

In Conversation with Anita Perr

Cole Neufield, Declan Gunn, and Keviin Shah are Teen Thinkers at the Bard Graduate Center. They spoke with Anita Perr, an occupational therapist who works at the New York University Ability Project on July 23, 2019. Below is an excerpt from their interview.

Location: New York University Occupational Therapy Department, New York City

Audio Excerpt #1:

Cole Neufield: One thing that has always stood out to me, just looking at the world, is how many devices for disabled people put function completely over form. I know, for instance, that my mom hates her heart monitor. It's like this clunky, big bracelet; nobody wants that-

Anita Perr: Right! Right-

Cole: Like she's a human person walking through the world-

Anita: Right! Why can't it be a beautiful bracelet?

Cole: There's no reason! It doesn't affect its abilities. Like, if you can make an Apple watch look the way it does, there's no reason why a heart monitor can't look like that.

Anita: So.. I agree with your theory, but in our culture things are paid by medical insurance. And if medical insurance thinks it's something that everybody is gonna buy, they're not gonna pay for it.

Cole: Yeah.

Anita: So sometimes, it's made to look medical so that it will be paid for by medical insurance. So instead of us thinking that 'if you need something you should be able to get it', we have to be able to prove that the person is in bad enough shape to need something. And, that, so like I have a difference in that whole philosophy. But I totally agree with you that things can be beautiful and still work! There's a really beautiful hearing aid that's a combination of the part that you wear on your ear, and then there's a necklace associated with it too. And it's *gorgeous*, it's beautiful jewelry and you would never know it's a hearing aid. Or if you knew it was a hearing aid, who cares! Because it's

still beautiful. And there is, also there is a watch that has just little dots on it. And the dots move and show the time. So that all you have to do is touch it with your fingers and you can tell if there's one dot- wherever- at two o'clock, at the two, and one at the three, then you know it's 2:15. And it's made for people who are blind, but it's *so beautiful* that everybody wears it and loves it. So that kind of thing that I think is great. That's, I, the concept of Universal Design, where you design for the broadest community.

Audio Excerpt #2:

Cole: I think it's really interesting seeing more and more designers get involved in the idea of mobility aids being another conduit of identity, of expressing identity and style. As other things people use to move, like cars, have always been-

Anita: Right!

Cole: like stylistically minded. One example being the 3D printed prosthetic covers, that look like-

Anita: So nice.

Cole: - that they're engraved. And I was wondering what you thought has contributed to this shift? It's obvious that there's a really long way to go with it, but like this shifting view of mobility aids as something that can be more than just something that helps someone move around...

Anita: Yeah! So I think there's a couple of things that kinda feed into that. Um.... So, the function of a mobility aid- like a prosthetic leg or something like that- is to get the best function like the leg. And a lot of that research comes from funding from the Department of Defence, because traditionally, originally, the people who were injured were people who were away at war and they would come back as amputees. And so, the V.A started doing all this research on making the best, most productive prosthesis. So I think part of it is acknowledging the importance of that research and having funding available to do that. And on the other end I think that with the design, not the function based design necessarily, but the aesthetic design, I think that a lot that's changed it now is this maker movement that's really kind of taken over everybody and 3D printers are so cheap that there is one in your community that you can use. So everybody is interested in it. Which I think is wonderful! I think the problem associated with that is that that designer still needs to be part of a team because they're only gonna know what's in their head. They're not

gonna know, for example, what happens with the amputee again; what do you have to do with pressure distribution so that someone doesn't get a pressure sore? How're you going to have somebody go up and down stairs? What're you gonna do for the rest of function? So, I think having them as team members is really important. But not at the loss of medical specialists, engineers, all the other people who've been doing the slower road through research to get things done. The other thing too is that- two other things- one is insurance, again, and the other is that for a lot of equipment it has to be passed through the FDA so that it's safe for people to use. So, power wheelchairs are regulated by the FDA in that the motor needs to be shrowded. So, what was actually happening was that if a ambulance, or something, went by and rang their siren the wavelength of the siren was the same as the motors. So sometimes -uh- a wheelchair would just go flying when a siren went by. Yeah. Yeah. Which is really dangerous! So then the design had to include shrowding of the motor so that that couldn't happen. And that really limits artists in their thinking. So, working with artists who have to work within regulations is also complicated.