

3.4 Design exercise: the parsimony of signs

Objective

This exercise shows how the elimination of details allows the observer to focus on the essential characteristics of an object.

Background

There is nothing like scarcity to trigger creativity. The subtraction of details from an image pushes our cognitive system to develop an intense and exciting effort to fill the gaps and build meaning from what is available.

We can practice this sort of visual frugality through the game of Tangram. According to the construction scheme shown in fig.3.4a, the tangram puzzle is based on seven geometric figures taken from the dissection of a square.

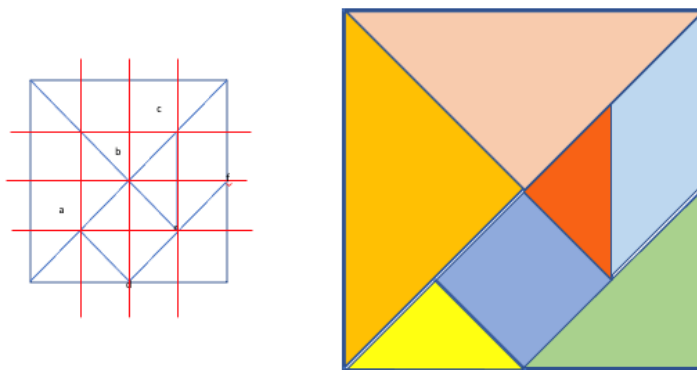


Fig. 3.4a – Construction scheme of Tangram

The tangram gives designers minimal elements to exercise their combination and observation skills. As one can see from the examples in fig. 3.4b, it takes just a tiny relocation of one of the pieces to transform the walking figure into one that runs or dances.

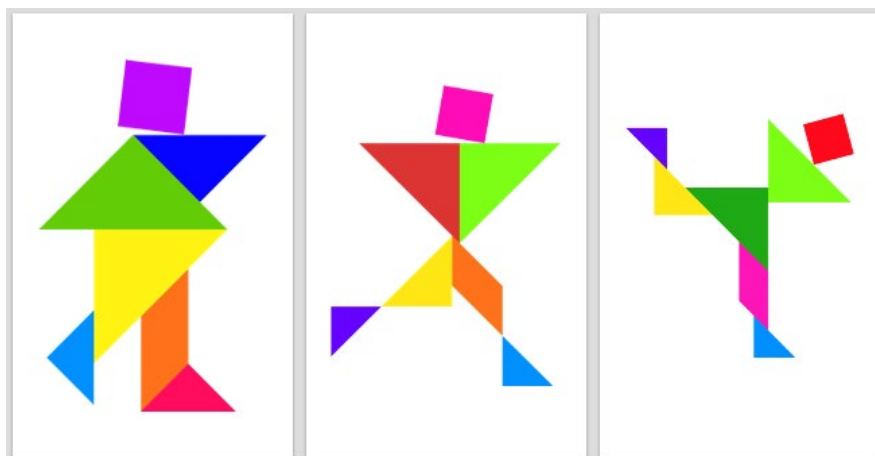


Fig. 3.4b – The representation of actions

Instructions

Build your tangram puzzle by drawing the pieces on a piece of cardboard as illustrated in fig. 3.4a, then cut the pieces along the lines (use different colours). Then, assign yourself a composition task, such as:

1. Compose three different figures of men who stand on one leg.
2. Compose three different figures of sitting women.
3. Compose three figures of a container of your choice (e.g., a box, a teapot, a vase...).

Notice how small displacements of a piece deeply changes the characteristics and possibly the meaning of a figure. Reflect on how you can minimize the use of the tiles while still creating a figure that makes sense. Identify, which parts of the figures are not removable without losing the meaning of the figures.