

arcdesign.com Preliminary Usability Analysis and Development Strategy

Conceptual Plan

Plan for the re-design of www.arcdesign.com.

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Company Goals

The existing site found at arcdesign.com is intended for self-promotion of a civil engineering consulting firm.

It is assumed that future expansion of the site will include such client management solutions (CMS) as project related data dissemination, instant messaging, and account management.

As of August 19, 2011, the existing site lacked considerable functionality. Entire marketing and service sections contained no content. Furthermore, no CMS was functional.

Because B2B sales are more relationship-based, and the sales cycle can be fairly long, B2B sites typically do not have e-commerce functionality. B2B companies tend to focus their Web resources on achieving the following goals (Miletsky 44):

- Reinforcing their brand name
- Establishing that they understand their clients' "pain points"—the critical issues faced by potential clients in their particular industry and those faced by the decision-making individuals within those companies
- Proving that they can deliver the products and services necessary to ease the aforementioned pain
- Showing themselves to be leaders in their industry
- Moving potential visiting clients to take action by contacting a sales representative

Client Goals

Arc Design Resources has received direct feedback from clients regarding contact information. Clients feel that the contact information is too difficult to find. As such, the office location and phone number will be located prominently in the site.

Initiating CMS, the contact page will feature a PHP form that will afford clients the ability to message and upload documents to the Arc Design Resources server. The form will contain javascript and PHP validation.

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In order to reach these goals, B2B companies focus on creating sites that will capture their audience, present information that makes the company seem established and capable, and encourage users to take further action by contacting a company representative. In developing their sites, B2B companies take many specific and deliberate efforts, including the following (Miletsky 44).:

- Utilizing copy and information more frequently than graphics and animation
- Using case studies and client testimonials to illustrate how their services can be beneficial to potential clients
- Authoring white papers (authoritative reports) on key industry topics and offering free downloads of those papers via their Web site
- Providing informational brochures in PDF format for easy downloading
- Developing a cyber newsroom that shows how the company has been improving, growing, and evolving
- Including an About Us section that details the biographies of key management to evoke trust
- Offering a password-protected area where clients can log in to review invoices, company files, time sheets, and other account information
- Presenting company contact information, including e-mail links and phone numbers, on an easily accessible contacts page

Feel

The site must be scalable for mobile devices.

Regional competitor sites such as [Manhard Consulting](#), [Fehr-Graham & Associates](#), and [Strand Associates](#) were referenced by Ryan Swanson as exemplary sites upon which to base the re-design.

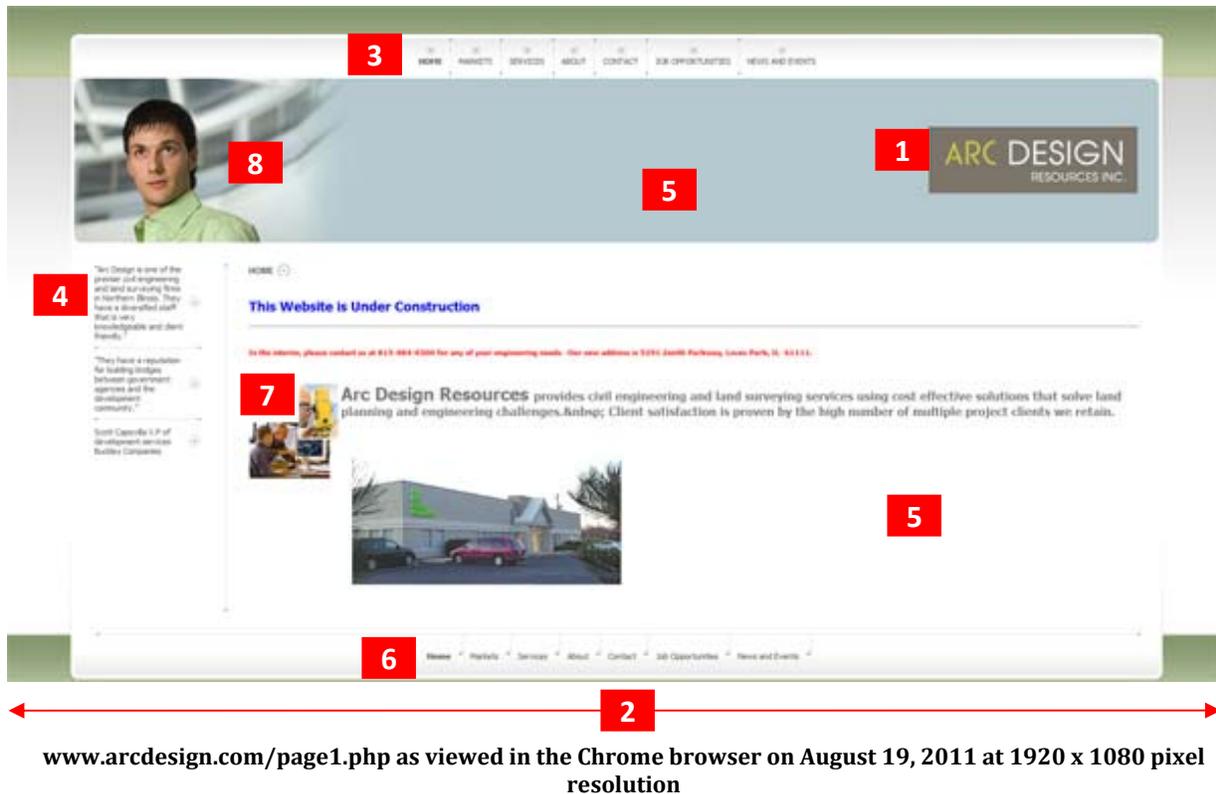
The color scheme will be based on the Arc Design Resources corporate logo. It can be assumed that the site will be primarily neutral (grey) and accented by a medium shade of chartreuse.



Preliminary Usability Analysis

The following analysis offers a preliminary look into the potential weakness and possible solutions pertaining to the current site.

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www.arcdesign.com/page1.php as viewed in the Chrome browser on August 19, 2011 at 1920 x 1080 pixel resolution

1 The site ID and Purpose should be located at the top of the page, otherwise known as the page header. Convention states that the site ID should be located toward the left-hand margin within the header. The site Purpose, or abbreviated mission statement, should be located in the header and near the site ID (Krug 63).

A site search function should also be provided within the header. Convention states that the search box and button should be located toward the right-hand margin within the header.

2 Design width should be fixed or flow the structure in an uncompromising manner to 800 pixels. This standard accommodates multi-tasking on desktop monitors as well as scalability for most mobile devices (Nielsen 2006).

3 The top navigation bar represents website sections in a broad fashion. Navigation, however, should give the user clear feedback regarding current location--breadcrumbs. Tabbed navigation is the current convention (Krug 65).

All navigation menus should call attention to respective links when the user hovers over them. The carrot icons that are currently used do not accomplish this task (Heim 416).

4 The left navigation bar currently offers links to quotes that are already present on the home page. Convention suggests that the left navigation bar should provide persistent deep navigation. If deep navigation is not offered on the home page, a prominent link to a site map

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should be offered to the user in the top navigation bar. In consideration of the deep navigation that may be required by a civil engineering site, a search engine could be employed to allow users the option to target specific destinations and forgo potentially frustrating deep visual navigation (Heim 69).

- 5** Unused space within the content area of the page represents 69% of the total viewing area when viewed at 1920x1080 resolution. Effective use of such space typically tops out at 30%. Such space should be used only to provide visual breaks for the user while scanning sections (Heim 219).
- 6** Navigation bar unnecessarily duplicates hierarchy indicated in the top nav bar. This area could serve more purpose as a contact footer containing persistent company contact information (Krug 25).
- 7** More content could make the page more useful. Perhaps the home page could replace the "About" page. The intent is to limit the number of clicks that a user must perform in order to find pertinent information. Balance should be maintained between clicking and scrolling. Pages should present enough content to make them useful, thereby eliminating extraneous clicks, while still being able to limit the need to scroll vertically to view all content (Heim 198).
- 8** Background and stock images should be used only to draw attention to particular content (Heim 248). The stock image that is presented seems to displace content. For example, the image in question depicts a man looking amusingly toward the top margin of the page. Such an image distracts the user from the content. Furthermore, it may be advantageous to decrease the opacity of such images so as to subdue them. Alternatively, a more abstract image may be used in order to add aesthetic interest without detracting from the content.

General Usability Considerations

- Font type and size should remain consistent throughout the content area. Font type should be serif if the content is predominantly text in order to facilitate legibility. Font size should be a minimum of 12pt at the smallest anticipated pixel pitch. The general exception regards heading elements, like those described by Heim, that could be used to highlight content area story headlines thereby drawing interest (479). This note also complies with 11:6 of the "Text Appearance" usability guideline.
- The cool color scheme--grey/green--that is employed in the existing site is a formal business color scheme. Grey is generally associated with conservatism and formality in North-American design (Heim 317). Darker greens can convey renewal, growth, or energy (Heim 317). It is important, considering the Arc Design Logo incorporates the color green, to maintain the hue consistently. We all know that green can be associated with jealousy, envy, or inexperience. Therefore, I would recommend a green-grey color scheme that incorporates the same proportion of color use as illustrated in the Arc Design Logo. A predominantly grey

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site should convey the conservative and formal image that an engineering consulting firm desires.

- Icons should be used contextual labels. Heim indicates that the use of icons in lieu of textual explanations is a result of decreased real-estate in smaller electronic devices (Heim 416). Considering the relatively wide design width of this page and the amount of white space, the icons that are employed do not seem to serve a purpose. Krug suggests that we not make our users think in his first law of usability (Krug 11). Should the redesign comply with the 800px width design standard, changing hyperlink and menu icons to more recognizable or identifiable images may be beneficial.
- The negative contrast (dark text on light back-ground) employed in the existing site facilitates easy navigation and scanning by users. It should remain in any redesign of the site (Heim 344).
- PHP, Javascript, and FLASH should be used sparingly or only as needed to draw interest or illustrate services within a corporate site. It is worth mentioning that users, or potential clients, may be utilizing mobile devices or other devices with security settings that may not support such programming languages without changing settings. The idea is to design to the lowest common denominator for the home page. Once a user is in the website, it is possible to indicate which settings the user may need to manipulate in order to realize full functionality of the site (Krug 48-54).

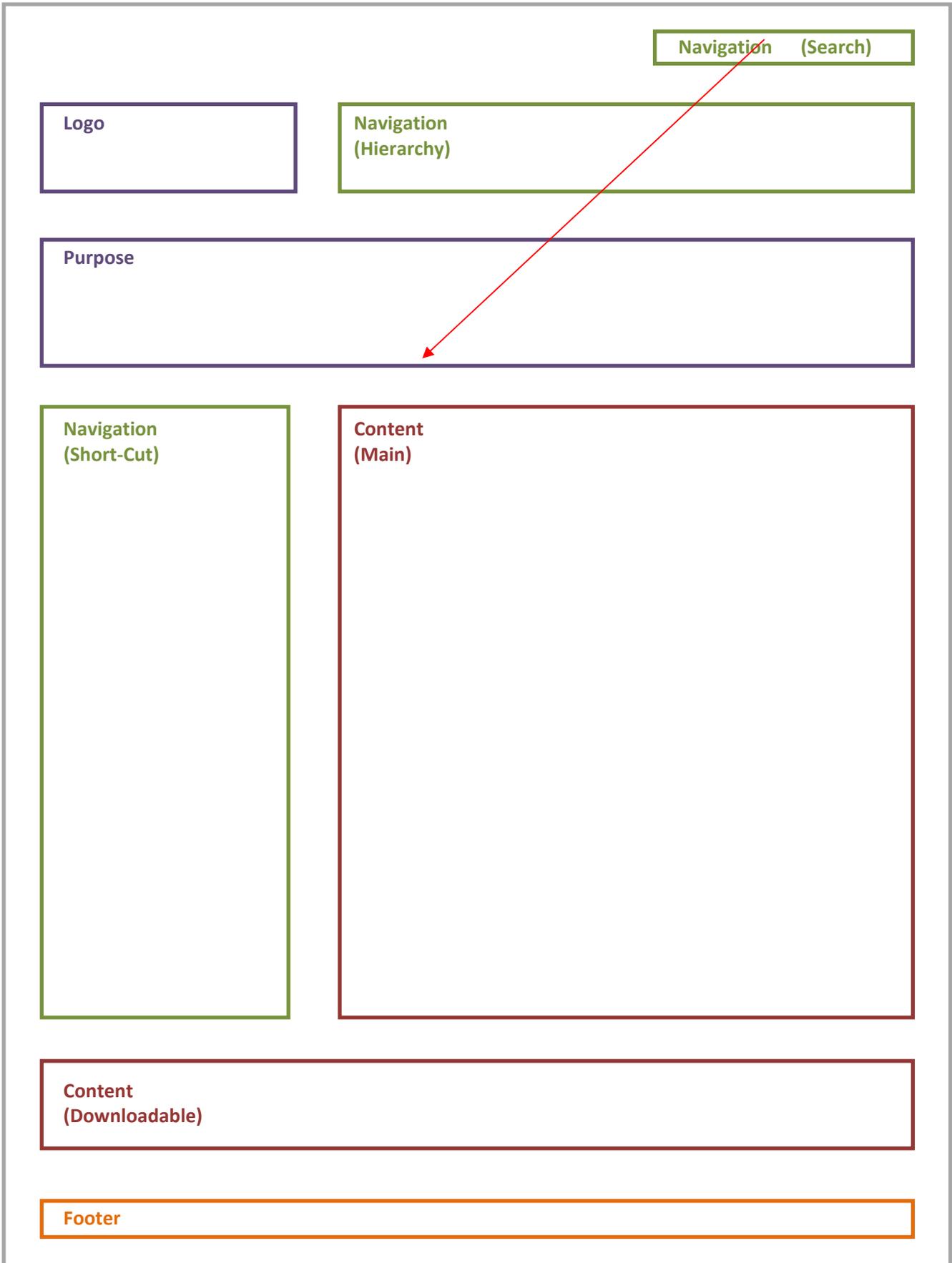
Mock-Up

The mock-up page seen on the next page is based on traditional web design conventions expressed by Heim, Krug, and Beaird. The site ID, corporate logo, will be persistent in the upper left hand corner of the container (Krug 63, Beaird 9). The search box is at the top of the container (Krug 67). Persistent navigation indicating site hierarchy is located above the fold (Beaird 9). The slogan, or purpose of the site is located near the logo (Krug 95). This area will also contain the contact information in order to mitigate explicit client concerns.

Grid theory will be based on the 960 grid introduced by Khoi Vinh and Mark Boulton (Beaird 11-13). The layout will be controlled entirely by CSS framework. The rule of thirds will be applied to the 960 grid in order to enhance visual balance.

Visual balance will be obtained asymmetrically utilizing horizontal symmetry (Beaird 15).

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