

SYPartners

Designing for Humanity

Episode 3: When a designer meets a social worker, with Tucker Viemeister

Tucker Viemeister: [00:00:00] How can you not be an optimistic designer? It's like you're going, "I'm really bummed out. I don't think, you know, I can't make the world better." That's not a designer, you have to be optimistic!

[Music]

Introduction: [00:00:15] This is Designing for Humanity, a podcast by SYPartners about designing a future that's made for all of us and the best in us. I'm Rie Nørregaard and I'm talking with some of the most interesting people I know about how we as designers can tackle the most complex challenges our society faces right now. How can we use design to reimagine the ways we interact with each other and with the world? I'm here to start the conversation about what new ways of thinking and methods are needed.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:51] Today I'm so happy to be joined by Tucker Viemeister, who I've known since... a long time. Not only has Tucker helped found many of the most influential design businesses such as Smart Design and Frog Design. He's vice president of the Architectural League in New York. You can find his work in permanent collections around the world from the Smithsonian to MoMA. And he holds a mere 32 patents. Tucker, thank you for joining me. And I'd love to start off with you and your calling as a designer.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:01:25] Designers always say they're trying to make the world a better place, and people go: "What is that? That's too broad to mean anything." But I disagree. You know, a lot of people don't try to make the world a better place, so I think that that's what I'm trying to do—make the world a better place. And not just in the physical part, but in everything—the way people live and how they interact with each other and treat each other. Because that's really what it boils down to: how people treat each other. I think in a literal sense I'm like the product of both of my parents. You know product because my dad was a designer and he named me after a product. But also my mother was a social worker and she realized how important design was into changing people's behavior. You know, she taught in Headstart; knew that having colors and stuff for the kids to look at were important. The combination of her and my dad really made me... there was never any separation

between design and making and the social part of design. It's all about not just the experience, the behavior.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:02:47] I love that. So I think you'd agree that design as an act of service is maybe at the heart of how you approach your work, also. How do you think about that role of design?

Tucker Viemeister: [00:03:03] Well I think it's a little difficult to do because on one hand you think you're all talented and smarter than everybody else, because that's why you're a designer. But you always find out that you're not as smart as you thought. That's what's great about the process because you're always learning something new from working with people—other people with other ideas—and trying to figure out how to make everything work better. And every day you're bumping up against some obstacles that you never suspected. But as soon as you get over it, it's like everything's better.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:03:45] So do you think there's a unique responsibility for designers to create impact through their work?

Tucker Viemeister: [00:03:53] No, I think everybody has the same responsibility and designers just have different tools and different perspective. You know, on one hand I always thought everybody is a designer. People get up in the morning and choose which socks to put on—that's a design decision. But they normally think that other things are outside of their control. Like they can control how they look, but they can't control the pedestrians walking in front of them so they honk their horn a lot. I think people should think more like they're in control—the same way a designer is, and that they have an ability to make bigger impact than they think.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:04:36] There's another moment I would like for you to describe to us a little bit—the making of the products and the brand OXO, the kitchen tools that Smart Design, and you being part of that team with Sam Farber, created and basically invented a category of products that didn't exist before. And it's clear how influential that invention became later on. But I'm wondering in that moment—a reasonably small group of designers, engineers and a client—did you have a sense of what you were making? That you really were going to set a new standard or create new possibilities for design and for universal design?

Tucker Viemeister: [00:05:28] No, I think that was one of the good things about the project. We weren't trying to like shoot the moon. It wasn't like we sat around and were like: What can we do that's going to really change the way people live? You know we were just like, let's make a nice potato peeler that's more comfortable, and we were actually worried because it was going to cost a lot. It was going to cost like seven times as much as a regular potato peeler. So it was like gee, this is going to be like a specialty product. It's not going to be a big seller, because it's so expensive. But it was kind of like a perfect storm, everything kept lining up. It turned out that retailers liked the fact that it cost seven times as much because they could make seven times as much money. But the actual process of designing it was a little bit like that too, because you know we were trying to design this stuff for older people or people with less dexterity. And it was like, yeah-yeah whatever, until this woman came in with arthritis and it was like, oh my god. I didn't even need to see how far she could bend her fingers or anything, that was enough, and it made the whole project much more important. The project just sort of had its own inertia moving it ahead. Sort of like when you mix some magic thing, and more and more people like it for some reason. Or it's like something goes viral on the Internet. Why? I don't know. But we had that feeling that this was going to be like that. And it was not just the design of it, but it was the philosophy that was evolving at the same time that we started to think that this was not a bad idea to design stuff for handicapped people that everybody else could use, and it would sort of eliminate the handicap then. Those kinds of things evolved while we were doing that.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:07:32] I find that your approach is both very pragmatic but you're also really optimistic in your practice.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:07:43] Wait, I was just talking about this other day! How can you not be an optimistic designer? It's like, you're going, "Oh I'm really bummed out. I don't think I can make the world better." That's not a designer. You have to be optimistic. You have to always be thinking, "Well at least we can make this better." I think it's the opposite of people who go, "Oh this sucks. I can't... There's no way we can fix this." That's not that's how designers think. They think, "Oh there's a problem here. But I bet you we could figure out a better way to do it."

Rie Nørregaard: [00:08:23] And for you it's very much to figure it out on behalf of others. Right? So in your work, I think you really connect it to the positive impact that you can make on people's lives, and that drives both your optimism and also the solutions that you create.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:08:47] Yeah, well, the user is always part of the design process so you always have to—whether you like it or not—you're not doing everything for yourself, so... That's art. You know we're always collaborating and working with other people, and that's also what makes it more fun and makes it more interesting and lively.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:09:10] Tucker, can you talk a little bit about beauty. Beauty is something that means different things to all of us, but to you, it has a specific meaning.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:09:19] You can't put a price on it. Nobody knows exactly what it is. And clients say like, "I'm not going to spend more money to make this look better." They used to. But I think people are realizing now that beauty is one of the things that makes life worth living. It really adds value to things. You wake up in the morning thinking about something beautiful. I think it's an important thing, and that's why I combine the word beauty and utility to create the word "beautility," because I think American companies would be more interested in paying for it if they had a different outlook on it. So that's another thing—I think that people need to have a handle to understand things, the same way as the Good Grips handle explains to people, tells people that they're going to have fun peeling potatoes. You know, you need to have words and stuff that people can use to explain things.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:10:26] You may not even remember this, but it's something that stuck with me, and I keep referring back to it, actually. It was an identity project at Smart Design. Something about a client that wanted to create a new identity and make new things. But they had a lot of their old... it could of been as simple as having envelopes and letterhead but they had a lot of their old stuff. And you said, well maybe it's about not doing anything at all. Because it's a waste and if it's just going to get a little bit better and you end up with a whole bunch of stuff that you don't need then maybe that's not necessary. Do you remember that at all?

Tucker Viemeister: [00:11:10] I don't remember that actual project, but around that time I was really thinking about that designers have three ways of working on projects. One, they can do a regular design project. The other way, which a lot of branding companies do, which is sort of like fix what's there. You know, like tweak it, make it a little better. But I also thought that the third way is that you don't have to do anything. And I don't think they talk about that at school or anything too much. Nowadays, there really is a clash between preservationists and people who want to do new things,

and I think that we don't really have a way of dealing with that so much. It's just like: Don't tear down the building! Instead of like: How can we go forward?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:12:02] I like that. Let's talk a little bit about your current team. You're working with scientists, designers, engineers, builders of this great vision for a very large planetarium. Talk to me about the team and what it's like to work with really complicated subject matter on a big team in China.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:12:28] There's so many like glitches and problems with that. But on the other hand, it's so interesting to work with astrophysicists who have like a whole different view of the world, really. And Chinese guys, who you know, are trying to build the museum. It's like a huge range of cultures and point of views and working styles. It's really interesting. It's not like the smoothest operation, but I think for me it's really interesting. I'm learning about different cultures, about different knowledge and stuff like that. Having big arguments about what it would be like to fall into a black hole and what you would see. Stuff like that. It's really crazy.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:20] So friction in service of creativity and invention.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:13:28] Yeah, it's like... I don't know, it's just fun, you know?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:32] Thank you, Tucker. It was really nice spending time with you and listening to you today.

Tucker Viemeister: [00:13:38] I'll say thank you, too. It's really great sitting here and talking to you too.

[Closing Music]

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:43] The thing that really stuck with me in talking to Tucker was his notion that it all comes down to how we interact with each other, how we treat each other. And if we can use designed to improve those interactions—whether it's through a potato peeler that removes stigma or how we understand the universe—then we might be on the right track.