Craft (/resources/#/cat/craft)

How I Made It: Ten Years of Design with AIR

Kate Krosschell (https://airmedia.org/author/kate-krosschell/)
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Editor's Note: *Angelynn Grant, AIR's graphic designer, has been with the organization since 2007. As an independent herself, Angelynn has weathered career twists and turns in art, media and design and has lived to tell the tale. Here we feature a Q&A with Angelynn in celebration of her long-standing relationship with AIR as we close out 2017—and hold a microscope up to some of her finest projects with us. Creatives working on projects with a design element and folks mystified by graphic design alike can glean insights into the craft and process thanks to Angelynn's work and career path.*

How did you get your start in graphic design?

I'm a design nerd who was once a math nerd. I was working on my PhD at Brown in mathematics, but felt the pull of making art. I asked my painting professor at Brown if one could earn money being an artist (since I was on scholarship) and he said I could be a "graphic designer." First time I'd heard that phrase. He suggested I visit RISD professor Malcolm Greer who had a studio right "downcity" in Providence. ("Downcity" is Rhode Island-ese for downtown. I'm a "real" Rhode Islander even though I've lived in Cambridge, MA for a long time.) I visited Malcolm, who was very generous with his time and so happy to show off his work. I then took classes both officially and unofficially at RISD in design while still working on that PhD (which I never finished).

Many of the RISD faculty had gone to Yale for their MFAs. I wanted to stay in Providence—I had such a nice apartment and life there—and applied to both RISD and Yale. The financial aid at Yale was much better, so off I went, with hardly any graphic design experience beyond the few classes I'd sat in on. Yale was an intense two years for the MFA, but thrilling, too.

Wow, what a transition. How did it feel to dive headfirst into a new discipline, full-time, as a relative newbie?

I was so encouraged by the faculty at RISD and was treated as a bit "exotic" by the design program at Yale, that I didn't blink. I love school anyway. I fully immersed myself and worked so hard, I barely left my desk to sleep or eat. I definitely had catching up to do; a second-year student in the program (the acclaimed identity designer Peter Levine) took me under his wing and showed me basics all the others knew, like what kind of tape to use and how to use it!

How would you describe your design style?

There is a "Yale style" from the years when the program was led by Alvin Eisenman, who cofounded the program in 1950 with art and design greats Alvin Lustig and Josef Albers. There was also a strong influence from many others who'd been part of either the heyday of post-WW2 New York design or émigrés from the Bauhaus, or both. When I was there in the early 80s, we were so lucky to be taught by some of the greatest 20th century graphic designers still living: Paul Rand, Bradley Thompson, and Armin Hofmann.

The Yale style is very strong on typography. I would tell my students that it is an "elegant modernist" style. (I taught design at the undergraduate and graduate level for about ten years at RISD, MIT, Simmons College, and the Art Institute of Boston.)

What was your first project with AIR?

I worked with Sue Schardt and her consultancy SchardtMEDIA for many years before she became the executive director and now CEO at AIR. So it's difficult to pinpoint the exact first project. This one sheet below is from 2009, which doesn't seem that long ago.

How has your work changed over ten years?

I do a lot of digital design in addition to print; web design has been a big part of my output. The nerd in me gravitated immediately to the web and I had my own first website up in 1994. I would read HTML source code on the subway to learn it. I've always tried to stay current with the coding and platforms and I think the habit of running my eyeballs over the web constantly has helped my own style, if not change, just shift—hopefully improve—with visual fashion. However, that bedrock of "Yale designer" is always there. "Type is king," I would tell my students and I'm always very careful with typography no matter what the trends.

Can you describe a project or two for AIR that are particularly memorable? How so?

I can honestly say that my recent projects for AIR, where I got to partner with the amazing design eyes of Marketing & Communications Manager Kate Krosschell, have been some of the most fun and rewarding I've done. From the small "5 Questions" handout to the "Storytelling Matters" postcards to banners for the website like the most recent one for Full Spectrum (https://airmedia.org/programs/full-spectrum/2017-winter-full-spectrum/). Kate brings really fresh ideas at the start of the projects and then pushes me past my first easier sketches to fine tune things just right. It's such a joy to be a designer when you "click" with someone filling out an art director role so well.

From where do you draw inspiration when you're starting a project?

Well, as I mentioned above, if the client has good ideas, that's great. If they don't, I try to see their projects as their "baby"—I put myself in their shoes with their audience and, depending on the content and message of the project, find a solution that will relay the message, attracting that audience, and stay true to the client's identity. For example, the Cambridge Historical Society wanted a new website that would emphasize that they're not a museum, rather a true society—a social group for sharing history. And they wanted to attract all ages and all Cantabrigians, not just those who live on tony Brattle Street where the Society has its headquarters. I feel that I achieved that with the new site design (cambridgehistory.org (http://cambridgehistory.org/)) that went live over this past summer. It's true to the Society's identity, fresh in terms of web design, and, with luck, attracting a new, wider set of members.

How do you get 'unstuck' if a design isn't working?

That's very hard. Sometimes you over tweak it. It can often happen if a client has too many visual ideas of their own and you're trying to make them all work. I usually step back and consider a purely typographic solution: just type, done cleanly, yet eye catching.

Anything you'd like to add or advice you'd give to others?

Here are some fun tips I gave to new freelancers in a talk way back in 2001. I've kept them on my own website (http://angelynngrant.com/teaching/angelynns-freelancing-tips/) all these years, because they're kind of evergreen:

- Don't be shy: Go to professional events and lectures and meet people.
- One person's castoff is your meal ticket: Call or email old teachers/mentors and ask them to pass along any jobs that may be too small for their studio.
- Don't be too choosy but don't be too cheap: Accept small budget jobs when work is slow but never underprice yourself or do work for free (unless it's a charitable gift).
- Ginkgo biloba + OCD: Keep all business email; try to be organized, but, most importantly, keep it all and back it up.

- How can you miss me if I never went away: Go out to walk/jog, go to a gym or yoga classes, or go grocery shopping (or all three!) in the late afternoon, early evening, so that when you return, you too can have that "honey, I'm home" feeling.
- Time is on your side: Hang around a long time – eventually people will know you and send work your way.

Angelynn Grant is a designer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, specializing in graphic design for print and the web. Since she regularly writes on design-related topics, she is also able to provide clients with help composing and editing their content, helping them to bring their message into focus. Up-to-date on the bleeding edge of tech and design and an avid follower of social media trends, she advises clients on how to effectively use both new tech and social media for their business. Given her past experience in education combined with her inner nerd, she is able to help clients with many of their computer-, internet-, and social media-related questions.

Since 1990, she has also been involved in college radio, first at WHRB at Harvard and, since 1991, at WMBR at MIT, where she produces a show featuring jazz, early pop, and rhythm & blues (from the 1920s to the 1970s), called Coffeetime (coffeetimeblog.org (http://coffeetimeblog.org/)).

Some of her recent work (including links to sites she has designed) as well as her CV and some of her writings can be seen on her website angelynngrant.com (http://angelynngrant.com/).

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