JOURNAL 9

MACRO UNDERSTANDING MICRO ACTIONS

SOUR

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INTRODUCTION 01

There's quite the distance between knowing you're hungry and addressing that hunger. Awareness of "need for food" is only the first step. You have to acquire it — buy it, grab it, forage it — then prepare it, then eat it. You complete the conscious tasks, and your body continues the process. It breaks the meal down into proteins and complex carbohydrates, and then further still, through a long chain of small sequential tasks. What started as a signal of hunger has become the energy to do the things you actually wanted to do in the first place.

The body is a natural, complex system, and it is astonishingly good at converting awareness into action. It doesn't leave the awareness of hunger sitting unresolved somewhere inside you. It runs an entire architecture devoted to conversion, taking an input it has registered and metabolizes it, step by step, into something usable. Nothing is meant to be held, and what's left stored in your body is often the excess that you didn't need (hi belly fat!)

Most awareness we carry about the world does not go through such a process. We know most plastic we touch likely ends up in a landfill, and we use it anyway. We know some of what we eat may contain carcinogenic ingredients, and we eat it anyway. We feel the climate growing hotter year after year and find ourselves looking to resolve our felt experience instead of the real problem. The awareness arrives fully intact. But the digestive tract that would turn it into necessary action simply isn't there.

Most of our input has nowhere to go, nothing to convert to. Unlike hunger, which the body knows exactly how to resolve, our awareness of systemic problems increasingly meets a wall instead of a roadmap. Energy that cannot convert does not quietly disappear, so where does it go? How does it translate? It gets stored into us as anxiety, stress, anger, depression, fatigue and more.

We have become exquisitely good at taking the world in, and less and less able to put anything back out. What we cannot metabolize we absorb and it manifests as unhealthy emotional or physical symptoms.

At SOUR, we briefly describe this as the AAA principle: Unless Awareness converts to Action it results in Anxiety. And there is much scientific evidence that backs it. A four-wave longitudinal study of 5,322 people (te Poel et al., 2016) tested whether searching online for health information raises health anxiety, which then drives more searching. Among people with non-clinical anxiety levels, they found initial evidence for the expected reciprocal relationship between health anxiety and online health information seeking — a loop in which anxiety about one's health drives online health information seeking, which in turn increases health-related fears. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 20 studies (McMullan et al., 2019) quantified the link, finding a positive correlation between health anxiety and online health information seeking and between health anxiety and cyberchondria (excessive or repeated searching of the internet for medical information). While the topic of these studies is health information, it is an analogous mechanism: the abundance of information on issues - and particularly a combination of accurate, inaccurate and vague information - does not result in the cure. Awareness does not have the means to convert into right action, therefore more awareness becomes a system overload that manifests as anxiety.

So if the antidote is action, why don't we simply begin somewhere? There are a million reasons why, and that in a sense is the answer. If we treat inaction as the tip of an iceberg, the visible "event" sits atop layers of patterns, structures, and mental models, each holding countless reasons why starting somewhere feels impossible [refer to Iceberg model]. The patterns beneath may be a history of failures, or of efforts that came to little, informing our reluctance to try again. Even when the will is there, we may be lodged inside a system structure that leaves no room to act. Dig further still and we reach the mental models: the assumptions absorbed through media, schooling, society, and lived experience that shape how we perceive a problem before we've even approached it. Faced with a system this complex, we tend toward analysis paralysis, because we cannot fully analyze a complex system. And while structural and mindset shifts are the most powerful leverage points available to us, they are also the slowest to arrive; they do not happen overnight.

Where does this lead us, other than to question things until the questioning wears us out? The answer has always been available to us in the wisdom of Indigenous communities and in the plain workings of the natural world. The Apache say, "Even a small star shines in the darkness." The Inuit say, "A rocky path is smoothed by many feet." And an African proverb offers, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito." Nature shows us the same. The earthworm burrows through the soil, eating decomposing matter and leaving behind nutrient-rich castings, and in doing so it carves millions of tiny subterranean channels so that water and oxygen can reach the roots of plants. The beaver chews through a single twig, then another, stacking these small pieces of wood against mud to slow a moving stream, and from that patient accumulation emerges an entire wetland: a filter for pollutants, a habitat for thousands of species.

We were never meant to hold the solution to wicked problems in our hands. What we needed instead was to define micro-actions: steps that are bite-size, digestible, and sequential by design, and that are meant to be performed by collectives. This reframing changes what we're reaching for: our goal is not to reach a solution to our problems, but to have alignment on what to tackle first. That alignment is what sets the principles, and the principles are what guide the micro-actions we take from here. Awareness, at last, is given somewhere to go.

Water ripples outward from a single point. Holding this macro understanding is what unblocks the micro-action of throwing a pebble. This journal is a reminder of that.

May you digest what follows not as one more thing to know, but as something that converts, in you, into an insight you can act upon!

THE AAA PRINCIPLE AT WORK

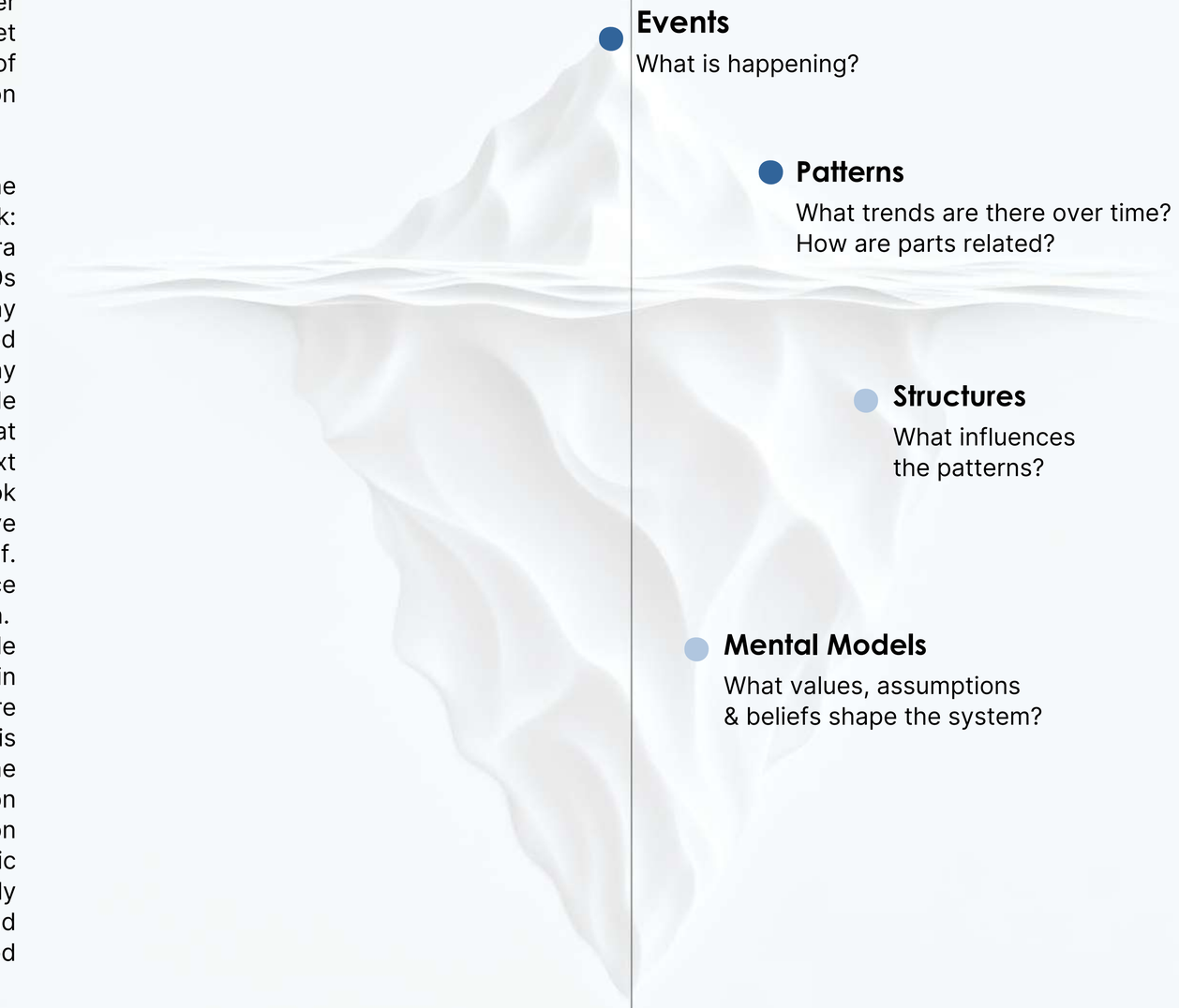
Organizations suffer from the same condition as the people inside them: they take in far more than they convert.

A modern company eats constantly. It takes in dashboards, engagement surveys, customer complaints, audit findings, exit interviews, market research and sustainability reports. Very little of this intake has a route to action. The organization has a mouth and no digestive tract.

Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton named this the knowing-doing gap in 2000. Let's take Kodak: One of its engineers built a working digital camera in 1975, and its own research in the early 1980s forecast the shift away from film. The company filed for bankruptcy in 2012. Its awareness arrived fully intact and had nowhere to go. An everyday version is the staff survey that produces a slide deck and nothing else. Employees learn that naming a problem changes nothing, so the next survey measures their cynicism. In the book Loonshots, Bahcall shares a similar perspective stating that the weak point is rarely the idea itself. It is the handoff between the people who notice or invent and the people who run the operation.
Occupational research reached the AAA principle decades ago:Robert Karasek's 1979 job strain model found that mental strain is highest where demands are high and the freedom to decide is low. Knowing what needs doing while lacking the power to do it is the most damaging combination a job can offer. The World Health Organization now describes burnout as the result of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. That is anxiety by another name, and it is the collective manifestation of what is stored inside us individually.

The iceberg beneath corporate inaction

The visible event in a company is the initiative that never starts. The three layers beneath it map closely onto what Bahcall describes.



Patterns. Every organization keeps a memory of efforts that came to little, voiced as "we tried that already." Bahcall calls many of these false fails: an idea judged dead because of a flawed test, not a flawed idea. He notes that most breakthroughs were abandoned several times before they worked.

Structures. Building on systems theory, Bahcall writes that "small changes in structure, rather than culture, can transform the behavior of groups". As a company grows, the rewards for rank and politics overtake each person's stake in a project's outcome. The same capable people then stop acting on what they know.

Mental models. Deepest are the assumptions: that big problems need big programs, that action must wait for certainty, that solutions come from the top. Bahcall warns against the leader who personally anoints the winning idea. Donella Meadows ranked such paradigms among the highest leverage points in a system and the hardest to move.

Analysis paralysis follows from all three. A company cannot fully analyze its market, its people or its climate exposure any more than a person can. The demand for a complete answer before the first step is itself a mental model.

THE AAA PRINCIPLE AT WORK

Earthworms and beavers at work

In “Emergent Strategies”, Adrienne Marie Brown builds her whole framework on the natural world for a working model. Her teachers are mycelium, ants, ferns, starlings and dandelions. From them she takes the idea of emergence, in which complex patterns arise from many simple interactions with no one directing the whole: “Small is good, small is all.”

She adds that the pattern is fractal. How a group behaves at the small scale is how it behaves at the large scale. For a company this means a single meeting, a single handoff or a single code review is a sample of the entire culture, and changing it changes the culture.

Designing micro-actions

Micro-actions have four properties, and each already exists in working companies. They are 1. bite-size: small enough to try this week and undo the next, like the reversible “two-way door” decisions Amazon expects small groups to make quickly. 2. They are sequential, so each step yields information for the one after it, as in pilots, sprint retrospectives and blameless incident reviews. 3. They are collective, meaning the team that holds awareness acts on it without escalating to a committee. And 4. they rest on agreement about where to begin, not on a finished solution. Brown favors presence over long preparation, treats failure as a lesson and prizes strong relationships over sheer numbers, while Bahcall expects good ideas to fail several times first and asks leaders to value inventors and operators equally.

An example of what could happen when there is alignment on a clear goal, coupled with a micro-action plan can be seen in Paul O’Neill’s leadership at Alcoa. In 1987, he didn’t offer investors a big turnaround strategy, instead he made a single commitment to worker safety and required every injury to be reported to him within 24 hours with a plan to prevent the next. That one rule forced information to travel from the plant floor to the top in a day. By Charles Duhigg’s account in “The Power of Habit”, injuries fell to a fraction of the national rate and net income grew roughly fivefold by 2000. O’Neill demonstrated that a leader’s job is to build the tract, not to hold the answer.

“COMPLEX PATTERNS ARISE FROM MANY SIMPLE INTERACTIONS”

- **Nick Obolensky**

MICRO-ACTIONS LEADING TO SHIFT

C. 552

Two monks hide eggs in a walking stick
Travelers returning from China carry silkworm eggs to Constantinople inside hollow canes.

China's ancient silk monopoly breaks, and silk-making spreads across the Mediterranean world.

1202

A merchant's son writes a math primer
Leonardo of Pisa, taught arithmetic in North Africa, explains Hindu-Arabic numerals to Italian traders.

Europe drops Roman numerals, opening the way for banking, bookkeeping and modern science.

1543

A storm-blown ship sells two guns
Portuguese traders driven off course to Tanegashima sell a pair of matchlocks to the island's young lord.

Japanese smiths copy them by the thousands, and firearms help unify Japan.

1796

A stratch on a boy's arm
Edward Jenner inoculates eight-year-old James Phipps with cowpox from a milkmaid's hand.

Vaccination is born; smallpox is declared eradicated in 1980.

1856

A teenager rinses out a failed experiment
William Perkin, 18, trying to make quinine at home over Easter break, finds his black sludge dissolves into a vivid purple.

The first synthetic dye launches the chemical industry and, from it, modern pharmaceuticals.

1893

A lawyer is thrown off a train
Mohandas Gandhi is ejected from a first-class carriage in South Africa for refusing to move.

He develops nonviolent resistance, which goes on to end British rule in India.

1928

A dirty dish left over the holidays
Alexander Fleming returns to find mold killing the bacteria on a forgotten culture plate.

Penicillin opens the antibiotic era and saves hundreds of millions of lives.

1955

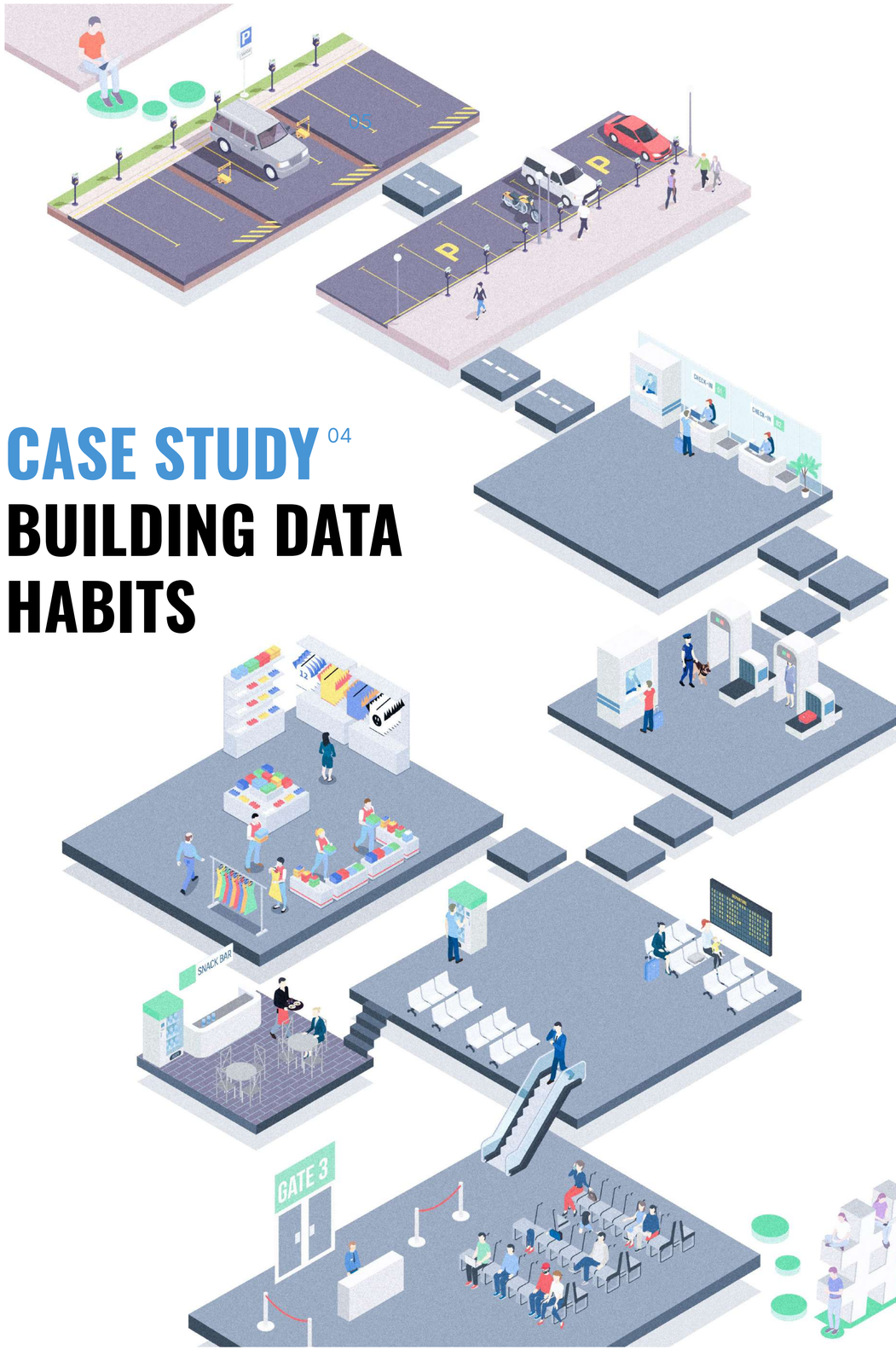
A passenger stays seated
Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama.

A 381-day boycott launches the modern US civil rights movement.

1978

Eighteen farmers sign a secret pact
Villagers in Xiaogang, China, quietly agree to split their collective land into family plots.

Harvests soar, the model goes national, and China's market reforms take off.



CASE STUDY 04
BUILDING DATA HABITS



An airport is one of the most data-rich organizations there is. SOUR teamed up with Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) to answer a seemingly technical yet very human question: how can the organization make data-informed decisions when choosing new initiatives? Conventional consulting would likely land on the answer of creating a data integration plan. But knowing that the airport was not short on awareness and had the technical means, we knew a unified dashboard would only give an organization a larger mouth with no digestive tract.

We worked on the layers beneath the visible problem. Cross-department conversations surfaced each team's understanding of data: what counts, what is tracked, who owns it and what it is for. This addressed mental models at the pace trust allowed. Templates for data communication and co-synthesis were generated, giving the conversations a repeatable structure. Finally, understanding that departments sat at different levels of data maturity, we knew a single roadmap would have overwhelmed some and bored others. SOUR led departments in defining their own micro-actions: initial steps sized to where that team stood, small enough to take and be owned by the teams.

Our engagement with PIT didn't focus on offering a solution to "becoming data-driven." It delivered alignment on where each department should begin and a shared way to turn what the airport already knew into what it would do next.

CASE STUDY 05

FROM WORKSHOPS TO MINDSET SHIFTS







Open Style Lab's work with SONY shows how an organization can bias its daily decisions toward what is more accessible and inclusive. Most companies are already aware that their products and processes exclude people; what they lack is a route from that awareness to a different decision on an ordinary Tuesday. Open Style Lab built that route as a playbook for Inclusive Design Workshops, then piloted the workshops in different regions and under different SONY companies. Teams at every level took part alongside co-creators from the disability community. The playbook enables a structure, a repeatable format that lets any team begin without waiting for a company-wide mandate. The co-creators change where knowledge comes from and accessibility stops being an abstract requirement. It becomes something learned in a room, from people with lived experience, at the pace that trust allows.

Held periodically, this collaboration across professions, lived experience and regions do more than informing teams on how to approach accessibility. It inspires them to make their own processes more inclusive which creates paths for awareness to convert into action. Each workshop is a micro-action: bite-size, repeatable and carried out by a collective and each participant leaves as a potential champion. The model does not try to redesign organizational structure, but creates many activation points across the organization. By encouraging small behavior shifts across the organization and not depending on a single program or advocate, SONY is setting the stage on how to build an inclusive innovation culture.

The project became part of Sony's wider commitment to embedding inclusive design into its practice, and was featured in **Sony's official "Inclusive Design Initiatives" lounge**.

RECENT PODCASTS

Learn more.

JUSTIN REICH
ASSOC. PROF. OF DIGITAL MEDIA AT MIT AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE TEACHING SYSTEMS LAB



WHY TECHNOLOGY FAILS TO DISRUPT EDUCATION?

"In education, I generally discourage people from imagining or pursuing approaches that lead to relatively short-term transformation, because those things are impossible. It is a game of inches. It's a sort of shoulder-to-the-wheel, long-term enterprise. If you want to see things get better, you need to be willing to work more on the order of years and decades than on shorter time frames.

I think there's quite a bit of role for the tools of design to get people started solving problems — bringing people together around ideas they care about, building some initial consensus about some things worth trying, getting them in front of people, getting real feedback, testing them and refining, and moving forward with the things that are good ideas."



JENNIFER MANKOFF
DIRECTOR AT UW CREATE

THAT'S THE ESSENCE OF CREATE

"It's the people first, right? So trying to understand each individual that I encounter and how I can support them in succeeding is always my starting place. [...] As a leader, I don't actually get to do that much. But if I can help the people around me succeed, then we're going somewhere. And so I know that's not necessarily about how do we solve all of AI or all of accessibility, but it also is in the sense that I can't tackle every problem. But every person that I empower is amplifying the ability to solve problems. And so we don't have to solve every problem on day one, but we just need to create space."

ERIN MOTE
CEO & FOUNDER OF INNOVATEEDU, ENTERPRISE ARCHITECT



HOW MIGHT WE ENABLE HUMAN FLOURISHING IN AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM?

"I think the thing that marks the success that InnovateEDU has had across all of our alliances is that we deliberately build and bring together uncommon allies. It's that idea of comfort and, you know, being a little bit uncomfortable in what it means to find and build common ground. [...] I want to encourage everyone to think about one way that they can be uncomfortable in the next day, in the next week, in the next month, whether that's a book you might not read, whether that's a news channel you might not always listen to. How are you making yourself uncomfortable and introducing that friction back into your life?"

DESHNI GOVENDER
AI ECOSYSTEM BUILDER, LAWYER AND GENDER JUSTICE AVENGER



THE BIAS BEFORE THE ALGORITHM

"I think we need to start auditing also our own defaults, because a lot of it is like we've known the system for so long, and sometimes we just have so much going on that you just accept the system for what it is because you do not have that energy, whether that is the emotional bandwidth to change it. [...] But I think we need to maybe just start auditing the defaults around us. Like, this is the default. Why is it that way? [...] Does it serve what we're doing now?"



OLIVIA GAMBELIN
AI STRATEGIST

"IN PURSUIT OF GOOD TECH"

"One key part of responsible AI is being able to understand that limitation. So I would say, pump the brakes in terms of — start iteratively, start with small iterations. What is your minimum viable product, really? At the end of the day, even if you're looking at in-house models, what's your MVP? How is this going to bring value, instead of going all the way to the very end? [...] Start small and work up instead of going with, like, 'AI is going to revolutionize our entire company.'"

TIANKAI FENG
DIRECTOR, DATA AND AI STRATEGY AT THOUGHTWORKS GLOBAL



THE HUMAN SIDE OF DATA & AI

"With creativity, it's really the most human basic thing that is fueling organizational innovation. Because all innovations are good ideas. But for good ideas to happen, you need to have the right space. So it's all about psychological safety and the space to experiment. Not only having good ideas and allowing us to have good ideas, putting them into reality and seeing if they work or not. And the good things that keep on working, they will become a default. And we can use them to make new things."



BUILDING RESONANCE IN AN AI WORLD

"If you can generate a fully fleshed out output, what's the point? Why would I spend 30 to 40 hours on creating a song? And the truth is, after my existential crisis, it helped me really have to define why I'm creating, because that 30 to 40 hours — skipping through that is kind of skipping through the transformational process of creating. Creativity is not about the outputs only. [...] The artist itself might go through sometimes harrowing experiences to get to that finished product — painful, messy, questioning, self-doubt, failures, whatever they went through. [...] That process is part, I think, what the point of this all is."

TESS POSNER
SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR AND MUSIC ARTIST BUILDING FOR HUMAN-CENTERED FUTURE AI

SOUR HIGHLIGHTS 08

Learn more.



PURCHASE PRIZE FOR KUŞADASI MUNICIPAL SERVICE BUILDING

We're proud to share that our proposal for the **Kuşadası Municipal Service Building** has received a **Purchase Prize (Satınalma Ödülü)** in the national architectural design competition.

Developed in collaboration with FREA, the proposal reimagines the town hall not as an administrative monolith, but as a **civic landscape**—open, accessible, and deeply connected to the ecology and sensory character of Kuşadası.

The project explores how a municipal building can become part of everyday public life, creating spaces for gathering, movement, and exchange while establishing a meaningful relationship with its surrounding landscape.

We're grateful to the jury and the Municipality of Kuşadası for recognizing the proposal, and congratulations to the entire team behind the project.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2026

365 AIGA YEAR IN DESIGN

PINAR GUVENC SERVES AS JUROR FOR AIGA 365: A YEAR IN DESIGN

"A famed competition, redefined for today's designer. 365: AIGA Year in Design celebrates your passion, hard work, and dedication. For agencies big and small as well as those going it alone, we're recognizing excellence and representing innovation across all categories of communication design, from print to web to service to spaces—both physical and virtual."

SOUR Partner **Pinar Guvenc** was selected as a juror for **AIGA's 365: A Year in Design,** a prestigious competition celebrating the projects, teams, and collaborations shaping today's design landscape.

Joining a distinguished panel led by Juror Chair **Morgan Light (Design Director, COLLINS)**, Pinar served alongside **Tomas Azoubel Lima (Senior Creative, VCCP), Chris Blackwell (Senior Creative Director, Hearst),** and **Aya Jaffar (Design Director, IDEO.org)** to recognize excellence across the field.

Known for surfacing "what matters in design right now," AIGA 365 celebrates work reflecting the evolving priorities and possibilities of contemporary design. **With the jury process now nearing its conclusion, the selected projects will be announced soon.**

AUGUST 15, 2026

MONOCLE RADIO
Monocle on Design
Presented by
Nic Monisse
Design

PINAR GUVENC ON CO-DESIGN FOR MONOCLE ON DESIGN PODCAST

SOUR Partner Pinar Guvenc joined Monocle on Design to discuss co-design — the participatory approach at the heart of SOUR's practice — and what it means to design with people, rather than simply for them.

> *"In co-design, we understand we need to design with people that we're going to serve. It is a very effective way of collaborating with your audience."*

The conversation also reflected on SOUR's field research in Antakya following the earthquake, where the team spent two weeks listening to more than 50 local residents, social workers, and a psychologist before making a single design decision.

As Pinar explained, "we always say start with the people, and people kind of guide you in how you should do the rest." The project continues to reinforce a principle central to SOUR's practice: **listening is not a detour from the work — it is the work itself.**

MARCH 17, 2026

SOUR FEATURED ON

WALLPAPER* INTERIOR DESIGN MAGAZINE & MORE

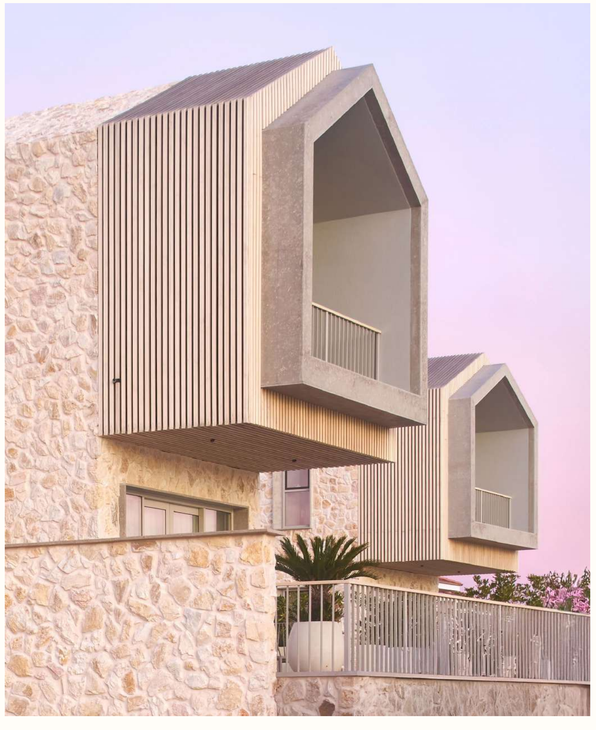
SOUR's residential recording studio **Pür** received international recognition across **Wallpaper*, Interior Design Magazine, The Spaces, e-architect,** and **urdesignmag**. The features highlighted the project's relationship with Cunda's local context, its carefully tuned acoustic environment, and the participatory process that shaped a space where **architecture, sound, and community come together.**

MARCH – APRIL 2026

SOUR HIGHLIGHTS 08

Learn more.





JULY 13, 2026

FINALIST FOR MIXED-USE INTERIOR BEST USE OF STONE

SOUR's **Pür Residential Recording Studio** was shortlisted in three categories at the **World Architecture Festival (WAF) 2026:** Completed Buildings – Mixed-Use, Inside: Interior Awards, and the Special Prize for Best Use of Stone, supported by Turkish Stones.

Recognized across **architecture, interior design, and material use,** the three nominations reflect Pür's integrated approach, where architecture, interior, and material logic were developed as one. The project will be presented to the international jury at **WAF in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in November 2026,** marking SOUR's third appearance on the WAF stage.

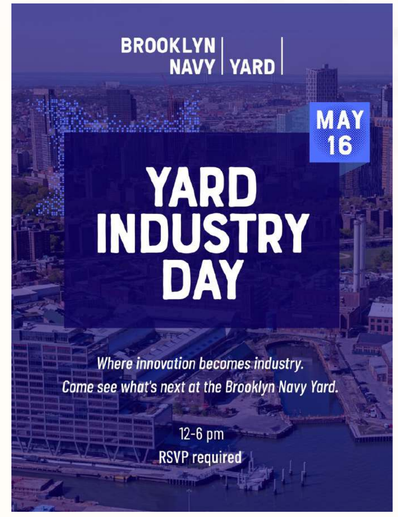
World Architecture Festival 2026
18-20 November



SOUR AT MAKESHIFT ACCOUNTABLE TAKE BY DESIGN

SOUR Partner Pinar Guvenc joined the "Soft Infrastructures & Undesigning Design" panel at MakeShift 2026: Accountable Tech by Design, alongside Marco Zamarato, Adriana Valdez Young, and Georgia Bullen. The conversation explored the role of soft infrastructures in creating conditions for new solutions, while rethinking the designer's role and process beyond traditional forms of design.

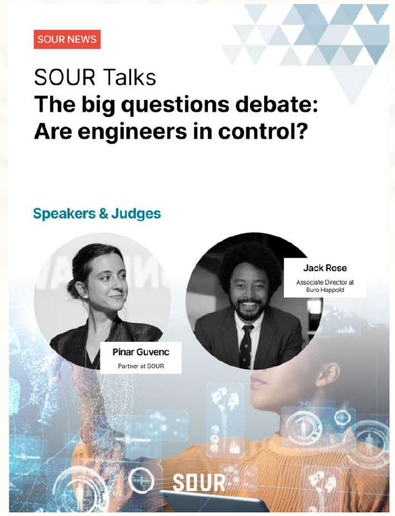
MAY 21, 2026



SOUR AT BROOKLYN NAVY YARD'S YARD INDUSTRY DAY

SOUR Partner Inanc Eray represented the studio at Brooklyn Navy Yard's Yard Industry Day, a gathering of companies working across emerging technologies and industries. As part of the "From Research to Practice" session, Inanc joined Qunnect and Starsuit to explore how breakthrough technologies move from research into real-world application.

MAY 16, 2026



PINAR GUVENC AT INSTITUTION OF CIVIL ENGINEERS'S THE BIG QUESTIONS DEBATE

SOUR Partner Pinar Guvenc joined the Institution of Civil Engineers' "The Big Questions Debate: UAE" as a keynote speaker, contributing to a conversation on urban development, infrastructure resilience, and sustainable growth. Pinar shared SOUR's approach to creating more inclusive, circular, and resilient urban environments, emphasizing the role of cross-industry collaboration in addressing the complex challenges shaping our cities.

MAY 14, 2026

WHAT'S NEXT? 09

Having discipline on identifying and aligning on signals and small steps matter more now than it did even a few years ago. Organizations are building AI systems and agentic workstreams into all their processes. Cities and neighborhoods are faced with data centers arriving at their edges. Climate change is showing up as floods, fires and heat that upend communities across the world. Each of these delivers awareness at a scale no person or institution can hold. Each also tempts us toward the two responses: waiting for a complete answer, or collecting more information about the problem. When the inputs multiply this quickly, a person or an institution without a way to convert them will not stay neutral. It will fill with anxiety and call it strategy.

So the task in front of us is to define the micro-actions, and to do it together. Which decision can a team make this month about how it uses AI? Which conversation can a neighborhood and a utility have before the next facility is approved? Which single practice can a local government change before the next storm season? None of these aims to solve the larger problem, yet each gives awareness somewhere to go, making the next step easier to see.

The earthworm does not set out to build soil, and the beaver does not set out to build a wetland. They do the small work in front of them, alongside others doing the same, and the landscape changes.

We hope this journal leaves you with less to carry and a pebble to throw.

website
www.sour.studio

Instagram
@whatissour

LinkedIn
/whatissour