

## Design for Community

**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 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 third episode, "Design for Community" featured guest Michael Chen, principal at Michael K. Chen Architecture and co-founder of Design Advocates, along with Walei Sabry, who is dedicated to digital accessibility at NYC Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication. Without further adieu, let's dive in to "The Responsibility of Design".

**Debbie Millman** [00:01:13] From NYCxDESIGN, this is the Mic, a podcast that offers an inside look into New York City's most creative minds. I'm your host, Debbie Millman. From projects to products, inspirations and more, during this 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 live 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'm currently joined by an expert duo of speakers to look at what it means to design for community. And we'll look at how practitioners and creatives can mindfully and empathically design for all. We'll examine current design barriers that exist for people with disabilities and ask how design decisions can be more equitable and include the widest possible range of considerations. We'll explore how places, spaces and environments can support diverse activities and communities and hear from two design experts about human based design and the importance of participation. Our first guest today is Michael Chen, an architect known for his collaborative projects with an equity lens. Michael's work emphasizes urban infrastructure and how communities work together. He's the principal of Michael K Chen Architecture. He's taught at Pratt for 15 years and in the wake of COVID, was inspired to build Design Advocates, a network of designers dedicated to leveraging design assets and capabilities through collaborative pro-bono work and advocacy. Welcome back to The Mic. So wonderful to be speaking with you again. I'm also very pleased to be joined by Walei Sabry, who is currently the first digital accessibility coordinator for the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication, responsible for making sure the city's digital products work for people with disabilities. Walei identifies as blind and has used his career and experiences with blindness as an opportunity to champion digital accessibility across the tech industry. Hello, Walei, welcome to The Mic.

**Walei Sabry** [00:03:53] Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Elissa Black** [00:03:55] Today, we're going to talk about design for community. Walei, I'd like to ask you the first question. Can you share some of the ways that design currently creates barriers for people with disabilities?

**Walei Sabry** [00:04:08] Absolutely. I'd like to start by just giving a picture of how many people with disabilities there are in New York City. We have almost 1 million people with disabilities, and that's about 11% of the population. And it's estimated that worldwide 15 to 20% of the world's population identify as people with disabilities. So you might not see us

often, but there's a lot of us out there. So it's important to remember us in design. So as a blind person, some of the things that I encounter as barriers in physical infrastructure could be the way that things are exclusionary, but in an unintended way. So if I'm walking through the sidewalk and there's a protruding object and that object is at a high altitude, I'm using my cane what's called a white cane, and it is close to the ground. So if there's something that is not rooted to the ground and it sticks out, right, my cane is not going to detect that. And that is an obstacle that I'm going to definitely clip, either on my waist or my shoulder or my arm. Or worst case scenario, my face. And I definitely don't want that. And that's just one thing, whether it's scaffolding, right? The way that scaffolding has those horizontal bars, nothing to give clearance underneath it. So my cane often goes right underneath those horizontal bars, making it a lot more difficult for me to traverse areas where there are scaffolding, whether it's design of construction or just streets figuring out where to go. The main sort of barrier for blindness is access to information. How do I know what street I'm on if I can't read the street sign? How do I know what address I'm at? If I if there is no signage that I that is accessible to me, how do I find my way from point A to point B if there are no tactile markers anywhere, really that I that are made for me that have some kind of logic and thought in them? And when we're talking about infrastructure and housing and transportation, a lot of these things have traditionally excluded people with disabilities in the way that they have been designed. So I can finally find an employer that's willing to hire me, but will I be able to take the train and get there? Is there an accessible subway station? This is a problem that people who use wheelchairs often face here. Even folks who are from outer state who might get a job here in New York City and try to find an accessible, affordable apartment. And they won't be able to. And we've had situations like that unfold where folks have had their offer rescinded because they can't find an accessible place to live. So it's important to remember that these things might not affect you right as an able-bodied person, but they make a huge difference in somebody's life. I want to be able to get a job I want, but people with disabilities want to be able to have meaningful employment and contribute to society. But we also need accessible housing so we can live. We need access to accessible transportation so we can get to the places that we need to, whether it's an education or an employment, or just hanging out at a restaurant or movie theater.

**Debbie Millman** [00:07:28] Walei, what's being done in terms of improving the way that people with disabilities are able to access the subway or able to figure out what street they're on or what house number they might be looking for? Do you know of things that are currently being done to improve these types of circumstances?

**Walei Sabry** [00:07:48] Absolutely. There's been a lot of developments over the years, things in technology. Right. Apps and GPS, but also just things in the infrastructure. When we think about accommodating people with disabilities, we're not just thinking about disabled people, also thinking about people of all ages. Right, because not all disabled people have access to the Internet or have smartphones. So there are wonderful apps out there that could be utilized. One example is an app called NaviLens from Spain, and they use some advanced QR codes to create an augmented reality for reading signage. And the technology that they've created is much more precise than your average QR code, so you can actually capture it from up to 30 feet away at a 60 degree angle. So you don't actually have to be able to center it or see it to actually capture it. And then it can tell you things like whatever sign says, right, this is this street or this is X room and even give some extra information. That is a little bit about how technology can help in terms of physical infrastructure. Obviously, we all know ramps are very useful things like elevators, right? Lowering things like lowering light switches. Lowering things so that people that use wheelchairs or little people can also reach them. Things that are very common and pretty

necessary, as well as tactile markers. So there is tactile guide ways, raised strips of whether they're bumps or lines that act as a guide way for blind people to get from point A to point B. And the MTA actually did a wonderful pilot in Jay Street Metro Tech, where they've implemented some of these things. So they have tactile guide ways that blind people can follow throughout the train station and get to wherever they want. But they went another step ahead of that. So there's this myth about Braille signs. They're there, but how do blind people find them? They solve that problem. These tactile gateways lead you right into a Braille sign. So wherever there's a split and a decision to make, whether I want to go to the R train or the train ride platforms, there is a pole and that is led to by the Tactile Guide Way and it has a sign on it with Braille and raised print and arrows that point towards the relative areas. With that, you can actually use those two features along with the novel lens, right? So you can have multi functional multi ways to access this environment.

**Debbie Millman** [00:10:25] Thank you for sharing so much important information. I am so grateful to know about the things that are happening now. Michael, you do a lot of work in participatory design. What does the participatory design process actually look like?

**Michael Chen** [00:10:43] Yeah, I think a really basic level participatory design is about including other voices, right? Radically diversifying the people who are at the table. I think that on a deeper level, it is a little bit about rethinking the paradigm that we have for what design is. In our work, we are fond of making a transition from designing for people to designing with people. It has a lot to do with us designers recalibrating our own relationship to our own expertise and relying on listening, coming before, before our expertise, right? Where I think as designers, we're frequently trained and we're well rehearsed at needing to have an answer for every solution and are needing to have awareness about every issue that has to be contemplated within the context of a design process or a design project. And I think designing with people is the process of including as many different voices in the design process. It's not something that is separate from or additional to the design process, it is the design process. A really lovely example, I was working on a project at a shelter in the Bronx called Concourse House that serves a community of women who have young children who are making the transition out of homelessness into more permanent housing. The Project is a series of outdoor learning environments. They have a very beautiful garden out by concourse houses. That's in an old historic building on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. So the project is nominally an outdoor learning environment, and a really important dimension of that project was actually developing a series of workshops and sort of design methodologies that would engage more directly the women and the children who live at Concourse House. And that was in part to realize or create pathways for their experience to to inform. We're going to become the design of the pavilions. But it was also a way of building trust. Without community there was no way to design for that population. We really needed to be able to put on our beginner hats and be comfortable enough to enter that environment as beginners and to really use the opportunity to interface with with that community to to learn about their experiences. And so the design process such as that is actually a series of arts and crafts workshops that are conducted with the moms and with the kids at Concourse House, and they're led through a series of making processes. The result and the thing that it produces a kind of learned experience of them utilizing their garden, which appeared to be just a thing to look at and not really engage in. The other thing that it does is it produced a series of artifacts. So the team developed a solar printing project using the use and flowers from the garden. We just wrapped a wind chime and made a project that sort of produced a series of sound elements that the moms and the kids made themselves. They take that object back to their space in the shelter and they use it to decorate the their own space.

But those are the elements that will ultimately become the components of the outdoor environment. So there is a sound pavilion that's made up of these wind chimes. Those are kind of a learning environment that's made up of these sort of solar printed fabrics. And so there's a sort of mutual production that is being generated. And the design of the pavilions themselves is emerging out of that process.

**Debbie Millman** [00:14:12] It's so interesting that there seems to be for so long in the design process, so to speak, been a real disconnect between usability, accessibility and equity. And I'm interested in the fact that you brought up working with people that are unhomed, because what I've noticed in not only New York City, but in cities all across the United States, there are designs that are created that seem intended to exclude. So, for example, bus stations, bus stops, park benches, airport benches, they all very intentionally have barriers so that people won't lay horizontally. And okay, I can understand maybe why that decision was made, but it seems particularly cruel for people that don't have a place to live, to then be excluded from the place that the only places that they have. What can we do to change some of this way of thinking that intends to exclude people? It's a big question, but a very big one that's unscripted. So Michael did not have an opportunity to think about this ahead of time.

**Michael Chen** [00:15:26] I think that certainly in the public sphere, there is, I think, an increasing awareness that that the physical manifestation of our built environment is a reflection of our kind of collective values, whether we have had agency or whether we've made decisions about that or not. There is a kind of reflection of those values. And so I think there is a limit to what can be accomplished exclusively in the context of the design disciplines and design processes.

**Debbie Millman** [00:15:53] Right, its values as well.

**Michael Chen** [00:15:55] I would categorize that in the same way that, you know, there are a number of initiatives within the design community. One comes to mind is the British organization that's now taking hold everywhere that is now as Architects Declare. So, U.S. Architects Declare is about design studios making commitments to comporting themselves and producing work that are consistent with the human recommendations regarding changes to the built environment to combat climate change. I'm not avoiding your question. I'm just coming at it in a slightly different way, which is to say that there are, I think, agreement among the design community to practice design in a particular way. And this is one this is one measure that we can take as a community to combat a series of inequitable regulatory environments or design briefs that come down to us. Another is about sharing resources, and this is something that we and Design Advocates have really tried to do and are really dedicated to spending some energy in our upcoming term, working on which is to develop some language, some specification language, some professional tools that can be utilized in the context of people's professional practices. Those ones that were developing are mainly around labor and worker exploitation, but I think that the ambition is certainly to make that specification language, that contract language, the sort of rehearsed lines that it can be provided or a kind of information that can provide it to clients about we don't do that, and this is why we don't do that. I participated in a conversation once with a well-known architect who shall remain nameless, who was trying to explain to the to the audience that architecture and architects are obliged to be congenial to power. And I think that this is a kudos to him for articulating that and in such bold terms. But I think that somehow, certainly our generation of designers is very much not interested in perpetuating.

**Debbie Millman** [00:17:47] Yeah, Walei, please.

**Walei Sabry** [00:17:49] Quick answer, and this is an idealistic answer to the question, how do we change that? And from my experience with the disability community, exposure is a big thing. Our history as a disability community is that a long time ago we were just shuffled off into institutions like nursing homes and people didn't want to see us in public. And the more we get out there and are exposed and are included in things, right? And the more the people expose themselves to different populations, whether it's people who are houseless or people with disabilities, the more we have a chance to design better for those communities.

**Elissa Black** [00:18:26] And now let's hear a message from our supporter, the Kohler Experience Center by Best Plumbing Supply.

**Laura Kohler** [00:18:33] 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 understand the importance of design being inclusive and focusing on providing experiences through our product innovations such as Kohler's new statement Hand showers that are designed with easy push buttons to change spray function, adjustable slide bars for positioning and contemporary styling to provide all users with a luxurious showering experience. You can see this product on display at the Kohler Experience Center located in the Flatiron District.

**Debbie Millman** [00:19:16] Thank you. While you have a front row seat to the opportunities and challenges that ensures that advancements in technology are accessible, how can we best ensure true accessibility for all and really ensure that new technologies are indeed inclusive? So for example, the what you mentioned before about designing signage for people who identify as blind but will only help if they're able to get to the signage. How do we avoid these what seems to be very obvious snafus in the design process so that these things don't happen?

**Walei Sabry** [00:20:00] It's a big question, but I think there needs to be that holistic approach and multiple parties need to be sort of at the table planning together. First of all, participation is key, right? Getting people with disabilities to be participants in design is still very much needed, but also not just having representatives there, as there are folks out there that maybe consider them disability adjacent or maybe even accessibility experts, but aren't disabled people. And while they are able to fulfill certain criterias, there's just some certain real world experiences that they will never have and not be able to bring to the table. When it comes to planning, we need to think of it as a holistic thing. So what is working on the signs where it needs to be working with people with disabilities, but also the infrastructure at that whole experience. Once you enter a train station, that whole sort of from point A to point B needs to be thought out for a blind person with the blind community so that blind people are telling you what they usually do when they first enter a strange train station. What kind of areas work for them and what kind of areas don't? Right, because architecture can be very enabling or disabling a train station like Grand Central Station, which is full of big open spaces. The sound there is very confusing and very disorienting for someone like me and certain train stations like Times Square where there's like lots of trains coming and on top of that, lots of people. But on top of that, lots of performances. Right? All of these things need to be thought about. Right, in a holistic manner, not just how do we make this one part accessible to a blind person, but how do we make that whole experience accessible? So we could create tests where the train stations are empty and we just prioritize the blind folks and see how they're going to

interact with the environment and are they going to have a successful experience or not. But then those blind people eventually are going to have to use the train station in its natural setting, and there's going to be so much more obstacles and so much more sounds. So it's important to think about that experience in as a real way as possible while bringing in the disability community from the beginning. Often in my work as somebody who works on digital products, people are coming to me at the very last day of the product lifecycle like, we built this thing. Is it accessible? And so if you're not thinking about accessibility from day zero, right, in your discovery phase, in your research phase, bringing in folks with disabilities to give you their input, it's even better to actually have people with disabilities on your team. There are disabled designers out there. There are disabled architects. There are disabled developers out there making sure that you have folks that are part of your team that are going to have that passion and also that buy in right for accessibility and want to represent their communities. And I have a lot more success when we are earlier on in the phase, whether it's straight from the beginning or at least somewhat in the middle before prototyping or even during prototyping and testing, but as early as possible is really the best way to include accessibility. Because what will happen is if you included in the end or as an afterthought, it actually is going to be a very bad quality experience because you've already made decisions that have excluded people with disabilities and a lot of those decisions, they can't be undone. You can't take the staircase away that you were already put there in certain ways. Digital assets are very much like that too. If you've already built your whole platform, it's going to be harder to change the inner workings of it. You're really going to be able to change some of the more like front facing superficial things.

**Debbie Millman** [00:24:01] Michael, in addition to your practice and your work as a Professor, you have formed the organization Design Advocates. I mentioned this in in your intro. Can you tell us a bit of that origin story and the Open Streets Initiative?

**Michael Chen** [00:24:18] Sure. Design Advocates was born of the pandemic. We formed the organization in March of 2020. Right during the beginning of the end of the first shutdown, it started as a hub. It started as an Instagram DM kind of conversation among five offices. And in the first in the last two years, about 250 design practices and volunteers participated in Design Advocates projects. And we completed about 100 projects, all initially related to pandemic relief and design aid. It was something that we were observing as kind of small practitioners that at the beginning of the pandemic, that many of the kind of larger institutional actors, even governmental actors, were very comfortable offering guidance around around the pandemic. But there were very few entities that were interested in providing aid to help communities, small businesses and nonprofits connect the dots between the guidance that they being offered and the realities of their spaces and their operations. And so that that really was the enterprise of the organization. At the beginning, we retooled it somewhat recently as the pandemic has changed into a different kind of emergency, because to focus more directly on on partnering with communities of need and finding opportunities to produce design and of novel and interesting ways, we're doing that in sort of what we're calling terms, is that these six month blocks of time where we work on a fixed number of initiatives to really try to bring them to some sort of tangible conclusion, and they run the gamut. Now our projects from we just launched the first term in April, we've got a public library project that was out on Long Island that was born of a pandemic kind of relief, but now has become a larger renovation. We're doing a number of projects in partnership with homeless communities and shelters, some serving women and children, some serving seniors. And we're doing a couple of other sort of really interesting bizarro projects that that are very much values aligned but are kind of unusual. We partnered with a coalition of Internet providers. One of the bigger actors is called NYC

Mesh and we are providing technical support and file and filing and permanent filing support and also storytelling and community engagement around installations to provide low cost or free wireless broadband services to native developments and also homeless shelters, because we're just kind of like really fascinating brush against the sort of essential infrastructure of our modern age. And we all know that, particularly in the last couple of years, if you were a child who lived in public housing or homeless shelter and you didn't have access to broadband, you didn't go to school. So it's become the kind of availability of broadband in the efforts to bridge the digital divide. And York City, 25% of New Yorkers do not have access to broadband, affordable access to broadband. This is something that we are really starting to dive in too deeply. And in addition to the more recognizable forms of values for where design work.

**Debbie Millman** [00:27:19] And how does Open Streets fit into that?

**Michael Chen** [00:27:21] So the Open Streets Initiative is a really interesting thing, and I think it also beautifully dovetails with some of the points that Walei is making, which is that we are also in the midst of a once in a generation kind of reconsideration of the public realm in the city through programs like the Open Streets Program, through outdoor dining, recontextualizing what the kind of contested space of the parking lane and the sidewalk really are. And those are long lasting kind of architectural changes to the built environment that we all share. Why should the parking land be the space for relatively low cost storage of a private automobile when an open restaurant space could also become a safe space late at night, a place a source of lighting? Some of the disability advocates that we've been working with as part of the Open Restaurants program observed that in many instances, because of the existing built fabric in the city, many restaurants are not actually accessible and that their urban designing pavilions are much more actually physically accessible.

**Michael Chen** [00:28:21] And so we've partnered with a number of community organizations who are operating open streets. We did about 40 kind of incidents of restaurant aid at the beginning of the pandemic. We've also helped in collaboration with NYCxDESIGN and the Economic Development Corporation and AIA. We hope to stand up a citywide program to provide pro-bono design services to any restaurant looking to to open outdoors. And that has all been about, I think, trying to trying to take advantage of the fact that that the sort of stranglehold that the status quo had on the public realm of the street really gave way at the beginning of the pandemic. And we're in the sort of incredible period where everything in the street is a prototype. And so I think it's a really exciting time to engage that realm.

**Debbie Millman** [00:29:02] I just saw a redesigned outdoor space that the Empire Diner did on 9th Avenue and 22nd Street, which actually took the aesthetics of their space and married it out to their outdoor space. And it was the first time I've seen that New York City. And I was thrilled, really thrilled, because New York City deserves that type of care taken to these outdoor spaces.

**Michael Chen** [00:29:28] Yeah, absolutely. And it's been a it's been a bumpy road, obviously. And there's a lot to learn. There's a lot to improve on. The city is trying there are many people in many public agencies, many nonprofits, many design firms that are thinking, working, trying that experience better for everybody.

**Debbie Millman** [00:29:44] So it does provide some really exciting opportunities. Well, my last question is for you. Do you have any examples of some of the more exciting

improvements you've seen in the way designers are creating more accessible environments? What's giving you hope and optimism for the future?

**Walei Sabry** [00:30:03] Yeah, I'd like to sort of preface it. I like this analogy of a village. It takes a village to raise a child. If our child is accessibility, everybody should do their part. And I would say accessibility sort of in its infancy stages. So there's a lot of room and a lot of work to be done. That being said, the fact that the open streets structures are accessible, that opens up a whole lot of new doors for folks with disabilities to engage with businesses that they couldn't engage with before, because a lot of businesses, unfortunately, have a step or some some barrier to getting inside. In terms of some project that I've been excited about. I mentioned that before the NaviLens app, MTA has implemented that in at least one train station and on one bus line on 23rd Street by a lighthouse guild. They're an organization of service line folks. They've also implemented it, their building, New York City. We're actually looking to start doing that within signage for our buildings. If all goes well and we keep moving in this direction, we will have hopefully some consistency between wayfinding indoors, wayfinding in streets and wayfinding in train stations and bus stations, which would be totally exciting because a lot of times these parts of the infrastructure don't speak to each other, at least in a disability sense. So I could easily imagine that MTA might end up having their own wayfinding system, and then D.O.T. might have their own wayfinding system. And then every building that cares anyway will have their own wayfinding system. And it'll be a constant struggle for blind people to constantly keep learning new things. But if we use kind of one that is used throughout consistently, then if I learn how to use the app that MTA uses, I also know how to use the same app for wayfinding in the streets or in a new building. So that's exciting and hopefully we will have a future like that. And in terms of the work that I do, I'm also excited because I've started in 2016 as the digital accessibility coordinator, and since then we've worked on over 200 websites to make them more accessible and city agencies are posting on social media or they're starting to post on social media with accessibility in mind. So when we post images, we put out text, which is a feature that you can add a description to your image so that a blind person can get some meaningful information out of it and things like that.

**Debbie Millman** [00:32:38] Thank you so much. Thank you to our audience for joining us today for this special edition of NYCxDESIGN's The Mic. Thank you to our guests Michael Chen and Walei Sabry for inspiring us with their insights into designing for community. Follow at NYCxDESIGN on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. And please subscribe to the newsletter for the latest in New York City design.