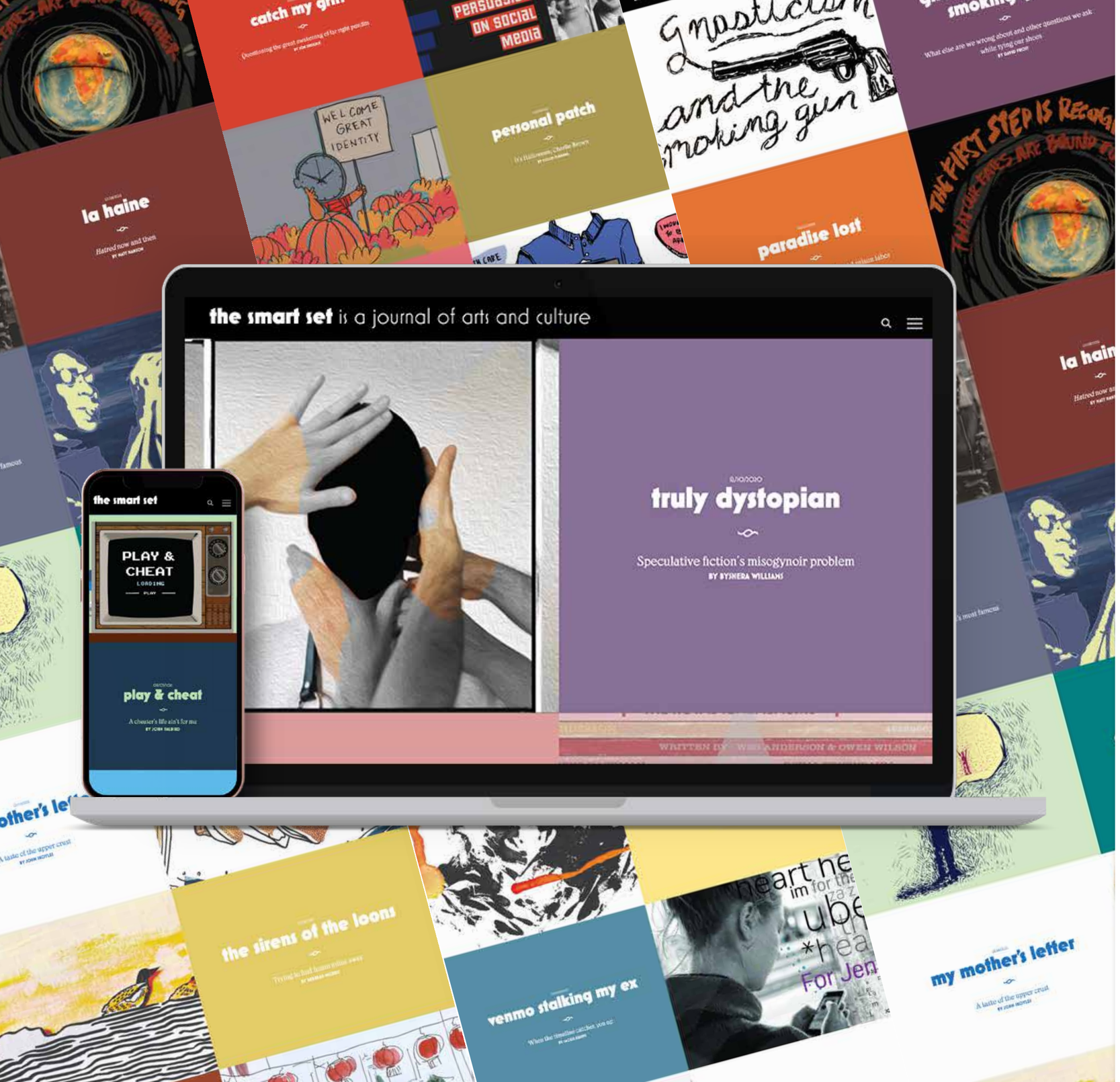
THE SMART SET
WORKGENIUS: WEBSITE
WORKGENIUS: ONBOARDING
WORKGENIUS: TASK-SPECIFIC INTERFACE
UNITED WE QUILT
ARTSPOTTING

THE SMART SET

A new look and a new workflow for a digital institution

thesmartset.com



Smartening up

The Smart Set is an independent arts and culture publication published by Drexel University. The Smart Set focuses on high-quality non-fiction writing, from reported travel essays to musings on culture.

When I first redesigned the site in 2013, it was a major overhaul. For that update (read the case study here) I worked with an outside developer and a content migration company to do a major overhaul of the design and move the site to WordPress.

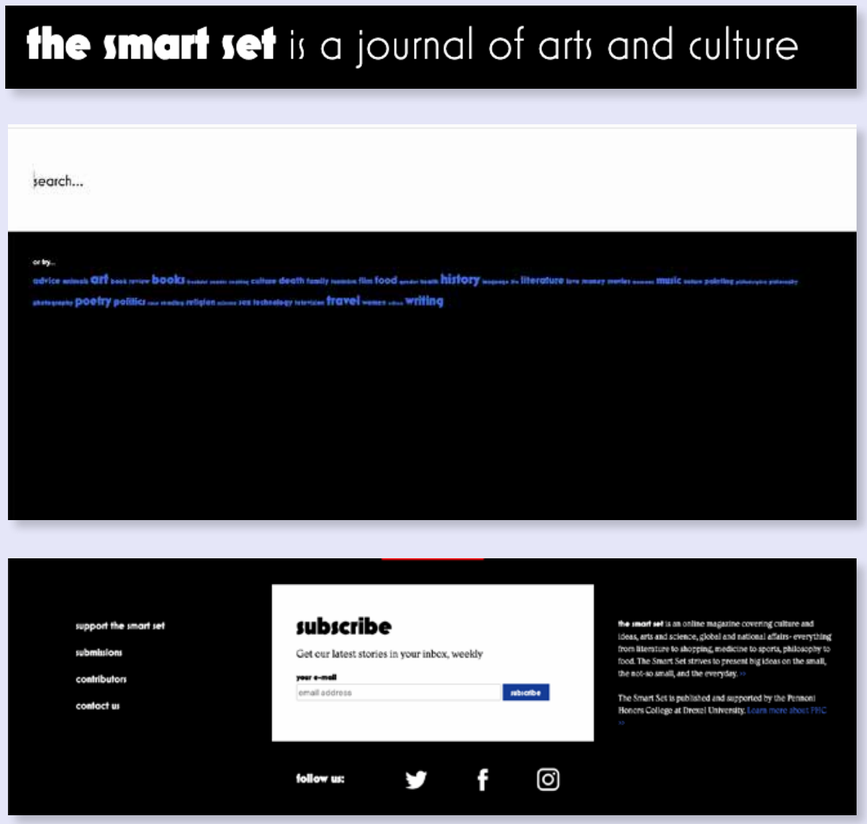
For this iteration, completed in 2019, the task was a bit different, and a bit smaller. The site was still functional, but with changes in leadership and team size/composition, the goals and tone of the magazine had shifted. We wanted to bring the look and feel of the site more in line with that new tone – fresher, younger, more diverse, more contemporary, but still smart and eclectic. I also wanted to streamline the editorial workflow to help the smaller team work faster and easier, while starting to take advantage of the new features in WordPress, like the Gutenberg editor.

WHAT I DID:

Web design
Visual branding
Front-end/WordPress template development
On-demand, ongoing art direction and technical support

SEE IT LIVE: THESMARTSET.COM

Homepage with user-chosen colors



Homepage with default title box colors. Stories layer over each other as they scroll.

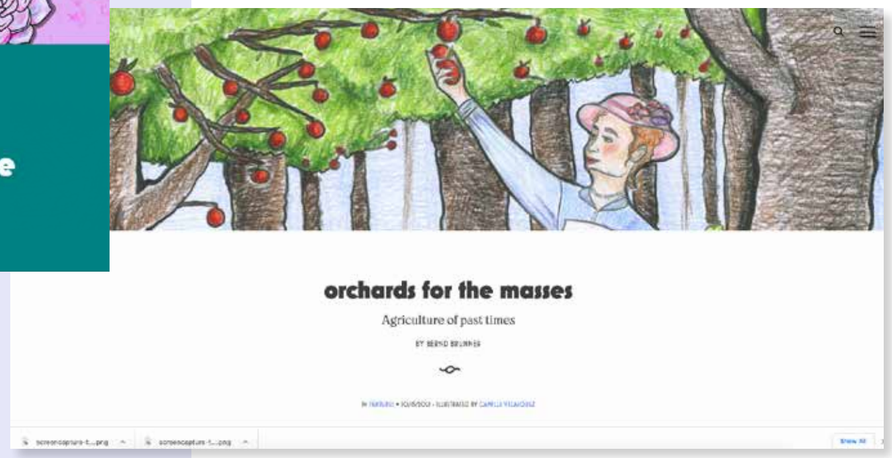
Design & color systems

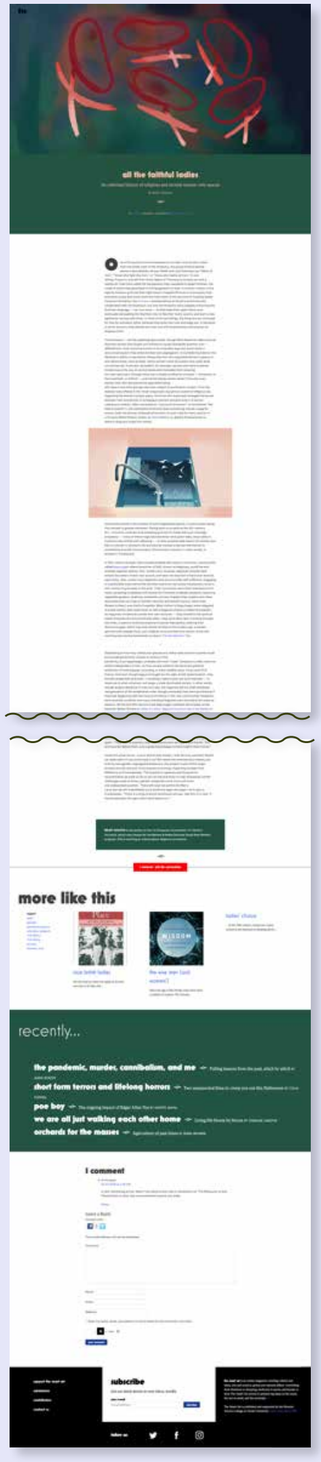
The site layout is fairly minimalistic, based on a strong grid, with moments of delight coming from clever layering and post-specific content. This meant that a lot of the personality and texture of the site would be coming from the typography, so I went in a more maximalist and eclectic direction there. I kept Mostra Nuova, an Italian art deco-style typeface used on the previous version of the site, for the logotype, headlines, and other display type throughout. For a younger, fresher vibe, I re-set the logo in the font's extra bold lowercase. It still feels Italian, but a bit more Memphis than deco — a more current trend. I paired it with a funky serif called Zangezi, drawn by an independent woman designer (a nod to the site's current first female editor.)

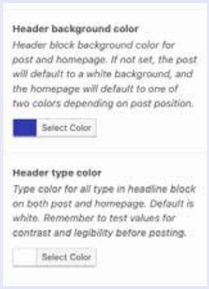
Since this iteration of the site would be more illustration-focused, I stripped back the core color palette to let the art shine. Many of the colors could be overridden by the user on individual posts (more on that later), but it was important that the default states were also strong and legible. Most of the site elements are in black and white — usually, black background, white type. Interface elements use an (almost) reflex blue and red. Stories on the homepage alternate between two colors based on position, keeping a rhythm and brightness to the page even without heavy customization.

Most of the microinteractions and transitions rely on layering. Black-and-white menus, with a hint of blue for links, load in full-screen modal windows. On the homepage, each story moves up as the user scrolls and sticks to the top of the page, letting the next story slide over it. The logotype gets a similar treatment: the first story slides over the site tagline, hiding it, but the logo and menu buttons stay on top.

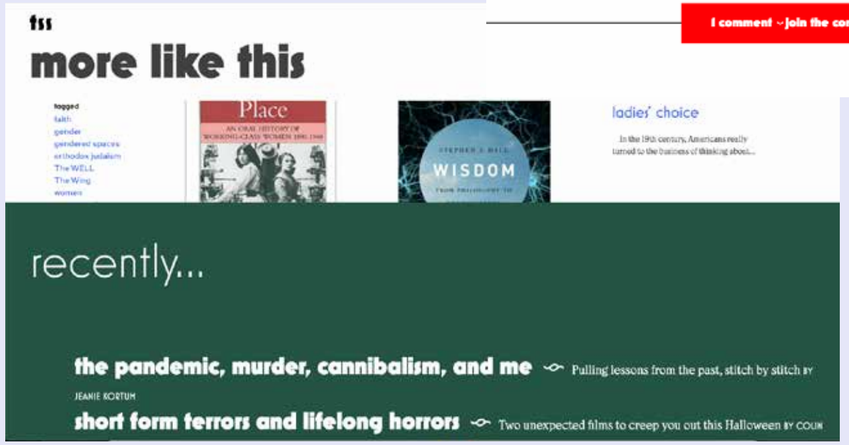
Default colors on story page elements. Similar layering effect applied here to feature image and title box and post footer elements







A user-generated color palette, based on the post's illustration, is automatically applied to the article page and to the article's teaser on the homepage.



1 comment – join the conversation

Article pages and workflow

For this site, I wanted to strike a balance between customization and automation. The block-based post building tools in WordPress 5+ are pretty powerful, but much like other page builders, they rely a lot on manual and often repetitive work. And when building a post under pressure, more to do = more to forget, and more opportunities for mistakes. The Smart Set's team had gotten smaller. They needed a site to help them do more with less.

I used a collection of off-the-shelf plugins and widgets to help. Advanced Custom Fields makes post data outside of the WordPress standard fields easy to enter and more accessible to developers. I used this to set up a new art credit with an automated link to the illustrator's webpage, as well as the post color controls.

I used Advanced Custom Fields to allow the user to input custom colors for each post. I also installed a plugin that generated color palettes based on an image, making color selection easier for non-designer days. The primary color was applied mostly as a background color: to the title block on the story page and homepage, and to elements in the post footer like the author bio and recent content. The secondary color is used mostly for the type in the title block. The fields each have a color picker, and clear instructions about where the colors will go and what the defaults are. The user can choose colors manually with the picker, or paste in the hex codes that the image palette generator provides.

Each post can now have its own identity, leading to a more varied and vibrant site with less work and less worry for those building the posts. And if it's a busy day, too busy to pick colors? The defaults look great too.

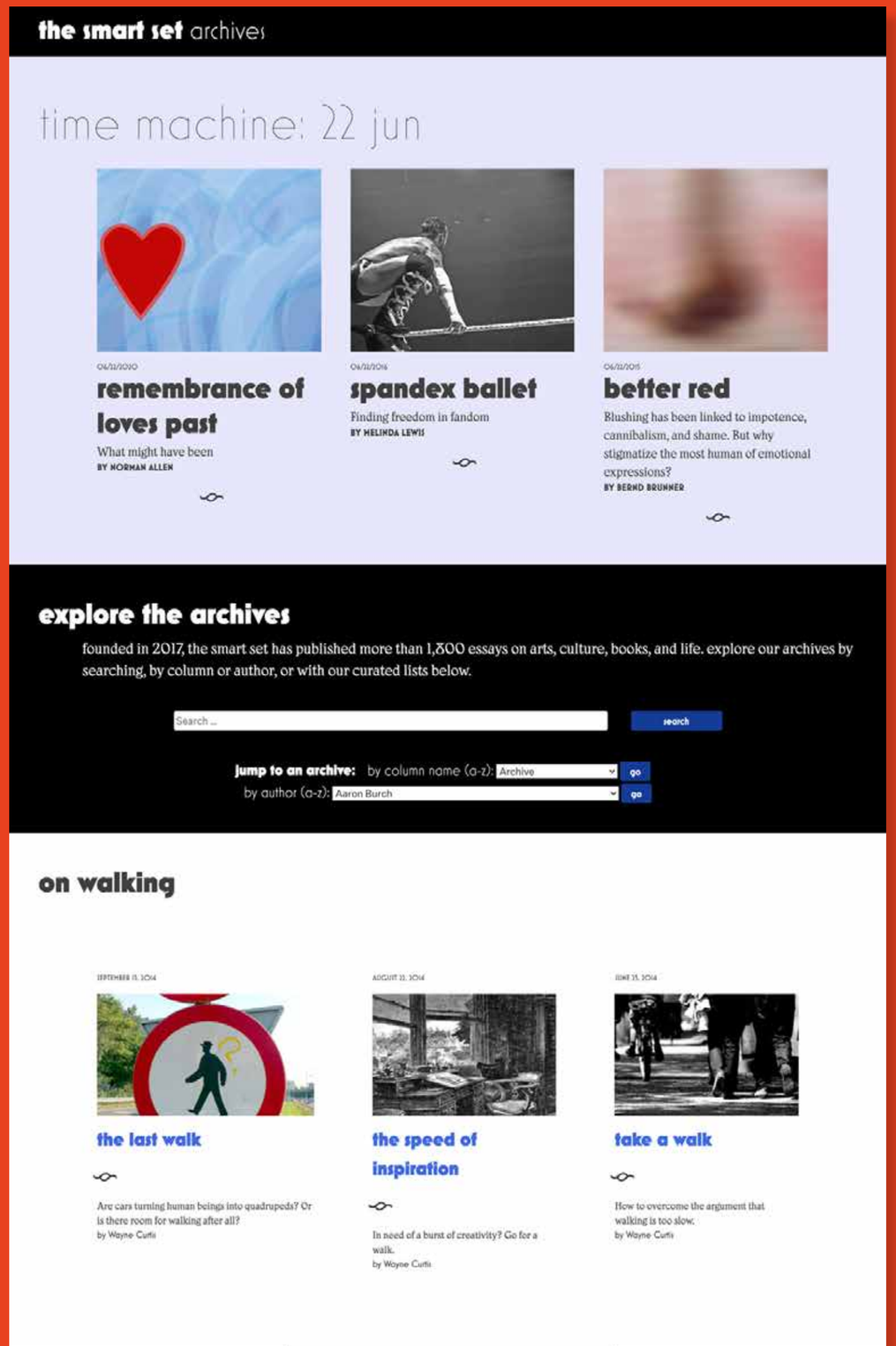
Conversion & surfacing the archives

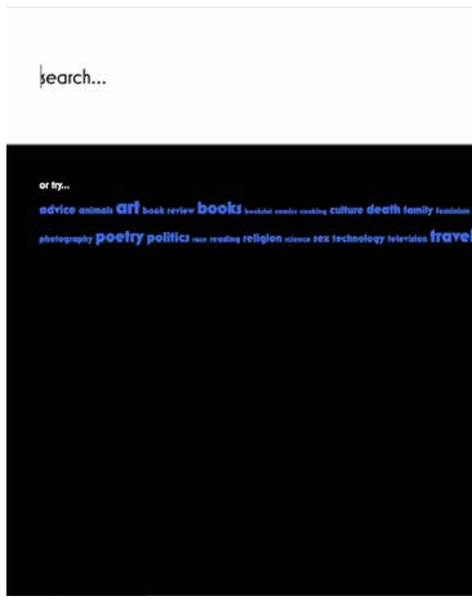
Since The Smart Set is funded by the university, our main KPIs weren't financial. Our biggest concern was overall readership, followed closely by "pages per visit." That is, success at The Smart Set meant getting people to stick around.

With more than 10 years of content and an almost entirely new team, The Smart Set needed help finding the hidden gems in its archives: stories from well-known writers, stories tied to holidays and dates, stories on evergreen subjects. I wanted to make those archives more accessible to curious readers, while also building a tool that could help the TSS staff get oriented to the site's history and find sources for social content.

The archives page uses a few widgets to make that possible. An "on this day" area auto-populates with content from today's date. A rich search area invites users to search by keyword, or to browse through dropdown lists of past columns and authors. Finally, customizable story collections created by standard WordPress widgets could highlight stories from seasonal or relevant topics. We started with summer, populated by the tag "summer," and walking, which highlighted a past column (in WP, category) on walking by a writer who had recently written for The Atlantic.

On story pages, we used widgets in the article footer to highlight related content, encourage browsing by tag, and show recent stories, in a visually attractive and distinct format that would be a bit more grabby than the standard grid of images. And in the site menu, I included a tag cloud ranked by popularity alongside the search field to suggest further areas of exploration.





WORKGENIUS: WEBSITE

A new name, a new market, a new look

workgenius.com*

New positioning for a new name

When MyLittleJob became WorkGenius in 2018, they were focusing on a new market, shedding a previous focus on student workers for a more holistic focus on workers of all ages. They wanted a brand positioning that reflected this to their enterprise-level clients. They also wanted to minimize developer time by working within their existing CMS and with small tweaks to existing elements as much as possible.

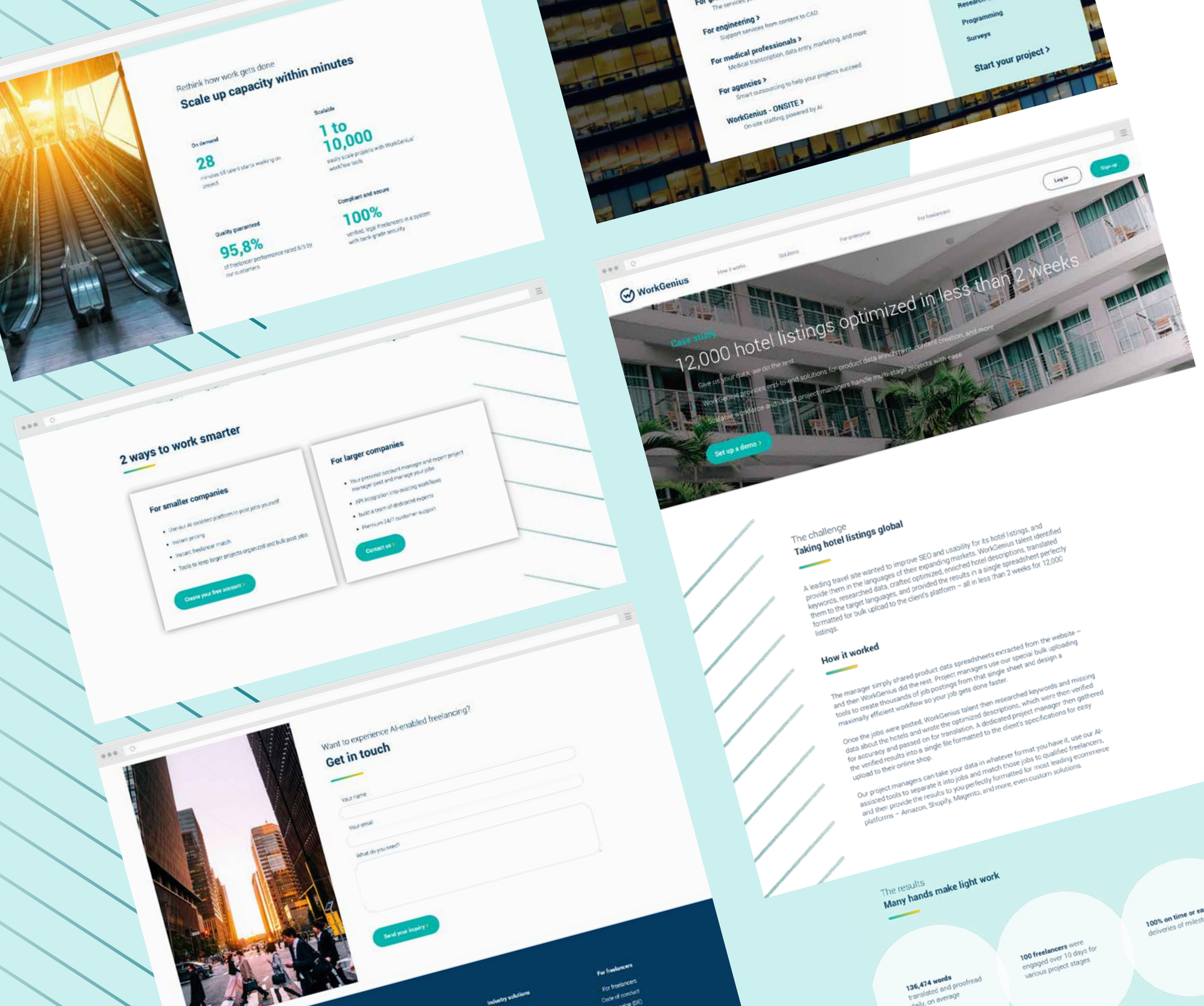
I created a bright and vibrant but still corporate design on a strong but flexible grid. I focused on creating reusable components, both layout-driven and function-driven, that could also be applied to subpages. I featured urban photography with interesting light, building a photographic vocabulary that helped provide visual interest to the pages, communicated corporate aspirations, and would be easy for the non-designers building future pages to replicate consistently.

A set of grid-based blurb units — with and without circles, with and without big numbers — and text units with an attractive headline treatment and strong visual hierarchy rounded out the modular section options, which could be used throughout the site as needed to highlight information and calls-to-action.

WHAT I DID:

Visual and UI design
English-language copy

SEE IT LIVE: WORKGENIUS.COM (ARCHIVED)



A modular experience

From left, in columns: a selection of modular site sections; the new SEO- and user-friendly mega-menu; and an example subpage.

WORKGENIUS: FREELANCER ONBOARDING

Getting, and growing, talent for a new kind of work

Web app

Helping workers get to work

Plenty of new users were signing up for WorkGenius, but very few were sticking around long enough to actually complete jobs and earn money. We thought that a better onboarding experience would help to convert more of these new users into the highly-rated workers that kept the platform going.

Our initial solution included an overhauled signup flow, a new user dashboard experience, and an updated user profile page that let users track their progress on the “career ladder.”

The stages

A streamlined signup process: collect user data only as we need it, and find ways to reward profile completion

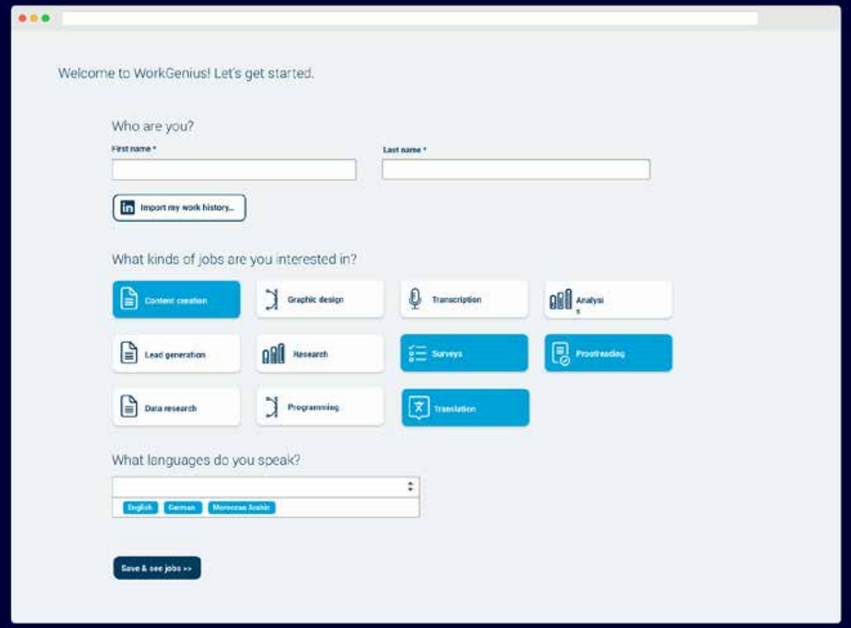
The “career ladder”: clearly explain how to progress to better quality jobs, and help to measure and celebrate growth

New paths to improve user rating: paid test jobs, using past work history, rethinking assessments

Over the course of about a month, the engineering team, head of product, and I tackled the first 2 items on the list in 2 sprints.

WHAT I DID:

UI/UX
Visual design
UX copy



Simplifying signup

The previous signup flow was one big form. Users were asked to provide all of their personal information, including validating their bank account for payment, before they even got a peek at the jobs on the platform.

Instead of soliciting all personal information up front, the new signup form asks for just enough information to set up a user account and populate the dashboard with a selection of interesting available jobs.

I designed two flows here: one that could be implemented immediately, within a single sprint, using existing components; and one for a future sprint, once additional planned features and capabilities were added to the worker app.

Above, the user flow that we implemented immediately asks for less information, and separates that information into multiple screens. The flow branches off into specific questions for professional and student freelancers after collecting universal information, such as name, location, and preferred job types. Professionals are asked to upload a resume and students are asked to validate access to a university email address.

To the left, the signup form for the future consolidates things into one large modal window. Applicants will be able to import their work history from LinkedIn or their resume, avoiding the tedious process of re-entering work experience. They'll select their work areas of interest, and, when necessary, answer additional questions like the one seen here (selecting "translation" triggers a question about languages spoken.)

Onboarding on the dashboard

WorkGenius's dashboard had a pretty common problem with its automatically-populated content: new users had none. The job matching engine used user rating to match users with jobs. New users started with a rating of 1.5 out of 5, and could increase it only by successfully completing jobs. However, the only jobs they could access were simple, low-paying jobs, mostly outside their desired specialty.

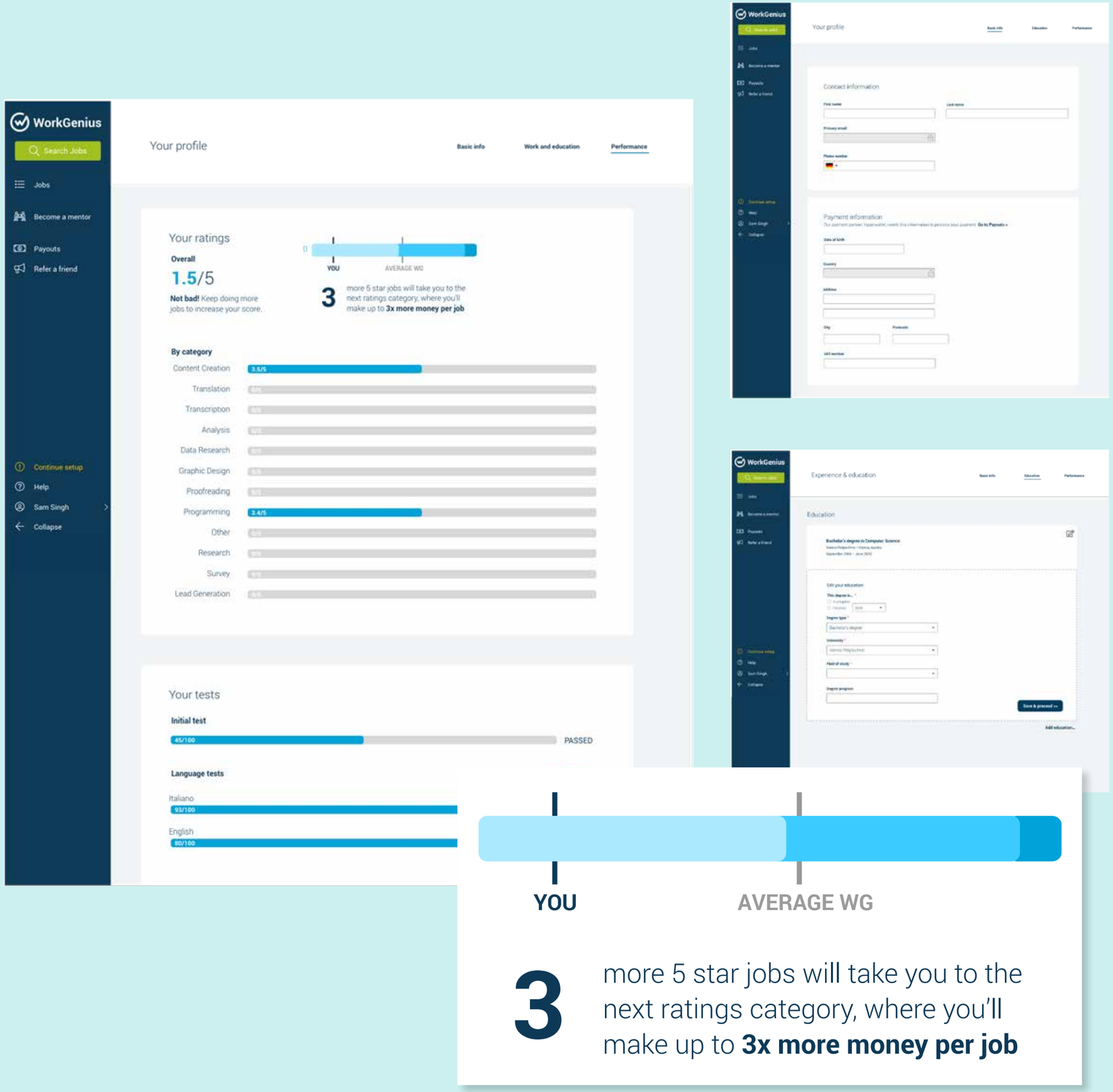
We needed to do 2 things:

- Teach users how to increase their rating, and show them why it's worth it
- Provide alternate pathways to improve ratings faster, in general and specifically for qualified professionals

To address the first point, we added a card-based welcome bar to the top of the user dashboard. It prominently featured the user rating, allowed users to set an earnings goal, and guided them through the next steps in the onboarding process, like taking assessments to qualify for certain types of jobs.

We also chose to populate the user dashboard with relevant locked jobs to show users that better work was available, and used tooltips to demonstrate what they needed to do to qualify for those jobs.

We decided that it was most important to get the user working as soon as possible, and to use that first, super easy job to help orient them to the system.



The right profile

We overhauled the profile experience to make adding information more pleasant. I divided the profile into 3 sections, covering both new and old features: basic info, education, and performance. Basic info was self-explanatory: personal information, but only the relevant stuff, including payment data. Experience allowed the user to add their work experience to rank up faster. The biggest improvement, however, came in the performance section.

The career ladder

We debated a lot of psychological strategies to motivate WorkGeniuses — comparative metrics like leaderboards and other gamification tools, for example — but really, what WorkGeniuses wanted was more money. And the best way to get more money was by accessing better-quality jobs.

The career ladder graphic is the highlight of the new “performance” section of the profile. It helps explain, in plain language and real numbers, what a freelancer needs to do next to “level up” and earn more money. We decided that the clearest representation of this was the number of five-star jobs needed to reach the next payment tier.

The performance section also allows the user to track assessments, and breaks down performance by job category to help users gauge performance and choose jobs better.

What comes next?

New ways to increase ratings, like:
Profile completion
Validated professional experience

Improved assessments (with a bigger ratings bump)

Better education: reworking web content/developing resources for freelancers that clearly explain how to succeed at WorkGenius, perhaps by tapping existing mentor network

WORKGENIUS: TASK-SPECIFIC INTERFACES

Can a better user experience improve worker output?

Web app prototyping

The task

WorkGenius wanted to do two things: reduce the amount of work for the project management team that was acting as an intermediary between client and worker; and get more accurate work from the worker. They hypothesized that part of the problem was the current workflow — heavy on spreadsheets, external files and apps, and copy-pasting.

WorkGenius already allowed users to get a job within a single click in the platform. I was asked to explore what it would look like to bring a similar mindset to actually doing the work within the platform — a file-free, task-specific workflow. For this exercise, I would focus on creating an interface specifically for writing e-commerce product descriptions.

I conducted research, then assembled feature recommendations and prototyped new interfaces for both freelancers (to do the work) and internal project managers (to approve or revise it.)

WHAT I DID:

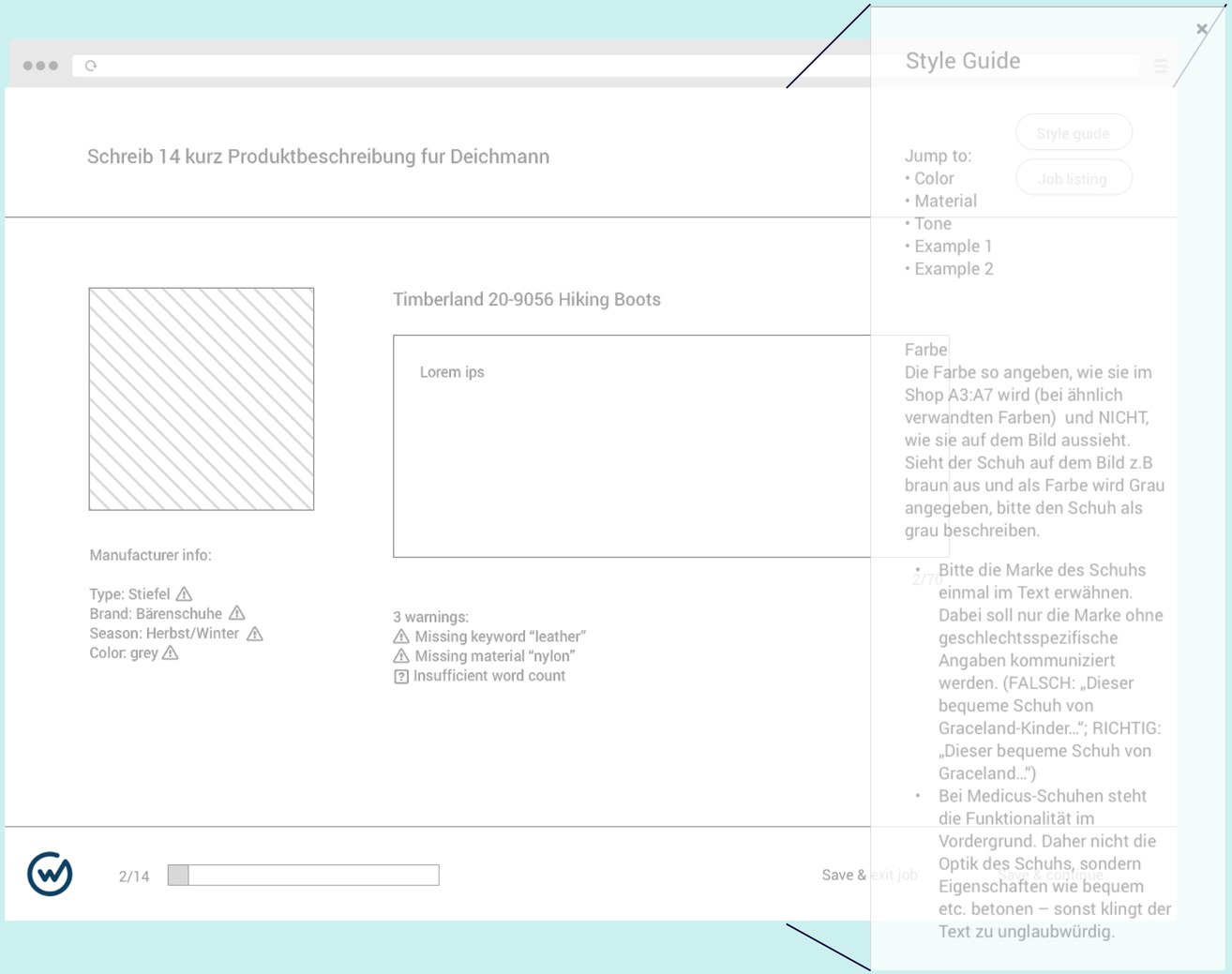
User research
Prototyping
Wireframes

Defining the problem

I read through as many real jobs as I could, choosing users with varying levels of experience and success. Some patterns began to emerge:

Clients were most likely to complain that workers weren't following instructions. They were getting results that were missing keywords, out of compliance with house styles, incorrectly formatted, or full of basic grammatical errors.

Freelancers felt that timelines were tight, and jobs were poorly defined. They also had trouble reaching Work Genius staff or clients directly when they had questions, which could result in missed deadlines and being banned from the platform, even when making a good-faith effort to do the work.



The big ideas

The user research lead me to a few clear defining principals and goals:

Minimize distractions: one task, one screen.

Maximalize context: make product photos, keywords, and job ad/further instructions easily accessible from the work area.

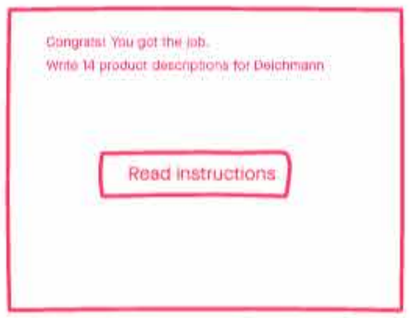
Leverage automation where we can: auto-validation of defined metrics like keyword usage and word count, integrated spell check.

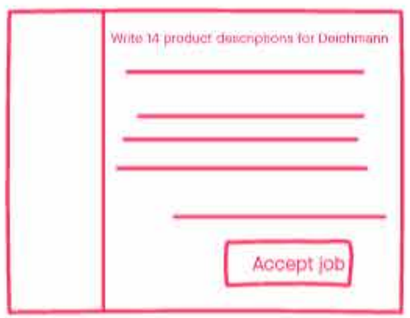
Teach workers how to succeed: workers want to do good work, but they aren’t mind readers. They can’t follow instructions that don’t exist, or write in an unfamiliar format without examples of that format.

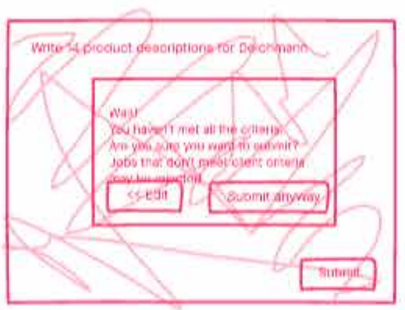
Suggested workflow

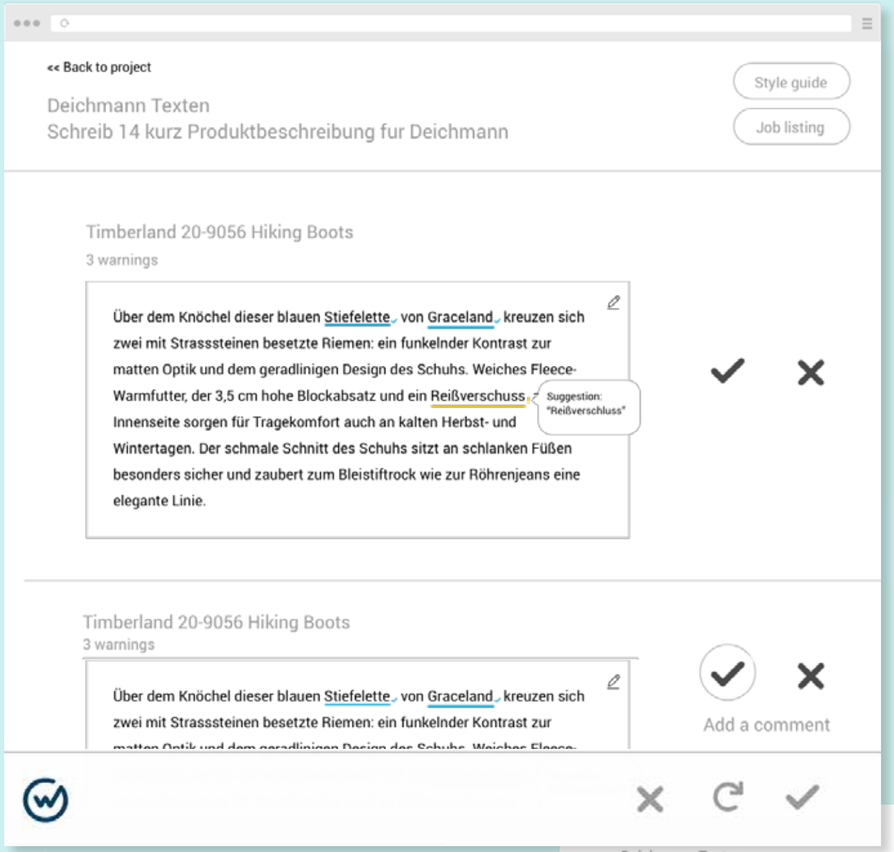
I pitched a focused, contextual writing environment that mimicked the look of a product page on a website. The freelancer would be able to write surrounded by the criteria they needed to include. The writing area would use spell check and auto-validate key metrics, giving warnings for things like missing keywords.

Writing guidelines from the client – things like house styles on brand usage, verb tense, noun count, colors, etc. – would be grouped into a new area called the “style guide,” accessible with a single click as a modal sidebar on each screen. Freelancers could also access the job listing/description the same way.

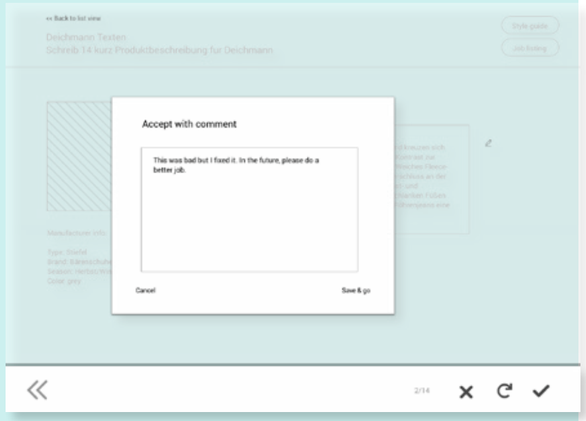




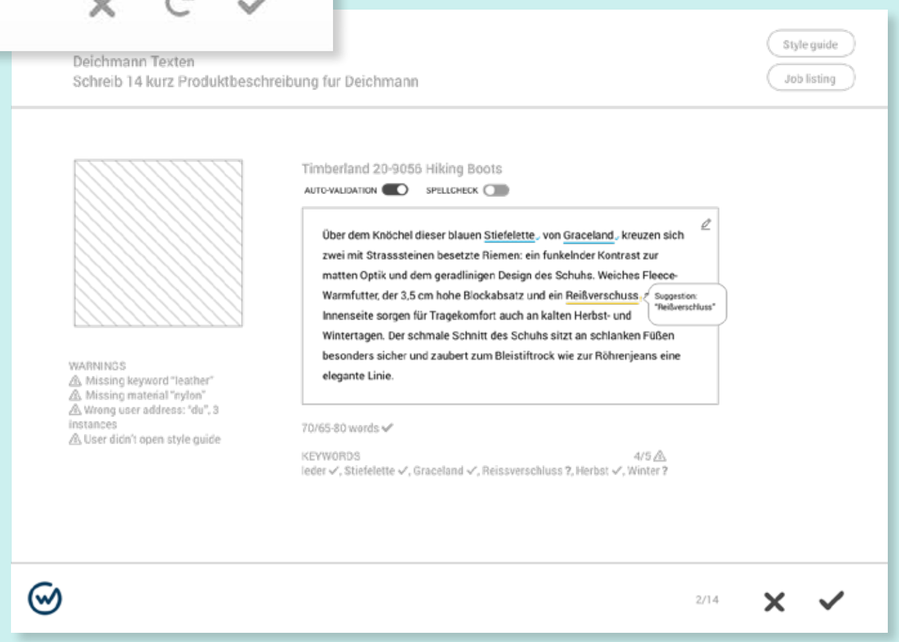




List view



Accept/reject/revise whole project with project-wide comment



Single view with additional controls for project management

Extending the system

After the head of product showed the proposed interface around, he came back with a new question. What would the interface look like for the internal WorkGenius project managers? They needed to be able to accept or reject results quickly, and with fewer clicks.

I reworked the interface to allow the project managers to access the new features and focused work mode while also allowing for a list mode for batch approvals. PMs also needed to evaluate results against the style guide and job description, and could benefit from auto-validation and spellcheck (with an on-off switch.) Also, having access to the same information in multiple views can help prevent change blindness — something that anyone responsible for proofreading would agree is crucial.

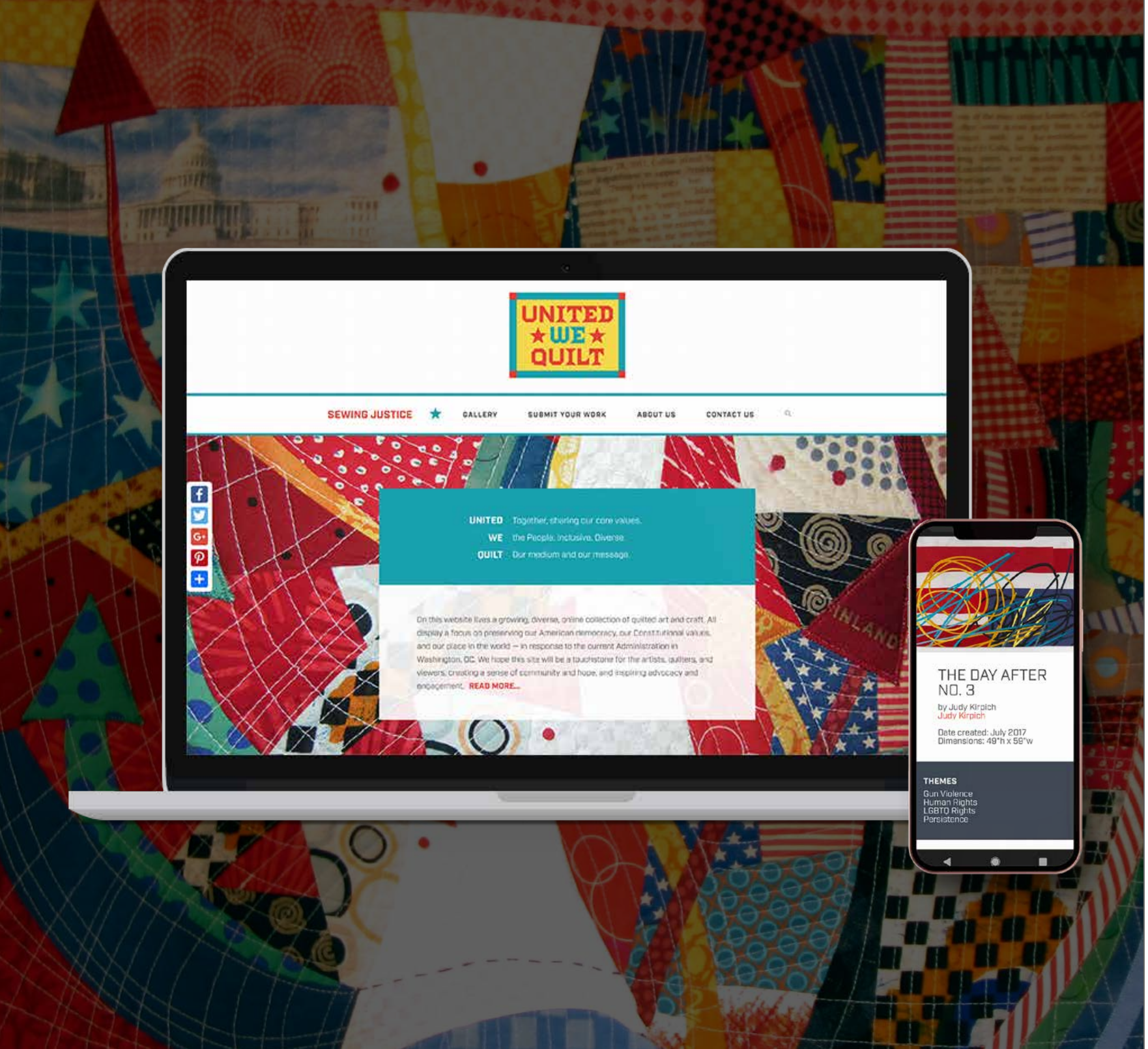
The conclusion

It was clear that, before WorkGenius could see results from this project, it would also have to improve a number of other systems. Implementing this workflow would also involve improving how job postings are generated, how workers are onboarded, and how internal tools for project management work. Many of these changes were already planned or in progress, but the research process for this project helped highlight ways to make those improvements, too.

UNITED WE QUILT

An online exhibition of activist quilting

unitedwequilt.com



Sewing resistance

United We Quilt is an online gallery of protest quilts that was open to submissions between 2017 and 2020. The site remains online as a record, but submissions were closed in early 2021.

Starting with wireframes and mood boards, I built a responsive WordPress site with an integrated content submission form and workflow, and a distinctive visual identity that drew from the rich visual history of American quilting.

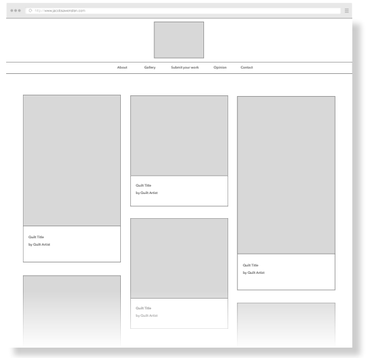
The site now features more than 200 submitted artworks in an attractive gallery commemorating a memorable time in U.S. history.

WHAT I DID:

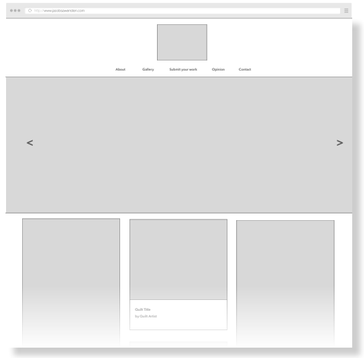
UI/UX and visual design
WordPress theme development
Training and ongoing support

SEE IT LIVE: UNITEDWEQUILT.COM

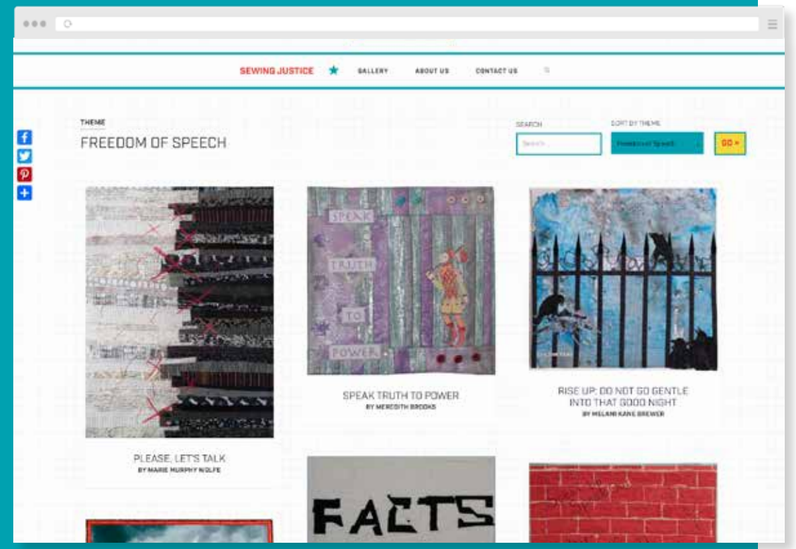
SITE WIREFRAMES: DETAIL/OPTIONS, 2

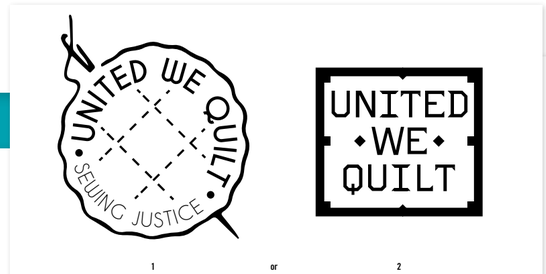


2: HOME OR GALLERY

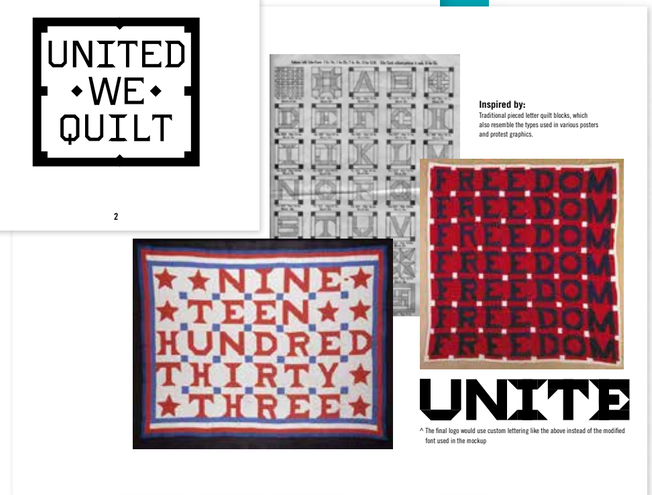


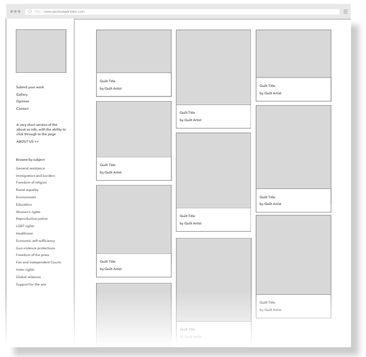
2: HOME WITH OPTIONAL SLIDESHOW/FEATURED AREA





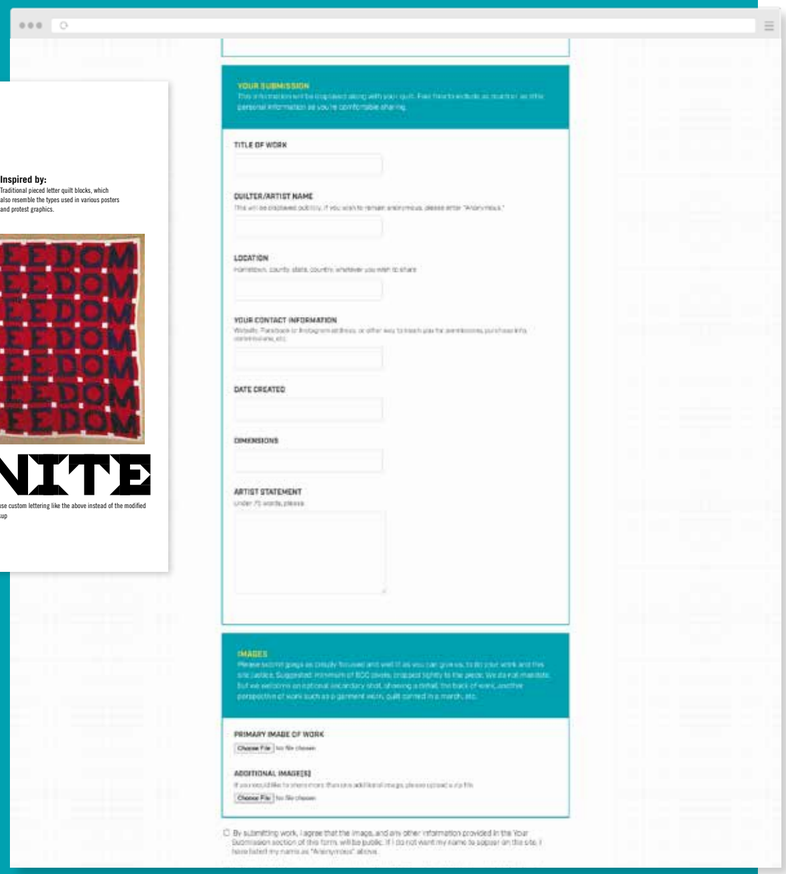
1 or 2





1: HOME OR GALLERY

1: HOME WITH OPTIONAL SLIDESHOW/FEATURED AREA



The process

I pitched the client with 2 sets of wireframes and 2 visual design concepts. She chose a simple masonry grid gallery with a large feature image, and a visual design drawn from historic typographical block quilts. Then, I worked through the logo design, ending with a final logo and color scheme. I iterated through site designs in Sketch, then began building the site into an existing WordPress theme, tweaking as I went in the browser.

Pages & workflow

The gallery allows the viewer to browse quilts page-by-page, search, or browse by theme. Pagination helps to keep the large gallery manageable.

The submission form was designed to be clear and specific. Requirements specified as needed. The form results would be emailed to the site's content team, who would screen and post the content. To save labor, content auto-posted to Facebook upon publication.

ARTSPOTTING

What if an art guidebook was more than a book?

Mobile app

Location-specific reading

Artspotting had dual purposes: as an experiment in the form of the book, and a monetization effort for the Center for Cultural Outreach at Drexel University/Smart Set Press.

Smart Set Press was the “first all-digital university press.” We wanted to capitalize on the audience of our online publications (The Smart Set, and several others no longer online) and supplement their funding by selling e-books. The press had already created several traditional e-books, both full-length and Kindle Singles-style, but Artspotting, a guide to Philadelphia public art, was a chance to try something different.

We decided to create a guidebook app that revealed its content as you moved through the world. Each essay would unlock when you first came into the vicinity of the piece of art in question. Then, the essay could guide the user’s experience of that artwork — right in front of it.

The app would help the user to discover art you may have missed in places you already go: on your commute, on your running trail, and around other points of interest. And by doing so, we hoped that it would build the habits of better looking, making it easier to begin to notice and appreciate art and the unexpected every day.

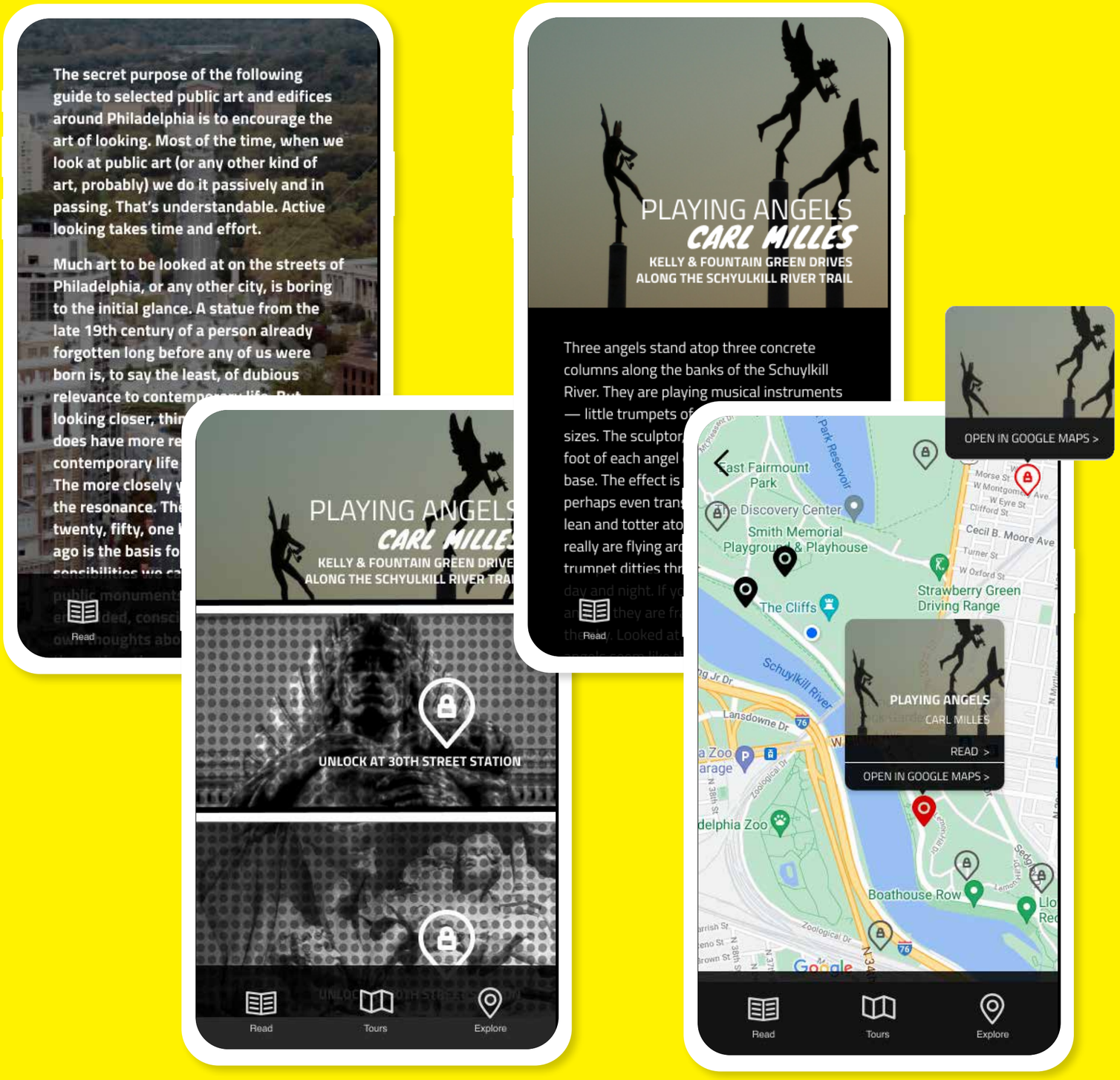
Location-specific challenges

Part of what sparked the idea for this app was one of many revelations that Google was tracking users more than users had realized. I wondered if there was a way to access and use this information openly and to less nefarious ends. Thankfully, it turns out that there is no API providing access to a user’s full location history — but this meant that our user would be starting out with an app with only locked content.

There was another technical challenge with location: battery life. In that generation of devices, location-tracking was still very battery-intensive, but in order to cultivate a feeling of spontaneous discovery, we felt that tracking would need to be running pretty much constantly. We couldn’t show a user art along their commute or errands if we didn’t know where they were, and it seemed that very few people would remember to turn their art app along with their playlist when they went for a run. We hoped that building a functional prototype would allow us to test through these ideas to find the optimal level of user tracking needed to make the app fun and useful.

WHAT I DID

Product design
UI/UX design
Prototype development with PhoneGap/Cordova



Building the experience

The app opens with an introductory essay, which orients the user to both the app and the philosophy and voice of the book.

The listing page shows which points of interest are locked or unlocked. An unlocked point, when clicked, takes you directly to the relevant story page. The story page simply provides a good reading experience for the essay, with easy-to-read, attractive typography, one or more photos, and a map. Locked points show only an obscured photo and a general description of the location. When clicked, the tile takes you to the location on the map.

The map view shows the user's location and the book's points of interest, with different icons and behavior for locked and unlocked points. A generously-sized geofence unlocks points when the user passes nearby. A locked point, on click, shows only the photo and a button to get Google Maps directions. An unlocked point also shows the title, author, and a link to the essay.

I liked having the locked points obscure information as a teaser, but I also wanted to make sure I was giving the user enough information to find the right piece of art or plan a journey.

The outcome

I built an iOS prototype using PhoneGap, a library designed to help build native apps from traditional websites. We had hoped that this would be not just stable enough to refine the outstanding questions about location tracking, but to also possibly serve as a launchable MVP.

I was able to build the geofenced unlocking feature, but what the process really showed was that we definitely needed to work with a more experienced app developer. The search began, but with budget cuts and staff changes in the new fiscal year, Artspotting the app was no longer feasible.

I wonder occasionally if, with the battery life issues largely resolved in contemporary smartphones, Artspotting would work better today. But the privacy concerns still stand: how much tracking would a user be willing to accept for art? I think with a bit more testing, we might have figured it out.