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Design As Humanity

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We are changing. We are becoming different people, and our society is evolving all the time. Having design be at the middle of that conversation about where we're going — I think it's an essential conversation for us to be having as designers.

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On this episode of Design As you'll hear from:

Susan Fabry is VP Design Research & Experience at Fidelity Center for Applied Technology.

Laura Forlano is Professor in the College of Arts, Media, and Design at Northeastern University. She is the co-author of *Cyborg*, a part of the MIT Press Essential Knowledge series.

Mahsa Ershadi is a Lead UX Researcher at Microsoft AI.

Sheng-Hung Lee is a Ph.D. researcher at the MIT AgeLab. He also is Board Director at IDSA, Industrial Designers Society of America.

This episode of Design As Humanity could have been called Design as Technology, or even more simply and buzzword-y Design As A.I. However, each guest highlights in their own way, the human needed for any of these design conversations.

First, Susan Fabry speaks about her role as a design researcher working with new emergent A.I. technologies, and how human collaboration is an essential tool they're using in her work at FCAT to create better and smarter A.I. systems:

By Lee Moreau

Lee Moreau is the host of Design As and The Futures Archive. He is Professor of the Practice of Art + Design at Northeastern University College of Arts, Media and Design as well as the Founder and Director of Other Tomorrows, a design and strategy consultancy based in Boston.

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> *We're working with him on understanding how the structure is, and that's bringing in all of these different facets. And, you know, he'll bring something new to the table and then we'll bring something new. And it's those cross connections, it's cross-fertilization. It's those conversations that bring everybody's work further. And it's incredibly exciting because it's not done yet. It's not there yet.*

Then, Laura Forlano discusses how in her new book *Cyborg*, she continues the work of Donna Haraway in thinking about the human being and body as already fused with technology:

> *We should stop thinking in terms of these discrete individual agencies or discrete individual components. And we need to really reconnect humans with nature, reconnect humans with technology...we can think of our own day-to-day work lives or think of our our own creative lives as already cyborg in many ways.*

As a UX Researcher at Microsoft A.I., Mahsa Ershadi describes the continued centrality of the human user in her research, and it's irreplaceability in her work:

> *I don't think it matters necessarily how much data we have about current or past customers. People change with technologies, with the world. And so I think the future of design is for it to be even more intimately involved with the customer.*

Sheng-Hung Lee ends the episode explaining his work at the MIT AgeLab, where technologies like generative A.I. are incorporated, but are simply not enough in isolation to deal with the biggest challenges design and designers face:

> *We talk about financial planning, longevity planning. Can we really plan? Or can we just prepare? And what kind of a capacity [do we have] to prepare for all these unexpected scenarios? I personally feel as a designer, like especially now, we're not just focused on one single challenges: form or shape or color, CMF. No, where we focus on complicated challenges. It's a collective decision process. And it's cross-discipline.*

Transcript

Lee Moreau Welcome to Design As a show that's intended to speculate on the future of design from a range of different perspectives. This season, we're bringing you six new episodes with six new keywords to interrogate. In this episode, you'll be hearing four different design voices speak to the idea of design as humanity. I'm Le Moreau, host of The Futures Archive from Design Observer, Founding Director of Other Tomorrows and Professor of Practice and Design at Northeastern University's College of Arts, Media and Design, which hosted the 2024 Design Research Society conference earlier this year. There I got the chance to sit down with various guests, leaders and speakers who are attending the conference, and we've compiled their voices into this episode about design as humanity. It's a roundtable in four parts. In this episode, you'll be hearing from Susan Fabry—

Susan Fabry You can talk about these crazy systems and never talk about the impact on people. And bringing that human element in, it opens everyone's mind.

Lee Moreau Laura Forlano—

Laura Forlano How can we bring together concepts from the humanities and social sciences, from science and technology studies into the design classroom or the engineering classroom, or even back into those humanities and social science classrooms, but through an experiential, embodied, material way.

Lee Moreau Mahsa Ershadi—

Mahsa Ershadi As we create technologies, especially like artificial intelligence technologies that at the end of the day have to be in the hands of consumers. We need to design for those consumers

Lee Moreau And Sheng-Hung Lee—

Sheng-Hung Lee I really feel like the future of design is like —human cannot be replaced, right? You have a lot of ideas, but can you have a great taste?

Lee Moreau We probably could have called this episode design as technology, or design as artificial intelligence or something flashy like that. But really, I think what ties all of these really complex conversations about design together is that they're all about the people that are at the center of the design process, who are designing for is ever changing technologically enabled. We are aging. We are changing, We are becoming different people and our society is evolving all the time. And having design be at the middle of that conversation about where we're going. I think it's an essential conversation for us to be having as designers.

Susan Fabry I'm here with Susan Fabry, who is the VP of Design Research and Experience at Fidelity Center for Applied Technology, otherwise known as FCAT. We're in the booth here at Northeastern. Susan, how are you doing?

Susan Fabry I'm good. It's been a really exciting conference. Actually, I've been surprised at the amount of work and the papers and everything to bring it all together.

Lee Moreau Susan, you've worked in many different realms within design, so talk a little bit about your background.

Susan Fabry Yeah, so I started off in psychology. I was 100% sure that I was going to be a psychologist and I was going to work with kids and families and, you know, went down that path for a while and got interrupted. And after that experience, I realized it was time to look at why did I want to do that? And while I was thinking about the why behind that, I was also just for my own sanity, was making jewelry. And people kept wanting to buy it off of me. /laughs/ So I thought, I'm going to head over to RISD. So I applied to RISD and almost immediately found out that jewelry was not it for me and went into industrial design. And I've been-loved loved industrial design. Loved RISDes methodology of hands on creating 3D objects. But that also waned after a while. So once I was at Smart Design, I designed a ton of stuff for OXO.

Lee Moreau Now, these were some golden years at Smart Design.

Susan Fabry Yeah, but they were also just the start of really getting into ethnographic research, like people really starting to question marketing briefs, why things looked the way they looked. And they kept coming to us with weirder and weirder projects. And I got put on the weirder and weirder projects not being the quote unquote, normal industrial designer that just wants to make stuff.

Lee Moreau Mhm.

Laura Forlano So first I got put on breakfast cereal and then diapers, did a bunch of experience design —things that nobody else really wanted to get involved in and was loving it. That, unfortunately, I cut short because I moved to Germany and my husband's German and he really wanted to move to Germany. So I agreed to go with him and worked for Siemens designing cell phones. So that was in 2000 till 2003. And then during that time, I had my my first son. And we then my husband again got a job at RISD. We moved back to the United States. And I was lucky enough to land a Continuum which I really loved.

Lee Moreau Which is where we met.

Susan Fabry That's where we met. And such a smart group of people really, really pushing the understanding of what it means to understand people and products and just really thinking about things in a challenging way that every project just felt like we were doing something to help the world and not the landfills.

Lee Moreau I think so too. There was an incredible quality of intellect and care and.

Susan Fabry Passion.

Lee Moreau And passion. It was a special place.

Susan Fabry Yeah, it was great the way that people cared so deeply about the problem and that really wanted to understand the people. So it just really was the perfect marriage between what I had hope for with psychology and what I strove for with industrial design. But all good things must come to an end.

Lee Moreau And tell us more about what you're doing in Fidelity.

Susan Fabry Yeah. I mean, I feel like the Fidelity Center for Applied Technology is kind of like a combination of all of those people. It's kind of fun in the sense that it's super smart people like I am, I'm really intimidated by the amount of brainpower that are in the incubators. I mean, these are people who are, you know, neuroscientists and data scientists in all sorts of backgrounds, quantum. I feel like it's always stretching my brain.

Lee Moreau And how many people are in the FCAT group?

Susan Fabry So FCAT as a whole is about 500 people.

Lee Moreau 500?

Susan Fabry Yeah.

Lee Moreau Okay.

Susan Fabry There is a large group of people, you know, working on different types of systems. The incubator side is about 200. And then our design team is only 25. So we're-we're a small, mighty team. And then within that, I'm super, super lucky in that I get to dip into all of the incubators and, you know, work on projects that really push what I thought I understood about financial well-being in many ways. Knee deep in crypto blockchain understanding to see like how do you open a bank account?

Lee Moreau This is all pretty blurry for me too. Yeah. So okay, I'm hearing you, but I can only imagine what you're accessing.

Susan Fabry Yeah, I really feel like I'm playing catch up all the time, and it's-it's crazy the amount of information that-that people are playing with and trying to understand. And I think my my role in design research is really to try to create those connections to make it understandable. So it is the connective tissue behind understanding and one of my favorite frameworks from all times is, of course, you know, feasibility, viability and desirability. And it's really fun to break out of desirability, a low desirability. But those intersections between desirability and viability and feasibility are where we get most of our POCs. And that's where you start to really see the I mean, I almost feel like smoke's coming out of my ears all the time.

Lee Moreau No — a POC is a...?

Susan Fabry Proof of concept.

Lee Moreau Proof of concept. Okay. It does strike me that the average human doesn't really know much about blockchain and crypto and some of the things that you just mentioned. So what's the responsibility that you have in that sea of people doing all that stuff and thinking about this? How do you see your role?

Susan Fabry I think it gets back to something we often talked about at Continuum, like what's in it for me, right? Like why-why should you care about blockchain? Why you should care about blockchain — because it's going to change the way that we deal with money. And it adds transparency. You don't have to understand how blockchain works to understand why it's important to you. So how do you create a meaning behind all of these crazy things? Quantum. Quantum is I mean, another like just mind blowing type of computing. But it's incredibly important in terms of understanding how you are going to create security and how security is going to change in the next few years. As you know, we're going to have more cyber attacks happening. And so if you don't have quantum to protect your systems, it's going to be a problem. So how do you take that understanding without trying to explain the intricacies of quantum, you know, which-which we have worked on, You know, what is what is a visualization like? It's that I don't know if you've ever seen the visualizations, but typically shown as a penny.

Lee Moreau The coin flip.

Susan Fabry The coin flip, spinning, spinning. Right. And so it's never on that zeros and ones anymore. So those, you know, understanding that, but then understanding why why does the average person care?

Lee Moreau So in a group that's so impressive and is on the forefront of everything, right, pushing all those edges, where is an opportunity for you as a designer or design researcher to come in and say, you know, there's something we're missing here? Is there something that you want to continue to bring in or you're excited that you're looking at that's not right now in the portfolio that you want to pursue?

Susan Fabry Yeah, it's always the the human element that I want to bring in. You can talk about these crazy systems and never talk about the impact on people and bringing that human element in is it opens everyone's minds. It makes people think about the. Things differently. I was just working with one of our our data scientists who has a background in neuroscience, and we're working on what the underpinnings of the structure are for the generative A.I. to make sure that it's not hallucinating and giving made up financial information that would-

Lee Moreau That would be bad.

Susan Fabry That would be very bad. The nature of generative A.I. is that it will hallucinate just like you and I when we're talking. We're actually hallucinating, we're making things up, but hopefully we're building it on context.

Lee Moreau Right.

Susan Fabry So if you can bring a context and you can make those hallucinations in quotes, not be fake information. So we're working with him on understanding how the structure is, and that's bringing in all of these different facets. And, you know, he'll bring something new to the table and then we'll bring something new. And it's those cross connections, it's cross-fertilization. It's those conversations that bring everybody's work further. And it's incredibly exciting because it's not done yet. It's not there yet. And there's a lot of badness around AI in general, but there's a whole lot of positivity that's going to happen from it if we do it right.

Lee Moreau Well, I'm a little terrified about what you might say because I feel a little uncomfortable about this topic. But when you look to the future, what are you seeing, particularly using the sort of financial lens, but like, where do you think we're going to be in 10 or 15 years?

Susan Fabry It is crazy, actually. I mean, there are more millionaires than there are ever before because there is a lot more action happening. You got all of these startups and you've got people investing and doing things in cryptocurrency and all this other stuff. And so there's a lot of FOMO out there, and the FOMO can lead to really bad behavior and a lot-and we saw the tragedy that happened with Robinhood where, you know, it didn't need to be that way.

Lee Moreau Right.

Susan Fabry It was bad information. It was bad design, unfortunately. And the consequences were a human life. So I think that, you know, we have to be really careful. But if I look at the future, I'm pretty excited because I think that with the promise of the way blockchain works and the way the cloud works, you bring down the costs of entry so everyone can have a participation in it. And that means being really cautious what that participation looks like. We just need to be sure that there are no horrible incidents that happen as you open up the doors. But I think that it might sound a little buzzy to say democratization because that's what everyone keeps talking about, democratization of this blah blah blah. But when you do allow more people, when you lower the cost of entry, you allow more people in and you help with education. And education is like a nut that I'm trying to crack. Everyone else in the world is trying to crack and no one's done it. Like, I mean, we we think we're getting closer, but we really aren't. You know, like, what does that mean, financial well-being and educating people on that. It's always been an elite few that truly understand it. And there's this idea that there's a back room with smoky, you know, mirrors and smoke and leather or something like that.

Lee Moreau Big armchairs.

Susan Fabry Big armchairs, and only a few people are allowed in. And that's just not true. I mean, it's there are very simple premises to financial well-being. If we can share that with a broader audience and allow people to start having that kind of security at a younger age, it's going to help. It's all ships rise. It's not going to be something that's going to create a problem for, my God, the wealthy have to watch out or there's not enough room. We can have all ships rise and it will be a more positive situation for everybody.

Lee Moreau Susan, I want to thank you for spending time with us. Thanks for being here.

Susan Fabry Yeah, thank you so much. That was great. It's really fun.

Lee Moreau This week it's the 2024 Design Research Society. We're here on campus I'm with Laura Forlano. Hi, Laura.

Laura Forlano Hi Lee, It's great to be here.

Lee Moreau Great to have you. Laura, tell me about your day job.

Laura Forlano So I'm a professor in the art and design department and also the communication department at Northeastern, both departments are with the College of Arts, Media and Design.

Lee Moreau And you have a book recently out. Tell us about your new book.

Laura Forlano Sure. Absolutely. So I just finished a book called Cyborg with Danya Glabau, who's a medical anthropologist at NYU. And the purpose of the book, it's a part of the MIT Press Essential Knowledge series. So these are a series of short books that are intended to be primers on cutting edge tech issues. The particular vision behind the book was really to have a feminist intervention into this series, to specifically engage the notion of the cyborg that Donna Haraway introduced in the late 80s, early 90s, and to specifically start to engage with questions about perhaps what might have been left out at that time and where this conversation has progressed since then. In particular, looking at cyborg labor, cyborg bodies, and also troubling the cyborg specifically about race and disability. We end the book with a series of ten principles, and these are intended to be shorthand for way of thinking about emerging technology today, such as a A.I. or bio implants or biotech. Really, any kind of technology can be engaged through this theme. So we have themes such as situatedness, context, the glitch infrastructure, failure. And this is a way of sort of giving people a set of keywords to think about complex technological and human relationships.

Lee Moreau This book series I know because I've read the one on GPUs and a couple of other kind of fundamental technologies, you know, it's meant for a kind of a lay audience, right? Normal people like me. And I'm excited that normal people are going to be learning about cyborgs, which is really only about a sci fi kind of concept for most people. But tell us about your take on this and actually where you hope it will evolve with the kind of feminist perspective that you're overlaying on it.

Laura Forlano Sure. So we use a lot of pop culture figures to talk about cyborgs, so we use Sophia the robot. We use science fiction films and plots and stories. The original meaning of the word cyborg was actually by the author Manfred Clynes. The purpose of that word was to talk about cybernetic organisms. It was about humans that could survive in outer space. So how could we give the body a suit that would allow us to survive in these other environments? But there were also cyborgs that were envisioned, you know, in other kinds of settings, and particularly experiments that were done on people in psychiatric hospitals using our technology, medical devices to give patients medicines. And so this was another meaning. And, you know, both of these visions for this technology are of interest to me because I identify as disabled. I'm a type one diabetic. I use the sensor system and insulin pump. And so I do a lot of writing about those systems. So that was the original vision and meaning. And then Haraway kind of appropriates the concept to talk more about the binaries that we in society navigate, such as nature and culture, human and nonhuman. And so she tries to, you know, say that we are all cyborgs and and say that we should stop thinking in terms of these discrete individual agencies or discrete individual components. And we need to really reconnect humans with nature, reconnect humans with technology. And so, you know, that's kind of her intervention into conversation at that time. But yet within the Cyborg Manifesto, there are sort of hints towards disabled bodies, there are hints towards global labor, but those topics are not necessarily engaged with in a lot of detail. So we try to engage specifically with those questions. Again, looking at art, looking at music, looking at film, and try to explain the ways that we can think of our own day to day work lives or think of our our own creative lives as already cyborg in many ways.

Lee Moreau And those contexts that you're talking about interacting with, which may have seemed somewhat incidental at one point, are now rising up to be very much at the level of our consciousness, right? Whether it's climate, social inequity, etc., etc.. These are bearing down. And is the suggestion now that we need different kind of intellectual infrastructure to enable our engagement with these? Is that part of where you're trying to push this?

Laura Forlano Absolutely. So definitely this idea for having these principles or keywords at the end were intending to, you know, help to develop that kind of language that we can talk about the complex relationships that we have at work or or at home, right? So one of the sites for this conversation might be we look at Amazon warehouses. And so one of the questions around Amazon warehouse work is as you automate these warehouses, you introduce more robots into the workplace. Yet the rate of human injury goes up. And so humans are made to work at a pace that machines can work. And so we look very much at that co-evolutionary relationship, whether it's learning to talk to our assistants at home and the ways we change our voices and change what we talk about or how we, you know, sort of give instructions to those devices or, you know, looking at these workplaces that have become more dangerous and all of the unionization efforts around that. And so we see all of those things as ultimately part of our cyborg existence.

Lee Moreau Are there places where you're taking some of this thinking and knowledge already in your research here at the university and playing that out? So whether it's an example with something in fulfillment like Amazon or in another sector?

Laura Forlano We are just about to start interviews on gender in the UX field. So we're interested in, of course, the types of discourses that are happening in the UX workplace around AI, and then what the implications for, you know, current, you know, the current economic situation and how that's impacted UX workers. We are doing some work with the Disability Alliance on campus, which is a group I've been part of since the first day I joined Northeastern. And we're talking about how we might think more about the-our working lives at a university and sort of in what ways are either things like remote learning or making accommodations for people with disabilities and how-how technology can allow us, you know, perhaps greater flexibility around the workplace, which is something I think we all learned during the pandemic, of course. I'm currently working on a new project that's around data physicalization. So it takes a dataset from my insulin pump and sensor system that I worked with in a robotic sculpture project that I did with the artist Itziar Barrio, and that has been shown in galleries around the world. And now I'm doing a second iteration of that same-same dataset, but making a textile object. And so that's another project that I'm doing. So my work, you know, I'm trained as a social scientist, and then I moved into design research around 2005 is when I started teaching at design schools. And so my work, you know, straddles definitely both the social, scientific, you know, qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, the critiques of our current situations and, you know, life with technology, but also making specific design interventions through, you know, participatory design workshops or through speculative videos or through data physicalizations.

Lee Moreau You've had an incredibly exciting career journey already, and I think this DRS conference is hopefully a highlight, right, and a moment, but also a moment to reflect. Where are you focused when you think about the future?

Laura Forlano I've been focused for a long time, I think, on developing kind of critical pedagogy. And so it's about how can we bring together concepts from the humanities and social sciences, from science and technology studies into the design classroom or the engineering classroom, or even back into those humanities and social science classrooms, but through an experiential, embodied material way. So I'm very interested in exploring, you know, how we can provide the infrastructure for the broader education community, whether being faculty or, you know, outside of universities, all kinds of educators that are looking for ways to make sense of our current time or current life with computing. So I'm really interested in, you know, I think that these passing moments of particular technologies like A.I., which will ultimately be reframed in ten years as something else and ultimately five years later, something else. And so, you know, you have those tech trends. But I think the thing that science and technology studies does is it allows you a way of understanding those things, a way of thinking about a co-evolution of humans and technologies. I can see it in my own life with technology. Of course, every update to my devices creates new ways of living and being. It might be whether or not I can eat a pizza in a certain way, as simple as that. But it could also be, you know, more capabilities that I might have. And so what I'm most excited about, as you know, as a scholar, is really engaging much more deeply with disability as a way of thinking about technology and thinking about also how we can kind of crip technology, so how we can slow things down, how we can live differently, how we can acknowledge difference. And so that coevolution between kind of disability and technology is of great interest to me at the moment.

Lee Moreau That's incredibly exciting. I'm so grateful for your time. Thank you so much.

Laura Forlano Thank you, Lee.

Lee Moreau Design As is a podcast from Design Observer. Did you know that Design Observer also hosts a job board? We do! Here's Design Observer's editor-in-chief, Ellen McGirt.

Ellen McGirt One of the most popular parts of the Design Observer website historically has been our jobs column. And I'm going to imagine that it's going to continue to play a big role in the lives of people. And I think it's particularly with, I guess you could call it a great reset about where design fits into corporations. Overall, this is a conversation that we should we should be having, making sure that people can find jobs when they're available, I love our feed, but a big part of our editorial coverage in 2025 is making. Or that people are prepared for those jobs, but they're getting the kinds of tips and advice from their peers or from their more experienced peers that I feel Design Observer's an unusually good position to provide.

Lee Moreau Visit the job board at Design Observer dot com slash jobs to check it out or post a job.

Lee Moreau I'm here with Mashsa Ershadi at Northeastern's recording studio, here at CAMD. It's June 24th, the first day of the conference. Mahsa, could you introduce yourself?

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah, sure. So I'll just start, I guess, chronologically. I come from a really multidisciplinary background. I used to work as molecular biologist and geneticist, and then I was a high school teacher. And then I went to grad school. And in grad school, I studied neuroscience and psychology. And as a result, I ended up with the privilege of being able to complete a postdoc at the Brookings Institution, where we worked on a global study, you know, examining education across the world and to help parents think of their children's education. And then I ended up at Microsoft. So I'm currently at Microsoft A.I., and I got to work with some of the smartest people I've ever had the privilege of working with. And I'm a researcher at Microsoft. So that's that's where I'm at now.

Lee Moreau So in that little description you dropped like I used tp teach high school or something like that.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau And so at some point you can draw a line and say like you were teaching high school and now you're doing A.I. research at Microsoft.

Mahsa Ershadi /laughs/.

Lee Moreau Like, what the hell?

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau That's... Okay.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah, it's it's feels like quite a leap. But I have to say, I've been really lucky, and I — do you know that meme where it's like A to Z and there's a bunch of scribbles in between?

Lee Moreau Yeah.

Mahsa Ershadi That is my life.

Lee Moreau Okay.

Mahsa Ershadi You know, and there's, it's like compared to that, like A to Z with just like a linear. So, like, good on those people who, like, have their plans like set out and they just get to Z,.

Lee Moreau Whoever they are.

Mahsa Ershadi Whoever they are. I don't know that they exist really, but I've had a lot of scribbles in between. But I'm grateful for all that because I think in the end it has made me a stronger researcher and a lot of what I do in my position, which we'll get into, is teaching, right? And so when you're working with stakeholders who are non researchers, it is my job to interpret the data kind of go from data to wisdom. So you're interpreting that data such that, you know, product managers and engineers and designers can take away what's actionable from the data. So I really do fall back on pedagogy that I learned when I was in teachers college.

Lee Moreau So I want to turn this to the sort of context that we're in right now in the design world generally, where design is being kind of beat up a little bit in corporate circles, right? There been a lot of layoffs. There's a maybe a kind of sense that design has lost its footing in the context of large corporations. But how do you feel about that as a design researcher and in previous conversations—

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah, I don't see design going anywhere. In fact, I see it having as we create technologies, especially like artificial intelligence technologies that at the end of the day have to be in the hands of consumers. We need to design for those consumers. And so I think it's naive of us to invest entirely in just the engineering of these products and not in the design and also not in the research to understand whether or not the design is effective or the models are effective before they're out into market. So, I mean, there have been layoffs, but I think those are— they're not necessarily a reflection of design mattering less. I think there-there's so many different variables that go into those decisions.

Lee Moreau And in your context as a researcher, how do you situate what you're doing day to day? Like, who are you doing your work for? Who's your audience? What kind of agendas are you trying to push? I'm not trying to put words in your mouth,.

Mahsa Ershadi /laughs/.

Lee Moreau But like, you know, these are the big questions that people are wondering about.

Mahsa Ershadi It's such an excellent question. First and foremost, I'm an advocate, an ambassador for the users. That is what my focus is on. As a result of that, almost as an artifact or a symptom of that, then I'm helping the business. Right. So we're a for profit business at Microsoft. As a result, we need consumers and customers to like our products and delight in our products. And those products need to bring value out to their lives. And so what I do is I focus on the user. I connect really intimately with the users to make sure that I bring Microsoft those insights. There's a quote by Steve Jobs that I'm going to totally butcher, but it's something along the lines of: Don't create a product and then find your audience. Know your audience, then create the product they want.

Lee Moreau Mhm.

Mahsa Ershadi Something along those lines, I'm sure. I'm sure, he said it in a more eloquent way.

Lee Moreau That's pretty good.

Mahsa Ershadi Okay. And so that that's really kind of my mantra. You know, I think we really have to understand what the needs are. And I'll be honest about the fact that we don't let users make our decisions, right? So oftentimes, consumers don't necessarily know what they want, especially in the field of technology where so much is changing and they don't know what's possible. And so what we do is we take their insights and interpret it along the lines of our pipelines, right? So what are we doing that could somewhat align with what users want or can we predict based on what they've told us, what they might want, based on what we're working on?

Lee Moreau I often define in the context of students and define design as our uniquely human response to change.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau And usually that's motivated by technology, right? What changes us? Are us coming to grips with something that's radically shifting the way that we live day to day.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau You are working in a context. Where there's immense change. And it's not even like like big change that we don't understand. It's big change. We don't understand. And yet everybody's talking about it all the time. How does that feel as a design researcher?

Mahsa Ershadi Exciting. It feels very exciting. I keep going back to the word privilege, but it really does feel like just such a privilege to be in this space, because I know that ultimately this is going to have such a massive impact on-on everyone. And that impact is I mean, I'm sure we'll talk about this later, but the impact of A.I., as many people have, you know, considered it, it's going to be both positive and negative. But working especially in a place like Microsoft, we take responsible A.I. So seriously. And I can genuinely say that because I'm steeped in it, we take it so seriously that I'm more excited than afraid of it.

Lee Moreau Yeah, I was going to say, like, with great privilege comes—

Mahsa Ershadi —Great responsibility.

Lee Moreau And you just did that beautifully.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau There's a lot of pressure. I would imagine that you must feel to be here in the forefront of this, right, to be at the table in design research and in the context of design. There's been a lot of conversation recently about the toll that it takes at times to be on the front line, to see what we see and to process it and communicate it.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah, it's a lot of pressure, I'll say, but I tend to thrive with more and more responsibility. So I think it does take a certain type of temperament to be in the space, and that's what I see in my colleagues as well. I think we're all, I hate to go back to the cliche, like type-A, but we're all very hard working. I think that goes without saying. And we're very curious people. So I think it's the curiosity that really drives us to explore the space. And we do all want to make a really positive impact on the world. So at the end, it's not just about revenue. Sincerely, it's not. I know we work for a for profit company, but I'm also a person trying to make a positive impact on the world and leave a legacy that I could be proud of. And I think we do that in the work that we're doing with Microsoft.

Lee Moreau So as we think about the future of design and again from your pretty awesome privileged position that we've already discussed, where do you see the future of design going? What's on the horizon and beyond?

Mahsa Ershadi These are big questions.

Lee Moreau I don't mess around.

Mahsa Ershadi No, they're excellent questions. They could each be like a podcast session in and of themselves, the future of design. I mean, I don't know if there's a right or wrong answer. I really think the future of design is going to be even more immersed with the customer. You know, and so like right now, there's some talk about using AI to create these synthetic users that the researchers could then work with and-

Lee Moreau Like what? What does that...?

Mahsa Ershadi Like an example of that would be, you know, so these companies are picking up on data that's out there about current customers for certain, you know, products. And then they're putting together kind of these user personas that then researchers like myself could then work with those user personas versus the actual users themselves.

Lee Moreau Oh I see, okay.

Mahsa Ershadi And I know that that sounds efficient. I'm not that interested. And I would never put efficiency ahead of quality. And I don't think it matters necessarily how much data we have about current or past customers. People change with technologies, with the world. And so I think the future of design is for it to be even more intimately involved with the customer. And we're working on that right now at Microsoft. So that, you know, I mean, we want to see more qualitative research. We want to see more mixed methods research. So I think there's there's a lot of hype around like the quantitative aspect of research, but qualitative matters very much as well. It gives you kind of it gives you that depth that you might not get with a quantitative and even like ethnographic research, right. There's one thing for me to sit back in my lab and have somebody in Ethiopia tell me in ten minutes about how they use a Microsoft product. It's a whole other thing for me to go out to Ethiopia and for me to just pull somebody aside and be like: What app do you have in your phone and what do you use it for? And you know, there's something much more organic and I think authentic about that experience. And then as a researcher, you also tend to help avoid the the conflation with experimental demand, right? So yeah, I think the future of user design or design is going to be much more steeped in in knowing your customer.

Lee Moreau I mean, you just, I think accidentally said user design and.

Mahsa Ershadi Oh.

Lee Moreau That's kind of.

Mahsa Ershadi Interesting. Yeah.

Lee Moreau Well that's where it's weird because it's like you talked about the how and the techniques,.

Mahsa Ershadi Yes.

Lee Moreau But then we're also talking about the who. But the who becomes a what? Yeah. Because it's not actually true anymore.

Mahsa Ershadi I mean, great. Yeah, that's.

Lee Moreau Yeah. Yikes.

Mahsa Ershadi That just came out. Yeah.

Lee Moreau Here we go.

Mahsa Ershadi Yeah.

Lee Moreau Thank you so much for being here with us today. I mean, this has been a fantastic conversation.

Mahsa Ershadi Thank you for having me.

Lee Moreau This week. It's the 2024 Design Research Society conference. You may not be familiar to our listeners, but you're very familiar to me. So—

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah.

Lee Moreau Sheng-Hung, I don't. I probably will miss some of the connections, but we go back to the Continuum days and IDEO days. Give us a little introduction, the official introduction for Sheng-Hung Lee.

Sheng-Hung Lee I'm Sheng-Hung Lee. I'm currently PhD student at MIT AgeLab at MIT Ideation ILab. Also the very fancy title of board director of IDSA,

Lee Moreau Ooh.

Sheng-Hung Lee Which is the Industrial Designer Society of America. Very fancy leadership title. And before that, I'm very lucky to to work on, two design consultancy: IDEO and design Continuum. And my college, I was major in industrial design and electro-engineering, and I'm very lucky as a designer I can also design from things from inside out, or outside in. So kind of like play with all of this like not just form, also like how we make it work, right? So something like that fascinating to me. Before I go back to school, study, and currently PhD research for MIT AgeLab and MIT Ideation Lab, I actually work in industry for six years. My first job actually design Continuum based in Shanghai, where with Chris Hamster, Brian and Lee and at the moment — Oh my God this like 10 years...

Lee Moreau Oh we're going back, right? It's great.

Sheng-Hung Lee /laughs/ Yes. And after that I joined IDEO in Shanghai office to support the project with Tokyo office, Singapore office, and Cambridge office.

Lee Moreau It's a whole mess. And you're like, I'm incredible mover and shaker both in real life and also on social media and the work that you're doing to like advance thinking and design. So Sheng-Hung, I understand that you're moderating or co-hosting a panel here, a track, can you explain what it is?

Sheng-Hung Lee So we try to understand, yeah, design design process, but what does it mean to our future? To our like life, right. So how to design for yourself, how to design we think about people's age, not just numbers, different life stages — How do you design for that? So we try to understand because ideas of longevity planning comes from financial planning, and we tried to extend that definition from only talk about money. We talk about other aspects, including community, family, mobility, investment, education, right? So kind of more broader aspect to talk about people's quality of life. How do we can improve that and through the lens of design or through the lens of creativity.

Lee Moreau Let's just say longevity is not the sexiest topic necessarily in design, but it's certainly been coming on strong recently. So maybe in the last 5 or 10 years. I know the- Joe Kaufman's lab has been part of that, but how do you feel about this kind of growth in the conversation about longevity and where do you think that's going to go?

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah, it's this is a great question because, I mean, people live longer and also want to live better, right? And now 85 plus is the fastest growing demographics. So like we did think about like what does it mean to our society, right? Like we need to celebrate multigenerational workforce, multigenerational culture, right? Our environment, and how do you make your life more sustainable? Right now we have little kids, but a lot of senior people. And this could be a new norm. And it's already happening, right? There's some Asia like cities or countries like Japan where we're like a super aging society. So what's the role for designers and how can we think about like in to contribute in a way that people feel they want to improve their quality of lives. And that's really complicated topic is beyond just financial planning, retirement planning. So we can reframe this as longevity planning.

Lee Moreau Designers tend to play a kind of mediating role between multiple forces. Who are you particularly involved with? Is it more in the industry side, governments — who do you collaborate with?

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah. So the project is sponsored by, fully sponsored by industry. So we have a lot of like a sponsor from financial planning company, health insurance company, banking. And it's like they also think about what is next for financial planning, right. Like, yeah beyond money, like wellbeing, not just talk about physical health or like mental health, emotional health. Also talk about social wellbeing. Right like yeah, you have money, you think about aging in place, but you feel lonely.

Lee Moreau Mhm.

Sheng-Hung Lee My dad retired at age 50 and I was in college at the time and I didn't know he got depressed for three years because nobody taught us how to retire. And it's a verb, right?

Lee Moreau Right.

Sheng-Hung Lee The reason, because he got depressed because nobody celebrates his birthday.

Lee Moreau Yeah.

Sheng-Hung Lee Like your colleagues. It doesn't necessarily means your friends. I owe you this. You graduate from our company, so you should figure it out by yourself. So that kind of — I'm working on this project. I think about my. My childhood memory. Okay. Wow. This is really important. Yeah. What? How can we increase our, not just financial literacy? What do you mean by a longevity literacy? Right, that's kind of the next stage I'm working on, focused on.

Lee Moreau One of the beautiful things about design research is it can surface stories like the one about your father. Are you seeing this in a lot of the work where you go out and do research and then you pull in these like hugely emotionally charged narratives that you can then resurface and bring back to your clients, your collaborators, etc.. ?

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah. So actually yesterday I finished my whole in-person interview, which is like 75 people, in person for ah hour long interview. And we think about, because we talk about longevity planning, not just focus on senior people, we think about young adults 35 to 54, right. Pre-retirement 55 to 64, and post retirement people above 65. And we tried to recruit people because experiment, we want to control the demographic. Focus on bigger Boston area. And then there are some like a control about their income investment and their savings. And I just realized: Wow, it's mind blowing. These 75 participants, some people — he's like 64 and his partner is 94.

Lee Moreau Right.

Sheng-Hung Lee 30 years difference. And they live in like a residential mall close to the Prudential neighborhood. Very rich, financial free. The only thing he care about: Who's going to take care of him.

Lee Moreau Mhm.

Sheng-Hung Lee Because his partner biologically will pass away as 94, 96. So you think about how can he find people to take care of him but without like emotional or financial burn out. They're from LGBTQ community? No kids, but how one stepson. What does that mean to him, right? How does he want to connect with the younger people? But our society ready for that, right? So if you think about the life changes, right. How does people overcome that difficulties? And you know...

Lee Moreau We don't do a great job of designing for uncertainty, right? And in general, like we tend to design for the things that we can understand, the things that we can touch, the things that we can pretty quantitatively predict. But, you know, this 65 year old person who may have five or maybe 30 more years and they can see that through the life of their partner, that how do we and how do we anticipate that?

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah. So this is a great question because it makes me think about, we talk about financial planning, right, longevity planning. Can we really plan right? Or we just prepare right? And what kind of a capacity to prepare all these unexpected like scenarios? Right. And I feel I personally feel a designer, like especially now, we're not just focused on one single challenges: form or shape or color,CMF. No, where we focus on complicated challenges. It's a collective decision process. And it's like cross discipline, right? And also, it really makes me think about the whole design education, especially at the DRS conference that you can see so many people talk about policy, identity, gender, right? And this is really something we should take care of because it's a complicated world that all the challenges are facing: climate change. Right, aging issue. And these are things we have to think about: how do you redefine the design? Right. I don't think designers should be divided by a discipline. It should be divided by challenge that we're facing. And everyone's a designer, I know sounds like cliche, but also like, yeah, it really is true. Everyone's designer that think differently and how to connect the dots. And that's the thing I still feel like is missing in our design education.

Lee Moreau So when you think of the future of design, as you've been working in industry, you worked as a consultant, you've moved into academia, you're getting a PhD. When you think about the future, what do you see out there that you're excited about? And I'm particularly this notion that you're working with longevity, but there's so much more that you have to offer.

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah, I, I know like everyone, everything is connect to A.I., right? And especially generative A.I. tools, right. Yeah, for sure. Remember like very classic modeled double diamond.

Lee Moreau Yeah.

Sheng-Hung Lee Right like converge, diverge, converge diverge. We we kind of use A.I. to create a crazy diverge for ideation, right, or different we generate ideas based on criteria prompt based kind of process. But I feel I really feel like the future of design is like: Human cannot be replaced, right? You have a lot of ideas, but can you have a great taste, right. So many like ideation for different wheels design. But how do you pick the wheels that match your car? Match your personal style. And these are coming from our daily life. You know, you can't generate empathy and you can't generalize people's lifestyle. You have to live there to understand people's lives. And if you have a feel that because of that, most of the time, including myself, misleading by all these cool, fancy tools. We thought we were all designers. No, no. Designers have to not just create also curated the experiences. And that really comes from our daily lives. And I feel that's the part I feel A.I. has a long way to go. Right. How do you reframe the challenges? How do you set up the filter to select the solution that fits client's needs or your needs? That takes time to experiences and takes people's wisdom and commitment.

Lee Moreau I mean, I've I've been thinking a lot about this topic, collaborating a little bit with the Center for Collective Intelligence at MIT, too. And I've become convinced that I is going to do a pretty good job at the diverge and also a pretty good job of the.

Sheng-Hung Lee Converge.

Lee Moreau Converge. And so once you do those things, what it doesn't have is what you just described as taste or curation or whatever, the kind of human judgment that kind of like a little something else that.

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah.

Lee Moreau .So we'll see if it can how quickly or it approximates that or makes enough people feel that it's faking it that — I don't know. We'll see.

Sheng-Hung Lee Yeah.

Lee Moreau I'm very curious about this, and I'm glad you are, too. Sheng-Hung It was wonderful chatting with you. Thank you so much for spending time with us.

Sheng-Hung Lee Thank you, Lee.

Lee Moreau Thanks again to Susan Fabry, Laura Forlano, Masha Ershadi, and Sheng-Hung Lee for taking the time to sit down with me. Design As is a podcast from Design Observer. For transcript and show notes, you can visit our website at Design observer dot com slash Design As. You can always find Design As on any podcaster of your choice. And if you like this episode, please let us know: write us a review, share with a friend, and keep up with us on social media at Design Observer —we'd love to give you a seat at our roundtable however we can. Special thanks to Maxine Philavong at the Northeastern Recording Studio and Design Observer's editor in chief, Ellen McGirt. This episode was mixed by Judybelle Camangyan. Design As is produced by Adina Karp

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