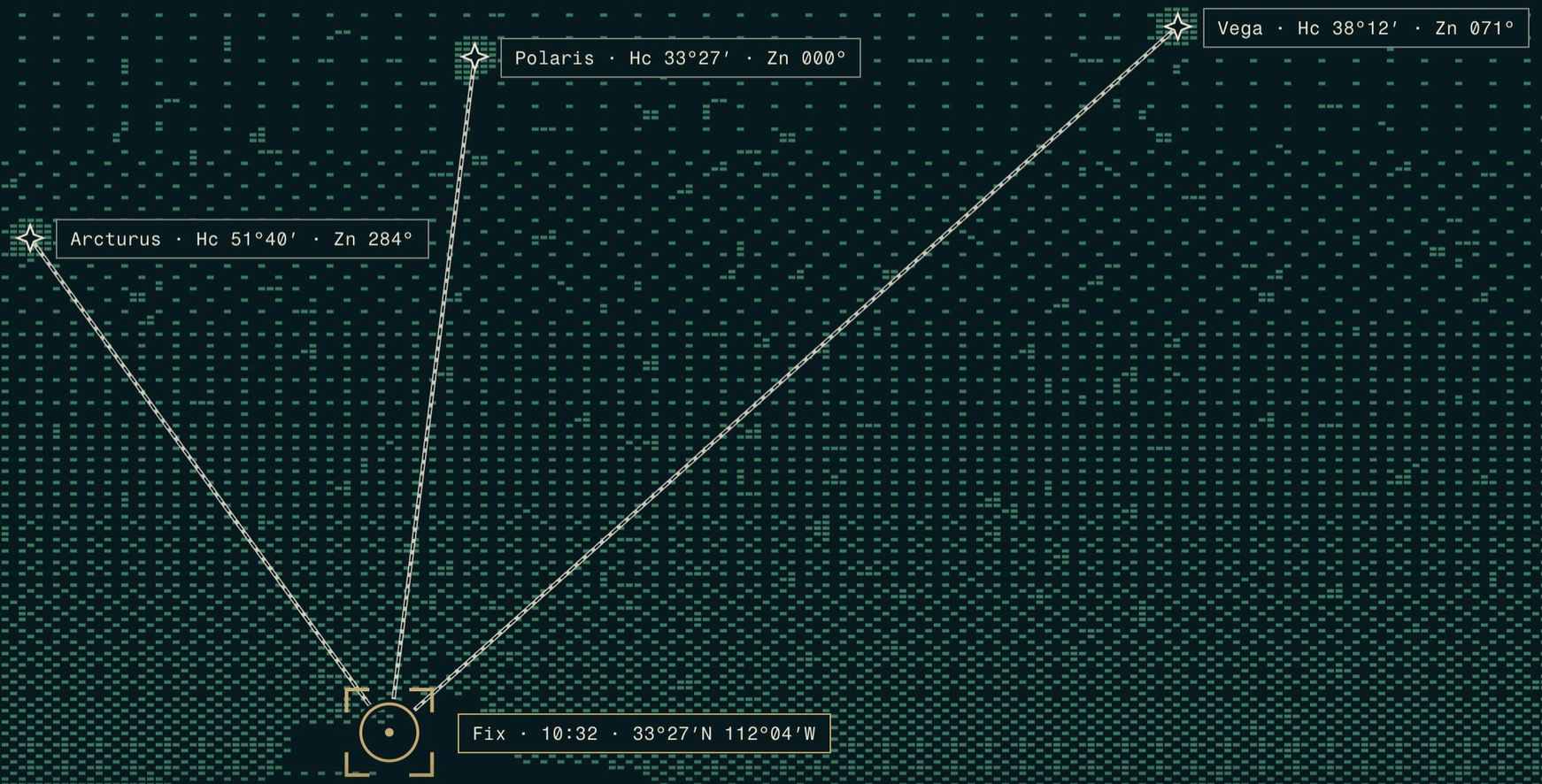
Ship AI | Studio



Case study · Ship AI Studio · October 2026

Taking a brand from hackathons to boardrooms

Raj Shah
Product designer · rssdesign.org

A brand PE buyers trust that builders don't roll their eyes at. *Four days.*

4.5

The number that ended the argument: where the brand sits between 1, very nautical, and 10, a sci-fi battlecruiser. More on that in a minute.

`My role`

Brand/visual design and design system creation.

`Stakeholder`

Santos Hernandez, founder. He reviewed every round.

`Timeline`

Four days in October 2026. Four rounds, nine directions.

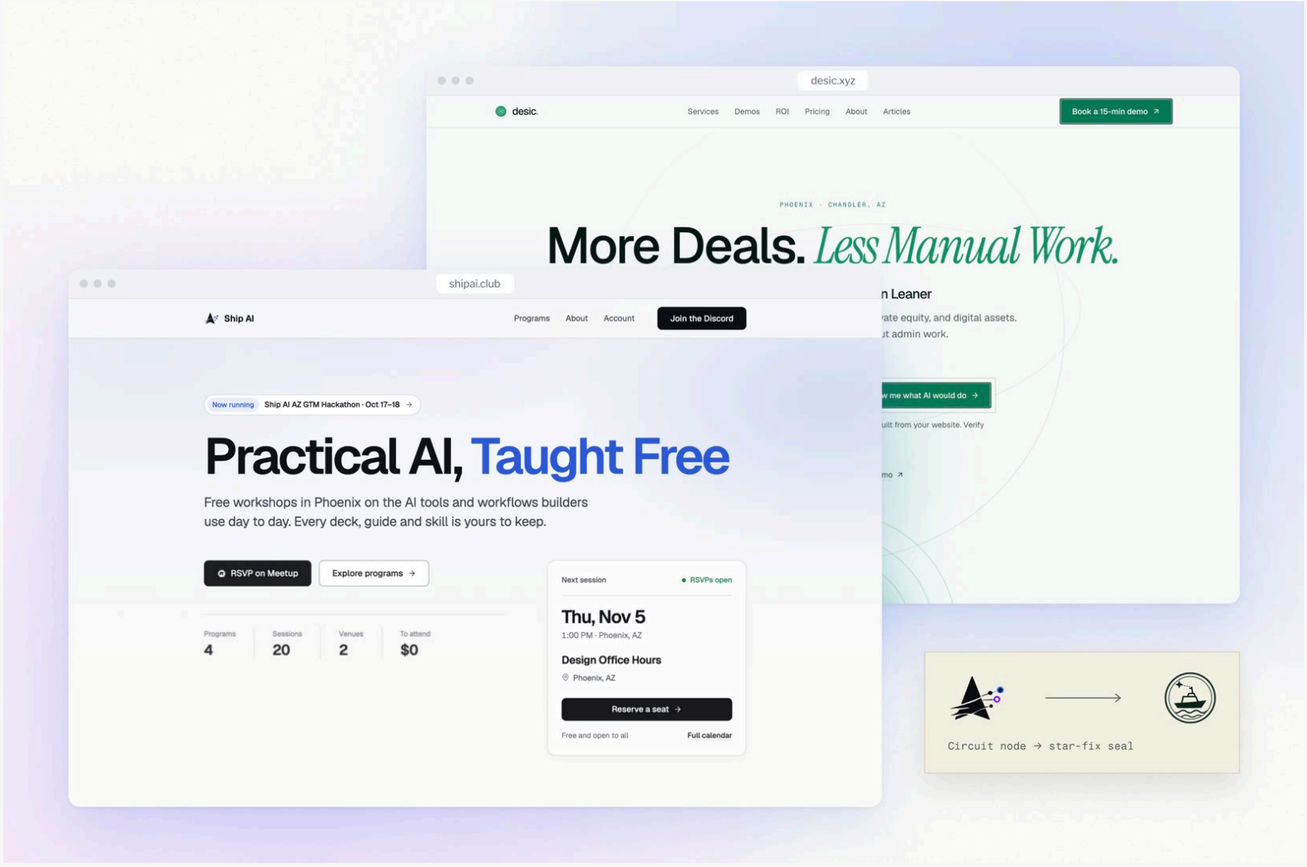
`Shipped`

A brand guide, a token package, a component library and two live sites.

The old brand looked like every other AI agency

Santos ran two businesses: Ship AI, a Phoenix community of AI builders, and Desic, a firm that deploys AI inside private equity and financial services.

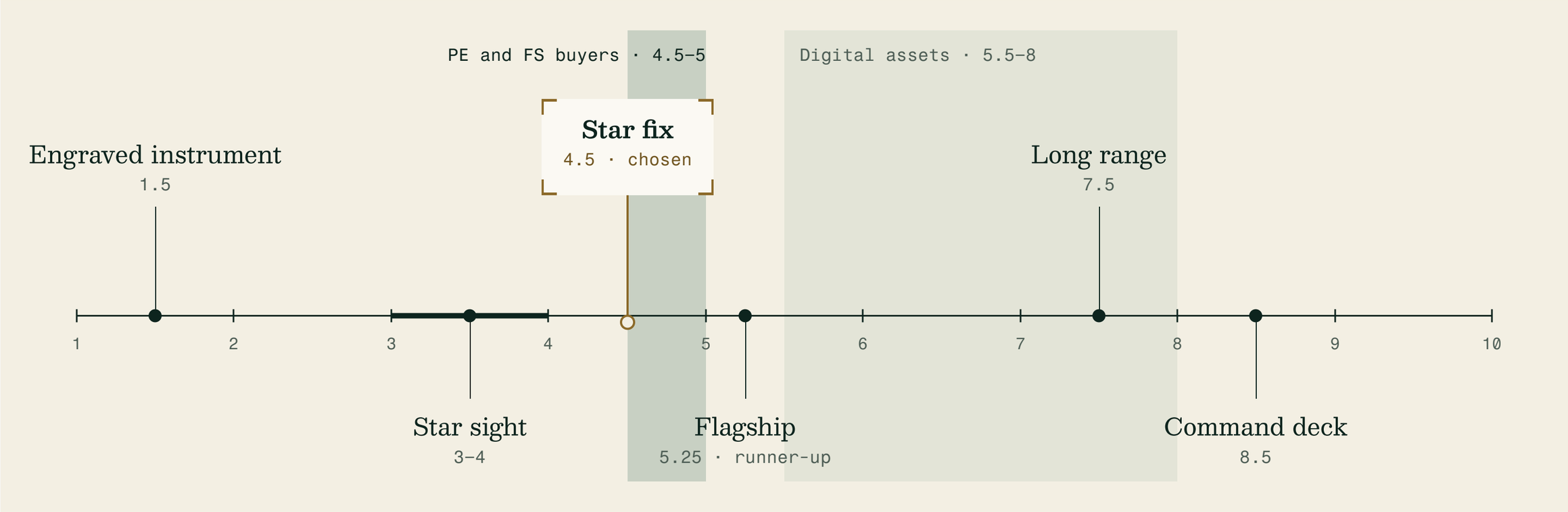
Violet glow, cobalt, Geist and a circuit-node logo. Perfect at a hackathon. In front of an operating partner, it looked like the template every automation shop already uses.



Before: two brands that shared a founder and nothing else.

A shared scale turned a taste fight into a positioning call

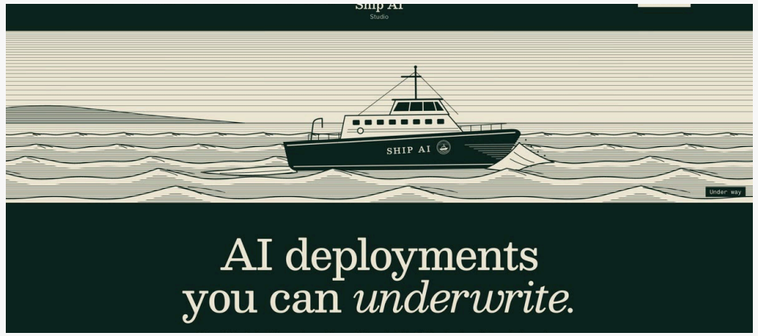
Santos wanted spaceships. I wanted boats. Debating it went nowhere, so I drew a line from 1 to 10 and asked where the buyer sits.



← 1 · Extremely nautical

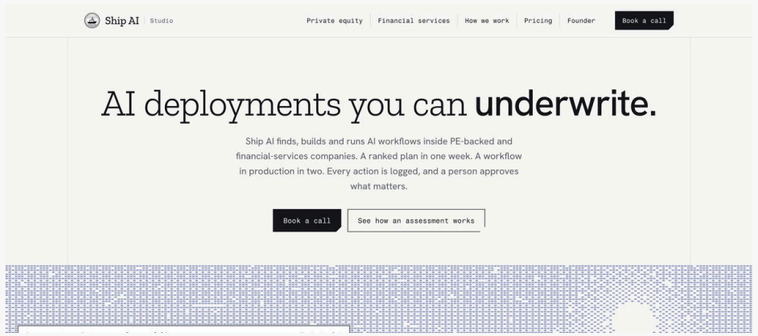
StarCraft Terran battlecruiser · 10 →

Six directions became working sites



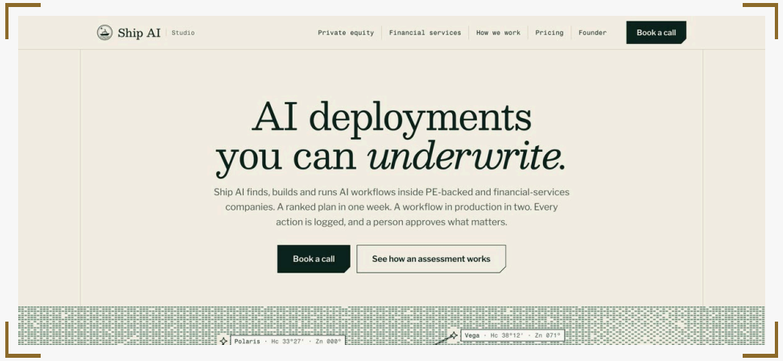
Engraved instrument 1.5

Lost, but donated its banknote green, bone paper and Besley.



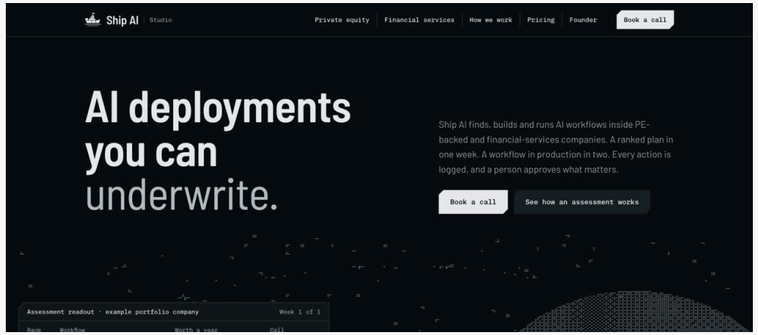
Star sight 3–4

Lost, but donated the dither and the named stars.



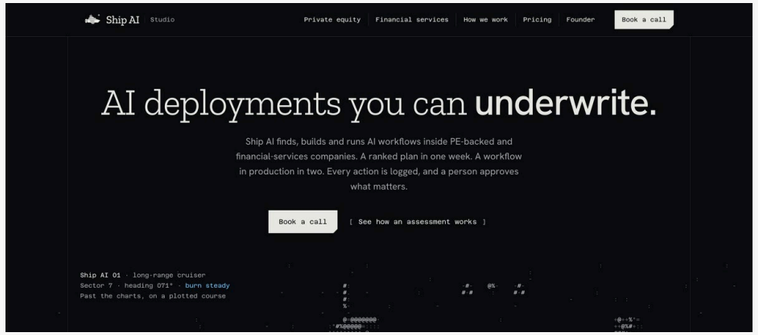
Star fix 4.5 · chosen

Chosen. Mostly built from parts of the two before it.



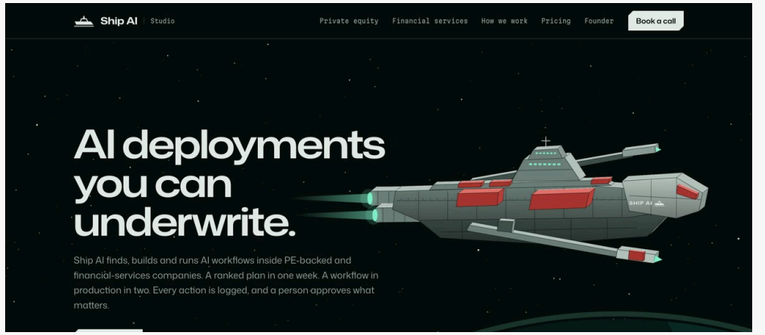
Flagship 5.25

Runner-up. Its fleet position report survived.



Long range 7.5

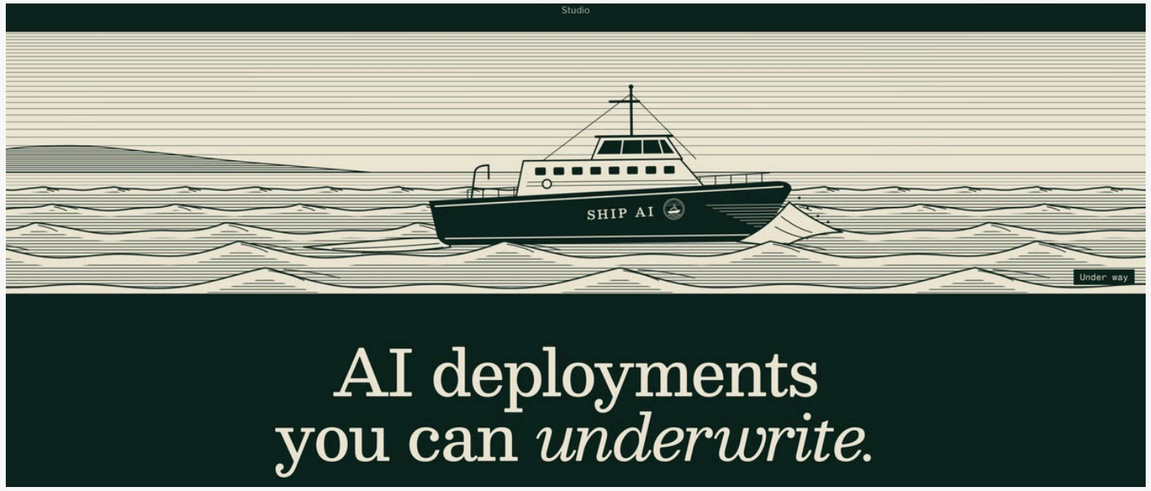
Cut. It looked like a crypto firm.



Command deck 8.5

Cut. Great spaceship, too far from money.

The community split - just like me and Santos



Non-technical members

← nautical

Wanted the boat. Nautical, heritage, calm.



Technical builders

galactic →

Wanted the spaceship. More galactic, please.

Too much heritage loses the AI credibility. Too galactic and nobody signs.

The bar: look like a firm that's been trusted with money for decades, and still knows more about AI than the buyer does.

I used Claude Code to benchmark YC startups selling AI into PE and FS (Varick, Snowstone, Maywood and others). The pattern:

Book a call Contact us

Square corners

Rounded pills read like a consumer app. The only shape rule: one cut corner.

AI deployments you can *underwrite.*

Serif authority

Says this firm belongs near capital. The fancier serifs got cut for being hard to read.

01 Covenant package	$186,000
02 Vendor records	$64,000
03 Board-pack drafts	$41,000

Monospace for evidence

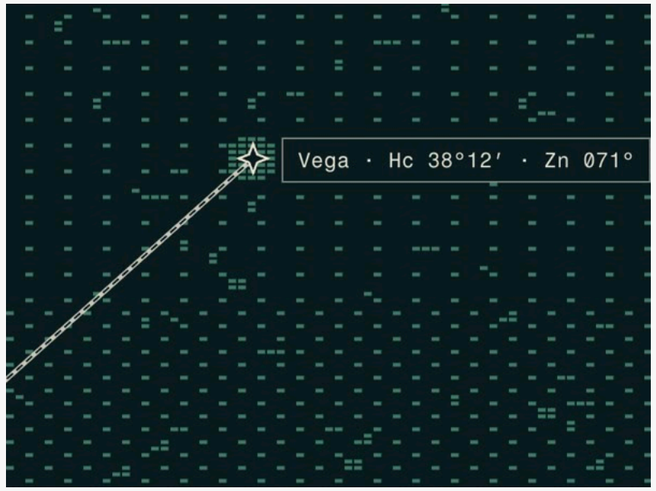
Numbers in mono look measured, not marketed. These ones are example data.

Star fix: heritage materials, rendered like agentic tools



From Engraved instrument: color and type

+



From Star sight: dither and named stars

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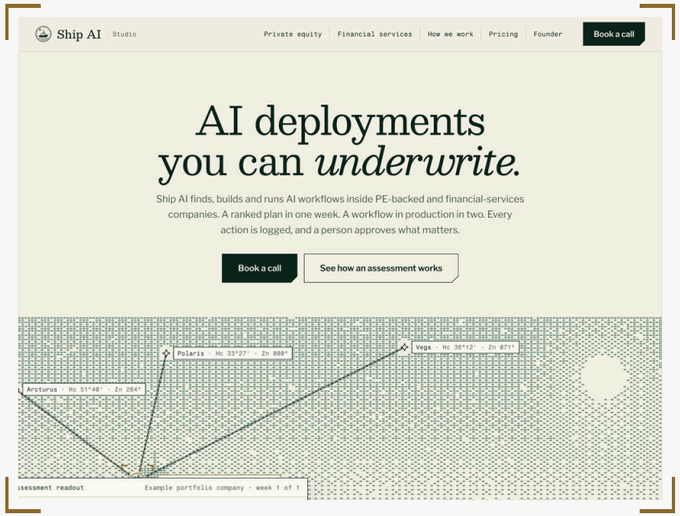


Star fix, the one we shipped

The idea

A navigator fixes a ship's position from named stars, within a known margin of error. The one-week AI assessment does the same for a company. It also ended the Discord argument. **The brand is the product, drawn.**

A system of rules, not a hero image

Form

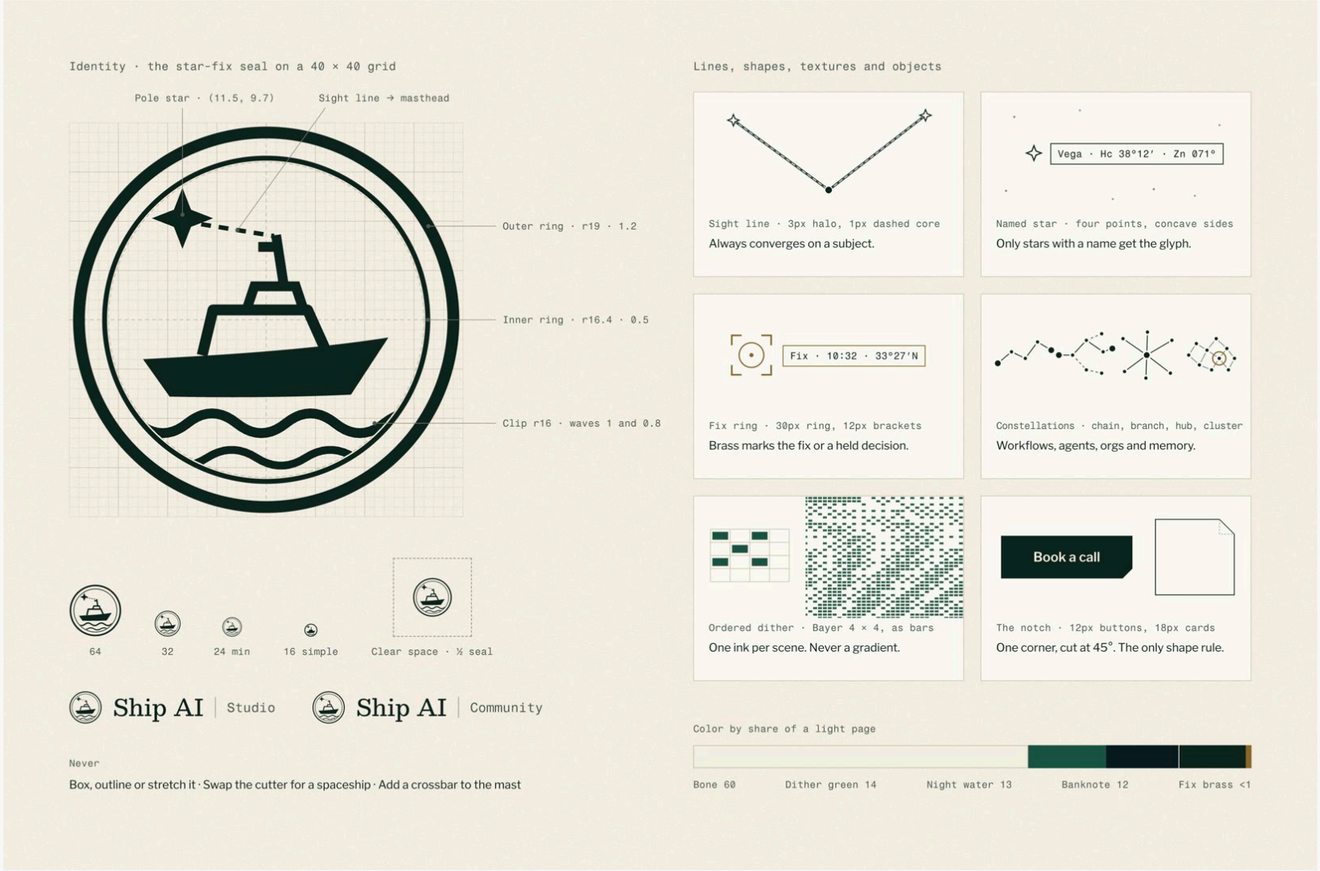
Every bright point is a named star with a reading. No decorative sparkles, ever.

Composition

If you read it or click it, it's a crisp vector. If it's atmosphere, it's a one-ink dither behind it.

Motion

Lock on, then release. Lines only converge on something a person has to decide.



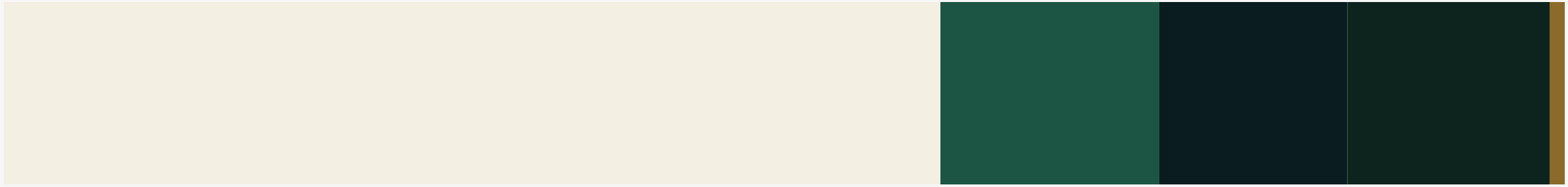
The seal on a 40 × 40 grid, down to 16px, plus every shape and texture a page is allowed to use.

Brass shows up only when a person has to decide

One accent, and it has a job. On any page it covers less than 1% of the surface.

Color by share of a light page

Brass: the one action held for a person ↓



Bone 60 Dither green 14 Night water 12 Banknote 13 Brass <1

Brass fails contrast at small sizes

So every held item also says “Held for you” in text. Color is never the only signal.

Dark mode is green, never black

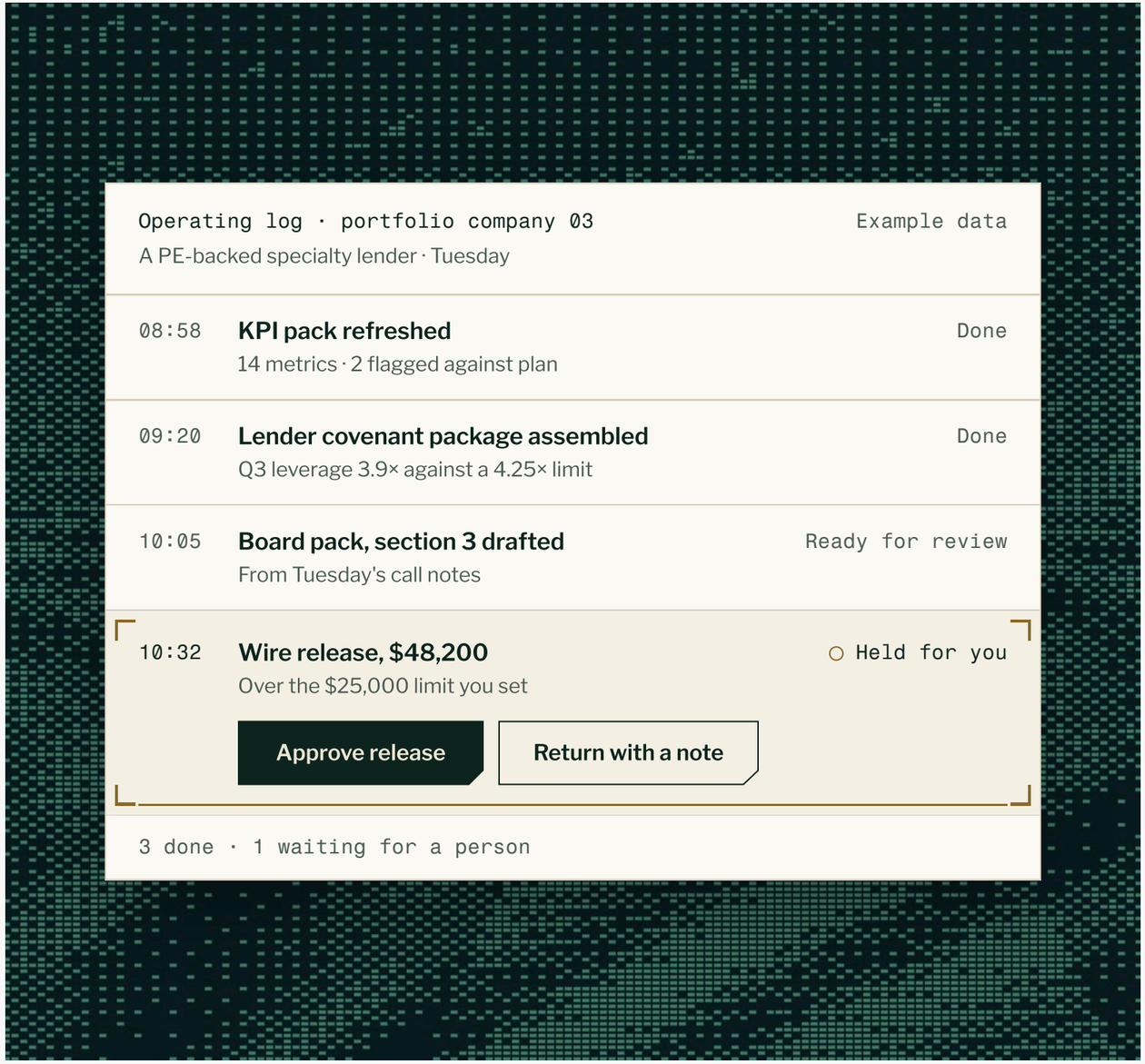
Banknote greens keep the money feel after dark. Body text holds 4.5:1 or better.

Motion means status, not decoration

With reduced motion on, every state change still happens, just as a fade. Ambient art pauses offscreen and on request.

Brass is the approval color in the product

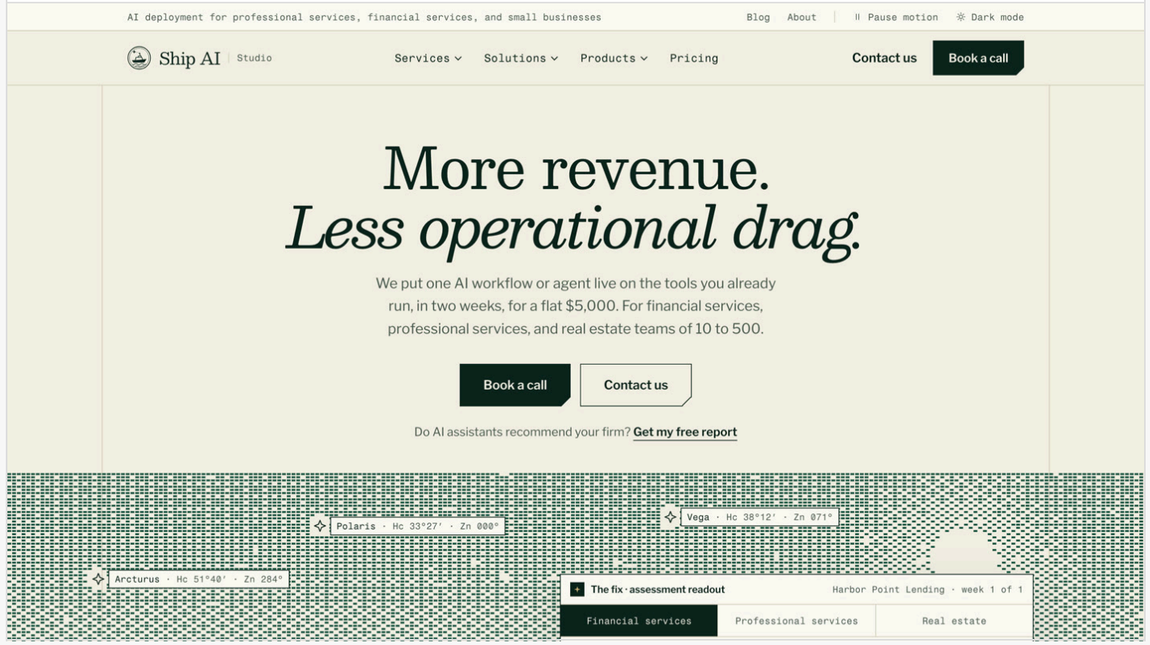
The motion signature turned into an interaction. Brackets lock on to the one action waiting for a person, then let go once they decide. Everything else stays quiet.



Acquire	Line draws 450ms, brackets close from 7px in 220ms
Approve	Brackets go green, travel out 12px, fade 500ms
Return	The same release in muted ink, with a note
Reduced	No travel. Every state change is a 150ms fade

One seal for two audiences

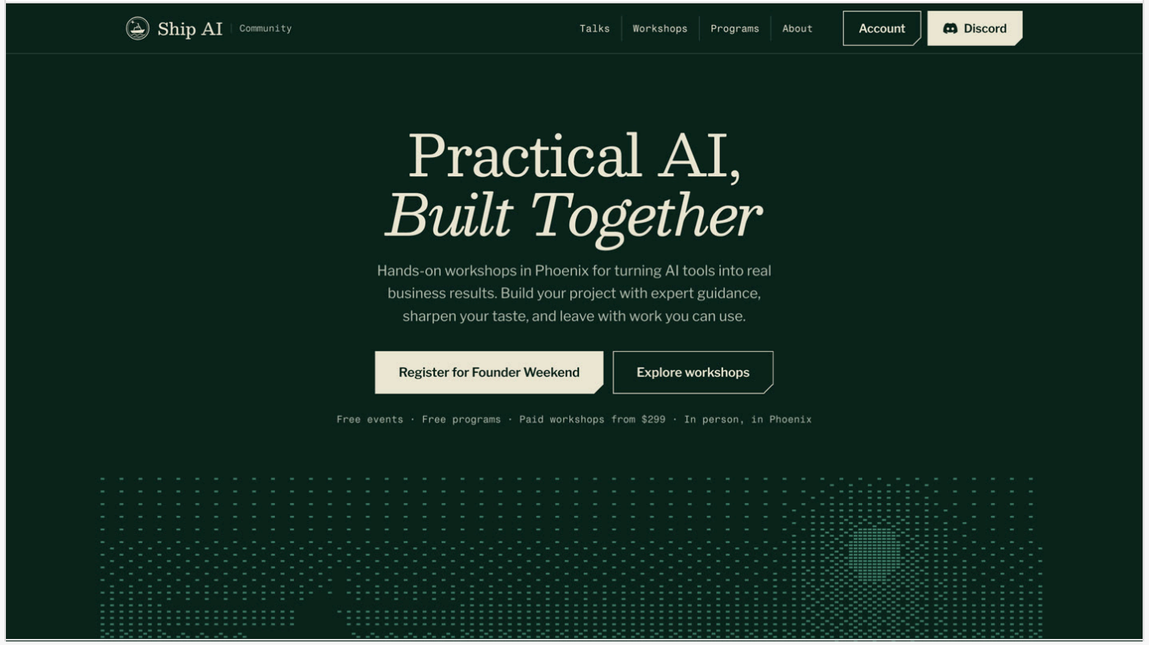
shipaistudio.com



Ship AI Studio · buyers

`Bone, banknote`

shipai.club



Ship AI Community · builders

`Night water, bone`

`In product`

Then I redesigned shipai.club one template at a time on the new system: 14 templates, from event pages to certificates. Each was picked from three to five directions before any of it got built.

The guide ships as code

One file

Every token, rule and “never” lives in one Markdown guide. It compiles to 103 tokens, light and dark.

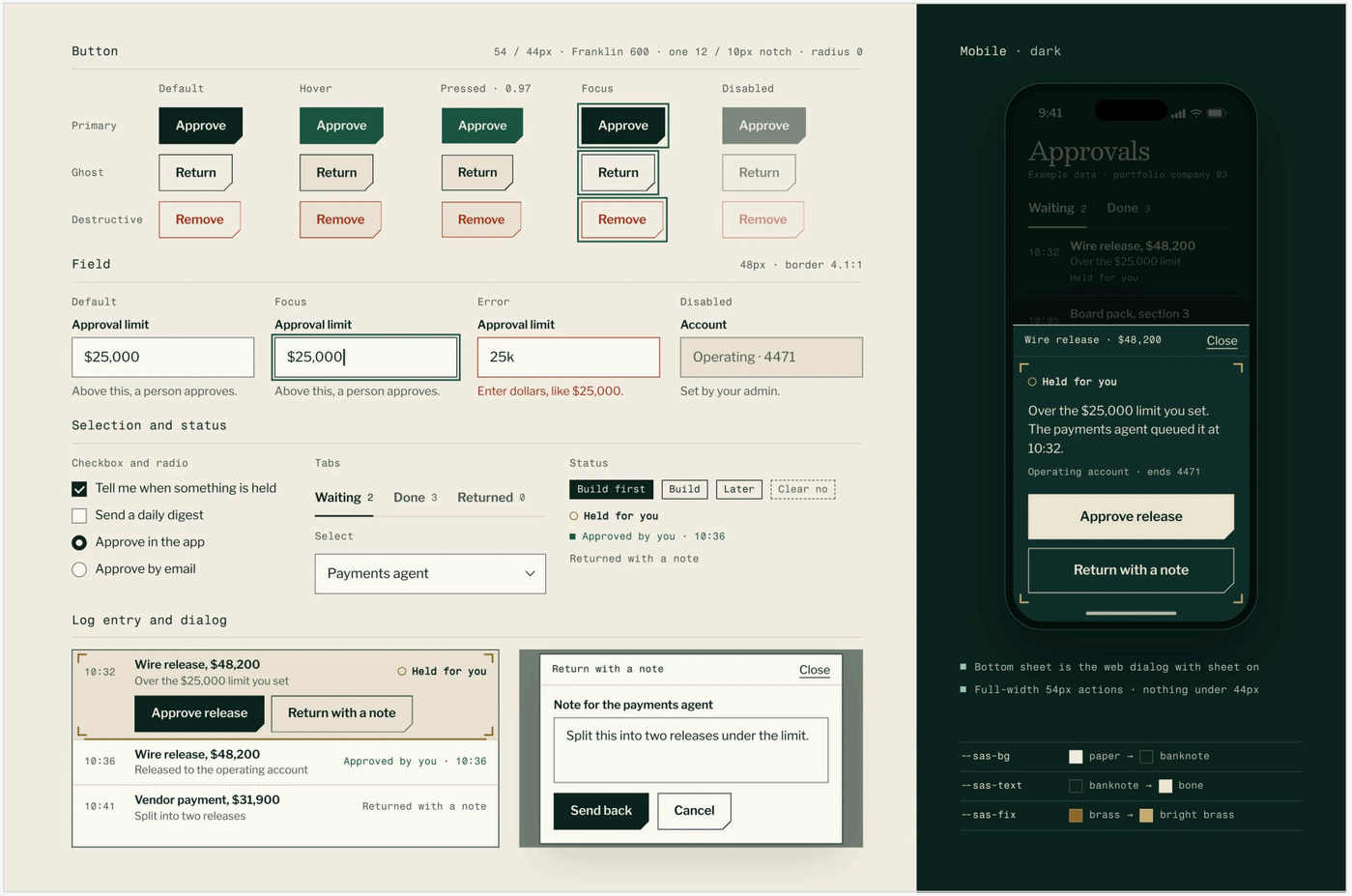
A 56-line bridge

Maps those tokens onto shadcn's names, so the Studio's existing components restyled at once.

```
--radius:  0px;
--primary: var(--sap-text);
--review:  var(--sap-fix);  /* held, with words */
```

Two sites

Reskinned by coding agents working from the guide. So the guide had to be right.



Every control in every state, light and dark. On a phone, the dialog becomes a bottom sheet.

Outcomes

4 days

From first round to a system the founder signed off on.

Live	shipaistudio.com and shipai.club, since Oct 28, 2026
Buyers	A new prospect in week one. Praise from PE operating partners.
Builders	Strong reactions from community members.
Adoption	Both sites and Ship AI's internal tools run on one token set.
Not yet	Pipeline numbers. Too early to claim, so I'm tracking assessment bookings instead of guessing.



I sent Santos the handoff pack. This came back.

A shared scale turns taste into positioning

`What worked`

Once Santos and I could both say “4.5,” we stopped arguing about spaceships and started arguing about buyers. A much better argument.

`What I'd change`

The scale showed up in round four. It belonged in round one. And my buyer scoring was me in the buyer's chair, not interviews with operating partners.

`What's next`

Assessment bookings from PE and FS buyers, and how operating partners react to “AI deployments you can underwrite.”



Thank you. *Questions?*

Raj Shah
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