Design Notes Episode 05 - Mitch Paone

Google Design Podcast Transcript

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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. Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.

Mitch Paone: There is a bit of self-discovery to get to a point where you can say, "I'm gonna remove my critical self out of the process and just make stuff and be free."

Liam: That was Mitch Paone, Principal and Creative Director at DIA Studio in New York. In the interview, we explore the parallel natures of improvisational jazz and design, the importance of being a beginner, and the difference between intuitive and analytical creativity.

Let's get started.

Mitch, thank you for joining me.

Mitch: Thank you very much.

Liam: To get started, like always, I want to ask about your journey. So both what you're doing now and also what your journey was like to get there?

Mitch: The journey's been a very, I think, multi-faceted one, and a lot of different interests, and I think people know me quite well-- a ton of energy and the kind of directions that I want to pursue things in. But obviously my creative path and creative mission came out of some influences when I younger, and particularly my interest in music, and in jazz, and then also in visual arts.

At quite a young age, you know, I was… started playing piano at four years old and was taking lessons all the way up until high school. And then at that point I discovered some jazz records of Herbie Hancock and John Coltrane and you know, some of these masters. And at that point I realized, you know, this is what I want to pursue musically.

And then simultaneously once I decided I wanted to really, really take that seriously, I was, you know-- visual arts and design were actually very interesting as well. Like Fillmore posters and, you know, skateboard magazines, and graffiti, and all this stuff when I was younger, was very engaging visually. So I was taking art classes in school as well. So I had this kind of dual path, so to speak, happening.

And I think in a way is kind of a luxury for me, to know right away that those felt good at such a young age. So as time went on, I ended up going to school in Loyola University of New Orleans. Out of some circumstance, there was really no school that would allow me to study jazz performance and graphic design at the same time, because they're… they're usually in separate schools within the university.

And that was only one that allowed that. And their programs in both of these studies were really incredible. The city has a tremendous culture and you feel this depth of humanity, and the people there are so powerful and interesting. And there's some like unguarded nature about that city that really is touching, like deep down. And that really I think, was quite inspiring.

And then I was like, "Well, naturally I should go into motion graphics." So really the first half of my career was spent working at, you know, amazing motion graphic firms like, you know, Brand New School, Psyop, LOGAN, I can just run out a big list of these things.

A lot of the people and creative directors that I, you know, worked with there had a profound effect on how I thought about design and… and really expressed that. So that was kind of the journey that got me into this 1.0 of my particular design career. I had the luxury of freelancing a lot through like the late 2000's, and cherry picked all of the things I liked at different studios and thought about them, and… and I think really the big thing that I pulled out of that, besides the craftsmanship and the work, was how to deal and work with people.

If I were to run a studio, how do I create an environment that I can foster the best possible work that I can do, and then make people feel really good about that? And then I think DIA as it is today, is really a product of that kind of thinking, and merging all these experiences together.

I had a really serious interest in typography, you know, editorial design throughout that whole period with my career, but working in film and motion graphics, you don't deal with that kind of side, it's really illustrative and using a

lot visual effects and film techniques. So the type kind of plays a back seat in the creativity in that area.

So a good friend of mine, his name's Ludovic Balland, and actually recently this young woman designer named Giliane Cachin, both from Switzerland, had a huge effect in teaching myself typography. And then just generally interested in that culture and, you know, Müller-Brockmann and the studios like NORM and [Gilles Gavillet] and all these different designers. Like that work was so compelling from a typographic standpoint, but it didn't deal with this motion or kinetic nature. It was very much like rigid, you know, type, print, editorial books. Here in America, we're dealing with like marketing, and we're dealing with screens and commercials, like it's pretty standard for us. Where in Switzerland and Germany and a lot of the European countries, it's not really part of the output. This was a problem that I was like, "This is what I want to solve. This kind of brings it together. I can be in the moment with my music background, but I can bring my typographic interests into it."

And I think that kind of leads us into where we are now.

Liam Spradlin: As I was looking through some of DIA's work, I came across a phrase that I was not familiar with. Kinetic brand experience, that's something that DIA kind of like specializes in, and you produce these really amazing kind of pieces that are at that intersection of typography and motion.

So I want to explore, first of all, just what is a kinetic brand experience?

Mitch Paone: So, it's kind of interesting in… you know, it feels like a new idea, but it really isn't. And… and there's this idea of futurism in the work, and it's funny because we've done interviews and lectures in the past, and they've labeled us as a futurist, which I didn't really think about at the time. But I don't know if you're familiar with the artistic movement, like let's get rid of all the politics because we're not violent, and we're not gonna get rid of nostalgic and tradition stuff, but the idea of using new technology and new tools to create dynamic work that's moving and capturing time, that is very interesting.

Like, talking about a little bit what I said about the idea of taking this Swiss typographic, or the Dutch typographic design cultures and bringing that into an area where we're going to be interacting with it. So it was like, this has to happen. This wasn't even a matter of interest. It was like, "We work on screens, let's take advantage of the experience. We're going through our Instagram, there's however many followers. How do we create that experience super engaging with that short attention span, if anybody is going through it?"

And then if you think about the parameters of a design system, like the possibilities of creating something that feels constantly changing and different, but have a consistent voice is like, to me, a powerful thought as far as how we deal with design systems. Not to be hard on modernism, it's not, "this is the logo, this is the grid system that's very strict." Once you hand that over to a brand team, it almost becomes oppressive. It's like, you have to abide by this brand guidelines exactly.

Where if… if you're dealing with an idea of evolution and kinesis and dynamism, like it's exciting because you can… you can kind of create tools that allow continued exploration and evolution in the work that is more supportive in… in a way, than it is kind of just, "Okay, here's the guidelines you execute."

Liam Spradlin: Yeah. I'm interested in the execution of that. So, I've seen in some of your work, you have generative identity, or things that supersede parametry, and become these really unique things depending on the application. So I'm wondering like, what are the components of that, and what are the rules?

Mitch Paone: So to be able to work in this capacity, it goes back to learning new things. So we need to be working in the software, or the programs, or thinking about stuff in a way that isn't traditional. So we start with those tools, whether it's After Effects, Cinema 4D processing, like I could just rattle off. But if I'm working in a time-based format to create the work out the gate, then you're basically setting it up that, you know, if I push play in frame five, frame six, frame seven, frame eight, like, they're gonna be different, they're gonna be unique.

We think about time and animation in a way that it actually is no different than scale, form, repetition, you know, any kind of design concept. So we're just layering in basically film principles in a way, and pulling that into the design process. And you know, you can set rules. So this is the keyframe expression, this is the frame rate we're going to use, these are the typefaces, this is the layout. And then you kind of create, you know, a generative system to apply that, and then the work executes consistently, but it feels like it's moving or evolving.

It's a bit of like flipping the design process on its head. So like, new designers get onboarded to our team, there's always a tendency like, "Oh, we all work in InDesign, you know, we're setting type." It's like the first thing that we do, it's like, "Get out of InDesign. That is the last place we're going. That's when we get into presentation mode, and we're gonna polish work." Like we do care about typographic detail, like it's absolutely insane about all that little stuff, but for us to get through these concepts and exploration ideas, we have to be using stuff that makes us uncomfortable to use, that we don't know that well.

And that's kind of where the surprises happen. We don't have control over it as much, so it's just like you know, "Wow, that's interesting. Let's see what happens there. Oh, let's try this, let's try that." It's not like controlled, specific direction. It's really freeing to allow the software or process, kind of take a life of its own.

Liam Spradlin: I want to go back to that intersection of type and motion, and ask how both of those elements interplay with one another to create an identity?

Mitch Paone: Typeface is an identity, like period. Like that… If you look at, you know Google's identity or any identity really, the one thing that you're going to interact with the most content wise, is the text. So illustrations are cool, graphic elements are cool, that's just layers of other things to add to it. But if we can solve the problem within the type itself, that's really difficult to do, to create strong expression there. So we know that nuance and subtle detail there.

And what's crazy about that is that trains your eye to be so dialed in to these details, and then you can do things and play with things, and make intentional mistakes that create personality with that. So then you layer in this idea of bringing this generative work, or animated work within that, then it gets more wild. This is when the jazz comes in. It's like, "Okay, we have this typeface that works out, let's see what happens when we do this, this, and this, and just hit play, or execute, or debug, or whatever you want to call it in the application." And then sometimes it comes out totally disaster, but then you get surprises.

And then you allow this kind of iterative process to produce so much work and you can kind of see it. And all it is, is just affecting type in a certain way, and applying like specific parameters to it, and that generates a specific aesthetic out of it. So with that, while they're very specific and not very many elements at all, you create a very powerful, expressive identity with very little material. Like, "Hey, let's just slant things at 45 degrees and execute and see what happens." Boom, you have this thing that you could print, repeat in different formats. And anything you want to do to make it interactive, make it animate, you can put it to print and it feels like it has this movement to it.

Liam Spradlin: So I'm interested in the relative contributions that the motion and the type make to the finished composition. So would you say that applying the motion to this very finessed, and structured, and produced typeface amplifies its aesthetic and identity, or would you say that there's like a unique contribution coming from the motion that creates something new?

Mitch Paone: You know, this is like a really hot topic I think for what we talk about in the studio, because it can destroy it and make it bad, or it can be really a tremendous asset. The key is that motion, animation, film, all these like multi silos that you're bringing together in the work, can't be an afterthought. I think there is a kind of an… an urge to just, "Hey, let's animate this logo," or like, "Let's make this move," but like you've already figured out design system. That's when it's detrimental to the work because it becomes an afterthought, but if you fuse design, and interactivity, and generative work right out the gate, and treat them on the same playing field as type and graphic design, then you have set it up in a way that it's going to be more powerful. Because you can… you can explain conceptually why we use this kind of animation and then you got formal things that come out of that process that, you know, in way we're actually animating and doing generative work and bringing it into print, so it's opposite.

It's tricky because I think the issue with that, it requires designers. And I think on our team specifically, we have to learn this stuff really well to be able to apply it on the same level as our design craft. And then the people that are interested in exploring this work, there's a learning curve. Like, and it can be a very intimidating learning curve. Like, if someone's opened up After Effects for the first time, they're going to be like, "Whoa, this is a really difficult program." Developing a creative process that allows you to take the intimidation out of learning new tools is, you know, because that's where the learning and the growth is fostered to get there. So eventually you have this toolkit where you can design, animate, generate, all at the same time and it's all the same thing. And that's… that's like the utopia really, but that's, you know, where we would want to be, um, with our team. And anybody on our team really can just move seamlessly into different mediums and places. Hop behind a camera, hop behind Cinema 4D, it doesn't matter. We're all just doing work to try define an idea or a concept.

Liam Spradlin: Do you worry about becoming comfortable with the tools?

Mitch Paone: I think as soon as you're comfortable with the tools, get out and try something else. Uncomfortable is good. The beauty of being uncomfortable, and we've had problems with this with designers. They'll come in and I'm like, "Listen, you're not going to even open up InDesign for like a week." And then for someone who's maybe has some insecurity possibly in the work, that's really difficult to deal with.

I mean I'm not doing this to be like difficult, you need to try this, but this is actually a personal lesson of, once you dive into something new and you realize you're terrible at it, and like I do this daily, that's humbling. It's like, "Oh my God, I

really suck at this." And then you're like, "Wow, I'm not like this great designer anymore, I'm just a disaster."

So what's special about this is, it brings you back to earth. It's like this process of like, "Oh, I think we're feeling good about work," and then, "Oh my God, I don't know what I'm doing." And then I'm like... I'm grounded immediately. And I think above doing great work, that's as important.

Liam Spradlin: Right.

Mitch Paone: Just to be a constant student.

Liam Spradlin: So in some ways it's about resetting and bringing yourself back to that first level-

Mitch Paone: Yeah.

Liam Spradlin: ... on a new project.

Mitch Paone: This might be cheesy, like you want to become like a baby again, like every other day, like and just be in this goofy world land where you don't understand anything, and it's beautiful. That's what's really cool about it. It's like, "Wow, the possibilities are amazing." And then you're like, you learn something and you think it's great and then you realize, "Oh, I need to actually really, day-by-day set a routine to practice and refine."

And I... To pull the music discussion back in on this, to study piano and play jazz piano and improvise, there's no shortcuts here. Any musician will tell you this takes rigorous, ritual practice to be able to do this. Like boring scales, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, over and over and over again.

But 5, 6, 7, 10, 20 years of that daily routine, and then you're able to execute work... or execute in your performance in a way where that just... that's your vocabulary. It's just like speaking, we can use words to express certain emotions and things. So why don't we apply the same kind of rigorous learning process to design tools? You know, After Effects is a piano, um, Cinema 4D is the drums. You know like, okay let's think about it like that.

So we'll sit there and just hammer out like the basics and just work it and refine, and then all of a sudden that becomes just a language and how we discuss things.

Liam Spradlin: I think in some ways there might even be an advantage of continual discomfort with software, in that, like the way that piano keys are organized has not changed in quite a while, but something like the Adobe Suite or Cinema 4D, like you get an update-

Mitch Paone: Yeah.

Liam Spradlin: …when there are new features.

Mitch Paone: I think the beauty of the piano keys and the rigid nature of that, the artistic detail in that specific… and music really, comes through the really nuanced, subtle expressions. You know, yeah we have scales and chords, a very classical way of thinking things that are structured like this. But in jazz, like I can play light, I can play soft, I can play in between, I can play staccato, I can play legato. Like, all of this expressive theory comes into the work.

You can never master it, there's always something new and something different you can apply melodically, or harmonically, or within the expression of that that allows a musician to really be a constant student as well. And I think if we take that back into the design process, that's where you get really interesting results. Like, you look at ways of being unorthodox about using things.

Liam Spradlin: Yeah those, uh, subtle nuances of the way that you interact with one given tool. Do you think that those… like the way that you interact with these tools, does that reflect back into your work as well?

Mitch Paone: I think there's definitely this nature of being very improvisational. You know like, allowing unexpected things to happen is… what's produced, I think, some of the favorite work that we've done lately. Unfortunately, a lot of the stuff we haven't even released on the site or anything. But that I think, for any designer, is exciting.

Like, in… I had a really good experience just last week and I was telling you earlier that I did a creative workshop in Moscow with this… a group called the United Notions. And it was in tandem with Hey Studio out of Barcelona and Mime Design out of London. So we all kind of worked together to create this program for these students, and it was the first time that I've done a workshop dealing with this subject matter. And it was probably one of like, the most like heart touching experiences I've had. To see, when you take a student out of their comfort zone and put them in a tool or like an instrument that they have to create that's totally different, but then you… All of a sudden, it was just like the brain was like, "Aha, oh my God, I can try this, I can do that. Oh my Gosh." And once you get into this flow of creativity, you know, you basically allowed

yourself to just create anything. And you've kind of removed your critical self out of the creative process in a way, and then it becomes like just generate ideas, and get excited about it, and just get it out, get it out, get it out.

Like a project that we're on creative development on, we could have four or five hundred different things to look at in one day, because we're not worried about like, "Oh, this has to look good, this has to be like this." It's like, "No, let's surprise ourselves. Let's come back the next day and then ..." And then you're like, "Whoa, that's interesting, let's go there."

So you've totally removed yourself and it becomes this collaborative generation of improv, that guides the work in a way. And then we back it in when it's time to like, present. We're like, "Okay, we need to get focused here, and bring things home."

Liam Spradlin: I want to touch on that too. The, um, notion of learning to improvise, or learning to create something that feels very dynamic and on the fly, but actually takes a lot expertise. And so something that I've seen you talk about is this idea of analytical versus intuitive creation.

So first, what are those conceptually?

Mitch Paone: Designers, I think we know how to make things look good at the very base level. Forget ideas, forget concepts, forget the content and meat, we can execute something that looks pretty. And I'm kind of saying this in a cynical way. So that to me is our brains getting in the way of being analytical. It's like, "Oh yeah, let's just you know, kern the type and set the leading just right, and create this kind of sterile thing that looks good and it's pretty and people will accept."

But I think what the problem with that is, is that it's familiar to people. Like when you present work like this, and it seems to carry this, "Oh, I've seen that, that's fine. It's good, you know. It's easy to digest," because it doesn't challenge yourself creatively, you haven't put yourself out of the comfort zone. And you're definitely not putting your viewer or their audience out of the comfort zone. And I'm not saying we have to do this in a provocative way, but intuition… It's really easy to talk about this in the jazz context, because when you're performing and playing a solo, you're deciding those notes right there, in time, and you're going to make mistakes and do whatever you want. But I think the beauty of understanding jazz improvisation, is that no one knows you're making a mistake if you play things with like a level of conviction. Like, "I'm gonna go for this, and I'm just gonna try to own it. And I'm gonna screw it up, but I'm just gonna roll with it and just keep playing through it. And no one in the audience is gonna know that." You know that you totally missed the chord.

So let's do the same thing, like in design. We'll establish a very structured process that gets you to the point where you can just create this flow. And this gets into, I think a deeper personal level of understanding yourself, what you like, and your tastes, and who you are, and what makes you tick. And I think… There is a bit of self discovery to get to a point where you can say, "I'm gonna remove my critical self out of the process and just make stuff and be free." That really is the process that we're going for, that's the aim.

And then on top of that, it's like, "Hey, let's trade art boards. I'm gonna take your ideas and do the same thing again. And then let's switch it back." It's about as democratic as it gets. We share, we make. You know you're gonna run into a limit of, "Okay, I can't do anymore," and then it's like, "I'll take that and see what happens."

So basically what I'm saying, is that I'm creating like a jazz solo out of the creative process. So, say you record your jazz song that you played live at the bar, or you're recording your whole process of the design that you created, the next day put it on the wall, throw it on the floor, put it on the screen, it doesn't matter. Then you can look, and refine, and see things that are interesting, or find mistakes, or something that we can kind of improve on.

But I think what's really special is, everybody on the team's like, "Oh, that one. Whoa, that one." And it's not like, "Oh, I created that one. That's my idea. This is the one we should go through." We don't care about that anymore. It's like, that feels super good. It kind of goes, mmm. And then you grab those kind of soulful pieces of design that have a special nature to them, and then that… Then we do the same again, let's work on that, refine that, let's kind of produce more in that. So I think the goal with this sort of process, is that if we're getting these reactions collectively, the clients gonna have the same thing. Their audience is gonna have the same thing. We're gonna present work and it's gonna be like, "Oh, it made me feel something. It feels weird. I have a little bit of gap before I know why I feel weird about it." And I think that's really, really interesting, and I think to really connect with people in a way, that's where we try to push things.

And I mean this is difficult to present work like this, because the clients like, "I don't know what that is. I don't understand this." And I like to create the analogy, if you like listen to a song, it's one of your favorites and you know it really well, you can sing the lyrics to it, and then you have a new song that just came on the radio by the same band, or same musician, and you're like, "Man, I don't… I don't know if like this, but there's something about it that brings me back over and over again." You know this unfamiliarity. It's different, it's like,

"Oh, I don't know." But then like five months of listening to that, that becomes your favorite song. The one that you liked is kind of boring.

Why not approach that for branding projects, or an identity? Like why don't we do this for our clients and their audience? Why don't we just go for this?

Liam Spradlin: I think the analogy to old and new songs is really good as well, because that suggests that like a dynamic and generative approach to things like identity and design projects, actually works against that. It means that the song is always new, it's always unfamiliar.

Mitch Paone: So part of my ritual, every day I play 30 minutes to an hour of music scales, then I perform a song, then I want to practice. Every time I played, that song has been different. It's been faster, it's been slower, it's been with like a groove, it's been with a swing beat. So then you… you can switch it and change, but what's beautiful about this, if you know the song, regardless of how I play it, the melody is there, the structure is there, and that is a parameter that defines an identity to music, that also defines parameters in design. And what I really like about that, is that it is not restrictive. It's… you can create a huge identity that has this inner kind of connective web of rhythmic changes and colors and stuff, but people all know it's part of the same thing.

Liam Spradlin: So your studio works on these like super contemporary techniques to create these things, and your studio's been described as futurist. So I want to wrap up by asking like, where do you see your creative process going in the actual future?

Mitch Paone: (laughs) I think it's funny the fact you wake up and think of yourself of a baby seeing the day as a new way, or new ideas are coming. Like if we keep this kind of lively humanity within the studio, we'll be able to kind of receive new technology and new thinking as we move forward. So that'll continue to progress.

And I think we're gonna constantly think about new tools and new directions. And I think, how do we evolve these ideas into different ways? If we start working in different mediums, if… Say we start working in film more again, or like different creative ways to bring this stuff together in the work, I think that'll be continuous.

But the thing that I've felt as a creative person, is… more important than doing great client work, is the connections we make with the people, the team members. I think creating a studio environment where you have dedicated a day, or a few hours a day, where you're experimenting and learning and trying

new things, and working together, that's gonna keep us fresh and new. We're gonna look back at our work two or three years ago, and think it's ridiculously terrible. It's not going to flat line.

So personally you get the… the evolution, but I want to share this with people. I want to go to the universities and schools, and luckily have some opportunities coming up that I get to do that, so. That I want to like make sure is a very big part of our studio's kind of process.

Liam Spradlin: Thank you again for joining me.

Mitch Paone: Cool. Thank you.

Liam Spradlin: Keep an eye on design.google/podcasts so you don't miss our next episode-- a special edition recorded at SPAN 2017 in Pittsburgh.

Guest host Aaron Lammer speaks with designer, professor, and *Architectural Intelligence* author Molly Wright Steenson about pattern languages, the important similarities between architecture and AI, and a lot more.

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Until next time.