

Thru My Lens - Design Thought Process

Introduction

This document explains the reasoning and thought process behind each design decision for Rosy's photography portfolio website. The goal was to create a space that feels personal, elegant, and lets the photographs be the star of the show.

1. Overall Vision

The Problem

Photography portfolios often fall into two traps: 1. **Too busy** - Flashy templates that distract from the photos 2. **Too generic** - Stock templates that feel impersonal

The Solution

Create a website that feels like walking into a quiet, well-lit gallery. The design should: - Feel warm and inviting, not cold and corporate - Let photos breathe with plenty of whitespace - Have a personal, handcrafted feel - Be simple enough that anyone can manage it

Inspiration

The design draws from: - **Art gallery walls** - Cream/off-white backgrounds like museum walls - **Film photography aesthetic** - Warm, analog feel - **Minimalist Japanese design** - Restraint, negative space, subtle details

2. Color Choices

Why Warm Cream Instead of Pure White?

Decision: Background color #f5f0eb (warm cream) instead of #ffffff (white)

Reasoning: - Pure white (#ffffff) feels sterile and clinical - like a hospital or Apple store - Warm cream feels like natural paper, canvas, or gallery walls - It's easier on the eyes for longer viewing sessions - Creates a cozy, inviting atmosphere that matches photography's emotional nature - Complements both warm and cool-toned photographs better than stark white

Why Brown Accent Instead of Blue?

Decision: Accent color #7a6348 (warm brown) instead of typical blue

Reasoning: - Blue is overused in web design (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) - Brown/sepia tones connect to photography history (darkrooms, old prints) - Warm brown complements the cream

background harmoniously - Feels more artistic and personal than corporate blue - Works well with both nature and city photography themes

Why Muted Text Colors?

Decision: Text colors are muted (#2c2825, #5a534d) instead of pure black

Reasoning: - Pure black (#000000) on cream creates harsh contrast - Muted dark brown feels more natural and readable - Reduces eye strain while maintaining readability - Keeps the focus on the colorful photographs, not the text - Creates a cohesive, harmonious color story

3. Typography Decisions

Why Two Fonts?

Decision: Cormorant Garamond (serif) + Montserrat (sans-serif)

Reasoning: - **Cormorant Garamond** for personality: - Elegant, artistic feel for titles and navigation - Italic style adds a personal, handwritten quality - Connects to classic print design and photography books - The name "Thru Lens" needed a font with character

- **Montserrat** for clarity:
 - Clean, modern sans-serif for UI elements and body text
 - Easy to read at small sizes (buttons, labels)
 - Provides contrast with the decorative serif
 - Feels contemporary without being cold

Why Light Font Weights?

Decision: Primarily using 300 (light) and 400 (regular) weights

Reasoning: - Light weights feel delicate and elegant - Heavy fonts would overpower the photographs - Creates an airy, open feeling - Matches the overall minimal aesthetic - Light italic text feels like handwriting or journal entries

Why Responsive Font Sizes with Clamp()?

Decision: Using CSS `clamp()` for fluid typography

Reasoning: - The title looks good large on desktop, but would overwhelm mobile - `clamp(1.8rem, 5vw, 2.5rem)` means: - Minimum: 1.8rem (never smaller) - Preferred: 5% of viewport width (scales with screen) - Maximum: 2.5rem (never larger) - Creates smooth scaling without jarring breakpoints - Better user experience across all devices

4. Layout Decisions

Why a Grid Instead of Masonry?

Decision: CSS Grid with equal-sized squares instead of Pinterest-style masonry

Reasoning: - **Consistency:** All photos get equal visual weight and importance - **Simplicity:** Easier for viewers to scan and browse - **Fairness:** No photo is “bigger” or more prominent than others - **Performance:** CSS Grid is native, no JavaScript library needed - **Mobile-friendly:** Squares reflow naturally on smaller screens

Masonry layouts can feel chaotic and make some photos feel less important based on their aspect ratio.

Why Square Aspect Ratio?

Decision: All photo frames are 1:1 (square)

Reasoning: - Creates visual consistency regardless of original photo dimensions - Instagram-influenced familiarity (users understand square grids) - Works well for both portrait and landscape photos via object-fit: cover - Easier to create balanced layouts - Square crops often focus on the most interesting part of an image

Why Sticky Navigation?

Decision: Navigation bar sticks to top when scrolling

Reasoning: - Users can always access navigation without scrolling back up - Helps orientation - always know you’re on the photography page - The blur effect (backdrop-filter: blur) keeps it subtle - Common pattern users expect on modern websites

Why Sections Instead of Separate Pages?

Decision: Nature and City galleries on same page, scrollable

Reasoning: - Single-page feels more like browsing a physical gallery - No page load delays between sections - Users can see everything at once, scroll naturally - Simpler architecture, easier to maintain - Anchor links (#nature, #city) still allow direct linking

5. Interactive Design Decisions

Why a Single Menu Button (⋮) Instead of Multiple Buttons?

Decision: Consolidated all actions (Edit, Replace, Rearrange, Delete) under one menu

Reasoning: - **Cleaner appearance:** One button is less cluttered than four - **Progressive disclosure:** Actions are hidden until needed - **Familiar pattern:** Users know the “...” menu from many apps - **Less intimidating:** Seeing a delete button on every photo feels aggressive - **Touch-friendly:** One larger button is easier to tap on mobile

Why Hover Effects?

Decision: Photos lift up and show captions on hover

Reasoning: - Creates sense of interactivity and life - Indicates photos are clickable - Caption appears only when needed (not cluttering the grid) - The lift effect (translateY(-5px)) creates depth, like picking up a print - Subtle zoom on the image adds visual interest

Why a Lightbox Instead of New Page?

Decision: Clicking a photo opens a dark overlay, not a new page

Reasoning: - Faster - no page load, instant viewing - Context preserved - user knows they're still in the gallery - Dark background makes photos pop (like a dark room or theater) - Easy to browse with arrow keys - Natural "escape to close" behavior

Why Drag-and-Drop for Reordering?

Decision: Drag photos to rearrange instead of numbered inputs

Reasoning: - **Intuitive:** Matches how you'd arrange physical prints on a table - **Visual feedback:** You see the result as you work - **Fun:** More engaging than typing numbers - **Efficient:** Faster for making multiple changes - **Familiar:** Users know drag-and-drop from file managers, Trello, etc.

Why Password Protection on Actions?

Decision: All editing actions require password

Reasoning: - Prevents accidental changes by visitors - Simple security without complex login systems - Password entered once per action is low friction - Visitors can view freely, only owner can modify - Appropriate level of security for a personal portfolio

6. Photo Management Features

Why "Replace" Instead of Just Delete + Upload?

Decision: Added dedicated "Replace Photo" feature

Reasoning: - Common use case: "I have a better version of this photo" - Preserves the title and position in the gallery - Fewer steps than delete + re-upload + re-title + re-position - Reduces chance of mistakes - Shows side-by-side preview (old → new) for confidence

Why Keep Title Separate from Filename?

Decision: Photos have editable titles stored in metadata, not filenames

Reasoning: - Filenames are ugly: IMG_2897_1765224805794_55cefca7.jpeg - Titles can have spaces, special characters, proper capitalization - Title can be changed without renaming the file - Fallback: If no title set, we clean up the filename automatically - Metadata stored in JSON is flexible and easy to extend

Why Sort Order in Metadata?

Decision: Photo order stored as sortOrder number in metadata.json

Reasoning: - File system order is unpredictable - Upload date order might not match artistic preference - Numeric order allows precise positioning - Easy to reorder without renaming files - Preserved across server restarts

7. Technical Decisions

Why Vanilla JavaScript Instead of React/Vue?

Decision: Plain HTML, CSS, and JavaScript with no framework

Reasoning: - **Simplicity:** Easier to understand and modify - **Performance:** No framework overhead, fast page loads - **Learning:** Better for understanding web fundamentals - **Longevity:** Won't break when frameworks update - **Hosting:** Static files work anywhere, no build step needed - **Appropriate scale:** A portfolio doesn't need component architecture

Why Node.js for the API?

Decision: Simple Node.js server instead of PHP, Python, or others

Reasoning: - JavaScript on both frontend and backend (one language to learn) - Native JSON handling matches the API responses - Lightweight and fast for simple file operations - Easy to understand the code - Docker container keeps it isolated and reproducible

Why Docker for the API Server?

Decision: API runs in Docker container, not directly on server

Reasoning: - **Isolation:** API can't accidentally affect other services - **Consistency:** Same environment everywhere - **Easy updates:** Rebuild container with new code - **Resource limits:** Container can be restricted if needed - **Modern practice:** Good pattern to learn

Why Mounted Volume for server.js?

Decision: server.js mounted into container instead of baked in

Reasoning: - Code changes take effect with just docker restart - No need to rebuild the entire container for small fixes - Faster development iteration - Can edit the file directly on the server - Original Dockerfile still works for fresh deployments

8. User Experience Decisions

Why No Login System?

Decision: Simple password instead of user accounts

Reasoning: - Only one user (Rosy) needs to edit - No need for registration, email verification, password reset - Password in environment variable is simple and secure enough - Reduces complexity significantly - Visitors get friction-free viewing experience

Why Confirmation on Delete?

Decision: Delete requires seeing the photo + typing password

Reasoning: - Prevents accidental deletion - Seeing the photo makes you think twice - Password requirement adds intentionality - No "undo" exists, so confirmation is essential - Red styling signals danger/warning

Why Auto-Format Filenames to Titles?

Decision: If no title set, convert filename like sunset_beach.jpg → "Sunset Beach"

Reasoning: - Better than showing raw filenames - Works as reasonable default - Encourages setting real titles (seeing auto-title might prompt "I should name this properly") - Strips timestamp and hash suffixes we add for uniqueness - Capitalizes words for readability

9. Visual Feedback Philosophy

Principle: Every Action Should Have Visible Response

Action	Feedback
Hover on photo	Photo lifts, caption appears
Click menu button	Button rotates, dropdown slides in
Drag photo	Original fades, drop target highlights
Click modal button	Button shows "Replacing..." text
Successful action	Modal closes, gallery refreshes
Error	Alert with specific message

Why this matters: - Users know their action was received - Reduces anxiety ("Did it work?") - Creates polished, professional feel - Helps diagnose problems ("It said invalid password")

10. What We Intentionally Left Out

No Comments Section

Reasoning: This is a portfolio, not a social platform. Comments add complexity and moderation burden.

No Like/Favorite Buttons

Reasoning: Portfolio should feel curated by the artist, not ranked by popularity.

No Social Share Buttons

Reasoning: Can be added later if needed, but they add visual clutter. Users can copy URLs.

No Analytics Dashboard

Reasoning: Keep it simple. Google Analytics could be added via script tag if wanted.

No Image Editing

Reasoning: Photo editing should happen before upload in proper software (Lightroom, etc.)

No Bulk Upload

Reasoning: Encourages thoughtful curation. Upload one at a time, give it a title, position it.

11. Future Considerations

If the site grows, these additions would follow the same design philosophy:

1. **Dark Mode** - Same warm feeling, just inverted (dark brown background, cream text)
 2. **More Categories** - Same grid layout, just more sections
 3. **Search** - Simple text input, minimal styling
 4. **EXIF Display** - Small text under photos in lightbox, not prominent
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Conclusion

Every design decision aimed to answer: **“Does this help the photos shine?”**

If something made the site flashier but distracted from the photography, we left it out. If something was complex but genuinely useful (like drag-and-drop reordering), we included it.

The result is a website that feels personal, warm, and gallery-like - a digital home for photography that respects both the art and the viewer.

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<https://rosy.shitchell.com/photography/>*