

FLUID INSIGHT

Designing Coherence



09 | 2025

Why Design Language Systems Still Matter

In 2025 it might feel redundant to talk about Design Language Systems (DLS). Most teams know the term, and nearly every product organization claims to have a “design system” in place. Yet many of those systems stall out as static libraries or ornamental style guides. They document components but fail to create real coherence across touchpoints, teams, and time.

The common missteps are telling:

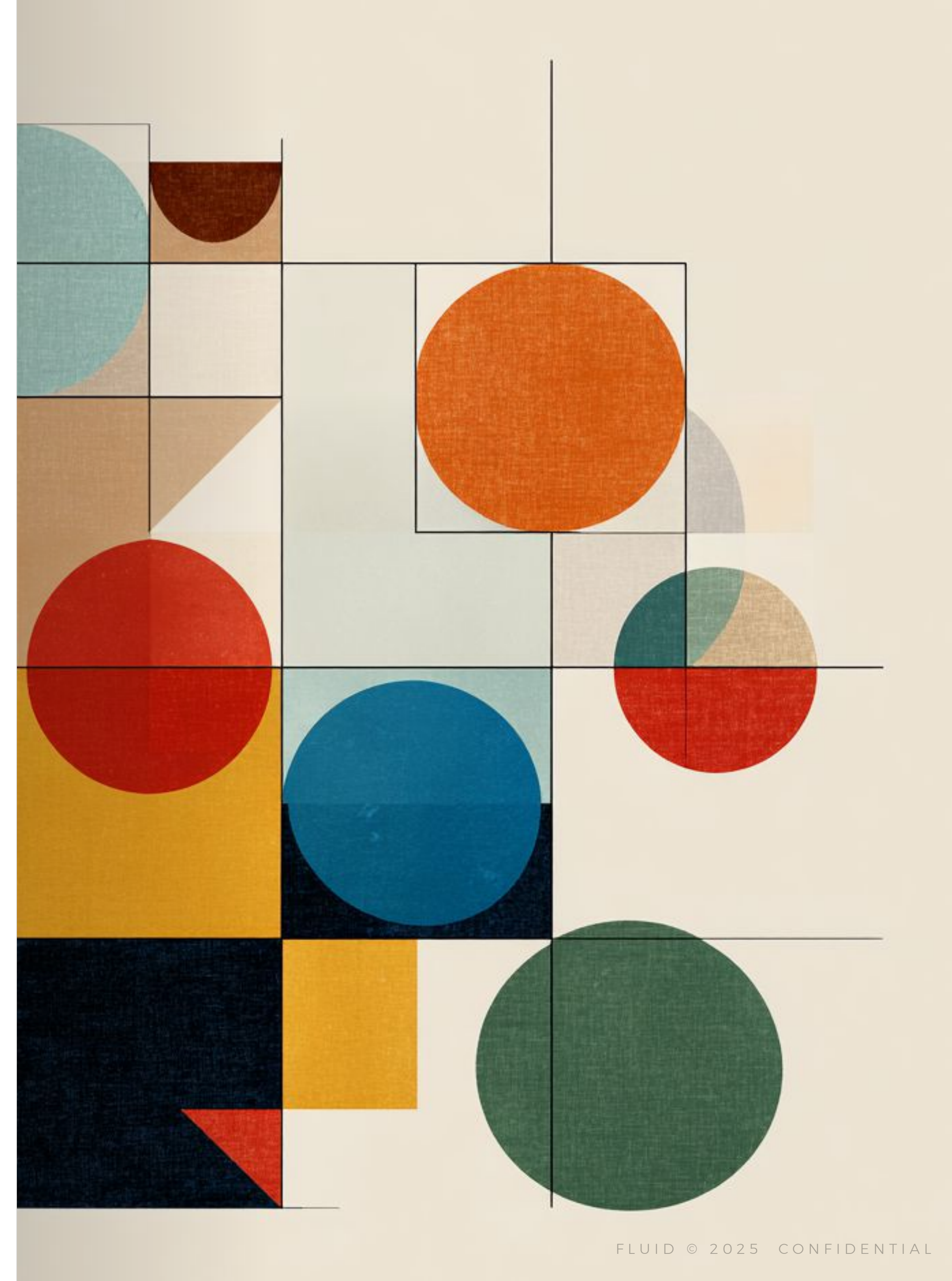
Treating it as a one-off project. A DLS is a living product, not a PDF. When funding and stewardship disappear after launch, entropy sets in.

Over-focusing on UI kits. Colors, type, and components are necessary, but without clear principles and governance they become a grab bag rather than a shared language.

Neglecting cross-functional ownership. If engineering, brand, and product aren’t equally invested, the system drifts and trust erodes.

Getting it right is more than a design nicety - it’s a business advantage. A well-run DLS reduces design and development time, speeds experimentation, and improves quality. It safeguards brand consistency as teams scale globally and lets designers spend more time solving real user problems instead of reinventing buttons. In short, coherence isn’t just aesthetic; it’s operational efficiency and strategic clarity.

“Designing Coherence” explores how to build and sustain a design language system that goes beyond components to become an organizational asset - one that grows with your business rather than holding it back.



Coherence as Operational Value

BRAND COHESION:

A DLS unifies the look, feel, and behavior of products across physical and digital touchpoints - avoiding misaligned designs that weaken brand integrity.

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY ALIGNMENT:

It connects industrial, UX, UI, engineering, and marketing teams, fostering internal unity and reinforcing brand culture from within.

BRAND RECOGNITION:

It ensures products are instantly recognizable, building long-term customer loyalty through consistent visual identity.

SUSTAINABILITY & COST CONTROL:

By reusing components and minimizing waste, a DLS supports sustainable design. It also cuts costs through scalable systems and fewer production errors.

EFFICIENCY:

A DLS streamlines design, prototyping, and production by providing a shared foundation across disciplines, accelerating workflows and reducing friction.



The Role of “Future” in a Hardware DLS

A successful Design Language System must be future-resilient - not by chasing fleeting trends, but by embedding the ability to evolve without losing its core identity. The role of “future” in a hardware DLS is not about predicting the next big thing, but about creating a foundation that can absorb change, integrate new capabilities, and stay relevant across product lifecycles.

Emerging technologies - from sensor integration and wearables to augmented reality and smart connectivity - are redefining what hardware can do. A future-ready DLS anticipates these shifts, providing a framework that can incorporate new components without feeling like an afterthought.

New manufacturing methods, such as 3D printing, overmolding, circular materials, and sustainable processes, are equally transformative.

A DLS should leverage these advances to introduce richer textures, smarter assemblies, and reduced environmental impact - ensuring innovation is expressed both aesthetically and responsibly.

Evolving user contexts - mobile-first workflows, hybrid work environments, and growing accessibility expectations - are shaping how people interact with hardware. A resilient DLS considers these from the start, enabling products to adapt gracefully to changing habits and needs.

Ultimately, a future-ready DLS doesn’t just react to innovation - it absorbs it. It becomes a living system, stretching into new territories while retaining the coherence, recognizability, and brand equity that make it distinct. In doing so, it transforms “future” from an uncertainty into a strategic advantage.



Nothing integrates advanced technologies like Glyph lighting, transparent enclosures, and intuitive gestures within a clear, recognizable visual system. Their phones and earbuds evolve functionally through new technical elements but stay true to minimalist, tech-forward aesthetics that define the brand.



Are Trends Relevant for a DLS? Selectively - and Strategically

Trends can influence a Design Language System, but they should never define it. A mature DLS treats trends as inputs, not directives – absorbing what adds value, ignoring what doesn't. The goal is not to be fashionable for a moment, but to remain relevant for decades.

Trends have a place when they are deployed with precision. They can enrich limited editions, create market- or region-specific adaptations, or deliver targeted resonance for specific audiences – whether that's Gen Z, creative professionals, or eco-conscious consumers. In these contexts, a DLS can flex its expression while staying rooted in brand identity.

A mature DLS acts as a filter. It evaluates trends against three criteria:

- 1. Do they align with the brand's values and visual language?**
- 2. Do they serve the product's purpose and user needs?**
- 3. Will they enhance rather than dilute the system's integrity?**

When the answer is yes, trends are integrated seamlessly – adding freshness without disrupting consistency. When the answer is no, they are left out entirely. This selective approach allows a DLS to engage with culture without becoming hostage to it.

By mastering this balance, the system remains both timeless and timely – able to speak the language of the moment without losing its own voice.

Image: Apple

Apple specifically designed the Ultra Watch for outdoor athletes, endurance runners, divers, and adventure-seeking users- a segment traditionally served by rugged, function-first gear brands like Garmin. Yet, despite its trend related expansion, the Ultra remains unmistakably Apple. The form is clean and geometric. The interface is familiar. The interaction model is consistent.



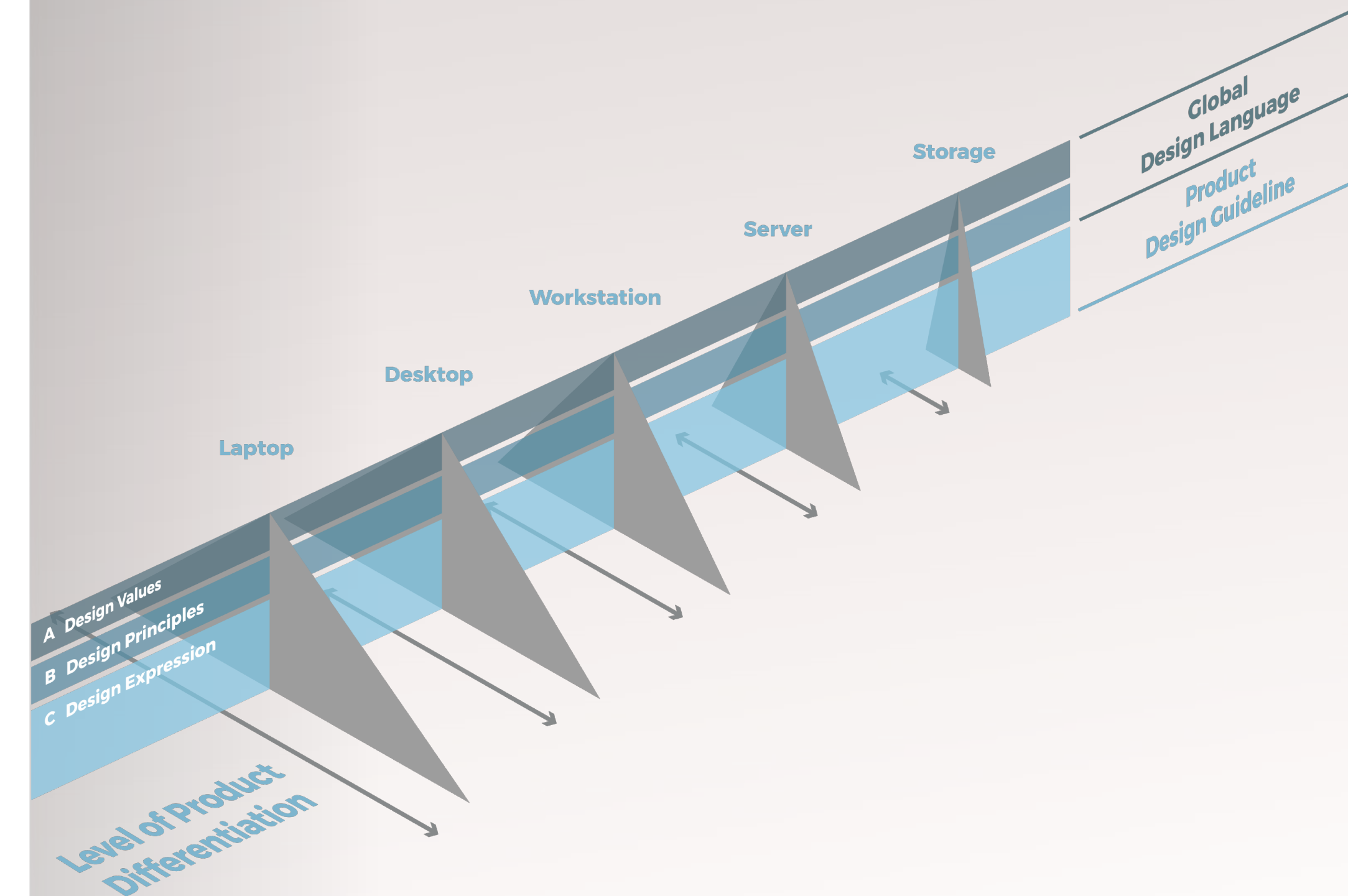
Freedom and Differentiation

A well-crafted Design Language System does more than set visual rules – it creates a structured, coherent framework that avoids the chaos of fragmented guidelines while still leaving space for creative expression. The strength of a DLS lies in its ability to balance consistency with differentiation, applying a unified brand DNA across diverse product categories while allowing room for individual character where it matters most.

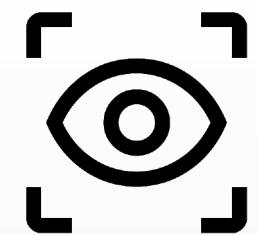
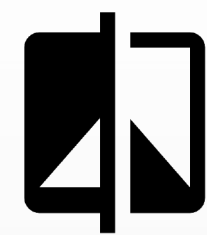
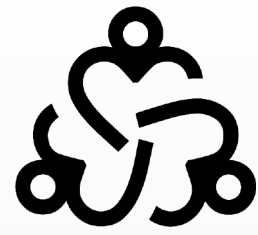
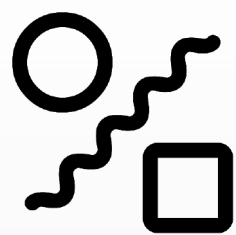
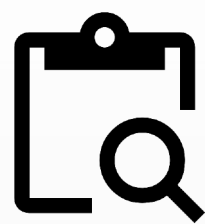
At a global level, the design language should be applied consistently to establish a recognizable, trustworthy identity across the entire portfolio. This ensures that no matter the product, the brand presence is clear, coherent, and unmistakable.

At the product level, however, flexibility becomes a strategic tool. Different market segments and user expectations call for different degrees of visual individuality. For example, lifestyle-oriented products – such as laptops or consumer devices – often compete in crowded, style-driven markets where uniqueness, aesthetic appeal, and emotional connection are critical. Here, the DLS can allow more expressive form factors, color palettes, and material choices while still maintaining brand alignment. In contrast, utilitarian products – such as servers, industrial equipment, or enterprise tools – benefit from a stricter, more uniform application of the DLS. Consistency in these categories supports functional clarity, ease of recognition, manufacturing efficiency, and cost-effectiveness, ensuring the focus stays on reliability and performance rather than stylistic variation.

By defining its boundaries clearly, a mature DLS empowers designers to know where they can push and where they should hold the line. The result is a portfolio that feels both diverse and unified – adaptable to multiple contexts, yet unmistakably part of the same brand family.



DLS: Methods and Framework



1. Audit & Analysis

Review current products for design inconsistencies and pain points.

Identify overlaps and brand mismatches.

Benchmark competitors and gather insights from stakeholders.

2. Foundational Definition

Define core brand traits (e.g., friendly, robust).

Establish form language: shapes, colors, materials, and key interaction behaviors like motion and feedback.

3. Systematization

Create a shared component library:

Physical: buttons, ports, enclosures

Digital: UI elements, grids, icons

Set naming rules and usage guidelines.

4. Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

Include design, engineering, and marketing early.

Align on feasibility and tech constraints.

5. Prototyping & Testing

Test with physical and digital prototypes:

Feel and responsiveness

UI legibility

Real-world use cases (e.g., gloves, lighting)

6. Documentation

Build a living style guide.

Include design rationale, examples, and edge cases.

Make it easy to access and use.

7. Governance & Maintenance

Assign ownership (e.g., Design Ops).

Define update and versioning processes.

Review regularly to keep it current.

DESIGNING COHERENCE

DLS: Checklist

Reflect on the Design System you have in place right now:

- ✓ **Is it Clear?**
Design Language Systems must be simple, legible, and intuitive to interpret - both for physical as well as digital products.
- ✓ **Is it Modular?**
Components and patterns must be reusable, swappable, and adaptable to new contexts.
- ✓ **Is it Consistent?**
Every interaction and product should feel like part of one ecosystem - no matter the touchpoint.
- ✓ **Is it Purposeful?**
Every decision (shape, texture, color, behavior) should serve a functional and emotional purpose.
- ✓ **Is it Inclusive?**
Accommodate a wide range of users and usage scenarios: different abilities, cultures, lighting conditions, environments etc.
- ✓ **Is it Feasible?**
Align design vision with manufacturing, sourcing, and technical constraints.
- ✓ **Is it Scalable?**
A DLS should scale across product lines, screen sizes, and markets - while flexibly adapting design expression to suit each product's role and positioning.

(If you answered any of these with “Perhaps” or even “No” - we'd be delighted to talk.)



Design Systems Experience at FLUID

With many of our clients, we are engaged in long-term strategic partnerships and are responsible for successfully defining their Design Language Systems, often across various categories in large-scale portfolios aiming at global markets. Some of the brands we have been supporting in shaping strong Brand Product Identities and unique Design Languages are:



ABOUT FLUID

FLUID is an independent, award-winning design and innovation studio based in Munich. We are creatives, strategists, researchers, developers and innovators.



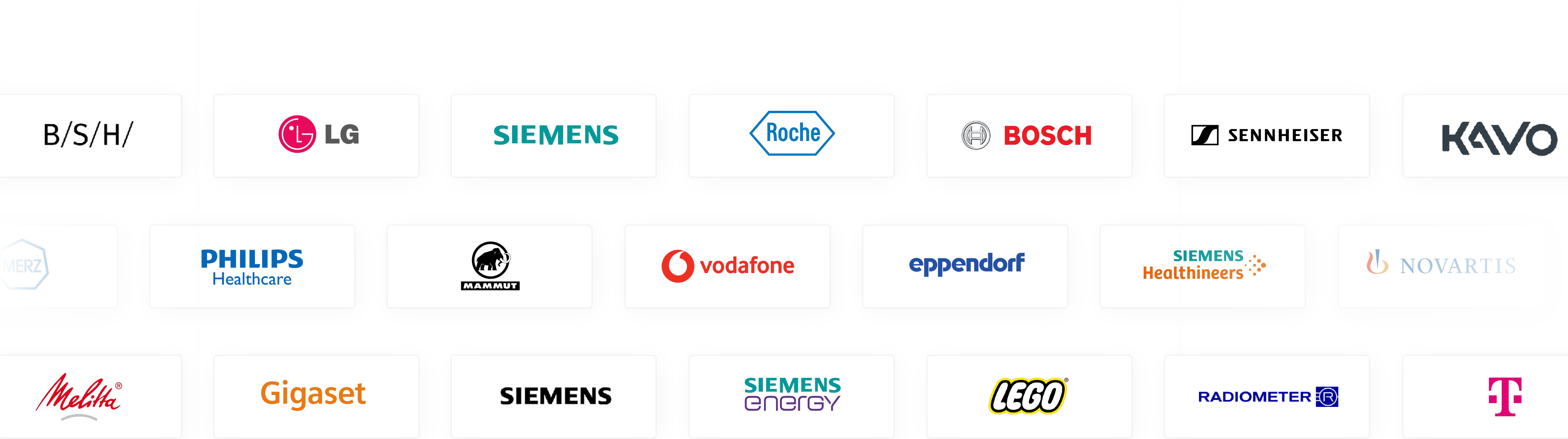
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