

By Jude Stewart

SPAN

Everyone I know seems to have an immediate pre-pandemic anecdote: some activity they enjoyed that the pandemic rendered impossible, or a project they undertook under pre-pandemic assumptions now shadowed with dramatic irony. Here is mine: On Valentine's Day weekend 2020, my family joined another family on a last-minute jaunt to an indoor water park in the Wisconsin Dells. It's an activity that now seems fantastically germ-ridden but also charmingly heedless.

The pandemic caught the Chicago-based design studio Span in a different place. Partners John Pobjewski and Bud Rodecker just founded their studio in January and were preparing for a grand opening event that never happened. Instead of popping corks and pressing the flesh, Pobjewski recalls "packing up everyone's computer individually, hooking on the face masks and all this protective gear, and then setting up people's computers for them in their apartments all around the city while they waited in their bedrooms." He pauses and sighs. "I met a lot of cats, yeah."

Up until this moment, the plan was smooth and straightforward. Pobjewski and Rodecker had worked together for twelve years at Chicago-based design firm Thirst. In late 2019, Thirst founder Rick Valicenti decided to close shop and pursue his work independent of running a studio. Pobjewski and Rodecker decided to open a new company, Span, under their leadership. With Valicenti's blessing, they hired most of the Thirst team, kept working with existing clients and even assumed the lease on the same office space. The goal was a seamless transition for all parties. COVID had other ideas.

Obviously, the Span team figured out pandemic-mandated remote work just like the rest of us. But unlike most people, they also meditated on the pandemic's impact on culture, both during the crisis and afterward. That meditation embraced multiple timescales and formats, including speculative ones. In the self-published AR project *Visibility Mask*, the "Instagram filter visibly shows the space we take up with our breath," as Span's website explains. "In a sense, it makes the invisible force that has altered our lives visible." The *Reaching Out of Reach* video series considers how the pandemic disrupted

touch, breath and play. Span also collaborated with architecture firm MASS Design Group and the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum on two projects situating COVID-19 in a broader historical context: The book *Architecture of Health* probed the various ways buildings make us sicker. The Cooper Hewitt exhibition *Design and Healing* examined design's role in this latest pandemic as well as previous health crises.

These projects are all emblematic of Span's approach to communication design: a historically informed, responsive, 360-degree process.

"Span takes the long view." So claims the company's About page, a provocation I couldn't help probing when I met Pobjewski and Rodecker, as well as associate partner Nick Adam, at their offices in Chicago's West Loop. What does that mean in practice?

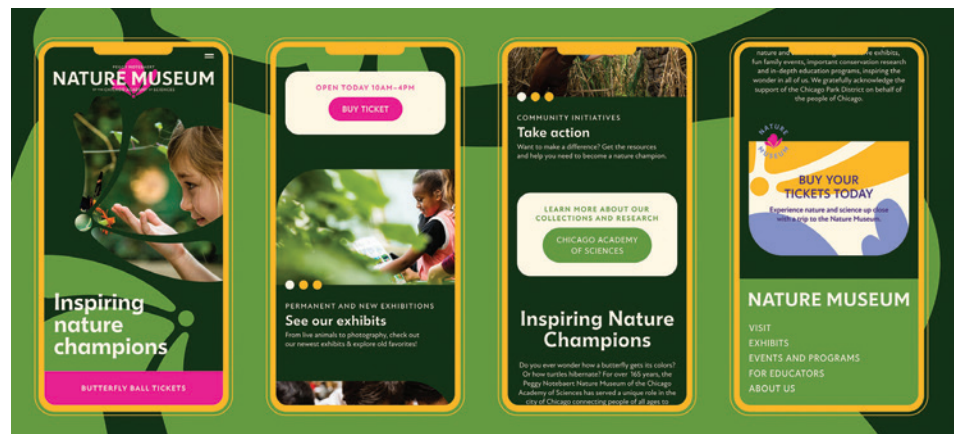
"It has multiple meanings," replies Pobjewski. "It can mean sustainability, yes. But for us, it's actually more philosophical. When we work with clients, we're thinking about how that design lasts longer than just the one project we're working on now. How is that organization going to perform and change over time? How can the brand allow for that change?"

Rodecker considers the statement as "both forward- and backward-looking. We're very aware of where our studio sits in the history of communication design," he says. "So, we're always considering what came before us and what led us to the point where we are now. Also, the vast majority of our clients are long term; we've become trusted collaborators with them." The phrase "taking the long view" means "we're going to do what's right, not what's going to make us the most money or be the best for our portfolio at this moment," as Rodecker explains.

Span's own branding reflects this ethos. Pobjewski explains how they chose the studio's name: "We really wanted to resist the gravity toward specialization. We want to be the studio that [does] lots of different types of work and challenges the boundaries that communication design has. Can we make performance art? Can we do our own exhibitions? Can we write our own books? Can we do short films?"

Captions provided by Span.

Right: "Since 1857, the **Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum of the Chicago Academy of Sciences** (known as the Nature Museum) has connected Chicagoans with nature and science. We worked closely with the Nature Museum to craft a new brand identity inspired by native Illinois prairies. We crafted the wordmark using Céline Hurka's typeface Tonka for its flaring stems that convey a historic, organic essence. The color palette spans catalpa green to columbine pink to milkweed cream, and the abstract icon evokes butterflies, flowers and clouds—capturing the sense of wonder the natural world inspires." Cheryl Kao, designer; Nick Adam, design director; Tom Mulhern, strategist; Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, client.





Flexibility and range inform Span's logo as well. Rodecker recalls the period when he was working on the logo: the days were

chockful of logistics and work, leaving only evenings to develop the new company's identity. "I tried not to rush it," he says. "I do a lot of custom letterforms, so I was just making versions and versions and eventually hit on this worm-like, NASA-inspired type [to spell out the word *Span*]. It could stretch, and it could change weight." The logo's variable font adjusts along the typical sliding scale between width and weight. But Rodecker threw in a third axis that he jokingly nicknamed Cowboy, enabling the monoline font to go into a reverse-stress "for the type nerds", as he says. "I've always called [the Span logo] kind of gutsy. It looks like intestines."

Intestines aside, "gutsy" is an apt pun describing Span's body of work. The studio's portfolio flexes across media and industries with a few recurring themes, Chicago and sustainability among them. Here's a lightning round of recent Span projects: A book commemorating the 150th anniversary of kitchen and bath product giant Kohler. A short film with a puppet studio blending analog and digital worlds. Developing the strategic plan and related campaigns for Chicago's Regional Transit Authority to advocate for transit's value to the public. A bold rebranding for Nazareth University in Rochester, New York. Another comprehensive rebrand for the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago.

Span's unique strengths shine through in an unlikely project, a commemorative book called *Slow & Low* for the lowrider communities of Chicago and beyond. Local nonprofit Slow & Low had been staging lowrider exhibitions in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood for years prior to the pandemic. After a pause, in 2022, the nonprofit came back bigger than ever and moved the festival to Chicago's Navy Pier, a massive convention center that extends eastward from the Loop into Lake Michigan. The organizers expected 3,000 attendees for the one-day event and attracted four times that, making it one of the most successful Navy Pier events in the past 20 years.

Slow & Low curators Lauren M. Pacheco and Peter Kepha approached Span to create a commemorative book documenting the organization's thirteen-year history. The job was not small: the curators gave Span an archive of more than 20,000 photographs. According to Adam, Pacheco and Kepha "were not interested in organizing [the archive] based on time or place. They just wanted to see what would happen when we'd try to create a narrative out of the images."

Deep listening characterizes much of Span's creative work: delving into a client's worldview and communicating to outsiders what the inside view really consists of. "Lowrider culture tends to be pretty misunderstood," says Adam. "While it's perceived to be predominantly adult and masculine, it's actually a family affair with folks of all ages, all genders, all races." Cars are owned by clubs, not individuals, and continually decorated and improved in an unending creative process that's multigenerational, communal and joyous. "Within a club, you may have a member who's wealthy or someone who's an expert metalworker or an expert painter, and they all come together to produce the car," Adam explains. He saw children grow into teenagers and then adults within the archive's photos, smiling next to the same ever-evolving car. The book design honors the lowrider spirit down to small details: "These cars are always moving," Adam continues. "Books are really portrait objects, and cars are horizontal objects. So, [the book's] croppings allow for movement and for width to be shown."

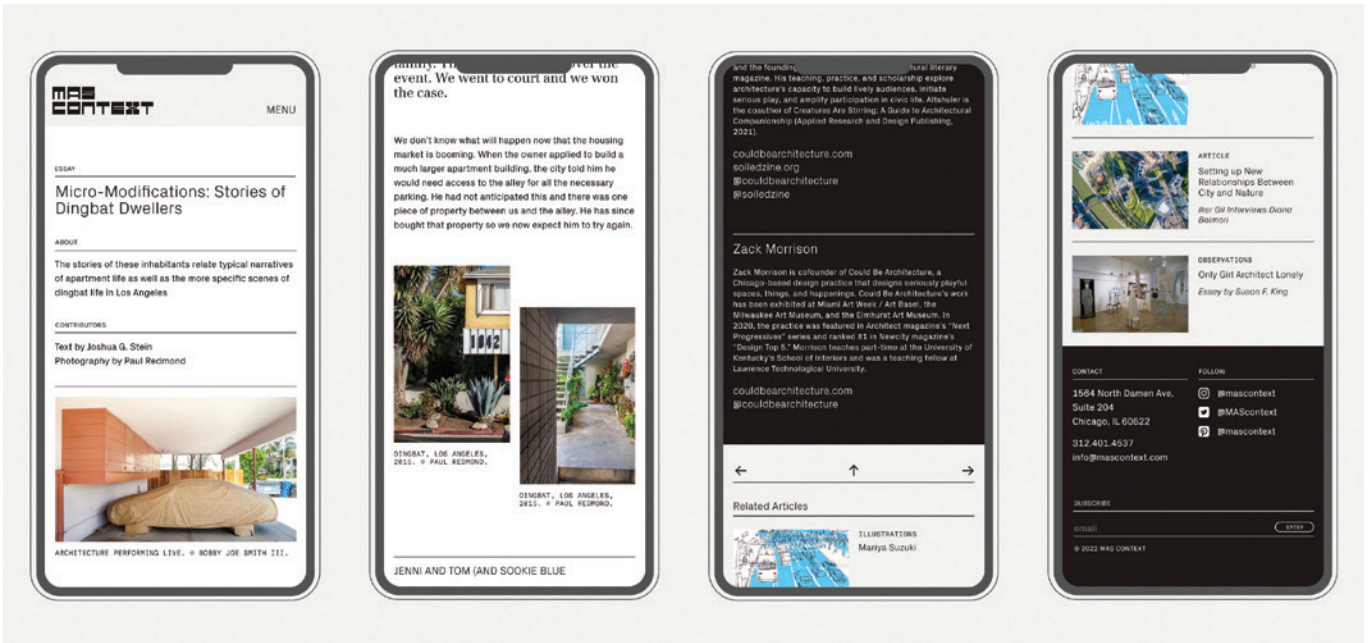
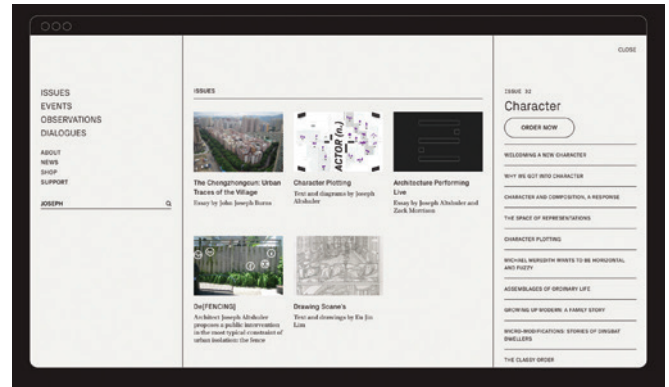
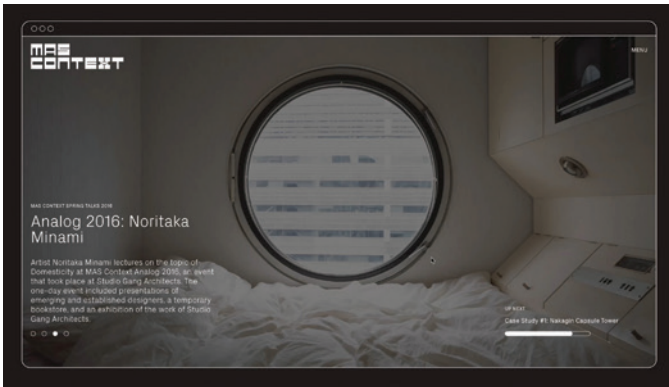
The studio has done an impressive number of sustainability projects from the *ReFramed* exhibit about pine's role in sustainable architecture to Urban Sequoia, a green building concept by architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in which buildings sequester carbon like trees. For the latter project, Span created a short film screened at the United Nations's COP26 Climate Change Conference.

What advice would the Span team offer to other design studios to attract such work? According to Pobjewski, participating in 1% for the Planet—a program in which companies pledge 1 percent of their annual sales to climate-change projects—makes Span's commitment tangible and brings climate-minded clients to the door. Beyond that, of course, one needs to do the ultimate challenge for communication designers. "Design at its

Above: from left to right, associate partner and design director Nick Adam; partner and design director Jon Pobjewski; and founder and design director Bud Rodecker.

Right: "One of the nation's foremost presentations of differing perspectives on the intersection of design, architecture and urbanism, **MAS Context**—a platform with a range of media from a semi-annual published journal to multidisciplinary events and exhibitions—commissioned us to design an online curatorial platform for all its facets." Cheryl Kao/Ell Mortensen, designers; John Pobjewski/Bud Rodecker, design directors; Collin Joyce, developer; Iker Gil, MAS Context, client.

"We transformed **Nazareth University's** visual brand by choosing to work from its home by setting up a studio on its New York campus. In dialogue with the students, we heard them refer to Nazareth as 'Naz' among friends; these three letterforms became a key strategy in how we changed the institution's presence." Avery Brannen/Grace Song, designers; Nick Adam/Bud Rodecker, design directors; Danny Schuman, strategist; Elizabeth Zapata, Nazareth University, client.





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Save the Dates

Nov 4 Lake County
Nov 10 McHenry County
Nov 22 DuPage County
Dec 8 Will County
Dec 13 Kane County

How can we address the most urgent challenges facing our region? Transit is the Answer.

November 18, 2022

Transit news alert

RTA begins work on new parking garages to encourage transit-friendly policies.

Adopted 2022 Operating Budget, Two-Year Financial Plan, and Five-Year Capital Program.

November 2022

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November 2022



EXPLORING THE ARCHIVES

NOV 06 2022
DCC CHICAGO

SOUTH SIDE HOME MOVIE PROJECT

CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER
78 E WASHINGTON ST
STUDIO THEATER

FILMMAKING ON THE SOUTH SIDE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

AUG 2 2022

MARGARET CARLES
JUSTIN MILLERMAN
YVONNE WELSON
MODERATED BY MICHELLE KENNEDY

SOUTH SIDE HOME MOVIE PROJECT

SOUTH SIDE HOME MOVIE PROJECT

THE ARCHIVE

EVENTS AND NEWS

CREATIVE REUSE

HOME MOVIE COMMUNITY

RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

THE ARCHIVE

SSMHP's Digital Archive is a globally accessible online portal and searchable catalog of our entire collection of over 450 digitized home movies shot by residents of Chicago's South Side neighborhoods from 1929-1982.

FEATURED CLIPS

- 00:00:00 Albus Smith Family Collection
- 00:00:30 Fred & Lela Albus Collection
- 00:01:00 Roy Herbert Branch Collection
- 00:01:30 Buford Family Collection
- 00:02:31 Burt Ramos Family Collection
- 00:02:31 Byrd-Forshey Family Collection
- 00:03:01 Alphonse and Narcis' Year 1964 Family Collection
- 00:03:31 Lynette Frazier Collection

NEWS

- 4.26.2021 WELCOME TO OUR WELCOME AND PRESERVING HOME MOVIES SSHP IN POWER MOVIES
- 4.30.2021 WITH SPINNING HOME MOVIES, ELS BRING CHICAGO'S A WEEKLY DOSE OF HISTORY
- 8.18.2021 SSHP SEEKS CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT
- 10.15.2021 NEW DIGITAL PORTAL TO CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE IS SPIN WELCOME TO SSHP'S NEW WEBSITE
- 4.15.2020 HOME SERVICES BACKED BY BUS PUT A NEW SPIN ON VINTAGE SOUTH SIDE HISTORY
- 5.1.2019 SSHP LAUNCHES DIGITAL ARCHIVE, DECADES OF SOUTH SIDE HOME MOVIES RELEASED IN DIGITAL ARCHIVE

PAGES

- OUR STORY
- CREATIVE REUSE
- HOME MOVIE COMMUNITY

EVENTS

- 70911 WHAT LOOKS LIKE IN PUBLIC? SOUTH SIDE HOME MOVIE PROJECT PUBLIC INSTALLATION
- TEEN ARTS COUNCIL - SSHP VIRTUAL ART SHOW
- SSHP ARTS LEARN BANNER - SPINNING HOME MOVIES LIVE SCREENING
- SOUTH SIDE SISTERHOOD: AS SEEN IN HOME MOVIES
- ARCHIVING WORKSHOP: THE GRITTY FOOT

CREATIVE REUSE

- SSHP & THE ARTS LEARN
- SSHP & THE ARTS LEARN - 2ND LOOK
- EPISODE 5 "SISTERHOOD" BY SELAH SAY
- EPISODE 16 "TIME TRAVEL" BY CAM BE
- EPISODE 18 "ICE TO WINTER SPACE" BY JAMILA WOODS

ONGOING EVENT

"What love looks like in public": South Side Home Movie Project Public Installation

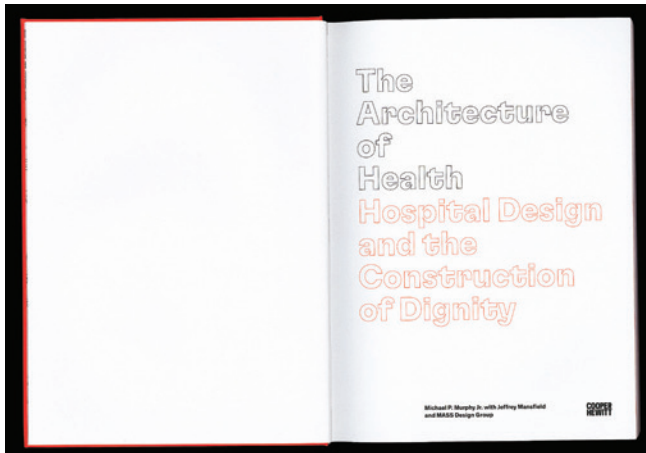
OCT. 09, 2021 - JUL. 01, 2022

In celebration of the upcoming Arts Learn, the South Side Home Movie Project invites you to walk, discuss and share stories of public life drawn from our home movie collections depicting moments of diversity and connection that green space nurtures across Chicago's South Side.

LEARN MORE

NEWS

- 12.13.2021 New digital portal to Chicago's South Side is open. Welcome to SSHP's New Website
- 11.17.2021 SSHP seeks Curriculum Development Consultant
- 8.20.2021 South Side Home Movie Project Proposing Website Redesign, Shareable Arts Curriculum
- 4.30.2021 WITH Spinning Home Movies, Els bring Chicago's a weekly dose of history
- 4.29.2021 "Welcome to Our Welcome and Preserving Home Movies" Press in Power Works
- 7.02.2020 Great Migration and History featured in new Newberry Museum exhibit



core is an optimistic practice,” says Pobojewski. “We create things and propose new ideas. It makes sense that our work looks at these issues through that lens as opposed to a more dire one.”

“In a way, what design does is helps us navigate environments,” Adam remarks. “It shows you which way you can go, what’s possible. Our work, from climate change to the pandemic and beyond, is a lot about navigation and understanding all these different contexts.” Rodecker amplifies on this remark: “It’s about becoming intimately aware of who [a client] is, what they do, and where they sit in their market and the world. Then, we use our perspective as this outside person; we hear everything they say and play that back to them through design. That is the secret sauce: we show them what they’re saying, and then we can have a conversation about whether it’s right or wrong or if it needs to go this way or that way.”

“I hear this all the time when we present our work,” says Pobojewski. “Everything looks so different. You have such a wide variety of work! You’re over here talking in one voice and over here talking in another voice. I think that’s what makes us really passionate about design: It doesn’t always have to be about one aesthetic, one style. It’s about going beyond style.” [ca](#)

Left: “We were invited to refresh the identity for the **Regional Transportation Authority**—which coordinates the Chicago region’s transit system—in advance of announcing its next strategic plan. The logo is a solid monogram reflecting speed and strength with an ‘overline’ running through the characters like a train or bus pulling into the station. The typography is a customized version of Graphik by Commercial Type, a hardworking sans serif typeface with a modified *r*, *t* and *a* to align with the logo’s visual language.” Valeria Bernal, designer; John Pobojewski, design director; Kathleen Hinkel, photography; Regional Transportation Authority, client.

“**South Side Home Movie Project** (SSHMP) is a film and cultural preservation entity within the University of Chicago. We designed its identity and website to embrace characteristics integral to film—stacking, sequence, film grain, dust, scratches and blurs. We balanced SSHMP’s desire for large hi-res images with its, at times, lo-fi archival materials. The customized *l* of the SSHMP logotype and custom brand typeface draw inspiration from film leaders and perfs.” Leah Wendzinski, designer; Nick Adam, design director; Alex Brindley/Shawna O’Neal, developers; John Pobojewski, technology director; Arts + Public Life/South Side Home Movie Project/University of Chicago, clients.

This page: “While combating the COVID-19 pandemic, the public has asked architects why buildings make us sicker. **The Architecture of Health: Hospital Design and the Construction of Dignity**, by Michael P. Murphy, founding principal and former executive director of MASS Design Group, as well as design director Jeffrey Mansfield, explores this question and unearths how our architecture has been influenced by developments in healthcare over time. We collaborated with MASS and the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum to create a book structure that enables the reader to interact with the images as footnotes to the text.” Alyssa Arnesen, design; Bud Rodecker/Rick Valicenti, design directors; Cooper Hewitt/MASS Design Group, clients.

This page: “We collaborated with MASS Design Group and the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum to translate the design and concepts from the book *The Architecture of Health: Hospital Design and the Construction of Dignity* into a physical exhibition, **Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics**. The exhibition presents architectural case studies and historical narratives alongside creative design responses to COVID-19.” Alyssa Arnesen, design; Bud Rodecker/Rick Valicenti, design directors; Regina Chen/Ellen Lupton/Jeffrey Mansfield/Michael Murphy/Morgan O’Hara/Julie Pastor, curators; Annie Wang, MASS Design Group, exhibition developer; Cooper Hewitt/MASS Design Group, clients.

Right: “**Slow & Low** is a Chicago-based nonprofit organization for low-riders. For its retrospective book, we made every editorial, design and material decision to resonate with lowrider culture. The book’s grid system creates an elaborate page sequencing that highlights perspective shifts and contextual relationships. Each photographic composition contributes to a filmic cadence, with motion, zooming and surrounding angles providing the viewer with a sense of cruising. The cover’s vertically stacked blackletter typeface evokes forearm tattoos and church altar banners, appropriate references given the ink coverage and the importance of faith within the lowrider community.” Cheryl Kao, designer; Nick Adam, design director; Peter Kepha/Edward Magico Calderon/Lauren M. Pacheco, curators; Slow & Low, client.

