

A black and white photograph of a long, arched stone walkway. The walkway is composed of large, rectangular stone tiles. On the left side, there is a wall made of rough-hewn stone blocks. Several large, multi-paned windows are set into the wall, each framed by a semi-circular arch. The walkway leads towards a dark door at the far end, which is also framed by a semi-circular arch. The lighting creates strong shadows, highlighting the texture of the stone and the perspective of the walkway.

Connecting Creatives

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly



JASON SCHUPBACH

Dean, Drexel University's Westphal College of Media Arts & Design

DesignIntelligence - Michael LeFevre (DI): You recently moved from Arizona State University to Drexel to take on a new challenge. At ASU, you led an ambitious curriculum redesign initiative to reposition the school to be more technological and equitable. Before that, you were with the National Endowment for the Arts, the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York, and held other cultural positions. Through all these roles, a thread of connecting communities seems common. Is that a guiding principle?

Jason Schupbach (JS): I believe I was put on this earth to help creative people do amazing work that will make people's lives

Connecting Creatives

In this candid conversation, Jason Schupbach, new Dean of Drexel's Westphal College of Media Arts & Design, reflects on transcending disciplines and generations, and embracing diversity and technology to enable multi-dimensional design education.

better. I get excited about the nexus where artists work on social justice issues. I'm not Beyonce. I'm not the super creative, talented person, but I want to be the person that helps those people behind the scenes. I feel like I know a lot about the structures that support creative people in this country. That's my art form. The through-line is how can I clear the decks so creative people can do awesome things to continue the human project and make the world a better place.

DI: A valuable role. So many of us are educated to think it's all about us in a singular sense. Our talent, creativity, and vision. But as we grow, we learn it's about connection. You've taken that on.



JS: I'm not interested in the white-man-designer-as-hero thing. That's been problematic for our society. Just look at what's happening with Philip Johnson's legacy right now. Brave people of color and others are stepping up to say, "This guy was a Nazi! Why are we honoring him?" I'm instead interested in the communal. How can we all work together while reckoning with our complex and damaging history? The simplest thing I can say is it takes a village, and creative people are part of that village and have a role. My job is to make sure that role is understood and supported.

DI: Let's talk about that. After a befuddling 2020, our editorial theme for this year is clarity.

We begin that pursuit this quarter with **Multidimensional Introspection**. As you reflect on your charge, what

untapped dimensions are you looking to explore, beyond architecture and the "lone, white, male architect" stereotype? What is the breadth of the Westphal curriculum and mission?

JS: Westphal is an incredibly diverse, innovative, and transformative applied arts college. It is the creative hub of Drexel University. You can name the creative career you'd like to study at Westphal – we've got it all. I love that about it. We have everything from digital media — which includes game design and VR— to architecture, interior design, dance, fashion design, and film and television. We offer a lot on the business side of the creative fields.

We have one of the country's best music industry programs.

We also have the country's longest standing arts administration and museum leadership program. I like that balance. It speaks to teaching the creative side, but also teaching the business and management side.

In January, we launched a major planning process. It is critical for anyone in the creative fields to lean into the generational shift that's happening. I don't want to sound ageist — I'm a Gen X-er — but we haven't done a great job managing and working with baby boomers. We have people retiring with 40 years of experience, and we don't even record a single lecture from them before they get away. It's like, "Oh my God, you just left, and you're a genius!"

There's that generational shift, the older generation leaving, but there are also other younger generational shifts happening in higher education right now and across society. We knew they were coming, and now we've got to take them on. Things like social justice, #MeToo, the anti-racism, LGBTQIA+, and inter-gendered work. There's serious work to do there in higher education.

We don't look like America in higher ed. Not only are the numbers of BIPOC faculty low across higher ed, we also don't have the "lived" experience in faculty. It's not just about race, although race definitely matters. Dori Tunstall, who I admire so much, is the first Black woman to run a design school anywhere. She is dean of Design at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD). She talks about how lived experience is just as important as the color of your skin — that you need faculty that understand the experience of BIPOC students so that they can bring their



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culture fully into academia. She is doing amazing things, working on how higher education systems don't support teachers with a variety of lived experience. Furthermore, she also talks about the importance of starting with indigeneity — that we don't focus enough energy and resources on hiring and supporting indigenous faculty and students. Read her Fast Company article. It's amazing. I'm in awe of what she is accomplishing and am trying to learn from her.

The generational shift has happened. We always knew it would happen around social justice issues. They've been around a long time, and now, the new generation wants change. We all know the horrible things that happened this year. Those were built on years of horrible history. The second generational aspect we're going to take on in our planning process is what the pandemic has wrought around technology. Zoom is just Version 1.0 of a new way of collaborating digitally. It's like when email was introduced. It wasn't Gmail or Outlook yet; it was beta technology. This is the "Blackberry"/first-out technology version. Even so, it's already fundamentally changed the way we teach and the way we operate in the world, including where people will live, work, and the ripple effects.

This goes across many fields — retail, digital media, architecture and interiors. Changes we thought were going to come in 20 years came in a matter of months. They're here. That is a huge impact to address in our planning process. Drexel University has a new strategic plan for repositioning ourselves. Higher ed has anticipated financial challenges on the horizon, including smaller high school graduating classes starting in 2025.

Going forward, I doubt there will be an all-face-to-face degree in America ever again. Some part of every degree in the U.S. will have an online component.

DI: That's dramatic.

JS: It may be, but we've already crossed the threshold. My mother can use Zoom. It's here. And it won't only be online meetings. We've learned what's good and bad about online teaching, but we'll adapt further because we're in the infancy of using this new tool. When we take on new tools, we change the way we teach. We change the way we do everything. Drexel and Westphal are doing quite well amidst COVID. We've got the same problems everybody else does, but these are simply stormy seas we needed to sail through. I am not interested in trying to find a way around the storm. We need to sail right into it. Let's have the hard conversations, do the hard work, and be experimental. It's okay to fail, and to try some things, to get to whatever's on the other side of those stormy seas. That's the challenge right now. Some schools and creative people will be willing to embrace it, be bold, and steer into the storm. Others will look for that way around it. But there is no way around it. . . . That's where my head is right now.

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DI: Love the attitude.

JS: This stuff was going to come anyway, so let's take it on.

DI: You're right. The design professions — certainly architecture — have been complaining about the problem for decades, so let's seize the opportunity. Since we're exploring multidimensionality, I'm glad you're talking about design disciplines, technology, working collaboratively, and generational dimensions. You must have been thinking about those things in your tenure at Arizona State. In redesigning their educational approach, your team made significant strides in adopting a technology-based pedagogy — two years before COVID. Share some of that.

JS: We tackled a total redesign. It was a collaborative, listening-based process, as opposed to a typical strategic planning process. We went around the country and tried to listen to folks in a multiplicity of ways. We had round tables, a listening website, tons of individual meetings, and we invited in forward-thinking speakers.

People consistently told us what needed to change. This was before COVID, so we worked through a process where we tried to embrace what people had said to us and figure out how to change what we did.

Through that process, we started to deliver a few degrees online. We were getting our architecture master's degree online. Normally, that would take a while to happen. We launched our graphic design degree in three months.

It was crazy how fast we did it. Up until then, the ASU Design School had no online degrees. We had awesome online classes, but we were able to take it further and get online degrees started. I was proud of that. Those aren't easy things to accomplish.

Several things came out of the redesign. One was the urgency around social justice issues. Secondly, the biggest thing we heard from everyone was they wanted us to teach people not just to be great designers, but also to be more prepared in leadership and people skills. There was a demand for students to better understand society, politics, negotiation, public speaking, and business.

There are technical skill sets, and there are soft skill sets. The World Economic Forum has a list of top skillsets, and teamwork is up around the top. Harvard Business School has been writing about teamwork for 200 years. How many of their case studies have we taught in a design studio? There's so much research about teams, and it's such a critical skillset, but we haven't taught the social science of teams in design schools. At least, very few do. We don't teach about failure. Public speaking? We say, "Oh, they'll just pick that up." We should teach those skills.

We started the process at ASU by looking at those human skill sets and how we would incorporate them into our curriculum. That was ongoing as I left. In other fields like law or medicine, the lines between undergraduate learning, grad school, residency, versus learning in practice, are clearly drawn and agreed upon as a field.



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But in architecture, design, and other creative fields, the line between what is taught in school and what is taught in practice is vague. We push on each other. The line is blurred. We need conversations about what can be done in the four years we have students, especially now that we have access to new technologies that allow us to teach differently.

I give a lot of credit to Marc Neveu, the architecture department head at ASU. He and the wonderful people in the ASU architecture program completely reinvented their architecture degree based on what Marc knew from his previous job as editor of *The Journal of Architectural Education*.

Through the redesign process they investigated what could be done to create a more flexible architecture degree. They're throwing out the old model of sequential studios and trying to open the curricula, so you can learn architecture and a multiplicity of other skill sets too. They're looking at the idea that an architectural mindset can be applied by a mayor or an astrophysicist and benefit other fields. I admire what the ASU architecture program has done. They deserve credit for rethinking things. That was a huge change and remains exciting.

DI: That's exciting. We've always heard the excuse in the four-year curriculum: "there's only so much room," and it's become insular. We've neglected the other things you've called adult skills. It's remarkable the ASU team embraced them. It's also remarkable that it was done two years ago. What was the catalyst?

JS: They had been talking about it for a long time. I was hired to redesign the design school. That was my job description. I'm collaborative; I try to listen, build off what's going on in the world. We hired Marc, and the team there worked hard. I'm far from the only hero. I was just trying to clear the decks and help people through it. Because we were doing the redesign, we said, "Dream hard."

They ran with the opportunity. One leadership act I took was to set the platform we were going to change. They're still working on getting it implemented. It was almost a year ago now they voted to make change happen. To implement it fully will take four years because of the way it has to roll through all four years of the undergrad degree.

DI: You have not followed a conventional architectural path – designing buildings, learning the craft. What shaped your mission? You have a Bachelor’s in Public Health from UNC, a Master’s in City Planning/Urban Design... I also saw a reference to creative economics. What prompted your role as a connector?

JS: Great question. I went to school for Planning and Urban Design. Somehow, I got into MIT. I became fascinated with creative people. I’d always been a creative person. I thought, why not go to Arts Management school? What am I doing as a city planner? Richard Florida had just written his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and it was influential.

It’s a troubled book. Even he admits it has no equity lens. But at the time, cities started taking an interest in their cultures in new ways. So, I wrote my thesis on cities’ roles in supporting creative economies. I got interested in doing that kind of work and went to work for the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City. That was the first time I encountered my white privilege very clearly. I had been in a bubble. I was the chief Cultural Planner for the city at 20-something. It was very humbling.

I learned a lot and wanted to keep pursuing that kind of work. I worked on a Ford Foundation Initiative, and then with Governor Patrick in Massachusetts, as the Creative Economy and Innovation Officer for the State.

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All those jobs looked at different aspects of support systems for creative people. The equity work has been a lifetime journey to learn to be humble and understand, because I have the appearance I do. Also, because I've been able to access more resources in the positions I've had the privilege to serve in. I do everything I can to try to make those systems work in more equitable ways. All those jobs were about how to create support systems with whatever tools were at my disposal in that moment. And to try to insert a through-line of equity in it as well.

Experience builds to the next experience, so fundamentally, I have always remembered to be humble. I've done a lot of equity work on the East Coast, but the East Coast has its own unique story about what America is. In the West, it is a completely different story. The indigeneity of the West, the complex history of somewhere like Arizona, which was part of Mexico for many years, is radically different. It's sobering to go out there and realize you don't know their American story. If you want to work the right way, you have to listen.

DI: Thank you for your honesty. I'm not aware of many role models for what you're talking about. Did any mentors, peers, or influencers shape your path?

JS: In my academic career coming out of MIT, Mark Schuster encouraged me to go in this direction. He was one of the very few urban cultural policy professors in America. I've also been fortunate to have crossed paths with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) women who have helped me in my journey. Susan Chin was my boss in New

York City. She is an amazing woman. She was the Chair of the Board of the New York AIA and ED of New York's Design Trust for a while.

When I started doing foundation work, people like Maria Rosario Jackson and Judilee Reed guided me and helped me understand how to work the right way, through an equitable lens. Roberta Uno was the Program Officer at the Ford Foundation. I'll never forget the first time I walked into a room and Roberta pointed out there weren't a lot of people of color in the room. That was the first time I'd ever heard anybody say that. I was in my twenties and thought, "Oh my God, I never thought about that before." Now, it's completely obvious because everybody talks about it, but this was 20 years ago.

I'm grateful those women of color did the hard work and were willing to shepherd someone like me. I had other great bosses. Charlie McDermott in Massachusetts, Joan Shigekawa, and Jamie Bennett at the National Endowment for the Arts. Joan Shigekawa's a legend. I was so excited to work with her. She's an amazing woman. There have been lots of people, but it's always been a village. As a result, I don't ever work without talking to lots of other people and working together.

DI: Let's shift to your current context. Culturally and contextually, Drexel and Philadelphia are very different places than ASU and Tempe. How might your mission compare? Are there synergies with Penn, Temple, and the other institutions that surround you now?

JS: I've been here five months. I know some of the people that run some of the other colleges in town. There are a lot of art and design schools in Philly. It's exciting to have so many potential partners and competitors. It is clear over the years — people have found their space: "We don't do that, Temple does that. We do this instead."

Our cooperative education program is famous for being one of the first of its kind and continues to be among the largest co-op programs. Drexel has always positioned itself to be industry-focused, preparing students for their future careers. We are also an R1 university and deeply tied to the Philadelphia community. So, Drexel's got its own personality and our programs have their own personalities, and we are pretty good in Philadelphia about not stepping on each other's toes.

DI: You are touching so many more disciplines than just architecture. Great potential synergy.

JS: Yes, Westphal has 25 degree granting programs, including product design, graphic design, photography, art history, animation and visual effects, and on and on.

DI: What are you optimistic about in the coming year?

JS: Vaccines that work! I think the generational shift challenge is here whether we like it or not. All the hallmarks of it are happening, and I'm excited to see what it reveals. The more voices we bring to the table, the more we hand over power to those voices, the better things are going to be. Take the example of television. We teach film and television,

as well. TV has never been better because people have finally started handing the reins over to different kinds of voices and writers. I was obsessed with *Lovecraft Country*, which was a bizarre combination of Afro-futurism and Lovecraft, who was a racist. It was like nothing I'd ever seen on TV before because it had new voices writing it. It was written and produced by a black woman. As the doors open and we figure this out, many of our design fields are only going to get better. The multiplicity reveals itself to better things. We have huge challenges as a country. It's no joke that our democracy needs work. Democracies are work, and we've got to get to doing it.

In higher education, the more we accept that change is here, embrace it, and are willing to have the hard conversations, and do the right things — is only going to make things better, more interesting, more challenging. And we didn't even talk about the environmental crisis we're in right now. We can take these things on. I'm a 300% glass-full kind of person. This can be annoying to the pessimists around me, but I always think the human project generally gets better. We can do this if we are real with ourselves and trust each other. So, I'm excited about the future. I can't stand when people ask me, "what's your vision?" Stop asking a white, male leader what his vision is. Please stop. It will be our collective vision — where we will all go together. In a place of higher education, one voice cannot be the only voice that matters. Not in these times.

I am excited to see what we all come up with together in our planning process. Then implement it. We have to do it. You can't just have a vision and not get it done.

We'll probably have to revisit it in five years, but let's get it done. Let's get to work. That's what I've been saying to everybody. Let's get to work. I'm sick of sitting on my hands and talking about things.

DI: Thank goodness we're finally acknowledging these issues. Thank goodness you're here. Thank you for the work you're doing and for sharing your thoughts.

JS: Thank you. I appreciate that. One last thing I'd say to everyone is to please find a way to be well through all this. It's so hard right now. One of my other goals as a leader is to constantly remind people their personal wellness matters. It's okay to not to show up that day because you need to find a way to be well — because it's not going to get any easier. I'm hoping people turn things off and rest when they need to. Resting is part of the work.

Jason Schupbach is Dean of Drexel University's Westphal College of Media Arts & Design. Recently he led The Design School at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, the nation's largest and most comprehensive design school. At ASU, he led the ambitious ReDesign.School initiative to position the school as a 21st century collaborative, relevant, and equitable institution. He was a key collaborator on ASU projects such as the Studio for Creativity, Place, and Equitable Communities; expansions of the school to downtown Phoenix; justice work with Race Forward; launch of a new Master of Innovation and Venture Development degree between the design, business, and engineering schools; and the university's partnership with James Turrell's Roden Crater.

Previously, he was director of Design and Creative Placemaking Programs for the National Endowment for the Arts, overseeing design and creative placemaking, grantmaking, and partnerships, including Our Town and Design Art Works grants, the Mayor's Institute on City Design, the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design, and the NEA's federal agency collaborations. Earlier, Schupbach served as creative economy director for Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick, growing creative and tech businesses in the State. Prior to that, he was director of ArtistLink, a Ford Foundation-funded initiative to stabilize and revitalize communities through affordable space and innovative environments for creatives. He has worked for the mayor of Chicago and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs and written extensively on the role of arts and design in making communities better. His writing has been featured in the Aspen Institute's "Best Ideas of the Day" series.