net

Issue 180

*Thwart the design thieves

What to do when someone
rips off your website
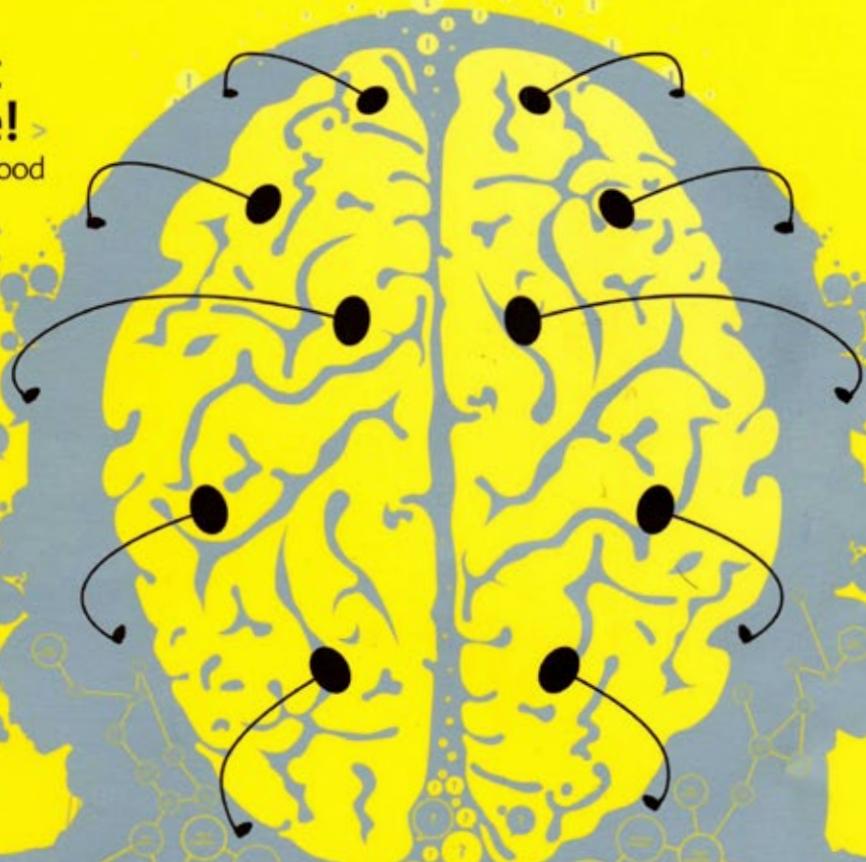
Discover the best robots of all time! >

The web industry's great and good
reveal their favourites inside

Plus >

- Enhance internal
  links with CSS
- Get animated
  with ActionScript
- Create a scrolling
  photo banner
- Design the perfect
  page footer
- Build error pages
  with impact

Blank
screen

Blank
page

>Beat the creative block

Refresh your head! We reveal the ultimate ways to
unleash your imagination and generate new ideas

Exclusive .net/interview

"We don't churn out stuff that won't
enhance the experience and we don't
pitch often"

Simon Waterfall
Poke

*Beat the creative block

A blank sheet of paper can incite creative paralysis. So how do you bust out and gain control? **Eric Karjaluoto**, of strategic interactive agency smashLAB, shares his thoughts

+ **Words Eric Karjaluoto**
Eric is a communication designer and the creative director at smashLAB.
www.smashlab.com

+ **Image Knight Design Studio**
Knight Design Studio is a Bristol-based graphic design agency.
knight-studio.co.uk

You've been staring at the screen for hours and it hasn't changed much. As the moments pass, you start to doubt yourself: Am I not good at this? What if I can't get it right? Am I the lamest designer alive? We've all been there at one time or another, but there is a way to break the cycle.

In writing this piece, I took to the street (the virtual "street" I mean, which is in actuality, email). I sent out notes to fellow designers and friends near and far for their insights. I asked a simple question: "How do you tap new ideas and 'blockbust' in your studio?" My usually articulate peers, however, were at a bit of a loss.

Pentagram's (www.pentagram.com) Michael Beirut noted that his only cure for creative block is an "impatient client and a non-negotiable deadline." Marian Bantjes (www.bantjes.com) explained that she rarely gets blocked, while Nik Hafermaas (www.uebersee.us) suggested lots of dark chocolate. (I find this to be a rather compelling option, even if it proves ineffective.)

So, for two weeks, I procrastinated, struggling with how to write this piece. Why are these great designers so tongue-tied by this simple question? Finally, it struck me – these people don't have a quick-fix, they simply keep working. I'll explain.

The problem of creative block starts with how we envision the creative process. Popular culture perpetuates the notion that creativity is akin to alchemy. It involves some magic formula that's only known to a select and gifted few. We noodle about in our studios, drink a lot of coffee, then sha-zam! – we're hit by a stroke of brilliance. Needless to say, the reality is vastly different.

Some people are naturally creative, but few arrive at powerful ideas at their first

> "Opportunity is missed by most people because it looks like work"
> Thomas Edison

(1) At Seattle design and illustration company Modern Dog (www.moderndog.com) they talk things out until they come to a solution – often this involves food
(2) Designers at the Vancouver-based studio Wallop (www.wallopcreative.com) remain creative through humour, as shown in this impromptu salsa dance
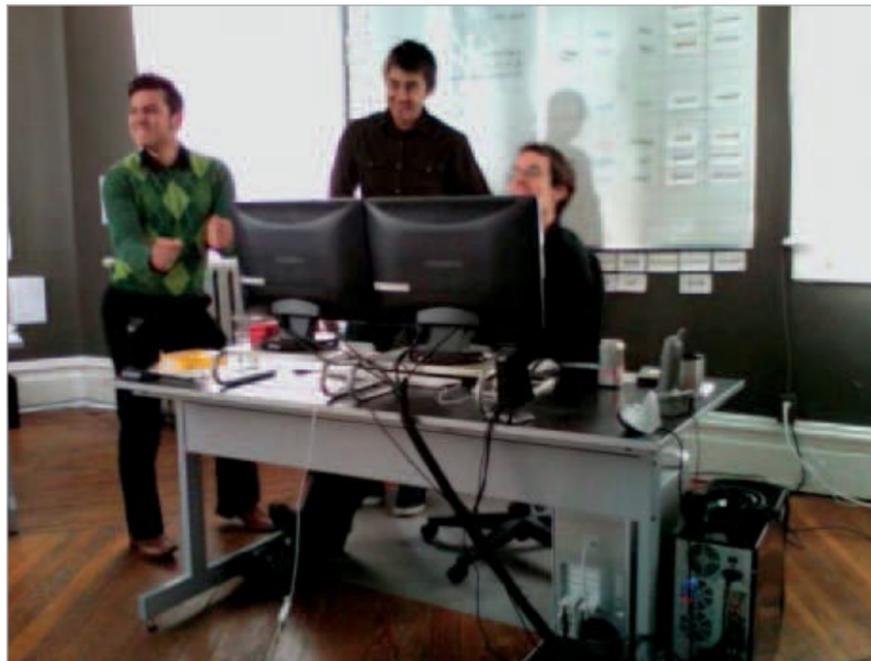
Books to spark your creativity

Whatever You Think, Think The Opposite

Paul Arden's passing this April leaves us short-changed as we're not afforded any future books from him. Nevertheless, we're lucky to have this insight book, as well as *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want To Be*. Both are great reads and contain some wonderfully distilled ideas and suggestions.
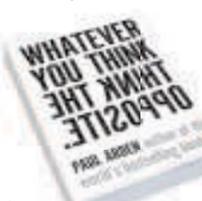
Hey, Whipple, Squeeze This

This is a must for anyone who creates for a living. Although Luke Sullivan's book concentrates on the ad world, it's highly relevant for all of us. It's brimming with insights and is decadently enjoyable to read as well.
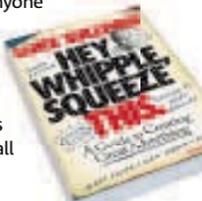
All Access: The Making of 30 Extraordinary Graphic Designers

Sometimes it's important to remind oneself of the struggles necessary to arrive at powerful creative. Stefan Bucher's sampling of some of the brightest lights in our industry reveals their fascinating back-stories, even highlighting earlier attempts.

attempt. Proficiency in producing good ideas comes from years of deliberate practice and old-fashioned hard work.

A method for working

In some professions, success is black and white. At the end of a football game, someone wins and someone loses. On an accountant's balance sheet, either the numbers work or they don't. Most creative work, however, is more challenging to measure. This, coupled with our desire to make 'great design' often sets us off on a nebulous path. Given all of this variability, I'd argue that we need to standardise certain aspects of what we do.

Almost every firm expounds upon the word 'process'. Some designers pay it lip service while others believe it to be the linchpin of their success. My belief is that you work better by establishing a general method that outlines key steps in a project. Some may argue that this limits free experimentation and compromises the possibility of a breakthrough but this is nonsense. In fact, a process liberates the designer to concentrate on ideas instead of getting hung up on questions of what step to take next.

Rather than looking at a screen blankly, waiting for a stroke of genius to hit, process enables us to concentrate on one issue at a time. Although 'create something brilliant' is a goal that often dooms one to failure, a simple task such as 'build the site map' allows us to focus on filling in the necessary pieces (and once we're actually moving, it's much easier to find ourselves in interesting and unexpected places).

It's important, however, to not allow process to become restrictive. Think of process as a big, loosely coupled machine. It needs to be flexible, as requirements change from one project to the next. But some tasks are universal in all projects, such as researching the competition and developing rough sketches. Establishing and documenting a general structure with these recurring tasks provides 'guide-rails', while affording ample room to move.

Establishing structure doesn't have to be a sophisticated process. Just document the basic steps that you follow on projects. Don't be overly detailed, as doing so can make it feel rather mechanical. It's easier to just get the basics in place with some simple checklists in productivity programs such as Outlook (www.microsoft.com/outlook) and 37signals' Ta-Da List (www.tadalist.com). Replicate the list from one job to the next, refining it as you go. When actually using it, you'll probably find that some steps are missing, while others are redundant.

We solve problems

Design isn't art. Some may argue that I'm belittling design by saying so, but this is hardly the case. They're simply two very different pursuits. Although both are explorative, design has a greater number of limitations and functional requirements. As such, art and design should be treated as separate entities.

In art, one seeks the 'perfect' idea. In design, we're in search of the 'right' idea. A tin opener doesn't have to be unorthodox, it just has to open tins. Similarly, many designers are often hamstrung by trying to make unique websites, whereas trying to meet the client's goals is more relevant, attainable and fruitful. To achieve these goals requires planning. One needs to truly understand the client, situation, expectations, context and competitors before starting to explore a creative solution.

> **"The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas"**
> Linus Pauling

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(3), (4) and (5) Co-founder of Canadian interactive design agency mod7 Wil Arndt (www.mod7.com) believes that rather than waiting to be hit by a lightning bolt, the best approach to liberating your creativity is through process. He suggests you try working through solution variations with rigour, iterating and prototyping repeatedly
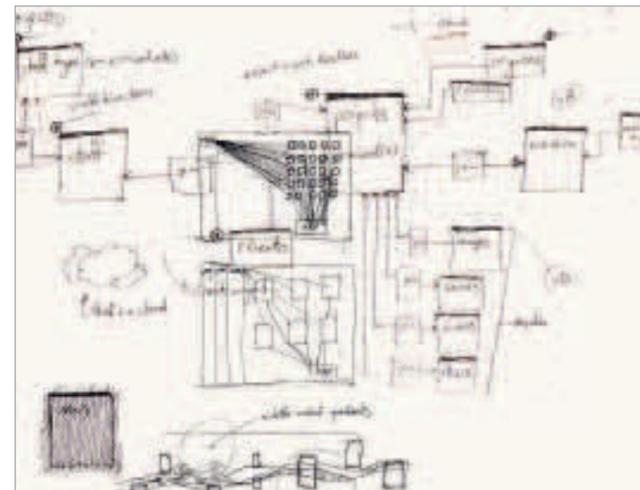
Q&A "Unlimited possibilities get in the way of decisiveness"

Scott Belsky
Job title CEO
Company Behance
Education Design, environmental economics and business
URL behance.com

net: Why are ideas so hard to come by?
SB: Actually, my experience is that ideas are not hard to come by. I think one of the greatest challenges in creative teams is to generate ideas in moderation. Ideas often lead to new ideas, but a creative group has to focus on one idea enough to make it happen.

net: What bad habits impede their progress?
SB: Designers who insist on working without limits often experience the white-page syndrome – unlimited possibilities get in the way of decisiveness, and without decisiveness, concepts fail to materialise. When designers are able to start acting without needing too much conviction, their true essence is revealed through the trial-and-error process.

So the habit of ignoring budget, deadlines and defined limits is likely to have a negative impact on making progress.

net: What's the best way to break the block?
SB: I think that creative blocks occur when you're intoxicated on a particular concept. This happens when you've been immersed for too long and when you lack external perspectives challenging your line of thinking. For individuals, simply switching to work on a completely different project can help resolve a block on a particular project. Think of it as a cold shower and a hot cup of coffee! For teams, the best approach is to involve some pragmatists – some people who would take a different approach or at least question your own judgment. Often the intellectual sparring is enough to resolve a creative block.

net: What other methods should designers employ to consistently arrive at good ideas?
SB: Cross-pollination. There's no question that virtual mood-boards, stimulation from other creative fields, and anything unexpected are all helpful in spawning creative insight.

You may be wondering, "What does any of this have to do with beating creative blocks?" The answer is – everything. Great ideas come from insight and insight comes from understanding.

There are a number of planning tools you can use to gain understanding. These tools may vary, but I believe the following to be important: a Target Audience Assessment; a Key Competitor Assessment; short lists of potential challenges and corresponding solutions; opportunities for exploration; project goals; and a succinct and accurate creative brief that can centre the project.

Don't fall into the trap of 'making paper'. I've seen 20-page creative briefs and I don't understand how they can possibly work. Distil your thoughts and analysis to a palatable length. This will ensure that you've isolated the most relevant points, and that your client will still be awake upon reviewing them.

Incubating ideas

The other guy started with a blank piece of paper. Now he's flustered and waiting for an apple to fall on his noggin. You, on the other hand, have the lie of the land. If you're anything like me, this lends a great deal of confidence. Once I have a clear understanding of where I need to go, I get the feeling that I only have a few problems to solve. It makes the task at hand seem far more manageable.

Tools are important to consider as well. Although this may make me sound like a dinosaur, I'm going to say it anyway ... put down the mouse! Every young designer explains to me how they work more efficiently on a computer. Fair enough, but the computer is a lifeless medium. It's wonderful for production and refinement, but it introduces too many choices at this early stage. What application should I build it in? What dimensions should I make

> **"Recognising the need is the primary condition for design"**
> Charles Eames

it? What colour should it be? It's just so much fun clicking about in design applications that one can easily miss out on the bigger picture.

Brother, it's time to go old-school. You know what I'm talking about: pull out the 2B, HB, Sharpie or Bic. Paper and pens don't crash, they allow for easy posting on walls for review, and they're blazingly fast. You need to be able to get the doodles and sketches down quickly enough to keep up with the monster CPU that's housed between your ears.

Getting started is seen by many as a hurdle, but it doesn't have to be. Just start. Grab a piece of paper and put down the most banal, clumsy ideas – it doesn't matter. The action of creating spurs new directions. Give yourself the licence to take bad and pointless directions; sometimes this is where you end up stumbling upon the 'magic' you'd hoped for.

Many find it helpful to collaborate at this stage, as doing so can lead to a wonderful group energy and mixing of perspectives. I suggest a few simple rules if you do this. Write every idea down, no matter how weak it may seem. Limit your group to no more than three or four people. And avoid critiquing the ideas of others or editing your own. It's simply too early to know what's in front of you, and dissecting it prematurely tends to slow the flow of ideas.

Of course, there are all kinds of tricks for this kind of work. I like to pull out large sheets of paper and markers just to make the process less constraining. Sometimes it's nice to relocate to the coffee shop for a moment and brainstorm there. Really, you just have to play and see which methods work best for you. What's important is that you're primed for success. Whether you realise it or not, for every moment that you actively think, your subconscious is working on the same problem. This is why we often find our solutions in the strangest of places: perhaps on the walk home, in the shower, or

Case study — The Corona Beach

(Above) Big Spaceship's site for Corona aimed to be the closest thing online to being on a beach
(Right) Much of the design direction for the site came from the recognisable details of a Corona bottle

www.bigspaceship.com

Zander Brimijoin, art director at Big Spaceship, discusses its recent project, The Corona Beach.

.net: Tell me about The Corona Beach.
ZB: It's a way into the Corona universe in a new way, instead of the traditional print/TV ads.

.net: Why the design/redesign?
ZB: Our partner, Cramer-Krasselt, wanted to brand Corona's online presence. For lots of different reasons, it had never been done properly before. There were lots of aesthetic decisions that needed to be taken into account in terms of creating a language that unites the entire experience. They needed a place that signified how far they've come and that also showed their tradition.

.net: What creative challenges did it present?
ZB: We needed to develop a language where people would come and instantly think 'Corona'. We discussed using the aesthetics of the bottle as a design direction: the physical texture of the bottle, the mistakes in registration of the label, the weathered look. We wanted to brand the site in a more natural form.

There's also the issue of what is relaxing. Doing nothing? Is that boring? It's hard to make a relaxing experience without making anything too difficult or giving too many features. The internet isn't a great relaxation place. There was a delicate balance to be found.

.net: What methods did you use to arrive at your creative solution?
ZB: In order to communicate relaxation, we needed to put the user in one spot (a beach chair) and have it seem as if they were turning their head to look at the beach. We couldn't make a flythrough of the experience that wouldn't be relaxing. So we set up some items in our green screen room, sat in a chair and scanned the camera around to see how the items would move as the camera panned from side to side. Our 3D designer modelled it for us so we could see how the movement would work. And then we converted it to Papervision with all the correct movements.

.net: Do you have any suggestions for designers struggling with creative block?
ZB: A combination of a few things. Talk out your ideas with other people. Sometimes you think you don't have an idea, but in describing that you don't have an idea, you realise that you do – and vice versa.

>> while out running. It may seem as though the idea struck you 'out of the blue', but I assure you it didn't. You set the stage for this to occur.

One thing to be aware of is the need for numbers. It's far too easy to fall in love with your first idea and rush it into production. Resist the urge. Every idea you scratch down experientially increases the possibility of stumbling upon a great direction. A doodle takes a moment, finished artwork takes hours. Run the maths in your favour.

Macro to micro

Early in my career, I worked as a painter. One challenge that dogged me throughout my work was the desire to concentrate on details too early. Often I'd focus on one small patch of the painting, blissfully perfecting that tiny segment. At the end of the day, however, I'd step back to discover this area

> ## "One should study a problem, and in time a solution will reveal itself"
> Albert Einstein

didn't work in the bigger picture. Throughout my design career, I have seen the same trend occur. It's easy to spend the afternoon prematurely debating typefaces. However, if the overall direction doesn't work, this kind of tinkering is rather masturbatory.

I've developed a mantra to combat this sort of issue – 'broad strokes, narrow strokes'. A painter applies large areas of paint first and then refines. A sculptor removes the large blocks and then moves on to fine details. As designers, we have to concentrate on the big picture and leave the little stuff for later. This method helps to organise and reduce the number of choices to be made, both immediately and in the future.

Ideas are actually pretty easy to come by. The thing that limits us is the hope that we'll magically be struck by the perfect idea. To combat this we need to cover a lot of ground early on. Mind-maps are great for doing this because they enable us to explore a multitude of new directions quickly. At our studio we also run two sets of moodboards, the first focused on examining existing norms to help us avoid clichés. The other is used to build a series of visual cues that inform our intended direction.

If I were creating a website for a high-end automobile maker, I wouldn't just examine the visual language of competitors. There are numerous industries in which the goals are comparable, and are worth exploring. It can be useful to mine the iconography and treatments of parallel industries. I might look to other premium lifestyle choices. How

are they using typefaces and organising space? Are they using particular images to convey this? Does it work? Good designers often don't know the answer; instead, they rely upon stronger observational, investigative and analytical skills to find one.

When it just isn't working

Now, given that you've followed the steps so far, it's reasonable to assume that you've uncovered some potential directions. From here you can compare

Stefan Bucher feels daily effort yields dividends, as he explores in Daily Monster (**www.dailymonster.com**)

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(1) When creating Puma Superstructure (**pumasuperstructure.com**), the folks from Vacuum packed up their notebooks and brainstormed at the lakeside beach
(2) Tyler Kealey from Vacuum (**vacuumsucks. com**) suggests designers "move away from the city immediately". It must be working – his team certainly looks happy

> # "Amateurs look for inspiration; the rest of us just get up and go to work"
> Chuck Close

them and engage your peers in some debate and discussion on which best meets the needs presented in the initial brief. But what happens if you simply aren't able to break through? You're beating your head against the wall – hopefully not literally – and you just don't know what to do next.

Well, tough as it may sound, my first suggestion is to keep working. We're often looking for a quick-fix when we just need to roll up our sleeves and work harder. (Hey, if this was easy, your neighbour would be a designer, too.) But really, problems sometimes just need to be tackled hard. So unplug the phone, turn off your email and dig in. You know, often you just have to cut out the noise, and many find the best way to do this is to reserve conceptual work for late at night and early in the morning. It's easier to maintain your train of thought when you're not bombarded by IMs.

A little perspective can also do the world of good. This can be as simple as stepping back for a moment. Ask yourself, is one thing limiting you? If so, can it be removed? Or perhaps this limitation is a perceived one – if so, is there a way to ignore it for a while?

For example, ask yourself what you'd do if budget wasn't an issue. Or perhaps you can buy yourself a brief vacation from the project by asking what you'd do if you weren't worried about what the client would say. Sometimes we get stymied by the silliest little thing, and if we take this out of the mix for a moment, we often find ourselves seeing things in a different light.

Some people I know pretend that they're a competitor, and build it from their rival's perspective. This is an interesting method of getting out of a rut, as it leads you to ask certain questions like, "What could our competitor do to totally drive us nuts?" This can prove to be a really effective way of arriving at some killer ideas.

When we really get stuck, we tend to make things more complicated. At these moments I stop, file everything away and start afresh. I then write down single-sentence responses to the following points: What is our goal? What is the problem? How can we achieve this goal? Why is it true? Do I believe it? This is about re-centring oneself and concentrating on the core issue, not all of the other stuff that might be swimming about in your mind.

Iteration is another wonderful device. It runs on the principle that it's better to get something down quickly than try to build the perfect solution. The designer works to get a prototype in process rapidly and then relies on real user habits to help inform improvements. While this doesn't work in all instances, it's a useful way to harness the power of the community to build more effective design.

And if you're absolutely, completely, unbelievably stuck and have no idea how to proceed, I suggest you employ something completely random. Look around your space and point to anything. From here – no matter how absurd it seems – work this item into your design. It may unlock a new door, or at the very least it will make your first problem seem minor by comparison. If this works for you, I suggest you order a copy of Brian Eno's Oblique Strategy Cards. Each of these cards contains a vague suggestion that can facilitate new variables and ultimately break a 'conceptual log-jam'.

When does this get easier?

As a young creative, I looked forward to the day when ideas would simply come to me as though I had opened a tap. Over time I've learned that this happens for very few people. Even those designers who we most admire struggle to find effective and novel ideas. The thing they tend to be better at, however, is in employing an effective process and having a number of different ways to tackle a challenging situation. You may never have 'ideas on tap', but that's largely irrelevant. Instead, you simply have to take as many shots on goal as possible.

In closing, I leave you with a few of the most insightful words I've ever heard about creation. American painter Chuck Close noted, "Amateurs look for inspiration; the rest of us just get up and go to work." So roll up your sleeves: there's plenty to do. ●

WWW. What are your tried and tested ways to beat creative block? Discuss at forum.netmag.co.uk.

Behance
A community of creatives sharing their portfolios. This is a great space to connect with other designers and creatives. Alternately, perhaps you'll enjoy simply browsing the work of so many great designers, illustrators, photographers and the like.
www.behance.net

TED Conference
Watching one of the talks from the TED Conference is inspiring. Listening to some of the most innovative thinkers and doers around really helps one remember that creativity isn't limited to design. Set aside your work for 20 minutes, grab a coffee and tune in – you'll feel different as a result.
www.ted.com

IHAVEANIDEA
Sometimes, I just have to remind myself that others also face the challenges I wrestle with. This always makes ihaveanidea a welcome visit. Don't let the rather old-school presentation of the site dissuade you from digging into its great interviews.
www.ihaveanidea.org

FWA
A collection of some of the most flashy (sometimes unfortunately so) and explorative design and creative work currently on the web, mixed with interviews and interesting articles. Sure, you've probably been to the site a zillion-and-two times – nevertheless, it's probably a good time to revisit it.
www.thefwa.com

AIGA
I don't know about you, but when I'm working with a medium, I often examine another. The AIGA Design Archives proves to be a lovely resource for doing so. It's a well edited and beautifully designed site that you'll find yourself transfixed by.
designarchives.aiga.org