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In Shape, George Stiny argues that seeing shapes_with all their changeability and ambiguity_is an inexhaustible source of creative ideas. Understanding shapes, he says, is a useful way to understand what is possible in design.

Shapes are devices for visual expression just as symbols are devices for verbal expression. Stiny develops a unified scheme that includes both visual expression with shapes and verbal expression with signs. The relationships_and equivalencies_between the two kinds of expressive devices make design comparable to other professional practices that rely more on verbal than visual expression. Design uses shapes while business, engineering, law, mathematics, and philosophy turn mainly to symbols, but the difference, says Stiny, isn't categorical. Designing is a way of thinking. Designing, Stiny argues, is calculating with shapes, calculating without equations and numbers but still according to rules. Stiny shows that the mechanical process of calculation is actually a creative process when you calculate with shapes_when you can reason with your eyes, when you learn to see instead of count.

The book takes the idea of design as calculation from mere heuristic or metaphor to a rigorous relationship in which design and calculation each inform and enhance the other. Stiny first demonstrates how seeing and counting differ when you use rules_that is, what it means to calculate with your eyes_then shows how to calculate with shapes, providing formal details. He gives practical applications in design with specific visual examples. The book is extraordinarily visual, with many drawings throughout_drawings punctuated with words. You have to see this book in order to read it.