Rosie Haslem of Streetsense on How to Create People-Focused Spatial Solutions

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Built environment Sustainable infrastructure



A director of the experience-focused strategy design collective on what it means to have a purpose-driven approach to designing spaces.

We first met Rosie Haslem, then a Director with the London-based design collective spacelab_, earlier this year at a panel discussion on workplace wellbeing. The event, part of this year's ARCHITECT@WORK Digital Summit, also featured Ben Channon, a director with the architecture consultancy Ekkist, and other experts in the field of purpose-driven architecture and design.

Haslem has since moved on to a new role with Streetsense, an experience-focused strategy design collective, where her focus remains on a "people-focused approach to creating and transforming places." We wanted to learn more about this purpose-driven approach to creating space and what placed her on this path.

1. What change does Streetsense want to facilitate within the design world?

At Streetsense, we bring a strategic, people-focused approach to creating and transforming places – starting by really understanding the needs of those who will use them, and then developing a comprehensive strategy to craft a place that will really work for these people. And, at a time when many people are rethinking how they want to live, work, shop, dine, and play, this is more important than ever.

We also always advocate for the need to think holistically, and beyond the confines of individual buildings, or individual uses within a building – so that the parts can come together, into something greater than their sum. Successful places are complex but harmoniously interdependent ecosystems, where different people come for different things, but overlap in space and in time. So the design world needs a more 'connected' outlook to understand, and design in complexity – and create the conditions for vibrant, evolving places.

2. What was your background prior to this, and how has it shaped your work with Streetsense?

I've always loved buildings, and cities. But it wasn't just the physical architecture and aesthetic of them that I loved – it was also how they worked, and how they were brought to life by people. So I studied human geography at the undergraduate level, to more deeply explore how people interact with and shape the world. I then went on to do a masters at UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture, which was all about looking at how architectural and urban systems work, and how to plan and design buildings and cities to shape better places for the individuals, organisations and communities that inhabit them.

I carried my learnings from these, and a postgraduate certificate in urban design, into an early career in urbanism, working at a specialist urban consultancy advising clients on how to optimise their planning strategies and design proposals to create more vibrant, human places.

I then moved to an architecture and design studio where I ran the strategy group, applying my interest in creating people-focused, research-driven spatial solutions, at the building scale – largely working with businesses to shape new ways of working, and new workplaces, for their people.

Given the societal shifts of recent years, which were then accelerated by the pandemic, I was keen to move into a broader role – to help rethink the places we all want to live, work and play in going forward. Hence the move to Streetsense, to pull together my various threads into a new UK venture for the US-based company.



3. Is sustainability a bigger factor now in your work than it was 3 years ago? If so, what's driving the shift?

Environmental sustainability is, rightfully, now rising up the agenda. There is greater awareness of the built environment's contribution to the climate crisis, partly nudged by the fact that we're actually starting to feel the impacts of the climate crisis on our towns and cities, and how we live in them. Design has a key role to play in helping solve these issues. Though environmental sustainability needs to be more inherently embedded in our thinking, and everything we do, rather than a separate workstream, or an 'add on'.

A broader, more holistic idea of "sustainability" (i.e. beyond just an environmental focus) is also very important for my work. Creating places that are socially, physically and economically "sustainable" is about creating places that are designed for fundamental, *un*changing human wants and needs (the desire to come together, to interact, and transact), whilst also understanding that the exact ways in which we do these things will in fact be *ever*-changing.

All of this is increasingly front of mind, what with the pandemic's acceleration of our evolving patterns of working, living, shopping and playing. More than ever we need places that are crafted to bring people together, and support vibrant and diverse activity, and are also inherently resilient to change – by being designed to adapt over time.

4. Can you identify any roadblocks you encounter frequently when trying to implement your strategies or ideas? How have you overcome any challenges?

A common challenge is that clients want to see results very quickly. And working in the architecture and design field, this is a very literal 'seeing'. Clients often want to know how an end product will *look*, before we've even established what the real need is, and how something should actually *work*. There's often an impatience to know the answer before we've had time to do the "workings out".

I always work closely with clients to help them understand the value of investing in creating a robust strategy at the start of a project, before jumping into a design. Giving examples of where the design-first mentality has resulted in unsuccessful projects is always really helpful!

And once they are on the journey – being challenged to think differently; being shown unexpected insights as the research is pieced together, and then being shown possible solutions that are informed by these insights – they invariably come to realise that these steps are even more than a "value add", and that in fact, they can't afford *not* to invest the time and money into getting a strategy right from the very start.

Feedback

5. What keeps you motivated during times of frustration?

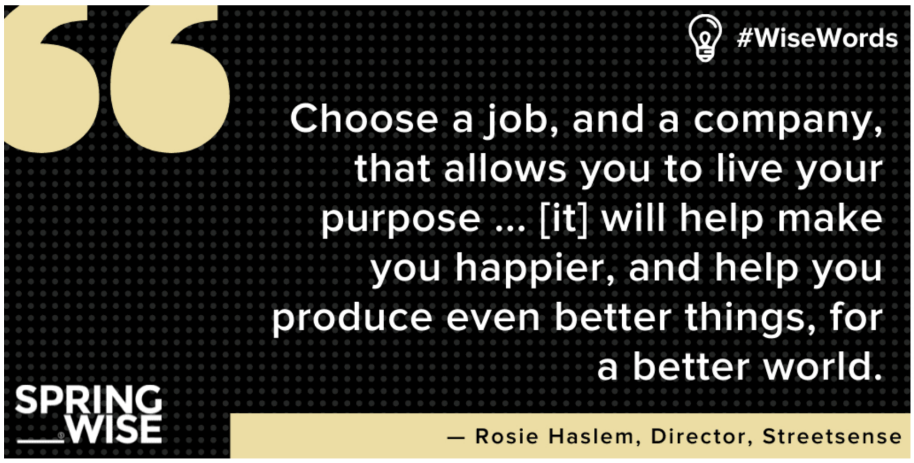
I try to focus on myself and the reasons driving me to do what I'm doing, and if I know that I am at least striving to do the right thing, then that is the best I can do.

6. What is one book you've recently read that has inspired you and that you might recommend?

I recently read *Let my people go surfing*, by Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia. Part autobiography, part 'philosophical manual' for the employees of Patagonia, it's an inspirational example of the power of bringing your values and purpose to your work – and of the potential for big business to do good in the world.

Chouinard's love of the natural world, and desire to be able to go and enjoy it – and keep it safe so that it can go on being enjoyed – drove the creation of Patagonia. His ethos is embedded into what the company makes (garments and equipment for enjoying the great outdoors, which are as environmentally sustainable as they can be so as not to threaten the very thing they help people enjoy), as well as the culture that is lived by all Patagonia's people (the go-surfing-when-the-surf's-up attitude).

A great read for anyone interested in challenging the 'norms' of business and capitalism, and in living a fulfilled, purpose-driven life.



7. Who or what inspires you personally?

I get a lot of inspiration from travelling and seeing different places and spaces around the world. It's fascinating to understand the contexts in which they were created – how they have been shaped (and subsequently reshaped) by culture and societal norms, as well as location, climate, and even material availability – and then to think about how certain elements can be translated into new ideas and projects I'm working on.

8. Do you have any other thoughts or wise words for aspiring purpose-driven designers or marketers?

A strong sense of purpose is more important than ever given the huge challenges (and huge opportunities!) of the current moment in time – both to drive positive changes in the world, and also to give more personal meaning to whatever you're working in. So choose a job, and a company, that allows you to live your purpose, because being able to channel your values into authentically purpose-driven work every day will help make you happier, and help you produce even better things, for a better world.

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