

# Places of Design

18/19  
Education  
Spaces  
Methods  
Processes

Institute of  
Industrial  
Design



# Designing is not a Linear Process

Johannes Fuchs

I met Jonathan Levien from the design studio Doshi Levien during the IID's International Workshop Week last year. We talked about his workshop "Fabric, Space, Object" and how it relates to his own work, about material qualities, and his approach as a designer.

**Johannes Fuchs:** As a starting point in your workshop, you have chosen a fabric by the company Kvadrat. Many of your designs are based on textiles and fabrics. Are they your preferred material for your design work?

**Jonathan Levien:** Which material I prefer depends on the design, of course. The workshop that we are conducting here is really looking at the crossover between different scales of design. If we are designing a chair, we could perceive it not only as an object but also as a space framing the person sitting in it. This allows us to recognise this object in a more artistic and sculptural way not limited by function, but one that will enable us to expand the references that go into the design. I wanted to bring some of that approach to the students here at IID and to encourage them to do this project with a primarily artistic starting point so they could start thinking about the relationship between the space of the object and fabric in a different way. This, in fact, reflects how we operate in our own studio when we begin a project. We always think more in terms of our sculptural concept and then we try to mould that artistic idea into a product.

**JF:** You've asked the students to create an object that has a spatial dimension using Kvadrat fabric as the primary material. I was thinking of room-organising furniture or microarchitecture. Why is fabric such an appropriate material when working on a spatial dimension?

**JL:** We're seeing a considerable increase in the use of textiles in interiors, be it in working or domestic environments. We've got these vast open spaces and it's necessary to create smaller areas within them. Textile is perfect because you have flexibility in the way you can mould space using textiles. Of course, you are not necessarily creating a permanent structure with it.

**JF:** What possibilities do textiles offer for your design?

**JL:** Textiles have superb acoustic dampening properties as well. And there is the exploration of colours that you can bring into architecture through them – this material has got such immense potential! This is why Nipa and I have found ourselves working with this material more often, in particular with the products from Kvadrat, who very generously supported the workshop we are running.

**JF:** You said in an interview: "I like to think with my hands." Can you tell me more about your design process?

**JL:** Making is a way of thinking. It is something that my design process is rooted in. I studied cabinetmaking when I first left school at sixteen. I learned to make beautiful things from wood. Now when I sculpt forms and define spatial concepts, I work with my hands to determine those forms. I use wire or cardboard, very humble basic materials with creative potential, to create very plastic and fluid forms, structures, and spaces. After I have "drawn" in three dimensions using this combination of materials, the challenge then is how to translate that into an object that can be industrially produced. That's the really challenging part. The other reason why making is still a very fundamental part of the design process for me is that I try to listen to the materials. I never have complete control over what I am making because the material is giving me feedback. A metal rod behaves in a very different way to cardboard and that behaves very differently to a sculpted material.

**JF:** I develop my ideas with simple sketches and paper models, and I like the moment of surprise about it, the moment when new possibilities arise. Does this appeal to you, too?

**JL:** Yes, very much so. For instance, when I make a piece and leave it for the evening and when I come back to the studio the next day, the material has relaxed into a new form. Instead of thinking, well never mind, that's a mistake, I incorporate that into the design. What I find interesting is how designs are sometimes shaped by the material itself. I am really interested in that relationship between skilled making and material properties that give their own input to the design.

**JF:** How do you teach this attitude or this working method to your team?

**JL:** Just by taking part. Our studio is an open space, that's the first important thing. Everything that goes on in the studio is common knowledge. I like to have people in the studio who are curious and who really want to get involved in the process.

**JF:** How are the assistants involved in the design process?

**JL:** They are really there to translate what I am trying to create into 3D. They are hopefully able to then develop the skills which are necessary to create their own concepts. But it is difficult indeed to replicate my sensibilities, my way of looking, or my skills, which are all sort of a complete package. I could never expect somebody to join the studio with all of those abilities. But I need people who can develop them and turn these skills into industrial pieces.

**JF:** What do you need for designing in terms of space?

**JL:** I need a workshop, really. I don't need a perfect environment, a clean and ideal space. But the studio needs to really support that process of making and sculpting. And of course, I need a lot of materials and inspiration around me! I also need a kind of visible archive of projects on the wall and standing around. Designing is never a linear process. I might start one project and it hits a dead end. But I won't discard that idea. I'll just put it aside. Working on another piece, it might come back. I do need to accumulate experiments and prototypes, to have them there for me to see them and to bring them into the work.

**JF:** Do you work outside of the studio too?

**JL:** I am always observing the world around me. Actually, I find it quite challenging to design outside of the studio just because I am in a different frame of mind. It is more like I am receiving information when I work elsewhere.

**JF:** Do you use a camera to capture your impressions?

**JL:** If you take a picture, you stop looking. But if you really try to memorise and understand what you see, you walk away with a much fuller understanding of what you just saw. Quite often we take pictures, but then they just end up in a big data bank on computers, useless.

**JF:** How important are digital tools for your design process?

**JL:** Essential. We use all kinds of digital tools and aids, some of which the companies we work for have access to. We take our designs and prototypes up to a certain point, which is usually in the form of these very basic mock-ups. We use a lot of 3D CAD.

Jonathan Levien (left) discussing with Johannes Fuchs. The exchange took place on the occasion of the Fabric, Space, Object workshop, which Levien conducted at the International Workshop Week of the IID.











**JF:** How important is the understanding of new materials and manufacturing processes?

**JL:** I see myself as a kind of serial specialist – becoming an expert for upholstered chairs, then for lighting. I like the way that we might focus on one area of design and production and then on another. Design is one of the richest professions in the sense that you could spend an entire career just studying colour. There are artists and designers who really specialise in colour. Not to mention how you could concentrate on materials, technology, forms, and so on. The longer we practice design, the richer our understanding and approach become.

**JF:** How can young designers develop their own approach to design?

**JL:** I am glad you said approach. Designers should develop a method and not a style which might be popular today, then next year, it's gone, it's history. An approach is limitless, growing and evolving endlessly. To start with developing a strategy is the right way. For that, you have to know yourself, what your strengths are, but also the medium that you love to work with.

*Jonathan Levien ran the workshop module "Fabric, Space, Object" during the IID's International Workshop week in October 2018. The students were asked to create an object that has a spatial dimension using fabric as the primary material. The workshop was generously supported by Kvadrat. Doshi Levien is an internationally acclaimed design studio founded by designers Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien. Doshi grew up in India and studied design at the National Institute of Design. Levien trained in fine cabinet-making followed by industrial design. They met at the Royal College of Art and have been working together for over 10 years in their London studio.*



















