

What I wish I'd known: 12 design leaders look back

Industry leaders reflect on their own careers and impart their greatest lessons for the next generation of design talent.

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With this year's cohort for [MIX 50 UNDER 50](#) just announced - marking 50 years of our signature awards programme dedicated to emerging talent - we tapped some of the industry's leading figures to share their best pearls of wisdom for the next generation, from trusting your instincts to embracing the unknown.



John Williams, Founder - SpaceInvader

I wish I'd known how long it would take to establish yourself as a designer. It might have made me more appreciative of each step - and more patient too.

Becoming the designer you're meant to be starts with working hard and getting as broad experience as possible. You only learn by doing. Then it's about working smarter rather than harder, as you add layers of depth to that breadth. Sometimes you'll be out of sync with your role, with more responsibility than you have the experience for, but you'll catch up. It's better than the other way around!

As you go through inevitable peaks and troughs, you'll find that pressures and anxieties fade as your judgement increases. Finally, you'll realise that what you really bring to your employers, projects and clients is not just all that experience, but the most important thing of all: your own unique worldview, energy and ideas.



Becky White, Associate Design Director - Universal Design Studio

Whilst studying, there can often be a pressure to know everything, to be fully prepared for the working world. However, education offers a rare opportunity for complete creative freedom; to test and experiment, to not be tied down to the pragmatism of reality. This creative autonomy should be nourished and enjoyed, as it becomes an extremely valuable skill in the office.

In the workplace, taking note of different communication styles, asking questions and being inquisitive, can help produce a solid foundation for your own professional approach.

Building a database of strong references during downtime can ease the pressure when workloads ramp up, providing a pool of curated ideas which can easily be dipped into.

In my experience, there is rarely a single right or wrong answer in design. However, responses that are well considered and thoughtfully developed tend to lead to impactful outcomes.





Alessio Nardi and Lukas Persakovas, Founders – A-nrd

One piece of advice we would offer to young designers starting out is: don't rush to define your style too quickly. Your point of view will evolve, and that's not only natural, but it's also necessary. Early in your career, it's okay if you don't have a clear aesthetic or signature yet. What matters more is staying curious, being present on site and paying close attention to the decisions you make instinctively. Ask yourself why you gravitated toward a particular material, layout or detail. Those on-site choices, those moments of gut instinct will lead you to your authentic design identity.

Equally important is remembering that interior design is not a solo pursuit. It's a deeply collaborative process. Your ability to work well with others – clients, contractors, suppliers and craftspeople – will shape not only the outcome of your projects but your reputation in the industry. Stay open, flexible and humble. The best ideas often come from unexpected conversations, and sometimes the constraints others bring are what push your creativity the furthest.

In short: discover your voice through reflection, not pressure. Cultivate relationships with empathy and professionalism. And never forget that behind every beautiful space is a team of passionate people who brought it to life together.



Eve Waldron, Founder – EWD

I wish I had spent more of my younger years appreciating and learning about our architectural heritage.

Growing up in New York City, I was attracted to modernism. From the super skyscrapers to fabulous Art Deco buildings such as the Chrysler Building and the Empire State building, also wonderfully engineered office blocks designed by Louis Sullivan at the turn of the century. We lived in a converted Loft on West 10th Street – but the cooler lofts were downtown around SoHo.

I loved and still love contemporary designs, but I increasingly feel the responsibility to understand the history, materials and craftsmanship of the buildings we work on.

As designers in a sustainably aware age, we are increasingly working to retrofit existing buildings created by our predecessors. Continuously educate yourself to past periods, respect and understand the materials and craftsmanship that was employed so you can give an informed and sympathetic interpretation – your interventions may one day be scrutinized and immortalized through conservation.



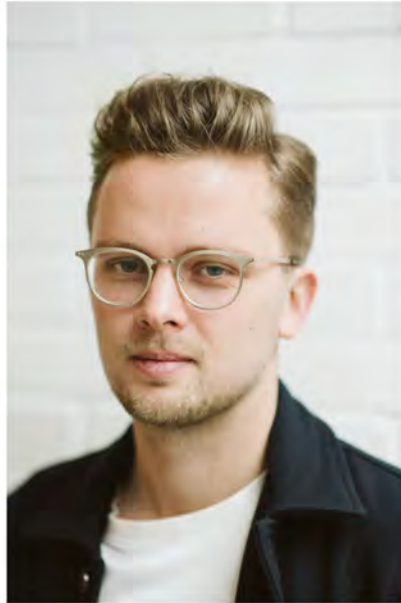
Neil Onions, Founding Director – Beyond the Box

I wish I knew that being ready to start your own creative practice begins with recognising you already know enough, or at least as much as everyone else, while also understanding that you will never know it all. And that's a good thing. You don't need every answer before you begin and, as creatives, we must accept that we can't know exactly what everyone wants or needs from the outset either. That uncertainty is what makes collaborative design so powerful; it invites shared knowledge, deepens learning and allows ideas to grow in unexpected ways.

Briefing in my career was a workline of late mean. I wish I had understood that design is not linear or absolute, not

reserved for the privileged few, and not always defined by a physical product or a single, standard process. Authentic collaborative design, and the process that leads to creating a 'thing', is an art form in itself. The learning that emerges along the way, when applied to making or designing something tangible, is where the real excitement lies in the future of our industry.

Whether it's public art, temporary installations or redesigning cultural landmarks, co-design doesn't diminish your expertise, it adds value. I wish I knew that earlier.



Liam Spencer, Studio Director – Thirdway

It's funny to reflect on 'wishing I had known' something as my mind skirts dangerously close to regrets - of which, career speaking, I have few. Instead, and far more positively, it has actually made me focus on the amazing pieces of advice I was lucky enough to receive early in my career. One sticks out above all; ask the f...ing question. Our industry is full of acronyms, abbrevs, and frankly made-up expressions. A close mentor in my early one was almost too proud to announce loudly to a room full of the suited and booted that he hadn't a clue what IPMS or HRS was - and that has stuck with me hard. Someone else is very likely thinking the same and in this industry of connections and relationships, those moments are often the ice breaker that is needed. Early in your career, it is mindless if not reckless to assume you know everything - so the more questions, the more neck sticking out and knowledge you can absorb through a genuine and wholehearted interest means 'no regrets' from there on out.



Emma Morley, Creative Director – Trifle*

When I started out, it took me years to shake off imposter syndrome - an utter waste of energy, yet so common, especially for women in design. What I wish I'd known is that confidence isn't about having all the answers; it's about trusting you'll find them along the way.

I'd also tell my younger self that design is 80% people and process. The grand gestures matter, but the real craft lies in listening deeply, collaborating generously and shaping spaces that make people feel seen, comfortable and inspired.

And colour! It isn't decoration, it's a language. It sets the tone, shifts moods and has the power to change how people feel in a space. Never be afraid of it!

Mistakes will happen, but they're your best teachers. Design is messy, human, alive - and that's where its beauty lies.





James Melia, Founder – BLOND

I wish I had known that creativity should extend to every part of a business, not just the core product. It shapes how a company works, how HR and communication evolve, and how new opportunities are won. Just because something has been done one way before – by a competitor or another company – doesn't mean it's right for you. As creatives, we have an advantage; we're taught to be creative. Using those skills in non-design related areas unlocks opportunities for design.

I also wish I had paid more attention to the saying: "It's about the journey." It's finally clear to me now, after 10 years, that there is no final destination. The goalposts keep shifting: "I'll be happy when the team is bigger; when we land a certain client." But happiness doesn't live there. The joy lies in the day-to-day; enjoying the challenge that lies before you. Finding joy in that shows, and people naturally take notice.



Maria Cheung, Partner and Head of Interior Design – Squire & Partners

I wish I'd known the importance of communication earlier.

Every design process begins with an idea that you work up in your own way. But no project comes to fruition without the help of the team around you. So, it's vital for any designer to have the skill to communicate and explain their ideas, whether it be to fellow designers or your clients. It's vital to get their buy-in to an idea, build their trust, earn their support and their invaluable input – design is a collaborative process, after all.

The first time I realised the importance of communication, I was studying at the Architectural Association. I had just finished presenting a project I'd put a lot of work into and one of my tutors remarked that the trees I had drawn weren't up to scratch. They might've been nothing more than ground level details, like the passing people and surrounding buildings, but all his attention had been consumed by the trees, and he'd been so distracted by them he'd barely engaged with the rest of my presentation. It's an understatement to say I was rather hurt by his remark, but still, he taught me a valuable lesson: I should've communicated the core idea of my project clearly enough to capture his attention.

So, when you're presenting, be crystal clear about what you want your audience to understand. Strip out any distractions, guide their focus to what's important and make sure your delivery highlights the ideas that truly matter. This way, you'll avoid losing their attention to a few badly drawn trees!



Andy Goodwin and Tom Parker, Co-founders and Creative Directors – Fettle

Our studio turned to this August, and looking back on our journey so far, five lessons have been key for us. Firstly, recruiting is hard work but a vital part of our job. As a small studio, every piece needs to fit perfectly to run efficiently and we have built up an incredible team that we are very proud of across both London and LA. Design is the tip of the iceberg – running a studio holistically takes a lot of time and dedication. It is an all encompassing job which you have to be ready to take on.

Good storytelling is paramount: the spaces we design must speak for themselves, because we aren't there to speak for them. Also, carve out a niche – clients invest in your thinking and approach, if you make it unique and stand by it, they will come back. Finally, the most important lesson we have learnt is to trust in ourselves, our abilities and our instincts. They are what got us here today and what keeps us going.





Jonas Pettersson, Co-founder – Form Us With Love

When we started *Form Us With Love*, I thought design was about proving with big ideas. What I've learnt is that real progress comes from patience and iteration. The most rewarding projects didn't begin as perfect visions, they grew through countless tests, mistakes and conversations.

I wish someone had told me that doubt is not failure. In the early years, I often worried uncertainty meant I wasn't good enough. Now I see it as a sign you're working in unexplored territory. If it feels uncomfortable, it usually means you're onto something worth pursuing.

I've also learnt the power of people. Surround yourself with collaborators and clients who challenge and inspire you, not just those who agree. The dialogue is what shapes meaningful design.

So, my advice: don't wait until everything feels ready. Start, share, adjust, and let the process guide you forward.



Samantha Sari, Creative Director – Area

Design isn't a straight road, whether you are talking about the design process itself or the route in which your career will take. You need to lean into the ups and downs; you will learn something new from every project and every client interaction which will ultimately help you become a better designer and shape the way in which you work best.

Technology will always play an important role in how we design, the key is to not be scared but to embrace these new techniques, programs and AI to help enhance our design processes. They are there to make our roles more seamless and we must lean into them, or you will be left behind.

The client is not always right. You have been employed for your knowledge and the fact that you are an expert in your field. Never be afraid to challenge your clients.

Earlier this week, we announced this year's Mix 30 under 30 ahead of the awards ceremony taking place on Thursday 22 September. Meet the Class of 2023 [here](#).

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