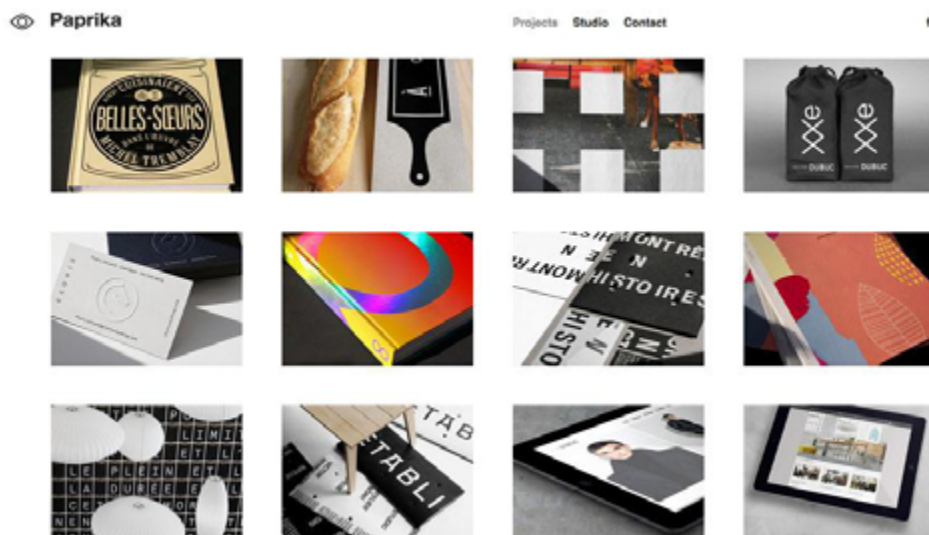


Photo credit: <http://paprika.com/>

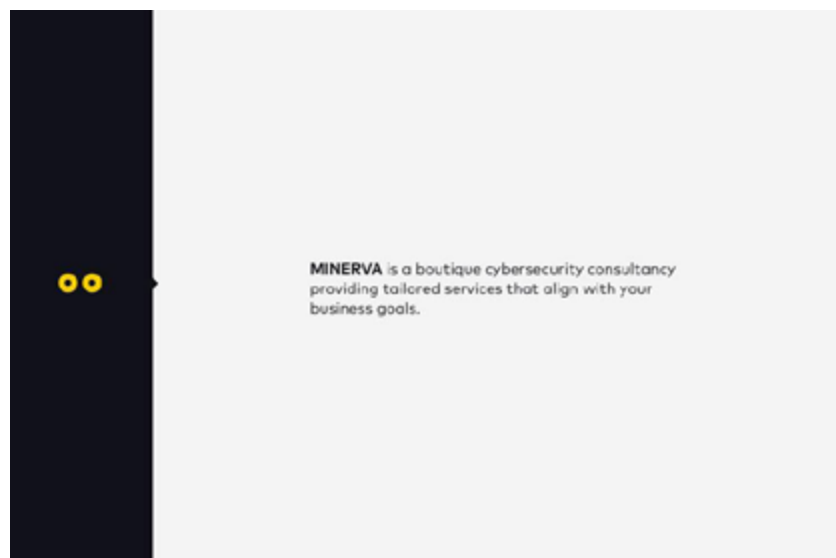


Photo credit: <http://minerva-is.net/>



Photo credit: <http://fabrik.co.jp/>

A minimal design by nature is not stark or barren, although it certainly can be.

Minimal design is intentional. It is a trend that strips most of the extra elements from a framework to leave only the necessary content and aesthetic. Most minimal website designs will not include a lot of color (palettes often only have one color aside from neutrals), texture or shapes or accents.

Minimalism works because it does what all design should do – put the focus and **emphasis on content**.

Minimalism and Other Trends

While minimal design has been around for almost a century, its popularity is partly due to other design trends as well.

Minimalism correlates directly with many of 2015's biggest web design features – flat design, large photography, simple navigation and stellar typography. While the trends are not always symbiotic, they are often shared.

1. Flat Design

While it was originally defined by an abundance of bright color, flat design has toned down and now works exceptionally well with minimal frameworks.



Photo credit: <http://wonderfulcolorado.karshhagan.com/>

The trends mesh because of similar characteristics in visual planning and in the use of content itself. Because flat design de-em-

phasizes design tricks, the stripped away concept pairs well with the philosophy of minimalism. The combination is quite common in modern websites – minimal visual hierarchy accentuated with touches of flat design in UI elements like icons and colors.

When it comes to comparing flat design and minimalism, designer and blogger Addison Duvall describes it best with a [food analogy](#):

If flat design is a trendy new ingredient used in all the hippest restaurants, then minimalism is the classic cookbook that the very best chefs all consult when coming up with new ideas for dishes.

2. Large Photography

For designers who feel that pure minimalist sites feel too emotionally distant, oversized photographs add a comforting touch of familiarity without dominating the foreground.

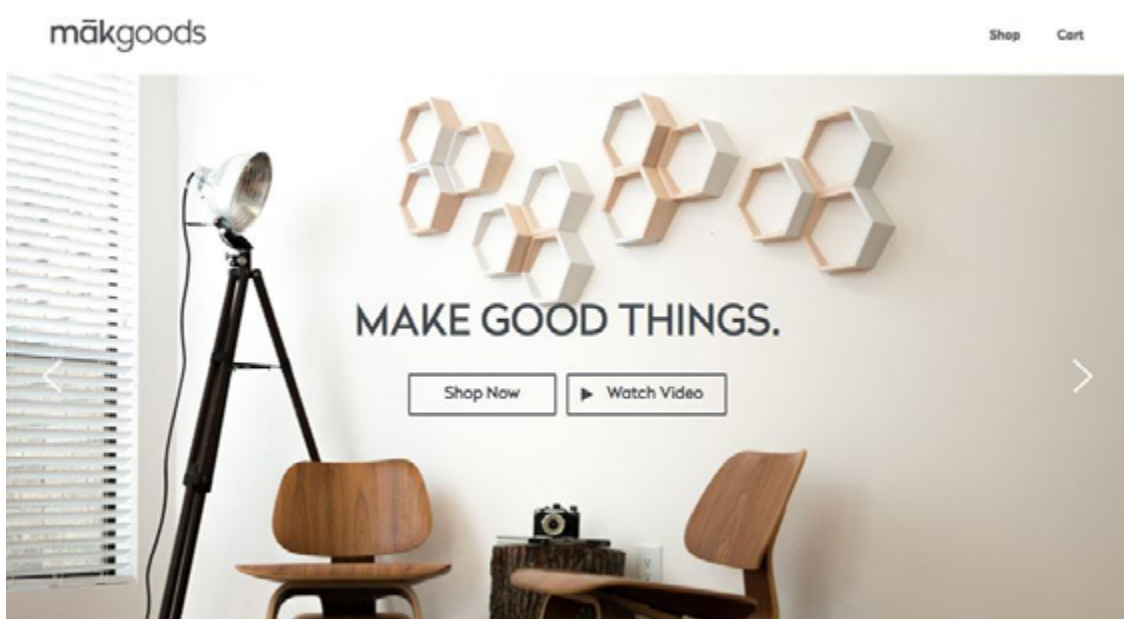


Photo credit: <https://makgoods.com/>

The most prominent form of artwork in minimalist design, **hero headers** and **hero images** are defined by a dramatic image or slider placed near the top of the scroll.

3. Simple Navigation

Minimalism meets the **hamburger icon**.

It sounds simple enough, right? A simple design aesthetic paired with the simplest (and **most controversial**) of navigation tools. Even designers who are veterans of minimal frameworks are ditching traditional navigation for the hamburger icon to further trim the number of UI elements.



Photo credit: <http://thru-you-too.com/#/>

Before you implement a hamburger menu to help simplify your interface, make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. As **Adobe** UX Designer Sandyha Talwalker suggests, make sure you understand the **primary, secondary, and tertiary functions** behind the navigation design.

Remember that hamburger menus also result in less discoverability of navigation items, and they can be less clear to people [over 44 years old](#) (as Linn Vizard of Usability Matters points out). Know your users and the context, then decide if the hamburger menu makes sense.

4. Stellar Typography

With an emphasis on content, comes an emphasis on readability and consequently typography. Beautiful, sharp and even [custom typography](#) is a perfect focal point in a minimal framework.

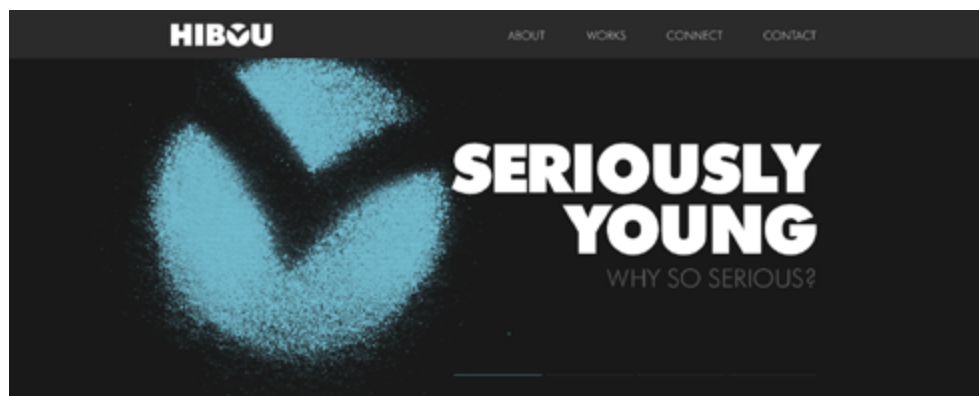


Photo credit: [Hibou Digital](#) via [awwwards](#)

Typography brings focus to the words and content while creating an intriguing visual. As we described in [Web UI Trends Present & Future: Typography](#), the most impressive examples of minimal design and typography in 2015 often include bold styles with thick strokes and interesting letterforms as a dominant element paired with a more neutral typeface for other content.

Design in Space

The primary design element that most people associate with minimalism is space. And in particular, white space. Lots of it.

But as we described in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, minimal design isn't just a small visual surrounded by a colorless expanse. The style also encompasses space of any color, although textures are not included in this context. White, black or very dark backgrounds are the most popular, but some designers also express negative space through full color backgrounds.

As shown below, **Lindvall A&D** uses a bright aqua background with simple navigation, elements and a line drawing on the homepage to lure users into the architecture firm's website.



Photo credits: <http://www.jonaslindvall.com/>

Interior pages fit into the minimal style as well, with simple images against a stark white background. A common element across the

color and white pages, both pages include plenty of negative space (alternate term for white space) which further emphasize the images on the page.

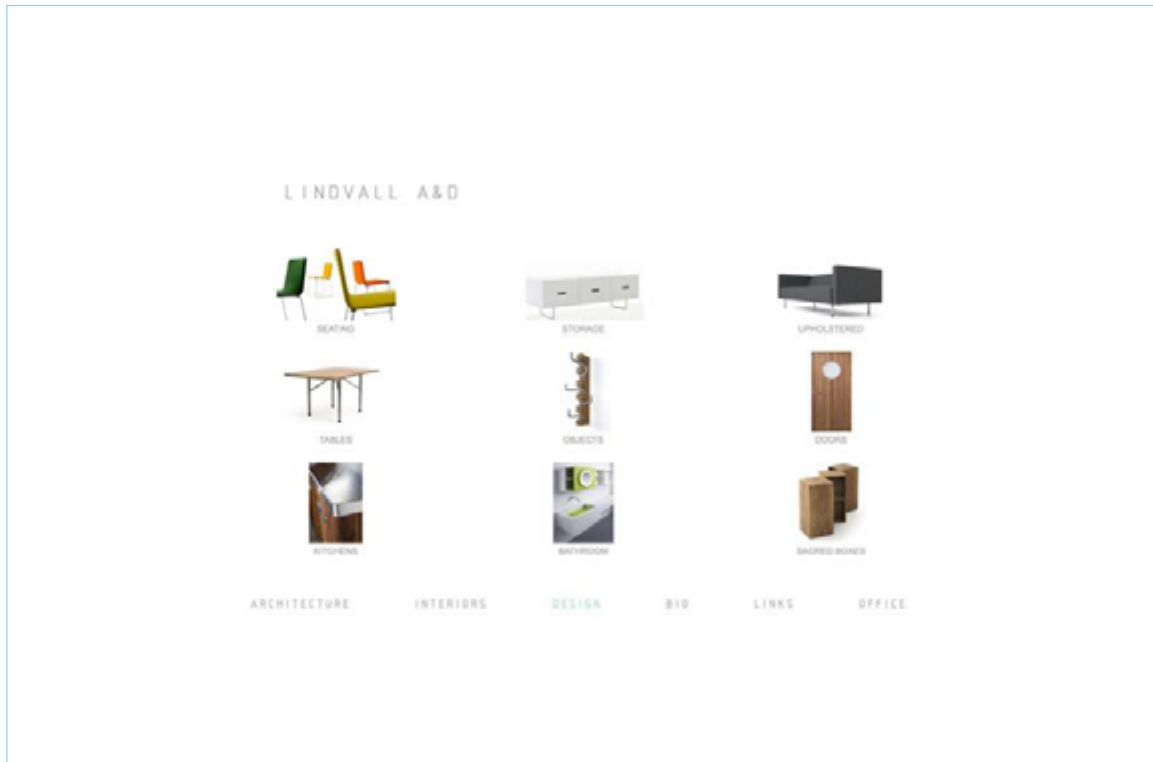


Photo credits: <http://www.jonaslindvall.com/>

Generous negative space **creates a sense of luxury** while drawing the eyes more towards the visuals. The treatment makes a lot of sense for this architectural design firm, considering how they want to appear sophisticated and draw attention to the most important part of the page: the images of their work.

To learn more about using negative space as a design tool, we highly recommend **this practical guide** from **Six Revisions**.

Create Visual Harmony

To be most effective, a minimal design framework needs a solid backbone and structure. The key components of visual organization include a strong grid, visual balance, and close attention to alignment.

A strong grid is the foundation for organization. The grid creates a sense of space and where space “lives” in the design, helping the designer place and arrange elements in a way that communicate purpose.

It’s also very important to clarify that alignment is not the same as centering content.

While many minimal designs include the bulk of content in the center of the screen, it is not the only solution. Elements can be aligned anywhere along a grid – text, in particular, can be aligned to the left, right or center.

Arko, below, does a great job of mixing and matching alignment styles to create visual interest and balance while using plenty of white space.

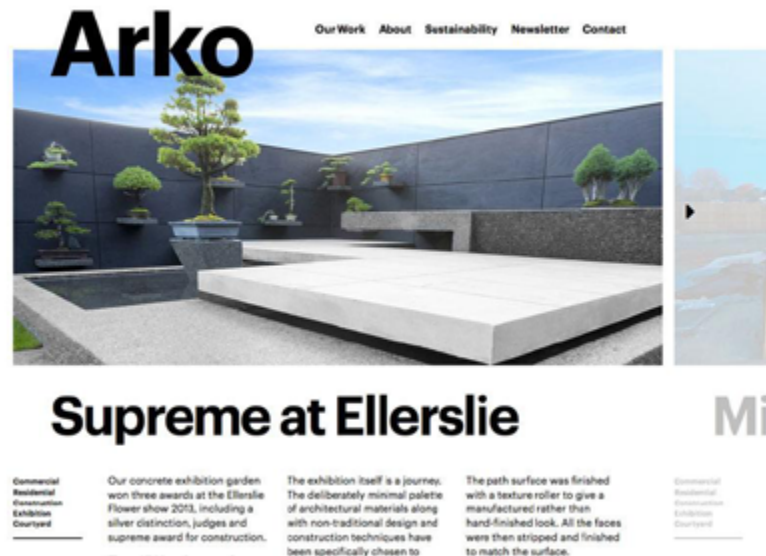


Photo credit: <http://www.arko.co.nz/>

When it comes to minimalism, many people jump to perfectly symmetrical concepts, but this is not a necessity. Because content will likely be simple and streamlined, the most popular ways to accomplish this are through pairings of large and small elements that balance each other out.

Balance comes in four forms:

1. **Horizontal symmetry:** Both sides of the screen have equal weight with similar groupings of elements.



Photo credit: [Hungcwot](#) via [awwwards](#)

- 2. Approximate symmetry:** Elements are different on the screen, but the visual weight is the same; this is often accomplished by pairing a lot of space or one large element against a grouping of smaller elements.



Photo credit: [Squarespace](#)

- 3. Radial symmetry:** The focal point of the design starts in the center of the screen and moves outward in an almost concentric-circle style pattern, such as the [Carlo Barberis site](#) below.

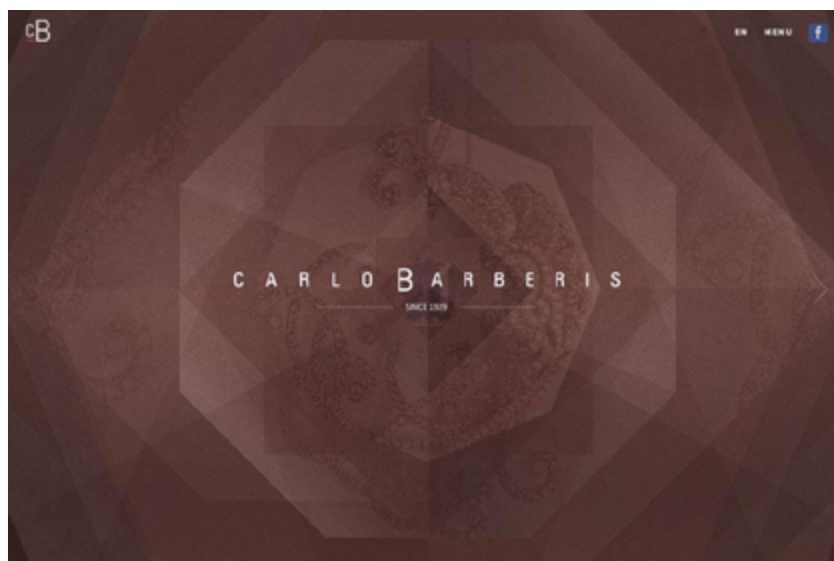


Photo credit: <http://www.carlobarberis.com/en/>

- 4. Asymmetry:** Objects are designed to purposefully counter one another on the screen with shapes, colors and sizes of contrasting styles. This is arguably the most difficult layout to execute well, considering there's only a fine line between a visually interesting layout and a confusing mess.

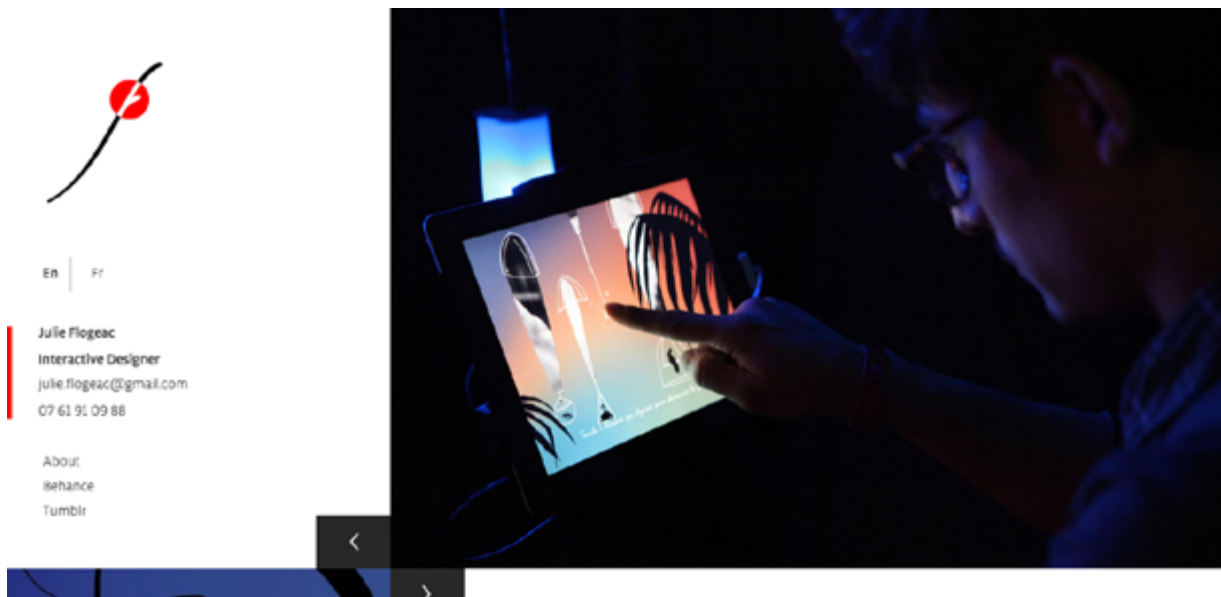


Photo credit: *Julie Flogeac* via [awwwards](#)

Contrast Elements

The white background is such a popular choice among minimalist designers because it's the perfect canvas for creating contrast. A hallmark of minimalist design, black or white backgrounds are commonly overlaid with small colorful elements or a bold image.

As we described in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, designers can create contrast with color, size, shape, location and scale. Contrast brings focus and attention to a design element, but also creates a sense of direction and hierarchy so that users feel guided through the visuals.

Photographer Jorge Riera's site uses contrast in beautiful ways that change page by page. On the homepage, a large white canvas includes simple, single-line navigation and a large image and the bottom of the screen in black with thick strokes and a bold feel.

HOME WHO I AM PORTFOLIO BLOG CONTACT EN / ES / FR



Photo credits: <http://www.jorgeriaflores.com/>.

Move to the “Who I Am” page for a lesson in typographic and size contrast – custom lettering versus a simple sans serif, and oversized font versus a size that many designers would consider more appropriate for [microcopy](#) rather than body copy.



Photo credits: <http://www.jorgeriaflores.com/>.

Normally, we’d recommend against this tactic due to accessibility and usability issues, but this is an edge case in which small body copy might actually be acceptable since it’s not the focal point. Instead, most of the page is occupied with images and examples of work (as you scroll down), which makes sense for an art director who probably prefers to show rather than tell.

How to Design Minimally

A minimal design framework can be a challenge if you are not prepared. Designers – and clients if the site is work for hire – must be willing to do without a lot of common design elements and features. Content and messaging must be streamlined and simple.

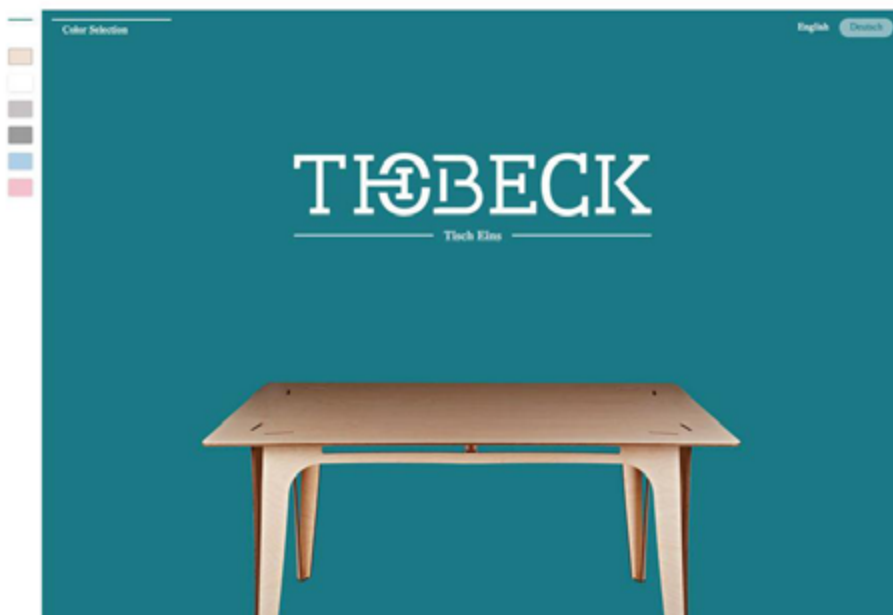


Photo credit: <http://thobek.com/>



Photo credit: <http://www.cultivatedwit.com/>

For these reasons, minimalism is most commonly used for agency sites and creative portfolios – it can be difficult to execute for larger businesses considering the vast inventory of content and the unfortunate reality of separate departments (like marketing) arguing for different priorities.

However, you could pursue the option of creating a landing page using the minimal style that serves a gateway to the rest of the site or other information. Even if you don't follow this exact tactic, you can still achieve a more minimalist look across the entire site by designing from the content outwards.

As [Squarespace](#) shows below, exercise Hemingway-like discipline in your copy, then pair it with captivating images.

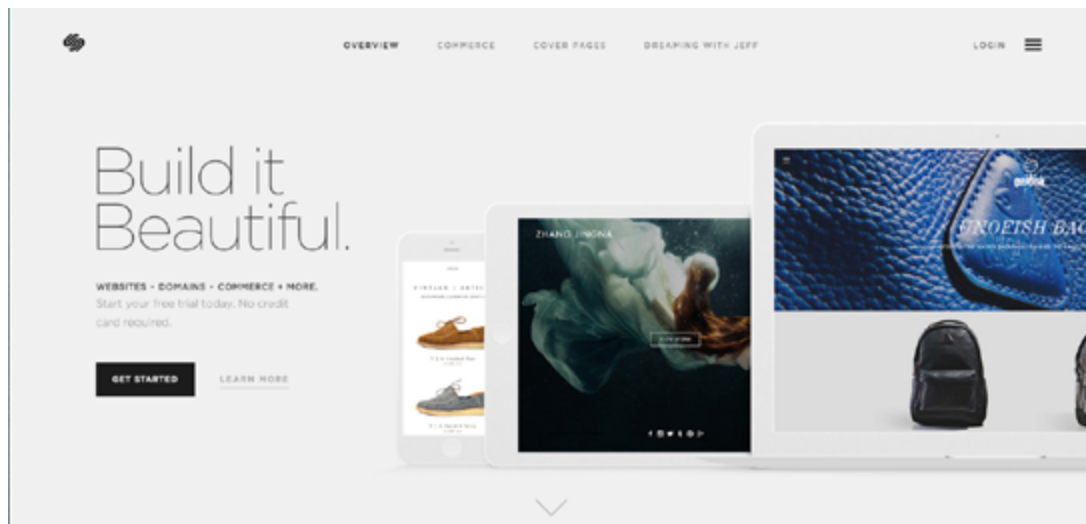


Photo credit: [Squarespace](#)

Be realistic with how users browse sites by placing high-level content at the top of the scroll (sparse copy and images), then increasing the density of text and images as the scroll deepens.

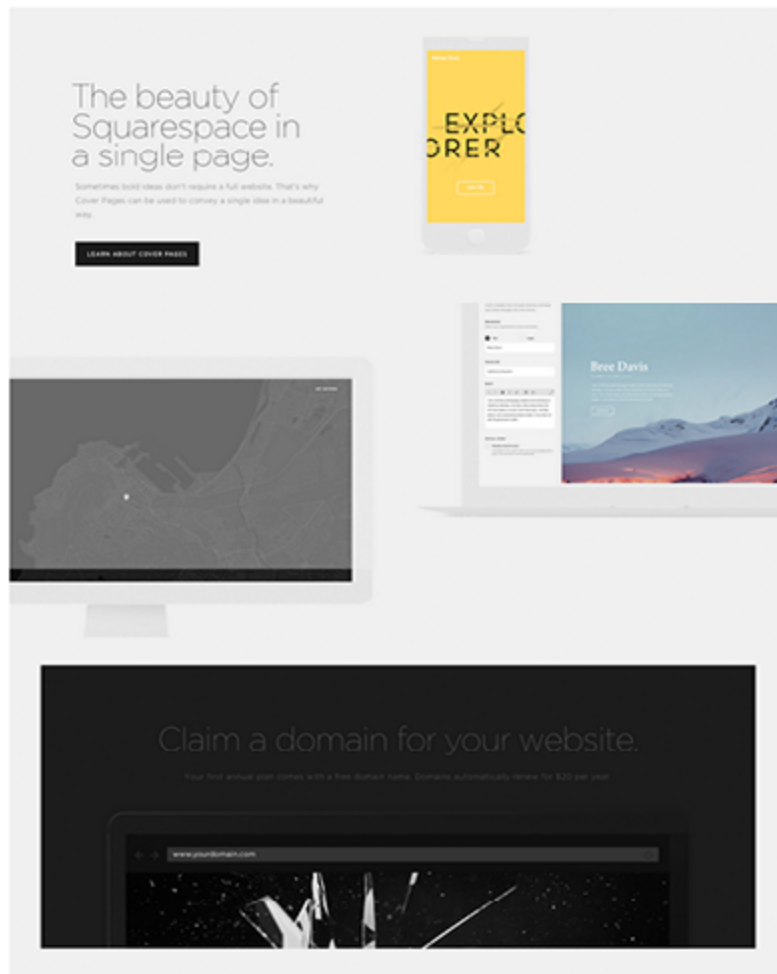


Photo credit: [Squarespace](#)

To prevent visual burnout, you can apply the different types of symmetry we discussed earlier to different parts of the scroll as well as alternating the placement of text and images for a **Z-shaped reading pattern**.

While this doesn't fit the popular minimalist aesthetic, remember that minimalism is more of a design philosophy than a single look. It's just been expressed in such similar ways that we've come to expect minimalist sites to be pure white backgrounds with either text-only interfaces or a strict grid layout. As Squarespace elegantly demonstrates, it's more important that you follow the spirit of minimalism.

Here's some more tips for simplifying your web UI designs:

- Group your site content into a handful of major sections (five or fewer if possible)
- Determine necessary elements – logo, navigation, body content, contact – and get rid of everything else
- One content concept or idea should occupy a page
- Pick a single visual to focus on for each part of the scroll
- Prioritize content and only use the top five items
- As you iterate the design, adopt a subtractive sculpture mindset and try to remove as much as possible at each step
- Start the design in black and white (or a low-fi wireframe) and only add visual touches, such as color, after the basic design is complete
- As dictated by [Hick's Law](#), limit choices for users so that a page only leads to one place or call to action (aside from basic navigation)

Common elements that are left out of minimalistic design frameworks:

- Social media icons or links
- Bulky footers or sitemaps
- List-style widgets, such as top or recent posts

Minimalism is Not for Every Site

Minimalism can be a difficult design technique to use. It requires a specific and focused attention on content and desire for every piece of the site to fall into that pattern.

For sites with a lot of content, this style is not particularly effective. This includes sites that are ad heavy, have an abundance of features or user options or content that is designed for children.

Ad heavy sites and minimalism can be a challenge because the minimal style may differ drastically from what is coming from an ad server. The ads – while often separate from the main content – can detract from the design and actually prevent users from accessing the content.

When put up against a busier framework, minimalism can often get lost because of its innate simplicity.

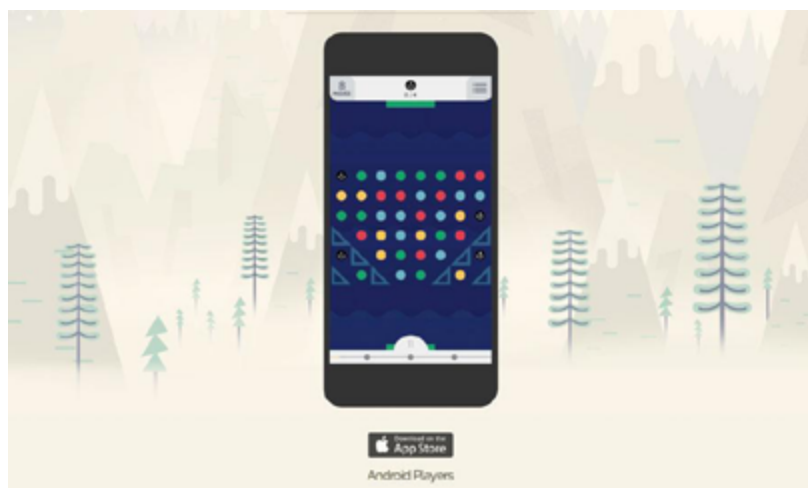


Photo credit: <http://weplaydots.com/twodots/>

The same concept applies to sites with a lot of features. While there are a few out there, such as the popular [Two Dots](#) (above), games are a prime example of sites that include too many features for a minimal style design to be effective.

Generally, e-commerce tends to be another area where some concepts of minimalist design may be suitable, but an overall minimalist aesthetic is not realistic due to the enormous amount of information needed to describe and actually sell items.

Of course, this depends greatly on the type of ecommerce site. Some clothing retailers (like [Over Clothing](#) below) can pull off the minimalist look by revealing more information on hover. Remember, however, that this is only possible because it suits the users (street fashion connoisseurs probably appreciate a more avant-garde design) and the content isn't overly complex (you don't need multiple tabs for technical specs).

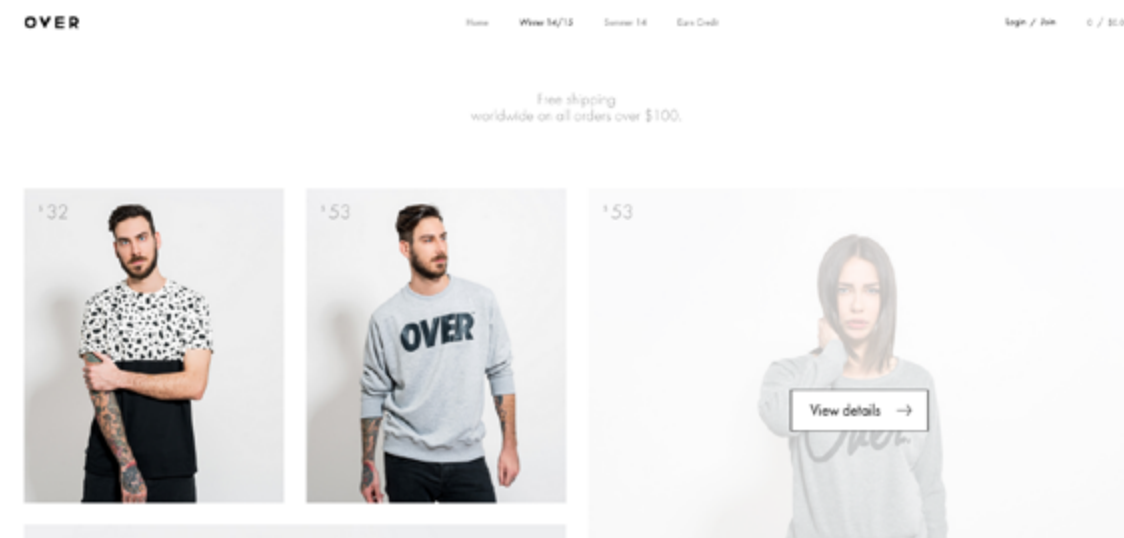


Photo credit: [Over Clothing](#)

The same design would not work so well for a general ecommerce site like [Ebay](#) or [Amazon](#) who require complex information architectures and whose wider audience probably appreciates a more traditional UI design.

Sites designed for younger users should also avoid minimal frameworks in most instances. The simple design is often seen as “boring” for a set of users that wants to be stimulated and usually have shorter attention spans.

Like we emphasized in [Web UI Best Practices](#), don’t apply a design trend just because it’s the hip thing to do. Know your users, create your personas, then make sure your design decision helps them best accomplish their goals.

Minimalism Will Not Die

Minimalism prevails because it is an effective and visually stunning option for designers. Like all lasting design philosophies, it's experienced multiple evolutions over time and meshes well with a variety of other trends and design techniques.

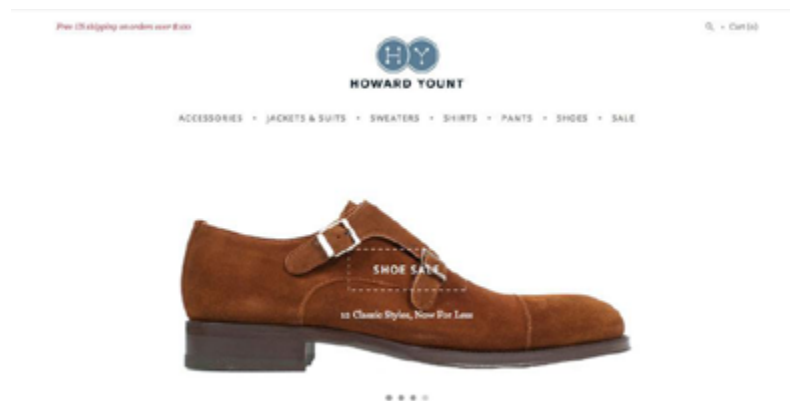


Photo credit: <http://www.howardyount.com/>

Minimalism is effective and lasting because:

1. The classic style has roots in fundamental design theory **over 100 years old**.
2. Design techniques work easily with responsive design frameworks.
3. Less information for browsers to process leads to faster site load times and better site performance.
4. The concept is content-driven, which could not be timelier given the rise in **content-first design processes**.
5. It applies to a variety of disciplines beyond web design, such as architecture, interior design and art.

Thinking Beyond 2015

Because we have seen it happen in print design areas, it is likely that minimalism will ebb and flow for years to come in web design as well.

As with any trend, the initial surge in popularity will likely be followed by a pull-back of sorts where almost opposing techniques will find popularity before the trend circles back again.

To that end, minimalism will continue to be a popular option but is likely to evolve into a style that is a little less stark. As we have seen with trends such as flat design evolving into “almost flat,” minimalist design will become richer (and more usable) as UI designers experiment with texture, color and effects – as well as moving away from symmetrical patterns.

Let’s explore a few of these evolving elements below.

1. Minimal texture

Designers will expand from stark background styles to include a more pale or almost unnoticeable texture with a aesthetic plan that is minimal in every other way. This breakaway from a purely minimalist style still has roots in simplicity but with a little more ornamentation.



Photo credit: <http://ezorzi.com/>

2. Reverse colors

While white backgrounds have been the dominate feature in minimal design (giving a very literal meaning to whitespace), designs will continue breaking from this pattern by using more color, backgrounds that are dark with lighter text, or a monotone color scheme using various shades of the same hue.



Photo credit: <http://www.bb-b.net/en/>

3. More interactive effects

Of course, minimalism is also traditionally defined by a lack of effects. Simple animation in the minimal style will become more popular as more designers appreciate that minimal does not equal static.



Photo credit: <http://oakstreetbootmakers.com/>

4. Move away from symmetry

The current minimalism trend is dominantly symmetrical, but that is certainly not a law. While balance is important, actual symmetry is not.

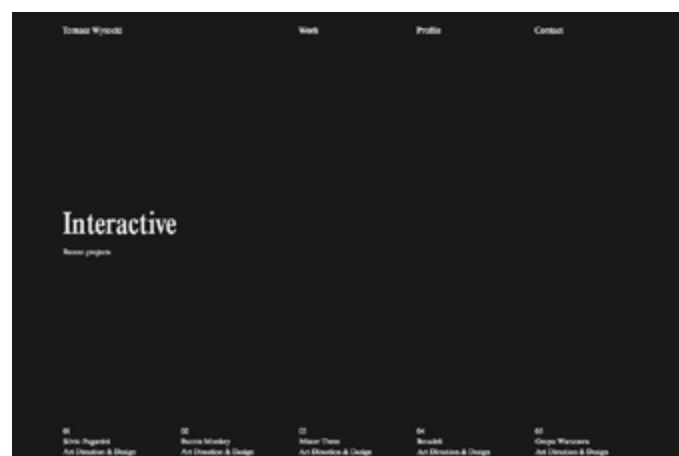


Photo credit: <http://theafrix.com/work>

More websites will actually use asymmetrical concepts to create organization, balance, a strong minimal aesthetic – and because it just leads to more interesting visual designs.

5. Improved usability

Ironically, minimalist sites should be more usable (in theory) since the content is clear and less distractions exist on the screen. However, you can easily run into the issue of [minimal design that's too minimal](#).

For example, as Delwin Campbell describes in the above article, using a purely icon-based navigation may confuse users if your visual metaphors aren't straightforward. Or, as Tara Hornor suggests in her [excellent article](#) on **UXBooth**, designers may only allow users to explore the site in a linear fashion, restricting the freedom of users to choose their most efficient path.

To swing the pendulum back towards functional aesthetics, we're starting to see more designers embedding traditional interface elements like clickable elements, scrolling designs, and additional calls to action into minimalist designs.

CREATE A FLOWER

Enter your names &
click ❤️ to create a unique flower
for someone



Photo credit: <http://wildflower.resn.co.nz/>

As we mentioned before, don't mistake the expression of minimalism with its intent.

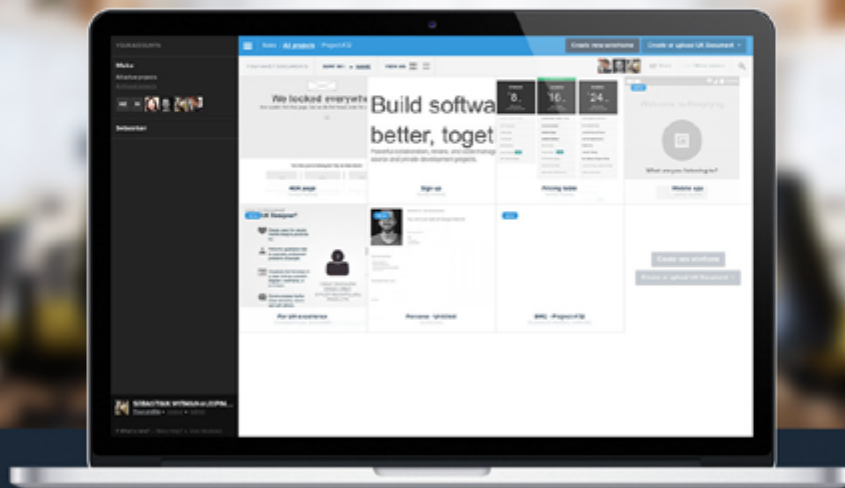
It's not about white space and grid layouts – it's a design philosophy that prioritizes content. Never misinterpret minimalism as a design goal, otherwise you'll just as likely find yourself deleting elements with irreplaceable functionalities.

Create an interface in UXPin (7-30 day free trial)

Free Resources and Tools

1. **Color Contrast Checker:** Enter the color values you plan to use to see if they are different enough to be accessible and provide a high-impact visual.
2. **“*Design Principles: Connecting and Separating Elements Through Contrast and Similarity*” by Smashing Magazine:** It’s important to think about design theory and basics when creating a minimal framework, particularly space and contrast.
3. **25 Sets of Icons for Minimal Web Design:** Simple icons can be an easy way to add links without a lot of clutter in a minimal framework.
4. **Responsive Grid System:** Organization starts with a solid grid and framework. There are a variety of options from two to 12 columns to work with.
5. **“Get inspired: 50 Awesome Examples of Minimal Typography” by 1st Web Design:** Much of minimalism centers on typography; here’s a great gallery of examples.
6. **Create a Minimal Portfolio Website Design Tutorial:** Designed for beginners, you can learn the process of creating a simple minimal site in Adobe Photoshop.
7. **Gallery of Minimal One-Page Websites:** The trend is easy to see – especially the use of black and white – in this gallery of minimal styles.

8. **Siimple:** The CSS gallery focuses on coding for simple and minimal design styles.
9. **Best Minimalist WordPress Themes:** Not all the themes in the gallery are free, but it's a good starting point if you are looking for a theme to create a minimal web design.
10. **Minimalist Color Palettes:** Not every minimal outline needs to be black and white, here's a little color inspiration.



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