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Lisa Strausfeld is a designer and information architect from New Jersey. She graduated from Brown University with a Bachelor of Arts in art history and computer science and later studied at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Born in 1964, she developed an early interest in architecture, influenced by her parents, a gynecologist and an urban planner. At MIT's Media Lab, she met Muriel Cooper, the cofounder of the Visible Language Workshop. Cooper mentored Strausfeld for a year prior to her passing, but her profound influence on Cooper was so significant that she named her daughter after her. Shifting away from her involvement in architecture, she pivoted to Web design and used many of the same concepts and processes that she had researched previously and implemented them for computational design. In 1996, Strausfeld and two classmates co-founded Perspecta, a software company in San Francisco that specialized in data processing. After the company was bought out, she worked on an online sports entertainment platform where she discovered her passion for data visualization, and said to Fast Company, "I realized I wanted to design products that I would use." She then joined Pentagram, one of the largest and most influential design firms in the world. There, she led a team focused on digital information design, creating large-scale media installations, software prototypes, and user interfaces for clients such as Bloomberg, GE, the Museum of Arts and Design, and the New York Times. In 2010, Strausfeld received the National Design Award for Interaction Design from the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. She has also held positions as Global Head of Data Visualization at Bloomberg, where she built their first data visualization team for editorially driven interaction, and as a senior researcher at The New School, where she explored new ways to experience day to day information. Currently, she is the principal of Informationart, a design and research studio dedicated to creating innovative interactive information experiences.

One of her most popular projects that she worked on was called Sugar, which was the graphical user interface for the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative. OLPC aimed to provide affordable laptops to children in developing countries in the Global South. The Sugar interface was central to this vision, offering a unique, child-friendly computing experience that diverged from traditional desktop environments. The Museum of Modern Art describes Sugar by saying, “The interface emphasizes community and ease of use, with bright, clear icons that show children their classmates’ locations. Sugar is an early example of the participatory character of Web 2.0, from its focus on sharing and collaboration to its Linux-based open-source code.” Strausfeld, then a partner at Pentagram, collaborated with a team of designers and developers, including Christian Marc Schmidt, Takaaki Okada, Walter Bender, and Eben Eliason, to create Sugar. The principles of design were guided in the interest of simplicity, collaboration, and exploration, all so that the interface was intuitive for children who might have had little to no prior experience with computers. Unlike many other desktop environments, metaphors like “folders” and “windows” were not included, and were replaced with a journal system that periodically logs the user’s session information to allow them to rewind to past activities. Other differences between Sugar and other common interfaces are that applications always run in full screen without multitasking, double-clicking is not implemented, and icons are heavily preferred over text throughout the experience. However, the OLPC project failed after some time pioneering low-cost laptops for children for reasons such as hardware glitches, political disagreements, and criticism of the project’s misplaced priorities. Sugar is still in active development by Sugar Labs, which is a nonprofit organization acting as a community of educators and developers who are continually extending the platform past its initial stages. Despite the overall lack of success, Strausfeld’s work on Sugar was significant in the evolution of user interface and experience design. Her contributions to the project demonstrated the potential of design to shape digital experiences for education, particularly in underserved communities. The principles she helped establish in Sugar continue to influence modern interface design, emphasizing accessibility, collaboration, and user-centered innovation.

Works Cited

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