

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host  
Tobi Fairley**

[The Design You Podcast](#) with Tobi Fairley

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 76.

Welcome to *The Design You Podcast*, a show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth, and joy. Here is your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey *Design You* listeners. I am so excited about today. So it's an interview for you, and it's an interview with two guys that are some of my really good friends. But I'm so excited about what we talked about in this interview. It's Jason and John from Madcap Cottage, and a lot of you designers out there know them, but you don't know the stuff that we're talking about.

So we're not just talking about how they're masters of print and pattern and fun. We're talking about what it really looks like to build the type of business or really, kind of empire that they're building. The number of product lines they're creating and what that looks like, and I promise you is not what you thought product lines looked like. Not visually, but the whole experience.

And there's so much more in this great episode. Fun things they're doing, things they're working on, how their partnership works, what makes it so special. So enjoy this fabulous interview with my friends Jason and John from Madcap Cottage.

—

Tobi: Hey guys, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*.

Jason: Hey Tobi, we're thrilled to be aboard.

John: Hi Tobi, how are you?

Tobi: I'm so good. And I'm so glad I can hear you both because what nobody else knows and we know is that this is our second time to record a podcast. We don't want to admit that we maybe aren't as young as we used to be and we might not be totally technically inclined, right?

John: Right. Never heard of this.

Tobi: Exactly. So we're all kind of holding our breath probably this whole episode and hoping and praying that at the end of this, when I replay it back,

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

we all are on there and we can hear all our voices. But I'm feeling pretty good about it, so let's jump in to this exciting conversation today. It's so much fun when I get to have not only people that are my friends and that I really love on the show but people that are just doing cool stuff. And y'all are doing so much cool stuff right now, so give us just a little taste for those who don't know you, if that's even possible, that people don't know you like, who you guys are and kind of like, what you do.

Jason: Well, Madcap Cottage is – we really look at ourselves Tobi as a lifestyle brand and as storytellers, and that's really the thread that runs between all of our different careers. John and I both started off as magazine editors in New York and John really – he was a crafts editor and a home editor and a style editor and he connected all those dots. I was the editor in chief of Gotham and Hampton's, and I later went into television.

And we finally reached a point where we said why are we writing about everyone else's products, let's turn this into our own business, and we did. And fast forward, the business is about 12 years old but it's an idea that we are currently in the home space but we hope to move into fashion, accessories, hotels, and we really think of ourselves as kind of a modern-day Laura Ashley. We're known for prints and pattern and color, but I think we really create a world that is – it is aspirational, but it's also very much accessible and approachable and attainable.

Tobi: Yeah, and John, what about you? Anything you want to add to really like how you see your company and the both of you and kind of what's happening in your business right now?

John: Well, I think we're at a transition in our business where we're kind of – we've always had sort of three different hats. Interior design, product design, and sort of product development. And I think it's figuring out which direction we really want to take it and how we really want to grow the business in a way that is fulfilling for us and makes sense.

Tobi: Yeah, and that's also profitable, right? At the end of the day.

John: That's the – yeah, at the end of the day, that's kind of the very important part of the whole thing. And you know, I think coming from the magazine background, we sort of saw – at least I did in the design space, working at

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

American Home Style and House Beautiful and a lot of these different home magazines, kind of how different design firms worked.

And so for me, while I never worked at a Parish Hadley or had that kind of training that people like Thomas O'Brien or some other people who are kind of at the top of the industry had, I really did learn a lot of things by interviewing people like that over the years and seeing how their businesses worked and maybe didn't work, and kind of helped me figure out where I wanted to go.

Tobi: Yeah, and I love that. You're both so resourceful and you are both very, in a lot of ways, business-minded, even though you're very creative. And I know you both have different roles you play kind of for the business and different strengths, but one of my favorite things about the two of you is not only are you really interested in creating a very unique perspective, design perspective, but you're also really open, like I am, to creating a business that really works for today and today's consumer, and isn't just the cookie cutter typical design firm, kind of like you were describing.

You got to see what those looked like, but that's not really what y'all are building right now. And you said you're in transition, you've done some of that traditional stuff but really, I think in so many ways, you guys are both really progressive in your thinking about where should we take the business, what part of the industry is profitable right now, and where can we make a difference. I hear you both talk about that.

Jason, I hear you a lot of times say like, how can we best serve the market or make a difference or show up and that's changed from what you were thinking just a few years ago, right? When you were really immersed in residential and now, that looks totally different for you guys.

Jason: Yeah. I mean, we've known you for 10 years now. We first met out in LA and it's been really interesting to see how our trajectories have changed and how the landscape has changed exponentially, not only in the last 10 years but daily and weekly. And I think for us, it's always responding to the marketplace and thinking about new revenue streams and thinking about how we can work cross-platform and tap what the resources are.

I mean again, in the last 10 years, we didn't have Instagram 10 years ago. We didn't have access. We weren't able to connect the dots in the way that

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

we are now, and so I think – I've always been fascinated and I'm always the one who wants to do a panel discussion, ask other designers, how many people do you have on staff? And I think it's fascinating to see when somebody has 10 or 12 or 14 people because to feed that bear, you really have to be bringing in a lot of money.

So I think we've always kept it lean and mean and it's really only been my and John and we have two very talented part-time people, and then we have a brain trust of other people that we bring in on projects, but we never were trapped to the payroll. We weren't trapped running that side of the business, and John very much heads up creative and I head up marketing. But I think it's that idea of like Martha Stewart, always being kind of young at heart and embracing that changing landscape and saying, you know what, maybe I don't need to have a million followers or I can't get that, but having a really good 30,000 to 40,000 who will pivot and who will buy and convert to whatever we're putting out there because we've really built that army, that community.

So I think we're really open and we're always learning, we're always asking question. I think the idea of we're interior designers, but really that is one small part of our business that's fading and leading to new things. And it was great at a certain period of time, and I'm not disparaging that but you know, again, it's not John Loecke over the door, it's not Jason Oliver Nixon over the door, it's Madcap Cottage, and we want people to buy into a brand that happens to be guided by us. It's not what does John Loecke stand for, what does Jason Oliver Nixon stand for. It's very different than what Madcap Cottage stands for, and building that brand.

John: Well, and I think one of the things that has changed with social media is that we really can see. I mean, in the past, if you were a designer and you had product out there in the marketplace, you could show up at a store and meet people who were your fans and kind of talk to them about things, but you could never really see in the way that we can today how people actually use the products you create.

And I think that for us, that has been a really big learning curve because we've realized that a lot of the people who are using our products are people who you would call makers. They're people who maybe could hire an interior designer but don't necessarily want to go that route because they feel more fulfilled doing it themselves.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

So it's been an interesting transition to kind of see where our product has ended up out there in the world and how people are using it and I think it kind of clued us into the idea that we can have a much bigger impact by producing product that is much more accessible and much more readily available.

Tobi: I love that. And I love that you guys – one of my favorite things that y'all are talking about and Jason even said it in so many words is that in a sense, you're moving away from what traditional – not traditional in style but like, the traditional business model of an interior design firm, you're in a lot of ways moving away from that because maybe right at this moment it's not as viable the way it used to be.

But what I love and it's the same thing I'm doing in my business, you don't panic. You don't think oh my god, is interior design dead, which it will never be fully dead. There's always a piece of that, but you're also just – it doesn't terrify you. You're open like I'm open to going oh, how fun, what's the new iteration of where we can make the most difference? What does that look like?

And I know you both told me that you are moving into more lifestyle, more commercial projects, so speak to that a little bit because I love that and what for a lot of people in our industry feels like a crisis or feels like this tipping point and they're literally standing there going should I get out or am I still in. people like you, people like me are excited. We're like, yes, it's not what it used to be but that's not a bad thing. This is fun. This is like, really what are the possibilities. So talk about what that looks like for you in that lifestyle and also in the commercial space.

Jason: Well, I love that idea, the iteration. I think life is all about chapters and I think that we wake up every day like you Tobi, and we feel like kids in a candy store. And I think that we have to be able to be nimble and we're always excited, and we have to be diversified. And we've always had that mindset, and constantly, as we said, constantly changing, but the diversification and having the multiple revenue streams.

And I think that I'm looking at gee, I'm not so excited by hotels that much anymore largely. I'm much more excited about Airbnbs and how can you get into the Airbnb space where gee, you can create a component where people can actually buy your product. They stay in it, then they can buy it, or that idea of hey, maybe we're not doing traditional interior design where it's we're

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

going to do your own home, but we're going to give you things like what you've done in the past.

You can buy a certain room component. You can buy or go into consulting with people and working with them, where it's not nuts that it used to be. But I think that idea of creating experiences, of creating activations, of bringing the lifestyle to life and perhaps leading next September, leading a trip to London and we put it out on Instagram a couple weeks ago and we got 67 people respond. And it's a trip that really nobody – I'm saying this humble pie, but the late person couldn't recreate and using our magazine experiences to work connections with top interior designers or insider information or the rooftop dinner on top of a department store, things you really couldn't create and bringing that fun and that whimsy and that style that I think Madcap Cottage is known for into a brick and mortar where it's not a brick and mortar where we had a brief moment of doing retail.

And that was great fun and it did quite well, but that wasn't what we were looking at in brick and mortar. It's really very much about taking it on the road or working with a small hotel or working with an Airbnb, or creating new ways of parsing that information because again, as we had said earlier on, it's storytelling. It's how do you tell that story through different ways and channels that maybe there's a component in one of the big box stores that allow you to make your own product with Madcap Cottage content that we're showing you how to package that.

I think it's a lot of storytelling, packaging, guiding, and for us it's really not strictly – if the right interiors project comes along, but it's almost more fun to just do our own home or we have an Instagram lab here at our office in Thomasville, North Carolina, and swish that out and have some fun and say hey, let's paper the wall and check one room and do it 10 different ways.

John: Yeah, because you know, I think if you think about how do you go after that next interior design project from a marketing perspective, it's really hard and really complicated to track down that next big project that's going to make the payroll and do everything else you need to do to run the business. It used to be you'd get published in a magazine and the phone would ring. Well, that doesn't happen anymore.

So it's kind of looking at it from a perspective of how do you keep that design component and reach those people that are interested in design, because like

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

you said, it's never going to go away. It's just the process of getting to that end goal has changed.

Jason: But I also think Tobi, it's also looking domestically and looking internationally and having your eye on both of those markets and saying how do we tell the Madcap Cottage story in the US and then how do we tell the Madcap Cottage story internationally, and is there a market in Singapore or in Italy or figuring out those distribution channels or the clients that perhaps are looking to hire an interior designer elsewhere. So I think it's parsing that story through many different lenses and saying hey, that may not be the story here in American, but elsewhere in the world we might have a relevance and we're so fortunate that we get quite a bit of great press and blog exposure and social exposure internationally, and saying hey, how can we partner with a department store in Tokyo or a department store in London, or create co-branded opportunities and experiences both domestically and globally.

Tobi: I love every bit of that and one of the reasons we love to have conversations, we always so much overlap, or at least we're on the same kind of train of thought. And just last week, I did a three-day photo shoot in my own house, not at all like a traditional shoot where we're just shooting a room, but creating editorial type content, exactly like what you're talking about. Like using my home as a laboratory because exactly like you were saying, in the past, we would get a certain client with a certain budget.

We could do the project to a certain level and get it published, and so much of the work that's out there now is not like that, and it's such hard work and you don't have the budget, and it's something that really allows you to be super creative. And so you kill yourself doing those projects, making no money, and then you really don't have that much to show for it. And I'm with you that why not separate those two things entirely and say okay, if you take a design job here and there, that's over here, but that has nothing to do with our ability to create our own content, our own laboratory, our own design, sort of vignettes and other things to show people what value we have to add, and I think that's exactly what you're talking about.

Jason: Well, I also think that over the years, our clients have hired us to plan their travel. They've asked us to help them with their fashion choices. They've asked us to help them with restaurants. So I think that there was something about us that lent itself always to lifestyle. Because we came from magazines, and so we said huh, if that keeps happening, let's blow that and



## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

let's magnify that and turn that into another component of the business. Because I think that again, in lifestyle, we're looking at food, we're looking at hotels, we're looking at what's coming off the runways and how that trickles down to H&M and Zara. And just across the landscape of what we're seeing, and it's not just home focused. And I love the idea of connecting the dots, that why can't you use a fabric that we've created and make a great apparel out of it.

Tobi: Yeah, and I think it speaks to your ability to be able to look at a situation and say where can I add value. And most people that I'm talking to that are going through this shift of the design industry are just – they're kind of lost because they're like, if I can't do the thing I've always done, I don't really know what to do or where to be.

And what I love about you guys, and it's what I enjoy doing myself is to look at any situation, like you just said, if it's fashion, if it's travel or whatever, and say okay, what does everybody already know because they don't need more of that and where can I add value? Where is there a void in this situation? Where is there a hole that I can elevate this or bring something new or add a different perspective? That's what people want to see I think, and that's exactly again, what you're talking about. Bringing that needed perspective, not just doing the same thing that's already out there that anybody can do, that anybody can find.

Jason: Yeah, and we're always looking at our lifestyle, Tobi, and what is it that's true to our lifestyle brand. We love – we have three pound rescue pugs so dogs are so important to us and we're not seeing leashes and collars and dog bowls that really speak to us. We travel all the time. What sets apart the experience? We're not all able to go stay at Blackberry Farm all the time, but why can't you do it in amazing, middle of the road motel?

I mean, that's what Howard Johnson did back in the 60s when they hired Sister Parish to come up with our color scheme. So I think we're always kind of looking at things that we're doing and saying hey, is there a relevance to a larger community out there? It's true to the brand, and how can we elevate that experience? We're not buying really expensive clothes but I think we're pretty good at connecting the dots between a pair of pants that I bought at my German grocery and a really cool bag from LL Bean that I customized. So I think that we're always kind of high-low, but saying how does this have a relevance?

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

John: Yeah, and I think – so I think when we kind of looked at getting – fabric was kind of the launching point for our product and when we looked at the fabric landscape, that was one of the things we asked. We said where do we shop for fabric? Okay, we shop at Brunswick, we shop at Schumacher, we shop at things that are considered the high end, considered expensive, and why are we buying things from there? Because they have great design. And it's kind of the typical American thing, to dumb something down, you kind of – and get to a lower price point, you dumb down the design.

Well, you don't have to. There's no reason why you have to. So I think we always looked at what's missing in the marketplace for people who can't afford to buy everything at a Schumacher or a Brunswick and that was great pattern, great printed fabrics that don't cost hundreds of dollars a yard.

Jason: And I think Tobi, to your point about that hole, we grew up – both of us grew up going to Calico Corners with our parents and that idea that we went to Calico, which is 70 plus brick and mortar stores from coast to coast is amazing, that we're bringing great design. They have so many great designers in their stable from coast to coast. And if you don't have access to an interior designer or a design center that you can still purchase that fabric and they can show you what to do with it and make it custom so that's going to fit perfectly in your home. And it's not as expensive as you think it is.

So I think that idea of slicing and dicing the pie and really even looking at the home space in a different way and saying it doesn't – just because it's always been done this way doesn't mean it has to be done that way moving forward. And breaking the model and looking at people like hey, Schumacher is pairing with William Sonoma and offering retail product. Genius idea. Let's find a retailer out there that we can create brand and product for that is going to take that prints and pattern story and bring it into a new market.

Tobi: Well, and I love that and in an industry which tends to have such a high snob factor in so many ways, and for years, we all remember if we were thinking about product licensing at all, like you two and I were, for years, all you heard was you can't start at the lower end of the price point. You've got to start high, you got to get all this big brand with all the well-known high, high end and then you could trickle down to say, a Target. And those rules, not only have they changed, you guys kind of bucked that system the whole time.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

Like John's saying, why can't you have accessible design? Why can't we literally design for – like you were saying, Howard Johnson and you guys are the first ones to be out. I remember, we have to talk about and tell everybody what you did, but I remember you've taken several road trips where you just hop in a car or a van or a station wagon or something and you're driving across the middle of America when other people are trying to go to the chicest places in Europe, and you're literally with your pugs driving across middle America on purpose because that's exactly who you are, and it's not anything about the snob factor. It's about experiences at every price point and product at every price point and good design is good design at every price point, and that really is your philosophy.

John: Yeah, and I think we wake up every day and every day is an adventure. And we love the idea that sometimes we have access to very – we can go to England or we can go to India or China but we love those road trips. And we love just keeping our eyes open, and I don't think that money doesn't equate good for me. And I think I'd must rather have a simple roast chicken, but if I walk into that restaurant and the server welcomes us and is kind and thoughtful, all of a sudden that is the best dinner I've ever had.

So I think it's that idea of I don't need to go stay at the most expensive hotel. I might want to go to that hotel and have a cocktail, but I don't need to stay in that experience. I think that we're fortunate enough that we save our pennies and are able to do some things that we're so lucky to see and experience, and we bring those adventures back. But I think it's the everyday can be magical and I think that so many people think that it has to be far flung and expensive and I can't afford it.

We only have one car. To your point, we have a Subaru, and there are some times where I'd like to have another car, but I would probably not buy an expensive car. I would buy a beat up old car because that's – I love kind of that quality, and I don't need to impress my neighbors with a Mercedes.

Tobi: Yeah. And I remember you even telling me when I've asked you, and let's talk about that right now. What are some of your favorite places to visit, to shop, to explore that are on your radar. Because if I could recall, you were even telling me recently that you loved Detroit maybe, or some places that people are not thinking of being – they're not like, I'm dying to take a vacation to Detroit. And you guys are out there going there are all these hidden gems

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

and jewels and antique shops and retail stores and boutique hotels and restaurants that nobody's talking about, right?

Jason: We love finding those undiscovered places or places that maybe haven't popped yet. We're going up to The Grand Hotel to do a story for Veranda recently and we missed our flight and they have a very strange schedule to Mykonos and we said let's spend the night in Detroit. And we rolled with it and we didn't stress out about it and we just rented a car, and we drove downtown and we had a blast, Tobi.

We stayed at the Siren Hotel, which is this amazing hotel. It has an incredible cocktail lounge downstairs, just really well thought. And we booked it on hotels.com, so I think it was \$140 a night. Within three blocks of the hotel there was this amazing Sicilian restaurant and we had just come back from Sicily. There was a couple of great stores. There was a Warby Parker, there was a Bonobos. We went to a little park the next morning and they had this egg shack with egg biscuits and coffee, and it was intuitive and thoughtful and it wasn't all manbuns and no problem millennial types that I was expecting, and that's okay too.

But I'm getting a little long on the tooth for that kind of stuff. But it was just that idea of gosh, I feel like I went to Paris. John and I really felt like we went to Paris for the weekend. We were only there for the night but our takeaway from that trip was the Mackinac Island. It was amazing, and Carleton Varney was amazing, but I really came back like oh my gosh, I fell in love with Detroit. And I think we're always out there looking for those places and those undiscovered – what's the next Charleston? What's the next city that's kind of on the rise where it's affordable, where chefs are coming in but it has just this magic to?

We've been going to Palm Springs for years, we just got back from Sicily, and Sicily was incredible because it was kind of undiscovered and just really magical. We went to Morocco last year, which I liked, but I didn't love it. And that was only to Marrakesh and we thought we'd love it. We love India. We go out to Des Moines, Iowa, where John's from every year. It's an amazing city. It's one of our favorites. John, describe Des Moines.

John: Well, I think it's a city that's completely landlocked and it's a city that for years never really thought outside of its little footprint, and it basically let every major city in the Midwest around it kind of steal the show. And then you

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

know, it kind of decided gee, we have a problem because nobody under the age of 40 wants to live in the city. What can we do? How can we make ourselves different? And they did some things like bring in some interesting architects to – the library is designed by David Chipperfield. The Renzo Piano has done a couple of corporate headquarters for different things, including a convenience store chain.

And so they've put a real premium on bringing in arts groups, and I think they have right now probably the largest and one of the best art shows in the Midwest that is juried and all of those every year. So they really thought about what they can do to make themselves different and to make themselves stand out, and I think that's kind of how we look at what we do. It's like, what makes us unique and what makes us special? Instead of doing what everyone else is doing, what can we do differently? And I think a lot of people don't really take the time to sit and think about that.

Jason: Yeah, what's your lane? What's your USP? What sets you apart? There's a lot of pretty out there but what makes you different? Is it using vintage antiques, is it prints and pattern, is it – what is the story that your brand is telling, and I think that idea that we have fun anywhere we go, we always have a great time. And to your point, we don't stress about it. We roll with it. And getting stuck in Detroit, you take a lemon and you make it into lemonade and wow, you know what, I'm open to opportunity and we loved it.

So I think that for us, finding those little moments of adventure that can be a daily adventure just really is what makes – aunty Mame once said you know, life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death. And I think that idea of having fun and that fun is really reflected in our brand and that story component, and showing you how to create your own adventures.

John: Yeah, and I think you know, what I find most rewarding for me is hearing from people how things that we've put out there in the world have improved their life, or made their home a more happier place. It's that interaction with the end user who you feel like you've had an impact on their life in some way, that they couldn't go to the depot and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, but they could go to their local mall and they could transform their home into something that really means something to them, and it made their world a better place. And I think at the end of the day, that's our goal.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

Tobi: Well, and I love that because not only do most people not think of some of these things, and they're not really being that creative in what's exciting them but even if they did secretly think Des Moines or Detroit were fabulous, they wouldn't tell anybody because they wouldn't have the confidence to say like, Madcap's tour of American and it's like, three stops. Des Moines, Detroit, and Greensboro, North Carolina. People would be like, what? What in the world? And you're like absolutely, it's going to be amazing and you don't want to miss this.

And the people that come would be blown away and that's the most fun and refreshing part to me, that you're comfortable in your own skin. Not only that, you almost enjoy finding the quirky and the unusual and the things that people would almost be embarrassed to admit they like and you're celebrating that to everybody. And that's remarkable. I love it. I love everything about it.

Jason: Well, thank you. Thank you.

Tobi: Well, let's talk about product a little bit more because in that kind of whole realm of filling voids and doing things different, tell us about the product that you currently have. I know in the last gosh, what, 18 to 24 months you've just had a ton of stuff come onto the market in different categories, and I know you probably have big plans for where you want to go next. So talk to us about product and your vision for that and what we can expect to see from Madcap lifestyle.

Jason: Well, as John said, fabric was really kind of the linchpin of the brand and that was with Robert Allen and we did three collections with them. And it was about 160 skews, prints, pattern, and then complimentary solids, but everything works – plays beautifully together. And the goal was really kind of like we're animals back in the day where we would make it easier, not only for the designer but for the consumer, and Robert Allen has had some bumps in the road but we've had some good conversations with them about moving forward.

And as they kind of rethink their strategy and one of their goals is really disruption, and we very much play into that mix because we always – every license we work with, it's a partnership and we think about it in terms of great design, great sales, and great marketing. And it has to be that in everything

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

we do. So I think that Robert Allen is picking itself up and dusting itself off and we'll see if we can play with that sandbox.

We have wallpaper, we have lighting and accessories with Port 68, we have rugs with the great team at Momani. We have party linens, party rentals, that's doing really well with a company called BBJ Linen out of Chicago, and they're actually the largest laundry facility in the United States. They're doing that kind of volume. We have with Westport, we have bedding that will be launching. We have flooring with MOR Studio, we have window treatments with Smith & Noble, and we have cased goods with Newport Cottages, which is made in America, and then we're going to be launching tabletop with a company called Certified International this October at tabletop market in October.

And that's two collections. One is again, we always think in terms of storylines. One is called English Garden and one is called Spice Route. So one is a little more of the English whimsy, the fun, the follies in the garden and the other one is more of a journey to India and Morocco, but very much through the Madcap Cottage lens where nothing is straight India or straight Morocco.

So we have this wonderful mirage of cultures coming together that's our version of what that exotic is. And we have dog products coming out in a bigger way next year. We're talking to an upholstery company that I think is going to happen, but again, it's some of those other areas we've been really concocting this Airbnb idea. We've been talking to a couple of small hotel groups about coming up with some concepts. What else do we have in the works? We've been reaching out to some fashion companies and some shoe companies because we make sure to copyright all of our patterns.

John: Yeah, I mean, I think everything kind of pivots off of the original artwork that we created for the fabric so that you really can – for the person who really wants a coordinated lifestyle and really wants something, they can do it. And for the person who just wants to dip their toe in it and maybe take a rug or do their windows or whatever, there's that options as well. So we've kind of thought about it in terms of an entire – like a Laura Ashley, from soup to nuts. You can be as Madcap Cottage as you want.

Jason: But also we're thinking about paper products and stationery, and anything that has packaging. Anything that has packaging and that could use

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

prints and a pattern storyline to it. So I think to your point Tobi about pivoting is if I see a shoe brand on Instagram and I think oh my gosh, these are amazing and women are buying them like crazy, do they need prints and pattern on them?

Figure out who runs the company and reach out to them because they think that idea of – and using LinkedIn and using Instagram and using all those tools that we didn't have even five years ago, and saying gosh, how often do people really buy bedding? But how often do they buy new shoes? How often do they buy makeup? How often do they buy a great wrap dress? Probably a lot more often than they're buying towels.

Tobi: Yeah, that's so exciting. And I just again, one of the things I love about both of you, and I'm sure it helps to have a partnership because sometimes even though I have my mom as my sounding board, who you both know, and she's amazing. And I have a team, it's so nice that you're both bringing ideas to the table but you're also both giving each other the confidence to reach out.

But I love that you never hesitate. You're like okay, what's the worst that could happen? They say no, they don't need it. But so often they say yes and that's where many, many people are sitting on the sidelines thinking of ideas, things enter their mind, and then their next thought is oh, but I'm sure they've already got that covered, or oh, but I'm sure they don't really need that or why would they want me. And I just love that that never enters your mind. You're like hey, let's have a conversation. Hey, what could we do together? And that's exactly why the list of your products that you just read, I would have had to be reading a printed list because I couldn't have even remembered all of those things.

And so many of those have come in the last, what, two years? Like literally, you really have exploded in this product area, so much so that you even told me earlier when I was like, what's exciting you and what does your brand look like, you're like, we're really a products company as much as anything else right now, right?

Jason: Yeah, I think moving to High Point five years ago, so many of our New York – we were New Yorkers for 23 years and we moved down here five years ago, and so many people thought we were moving to Siberia or what have we done, or gee, the south is this or the south is that. And it's been the



## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

best thing we've ever done. It's really opened ourselves up to opportunity. I think that we're in an environment where people – they're makers and they're doers and they're creators, and it's affordable, and it's a great home base.

And we travel, again, we do road trips, do more far flung trips but it's a great home base. And it's really allowed us to do things that we probably weren't – New York was great for certain periods of our lives but we kind of maxed that experience out and I think that idea of picking up and making some educated guesses...

John: And I do think when you're in a place like New York or maybe LA, you end up in a bubble to a certain degree and you kind of don't think about the rest of the world beyond those two cities and I think sometimes that can really stifle what you're able to do.

Tobi: I love that. I think you're right, and so many of the rest of us who aren't in New York or LA just automatically look to those places kind of as being the Mecca of design or the Mecca of style and so we end up kind of repeating the same patterns over and over again instead of getting exactly what you're saying, like a fresh approach, kind of a white box look at what the possibilities are, which is what makes it so much more unique, so much more fun, so much more creative.

So talk a little bit about your partnership – I know Jason, you said you're the marketing guy and John's kind of head of creative, so what does that look like? Because I'm so fascinated by partnerships and I know a handful of them that are really great. So often though, they don't work at all and yours works really, really well. So tell us how – who does what and kind of what your strengths are and how you make it work so well. And really, it's sort of almost like your own little mastermind there together because two brains are better than one, right?

Jason: Yeah. We feel so fortunate to have that partnership and I think as you said, to run things by each other. But we're partners in life as well as in business, and I think it's really – I personally feel so fortunate that we found each other because it's just been this really amazing synergy. And we say this all the time that John and I can go split up in a department store and meet up an hour later and we've identified the same five things in a store.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

So it's – John is the head of creative. He's an amazing artist. He paints, sketches, and draws. He comes from a graphic design background and he also has a journalism degree, so he's able to not only capture a story through visuals. He's a very good photographer too, but he also is a very good writer. So he's able to be that kind of triple threat on that front.

I'm head of marketing new business and social, so I look at myself very much as kind of a Hollywood agent who's always wheeling and dealing. As you said, I send thank you notes and I have that Southern – I'm from Florida. I have that Southern component to myself, but I have no qualms picking up the phone or reaching out through LinkedIn or any of those kind of things. I'm very much a connector. I love bringing people together. Nothing makes me happier than to host a dinner party where two people get to know each other.

And you're a great architect and you want to build a house, well, let's bring you all together. And I think that being kind is something that we both very much appreciate and having a point of view. So John's head of creative, I'm head of new business and marketing and PR, and then we have a part-time person who kind of helps with business operations and kind of making sure that our underpinnings really work.

And then we have somebody who helps us not only with kind of building the website, but also broadcasting the digital messaging through newsletters, through mailing lists, through engagement. So it's – John has a part-time design assistant who really works with us and Photoshop and Illustrator and helps brings things into – take things.

At a certain point, we were working with licenses and working with their design teams. Now we've really reached a point where everything happens in-house in the Madcap Cottage HQ studio. And then it goes to the licenses. So we really own the content entirely, and we tweak it obviously with licenses but we're not looking to them to do the heavy lifting. We do all of that in-house. So it's a really nice partnership and we run ideas by each idea.

We have a Monday meeting and a Friday meeting. Kind of all hands on deck. We do a monthly lunch. We love that idea of having fun. We always have our Sonos – every couple days we pick a new channel on our Sonos. We have like, nine Sonos speakers. We have a huge disco ball in the front of our office. It's always rotating. So it's very much a fun environment and I think again, that's such a key tenant of the brand.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

We really don't fight. Maybe sometimes I have to say John, I'm not your assistant, and he has to say you have to work harder because I'm down the rabbit hole. I'm like, new shoes, new driving moccasins on Instagram because you know I like shoes. But other than that I think John, I kind of talked a lot there but I feel – we feel so...

John: I think we balance each other out well. I think I have certain artistic skills that Jason doesn't have, but he has an eye that's equally good and he has ideas and he shares ideas and I think he tends to look at things a little bit differently than I might. So it balances out well. Even though we both sort of have the very similar aesthetic, we approach things in a different way. So I think that helps round things out.

I don't think this business would be where it is or perhaps even exist if it were just me or just him. I think it's really the both of us and I think it's a good balance. Jason, like he said, likes playing Hollywood agent and he's really good at that. And that's not something that I enjoy doing. So I think we also have certain – just like Jason doesn't want to necessarily sit and paint patterns. So I think it's like we have this good balance that complements each other and I think has really helped push the business.

Jason: But I think Tobi too, very much obviously like you, we can look at a spreadsheet too. I just don't necessarily want to create the spreadsheet. You know, having somebody really talented who can create that and then present it to us in the way that we've asked it to be presented, but I think we've reached a point where it's the two of us, and like you, you have a small team, we're probably wearing the hats of four people, but finding those people who can now do the things that we don't like to do.

John: Right. And I think the other thing like you, I think we look at it as it's a business and it's our livelihood. So if it doesn't make money, then we have to go do something else. So I think...

Jason: I don't want to work at Starbucks.

John: No, and I think I'm too old at this point and have been doing my own thing for too long to go back and get a job in corporate America. I really don't want to go. I mean, there are creative jobs in corporate America that I could go do, but I really don't want to go do that.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

Tobi: Well, and I love that there's so many people in our industry - not being critical at all, but so many people that work in the design or decorating industry that don't have to make a living. And in one sense, there's times when – I'm sure you or I am sitting there going we have to pay the bills, what's this going to look like? But at the same time, I think when you don't have to make any money, when you really don't have to have business sense and you can just play at this, you lose a lot of the creativity. You lose a lot of the inspiration.

It's kind of like why – there's only so many days that you can get up and just be creative for fun to me, and I think it's the marrying of the business piece of it that makes it more challenging and more fun and more exciting, and gives you a reason to go figure out a solution. And I watch you both, I mean Jason, we've had conversations because we were both with the same fabric company and are now, but for a little period of time when they merged.

And we were having conversations like hey, do you own the rights to your designs? Hey, did you make your own designs? And literally having to not just be the person who paints the pretty patterns, but has to also protect ourselves and think how we're going to want to use this later and not just sign on the dotted line and not having read the 80-page contract. You can't just do that and end up with this type of business, this type of creativity, and this type of profit really.

Jason: Yeah, and I think that, even Tobi, we do fine but there are months where the cashflow is always kind of the *bête noire* in the room, as it is for you, but that idea of even if we made a lot more money, there's really not much in my life that I could change. I love what we do and we cook all the time, and we love going to Lidl, fantastic German grocery store up the road.

I mean, there's not much that – I feel like we're able to do really fun things and I don't need to stay at the most expensive, fanciest thing. But I will always have access to those through some form and again, maybe that idea of having cocktails when we travel or whatever it is. But I think that it's about the experience, and I think that we work really hard, we play really hard, and we just really enjoy the ride and we're very thankful for everything that comes to us, but that doesn't mean we're not clear. It doesn't mean we don't have a point of view. It doesn't mean we don't have a great attorney.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

But I think that that idea of trying to stay on the focus and that focus changes, and being open to that rethinking your model all of the time, but really enjoying the ride. And I think that that has to be part of it because there have been plenty of times where I'm like gosh, I work harder than most people I know, and if you really look at my numbers, sometimes there are some months where you're like, goodness. Over the years, you say that was a lot of work for not much return.

Tobi: For sure. John, do you have anything to add about that? About just how – that whole picture. Because I think you do that really well. You experience life, you have fun, you don't let budgets or constraints really squelch your creativity, but at the same time, you don't just kind of take the easy way out of being a creative and not really maximize the business side of what you're doing.

John: Yeah, I mean I think it's really easy to spend money, especially if you have a lot of money to spend. There's nothing creative about that. It's more creative to have to stick within a budget or figure out how to get something to come in at a certain price point. That's much more of a challenge. That's much more interesting, and that was – when we started with HSN, the deal was HSN – very large company. We were very small. And they had one product development person.

So the deal for us going on HSN was hey, you guys want to do this? We'll give you the opportunity but you have to work with the manufacturers directly and figure out how to manufacture this product and come in at the price point we want it to come in at.

Jason: And that manufacturer was in China, Tobi. So it was a quick study on how to manufacture in China because every single day, six FedEx's showed up with a complete price structure of what this is going to come in at. So John and I really learned. It was a quick study of gee, here's how you manufacture in China.

John: Yeah, and so I think – and whether it's China or elsewhere, here's how you mass produce bedding. I think that kind of stuff really fascinates us at the end of the day and I think that that's where you can't just put your name out there in the world and expect everyone else to do the work for you anymore. You have to – if you're going to put product out there and if you're going to go down the road of licensing, you really have to be a participatory partner. It's

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

not just here's my name, here's my look, okay, you do all the work for us. It doesn't work that way anymore.

Jason: Yeah, but I also think it's really thinking about distribution channels now and what works, and saying you know what, those traditional channels don't exist anymore.

John: No, because the buying world on the retail side has changed dramatically in the last five to 10 years. And so this idea that back in the 80s, you could license your name and you could be in every store under the sun and you could be making a gigantic amount of money, and that's not true anymore.

Jason: What happened to some of these brands, they were kind of the stalwarts of department stores.

John: Well, Claiborne is the perfect example. Not that that was a license, but you know, where is Liz Claiborne today? It doesn't even exist and it was in every store from JC Penney to Dillard's, to everywhere, and that made a lot of money, but that – the buying world changed. And it's the same in our world. When it comes to the design world, the buying world's changed and you have to really think about what you're putting out there and you have to approach it differently and you have to really be a part of the process.

Jason: I think you have to always evolve. I mean, my teacher once said I'm a commodity, I'm a box of corn flakes, I have to be forever fresh. And I'm paraphrasing that, but that idea that you have to evolve, but maybe you don't evolve from you're going to one look to a completely different look, but that your style completely evolves so that you feel fresh.

Because I think too, if you get too close to the flame, I have a card on my desk that says today is peacock, tomorrow is feather duster because I think that you have to burn bright for a long time. It's a marathon. It's not the short race. So I think that idea that always constantly evolving, always being fresh, always rethinking your strategy, your retail channels, your distribution, all of those kind of things, if you don't do that, you're going to fall to the wayside. But you still have to have that smile on your face at the same time and enjoy that ride.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

Tobi: Well, and I love everything you just said. It just makes me giddy because you know I love this anyway and I'm a total nerd and I love business, but that's exactly the kind of conversation I wanted to bring to the table today because so many people that I know that are creatives and people coming up in the design industry and seeing how it's always been want to just say oh, I aspire to have a fabric line or I aspire to have a furniture line, and they still think that it's about well, if I'm just creative enough or if I get known enough, then they'll just put my name on that and they'll pay me a lot of money.

And I think you're so right and I love how you shared that it is about so much more than that, and most people aren't sitting around going well, I really would love to learn how to manufacture bedding in China, or learn about all the distribution channels. I mean, that's what they're thinking of like a business student or an economist is looking at. Not a creative who wants a product line. And I love you showing that it's about so much more than painting a pretty pattern and saying here, turn this into bedding. That does not fly at all anymore.

And if the companies are going to do that, they've already got those designs. Why would they pay you for that? Why would they make their lives harder so they can give away part of their profits just because you want your name on something? It just doesn't work that way anymore. So I think it's so important that people see, okay, when I say I want a product empire like Madcap Cottage, what am I actually saying that I'm getting myself into and am I willing to do the work? Am I willing to do what it takes? And most people have no idea what it takes. They really don't.

Jason: Because I think a license is a program and when we go to a licensee or a licensee, whatever, that idea of we're not just coming to them with designs. We're coming to them with a whole package of here's how we're going to market it, here's how we're going to sell it, here's how we're going to activate it, and here's how – and the design is going to be great too. But it's really, design is one third of that whole program, but really, we sell them a storyline and a program and it's not just hey, we're going to go do fabulous florals. It's those florals are going to be part of a much bigger package.

Tobi: Yeah, and we're going to put our money where our mouth is and we're going to put our blood, sweat, and tears, and we're going to share it on our social media, we don't expect your social media just to carry the weight and we don't expect you just to pay for all the advertising dollars and it

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

miraculously sell. We're going to literally be out peddling our wares everywhere we go and every chance we get.

I mean, it is truly so much more work than people understand, and that's why when I literally listened to you read that list of those partnerships, people have no idea how hard you're working and it's so impressive to me because I do. And wow, it's just amazing and I'm so, so grateful for you guys for sharing this. So as we wrap up, anything – I mean, we've talked about kind of where you want to dip your toe in a little bit next. Maybe there's a little bit more you want to share on that or anything else that you kind of want people to know of what's coming up or what you hope comes in the not so distant future for Madcap Cottage.

Jason: I think we're working on a children's book and it's an idea of using our three pound rescue dogs and it's kind of a launching pad for that. John will illustrate it and I'm writing it, but we have a publisher aboard for that. Again, I think design books are great but that's a very finite audience. And we love telling stories that have a takeaway, a learning experience, and so to bring that into the kids space and use John's great illustrations, but I think we're just always looking for new opportunities.

And again, it's just me and John so it's a very small group. We don't have a PR person, we don't have a licensing person, we don't have a marketing person. But I think the idea of just always looking for, as you said, holes in the marketplace. It might be the – the biggest revenue streams might come from the most unexpected spaces and the merchandising opportunities might come from a children's book that becomes the next Peppa the pig or the next whatever it is. So I think it's just that idea of keep your eyes open because you never know what the day is going to bring. And I think to your point, a lot of people are kind of closed and think it has to be a certain way.

John: I mean, I think fashion is still on my horizon and I don't know that it's necessarily doing Oscar De La Renta type fashion but we did a small – when we were with HSN, we did a small line of dresses for them to tie into a special promotion they were doing and it was just something that out of the blue, they said hey, would you be interested in this? And we said sure. And I think...

Jason: When you had a manufacturer though.



## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

John: But I think it was interesting seeing – and you still see them show up on Instagram every once in a while, but people who bought them really love them and so I think there is something in that space for us. I think it's just figuring out what that is and is it a partnership, how do we do that? How do we achieve it?

Jason: You look at Tory Burch. She started that empire with a tunic and a tunic is flattering with white jeans, it's flattering as a stand-alone. It hides faults. And I think that idea of just identifying holes in the marketplace to say hey, who can you partner with, I count the number of Vera Bradley bags when I get on a plane. And how do you take that market and speak to somebody who wants a quilted bag and bring a print and patterns story?

So I think that yeah, we love the fashion idea but I think it's how do you partner with somebody who's doing something innovative and how are they distributing it in a way that's really innovative too? It's not the typical model. It's maybe an Instagram based brand that is engaging new audiences in a very different way. It has an eco-story perhaps to it. Ticks off a couple other boxes.

Tobi: Yeah, so good, guys. So inspiring. Thank you so much. I think for all the people who get so focused on what the only version they can see of themselves or their business, to me this is just so enlightening to say oh my gosh, I had no idea. I felt stuck over here. The design industry is changing and here they're talking about literally children's books, the next Peppa Pig, a dress or shoe line, a bag, something at a hotel. I mean, our only limits are if we put them on ourselves.

And I love that you guys really don't believe in limits at all. And you're just open to the possibilities. So thank you so much for sharing that and inspiring other people to think differently and to have the confidence to love what they love, and to not just go with the crowd and the easy, comfortable, cool stuff, but actually really have a point of view. And I just appreciate you so much, both of you for sharing that.

Jason: Well Tobi, thanks for having us on *Design You*. We always love these conversations. They always could go on for hours and hours, which is such fun.

## Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage

Tobi: Well, I agree, and everybody's going to love this. And because I do this fun thing where we have our guests come over when they are willing and have a conversation in our *Design You* podcast group on Facebook, I hope that I can get on your schedule for you two to come have a Facebook Live. Because I know a lot of people are going to have a lot of questions about exactly how you get to really where you guys have gotten to.

So we will follow up on that because I know a lot of people would love to ask follow up questions and podcasts don't really offer that. So I'll be in touch about that but just thank you again and I loved every minute, and we'll do this again soon.

--

Okay, so I told you, right? So inspiring. All of you creatives out there who are sitting around worrying and thinking that the industry that you're in is changing and how in the world are you going to move forward and should you just go ahead and get out and you just don't know how to reimagine or reinvent yourself or your brand or anything else, you should have gotten a ton of a-ha moments from this episode.

Because Jason and John are just so cool to me, that they are willing to make anything and everything cool when it comes to their own opinion. They're willing to embrace things, whether they're expensive or not. Just because they have really great taste and they know what's chic and they know at the end of the day what they love.

So I hope they inspired you to think out of the box when it comes to your life, your business, your interiors, and I just hope you loved it as much as I did. So I'll see you back really soon here friends with another episode, and if you want the chance to get to ask Jason and John questions yourself, then head over to Facebook and request to join the *Design You Podcast* Facebook community because I'm going to have them in there really soon and we have other guests in the group on Facebook doing live Q&As with my and you're not going to want to miss any of those.

So head over and join now and I'll see you again right here next week. Bye for now.

## **Ep #76: Fearlessly Filling Voids in the Marketplace with Madcap Cottage**

Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of *The Design You Podcast*. And if you'd like even more support for designing a business and a life that you love, then check out my exclusive monthly coaching program Design You at [tobifairley.com](http://tobifairley.com).