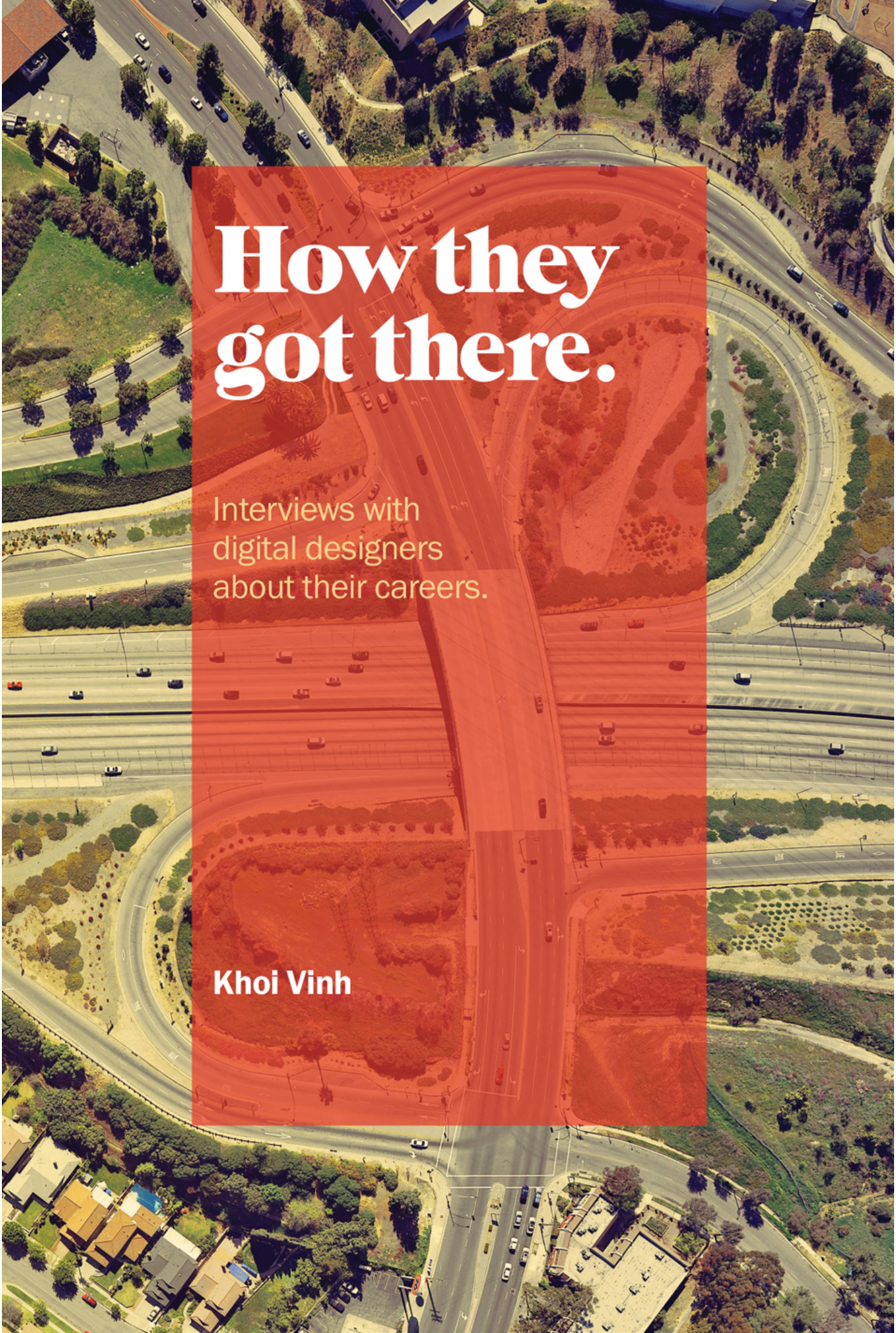


How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

Chapter 8

Karen McGrane

Founder, Bond Art+Science

After a highly regarded run at the pioneering digital agency Razorfish, Karen McGrane co-founded Bond Art+Science in New York City. Eventually she transitioned it into a unique independent consultancy that has stayed at the forefront of digital practice for years. McGrane is also the author of "Content Strategy for Mobile" and a co-host of the Responsive Web Design Podcast.

You studied philosophy at the University of Minnesota?

I did. I have a double major in philosophy and American studies, and I have a minor in religious studies.

That's an interesting place to start from and eventually end up in interaction design. Was there ever any hint of what your career might be?

I had parents who strongly encouraged me to get a good liberal arts education and not to treat college like it was vocational

school. They were quite adamant that the point of college wasn't necessarily to get a business degree, so that was great. That was actually exactly the right thing for who I was at that point in my life. I knew pretty much immediately that I wanted to study philosophy. And my graduate degree was in a rhetoric program.

A fair number of seeds that would lead to the kind of work I would do were planted even as an undergrad. Computational logic was definitely one of my best classes. One thread that went through my undergraduate and graduate studies was ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric. I take great pleasure in systems of argument, or how you present your ideas in a way that they will be most meaningful for other people.

At grad school I got to see how that actually played out in an academic discipline. The name of my department was Technical Communication and Rhetoric. We did a lot of ancient Greek philosophizing, as well as then using those ideas as a way to present technical information so that it would be most resonant for the user or for the reader, or whoever wants to understand it. I could draw a pretty straight line from my work in philosophy up to the work that I do today.

Was university life very tech-savvy at that time?

Yes, to a very large extent. At that time—and this is pre-web—the Gopher protocol was big at the University of Minnesota. Even prior to college, I was probably more engaged with and more familiar with computers than a lot of my peers were. The school district in the state of Minnesota that I went to my entire life was a magnet district for technology. I can remember being on Apple II computers in the library when I was in first or second grade.

Computers were always there in the background of my entire education, and I think that informs the work that I've done. I wasn't some crazy hacker or a huge computer nerd when I was

12, but I liked computers and I knew how to use them. Once the web took off and I was in grad school, I never thought, "Oh, this is the strange new technology that I have to learn!" I could make a strong case for saying I was always a digital native. It's just I was a digital native on green screens.

You also did a summer intensive in sign language?

Yes, I am hard of hearing and I had a language requirement that I had to fulfill in college. The University of Minnesota offered sign language as one of the language courses that you could take, and I jumped on that immediately. I had taken French in high school, but I did really struggle with learning another language, just in that I couldn't hear the fine differences. I could read fine, but any oral pronunciation or any of the oral tests that we would be given were so stressful for me because every fiber of my being had to focus on trying to understand—to pick up all those little differences in pronunciation that for people who can hear fully it's not that hard.

Sign language was nearly impossible for me to learn, really. My hypothesis is that you're using parts of your brain that, if you are hearing, you don't normally use for language. I know nothing about neuroscience, so don't quote me on my actual understanding of this. It seems like you have parts of your brain that are mapped to language acquisition, and if you're not hard of hearing, then those parts would tend to map more towards your speech and hearing centers. Then all of a sudden you're trying to switch that over to your vision and movement.

What strikes me is that I remember so little of the sign language that I learned. I took it for years in college and I have virtually no memory of it. Whereas with the few years of high school French that I have, I can still go to France and read things, basically. But sign language just went to some other place in my brain that I have no access to anymore.

Has your hearing difficulty influenced the way you think about your work?

It definitely informs my work today. I just joined the W3C Mobile Accessibility group, in large part because I can make such a strong case for universal design and arguing, "Hey, guys. You know what? If you just followed all the basic accessibility guidelines that you should have been following all along, you'd be doing a lot better on mobile right now."

Recognizing that there are situations in which I struggle and that technology could really enhance my life—I think that that is a really healthy perspective for anybody who is working in design professions to have. If people could think about designing for someone with a hearing impairment, or for someone with a vision disability or a motion disability, in a lot of ways you would be making things better for everybody.

One of the most important aspects for any designer is empathy. Is it too simplistic to say that you have an enhanced empathy for people?

I do think empathy and the ability to put yourself in somebody else's shoes are probably the absolute most important things that a designer can have—to have a sensitivity for situations that other people might find challenging and even respect for that. I don't want anybody looking down on me because I can't hear as well.

Sometimes I get frustrated because people get annoyed when I ask them to repeat something or people assume I might be dumb if I don't understand. That level of disrespect bothers me, and so I want to be careful not to treat somebody else that way. If someone doesn't understand something or if they're frustrated with the technology, it's not because they're dumb. It's because there's something wrong with the design or with the technology.

One of the things that I know about myself is that I'm just profoundly idealistic. It may be one of my best and my worst qualities, but I genuinely believe that we can make a better world and we should help out the people who need a little bit more help. I know that's super idealistic, but I find that very, very motivating.

What did you do right after college?

I worked for a company called VEE Corporation, the only company that is licensed to make full-sized Muppet costumes. I'm pretty confident that I'm the only person that you know who has been both Bert and Ernie in mall appearances for children. I was not working in costume on a regular basis, but in the office every once in a while they'd say, "Hey, we need to do a parade or mall appearance. You're the right height to be in one of these characters."

I count it as one of my formative experiences, being in one of those huge heavy costumes, which smell terrible on the inside. Knowing how hard it was to even get led out into a mall and have some toddlers grab onto my ankles, I can't imagine being in one of those stage shows or being one of the characters in a park. I have a huge amount of respect for that job. That's hard.

How did you get that job?

I had a friend at the time whose sister worked there, and I was looking for just a little post-collegiate job in Minneapolis. I think I worked there for a year and then went to grad school. I knew that I was going to go to graduate school. I felt pretty strongly that I wanted a bigger career than I was going to get with my degree in philosophy from the University of Minnesota. At that point, I was ready to take on more vocational training, or more advanced training that would land me a better job, and it most certainly did. I credit all of my professional success to graduate school.

How did you decide to do HCI work in grad school?

To a certain extent I got lucky. I would never have called it this at the time, but I was good at content strategy and information architecture. I was good at structured content and at what I'd call technical writing, and I knew that the Internet was going to be the place to be. This was in '94, '95. I was excited about what was going on. I thought, "Computers! They're awesome. There's bound to be jobs on computers, right?"

I got a full-ride scholarship to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and then I found myself living in glorious Troy, in the armpit of New York State.

Why do you credit all your professional success to graduate school? What was the experience like?

I feel like I got a fantastic education—I would give huge props to that RPI program. It was so perfectly aligned to what I thought my skills were, the kind of work in writing and information architecture or taxonomy or structured content. It also opened my eyes to this whole other world of design that I didn't know I was going to be learning about. I describe it as the idea that these words had shape and somebody would be navigating through this information; the idea that the design shapes the meaning, and that layout and stylistic considerations weren't just purely decorative, but rather they deeply informed the way that meaning was constructed. That's exactly what should happen to you in graduate school. It's like your whole brain explodes and you think, "Oh, my God. I have never been more excited to explore this."

I tell people I remember where I was the first time I heard the phrase *information architecture*, because to me it was a beautiful encapsulation of the intersection between language and structure, of the verbal with the physical, spatial, and tactile side of design. To be a really effective communicator you need to be

able to work with both sides. That right there shaped my entire perspective on my career and continues to shape it to this day.

I feel very lucky because in many careers, and in many academic programs, it's very easy to be shunted over to the word side or shunted over to the design side and not be encouraged or even forced to integrate the two perspectives. I think truly successful work in digital or on the web requires that you be able to do both well or take both perspectives and do something with them.

To what extent was your graduate work vocational or were you exploring this as an academic pursuit?

I would say decidedly *not* vocational. All of the professors there were quite explicit about saying, "We are not giving you professional training." I can remember one graphic arts professor going off when a student was complaining that they weren't teaching us how to use Photoshop well enough. He said, "I am not here to teach Photoshop. I am here to teach you the basic principles underlying visual communication that you will be able to use for the rest of your career. Your knowledge of Photoshop 2.5 is not going to last you that long." By God, was he right. Still, I was learning very practical perspectives that I was able to take and go right into a job. Those perspectives still inform my work to this day.

After getting your master's, where did you go next?

I threw all of my stuff into the back of a friend's Jeep and went and got a job at a little company called Razorfish, which was about thirty people when I started.

How did you come across that job?

The guys who started it are from my hometown. I didn't know them before, but somebody from my graduate school program

had gotten a job there and she introduced me.

What was your title on day one?

My title on my first day of working at Razorfish was Information Designer/Writer.

What were the responsibilities that came with that title?

That was somewhat unclear [*laughs*]. I was the very first person they hired with an HCI and information architecture background. At the time, there was a very large team of traditional graphic designers—maybe fifteen or twenty people, by far the largest group—and some random producers and some developers. My experience the first couple of years was not unlike what a lot of people in the user experience fields have dealt with, which was, "How do you evangelize for this new position and way of thinking that integrates its perspectives from design and development and communications, but is not any one of those things?"

When I was interviewing at another firm, I remember they said, "We need somebody to code HTML." I said, "I don't understand why you would hire me and have me code HTML." Razorfish was really the only company at the time that when I said I was a user experience person or an information architect, they said, "We need more of that. That's what we want right now."

What kind of projects were you tackling?

My very first project was making a bank for Citibank. I look back on those years and I laugh.

You said you made a bank?

I made an online bank for Citibank. They hired some kid right

out of grad school and had her designing their new online bank for them. This was in the years when everybody wanted to do an online-only bank. It was in the same years when all of the airlines decided that everybody hated the airlines, so what they should do is build an entirely different airline brand, like United had Ted and Delta had Song. Ah, companies!

My favorite project of that era was when I went out to Los Angeles and Silicon Valley and worked for a year on Go.com. Disney bought Infoseek and they decided they wanted an Internet portal. That was an interesting project. I had a number of meetings in the Disney boardroom with Michael Eisner and Bob Iger and the executive team. I was some kid, I didn't know what I was doing. I learned very many interesting things about how corporations are run by seeing the Internet up close and personal.

What was it like, figuring out and redefining your role several times a year? Were you doing it entirely on your own or did you have mentors?

Looking back at that time, I was managing the UX and information architecture team, and I did a lot of interviewing. Full days or weeks or even months of my life were entirely given over to interviewing UX candidates and hiring them.

I found it striking how much high-minded thinking was going on in the industry at that time. You would see new processes or new deliverables take hold and you could almost see the ripple effect through people's portfolios, where all of a sudden everybody was doing personas when six months earlier no one had been talking about that kind of stuff.

There was an almost osmosis-like awareness of what was going on in the industry and a desire to figure out which ideas were good ones and which ones were hype—the things, the processes, and the principles that you thought were effective, to sit

down and figure out how to make them as effective as possible.

I quickly started to realize that the real challenge had less to do with specific processes or deliverables, and had way more to do with the people side of the problem. How do you get people to work effectively together? How do you have a smoothly functioning design team where people feel that they have appropriate authority?

People want some autonomy over their work, but also want, and need, to collaborate. So how do you set people up to succeed? A lot of the process challenges that you might run into are rooted in things that designers often don't think about or touch very often—things like how the statement of work gets written, how the work gets contracted, how the project plan is set up, or how the project manager is being evaluated in terms of project profitability, timing, and scoping of the project.

Those kinds of organizational or operational questions are more interesting to me than some of the actual hands-on design work.

You're speaking of the management track versus—for lack of a better term—the individual contributor track?

For everybody who works in design—and this is undoubtedly true for developers and other roles as well—you have to strike the right balance for yourself and face this question of "How much management do I want to do versus how much hands-on contributing do I want to do?" For me it makes a lot of sense to try to keep both of those sides of my brain alive, but that doesn't necessarily mean every single day on every single project that I get to do both things. Having coached and counseled dozens of people over the years on how they work through those issues, there's no right answer for how you do it. You will have to answer that question for yourself.

How was that process for you? The way you talk about it, it sounds like you naturally gravitated towards taking on management responsibilities. Was there ever a crisis for you, that you'd given up too much of the craft?

For me, no. With the work that I do, especially around content strategy and more publishing-focused or editorial work, I keep my craft up. The information architecture and the content strategy stuff is a bit more stable in that things don't change quite as quickly as they change on the design and development side.

If you told me that I had to design a really awesome mobile app right now, I probably couldn't do it because I'm not up to speed on the latest design solutions or technologies to know what's possible. But as for the underlying structure and publishing processes, I feel like my craft there is as strong as it has ever been. I can do that and also focus more on the management or organizational or operational questions that I want to solve, so I'm very happy with that.

I have sympathy for people who are deeply involved in doing front-end design and development. It must be exhausting to keep up with. You must just have this sense of "Oh God, if I blink even for a moment, the world is going to have changed and passed me by." It's hard to balance keeping up with the field with growing a business or managing people or understanding broader organizational and operational trends.

You were at Razorfish for a good long time.

Yes, over eight years, almost nine.

How did your job change?

It was a different company every year. Every year, it was a different job in that I went through so many mergers and acquisitions that, even if it wasn't a brand new job or even if I had the

same manager from year to year, I definitely had new co-workers every year. I can remember around 2004, 2005, I thought, "I am sick of proving myself at the same job I've been working at for seven or eight years now." That does keep you fresh and it certainly kept me very engaged. I generally liked working there, but after a while it was nice to step back from that and go, "I'm done proving myself."

Was that wearying for you or did you build up a skill for adapting to new mergers-and-acquisitions scenarios?

Yes, it was wearying for sure. There was at least a fair amount of consistency in terms of the core of people who I was dealing with on a regular basis, so that provided the right amount of stability. I really did like my role. I liked the UX team there. I felt like I had a fair amount of autonomy. I felt like I had a fair amount of respect. I could make it so that the people on the UX team didn't feel unnecessarily buffeted by all of the changes. When I'd ask them how the merger was going for them I'd have people working for me say, "Oh, we never really notice it, that never really changes our jobs that much." If that's what somebody is saying, then I was doing a very good job.

All along you were having good experiences working with your clients. Was that one of the things that sustained you through eight years there?

Yes. When I was starting to think about leaving, I described my job as "I was doing the work and then I was telling somebody else how to do the work, and then I was telling executives that somebody else was telling somebody else how to do the work." I was in this weird meta-job not doing very much work at all, and I woke up one day and I thought, "My job is resource management spreadsheets. How did this happen to me? This wasn't what I signed up for."

When I was in graduate school getting all excited and feeling

like a heroine in a William Gibson novel about information architecture, I was not doing resource management spreadsheets.

That's the challenge of everybody's career. I got very good advice once from Jean-Philippe Maheu, who was the CEO at Razorfish at the time and was doing my performance review. He said, "Look, Karen. You have to figure out what it is about your job that you love doing and you have to make sure that you do it, whether that's every week or every month or every quarter. You have to explicitly build in time for yourself to make sure you're doing the parts of your job that you love, because otherwise you're just going to get sucked into doing stuff that you hate. The stuff that you don't want to do is a bottomless pit and you have to be responsible for that."

I tried to be very careful about that. I tried to make sure that I built in time for myself to work on the kind of projects that I wanted to work on. I couldn't do it all the time and I certainly couldn't be doing a lot of hands-on design work, but I tried.

What are some of those projects that kept you going and doing what you really love to do?

There was this one project called The New York Times, you might have heard of it. That's the kind of project where I really thought, "I want to get this right." It was horrible and I hated every second of the project and I don't speak to anybody that I worked with on the project anymore. And I couldn't look at it for six months after it launched. It was so painful to work on, but yet it was exactly the magnitude of intellectual puzzle that I wanted to be able to solve. And then I left almost immediately thereafter.

I've never been on a worse project [*laughs*]. It's not that I quit because of it, but it got me to the point where I thought, "What else do I want to do here? Now this would be a good time to go out on a high note," and that was that.

Had you already started thinking about what's next?

Some of my former colleagues from Razorfish, Jeff Dachis and Evan Orensten, said that they wanted to get together and start a company. I made an incredibly impulsive decision to just say, "Great, I'm going to go do this." In retrospect, it was a perfectly fine decision. I have zero regrets about it, but I would not say that it was a decision that I made particularly thoughtfully or strategically. I had absolutely no break in between jobs, which was a dumb idea. Don't ever do that to yourself, that's not right.

What was the concept for Bond, this new company, when the original partners started it?

When I left Razorfish, it was as though I woke up one day and realized I worked for an advertising agency, and this was shocking to me. To Razorfish's credit, I really do think that they valued UX work. They had a tagline that was "Everything that can be digital will be," which I thought was super motivating and a great encapsulation of why the work that we were doing was transformative.

That was in support of their positioning that they called "digital change management," and I just remember thinking, "No, we make web sites." Somebody calls us up, they want to build a web site, we build them a web site, we try to make a good web site for them—that is what we do. What I walked away feeling was, "You guys, you're missing what we can be, which is a digital agency that helps organizations through digital change by working on platform initiatives broader than just the marketing campaign."

So at Bond we were all extremely well aligned about what the vision for the web and mobile should be, how the kinds of client relationships that we would have would be much more focused on organizational transformation and broader operational concerns than just "go build me a widget" kind of projects.

Your partners eventually left and then you were the sole remaining partner, with a staff to oversee. How was that transition?

We were five partners when it first started and one of them fell off relatively quickly. Jeff went and he's doing his social business thing down in Austin. Evan Orensten and Josh Rubin went back and did Cool Hunting. I just kept the brand name and the legal entity because I needed those things. The only reason that I stuck with our brand name was that I had this really nice box of letterpress thank-you notes that have the Bond logo on them.

We probably had fifteen people at one point in time, and then over the years I just maintained a small team of about five. It just became really clear to me that the things that I wanted to be doing and what I was doing with a team of designers and developers, it just wasn't aligned all that well.

I actually have a much easier time now as an independent consultant, because companies can hire just me. If I position myself solely as providing strategic consulting services, I can get brought in much more easily and then partner with whatever design or development or production teams they have. Whereas if I have a team of people that I have to keep busy doing copywriting and design and development, then that limits me.

So you went from a company of many to a company of one, which allowed you to focus on strategic thinking and higher level solutions for your customers?

Right. I don't do any design and development work at all and very explicitly tell clients, "At no point when you work with me will you get anything that looks remotely like a web site or a mobile application."

I focus now on doing content strategy consulting, particularly

around how they need to set themselves up to get their content onto mobile devices. This could not be a better alignment with what I think I'm good at and what's a real, genuine pain point in the world.

The work that I do now is almost entirely not competitive. I don't respond to RFPs or anything; clients just call me up and ask me if I'll come in and consult with them. I do a lot of full-day consulting sessions where I'll get hired to come in for a day and talk about problems and hash out issues, and then coming out of that I often will also do longer-term strategy projects.

How do you come across this work?

It's mostly word of mouth. I do a lot of conference speaking and so somebody will see me speak and contact me to say, "I wish all of my executives could hear what you have to say." And I'll say, "You know, I do that for money." Sometimes they just want their executives to hear things. Sometimes based on that, they'll come back and say, "Great. Now we want to actually do this. Can you help us with the initial pieces of this so that we can then do a redesign or re-platform our CMS or build a mobile app or whatever?"

It sounds like you've really engineered the ideal working scenario for yourself.

I'm extremely happy with the type of work that I'm doing and with the client relationships that I have. They're bringing me in as a trusted adviser, so I have this unique positioning that directly addresses one of their pain points, and I feel like I've succeeded quite well in that. This will probably only last a few years. As organizations are making this transition to mobile, it seems like this will be the kind of thing that's not competitive for only a couple of years before I will either have to shift gears a little bit or deal with a more competitive environment. I'm not sure, but right now it's great. Total green fields.

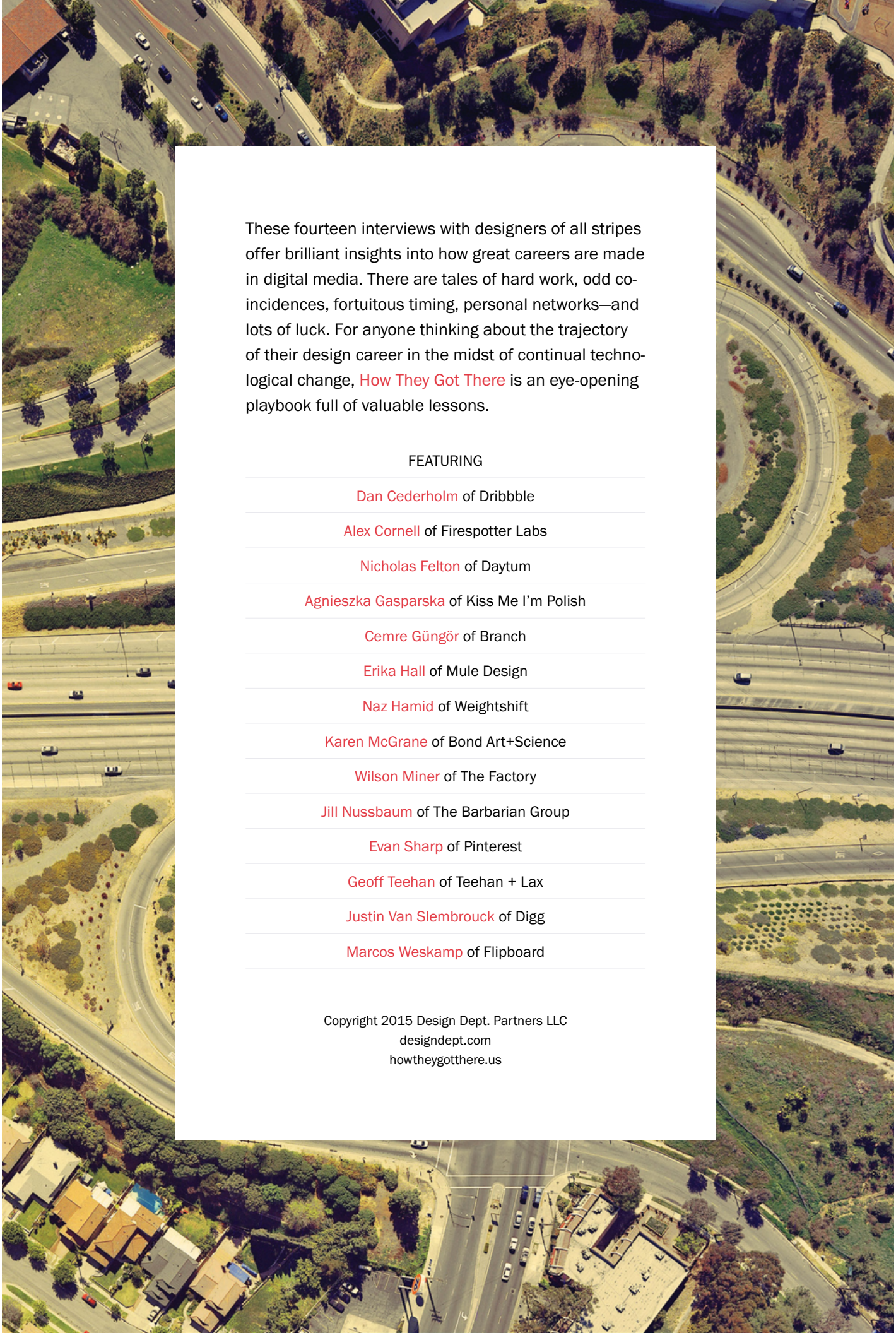
It's interesting that you already see the end of this, this era that you're reveling in.

I think that's inherent to working on the web and working in this space. I've seen so many transitions. You think this era is going to last forever, but then it actually only lasted three years, just like the last one. I have definitely been putting a two-to-five-year timeline on this, what's going on with the mobile web right now, or more broadly mobile publishing practices, to help organizations figure out how they're going to deal with true multi-channel publishing. Most organizations are going to have dealt with that question within the next five years.

I don't know that it will be an entirely solved problem for these organizations, but I would imagine within five years from now that every major digital agency would have a point of view on how to deal with this stuff. It won't be people saying, "Oh my God. We have this problem. Go hire that one lady who talks about it all the time." It's going to be more that everybody is going to have to have a point of view on how content management works, how publishing processes work, how responsive changes your design and editorial process. That stuff will just be more commonly known.

Do you know what you'll do next?

I think I'll figure it out. That's probably one of the best benefits of being mid-career. I've got a good fifteen, almost twenty years under my belt, and I've easily got another fifteen to twenty years in me to know that I've seen lots of change happen and I feel very comfortable that some new change will roll along, and that I'll be able to adapt to it if I want to. That's a great feeling. It actually lends a significant amount of confidence to my work, to be able to look back on challenges that I've had, rough spots in my career, and say, "I got through that. I'll get through the next one, too."



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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