

## Ep #199: Redefining Success Part 3: The Lure of the Luxury Lifestyle



### **Full Episode Transcript**

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**Tobi Fairley**

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## Ep #199: Redefining Success Part 3: The Lure of the Luxury Lifestyle

You are listening to the *Design You* podcast with Tobi Fairley, episode number 199.

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.

Hey, friends. Just one more episode until we are at a milestone, the 200<sup>th</sup> episode of the show. That's crazy. And the cool thing is that next week's episode, number 200 will actually go live on Thursday January 27<sup>th</sup>, my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. So fun. Two big milestones for me all in one day. But before we start looking to next week, I do have a great episode for you today. So we are continuing our Redefining Success series.

And today I want to talk to you about the lure of the luxury lifestyle, or maybe we will even call it the lies of the luxury lifestyle. In this episode I want us to break down or break through some of the smoking mirrors of glamorous looking industries like the interior design industry and get to the truth of what success really looks like versus what we think we're striving for. We've been talking about success and redefining it for two weeks now. And I think it's one the trickiest things about the design industry.

And I feel certain we're not alone in this but our industry is based on appearances, on optics. We are really good at presenting beauty and creating a feeling or an emotion with our work, our images, our Instagram feeds. But because most of social media, optics aren't always the truth. They are a version of the truth at best. They are the rose colored glasses look at the industry, or a room, or a space, or a designer's life and their success. So they are created in no small part with smoking mirrors, it's like magic but it's not the truth.

It's a snapshot of a moment in time and even that moment it is often embellished like a good glamor shot from the 90s. You know what mean, you remember those. So the very nature of how we take photos of a space

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that looks perfect to through camera's lens, but if you could see the rest of the room you might see chaos and real life happening. The whole nature of that is a perfect insight into the business of interior design itself because the part you see when you look at other people's businesses or lives may look perfect but there's often chaos lurking just out of view.

And I think this is really important, I hear from clients and friends a lot who say, "When I hear these designers talking about making multimillions of dollars, I just feel like a total loser. And I always remind them that what they see is just a snapshot. It's just a moment that's likely even embellished and rarely is it the truth and most often it does not show the chaos of what's happening behind the scenes. Or even the fact that multimillion dollars in revenue does not mean multimillion dollars in profit.

So we are really good at showing the highlight reel, that part that's perfect looking. And I have been guilty of showing that side of my business too for a lot of years. Back in my 30s and even in my early 40s I was much more prone to create the appearance I wanted people to believe about me. That side of you that's sort of like the fake it till you make it, make it look like your business is bigger, and more successful, and more important than it may actually be until you arrive at really being important or successful, whatever that means.

And I used to talk about my business as we. And I mean, yeah, I had some team members but I often talked more about it as we do this, as if my business was really big. Just my ego needed to feel like our business was legit. I mean, and it was legit. But I tried to make it sound more important. And that's not the same like we that I talk about now when I talk about the me to we shift, which is an amazing thing we've done recently which is really create that company culture where it's not Tobi's company, but it's our company. That's been amazing.

Back then I couldn't see past the fact that it was my company, but I needed the world to believe that it was bigger. And so in most ways it was all about

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me. I was trying to make it all about me. I wasn't putting people's names and pictures out that were helping me do this. It was kind of the Martha Stewart esque version of yeah, this is all about me but this is a really big business, which wasn't exactly perfectly honest. But I wanted the world to think that it wasn't just little old me and my cute little design business.

I needed to feel legitimized like I was big time, like I was a thriving design firm, again, whatever that means. Because so often what we think looks like a thriving design firm is not really thriving at all. So my business goals for a lot of those years were based on checking all the success boxes for the design industry. You know them, you know the list.

We've probably talked about it before on here. But get published locally, then get bigger and better clients with bigger and better budgets so I can use cooler and fancier products. Then maybe get published nationally. Get named on one of those lists, for me it was the New Trads list for Traditional Home back in 2009, way back a long time ago. Get invited to a designer room in a fancy showhouse. I did several. I did the Hampton showhouse twice. I did the Holiday House in New York.

I started earlier in my career doing showhouses here in Littlerock. Also one of those boxes to check was get national magazine covers which I got. I was on the cover of Traditional Home twice and House Beautiful once, and a bunch of smaller regional covers, for sure thought all those things would make me feel legitimized in my business, would just thrive. What else were the boxes? Well, getting speaking engagements.

And yeah, I had spoke at markets and I've keynoted for 300 or 400 people at Highpoint Market in the morning with the WithIt Organization. I spoke as a keynote at the Design Bloggers Conference once or twice. I was a speaker at the Design Leadership Summit in Marrakesh. I mean I got a lot of big speaking engagements. And then of course there was the box to check about getting product lines. And I got five, fabric, case goods, upholstery, art, rugs.

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And if I was to continue on this path there's more places to go. Typically up next would be getting a book deal with that fancy beautiful coffee table book. And I've talked to editors. I basically had a deal a year or two ago and I was already starting to feel like this wasn't really the success that I thought it was going to be. There was a lot of expense to making a book like that. But if I was going to keep going down the path I'd for sure need a book deal, and more magazine covers, and more product lines because success in the design industry is always about more, more, more on the outside.

And it's been a lot of hard work to check off all those boxes that I checked off. And I've checked off a lot. And there have been some really fun moments, don't get me wrong. There have been fun, and fun moments mixed into this success trajectory of mine. I loved getting invited on trips. I went to Scotland with Traditional Home and probably six or seven other amazing designers, some of which I thought were iconic at the time.

And it was super fun to design a room at Pandora's Manor Hotel in Highpoint with some major big named designers that are friends now with Eastern Accents. We had the best most fabulous sleepover in the house with all the designers. It was so fun. I was invited on a trip to Italy with the Antiques Diva, all these all expense paid trips and all those things were amazing. And they really did make me feel like I had at some level arrived.

And I've had some exquisitely creative moments, designing product lines, some magical times with my vendor partners, with clients, with friends and some pretty glamorous destinations. And I've won many awards locally and nationally. All of that's been really fun. I'm not here to diminish those things. Well, and first let me say, I should celebrate those things more than I do because now that I feel the cost of what it takes to create that success I think I sometimes lean into thinking about the cost and forget to celebrate.

And there is plenty to be celebrated that I probably do take for granted because it has been an incredible experience in many ways. And that's

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what a lot of you want and I get that, I wanted it too. And yes, all of those things are versions of success but the part we don't talk about is the huge cost to this type of success, it's one that you rarely hear about. And one that when you feel it and experience it, you believe you must be doing stuff wrong because no one ever told you about this part, this miserable soul sucking cost of success and it really is miserable in a lot of ways.

So I have spent literally hundreds of thousands of dollars over my 20 plus year career, if not more to make these successes happen. These successes aren't free. Yeah, the all expense paid to Europe might sound amazing but I could have sent myself to Europe a million times with the money I've invested to create that kind of success in my business. And the amount of hours, countless hours hustling, and struggling, and burning the candle at both ends through exhaustion and multiple bouts of burnout. That stuff, yeah, nobody's talking about that.

And I missed out a ton on my daughter's childhood working nights and weekends. And I did a lot of damage to my marriage which you've heard me talk about, my relationship with my husband. Thankfully we were able to repair it but not without hitting rock bottom about six years ago. And many marriages don't survive the toll of being a creative entrepreneur and a business owner which often lures us, the success path lures us into putting business before family, it definitely did me.

But even without the truth about the high cost of creating success in this way, just looking at the wins alone, I think it's important to also realize that somehow as amazing as they sound and even as amazing as they were in a lot of ways. Somehow they don't always translate to what I believe a lot of us are dreaming of when we dream about success. So yeah, we dream about the magazine covers, and the product lines, and the book but mainly because of what we think our life will be like after those things happen.

We are hoping there will come a time when we don't have to work so hard, when the money is just consistently there in our bank account, when our

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pipeline of work stays filled with ideal projects, with those big, dreamy budgets. Surely when you're at that level of success that's what it looks like.

And we think working with clients will get easier. And that as long as we have magazine connections we can send over our latest projects, once we're in that club, the club of successful designers or we have a seat at that table. Surely by just sending over our projects they'll want to publish the majority of our work. They'll just say, yes, that's what we think. And we think about the fun and the rewards of having product lines. But we don't think about the work that goes into having them.

We have to come up with new designs regularly and go to market to represent and sell those products, and do press for those product lines, all while keeping our regular business going and our clients happy. Which is hard, it's a juggling act but we don't think about that. We only see the highlight reel in our dream. And the reality of what it takes to create this kind of success is what I would call the Debbie downer part of the story, that we just don't want to think about because it's going to spoil our exciting dreams. So we forget to focus on the cost.

And no matter how many markers of success and boxes we check I have found it to be true for me and many, many other successful designers that I coach. That these things we hope for, the full pipeline of dreamy clients and ongoing success without a lot of work, that's just not true. That's a myth at least for most of us. Because to keep the press coming, and the leads coming, and to continually close the right clients, just that is a full-time job. Not just a full-time job, a full-time ongoing doesn't get any easier job that after a while can feel like a grind.

To me it often feels like a monster or a machine that I've created, that I have to keep feeding, that never sleeps, that is insatiable. And once you start this process it's hard to stop it. There's something about us that just doesn't want to quit, or change, or we think, what will people think about us.

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And so we get all those boxes checked and all those things rolling and it's like we're locked in to keep up with it all forever.

And for me though there have been many, many exciting and beautiful moments, the 'success' or at least the part that the world perceives as success just didn't give me the feelings I thought it would. Or maybe it sometimes did but the feelings were fleeting. And each time they came they seemed to light me up less and less. And they seemed to go away faster and faster.

And I think one of the most confusing parts of the promise of success is not just what our industry's version of success looks like but combining that with what culture tells us will happen when we check all those boxes in our career and our lives, this lure of the luxury lifestyle.

Because the world tells us when we get there we will have lots of money and we can buy lots of fancy things that we deserve and we will for sure be happier with all those things. And life will be easier and more fulfilling and we'll now be part of the cool crowd, the club, we'll have the it factors, we can take fancy trips and fly first class. And we can give our kids everything they want and dream of. And we can be the best dressed person at the industry or social event. And we can have that bag, or that ring, or that car that everyone envies.

We can pay for our kids' college dreams. We can have a fabulous house that's perfectly designed inside and out. We can get help around our house, and with the yard, and with the kids, or maybe a chef. And we can afford massages and a personal trainer so we can finally be fit and healthy. Because for sure we'll have time to do that now and we can get a Peloton. And we can hire a perfect team and learn to be a whizz at delegating so we can work so much less and all of this will come easily and we will have arrived.



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Yeah, we buy into the promise that we will arrive at success as if it's a place that you can get to and that you can stay there. We believe that when we get there, you know, there, success, then we will have everything we want and need. And we will be living that luxury lifestyle and all the money and the stuff will for sure fix all that ails us. Because for sure, for sure money and success fix our ails like imposter syndrome, and exhaustion, and fear, and anxiety, and overwhelm, and people pleasing, and insecurity, and doubt, and the not enough-ness.

Yes, for sure when we have success we will feel like we are enough. Every one of those boxes, surely every one of those boxes we check, and each luxury item we buy, it will add a little more enough-ness to our enough-ness jar, for sure. But it doesn't. There are just as many people with all the outward signs of success that you could possibly imagine that still don't feel the way they want to feel. And to keep up all the success they often just get a lot of exhaustion to go with the rest of their crumbly feelings. Sounds pretty incredible.

So now that I've painted such a lovely picture of the reality of creating success and combining that with the lure of the luxury lifestyle, when we're following that path that culture tells us, that gets us there to success. The one that has us hustling and checking those proverbial boxes and buying all the stuff. Now that I've painted that beautiful exhausting picture I want to offer you an alternative view. And this alternative view doesn't mean we're taking a vow of poverty, and that money isn't amazing, and that often money is not lifechanging as a resource, because it is.

It also doesn't mean that luxury goods aren't sometimes exquisite and enjoyable. I love those things. But what I've learned is that nothing, no amount of success, or money, or stuff changes the way we feel, our thoughts do that. And for a long time my thoughts were leading me down the path that culture set me out for, the one we've described. And it was a lie because it was unsustainable, it was unachievable or at least

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unachievable without those very high and costly tradeoffs. And it was unreliable. That maybe is the worst part.

Even if I did every single thing the world told me to create success there was no guarantee that I would actually have success ever, or regularly, or have it long term. And just because I look successful doesn't mean that the finances follow, or that I feel like a success. Remember, it's the optics of looking successful but not necessarily what we think success will bring.

So what is the alternative? Well, I believe that it goes back to asking some very important questions of ourselves. Really the one that Simon Sinek made famous, and yes it may have since become overused and clichéd but it's still the right question. The question is, why? Why am I trying to check all those boxes for success? Why do I think that having those boxes checked will make me feel better than I feel right now?

Why do I want to feel that way that I think is out there in the future? And why haven't I created that feeling right now with the amount of success or lack thereof that I currently have? And why do I think I will become someone different when I am successful, that I can't be today?

I recently heard a podcast episode of We Can Do Hard Things, one of my favorite podcasts with Glennon Doyle, and Abby Wambach, and Glennon's sister. And they were talking about how they had recently watched a special on Netflix that was about spiritual icon, Ram Dass, which you may have heard of if you're into spiritual stuff. A lot of you are into self-help and woo woo like me.

And so what they learned from his teachings in this documentary is this. You spend your whole life becoming somebody but the actual goal is to become nobody. And as Abby said, the path that we put ourselves on or that the world puts us on is so counterproductive because you spend the whole first part of your life being somebody that you're not. And then you spend the next part of your life trying to find the person, that somebody that

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you really are and then you spend the rest of your life trying to become nobody. In other words to lose thyself, that which you just found.

So Glennon added, “Yeah, Abby, it’s to become as wise as you were when you were born. That’s the ultimate goal without all the ego”, is what they’re saying. And they were joking about this and laughing. And I could so relate because they were saying, “We spend so much time becoming somebody, which turned out to be somebody they couldn’t even stand.”

And that makes a lot of sense to me. Because when I did all the things that had me buying into the lies about what it takes to create success, and what success looks like. And what I need, and how much money I need to buy into the luxury lifestyle. I created a person that in many, many ways I didn’t like at all. I didn’t like that I was overworked, and overwhelmed, and irritable, that I lost my temper at my sweet little girl. And when she was really young I did a lot of times. And I lost my temper at my husband.

And I didn’t like that I was always so busy, too busy to talk to my mom, too busy to have fun. I was always so busy, and so tired, and so irritable. Let’s not forget that part. And so stressed. My mom used to just say, “I hate that you’re so stressed.” And I’d say, “I’m not stressed, what do you mean, stressed? Why are you saying I’m stressed? Stop telling me I’m stressed.” I was stressed, you all. And I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that version of me I’d become.

I didn’t like that I was grumpy and irritable. But I also didn’t like that at some level I was also self-righteous in a lot of ways. I didn’t know it at the time but looking back I was because I thought I knew more than other people. Because if I’m honest, and this is kind of hard to admit out loud, but you know I’m into honesty. So if I’m honest, when you create that kind of success, you start to think at some level that you’re better than the other people who aren’t killing it, who aren’t checking those boxes, who aren’t really ‘making it’ in life and business like you are. Define making it.

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But to think about that feels so gross now and not at all like the person I want to be. And the ironic part is it's less that you are killing it in business, it's not as much that. It's more that business success is killing you and you don't even know it. So we think we're killing it in business yet business is killing us. And I didn't like that. I didn't like that I heard myself say more often than not to my family, especially my daughter, "I have to, mommy has to work. Leave me alone honey, mommy has to work, mommy has to go on this trip, mommy has to write this blog post or be in a meeting, I have to."

As if I had no choice. And I believed that I didn't have a choice, not if I wanted to actually achieve success in the way that the world told me to. I didn't have a choice but to work all the time, and be more productive, and get up earlier, and work harder, and work smarter, and work longer. And do all the things that reaching success required of me. I didn't have a choice if I wanted to become a successful person and reach the pinnacle. That's what I believed.

And I didn't like that I never had time to read, or relax, or have fun, rarely time for downtime, or vacations, no time to connect with friends or family. I didn't like it but I believed I didn't have a choice. It's so ironic you all that we think we have to rise up the whole ladder of success every single rung, rung by rung, killing ourselves in the process to arrive at the place where we can finally enjoy life and have more downtime and experience pleasure and freedom. That's what we think, that's how you get to pleasure and freedom.

But we don't notice that we already had free time, and space, and freedom, and a lot more joy before we ever stepped onto that ladder, that very first rung of success. So we had it all in many ways all along, the things we were looking for but we believed the lie that we needed to earn them. And that the way to earn them was stepping onto the path of success. The big question I think that comes for most of us is, what is the other way, Tobi?

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If all we know is the roadmap that society has created for us, or more accurately, a few people in society, mainly some rich white dudes, created for us. What other options do we have for creating the money and the freedom we all want without getting on the hustle bus or the success treadmill? And I think to answer that you first have to decide how much money do you even want, and need, and why.

Why is really important here because without the why we may pick a number that's way too low because we don't want to be greedy, or way too high because we just really think big, and gigantic, and the sky is the limit. So how much and why, and even exactly when do you need this money? I used to think I needed to make \$10 million in my business to be successful. Now I realize that we don't need that much at all.

We could make half of that, or maybe half of half of that. And probably have the exact life I want and make the impact I dream of in the world and pay my team really well. And do all the things that feel like real success to me now. So how much, and why, and when? Also this one's really important. How much free time do you want to have on a regular basis and why? You all, I want a lot.

Right now I'm working about 22 to 24 hours a week on actual work stuff, not counting all the time I'm reading, and studying, and learning. That's kind of what I do all the time and definitely it benefits my business. But the actual work time with my team, or on specific work tasks, or recording this podcast is about five and a half hours a day four days a week. And it's amazing. It's the perfect amount. That feels crazy. For so many years I would think that was part-time work.

But all the studies show that's the most productive way of living and working and the most fulfilling. It's true for me for sure. So how much do you want to work and how much free time do you want? And how do you want to feel in your business day-to-day and why? And not just you but how do you want your family, and your clients, and your team to feel? All of this

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is so important. And this is not what we're thinking about when we're on that cultural path to success that's checking all the boxes, for sure not.

We're not asking ourselves what's the sufficient amount of money to create the impact I want in the world and how much free time do I want? And how do I want to feel? And finally, how much or what impact would you like to make in the world and why? And what does making this impact look like? Because impact doesn't really come a lot of times from just checking those boxes. It's a more intentional approach to creating a difference in the world. So who, and what, and how much money do you need to create this impact?

I believe the way we make the most impact is to not exploit ourselves and others, not turn us into commodities or machines that we overwork regularly, that keep the cash flowing. But I didn't know that early on. And I totally was guilty of the opposite. But instead of making us machines and exploiting ourselves I think the answer is to create assets that produces a sufficient amount of money, and results, and value for our customers, but once we create the value it in turn creates the money that affords us that more sustainable and enjoyable version of success while creating an impact.

We're not robots, you all, contrary to what post-industrial revolution economy and culture would have us believe, we're not. And I learned a few years ago the value of a concept of selling things that you already have created, not something that you have to go and create at some point in the future. So for example, I've already created my Design You program and my Millionaire Mentorship programs and they're awesome. And though we do regularly add content and we're always improving them, and there's a lot of very valuable stuff in there that we're improving, it exists already.

The valuable content, and the coaching, and the community, and the thought leadership is already in those programs. And people can buy and immediately start benefiting from them the moment they join. So in other

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words we aren't creating custom content for each human being that buys from us. So that makes these programs scalable and we can make them once and sell them to multiple people. Or we can teach live group coaching calls with 20 or 40 people in an hour instead of teaching 20 or 40 individual hours of coaching.

We still serve the same number of people but in one hour, not 20 to 40 hours. This lesson of creating something that you can sell over and over instead of always selling custom stuff to be made is a huge gamechanger for a more sustainable life.

And some people would have you believe that the value is lower in a situation like this, like these group coaching calls, or these programs, or other scalable things because they're not one-to-one. But I would argue that a lot of our clients get as much or more out of hearing other people be coached. And having those peer relationships, sometimes even more than getting coached themselves.

So just the point of me saying this to you is that I want you to see the difference in this approach of selling something that's created and how far different that is than say doing interior design projects. That every single time I sell a job or sign a contract I have lots and lots of hours ahead of me, many months of work that I have to now create a custom interior in order to deliver on the promise that we sold.

And you all, that work is hard and stressful, especially in an industry like interior design, we're so much with contractors, and materials, and supply chains, and shippers, and delivery people, and damages, and defects, all those things are out of our control. It is very stressful. So that's not to say no one should be interior designers, or that you shouldn't have interior design services. I'm glad interior designers exist, we make the world more beautiful. But I do think it's really important to understand the magnitude of what this job, this career is asking of us, the tradeoffs.

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And when we combine the expectations of our job with cultural expectations and the lure of the luxury lifestyle, and our personal perfectionism, we have a recipe for exhaustion. And often the costs are too high for many of us without the payoffs financially or emotionally. These things take a toll on our health, and our lives, and our relationships. And if we knew it was going to look and feel like that going in we would likely never agree. We would likely never step on that first rung of the ladder.

Okay friends, I hope this episode was helpful for you, helping you to see more into what's behind those boxes we're trying to check. And what that lure of luxury is causing us to sign up for and what the costs are. What we're trading in exchange for potentially empty promises that look really successful on the outside but don't come with all the things we thought they would come with.

I mean if we were purchasing that we would be returning it immediately. I'm sorry, but I bought all these boxes that were promising me money and fulfilment, where is my money and fulfilment? I want a refund. So my hope for you is not that you necessarily stop aiming for some of those goals and some of the traditional markers of success, that can be really fun. But at the very least that you get real with yourself about how much you're willing to give in exchange for success.

And know that you can get creative and redesign what success looks like for you by asking those questions we've asked today. So that the cost and the benefits are more aligned for you, that's it. That's what I want for you.

Alright friends, I'll see you next week. It's going to be the last episode in our Redefining Success series and it's going to be a good one because it's my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday you all. And I promise the episode will be epic. Okay, friends, see you then.

Thank you so much for listening to the *Design You* podcast, and if you are ready to dig deep and do the important work we talk about here on the

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