

**WHO** AREA 17

**WHAT** Strategic planning, visual identity, user experience, web and mobile engineering, analytics and optimisation

**WHERE** Paris and New York

**WEB** [area17.com](http://area17.com)

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**KEY CLIENTS**

Opéra National de Paris

ESPN

Facebook

Vice

Harvard Art Museums

Quartz



# Engineered Design

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**G**eorge Eid founded AREA 17 in a corner of a large loft in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The space was called The Ranch and was primarily dedicated to George's filmmaking activities. 1999 marked the first year AREA 17 poked its nose out into the internet fray, working for the legendary hip-hop label Tommyboy Records. However, the agency in its current incarnation was officially founded several years later.

In 2003, AREA 17 was a new agency in search of its symbol. George contacted renowned interactive designer and founder of Elixirstudio, Arnaud Mercier. After a few days of non-invasive coercion techniques, Arnaud agreed to assist in the creation of AREA 17's visual identity.

Soon, it became clear that both George and Arnaud's ideas played well together. What started as the designing of a logo turned into the creation of a mutual philosophy. The collaboration continued on a project basis until 2005 when the duo decided to tie the knot and merge companies. Arnaud left his studio overlooking a small Mediterranean port in Marseilles to come work face-à-face with George at The Ranch in Brooklyn, overlooking a dumpster.

From the start of this new beginning, their eyes were set on being an international agency. With clients from all over the world, and the inherently borderless nature of their work, planning for a European studio started immediately. Paris, France – the city of love and the home of croissants – was the chosen location. The effort was spearheaded by Dominique Deriaz, a blood-in-blood-out Parisian, who had joined the agency in 2004 as a senior producer and information architect.

Since the internet boom of the late '90s and before her séjour in New York, Dominique had been working the web scene in Paris. She was looking to move back and opening the European studio was the perfect opportunity. In 2006, Dominique became a partner and AREA 17 officially opened its doors (and hearts) to Europe with its new Paris studio.

During the years that followed, George split his time between the Paris and New York studio. As the agency grew from both sides of the Atlantic, it became clear that stronger leadership was required in the New York studio. The reins were taken up by Kemp Attwood, who joined the agency in 2007 as a design director in the Paris studio. ▶

Design is woven into the DNA of **AREA 17**. From its inception, the ambition to transform communication using diverse channels and approaches has shaped this studio.

Today, few can match the breadth of understanding AREA 17 bring to the digital channels and beyond

Back in the day, Kemp and Arnaud were close collaborators at an agency in Vancouver and immediately before joining the Paris studio, he was directing designers at an agency in Portland, Oregon. After his two-year séjour in Paris, he was ready to move back to North America and in 2010, he became a partner and AREA 17's New York studio gained a new leader.

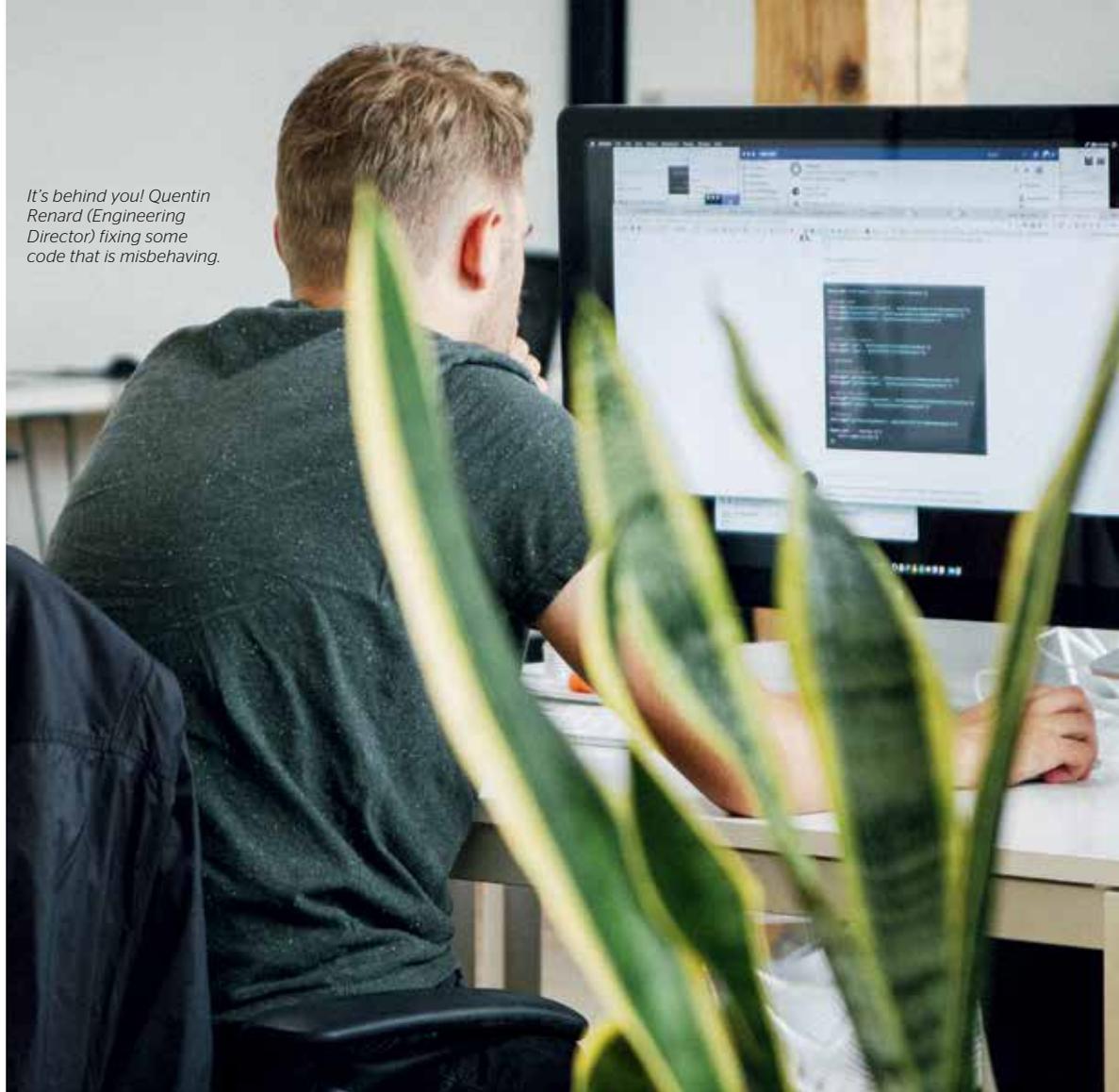
In 2011, Arnaud was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukaemia and died on September 26 that year. Widely considered to be among the most important and prolific interactive designers, his death was a great loss for the agency and the industry as a whole. An online collection devoted to his work is available at [arnaud.area17.com](http://arnaud.area17.com).

For AREA 17, naming their new studio was an important first step as George explained: "AREA 17 refers to the visual cortex of the brain where sensory data is received, patterns recognised, and images formulated. While there is a mechanical aspect to human vision, it is sensory memory that constructs most of what we see as individuals."

AREA 17 now has a website that uses the latest techniques to showcase the studio and its work. However, as George commented, it wasn't always like this: "Our first website was an original concept using a basic file structure to present the work. Echoing the early days of the internet and representing the fact that the work – not the website – should speak for itself. This first website was a big success. In 2008, the second version of our website was launched and received many accolades including best portfolio website awards."

George continued: "By 2015 we still had the same website and while we knew it was old, we felt that it stood the test of time, and ultimately we didn't have the time to redesign. By 2016 we realised that our phone stopped ringing and most of the business we received was from existing clients. A close friend of the agency opened our eyes by saying, "Of

*It's behind you! Quentin Renard (Engineering Director) fixing some code that is misbehaving.*



course you are not getting new business, your website is old and dusty. Your situation is 911 and you must relaunch ASAP!" Heeding his advice, we took down the website and within a few weeks, launched a one-page temporary website. The phone started ringing almost immediately. It was magical! Within a few more months, we launched our full site and 2017 has been our best year yet."

The new website was clearly a key component of the studio's marketing, but how else does AREA 17 gain new clients? "Most of our business comes through word of mouth and reputation," said George. "Many of our clients stay with us for years and recommend us to others. That said, we recognise that when most of your business is inbound, you are only working with clients that think of you.

**Most of our business comes through word of mouth and reputation. Many of our clients stay with us for years and recommend us to others**

While over the years we've been honoured by the fact that many great clients think of us, we also understand that there are many other great clients that may not be thinking of us. As our agency grows, we look to develop our outbound activities through thought-leadership and active outreach to clients we'd love to collaborate with."

How an agency approaches its business can be manifold. The work completed has to fulfil a number of criteria that not only meets financial needs, but also enables the studio to grow as a business. George outlined AREA 17's approach: "Over the last 12 years, we've actively kept our agency small in order to maintain quality of craft and effectiveness of output. We've always felt that as an agency, we are defined ▶

## TIMELINE



**2003**  
AREA 17 is founded in New York and creates a first of its kind music discovery and listening platform for Giant Step.  
**employees: 6**

**2006**  
AREA 17 opens its Paris studio and redesigns Madame Figaro, boosting its traffic and user engagement significantly.  
**employees: 14**

**2007**  
AREA 17 partners with Aol. to start a three-year redesign of many of their properties including Aol Weather and Moviefone.  
**employees: 24**

**2008**  
AREA 17 creates the brand and website for ALLI, the alliance of action sports and its property the Dew Tour.  
**employees: 26**

**2009**  
AREA 17 partners with Vice to create Motherboard, The Creators Project, and VBS, the largest video platform of its kind.  
**employees: 28**

**2010**  
After the creation of its incubator, AREA 17 launches Slash, the premier art event website in Paris, and Krrb, a buy and sell platform.  
**employees: 30**

## BARNES FOUNDATION

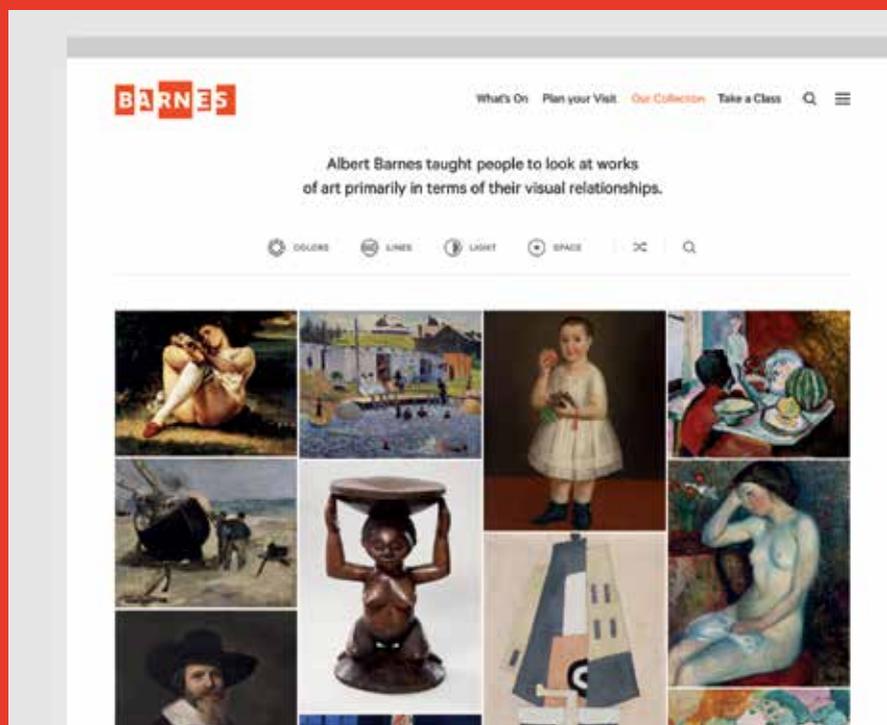
[barnesfoundation.org](http://barnesfoundation.org)

The Barnes Foundation is home to one of the most important collections of Post-Impressionist and early Modernist art in the world, and includes masterworks by Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh, and others. The world-renowned permanent collection is known not just for the artworks themselves, but for the presentation of these artworks in 'ensembles' – groups of paintings, decorative art and sculpture that share formal connections.

Following its move to Philadelphia in 2013, the museum had an opportunity to engage

more regularly with a broad local audience, while continuing to elevate its stature as a must-see destination for out-of-town visitors.

The previous website, designed shortly after the move, made it difficult to elevate programs outside of the permanent exhibition and, as it evolved, expressed a museum-centric rather than visitor-centric organisation of information. Together with the Barnes, AREA 17 helped reshape the story of the museum and create an experience where visitors could easily learn about



the museum, access current and upcoming programming and plan their visit.

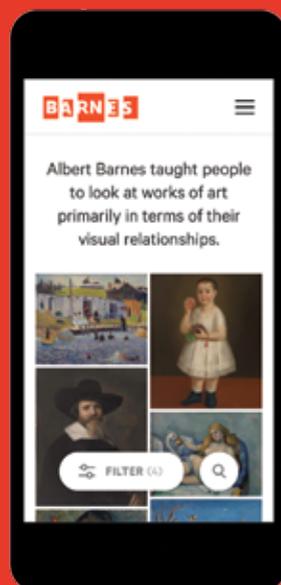
It was important that the redesign reflected the singular nature of the Barnes, and in this we were inspired by the beautiful architecture of the building itself, which achieves a unique blend of minimalism and warmth. By pairing a liberal application of white space with full-bleed, outsized artwork and imagery, the new site approximates the experience of being in the museum.

In support of the aesthetic direction, with each design decision

we asked ourselves if any element could be removed or simplified, such that the overall effect is a 'purity' of information. We limited the number of options on the homepage, reduced the main navigation – tucking less-essential critical pathways under a secondary menu – and designed pages that were dense with information into collapsible components to make it easy for visitors to scan all of the available options before diving deeper on a specific object or topic of interest. The response to the redesign has been overwhelmingly positive.



Above A bold design was adopted for the mobile incarnations of the site. Uncluttered pages let the artwork speak for itself.



Top The use of white space across the new site speaks to the unique architecture that houses the Barnes collection.

Above Inspired use of a collapsible navigation, enables visitors to see the collection.

### 2011

The industry mourns the loss of Arnaud Mercier and a permanent online collection devoted to his work is launched.  
**employees: 32**

### 2012

AREA 17 creates Facebook Stories, a UGC platform that becomes a primary marketing engine for Facebook.  
**employees: 34**

### 2013

Creates the event platforms for Paris Photo and Maison & Objet, the largest design and home decor exhibition in the world.  
**employees: 36**

### 2014

Redesigns the website for ESPN, for the first time in six years, transforming the sports behemoth into a modern, user-first experience  
**employees: 40**

### 2015

AREA 17 redesigns the website for Opéra national de Paris, increasing traffic and ticket sales, and winning the Strategies Grand Prix.  
**employees: 40**

### 2016

AREA 17 creates the video platform for Charlie Rose, presenting over 20 years of interviews with the world's most influential people.  
**employees: 41**

### 2017

AREA 17's long partnership with Pentagram on sites such as Adweek and Billboard culminates in the redesign of their own site.  
**employees: 48**

## THE NEW SCHOOL

[newschool.edu](http://newschool.edu)

Design and social research meet to form an intellectual hub at The New School in New York. But the university was not yet top-of-mind for many prospective students, despite having academic credentials which rival the best schools in the world. Further, the New School was not capitalising on the success of its constituent parts.

Despite Parsons' status as an elite design school, few can grasp how profound an impact its placement within a full-service university has on its progressive approach. So, when The New School came to us with a mandate to "deliver one university," we were thrilled at the challenge.

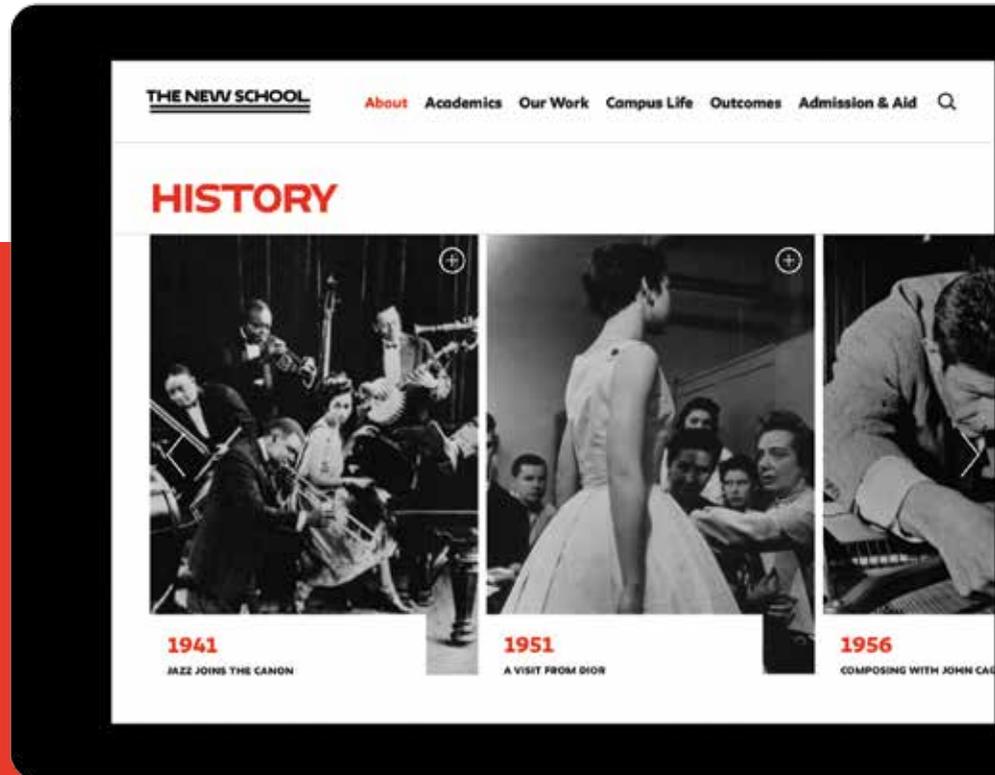
The New School knew that a lot of their

prospective students were self-starters, but weren't always sure which academic path to take. So, we helped those students explore fields of study through a card-based visual browse experience organised around high-level topics, not courses.

With light and fast interactions that allow users to get a quick overview and links to additional information, students get a bird's eye view of how they might carve their own academic path at The New School.

To tell the story of the university, we crafted a user experience with a strong central narrative and channels that made it easy for visitors to discover its individual schools and programs.

We built a robust



Above A long history in design education was also made a critical component of the new site's design.

content-publishing platform so The New School can feature the groundbreaking research and work done by students, alumni, and faculty. And with a mandate to deliver technology that can be used across other sites in the future, we developed a modular front-end that opens the door for consistent experiences

across The New School's digital platform.

The look and feel of the user interface reflects the values of a university looking not just to expand boundaries, but to redraw them. We brought their progressive ethos to life online with a bold, open and airy system that extends the type-driven visual identity by Paula Scher

and the rest of the team from Pentagram.

While invigorating us as designers, the dynamic brand required intense focus to control screens and devices. To solve this, we designed site-wide templates as a foundation for content, then collaborated on page-specific effects that reflected the spirit of the university.

by the clients we collaborate with and the excellent work we produce together.

"Choosing each client we work with is paramount to maintaining our mission because our clients' success is our success. First and foremost, we look to collaborate with clients that have success on their horizon – offering great services and products through a team that is able to bring their own mission to fruition. But further, it is important to us that they have design as part of their business strategy (as we do not want to be in the business of educating clients on its value). And finally, that they are bringing some sort of good into the world, including the support of arts, culture, science and education. While there have been times where we've needed to take on projects because of financial reasons, we pride ourselves on the fact that most clients we have worked with are representative of our values, ambition, and mission."

Like most studios, AREA 17 strive to ensure they continue to develop

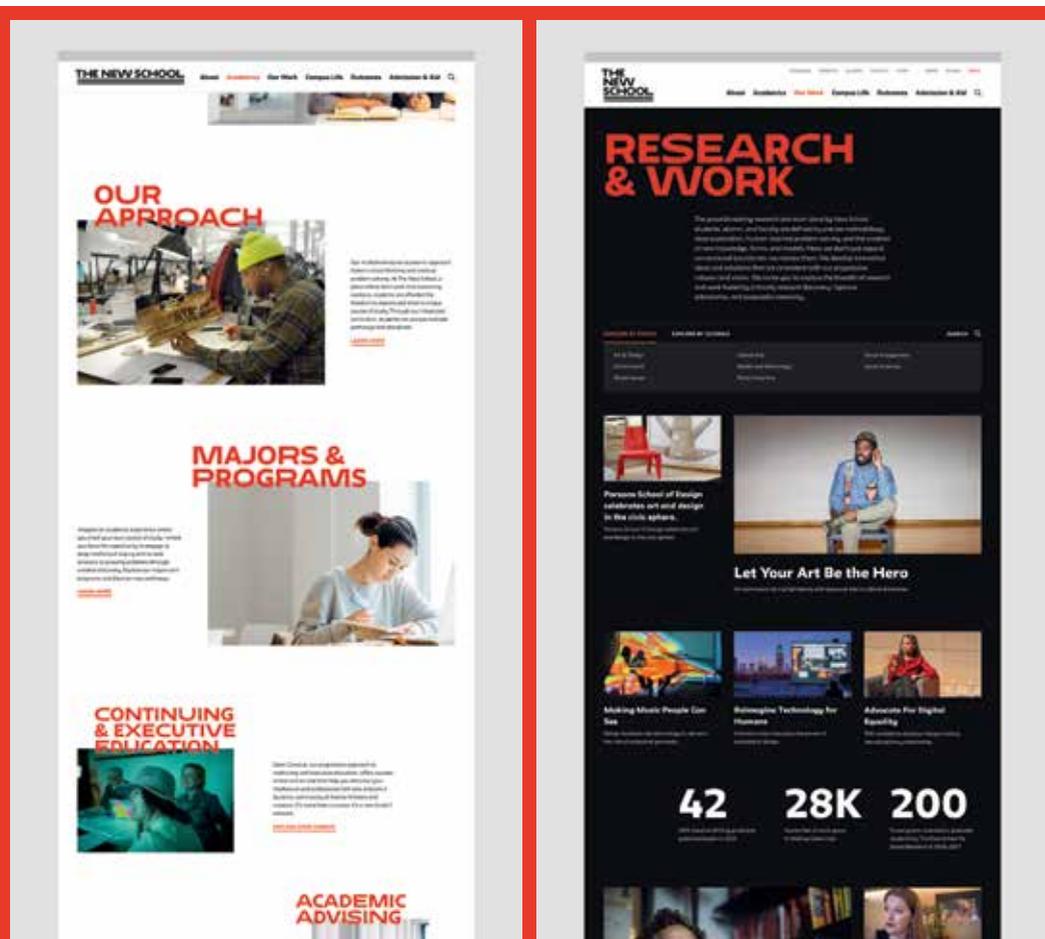
world-class original work for their client base. However, does the studio have an ethos that is enshrined in the work they create? George commented: "It is difficult to pinpoint a single project that is representative of our ethos as we believe that it is the entire body of our work – as a whole – that best represents the complexities and intricacies of who we are. It is a strong belief of ours that every project we work on must be representative of our values, ultimately pushing our mission forward.

"It is a common idea at AREA 17 that we are building a single platform across all projects – with common features being standardised and client-specific ones representing their differentiating factors. Internally we build developer toolkits that allow us to rapidly develop standard features so that we can spend the lion's share of our time on the ones that'll make them different, that'll ensure our clients' success."

How AREA 17 approach the innovative work they produce offers an insight into

Senior Design Director David Lamothe deep in thought. We're not sure what he's listening to. Let's hope it helps him come to a decision.





**Above** The use of bold typography – from Pentagram – ushers visitors across the site to discover not only the available courses, but also the research programs that the school develops.

***In our early days, when everyone was focused on Flash, we doubled down on HTML/CSS/JS. Our belief was that Flash was a media, not the internet itself***

what drives this studio. George outlined their workflow: “We work on many large-scale projects of different sizes. Excluding strategy only or design sprint projects, it is rare that we work on a full-service project that is less than 4-5 months. An average project is 6-7 months and a large-scale one is 9-12 months.

“It is important to note that this doesn’t necessarily mean that we are not quick to market – on the contrary. When we’re approaching a large-scale project, we most often break it down into phases that reach beyond the first public launch. Our first phase focuses on MVP (Minimal Viable Product) and the feedback mechanisms that give us qualitative and quantitative feedback, allowing us to measure success and identify the priorities for subsequent phases.”

George also said: “We work in small interdisciplinary teams, ensuring that each person is vested in the project’s success. At minimum, a project team includes the following roles: Product Director, Technical Director, Producer, UX

Architect, Designer, Interface Engineer, Application Engineer, and QA Tester. Additional support team is added as needed for larger projects.

“From an overall philosophy perspective, we are technically agnostic. However, tactically speaking we develop platforms using open source frameworks, libraries, and components. From a language perspective, we specialise in Ruby and PHP (Laravel).

“Internally we develop standardised toolkits and boilerplates that ensure quality, consistency, and rapidity – and allow us to rapidly develop custom solutions as quickly as a packaged one. As for design, we are Adobe-centric, designing mostly in Illustrator (see our design techniques: [guides.area17.com/design-techniques](https://guides.area17.com/design-techniques)). However, we are currently experimenting with other tools such as Sketch (see page 66). For prototyping, we use various tools depending on project needs such as Framer, Invision, Principle and Axure.”

George also commented: “One of our founding principles was to create a new kind of design vernacular that is native to the internet. So, in our early days, when everyone was focused on Flash, we doubled down on HTML/CSS/JS. Our belief was that Flash was a media, not the internet itself, and if we were to design an internet-specific vernacular, then we must stay away from designing media (which includes broadcast design and other types of interactive design).

“This decision served us well and today our agency is on the forefront of web-based mobile technologies. As for jQuery, we do not use it a lot as it is bloated, however we do invest quite a bit into modern JS frameworks such as Angular, React, and Vue.”

Turning to design for mobile, George explained how AREA 17 approaches these design technologies: “While we have a great deal of experience building native apps, our focus is on mobile web technology. We see similarities in the current web app vs. native app debate as the Flash vs. HTML debate of years past. Back then, we committed ourselves to HTML/CSS/JS as we believed its semantic nature was more suited to the strengths of the internet. That decision positioned us well as Flash died off.

“As with Flash, native apps are closed systems. While native apps allow for a high degree of customisation, fluidity and functionality that takes advantage of the smartphone ecosystem (notifications, ▶



## GEORGE EID

Founder and CEO

*“With our commitment to HTML/CSS/JS in the past, today we are committed to web apps because they are open systems that take full advantage of the semantic nature of the internet. As an agency, we’ve made significant investment into web-based technology for mobile to behave more like a native app”*

*Some people just don't like their photo being taken. A very shy member of the AREA 17 team.*

on desktop or mobile device – to behave more like a native app with transitions and fluidity, but with the added bonus of ubiquity. Moving forward we will commit ourselves to Progressive Web Apps and build up our skills with React and React Native so that we can build one app that can then be both web and native.

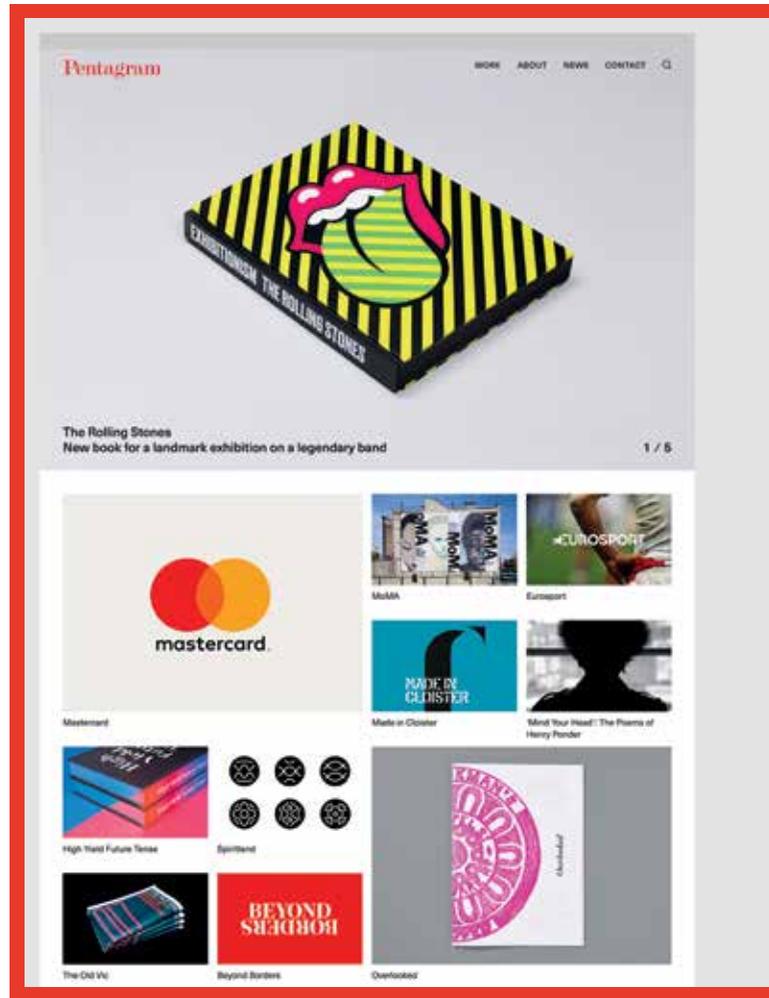
“As for responsive design, we see this as a starting point. Of course, the design must visually respond to a device. However, a mobile-first approach recognises the importance of other technical subjects such as mobile performance, fluidity, ubiquity, and security. And, of course, we believe that context matters when designing an omni-channel experience, with different usage patterns and expectations across different devices and channels, including offline ones.

“We tend to adopt new technologies slowly as our goal is to be on the cutting edge of technology, not the bleeding edge. Plus, it is of the utmost importance to us to deliver consistency on time and on budget. Our engineering team meets twice a month to discuss new technologies and, as needed, new ones are adopted and integrated into our boilerplates and toolkits.”

And, of course, the rise of social media networks has meant designing for these channels must be an integral component of any development. George said: “While

data storage, etc.), Google and Facebook are both seeking ways to bring these capabilities to web apps. Google has created the Progressive Web App architecture that enables native app features on a web app and Facebook has created React Native to allow developers to use JavaScript (React) to create native apps for both iOS and Android.

“Also, with our commitment to HTML/CSS/JS in the past, today we are committed to web apps because they are open systems that take full advantage of the semantic nature of the internet. As an agency, we’ve made significant investment into web-based technology for mobile to behave more like a native app. We’ve committed to Single Page Apps that allow for a website – whether



we are not a marketing agency, we see search, social and syndication as a key part of our work. The work we do is semantic by nature and must be machine readable. If we are going to design the overall experience, it must extend beyond the walls of the domain and across the internet as a whole, even extending into offline environments with connected things and places. When launching a platform, we have an

## AGENCY BREAKDOWN

Leadership 

Strategy 

Design 

Engineering 

Production 

Operations 

## PENTAGRAM

[pentagram.com](http://pentagram.com)

As the world's largest independently owned design firm, Pentagram needs little introduction. Working across a broad spectrum of clients, Pentagram design is woven into the fabric

of our culture and ubiquitous in our everyday lives.

Having enjoyed a long partnership with the firm, beginning with the website redesign for Adweek in 2011 and continuing through the years on projects that include Billboard Magazine, Library of America and Charlie Rose, we felt uniquely positioned to elevate the firm's website to meet their own high standards of design and performance.

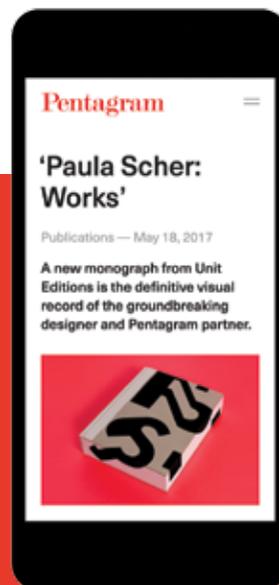
"As a consultant myself, I can't imagine a worse client than one with 20 equal owners, each of whom are opinionated and strong-minded. AREA 17 not only did a great job on our site, but structured a process



*Above* Pentagram's site also offers regular columnists who bring a depth of design understanding that is reflected in AREA 17's design for these components.

that led to interesting discussions, clear decisions, and a result that we can claim as the best expression of our thinking and work." — Michael Bierut.

Our approach focused on consolidating information into fewer entry points, providing more context and curation throughout and designing a browse and search experience that makes it easy to find and



discover relevant work from within the firm's expansive portfolio. Befitting the values of the firm, the work comes first and the visual design and information architecture aim to elevate the firm's output. Functionally-focused, elegant animations provide hints on where to go next — making both navigating the site and browsing the work effortless and enjoyable.

With an archive of nearly 1,000 projects across a range of disciplines, it was crucial that the CMS allows partners to easily customise each case study. A modular system with fixed and flowing underlying grids, individual projects can be optimised for the visuals that are best suited to it.

Visually-driven, all case study images open into a full-screen slideshow and for select projects, a secondary 'story' view splits the screen into independent narrative and image panels. Not only is the website a showcase for Pentagram's prolific output, but a hub for all of their rich contributions to the industry. Champions of design, the website includes a stream of regular columns, speaking engagements and podcasts.



*Above* The modular design of the CMS was critical to enable case studies to showcase the work of each client.

exhaustive checklist to ensure adherence to best practices for performance, search, social, and other types of syndication."

The breadth and depth of the work AREA 17 has created is thanks to the talented people that make up the studio. George outlined how valuable people are to AREA 17: "We are made of people and it's the success of our team as individuals that makes up the success of our agency. We look for talented people who have a consistent record showing commitment to their craft. But further, we look for curious, helpful, and committed people: people who love to explore, learn, and iterate; people who seek to collaborate with others, respecting the interdisciplinary nature of our work; people who like to help others and be helped; people who like to finish things 100 per cent. Ego has no place at our agency."

As a dynamic studio driven to not just create new innovative work, but craft whole new experiences, what does the future hold? "Over the years, we've kept ourselves small in order to maintain the highest level of quality output. And as a

small team, we invest a lot into the professional growth of each individual. Because of this commitment to quality and professional development, many who join AREA 17 stay around for a long time. In recent years, we've realised that we've become quite senior and because we like to keep project teams small, it has left little room for junior talent.

"In order to maintain our agency for the future, we must look to the role of apprentices within our team structure and that means growth. However, we believe that the world doesn't need another large digital agency and if we are going to grow, we must grow our soul.

"In 2017, we've looked internally to 'service design' ourselves and the programs we offer. This will act as a foundation to our growth, as we introduce multiple levels of talent within the agency, and ensure that it doesn't mean multiple levels of quality output.

"We are not looking to diversify, but rather become more focused as we grow. So that we can truly affect change within our ever-changing industry and be a

wonderful part of the digital community as we all build the future of the internet and how it becomes an extension of our daily lives, not a distraction from it."

The approach AREA 17 takes to each piece of work they create is akin to engineering. Understanding how form and design integrate to create experiences in the digital space, is a skill few studios master to the level AREA 17 have achieved. Code becomes not only functional in their hands of AREA 17, but also engaging and beautiful. ■



**area17.com**  
**Founder** George Eid  
**Year founded** 2003  
**Current employees** 48  
**Locations** Paris, New York  
**Services** Strategic planning  
 Visual identity design  
 User experience design  
 Web and mobile engineering  
 Analytics and optimisation