

Chris Wu and Prem Krishnamurthy on design as an ongoing conversation



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3874 words.

Tags: [Design](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

How do you start a project?

Prem: I'm a typographic nerd. I always start with typography. I always start with the history of a typeface or its name or why it was designed, and then I try to make some contextual link. I make a lot of typographic in-jokes, too. Not that they're meant to be legible to anybody else.

One of the things I realized in the last six months was, "Oh wow, I also studied photography and I'm obviously very interested in images: Why is it that for the last 15 years I've basically just focused on type?"

So it's a thing I'm currently trying to think through in a different way.

Chris: I think it's one of the distinctive parts of our approach. Every time Prem and I go to a kick-off meeting of a new project, we write to each other what typeface we want to use, and it's always somehow referential historically. It's can be from a very blunt or straightforward reference of, like, "This is a German institution so we should use a German text." Or like, "This is French Baroque, a type is like that response to the root of the artist." We always try to do that. Or, it's a little bit stupid maybe—the name of the typeface starts with the same letter of the institution or of the client. It's something we always think about for a typeface.

But my background is actually marketing and PR and advertising back in Taipei; I worked in an ad agency for a couple years before I moved to New York. So, I always start a project with composition. In my head, the typeface is one thing, and then how the poster or the logo or the overall design looks compositionally is another. Then, the white space, and how they'll be positioned. I have a vague picture in my mind, a very abstract visual, without color, without anything. That's my starting point. It comes together in that way



Does creating a subtext keep things intellectually interesting? It seems like there are parts of the project for the client and a part for you—like you have a private ownership over a project or piece.

Prem: I wouldn't say it's a private ownership. I would claim that the best pieces of design, or the best design systems, are like novels. They're like literature. There's a level of depth to why they're made and how they're made and there are internal stories, some of which might not be visible to a reader, but on the other hand, they read as something that has narrative complexity and different levels of interpretation.

Obviously, you're right, they do keep us excited about the work and give us some other little level, but hopefully you can also feel them in the final work as it unfolds.

Do you consider being a designer as also being an artist?

Chris: Our studio has been working for art and culture over the past 14 years. We positioned ourselves not only as designers. Also, our design is always very specific and has a contextual thinking that's related to the project or the artist or the institution. Our work involves a lot of form-giving processes.

Every time I go to openings—or events, press events, or social events in an art context—people think I'm the artist. And people actually mistake me as one of the famous Hong Kong artists, because we kind of look alike. I quite like that because it feels like the definition of a designer and an artist is very straightforward: An artist is the thinker and a designer is a doer, or designers choose colors and typeface and design logos and an artist has deeper thinking and a more conceptual-driven methodology.

Our ideas, our concepts, our thinking, and even our existence is being acknowledged in a broader context. Instead of just straightforward client commission projects and "These guys are the designers who made a beautiful logo or a cool ad campaign for us," it's more, "This guy is actually part of the process" or "These guys are thinkers and readers and curators and editors."

Prem: In many ways, building a practice like the kind of studio we have is itself a project, or a process. That's the work. In many ways, I think a designer might be an artist, it's just that their medium is people.



When you're an artist you can say "I'm going to make my thing in a solitary space." When you're a designer, you're dealing with clients, and you have to adjust this thing that you thought was amazing and go a different route. How do you balance that? Or is it something where—because you've established an aesthetic and approach—people who come to you let do your thing?

Prem: I think that's true, but then the flipside is when we sit together with other designers in the studio and we're making things—that's more in the painterly/writerly mode. You're creating something; it's just that maybe you're creating something after you've internalized who the client is.

Chris: I think it's a little bit of both, too. I think that circles back to the kind of unique approach we have of working: We usually start with listening. We call it a discovery process. We start every project with a two-hour workshop. We'll send the client or collaborators intake questionnaires, basically questions that reflect the client, the institution.

Prem and I always joke that it's like group therapy. We get everybody in the room at a table and then everybody speaks whatever they wanted to talk about. You start to get the essence about what the project is really about, and then we start our design and our idea based on that instead of, like, "Alright, we have this fixed super cool idea." Our approach is always that we walk into a group without knowing anything, and we talk very little. We only ask questions. We never make any assumptions or conclusions. It's very much a therapy process. It's just listening and asking questions.

That goes back to the artistic process. My Dad is a painter and I paint in my spare time. I'm lousy, but I can paint whatever I want. But for the design process, in a professional process, it's more like I can sift through a lot of different ideas that I'm thinking about, but it has to be based on something, based on what's the lead or the essence of the project or the client.

Prem: Can I add to that? Or, maybe even contradict that? I totally agree, and that is true. I think that that's how we work and that's our process—its starts from this kind of listening.

On the other hand, I don't want to overuse the therapy metaphor, but it's also... We do bring with us all of our own baggage. We're authorial in some way. We have our own ideas and

things we've looked at and things we've made. Ideally our clients, or collaborators, chose us because things resonated with them. I used to never do this, but nowadays I do ask people, "What of our works did you like?" I want to have some sense of why they want to work with us. And then the ideal situation is that we can understand their context and who they are, but then we can also bring to bear our personalities and our own ideas, and then those things meld together.

I'll try to hopefully stop talking about therapy, but I once asked my therapist, "What kind of a therapist are you?" And she said, "Oh, I'm relational." I thought that was hilarious for the relationship to relational aesthetics and things, but I didn't realize that there were therapists where it's about understanding a situation, and understanding how two people or two organizations interact with each other, and being able to make that productive.



How do you decide if a project that you've done with someone is successful? Have you ever done something that you felt was not successful and was a failure, but the client was into it, it was completed, and you were done with it?

Chris: I think it's somehow a learning process for us, too. In the older days—say like six or seven years ago—we were very enthusiastic about design and the final design product. The definition of a successful project, usually is like, "Oh, our logo being made and put into the giant building. Or, this book came out really well and nicely and everybody likes it." And then the less successful project is usually, like, "Oh, they changed the typeface we chose, or they didn't use the color palette throughout. Or, eventually they changed the book cover without informing us."

But over the years, we started to discover that that's actually not quite true. Even if a client ended up changing the logo at the end, or used a different typeface, we think the successful part of that project is that we provoked that sort of thinking: people paying attention to the design and the system, or the logo or the typeface that we chose. It's a successful project in terms of the process. How the design actually influences people in all perspectives instead of just looking at design in a limited scope, or a limited point of view.

It's a learning experience for us, too.

Prem: 15 years ago when I first moved to New York, I remember going through a list of all the projects I'd done before then, and I realized that the projects I had good memories about, and thought of as successful projects, were not always the projects that were most graphically radical. They were actually the ones where I felt like it was interesting to work either with the other designers I was working with, or with the client, and that were generative, and that somehow those relationships continued over time. Maybe that's one success criteria: How you develop an ongoing conversation with somebody.

When you've had as many clients as you've had and you've worked together for so long, is there a point where you just kind of like: "This has changed so much, it's no longer our design"?

Chris: Change is always needed, but not necessarily from our perspective. If we need to upgrade the identity, if we need to upgrade the system, or if the client decides to change the typeface because it didn't quite work for them, or someone has a different opinion about that, I would frame it this way: It's more about the people and the relationship than the bigger picture of what the designs do for the client or for the project.

We always keep a good relationship with our clients and eventually we become friends. And then we're also going to check in sometimes and say, "Oh hey, I went to the museum today, I saw the poster has been doing this..." And I'm curious to hear what's changed, and then if you do want to do a refresh or upgrade of the project, we can discuss that. So, yeah, I think that's something to tag back to the idea that designs are living things. The product we made is less of a physical object anymore, it's something moving around people.

Chris: A good client relationship, in terms of being a designer or an artist, includes many different approaches. Prem and I have both worked in the industry for quite some time. When I was at the ad agency, it was purely what I would call a "client service" basis. Whatever clients said, you just said "yes" and tried to make them happy.

That's a very obvious thing: you try and make people happy in a meeting or in short amount of time; but if they're not really happy about what you come up with, they'll change their mind and call you and say they don't like it. And so to us, it's more like dealing with a client instead of just fulfilling their need of what they'd like. It's really understanding people and then trying to be empathetic about what they think and answering their questions.



You recently changed the name of your firm. People use the term "re-branding" for moments like this, but this feels less like that and more like stopping one thing and starting something entirely new. I'm curious about the challenge of something like that—you established a name and a project. I imagine it's difficult to pause there, and start something new.

Prem: It does feel less like a rebranding and more like a new phase. The flipside is that it's funny how you get caught up in an identity for a long time, and then it changes, you change, and then at some point it doesn't match anymore. For example, the name Project Projects was totally an accident in the first place. It came randomly in that way that the name of a band comes—you sit around and you drink, and you try to come up with a name. It's too long of a story for this, but it was this recognition that the way we've worked has changed in lots of ways, who we are as a studio and what kind of work we do has changed, and that maybe it was the right moment to make that more visible.

Chris: It's mostly a natural evolution from our old name. It's kind of referring to what we feel or see changing in the design industry. Project Projects mostly referred to the product, every product is a project and then we make the final design product in websites, books, exhibitions, identities, and such. But then, over the years, it changed—we looked more into process and into the bigger picture in terms of process on the client side, and then as a designer working not necessarily as a strategist, but more like a kind of consultant. Though we're still sharing our expertise as designers.

But that's why that's related directly to the name change. It feels like everything is a workshop. It's a conversation, a collaborative process.

Prem: Workshops are the new projects, I guess.

Most projects are collaborative, but is this putting more of a focus on the idea of a workshop or a team versus like a singular project or a singular person?

Chris: Yes, it's reflecting the change of the design industry as we've observed in the past few years, but also, it's less about one individual designer or one design outcome anymore, it's always about the team. That's significantly influenced our structure of the studio, too.

We'd been doing this workshop, we call it Workshop Workshops, every week for the past six months. Every Thursday we get together as a group—designers and non designers—everyone on our staff, and we sit together in our conference room and we order lunch and then we workshop things. It's one way pedagogical, but it's one way pragmatic. Sometimes we'll share our recent presentation to the client—or, we might do a reading group, like we share the book we recently read. Or, interesting artwork, or design or film. It's very loose, but somehow it's this idea of work spent together, less of a lecture or a show and tell. Almost everyone weighs-in on the process.

Prem: Yeah, and I think that that's the internal part, and then the external part. I do think, when I first started working in design 20 plus years ago, you would have these concrete assignments where you're hired to design a book. You're hired to design a corporate identity. You're hired to design an exhibition. And I think that maybe that was always not quite true. I think that maybe that was always not quite the reality, but I think in recent years it's become clear that actually those things bleed in a lot of ways, and what defines a single project is never that clear. The most obvious thing to say is that nowadays a lot of what we do is digital, a lot of what we do are websites. These are things that change constantly. And so, the idea that you make something and it's finished and then it goes to print, or it's produced and then it never changes, it's just almost never the case.

That's a relatively obvious thing to say to a digital native, but the design industry has been pretty slow to adapt to that, particularly in the art and cultural realm. It's kind of funny because we've always worked in the cultural realm because that's what we're also interested in and looking at and thinking about, but sometimes the cultural realm is much more conservative. People think a designer is somebody who designs a nice book and then it's finished and then it goes in the bookstore, rather than thinking about somebody who designs a system.

How do you manage to keep a collaboration strong and interesting? Once you found a good collaborator, how do you manage to keep going without falling out? How have you managed to keep this going for so long without getting sick of the other person?

Chris: I know what Prem is good at, I know what our designers or our team members are good at. I know the clients. I'm always trying to find the right position for myself in this, and how to contribute to this ongoing conversation. That makes the collaborative process easier. It's not necessary that I always be the talker in the room, or always be the listener in the room. I can play multiple roles.

When I walk into the room with Prem, I know he's gonna talk over me. I can tag-in and I'm not as good as a talker, especially in English, as he is. So, I always think, what's the role I play in this or that? That, I think, is a good way to think about this collaboration.

Prem: Well, I would add. Sorry, now I'm self-conscious. [laughs] I do think, Chris you already said it, you said something that I thought was really important, that it's also about communication. Chris and I have worked together for over 10 years. We can say pretty much anything to each other and we can be brutally honest with each other and we can support each other, but also we can argue about things.

You're never going to have a relationship where there are no conflicts. It's not a question of the conflict, it's how you talk about the conflict and how you deal with it. That's the important thing. And so when you talk about a collaborator who you never wanna work with, I think those are mostly situations where there's somebody who you have blocked communication with, where you can't even start to have a discussion of, like, "Why did you do that thing?" That's where it doesn't work.



Looking at your "Some Things" list you made for TCI, you both also like jazz. Jazz seems like a good way to think about this kind of collaboration.

Chris: When I first met Prem, I walked into his studio and he was playing "Lonely Woman" by Ornette Coleman. I decided I wanted to work with this guy because he was into jazz, too. But, yeah, I think that's a very good point. We both like jazz. It's also this: Improvisation is harder than just playing the sheet music. Also, there's the embedded personality [of the player]. Every person has their own sound, even if they play exactly the same song with exactly the same instrument, because the structure of your mouth is different and the personality is different and the look is different. Everybody's sound *sounds* different. That's a very subtle, or hidden distinction between musicians. Somehow, to me, that is what most resembles artistic expression.

Prem: I've been thinking more and more about improvisation in terms of our practice, too, and also in terms of curating and exhibition making—as creating the structure that you can then improvise on top of... Just the fact that it does have a very solid structure. There's a structure and a level of training and a level of skill, and that's what allows you to be spontaneous. There's so much preparation that goes into being able to build something into a system.

Chris Wu recommends:

Haruki Murakami: *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*

I've been reading this book every day since I was 18. It's my ultimate go-to inspiration, as well as a life manual.

John Coltrane: *Ballads*

I'm continuously blown-away by how beautiful Coltrane's standards are. To me, it's as inspiring as the innovations and experiments he brought to music. It never feels like he tries to impress people. It's more about doing everything great in the way that it's supposed to be. Even if you listen to the most cheesy, corny standard he plays, it's still more beautiful than anyone else can do. It's the craftsmanship. To me, that's inspiring.

Carl G. Jung: *Man and His Symbols*

I'm always curious about dreams and the human mind. I still can't quite understand this book, dreams, or the human mind.

Melissa Clark: *weekly cooking videos on New York Times*

I love how she presents cooking and food in a feel-good, no-stress manner

Paintings of Firenze Lai

This one is purely visual and, as a amateur painter, a study reference.

Prem Krishnamurthy recommends:

Some new ones and older influences

Ted Chiang: *Stories of Your Life & Others*

I've been reading this since last summer. It's so smart. Language, translation, time, change... I gave it to over 30 friends last summer. There's a story in it called "Understand," which is about this man whose brain is damaged. His brain gets damaged and then he goes on an experimental therapy that makes him super smart. The narration changes as he becomes smarter. It's like you see how his brain works.

Jeanette Winterson: *The Powerbook & Art Objects*

Her writing about writing and the life of art—challenging, seductive, inspiring.

Sherlock

I just started watching this series. I love seeing a filmic version of how a mind works.

Yvonne Rainer: Feelings Are Facts

Mix of genres, honesty, self-perception... her ability and openness to change her own practice...

Kevin Eubanks: first track of Turning Point

One of my favorite jazz songs of all time, since I was in high school. Hearing him play last year in NYC was a "turning point" for me. Learning about structure and chaos, explosive energy with a quiet intensity.

Name

Chris Wu and Prem Krishnamurthy

Vocation

Designers

