# Albers & Vignelli in CSS

## THE INTERACTION OF COLOR &

how to help typography breathe


One Hundred Percent Human-made

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# A Rebel's Manifesto

## Basic rules to make products beautiful

When many people design, they think functionally first. This makes some sense, as it encourages the design to center on the user.

Many companies, especially those with government contracts or grants, also prize Accessibility in design. AI agents, developers, and modern designers tend to think this means appropriate contrast levels and semantic labels for keyboard navigation and search engine optimization.

They are partially correct. This mindset has also turned the modern web into a slapdashery of dimestore interface designs, insults to the human spirit.

At its core, the designer has a few shapes, and most of them are rectangles or circles. The other things that a digital app designer have might be described as decoration, such as: color, typography, iconography, and graphics/media.

That sums most of it up.

However, most designers are taught bad practice these days. The two primary culprits are corporate design teams who prioritize development time spent above all else, and the proliferation of Figma. Via its introduction of FigJam, Figma obliterated service design as a standalone expertise, and with the introduction of auto layout, tokens, variants, and more subverted centuries of typesetting and grid-based design that crafts elegant experiences. This is why your favorite agentic building tool can crank through backend tasks like a lightsaber through butter, but if you ask it to build a cohesive UI that utilizes components and well-typed CSS variables, it burns five times as many tokens and it still looks like all the other slop that AI makes. It is infuriating it is unlikely to change anytime soon.

## A few simple tricks to make text ugly & inaccessible

The first thing we'll do is adjust the line-height (otherwise known as leading) to the default for Roboto, which is the font I am using here. The second thing we'll do is stop writing for humans, so I'll just tell you that the color of the text you're reading is #7C665F in RGBA values with an alpha (opacity) set to 1.0.

The next way we'll make it terrible has already happenend. Maybe you noticed?

You see, I set the character spacing (the amount of space between letters) down to 0, which is Roboto's default. Since Roboto is basically the internet's default san-serif, it's probably best not to mess with the defaults. Isn't it much easier to read this text now that it's set to the defaults? Isn't the readability improved when it's all so much closer together?

The 3rd thing we'll do is use lots of numbers and put in some `code-styled` blocks that aren't rendered properly or maybe some unformatted **markdown** elements that _should_ be **bold** and stand out. That'd be really great.

And while we're at it, why don't we just switch things up right now and go for the maximum amount of contrast so we get AAAAAA compliance in our WCAG and a11y and corporate won't lay off any more designers.

Text is so much more user-friendly now, right? The truth: it is more user-friendly, by most evaluative standards, but it ignores the noble spirit of the human-in-the-loop, and it ignores basic principles of how humans subconsciously (if untrained) or consciously evaluate groups of like things. That's why it is so distracting when something (or someone like me) chooses to be a n o n - c o n f o r m i s t . It makes the viewer uncomfortable because they've encountered something they cannot predict, and whatever stands out is considered possibly a threat to the **basal ganglia**, the _deepest-seeded_ part of the human brain.

## It's not only the type

Now that you've read one section as a user, I'm happy that both of us get to experience this section as humans.

Most designers will tell you that without the copy or the content, the design is impossible. This is true, and most writers aren't judicious about whether they should say inline that this is 20 point Roboto with 0.63 character spacing and leading set to 48, or if those details would better belong in a card elsewhere that explains the logic without weighting down the text. It would be better as a card, but if I just tell you how to do it without showing you, it probably won't be as memorable.

The words themselves and the sentence structure go into the underlying Gestalt psychology of how humans see order versus chaos, or said another way: safety versus threat. As with parenting, helicopter product managers or business stakeholders or stressed out design managers create an environment where the designers do not want to defend their users or fight for elegance; rather, they want to reduce friction and retain their jobs. This is noble, in its own way, but across time it degrades the human-in-the-loop by orienting everyone toward Userdom, that fate where we need features to make products feel fulfilling, whereas we used to feel fulfilled without products.

Believe it or not, we used to just exist in nature, spending time with the things and people around us. And that human experience gets hung out to dry by a lot of modern designers who only facilitate business decisions or optimize developer handoffs.

We can fix it. I think we must, and it starts with reminding users that they were once considered humans. As digital designers, we can provide that gentle nudge when possible by utilizing basic principles of typesetting and grid-based design. We can remember that while the user has their job-to-be-done, they are also a human who feels unseen and who wants nothing more than to be recognized and acknowledged.

That is, or it should be, the designer's main task. Are you up to it?

## Style and art direction used in this section

**HEADER ELEMENT**

| HEADER | SUBHEADER | TITLE |
|---|---|---|
| EB Garamond | Roboto | EB Garamond |
| 08 regular weight | Regular weights | 08 Regular |
| 64pt font | 38/24pt fonts | 38pt fonts |
| 5.33 char spacing | 12/3 char spacing | 4 char spacing |
| 88 leading | 88/48 leading | Default leading |
| E05837 orange, muted sunset | 73385D mauve, last light | B91C1C burnt orange, sun over black sand |

**BODY COPY**

| HEADERS | BODY | SURFACE |
|---|---|---|
| Roboto | Roboto | |
| Regular weights | Regular weights | |
| 40pt fonts | 20pt fonts | |
| 1.25 char spacing | 0.63 char spacing | |
| 48 leading | 48 leading | |
| 4A352F brown, chocolate | 73385D brown, milk chocolate | B91C1C cream |

## The basics of grid-based design: eight

Computers generally understand zeroes and ones. Encryption and most programs are built on the power of two. 2 ^ (0 + 1 + 2) = 8. That equation is not true, but it's nice.

Also, it's a neat number, and with the root em (rem) of the internet typically being 16, half of that gives you enough space to work with without working at the full rem size. I tend to favor numbers that are divisible by eight for everything, but will occasionally settle for divisibility by four.

If your fit or hug setting makes your text box 71 pixels high and you do not round it up to 72 pixels, this will break the root level grid of everything you are working on eventually. Your grid gradually degrades, one lazy auto layout at a time, and the human-in-the-loop is worse off for it. If your padding-left or padding-right occasionally lands at 13 instead of 8, 12, or 16… well, you get the idea.

## Why some people describe design as clean

Typically, this happens when designs are "consistent." This was the buzzword in design from roughly 2005 to 2011 (Sketch launched), then onward to 2016 (Sketch launches design systems and primitive Symbols, InVision's heyday). Since then, the march toward consistency and efficiency has betrayed grid-based design, and those one pixel rounding errors have compounded over time so that most apps look identical.

It is all because the grid respects the Gestalt principles. Typesetters have been using it since the fifteenth century, and around that time the souls of thousands of monks, accustomed to copying texts by hand, sighed in relief when the printing press automated letterform and leading. Relieved of some of their duties, they could now focus on matters of the spirit, heart, and mind. Design enabled humanity to make art.

It's a heavy-handed analogy. Nonetheless, an embrace of better grid structures will allow designers to focus on what should matter most to them: the humans using their products with subconscious anguish because the grid is so broken.

These days, most apps are the equivalent of being in a place with white, blue, and yellow lights all turned on at the same time and then walking room to room—the switching costs are real. The human is agitated, and there is data that says that certain light frequencies in streetlamps correlate to higher violent crime rate. Apps are similar.

## CASE STUDIES in JOSEF ALBERS

Josef Albers' most popular work is his book "The Interaction of Color." Within it, he explains that humans don't perceive color in isolation, but in how it interacts with colors around it. A color is neither light nor dark, ugly nor beautiful; rather, it is in relief (or a support) role, or it is in focus.

Albers argues that the perception of color itself is an application of Gestalt principles. More or less. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and Albers would likely agree that without the whole, the parts do not exist, and the parts cannot exist in isolation.

Within an app I'm creating, I am working with Albers' principles in mind, and also Massimo Vignelli whose impact can be felt keenly across this digital poster you are exploring. Massimo would have approved of my use of EB Garamond, but he probably would have required some convincing that Roboto is a better webfont than Helvetica.

The following studies are made in honor of Massimo, Josef, and his wife Anni Albers, with much gratitude, admiration, and joy.

### CARD ONE

INTERESTED?

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

SURFACE

E8E2D5 rgb(a=1.0)

border-radius: 0,12,0,12

width: 400px
height: 408px

The surface is 2% taller than it is wide because humans like it when art/etc is slightly taller or higher than dead center.

Humans like a little bit of predictable quirk.

Ever seen a Pantone color card?

### ART

ANCHOR (Albers)

FFFFFF rgb(a=1.0); white

width: 240px
height: 240px

INTERACTION

E8E2D5 rgb(a=1.0)

width: 180px
height: 180px

position: center

padding: 30px (1/8th of container)

INTERACTION
F0F8F7 rgb(a=1.0)
width: 100px
height: 100px
position: center
padding: 40px (base 8 * 5)

### INTERACTIONS

INTERESTED?

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

| Roboto | Button | Borders | Roboto | Roboto |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Light weight | 240px wide | 1px wide | Medium weight | Medium weight |
| 12pt fonts | 48px tall | pos: inside | 12pt fonts | 12pt fonts |
| 3 char spacing | | | 1 char spacing | 1 char spacing |
| 16 leading | | | | |
| 7C665F brown, milk chocolate | FFFFFF white | 7C665F brown, milk chocolate | 4A352F brown, chocolate | 7C665F brown, milk chocolate |

### CARD TWO

INTERESTED?

I was for years in the yellow period, you know.
—JOSEF ALBERS

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

SURFACE

EAD392 rgb(a=1.0)

border-radius: 0,12,0,12

width: 400px
height: 408px

### ART

ANCHOR (Albers)

D9A206 rgb(a=1.0)

width: 240px
height: 176px

padding 24 tall by 240 wide

quote block 40 by 240

INTERACTION

FFF8E2 rgb(a=1.0)

width: 182px
height: 132px

padding: 22,30,22,30

INTERACTION
FFD140 rgb(a=1.0)
width: 80px
height: 80px
position: center
padding: 24,49;24,49

Sometimes you have to break the grid. It's unavoidable. Here, the size of the circle is more important than the padding.

I was for years in the yellow period, you know.
—JOSEF ALBERS

Roboto, 10pt, 16 leading, 0 character spacing. 24 tall.
Roboto, UPPERCASE, 6pt font, 0.75 character spacing

9A7304
yellow, deep mustard

**IMPORTANT NOTE:**

While this yellow art is less tall than the sandstone art, the art + the quote fit into the exact same container height as the sandstone art. This is grid-based design at work.

### INTERACTIONS

INTERESTED?

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

| Roboto | Button | Borders | Roboto | Roboto |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Light weight | 240px wide | 1px wide | Medium weight | Medium weight |
| 12pt fonts | 48px tall | pos: inside | 12pt fonts | 12pt fonts |
| 3 char spacing | | | 1 char spacing | 1 char spacing |
| 16 leading | | | | |
| 9A7304 yellow, deep mustard | 9A7304 yellow, deep mustard | 9A7304 yellow, deep mustard | FFFFFF white | 9A7304 yellow, deep mustard |

### EXAMPLE IN AN ORGANISM

### CARD THREE

INTERESTED?

The sun is up, the sky is blue. It's beautiful, and so are you.
—JOHN LENNON

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

SURFACE

D9EEFD rgb(a=1.0)

border-radius: 0,12,0,12

width: 400px
height: 408px

### ART

ANCHOR (Albers)

F1F8FD rgb(a=1.0)

width: 240px
height: 176px

INTERACTION
D9EEFD rgb(a=1.0)
width: 132px
height: 132px
padding: 22,55,22,55

INTERACTION
F1F8FD rgb(a=1.0)
width: 132px
height: 132px
padding: 13,16,13,16

INTERACTION
A2C8F3 rgb(a=1.0)
width: 50px
height: 50px
Split into triangles. Distribute evenly: 10px and side of 50px

INTERACTION
4065BF rgb(a=1.0)
width: 50px
height: 50px
Split into triangles. Distribute evenly: 10px and side of 50px

padding 20 tall by 240 wide

quote block 44 by 240

The sun is up, the sky is blue. It's beautiful, and so are you.
—JOHN LENNON

Roboto, 10pt, 16 leading, 0 character spacing. 32 tall.
Roboto, UPPERCASE, 6pt font, 0.75 character spacing

4065BF
blue, atlantic

### INTERACTIONS

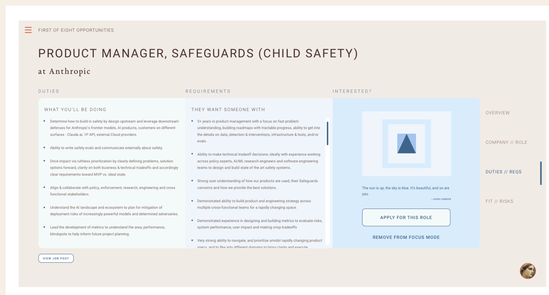
INTERESTED?

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

| Roboto | Button | Borders | Roboto | Roboto |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Light weight | 240px wide | 1px wide | Medium weight | Medium weight |
| 12pt fonts | 48px tall | pos: inside | 12pt fonts | 12pt fonts |
| 3 char spacing | | | 1 char spacing | 1 char spacing |
| 16 leading | | | | |
| 4065BF blue, atlantic | 9A7304 blue, kitty hawk | 4065BF blue, atlantic | 4065BF blue, atlantic | 4065BF blue, atlantic |

### EXAMPLE IN AN ORGANISM




### CARD FOUR

INTERESTED?

Pink isn't just a color. It's an attitude too.
—MILEY CYRUS

LET'S LAND THIS JOB!

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

SURFACE

EECEE2 rgb(a=1.0)

border-radius: 0,12,0,12

width: 400px
height: 408px

### ART

ANCHOR (Albers)

FFF2FA rgb(a=1.0)

width: 240px
height: 176px

INTERACTION
fill: none
borders: EECEE2 rgb(a=1.0)
border-width: 4
border-radius: 64
rectangle-size: 64

padding: 0

INTERACTION
fill: none
borders: EECEE2 rgb(a=1.0)
border-width: 3
rectangle-size: 56.53

INTERACTION
733850 rgb(a=1.0)
flex circles
Distributed evenly. Uses complex to describe in space. Combine with flexible a "blur" effect.

padding 24 tall by 240 wide

quote block 40 by 240

Pink isn't just a color. It's an attitude too.
—MILEY CYRUS

Roboto, 10pt, 16 leading, 0 character spacing. 24 tall.
Roboto, UPPERCASE, 6pt font, 0.75 character spacing

733850
pink, cabernet

### INTERACTIONS

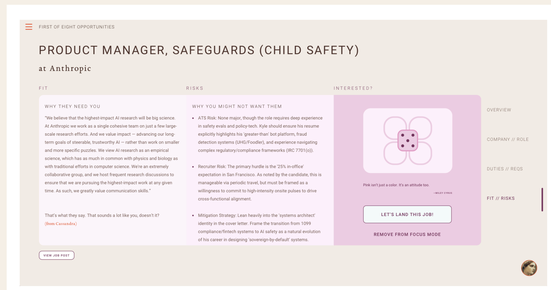
INTERESTED?

APPLY FOR THIS ROLE

REMOVE FROM FOCUS MODE

| Roboto | Button | Borders | Roboto | Roboto |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Light weight | 240px wide | 1px wide | Medium weight | Medium weight |
| 12pt fonts | 48px tall | pos: inside | 12pt fonts | 12pt fonts |
| 3 char spacing | | | 1 char spacing | 1 char spacing |
| 16 leading | | | | |
| 733850 pink, cabernet | 9A7304 pink, rose kiss | 733850 pink, cabernet | 733850 pink, cabernet | 733850 pink, cabernet |

### EXAMPLE IN AN ORGANISM




## Some rules are made to be followed, but occasionally, you can bend them.

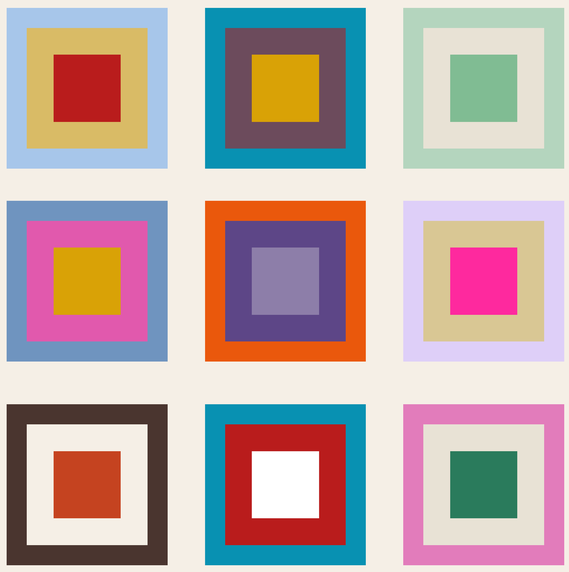
Caveat: you can bend them if you respect the rules and have a justifiable reason to bend them, e.g. a minor override to achieve the larger purpose of a product in harmony with itself and with its humans (end users and the people who work on it).

Design concerns itself with the human's goals.

Art should concern itself with the depths of the human mind, heart, and soul.

Good design should concern itself with what makes each human/user most productive. It lowers friction, i.e. the amount of pain someone experiences when going about their life and daily tasks. Great design happens when the user is seen as a human, and when that human is valued and encouraged to succeed.

Grid and typography taste can make you a good designer. But to be a great designer? You've got to be a human who sees others as humans first, users second, and customers last (if you earn and retain their trust).

### THE INTERACTION OF COLOR

We'll be using a color palette I'm designing, used to create this design poster, along with some colors featured in this document. It's designed for Cassandra, one of my projects and the source of screenshots within this poster.