

The Design Untangled Podcast

Episode: DU028 - Diversity and the Future of Design

Host: Chris Mears and Carla Lindarte

Guest: Dan Harvey, The Dots

(00:16) **Chris:** Hi Guys. Welcome to Design Untangled. First of all, sorry this episode is a bit late, but me and Carla both got ill when we were, meant to record the last episode, so it did not happen that hopefully we have made up for the lateness with this episode, which is an interview with Dan Harvey from The Dots. We did something a little bit different in this time in that we recorded before we got to the interview strolling around London. So it was quite cool to hear kind of the background sounds, if you have never visited London or even if you have. So we quite liked doing that. Let us know what you think. The other thing to mention is the sound quality you will notice during the interview gets a bit worse. Midway through, that is unfortunately because my mike ran out of space so we had to switch to the backup recording but still definitely listenable, hopefully. And worth sticking with just to hear what Dan has to say. So stick with it till the end. I think you will definitely get some value out of it. And let us hit the streets.

(01:19) **Chris:** So what are we doing? Where are we going?

(01:20) **Carla:** So we are walking to Protein Shake and we are going to interview Daniel Harvey.

(01:32) **Chris:** And who is Daniel Harvey?

(01:33) **Carla:** Who is he? He is actually quite famous, maybe because I know him, but I think he is a keynote speaker, he is a writer as well. He is been actively working in the U.S. and the U.K. on transforming design and creative community. I met him back at Sapient Nitro. I got invited to one of his events once at The Dots. And The Dots, I think what they do is, that they help designers with job hunting, which is really cool. (I think we have to go right here) And so they basically have a platform where you can upload your CV and folio and they basically, find, they connect design companies or companies looking for designers as well. They also do public events, helping out designers with their portfolio. So I was in one of them as a mentor. And basically what happened in that event is that people come, and they show you their folios, and they ask you questions,

and also they are trying to get a job as well. So they do, quite good stuff. So we are going to see what they are up to and what Dan is actually doing there and we are going to learn lots from him. He is a really good and known designer. Hopefully it will be good.

(03:07) **Chris:** Yeah, it should be. So we are just walking. Where are we now? Commercial Street. It is recording some ambiance on our strobe from interviews.

(03:16) **Carla:** Why English people, English guys mainly walk so fast?

(03:20) **Chris:** This is not fast. I am going at quarter speed now.

(03:24) **Carla:** And I am almost running. Is it because my legs are so short?

(03:26) **Chris:** Yes, I think so. All right, walk at your a normal speed and then I will see how slow that is. Is that, your normal speed?

(03:34) **Carla:** Yes, that is my normal speed.

(03:34) **Chris:** Oh, god. No wonder you are late for everything.

(03:38) **Carla:** I am not late. Yeah, I am late for everything. No. Am I? Yeah.

(03:42) **Chris:** Yeah. So that is a nice chili autumn evening. I do not know if this is interesting to our listeners or not.

(03:47) **Carla:** Probably not.

(03:48) **Chris:** Probably not. But we would do it anyway. So where is our next startup going to be? I might as well do it more now.

(03:55) **Carla:** I do not know.

(03:59) **Chris:** Oh, we have got some tunes now, as well. Maybe this is the new intro music.

04:03) **Carla:** Oh yeah. We should change that music. I really hate it. It is too aggressive.

(04:10) **Chris:** Yes. But it is an aggressive podcast.

(04:13) **Carla:** It is not. I do not think it is aggressive. This is much nicer, maybe he should do it.

(04:20) **Chris:** Yes, let us hire him on the way back.

(04:28) **Chris:** We are at The Dots today with Dan Harvey, who is head of product and design. So welcome to the podcast festival.

(04:37) **Dan:** Thank you.

(04:38) **Chris:** So yeah, maybe just to kick off, if you could tell us just a bit about yourself and your background.

(04:43) **Dan:** Sure. I got into digital in the mid nineties when everything was massively wild west and there were no programs training people on how to do anything. So since there was not the academy behind it, and degrees associated with it, people got hired into roles based on, less about skill set and more about sort of personality and sort of related skill set. So I have an arts background and segued from early roles in QA departments and doing user ability stuff, into a role as an interaction designer, pretty early on. And then moved up the ranks into very senior roles like executive creative director, or chief creative officer, and stuff like that. A lot of that time was spent in New York, RGA. And then in 2012 my partner and I decided to throw all caution to the wind, and moved to London and I took a role at Second Nature. And then after being there for a few years realized that because of the sort of tug of war between agencies and consultancies, that I kind of wanted to see what life was like at a smaller independent agency before they all went away. So I spent about a year, and I was chief creative officer at Zone and then when Zone got acquired by Cognizant, decided to shift gears yet again, and took the head of product design and brand role here at The Dots.

(06:39) **Chris:** Cool, so I guess that leads nicely onto the next question then, which is, what is The Dots? What is its mission statement?

(06:46) **Dan:** Sure. In a nutshell, companies publications like Forbes and Tech Crunch like to call us LinkedIn for creatives which is, I guess fantastic short hand, but also make some people go to eww, LinkedIn. Actually, LinkedIn, despite full jokes to the contrary is, great for the audience that it is targeted at. Sort of white collar workers, sort of CV based kind of skill sets. That is not who we are built for. The Dots is aimed at the group that we like to call, no color workers. And these are professionals who job hop, a lot rather than climbing a job ladder. There are people that have creative skills, as their sort of dominant forte rather than sort of more managerial or tyrannical ones. There are people who have skill sets and roles that are sort of constantly evolving and they often sort of value purpose over paycheck.

(08:07) **Dan:** And so that means that, we are attracting a lot of people who tend to be

younger and audiences that are a lot more diverse than a platform like LinkedIn. So, we are a diverse community by design. We have got about 68% of our audiences is female, 31% is same, 16% is LGBTQ. Plus we have got a lot of effort on the platform around socioeconomic diversity, neuro-diversity and the like. And we have got hundreds of thousands of members on the platform, and we work with about 10,000 brands. So that is a lovely combination. It is good story.

(08:57) **Carla:** I am really, really excited to have you on our podcast because I have heard a lot about when you guys do and what you do as well. And you have been working with volunteers, you have been volunteering for quite a long time. And I guess this was a kind of a link to that, was it not? You started volunteering and then you realize you are doing a lot of the creative community and then you realize you wanted to do that, like for your job.

(09:21) **Dan:** That is right. And that is super insightful that you have picked up on that, because a lot of, a lot of what I have done in the last several years is specifically, around changing the ratio in the creative industries particularly in this sort of agency, and consultancy world. At Sapien I was involved in a lot of efforts, that gender diversity efforts there. It was on the back of that that I met Ellie Hannan at Creative Equals she kindly asked me to come on as an advisor there. Creative Equals if you are not familiar is kind of the industry Kitemark around gender equality and diversity in the creative industries. When I was at Zone, I was very proud of being able to help shape the creative department there to be a 50, 50 gender balanced at all levels of the company. It was not just sort of bootstrapping a lot of young people. It was at very senior levels as well, where we have that diversity.

(10:34) **Chris:** Because you do see that a company has, the gender kind of mission sort of stops as soon as you get to a certain level with hierarchy and above that it is kind of like, yeah, we will just leave it as it was.

(10:45) **Dan:** It is a big thing and there are a lot of issues wrapped up into that. And yeah, there are definitely sort of, I have seen some agencies that have sort of glass ceilings at the associated creative director here. Which was again, while I was so proud of what the sort of shape of Zone, what we were able to do, in the brief time that I was there. And it is funny, it is but you do spend an awful lot of time when you are, when you are committed to efforts like this, of doing that in your spare time, versus juggling those sort of day job. And to Carlos point, when I had the opportunity to, it was a bit of a random opportunity as well. But when Pip asked me if I was interested in coming on board, I was like, absolutely. Because then, the day job and what they care about can be perfectly aligned.

(11:45) **Carla:** That is amazing. I think for me that would be the dream. How is that change? When you moved from consultancy and agency, which I have been part of for many, many years, into a more startup, a smaller agency, is not like an agency, it is more like a set up. What are the biggest challenges? What are the pros and cons basically?

(12:10) **Dan:** That is having done this for a little over a year now, I am still trying to wrap my head around that, but it is interesting. So prior to me coming on board, the design activity for the platform, was but was done by an external agency, small agency, a patch of great people there who basically do work for startup companies. But that was obviously a bit of a struggle for the team here, because that meant that you sort of had to raise money and then invest, in that group and a lot of back and forth. And so I came on board and then quickly brought on board Joyce Lee from US Too, fantastic product designer, also product owner for Mood Notes, which is a fantastic app around mental health. And Nadine Grant, as our of junior designer, and then spent time working doing internships at companies like Made by Mini, Apple, Ideo, et cetera.

(13:26) **Dan:** So my sort of first mission was to build up a world plus design team, and it is like, well, now that, that is done, let us get to work. And we have been been blessed to have Raquel Sacristan to join us recently as Nadine has moved back into education, to get her master degree. But there are lots of differences between designing for agencies or consultancies, and designing for for a startup. Biggest differences obviously, that you are living with what you are designing, right. So it is not just about sort of laboring for a couple of months and then.

(14:10) **Chris:** Moving on to the next thing.

(14:10) **Dan:** Exactly, so the kind of variety that brings people into agencies is different, but you are offsetting that by a real commitment, an ongoing sort of tenacity, to sort of see things through to the next stage. And that is fantastic. You do not have clients to blame when things go wrong because your client is your boss in a weird way. But yeah, I am still trying to wrap my head around some of the differences. Now there is definitely, you want things to be, I am going to, hope you can feel the air quotes through the recording. You want things to be 'pixel perfect', but you are also, having to ship quickly. Because it is not, you are not spending a client's money. You are spending your own money. Then you need to see results for quickly, than a lot of what comes through agents and consultancy worlds.

(15:22) **Chris:** So is it kind of, sort of creative industry as a whole? What do you think the main kind of challenges at the moment? What is kind of disrupting? I have seen you

write about Brexit in some place, they are quite interested to hear your thoughts on how that is affected design as a community.

(15:37) **Dan:** Yeah, I think design benefits from empathy. And I think the best way to sort of have that is to be surrounded by multiple points of view, multiple perspectives. And obviously I think with something like Brexit that sort of, it becomes a potential very difficult challenge to do that. At Sapient, for example, because we are, there is was a large sort of multi-national, global thing. Our experience design studio was very sort of culturally, geographically diverse. And, and there are a lot of benefits to that. And, not just sort of but we will say, I hope, I still hold out hope that London will remain as cosmopolitan as it is today. And that hopefully our friends in the EU would not, I do not know, it is tough, had I been in the country for the People's March, I would have been at the People's March.

(17:11) **Chris:** So your concern is we would not have as many if those kind of designers from different backgrounds representing designs, potentially?

(17:19) **Dan:** Different backgrounds, different cultures, different you know, sort of different ways of designing, different approaches to design, different contexts for design. You know, Joyce who I mentioned earlier, is from Hong Kong and types of references that we make are different. And we learned a lot from that.

(17:43) **Carla:** That makes you definitely richer, in terms of, from a design perspective. I absolutely, agree with you. Sapient was full of people from all over the world. I was actually quite surprised, that I found another three Colombian designers, which I would never found that before. It was just amazing. And that brings a very nice culture, like studio culture, as well as the variety of thinking. So I want to ask about, now that we are talking about a little bit about the present and the future. What are your thoughts about UX as a practice and how do you see it already changing and will continue changing in the future?

(18:23) **Dan:** Yeah, well I think, a tribe, as a community, we are always in some respects, even to our own detriment, we are always obsessed about what to call our selves. And I think Mike Montera said it best, when he said, you might be called a UX designer, you might be called a business designer, you might be called an information architect, or whatever. Fuck it. You are a designer. If it was good enough for the Eames, it is good enough for you. And I think there is something liberating about that. I also acknowledge that part of the reason why we do that kind of obsessive naval gazing is financial, in respects. In that, there is definitely a demand for roles like UX designer, and product designer, and service designer right now, and each of those carry different

salaries associated with them. And skill sets are similar but different. And I think that is the thing that is so magical about our community, is that we are content and we have people who are good at some parts of the role and other people are good at different parts of the role. And I think it depends on where you go as well. So I think, big, big agencies, big consultancies can give you the opportunity to have kind of narrow specializations. So all our agencies are startups. There is no room for that. You need to be able to think strategically, be exceedingly well crafted on pixels and everything in between.

(20:30) **Carla:** So, at The Dots., have you seen that trend happening with the people applying for jobs, as well as, companies looking for people? Do you see that now, they look more for hybrids and designers who can do UI, UX more than the specialisms?

(20:52) **Dan:** That is a great question. And I think, internally, obviously we need people who are product designers. So robust sort of hybrid designer like you were saying. But in terms of roles on the platform, we still see an awful lot of demand for what you and I might think of as a straight up UX designer. So I think there is demand out there for all sorts of different flavors and different members.

(21:31) **Chris:** I think it depends on the company as well, right? As a startup for example, it is going to be a lot more likely to look for a product designer, because of the financial situation they are in, potentially. And they need to work fast.

(21:42) **Dan:** It is efficiency. You cannot have, the more sort of roles you toss into a mix, the more complicated process becomes then you sort of, what might have been a beautiful, wonderful agile thing, sort of become risks becoming a slower waterfall leak kind of thing. And it is, skills are important. And, and I think it is, in terms of skills, being able to prototype something whether that is with tools like Pinnacle and Figma or within code, or what have you, is obviously important. I think scaling that question up even more broadly, how we design to take into account things like artificial intelligence and machine learning, the implications that more voice-based behaviors and interactions, what that does to a UX designer? How different shifts like that might put a greater emphasis on a different skill or new skill like writing, or product management, or what have you. It is all sort of variable.

(23:17) **Carla:** It is all possible. That is the good thing and sometimes the bad thing about it, isn't it? Because you do not know who you are anymore.

(23:24) **Dan:** I think that is the other thing. So imposter syndrome and something else that I see, that sort of haunts our tribe and our community. And I think that is just

something that we just have to sort of realize that it is not about, it is not even confidence, it is just about knowing that things are that variable, and the ground shifts from one project to the next. And like I said, it is not about confidence, it is about becoming comfortable with that kind of flexibility.

(24:04) **Chris:** And comfortable not knowing about something, I guess as well, which in a way is like almost what a designer is.

(24:10) **Dan:** And should be. You should be the first person to raise your hand and say, well, I am not exactly sure, but I will learn. And that, harkens back to what am I saying about sort of mid-nineties, wild west culture. It is just, work as designers, as UX designers in particular, we are often like the first people in the room to have a conversation about what the thing should be. And we are often some of the last people to leave a room too because we are, yeah, the thing might be launched but okay, now we have to do the research, to see if it is doing this, that and the other. And it is just, we wear so many different hats.

(24:58) **Chris:** We do, a very big hat collection. So we have got probably a lot of listeners who [\[inaudible 25:04\]](#) in there, I guess career path or thinking of moving into design. Is there any kind of advice or tips you can give to them I suppose, in order to prepare them for life in design almost ?

(25:17) **Dan:** I would say do not be scared about the last five minutes or so of the conversation, because we are a big tribe. There will always be different entry points and different things that people are sort of naturally good at, or inclined toward, or predisposed towards, so focus on that. Get really good at that. And then start to start to branch out to the related things that make sense for you to sort of practice. And I think in broad strokes having had a long career myself, and having mentored people for a portion of that time, it is just, as in any sort of role but I think especially in design roles, I think you will start by honing your craft, whatever that craft might be. And then you will eventually need to start to think about other related dimensions, and it becomes the sort of Venn Diagram of craft, thinking experientially about something, thinking a bit more broadly about it. But then also being able to think and speak convincingly towards more strategic diminishings and more business minded dimensions. And, I think that is super important, but that takes time. So I think as a junior designer, it is all about majoring on the craft and really understanding that I think it is important to be able to think, to be able to speak about the rationale of your work. I think it is important to particularly and when it comes time to sort of build your portfolio, yeah, it is important to sort of be judicious. You will always be judged by the weakest piece of work in your portfolio. And that is one of the things that we do here at The dots. We hold monthly, we call them

portfolio master classes and they are opportunities where we, where members of the community apply to be a part of the master class. And then we have ten or so mentors who are available that night. And we sort of do group review. So one mentor, will have about four or so people at their table. Each person gets about eight minutes or so to ask questions, review work, et cetera. And it is sort of like almost group speed dating. In a weird way, but I think those are all important considerations. Make sure that you are showing work that you are proud of, and make sure that you are showing your best work, and be able to speak about why. The why, is important. Rationale is important.

(28:26) **Carla:** I was part of one of those sessions. I was a mentor once. It is really interesting how different from a lot of different backgrounds. People from a lot of different backgrounds come in and showing the folios. And something that it was quite repetitive, from the people coming to the session was like, I do not really have design experience. I come from being a cook or come from being a chef, or being an accountant, whatever. How do I build portfolio if I have not got any experience? And I gave him a few tips, but what tips would you give those people? Because we also have an Slack community, so we have got some junior people, sometimes they are asking similar questions. So what do I do if I do not have the experience, to be able to get a job in design?

(29:17) **Dan:** Well, and I think that is another thing that is interesting about dynamics in the UK right now, is apprenticeships, internships are all sort of big factors as well. But I think even for people, one of the things that I love about the master classes is that you will see like the ones you described, you will see junior people who have maybe had an internship or two under their belt. You will see people fresh out of uni. Those are almost usual suspects in some regards. But we also see periodically people who are actually reasonably, far along in their careers who are coming to the master classes just to make sure they are still fresh, and make sure there is still sort of interviews, portfolio critiques. Those are all skills. Those are all muscles and that you have got to keep flexing them, and exercising them, otherwise you will get rusty.

(30:21) **Dan:** But, I think in terms of like people who have no direct experience and getting into the market, it is obviously a bit harder, than it was in the mid-nineties when I fell into things. But, because there has now become an academy, and you can have degrees in this stuff, and there are tons of books written about the subject and all of this stuff. But you know, I think you can start with, I mean, my god, it is impossible to open medium without seeing someone's hot take on how they would redesign something.

(31:10) **Chris:** That is the sole purpose of medium, really, isn't it?

(31:15) **Dan:** That is an opportunity, I do encourage people to look to internships, to network and find those, find events like the master classes, or meet ups to sort of find ways and opportunities where people might sort of be willing to willing to take a chance. And not everything has to be for Apple, or Google, or whomever. Design is here to help everyone, and there are probably, mom and pop shops, or organizations, and people's communities that could need help, and would be willing to sort of take that chance, take that gamble. So I think there is always room at the inn.

(32:17) **Carla:** I was going to ask about something that I am actually working on myself, which is public speaking. Since I joined Google, I have been forced to speak to a number of people, sometimes not knowing what I am actually saying.

(32:34) **Dan:** I have not known what I have said, in the last forty minutes.

(32:38) **Carla:** So, obviously you are a keynote speaker, you speak at a lot of events, and I think it is really related to, for a designer or a creative to have a brand, and public speaking is, it is a good way of doing it. So what kind of tips or, advice could you give to people who want to build that brand or want to do more public speaking, but they would be terrified?

(33:02) **Dan:** Yeah, well it is funny, public speaking is, I am always terrible at sort of botching this, but you know, in terms of things that people are afraid of, you have got death, as the number one thing, right? And then you have got public speaking as the second thing. And I am lucky, I have a weird theatrical background. I had a forensics and speech and debate activities in high school. So I am not inclined to be afraid of it, but I am also a soft-spoken, so I am not one of these people who has got like a naturally big bellowing voice. I cannot command a room and in quite the same way. So people have different ways of engaging and drawing in an audience. There is one great story about this guy who was, as for some big tech company, like a Google, or an Instagram, or something like that and was presenting at Canne. And was just botching it for the first ten minutes. And could tell that had lost the crowd, never had the crowd. But, he stopped. Took a moment, allowed himself a moment to regain his composure, and turned to the audience and said, guys, I have been totally screwing up for the last ten minutes. I would kindly like to ask her permission to start over. Would you be willing to do that for me? And boom, everyone stood up, took notice, massive applause at the end. So it, you know, it is insanely uncomfortable for a lot of people. But talk about what you care about, talk about what, you know. I think there are ways to you sort of talked about building up a brand. You will get known for other things, and that is what sort of leads to speaking and speaking opportunities. Bigger companies are always looking for opportunities to build their brand and to have people evangelize for their products and

their services. So, there are, I did not really have any speaking opportunities while I was at RGA because those were sort of guarded by the C-Suite and people like that. And those were the faces of the company. And that was it. But, a company like Sapient where there were literally tens of thousands of employees, they were often asking for people to sort of volunteer to speak at events, to be the face of the company, and to do that. So the opportunities will manifest themselves in weird ways.

(36:28) **Carla:** I think for me, this podcast has helped a lot, because I am not that afraid anymore. So I normally ask people like, just to obviously give people advice. Can you recommend a book, a podcast, a blog or person to follow? It could be or an and, if you have all the answers.

(36:52) **Dan:** Goodness, I would say that we need a lot of, for designers brains to work, we need a lot of stimuli, right? So I think sometimes it is great when that stimuli is from far reaching places. So I think in terms of people that I think are just important to sort of listen to, on Twitter, Arlene Hamilton is fantastic. She is a venture capitalist, African-American, lesbian venture capitalist who is creating a lot of change in the world by being able to fund a lot of different companies. And so I think I think she is fantastic. I think Cindy Gallop is always a barn burner, and always talking about important things from media to the old sort of agency consultancy thing we were talking about before.

(38:13) **Dan:** My boss here, Pip Jamison is always talking about the things that we care about as a company. And it was on the BBC recently, sort of talking about socio-economic diversity. And so I think start there. I think finding people that are not just about design but are talking about things that you care about. And then as a designer, you will find a way to weave that into what you are doing.

(38:43) **Chris:** Yeah. I think that is some great advice to end on. So thank you very much for talking to us.

(38:48) **Dan:** Cheers. Thanks guys.

(38:49) **Carla:** Thank you.

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