

Design Notes Episode 01 - Talbot & Yoon

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Liam Spradlin: Welcome Youngjin and Mark, thanks for joining me.

Youngjin Yoon: Thank you for having us.

Mark Talbot: Thanks for having us.

Liam: Just to get things started, something I always like to ask is about your journey so I would like to know what you're doing now and what the journey was like to get there.

Youngjin: Well we're currently product designers, mostly focused on home goods, but we initially started out as architects, and I think our interest in this type of product design started mostly because as architects we realized that lot of architectural projects a) it takes a long time to realize these projects, a lot of the projects that we worked on take anywhere from like three to five years to realize from design sketch to construction, and then also for working for a lot of larger companies we realized that as a young designer, you don't really have a lot of say in the designs that we are participating in. So I think that kind of stemmed the interest in focusing on a lot of the smaller products that we surround ourselves in, and also as architects you usually can't afford the things that you can design so (laughs) by doing these smaller product designs you can design the things that you actually want and surround yourselves with it and hopefully other people want it and like it too.

Mark: And as far as the journey is concerned, we're very much still on it obviously.

Youngjin: Definitely.

Liam: As we all are --

Youngjin: Yeah.

Mark: We've only started and and been active for maybe two years so still a long way to go.

Liam: In reading about your work, you talk a lot about this notion of play as part of design, so what is that exactly?

Mark: So again like, everything from our recent experience kind of stems from our architecture. So we realized pretty early on that there's a myth about the lone genius designer that's just a myth, when you work on a large scale project with multiple moving pieces, it really takes a whole team of people to make something come to fruition, it's never just the labor of one, one mind even.

So what we see as being most important to the design process coming from that background of doing more complicated design is collaboration and in our mind there, there are couple of approaches to collaboration. In the firm that we used to both work at together actually, [there were] projects were given little bays within the overall studio where clients and architects and all of the consultants that were involved would kind of congregate to have discussions about the project, and the rooms that those things took place in were called war rooms and we thought well that is one approach to collaboration but it seems a little bit antagonistic for our taste. That's maybe not as productive as something like a playroom for instance. So we see [as] play as like the most appropriate ethos through which to, to address collaborative processes in general. And I think that's where we kind of started with the notion of play.

In doing our research on play and this notion of collaboration and what play is relative to a collaborative process, we started to do a little background discovery I guess. We found the Dutch cultural theorist, Johan Huizinga, who wrote this entire book about play being an element of culture, and in it what's interesting is that he notes that play is not just a product of human culture but it's also the way that animal culture develops as well, the way that a newborn animal learns to socialize and learns to interact with objects within its world is through playing with other animals, and going through the process of discovering how the world works together as a group task. So why wouldn't we adopt it as kind of central tenet of our design practice?

Liam: So how does that manifest in, in your work or how do you reflect that thought process in the things that you create?

Youngjin: There are a few branches of where we try to develop products with play, one of the branches is for instance, just being as architects, and always working with scale models to develop these larger scale buildings and thinking about these smaller scale models as things that children also play with, like doll houses and so forth, so I think one branch of our practice is to take some larger scale architectural elements and bring them down to a scale that is... so for instance, we developed this tray that's derivative of a waffle slab system in

concrete buildings and, while we were making prototypes of that, we would put scale models to it and imagine the space in a larger scale. so that is one branch of it.

Mark:

One of the branches that we started out with was a very early project for table or set of stools, it's kind of a modular project and we thought about our childhood play experiences. So one of the ways that we develop design is by thinking about how we used to interact with you know our parents' stuff and the way that we used to think about furniture when we weren't just consumers of furniture but when we could see furniture for maybe what it wasn't intended to be. So one of the examples that we like to use is the, the play fort and how the play fort is kind of an early manifestation of a child's interaction with a couch.

There's nothing about a couch to an adult that would suggest that it should become a fort, there's nothing that makes a pillow a simulacrum for wood or stone, but a child kind of looks past that understanding that you know couch cushions are only removable because you need to clean them more often -- they say no, couch cushions are there so that I can make walls out of them and then with a sheet, make it into you know a space of my own inhabitation.

And the idea of the play fort specifically as it relates to my own childhood where we were allowed to like write on the underside of our coffee table, it was an IKEA coffee table, it didn't hold much value to my parents uhm the underside of it is obviously not visible and draping a sheet over it or boxing it in with couch cushions made it so that it was our own uh kind of Sistine Chapel ceiling, we'd all sit, my brother and sister and I would sit on our backs and color this thing until there was no more space left.

Vaulting is the technique used in a lot of uh old European churches and here in New York you can see vaulting in a lot of churches, but it's the technique for producing the kind of height of the ceiling that would be painted in order to provide some kind of ethereal feeling in the presence of God or whatever. So with the coffee table and stool we thought well you know, my- my child experience with painting the ceiling could be translated to a small scale in a more majestic setting than the underside of an IKEA table and uhm, and then maybe you know how do we, there's always the question of okay so the child might understand what we're going for but as an adult you don't see this thing from the underside so much, you don't typically crawl around unless something's wrong, you've lost something or something.

So we introduced this concept of modularity as well, because re-organizing the furniture is something that adults do, so how can you make the reorganization

of a furniture piece into a game of sorts, or if not a game then at least open ended enough and interesting enough that they might develop their own method for doing it and therefore interest in re-arranging it.

So then the objective becomes like how do you develop a hook for an adult to be involved in it that's not the drawing on the bottom of it and one of the hooks that we thought of is inconsistency, introducing some kind of inconsistency that breaks the possibility of them arranging this so that it's a satisfying organization without the introduction of some, some kind of logic of their own, like they would have to make it their own by making a decision about how these ill-fit pieces come together that satisfies their own notion of what fitting together looks like. Uhm, so I think in ... that's another aspect where we used play as like to take this thing through all of the criteria.

Youngjin: I think the funny thing is children have enough imagination that they don't need functional necessity whereas adults need the functional necessity to even start engaging.

Mark: Right which is why there's like extremely long complicated process that I was just describing--

Liam: What are some other cues or ways that you encourage, I guess you would call them users, to uh to engage with the objects that you make?

Youngjin: Our jewelry cabinet for instance, uhm when it's closed it's just a seamless box, all you see is a hole, a copper tube in the middle and then there's some hinges so you know that you can open it but once you open the jewelry box you see all these different little compartments that are of different shapes and sizes, the copper tube becomes the ring that you can hang jewelry off of or other things and I think not only the fact that it is produced in smaller quantities and uh, has ... they are hand-made, there are only 10 of them in the world for instance.

Uhm but also the end user it just varies depending on what type of person you are or what type of objects you would insert into these different shape boxes. So for one of the longer compartments, Mark might use- put his brush in that compartment whereas I might put a little sea shell that I got, it becomes this uh very customized cabinet of curiosities.

Liam: Having so many different uh types of compartments kind of removes the suggestion of what should go in them, right?

Youngjin: Exactly. There is this really interesting, Walt Disney test, I- I don't know if they still do it but it's based on the animators and apparently if you wanna become an animator at Walt Disney you go in and you're given a test that you need to draw a series of pillows that look like they have motions without drawing any faces on them. So based on the uh fold that's in the middle or on the side you can make a grumpy pillow or a happy pillow or an angry pillow and it's kind of like this uh kind of what do you call it, the anthropomorphic experience on it and uh, our candles are kind of made in the same organic way where we're just testing different shapes and seeing what kind of uh expressions that these guys have.

We have a lot of followers on Instagram and they kind of post these things tagging us sometimes and they say like, "Oh this is how I feel today" and it's just .. of this candle, it's just kind of like grumped over and uhm that's another end, a different kind of way that our customers interact with some of our products which we think is very interesting.

Liam: And going back to, to the example with the table and stools—I've read that you believe that objects continue to evolve and remain dynamic with their owners so once owners start making choices about the objects, things start to change. So I'm interested to hear more of your thoughts on that concept - is that something that typically happens organically or do you build that intentionally into an object?

Youngjin: As designers, we're not interested in the mass produced, I think that's key. For this chair or for this table or these cups for instance they're just objects that you don't really attach yourselves with. Uhm I think we always try to design objects that are carefully considered and the materials that we choose are also carefully considered, we wouldn't just use you know wood dust glued together so just in that sense alone I think the end user has this kind of emotional attachment to it throughout the life of the product. Candles obviously they burn, they're not meant to last forever, uhm but some of the other products we definitely try to design that lasts for a long time and we've uhm you know I guess the emotional attachment kind of evolves over time. What do you think Mark?

Mark: There are less and less objects in the world that have the inherent staying power of some of the objects of older generations, and I think the objective of a lot of our peers within the kind of design world that we're interested in, their objective is to re-imbue objects with the kind of quality and the staying power that would keep them around long enough to remain dynamic but in like a more short term, we had discussions where we don't necessarily like offering different options, like using the table as an example we had a larger version of

it that was a dining table, and we started to say well what if somebody wanted a dining table for eight people? What would be different about it than a dining table for six people? And we kind of decided that we don't wanna just sell different sizes of planks, we would rather sell leaves instead of just having the central leaf that you can insert to a pulled apart you know dining table. We would just wanna sell the leaf part and not the table part and the leaves would make the table, so if you had another person added to your family you'd just request another leaf you know instead of having to buy a whole new table. I feel like the idea of investing up-front in something that will last for a long period of time, is something that's even based on your ability to stay in one place for a long period of time which is something that entirely has to do with your ability to you know hold a job in a certain city to be able to afford the astronomically rising rents in said city, you know all kinds of factors play into it.

Liam: I'm wondering how you kind of detect this quality up front, because thinking about it, all of the things I can think of off the top of my head that I feel are objects with real staying power in my family already are heirlooms. So is there kind of a way to detect this from an object designer's perspective without knowing kind of the design or production process that went into making something?

Mark: I think that if the object has a kind of a unique hook and it doesn't look quite like other objects and maybe as a user, you can't read the manual and understand how it's supposed to be put together, like I think there's a whole series of those kinds of qualities that announce it as being slightly unknowable but at the same time fairly familiar.

Liam: I would like to know from a designer's perspective how you would think about the way that your objects are contextualized in end users life.

Youngjin mentioned earlier the uh candles, one of the people who purchased one of the candles earlier on had- had mentioned to us that the candles look like you feel when you want to light a candle which we thought was a great like, so that kind of contextualizes that piece within their life, that's you know when they're feeling down they wanna light their scented candle, you know. I have also worked at a developer's office before and we all know the kind of real estate development that's going on in the city and one of the things that also got us into this is that we don't like the ubiquity of interior space that's being produced in new apartment buildings. And we feel like the objects are the context of people's lives, not necessarily their- the spaces that they occupy everyday. apartment buildings in older buildings generally have unique qualities about them that can help to characterize a person's living

environment but in the majority of new buildings there isn't that. So, to us, the idea of having morally empty objects that are just made of white plastic laminate that you buy and you don't really care about is the reason to have objects that have more character.

Youngjin: We have this person on Instagram that uses our candles and she always posts a vignette of her everyday life, and it's always uhm a picture of a white drawer it's very generic, a mirror, very generic, and then a few select objects that change every day and the candle is obviously very much a part of her everyday life because it's right next to her bed, she takes a contextual picture every day, a snapshot of her daily life and we think that's very important because there's only so much that you can afford and it really is the objects that you surround yourselves with every day within the space that you occupy every day that makes your context more personable and uhm kind of creates an identity for yourself.

Liam: I want to wrap up by just asking about your creative process as you've been designing and building these objects. How it's changed up to this point and where do you see it going in the future.

Mark: So like we were saying, we're kind of a fledgling company so so the way that our process evolved is from this kind of general notion of play as being important to the collaborative design process, we understand that design is a part of this kind of culture, it's a part of a culture that has a longer history, if you're going to make something that's not just going to be around for a short amount of time that needs to be around for longer amount of time, uhm such as a building or even a piece of furniture, we feel that it's not only important to make things that you like at the moment, but engage things that are part of our shared cultural past as well.

Youngjin: I think Mark's point is we're interested in scaling back up. So we've scaled down from architecture and uhm, playing with these scales is I think very important to us so I think we'll just continue to do that throughout our profession, we'll scale up at one moment to like the living environment, to a larger uhm interior environment and then back down and we'll just keep playing with scales.

Mark: So, so when we departed our profession, it was out of a frustration for the amount of time that the thing took to produce and about the overall seriousness with which it took to produce it.

We've kind of realized that maybe we jumped ship too early and like what are the ways we can get back and still use play as a driver for larger projects and

one of the key ways that we see the development of a larger object that has more staying power being done is through treating buildings as if they were play things, in essence to start developing models of buildings and playing with them for instance Youngjin was mentioning uh taking these historical structural systems from buildings and scaling them down to the size of a soap dish, like the idea of doing that is to in a way profane the place where it came from, like we have this soap dish that comes from a, a Louis Kahn building at Yale, this big haughty thing has now been shrunk into the size of a thing that you keep in your bathroom you know and it's almost profane the way that that action takes place.

So I think moving forward we would seek to create actual buildings uhm, that were developed using a more playful manner to make them more interesting to be in, to make them less similar to one another et cetera, just to make something different.