

On finding a path that makes you happy



Designer, architect, and Haptic Lab founder Emily Fisher discusses not being afraid to shift career paths in order to pursue what you really love.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2664 words.

Tags: [Architecture](#), [Design](#), [Independence](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

As someone with an architectural background, how did you end up getting into what you're doing now? What's it like running a business that's maybe different than what you thought you were going to do initially?

Architecture is like a salt mine—there are a lot of late nights. School kind of preps you for that. It's a cult. I feel like over time, I've left the cult and now I have a new approach to making things that is, I think, a little kinder and gentler on me. But, yeah, architecture's one of those strange fields where it's both left-brained and right-brained, so it gives you a lot of tools to work from that are really interesting. I met the artist [Ann Hamilton](#) years ago when I first moved to New York. She was like, "I always hire architects because you guys know how to do everything." I thought that was pretty cool.

In terms of my own work, I was always doing something else, but on an experimental level. I was always outside the office working on design competitions with friends, and then on craft projects, I guess you'd call them. Over time, I started to get quite a few of these ideas built up and it was frustrating because I didn't have a channel where I could put all of that energy.



When I was laid off in 2009, it was kind of a great experience. I was glad it happened, mostly because I'd already survived a couple rounds of layoffs, and I was working 16-hour days and just really not thriving. It felt like somebody had just opened a window and let some fresh air in. It was really creatively freeing. I started to put some of these weird projects online and I won second place in a kite contest. The projects were things that previously seemed really frivolous and dumb, but were coming out nicely. With that and my [architectural pieces project](#), which was all about [haptics](#), I already had the groundwork to do my own thing.

I've had a couple friends who've made good use of losing a job—they used that moment of free time to develop what ultimately became a more fulfilling life path.

It was definitely driven by a lot of anxiety. It was fun and freeing but it was also like, "Now what do I do?" I felt like I'd done everything right. I went to a good school and I worked hard at my job and put in all of this effort that'd gotten me nowhere. Like a lot of people, I think I was on the cusp of having a straightforward career path. My parents always gripe because they're like, "You took that away from us." "Architect" was this tidy one-word answer they could tell people that I did for a living. Now they're like, "What do we say?"

Now that you run a company, do you have less time to make things and do things? Is your creative time spent running the business?

No, because I get to decide what I do and I'm not as intimidated by the project management or the managerial aspect of things. I enjoy Excel spreadsheets. You can always carve out time to do stuff when you don't have a client you're answering to. Also, having a kid is a great way to structure a schedule that's more focused on next steps.

I often touch upon architectural training as being this petri dish of how to have a creative working life. There was an old professor of mine that said students were either turtles or rabbits, and that I was a rabbit and I needed to learn how to be a turtle. What he meant: Rabbits were these manic people who would become really inspired by a lecture or a book or something. Because of this, every few weeks when you have to present your work to a jury, you always have a completely different project to show. You leapfrog from idea to idea. Everyone wanted to be a turtle—people who had these long-trajectory ideas that developed slowly and organically. At the time of their final critique, they'd always have a master work that they'd created over time. It's just hard to do that for me, but I do aspire to be a turtle. I'm getting better at deploying ideas slowly and strategically.

Speaking from my own experience, having a child is definitely a good way to get a lot done. Once you have a kid, you realize how much time you wasted before you had one.

My partner and I talk about that all the time. He's a writer, so he thinks about this even more acutely because writing is something that is exhaustive and requires a long incubation period. He'll be working at home, and even if he's just reading a book, that's still working. It's just hard to explain that to someone else. I've acclimated to what writing work looks like.

In my own work, I talk to a lot of other moms who are like, "I'm so focused now." I don't really buy that. I think you just have less time to do stuff. Now, I definitely work faster than I ever have before. There's exploration that happens early, and whether or not there's a project in mind or goal in mind, there's this junk drawer of ideas that are half-baked. For example, I made a kite frame for a structure and I'm not quite sure what it is yet, but I will revisit it when the moment is right.

I designed an entire collection of kites in four hours back in January, but that's only because I knew exactly what I wanted at that point. Maybe I had sketches or things that had been worked out in between everything else. There's creative work happening, but it's not like I sit down and design something every time.



Do you get creative blocks?

It sounds kind of jerky, but I feel like I suffer from an abundance of ideas, and the hardest part for me has always been editing and slowing down. Sometimes I just have to empty out that imaginary mental junk drawer. I literally have this mental image that I use sometimes where I'm just shaking out the junk drawer and throwing stuff away. Mental clutter is something that I have a problem with. At times, people in the studio will roll their eyes because I'll be like, "Hey guys, look at this. I made this and it could be this color and we could do this or this!" Everyone's like, "Calm down, Emily."

Perfume Genius mentioned to me that when he's taking a break, he tries not to do anything creative, but that in his mind, things are always happening. So even if it seems like he's just sitting there watching TV, he'll go back to the studio and have an idea. When you enjoy the things you're doing, your mind is going all the time. It's not like you can shut it off entirely.

I definitely feel that way when I'm with my daughter. I put the phone in another room. It's just a new way to be present that I haven't experienced in a long time and I love it. I love every single minute of it, because it's time that you're just not working. When you do your own thing or you're self-employed or freelancing, it's just hard not to work all the time. You are your work. I've learned to pace myself.

Running a business is a full-time collaboration in a lot of ways. You're probably working with people to help get all the stuff together. Is that the case?

Totally. I have a studio with seven people. Haptic Lab is my show, but there are a lot of performers in that space, and a lot of people that bring their own creative work to the studio. When somebody joins the studio as an employee or an assistant, I look for people that have a weird, diverse skill set. I love working with people with theater design backgrounds, other textile artists, or people that have a unique approach to what they do.

One of the things that's been important to me in my working life is that my mom is visually impaired, so I try to privilege the way things feel more than how they look, which sounds really stupid when you sell things online—a space where we privilege visuals over everything else. As long as something looks cool, it has a value. I think finding people that can really work from a craft knowledge, rather than purely a technological standpoint, is important.

The things you make are artistic. Can you imagine also doing things in a gallery setting?

I was never interested in being an artist. My work gets better the more my ego is removed from it. That's not to say that I don't have a signature fingerprint involved in what I'm

doing, or that I don't have an emotional context of my own that I'm putting into the work that I do, but it's less about me and more about the person who gets it. I mean, I'm friends with artists. I have a friend who's a gallerist and I love poking around in that world, but it seems almost too esoteric sometimes.



I guess it's whatever feels most sustainable.

Yeah. I think everyone experiences unevenness when you do your own thing. I don't know how it is for everyone else, but I certainly feel like there's always the possibility that everything I've built could just turn to dust in my hands, and that no one will ever want a quilt ever again. You've got to keep your eye on the long game. I think that's important for everyone. Our ambition is often to chase after short-term gains where you're like, "Oh, I talked to this magazine, I've made it," but I've been doing it for eight years now. At some point, you start to find a pace and rhythm that seems more natural and more "small-business" instead of "tech start-up."

Finding a rhythm and finding a naturalness helps you avoid burning out.

Absolutely. I mean, I'm tired. Right now I feel like I've been going full-tilt for a while, but you have to feed yourself creatively. You have to give yourself that creative fuel. I hate using the term "self-care" but I think that's a part of it. Even if it's just going to bed early. I think those little things you do for yourself can help. I also think being realistic helps. I've talked to other design friends who have similar practices, and we've all freaked out when we hit this wall where you're like, "Oh god, I'm not young and cool anymore. What do I do?" Or maybe it feels like, "Oh, my aesthetic has worn thin." I think eventually you just find the part of what you do that is evergreen and true and you focus on that, and less on trend cycles.

For example, I do trade shows now and it's exhausting because we're literally caught in this artificial, nonsensical cycle of consumption. I'll show up and feel like, "Okay, I made this in a different color. Enjoy. The last few months have been a little crazy." I definitely feel that a part of making new work is less about satisfying someone's request for, "Oh, what's new for spring next year?" And more of, "Oh this is the important work that I want to do that I'm excited about."

You guys are making things and doing things with customers in mind. It's like having a built-in deadline for projects. Just knowing when something is done, and knowing "This thing is complete and ready to ship." It's not like you have the luxury of being able to spend one year on one single project.

Yeah, exactly. We have to keep things moving. I think one of the things that attracted me to the working life I have now is that the effort-to-reward ratio is really high, because we can immediately see what we've made. Whatever we want to do, we can make it happen and get it out into the world. Whether it has an impact or not, it's done. A thing that would frustrate me with client work in architecture is that so much work goes into making nothing happen. I can't tell you how frustrating that is as a creative person. You exhaust hundreds and hundreds of hours on something—these beautiful ideas that you craft for somebody's workspace—and it never happens. Client-based projects sometimes just lead you in a direction that's not real.

Clients are often just driving you further and further away from making something, or you end up making something the other person wants to make, and it feels like you weren't actually necessary for that to happen. Running a business like yours gives you more control over your overall vision in general.

Totally, and that's not to say that there aren't incredible clients and partners in design, and people who you can collaborate with and be fully transparent with. I think that exists. I guess it's the difference between a service industry, which is a part of design, and selling stuff. Architecture is this sort of gentleman's profession that's very service-driven. It's a part of the job that always made me a little uncomfortable.



When I was doing custom projects for individual clients, the expense of those projects was so extreme. I was making stuff for people who had four houses, even during the economic downturn. That's fine, I guess—like, good for them and good for me if I'm their architect. It's just New York. Since I've lived here I've encountered the extreme kinds of haves and have-nots. I never felt comfortable working in a world where I would say, "Oh, you really need to consider the \$128-per-square-foot tile," with authority. Like, "This is the best." I prefer approaching design with a certain humility and pragmatism. I'm from the Midwest. It's just a part of who I am.

Sometimes people assume the thing that they enjoy doing, or they find the most fun, can't also be the main thing they do for a living. It's important to realize, "I don't have to suffer through the other thing if I can find a way to pay the bills with the thing I like."

Oh, totally, but at no point in my life was I ever like, "I'm going to become a professional quilt maker. That's my path in life." I think it still seems silly to say that out loud. What attracts me are people who do lots of different things. People who are musicians, but who also do this other thing, or have work in queer performance art spaces, and maybe also know how to make kites. I think New York is such a fascinating place because you just have to show up. It's not to say New York isn't an incredibly difficult place to work and live, but there's still that synergy of New York being a safe place for the misfits of the world.

Emily Fischer recommends:

[Muj gel pens](#)

[RUN cafe](#)

[I miss October sweater weather](#)

Can't wait to take a field trip to visit [these folks](#)

Haptic Lab alumna Alayna Rasile Digirindakis, saving the world through [milkweed seed design innovation](#)

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