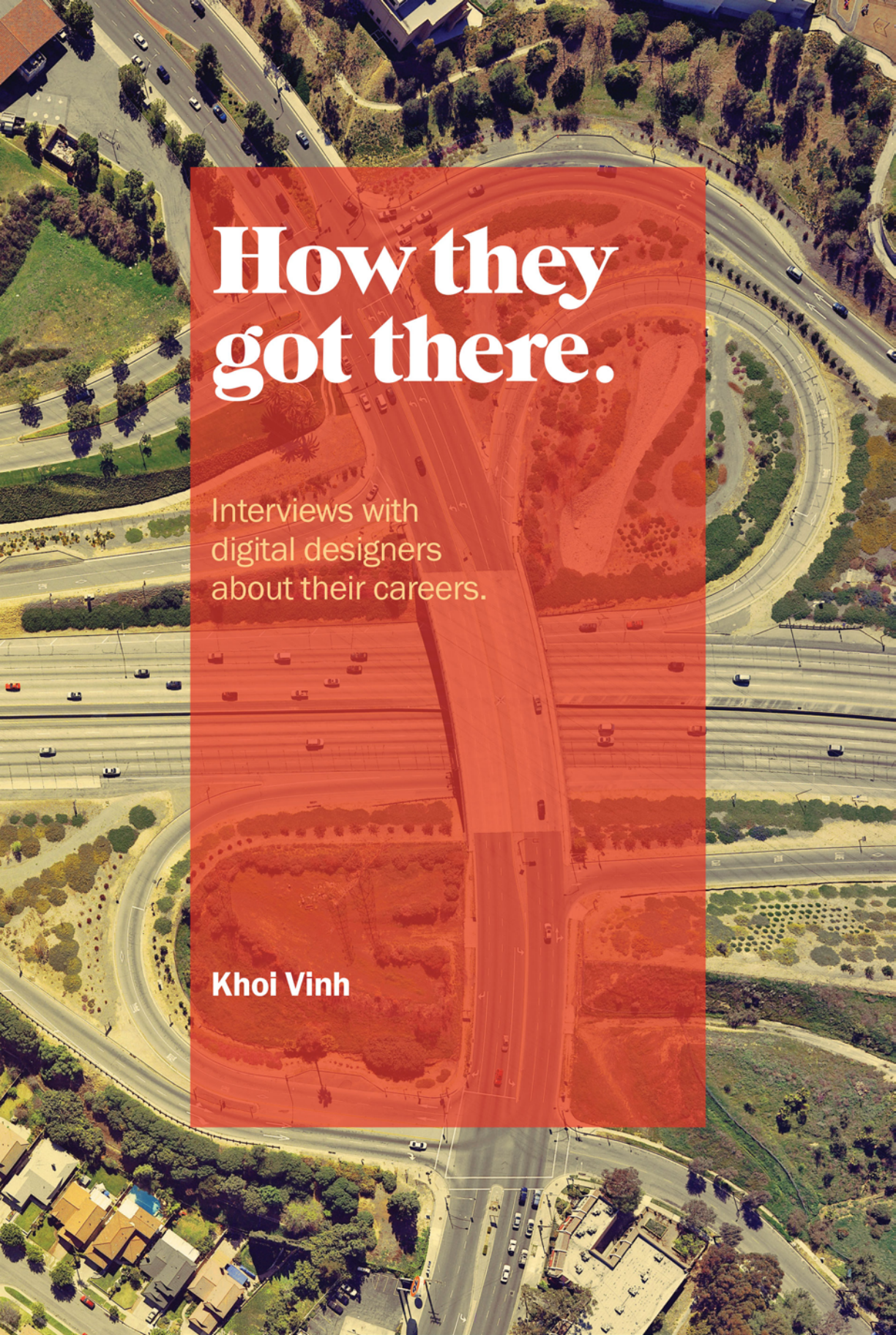


How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

Chapter 12

Geoff Teehan

Co-founder, Teehan+Lax

Toronto native Geoff Teehan came up during the first dot-com boom at pioneering digital agency Modem Media—until the market crashed. But he managed to salvage a client roster from that business and, with fellow agency veteran Jon Lax, co-founded Teehan+Lax, which went on to establish an international reputation for stellar digital design.

What exposure to design did you have prior to college?

I was never very studious. I struggled in high school a lot. I didn't do all that well with structured learning environments. I was always a very visual person, so my grades suffered. I had one brother who was exactly the opposite of me; he did very well in school and was not a very visual person. I thought that I had to do whatever he was doing.

I thought I wanted to get into architecture. Then I realized how much structured learning there is to get into that field, so I

quickly looked for something else to do. I had a friend who was working at a print company, and he would do designs for small clients: posters, flyers, that kind of thing. This would have been the early '90s, so he was using Corel Draw. I thought, "Oh man, that looks like fun. I could totally get into that." I started to do rave flyers for people, back when that was a real thing.

Did you know that what you were doing was design?

Yes, I did. It wasn't good design, but it was design, nonetheless. I was making a tiny bit of money at it, but I was still going to school, and I hadn't yet decided what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Then this guy who was doing the flyers turned me on to this program at a local community college up here in Toronto called Seneca. They had a school of communication arts, which was in this really rinky-dink building in a strip plaza. It was a three-year program.

The Internet was just starting to become something, but there were no design careers in that. The focus was still primarily around print, although we were starting to use computers to do design work, early QuarkXPress layout stuff. When we were doing typography, it was marker renderings on vellum, that kind of thing.

I really got into it. Because it was something I was passionate about, I decided to double down on it. I took summer programs so I could get through it quicker. I did the three-year course at Seneca in two years. Technically, though, I didn't attend enough hours, so I actually never got my diploma.

So, technically, you don't know what you're talking about.

Yes, exactly [*laughs*]. I could have done another semester, taken two more courses and gotten it. But part of the program was

doing an internship. I went into a local design firm here in Toronto called HM&E. Paul Haslip, who was one of the founders of that agency, was a very good print designer at the time. I went to go work for him for a summer semester.

How did that come about?

The school did placement, and HM&E had taken placements in the past. I worked with him for a summer in the mid-'90s. I really enjoyed it. I learned a ton about what we call "flat design" today. That's what you did back then.

Did you know about this studio before you were placed? Would you say you were aware of the design world?

Yes, definitely. It was a really big part of the college program, actually. We talked a lot about who was doing good work. A lot of times we were talking about people who were in the UK: Emigré and Rudy VanderLans, that kind of stuff was really big back then.

Were the people at HM&E your design heroes?

I don't know if I'd say they were design heroes, but I certainly looked up to them and aspired to be as good as they were. They weren't world-renowned, but they were definitely well-known locally. I actually think I had to apply to a few different ones, so I got a couple rejection letters, and I got accepted.

I remember, I went into work and it was pretty daunting at first. Even though it was a small company, we were working on good projects. They did a lot of annual reports and identity design, which is something that I was really passionate about: working with tabular data, working with real information, not just doing print brochures and poster work. I was really into more functional design.

Back then, annual report design was gorgeous. Companies spent a ton of money on their annual reports, so it was something I was really into. To get exposed to that, at that level, was really important. It really helped shape me and helped me find the kinds of work that I still like to do today, which is highly functional work. I don't really love doing a lot of the brochure-ware type web sites. I'd far rather work on things that are grounded in utility, which stems from my experience doing annual report design.

At what point during school did you get this gig?

The last semester was a placement semester. I was two courses shy of graduating, but after that experience I decided to look for work. I tried to get work at the same place I was working, but that didn't pan out.

Why was that? Weren't they hiring?

They were hiring, but maybe I wasn't good enough. Whenever I look back on the work that I've done, even just a few years back, some of it I find really cringe-worthy, even today. Back then it was probably the same thing. I think you always think you're better than you are. It's nice sometimes to get a reality check. I definitely got one, and it forced me to go out and look for work.

My mother, God rest her soul, was golfing one day with somebody who owned a print shop up here. She mentioned me to him, he brought me in, looked at my portfolio, and hired me. I ended up working in a print shop for the first couple years of my career. We did a lot of movie and music posters, so I was doing things I didn't want to do, but I was getting paid for it, and I was getting great experience. I loved getting to know the guys back in the press room, following everything from design right through to production, which I thought was really amazing.

You mean to see the whole process from end to end?

Yes, and being able to make changes. There were no digital presses, so I was processing the film, going into the darkroom, and then I would print plates and take them back to the press room. I'd get to know the guys who were running the job, and once they got the registration right, we would work on how heavy the ink should be and the different colors. It was great, getting to fine-tune everything.

In a lot of cases I was working directly with their clients. I would be an in-house designer if they didn't have somebody. One of the clients I happened to work with was an Internet startup, I would guess it was '95 or '96. They needed an identity package, and they were this company that would get you on the web for $1,000. It was this crazy menu-based Internet package deal that started at $1,000, and you could do add-ons, such as, "Here's an email template, that's an extra $50," or whatever it was. I did all of their brochures, their identity, the stationery, and all that kind of stuff. They invited me to their Christmas party, and then offered me a job.

What was the name of that company?

It was called NetSteps, Inc. We worked out of their house for the first maybe eight or nine months, and then got a real office.

At this point, where did you expect your career to take you? What was your vision of what you thought you would be doing going forward?

My ambition then was to work at a similar place to the one I interned at, where I couldn't get the job. I needed to build up my chops, and I needed real experience. I needed face time with customers. The print shop felt like a good starting place. I thought it was really healthy. To be honest, I didn't aspire to do anything but print design and annual reports and identity work

for a small company like HM&E. I would get to know other parts of the industry, too, which I felt could probably be valuable if I was to go into another boutique print design shop.

What was your relationship with technology like at the time? You were using analog for printing purposes, but you were obviously using computers, at least at the outset of the job, right?

My relationship with computers started early on. As soon as they were around and consumer-friendly, that's when we got them. We always had computers at home. We didn't get the Macintosh when it came out, but my parents ended up getting the Apple IIc. Later, I had a PC at home, and that's where I was doing all of my early freelance work, my rave flyers and that kind of thing. I remember computers were so slow back then, and so memory-intensive. I remember having to take all the profits from one particular job—maybe $1,600—and I spent it all on 32 megabytes of RAM, so then I could actually run Photoshop properly.

Having worked with the print company, I was exposed to some of the better equipment. We were working on Quadra 900s, which were these huge, beige Mac towers—massive, these things were. They were the best at the time. I was lucky enough to actually get to work on some pretty decent equipment for the time.

So, after the print shop, you went to work at NetSteps. Were you thinking, "This is a good job for now," or, "This is a great job, and it's also the future"?

It was the future. Immediately I thought, "I can't say no to this." It was scary, because it became clear that this was something that was totally different, building and designing web sites. There were loads of constraints that were different from print—the constraints of screen size, how interactive things could be, page size. This was just a different set of design constraints, and

I found it really fascinating.

It was a whole new learning experience. I didn't know anything about what it took to design a web page at first, yet I knew right away that it was probably what I was going to do for the rest of my career. I figured I would probably still dabble in print, but from a career perspective, I couldn't ever see myself going back. I gave up pretty quickly on that dream of doing annual reports.

Did you learn HTML at this startup?

Yes, really basic HTML. I learned it on the job. They had hired webmasters back then, who were actually in charge of doing the code. I was doing design. I was basically working in Photoshop, from an early stage, but I would do a little bit of code, not very much. Back then the web was so basic.

How long did you work at the startup?

I worked there from pretty much the time it started, right to the last day, when the banks changed the locks on the doors [*laughs*]. It went bankrupt; they couldn't afford to pay the bills. What they were selling, no one was buying. They struggled for a few years. The owners had made a lot of money in a fax business, believe it or not, and then they basically spent their millions running this thing into the ground. I worked there right until the very end, which would have probably been '97 or so. There were a lot of good people that worked there. We started a new chapter together after that company went down.

Was that the earliest foundation of your professional network?

Yes, absolutely, it was. With a few of the people that worked at NetSteps we started a company. One of the guys, I remember, came into the office one day and announced, "Hey, I got this new piece of software, and it's pretty game-changing. It's called

FutureSplash" (which later became Macromedia Flash). We were blown away and started doing full-screen animation. We thought, "This is what every site needs!"—which now is obviously ridiculous. Back then it was really something.

We started to do a lot of that stuff, or we tried to pitch it on clients, anyway. When that company went bankrupt, we had all been working in FutureSplash since its inception. All we were doing was Flash work.

On day one at NetSteps, you were a print designer making the transition to doing web design. When you left NetSteps, how would you have described yourself?

I'd say I was a web designer. We were doing some relatively interesting work, for the time. There were probably only a handful of shops that were doing what we were capable of doing on the Internet, so we felt pretty confident that this was the direction that we were going to head.

Personally, I felt like I had taken my career in the right direction. Leaving behind the print industry and the dream of doing really great annual reports was probably a really sound decision even back then. I wasn't making a lot of money. I didn't really have much of a name for myself. We didn't have the networks we have today, where you could build a reputation. Everything just resided in this little vacuum. I didn't have a personal portfolio site—no one did that kind of thing, or not to the level that it happens today. Still, I felt like I was headed in the right direction, and that this type of work was going to be where my future was.

When NetSteps went bankrupt, what did you think you would do next?

I was scared. I didn't have a job. The market was a little bit different. There were very few interactive shops. The agencies

hadn't started to do that kind of work. I thought, "What do I do? Do I go back to print design?"

So we opened up our own shop, Templar 3, with some of the guys who had a technical background. This is pre-Teehan+Lax. We started with three guys. It took us maybe a month to find a space, and get up and running. It happened relatively quickly.

Did you have an anchor client, somebody that you were able to take away from your experience at NetSteps?

No, in fact, I don't think we had any work when we started it. We had built up a small network of people that we knew. One of the guys was connected with the entertainment industry, and one of his contacts fed us a relatively good piece of work at the time. That's where we began to build a reputation as being a decent Flash shop. Some agencies caught wind of that, and our clients then became primarily agencies. We weren't doing a lot of direct client work. We were like an outsource firm for Flash work.

Who was doing the business development?

Initially, we all were. Then after a few months we hired somebody fulltime to take that on. We talked about, "Should one of the partners take that role on?" But we didn't think we were going to be very good at it, so we hired somebody else. It turns out that they didn't really move the needle forward for us, either. Selling that stuff was hard. No one had a budget slated for it. It was considered an extra. The bigger clients were focused on spending their budgets in the same ways that they probably had for the last fifteen years. It was a very difficult sell.

Through the Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund—funds set up by the Canadian government to help companies that wanted to do things on the Internet—we actually had some traction. We found some clients to work with, so we could build some

decent stuff. Then we got in touch with this agency called Modem Media. They were digital only and had really good clients, and that's where we really started to do better work. We didn't have to worry about new business. We could just focus on doing the work.

We still weren't making that much money. Outsourced Flash work, back in the late '90s, was not exactly super-high paying. We did what we could, and then after a while, it became clear that we might as well just go work for these guys, because it's all we were doing anyway, and we could probably make more money doing it, and not have to worry about all the back-office stuff, such as billing and everything else that comes with running your own business.

What sort of Flash work was being outsourced to you?

We were doing a mixture of microsites and advertisements, such as IAB Flash ads and GIF replacements—all the stuff that makes the Internet such a nasty place today. It used a skill set that we had, and it enabled us to then begin another chapter.

All of us at Templar 3 ended up going over to Modem Media and working. That's where I met my current business partner, Jon Lax. He was the creative director. I got hired on as an art director, and then eventually became associate creative director.

Were you still paying your dues at that point or did you feel that you had arrived?

I was definitely still paying dues. Today, there's that term "digital landfill"—that's all we were doing. None of the stuff we were making was going to be around in, hell, six months, let alone six years. We knew it, and that didn't feel great. The Internet couldn't offer much more than what we were doing. We were doing probably the best we could at the time.

It wasn't until we started to work on this really early weblog, which came out at around the same time that Blogger did, that I started to feel more invigorated about the industry as a whole. We had actually built it for General Motors. It was a social network where kids could talk about things that they were interested in, and it just happened to be sponsored by GM. For all intents and purposes, it was a weblog and we got to do really interesting, functional work there. It wasn't necessarily great, but for the first time in my career I felt like we were building something that could have some use to people, and it wasn't just about advertising.

Was that a revelation to you, that you could do work for businesses and it doesn't have to be advertising?

It wasn't even about me. It was a revelation of what the Internet could become. We can do really functional things here. We can actually enable people to communicate, and it's not just through email or Instant Messenger or whatever the flavor of the week was.

This was the web doing this, and that was a whole new thing. It made us think a little bit more strategically, not just jump into Photoshop. We had to formalize an information architecture practice. That got me really excited.

How about the client-facing aspect of your job? Were you presenting or managing clients?

Maybe a year in, I started doing client presentations. At first I was art-directing other designers, but I wasn't managing them. I got promoted to associate creative director, and then I was running clients. We had other people who were strategists and technical leads, but I was leading them from a creative perspective.

The client-facing stuff was really intimidating at first, because

we were dealing with really big clients such as General Motors and Coke. That was intimidating as a young designer, to have to stand up in front of your clients—not just your peers—and speak passionately about your work and defend your decisions.

That was definitely a learning process. It was another aspect of the job that I hadn't thought about. I had always just thought about the craft. There's obviously a whole other side to it, that I still like to this day.

Did you like interfacing with clients right away or did you have to warm up to it?

I hated it. I wouldn't sleep the night before. I was totally nerve-wracked. I'd have to rehearse. I don't speak off the cuff very well. It's just not part of who I am as a human being.

I got more comfortable as time went on, but I remember the first year of it, I would never look forward to that kind of stuff. Even if I was really excited about the work; even if I thought the work I was going to present was going to be well-received, and if I thought I could defend it well, I was just nervous and young and inexperienced in that aspect of being a creative professional.

What prompted you and Jon Lax to leave Modem Media and start your own company?

At Modem's height, they had more than five hundred people in ten offices around the world. When the dot-com bubble burst, they shut down almost all the offices, including Toronto. While I was saddened to see the company fold, it was also exciting. There were still opportunities out there. Agencies were starting to build up their digital arms.

I'd had a very good relationship with one of my big clients, one that Modem Media's U.S. firm wasn't going to take on. It was

Maritime Life, a life insurance company out on the east coast of Canada, and we were working on an intranet for the entire company. We were probably halfway through the information architecture and still had a lot more work to do. I talked to the other people that had been on my team and Jon about going out on our own.

I asked the U.S. division if it was okay to pursue the client, and they said yes. So we started with this large piece of work, that would probably take another two or three months. It was a really good, healthy budget that would sustain us for a while. That was what launched the next chapter.

When Jon and I were interviewing around the city at various agencies, we weren't happy to see that everybody was doing the same thing. Digital agencies were structured after traditional ad models, with tons of layers of hierarchy, these A-teams and B-teams. We thought, "There's got to be a better way to do this." We decided to take on the Maritime Life work, and we started Teehan + Lax.

How could you tell that you and Jon would make good partners?

I interviewed with Jon at Modem, and I remember liking him immediately. He was young to be a director in that company. He was just very smart, and had a very good sense of the industry and where it would go. And then we got to have a good working relationship. He is incredibly pragmatic. He is insanely loyal. He comes from a copywriting background, and I come from an art background. Back then, art and copy were the match made in heaven. We just played off each other really well. We're very different in terms of our personalities, but I think that that helped us as well. He very much challenges decisions, in a healthy way, to try and get a better product out.

It was a good fit and we knew it. We figured we could probably

make a pretty good stab at this on our own.

So you and Jon were co-founders, with a few freelancers from your old team. Tell me about the process of turning it into a viable company.

We had that big anchor client, so we didn't need to go into debt. Through Modem we had a couple of new clients. We didn't really have to worry too much early on about new business. We didn't really have to worry too much about money. We had a really good network of talent that we could hire. There were definitely moments where it wasn't easy, but I felt really fortunate that getting the company off the ground in the first six months was relatively easy. It was really liberating to run our own thing.

We did quickly run into the realization that there are a lot of other parts of running a business besides just doing web design. We did have to worry about billing. We did have to worry about payroll, banking, credit, cash flow, dealing with people who don't pay. There's a whole bunch of things that we had to deal with that definitely brought on levels of stress. Again, Jon is an excellent business partner, and he took a lot of that stuff on. He's a driving force for the business, always has been.

How did your job evolve once you became a co-founder and co-owner of a company?

I was doing tons of design work at the beginning. When we grew to about thirty people, that's probably when things started to change, where I was doing a lot more client management than client work.

To be clear, I still do client work. I still consider myself a designer. I still like to design. I definitely spend a lot more of my time going after leads and following up on new business, but I try to maintain a good balance between managing the work

and doing the work. It's important to me, personally, that I stay active doing that stuff, because it's still what I love to do.

What were the major milestones that you had?

In 2002 or 2003, we won a really big client up here called Telus. They are a big mobile carrier in Ontario. That was a huge win for us. It had recurring revenue, so we could literally staff a team against it. This was our first solo win. We had Maritime Life, but that didn't feel fair because we got that from the previous company. That was a huge, huge moment. And we kept that client for five years

I also think of small things, like when we first leased a color copier. That was a really big accomplishment, because it was our first big investment. This thing cost $20,000 or $25,000. It marked a commitment that this company was for real. We were signing a three-year term on this piece of equipment, and it meant that we weren't just going to walk away from it. It meant we were going all in. We were not going to just shut the doors and go get jobs; we were making commitments.

I think the same thing could be said for when we were hiring people. It was the same thing: "We're committing to this." With contracts and freelancers, there's less of a commitment. When you're asking somebody to leave a job, or to start a career with you, that's a big milestone.

What were the low points? Was there ever a time when you thought, "Maybe this isn't the future for me"?

Yes. That Telus client, we lost them. They represented more than 50 percent of our revenue, and we lost them.

That was after five years?

Yes, new management came in, and they wanted to consolidate

agencies. They went with the agency that did all their traditional work with TV and print, who also had a digital arm now. They gave all the business to them, so we lost them overnight. That was really hard. It took us a while to recover.

I remember Jon and I didn't take paychecks for three months, so that we wouldn't have to fire anybody. I don't think we were ever at the point of, "We need to shut down." But it was definitely a conversation that we had. We had invested so much into this company, we were not going to just let it go. We didn't want to have to let these people go, only to have something bounce back and then try to re-hire them. It's not really their fault. It's just a byproduct of the industry. That was definitely a low point.

How did you claw your way back?

We just grinded. We made lots of phone calls. We waited. We weathered the storm. This industry is such a beast. What I'm about to say used to stress the shit out of me. And that is, we probably only have six to seven weeks' visibility. In a month and a half, I have no idea what we're working on. We have built up a level of trust that something will come in the door. And it has—knock wood—for eleven years. It doesn't stress us out like it used to. We definitely cut it close to the line sometimes, where things get a little sketchy. Thankfully, we've been good about reserving cash for when things do go sideways. We have some runway, where we can allow some gaps. It's definitely a stressful business, especially when you have so many people that rely on you. If it were just Jon and me, that's not as stressful. When you have fifty other people to worry about, it is.

Looking back, what are the things that you've done that really distinguished you from the countless other studios and agencies out there?

Very early on, we did a PVR report, a report on personal video

recorders. This was back in 2003 or something. We did this 40- or 50-page report on the state of the union on PVRs. We did full reviews, and on the back half of the report, we designed our own. It was a self-initiated, not-for-profit piece that we did to gain reputation. The digital channel back then was all about one screen: your desktop. We felt like there were other screens to design for, if we could get that opportunity. We thought this might be a good way to demonstrate that our skills could transfer into other interfaces. We chose the living room.

The report got picked up pretty widely. It was good for our reputation and it got us some meetings. I don't think it ever translated into actual work, but I bring it up as something that I'm proud of, and that I think we do differently. That is, we will take chances and do things in an effort to advance our skills and our reputation, in areas where we maybe don't have much. We did that with the PVR report. We've done it with other things, like creating applications for iOS. We've built out an entire labs group, and all they do is tinker with technology and physical Internet.

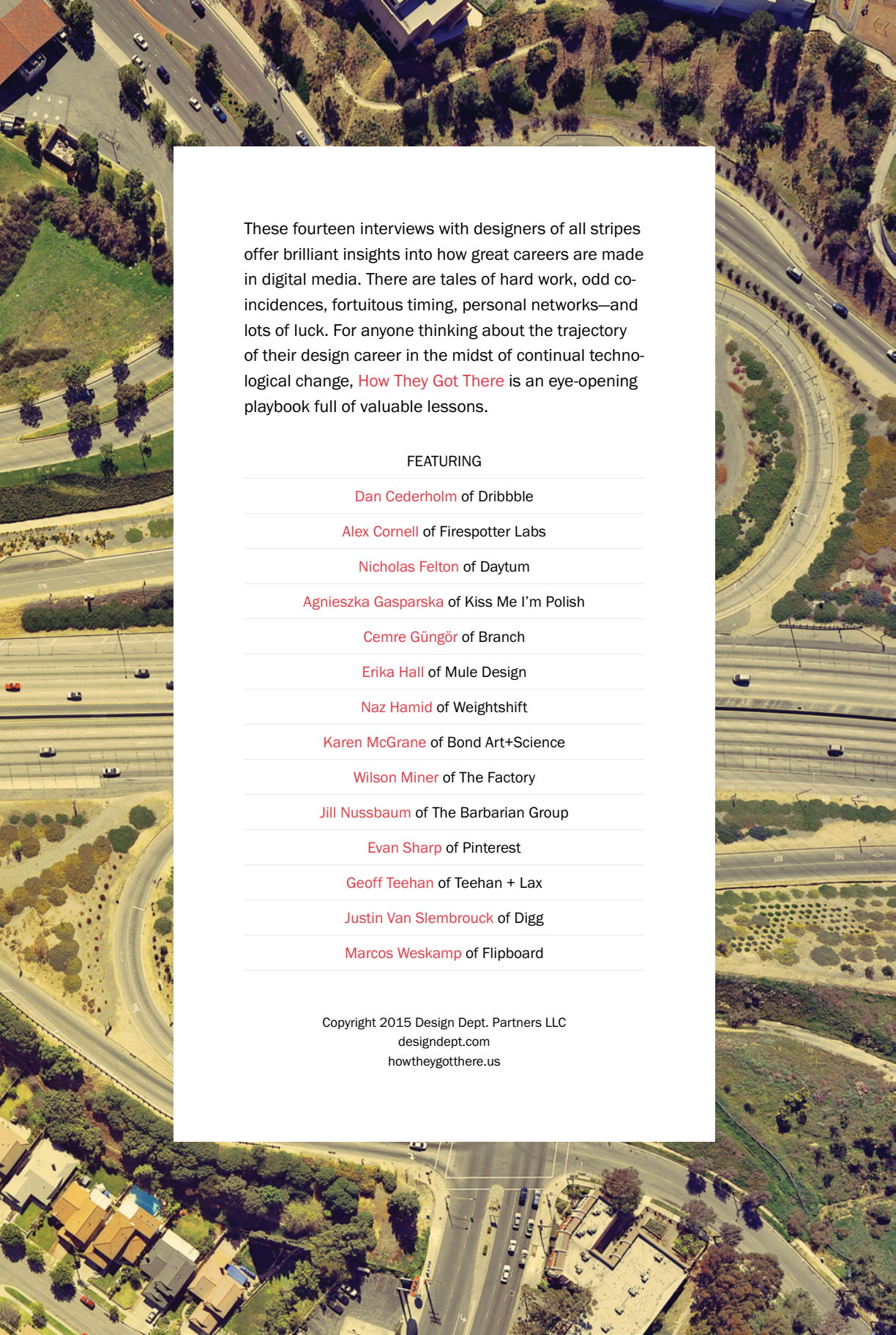
We created a UX fund, with fifty thousand real dollars, and chose ten companies that we felt do a really good job of creating great user experiences. We invested it for a year, and we created a site that tracked it against the indices. Things like that are interesting.

Also the work that we've chosen to do primarily has been grounded in utility. I think that's pretty common these days, but back when we were starting out, that distinguished us from a lot of other places.

It's been eleven years since Teehan + Lax was founded. Is this a rest-of-your-life company?

The rest of my life? I don't know. I think as long as we're doing great work, as long as good work comes in, as long as we're

happy, yes. Jon and I have definitely talked about, "What is the next chapter? What's the end game?" I don't think we know. I just love working on products. As long as I get a chance to work on great products, that's what I'm going to do.



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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