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Designing for Humanity

Episode 8: What it means to design for humanity, with Rie Norregaard

Rie Norregaard: [00:00:02] This is Designing for Humanity, a podcast by SYPartners about designing a future that's made for all of us, and the best in us. I'm Rie Norregaard, and I'm talking with some of the most interesting people I know about how we, as designers, can tackle the most complex challenges our society faces right now. How can we use design to reimagine the ways we interact with each other, and with the world? I'm here to start the conversation about what new ways of thinking and methods are needed.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:00:37] Hi, this is Tiffany Kuan. I'm a producer on Designing for Humanity. And today we have a special episode where the guest is... you, Rie!

Rie Norregaard: [00:00:46] Thank you Tiffany, it's really funny to turn the tables here, and I'll do my best.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:00:53] I'm really excited to get into this interview today and learn about how you think about designing for humanity, and how that has evolved. I know throughout your career as a designer you have had a lot of different experiences that have led you to actually ask if we need a new design framework—and the word framework is a bit of design shorthand. Maybe you could clear up what that means for you when you talk about a framework.

Rie Norregaard: [00:01:17] Yeah, it's a way of thinking about how to do something. Basically, you could talk about principles or guidelines, and those are maybe more helpful words. Framework is perhaps more expansive, there's more conversation in it, but it is helping you define principles to design against.

[00:01:39] So if I were to draw an arc of what led me to this question I would start with where I'm from. I'm from Denmark, I went to school in Denmark, my whole family is there. I'm very Danish in many ways when it comes to what I feel about design. And so, it's less about blonde wood and simplicity, and it's more about the role and the responsibility of design in society, and using design to create the best experiences possible for everyone is something that I take with me. When I started working in the U.S., I was really fortunate to join a small team at the inception of a new idea of

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creating kitchen tools, OXO kitchen tools, which maybe some people know. They have big black rubber handles.

[00:02:28] And I really came to understand how looking at the ability to do something as a spectrum, and looking at the edges of ability and access as a place to look for innovation in design solutions, would create vastly better solutions for everyone that we would consider in the middle of the spectrum. And that's sort of the idea of universal design, coming from architecture of creating access, physical access, to spaces. When used in product design, it asks the question of, "how can we make products that are accessible to as many people as possible, physically?" So that was a really meaningful experience for me, and many years later when I co-founded a company called Umhu, which means, "something that's done with great care" in Danish.

[00:03:22] So what we wondered was if we can use design to make—let's say, a cane—an object that you can give us a present, something that you would really like to give away, and that you would like to receive, something that you covet and desire, versus a piece of medical equipment that you don't want to use, then can we start to change how we think and feel. And it turns out that you can, that design has the power to do that. I took that learning with me and expanded the question. So Umhu sought to answer the question [of] if we can change how we think and feel about aging and disability through design.

[00:04:01] I had my second child at that time and I was finding that the baby stuff market was really exploding with creativity and design choices, and you know, it was a whole new category popping up of a much more well-designed products and services. But at the same time, my husband and I were also becoming caregivers for my husband's family. And I found that there were no well-designed products to help them in their daily chores—such as bathing or walking or dressing even—that were really dignified or fit into their lives, that I could imagine giving to them and feeling good about, and that they would feel good about in their lives also.

[00:04:45] And it was perhaps before I used the term "inclusive design", but I was beginning to apply what we know about how our brains work to help create new rituals and connection. So, if universal [design] describes the relationship between a person and an object more specifically, then inclusive design starts to consider the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age, and many other forms of human difference. So that is how I got to really work with inclusive design. So, if we then add to what we know about neuroscience and why we do the things

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we do—our biases—with beginning awareness of that how that changes how we think about design and therefore the products and services that that we take responsibility for, so many of the things that we as designers come into contact with and that we're part of creating require data input and also produce data. Intent and awareness becomes incredibly important. So this is where I began—and many others in design and technology and most fields are—asking if we're really equipped to take responsibility for the solutions that we're imagining and then creating. So from the personal to the interpersonal, to a group, to the structures that we exist within, can we consider all of that when we are designing. And I think that's where the investigation is going, is to begin to see how we can answer that for all of us.

[00:06:29] I am very encouraged by seeing how design is applied and relevant and it's both the ability for designers to participate and to lead in work that is outside of the realm of solving one design problem. But also I think, for me, the recognition that design is a piece of the solution when addressing really big systemic issues and that's been great to explore.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:06:56] I think one of my favorite things about the conversations is that each of your guests are using design in very different ways. What are your greatest takeaways after speaking to each of them about how they approach design?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:07:08] I think what I have been listening for are the things that motivate us deeply, fundamentally, and how that shows up in the work that we do. And that's different for everybody, but I think that's what I've been drawn towards and listening for. And at the same time, also trying to understand, or to clarify maybe, techniques, principles that might apply from one realm—so, such as science fiction interface design, to painting a picture of a world that we actually want to live in, maybe when it comes to policymaking. And how learnings from one realm of design can be applied in another, which I think is a continuous exchange, and something that is fundamental about design. Why we do the things we do, and what we really care about, and how that shows up in our work, and also what are techniques that we can share with others that we can learn from.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:08:14] I'd like to go a little bit deeper into that. You and Tucker talked about how design is an act of service. And I'm wondering if the conversations that we've had throughout the past couple months have changed how you think about the role of design.

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Rie Nørregaard: [00:08:28] Hmm. My thinking is always changing about the meaning of the work that I do, and other designers do, as I learn from other people and find myself in new context. And that's part of the job. So I can tell you what I'm thinking about now, is both what I just talked about—is that design methods, processes, and the ability to manifest something that didn't exist before, in order to create a change or to deliver a service, is one aspect of design. And in that, I think the ability to collaborate is hugely important when we think about design in a broader sense. But I'm also very focused on design related to personal expression and craft, and the power in even small-scale acts of working to make sense, to create beauty, to make things that are useful, helpful, even if just for a little while by individuals. And the power and the impact that that also has, sort of the dedication to thinking about the whole process of how to bring something into the world, why, how you do it, and who it's for.

[00:09:46] When I think specifically about some of the starting points for me in this conversation around how to create a new set of design principles, or a new design framework if you will, I think back to some of the interviews. I think about what Marty said about imagination, and that's a very good prescription for how to think about the world that we want and how to design for it, and not to be simply held by reactions to the present. Listening to Gabby Almon talking about design's role in disaster recovery tells me that designers and non-designers with other deep expertise working together is the most powerful way forward. We don't need everyone to be a designer, but designers can trust in what they have to contribute to complicated processes and problems.

[00:10:37] And you know, of course we're not done with creating access, and seeing access as an opportunity, not just a moral issue, or a business issue. And that's what Sinead, as an advocate, talks a lot about. As Kat Holmes mentioned, addressing exclusion is an ongoing and expanding job for design. It's the ability to put one foot in front of the other, solve one problem, to learn, and then solve the next. And that's where the idea of a new design framework comes in—one that allows us to do that in a better way. So this is where I get back to answering, I think, your question about maybe what I've learned through this series of, "do we need a new design framework?" And I would say yes, we need a framework that helps us to take into consideration what we know about how our brains work, what we know in terms of feedback on design solutions from the data that we generate, and how that affects the input into design when we design for complex systems. And that means that we also now can look at the structure in which we design, which is many times invisible to us. So any system really, right? So thinking back to conversations I had, Tucker Viemeister saying, "design is

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how we treat each other" comes to my mind as a really great expression of the desire to be able to include the entire experience into a design framework.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:12:15] So when we start to think about a new design framework, one that can work across various industries, various types of challenges, and serve humanity as a whole... is that possible?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:12:27] I think it's possible to strive for that awareness. Is it possible to act on things that will come to light in the future? No, but it's possible to have intention, and to work to create awareness for ourselves and for the people around us all the time.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:12:48] As we've explored throughout some of our conversations in Designing for Humanity, even design frameworks like inclusive design have their shortcomings. So when you think about a new design framework, what are some of the greatest risk points that you see?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:06] So one of the things that we ask ourselves a lot now in design: who's in the room, right? Who's on the team, who is actually there creating, not just the designs, but also the frameworks, the rules of the game, when we make up new stuff, and we have a new idea of how to do something better or something new that maybe has not been done before. So I think that is a risk that we see probably more clearly now—not changing our behavior around inspiration and development and decision-making. Not changing our expectations around power structures that are in place, and how those affect outcomes of anything—even a new design framework. I see it's an opportunity and it's a risk, to really reconsider how to go about even thinking about, or talking about a new design framework. And that's why I think it's not, it's not a conversation, it's not a set of guidelines that would come from academic institutions or from one design firm or from one designer or one group of designers. The question is who needs to be part of the conversation in order to represent something that is actually different, that will actually be very helpful in solving these bigger scale problems.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:14:36] And there's a bit of pre-work there as well, I think, that we have uncovered throughout our conversations in which it's not just getting a diverse group of people in the room to have all those different perspectives, but it's also laying the groundwork as an organization or as a team or as a design leader to create a space where those different design voices can thrive and be able to speak up.

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Rie Nørregaard: [00:15:00] That's super meaningful.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:15:01] So as we look ahead, how has your thinking about a new design framework changed since we started the show, now that you have input from all sorts of different designers?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:15:13] Yeah. I was aware of in this first season that that we did have a fairly U.S. centric point of view, and there are some practical reasons to that: we wanted to get going and start this conversation, and we're U.S. based, and that was a place to start. I think my next chapter will be about broadening the conversation. Acts of design happen every day all over the world, and so it would be not working towards a new conversation or new framework if we were only talking to ourselves in a particular part of the world.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:15:52] That's what I love about this process. We don't have it figured out yet, but through this podcast and through these conversations, we get closer to it. I'm curious if anything throughout the season has surprised you.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:04] Well you know it's such a privilege in itself to be able to just have a conversation and listen to a practitioner of something that you deeply care about yourself for a good extent of time. We don't do that—I don't do that—very often and it's been a great reminder to stay in conversation and see where it goes. Not for the purposes of a project or being in, sort of, the solving mode always... it's been such a privilege.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:16:34] Well I think we usually benefit by asking more questions. Authentic communication.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:39] Why! Why! Why! (laughs)

Tiffany Kuan: [00:16:42] One question that has been constant throughout every episode is this idea about being an optimist, and whether being a designer means that you're inherently an optimist...

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:51] Oh no, not that.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:16:52] ... And so, I am wondering. Rie, do you consider yourself an optimist?

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Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:57] What do you think?

Tiffany Kuan: [00:17:02] Well, I'm going to say tentatively that you are an optimist.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:17:10] Hmm. I'm not that optimistic. (laughs) No, but I think that's why I've had the question. A little bit of a trick question, actually. Because I think that as designers, you have to have a belief that what you do matters, and that it can change someone's experience, even if it's just an interpersonal way. And I do believe that. I see that and I feel that every day, both from what I learn and from what I can sometimes impart with. But I also believe that design has a role amongst other ways of creating change that is unique, but not all powerful.

[00:17:55] So I have a lot of humility towards my profession and towards the contribution that I can make, and other designers can make, and our work becomes much more impactful when we are able to connect with other practices that are not covered by design frameworks, for example. So it's not that I don't believe in the power to change someone's experience through making something that is beautiful, because I absolutely do. I see it as a piece of a contribution towards a larger goal.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:18:31] Well, I think that humility is healthy. I think we start to get ourselves into trouble when we believe that our way is the best way or the only way, so, that's great. And what a plot twist!

Rie Nørregaard: [00:18:44] Ha-HA! (laughs)

Tiffany Kuan: [00:18:44] Well thank you Rie, thank you so much for being here and I'm looking forward to what lies ahead.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:18:50] So, since this is truly the last episode of the season should we thank the team, Tiffany? I think we should.

Tiffany Kuan: [00:18:55] Yeah, let's do it. Jessica Harris is our executive producer. Peter Fedak is our audio producer. Content editing is done by Tiffany Kuan. Julia Steele handles marketing and promotion. Graphic design is by Matt Kay and Laura Vignale, and Charisse Holman is our associate producer. From the team at SYPartners, thanks so much for listening.