

Podcast Transcript

Valuable Conversations with UCL IIPP

George Aye

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SPEAKERS

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Justin 00:06

Hello and welcome to valuable conversations a student produced podcast from UCL Institute for Innovation and public purpose. I'm Justin Beiroid. Today I sit down with George Aye, a co founder and director of innovation at Greater Good studios. Greater Good Studios is a design consultancy in Chicago that advances people centered social change. There's a reason why very few design studios focus exclusively on making the world a better place. It's because it's really, really hard. And it's even harder if you're willing to admit that many of the most reliable tools in the design toolbox either totally ignore or actually intensify issues of power and privilege. I highly recommend checking out some of George's other talks online to learn more. In this conversation. We cover some of these questions, as well as the personal side of how George got to where he is today. I'm also joined in this interview by Nika Lola, a brilliant scholar and PhD student at IIPP, who is also my TA for the transformation by design module in the MPA now is fantastic. And keep an eye on your podcast feed for a full episode where I interview her in depth. I knew I wanted to interview George from the moment I heard him give a guest lecturer in our MPA and I really appreciate him taking the time to share his perspective with us. So without further ado, I hope you enjoy our conversation with George A. George a thank you so much for coming on the podcast today.

George 01:33

Really pleased to be here. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Justin 01:35

Well, where does this podcast find you today? Are you in Chicago?

George 01:40

I'm in Chicago. That's right. Oh,

Nai 01:42

Midwest.

George 01:43

Yeah, it's exciting to be I grew up in the UK. But yeah, I have lived here for 20 years now. I think there's my anniversary was in April, long enough to get citizenship. But I think my my accent is still somewhat present. Its president after my kids make fun of me. So. So cool.

Justin 02:04

That's, that's awesome. I, you've been there for that for 20 years. Now. That's your you're pretty American. At this point, I'd say despite the long time long about

George 02:13

yeah, getting citizenship by 14 was not something I was really aiming for it but because of Trump, I didn't frankly feel safe being here. Yeah, just British citizenship. And I worried that somebody, some person at the border patrol will kind of take a look at me and say that, that doesn't add up with what I think of British people. So I just didn't want to risk it, you know, and do what I have to explain to my kids, that he didn't come home. So yeah, that stuff is Skeino that we'll talk. Yeah, that makes

Justin 02:42

a lot of sense. Yeah. Um, well, well, George, I was wondering if if we could start out if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself and your work at a greater good studio. And, you know, you describe yourself as a pissed off optimist. And I really love that phrase. And, you know, I absolutely understand the pissed off part, because there's a lot of things you pissed off about. But I'm curious in your answer, if you could say a bit about why you're optimistic too.

George 03:10

Yeah, I mean, I think our studio has held that tension for a long time, the term actually is coined by my co founder, Sarah, and she has, she sort of recognized the need for there to be this admission of attention. And I think the idea that somebody is pissed off, I think we have lots of reasons to be, and probably more so than every year. But in being pissed off, I think you can get so far that you are just so angry all the time, that actually can't start to see that there's any hope to it. So I think that there's a there's a version that would acknowledge why we're upset and what to be upset about. Not that I could determine for you, but I know there's plenty of things to be upset about. To remain optimistic, though, in light of that is I think, our mission, that design I think is still a very hopeful practice. And the idea that actually in face of adversity we can be quite generative, is, I think, a strength of design, but also, I think, a component of just humans. That being said, being so optimistic to say it's all sunshine and rainbows, I think what somehow feel like we've missed the reality for a lot of people that we that we serve. So to be so optimistic to sort of be like fingers in the ears, Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah, everything's gonna be fine. doesn't really seem to make a lot of sense. So I feel like it's, it's helpful to be both at the same time, and also to recognize actually, that many things that are complicated tend to be two things at the same time, seemingly oppositional. And, you know, I don't know if it's just Western thinking or binary thinking or just traditional thinking that is, that would seem like two things can't be the same. But the same can't be true at the same time. It would negate I think, a lot of complexity that we see in the world and the work projects that we do, which often feature two things both True, that seemed logically that they shouldn't, but

actually is the root of why things are stuck. Maybe that's bigger a longer answer than you're expecting. But that's that's probably where that term comes from.

Justin 05:12

No, not at all. That's a that's an amazing answer. And, you know, we're encouraging people to check out your other, your other talks and things online. But could you just tell us a little bit little summary of what you guys do a greater good studio?

George 05:25

Yeah, so we're a design firm that's dedicated to the social sector. So what that means is that we primarily serve non profit foundations and government. And with that level of sort of focus, it means that we get to do the thing that we used to do, if we were lucky, once a year. So before really good, if we were working at a design studio that was, you know, my co founder, most of the team, frankly, might do one of those, like, give back projects, or have something that would be like a hackathon. I don't think it's sort of me trying to say that that work isn't, has merit or isn't contributing to something. But I think it's a difference to do anything once a year versus do something every day. So simply, the sheer idea of having daily practice is something is something we afforded when you have a focus like this. So when you work on things like this every day, I found, to my surprise, I think probably to my embarrassment, at how much harder everything is, but also the idea that we could simply copy paste, what we did in design for the social football commercial sector, and be just like, bam, bring into the social sector be and be welcomed with open arms was a shock to find it, that it was not always true. And that necessarily that people who have tried this in the past. And they're left with a case study, you know, again, that, you know, one project per year model tends to leave a lot of trust deficit, and that we might be starting a deficit from the very beginning. It's hard for us to kind of what's hard for us to learn and appreciate and realize, oh, wow, there's been a lot of scar tissue actually, in projects and communities, there'll be vented, seemingly like we're here to help. I don't know if we ever thought of ourselves as saving. But I know that people who try this work, have that narrative. And perhaps that's even in our heads as well, I think we will try to perhaps, like helping as earnest away as possible. But how could we not end up thinking we've probably saving it was it was really, it was really dicey. But we've learned, I think, over the last 10 years, some of the more common pitfalls, partly because we do it every day. And also, what we realize is how much of the projects have to be set up. I'd say hold on, how much of the outcomes that we have in our projects are somewhat determined before the project starts in how it's framed and set up. So a lot of that initial understanding of of the context actually helps determine whether or not we should even show up. And if we do show up, in which context are we working. And that makes for, I think, really rich, interesting projects. And it allows us to do design work that I think is a little different than how I think I used to think of design work. It's been half about designing stuff, like the things that you might typically associate with design, and half of it is about designing the engagement itself, with communities that were working for. That does that make sense?

Nai 08:28

That makes perfect sense. I'm just sitting here nodding, like so true. So true. And I think, you know, thinking about how, how engagement is structured, and how things are set up. And who even gets to be a part of that process. It kind of makes me think about how and when did you start thinking differently about power and privilege and design? And particularly, as you all work with communities?

George 09:03

Yeah, I would say that it was not top of mind at all. Going into it, it was very much a horribly naive and almost like a shock to realize, why are people not just throwing money at me? Like, instead why don't they realize how awesome we are like you guys were like, here to fix it yo, like, what's the holdup? Yeah,

Justin 09:24

it was pretty pretty much in that boat right now. So why,

George 09:28

I don't know, Where's where's the where's Why not people making it around? Like, I don't know. We'd be raising money. Because I'd always heard the narrative. You know, the social sector is always looking for new ideas. Clearly, there's such a huge need. I'm here to help. What is the holdup? And it took a long time. Not only that, I mean, we will obviously very fortunate we did actually get some projects. We weren't completely wholly that terribly idiotic. But in doing so we started to notice just how much of the projects had an underlying currency, there was like movement and sort of motion that was set up in the project that was not that visible, and certainly not in our scope of work. And I and I was very fortunate enough for myself at least, to go on a conference where the facilitation that was done at the conference, this was done in Mexico, for those most international development folks had a really profound effect on me, because the questions were based around power. And I think for everyone else in the room, who were primarily not designers, they were very afraid with the language very good a fee with just the idea of like making space. It's not the term I'd ever heard before making space like, what is the space you're talking about? When I heard space? I don't think you know, outer space, I'm thinking mostly environments, that's at least a term I'm familiar with. Making space for something just sounds. I don't know what it means. So like, Alright, are we making space, whatever. So I'm there in the space that they've made? And questions around? What is power mean to you? Whenever you lost power? Whenever you gain power? I was like, What are you talking about? And I was stunned by just how actually how much it affected me because not only did I not feel comfortable talking about it, because of having no practice, but I thought, Oh, shit, I can think of moments where I've lost power. I can think of moments where power was present, but I didn't see it. And it kind of shook me to my core, because I thought, How have I got this fire not knowing any of this stuff. And then I realized, Oh, this is showing up in all our projects. And that Oh, shit. Now we have to rethink everything. And you know, occasionally I will have a moment like that where I'll come across something. It's not like I'm a genius. But rather, I'm feel like I'm often very late to this, where I'll have to reassess everything. And that for me was one of them was was decided that power might be the only lens that I can now look through. I can't unsee the stuff that I've seen through it, because it helps explain so much of what was odd or weird or paralyzing about those moments that I found very memorable. They've left a big emotional memory on me. And in those moments, I realized, oh, right, I was set up. I was just set up. I'm not i There's no way I could have been successful because of how a symmetry or Paris symmetry was so stark. And that how I've interpreted those moments of Paris symmetry now that I move in a way that that that's the thing.

Nai 12:21

I realized very interesting.

George 12:23

My own role in it wasn't quite as 100% as I thought I had blamed myself so often in those moments of being incompetent, not that smart. Stupid to have gone into it without realizing there's no way to get out of this alive, you will I was set up from the start. So it's not to say I'm blame free? Yeah. But I can dial down from 100 to like 99, maybe 98 in like dial it down over time to start to get a better sense for like, what was my role in this? And actually, what is the context I've been operating in, where I can now do a better accounting for my for my own sort of role. So when you think about that, and you know, I'd like a slight mini implosion of during that trip of like homemaker, this isn't really freaking me out. How is it not true, then that in client relationships, when we meet them for the first time, as we set up a project, that power wouldn't also be present there, anything over eight. So then when we start a project, where's the macro version of power here. So I started at a scale just because of this particular instance, at a one to one person to person scale, I didn't come at it from power from like a political science point of view, or like, go, you know, any money learned people understand power way more than I do. But I think it's treated. And often I'd heard about it at a macro scale. So now that I'm seeing it from this one to one scale, I'm now able to much more clearly see the macro. But I find that when you started the macro and actually stay there, that interpersonal version of power could get lost. But it's also present. So I've just been very lucky that I was able to be introduced to it at this scale, because I can see the larger, better now. But it's this micro one that I think is fascinating to me, because it's those tiny interactions in the moment on one on course ideas, but also when you're in conversation with your teammates, with your professors, with your clients with your family. That's the stuff that determines, actually is contributing to the larger macro stuff.

Nai 14:31

So I think this is really interesting, because you mentioned even international development as an example. And so kind of as your eyes are opening, and you're, you know, you're becoming aware of what was obscured in relationship to this asymmetry of power and privilege how it was manifesting, like what were some of the examples that came to mind of how it undermined design, like how did it undermine the ability to carry out design Um, from moving between, I guess the individual interactions to the larger outcomes.

George 15:06

I mean, I think it was had it. Again, I'm incredibly fortunate to have had the things that have happened at the time that it happened. Because had they come in a different sequence or at a different time, I probably wouldn't have put it all together, at least not to say that this is like, never been seen before, but I just hadn't seen it. So had I had I had the power conversation and had that revelation, but I was still working commercial design, I'm not sure if it would have been quite as meaningful for me. Because not to say that power isn't present in commercial design projects. Of course, they are, you know, clients to consultancies, who the clients are, they're responsible, and you know, have accounting for who our teams are all that is still present. But I don't know if the stakes are quite as high when the projects are around developing a new brand of toothpaste, or developing a new laptop, or projects that I've done in the past, like, innovation around frozen pizza. Power is still present. But I might argue, okay, good luck with that. Yeah, I don't know if you'd like has such a dramatic outcome on people being harmed. Right? Yes, you can say first and features harming families. But that's fine, right? That's a separate type of harm.

Justin 16:18

You're not trying to go on a crusade against your nose right now?

George 16:22

No, I'm not particularly good. I mean, I either. I've actually just discovered this whole whole new thing called Detroit style pizza, which is blowing my mind. By the way, it's so good. I have lots of Costco has a really good deal on Detroit. So anyway, the idea though, that it might be present in design. But when it matters more might be because we're doing social sector projects. So then I thought, Oh, this is this is actually freaking me over more now. Because not only is it present, my or our design as a field, our lack of understanding of it might mean, we don't realize what we are wielding when we show up in those communities. And then you have to question how did we get invited these committees? What's up with that? And then when we do get invited, how do we show up with it? And what are we doing when we are in some cases? Like then the example would be? Why do you why why is it that doesn't designers want to show up with community earnestly helping Sharpies and posters in hand? And you go Wait, why is everyone upset? Why they upset with me? I didn't do anything wrong. Why is it whole room really angry? Right now? I'm just here to do a brainstorm. Like, can we just get to the next phase of the project? We like to have a Gantt chart like it would clearly meant to be on track schedule here. Why is everyone upset? And I realized that it's a weird, like, oblivious, of why there is anything to be upset about in the first place. To a lot of designers. Again, if you have frequency of practice, that would help. But if you don't, you become incredibly it's like inconvenient to realize how power showing up, you will slow it down. And, again, if you're doing it once a year, you kind of want it to go well. It's almost like if you think about it's like going on vacation somewhere. Yeah, right? Right. You don't want to have your big concerns of daily life, you don't want to think about laundry, you're gonna think about like paying bills, you want vacation. Like, I want you I'm here to have a good time. And all of you community members are here to be my vacation. So like, can we just get on with it? I don't want to, like real life is working on, you know, frozen pizza over frozen pizza, working frozen pizza over here. I'm here to have a vacation, I need to have a break from that whole rigmarole. So that attitudinal difference might make when you show up a mismatch. And that, to me feels like a very rich area for both discontent is expectations but primarily just wasted time. So this is this is what I ended up thinking about. And I wonder like, oh shit, how many projects have we done that are doing that now? And also, what are the how do we prevent that perhaps from ever happening again, now that I know it, I can't unknow this stuff. So bothers me that I'm stuck with this knowledge of this stuff. Not that again. Nobody's ever thought of it. But I feel like I'm burdened with it now, because I can't not know it now. I can't take it out of my head and go back to being oblivious. You're accountable? Well, I'm just I'm just stuck. So I feel like I don't want to perpetuate cycles of abuse or nonsense. And I want to stop it. I want to stop the cycle from continuing because I just feels like it's a it's just seems questionable to me. But it turns out, there's tons of people who also didn't know. You know, I found that this is really interesting direction. I wrote a piece back in like 20 2017 around how design design education specifically, is a little weak when it comes to to acknowledging and that teaching power especially. And I found the reaction to it when I first published it that form designers who wrote to me to say, Holy shit I am. I can't sleep at night. Now. I'm freaking out right now this thing has been blowing my mind is like, Oh, wow. And then I heard feedback from people who work in the social sector. And they're like, that's cute. That's cute. Thanks so much. Like, welcome to the party. I'm glad you're here. But like, we got work to do. Yeah. Oh, right. Okay, that was like a healthy balance. Because if I had just listened to the designers he was hearing from, I think it was hot shit. You know? So it's, it's, it can be both true. This is mind blowing for some incredibly, sort of, I'd say, one on one class level for Yeah. Yeah. And I've been I think we as a studio by myself, has been trying to

balance how I speak to which group of cognizant that I there's some people are incredibly far in their journey. Some have really early, and that's okay. I don't, I can't, you know, not forget where it where it came from, in terms of my own, you know, learning on this, but that I have to work with people who on both ends of that spectrum pretty often. So how it shows up in projects just means that when we are cognizant of how a new client comes to us, I'm often trying to check for when called a red flags, but just like how is power even being shown up in this call? Does that make sense?

Justin 21:32

That does make sense. It makes perfect sense. But how do you actually do that? How do you actually assess it? Yeah,

George 21:39

so we had this, it seems unfair because this this, this particular email and call was had just every issue, but it was really illustrative example. The email, first of all came in saying lots of buzzwords. Okay, that's a clue. Lots and lots of buzzwords around the social sector. Okay, we want to do to Gen work. We're here to change people's trajectories, we're going to be investing in under invested communities like Bumble, but like, there's almost like a checkbox of every every super cool term. Oh, this is okay. Well, at least the least familiar with with with the terminology, I wasn't any, all this was new to me. So it's, it's kind of cool that I even know it. But there was a tone to bid. They had a I am looking for someone to execute a plan. And I need you monkey two, like, I'm gonna pick you until you do it. Okay. I thought not sure about this, this was kind of funky to me here. And the tone was, We're so sure of this plan, which is nice. I want to execute. And that there's like a, there's the confidence to me is always very close to hubris. And I'm trying to work out to what degree does confidence become hubris, in an email on a phone call in a project just in the general tone, okay. And what I identified after the call, not only was what I do is issue determined was that this entire thing was a vanity project, there was a wealthy person that was being represented by the person who was contacting me. And they also could tell that something was up, but didn't want to admit it. Because in admitting it, they would also have to see the flaws in their own participation, their own complicit in this, which is very tough for most people to admit to their loan consultants who are often tied directly to their complicit nests, because getting paid means certainly have been complicit means getting paid. And why would I? Why would I want to highlight that? So what I'd offered was a couple of things I said, what we tend to find on our research, okay, can be really revealing and expose a lot of really difficult realities for them in particular, but some of those realities might actually also implicate you, the client. How do you feel about that type of, you know, knowledge? What if something came up that directly challenged the thesis you had? What if it turns out that you're, you know, whatever it was a billion dollars that they wanted to raise towards this community isn't at all what they want, but the committee says they want 15 Other things, some of which might not make sense to you, like, I need to have like cheaper cellphone plans, or I just need to have housing be stabilized. And I don't need this college assistance program that you're offering. It sounds good. But what if they say they don't want that? What if instead, the billion dollars gets raised to all the community, local nonprofits that are doing their work already, because they have their feet on the ground? And especially if your name is never attached to any of it? What will you do then? Yeah, and she had a really hard time, if only because I think she knew. So I offered like if you if you want to talk about this stuff again in the future, I'm happy to be a sounding board. But we can't participate in projects like this. Yeah, there are there are too many issues here. We're where if we just peek under the under the lid just a little bit, it's quickly going to fall apart, because

the whole thing is entirely flawed. And I'm not doing it to be annoying, although I'm sure I am annoying. It's the reality, though, that I would imagine if a community member were in the room instead of me. Right, they would ask those questions. But here's the crux of it. They're never going to be in the bloody room. They see these clients, some of which, who, oh, I think we're trying to work out how to avoid, find comfort in people like me. Does that make sense? There is less comfort when they talk to community directly.

Nai 25:38

What do you attribute that to?

George 25:41

Having accents like having this British accent helps? Yeah. appearing like a company versus community, having a track record of taking money, when when people give it partly because we have a design team, and therefore we like known for having solutions. So it's probably us our reputation, but also I think what design is known for? I think there's a certain comfort that comes in knowing people will just do whatever it takes until we get until depending on how much they get paid

Nai 26:12

to like sidestepping the community. Like oh, yeah, yeah,

George 26:16

yeah, that's kind of what design is not not like designed to do, but can do if you if you throw enough money at it. So that's why I feel like I don't trust myself often some of those calls. So I'm trying to step out of it, like I'm put someone who's going to directly benefit and work out how would I, if someone else could be here is probably like these people were talking about? What would they say? And paired with my knowledge of this field? What would we say together? So that that begs, for, in some cases, radical compensation, some of our clients who come to us and they're the ones who I go, Oh, thank God, you exist. They will say when I asked so So what happens when you when we find out the thesis was wrong, and our community needs something else? They're like, that's exactly what we caught you. Oh, really? Yeah. So if they find that it's wrong, then we should just go do whatever they said, instead, oh, my God, thank thank God, you exist. And it's rare, I would say, like, never happens. But I'd say it's like, well, at this point is 10 years now. So we get them more often than not, we're getting more of them. But it's those types of calls that go. This is why we're in business, like I had a hope that you can work with this person that's you existed. And I'm just grateful that you exist in the world, I'd love to help you. But I'm just grateful that you exist at all. And that puts in contrast, the occasional rarer still, thank God, someone who was a little misguided.

Nai 27:45

Wow. I really, I really liked the some of the points that you make about making like by emphasizing what would people from the community asked if they were in this room. And then also, I won't use the word creating space, but I guess looking for opportunities to include them on some of these discussions so that these types of things will come up, and they become more radical. And I guess, you know, one of IPPs models is innovation is political. Would you also say that design and particularly the design that, you know, your your company works with? Is also political?

George 28:28

Yeah, so it's, it's a tricky question. I don't think it's, I actually I'm gonna employ something I've seen other people do, which is just being cute, you know, sometimes decide to do like designed with a capital D or little D. or, or in this case, politics with a big P or little P, I'd say we do is political and a little P sense, because we aren't trying to be overly embroiled in federal state politics, campaigning, influence influencing votes that are best. Yeah, we don't have any influence, you have no experience, really not an awful lot of desire to do that kind of work. But I would absolutely say that the work we do is political, because in many cases, the projects that we're working on have a history of where politics and power in particular, have caused the situation that we're working on to be so exacerbated. So to have done a project with, let's say, a group whose entire purpose of existing is advocating for people who have been exploited in the past. How was there not political? Of course, it could be of course, it must be. Yeah. So to pick a side is it worse seems to be so reductive because there's no I don't think we're talking about it. I just don't think what is happening is just or fair, or should be the way it is right now. And if anything, it's a frustration at how we've become numb to the status quo. How normalized how fucked up things are, would seem to me weird. Why have we become why is that okay? That Not that anyone thinks it's okay. But just the idea that, you know, wages have been stuck for like 30 years straight, and everything else has accelerated around us. So therefore, the rights of those same workers who were, let's say, working on a project for, should stay stagnant. And if we, you know, if what we try to do is work ahead, we'll be either like, get the salaries to go further, or to get them more benefits to operate in this space. And I'll be cognizant of the politics of how it shaped it would seem naive. So I think it can't not be. Right, there's another, you know, I don't know if I fully fully versed in this, to say this part. But I would say that remaining oblivious, I guess, is a choice. Yeah. And that is also a political act. Not because they're overtly saying I'm choosing to opt out because of like, like consciousness, but the risk of being manipulated in used when you're opting out by those who understand it better, is a very high risk. So you're opting out ends up becoming political, even if you don't want it to be because you're being used your lack of voice and your lack of action in those moments when, you know, the power of a vote could really make a difference. Gets weaponized, your your lack of participation is essentially used against you. Yeah. So that's terrifying. And that happens a lot. I don't know if we have projects or are interested in working out how to get how to change changed, let's say, you know, gerrymandering? Yeah, I mean, I think I might personally be interested in working out how to get more people to vote, even if the person that they're voting for would be would be different than my choice. I still believe in in people participating in the democratic process. Whether it's because I recently became American obese, because it's I think, I actually think it's like a right, the idea that people are choosing not to add of apathy, I understand. But I wish I wasn't quite as true. So I might personally be interested, I don't know if the whole student would feel that way. But I would be interested in looking at how to get more people just simply to vote. So again, that that question around politics is I think in terribly, it's terribly complicated. But I think those design projects that we do, are like, saturated.

Justin 32:28

Absolutely, and, you know, I think the way you're talking about it is the way that we typically meet IIPP as well. It's kind of interesting, it's kind of like, you know, there's this concept in biology of convergent evolution, where there's like, 14 different types of crabs that have all evolved separately into the shape of a crab like independently of one another. And I feel like something happened with where, you know, with with IIPP, we mainly talk about political economy and technology. And you're coming at it from a design direction, but we kind

of arrive at a somewhat similar place, which is like, a lot of these things that we see as neutral or without, you know, significant power dynamics actually have them and they're just, they're just kind of hidden. And you mentioned this earlier, too. And, you know, when I was listening to your lecture, in our class, I thought, so many of the things you were saying applied so well, to many fields beyond design. And the one I know the most about is economics. And you know, I think I think in economics a lot of times, and then technology complexity and, and expertise and you know, fancy mathematical models are used to hide the power relations that are actually happening. And I'm curious, you know, it's harder for me as an outsider, I've learned about designs this semester, but it's harder for me to see the ways those power dynamics are hidden in the design process. I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit more about that about how the the typical way that this stuff is done, obscures. And when we say politics, like you small p politics, the definition I use as a who gets what, when and why. Right. It's kind of like that kind of politics of, you know, so what are the things in design that obscure that?

George 34:21

I think what has been tough is to kind of do that review of the design process as a whole. And to see sort of ways in which power can and has showed up? I think there was probably a big shift, probably 20, maybe two to three decades ago, where we started including, beyond aesthetics and beyond engineering. We started to include the utility, the usability of objects. So when things started to actually interface with humans, which obviously they had been doing until then, to include the insight around human and human behavior or human interactions with the things we were designing, I think changed the course of the Design by an enormous amount, because it's difficult to even imagine a time when we didn't do that. But there was a time, right? We would just design stuff, we'd figure how to manufacture it, and then we'd release it. And we would primarily use the feedback loop off does it sell or does it not sell as being an indication of whether or not it was usable. But mostly, we just use the word it was successful or commercially successful. But when we had this change around how interaction works, we started to include that that baby, not only does designers and engineers and this client know what people want, but actually there's a fourth group, which is the actual users themselves might and perhaps even should have a say, in how these products are designed for them. I think we're all in the wake of that revelation, working on the idea of that perhaps humans that were working, and designing products for have input. The limit to that that the limit that I see in that process wasn't really bound by designers, I think designers in design as a whole could have extended much, much further in the amount of participation in Insight gathered by humans, about those humans about the projects that we're working on, except my clients. And the project itself was already capped, to only take one maybe two at best, like 10% of all the learnings and insights about humans that we gathered and enter in our research, because they only ever cared about that one sliver, because that's the only bit that matters about whether or not this air freshener is going to work in this home. But if we found that people's understanding of home's comfort, being welcoming, what I do to relax well, who I want to be in the future, which we actually ended up learning in those research sessions, and 99% of is thrown out, because who gives a shit? Just seem to sort of like why is it happening? How was that? That's such a shame, what a tragic loss of learning about humans. So it turns out that if you look further and get unbound by the question set that is determined by the project by the client and the design team around how do we make this commission successful, we start getting more insight into the amazing richness of human are really off humans of which are always amazing. So in order for us to kind of like have more of that power, which is this insight into human behavior, we have to fundamentally shift the questions that are being asked of us, we have to fundamentally shift the entire project itself. When one way that we did it was to look at how do I get rid of those clients who

are very narrowly focused on profit, and work at a different kind of client who are nonprofits, foundations and government? Who are looking at pretty complex human lives to work out? What role do we have in that. So it's not to say I now have full remit to do ever, like, that's not what I'm talking about at all. I'm just now given more leeway to be able to take what I'm learning from these humans and their richness, and actually do something that I think contributes to their lives. The question around powder, specifically, as if we had just kept the process as it was, we'd probably still be just fine. But I don't know if the if the actual, like social impact that I think we had before. And I think we still struggle to know what impact we have had. I don't think social change happens if we just keep doing things the same that we're so we have certainly had to work out in to what degree can we open up and reveal and give up our power to those who want in community, to those who we're learning from, such that their insights that we're gathering, you know, with them, actually, then inform the next step, inform the next plan inform the next, like, the design of the thing. And what we found is that in doing that process of like, slightly, slowly letting go, we're giving away our power, because we're getting it back and return two years later, we find this power to be really regenerative, and to even restorative. And we try to work out how do we how do we get so that the client who centered us goes back to centering this community. And I think the best clients understand that there's a temporary need to focus on us in order to get back to centering on the humans that they that they've advocated for. They're the clients that we think we resonate and feel like the most kinship with, because they see us as a, an inconvenient need. Because we're not here to serve greater good, we just need to get this project and because our community needs this help desperately. And we get great excitement and just realizing oh my god, I can't believe you, you see that I see the utility of us. We can help, you know contribute, but also they can tell that even if we were to help and just do a design process, it wouldn't be enough. It has to have our design process. Like explicitly work out methods of Cobalt with the ship codesign collaboration with these community members. So whether it's understanding sort of how this website works, and the same how the tools are being used, understanding how the new future version of this of this tool and website might be used in the future, determining like, what are they really trying to do, regardless of the tool, but just what are they trying to do in general, that type of CO authorship, I think is about how we're letting our power go, in order to go back to where it should be in the first place. That's a very long answer.

Nai 40:35

Very terrific answer. I love the answer, I think immediately makes my brain wonder if you know, through the process that they go through with you. It's not just about you know, transforming what's going on in communities, but even changing the organizations or institutions that you partner with themselves. And so that's really cool.

George 40:59

That's generous. I mean, I think that's what we hope for, yeah, hope that that can be the thing. One thing that we've actually determining as a team, which seems kind of late for a social impact design studio, frankly, but trying to work out what is our accountability? And who are we what are we tracking? It's been really difficult actually, for us to determine because we do so many different things. We're not a nonprofit. So we don't have like a particular focus already in the way that typical nonprofits have like a single mission or a thesis a theory of change, as it's a little more complicated. So we've had to work out what is the accounting for things that we can actually have impact for, versus things that happen because of our clients who are often nonprofits who have impact goals. So to be able to claim what they do isn't real impact is completely not possible. Yeah. So to work

out whatever we left as a deliverable. In this a language that was new to me is to like, say, outputs, and now merely new inputs for them. And that may be one day leads to impact. So trying to get like really clear demark, like the compartmentalization of what we actually can claim has been hard to do, because I don't know if we had the language or I didn't definitely. But that the language means that we have to take a lot more clarity for what we can account for and therefore be responsible for. And we're still really developing their language as

Justin 42:16

we speak. Have any interesting new metrics popped up out of that discovery process? Or are those still top secret in development?

George 42:24

Early, I would say Chelsea could just still live early. We'll be we'll be watching early for me, I even said, whatever I would say, be premature. I'd be watching eagerly to I'm very interested. But it's definitely something that we were keen, we're keen to do. Because I think it would mean that we actually have a better chance of actually just shifting members. So they change what we do. But knowing what we're doing, why, because we'll be doing it for might lead to something that we can therefore measure, and then find out whether or not our impact is actually is actually happening. So it's, it's all it's all kind of a little recursive, but it's it's tricky to do.

Justin 43:05

No, that's, that's really great. You know, one question I had, that's a little bit a little bit of a different subject is a lot of IPPs work focuses on, you know, rethinking the role of the state, and how to make bureaucracies more dynamic, and creative and these kinds of things. And I'm just curious, you know, you've talked a bit about your engagements with the nonprofit sector, the kind of moral hazards of the private sector are more obvious, but what's been your experience working with government agencies, and what have been the kind of challenges of have, you know, ethics or power or bureaucracy that you've encountered with the state?

George 43:44

Government work has been actually fairly limited, I'd say in representative, a very small portion of the work that we've written that we've done. The contracting process alone is very challenging, it takes forever for us to be able to kind of get a project even started. I mean, things that may not be seen that surprising, it's just incredibly Paik, which compartment which silo is of who's doing what is happening. And knowing it half the time is what we're doing has any impact at all? Because not only do committee members have some hesitancy, we're like, has this going to change anything? So we we have the same doubt too. So it can be really tough. We've been lucky that the people we have worked with have been actually fairly good about admitting where they've been, you know, perhaps gaps in the past around performance or gacha and trust. And I think that a lot of folks that we work with are very cognizant of that and are quite keen to kind of like change things. In those settings though. Politics with a capital P is definitely present. So to be to pretend that it isn't would seem kind of naive. So there's, there's like a, I wouldn't say like a background worry. But it's always in the you know, how, what is it the scientists have figured out there's like background radiation from the original We'll be fine. The background radiation here is the backdrop of politics. How is this contributing to Omair? And and a campaign for re election? Is this on track? Is this going to bring kudos from community members is is going to embarrass them in some way. That's, that's always in the background of the work that we do. And I'm hoping, if only just because we

don't have a lot of we just haven't had that many times at this. I'm hoping that we don't end up in a wrong place where we've ended up working with somebody, because they have a two year contracting process. Working for somebody who is now in hot water for some horrible heinous thing that they've done in their previous career. That would be obviously very difficult for us. But that's kind of the nature of working in politics, and what I can Oh, just work in government that there's a lot of things out of control.

Justin 45:50

Sure, that makes sense. You you actually you might you might not know, but you hit a lot of the points of what we we talked about it in the NPA, about silos, and basically every problem comes back to procurement. Ultimately, like not every but a huge amount of them do.

George 46:08

Yeah. But you know, what I am pleased, though, by is the work that we do with government people, but not necessarily by government clients. So I'm on a current project with Bloomberg Philanthropies where we're working with city officials across a whole range, a whole range of different sizes of cities. And the team I'm working with is in Montgomery, Alabama, and they've been fantastic. So their team, as city officials, has been just a pleasure to work with and coaching them through like a nine month process of becoming more human centered themselves. They're already quite human centered, if you if you really press them on it, but it's the language use and particular terminology plus the repetition of cycles that we do. So they're already doing things intuitively like design. But I think there's some formality that we've brought, which is great. Similarly, when we've done projects around like government finance officials, and we're mainly looking at a new project, which I'm very excited for fingers crossed, that we will run racial equity in government as well, I find that most people who work in government are fantastic. It's the structures that they're working in that over compromising. Exactly. So any one individual person, because I worked in government for all 11 months, almost a year, I left IDEO and so do started working at the Chicago Transit Authority trying to design the bus, which was nuts, by the way, but every person I worked with, they're all working towards a larger goal. So I find that there's not any individuals, it's the structure, and the structure and the context in which they work on incredibly preventative to change. That's the problem. But any individual I've ever seen or met has been remarkable. And they're all working, actually, they work really hard at it, but they often kind of stuck. That's the That's what the challenge has been.

Justin 47:53

Much like what you were talking about with design, I think we often don't even have the right terminology to describe how to change it or what exactly is wrong. So yeah, I mean, that's, that's some of the stuff that we're trying to think you know, really deeply about. But I really appreciate your reflections on that. Make a pretty bold choice. And one that I think is is really courageous and admirable, which is to turn down projects, when you don't feel right about the project. I think that's really hard to do. Even for someone at your level, who is, you know, has a successful studio and these things, but I guess part of my question, we had a great discussion about your lecture as a class, and one of the things that came up was, you know, I guess on your own life, like, if you would have held yourself to that standard, from the time you were, you know, coming up, when you're when you're younger, would you have been able to still break through while maintaining, you know, that kind of ethics. And the other kind of other side of that is, you know, for people who maybe, who maybe don't have, you

know, financial security in their life, or, you know, or whatever it is and need to go sell frozen pizzas for a couple of years, you know, how do you think about these that how do you you grapple with, and what would you recommend for, you know, graduate students and, and people like that.

George 49:25

This is such a difficult thing to talk about. Sure. I grew up with a scarcity mindset. And I still think I have that deep in my core, maybe because I grew up as an immigrant in England and I, you know, move 20 years ago, so I felt like an immigrant again in the United States. And I didn't know I would even argue that I don't think I could afford to have ethics is really how we're able to phrase it, right, because to have them would bring up incredibly difficult conversations and questions for myself that I wasn't comfortable having. But that was the primary sort of like baseline I'd say that the confidence I speak about it now this boldness you describe was not originally something I would have ever thought to have. But it's similar to how I said I talked about having had power and a B lens to the target. Wow, I can't, I can't unsee it. Now this is changing everything. My co founder brought to me this idea of just like abundance mindset, or just the idea that we don't have to say everything. We don't have to say yes to everything, right. We can actually say no to some things, if not a lot of things. And we're going like, you could do that. I didn't know you could do that. That's a thing we can do. And she goes, yes, it Who will we just say no, I just feel like flummoxed us. I don't understand. And I think she just had a confidence. I said, Well, yeah, because what who else is going to sue us? We'll say it. Okay, hold on, let me just get this straight. We are going to say no, even though we have no reputation, and we complete nobody. Because yes, I said, it just completely threw me off. What I found is, as someone who has a scarcity mindset that I can now do a pretty good impression of someone that has an abundance mindset. I can like go through the motions of having someone who's like, oh, yeah, we got this, this is gonna be fine. And I'm freaking out inside. But I noticed that if I speak from that perspective, I see things differently. I act differently in those calls, because I'm not desperate. And I'm speaking like someone who is again, do you know how we talked about if someone else was in the room, who often isn't on this course, their mindset might also be similarly different? Or like, how's this really going to affect things? So if I can operate from a place where I'm not needing the work, my questions tend to be different. So that switch from being scarce to being abundant, ends up actually demonstrably showing up with questions, I think of being of a high caliber, because the questions are funnily different, because I'm not worried about how I gain. I'm worried about the project's inherent value, like should it exist? Right. And that way, I found again, very counterintuitive, Lee, I still do actually has stayed in business, I think, because of who we've turned out. Not that anyone's tracking, okay. I mean, I'm tracking but nobody else is tracking, but not because anybody else is saying they turned it down. So therefore, we have to say yesterday, nobody knows any of that stuff. But it's actually how we repeatedly have done this turned out, I think you'll have a track of about 50 emails now. 50 breakup emails over the last 10 years. And in doing so, I show up differently right out of practice. But also similarly, because our studio almost literally isn't wasting its time on on nonsense. Yeah, our capacity isn't worn down for when the right one shows up. So it's been less about an explicit business development strategy. It's more like an energy conservation strategy. Who will we reserving time for that needs this help? Who are we limiting distraction from who doesn't really need this help? I'm trying to like trying to dial down the noise on this nonsense. Turn up the volume on the stuff we really need. So that's about priorities. Right. But if the priority is we just need to get paid. All this is out of whack. Yeah.

Justin 53:26

Yeah. There's an element of fake it till you make it in there.

George 53:30

Yeah, it was, but I think actually is proving itself to be its own strategy. Yeah, actually has turned out to be its own working mechanic and is now realizing, Oh, I think a lot of people probably don't even know this. And that they could probably if they look back on the last year of projects, they did how much time they spent on nonsense. Yeah. If they had that time back, would they have meant that they have moved what they enrich them? Or could they just save that energy and do it on something else altogether? That autonomy, okay, which is essentially what you get as an outcome is one of the most valuable things we get as a studio, we have autonomy of what we pick, which is actually a choice we have every time we interact with the new client. But I think a lot of designers and frankly, the head of design teams, who does business development, are already in the mindset of being scarce. And that will take whatever and they even justify saying, Oh, we have to take whatever because of all the people that they're trying to feed. But I think what actually is comes through is that they don't want the discomfort of having to explain why they said no to something. They would rather get into the seamless cycle of saying yes to all this bullshit clients and defend it, that that choice because of their way of, you know, 100 people's mouths to feed. When actually I feel like I'm here, trying to protect our team from nonsense. That I think is a good use of my time, because I want my team to be dedicated to things that are really important. Not just whoever walks in the door so that that feels like it's a different role. Because I saw when I was working in places where I was the designer and someone else was doing that representation, I felt like I was getting pimped out. That is that is a very unhealthy place to be. So you might ask, what are the priorities were clearly different in those cases?

Nai 55:23

Seems like this. abundance mindset also has an ability to diminish some of the power asymmetry. They are talking about,

George 55:33

which you absolutely nailed. That's exactly right. You actually disrupt a cemetery.

Justin 55:39

I love that is such a such a thoughtful and an unexpected answer. I guess. I had never thought of it that way.

Nai 55:47

George, I'm waiting for the book. I need.

George 55:50

I need you to help me. I need you to help write it. That's what I do. I'm at the time. I have to go. I have to go to another meeting. Yes. That went by in a flash. Can we do another one? This was really fun.

Justin 56:02

Oh, that would be great. Love it. No, literally.

George 56:06

Okay, yeah. The questions were great. So if we can do another one, this was really fun.

Nai 56:10

Okay, yeah, we'll do it again. But thank you so much. It was so great to learn from you.

George 56:14

You're very welcome. Thank you for the very kind for the invitation and appreciate it you guys would think so deeply about the questions put together so we sent my best to the to the to the class to the team. Yeah. To grow and and everyone over there. I enjoyed this conversation very much. So. Thank you so much. Do run up okay. Okay. Have a great day.

Justin 56:34

Bye.