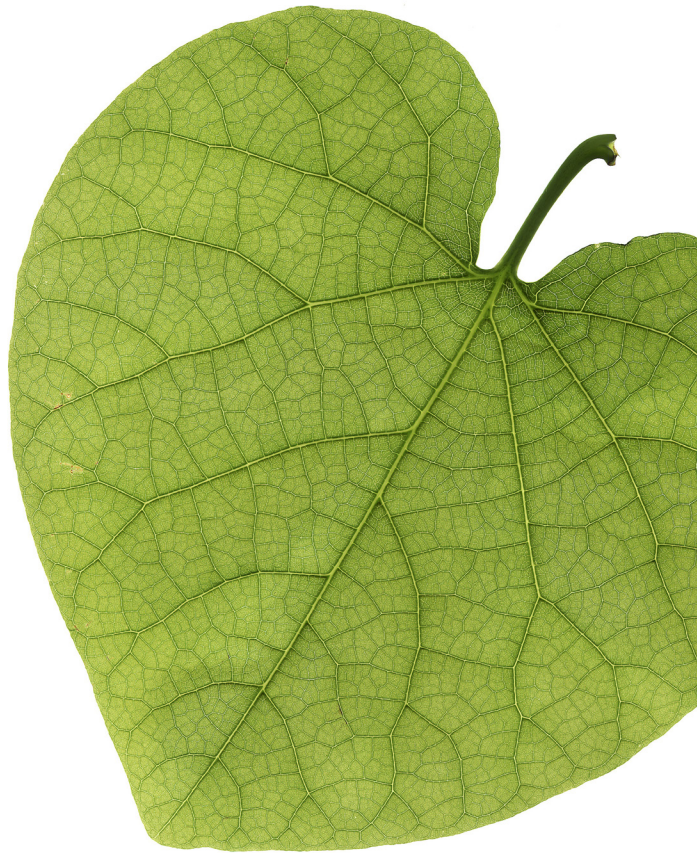


A Reflection on Simplicity and Complexity

Louis Bullock



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“In design, there is simplicity and complexity.

Have a balance of both.”

(Whaite, L., 2011, pers. comm., February 10)

Introduction



Lucy Bushaway

The pair forms the ultimate, most sophisticated of principles, they're timeless.

Designers make careful and considered decisions in designs regarding what aspects are simple, and what aspects counter this in being more complex.

The aim of this book is to break down the preconceived ideas and notions of simplicity and complexity, both individually and as a pair, and elaborate on their relationships and purpose.

Exploring this, I hope to bring about new thinking and redefine what designers consider the principle pair to be, and introduce philosophical thought into the mix.

Definition

Simplicity is only the absolute necessary; it speaks with less. Complexity dares to reach beyond this, to overflow and spill outwards, to keep the scale interesting.

The goal for using both is to reduce superfluous information, and to present the remainder well.

Simplicity is a means of summarizing visual language. It is a mode, a manner of presenting and communicating ideas.

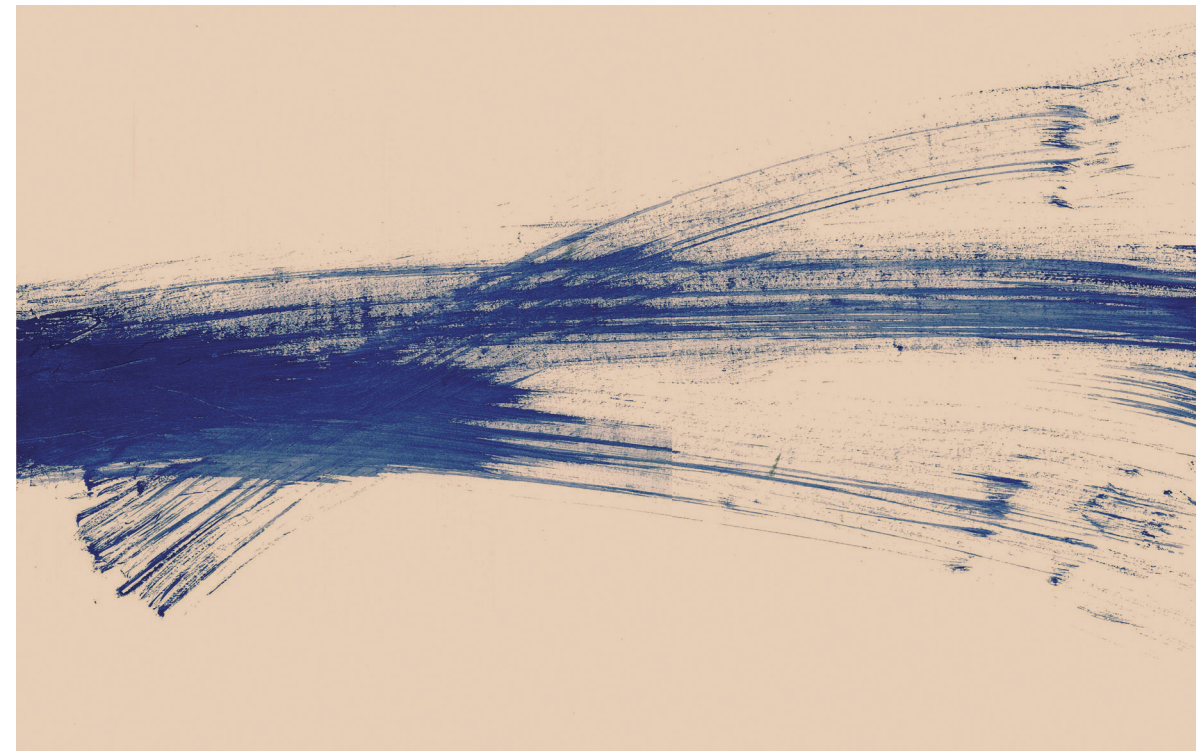
Complexity is useful, as it sets an acceptable limit to what can be shown while still retaining attention. Similar to simplicity, yet a higher amplification, an acceptable density.

Some would consider complexity to be linked to chaos, an unwanted, supposedly negative direction

However, I perceive it to be the moment before chaos, the remaining order of information.

The definitions I've described are not as literal as one is used to reading — this is intentional (Gell-Mann, 1988).

Rather than describe the two in ways that we are used to, I've aimed to broaden the definition to encourage different thinking.



Amber Elliot

Foundational quality

Jordan Tucker



The two form the strongest polarity that sets a foundation for design principles.

Principles such as contrast can take on properties of simplicity and complexity.

For example, an element of a design may have lesser contrast when compared to another element within the design of a higher contrast, by colour, form, texture and so on.

This shift, almost like a step in hierarchy can mirror the steps of simplicity as the primary, complexity as the next step up the ladder (Saunders and Whaite, 2011).



Gemma Wallis

When does one become the other?



Jordan Tucker

Whether something is simple or complex is dependent on the relationships an element has with other elements in a design. These states are all relative.

For example, a form that may appear complex when juxtaposed with a form that appears simple may in fact be far simpler than other more complex forms within the composition.

Upon closer inspection, Jordan's piece shows forms that have tighter curvature inside the crevices of the positive forms, smaller angles and edges of the negative forms cutting in to the larger sweeping lines of the leaves.

Almost like a fractal, the details and various relationships of simplicity and complexity sit within larger occurrences.

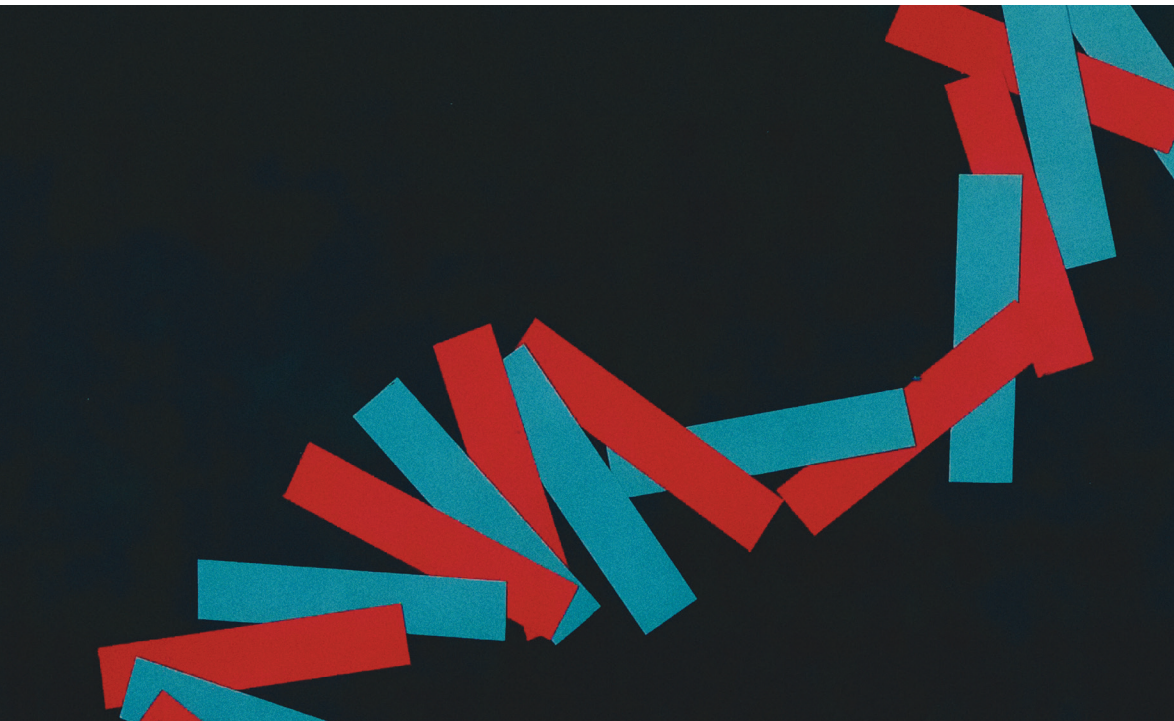


Perhaps simplicity and complexity are merely a flexible and comparative perspective, a means of maintaining a balanced design at all points, nothing too similar, with little grey area (Saunders and Whaite, 2011).

Coexistence

Each strengthens the other, at times they fight, other times, feeding off one another.

In a similar way to positive and negative space, simplicity and complexity have a desire to be together, one cannot leave the other behind. Both states coexist, they are dependent on the other.



Lucy's piece shows a barrage of forms, colour, contrast, all flowing out in a lively manner.

Throughout are points of play with simplicity and complexity.

An example of this is towards the center, where the rectangles begin to untangle. To the left of the most prominent blue rectangle is a build-up of rectangles, layered and pointing in various angles.

The blue rectangle is in a singular direction, connecting only with a few other rectangles, therefore rendering it simple. In comparison, the layered rectangles to its left can be seen as being complex.

This relationship is one of many in the piece, and it shows that even at smaller points of a whole, the principle is still present.

Lucy Bushaway



Design purpose

Using simplicity, designers can deconstruct compacted information and content.

One can reduce the intricacy and the density of ideas that are displayed to ensure the salient points are relayed with ease.

It shows enough, remains modest.

At times, it reveals only the most significant, only what is worth the audience's attention.

This is exactly what the designer must aim for, to seize and secure attention.

If simplicity can aid this, communication becomes even more direct and powerful.

When used considerably, complexity can allow for large amounts of written and visual information to be presented, just within the threshold of attention of the audience.

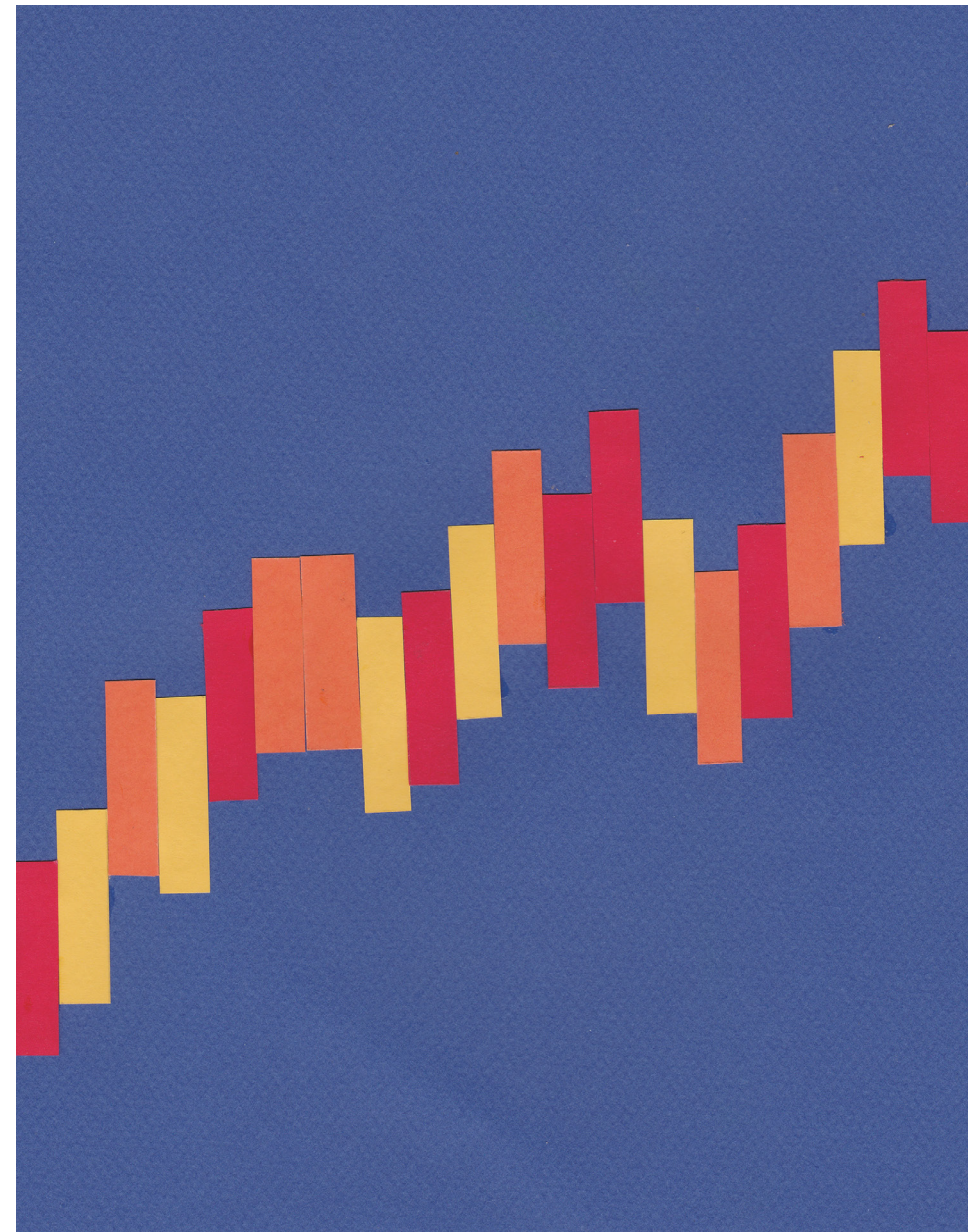
"...due to the acceleration of our communication practice — you need the clearest communication to make yourself heard.

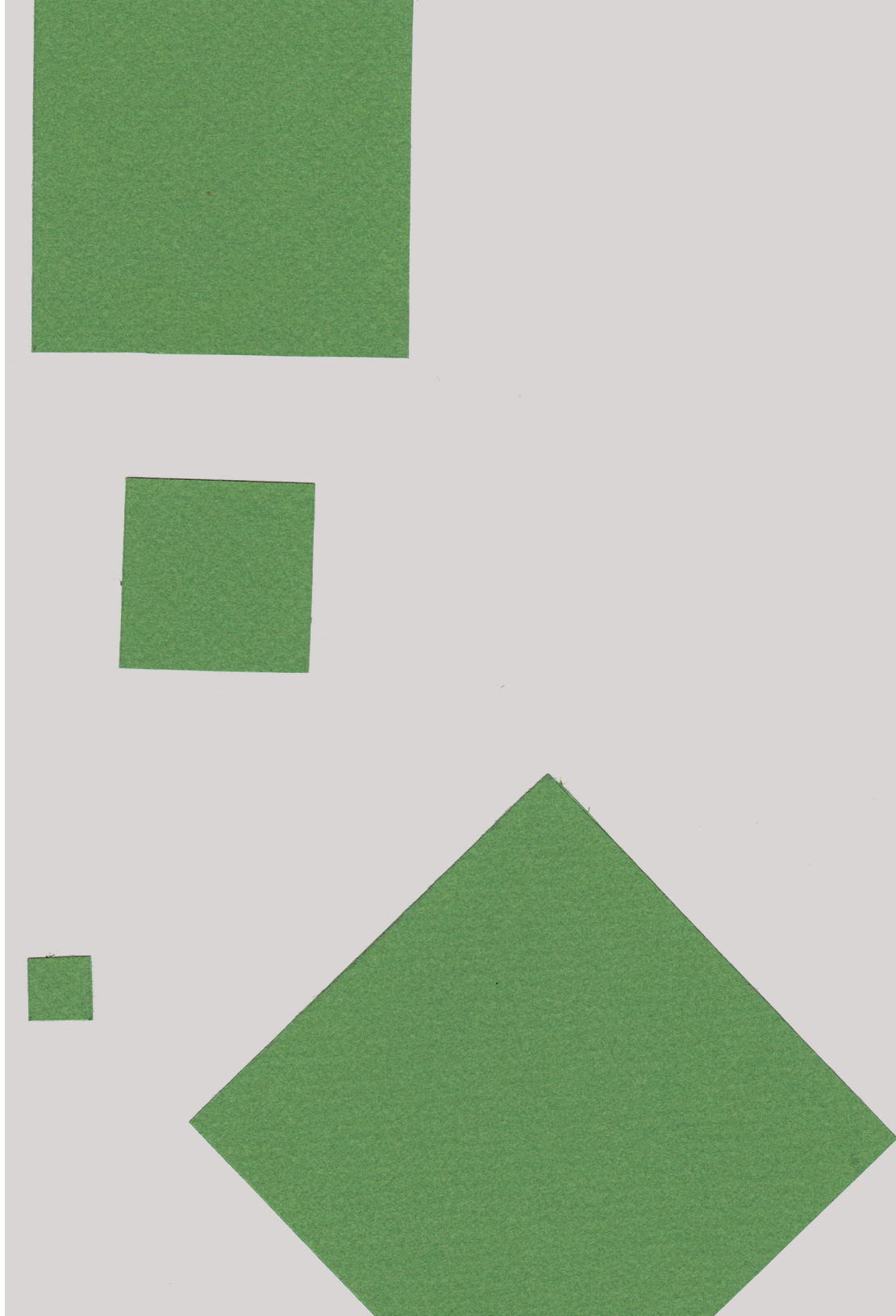
...simplicity is not a given: it is the fruit of concentrated, diligent work.

If you know what you do you are able to do it simply"

(Lüscher, 2006)

John Miliado





Observable applications

In a broader sense, simplicity and complexity can also be applied to other forms of visual communication, works of art, sculpture, installations, and even musical pieces.

For example, in publications such as the one you're reading, the principle can be applied in deliberate ways that reflect and accentuate the content.

However, like most principles, there should be caution in how obvious this is shown, the reader should perceive there's something behind it all, but it should remain mostly invisible, as to not detract from the value of the content.

Our interactions too can be deemed simple or complex; this is affected by our own abilities, past experiences and previous interactions (Few, 2011).

The perspective we have in the moment can also be further shaped by the design we encounter, perhaps a design that communicates through absolute simplicity will cause us to disregard or devalue designs that are more complex, or increase our appreciation of simplified work.

For instance, a designer may use the contrast of simplicity and complexity to create further interest and intrigue in the layout of a book or magazine, by juxtaposing a simple image, with simple attributes against type that upon closer inspection, is a detailed and complex serif typeface. Each detailed serif at their tiny scale against the large scale, and bold form of the image.

These relationships should not be used too temerarily, as overuse can weaken the intended impact and effect.

One might feel that it debases the principle pair, and without a balanced distribution of the intensity of all of the interconnected and overall relationships, the end result may appear to sit in an uninspiring median. Ultimately, this decision-making is up to the designer.

John Miliado

To illustrate this, a poster, flyer and website may all communicate one main event and various amounts of details or information, for this example let's suppose it's for a conference.

The information required to advertise this conference will go as far as being multiple descriptive paragraphs, lists of specifics such as the event's location, time, date, pricing, contact details and sponsors, as well as any accompanying imagery or graphics.

The designer responsible for organising and displaying this information on the various media can either distribute it evenly, or they may try something more innovative, and show only what's appropriate for displaying on that particular item, what is necessary to be communicated. Perhaps they may lead the audience along a paper trail of sorts, each item expanding on the last, each pointing to another.

Another example of this in advertising is television advertisements for films compared to film trailers online and shown in cinemas.

Shorter run times can be a challenge to fit in as many details in as possible, though this can create clutter.

If executed well, it can make for a rich and delightfully complex viewing experience.

Longer trailers allow room for detailed exposition and narrative, more screen time to captivate through moments of simplicity against moments that are intricate and complex (Blanchard, M., 2015, pers. comm., 10 May).

As a means of preventing this, a designer may employ the element of surprise within their layouts and designs, to excite the reader or audience, to put something unexpected into the mix.

This may come in forms such as a spread that is excessively complex and calculated amidst spreads that are stripped-back and simplified.

The application of this differs by a degree from the approach of a balanced and harmonious contrast of simplicity versus complexity by performing a juxtaposition that wasn't predicted by the reader, or foreshadowed in an earlier part of the design's flow. (Saunders and Whaite, 2011)

By applying this, the audience is engaged and curious by what could be next, be it the spreads following a surprise juxtaposition, or the abrupt finality of sponsor logos bringing weight to a poster's bottom, each with relationships of simplicity and complexity of their own within the poster's own parameters of the pair.

Information spanning across multiple designed items can be truncated, and refined, as a result of dispersing overall simplicity and complexity — which item identifies at what point of the scale.

John Miliado



Philosophy

Consider this, like other principles of contrast, simplicity and complexity are like *yin* and *yang*, of Chinese philosophy.

They describe the complimentary nature beneath these opposites, how they are interdependent and share a connection. Additionally, each is strengthened by their interrelationship.

Like air, it's ever present, a necessary part of our observations and responses of our world.

Designing with simplicity and complexity requires great sensitivity; a designer must live and breathe it, as with any principles of design.

Just as hydrogen is abundant, our designed world is teeming with relationships of simplicity and complexity, present at all observable points, microcosm to macrocosm (Satisfactellent, 2013).

"As a designer especially, but also as a general 'creator', or even at a more basic level, as a human, it's so important and instinctual for us to constantly and subconsciously simplify."

To survive, we need to make snap judgements and decisions.

We would not survive if we took in absolutely all the surrounding sensory data at once."

(Kowald, K. 2015, pers. comm., 24 May)



Alexander Anthony

Conclusion

Central to this thinking is simplicity communicating through minimal means, complexity through the maximum.

Simplicity isn't nearly as simple as one would think, it requires the ability to cull and refine all information,

Though it may initially bring to mind systems, organisation and thinking that is convoluted or complicated, the stance I take is that complexity can take on a different meaning. One of refined structure, and problem-solving without becoming visually cumbersome.

Although this involves theoretical thinking, I feel that the applications mentioned suggest a unique perspective on how to implement the two as a principle, and I would encourage designers to continue to do this with audacity when doing so.

I have expanded upon common thinking of the pair, introduced new ideas and theoretical reasoning with the aim of further opening up interpretations and providing what I believe to be a shift in the classical designer mentality.

By nurturing this thinking, designers can challenge modern design theory and go forward with an attitude that remains open, and can truly live and breathe the philosophy that is simplicity and complexity.

Alexander Ryan

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