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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, Professor of Architecture and Chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

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Today, we have with us Paul Nakazawa, who works internationally as a consultant and advisor to private and public companies, institutions, and governments. His experience encompasses the fields of strategy and leadership development, finance and investments, operations management, organizational structure and development, governance, marketing, and business development, large scale project acquisition and mobilization. So many areas that are so important to design practice, and so we felt it was really important to do this podcast with you, to learn a little bit more about the way in which you, in particular, practice.

It's actually in some ways outside of design, but very much inside design. So I think it's a really relevant kind of conversation. So first of all, welcome, Paul. Thank you.

**PAUL W.
NAKAZAWA:** Thank you, Grace.

GRACE LA: You have run one of the longest practice courses ever taught at the GSD. It's legendary. It's called frameworks of practice and it's been running for more than 20 years. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and how it started and your role in it?

**PAUL W.
NAKAZAWA:** Sure. The story begins when I was a student at the GSD from 1975 to 1979. At that time, I was the TA for John Seiler, who was a professor in practice at the GSD for many years. And when John retired, I'd been kind of midway through my career, and I received a call one day from Jorge Silvetti, who said informed me that John had retired and that he was looking for someone to replace him in terms of getting a course together for practice.

And I said, yes, of course. I mean, I never thought about teaching, but Jorge said, well, that's great because you have six weeks to get ready.

GRACE LA: That's like Jorge

[LAUGHTER]

**PAUL W.
NAKAZAWA:** And so we were off and running, and I had to scramble for six weeks to figure out what to do. And the first year that it was given, I think it was 75 or 80 students. And then the next year was 102 or something like that. So at the beginning, it was a large lecture course, and later on, it was transformed into a seminar. So today, it's a seminar with about 25 students.

GRACE LA: And at this moment in time, had you actually started your consultant practice, because I just-- for our audience, I think it's very interesting to note that you previously served as a managing principal for multidisciplinary design practices in various cities New York, Chicago, Boston, and Charlotte.

But as a founding member of AMO, the research and development arm of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, it's so interesting how your practice evolved. And of course, now you serve as chairman of Snohetta's advisory board in New York, for example, a director of MASS Design Group here in Boston. So your type of practice, did it run parallel to the development of the course or how did that work?

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: It was a mid-career change, actually. The last job that I had was really as managing principal of Moshe Safdie's practice in Boston, and it was-- I want to say, early '90s. And at that point, the office had missed the recession. But then through a series of things, we had lost a lot of work, but it seemed that it was a good idea, actually, to consider that because the office had shrunk, having a managing principal didn't make much sense because there was not that much to manage.

[LAUGHTER]

This is not the case now, because Safdie's recovery is as robust as ever as a practice, but it was a period of searching for what I did best, and I think I realized that I had held a lot of different positions in firms with official titles. But actually, that's not why people hired me. So I realized there were a whole bunch of things I was OK at, and there were a few things I was pretty good at.

And so I went down the consulting route initially with two other people, one of whom worked for me in New York, and another one, actually, who was the recruiter who recruited me to Safdie's practice as managing principal. And then we formed an alliance where we developed a body of work together over 10 years, where I did the managerial piece, Marjan did the human resources piece, and Nancy, which was the third person in it, did marketing and business development.

GRACE LA: So in that role, is that how you then began to advise close relationships with some of the most powerful and influential architecture practices around the globe? And many would say that even the principals of those firms have said in the past publicly, oh, well, my practice wouldn't be what it is today if it hadn't been for Paul Nakazawa. So tell us about that. How did that happen?

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Mhm. It actually started when I was a student. I just think that one of the aspects of education at the GSD, both back then, and I think probably now is that you come into contact very early in your education with people who are highly accomplished in their fields. And so in an educational environment, you try to minimize the social, political, and economic divisions that might otherwise be present in the outside world, and you learn how to talk to each other. [LAUGHS]

GRACE LA: But you've been specifically able to advise some of these practices.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: What I'm saying is that symmetry of being able to have a conversation with someone like that starts very young. And I always tell my students, your education includes the development of social capital. It starts now. It doesn't start later. And so learning how to communicate with others in a genuine way is so important to the educational mission.

GRACE LA: So I think that's a fascinating topic, because in our day and age, one would say that most students, maybe graduate students today of the millennial generation are perhaps more transactional than ever. And this idea of building social networks and capital, but through authentic relationships, is still at the core of what you believe we should be doing in terms of the discipline.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: It's hard to explain to someone who isn't in the field or doesn't have a lot of experience, but our field still is fairly small, even in global terms. And so personal relationships mean a lot in the sense that it allows you the trust that you need to communicate with each other, and the ease of being able to understand who the other person is and their own kind of personal integrity and where they come from.

And it helps with the collaborative process. I mean, trust is a big part of what we do. And part of it is being able to be comfortable with the other people that we're collaborating with.

GRACE LA: That's right. And would you say that in some ways that's the kind of foundational ethic which stands the test of time, as opposed to the way in which the profession has to always embrace change? Because you've said in past lectures that with the architecture profession must figure out ways to embrace change in order to survive. Maybe you can tell us a little bit more about your views on that.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: OK, so with regard to relationships and social capital, that doesn't change a feature of practice. And as a matter of fact, because we require more and more different disciplines to do our work, the teams and everything just keep getting bigger and bigger. So if you can't get along in a team format, you really aren't going to make much of an impact in this profession.

And with regard to adapting to changing circumstances in the world, that's a big subject. Because I think there was a time when things were a bit more stable in the external environment, and there were a different set of conditions and people in charge of the enterprise, basically.

I think if you look at architecture as a cultural enterprise and not as a business, the cultural enterprise survives actually all sorts of different attacks on the organism. And one of the things that's impressive about our resilience as practitioners, as a discipline and as a practice, is this ability to have strong cultural basis for what it is we do.

And if you think about culture in general, the real problem of the last, I don't how many years, was actually the substitution of culture as the driver of projects and putting money in the center of it. So neoliberalism put really finance and economics in the middle as a driver of progress. But money produces more money, but it doesn't produce other benefits.

Culture produces much more even benefit to a number of diverse stakeholders. So culture, hopefully if you have a healthy one, tends to be more inclusive, tends to distribute benefit more evenly, socially and naturally which would include environment just not people.

So over time, from the time I started my consulting till now, I've gone from being a traditional management consultant looking at project, budget, schedule, organizational structures and all that to looking and examining practices as cultural projects that are unique in the sense that the people that constitute those projects are not interchangeable and have very specific outlooks on the world and have very specific opinions. And that's where the differences between practices becomes interesting, because I think that then if you look at it that way, competition per se is a figment of your imagination.

If you're not competing on services and price, but you're competing on cultural project, it's not really a head to head competition. It's actually what's the best fit. How do you frame up the problems and the things that you're going to address, and who can do that best for any given opportunity.

GRACE LA: That's a fascinating way to look at it, because it seems that most architects, particularly emerging practices, are perhaps not self-actualized enough to realize their own value in terms of their specific contribution to cultural production. Perhaps one could say that they don't know what it is yet.

So do you find that practices will come to you to help them form that or help them to realize that and to solidify that as the driver behind, let's say, their mission or the way in which they might work? I would love to hear an example of the way in which this has played out in an actual scenario, if you are able to share with us.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Well, if you look at any of the major architects right now, and if you go back to the 1970s when many of these people were forming up their practices. Most of them founded them with an assumption that they were cultural players, and it wasn't really a business. Most of them didn't even think it was art, right, hopefully. But it was a human enterprise.

I think the reason that I'm actually able to advise them is that I bring managerial and business skills to a cultural project, but I get it that it's a cultural project--

GRACE LA: Cultural project.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: --and not a business project.

GRACE LA: Right.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: [LAUGHS] So if you look at a firm like OMA in the mid '90s. I mean, it was forming its ideas. It had some organizational and business issues which needed to be solved. But the essential lack wasn't the drive to do certain things creatively or wasn't deficiency intellectually or anything like that. It's just they needed to know how to organize themselves and how to operate in a certain way in order to develop their ideas most effectively.

So my contribution to that was solving some of those economic issues that underlie it. But it really wasn't about the talent that happened on its own, and it was liberated by the fact that they weren't broke.

[LAUGHTER]

They had the resources to liberate their creativity.

GRACE LA: Creativity.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: That's how I help firms, actually, is understanding that cultural project fully. And then it has a lot of manifestations. It's like who do you hire, how do you grow, how you run your business.

GRACE LA: Yeah. That's right. And some of those practices, you bring up OMA as an example, but they've gotten so large or they're growing, or maybe they're in the process of potentially quite rapid growth.

So then the question becomes, how do we maintain the kind of authorial voice of the cultural project when there becomes a built-in pressure to feed the monster that is growing and growing and growing because we actually are seeing right now a number of practices that have been very successful in articulating their cultural project, and they're getting so much work, which is great. They're successful, but they're kind on the precipice. And we wonder, oh, are they going to lose it? Are they going to start doing really bad buildings because they have to kick them out so fast? So what is the advice on firms that are at that precipice?

**PAUL W.
NAKAZAWA:**

We're in a really interesting moment of change, and I'd have to go back and describe how the world to me has changed that allows an organism that was unthinkable in the '90s. Why that it's a thinkable organization now?

So if you look in the 1970s or '60s, government actually held a lot of authority. It had the money. It built a lot of buildings in the United States, I believe. It accounted for at least 50% of non-residential vertical construction. We had a bureaucracy that managing cities could build parks, manage them, maintain them. And it was pre-privatization of cities.

If you look at things fast forward now, governments may still have convening power, but they're mostly bankrupt, are always begging for money, looking for money. We have public private partnerships. We rely a lot on non-government players in order to provide and sustain the city. And so the locus of authority over building and decision making has changed.

And so as the process of acquiring work and doing work, what's at stake, for whom, and how they measure risk has changed a lot. If you want to look at the complexion of practice, one of the major adaptations is who's driving the bus on urbanization and other issues. And lo and behold, you find that major corporations, private equity, private sources of capital really are driving urbanization through real estate development and other things, not so much governments. Governments can either help or hinder or try to regulate the process, but they're not in charge, really.

GRACE LA:

Does that mean that there's really no-- because as you suggest, we see all over the place that municipalities are actually not in control, and they have to by virtue of capital, relinquish that control to developers as an example. How can we continue to work in the civic realm? Is it possible for architects to do that?

**PAUL W.
NAKAZAWA:**

There's an emerging kind of banter between Patrik Schumacher and Reinier de Graaff. So Reinier just published his book, and Patrik has been a longtime standing fixture at the AA and other places. So if you look at Patrik's world, a lot of it is algorithmic. There's a whole global movement toward parametric and algorithmic considerations of what's building the city.

On the other side, you have people out of the humanistic tradition, which Rem definitely comes from. It's a different way of arriving at conception of the city and solutions. Both of these things are operating simultaneously, but it's not clear that humanism is going to survive this next period of time, and the design of the city is relying more and more on parametrics and algorithms in order to drive development.

So as an example, if you look at autonomous vehicles, this is going to be driven by algorithms, all of infrastructure that requires logistics. All these logistics platforms are now the basis for operating systems of cities. All of those are driven on algorithms. Retail increasingly through Amazon and others are driven by algorithms. And architecture increasingly is driven by algorithms.

So the cultural project doesn't survive on algorithms. It actually is an overlay on the algorithmic substrate, as a intersubjective agreement among people about what's valuable and what's significant and everything like that. And right now, I think there's a good deal of confusion, but also tension in the environment of how these two projects or two processes, one's a process sustaining of algorithm that kind of basis for operational aspects of urbanism. And the overlay of intersubjective kind of development of culture, of public space, of all those things.

It's not a happy marriage right now because capital has to glue these two things together. And what's interesting in the environment right now is you have players on both sides of that. And so what's driving me crazy as a professor is that how do you educate a student in practice? I mean, what do you convey in terms of content? Because clearly, there's a trajectory that's taken us up to this point. And then there's these discontinuities that are happening.

So some curious things have happened in the last year where a number of firms have backgrounded market expertise, have put to the front of their advertising, of value-based, human-centered kind of trope. Others then are into just service providing where it's this huge pallet of potential services that can be arranged and delivered the profession's very much all over the place.

GRACE LA: This overlay or this potential sandwich that could be created between the algorithmic project and the humanistic project, if one could lock those two things in, you would have a very powerful understanding of how to engage this city with an authorial voice that is not fueled exclusively by, let's say, data. But that brings to the project of architecture and ethic or a set of values.

I mean, it's a little squishy, but are there firms then that you see that are doing this well, that are actually locking together these two different kind of strains in a productive-- I agree there's clearly a tension, so now how does one reconcile that tension in a way that produces more than what it could have produced separately?

PAUL W. Practices from the Nordic region right now seem to be in favor with a lot of developers and educational
NAKAZAWA: institutions, both in Canada and the United States. And I hypothesize that one of the reasons is that their spatial models and design comes with an implicit social model.

GRACE LA: Yes.

PAUL W. Right. It could be read explicitly if they sell it that way. But if they don't say anything, it's just an assumption that
NAKAZAWA: it comes with certain values operationally, in terms of how you go about methodologically determining how you're going to design something. It is made more interesting by the fact that they're trying to fold in environmental issues, so that the whole issue of sustainability is not an overlay on good architecture, but becomes an integral part of it.

So I think that because they come from a certain social structure and also from a certain climate that they can make the claim that they're able to integrate the humanistic project in spatial and operational terms that lives side by side with the algorithmic in a happier relationship.

GRACE LA: I think that's a very timely topic. National Geographic, recently on the cover of one of their recent magazines, was declaring the happiest places on the planet. And of course, Scandinavian countries, Denmark popped up. In my experience in traveling to Denmark, this kind of social value was really at the core of that society, and it's very palpable from the moment you step off the plane and this concept of hyuga and the coziness. And it's very interesting because I do think that as a people, Scandinavians have a really interesting view.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Actually, there's a society that wouldn't be where it's at without a broad agreement on what the societal project would be. So in 1850, a good number of people were living in stone huts on farmland. And so without this broad cultural agreement, the pieces of society wouldn't really have known how to act in terms of greater good. And so now, since their project has more or less succeeded, the problem with that zone is, well, what do you do next? Because projects that come to an end that don't have another project tend to deteriorate. [LAUGHS]

GRACE LA: Right.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: So I mean, they're exporting their wares to the rest of the world because the rest of the world is not there in terms of development yet. But they themselves, in the homeland, have these other issues, which is they need to reinvent the next project.

GRACE LA: That's right. So in light of that and your knowledge of various architecture firms, what parts of practice do you think today are most susceptible to change? And when you think about architecture firms, what must change in order for practices to survive? That's a huge question, but I'm curious to know from your vantage point.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: I mean, people ask me about my crystal ball all the time and I go like, well, crystal balls, it's great for selling stuff, but you're usually wrong. So prediction is very hard, but I think we know that we're going to have to deal with certain things in the next 50 years. So climate change being one of the things that we're going to have to deal with as a profession.

I don't think it's baked into our pie. When I see projects in studio and everything like that, it's a side issue. We say that it's a central to our thinking, but not really. There has to be a better integration of it. I think the reason that is an outlier still, even though everyone agrees it's important, is we haven't figured out how to make it a non-engineering issue.

GRACE LA: Right. The method by integration is still unclear. Yeah.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: And that happens with a lot of social and environmental issues is being able to integrate that into a design process where it's not seen as additional information that somehow modifies what you would normally do as a designer. I think we have to find a better integration of those elements in order to actually fulfill our own mission, which is to make structure built environment that's worth living in.

GRACE LA: So recently, as you know, Iñaki Abalos was the chair of the Department of Architecture here at the GSD. And I'm curious to know your thinking on the kind of thermodynamic agenda that he started to build for the school and whether or not you've seen through either the student work or the kind of general direction of the school, if you've seen advances in understanding the way in which the issue of climate change.

I mean, at least in this sense viewed through the lens of thermodynamics, is affecting the way students are thinking. Do you see that students are bringing this more into the classroom, or is it on the tips of their tongue and how are they--

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: I mean, I think there's greater awareness. For awareness to actually being able to integrate that knowledge into designing. It takes a while. And it's not only the object itself, it's how you operate it. So one of the things is we teach students how to design, we're not necessarily great at understanding all the different aspects of what we're building. A lot of it's operational, a lot of how it's occupied.

I think that one of the areas, which is the most difficult to teach actually convey only through case studies would you be able to get at it is the interaction between what you've designed as built environment and how it's used, and how it's occupied, and how it performs over time as a human environment. And that's still not worked out as an educational pedagogy.

GRACE LA: It's still a challenge.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: It's still a challenge, I think. And it's a lot to ask, I think in the amount of time we have in order to teach students something. So I don't think that you can teach someone everything in the short period of time they're here. But what I do think is that what you can impart is the importance of different things in terms of their thinking, which is where mentorship and leadership come in, which is not necessarily saying that you're leaving with a full deck of cards, but pointing out what really is important, and what's at the heart of the mission.

GRACE LA: And specifically, mentorship for you has been an important way of working and thinking. And you mentioned earlier that you can trace mentorship and the subject of mentorship all the way back to your own days as a student. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts on how you feel mentorship plays a role today.

And when architecture students or even practitioners that are out there right now practicing, how might they leverage this idea of mentorship, which still is a very mysterious and unspoken subject how mentoring occurs, and I guess in your roles as a consultant, in some ways you are mentoring practices. So maybe you could tell us a little bit about that because, again, we never seem to speak about it openly and, yet, we all know that we've had very important mentors in our lives, otherwise we wouldn't be where we are today, et cetera.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: There's probably no one definition of mentorship that is satisfactory, but when I was being mentored as a student, so that was more of mentorship in the sense of finding people who could show you the way. So it was wayfinding. And what was important were standards of performance that you needed to meet in order to have excellence. And this is from the 1970s. So the profession was quite different then.

But one of my early mentors was Rafael Viñoly. And what's interesting about Viñoly was his background in music made him a fanatic in terms of how people performed. So if you took musical performance and you ported it to architecture, what were the elements of performance as a professional that were the minimum to call yourself a good professional, et cetera. And so this aspect of achieving a certain level of excellence was really inculcated fairly early.

So it was wayfinding. It was setting the bar in terms of performance and ideas of excellence. I think it's a little bit different right now, I think because the profession is so broad in terms of what it encompasses. It's more helping people frame what the way is for them, not necessarily a way or the way, but helping people understand the world better so that they're better oriented and better sighted, and to keep track of their own progress. It's very easy to lose your way, I think.

GRACE LA: Yes, yes.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: And even for established practitioners, a lot of what I've given as advice is, they say, well, do I take this job or do you take that job? Or do I do this or do I do that? And you go, OK, so what's at stake for you in either one? And someone will say, well, I can do it. It'll make money and blah, blah, blah. I can get it. The other one, I don't know whether I can get it, but I have a unique insight into it means a lot to me. You go, OK, well-- one is you're kind retreading.

So if you're a mature professional, doing retreading is a waste of time. It may make you a few extra bucks, but what are you doing? You always have to be in a way, and find the frontier of your own life as a professional. And the definition of that frontier is not always clear to practitioner who's always besieged by a million kind of requests and demands and everything from clients and jobs and all that. So part of my job is to help my client identify that frontier so that they can be on it.

GRACE LA: Right. But it seems to me the difference between, let's say, a formalized role in which you are advising someone versus the mentorship role is that you do have a stake as a mentor. You do have a stake in your mentees--

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Outcome.

GRACE LA: --outcome And it's everything from an intellectual stake in it, a legacy stake in it. There could be many reasons why one would take on a mentee or why a mentee seeks a mentor, which is quite different than the roles that you've played in formal consultancy relationships.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Yeah, but in every case, it's because you value what the person, the practice, whatever. So in the case of a practice, it's not just the individuals, it's what they do.

GRACE LA: Sure.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: In the case of individuals as mentors, it's because you think that there's something meritorious about them that merits that investment in their development more fully, not just along a narrow line.

GRACE LA: Sure.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: And I think the difference between someone who's a coach and the mentor is holding that person accountable to much more than a narrow band of outcome.

GRACE LA: That's right.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Whereas a coach, you're just trying to get them to do something specific.

GRACE LA: Right.

[LAUGHTER]

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: So I mean, I've played all these different roles. I've been coach where we're just trying to win a job or something. But I think mentorship, you're looking at the whole human being and you kind of gravitate toward each other because you see in another person something meritorious or admirable, and it's not a way of you living vicariously through someone else. That's really being a bad mentor. [LAUGHS]

You also realize as a mentor, I think that if you don't do it, that maybe what you value in life will disappear from the world. So part of that is also a calculation that if you don't help others, what you value in life might not be there in the next generation. And you don't want that to happen.

GRACE LA: Sure. Yeah, I also think that many of my most favorite mentors were those who were invested enough in the relationship also, that we could disagree with one another, still respect and hold each other dear beyond any particular kind of disagreement. So there's a longevity to the relationship that is very unique.

If you disagree with, you just fire them with an employee or supervisor, you just separate ways. But it's quite different with the mentorship. It's a kind of lifelong relationship.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Yeah, yeah. And I've been fortunate of having good coaches, good mentors. I think that anyone who has a good mentor is very lucky.

GRACE LA: And how would you say an architect develops that today?

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Being open and being curious. I mean, you're neither open nor curious.

[LAUGHTER]

GRACE LA: That's it.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: You probably won't discover a mentor. You may not discover a lot of other things too, but I think it's the ability to engage other people with that openness and curiosity. It's a form of discovery. A lot of it starts with someone just coming to you with a lot of questions. They go like, what about this? And then they start telling you about their life and about why this is important to them. So then you find motive and you find what's underneath all of this. And that's when this thing starts to.

GRACE LA: Right. This might seem to those listening a very strange conversation for our practice platform to take on, but I think it really is very interesting, particularly because, again, it's this unspoken condition that lies behind many practices that are quite successful. They have found mentors, practitioners, and they've figured out ways in which to leverage that kind of advice, which is life advice often in addition to being practical advice. So I think that it's particularly interesting to hear your take on it, given the consultancy roles and advisory roles you've had for so many practices.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: In the future, there may be practices that base their entire existence and business model on the development of algorithms and the element of human relationship capital in terms of how that plays into their thinking, maybe vastly different than the group of clients that I serve. But the client base that I serve values social capital very highly. And so, I think without exception, all of my clients believe that design is a human enterprise. It's a human-centered enterprise. And therefore, it's important that at the core of it is that relationship with others.

GRACE LA: Right. That's very powerful. I'm going to ask you something that I think a lot of people want to about, but they don't want to ask you. We want to hear some secret stories. Tell us something that we wouldn't be able to hear in a lecture from you. I'm curious about, for example-- again, the fact that you are involved in such diverse groups, serving on the board of MASS Design Group to something else like OMA and all the firms in between, I mentioned Snohetta earlier.

Maybe you can't divulge this, but could you tell us something about a challenge that a practice is having and how they're overcoming it, or just to get a kind of inside scoop on the reflection that might be typified in some of the things that we see today? Maybe it's not a specific practice, maybe it's something that you're seeing more generally.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: I think practices come to. There are different struggles that happen at different times. So I've told my class over and over again, stereotypically, practices go through crisis points. The first, the third, the fifth, the seventh, the 15th and the 25th years. And then a lot of them go through the crisis at about 100 years. So it more or less tracks human experience.

There are a lot of people who just are itching to get into practice, so they do it, except they had no business doing it because they were not prepared. So at the end of the first year, they find themselves in debt. They did the wrong things. They rented an office and printed business cards and didn't think they needed any clients or something like that. Or they did a dormer edition and that wasn't sufficient to. So that's a no-brainer.

Then there are people who have beginner's luck and managed to snag a few things and then go along and do things, and then by the third year, they're out of it because they actually didn't know how to continue to attract and acquire opportunities. And so then the crisis is that you did a good job on your first commissions, and then you forgot that actually, you needed to have continuity.

[LAUGHTER]

GRACE LA: Is that fifth year?

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: That's the third year.

GRACE LA: That's the third year. OK.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Then the fifth year, actually, you have to move out of your garage and you have to start making major investments. If you are successful, you can't work out of your apartment anymore. And you have to actually start making real investments, like you have to put down \$100,000 for a real infrastructure, et cetera, et cetera. And normally, at that point, a number of other people that you didn't expect to appear start having to appear. You have to have an accountant, all that stuff.

And there, if you're unable to manage your affairs, that shows up in a negative way. On the positive side of it, at that point, you're probably pretty good at doing work, and you're starting to learn how to manage your client base, et cetera. And the seventh year, I call it founder's trap, which is that if you're doing great, you're almost dying because the only one who has any authority are the founders.

And so any problem that happens in your firm, it's got your name on it. And there are too many problems and you haven't been able to delegate or find someone to delegate them to. And therefore, it's the founder's trap. I call it being caught in the propeller, which is the overlap between representation and production and the enterprise functions of how you keep things infrastructurally going accounting, HR, all that.

The founders are caught in the overlaps of all those domains, because they're the only ones with any authority to actually cause things to happen. And at that point, if you don't understand how to structure your practice, you'll live in chaos. Then in year 15, your practice is mature. It's crystallized. You own your own face as a practice. And at that point, if you aren't able to reinvent yourself. In 15 years, the market's changed. The basis of practice has changed.

If you were coasting along doing retreads for the last five years, you won't make it. And at that point, a lot of them merge or do other things. And then there's 25 years and hundreds years. But most people who are listening to this podcast aren't worried about 25 or 100, but you get the idea. The canonical issues of growth and development that afflict people who found practices, this is pretty standard. And I get phone calls at each of these disjunct. And there are certain people I can help and certain people I can't.

GRACE LA: Why is it there are certain people you can't? What is it that distinguishes that group because they don't get it, because they can't see?

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: They don't get it and they don't have the talent.

GRACE LA: I see. They can't find ways, for example, to get out of the propeller.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Right. Or they don't have the talent that's worth saving the enterprise.

GRACE LA: And maybe they get absorbed by another practice.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Right. It's like, go work for someone else and be a principal with another firm. It's like, don't mess around with it. It's too much trouble.

GRACE LA: Interesting.

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Right? What you find is that in many cases, it's not a lack of talent. It's really just a lack of insight into how to organize your affairs properly.

GRACE LA: Right. That's very interesting. So it's kind of massive executive functioning issues. [LAUGHS]

PAUL W. NAKAZAWA: Right. Yeah, yeah. And I think a lot of designers wear as a badge of honor that they're always on the verge of bankruptcy. But I mean, that's no way to live in the world. And actually, I can honestly say that the best designers I work with are also decent business people. Not good managers necessarily. They're good leaders and they have good business instincts. They may not be able to manage things. They need other people to help them manage the enterprise.

But as a leadership function, they're not naive. They certainly know how to deal with difficult interpersonal and political situations. They know how to strike a deal. They know how to bargain. They know how to negotiate. And so these are core skills that particularly with designers, if a designer has those skills, it's dynamite. Because actually, they're the ones who can make things move, right?

GRACE LA: That's right, that's right. Well, I want to thank you so much for joining us today to talk to us about practice from your perspective. Again, it's one that's so broad and so fascinating. You've seen so many different types of practice and you've been able to really think through, for example, even the milestones of practice, which I think are really quite interesting because there's no textbook on practice.

And yet, from your vantage point, you see all different ways in which practices have emerged and what makes them successful and why. And I think that this is an important part of how-- not only what we teach, but how we might learn from this kind of great body of knowledge that you have. So we're really lucky to have you, as part of our faculty and just grateful that you could spend this time with us.

PAUL W. Thank you, Grace.

NAKAZAWA:

GRACE LA: Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I'm Grace La, and you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the practice platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Ronee Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik. Research was provided by Alexander Porter. To find out more about programs and events at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, visit us online at gsd.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening.