

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Rachel Bronstein, Senior Programme Manager, The Design Council

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. We've existed since 1944, so been around for a while. And I've been at The Design Council for three years. And I would say I fell into the world of design. And that's because I started out my career in digital transformation as a consultant. My work always touched on design, although I didn't really necessarily realise it so explicitly at the time. I worked on a lot of service and systems driven projects as a consultant. So, I was often doing user research and strategy and touching on design but not doing the designing necessarily myself. And through that process I became interested in user-centered design. How do we design for people? How do we make things that are actually useful for people rather than just being driven by the assumptions of people who are doing the designing?

And then over time that didn't feel sufficient enough and I started to question is user-centered design really enough and that drew me to human-centered design and to exploring what the world of human-centered design looks like. So, appreciating that it's not enough just to design for users who are interacting with your product or your service, but actually to think about the 360 experience of that person. They have a life outside of the design that you're creating, that they're interacting with. So, how can you appreciate that and bring that into design?

And then somewhere along the line in my consulting career, I decided that actually I wanted to move full-time into the social and environmental impact space. So I did a career change programme, a social leadership programme called On Purpose for a year. And that introduced me to systems change and systems approaches. And essentially systems approaches are just where you don't just think about the people and the product and what it is that you're doing on one project. You think about the big picture. You think about the connections between things; you think about the relationships between people; the levers and the structures that you can't always see.

And so at the end of the programme when it came to looking for a job next, I thought, I've got to find something that can marry this human-centered design approach that I've become really interested in with this world of systems that is about more than just people. And I came across The Design Council. And The Design Council had recently published a framework called the Systemic Design Framework. And that felt like a

light bulb moment for me because it did marry this need to appreciate and focus on people, but also think about the wider systems. So, it introduced me to the world of systemic design which is what I've then been doing since really at The Design Council. So that's how I've ended up where I am now. And I think it's interesting because 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.

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

What I love about the world of design is that it influences everything. It touches on our lives in so many ways every single day and there's a huge power and responsibility there as a result. I really do believe in the value that design can bring to the green transition. I think that it's a hugely important lever for enabling us as a society, as a global society, as a society in the UK, to operate in a radically different way. I think design can do that. And that's because yes, it's a profession with a technical skill set, but it's also a mindset. It's also how we approach problems. It's also how we collaborate. It's also how we convene. It's also how we bring different voices to the table, the marginalised voices that might be left out of the conversation. I think design does that really really well and should lean into that strength as a whole sector.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: How is design changing?]

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.

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

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.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Design in action]

So in the Skills for Planet Blueprint, we're really keen not just to talk about the theoretical green design skills that are needed, but to show some amazing case studies of these in practice and to incorporate those examples because that is the inspiration to act in this way, to show that it's been done before, that those skills can be embedded and can have a follow-through to positive impact.

There's two examples in our Skills for Planet Blueprint that I love in particular. One is an organisation called Been London and they are an accessories and homewares company, and they have embedded a circularity approach from the outset. So they are a circular business model and they see waste as a resource. And what's really interesting is one of the skills in the blueprint is select materials responsibly. And traditionally in design sometimes when you're creating something, you might take a colours and shapes first approach. But Been flipped that on its head and they really embody this skill of selecting materials responsibly by starting with the material, by thinking about what the material can do, how it can be responsible, how it can make use of something that was otherwise going to landfill. So an example is they've done a collaboration with Tate where they took waste banners from Tate that were otherwise going in the bin and turned them into bags. So it's just an amazing organisation to see, that is doing something different and is putting circularity into practice.

The second example that I love is a company called Faith in Nature and you might have seen them on bathroom shelves. They produce shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, all of the products that we love to use. But actually, what you might not know is that they are the first company to put nature on the board. So, when it comes to the skills that designers need to regenerate nature, one key skill is being able to collaborate with nature to represent nature in decision-making. And we have to operate radically differently in order to do this, and Faith in Nature show that in practice. So they put nature on the board, which means that nature is part of their governing body that when decisions are made in the organisation, there is a voice for nature in the room. So that they're thinking not just about the products that people use, but actually thinking about what is the impact on nature here? So that shows that design isn't just about creating the product, creating the packaging, shipping the product, working out what it looks like, what it does for the consumer. It is about making sure that the whole design journey, the whole design process and the mental

models and belief systems that underpin it are also considering nature and the planet as a whole.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Advice for future designers]

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.