

# EPIISODE 059

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## RISD

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Andrea Trabucco-Campos, Gretel

AND

Huy Vu, RISD

### **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

### **ARMIN VIT**

Hi, this is Armin Vit and welcome to episode number 59 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Rhode Island School of Design, RISD for short, a private, nonprofit college founded in Providence, RI in 1877. It is one of the first art and design schools in the United States. About 2,500 students from around the world engage in liberal arts studies and rigorous, studio-based learning where they earn bachelor's or master's degrees in 22 majors. Its mission is to educate its students and the public in the creation and appreciation of works of art and design, to discover and transmit knowledge and to make lasting contributions to a global society through critical thinking, scholarship and innovation.

The project, co-created by RISD's in-house design team and Brooklyn, NY-based Gretel was posted on Brand New on October 3, 2022. You can pull it up on your browser at [bit.ly/bnpodcast059](https://bit.ly/bnpodcast059) that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast059, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Andrea Trabucco-Campos, Creative Director at Gretel and Huy Vu, Creative Director at RISD.

In this conversation we learn one particularly surprising fact about RISD, that prior to this exercise it had never had a formal identity. Like, what? This made the need for a robust research, discovery, and strategy phase to help uncover what the school stood for and what it needed to communicate that even more important. This stage of the process yielded the guiding idea of, quote, Question to Create, Create to Question, end quote. This, in turn, provided a framework that made matters more... interesting, as every decision was up for discussion and re-examination. Add to that a completely transparent process that catalogued and chronicled every step for the RISD community to access and you would think this would be an insurmountable challenge but with everybody involved committed to the process and the guiding idea they managed to complete it by, well, making it incomplete. What do I mean? Well...

Let's listen in as Bryony follows up with Andrea and Huy.

**BRYONY** Designing for yet to be designers, designers in the making, and practicing designers is something I understand to be a very unique challenge. Adding an open process to the complexity could be a disastrous move, but in the case of RISD's these recent rebrand it was, it seems just what was needed in this particular moment in time. So let's find out why. Andrea and Huy, welcome to The Follow-Up.

**ANDREA TRABUCCO-CAMPOS** Thank you Bryony.

**HUY VU** Yeah, thank you for having us.

**BRYONY** If you could just each take a minute to introduce yourselves and let our audience know where you're coming from.

**HUY** My name is Huy Vu. I work as the Creative Director in the RISD Marketing and Communications team.

**ANDREA** And I'm Andrea Trabucco-Campos. I am a Creative Director at Gretel and helped with leading the project of RISD at Gretel.

**BRYONY** Very excited to have you both. I think it's important to establish some context in the beginning. Hyy, the why now of a rebrand is something that our audience often considers. And I think it would be helpful for everyone to understand the chronology of RISD's most recent strategic plan, and the plan to rebrand as it was all impacted by the pandemic and conflicts outside of the pandemic, as well over the last few years. Can you lay the groundwork for that?

**HUY** Sure. I mean, it's actually a very long and windy road. The reality is we actually kicked this project off before the pandemic. I think just starting to think about the project, I believe in late 2018. We didn't start going out in an official capacity until I think the beginning of 2019. Just for some context, RISD has never really had an institution-wide identity. We've had variations, we've had colors, we've had logos, but nothing comprehensive, nothing wide reaching, and nothing to really establish a sense of an institution. I'd say they're probably more visual artifacts than anything else. In general, as an institution and as an organization communicating in ways that we're like wildly expressive, wildly diverse, that just speaks to the creativity of our community, definitely caused a lot of confusion. It was hard to know what was RISD, what was not RISD and the bigger issue, apart from the visual identity—or not having a visual identity—was that we didn't have a shared understanding of what RISD stood for. What made it unique.

**ANDREA** could definitely speak to this, but everyone had their own version or vision of what the institution was. Pre-pandemic that was really the driving factor. We issued the RFP I think in early 2020 and funny enough Gretel was definitely part of that. But I think we were scheduling the second round of interviews, or second round of presentations the week before most cities, or most schools, or most institutions shut down. So I think we were trying to schedule a meeting for sometime in March of 2020. Everyone's had a little bit of amnesia about what happened over the past three years.

**BRYONY** Absolutely!

**HUY** Or two, three years and so <laugh>, I think that's what happened. And so we put the project on pause and didn't really kick it off until a year later. So now we're talking like post, not post-pandemic, but now we're talking about we've lived with the pandemic for about a year and it just shed light on some of the issues that we originally raised in what we needed, really shed light on the lack of tools we had to communicate effectively both verbally and visually. I think it really shed light on our ability to articulate our reason for being. At that time, most colleges, most institutions of higher education, the value of those were being questione. When things went remote and during that period too, I think it also accelerated RISD's need to respond to... you know, our community was demanding for the institution to address racial equity, inclusion in its curricula, its hiring practices, and the makeup of it suit body, and so sorry to be so long winded, but I think we revised proposal and then went out again, ended up selecting Gretel exactly a year later in March of 2021. Can't remember exactly when we kicked off the work, but I think very quickly thereafter, maybe in April or May.

**BRYONY** And what were you hoping to find in that design partner?

**HUY** We started with a really long list of criteria and also a huge list of partners that we thought we could work with. Just starting to go through them, there's so many talented agencies and studios doing amazing work out there right now. Just the sheer quantity and quality, almost like overwhelming, but I think what we landed on was we really wanted a design partner that had a strong strategy practice. One of the big goals apart from a visual outcome was we really needed to have a shared sense of where we were headed and a way to articulate that clearly. We also wanted a partner that had a really wide range of clients that just didn't solely work in the cultural sector, or just didn't work with startups, or just didn't work with big corporations. We wanted a partner that could easily move between lots of different organizations and had to deal with all the above, had the fluidity to deal with

all the above. I think this really set out with Gretel in particular. We wanted a design partner that was curious and could take this on as an intellectual exercise. The success of the project also really hinged on the ability for someone to come in, have an intellectual discussion with our deans, our faculty. We needed a partner that could navigate, feel comfortable in those types of conversations. That was what we were looking for. It's a lot to ask for, but obviously we found a great partner.

**BRYONY** But when there are so much creative around you, it helps having a long list because it helps you narrow down your options as you go down the process.

**HUY** Yeah.

**BRYONY** Now Andrea, you obviously responded to the RFQ, but what was that process internally for Gretel? and do you respond in the same way to most RFQ's or was this treated in any way differently?

**ANDREA** I think there's a sturdy way in which we tackle any RFP, any proposal. We really try to first of all understand the context as well as the brief. And we do a little bit of initial research to really start embedding ourselves in the mind of why does this brief even exist. We look at the history of the company, and then we look at the competitive context, and just try to place ourselves and give more dimension to the brief. In this process, we definitely went a little bit deeper than usual in the sense that there was just a general excitement. I mean, this is a 145-year-old institution. A school that has been around for a very long time, has generated some of the most impressive talent worldwide, it has continuously engaged with the fields around them, and to us it was really important to put some of the best thinking that we could.

We don't do any spec work ahead of time, but what we like to do is do thinking and truly engage with what we're being asked ultimately to do. Through that research, we start finding some interesting concepts and we put together a sort of thorough proposal where the first version, which is in 2020—before the pandemic—was really focused

around this idea of dialogue and how RISD really engages with the context around itself, and it builds that dialogue, it builds that critical exchange. Because of everything that we were reading. It's a highly intellectual school, but yet focused in making. And we'd like that sort of combination of the two things, the intellectual and the making. They even had a term for it, the critical making. In 2020, the focus was definitely on that concept, but I think as Huy was mentioning, the focus shifted throughout the pandemic because culturally throughout the states and around the world, there was a reckoning with a lot of realities and some of them led to thinking about transparency as a core principle. For us responding the second time, we augmented the whole brief with a much deeper look into how we would make the process transparent, open. How we would involve the school itself, its community, not just the leadership, not just the board, but rather the people that have to live with it, and carry it forward and make it grow.

Throughout that, we studied quite a bit of the other public examples. Snøhetta had a great Wikipedia Now, I believe it's called with a great microsite and so on, and we sort of tried to learn from the things that have happened in the past. Mozillas. And come up with our own version that would engage the community at the right stages and would allow for that conversation to happen, and we put that forward. We didn't have all the answers when we were chatting in 2021, but we had quite a bit figured out and I think through the various conversations that we had with Huy, Kerci, and the media group and the board as well, who was very instrumental in driving this position. We sort of gave that more dimension and just got to a process that ultimately is the process that we took on, involving the community at that first step where as much as possible.

**BRYONY** And aside from specific groups of the community, who else was involved in making this happen? Did you have any other core groups that were assisting in the process?

**ANDREA** From a project standpoint we engaged the school in three groups. There's the core internal team that was Huy's team, the media group, who's really ultimately going to drive and is driving the identity and holding it, and making sure that things are evolving in the right way. Then there's the Board and the Cabinet, the bodies that are usually decision makers, but they themselves were really pushing for the community involvement and making sure that the community itself, meaning anywhere from students, to staff, to faculty who had been there for many years who have devoted their lives to the school, that we would involve all of the different areas of that spectrum of the community. Alumni also equally as important, of course for the life of any school. For us, we had to create sort of a framework for that, and so for every presentation we would have actually a three step where we would share and have to then rearrange the feedback that would come in and sort of evolved things.

It was definitely not as straightforward as some other projects, but it was such a learning ground for the entire studio. And I think also as partners, for RISD themselves, we have to really grapple with some of the things that were coming out, some of the differences. And turns out it's just like a design critique, meaning in a design critique, you have various opinions. We might have your peers that are weighing in, you might have your professors or guest critics, and is up to you to resolve how to drive that forward. In our obviously processes, this wasn't personal expressions, which was for the school, so we needed to weigh the interest, weigh the different inputs, and ultimately come up with something that reflected the common denominator across and really listen to everyone that we were engaging.

**BRYONY** Sounds like a very easy puzzle to solve, <laugh>. Not!

**HUY** Totally, yeah, a one-year puzzle.

**BRYONY** Now, one very small question is... was the entire studio involved? or was there a smaller team?

**ANDREA** There was a smaller team because of the length. And I should add, sorry for your previous question, there's an important piece of research. I was talking about the client as their makeup, and sort of the stakeholders. From the project team we had our internal Gretel team, but we added a very important very critical group called On Road who are based in London, who helped us conduct ethnographic research and look into the views and the lives of underrepresented students at RISD who are young, who are self-made creatives, who don't exactly fall within RISD, and this was an effort to understand what is the wider area that RISD's currently not including? and how can we open it up, what can we learn from it? What can we learn about the creative attitudes that are alive today around us in a time where anybody can go to YouTube and learn anything that would be taught in a school?

So what is the value of the school? It pushes a lot of really critical questions and allowed us to really think through. So On Road to us was an instrumental partner. They brought a perspective that helped us expand the research, helped us expand our understanding. But from the perspective of Gretel itself, we're about 35 oscillates. Like we had very small strategic team, my strategy partner, Kasia Galla who led a lot of the strategic work. And then from the project manager standpoint we had Gary Griner who also helped lead that work, and then from the design team is actually pretty small. The core design team was made up of myself, Dylan Mulvaney and Leah Luke. We would basically conduct all that throughout the process. As we neared the latter part of the project, then we involved a couple more people just to help us with guidelines, and clean-out the applications and whatnot. But for the core project, it's quite small and it might be just my upbringing as a designer. I think smaller teams that have deep understanding of what they're doing, and a deep passion for what they're doing, that can have the continuity from the beginning all the way through, add a value, and fluidity, a flexibility and sort of power to deal with any curves, loops, anything that can happen in a project. And for us, that core group was really, really instrumental. We

always have the soundboard from the studio perspective, the ECD Ryan Moore is a great person that we check in with, and just have conversation from a high altitude, strategically and in design, how are things evolving and also down to very specific design questions. That's pretty much the breakdown of the team and we tend to keep them tight depending on different projects. But for this one, both the timeline that we had built, and also the length of time that we needed to be on the project dictated that it wasn't gonna be a 20-person project.

**BRYONY** Speaking of the timeline, I think we could have a three-hour podcast just on the strategy itself, <laugh>, but we're not going to do that. But I do wanna get a sense of how long the strategy phase was.

**ANDREA** We started in April. The research took two months because of the ethnographic research and because of all the conversations that we had. We spoke to over a hundred folks across the board at the school. We conducted research surveys with students and the local community that surrounds them. It was a lot of input that we needed to digest. We created a research document that was the output, a full summary and synthesis of what we had learned. We had the ethnographic research that complimented that from an outsider perspective. So we were really trying to get a sense of 360, not just of RISD—of course RISD is the focus—but actually the field itself, what's happening in art and design education? Where are things moving? How can we position RISD so that they're not only honoring their past and the craft, but also posed towards the future? And then that quickly led into strategy and once the discovery, what we call the discovery phase that had the research embedded into it was wrapped in that two-month mark we kicked off strategy and then designed shortly after.

And from there there's voice, which was another big piece. Kasia, as I mentioned, the strategy lead on this and the great writer Fern Diaz helped us build the voice and the verbal understanding, and it's a tool that had never been fully codified and alongside with Huy and Kerci's team, it built a dimension that crystallized a lot of the principles that

were alive in different ways throughout the school, and brings some cohesion through them. And then from there, that whole process of strategy, design, and voice took us several months, about four, four-and-a-half months into November. In November, we were getting to applications and wrapping up at the end of the year. Added to this, there is a custom typeface that was commissioned at the end of all of it.

**BRYONY** Yeah, but I'm gonna pause you because we're jumping into too many topics and I need the client perspective as well. <laugh> I wanna take a step back very quickly from the strategy, were there any surprises or any super "aha" moments for RISD that helped spark the next phase?

**HUY** One of the big surprise moments, aha moments when it comes to this project, it's probably a little bit more nuts and bolts. I think just with folks being at home, folks being accessible, it just opened up the research process to include so many more people than I think in a normal project like this, we would've been able to access. Whether it's at RISD or at other places, it's always limited by time, or money, or even just being able to schedule people's time or travel. I think that made the resulting strategy work so much more robust. I felt like we got a really deep understanding of our community and the folks that would be impacted by this work.

**BRYONY** Yeah, absolutely. That is a trend that we're seeing across industries, just the accessibility to more people in this process and being able to get deeper within the research or the testing. If we jump over to the first iteration of creative. Did you go in knowing you had one clear direction based on the strategy and all of the research? Did you come with several different directions? What was that first meeting like in terms of visual creative?

**ANDREA** We had a strategic meeting before we got to any design. Usually how we approach it is through building worlds. I'm pausing for a second because there was a big internal, and actually with Huy and Kerci discussion around terminology. And where the terms be used, there's a larger discussion going on in our industry where things like

territories. We usually would call strategic territories, design territories. Is that a good term to you? And for the context of a highly critical and intellectual school, how do we translate things in ways in which we decolonize them because there's big conversations around that. And also not use brand speak, use brand speak as little as possible so that anyone can understand it. The meaning of it, and the use of it becomes immediately clear and it's not hidden by jargon. So we had a little bit of lexicon reworking and sort of figuring out that piece, which was really interesting as an exercise.

What we were searching for at first with the strategic first presentation is the guiding idea. So it's what normally would be called something like brand purpose or brand promise. For us it was something more than that even. What's the core ethos, core alignment that the entire school can get behind and truly believe? What are they currently doing? What have they been doing for many, many years? We presented a few worlds around that, and the one that stuck the most is truly something that we heard in every interview. RISD is not a place where you go to shape or form things. You go to question. To experiment. You're not approaching it, or you're not preaching design or art, in the traditional sense of design thinking of like, oh, I'm trying to come up with a solution, trying to solve things. You're actually approaching it from a quite critical standpoint. What is right? What is appropriate? What connects with culture? What is the form? What is the material?

All of those conversations, plus cross-connections that happen during design crit lead to a really interesting set of results. And you can see it in anybody's portfolio that comes out of the school. It's really tangibly different. And what I find really interesting from a person who looks at a lot of design portfolios for our studio is that there's a good mixture between intellectual and actual craft visible in projects. That in itself is a good summary of... the school prepares people to be in the world, and at the same time it prepares 'em to think in the world. That was

a big learning from discovery that then led us to this strategic idea of a critical exchange, meaning RISD is a place where you go to learn how to exchange and truly engage with the fields around the people around it, with the craft that you're in. And ultimately that evolved into "question to create, create to question", which is a more powerful statement because it speaks very directly to what happens at RISD.

**BRYONY** And Huy, what was the reaction to these different options that were being presented to you and your team?

**HUY** I think it was actually pretty surprising as Andrea mentioned, in that there actually wasn't a lot of critique around that. I think because folks in general felt truth in that statement. There was a lot of fear going into the process like this that it was about reshaping the school in a way that didn't feel natural, or shifting it in ways that didn't feel appropriate to what it was. And I think the fact that it felt like a mirror back, but just crystallized, and clearer, and sharper, made for a really easy conversation. I remember the one flip that happened was I think originally it was "question to create" and then in true RISD fashion, the response was can it be in exchange? Can it go the other way? And so that was reflected in the end statement. A moment in time to have a critique, have a discussion, then the idea a little bit to make it better. So again, just a reflection of what came out of this process.

**BRYONY** You never stopped questioning.

**HUY** < laugh > Yeah, yeah, exactly.

**BRYONY** Now moving on and taking us back Andrea to where you were leading us, the evolution of the seal and the custom typography. Let's get into more of those details and also the involvement of Ryan Bugden who is, if I'm not mistaken, a RISD alumni.

**ANDREA** That's correct.

**BRYONY** How did all of that come about?

**ANDREA** From that timeline perspective, we had three strategic directions, no design work. Those got narrowed down to two strategic directions and within those we presented three and two design directions. So in total, the first design presentation was actually a five-direction, which is more than we usually do, but it felt important. At this stage it was the second time we were gonna chat with the community as well, so we had this open forum where the entire community was coming, and we wanted to have a fruitful conversation and options that reflected different possibilities for the school. From there, it was narrowed down to three and then to two <laugh>, and then there was a moment in which the community was responding very strongly to one, and the leadership to another, and we had to synthesize this. And ultimately one direction came out of it, which was a net new direction.

You think of why “question to create, create the question” is important is it establishes this loop of you’re sort of thinking about what you’re doing, you do it, and then you think again, and you make more things out of it. And in some way you’re going from states of completing something, when you’re making something, to incompleting it again. And that idea of complete and incomplete connects also quite strongly with art and design education. You’re never really done learning things, you’re always continuously engaging with the field. If you’re earnestly doing that, you’re going deeper into knowing that you do not know. Recognizing the ignorance and also just making more things out of that. And also it connects with the field itself, the idea that as artists and designers we see things that are not there. We are continuously completing things that other people cannot see in our own individual ways, from our own perspective.

Once we identified that bridge from “question to create” to “incomplete to complete”, we had a lot of legs in design. And of course it doesn’t happen linearly, happens through sketching. All of this is documented in the microsite, which the RISD team made a bold decision to just keep it entirely public. It was public to the

community, but it's accessible to pretty much anyone where you can see all the design directions and their evolution. But in that final stage, when we identified this design translation into "complete to incomplete", we started playing with the idea that what if the typeface itself completes an incomplete? and what if the typeface contains this duality between something that feels historic to some degree, but utilitarian? something that you make something with? And we paired that with a completely different voice, which is a very straightforward voice, a neutral tone that was somewhat atemporal in a way. Felt contemporary, but it also felt at home with the serif. We had this display typeface, very quickly sketched in-house to prove the concept, to get it approved by the community, to get it approved by the RISD team, the RISD leadership, the Cabinet...

That was an important tool to kind of get the idea across and get signoff. From there we were already talking to a few foundries, including Ryan Bugden, all of them who were RISD alumni, very talented across different spectrum of experience and in their career. Ultimately RISD decided Ryan was the best option, which we totally agreed. This opportunity to collaborate with someone who's brimming with ideas, brimming with talent, craft. For us, it was a great opportunity to have someone who would be embedded almost in our team and would help us translate that very ganky prototype we had made into something else. That process in itself opened up into its own set of explorations.

**HUY** I think we talk about lots of projects as a long windy road. This was truly a long windy road with lots of detours, pauses, interruptions, and this was definitely a project that from the design directions, to even the type development was as deep as... I couldn't have even imagined how deep it had gotten or has gotten.

It also helped us re-articulate or understand what we were actually seeking out. We always had this idea of whatever we do, it has to feel appropriate to the institution. It has to be appropriate to its long

history, it has to be a facelift that feels appropriate, can't just put on a new outfit and expect that people will buy it. Even through the design process, even through the type development process, is constant tension between how far is too far? Are we being too conservative? Are we pushing us to a place that's actually not true to who we are? And so I think what Andrea just described is us going through, emotionally that process. Having a clear idea of what our principles were, but not a clear idea on how that should take shape.

**BRYONY** Well that, and as you balance it out with all the other parts, sometimes you're focused on creating this one little aspect that it has a big impact, but it is still one small aspect and you don't know exactly how it's going to relate to everything else. So <affirmative>, as you're developing this quirky typeface that goes from complete to incomplete, that is also going to be communicating a tone of voice that you're developing that has to work with it. You can't just wing it. So what was the development of that voice like, and how did it relate to the visual application?

**ANDREA** I think we landed on the general area within typography where we wanted the "complete to incomplete" to work. Obviously "complete to incomplete" you can do it to any typeface. You could take a sans serif, a slab, even a script. But to us a serif felt appropriate. But a serif that wasn't overly ornate or historical, something that felt industrial to some degree, that you make things with to have that immediacy of making.

**BRYONY** Utilitarian.

**ANDREA** Yeah, exactly. The utilitarian aspect was a through line because there's a pragmatic nature to an education at RISD. There's an intellectual nature, but there's a pragmatic nature. You're making things, you're learning about the materials, you're learning how they respond to your ideas, you're being pushed to engage with them, a hands on. To us, a serif that had that sturdiness, that combination between somewhat academia, an academic voice, and the utilitarian voice embedded into it felt appropriate. That meant simplified serifs, somewhat

contemporary model for it. That's where the work with Ryan Bugden was really expansive in the sense that through him we were able to explore you know, he made something like 105 prototypes. Which means there are upper and lowercase, you can typeset the entire Rhode Island School of Design, which is a large swath of the character set, he made numerals for most of them, punctuation for most of 'em.

We were able to type set entire paragraphs and he was doing this at a very fast rate. We would have internal reviews with him. It was just an amazing thing to see day-to-day even, how much progress there was. Extremely talented and not singing his praises enough. The challenge with all of this was a) identifying exactly what frequency within that range that I was describing, we would land on. What is the actual typographic model we're following? Meaning, is it a Dutch-leaning serif from the 1700s or 1800s? Is it a more sort of Clarendon-like interpretation of it? Or are we talking about something like Times New Roman? We have a lot of gesture happening in the complete to incomplete typeface, having these states. The task became how do we make this typeface feel as sturdy, as usable, as readable as possible? And the Times New Roman model, with its own ways that Brian interpreted, felt appropriate. Something that felt usable, and felt familiar, and yet had this gesture that made it completely distinct. It took a while to get there. Perhaps our starting point was actually close to the end point, but in true RISD fashion we questioned this over and over < laughter >, even dipping into sans serifs that completed and incompleting in different way. Sort of investigating the idea of completing to incomplete.

**BRYONY** Let's say it was a hairpin kind of road going back and forth. That application of how you communicate with the different groups, where do you fall in that tone of voice to counteract the typographic application?

**HUY** Thinking about our voice, like our written voice, how RISD speaks, I think one of the main areas and goals that we were trying to shift with that is moving away from higher ed speak, and how do you balance this

need to speak clearly, speak humanly, but still speak as an academic institution. A lot of the guidelines are developed by the Gretel team I think really took that to task. One of the premises is like “not always knowing” or re-articulating a question back to the audience. These are areas that we need to understand. In the past that had been common to be really declarative, really common to feel like RISD had all the answers. Definitely a thing that we were trying to shift from the get-go regardless of this process. Our team had been toying around with this idea even prior to the project in small ways, in small gestures. But I think it really took this work to make it a priority and to actually articulate in a way that others could bring to life, not just one or two writers on our team.

**BRYONY** But that it could be implemented by many? So taking a big picture step back, for you in particular, what was the most challenging aspect of the entire process?

**HUY** Personally, I think the timeline and staying positive throughout the process. My role in this is, I'd say is more shepherd than creator and I think given, I think I'd mentioned we started thinking about this in 2018, about four years ago. Keeping the momentum of the project going was really the most challenging part along with making sure that regardless of whatever shifts and turns we made in the process, that we were still maintaining our point of view on what it needed to accomplish. And this may have shaped some of the design directions too, but I think one of the things that we had talked about often is, is this a system that we can actually implement as an institution? We have a variety of folks on our team and at RISD in general. Can someone working in an office who's not a trained designer makes something in the system? Can someone who is a trained designer, and really talented make something in the system? You need to stretch that far. We don't have a ton of resources in terms of people to bring this to life, and so we really needed to make sure that it was something that we could actually bring to life and not just in a speculative fashion.

**BRYONY** Kind of flipping the coin on you Andrea, was there a moment where for the creative team you had this, “yes! there’s no turning back, we just hit the nail on the head” with this visual aspect of the project.

**ANDREA** I think was that synthesis of two different directions merging into one, and sort of having the core concept of “complete to incomplete”. That was sort of the true moment where everything clicked. What we tried to do throughout projects, and why strategy is also an important piece of this, it’s more than words. It’s supposed to guide behavior, it’s supposed to shed some light as to where you need to step next. So, how “question to create” connects to the verbal expression is quite tight together as you were just discussin. How it dictates what you do in design, from the typographic position, the expression of that, but then also layout, and then questioning to create in terms of the school itself picking its own colors depending on where it sits, like academic departments being able to choose their own expression within the framework. That is really important to me.

It was a critical moment in which all of a sudden we had alignment all across. Things clicked. Also this type of typographic expression, not as prevalent, not as common. I hadn’t seen it executed this way and it was very exciting as well. From that perspective, given a tool that can span across time, is flexible enough... An overarching intent here was to, first of all, co-create the entire identity with the school itself, its community, its stakeholders. And then ultimately give them tools, as opposed to specific prescriptions on how to do things. We wanted to give ingredients like typography, like a framework for color, like grid and layout principles that are supposed to be questioned, and interrogated, and reused, and changed so that when it reaches the school and it starts permeating and we’re seeing it through Huy’s teams work, and now all the branches that are starting to embody it.

That it gets reinterpreted and it feels fluid and fresh. At the core of the project, we were thinking about giving structure and space. Creating the ability to have the tools to make, but know what is generally in line

with the school, but also having a lot of room to build. And I'll offer one small nugget, for us, that we identified really early on. I've been sort of enamored with this architectural project by Elemental in Chile, an architectural group who when tasked to build a housing project made the bold decision to use the budget in this way: they would build a house where half of it was built, and half of it was empty. They would give a stipend from the other half to the homeowners who would come to inhabit that house. So you have these communities of tons of houses that were half built. The other half would be completely up to the people living in it. In that sense, the structure and the space existed, the participation existed, the co-creation existed, and yet there's a framework and a way of doing this. You don't have an open field, like you're not building the house from scratch. You actually have some guidance, you have some structure, but it becomes yours and if you look at photos of many of these projects that are done, they look completely diverse. And to us the expression, the unique voices within the school were really important to preserve, and give voice to, amplify them. The identity is built in that way and hopefully we'll carry on for quite a bit <laugh> and evolved from it from these tools.

**BRYONY** Huy, obviously the brand and the assets and all of these tools haven't been out for very long. What is the initial feedback that you're getting across the various groups?

**HUY** I think it's been overwhelmingly positive so far. Particularly for the folks that have been here for many years, ranging from our staff to our faculty. There's been such a hunger...

**BRYONY** For a cohesive identity?

**HUY** For something <laugh>, for something! I was talking to someone the other day, a studio that often worked with some of our departments and I was just asking like, how does a project start usually? They had said it prior to the identity, everything had started with a blank slate. Thinking about that type of decision making, having to happen with everything, whether big or small, and just the amount of thinking

required to build something from the ground up every single time... So the response has been overwhelming positive in that as Andrea is saying, it gives structure, but it gives folks the flexibility to adapt.

I'm really curious to see where it goes and where it sort of mutates into. I think it's probably impossible for it not to go in that direction, in some way or another, but I think because we have the foundation of the type and these core principles, it gives us a path to that future. Whereas had it been really prescriptive, had we walked in with a huge book of guidelines, I think folks would've felt constrained by that. I still think there needs to be some amount of that to start, but I think three years from now, five years from now, hopefully it will take in a whole new form, but still recognizable as RISD and recognizable is what the Gretel team created.

**BRYONY** Absolutely, it will be an interesting journey and that kind of answers my final question that I had for you. What do you expect or what are you most excited about looking forward? and I think the evolution of this as being implemented by RISD is going to be a very interesting thing to watch, and to guide, and to mentor through since you have that history since 2018, you've got the foundational work, all of it in it. Now it's another fun part and an entirely new chapter in the evolution of the brand.

Andrea, one last question for you is, of the learnings from this open, transparent, all inclusive process, is there anything that Gretel is thinking of applying to future project as part of their core process moving forward for other institutions and projects?

**ANDREA** There's a lot that we've talked about in the learnings from this. I think the community involvement piece... you know, to some degree when we're working with other cultural brands, there's a fair amount of that just naturally embedded in it. But it's different when it's this open. A microsite where things are thoroughly documented was not only helpful for the community to go through to provide feedback—we had

an email that received comments, questions—not only is it helpful for that level of communication, but it's helpful as an archive of the process itself, and it's helpful as a point of reference as you're making new decisions. Or even later on, when you're in applications or rolling things out. I believe in studios and personally practice this as well, where you keep an archive of the things that you've done throughout the project.

Some studios decide to print it, have actual binders with all of this, obviously that's somewhat wasteful in terms of paper, but <laugh>, it's just a great way to revisit, and look at it, and so on. Currently a Gretel we're working on a project that is exactly that, cataloging entire sections of projects throughout the last years and showing a lot of tha. For me in this case, the digital ability to quickly cross over from strategy, to verbal, to design, C-1 and so on. It was so helpful! And I think that's one piece that we're taking on. The other piece is just the learnings on how to even do an open forum. <laugh> What do you do? What do you do internally? Someone like myself is speaking and then you receive questions, what do we do? So we had protocols that we invented. Ways to Slack each other and track the questions with the RISD team and sort of say, okay, this is your turn, our turn, and so on, and do it all synchronously but not in the same room.

There's a lot of really interesting learnings just from that exercise itself, which I'm sure Bryony, like from running all the conferences, you probably have experience some degree of this, the live response to things. From that perspective, being able to have this back and forth was massively helpfu. For the right process, right timeline, it fits, but something like the microsite is something that we are constantly thinking about. And the last thing that I'll say is just shouting out Standards, the new brand guidelines platform, because we worked really closely with them as we developed the guidelines. We're alpha testers, we did a version of the guidelines that was like that. It was closed, it was just delivered to RISD, and then with RISD we worked

through the version that is live and everyone can go to. That's live powered by Standards who evolve pieces of the tools based on our conversations, and even that part itself was part of the "question to create" and evolving and so on, and I think we had a very fruitful evolution of that to the point where we think this is now something that we're gonna take on for a more projects.

Overall, it reassured us that the process that we've been taking on with other projects as well is one that is solid and can scale to this size, which is, as Huy were saying... I've been lucky to be part of many projects of many scales, but something like this is really out there in terms of the magnitude of stakeholders, historical relevance, and so on. It can scale to this size and it can go very small to other cultural and other projects that we have, and it's reassuring I think from a studio perspective that things are stepping in the right way.

**BRYONY** Final, final question. Huy, since you have the creative side and the client side experience in a way in this process, do you have any words of advice for anybody embarking in a project like this, with that openness and transparency?

**HUY** I won't give so much advice. I would say my observation from the process was that a branding project like this, at least on the in-house side or on the internal side, it really is about storytelling. It really is about helping shift an organization to see things differently, to think about things a little bit differently. I think what was really beneficial about the open process, like the presentations that the Gretel team would give to us, 90%, 95% of the content and the directions would be shared a few days later to the larger group, and open to anyone at RISD who wanted to join. Just opening it up in that fashion, just made for been at other places. Also in-house capacity where that process has been held, and separated, and put on the leadership side, we would work with a CMO or a CCO, and then roll it out very quickly. Folks ability to understand, and implement, and rally behind something. Having this open process I think really facilitates that 'cuz

people can follow it as they wish, can understand really the deep thinking behind it, and not sort of a dumbed down version of it, or a press release version of what we're doing. And I think just seeing all the avenues shows that it wasn't an easy process, that it wasn't simple, and that these solutions weren't obvious. I think just opening folks up to seeing that as part of the process.

**BRYONY** Few people would be able to say, "oh, I could have done that!"

**HUY** Yeah, <laugh>, I mean there's definitely part of that.

**BRYONY** It takes a lot more than having a guttural reaction to a visual identity, where I like it, I don't like it, I could have done it better, move on, right? It gives you that depth of understanding. I do want to thank you both for being on The Follow-Up today. We went back and forth as well, just like your process since 2018, and I hope you both get a nice straight arrow drive for a few months before hitting something like this again. You definitely benefited from this windy, questioning, revisiting process that while it took a long time, should withstand a long time within the community and within RISD. Thank you so much.

**ANDREA** Thanks so much Bryony.

**HUY** Thank you.

**ANDREA** Thank you.

**ARMIN** RISD's well-known critical outlook on theory and practice evidently made its way through this identity and it delivered an unexpected and fantastic system that reflects that tension of always trying to dig deeper and asking the harder questions. The result is even more satisfying after learning that this project was first attempted to be started in 2018 and that the RISD team was able to stay motivated and driven to undertake it despite the global curveball of the pandemic. One particular quote from Huy that stood out — that should help any designer stay motivated and driven — was about one of the ways in which we can help our clients: "Having a clear idea of what our

principles are” he said, as he recalled the redesign process “but not a clear idea on how that should take shape”. It’s not the best elevator pitch for designers but, yeah, THAT’S what we are here for: to help give visual shape to principles and nothing could be more exciting. Or scary. And when in doubt: Question.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we’ll be here, we hope you’ll be there.