

Why the Best Design Starts with Empathy (S9:E1) - Transcript

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Chris Congdon:

Have you ever felt like the spaces you move through, the tools you use, or even everyday objects were designed in ways that just don't work for you? Like why doesn't the men's bathroom have a diaper changing station? Or why doesn't the automatic faucet work?

Today's guest challenges us to rethink something we rarely question: how design might inadvertently cause friction or even harm.

Omari Souza is a designer, educator, and author of *Design Against Racism*, where he introduces a powerful concept called *restorative design* – the idea that design sometimes has unintended consequences. Through his work, he's helped reshape how we think about everything from workplaces and products to systems and culture, pushing designers to move beyond "designing for" people to designing *with* them.

Omari joined me in Grand Rapids where he shared eye-opening examples of how design decisions impact our daily lives in ways most of us never notice and challenges us to rethink what it really means to create something that works for everyone.

Here's my conversation.

Chris Congdon:

Omari, welcome to Work Better.

Omari Souza

Thank you for having me.

Chris Congdon

This has been exciting. Thank you for coming to Grand Rapids today and spending this time with us. And I just want to start out asking you about something that happened when we met initially earlier today. Like you said to me, are you a hugger? And you reached right out and you gave me a hug, which surprised and delighted me. Do you do that all the time? And how does that go for you?

Omari Souza

I mean, it goes okay. I'm a big hugger. I used to get in trouble for it as a kid, but you know, you always have to ask for consent before you hug people. I think it's more personal than handshakes. So I always prefer to give people a hug.

Chris Congdon

I think that's pretty cool. And it's kind of like you're almost designing that initial interaction, which I hadn't really thought about on a conscious level. So I want to ask about your book, *Design Against Racism*, which I want to ask a few questions about throughout the time that we're together.

But one of the things I found really interesting is that it's organized around an idea that I think is your idea, around restorative design. And I had heard of restorative justice, but I'd never heard of restorative design. Can you just talk a little bit about what that is and what made you think about that for this book?

Omari Souza

Yeah, so the book was inspired by restorative justice practices as well as the practices of Zora Neale Hurston. A lot of people normally know her for her work in the Harlem Renaissance, but I was inspired by her work as an anthropologist when she studied at Columbia University.

And a lot of the work that she did was around documenting African diasporic folklore, but restoring dignity to those populations. With restorative justice, it's all around the concept of measuring harm, understanding harm, but thinking about the victim of said harm and the person who perpetrated the harm and figuring out how you heal the engagement between both parties.

So when I thought about that, how do you restore harm by the practitioner and the person who's on the receiving end as well as how do you restore dignity? That's where the concept of restorative design came into place because as a practitioner of design, we create things that engage audience groups and sometimes the things that we create are harmful.

However, design institutions and in academia, we don't always teach frameworks by which we can measure what that harm is. And *oftentimes, if there's distrust around design artifacts because of past harms that have been created, there aren't really avenues to give to designers and design practitioners on how to approach it as to heal the harm that's been caused, restore trust in the process of designing artifacts going forward, and the restoration of dignity to the person who's on the receiving end of the solutions or product that we're creating for them.*

Chris Congdon

Yeah, so I was listening to somebody, actually I'm taking a class, and they were talking about design, they were talking about neuroarchitecture. And I heard one of the professors say something about, first do no harm. And it actually reminded me of something that I had just read in your book, like design, even if you don't intend it, can actually do harm. Is that right?

Omari Souza

Yeah.

Chris Congdon

What would be an example of that? Like, can you talk through that?

Omari Souza

So before I give an example, I first, especially for the audience, want to give my definition of design and talk about blind spots. So I define design as anything artificial that augments, curates, or amplifies human existence. The clothes that we wear, the seats that we're sitting in, the mics that are in front of us, all of these were designed for human interactions and for whatever types of things that we as human beings tend to participate in.

Chris Congdon

Right. We would often refer to that as like big D design.

Omari Souza

Yes. Also, in addition to that, design functions as a tool to supplement cultural exchanges. So if we think of what culture is, it's really just a set of societal rules that a cluster of people have agreed to abide by and belief systems that people have agreed to abide by.

So if you think of any traditions, whether it's Christmas celebrations, proposals, engagement proposals, bar or bat mitzvahs, quinceaneras, all of these other pieces, all of them carry with them artifacts that have been designed to supplement these exchanges. So when we think about design as a tool of harm, we also have to think about the fact that we as people are designing from our own lived experiences.

And oftentimes, there are limitations to what our experiences are and they get fixed into the things that we're designing. So as a male, I can empathize. Empathy being a big word that we use, not a large word, but using big in terms of consistency, a big word that we use in the classroom for students. You have to empathize with who you're designing for. But as a male, I can empathize with women that I may be designing for. But even if I'm being told about particular experiences or reading those experiences, there'll be nuances in the lived experiences that women have that I may never understand because I'm not living in that body. I'm not navigating those spaces within that body. So if I'm designing from my peer view as a male, the things that I don't understand could be things that create limitations in the experiences that women have around particular design artifacts.

In the book, I use the example of bathroom experiences at concerts and sporting events. And we talk about the difference in access. In the book, I mention that in my classrooms, I will often ask cisgendered men and women to identify how many steps it takes them to use the bathroom in that type of condition. And for men, it ranges from three to five steps on average.

Chris Congdon

So steps being not how many steps I have to walk, but how many stages I go through in the process of leaving my seat at the concert or the sporting event and going to the bathroom.

Omari Souza

That's a perfect way of articulating it, yes. How many stages does it take? And for men, it's usually three to five. I get up, find the bathroom, use the bathroom, wash my hands, go back to my seat. If it's less than four steps, they often forgot to wash their hands or account for washing their hands because men are gross. But for women?

Chris Congdon

I raised a couple of them, so I, you know, but they're good. They're good too.

Omari Souza

I'm raising two of my own, and they also forget to wash their hands sometimes too. But for women, When we ask the same question, the amount of steps increase from 3 to 5 actually to 8 to 34. And that ranges.

Chris Congdon

So much sense.

Omari Souza

Yeah. And it ranges from getting up, finding the line to the bathroom, then finding the stall, inspecting the cleanliness of the stall. Does the stall have a place for you to hang your purse? Is it big enough? Are you on your cycle with the child, lactating? Did you have to bring a child with you into the stall? What is the complexity of the outfit that you're wearing and undoing it so that you can use the bathroom? What steps do you have to take to return the outfit to the integrity that you're using? So forth and so forth. And when women are going through this long list of steps that they have to consider, the men in the classroom often drop their jaw because they were unaware.

So I follow this up with the question of asking the cisgendered men to keep and women to raise their hands. And I say, only drop your hands if I've said something that you disagree with. And then I'll say, I firmly believe.

Chris Congdon

Can we practice?

Omari Souza

Yeah.

Chris Congdon

Okay, can we do this? So I have my hand raised. Okay.

Omari Souza

So I'll go, I firmly believe prior to Omari, articulating the steps that women have to take to use the bathroom at a sporting event or concert that I could have equitably designed a bathroom experience for women, to which the men in the room, like I will right now, will drop my hand.

Chris Congdon

I might actually drop mine. Well, just because, I mean, I think women aren't a monolith. Just my experience when I go and use the bathroom, like, you know, I'm thinking about if it's cold, you know, do I have a place to put my gloves? Or literally one time going to a sporting event, it was so cold, it was like I had to thaw my hands before I could even unzip my coat. Okay, TMI, but that's enough. But anyway, I don't know that even I could do it well because my experience is not the same experience as other women.

Omari Souza

No, I think that's perfect. Because when I ask the question, men drop their hands, some of the women in the classroom will drop their hands, but some will keep their hands high.

And then I start throwing different intersections of identity into the discussion, and then you start to find people drop their hands. So I'll then go, what if the woman you're designing for is trans or disabled or comes from a part of the world where the flushing mechanism on the toilet is different? Do you still feel that you can design an equitable experience for them? So once everyone drops their hand, it becomes this question of who have you traditionally considered in the solutions that you've designed for? And what type of harm or pain points have you crafted for those people that you've ignored in the solutions that you've presented? And now how do you begin the process of accounting for them in the work that you do going forward?

Chris Congdon

Yeah, you're reminding me of when sometimes the design community will use different ways of truly wanting to represent the people that they're designing for, but maybe they're using some kind of a persona. And you used an example in your book about online dating apps could you just tell that a little bit because it just really stuck with me.

Omari Souza

So as a professor, I try to relate things to my students in a way that they'll understand. And students, I'm generalizing, but I joke with them and say that they often understand dating and drinking.

So with personas, it is. So with personas, I often tell them that personas are often very comparable to the profiles you see on dating apps. It's very surface level information, but I'll ask students, by show of hands, how many of you guys are using dating apps? So a number of the students will elevate their hands, but then I'll ask them, how many of you would feel comfortable with a designer leveraging your dating app in order to make something meaningful for you? How on the nose do you feel the solution would be versus how far off could it be to actually creating something of purpose for you? To which none of them are more confident than it would.

So it then begs the question, why use personas, especially in the early stages of design work? I'm not opposed to it in the later end, once you've gathered the necessary insights and you've validated the things that you've needed to validate in order to come up with your solution. But if you're using it in the very beginning to guide your work, it really in my opinion, isn't something that is the most effective way of understanding the audience that you're designing for.

Chris Congdon

Yeah, it would be like assuming, again, with the dating app, like, you know, we've maybe gone on our first date, but do you really know what I'm gonna be like after 5, 10, 20 years of marriage? You know, a lot can, there's a, you learn a lot about somebody over time for sure.

Omari Souza

Definitely.

Chris Congdon

So one of the things that I also wanted to hear a little bit more about, I was listening to one of your talks on Sunday. My husband was heading out the door to walk the dog. And then I realized that he was hovering and then I realized that he was hanging out in the other room. He was listening. But you were telling the story about automatic faucets. Can you tell our audience about that in terms of an example of a design that maybe wasn't fully informed.

Omari Souza

Yeah, so in the book, I give a number of examples of things that were designed, but weren't necessarily designed with all stakeholders in mind. And with the same example of bathroom experiences, I talk about how people of color have different bathroom experiences as well, that the automatic faucets that register the light refracting off of your hands doesn't always function adequately if you have darker skin tones, which is a bit more absorbent of light than lighter skin tones.

So for myself, in particular bathrooms, I find myself in troubling situations if there is only an automatic faucet and no hand sanitizer and things of that nature because they don't always work for me. Some models do, a good percentage of them don't. And whenever I give my talks or I'm giving these presentations and I bring that up and I ask, how many of you guys have had difficulties using the automatic faucets? It's usually the darker skinned people in the room that raise their hand, but also feel seen because someone has acknowledged it or a light bulb moment happens where they then understand, oh, this is why this doesn't work.

And then from there, going back to this idea of design doing harm, I then ask people, why is it important that we wash our hands after bathroom experiences? And if no one can give me a rationale, I'd probably make a joke about Chipotle and the trouble they had a couple years ago with E. coli outbreaks and ask like, how does E. coli normally break out in restaurants? Is it not a matter of hygiene? And if you give people less access to be hygienic, does that not become a health issue? Is that not harm?

But also, is there not psychological harm? By going to a particular place and then realizing that your identity isn't seen in a particular space. Is that not also an aspect of harm as well too? So I use these to challenge the notion that design does no harm, because in reality, it's not that it doesn't do any harm. It's the fact that we haven't taught frameworks to measure that harm. It's an idea that we should aim for, but in reality, it's not something that's practiced.

Chris Congdon

So that's crazy. From your work, you talk about something that I think we're pretty passionate about too, which is this idea of designing with and not for. And I would love to hear more about just like you've got a bunch of different tools here, but I would just love to hear more about that. What would you say are some of the key principles that you're teaching in the classroom or you're coaching people to say like, this is what you need to do if you really, if you really buy into this idea of designing with and not for?

Omari Souza

Yeah.

Chris Congdon

So what does it mean to you?

Omari Souza

There are a number of different frameworks that we use from positionality matrix setting, which is a framework that I crafted within the classroom. to allow people to identify the intersections of identity of the stakeholders that are experiencing the product that they're designing for, not just for the stakeholders, but for them as individuals as well as their team.

And for those who are unfamiliar with the idea of positionality or how I use it in the book, this is your race, your gender identification, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, community you grew up in, whether it was urban, rural, or suburban, country you grew up in, so forth and so forth. All of these things influence how you see the world, the rules by which design artifacts play in your day-to-day life, and also how you navigate design solutions. This also changes over time as your level of education, your socioeconomic background, even your physical ability changes over time.

So If all of those things change how you navigate different design solutions, it's important for the person who is designing to have an understanding of that, but also have an understanding of themselves and the team that they're designing for. If positionally the team is drastically different than whom they're designing for, then you have to now create bridges in order to understand.

Going back to my gender identification, if I as a male have to design for women, If I design for women while not being positionally aligned with women, and positionally aligned means not having the same positionality as them. I'm missing the lived experiences. I could create harm to women by not giving them a voice in the product that I am making for them or the solution that I am making for them. And where that voice needs to be, is hard to identify without having that map or that matrix in order to share that piece.

I forgot the other half of that question, so I apologize if you can repeat it.

Chris Congdon

No, that's okay. I think you're going there, but we're just, I'm really wanting to dig into tools, if you will, to help designers be successful when they're trying to design with, not for. So I think there are a lot of different things that people try in order to have empathy for the people they're designing for. But if you don't have the same lived experience, like how do you coach people to do that?

Omari Souza

It then becomes this process of shedding in particular intervals around traditions when it comes to engaging out-groups. One thing that we talk about in the book, rather than making things about race, gender, or sexual orientation, we talk about them in terms of in-groups and out-groups. In-groups become the dominant party or dominant force or dominant collective and out-groups usually become the marginalized group.

Taking it away from race and some of those other things, I often refer to iPhones and Androids, right? In most rooms that I find myself in, especially in design circles, they're predominantly iPhone practitioners. Most Android users fall within that outgroup within those same spaces. If I ask that room, the iPhone users, to identify what annoys them or inconveniences them about text messaging or communicating with Android users, there'll be a litany of things that they can mention by the green bubble, emojis being different, photo quality in the exchange being different, difficulty around group text messaging. But if I then ask those same iPhone users what inconveniences the Android users when they communicate with you, their silence or there may be one or two ideas from which I then tell them, you know, this is an example of how outgroupers are familiar with what inconveniences them, but are unaware of the challenges that outgroupers face. In-groupers are familiar with what inconveniences them when dealing with outgroupers but aren't familiar with how outgroupers feel inconvenienced by the dominant party.

I then share with them traditional methods that were taught as researchers, interview, case studies, things of that nature, that oftentimes these are methods that are taught and used by in-groupers when engaging with other in-groupers, but out-group parties often have to find non-dominant means of communicating because their identities aren't in the forefront and sometimes also asking folks insights about their identities might not always be the most fair or appropriate because not everyone has those tools.

So if I were to come to you and ask you to give me insights that I can use to better design for women, at the moment that I ask you, it might be hard for you to come up with something or you might say something as a knee-jerk reaction, but it could also be comparable to me asking you what does it feel like to breathe air or ask a fish what does it feel like to swim in water. The book gives frameworks around finding non-traditional means by which you build relationships with these communities and through trust and relationships end up gaining the insights necessary.

Chris Congdon

I'd like to ask about the workplace because a lot of our listeners are coming from that point of view. They are either designing workplaces or have very strong interests in how well the workplace works out. And I'm just wondering if there are things that you see that are common blind spots, if you will, in looking at the environments in which people are working?

Omari Souza

So I think a part of the blind spots that a lot of designers operate under is that designers often profess best practices and best practices aren't necessarily best practices. They're traditions and they're subjective.

Chris Congdon

Interesting.

Omari Souza

Yeah. So I am teaching this as a best practice because this is how design has evolved and these are the traditions that we have, these are the rules that we've agreed to culturally within design.

However, since the example is around the workplace setting, because we are looking at it from best practices, we are iterating on already preconceived ideas versus actually asking, based off the positionality of the people that are in the room, this is how they are most productive. This is what inspires them to do the best work necessary for the company or team or service that they are providing for. And this is how we can redesign this in order to make this work. Instead, we are often locked into, I guess, prior methodologies, grid structures, and ways of thinking that don't necessarily evolve much innovation in how we approach things.

Chris Congdon

Well, one of the things that I had a chance to hear you speak about, I know we're talking about the workplace, but rectangular tables and Thanksgiving. I have a thing about rectangular shaped tables. I don't love them because I feel like they may not be intended to represent hierarchy. It may just be that it's a rectangular room and it's, the dimensions are easy to plan for and it's easy to build a rectangular shaped table. But then you get into the workplace and then you find this dynamic happens and it becomes about, well, who's sitting at the head of the table, you know, or who's sitting furthest away from where the information is being displayed.

Omari Souza

Exactly. And a lot of people don't really consider that, but that is a design dynamic versus having a round table. How does that change the dynamic of how people are able to engage and how information is shared at the dinner table? Going beyond that, what types of dishes are being curated for the meal that's being exchanged and what utensils are being used for that exchange? All of those things are design choices that change how people engage at the table. Is the food being served family style? Is it single serving? Are these individually plated dishes? And if they are plated dishes, how are we arranging the food for people to consume?

Chris Congdon

Sure.

Omari Souza

All of these things are design choices that, again, add to expectations, rural settings, influence how we engage with one another influence the type of conversations that are being had and who can have conversations with whom at what time. Even if they're multiple tables, like who gets placed at the kiddie table versus the adult table? And at what point do you transition from adult to kid or kid to adult?

Chris Congdon

And we've used that analogy sometimes, you know, jokingly at work about like, oh, I'm at the kiddie table. But it does seem like those are elements that often get overlooked. And I will say just as an additional point, while my husband was still eavesdropping on your talk, we were discussing like, what would that be like at Thanksgiving dinner if we had a round table instead of a more rectangular one and I said, I like to sit at the head of the table because I want everybody to know who the boss is.

But in the workplace, maybe not so much. So it seems like you can't talk about the workplace without talking about AI. And I'm interested in something that I heard you say about really how AI could potentially be limiting perspectives in any situation, whether it's design or just in our general work. And I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see happening there, some of the risks and how to avoid them?

Omari Souza

So if we think back to the point that I was making earlier about how out-group communities normally engage versus how in-group communities normally engage, in-group societies and clusters of people traditionally have their information more readily available, their voices readily available, their perspectives readily available.

So when you have large language model AI systems like ChatGPT and Perplexity and all of these other places, they're really pulling the source information that's being shared from the in-group societies without much input from the out-groupers. And I think that becomes the point where it becomes dangerous, especially considering for many, I know children that will use ChatGPT as their Google now, rather than Googling something or going to the library. So how does this give voice to the outgroupers? How does this restore their dignity or how does this allow their perspectives and insights to not get drowned out, especially if the traditional means by which we document histories and stories or voices aren't necessarily as readily available on the net.

Chris Congdon

Yeah, they're not always complete, right?

Omari Souza

Exactly. So for the immigrant communities that probably share their histories through oral storytelling or the queer communities that don't feel safe enough to articulate themselves in particular spaces in their most authentic outside of particular viewpoints and vantage points, that's not going to be there.

If there are communities of color that have traditions that aren't documented by in groups, it doesn't mean that it's not happening. It's just not being documented through traditional means. That's not going to be there.

So when you are utilizing these systems for whatever the purpose may be, there's so much context that's being stripped away and not necessarily being allotted to the same group that this book basically speaks about. And while some may think about it like, oh, that might be unfortunate to communities of color or queer communities, the thing that this book emphasizes is that we all have out-group identities regardless of who we may be.

I, as a cisgendered male, my gender places me within an in-group, but my race places me in an out-group. And I am assuming your race as a white woman. race places you at an in-group, but your gender places you at an out-group. So there are particular spaces that I could potentially operate and not feel unsafe and not feel invisible that you may, and there may be spaces because of your racial in-group that you may feel safe and you may feel seen, that I may feel unsafe and I may feel invisible.

So if we all consider the fact that regardless of your race, gender, sexual orientation or religion, they're still going to be in an outgroup aspects of your identity. And those outgroup aspects of your identity is what's getting lost in how design is being practiced, but also in some of these larger language model AI systems. That's the thing that we need to make sure that we are accounting for in terms of what's being seen, heard, and utilized going forward.

Chris Congdon

Clearly, this is a topic that a lot of people are thinking about. I have to ask you one last question because I know I have to wrap. So this is maybe kind of a big question, but I'm interested, you know, there's a lot going on in the world right now. What is giving you hope about the future, the future of work, the future of design.

Omari Souza

That's a good question and a difficult one. I don't always feel hopeful.

Chris Congdon

Yeah.

Omari Souza

I think with everything that's happening, it...

Chris Congdon

Me either.

Omari Souza

Yeah. If my hope was in the shape of a parachute, I feel like my parachute gets punched daily. But I also feel like my parachute gets filled when I have the opportunity to speak to folks like you and the folks here at Steelcase and other audiences that attend these book talks as I've toured to share the knowledge within this book of the people that engage with me on social media who've read the book and have either challenged perspectives within the book or added onto perspectives within the book or shared with me how they're executing it within their day-to-day practice.

The people really motivate me as well as the folks that have inspired the book.

Chris Congdon

Yeah. I just have to say that I found your book so moving and challenging. I feel like I learned a lot. And I will also say that I think I'm going to start hugging people more often. So, I think that breaking down some of those barriers are, that's just going to be a really important way of making a little tiny bit of difference in people's day every day.

Omari Souza

Also because you don't know if the automatic faucet worked for them to wash their hands. It makes it a little bit easier.

Chris Congdon

There you go. I hadn't thought about that, but it's a design solution, right? Anyway, okay, thank you so much for joining me today, Omari. It's been a pleasure.

Omari Souza

Thank you.

Chris Congdon:

Omari challenged me to think about the ways in which design might cause difficulties for some people and how we can work to design with and not for – especially in bathroom experiences!

If you enjoyed today's episode, share it with a friend or colleague and follow us wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to visit us as steelcase.com/research to sign up for the Work Better Weekly newsletter for workplace research, and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.