Accessibility of web content

If the WWW is seen under the aspect of availability of information, rather than from a purely visual point of view, the question of general accessibility of web front ends arises.

The key criteria whether a web page works or not are still thought of as the (visual) output of most frequently used web browsers. Source code is considered the barely machine-readable internals of a web interface which need not be understandable. On the other hand, HTML is a logical markup language which was designed to be quite intelligible to humans readers.

If the output of a web page is read aloud by a screen reader software, it becomes fairly obvious that focussing on a logical and semantic use of HTML elements (in contrast to HTML used for mere display) is most valuable in order to present web content to visually handicapped people.

The design of web documents ought to follow the logical steps of document creation, which basically means separation of content, structure and formatting. As a consequence, customised versions of display could be created without the need of touching the structure of the actual HTML interface. This process is demonstrated impressively by http://www.csszengarden.com, where completely different screen output of an unchanged HTML source is generated by applying diverse css style sheets.

A WWW front end may be considered little more than a user interface to a program, which is expected to be available for a certain group of clients fulfilling basic requirements such as support of Javascript. This is how general accessibility of content is given away. Control elements of interactive, dynamic web pages can be realised as pure server tasks. The look & feel of a page can admittedly be enhanced by using non-standard code. However, creating an accessible interface does not necessarily imply doing without facets of design. Generally, non-standard web interfaces do not mean enhanced quality of design, but a lack of accessibility.

To put things in a nutshell: Accessibility is achieved by 100% compliance to W3C standards. See http://www.w3.org/WAI (Web Accessibility Initiative) for further information.