



E08: Next Moonshots in Fusing Futures: Where Should We Begin?

O: Since we're still spending most of our time at home and we have more spare time, I'm pretty sure that all of us are into a lot of thinking and having a lot of new ideas. Some ideas are about redecorating our homes, since we spend a lot of time in them right now. Others may be came to discover that this slower-paced of living is something that is actually enjoyable and maybe have new ideas about how to reorganize their life and not rushing to the usual fast-paced living, as it was before the COVID-19 crisis. These small and big dilemmas are exactly the topic of our episode number 8 of the Fusing Futures podcast. I'm delighted to welcome a fellow member of the of the BOS alumni network: Dragana Petković, Co-Founder of StartIt, Owner at Themis Consulting, as well as the cofounder and board member of Serbian co-working association, as my guest in the episode number 8 of the Fusing Futures podcast.

D: I'm currently moving houses, moving cities actually, and buying new home appliances. I've noticed a trend of smart refrigerators, smart dishwashers, smart ovens and other kitchen stuff that used to be simple and straight-forward, but now are connected to Wi-Fi and have a phone app. These appliances offer solutions to non-existing problems. I really don't need the ability to turn my dishwasher on from my bed, from my iPhone, or check on the chicken in the oven through my camera... The problem is that, firstly, these appliances used to be reliable, now if my W-Fi stops working my oven gets confused and I need to call a repairman to fix it. Secondly, this trend of "convenience" makes us even more distant from the simple every day chores we used to do with our hands, with our bodies. Getting up, going to the oven, checking on our meal, enjoying the process with all of our sense. Instead of slowing down, taking the time to prepare something, to take care of our household, we are rushed. We are making this part of life secondary to work, we are being sent the message that everything except our work has no value, it should be done quickly, in between other more important tasks, or even better, completely outsourced. I've realised, during the quarantine, how much joy and mindfulness comes from being present and doing these simple things - cooking, cleaning, creating something with my two hands, being present and active during these tasks. For example I took some time and energy to properly clean a super dirty, oily, old rusty pan, I probably would have just thrown it away before, and I was so happy to see it shine again. Like - Look, I've done this dirty job by myself and now this pan is shiny like new! Such a good feeling, immediate gratification, unlike my consulting work and talking about investments, product-market fit, traction, validation, minimum viable product. No bullshit, just a lovely clean pan, a direct result of my hard work.

O: Although necessary and beneficial, the continuous innovation isn't all smiles and sunshine. Dragana, could you tell us more about the other side of the medal, some consequences of the constant innovation that remain hidden in plain sight?

D: This trend of innovation in terms of internet of things and solving non-existing problems actually contributes to piling up of unnecessary information that needs to be stored

somewhere, that uses more energy and created even more carbon emissions, so that I can take a look at my fridge from my phone and see if I should buy more milk, or that I can turn on my washing machine remotely to save approximately 5 minutes of my precious time. To use it to watch yet another motivational YouTube video. It is a good example of the law of diminishing returns, or even negative returns, in terms of my eyeballs being increasingly glued to some type of a screen. Because, I'll take my phone to check on my fridge and an hour later I'm still on it, checking email, twitter and Instagram, receiving and emitting even more unnecessary information, using more energy, piling up and storing more, mostly useless information. I personally don't feel more productive with these toys, I feel less productive, my attention span is shorter, I'm more snappy and restless, I have less patience, and I don't think it is only me. I see this happening for many of my younger friends and colleagues. We don't have enough attention or patience for books, we are in constant mode of multi-tasking, between our screens and other things we are trying to do. So I opt to strive towards a more minimal, simplified lifestyle, trying to disconnect from the technology, from time to time at least, and connect to some form of physical creation and manual labor. It heals, brings you back to reality. I think a big silver lining to the pandemic is actually realizing what is essential for our living and wellbeing, what are the things we can do without, finding what the "less is more" means for us, which I think is ultimately better for the planet. Less consumerism, spending on durable, quality products, repurposing what we already have, using things we have for longer, equals less pollution.

O: Let's talk about the hidden costs a bit more. The profit isn't the only criterion that we should meet. What about ethical principles towards humanity and nature, what about sustainability? Is there a way for us to stay on pace of innovation while remaining profitable and responsible towards our environment? Can we meet all of these criteria?

D: I think this is the key question - is it even possible, for example in the fashion and retail industry, to have a production that is both ethical, economically sustainable and environmentally sustainable? Can we produce garments from ethically sourced materials, made by workers who are paid and treated fairly, in factories that hold key environmental standards, that don't overly pollute water and air, and that don't cost a fortune in the store for the end consumer? With margins in today's fashion, I can hardly imagine that happening. Small local designers and fashion productions can't compete with fast fashion in terms of price, and in Serbia, unfortunately with such a low standard of living, even fast fashion brands are considered luxury for most people. With our current mindset, sadly, most people would rather buy low-quality plastic "designer" items than higher quality locally made items even if the price is the same. What brings some hope is the growing fashion and handmade market in Serbia, where obviously some groups of consumers are capable and willing to spend money on local clothes and food. And not only people in Serbia, I think that our fashion designers and food producers are exporting when they can, and the different people from abroad actually buying these items. Having a handmade fashion piece, for example, a sweater that a grandma, or a single mom from a rural area knitted for you, knowing who made it and that you are supporting this brand and these people by buying, makes a lot of sense to the conscious consumer. She will cherish this piece, hoping to leave it to her daughter, to be worn for years to come. I have a hard time picturing someone leaving an H&M sweater to later generations. I guess our only way out is - on one hand in changing the mindset, on the other changing the regulations, holding higher standards and holding companies accountable, which sadly is not happening. Since the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, when a fast fashion factory collapsed in Bangladesh,

killing more than 1100 people, nothing has changed. This factory produced garments for many brands such as: Benetton, Primark, Prada, Gucci, Versace, you name it. Today these and similar brands, decided, during the pandemic, not to respect the contracts and refused to pay for the produced goods because they claim that they can't sell them. So with trying to influence corporations and governments, I think influencing and educating the consumers is the path to take, simultaneously. I believe that campaigns that promote buying locally produced products work, especially in times like this, when the borders are closed. Of course, there are many underlying issues - production chains, but we have a large number of small producers of food, of fashion items, furniture, it is completely doable. When our fathers and grand-fathers were talking about the importance of having industrial production and not basing the economy solely on services, we brushed that away, but it doesn't sound as crazy anymore when 90% of everything is produced in China, and we are dependent on them for things like generic medication and various materials.

O: Your professional background is related to supporting IT entrepreneurs and startups through your work. We all know the entire economy was under a great impact during the COVID-19 crisis, but it seems this sector found its way out. So in your view, what comes next for digital entrepreneurs?

D: The world of startups is massively growing, with small companies and entrepreneurs disrupting every industry imaginable. Having a startup is also a very trendy thing to do with so many young people wanting to be independent, digital nomads, working from beaches. For a time it seemed that any app can become a unicorn, a billion dollar worth app. I believe that times are changing and that the hype is passing. Solving real, essential problems is what I would love to see more of. If the world economy has this huge energy, motivation and creativity of young people at its disposal, it is such a waste to focus it on apps that bring no real value. Young people in the Silicon Valley and other similar tech hubs around the world experience abnormal working hours, crazy fatigue, unsustainable working models to try to reach dreams and end up drained too early in their careers. Working smarter, not harder should be to goal, using technology to help us become more productive, not less, and I'm not talking about productivity apps and individual productivity as such. I'm talking about creating products and services that will bring us valuable innovation in the fields of health and medicine, in the fields of insurance, banking and financial systems, in the fields of transport and agriculture. I would love to see deep changes in these systems, this innovation and creativity employed to bring us to a more sustainable way of living. It is obvious, with currently most popular apps and games, that the extensive knowledge of human behavior and psychology is available. Sadly, many companies use this knowledge to capitalize on our natural shortcomings, fear and addictive behaviours, not to nudge positive behaviours. For me, the future of digital entrepreneurship would ideally focus this disruptive force towards solving big problems, not only bringing more convenience and entertainment to people, which changes lives in marginal ways and leads to more waste and pollution.

Nostalgia: I just got a book from my friend with a short dedication saying - What's for dinner? How vivid memories it brought back! What's for dinner is for all of you the most common and recurring question, isn't it? Hearing it time and time again may be annoying... Nonetheless, it reminds me of an amazing night when a group of enthusiasts succeeded in bringing the Far East into the Balkans. We decided to host Deli Monday for more than 250 BOS alumni as an opportunity to enjoy the tastes and smells of Thai cuisine. Our focus was on jasmine rice to get subtle floral

aroma and a soft, sticky texture of the food. As with the jasmine flower, once you smell it you immediately fall in love. Sweet smelling scent of jasmine rice was spreading throughout our kitchen while the rice was rinsed at least five times. No shortcuts, no one-click solutions, no insta-fun - very different from our daily habits. However, that night cooking traced a path for a new habit - what's for dinner became our invite for upcoming life adventures.

D: 10 years ago I almost threw away a hand-made rug from Pirot, thinking that it looked dated and too rural for my interior decoration style. Fortunately, my mom was there and she explained that the rug was actually priceless, it was made by my grand-grandma, from the wool that she gathered from her own sheep. Mind blown. Today this rug has a special place in my home, I can't imagine putting a price on it. That is value for me. Surely, a rug like this, or an imitation of it, can be bought in furniture stores, it will probably be 3D printed soon or something... This old craft is dying, and having a piece of it is amazing, and I believe that people are going to cherish and respect handmade things even more in the future.

O: Since we mentioned home decoration and refreshing of closets, little bit earlier in this episode. Let's talk about fashion industry through the prism of our discussion today. Mass fashion production, of course, leaves a massive impact on the environment. I'll just give a little bit of numbers to support that, so, the average EU citizens annually buy more than 12 kilograms in clothing, the production of which contributes to emission of 195 million tons of CO2 to the atmosphere. And in addition to that, the production of this uses 46 billion cubic meters of water and yet, this average European citizen only wears about 30% of its closet. So what are the Alternatives among local initiatives to this mass and fast fashion?

D: In Serbia, currently, there are more than 300 different small entrepreneurs and designers in the fashion industry, producing clothes, shoes and accessories, as well as handmade items. It is hard to have an overview of this field and information about them is scattered, mostly on Instagram and Facebook... A project I have been supporting and cooperating with is Zanateria, for example, who created an online craft marketplace, gathering many of these producers in a single online store, where you can order stuff online. Another great initiative is the Fab Living concept store in Belgrade, in Krunska, led by Una Nikolić, who offers an amazing selection of items both in store and online through their Grom and Kakao website. There is also a great Facebook group called "Mali proizvođaci hrane u Srbiji" where many small local Serbian producers of food are gathering and selling their products. This group has almost 40.000 members. This is a great example of how the internet, social media and ready to use e-commerce solutions are bringing key information to people and making these products available to them. These local initiatives are great alternatives to mass produced goods and I'm considering doing a personal experiment of using only local food producers for a few months, trying to avoid supermarkets and see how it goes. I'm ready to sacrifice a bit of convenience - not being able to buy food any time of day, having to plan the meals a bit more closely, respecting shorter expiring dates for fresh foods without preservatives, having to wait for the delivery a bit, but it is all a part of my general slowing down in this period of life. I'll let you know how it goes.

O: As you mentioned going local is apparently a good alternative in today's world. Is going local and becoming off-grid, totally independent really the only right path? We are apparently at the crossroad, so, I want to ask you what is the right way for the future, should we strive towards a completely decentralized society and economy, or should we somehow try to make the past and the future meet the halfway?

D: Being totally independent, I believe, is not the goal. We are interdependent, we rely on each other, it is what made us rapidly progress economically. On the other hand, being completely dependent on others, expecting constant availability of cheap goods, being completely remote from how our food is made, how it magically appears on our tables, how our clothes are made... It makes us more vulnerable, as individuals and as countries and communities. Something breaks and you sit around waiting for someone to fix it. Prices of oil or electricity raise and you have to pay. Finding ways to be more reliant on ourselves, brings more power and belief in our own ability to sustain ourselves and our family. For some it means having a garden, growing your own food. For others it means buying locally grown food from your neighbours. For others it is having solar panels and using more natural energy in their house. For many it is moving away from the cities that are becoming unfunctional, crowded and polluted, moving to the countryside or a smaller town. Buying a house or a flat is becoming increasingly hard for many people. New solutions are emerging in this field as well, thankfully enabled by the good use of technology, for example co-living, sharing housing expenses, or crowd-funding real estate projects.

O: Finally, let's leave our listeners to cast a new light on their future. What's your key take and key message to them?

D: I think finding a sustainable way of living today relies upon our ability to distinguish what is important for us personally in the long run. Every season of life has its own challenges and its beauty. Today, as a 20 year old, you probably find living in a fast paced city with all that it offers is a great opportunity and a lifestyle for you, and that is completely ok, seize everything it gives you. At the same time, simply be aware of how this rhythm is affecting you, what is the price you are paying long term, be aware of your ambitions and goals, keep it real, because you don't want to get stuck with chasing the very same things 15 years from now. Your ambitions might change, they probably should, and that is perfectly natural. I believe new initiatives always start from our personal vantage point, solving our own challenges, cooperating with people who share them and finding solutions together. These solutions are often simpler than we think, they consist of taking away something, not necessarily adding something new. They rely on connecting to the very base of our needs, why do we want the shiny object, what we believe that it will bring us, is it security, freedom, recognition, connection... Can we find a simpler way to have this need met? I believe one important mode of innovation today is actually taking away the tech for a moment. In art, for example, while making an image, for example some letters on fire - taking a photograph of actual burning letters, instead of digitally producing the fire. Metaphorically speaking - create some real fire sometimes, not just virtual fire. Try living the real life, away from the screen, it will be an incredible advantage for you in the future. Use the screen as a useful tool and be the master of the screen, masterfully using it and not letting it control you.

O: Fusing Futures: Light Them Up is a Belgrade Open School's audio podcast. Members of BOS alumni network – Dragana Petković, Gordana Bojanić, Jelena Šapić and myself, Ognjan Pantić, took part in making this eighth episode. Aleksa Račić and Marko Mitrović supported by designing the sound and audio effects.