

# Design Notes Episode 03 - William Okpo

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Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host, Liam Spradlin. In each episode, we talk to people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.

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Liam: That was Lizzy Okpo, one of the designers behind New York-based fashion label William Okpo. In the interview we explore how Lizzy and her sister, Darlene, form a successful design partnership as family members, the intersection of expression and utility, and what gives their fashion line its identity. Let's get started.

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Liam: Darlene, Lizzy, welcome to Design Notes. Thanks for joining me.

Lizzy Okpo: Thank you.

Darlene Okpo: Thanks for having us!

Liam: Just getting right into things, something I always like to ask is, what do you do, and what has your journey been like to get where you are? So, let's start with Darlene.

Darlene: Absolutely. I am one half of the William Okpo label, fashion designer, along with my sister, who's my partner as well. And for me personally, the journey has been long, but it has been a very humbling experience to be able to just own your own business and design alongside, you know, your family member, too.

Lizzy: As Darlene said, our journey has been long, but so short. I think, quite often I've been just thinking, rewinding back in to 2010 in the beginning stages and now coming in 2017, it's like, never ever ... I mean, yeah, I- I felt like we were gonna have a brand, and I still feel like we're gonna have a brand that's gonna last for 100 years; that's the goal. But even seven years ago seems so long. You know, I think about how ... You know, what we thought about the brand.

It was like, "Okay, it's gonna be this whole masculine thing and we're gonna be undercover. We're gonna be like, two females and it's gonna be named after our dad so everyone's gonna think it's a man," which is still the same thing. Everyone thinks that we're men, and everyone thinks that we are William, which is cool. Being the face behind the brand, actually shifted the direction of the brand, um, and it has been really inspiring for other young women around the world as we receive so many emails constantly just saying that, "I love you guys's story."

So, we never really thought that it was our personal story that was gonna tell the brand story. We thought it was just gonna be the designs, you know. That's what every designer thinks, that we're gonna make some amazing designs and people are gonna like, "This is amazing," and then never think about the backstory. We've grown to love so many people. We've met amazing people. Uh, we met crazy people. We've fallen. We've risen. Um, and we're still learning.

It's like the biggest education we've ever received in life. Never thought it would be this.

Darlene: Right.

Lizzy: We learn everyday.

Darlene: We didn't really go to a traditional design school. Everything was pretty much self-taught. You know, Lizzy went to Pace University in the city and she studied entrepreneurship, and I went to Lehman College in the- the Bronx, and I studied African American studies with a minor in Women's Studies. So, we didn't really have that FIT, Parsons, Central Saint Martins type design background. We kind of just said one day, "Okay, we wanna design." You know, um, it wasn't just like two girls that just love clothes and playing in the closet. It was more of, we wanted to design clothes for women that look like us, and women who are just really outgoing, confident, um, just loved color, print, you know, everything of that nature, and for us, it was kind of like, we just went into the garment district. We did a lot of research, and like Lizzy said, we met some really great people, but we also have some really great mentors who actually sat us down and told us- taught us about the business. 'Cause most of the

times when it comes to fashion design, a lot of people don't look behind the scenes of the business side-

Lizzy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Darlene: ... and what it takes to actually produce a collection, sell it to masses, um, dealing with buyers. I mean, that's a whole 'nother conversation-

Lizzy: Marketing.

Darlene: (laughing) Dipping into marketing. So, within that seven years starting from 2010, we've done so much. That was our journey from collaborating with Puma to Pepsi to, um, GenArt, which was a- a fashion fund that used to house, like, young fashion designers to do a runway show, from just selling at Opening Ceremony-

Lizzy: And opening a popup store-

Darlene: ... and opening a popup store at the seaport. It's kind of, um, unheard of for two young fashion designers out of New York City where, you know, they're still not in the mainstream stores in America. We kinda really just did our own thing, and that's our story where we just don't follow what the rules are in the fashion industry. We just kind of just do it and what feels right to us.

Lizzy: It's like, that's the epitome of our journey, if you think about it. When we started, I wouldn't say we started in a chaotic situation. I mean, Darlene and I, when we started we were both in school. So, you can imagine us having New York Fashion week, having shows, having to present, and also having to take finals. And at the time I was like, "This is ludicrous," but, that- that story is still our story. We're still doing five different things and also having to do other- ten other things. None of them even align with each other, and still have to make the brand work. And that's kind of been a theme-

Darlene: Yeah.

Lizzy: ... of our brand. It's like, very unconventional. Nothing is really like this then this. It's like, "Yeah, you're gonna be producing a collection overseas, and then you're gonna have to like, figure it out in 24 hours, and then you're gonna have to present it. Oh yeah, and meanwhile you also gotta go to work." (laughs) "And, you know, do your other job, and also gotta go to school and fix that final." That's what's keeping us motivated in a sense that nothing's ever set in stone. Things are getting thrown at us from left to right, and it's like how do we

face our challenges? Can we get over those challenges? We have. We've learned from them, which has been the greatest part of the journey.

Liam: So, knowing all of this, I want to explore your process and how you work on a day-to-day basis as all this is going on.

Lizzy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: From a high level, what goes into designing a new piece? Like, what are your thought processes? How do you get started? What are the considerations that you make?

Lizzy: Everything.

Darlene: Yeah.

Lizzy: Darlene and I used to come up with ideas and our mood boards on the train. Um, anything. It's never really like, "Okay, I sketch or Darlene sketches. Then we, you know, go fabric swatching." Sometimes ... Darlene, you can explain it.

Darlene: One day we were on a train, and this guy, he had on about three pairs of jeans, but each jean on a lower bottom was cuffed, and it was (laughing) like three layers and it was cuffed, and I was like, "Man." Lizzy and I looked at each other and at the same time we said, "This guy looks so cool." And we were inspired just by his silhouette and how he dressed, and we ended up making these denim pants called the triple cuff pant, just off of just visualizing and seeing people in New York City. I'm always inspired by just people in New York City and just how they're able to just express themselves freely. Um, Lizzy, literally is inspired by travel.

Lizzy: Travel, color, and also- also, I get bored so easily.

Darlene: She does get bored.

Lizzy: I get bored, so it's like, "Yeah, sure, we can see another button-up shirt. We can see another a-line dress. We can see another whatever's in style." But I'm just like, "How do I make that one ..." And I hate to use the word special or unique but it's like, "How do I make that one so rude" that people are like, "Oh, that's such a cute dress, but like, why are there, you know, garments in the most obscure part of the dress?" Like, some of it can be so unflattering, but then, it's like allowing the consumer and the designer to feel comfortable with just actually realizing like, "Actually, this is the most prettiest part of my body; I should've showed that off more."

Darlene: Right.

Lizzy: So I think that's what we play with, you know, when we're designing. Just figuring out ... Before we start a collection, like, how to make something that's so everyday for all of us, but just tweaking it a little bit that it will allow us to show off our bodies or feel comfortable in- in a new way.

Darlene: So a lot of it is a thinking process. It's like throwing all of our ideas into this big thinking pot and then coming out with like, this beautiful masterpiece in our mind. And, most of the time, it's pretty much like, not even on trend. It's- we predict the future of what we wanna see on young women. So, a lot of our design process is just saying, you know, I don't wanna see what's in stores, I want to start something that is going to be predicted in the future, where it's like, okay, it may not work right now and they may not see it, but two years, three years from now, everyone is gonna start doing it. And that's pretty much always-

Lizzy: Been the case.

Darlene: ... been the case with us. We have so many, um, big design people in the industry say, "You know, you guys were doing this before it became a trend." Because we always want to make sure that we're not doing the same thing as everybody else. And sometimes it's really hard, you know? Um, to constantly always think that way because you get burnt out sometimes as a creative, 'cause it's like you want that masterpiece and you want it to sell, and some items don't sell, but we're okay with it.

Lizzy: And one thing is like, we don't want clothes that you throw away. I think in our day and age, we overproduce, and there's just so much of so many things. There's just so many clothes around, so it's like, do ... I don't want you guys to empty out, or our customer to empty out their closet and like, "Oh yeah, I can get rid of that old dress. It's so 2000-whatever." Like, that would be the last thing. I want someone to say, "Oh yeah, this dress is forever. I'mma keep it. It makes sense now and it will make sense later. It's just my favorite piece." So I think that's what we design for.

Darlene: Color's important to us too.

Lizzy: Yeah.

Liam: I'm interested in that. In the- the focus on helping people embrace color.

Lizzy: Our dad- When we first started the collection, he would always tell us, he's like, "You know, when I first came to New York, and America period, everyone was wearing black, black, black." That's how he said it. "Everyone was just wearing black, black, black." And I was like, "You guys don't have no style?" He goes, "I want to wear a gold suit. I want to wear a green suit. You gotta play with color." And then growing up, we've always seen him wear that purple, magenta-looking suit. (laughs)

Darlene: That purple suit.

Lizzy: And we look back and he had that banana yellow suit with bell-bottoms in the '70s, and- and then we got it and we're like, "You know what, we don't wear black either. Why would we?"

Liam: I'm interested in when color comes in in your process. It might be tied to factors like selecting color and material and things like that, but I'm interested in where that comes in, and also how you use that as an expressive tool in your pieces.

Darlene: For both of us, we both have very vibrant personalities. When I say that, we're pretty much always outgoing, bubbly, um, always full of laughter. So for me, I want to express that in our clothes, and we want it to be a conversational piece. You know, when you're walking down the street it's, "I love your shoes." Most of the times, someone loves something because it's a certain silhouette or it's a color. So for us, it's always something that is just bright and happy.

The first thing I think about in the morning time when I get up is, "What am I gonna wear today?" Even if it's sweatpants or a sweatshirt, but you best believe it's gonna be a color, you know, because it just brightens up my mood. So for me, when it comes to designing, I want something that's kind of subtle but it has that warm, energetic feeling, and um, color plays a huge part in our design process.

Lizzy: Right.

Darlene: We probably used black for like two seasons, just as, you know, as a ...

Lizzy: A request from other people, like-

Darlene: (laughing) A request.

Lizzy: ... "Can we have this in black?"

Darlene: But yeah, if you look at our previous collections, we use patterns, neon pink, (laughs) like, we use crazy colors.

Lizzy: Lime green.

Darlene: Lime green. You know, colors have meanings to them too.

Lizzy: Yeah. Confidence. I feel like ... We design for women with confidence, so it's like, nothing- nothing against people who wear black or dark colors; that's fine. But it's like, I can't see the product. We like to play with details, so I feel like if something's in black, you're not seeing the shape. You're not seeing the little details and the hints of the playfulness that we're doing in the garment. You just see a little black thing hanging, and that's not fun.

This year, we've been playing with a- Darlene loves this red denim, and every time I see this denim, it just goes with everything. It goes on everyone's skin. It just does no one wrong. It makes everyone happy. Uh, and it's just a really hard, rigid, red denim. It's like crimson red.

Darlene: Yeah, it's a rough texture.

Lizzy: It's- and it's so rich in color that it's like-

Darlene: It's beautiful. And most of the times, everyone's like, "This is pretty hard," but we never sacrifice, (laughs) the texture of the design.

Lizzy: Yeah, but it's like, but it's beautiful!

Darlene: It's beautiful, and maybe it's not for you, but it's for someone that wants to feel like they're wearing a piece of art on their body-

Lizzy: Exactly.

Darlene: ... when they leave home, so.

Lizzy: And that comes first.

Darlene: And that's what happens with a lot of designers is, you have to be comfortable with your designs. You can't really say to yourself, "Well, this person doesn't like this." You know. You kind of have to be true to yourself and you kind of have to be like, very persuasive and convincing.

Lizzy: I would love to convince one of our customers to wear the most neon colored wedding dress if I could. Like, "Just go with that neon pink." (laughs)

Darlene: That's tacky.

Lizzy: It is tacky, but you gotta- you gotta be happy. It all goes.

Darlene: (laughs)

Lizzy: It's just, you know, it's a happy day.

Darlene: And that's another thing, it's two of us, so sometimes, we always have to meet in the middle, so sometimes I'm a little bit more simplified and Lizzy's very avant-garde with her design process-

Lizzy: I like that you called it avant-garde.

Darlene: She is.

Lizzy: (laughs) She uses other words.

Darlene: (laughing) Most of the times, I have to come in and I have to kind of bring Lizzy down to a level of, like, "Okay Lizzy, that's a little bit much." So I think that's what really helps with the process is that it really is both of us. Sometimes, you know, I could get a little boring sometimes, to be honest, and Lizzy comes-

Lizzy: You can.

Darlene: ... in and she really shuts it down. She's like, "That is just bland. I don't like it. Come back with something new." So we're constantly always pushing each other, and I think that's the beauty of being partners and being family too, 'cause you're able to be very honest with each other, where sometimes, you know, I've seen a lot of design partnerships crumble because there's two totally different personalities and they just can't compromise. You have to learn how to compromise in the design process or it's really not gonna work, to be honest.

Lizzy: And take risks.

Darlene: Yeah.

Liam: Coming from an interface design background, I know that there are expressive elements in the interface, like color, imagery, voice, things like that, but then



practical constraints of like, user experience and is the interface usable and things like that, so, I'm interested in- in exploring what the counterparts of those would be for fashion design, and how those interplay with one another when you're making a piece.

Lizzy: That's been the theme of our year.

Darlene: (laughs)

Lizzy: Recently we had a focus group, and it was just gathering about twenty something women at one table, and we said, "Guys, just give us what you got. Tell us what you think. Tell us what matt- Like, what about this collection matters." The reason why we had to do the focus group is because, again, Darlene and I, we design, we close our eyes and I say, "I see a silhouette. I see a fabrication. Go." And then when it comes into fruition, it's this beautiful piece but it's like the shape of a cardboard. But it's so beautiful. And then I'm just like, "Yeah, so what? People walk around with cardboard. What's wrong with that? What's the big deal?" And then she's like, "Uh, it's commercial-ability, Lizzy. People have to be able to walk and sit." I'm just like, "Well, they can go somewhere else for that. Like, you're buying a piece of art."

So we gathered all these women together and we said, "Guys, what do you think about this denim, the red denim that we've been using?" Because it means so much to us because- it's only- it comes in blue and it comes in red, but it's so rich because it's a raw denim. It's like a Japanese raw denim. And we actually ... Buyers also said, "I love it, but customers are all about feel," and I'm just like, "I lost you at 'love it.' Like, all you have to say is you love it and everything else doesn't mean anything." And I'm- We're trying to learn, like, it's not about just loving things. People want to be able to wear it no matter how pretty it looks.

So I think that's been our ongoing challenge of like, how to meet in the middle, and I'm on the side where it's like, there's no middle to be met.

Liam: I want to get a feel for what a collection means, like a fashion collection, like, what does that represent conceptually, and what goes into making pieces that go into the same collection together?

Darlene: A collection is pretty much a body of work, right? And for me, how I look at it, it's basically a- a group of women that are- have very different personalities, but they all have the same taste, right? Did that make sense?

Lizzy: Yeah.

Darlene: I know, that sounds pretty cool. (laughs) But um, when building a collection, it is pretty difficult because you want all of your pieces to be married together. You want them to be cousins, sisters, brothers. You don't want each piece to- to be kind of like sidelined, to the side. It has to be cohesive. So we do this thing where, if we're doing straps or hardware, we have to make sure that it's across the board throughout the whole collection, and again, for- for me, I think of the many different women who represent our brand. It's not just one person, but they all have this one common interest which is, you know, looking beautiful and having a piece that is- really just describes their personality. And I kind of- It becomes like this scientific research type project to me, 'cause I really do think of different women, like our friends. Like, this person's very outgoing and they're into tech. You know, this one's an artist. This one's a lawyer. So that's how I build upon a collection.

And it does get pretty overwhelming a little bit because you have to tell this story, but you also have to sell, so from a buyer's standpoint, I feel like sometimes they don't even care about the collection; they just want something that's gonna sell-

Lizzy: Right.

Darlene: ... and is doable, so it- it kind of ... We have to be two different people. We have to be a designer ... Not even! Three different people, sorry. You have to be the designer, the consumer, and the buyer. But now we're kind of going back to our old roots where we're just simply the designer.

Lizzy: We started a new process, because as young designers, we started trying to compete with the big guys, um, and we realized, 'cause there's usually four seasons in a year ... Four- Would you say? Yeah, four seasons-

Darlene: It's four. It's like, four. Some designers do about four collections a year.

Lizzy: Four collections a year. And to us, that was a really quick roll around for us, so it's like, "Geez, I just showed that! How am I gonna tell a new story and- and make it cohesive and make it sellable and make it cool and make people remember us?" And before you know it, we're just popping out anything.

Darlene: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lizzy: And that kind of diluted the storyline. It took away what we wanted to do, and we just became factory workers, like just trying to push out things for the sake of saying we beat the deadline. It was like, honestly, doing a paper for school,

and you were just like, "Ah, let's just get this out the way." So we said, "Hold up. We're not them. We shouldn't have to try to keep up with people. We have to do it our own way."

So now we started doing something where, the collection is the whole entire year. So it's no longer four different collections. It's like, we are telling a story from January to December, and it's all gonna be a consistent story.

Darlene: And that goes back to what I was saying about, when building a collection is- everything has to be married to each other-

Lizzy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Darlene: ... and it's all of these different personalities, and it's really just making a piece for, "Okay, this jacket, I know it's for our art curator. The dress, I know it's for our, you know, mom that lives on the Upper East Side that just is very quirky and once in awhile, she just wants to wear something extravagant."

I observe on the train. That is like, my design inspiration. I just watch, and I look at what they're reading, their hair type, their glasses, what type of bag they have, what dress they have, and I really observe, and I build that character and really come to Lizzy and I'm like, "You know, I seen this lady on the train and she had like these really cool, funky shoes. I wanted to design an item for her shoes."

Lizzy: Right.

Darlene: Yeah.

Lizzy: Right.

Liam: When you talk about fashion pieces being art that you're wearing, I think like, in my practice of interface design, like, we're used to using shapes that are positioned very predictably. If they move, they move in programmed ways that are very strict and predictable, but I get the feeling that fashion isn't like that. Uh, the shape of a garment interplays with the person's body, it interplays with what they're doing, so, I guess I'm wondering like, how that impacts how you think about a piece, knowing that once it's actually out in the world and in use, as this art piece, it still remains like very dynamic.

Lizzy: That would be a reason behind, like, the Pope jumpsuit, how everyone thinks it's a dress, and then ... A lot of the stuff that we sell, people think it's one thing and we're like, "We'll just let them figure it out later," and they're like, "Oh, it's a

jumpsuit," or like, "Oh, it's a skirt," and it's because we kind of play with a lot of secrecy. So it appears to be one thing and then you stick your leg out and another piece of fabric is flowing through it.

Darlene: But if it is something where it has a specific shape, we do, before we even put it out into the market, we do a trial and error where we have to make sure that it's fitted on a body. Like, we do a fitting, or we just do multiple prototypes to make sure that we have the exact shape and on how we want it. And um, sometimes that takes up time when you're doing a really intricate item or piece, where you pretty much have to try it on different body types. So for a woman that is 5'4", you know, she may not like a triangle shape jacket. Or a woman who is 6'1", you know, and slender, athletic build, it may look a little different. Sometimes it doesn't work for every body type. So you kind of have to find your way around it to make sure that your piece is still what it is that you want it to be, but your customer is happy too.

Liam: So, speaking of making these kinds of alterations to the art while maintaining, like, the core of what the art piece is that you created, what would you say is at the core, underneath any of the alterations that you might make for specific customers? What- what gives a piece its identity, or is it- or is it a combination of everything we've talked about?

Lizzy: It's a combination. Like, we'd never compromise the shape, you know, and I think the customer understands that. Like, they probably wouldn't order something if they're like, "Hey, this is a long dress. Does it come in a mini skirt?" I'm like, "Well no, that's a different product."

Darlene: (laughs)

Lizzy: "No, it doesn't." For the most part, like, the triangular shapes and the really like, narrow top fittings with the bellowed out jumpsuit- like, wide-leg jumpsuits, I think they understand that, so they're like, "Okay, that's what I'm looking for so I'll get that."

Darlene: They know that- that it's our aesthetic.

Lizzy: Yeah.

Liam: I want to wrap up by just asking ... I think we've covered a lot during this conversation of how your creative process has kind of grown and changed over time, but where do you see it going in the future as- as the fashion industry continues to evolve?

Lizzy: Even outside of apparel and accessories, and I realize over the last seven years, we're just people. We're just- We're always around people and we love engaging, and working with people from all over the world. So, and I think when we're so involved in fashion and clothing, we get sometimes uninspired; I gotta be honest with you, and we feel like, are we really doing something that's sufficient? Like, like- After I was like, "Alright, who cares?" You know? We love what we do, but it's like, I don't want to talk clothes all day. I want to engage with people. I want to get to meet people. So, I think it'll be really nice for us to like, figure out again, reestablish, like, having foundations and programs when we're working with, like, young students, like Darlene's program, Building Bridges for the Arts, where she worked with teenage students, just working with them in- in the art field, helping them explore different art industries and teaching them that, "Yeah, you can be a graphic designer. You can be this."

And even probably expanding in the sense of, working with the women that we've- we work with today. Again, over the last seven years, we've met amazing women who happen to be our customers, friends, mentors, so it's just ... We're trying to figure out how we can make more of a community.

Liam: That's great. Thank you both for being on.

Darlene: Thank you!

Lizzy: Thank you, that was fun.

Darlene: That was fun.

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Liam: Keep an eye on [design.google/podcast](https://design.google/podcast) so you don't miss our next episode, a special edition recorded at SPAN 2017 in Pittsburgh. Guest host Aaron Lammer speaks with Duolingo CEO and MacArthur Fellow Luis von Ahn about founding the world's most popular language learning platform, the invention of the CAPTCHA, and lots more. You can subscribe to Design Notes on Google Play, iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Until next time.