

# Design for Planet Fellowship Exchange

## Episode One: Language

Alisha Morenike Fisher (00:21)

Welcome to the Design for Planet Fellowship Exchange, a series of thought-provoking conversations bringing together the collective intelligence of our fellows. This is part of the Design Council's Design for Planet mission, which aims to galvanize and support the UK design community to address the climate crisis.

I'm Alicia Morenike Fisher, a multi-disciplinary polymath of sorts, practicing in the fields of design, landscape, green building, and emerging technology. I'm your podcast host, and in each episode, I'll be joined by two fellows to explore some insights and provocations around key themes.

These conversations aim to inspire action and change for anyone interested in regenerative design, and for those seeking to integrate design for planet into their practice.

So, joining me in the first of our series of conversations are Bernard Hay, the programme manager of the Design Council's Design for Planet Fellowship, and Josie Warden, Head of Regenerative Design at the RSA Royal Society of Arts, where she leads the regenerative futures programme.

Welcome Bernard and Josie.

Being able to witness the discussions around design the planet has been exciting, especially over the last few months. Bernard, could you tell us more about this fellowship?

Bernard Hay (01:32)

So, to give a bit of background, the Design Council launched a new mission in September of last year. And that was about how we can galvanize the 1.97 million strong design

community in the UK to design not only for planet, but to address issues like the climate and biodiversity emergency.

One of the things that we are very aware of at the Design Council is different sectors and disciplines of design, but also community activism and organizing, have been doing amazing work to address some of these issues, but are often treating it in very specific or discipline focused kinds of ways.

And so for us with the fellowship what we were really interested to do was to ask: what would happen if we created a space where people who were really immersed in those different sectors and disciplines of design could come together and share what they'd learned - as a fashion designer or an architect - and to exchange that knowledge across those sectors.

So that was kind of the big idea. And I guess the other thing to throw in is that one of the things we see as being really important in terms of design's role in addressing something like this is that it's about bringing different kinds of knowledge and different kinds of actors and people together into a space and facilitating those networks and relationships.

And so, for us, the fellowship was very much about: how can we build on that skill that design has to bring those different conversations together?

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (02:57)**

Language was one of the things that the fellows were learning about and discussing in the workshop. So Josie, maybe you could tell us more?

As a fellow yourself, how do you perceive the position language holds in design, and as part of this fellowship?

### **Josie Warden (03:08)**

It was a really interesting discussion. We talked about starting the fellowship not with just going straight into what we think about as designers, but also thinking about how we consider our work and how we talk about our work. And that's where the idea of language came up: what is it that we are bringing to our practices? And how do we talk about them and discuss them with other people?

Because we all come from very different disciplines, we found that in our initial discussions it would be really helpful to unpack a little bit the words that we use, because each of our disciplines comes with its own kind of language. So, things like the built environment talk in a particular way, fashion talks slightly differently, service design talks a bit differently.

So, we thought it would be good to kind of unpack that and to interrogate the deeper values, thoughts and ways of thinking that sit beneath the language that we bring. We think that's something that is really important to surface when we're talking about designing for planet. If you're really thinking about what a kind of radical systems change could look like, then the values that we bring are really important. So, we used this first session to kind of unpack some of that,

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (04:10)**

And how have you both seen language change when addressing the climate biodiversity crises?

### **Josie Warden (04:15)**

Where we started with the conversation around language was this idea that we often talk about the way that design designs. So, we know we design products, we design the world around us, and then those things shape us back. And we think there's something similar going on with language: the way we think and talk also shapes the way that we start thinking and acting. So, there might be a kind of parallel between design and language in that sense.

And so, we've been thinking about the sorts of changes that have happened to the language across last few decades around designing for planet. And I think even that framing is quite new: the idea of designing for planet which is kind of beyond just the human societies but thinking more about holistically about ecosystems and other species.

So, we as a fellowship in that session kind of mapped a little bit of the shifting language that we've seen around this space. And there have been some really big changes over the years. You see in language that ideas kind of come into fashion or integral to public consciousness, and then evolve or change and move away.

Even if you think about the word sustainability, it only came to kind of mean what it does in the environmental space in the sort of latter half of the last century. And now it's something

that has, you know, has taken over lots of public discourse. Everyone knows the word sustainability.

But within design spaces, people are now also thinking: “Okay, what does sustainability encompass in terms of values that we might want to shift?” So, the idea of sustainability can sometimes feel a bit static, it can sometimes feel like you're looking to do less harm. And maybe there's an opportunity to think about what it would look like if, as we moved forward, we were really thinking about how design can help communities to evolve, to change, and to flourish over time. And maybe sustainability sometimes doesn't capture that in a kind of emotive sense. That's where maybe the idea of regeneration, or restorative, or replenishing design is kind of moving forward.

So that's one example I guess about how some language has changed.

#### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (06:09)**

And is there also a way in which language you feel can merge, especially with old traditions?

And what about the emergence of new language in terms of us being able to imagine new phrases, new words and new formats and new texts?

#### **Josie Warden (06:27)**

Yeah, that idea of how with some of the things that we're talking about the language might feel new in our current context. We did reflect too on the fact that our context might be quite a western context, an English-speaking context, and that some of these words might feel new in the context of design, such as regenerative, for example.

But, the concepts that we're talking about are rooted in lots of cultures and languages around the world. There was lots of conversation about that: how actually this ties into the way that humans have lived for a long time in many communities. So, there were lots of references to that: it both being a new thing, but also really rooted in the past and present of many cultures around the world.

### **Bernard Hay (07:10)**

It's interesting to see how particularly over the last year, with things like UK hosting COP 26, as Josie was saying certain words have become the dominant ways in which we start to understand and make sense of what is happening. So, phrases like 'net zero', we're talking a lot about kind of 'carbon targets' and 'carbon measures', thinking about things like 'natural resources'.

And I suppose the thing that's coming to the fore with that is: language isn't simply about how we describe the world, but it's also shaping how we perceive it, how we value it, what kinds of actions and change we can achieve, on the basis of having that understanding of how things are.

And I think for us, what's been really interesting is that, whilst this has been really important language to help starting to build the kind of collective awareness and understanding we need to do something, and we need to do something urgently, it also prevents us from entering into different kinds of relations and different kinds of understanding with ecosystems with non-human animals. And also, different ways of valuing and caring for landscapes and environments as well. And so, I think for us, it's about trying to open-up those different ways of understanding that we've maybe eclipsed or have become less visible, because of the ways in which certain words have become very dominant in climate discourse and action.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (08:34)**

How can designers learn from the languages and practices of plural cultures and actors in their work?

### **Bernard Hay (08:39)**

There is one thing about how as designers we can become really good listeners to other actors and people who are involved in, or affected by, the designs that we create.

And I guess the other thing was about how, as a fellowship, we could embody a principle of humility to the work that we're doing. Part of what that was about, was recognizing that we often hold different kinds of knowing and talking about climate in a hierarchy. Often that tends to be around thinking of scientific rationality, for example, and the language of science and mathematics, as being the right or the best way to make sense of climate change. And so, embodying a principle of humility there is about recognizing plural voices and plural ways of knowing, to help inform what we design, and what we need to understand about an issue or a context when we're designing.

**Josie Warden (09:35)**

We also did an interesting exercise at the beginning of the session where we brought in some words from other languages, including some minority languages that talked about nature in a different way - different way of seeing it.

And again, that was quite a nice way of engaging with the idea that we could be thinking about this in very different ways. And one of the ideas we posed to one pair of fellows was the that the Antarctic has no language for this. And they pushed back and said that maybe it does have a language: it has a language that we don't understand around the ecosystems and the movement of elements.

I thought this was really interesting on how we bring in the perspectives and voices of ecosystems or non-human actors.

So, I think some interesting exercises like that could also help spark people's imagination and get them to think a bit differently. And to look beyond where they'd usually be looking for information as they start to design.

**Alisha Morenike Fisher (10:25)**

Yeah, I think it's really interesting how you're able to learn more about these kinds of infrastructures, especially in terms of them being like, native to the land. And I think that's also quite important, because there's an element of educating there that's quite essential.

**Josie Warden (10:41)**

Do you mean working with communities?

**Alisha Morenike Fisher (10:43)**

Yes.

**Josie Warden (10:45)**

Definitely. And I think that's comes back to what you were saying Bernard, around different ways of knowing, and actually really thinking about that as you're starting a design project: how do you bring in lots of different perspectives that you might not normally look out for, so we can really learn from people who are embedded in that community and really know that ecosystem and those infrastructures, to really make sense and explore what the possibilities are in that place?

**Alisha Morenike Fisher (11:09)**

And how does the language of design for planet need to shift to help us address the climate and biodiversity emergency?

**Bernard Hay (11:15)**

The temptation is to say: there is one language and what we need to do is to come to a different kind of language. And I think whilst that's partially true, one of the really strong sentiments that came from the conversation that we have with the wider fellowship is that, actually this is about giving space for multiple languages to be able to kind of co-habit and coexist with each other in that space.

But I do think at the same time, there were a few really important conceptual shifts, that the group as a whole felt needed to happen to have the kinds of deep change that we know design has to go through if we're going to actually center the planet as a living cohabited part of the universe.

And I think that the really big one was shifting from what we might call a kind of human-centered idea of design, and all the language that comes with that, to a pluriversal idea of design.

**Josie Warden (12:13)**

Yeah, I completely agree with that. There was a feeling in the room that the risk with language is you say 'we need to talk in this particular way' and that means everyone



understands the same thing. But actually, if we think that this idea of multiple perspectives is important, then that should relate to our language as well, and what we use, and we should be able to accept lots of different ways of talking about things.

There's an academic from South America called Arturo Escobar, who has written a book called 'Designs for the Pluriverse' and he captures this really well. I think the idea that, rather than thinking about a single future, that is kind of the perfect future for all of the planet, what if we thought about it in lots of different opportunities for different futures in different places, that's really rooted in what's right for that place in the culture and identity, in the resources in the landscape of that place.

And that seemed to us really exciting, because it kind of tackles some of the challenges that we have around the idea that you can design something, and it would be right for anywhere.

And we've seen in the history of design, I think the challenge of maybe, say, with urban design, creating a perfect sort of idealised version of what an urban design could look like, and actually then finding that it doesn't quite work for that place and for those people.

And this idea actually says, well, actually, let's look at lots of different ways of seeing things. So the idea that indigenous cultures around the world have all used very different ways of relating to the land, and building infrastructure and building the vernacular buildings, etc. But they all kind of work for those particular places.

So this idea of pluriversality is thinking, not just how do we have plural multiple ways of doing stuff? But actually, how do we really value that difference, and think about the huge amount of potential that there could be for these new variations on the way we build, and the way we make products, and on the way that we live together.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (13:57)**

That's great. I really love that. And I think it also touches on this understanding of equity of space, because in order for us to learn more about how we can design for each other, we have to be able to look at how multifaceted we are, how creative we are, but also this kind of interweb, almost of learning from so many different people, it actually gives me a lot of hope. It just makes me feel like there are opportunities and sometimes you have to make them, sometimes you have to be ready to kind of dive into them. But also it just provides us that space to create again.



One of the things I wanted to ask both of you is have you been able to imagine new phrases, new words, or have you been able to kind of create in this pandemic, or is that something that you're looking to do more often in the next few years?

**Josie Warden (14:52)**

Well, that's a really good question. I think for me in terms of their sort of impact of the pandemic, I've spent a lot of time probably like a lot of people in a small room behind a laptop. Maybe it has affected my ability to think of it differently. And what I'm finding increasingly as I'm getting outside more, is that I'm feeling kind of energised in different ways from being out in the environment and connecting in that different way.

Maybe it is a bit like language too, like our space gives us a kind of language for thinking. And the more we can explore different places, and particularly, I think be in nature, if we're talking about what this really looks like, and how we learn from nature. And that's something that I really want to be doing more of.

**Bernard Hay (15:26)**

I just completely relate to that sense, that the space of where you have a conversation, and the context is so important. And being able to see friends outside and go for a walk and have a conversation together has just really reminded me of the importance of having the space to slow down, and actually to really have a good dialogue.

And in a way, I think for me, that's also a really important lesson, as designers that we need to remember. I mean, I'm sure so many designers will have had that experience where you have a kind of co-design workshop and you talk really quickly, you jot down notes on a post it and then someone will synthesise that into an abstract overarching concept that summarises everything that everyone said.

And for me in a way, one of the big takeaways over the last couple years is actually it's really important to slow down and actually listen to the specificities and the particularities of what people are saying and not to try and generalise it up or really quickly package it in some way. So I think for me, it's the art of being slow and the art of listening.

**Alisha Morenike Fisher (16:31)**

I think, because we're in a space that's very much of consuming. We're so used to consuming that actually, the fact that we're able to slow down provides us the opportunity to venture and to learn and to sit with ourselves almost and sit with other people in

communion. And that's so important and flesh out these ideas. So it provides us that space.

**Josie Warden (16:55)**

Yeah. And I think that's exactly why this fellowship is so exciting as well, because that kind of came up so much in that session, the idea that we need to slow down or that how can we create space? And also how can we have language that creates space? And the feeling that actually, by bringing these different ideas together, we are doing a bit of that sense making together and, you know, sitting in circle and listening and learning from one another feels really important, but also recognising that we're speaking for ourselves as a group, and that there are lots of other perspectives out there. And we did a little bit of reflection to you around who maybe isn't in the room. And I think that's another good thing to be reflecting on, in terms of design disciplines like, what do we not bring as a group? And how can we start to bring those perspectives in?

**Bernard Hay (17:34)**

Another thing I think that was really important is, this isn't simply a kind of an abstract conversation. But it actually the language that we use as designers has real effects when we're working with clients with communities, or when we're talking about our work to the wider community. And I think there was a sense that actually, a challenge of how can we create languages of care for the planet rather than languages of extraction? Alisha, just what you were saying earlier about - how do we shift from a kind of consumption mindset to one which is more around empathy and care and opening up relationships - I think is a challenge of language.

**Alisha Morenike Fisher (18:10)**

One of the things I was thinking about as you're speaking was, how do we also engage communities that may be on the peripheries of our cities, maybe in the peripheries of our countryside and towns? How do we engage with them in terms of our language, especially if, for instance, they might not necessarily be entwined with our own set of languages?

**Josie Warden (18:33)**

Something that I think came up a lot. And that I've been thinking of a lot too is how we relate to land. And this is also to do with language, I think.

There's a fantastic book called 'The Lost Words' by Robert McFarlane, who talks about last words in the UK that we used to have across different dialects of English, but also other languages, such as Cornish, or Welsh. And a lot of the words describe nature. And there are lots of words in there that are just incredible, that describe something very specific, like I remember the word for it, but the hole made in a bush by the passage of a small rodent, and things that people would have noticed in their landscape and that maybe we just don't see any more or fewer people see them because so many people are living in more urbanised spaces.

I think there's a lot that language about land can teach us about how we relate to the land differently.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (19:23)**

I think we touched on the term sustainability. Where do you see this word in our current space?

### **Josie Warden (19:31)**

Yeah, this is really, really important when we think about language. So the sort of evolution of the word sustainability, actually what has also changed is not just the way people are using it, but the way people are thinking about the world around them. And it's the same with regeneration.

I think what's really important at this point as it's kind of gaining traction is that when we start changing our language that we do so not just because something is a new buzzword, and that we sort of use a new word but carry on acting in the same way, but actually we use that sort of shift in language as an opportunity to explore different ways of thinking.

And I think that's what regeneration does the sense of thinking, actually, some of the things that we've brought up today around, how do you think beyond the kind of human? How do you think about the longer term? How do you bring in different ways of knowing? How do you think about the kind of conditions that could support a place or a community to keep evolving over time? Those are quite different to some of the questions that might come up within sustainability. So I think it is really thinking about as a designer, how do you ask different questions? And if you're going to shift your language from one place to another or start using a word that you've heard, actually reflecting a little bit on: what does that really mean for you? What are some of the deeper questions that you might need to ask?

It's interesting with language as it changes, it also gets shaped by the way we use it. So if we use regenerative just to kind of mean the same business, as usual, that we've been

doing recently, then its meaning will shift. And actually, we'll lose some of that exciting essence of the possibility of a new way of thinking about things or a kind of emergent way of thinking about things.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (21:01)**

One of the things about language is also looking at the cultural preservation, which is really, really important. How do you contemplate the ways in which we can start preserving some of the words, the texts, whether that's Cornish, whether that's Welsh languages that may not necessarily be at the forefront? How can we merge it with our current other languages that may be more prominent?

### **Bernard Hay (21:21)**

One thing that's really important to remember is that languages aren't simply words, they are living parts of a culture and a community. And so I suppose one immediate way that you enable languages to survive is you support the communities that are using them to continue to flourish.

And I think also as well, as designers kind of going into a space or a new community or a new area, which, you know, often is something that designers will do is they'll be parachuted into a different context. How can you not only be really intentional about introducing new words that can change mindsets, but also as well give space to learn languages of others and and to really spend time trying to understand those different terms and those different ways of understanding and seeing the world that you might be designing with?

### **Josie Warden (22:08)**

I was reflecting on it in terms of my own family. So my mum's family is Cornish. So there was a Cornish language, which was almost lost, but has kind of been revived. And it's a real source of pride and in the place. And then on my father's side, my family spoke Halkomelem which is the first nation language. And again, that's almost been lost, but it's kind of being revived. And I don't speak it at all. But I'm really interested in kind of exploring that. And it feels like again, it's a real source of pride and way of seeing the world differently, and really being connected to that culture. So I think it's something that maybe people are coming back to a lot in different parts of the world really thinking about, actually, how do we explore things differently. And I think that's where the kind of conversation about English comes in, in a really interesting and quite challenging way. Sometimes, too, that English has been a really important language in design, because of the kind of connection with the Industrial Revolution and the kind of role that England has played in design and design education today. But also, it's a language that is really connected to

colonialism, and has been a source of oppression for many languages around the world. So it's interesting also to reflect on what role that plays in the history of design and all of our own practices to I think.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (23:11)**

Also, one of the things I wanted to ask you as well is that some words definitely have deep rooted meaning. So in my culture, I'm British, but I'm also Nigerian, and one of the things is I'm starting to learn more about the Yoruba language. When you break down on one word, it doesn't necessarily mean one thing. Do you want to share any of the examples that you've learned or you've read or that other people have contributed, especially in terms of the fellowship workshops that you've been through?

### **Bernard Hay (23:40)**

One of the examples that really stood out for me was a project called 'Regenerative Empathy'. And it was run by the Harvard Graduate School of Design, specifically led by a landscape architect called Teresa Galí-Izard. And what she did was she invited her students to go along with her to the south of France, and really wanted them to start to think differently about how we understand the environment, land and place. As a starting point, it's quite interesting, we often talk about environmental issues. And one of the issues with that is that it often treats the environment as being quite a passive thing, almost a backdrop for human activity and action.

And so within this project, what Teresa did was she took the starting point that we need to take a multi species view to design. And by that I mean that she wanted all of her students to recognise that things like the soil, the air, were living systems filled with micro biomes, fungi, small animals and insects, and to then go and work with communities and with that soil to design more regenerative agriculture solutions,

One really quick example of that is a project that one of the students did was to look at how a peach orchard could act in symbiosis with pigs on a farm, and those two non human life forms, collaborating, if you like to create really great crops and farming sustainably as well.

### **Josie Warden (25:10)**

There was another one that I really liked as well - and would really like to do - which is called the amateur ancestor tour. And so this is something that was started by design curator, Justine Boussard. And it's a half day exploration of London's museums. And the idea is that you kind of walk through the museum's starting back in time through the kind of evolution of the world through the history of human interventions and human societies and use that then as a starting point to have conversations about the future. And where do we go, and how do we act as ancestors?

One, it kind of gives you like an embodied experience, you know, you see parts of history through fossils, or through machinery that started to get you thinking differently, not just about the role that you're playing as a human life today, but also your role as an ancestor for people who are going to come in the future.

And I think those two words in the title are so exciting, the idea of, you know, being an ancestor, that we're not the kind of pinnacle of human development so far, but we're actually really our kind of purpose is maybe to be the ancestors and the stewards for the people and the nonhuman species and environments that come after us.

And also the idea of being an amateur, because this is something that maybe a lot of designers are not used to sort of seeing themselves as, but actually, it sort of sets you in the space of one being kind of inquiry and being in a learning space. But also, I think it sets you and the idea that actually maybe humans, maybe we're also kind of amateurs within nature, like with the kind of younger siblings that we're learning from the way that mother nature works. So I think those two kind of words have quite a lot of provocations within them.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (26:42)**

Josie and Bernard, thank you, honestly, so much for joining this podcast session. It's been incredible to have you both here, and to hear more about your takeaways from the workshops that you've had with the fellows. But also to learn more about ways in which we can plan for the future, especially when it comes to the climate agenda.

One of the things that I'll definitely takeaway is understanding more about the ways in which we can build on new systems, but also look at ways in which we can continue to change behaviours. And sometimes that does take some time, it's really great to be in a space where there's that optimism, there's that sense of actually, these are the transitions that are coming about right now. And looking at slower approaches as well, which maybe can be defined or redefined or changed and built into a new.

Just speaking to the community that Design Council has. Are there any takeaways, any actions that maybe you'd like to share?



### **Josie Warden (27:38)**

I think for me, the main thing that comes up is the kind of idea of asking different questions. And we sometimes think about this in terms of like three levels. So what can you do as an individual? So what kind of questions might I ask myself about the language I'm using? And the way I'm using words in the kind of work I'm doing? Maybe what can my discipline learn from this? What collectively could we talk about differently? Or maybe how can we bring in different perspectives and different ways of thinking, and then also more global or world level sense of things, just noticing what words you're seeing? What things are being used more commonly? And think actually, as I see that word, not just sort of take it as kind of read but saying, okay, what are the kind of mindsets and values that sit beneath that word? Do they align with mine? Are there ways that they can align better, and then kind of using that as a springboard for asking some of those different questions with within your own practice?

### **Bernard Hay (28:27)**

I think for me, it's if you think that language shapes how you understand and act in the world, then if you're wanting to design for planet, and to really change people's relationships to the planet, so that we can live more sustainably or regeneratively or however you want to describe it, then language itself is a really incredible design material that we should all be really mindful of and excited about using in the work that we do. So any opportunity that you have as a designer to change the language away from something like natural resources to something richer and or celebratory of the planet is itself doing design for planet I think.

### **Alisha Morenike Fisher (29:12)**

The Design for Planet Fellowship is hosted by the Design Council, the UK's national strategic advisor on design. The Design Council team are Bernard Hay, Cat Drew, and Lucy Wildsmith. The Design for Planet Fellows are Dr. Tayo Adebawale, Professor Carole Collet, Sarah Drinkwater, Finn Harries, Nat Hunter, John Thackara and Josie Warden. The fellowship exchange is hosted by myself, Alisha Morenike Fisher, with Production and Sound Design by Lucia Scazzocchio from Social Broadcasts. The fellowship programme is funded by the National Lottery community fund and supported by the RSA and Shared Infrastructures. You can find out more about the fellowship and further resources at [designforplanet.org](http://designforplanet.org).



## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

### Resources

[Designs for the pluriverse \(2018\) – Arturo Escobar](#)

[The Lost Words \(2017\) – Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris](#)

[Regenerative Futures: From sustaining to thriving together \(2021\) - RSA](#)

### Case studies

[Regenerative Empathy \(2019\) – Harvard GSD](#)

[Amateur Ancestor Tour \(2022\) – Justine Bousard](#)

### Keywords/ terms

Sustainability

Restorative/ replenishing/ regenerative design

Ecosystem

Non-human actors

Human-centred design

Pluriversal design

Extraction