

Andy Clarke's

STANDOUT DESIGNS FOR THE WEB

Hardboiled Web Design shot



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For Lemmy Kilmister, "Fast" Eddie Clarke,
and Phil "Philthy Animal" Taylor.

*Ain't a hope in hell
Nothin' gonna bring us down
The way we fly
Five miles off the ground
Because we shoot to kill
And you know we always will*

*It's a bomber
It's a bomber
It's a bomber*

CONTENTS

The web has matured as an industry and a platform, and it's never been easier to produce a design that looks polished and professional.

But along the way, we've lost some of the web's early creative spark. This book will show you how to rekindle it.



Get cracking



1

**What makes a
website memorable?**



2
**Every company has a
story worth telling**



3
**Designing
with personality**



4
**Patterns are tools,
not templates**



5
**Designing
standout websites**

About the author

Andy Clarke is a well-known designer and writer. He's been called plenty of things since he started working on the web. His ego likes terms such as "Ambassador for CSS," "industry prophet," and "inspiring," but he's most proud that Jeffrey Zeldman once called him a "triple-talented bastard."

With his wife Sue, Andy founded Stuff & Nonsense in 1998, where they've helped companies worldwide improve their designs by providing design expertise. Andy's written several popular books on website design and development, including *Art Direction for the Web* (2019,) *Transcending CSS Revisited* (2019,) *Hardboiled Web Design: Fifth Anniversary Edition** (2015,) *Hardboiled Web Design* (2010,) and *Transcending CSS: The Fine Art of Web Design* (2006.)

Who this shot's for

I wrote this Hardboiled Web Design Shot for web designers and developers who want to make digital products and websites stand out, no matter their background or the tools they use.

This shot is about design, not technology. The principles I describe apply whether you handcraft every aspect of a digital experience or work with an off-the-shelf platform. They apply equally to digital products and websites designed to market them.

This Hardboiled Web Design Shot draws on thirty years of experience working with clients and making websites. But, as with my previous book, *Art Direction for the Web*, I also wrote *Standout Designs for the Web* for myself because, quite frankly, I'm weary of seeing websites that feel soulless and look identical to one another. We've never had better creative tools, and I want us to use them better.

What this shot's about

It's never been easier to produce a design that looks polished and professional. Off-the-shelf templates provide sophisticated layouts, design systems carefully categorise UI patterns, and generative AI can turn a prompt into a polished-looking design in seconds.

Things were very different when I started designing websites thirty years ago. Browsers had primitive typography controls and painfully basic layout tools, so I hacked layouts together and invented workarounds for things that CSS now makes trivial.

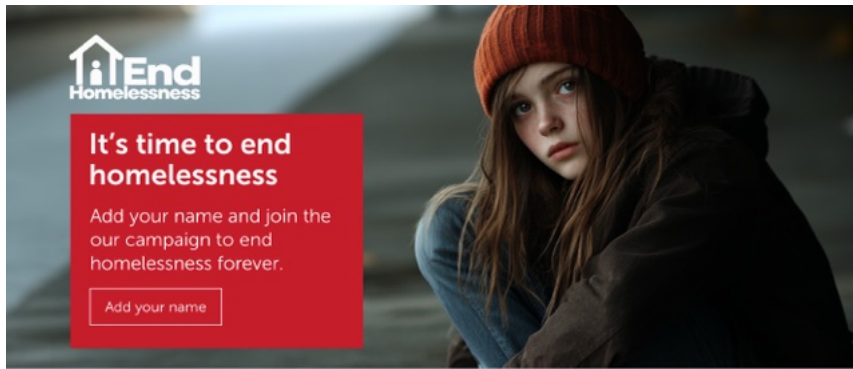
Technology no longer limits our creativity in the ways it once did. We can animate and manipulate images with CSS, lay out pages with Flexbox and Grid, and use variable webfonts and sophisticated typography controls.

Yet despite this creative freedom, so many websites look remarkably alike. They're assembled from the same handful of components and arranged into familiar layouts. And full-width hero banners have taken over the web like an invasive species.

Designs look the same whether a product lets people book a ride or buy car insurance, and whether a website publishes news or asks for charitable donations.

Change the logo, swap the brand colours, replace the photographs, and a website for one business can quickly morph into one for another.

Look at this charity's website design.




**End
Homelessness**

It's time to end homelessness

Add your name and join the our campaign to end homelessness forever.

▶

I need help

▶

I'm concerned

▶

I'm a practitioner

How you can support us



Join our campaign

Can't wait for everyone to have a safe and secure home? Neither can we. Join our campaign to end homelessness.



Get involved

There are so many ways to play your part in ending homelessness: Give your time, pledge your support with a campaign, or raise money through volunteering..



A gift in your will

No one should grow up to experience homelessness. With a gift in your Will, the next generation won't have to.

Together we will end homelessness



End Homelessness is the charity for people experiencing homelessness. We help people directly out of homelessness and campaign for the changes needed to solve it altogether.

Our main aim is to relieve the huge pressure of homelessness, by helping people find safe and affordable homes as quickly as possible.







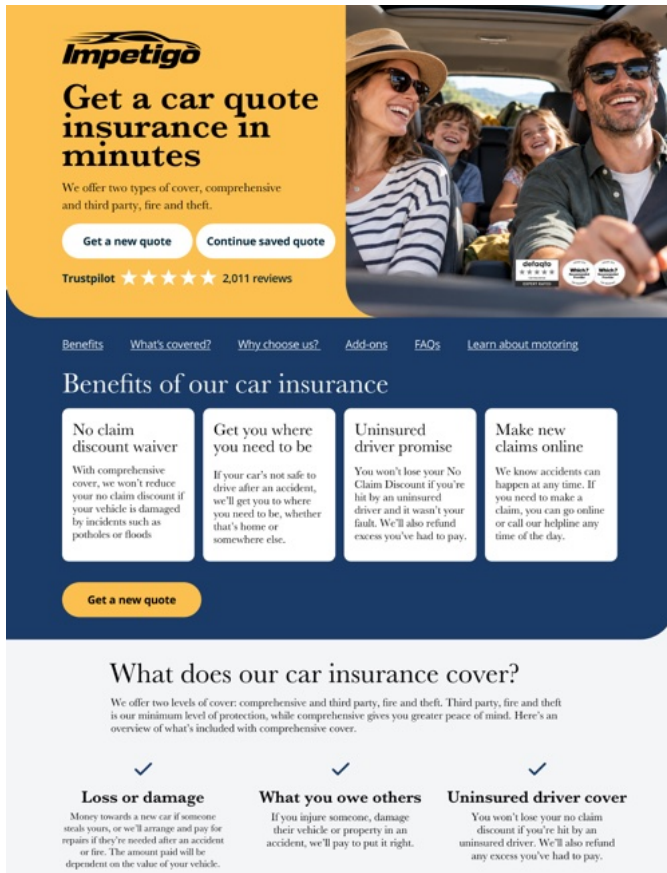


Then this one.



And this one.

Now, cast your eyes over these designs for several insurance companies.



Impetigo

Get a car quote insurance in minutes

We offer two types of cover, comprehensive and third party, fire and theft.

[Get a new quote](#) [Continue saved quote](#)

Trustpilot ★★★★★ 2,011 reviews

[Benefits](#) [What's covered?](#) [Why choose us?](#) [Add-ons](#) [FAQs](#) [Learn about motoring](#)

Benefits of our car insurance

- No claim discount waiver**
With comprehensive cover, we won't reduce your no claim discount if your vehicle is damaged by incidents such as potholes or floods.
- Get you where you need to be**
If your car's not safe to drive after an accident, we'll get you to where you need to be, whether that's home or somewhere else.
- Uninsured driver promise**
You won't lose your No Claim Discount if you're hit by an uninsured driver and it wasn't your fault. We'll also refund excess you've had to pay.
- Make new claims online**
We know accidents can happen at any time. If you need to make a claim, you can go online or call our helpline any time of the day.

[Get a new quote](#)

What does our car insurance cover?

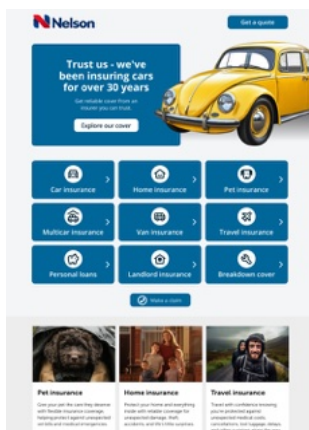
We offer two levels of cover: comprehensive and third party, fire and theft. Third party, fire and theft is our minimum level of protection, while comprehensive gives you greater peace of mind. Here's an overview of what's included with comprehensive cover.

- Loss or damage**
Money towards a new car if someone steals yours, or we'll arrange and pay for repairs if they're needed after an accident or fire. The amount paid will be dependent on the value of your vehicle.
- What you owe others**
If you injure someone, damage their vehicle or property in an accident, we'll pay to put it right.
- Uninsured driver cover**
You won't lose your no claim discount if you're hit by an uninsured driver. We'll also refund any excess you've had to pay.

Notice the patterns?

Now, there's nothing inherently boring about a twelve-column grid, a hero banner, a row of cards, or a familiar navigation pattern.

Familiarity makes interfaces easier to understand, and patterns save enormous amounts of design and development time. The problem comes from choosing those ingredients simply because they're familiar.



Nelson [Get a quote](#)

Trust us - we've been insuring cars for over 30 years

[Explore our cover](#)

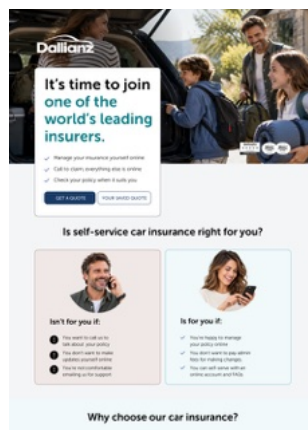
- [Car Insurance](#)
- [Home Insurance](#)
- [Pet Insurance](#)
- [Multicar Insurance](#)
- [Van Insurance](#)
- [Travel Insurance](#)
- [Personal Injury](#)
- [Landlord Insurance](#)
- [Breakdown Cover](#)

[More >](#)

Pet Insurance
Cover your pet for the cost of vet bills, including surgery, medication, and diagnostics. We'll also cover the cost of your pet's food and bedding.

Home Insurance
Cover your home for the cost of damage caused by fire, flood, theft, and other risks. We'll also cover the cost of your home's contents.

Travel Insurance
Cover your trip for the cost of cancellation, medical emergencies, and other risks. We'll also cover the cost of your luggage and travel documents.



Dollarama

It's time to join one of the world's leading insurers.

- Manage your insurance portfolio online
- Call to claim, everything else is online
- Check your policy online to suit you

[Get a quote](#) [Your saved quote](#)

Is self-service car insurance right for you?

Isn't for you if:

- You need to talk to us to sort out your policy
- You don't want to make changes yourself online
- You're not comfortable dealing with us for support

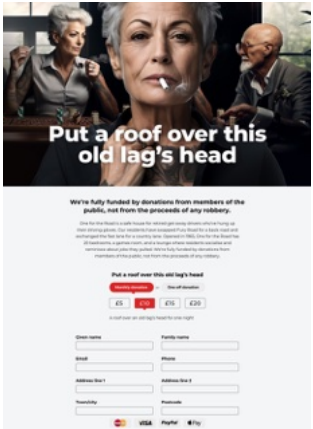
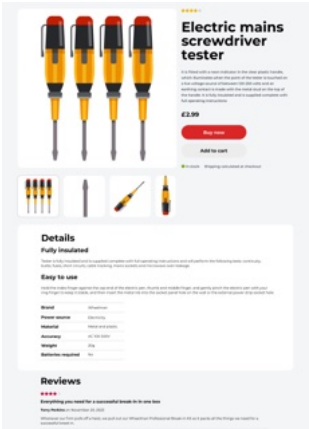
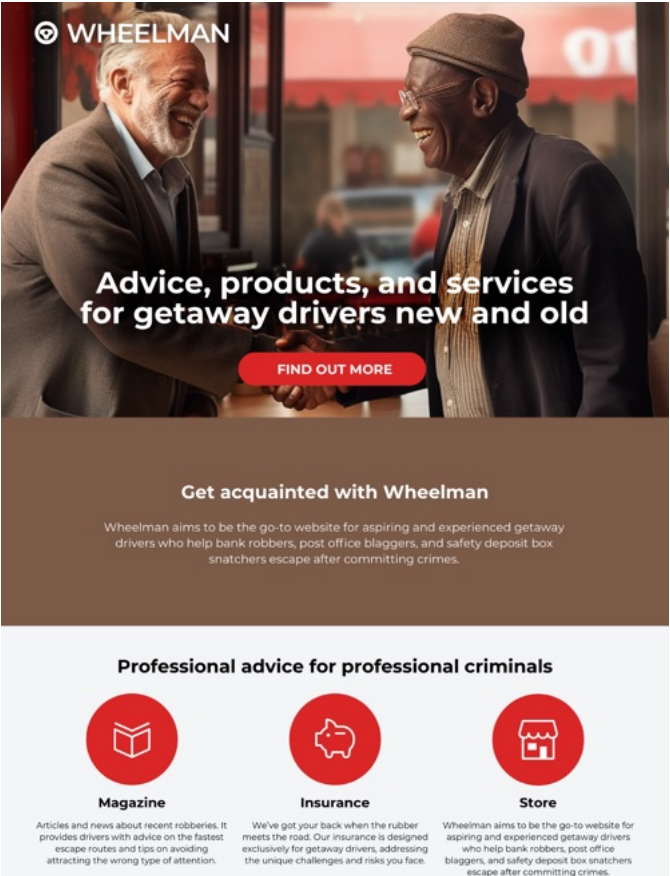
Is for you if:

- You're happy to manage your policy online
- You don't want to pay extra fees for making changes
- You can set up your own online account and FAQs

Why choose our car insurance?

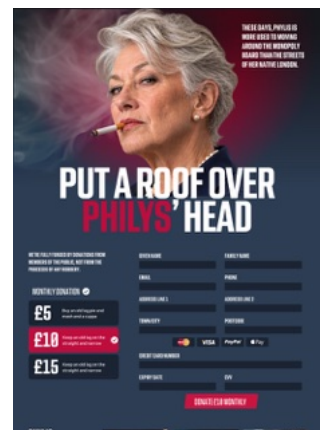
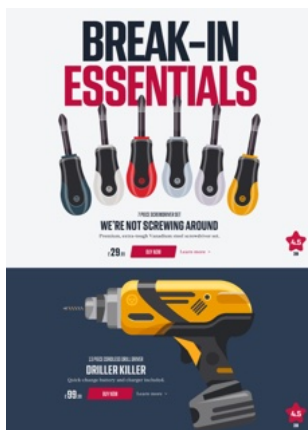


PAGES FROM WHEELMAN'S WEBSITE BEFORE THE REDESIGN I DESCRIBE IN THIS BOOK.





WHEELMAN'S WEBSITE AFTER THE REDESIGN I DESCRIBE IN THIS BOOK.



Design isn't simply choosing components and arranging them neatly. It's deciding which ingredients are appropriate, how to combine them, and which should dominate. It's knowing when familiarity helps and when something unexpected makes an experience more engaging or memorable. Above all, it's making deliberate choices for the product or website you're designing.

The web is packed with products and websites which look great, work well, and provide smooth user experiences. But with millions competing for people's attention, that's only part of what makes a design successful. People also need a reason to notice, recognise, and remember it. That doesn't mean making every website unconventional or inventing a new interface every time. Stand-out design isn't about novelty for its own sake. This Hardboiled Web Design Shot is about designing a website that's impossible to confuse with anything else.

Get acquainted with Wheelman

Throughout this Hardboiled Web Design Shot, I'll use one client to demonstrate how the ideas in this book can influence real design decisions. So, let's meet Wheelman.

Wheelman aims to be the go-to website for aspiring and experienced getaway drivers who help bank robbers, post office blaggers, and safety deposit box snatchers make their escape. Its magazine publishes articles and news about recent robberies, alongside advice on the fastest escape routes and tips for avoiding the wrong kind of attention.

But Wheelman has grown into much more than a magazine. There's a heist planner for organising that next big job. It provides legal services and robbery insurance. One For The Road is a retirement home for old lags who've hung up their driving gloves. There's even an online store selling those all-important robbery essentials.

Wheelman launched a year ago, and its owners now want a new website to help grow the business, legally. Its current design is perfectly functional, but it does little to express what makes Wheelman different.

Its magazine articles use the same single-column layout; service pages could belong to almost any insurance or legal company; and the store uses off-the-shelf e-commerce templates. Wheelman has plenty of personality, but very little of it comes across in its website. That gave me plenty to work with.

I'll explore Wheelman's attitude, language, people, and products and show how they can influence colour, imagery, layout, and typography.

You'll see familiar patterns adapted and how connected decisions give very different parts of the website a consistent identity. By the time I'm finished, Wheelman's pages will feel like parts of the same website without all looking the same.

I hope you've realised that Wheelman isn't an actual client. But the creative challenges and design decisions involved in a project like this are very, very real. They're the same challenges you face when trying to create websites which belong unmistakably to the businesses behind them.



Adding another dimension with modular grids

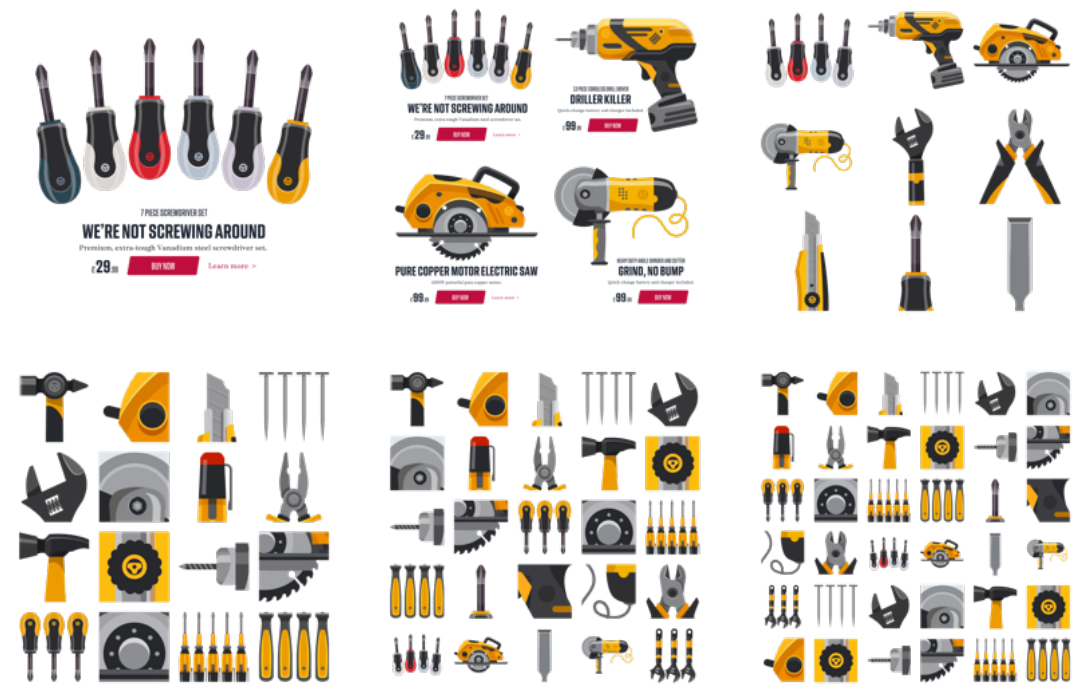
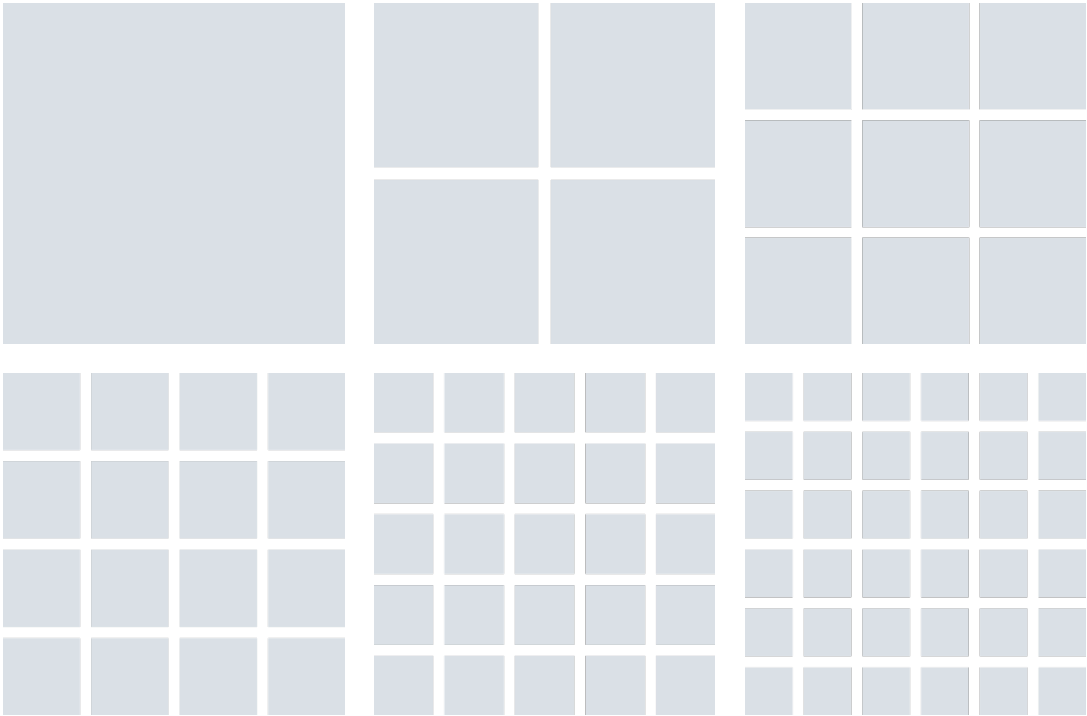
So far, I've concentrated on dividing a layout vertically into columns, but adding horizontal divisions creates another dimension and many more creative possibilities. Where columns and rows intersect, they form rectangular or square units called modules, and repeating those modules horizontally and vertically creates a modular grid.

Modular grids might look complicated, but they're surprisingly easy to use. You can fill a single module with content or combine several to create larger spatial zones. Those zones can determine the size and position of headlines, images, captions, and running text, giving you far more freedom than simply deciding how many columns an element should span.

Like columns, modules don't all need to contain something. Leaving some empty creates whitespace, while combining others creates differences in scale that help establish a visual hierarchy. A large image might occupy several modules, a headline fewer, and a caption only one. The underlying grid connects those differently sized elements without making them look the same.

The number and size of modules also affect how a composition feels. Fewer, larger modules create substantial spatial zones where someone can linger, whereas more, smaller modules can make a layout feel busier and more energetic. So changing the number of columns and rows can alter how quickly someone moves through a design.

And despite all that structure, modular grids needn't look rigid. Content can flow between modules, span several of them, or extend beyond the grid and into a margin. The grid provides the underlying organisation, but it doesn't have to dictate the finished composition.





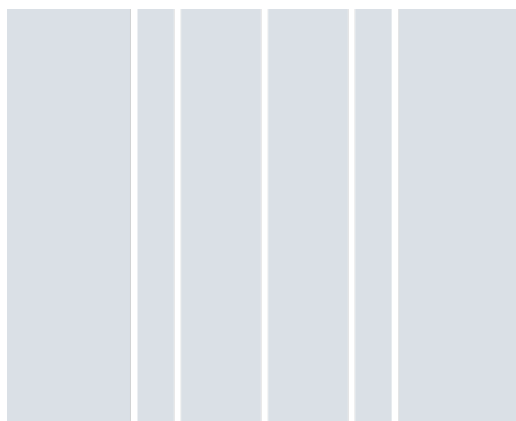
COMBINING MODULES CREATES DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EMPHASIS.

Mixing up grids

If different grids change how you approach a design, then compound grids will fundamentally alter how you think about layout. I know that sounds like an exaggeration, but it's true.

A compound grid is two or more grids of any type—column, modular, or hierarchical—on the same page. These grids can overlap or occupy separate spaces, side by side or stacked one on top of another.

Either way, mixing grids creates possibilities which neither grid offers on its own.



ONE OF THE LARGEST BANK ROBBERIES IN
THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

£26.5 MILLION
IN CASH STOLEN



On December 20, 2004, there was a massive cash heist at the Northern Bank in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The thieves got away with a jaw-dropping £26.5 million! They didn't pull off this heist alone; they took the tacit support of two bank insiders to help them grab both cash and several pounds sterling banknotes. After packing the cash into a van, they made one trip to haul it away. This heist was seriously one for the record books—one of the biggest bank robberies ever in the UK.

Now, when it comes to pointing fingers, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Independent Monitoring Commission, the British government, and even the Taoiseach (effectively the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland) all pointed at the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). But the IRA and Sinn Féin were quick to deny any involvement. 2005 was a

44 NORTHERN BANK DECIDED TO SWITCH THINGS UP AFTER THE ROBBERY. THEY REPLACED THEIR £10, £20, £50, AND £100 NOTES.

busy year for the cops. They arrested folks and searched houses in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. They even found a small £2.5 million stash away at the home of a financial adviser named Ted Cunningham in County Cork. This whole ordeal got Phil Flynn in hot water, and he had to step down as the chairman of the Bank of Scotland (Ireland).

This whole ordeal got Phil Flynn in hot water, and he had to step down as the chairman of the Bank of Scotland (Ireland). Flynn was a director of one of Cunningham's companies.

Cunningham went through a legal rollercoaster—convicted in 2009 of money laundering, then having his conviction tossed in 2012, only to be convicted again in 2014.

Chris Ward, one of the bank employees who got a scare from the gang, ended up in cuffs himself in November 2005. They charged him with being part of the robbery.

£26.5 MILLION IN CASH STOLEN

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“**NORTHERN BANK DECIDED TO SWITCH THINGS UP AFTER THE ROBBERY. THEY REPLACED THEIR £10, £20, £50, AND £100 NOTES.**”

But the IRA and Sinn Féin were quick to deny any involvement. 2005 was a busy year for the cops. They arrested folks and searched houses in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

They even found a cool £2.3 million stashed away at the house of a financial adviser named Ted Cunningham in County Cork. This whole ordeal got Phil Flynn in hot water, and he had to step down as the chairman of the Bank of Scotland (Ireland.)

THE THIEVES GOT AWAY WITH A JAW-DROPPING £26.5 MILLION IN CASH AND GOLD BULLION ”

This whole ordeal got Phil Flynn in hot water, and he had to step down as the chairman of the Bank of Scotland (Ireland). Turns out he was a director of one of Cunningham's companies.

Cunningham went through a legal rollercoaster—convicted in 2009 of money laundering, then having his conviction tossed in 2012, only to be convicted again in 2014. Northern Bank decided to switch things up after the robbery.



A compound grid's flexibility extends to every corner of Wheelman's website. Its crew needed layouts which made Wheelman's content approachable and easier to consume,

ROBBERS BROKE INTO THE BRINK'S-MAT WAREHOUSE. IT WAS DESCRIBED AS
"THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY."

BRINK'S-MAT BULLION ROBBERY

1983
26
NOVEMBER

6

SIX MEN WERE INVOLVED IN THE
WAREHOUSE ROBBERY

26x £26M

THE ROBBERS THOUGHT THEY WOULD
STEAL AROUND £1 MILLION WORTH OF
SPANISH PESETAS, BUT DROVE AWAY
WITH A HAUL WORTH £26 MILLION

MOST OF THE GOLD WAS NEVER RECOVERED. LLOYD'S OF LONDON
PAID OUT FOR THE LOSSES, AND SEVERAL SHOOTING DEATHS
HAVE BEEN LINKED TO THE CASE.

The Brink's-Mat robbery occurred at the Heathrow
International Trading Estate, London, and was one of the
largest robberies in British history. Gold bullion, diamonds,
and cash was stolen from a Brink's-Mat warehouse.

Micky McAvo, and Brian Robinson were convicted of armed
robbery. Most of the gold has never been recovered. Lloyd's
of London paid out and several deaths have been linked to
the case. It was described as "the crime of the century."

76

76 CARDBOARD BOXES CONTAINED GOLD BARS

1000
CARETS

£250K

1KG
3000
GOLD BULLION

but they also wanted designs filled
with energy. Moving from twelve
columns to a compound grid allows
every page to look distinctive while
still feeling connected



Letting typography do more

Typography gives words a voice, but it can give them shape too. Headlines, standfirsts, quotations, captions, numbers, and labels can all do more than simply communicate information. They can become part of a composition.

The conventional position for a stand-first is underneath a headline, but it doesn't have to stay there. I could move it alongside the headline, break it into pieces, or rotate its parts to create a more interesting composition.

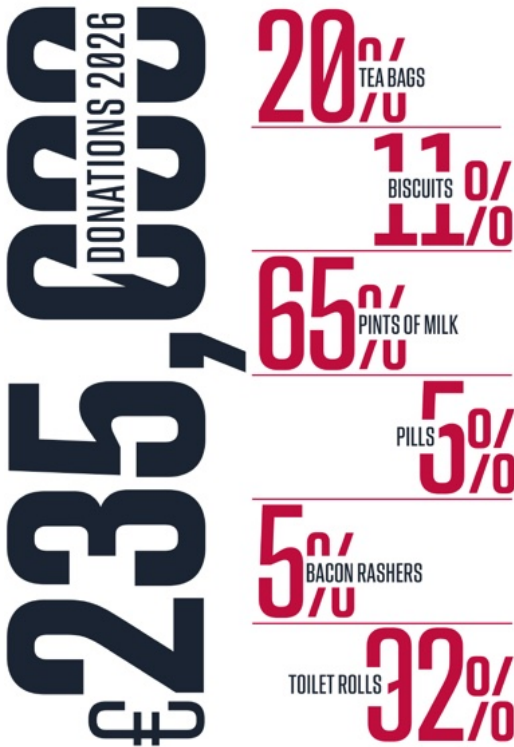


Small dates can make a big impact. I could exaggerate the scale of a day, month, or year, reposition them, or stack their parts to create a more interesting typographic element.

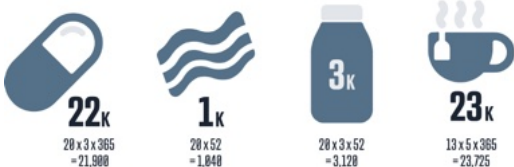


Even the most ordinary items deserve attention. Unordered lists don't always need conventional bullet markers, and ordered lists can have engaging numeral designs. Form labels can be given more emphasis, and image captions don't need to sit quietly underneath pictures; they can be larger, louder, and repositioned around an image.

**WE'RE FULLY FUNDED BY DONATIONS
FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC, NOT
FROM THE PROCEEDS OF ANY ROBBERY**

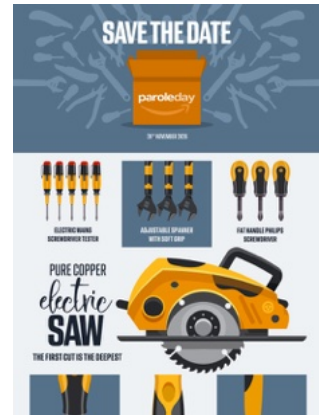
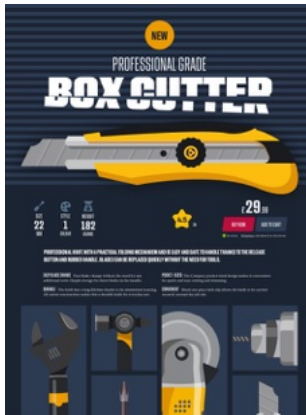
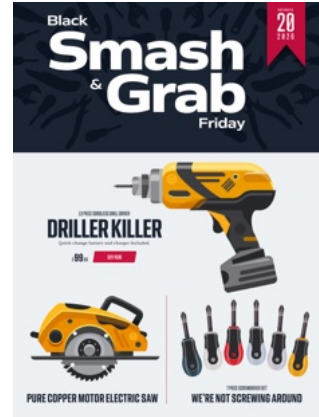
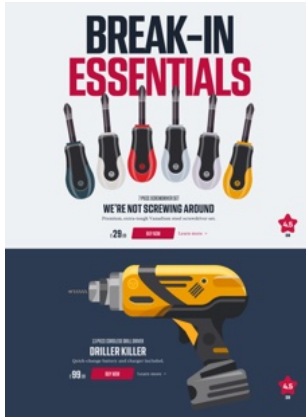


165 CAT BURGLARS, GET-AWAY
DRIVERS, FORGERS, AND SAFE
CRACKERS HELPED SINCE 1965



That doesn't mean every scrap of text deserves a turbocharged typographic performance, because when everything is loud, nothing gets heard. But sometimes, even the smallest piece of content deserves a little more attention.

£652,011 STRETCH GOAL



CONSISTENCY DOESN'T MEAN MAKING EVERYTHING LOOK THE SAME. DIFFERENT DESIGNS CAN SHARE A VISUAL LANGUAGE AND STILL HAVE THEIR OWN CHARACTER.

Every section of Wheelman's new website is connected to the others and to the stories which inspired its design. They don't all look the same, and they shouldn't, but they share enough of the same visual language to unmistakably belong together. Most importantly, the finished website feels distinctive because its design decisions have reasons behind them, and those reasons belong to Wheelman.

Applying Wheelman to your work

OK, I'll hold my hands up and admit I gave myself an unfair advantage when I invented Wheelman. A company run for getaway drivers gave me fast cars, old lags, robberies, and stolen loot. I was never going to be short of colourful inspiration for my design ideas.

Real clients aren't always quite so accommodating. They might campaign for political change, compose music, develop software, or manage infrastructure projects. Their stories might not involve drilling holes into a bank vault, but that doesn't mean you can't find ideas in them.

Wheelman's subject matter made those ideas easier to spot, but it wasn't what made the process work. The thinking I've used throughout this book is the same thinking I bring to real client projects. I look for something distinctive about each client—whether that's their business, personality, products, subject, or sometimes a seemingly insignificant detail—and use what I find as a starting point for their design.

My real clients aren't criminals.

At least, not as far as I know.



It's never been easier to produce a design that looks polished and professional. Off-the-shelf templates, frameworks, libraries, and generative AI can turn prompts into polished-looking designs. Yet despite this creative freedom, so many websites look remarkably alike. Change the logo, swap the colours, replace photographs, and a website for one business can quickly morph into one for another.

Andy Clarke is weary of seeing websites that feel soulless and look identical to one another. This book shows you:

- What makes websites memorable?
- Why every company has a story worth telling
- How to design with personality
- Why patterns are tools, not templates
- How you can design standout websites

This *Hardboiled Web Design Shot* draws on thirty years of experience. We've never had better tools, and Andy wants us to use them better.

About the author

Andy Clarke is a well-known designer and author. He's been called plenty of things since he started working on the web. His ego likes terms such as "Ambassador for CSS," "industry prophet," and "inspiring," but he's most proud that Jeffrey Zeldman once called him a "triple-talented bastard."

stuffandnonsense.co.uk



Photograph by AI Power