

Design Templates: Between Empowerment and Control of Amateur Graphic Designers

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Introduction

Templates are singular graphic and digital objects that structure a large part of our visual environment and have profoundly transformed graphic design practices since the beginnings of personal computing. Before its adoption in the digital realm, the term “template,” borrowed from the French “templet” (or temple) meant “A gauge, pattern, or mold, commonly a thin plate or board, used as a guide to the form of the work to be executed; as, a mason’s or a wheelwright’s templet.”¹ In graphic design, a template is generally defined as a predeveloped page layout containing placeholder text and images. Today, templates are ubiquitous in all platforms and software used to create content: they welcome us when we open document-creation software such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint, and they enable us to put our own website online in just a few clicks via content management systems (CMS). Templates, both technical and graphic devices, embody an important reversal in the history of graphic design: whereas in print, graphic designers shape content once it has been produced, with desktop publishing and then on the web, they often create empty forms waiting for content to blend in and conform to them.²

Templates have a negative reputation despite their central role in our digital ecosystem. Often perceived as the cause of rampant graphic homogenization, particularly online and for a long time, they are also accused of dragging down the profession by seeking to replace it with low-cost or even free graphic designs, necessarily of poor quality and mass-produced.³ Despite their profound effects on the discipline and our visual environment, templates have remained relatively little studied.

Although templates are neither software nor simple programs, they represent a type of digital object—an invisible architecture that should be better characterized and integrated into our understanding of contemporary graphic and digital design. This article begins by tracing the history of templates to reposition them in the history of the discipline. I conducted several interviews to explore the reasons for inventing the first templates in the Aldus PageMaker page-layout software, as well as the technical

- 1 T. F. Hoad, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William D. Whitney and Benjamin E. Smith, *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia : With a New Atlas of the World; a Work of General Reference in All Departments of Knowledge in Twelve Volumes* (New York: Century, 1911), <http://www.websters1913.com/words/Templet> (accessed March 26, 2023).
- 2 Etienne Mineur, “Peut-on encore être graphiste au pays des Templates ?” [Can there still be graphic designers in the land of templates?], August 8, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120312151829/http://www.my-os.net/blog/index.php?2007/08/08/564-peut-on-etre-graphiste-au-pays-des-templates> (accessed December 10, 2023).
- 3 Eye on Design, “Early Web Design Helped a Generation Express Themselves Online. How Do We Capture That Feeling Again?,” 2022, <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/early-web-design-helped-generation-express/>; Catherine De Smet, *Pour une critique du design graphique* [For a graphic design critic] (Paris: B42, 2020).

and graphic choices made when designing them. Those interviews were with Ben Rotholtz, program manager for PageMaker from 1987 onward, who became product manager for InDesign when Aldus was acquired by Adobe; with Laura Urban Perry, who was the seventh employee and first graphic designer hired by Aldus as early as December 1984 and who presided over the creation of the first templates; with graphic designer and educator John McWade, who took part in the creation of the first set of templates; and finally, with Marion Desmartin, PageMaker's French translator and first reseller of the software in France. The second part of the article focuses on the evolution of templates on the web and their role in the web's development. Building on this historical work, this article also attempts to more broadly reveal how templates have transformed the practice and aesthetics, and the role of graphic design in the digital realm. By reversing the designer's role of inventing forms for content that does not yet exist, the template can be understood as an extension of the grid or graphic design guidelines, other intermediate tools of graphic designers, just as invisible in final productions. However, its technical and deterministic nature transforms its effects. By making graphic design a work that is a priori disconnected from the text and images on which it is applied, what aesthetics does it help create and disseminate? How does it transform the relationship between professional and amateur graphic designers?

Inventing Templates: Graphic Design in between Control and Empowerment

The history of templates is closely linked to that of desktop publishing and to analyze the graphic choices behind the first templates we first need to understand why they were created.

Templates as a "Killer Feature" for the Nascent Desktop Publishing Industry

The desktop publishing revolution took off with the mutual development and availability of the Macintosh graphical user interface, Adobe Postscript printer language embedded in Apple's Laser Writer printer, and page-layout software, including PageMaker. Paul Brainerd founded Aldus Corporation in February 1984, and PageMaker was released in July 1985 as the first major desktop publishing success and one of the main use cases for the rapidly expanding personal computer market.⁴ For the first time, it became possible to combine text and images on pages, manipulate them in real-time with a graphical user interface, and print the result on a desktop printer. Behind the invention of desktop publishing was the idea of democratizing publishing by enabling anyone to lay out and print documents combining text and images.⁵ The goal of desktop publishing was already reflected in the choice

- 4 John Scull and Hansen Hsu, "The Killer App That Saved the Macintosh," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 41, no. 3 (2019): 42–52, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2019.2918094>.
- 5 Suzanne Crocker, "Paul Brainerd, Aldus Corporation, and the Desktop Publishing Revolution," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 41, no. 3 (2019): 35–41, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2019.2920174>.
- 6 "I also understood that, at least in the short run, these applications would not work for high-end book, magazine, and newspaper publishing, so we would need to target groups that produced lower-end, smaller-scale materials such as brochures and newsletters." Scull and Hsu, "The Killer App." "The first thing we did when we created the company is we got in a car, myself and the engineers, and we travelled from city to city asking that very question: who could use this new tool using the new technology that was available. And we originally thought that it was professional graphic designers but we actually in that trip decided that there was a much broader audience, people who created newsletters, graphic artists and designers; and small companies. It became very apparent that we had to figure out ways to make it easy to use." Paul Brainerd, in conversation with Laura Perry, video recorded on August 14, 2022.

of the company name, Aldus, inspired by Aldus Manutius, the Venetian printer of the Renaissance who broadened the availability and accessibility of printed matter.

Before the development of desktop publishing, producing printed documents involved the work of typesetters, who were responsible for setting the text, that is, assembling the typographic characters, first in lead and then, from the 1970s onward, through photocomposition. During this time, there was a real separation between the graphic design and layout professions and typesetting and printing. Because of this separation, corrections were extremely costly and time-consuming. For desktop publishing advocates, the goal was to bring design and production closer together by eliminating these steps. As a result, one of PageMaker's key features from the outset was to enable the styling and rearrangement of all text in the various text blocks as it was edited or corrected. Modifying text thus had a real-time impact on the final layout of the publication.

While fast-moving publishing professionals, such as the press, were the first intended users, Apple and the PageMaker team soon realized that desktop publishing was of interest to many others—companies, retailers, associations and even private individuals—who had until then been relatively isolated from the print production.⁶ The aim of democratization was twofold: to enable graphic design professionals to avoid the typographic composition stage and give the general public access to simple publishing projects without going through graphic designers. This dual objective can be clearly seen in PageMaker's communication at the time, which reveals the dichotomy of its two audiences with very different needs and stakes.⁷ On the left, an ad shows the “creative side of PageMaker” with “powerful features for precise page composition.” On the right, the ad shows the “business side of PageMaker,” communicating that it offers “built-in templates and comprehensive support for long documents.”

The desire to make publishing accessible to the general public met with hostility from a large proportion of the profession who were very skeptical about the basic quality of printing and the limitations of page layout software that did not take into account many of the typographic rules considered basic.⁸ Since desktop publishing was developed with the idea of overcoming the monopoly of typesetters and that of the rest of the graphic industry, they rightly saw it as a direct competitor seeking to render their know-how obsolete.⁹ As a result, desktop publishing quickly suffered from negative press for putting a powerful software program into the hands of anyone—especially those who didn't understand the basic rules of professional publishing standards: using a large number of fonts in the same document, saturating page space, or the freeform manipulation of structure.¹⁰

7 You can find the advertisement at <https://interface-experience.org/objects/aldus-pagemaker/> (accessed March 26, 2024).

8 When the first version of PageMaker came out, it was heavily criticized because it did not provide a kerning feature. See Andy Benedek, “The Craft of Digital Type. Digital Typesetting: How Does it Measure Up?,” *Eye Magazine* (Winter 1990), <https://www.eyemagazine.com/review/article/the-craft-of-digital-type>.

9 “My background was in journalism and I had worked in newspapers on graphic design. . . . I saw that the world was changing, we were moving from hot metal composition to cold type and it opened up a lot more freedom but it was still very much controlled by others, by third parties. You had to get the type sets separately.” Brainerd conversation. Consider also the following advertisement extract: “Because PageMaker users don't require outside services for such things as typesetting, illustration, photostat and art supplies, it is an excellent cost trimming tool for business.” Quote from a PageMaker ad, in Briar Levit (dir.), *Graphic Means* (2018).

10 “To get things built, you have to be able to describe them. . . . The act of specifying requires one to define the structure of a design very precisely. . . . It places one's design under intense scrutiny in terms of structure and logical process. . . . Very different to the 'drag and drop' computer screen environment, where close enough is often good enough.” Mark Holt and Hamish Muir, *8vo: On the Outside* (Baden: Müller, 2005), 313.

If the result doesn't appear sufficiently "professional," it would not be worth it for companies to invest in desktop publishing software and all the requisite hardware. From the outset, PageMaker had a major stake in enabling non-graphic designers to produce documents of sufficient quality. Because very few people have had the opportunity to use a graphical user interface, there was also a need to train people how to use WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) software, but this had to be complemented by education in design principles. Templates were PageMaker's answer to these two challenges, enabling the production of "professional-quality" documents while reducing the barrier to entry required to achieve a satisfactory result for nonprofessionals.

The Conservative Design Choices of the First Templates

The first set of templates was released in 1986, as part of PageMaker version 1.2 on Microsoft Windows. Templates became available before many features that could be considered indispensable for desktop publishing software, such as automatic hyphenation that demonstrates how important the features were for PageMaker. This initial set was the result of a collaboration between PageMaker in-house graphic designer and project leader Laura Urban Perry and freelance graphic designer and educator John McWade, who created the templates. This first set of twenty-one newsletter templates was included in a document designed as an instruction manual for the software and a presentation of key layout principles.

Even before looking at the graphic decisions behind these templates, it is interesting to note the choice of the types of publications for which templates were created. It is no coincidence that the first set included templates for newsletters, followed by templates for calendars, memos, and business plans. These documents are artifacts that could be described as intermediate, lying between posters and purely textual documents. At one end of the spectrum, posters appear too complex: they require solid visual communication skills and have little need for automation. Moreover, their format and expected print quality are often beyond the capabilities of desktop printers. At the other end of the spectrum, purely administrative documents do not involve text-image relationships. Intermediate documents, that is, recurring documents for internal use, are therefore the first to be targeted, as one can reuse the layout principles of previous issues. The first set focused on newsletters and included seven series of templates, following a progression in layout complexity, from two-column compositions for "flexible and quick" layouts to five-column templates that give room for "specific needs."

Urban-Perry characterizes her work on templates as primarily structural rather than conceptual. The templates are designed to show what can be done with the software, to demonstrate its (then

limited) range of possibilities. Aesthetic choices were also dictated by the tool's limited possibilities. At the time, the Macintosh included only a dozen fonts, only half of which, according to Urban-Perry, were of "professional quality." Of these, only one—Helvetica—had a distinctive bold variation. The choice was therefore a default one—a forced selection, the opposite of the current idea of templates that offer an identifiable graphic "style" from an infinite number of possibilities.

As with the choice of typefaces, the graphic choices are very conservative, as Urban-Perry admits, because the idea was to try "to honor tradition." We can sense the need to establish PageMaker's credibility by linking it to the aesthetics developed by print designers, particularly those working for the press. Yet by this time, graphic designers like April Greiman had already perceived the potential of the computer and were working to explore its graphic possibilities. While Greiman was hired to design visuals for PageMaker's communications, it is quite ironic to note that the aesthetic she was developing was too revolutionary and was carefully avoided in the templates.

The Two Sides of the Template: Empowerment and Control

Templates crystallize two paradoxical, almost contradictory objectives. First, they are a means of stepping up for the many people who never received graphic design and page layout training. They enable those who lack the skills and knowledge to produce documents by providing them meticulously prepared examples that can be progressively modified, thanks to the magic of direct manipulation.¹¹ Templates enable anyone to produce a professional-looking document simply by filling in the placeholders with content. In this case, the choice of template acts as a creative act. But the same template can also serve as a base on which the untrained user can add her or his own "design touches," as the associated manual proclaims in its preface, to make the template unique. For example, you can change the font of headings or the position of an image while avoiding mistakes, since the essence of the composition remains intact. Finally, the template can be used as a starting point for more substantial editing work for those who have acquired more confidence using the tool. In this sense, templates incorporate and synthesize a whole range of know-how into a ready-to-use form.

Behind this goal of empowering and emancipating the public, the template is also, perhaps above all, designed to guide and supervise production to avoid "graphical mistakes" (the second objective). This may seem contradictory to the first objective, but these two goals go hand in hand. PageMaker claims to be a tool for the production of professional-quality printed documents. Because they are produced by professional graphic designers experienced in printed graphics, templates assure a certain quality and thus

11 Direct manipulation was a key concept in user interface design at that time. See Ben Shneiderman, "Direct Manipulation: A Step beyond Programming Languages," in *Sparks of Innovation in Human-Computer Interaction* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 1993).

reassures users the quality of their production when using the software. But this control is also built into the technical form chosen that embodies the templates. In later versions of PageMaker, templates became a different type of file. Saving a document as a template ensures that the program opens a copy of the document rather than the original. Consequently, even if it is possible to use the template as a basis for a particular publication, the template itself remains unchanged. In particular, this allows graphic designers to create a template that cannot be altered but must be used as such by its users. Indeed, it is—above all—this technical closure that distinguishes the template from master pages, a feature also present in the first version of the software. PageMaker has made use of this controlling dimension of the template. Indeed, the graphic design department had designed a whole set of templates for the software’s resellers, enabling them to control communication and preserve the brand’s graphic consistency. Resellers were only allowed to modify the various practical and contact information on the documents.

Regarding the transformation of the graphics profession, desktop publishing and templates appear to have played a major role in challenging the traditional organization of the design and printing process. French type designer and semiotician Gérard Blanchard, in his 1979 analysis of the impact of computers on graphic design, suggests, on the contrary, that “today’s computerized work once again imposes the predominance of the global system, which, being done in packets (text-images), returns to the first system of block page production.”¹² In his view, it was the printing press that had profoundly divided the work of page layout, separating text layout from page layout. In this first incarnation, the template, by bringing images, text, and page layout in the same tool, helps put these activities back on the same level, which was not to the taste of many graphic designers, who were attached to the idea of thinking up the layout before moving on to the production stage.¹³

This initial version of templates is still around and has even spread to all mainstream publishing software from Microsoft Word to PowerPoint. Their use is often the first choice for those wishing to produce a document. In many software packages, the blank page is just one of the possible options and is often placed on the same level as templates. While desktop publishing templates still exist, templates have been adopted on other platforms, such as the web. And like with desktop publishing, templates have been instrumental in democratizing its use.

Templates for the Emerging Web: Dissociation, Stiffening, and Mass Distribution

The development of the web has opened a new playground for the use of templates, profoundly transforming them in the process.

12 Gérard Blanchard, “Dix ans de graphisme ‘en français’” [Ten years of graphic design in “French”], *Communication & Langages* 41, no. 1 (1979): 86–99, <https://doi.org/10.3406/colan.1979.1292>.

13 “In the digital age, design development artwork and repro are largely homogenous—what you see on screen is close to what you will get back from the printer—there is little to anticipate, some of the magic is missing” in *Octavo Redux 1.1: Record of Octavo, Journal of Typography 1986–1992*, ed. Hamish Muir and Mark Holt (London: Unit Editions, 2018), 220.

The First Web Templates: A Content Structuring Tool with Little Visual Agency

Templates have been around since the very beginning of the web, present with the first WYSIWYG webpage creation software, such as Microsoft FrontPage, released in 1996, at a time when the web was just taking off.¹⁴ By offering a semi-WYSIWYG interface for editing webpages, FrontPage clearly intended to follow in the footsteps of desktop publishing, crafting the short-lived phrase “webtop publishing” with the idea that it could be as easy to create and publish a webpage as it was to edit a document for printing.¹⁵ As with PageMaker, the goal was once again to enable anyone to publish their own page, even without the services of a graphic designer. FrontPage chose to operate on a template principle, allowing you to choose the type of page you wish to create: “a template is a shell that you can use as the basis for a new document.”¹⁶ Among the pages on offer in FrontPage 98 were templates for a personal page, employee directory, product description page, seminar calendar, bibliography, survey form, and event registration form. If you choose to create a personal page, you can select one or more pre-formatted sections (e.g., current projects, list of favorite sites, contact, comments, etc.). In this new context, templates help demonstrate the wide range of possible uses of this new interactive medium while helping standardize these uses. In fact, they are characterized by a categorization and fixation of standard pages that dictate how a webpage should appear not only graphically but in terms of content structure. Whereas PageMaker offered twenty-one different templates for newsletters, FrontPage 98 offered just one template per use. This is not only because graphic possibilities on the emerging web were limited but also because the function of the template had suddenly shifted from the specification of a page layout to the semantic description of the various content elements that should appear on a webpage. While there were a few options for adapting this content, they remained very limited. For biographical information, for example, you could only choose between three “profiles”: academic, professional, or personal.

In this type of software, interaction mostly takes place via modal windows, departing from the idea of direct manipulation of desktop publishing.¹⁷ The desire to learn and empower by example, which prevailed in the early desktop publishing templates, had nearly disappeared.

At that time, cascading style sheets (CSS) were only being developed, and page layout possibilities were extremely limited. HTML allowed for the creation of tables, and graphic designers quickly adopted these tags in their attempts to re-create a page layout grid system.

The difficulty of composing pages helps reinforce the general public’s interest in other ways of individualizing the page, partic-

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- 14 To get a glimpse of the software history as told by one of its co-founders, see Randy Forgaard, “The Early FrontPage History,” May 1996, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161102153429/http://www.microsoftbob.com/post/The-Early-FrontPage-History.aspx> (accessed March 26, 2023).
- 15 “Microsoft Acquires Vermeer Technologies Inc.,” January 16, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060815133347/https://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/1996/jan96/vrmeerpr.mspx> (accessed March 26, 2023).
- 16 Kerry A. Lehto, and Brett Polonsky, *Official Microsoft FrontPage 98 Book* (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press, 1997), 73.
- 17 For modal windows, see screenshots in David Boles, “FrontPage 98: Elegant & Exquisite,” *Golnside*, August 6, 1997, <http://www.telecommander.com/pics/links/application%20software/microsoft/Frontpg98/FrontPage%2098%20Elegant%20%20Exquisite.htm> (accessed April 17, 2024).

ularly the use of wallpapers and GIFs, which are attractive because they are animated. This helped create the vernacular web aesthetic well described by Ola Lialina.¹⁸ It also helps explain designers' relative lack of interest in this new medium:

Graphic designers have been slow to grasp the Web. . . . The low resolution of the computer interface has long put a damper on designers who are used to working with the ever-increasing detail of print media—even if they design these details on screens. Technology is complex: perhaps that's why so many of these websites resemble templates or standard examples programmed in HTML or on software such as Photoshop—web design has long been driven by technology.¹⁹

The Emergence of Themes and the Dissociation of Layout and Visual Appearance

In this context of constrained graphic possibilities, the term “theme” has emerged to distinguish it from templates. In a web environment, templates have taken on the meaning of semantic structuring of the page, whereas themes represent the graphic appearance of these templates. Templates and themes tend to echo the decoupling between semantic structuring (HTML) and styling (CSS) that came to prevail on the web.²⁰ Following this logic, any content can be styled in any way.

Technically, themes are graphic variations of a page's various elements and are predesigned to work together, no matter the layout. Added in FrontPage 98, themes include prepared font styles for different levels of text, a background, and decorative elements for bullets. Each theme is presented using the same page template and the same skeleton, reinforcing the idea of a skin that can match any content and layout. Graphic elements can be modified, but this is also done by an indirect interface separating these elements.

Choosing a theme is very different than choosing a template. Whereas PageMaker templates were structurally designed to match and invite specific types of content, graphic choices must adapt to any page layout and virtually any content. The result is a profound separation of content and form and of content, layout composition, and visual style of page elements. Themes become what we might call a “graphic ambiance,” sometimes referred to as look and feel or skin, which is concretely conveyed by the names chosen to designate these various themes: “nature,” “automobile,” or “Saturday morning TV cartoon.”²¹ This technical choice implies a vision of graphic design as a purely aesthetic choice, independent from content, at the opposite end of the traditional ethos of functionalist graphic design. In 2001, the popular website creation service Geocities Hello Kitty templates (or themes, as both words were used) were made by Japanese cartoon brand Sanrio.²²

18 Ola Lialina, “Vernacular Web 2” *Contemporary Home Computing*, August 2007, <http://contemporary-home-computing.org/vernacular-web-2/> (accessed April 17, 2024).

19 *Eye Magazine*, “Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Web,” Summer 1997, <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/stop-worrying-and-learn-to-love-the-web> (accessed December 10, 2023).

20 Derren Wilson, Saeed-Ul Hassan, Naif Radi Aljohani, Anna Visvizi, and Raheel Nawaz, “Demonstrating and Negotiating the Adoption of Web Design Technologies: Cascading Style Sheets and the CSS Zen Garden,” *Internet Histories* 7, no 1. (2023): 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2022.2055274>.

21 See screenshots in Boles, “FrontPage 98.”

22 See “Yahoo PageWizards,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20010615133040/http://geocities.yahoo.com/v/w> (accessed March 26, 2024).

Choices are less about functional graphic design and more about (personal) branding.

WYSIWYG website creation software rapidly showed limitations for professionals, particularly developers who find it too cramped and for designers who reject the poor quality of templates and themes available. Yet they realized that it was becoming untenable to customize for the web, as it had become impossible to produce each page individually.²³ Designers like Jessica Helfand, who saw it as an opportunity to simplify their work, were reclaiming the template: “Helfand. . . will give her customers a website template in the form of a single designed screen, accompanied by a detailed description rather than an endless sequence of complete pages.”²⁴ In this context, CMSs that were emerging at the time appeared as a new way of working on the web and radically transformed the profession of web designers. CMSs are programs that separate the website creation from the content creation, generally providing a dedicated simplified interface for content creation and edition. With desktop publishing, templates were being produced by a few designers, who intended them as starting points for nondesigners. With CMS, templates become the final object, the real production of all web designers.

CMS allow designers to concentrate on design by creating templates. The domain experts build the content in a different environment. The server takes this content, inserts it into the corresponding template and sends the whole thing, neatly packaged, to the end users.²⁵

If designers have abdicated the power they once had to control the final appearance of a webpage,²⁶ web templates reinforce their power by detaching content editing from graphic design editing:

With CMS, domain experts add content in a simplified way. Not through complex software like FrontPage or GoLive, but through a simplified interface without all the design parameters they don’t need. . . . The end result is that, while it’s easier to publish content and design, there’s still strict control over what ends up on the server.²⁷

The growing adoption of CMS contributed to the intensification of “templatization” of pages and their homogenization in a feedback loop where users’ habituation to certain site architectures leads them to prefer that architecture, further reinforcing its adoption and deployment on other sites.

An Ever-Tightening Straitjacket that Continued to Facilitate Publication
In the case of CMS, particularly those dedicated to blog publishing such as Wordpress, the idea was the same as that which presided over the creation of templates in desktop publishing: to facilitate

23 Nico Macdonald, “Go In at the Top and Redefine the Project,” *Eye Magazine* (Spring 1996), <https://www.eyemagazine.com/opinion/article/monitor> (accessed December 10, 2023).

24 Ibid.

25 James Ellis, “CMS and the Single Web Designer,” *A List Apart*, January 11, 2002, <https://alistapart.com/article/cms1/> (accessed December 10, 2023).

26 Mineur, “Peut-on encore être graphiste.”

27 Ellis, “CMS and the Single Web Designer.”

publication by the public. With just a few clicks, you could start telling your adventures on the web. The architecture of templates (or rather, themes) made it easier to publish. At the same time, CMSs are multiplying the number of themes they offer, often free of charge, bringing to the fore a growing catalog of templates with limited modification possibilities. While templates are no longer really about facilitating learning, they continue to play their role in facilitating access to publication.

This time, it was not just the public who could benefit from templates. Graphic designers tempted by the idea of creating their own websites also discovered the benefits of using templates. All the more so as, at that time in the early 2000s, few knew how to program. For many graphic designers trained solely in print, templates offered an opportunity to participate in creating a website without having to learn development skills. A template could be chosen as a starting point because it corresponded with the chosen semantic structure. All you had to do was make it your own by modifying its theme. In this sense, it may be tempting to make the connection between the ability to identify a template for its potential and its suitability for the project in the same way that print designers know how to identify, in a catalog, the fonts on which they base their layout work. However, this is not today's favored understanding, and the template is still presented as the avatar of an absence of design.

The shift of templates from desktop publishing to the web has indeed contributed to their rigidity. Desktop publishing templates represent a graphic output that is already complete but is relatively easy to modify, even completely. If we follow Gérard Blanchard's lead, we could say that unlike desktop publishing templates, web templates were gradually reinstalling a strict separation between page layout and typesetting. While it is often possible to modify certain graphic details of templates, such as their colors, the layout of on-screen elements is now almost totally beyond the control of amateur graphic designers or nonprofessionals, who cannot get their hands into the code. However, it is not just templates that have become more rigid; it is the whole architecture of the web, in particular CSS, that graphic designer Espen Brunborg described in the following way in 2013: "what print designers use as a visual aid—a layer of underlying, non-prescriptive principles—web designers implement as structural limitations in CSS."²⁸ Despite its general trend toward rigidification, the evolution of templates and their role might not be set in stone. It is interesting to note that we are seeing a return to the approach of the pioneers of WYSIWYG website creation with the development of so-called no-code platforms, such as wix.com or readymag.com, exploring a return to forms of templates that can technically be modified, to a certain extent, by direct manipulation.

28 Espen Brunborg, "Fuck Grids," *8gramgorilla.com*, July 8, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150919005258/http://8gramgorilla.com/fuck-grids/> (accessed December 10, 2023).

Templates as Vectors for Standardizing Aesthetics and Transforming the Graphic Design Industry

Building on the analysis of the birth and progressive stiffening of templates on the web, I now discuss the larger impact of template use and try to understand how they fit within the vast family of intermediary graphic design tools.

Thanks to their digital nature, templates have certainly played a role in driving graphic design homogenization around the world. As Gaurav Mathur showed in his article on the design of Indian signboards, despite an increase in the number of signboards manufactured, there hasn't been a diversification of design because templates, generally coming from Western advertising agencies, have forced a strict adherence to predesigned corporate identity.²⁹ Whereas graphic design guidelines also aim at controlling, their prescriptive nature is limited because they always necessitate a reinterpretation. Acting as guidelines, they generally acknowledge that some situations might require tweaks and accompany them through written advice. However, templates being already digitally implemented have a stronger controlling and homogenization effect: even when they can be modified, it will require extra dedicated effort to tweak or transform them.

However, as we have seen, the controlling effect of a template is directly correlated with the surrounding software ecosystem in which it evolves. While templates inherently favor a default status quo, there is a wide range in how much they can prevent or instead invite modifications. In their original version, the twenty-one PageMaker templates were accompanied by a 114-page manual designed to facilitate their use and appropriation. PageMaker, with its WYSIWYG design, facilitated direct appropriation. In contrast, when only a few parameters are available for change on a CMS panel, the template's controlling nature becomes stricter. Templates carefully crafted aesthetics, as Kvåle and Poulsen argue, can also push a disconnection with technology altogether.³⁰ They argued that the way templates are provided in modern webpage builder such as wix.com "raises the bar for users to make additions without compromising the site's aesthetical qualities."³¹

Beyond its impact on nonexperts, templates also greatly affected the graphic design profession. Designing templates is a very different endeavor from designing for a specified content. Whereas it is important for graphic designers to stand out from the crowd in their custom work, template designers need to make it clear that their template belongs to a specific type of publication. While we can point to the relative low quality of the templates that feed our software today, these are nonetheless modeled on the aesthetics and rules of professional graphic designers, in an attempt to imitate them, tending to obliterate the more vernacular aesthetics that can emerge when amateur designers are left to their own devices. While designers are often the first to criticize the standar-

29 Gaurav Mathur, "Signboards as Mirrors of Cultural Change," *Design Issues* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 78–93.

30 Gunhild Kvåle Poulsen and Søren Vigild, "The Templated Aesthetics of Wix: A Social Semiotic Technology Approach to Web Design," in *Multimodality and Aesthetics*, ed. Elise Seip Tønnessen and Frida Forsgren (New York: Routledge, 2018).

31 "Wix's comprehensive templation thus introduces a design challenge: It raises the bar for users to make additions without compromising the site's aesthetical qualities," 222.

dization induced by templates, it is the very reason they exist in the first place. Since one aim of templates is to ensure professional quality, they need to communicate this unambiguously, leading to the adoption of conservative graphic choices that are immediately identifiable and categorizable. The graphic choices made are often conventions that templates reinforce by exploiting them. Graphic designers, such as Neville Brody³² or Rob Giampietro, already noted the “default aesthetic” fostered by the computerization of graphic design.³³ Building on this line of thought, we can assert that templates more specifically contribute to the creation of an aesthetic of graphic clichés, which define and further reinforce the prevalence of graphic codes exploited by templates.

This trend is reinforced by the development of template “marketplaces,” such as Canva.com, which further reduce their nuances because they must classify templates. Indeed, on these platforms, which offer a catalog of thousands of templates, users are led to search for templates using keywords or categories, forcing each template to be positioned on a series of extremely restricted keywords that generally have little to do with layout specificities. The template’s entire graphic work is then reduced to a few common terms: we look for a “zen” leaflet, or a “fun” one. Reliance on keywords and categories are, I think, one of the key factors driving graphic clichés aesthetics. If we are to accuse templates of being a driving force behind the homogenization of aesthetics, we need to examine the determining role played by template marketplaces that have mostly escaped scrutiny from design research.

Conclusion

The history of templates can be divided into several movements: the birth of templates, between empowerment and control by amateur graphic designers; the arrival of the web and the separation of semantic composition and graphic appearance; CMS and the imposition of this dissociative logic on designers; and finally, the hegemony of templates crystallized on digital platforms. In its early days, the template was caught in an ambiguous tension between empowerment and control of amateur graphic designers; the latter dimension has gradually gained the upper hand in web design. Empowerment is reduced to facilitating publication, to the detriment of any learning or graphic practice.

This article demonstrates the legitimacy of the template as a graphic design object in its own right, which should be given greater consideration in the analysis of visual cultures, aligned with current efforts targeted at developing a history of graphic design beyond the canon.³⁴

Acknowledgments

I thank Ben Rotholtz, Laura Urban Perry, John McWade, and Marion Desmartin for their generous accounts of the origins of templates.

32 Rick Poynor, “Reputations: Neville Brody,” *Eye Magazine* (1992), <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/reputations-neville-brody> (accessed December 10, 2023).

33 Rick Poynor, “Reputations: Neville Brody,” *Eye Magazine* (Spring 1992). <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/reputations-neville-brody>; Rob Giampietro, “Default Systems in Graphic Design,” *Lined & Unlined* (2003), <https://linedandunlined.com/archive/default-systems-in-graphic-design/> (accessed December 10, 2023).

34 See <https://peoplesgdarchive.org> (accessed April 17, 2024).

I also thank Paul Brainerd for enabling these encounters, as well as France Corbel and Jean-Christophe Bousignac for insights on templates' key role during the early professionalization of web designers in France. This article is a revised translation from Nolwenn Maudet, "Une brève histoire des templates, entre autonomisation et contrôle des graphistes amateurs," *Design Arts Medias* (2022), <https://journal.dampress.org/issues/systemes-logiques-graphies-materialites/une-breve-histoire-des-templates-entre-autonomisation-et-contrôle-des-graphistes-amateurs> (accessed April 17, 2024).