

Design Notes Episode 20 - Tuuli & Kivi Sotamaa

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- Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show 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.
- Aaron Lammer: Welcome to Design Notes! I'm your guest host Aaron. This episode was taped at SPAN 2018 in Helsinki. I've talked to two designers from Helsinki. Kivi and Tuuli Sotamaa. They are a brother and sister team that designs everything from museum exhibitions to the interiors of fine restaurants.
- Kivi Sotamaa: The restaurant sector is one example, I mean, the fine dining is this world where everything matters. Everything.
- Tuuli Sotamaa: It's like a theater almost, where the uh, diner becomes part of the audience. But it's a participatory audience.
- Aaron: They talked about the importance of friction in experiential design.
- Kivi: And the idea, our idea, is that this friction is how cultural change happens. If you can challenge people, seduce them into adjusting their conventions, then you can actually change the way they relate to the world. And that's the kind of work that design can do, at it's best.
- Aaron: They often work in between multiple disciplines.
- Tuuli: Because we were not designers, we were not the architects, we were not the artists, but we would work between these fields. And we were really interested in, what is possible?
- Aaron: Design Notes comes to you from Google Design! You can find out about all of Google Designs podcasts at design.google.podcast.
- Welcome, Tuuli and Kivi Sotamaa.
- Tuuli: Thank you.

Aaron: You...run a design studio. Tell me what you do. What do you design?

Kivi: That's a tough question (laughter)

Aaron: (laughter)

Tuuli: (laughter)

Kivi: Really, we have to figure out an answer to this question. Because we're not specialized in anything.

Aaron: Right.

Kivi: Meaning we're specialized in everything. In other words we do projects that cross scale and media. For clients who are really, for one or the other, one or another reason are really interested in experiences. And, and, considering every aspect. Everything that contributes to an experience.

So we do projects that range from the scale of buildings to the scale of glasses.

Aaron: What was your relationship to design like growing up?

Tuuli: Well we grew up in a family that has very close relation to design and architecture. We lived in, we grew up in [inaudible 00:03:06] House. And, uh, which was built in the 60's. Our whole house was full of art, design and anything to do with the 3-dimensional world. And our father is also in the same field. It's in our DNA basically.

And we used to do quite a lot of stuff with hands.

Aaron: When did you first collaborate with each other? I failed to say you are a brother and sister.

Tuuli: We started, the first project that we did together, was 1999. I studied ceramic art and glass art at the beginning and did a lot of sculptures. And we studied in the same floor, at the same university with Kivi. And Kivi would walk past my studio and once in a while go maybe we should do something together. Like, once, maybe we could bring this stills together and it was a project in 1999 where we could test how would we work together.

And it worked out really well, and ever since then we've done projects together.

Kivi: I studied both architecture and design. I could never decide which way to go, so I chose both. We were invited by Herbert Muschamp of the New York Times to participate in a competition to design the Millennium Capsule for the New York Times. And the idea was that the readers of the New York Times would choose objects that would be saved for thousands of years.

So we didn't know what the objects were, and we decided to use the computer to produce this sinuous, polymorphic digital skins around whatever objects they choose. And then embed them in composites, ceramics, and we ended up with this. The idea was that this object is going to somehow contain today's technology, design technology, material technology. And aesthetic sensibility.

And we came up with this amazing thing, and when it came time to make it physical, couldn't figure out how to get it out of the computer. So I went to talk to Tuuli, I said we should somehow materialize this. And then, it wasn't a problem for her, because she was used to working with complex forms by hand.

And the result was so good that from that day on, we always kept going on between the analog and the digital, and working together.

Aaron: Before you had this track record of work built up, how did you deal with being involved in a cross-disciplinary practice that had no real specific purpose? Like how do you even find work like that before you have work like this?

Tuuli: We used to work what the [inaudible 00:05:44] curators were interested in us. Maybe particularly because we were not designers, we were not the architects, we were not the artists, we would work between these fields. And we were really interested in creating, also, temporary structures because that allows you to test things out. They don't have to be physically there for the next hundred years.

But we would try things and really test, what is possible?

Kivi: Yeah, that's true. I mean, we were really embraced by the art scene. And then, I think, the world changed in a way where, maybe because of digitalization, people who exist and compete in physical space, hospitality,

retail, museums, they actually have to deliver experiences that you cannot download.

Those are the kinds of clients we're working with now. And the restaurant sector is one example. I mean, fine dining is this world where everything matters.

Aaron: Looking at that analog, digital divide that you were describing in making the capsule. Um, over those 20 years I feel like the default experience have gone from a mostly physical analog experience to where a lot of people's primary experiences now are digital experiences, and are staring at their phone for the most part.

How has your practice changed along that, um, that curve? How was that changed what you do?

Kivi: What we tend to work, let's say in a manner of movie directors, who control quite carefully how those other media are part of the environment. So we do consider the digital experience as part of the physical environment. And we are a little bit disturbed by the fact that the design in the digital world is geared towards erasing any friction.

Is trying to make the user experience as smooth and effortless as possible. Which makes sense for most things. But funny enough, we're actually interested in almost the opposite. We're interested in the kind of friction the physical space offers. And the kind of friction that, for example, you find in good artwork.

Meaning there's something that gets your attention and challenges your preconceptions and seduces or provokes or forces you to adjust your pre-existing models of the world. And we see that go away more and more when design is geared towards, you know, the elimination of any friction. And it's all supposed to be smooth, and you're not supposed to notice.

Tuuli: Very interested in the opposite.

Kivi: There are certain moments when that's good, and there are plenty of people working on that. But we're almost interested in the opposite.

Aaron: Thinking about friction...when you're working on a project, do you have a discussion like how much friction is there in this experience? Needs a little more, needs a little less?

Kivi: Yes.

Tuuli: Yeah.

Kivi: Yeah. Exactly.

Tuuli: I think in the beginning of maybe 15 years ago, we did a lot of projects where the object itself didn't tell how you're supposed to use it. And what is it, the only, the maybe the scale and the materiality, gave a hint. But then, after that, you would have to find with your body, how does this work?

And it was an interesting experiment to see how people reacted to them. And started giving new meanings. And it was more of like hinting towards, use your own imagination, and use your own brain. And be sensitive to what you are offered.

Kivi: [crosstalk 00:09:12]

Tuuli: So you become more conscious about how you, uh, what the world is surrounds you.

Kivi: And the idea, our idea, is that this friction is how cultural change happens. If you can challenge people, seduce them into adjusting their conventions then you can actually change the way they relate to the world. And that's the kind of work that design can do at it's best.

So we always think of that. How much friction, where, and towards what end?

Aaron: In software design, user experience research is usually to reduce friction to say, this person is getting stuck here, we need to fix that. And it seems like you can use research, user research design, also to do the opposite. To say this is too easy, or, people are not having the exploratory experience.

So when you're thinking of a project, like, I actually know nothing about developing a restaurant. Do you do sample meals? Do you let people sort of have the dining experience and film them? Or study them or something?

Tuuli: I think that's the expertise of the chefs.

Aaron: Got it.

Tuuli: How the food is and how it tastes and how it's served. We deal with everything else around it.

Aaron: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Tuuli: And of course we work a lot with the chefs. So we have a lot of conversations like what type of plate, what the color is, how the sequence of different plates and settings are gonna change during the evening. So it's not when you go to a restaurant you don't know from the first plate onwards how the evening is gonna go. But it's gonna be full of surprises that in one moment you have something that is very plain and very translucent and then you get something that is dark and heavy and rough. It's like a theater, almost, where the diner becomes part of the audience but it's a participatory audience.

Kivi: And you're referring to this latest restaurant project that we designed. The chefs wanted to take on the issues of climate change, really. For us the question is then, well, how can we then participate in this project through design?

So one of the things we did, like a concrete example, is you sit down in this restaurant and you look up and there's some lamps. And they look kind of curious. And then suddenly there's something moving inside the lamp, and it's full of crickets. It's full of insects.

Now everybody knows insects like lamps. They like to be there. So there's a weird, it's expected, but in a restaurant, is that appropriate? And they're white, the lamps, so you just see the shadows. So it's a little bit like a scene from Hitchcock's Psycho with the hand on the shower curtain.

And that triggers conversation. What are they? Why are they? They will ask. They talk to the waitress, to the chef who is in the open kitchen. And they get interested in the subject and that's what we want to do. That's all we want to do. We want to, like, build in this potential. And it's a kind of subtle power that design has, but on the other hand, it's very potent.

Aaron: I imagine, in your careers, you've had clients who you've said hey we want to fill the lamps with crickets, they were like what?

Kivi: (laughter)

Aaron: Is that something you have to sell people on? Are do you have to compromise with the clients?

Tuuli: There is also a tendency that clients will come to us. Share the same type of attitude with us. So with example of cricket lamp it wasn't, we didn't really have to sell it. It was a mutual understanding and a wish to create something like that.

And this was already a second restaurant that we did with the same chefs.

Kivi: We really need the client for our art, if you want to call it art. That we rely on their expertise and we actually, to be a bit bold, we wouldn't work with every client. We hate styling, design is styling. And we think design more as innovation, as a cultural activity. So we need clients that have similar agenda.

Aaron: In seeking those kinds of clients, I would think New York, London...

Kivi: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Tuuli: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Aaron: This is where the most of these people are. And you're here, in Helsinki. How does being here in a smaller city, in a smaller, well, this is actually a pretty big city. But, a big city in a smaller country...

Kivi: Yes.

Aaron: That isn't on the international design tour circuit affect what you do and the visibility of your work and that kind of stuff?

Kivi: To be honest, it's a challenge. You have to move quite a lot. On the other hand, we've had always, an international career. On the other hand, architecture and design is quite local. You need to work in a meaningful way with clients. You need to physically to be present quite a lot. So there's a certain amount of friction there. But, I think the upside in being somewhere like Finland is, it's small, it's very non-hierarchical. And you can get anybody on the phone, anybody. Any head of a corporation, anybody. So it's easy to get things done here. It's more challenging finding clients for the kind of work that we do, that's true.

Tuuli: So Finland, so far, has been large enough. Of course there aren't that many clients who maybe would be a perfect match with us. But likely there is also a lot of individuals. So now, lately, we started to work with private clients. Create houses for them.

Aaron: When you're doing like a house, and you're describing decisions. I brought up what happens when the client doesn't want the cricket lamp. But what happens when people sort of think they know what they want, yet they also want you to surprise them and do something different than that?

Kivi: Yeah, that's the dance, I suppose.

Aaron: (laughter)

Tuuli: (laughter)

Kivi: That's the dance. And I'm not.

Aaron: For people listening, his face just kind of like a weird shadow...(laughter)

Kivi: No but it is. If you don't enjoy that dance, and back and forth, then it's very difficult to do our kind of work. And obviously it won't work out with everybody. I always thought that, you know, the challenges of the peculiar fantasies and dreams of our individual client. I think the more peculiar they are, the better.

Tuuli: The more interesting they are.

Kivi: Then there's always the site, the budget, and these constraints. And they give limit to what you can do which actually makes life easier. If we worked in, more like a conventional artist, with a blank canvas, say, without any limitations. That's more difficult.

We're used to working. We have a certain agenda but then all of these external forces and inputs that come from the clients, from the site, from the budget. Always think of this, actually, marine biology analogy. If you have a coral, and there's a kind of internal DNA that governs it's growth, but the specific form actually comes from the interaction of that internal logic with external forces that have to do with the environment.

And projects I kind of like that. Like, we introduced this DNA but then it works against and works with all of this external factors. So one answer is, we do a lot of physical models. We discovered nothing works like a physical model. So we 3-D print, and we print and we build. And the client gets to see these things.

And they get to move things around and engage. And you can have a conversation through these objects. They are like these objects of friction in a sense. Then that's how they develop. I mean reasonably VR has helped us actually quite a lot.

Tuuli: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Kivi: That's being cool. But we give them, we have clients who are based in California. Put the VR goggles on and we can share the space and have a conversation. And that helps this dance quite a lot. I think nothing is as difficult as a client who doesn't know what they want. That's difficult.

Tuuli: Yeah. Or doesn't have an opinion.

Kivi: Doesn't have an opinion, who is not peculiar enough.

Tuuli: What are the values? What does the client stand for? Like, the more precise...and the more precise dreams the client has, the easier it is then to start work with the person. Because then you get personally, also, attached to somehow. You get a feeling that if it's very neutral and gray and everything is fine, then you're supposed to be doing something frictionless. Then it's really difficult and maybe it's not for us then.

Kivi: Yeah, of course, it's almost impossible if somebody says here's what I want it to look alike.

Tuuli: Yeah. [crosstalk 00:17:21]

Kivi: Then it's a difficult conversation because that's of course not what we deal with. We hear dreams and then turn those into architecture.

Aaron: In a way, that's I think how people are conditioned to respond, as I want this. But how do you get that, like, how do you find out what your clients dreams are? Do you have like an intake dream interview?

Tuuli: We talk a lot. We ask questions and we listen and analyze. And then soak it all in.

Kivi: Depends on the client, of course, it begins [inaudible 00:17:51] from an individual. But you figure out how you can engage them in a process in some meaningful way. Design and designer, people talk a lot about design thinking. But I think this idea of prototyping and modeling is key to having these conversations.

If you can have a relationship with the client where they can, well, they can develop a confidence that eventually we'll get there. All of the steps, there might be missteps, or moments where it's a bit scary. Will we ever get there? What are you guys doing? How much is this going to cost? And so on.

So of course you need, they need a lot of faith in us and I suppose it does help to be a little bit further down the line in our career and have a certain portfolio. That people have more trust that, well if they pulled that off, they can pull this off.

Aaron: Speaking of dreams, and being further along in your career. Do you have dream projects that you want to do, but have never met the right client? You're just waiting for someone to say I want to build a blimp, or something like that.

Kivi: It's more like...It's almost like the ladder is more important. That right client. I have to say, honestly, that we are horrible business people. I mean we've learned that you need to make money in order to keep things running and do good work. But it's never been the motivation. And the most fascinating, fascinating part of it is when you get to work with an amazing curator. Or, you know, just a brilliant person wants to design an unusual house for their family. Or you know, top chefs who want to revolutionize food culture.

Aaron: So, you never, I'm more interested in the client, actually, than the project. I was gonna ask you about business, um. Because usually when I meet duos, of all kinds, there's the creative person and the business person. And it sounds like you're both the creative person. And you said you're bad at business. But you still exist, so you can't be that bad at business. When you're two creative, it seems like strong-willed people, with your own drive, like, how do you even make business decisions?

Tuuli: Do you bring in another person to do the business, or how does it work? Well, of course we do some calculations of how to keep the business running.

Kivi: These days.

Tuuli: These days. (laughter). The last couple of years we've done that too. So there's like a line that we know, that this is what we need in order for the studio to run and be up and running. And we living. But we never actually had, like, conversation of should we grow bigger. How should we start bringing in more money, or that type of thing.

Kivi: I don't know if this is understandable, but there is, I think, we have a project. Meaning, we have a cultural project. We can position it, we can argue for it, we can defend it. Then it turned out that we actually do need somehow to keep the practice running in order to get that project done. And we're interested in business as far as it helps us do better work. We realize that we can't do a certain kind of work if we don't get access to engineers, and 3-D printers, and things like this.

Aaron: You almost talk about the project like it's an organism.

Kivi: Yes.

Aaron: That you need to continue to feed.

Kivi: Yes!

Aaron: But you don't want to feed it too much. You don't want it to get enormous, you know. You're almost trying to just keep it alive, and...

Tuuli: Evolve.

Aaron: Yeah, evolve.

Kivi: That's a good...

Tuuli: We don't, like, uh, I don't think I, I think in a few days to look back to our projects and noticing like can I find something. Like, have we done two projects that are alike? Have we ever repeated ourselves? Have we...and it turns out no. Like every single project is unique. And as Kivi said it feeds into the project that we are after. And which drives us.

If we were business people, I assume we would start creating like, this is the line of work and this is, like, the housing portfolio. And we...

Kivi: Re-use of the idea...

Tuuli: Yeah.

Kivi: As opposed to always developing new ones.

Tuuli: It would...yeah. Sometimes it would make life easier, but then again it makes life much more interesting. And it also forces us to learn all the time new things. And keep ourselves really inspired, and not get lazy.

Aaron: Is there anything new that you're working on that you're allowed to talk about? Um, do you talk about the projects that you're doing in the present, or do you wait until it's unveiled?

Kivi: No, only in general terms. We have a lot of, we're working on a number of really interesting houses that are in Finland. Or located in Finland. But they're all based on very unusual ideas about being in nature.

Aaron: Hmm.

Kivi: And those ideas come mainly from the clients. That the clients had want something beyond the normal. And different fantasies about the life of the family, but also the relationship to nature. So that's really fertile ground for design. And we're working on those and there will be realized now over the next couple of years.

And in Stockholm we have a very prestigious client. We can talk about that, right?

Tuuli: Yeah. Of course. We are working on the, it's called the Royal Engineering Science Academy in Stockholm. And we are helping them to renew the building, the premises, which are really downtown Stockholm. As central as it can get. But we also help them think, how they values and the activities would be visible in their spaces. How to make their day activities visible for others, so that when you enter a space, you actually, without thinking, you start noticing. Like you start to understand what this academy is for and is about. And what are the current projects that they work.

Aaron: Thank you so much for this interview. I'm really looking forward to your talk.

Kivi: Thank you!

Tuuli:

Thank you! Thank you.