I've been thinking a lot about taste lately: what it means to have taste, who has it, and if it is important to cultivate it. Then I met Alex Woogmaster, a visionary designer and a man with undeniable taste. He grew up obsessing over castles and Baroque palaces. His taste was always grand. Those classical influences are woven throughout his work, from his time as Design Director at Wynn Design & Development, through the formation of his own firm, Woogmaster Studio, where their work runs the gamut from megavillas to yachts and where the lines between home and hospitality are increasingly blurred. Press play on the clip below to listen to our discussion:

Design to the top of your intelligence

Woogmaster was in the middle of writing his dissertation at Cornell about how influential architecture can be on human behavior, when he found himself in Las Vegas for the first time. He was there for a friend's bachelor party, but did not think of himself as a Vegas kind of guy. To his surprise, the moment he descended the grand staircase into a nightclub he was transformed. He jokes he 'abandoned his morals and emptied his wallet.' Vegas tends to have that effect on people, and it worked on him. What he was writing about theoretically he was experiencing in practice – and it was a lot of fun.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

The effect of that environment is what happens when a space is designed at the top of a designer's intelligence, transcending whatever activity may be taking place in it. It was a lesson in expanding taste, eschewing simplistic distinctions between high and low, and instead, allowing oneself to be moved by the architecture. He would later move to Vegas to work for Wynn on the very hotels that had such a profound impact on him.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

Balancing grandeur and intimacy

Woogmaster Studio designs by principles which they have nicknamed their 'Gentle Manifestos.' In them, luxury is defined as "the removal of all superfluous obstructions between the user and the desired need or action, and the celebration of that ultimate need or action through the infusion of specific design (i.e. Ceremony) to highlight them." Neither homeowners nor guests in a hotel room should have to 'learn' how to use a space. Luxury, in other words, should be seamless and intuitive.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

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At Wynn, Woogmaster was asked to approach designing the hotel rooms as though they were very large homes. This is where his academic fascination with palaces becomes a practical skill. His projects are always, as he describes them, a balancing act between grandeur and intimacy.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

There may not be a lot of demand for castle-building in the US, but a Vegas hotel may be the closest thing

In talking to Woogmaster, I'm reminded of an Ira Glass quote about a concept he calls 'The Gap.' That is, the liminal space between one's taste and capabilities. He says, "…All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you…We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have…" As creatives, we are our own worst critics, and the work almost always falls short of our own expectations as colored by our taste.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies

Woogmaster, though, is undoubtedly capable of building a palace, and one day he might. In this case, the gap is something different: There is simply not much demand for palaces here in the states. The closest thing are the hotels, megavillas, and yachts Woogmaster Studio designs. And they are only made capable by having a visionary leader at the helm who's spent a lifetime cultivating his taste and applying it on a massive scale. | To learn more about Woogmaster Studio, visit their website.

Design by Woogmaster Studio | Photography by Roger Davies