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August 2020 Transcript

+ Resource Guide

This Design Book Club conversation took place on August 13, 2020. It was facillitated by Kristin Rogers Brown with participants Kris Blackmore, Lis Charman, Diane Chiang, Ariel Fogden, Harrison Krohne, and Oskar Radon Kimball. All were asked to read four articles beforehand: 4 Climate Activists Explain Why the Climate-Justice Movement Needs Feminism, Formafantasma Interview on Sustainable Design, Quick Guide to Sustainable Design Strategies, *and* Circular EDOnomy: Japan's original circular economy model. *The following is a transcription of this conversation, edited for accuracy and readability.*

Well, should we get going?

Yeah. Sounds good.

Well, first, to the two people who haven't joined us before, welcome to Design Book Club. As you know, we're not really a book club, but we're kind of like one. We talk about issues relating to how design affects society. And this time we're talking about sustainability and looking at it from a lot of different perspectives, led by Kristin Rogers Brown, and so I'll turn it over to her.

Thank you. I think we'll do some introductions for a quick minute here. If you want to just give a quick, maybe how you found us and what your connection to design is— what your interests are, your practice is—and then your name and pronouns. I'll go first, just to make it easy. I'm Kristin, I use she or they. I started off in graphic design as a print designer, but I would say I'm more interested in user experience now. Just how people engage with things and brand design as problem solving. And I teach design as well.

Hi, I'm Lis. I teach at Portland State. I was lucky enough to work with Ariel, Harrison, and Kris. I'm a designer and I did come out of the print tradition, but mostly I do admin stuff now. I direct the school, which is fun— art history, art, and design. And then I have a program that all these guys know about—the three of them I mentioned—called Friendtorship. And that's been my focus where art and design college students mentor high school students.

Hey, I'm Oskar. My relationship to design—I started out as a web developer and then got into product design, and then fell in love with print design. And now I'm coming back around and I'm back into digital product design and being a web developer. Just following the cycle. My prounouns are he/him. And I think I was at the first Design Book Club meeting, which was so sick. We watched Adam Curtis, and got really, well I personally got sort of down the dumps because he's kind of a downer sometimes. But yeah, I've been with it for a while.

Yeah. Oskar is our longest standing member at this point. So we should get you a punchcard. [Laugher]

Hi, I'm Diane, this is my first time here. My pronouns are she/her. I'm calling in from Seattle, Washington. I used to design aircraft interiors for Boeing. But I made a pivot and I'm doing primarily digital design up here now, as a design contractor. Thanks for having me. I'm really excited. Finally got in! Finally got a spot.

Thank you for persevering.

Thank you for having me.

I'm Harrison. My pronouns are he/him. I joined the Design Book Club team around June or something like that? So kind of late to it, but I'm a design student at PSU and I'm Senior, going to graduate in the fall.

Hey, I'm Kris. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a senior about to graduate in the design program at PSU. And I do mostly freelance outside of school, art and design.

I'm Ariel, she/her pronouns. I started Design Book Club with Kris. I'm also a student at PSU, but I mostly work with children, designers, and artists and kind of facilitate that educational experience and help them legitimize their work as professionals.

Well, welcome. There's no rules to this other than, I would say, if y'all feel like you're having a lot of comments, taking up a lot of space, maybe take a minute then before you ask the next question and let some of the quieter folks speak up a little bit. Since no one's talked yet, that's a horrible way to start, but don't feel shy about piping in if you have a conflicting opinion or something else interesting to point out. Sidetracks are all interesting, I think, especially when we're reading such disparate texts and kind of putting them next to each other. So I'm going to guide this pretty loosely, I'll kind of pipe in with questions to get us started. And then I've got a little bit of follow up at the end to help us think about how to integrate some of this into our own lives, too.

So, I guess I'd start with reading these articles, were there any moments of epiphany for you? Things that challenge your existing ways of thinking about sustainable design?

It made me think about digital design, because like I said, I'm kind of getting back into digital design, and it made me think about that possibility of sustainability for digital things. My friend has the saying that sustainability is a goal, not an actual concrete possibility. What sort of choices can we make when digital products rely on, you know, burning fossil fuels or rare earth metals? I thought about that.

Yeah, I think you know, this was brought up and one of the one of the readings and I think about it a lot just as somebody who loves print and used to work in magazines, like the idea that you're thinking about the birth and the death of an object that you make, including digital objects. The energy that goes into that is really interesting. You don't necessarily have to design for things to last forever, or to figure out how to dismantle them, but figure out how they can live and degrade and transform them. All of that is part of this. What else?

Your comment reminds me of—it's this photo that I saw of a person wearing a shirt walking down a runway. And the shirt says, "lamps in video games still use electricity." I think about that a lot. For the last few years there's been an idea that digital products are inherently more sustainable because they don't have what we would think of as a physical output. But, you know, the way that electricity is used and what a precious resource that is, and also, in terms of how we view those digital products, through things like smartphones and tablets that require lithium batteries and things like that, and all of the waste that creates. I think that there needs to be a little bit of a challenge of that assumption that we'll just make it digital and that's inherently better, is perhaps not necessarily a creative way to think about those issues. And then you know a little bit more thought about the entire lifecycle of the process needs to be thought about and teased out

a little more. To me that connects to the Formafantasma article about building long term relationships. A lot of the threads that I saw were about long term relationships, long term goals. With the circular economy and the Edo articles, it was all about thinking a few steps into the future. I think that was a really important thing to draw from those pieces.

It reminds me of the tension between designers and developers, too, in the digital sphere. I think that we often don't consider developers our collaborators. But when you design for print, you think of the printer as your collaborator. They understand how this thing is going to be made, and maybe how it will impact the environment. And there's a series of choices that happen in creating the product. And developers they understand how the data is rendered, and how many servers it has to go through and all of this complex kind of information structure that I feel like as a designer I'm not educated on and I haven't learned how to communicate with developers to make a website that can be that efficient. That reminded me of long term relationship building and building a relation-ship between designers and developers and all of these different pieces that mix in.

There are a lot of relationships that play in the mix. Both of these, they'd almost be like your producers. But also your vendors and your users. Thinking about how someone's going to use your object. For me, it's always been, this idea that I have control over where something is going to go or how it's going to be used. But it's been really liberating to think about your users as partners in that, and thinking about ways that they might trans-form something that you've designed as well. So not only digital energy use, but how could this thing that you've made digitally actually have ripple effects into their lives depending on what artifact they're viewing it on, if that's a thing. And to me the Dezeen article—the Formafantasma piece—started to get at that, because they're talking about not only resources but people and how people are brought into the mix. That opens up all sorts of other conversations and ideas.

Last month's DBC, I believe it was you, Kristin, who brought up the idea, or you or at least you spoke at length about the idea of the partnership with the client. And I've been thinking about it all month, just the idea that approaching design as more of a partnership. And you build a team around that. And I think that extends to vendors, that extends to your developers, and your printers. I've been really interested in that because it feels like for the past few years, I've been trying to adopt this sort of idea of myself as the designer who knows things. And you should listen to me because I am the expert. Something about that kind of subtle shift in mindset really clicked with me.

I really want to just start approaching my role as a designer more collaboratively and less as somebody who wants to dictate to what is good and what is popular design and what is trendy design to a client. And I think I already have been doing that a bit, but it really like made a lot of sense to me. I feel like I've been skirting this line of what a professional designer is and should be, versus what I want out of a job and out of this sort of career. And I think that it also can really easily extend to sustainability because when the Formafantasma folks are talking about how they're saying, "no, we're not going to take a one off job, we're going to build a relationship. If you don't like it, then that's fine." I felt a lot of interest in that because I do agree that you can't really just like say, like, "Oh yeah, this is going to be sustainable." or "We're going to create something now that is racially equitable or equitable for gender on this one off thing." It has to be a holistic ground up approach. I think the Teen Vogue article really spoke to that, too. That's what I've been chewing on all month.

I think that's super interesting. I'm curious. You know, a lot of people on this call have done a lot of different kinds of collaborative work and I'm thinking you know, Diane, you mentioned like a couple of different parts of the industry that you've worked in—and Oskar too. Everybody's kind of got those contrasts that you can look at. I'm curious, in switching between industries or sub sectors within design or for those of you who are still in

school and kind of trying on different parts of design, what opportunities have you seen, to take hold of that idea, that relationship building? Are there parts of the design culture that seem more prepared for that?

Yeah. In my opinion, in my experience, I think sustainability is the last thing on everybody's minds, especially with clients. You're always talking about budgets and billability. No one in the industry really talks about sustainability outside of school. And so we have instructors cultivating a culture of sustainable design, both from a product, digital and physical point of view. But when you graduate, you completely lose that contact and you lose that ability to almost empathize with sustainable design. And so it's really hard to find partners who are willing to go there. And when you do, it's always a really good feeling.

Yeah, I feel like I've noticed that too. And it's actually changed, again, to being more that way in the last like ten years. I think we had a little bump in that. For folks who have been working in other parts of the industry for longer I'm wondering what you've experienced too? It did feel for a while, like what Oskar said, about sustainability not being an endpoint, but a goal. You know, we're like striving towards it. We're not reaching it. I feel like in my career where, when it became something that was commodified, that people wanted when they're like, "yeah, we want to work with you because we want that, sustainability." It's almost like they were trying to buy a product or put a badge on something, certify it. Which is really interesting looking at the circular economy article and the culture around that in Japan, how that different is.

Yeah, I can't speak for all Asian countries, but in Eastern philosophy, sustainability is very much part of the culture. And you kind of just accept it for what it is because everyone else is doing it. So because there is already that environment where people are contributing towards it, people accept it. Whereas in the States, it's a lot harder. I don't

think it was even brought up once in my time at Boeing—that it needed to be discussed.

That idea of it needing to be discussed is something I've been thinking a lot about lately. Especially over the last few years, I've been involved in a lot of activism and things like that. And I find that so often, I feel like I'm in a room with a bunch of people and there's something obvious to me that needs to be brought up. If it's about sustainability or accessibility. And I have this idea of, "well, everybody else here knows more than me. And they are the ones who have more experience and more expertise. So I shouldn't say anything. Because obviously, it was probably brought up before and it's probably just not how we do things here." And so I keep quiet and then later it always comes up like, "Oh, we should have thought more about accessibility for this event" or something. And I'm like "crap, this feels like it's my fault" because I knew that I should have said something. And I increasingly think that maybe it's our job as designers to be the ones who say something.

I always love being a designer, because I feel like there's a lot of opportunity to learn and grow in this role. You get exposed to a lot of different fields over the course of career. I know a lot about random international finance stuff from working with a multi-national investment corporation. Just a lot of random information rattling around in my head and then a lot of information from school and from outside research about accessibility, equity. You know, things I've been exposed to. And I always think that "Oh, well, it's just not my place to bring it up in this field. This field is somehow separate, and I shouldn't bring it up." And I'm trying to get more comfortable with the idea of: if you don't do it, nobody will. We maybe have to start being the generation that takes those conversations out of the classroom and make it not theoretical and move it into an actual practice and guide clients a little more.

Yeah, and I totally agree, one hundred percent. I was scrolling on Instagram, like a lot of people do, and I saw this great quote. It said something along the lines of "Our generation didn't inherit the planet from our parents.

We are borrowing it from our children." And that quote, just really hit me really hard because I think the way that people have been thinking about it is, "oh, we're cleaning up somebody else's mess." Whereas instead, we should be proactive about protecting it for the next generation. So I one hundred percent agree with you. And that's definitely something that people need to start having conversations about.

I just hate causing a ruckus.

You know, it's funny you say that. I don't want to take away from everyone else, I feel like I've been talking a lot.

No, it's good.

But there's this thing—I'll just share with you an inside secret—when I used to work at Boeing we would have meetings all the time. And not only was I the only person of race, usually I was the only woman. So it was very uncomfortable. But every meeting room had this big giant table, and people would sit around it. And the first thing at meetings, after it started, it would be like, "I'm Bob, and I've been at Boeing for 35 years." And then you would just go around the table and everyone would say their name and the number of years they've been at Boeing. And then you can see like, the numbers go from double digits to single digits, and people like slide down in their seat.

It's interesting because designers don't really care how many years you've been in this industry. It's more about what you bring to the table. So I had a creative director, who always said, you know, "if somebody says, I'm Bob, and I've been at Boeing for 35 years," he'd be like, "wow, that's longer than I've been alive," which is obviously not true. But you know, just to shake things up, and just say something that either makes people laugh or kind of catches people off guard is one way to deliver these messages. Yeah. So I like your thinking there.

Totally. And I think that's great that you tried to unpack that there were layers to that. Feeling that confidence in the room, knowing where you fit into that system, how

do you know when to speak up or when to not, and how to deliver it. Those are important things. Also, where you sit in the room, who you sit next to. All those things are part of this kind of psychological game, sorry to do this, but especially for women, that you have to make certain decisions about who you're aligning yourself with and how you're going to deliver those things to be able to be seen as a leader. It's a little harder row? Paddle? I don't know what I'm trying to say.

I gotcha.

There is a metaphor in there, but I mixed them all up, because I think that was about planting. It's just harder to do and it is something I did consciously. I would consciously make certain decisions about the power structure of a space and where I sat in it, and who I talked to, and who I spoke after or before. So I don't know if you've had to do that, because I worked at these big companies in New York or I was presenting to American Express in the building that's no longer there… But I had to make very, very conscious decisions about where I stood in the room. And how I took up my space. Especially since you guys don't know me, I'm a tiny little thing. So I had to be kind of, you know, a little bit louder than I should have been probably.

So true. I agree with you, one hundred percent. I would love to take this conversation offline with you. I'd love to hear about your experience.

I'm sorry, I'm taking away from sustainability.

No, that's okay.

But I just think that was important and what Kris was saying. It's also when you're being a junior designer, but it's really being conscious about that. Because you have such great instincts, sorry to coach women, but you have such great instincts, you're so smart, you're seeing the holes in that conversation. And there are gentle ways to introduce it.

That brings me back to the two articles that I really love which I'm sure we've already talked about, but I loved the Edo one. Just the power of where—even the wax got picked up again, and everything got used again and the burnt wood got reused, and looking at that period in history took me down a little rabbit hole. But then also the feminist side of it and looking at it from a feminist lens and realizing that eighty percent of the people affected by climate change, or by migration are women. So, a lot of that resonated with me in really trying to think about—I don't know how to solve these problems at any level—but that those are pretty powerful. So whoever picked those, thank you.

I felt like this wasn't talked about but an interesting connection I felt with those articles about the Edo and the feminism is this idea of craft. So much of what happened in the Edo was about reuse and reuse through craft. And then I was thinking about how capitalism inherently takes us away from more traditional craft. And the way craft has long been a source of livelihood for women especially, but also different populations all over the world, throughout time, throughout history. There's always been an ebb and flow. The way that relying on a capitalist system that always demands new, new, new and how that can rob people of a livelihood of craft and repair and that opportunity to create a new economy that is more holistic. Instead of running people ragged in this consume, consume, consume, quicker, quicker, quicker economy, it's about bringing your clothes in to be mended or repaired in some way. That person works a nine to five, they earn a good wage—or not even a nine to five, let's get down to a thirty hour work week people. Forty hour work week is ridiculous. I'm done with it. I just feel like there's this thing that's missing. Where it's like this hyper focus on everything always has to be new all the time, robs us of these opportunities to have these more sustainable craft based industries, which could be really twofold. Provide more opportunity within local communities and be more sustainable.

Well, and I think you're right, there's models that are already out there. And we read about some of them, and especially the ones I know, in Japanese culture, but then it feels like that idea that you started, which was like, building these partnerships between people who can look at the sustainability of it, the financial—the viability of it. How you can make this and then how do you change the culture or the shift from the culture. So I think that's super powerful. And you guys have all the tools for that, but education silos us in a way. If we could build relationships better across the business school, or the other things that are happening, it seems like that—or building those friendships across those barriers that we have, so you can come up with creative ideas. It always seems like the design, you're coming in at the end of things at some level. I mean, even with just being part of the system that we're trying to break through, it does seem like partnerships and friendships are going to be so important for that.

Yeah, it leads me to ask the question, and we talked about this a little bit leading up to choosing the readings, what is the role of the designer in bringing their ethics and values to the table, with intentionality, and just how they show up? I'm curious about the experiences in the room here, with that. I'll say for me, I have found it impossible to not bring those things into the room. Partly because of what you were saying, Lis, about needing to make choices and show up and display power in ways that felt right to you. I mean, that is something I've thought about my whole life, even working at feminist organizations and watching that those power structures are in play, even at the most forward thinking, what I think of as open minded places, schools, everything. And it just changes.

So for me, it has been the thing that has brought my clients back to work with me again, even if they were big corporate clients. It's been the thing that got me the next job and it's been the reason I've actually had friendships with some of my clients. Which I didn't think would be important to me. I thought it would be great to be able to do the work, do something really glamorous, and then

come home. But I'm curious how other folks, I mean, I think there's lots of ways designers can engage. And it comes back to me to thinking of design as in service of whatever idea is behind it or in service of starting a conversation. I'll just leave that there. I'm curious what y'all think.

I'm glad you brought that up because I feel like that's something I've asked myself and I've asked other professors throughout my time going to design school, about what do you do when you're faced with client work that really goes against your moral values? I think a lot of what I've heard is when you're just starting out as a designer, you don't always get a choice to turn jobs away if you're financially struggling and there's this kind of idea of paying your dues not only in design but in any field where you're just starting out. A lot of times you don't have the choice to turn down work because you just need the money to live. In my mind I've always thought, "Well, I don't like that. That's not good enough. I want to turn it down anyway." But I also understand that in itself, within the system that we live in, is a privilege to be able to turn down work. Because not everybody has the financial security to be able to do that.

I find myself struggling with that idea of should you turn down the projects that you disagree with. Maybe that is a reason to take the project on and come face to face with this thing that you disagree with so that you can make the change. Because I think, at least for me, if I'm always working with people I agree with, I'm not really doing anything new. I'm not pushing forward. But at the same time, it's painful to do something that you hate and you know that maybe the work isn't going to meet your standards, but maybe you can make a really tiny move forward, and that will end up being part of something bigger. I haven't had that experience. But I'm struggling with how am I going to handle that when I'm faced with a decision to work with somebody that I do or do not agree with?

I asked this question of one of my professors and he said that our job is to take the jobs with companies that we might not agree with fully so that we can use that money to fund projects for people who we really, really believe in, who might not have the money to hire us. But it makes me think about where are my boundaries for that? Would I do a project for Walmart, or would I do a project for Raytheon? Where's that boundary for me? I think it's different for everybody, I guess. But it makes sense to me that that's how we can fund the really cool cultural projects.

It's interesting to even have that discussion with your teammates on projects like that. I was gonna say when I was a newer designer, I was working at a big consulting firm that worked with American Express and BP, actually, and a bunch of companies I wasn't sure about, as well as some really interesting smaller companies, working with their people to try to make them better leaders. And for a long time we on our design team kind of asked ourselves those questions. And that exact question of like, "Where is your line?" came up a lot. And I was working on some climate justice projects and an environmental art magazine at the time and was put on the BP account because none of my teammates would do it. And somehow, I made it through that, but I definitely found my line. But it was actually a really interesting place to work because I was approaching it the way that you're suggesting and it felt good to be able to do that, but it also felt really good to be asking those questions within a company that was made up of some really great people who are all trying to navigate that.

I guess ISIS would be my line.

Yeah. Yeah, that's good line maybe.

Did you ever find that, having worked with BP, a future client might actually trust you less because they thought that you supported something that you didn't? Or did you maybe trust yourself less? I'm just worried about putting myself in that place and no longer believing in myself. What happens then?

Yeah, that was my line. Feeling like I trusted myself less. It was actually a technology company that was my line that was involved with some weapons manufacturer that I was like, "this is the line for me and can't live with that." With BP, my next job after that was Bitch and that definitely was something I brought up in the interview because it's so wildly different. But we were working with them after a particularly disastrous oil spill. And working with the people who were developing their safety manuals to try to make a better work culture and accountability structure. And I wasn't really involved with that, I was involved with designing the materials that they were going to use for the training. But it felt like there was a possibility to do some good. And so that was a really interesting conflict. For me just feeling like "wow, I could actually support leaders in being more ethical at this nexus where it feels like that is really lacking." And I don't know how much your graphic choices really impact that, but it was interesting to be in the room and, and to expose myself to that.

You also don't have to put everything in your portfolio. I mean, that's something that—you know, the story is good in my experience and talking about it and sort of how I made those decisions. But when you're just looking through someone's work, you don't necessarily feel that. It's all about how you tell your story, I think, too.

I definitely agree. I think that even just by being in the room with the people you don't agree with and having conversations is a starting point. So my personal line was military and defense. I've had multiple opportunities to work in that area and I didn't end up taking any projects. And like Harrison said, it is a luxury. It is such a luxury to be able to turn down projects because you don't agree with it. But if you need to take it, you should take it and no one else should judge you for it. Like I said, again, you just maybe need to be in the room show up and have those conversations or even just listen. You do what you can do in that moment. So I think definitely, it's a hard choice.

Like, I definitely have extremely high standards. So I'm like, "What are y'all talking about? I've never agreed with any client I've ever had."

Yeah.

That's not totally true. But, I mean, this past election season I worked with clients I didn't vote for and I've worked for the investment company, and that's a bunch of billionaires and I'm like, "I fundamentally disagree with your existence." And I guess something I've learned is that just being in the room you really- and this is my perspective as an activist—you really start to understand your enemy in a way you didn't know before. Which I have actually found quite invaluable and interesting and actually a little bit worthwhile and why I kind of don't mind shrugging. I mean, I also have lines and boundaries, which is like, you know, "are you tier one evil, tier two evil, tier three evil?" But I just think that when you can better understand where the people you strongly disagree with are coming from and how they're talking to each other and what they really value and what they don't care about at all—that can be very educational and really interesting, especially in the political arena.

Yeah, we're all talking about situations where there's sort of two different ways of engaging as a designer, there's—I mean, there's a million ways—but the two that I'm hearing us bounce back and forth on is the idea that we are taking something that someone's given to us and can we review that, snap on our ability, make a decision, accept or reject; versus partnering and using design to start conversations, to be in the room, to get you in the room. The Obama administration was the first, and I do not remember where this is from, but he had a board of advisors and he actually had called on someone from AIGA to sit on an advisory committee with him regularly to have design thinking in the room while they're having hard conversations. So when I heard that I was so hopeful in so many ways for how design can show up. And I love hearing y'all talk about that in these different ways where you can change culture, whether it's diverting it like some of

us are suggesting, taking the money and re-allocating it, better you get it then some horrible person to just asking questions at the right time.

I agree. Other things I've seen is within corporations like when I worked in New York, there were certain people who refused to take certain projects like cigarettes or alcohol, or whatever. And they were respected. A lot of those sometimes were religious, like they would be Mormon. But there were definitely people who were like, I'll take these companies, and I'll work on these, but I'm not willing to do this, do you still want to hire me? But those things have happened. Again, building your own partnerships, or your own structure and your own kind of culture around what you want to do. Or it's a process of making choices, like Kris said, where you learn and then you and Kristin said, where you learn and then you switch. You're like, "Oh, I thought I could do this, but I don't think I can do this now I'm gonna switch" which is what happened to me and working in corporate America. Like I said, first I said, "I'm only going to work with cultural institutions." So I built a practice around that. Then I started doing education and then I did corporate and then I just felt I couldn't handle it, I couldn't hack it on a lot of levels. It was exhausting. And then I switched back to education. But in the very beginning I had worked on magazines and editorial for Emigre and all these weird little magazines.

So it was this long pathway of trying different jobs, different freelance, that got me to a space where I'm like, "this is where I think I fit. And this is where I feel like I can be who I am and give back." But it was a long path, I mean, I'm 53 years old. So it took a long time to figure that out. And I made choices that were great experiences, but I couldn't do it for more than a couple years. I got burned out on it. So I wouldn't assume that everybody's going to have this answer right away or that you're going to know right away. There's just a lot of ways to figure out your path and figure out where you fit. I don't know if that's helpful. But that's kind of how I see it as more of a process. Then again, there's some people who just

know what they want to do, and they go do it and they stick with it.

I am not that person. For the record. I'm much more like what you described. It's like, "oh, now I've changed. I'm this way." And, I mean, that's probably why education fits for me too, because you're constantly questioning. But I think even designers, so many designers are such researchers and learners. You're here to evolve and push to the edge. Even if your work isn't edgy, your whole job is based on questions. So I would expect that these kinds of questions like, "what is your responsibility?" are gonna knock around in your head for your whole career, kind of like a little anthem, you know? Or else I'm crazy, but that's possible, too. They keep coming up.

In thinking about responsibility and ethics, I would also ask, what is the role of the designer in building, bridging these chasms? I'm thinking about the Teen Vogue article that sort of breaks open the world and shows us like—we talk about sustainability in Portland, specifically in the Northwest, in this really sort of utopian, glorious way where we're going to have a cleaner society. But it discounts a whole part of the world—many parts of the world, and many communities even within our own communities—that are more affected by these choices. So what roles can the designer play in opening those up? That's a huge question, but I'll let that sit because that's too big.

I'll introduce an idea. Is anyone familiar with the idea of the triple bottom line? This came up a lot in like 2006/2007, when we really started talking about sustainable design in a mainstream way. And the idea was that it kind of goes back to some of the stuff y'all were saying earlier, Diane, about sustainability not being what manufacturers want, or what businesses want, what your clients want. To make sustainability palatable and relevant. The idea that it approaches not only the environment, but economical sustainability and sustainability that affects people and like the social part has to be considered. I remember reading and was really excited about a model a little bit later that added on cultural relevancy

as a fourth facet of this too. And I think that those four are a really interesting. I'm always laying—as a teacher, and as a designer—I'm laying these matrices over what I do, to try to help me make decisions and make sure I'm making things relevant for my clients. So that's a way that I've tried to take steps with clients or with partners who weren't interested.

So for example, we talked about paper use and certain certifications. There's tons of different ones now that show that something is environmentally sustainable. But if you're working with a client, you can say not only that, but "it looks amazing." So it's gonna be more delicious to your clients. And "it's cheap." So there's a lot of value there. That adds a whole different sway to the idea. I felt like there was a long part of my career where I was zhuzhing up the idea of sustainability to make it more delicious by making it seem like something that's not only relevant, but they have to have it. I know that commodifies it, too. But maybe that's relevant to our culture here in America, that you would have to do something like that.

I think there's salesmanship in everything that we do. You know, and getting people excited about ideas or excited about anything. And knowing that they're helping if that is what they want to do. I think all those things are incredibly valuable, to be able to get people excited about things, especially if they haven't thought about them in a certain way before. Kind of figuring out who this person is. This is the thing you guys are all taught in design thinking, which is around empathy, and really getting to know whoever you're working for, what really gets them excited, what are they really focused on about what they want out of it. Obviously, you have to think about the audience too. But you're also thinking about the person that you have to convince that this is a good idea. I love your word "zhuzhing," I don't know if I said that right. You gotta zhuzh a lot of things.

It's a lot of zhuzhing.

I don't know, there's some things that we're taught in school and some things that we aren't and some people

naturally have them. And other people have to kind of work on that part, which is like going in excited and being excited for certain reasons and explaining the benefits of that person. Maybe we talked about that in school, I'm not sure.

I hope so.

What you were just saying reminded me of the Teen Vogue article. One particular quote that I pulled out was just that "our personal experiences with climate change or sustainability are shaped by our experiences with race, gender class" and then "the climate crisis intensifies to those systems of oppression." And I think you were saying, the salesmanship is really just showing them the connections with their own experience and why should that matter to them through their lens? It will mean something different to them versus your audience, ideally, or probably. But I always just find it interesting and challenging to think about why it matters in a way that I can't see. Because I don't have those connections, myself.

Yeah, I think it takes a lot of research into whatever you're doing. I mean, I think recycled paper is kind of an easy sell people get that. And then the other part is where you can impact the system which is harder. Especially for somebody like Diane and I guess with Oskar, when you're dealing with supply chains, and you're dealing with "how does the material get where it's going? Where does it go when it dies?" there's a huge, huge system of problems that require a lot of research and a lot of knowledge and a lot of having other people who can help you figure that out.

I was watching some video about somebody who built their own house and they went from like, "paper towel versus sponge versus how your faucet is on." They even just went on this whole line—the washcloth and the dishwasher. The effects of these things are so massive that you came back to the half slice of paper towel was actually the best choice. They went back through that but also how they built their house into their home and how they put every part into it, and how they had all these tables

and charts. It's a lot to learn. It's almost like when you're affecting something that big you're going to need other knowledge or other people to support you. But I'm not sure if that's what you mean, if that's the kind of research level you have in mind or…

Yeah, and I think also just recognizing your own experience with the thing. Like for me, sustainability is challenging because I was raised in a very sustainable way. I was born in an Earthship in the middle of the desert—all our water was recycled. That was just my life and having this conversation now, it's hard for me, because it just makes sense to me that you would do these things. It's hard to pull those different stories that are going to mean something to people who have no really deep connection with that way of living or that way of thinking.

I also think that people are really susceptible to cultural norms and the idea that they might be doing something outside of a norm. So if you can just speak to things as if the most sustainable way is the normal way to do things. Like, instead of trying to sell it as, "I have this weird idea. Follow along," just be like "it makes sense to do it this way." I feel like that leaves more of a chance that people will just say, "Okay, yeah, let's do that. They say it makes sense. It makes sense." Of course, there's always budgets involved, and there's always project parameters. I feel like maybe it's time to stop acting like the sustainable thing or the equitable thing is somehow outside of the norm and just work on living in the world you want to live in. Everybody else can get in your world, don't go to them. Stop acting like you're the weird one.

That was awesome. I'm gonna live that now.

Yeah, just live it everyday.

I'm feeling that.

Wake up in the morning and say "no, you're the weird one."

I'm gonna make a t-shirt that says that to wear on every single zoom call.

Welcome to your future in book club.

Or you can make a background. And say "I am your future."

You are the weird one. I am your future.

No, you got to catch up to me. I feel like that's so often conversations I have, I feel like I'm being dragged back ten, twenty years in terms of a lot of things when it comes to face to face with clients and things like that.

So we have about twenty minutes left and every bit of this conversation has been good for me. So we can keep going. But I also want to ask a couple of questions just to let us sit with it for a bit, it's something you can kind of meditate on. I'm really curious to hear from all of you. What are some practical ways that you can change your practice of design? Because it is a practice, right? It's something that's going to evolve as you continue to practice it. Do you have any ideas from either this reading or this discussion for specific and tangible things you could try out? Change? Besides wearing a "You're the weird one" t-shirt?

Honestly, that's kind of it for me. It's connecting a bunch of threads from this conversation. I feel so often pulled back. Like we talked about earlier, that idea of partnership, and saying, "this is how I work now. This is this is me, this is the future, I am doing it. We're moving into a more collaborative, community oriented, less individualistic society. Get with the times, this is how it's gonna be." And you know, hopefully I won't starve to death.

Well, it sounds like you have such a strong set of values that you can bring those into those partnerships that you're trying to build. That sounds really powerful to just set to set that up that way.

Yeah, I mean, I have found that usually, people will buy what you're selling if it is well thought out and it's a core conviction. Because often there are other people who are tired of the same things you're tired of. It's a client who's tired of being treated like they're dumb by every designer they work with, or getting work that they don't feel…it's

good work but they don't feel like the soul of them isn't it in that same way. Inevitably there are people who like the way things are and it's working just fine for them, but I think there's usually a niche out there for however you want to work. And a caveat is maybe that should be like positive things, not "I want to work by being a jerk to all my clients. I like telling them what to do." Don't do that. That's just rude. But I think there are some matches out there for everyone.

I do too.

This might be a tangent, but that reminded me of a question or a thought I had about the Edo reading and design specialties. In Edo, they had such a hierarchical community and that's one of the low points, at least from the other related readings I've done, why it's not a good option for us. And that idea of being so specialized that you know exactly what your place is in that well-oiled system. I don't know if that's good or bad, but like Kris was saying, finding that niche and sticking with it and going hard on your values. Maybe you do that with your range of knowledge about sustainability, you just stick to it and you put yourself where you need to be to further that particular thing that you know about. I don't have an endpoint to this, but that was just a thought that keeps bubbling up for me.

Well, I think you bring up an interesting point, because as somebody who has a million interests, the idea of being one little part of a well oiled machine, I hate that idea. I'm on my second career by age 31. I'm not going to stop anytime soon. So I think there's a balance there. Because I actually think that the world would be maybe a little bit better if we had more room for generalists and people who were way more multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. I feel like our culture itself really tries to say it's a good thing if you know exactly what you want to do. By the time you get to college, you major in that thing, and you stick with it your whole life and maybe you have one hobby. But that's never been my life or my experience. And I've always felt bad about it. And I've been trying not

to feel bad about it. But yeah, I wonder how a society like that works with more generalists.

It just seems so impossible to replicate that same level of success with the circular economy if you're not doing it in a way where everyone knows exactly what they're supposed to be doing to continue that cycle through.

I felt like there were opportunities for young people to make, with your power as designers, to make those things cool again. There's a lot of power you guys have in shifting the culture and making it cool or interesting to do certain things that we know happened for hundreds of years. My parents grew up in England after World War Two, you know every dishwater to the garden—it's like what you had, Ariel, you never throw anything out, you reused everything. But, is it through narrative storytelling? Is it through product? Is it through that? Or the other thing I heard you say at the beginning, Ariel that I thought was powerful, which is kind of where I've focused my energy is on people, as opposed to products.

How do I help people and the most vulnerable people? And what are my skills and who do I have around me who have those skills? Which is you guys, right? So, that's where I shifted. There was something you said that was an ethos or a value or a mission that you said in the very beginning, which was the work that you're doing around educating younger people and I think building those value systems, really thinking about how that works for you. And what you can do to support people and its own way will build its own thing. I say this from a very privileged point of view, right? Because I have my job, and it's set. And so I can do other things. And it took a while to get there. But I think focusing in on what you said, it was really beautiful, the beginning and I can't remember how you said it. But that is, in itself, a way of being in the world or thinking about how you help people and how you connect people through that. What are the products they need? What are the other people that are doing that work? How do you support it? I don't have the answers, but I heard that in what you said, and I thought that was pretty powerful.

That's interesting to me also, because of the Teen Vogue article. I remember we were talking about how do you lift up those groups that are really struggling because of the climate crisis or sustainable issues, and that also feels like an impossible quest for me as a designer. I don't know how I can help them because I feel like the work I do as a designer really only reaches people who are in a very different world than them. I'm sure there's a way to do it, but I don't know how and I want to know really badly.

For me, I love this conversation about the generalist versus the specialist and what kind of designer you are versus how you show up with people. I don't know if it has to be either or, and I think hopefully life is long and we can kind of migrate and then go deep like we do with projects with clients too. I mean, I feel like I've been a junior high school teacher and PR person, a writer and bartender. What all have you been in your life? If you bring those experiences with you… I think the older I get, the further along I get in design, I'm going back to what I did when I first started out, which is throwing myself at the intersection of things that are all interesting to me and seeing how resourceful I can be. And if I had known early on that that meant, "oh, you're a designer," I would have probably had a lot straighter path, but it would have been a lot less interesting.

   I think, in terms of lifting people up, I think part of that is listening. We talked about that a lot over the past few months especially. I think that even just researching the science behind some of the way things that are made, listening to people talk about it, looking to the next generation or to women who are solving wicked problems around sustainability, to some of the scientists working in Africa who are reinventing the way we deal with water systems. Looking for the designs behind everything, listening to the science and figuring out how to tell those stories. I think that's a really interesting intersection to be and you don't always have to be the one doing the exact work to move it forward. So that's a lot of rambling, but I don't know that's very inspiring. For me to think about those intersections like what's in between my feminism

and my sustainable design practice to really move. That's where I want to work and y'all will have your own intersections.

Something that really has been solidifying for me over the past few years is, a couple of years ago, I felt kind of paralyzed by this idea of, "how can I help? How can I do anything? How can I be the one to change something?" And I was thinking about this a lot yesterday because a housing group that I've been working with over the last year got a big housing policy passed. It was a victory five years in the making. We're really proud and what I was thinking on last night after the celebration and stuff, was that it's not about me. It's about you as a little something, finding an organism to attach yourself on to, to do the work with and honestly, I kind of had to have a conversation about that with myself. Stop centering yourself in this, it's not about you. Find the people who are already doing the work that you want to be doing that you feel like is helping and just get involved in some way. And I think as designers there's a lot of ways we can, beyond just volunteering for nonprofits and causes that we believe in. That is one very obvious way to do it.

Something I feel like I'm learning from the protests recently is be a squeaky wheel. Be annoying, make somebody's job kind of hard if you're working for a client that you don't agree with. If you don't have the privilege to put your livelihood on the line, don't do that. But you can be really annoying without doing that. And I've just seen recently how easily systems start to buckle under a little bit of pressure. Especially here in Portland right now. And that's been really inspiring. So I think that's a way you as a designer, can be helpful. Make somebody spend like eight hours going through your emails on sustainability and stuff. Maybe that's a little bit of an exaggeration, but that's eight hours they're never gonna get back.

Such a good fire to light under you, I think, especially if you're taught your job is to help make people's lives easier. As a designer, that is a really hard shift to make. But if you can make them easier, you can make things challenging, and that engages with a different kind of person and

some people need that tension to really hear you. And if you're too easy, you're not actually solving the problem. You're just making it invisible.

Yeah, I always think about the ways bad graphic design or bad design has exposed countless problems. There's a lot of ways… I mean right now, I feel like I'm watching the Portland Police Bureau have a total meltdown on their social media. It's bad marketing that's just showing how bad the institution is and how design definitely plays into that because all marketing strategy is interlinked with design. And I don't think that there's actually a chaos agent. I think somebody is trying their darndest there, but I just think it's interesting how a little bit of error really exposes what is wrong with the institution.

That's hopeful and satisfying. I like hearing you say that.

Be the future you want and also a total pain in the ass.

Yeah, making it harder for some people to make it easier for a lot of other people in the long run is the goal.

I'm writing that down.

I feel like we've had a lot of quotables on this call here.

That's the great part about the transcript.

I know, I'm thrilled, until I read it later and I'm like, "What did you say? You thought you were so smart"

Oh, God, I wouldn't go back and read it. For myself. Not for you. I said that wrong. That's not what I meant. I meant for me. I couldn't imagine going back and reading a transcript for anything I said.

No, it's never good.

Yikes! Not you Kristin, you were brilliant.

Obviously, but, if I weren't me…

You are you. Well, I probably have to cash out because I have a husband wandering around who I think would like to eat dinner with me. So I think I'm gonna go.

Yeah, I think we're wrapping it up.

Yeah. Thank you guys so much. Thank you, Kristin. Thank you everybody for doing this.

Yeah. Thank you for being here, Lis.

Oh, nice to talk. Yeah, we'll see if you guys invite me again.

Bye, guys.

Yeah, I gotta hop off too.

Yeah. All right. I know. We were gonna follow up with some links. And there's the transcript.

This is probably mostly for Oskar just because you're the last man standing and the rest of us talked about it, but we went through many readings that we might include on this list, so I think there's potentially some really cool stuff to explore after this conversation too.

August Readings:

Acaroglu, L. (2020, May 27). Quick Guide to Sustainable Design Strategies [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://medium.com/disruptive-design/quick-guide-to-sustainable-design-strategies-641765a86fb8

Block, I. (2020, February 26). "It's not enough to ask designers to be sustainable" says Formafantasma [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://www.dezeen.com/2020/02/26/formafantasma-interview-sustainable-design/

Dolan, M. (2019, September 19). 4 Climate Activists Explain Why the Climate-Justice Movement Needs Feminism [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/climate-activists-explain-why-climate-justice-movement-needs-feminism

Ong, R. (2019, November 13). Circular EDOnomy: Japan's original circular economy model [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://zenbird.media/circular-edonomy-japans-original-circular-economy-model/

Start with moments of epiphany. Were there any moments in this reading that made a light turn on for you, created a spark?

What in these readings challenged your existing ways of thinking about sustainable design, and how? Did other selections contradict in any ways?

What gaps exist between the perspectives and ideas discussed in these readings? (Perhaps this is an area for research or design ideation.)

Let's talk about the responsibility of the designer, in relation to ethics. What is the designer's responsibility? Are there ways that we as designers can interrupt, disrupt, or redesign processes to correct harms being done, design to re-route impacts that disproportionately affect folks outside of each of our affiliated groups?

What are ways we can use design to make these ideas delicious to our clients, and how can we build relationships in our work that create space for this discussion? What makes sustainability relevant to them? Are we in this work to pull the stories that persuade, or are we here to ask the questions that make them come up with their own ideas? How do we show up in this effort?

Close your conversation by discussing specific areas your readers can do more research...one area sparked by or missing from this discussion that we might all pursue and consider.

To ease out of discussion, commit to one practical way this exploration can show up in each person's practice or conversations, starting tomorrow.

Books:

> *Cradle to Cradle Remaking the Way We Make Things* by William McDonough

> *Design to Re-nourish: Sustainable Graphic Design in Practice* by Eric Benson and Yvette Perullo

Articles:

> *In the world's biggest city, the past offers lessons for surviving the future,* theconversation.com

> *Knowing what 'just enough' is: Azby Brown on Japan's Edo period – Part One,* transitionnetwork.org

> *Product Design for Sustainability,* uxdesign.cc

> *The World's Most Sustainable Corporations Might Surprise You—and Other Lessons from Design Educator Mariana Amatullo,* eyeondesign.aiga.org

> *Should Designers Take Responsibility for the Ethics of their Clients?,* eyeondesign.aiga.org

> *The Living Principles for Design,* aiga.org

> *Your Roadmap for Sustainable Design,* aiga.org

Academic Papers:

> *Environmental Justice Reimagined Through Human Security and Post-Modern Ecological Feminism: A Neglected Perspective on Climate Change* by Linda A. Malone, William & Mary Law School

> *The Role of Designers in Integrating Societal Value in the Product and Service Development Processes* by Yoori Koo, Hongik University

Mothers of Invention Podcast: mothersofinvention.online

Taking Over

You Probably Have Everything You Need

Jugglers of Time

Websites:

castirondesign.com/faq/sustainability

www.intersectionalenvironmentalist.com/

re-nourish.org

paalf.org/ej-forward

compostmodern.org