

The personal disquiet of

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Design and the Divine Proportion

Many designers, whether traditionally schooled or not, have trouble with composition. I've sat with plenty of designers who simply moves things around until they feel 'right'.

Design is, in essence, communication (I know, I know, I rant about this enough, but this isn't one of them) but the vehicle for communication is the design. One of the key components in the vehicle of communication is composition, and in design schooling it is something that is taught as something you should **feel** rather than **create logically**. This has always bothered me.

The feeling

When creating a design, or composing a photograph, we reach a point when we say 'that's right' (or 'that'll do' depending on the deadline and budget). How many of you create compositions based on feeling rather than logical thought? (come on, hands up). Well I do, but i'm beginning to think more about what underpins that feeling.

The Divine Proportion

Remember back to your art school? (If you went that is). Who remembers the Golden Section? Ok, so who understood it? Or more importantly, how to use it? Well I answered yes to all of those except the last one. I seem to recall the lecturers not fully understanding it either. Well, i'll do my best to shed some light on it.

The Golden Section, or the Divine Proportion is a visual representation of a number called Phi (pronounced fi). Oh, and before I go on, yes I have read the Da Vinci Code! Anyway, Phi is a number produced by bisecting a line at a particular point (see diagram below.) Phi is 1.618033988749895, or by the numerical sequence called the Fibonacci sequence.

So, what has this got to do with design?

Well, in short, a lot.

The Phi is evident everywhere in universe — Nature, Space, Physics, Mathematics, Physics, Art and Design. Phi creates the Divine Proportion (so called by the renaissance artists because of it's abundance in the known universe, they thought it was created by God), the Divine Proportion is used by artists and designers.

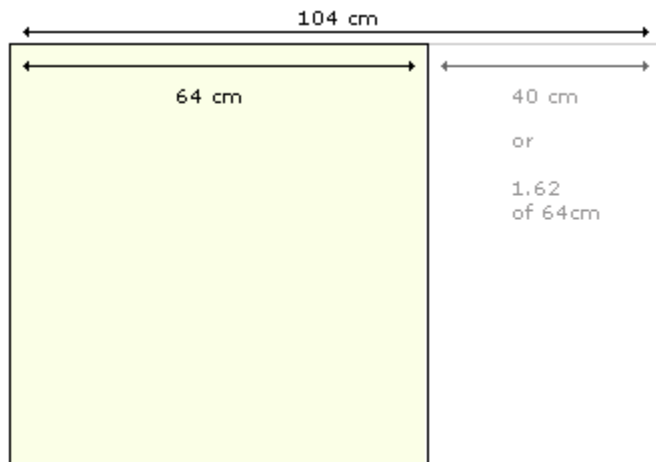
So, here's the thing. **Using the Divine Proportion as a guide to your compositions can improve the communication of your design.**

How? By creating a natural language your brain understands. If the unique ration Phi creates is all around us, it stands to reason that designs created this way are more comfortable to us and therefore do their job quicker and more effectively.

Using Phi in your designs

It's all very well talking compositional theory, but putting it into practice is another thing entirely. Hopefully I can shed some light on it.

Let say for example you have to create a poster design. You start by deciding the size and dimensions of your paper. I start by deciding the height and the I want this to be a landscape poster. The height is going to be 64cm. So, I take that height and create a 64x64cm square from it. I then take 64cm and multiply it by 1.62 (you can use the whole sequence by rounding it up at the point is ok.) Which gives you 104cm. This is the full width of your poster. This is shown in the diagram below:



So, subtracting your initial height (64cm) from your new full width gives you the all important Divine Proportion line.

This is a very important compositional line and feels right. The poster can then be designed around this to create a balanced image. Here's an example:



Conclusions

There's nothing new in what i've said, in fact Da Vince was doing it all yonks ago. But this practical theory seems to have been lost in the design education system, being taught by design lecturers who themselves don't understand the nuances of composition theory. Hopefully here i'm giving some understandable, but more importantly, practical information on how to compose designs based on logical thought and simple rules, rather than just 'a feeling'.

If this has been helpful to you? Also if you have any other nuggets of design theory that could be added to this post let me know.

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31 Responses to “Design and the Divine Proportion”

1.  [David Lee](#) said on: [January 7th, 2005 at 6:29 am](#)

That was a very informative and useful article. It really interests me to hear of such theory,