

# OBSERVED

DESIGN OBSERVER THE PROCESS BOOK

SMITHA PRASADH

GRADUATE STUDIO I

FALL 2009

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

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## 1. project and initial thoughts

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# PROJECT AND INITIAL THOUGHTS

Our objective was to visualize the information space of a given source. The medium by which we did so was up to us.

I was assigned the website Design Observer.

Admittedly, my first reaction was a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'd been familiar with the site already, but realized maybe a week or so earlier that while the site was an excellent resource and a great way to tap into the minds of some of the most well-known graphic designers in the US and abroad, I just couldn't relate to some of the detached higher-level idealistic mindsets I'd perceived in a number of their articles, as I didn't come from the same traditional design/art-school background the major authors of the site did. As a result, I'd decided to not follow it as regularly anymore.

Additionally, with over 1000 articles and counting, the site is *enormous*.

After speaking to Dan, though, I resolved to stick with it, to challenge myself to delve deeper and make it work.



## DESIGN OBSERVER



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[My Design Life](#)

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### RECENT COMMENTS

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[How Much Does Your Bioethicist Weigh?](#) (1)

### OBSERVED

For *New York* magazine, nine graphic designers take the OOO. Nice job by the winners, [Tate St. John](#) of [Humber Gatherer](#) (great process shoot) and [Sweden's Fellow Designers](#). [HR]

[Submitted logo applications save fans](#) a beautiful story from [Staff Designer](#). [HR]

Design Observer's [Job Board](#) has new jobs in [Champaign, IL](#), [Austin, Chicago, NYC](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Stockholm](#), [Princeton](#) and [Portland](#). Companies hiring include [University of Illinois](#), [Harris Publications](#), [GOOD](#), [Yale University](#), [Egenide/design](#), [Connet](#), [Motorola](#) and [Legitech](#). [Post your job today](#). [HR]

How do you persuade people to take the stairs? Turn the steps into a [Piano Staircase](#). How do you encourage people to throw their trash in the can? Create [P&G's Recycled Challenge](#). [HR]

### OBSERVATORY

Today, 12.12.09



By [Eric Baker](#)  
Here are Today's images.

[READ MORE](#) | [COMMENTS](#)

### OBSERVATORY

Holiday Books 2009



### ASPEN DESIGN SUMMIT REPORTS

[Hale County Rural Poverty Project](#)  
[CDC and Healthy Aging](#)  
[Sustainable Food and Childhood Obesity](#)  
[Rayo Clinic and Rural Health Care Delivery](#)  
[UNICEF and Early Childhood Development](#)  
[UNICEF Menstruation Challenge](#)

### ADS VIA THE DECK

### DESIGN OBSERVER JOBS

[GRAPHIC DESIGNER](#) (web, print, marketing)  
[Lucas Entertainment](#) -- [New York, NY](#)

[Industrial Designer](#)  
[Benchmark Electronics, Inc.](#) -- [Rochester, MN](#)

[Post and find jobs on the Design Observer Job Board](#)



### PLACES: FROM THE ARCHIVE

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## BASIC ANALYSIS

Going through the site with the structure in mind revealed four major sections, around and heavily tied in with the major flagship Design Observer central core, but just separated by a subtle color difference:

**Observatory:** essays and commentary on design and visual culture (this was the entirety of the site until its July 2009 redesign), as well as photo galleries

**Change Observer:** designing for social change, in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation--focuses on design strategies for improving health, education, housing, and the environment worldwide

**Places:** an architecture magazine started in 1983 that has moved online

**Observer Media:** audio and video for the whole site, as well as podcasts and interviews

*It hit me that I really had to dig for these descriptions, and besides basic taglines at the top of each subsection, was unable to find anything this comprehensive on the site beyond the entry announcing the launch. I didn't think much of it at the time, though.*



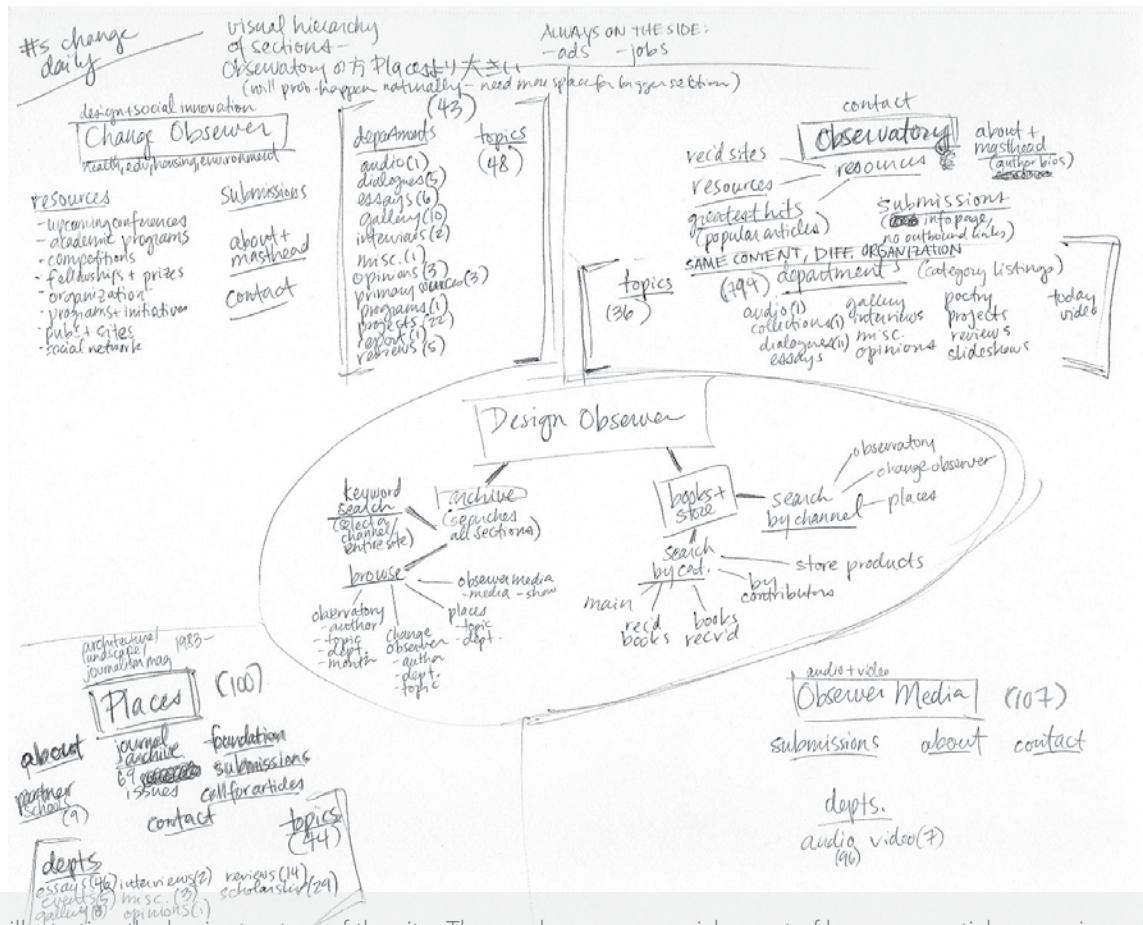
1. project and initial thoughts
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## BASIC ANALYSIS

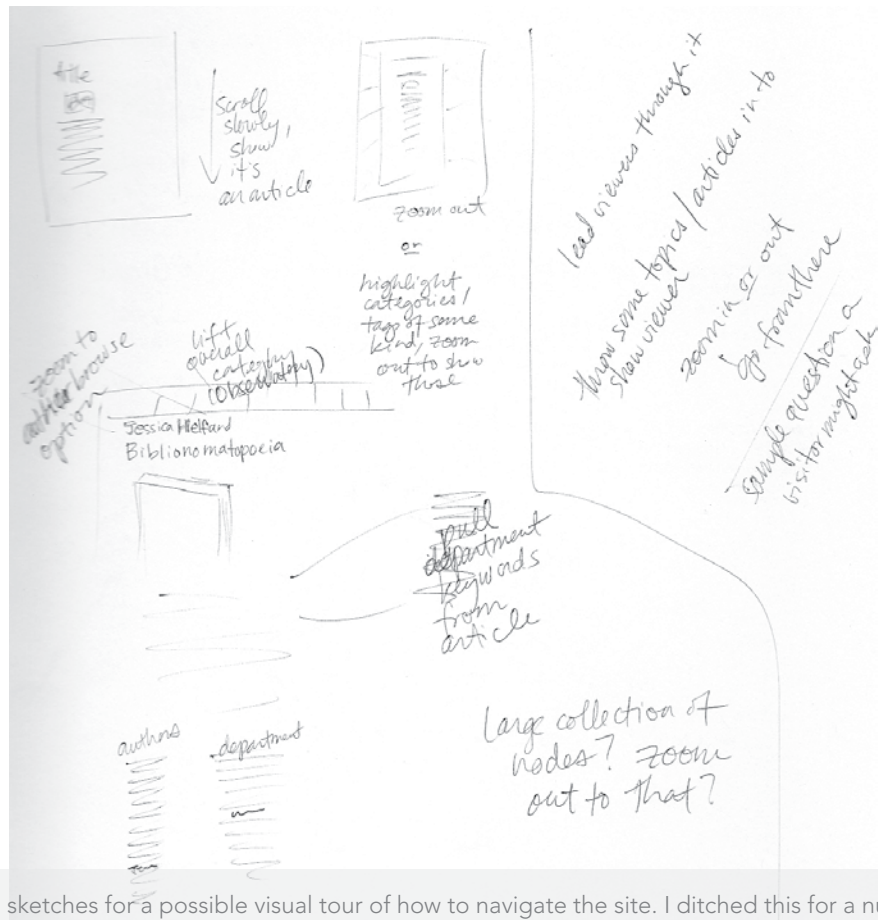
I mapped out a basic sketch of the site structure, and started jotting down the department (a.k.a. content type) and topic (a.k.a. category/keyword) names for each major section, as the articles were organized under both these lists.

When we broke into small groups in class to discuss our assignments and ideas, several people suggested an interactive or motion piece, to help parse the dense information structure of the site.

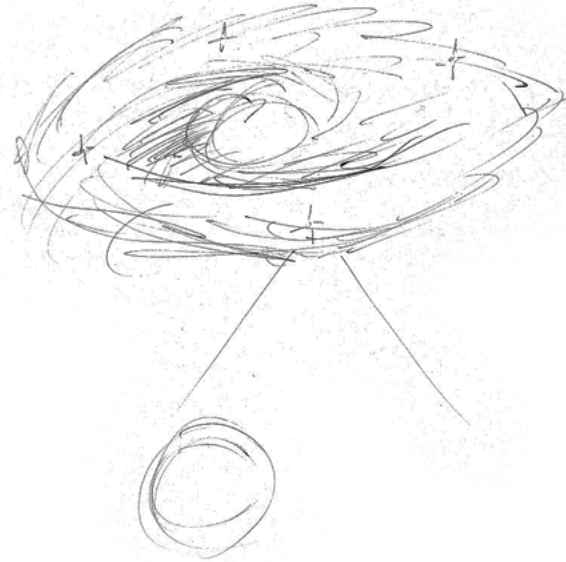
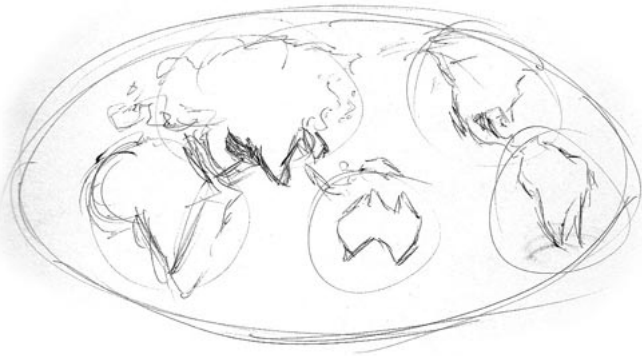
The more research I did, though, the more I found myself gravitating towards a print piece—the site was huge, the subsections were massive, and I knew I could handle a print solution more gracefully. I started exploring a few basic metaphorical representations, such as a galaxy, but ultimately abandoned them all.



Sitemap illustrating the basic structure of the site. The numbers were a quick count of how many articles were in each section.



Initial sketches for a possible visual tour of how to navigate the site. I ditched this for a number of reasons, one of which being that it felt like far too literal an approach.



Concepts of a galaxy and world map as illustrative ways to describe the site's structure. Individual solar systems and stars within the galaxy, and continents and countries within the map, would have illustrated various bits of data and general organization.

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## REFINING IDEAS & CONSIDERING USABILITY

By this time, I'd started counting the number of articles in each section to get an idea of the density of content throughout and across the site, and realized that I had to lay out where the content lay between these sections—it would be really tricky to go further in-depth than that, due to the sheer volume of information. I figured I would represent the data through something like dots for the individual articles, illustrating the density of data, or a tag-cloud format.

I also reflected that the site did not actually provide these numbers (though they very easily could have, thanks to the back-end framework they seemed to be using), forcing me to count the articles in each section manually. This time I took notice, and kept it in the back of my mind.

design observer - topics list				design observer - department list	
TOPICS				USABILITY ISSUES	
	Observatory	Change Observer	Places	- Archive: when you make a search, there's nothing indicating what your search terms were on the results page	
Advertising	34	2	-		
Aid	-	1	-		
Architecture	65?	6	46		
Art	125	3	-		
Books	104	4	1		
Branding	55	2	1	DEPARTMENT	
Cities / Places	81	2	18	OBSERVATORY	
Community	1	8	8	-----	
Culture	128	5	6	Audio: 2	
Design History	97	1	6	Collections: 2	
Design Practice	48	6	3	Dialogues: 11	
Development	-	3	1	Essays: 628	
Disaster Relief	-	4	4	Interviews: 5	
Ecology	1	1	5	Misc: 24	
Economy	3	4	2	Poetry: 10	
Education	39	9	1	Projects: 6	
Energy	-	11	2	Reviews: 9	
Environment	-	11	14	Slideshows: 44	
Fashion	-	2	-	Today: 52	
Film / Video	41	1	1	Video: 3	
Food/Agriculture	1	7	-	-----	
Geography	-	-	1	Total: 794	
Global/Local	-	5	1	CHANGE OBSERVER	
Graphic Design	156?	3	2	-----	
Health / Safety	1	12	-	Audio: 1	
History	63	-	7		
Ideas	115	5	1		

I HAD TO [REDACTED] ING COUNT THESE MANUALLY

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## REFINING IDEAS & CONSIDERING USABILITY

I turned to Photoshop to start laying out the look and feel of the text and throwing around ideas for how to organize the data and numbers I'd collated.

That's when my frustrations with the usability of the site really began to crystallize, as I realized that they were preventing me from properly navigating the information space. I had to see if I could address this in my project somehow.

I started including small notes in red text pointing out usability issues with the site, and received permission to include a usability critique of the site, on the grounds that I point out how the information space was affected by these issues (and boy, was it ever).

ABOUT + MASTHEAD  
author bio

SUBMISSIONS

RESOURCES  
- recommended sites  
- resources  
- greatest hits  
(popular articles)

## OBSERVATORY

(not directly clickable from side nav)

TOPICS

Advertising  
Architecture  
Art  
Books  
Branding  
Cities / Places  
Community  
Culture  
Design History  
Design Practice  
Ecology  
Emerging  
Education  
Film / Video  
Food/Agriculture  
Graphic Design  
Health / Safety  
History  
Ideas  
Illustration  
Info Design  
Internet / Design Journalism  
Libraries  
Magazines  
Museums  
Music  
Obituary  
Office  
Photography  
Poetry  
Politics / Policy  
Popular Culture  
Product Design  
Public Art  
Religion  
Regulations  
Science  
Social Enterprise  
Sports  
Sustainability  
Technology  
Theory/Criticism  
TV / Radio  
Typography  
Urbanism

DEPARTMENTS

Audio  
Collections  
Dialogues  
Essays  
Gallery  
Interviews  
Miscellaneous  
Opinions  
Poetry  
Projects  
Reviews  
Screenshots  
Telesy  
Video

ABOUT + MASTHEAD  
author bio

SUBMISSIONS

RESOURCES  
- recommended sites  
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- greatest hits  
(popular articles)

## CHANGE OBSERVER

(not directly clickable from side nav)

DEPARTMENTS

blogs  
essays  
gallery  
interviews  
opinions  
poetry  
projects  
reviews

TOPICS

air-pollution  
architecture  
art  
books  
branding  
business  
cities/places  
community  
culture  
design history  
design practice  
development  
education  
emerging  
energy  
environment  
events  
film/video  
food/agriculture  
health/safety  
ideas  
illustration  
interviews  
landscapes  
landscape  
media  
miscellaneous  
music  
obituary  
photography  
poetry  
politics/policy  
product  
product design  
public art  
religion  
science  
social enterprise  
sports  
sustainability  
technology  
transportation  
urbanism

# DESIGN OBSERVER

ARCHIVE

(a.k.a. search)

KEYWORD SEARCH

(not recommended, doesn't fit your search terms or give a number of results or any identifying info)  
channel entire site

BROWSE

OBSERVATORY  
- author  
- topic  
- department  
- month

OBSERVER MEDIA  
- media  
- show

CHANGE OBSERVER  
- author  
- department  
- topic

PLACES  
- topic  
- department

BOOKS & STORE

SEARCH BY CATEGORY

- main  
- recommended books  
- books received  
- by contributors  
- store products

SEARCH BY CHANNEL

- observatory  
- change observer  
- places

## OBSERVER MEDIA

(not directly clickable from side nav)

SUBMISSIONS

ABOUT + MASTHEAD

CONTACT

author bio

DEPARTMENTS



Architecture  
Books  
Branding  
Cities / Places  
Community  
Culture  
Design History  
Design Practice  
Development  
Disaster Relief  
Ecology  
Economics  
Education  
Energy  
Environment  
Film / Video  
Geography  
Global / Local  
Graphic Design  
History  
Ideas  
Interviews  
Journalism  
Landscape  
Magazines  
Media  
Museums  
Nature  
Poetry  
Photography  
Planning  
Poetry  
Politics / Policy  
Popular Culture  
Preservation  
Product Design  
Public / Private  
Public Art  
Reputation  
Sustainability  
Theory/Criticism  
Transportation  
Urbanism  
Water

Essays  
Events  
Gallery  
Interviews  
Miscellaneous  
Opinions  
Reviews  
Screenshots

DEPARTMENTS

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## DESIGNING & IMPLEMENTING

Depicting the content with a cluster of dots between the lists of department and category titles, and lines connecting the titles to the appropriate dots, seemed to make the most sense. It provided the best view of how the bulk of the information across the site was organized.

I decided not to focus as much on the more “administrative” sections, like the content under the merchandise and resource sections, as the actual articles were the main aspect of the site. It also became immediately apparent that tying the authors in would be tricky, as there were no lists of articles written by each individual author.

ABOUT +  
MASTHEAD  
(author bios)

## OBSERVATORY

*(no landing page, not  
clickable from side nav)*

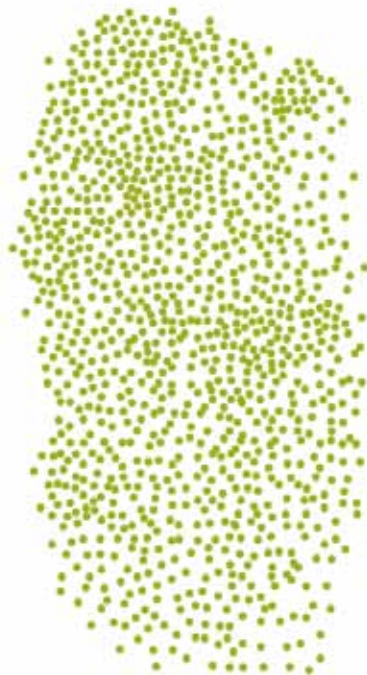
SUBMISSIONS

## RESOURCES

- recommended sites
- resources
- greatest hits  
(popular articles)

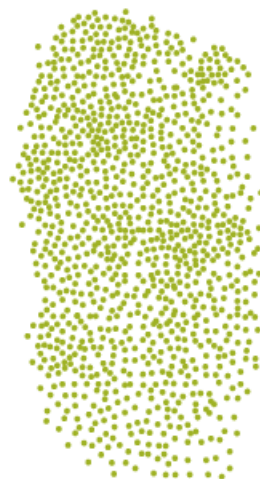
## TOPICS

Advertising  
Architecture  
Art  
Books  
Branding  
Cities / Places  
Community  
Culture  
Design History  
Design Practice  
Ecology  
Economy  
Education  
Film / Video  
Food/Agriculture  
Graphic Design  
Health / Safety  
History  
Ideas  
Illustration  
Info Design  
Internet / Blogs  
Journalism  
Literature  
Magazines  
Museums  
Music  
Obituary  
Other  
Photography  
Poetry  
Politics / Policy  
Popular Culture  
Product Design  
Public Art  
Religion  
Reputations  
Science  
Social Enterprise  
Sports  
Sustainability  
Technology  
Theory/Criticism  
TV / Radio  
Typography  
Urbanism

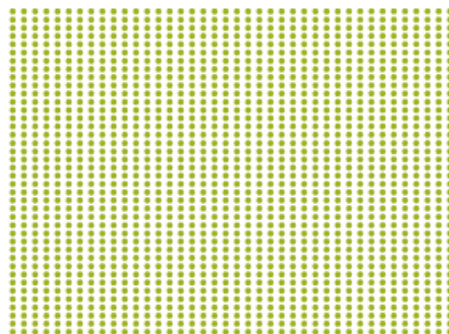


## DEPARTMENTS

Audio  
Collections  
Dialogues  
Essays  
Gallery  
Interviews  
Miscellaneous  
Opinions  
Poetry  
Projects  
Reviews  
Sideshows  
Today  
Video



VS.



?

1. project and initial thoughts
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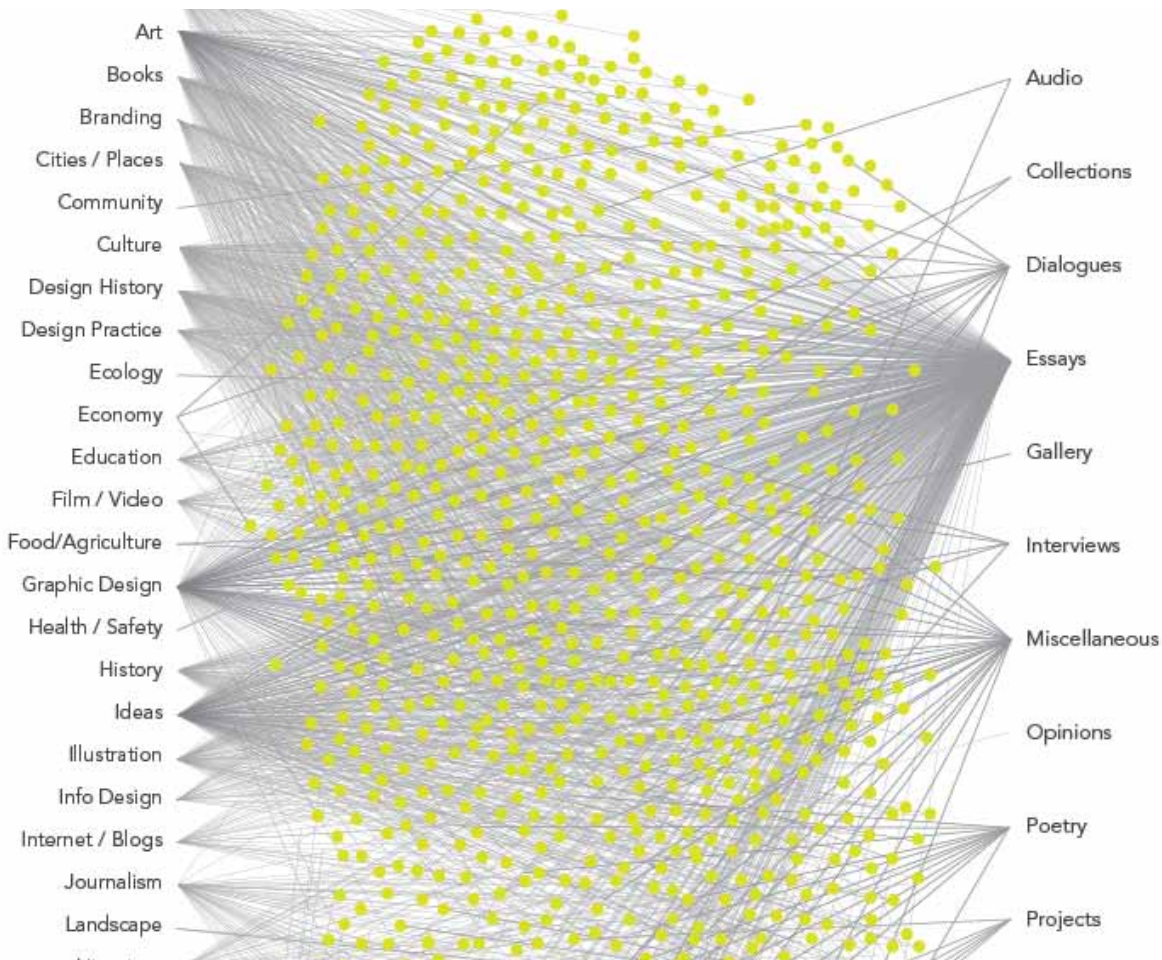
## DESIGNING & IMPLEMENTING

And so I got to work, drawing every single dot and every single line by hand.

(This was, for very obvious reasons, not completely accurate; the lines corresponding with each dot are not an accurate representation of what articles tie in with what topics and departments. There was no conceivable way I could do that, and the usability issues of the site--the lack of a listing of what topics and departments each category fell into on the category pages--didn't help. Not to mention, I seriously doubted anybody would scrutinize this poster that closely anyway.)

This took me a solid day to complete.

TOPICS



DEPARTMENTS

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## DESIGNING & IMPLEMENTING

The layout of the dots (with Observatory being a large massive cluster, versus Change Observer and Places being straight lines) doesn't necessarily reflect the content of the site, as much as it perhaps reflects my feelings towards how well organized the site content was.

Additionally, there were enough topic and department listings that I felt the need to space out the Change Observer and Places dots simply for the sake of legibility, and lines connecting to a large grid would not have been nearly as effective or legible (I thought) for the Observatory dots.

## CHANGE OBSERVER

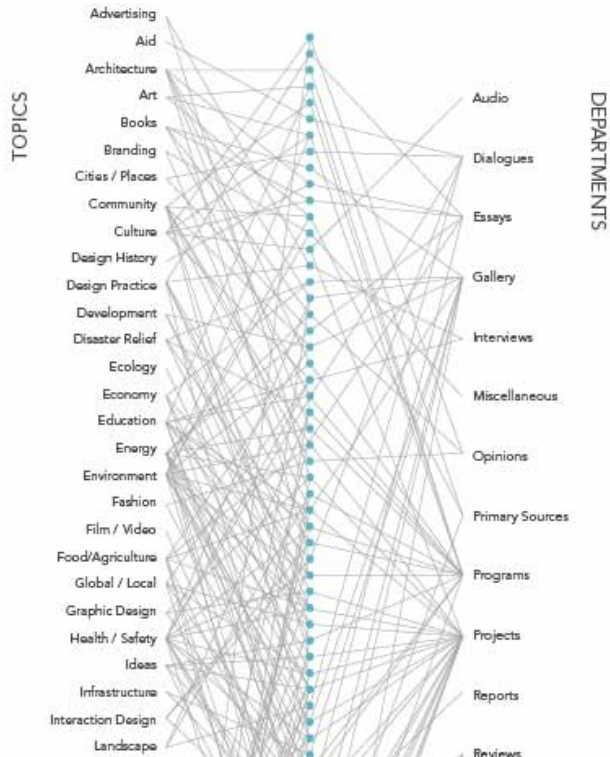
(no landing page, not  
clickable from side nav)

ABOUT +  
MASTHEAD  
(author bios)

SUBMISSIONS

RESOURCES

- recommended sites
- resources
- greatest hits  
(popular articles)



## PLACES

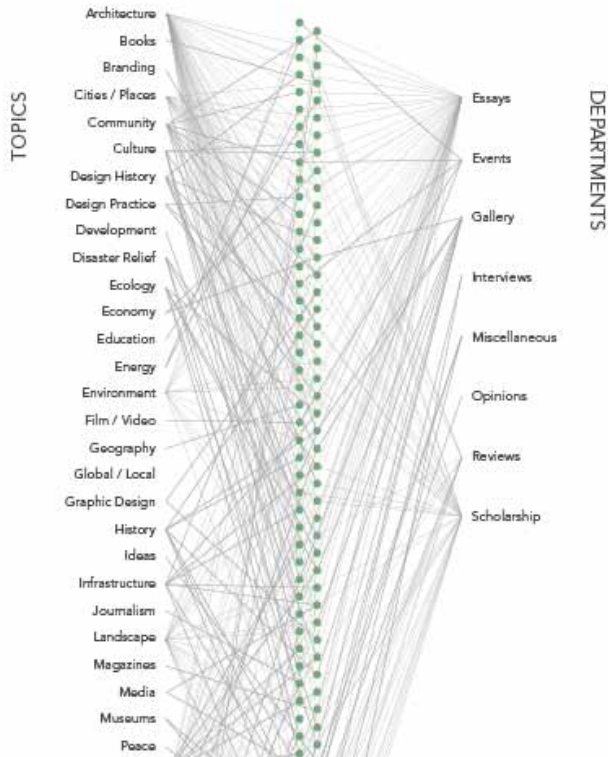
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ABOUT +  
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## TWEAKING THE LAYOUT

I had to do some rearranging on the digital canvas itself, as originally each section was in a quadrant of the canvas with the site's title in the center, but that just didn't work, especially since the Observer Media section's content was tied to the other sections of the site. I ended up arranging them all horizontally, which worked wonderfully and contrasted the sections with each other.

But what to do about Observer Media, the one tiny section? To have it on the right would've left a huge gaping hole of white space, and it would've separated it too much.

I finally resolved to put it at the bottom of the piece: I'd separated the three other sections (Observatory, Change Observer, Places) with solid lines, but used a dotted line across the bottom to signify that Observer Media was not completely cut off from them, and overlapped with all three.



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## TWEAKING THE LAYOUT

However, the feel of the piece was still very stark, all black text (with a smattering of colored dots and grey lines) on a white background. Additionally, I realized that there was nothing really describing this as a website in a visual sense.

So I crafted a loose header and footer feel that referenced the look-and-feel of the Design Observer site, creating a “header banner” with the site title and “header navigation” with the major central Design Observer navigation, a subtle grey background to quietly suggest a web browser/website layout, and my line-and-dot breakdown as the body of the site. The footer would include my signature.



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## THE FINAL TOUCHES

But the piece had come together nicely as a perfect square, and I had a little extra space left...so I couldn't resist fleshing out the story of a certain comment made by William Drenttel, one of the main Design Observer contributors, at an AIGA Atlanta meeting earlier this year, which was what had started my path towards my "loss of faith" in the site. It ended up working out well, especially with how I'd laid out my footer signature text, so that, from a distance, it seemed to resemble the copyright/disclaimer text and footer navigation that many web-sites have.

All throughout, I was working in little text blurbs with usability issues. I positioned ones that pertained to specific portions of the site near the element or area in question. There were general concerns, though, which I put in the lower-left, to the left of the Observer Media section, and there were general usability and web design practices that I had noticed had not been carried out with the site, which I noted to the lower-right. Originally I had bright red text for these blurbs, but scaled that back to make it feel less urgent and harsh, and the new color meshed really well with the overall color scheme anyway.

with accessibility in mind:  
lots of clutter above the fold,  
before the actual content

if  
delineated  
they look  
the main s

no "title" attributes in  
the image tags (web  
standards)

XHTML and CSS  
do not validate

ord  
this  
ately  
e

Mr. Drenttel remarked, "We do user testing for our websites now. *I hate it, but we do it anyway.*"  
that was, especially considering the fact that he was addressing students, who might take that sentiment to heart.  
s poster is not meant as an attack or insult, but just as a quiet assertion that usability is crucial for good, solid web design w

FALL 2009

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

# DESIGNOBSERVER

*(with running commentary on usability issues impeding navigation of the information space)*

## BOOKS + STORE

PLACES  
- topic  
- department

### SEARCH BY CATEGORY

- main
- recommended books
- books received
- books by contributors
- store products

### SEARCH BY CHANNEL

- Observatory
- Change Observer
- Places

*cluttered, disorganized landing page*

JO

CO

## CHANGE OBSERVER

ABOUT +  
MASTHEAD  
*(author bios)*

SUBMISSIONS  
RESOURCES

CONTACT

*"resources" page is cluttered and bulky: uneven column lengths*

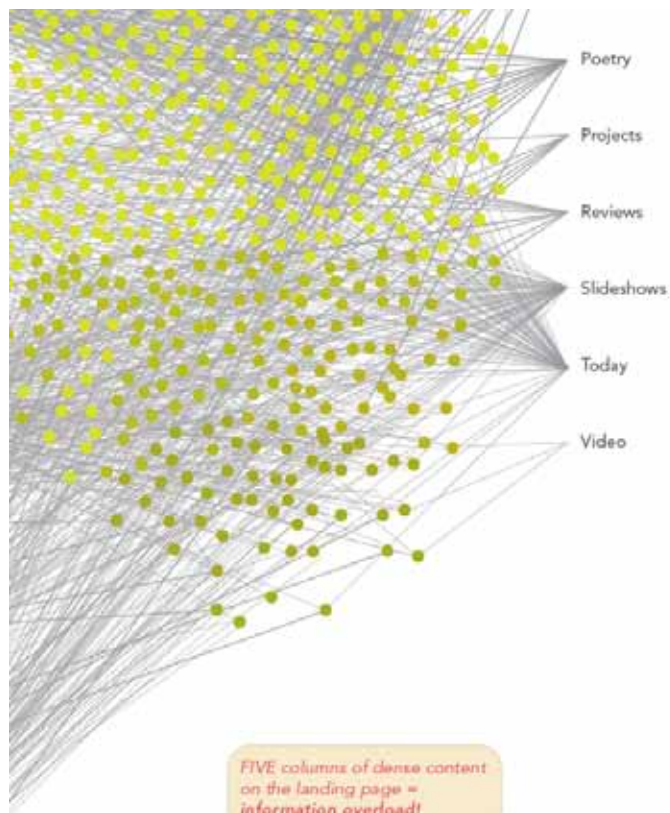
Advertising

Aid

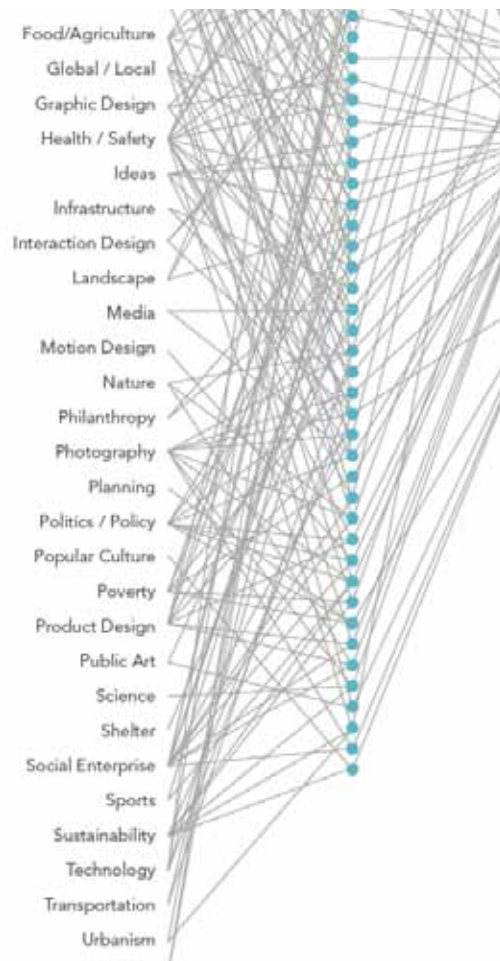
Architecture



*"resources" navigation's location obscures it and makes it seem like part of the "periphery"*



*FIVE columns of dense content  
on the landing page =  
information overload!*



**ARCHIVE** *aka "tree"*

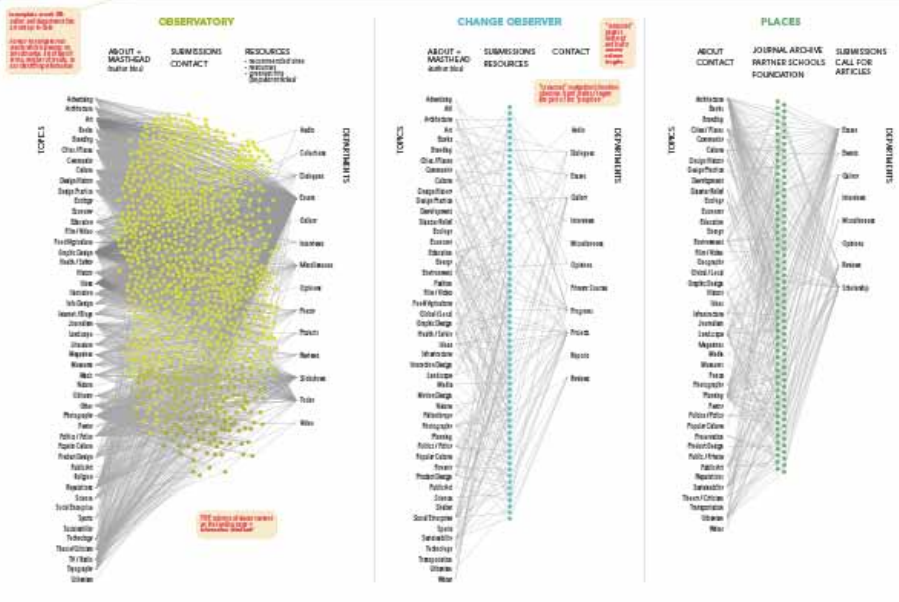
**KEYWORD SEARCH** **SEARCH**

**BOOKS + STORE**

**SEARCH BY CATEGORY** **SEARCH BY CHANNEL**

**JOB BOARD** **ABOUT**

**COMMENTS** **CONTACT**



**OBSERVER MEDIA**

**ABOUT = MASTHEAD** **SUBMISSIONS** **CONTACT**

**COMMENTS**

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## CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is some color differential in the pale green Observer dots—that was to attempt to compensate for the varying background. On my monitor, the pale green stood out just fine against the dense network of lines, but was obscured in areas with few or no lines, so I darkened those. I wouldn't mind cleaning that up.

I might rethink the dot arrangement for Change Observer and Places if I had more time. I couldn't figure out a good way to make the text lists into an arc and have the lines connecting them still be legible, but with more time I might be able to.

I'd also shrunk the whole piece down to 26"x26" after a comment that my previous size (~36"x36") was too large. I guess it was enough, as it wasn't crucial to see every individual line, but perhaps making it a touch larger wouldn't have hurt anything.