

# Silent Designers Episode 3 Marie Williams

Steve Welch 0:08

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

Katherine Wildman 0:39

Hi Steve. Thank you for the introduction. In today's episode of Silent Designers, we're going to be exploring the theme of Knowledge Transfer and Design. And we're going to be talking to Marie Williams, Chartered Engineer, Design Lecturer, TEDx speaker and founder of the social enterprise, Dream Networks. Marie, thank you so much for joining us today.

Marie Williams 1:00

Really glad to be here. Thanks.

Steve Welch 1:03

Yeah, thanks for joining us. And well, how about you tell us a bit about yourself and the area of innovation you work in.

Marie Williams 1:10

So I've had quite a varied career. So I actually am a senior chartered engineer. At a, I guess, a core part of my being I am a mechanical engineer, I've been doing mechanical engineering, associated work for the last 15 years. I started seven years in aerospace, which I actually loved. I was in an innovation department. I got a patent when I was in aerospace. Then I moved on to nuclear fusion, very big change. And that is due to someone actually knowing about my skill set and putting me forward for a new role. So it wasn't actually me putting myself forward. Then I got pinched to go into software engineering, interesting world, and I moved back to London, I was actually in Bristol. And then that's when I started to think actually, I've moved quite a few times, what is the core heart of what I do? And that's when I started to develop and launch the social enterprise called Dream Networks. And Dream Networks is a social enterprise, which is not aerospace, not nuclear fusion, or software engineering, but it's play. It's looking at how can we address play inequality, and provide more equitable play areas across the UK and actually the world. Do work with communities, schools and businesses to co design play spaces in many marginalised communities. And yes, love it. It kind of puts together all different parts of my skill sets. It's very collaborative, very playful, as you can imagine. I'm often called a playful engineer, and I probably am. And yes, that's, I guess that's the main thing of where I'm at now and what I'm doing in terms of my social enterprise. But as you said, in the beginning, I'm also a design lecturer.

So I focus on enabling students, mainly university to understand co-design. And I can talk about that a bit in a bit. Also talk about inclusive design, design for equity, and just understand how they can use their skill sets to be able to be more innovative and design for more social good. And then one thing that's also quite important, because I'm an academic, I'm at The Bartlett, which is at the University College London, I'm in the department of Institute of Global Prosperity, it's long name. And in that department, I'm working on how to enable play in refugee communities in Kenya.

Katherine Wildman 3:22

It's one heck of a CV. Marie, can I ask you how, just going back a couple of points, where you use design in the social enterprise? And you talked about getting people to be involved in design. Why is that important to your innovation? How does that work?

Marie Williams 3:44

So I think the core heart of it is understanding that design can be in response to a need. And often it may be for to many people, potentially economic need. But there's a growing trend to focus on social and environmental needs and problem sets. So for us, it's actually really recognising play spaces aren't around everywhere. They are often in certain communities.

I think about one in eight children in the UK have no access to a garden. And they rely on a public place space. But actually, if you find, if you look into the data, you'll see the places that are more deprived, those are the places that haven't got the public play spaces. So that's when what design is the catalyst for change.

So we started to think, actually, if we recognise there's limited play spaces, how can we enable them to occur? And there's two strings to that bow.

There's one actually understanding who invests in play spaces. So often typically, it may be a local authority in an outside park, or it may be a property developer, or it may be somebody in real estate, and they're investing in play spaces.

But again, it's that whole issue of work has been designed in terms of planning and the structures that our society live in, is often in more affluent areas.

We started to say actually who else can invest in play spaces? And we started to consider businesses, and what businesses want to do in their environment. They want to improve children's lives, they want to improve well being, why not pitch to them play? So we pitched them, how can you through the way you work, influence the way play spaces are labelled, provided, and in reality designed systematically.

And that's the one key thing. To work with businesses. So we provide them a programme, where they're able to co- design play spaces with children. And that's, I guess, the most key part. So co design is a really - it's not actually novel way - it's a really broad term.

And co-design fundamentally says, actually, I'm going to understand the needs of the user, and the stakeholder. And I'm going to put them in the central place in the design process. So I'm not going to focus on "Oh, I think a play space would be great if it's got maybe brutalist architecture". They just said "Actually, no, this is what I think is fundamentally important". Understanding what the children need -

to be co designing them. And we say that actually, they're going to be our design partners. So you have a design now you may have a researcher, you may have a volunteer, who is part of the business who are supporting their play spaces. And the children go through a typically, could be eight sessions, sometimes smaller, sometimes six sessions.

The right design workshops, where they're going through a design thinking process, where they're trying to understand what are the play needs, they're doing things that are relevant to their age, fun, they're using crafts, they're using kinaesthetic learning, so their using their body to understand what's going on in a play space. And they are actually becoming the designers, they actually are the design partners in own right. And that's a really fundamental, if you're considering skills development in the UK. We know that there's a growing need for more and more design jobs. Design brings out critical thinking. It gives out problem solving. It's analytical, it's collaborative, it's empathetic. And children, as young as seven work with us. Actually, I love play, I want to design play space, but oh, no, I have to stop and think "Who asked me for play space, what is their needs, where are the gaps?" The end summary of the co design is really putting the child or the user at the heart of the design process and really, really focusing on giving them agency and control and power. That's the heart of what we do.

Steve Welch 7:08

Wow, there's a lot to unpack there. Actually quite a lot I'd like to ask more about but one thing I'm tempted by, and I know it sounds like the term social enterprise, I guess does what it says on the tin. But what does it feel like? What attracts you to work in that way? And what does that really mean for the people working in it, compared with other types of business?

Marie Williams 7:32

Yeah, so I came from very much a corporate world. I definitely enjoy it. And as good as, I said the beginning, that I'm an engineer, and I focus a lot on research and development and tech, and I love learning new things. And it was all exciting. And then when I started to do social enterprise, I thought about the business, I thought actually I really care about businesses or people who maybe were previously in my position. Being enabled to support children, and support enabling more equitable access to play. So we have looked at different structures. You could have maybe a charity and typically, not saying all, often charities rely on grants. So applying for grants to be able to enable them to, I guess survive and be able to affect good in society when the government's not doing it. I won't to get political right now, but in the government aren't doing it. But social enterprises, what I think is great about it. It's like a business of a charitable type heart. So your assets are locked into social goods. So when you sign up and you apply with Companies House to be a social enterprise, you have to say actually, these are the key areas I'm going to focus on. Our area is actually education. Within this we couldn't do play, but education, because of the fact that we design through play and being able to try to educate and develop their skills, and a lot of its knowledge

transfer. That's really key to us. So we decided to be a social enterprise. So we will be business orientated, so we get in a majority of our funding from corporates or from sales. But that doesn't have to be true. Many social enterprise thrive and do have grants but we're trying to say we want to not just rely on grants. Again, going back to whole part of social good, enabling businesses to do it, really trying to sell our services. And I know the word 'sell' seems a bit odd when you're like this is for social good, but it really does matter. Because social value is a top topic for a lot of corporate companies in the UK. If you're thinking a more international market, they may be using ESG, so think about the environment.

Social governance is the top topic. A lot of companies have funding towards it, we just sell them the programmes. And again, that's why we go towards being like a business for social good. Equals social enterprise.

Katherine Wildman 9:36

So good. I just have this vision of the workshops. Is it the case that the academics and the designers are learning from the children? Can you see, like the talent of the future coming through?

Marie Williams 9:49

Yeah, I really love that question. It is definitely a two way street. And I think it sometimes, as they are voluntary, you may be maybe a graduate engineer or a graduate architect, so you may be working and may be working with someone who's a senior architect in your team. And you come to this workshop and it's like a level playing field. You both like, oh kids, why are the chairs are small? And then the children have like, they sometimes can have quite... I really want to use creative. Being co design design really, I think enables adults to see the creativity in children, but also provides them with the tools to open up their creative potentials. So the fact that they're able to be there and the example I remember, there was one time in the really early beginning bits of the social enterprise when I came and did my workshops, which I miss. And I remember there was a boy who had an idea. He was like "Yeah, well, I like skating. And I think we should create a skate park". I was a bit like, oh gosh, there's no space for a skate park. It's something that I did an open question. So I suppose saying that it doesn't work. "Right, okay, where would a skate park go?" And he had an answer. "How do you fund it?" He had an answer. "What materials we could use?" He had an answer. And I was like, "Ok right, let's think about why we can't do it." I literally had to, like, have a different mindset. "Let's do some costing." And obviously, you didn't use the word costing. And then we helped him understand actually, this would take up a lot of space in the playground. And then also, it wouldn't meet the majority of the children's needs. And then he had another idea, which was to create like a dancing step that he thought was really great. And he pitched to his team. And he did like character modelling of it, not just him, him and his team. And then we were able to develop that, but the skatepark we weren't able to. So it's again, we're able to listen to what they said and then actually, realise that a lot it is creative and could work, and how can we improve it, enhance their ideas if needed, or give them more, I guess, information to help them actually refine or realise this is a no go,

which is like the key of innovation, you know. You can have a great idea. It can work but you know, sometimes requirements, like engineering come in place. There's requirements to come in, that's not going to work.

Steve Welch 11:55

Oh, yeah, that's great. I was thinking about this question of knowledge transfer. I always think we need new words, for some of these things. Maybe that as a concept means different things to different people. But what, how would you talk about knowledge transfer?

Marie Williams 12:16

I think it's very contextual. And I might actually talk about my work I do academically. So the PhD I'm working on is in Kenya. It's working with Congolese refugees and Kenyans. And in that environment, often the work that people do, especially they come from the UK, whether they're African or not, I'm actually African, I'm British Nigerian, and whether you're African, or whether you are like, more typical British stereotypical person to an African. When somebody goes into a space, I think that often feel as if, okay, these are the beneficiaries. This is how we can support them. This is what we're going to, what are they going to learn from us if the data we're going to gather. But for me, one of the key heart of the work I've been doing with the PhD is recognising that knowledge transfer means I guess, deprioritising myself, and being humble, to open up a space that enables those particular people I'm working with, for example, a Congolese refugee who decides he wants to apply to be a local researcher with my PhD work. He comes to interview. He's got some ideas, but maybe he's got limited English. As opposed to me saying, actually, his English is limited, I think, actually, no, he is the right person in the place to be able to understand the needs of the people. He can gather knowledge. What do I need to do, to deprioritise what I do in terms of my methods? How can I humble myself? How can I create more appropriate tools to enable him to be the person who gathers that knowledge? Who comes up with ideas with my support? So yeah, I think that's kind of academic, but it's a lot of work that actually talks about, like decolonizing design and changing people's mindset about what design is, and often the way we design excludes. So in the academic work, it's definitely thinking actually through, around design in the methods I'm using, the language being used. How I might, enabling those pupils to be included in a manner that is equitable, that actually gives them support they need to be able to beyond thrive, excel and maybe I'm not even needed. I get taken out the place, but don't tell my supervisor, because obviously, you're meant to do your PhD yourself.

Steve Welch 14:30

We'll remember that. But that's wonderful. And that's so true I think, from things that we've seen, that if you can be that open in both directions, the thing you get in the middle, that arises from what you're doing, wasn't something that anybody thought of in the first place. It was like the idea came out of nowhere, but it really came out of being open to that inclusion of people with what they can bring.

Marie Williams 14:59

Yeah, I would agree. And I think even just having the systems in place, I think sometimes people say good or bad things about design thinking or the double diamond. But actually, in my work in terms of the social enterprise, and even the PhD, I use either the five steps for design thinking, so just for the audience, so you think about how you can empathise with the environment, and also the people to understand the problem space. Being able to define what a problem space is. Then you're able to come up with ideas, and you're able to prototype and then test. So those five stages, those because that process that is available, and it's you know, well used, when I'm doing work with children in co design, in the social enterprise, or when I say I'm doing it, well, often the people volunteering and the team are doing it.

It is built on that as a bed rock. But we recognise that, you know, sometimes children might have ideas in the empathy stage. They may have been asking friends a question or watching, looking at their space, and they've got an idea. So you don't say, actually no, sorry the process is this way. We got to, you know like, it's supposed to be intuitive anyway. But you can improvise, understand the need and come up with ideas and come back to define. A bit similar to the example that I gave you about the boy with the skateboard. And then when I'm thinking about the work we did with the academic work in terms of understanding how to enable play for co design, in Ghana, in Kenya, we use the double diamond one, that's the four stage one, so that's the one a lot of people know in Design Council. But again, we use that and actually, how does that work in the context that we're working in? And if we're able to consider how we're going to discover what tools are typically used, and you can get that from online and numerous like literature. And then that can be like a toolbox, and it can inform what you're doing. But it's been able to also say actually this is the toolbox, but I will kind of definitely change it. Because if you go in there blind, you could really not come up with anything. Just a lot of conversation, and probably the engineer in me wants something to occur.

Katherine Wildman 16:56

That's amazing. It's, I suppose it's being open to the different ways of working, isn't it? Different frameworks and processes? Marie, we're coming to the end of our time today. I could talk to you for hours, but I know that Steve has one more question to ask.

Steve Welch 17:09

So I've got the hardest question of the session, so I hope you're ready for this. But as an innovator then, if you could crystallise everything into one piece of advice to people wanting to incorporate design, just one piece of advice, what would your first thought be?

Marie Williams 17:28

Ooh good question. The first thought that came to mind was actually don't focus on being, doing something new, or doing something novel. If I think about that

more, I think often as in innovation, we think actually what's new, what can be cool? And I remember when I first wanted to do this social enterprise, a friend of mine who works in IT, he said to me, I was I said about my idea, he was like it sounds great, blah, blah, blah, then I started researching it. And I was like other people are doing things similar. And I was like I'm dead, can't do it anymore. It's not innovative, I didn't use that word. I was like, it's not going to work. And he said actually, it's not about having something new. It's what you bring to the table, and what problem you're addressing. And I think that's the key thing. You know, we can focus on being novel or being new. But actually, if you understand the proper space, be able to challenge assumptions, able to provide the tools to enable more people to engage in the design process, effectively co-design, what you get will be innovative, it will address a social challenge, but it won't necessarily look brand new.

Steve Welch 18:31

I love that, yeah thank you. And we say that sometimes don't we? That sometimes innovation isn't about new. It can be about new to me. But anyway, listen, thank you so much. I've certainly like, it's been an inspiration to talk to you today. Thank you for what you've shared with us. And 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, just come and sign up to the network. And we'll see you next time on Silent Designers.