Ep #205: The Value of Design Part 1: Designers vs. Creatives

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to the *Design You* podcast with Tobi Fairley, episode number 205.

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, everyone. I hope you are great. I am great. I'm just so excited to start another series here on the podcast this week. The last series I did back in January was such a huge hit with so many of you. It was called Redefining Success. And if you didn't listen to those four episodes I highly recommend that you do. I was planning to start the Entrepreneurship series next. But as I dug into the research and began writing that content I realized there was another series that needed to come first.

So, the Entrepreneurship series is coming, don't worry. And we're going to talk about what it really takes to build a six figure or a seven figure business and a whole lot of other stuff over in that series. But first starting today we are beginning the Value of Design series. And I'm really, really excited about this one. We're going to dig into the difference between designers and creatives, how we commodify ourselves accidentally as designers, what role gender plays in the value of design and so much more over these next four episodes.

And I believe this series will likely be just as eye opening as the last one we did on redefining success. So, buckle up friends, here we go. Okay, so to start the series I want to define two important words for us to get started so that we are all on the same page. Those words are creative and designer. And I want to break down how they are similar, and how they are different, and why this matters.

First, creative means relating to or involving the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work. Now, similarly but different, a creative is a person who is creative typically in a professional context. So, we've got being creative or creative, what it means to be

creative. And then we've got a creative, a noun, a person who is creative typically in a professional context.

And I want to contrast that with designer. And a designer is one who creates and often executes plans for a project or a structure. Or as Wikipedia says, the person who produces a design is called a designer which is a term generally used for people who work professionally in one of the various design areas such as a fashion designer, or a product designer, or a web designer, or an interior designer but also others such as architects and engineers.

When I speak about designers and creatives I often have used those interchangeably in the past when I'm talking to the various types of designers that I coach in my Design You or my Millionaire Mentorship program. Because those people have included interior designers, product designers, event designers, design build professionals, caterers, I guess those are food designers, home stagers, who design homes to sell, web designers, graphic designers, course designers, architects, many, many other kinds of designers that we work with.

So, when I talk about designers and creatives a lot of times I do use them interchangeably. But we're going to talk about today and really start to set the scene for how they are different. Also, when I talk about the design biz in my business, and in our Facebook group, and in other places, I'm often talking about both the business of interior design but also the greater design biz or creative businesses which encompass business for all the different types of designers I just mentioned above.

And anyone else who identifies themselves as a creative or a designer, we even have people who have worked with us or asked to work with us who are lawyers but happen to consider themselves a creative. So pretty broad terms when I'm talking about design biz, or even creatives and designers. So, there are many types of designers all who would mostly consider themselves to also be creatives. But I think that this distinction between designer and creative is more important than we may realize.

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Because when we start to think about and quantify the value of design and who exactly values design I think things have been changing over the past decade or two, maybe even a little bit longer. So, thanks to the invention of the internet, and television, home makeover shows and Instagram influencers, and sites like Pinterest and House, and sites like these and other design industries, many consumers have begun to think that they too are designers.

And let's just be perfectly honest, in many ways they are. If what is most valuable is the creative piece which we defined earlier as the original ideas coming from the imagination, and where design or designer, that component by the definition we gave earlier is more the execution of those creative ideas. Then we suddenly have people everywhere who are more able than ever to install, or implement, or execute designs even though few of those designs are truly original from a creative perspective.

And this is precisely in my opinion how trends like the farmhouse look made popular by Chip and Joanna Gaines and other trends are replicated millions of times in millions of homes across America and beyond. And that's not to say that they weren't designed and executed well, or that they were even. Because design principles often aren't honored or achieved in many of these designs or most of them, that are just being replicated by consumers.

And this is just the trends happening in just the interior design industry. It's happening in all design industries, graphic design, event design. It's all over the place that people are just replicating and installing, or implementing, or executing designs that they have seen. And this may be the very reason that so many people think they can do the work of designers on their own. In this particular example of interior designers doing the farmhouse look, at some level or in a big way devalues design and what we can charge for it because they think they can do it on their own.

So, in a lot of ways, it greatly diminishes the value of what we do. When I was researching this concept of the difference between a designer and

creative, and really starting to think critically about it. I ran across a podcast episode that was recorded back in 2019 by Stephen Gates which perfectly aligned with my thoughts and really even added some new ideas. Stephen has over 20 years of experience creating strategy, and concepts, and designs for award winning integrated global advertising brands. That's what his website says.

He has built multiple global Fortune 500 brands and innovative digital experiences. So, here's what you need to know really. He has worked with Apple, Facebook, Google, NASA, American Express, LEGO, Amazon, Nike and Uber just to name a few. He has worked with the big guys. But in this podcast episode from December of 2019 on his own podcast he was saying that if you really want to go to the next level in creative fields, and he's really talking about working for big corporations like some of these that I mentioned that he's worked for.

But I really think it certainly applies when you're working for yourself too. But he says you have to stop thinking of yourself as a designer, as the person who executes the design and think of yourself as the creative, the one who imagines the truly unique, the one who innovates. And I'm paraphrasing there from this episode. You really want to be that person who takes things to a completely different level, the person who imagines the unimaginable. That's where the value lies.

And those who are the designers instead of the creatives become commodities he says because the execution of design, which is usually done in a process of steps that are systematic and repeatable and therefore not that unique. They can be replicated by others and therefore ultimately, and even unfortunately are not that valuable. Sit with that for a minute. I don't disagree.

But let's break this down a little bit more so I'm being really clear here. Okay, so I think it's important to note here, we are not saying that execution of design isn't completely invaluable or unvaluable. But compared to creating truly unique concepts and ideas there is a great disparity.

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And I really think this is an aha moment when it comes to the struggles of monetizing design and design professions. Because when you think about what we're referring to for the example of the interior design industry when we talk about design and designers, most of the work that's being done is not that unique. Even work like my own that has a strong element of color or pattern is still derived from a lot of existing inspiration, and ideas, and executed using mostly readily available mass produced products. So, it could be replicated.

And many of us have heard it said that there are no new ideas or original ideas in the world, that it's all been done before. And maybe this is our way of justifying our less than unique work because I bought into that belief too. And we see this in the fashion industry, and the interior design industry, and I'm sure it's true in event design, and even web design, and graphic design that there are so many knockoffs and replicas because somebody has a really unique idea out there.

And then it becomes a trend that everybody is following and the current hot items, and trends, and looks, and materials, and usage, and style is being used over, and over, and over again. And yeah, some of it in different ways in the execution of the design. But it's just not that unique. And most decorating, and design work, and interiors does use mass produced products now readily available on the internet, and direct to consumer.

So, if a customer has a look that they like and some photos of it, and they have access to purchasing products, at least similar products in a lot of ways they can do what most of us are doing when we're calling ourselves designers or interior designers. And that's because we're often not being that creative. We commoditize ourselves and our work. So, let's define commodity or commoditizing.

So, let's start with commodity. A commodity is a basic good used in commerce that is interchangeable with other goods of the same type. So, if what we are doing in our role as interior designers, or product designers, or graphic designers, or event designers is not that unique or creative but it's

put together using a lot of mass produced items, or trends in our industry. That could be done not only by a lot of other designers, but even possibly by the consumer then we have been commoditized because we are interchangeable with others who can do this work.

And you may have heard me use the term, commodity before, usually it was with regarding pricing. And I often say well, I don't really like hourly pricing models for designers because it infers that all designers are apples to apples. And that the only thing differentiating us is our price. And that really fits this definition of commodity.

We're interchangeable depending on price, depending on how much time we spend being a creative though versus a designer our work could be far more valuable than some others that we may be compared to accidentally just because we're compared or commoditized based on price alone. So, it's not a good indicator of how much creativity is happening. And a lot of people are being super creative and not even the most expensive.

So, it's not helpful to just compare on price which is why I like to kind of take us out of that comparison by not offering somebody an hourly rate to compare me to the next person. But what I'm talking about here today about commoditizing is not about price. And so, it may not only be the way we charge that's commoditizing our work but the way we work may be what is doing far more to devalue design because it's just not that unique.

And I think it's interesting that when I do think of designers that I would say are maybe the most successful, able to charge the highest prices, whose work is the most unique, who we see working for some of the most famous people or something that we deem super successful, we do see a great deal more creativity and one of a kind elements in their work.

As far as interior designers go, these designers rarely use mass produced items even though they may have a licensed product of their own that they're making money from. They're not usually putting those mass produced products of their design in their own work, not even their own products. They are likely for their customers, their clients creating custom

upholstery and case goods, working with artists and artisans to create furnishings, and artwork, and accessories, or finding objects that are usually antiques or one of a kind and putting that in their work.

Because it's much more difficult to replicate these projects and they spend more time in the creative designing these spaces. And again, this is true in other design segments, not just interior design, and therefore because they are more creative, they're more valuable and their pricing and profits usually reflect that value. But aside from those handful of designers that are working at the top of any of the design fields what we see mostly is a lot of repeating parts and pieces of designs over and over again, resulting in less than original creations and I'm guilty of this too.

Another thing that adds to this devaluation is that we're actually taught to copy in the world, that's the opposite of innovation by the way, it's replication. We live in a culture of copying. We are taught to copy to get ahead. A lot of the best business gurus, and teachers, and leaders in the world say it's smart business to find people doing what works and just do that too. And yeah, there's definitely plagiarism in design.

But there's also something that is a psychological effect called cryptomnesia. It's hard to say cryptomnesia. Cryptomnesia happens when the source of a memory somehow gets hidden from your subconscious but the memory itself remains intact. And so, then when an idea pops back into your mind you mistakenly believe that it's your own, that you came up with it in the first place. And when you repeat that idea and claim it as your own you end up unintentionally plagiarizing somebody else, the source of the work.

And a lot of times we think an idea is novel but it's actually a memory or something we've seen before. There's another culprit also that causes copying. So not just cryptomnesia and not just the fact that business gurus tell us to do this to get ahead, to find somebody to mimic. But one of the biggest culprits is also the hustle culture. So let me explain this. If you've

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heard my Redefining Success series you know the concept of hustle culture and what the success path looks like for any given area of design.

For interior design in particular it looks like getting published and later on getting the path to product licensing and book deals. There's certain boxes that we all think if we're really arriving that we will have checked and that's true for all the design industries. And the place that hustle culture leads us to copying is in the immense pressure that really hustle culture puts on us to achieve these different levels of success, to check the boxes for things that we might not actually be an expert in.

This was very true for me when I began product licensing in design, some of the companies I worked with had their own designers onboard, like own product designers that I worked with. And together we really did create one of a kind designs that were often inspired by antique furniture forums or other things that, you know, in Nature or something that was really unique. But in other instances, we used a lot of inspiration from existing pieces on the market.

And I have to admit now many of those were way too close to knocking off existing products and works. And that didn't feel good. But after a few years of some of these products being on the market, some of them I decided to discontinue voluntarily because it didn't feel right. I have a lot of thoughts about how this happens though as I see other designers doing it and I did it too, including some very, very big name designers who we see are very accomplished but are knocking off products or companies and other artists.

But now I think I see what is happening here in a lot of instances. Yeah, it might be cryptomnesia but a lot it I think is this hustle culture, this drive to achieve, to make things happen. And critics would say it's a disgusting practice and that designers should know better and maybe that's true. But with my own experience I can see how when I've been guilty of borrowing way too much of someone's inspiration, I wasn't even totally aware of it or clued in. Now, that's no excuse. And the practice I believe is wrong.

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But maybe it's also a part of cryptomnesia but I think it's really more that it's the pressure to succeed. And somewhere in the process of creating the designs we lose sight of what's important, or of what we value. And money or even just getting the product line created and produced becomes more of a priority than doing truly unique work. Even as I was being taught the process of product licensing by many who were already doing it, the process was even explained to me, that you go find inspiration and you create something from it.

And I've definitely heard as long as you change something 10 to 20% then it's not really copying. But wow, in hindsight that practice is not in alignment with my values at all. And as I think about the real problem here, I'm not a furniture designer. I'm not a fabric designer. I'm not an art designer. I'm not an artist, a painter or a watercolorer, I wasn't trained in these things. But because of hustle culture and the expected path to success we push ourselves to follow the path that others had before us.

So suddenly we're outside of our expertise and what else is there to do but to borrow too closely even when you don't mean to from others as inspiration to create goods for sale. And this happens not just in product licensing. This happens in creating the actual design work we do. It's really where capitalism meets hustle culture, or productivity, or success culture.

I remember when I designed my daughter's nursery and she's 16 now, so it was a long time ago. I went into a local store that sold cribs and things but they also sold a lot of baby clothing. And so, I was in there shopping for clothes. And when they saw I was there and they knew who I was they were like, "Oh my gosh, we love your nursery. I bet we've replicated that no less than 10 times." Which they thought was a compliment. But that's what we're talking about.

And it's really no wonder, products, and designs, and services are devalued for this reason. They are mostly merely designed and not truly creative. There are knockoffs of knockoffs, even high end brands knocking

themselves off to hit a lower end of the market because of capitalism, because of money.

So why do we believe that we are suddenly supposed to be a furniture, or a product designer, or an artist, or even an interior designer, or a graphic designer, or a photographer, or any of these creative fields when we haven't really studied it, or learned it, or honed our creativity and our craft? Why do we think so? Because I thought it too.

And when I realized that I really wasn't some of these things I began pulling back a lot, especially from my product lines and leaning more into my own personal zone of genius which in many ways it's not even interior design for me but it's business design and coaching. But it's quite hard to wrap your head around all of this when you think of it this way. We are creating our own pricing and valuation or devaluation problems with the way we work.

And I don't necessarily say any of this to say that there is not a demand for design or designers. But we shouldn't be confused when it's difficult to charge fees that would sustain a growing business or help us reach the personal salaries or lifestyles we dream of. We shouldn't be that confused when we see it this way. So, as we dig into this series on the value of design and we think about our own work in the world, our real zones of genius to use the term that's becoming cliché at the moment. But it's kind of the easiest way I know how to describe our sweet spot and our true gifts and talents.

So, if we're really in our true zones of genius, I think that this valuation of design and the work we're doing becomes a very important discussion. It matters if we have goals to hit a certain level of financial success and freedom to know what is valuable. We have to be realistic about the value of the work we're doing in the world, how easy it is to replicate what we offer, that it's truly unique or something that a consumer or other designers can't easily do, or even that product companies can't easily replicate. So that we're not a commodity.

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Because commodities aren't typically highly profitable. For my own business where I think that I'm most valuable to the designers that I work with is in helping you find that sweet spot of where your business and you are most valuable. Helping you create the right mix of offerings that will maximize your earning potential and help you with the coaching and mindset work that will assist you in carving out your specific spot in the market, that brings the most value to your firm and your brand.

And yes, as a bonus, we've created replicable systems for you like the design process or digital marketing. Because if I can save you time in those areas, then by all means I want you to spend more time being a creative and less time being the designer, the one who executes. So, you can lean into your specific zone of genius, and gifts, and spend time honing those gifts and talents to increase your value.

I also think it's important that we have coaching to help us dig deeper when being creative feels hard. The easy path is replicating, you all, the easy path is knocking off or following trends. The easy path is doing what everyone else is doing. But that is also the least valuable and least lucrative path. But to dig deep and be creative is uncomfortable. It's ripe with fear of failure because creating is inherently risky. There is always a chance that the idea may not work or that others may not like it but that is a risk that is important to take if we want to create real value in the world.

And part of the creative process requires that we keep hustle culture at bay because creativity cannot be done on a timeline or a deadline. Whipping out designs to meet a client's or a contractor's schedule often engineers the creativity right out of the process. Hustle culture kills creativity in so many ways. I can't say that enough. Hustle culture kills creativity. Creativity needs time and space, it needs an iterative process. And often it can't be done on command.

And when we are harried, and hurried, and overwhelmed we are less likely than ever to be able to access the parts of our brain that are responsible for truly creative ideas. So, I hope this introduction to the value of design has

you thinking critically about your work, your dreams of success and whether those boxes you were planning on checking would have meant you being truly creative. Are you just replicating what's already on the market at some level?

I hope I have you digging deeper about where you will go next in your life and your career. Will you be more of a designer or will you be truly creative? And as Stephen Gates says in his podcast episode that I listened to. He noted that most people in design and creative fields do start out in the execution or implementation of tasks, and roles out of necessity because somebody needed them to play a role or a part. And that's how we end up in our careers, executing designs.

But after the basic establishment of our work as designers, either for ourselves or for other companies, if we want to really create real value, then we have to exit the identity of designer as our primary role and really inhabit the role of creative to go to the next level. And I think he's right.

Okay friends, I want you to think on this, this week. I'll be back in a week. We're going to dig deeper in the second part of the Value of Design series but I think there's a lot of truth bombs here, some of them that are really hard to hear, some that are hard to say and admit by myself and probably by you too. But I think it's really important. So, think about it until we come back next week.

And if you want to talk about this more, reach out on Instagram. I want to connect, I want to discuss. I love exploring big ideas like this one, it's who I really am, it's what I do. And I'm always excited to discuss it with you. I'm always excited to grow personally. So let me hear what you're thinking. And I'll be back next week. We're going to dig into the next couple of parts, one of which is called Are You a Doer or a Thinker.

And the other one after that which is called Women's Work. And yes, it will sound just as controversial as it sounds there because we're going to dig into some big topics like misogyny, and the patriarchy, and sexism, and

what they do to the value of our work. So as usual, I'm not holding back, friends. So come back next week. Let's do this again. Bye for now.

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 podcast of transforming your mindset and creating a scalable online business model, there has never been a more important time than right now. So, join me and the incredible creative entrepreneurs in my *Design You* coaching program today. You can get all the details at TobiFairley.com.