WHAT IS A VISUAL IDENTITY?

Corporations do not have a monopoly on visual identities despite the term "corporate identities" being commonly used to describe systematized visuals. Every association is defined by a common story, a (visual) identity, whether that story is created accidently or consciously. Organizations, institutions, events, as well as products, book covers, and media campaigns all need coherent visual identities too. Everything that has a series of communications to make needs a consistent visual language

From Logos to Systems

There was a time when logo design was almost synonymous to identity design and under certain circumstances it might still be, to a certain extent.

An example: A small family business makes shoes and sells them in their own shop. The shoes sell well as they are the only shoemakers in town. The family just needs to communicate that it is selling shoes. The only means of communication they need is a sign with a shoe in front of their shop so everyone knows where to buy shoes. Identification by the product, the shoe, is sufficient as a visual identity.

Now let's add a competitor to this example, Family B. Another family business that also makes and sells shoes opens a shop on the same street. Family business A no longer has a unique product. The shoe as an identification element is no longer sufficient.

A and B have two options to stay in business. They could offer different products. For example boots and sandals. In terms of the visual identity this would only mean that they need to change the symbol on the shop sign. A's shoe becomes a sandal, B's shoe becomes a boot.

The other option is not to change the product, but design everything that influences the buyer to buy at family A or B. Part of an identity is not only the product, but also by whom, how, and where it is sold. What does the shoe store look like? How does it smell, sound, and feel? How do the sellers treat their customers? What do the labels, the shoebox, and the

shopping bag look like? How do they produce everything they need to make and sell the shoes? How do they treat all the people involved in this process?

Even the shape of the shoe, which goes beyond the pure functionality and type of the shoe, can become a distinguishing feature and thus an identification element.

In addition, A and B could communicate in public spaces and not just invest in distinction but as well increase visibility. Hang posters in the streets, place advertisements in newspapers and magazines, run spots on different media.

They could even hire well-liked public figures to wear their shoes. Potential customers would associate the values that their spokesperson transmits with the product, apart from just making it more visible.

All of these communication tools can be used to get the potential customer to buy at A or B. The communication process has suddenly become significantly more complex. The shoemakers have to realize that they communicate with different people, in different places, at different times and with different interests. They need a distinctive and visible visual identity, but that's not enough. They also need a flexible visual system in order to be able to communicate in a coherent, controlled, effective, and efficient manner in changing environments.

Social media has only made communication more complex. Not only have they created new communication channels, but also new forms of communication. While the recipients of traditional communication were passive, today they are very often part of the communication. Audiences like, share, and comment, thus influencing other recipients.

Now, if not before, a visual identity based on a symbol or logo is no longer able to adequately communicate. It does not adapt to the actors and surroundings of communication and cannot formulate adequate messages. It is too monosyllabic when eloquence is required. We need contemporary visual languages to be able to solve contemporary communication problems.

HOW TO DESIGN A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM?

Before you start browsing through this book I want to give you an overview which are the most important steps to follow when designing a flexible system for a visual identity. Each step refers to articles that offer insight and help, but can be skipped if you feel you do not need them.

1. Define the Communication Problem

Before you can decide how to communicate, you need to know who needs to communicate what, when, where, and to whom. These factors help you make informed choices during the design process and will influence your choice of shapes and colors.

2. Decide Where Your Solution Will Be Applied

Does your client need to focus on printed, animated, digital or analog media? Even if the visual identity should be applicable to all media, a focus on a specific media can make the visual identity special. If most applications are printed in short runs, you can use special printing and production techniques, while if the majority of the applications are on screen, you can focus on animation.

3. Select a Shape

Even geometric forms, as neutral as they might seem, convey messages to the person interpreting them. A circle might transmit playfulness and a hexagon might remind the receiver of a beehive. The form you choose to build your system with will influence the tone of your visual language.

4. Build Your Own Assets

After choosing a shape. What should you do with it? You could make symbols, patterns, lines, frames or even letters with them. Developing your own assets has the advantage that your visual identity will become more distinctive in comparison with competing visual identities.

5. Test Your Assets on Different Formats

Focus on the applications that you have to design, but always test your visual system on narrow, wide, large, small, loud, quiet, moving, and still applications too.
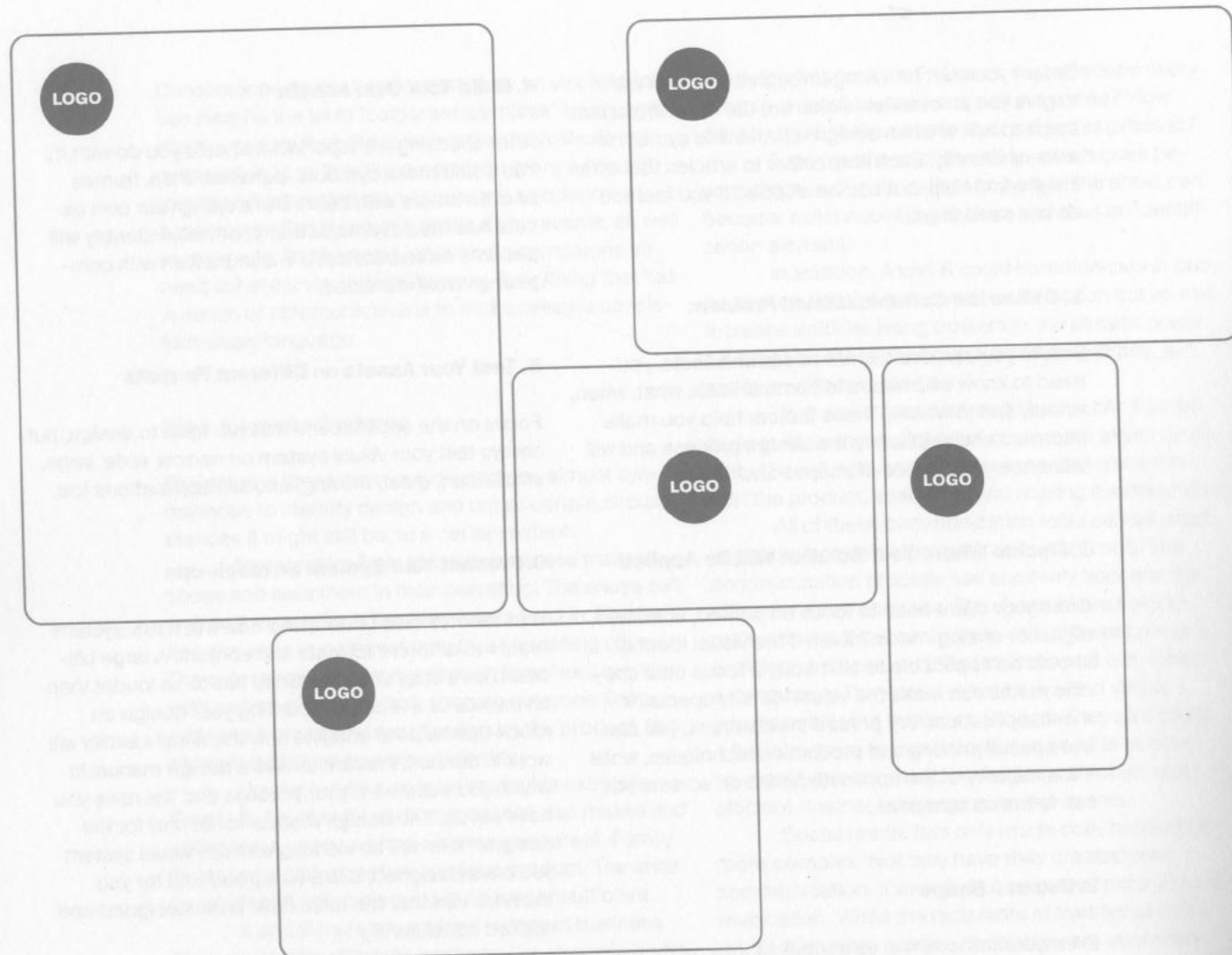
6. Present Your System on Mock-ups

Your client should understand how the visual system reacts to different formats and content. A large billboard on a busy street naturally has to be louder than an invoice or a receipt. Mounting your design on mock-ups helps to imagine how the visual identity will work in context. Present as well a design manual in which you document your process and the rules you have set up. The design manual is not only for the designer who will be working with the visual system you have designed, it is also a good tool for you to check whether the rules have been designed and applied consistently.

There are countless possible visual identities in these six steps. After you have mastered the tried and tested shape-based visual systems, part 2 introduces transformative systems. A transformative system is like a filter that distorts an image, font, or graphic in a recognizable way. The transformation becomes the identifiable element of visual identity and not necessarily the transformed.

LOGO

LOGO

LOGO

LOGO

LOGO

YOU DO NOT EVEN NEED A LOGO ANYMORE

BACKGROUND, COLOR AND FONT

ARE ENOUGH

VISUAL IDENTITY

TO CREATE A RECOGNIZABLE

While a logo-based visual identity communicated the same message over and over again, a system-based visual identity is a language capable of articulating different messages in different ways to different audiences in different circumstances. Although the logo-based visual identity is anachronistic, it won't go away overnight. Our memories are branded with logos, like cattle is branded with hot metal. I do not use the term "branding," not just because of its cruel origin, but because of the ineffectiveness of this approach when building visual languages. Even though we grew up with logos, it does not mean that new visual identities still have to be based on them. Logos are very limited when it comes to adapting to different messages, contexts, and formats. A flexible system does not have this problem. We need to start to see and design identities in their full complexity.
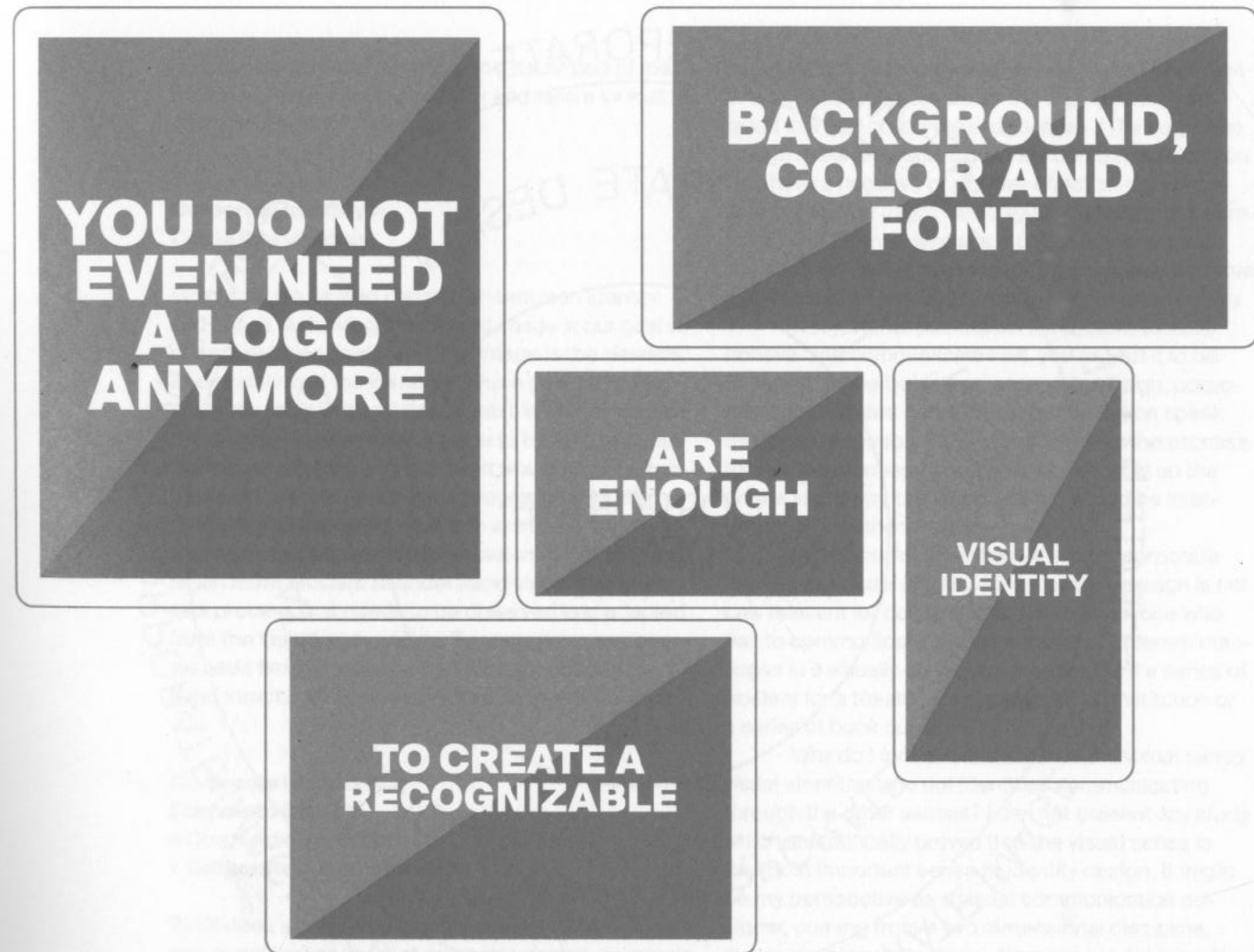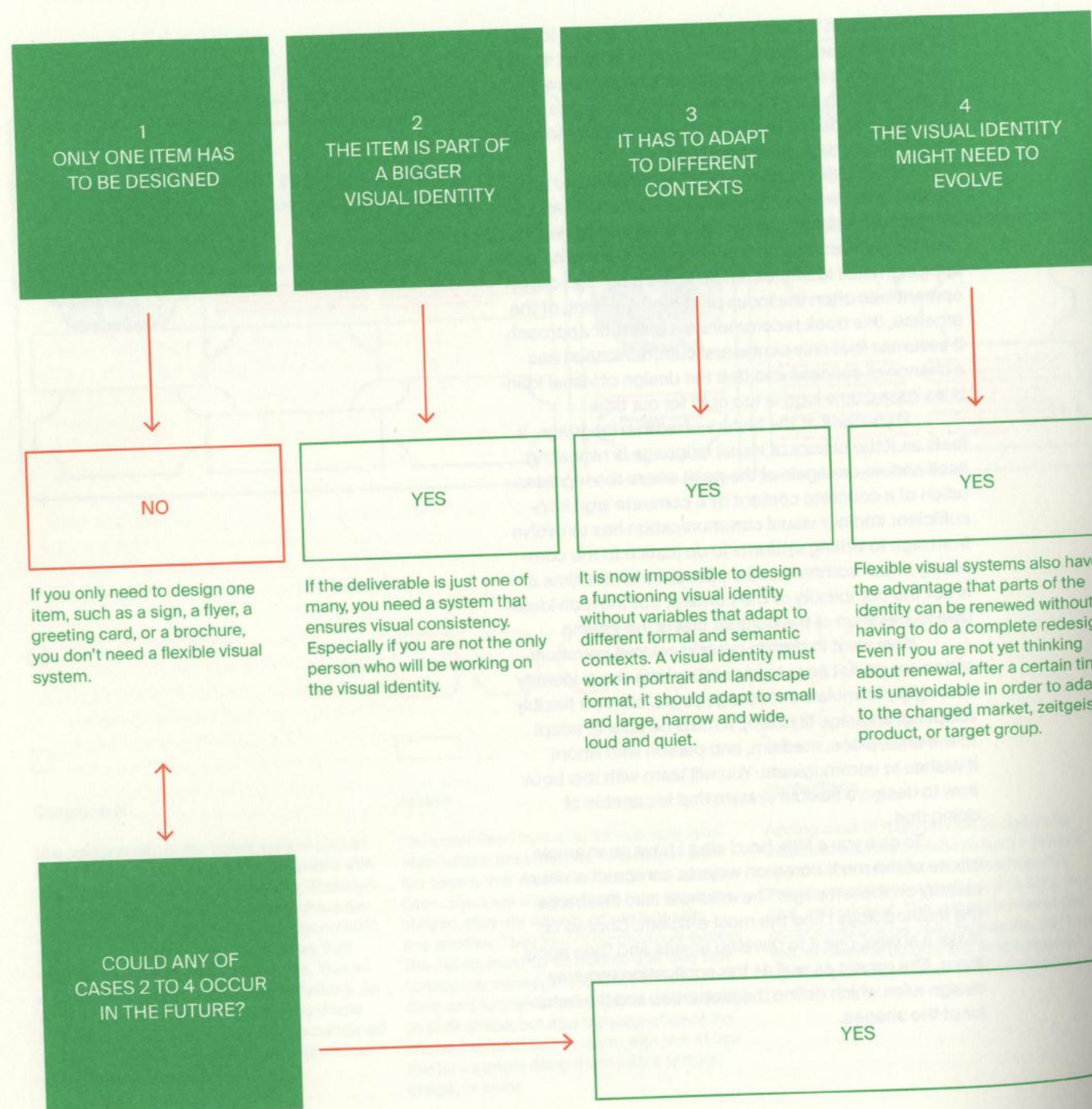
One of the main functions of the visual identity is to make the association (corporation, institution, organization, event, or product) identifiable. As we humans perceive the outside world through our senses we can use any sense to make an identity recognizable. From the visual sense to smell, taste, sound, and touch. Choose the one that makes most sense for your brand. Communication nowadays is mostly based on images and text, but by shifting towards digital media, sound and movement becomes more important. Which means an identity can be completely based on recognizable movement and sound. Forms are still needed to express movement, but forms without some concept of movement rarely exist anymore. Even if the change from static to flexible visual identities and its further expansion to multi-sensorial and -dimensional solutions is inevitable, educational strategies are still very much focused on the design of specific deliverables without seeing them as part of a larger system. My approach stands in opposition to this way of teaching. It is my goal to teach approaches and perspectives and not a specific craft or aesthetic.

SPOILER ALERT: IN 3 OUT OF 4 CASES YOU NEED A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM.

Not every piece of design needs a flexible system. If you only have to design one item, or if you work alone and will continue to do so in the future, you do not need a flexible visual system. In all other cases you need one.

1 ONLY ONE ITEM HAS TO BE DESIGNED	2 THE ITEM IS PART OF A BIGGER VISUAL IDENTITY	3 IT HAS TO ADAPT TO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS	4 THE VISUAL IDENTITY MIGHT NEED TO EVOLVE
NO	YES	YES	YES

If you only need to design one item, such as a sign, a flyer, a greeting card, or a brochure, you don't need a flexible visual system.

If the deliverable is just one of many, you need a system that ensures visual consistency. Especially if you are not the only person who will be working on the visual identity.

It is now impossible to design a functioning visual identity without variables that adapt to different formal and semantic contexts. A visual identity must work in portrait and landscape format, it should adapt to small and large, narrow and wide, loud and quiet.

Flexible visual systems also have the advantage that parts of the identity can be renewed without having to do a complete redesign. Even if you are not yet thinking about renewal, after a certain time it is unavoidable in order to adapt to the changed market, zeitgeist, product, or target group.

COULD ANY OF CASES 2 TO 4 OCCUR IN THE FUTURE?

YES

DOES EVERY VISUAL IDENTITY NEEDS A VISUAL SYSTEM?

Do you need a flexible visual system for your design? Yes! You and I know that. If not, you wouldn't have picked up this book, and I wouldn't have spent the last two decades researching, teaching, and designing flexible visual systems.

But even if we are aware that visual communication can no longer function without flexible visual systems, the question of necessity arises again and again. If you are with your client and have to explain why the initial phase of the project takes longer and becomes more expensive, if you have to explain to your students that logos are not visual identities and if you have to force yourself to invest time in systemizing what you have designed intuitively, I have a couple of arguments that should help you:

What to Tell to Your Client

As soon as more than just one application has to be designed, now or in the future, a flexible visual system saves time and money. It is true that the initial effort is higher because the system has to be developed first. However, the application process becomes faster (and cheaper) because all the design rules needed to design future deliverables are predefined by the system. With the right planning, even complex projects can be managed by small teams in a cost-and time-efficient manner. Even for large teams, systems are an indispensable tool for generating consensus and preventing internal and external communication chaos. Systems will save you a lot of headache, time, and money in the long run, and the best thing, they make you free to work with anyone you like.

What to Tell to Your Students

Often students come to class with an outdated definition of what a visual identity is. It is important to give them a theoretical and practical overview. Many feeds, blogs, magazines, and books do not help, on the contrary. They support the misconception that

the logo is the centerpiece of a visual identity. It is absurd that the design press introduces a new visual identity with its new logo, when the final customer probably will see only the user interface of the website or app and barely notice the logo. This creates a false impression of how a visual identity works. The students should free themselves from their previous knowledge and think about visual identities without bias. They should look around themselves and analyze how to communicate what with them, when, and why. This sharpens the analytical eye, keeps the lessons up-to-date and provides an inventory of the requirements for the visual system. The versatility of communication makes the need for flexible systems evident.

What to Tell Yourself

Designing a system does not mean giving up intuitive working methods. Intuition is informed by knowledge, experience, taste, sense of time and context, and empathy with clients and target group. It is in many cases faster and better than rational working methods. However, a system will help you to know how you have to design the deliverables a year after you have designed the visual identity. This is especially important if you want a consistent appearance for your customer. In a year you, your taste and the way you design will have changed. Clear, objectively comprehensible rules will keep you on the right track.

1. Let the system do the work
2. The process is the result
3. Everything can be programmed
4. Program with everything
5. Do it wrong

HOW TO THINK AND WORK IN SYSTEMS?

1. Let the System Do the Work

We are used to working on concrete formats, like business cards, letterheads, brochures, or posters. Intuitively you would think of a concrete design in a concrete format. With system design, the approach changes. The concrete applications become examples of how the system is applied. In fact, when you design the specific applications, you think about the general rules and how they adapt to the different formats. You will notice that once these rules work, it is easy to work on other formats, while in the absence of a system, each design for a new format has to be invented from scratch, and therefore takes longer.

2. The Process Is the Result

Each approach leads to a different result. As you know by now, the system serves not only to control design, but defines the approach to design. The approach, whether you develop a form-based or transformative system, influences the outcome. So before you develop a system, be aware that the choice of system is a design decision.

3. Everything Can Be Programmed

Any design can be turned into a system. As soon as comprehensible rules are present in a design or subsequently interpreted, a system is present. The design of systems is about making subjective decisions into objective rules in order to be able to share them with other people or automate them with machines. This is exactly where the power of systems lies. When automating, you can accomplish much more than you would have been able to do on your own. Remember though: even when the process is computer aided and at times very complex, communication as described in this book remains between humans, which means that the start and endpoint of the process should also be intuitively understood by humans.

4. Program with everything

Programs develop their full potential when you program them. Let the programs do the work for you. Use variables. Automate as much as they can. Your task should be to develop concepts and systems, not to perform mindless repetitive tasks.

5. Do It Wrong

Although programs are great in executing systems, they are not great in helping you to develop new ideas. They were developed with preconceived ideas about what the design process and outcome should be like. That is very limiting as the process itself is influencing the result. Just look at the circular grids of Josef Müller-Brockmann and compare them to today's grid based design. Müller-Brockmann was far more innovative than we are nowadays because he used a pen, a compass, and a ruler which allowed him to think much more freely than we are able to think using today's layout programs. Although it's very tempting to go back to the pen, it's nonsensical to ignore the advantages processed design gives us. Instead we should start to hack our tools. Experiment with using the wrong programs and don't operate them the way they are supposed to be operated. Programs should always be the tools of the designer, not the other way around.

CONSTRUCTION OF COMPONENTS AND ASSETS

Component

Choose the elements you want to work with. I chose a circle, divided into four quarter circles, which are easy to combine to new forms.

The new combination of the four quarter circles is repeated four times, so that a square of 16 modules is appears.

Instead of repeating the rearrangement of the four quarter circles, you can also use the vertical ...

... or the vertical and horizontal middle axis to mirror. One of the resulting graphics could be your identification element.

Asset
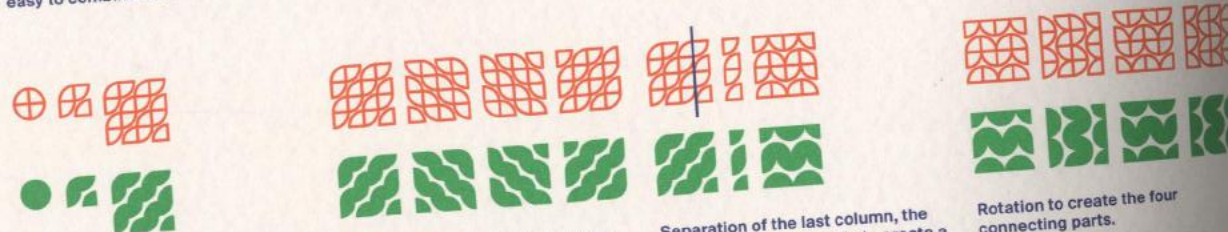
A circle, divided into four quarter circles, reassembled and repeated three times.

Rotation to create the four corner pieces.

Separation of the last column, the upper left corner module to create a connecting part through horizontal mirroring and repetition.

Rotation to create the four connecting parts.

Frame made of corner and connecting parts

Line made of connecting parts

Line made of corner parts

Labels
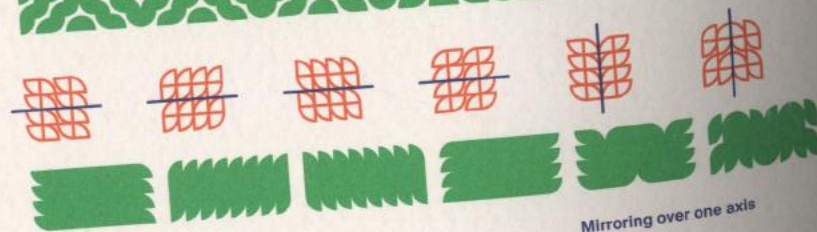
Repetition

Mirroring over one axis

Labels

Mirroring over two axis

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR COMPONENTS AND ASSETS

Component

A simple division and rearrangement of a geometric shape, in this case a circle, can create a small identification element that can be used as a logo. It cannot be stressed enough that a logo alone does not constitute a visual identity and that its primary function in a flexible visual identity is to be identifiable on a small scale. The logo is part of a bigger visual language and should not be relied upon to be a transmitter of a specific message. Apart from being able to be used as a logo, the component can be used to create lines, frames, or patterns.

Asset

Assets like lines, frames, or patterns made with the same shape can be very useful for the application of the visual system, which I demonstrate in this book. Apart from being helpful design tools to structure content, being based on the same shape, they are consistent and reinforce the memorization of the identity. Complexity can be increased or decreased by using more or fewer components.

Components can also be used to design "labels," which is the term I use to refer to elements in which texts or images can be placed. They can also be used as interactive buttons, fields in forms, or even as shapes of physical devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, or computers. Think of the rounded corners of Apple's hardware and software. A very simple and effective idea inspired by Braun's identity, which again inspired others and therefore lost some of its distinctiveness. However, the simple examples do not play a major role in this book. Not because they don't work per se, but because it's almost impossible to create nowadays a distinctive brand with rounding corners and only using untouched geometric shapes.

Modules

Repetition

Vertical repetition and horizontal distortion

2

4

1   2   3   4

Horizontal repetition and vertical distortion

Horizontal and vertical distortion

2

4

1   2   3   4

1   2   3   4

Horizontal repetition and distortion applied to section

Horizontal and vertical distortion applied to section

2

4

1   2   3   4

1   2   3   4
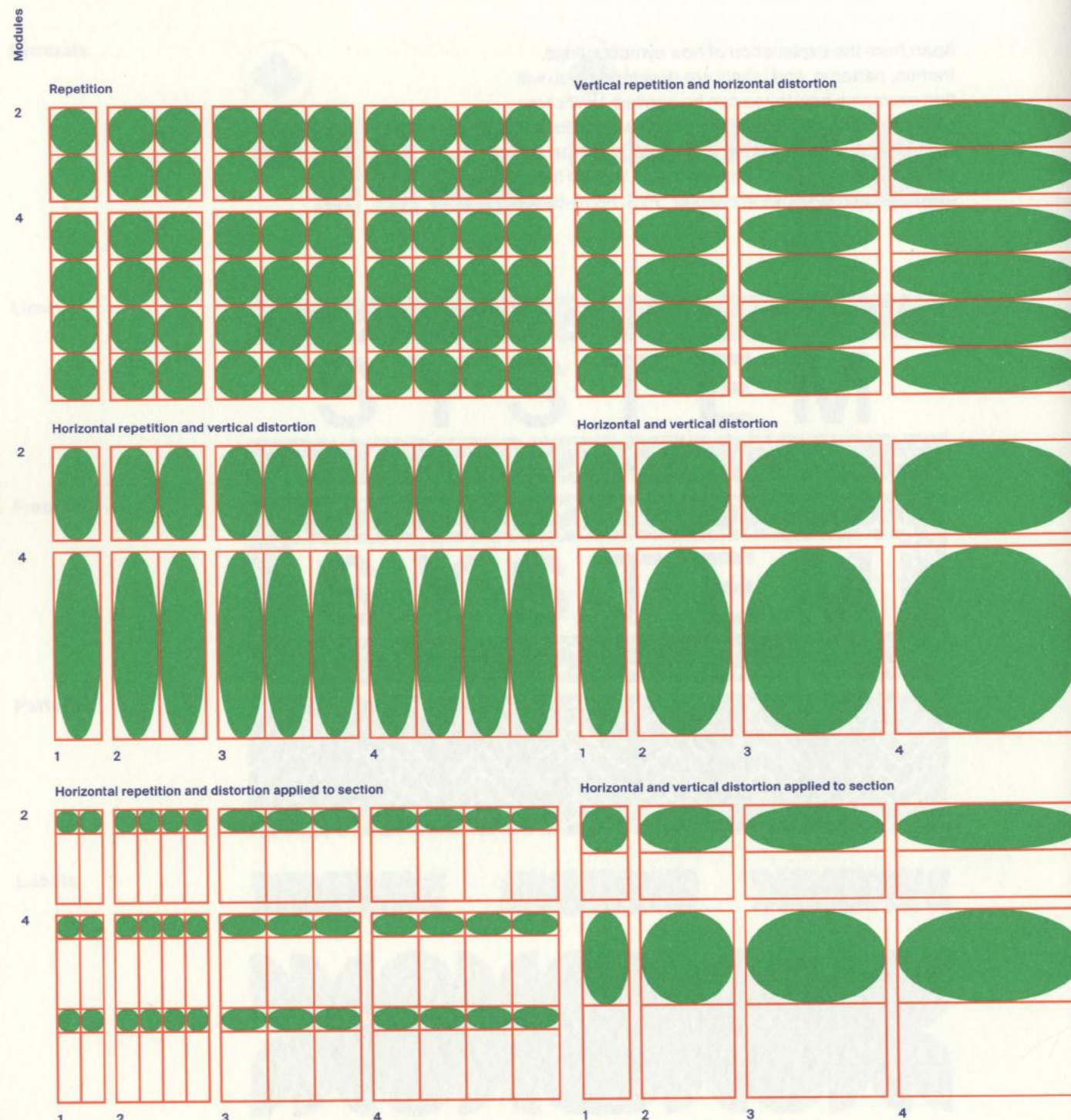
HOW TO APPLY ASSETS TO DIFFERENT FORMATS?

How a visual system is applied to a format is as important as the visual system itself. If the application is not flexible, the system will be limited. Using many different components can create a sense of complexity that might go against the communication goal. In contrast, using only one component might oversimplify the aesthetics and not be distinctive enough. The application process offers a lot of possibilities and needs to be well designed.

In order to achieve a well balanced application system, it needs to be constantly tested. You need to test the whole range of articulations of your visual language. The first step is to test it on the different formats and then move on to very different types of applications, such as big, small, wide, narrow, subtle, expressive, still, and moving.

If your system is based on motion, it might be best to start with the animation and use stills for the non-moving applications. It is much harder to animate a still than to take a still from an animation.

On the opposite page I demonstrated different ways to apply the component in a regular and format filling manner to different formats. You have basically four options how to apply your shape:

1. Position
Decide where the assets should be placed (center, up, down, left, right, or a combination of the mentioned) and apply that rule to every format.

2. Distortion
Let the assets stretch to the size of the format or a segment of the format. In the example on the left page, the design adapts to the entire format, but using a grid you could decide that the asset only fills a specific row, column, or module.

3. Repetition
Repeat the asset until the format is filled. Again, if you are using a grid, you could decide on just filling a specific row or column, which creates an empty space you can use for text or image.

4. Combination
You could combine all three ways of applying your assets.

It is important to mention that the aesthetics of the examples might deceive. Using a component to make patterns, which actually is already a pattern by itself, creates a specific look that you might or might not want to achieve. If you do not want to achieve the pattern look you simply need to avoid repetition. Use less elements and do not repeat them regularly. On the following page you will find two more examples with different aesthetics. Many more are possible.
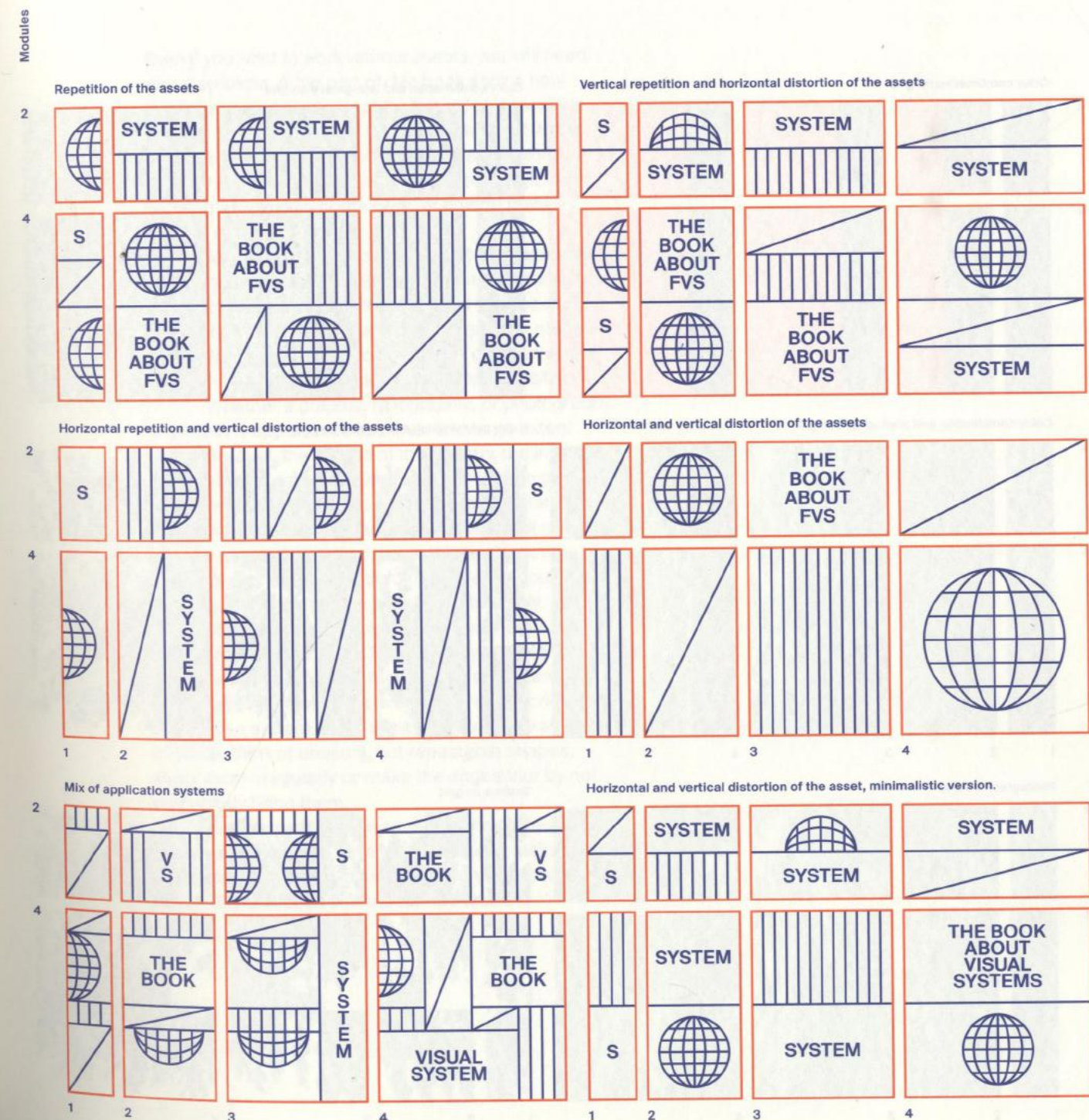
This book is about approaches to how to design flexible systems for visual identities, not about showing you all the possible aesthetics, which by the way would be impossible anyways and in my opinion not good for your learning process and not true to your own individual path. The beauty of flexible systems is that any aesthetics can be systemized, even ones that appear to be unsystematic.

Modules

Repetition of the asset

Vertical repetitio and horizontal distortion of the asset

Horizontal repetition and vertical distortion of the asset

Horizontal and vertical distortion of the asset

Mix of application systems

Horizontal and vertical distortion of the asset, minimal version.

Modules

Repetition of the assets

Vertical repetition and horizontal distortion of the assets

Horizontal repetition and vertical distortion of the assets

Horizontal and vertical distortion of the assets

Mix of application systems

Horizontal and vertical distortion of the asset, minimalistic version.

IDENTIFICATION THROUGH COMPOSITION, COLOR AND / OR FONTS.

Color combination on grid

Color combination and typography on grid

Color combination and photograph on grid

Color combination and texture on grid

Photograph on grid

Texture on grid
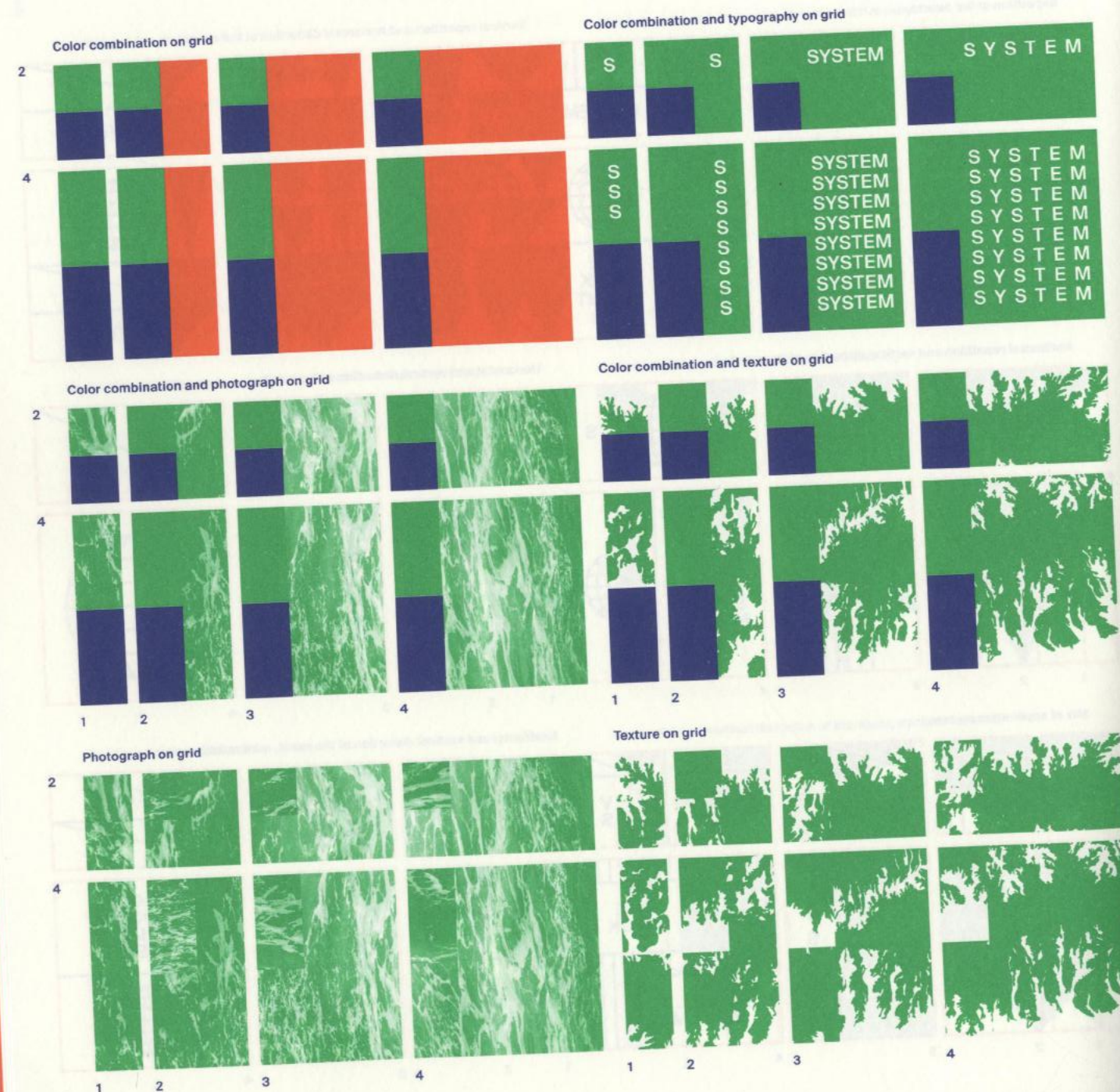
WORKING WITHOUT ASSETS

Even if you want to work without assets, you still need visual systems. A big part of this book shows how to generate and apply graphics based on geometric shapes. This might evoke the impression that visual identities always need visible graphics. Far from the truth. Geometric shapes, such as rectangles can be used as invisible containers for colors, textures, photos, or text.

Although at some point geometric shapes will probably be present in your designs through formats, grids, picture, and text frames, they do not need to be the identification element of the identity. A characteristic layout, a special color scheme or a distinctive font can be sufficient to make an identity identifiable.

Whether a graphic, typographic, or photographic system is appropriate depends to a large extent on the product, the culture of the country, the industry, and the target group. While graphics might be perceived in one occasion as a neutral design element in another they might appear too playful. I will not go into the semantics of the form in this book, as this is a highly context-dependent matter, and should be addressed for each of the projects individually.

Making shapes invisible does not necessarily mean getting rid of them. Shapes are very helpful to describe a visual system. Many shapes repeatedly form a grid which makes it even easier to describe and work with a system. If you want to make these shapes invisible, think of unusual, but repeatable shapes, apply them irregularly or make the edges blur by not completely filling them.

Shapes, as in the example on the opposite page are also helpful as text and image containers. Organized in a controlled way they can create identification and establish information hierarchies.
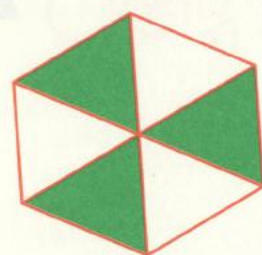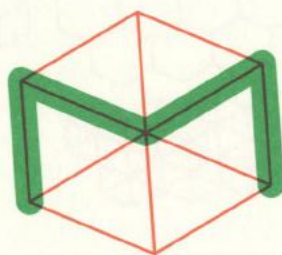
USING GRIDS

Use of the modules
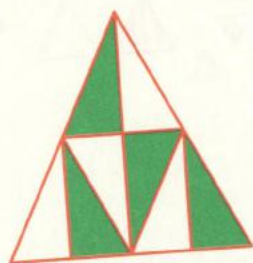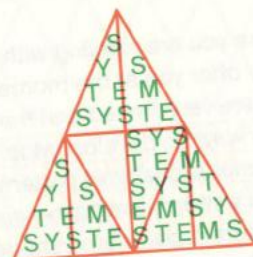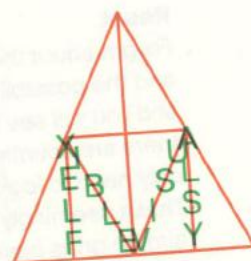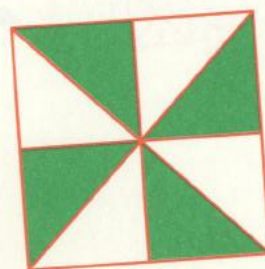
Use of the nodes

Use of the modules

Use of the nodes

Use of the modules

Use of the nodes

Use of the modules

Use of the nodes

Use of the modules
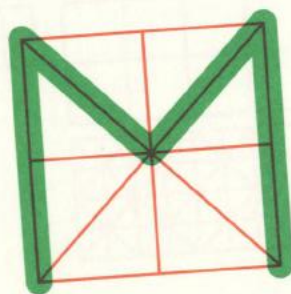
Use of the nodes

Use of the modules
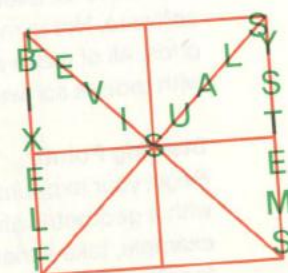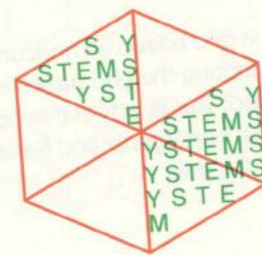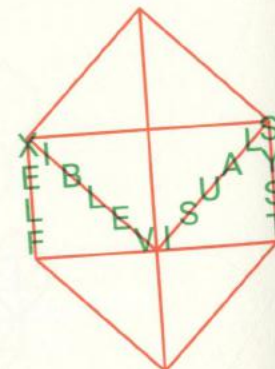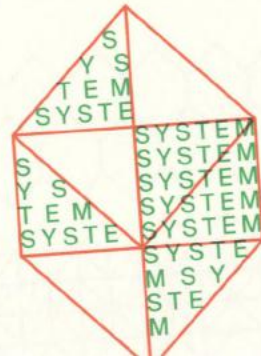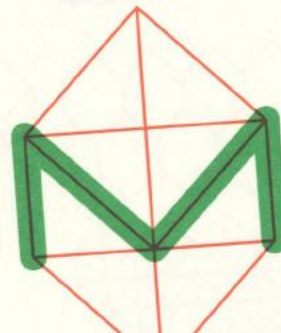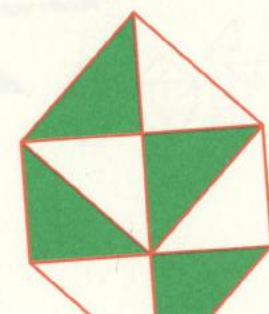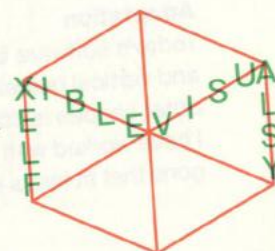
Use of the nodes

Use of the modules

Use of the nodes

Use of the modules

Use of the nodes

HOW TO USE GRIDS?

There are different ways to use a grid. You can generate shapes by filling modules or their outline. You can also use the module or outline to align text or graphics. The more unusual the grid and its use is the better it serves as a distinctive visual identity. These couple of options give you already sheer unlimited possibilities. You can repeat the modules and use them to create larger patterns, lines, frames, or labels, depending on the need of each deliverable. Adjusting the complexity of the grid needs to be dependent on content and scale of the deliverable. Simple solutions are better suited for small applications. The larger the format, the more complex you can get.

1. Take an assembled shape.
2. Color it.
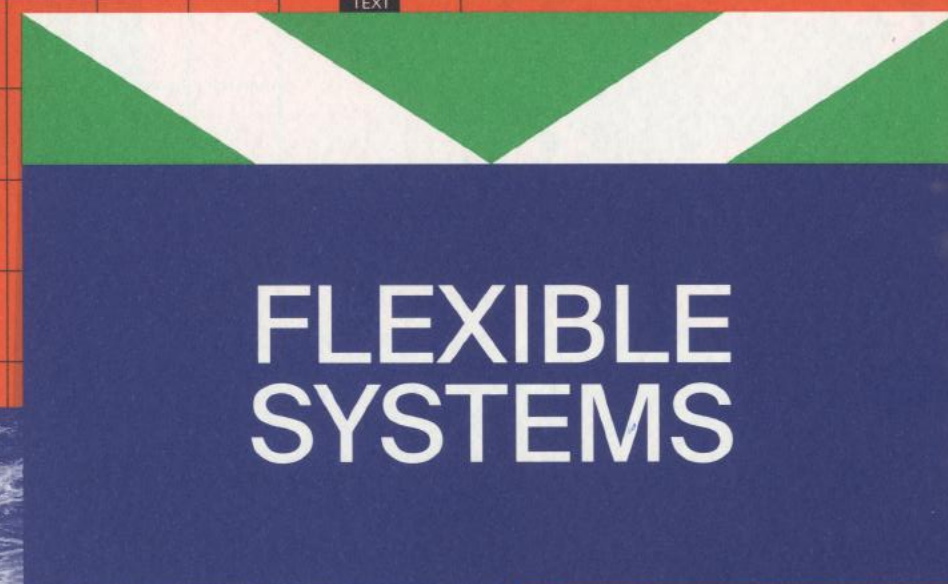3. Cover a part and insert text and / or images in the covered area.

FLEXIBLE VISUAL SYSTEMS INFO

ML

TPN
HH BCN

TEXT

FLEXIBLE VISUAL SYSTEMS .INFO

ML TPN HH BCN

FLEXIBLE
VISUAL
SYSTEMS

ML
TPN
HH
BCN

1. Take an assembled shape.
2. Color them.
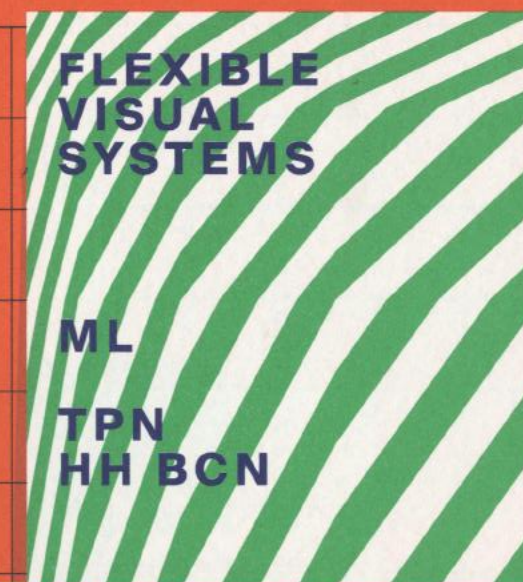3. Cover a part and insert text and / or images in the covered area.

TEXT

FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS

1. Take an assembled shape
2. Use a different shapes depending on the format.
3. Fill the format with the shape.
4. Insert text and / or images.
5. Color all the elements.

S

SYSTEM

FLEXIBLE
VISUAL
SYSTEMS

ML

TPN
HH BCN

1. Take a assembled shape.
2. Duplicate the shape, place it in the next column
   or row and change the width or height.
3. Insert text and / or images on top of the pattern.

FLEXIBLE
VISUAL
SYSTEMS

ML

TPN
HH BCN

FLEXIBLE
VISUAL
SYSTEMS

ML

TPN
HH BC

FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS

1. Use assembled shapes to design letters and patterns.
2. Color the outlines.
3. Fill in the format with either letters or patterns.
4. Insert text and / or images in the gaps.

ML

FLEXIBLE VISUAL SYSTEMS

TPN

HH BCN

FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS

TPN HH BCN

FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS

TPN HH BCN

Part 1

Form:
Asset:

Form-based FVS

Triangle
Symbol

Part 1

Form:
Asset:

Form-based FVS

Triangle
Symbol

Component, rearranged.

repeated,

mirrored over one axis and
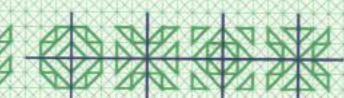
mirrored over two axes

Four triangles are rearranged in a
square and.
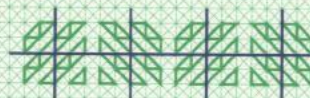
repeated three times

Instead of repeating the basic
pattern three times, it could be
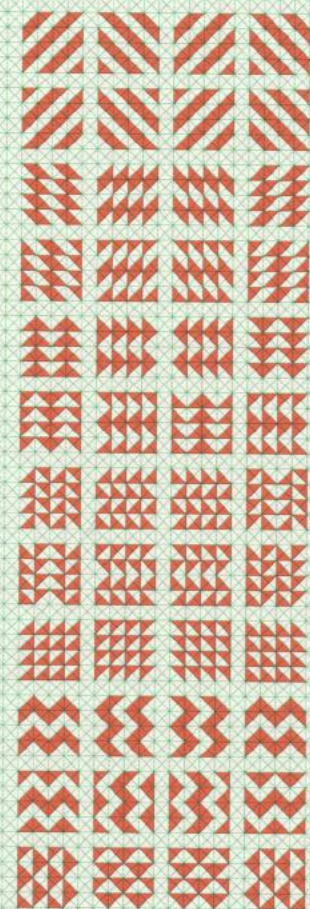repeated once and then mirrored
over one axis or

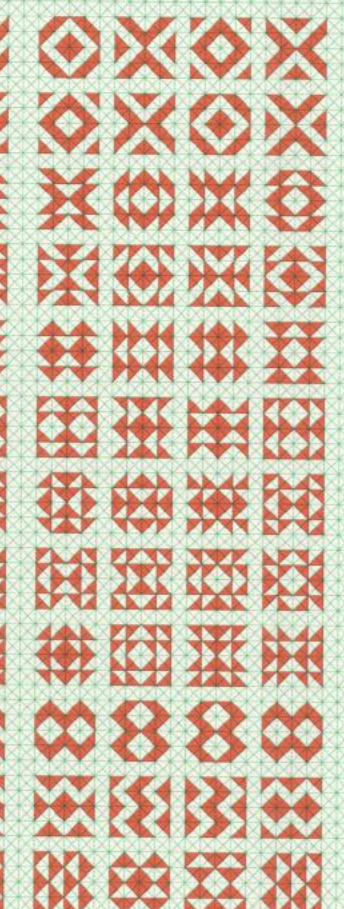or over two axes.

Rearrangement	Repetition	Mirrored over one axis	Mirrored over two axes

Elements have been deleted from
the pattern in the first row to create
new, lighter patterns.

Lighter patterns can be used in
infographics or cartographies to
show lower values.

However, a grid and pattern construction with equilateral
also have been possible, which can also