

## Design for Wellbeing

**Elissa Black** [00:00:00] Hi Mic listeners, it's NYCxDESIGN's executive director Elissa Black here. This past May as part of the ten year anniversary of the NYCxDESIGN Festival, we teamed up with our friends at the Kohler Experience Center by Best Plumbing Supply to present "The Responsibility of Design", a special live recording of three Mic episodes exploring topics of design for environment, wellbeing and community. Hosted by our very own Mic host Debbie Millman in the Kohler Experience Center, these conversations presented striking discussions about design in its many forms and how it can be a tool for the greater good. The second episode, Design for Wellbeing, featured guest Laura Kohler, SVP of Stewardship and Sustainability at Kohler Co., and Suchi Reddy, founder of Reddymade Architecture and Design. Without further adieu, let's dive in to the Responsibility of Design.

**Debbie Millman** [00:01:07] From NYCxDESIGN, this is the Mic, a podcast that offers an inside look into New York City's most creative minds. I am your host, Debbie Millman. From projects to products, inspirations and more, join us each episode as I talk to members of New York City's design community about what makes design so outstanding. Today we are live at the Kohler Experience Center by Best Plumbing Supply for a very special edition of the Mic. On the theme of Responsibility of Design in honor of NYCxDESIGN's 10th Anniversary Festival happening now through May 20th, all across New York City. I am currently joined by an expert duo of speakers to look at what it means to design for well-being. Over the next half hour, we'll focus on our interior surroundings and how they impact our mental health. We'll speak with designers and product leaders who are paying attention to the impact of design on the mind, the body and soul. We'll also learn about neuroaesthetics, a field that bridges design and the human mind, we'll differentiate between design led by style and design led by feeling, and discuss the importance of an enduring impact of a space on mental health. We're joined today by Suchi Reddy, an architect, an artist and founder of Reddymade Architecture and Design. Suchi is known for her emphasis on neuroaesthetics and her mantra, form follows feeling. From a very young age, Suchi noted how her surroundings and home had an effect on her, and that has stayed with her since. Her art installations and architectural work use color and generate wonder with an emphasis on well-being. We're also so pleased to be joined by Laura Kotler, the senior vice president of H.R. Stewardship and Sustainability at Kohler Co. Laura has been on the board of directors at Koehler since 1999, where she directs the company's worldwide human resources and environmental sustainability, DIY and social impact programs. She also oversees Kohler's renowned arts industry program. Last year, Laura was named a finalist by Fast Company as Innovative Leader of the Year. Welcome, Laura. Ladies, I'd like to start by talking through the importance of designing spaces for wellbeing. So the first question I have for you is this. How would you define wellbeing in your work? And two, can you give us a best in class example of design and wellbeing?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:04:00] I think every design project is an opportunity to create a sense of well-being. I think spaces are incredibly important. I think they act on us. I don't think they're just passive spaces that we're sitting in. I think every element in this space, the relationship of color, texture, scale, proportion, all of these things come together to make us feel a certain way. And when we feel a certain way, we're actually downloading certain chemicals in our body. We all know what it means to feel good and what it means to feel bad. And I think one of the things that we underrate is how much our environments can actually affect that and how much agency we have over that. And that, of course, becomes a personal question. It becomes a political question, it becomes a question of agency, of

responsibility of all of these different scales in which you address it. But I personally think about, with any client of mine that any project of mine, how can I design something so that it makes someone feel better after having engaged with it, whether it's touching an object or being in a space?

**Debbie Millman** [00:05:01] Can you give us an example of what you would consider best in class design for wellbeing?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:05:07] It's a it's a really interesting question because one of the things we have to understand is when we say we're designing for wellbeing, wellbeing is a very big, broad category. And as humans, we're all individuals. We come into every space with a certain mental state. We're hoping to leave that space with a better mental state than when we came into it. So every intervention that I make actually has to do with that. So there's never a same thing. But I would say perhaps one of the we've done some projects that are exemplary of this idea, and one of them is an installation that we actually did in Milan in 2017 where we designed three different interior spaces, all with the same function along with Google. And there's a lab at Hopkins, and we actually measured people's physical reactions to the space and showed them their reactions to the space as not just as numbers, but as beautiful images to show them that design wasn't subjective. And to paraphrase your words, design really matters, that you might think you feel good in a certain space, but you might actually your body might actually be doing something different. And the point of that was to really just show people that there is so much more we can do and that we should think about it. And currently there's a project that we're working on for Johns Hopkins, where we're looking at creating spaces that can reduce the stress of healthcare workers because this class of people were incredibly stressed before the pandemic, and we know now that's going through the roof. So we're working with several different kinds of techniques, both spatial and including immersive experiences, to do that kind of work.

**Debbie Millman** [00:06:43] Oh, I want to come back to you and ask you specifically about design and health care. Laura, talk about how you define design for wellbeing and if there's an example, you can point to do something, whether you've worked on it or not, that really is best in class, so it's not new to us.

**Laura Kohler** [00:07:00] In the early seventies we created the mission of Kohler Company, which is every day of our working lives. We strive to bring gracious living to those who touch our products and services, and we truly believe in the experience of the user. And because we make products that are intimate, we really walk in the shoes or have empathy, right? Use empathy to understand the person's experience. And we look at sound, we look at light, we look at sustainable solutions. We look at how someone feels. We look at all those elements when whether you're turning on a faucet, a shower, a toilet, to understand what that person will experience when they use the product. We have several products that drive wellbeing and I would say one is a brand new bathing experience called Stillness, which is an absolutely, simply, beautifully executed bath, that all the water moves over the edge and it's incredibly peaceful. There's light and sound with that. Then I'm a fan of bedsheets. I believe honestly that the hygiene that the Japanese have focused on for decades and centuries is something that the American population is yet to adopt. But that's all part of, you're now finding more functionality with toileting and how that can drive health and wellbeing and sustainability? Absolutely. And then the whole showering experience and how showering for many people is really part it's not just cleansing, it's actually part of relaxing, massaging all of that. So we are finding that

personally the bathroom really helps drive a sense of well-being. If it's curated and designed and put together with the person in mind.

**Debbie Millman** [00:08:45] Suchi, you have a rich, artistic and personal background that's steered your practice towards something that I mentioned in the introduction, neuroaesthetics. I'd love for you to talk a little bit more about what that is, how it's practiced and why it's important.

**Suchi Reddy** [00:09:07] Absolutely. So I grew up in India and I was lucky enough for the house that I grew up in. My father actually hired an architect. It wasn't done by a builder, which would have been normal. And I remember when I was about ten years old, I had this feeling that my house was like making me different than my friends. And, you know, when you're a kid, you just accept this idea. You just you don't question it. You're like, oh, yeah, of course it's doing that. And that's what kind of led me to be an architect. And about maybe 15 years ago, I was in a cab coming down, I think it was Madison Avenue. And I heard on the radio something about the blend of neuroscience and architecture. And I couldn't wait to get home and figure out what was going on, who was talking to each other. How could we actually learn more about this? Because one of the things that had me somewhat dissatisfied with my profession was that the idea of design had maybe restricted itself to discussions of style. And I really wanted to be able to find a more authentic way of addressing design. And I felt that if we brought it back to the body in a way in which all of us could understand it, that this is a very much more democratic way of understanding design. It crosses socioeconomic barriers. We could really talk about design in different language. So I came across this field called neuroaesthetics, which is a fairly new field in science. Anything less than 100 years is really new, and what it is a translational field is bridging science and design. And there are groups of researchers all over the world. Neuroscientists have been working on this forever because I think one of the fields that's made the largest advances in science is neuroscience in the last 50 years. And they've been looking at how does our brain, how does our body respond to all of this? And scientists, because they have to work in labs and they have to do the same experiment a certain number of times under the same conditions to be able to know what they're doing tend to have to do this work in VR. As architects and designers, we're doing this in real life and we're doing this with real people. And that connection, really looking at how they were, looking at knowledge of how our environments are affecting us and how we were looking at affecting how our environments could affect us really got me excited. And so I started looking into how can I get involved in this? What kinds of projects could I do? What could I learn to really become a designer that's perhaps not simply working for my instinct, but also understanding why my instinct and my skill are taking me in a certain direction. So to put it very simply, neuroaesthetics is the science of how experiences and atmospheres affect our brains in our bodies. So that could be anything. It could be a piece of music, it could be an artwork, it could be a conversation with someone, because we're constantly being affected by this. So to understand what it does to us, I think is the first step to really realizing what we can do.

**Debbie Millman** [00:11:56] Now, you mentioned that you first got this sort of intrinsic experience as a child in India and feeling like you were different, that you felt different in your home. Was that a good difference or did you feel excluded by that?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:12:13] Such an interesting question. No one's ever asked me that, but it was an epiphany and I accepted it as a good thing because I just accept it as a good thing. Actually, I don't think I thought of it. I just thought it was so interesting to feel like I had this

other protagonist in my life that wasn't just my family, that I had somewhere else that I could express to and be expressed upon.

**Debbie Millman** [00:12:36] Last year, for the first time in my life since I was four years old, I spent an overnight in the hospital. It was not not the surgery itself, which was an emergency appendectomy. I was fine. But the experience of being in the hospital was among the most horrific experiences I've had in my life. Everything about it was offensive. The things that they were making me wear—the bed, the sheets, the pillows, the toilet, the shower, every single aspect was an assault on my senses and my physical well-being. How has that happened? The place where you're supposed to be going to be cared for, to be made again is a place that actually is a detriment to your mental health. And it just struck me and when you were talking about research, I was looking at what you are doing with John Hopkins, I was just thinking, how can we make this better?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:13:40] I think actually one of the positive notes about that is health care is probably the place where maybe the most amount of advancement is being made in trying to understand sensory design better and really how it can help us because of people like you and your experience where there's such a burning need for it, most people in a dire state can feel better because of this. And we've actually done designs for prototypical hospital rooms where we're looking at separating the stress of like for children particularly, we're thinking of separating the stress of the child from the stress of the caretaker, simple things like that, which could be so important in reducing any important biomarker, whether it's heart rate variability, cortisol or any of those things which all affect all your absolute biomarkers. So there's huge opportunity and I will say there is great work being done. So I'm very hopeful that within the next decade or so, we're going to be seeing some very different experiences. I'm hoping not just in health care, but across platforms and technology.

**Elissa Black** [00:14:47] And now let's hear a brief message from our supporter, the Kohler Experience Center by Best Plumbing Supply.

**Laura Kohler** [00:14:54] Thank you for tuning in to our discussion about the responsibility of design. I'm Laura Kohler. And as a major lifestyle, kitchen, bath and energy brand, we keenly understand the importance behind the way our physical environment is organized, the way it looks, the way it functions, and the way we interact with it. It provides the foundation for our ability to seek out and achieve a greater sense of well-being. That's why we offer products that aid in well-being with smart technology like intelligent toilets, kitchen sprays that offer more time at home, cooking, more healthier eating and personalization like our components foster collection. All of these products are available at the Kohler Experience Center, located in the Flatiron District.

**Debbie Millman** [00:15:46] Laura, you've you have a real background in understanding the value of the type of home products that we have and how those products can really create a daily impression of our well-being and in our mental health. How do you think design decisions can include the widest possible range of considerations for mind, body and soul?

**Laura Kohler** [00:16:12] So we happened to be a kitchen bath company that also owns a hospitality business. We have hotels and spas, so we have our own incubator. And I think we learn we are constantly thrust into the shoes of the user. So think of the hotel guest. Think of the the person who stumbles into the spa for a day of restoration and retreat. So we take our products and we can test them out. We can understand what people need

when they need it. And we actually have more data than I think most companies do that really feed the innovation process. And it widens our lens as to really what people need and why they seek what they seek to find. Retreat and refreshing experiences. So for us, it's continuing to expand our net of inputs to make our solutions all encompassing. And it's also not just designing for ourselves, but looking at people who are not like us. And it also means that we have to have teams that are very diverse and we design in different parts of the world. So it's super important now as a global company that we incorporate the diverse and user, the diverse design teams, whether that's ethnic, whether that's socioeconomic. So all of those things influence the way we now think about wellbeing because we as the company are not just designing for us and we need to keep reminding ourselves of that. And again, walk in the shoes of the people around the world that are using the products.

**Suchi Reddy** [00:17:56] I think Laura brings up something really important. Laura, by the way, so much I have to ask you. So I have a lot of fields, three several questions that have a lot of conversation about this, because touch and water are just so important to anybody's sense of reconnecting to themselves. And I think that's super important. But I forgot where Laura was talking about the notion of working in with diverse teams, diverse groups, through a range of associate and an army condition. Right? This idea of always putting yourself in the shoes of someone else, I think that's a really important thing. And I will say that's one thing that working. You might not think that working in more of like a science based version of design doesn't make you more empathetic. But really, I think it all comes down to empathy. And I think this is one thing that through the pandemic, certainly when you saw everyone becoming so much more sensitive to their personal space, really feeling like we had nowhere to go, how can I remember I was on a webinar, I think, and I had someone call in who was suffering from mental issues and couldn't go anywhere, didn't have access to their normal resources. And the question was, what can I do within my home to make myself feel better? And whether that was you bring a plant or do a creative activity yourself, make something, even if it's not beautiful, so that it gives you that sense of pleasure, that sense of satisfaction. I think these are things that we can widen the role of the designer to really think about that. And when we do residential work or learn the kind of spaces that you guys create, it's easy to think about it because you're thinking about an individual. But when we expand that scale and we think about cities and we think about public space, it becomes even more important to really think about how can we be inclusive? How do we make a space that makes somebody else feel like they want to know what's going on, on the other end of the park, that they want to be nice to that park? And a friend of mine just said something to me the other day that I thought was so wise. She said, the nicer I am to myself, the nicer I am to other people. But that's what I want space to do. I just want the space to be nice to you. And part of that is people feeling like space is made for them. That sense of agency can be the simplest thing, doesn't have to be expensive. It doesn't have to be the most beautiful thing you've ever seen. Although I would agree with your previous panelists that a lot of innovation comes from that end of the design spectrum. It's important that people feel that space and things are made for them, you know, that they respond to a need that they have. I think that's another thing that as designers, we really need to refocus on empathy and we need to refocus on agency.

**Debbie Millman** [00:20:24] How do you do that? Laura mentioned the fact that they have built in focus groups, ethnographic focus groups, working with some of their customers and audience. How do you do that as a practitioner? How do you get someone sitting in a park to want to go to the other side of the park to feel included or to talk to someone else?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:20:42] Well, for for one thing, good architects and designers have done this for centuries without all of the things that I'm talking about. I will say it's really just the fact that we're now just trying to acquire more and more tools to be able to tell us that. So if we were designing a park, for instance, and we wanted to make sure that the circulation was working, the one way you can do it is test it, which is how we would often do it the other way. Now we have so many tools of understanding how people use space to really know that. So to even watch patterns to sense how people are already using a space, bringing in this element of sustainability, because that's very high on our list as well of elements that we really want to push in our projects to understand how things already work and whether it's a private client or it's someone new or it's an institution or someone I've worked with for a very long time, which we do have several clients that we've worked this for decades. I there's a level of familiarity with the subject, and I think that's the first thing we need to do in order to make that happen.

**Debbie Millman** [00:21:43] I want to talk to you about the resilience center at Johns Hopkins. Talk a little bit about what that actually is. And then how do you go about responding to senses and wellbeing in an environment like a resilience center?

**Suchi Reddy** [00:22:03] So this is an amazing pilot project that's put together by several groups, one of them being a lab at Hopkins and another being an organization that's looking at the welfare of the health care workers who responds to people when they're stressed to be able to give them counseling and support. And there was clearly such a need for this. So what we're working on is creating a space where we offer spaces for people to go and relax, because that's not something that you would think you would find in a hospital for the workers, the quality of the lighting. That's the first thing we adjust. It was interesting to me that you didn't bring that up. You were talking about clothing and sheets and the toilet, but the lighting, I thought would have been number one.

**Debbie Millman** [00:22:43] No, the clothing was number one.

[00:22:46] Gotcha. There's that, too. So using things like lighting, like texture, like even like creating a hallway where if someone doesn't have the time to use any of the facilities being offered in the center, that just passing through the hallway might bring their cortisol levels down because it's different than everywhere else. The colors are modulated, the lighting is different, and there's limitations to that in the hospital because we have to look at clean ability being able to this is has to be zoned slightly differently in inside of hospital. So there are challenges to that. But the idea is to provide people with different spaces, whether it's a biophilic space, an immersive space, a VR opportunity to relax, a place to meet their coworkers and do things together, those kinds of things. What is a resilience center? I guess it's a center that will improve resilience in the face of adversity every single day. So it gives them a place to bounce back.

**Debbie Millman** [00:23:46] Laura, we're in a time now where resilience is sort of a requirement in the work environment and you are managing the human resources of Kohler. How do you navigate through the benefits of having new technologies that help us connect but also the need for people to be off those technologies because of this blurring now of the home work space? How do you manage to encourage people to take care of their well-being when there's this tension between technology and wellbeing?

**Laura Kohler** [00:24:30] So mental health has been ever more important in the last two years. We, I think, overindexed on technology out of necessity in the beginning of COVID, through most of COVID, in fact, we ran the company in a remote way for much of of

COVID. Our manufacturing facilities stayed on site. We're now at a place where we are encouraging face to face interaction. We believe that it will help our associates turn on and off work and to get energized from each other. We know that technology and face to face will always be in a different place. We are forever changed in terms of what we've gone through in the last two years. But we are encouraging people to turn off their devices and not work all night, not message each other all night and to take breaks. We're doing Tech Free Fridays, things like that, stopping meetings at noon and encouraging people to just do other things but not be on their device. We are encouraging people to come together and be intentional and collaborate and not sit in a room, in an office building, on a teams meeting when you could be actually talking to the person instead of messaging them on the next floor. So things like that. But we have to reteach and know that technology is this looming thing in our lives that we have to control too. And we have to get back together to collaborate and create energy and this engagement with each other. So it's reteaching and getting people to turn off and to restore and refresh and to self-care. Because if we don't and I always say we're not sprinting, we're actually running the marathon, you have to rest along the way. You have to take care of yourself along the way and family first. If you can't if you don't take care of your family, you can't be your best self. So really it's all those things. And companies like ours are in much more of a position now to drive mental health and well-being at work so that our associates can be their best. And it's a different role that we play now than we did two and a half years ago.

**Debbie Millman** [00:26:35] Yeah. So you talk about the juxtaposition of complicity and technology, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that.

**Suchi Reddy** [00:26:42] Right now, I do think that we have to come to terms with our relationship with technology. I think we've entered into it rather in a non self-aware manner. And what we didn't know, what we didn't know and we don't. But I think we're at this point where we can actually see how far we're coming. I think it's actually a crucial point where we really need to look at how are we using all of this data we're collecting, what are the lenses through which we're looking at this data? Is it really just for business or are there two lenses like empathy lenses, like collaboration? Maybe those are the ones that we should be slicing the data for because data is numbers and we really have to just it all depends on our wisdom and how we're using that. And I guess the best way is in which I'm able to explore this is through my installation work. I've got an installation that's at the Smithsonian. I ask people to give me a word for their future. And we use artificial intelligence and machine learning to read their emotion, their voice, and give them back a kind of a light mandala that reflects their voice for the future. And in the center of the sculpture, there's a piece that puts together everyone's visions of the future constantly. So the colors are all mixing, and you get this sense that, Oh, you just said something and it's affecting somebody else and you're thinking about it. So I think I try to bring awareness to that kind of responsibility with technology, and it's easier to do through our work than it is through design. But I don't think that's limited. I think it's just we haven't gotten there yet. You don't really think about it. But I also think there is a quality, an emotional quality to digital space. And I think we haven't thought about that. I think we're all pretty much 5050.

**Debbie Millman** [00:28:25] What do you mean by the emotionality of digital space?

[00:28:28] I think that when you're using your phone, when you're immersed in this world, what's actually going on, dopamine tokens of enjoyment, is it only that? Is it other things? What might you be looking at in order to do that? And how can everybody who's providing digital content be thinking about how to steer that? But I think it requires a huge amount of responsibility on the part of people. Just hold back a little bit and really think about not just

how we're using things, but how we're also offering things to be used. And there is a space to be entertained. There is a space to connect with other people. All of those things are important, but perhaps as something else we can do. I don't know what that is yet, but I want to be able to think about it because I think it's if we don't, we're just going to continue the same way we are and just kind of feel like we're hurtling towards something we don't understand. And that's never made me feel good.

**Debbie Millman** [00:29:20] The last thing I want to talk to you about is a common denominator that you both share. Suchi, you have spent a lot of your life in India. You've brought a lot of thinking about your heritage and legacy to the United States in the work that you're doing here. And I know that you, Laura, have spent a lot of time in India as well. So talk can you both talk a little bit about what you've been able to glean from the culture in India, what you've brought back to the United States in ways that may have surprised you?

**Laura Kohler** [00:29:53] Sure, I'll go. We've been in India now about 15 years, so we've built the brand from nothing and I think we had a lot to learn. We made a lot of mistakes. It is a fascinating culture, rich in history and vibrance and creativity. Much more advanced than we understood so many of our best in class practices, whether it's I.T., human resources, things are coming out of India that are informing the rest of the world and how we operate. Also this concept of water and access to clean water and safe toileting is honestly life sustaining. Two things that if you don't have them, you can't live. And I think that for us, it really helped us inform our safe water for all platform that we're really driving in all of our businesses. And that becomes real when people can't find water to drink every day. It becomes real when little girls can't go to school because they're menstruating. And that's embarrassing and there's not a private place to use at their school. And those basic needs become very important to a company like us. And we realize that we can inform that and make it better and help those communities live differently. And I think those are the things that we've learned. And India is helping us be a better company.

**Suchi Reddy** [00:31:27] Thanks, Laura. It's always so nice to hear that. I'm very proud of my heritage. I take it with me everywhere. It's also very interesting. I've lived here a very long time as well, and people will often say, Oh, you don't sound so Indian or whatever it is to sound Indian to other people. But I think my spiritual heritage is really what informs me and takes me forward. And I take that into my work, into my practice, into the culture of my studio, because it's really about the fact that all of us are connected. And I think it's the same thing with space. I do think that we're all just vibrations and we're all together here and let's figure out how to make this something that takes all of us to a better place. And that's what I really carry if I had to distill my heritage down to one little thing.

**Debbie Millman** [00:32:12] How has your heritage helped you think about well-being in your practice?

[00:32:18] Well, it's an interesting thing to be an immigrant. It gives me really this place of like always being in the middle and being able to look at things from two different spaces and really at least and really understanding what it might feel like to someone who's not from here or someone who doesn't know what you're talking about. That's always in the back of my mind. So that kind of thing I think is extremely important as it goes along and we all get entrenched on different lines of different ideas. I think it's even more important to remember that what I'm working in is a boundary less discipline. At least that's how I see design. And to think in a boundaryless way, I think, is what we really need to do.



[00:33:02] Thank you both so much for sharing your thoughts about design and wellbeing. Thank you to our audience for joining us on this special edition of NYCxDESIGN's The Mic. Thank you again Suchi Reddy and Laura Koehler for inspiring us with your insights into design and wellbeing. Follow NYCxDESIGN on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and subscribe to the newsletter for the latest in New York City design.