A working canon · issued MMXXVI

Canon

Nine rules for durable design, collected from the long habit of making identities, timetables, and books that outlive their briefs.

A canon is not a cage. It is the promise a studio makes to the work: that what we ship today will still hold its dignity when the fashion that carried it is long gone.

The argument

Every studio accumulates rules the way a workbench accumulates scars: one mark at a time, each earned by a specific mistake. This small book collects nine of ours. They are not laws of nature, and they are not fashion advice; they are the *habits of durability* — the working defaults that let a piece of design keep its dignity long after the applause for its novelty has died down.

We publish them for the same reason a kitchen posts its recipes: not because the reader will follow them exactly, but because writing a thing down is the only way to be held to it.

Style is what survives when the trend that produced it has gone.

Read the nine as one argument. *Substance* decides what may be said; *structure* decides how it stands up; *surface* decides how it feels in the hand. A failure at any layer will eventually surface at the others — always at the least convenient moment, and usually in print.

The rules at a glance

The whole canon fits on one page, which is the first thing we like about it. Each rule is developed in its own section further on — a statement, a short argument, and one pair of working habits: the thing to do, set beside its tempting opposite. The numbers matter; the order is the argument in miniature.

1 ..... Content precedes form — *Understand the thing before you shape it.*

2 ..... One idea per artifact .... *A page that says two things says nothing.*

3 ..... Honesty is a material ..... *Plain truth outwears clever varnish.*

4 ..... The grid is the law ..... *Freedom is what structure buys.*

5 ..... Type is speech ..... *Two families, a few weights, no costumes.*

6 ..... White space is material ..... *Emptiness is purchased — spend it.*

7 ..... Color is information ..... *One accent, used like punctuation.*

8 ..... Details are the design ..... *The kerning pair is the cathedral.*

9 ..... Endure, do not trend ... *Dated in five years means wrong today.*

Part I · Substance

The first three rules concern what a piece of design is allowed to claim. They are the cheapest rules to state and the most expensive to obey, because they must be obeyed before any drawing begins — in the meeting, in the manuscript, in the long argument about what the thing actually is.

Rule 1 · Content precedes form

You cannot design what you do not understand.

Semantics before syntax: the meaning of the thing dictates its shape, never the reverse. A timetable should look like a timetable and a poem should look like a poem, and the designer's first job is to know the difference — which means reading, asking, and sitting with the material until it confesses its structure.

Do — Read the manuscript twice before opening a layout.

Don't — Pour unread text into a beautiful template.

Rule 2 · One idea per artifact

A page that says two things says nothing.

Attention is the only currency the reader carries, and it does not make change. Decide the single message, give it the whole page, and grant every secondary thought its own occasion — a caption, an appendix, another day.

Do — Cut the second message, or give it its own page.

Don't — Let a footnote argue with the headline.

Rule 3 · Honesty is a material

Never let the costume speak louder than the actor.

Honest work names things plainly, shows the price, and admits what is unfinished. This is not a moral ornament; it is an engineering property. Trust, once set into a document, bears load — and like any structural material it fails suddenly when it has been faked.

Do — Name the product what it is.

Don't — Rent adjectives the work cannot repay.

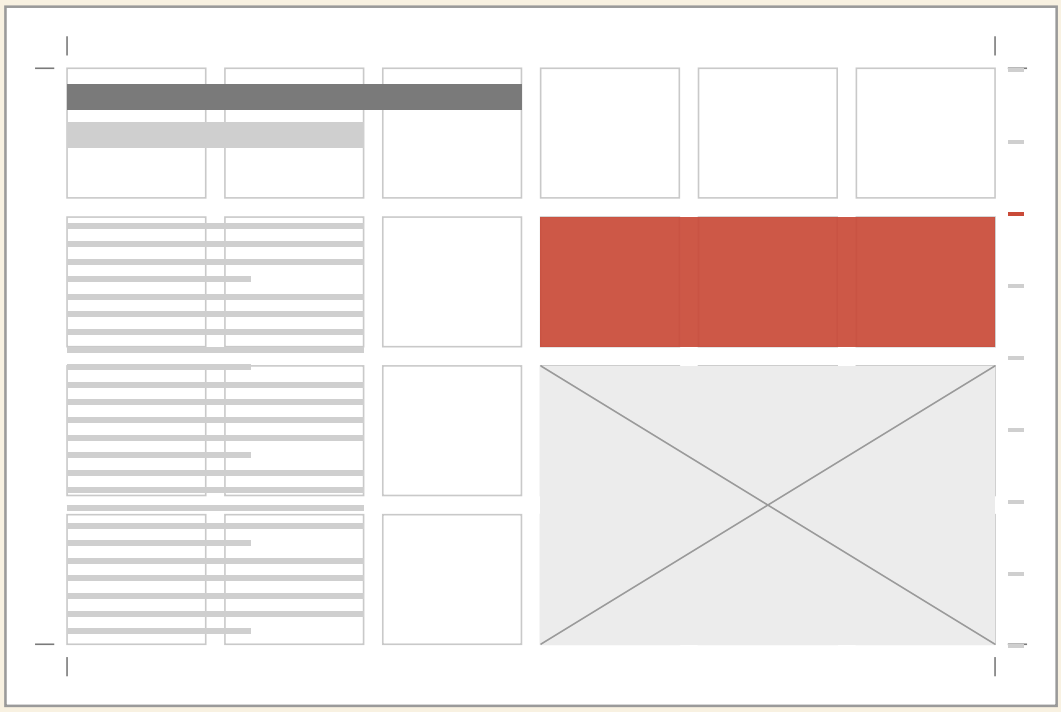
Part II · Structure

The middle rules concern the skeleton: the grid that places things, the type that voices them, and the space that lets them breathe. Structure is invisible when it works, which is why it is the first thing amateurs cut and the last thing masters surrender.

Rule 4 · The grid is the law

The grid is invisible exactly when it is working.

A grid is not a cage: it is the constitution of the page — a small set of agreements about where things stand, so that every later decision is faster and every exception is legible as an exception. Break it once, deliberately, and the reader feels the emphasis. Drift from it casually and the page merely feels cheap.



A six-column modular grid. The red span is the one deliberate exception the system exists to make possible.

Do — Break the grid once, on purpose, where it matters.

Don't — Drift from it a little on every page.

Rule 5 · Type is speech

Typography is speech made visible — do not mumble, and do not shout.

Choose two families and learn their manners: how they wear at small sizes, where their italics lean, what their numerals do in a table. A designer who knows two typefaces deeply will outperform one who samples fifty, for the same reason a cook with one sharp knife outperforms a drawer full of gadgets.

Do — Choose two families and learn their manners.

Don't — Audition a new typeface for every occasion.

Rule 6 · White space is material

Emptiness is purchased by the square inch — spend it on purpose.

The margin is not what is left over; it is what was bought first. Space is how a page signals rank: what stands alone is announced, what is crowded is merely stored. Guard the silence around the important thing as fiercely as the thing itself, because the silence is doing half the speaking.

Do — Let the margins hold the reader's thumbs.

Don't — Fill every silence with a caption.

Part III · Surface

The last rules concern what the hand and the eye actually meet: color, detail, and time. Surface is where design is judged first and forgiven last, and it is the only layer the audience will ever name — which is precisely why it must be rationed.

Rule 7 · Color is information

When everything is highlighted, nothing is.

One accent, used like punctuation. Color in a working document is a signal, not a mood: it marks the thing that must be found first, and it can only do that job while it is scarce. The second accent halves the value of the first; the third abolishes them both.

Do — Reserve the accent for what must be found first.

Don't — Paint enthusiasm over the hierarchy.

Rule 8 · Details are the design

The kerning pair is the cathedral.

There is no such thing as a minor decision — only a decision whose consequences have not yet been printed. The widow, the false apostrophe, the caption a half-point too large: the reader cannot name any of them, but the reader can feel their sum, and their sum has a name. It is called quality.

Do — Fix the widow nobody else noticed.

Don't — Ship "close enough" and call it character.

Rule 9 · Endure, do not trend

If it will look dated in five years, it is wrong today.

Fashion is a clock; discipline is a compass. The pieces we still admire from fifty years ago were not ahead of their time — they were indifferent to it, built from proportion, structure, and restraint, which do not expire. Design for the shelf, not for the feed.

Do — Ask what the piece looks like in ten years.

Don't — Chase the gradient of the month.

The palette, specified

A canon needs a spec, and a spec must proof itself. The three tokens below are the entire chromatic vocabulary of this book: each edition re-inks them — the reference values shown here belong to the modernist edition — but the roles never change. The chip printed beside each row is drawn in the token's current ink, so the table is its own specimen.

Token	Reference	Usage
ink	#111111	Running text, rules, and folios — the voice of the page.
accent	#D7182A	One raised voice: the numeral, the exception, the found thing.
muted	#6E6E6E	Second-rank matter — captions, essences, the colophon.

And the working vocabulary of the system itself, five words long:

Grid Type Space Color Detail

Colophon

CANON is issued in three editions from a single manuscript: a modernist edition set in Nimbus Sans; a brand edition set in Montserrat; and a classical edition set in EB Garamond.

No sentence of the body was altered between editions. Every difference on these pages — the grid, the numerals, the chrome, the ink — is carried by the style sheets alone.



The Studio · MMXXVI

set, argued, and printed under one roof