

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Joanna Choukeir, Director of Design & Innovation, The RSA

JOANNA CHOUKEIR:

So, I'm Joanna Choukeir. I'm director of design and innovation at the RSA. We're a social change organisation supported by a community of fellows, 30,000 fellows all around the world who are passionate about social change and social impact. Our mission is to unlock everyone's potential to do more good for people, places, and the planet. My role is to look at how we can embed more innovative ways to support our fellows to do that.

So I co-lead a programme of work called Design for Life. And part of that programme is three core ingredients that we believe are essential to unlocking everyone's potential and that's what people know, who they know and where they live. So for each of these areas we have a programme of interventions, and I specifically lead on the capabilities for life programme, which is looking at the kind of skills that you need and the agency that people need to be able to contribute more positively to the world in the future. So that's kind of my role in a nutshell and where I work.

And then I guess what drew me to design if I kind of go back to my root. I come from three generations of designers. So my grandparents, my parents, and me and all my siblings are designers across different disciplines. So, we've always kind of I grew up in a creative family, but that also overlaps with my background. I'm a survivor of the Lebanese civil war, so the first 10 years of my life, I grew up in a shelter and my dad is a diplomat. And so I was very close to social and political issues and the role that we can play as citizens to affect change. So kind of bring these two things together very much since I suppose doing my first undergraduate degree in design, I knew that I wanted to work at that intersection of social change and design, and I kind of more recently I described myself as a lifecentric designer. So, a designer whose role is to support life and people and all living things to lead a good life.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: How is design changing? New roles and responsibilities]

When I started, that was around kind of the year 2000, and doing kind of purpose-led design was kind of seen as kind of the pro-bono thing you do on the side. There weren't enough career opportunities or awareness of the role that design can play for societal good. A lot of the roles were much more kind of commercial, like designing new products and campaigns and merchandise, and advertising.

So what pulled me initially was design activism. So where designers were using their visual communication skills to mobilise communities to protest or show a different alternative. So I was very much kind of pulled into design activism. But I suppose the 10 years after that and particularly kind of if we talk about the UK between 2010 and 2020 with the new Labour, or just before that I suppose maybe 2006-7 to 2010 with the new Labour government and then the Social Value Act, we started to see more kind of civil servants coming in with design skills looking at how you can use design in policy making contexts, and to design public services with the government digital service, and also growing from within government.

So, at the moment I'd say there's a lot more maturity around how design can be a kind of a skill and a practice that can benefit all sectors in society, but that can also help different sectors come together – private, third and public sectors around some shared goals, and that's often referred to as kind of mission led design. How do you bring a whole ecosystem of players around a particular challenge and use design-led approaches, creative strategy approaches to really think about how you can kind of make a dent or make progress in response to that particular mission?

So I think it's a really exciting trajectory but there's quite a way to go I think particularly with climate change and the role of designers, green design skills --- some of that is -- -very, or regenerative design skills, that is still an emerging practice and there's a lot of kind of learning through doing that is still happening and hopefully that can mature over the next 10 years.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Systemic design thinking]

What's been really beneficial is designers rubbing shoulders with other kinds of specialists and experts and professions, from social scientists, policy makers to data scientists to business skills, entrepreneurial skills and particularly in the context of the kind of world that we're living in. It's a very rapidly changing world. We're seeing a lot of skills displacement with technology and AI. We are recognising a lot more that some of the economic, social and environmental crises that we're experiencing in different contexts are connected and interrelated. So I think the value has been that more designers have started to work with other professions to understand some of the issues that they were trying to design a response or a solution to much more rigorously and much more systemically.

So it's no longer a linear, you know, if I design an exercise app for children, then we can eliminate childhood obesity. It's has a lot to do with merchandise and access to healthy food and the price points of healthy food and the time and capacity that families have to cook in healthy ways and perceptions that people have around body image. It's a really complicated landscape and as a designer the only way you can respond to a challenge like that is to actually work with a lot of the people who are proximate to some of these issues and to really kind of map the root causes and the interconnections and interdependencies across all of these different issues and then to look at right what is the lever we can pull that can have the greatest ripple effects

across this system. What do we have control over? Where's the money coming from? Who's commissioning me to support on this? What levers do they have? What control do they have? And I think in a way it's the kind of complex issues a lot of designers have had to deal with have meant that they have matured and needed to mature more of their kind of systems thinking approach in order to respond to some of these issues more effectively.

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

A lot of the work that we that I've been leading at the RSA in the last three years has really been in response to the question around what skills do we need to futureproof careers and contribute to an economy that is more regenerative for people, for places and for planet.

We kickstarted that work with a capabilities inquiry. So we convened about 50 organisations across sectors that had deep expertise in the future of skills. These include think tanks, government bodies and business. And we reviewed a suite, a couple of dozen, existing skills frameworks. And through that kind of multidisciplinary and multi-method research work and convening work we co-designed the Capabilities for Life Framework. It's a framework that builds on Ken Robinson's eight C's for creativity and we turned them into 10 C's so that each of these skills starts with a C and these do not focus on the foundational or professional skills. We see that as kind of an additional layer. These skills are much more transferable, humanistic, softer skills, life skills that we think are really key to have as core for all designers and kind of all innovators, all creatives across the life course.

So these 10 C's are skills like creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, courage, citizenship, compassion, etc. And each of these capabilities shows up at three levels. The first level is individualistic. So, this is about how you have a sense of confidence and awareness of your own strengths, your own purpose, what you're here to do in the world, your agency.

The next level is human centric. So this is about your awareness of your relationship with others and how you work with others around you. And then the last layer is life centric and that's about your awareness of your relationship with the living world that you rely on to survive and thrive.

So these are the sort of skills and capabilities that we have really been centering in all of our programmatic delivery and we have a number of initiatives that focus on different kind of learning cohorts or age groups, in order to support them to nurture some of these skills.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: RSA's playful Green Planet. Reconnecting children to nature and community]

So a couple of projects that I've been nurturing are related to capabilities for life and how we grow some of these capabilities across the life course. The first is Playful Green Planet and that's targeted at 0 to 10 year olds, and the vision is to create opportunities for every single child in every urban neighbourhood to access outdoor nature-based play as part of their kind of enrichment and childhood experience.

And the way I'm leaning into kind of design thinking with the team and movement building is we have a lot of fellows who already work in places. So we are leaning in and opening up a call to fellows who work within organisations locally that have a mandate to work with children or deliver better outcomes for children.

So these could be schools, these could be nurseries, early years settings, community centres, libraries, parks and playgrounds. And we are inviting these stewards to join a network that we are convening as the RSA.

And we are supporting them by connecting them together to learn from one another. And to learn from incredible practitioners like the Eden Project, to look at how do you create these outdoor playrooms and classrooms for your local children in a way that can deliver this kind of nature connection, community connection that's so vital for children's learning and development, but also to support them to grow to be ecological citizens because they will only learn to care for our natural world if they are connected and they feel connected to the natural world, and they understand it and they understand how life cycles work.

And so that's one example. So rather than us kind of being the delivery team on the ground, we're partnering with these stewards so they can develop programming within their own settings that can unlock more hours and more experiences for children locally.

So one example is in Dundee. This is Maxwell Community Centre and they've got their gardens at the back. So they are working as part of their after-school provision but also offering school visits and they have a nursery setting. Lots of opportunities for children to play in their local garden to like look at the life cycle of a frog, to plant some veg, like understand where food comes from. Really really exciting experiences. Similarly with a Hull University who have amazing botanical gardens. So part of their education programme includes now upskilling for teachers studying on their degrees to be able to feel more confident teaching nature-based learning and nature-based play. And they're also opening up their botanical gardens for school visits and children's visits.

And we have just announced in June two more stewards to join the network. And that's Cody Dock in Newham, it's a blue regeneration programme across River Lee. And also in Redbridge Council, a couple of country parks where they're looking at a similar approach. So that's one example.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: RSA Spark. Students changing tomorrow]

Another example is for higher education students and that's RSA Spark. It's built on the solid foundations of a hundred years of the student design awards, but we have made a number of improvements to support it to drive more impact.

So in a nutshell we partner with industry and we collaborate to shape real world briefs that focus on the knottiest challenges in the world and we put these briefs out to students and we invite students to come up with the most radical ideas.

And with the student design awards we used to pick a single hero winner for each of the briefs, but in a systems thinking context we recognise that you can't have a silver bullet. These are really complex challenges and often you need a whole portfolio of different ideas that might tackle the issue at different levels.

So it might be a policy campaign, or a service, and you also need the service, and you might need some product and you might need some kind of educational awareness stuff. And so we have shifted that to recognise that for each of the briefs instead of a single winner, we identify up to 10 ideas that could work together and we showcase these ideas and offer them grants so they are able to kickstart startups if they wanted to or connections into the industry partner so they can take some of their ideas further.

[TEXT ON SCREEN:Advice for future designers]

It's a very polarized world I think at the moment and a very disconnected, disjointed communities. Growing up as, kind of, working as a designer, studying as a designer, one thing that stood out for me was that you kind of have to learn about the thing you're trying to design for and with. And with every design challenge or design opportunity, you're learning about a whole new world and a whole new kind of industry or discipline.

So I think in the context of what we're experiencing at the moment, it's really important for designers to embrace curiosity, to not make any assumptions or judgments, but just ask really good questions and look for really good sources and diverse sources for answers to these questions.

From curiosity you have critical thinking. So when you're getting a lot of these answers, you can use AI if you want, but also talk to different people who think very differently to you.

Apply your critical thinking. You know, put your own assumptions to one side and really lean into different realities and different truths.

I would also say that creativity is really important. Don't be afraid to try something for the first time. We need a lot of first times when we're trying to innovate in different ways.

And I would say finally be courageous because it can feel sometimes very lonely trying something new for the first time. So be courageous and kind of stick with it long

enough to see if it's going to work because some of social designing within the context of social and environmental change can take time and you know decades.

And looking at my career and the different chapters of my career, each of the chapters took at least 5 to 10 years of just sticking to like, let's get this, do we think there's a path forward?

So just kind of having that courage to keep going. And being really committed to that purpose or what you really care about.