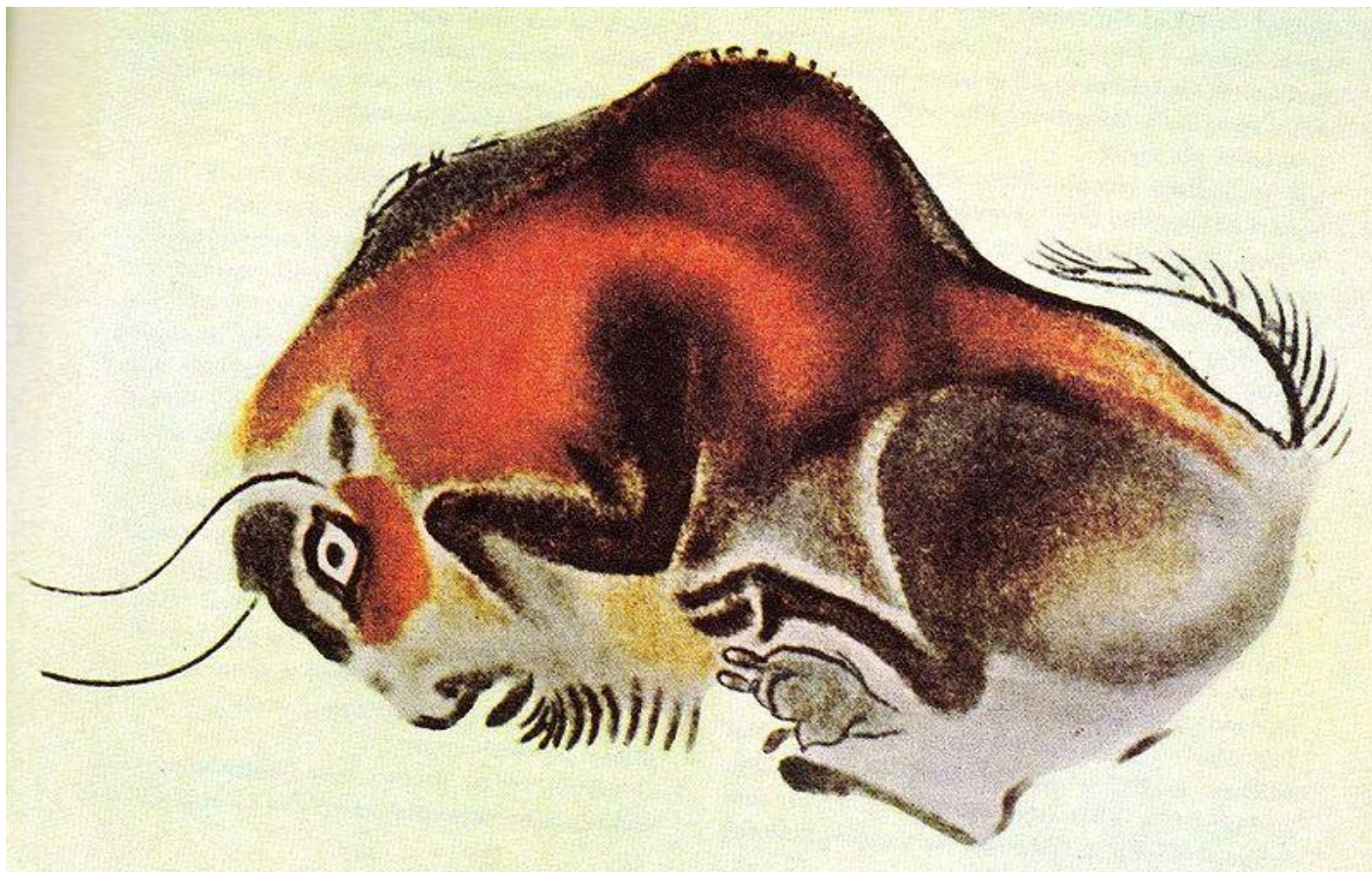


Design: Getting Back to the Grid

Linda never thought she'd live long enough to see a magazine layout applied to Web design. She talks about the 960 Grid system in this article.

Grid Layouts and Cave Paintings



Sometimes, when I write articles about Web design, I feel very, very old – almost as old as a [cave painting](#).

Back when I was a production manager for a business magazine on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, I was using wax and [linotype](#). That was well before computers. Then, we were grilled on the [grid](#) – the layout that made sense for newspaper, magazines and any other print medium.

But, with computers came layout software, and the learning curve was excruciating. Still, it was better to learn the software than lose your job to someone younger (and who would cost less to the boss). I think I was about age 35 at the time. I would have lost my job to a nineteen-year-old with pimples on his or her face.

Then, came Web pages, along with online sales. No one admitted, at least publicly, that Web design was conducive to a grid system. Oh, we tried...and [tables](#) were the result.

But, nearly all of the presentational attributes of HTML documents were contained within HTML markup; all font colours, background styles, element alignments, borders and sizes had to be explicitly described, often

repeatedly, within HTML code, and the application still did not seem to work when applied to various browsers and operating systems.

Additionally, tables remain a horrid way to create an [accessible](#) and usable Web site.

Enter CSS

Zen Garden

The Beauty of CSS Design

A demonstration of what can be accomplished visually through CSS-based design. Select any style sheet from the list to load it into this page.

Download the sample html file and css file

The Road to Enlightenment
Littering a dark and dreary road lay the past relics of browser-specific tags, incompatible DOMs, and broken CSS support. Today, we must clear the mind of past practices. Web enlightenment has been achieved thanks to the tireless efforts of folk like the W3C, WaSP and the major browser creators. The css Zen Garden invites you to relax and meditate on the important lessons of the masters. Begin to see with clarity. Learn to use the (yet to be) time-honored techniques in new and invigorating fashion. Become one with the web.

So What is This About?
There is clearly a need for CSS to be taken seriously by graphic artists. The Zen Garden aims to excite, inspire, and encourage participation. To begin, view some of the existing designs in the list. Clicking on any one will load the style sheet into this very page. The code remains the same, the only thing that has changed is the external .css file. Yes, really. CSS allows complete and total control over the style of a hypertext document. The only way this can be illustrated in a way that gets people excited is by demonstrating what it can truly be, once the reins are placed in the hands of those able to create beauty from structure. To date, most examples of neat tricks and hacks have been demonstrated by structurists and coders. Designers have yet to make their mark. This needs to change.

Participation
Graphic artists only please. You are modifying this page, so strong CSS skills are necessary, but the example files are commented well enough that even CSS novices can use them as starting points. Please see the [CSS Resource Guide](#) for advanced tutorials and tips on working with CSS. You may modify the style sheet in any way you wish, but not the HTML. This may seem daunting at first if you've never worked this way before, but follow the listed links to learn more, and use the sample files as a guide. Download the sample [html file](#) and [css file](#) to work on a copy locally. Once you have completed your masterpiece (and please, don't submit half-finished work) upload your .css file to a web server under your control. [Send us a link](#) to the file and if we choose to use it, we will spider the associated images. Final submissions will be placed on our server.

Benefits
Why participate? For recognition, inspiration, and a resource we can all refer to when making the case for CSS-based design. This is sorely needed, even today. More and more major sites are taking the leap, but not enough have. One day this gallery will be a historical curiosity; that day is not today.

Requirements
We would like to see as much CSS1 as possible. CSS2 should be limited to widely-supported elements only. The css Zen Garden is about functional, practical CSS and not the latest bleeding-edge tricks viewable by 2% of the browsing public. The only real requirement we have is that your CSS validates.

select a design:

- Under the Seat by Eric Stoltz
- Make 'em Proud by Michael McAgnon and Scotty Reisnyder
- Orchid Beauty by Kevin Addison
- Oceanscape by Justin Gray
- CSS Co., Ltd. by Benjamin Klemm
- Sakura by Tatsuya Uchida
- Kyoto Forest by John Polkowski
- A Walk in the Garden by Simon Van Hauwermeiren

archives:

next designs »

View All Designs

resources:

View This Design's CSS

CSS Resources

FAQ

Submit a Design

Translations

The first CSS specification to become an official [W3C](#) Recommendation is CSS level 1, published in December 1996. While I – and a million other Web designers – swung immediately to CSS in its simplest form, browsers and operating systems still refused to cooperate. From the beginning, all CSS did was create more confusion in interpretation of the code – what you saw in code was not what you'd get in the final design.

It wasn't until about three years later – about 2000 – that any Web browser achieved near-full implementation of either the CSS1 or CSS2 implementation. According to [Wikipedia](#) (I have to rely on something here, as my memory is foggy):

When later 'version 5' browsers began to offer a fairly full implementation of CSS, they were still incorrect in certain areas and were fraught with inconsistencies, bugs and other quirks. The proliferation of such CSS-related inconsistencies and even the variation in feature support has made it difficult for designers to achieve a consistent appearance across platforms. Some authors resorted to workarounds such as CSS hacks and CSS filters to obtain consistent results across web browsers and platforms.

Oh, right – it's all coming back to me now. The hacks. The workarounds. The misery.

I remember when (but not exactly when) Rachel Andrew wrote an article for DMX, entitled, "[Many Boxes: a CSS Layout](#)." I downloaded that article and tried to recreate a Web site. It took me a week and three bottles of Port, but I did it (I never once said I was a programmer in my resume). Still, this attempt at grids was not the perfect solution for some Web browsers.

Then, in 2005, David Shea came up with [an article](#) that inspired designers to try and make sense of browser incompatibility and grid design yet again. If that name doesn't ring a bell, Dave Shea is a Canadian Web

designer and co-author (with [Molly Holzschlag](#)) of *The Zen of CSS Design: Visual Enlightenment for the Web* (which led to the development of the [css Zen Garden](#) Web site). It was time to start over, to try and make sense of browser incompatibility, varying operating system snafus and CSS (with a touch of tables).

About four years before Shea's article, I gave up on Web design and went back to college to obtain my undergraduate degree in visual communications (where the GREAT GRID was emphasized – still) and then on to earn my masters in history. I was as far afield from Web design as I could get – and very happy about it, too.

Then Came WordPress

The screenshot shows the WordPress.org homepage. At the top left is the WordPress logo and the text "WORDPRESS.ORG". To the right is a search bar with "Search WordPress.org" and a "Go" button. Below the logo is a navigation menu with links: Home, Showcase, Extend, About, Docs, Blog, Forums, Hosting, and a prominent "Download" button. The main content area is split into two columns. The left column is titled "Media Library" and shows a list of media items: "Tybee Island.JPG" and "Maggie at the Beach.MP4". The right column contains a promotional message: "WordPress is web software you can use to create a beautiful website or blog. We like to say that WordPress is both free and priceless at the same time." Below this is a paragraph about the community and a "Download WordPress 3.0.1" button.

WordPress Books



News From Our Blog

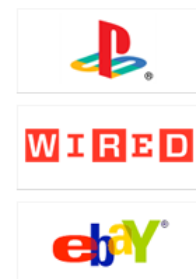
WordPress Wins CMS Award

I was just informed that WordPress, in head-to-head voting against Joomla and Drupal, has won this year's Open Source CMS Hall of Fame award. We have to be careful because if this trend continues people might think WordPress is a real CMS, useful for more than just a blog. This would ruin our stealth campaign...

It's Easy As...

- 1 Find a Web Host and get great hosting while supporting WordPress at the same time.
- 2 Download & Install WordPress with our famous 5-minute installation. Feel like a rock star.
- 3 Read the Documentation and become a WordPress expert yourself, impress your friends.

WordPress Users



... and hundreds more

After graduation from college, I couldn't have been happier to learn about [WordPress](#) and to take it on as my primary CMS (Content Management System) for Web content. How simple is WordPress, especially if you've already had experience with code? I fell in love with this free layout tool – I wrote loving articles about it – I even wrote an eBook about it.

And, I still love WordPress – I just don't like creating Web sites. I'd rather create content than create a Web site that – hopefully – is accessible, usable and beautiful to boot. That's far too much work for my simple mind.

Now, the cycles of the sun and moon have brought us all into the end of 2010 and to the cusp of 2011. Enter a design tool that is modern, yet ancient; a tool that is based upon – you guess it – THE GRID.

The 960 Grid System



Twitter
@NATHANSMITH

**960
GRID SYSTEM**

Download - Templates: Acorn, Fireworks, Flash, InDesign, GIMP, Inkscape, Illustrator, OmniGraffle, Photoshop, Visio, Exp Design. Also: PDF sketch sheets + CSS files. Repository at [GitHub](#).

ADS BY FUSION
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CUSTOM CSS GENERATOR **HTML LAYOUT GENERATOR** **GRID OVERLAY BOOKMARK**

Essence
The 960 Grid System is an effort to streamline web development workflow by providing commonly used dimensions, based on a width of 960 pixels. There are two variants: 12 and 16 columns, which can be used separately or in tandem. [Read more](#).

Dimensions
The 12-column grid is divided into portions that are 60 pixels wide. The 16-column grid consists of 40 pixel increments. Each column has 10 pixels of margin on the left and right, which create 20 pixel wide gutters between columns. [View demo](#).

Purpose
The premise of the system is ideally suited to rapid prototyping, but it would work equally well when integrated into a production environment. There are printable sketch sheets, design layouts, and a CSS file that have identical measurements.

More Columns
For those more comfortable designing on a 24-column grid, an alternative version is also included. It consists of columns 30 pixels wide, with 10 pixel gutters, and a 5 pixel buffer on each side of the container. This keeps text from touching browser chrome — helpful for devices like the iPhone, where a lower-case "i" or "l" might be easily missed. [View demo](#).

Source Order
By utilizing the *push_XX* and *pull_XX* classes, elements can be rearranged, independent of the order in which they appear in the markup. This allows you to keep more pertinent info higher in the HTML, without sacrificing precision in your page layout. For instance, view the source code of this page to see how the *H1* tag has been re-positioned.

[Keynote Wireframe Toolkit](#) — 12 col **SHOW GRID** [Drupal](#) — 12 col **SHOW GRID**

As I was writing recent articles, I caught a glimpse of the [960 Grid System](#), but I ignored it. Now, I'm wondering if this system is the route to an old production manager's heart...and I wonder if it is the solution to a perfectly designed Web site.

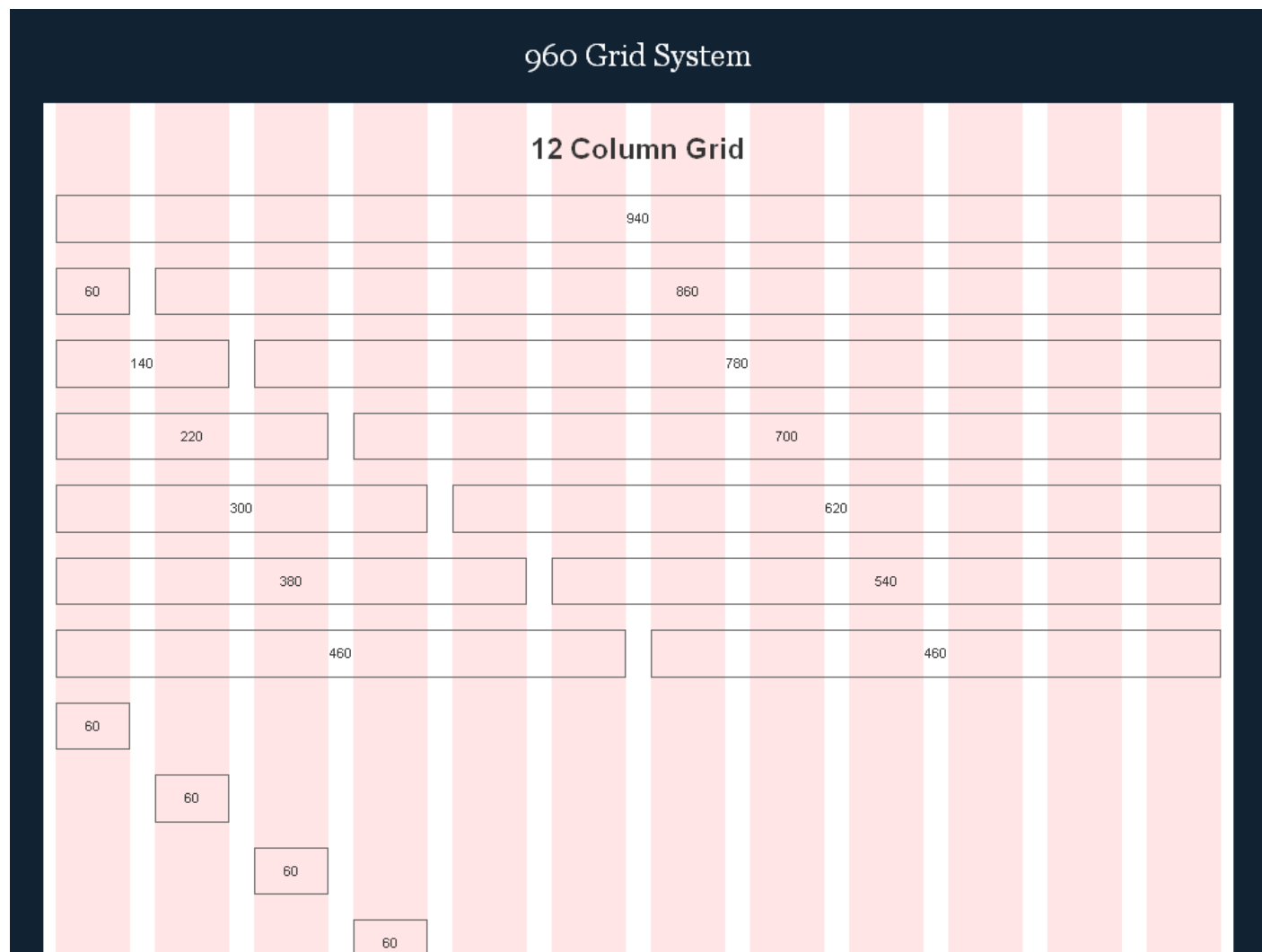
I read the background to this system, and I found myself laughing (not AT the author, mind you, but at the concept) when I read this [paragraph](#):

I first became interested in grid design via reading articles by [Khoi Vinh](#) and [Mark Boulton](#). Initially, I must admit that I didn't fully grasp the concept. But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this time-

tested practice from printing works well on the web. Like it or not, web pages essentially revolve around boxy shapes. Inevitably, these rectangles have to come together in some way or another to form a design.

Well, the concept lives on. And, it seems it is catching on. This is how it works:

The 960 Grid System uses common dimensions, based on a width of 960 pixels. There are two variants: 12 and 16 columns, which can be used separately or in tandem. The 12-column grid is divided into portions that are 60 pixels wide. The 16-column grid consists of 40 pixel increments. Each column has 10 pixels of margin on the left and right, which create 20 pixel wide gutters between columns. The premise of the system is ideally suited to rapid prototyping, but it would work equally well when integrated into a production environment. There are printable sketch sheets, design layouts, and a CSS file that have identical measurements.



For those more comfortable designing on a 24-column grid, an alternative version is also included. It consists of columns 30 pixels wide, with 10 pixel gutters, and a 5 pixel buffer on each side of the container. This keeps text from touching browser chrome — helpful for devices like the iPhone, where a lower-case “i” or “l” might be easily missed.

In the repository at [GitHub](#), you can download templates for Acorn, Fireworks, Flash, InDesign, GIMP, Inkscape, Illustrator, OmniGraffle, Photoshop, Visio, Exp Design. Also: PDF sketch sheets + CSS files. You also can generate a [custom CSS file](#), an [HTML file](#) and a [Grid Overlay Bookmark](#).

I'm almost tempted to try it.

But, don't hold your breath, although some of the layouts shown on the 960 Grid System page are working for me visually. If you want to try the 960 Grid System yourself and have some other tools of the trade already on hand, I've made a list of tutorials in the conclusion below.

Conclusion

Before you attempt to design a template or a Web site within a grid system, you need to understand that system. One simple link can provide you with all the information you need...and you can find that article, "[Designing With Grid-Based Approach](#)" at Smashing Magazine (yes, it was written in 2007, but the grid system goes back to cave paintings – I swear!).

Beyond that article, here are a few new articles about designing with the 960 Grid System:

- [Why we love 960.gs](#): This WOO Theme article is short, so you might have time to read the comments, too.
- [Fight Div-itis and Class-itis With the 960 Grid System](#): The Webdesigner Depot offers a clear explanation on why and how to use the 960 Grid System, and how <div> can be used to replace tables (although "using three or more levels of nested divs doesn't solve the problem—it just replaces one set of tags with another"). Read on to learn more about the solutions.
- [Prototyping With The Grid 960 CSS Framework](#): This article from net tuts explains the basics of Grid 960, how to plan the grid for a design, and how to code the prototype.
- [Creating a Basic Page Layout with 960 Grid](#): Teodor Kudaschiev wrote this article for DMXZone, using the free [960 Grid System Dreamweaver Extension](#).

Now, DMXZone also has a [Designs Template](#) section filled with designs created with the 960 Grid System extension for Dreamweaver. Take a look and let me know what you think.