

Hi, I'm Mauro Porcini, PepsiCo's chief design officer.

Join me for our new series where we dive into the minds of the greatest innovators of our time.

With the goal of finding what drives them in their professional journey and in their personal life, trying to uncover the universal truths that unite anyone attempting to have a meaningful impact in the world.

This is In Your Shoes.

Designers actually can change the world for the better by making the complicated simple and finding the beauty in truth.

I am quoting the guest of today

is a partner in the New York office of Pentagram, the world's largest independent design firm and founder of Design Observer and a teacher at Yale School of Art and Yale School of Management.

His clients have included the New York Times, Sax Fifth Avenue, the Robin Hood Foundation, MIT, [MIALab?], MasterCard, Princeton University, the New York Jets, and many others.

As a volunteer to Hillary Clinton's communication team, he designed the H logo that was ubiquitous throughout the 2016 presidential campaign.

He was elected to the Alliance Graphique Internationale in 1989, to the Art Director's Club, Hall of Fame in 2003, and was awarded the profession's highest honor, the AIGA medal in 2006.

He was a winner in the design mind category, 2008 Cooper Hewitt National Design Awards as well.

His work is featured in the most prestigious design museums of the world.

His books include Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design, Now You See It, and then How to Use Graphic Design to Sell Things, to Explain Things, Make Things Look Better, Make People Laugh, Make People Cry, and (Every Once in a While) Change the World.

Michael Bierut, Welcome to In Your Shoes.

Mauro Porcini, I'm very happy to be here.

We were joking about the pronunciation of your name.

Mauro Porcini. Yeah.

Yeah, you pronounce mine very, very well.

I hope I did a good job with your last name.

Yeah. Thank you.

So, you were born in Cleveland, Ohio.

Yeah.

And today you live in New York, and you're one of the most renowned designers in the planet.

How did you arrive to where you are today from Cleveland, Ohio?

Can you tell us a little bit of your story?

I grew up in suburban Cleveland, born in the late 50s, grew up in the 60s.

It was a very typical American suburban experience,

and to that regard in those days, it really was a very undersigned one.
It was not a particularly cultural environment.
I didn't know anyone who did anything like art or design.
I had no idea that those things were professions or options that adults could do.
Although, I knew that there were things like artists and stuff,
and I,
at an early age started getting enthusiastic about drawing and making things,
like a lot of people who ultimately become designers,
including you, I know
and many of our listeners perhaps,
and my parents, who were fantastic, encouraged me.
They would take me downtown to the Cleveland Museum of Art,
which is an amazing museum.
It is to this day with incredible paintings in it,
and I got very enthusiastic about kind of the idea of art
as a possible future,
but also sort of I found myself drawn not just to the paintings in the museum,
but even more to the covers of records, vinyl records
or book covers or posters at the movie theater,
which I could tell were also kind of art,
but they weren't art that was being done by artists and painters on easels,
but somehow it was being done in some other way.
And I didn't know anyone who did anything like that, and even pre-Internet,
I'm not even sure how I could have figured out
what that actually was and what it was called.
Luckily in my high school library, there was a book called
"Your Future in Graphic Design/Art",
a little book that was part of a series that had a bunch of other books
about your future in gardening and your future in auto repair
and your future in different professions,
and one of them was commercial art basically,
and then I saw, oh, this has a name,
and this is what it is, and I decided right then and there that's what I wanted to do,
and I've never been the kind of person who really wanted to be an artist
and wanted to just go off and be creative on my own.
I'm not good at being creative on my own.
What I really like is having someone call me up and say,
in those days it would be, hey, you can draw.
Can you do a poster for the play we're putting on in school?
Hey, Mike you're a good artist.
Could you come up with a way of writing the name of the band on the drum,
and I love that, partly because it was like being in the play
without having to memorize lines.
It was like being in the band without having to know how to play an instrument, right?
And so, it was like participating in this larger world,
and I just found that really, really, really exciting and bringing a talent

that I have that complimented the talents and passions of other people, and so, I ended up studying graphic design at the University of Cincinnati, which is at the other end of the state from Cleveland, and then in those days, in the 70s, if you wanted to really work professionally, it was very hard to do if you were outside any of the big, urban areas, and I had gone on a class to trip to New York in high school, fell in love with it, just thought it was incredibly exciting, and this was in the late 70s when it was actually incredibly exciting, incredibly dirty, incredibly noisy, incredibly dangerous, incredibly crime-ridden, but it was really, really exciting too, particularly to a kid from nowhere like me. And I, through a series of coincidences and just lucky breaks, I ended up starting at one of the great design studios of its time, working with one of the great masters of the 20th century, an Italian, like you, Massimo Vignelli, and that was my first job, right out of school that I started at a week after I graduated, and I ended up staying there for 10 years, and so, Massimo Vignelli in many ways was my first mentor and my introduction to the larger world of design. I couldn't have had a better introduction. I was actually going to ask you about Massimo. What was it to work with somebody like him? He is very known all around the world for his work and his art. Yeah. Again, just as I learned that design has multiple facets to it, that learning continued working with Massimo and with his wife Lella Vignelli. Certainly, there was kind of mastering craft, and he was a very demanding and precise and rigorous craftsman in terms of typography, in terms of scale. People who know his work will associate him with modernism, and modernists have one incredible virtue, which is that because it's based on a reductivist sort of ideology, what's there has to be perfect. There's nowhere to hide, and so, if you're getting trained as I was in that aesthetic, every detail has to be right, and I think as a starting point, it isn't necessarily the end point, although it is for many people, I think the starting point is an incredible foundation for thinking about what design can be. At the same time, both of the Vignellis, they both died, unfortunately in the last few years. But they were very much alive when I worked there for those 10 years and in many ways at the peak of their power, and they were extraordinarily cosmopolitan, traveled all the time. Both began their careers trained as architects in Italy,

emigrated in the early 60s to the United States.
they didn't just know about design.
They knew about food, wine, music, architecture, and so, just like anything else,
the education I received, because I was a sponge,
and because I was so eager to kind of absorb it, wasn't just about typography.
It just wasn't about the craft of design, but it was also about the larger culture.
So, in many ways it was, that enthusiasm that I sensed back as a kid in high school,
where knowing how to draw can get you hanging around with the drama club
or the football players or the band just because
you had a talent that could compliment the talents that they had,
they threw that door so wide open where it was working
with the best architects, restauranteurs,
product designers, marketers at a really high level.
And when I began, I was kept way in the background,
the last seat at the back of the studio
in my crumby sneakers and torn jeans and long hair,
and eventually as I sort of started getting a little bit more refined and presentable,
I started going to client meetings and sort of seeing
that larger world for myself, which was just tremendously exciting.
And then in 1990, you moved to Pentagram.

How did it happen?

So, when I started working for the Vignellis,
I was smart enough to understand that they were very powerful personalities,
and I wasn't there as a disciple who wanted to kind of learn the faith
and then propagate it letter for letter and word for word.
I wanted to learn what I could from that experience
and move on and have other experiences.
Instead, I just found it so interesting,
and they just were such great bosses and mentors
that I ended up staying there for a lot longer than a few months or a few years.
I stayed there all the way to 1990, as you said, and in so doing,
by the time I was at the end of my tenure there,
I was basically in charge of all the graphic design operations.
I had a team of graphic designers reporting to me,
and then I would in turn kind of report up to Massimo and Lella,
and so I was managing a pretty large team.
I was working fairly independently on all my projects, but the premise was,
and I had no illusions about this, people who came there wanted Vignelli design,
and I got to that position because I could reliably
deliver a Vignelli design, Vignelli-style design.
That was the name on the door.
That was the product that was being sold.
I think I did it in my own way sometimes
with my own sort of particular point of view woven into it.
But basically, I never sort of resented the fact.
that was sort of the terms of my employment.

I always thought as long as you're working for someone else, you're first responsibility is to sublimate your own ambitions in the service of the boss's vision in a way, and so that can only go on for so long unless you're born to be a protégé, and some people are and they can make a life's work out of just being a second to a very talented designer.

I sort of always wanted to do something more.

However, I had grown to love the idea of working in a larger studio.

I like having people around me.

The appeal of going to a little room and sitting by myself

and hanging my own name on the door

and waiting for people to find me,

it just seemed kind of lonely,

and if nothing else worked, you could do that, I suppose.

But I just sort of liked the sense of community that the Vignellis provided,

and if I would have been asked what would my dream situation be,

it would be to sort of have independence

within a larger community somehow.

Seems impossible, right?

Have autonomy and be able to do whatever I wanted

but still have people around me, and interestingly enough,

there is a model in the design world for that, which is Pentagram's model.

When Pentagram started in the early 70s,

the model was it was going to be a collective with no boss,

with no hierarchy made out of partners,

each one of whom could choose their own team,

work for whatever clients they want at whatever terms they were able to agree to,

do their own work without having to get it approved by anyone else,

and sort of operate almost independently

but get the benefit of a collective portfolio,

of a collective management system,

and, I think more importantly,

the mutual support of friends and colleagues who were right there,

not as competitors but as collaborators and potential collaborators, right?

So, the five guys that started it in 72 eventually had taken it to New York City

where I met Colin Forbes, who was one of the original founding partners,

and his partners in New York, Woody Pirtle and Peter Harrison,

I knew them through AIGA and a couple other professional organizations.

And then towards the end of the 90s, we started talking about

what might be the next step that I could undertake,

and the idea of me joining Pentagram as a partner came up,

and I realized that that was actually the best of both worlds.

I could come in there and sort of set up

my own independent operation as a partner of Pentagram,

get the benefit of their business acumen and, more importantly,

the benefit of the inspirational companionship that

the partners provide, and that has really worked out for me. Within a month or two I'll be there for 30 years, from 1990 to 2020, which is a really long run in the same job, and of course what's made it possible is that when I joined, I was the newest partner. I was the youngest partner, and year after year after year, some of the older partners have retired, newer partners have joined, and so it's constantly been evolving as a partnership and been a really interesting place to work as a result. Fantastic.

Sorry,

You have so many achievements in these 30 years in so many different ways. You have been quoted saying very early on in your career I think but not just then,

that essentially you think that many people don't even read the printed material of brands and companies, and so your mission became the one of making the work more engaging, more pleasant and so can you tell us more about this philosophy. Essentially you want to democratize graphic design and design in general.

Yeah. Yeah. I'm so glad you asked about that Mauro, and I know that that's something that you're quite interested in as well.

I think that if you spend time working in large organizations, if you spend time working in a corporation, I find one of the biggest traps is that the people working in any organization forget what it's like to work anywhere else.

They forget what it's like not to care what their organization is doing. They sort of, because everyone around them is dedicated to the same purpose, and if it's a good job, everyone is kind of sincerely enthusiastic and even passionate about that purpose,

and if you spend all your time in conference rooms just coming up with plans to kind of sell whatever product you're selling, you sort of forget that the outside world is not waking up every morning, saying a prayer that someone will be selling them the thing you're selling or someone will be coming into their lives with the message that you're trying to communicate, right?

And I think that corporations and designers tend to invent private languages that normal people don't understand. They end up getting obsessed with their own goals and forget that their users or their customers or their audiences or however you want to define the people that are out there that you're trying to communicate with, that they don't care about that private language, and that you're really asking them for a real favor of attention and interest, and you have to earn that, and you can't just simply do it because you force your way into it.

You have to really come up with ways to remember what it's like not to care that much about whatever it is you're selling and put yourself in the shoes of the person on the outside. And I think partly I've been lucky in a couple regards. I actually sometimes think coming from my late mother, I would often think what would my mom think of this? 'cause my mom was not a designer at all. I think she lived her whole life not fully understanding what it was I did exactly, knew that I was good at drawing, but somehow, I wasn't drawing with a pencil or paint brush. I have the same problem. And yet people seem to think I was doing something important, but what was that thing. And I think there's two ways you can go. You can sort of think, my poor mom, God bless her, I love her, but she's dumb and uneducated, and I'm the smart one. Or you can think, God bless mom. She's normal, and I've gone through a series of experiences which have made me, among other things, kind of very not normal in terms of my interest and my sensitivity to certain issues. And I remind myself of that all the time that it's not a matter of educating the client or educating the audience. I think that we all have responsibility to do the best work we can and to raise the overall level of design and advertising and the quality of the environments we pass through and the quality of the messages that intrude on people's daily lives, but I don't think it's a matter of blaming people if they are too dumb to understand how talented we are. I think it's a matter of understanding, how do we do things that legitimately connect with people on their own level, and my mom was like that. I married my high school sweetheart, and she is not a designer. She's a psychotherapist, which is more useful than be married to a designer. I'd recommend it really highly actually, but my three kids are very different. They're all adults now, and they have very different careers. One is a video editor. One is a lawyer, and one is a research biologist specializing in wildlife conservation, and they're all like very good, funny critics of my work. I can show them something, and none of them like will say, wow, that I always wanted to do that when I grow up dad. Like, they'll say that reminds me of this, or you did that already, or I don't get it, or I can't read that.

like and my wife is just as harsh, right?

And I think about ways to kind of situate yourself in the real world and not isolating yourself in a world that's about design for designers about marketing for marketers about the private language that we've invented so that we can do our work efficiently and well. but remembering that work to be effective really has to live in the real world.

And that's when it's most exciting, when it lives in the real world if you ask me.

I mean I'm never more excited than when I am out and about in New York say, and I sort of see something I worked on, on an ad in the subway or on a shopping bag that someone's carrying on the street.

I agree so much.

Yeah.

With you, one of the things I like the most to work for big corporations like Pepsico is actually access to people and see your work impacting in a way or the other the life of people.

Building on what you just shared with us, in the past few years, many brands in many different corporations, in Pepsico we've been doing this a lot, have been investing in this idea of purpose, trying to understand what is the purpose of the brand, of your company, and recently, between the COVID crisis and then the civil unrest and the Black Lives Matter situation here in the United States, this idea of brands having a point of view and a purpose is becoming more and more relevant than ever.

What is the role of design in all of this?

Can design help brands in defining their purpose and then communicating that purpose?

I mean from my point of view, definitely the latter.

I think that I mean sometimes people mistake the work that designers do on brands with the meanings of the brands themselves.

I'm trying to think of how put this clearly.

I think that organizations, human beings have a kind of integrity.

Organizations are made up of human beings, and when they're all working together in a concerted, purposeful way, they're able to communicate that sense of their own values and their sense of mission that often, if done in a good organization, will both be relevant to whatever it is they're doing as a business, but also transcend the specifics of that business goal so that it actually is acknowledging the role that their activities are playing in the larger world in a cultural way, in a political way, and in every possible way.

'Cause none of us stop being citizens.

None of us stop being human beings just
when we're showing up on Monday morning at work
or when we're working on a particular project to serve a particular end.
You still have a responsibility as a ethical human being
and as a citizen with everyone's mutual success in mind
to kind of do the right thing, right?
So, I think designers need to think that way.
I don't think that an organization, a company,
can go to a consulting firm or hire a designer
and say, look, we've got this problem.
We have no sense of purpose.
Could you kind of design one for us and we'll put it on like a costume in a way.
That just isn't how it works, right?
And I think again, like so many other things,
it's easy for organizations to feel like,
being purpose driven is a thing you have to be in 2020,
and caring about social justice
and the environment is something you have to do in 2020.
So, let's add those boxes to check on our to do list, right?
And I think again audiences, regular people,
are very good, intuitive critics of the authenticity of those kinds of gestures.
I think people can tell pretty quickly
whether or not you've got a legitimate claim
on those sort of ideas and whether or not you're reaching
or just kind of hopping along a bandwagon.
So, that said, when an organization does have a real sense of purpose
that's being driven from the top,
that is aligned with the business success of the enterprise but
also is contributing to the larger world
in every way possible and certainly in many ways,
as designers, that ends up being part of the brief and ends up maybe being
the most important part of the brief that you're working with, right?
I think designers end up in organizations
or consulting with organizations automatically being connectors.
We join things up because we're able
to work across a number of different disciplines.
We're able to work-connect up things that are in different silos, right?
So, I think a CFO, someone doing accounting for an organization
has the same nature of responsibility to that organization's purpose, right?
But designers a lot of times, because we have to work with marketing,
with manufacturing, with finance, with distribution,
with sales, with fulfillment, like decisions
that we participate in will have an effect on the environment.
decisions we make about who to work with or who's communicating the message
has repercussions in terms of our credibility to speak about social justice.
I think that again,

I don't think we kind of superimpose values onto an organization that either has no values or has opposite values, but I think when, if you're lucky enough to work somewhere where you're confident that that organization's values correspond with your own or you're hired by an organization where you sort of sense that sort of compatibility, then it's your absolute responsibility to push it as hard and as far as you can and to be the first person to kind of like question when that organization is stepping off the path and to identify opportunities to reinforce the best of what they're doing. I'm totally with you.

Through your work, you'll be reaching so many people, right? And one of the projects that probably reached the most people ever is the design of the logo of the campaign of one of the candidates to become president, Hillary Clinton in 2016, the H of Hillary Clinton in 2016 that we all saw during their campaign. That logo was received with mixed feelings, and then people started to appreciate it more and more and more. So, how did you leave that entire experience, from designing the logo of a presidential candidate all the way to the reaction of the public and then how things change over time in the positive.

What was your experience?

Well, the work that we did, and it was just me, one designer who worked with me at Pentagram called named Jesse Reed and then a project manager named Julia Lemle. We formed this little three-person team, and we did this all as volunteers. It wasn't as part of Pentagram.

We did it after hours, before hours, on weekends, everything else, just volunteering for the campaign.

I got approached by Wendy Clark, who I bet, who was consulting with the campaign and kind of helping to put together a group of creative collaborators for them.

And they identified me as someone.

basically I had a very simple brief which was to do kind of the icon that would be the centerpiece of the communications, and it was interesting because on one hand, I was passionately enthusiastic about Secretary Clinton's prospects as a candidate and her qualifications to be president, which I still to this day think are unmatched by anyone who's ever run in the history of that office.

And so I was a true believer even before I got that call, and so I brought that passion and that sense of conviction, that this was something I really wanted to work on and contribute to,

and like I said had to have that conviction,
because it wasn't a paid position.
We were doing it as volunteers to the campaign.
Then I think I got very interested in just again
sort of that mechanical craft side of the problem,
which you put aside your enthusiasm for a moment.
Then you think, okay, what's the real challenge here?
And one of the challenges is that, unlike Barack Obama,
eight years previously,
Barack Obama, that was sort of like a start up launch in a way,
a name no one had ever heard, a guy no one really knew.
how do we introduce the public and
how do we make the public think that this is a real thing?
And I think they did a brilliant job with that.
If you want product differentiation,
it helped that from the get-go he obviously had
as the first Black presidential candidate from a major party,
he was different immediately,
and I think a lot of what had to do with the graphics for him,
in a way, oddly had to do with making something
very unfamiliar seem more familiar in a way, right?
And I think with Secretary Clinton, it was the opposite problem.
She had 100 percent name recognition,
moreover almost everyone sort of had some opinion about her or another
that was formed either thoughtfully or without much thought, but people sort of
thought they knew what they thought about her already.
And, so part of what we did was we tried not to make a logo
that felt too finished in a way, and I remember saying,
I want to do something that's like a smiley face or a peace sign.
I don't want it to look like designers did it.
I didn't want it to look like you needed to know software programs to draw it.
say what you will about it, I really admire the Obama O with the lines
and everything else, but that's a fairly complicated logo to draw.
You sort of need to be able to manipulate those curves
and have them do just the right thing,
and I said I wanted this thing to be something
a four-year-old could do with crayons
and kindergarten scissors and some colored paper, basically.
And my idea for it, and I think the idea that we proposed
and we sort of demonstrated in those early days of 2015
was if you had a really simple geometric foundation,
people could then do progressively more complicated things on top of it, right?
You could customize it in all these different ways
and all those different sort of customizations
would serve the purpose of keeping it
more surprising, keeping it less familiar,

less kind of bang, bang, bang, rubber stamp imposed the same way all the time,
but just kind of let it come at you in a lot of different directions, right?
And let people do it themselves.
let her supporters kind of customize it their own way.
So, I think when it first launched it just looked kind of like,
people would say, that thing is stupid.
My three-year-old could do that,
and I actually weirdly had kind of made that the brief for myself.
I wanted something that a three-year-old could do.
So, I was like, yes, exactly, and I guess I think that's a good thing.
You think it's a bad thing.
But I think what happened ultimately,
and this always happens with abstract logos,
as you know Mauro, is that they end up being vessels
that are filled with the meaning that
reality pours into it, right, with actual experience pour into it.
and as that campaign progressed, it certainly was fascinating at the outset.
I developed a very thick skin right away.
I remember kind of like sighing to my lovely wife, Dorothy, and saying
people are just always complaining about my logo,
and like it's just some simple shapes.
I don't get why it makes people so mad, and Dorothy said,
well maybe it's not all about your logo, Michael?
Maybe it's actually people are kind of
superimposing political opinions on top of it,
and in a way, that's exactly how symbols are supposed to work.
They end up being placeholders for larger ideas,
and to the degree that in the end,
that ended up being a choice between two figures who,
for one reason or another, were hugely polarizing.
I think symbols ended up playing a large role
in the way the campaign played out,
and I mean as you were saying before, you work for something like Pepsico,
and if you go outside or if you even open your refrigerator
or your pantry or if I do,
you'll see work that you had a hand in doing,
and there's something just exciting about that,
and I remember watching the Democratic national convention
and seeing an arena full of people all holding up signs.
I'm thinking that thing was a drawing in my notebook 14 months ago.
I can't believe it.
and like now everyone is acting like it means something.
And indeed, it does, 'cause that's how symbols work,
and in a way, it was never my symbol.
It was always designed to be Hillary Clinton
and the Clinton campaign's symbol,

and that's how it was taken on ultimately, and in the final days, one of the most fun parts of it was sort of being the recipient of people just sending me images they had found of people baking it into cakes or painting it on the side of barns or arranging flowerbeds to kind of play it out.

It was doing exactly what we thought it would do, because it just had that very simple game plan underneath it all. Crowd designing essentially.

Yeah. Yeah. In a way, yeah.

Put it in the universe and then it grows in the universe.

Exactly, and if regular math, she got more votes than the opposition, so only in America can you win more votes but still not win, and like again, it goes to that question you asked earlier of the role of design in communicating purpose.

I think it can do that, but at the end of the day, and I said this the very first time

I met the candidate, Secretary Clinton,

I said, I'm happy to be here, but I don't have any illusions about this.

People don't vote for logos.

They vote for candidates who they think embody

what their own hopes and dreams and fears

and ambitions for their lives and their families and their country are,

and logos only come to become associated with those ideas,

but they aren't those ideas.

they become symbols of those ideas, and ideally, we would come up with something that could function that way for you as has been done in the past.

And I think we accomplished that goal,

but that's only one goal among many

in terms of winning an election in this crazy country. So.

What's the project you are the most proud of and the one

that you enjoyed the most doing, and are they the same?

This question came naturally no,

looking at the passion you have already for this project you shared right now.

Yeah. Yeah.

I have to admit that was like a thrilling project,

and because the stakes were so high

and partly because the ending was so bittersweet.

I came to know a lot of people working on the campaign,

and particularly a lot of talented designers who had gotten involved with it,

and everyone was just so crestfallen after election day,

but I don't think that took away from the passion

that people brought to it overall,

and particularly I think that that election actually set the stage

to activate a younger generation in the importance of engagement around the subjects of social change.

You really realize that these things matter and they're important.

And so, I remain really, really proud of that work.
I have to admit the things that give me real satisfaction to this day are,
if you're just working on one little project,
and you realize hey, wait a second, if I kind of turn this sideways
and look at it this way, you know it all kind of comes together like that.
I mean and those are like tiny little things
that don't really affect the world all that much.
I mean keeping on the political theme,
The New Yorker magazine back when
the Mueller report was as of yet unpublished,
The New Yorker asked a bunch of designers to design a cover
for the Mueller report that had been commissioned about Russian interference
in the 2016 presidential campaign,
and I sort of thought there was just so many conspiracy theories,
and the whole thing was so convoluted and complicated.
I ended up taking the word "The Mueller Report"
and it happens to have exactly I think 16 or 25 letters or something.
So, you're able to arrange them in a big grid, and you can't really read it.
So, it seems very abstract,
and then I started drawing lines between all the letters,
like implying that there's this complicated,
crazy conspiracy connecting everything up,
and then I realized it was boring if all the letters were connected up.
So, I thought, let's leave some letters that aren't connected,
and then I realized that were five letters that you could leave unconnected
and that was T-R-U-M-P that are all in the Mueller report,
and so I ended up just sort of making this grid that you sort of couldn't read,
connecting all these letters in this way didn't make any sense,
leaving five letters out of it for some reason,
and then just putting that on the cover and having people figure it out.
And the idea that those five letters happened to be in those three words
and you could make this pattern and the pattern actually looked nice
and still actually had this second meaning,
I remember when I did that, I drew that in a notebook like this,
and I just thought, oh, it works. It works.
I was so excited about it.
It was as if I had solved a giant mystery myself
on the level of the kinds of investigation
that the report itself was doing,
and instead it was just this like tiny little thing
that would have given me pleasure when I was you know 17 years old,
exactly the same sensation of kind of resolving
something from a graphic point of view.
So, I still take pleasure in those really small moments.
One of the older founders of Pentagram, John McConnell use to say,
it was just like the sense of the perfect dovetail in wood working

where the thing just fits perfectly into the other thing,
and every once in a while you do that as a designer,
and you just get this sense of satisfaction.
Oh, that's so nice the way that clicks into place,
and it can be a very small thing that most of the world won't notice,
but it's the kind of thing that if you can have that happen
once every few weeks if you're really lucky
and twice a year if you're just getting by,
you can have a pretty nice life as a designer.
Beautiful.

In your life, you've been working with so many big brands and corporations.
What advice would you give to any designer
that works with these big companies on how to interact with them,
but then also to anybody that is in these big companies.
It could be designers like us, but it could be also the business people
on how they should interact with the design community.
There's a lot of things that I've always heard that are easy
to sort of like take as guidelines and actually hard to do in real life.
For instance, one of them, and I suspect you do this all the time,
is to really question the brief when you get it.
and I think we interpret that as meaning, oh, you're going to be asked
to do something, and it's just too cookie cutter,
and it's going to stop you from being creative,
and so you have to kind of push back at the brief so you have more space
to operate and do really cool, amazing, creative things.
To me, I think that that may very well be true,
but I actually think when I'm working with large corporations,
what you want to do is you get an assignment
and it's your responsibility to figure out how it fits into the bigger picture.
And a lot of times, depending on
who's giving the assignment within an organization,
their remit is actually quite narrow.
so, their boss has told them, go out and get this thing figured out,
and they're coming to you to help them figure it out,
and it's inconvenient if you start asking,
well, wait a second, isn't this like this other thing
that someone else did last year in your organization,
and what's the relationship of that?
And they're like I don't care about that.
I'm just supposed to get this thing done,
and I need to have something ready on Friday, right?
And so, I think you have to both be very sympathetic to those people
and understand what their role is in the organization,
but sort of look for opportunities to make them successful
by kind of giving them something,
coming back with a response that's acknowledging the larger context,

and that context can be as large as the entire world sometimes.
And sometimes it's just as large as the person three offices down,
but I think one way or another,
just kind of taking a broader view of the assignments you get,
looking as I think you've said many times,
for conspirators in a way, co-conspirators who share your interests
in pushing things, and those people are just invaluable.
If you find someone who,
sometimes they're just ambitious and they want to get ahead,
sometimes they love design, sometimes they just have an open mind,
but if you get the right person, you can actually go to them and say,
here's the thing that I think everyone expects,
but what if we did something extra, and that could be like this.
And to me, those incremental moves are how you actually one,
establish credibility as someone who is going
to bring value to the process and two,
kind of expand the minds and sort of the muscles of the people
you're working with as collaborators in an organization, right?
And so, I think it's always about people.
It's the one thing that I learned very early on to my surprise is that
I somehow came out of school thinking that
I would simply show people things I had designed,
and they would just be so overwhelmed by my brilliance
that they just would say, how can I thank you?
Am I limited in how much I pay you,
'cause I'd like to double the fee we agreed,
because this is just so fantastic, and instead, the opposite happens.
You show them something, and most of the time
they have no idea why it's the right solution.
They have no idea how they're meant to describe it to other people
who might have to approve it or what its potential value is,
and your ability to kind of not just communicate that,
because I don't think it's a matter again of sort of saying,
listen, stupid, I'll explain to you why I'm brilliant.
That's not it at all.
What it is is how do you actually kind of like take the work that you're doing
and figure out how to put it in terms that are relevant
for what they're trying to achieve
and language that then they can use
as they're kind of talking about it themselves.
So, they can kind of take possession of it
as something that they helped co-create with you.
And I think that that took a long time for me to figure out.
when I realized that design does speak for itself, but when it's first being
introduced to a world that's never seen it before,
a lot of times you need to kind of chaperone it very carefully

and introduce it to some friends who will kind of stand side-by-side with it and protect it as it goes out into the world until it matures and turns into something that can stand on its own. And that really means you need people all the time.

So, being able to understand people, being able to read people, being able to listen to people, all of those things are really, really important.

What advice would you give instead to the people on the other side of the fence, especially to the business leaders that eventually work with agencies.

I'll give you an example.

Sometimes I saw situations where they don't really empower the agency.

They don't really give enough creative freedom, but what would you tell them?

I mean really what we're talking about at the end of the day is trust.

I'd like to come up with a more complicated mutli-syllabic word for it,

but I think it really is a pretty simple word with just trust,

and I think the best business people find people

who they can trust and trust not just to take orders and execute them accurately,

not just be loyal and faithful, but who they can trust to challenge them,

trust to push them, trust to contradict them,

trust to come back with something that is unexpected, challenging, even risky.

But that trust has to do with our ability as designers to project the sense

that what we care about is everyone's mutual success.

I obviously want to do work that I'm proud of, but at the same time

I want to do work that my clients are enthusiastic about

and that at the end of the day serves their purposes,

whether it's getting a candidate elected or selling a product

or communicating a message, right?

Simply, I'm a brilliant designer.

Trust me, which is sort of the model that I started

with ends up being the most difficult one to achieve.

I do think some designers can get away with it by the way,

but they have to be a lot more charismatic than me.

It helps if they're Italian.

It helps if they're amazing dressers, and I'm like not either of those things.

You are totally that, come on.

But I do think kind of how you can build a sense of mutual trust.

I also want to be able to trust the people that I'm working with,

that I can trust them to sort of interpret their own goals accurately for me

in a way that I can then react to and come back with something.

And one of the most challenging things that I have a lot of times

working with large organizations is getting permission.

I don't know how to put this.

This sounds sort of shocking, but getting permission to show bad work to people,

like sometimes we will have done an exploration

to a challenge that'll have three, four, five different solutions,

some of which I don't think are right,

but I think are provocative in an interesting way,
and then a lot of times people in organizations, what they want to do,
they think their responsibility to the process is to sideline
all but the things that are absolutely guaranteed to work,
which a lot of times gets you something
that's fairly lukewarm in the middle and edits out the provocation,
and I'm always saying I learn a lot from having my work rejected.
I learn a lot by someone saying I hate that one.
I mean the last thing I want to hear, and I'm sure you've heard this, is hm,
you've given us a lot to think about.
if someone says I just hate that one.
I'm like, tell me more.
Talk to me for 15 minutes about what you don't like about it, 'cause I learn
so much about not just about the taste level of the person I'm working with,
but to the degree that they understand their audience
and the aims that they're trying to achieve.
They're kind of like comparing this vision
that they don't have formulated in their mind with the thing I'm showing them,
and the disconnect between those things is really, really, really interesting to me,
sometimes more interesting than kind of a direct connection sometimes.
So, and that requires trust.
Someone has to trust me that I can kind of like
I'm going to do some experimental work.
I might show you things that seem to risky.
I might show you things you don't like.
I might show you things that seem absolutely perfect,
but I think are too safe, and you have to trust that process and
I mean my favorite clients are ones where I can tell that
the meeting I'm having with them is, when they see it on their calendar,
they think, oh, this is going to be fun. I love doing this,
and there are some people who you can tell they think it's scary
because you can't go into it with a calculator
and then punch in numbers and have the answer come up.
You have to look at things, make judgements about them
and know at the end of the day,
you're never sure whether you're going to be right or wrong,
but you have to trust people.
Look, you say something so powerful and so important.
If you think about the definition of design thinking,
you may like this word or completely hate it.
we could call it even in some other ways, but at the end of the day,
it's the way we work, and this mix of empathy,
understanding people, the people we design for, strategies,
understanding the company, the business, and then finally prototyping.
You just described this idea of prototyping.
Essentially an agency, a designer arrive to a client with ideas.

These ideas, sometimes yes, it's the final solution to a need or to something you need to create, but most of the time in the process, they are catalysts of conversation. They're activators of dialogue.

They are a way to get those answers, those data from the client, also from the consumers eventually that you need to then create the final, right solution to take to market.

So, it's so true, so powerful, but many times people don't understand the value of design concepts as prototypes to activate conversations.

Yeah. Yeah. And I think designers have this amazing ability to bring the future to life for people, and that's really what design does.

I heard a lecture at this point years ago.

It was almost like 30 years ago at this point by this Canadian designer named Robert Burns, and he talked about the cave paintings in places like Altamira, that our ancient ancestors had done, the first works of art that's been preserved that's come down, and we all can picture the most vivid ones which show for instance these primitive drawings of people that are throwing spears at a mammoth or something, right?

And he said people don't know why.

We can't know why these drawings were made or what they were done, but I'd like you to imagine that there's a bunch of people in a cave, and there's a fire, and they're talking, and someone is saying, okay, this is what we're going to do tomorrow.

None of them have ever hunted a mammoth before, and it's dangerous. People might die. None of them have done it before, and how can we help them imagine what it'll be like.

So, here's a mammoth. Here's us. This is what we're going to do.

We're going to throw these spears, and we're going to win, right?

And he said that's sort of what design does.

It sort of helps people imagine a future before they're actually in the future, right?

And then I think most interestingly sometimes you can say, look, you have three possible routes, and if you do this route, these prototypes will help you imagine what the consequences of that decision will be.

This set of prototypes shows an alternate set of decisions, right?

And it helps people in a way that

I think a million PowerPoint presentations, a million flow charts, a million kind of spreadsheets don't help people understand as clearly as, oh, this is what the world could look like.

I mean I remember when we were doing our work for the presidential campaign four years ago,

we had one photoshop simulation of the logo on the side of a bus,
and I remember every time we showed that,
everyone sort of just got excited,
because all of them had been on those campaign buses,
and suddenly, they're like, oh, my god, it's like real.
That looks like a news photo of our campaign before it had even started, right?
And what a magical thing that is to kind of bring the future to life,
and we're not bringing this fantastical private spaceships
in the air and silver jumpsuit future to life.
It's a very close-in future.
It's sort of like this is when you launch your new company,
this is what your website could look like.
Or it could look like this or it could look like that.
Which of those things corresponds to what your vision is?
I think being able to kind of create those prototypes
as a manifestation of alternate strategies
or a manifestation of possible decisions is the most magical and powerful thing
that designers can do, and you learn a lot from people
who find that really exciting sometimes.
Other people find it like scary actually,
realize that they're kind of like deep down inside afraid of the future,
and they're more worried about making a mistake than having a success,
and I think one of the things we have to do is just kind of like
make evident to people the joys that come with something successfully done, right?
And that really requires our skill as designers
to help visualize those things and connect them up
with the strategies and goals of the people we're working with.
Absolutely.
One last question.
One quick last question.
With your work, you have been inspiring so many people around the world.
You're one of the most renowned designers in the world.
What inspires one of the most renowned designers in the world?
Where do you find your inspiration?
Oh, I mean I know it's not popular to say,
but I will look at other designers' work,
young designers, let's say, and see things
that they've done and just think, that's amazing.
I have eight or so designers that work for me,
some of whom are just starting out,
some of whom are a little more seasoned,
and the work that they do, I'll say, here's my idea.
Go off and do this.
They'll come back, and they'll say, I did that idea,
but then I also thought of that,
and sometimes I'll just think, to me it's just like being surprised with

a wonderful gift that's really exciting.
And I get inspired by the designers that work for me.
I get inspired by my partners, who I work side-by-side with.
I get inspired by you and other designers
I've had the privilege to meet along the way,
and then of course, outside of the world of design, I can hear a piece of music.
I can see something in a film.
I can be reading a book and just even read a turn of phrase,
and just I think that creativity can be expressed in so many different ways,
and so many people are actually capable of participating in a world
in a creative way that kind of gives voice and makes manifest
their own talents that you can find inspiration anywhere if you want.
And, I actually think that one of the great things about being a designer,
particularly a graphic designer, where we're always being put in situations
where simply discharging the function of something,
making the words readable, is one level of what we have to do.
But what those words say and what those words mean
and what you learn by engaging with those words,
what the ideas are behind those words, end up being even more important.
I think that your capacity to just be continuously inspired by everything
you're encountering everyday is what makes you,
at the end of the day, an effective designer,
and I think that it's a great privilege as a designer to kind of
have part of your responsibility to be just to go out and be inspired,
and so that's why I just love what I do.
Fantastic. Well, Michael, thanks for sharing with us your thoughts today
in such a profound, sophisticated, inspiring way.
I didn't expect anything less.
It's been a pleasure to have you with us.
Mauro, a great pleasure to talk to you,
and thank you so much for inviting me.
Thank you.