Design Notes Episode 16 - Isabelle Olsson

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 speak with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.
Aaron Lammer:	Welcome to Design Notes. I'm your guest host, Aaron Lammer. This episode was taped at 2018's SPAN Conference in Helsinki. My guest was Isabelle Olsson. Uh, Isabelle Olsson is the Head of Industrial Design for Home and Wearables at Google.
Isabelle Olsson:	How can you create things that a lot of people are going to want to put in their most intimate space, which is your home?
Aaron:	You may know Isabelle's work from Google Glass or perhaps more recently, Google Home, which she injected with a unique sense of color.
Isabelle:	Yeah. And I had to convince a lot of people that color was important. We have to be inspired by the context in which our products live in. We don't live in black and white homes.
Aaron:	And why it's all about what people feel, not what they think.
Isabelle:	And what I've realized is do not ask what do you think, ask what do you feel. You get completely different answers.
Aaron:	Design Notes is brought to you by Google Design. You'll find out about all of Google Design's podcasts at design.google/podcasts. Uh, welcome, uh, Isabelle Olsson.
Isabelle:	Thank you.
Aaron:	Um, so you grew up in Sweden. What was your, uh, relationship to design like as a kid?

Isabelle: Well, I started making things at a very early age. I didn't think of it as design then, but now as I look back on it, that's what I was doing.

Aaron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Isabelle: Um, my grandfather had a workshop in his basement and he was kind of a self-taught industrial designer, um, never went to school, but, um, started making lamps and furniture and, uh, so, I experience lathes and saws and, um, different kind of ways of, um, treating, um, wood very early on. So, I started making little boats and things like that.

Aaron: Was he making furniture and stuff for functional purposes or like-

Isabelle: Yeah. I mean, he would, he always tried to reinvent everything, so. The one object that I really remember was a bottle opener and it was just a piece of wood, uh, with a nail, um, through it and it was so beautiful because it was extremely simple to make, but it was well crafted and it was one of those things that, well, bottle openers have looked the same forever, but he found a way to reinvent it. He hacked into his car. He thought I, he wanted an armrest and, you know, built one and covered it in leather and now that's part of status quo in a lot of cars, but it wasn't back then and he just kind of found problems and, and tried to solve them, um.

Aaron: That's the best do-it-yourself project I've ever heard, an arm rest in your own car. (laughs)

Isabelle: (laughs) Yeah.

Aaron: What point did you realize that, um, building things could be your job, not just your childhood hobby?

Isabelle: Well, pretty late, I think, um, because I didn't realize there was a way to combine kind of my passion for science and math with kind of the creative side of painting and, um, I started sewing clothes very early on and I just didn't understand that combination, um, and after high school, I felt like I needed a creative outlet, just a break before I was going to be, you know, a doctor or a lawyer or one of those three things that my parents thought was the path in life, um, and no offense at all, but that was what they thought and that's how I grew up.

And then, I did go to art school, um, to kind of learn more of the foundational of, you know, form and, um, new drawing and color theory

and all that and that's when I realized, like, wait a minute, there's something called industrial design, um, and that's where I could take my, my passion for kind of the technical side and combine it with the arts and, um, applied for industrial design school and that's how, how it happened. So, it was pretty late. I was like 20 or something. Yeah.

Aaron: It seems like you, you were well timed, um, within industrial design for a shift that happened. Where computing was mostly a software, uh, problem looking for a software solution and, um, increasingly, like, the thing that's in our pocket physically is what we think of as a computer.

Isabelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron: What, um, like, what were the first few industrial objects you built?

Isabelle: Well, um, that's also interesting because that happened late for me, as well, because I didn't go to design school, but I focused a lot on jewelry design, furniture design, nothing to have to do with technology, at all. Uh, but after graduating, after working a couple of years and I did exhibitions in Milan and, and had a lot of fun with it, I realized I was only designing for a very small group of people, um, and I felt like I could maybe apply my skills, um, to have more impact.

So, um, I learned about this project called [inaudible 00:05:14] um, and it was super inspiring to me and not necessarily for the specific design of it, but just this idea that with great design, um, you can, you know, have an impact on people's lives. So, I figured out who, who did it, um, and found this, um, agency in San Francisco and that's what took me to San Francisco and I applied there and, and they took me on.

Um, and, yeah, I worked on a huge range of things, but I ended up designing a lot of tech products, um, and it's not what I expected and, but what was cool was back then I was still, when I was looking around and seeing what everybody was sketching, it was all kind of black glossy boxes and, and I had this naive kind of reaction, is like, "Why is everybody just doing the same thing?"

And just even in the inspiration boards, I was just seeing the same object over and over again. Um, so I started, you know, putting up images on the wall of details of furniture and chairs and, and jewelry and at first people just kind of laughed at me a little bit, but then they just started to, like, you know, "Well, maybe there's something there." And that's how I kind of, I started to realize over and over on each project that I had a little bit of a

different point of view and how to, um, you know, rethink the way of design technology and it doesn't have to all be the same.

Aaron: What, like what kinds of lessons from jewelry making do you take with you?

Isabelle: Well, I think first of all everything that we design have to fit into people's lives and, you know, jewelry is that most extreme version of that because it actually literally has to fit your body, but it also, you have to create a desire, you have to, um, provide, you know, a range of things that, you know, people get excited about.

           Um, and, and then, and then the similar problems as anything else you design, you know, come up like how can we manufacturer it, can we manufacturer it at the right price? You know, all of those things, so I think, I think the, the jewelry piece is just, it puts those things into the extreme. Um, and same thing with furniture, I think, again, um, how can you create things that a lot of people are going to want to put in their most intimate space, which is your home.

Aaron: Jumping from Stockholm to Tech Boom, San Francisco, um, was it a culture shock for you as a designer?

Isabelle: Well, it was a culture jo- shock in general- (laughs)

Aaron: (laughs)

Isabelle: ... I have to say and, and, and I think a lot of people say that, you know, Sweden is one of the most Americanized, you know, countries in the world, and still. Yeah, it was a huge shock for me. And it was the everyday stuff. So, I would go into a store and, you know, people would greet me with, "Hey, how are you?" And, and I would start, "Well, you know, actually this morning, I wasn't, you know."

Aaron: (laughs)

Isabelle: And then, they were gone and I was like, "What? Wait. What just happened?" And I felt so awkward because I didn't realize like, oh, that's how you say hello. Like it took me like two years and then, I was like, "Oh, how are you?" "Yeah, good. How are you?" You know, and then it became like a normal thing.

And, and I remember a pivot point, which was, I think, two years into my, um, stay in the U.S. I went back to Stockholm and, and I was at a restaurant and I had this epiphany, I was like, "Everybody is so rude." And then, I realized, like, okay. I've adopted the American kind of friendliness and openness and just, um, you know, the less, you know, Swedish people in general are a little bit more reserved. I, I think that's a fair generalization to make.

And I'm fairly outgoing, so but it was still super strange for me. Um, so, I think it was more the qu- like not necessarily as a designer, but as a person. The other piece is the language. Um, I didn't feel like I could be myself for, for, for long time because a lot of your personality comes through your humor. You can't really be funny in a language that you don't understand. Um, so, that was kind of like, I realized I was a little sad for a moment and then, then there was a turning point where I started to feel like myself again. Um, so, yeah, so, those are some of the things.

Aaron: Designing, um, physical products has a certain similarity to being someone in a culture where you don't speak the language. You're building things that people have to use around the world. You can't rely on labeling or, um, instructions in the same way. It's, uh, a, a language-less form of communication.

Isabelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron: So, when you're designing things that you expect to be used, not just outside of California, but outside of America, all over.

Isabelle: Yep.

Aaron: How do you think about those kinds of cross-cultural, uh, communications?

Isabelle: Well, we actually have something called design language and, um-

Aaron: There you go.

Isabelle: ... so it, it kind of exists. I think the thing I'm trying to figure out is not so much, um, the usage patterns or, or things like that, although those are really important, but the, the critical piece is to figure out how something makes people feel because at the end of the day, that's the first thing. Um, you know, people's attention span are really, really short.

So, no matter of how good intentions you had with, well, it's very ergonomic and it's, you know, well manufactured and all that, but unless the five-foot view is intriguing, desirable, inviting, um, you're not going to catch people's attention or they're going to reject you.

Aaron: As an outgoing person who is interested in how the things you make people, make people feel, what have you learned about talking to people about experiences that are largely non-verbal?

Isabelle: Yeah.

Aaron: You know, a lot of people are like, "I don't know. It's a phone."

Isabelle: Yeah.

Aaron: You know.

Isabelle: Yeah. It's a really good question, um, and what I've realized is do not ask what do you think, ask what do you feel.

Aaron: Mmm.

Isabelle: You get completely different answers and in some cases if the question of what do you feel doesn't work, uh, you can ask people what does it look like.

Aaron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Isabelle: And then people start making these associations, which they will make in real life, um, anyways. So, we see a lot of this when new products come out on the market. "That looks like a trashcan. That looks like a donut. That's looks like a X."

              And you better be sure that your thing looks like something positive, something that has a positive connotation because anytime we make a prototype, I force everybody to like tell me, "What does it, you know, how does it make you feel? What does it feel like? What does it look like?" Um, and you know, the other day, we had a review of something and, you know, there was something about, you know, the posture of the, the object that, you know, made it look sad, but, you know, at first people started to like, "Well, this, this hinge" and you know, and it started them thinking about the details.

And I was like, "Well, what does it look like?" And then someone was like, "Well, a very sad person." And then, people started adding, "Oh, someone with a hunchback. Oh, and" and they just started adding on and all of a sudden we had, you know, 50 attributes about this model that clearly described it in a way that we would never want to shape a product like that.

Um, and then, of course, there are really positive examples of when we decided [inaudible 00:12:38] for example, you know the first time, you know, we landed on, on kind of a, the softer shade, they started saying, "Oh, it's like [inaudible 00:12:46]. It's like a [inaudible 00:12:47] It's like a donut, even." Although I prefer [inaudible 00:12:51] over a donut, but that's a whole other story. Um, and, and I was like, "Oh, these are all things that you want to eat." So, then I started to ask people, like, "Do you want to eat it?" Um, this doesn't apply to all products, but sometimes that works and just being able to create that initial kind of positive connotation, so you can then let people, you know, understand the object, use it, invite it.

Aaron:	Is people wanting to eat it good or bad in your opinion?
Isabelle:	Oh, it's great.
Aaron:	It's good. Okay. That's what I thought.
Isabelle:	It's a great thing.
Aaron:	Yeah, that's what I thought. Yeah, the donut is, uh---
Isabelle:	[crosstalk 00:13:22] desire, it's like yummy.
Aaron:	Yeah, it's a powerful lure …
Isabelle:	Yeah.
Aaron:	... the donut. Um, I was watching, um, actually I don't remember which product that this was about, but, um, about sort of thinking about color-
Isabelle:	Mmm.
Aaron:	... with regards to hardware products, and as you said, um, one way to deal with it is to just make black boxes and not think about color at all.

Isabelle:	Yeah.
Aaron:	Um, but when you're, because you're really into unchartered terrain like that, like, "Hey, everything, every version of this product to date is a black or white box."
Isabelle:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Aaron:	We're making the first color one.
Isabelle:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Aaron:	How do you like start from zero to something like that?
Isabelle:	Yeah. Yeah. And I had to convince a lot of people that color was important, um, and it took awhile, but I think the key piece here and it's actually quite logical it's is we have to be inspired by the context in which our product live in and we don't live in black and white homes. I mean, we for sure don't live in black homes.
	Um, you know, a lot of people have a lot of white walls, so therefore, you know, it makes sense to have a lighter skew and, you know, it might make sense to have a darker skew too because you might put it next to your TV or whatever other tech things you have. Um, so you might have to have those things, but if you think about, you know, people's homes, accent pillows, shelves, chairs, you know, they're all sorts of colors. Um, and I think if we want to have people invite our products, um, into their home, you know, we have to have a higher bar, it has to fit in or be something that you're, you know, excited about. Um, so, I think that's the very fundamental piece of it, fitting into people's lives and their homes.
Aaron:	Yeah, I hadn't really thought of that, you know, in some ways, your career has come full circle and you're making, um, household goods.
Isabelle:	Yeah.
Aaron:	That happened to have a technological brain inside of them-
Isabelle:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Aaron:	... but basically have to operate, uh, in the same way as something that could be sold at Crate & Barrel or something like that.

Isabelle:	Yep.
Aaron:	So, has that been a re-education process for you?
Isabelle:	Well, it's, it's, it's, yeah, it feels like coming home.
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	Um, and it's, you know, incredible to be able to combine something that was, you know, a passion of mine or an interest of mine with, you know, my job. Um, so, it doesn't feel like a job always. Uh, which is cool. So, yeah, I agree with you. It's, it's great and, you know, it's been helpful for me because, you know, now again, I get to go back to Milan to Furniture Design Week and I get to see the things and even last year we got to do a little exhibition with Google [inaudible 00:15:59] software, which was super fun. Um, so, yeah, I feel like, I feel like I'm back.
Aaron:	Have there been any products from the non-hardware world that you have been like, "I want to make the technological version of this" that you've encountered?
Isabelle:	Oh, that's a really good question. I haven't, you know, necessarily thought about that. I mean, I think, you know, the speakers are a really good example of something that, you know, I've always wanted to revisit. Um, you know, and even anything that surrounds entertainment, too, I think it's just currently at a not a great spot. I mean, the fact that we have to have all these media cabinets that we use, we design furniture to hide technology.
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	We got to get, we got to get away from that. Like, that's silly.
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	Um.
Aaron:	We even like hard code it into our houses to hide it.
Isabelle:	Yeah, it makes it inaccessible both literally and conceptually and I think that's another piece that, you know, I really enjoy about my job is we, we've set some pretty challenging requirements for us to create things

that are desirable, but at a really affordable price point. Um, so there you have to be pretty creative.

Aaron: Do you often have, like, iteration design, where it's like this is the $1,000 version, this is the $500 version?

Isabelle: I think it's more about, you know, what we've been having to do is figure out a design language and an approach that scales across different price points.

Aaron: Mmm.

Isabelle: So, whether it's, you know, a thousand dollar laptop that goes in your bag or a $50 speaker that goes in your home, just figuring out what are those common elements and how, how does it hang together? How does it feel like one brand while not just applying the same thing on both, but, but more philosophically, um, thinking about them, um, so that they belong together.

             Um, and, yeah. I mean, a lot of, a lot of times when you design things, you have to, um, I think first of all, have the idea of what, what you want to achieve and then there are multiple ways of achieving that, um, and some are more expensive to make than others. And as [inaudible 00:18:04] I have to collaborate really closely with engineering and be clear about, "Here is what we want to achieve, what are like five ways we can do that?"

Aaron: It seems like a lot of the things you're making now, like the first generation of hardware was, "Wow, here's a novel experience you've never had before." And these are almost like instead of this technological experience, how about you switch to this one, like Google Glasses. You know, don't walk around trying to film everything and experience everything with your phone, like put this in your eye. Or the, a lot of these home speakers are, "Don't look at it, talk to it." These kinds of things. What has it been like sort of building experiences on top of existing experiences?

Isabelle: Um, I don't know if I have like a super great answer to this question. Um, I mean, I'm, I think fundamentally, we have to recognize that while, while there is evolution in the way we live and, and, and work and think, you know, we're fundamentally humans and, you know, someone was asking me, "What does the home look like, in you know, 20 years from now?" And I was like, "Probably pretty much the same.

Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	Because if you think about what the home looked like 20 years ago, it's pretty much the same. It's just the TV has gotten a lot thinner, um, and we talk to our speakers instead of, you know, using a remote control or a control panel. So, I think, um, it's really about how can we, you know, create experiences that are simpler, more beautiful, um, easier to use and that kind of let's us go back to, like, cooking and chatting with your partner or, you know, having a party or doing the things that we want to do and if we, with technology, can make those experiences either more fun or better or cooler or simpler or less expensive or whatever it is, uh, if we can improve it in one shape or form, I think that's what's, what's challenging and what's cool and what's interesting.
Aaron:	I was, uh, I was talking to a locksmith, uh, a few days ago because I had to have the lock replaced on my door.
Isabelle:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Aaron:	And he, and I was talking to him about innovation in locks because there's, you know, smart locks have become a thing. He's like, "Yeah, no one is really buying them. Um, people only change their lock like once every 35 years on average, so, like we're waiting-
Isabelle:	Yeah.
Aaron:	... we're waiting to hitting that point in the cycle." A lot of the things that you make are not on a 35-year cycle, they're on a one, two, three, five-year cycle. Is it, is it emotionally difficult to see these things that you made and poured your heart into get inevitably recycled at some point?
Isabelle:	Um, I mean, I think the thing I want to be, it's not, like, for me personally, that's fine. The thing that worries me is just, you know, we have to be considerate about the environment.
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	And I just, I don't want to contribute to like a wasteful way of-
Aaron:	Sure.

Isabelle:	... you know, buying things and, you know, so that, so that keeps me up at night. But that's why I want to make sure the things that we design can stand the test of time if you do decide to keep it around and that it doesn't feel like, "Oh, that was clearly 2018."
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	You know, but like how can it be that it, you know, last for years like just like a really good chair, um, or any, anything else in your, in your home. Um, that's one of the reasons, for example with Google Home Max, we made it so ultra simple because we know that people keep their speakers around for like 10 years.
Aaron:	Yeah.
Isabelle:	So, instead of, like, coming up with a flashy design, and, you know, we had some more expressive option, like options on the table, literally, and, and I was, and I was convinced we had to go with the most minimal approach because this, this product needs to live for a long time. That's also why we actually didn't make Max in a bunch of like trend colors. We made it in a dark and a light.
Aaron:	Tell me about, like, bringing fabric into that equation.
Isabelle:	Yep.
Aaron:	It seems like a weird, like almost a radical decision to include fabric in a technological product.
Isabelle:	Yeah. Fabric is an incredible material for like a million reasons, but, but I'll talk about a couple of them, um, first, it's you know, for the, for it's properties. It's flexible, like physically flexible. It's, um, lightweight. It's fairly inexpensive. It's soft. It's durable and it's what we're surrounded by. Our clothes, our, you know, sofas, everything that we have in our home and on our bodies are a fabric. So, it can let through sound, it can let through light, you know, hide buttons behind it.
	You can really reduce the complexity of an object and I think, you know, as designers and especially as we create technology, we have to not only make it easy to use, but make it look easy to use. Um, and not be a distraction. So, for me, fabric was this kind of turning point where we realized we can have this premium finish for not too expensive of a cost and then we can kind of tuck the technology away so really all that you

think about is that you're talking to it. You know, and it alludes this kind of simplicity.

Aaron: All right. Well, I'm, I'm really looking forward to your talk today.

Isabelle: You make me nervous.

Aaron: (laughs)

Isabelle: I'm still working it out in my head. (laughs)

Aaron: All right. I'll give you-

Isabelle: But I have, I have some nice pictures, so hopefully that helps.

Aaron: There, I think it's going to go great.

Isabelle: Cool.

Aaron: Um, thank you so much for this interview.

Isabelle: Thank you.

Aaron: Hey, Liam. Um, I'm Aaron. I'm your guest host. Liam is the normal host of Design Notes. Hello.

Liam: Hi.

Aaron: Um, so thanks for, uh, thanks for letting me have the reigns, uh, briefly here. We both, actually, taped episodes at the, uh, SPAN Conference in Helsinki this year. What was the stuff you did?

Liam: Uh, so I recorded interviews with this year's Material Design Award winners.

Aaron: What is the Material Design Award and what kind of people win it?

Liam: So, the Material Design Awards are kind of like an annual set of awards that we do for apps or products that bring material design to life in a unique way.

Aaron: And, uh, where can people who want to subscribe to Design Notes and find all of these episodes find them?

Liam:	Um, you can find them pretty much wherever you listen to podcasts, so iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts. Uh, there's an RSS Feed. You can also go to design.google and find show notes and links and stuff like that.
Aaron:	Thanks, Liam.
Liam:	Thank you.