

TRANSCRIPT

The changing world of design. Three design leaders from RSA and the Design Council, share reflections on the new roles, skills and responsibilities of designers today.

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. And that's an organisation and membership that works to support people, places, and planet to flourish in harmony.

JOANNA CHOUKEIR: So I'm Joanna Choukeir. I'm director of design and innovation at the RSA and my role is to look at how we can embed more innovative ways to support our fellows to do that.

RACHEL BRONSTEIN: I'm Rachel Bronstein. I'm a senior programme manager at the Design Council. And the Design Council, for those who don't know, is an independent charity that exists to champion design in the UK.

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

DAISY CARTER: 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. So really seeing deep attentiveness to people's experiences as being fundamental to be able to offer impact and purpose.

JOANNA CHOUKEIR: 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. And 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.

RACHEL BRONSTEIN: My micro journey from user-centered to human-centered to systemic design is actually writ large in society and in the design sector generally. It's a shift that we've seen. When I speak to people about design, people who are not in the design space, there's an immediate assumption that I'm talking about aesthetics, that design is just shapes and colours and making things look pretty. And I think once you enter the design space, you realise it's so much more than that niche. It's so much more than aesthetics. Yes, that's a part of it, but actually design touches on everything. It's the places we live in. It's the buildings we inhabit. It's the products and services we use day-to-day. It's how we navigate our cities.

And that makes me think that designers have such a role and a responsibility to play in creating design in a way that influences the behaviour we want to see. And today that is increasingly about green behaviour. So how can we influence people through design, by design to navigate the world in a way that is not just good for us as people, but also regenerative and restorative for the planet too. So I think that designers now, although behaviour has always been a part of the question, I think even more so, there's a responsibility and a need for designers to think about the way that they're designing from the perspective of all planetary beings, from the perspective of the planet as a whole and not just people.

And what we're seeing at Design Council, through our Design Council Expert Network that we work with really closely, is people are referring to themselves not just as architects or as product designers, but as regenerative designers, as systems designers, as strategic designers. And that for me really touches on the fact that design, yes it's a profession, yes it's a craft that has technical skill sets required, but

it's also simply a way of thinking, of making the world a better place, of the processes and the approaches that we take to problems. And designers are so good, not just at the craft that they've been trained in, but in convening, in facilitating, in making sure that collaboration is happening across different disciplines, in making sure that we're critically thinking and we're challenging our assumptions, in appreciating that we have to work in a different way today if we want to live on this planet and survive and thrive. And I think designers are naturally great at that because they're inquisitive people who want to do good and want to design in a way that is helpful and healthy and regenerative at the end of the day. So that is a shift that I think we're seeing more and more.

JOANNA CHOUKEIR: 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?]

DAISY CARTER: 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.

RACHEL BRONSTEIN: In 2024, The Design Council released some research as part of our Design Economy Skills Gap report which showed that 71% of designers in the UK say that the demand for green skills for environmental designing is only going to grow. And yet 43% said that they don't feel like they have the capabilities needed to meet that demand. So that evidences a skills gap where the demand is going to grow, but the supply isn't quite there. So that ignited a mission for Design Council which is our skills for Planet Mission and it's about ensuring that we can close that skills gap. So how can we give designers the skills that they need today, specifically the critical green skills that they need in order to design for the planet?

And this is really crucial because if we're talking about environmental design and designers being able to design in a way that is not just user friendly and human-centered but system-centered and planet-centered, we need designers to be equipped with the skills to do that. That is the enabler and that's how it gets practical and tangible. So, the starting point for this mission at Design Council was to produce our Skills for Planet Blueprint which creates a shared language that outlines the critical green skills that all designers need, and it's deliberately cross-disciplinary. So, we don't specify skills for architects or skills for product designers. It's looking at the commonalities between all design disciplines and drilling down into, if we had to create a set of skills that all designers need when it comes to designing for Planet, what would they be? So what are the skills for Planet?

There's three components that we cover in the Skills for Planet Blueprint. The first is the Green Design Mindset. This is what we value. This is underpinning how we act. So if we only value human beings then it follows that our designs will do the same. But if we adopt a systemic approach and a planet-centered approach then that is the value system that our designs will be based on.

The second component of the blueprint is the foundational design skills. The bread and butter of traditional designers today and that incorporates critical thinking, problem framing, problem solving and co-creating. And these are the skills that designers already possess, but with a green design mindset they can suddenly enable the green design that we want to see.

And then the final component of the blueprint is the Green Design Skills in themselves. So ensuring that designers have the ability to regenerate nature, to embed circularity, to eliminate emissions, to empower green communities, influence green behaviours, and evaluate green impact. And that is all outlined in the Skills for Planet Blueprint.

JOANNA CHOUKEIR: 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: Advice for future designers]

DAISY CARTER: 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.

RACHEL BRONSTEIN: When it comes to advice for the designers of tomorrow, what I would say is that trust in what you have to bring to the table. The design industry is changing so much. And yes, that's uncertain and yes, it's scary, but it means that when you as a young designer enter industry, you have things to teach the people that are already there. The design stalwarts who have been in the organisation for years and years and years, yes, they have honed their design practice and have more industry experience than you, but you are coming from an education system that has better equipped you with the skills needed to design for planet. So feel confident in your ability to advocate for that. You know more than you think and you are able to make sure that nature and the planet is represented in conversation because you have been taught that you have the skills to do that and you have something really valuable to offer as a result.

JOANNA CHOUKEIR: 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.