Design Notes Episode 25 - Rob Giampietro

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.

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All of those things are ways that you're actually changing someone's experience of their life, and the fabric of their life, through design.

Liam: That was Rob Giampietro, Design Director at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In the interview, Rob and I discuss design's role in the production of culture, how the built environment can influence our movement and perception, and the invisible ways design can create memorable experiences.

Let's get started.

Liam: Rob, welcome to Design Notes.

Rob: Thank you so much.

Liam: I wanna start off by hearing about your journey, both to design, and to design directorship.

Rob: I started, um ... I was a ... a designer, and running my own business very young, I think, relatively speaking. So I started a ... a design studio at 23, with a partner, called Giampietro and Smith. And very quickly we kind of have had two main focuses to our business. One was design for culture,

and for arts, so we had a lot of art galleries, like Gagosian, and White Cube, and Luhring Augustine, and things that we did a lotta work for. And that was a passion.

And then we fell into a lot of work in doing global nonprofit work. So we worked for, like, the World Health Organization doing annual reports, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria was another one of our big clients. So our, kind of, money jobs were actually feeling really good in terms of, like, our own values and things like that.

At a certain point, we went separate ways, but I was still really passionate about working in design and culture, and partnered with a studio called Project Projects that was run by some friends of mine, who were doing similar work. Brought some of my clients over there. Joined them as a partner for five years. We started at around four, and we grew to about 18.

Did museum rebrandings. I made about, hm, 20 websites during that time, for clients in architecture, fashion, different things like that.

So I think that was actually the beginning of my time scaling myself from being kind of an individual designer, or a design lead, to being more of a manager of a team. And also manager of an interdisciplinary team. Like, not just designers, but, you know, project managers, developers, different things like that.

About right around 2014, I was kind of encouraged to apply for a fellowship called the Rome Prize, which lets a designer spend a few months in Rome doing independent research.

And I was at a point in my career where I was trying to figure out what was next, whether my future was to continue to grow Project Projects, or whether it was something else. And a lot of our technology projects there were getting a little bit repetitive, like a lot of architecture portfolios and things like that. They were wonderful, they were for important architects. I was proud of bringing their histories, and the work of their practice, online. But I was also a little bit like: "What is it like to make real tech?" You know?

And so, when I was in Rome, my project was around mobility, and using mobile devices in an ancient city. And it was during that time, that ... I think just sometimes your headspace moves you in a certain direction, but it was during that time that Google reached out with an opportunity to kinda help lead the New York site for Material Design, and grow the

design advocacy program that became Google Design and SPAN.

And I think that was actually a conscious moment of transition where, when I was interviewing for the role, I remember there was ... Jonathan Lee at Google said to me, "You know, this is not a designer role, it's a design manager role. They're different." It was the first time I'd ever really consciously thought of the difference, and, I think, tried to learn a lot about how Google thinks about that difference, and conceives that difference, and, you know, try to be the best design manager I could be.

Liam: What was that transition like, in terms of the work you were doing, and how you were feeling about it?

Rob: I was never the fastest designer, so I was always a very detailed designer. Really sweated things like baseline grids and kerning, and things like that. But I also was never quite the fastest designer. Like, sometimes it would take me a little longer to come up with a ... an idea, or an approach. And, yet, I was always really good at communicating design, at evangelizing design, at being an ambassador for an ambitious idea, to help it reach a public, and make it through all those levels of review and things that design has to go through.

So I think I had started to get a sense, as I was running my business, that my role was shifting from just actually making the work, which is what I was hiring people to do with me, and actually advocating for the work, or showing work and talking about how it could be indicative of how we could solve another new problem for a client. So growing business, and things like that.

So I think I could sense my role starting to shift there, but then I think any designer that's in that transition goes through an identity crisis, or an impostor crisis, where you sort of say: "Well, if I'm not making design every day, all day, am I still a designer? You know, what does this mean?" And I think that, actually, was, for me, like a multi-year transition. It was not, like, an overnight thing where I just woke up one morning and said,

"Okay, I'm okay with not designing any more."

Liam: (laughs)

Rob: You know? (laughs)

But I feel like the vision that I help bring to my team, and the way that I

help digest problems and frame opportunities for them, or encourage them to bring me solutions, and have me help them move forward in the organization. Like those kinda things. It's a different kind of design process. It's a little bit more of an editing process, of a selection process, of knowing organizationally, like, where the most important bets are that you can place with your team's time, or those kinda things.

I like to quote Rem Koolhaas, he talks about himself being an editor in the studio at OMA. Like, he's not making the models, but he's refining the selection process, and helping frame the goals of the project, and continually reinforcing those goals to his team, and you know …

That makes him more an editor or curator than a kind of pure designer, but he's a very important element of the design process, especially in terms of bringing that process to excellence. So.

Liam: So maybe that's a characteristic that all designers should strive for.

Rob: Excellence?

Liam: Well-

Rob: (laughs)

Liam: (laughs) Well, I think remaining critical, and thinking as an editor, even as you're making things.

Rob: I was actually just reading John Maeda's Design in Tech Report, and he was talking about designers that are a very special kind of introvert. Like, designers are introverted. We're not the life of the party often. But we're, like, social introverts. So it's like we want to be quiet together. And I do think that there ... A lot of times, when you're working visually, the, the transition to words, or to describing what you're doing, isn't necessarily easy or seamless.

And so when you have someone there, like, whether it's another designer or a manager or someone like that, to help discuss an idea, and, uh, help you ... give you words to describe what you're doing that is making visual sense, but maybe not verbal or strategic sense yet, I think that can be very powerful.

And so a lot of my job is to really just be available in the studio, to be that sounding board for people as they're making work, to say, "What do you

think of this? Like, what is working about this? What is not working about this?"

And for me to have a muscle that's much more a quick critical reflex, rather than that kind of slow, visual development reflex.

Liam: And just staying on this topic of remaining critical, and kind of having an editorial eye, and, like, identifying these opportunities: you're a senior critic for the Rhode Island School of Design's MFA Graphic Design Department, and I'm interested in the ways in which that sort of criticism compares to the kind in the studio. The kind where you are involved in the process of making the work, and the one where you're not.

Rob: Hm. Yeah. It's really fun. I would say that, like, when you're working on a team, everyone has a lot of the context for what a design solution is trying to do. But when you're in the classroom, students are bringing a lot more of their own context. So there's no better way to get really good at being a design critic, than to be a design teacher, I think. Because particularly for the work that I do with my MFA students at RISD, I'm a thesis at critic. So each of them is working on their own thesis research, and presenting that to me.

So if I have 14 students a year, I'm switching context 14 times. Each time I do a review. And that actually is really good at building that critical muscle, and it lets me do a lotta different things.

One of the things it lets me do is bring lessons from my practitionership, and the world that I'm practicing in, to the students. So I'm constantly able to apply things that I'm learning at Google, things that I'm learning at MoMA, in new ways in the classroom, that I can't necessarily apply within the organization I'm working in.

And then, I think, the other thing that it helps me do is, as .... Uh, I've been teaching there for 13 years now. I start to spot patterns of: where is the design thinking here sound? Where is it going off-track? This student is making this kind of project, and other parallel projects to that have been successful by doing these critical things. And so I have to be there for them, to be interested in it with them.

And that's been a learning process for me, very often. Like, exposing me to areas of design that I wasn't drawn to naturally. So I really get a lot out of teaching, and I think a lot of my role as a manager as a kind of teacher or coach. So it also has helped me not be, I think, a micromanager, or

someone who is wishing they were designing but just doesn't have time. You know, it's a different level of support, when you're there for someone else, and for them to be successful, and to grow.

So I think there's a lot of parallels. There's also some distinctions.

Liam: But I feel like we would be too easily glossing over something if I didn't talk about the fact that we actually met at Google. When I started back in 2017, there was some overlap between us, and ... and I always wished that I could have you on the show, and it's so convenient now that ... (laughs)

Rob: Oh, I'm so ... I'm so honored.

Liam: Now that you're at MoMA, we have-

Rob: I always wished I could be on the show.

Liam: (laughs)

Rob: (laughs)

Liam: We have, uh ...

Rob: Wishes come true.

Liam: Yeah, we have so much more to talk about.

But I wanna get into some of the initiatives that you worked on at Google around Material Design, and the sort of idea of design outreach.

First of all, how do you conceptualize design outreach?

Rob: So, I mean, I think when I arrived at Google, Material Design had launched v1, and I think it was really incredible to me, as an outsider, both as an educator and as a designer making websites and projects ... Just in terms of the education that it brought to my students who were maybe just becoming familiar with patterns on the web. Like radio buttons, and drop-down menus, and usability best practices and things like that.

I think the academy actually hasn't quite caught up to the self-education that's happening by people all over the place, especially at that moment. So I was really inspired by the educational mission of Material, as well as

the kind of incredible way that it let you build on top of it. And I thought that that was something that ... Often we were, you know, building our own frameworks at Project Projects, and then to have someone come along and give us those frameworks so we could focus more on the design and the design expression for our clients, was just incredible.

So I was really inspired by that, but I think there was a moment to say: "Okay, we've put this amazing thing into the world, and now do we continue to help that community around it?" And I think that that was a moment that I was really interested in when I got to Google.

We approached that in a lot of different ways. You know, one of them was we launched the Google Design website, which had been started before I arrived, but I was part of the team that launched that, and also part of its new design iteration. I think, you know, working closely with Amber Bravo, and a lot of the content team ... Just talked about, like, "What is our voice when we talk about projects? How do we help make someone who is maybe working on a team of one or two understand what it's like to work on a team of 30 or 40, and that there are parallel problems there, but there are also very different types of problems that are maybe interesting for Google to talk about when it talks about its own work."

And I think we felt, like, always worried about monopolizing the conversation, or having our voice be too dominant. And we feel like design is made of many voices at many different scales and positions within a community. So SPAN, I think, became very important as the kind of corollary to Google Design, where, you know, if Google Design is where Google speaks and talks about what it's proud of, SPAN is a place for Google to create a platform for other people to speak and talk about what they're proud of.

And I think one metaphor we used while we were developing SPAN was the idea that it should be as good as a Google search in any market. So it's like if you go into Tokyo, Google should know, just like it knows the great restaurants and can help you find them ... It should know the best designers, and it should help you hear from them.

So this idea of, like, the hyper-local really came from that. And, you know, that involved a lot of boots-on-the-ground research to find those people, and hear their stories, and help them draw those stories out and make connections to those stories.

Liam: So we've talked now about remaining critical of design, understanding the context of the design, existing in the context of the design, and also involving the kind of place, either geographically or culturally, of the design. But you've also spoken about designing in one's own time, and that's a concept that I'm really interested in. Could you explain that a little bit?

Rob: Yeah, definitely.

I mean, this was an idea that I've had with me throughout my career for many years. But I think the origin of it was that ... Before I taught at RISD, I taught at Parsons, and one of the nice things about teaching at Parsons was that if you taught a class you could take a class for free. And my mom is an educator ... And just like we say design is never done, her idea is education is never done, you know? So lifelong learning was something that I was really interested in, and wanted to take a web design class. 'Cause I could see that that was training that was important, and growing, in terms of design impact.

And at the time, a number of designers who were trained, as I was, mostly in print and some kind of identity design, were kind of asking me, like: "Why would you wanna make websites? You know, you don't really control them. They're impermanent. They change all the time. You know, why not make a book that's gonna be on a shelf for 50 years, and be durable, and be very much controlled by the designer from end to end?"

And, you know, that was something I really had to wrestle with, as I began to work more and more on the web, and the way I kind of anchored myself to that was to be a designer is to be of your time, and this is an emerging form of our time that needs designers, and where designers can have a greater impact than in so many other forms.

I mean, the form of the book is incredible, but very slow in terms of its evolution, and that's what's wonderful about it, is it's so deliberate and enduring. But if you are someone like me who's really interested in dabbling in lots of things, and super curious in lots of areas, websites had a different texture and quality, and rhythm to them. I loved the democracy of them, and that you could send a URL to a friend when a project launched, and they didn't have to go buy the book, or fly to see the show, or something like that. They could actually directly experience that thing.

And yet their experience of it would be super variable. Like, depending on the device that they had, or the moment that they hit refresh on the URL,

or whatever. And I just ... I thought that dynamism was so amazing.

And I think that was sort of a part of becoming more comfortable with design leadership, was also learning that I was beginning to make a type of design that I couldn't make completely by myself. There was gonna be different sets of experts, and different types of people that were all gonna be involved in this project. And my goal, as a designer, was to keep reinforcing what the intent of the design was, and how it was solving the problems, or it could solve the problems better.

So I guess I see that as being what that means to me, and, you know, at Google it took a sort of second turn. Because I had opportunity to work on a team here that was under the research and development part of Google, called Google AI, in my last few months at Google, and, you know, that was another amazing opportunity to be part of the design of our time, you know. And to learn about AI systems, and things that were not fully understood by designers in a lotta ways, and to try to both help designers understand that, as a designer, and also begin to learn how to think about those things, and the ways that they could be more ethical, increase liberty, be more inclusive. And where the levers of that would be within a design process.

Liam: So in contrast to designers getting to know technology, there's a new show opening at MoMA, New Order, that asks how art pushes the boundaries of technology. In the opposite direction. And that's something that I've been really interested in lately, so I'd like to get your thoughts on that question, and also the relationship between art, design, and technology.

Rob: You know, I think the show, New Order, which is curated by my colleague Michelle Kuo, is, uh, using all works from our permanent collection at MoMA, to look at the present moment. And it's interesting, because a number of different art museums and different institution have done quote unquote "internet shows," art in the age of the internet, you know, Painting 2.0. These sorts of things.

I think it's been really interesting to see those efforts come about. I think, particularly ... You know, I was able to attend Painting 2.0 in Munich, and just seeing the way that the art world was drawing metaphors from the technology world to talk about painting as a social network, or these different things, almost is the reverse, in some ways, of thinking about the internet as a highway, or something. Like, where instead of metaphors going from the real world to a virtual world, they're coming back from a

virtual world, back to the real.

And I think one of the things that is really important to understand about the show at MoMA right now, is that it's very, very interested in the real, in materiality. There are a lot of metaphors, but it's actually very much about the materials as much as the metaphors. And I think that's an important next step in the critical understanding of art right now, is that it's actually made of stuff, it's made of bits. And when you go to an art museum you experience those bits, as stuff, not just as bits.

And so there's tubs that are filled with ultrasound jelly. There's a vending machine that not just has Soylent, but has cocaine and blended up dollar bills, and crazy things, by Joshua Klein. Anika Yee did these incredible tubs of ultrasound jelly with things growing in them. There's a piece by Ian Cheng that uses AI and a gaming engine to create an ambient virtual world.

So there are all these things that really help us to reimagine, and understand differently, what stuff is in today's world. What a world is in today's world. What human agency is in today's world. What a human can make by themselves, and what they can make with other technology, in today's world.

And I think artists are often at their best when they're talking about those types of questions, and helping us understand those types of limits, as well. And not directly critiquing society, maybe, but placing objects in society that help us have a debate with one another.

So I think those are all good reasons to see the show.

Liam: So throughout our discussion, it's become clear that your career has touched on a lot of design disciplines, from typography, to machine learning, to art criticism, to the kinds of meta-design that you do as a design director.

And we've touched on the patterns that start building up as you encounter all of these things, but I'm curious if you've found any sort of through-lines that intersect all of these things, or, like, commonalities that bring them all together in any way?

Rob: It's so interesting to hear that.

I think one of the things that I've stayed truest to is that I love making

culture, as a designer. So, you know, even if I'm working on a branding project, or an app, or something like that, you're still making a thing that's going in the world and is part of culture.

And I think one of the very powerful ideas that drew me to Google was that Google is a kind of a cultural institution as much as it's a technology company. And it has a responsibility ... Its public wants it to make good culture. And I think I felt a real connection to the mission of that drive. And I think it does make very good culture. But I think it was fun to be a part of that.

And I think at MoMA, it's even more present for me, to have the importance of culture, and the way that culture shapes our understanding of who we are, and what is meaningful in life, and ... You know.

I remember hearing a philosopher talk a lot about whether or not you should go to an art museum. (laughs) That is seems like an obvious thing that, like, everyone should go to art museums, but, you know, assuming that you're in mid-life, and maybe you have a family, and you only have so many weekends left in your life, why should you go to an art museum and not go for a walk outside, or something like that?

And I think it ... It actually just helped frame for me the kind of scarce resource that time, leisure time, time with ourselves, really is in our world right now. And as someone who is sort of a cultural producer, I really think a lot about that, in terms of: are we asking people to spend time with culture that's of value to them, and that is really gonna make their lives richer and more thoughtful and more ... Maybe even spiritual, you know? To ... To use that word. I think people have very spiritual experiences at an art museum that are different from experiences they can have in other parts of life.

So I think the thing that's fun about working at MoMA in particular, but also I think I experienced this as Google too, is just: in order to get culture right, you've gotta sweat the details. You know, it's all execution at the end of the day, and whether it's a corner radius on a button for Google Material, or, uh, making the shadow a little bluer, so that it feels a little brighter on-screen, and more connected to the colors of Google's brand. Or it is the positioning of a wall label, or even removing the label and silk-screening right it on the wall so that it almost becomes invisible, so that you can focus on the art.

Those sort of subtle decisions, when you make them serially, build up to

something that is difficult to say why it's working, but it's beautiful, and it's incredible, and it's not something that someone has the time to conceive of themselves, which is why they're paying the ticket price for a museum, or the price for an app, or whatever it might be.

So to answer your question in, in a very looped way, I would say: I've always been drawn to making culture as a designer, and the thing that's connected that for me is how detailed it is to make culture, and how sophisticated it is to get culture right.

Liam: Right, and I think someone would argue that, given that most of the physical environment around us every day is designed on some level, anyone who touches that is creating culture, in the same way, since-

Rob: Absolutely, yeah.

Liam: Perhaps about the intent that you mentioned, and really being observant of that, and respectful of it.

Rob: I think often designers are overwhelmed by what they have to produce, but it's such a privilege to get to make the world. Like, the interface for the world. Whether you're working virtually, or with materials in the real world. You're deciding when someone should turn the page. You're deciding how heavy their phone is that they left up every day. You're telling them whether they need to swipe to get more information, or they can have it right on the screen.

All of those things are ways that you're actually changing someone's experience of their life, and the fabric of their life, through design. And I don't think there could be a more transformative discipline than that.

I think it creates an even greater imperative for designers to be really good listeners, and I think that that's something that is another learning, maybe, from my life, is just like: as you go, as a designer, initially you struggle to have your skills, and once you start to master your skills, you wanna show off how great you are at them, and so then you're very eager to show that you're capable, and that you have the answers.

And I would say that's, like ... For me, that was, like, a six-year arc, to getting to a place where I no longer felt like I needed to show off what I knew. I could actually have confidence in that of myself, and be patient enough to listen to the problem, and really understand it, before I applied those skills, or made suggestions to people.

And I think the better I've gotten at listening, the easier leadership has become, too. Because often you think, like, a leader is there to have ideas, and ... and make declarations about what should be done in a certain situation, but really, I ... uh, most of the problems that arrive to me, like, no one really has the answer. And it's sort of just about listening to what everyone thinks the answer could be, and trying to help guide the team through the confusion and the ambiguity of that, to get to something that everyone is excited about executing.

If I just said what I thought without having a lot of context, I think I would make a lot of very bad decisions. (laughs) You know?

Liam: Yeah, maybe after the point when you think you have all the answers, it turns out that the answers are just questions.

Rob: (laughs) Exactly.

Liam: (laughs)

Rob: Yes.

Liam: All right, well, thank you again for joining me today, Rob.

Rob: Thank you so much for having me.

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