19

TUTORIAL:
DESIGNING A BUSINESS CARD

Even in this supposedly "electronic" age, business cards (or visiting cards, or address cards—if you don't want to sound too business-like) remain popular. This little piece of cardboard is a reflection of your—or your organization's—personality, a little presentation of what you consider most important about you. So, not surprisingly, the design aspect of this small item of stationery is very important. Like in a three-line haiku, you have a very limited space to make a clear, original, and memorable statement.

For the same reasons—simplicity, limited space, and the need for the design to stand out—a business card is a perfect test project for such an essential designer's tool as a vector editor. Inkscape's toolset makes it a great tool for the job; its only real weakness is the relative difficulty of creating print-ready output files with device colors.

The steps of this tutorial show two quite different sample designs, but I'm not inviting you to follow them exactly (unless you just want to learn the techniques). If you plan to design a real business card, try to find and analyze a lot more examples than these two, and play with Inkscape to come up with something that combines the best features you've seen with something completely original.

Creativity cannot be taught, but it can be inspired. My examples are both somewhat on the artsy side; perhaps what you have in mind for your own card would be more traditional—but the general approach would be the same.

19.1   Design 1: Template and Text

The first step is straightforward. Create a new document by choosing the template called **business_card_90x50mm** from the **File ▸ New** submenu. (If you need a different size, you can always change it in **Document Properties**, Shift-Ctrl-D.) Then switch to the Text tool and create text objects for all the text lines you will display on your card—name, position, address, phone, etc. Make them all independent objects (click and type each one separately) because you're going to move them around a lot, trying different layouts. If you will display a logo on your card, import the logo file (Appendix B) and, if you only have it in bitmap format, trace it (18.8) to convert it to paths.

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Figure 19-1: Preparing the workspace and adding text objects

The next step is choosing font(s) for your text objects. A font you like will go a long way towards a design you like, too. If you're serious about design, you likely have a large library of your favorite fonts; otherwise, a few basic (but good) fonts usually come with your operating system. Many high-quality and free (or inexpensive) fonts can be found on the Web.

I have long liked the free font called Gentium;[1] its main feature is good Unicode support, but I also find it aesthetically pleasing, so I decided to use it for this design. After you assign the font to all the text strings, play with their relative sizes by resizing them in Selector (Figure 19-2). Do the different sizes of the same font look good together? Strangely, that is not a given—and if not, you will need to use different fonts for different elements. In any case, however, never use more than two fonts in such a small design—it will likely look too motley.

To make Inkscape see a new font, just install it as you usually do in your operating system and restart Inkscape. The new font will be listed in the **Text and Font** dialog as well as in the Text tool's drop-down list (15.4.2). Supported font formats include TrueType, Type 1, and OpenType.

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[1] Available at *http://sil.org/~gaultney/gentium*

Figure 19-2: Fonts and sizes

19.2   Design 1: Layout

Designing a business card for a single person (as opposed to creating a template to be used by many cards with different names) has an important advantage: You can position and align your text objects precisely, without having to leave extra space for variable-length names and addresses. In this case, I was able to push all the address bits closely against the name, creating an asymmetric composition tightly bound together by its alignments (the address is aligned with the start of the last name, the email with the top of the name, etc.).

Figure 19-3: Laying out the text

This already looks interesting—but perhaps a little too rectangular. An obvious thing to try is to select all (Ctrl-A) and rotate a bit (press [once). Much better! The design now has a flair of constructivism—a short-lived but influential movement of the 1920s whose proponents loved bold contrasts and running texts at an angle (though they probably would not have approved of the Gentium font). Let's develop this style; add three black corners intruding into the composition from the edges and place a big red circle in the mass center of the composition, as shown in Figure 19-4. (Constructivists loved simple geometric forms in black and red!)

To look their best, most text objects require adjusting of letter spacing (uniform spacing between all letters in the text) and kerning (intervals between some particular letter pairs). In the Text tool, use Alt-<, Alt-> to change letter spacing and Alt-arrows to change kerning at the text cursor (**15.3.3**). Generally, large text objects look better with tighter letter spacing, while small type needs increased letter spacing for readability.

Figure 19-4: Rotating and adding shapes

19.3   Design 2: Graphic

Our first business card attempt was mostly inspired by a layout of the text lines, with graphic elements coming secondary to support and reinforce that layout. Could we go the other way around, starting from some piece of graphic and building the design around it?

Of course, if you're doing a company business card, the obvious starting point is the company's logo. If you're designing a card just for yourself and want it to be more personal, you can try tracing (**18.8**) an imported photo of yours. Finally, you can also use a piece of clipart, for example from *http://openclipart.org* (**1.3**), which has many decorations and abstract pieces that might become the centerpiece of your card.

For my second demo card, however, I chose another approach: artistic initials. I switched to the Calligraphic pen, set the **Angle** to 90 degrees with a **Fixation** of 100 and drew a couple of intertwined letters. After I finally got the lettershapes more or less right, the result was mildly interesting but far from exciting. I then tried to improve it by creating a union of the path objects and then simplifying, insetting, and outsetting it a few times:

original drawing (5 strokes)   unioned, inset/outset, simplified
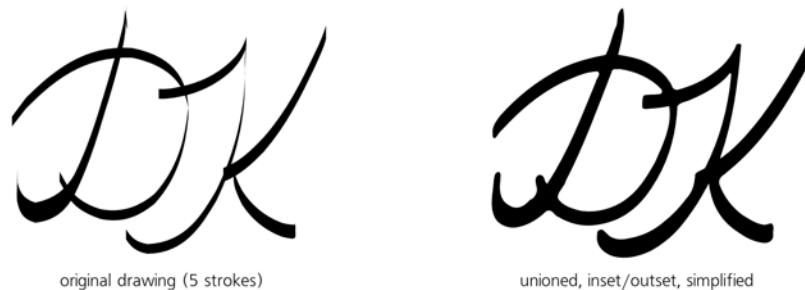
Figure 19-5: Creating initials

Now the letters look more natural—but they can still be made much more interesting. The general rule of modern design seems to be: Don't be too neat! If you can dirty, distort, or damage your art in a creative way, go ahead and do it. So I selected a somewhat narrower pen nib, maximized **Tremor** to 100 and danced wildly around the letters with my tablet pen (though this could just as

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well be done with a mouse). At first the result may appear rather unattractive, but this is because I forgot to do the usual Simplify/Inset/Outset magic to it:
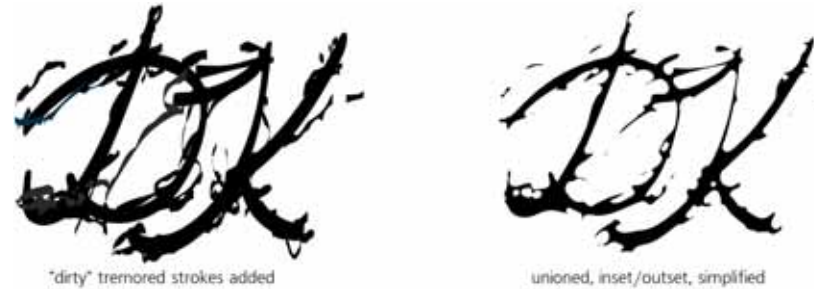

"dirty" tremored strokes added   unioned, inset/outset, simplified

Figure 19-6: Damaging the lettershapes creatively

19.4 Design 2: Layout

Naturally, such a piece of distortion art deserves the central place on the card, with the rest of the stuff being placed symmetrically around it. I used a plain, slanted, very light sans serif font (Helvetica Condensed Light) which does not distract from the artwork in the center. The horizontal layout may not be the best here—the card seems to be cramped. Rotating everything on its side (press Ctrl-[) gives ample space to the art and allows the text to float to the edges so it does not interfere:

Figure 19-7: Laying out the card around the initials

19.5 Design 2: Texture and Color

Something is starting to emerge here, but it's far from being ready. The card looks too empty, too flat, too hostile to the irregular blotch of ink in its center. Can we do something about it? Let's try adding some background gradients. As explained in 10.7, the default gradient from opacity 1 to opacity 0 of some color (for example, blue) looks crude and unnatural, its boundary clearly visible even if it uses a very pale color. To improve the look of a gradient over a white background, paint the transparent end of the gradient white, instead of the same color as the other end.

Here, I added four rectangles with irregularly slanted bluish green gradients at the edges of the card to achieve a naturally curly, softly blended, asymmetric look. The dashed lines are the bounding boxes of the four rectangles with gradients, and the gradient lines show the span and direction of each gradient. I painted the initials dark blue and added a blurred, 50% opaque drop shadow to the letters (**Filters ▸ Shadows and Glows ▸ Drop Shadow**).
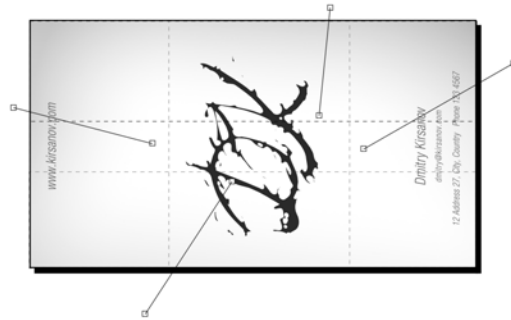
Figure 19-8: Adding gradients and shadows

Can it be still improved? A good way to add texture to the card is by overlaying a regular grid of semitransparent lines. Draw a rectangle over the entire card, open **Fill and Stroke** (Shift-Ctrl-F), switch the fill to pattern, and choose the **Stripes 1:1 white** stock pattern. Now, using pattern adjustment handles in the Node tool (10.8.1), rotate the strips and scale them down according to taste. Finally, move the rectangle over the gradients and the initials but below the text in z-order, and reduce its opacity to 20%.

Figure 19-9: Adding striped texture: The card is ready.

19.6   Export and Printing

We now have two decent business card designs—but how do we actually get them printed? The best course of action depends on the nature of the design, and you must understand the current limitations of Inkscape and the capabilities of various output formats (Appendix B) to identify the best approach.

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19.6.1   PostScript

The first ("constructivist") design does not have any transparency or gradients; it is a collection of fully opaque shapes. This means it can be saved without any quality loss as PostScript or EPS, which most print service providers will accept. To be on the safe side, preview your PS or EPS output file using Ghostscript.[2] Or, you can directly print such a file to your local printer device by the **File ▸ Print** command, which sends the PostScript rendition of the document to the printer.

19.6.2   PDF

For more complex designs, the best output format is PDF (B.3). These days, nearly all print service providers accept PDF, often in preference to PostScript. PDF is a more powerful format by itself and it is better supported by Inkscape; with it, you don't have to worry about gradients or opacity. Filtered objects—such as the initials with a drop shadow in our second design—will be automatically rasterized on export to PDF if you enable this option in the PDF export options dialog.

   Generally, the safest strategy for preparing your design for print is to separate the necessarily vector elements from those that can be rendered into a bitmap. For example, text (especially using small-size fonts), logos, and crisp foreground shapes must remain vector; avoid using filters on them, but separate them into a foreground layer and convert all texts to paths so they do not depend on the availability of the fonts. Anything else (background shapes with or without transparency, filtered objects, imported bitmaps, etc.) can be collectively pre-rendered into a single bitmap with **Make a Bitmap Copy**: Set the desired resolution in **Inkscape Preferences** (**Bitmaps** page), select all the objects to rasterize, and press Alt-B, after which you can delete or hide the vector originals. Thus, an "export-hardened" file—with best chances of being exported to PDF, imported into other programs, or printed without loss—would typically have just two layers: one with bitmap-like artwork rendered as one large bitmap and the other with vector-like artwork all in paths.

19.6.3   Bitmap Output

As a last resort, if even PDF doesn't cut it, you can always just export the entire design as a bitmap. Inkscape can only export as PNG, but any number of other programs, from expensive Photoshop to the free GIMP or command-line ImageMagick, will convert a PNG to another bitmap format, such as the old (but still popular in the print world) TIFF.

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[2] *http://ghostscript.com*

19.6.4   Using Device Colors

Often, however, what you need to send to the print service provider is not just PDF or TIFF that faithfully reproduces the way your design looks on screen. Instead, you need your output to use device-specific CMYK or spot colors. While there's some limited support for using color-managed display, you can't export anything except the sRGB screen color space into any output format. Until this area is improved, you will need to use some other software to rectify this.

I have successfully imported Inkscape-produced SVG or PDF files into Adobe Illustrator in order to set a spot color for some objects, after which I resaved the file as PDF. With bitmap output, it is possible to create a device-specific CMYK file using only open source tools; first, convert the PNG exported from Inkscape to regular RGB TIFF, and then use the tifficc command-line utility from the LittleCMS library[3] to convert it to CMYK. You will need the ICC profile file of your target output device for this conversion.

19.6.5   Tiled Output

If you print your cards on an office or home printer, most likely you will use the A4 or Letter paper format instead of the business card format. In that case it makes sense to print multiple copies per sheet and then cut it into separate cards. To prepare a printable file, group all objects of your card, then use the **Create Tiled Clones** dialog to create a 2×5 grid of clones of the group that will exactly fit on your printable page.
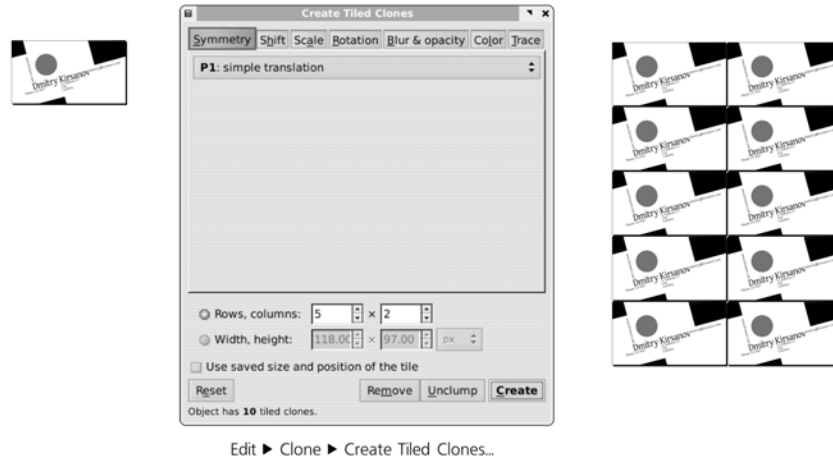

Figure 19-10: Tiling the card to fill the output page

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[3] *http://littlecms.com*