

Design Notes Episode 19 - Marko Ahtisaari

Google Design Podcast Transcript

Published December 13, 2018

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 Aaron Lammer. I'm your guest host from the 2018 span conference in Helsinki. I got a chance to talk to Marko Ahtisaari. He's the former design director of Nokia and after some time at the MIT media lab, he is now back in Helsinki and had this to say about the Finnish people.

Marko Ahtisaari: From a cultural point of view, I'm thinking purely from Fin. We're like the Nordic auditory, like we sent a monster heavy metal band to the Eurovision Song contest and with very conflicted my people said, "What have like what have we done?" And then they win.

Aaron: We talked about how the spirit of Finland influences finished design.

Marko: It was this sense of kind of a gentler structure to life in a beautiful every day, which was part of the larger social project of education for everyone.

Aaron: Marko most recent startup was concerned with how music could be used to heal.

Marko: We were looking at the health effects of music. So how could you actually potentially compliment to replace pharmaceuticals using personalized sound and music?

Aaron: Design Notes is brought to you by Google Design. You can find out more about all of Google Designs podcast at design.google/podcasts.

Aaron: Where did you grow up in Finland?

Marko: I grew up in Finland in Helsinki until I was five, but then, um, moved with my parents to a Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and was there for a little while, moved from there to New York. Uh, then came back for high school

in Finland, uh, graduated from high school year and then returned to New York, uh, to study at Columbia University there, uh, and stayed there through undergraduate and uh, Grad school and then through a series of twists and turns and ended up back here in Finland. So I kind of grew up on three continents. And um-

Aaron: Is it strange being, um, known as a Finnish designer considering that probably half your life more than half of your life if you've been away?

Marko: Yeah, I think at some point I had been away more than more than half my life. Um, I think the, there are certainly things in Finnish identity and made sure and lifestyle, if you like, that are deeply part of me. But then also those early years in Africa, some, um, friends say that they can kind of tell the colors and that, that, that I grew up in East Africa. I think other people are always better to see those things than yourself.

Aaron: Was designed something you thought a lot about as a young person growing up and was it uh something that was prominent in your education as a finished high school student?

Marko: That's a good question. I don't, I don't think so. I think there's a, like if you think of the Nordics, Finland is, uh, uh, we, we never became, even though we have a history of being in between Russia and Sweden historically and being part of each and then we've been independent, we'd never um, kind of ornamentation that comes with maybe royalty and to end sort of figuration. We've just a little bit in comparison. We're like the country cousins of the royals to the west and the-

Aaron: I like ours to Scandinavia politics. I've never asked people within Scandinavia what they think of the other people in Scandinavia.

Marko: I'm just trying to say there's a, I guess there's a real tradition of making things yourself. And then also we're, we're importantly, we're a country and a society that industrialized and urbanized fairly late.

Aaron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Marko: So really it's something after the Second World War moving into the cities and even though we're technologically very advanced, I'd say we're still figuring out what it's like to live in cities. And so every family pretty much regardless of economic status, and we'll have a, some form of summer house in the extended family so that in um, July, typically in Finland you'll just go and live in the countryside and the placer cottage will likely be

something you at least in part built yourself. You certainly keep renovating it. You may kind of chop the wood to heat it and so on. I don't mean this in a kind of a rustic, Wolgan uh, way, but I think there's a connection with nature and then tinkering with things.

Marko: But in Finland particularly, I think it is, it's sparser and it's less ornamented and less refined somehow. And there, I think there's more of a link towards a, at least with friends and having visited some of the places, there's a, I think a deep link to Japanese culture somehow. Maybe it's also in the bathing silence, some, some other things. But so I guess you grow. What I'm saying is you grow up with this, it comes um, with you. But I was always a, from a design point of view. I was, it was mainly a early days of the internet and you know, seeing the pine and the Mosaic Browser for the first time and looking at it and say this thing is endless, you know, and then wanting to get involved with that and that at that point I was already in the, in the States. So I guess there was a sensibility towards things through music and playing base that had been a part of my life and was a part of my life at that time.

Marko: But I'm self taught and just stay curious. So it certainly wasn't early on, but I think it comes in this society. But one thing I'd also say is it's somehow imbued in, in some of our great designers, like Aino and Alvar Aalto um, the, the couple is, there was this sense of kind of a gentler structure to life than a beautiful every day, which was part of the larger social project of education for everyone. This, this is pretty broad brush, right? But, uh, still it's, it's definitely there that a beautiful everyday experience and having, um, uh, objects that are well crafted and simple but enhance well being is kind of that general story. So it's, I think deeply, I think the kind of design that comes from here, maybe this is the way to summarize it, is coming from values that are deeply in the societies.

Aaron: I want to come back to that idea of wellness and a good life because I know that's been a focus of some of your more recent work, but um, taking us back to the Mosaic browser. Um, and the idea of being self taught, um, where were you in your life when you had these early internet experiences and what was the path that took you from there through, I understand you studied philosophy and music to the point where you're designing at Nokia, like how do you get from point a to point be?

Marko: It's a twisted path, no logic to it. But, um, I remember I was meeting a former colleague wants to. He said, you know, you told me about the World Wide Web. I said, "What are you talking about?" So, and he's a professor of philosophy and mathematical logic and it was just, we had a

band a at that point in New York with um, a percussionist called Mauro Refosco uh, and uh, and few other musicians, but we, we, we had a URL and so it was kind of to promote Ben. So it was in addition to putting up the flyers, you know, (laughs) all around the village and in Morningside Heights, uh, we, you know, we put the URL on there. It's interesting, there's actually a book by a guy called Jacques Attali who was I think a major European central bank uh, person, but it's called the Noise is the name of the book and it's called the political economy of music.

And the thesis is that the business and structures in the world of music predate those in the rest of society. So you look, so this is one kind of flyer and put the URL so early days of online marketing, whatever. But, uh, so, so that was where I was. I then returned here and through a bunch of, um, uh, did a bunch of early work on mobile, mobile interface design and there wasn't really any place to learn that. Now we have schooling and education for, if you call it interaction designer, user experience design, but just went that on the job then for a little while at Nokia and then started doing startups with people that I respected and who saw something in my skills and, you know, give you the courage to jump and uh, uh, did that. Then-

Aaron: I want to pause you there so you don't. There's no basis for user experience design at this point. I'm, I'm guessing probably the word user experience design hasn't even been widely disseminated. So when you're trying to figure out the problems that would become user experience design and like how did, how did you tackle those?

Marko: I think it was again, pretty pragmatic and you went after in those days it was a pre, pre iPhone days. So these were browsers on early, uh, early mobile phones after that, uh, I actually jumped and that was interesting and also fairly, uh, early days. It was a startup developing a basically free mobile service, uh, for a younger audience in exchange for advertising. So it was like an explicit deal. You get x texts, y minutes. Now Some models that have been tried, but then it was fairly novel virtual network operators. So we bought minutes and texts wholesale. Launched in the UK was right at the time Lehman was collapsing, so pretty hard time to sell alternative advertising for new medium that no one believes is-

Aaron: Not not great time.

Marko: And so I learned a lot but, and many, many good friends who have done extremely well and then um, completely different to jumped into a ... we built a social network, a ballplayer which was a, like a pro foursquare for

people that travel a great deal. And it was really, in that sense, part of the early web. It was only a few things really, really well and connected to a lot of services when that was still, when there was an open internet and the uh, and uh, that, that was possible. And Nokia acquired that company. And that's when I went to have the design studio and there the idea was bring together, this is 2009, uh, bring together all of the industrial designers and user experience designers and packaging design into one studio.

Marko: Kind of reboot the portfolio from a design perspective, and also the brief was kind designed a better smart phone at a time when it was, it was business was super challenging and the walls were shaking and we worked on a product called the N9, which still very proud of. It's a very lucky to have worked with such talented people and despite the wall shaking, we were able to ship some, uh, I think very meaningful, uh, things not just different for the sake of being different but something a bit better. So I think, I think there's this constant thread, it sounds like a cliché these days, but you just keep learning and you follow those things where you think you can contribute. And also for me, people, you know, some, someone that inspires you to like, Hey, in this context I could learn a lot.

Aaron: When you're working on these kinds of projects um, like here in Helsinki, um, do you feel like your geographical basis being here in a relatively small country with a technology industry that is not as big as Palo Alto, say, um, affect how you work and think about what you're doing?

Marko: Really good question. I think most business, at least at the time I was working most business is pretty global by nature, so it's, unless you're careful, it's kind of an endless, endless series of telcos late into the night, uh, from a cultural point of view. I'm thinking purely from Finland. Would like the Nordic oddity and speak a little bit about the, like we sent a monster heavy metal band to the Eurovision Song contest and with very conflicted minds people said like, "What have we done." And then they win, you know, and we, there's a kind of oddity and not, we're not super slick, you know, as a ... and then there's the whole thing that relationship to nature and these sometimes are called clichés, but they're very, I think in the sense a true. So there's this kind of oddity in us and not to be ashamed of that, but let that come out.

And uh, then in terms of software that's ... how do you, how do you make software that's not like a one is you need to believe that it's interesting to have different kinds of software that feels like, and some people will say

no, it's all should be like, um, easier to use in some way and grow whatever. But I think what is interesting, maybe this is where it will come in, we're seeing this model of the internet was built now on these layers of value control and capture on top of an open internet which are essentially islands of the Internet within the Internet and they're a quasi monopolistic systems of the, of high growth where we get free service for complete surveillance and exchange for advertising sales. But I think there's a lot of movements for a different kind of smaller um, social networks. Some, some, I think people confuse it for nostalgia.

Marko: Uh, uh, only nostalgia for an early internet or the way used to be or ... but what I mean by this is a different forms of social networks and communication that are slightly smaller, that are slightly slower and uh, in a country like Finland, we are somewhat responsible for IRC, for Linux. So a lot of, uh, uh, and these are individuals within Finland, but I don't think anyone should claim anything. But for some reason it happened here, you know, I, I still believe in, in, in strong individuals, but some, somehow those values and values imbued. So I'm very curious for the next phase of communication applications and protocols and platforms if you want to, if you like that word or not, but systems for people to communicate that whether we could make some things that look a little bit more like Finland and the Nordics.

Aaron: Does that idea come at all from your experiences in music or you've been in bands, you've toured, you've gigged, you evolve this stuff. How does your experience in those kinds of communities and form your ideas about how to design Internet stuff?

Marko: Wow, it's a very good question. Sure. I know, I mean, my, my experience with me ... I was playing back then. I took a 15 year break and three years ago uh, next to a large CNC mill at MIT in the Fab lab, I met a researcher called Nadia Peak, who's now a professor at the University of Washington and she was very patient with me and showing me a large format shop Bot and we started a band together called construction and uh, I think one, one area of music we're talking about putting up posters with URLs in the way early days. There's some topic about how, how rights are divvied up in the authorship in, in the arts, which I think still needs a bit of work and there's a bunch of work on that.

Marko: Um, Berkeley and also MIT kind of like how do you create, how would you make it more the information more available about authorship. So basically open API is to, um, to stitch together the different disparate databases on publishing rights and things like that. I'm not sure how

fundamental this is, but music isn't, music ... the funny thing is music is such a cultural force and for each of us, right? So important and yet economically the whole thing is very small.

Aaron: But you can learn a lot about the economics of anything by studying something like how music works. I think about how, you know, if a Nokia or Google makes something and they hire a bunch of people like you, there's no question to who owns it. Nokia owns it. Like everything you ever did at Nokia is owned by Nokia. Um, the minute you try to do something yourself, for yourself without someone else's money that requires more than one person, you're setting yourself up for a very awkward conversation.

Marko: I think there'll be more. Maybe there'll be more kind of a ... it's not a tools and automate as much about how to have those conversations as possible. But we now, uh, let's say right after this podcast, we decided to stay here and jam a little bit. I'll get my base and then we put something immediately on line. [crosstalk 00:18:28]. Does it have an ISRC number? What's the split? Uh, and uh, you know, of all of this information, when, when is it, when is it, when is that Meta information being attached to the files and-

Aaron: You've actually been working with sound recently. You, um, you've been at the MIT media lab and doing well, what brought you to the media lab first?

Marko: Well, um, it was a Joi Ito, the, the director of the MIT media lab whom I've known for a long time. He's been sometimes an investor in companies and also kind of a mentor, someone that, you know, encouraged me early on to get into companies. And at the time when Microsoft acquired the phones business of Nokia, I paced the decision either to go, go with the acquisition or to not. I decided to leave at that point, not because I was against, but I just thought like an another big company for four years if you want to impact the culture of product making, it takes a long time. And at that point we just had a call with Joi instead when you come here, they had a program called the director's fellows program with some remarkable group of very diverse people. Um, ranging from very well known like JJ Abrams to a people that we hadn't heard of until a Pashon Murray who's working on a project called Detroit Dirt recycling garbage from a lot of the sports venues and restaurants and making dirt for Detroit.

Marko: Just an example there tens of remarkable people um, from whom I learned a great deal. And there I started thinking about well, wellbeing of

the student population as well. MIT is a great place, but also pretty high, high intensity. And uh, at the same time I was kind of returning to musical. So, um, met my band mate and then we met a few other people both by the media lab and otherwise in Cambridge uh, to ... who are looking at the health effects of music. So how could you actually potentially compliment to replace pharmaceuticals using personalized sound and music? And we co founded a company called Sync Project, which at the time it was acquired by Bose Corporation, uh, in February of this year. But that time we were working on generative music. Um, so algorithmically generated music meant to help people with sleep disorders and acute pain. And had started our first clinical studies and, and that, that work is continuing at, at Bose and they can speak more, more about it and I'm still, still involved and I would say that I think if you take a long enough for you and this will be perfectly normal in 10, 15 years' time.

Marko:

I think the idea that we'd use non drug modalities that are affecting our senses and through that our brains music is a particularly powerful one, but lighting certainly is. And uh, other, uh, other, other modalities. But music is particularly interesting because it, it ... when listening to music or playing music, but let's say just listening to music, your brain fires very broadly. So it's not only the auditory cortex, it's a lot of um, other effects that it's having. Somehow it seems very fundamental. We don't of course understand everything, but even though we don't understand that anything, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be using it. So it just will take a little bit of time to show the effects in a language that the medical and healthcare community will understand. That I think in the long run, the idea that you would be in addition to having the full, full on opioid subscription, why don't you get half of that amount and you get a music subscription. I think eventually that'll be a normal.

Aaron:

So you're back in Finland now you're mostly in the countryside, but also in Helsinki. You must be here every week, several days because you do more in Helsinki than I do in New York and I'm there all the time. So you are curating or curating is maybe the wrong word. Running an arts festival-

Marko:

Yeah. No. Curating is a great word I think for it and I'm very grateful. It's a kind of new new direction f-for me. There's a, I'm the artistic director of the Helsinki Festival, but Helsinki Festival is the largest multi arts festival in the Nordics. Held every year annually in last two weeks of August. Multi arts means classical music, all kinds of music of different scales. There's XXL, one and a half orchestras, three choirs, Mahler's eighth, you know, big stuff than super small as well. Uh, with our partner festivals here, we

have over 300 events in restaurants and bars called art goes bar or Art Kapa Haka.

Marko: It's great. Uh, and dance, um, occasionally different forms of, uh, a circus or new, new circus. Uh, uh, so it's, it's really a diversity of all kinds of arts and really takes over the city and they were looking for new kinds of artistic director. And uh, a friend Pekka Kuusisto who's an incredible violinist, if you've never seen his encore at the BBC proms uh, google that-

Aaron: I'm looking forward to the transcription that's trying to figure out all of these names afterwards (laughs).

Marko: I'll, I'll, I'll send the footnotes. Uh, and uh, he, he sent me a text message saying, "Hey, I know you're thinking about doing something else and maybe not a startup immediately and, and given what you've been doing on, maybe you should apply." And I recommended you already and I was like, "Oh, thanks." I think. And then that led to a process where it got ... did more of my homework. I think as a bass player and musician, you always like, you got to do the practice. And do the work. And so, uh, I started researching it and now just started two months ago, I attended the first festival. I'd been in Boston for the last three years, so I hadn't seen it and I saw it like no one else does, which is like three shows a night. So totally manic.

Aaron: Yeah.

Marko: But uh, it's incredible potential. So also to you and all your listeners would love to see you in Helsinki next August and lots of cool surprises and a new, new kind of connecting things. So that's also here um, here at span is kind of a ... When, when I was asked to come and speak, I said, well, I'd like to talk about the very early ideas of what it is to like to design a festival.

Aaron: Do you think of it as a way to promote coming to live in Helsinki or promote tourism? Or like what, what is it like if you, if someone took one thing away from the festival, what would you want it to be?

Marko: So really good. I think one theme actually is, uh, our goal is, and we will put art in those nodes in the network where people arrive in and leave Helsinki. So welcome.

Aaron: I will see you at the festival. Thanks, Marco.

Marko: Thank you very much.

Aaron: Hey Liam, this is your guest host, uh, Aaron Lammer, but you are the normal host of Design Notes for people haven't listened. Tell us a little bit about what Design Notes is.

Liam: Uh, Design Notes is a show that I started partially to satisfy my own curiosity about other design disciplines, but also something that I started to find out what the common threads are between different practices.

Aaron: What kinds of people do you have on Design Notes?

Liam: Uh, so we've had everyone from furniture designers to identity designers to game designers. Um, I really want to cover the full spectrum of all of the types of design things people are doing.

Aaron: And uh, where can people find a Design Notes?

Liam: Um, you can find it pretty much wherever you listen to podcasts. So we're on Google podcasts, iTunes, Spotify uh, there's an RSS feed if you're into that.

Aaron: Well, uh, thanks. Thanks for letting me fill in, Liam.

Liam: Yeah, thank you.