Ask the Expert

AREN HOWELL, GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Aren Howell has been a graphic designer for more than 12 years, designing book covers, marketing materials, and "just about anything you can imagine," for publishers and other companies all over the country. Aren has also been a contributing author to two Photoshop books, and her work has been recognized in *Print*'s Regional Design Annual, the American Advertising Awards, Bookbuilders West Book Show, Independent Publishers Book Awards, and the American Graphic Design Awards. I wanted to ask Aren about her love of page design and her insight on what goes into an effective page design.

Q *What do you love about page design?*

A Page design is a challenge. It takes a lot of preparation of your subject matter to figure out what you think is the most important. I think that's the biggest challenge: to figure out what you really want to show your reader and what's just secondary.

Q *How long have you been a designer?*

A I have degrees in design and photography. There are many similarities between cover design and good photography—you think about how to break up space and use foreground and background. I was one of those kids who just knew what they were going to do. Not long ago, I was pulling some old pictures for a school project and going through art projects my grandmother had saved… I got first place in the poster contest… I had drawn an ambulance with the typography all laid out… and my type had serifs on it! Both my parents are very artistic and I used to watch my dad hand-letter signs for

"Every page has a most important element. The challenge is to find it and design the page around what's going to get the most attention."

people. I think that's how I learned to lay type out on the page.

Q *What process do you go through when you design a new project?*

A For me, the process is about preparation. Most of my work is book cover design, which is not unlike designing scrapbooking pages. You have only a quick second to catch your reader's attention. I begin with whatever's most important—words or an image—and place it on the cover in the size I want. Then I take my hierarchy of information and add other elements. I tend to design around what's going to get the most attention.
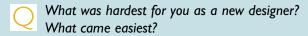
Q *Where do you get your inspiration?*

A I keep a cool designs file with layouts I really like. I also spend a lot of time in the bookstores to see what's going on in design. I tend to spend a lot of time in really obscure sections, maybe at the novel covers. Novels are so competitive—their cover designs tend to be cutting-edge. It's helpful to see how other designers put things on the page and use the space available to them.

Q *What do you think is the most important element on the page?*

A In every project, there is always a most important element. It might be your photograph—it might be the text. Or if you have two things that are very close in

importance, sometimes you can join them and make them one. For example, say you have a photo that is the key to your page, but without the text, you don't understand the photograph. To solve this, you can use your image editor to integrate the text into the image so that parts of the image show through the text. That way, the elements become one piece… the eye picks up both at one glance.

Q *What was hardest for you as a new designer? What came easiest?*

A The hardest thing for me was creating designs that appealed to people who weren't like me. I needed to learn to step into someone else's shoes and ask myself what was going to keep them in the page. Typography comes easiest to me. It's something I really love. There's an art to it, knowing when to use a simple readable font and when to push the envelope using a display face.

Q *What words of advice would you give someone who is preparing to design her first scrapbook page?*

A Have fun! And also, pick out the thing that's most important and make your other layers secondary. Throw in something unexpected: follow all the rules of page layout, but then break one. You might put type at a little angle every now and then. Put a picture you'd expect to see in color in black and white. Do something that stands out from the ordinary.

Aren's Favorite Scrapbook Page: The collage is created with memorabilia that my grandfather had from his service in the Navy in World War II. The photos are ones that he had taken in his travels and the portrait in the lower right is actually my grandparents' wedding portrait. It was a wonderful piece to work on and very exciting to listen to my grandpa talk about the places that he had been and all of his sailor friends whom he could still name by name. I only wish that I'd had a tape recorder or had taken notes as he told stories. My grandpa has since passed away so this particular piece is very dear to me.

Thanks, Aren, for sharing your experience, inspiration, and insight with us.