Steve Welch 0:09
Hello, and welcome to Silent Designers, a podcast about the under the radar design activity, which goes on in many organisations, even though it's not seen as design, or even necessarily done by designers. Each month we have an expert guest to share their knowledge and the impact that design has had on what they do in their domain. I'm Steve Welch from Innovate UK KTN and I'd like to introduce my co host, Katherine Wildman, founder of B2B copywriting agency, Haydn Grey.

Katherine Wildman 0:42
Hi, Steve. Thank you for the introduction. In today's episode of Silent Designers, we're going to be exploring the theme of Net Zero and Sustainable Technologies. And we're going to be talking to Cat Drew, Chief Design Officer at The Design Council.

Steve Welch 0:56
Cat, thanks so much for joining us today. How about you tell us about yourself and the area of innovation you work in?

Cat Drew 1:04
Sure. Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me here. I'm Cat. I'm Chief Design Officer at The Design Council and that means that my role is really to bring together the best knowledge, practice and frameworks about how to design really well. And then share that with designers but also with innovators and people who commission design, and policymakers who can create the right conditions for everyone to do their best work. And Design Council, The Design Council is the national strategic advisor for design. We were set up in 1944 and at that time, we were set up to really use design to shift from a wartime to a consumer society, and 80 years on, the climate crisis is now the biggest challenge that we face, and so our new mission is to design for planet and really shift us from a consumer to regenerative society. There's 1.97 million people working in the design sector, that's they produce £97.2 billion, which is about 60% of the financial banking services sector. So it's a huge amount of creativity that they offer, and really harnessing that to be part of what we think is a critical piece of the green transition.

Katherine Wildman 2:26
That's fascinating. Can you tell us how you use design in this area - why it's important to your innovation?

Cat Drew 2:32
Sure. So design, I think is critical to innovation, because at its simplest, it turns ideas into action. So you can have all the most amazing technology that you require for the green transition and actually, we have got quite a lot of it. You know, lots of people saying we know all the technology we need to transition to net zero, but people aren't adopting it. And that's where design comes in because design really thinks about who's going to use the things that you're creating. So it can turn a piece of imagination in your head into something tangible. And so people can start feeding back on it. How it's going to be used, would they like to use it, and so it can increase the chance of it being adopted. And so that's why for us, it's really, really critical. So to give you some examples, an electric charge point is great. But if they're in the wrong spots for people, or if the handle is badly designed, then people with less dexterity can't use it, so that won't work. Renewable energy is of course the future, but people have to be motivated and excited to want to use it and see the impact of how their action is helping the climate. And then you know, we can build lots of new buildings or not new buildings, we should retrofit our buildings and create them with lots of recycling facilities and trees and nature all around. But if people aren't involved in that process, then they won't take care of them and they won't use them. So design with people is really important and then I'd also say design with planets, thinking about kind of nature and it's natural resources is also critically important.

Steve Welch 4:22

And I think you have something coming up in October.

Cat Drew 4:25
We do. So a plug for our festival, two days in October, 17th and 18th of October, Design for Planet Festival, where we will bring together hundreds of designers, innovators, all saying how they are designing for planet. So there'll be lots of keynote conversations but also practical how to sessions. It's free, anyone can join. Registrations are open so please go on www.designcouncil.org.uk and get your slot now.

Katherine Wildman 4:56
It sounds amazing. I know that you you've been working on the Systemic Design Framework. Is that right? Could you tell us a little bit more about that, please?

Cat Drew 4:56
Yeah, sure. So we have, as a kind of response to design needing to work on these bigger challenges, the climate crisis, health inequalities, we have evolved the way that we think design can really work. So maybe I'll start first with how design works at its most simple. So at its most simple, we think design is a process, design is the physical kind of manifestation of an idea, but it's also the creative process for getting there. And the former requires often quite a lot of technical know how. You have to know how to build a website, or create a building. These are kind of really technical design skills. But the creative process for getting there, anyone can do. And we 20 years ago created something called the Double Diamond, which was a way of describing the divergent and convergent thinking process that design uses. So rather than jumping straight to a solution, or an idea that you might have, first of all, spending time with different types of people, really thinking about what the problem is, often, then you reframe the brief, and then coming up with lots and lots of ideas, but quickly getting to a stage of prototyping or testing, so you can quickly see which ones are going to work and which ones aren't going to work, and then choosing the best ones. So at its basic, that's what design is. But what we saw is when we're working in areas where there's more complexity, where there's a bigger challenge, where basically one design on its own is not going to address the challenge, design needs to work in slightly different way and we've called that the Systemic Design Framework. So starting at the beginning, before you even get into any of that is visioning what you think a very different and hopeful future might be. So our vision is for a regenerative world for all, where we don't just care about profit and money. And we're not just extracting lots of materials from the earth. But actually we're putting back, we're caring about environmental and social value, and for future generations. So starting there. And then as you're going through the process and doing your design in your own organisation, it's also thinking about how your work impacts on others. So who the other people in your, in the world who are also doing something similar, or who've got a similar goal to you, how could you work together with them? But also thinking about what are the other impacts of your work, unintended consequences on others. And then it also means not just being overwhelmed by all this complexity, but still doing that good design work of prototyping and testing. And then really telling the story all the way through, so that as well as improving what, you know, increasing and growing what you're doing, you can inspire others to get on board as well, because we need everyone to be working in very, very different ways if we're to design for planet and not just, you know, a few niche innovators.

Steve Welch 8:14
That is great. That's really inspiring. And that vision is pretty motivational. It often feels that that human factor and about finding people where they are and helping them to feel engaged with something is going to be very important here.

Cat Drew 8:32
Exactly. And the other thing I'd say about that is innovation sometimes it's always about discovering something new, coming up with new things all the time. And actually, if we're trying to design for planet, it is about understanding what's already there. And growing that or just bringing

that together. So as an innovator, you don't always have to build something new and in fact, sometimes that's kind of been part of the problem, that we're just creating new things all the time, rather than looking at what we've already got in the world, making connections between that or using that in different ways, valuing that in different ways.

Steve Welch 9:09
At KTN we often say that innovation isn't just about new, quite often, it's just about new to me.

Cat Drew 9:17
Yes, exactly. I love that.

Katherine Wildman 9:20
It's very reassuring in the world, isn't it? Can I ask you how you made the transition from policy into design?

Cat Drew 9:27
You can. It's a very interesting one, I think. So I started off as a policymaker. And I worked across government and various roles in Number 10, and the Home Office, Cabinet Office. And I was often writing big strategies and I got really frustrated with writing all these strategies about empowering people that we'd never met. And that seems so wrong to me. So I've tried to go out as much as I could, to communities to really understand the experiences of people who were experiencing homelessness, who are suffering from long term health conditions or antisocial behaviour. And really try to understand things from their perspective. Because I am one person, I come from a certain background, and I cannot hope to be able to represent all of the other experiences out there. So that was really important to me. And that really, without even knowing it, that is a form of design. It's designing a policy rather than a product. But my work was always trying to involve people as much as I could. And I was a co founder of something called the Policy Lab, which was brought together by three really amazing colleagues that brought design thinking into the heart of government and how it works. And it's still going strong, and is an amazing and very inspiring team.

Katherine Wildman 10:51
I'm going to add another question. Thinking about, when you're talking about working with people, is it that you have a set question, a set of questions that you ask people? Or do you respond on the spot to people, different circumstances? And I would imagine, collating so much information is a challenge.

Cat Drew 11:11
Yeah, it is and I think the biggest kind of skill that a designer has, alongside being able to kind of visualise an idea, is to listen and to listen really, really carefully, and be okay with not being, holding on to your idea so preciously that you can't be open to it changing based on feedback. And so often, when you go into a design process, because we're human, and we come with our own kind of backgrounds and assumptions, you've got a kind of an idea of what might be helpful, but actually, it's only when you test it and really listen to people that you truly find out what is really needed. And often, when you ask people in a survey or set of interview questions, people can't actually really tell you what they need. It's almost like they need an experience to kind of somehow reveal that. I'll give you an example. In the States, there was a project where people were trying to create more empathy among first responders, people who went out to kind of respond to drug overdoses. And over time, people were getting kind of desensitised to it. So they were prototyping with lots of things, with kind of stress courses, massages, empathy training, as well, all these kinds of fairly expensive interventions. And as they were prototyping them and testing them, it was only then that people were able to articulate you know what, none of this is really important, what really matters to me is a thank you letter, or thank you from the people that I did help. So that completely pivoted what the project was, and what the idea was, so that

people could, yeah, respond to that kind of latent need that people weren't able to articulate to begin with.

Steve Welch 12:59
So it's harsh, but we're going to ask you a tricky question now, possibly the hardest question of all. So as an innovator, what one piece of advice would you give to somebody wanting to incorporate design?

Cat Drew 13:17
Ooh one piece of advice... I would say incorporate it early. So design is not the thing that happens at the end of the process to make something look shiny and nice. It is the fundamental way in which you approach innovation. So starting with a real inclusive sense of what is needed, and listening hard. Then co designing with people and coming up with a series of options. And as you test them, to be really open to what is the right one, and to be thinking, first of all about kind of people and how people use it, but also thinking about the materials that you're using and seeing what you can do to use less in the first place, to reuse things or even better, to grow natural resources through the work that you do.

Steve Welch 14:10
Awesome, thank you. And that idea of doing things, putting that thinking in early is remarkably hard to get people to do. In Systems Engineering that would be called left shift. So you put a lot more effort to the left of the timeline, so before you spend real money, but still, it's very hard to get people to do that. But even though there's academic research, showing that it ultimately saves you money,

Cat Drew 14:37
Yep. And same in healthcare, I mean, prevention is way better than acute health services, upstream innovation. So seeing what you can do earlier along the supply chain to reduce resource use. Always, always upstream, always kind of in advance at the beginning.

Katherine Wildman 14:55
Think it's going to be very interesting to see what happens with the Design for Planet Festival, isn't it? See what I ideas come from that.

Cat Drew 15:02
So yeah, if you want to learn more about any of this, or about kind of how to build a green website, how to build a product that can be repaired, listen to inspiring kind of architects and fashion designers, then this is the place to be - 17th and 18th of October and we'll see you there.

Katherine Wildman 15:21
Fabulous. Cat, thank you so much for your time and for sharing all your insights and advice with us today. It's been a delight.

Steve Welch 15:27
Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you. And I feel inspired. So this podcast has been produced by the Design In Innovation Network, which is sponsored and supported by Innovate UK. If you want to find out more about design in innovation and gain access to other interesting people, sign up to the network. And see you next time on Silent Designers.