

# AGDA

**Conversations with Designers**  
**Film 01: Michaela Webb, Studio Round**  
**Directed and Produced by Liana Lucca-Pope for AGDA**  
**Filmed and Edited by McClure Multimedia**

Transcript of interview with Liana Lucca-Pope, January 2010

**What motivates and inspires you in your work?**

So what motivates and really inspires me is intelligent design – great concepts and problem solving, being able to kind of put all the pieces of the puzzle together. When I'm given a brief I take it away and really think it through. It's through coming out with great ideas that I'm inspired to actually get on and produce the work. Collaboration is also very inspirational and as a team we're often talking and discussing. Getting on to a computer is probably the least inspiring thing. That's just a means to an end. That for me is just the tool. It's the thinking, the ideas and the generation of those ideas that motivates me and ultimately gets the work that we produce done. And beautifully crafted pieces of work also inspire me. So it's not just the idea, it's once you get to the end and the idea is completely refined and evolved and been worked through, been taken through different manifestations and really got to what the essence of that idea is without being too clouded and then producing something that's very beautiful and crafted.

**So where do your ideas come from, how do you get them?**

Every single job comes from a completely different place and there's no one place that they actually come from. And I think dialogue plays such an important role, and idea generation, discussing and talking about those ideas. And also really listening to the brief, vocalising what the brief is about and then the ideas tend to come from that. So again brainstorming is a really big part of our idea generation and collaboration of different minds thinking in an almost subconscious way. I never stop at the end of the day, I'm thinking while going to the supermarket or watering the garden. Ideas are always being mulled over until you come up with something that you think "that's going to work" and quite often it might be the first idea. It might be quite complex and there might be different audiences, you need to allow that time in your head to kind of make sure. Gestation time to make sure that is going to be able to communicate to variable audiences or that idea will work for a vast range of mediums. So there is a lot of thinking that goes on off the computer and outside of traditional hours.

**Do you get a brief as part of a team?**

Yes. We often have a project manager and myself and another designer. We find that at that beginning stage we have quite a few people onboard and then as the project goes through the studio less people need to be involved. So in the idea stage we all go to a briefing so we can all brainstorm. We don't just have designers in the brainstorming, we have project managers and account managers there, they have a very good understanding of the client and what the client might need or what the audiences might need and come at something from a different perspective. Often at the end of a project we don't know whose original idea it was because there's been so many different minds that have collaborated.

**And what about if a client says to you "I've got a great idea, this is what I want you to do..."?**

Well I think if it is a great idea we are totally onboard and the clients that we work with we want them to be engaged. Some clients ask if they can be in the brainstorming, which is difficult at first, just because we (as a team) know each other so well you kind of don't worry about putting out silly ideas, no-one has a problem with the fact that you might say stupid things. We go off on tangents and that doesn't matter because we know we always get somewhere that's really worthwhile. Whereas if a client is there they're a little bit like "whoa, I

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don't want that" and this can stop the process. So I think as long as they're open to being part of that full process and confident enough that there will be the right idea at the end, then that's absolutely fine. And yeah, sometimes their ideas are really good and you have to be open enough as a designer and not precious enough to think "oh that's not our idea". You have to kind of go "no, actually it's a really good idea, it's the way now we're going to interpret that idea and the way we're going to use that idea and add value to it. When it's a bad idea then there's a lot of conversations that have to go on and you have to show how it might not work. I believe that designers need to take onboard what clients have to say and if they don't think it's going to work they have to show them that. It's an education that they have to go through. You have to often put it down and visualise something to show them why there's some problems there and then articulate that in an intelligent way so they can understand and that it's not just about the visual outcome, it's about the idea.

**So that kind of addresses my next question about what you think is unique about the way designers approach problem solving. Can you tell us more about your perspective on this?**

Again it's listening and designers being able to visualise what the problem is. Designers have very good visualisation skills and need to be able to use those not just when we're presenting to clients but when visualising the problem. Just recently we were given a big brief from a large advertising company, it was a brief that they couldn't solve internally. It wasn't just one problem, there were loads of different problems and as they articulated the brief we really listened. I was able to understand what all the problems were. The account manager in the meeting said to me "how did you do that, it just seemed like this bombardment of problems" and to him he couldn't make sense of them all and I think as designers that's one of the things that we do really well is actually use that visualisation to see where the problems are, where the holes are and be able to kind of work with that. And so listening skills, visualisation skills and again dialogue skills are all things that designers need to, I suppose, work at and continue to push and strengthen. It's not just about what we produce on the computer and how we present that, it's how we actually take the information that's given and how we decipher it.

So as a designer being able to show empathy and be sensitive to what the clients needs are and understanding what the problems is, From there you can produce solutions that are correct.

**What is it that makes a dream client or a dream job?**

I think a client that really respects what we do and respects the process, a client that doesn't want to cut corners, wants design solutions that are going to stand the test of time and really wants to be part of that process and come on that journey with us. And a client that is confident about the ideas and the generation of ideas and is open enough to see things from different perspectives.

Sometimes a client just might want a green logo for instance. We had one client – Melbourne First Aid – who came in and said "we just want a cross in dark green". Through communication and understanding who their audience was we took them on a journey and produced something that was quite different to what they'd ever dreamed of. At the end they said "we could never have imagined where you've taken us to and yet this is so right". And I guess it's those sort of clients that are open to that process and that journey, they want to be challenged and want solutions that aren't going to just stay around for the next six months but stay around for a long time.

**When you say they need to interested in things staying around for a long time, what do you mean, how do you know that that's going to happen?**

In general we want clients that aren't just looking for the latest trends and want things that will still stick around, design they can live with for a long period of time. They're not going to come

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back the next year and say “oh we’re fed up with that logo now we want a new one”. They see the value and want it for the next 10 to 20 years. New things can be added and we can produce other material to go alongside but the actual core concept or idea or mark is retained.

## **Tell us about a favourite job or a really effective client relationship.**

Often the latest job is your favourite because it’s the one that you’ve just finished. – at the moment its probably our longest standing client, the City of Melbourne. We’ve worked together for seven years and every two months we produce an exhibition. The client is always the same but the curator changes. At the beginning this client didn’t want the graphic design to have any voice or any personality. At the beginning the client didn’t mind if the identity for the exhibitions all looked exactly the same but as time went on we’ve taken them on a journey and now they’re so involved with what the catalogue and the exhibition identity is going to be. Now the client asks “What are we going to do this time and how’s it going to be different” and each time it’s a new challenge for us.

So with all of the exhibitions that we’ve done the only thing that’s consistent is the catalogue size. We’ve stuck to one size all the way through, and what’s been interesting is that size has become an identity in its own right. People look out for that size and understand that this is another City of Melbourne exhibition.

There’s a couple that I was just going to talk about. One was called Flush, which was about public toilets. The logo was the vacant and engaged symbols from public toilet doors. We produced big windows with the symbols blown up. Then for the catalogue we interleaved sheets of paper to reference toilet paper. Each architect had a separate leaf. So you can see the identity plays a strong role and the way that it was translated had quite a different look.

The other exhibition was titled Rubbish, Cleaning The Streets of Melbourne. We produced posters all about where Melbourne’s rubbish goes and it has a completely different look and feel. The budgets on these are very tight, we always have the same amount of money but we always try and do something completely different.

Another was about the public parking meters and we actually produced this life size brochure on Melbourne’s parking meters and the history of those parking meters. We come up with an idea and then we translate that idea through the exhibition, the catalogue, and the windows.

During those seven years we’ve done exhibitions that have travelled, therefore the identity needs to be portable. So every one is a completely different, there’s a lot of problem solving. As a project I suppose it’s one of our favourites because we always have a lot of fun with it and we know exactly what the budgets are and the clients are very open to how far we can actually push things within those budgets. We know what the rules and the restrictions are. I think that’s really important as a designer.

## **So you can measure the success with a client because they obviously love it but can you measure the success with the public?**

Yes. I don’t have the statistics on hand but the visitation of these exhibitions, when we first started when they’d have an opening you could quite easily all fit within the space. Now the whole exhibition it spills onto the street. It was only meant to be a temporary space and now it’s actually become a permanent fixture within the City of Melbourne Council.

## **Fantastic. So the last question I’ve got on my list is do you believe that good design can contribute to our quality of life?**

Yes, definitely, especially mine.

I think design definitely adds a lot of value to the quality of life. Architecture – we love being in great buildings, we love being in great spaces. Buildings can offer cultural exchange, there’s

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a social aspect with buildings. Products – well designed products really add a lot of value to our lives and can make people's lives change completely. With graphic design it's just as important. Graphic design conveys messages and meaning. People inherently understand good communication. To communicate strong concepts enables people to align with certain brands, to feel part of something. All add a great depth to our lives. So intelligent design and clever design can really add value to our lives.

I was part of the team that created Orange mobile phones in the UK. Before we began it was called The Telecommunications Company and there was nothing inspiring about it. We had to create something that people wanted to be a part of. This changed the mobile phone industry in the UK.

**I once heard someone saying about how a graphic designer can only get people in the door or try a product once, after that it's completely up to the client's ability to deliver. So you can only promise what's actually going to be delivered?**

Yeah, that's right. You can't trick them and there is a lot of that and especially when you do fashion based work. It's really hard as a designer to work out how far you go. We need to be responsible, think about what we're communicating.

**So referring back to the question about designers contributing to our quality of life – do you actually think that designers have some kind of social responsibility in terms of integrity or honesty?**

Yes, definitely. I think it's not something that is taught. This is a huge dilemma because you're often given information and you need to convey that in the best possible way and it's how far you push that information.

**What about environmental stuff?**

Environmental is a really hard one because we do try to at all times get clients to choose printers that are environmentally responsible, use paper that's environmentally responsible but it's hard because information keeps coming out that's changing all the time and the industry we are in we consume a lot of waste. At times we get clients to choose online mediums rather than printing or the printed information that we do produce is more considered, communicates more effectively and we're rethinking the way that that information can get packaged up. So all the time we're changing the way we produce things and not suggesting production methods to clients that aren't environmentally responsible. It is something that we have to be educated about all the time as designers and sometimes clients just won't pay that extra. Sometimes we've actually taken cuts on projects and we wear some of the cost, but as a design studio you can't do that all the time.

**And to finish up, do you think that the general public or clients or the business community has a better idea now of what it is that graphic designers do? What sort of understanding do you think is out there about what it is that designers do?**

There's still a lot of education that needs to be had, we still get clients all the time that don't know the full extent to what graphic design is. They don't understand what our role is. Whenever we start a project we begin by telling new clients what we do. We still get clients all the time saying "well I didn't realise that you actually thought through all those things and I didn't realise you actually spoke to me about how I was going to communicate to my clients or how we were going to actually go about taking that brand through all of the parts of the business."