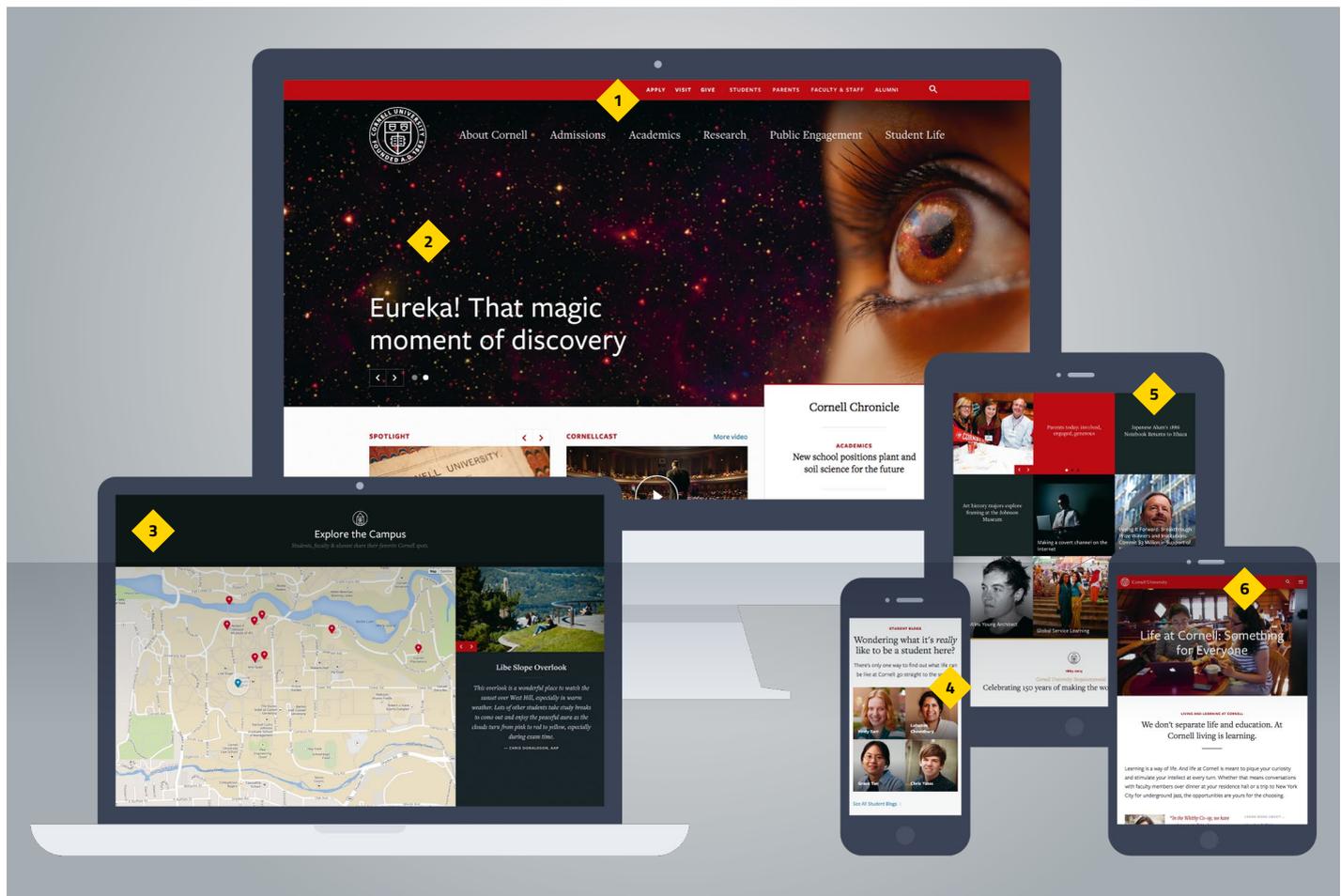


*HOW WE BUILT

CORNELL.EDU

An in-house team at Cornell joined FreeAssociation to create a lean, responsive site that opens a window into campus culture



BRIEF

Cornell University partnered with FreeAssociation to create a rich and accessible expression of the Cornell brand – authentic, engaging and high in utility. The goal was to produce an exceptional user experience on any device.

Q CLOSE UP

(1) Primary, transactional and audience-based navigation models offer alternative ways to access information on the site. When users hover over the primary navigation, it expands to reveal sub-pages and related links. (2) Large, full-width photos and videos are used to create an immersive experience for visitors, enabling them to envision themselves at Cornell University. (3) Maps, photos and student perspectives, supplemented with insights from

the current student community, help users explore some of the unique places on campus. (4) Authentic storytelling from students and members of the faculty is included to give first-hand accounts of what it's like to be part of the diverse Cornell community. (5) Distributed curation allows campus partners to promote their news and features in an engaging, interactive grid. (6) The highly responsive design adapts to any screen or device.

ZAC DOOB



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> In time for Cornell University's 150th anniversary in 2015, its in-house website team set about redesigning the university's site to create a cohesive brand experience that focuses on Cornell's position as a leading research institution, as well as honouring its heritage and academic rigour. Partnering with user experience agency FreeAssociation, the team set out to create an intuitive, lean experience that works seamlessly on any device.

net: For those who haven't heard of it, please introduce Cornell University...

Lisa Cameron-Norfleet: It is 14 colleges and over 30,000 people that represent global cultures, experiences and ideas. Our commitment to share knowledge for the greater good and develop practical solutions to contemporary challenges sets us apart. Our main campus in Ithaca, New York, is known for its unparalleled natural beauty and open spaces.

net: What prompted the University's decision to redesign the site?

Zac Doob: Our previous design had a very successful life span of about 10 years. Many aspects of the site worked really well, but we outgrew its architecture. Cornell is a forward-looking institution, and we wanted our website to reflect that.

net: What was the design brief?

Chris Rodemeyer: Cornell challenged us to "set and exceed the bar for .edu websites". We saw it as a tremendous

opportunity to push things forward in the education category. We wanted to design a site that was intuitive, useful and communicated Cornell's unique culture.

net: Was the redesign data-driven or based on user interviews?

CR: We interviewed dozens of students, parents and faculty, conducted co-design exercises and tested critical assumptions with our users in order to arrive at our final designs. Truly designing with users' needs in mind helped focus a diverse array of stakeholders on what really mattered.

net: The site is huge. How did you manage the scale?

ZD: Actually, the site is 99.4 per cent smaller than it was before. One goal was to provide a focused, lean site. We partnered with subject-matter experts across campus to present accurate and concise content. Managing size was less critical than connecting with the right people at the right time.

net: Clearly, responsive played a big role. How do usage models change between mobile and desktop?

CR: There are broad patterns, but people will use the site differently depending on the task at hand. We looked at the site as a tool to connect people with information and utility. There are subtle shifts in content on mobile. For example, if you're visiting the campus and open up the homepage, quick jump buttons are exposed, linking to campus maps or tour



***TIMELINE**

A run-down of the redesign project chronology

AUGUST 2013

Cornell takes inventory of pages and content, with a first pass at streamlined information architecture.



SEPTEMBER 2013

The partnership with FreeAssociation begins with an audit of existing web properties and needs analysis.



OCTOBER 2013

Dozens of interviews are conducted to cover a range of users and stakeholders. Personas are created to reveal different audience needs.



NOVEMBER 2013

On the heels of research synthesis, ideation is coordinated to generate a large volume of concepts that are aligned to personas.



DECEMBER 2013

Emergent patterns are translated into wireframes to guide the design process. Visual and content streams are conducted simultaneously.



MARCH 2014

Internal rollout of a static, operational frontend for stakeholders on campus to review and provide feedback on.



MAY 2014

Backend functionality is completed to connect existing systems and provide an efficient method of publishing content and tracking performance.



JUNE 2014

Public launch is well received and sets the stage for further testing to ensure the site is accessible and intuitive.



* EVOLUTION

The in-house team at Cornell explain the tools and techniques that helped the project on its way

- (1) Information architecture studies kicked the project off as we began the process of streamlining the site.
- (2) Numerous personas were constructed to guide our decisions in favour of the user experience.
- (3) Ideation workshops were designed to translate research into a large volume of concepts, features and patterns.
- (4) Card sorting was one of several techniques utilised to include users in our development.
- (5) Wireframes were instrumental in keeping all stakeholders involved throughout the process.

► info. Search was also critical. We made a large and intuitive search feature that works great on any device.

net: The site is very visual and conveys a sense of place. How did you achieve this insight into university life?

ZD: Our research showed that prospective students wanted to explore Cornell through authentic storytelling from students and faculty. Many ingredients to accomplish this were already in place, like our student blogs and Portraits website. The redesign added immersive imagery and video. We want users to experience the university, not just a website.

LCN: The site invites members of the Cornell community to contribute. A great example is the Explore Campus feature on the Visit page, where students share their favourite locations on campus to feed the map. Giving users access to real stories opens a direct window into life at Cornell and lets the community shine.

net: What role did FreeAssociation play in the project?

ZD: We partnered with FreeAssociation in order to leverage its refined approach to building user-centred experiences. The team conducted numerous interviews, led workshops to inform design patterns, provided art direction and delivered frontend code. While the FreeAssociation ‘family’ does include Cornell alumni, we expressly sought an outside agency to bring in a new perspective.



On the move Completely fluid between breakpoints, the site is usable and beautiful on any device

net: Which technologies did you use?

ZD: The university has a very robust ColdFusion environment that has hosted *cornell.edu* for many years. We considered moving to PHP, but considering the interdependencies and aggressive timeline, in the end we decided to stick with ColdFusion.

We have a proprietary suite of tools that work together for publishing content at Cornell. At the centre is a large database fed by processes that consume content from many other Cornell websites and properties. For *cornell.edu*, we have a tool that enables communicators to move content through the site very efficiently. As content gets published, we capture metadata that will be merged with Google

Analytics to provide our campus partners valuable insights about how well their content performed.

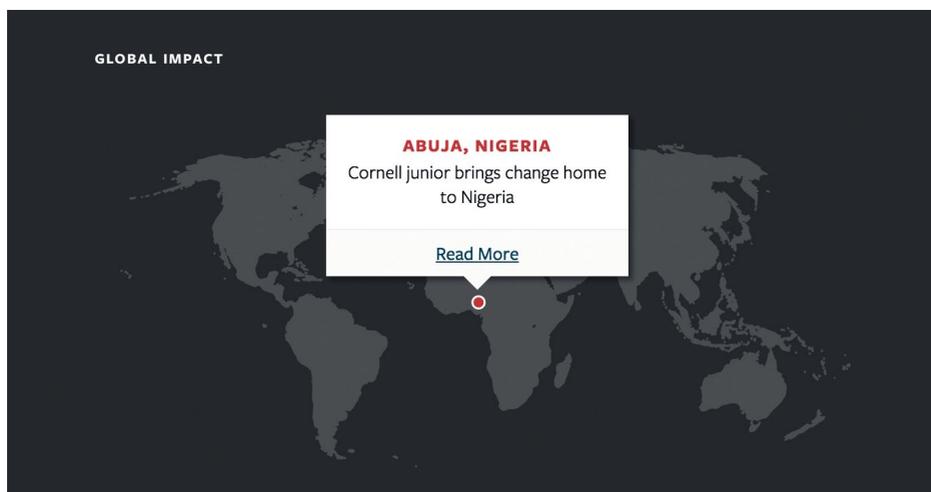
net: What were the biggest challenges?

ZD: Having to put our pencils down. With finite time and resources, we couldn't realise all our dream features and functionality. We worked to balance innovation, flexibility, and usability – wanting to try new patterns without confusing users or restricting the flow of content.

LCN: Balancing numerous audiences is always challenging. We addressed complex requirements through user-testing, stakeholder conversations and persona creation. These helped to define a clear path for the information architecture and user experience. Having hard data to inform our decisions was invaluable and provided a solid foundation for the project.

net: Is the job finished?

ZD: This actually feels more like the beginning than the end. The redesign was a shift from old to new. While a significant endeavour, it was a transition to a new era for *cornell.edu*. There are many more exciting things ahead – such as engaging with Cornellians during our sesquicentennial in 2015. 



Round the world The dynamic map in the footer demonstrates the global reach of Cornell University

 **Next month:** How Code and Theory reimaged the LA Times website