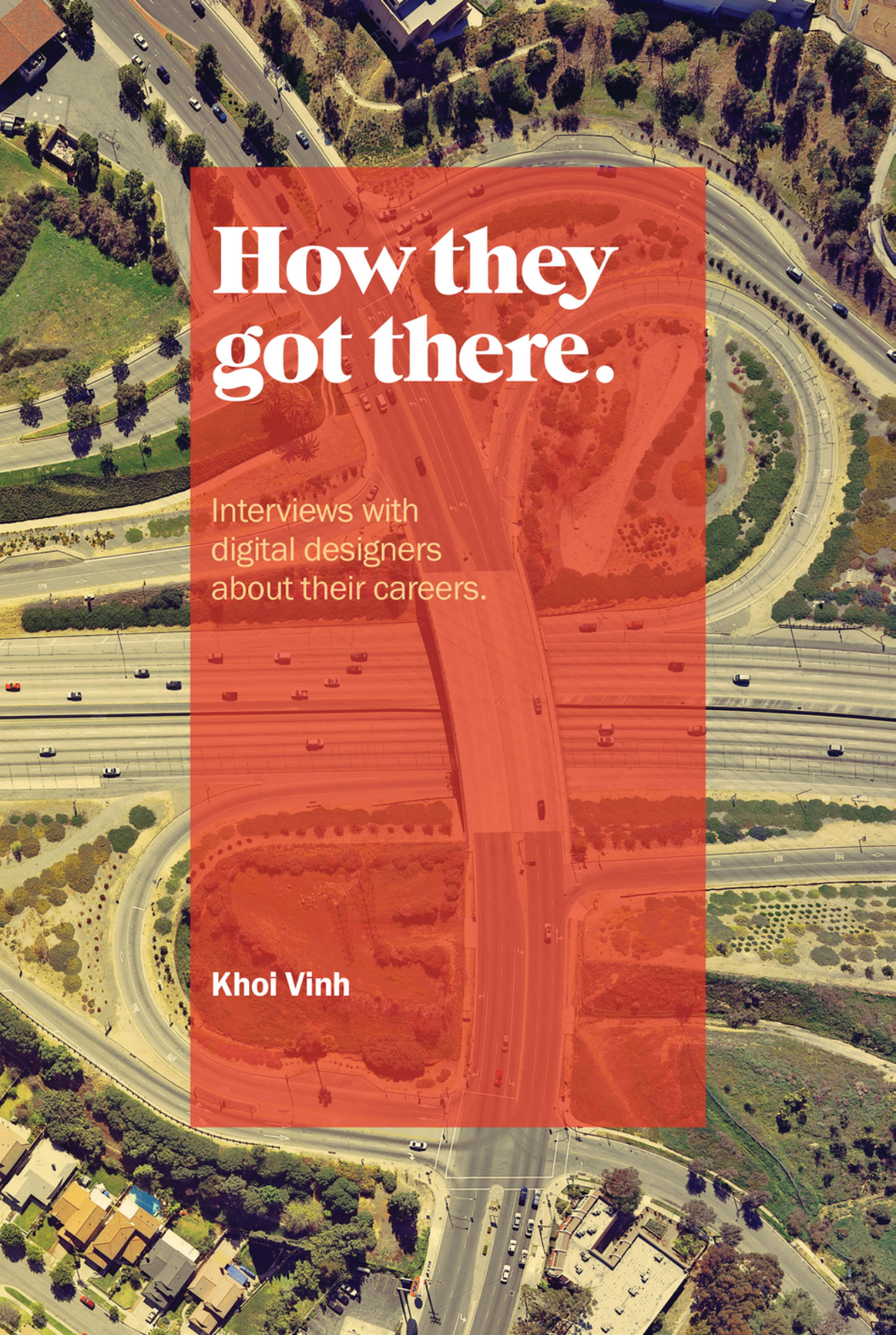


How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

Chapter 6

Erika Hall

Co-founder, Mule Design

After the dot-com bust of the early 2000s, Erika Hall co-founded Mule Design in San Francisco. Over the course of the next decade-plus, she helped build Mule into one of the country's preeminent digital design studios. Hall also became an influential speaker and author, and wrote the highly regarded design research primer "Just Enough Research."

You studied philosophy at Dartmouth. How did you get from there into doing the kind of work that you're doing? What was the first step?

Well, let's see, the first step was graduating into a recession with a philosophy degree [*laughs*].

Perfect.

Then the first job I got, amusingly, was—you know how venture capital partnerships frequently have girls in the front office?

That's the job I had immediately after graduating. Well, not as immediately as I would have liked—I got it six months after graduating. I did not know what a venture capital partnership was, but I knew that my philosophy degree qualified me to sit at a front desk while I figured things out. It was a pretty unsuccessful partnership. It wasn't even on Sand Hill Road. I had no idea what they did. So I spent a couple of years working at this grunty VC job for no money with horrible people, and all my friends were working at Apple.

Dartmouth sent a lot of graduates to Apple. When I went there it was an all-Apple campus. So I wasn't really aware of what it meant to have what I had there. All of the dorms had AppleTalk and we all had Macs. All the Macs had HyperCard and I taught myself HyperTalk.

This was at the end of the '80s, early '90s?

Yes, early '90s.

That's pretty impressive.

I'd always been interested in computers, too. Actually, going back further, one of my great holiday meltdowns was when I'd asked for a computer and my parents got me an Atari video game system. I had gotten out the Sears catalog, the "Wish Book," and I thought, "Hey, the Atari 800, there's a computer. I want to learn how to program." Then the box showed up under the tree, and I thought, "Yes!" I opened it, and I thought, "A video game system, really? *Really?!*" I was just so angry.

How old were you?

I was 10 or 12, somewhere in there. Maybe middle school-ish. I hung out at RadioShack more than most little girls. I got Omni magazine. I read a lot of sci-fi, too.

Then for my birthday, six months later, I got a Commodore VIC-20, plugged it into the TV, and I learned BASIC and made little weird graphical things happen on the screen.

When I went to college, I drew on that and took a programming class. It was fun. I learned a lot and I learned the basics of programming.

Did you think then that you would work in technology?

Not necessarily. I was surrounded by technology in a way I didn't realize. In the fall of 1988, at Dartmouth, they introduced an email system, BlitzMail, which looked a lot like Eudora, and all the students used email. Here it was, the end of the '80s, I have a networked computer. I send my papers to the library laser printer and then go pick them up on my way to class. I'm learning HyperTalk. I just thought, "Oh, everybody has Macs. That's just the next evolution." Then I graduated and found out 3 percent of people have Macs. I saw Windows for the first time and I thought, "What are you people doing? This is hideous. This is really horrifying."

Anyway, technology had always been in the background. And maybe I had a very early version of that "everybody should code" mindset. I'd always had really nerdy and geeky friends. The first guy I dated in high school was already programming for NASA.

This was just something that really appealed to me, especially coming from Los Angeles. It seemed more substantive. I thought, "We're going to make things with technology and it's going to be awesome."

I was also fleeing from being an English major, which is what everybody thought I was going to be because I was interested in language. I majored in Russian, and then I went to Russia for a while and got back and I thought, "No, I feel like I've

learned all the Russian I really want to learn." Also I saw the state of Russia and the economy there, and I knew, "My friends who majored in Chinese and economics, they're the ones who made the correct bet."

So, I had this stupid VC job and thought, "Okay, what am I going to do now?" One of my friends had Lynx and showed me, "This is the World Wide Web and all of these different servers are connected." Then another friend of mine who worked at Apple said, "Oh, hey, here's this thing called Mosaic." My reaction was, "This! This is everything I'm interested in. This is everything that interested me in philosophy. This is everything that interested me about design and being an architect. This is everything that interested me in publishing."

So when you saw the web, you said, "This is what I want to do." How specific was that idea? Was it like, "I just want to do *something* in this industry" or was it "I want to be publishing here" or "I want to be programming"?

I wanted to somehow be involved. At that point, everybody was making it up as they went along. At the time, we were asking ourselves, "What is this for?" There was no commercial Internet. Having things online, being able to communicate asynchronously, always being networked—that was what I loved about being in school and communicating by email, and hating the phone. That was so natural to me.

I saw that and I thought it was exciting and I wanted to be involved in it, but I wasn't totally clear on what that could be. What kind of job can you do with this? So I just started calling people up. "Hey, I want to do Internet-y things." Something that I totally recommend is calling people up or emailing people and saying, "Hey, can I buy you coffee and have you talk about your career?" People will do that, and I totally did this.

Who were you calling up?

It was tech publishers and maybe more magazine-oriented people. Because of that, it ended up that somebody at IDG Publishing got my name.

So you were calling people looking for job opportunities?

Or just looking to talk. I'd say, "Hey, I'm interested in this stuff." Again, the willingness of people to just talk to you is real. This is my number-one advice for anybody starting out in their career and especially after interviewing a lot of people for jobs. Having a thing you want to do in an industry and being super-excited about that thing is the hugest asset. If you just come in to a place, even if you say, "I want to have coffee," and you talk to somebody who's in a particular field and you say, "What you do is so kickass and I want to do it. Tell me how you did it," that person is going to want to help you.

Sometimes people are kind of shy. They think, "Oh, I'm going to wait until there's a job opening" or "I don't want to take somebody's time up." Seriously, that's a break for somebody who's really advanced in their career. As long as they have any free time at all, they'll say, "Oh, God, I could talk to all these annoying people I work with or I could go talk to a young, idealistic person who's going to look at me like I'm their hero and talk about myself for an hour." That is candy to an experienced professional.

And it totally worked. This was '94 or '95, at this point. I'd quit my stupid job and I'm running out of money in my checking account. Then the phone rings and it was somebody at IDG in San Francisco saying, "Hey, we have this research job. Would you be willing to just come in and we'll give you 15 bucks an hour." My reaction was, "Wow, that's so much more than minimum wage. That's amazing." They had all these tech publications and this was the unit that had Publish magazine, which was about print publishing.

I remember it.

The CEO of this particular business unit said, "I'm trying to figure out whether we should start a publication about the web and about HTML. I want you to talk to people and gauge their interests." So I just got this list and—I can't even explain to you how much I hated talking on the phone, how much the phone just filled me with anxiety—but I knew that, once again, I've got to call random strangers and ask something of them. I wanted this so much, I had to overcome this horrible social anxiety about talking on the phone. That's why I love the Internet.

But I managed to get people to talk to me. I'd shown a certain amount of moxie, so the CEO of this IDG business unit that published four or five magazines hired me to be part of the exploratory Internet team. I don't even remember if I had a title.

This is exactly what they say happens in books. You talk to people and then somebody makes a job for you. It was like "What Color Is Your Parachute?" by the numbers. It was amazing. The greatest part about that job was that everything was just starting. Nobody knew what anybody was doing. I had a salary and really ill-defined responsibilities. It was just us trying to figure out how this publishing company was going to get into the Internet business.

Other than being able to get people to talk, what technical skills did you have?

I didn't know HTML when I went in. I just had this interest, so I taught myself HTML. Then I started teaching myself Perl. I started learning all this stuff and then I started freelancing and getting people to pay me to do things I didn't quite know how to do yet. I got a freelance Perl scripting job and I was making web pages. I got my own site. I got up on Laughing Squid way back in the day. I was getting paid and on the side I

was just learning stuff because nobody knew what to do.

Then this IDG business unit kind of imploded and I went to go work for another part of the company that was doing stuff around online community. The initial idea was that we were all going to be the central service bureau to do Internet-y things for all the IDG publications, and these were all really technical publications like Macworld, PCWorld. They built this whole platform from scratch, like a CMS and BBS together and they said to me, "You're kind of technical but you also know how to write and you're good with words, so you're going to be the producer and you're going to run this online community."

It was called Arcadium and so I was the producer. They let me hire three interns, who were basically just low-paid actual production staff but they called them interns. I learned a lot of things about online communities—that was the buzzword. People weren't quite sure how to make money from socialization online. I think we're still in the same place.

I also got to live through my first community shutdown. It was terrible. I saw the connections people were making online. People met prom dates on this stupid video game community. They met spouses. They made friendships.

So, you found these opportunities by asking for them or being enthusiastic about them, and basically getting opportunities to learn on the job. The things that you were doing gave you training in product design, interface design, and strategy. Did you realize all of this would lead to being an experience designer?

Well, that didn't exist then. I was technical at that point. I'd always been a generalist.

If someone had asked you what you did for a living then, what would you have said?

Internet. That's what we all do. We make Internet.

What did you do next?

This was '98, '99. I interviewed at Yahoo to be the producer of their online games. They really liked me and wanted to hire me, and I said, "No way am I commuting down the peninsula. Not for any amount of money. I don't care." I took six months off and I went to Europe for a while, then I came back and hung out in San Francisco, being unemployed, which was fantastic. If you can somehow manage to be there and not have a job…

It's like a playground.

Yes, infinitely entertaining. It's so great to spend some time without a job in a city like that. Then I thought, "Okay, where am I going to go do Internet things next?" A friend who'd been my manager at the IDG community thing said, "Well, I've got a friend who works at Studio Archetype and they're hiring a lot of people right now." I said, "Well, what do you need? I guess I could be a project manager," because at that point, I was still too general to have any specific skills. They hired me and then I was in an agency.

And I was not only in an agency, I was in one of the greatest agencies going. I mean, that place was fantastic. The people there were so smart. All of a sudden I was part of this multi-disciplinary, problem-solving, Super Friends team. We worked really, really hard. We had these insane long days, but everybody that I worked with was so smart. I just learned stuff from being around these people every day.

Were you still acting as a generalist there or were you starting to specialize?

Well, I was brought in as a project manager, which is really funny because I think no person in their twenties can be a project

manager. The whole skill is having experienced a lot of stuff and being able to say, "Oh, yeah, I know what's going to happen." It was like this runaway train because they had all these clients and there was so much going on that I got thrown into things.

Then I did some writing and I was an assistant project manager on the Xerox account. I had no clue what was going on, that project was enormous. Web projects were huge then because you had to make a site for every single browser. There was no CSS. They required a project team of twelve people and a seven-figure budget, which would be a $5,000 project to do today. It was crazy. What was I even doing? I was faxing things. Then they needed somebody to do some writing, so I did some writing. Then they said, "Oh, would you like to be a content strategist?" I thought, "Awesome. I'm going to be a content strategist now." This is how these things happen.

I worked on this enormous redesign for Electronic Arts as a content strategist. They embedded me with this content team that had all come out of journalism, and it was really cliquish and weird. It made me think, "Okay, I'm a second-class content strategist," but then I did the job and I did fine. I did a good job. That's really where I got into navigation design and interaction design. That's where I had my first screaming fights about navigational nomenclature. It was awesome to be in a place where people would have actual screaming fights about what to label things. Everybody took it so seriously.

Then that job wrapped up and they ended up killing it because they did a deal with AOL. We did this whole project and then we heard, "Oh, well, the client's going in a different direction. We're going to get paid. We're going to get the two million dollars or whatever, but nothing's going to launch."

Then the Sapient acquisition of Studio Archetype was being completed and I decided, "I am out of here." That's when I quit and went to New Zealand.

Why did you go to New Zealand?

I went to New Zealand because I just had these successive crushings of my spirit. "All these really smart people are putting all their energy into this, but, hey, the powers that be have decided to take it in another direction." It was so intense and I thought, I just need to take a long walk in a peaceful place.

What year was this?

That was 2000. I spent a couple of months walking in New Zealand and I came back. I freelanced for a while. I decided I missed working for a team and that's when I went to work for Hot Studio as a project manager because at that point, I was still a generalist.

Then the recession was really terrible and they had to lay people off, but I got out before that. That's where I met Mike Monteiro, my future partner at Mule Design. He was the art director at Hot Studio. He left to go to this photo company Snapfish. I was super miserable at Hot. Their biggest client was Charles Schwab. This giant project that had been keeping us afloat was shut down, and I got out because Mike said to me, "We're doing a huge redesign and we need a writer to essentially write the interface."

We hung out for that summer and I worked on the interaction design. Even though it wasn't really called that, that's really what I was doing. I started wireframing and I was really involved in the research. I was involved in every part of the project and it was exciting. It was the last startup in that period that was paying people, and we felt like the last people. Like, the ship is sinking and we're on the last Titanic life raft out there.

I remember that time, for sure.

We thought, "Hey, we all have exciting jobs!" Then, "Hey,

nobody I know has a job anymore!" People either went into restaurant jobs or, if they'd managed to make any money during the first tech bubble, they were hanging out in Thailand.

You were at Studio Archetype, which then became Sapient, and then you went away and then you went back to Hot Studio—these are all agencies—and then you went to Snapfish for a summer. Did that make you feel that you wanted to be on the product side rather than the services side?

It was more like, "This is a place that's paying and fun." When I worked in the agency environment, I loved having that level of really wanting to solve the design problem really well, and the sense that everybody that I was working with had that shared concern. Clement Mok had written that book, "Designing Business," about strategic design, and it was essentially what we were doing.

We knew that Snapfish was short term. Mike was their creative director, making a stupid salary working with some really not-awesome designers and fighting with engineers about what was possible. I asked him, "God, what are we going to do?" Having been at the mercy of all these top-level, strategic decisions that really affected us as employees, we thought, "Well, we could start our own agency." It's good that we did, because the fact that we had created jobs for us ourselves made us the only people in San Francisco with jobs! Not that we were getting paid. I had a little money saved up and he had some contract work.

So you went out on your own. Did you have any clients right away?

One of the great things to do is to quit your job. Sometimes you quit your job but manage to set up a contracting relationship with your former employer. That's something to consider as a person trying to go on their own.

We got this little starting place and then we started to get clients. That's where I had to learn all the rest of the stuff I didn't know. All the experience I'd had was weird and patchy but super valuable. I'd been involved in business development and I was involved in proposal writing. I'd done things on the technical side. I'd probably even done some terrible visual design, but I've done really everything. It also turned out that the philosophy degree was incredibly relevant.

In what way?

It's very much about constructing an argument and clarifying it. Philosophy is this total precursor to strategy or interaction design or information architecture. Because you create ontologies or you understand the ontology. You propose different worlds. A lot of times what philosophers will do is propose a model. "Here's a model for how the universe is set up." Well, now I'm going to critique that model and propose a different model or I'm just going to do a pure critique. That's what philosophers have done through the ages.

So, despite the fact that I never went through the design school crit process, that sort of building a rationale or critiquing somebody else's rationale was part of my work. If you said to me, "Here's the goal, here's the design solution," I could sell that cold to any client. I can build a rationale for anything. You could call it bullshitting, but then you know how you start saying stuff and you realize after the fact, "Wow! I was actually right."

When did this skill develop? Did you have it there because of your philosophy background or did your experience and lots of client-facing time bring it out?

I think, to a certain extent, I'm a talker. Despite the weird phone thing, I'm super comfortable in front of people. That's something that doesn't bother me. I don't know where that

comes from, but standing up and presenting to people and explaining things to people had always been something that I'd done and enjoyed doing.

Then I just got more and more practice with it and more exposure to uncomfortable situations or when something goes horribly wrong at which point you say, "Okay, what could I do better next time?" It's all just practice, practice, practice.

So this is when you and Mike were forming Mule Design. Did you have a first client to kick you off?

Yes, yes. Mike got his MFA at the University of Texas and lived in Austin for many years. He had an old friend who was the marketing director of a wildlife preserve outside of Austin called Fossil Rim. We started Mule with him as our very first client and that was very exciting. It was a great job and we actually made a really great site for them. The next marketing director came in and screwed it all up, but it was really, really good.

Was it just the two of you doing all of the work? The sales, the client management, the design and development?

It was the two of us and then we brought in contractors because, wow, there were a lot of people available! A contract project manager was brought in, we had a contract coder, a contract Flash developer. We said, "Okay, we have friends with skills who need money." It was really touch-and-go that first year because we had a couple of clients to start off and then we realized, "Wow, now we've got to get more."

We all had a kind of PTSD. I remember we had no money and one proposal out to a prospective client and we thought, "Please, God, sign this soon." We were trying to figure out how to run a business and then Yahoo, amusingly enough, was the first Internet company to revive and resuscitate. We had a friend who had gone to work for Yahoo who called and said,

"Hey, we need some help on this project. Do you guys want to come down and work with us?" It was a big and substantial contract and we said, "We eat tonight!"

The funny thing about Yahoo at that time is it was like the afterlife for the tech boom. We're on this sunny campus with the free cappuccinos and I ran into everyone I'd ever worked with from every job. There were people there from IDG, there were people there from Studio Archetype. I think there were people there from Hot. They were the only people hiring.

For the next year or so, we did a ton of work with Yahoo and then they started hiring some real strategic designers such as Irene Au. They said, "We're going to change from being an engineering-driven culture to having this user experience practice," and then they wanted to bring us in and mentor their design teams.

After a while, we'd gotten everything out of Yahoo we needed. We ended up getting this job working with the UN that was really awesome. Then we were off and running.

It's funny, the one good thing about economic downtimes is that the risk of something not working out is so low. The really exciting thing about starting Mule was that, to the people we talked to, we were this shining beacon of optimism. Everybody else was of the mind, "I'm so screwed. I thought that being an interaction designer was this awesome career and now nobody needs that. Was that just something that we thought was going to be a business? The new economy wasn't actually a thing, and the Internet isn't actually important?"

And there we were, starting a company to design web sites. We got so much great positive reinforcement and people were so excited to hear that we were starting something. We weren't just talking about what crashed and died. We had a lot of cheerleaders just because we represented a counter to the prevailing

attitude of doom and gloom, that everything's gone and it's not coming back.

So to clarify, what was the turning point for you? When did you say, "Okay, now I'm in the business of design"?

I think I was in the business of design as soon as I went to work for Studio Archetype. It felt like, "We're the design team," especially when we went into a client's office. There wasn't this sense of, "You're not a designer," because everybody was participating. That's why I developed this holistic view of how we work. It's not just the visual design. It's not the code. You need the strategic thinking and you need that technological thinking. That was when I formed that identity of "I am a designer," but I also learned that a designer isn't one genius person. For this kind of work, you absolutely need multidisciplinary thinking or you're only going to be solving part of the problem.

How do you feel about your career today? Do you think you've arrived or do you think there's another milestone that you guys are trying to get to, as a studio or personally?

If I'd arrived, I'd be in Thailand.

I sort of feel that at this point you can go to Thailand.

Yes, that's true, but it's good to be here. In some ways, we're the Internet's "children of the Depression," because having been through that experience we're now of the mindset, "The pantry is always going to be full so at least we can eat." When we talked about Mule, we said, "We are never getting so big that we can't weather a downturn. We are never laying people off." We saw what "growth for growth's sake" did to other companies and we said, "Why? What does that get you?" It doesn't necessarily get you more money, because your overhead goes way up and up. We're always going to have close control over the clients so we don't have to say, "Hey, we really need mon-

ey because we've hired all this staff, so now we're working for Monsanto." We never want to be in that position.

What we want is a place that we have control over, that we can go to everyday and do what we want to do. In that sense, we arrived as soon as we founded the company. I feel we're in a good position and we have a lot of choices and opportunities. We continue to make new and better and different mistakes. We're fulfilling the vision, and it's a place that's very pleasant to go to instead of commuting down the peninsula. This work is tremendous fun and it's taking everything we have and everything we've learned and asking, "What can we do?"

I think when you're just starting out in your career and you think about other people's careers, it seems like a super-smooth trajectory and it seems like people do things really intentionally. I love looking back at the things I tried that totally didn't work out. Those things are really, really useful. Things go horribly, but somewhere down the line, that thing that went horribly is going to totally help you do something really fantastic.

Let me ask you about your partnership with Mike. Do you feel like things accelerated for you once you two teamed up? How pivotal was that in your career, finding someone who could complement you and be there as a partner in crime?

Our skills are super complementary—extremely. This also sometimes leads to epic battles, because the flipside of things being really complementary is having these really different approaches. I'll come in and be super analytical about something, and he'll come in with this—I don't want to call it intuitive, that sounds dismissive, but a different sensibility, and a more—I don't know even know how to describe it. Anything I say is going to sound like Spock describing how humans have emotions [*laughs*].

That's how it works, though, because we can come in from both

places. It really helps in that sense because we have this real strength. It's good to have a counter. We're both super opinionated and have a super-strong sense of what the right way to do something is. That difference is good, even though it might be uncomfortable. I talk about this in my book, "Just Enough Research," but striving to be comfortable is not a productive feeling. If you feel comfortable in what you're doing, then you're not challenging yourself and you're not growing. Have you seen the Metallica documentary "Some Kind of Monster"?

No, I never have. But so many people recommend it.

It's so good. I resisted it because I'm not a Metallica fan, but in the same way that "The Wire" isn't really about the police, the Metallica documentary isn't really about metal. What you'll see are people who have become comfortable trying to make music for people who are in this young, striving, rage place. It's like, you can't sit there with your Chardonnay in one of your five houses and talk about raging with Satan, or whatever they did.

I definitely think, if left to our own devices, Mike and I might've each just gone off and been a freelancer or just done our own thing. It seems so terrifying to be responsible for other people. It's good to have another person to share that terror with.

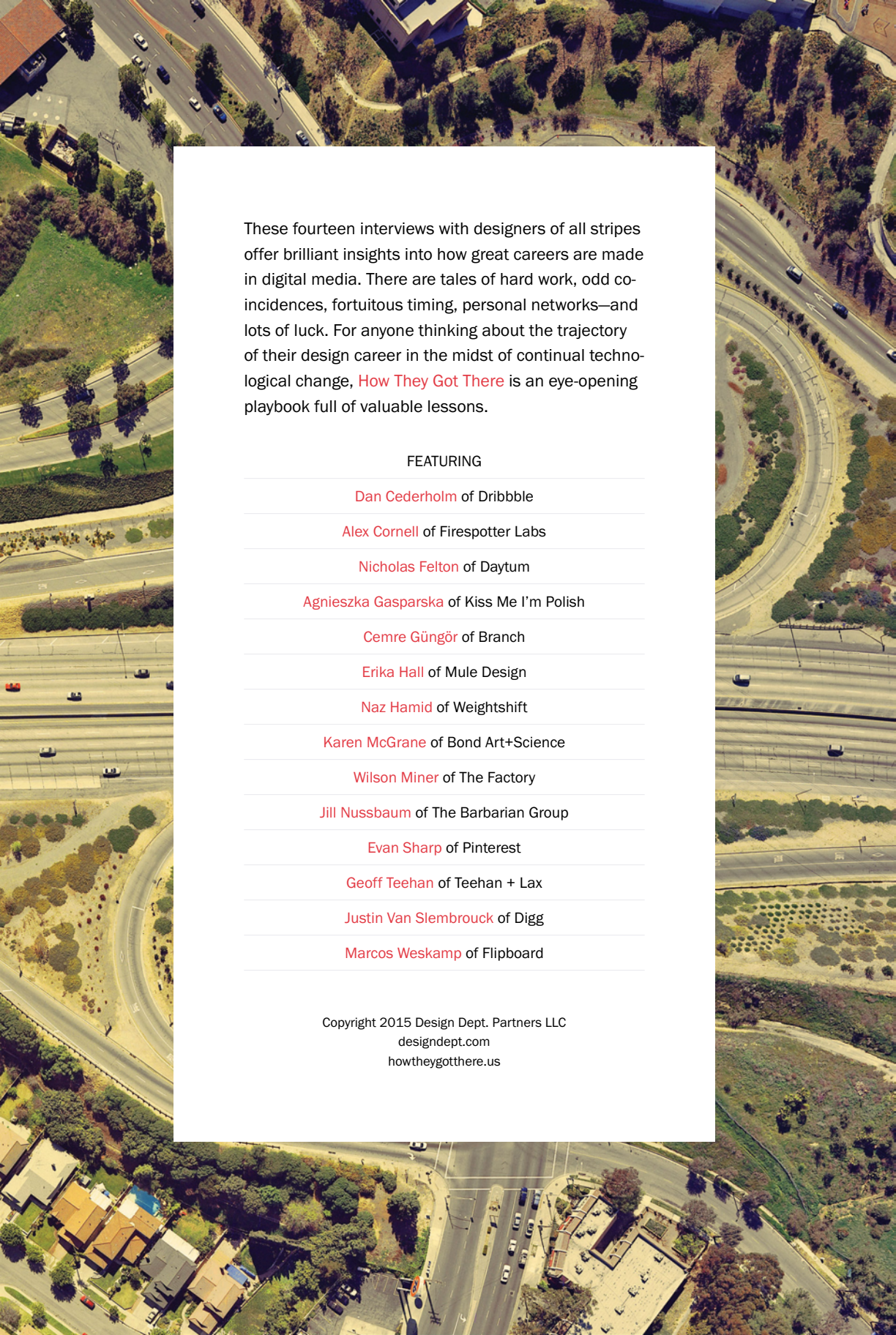
How long do you think you guys will run Mule Design? Is this until you retire? Or is this…

Until we die. I feel like, Mule is what we do. What Mule *is* could change.

We don't have a strong idea about what Mule has to be. It just has to be the place that supports the kind of work that we want to be doing. If someday Mule is the name of the island that we've retired to, great, but I can't even imagine that. And this might be true for a lot of designers—to me the idea of retiring sounds just horrifying. No longer having problems to solve,

other than when I'm going to schedule my knee replacement or where I'm going to play a round of golf or whatever. I have to solve problems for other people. I just love solving problems for other people so much. I can't imagine not doing that.

There's a quote that goes, "You think everybody's highlight reel is their documentary." People have this sense that everybody else has it figured out. And then you're doing it, and you think, "Oh, my God. I don't know what I'm doing." If you do it long enough without knowing what you're doing, then you realize *no one* actually knows what they're doing. That is the liberating insight. People running these enormous companies, they know some things but they're making stuff up and hoping it works out. That's 90 percent of it. Once you accept that about the world, I think that's very calming.



These fourteen interviews with designers of all stripes offer brilliant insights into how great careers are made in digital media. There are tales of hard work, odd coincidences, fortuitous timing, personal networks—and lots of luck. For anyone thinking about the trajectory of their design career in the midst of continual technological change, How They Got There is an eye-opening playbook full of valuable lessons.

FEATURING

Dan Cederholm of Dribbble

Alex Cornell of Firespotter Labs

Nicholas Felton of Daytum

Agnieszka Gasparska of Kiss Me I'm Polish

Cemre Güngör of Branch

Erika Hall of Mule Design

Naz Hamid of Weightshift

Karen McGrane of Bond Art+Science

Wilson Miner of The Factory

Jill Nussbaum of The Barbarian Group

Evan Sharp of Pinterest

Geoff Teehan of Teehan + Lax

Justin Van Slembrouck of Digg

Marcos Weskamp of Flipboard

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