

# Kristen Spilman '05: Design as a Way of Life

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Design as a practice and discipline is relatively new for the technology industry, according to **Kristen Spilman '05** (Graphic Design M.F.A.), Design Director at Facebook.

Spilman has had some of the most coveted design-related jobs in the technology industry. She said she has been fortunate in terms of her career trajectory, because the sector has not always understood how designers could integrate and influence the engineering process.

“The term ‘product designer’ is now common in the technology industry, but it hasn’t always been, because for a long time, there weren’t many applicable roles in technology companies for designers,” she shared. “In fact, it was taboo for graphic designers to apply to tech companies. And there was a lot of confusion around what the term ‘product design’ meant, exactly, and how it related to graphic design as a practice.”

Spilman, who was in the first graduating class of MICA’s Graphic Design M.F.A. program, which started in 2003, has held roles in companies that design students could only dream of working for — including Pentagram, reputedly the world’s largest independently owned design studio; well-known global collaboration platform provider, Dropbox; and social media giant, Facebook.



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During what she calls her “formative years” at Pentagram, Spilman learned how to extend her practice and thinking as a designer to any space, surface or medium that felt appropriate to convey a story. “I was able to practice design in a manner that went beyond the individual object or deliverable, and extended into crafting a holistic experience.” She even had the opportunity to design MICA’s logo.

But nearly a decade into her dream job, Spilman said, “I started to notice that my work and process had become too familiar.” She decided it was time to make a big change in her career.

In 2012, Spilman joined MICA’s undergraduate graphic design program as a faculty member, and over the course of two years, also set up her own design studio. But the consummate designer was still searching for more. “I was at a point in my career where I wanted to challenge myself to do something entirely different, something uncomfortable,” she explained. “I was looking for something that would push me to a point and force me to apply my skills in a different way.”

Around that time, many of Spilman’s students were being hired by technology companies, and more and more of their recruiters were taking part in campus talks. “Something new was brewing, and that sparked my curiosity,” she recalled. Eventually, Spilman’s reputation as a key influencer at MICA brought savvy tech recruiters to her door.

**In 2014, Spilman moved to San Francisco to join Dropbox. Two years later, she was hired by Facebook and now leads a team of about 80 multidisciplinary designers — in graphic design, illustration, animation and technical art.**

Seeing herself as more than just a designer, Spilman refers to herself as a design practitioner, thinker and educator. She said her time at MICA exposed her to the notion that design is not a thing, but a way of life. “We’re all designers, and almost every component of our lives is designed,

but not everybody thinks of that as being intentional.”

When she entered the technology industry, Spilman was immediately ushered into design management roles. “I’m not practicing design. I’m designing teams, helping tech companies understand how to work with design talent, to set designers up for success.”

She’s passionate about getting designers to advocate for design within the technology development process.

**“It comes from having expertise not only as a practicing designer, but also as a design educator. I help large companies wrap their minds around how critical design is, but also understand that to become a designfirst practice, there are a lot of unknowns that sometimes feel counterintuitive to an engineering practice.”**

Oftentimes, she has been there to be the glue between two different and somewhat opposing ways of thinking.

Today, Spilman encourages her team to think about design and their work the same way her mentors at MICA — such as faculty members Ellen Lupton, Abbott Miller and Jennifer Cole Phillips — did with her. She continues to educate companies and get them to “move beyond the utility aspect alone and approach design as an experience.” Her goal, she stressed, is “to add a degree of humanity, emotion and connection to the digital products that we build.”

“We’ve barely unlocked the influence that design can have in terms of the technology we build,” she continued, adding that MICA instilled in her a way of thinking that focuses on what’s possible in the future as opposed to what needs to be made right now — and that is essentially what the technology sector is all about.