Florida DrupalCamp

Feb 2025

BACK DROP TO THE FUTURE

ATEN DESIGN GROUP

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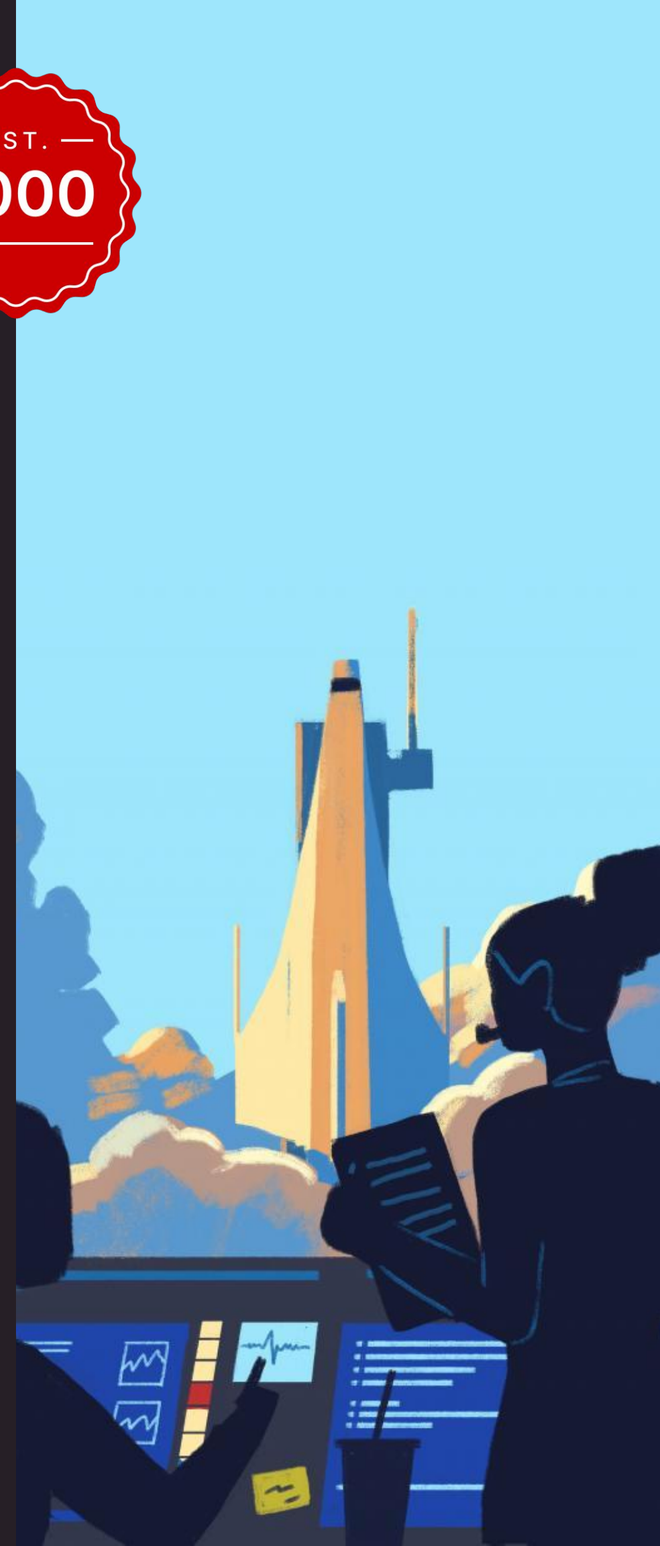
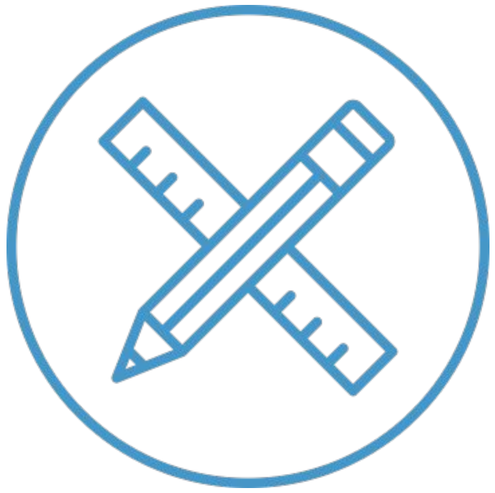


Strategy



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Special thanks to

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University of Denver

For being a conversation partner
on this topic and reviewing an
early version of this presentation.

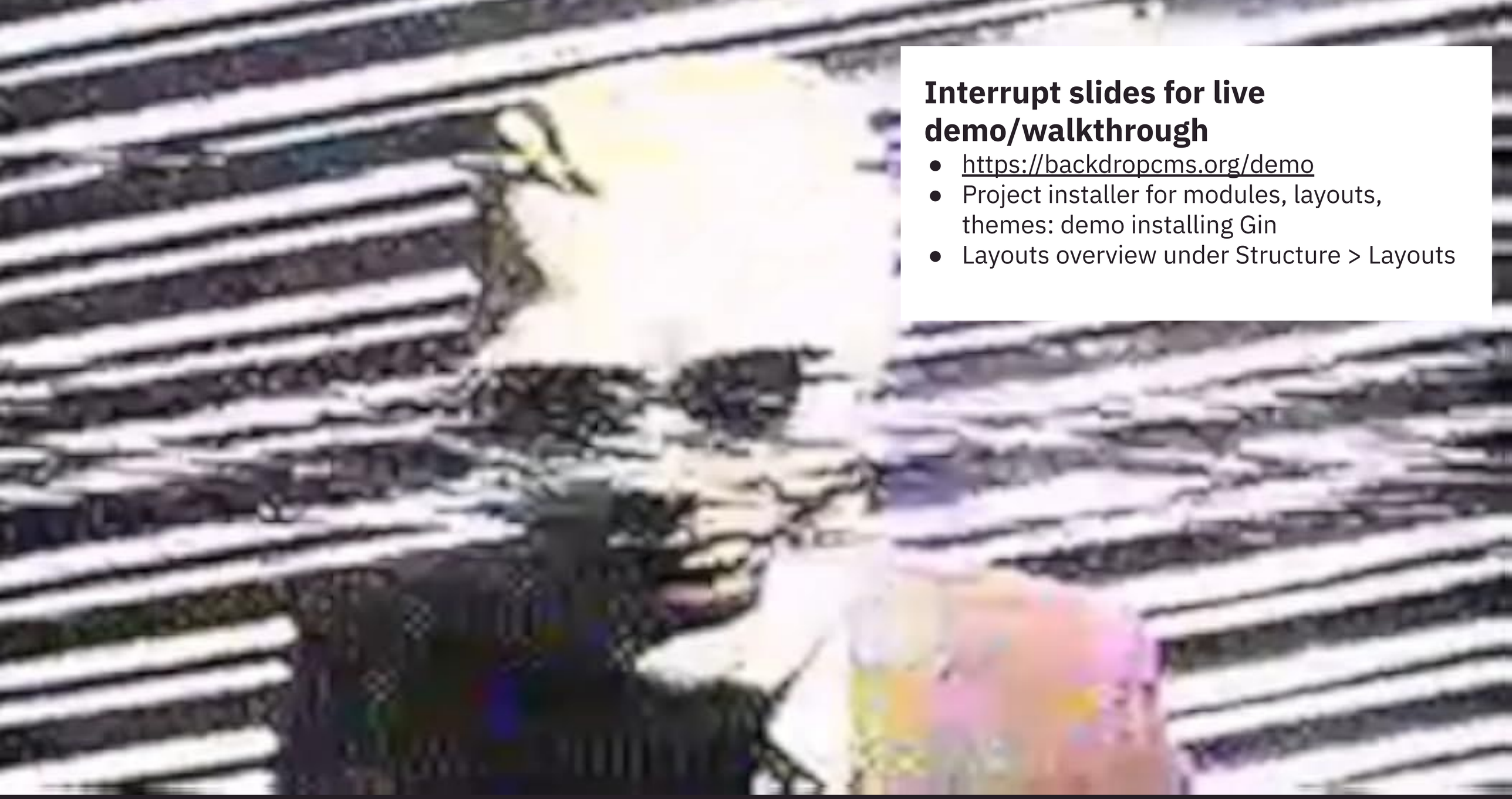
Special thanks to

Backdrop User Group

Fortnightly community meeting.

For giving up a typical meeting to talk through and give ideas on an early version of this presentation.

Who has heard of (or used) Backdrop?



Interrupt slides for live demo/walkthrough

- https://backdropcms.org/demo
- Project installer for modules, layouts, themes: demo installing Gin
- Layouts overview under Structure > Layouts

Quick background

- Fork of Drupal 7 (or very early Drupal 8)
- A group of people who loved Drupal and were very active with Drupal saw the scope of changes moving deeper into Enterprise space/budgets, realized it was going to be too much for too many people to follow, and decided to fork the project.
- Affordability and backwards compatibility were always key commitments.

Similarities with modern Drupal

- Great for clean, structured data
- Views
- Content types
- Taxonomy
- Granular roles and permissions
- Configuration management
- CKE5 out of the box *(Backdrop also has actively maintained TinyMCE contrib option)*

Some key differences from modern Drupal

- Layouts are different
- Simpler implementation
- Many of the same questions are answered but in a different way (typically less complex).

- When Drupal got “off the island” and integrated Symfony, Twig, went fully in on the Composer workflow and the whole dependency tree model, for many projects, everything was awesome...

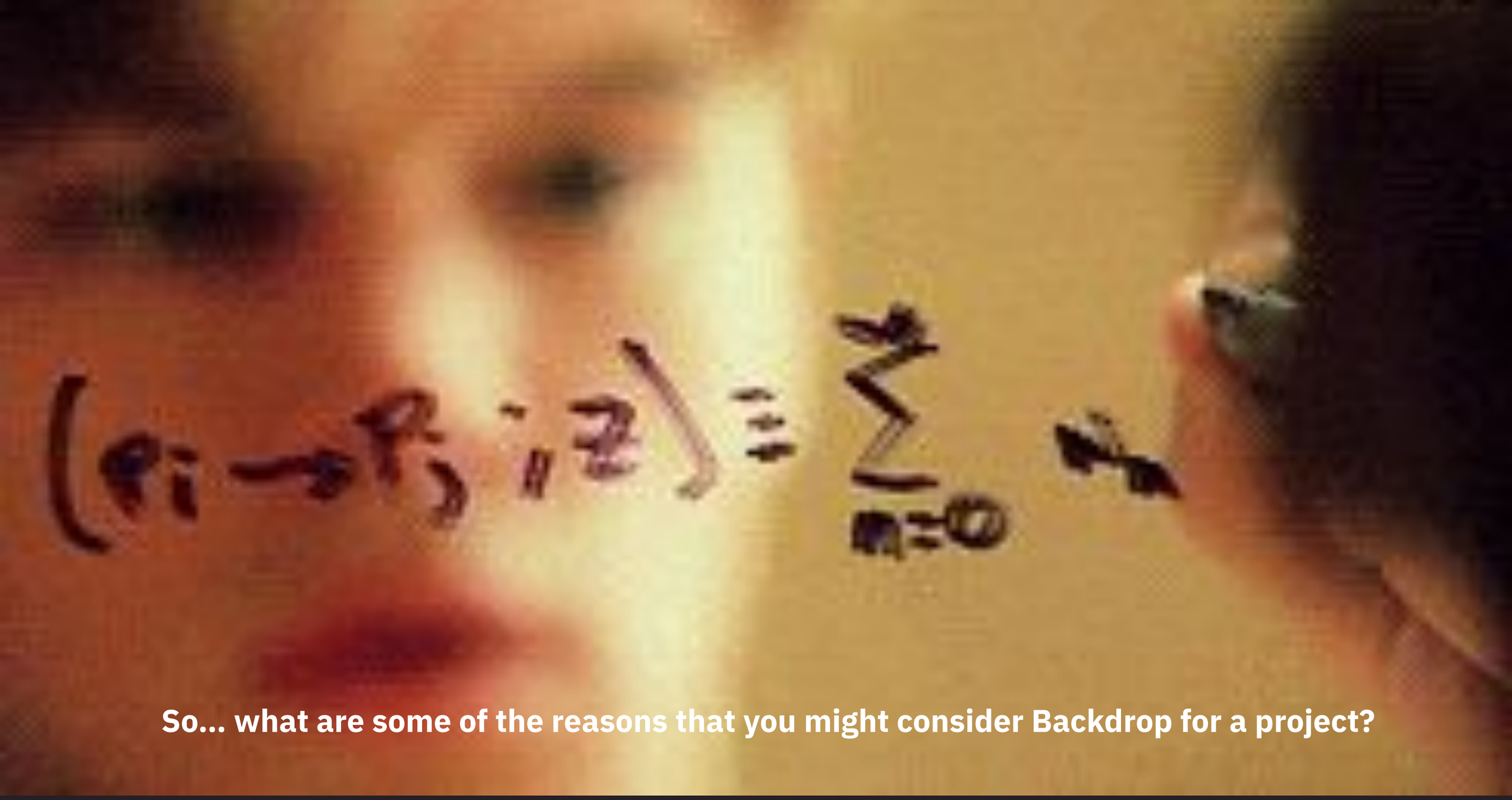
...but for other projects, getting off the island resulted in a system that is too heavy, too complex, and too expensive to build and maintain.

Backdrop CMS mission

Backdrop CMS enables people to build highly customized websites affordably, through collaboration and open source software.

Backdrop CMS principles

1. **Easier updates:** Backwards compatibility is important.
2. **Simplicity:** Write code that the majority can understand.
3. **Focus:** Only include features that benefit the majority.
4. **Extensibility:** Ensure Backdrop can be customized.
5. **Security:** Keep sites and people safe.
6. **Performance:** Meet low system requirements.
7. **Release on-time:** Plan and schedule releases.
8. **Freedom:** Remain both Free and Open Source.



So... what are some of the reasons that you might consider Backdrop for a project?

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project?

Affordability

- Drupal 7 site upgrades (upgrade, not migration)
- Lower total cost of ownership/maintenance

“We have a fiduciary duty to our university. We take stewardship of funds and resources seriously. With Backdrop on Pantheon, we were able to save nearly half a million dollars!”

-Zach Chandler, former Director, Research IT and Innovation (now IT Strategy & Services) at Stanford University (Source: Pantheon+Aten case study)

That's not a small amount, said Chandler. "It is equivalent to several postdoc salaries, which – quite honestly – the university (and the world) needs more than we need any particular website technology, assuming the alternative is just as viable, which Backdrop is.”

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project?

Predictability

- Commitment to backwards compatibility
- A safe alternative to LTS, where you still get improvements
- Release schedule is set, three times a year
- Bug squad / Security team / community ownership of contrib

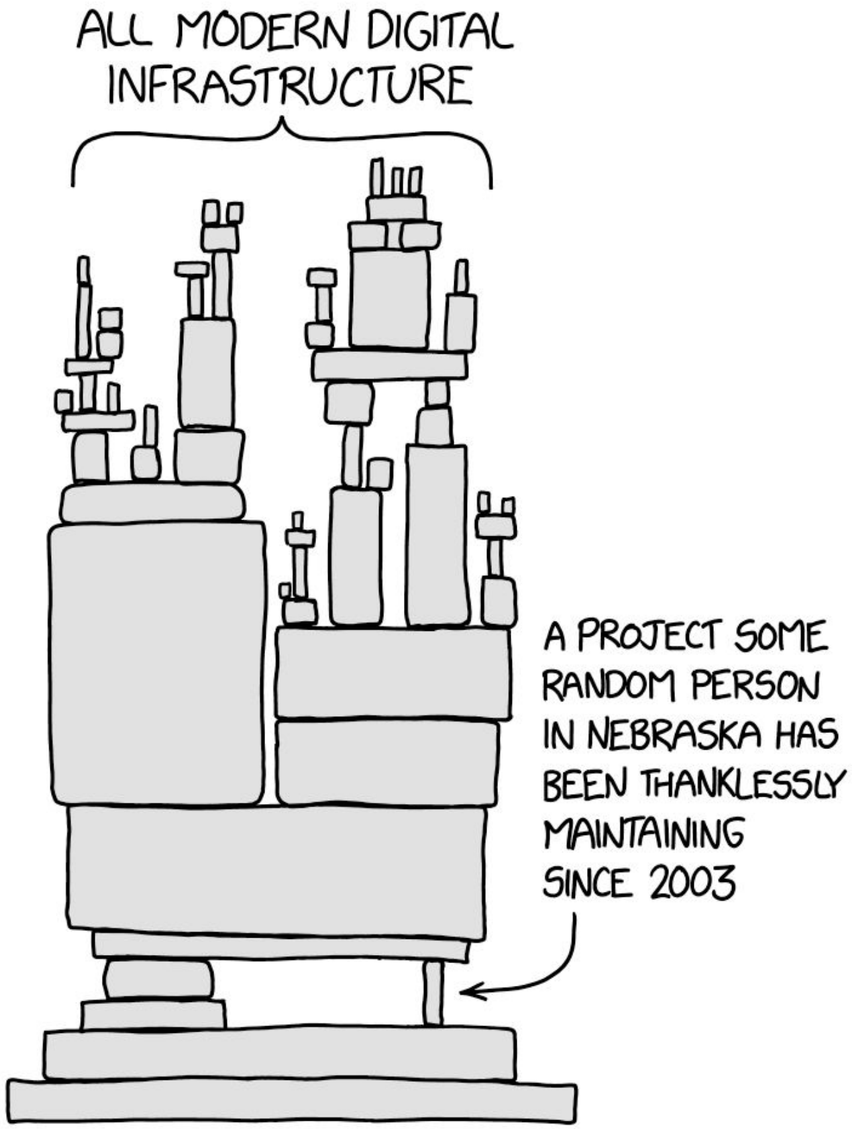
quicksketch

This might not qualify to answer the question; but I think a "meta" answer to "what's the biggest feature" might be "no breaking changes". Yes, we dropped support for MySQL 5.0 and 5.1, but that decision was backed by Telemetry reporting 0% of current sites use those old versions. Backdrop 1.30.0 marks **10 years** of continuous incremental improvement while maintaining maximum compatibility. That high-compatibility translates to a low cost of ownership.

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project?

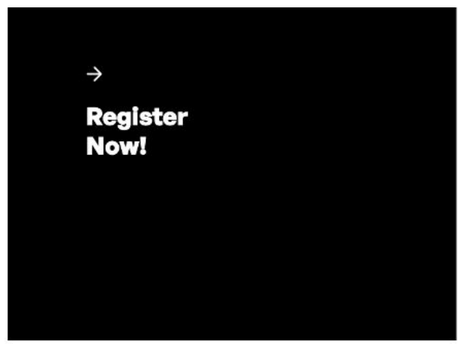
Simplicity

- Smaller dependency stack (fewer moving parts)
- Traditional power, structure, flexibility of Drupal but in a simpler shell
- You don’t need Drupal-only solutions like Mercury Editor, modern Drupal’s webform



https://xkcd.com/2347

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project? [Simplicity]



Follow the Drupal Brick Road? Is Drupal Just Complex or Becoming Too Complicated?

Site-Building 158 All Attendees Sun 11:00am to 11:45am (2/23/25)

Users and Admins and Developers, OH MY! Have Drupal's increasing number of third party dependencies become too complicated for new users? Are those dependencies breaking Drupal's more advanced features?

In this discussion, Drupal is going to be held up to a microscope, dissected, and analyzed from a historical user perspective. Who builds, administers, and ultimately uses Drupal sites, and how has that changed over time? Are all of these changes and added dependencies on outside technology actually for the better, or has Drupal

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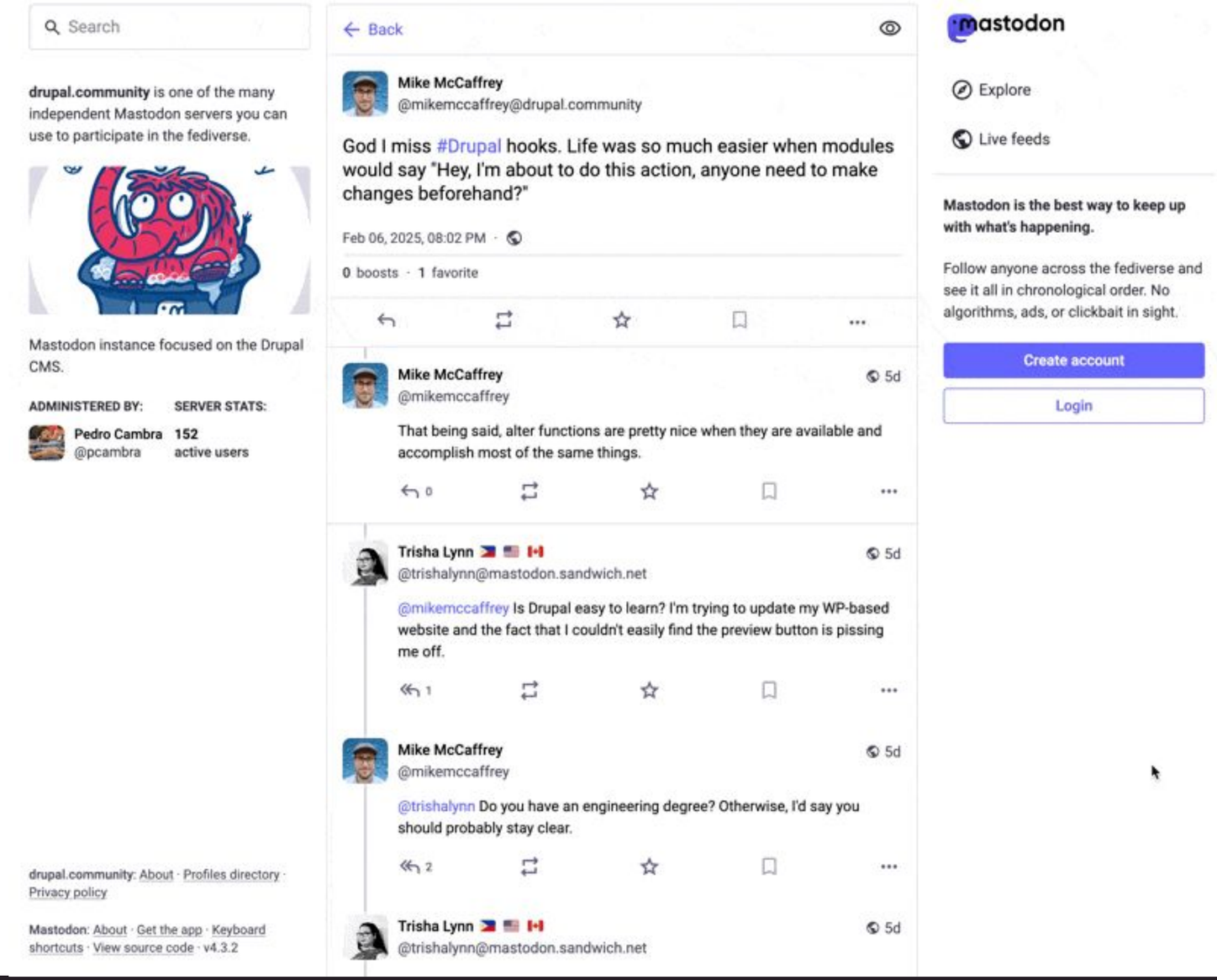
Why might you consider Backdrop for a project? [Simplicity]



Why might you consider Backdrop for a project?

Efficiency

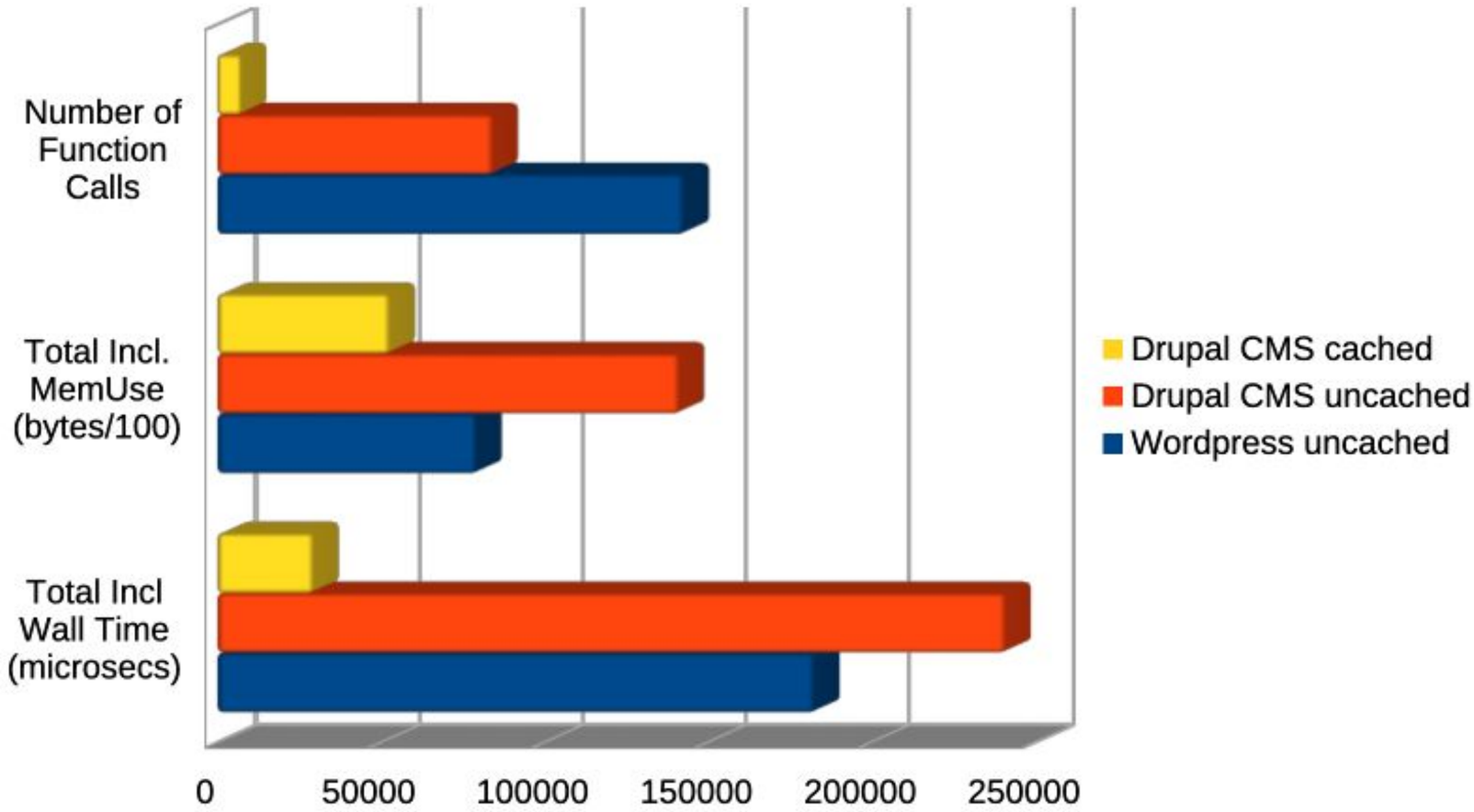
- Spin up quickly without a lot of maintenance overhead
- Reuse config (recipes-lite)
- Performance: can run on shared or lower-resourced hosting; can also run extremely well self-hosted or on hosts like Pantheon ***[NOTE: mention config storage flexibility?]***
- Lower resource usage: potential positive environmental impact

Eco-friendly Web Alliance:

“The internet, a seemingly ubiquitous aspect of modern life, has a significant carbon footprint, contributing to 3.7% of global emissions – more than the aviation industry.”

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project? [Efficiency]

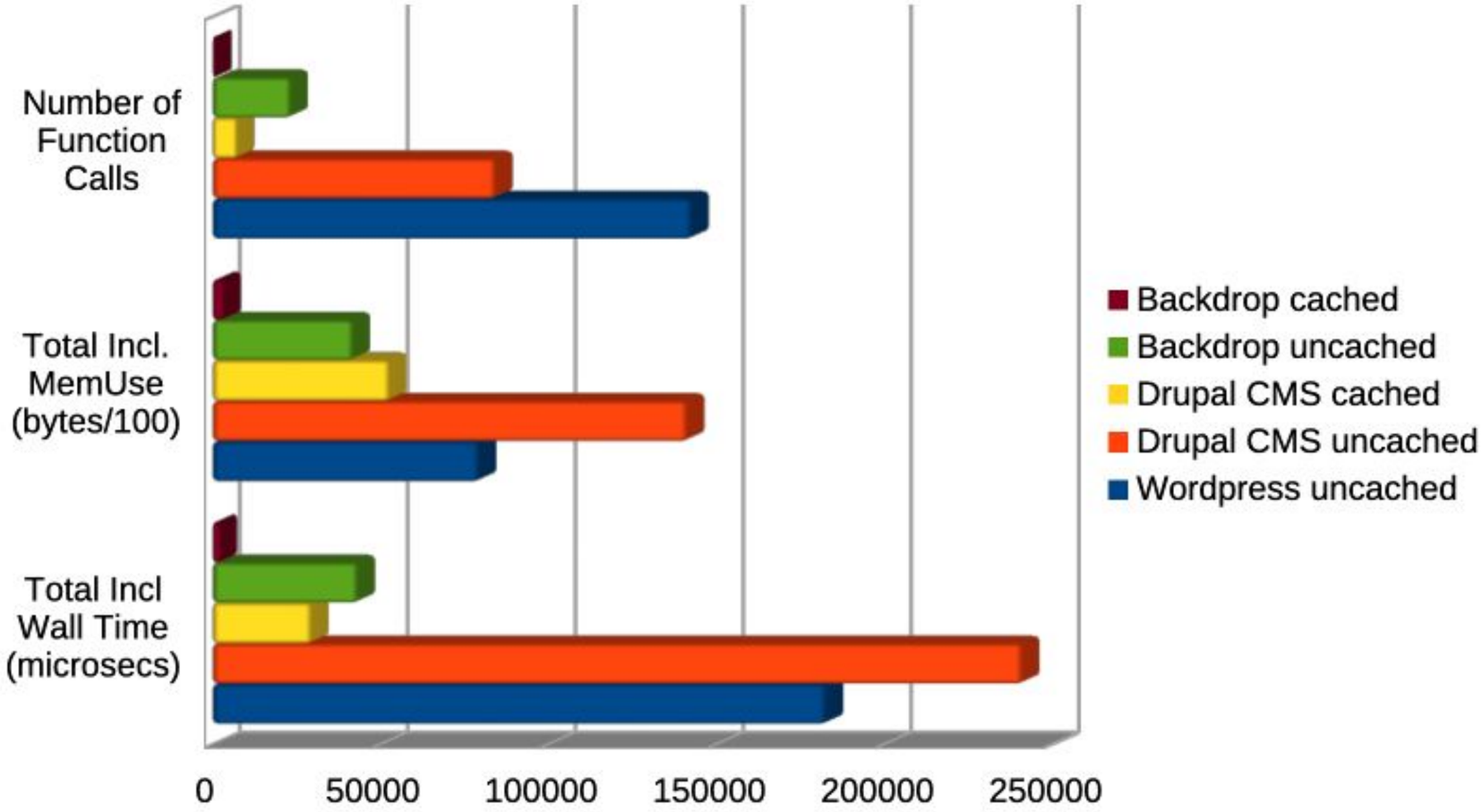
Drupal CMS (cached/uncached) vs. core Wordpress (uncached).



Data from https://www.tag1consulting.com/blog/drupal-cms-vs-wordpress-performance-2025

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project? [Efficiency]

Backdrop CMS (cached/uncached) vs. Drupal CMS (cached/uncached) vs. core Wordpress (uncached).



As with the original comparison, this is not a complex, real world comparison, but can provide some information.

Why might you consider Backdrop for a project?

Philosophically

- Governance structure of the project
    - Project Management Committee (PMC) as modeled after the Apache project, rather than a “benevolent dictator for life” model. This is reassuring when considering things like the recent Wordpress drama.
- Needs of the project/organization/budget over dev preferences (avoid dev “shiny object” syndrome)
    - Smaller budgets for development and/or long-term maintenance
    - Small (or no) client dev team
    - Project specs make Backdrop appealing even if Drupal could work
    - Higher ed example: Sites provided to professors, units, departments, clubs that don’t have extremely difficult specifications.

Early comparison of Backdrop and Drupal CMS/Starshot

Starshot:

- Not mature yet, moving quickly, has a lot of excitement in the Drupal world
- More AI-forward
- More highly developed recipes to package and pre-configure contrib modules
- Details of future functionality are yet to be seen (Experience Builder)

[Mike Anello]: “I don't think 'seasoned Drupal developers' are going to be affected all that much by Drupal CMS nor Experience Builder—with both of these things, we'll bring new folks into the Drupal community, and a portion of those will quickly require things that require a 'seasoned developer'.”

[Kevin Reynen]: Still expensive, requires constant maintenance and updates due to the modern Composer workflow and large dependency tree.

Early comparison of Backdrop and Drupal CMS/Starshot

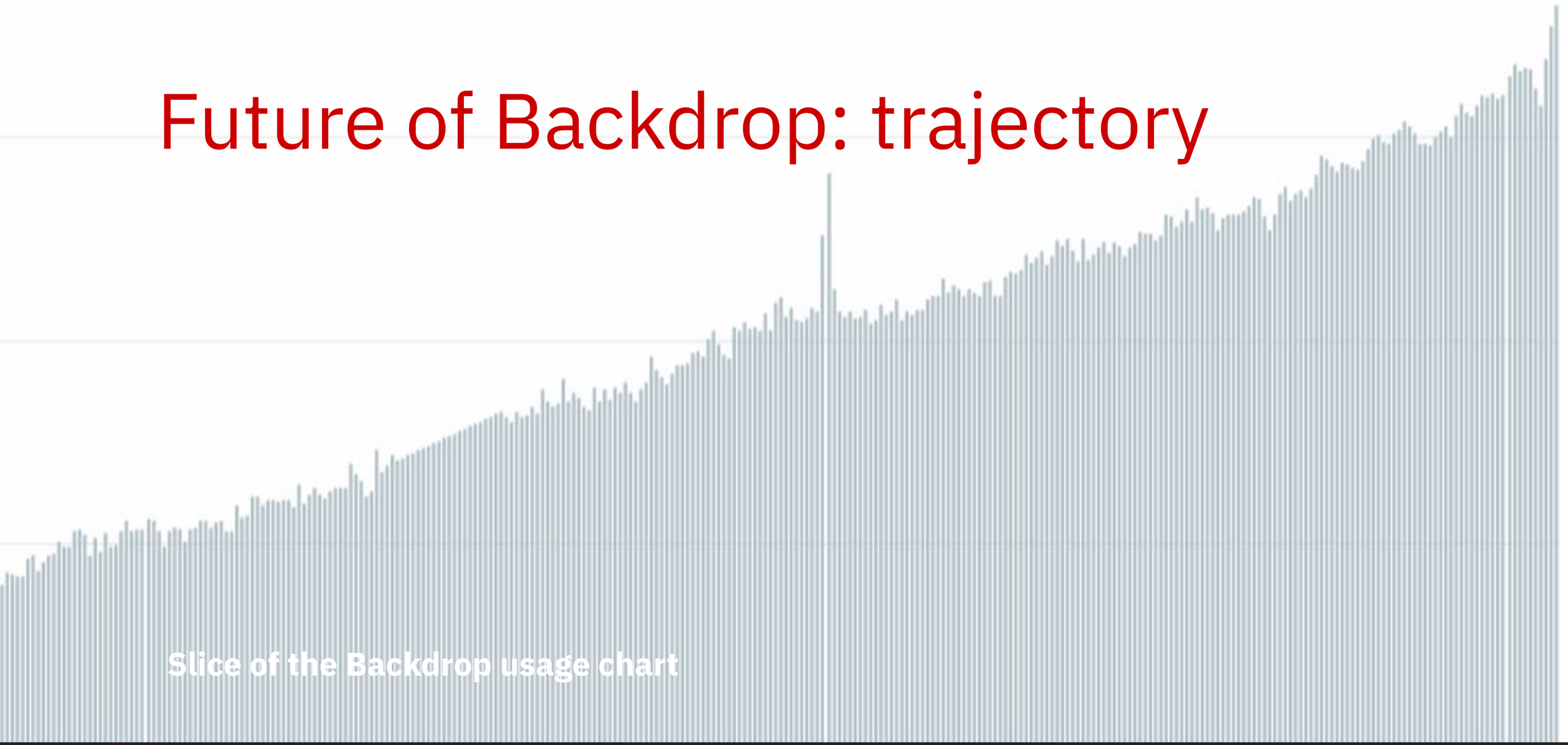
Backdrop:

- Commitment to backwards compatibility even with improvements and new features
- Predictable release cycle
- Many “80% use case” modules have been merged into core
  - Some as core modules, some more deeply integrated (e.g. pathauto, token)
- Not all the bells and whistles (but still a lot of bells and whistles)
  - Some that aren’t in core are available in contrib: Gin theme, AI module, etc.
  - Others in process and being answered differently: Recipes

Future of Backdrop

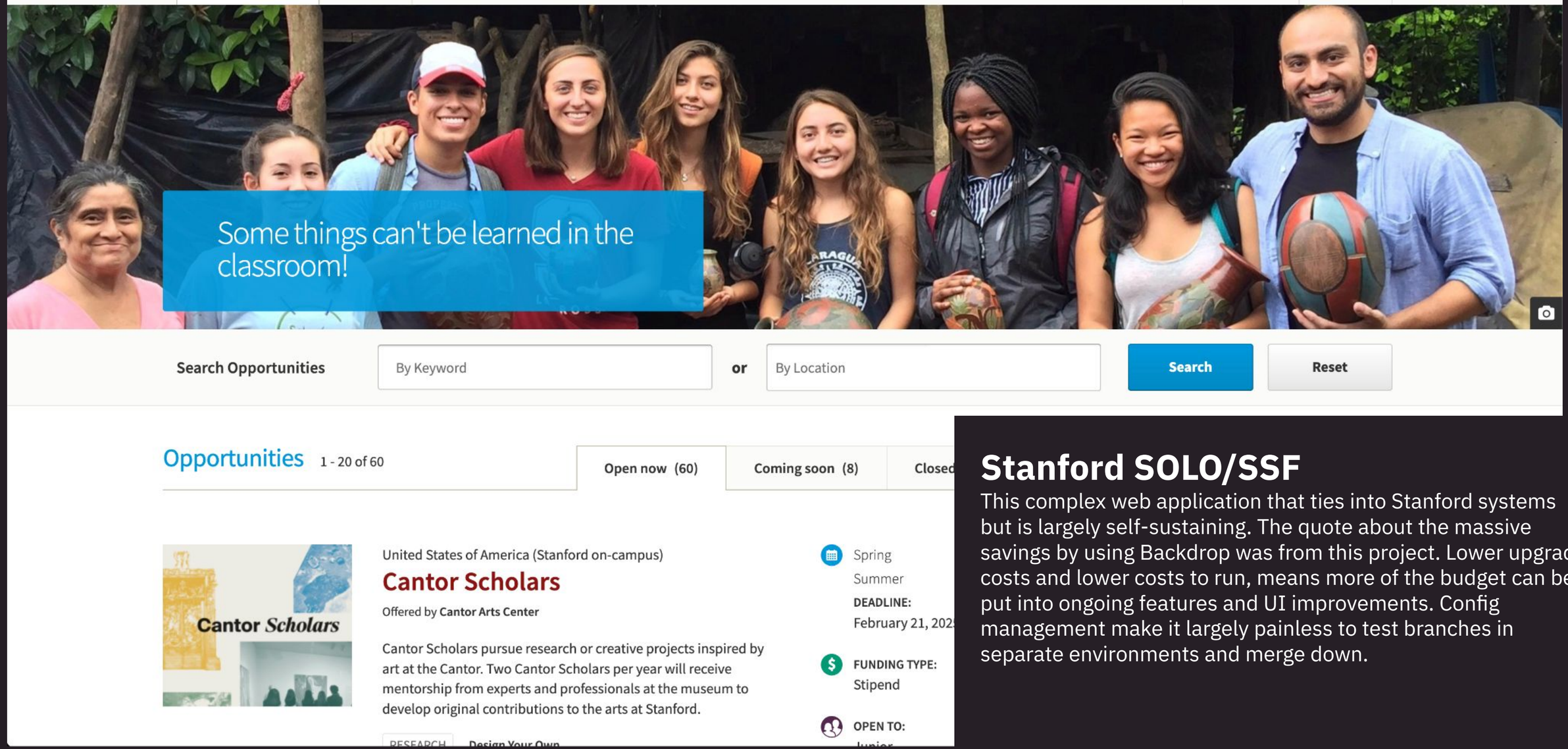
- No denying it is currently a smaller community – but it’s steadily growing with 10 years already under its belt.
- Led by diverse voices in the Project Management Committee (PMC) as modeled after the Apache project, rather than a “benevolent dictator for life” model. This is reassuring when considering things like the recent Wordpress drama.
- Agencies are beginning to offer Backdrop as an option: using it and also contributing back to it.
- And the project is still committed to backwards compatibility as much as possible even with ongoing improvements

Future of Backdrop: trajectory



Slice of the Backdrop usage chart

Bite-sized case studies from Aten



Stanford SOLO/SSF

This complex web application that ties into Stanford systems but is largely self-sustaining. The quote about the massive savings by using Backdrop was from this project. Lower upgrade costs and lower costs to run, means more of the budget can be put into ongoing features and UI improvements. Config management make it largely painless to test branches in separate environments and merge down.

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Rick Rubin

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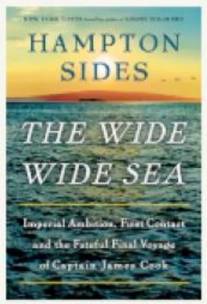
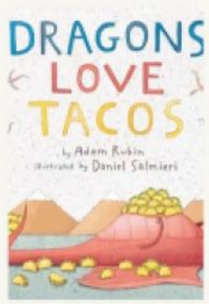
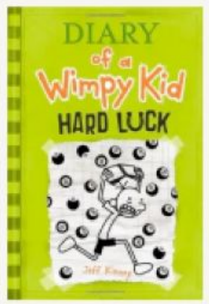
America's Test Kitchen



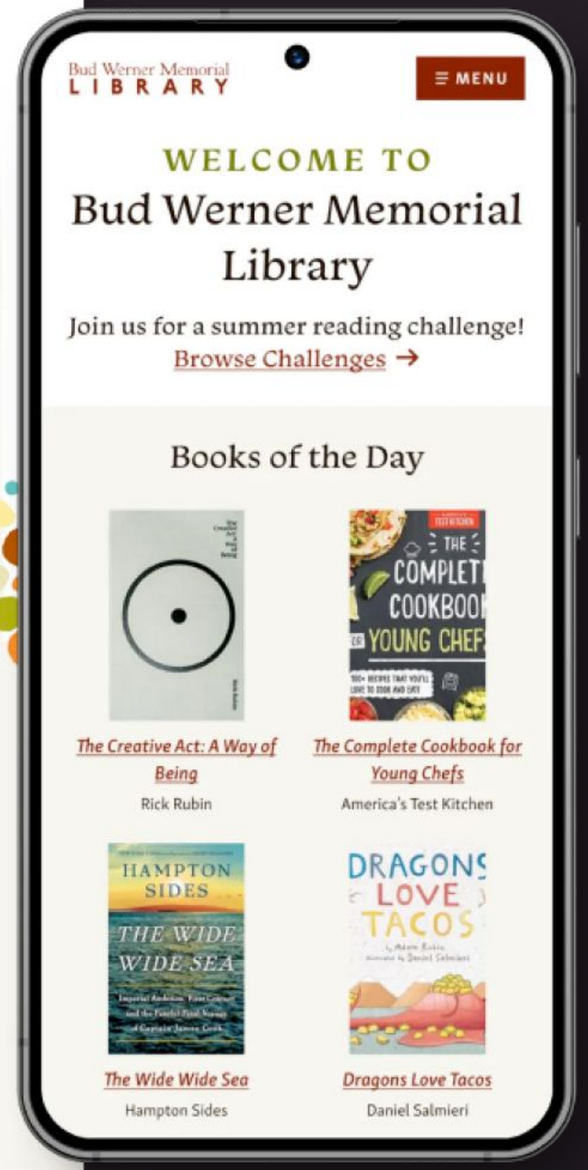
The Wide Wide Sea
Hampton Sides

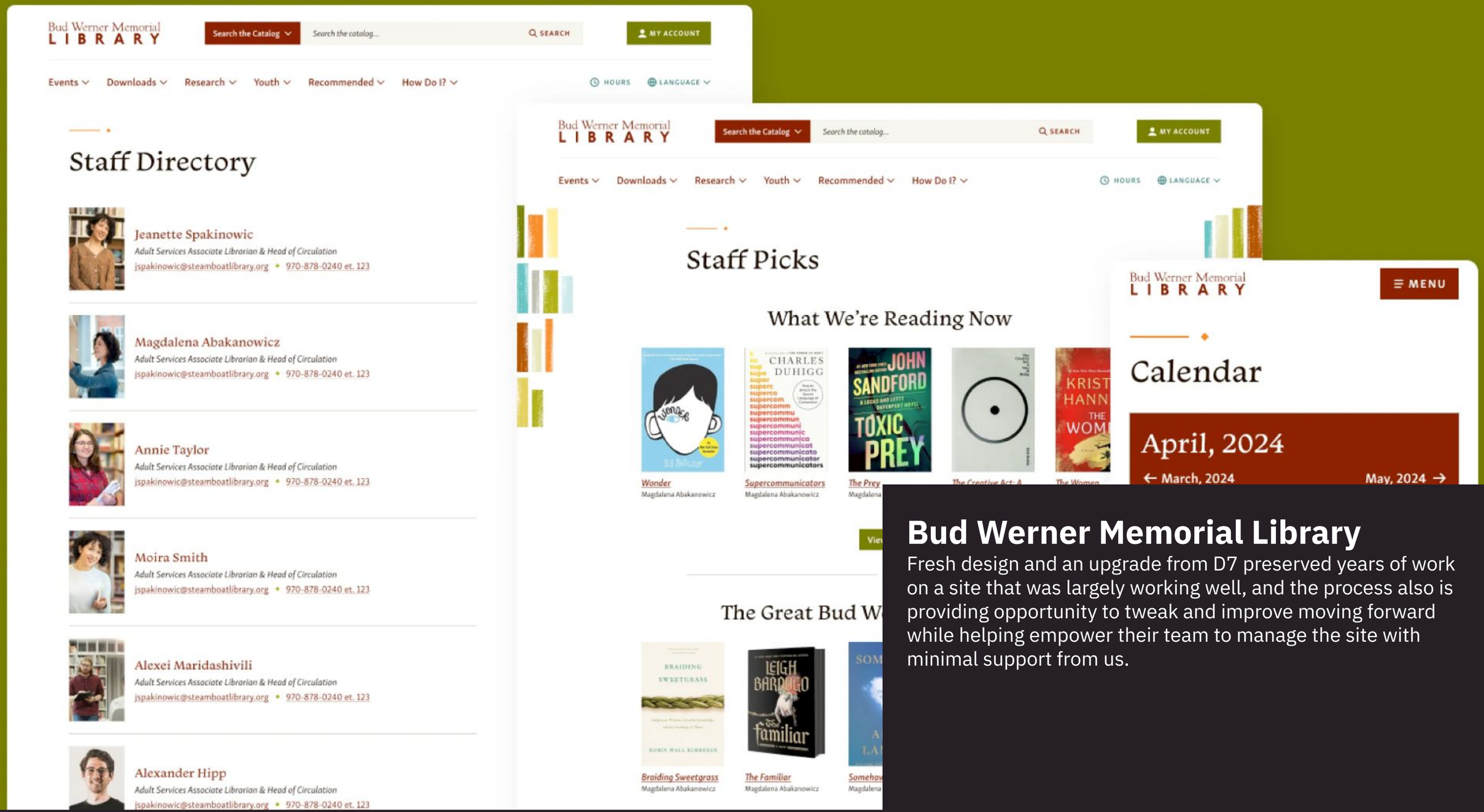


Dragons Love Tacos
Daniel Salmieri



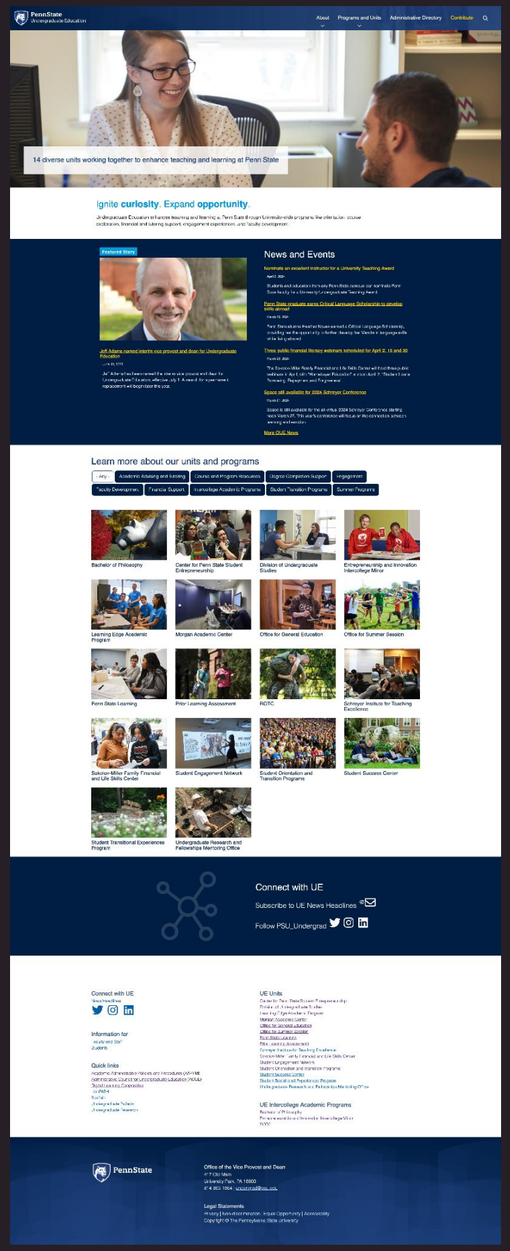
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck
Author

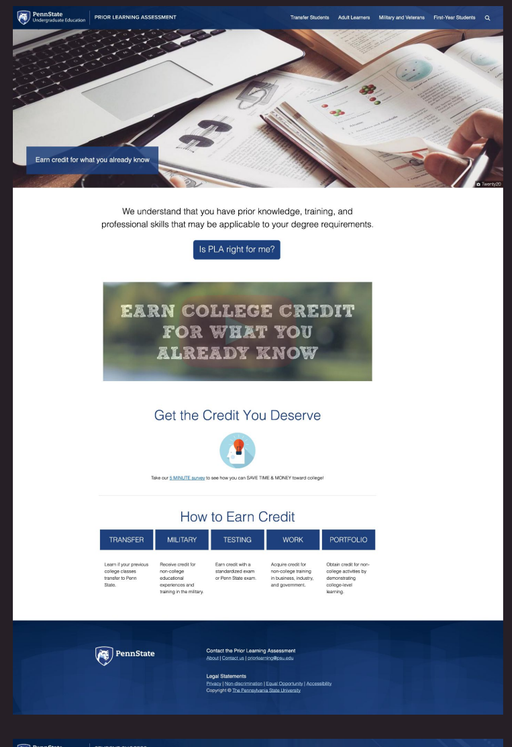


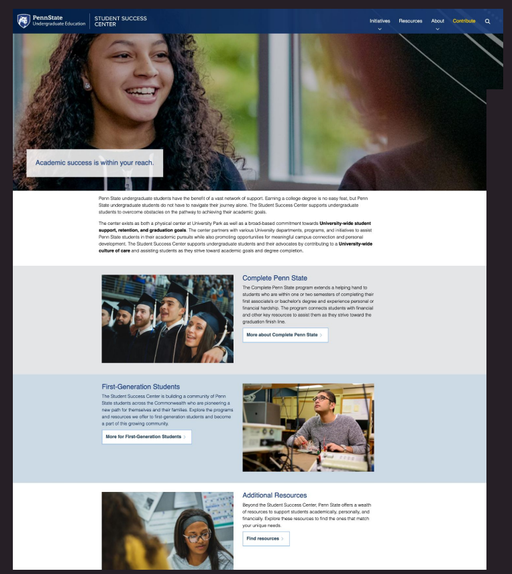


Bud Werner Memorial Library

Fresh design and an upgrade from D7 preserved years of work on a site that was largely working well, and the process also is providing opportunity to tweak and improve moving forward while helping empower their team to manage the site with minimal support from us.







Penn State Undergraduate Education

A Backdrop solution provides different units and departments with a consistent shell to work within, with all default content types, paragraph types, etc. pre-configured using a shared config collection that gets imported. Ongoing maintenance time is minimal. Configuration settings allow some customization of color scheme and a few other choices. Going on a dozen or more sites upgraded from Drupal 7, created from scratch, and potential for migrations from other systems.

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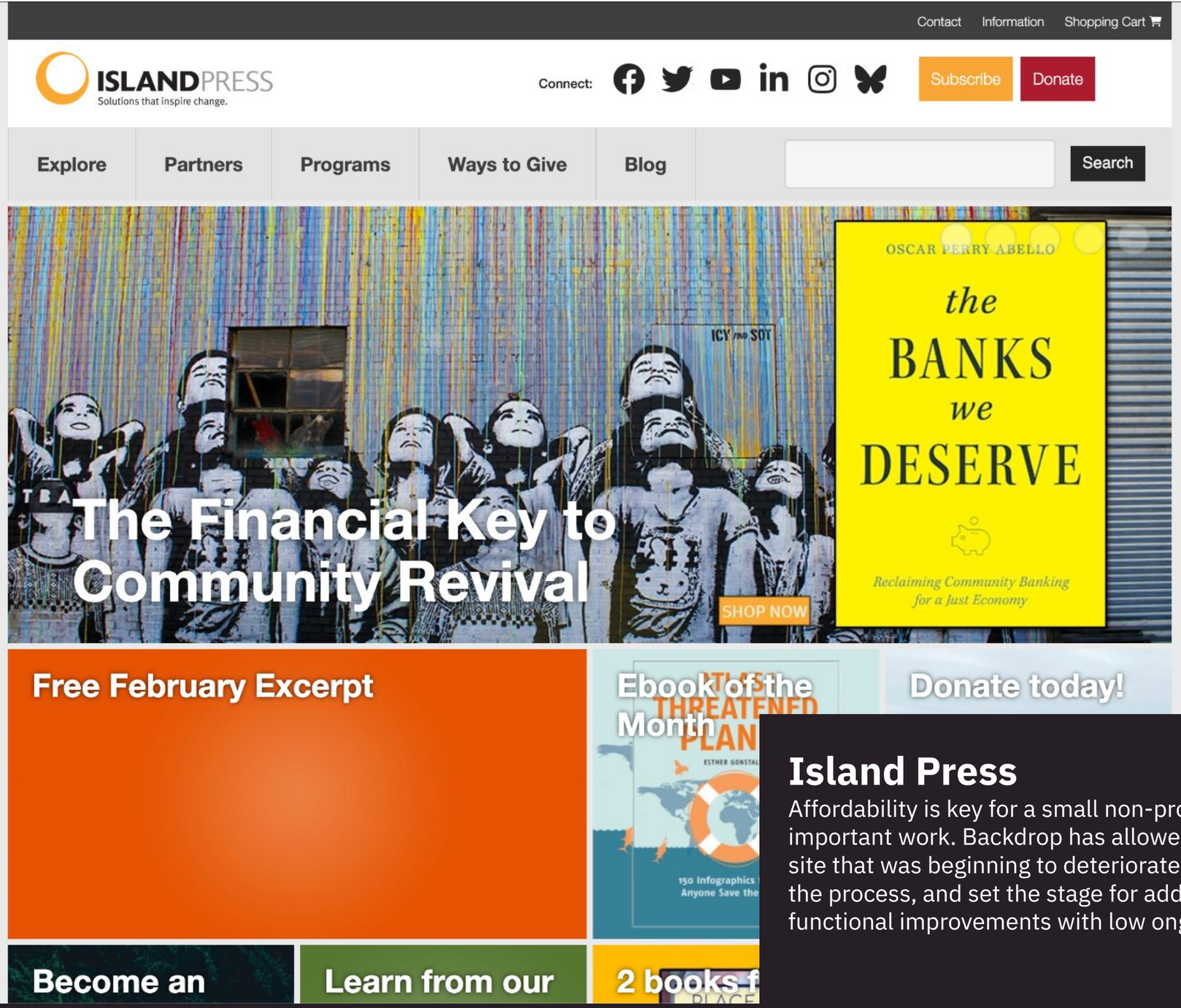

Island Press

Affordability is key for a small non-profit organization doing important work. Backdrop has allowed us to upgrade Drupal 7 site that was beginning to deteriorate, fix many of the issues in the process, and set the stage for additional future visual and functional improvements with low ongoing maintenance costs.

Backdrop resources

- Code: **github.com/backdrop/backdrop**
- Chat: **backdrop.zulipchat.com**
- Forum: **forum.backdropcms.org**
- Site: **backdropcms.org** and Demo: **backdropcms.org/demo**
- Docs: **docs.backdropcms.org**
- Bluesky: **@backdropcms.bsky.social**
- Mastodon: **@backdropcms@phpc.social**
- Meetings: Thursdays **backdropcms.org/news/meetings**

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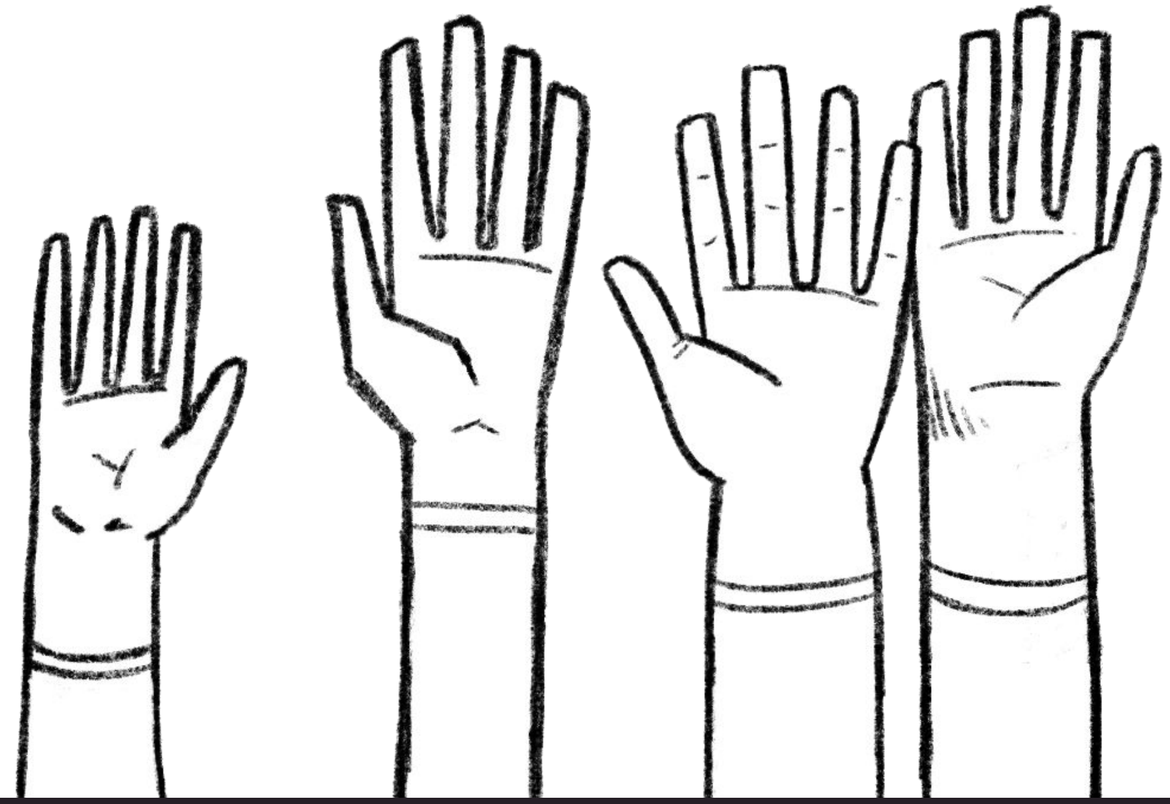
Questions?