NARRATOR: Welcome to Intersections: The RIT Podcast. Since 2010, Metaproject has paired RIT student designers with a client in what has become a signature project for the university's internationally-ranked industrial design program. Today, distinguished professor Josh Owen, director of RIT's industrial design program and the founder of Metaproject, talks with distinguished professor Roger Remington, director of the Vignelli Center for Design Studies, about a decade of connecting students to industry.

ROGER: How did the Vignelli Center start? We have to go back about 30 years ago when we began bringing designer archives to RIT. This process was ongoing, and Massimo Vignelli was very aware of this because he was a real proponent of history theory and criticism in design education. He was a very world-class designer who had a great interest in education and supporting education. And so, ultimately, when he had closed down his office, his health was not well, he was looking for a place for his archive, he approached us. And we were very happy to begin dialogue with him. The stars were properly aligned, so that we were able to get the project off the ground. The project took off. We have one floor of graphic materials, another floor of three-dimensional materials – furniture and tables. And we have two exhibit galleries as part of the center. We've had 10 years now of experience. The center is functioning both in terms of its archival resources here at RIT for design students and faculty and other researchers that come to visit, and other kinds of projects that we support such as the Metaproject from the department of industrial design.

JOSH: That's a good segue to my involvement in all of this. Right about the time when the center was under construction I was approached by RIT to consider joining the faculty. So, I came over to the Vignelli Center, which, as I said, was under construction and had a look around and was overwhelmed, actually, by the fact that RIT had solidified this deal with the Vignellis and, more importantly, that this archive was to be a living, breathing, functioning study collection for future generations of designers. It was a fascinating time to join because as I was ramping up for my first teaching assignment I was shaking hands with the best and brightest folks in the history of design who had come to the ribbon cutting of the Vignelli Center. And the folks that I had been working with in the industrial design department asked me to consider linking the programming that I would develop for the industrial design program to the Vignelli Center in some way. I thought we could easily fold in lessons learned through the Vignelli artifacts, focusing students' output on powerful understandings of meaningful design. And so we used the archives in the way they were intended to be used, which is to say we examined the exemplary processes that were self-evident in the many projects that Massimo and Lella left us. And in those early years Massimo was quite involved. He would chime in on projects that we sent his way. He would join us and meet with the students and offer us his insights. And so that's a little bit of how the project came to be. The other piece of it, of course, was thinking about how to leverage industry in the picture. And so each Metaproject incorporates not just a senior design studio leveraging the output from the Vignelli Center, but also a powerful design-centric industry collaborator or sponsor. So, we've had the good fortune over the years of working with the likes of Herman Miller, Areaware and Kikkerland and many others. Each of these has brought their own challenges to the table, which makes it especially exciting for

students because they're not solving a conceptual problem. They're solving something which is of dedicated interest to the outside industry collaborator, so it's something in their wheelhouse as well. Coming into the tenth year of exercising this program, we've seen some astounding results in terms of the way the work has been received by the critical design field and also that these students have gone on to be leaders in industry after a few short years.

ROGER: These artifacts of the Vignelli design years really are very important symbols for young students who are trying to learn about design and trying to internalize all the different variables involved in a design education. I don't know of any other design school in the world that has these kinds of assets and resources for their students. Most students learn about the history of design from slides or books or something online. Our students learn from putting their nose in the actual artifact, and that's very special.

JOSH: I agree. Here we have students in graphic design, students in industrial design, students in all these design fields, who take advantage of learning from the archives through coursework, but also through independent studies that take them into the archives, learning archival practices, and studying things that are directly relevant to their field of study.

ROGER: We have an opportunity to show the students how the designers think and how they work through a project. We have the graphic evidence of that in the archive. So, the students can realize that there really isn't always some magic thing that happens, something that comes down from on high, in terms of a great design solution that everyone knows about. But it's really a very systematic, normal, problem-solving, step-by-step process. Showing them the actual artifacts that prove this is really a tremendous educational opportunity.

JOSH: Whenever I tour people through the Vignelli Center I stop at a number of places. They include the subway diagram that the Vignellis did and the National Park Service project where they exercise the Unigrid. But my favorite is really the Heller mug that the Vignellis did. The mug that the Vignellis designed for Heller in the 1970s is iconic in many ways. So many visitors that I take through the center, from all walks of life, can recognize it as a piece that either they sought out as a design aficionado or grew up with in a household, like mine, that knew nothing about design because these were democratically designed, they were affordable pieces of plastic. It starts with, "Oh yeah. I recognize this piece. I've used this. Wow! They designed this? I had no idea." That's the entry point. Then we talk about the details. There's a wonderful story between Massimo, the designer, and Alan Heller, who was the manufacturer. And that is a little dam, which is built between the carved-out handle of the cup and the actual volume, which the liquid fills. And that dam was put in place to stop liquid from flowing over the rim of the cup and down the handle where it would burn your hand. And that sounds logical when I explain it. But it wasn't deigned to be there. In the original version of that cup that the Vignellis designed for a European market, the dam was not present because the Europeans, and particularly the Italians, don't fill their cappuccino to the top. So, no one would think to fill it all the way to the rim, and therefore the liquid would

not flow down and burn someone. When Massimo adapted this cup for the American market, Alan Heller said, Americans are going to want to fill it to the rim, they're going to burn themselves, and there are going to be lawsuits, so we can't do that. Massimo's perspective was, let them burn themselves, they won't do it twice. Alan said, that's not the way it works here. So, there was this kind of back and forth. To me, the reason that this story and this artifact is so interesting and is my favorite is that we can have this conversation and we can talk about design teaching, we can talk about the ethics of design, we can talk about materiality. It's all imbued in the artifacts of process right there. And we own all of that – every cocktail napkin sketch, every fight between the manufacturer and the designer. We can discuss with students, scholars, visitors, friends, family, others what design means. And that is why that is my favorite piece. This is what we live for, especially in the educational sector. We are enthralled by the process of design. It's what we live and breathe. So, having not just exemplars, but strategically collected exemplars, has proved to be a successful strategy for design education that complements everything else we do here.

ROGER: RIT is a very product-oriented place. The focus is always on one kind of product or another, whether you're talking about graphic design or engineering or whatever. But having the evidence, having the artifacts of the process, really helps to balance that out. Because then the focus in the classroom can shift from looking down the road to the end and the deliverable, but it can then focus earlier on the steps that need to go into the design process that will lead to a design product. I think this is all represented so well in the Metaproject experience, and we're looking forward in this tenth-year anniversary of the Vignelli Center for Design Studies for the center to become the client for the Metaproject experience.

JOSH: We're very much looking forward to sharing the output of this course with the design world at large. We take the students of the Metaproject, every year, to Design Week in New York City as part of the largest celebration of design nationally each year. This year, we're looking forward to sharing the results in a very special context, the church that the Vignellis designed in 1977, which is known as St. Peter's Church on 53rd and Lexington, will be the site at which we will show off not just the output of the Metaproject, but also some very special exhibits that help celebrate both the legacy of Massimo and Lella Vignelli and the anniversary of ten years of our beloved Vignelli Center for Design Studies.

ROGER: And you know what's interesting when we talk about the legacy, the Vignelli legacy, because it's really an important part of our mission here at the center is to keep that alive. They had a motto among them and their design team that they called it "Design is One." And "Design is One" really means a number of things. It can mean, for them, something that Massimo and Lella collaborated together. They were separate designers – he liked to work in two dimensions and she liked to work in three dimensions – but they really collaborated. "Design is One" is a model of their own process. But "Design is One" also means a broader kind of thing, and that is we can take it all the way back to maybe the German Bauhaus in the 1920s. That is that the vision of the designers, the vision of the Vignelli design, is that the designer is not just a

person that works in many separate fields such as architecture or posters or product design. But really a designer, a well-educated designer, needs to be able to work, ideally, in a seamless way going from one media form to another. That's a really important kind of global definition of "Design is One."

JOSH: I think that "Design is One" is very much about their methodology and about their approach and about their seamless understanding that they desperately sought to share with us and that we use. But it's also a lifestyle choice. It's a way of seeing the world through a designer's lens. That is, in many ways, what we hope to impart: that design is everywhere and that design is a way of being. And if we can impart that lesson to our students, then we've done something.

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