DESIGNING POSTERS

In this case study, a designer explores six approaches to one project: an event poster.

By Nigel French

Back in the day, if you had an event to announce, a product to sell, or a cause to proclaim, you needed a poster. Today, a poster may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you have something to advertise, but they're still an important part of any advertising campaign.

Creating a poster appears deceptively simple. With relatively few elements—the title of the event, the date and location, some contact information, and a graphic—it should surely be a straightforward assignment. In practice, however, with so much space for text and pictures, it can be difficult to know where to start. The common challenge of publication design—having to fit too much into too small a space—is turned on its head, and you have a vast expanse of paper and relatively little content to fill it.

The near limitless number of possible solutions can be as paralysing as it is liberating. For this reason, it helps to have a methodology—something to hang your ideas on. For me, it's taking an historical approach. The rich history of poster design is well documented in books and to a lesser extent on the Web. Studying past examples is a great springboard

for ideas. Previous generations, though they worked with pens and paper, glue and scissors, approached the challenge of a poster in much the same way as we do today.

I decided to design my poster in a range of historical design styles, inspired by the main attributes of such styles but not constrained by a need to reproduce them too faithfully. But where would I find the posters' content?

While there's value in fictitious assignments, nothing gets me going like a real project. So I asked David Blatner how he'd feel about me designing a series of posters for the forthcoming Print and ePublishing conference in San Francisco. He agreed and I had my case study. For each example, I used the same content, though with some variation—in those that call for a minimalist approach, I left out things like the list of speakers and sponsors, for example.

When it comes to posters, bigger is better, but there are practical limitations. For this reason, I used a Tabloid (11×17 inches or 279×432 mm) sheet. Anything smaller is a flyer, anything bigger is cost-prohibitive and impractical to print. If this were this for a European client, I'd use the international

paper equivalent, A3 (11.7×16.5 inches, or 297×420 mm). As well as aesthetics, I chose my designs for how well they leant themselves to being created in InDesign. I also used Photoshop and Illustrator, and to a lesser extent Bridge, but always came back to InDesign as the hub.

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Victorian Circus

I found it helpful to name my different approaches. As well as distinguishing them, the names also let me focus on what they're about. Let's go through them in historical order, starting with what I refer to as the "Victorian Circus poster".

My inspiration is the same poster that inspired John Lennon to write "Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite!" on the Sergeant Pepper album. Working in this style is very forgiving because you can forget rules about keeping it simple and limiting the number of typefaces. In this case, more is more: Use lots of typefaces in a variety of sizes. I worked with the Adobe woodtypes Poplar and Birch, as well as Clarendon, an 19th century slab serif, and Bodoni Poster. I scanned a suitably kitschy image from an old clip art book and threw in lots of bold lines, dingbats, and ornaments. The custom page size (8.5x17 inches) approximates the aspect ratio of the original.

To make the border, I started out with a glyph from the Adobe Woodtype ornaments set. While these glyphs were designed for borders, it's easier to make a pattern brush in Illustrator, and that's what I did, copying the tile of the original pattern and combining it with a corner tile for a border that will adapt to any size. For tips on using Illustrator this way, see http://adobe.ly/z2zAbZ and http://adobe.ly/xX908Q.
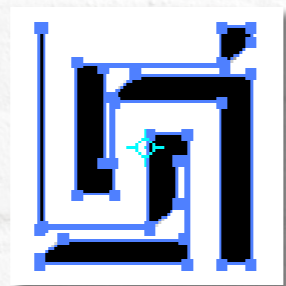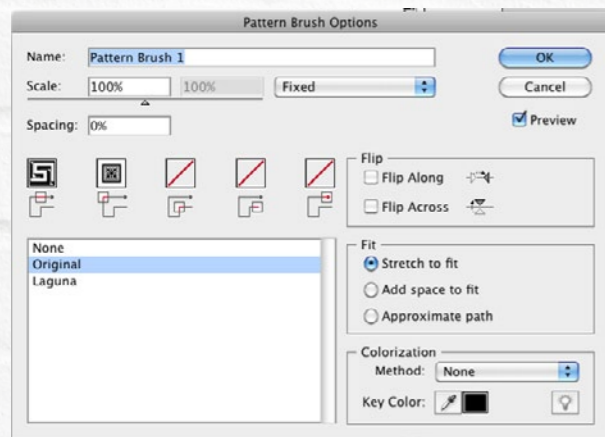

Figure 2: Creating a pattern brush to apply in Illustrator to the poster border.

Inspiration

Constructivist/Bauhaus Poster

My second version is a hybrid Constructivist/Bauhaus approach: lots of bold typography, reds and blacks, and diagonals. I used the abstraction of the letter P as both diagonal and circular shape around which to orient the type. Originally, I'd chosen a Futura P because of its geometric qualities, but the bowl of the letter wasn't quite the perfect circle I was after. So I made my own character using InDesign's shape tools and then, using the Type on a Path tool, ranged the text around the circle.

For added visual interest I also incorporated some transparency and a Gradient Feather to the "PePCon" text frame. This may be mixing my design metaphors a bit, but the rules are mine to break. The typeface (P22 Bayer) is based on Herbert Bayer's universal, a unicase typeface designed by the Bauhaus director of printing and advertising between 1925 to 1930.

Constructivist and Bauhaus stylings are often emulated for two reasons: They look good and they're easy. In the 1920s, rotated sans serif type was technically challenging and revolutionary; today it's perhaps become a cliché or pastiche, but it's still an effective way of creating tension on your page. I resisted the urge to flip any Rs or Ns to make things look more "Russian."
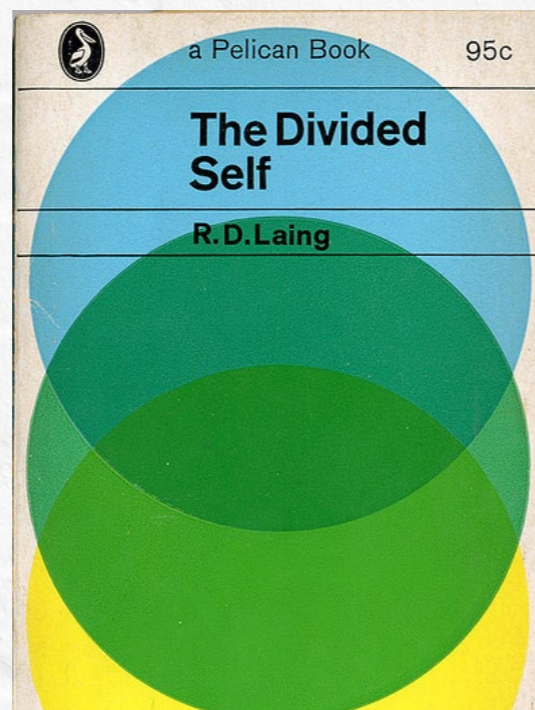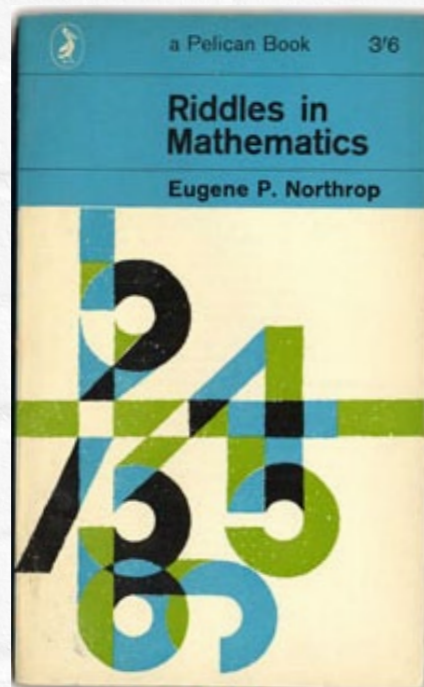
Inspiration
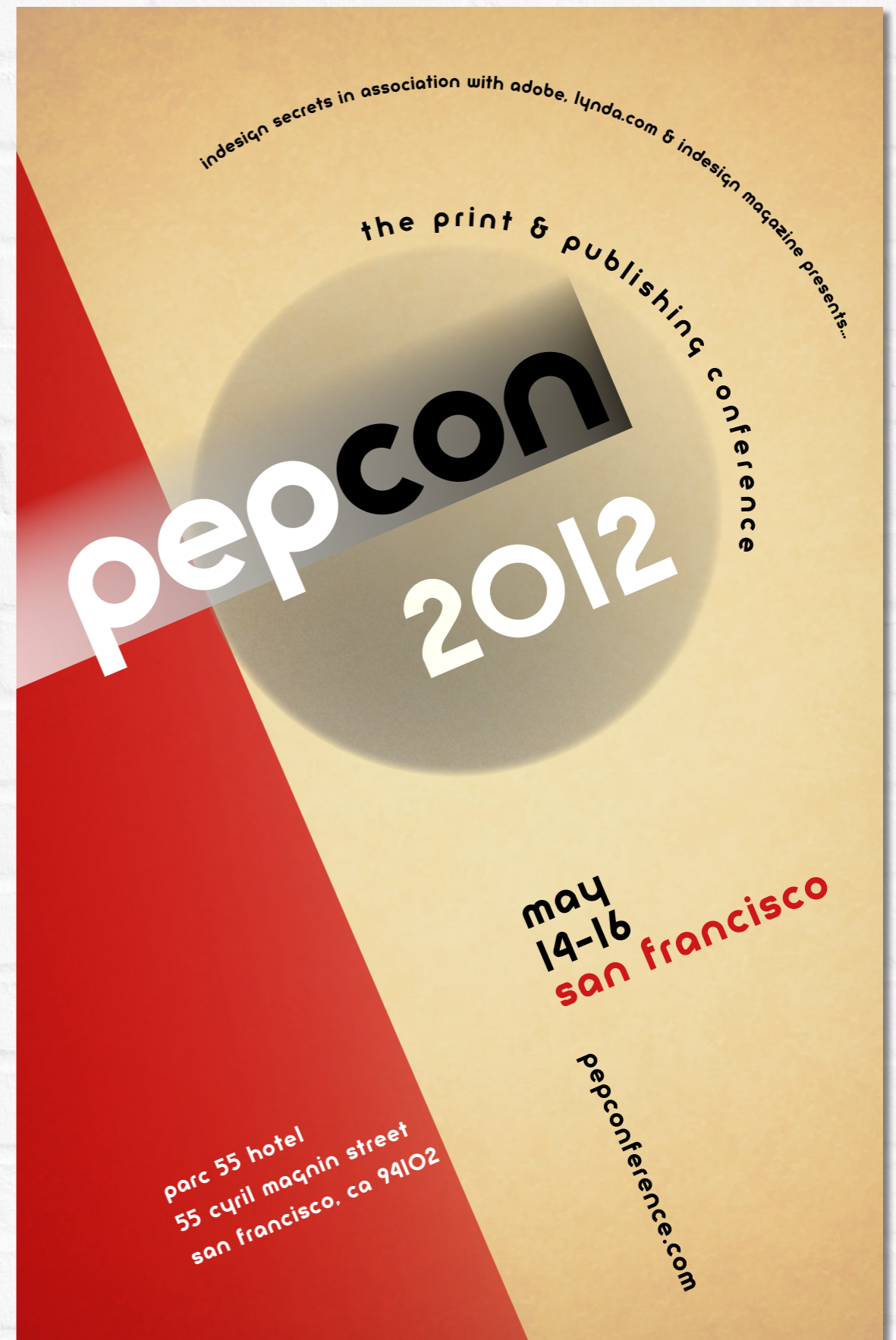
Pelican Text Book Poster

My next version I've dubbed the "Pelican text book". Reminiscent of a 1960s or '70s sociology textbook, it features sans serif type and simple geometric designs.

Initially, I was experimenting with the Transform Live effect in Illustrator to generate repeating geometric designs inspired by the Spirograph, the children's toy popular in the 1960s and '70s. Ultimately, I kept things simple, and the "snowflakes" are nothing more than rotated rectangles set to a blending mode of Multiply or Screen (set in the Effects panel) to create an interaction of the overlapping shapes. One features the "print" colors cyan, magenta, and yellow, the other the "screen" colors red, green, blue, affirming the dual print and screen design aspects of the conference. I reduced the tint of the color to 75% because the colors were too saturated at full strength. The typeface is Helvetica—what else?

Inspiration

the print &
epublishing
conference

san francisco
may 14-16

parc 55 hotel
55 cyril magnin st
san francisco 94102
pepconference.com

pepcon 2012

Common Elements

All the posters are designed on a grid. I started with margins set to zero, then used the **Layout** > **Create Guide** command to divide the page into a framework of grid fields. Because a tabloid page has a ratio of approximately 1:1.5, by dividing the page into 24 rows and 16 columns, I generated grid fields that are (almost) square, and there are enough fields to allow flexibility in terms of placement of elements.

Superimposed on this framework, and on an independent layer with guides of a different color (**Layout** > **Ruler Guides**), I also divided the page into thirds. This allowed me to apply the photographic rule of thirds, where possible placing important elements of the design at the points of intersection.

If all this sounds overcomplicated, keep in mind that what works for one designer may not work for another. The grid gives me the confidence to position elements on the page knowing that they relate, in some way, to other elements on the page. A tabloid-size sheet is a big expanse of paper, and I think the grid helps give it meaning. But if the grid becomes too restrictive, I break it.

Another feature common to the designs is the use of layers. This is important when different elements overlap background fields of color and texture. The ability to lock and unlock layers and to hide and show layers selectively is the best preventative medicine for the frustration of not being able to select the content you want to select. Naming the layers is a good idea, too.
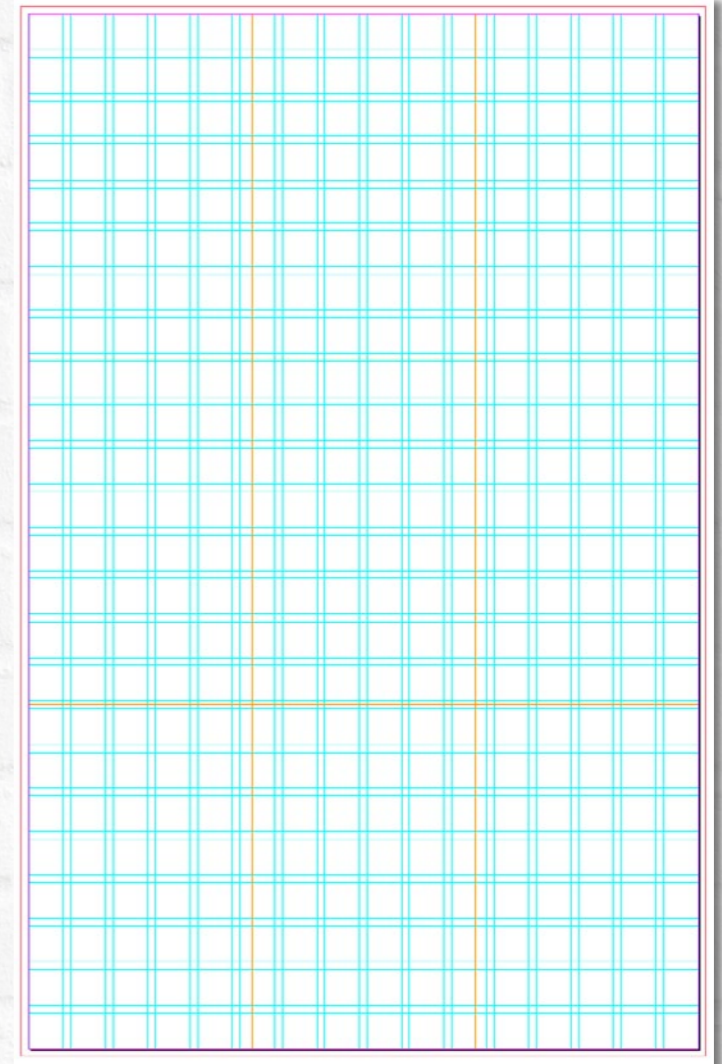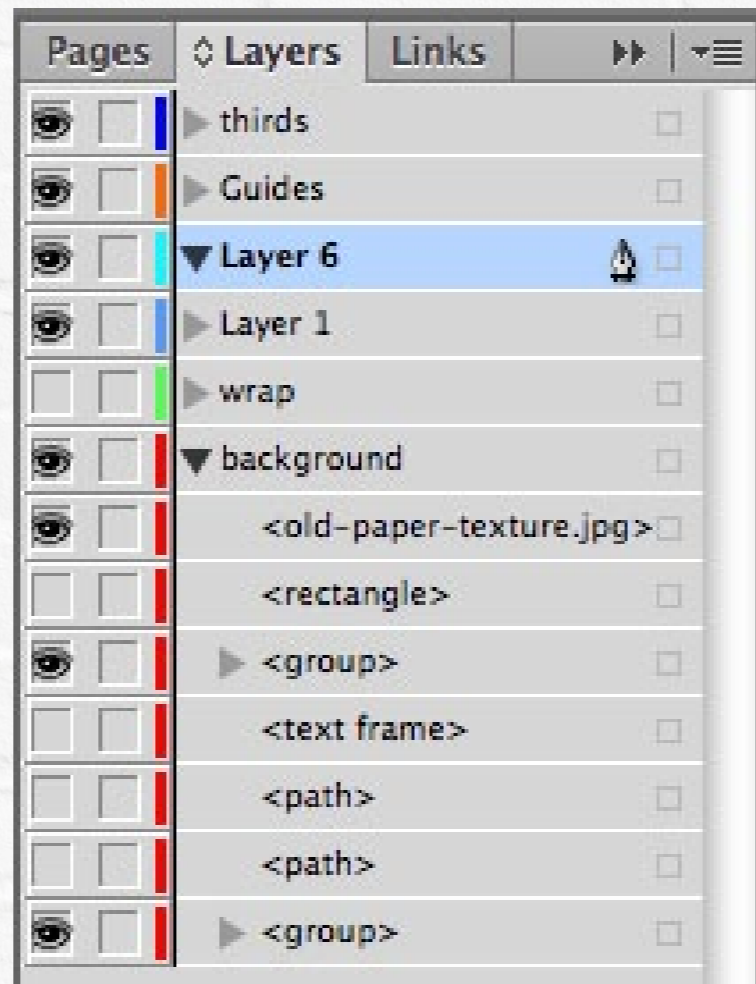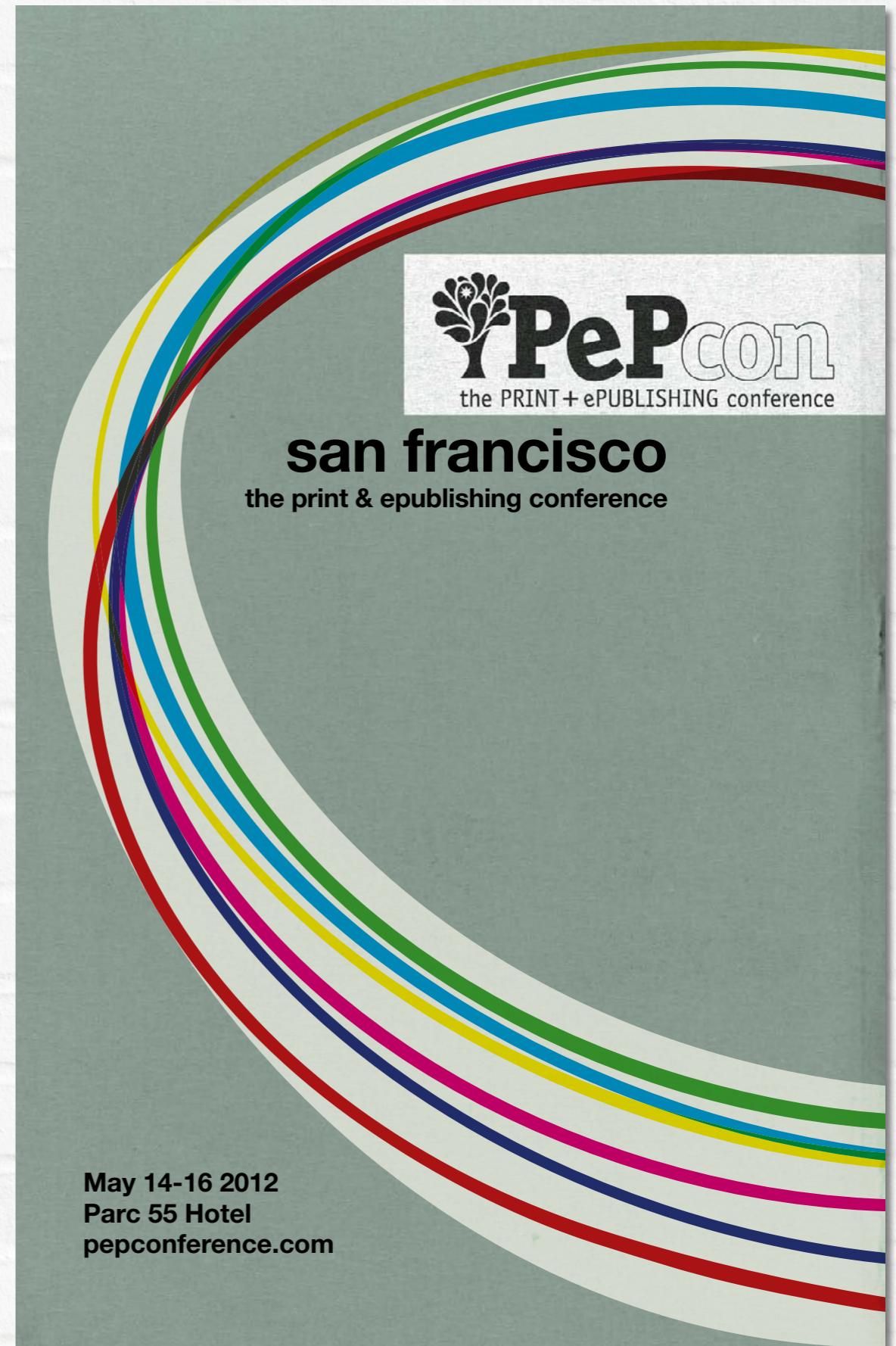
A 16 x 24 grid with rule of thirds guides (orange) added on a separate layer.

Working with Layers allows me to organize content so that it's easier to access as well as experiment with alternate versions—note the hidden layers in this screenshot.

Scooter Manual Poster

The next design, which I refer to as the "Scooter manual," is as minimalist as the Pelican text book poster. While no traces of scooter remain, the design was inspired by a Pirelli scooter manual. As well as the simplicity of the design, what attracted me about this style is how well it lends itself to the vector tools in InDesign and Illustrator, making it perfect for someone like myself who can't really draw. The design is nothing more than a series of overlapping ellipses, stroked with "print" and "web" colors and set to the Multiply blend mode so that their colors interact. Once I had these shapes in place, I copied and pasted them into Illustrator, where I used the Width Tool to vary the stroke widths. Finally, I pasted the result back into InDesign.

Inspiration

PeP con
the PRINT + ePUBLISHING conference

san francisco
the print & epublishing conference

**May 14-16 2012
Parc 55 Hotel
pepconference.com**

Postmodern Poster

For my "postmodern" design, I used the cover of David Carson's *The End of Print* as my template, dividing my page into similarly sized and colored segments, which incidentally corresponded to my rule of thirds grid. I flipped and reversed copies of some of the text and combined a scanned page from a book (*Real World Adobe InDesign CS4* by Ole Kvern and David Blatner) to both add texture and as an inside joke. The type is Matrix, designed in 1986 by cofounder of *Emigré* magazine, Zuzanna Licko, and emblematic of that period in design.

Texture brings this poster to life. All the designs look rather sterile on the bright white background of an InDesign page. Not until the addition of a textured background do they start to look credible.

To apply the texture, I grouped the rectangles of the background, pasted them into Photoshop, and combined them with my photograph of a crumbling wall. I recommend building your own texture collection, taking photos of any interesting texture you see. I use Lightroom to manage my images and have Collections for things like textures and sky. You can do the same thing with a Smart Collection in Bridge.

While there are obviously more options in Photoshop, you can do a certain amount of "texturizing" in InDesign. For example, with the Constructivist example, I added a vignette to the background by applying an Inner Glow. I also added Noise to the sphere in this way.

Inspiration
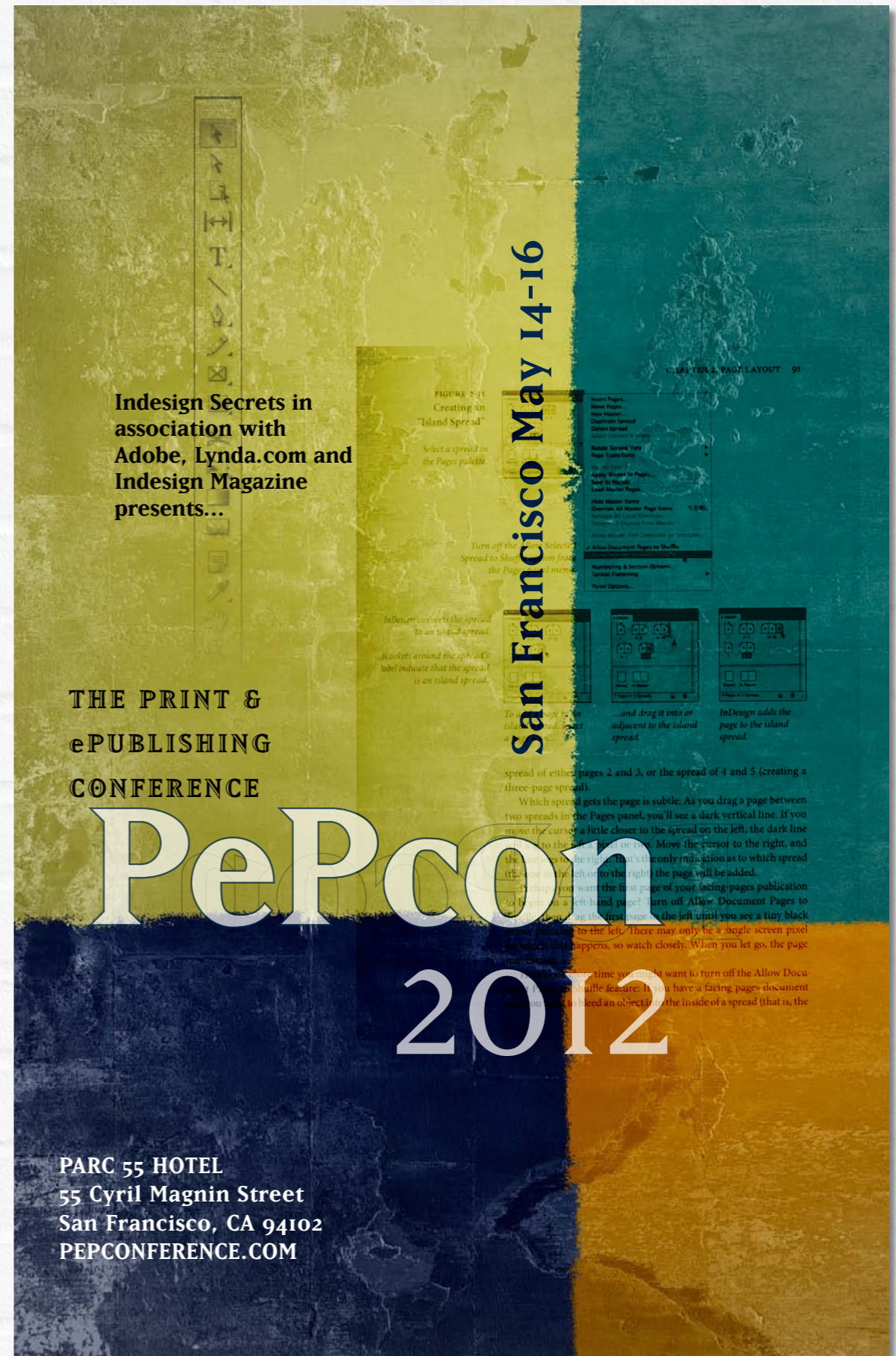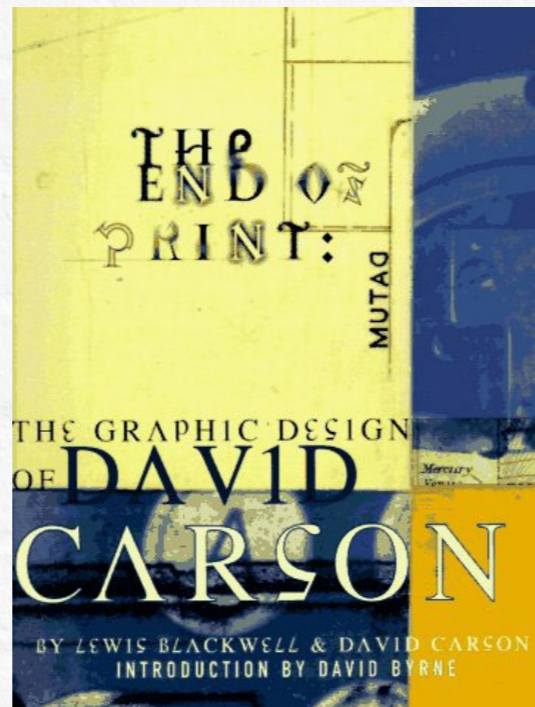
Contemporary Posters

After experimenting with different design styles—including some tangents I'm too embarrassed to share with you—I thought I'd better also include a more "contemporary" solution, which is where my last two versions come in. Using the PePcon "tree" logo as a background texture gives visual interest to what a client might otherwise consider empty space. Designating a single row of white space above this gives the illusion of greater height, and having the curved shapes of the background peak out over the top helps tie the different elements together. Once again, the grid aids me in making confident decisions about the use of white space, running the list of speakers off center. (I prefer to avoid symmetry or centered elements because with equal amounts of white space either side they can look static).

The version with the black background is a variant of this design. It incorporates the sunflower picture, which is an idea that wasn't really working, but one that I couldn't fully relinquish. Here, I've placed a grayscale image, copied and pasted in place three times for a total of four images, each colored with a different process color. (You can color a grayscale image by first selecting it inside its frame.) The picture frames are cropped to give the effect of four equal quadrants.

Click for alternate version

Final Words of Advice

If I had to boil my advice down to a few points, they are these: Work with a grid but don't be afraid to break it. Use Layers to order your content. Most importantly, before you even open InDesign, study books and websites and draw thumbnail sketches. Know where you're going before you sit down at the computer; time spent in researching your topic will be repaid in the form of much better end result.

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Nigel French is a graphic designer, photographer, author, and teacher living in Brighton, UK. Between 1991 and 2001 Nigel operated Small World Productions, a graphic design firm in San Francisco. In 2001 he became the director of the Graphic and Interactive Design program at University of California Berkeley Extension. He is the author of InDesign Type and Photoshop Unmasked, both from Adobe Press. Nigel travels internationally teaching InDesign, Photoshop, Lightroom, and design classes. And yes, he will be speaking at PEPCON this year.