

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Daisy Carter. Head of Strategic Programming, The RSA

DAISY CARTER:

My name is Daisy and I work for a 270-year-old membership organisation called the RSA, which stands for the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce. That's an organisation and membership that works to support people, places and planet to flourish in harmony.

I moved into design by accident. I think I started working in the social impact space, and before that when I'd been studying, I felt that I had to make a choice between doing serious change, and creativity and artistic expression and design. So I kind of dropped that at school and moved into what I thought was a more serious pursuit of social impact.

I was really lucky in my first role to be working alongside service designers who I just thought were the coolest people in the world. I watched them create these sandboxes for play and experimentation and testing and learning. I watched them work really closely with lived experience and story, as well as the invisible insights that happen beneath the surface, and how they were able to really help people collectively move into action through making and testing and learning. So, it was this beautiful proof to me that design can hold both. It can be a very serious thing in terms of driving change forward, but it's also quite magical and playful and draws on all of our innate creativity and imagination.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: What do you love about design?]

I love that design offers us a set of tools and, probably more importantly, a set of values for collaborating differently, for witnessing and spending time with people's experiences. I love that it's playful and silly as well.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: How is design changing?]

I think I've witnessed the design world changing very rapidly in really exciting ways. So, designers are being brought into how we think about public service delivery, how we think about the design of community infrastructure, how we think about ecological transition and a more regenerative future and world.

I'm always quite excited by the fact that most local authorities in the country now hire service designers, and that's a really big shift in terms of how we think about the

public realm and public service delivery. We're really seeing deep attentiveness to people's experiences as being fundamental to being able to offer impact and purpose.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: What skills are important for designers today?]

I think that designers are stewards. I always feel a little embarrassed that I'm a designer that's not very good at making things. I think I'm a designer that's good at helping other people to sense-make, and helping groups to make together and test things out and try things, and also work with them to think about what are the conditions that help that change to stick.

I think designers don't need to be too caught up about their own creative credentials, so long as they're up for helping unlock the creativity of others. I think designers should be brilliant facilitators. So how are you able to hold a group and a room, and help them to surface insights about their own lives, notice things that they spot in their communities and their place, and help people to weave together a story and do some collective sense-making.

I think in terms of that facilitation role as well, supporting people to feel confident and capable to come up with new ideas and test them out. So I think for me, being a great designer is being able to support people to lead their own change in their community and in their place.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: RSA's Connected Places. Nurturing social connections and inclusive growth in communities]

In my work, I'm very often pushing beyond the traditional parameters of design, and it very rarely looks like a traditional service design approach or journey. So to draw in a few examples, we have programmes of work that are all about people- and place-led change. We do lots of work around social connections. So that work starts with the insight that our relationships, the connections we have, or our social capital, profoundly shape our life outcomes. At a community level, it shapes how resilient we are, including to things like the climate crisis. But that kind of capital, like most forms of capital, is not evenly distributed.

So, we've been thinking about ways you can work with people in place to ensure that everyone has the connections they need to thrive. In that work we're drawing on lots of different approaches, from asset-based community development to participatory design to systems change and systems thinking.

And that work really seeks to begin with people that live within a neighbourhood, working with them to spot and understand the assets and resources that they have within their community and within their neighbourhood to support connection, and to support more thriving. So in particular looking at relationships that cross lines of difference. And we work within, on a neighbourhood level, to then think about how that

neighbourhood in reverse commission services, institutions and local businesses in support of those assets and their local vision.

So that work is really kind of using different design practices and facilitation to connect the insights and vision at a neighbourhood level to services and institutions, so they can shift resources, trust, power and people into servicing the neighbourhood and supporting a more connected community.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: The Living Well UK Programme (2018-22) Community based support for good mental health and wellbeing]

One of my favourite design projects ever was a project called Living Well, which was about transforming local mental health systems so people could find help in the places they lived, and be supported by holistic support that met them as multifaceted human beings rather than as a people with a particular condition or diagnosis. That work started by convening what we called collaboratives in place, so that mixed residents with NHS commissioners, with local authority people, with the local voluntary sector and lots of people who had lived experience of mental ill health, and their carers. Their role was really to steward the health of their local system and design new services, new teams and networks, and put them into action that would support people's mental health locally. It was just such an exciting piece of work.

We worked with that collaborative to gather stories of lived experience and shared them with the wider system. We co-designed multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams, prototyped from the ground up new forms of practice, which were much more meaningfully human-centred and relational, and did that work to attend to a whole person and not just a slice of them.

We saw incredible impact from that work, so shifts across the system in terms of important stuff like reductions in waiting lists, but also most fundamentally changes in how people reported their own sense of wellbeing, their own sense of hope and their own sense of resilience.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Project process]

This was a project that took a really long time. I worked on it for about four or five years, and we worked in different places across the UK, and they are still living, evolving programmes of work that are messy and challenging. But a lot of the spirit that I think was imbued at the start of that project still really lives on.

So, there are people in Greater Manchester who are employed as professional storytellers for people in the mental health system, so that voice of lived experience is never lost in how ensuring that lived experience is never lost in how practitioners and mental health workers are thinking about and delivering mental health. One of my proudest achievements is that lots of places in Greater Manchester NHS talk about prototyping. So that was a huge win, which is real kind of cultural mindset shift that takes a very long time in terms of thinking about a service, thinks about delivering a

service to a sick person, versus thinking about how do you work with a whole community to support their mental health and wellbeing. It's a huge culture shift.

And I guess one of the biggest changes we saw is, the way that the mental health system is organised means that you can be too sick and not sick enough and fall through the gaps in care. So you might be too sick for one service and not sick enough for another, and end up falling through the cracks. What we were collectively working against was that and so we were responding to that need by co-designing whole teams that could meet people where they are, instead of whether or not they met a particular service criteria. And that was really challenging in an institution that's set up to manage demand, because they have to, for very good reason, but actually that system was no longer meeting people, or making people well.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: The role of design in Living Well UK]

I think there's a role that design plays in that kind of complex systems change work. I think the first thing is it helps to make the complex legible. So through synthesis, narrative crafting, storytelling, visual design as well. You can help to bring together rich insights and rich ideas into something that people can get around and touch and see and respond and react to, becomes something that you can kind of test. I think design puts experiences at the centre of decision and planning and forward-thinking. So in a system that for a long time is being designed from the kind of service delivery perspective and not from the perspective of what it is to live with a mental illness that's quite a radical shift to bring story and lived expertise and live wisdom into how decisions are made into service design, into commissioning, into policy. I think it also created a space for emergence and experimentation, which equally isn't easy or natural cultural fit for an organisation like the NHS, or local authority, necessarily. But actually creating protective spaces to test and to learn is totally vital to be able to create things that meet the reality of peoples live.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Advice for future designers]

I think my advice to future designers is always, and whenever you can, get close to people and places. Listen and watch deeply, and trust that they hold a lot of the answers and a lot of the capability to put that answer into action. I'd also say that design is serious, it affects power and it can shape real outcomes — but it's also really playful and you shouldn't lose that. So creating moments within any design, or experience, or outcome to think about joy, and to centre joy is not something that should be lost even as your design practice is expanding and you're thinking about applying it to really tricky and complex and heavy subject areas.