

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

[Intro Music]

- TOSIN:** Initially I used to get annoyed when they say female architect.
- ‘Cos I used to feel like, “oh why do they have to qualify as such? I am an architect first and foremost; I just happen to be female.”
- LADE:** I think the only context in which I have used women or female designer is in reference to SheDesigns.
- I can’t recall a time where I ever explicitly referred to myself or someone else as a woman designer.
- TOSIN:** But I also have noticed that as a genre its quite small.
- It’s also given me an opportunity to be propelled because then people sit up, “wow she must be doing so well!
- How did she get there?
- What did she do?”
- LADE:** There are so few women who do X-thing that you have to qualify X with female for people to know that, “oh, there are women that do this thing.”
- It can be in some sense important to put to that qualifier and say, “that is a female scientist.”
- Because women are so easily erased.
- TOSIN:** It is actually an advantage point.
- I have accepted it and I am using it to ride my wave.
- LADE:** But then on the other hand it is just annoys me.
- My feminist agenda is to dismantle gender.
- When I say gender, it doesn’t mean anything I mean like all these, “oh, a woman should be this”.
- LADE:** like it doesn’t make any sense [laughs] to me
- And this is even before my “feminist” awakening.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

music

TOSIN: My name is Tosin.

I am very proud to be a practising architect, designer, entrepreneur.

LADE: My name is Lade.

I currently lead a design team at a health/biotech company.

TOSIN: I was born in Ibadan in Oyo State in Nigeria. I grew up in Lagos.

LADE: I am 24.

I live in Lagos, Nigeria.

I went to the University of Lagos, which is in Yaba.

TOSIN: I left Lagos at 16 to go to school in the UK.

I went for my A levels in Harrogate.

After that I went to Kingston University to do my first degree in architecture.

Then I wasn't really sure I wanted to be an Architect

I did a masters in urban design at UCL.

I finished my architecture part two at the Architecture Association in London

I sailed the nest of academia into professional life.

I worked at Office of Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam for a cool house, very prestigious office.

It is a really interesting place to work and the magic is real.

We got to work on absolutely ridiculous projects. Things that even make sense you know.

But it really gave you the opportunity to expand your mind.

It was almost like an extension of school.

And then I moved back to Nigeria and I worked at James Cubitt Architect.

But guess the field of design in Nigeria is not terribly kind of fully developed.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

There is one thing to building projects and another thing to do design building projects.

So, I started to get restless and it was actually after four years of practising there that I now set up my own office — CMDesign Atelier.

So, I got the opportunity to direct the work into the kind of jobs that I wanted to do

Because I have been able to carve out this space and carve out an identity that it's made it easy to kind of, I guess, be celebrated and excel within my field.

LADE:

I build products. I improve products and experiences and businesses to an extent, and teams but the bulk of it focuses on like designing products and experiences and systems and processes.

So, started out doing purely UX research and then I started doing some more like interaction design, information architecture, content strategy, all of that.

I describe my work as everything in design apart from User Interface Design.

Eight/Nine years ago I met someone on twitter, we became friends and then he started a digital marketing company and I started writing for the company.

He used to work at CcHUB in Yaba (Co-Creation Hub), and CcHUB is basically one of the earlier like incubators/accelerators in Nigeria.

So, I just started going there, cos it was close to my school.

And then I got into this women entrepreneur meet up and I am talking to somebody there and talking about, "oh I studied Psychology"

And she was like, "oh!" I should talk to the UX designer guy at CcHUB.

So, she introduces me to him — Kenneth.

He said, "oh! I have this meet up that is for designers that happens every last Thursday of the month. You should come"

And so, I went for the first one and I was like, "Hmm, this is interesting. This way better than writing code."

Like I could see the connection between UX and psychology.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

And so, after like three years of attending the meet up, Kenneth sent me a message one day and says, “oh, we are hiring.”

Because the team was made up of mostly men their preference was to hire a woman — ah gender balance.

I said, “Yah sure. Definitely. Why not!”

My interview didn’t go very great but **[laughs]**

You know what? They took a chance on me and it was a very pivotal moment in my life.

I think the meaning of ____ doesn’t come from like you as the person designing. It comes from the people who are using it. You can have your own meaning as the person creator of thing but if it doesn’t translate to the people who are using it — is what they think that it means that it means.

Creativity is basically being able to export something that wasn’t there before, something that doesn’t exist and then you make it exist.

If you draw a fan you are not the first person to draw a fan, there are fans everywhere **[laughs]**

But that your particular drawing of a fan did not exist and now it does

TOSIN:

Design is my lifestyle.

I think, eat, sleep, dream design.

There are two ways you can design.

You can either design from being a genius.

Geniuses are very rare — where you create something that never existed before.

But most people design from experience or from an evolution of experiences to create something.

For example, I look at somebody like Zaha Hadid who was a very famous Architect.

She achieved so much in her lifetime.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

Now, she was one of those people that you border on genius.

In fact, its genius because she created stuff that never existed.

I respect her craft

I respect what she attained

I respect the work that she did

LADE:

When I started out four years ago there was probably one other UX Researcher that I knew.

Her title wasn't UX researcher, she is a service designer.

Her name was _____ and she is basically my unofficial mentor because I used to disturb her all the time.

And so, she also like gave me advise on how to tackle a project, sent me like job opportunities and all those kinds of things.

TOSIN:

I will honestly say I am actually genuinely influenced by everything that surrounds me.

I didn't have a mentor.

A lot decisions I've made have been trial and error and I have been very fortunate that they have worked.

Maybe if I had a mentor I might speak differently in that capacity.

Generally everything that I have ever seen, experienced been around all influenced my work.

That's why for me being a designer on this side it is very important to live through experiences

My experiences working in Europe, going to school in Europe, my experiences of travel, my experiences of living and working in Nigeria all influenced how I create design.

[music]

LADE:

My mum is kinda of like aware of stuff

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

I didn't have to explain to her what my job was

TOSIN:

My parents were never dogmatic in pushing any particular direction.

My mum is a Nurse

My Father is a Gynaecologist

My father has a very famous cousin who is an artist — who is a very celebrated artist in Nigeria, Kolade Oshinowo.

It was obvious that I was the creative child.

They used to send me to his house on Saturday's to go and sit down with him while he was painting.

You know they were always very encouraging of whatever position I was in

[music fades out]

TOSIN:

Patriarchal society can hinder women.

I haven't personally experienced it rising as a professional but I have experienced it in business.

LADE:

Yeah, I have heard of people being sexually assaulted and harassed in the office.

So, if your manager is like sexually harassing you or making sexual statements to you, where do you go from there?

So, it's like very ridiculous things.

TOSIN:

I think it's just really this thing about feeling slightly sometimes not having a level playing field.

Men can go and drink in a bar and discuss business and they can move forward.

If I am there, they will ask me "what am I doing there?"

I mean this happens even in investment banking – casual ways that men can do business that they can be sitting talking millions or billions of Naira over alcohol, you won't do that with a female business partner.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

So, the relationship that they would be able to build and to foster, to harness and propel business as a woman you don't get that opportunity.

I do think that the other thing that could be a potential hindrance is the challenges of the job or getting the qualification to get to the point where you can now free sail as a professional.

For architecture in particular, it's a very long course.

It is a six-year course.

You do a three-year degree, you work for a year, you go back you do a two-year graduate and then you have to work for a period of time before you can register.

In life, women will because our bodies do a lot more than men do

So, in many situations somebody might just by the roadside fall... not fall, let me not say like it is a bad thing but might just decide to have a slight deflection or their not interested, it's too demanding, they wanna do other things — they just don't have this calling.

Some people will work and then get errm married and decide, "I don't want to work anymore."

It is a very personal decision.

Some people are very maternal and their joy comes from raising children.

There's no amount of work you can give them that would make them happy because it is not their interest and that is okay.

[music]

LADE:

I am just very lucky I think, the most I have experienced is maybe some random micro-aggressions

Somebody expecting me to like clean up after them.

And more recently in my new role there was some bit of drama that the only thing I could attribute it to was gender — the person feeling like because like I was not a man they could be talking to me in some way

I was so angry.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

I kept asking myself like, “if I was a man would this person be saying these things to me.”

And it was very upsetting.

At some point I felt like in fact I am just going to quit

I didn’t realise it at first, it was when I was talking to my friend about the whole situation, he was like, “oh, this is obviously a thing of gender”

You are expecting me to be XYZ because I am a woman and you are not and I am not going to stand for it.

[music]

LADE:

This is something like I’ve heard [laughs], “you don’t have to be earning so much or as much as this guy because you are a woman — you have a husband that will take care of you.”

When did my pay become dependent on what I need money for?

Is it not the work my brain and the value of the work that I am doing!

What does it matter if I am the only person that I am using my money on? It is not your business.

Thankfully, I have never experienced sexual harassment in job interviews but I have heard from friends who have.

That the interviewer would say something like, “ahan, you are looking really sexy” or some shit like that and they would now make you feel like you don’t have any options.

So, it’s like, “what do I do then? Do I say, okay I can’t work in this place because I have already experienced sexual harassment from my interview or do I just suck it up?”

So many decisions that women have to weigh every day.

TOSIN:

But what can you do? It’s not something you can control.

I know for a fact that there was some work — particularly when the office was still quite young

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

I got contacted by a lady about a house that her father had left her in his will

Her father had passed and she need to refurbish it because the house was in a very good area of Apapa and she needed to get tenants into it.

And we initially did, went to do a survey, did a design but when it now came to the build her brother got involved and was almost like, “they won’t be able to do it”, without asking us!

We were actually asked to handover the design to another architecture practice who was even a more inexperienced practice than us.

For me it was very obvious because he was a guy.

Really irritating things.

I worked on a project where I had a very very, as far as I am concerned incompetent FM Manager that came and was asking for some stupid inconsequential petty things because he wanted to flex some muscles.

And we had to have a meeting with the client because I was telling the guy that he has no right, first and foremost to be asking for these things and to be honest, “I am an architect you, you are an FM. I understand my work more than you do. You only come into facility when we are done! So why are you getting your knickers in a twist?”

And then do you know what the client said, “you guys are arguing some much. You guys should date.”

[scoffs] How rude! I’m a mother! How dare you say that? Would she have made that kind of silly comment if I was a man? Of course, she wouldn’t!

[music fades out]

[music fades in]

LADE:

I think it goes back to assuming men as the default and being better than default

But growing up, in my own house most of the time, when it came to like work and the ability to achieve things, there was no conception of, “oh boys do this better than girls or girls do this better than boys.”

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

So, for me I have never felt that, “oh my work might not have as much quality”

Like people might perceive that my work doesn’t have as much quality because I am a girl but that’s really your personal problem.

If I am aware of that I am going to disabuse of that notion very quickly.

So, there was this study that was done a while ago that found that wherever women are the majority they are seen as less difficult .

See, it is not because its “softer” or whatever that women are there , it is seen as “softer” because women are there.

There is this tendency to feel like, “okay I have to prove everybody wrong.”

There is unnecessary weight that is like, “oh my god, you have to prove everybody wrong because all the women in history are relying on you to make this decision right. You can’t make this mistake, because if you make this mistake you are going to ruin for all the other women that could come after you”

But men don’t have that pressure!

Why is this one person’s decision going to be the thing that’s like, “okay! Yeah! this is why we don’t allow women do this thing”

It’s so stupid.

So, I want to give an example but don’t want it to seem like I am endorsing political corporation, right?

Look at how Cecilia Ibru, like Diezani, like Patricia Etteh and the kind of backlash they have faced for the errm corruption and stealing and all those things.

And then everybody uses those three women as an example of why, “oh no, women can’t be leaders.”

But like 90% of politicians are men and they all are stealing [laughs]

But everybody isn’t saying men can’t be politicians and leaders

There’s always this extra level of criticism that women face when they are in a male dominated space and they do terrible things or make mistakes

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

Again, I not endorsing terrible behaviour in women.

I feel like I have to say this.

I am just saying that criticize everybody the same.

People are complaining that there's a double standard for women whereas the double standard is against women.

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[music fades in]

TOSIN:

The more people see visual models of themselves in a particular profession the more likely you will get the next generation aspiring into that profession.

If you think about it, before the 1950's women did not work in many countries in the world.

So, it was after the second world war, "half the men have died, okay let's be realistic, women have to take up jobs." — prior to that it didn't exist.

And so slowly slowly slowly to where we are in 2020, it has become more common place.

It is still not perfect, to see more women in more and more workspaces that they never would have seen.

But it is because people see that people are doing it and people are achieving and balancing life in it.

There's a little bit of perception, so, and again this having the opportunity to see somebody in that role and to say, "ah, if this person can do it, I can do it!"

LADE:

For example, you've never seen a woman win a Nobel Prize, it is not something that you would think is possible.

Women can also win Nobel Prizes, "like okay I can do that too."

SheDesigns came from...

I had noticed that we weren't seeing a lot of women attendees at Useable and it's like, "why is this happening? Where are all the women?"

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

Cos, I know a lot of other female designers.

Useable meetups there will be like only five women/seven women in a meetup of like hundred/one hundred and twenty, “you know what? let us create this community where women can find like help/resources.”

And it is also kind of a safe space because most of the time when there are too many men and you are the only woman there it can be uncomfortable.

So one of the things that I also wanted to do was to give more women the platform to speak— like to encourage them to talk about their work, share about the things that they are learning and in that way be exposed to more opportunities.

Since 2018, we’ve had like workshops, talks, meetups, events all those things with over a hundred women.

I wanted to like, spotlight people.

I wanted to do a podcast but I didn’t want to manage the podcast — all these things and editing and whatever.

So, I put out that, “oh, I want to host a podcast segment.”

The African Tech Woman Podcast errm, Joke Adekunle started it.

I have known Joke for a while.

Joke messaged me and said, “oh okay, I can do a segment on the African Tech Woman Podcast: A - Woman in Design Series.”

And so, we talked about it and the details

And so, I reached out everybody — I put out tweets asking people who liked to be featured.

The thing that drives me to do all these things is to just generally encourage people to like, be spotlighted and to have visibility and to shine as well.

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[music fades in]

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

TOSIN:

I do think that it is wise to always seek/reference people with whom you mark their success or you know their success as aspirational and you, I guess observe the decisions that they've made and you see how it benefitted them— you learn the things to do and not to do.

For example, I look at somebody like Zaha Hadid.

You know I said that there are two types of creatives: you have those that create from a complete vacuum and those that are able to take experiences and to be able to evolve— this is the kind of designer I am.

Very few people ever get to this level or status of being a of designer, but she was that.

But I feel she scarified so much to achieve this — she died very abruptly from I think a heart attack.

She had no children, she never married; it was always work and I wonder if in her last moment she would have thought, “is it was all worth it?”

But she's left a massive legacy.

She's etched in the sands of time of immortality.

Maybe for her that is enough but for me I don't think so.

And that is why I said everybody is different and I think that's why personally, her sacrifice was too much.

And I would take the positives of what I think I can from the lessons that she has put out for all of us but then there are certain things I would like, “ hmm... but I would do that differently”

I think to be honest and I think this is something that COVID has taught us, “what is, what is all of this worth? If not, the relationships you have? To what end? You will be ____ chasing your tail? At the end of the day does it really matter? If on the death bed you happen to be aware? Are you going to be thinking of the work you are leaving behind?” **[laughs]**

“Or maybe your motherhood you will miss or your child?”

Do you see what I mean?

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

We live in a modern world where our sheer existence is to continue acquire more, work harder, do more — it's not the most important thing.

That's why I look at what she achieved, and I just think, "the sacrifice is too much."

That for me is not complete success.

When I see people, who have a very balanced success — you can see their home, you can see their family, you can see the work has gone well.

I have a friend who just became Chief Financial Officer for UAC Foods (UAC Foods is one of the oldest companies in Nigeria).

She is a mama ibeji, she has two twin boys — four years old.

Do you understand?

I see somebody like that, and I think, "wow, that's a woman who is managing a corporate job."

First of all, for her to attain that status in that company, plenty politics she would have climbed ladders on, do you know what I mean?

But she has a very balanced home life as well and she is raising two beautiful boys and she is making it look easy **[laughs]** even though it probably isn't.

That for me is progress.

Nothing is to be gained by setting different factions, I don't think so.

Women still raise boys, you will still raise girls, you will raise people , you will raise non-gender/non-binary individuals **[laughs]**.

You know, does it really matter? I don't think so.

I don't like to errr, place energy on these kinds of things because, again this is about ideology, you know?

Because there are so many ways to skin a cat, there is so many ways we can view the world.

Personally, I feel it is your choice at the end of the day.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

If somebody feels like it is not their choice, “oh, why do I have to have ovaries?”
Go and remove them! Okay, it is not by force!

Me I am happy that I have it and I am happy that God blessed me with.

I have a daughter and I look at her and my flower is growing, and I am very thankful that she is doing well.

It’s a choice you make but let it be your choice.

I believe in having choices, if you decide it is not for you — It’s okay.

The irony is that whenever we are dealing with ideologies and it is the biggest problem with society, everybody within their different ideology faction thinks that they are right.

Any movement, ideology or religion, do not impose your opinions on everybody — everybody should be able to exist or co-exist, agree to disagree. **[laughs]**

[music fades out]

[music fades in]

LADE:

I prefer to work with women to be honest because no one is going to be like raising voice at me.

I am not saying that I am going to always only work with women, I work with men as well, but I will search for a woman and then find the best.

The misconception that people have is that when you are trying to involve women that you are lowering standards.

Like, its work. I am not going to lower standards because I want to work with a woman, because I care about my work.

TOSIN:

You are always at a slight disadvantage.

So, you almost have to be ten times better and good that people would seek out your service in a very formal engagement — because you don’t have the same luxuries that men have in terms have of business relationships and networks.

I think it is naive to expect it to say it has to change.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

Who do you enforce the change with?

It is not something that you can put into policy.

I am not going to start going bars.

Will you tell the people that go to sit down and drink beer that are going to exchange discussion over Guinness, to now not do it, because there are certain women who will not get the advantage?

So, you have to learn how to manoeuvre yourself or to equip yourself with skills that, even beyond those relationships that they are able to manoeuvre, that these people will still come and look for you because you must be so good that they come and require your services.

That is the only thing you can do.

So, it is like you understand the environment you live and work in and you adapt yourself accordingly.

That is the only way to survive.

If you want to sit on a high horse and say you expect things to come to you, you will wait long ooo...

The world will not change for you. You have to change.

You have to adapt yourself and it is the wise people who understand this early, who would excel.

[music fades out]

[music fades in]

LADE:

This thing, I did not look for it. **[laughs]** I did not seek it out. It literally jumped into my lap and I followed that opportunity that became a thing, where now I am doing UX research.

Google was my dream company.

And I worked with Google, not as a full-time employee but I worked with Google.

BEYOND DESIGN: TRANSCRIPT

I feel like my journey has been one of great opportunities.

LADE:

In ten/fifteen years, I may not be doing design anymore.

The thing is that I want everybody to be able to say that like, “Lade does great work like.”

I want people who have worked with me to say, beyond the actual, like the work, “and she’s also a great person to work with”.

TOSIN:

I guess I was kind of more comfortable knowing who I am - and I think sometimes this idea of, if you are comfortable then you will excel if you are struggling to find your feet that can always be a massive challenge.

TOSIN:

I just want to be remembered as somebody who added value, who left a mark.

At least to have my great grandchildren say, “oh my Great Grandmother was a really good architect and she did some interesting projects and she made some nice chairs and she was very successful”.

[music fades out]