GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 7
Jannette Le

Seth Robinson:

Welcome to GameChangers. The show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who have taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season we're taking some time out to reconnect, exploring the ways our game changes are forming connections in the world, by creating new communities, spaces and technologies.

Jannette Le:

And I think understanding how a person uses space also helps you later on when you're specifying and designing a space for someone to live in for a long time, because if you look at staircases from old buildings, you can see how they're sunken in, in the center. And it shows you where the most popular space to walk is.

Seth Robinson:

Today we're speaking with Jannette Le, an architect, teacher, and storyteller whose practice pushes the boundaries of imagination into life-sized spaces, miniatures and online.

Jannette Le:

My name's Jannette, and I'm an associate architect at Peter Ryan Architects, and I'm also a bit of a hobbyist, as in I love to build miniature models, which is a little hobby that's taken me all over the world, and a crazy cat lady.

Seth Robinson:

It's very much a portfolio career and lifestyle you have there, which is one of the reasons we wanted to chat today, which is fantastic.

Jannette Le:

Yes. Yes. A bit of a different path than normal after graduation, I think.

Seth Robinson:

Can you tell us a little bit about that. How is it you got from graduation point A to this point B where you're balancing these different project?

Jannette Le:

So after I graduated, I started a business with a good friend of mine who had come back from the UK. That business is still running, but I'm not a director there anymore, because I decided to take other hobbies into account, but it was an excellent experience. So architecture's a little strange in that I think you need five years of education. So the undergraduate and the master's, and then a minimum of two years before you can hit the registration exam. And then what I did after university was that we started taking on small projects, which we did in collaboration with other architecture firms too, so that we could get our hours up to do the registration. And those small projects started out as little fitouts and everything that we'd actually won from Instagram at the time. And it was for Adriano Zumbo for his cake stores back when he was on MasterChef and stuff like that, which was pretty fun.

Jannette Le:

And then after that, the Instagram marketing worked pretty well, and we were invited to do a couple of artworks for YouTube and Google in Singapore, and Facebook as well, and we did that in collaboration with Red Hong Yi. And doing those projects actually really built up my network in terms of meeting new people and doing other things. And from the people I met there they reached out to me and we ended up doing a few advertising campaigns. One of my hobbies is to build little doll houses, and I'd post those casually on my LinkedIn and my Facebook and everything. And every now and again someone would contact me, and this advertising agency contacted me and we built a small miniature kitchen where we renovated everything on camera. And then I think it was filmed in San Francisco. So they flew us over and it was really well received ad campaign. And I think they showed it during the NBA playoffs.

Seth Robinson:

Wow. That's cool.

Jannette Le:

Yeah. As the launch. So, that was that. And during all of these things, I also was doing my proper architecture career. And I'm still doing that now.

Seth Robinson:

That's fantastic. Yeah. So can you tell me a little bit more perhaps about your professional architecture practice? Because I suppose that's really what's at the core of all these projects you work on.

Jannette Le:

Yeah, that's right. So I think what's really fantastic about architectural education is that it teaches you design thinking as in solving problems left field, like you look at the entire picture and then you can see how you can solve it. So I'm currently a associate architect at a small firm in South Yarra. We do large scale office buildings. So it's very, very commercial compared to this fun, small stuff that I do. But all of it is a basis of the education that I got, and the contacts I made during university.

Seth Robinson:

Jannette has also taken her love of architecture and making models and used it to launch Tinytecture, an Instagram page that showcases her small-scale work.

Jannette Le:

We did call it Tinytecture as being like tiny architecture. And it was like model making skills that you pick up in the undergraduate. So I think around the second year of university, the architecture faculty bought a laser cutter, it was the first one at the time. And that's probably just showing my age because I think all of the students now come in and they have four or five laser cutters there. And we use a computer program to model things up, and then we cut everything in flat sheets. And the thing with the laser cutter is that you're able to cut a lot of things in detail and pretty fast.

Jannette Le:

The business that I had after the university, we actually had a laser cutter in-house, and I think, yeah, we used that to fabricate everything. It also meant that we could do things very quickly for clients as well. And there is something about having a tactile model to show people, that's one thing. It's a bit different after last year where everything's more digital and we have to change it again. But I find that a lot of clients struggle with the digital representation sometimes than something tactile that they can see and point to in front of them as being very, very handy.

Seth Robinson:

You've touched on something there that I think is really interesting and is incredibly timely, is that we think of architecture predominantly as a spatial art form. It's something where you're used to walking into a place and experiencing it. Or as you said, seeing that model, but I suppose the last year has created some real challenges in that space. And you yourself have created a practice that combines those two things really nicely, I imagine in a lot of ways with your work in advertising, and Tinytecture, and social media, you're ahead of the curve in terms of representing things virtually.

Jannette Le:

Yeah. The thing is you also have to get the clients to engage in that type of thing as well. So with the more commercial work at Peter Ryan, it's difficult to have the commerciality, to have someone sit there and build that model the entire time. So I think with COVID and everything, having to lockdown and then rethinking how you present a project so that people can understand, has been a little bit different. So we've been using programs like Inkscape, which do live modeling. With using Inkscape we can basically model the entire world around the building. And that's very handy when you're having a Zoom meeting with 15 stakeholders, and they're all staring at the screen. And then what you can do is you can take them through the building. They ask to look at something and then you can show it to them, but the problem with that is that there's a lot of work upfront to make sure the model is detailed enough to do a tool like that.

Jannette Le:

But we found that after switching to this type of representation, it's been much, much easier for clients to understand the design intent of what we're doing. And with an architectural model, there's a lot of benefits to it in that there's something tactile there, but in order to get it to the level where it looks like a room, there's a lot of painting and a lot of detail, and that's another art form by itself. And at school, they teach you to do a white massing model that requires a lot of imagination to fill in blanks. And that imagination is fine sometimes early on in the project because for the clients that makes them feel like they're more involved and they can look at the model and talk to you about what they want, but showing a white box on a screen over Zoom is not the best way to get your ideas across because you don't have that ability to read expressions as much to understand when someone's a little bit lost.

Jannette Le:

It's more like a game rendering nowadays, where you have people, and you've got the trees flowing, and the water's flowing as well in the image. And it was a big learning curve for all of us, but highly beneficial in terms of 2020.

Seth Robinson:

You've mentioned clients a few times in there. What is the percentage breakdown of your day job, if you will? Do you spend how much time working with clients as opposed to designing and making, and that sort of thing?

Jannette Le:

Now I'm a little bit more progressed with my career. I probably spend a lot more time with clients, and I have a team, a very, very good team that works under me, and they basically translate my very, very dodgy iPad sketches into little escasez and drawings that we can present to our clients. When I was a bit younger and a graduate then, that used to be my job, but I think things change as we get older.

Seth Robinson:

In fact, as architects progress further in their careers, the roles often become more managerial in nature.

Jannette Le:

It's probably not for everyone. You do get a little bit shy the first few times because I think there's one thing presenting a report, but there's something else about presenting a design that you've done because a lot of it's so subjective. And even though they teach you at university to sell your story and stuff like that, there's a lot of commerciality to it. And trying to explain why you think that this will be fantastic, because trust me, it's a little bit harder. When you've got your beautiful design, you've got that first shot to really reel them in to the presentation.

Jannette Le:

The people that you're presenting to, they're very busy. They have 15 meetings a day, and you've really got to win them over at that first point. But then obviously after that, they'll always have a lot of questions, but you almost have to do it there, and have an answer on the spot there in order to keep that energy running at that meeting. And I think that's actually why Inkscape is a pretty cool thing, because it does live updates on the model, but also means I have to have very talented staff that can model it very quickly and show the clients as they're talking what that means for them. So we have worked out a system, but I believe that it's very true. If you don't get them excited about it early on, they start questioning why you're there.

Seth Robinson:

And I imagine that's a very tough thing to do in any role, let alone a creative one, is to have to justify your existence.

Jannette Le:

Yes, yes. For sure. Architecture itself is, as a job, has slowly been diluted over the past 200-300 years, and every section of our job is being cutt off for other people. And then we have to prove that spending that extra money on an architect, and not just a building designer is worthwhile for the client. And especially if it's a new client, that's a little bit harder than say someone who's trusted you for a very long time, but yeah, it's hard because it feels very personal as well. And I think any architecture student would understand when you're doing that presentation in front of someone

that when they give you a critique, it's a critique on the work, but it's not a critique on you personally.

Seth Robinson:

You said something there I'm really curious about, which is that architecture as a practice has been diluted over the last couple of centuries. Can you go a little deeper on that?

Jannette Le:

Yeah, for sure. If you look all the way back where the architect was also basically like the God where they built the pyramids and everything like that. Whereas as things have progressed in terms of laws and responsibilities in practice nowadays, they've split off sections of it. So you'd rarely have an architect engineer, there are two completely different jobs. Project management is a thing that exists now. So, that part used to be a large segment of architectural practice where you would do contract management. And I think that type of contract management still exists on smaller projects, but larger projects now they have client side project managers and people to look after that job. So in the end you become more and more specialized. And I think architects tend to try and sell themselves a lot in that they can do everything within architecture. And it's scary to further specialize yourself within the industry when you're ready slowly losing bits and pieces of it, but we'll have to see how that progresses in the next few years. I couldn't tell you.

Seth Robinson:

Staying with the historical theme in terms of questions, I'm curious, I know that previous pandemics and events like that have led to new architectural movements. In thinking about the last year we've had, and the COVID-19 pandemic, do you foresee any new architectural changes, or styles, or things we might see more of?

Jannette Le:

In my commercial work, we mostly do offices. And I think nowadays there are slightly different requests when people are looking for offices now.

Seth Robinson:

Absolutely.

Jannette Le:

Yeah, because I think in the past, like a fresh air intake, as in having the ability to open your window wouldn't have been as important, if you look at the skyscrapers in the city, most of the mechanical systems do all that for you, but now clients are actually looking for that ability to have more control over their atmosphere.

Jannette Le:

The other thing is there's a lot of operational things that have to change, just making sure that there's not too many people in the lift. So having lifts that are fast enough to get people through, because you can only have four or five, packing everyone in like sardines anymore. And then other things such as having those end of trip facilities so that people who are coming in via bike, which is a lot more popular, so they're a bit worried about catching the trains, have somewhere to freshen up when they get into the office. So a lot of the officers are advertising good end of trip facilities, but other small things that you can introduce that are more like control base, which is if you have a security door, you don't have to touch the door to open it, or if you're exiting the bathroom instead

of having a normal lever handle, you might have a door sensor instead that you can wave your foot in front of it, and that opens the door instead.

Jannette Le:

So stuff like that might become more popular, but everyone has to come onboard. It's always driven by commerciality, because it costs a little bit more to do that. And other tenants moving out of the city and into the suburbs where that's a little bit closer to home, and everything like that. But I guess the other thing is after last year, everyone started working from home because they had to, and before when all the offices had your space to come in, and you've worked there five days a week, and you're looking at massive capacities of people, like a hundred percent full buildings, and now the city's struggling to get people back into the offices because after you're introduced to convenience, everyone wants to keep that part of it in their lives.

Jannette Le:

So you might, nowadays if you're designing an office for a hundred people, maybe 50 people are in the office at a one time. So it might have to change the way people work in terms of you might not have fixed offices in there, because you're not there all the time, and they have to have seats, it's more of a hot desking thing, but that's interesting because hot desking was slowly becoming less popular in offices as people wanted their own space to relax and sit down. So it might be a bit of a, like a whiplash situation where it comes back in because it's not commercially viable to have an office for a hundred when there's only ever 50 or 60 people in there at a time.

Seth Robinson:

I know it's not so much your area of expertise, but I wonder if there's going to be a larger shift in residential architecture as well, where the home office is now more of a focus.

Jannette Le:

For myself, I had bought an apartment, so our apartment was settled. And then we were moving in at the beginning of March last year, and we were halfway through moving in two weeks later and then lockdown happened.

Seth Robinson:

Wow.

Jannette Le:

And when we purchased the apartment, it was like, your two bedrooms, two bathrooms, it's fine. We can go to work and you come home in bed and relax, but we weren't really prepared to have two bedrooms, and then also two offices inside the space, the apartment was not made for that.

Seth Robinson:

Yeah.

Jannette Le:

So everyone was, my house was not prepared. And I think everyone got a lot more forgiving with terrible backgrounds to your Zoom meetings. But I think it might be going forward that working from home is a lot more prevalent in all industries that they might say, when you're looking for a space, they'll always have a study knock, or something that has a slightly professional background for you to sit in front and do your video calls.

Seth Robinson:

The classic bookshelf that we've seen become the background for everything.

Jannette Le:

Yes, exactly right. Exactly right.

Speaker 3:

For much of the past century, architecture was under the spell of the famous doctrine. Form follows function had become modernity's ambitious manifesto and detrimental straight jacket. As it liberated architecture from the decorative, but condemned it to utilitarian rigor and restrained purpose. Of course, architecture is about function, but I want to remember a rewriting of this phrase by Bernard Tschumi, and I want to propose a completely different quality. If form follows fiction, we could think of architecture and buildings as a space of stories, stories of the people that live there, of the people that work in these buildings, and we could start to imagine the experiences our buildings create.

Seth Robinson:

I'd like to touch on one of your other interests, which is the relationship between architecture and your model building. And then also other artistic practices, things like narrative and theater. I think this is something you've actually taught a class on, is that right?

Jannette Le:

So a friend of mine and myself, I think we taught for three, four years, my master's of architecture studio as well as a elective, which was a summer intensive, which we're not currently doing. We do get emails every year asking when we're going to do it again, but not at the moment. But the idea being that you can use architecture to tell a story about the people who live in that space. This type of thinking is not something that you would use commercially, because you tend to want to age the design so that you can see the use of a building. That's a little bit different to how you would approach it if you're designing a brand new building.

Jannette Le:

So one of the last electives we did was we took the Harry Potter books and we asked the students to look at some characters within each of the books. And so we pulled out some excerpts and things like that. And for them to design spaces, like set design if they were going to build a part using the model. So for example, one of the students did the Burrow, which is I think where the Weasleys live. And then just using the very small one or two sentence descriptions that were given in the books, and then the contextual stuff about the characters, it would be how they design the space so that it would be matching to how the characters are explained.

Jannette Le:

And I think it's a lot in set design as well. And you can tell a lot by how a building ages, which handle is grabbed more, why are the taps scratched that certain way? And I think understanding how a person uses space also helps you later on when you're specifying and designing a space for someone to live in for a long time, because if you look at staircases from old buildings, you can see how they're sunken in, in the center. And it shows you where the most popular space to walk is, or if you look at tapware for married couples, and it's always the left-hand tap is always all scratched up because of their rings. So if you understand that type of thing, you wouldn't specify a very delicate powder coat for a house later on because you know that, that will get damaged very quickly because of the rings on people's fingers.

Jannette Le:

And I guess it's like that type of thinking and approaching to the storytelling of the space, is very important to me. And also in the models as well, in order to make something look realistic, you just don't age everything everywhere all at once. You would darken the space in front of the fridge because someone would be standing in front of the fridge for a long time working out what they're going to cook for dinner, or you don't age the entire cupboard door, because it's more likely that they'll grab the door handles, or the lips around the cupboard instead of just in the center, because that type of aging doesn't make sense. And understanding the use makes the design a lot more convincing when you're looking at it through pictures.

Seth Robinson:

One thing that sprang to my mind when you were speaking just then is I know for a lot of actors they're, particularly when they do things like audition for drama schools, you'll get a monologue which is from a film, say De Niro in Taxi Driver, and you're asked to do that monologue, but one of the things they really emphasize for young actors is don't play De Niro, interpret this character in your own way. Is that something you really run into with a project like this, where you've got architects who are thinking about these spaces from the textual relic, which is the books, but then you also have this thing of, these spaces have already had set designs, they've already been imagined for the Harry Potter films.

Jannette Le:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And I think it's hard when the best version has already been done. Well, if they were very, very successful in terms of their set design in the films, but asking the students to just step back and look at the analysis, because sometimes their restriction in films is very different to our restriction, building a model of it. And obviously we've got other things as well because they might only, in the movies, they might only have to build a front, and a lot of it's CG and magic, right? Whereas we'd actually have to build a physical representation. So we have a little restrictions in other ways to that space, but I never think it's a problem to look at how someone's done it before, because it's like your Pinterest board of inspirations and things like that.

Jannette Le:

And you can take certain people's interpretation of a space, but how you color it with your thoughts is what sets aside that student's work compared to how the professional has done it in the movies. And sometimes the students did what I thought was a much better job than what was shown in the movies, because they had just a different interpretation, or they loved the character slightly differently to the person who had done the space. And that just adds a little bit more to the whole thing.

Seth Robinson:

It's very, very cool.

Jannette Le:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Robinson:

Jannette, I have one last question then we'll let you go, but this is one that we ask all of our guests as our final sign off. What's one thing that's not on your resume, that's helped you get to where you are today?

Jannette Le:

Not on my resume would probably be my love of journaling, and I have another Instagram account that just shows pages from my journal. And that page, I think is a lot more popular by multiples than any of my architecture work. Maybe it's because it was a little bit more accessible, but the ability to put all your ideas down in a little book, and then practice that sketching, has helped me a lot in ways that you don't really learn to do at university. And I actually started it because when you draw for architecture, you don't actually practice drawing a certain way, because you always drawing little details and plans and things like that. And you lose the happy, little whimsical sketching that you might've done as a kid.

Jannette Le:

So I wanted to re-practice drawing again. So I started journaling and as part of it, I just took pictures of those spreads and posted them online. After that it really helped with normal work because it helped me draw faster, because I was setting those goals for myself. It also helped me represent things easier because sometimes you imagine something in your mind and you can't draw it on the page. So it actually helped with everything. I just make sure that anything that looks a little bit too private, I just pixelate all that, but people don't mind. They just want to see how the page is laid out.

Seth Robinson:

That is awesome. Jannette Le, thank you so much for joining us on GameChangers.

Jannette Le:

Yes, no, thank you for having me.

Seth Robinson:

When we're little, we often say we want to grow up and become doctors, lawyers, or architects. We spend those childhoods imagining what we'll be when we grow up, but it's a pastime that too many of us give up when we reach adulthood. If there's anything we can learn from Jannette and our other game changers, is that a little imagination goes a long way. Subscribe to GameChangers for new episodes, or catch up at FBE.unimel.edu.au/gamechangers. GameChangers is recorded on Wurundjeri land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem with support from the University of Melbourne.