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## CTRL+CLICK CAST #071 - Developing a Signature Design Style

[Music]

**Lea Alcantara:** From [Bright Umbrella](#), this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today we're talking about how to develop a signature design style. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

**Emily Lewis:** Emily Lewis!

**Lea Alcantara:** This episode is brought to you by mithra62's [Backup Pro](#), a complete backup solution for WordPress, ExpressionEngine 2 and 3, Craft, PrestaShop and concrete5. We use this one ourselves for some of our client sites. It's insanely customizable and includes automated backup integrity, eight built-in storage locations, console routing. Basically, Backup Pro was built to make disaster recovery as painless as possible. Just visit [backup-pro.com](#) to get started.

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**Emily Lewis:** If you're a regular listener, you know we were scheduled to talk about data-driven design with Matthew Oliphant. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to join us, but we have rescheduled with him later this month, which means you have even more time to send us your questions about using data to inform design. So today what we're going to do instead is talk about signature design style, but before we get into that topic, Lea, happy 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yay!

**Emily Lewis:** This week marks five years since we started podcasting.



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**Lea Alcantara:** I think time has literally flown by. I mean, can you believe that our podcast has even lasted five years? [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** You know, I can because you and I like doing it, and so... [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** I know, yeah, that's true.

**Emily Lewis:** That's the only reason it stuck around so long.

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, that's true, and we've learned so much along the way, and we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for our listeners, so thanks for our listeners for tuning in.

**Emily Lewis:** Absolutely, thank you, everyone, and we hope you're learning along with us. We had some tweets from some listeners last week just saying how much they're learning, and that's really why we do it. It's not just for you guys, but for ourselves.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** Twice a month, we talk about some topic that we get to practice with and experiment with and getting inspired by, so yeah, I love it.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, me too, and being able to talk to our peers about stuff that's happening right now, I feel it's such a great privilege to do so too.

**Emily Lewis:** Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. So happy anniversary.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yay!

**Emily Lewis:** I'm raising my cup of coffee. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

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**Emily Lewis:** All right, so let's get into our discussion today, and this is actually really going to be more like me interviewing you, Lea, because this is a topic you've been blogging about recently.

**Lea Alcantara:** That's right. So I posted a little call to action to my fellow designers last week on Bright Umbrella's blog. It's really kind of a statement piece so to speak. Essentially, I'm saying, "[Designers! You should have a signature style.](#)"

**Emily Lewis:** Well then, let's talk about that first. What is a signature style? What is a signature design style?

**Lea Alcantara:** So first of all, design is such an all-encompassing term, so let's establish first that we're going to focus mostly on the visual aspects of design in this particular show, so that's what I mean when I say "style."

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But in the simplest terms, signature design style is about how you reflect your unique personality through design and how you translate these client problems into some sort of design solution. Often the simplest way to recognize it is when people start to recognize your work before they even definitely know it's you.

**Emily Lewis:** So in terms of a signature design style, that sounds, I mean, what you just described, if someone sees your work and before they even know it's your work, they know it's your work. That sounds like a huge benefit. Is that why someone should have a signature design style?

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely. I definitely think that's the main benefit. It allows you to be identifiable. Let's be frank here, this is a competitive industry.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And we do a lot of our networking online, and many of us work from home.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So having something that's distinctive, that people understand is you, is very important, especially if you're trying to sell yourself remotely. I do want to be clear that having an identifiable style is only part of an overall designer's branding and reputation.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But it's often the first thing people recognize, right?

**Emily Lewis:** Right, like how they apply their aesthetic to the visual results.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right, exactly. Usually, if they don't know very much you or whatever, the first impression of you is them clicking on a link to your site, whether it's a blog post or your portfolio or whatever, and the first thing they see before they even parse the content is the stylistic choices.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So it's basically the first impression people have of you online, and then it's also what people on a repeated basis if they decide to continue reading your site's article to subscribe to your site or if they're there to review your portfolio.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So it's definitely something that's important and a pro to have so that people are reminded about who you are, especially if they're reviewing various portfolios, right?



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** If all the portfolios start looking the same, how is that hiring manager or your client able to parse who is who?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Having a signature design style like puts you above that list of prospects then.

**Emily Lewis:** Then what's the flipside? Is there a flipside?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, the flipside, in my opinion, is when an individual designer forces their signature design style in the wrong context.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So I don't think personally that a signature design style in and of itself is negative. It's more about how that person applies it throughout their work. The other perceived negative part of it is that clients might be put off by that signature design style.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** However, people forget that your brand isn't just about attracting the right people. It's also about rejecting the wrong type of people as well.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So to me, the "negative" of someone rejecting working with you simply because they don't like your signature design style, they wouldn't have worked with you anyway.



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**Emily Lewis:** So can you talk a little bit more about the – you said, “A con might be a designer taking their signature design style and forcing it into, let’s say, a client project in the wrong situation.” Can you explain that, like an example maybe?

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, for sure. So I feel like this is what many designers have a problem with when there’s a debate regarding having a signature design style is that you get stuck in a box and then you’re trying to apply that box to every sort of solutions.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So let’s say you have a preference for Helvetica. That feels like the designer stereotype there, like everyone loves Helvetica. Well, Helvetica isn’t correct in all contexts.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So if someone who is applying a signature design style incorrectly would be insisting on using Helvetica for no real apparent reason, whether that’s not applicable to that particular app or website or brand or audience.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, okay.

**Lea Alcantara:** It’s just, “I like Helvetica, ergo, I always use Helvetica, ergo, all my projects lead with Helvetica.”

**Emily Lewis:** Right, and I mean, could it even be on like a less narrow, but more broad, where someone has a very minimalistic perspective in terms of their personal design style, but their client – I don’t know – maybe works with kids and there needs to be some other. It’s not just a typeface, but just...



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**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, oh, absolutely, absolutely. It's basically trying to find a design solution before you're actually considering the problem, right?

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, okay.

**Lea Alcantara:** Like you're not considering the audience or the problem at all, and you're just considering like how do this fit? How can I make this fit in my narrow box? And in some ways, this is almost like CMS development too. It's kind of like a bad designer who forces their signature design style is like a bad developer who forces a client to the wrong CMS simply because they know that CMS, right?

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** They know the code.

**Emily Lewis:** Good analogy. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, so it's literally the same thing like, "Oh, I know ExpressionEngine, therefore, all sites need to be on ExpressionEngine."

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, that's not necessarily true. I mean, you like Helvetica, that doesn't mean every site needs Helvetica.

**Emily Lewis:** Right. So let's get a little personal here, what is your signature design style?

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs] I feel like I used the word "sassy" a lot in my marketing.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]



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**Lea Alcantara:** But I honestly think it's true, but if you break it down, I very clearly have a preference and knack for the use of color.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And that means bright colors, strong colors, et cetera. I don't think anyone would say I'm a minimalist. I like playing with layers and textures, but not in a chaotic way, and I think my magic power as a designer is making what seems too much to balance out in the end.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** I'm definitely not afraid of backgrounds that aren't white.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And I also tend to favor certain typographic patterns too.

**Emily Lewis:** And so I think this is an interesting question, so you have your own signature style.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** But you work for Bright Umbrella.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** And we're selling your services as our designer to our clients, so I feel like in a way our website, while I truly do feel it reflects our brand in both of us, I think it really strongly reflects your signature style.

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**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.



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**Emily Lewis:** And I feel like that was an intentional choice on your part, and you mentioned earlier like clients being put off by things.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** Can you talk about that a little bit in particular in relation to Bright Umbrella's website, because I think it's a perfect example of your bold use of colors, some of your typographic patterns, just things like that.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely. So definitely, I was thinking about how do we marry audience goals with my own aesthetic, and how do we state our personality to our particular client. But I also understand that our bold uses of particular colors can put people off, but in some ways as a professional, you just have to make these concessions, whether or not this is the type of direction you want to take.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because the worst thing, I read this book, I forgot the title, but it basically said, "The worst type of success is success in something you don't want to succeed in."

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because then you get trapped in this kind of circle. So as a trained designer, I could have applied a heavily minimalistic style to our aesthetic and that could have been a more generic look and it could have appealed to more types of clients, but that's not what we want as a business.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** We don't want to appeal to all types of clients.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And that's kind of a scary thing to kind of contemplate.

**Emily Lewis:** Right, you're capping yourself in a way.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, yeah, exactly, but the thing is, we want to be successful with the type of clients that do appreciate this type of thinking process, and who is a little bit more open minded and bold.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because if you are inauthentic with how you represent yourself, then you're just going to have many conflicts during the design and discovery process in the first place.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

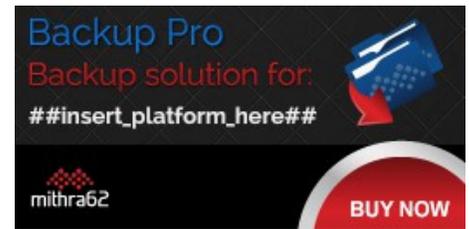
**Lea Alcantara:** So in many ways, having these kinds of bold colors out there, these bold patterns, it already shows to clients like, "Hey, are you cool with this? I'm not necessarily going to put bright colors on your site, but are you cool with this type of thinking?"

**Emily Lewis:** Right. It's like if your dating, it's like the first meeting, you get some coffee. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Right, right, absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I think that's a good point to make because I really do think there is a lot of value in taking this concept of a signature design style, and while it's true that it applies to, let's say, designers' portfolios, but it can also apply to clients like us.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.



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**Emily Lewis:** Like Bright Umbrella was your client for the design of our website and why we are putting that sort of signature style out there.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** And so I feel like that answers the question of why you felt our site needed a signature design style, but why do you think you individually, like even before you and I joined forces and when you were just you yourself and I, why was the signature design style important?

**Lea Alcantara:** So let me ask this question, why should someone hire me when I'm in Edmonton and they're in New York? If they haven't met me, haven't had a conversation with me, what do they have to review, right? So it's my site. So when I was solo, I had to figure out like, "How was I going to stand out? Why would my peers or clients care?" So that was my thought process when deciding to be very specific about my stylistic choices, and so figuring out how that could be applied and how bold I could be was essentially my statement piece to just get the conversation started.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So again, if they're looking at a variety of websites, whether or not they like mine, they know mine is different.

**Emily Lewis:** And so I feel like a lot of what you're talking about, and even when we were talking about it in context of Bright Umbrella, but it seems to be tied a lot to branding.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** And you've been talking about it. I mean, that was the first presentation I ever saw you give, it was on self-branding. So I mean, they just go hand in hand.



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**Lea Alcantara:** Pretty much. Essentially, a signature design style is part of how you express your personal brand. It's not all of it, but it's the visible, most obvious part of it.

**Emily Lewis:** And here's the question especially considering a personal brand, do all designers need a signature style?

**Lea Alcantara:** I definitely think so. I feel like there are situations, like I said earlier in the show, that they shouldn't apply their specific signature style.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** So let's give another example. Let's say, you lean towards gothic aesthetics, but you have a client site and you're designing a site for a baby food company, and it doesn't really make sense to have black letter on that site.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But that doesn't mean you shouldn't use these ideas on your own site or your own work, and that also doesn't mean you can't use that alternative way of thinking to a client that doesn't, again, on the surface share the same aesthetic sensibilities.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And also in the meantime, we're kind of making a ton of assumptions about this particular industry as a whole, so I've been just using this as an example. What if this baby food is marketed for an upper class European high-end audience? Suddenly, that bubbly round font, that elementary school aesthetic for babies no longer applies. Suddenly, your gothic aesthetic towards



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old-fashioned typefaces that might have been too gothic for a different niche for that client suddenly makes sense now because if it's like a high-end, upper-class European, you'd be designing crests.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** You're going to be looking up Old World items and you'll be integrating old-fashioned typefaces.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So again, like you can't make assumptions over what type of clients you're going to get and who their audiences are, and sometimes an opportunity will come to you where you can literally put the exact same stuff or you just use the same way of thinking.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like because you have a different perspective that you won't immediately go towards a bubbly round font, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because that's overdone. Everybody knows baby equals bubbly round font, but maybe this particular client is like, "Okay, what's next? I don't want black letter per se, but you're somebody who thinks differently enough that I think you're not going to do Arial Rounded on this project.

**Emily Lewis:** Right. So I think this is interesting point that you bring up is that we've been talking about how this style may be expressed visually like on a website, but you're also talking about how someone thinks.



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**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** So can you talk about that a little bit more. I mean, I think it's worth reminding our listeners. I always try and remind myself, design is really about solving problems, and so the thinking is a huge part of it.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely. The main thing is as designers, we all have our own unique experiences that lead us to where we're at, and so expressing that through a signature design style is a way to state that journey in a way to explain that there is a thought process to this.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then at the same time for clients and for yourself, it's showing that you're willing to put yourself through the wringer that you would put your client through. So it's essentially that kind of thought process, that kind of un-generic way of applying things. The signature design style is one way to express that. Again, this is a show on signature design style. I'm not saying it's the only way, but it's definitely a prominent, very obvious way to do so.

**Emily Lewis:** And can you share some examples of signature style that you've seen on the web, particularly designers who really embraced it and use it successfully?

**Lea Alcantara:** I can think of two really good people that I feel like have distinct styles, Katie Kovalcin has a really and clear signature style.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** I feel like she's really confident in her use of grids, geometric shapes and type. I've seen her talk, and even her slides match that particular aesthetic.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** I also think she uses color cues very well, and on her site she's got even a slow animation so even the geometry is a little bit more interestingly applied. But I'd like to point out is that when you look at her portfolio, it doesn't necessarily mean she is applying all these particular aesthetics to them, however, you do still notice that every piece in her portfolio has a strong use of grid, geometry and type.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** It's not necessarily the same grid or the same geometry and same type, but there are cues like a poster with a very, very strong shape or a website where the color choices are super clear for wayfinding purposes. It's clearer that those are her aesthetic sensibilities applied in different context. The other designer that I think has a very, very distinct signature style is Khoi Vinh. He literally wrote the book on grids with web design. He's always worked with a minimal black and white pallet, and surprise, one of his past jobs was design director of the New York Times. That is not a coincidence.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** He's parlayed his signature style to future positions and this particular aesthetic isn't just "clean design," though it is clean. It's specific to how Khoi applies typography and grids, and it hasn't held him back as far as I can tell based on the work he still currently does and the articles he's written. So for example, while everyone knows and understands "grids are good and type is good" in a general sense, Khoi still experiments with applying these concepts through his site.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** And sometimes he breaks the rules in terms of what you might not do in a client site, but again, this is for his personal site, like if you look at his site's archive, the articles aren't in a regular bullet list. He also very clearly shies away from the current trend of ultra large typefaces. He uses smaller typefaces than what a lot of user testing and user experience people will probably say, "No, this is unreadable, blah, blah, blah." But this is his website, this is his personal playground.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** This is the time for you to make some sort of statement and some sort of creative use of your design thinking just to show that you're not just any other person who applies type and grids.

**Emily Lewis:** Now, you said you think every designer should have a signature design style. Is there a situation when a designer should withhold? I don't know, I'm thinking like you're trying to get a particular job and you're concerned your site won't connect with the client and so – I don't know – you make an adjustment or I don't know. Could there something like that?

**Lea Alcantara:** Sure, and I mean, that's actually a great question. I'm going to be of the opinion that anything less is inauthentic. It's one of those things though it's a balance where you can still have a signature design style, but then how you apply that is up to you, and if you are looking for a particular job or position and they have a certain particular set of values, design-wise, that you want align yourself with, first of all, ask yourself if your design style is so incongruent to that, why are you even applying for this job?

And then next, if there are a lot of similarities or like it's just a good fit, but there might be some stylistic weirdness or whatever like that's different, then it's up to you to display more prominently



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what is the same and downplay perhaps what isn't the same. I just feel like the mistake a lot of designers think is it's an either/or position. You have to go all in with this particular client and aesthetic and like suppress yourself or all in with yourself and then forget what the client's perspective is. There is a middle ground there.

**Emily Lewis:** Let's talk about that middle ground. In context of you, how do you find that middle ground? How are you applying your signature style to the web and app design that you do for our clients?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, first and foremost, I think about like my own aesthetic sensibilities, like I mentioned earlier, that I love playing with color. I love pushing and seeing what kind of combinations can work, and sometimes it doesn't work and I push myself a little too far, but the main thing is, I try to see what the client has that appeals to me almost immediately.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So the first thing isn't trying to figure out what the differences are and trying to shoehorn in like suppress myself or whatever, it's just they are your client for a reason. They've already approached you for a reason. They've already hired you for a reason.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So there's already some sort of commonality there, and the first thing I would have all designers do is figure out what that commonality is and start from there.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then when you start from that type of commonality, then push yourself.



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**Emily Lewis:** Well, let's take it a little further. You said one of the things you do is try and find something that appeals to you about, let's say, like their brand assets.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And then let's say we go through a detailed discovery.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** We gather those brand assets, but we're also looking at goals and audience behavior and all of those different things. So when you go into, let's say, the first like real true visual design deliverable, which is our Element collages.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** When you go to that stage, what is your process? Like you mentioned, you look for some colors that you might be able to push the boundaries of, but you're also dealing with type and you're dealing with the known goals and the known audience behaviors.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** What is that process like?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, first and foremost, there is never a static like Step A, Step B, Step C.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Overall though, for me, because this is the way my brain thinks, I do tend to start with color combinations, first and foremost, and then typography.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** And from there, I see how those color combinations work in terms of what should be the primary color, because I feel like that is one of the biggest decisions that you make in a particular site, you know?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** For example, I'm just thinking of one of our client sites that we redesigned and they have a blue, orange and green color, and those are all very, very strong colors.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So in order to balance it all out, I had to choose one that needs to be the main statement color and one which is the accent color, and then in regards to that, that everything else in general falls to place. Because once you choose the main color, depending on whether it is a subdued color or a strong color, will fall all the rest of the decision making. So for example, if the main color that you've decided based on their brand, based on what that color reflects, let's say, it's an orange, which is super, super strong, then as a designer, I understand that I can't do a full orange page background.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because that's just going to be too crazy and too bold perhaps for that particular client and project. So once I figured out whether this is a bold color and this is going to be the primary color, then I try to figure out how do I still make this prominent, but not so prominent that it takes away from the content.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** And then everything else sort of falls into place after that first lead from there.

**Emily Lewis:** And I feel like because I know the project you're talking about. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** This isn't like a true like interview, like I know the answer to this question. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** But I think it's worth mentioning. It's like that project, which had the three bold, like essentially primary colors, orange, blue, green.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** I think part of your process, because I was privy to watching it, was, like you said, picking that primary. Part of picking that primary is not only you favor bold colors yourself.

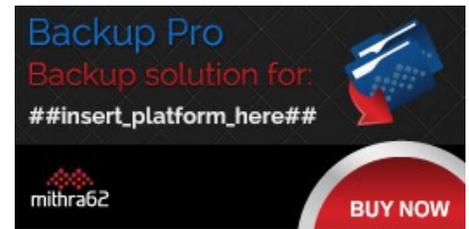
**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** It's that that option of the three was the one that most supported the goals of the site, which is energy and inspiration.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** And I feel like that's another huge part, like you're talking about your color process and choices, but you also think a whole lot about which of those colors is going to have that visceral connection for someone to achieve a certain goal.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.



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**Emily Lewis:** Because you took that same approach with a totally different type of client, a law firm, and still used very bold color choices, but they were very subdued and serious.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yes, right.

**Emily Lewis:** And that's because that is what connected with that audience.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. So that's actually an excellent way to show that despite the fact that I clearly have a design style preference, that this type of design style can be applied in different manners like a law firm that needs to be more subdued, but this particular law firm doesn't have a plain white background.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Which some people might say like, "Oh, it's got to be the most stark or whatever."

**Emily Lewis:** Stark.

**Lea Alcantara:** There are several levels and layers of subtlety we can deal with, like there are so many shades of gray and there are so many shades of white [laughs] that we can work with that we don't have to always default to #fff for a particular background.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Especially when if you are thinking about seriousness, something stark white actually might not work. Like you need to have something that reflects something that's a little bit more old, a little bit more solid.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And that needs a patina of age.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And bright white doesn't give you a patina of age, that gives you menu and clean, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And so there are a lot of things that aren't just like immediately obvious in terms of how you apply these particular pieces of color. But all of these, even though I started off in a place where I want to be bold and these clients understand that that's where I started off with, the application of them is always in line with their brand, with their particular goals.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, and I think that that's a huge point to underline, to underscore, because there are always going to be people who react to the concept of a signature design style and see it incongruous with working with a client's own brand and style, and I just don't think it's true.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, I mean, a lot of it is just about application, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like with that redesign of the client with the green, orange and blue, their previous designer applied all of that in totally different ways, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And not necessarily in my opinion obviously, we redesigned it in line with their particular goals. It was just like, "Okay, let's put green here because she likes green, or let's put orange here because it's orange."

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** So there are so many different ways you can look at things. It is just about, again, understanding what are the goals, and it's not black and white.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Having an opinion doesn't mean you're inflexible.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** It just means you have an opinion. It means you have a starting point.

**Emily Lewis:** Let's talk about, and maybe this isn't just new designers, but maybe designers who haven't really thought about their own personal brand, but they want to, and so how do they start developing a signature design style?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, definitely, developing a signature design style does start with identifying your personal brand, because if you don't know who you are and what you stand for and have no opinion, then you're starting off on the wrong foot. That means you're just making design for design's sake, which is the opposite of what design is for, which is context.

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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So a lot of the exercises to developing a signature style is directly tied to exercises regarding personal brand, and one of the most important ones is realizing you probably already amassed an entire library of references already.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** For example, your home, do you tend to have a specific style of furniture you like, the linens that you've bought, the type of silverware and all those kinds of things? For example, if you have all bamboo furniture, or are you the type of person who has a ton of glass and steel?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** That's a definite strong choice in terms of aesthetics, and of course, there are your clothes. Is there a color palette that you're drawn to, and how about the patterns that you tend to wear? And of course, there are obviously the design projects you've already done. There's probably a pattern of decisions you've made and there's a pattern in terms of the process with all these designs. Do you tend to start with type, and if you do, do you tend to automatically go to a sans-serif without thinking or a serif?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Those types of things. So when you're developing a signature style, the first thing is do your research...

**Emily Lewis:** On you. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** On yourself.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Amass that kind of library and then look at the patterns, because there will be a pattern.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** It's not like someone who is into say like glass and steel, suddenly will be like, "I like everything grunge."

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, right.

**Lea Alcantara:** But I'm not saying that you can't have both. People are complicated and I also like those types of things, but overtime, you probably had a pattern of what your final decision was going to be.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** You've finally decided that I just want bamboo furniture.

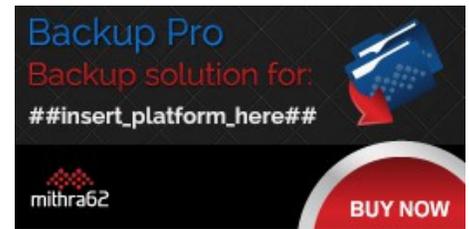
**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Or I want to have a steel and glass kind of aesthetic for their house, and the same is true for websites and design. It changes over time because aesthetics then trends over time and you yourself change, but sometimes there are certain patterns that remain the same. Like, for example, with me, I'm still pretty strong with color, even though the way I apply color has definitely changed, especially with me caring about accessibility more than I did ten years ago.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So that's definitely in line with shifting how I applied color, but the main thing still stays the same, like this is something that appeals to me without even thinking about it.

**Emily Lewis:** So once someone sort of done an inventory and looked for the patterns in their home and their clothes and stuff, what would you say they would do then in terms of finding a way to take those patterns and ...



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**Lea Alcantara:** Applying them and figuring out what does this all mean?

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, one thing I like to point people to is that there is art history and there's design history, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like what do these particular style choices that you have made around yourself, like your clothes and your linens, there's probably already a statement or a term that's associated to that, like is this post-industrial?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Is this minimalist? Is this international? Is this this, that or the other? So look up some design history and just look up those particular terms.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Once you have that term, you can go into a rabbit hole of similar things.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like even just googling "post-modern" will show up paintings to buildings, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then that will open up a whole world of inspiration for you to start working off of, and in terms of bringing that down to, say, graphic design and web design, let's say that your aesthetic has some historical significance, there are a lot of typefaces that were literally created in



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that era or for that particular significance, like Art Nouveau, for example, is a very distinct style or Bauhaus, that's a very distinct style.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And once you figure out what that distinct style is, because there are terms ready, there are patterns, you just need to figure out what that vocabulary is, and once you've made that translation, then you open up a whole slew of other inspiration that will lead you to that rabbit hole of, "Oh, so there are typefaces that are associated with this, or there was a color aesthetic combination that seems to match all of this as well."

**Emily Lewis:** Right. So you're finding things that reflect what you've identified as your style and that you can start experimenting with in your own, let's say, portfolio or something.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely, absolutely, because, let's say you are that bamboo style person and then you noticed that you love plants and then that leads you to Art Nouveau, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then all you do is go into the rabbit hole of Art Nouveau and see what typefaces pop up and you see what kind of aesthetic shows up and then that doesn't necessarily mean you're going to do a one-to-one Art Nouveau website. It just means that there's a starting point for inspiration that you can start applying things to.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** Again, I feel like sometimes when I talk to other designers, they're always thinking in extremes like, "Oh, you said Art Nouveau, and then you're going to make an Art Nouveau poster for your website?" That's not what I mean.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** It means maybe you're going to use, say, a border element that is a wink to that, you know?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Or maybe it means that you're going to use a particular typeface that is a serif that isn't a 100% Art Nouveau, but it's got a little bit more of a twist that makes it more modern, but it gives the wink to that particular aesthetic.

**Emily Lewis:** Is that something that is a mistake you see designers making when they sort of like go all in, like there's blatant everything is one style?

**Lea Alcantara:** It's only a mistake if that was not their intention.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** I mean, if they go all in one style, that could be a purposeful choice. For example, I think of other personalities in other places and in other industries like, say, Gwen Stefani.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** When I said her name, you probably already had a bunch of visual cues that popped in your mind.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** Because she has a very, very strong personal aesthetic in terms of fashion, in terms of her makeup, in terms of her music video, and then when you visit her website, her website looks like Gwen Stefani.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And it's not necessarily because I've broken down and looked at the font and I'm like, "Yes, this is the Gwen Stefani font and it has this background or whatever." It's because the designer who designed her site has considered all of Gwen Stefani's personalities and made a combination that reflects who she is, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And I'm just saying that designers do that for yourself.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Do that for yourself.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I was actually just looking at Gwen Stefani's site and it's a really interesting take on it, but it's totally in line with her current tour and her current image that she's putting out there, whereas if you go back to the 90's, it would be totally different, but it still got that underlying vibe that she's always had.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right. Right, yeah. It's always like interesting to me whenever I look at musicians because they do believe that part of their marketability is their brand. It's kind of their thing.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** Like when I say Nicki Minaj, you have an aesthetic in mind, and then when I say Beyonce, you have an aesthetic in mind, and that can also be applied in particular design principles, and again, maybe when I say those particular celebrities' names, the first thing you think of is like maybe how they look in fashion because that's clearly what you see first, but then when you visit their websites, their designers also very clearly understand what people are looking for and how they want to be reflected.

**Emily Lewis:** And being able to still reach an audience too.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right, right. Because brand is every touch point, right?

**Emily Lewis:** So I want to talk a little bit about if a designer is developing their signature design style and they want to apply it to their portfolio, how do you balance applying that to your portfolio, but still effectively showcasing the work in your portfolio, and this is making the assumption that the work in your portfolio reflects the needs of your clients, that it's not all one to one, like we've got some sites in our own portfolio that don't visually, at least, align with our own site itself.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** So like how do you showcase the work, but still showcase your signature style?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, it's up to you to figure out how to showcase all of that. Really, at the end of the day, it's your site, and so the entire site in and of itself is already a statement.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** So that's there. The other way is again figuring out like, "Well, how do I showcase the stylistic reasoning through solving the necessary goals of the client, and that could be helped through the copy more than necessarily the design.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And part of it too is just, again, like balancing what is part of your aesthetic sensibility that needs to be pulled back or added to that enhances your client's particular site. So like in terms of our case studies, we decided to go with something more minimal so that the screenshots, for example, are cleanly highlighted.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And yet all the headlines and stuff around it still has our burst of color, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So that it's not taking away necessarily from the work itself, but we've inserted, "Hey, it's still us here." You know?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So like if you're scrolling through some of these things, you still see the pop of green. The other way is taking not necessarily their work, but maybe the outcomes of the project or the testimonials and quotes your clients give you and then that's a way you can express your personal style for your client.

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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

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**Lea Alcantara:** So for example, our quotes on our site are encased in our particular design pattern.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And so in many ways it really is that balance. You're just basically balancing the reasoning with your own particular design style and then also like, again, if the point is, again, everything is about context, so if the point is, "Okay, this page's point is the case study, so it's to highlight the client. Okay, I'm not going to put the patterns all behind the client screenshot because it's going to take away from the screenshot. However, maybe I can put pattern behind testimonial quote," those kinds of things.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** So it's know again like...

**Emily Lewis:** One right way.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** One right way. It's just basically again, what is the context of this page? What is the point of this page? How does this fit our particular aesthetic so that it doesn't clash because, for example, our particular colors might not necessarily work with the layout and colors we did for a client, so yeah, maybe we should figure out a design where a plainer white background would be the particular aesthetic so that the client work stands out, but then we incorporate other elements like, for example, in our case, we had transparent umbrellas. They're bright umbrellas, but we've made them faded more into the background so that they don't take up so much visual inventory on the page itself.



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**Emily Lewis:** So taking it even a step further, let's say, a designer has really developed their signature style, they found that right balance on their portfolio, and they're in the sales process. I mean, we recently had conversations with prospects about style and where that fits in. So how do you sell the benefits of a signature style? I think it's easy to say, "Well, I'm not just any designer."

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** But I think making it more specific to why a prospect is coming to you in the first place and reemphasizing the value.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And especially if they ask, they say something like with the law firm, and they're like, "Well, one of our partners noticed your site had a lot of bright colors and is a little concerned that you may not understand the seriousness of what we do."

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, the main thing at that point is figuring out how do you articulate that in person, through email or in discussions.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because at some point, if they are just – again, this is signature design style, they're looking at the design, they're just making an assumption based on how all of that looks, but if you've gone through the sales process leading towards the results you've given to others. That's one of the main things that you have to deal with, and the first thing I want to also mention is that I've never, neither of us have ever had a client go up to us and say, "You know, I want a homogenous design. I want my site to look like everyone else."



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then so if they come to you saying, “I’m concerned about this that or the other,” in terms of like, “Oh, you’re really using bright colors,” then you just need to articulate that, “First of all, these bright colors brought you to us in the first place. That’s why we’re even having this kind of conversation.”

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And next you explain that your thought process is meant to make sure that they have a unique statement online.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So you just kind of take the conversation and you flip it on its head. So it’s basically explaining that our site is a certain way because that’s reflecting our particular values, and then we are able to apply that same thought process and thinking to your particular site, and we might not use bright colors, if that’s not in line with your brand, but we will definitely use the mode of thinking that makes you distinct.

**Emily Lewis:** That makes your site stand out.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, exactly, and that makes your business stand out.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** For example, I was just thinking about the chat app Slack, because I always have that on once in a while.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** And then part of its success, and everyone has written all about its success story and all that stuff, and it's due to the user experience, and part of that is the stylistic choices their team has made. It's not "a very serious looking" app, let's say. It doesn't look like a Microsoft product, for example. It has clear like emojis and a ton of color, but it's clear that they made a stand on how they present themselves, and yet very serious businesses use this product, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So it's trying to state too that just because you've made a design statement or stylistic statement doesn't mean that people won't use your products.

**Emily Lewis:** Right. It doesn't mean it's in conflict with what...

**Lea Alcantara:** Exactly, exactly.

**Emily Lewis:** So in terms of you being a designer with a signature design style throughout your career, have you noticed whether it introduces something new or challenges to the different phases of a project, like does having design style mean you have to work with a certain type of front-end developer who gets you or something like that?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, I don't necessarily think it's about the front-end developer as opposed to everything that happens at the beginning with the client in the discovery process. It's really figuring out what is the point of this project, and does that style that they want to express in your own style, is there a way of compromise in the way to create solutions through that compromise as well?

So I feel like if there's anything that's really relevant in terms of like the entire design process, it's definitely discovery and information architecture since design affects every part of the process and the visual aspect, the style aspect is just a small part of the design process, but it's through that



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discovery and IA is when you start to see where your own aesthetic preferences and your client's converge or can diverge like really, really early in the process. I would say working with a client who's open minded and working with a team that's open minded, that allows you to have the leeway to experiment is important.

I think part of the issue with some designers is that they feel constrained in their own particular teams so they default to really simple standards or a typical solution because everyone else is thinking in a "typical" way, but you don't get innovation in this industry, you don't get innovation for your clients if all that you do is what everyone else is doing.

**Emily Lewis:** I mean, that kind of reminds me of our process back and forth, I mean, because we do everything, all the phases in a project. So when you're doing design, for example, and you and I are going back and forth on concepts, I think there's a point at which I'm throwing you a lot of feedback and you pretty much absorb, let's say, 95% of it, and then 5% you're pushing back but with reasons. You're like, "This is why I think this is right." It reminds me, what was the blog post you wrote, I forget, but it's something about communicating your design process to a client?

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, right, Justify Your Design.

**Emily Lewis:** [Justify Your Design](#), and that's been really effective for me because I'm a front-end developer, and I think this is tied to that, I tend to lean towards established patterns because I just envision the markup and once I see something different, I'm like, "Oh, I'm going to have to come up two markups for that." And so I tend to push back and so when you push back on me pushing back, it's always with thoughtful reasoning that's like, "But I do think it's going to achieve this goal," and that gets me realizing that, "Oh, that's why you have a designer. It's not just to make something that looks like everything else and makes my front end easy, it's to have a genuine solution that's trying to solve



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a very specific problem in maybe not hugely divergent way, but just slightly different than you're used to seeing."

**Lea Alcantara:** Right. And the thing is what I think you're really pointing out here is that you and I have conversations, and respectful conversations.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And as a designer too, I think one of the things, and I know sometimes we struggle with this too, is having to explain ourselves...

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Sometimes designers are terrified of doing that or even resentful for doing that, and I take the perspective that, how the hell would you know because I'm the one that had training?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So for me to expect you to understand why things are the way they are almost immediately is kind of unfair to you.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And so a lot more designers, they feel like they should speak up if they think that the solution is incorrect.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And if they do think it's incorrect beyond "I just don't like how it looks," then they need to articulate that, and I think if you've got a respectful team, then they should be able to hear you out.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But if you aren't able to explain your reasoning in regards to how it fulfills brand goals or business goals or even development goals, then maybe your solution isn't correct.

**Emily Lewis:** You know I haven't worked with a ton of designers, but I do find it refreshing the lack of ego you bring to the process.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** And you know I mean that in the best way. You still bring your eye and your approach and your style, but there isn't a lot of ego, and anytime a client gives you feedback, you respond to it from a point of curiosity, "Well, what were you thinking?" You know?

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**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** It's not to defend yourself.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** It's not to automatically be like, "Oh, I must defend myself." It's like you want to find out, "Why are they pushing back? What is their concern?"

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, and I think you just get a lot more done with that kind of attitude.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, and I feel like that's again where people have conflict with even the idea of a signature design style, because there are a lot of designers out there who conflate having a signature



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design style as being inflexible, as not hearing anybody else out or, worse, that there are designers who just cares about looks and not about function, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And again, the answer is always in the middle. Having again a signature design style or an opinion doesn't negate being flexible.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** It doesn't negate having any sort of original thought process or thinking. It just means you have an opinion, right?

**Emily Lewis:** All right, so before we wrap up, do you have any tools or resources that you could share for listeners who want to really develop or maybe fine tune signature design style?

**Lea Alcantara:** Sure. So actually, I did a little bit of research before this call just to see if there's any recent article, and I was actually kind of depressed to find very little, and the one article that I still think stands out was written in 2008.

**Emily Lewis:** Wow!

**Lea Alcantara:** It's just kind of depressing. But I read through it and I thought it was really great. It's called *7 Steps to Developing Originality in Your Design and Illustration Work*, and it's by Sean Hodge, and he goes through like seven simple steps to consider how to push yourself further in terms of originality so that's something that I think is interesting.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** So that one is I think directly relevant to his design and development. The other thing that I want people to take a look at is design industries outside of the web.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because here's the other thing that frustrates me a little bit is that I've been reading all those articles about how homogenous design is great or this is just all about web standards, but it's where I feel like we're actually having two different conversations. No one is saying standards are bad.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like that's ridiculous. What they're saying is have an opinion. Have some different way to apply those particular standards, and I feel like other industries have gotten the memo including interior design, for example.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So I have this article that I'm going to link in the show notes that's called *10 Tips on Developing Your Own Style* from Apartment Therapy.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh.

**Lea Alcantara:** And obviously, it's directed towards selling your own home, but I feel like a lot of things can be applied online, like surround yourself with inspiration, think about this process as developing your sale as a long-term process, get personal, mix and match.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** I also like the “if at a loss, start with neutrals,” and I feel like that’s the same thing with web design. If you are at a loss, start with minimalism, start with typography, and don’t go crazy. So even though that’s about interior design, I feel like the actual tips on just making yourself think interestingly or originally is pretty good.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh yeah, I feel like these ten tips from the Apartment Therapy, I’m sure our assistant Erin is listening.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, it’s relevant.

**Emily Lewis:** It’s like reminders for her because she’s learning to design. She’s learning to develop her style.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** And I think the point about this is a long-term process.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yes.

**Emily Lewis:** It’s something that I think is really important for someone who’s just starting to develop their sense of style and apply it in web design, because it looks so easy.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And there’s so much frustration in this, and so if you really just embrace like this is a process, it might take a while.

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, totally, and there’s one particular sentence that resonates with me in that Apartment Therapy article, which is, “This process will help you trust the opinions that you do have and give you confidence in your style choices.”



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Another maybe obvious one I have a link too, WhoWhatWear, which is a style blog, and they are just like little quotes from famous fashion designers about how to develop your own style, and so it's just a little bit of like more inspirational than practical, like the Apartment Therapy one, but I still feel it's a good way to just get yourself on in the correct mindset.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And the other resource is that, in general, you should take a look at corporate brand guidelines that are open out there, because I know that there are brand guidelines for Salesforce, it's the obvious one.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** There's a style guide in everything like that, and I'm sure there's also a brand guideline, but when I was searching for an example, the one that I'm going to link to in the show notes, hilariously enough, is for the National Health Services in Britain.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh.

**Lea Alcantara:** So they have this NHS identity website and brand guidelines and they have this one particular page called Developing a Design Style, and in particular, the point of that page is for local initiatives of the National Health Services.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And the one paragraph that resonated with me is the very end. They wrote, "Remember, a design style is not about creating a new brand or designing a new logo," because of



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course that's established with the NHS, "but it is a way to create a distinctive look and feel relevant to local needs."

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So when you take that and extrapolate it to your own signature design style, especially when you're working with a client, you're not going to be forcing your brand on their brand.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** You're not designing something brand new unless that is what they hired you to do, but still your signature design style, your signature design opinion and perspective is about creating a distinctive look and feel that's relevant to that particular need.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So I feel like a lot of other design industries have already gotten this type of perspective, because the thing that frustrates me the most is who wants to be the same. Otherwise, why are we hiring designers? Why aren't we just all moving everything to Squarespace, right?

**Emily Lewis:** That's a good question. Can you answer it, like why this is happening? Like you just mentioned, you did research.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And the best article you found on this idea of personal design style is from 2008.

**Lea Alcantara:** It's 2008, yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** We're seeing it all over the place. Your blog post highlighted it about all the bootstrappy sites and all the foundation...



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**Lea Alcantara:** Foundation sites.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, yeah and Squarespace.

**Lea Alcantara:** And Squarespace and stuff. Now, like first of all, I want to mention that there's a time and place for that, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like there is a market, there is a niche. There are reasons to legitimately have a kind of like starter website is what I'm going to call it in regards to that.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But at the same time, I think with the rise of these particular services and these frameworks and people being overwhelmed with technology, they have gotten complacent in regards to pushing themselves further from what they've been given.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And that started when like Bootstrap was kind of introduced and people were like, "Oh, finally, we can all have like a starting point so that our jobs can be easier." But then people started using Bootstrap as their endpoint as opposed to their starting point.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And part of the issue is, and I think part of the reason why we created our own framework and everything like that that was super un-styled is that it was too styled already that people thought that was done.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.



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**Lea Alcantara:** And then when you got particular clients and you've got deadlines, it might be just "good enough."

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** I know I can't blame them, because, I mean, we've gone to that point too in certain projects where we're like, "Sure, it's good enough. It's good enough."

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And there's always something that we can improve and sometimes as designers and developers, we're so passionate about our projects, we know exactly what to improve, but we don't have the bandwidth, and then so these frameworks or these services, etcetera and so forth, are good enough.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And I feel like we're at that point on the web where too many people are saying "good enough" as opposed to "what's next?"

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** So I can't blame them because it's kind of like commerce is pushing it and the web is maturing in that particular way, and I feel like studios are still trying to figure out how they can prove their worth when there is something like Squarespace, why would you want something a lot more custom, et cetera?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** And to me I feel like is if more designers embrace the signature design style, then more clients and businesses understand why they're hiring a unique designer instead.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I feel like there's just like always, and again, it's probably because of the young age of our industry.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** But we aren't doing a good enough job educating our clients about why they want a site that stands out.

**Lea Alcantara:** Absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** Like it's saying the words where you're like, "Why wouldn't they?" Well, we have to take the time to talk to them about that, you know?

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Emily Lewis:** Because they're having to fight against numbers of budgets that definitely support choices of templating and same old same old, just build it with Bootstrap and put some of your own colors and do it, but that's only part of the conversation, and so I feel like we're not having enough of those conversations with clients about that. Once again, to bring the analogy to CMSs back, "why WordPress isn't the right fit for your robust site that has all of these other requirements" kind of thing, is we have to take the time to educate them.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** But then also holding ourselves to a certain standard, that we have to value our own work in order for clients to value it.



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**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, it's definitely an interesting debate because like I even linked on my own article, there are some people who say that you shouldn't even have a portfolio site, like let's just completely invest in in-person networking or let's just completely do this other other thing, and those are legitimate, depending on your particular niche maybe.

**Emily Lewis:** Not even just niche, your station in life, who, does everyone can afford to do in-person networking? Like that's crazy.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah. That's exactly it, and does your city or market actually have the type of clients that you want to work with.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** And I say this is difficult because I lived in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and a lot of my clients were in part in the United States, and so it's just like, did my in-person networking affect that? Some of it did. Sure, absolutely, but at the same time, it's kind of like a lot of the online networking was a lot more lucrative. So it's a complicated situation.

I definitely think that the rapid changes in technology has affected client decision making in terms of hiring designers or going towards these particular services instead, and I mean, I don't blame them because I mean, there is that ease of use, but if we as designers can't convey our value or as we designers can't convey why they would ever need a unique design, then what's the point?

**Emily Lewis:** From your own personal experience, can you offer an anecdote or two of how embracing your own personal design style and maintaining that through the years has led to a certain success story? I mean, I'm thinking FamZoo.



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**Lea Alcantara:** Well, yeah, absolutely. FamZoo, that client has been with us for a long, long, long time, and their particular aesthetic is unique in their industry, and it's one of those things that I'm proud to say that even their users mentioned that they have fun using the system.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And part of it is because of how it looks.

**Emily Lewis:** It's a financial application, but for families and kids.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** So it takes something that you may think of like a banking app. Just think of your own banking app, think of that.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And that's not what you designed.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** And I mean, that's not what they wanted. That was definitely in alignment to that, and it's interesting that you mentioned that because over the years, they've been kind of trying to pull back because there is some sort of people are really into like that cleaner, more minimalist aesthetic.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** But that doesn't necessarily mean that we scrap everything that we have, like we still have a particular font that we're using that's different from everybody else, or there's a particular way



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we're applying color that is different, or we have a lot of cartoons on the site and we're pulling back on those, but that doesn't necessarily mean we're removing them.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** It's still one of those things where now we're just being a little bit more choosy as to where it goes.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So again, like brand and everything like that, it's a living being and you have to adjust sometimes and you can adjust your aesthetics and your thought process in regards to that simply because design as well as technology does show its own age as well.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** I mean, the other thing too is like, how did you and I meet? How did this all start? And I mean, it's kind of like the website started the reputation, that started the articles, and just, as you know, on and on and on and on, and it's just kind of like this cascading kind of thing.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I think it just underscores that a signature design style is something that can support a long career with long lasting client relationships.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, at the end of the day, it's only a part of your overall value that you bring.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]



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**Lea Alcantara:** The main thing is, are you able to solve business problems? Are you able to address audience needs? That's the number one. But to ignore visual style as a way to express or solve these problems, I think it's a little foolhardy.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And to also pretend that you personally can't have an opinion or a way to express that, then how are you different from Joe Schmoe.

**Emily Lewis:** All right, I think that's a good note to end on, but we still have our Rapid Fire Ten Questions.

**Lea Alcantara:** Whoohoo.

**Emily Lewis:** And this time, it's your turn, Lea.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** All right, are you ready?

**Lea Alcantara:** Okay, yes.

**Emily Lewis:** All right, morning person or night owl?

**Lea Alcantara:** I'm trying to be a morning person.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** But I'm kind of neither at this point. I need my sleep, but I don't like getting up early.

**Emily Lewis:** What's one of your guilty pleasures?

**Lea Alcantara:** Gossip blogs.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** I read gossip blogs and I probably know more about celebrities than I should.

**Emily Lewis:** I didn't know this about you. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** It's like your dirty secret.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** What software could you not live without?

**Lea Alcantara:** Chrome.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, okay.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** I thought for sure you would say Photoshop.

**Lea Alcantara:** I know I wanted to. I knew. That was the first thing I thought of, but I'm like, "No, it's Chrome because I use it..."

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] For everything.

**Lea Alcantara:** For everything, yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** All right, what profession other than your own would you like to try?

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, this is always so hard because I feel like I would have liked to try so many different things.



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**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And like what would be fun or what's realistic.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** Do you know what I mean? Because like I feel like the fun one would be trying for like an acting or singing kind of career, but that's completely unrealistic, but maybe more realistic is something like writing.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Some sort of writing profession.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh God, I would not want to be a writer.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs] But maybe like a novelist. Do you know what I'm saying?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Like kind of like *Harry Potter* and stuff like that.

**Emily Lewis:** What profession would you not like to try?

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, politics.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah. If you could take me to one restaurant in Seattle, where would we go?

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, this is so hard.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]



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**Lea Alcantara:** Because I'm a foodie and I go and have so many things to think of, but probably the one place that I'd like to recommend to people is called Cajun Crawfish. It is not really Cajun and it's run by Vietnamese people and it's in the south side of Seattle. But everybody is always thinking about the Crab Pot or something like that.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** They have seafood in Seattle, but the place to go is Cajun Crawfish because it's messy and delicious and then you eat with the bib.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** And I think it's reasonably priced too and you get really huge shrimp. With Crab Pot, they don't give you anything. It's like piddly and expensive.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] All right. If you could meet someone famous, living or dead, who would it be?

**Lea Alcantara:** Geez, this is hard. I guess the first person who came to mind is Beyonce. Oh God.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** I feel like that's so obvious, but like that literally is the first person that came to my mind and I'm just like, "Oh, I'm lame. It's so obvious."

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] All right, if you could have a super power, what would it be?

**Lea Alcantara:** Reading minds.

**Emily Lewis:** What is your favorite band or musician?



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**Lea Alcantara:** I don't really have a favorite band or musician. It's just more like I like hip hop and pop overall and whatever makes me want to dance.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] All right, last question, pancakes or waffles?

**Lea Alcantara:** I like French toast. I am actually one of those French toast people. There is a diner here in my neighborhood called Geraldine's that has this crispy French toast.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** Because I don't like the soggy French toast.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** I like the ones where it's like slightly crispy.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** And they keep changing the type of butter that goes with it, so sometimes it's like peach butter or sometimes it's strawberry, like they keep changing the compound butter.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** So there are a lot of incentives to keep having it. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] I actually saw one of those food shows, and they were making French toast, but then they cooked it in a waffle iron.

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh.

**Emily Lewis:** So it was like the bread dipped in egg custard and then put in a waffle iron so it was French toast, but with like waffle marks.



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**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** I don't like waffles, but I would try that.

[Music starts]

**Lea Alcantara:** Yum. All right, well, that's all the time we have for today, but I would like to ask our listeners to let me know what they think about this idea of a signature design style. Make sure to tweet me [@lealea](#).

**Emily Lewis:** This was fun. I always forget how nice it is just the two of us sometimes.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, I know, but like noticed how long this show is? [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** I know, that's because we just keep running our mouths so we'll just end it there.  
[Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** I know, totally. All right, CTRL+CLICK is produced by [Bright Umbrella](#), a web services agency obsessed with happy clients. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsor! Thank you, [Backup Pro](#)!

**Emily Lewis:** We'd also like to thank our partners: [Arcustech](#) and [Devot.ee](#).

**Lea Alcantara:** And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter [@ctrlclickcast](#) or visit our website, [ctrlclickcast.com](#). And if you liked this episode, please give us a review on [iTunes](#), [Stitcher](#) or both! And if you really liked this episode, consider donating to the show. Links are in our show notes and on our site.



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**Emily Lewis:** Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when Shawn Maida returns to the show this time to talk about CMS workflows for landing pages. Be sure to check out our schedule on [ctrlclickcast.com/schedule](http://ctrlclickcast.com/schedule) for more upcoming topics.

**Lea Alcantara:** This is Lea Alcantara ...

**Emily Lewis:** And Emily Lewis ...

**Lea Alcantara:** Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

**Emily Lewis:** Cheers!

[Music stops]

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