

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.

"As a design leader, you need to build meaningful relationships across the business. Design is only successful when its value and potential is fully understood and utilized by as many people, teams, and departments as possible. There is so much more power in showing the value and direct impact design can have to the business through projects than there is in talking about it."

I'm quoting our guest of today who is the VP of design at Booking.com and previously was the head of design at The Wall Street Journal.

In these roles, he was and is responsible today for the user experience, the user interfaces of the different apps, websites, publishing tools, newsletters, and voice products of the two companies.

Before joining The Wall Street Journal, was also the founder of BTP Design, an award-winning Australian branding and digital product design agency.

He won a 2018 Webby award for Best News App.

He's a board member of the Australian Graphic Design Association Biennale Committee, and he's given talks on the power of design at several events all around the world.

Che Douglas, welcome to In Your Shoes.

Thank you, Mauro.

It's such a pleasure to have you with us today.

And I am in New York, and you are far, far, far away from us, all the way in Australia,

and I think this is the magic of these digital technologies that connect us all from every corner of the planet.

We talk about walls and visas and countries, but at the end of the day, this digital world unifies us more than ever.

So, you're based right now... where are you in Australia?

I'm in a small town called Aubrey in the country on my wife's family farm.

We've just traveled back from Amsterdam through the pandemic about a month and a half ago to be with family, to have our first child.

Oh, congratulations.

So, that's been an adventure. Yeah, thank you very much.

That's fantastic news.

And Australia is where everything started.

I mean, you are from there.

You started design in Melbourne there in Australia.
How did you arrive all the way then to the U.S. and more recently in Amsterdam?
We met in New York a few years ago
when you were working for The Wall Street Journal.
So, how did you get here?
Yeah, we did.
So, look, it's an interesting story. I think...
like you said, I started my design career in Melbourne.
I studied communication design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology,
and from there, actually found it quite difficult getting a job out of university.
It took me a year, so in that year,
I was kind of freelancing here and there to survive.
And then a friend of mine worked at our sports league,
the Australian Football League, and he was an illustrator
and actually invited me on to help out with some projects.
I ended up landing a full-time job there,
which was my first full-time job out of university.
Worked there for about three years, though mainly in publishing,
so they were doing a lot of kind of print.
But during that time, web design as well as other kind of digital mediums and
brand identity work was starting to come towards 'em,
so I ended up helping win a few projects there
and dabbled in my first kind of website design
as well as front-end coding, et cetera,
and also won some brand identity work.
And then out of that, I basically just kind of decided
why not kind of quit and start my business?
In that year, freelancing, I had a little bit of fun,
and over the course of that nine years in Melbourne, built a company,
employed lots of people, did a lot of brand identity work,
packaging work, environmental work with architects, interior designers,
and had a lot of fun doing a lot of creative projects around the world actually.
And then from there, a friend of mine, a guy called Paul Miller,
had recently been working with Google
and asked to be the interim CTO with Dow Jones
and eventually the chief technology with Dow Jones,
chief technology officer with Dow Jones.
And at that time again, kind of the software industry,
particularly within news organizations,
was something that was kind of new
in comparison to graphic design and traditional print media.
So, they wanted someone that had worked across brand identity
right through to all the different kind of touch points
and experiences as well as software development.
So I kind of luckily landed an opportunity there, met a lot of folks,
and they offered me a role to move over and head up digital design,

so I ended up moving to New York with my now-wife and had a lot of fun at Dow Jones and predominantly working primarily with The Wall Street Journal for five years and in the news room there. And I mean, it's a funny time right now with where you are in the world and with the election on, and I remember sitting in the news room right in the middle of, yeah, this time four years ago, so that kind of changed. And now being back in Australia and my adventures from there to Amsterdam have been a lot of fun and a really interesting journey, a lot of learnings, and kind of here we are today. So, that's a little bit of the story from how I arrived in New York. So, there are many people listening to us that are not designers, and for many people, probably it's not that clear what a designer does in the digital world, both in The Wall Street Journal then in Booking.com. There are design leaders in Spotify and in so many digital services there is design, and design is more important than ever. But can you explain to the people listening to us what you did in The Wall Street Journal and then now in Booking.com? What is the role of the designer? Well, I think, one, we have to kind of acknowledge how kind of young as an industry it is in software development. Software engineers have been working in coding for a lot longer than we were designing interfaces for it in the same kind of scale and capacity. So, it's a, I would say, very kind of young industry. We still have a really long way to go, a long way to mature. But what it means to me is simply what design's always been doing, and that's, making the world a better place through human connection, working with people to understand their needs, their wants, all the things that you've said many, many times over, their desires, and build products, services, experiences for them. I think we've lost some of the magic of creativity in software development 'cause it gets so complex in scale so quickly, and you're working with so many people. So it all ends up being about people, how you collaborate with your colleagues in different crafts and disciplines, and how you also engage with business and are able to kind of translate all the things that you do daily and the things your team and the other teams, et cetera, do into something that is actually tangible for them. Unlike kind of having a CFO, a chief design officer is feeling new for a lot of businesses. And so, I think we carry a lot of weight on our shoulders right now to make sure that we're kind of carrying the torch. We're also at the same time defining

what it means to be in the head design role at a large organization and leading design and all the different aspects for it. You mentioned the size of these organizations, and your challenges is so similar to mine in PepsiCo. We serve the masses, and it's not easy because you want to please them all, but they are diverse and different tastes, different needs and wants. How do you deal with all of these, both in The Wall Street Journal and then in Booking.com? Honestly, lots of conversations. So I think thinking that you know everything, coming in early, is probably one of the bad traits I had early on as a designer, and the more and more I've learnt to sit back and listen and ask questions and continue to learn and absorb information, the more I've realized that through listening, you build relationships, and through the relationships, you build. Organizations are built and made up of lots of different people from diverse backgrounds, so understanding what their motivations are, what their purpose is, why they come to work first, even before you get into the work you're doing with them, is actually incredibly important. Otherwise, you're never able to kind of understand kind of where they're coming from, what their point of view is, and try really hard to kind of, I don't know, I guess, pardon the pun, but walk in their shoes to a manner of speaking. So I think that piece is really important, so I invest so much time in, talking to everybody at all levels of the organization, and I think it's incredibly important, and from all departments. I don't think we need to just purely focus on designers or copywriters or anyone else. I think we need to actually engage with mainly, particularly, is design leaders, all the other areas so they understand all the things we're doing and we also understand the things they're doing as well. And in The Wall Street Journal, you built the capability from scratch. There was not a design function before you, or there was? Oh, no, there was. I mean, there was a huge design function. But if you think about it, mainly it was to do with creating and laying out the printed newspaper and creating graphics and charts to do with the stories every day. The journalists would write up to about 130 stories a day, so you needed a lot of rich visual content for that. So there are a lot of what I would probably more describe as visual journalists that had design backgrounds often, that would be translating the journalism into rich visual content.

And, yeah, there was probably upwards of nearly 100 people kind of working across the organization, doing that.

And what I think...

I brought a slightly different way, so I added some new capabilities.

So, we looked more at information architecture and user research and copywriting and brand identity design, and fused that with all the user interface and user experience design capabilities.

And that's what we matured while I was there mainly rather than the kind of traditional print-rich pace that had been working for a really long time prior.

And then you moved from New York to Amsterdam to Booking.com, so what's your mission there?

Yeah, at Booking.com.

I mean, Booking.com's mission is for everyone to experience the world, so, it's a lovely place to be.

It was a strange time to join because we joined during a pandemic, so I'm not sure picking a travel company during a pandemic is the best idea, but...

I want to hear everything about that.

As soon as you tell me about your role as a designer, then I want to hear about...

Exactly.

...how you're dealing with a global pandemic in that kind of company.

So, yeah, look, I think there's just so much opportunity in travel.

I think it's a really rich industry.

There's, so many household name brands that we know, like Expedia and Airbnb and Booking Holdings.

We own Kayak and Agoda and OpenTable,

so not just Booking.com, as well as Priceline.com in the U.S.

So, our footprint is really, really large, nearly a billion hotel bookings a year, and our audience is incredibly diverse.

So, what really attracted me to come to Booking was that, kind of similar to The Wall Street Journal,

you're getting to touch the lives of so many people at a point where they're making this decision to actually take precious time off and go and do something, experience the world,

travel, create memories, and there's something really powerful about being a part of that and enabling it and making it easier for people.

And so, I think that's what really drew me to it,

I think that kind of mobility space with people.

I've spent a lot of my kind of last 10 years traveling, from moving from Australia to New York to Amsterdam now.

And during that time overseas, being expat and on different visas,

I've also spent a lot of time exploring America and Canada and Africa and other continents.

And travel's just such a big part of who we are where you get to experience different cultures.

And what I also loved about Booking was

the headquarters being based in Amsterdam,
that attracted so many different people from different walks of life
from all around the world to come and build those digital products
and build a business there, and a very, very kind of diverse group.
So, that, being an English speaker,
and my first kind of meetings where I would
run through work or kind of get to know me, et cetera, with some of the teams.
People had to kind of constantly slow me down and interject,
and I felt very awkward at the end because they were all basically...
English was their second language, and I was this imposter kind of coming in.
And so, I had to really recalibrate and really, think about
how I engaged with everyone
and realize just how diverse the group was there,
and that was also something that attracted me to it,
and that we'd build products for... our products serve 47 different languages,
so incredibly complex in that vein as well.
So there's a lot to do, a lot of complexity,
a lot to unpack, but I also love simplicity,
so I thought it would be a challenge.
And was design already established?
You are taking it to the next level?
What's the situation there with design?
Yeah, look, heavily invested in,
so upwards of 260 designers, digital designers,
so UX and UI, 60-plus UX copywriters, lots of user researchers.
So, in the kind of frame of what a lot of the big tech companies would
kind of put under the umbrella of design, there's hundreds,
so the company had clearly kind of decided to invest heavily in design.
I think where I came in was, there had never been a VP of design before me,
so it was a new role.
So, they'd realized that kind of at scale,
we probably needed to think about how we design at scale,
how we really set up a cohesive design strategy for the entire company.
We need someone to come in and do that.
The community is too large to almost self-organize and be able to do that
and have a voice at the right level of the organization
and attached to the business, so I was...
yeah, that was really my challenge
and the role that I came in to play, and so it was new.
And, yeah, joined in October last year, so I've been there for just over a year.
So, the good part is I got to spend some time in the office, so that was good.
And how is it all changing in the middle of a pandemic, that kind of industry,
people not traveling anymore or not as much obviously as before?
Look, early on, we almost hit the reverse button because
one of our value propositions is that you can cancel.
And so, I think a lot of what Booking.com is known for is

that ability to just cancel last minute and get a refund, so that almost commitment to our customers impacted us heavily, not only on top of the fact that most people were not traveling and airlines were shutting down and borders were closing.

So as a business, we were heavily impacted.

we've seen some return, particularly in domestic travel and people wanting to book homes or rental cars, et cetera, to move locally, to just get a break, get away from your kind of screen for a few days, so that's obviously a change.

I would expect aspects of that to persist for sure, but we're really not going to see a lot of it return until,

I would say, like 2019, until a while after a vaccine and hopefully also a cure as well.

So, yeah, those two things combined, but we'll see if things return, but it will be a while, that's for sure, but it was, yeah, absolutely heavily impacted.

And how do you think the way we work will change after the pandemic?

Well, I mean, personally speaking,

I absolutely miss the energy that I get from my colleagues and being in a room and that creative energy that you get from just walking past someone's desk, grabbing a coffee, going into a room. More ad hoc sessions.

While it feels like it should be easier because everyone's just already set up in their office to just jump on a quick Zoom call, it's actually I find it a lot more kind of fatiguing and challenging, and you miss all of the body language and the nuances and the interactions where you kind of go from talking about work to checking in to see how someone's feeling because they might be kind of not quite there that way, they might not be feeling quite right.

So, look, I personally on that aspect,

I very miss the dimension of a creative workplace and getting energy from colleagues.

And I know people get energy from all sources, but that's one that I definitely do.

It definitely gets me up in the morning.

And so, but I think there's also a lot of good things that have come out of it where

I'm in a lucky position

where I've been able to jump on a plane to be with family, even though it was incredibly difficult to get home, almost a privileged position to a degree to have a baby and be close to family.

And while that's kind of a unique circumstance at this point, there's aspects of that may change because we've realized that remote work is possible.

Huge businesses switched over just like that, and it worked.
we're all set up.

Our tech was there, our IT support was there,
and giant multinational companies like ours
were able to just kind of flip the switch
and change the way we work and make do.

Look, and I don't think it's perfect,
and I think we do need those human connections in time and space in offices,
but I think there's a few barriers to that.

There's obviously all sorts of tax implications and jurisdictions
in different regions if you're a big global company,
and I think we'll kind of start working through
some of those things, I would say.

The biggest companies will obviously kind of push
for those changes going forward, and hopefully,
we'll see a bit more flexibility around all of those things.

But it's a new process, and we have yet to see kind of
what happens on the other side of it.

I totally, totally agree.

Well, it's a beautiful design project by itself to redesign the way of working
and this hybrid kind of world we live in more and more in the future.

Talking about people and ways of working and things,
there are many companies out there

that right now are trying to figure out how to create a digital design team,
a team focused on the digital platforms.

What would you recommend to any business leader out there
or design leader out there that wants to build a digital design team?

What they need to do?

What kind of capabilities, where to start from, what mistakes to avoid?

Hmm, great question.

I think you have to always start with the why. So,
why do we think we need a digital design team?

- That's a good point. - And really...

Why do you think companies will need it?

What would say to a market that, "Oh, I don't know if I really need it"?

Do you think they need it?

It's a general question.

Oh, yeah, like if you have any interface with customers,
any experiential touch points with customers,
where people are engaging with your product or service,
whether it's partners, customers, employees,
it can even be employees in your own organization.

You need designers, whether it's service designers, copywriters,
user experience designers, industrial designers, architects.

I mean, you can't avoid them.

They're everywhere you look, basically.

But on the digital design front, look, it's incredibly important, all those interactions. People expect all of these things to just work now, how fast the app responds to thinking about how accessible our products are, particularly with the diverse audiences and people with varying abilities. They're all incredibly important topics, but you need people dedicated to work on them. It's not something people just pick up on the side. There's actually expertise and people that have been working in these fields for a really long time now that have and will bring a lot of value to the organization with their experience and their ways of working. So the things I would kind of look at doubling down on are, one, absolutely the research aspect upfront, so really diving into customer behavior and thinking about, if you already have products or you're looking to build products, understanding your market, your customers first and foremost is your primary goal. And from there, you can start mapping out the types of skills and things that you might need to provide a better product or service to them, and there's lots of dimensions to that. I think there's the brand dimension. There's the kind of service design dimension of the full end-to-end customer experience through to the employee experience as well. And so, it's something that is incredibly important that, yeah, that is absolutely needed. I don't think it's always needed at the same scale as different companies, and I don't think there's a one size fits all. I think you also have to look at your company culture and your existing ways of working and make sure that whatever you do, you don't build a kind of ivory tower of designers over in a corner that never get to influence anything and just create amazing mockups. But you actually need people that, again, kind of deeply understand the customer, are deeply connected to the business strategy and the strategic priorities, and understand how the company works from its revenue structure right through to its cost, everything, the whole thing. And until you've kind of got designers doing that, I think it is very challenging. They are kind of in an ivory tower, designing mockups and maybe end up getting very frustrated that none of their work sees the light of day in the way that they'd originally imagined it, so that's another point for that. In this final comment, there is probably already the answer to the question I'm about to ask you, but I'm going to ask anyway because there is a different angle in the question.

Do any companies, or these companies that are thinking about creating a digital design team in house, do they really need it in house, or can they just work with agencies? If the agency can do the same kind of work, why do they need them in house? Yeah, I mean, I think you need people in house for honestly like not just maintenance but evolving. So, yeah, there's a kind of tricky pace to this. I think if you're iterating and evolving over time, I think sometimes companies can get stuck, and without the right kind of setup, are unable to make big leaps or innovate or change. And often companies will then kind of default to going to an agency 'cause it might be a bit easier. But that can cause a lot of headaches, and I've seen that a lot in the past where you bring in agencies, and really what it does is kind of just cause organizational pain for everyone. Someone else is brought in to do your job basically. It's not a good feeling, so... because you weren't creative enough or innovative enough. But, some of the most amazing innovations that I've seen in the last six to 10 years across the Journal and Booking have come from not just designers internally, but it can be software engineers, data scientists, product managers. And so, I think what you get from really fusing design into an organization is a new way of thinking, whether we call it design thinking or something else. It's just this additional creative kind of superpower, hopefully asking lots of questions and kind of always diving and reframing problems so that they deeply understand them, and that often brings out the best in people and the most interesting ideas, and from that, you can kind of build out a lot more. So I also do think there is a way that you can work with agencies in that mold, but you need to set it up and think through it and be really, I guess, deliberate in how you want it to work, culturally as well, so you don't kind of put people out and make them feel sidelined and their job is not important, they're just doing production design or maintaining a website, versus being able to innovate and really push things forward. So I think there's a fine line there, but it can absolutely work. I really love how you're talking essentially about the importance of building culture and through a dialogue with all the different functions inside an organization help the entire company changing the way of thinking, the way of working, the way of serving the customers at the end. And it connected to also what you were saying earlier, this need of integration, of dialogue. the two things together are really, really powerful. I totally agree.

I see in PepsiCo something very similar as well.

And another component of all of this is how you inspire that team. the team that is in house eventually, is not exposed to the different projects and brands and industry that an agency could be exposed to.

So how do you inspire your own team every day?

Also a really good question.

I think at the moment, it's incredibly challenging because, as a company, we're going through big gray structures, and we're going to sadly see colleagues and friends leave the organization.

So there's kind of a level of sensitivity around pointing to the future and how exciting it might be, instead of focusing on the right here right now and taking care of everyone and making sure, the levels of anxiety and stress with all our colleagues is looked after and cared for and people are being sensitive to it.

So right now, definitely a challenging time.

But I think in normal senses, I think there's many different facets.

I think, one, having a really crisp singular kind of vision as the design leader is incredibly important.

And not only that, but that you have the full support of the CSWB and the CEO and the rest of the organization.

So, a lot of kind of what I spent my time on early is trying to understand, again what we talked about earlier,

the needs of the business and the direction of the company and where it was heading and what was really important to it as also how it was going to grow in the future,

how it's going to deal through the pandemic, and make sure the things that I was doing aligned with that.

And they supported it and had my back too 'cause

I think that's just as important as having that kind of crisp singular vision that people can stand behind and understand.

And I think something kind of more long term so people understand the steps of how you're going to get there but understand how they can contribute to it and that it's not laid out for them,

and they're just going to be following a strict set of things that are already predetermined,

that there's a lot of space to create in that for them.

So, yeah, not getting too hands-on,

even with the kind of senior management throughout design and other design leaders in the organization,

to make sure that there's space for people

to still create because that's where we see always the most impact,

I think for the business and for our customers.

So, yeah, right now, like I said, it's challenging because

we want to paint a great picture because

I think there is a lot of opportunity.

But it's a difficult time to do that because we do have to be sensitive to

how everyone is feeling and what's happening right here right now.

I totally, yeah, I totally get it. I totally agree.

Another challenge, if you want, of the society we live in,

but then especially in companies like yours,

is the one of being as fast, reactive, agile as possible.

I think in The Wall Street Journal, that was really to the extreme,

I guess, I mean, news and people, conversations,

but this is true in so many different industries.

You need to react fast.

So, what is the right balance between reacting fast with relevant content and being connected to people,

but in the meantime, governments and be aligned to

the strategies of the company and really balancing, the two dimensions?

I love this question 'cause actually, I think about it a lot,

and I think it's very relevant to where I am now.

And I actually think you need to realize that

there's lots of different types of teams

that can be doing different things on different time scales.

And people actually like fast paced challenges,

and those people should absolutely be working in that environment.

And then there's people who would actually like to be planning

and doing a lot of work on long-term or really complex technical problems

that might take more than one year to solve

'cause they're required technical architecture updates

and a whole bunch of other things, right?

So, there's all these different time scales,

and I think there's very different types of teams

you need to tackle them, different types of makeups.

And I think that's also something that a lot of companies

I think have struggled with a little bit,

particularly more recently as they've scaled and grown, and the way that

your products, digital products specifically in this context,

have I think struggled a little bit in understanding.

It's not kind of a one size fits all.

The technology industry talks a lot about what's the best ratio,

how many copywriters, designers, researchers, product managers, that

to make up an agile product team or any other for that matter?

And, look, I don't think there is a perfect formula.

I think it absolutely depends on the topic, the problem you're solving,

how complex it is, how long it might take, and I think we need

a lot more flexibility and fluidity in software development.

I think we've already become too rigid in our thinking

and planning and workforce planning around it,

and we need to kind of break away from that again, and I think that's really

challenging because people like being embedded in teams

and knowing their teammates and spending time with them and forming bonds.

And so, creating flexibility and fluidity in that environment is also tricky 'cause some people might not want to move around. They might want to stay exactly in one spot, so from a business standpoint, also challenging from a workforce planning point of view, but a really good problem to look at in the future because I do think the time scales of different problems vary a lot. The type of work varies a lot, so therefore the type of people and skills you need vary just as much. And you talked not just now but also earlier about the need of change and transformation. Those are keywords of, the broader realm of innovation. That's what innovation is about. And innovation is difficult, is risky, and implies also the ability to manage failure and mistakes. What's your relation with failures and mistakes? How do you live them, how you manage them, for you and for your team? Well, every day? I think that's the only way I'll learn. And, look, I think there's failures in lots of different dimensions, and particularly being in a leadership role, I think, I'm very sensitive to how everyone is kind of feeling at any one moment and their energy levels, their excitement for the future and what they're building and why they come to work. I think that's always a really challenging one. But, look, no, almost wasn't joking. It definitely is daily, and there's mistakes daily, and there's things that I would like to do differently, but I always have to kind of keep moving forward. That's part of life, and you can't control time, and we have to keep pushing forward and try not to do it again. And, I think I always focus on as much as possible, really trying to, I guess, just understand where other people are coming from. I touched on it earlier, but it's very easy to just kind of try and dive into your thing that you want to talk about and not really kind of understand where someone's headspace is at before you engage what you're doing, and I think that's a mistake I've constantly made and I have to kind of keep reminding myself to pull back from. the world doesn't always revolve around you and the thing that you're working on and the thing that you're doing. And so, someone might be having a pretty shitty day, and you have to acknowledge that sometimes and maybe make space for it, and I think particularly right now, that's incredibly important and doing everything remotely. It's really hard, so you actually have to ask questions

rather than sense it or try and read the room.

So, yeah, trying to start with that and seeing how people's days are going so that you can manage the conversation differently or being more sensitive is super important, or help uplift someone.

They might be having a really shitty day, and all you need to do is just spend 10 minutes laughing, and that's great, that's okay.

- That changes their day. - See, I don't know you...

It motivates them, yeah.

I don't know you personally, that well.

We met a few times in New York City, but I really love the sensitivity and the empathy

I feel in your words.

It's a theme of all your answers that you must be a wonderful people leader.

I really feel it, in your answers.

As leaders, often we are asked, "Well, how do you inspire your teams?"

I asked you earlier how you inspire your team.

Where do you find is that your inspiration?

Where do you hunt for inspiration?

How do you stay inspired every day?

Another great question.

For me, it's time and space away from work and what I'm doing.

I always recalibrate.

I actually miss being on planes quite a bit because it was the one time that I always really switched off and would listen to music, maybe have a glass of wine, and just start writing notes and sketching things, and there would be thoughts from all sorts of aspects of my life, and I think that's where I,

yeah, that was one moment that kind of is missing now.

So one thing I was doing in Amsterdam was changing the way I structured my calendar.

Probably like you, it's pretty full, and you're back to back with meetings,

and then you try and find time for space and thought,

and everything else around that is challenging.

But creating moments during the day.

So, one of the things I was doing was, on one-on-ones, basically having just a phone call, so I'd put my AirPods on.

If we didn't need to share a screen or look at slides or talk through something, for my staff particularly, we'd have our one-on-ones going walking.

And there's lots of beautiful parks in Amsterdam,

so I would basically just spend a couple of hours walking through the parks, having my one-on-one calls, and working through stuff.

And at that same time, I think that gave me a little bit of space to recalibrate, hopefully gave them a bit of space as well too, and I really enjoyed that aspect of it.

But other than that, look, it's just, yeah, being away from it,

engaging with other people, discussing new topics.
So what I really loved about working at The Wall Street Journal and now Booking
and working with lots of clients in my agency was
I got to learn about so many different things and
different people and what they cared about and what they did
and how they built something.
And so, I think what's also challenging with COVID is that
I'm not getting to meet as many new people.
When I landed back in Australia and then went into,
obviously, into quarantine, et cetera,
in a hotel, I ended up after that, I came out,
and we just hadn't seen people for a really long time,
and we didn't really know many people in Amsterdam,
and we were being pretty careful.
So I remember going to the cafe here in Aubrey
and starting to just basically make friendships with people again,
so like people that I didn't know that
I could just have these great, wonderful conversations with,
and I would learn about what they're doing.
And those ideas and the things and the threads,
you never know where it's going to go.
But the stuff that comes from conversations with people always inspires me,
and that's where I always get my kind of new thoughts
and paces of kind of inspiration from.
So long-winded answer, but now you
One last double question.
- A double question? Like it. - What's your favorite...
Yeah, exactly, it's a double question because there is the past,
what is your favorite project in all these years,
the one that is close to your heart and you love the most,
and what is a project that you love that you're working on right now?
So my favorite project... oh, God, it's probably a tie, but I'll start with one
because I think it was just,
as someone that had run my own business for those nine years,
I got to work with an Australian whisky maker, guy called David Batali
who was just starting out making,
embarking on making, an Australian whisky,
a modern whisky kind of unshackled from tradition,
and I got to work with him from the very beginning
on naming the distillery to the product to sourcing,
the bottles from Italy to like all of these kind of modern processes.
I learnt so much about it, and we worked on that for three years to launch that,
and it was just so much fun.
I remember right at the beginning,
I got hooked because he was a great storyteller.
And, I learned about all the elements of the process of making this whisky, and

what kind of stood out in theirs was that right at the very beginning, and it's changed a bit since, but basically, there's this old extinct volcano where they got the water from, and it was kind of filtered through the coal, et cetera, and then every part of the process had this piece that was born in fire. So it was Australian barley that was toasted.

It was South Australian red wine barrels that were French oak that were then burnt and charred on the inside to kind of caramelize it. So every part of it was born in fire.

And we went through this whole kind of six-month journey trying to get to a name and what we were doing, and we landed on Starward, and the reason being that all of these processes were born in fire, and like the fire we know is the sun and a star.

And then we decided, and this is what I loved about it, and his creativity and his passion for what we were doing that was so unique and interesting as well, we decided we'd embark on trying to get real gold infused onto the bottles.

So, the first two-and-a-half thousand bottles that he created we actually worked with a manufacturer that was able to actually melt down gold with glass particles and fuse it onto the front of the bottle.

Wow, charming.

So the first two-and-a-half thousand had kind of real gold. So we kind of took the whole process all the way through, and working with him on that was just so much fun.

And they've been really successful since now.

They're on the West Coast in the U.S. and done really great things.

So, that was a lot of fun.

And what about now?

What are you working on now that...

I mean, something you can share obviously, you know?

Yeah, of course.

Well, I think, look, travel is mobile, and all I really kind of see going forward is how people engage with all the things that we do at Booking, and all of our offerings from hotels to homes to transports or attractions and experiences, and accessing them on your phone.

It's just a really kind of simple thing that we should be doing really, really well, and meeting people where they are in that moment and giving them everything that they need on their fingertips.

So really just supercharging our apps has to be kind of our mission going forward and making sure that they're as good as they can possibly be, and there's so much we can do in that space to make it even better for people.

And there's so many situations where people are traveling, and they support an offline mode and geo and notifications and things, and really taking it from the customer lens, like really solving for those really important pain points

that people experience when they travel.

So I think that's what I'm most excited about and what we're really going to be doubling down on going forward from a UX standpoint is our app and just making sure it's the best possible travel app out there.

I love this journey from the relation with the founder, with an entrepreneur, the craftsmanship of the first project, and then the masses and the broad audience and the traveling industry.

That is a beautiful journey.

So, Che, thank you so much for everything you've been sharing with us today.

We talked about empathy and love and building teams, integration, business, design, digital, about so much.

There are so many insights, and I think it's so inspirational for many people in many different ways, so thanks for having accepted our invite...

Of course.

...and being with us today.

Yeah, thank you, Mauro.

Really great to catch up, and, yeah, really appreciated it too, so thanks for the time out

and getting to spend some time together and have a chat. Appreciate it.

And congratulations for your baby coming once again.

Thank you very much. Really appreciate it.