

Het Parool



→ “We want to help listeners see better,” Harald Dunnink says. Photo by Linda Stulic

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'Design is about more than physical objects'

In a new podcast, designer Harald Dunnink talks about what design means to him – and what it can mean for listeners. 'Everything around us is designed.'

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Ask Harald Dunnink a question about design and for the next 15 minutes all you have to do is listen. He segues smoothly from Schiphol Airport's passport scanners via the New York Times logo to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam's new exhibition layout, mentioning his mother along the way. Dunnink, 37, speaks with a sense of urgency, but he doesn't rush. He can be emphatic, but he never gets preachy. More than once, listening to him, you think: Now that you mention it, that's something I need to think about a bit more.

Dunnink also talks this way in *Verwondering* (meaning 'wonderment' in Dutch), a podcast whose first three episodes launched on July 12. A new instalment will appear each month. "We wanted to talk about design in a different way," he says. "People tend to use the word 'design' about a nice lamp or a chair. But design is about more than stuff. Everything around us is designed, from the side walk to the polder. We want to make listeners more aware of that, to help them see better."

Self-taught

Dunnink is one of the digital design world's pioneers. He set up his agency at the start of the century, as people were slowly beginning to realize the Internet might be ushering in a revolution. But connection speeds were slow, there was no such thing as social media, and wifi was still a dream.

Today, 30 people work at Momkai, making websites, online platforms, visual identities and apps. For the pram company Bugaboo, they designed a 3D animation that lets parents view planned purchases from all sides and add features. For the Royal Netherlands Football Association, they welded existing websites into a single coherent platform to ease the organization's communication with its 1.2 million members.

Dunnink knew early on that his future lay in design. "When I was 12 and my oldest brother went away to university, he asked me to make a sign for his room. I think it was so the girls would know where to find him. I did it graffiti-style. What do you want for it? he said. And he paid me 25 guilders. He was actually my first client. That job made me realize you could live from creative work and operate independently."

His father gave him his next leg up. The software distributor loaned his self-taught son, then 19, the money to set up a design agency helped him get to grips with accounting. "He normalized the idea of starting your own business," Dunnink says. Meanwhile, Dunnink's mother, a district nurse, gave him a sense of social responsibility: "Whatever you do, it should have social value."

'We want to make users think about the question: what's worth paying attention to?'

In 2002, Dunnink moved to Amsterdam and founded Momkai. “Digital design was one big open prairie then,” he says. “In 2018, anyone starting a digital design agency has a lot more competition. There are exceptions, like Stripe, a successful payment module similar to PayPal that was launched in 2010, but in general, all the big brands started in the late 1990s or at the beginning of the century.”

Not that Momkai’s early years were a walk in the park. The Internet bubble had just burst, and much had to be done with little. “I met with the European heads of Kawasaki motorcycles at home, in my room,” Dunnink says. “I look at the first four or five years running my business as a hands-on master’s degree. Of course you get screwed financially because you didn’t put everything down in contracts beforehand, and you make mistakes. But I wanted to do it for real, not as some kind of student project.”

Creating calm

As a designer who spends his days working in the virtual realm, Dunnink is more aware than most people of the addiction hazards of digital platforms. “I’ve switched off all notifications on my phone,” he says. “And I have my email on the second page so I’m not constantly distracted. But the Internet is a young medium that’s still very much developing, and the same is true of users. It comes down to self-knowledge and making conscious choices. For example, you can set up a clock that will give you a certain amount of time on Instagram.”

The idea lies at the heart of Momkai’s design philosophy. “We’re bombarded with images online,” Dunnink says. “We want to create calm spaces amid all that. Think of a well-insulated, sparsely furnished house in a busy city. The design is there to serve, so users can get excited about the content, about the stories that deserve to be heard.

We don't seek to encourage that greediness that's always searching for new impressions. Calm is a means and an end. We want to make users think about the question: what's worth paying attention to?"

That question is also key at De Correspondent, the online journalism platform of which Dunnink is creative director and a cofounder. De Correspondent produces in-depth articles as a counterweight to the endless stream of rushed news stories. It's slow journalism, and its subscribers actively help create it. "It's ad-free, independent journalism, which is hugely valuable in a time of mud-slinging and private bubbles," Dunnink says. "De Correspondent also uses the Internet's interactive capabilities. It's a knowledge platform where journalists act as conversation leaders and members act as experts. We're celebrating our fifth anniversary this year, and we want to launch an English version next. We're starting a membership campaign at the end of the year."

A warm embrace

These days, Dunnink is applying lessons learned at De Correspondent further afield – at Imperial College in London, for example. "Their lecture theatres hold a few hundred people, but online lectures reach hundreds of thousands of students, many of them in developing countries," he says. "We're looking at the best ways to convey information through the Internet, building on the way we engage readers at De Correspondent. It sometimes involves organizing events or publishing a book."

Knowledge-sharing is important to Dunnink; he often gives lectures and workshops. The new podcast is a natural step. Verwondering is a joint project with Ernst-Jan Pfauth, De Correspondent's publisher. Pfauth plays the enthusiast who comes up with discussion topics; Dunnink is the professional designer who delves into them.

The men lob examples back and forth. “For instance, in the episode on selectivity, we talk about the new iPhone X,” Dunnink says. “It has facial recognition. Like a dog recognizing his owner, the app chooses you to respond to. It’s technology as a warm embrace. The coldness is gone.”

To Dunnink, podcasts are a great way of conveying information. “I listen to a lot of them. You get to hear a philosopher or a writer as you’re hanging laundry. It’s so human and intimate. And doing it with Ernst-Jan adds an extra dimension. After all, conversation is the most essential form of interaction.”

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podcast.momkai.com