

Design for Planet Fellowship Exchange

Episode Four: Resilience

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 Alisha Morenike Fisher, a multidisciplinary polymath of sorts, practicing in the fields of design, landscape, green buildings, and emerging technology.

I'm your podcast host and in each episode, I'll be joined by two fellows to explore insights and provocations around key themes. These conversations aim to inspire action and change for anyone interested in regenerative design and those seeking to integrate Design for Planet into their practice.

Today's episode is all about designing adaptive and resilient places. We have two great people on the podcast today, Chief Design Officer, Cat Drew, and Design for Planet fellow Dr. Tayo Adebawale. So, a little introduction before we dive right into all the questions, Cat Drew who is the Chief Design Officer at the Design Council, where she champions design for planet bringing together practitioners from across design economy, to develop new regenerative practice and create the conditions for designers to do the best work. Dr. Tayo Adebawale is a sustainability strategist, she started a consultancy Cirkadia in 2003, which focuses on working towards a sustainable future. Her portfolio spans over 35 years and includes design, environmental science, strategy, policy, and training.

Climate change is already happening. And its impacts are felt by so many of us across the world, especially who are the frontline of climate change, we need to also adapt how we are going to live in these changing conditions. And we need to do so now. Many of the world's urban and densities and spaces are also in coastal areas at risk from rising temperatures. So the themes around adaptive and resilient places are crucial as to how we build, preserve, protect, and also design for future.

Tayo, one of the things, especially in your workshop is based on this discussion on the adaptation resilience and mitigation. What do these terms mean, and what have they got to do with the climate crisis?

Tayo Adebowale (02:32)

It's not about the terms, but it's about the thinking. And the thinking has to be about how we stop designing on a silo basis. And we design on a multiple benefit basis, where we are looking at all the features of climate change. So basically, we're looking at designing for planet. So a quick example of that is if you're designing a scheme to reduce flooding, don't just think about the flooding, think about the drought, think about the well-being health, etc. Right at the beginning of the design.

Cat Drew (03:16)

I completely agree with Tayo that it's much more about a mindset. But I think these terms are interesting, because they're obviously used by government, by the international climate community. And so adaptation quite often means the ability to change in climate conditions and rising temperatures.

And we've got in the UK and national adaptation plan that talks about these are six risks, as you said about flooding and coastal erosion, health issues from overheating. There's water shortages, that leads to risks and food production risks to around our natural capital or soil, and also introduction of non-native species that can harm our native environments.

And mitigation, then is about trying to reduce the harm caused by these changes, particularly to the most vulnerable, for example, those living in the global south or those who have got disabilities who, for example, might find it difficult to adapt to flooding.

And then resilience is a way of managing and thriving through that change, to be able to bounce back and be able to both adapt, but also thrive. I think we've also got to see ourselves as not pitting ourselves against nature, but recognising we're part of it, we've caused these changes. And it's only by seeing ourselves working together with nature for mutual benefits, that we can live through them.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (04:29)

How do you feel that water communities increasing adaptive and resilient places is part of this as?

Cat Drew (04:35)

Communities are absolutely key because they are the people living in these places amongst nature, surrounded by nature, who can care and steward it and provide that mutual benefit. So

they are the stewards, they can protect nature, but they can also reap the benefits of what nature gives to people.

Tayo Adebowale (04:54)

The way I think about it is that there should never be a sort of a line between those designing for biodiversity and designing a building the two should be thought of together. You know, if you look at what is the goal, the goal is that any design for anything, and particularly infrastructure I'm talking about, you should always consider the blue and the green and the grey.

And that should be the way that we all think, and that is a massive paradigm shift that we need. But without that, nothing will change to the extent that we need it to change in order for every designer to design everything. With planet in mind.

Cat Drew (05:38)

A quick example that comes to mind of that is the Forth Valley Hospital that in 70 acres of natural lands, and the people developing it might have seen the lands as a liability, something that needs to be managed and controlled and kept tidy, and so on. Whereas actually, they shifted the paradigm to see the natural environment as part of providing good health care. So they brought in ecological experts, and completely reimagined it so that walking in nature, spending time amongst the trees, was actually part of people's health rehabilitation, I think it's a really nice example of that different type of way of thinking.

Tayo Adebowale (06:21)

My mom was a nurse before she was retired, you know, quite senior. She remembers when she first started nursing in this country, that most of the hospitals had land. And that land was new used as part of growing the vegetables and the food that was cooked for the patients. It was used as part of the rehabilitation to walk around the gardens, we often think that everything is new. And actually some of your old ways of doing things were more regenerative, resilient, and sustainable.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (06:56)

And it's interesting that you're saying this as well, because I think that we forget that there needs to be a wellbeing aspect to the way in which we work, the concept of being in a land where you're understanding more about how vegetables grow, and your understanding of the process of bettering yourself, that is not just a linear process. And this kind of ties into the discussions about the circular way in which we work on the circular economy.

Could you expand further to about your work towards sustainable futures? And could you also explain about the blue, the green and the grey?

Tayo Adebowale (07:29)

I've been working, like I said, in this area for 35 years. And one of the things we always think of is: where is the evidence, wherever are the cases? The truth is, there are so many fantastic examples, showing that this works. But I think it's really important to be brave, and say, yes, the evidence is there. The cases are there on so many different things, you know, whether it be health and well being etc, etc. So it's about how do we move on from that and stop people asking almost what is the evidence? And we move on to how do we do this?

So when I first started, my particular focus was on water. And it was clear to me that how do you almost persuade others to think in a way where you are thinking for planet, the terminology changes, and that's good. So when I first started, it's very much about sustainability. It is about the social, the economics and the environment. How do you within the design, cover those things? In some designs, you can't. But one of the things I realised in my work is that it's almost about the portfolio that you create. So where you can, in everything that I do in every piece of work I do, I always challenge you know, whether it's designed in a way to help people pay for the bill or whatever. It's about how is that designed in such a way that you're looking at the three things as he was then in terms of sustainability. And now when I look at is how do you design in such a way that you're looking for designing for planet? And that is fundamental.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (09:18)

So, one of the things I guess that is also discussed very heavily in the fellowship has been around this theme about resilient, placemaking and design. This, I think, also contributes towards environmental justice, as the inequities within our societies and the governance structures continue to cause problematic issues. In times where we feel maybe disempowered. How can we design and change these systems and injustices further?

Cat Drew (09:39)

When I think about resilient placemaking, I see it as the ability to adapt and change as the world changes around you. And to have that kind of flexibility and attention to nature and your surroundings built in. To see how everything is connected and has mutual benefit and to live within the planetary boundaries and take no more than you get back and then creating the right enabling conditions so that people and living systems can grow. You know, the conditions might be skills for people or soil, for living systems, and so that your design can be open ended, and back to my first point that it can continue to adapt and change over time.

And as Tayo was saying, these are not new ideas at all. These are ideas that have been in our culture and other indigenous cultures around the world who've been living in harmony with nature for time, I suppose. But in order to do that, I think there are some underlying structural changes that are needed at the kind of the policy level. One is around valuing nature and what

it provides. The new agricultural bill in the UK is paying farmers to protect natural environments now. So we're really trying to recognise the financial benefits, I suppose.

But the other one is around community land ownership and providing people with the rights to steward their land and keep them in really close communion with it. And I think that's kind of critical to this, the Commons was a way of sharing land for collective use in mediaeval Europe. And it's kind of been broken up by landowners. And to some extent, these ideas are coming back to technology platforms like blockchain, which is making it easier to create shared ownership around energy or housing, for example. So I think sharing natural environmental value, and also a point about land ownership, really are the things that will deeply shift some of these systemic inequalities that we're seeing, which needs to be addressed, as well as the very, very good design of resilient places.

Tayo Adebowale (11:33)

And in the work that I do think linked to the water side of things. This natural capital accounting is rising up the ladder, and it is helping to facilitate change in terms of designing things for planet because it enables indicators, much, much wider than finance and the pound, so is gaining momentum. Without a doubt.

My background is farming, my family farm and still do in Nigeria. It often strikes me that as we talking about design for planet, and we're talking about climate change, that there's countries that are in the midst of it far greater than we are. And there's countries that have grown things in hot climates, you know, for generations. And I think there's something about why there isn't a lot more learning from those countries in an equitable way, that have actually designed and done things in a different way, in order to be able to survive in temperatures that are going to be happening to us already are happening, but will be in the future. So I think there needs to be a much greater openness and a much greater acceptance, that actually, there are other people in parts of the world that know more than us linked to designing for climate and climate change. And there also needs to be this respect and value of that information as well.

And one of the things that I see that disturbs me a lot actually, is the idea that biodiversity, the environment costs nothing to look after. I say this because there's a huge element of voluntary that is often attached to environmental and biodiversity projects, as in if you don't actually get that voluntary contribution, it wouldn't be done. And that worries me. You know, if you look at other sectors, that element of voluntary is certainly a lot smaller than that is when we look at the environment. And I just think it's something that we need to be aware of, because at the end of the day, all the things that we want to do in terms of including biodiversity, including the green into design, there is an element of cost in terms of maintaining, and if there isn't an element of cost, then it means that some of the poorer areas will not have the biodiversity and the green and blue infrastructure that we want to be shared by everybody.

Cat Drew (14:27)

It really reminds me of a kind of similar argument remains around care, and housework and the undervalued nature of this type of work and care and tending for people. Also, what you're talking about in terms of nature. And I think if we are asking communities to be part of the co-design of new places, which property developers often ask for or is asked of them by kind of regulation, and we expect them to keep up or steward or tend for their local green spaces, making them more attractive places to live and, and actually protecting the natural environment. So the natural environment can protect the built infrastructure, creating biodiversity, which prevents flooding and cools buildings. That has an enormous amount of value that they're providing through nature.

And we need to be able to find ways of giving that back and recognising that through either paid work, or through some other way of rewarding communities, because otherwise, it's going to be the property developers that just keep taking the increased prices of the houses of the places. And that doesn't always go back to the community. So it is a massive social justice issue as well.

Tayo Adebawale (15:38)

And often, you're asking for information from the community and paying nothing for that information, given it no value whatsoever, and others, again in that value. So that is also something that needs to be addressed as well.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (15:54)

Resilience is such a big, gritty word. On one hand, resilience can be great as it shows endurance, adaptability, but at the same time, it can reveal the major cracks in our societies. So what you're touching on about indigenous and local knowledge, for instance, and it can be under resourced and further exploited. And they're actually quite harmful to many of our ecosystems. So knowing this, how do we think we as designers can expand ourselves further to build these spaces and pockets, and that is to thrive?

Tayo Adebawale (16:20)

Resilience, to me matches really nicely with the regenerative design.

Cat Drew (16:26)

I think resilience and regeneration are kind of very, very similar and linked. I mean, I think it's all about kind of authenticity, about how you design. So when you're designing with communities, it's not just kind of extracting knowledge, but it's a genuine intention to design for the benefit of those communities. And actually, even as a designer, to step back and think about whether it's you who's designing whether it actually you're supporting the community to be able to design, and actually what you're providing is the skills and capabilities. So, you know, resilience is

often about providing people with the skills and knowledge to be able to create their own designs, rather than doing something for them.

Tayo Adebowale (17:11)

Many, many years ago, I remember hearing somebody talking about design and communities. And one of the things I said, which always has stuck with me, is that you design with communities, and you don't design for communities without asking those communities what they want.

Cat Drew (17:33)

A really lovely example of that actually is something that we were involved in as Design Council about 10 years ago. And this shows the kind of the time it takes to see the impact. So, there's a fishing village called Amble in the north of England, and it's a fishing village that had been in decline for a while, lots of unemployment, a kind of food factory moved in, and then the factory closed down. And then people were left without any employment again. And there was a development on the waterfront to convert a an old fish factory into a block of flats. And we took a slightly different approach.

So Nick Devitt, who was one of our associates, he worked with the local community to not just think about kind of creating eight or so flats, but to ask the community, what they needed, what their aspirations were, what their hopes for the future were. And they said, actually, what we really want is not necessarily new flats, it's self-employment opportunities, they didn't want to rely on the big kind of employer coming in again, they wanted to work for themselves. And so along with the waterfront, they created all these little pods. And these were spaces that the community could use to create a surf school, a little cafe, a craft shop. And all of a sudden, that kind of platform gave the community space to create their own designs for things. It became a foodie destination at one high street of the year in 2015. And that then encouraged further investments.

So you can see by kind of expanding and asking the community what they need to be able to design for themselves and evolve over time. You know, not just give a man a fish, but teach him how to fish.

Tayo Adebowale (19:14)

One of the really beautiful things about that is it's that because it's what the community wants. That development, not only does it expand, but it's looked after by the community, because they've invested into that themselves. And when you look at a development like that is so different to some of the estates that I see being built, which are like one two years old, and you already see the signs that in 10 years time those houses are gonna be not a community, basically.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (19:43)

There's something in being a designer and a facilitator. So being able to design is one thing but being able to facilitate for others to be part of that design is what actually provides that economic structure and infrastructure that is actually needed because it's not enough just to design something anymore. There needs to be the maintenance and the care. And the maintenance has to come also from communities. So when we look at the way in which our spaces are designed, we have to question who's maintaining those spaces. Going back to like water systems, I know that these are going to have great impacts within our spaces and places. And we usually don't plan or design with water. NASA has stated that global sea levels are going to be rising approximately 3.3 millimetres a year, 30% more than when launched its first satellite mission to measure ocean heights in 1992. How do we begin to start designing with this in mind?

Tayo Adebawale (20:37)

Do you know I could talk about this subject for the next day, probably. One of the things that I find unbelievably frustrating is how water and how you could design these sustainable drainage systems are so easily into designs. And yet it's not done. It is frustrating. Leadership has to come from the top. And I believe that the government, national and local, all their estates should be showing leadership and one of these people that go into a building, and it's owned by sort of a local authority, or nationally, and you see all these wonderful new technologies that people actually don't know how to work. So they might be brand new basins. And people have just left them with water only because actually, there's no sign say now they should switch you off. And you see all this new build or refurbishment on public buildings, which have no thoughts about the water elements and climate change.

Cat Drew (21:51)

Tayo, one of the examples that inspired me so much from your work is around Salford wetlands, because I think it's a great example of mutual benefit and designing resilient places.

Tayo Adebawale (22:02)

Yeah. it encompasses a lot of what we've been talking about it encompasses the idea that you design with community that you ask community what they want, it encompasses this idea that community are happy to sort of make sure that wetlands remains a beautiful place because it's part of their back garden. In a nutshell, Salford wetlands is about an area, which was prone to flooding, and about how a design was developed, which tried to address more than flooding. So it ticks the boxes for biodiversity.

So what a lot of people think about when they think about a flood alleviation scheme is a concrete structure. There, the design was of, actually, these beautiful natural wetlands, as in these basins that collect water that make it look like beautiful ponds that attract wildlife that

you wouldn't expect to see in the city, the city of Salford and now you would never know that that was a flood alleviation scheme. It just looks like beautiful countryside, with all these lakes, with all these rare birds, with the community really getting the benefit of such a wonderful community resource on their doorstep.

And in a way it smashes the idea of what people might think of what cities are, and it shows you what cities truly can be with a bit of fart of design for planet with a bit of thought about monitoring parameters, which are more than the pound sign. If you go to the northwest flood hub. On the internet, you will see a wonderful video that tells the history of Salford wetlands, and it's truly worth seeing. It's just a beautiful example of how we should do things. And it's a beautiful example of a multidisciplinary teams working together. You've got councils, you've got engineers, you've got designers, you've got you the Northwest region for the coastal committees, which actually were promoting this sort of design.

So it's just a wonderful example of how things can be done to benefit not only the key issue, which was the flooding in the first place, but to benefit health, well being, community, loneliness and the list goes on. The Northwest Regional Flood and Coastal Committee was actually instrumental in changing European guidance so that it actually does address wider benefits.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (24:55)

Cat, one of the areas you are passionate about is homelessness, which is a major contribution within climate change too. You've mentioned within the fellowship about the impacts of resilience against something that is enforced on you at times, and then how we can alleviate these pressures, especially in urban dense areas and cities in which by 2050 70% of the world's population will be living in cities. How do you feel about this?

Cat Drew (25:16)

The reason I was thinking about homelessness in this context of talking about resilience was because that is something that we see in abundance within people experiencing homelessness. My design work started actually much more in the social and the environmental space. Of course, what we're seeing is it's all linked. But I was working in government in the Policy Lab, which brings in design into the heart of how you create policy and legislation. And we were co designing and prototyping what new prevention legislation for homelessness might look like. We were going to Lewisham, and Newcastle. And we spent lots of time with people experiencing homelessness.

And what we found is what the system, while local authorities government, always ask people about their risk factors. What we saw was huge amounts of resilience, which is helping people get through really, really tough times. And some of these characteristics were about being able to foresee what was coming and planning ahead, having a positive hopeful outlook, and mindsets. Really importantly, having a supportive network of others that you could call on. And

then also confidence in knowing that you do have resources and skills to share with others as well. So our design question became much more about how we could harness the strengths, rather than focusing solely on people's challenges.

For example, when people came into the housing options office, they were often asked for a rundown of their risk factors, what's wrong with you? What are your challenges, rather than asking what their hopes and strengths were, and we flip that, and so when I look at issues of climate and biodiversity resilience, I often think about this, and how we can design our places where people are living systems are mutually supporting each other. So that when one provides benefits the other and vice versa, with everyone knowing the particular skills and role that they have in the system, whether that's nature, providing natural shade cover, or whether it's nature, providing ways to stop the rain, falling down so quickly onto our pavements, which leads to flooding, and equally the role that people have in protecting natural environments, so that they can all be in mutual benefit.

I mean, the other thing, just to say is climate change is obviously having a huge impact on homelessness, more people are living in cities, and there's gonna be maybe fewer cities or some cities get eroded, that will have impacts of housing density and affordability. People will be displaced, moving from areas affected by drought into cities. And of course, they sleeping on the streets bear the brunt of extreme weather conditions like heat and flooding. And just like the kind of the traditional risk factors of drugs, childhood trauma, we talked about in homelessness, actually, these are societal issues rather than individual ones.

Tayo Adebowale (28:00)

Why would you ask people about the negative things? Why would you not focus on people strengths? And I just imagine if I was homeless, and people asking me all the negatives, how that would make me feel.

Cat Drew (28:13)

I think it's the thing about starting with, there's a phrase start with what strong, not what's wrong. And regenerative design is all about building on the assets that exist in our natural environment, not extracting them, but growing them. And that's the same whether that's a kind of physical, material, and natural plant or resource, or the kinds of skills and the knowledge and confidence of people. These are all materials with which we can grow through our designs.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (28:47)

A recommendation I would give is to look out for TU Delft's summer school, which is planning and designing with water. I undertook this back in 2017. And it was the first time I was able to meet a wide range of, I guess, changemakers or designers from all different spaces. And the reason why I encourage it is just because it's really good to understand a different approach to how other people from different spaces and countries and cultures understand water and

understand the different traditions that come with it. For the wider design community, are there any last recommendations or comments you'd like to make to inspire and challenge us further.

Tayo Adebowale (29:23)

In order to have real change, there needs to be change in terms of the briefs for these designs, from clients. The needs to also be changed as for the types of contracts that are produced in order for this multidisciplinary working, whereby there's a much more even consideration given to the different actors involved in any sort of project, because without those two things, it's unlikely that we get the movement we need to have in order to meet those challenges that we have for designing for planet,

Cat Drew (30:08)

I think for designers it's about really seeing how everything is connected locally, and how your designs can turn that into a web of mutual support and benefits. And the other thing is to build into your designs the ability for things to grow, adapt and change in an open ended and regenerative way. So creating the right enabling conditions, the skills or the soil for people in nature to thrive. Those for me would be two takeaways for designers.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (30:39)

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 Adebowale, 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.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Case studies

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