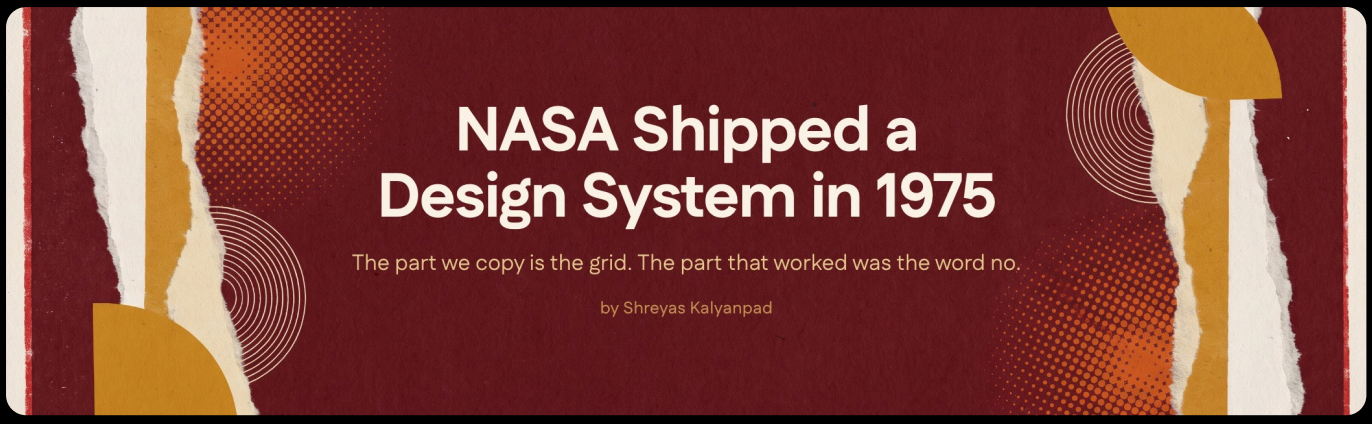


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A design system is a shared set of decisions about how a product looks and works.

NASA had one on paper in 1975. I read the manual again this morning. It is better written than most of the systems I see in Figma today.

The logotype came first, in 1975, from the firm Danne and Blackburn, under the Federal Design Improvement Program. The copy NASA still hosts is the edition whose pages were "officially in effect as of January 1, 1976". About ninety pages in a ring binder. Tokens, components, usage rules. Nobody had said the words design system yet.

> *A system that only shows what is allowed is a catalogue. The reasoning is the system.*

Five things it did that we skip.



Three people and one binder. The binder is the part most teams skip.

1. It said out loud that it was policy

The manual: "This manual is a reference book for NASA designers. It is the official policy document regarding NASA identification."

What we ship: a site called guidelines, with no owner and no start date.

Do instead: mark which rules are binding, name who owns them, give a date. A guideline gets ignored politely. A policy gets argued with, which is more useful.

2. A whole page of no

The manual: one page, nine numbered rules, almost every one starting with never. Never broken by a pattern laid over it. Never placed inside another shape, such as a circle. Never outlined. Never given a shadow. Never set on a

vertical axis.

Why it works: a rule that names the failure can be checked. *Use the logo tastefully* cannot be reviewed by anybody.

Do instead: for each component, write the three ways people get it wrong. You already know them from review.

3. Every rule carried its reason

The manual: the A has no crossbar because losing the cross-strokes "imparts a vertical thrust to the logotype". Mission patches get their own space, away from the official mark, so that "the two elements are noncompetitive".

Why it works: a rule with a reason outlives the person who wrote it. A rule without one gets reopened every quarter by whoever joined last.

Do instead: one line of why under every rule. If you cannot write it, the rule is taste, and you should say so.

4. It was written for people who are not designers

The manual: where the mark goes on a van, down to the door handle. Which weight of Helvetica for the agency name, and which for a centre name. Stephen Loges, who worked on it, told WIRED there was a section explaining what a grid was, because he was writing "for an audience who might not know the first thing about design".

Do instead: write for the engineer in a hurry, not for the design team. The design team does not need the document.

5. The reasoning still did not save it

This is the part I like least. The work was honoured by President Reagan in 1984. In 1992 NASA retired the mark anyway and went back to the badge from the 1950s. It came back in 2020, on the Falcon 9 that carried the Demo-2 crew, and the old badge is still the primary symbol.

So written reasons do not protect a decision from the next decision-maker. They protect it from drift, which is a smaller and more boring thing. Still worth doing. Just do not mistake it for safety. Get the people who can cancel your system into the room while it is being written.

The short version

OUR HABIT	WHAT THE 1975 MANUAL DID
Guidelines, no owner, no date	Named itself the official policy document
Only correct examples	A page of numbered never
Rules stated bare	Rule plus the reason for it
Written for designers	Written for the person painting the van
Published and left alone	A named coordinator to ask

The audit

Open your system. Pick one component. Four questions. Does the page say whether this is binding? Does it list the ways it gets misused? Does any rule say why it exists? Could somebody outside design follow it without asking you?

Four noes and you do not have a system. You have a catalogue with good screenshots.

Checked against

Read on 6 November 2026.

- NASA Graphics Standards Manual (NHB 1430.2), the primary document: the policy statement, the Incorrect Uses page and the stated reason behind each rule
- NASA, The Worm is Back! Danne and Blackburn, the Federal Design Improvement Program, the 1984 honour, the 1992 retirement and the 2020 return on Demo-2
- WIRED, Inside the Rise and Fall of NASA's Beloved Worm Logo: the 1974 commission, the ring binder, and Stephen Loges on writing for people who are not designers

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