

Dessau Design System

Client: Self-directed · Role: Design system architecture & engineering · Year: 2026

A standalone design system with no framework and no runtime dependencies — semantic HTML first, progressive enhancement, and WCAG 2.2 AA as a floor. Neon, the system this site runs on, is derived from it.

What it is

Dessau is a design system delivered as plain CSS and a small amount of optional JavaScript. There is no component framework to adopt, no build step a consumer has to run, and nothing loaded from a shared CDN at runtime — a product links one stylesheet and writes standard HTML with dds- classes.

Principles it is built on

- **Semantic HTML first.** A `<button>`, a `<dialog>`, a `<details>`, a `<table>` — never a `<div>` with a role bolted on.
- **Progressive enhancement.** Every component renders and works with CSS alone; JavaScript adds behaviour the platform does not provide, and its absence degrades to something usable rather than broken.
- **Native before custom.** The platform's own elements and APIs (popover, `<dialog>`, `:user-invalid`, scroll-driven animation) are preferred over re-implementations.
- **Semantic tokens only.** Colour, space, type and radius are consumed through named custom properties that follow the theme — never a raw hex, never a primitive ramp step.
- **Never colour alone.** Status and emphasis always pair colour with text or an icon and a change in weight or fill.

Scope

Around forty components and a dozen recurring interaction patterns — forms and validation, navigation and site chrome, content display, overlays, multi-step flows — each with a fixed, ARIA-correct markup contract, a rendered reference, and a machine-readable inventory so an agent can answer "does this already exist?" before building anything.

Outcome

Dessau is consumed in two ways: directly by a product, or as the base for a **derived system** that substitutes the foundation (colour, type, radius) while inheriting every component unchanged. Neon — the brand layer this portfolio is built on — is exactly that: Dessau's components and ARIA, Martin Gude's palette and typography, shipped with no runtime tie back to Dessau.