

99designs

by  vista



*Design Without Borders 2022*



# A fresh perspective on freelance





by bananodromo

**10,000 +** designers

**144** countries

# New industry perspectives.

In 2022, while the future of work remains unclear for many global industries, freelance designers are finding clarity in what works for them.

Motivated by a life of freedom and flexibility, they're taking charge of their time, their craft, and where they channel their creativity; from the messages they promote, to the folks they align themselves with.

Freelancers are refining and applying their skills in conscious ways that challenge both them and their clients. And they're hungry for

new ways to work together – with some asking whether traditional industry structures work for them at all.

This report dives deep into the collective struggles, triumphs, and possibilities of one of the most diverse and globally accessible industries to date.

With insights and opinions from freelancers around the world, see the year through the eyes of creatives.

# Foreword



*Patrick Llewellyn, CEO 99designs by Vista*

Representing more than 10,000 freelance designers across 144 countries, this report – the third of its kind from 99designs by Vista – offers a unique perspective on how the industry landscape is evolving.

The themes in this year's data reveal a globally distributed design community thriving in a changing world, harnessing creative power for good.

The integrity, passion and entrepreneurial drive fuelling freelancers around the world is both humbling and inspiring. Hard work and determination, underpinned by principled and purposeful action, has real impact: designers are earning more, taking more control over how they work and the brands they work with, and are finding greater balance at the same time.

Our whole team continues to be challenged and inspired by the creative community that calls 99designs home, and I am truly thankful to everyone who took the time to share their experience and insights with us for this report.

With changing attitudes to remote work, opportunities to connect with creative talent around the world have never been more accessible. And with their optimism, upskilling and appetite for social change, designers are positioning themselves to make an even greater impact in 2022 – both for their clients and in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Llewellyn'. The signature is stylized and fluid.

*Patrick Llewellyn, CEO 99designs by Vista*

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# Diversity: the driving force in design



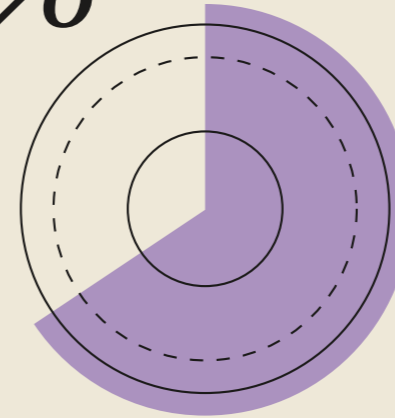
# Talent is everywhere. And it's accessible.

The freelance design community is made up of an infinite number of creative viewpoints. While the industry as a whole is still male-dominated, freelancers come from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures, each with unique life experiences. And with 84% of designers working with clients in different time zones, they're sharing these diverse perspectives with clients around the world.

## The diverse nature of freelance

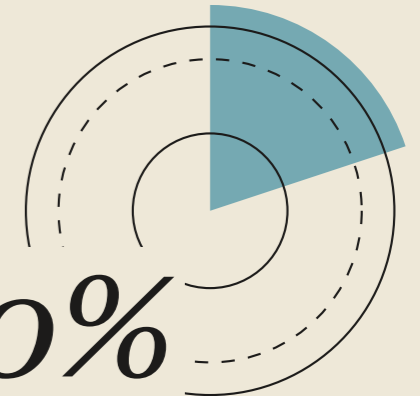
66%

identify  
as male



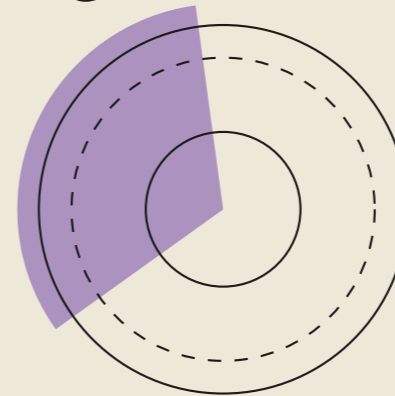
20%

1 in 5 identify as a minority



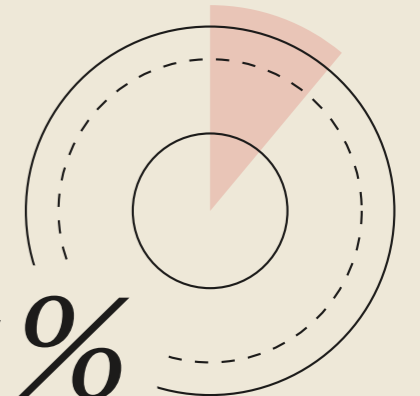
33%

identify  
as female



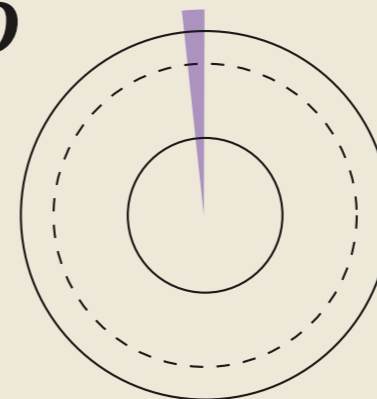
11%

have held refugee status  
at some point in their life



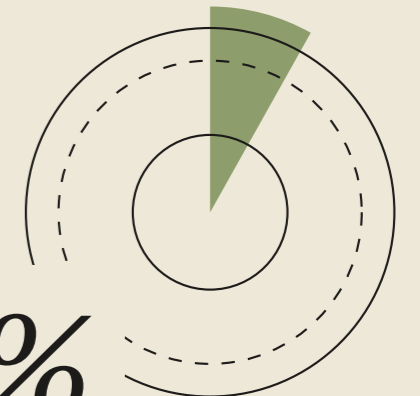
1%

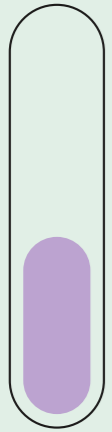
identify as  
non-binary



8%

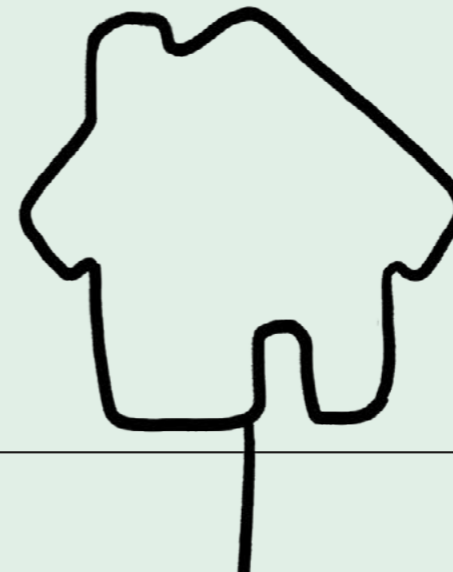
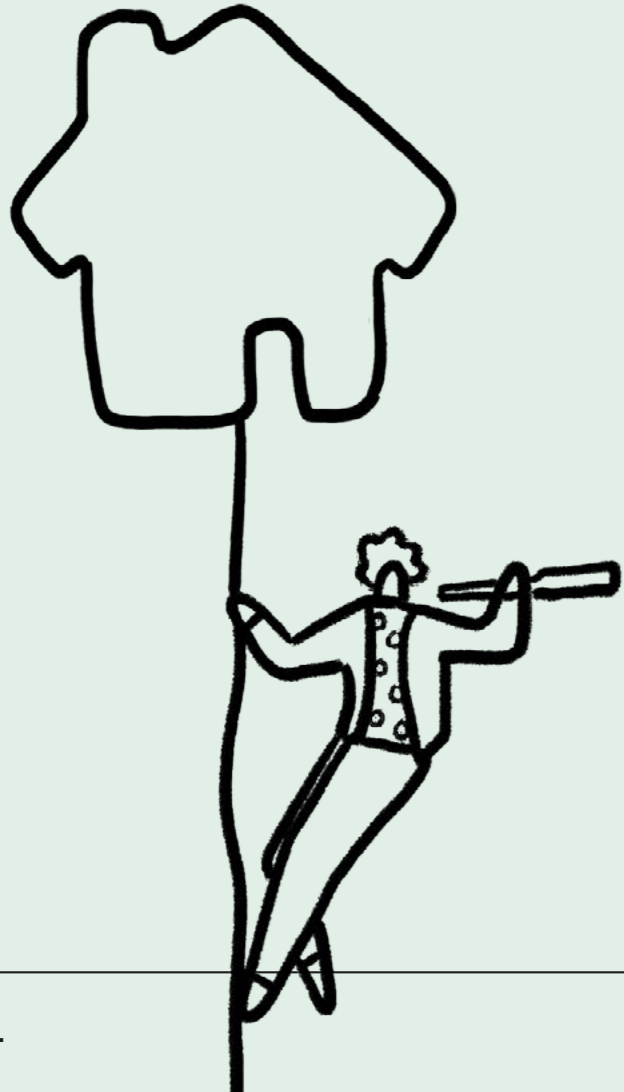
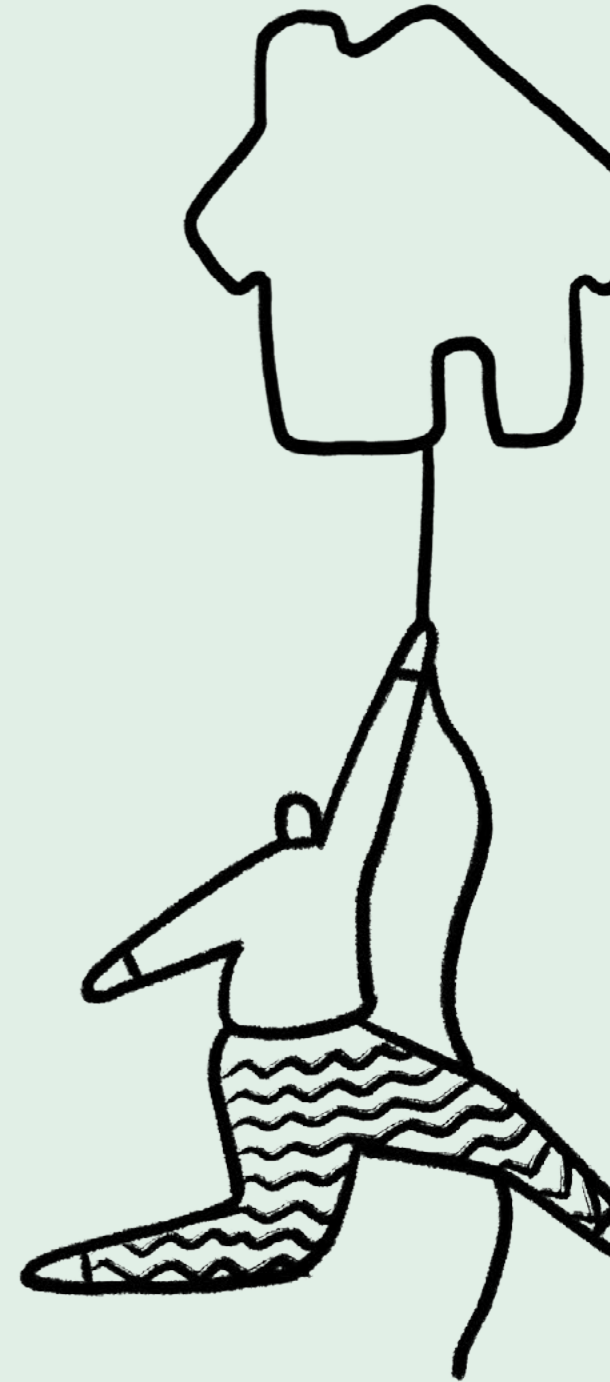
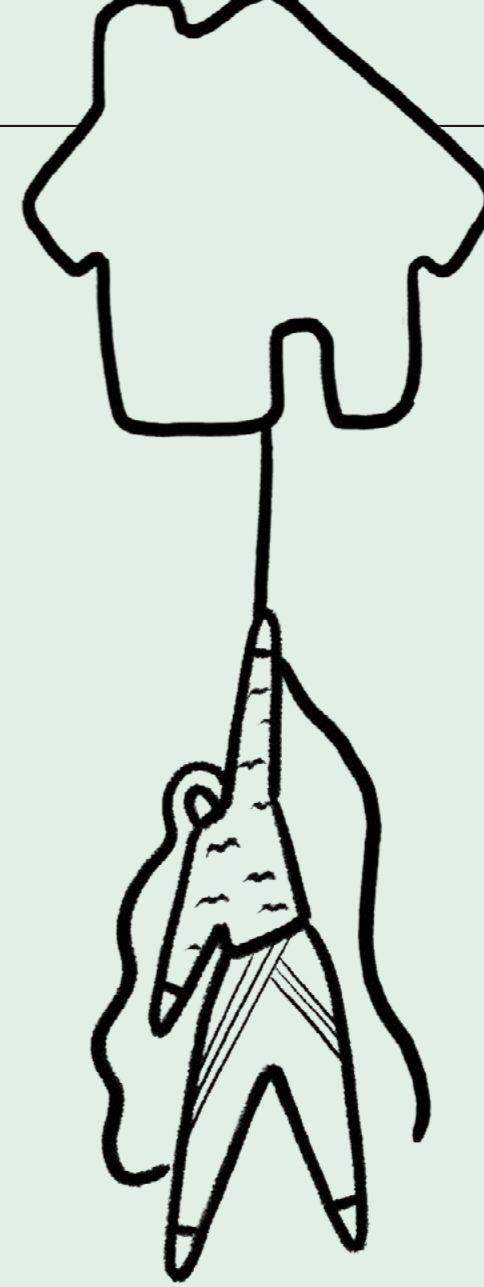
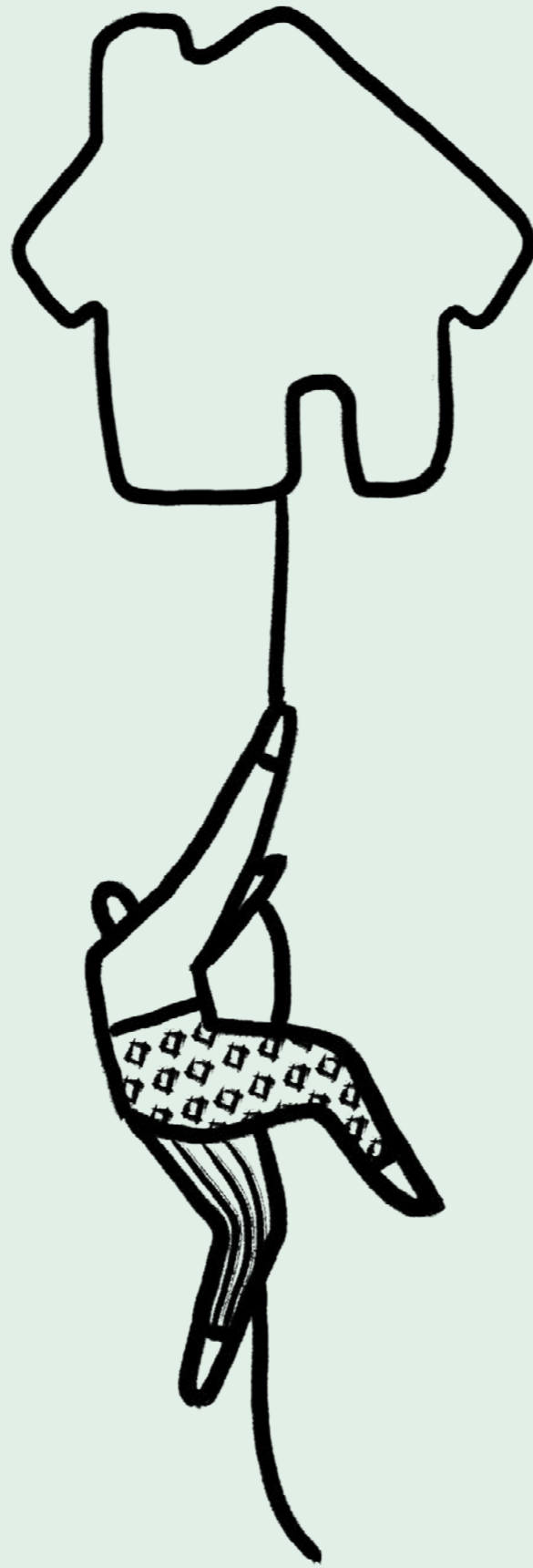
are first-generation  
children of immigrants





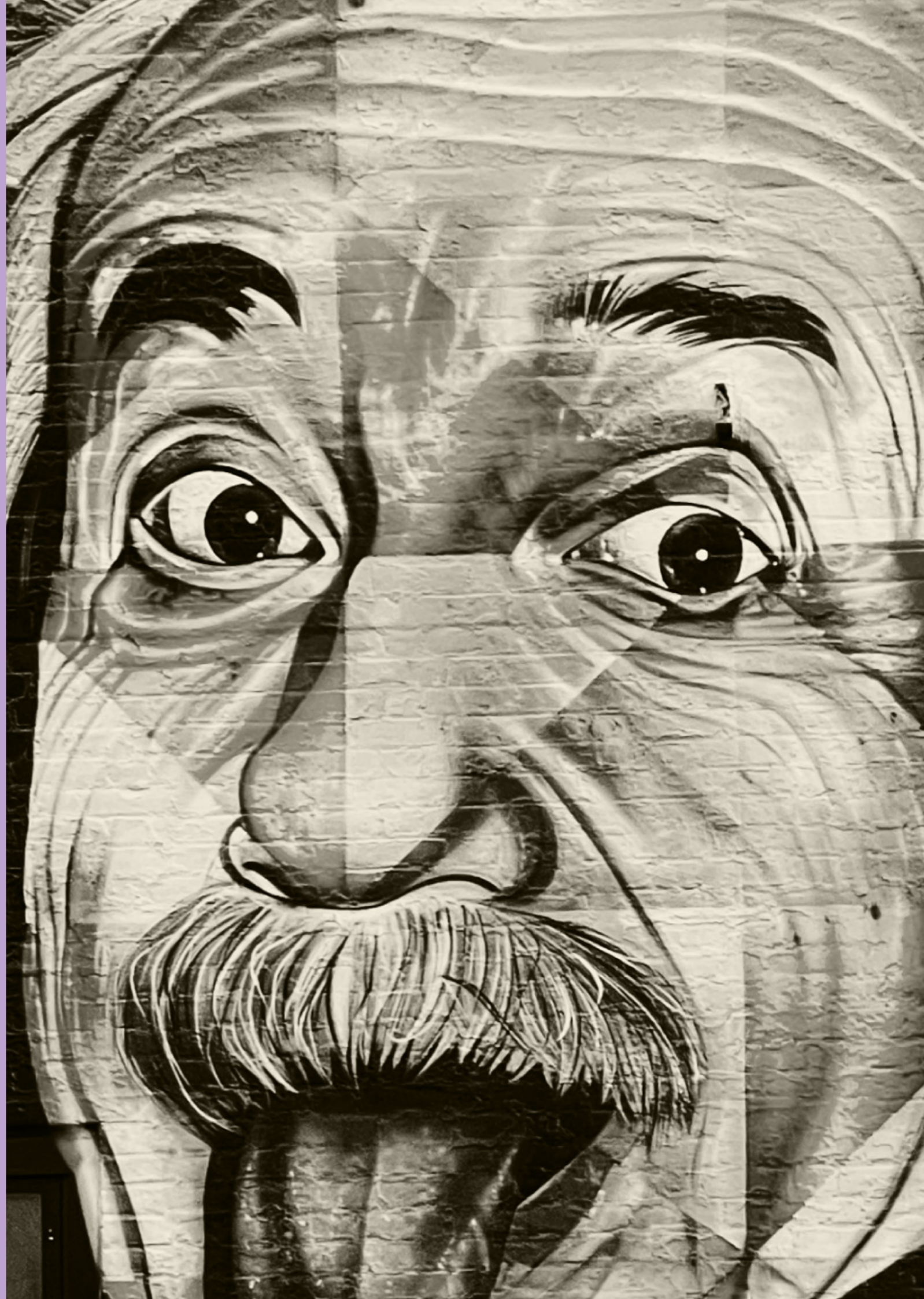
32%

*of designers have moved countries to live and work abroad*



**“Creativity  
is the one  
language that  
all people can  
understand.”**

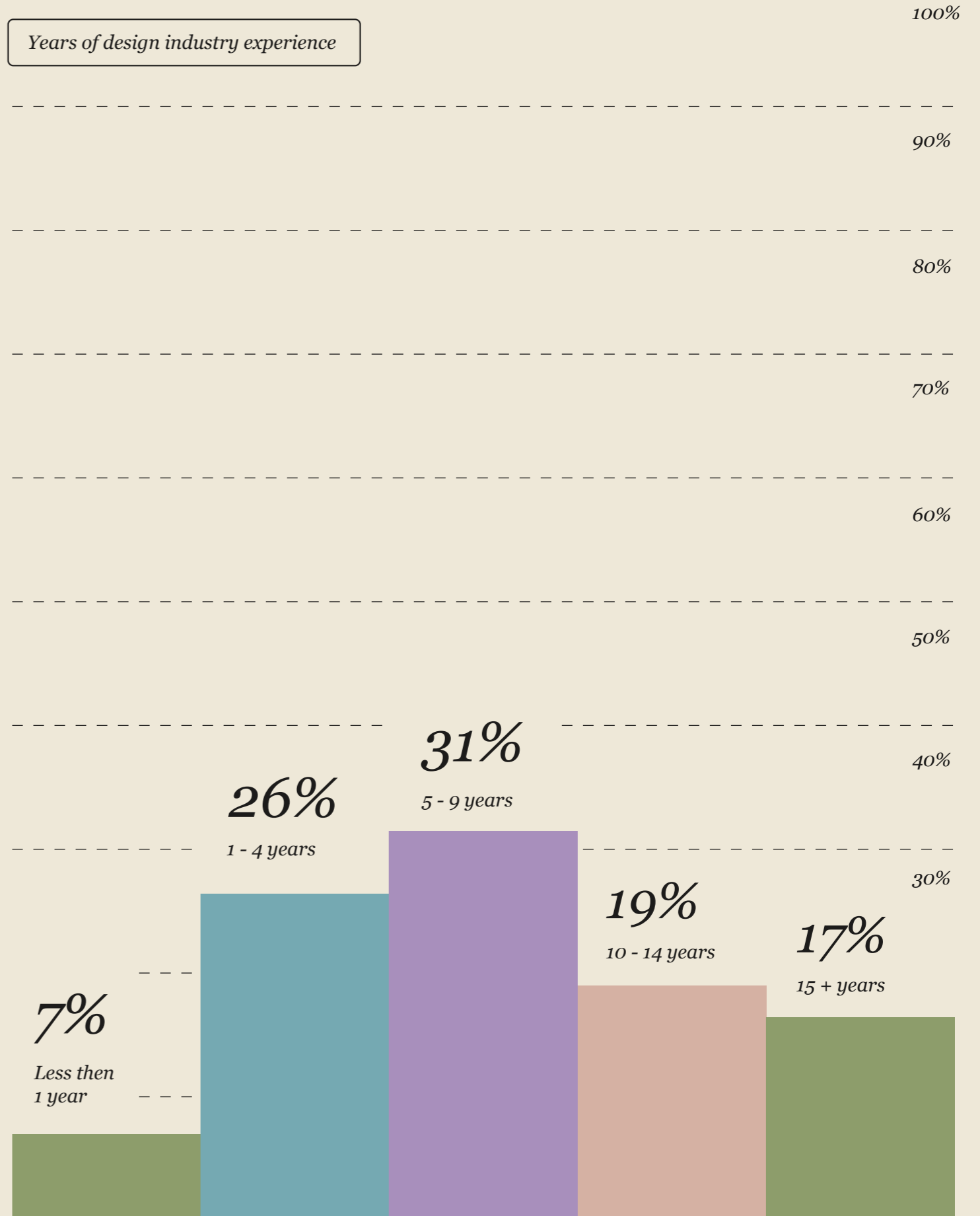
- Stasha, Serbia





# Cultured and qualified: the perfect mix for creativity

Diversity is not the only quality that's driving unique design. When you consider that 67% of freelancers have 5+ years of industry experience – more than half of whom have worked in design for more than a decade – the creative results are not only well-rounded, they're well-polished too.



# Creativity with a conscience



# Designers are looking for purpose, not just a paycheck.

From healthcare and climate change to racial injustice, each year brings a new global crisis into focus. And with brand activism on the rise, freelancers are stepping up – 97% of them believe creatives have the power to make a real social impact, and 85% feel it's important to work for clients who share their values. In fact, we're even seeing this play out in designers' financial decisions.



*Creativity at a cost*

# 40%

*of freelance creatives have turned down work because of a client's stance on social issues*

# A cause for creativity.

As designers strive to use their skills for good, they're looking to philanthropic causes as a way to do so. While 76% said they would like to work with a social justice organization, almost a third of designers already do – and 66% of that work is done pro-bono.



*Fig 01. Logo design for homeware brand and zine distributor by Farida Rafikova*



*Fig 02. Retro-inspired logo for eco-friendly retailer by Dusan Klepic*

**“What matters to me most is the motivation of an organization. Authenticity and good intent matters.”**

- Viktoria Stalybka, Belarus

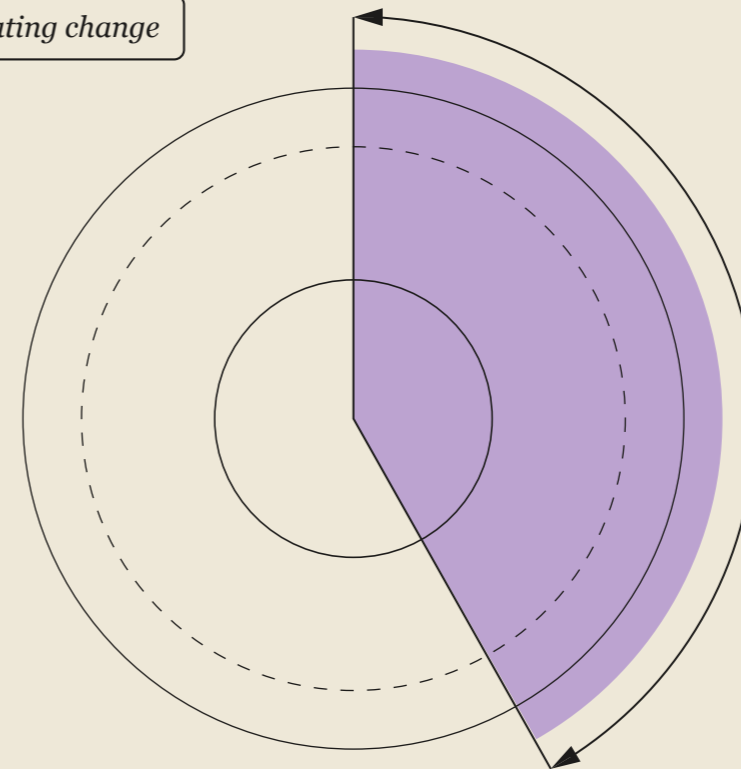


*Fig 03. Logo for a virtual hackathon hosted by Black Girls CODE X Nike, exploring tech as a tool for social change by Andreas Studio*

# Social feeds are still a force for change.

Social media continues to transform the way we consume news, and for freelancers it's no different, with 78% saying it's where they get their information on current issues. It's also where their designs can have the most impact on a global audience, as they convey complex issues through simple, sharable visual forms (a snappy hashtag also helps!).

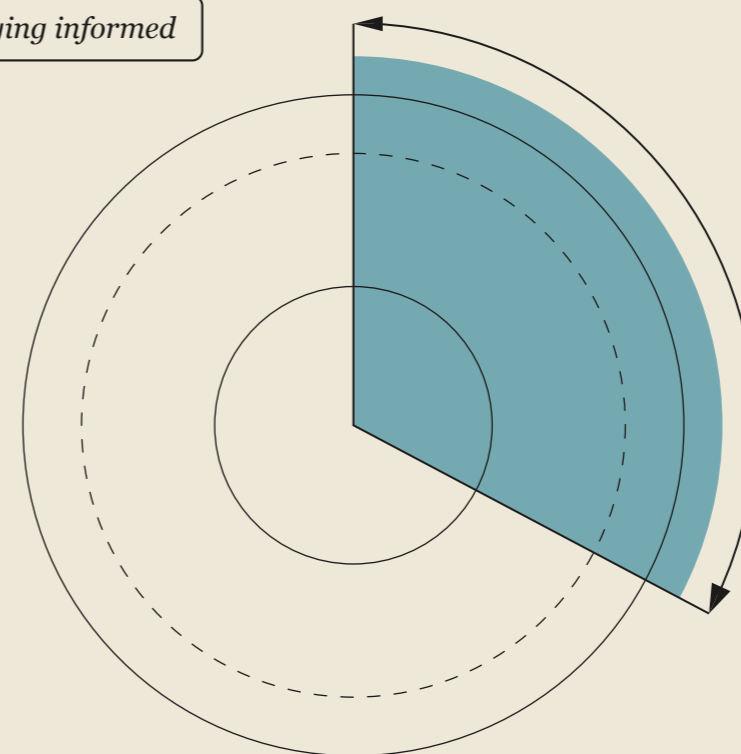
Creating change



# 42%

*shared or created a piece of content related to a social justice issue*

Staying informed



# 33%

*of designers follow a social media account related to a social justice issue*

**“A teacher of mine used to say that all design is political, which is true. We are the bridge between a message and the public. We can make the world change and improve.”**

- Designer #4663, Chile



by BATHI

**“The world is big and the internet has shown us that there will always be someone who has the same values as you and for whom your creation will have an impact.”**

*- RAJAOMAZAVA Fenosoa Abraham, Madagascar*



**“Design is about showcasing a problem and solution in a way that it will make the viewer do something about it. It’s about distributing that message to the right people and creating a need for change within individuals to make a difference in the world.”**

*- Tonya-Dee Greyvenstein, South Africa*





# Striking a balance & finding success



# The wins that come when the world works from home.

While designers are more selective about the projects they take on, and some (32%) experienced difficulty finding steady work, the majority managed to find greater balance and financial freedom. 60% of designers said their work-life balance has improved this year, allowing them to reconnect with their

main motivation for freelancing: personal flexibility and freedom. The global shift to remote work has also created increased opportunities, with 68% saying clients and agencies are more open to working with freelance talent than before the pandemic.



Fig 04. Working from home by Illia Kolesnyk

*A better (bank) balance*

# 71%

*of freelance designers expect their income to increase in 2022*

**“When I became a full-time freelancer, the major worry was being able to keep up with the same financial status as I was used to. This year I finally managed to surpass my previous job in terms of income and I consider that a win.”**

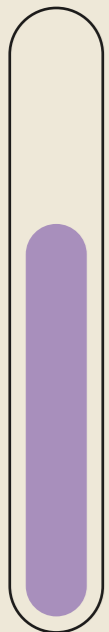
*- Kosala Liyanage, Sri Lanka*



# Working for yourself, not *by* yourself.



The nature of working remotely on top of a lingering pandemic has seen freelancing remain a solitary endeavor, physically speaking, as 59% said they didn't go to a workplace or see clients in-person. Yet this has had little effect on their appetite for connection and collaboration.



## 68%

*of freelancers said they worked with other designers on projects at least some of the time*



## 83%

*said they'd like to work with a team if given the option*



## 32%

*said they made new industry connections online*

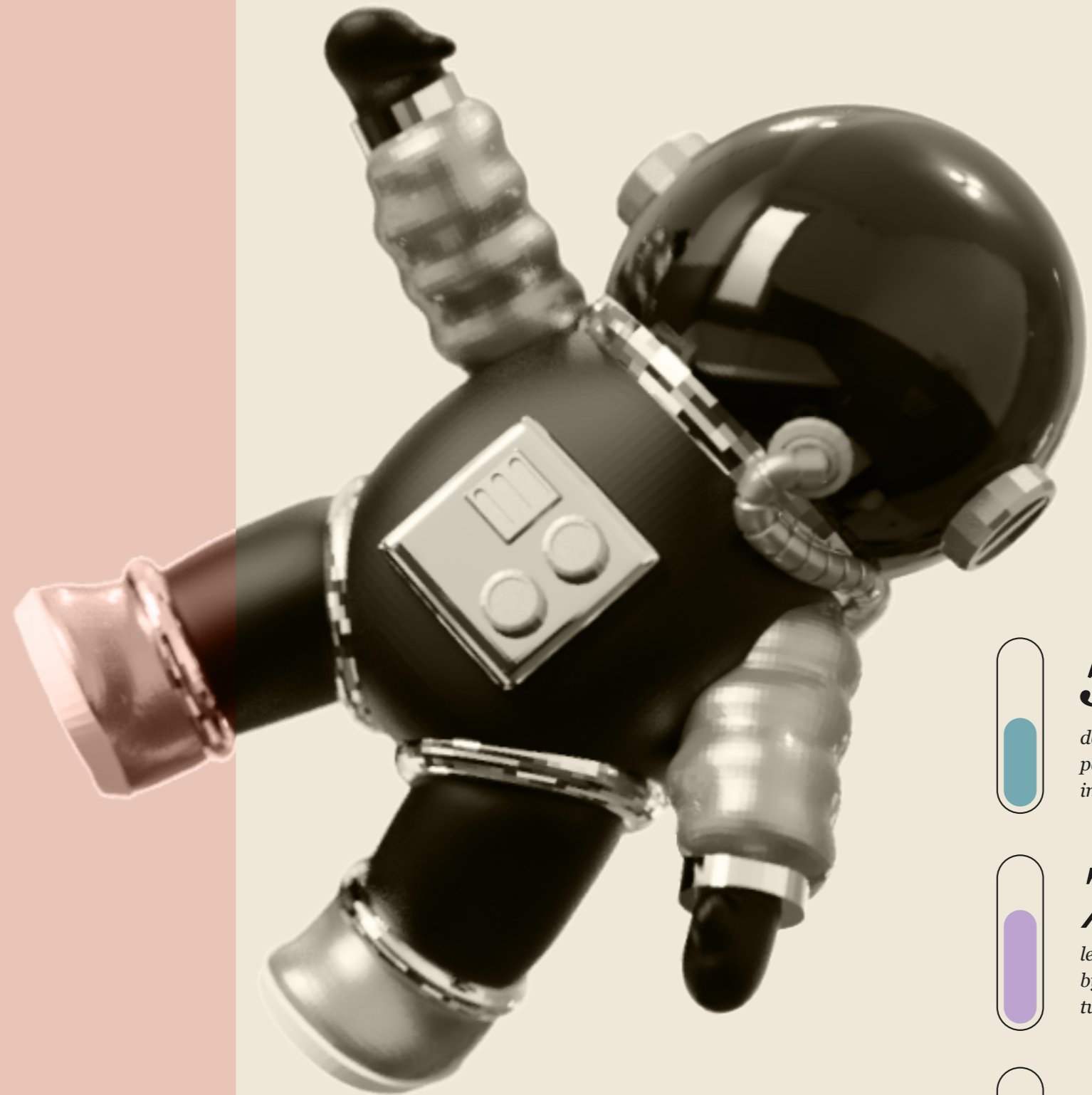
**“As more organizations adopt the use of collaborative tools such as Figma, design will be something that employees from all teams will engage with. More people across all industries will be exposed to the importance of design, and more people will have input in the process.”**

*– Zach Eichler, Canada*



# Self-development – the freelance superpower.

Freelancers are also embracing online environments to set themselves up as multi-tooled creatives for the future. Their commitment to constant (and never-ending) improvement has seen 78% start to learn a new professional skill in the past six months, almost half of which was done through online classes.



**52%**

*dedicated time to personal development in the past 12 months*



**72%**

*learned a new skill by watching YouTube tutorials*



**60%**

*learned a new skill by experimenting*

*Fig 05. Self-development through experimentation with 3D design – by Alejandro Duque*

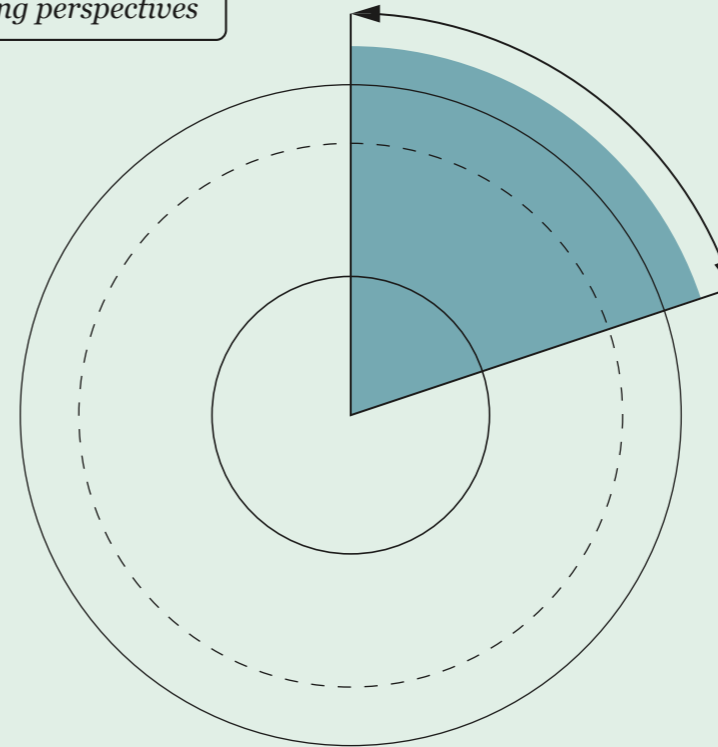
# The Great Agency Exodus



# A desire for something different.

Agencies have stabilized after the most turbulent months of the pandemic in terms of both client losses and staff layoffs. But as we continue to see industries hit with the tidal wave of the 'Great Resignation', designers are reconsidering their place in the agency landscape. As the majority (60%) find greater work-life balance, just 15% of designers want to be employed at an agency in the next 5 years.

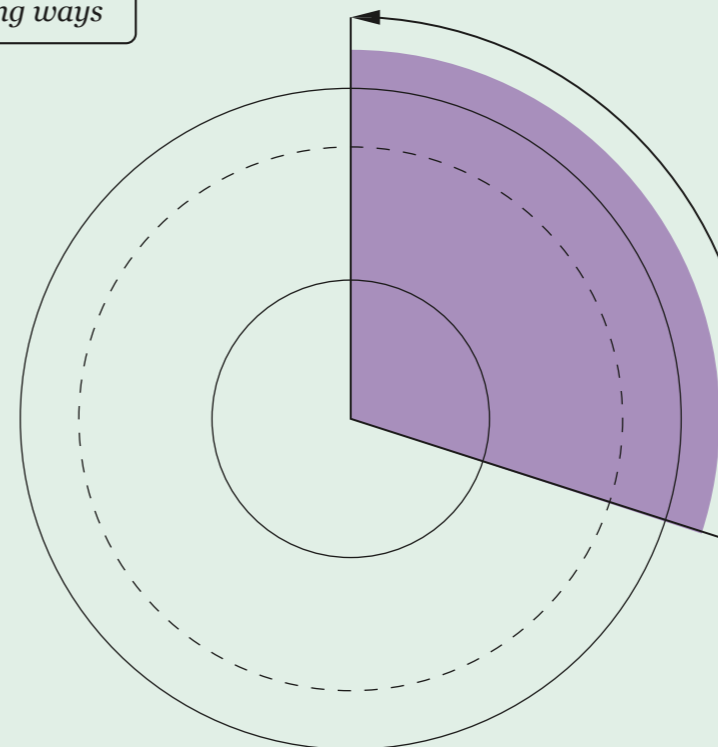
*Shifting perspectives*



# 1 in 5

*freelancers currently work at an agency – and almost half (45%) of them have considered leaving in the past year*

*Parting ways*



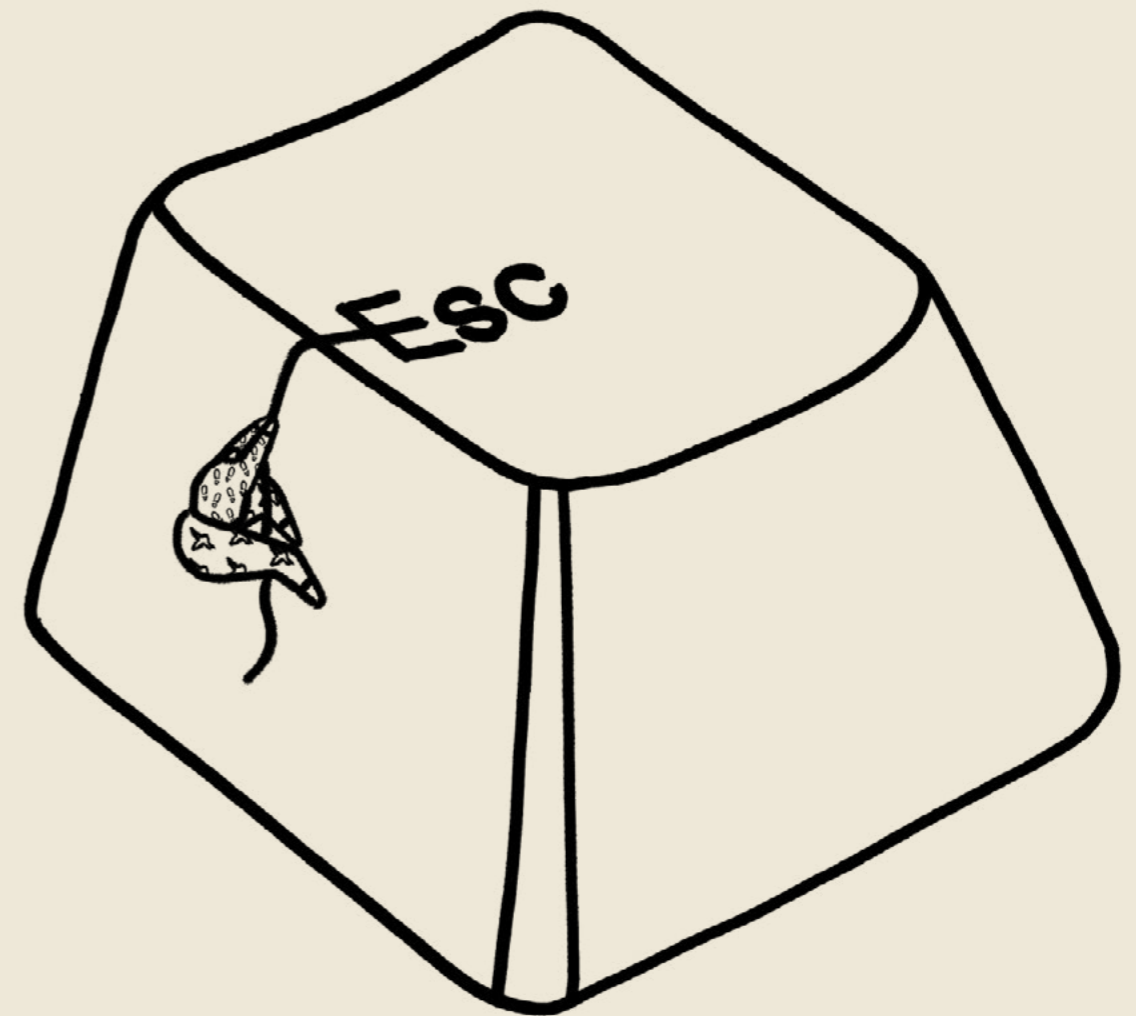
# 30%

*Almost a third of freelance designers with agency experience have quit their agency job in the past twelve months*



**“My biggest win  
this year was  
leaving full-time  
agency work to  
freelance with  
my own clients.”**

- Designer #4068, Australia



# Are agencies losing their agency over freelancers?

Around a third (35%) of freelance designers currently have agencies as regular clients, but they aren't exactly their favorite kind of client. Freelancers still favor working with entrepreneurs over anyone else. Considering the parallels in

their professional values – with each known for their passionate, self-reliant, hard-working approach (42% of freelancers work 40+ hours a week) – it may be no surprise that freelancers rank them as their ideal creative match.

*Who designers rank as their ideal clients:*

01. **Individual entrepreneurs**
02. **Medium businesses** 11-50 people
03. **Small businesses** 2-10 people
04. **Large businesses** 50+ people
05. **Agencies**

# Self-employment beats working for someone else.

True to their nature, freelancers want to maintain control over their lifestyle and workload, as almost half stated that they want to freelance full-time. But they also have ambitious ideas for how that evolves in the future.

As the world becomes accustomed to working with remote talent, the scope of work and opportunities for collaboration are (quite literally) boundless. And considering that 68% of designers already collaborate regularly by forming remote teams for projects, how these creative collectives come to be in the future might not be what we think of as “traditional” agencies.

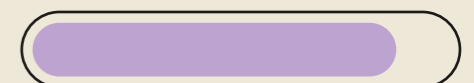
Looking ahead



# 48%

*want to establish their own  
studio or agency within the  
next 5 years*

Average confidence 0-100



# 87%

*"I am confident that I will  
reach my professional goals  
in the next 10 years"*

# Future focus



# Motivated, positive and poised for impact: freelancers are stepping into their power.

Freelance designers identified professional and personal growth alongside financial success as the things most important to them. The vast majority are earning more (71%), are learning new skills (78%), and have found better balance in their lives over the past 12

months (60%). But they're not resting on their laurels. Freelancers are embracing their entrepreneurial drive, bettering themselves and fueling their growth in order to take on the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead.



*Fig 06. Armed for anything by Illia Kolesnyku*

# Challenging bias with belief in a better future.

Creatives identified systemic social bias and algorithmic bias as two of the biggest problems currently facing the design industry. But they also see areas of significant opportunity and growth through artificial intelligence, virtual reality and NFTs, reflecting their strong belief in a better and more equitable future for design.

Average level of optimism 0-100



83%

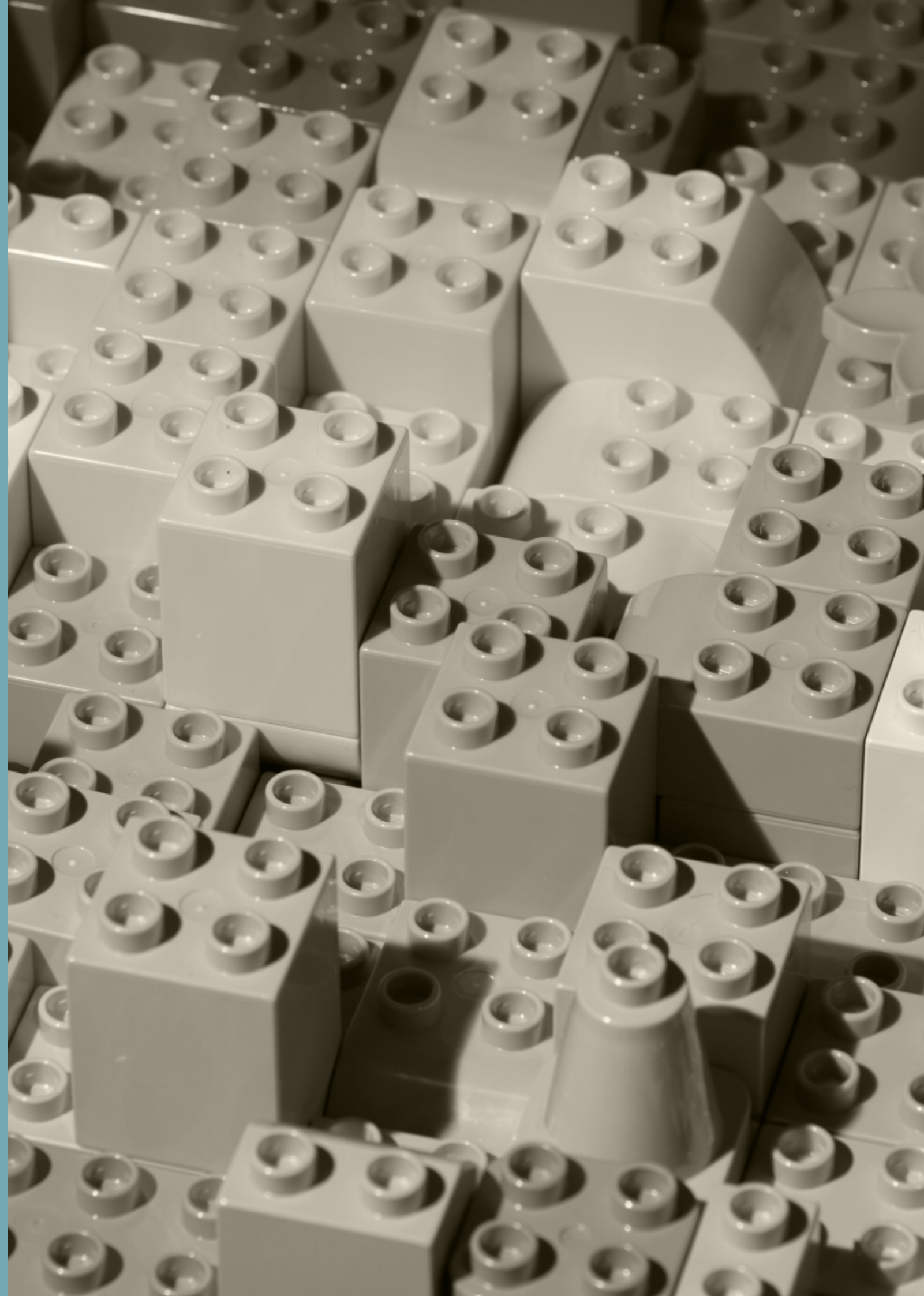
*“I am optimistic about the future of the design industry”*

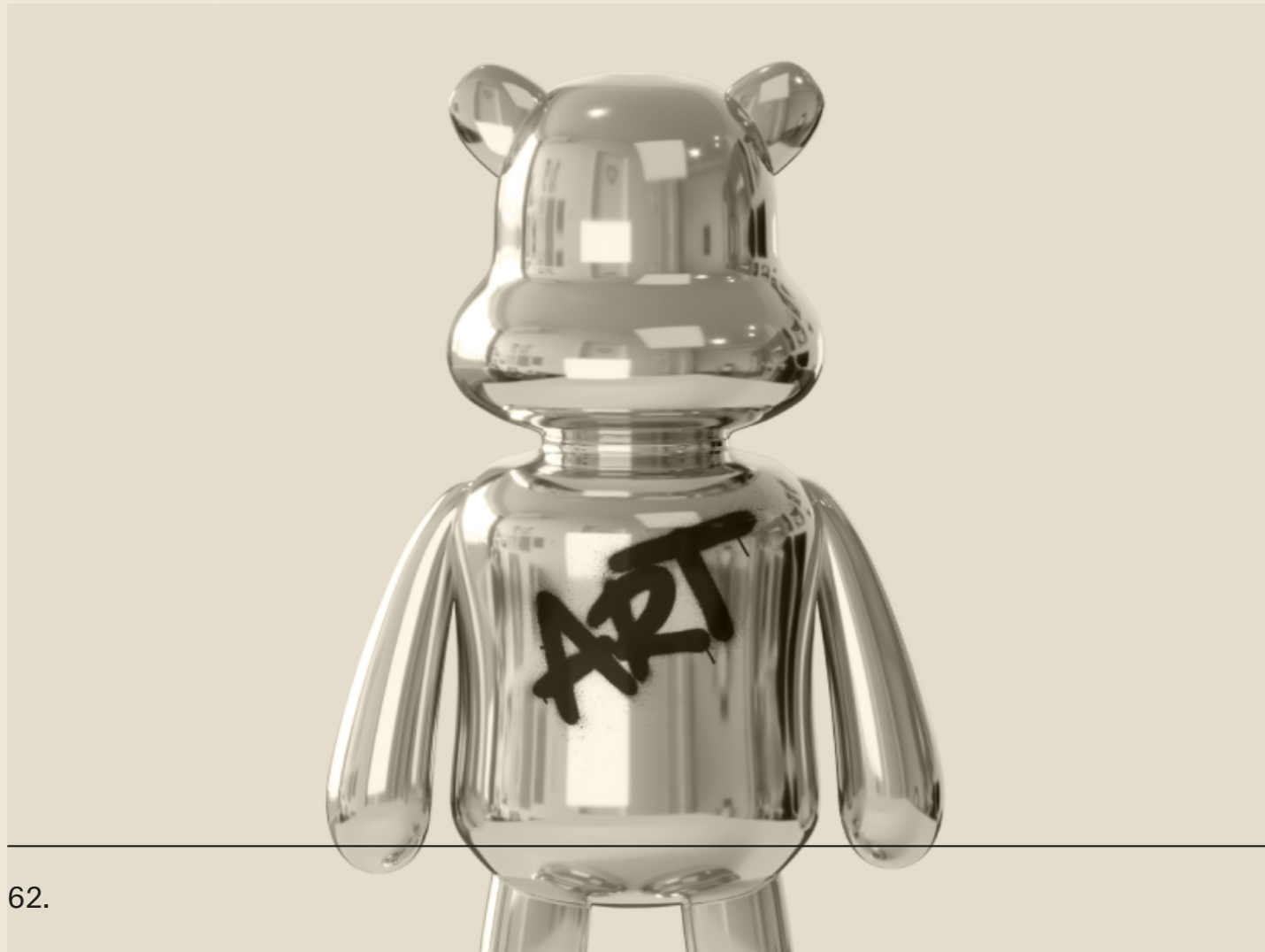


by SiBudi Design

**“If there is anything we've learned during the pandemic, it's that systems are beautifully complex and intertwined. And it's designers who strive to shed away the layers of misconceptions, biases, and stereotypes that exist, approaching systemic problems through a perspective of growth and learning.”**

*- Designer #8758, Canada*



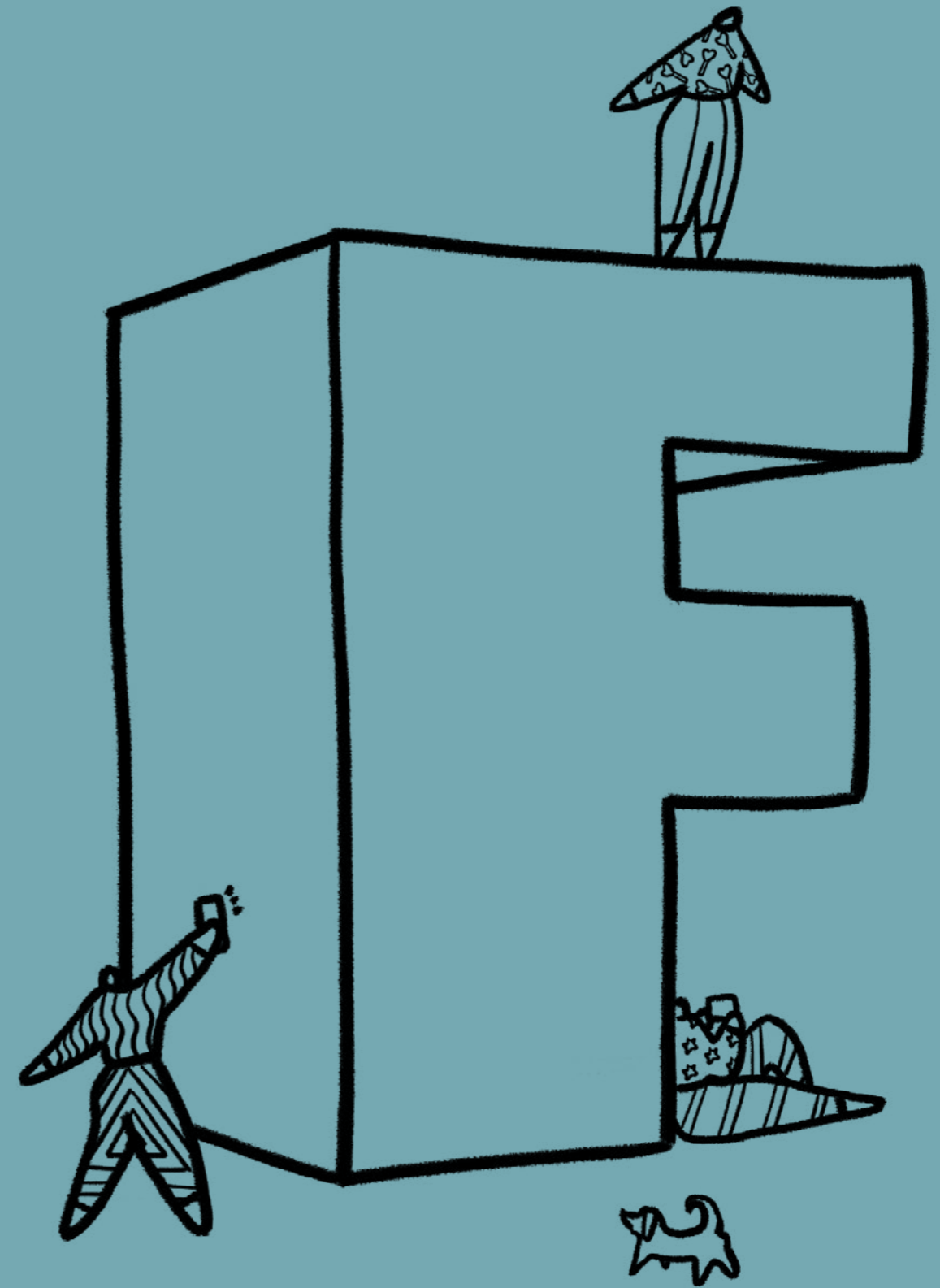


*NFTs and 3D Art (and 3D Art NFTs!) are all rapidly growing markets in the design world*

*Far left (top and bottom)  
by HTM13™  
All others by Valeriia\_*



# A fresh perspective on freelance



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**With their optimism, upskilling and appetite for social activism, freelance designers are positioning themselves to make an even greater impact in 2022.**

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Through the widespread adoption of collaborative online tools, we're seeing a distributed creative workforce that are hungry for new ways to come together – combining their creatively unique and diverse perspectives to reach clients in all corners of the world.

Many have become more disciplined with their time as they look to get more out of their craft. Whether it be future-proofing their skills, or aligning themselves with social justice causes, designers are choosing to work with meaning and purpose on projects that matter to them – it's less about money and more about making a difference.

And while they're optimistic about their own success, they're under no illusion that it's an easy road ahead. They're not naive to the global and industry-specific challenges that await – in fact, they're willing to adapt and tackle them head on with conscious action, self-belief and determination; the inherent traits that could see freelancers influence the world in a deeper, more profound way.

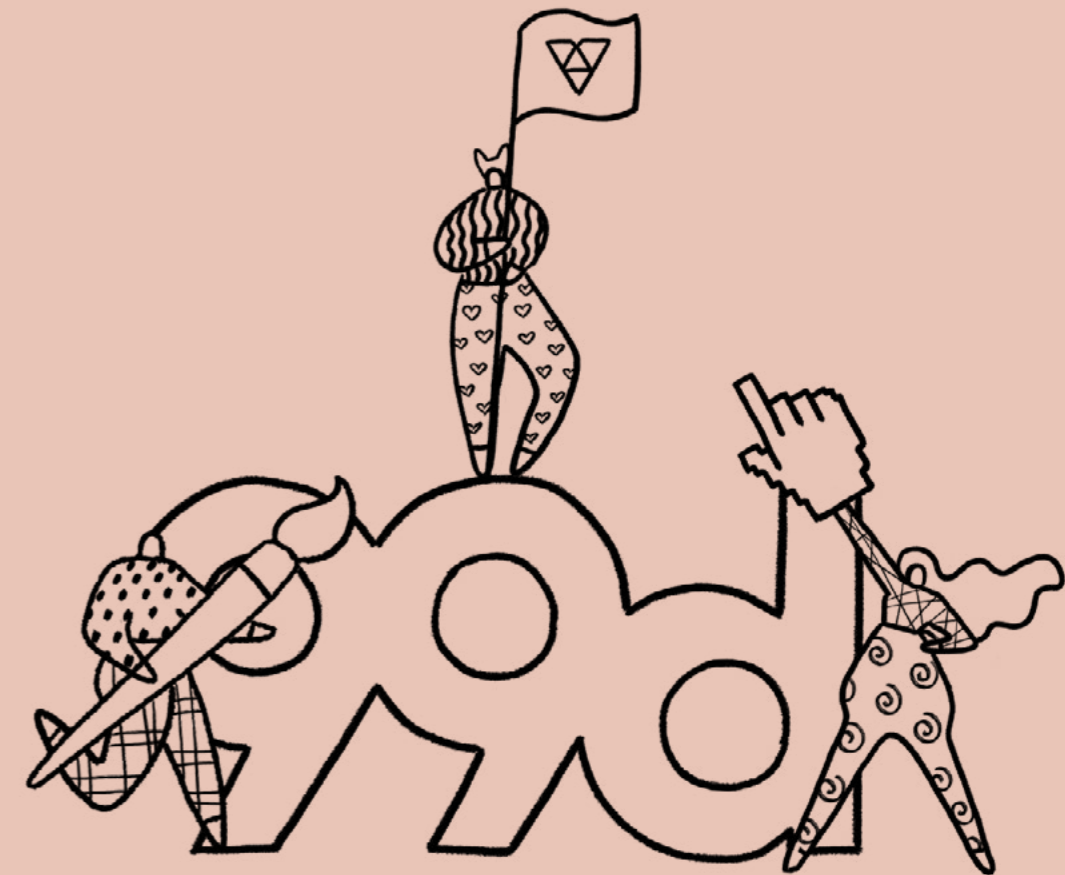
**“Creatives are  
the builders of  
the future.”**

*- Designer #7087, Canada*



# Methodology

The data for this report was collected by 99designs by Vista between October 18, 2021 and November 1st, 2021. The online survey was distributed via email, social media, paid partnerships and industry-targeted ads on LinkedIn and Facebook. It had 10,118 qualified respondents from the following regions: APAC (4,059), Europe (2,570), North America (582), South America (1,283), Africa (765) and Unknown (859) Quotes have been pulled from open responses.



# Meet the designers



## Aleksandra Dimitrijević

- *Illustrator*

Aleksandra Dimitrijević (šaška™) is a Top Level Designer based in Novi Sad, Serbia. Her work is a mix of collage, photography, and illustration, with a particular fondness for hand-drawn elements. After many years of being a self-confessed “jack of all trades”, Aleksandra looks back on her 10 years of design experience as a journey of experimentation that led to her personal niche. When it comes to working on 99designs, she says she feels lucky to have such amazing and bold clients who give her the freedom to design from her own sensibilities. And her advice to new designers is twofold: trust the process of finding your style through imitation and experimentation; and remember to play away from the computer, as inspiration often strikes when you’re at a bar, in nature, or hugging your favorite person. Her guiding principle for this year’s report was “simple illustrations that carry weight”.



## Marko Šmitran

- *Report designer*

Marko Šmitran (SmiDESIGN) is a Top Level designer and creative director based in Novi Sad, Serbia. With over 11 years of industry experience, Marko started his journey on 99designs as a logo designer and cites his “stubbornness and passion” as the reason for initially taking on multiple contests to improve his craft and expand his style. A lover of minimalism, Marko brings a clean and considered design approach to every brand he works with, utilizing visual storytelling skills to turn each project into a unique identity. Marko isn't afraid to share his wisdom with those just starting out either, advising new designers to keep their primary audience top-of-mind and always ask questions throughout the project. His belief is that designers are not merely makers of pretty things, but visual communicators and problem-solvers. Marko never shies away from an ambitious project – which is just what we wanted to hear when we asked him to collaborate on this year's report.

# And that's a wrap!

Well, kind of.

Here's one last fact that you don't need to know  
(but you'll be sure to remember)...

The term freelancer comes from "free lance" the  
old English name for a mercenary who would sell  
their 'lance' (that's a spear) to the highest bidder!



*Fig 07. by NOVACHB*