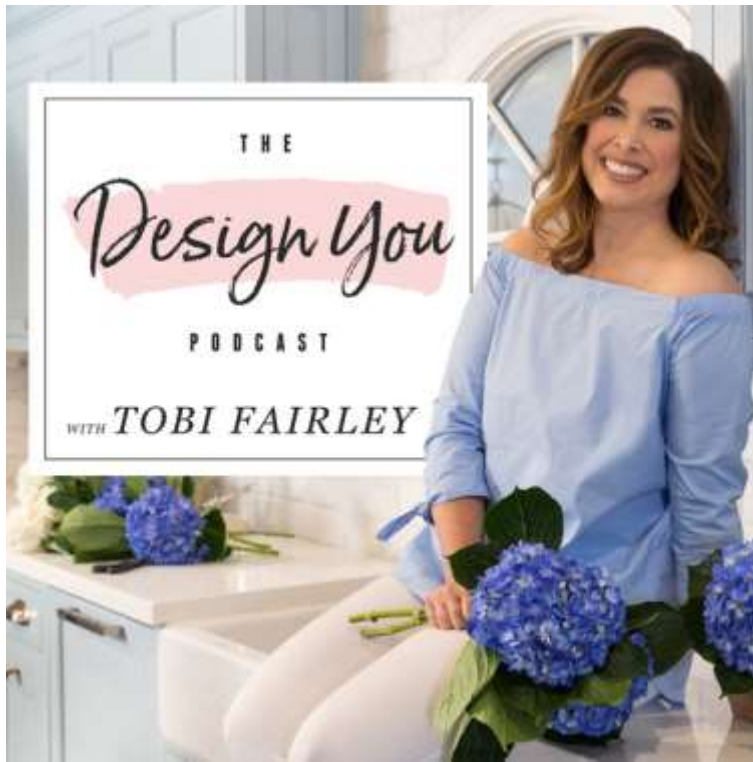


Ep #132: Shifting Narratives in the Design Industry with Kia Weatherspoon



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Tobi Fairley

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Tobi: You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 132.

Female Announcer: 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's your host, Tobi Fairley.

Tobi: Hey, hey, friends. We're finally getting into fall, aren't you excited? I love this time of year. It is my very favorite. In fact, I think the day this episode goes live it's my dad's birthday, so happy birthday, Dad. But this is the time of year that I just love. Football – maybe football's a little different this year, but we get a little bit of it and time to cook some yummy fall food and get those sweaters out. You know the drill. But it is just my favorite.

So, I hope you're loving this time of year, too. Now, what I know you're going to love if you love to be inspired is this episode. So, we've just wrapped up a series of three inspirational episodes with amazing women building businesses, all of which I work with in Design You. I don't work with Kia, but gosh, it is just as inspiring and it's also about a woman building an incredible business.

We're tagging along on the end of that other series and this is the perfect place to go next. So, Kia Weatherspoon is a design voice of impact and change. My gosh is this woman incredible and inspiring. She is NCIDQ certified, professional member of ASID, those of you who are designers know what that means. It's not an easy task to really be that level of certified professional interior designer, but what she does, the work she does is the part that will blow your mind.

She spent the last 15 years defying every design stereotype. As she says, "The most damaging one which is that interior design is a luxury reserved for a few." She absolutely believes that is not the case and she works every single day as a voice and advocate for design equity. Really she is doing this work in a way – you're going to see, it's so inspiring. Really her design practice has shifted into this new narrative of design equity and really

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making interior design a standard for every single person no matter who they are, no matter where they live, no matter how much money they have, no matter their race, no matter their ability.

She is all about making design for all people. I just love it so much, so if you have little kiddos around, you might want to listen to this with your headphones on because we have a few expletives in this show, but heck, I don't want to cut them out because I'm with Kia. This work and the challenges that she faces in this process deserve a little cursing, I think.

So, I just want to give you a heads up. Maybe don't listen to it with your littles in earshot, but other than that get ready to have your socks knocked off because this woman is doing work that absolutely changes the world and it's such an honor to know her, to have her here on the podcast, and I can't wait for you to be inspired, too.

Hey, Kia, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. I'm so glad you're here today.

Kia: I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Tobi: You're welcome. You have the best smile. I wish everybody could just see you right now. Like, you have the best smile ever.

Kia: Thank you, I appreciate that. Kimora Lee Simmons said once that your smile is your best accessory, so I tend to smile quite a bit. I think it's just approachable. It makes you more approachable, keeps your spirit light, so thank you very much.

Tobi: I agree. I love it and I feel your energy through seeing you on – we're actually on Skype, not Zoom, but I feel your energy and I love it. So, thank you. Okay, so for people who don't know you yet who haven't seen the amazing and inspiring work you do and they didn't see you written up in *Fast Company* and all the other incredible places you've been written up.

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Tell everybody who you are, what you do, and then we're going to get into some of the details about your work.

Kia: Okay, I'm excited. So, who I am, I am Kia Weatherspoon? I am a design equity advocate first and foremost. I'm the founder of Determined By Design here in Washington, D.C. where we advocate that interior design isn't a luxury for a few but a standard for all. We elevate the design outcome specifically in low-income and affordable housing which is in predominantly communities of colors. That's what we've done for the past 8 years and we will continue to do until design outcomes are equal and not biased on your socio-economic standing.

Tobi: I love it! I have chills from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes, literally. I mean, seriously mic drop. It is awesome.

Kia: Boom.

Tobi: Dang, awesome. Okay, so let's get into that. Tell us about how you came to this work, why it inspires you so much? Let's just start to dig into your story and really – I mean, I get the privilege of talking to you quite often because we have regular phone calls set up [inaudible] and we have fun talking to each other, and we have fun dreaming up ideas to maybe collaborate, but since everybody else doesn't know all of those details, bring us into the story.

Kia: Okay, so I think sometimes there are careers you either find your career or it finds you and I think design definitely found me. There are two kind of pivotal moments where I didn't know that design mattered or space mattered, but it was crucial to my life.

So, the first moment where I didn't know this was a thing, when I was in high school my brother was incarcerated. He was incarcerated for 15 years and it started this journey of myself and my family going to visit him in prison facilities. During that process, every year I started questioning for myself, "Oh God, this is so undignified."

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Then I started looking around and I started thinking about, “God, there are kids coming in here. This is so undignified. Then I thought about the men who were in there, again predominantly men of color, then I started even thinking about the staff. Like, “Gosh, these people work in these conditions day in and day out,” and it was that kind of spark of thinking about how people are moving through spaces from a personal experience that stayed with me.

Tobi: Real quick, how old were you there? Because I’m so impressed that you were so aware. This, of course, speaks to who you are, but wow.

Kia: I think I was in high school, maybe around my sophomore year.

Tobi: So, my daughter’s age, you were like 15 or 16 years old and you’re like, “Wow, there’s something so not okay about these conditions.”

Kia: Absolutely. But I think it’s also a part of what I do a lot now. I started with myself and then I started thinking about others which is empathy. Having this – I think one of my superpowers is this empathetic lens I can put on a lot of things taking myself out of the equation and putting someone else in it.

So, that was one moment. Then, fast forward I went to college and I didn’t get financial aid and I decided to join the military and in my naïve mind I was going to get stationed on the east coast and I was going to dance at night because that was my major and I was going to serve my country during the day.

I got stationed in Wichita, Kansas at McConnell Air Force Base. “Nothing kicks ass without Tanker Gas” [inaudible] Sorry. And I got there in August of 2001 and then shortly after that September 11th happened and I was on my first of four deployments. I was 19, it was my first time out of the country, my first time away from my family and I was in a tent on a bare base with about 14 other women and I wanted to cry so bad and I had no privacy.

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So, I took some sheets, I hung it from the top of the tent and I made three sheet walls and that was the first space I ever created. I would do that four more times at various locations throughout the middle east, but every time it was about creating a space for myself that healed me, brought me comfort during a tumultuous time in the world and also in my life. So, when I got out of the military I was like, "I want to do this thing where I create space for people."

I think that goes back to my point. Sometimes your craft finds you because I legit had to go all the way to war on the other side of the world to find design.

Tobi: I'm sitting here again, and you know this because I tell you every time I talk to you, I'm just so inspired by you because so many of us think we do hard things every day. I'm not saying things are easy. It's hard to have a business which we're going to talk about in a minute, but wow, it really puts things in perspective.

When we're talking about prison and war that is a whole other perspective of what most people come to the interior design field for which is clearly why you're doing an entirely different level of work than so many people are doing. Not that what other people are doing is less valuable, but it just really speaks to a whole other level that we're talking about.

Kia: Just hearing you say it that way, prison and war, I think sometimes the story sounds so cool but when you deduce to what it is, it's prison and a war and it makes the value of space about survival, about necessity, not just about this is a luxury. So, I got to start thinking about it that way, too.

Tobi: I mean, it moves me to tears, honestly. It really moves me to tears. It's so emotional to me when I think about it because I do think we get so wrapped up sometimes in the aesthetics and the superficial value of design, especially if you're working in residential design. Again, beauty is really important. Mental health and all of that is so important no matter if you have money or don't have money, but when you start having this

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conversation of just the basic, basic needs we have and how our spaces impact us in every way and how every human deserves that no matter what.

I love that your story comes from those two places because it's the only way, I think, we can really get our minds to understand this level of what we're talking about.

Kia: Absolutely, absolutely.

Tobi: So good, okay, I'll try to stop interrupting but every time –

Kia: No, no, no, no, I love it.

Tobi: You move me so much in this work. Okay, so finished with your tents, four deployments, you came back to home, right?

Kia: So, I ended up moving to Philadelphia because of the military and it was ready, set, figure out how to become an interior designer, what that meant and get a job. Get an education, get a degree, it was very early in me saying, "I want to get this formal education." I learned about licensure and becoming a licensed interior designer. So, that was the thing for me.

I still do not know much about our industry. I worked for a hospitality management company simultaneously while getting an associate's degree in AutoCAD, but that was kind of those next steps. In that timespan I learned a couple of things.

Work ethic is key. You have to know how to advocate for your worth. You have to articulate your worth by what value you bring and you have to have a plan when you want to ask for a lot of money, but don't be motivated by money. So, those are things that I learned very early on from leaving the military, full-time job, creating a position for myself, leaving that position to go get an educational degree. That was in like a five-year timespan.

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Tobi: Wow. What's striking to me is just – which, of course, it makes so much sense, the fearlessness that you were starting to create for your business because of course if you had the life experiences you were just sharing with us the last thing you're afraid of is going out and asking somebody for money or asking for somebody to do a project or whatever. Not that it's easy. You had to get ready for it, but in the same way where some of us who've had like sheltered lives and we sit behind our businesses and we're like, "Oh, I really hate to ask people for money," or, "I really don't want to be all about the money." You're like, "No, I'm on a mission and it takes money to do what I do and I've got to get myself – " You just said it in a nutshell, here's what I need to know, here's the equation that I need to know and it's literally just the math and that's what I'm going to use to go out and create this change in the world. That's amazing.

Kia: You know, this is what I always said, "A closed mouth doesn't get fed." So, if you want it you have to ask for it and you've got to give all reasons why you're worth it. You have to know your value before anyone else can pay you your worth, period.

Tobi: Wow. Okay, so the next thing – at some point moving forward, let's tell people about the work you do.

Kia: Sure.

Tobi: Because if they aren't already inspired enough, which I know they are, because I've had chillbumps like seven times already in 7 minutes or something. But let's start getting into the super exciting but meaningful work that you are doing to literally change the world for people. One home, one apartment, one living space at a time, let's talk about it.

Kia: So, the very first thing I did when I started my business was a non-profit project. I know, everyone is like, "What? You don't start a business and then do free work."

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Tobi: You had a plan though. But you had a plan.

Kia: This non-profit project was for domestic violence survivors. It was for 12 women and 32 children and I approached these women excited to provide pro bono design services for them. The conversation went something like this, “We don’t need what you’re doing. This is not relevant to our lives. Thank you, but no.”

Someone could have easily been offended by that, but I knew a couple of things, one, first and foremost these women did not know the power of space. So, it went from that narrative of, “We don’t need this,” to, “Oh my God, I thought I could only see this on TV. Someone would do this for us to – man, is this something I could do one day?”

When we finished the project, you know design is all about the big reveal, right? When we finished the project the woman said to me, “Miss Kia, when I walked into this room I realized change was possible for me.” Right then I knew that people who need access to well-designed spaces the most they don’t know they don’t have, they don’t know they need it, and they don’t have an advocate. So, Determined By Design is that advocate.

We strategically focus on elevating design standards in low-income and affordable house, and depending on where you are in the world, in any major metropolitan city affordable and low-income housing is filled with predominantly African American, Latina, people of color, right?

So, our whole practice it’s kind of doing two things. It’s saying, “One, do better by these damn communities.”

Tobi: Yes.

Kia: These people deserve access to beautiful spaces, elevated spaces. It’s not hard. It’s not hard to design for this demographic, we just need professionals who want to challenge and educate developers and general contractors to provide better design outcomes.

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Tobi: Right.

Kia: So, that's about 80% of our work. But we're also simultaneously doing one or two things. I came to design through prison and war, I want the communities we serve – I want to inspire the next wave of black and brown designers by the space they live in, by the front door they walk in to every damn day.

If you think about – and affordable housing is just a fancy way to say ghetto, Section 8 housing, marketing cleans everything up, but we deduce it to what it is, right? It's ghetto. How do we design spaces that don't oppress people and make them feel like they aren't of worth.

Tobi: Right.

Kia: That's what we do at Determined By Design because we want them to be inspired when they walk into that lobby, when they go into amenity space, those interiors should inspire them. Not to the point that they can say, "Oh my gosh, this light fixture here just changed my life." Design is not about tangible elements but a feeling.

Tobi: Yes.

Kia: To be a design equity advocate you have to be trying to create a feeling that cultivates change in someone's life.

Tobi: Right.

Kia: That's what we do. That's the nitty-gritty.

Tobi: I love it, and a couple of things that came to mind when you were talking about that, not only the importance, because it's not hard, as you say, of creating these inspiring spaces that are durable, that have equitable – we've talked about it, you and I on personal phone calls together of like equitable materials, things that are going to last. Like you said, affordable

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housing, not only is it, as you call it, “Ghetto” or it’s sub-par than what any of us would want to be living in ourselves.

We also, in a sense, have the arrogance to think, “Oh and you should appreciate that I’m giving you this sub-par place to live,” right? “Not only am I giving you a crappy house that’s really uninspiring and how could you ever live your dreams in it? You should be grateful that we’re giving this to you.”

Kia: Exactly, and this is the thing. This is where my architectural counterparts and my developer clients come in. It’s like, is no one challenging them that this isn’t good enough? No. A lot of that means because it lacks empathy, right?

Tobi: Yes.

Kia: A lot of times people always say, “How did you get that developer to spend that type of money?” I told a better story than you and I use empathy and I ask that developer, is this a space you would want for your child, for your mother, for your grandmother, your brother. And the minute you put this lens of empathy on it, the humanistic side of people will come out. So, it’s not hard –

Tobi: Well, you have to face the reality that prior to having that kind of conversation, that intimate personal conversation with them about would they put their own family member in, they’re able to take the human story out of it. It’s just a job. It’s just about money, but essentially they’re saying this group of people is not as worthy as this other group of people, whether it’s intentional or not, by the choices they’re making based on money.

Kia: It’s intentional, but –

Tobi: It’s usually intentional.

Kia: It’s intentional.

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Tobi: Yeah, it is. It is usually intentional, but they are making that particular statement. Why would put quartz counter tops in that would last for years and make someone have a beautiful, clean space when we could put some really crappy plastic laminate counter tops that are going to be torn up in a year and they can just live with it. I mean, it's not my problem, right?

Kia: That's the thing, one of the things you just said. You know what, no shade to the developer, development is about dollars, that's cool, that's fine. I'm not going to knock anyone's hustle, but for me as a business owner I had to learn to speak dollars. I had to learn to do our design within their budget and constraints. I think where we fall short in the interior design and architectural community is people take on affordable house projects to pay their operating costs, not to change lives. I think that's the part that's missing. That's the part that I need other interior design professionals and architects to understand. You should be serving communities at all times.

Tobi: Right.

Kia: Like, this is your family.

Tobi: If it's not making a difference, why are you doing it? If it's just the least that you can possibly show up, if it's the minimum kind of base line of the work you're going to do then why are you even doing it?

Kia: Why you here?

Tobi: Yeah, exactly.

Kia: Because our craft is about people, period. Beauty is not a luxury. Beauty is healing, it is life, it is needed in everyone's day-to-day.

Tobi: And safety. Like, so many of the people you're talking about don't feel safe for all kinds of reasons ever in their day and if they can't also go home and feel safe and feel nurtured and find beauty in their space how do you get up and have hope every single day? You don't.

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Then we look at the toll it takes on mental health and all of it. Literally, everything we can look at the stats would show that the path – even the path that, what do they call it from pre-school to prison or whatever, all of that can be impacted with this work we're talking about right here.

Kia: That's such a good point because when I think about we did a video about what does design equity look like? We talked about how there was this octagonal leasing wall the minute you walked into the lobby of an affordable housing project.

In that video we explain, one, it looks like a prison. Two, it reinforces that as a person living in affordable housing you need to be watched. You need to be watched once you walk into your front door. How indignified is that?

Tobi: Yuck, yuck.

Kia: If you're in a low-income community you're going to be met with that same plexiglass aesthetic at the bank, at the post office, at the corner store, so how are we constantly creating environments for people in low-income communities that is so –

Tobi: That constantly remind them where we think they should be.

Kia: Yes. I always like to say, it's people's circumstances. That you can be in someone else's place, it's your circumstances and sometimes generational, but no one should be judged or considered less than based on their socio-economic standard. So, a big part of about what we do is removing their demographics, they're fucking people, period.

Tobi: Yeah.

Kia: That's it.

Tobi: I love it.

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Kia: From a business perspective, I went after a client base that people were like, “You can’t make money doing that,” and we’ve done very, very well.

Tobi: I love it. So, let’s talk about that a little bit because, honestly, again so gutsy, so fearless, so meaningful, everything you’re talking about and it flies in the face of everything that a lot of us know and believe about what this industry should look like.

But at the same time the interesting thing is not only are you making a lot of money, I suspect, from what I know with – I’ve coached designers and creatives all the time, not only are you making a lot of money, you’re making a lot more money than people who doing the other more traditional version. Not traditional in style, but traditional business model of some of these creative fields that are really a lot more hobby business. They’re really not making money scratching a creative itch, but not only are you making a difference, you’re also making money and at the same time you’re showing other people of color, like you said, those women who were like, “Could I do this one day?”

You’re not only doing that, you’re making it all work and you’re showing people what’s possible and I love that. You and I talk about this a lot, we talk about making money. We talk about – I mean, it’s so fascinating that – again, turning the conversation on its head about black business owners and I think the stereotypes about race in general to say, “I am a black woman who’s making or on my way to make millions of dollars.”

Yes, of course, we can get into all the politics which is a whole other episode, but I am here for the money. Like, I want to have legit conversations about taxes. You and I talk about that. You’re like, everybody’s thinking I’m just some person of color, I must be for socialism or whatever. No, I’m here to make money. I’m here about capitalism in a lot of ways, not the ugly parts, but the beautiful parts where you can make money, and treat me like a legit businesswoman that I am.

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Kia: So, it's a couple of things, right? It's both and not either or. These are all the contradictions that I represent for interior design.

Tobi: I love it so much.

Kia: One, I'm black. You guys can't see me, one, I'm black, two, I'm perceived as young, and three, I'm gifted it, right? Our industry has historically been predominantly white women or white gay men and here I am coming in as a young, black girl, fresh face, fresh voice, fresh perspective and then saying, "I'm not going to chase luxury whatever markets I network, I'm going to do community and social impact work, and I'm going to do it and still make a lot of money." How did I get there?

One of the things you have to embody as a business owner is situational awareness. When I started my business and after the non-profit project, I said, "Who do I want to work with?" To be a good business owner, you have to first know who do you want to work with, period? Are they going to have the same values? Are they going to buy into you?

So, right off the bat I knew – again, my superpower is young, black, and gifted, there have been 7 – the same 7 white-led women design firms in DC doing multi-family work. So, I wasn't going to go after their developer clients because they weren't going to have buy-in to me. But what I did strategically do is go after black designers, right?

Tobi: Developers?

Kia: Black developers, yes, and I immediately said, "They're going to have more buy-in to me. [inaudible] and Cory Powell will have more buy-in to me than Toby Bozzuto or Monty Hoffman at some of these big development firms.

Tobi: Right.

Kia: I hounded them for business.

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Tobi: I love it. And I can see you hounding. Like, I love it so much. You're like, "You will not stop hearing from me until we work together."

Kia: Tobi, when I say it was seven times in one week I reached out to them, they be like, "Oh my God, who is this girl?" This is why it is was so smart, right?

Tobi: Yes.

Kia: I didn't go after the big fish, I was strategic about relationship building. At that time they were a small development company growing. At that time our first two projects I didn't have to collectively take \$15,000 off my fee, and sometimes if it don't make dollars it don't make sense, right?

Tobi: Right.

Kia: That technically means you got to think about the long game. So, right off the bat somebody be like, "Oh my God, you have to take off \$15,000? Why would you take that project?"

Because I had the foresight to know this developer, they're going somewhere.

Tobi: Yes. This is an investment in my future.

Kia: Exactly, so what happened was my developer client he's like kind of emerging and growing a little bit faster than me, so now the Toby Bozzutos, the Monty Hoffmans, they're like, "Well, who's he using? Well, we want to use her."

That is literally how I built my client base by starting with my community and people who look like me. It was probably one of the most strategic and successful things that I've ever done because I was able to grow with my client. Now, no one questions our fee. We articulated our value 10 times over of being a design firm that truly understands how to design within a GMP, how the development process works, how to build relationships, how

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to challenge a general contractor to the benefit of our client and simultaneously, the end user? How do we price ourselves into the deal? How do we take out the middle man from getting on a deal which is, frankly, the architect, right?

I went straight to the well which was the developer and I think that is how we've been so successful. Yes, we make pretty spaces. Yes, we have great concepts that tell the narrative of the community, but we are also relationship and value-add-centric that that allows us to do both.

I don't know when this will air, but we're in a middle of a pandemic and COVID, right? COVID, racial unjust, everything that's happening and we've probably secured seven new contracts since March, inbetween March and August, during a pandemic where everyone is like, "Oh my God, the financial business world is crashing." No, because we've spent 8 years doing the work and articulating our value. We're doing very well as a company financially in this climate.

Tobi: That's so beautiful and it speaks 100% to what I believe in about really carving out a niche that is uniquely yours. We hear a lot niche or niche and it becomes a buzzword and it loses its meaning, but I think two things that you're talking about here really carving out that space for yourself which you've been so savvy at doing.

Then, that piece that you've mentioned multiple times about the value you create. I don't think we can emphasize or over-emphasize that it is about value and when we see a lot of businesses that are struggling in the coronavirus or any other time, any other situation, or circumstance, or an economic downturn, or when the Internet changes or whatever, I think that's the question that we should be looking at of going, "If I'm not thriving, if nobody is wanting what I'm selling," or, "My phone's not ringing," don't I have to turn to myself and say, "Am I even creating something of value?"

"Can they get this everywhere else, anywhere else by any person that they could find? Could it be replicated? Or have I really created something that

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people – it's not a nice to have, but it is an absolute necessity, it is a requirement," and that's what I think you're doing with your business.

Kia: That is the key. It's kind of like, especially in interior design, taste and style and décor, I don't want to say anyone can do that, but a lot of people can do that. But a big part of our job is selling. We're selling, right?

Tobi: Right. It should be. It should be, but not so many people are savvy like you and have the confidence or just any of it. Some of it's your confidence, some of it's your drive, some of it's that you just literally pulled yourself up and said, "We got to make this happen."

Kia: I think I'm not selling for me.

Tobi: That's the difference.

Kia: The minute I take my ego out of it, right, I'm selling because God damn it, I need better design outcomes in low-income communities. So, I can sell a little bit more aggressively because my ego is not in it. I think when your ego shows up in something that's when you start to second guess yourself.

Tobi: 100 percent.

Kia: When you are doing something to the greater good of someone else you don't have time to think about yourself. That's what makes me a good salesperson and even how we design, a big part of our design is about concept development and weaving in the fabric and history of the community. We're not doing coral walls because the Pantone color of the year is coral.

We're doing coral walls because when I walked that community, those were the colors and tones and textures that we saw. So, we're taking it outside of, "Well, you just do it because that's the trend." No, "Here's the reason," and the reason always connects back to people.

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Tobi: I love it.

Kia: People at the end of the day, serving people, designing people, making sure their stories are present and knowing how to sell that story. That's what makes me a good salesperson. It's not about me winning and the more I keep other people forefront the more money I make.

Tobi: I agree with you 100 percent. Let's just stop here for just a second and make sure everybody hears this because I feel like so many people do not get this and we live in a world where it is all about us; me, me, me. Instagram is about me, and then I hear all these people going, "Well, I'm so terrified to sell or to show up or to do a Facebook live or to talk about what's important to me," and we always say if you're afraid, if you're afraid to show up you got that flashlight shining right on yourself, sister. All you're thinking about is you.

A visual, you can see me, if you can take their hand and turn the flashlight around and shine it right on the faces of the people that really matter then you would literally not ever think of yourself again. In fact, you would be so motivated you wouldn't be able to sleep at night and you would be falling all over yourself to get out and tell the world what's important and what you stand for which is what I think I do, and you do it even better than I do. You really do.

Kia: This is the key, business 101, they got to like you to want to do business with you and if you are afraid to show the world who you are as a business owner you are not going to make it. If you cannot show up as your whole, authentic self leaving your ego at the door you're not going to make it.

Tobi: Yeah, and if you're only focused on you they immediately will know. I mean, they will know instantly and they'll think, "She's not in it for me. She doesn't care about me. She doesn't even see me. She is not for me."

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Kia: The best compliment I got this year in 2020 someone said, “Oh my God, you just could tell that you love yourself from the inside out because you come across with so much passion and power.” You’ve got to be right within, with yourself. Not in an ego, “Oh I love myself,” conceited, but like you got to do the work from the inside out.

Tobi: Like at the core I have a deep knowing I’m right where I’m supposed to be, this is the work I’m supposed to be doing, these are the people I’m supposed to be helping. These are the people I’m supposed to be loving, this is how I’m supposed to show up, and I think you know it. It’s a different level that has nothing to do with the false self, the outside piece.

Kia: This is why it matters because when you’re pitching to a client or in a business development meeting if all that insecurity shows up and seeps out of your pores then that potential client is going to feel it, right? That’s when you begin to second-guess yourself, but you got to know how to be who you are and grounded. To be a black woman and thankfully, good black don’t crack, I’m always perceived as like 10 years younger than what I am.

Tobi: You’re so funny.

Kia: So, when I’m walking into these rooms with predominantly white general contractors, white developers, there has to be a certain amount of self-love and just groundedness in who I am with my big hair to not give two shits, but to only really show up as me and knowing I’m here to change design outcomes, period. That’s how I do amazing business development.

Tobi: Honestly, I can talk to you – and thankfully, we do. We talk all the time, but I could literally talk to you for hours because you are one of the single most inspiring people and I don’t say that to blow your skirt up, I mean it. It is so inspiring because it’s so meaningful, like, you’re impacting so many lives. It’s incredible.

So, before we wrap up, is it appropriate for you to talk a little bit about some of the sort of work you’re dipping your toe in to share this message with

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other businesses? Because you really inspired me recently about you had an opportunity to talk to some other – I don't remember if it was architects or contractors, and I just loved that story so much. You don't have to go into super great detail, but if it's appropriate, if it's relevant I would love for you to share a little bit about that.

Because I see you already as – I mean, gosh, what you've already done is remarkable. It's a lifetime worth of work already at your young age, but there's so many other ways that I know you're going to change the world and I'm seeing you start to do that in another way and it's equally inspiring.

Kia: So, it is appropriate because I think to want to change lives you can't be the only one. You need other people to want to change lives and to do better, right? So, a big part of what I'm doing and what's coming up is we are offering equitable design strategy sessions and we are, I don't want to say teaching, but we are teaching our architectural and interior design counterparts how their implicit bias show up in their design work and it limits their design outcomes.

How they can literally change their thinking and a big part of that process is in this particular presentation that you're referencing we cycle through a series of images. Some were, frankly, really shitty and some were really glamorous. They were really pretty and luxury.

So, as we're cycling through I'm asking them, "Well, who do you think this ugly space for?" And it's always, "Well, this is in a low-income community. It's a multipurpose room." Then, the fancy luxury work, they were like, "Oh, this is like luxury market rate, high-end," blah blah blah. So, I flipped it on it when I told them, "Well, actually, all the spaces that you thought were luxury and sparkly and pretty were all of our affordable housing projects."

I literally had to shift that narrative that, as designers, we've kind of pigeonholed ourselves that this thing is for this demographic, and this chair or aesthetic is for this demographic. No. It was very refreshing that it was well-received, but we also talked about diversity and how if your team does

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not reflect the communities that you serve then you cannot provide a well-balanced, equitable design solution and outcome, period.

Tobi: Because there's no way for you to know what your blindspots are. Like, as a lot of books say, we're white people swimming in a sea of whiteness, how could we ever see our whiteness?

Kia: Exactly.

Tobi: We can't. It's like it's camouflaged, we can't see it. So, unless you have that perspective, you will not ever know your blindspots, right?

Kia: That is essential. It's so funny because in this same presentation, they're saying, "Well, we do community work and when we go do community we ask their names." I said, "You ask their names?"

Tobi: Shocking.

Kia: That's just like good etiquette 101.

Tobi: Gosh, that's crazy.

Kia: I was like, "Well, what type of community do you think your firm represents?" And they say, "Oh, we represent community. We're a close-knit family." I was like, "Well, you know, as a speaker," when the gentleman, Matthew, asked me to speak here the first thing I did was go to your website and I was like, "This is an all-white firm. What they want me as a black woman to come in and speak about?" You know what I'm saying?

Tobi: Right. Yes.

Kia: Then I looked at the recipients of the award that this whole conference was about, none of those folks were of color. I think it goes back to your point of, if you're in a sea of whiteness, you really won't know until someone says like, "You know everybody's here is white, right?"

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Tobi: Right. Like, “You could not be more white if you tried.”

Kia: They were just like, “Okay. We heard you.”

Tobi: That’s awesome.

Kia: So, it was those types of uncomfortable conversations that made me make them look at themselves and how their non-diverse community could affect them doing for better if they don’t have an inkling of connection to the communities that they’re serving.

Tobi: Totally. And I love a couple of things here, one, I think the timing in what’s going on in America right now is one of the reasons, people are open. Not everybody is, more people are open because they’re hearing this now, they’re getting the message, we’re getting the message, I’m getting the message in my work, in my business.

Then, I think also not everybody is going to have that response and it really speaks to the people, to their character, to their heart, to that empathy piece for them to be able to say, “Okay, we hear you and we’re not offended. In fact, we see what you’re talking about and you’re 100% right. How do we go – we didn’t know it. It was a blindspot, but that’s not what we want. We want to show up differently and so you’re teaching them or guiding them on these strategy sessions to say, “How do we get to a different place? How do we become not only diverse maybe in our team, but equitable in the work that we do.”

Kia: In our practice.

Tobi: Yes.

Kia: This is the thing, interior design is the greatest form of empathy in practice. So, we don’t have time as people who create spaces, we don’t have time or space for blindspots. We should always be focusing our craft on elevating design outcomes for the greater good, period.

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Tobi: I love what you just said.

Kia: Whether there's racial unjust happening right now, spaces last for years and decades and is generational. If, as a designer, you don't remember or embrace that power at all times then you're in the wrong profession. So, it is a lot about teaching about diversity and equitable design outcomes, but also reminding interior designers and architects the power of our craft and who's in it for good. That's your duty.

Tobi: As you were saying that I had a whole other level of understanding about blindspots because as you were saying that I was thinking a whole other level of thinking of blindspots because typically, especially with architectural firms, engineering firms, contractors, the blindspots they're looking for are the ones where a building is going to collapse and someone is going to be harmed or it's going to catch on fire or all the codes. But nobody is putting a code on – well, now there's the WELL Exam and some other things, and thankfully I love that I'm studying that work right now, but it's elective. Nobody is requiring things like what we're talking about equity in design as a code. It is not the law.

But as you were saying what you were saying I was understanding that there is more harm done in having inequitable, mentally and emotionally unsafe spaces for people every single day than harm done because someone actually gets injured in a property or whatever. We're literally costing – we're offending people, we're taking a toll on people every single day with these unspoken blindspots and they are more important, I'm hearing now as you say this, than the things that we actually make sure don't happen to people.

Kia: This is a visual that's coming to mind, I think about families. These are mothers, children, fathers, children, grandparents and their grandchildren living in existing low-income housing that was built 50, 60 years ago.

Tobi: Yes.

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Kia: People are living in a pandemic, quarantined in sub-par living conditions. While everyone's talking about returning to the workplace, I think they should be thinking about, "Well, how did you quarantine? How did your space heal you? How did it uplift you?"

I think to your point, no, for a building to collapse, that's not going to happen. But to sit in sub-par conditions in a pandemic, lead paint, VOCs –

Tobi: Terrible air quality, yes, lighting, air quality, everything that just takes that –

Kia: No natural light.

Tobi: No.

Kia: Right?

Tobi: No. It literally impacts every system, the nervous system, I mean all of them, it's assaulting them at every moment.

Kia: And this is the thing, we want research to tell us that we should do different. This is the only research I want most developers and politicians to go do. You go live in that building with your family for a week. Hell, make it a full 48 hours. If you can't do that, then it's not good enough for the people and communities you serve.

Tobi: Exactly.

Kia: I sound like a broken record with empathy, but you've got to see yourselves there to want to do better by people, period.

Tobi: Wow. I think that's such a great place to wrap up because I mean we can just leave people with that. We can leave people with that. We can say, you can argue all you want on politics or economics or whether the virus is a hoax or real or any side you want to pick, it's not political, but if you would not take your family and live in this space for 48 hours then why are we

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even having this discussion? Why are we not talking about how to fix this problem?

Kia: Yep. We're going to leave it there, because I feel like we could keep going.

Tobi: Well, I'll have you back because we're not finished with this conversation. There is so much work to do. Like, all I think we've done right now is just open a lot of eyes of people that aren't even thinking about this. We get so busy and we're so wrapped up in ourselves and our worries. Again, not to diminish that life in general is hard, but let's see how much harder life is for some of us than others of us.

Kia: Absolutely.

Tobi: Right?

Kia: Absolutely. That is the truth. Every day.

Tobi: Wow. Well, you know, gosh, I'm so grateful for every moment I get to spend with you, all of them. I loved this one because usually we're on the telephone and today I get to see your face. So fun, but I just thank you for your courage, for your commitment, just for your – I don't know, what is it? Drive? Your unwillingness.

Kia: Determination.

Tobi: Yes, well heck –

Kia: Determined By Design.

Tobi: Exactly, that's it! Determination for your unwillingness to accept anything but the work you're doing in the world. I want you to hear me, it's moving me in ways that I didn't even know I needed to be moved. So, just even this one white girl down in Arkansas in her mid-40s you're moving me in ways that I just need you to know that you are and I know so many other

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people will be moved, but the more important story is that we all can have an opportunity to do this work.

Kia: Absolutely.

Tobi: And before we go, because you and I talk about this a lot, just for those of us who are white who immediately want to jump on our horse and go out and start changing the world which is not the way this works, not if you're going to have any impact. It's going to be just like those women who told you, "I don't need you here and I don't want what you're bringing." That's one of the things I keep telling you.

I'm like, if I've learned anything during – since George Floyd and during my anti-racist studies, I've learned that when we do this level of work even us bossy white people that think we have skills need to sit back and listen and let people like you guide us in this work. So, I am your – I told, I'm your assistant, show me – tell me what to do. I think that's so important because just without even knowing just indoctrinated into the white supremacist society we're in, we're used to – I don't know if you've listened to the podcast called, *Nice White Parents*. It's a great podcast by The New York Times and it's about this school in New York and all these white parents decided they were going to save, as you can imagine, a low-income school and how that went.

So, I just want to make sure people get that yes, we can make a difference, and yes, we need you. But we need to show up in a different, completely different way than we would normally show up and so I thank you for being my guide. If anybody else wants to know more about you, from you, the work you're doing, how do they find you, follow you, connect with you?

Kia: I am on Instagram, our company is Determined By Design. My personal handle is @KiaNWeatherspoon. You can always go to our website, determinedbydesign.com, but yeah I encourage folks to reach out and let's do better and make money.

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Tobi: Yes, and those can co-exist, right?

Kia: Yes, absolutely.

Tobi: And the better we do all those other people we're helping we'll make more money, too.

Kia: Ding, ding, ding. We can all eat from the table.

Tobi: The end. I love it! I love you, girl. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you, thank you.

Kia: Thank you.

Tobi: I mean, really? Mic drop, right? 100 percent mic drop, I don't even have to have an outro, honestly. I'll just say this, Kia is adamant that change is possible when difficult conversations happen and I agree with her 100 percent, and she is having them every day as a female leader of color, as a speaker, as an educator, as a mentor who exemplifies what is possible for those who are Determined By Design, which is the name of her business. So, as she said, find her out on the web, on Instagram. Send her a message, follow her, look this woman up, she is doing amazing things.

Again, it's just such an honor to know her and to call her a friend. I thank you for listening. I can't wait to see what she does in the world and what the rest of us who are inspired by her step up and do in the world, too. So, I'll see you back next week with another episode hopefully as inspiring, but this one is going to be hard to beat, y'all. But I'll see you back here. You know we'll always have something amazing for you and I'll talk to you again really soon. Bye for now.

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