

Design for Planet Fellowship Exchange

Episode Three: Culture Change

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.

So today's episode is all about culture shifts and change. We have two incredible fellows today, Sarah Drinkwater and Torange Khonsari. Sarah is a community builder, entrepreneur and investor. Most recently, she built and led the Responsible Technology team at Omidyar network. Before that she was at Google building up physical community spaces for entrepreneurs. And we also have Torange, she was one of the original co-founders of the art and architecture practice, Public Works. She has been a senior lecturer in architecture at London Metropolitan University since 2000, and is currently the course leader for postgraduate programmes and research on design and cultural Commons at London Metropolitan University. So when we talk about culture, oftentimes we forget the impact power can have to influence and dictate the shift within the pandemic, what shifts have you seen? And where do you see us collectively moving forward?

Sarah Drinkwater (01:36)

Power is so often invisible. And I guess one thing when you ask about the pandemic, and culture shifts, one thing I think of is, particularly from my background, being the technologist in the fellows group, I think about this shift from the idea of the individual to the idea of the collective. So you know, technology has always had this myth of the individual, you know, we think about products being like the iPhone, the iPad, you know, we think about magazine covers would like Steve Jobs is kind of solo genius. And anyone who's worked on a technology product knows that things get built by groups, not individuals. And I think in the

first year of the pandemic, particularly, we learned that no man is an island that we do not live individually, that we exist in community that we exist, and we crave society, there is an awful lot of encouragement there for me in the way that we can choose to be in community. So you know, like all data became health data in that first year, the patterns of how we exist in the world.

And yet, a lot of our data standards, in web two and the kind of old version of the Internet are really extractive they're top down, but dominance. You know, they're kind of masculinist in practice. And when I think about emergent behaviour shifts, that I'm thinking about two years into the pandemic, you know, in the last year, I've begun working a lot more on web three, I've long been interested in collective ownership as a mechanism for better outcomes, a broader stakeholder group than who's traditionally benefited. And so when I think about power shift, for me, the shift in thinking and technology from individual to collective is really powerful.

Torange Khonsari (03:00)

Building on what Sarah was just staying, at the crux of it is that we realised that we are a relational society, we exist in relationships, we don't exist as islands. But I suppose another issue around power and cultural shift is also that I think it's very destructive when there is the aim or drive to gain power, and also the drive, and the need for power, and egos. And these are the things that I've seen more and more often, in the last 25 years of teaching and practice, that has been quite destructive in actually creating both a fairer society, but also planetary care.

And so the moment that you start to think about relational power in a way that it's oscillating in a way that it's everybody should have power in one point in their work in their home environment in their everyday life. And that actually, we reorganise the idea of work where everybody gives power and has power at one point in their daily life, then you don't create a situation for people to need it so badly that they have to accumulate it. And they have to kind of impose it on others in order to get that need as a way to support us to do this, which possibly was very difficult to do before because it's very time consuming, and so on.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (04:33)

I just wanted to also ask if you can break down Sarah, web two and web three?

Sarah Drinkwater (04:38)

Oh, sure. So Tim Berners Lee launched the world wide web as we know it in 1989. A lot of the early ideology of the internet was very idealistic. You know, it was launched as a nonprofit, for example. And the web one as we call it was the era when all you could really do on the internet was read things. It was very passive. And then web two, as we talk about it is the shift for users to be able to participate often in the form of social media.

So when we think about web two, we think of Twitter, Facebook, Google, the increasing encroaching of advertising on our eyeballs. A lot of the practices that I spent time in my last job at Omidyar are working against, you know, the idea of data extractivism data colonialism as some folks call it. And I think web three imperfect as it is, is really an ideology backed often by blockchain technology, but not always, that centres around ideas of collective ownership, decentralisation, as mechanisms to enable better internet and fairer outcomes for more people.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (05:35)

I think it also hinges on responsibility, and understanding how we can be more responsible for our ecosystems and understand more about the caring aspect and the sensitivities involved as well.

Sarah Drinkwater (05:46)

So the team that I ran at Omidyar we called it Responsible Technology, which we agonised over that name, because the natural question you have to ask when you call a team that is responsible to whom and for what, and everything depends on your way of seeing everything depends on the viewpoint that you have, you know. When I worked in engineering at Google, you would not get promoted for fixing bugs, right? You'd get promoted for like launching a cool new thing. And then if it broke in the background, nobody really cared. I think there's a couple of overlapping things here.

Then there's peace around like maintenance and care, like anyone that has parented a small child or looked after an elderly parent knows the care work is essential and thankless. But if we're thinking about like the planet, every sphere of existence, there are folks out there doing the work of maintenance and care, that we need to hold up reward and support in every way that we can. And that's why I think the word responsibility is important to me, because there is a responsibility that a bunch of actors have to each other, to build a system that works for all of us.

In the session that Torange and I ran, as part of this fellowship, we talked about how change happens, you know, I always think about markets, laws and norms. The government has their say, the private community has their say civil society has their say, and there's this negotiation in the middle around, like, what responsibility looks like. And right now, a couple of those actors are not pulling their weight, and we're suffering as citizens.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (07:02)

This actually comes back to I guess, value systems, right? So understanding what is it that we actually value whether it's individually or in communities with and maybe looking at the resources and understanding the hierarchy of accessibility is how has this played through in the work and the fellowship programme at this current time?

Sarah Drinkwater (07:21)

Torange and I both have a really strong interest in DAOS as structures, decentralised autonomous organisations, these are collectives that come together for a very particular purpose, often financially, it's a bit like a group chat with money. And they vary enormously, you know, you have everything from groups that exist by the Constitution, which is one very particular kind of DAO. And there are others that are focused around collectively buying and maintaining land. And I think your point around accessibility is really important.

So I contribute to Gitcoin who are basically open source funders in web three, what they do is they raise money from organisations and redistribute to public goods, which is their frame. And there's this really interesting trend of in the crypto communities that I'm in around the idea of public goods, which is everything from open source to libraries, to parks to good law. And looking at the gitcoin mechanism, which is so pure, they've given out 60 million to projects, a decent amount of nonprofits working on everything from climate to kind of DEI, there is this real challenge around accessibility.

First of all, the language like it took me months to learn this space. And I'm someone who's worked in tech for a long time, the time itself to do unpaid labour in learning terms and finding your way in the right space. That's a privilege that we forget about the whole time. And that is reflected in the voices that tend to exist in certain spaces, right. So I'm lucky in the web three communities, I'm in a comparatively diverse compared to web two. But that's not even saying something. When I first began working on web two, I was the only woman that like probably the first five events I went to 15 years ago, we live in one of the most diverse cities in the world, there are still an enormous amount to be done around who is not included. And I think particularly web three, I worry about things like age, I worry about things like caregivers, because I'm one of the only parents.

Torange Khonsari (08:58)

Yeah, I think in terms of value, I suppose my critique of the current status of how these DAOs and these technologies work is that they tend to just see that world, you know, they tend to almost kind of retreat into the virtual or into the technology. And that worries me because I think that becomes something that will leave people behind.

Sarah Drinkwater (09:21)

But if we're thinking about the way that we live now understanding I'm going to generalise in embarrassingly massive terms, we are conditioned to consume and I think we're being conditioned away from good negotiation and good debate. So like Oscar Wilde quote about socialism, the problem with socialism is it takes too many evenings, which is funny because it's totally true. Anyone that's ever lived in a commune knows you break up because the washing up doesn't get done. Anyone that's been to like a local council meeting. It's the same people that go but that's what participatory democracy means. It means going and sometimes sitting

through kind of a boring debate because you want to make your point heard and I think the way that social media particularly has conditioned us to live in these outrage cycles and to form how we've held opinions, I feel quite strongly about there being digital space for debate and digital space for healthy debate. And digital space can nuance two things can be true at the same time, you know, we need to strengthen our muscle in this way, I think there is a lot of opportunity for technology to simply be the tool that underlays and create space for digital healthy debate.

Something that I observed in the group is all of us tend to exist on the margins. So like I'm a technology person, but I'm perceived as on the fringe in technology in lots of ways. And I think many of us in the fellow programme, we exist in a couple of worlds at once. And that has meant a core challenge has been building shared language. I remember in the first session, I Googled like half the words people said, I was like, I don't understand what I was talking about. And I think if we're talking about true culture change, it comes from building common narratives.

So if we're looking at powerful examples, like the gay marriage movement in the US, for example, I spoke to an amazing guy a few years ago, and he said, For the first five years of that campaign, we focused on fairness. And then we realised that that wasn't resonating. But love wins that message that this one person who's meant to be with you that conquers everything. That's what won them that legislative fight. And so if we're thinking about culture change that has the ability to shift hearts and minds, it often comes back to building really powerful shared language and kind of understanding where folks come from. All of us kind of act as membranes or translators in our world, you know, we come back to our core function, and we're like I heard about this thing. It was amazing.

Torange Khonsari (11:28)

Yeah, in my research, I kind of started to, and also Kate Raworth's work, I started to kind of see these distinct spheres of the public, the state, the private, the market, and the commons, the sphere of the community. And the fact that actually there is work in the state, yeah, you can have a job in the public sphere, you can have a job in the private sphere, but very little jobs can you have in the Commons. So what we are not producing is a notion of Labour and the conditions of labour and work within the commons, we have to be looking at the Commons as its own distinct sphere.

And so I suppose my focus on the Commons is that that is tangible. It's in the city. It's working with people on the community, on the ground. So it's the relationship between the one to one tangible on the ground, and the technology that could support a scaling up. And I think that becomes really important. But these value shifts, they happen through experience, they happen through experience of every day. So when you are offering different dialogues, different platforms for dialogues, different learning environments, be it informal learning, say public art project, say projects which engage with people, and you start to talk about different

values, then that's where people start to think about different ways of doing and different ways of being a new imaginaries start to be created.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (13:11)

Just in terms of feminism, and looking at the ways in which we understand labour and break down labour, which is basically doing a lot of unpaid work. There's also this understanding of there's a big fat burn out, there's this exhaustion. So what are some of the challenges that maybe we can talk about? And we can also navigate that actually alleviate some of the pressures that's maybe down to that one or the community of women who are really trying to do that great work, but also really slow down by so many different isms in the world?

Sarah Drinkwater (13:41)

Yes. Well, then, I guess my definition of feminism, just to be super clear is liberation for as many people as possible Really randomly, this guy gave me \$10,000. And I ran a granting programme to basically redistribute it to folks in my community. And what was interesting is nearly every person from the Muslim community running the food bank, to the group of moms that were looking after the community flowerbed near my house, they were all doing it already for free. And in nearly every case, they had a job already, or they had care duties already.

And it made me think about how there are certain people who just have this impulse to help. And I think there's something really interesting around who feels called upon to serve the broader community. And who doesn't, because I do not see 30 year old men volunteering it, maybe they're so busy at work, I don't know, maybe it's just that they feel cared for by other people. I would love to extend the branch of allyship to those folks to get volunteering and do more for their communities.

Torange Khonsari (14:31)

Partly it's embedded that you just want to do that. So I think it's really about a quality and attitude and a way of practice. And that should not be exclusive, but it should be honoured. Until very recently, it wasn't, if you dealt with things subjectively or emotionally, you were a weakling. So all of those things that need to become part of how society is run and structured. And I think it's happening I think that's what gives me so much hope. Because from when I started practising in 99, to today, I have seen such a huge shift. And I don't think I'd be continuing to do this, honestly, I'd be like, okay, nothing changes, I'm going to work in a bank. But I think also, I'm sorry to keep going back to common sphere.

But what excites me about that is that it gives us the opportunity to actually create a completely different set of values around which new systems are being created. So reciprocity care, act, mutualism, collaboration, shared power, you know, all of those, and I don't think this world should be just ruled through the commons, I think there'll be a horrible world, I think it needs all three, because you will always have people who want power, you always have people

who want a lot of money. So you can't also suppress them, you know, that's also a problem. So you need the three spheres, but you need the three spheres, to be able to do what they do without corruption without hegemony of one over the other. They work together as an ecosystem and in collaboration. And so those who want to operate, the way we're talking about, can operate within the sphere of the commons, there is work there, they can get paid for their time, they can be honoured, there can be rewards. And then the others who want the other forms of work can choose

Sarah Drinkwater (16:28)

If we look at New Zealand, Taiwan, Finland, there are countries that have cracked this model in some ways. It's not out of the realms of possibility, it's more that we're very much in a global North Western tradition, this is where technology can come in, all of these signals add up together to the need for there to be change in a really, I hope, positive way. And I think there is a broad trend in business, whether it's the rise of the B Corp, whether it's the rise of the idea of stakeholders versus shareholders, I think there's a lot of positive changes there when we're considering stakeholders in terms of the planet, in terms of the communities around where our offices are built. That I think is a positive move in business.

Torange Khonsari (17:08)

But I think also, it's the falsity in the 1000 years of value, that power is strength. And I think once you start to shift that, and think about strengths being sharing power, because it is much harder to share power, than it is to hold it. And I know that because that's what we did in Public Works, the founding members that were left, we decided we're going to make everybody director, so everybody has the same power in decision making about the company. I know how hard that was, because they had the power to potentially if they wanted to, but then not like that, because there's a lot of trust between us, but they could throw me out right as a founding member.

So that vulnerability that comes, it also needs to have the other bits added to it. And the other bits are that you have to have respect for each other. You have to have ethics of care, you have to have trust. So all these other things comes with the sharing of power. So then you have to develop all of those things in order for you to be comfortable enough to share that power. Otherwise it will always be tokenistic.

So I think those are all systemic changes. So the sooner we start to look at proper systemic change, because the other interesting thing is, when you talk about systemic change, it's so unfamiliar that people don't get on board, you have to go through the cultural shift, slowly and rejig. And that needs confidence. And it needs time, you have to be comfortable with unfamiliarity, and human psychology is generally not we have to turn it into something that's familiar like language, you know, you will turn it into something you know, something you've experienced in order to have access to what it is about. So we have to be aware of that with system change. Because if we're not, we can't design it. And then you know, a lot of people

say but I talk and talk and talk and nobody listens. But that's why because they don't know how to enter it.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (19:25)

For any designer that's listening, it encourages them or us as well to reimagine the ways in which we communicate. And going back to this language, going back to you talked about entering the space, really thinking about okay, how do I be organised the ways in which I'm creating this prototype? Or I'm creating this idea, and how do I come out of this space of not necessarily looking at it as a selling point but looking at it as actually something that has some type of substance and it can reach and break boundaries in some capacities.

Torange Khonsari (19:59)

So to me, the issue with that is the issue of innovation in practice, because the moment you still have this idea that you have a client, the client gives you a brief, then you do the thing that the brief has asked you, okay? You can be ethical with what you make it out of, then it's going into the market and so on. You are not shifting anything, you're just changing a tiny, tiny little thing. Does it really change anything, I'm not sure.

That's why I keep talking about change the nature of the work, change the nature of the practice, it might have to be plural, you might have to be a farmer, a product designer, a botanical dye maker, you know, and it can be a collective, it doesn't have to be that you do it all a single person, it might be your organisation is not about just, we do one thing. And that's what I was talking about with my student who is a fashion designer. So you know, she came in, it was the most ethical, I mean, there's nothing more I could do with her. It was really ethically sourced silk and cotton, and she had memberships, she doesn't have buyers, and so on and so forth.

But her fashion line cannot be completely sustainable, unless she has diverse income. So then we started to talk about what are the obstacles for you to survive? And then she talks about, you know, the fact that you need 10,000 metres of fabric in order to make it viable from a mill. So then we said, Okay, why don't we think about a collective mill in Brixton, where small fashion designers it becomes a cooperative? Why don't we talk about all these different community gardens, growing dyes, they're doing botanical dyes for the fabrics, they're now looking at a farm to grow certain things outside London. So there is an entire system around which you reinvent and recreate a commons based organisation. It's like architecture, if you're still thinking about your final product being a building, forget about it, it's just rhetoric, you're not going to change the world. I'm sorry. But you won't.

Sarah Drinkwater (22:10)

Something that's really interesting to me. In this conversation, I was talking to my friend, Ashanti who's a futurist. And I was saying, sometimes I find it really hard to articulate like a

feeling I have about how things are gonna go. Because the future often starts like a feeling, even when it's built on exactly what's gone before. I think very often, in my particular use case, maybe this is just me, I don't know, to help folks to bring people on the journey, to build solidarity, to build community, to build the network that you need to make something happen, you need to build a say, in some words, kind of what this thing is. And it can be hard because things that are very frontier, they all must exist before language, what you're saying is there is a better way of doing this, but I don't have all the answers yet. And so that always kind of starts with trust, right. And it starts with values.

And I think in that very particular use case, you're quite far down the journey already, because she kind of knows what a output will be. It's a better system for building a beautiful item. I think we need more mechanisms at scale. It's really hard to reimagine capitalism. We're basically painting a watercolour in a stream, it's really hard for humans to imagine very few of us have lived outside of capitalism, you talk to anyone that has lived outside of it, and the like, pros and cons. But I think that's the crux of what we have to do is reimagine our society, in the face of powerful interests that do not want to do that. That is an exciting challenge.

Torange Khonsari (23:24)

I get very worried about hegemonic systems, you know that you have one system, and it's the perfect system, I think we will have capitalism, it will be a very different form, potentially, I think I am interested in plural markets, because you've always had markets right from Egyptian time, you had markets where you sold things, but what does a commons market look like? And so I just wonder, what are those different systems within which you can have an economic, you know, system for a different way of doing things within the Commons or whatever. But within a different sphere? There are also a lot of common good economics, there's also discuss of diverse economies.

So actually, does an economy there? Does it start to have reciprocity as part of it? So it's not just about monetary value, but actually, we start to have different values different, you know, social, natural, and so on, but actually then mapping that to see okay, is it about reciprocity of exchanging goods within the commons? Is it about selling some of it for public good, or for common good? So I think that's where the exciting stuff comes. And I think if we're talking about system of objects within design, what does that look like?

Alisha Morenike Fisher (24:46)

I wanted to use a quote that design studio for social intervention users and it's basically discussing about how ideas are embedded within arrangements, which in turn produce effects. So how the folks are working to solve these problems. Usually the ones that are impacted by them, the work that they usually do is to reimagine social justice. You're doing all this fight, fight, fight, fight all the time. But then oftentimes, we identify something as you know, sexist, racist, heterosexist. But then one of the things that they've tried to look at is how these effects can be embedded into everyday social arrangements, and really looking at ways in

which they can reframe, adjust, look at all the intersections of the gaps, or they're like fuzzy bits, which is really, as you said before, it's the exciting part.

Sarah Drinkwater (25:28)

It's also really small, what I like about what you just said, is the idea that we can start with extremely tiny building blocks. So my kid's nursery always calls me when he's sick, every single time, I'm not the primary carer, but I always get the call. It's a tiny micro aggression, that reminds me of how embedded some thinking is and how we see the world.

And building on what Torange just said, I was thinking about a book that I read, that's about 20,000 years of women's labour through the lens of cloth, and it starts 1000s of years before currency existed. And in that era, women made cloth because it was the job you could do while caring for your kids, you know, the men are out hunting. And this is like Mesopotamia, Egypt, every single civilization that we know, existed at that time had this setup. And the cloth was the thing, like you had to eat the meat right away, because they hadn't invented storage mechanisms yet. The men were doing a thing that was valuable. But you had to do it right away, the cloth that was made was both the thing that you wore to keep yourself warm, but also what you traded. So the basic economics, small unit setup was very different. And it meant that a lot of what happened at that trade level, you were only selling what you needed to buy more meat, maybe who knows what they bought, then I don't know. But something about that book really reframed my thinking about how the domestic unit is actually really powerful. You know, the constellations that we live in a very diverse and varied these days, right? They always have been like, the myth of the nuclear family is quite new. But to me, it reminds me that what we do domestically is actually really powerful the choices that we make.

Torange Khonsari (26:53)

Yeah, and I suppose again, I go back to practice, where do you position where you do work. So if you're doing it in a situated place, if you commit to an area, a neighbourhood, a borough, for seven years, say, and you're producing work within that, and the impact is in that detailed small system, then your impact is going to be small. But you can see the impact of it. It's not abstract. And so in a way the effects can be varied in that situation, because it also affects your practice. And I think for change to happen, it needs commitment in unless you're experimenting with methodologies. You can't jump from one thing to another and expect change, you have to really commit. And so -

Sarah Drinkwater (27:48)

Then practice implies repetition, right? And ritual and repeat.

Torange Khonsari (27:51)

Absolutely. And I like that repetition, commitment. And also, again, because of that whole social media culture, all the younger people want everything fast. Now today, I want to see the change tomorrow, you know, it won't happen at all since success. That's a bit of a problem. Because I think you should invent, you should take your time, you will get to that place. And you will get to that position. Don't rush that. And then you end up there. And then you don't have enough facilities to be doing what you should be doing. I go for slow every time.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (28:28)

And also embrace mistakes and failures, because the failures and understand how you can get better. And yeah, maybe we work something as well. Thank you so much. This has been so energising and powerful. Yeah, just listening to all the things that you've shared. And one of the things I just want to touch point on is just if there's anything else that you want to add?

Torange Khonsari (28:51)

Just very quickly, I would say be open to unlearn some of the things you've learned.

Sarah Drinkwater (28:56)

I love that. How can I top that? I guess the only thing I would say like I'm not a designer, right? This fellowship has opened my eyes to what design really is. Design is everything. I love that last point Torange made around practice being about repetition, about how we should think in Cathedral thinking this idea of things being built on generations, not necessarily my tea time. That's quite encouraging. I think I'll end on that.

Alisha Morenike Fisher (29:20)

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 Adebawale, 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

commons, community, power, shift, design, web, programme, technology, sphere, practice, system

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