

Designing Accessible Spaces with Nikkie To and Grace Mendez

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, design, building, inclusive, excluded, grandview, grace, inclusion, ended, nikki, create, children, work, pandemic, interviews, point, sensory, space, thinking, beijing

00:10

Zoya

Hello again, everyone. In this episode, we are chatting with Nicky To and Grace Mendez; two members of our cohort. As inclusive designers, their work is always stellar and they always seem to go the extra mile in what they're doing. Nikki has a fine arts background, while Grace has a graphic design background, but somehow, they found a path to collaborating with one another on their research to design more accessible space for children at Grandview kids. This is a center in Ontario, Canada, which provides Family Centered pediatric and rehabilitation services for children and youth with physical, communication and developmental needs. Now, because of the pandemic, we haven't seen them in so long, and we didn't really know the outcome of the work that they were doing for so long. So we wanted to catch up and find out the results of their design research. And here is that conversation.

01:14

Zoya

We are very, very happy to have you guys with us today, because we feel like we haven't seen you in forever. So this is a nice catch up for us. So Tania, and I have a few questions. I don't know who necessarily to start with because to me, you guys are like so tied together [laughter] in your projects? So the first question we were thinking of is that we don't really know how you ended up in inclusive design? Like Tania and I are both graphic designers and we kind of wanted to have a more social impact, and we found our way to the inclusive design program. But how did you guys both end up here? Either of you can go first.

02:00

Nikkie

Sure, um... how about I go first? It's hard when there's two people in here but yeah, so for me, it was really a winding road to inclusive design. I didn't necessarily know from the very beginning that I was going to end up here. So it was certainly a really pleasant surprise. So I started my undergraduate degree in studio art at McMaster University. So after that, I ended up staying at McMaster working in higher education for a little bit and also on the side, I was painting and just doing a few exhibitions. And then after that, I ended up going to Beijing to work in a commercial art gallery called Lamarche Space. And it was really there where I really fell in love with the city. And there are so many things, like exciting things happening at that time, especially in the art space with really, really innovative exhibitions happening.

03:14

But it was really when I was living there that kind of sparked my interest in inclusion and social impact. And one of the reasons why specifically in terms of my interest in the built environment was because as I was living in the city, Beijing is sort of built out in rings. So the oldest part is sort of in the center. And as time passed, they sort of started expanding further and further out. And so there was not really efficient planning and there were a lot of barriers in the way that the city was designed and built. And so at the same time, a lot of people were sort of coming into the city looking for jobs, going to school and often alone and far away from their families and very isolated. So I can see this really big need for community but also the barriers to form strong communities because of those challenges to connect. And so I came back and I was looking into programs and OCAD, just happened to have a really great program for inclusive design. And yeah, that's kind of how I started and that's why I applied.

04:42

Zoya

How long were you in Beijing for?

04:44

Nikkie

So I was there working for about one year but actually before that, and the reason why I ended up going to Beijing to look for work is because right after my undergraduate I had an artist residency as well. And so I spent about two months, sort of living in a studio and there were sort of other shared studios in the same complex.... artists from all over the world. And we were just able to have dedicated time to be able to produce work, and sort of get to know different types of arts practices as well.

05:25

Zoya

Okay, I feel Nikki like, I should have known that about you. But for some reason, I didn't know it. Like that. I always used to associate you in my mind, like Nikki loves spaces. I know, Nikkie's about spaces like, she's, she's got the spaces down. But I didn't know like, that's where it's all started. So that's super cool.

05:43

Zoya

So Grace, how did you end up in inclusive design?

05:43

Grace

Yeah, for me, I'm my graphic designer too, so pretty much, I was kind of engaged in the creative side. So I did my undergraduate back home, which is Ecuador. And then when I moved here, one of the first opportunities that I had was to work in an agency that belongs to the government, specifically to the Ministry of Health. So I was there for like, at least like three months, after that I was kind of just jumping over – trying different types of agencies and so on. And then again, I had that opportunity to go back there. And just like, I guess, it was exposure to people and to different audiences. So being part of the communications

department, it was kind of just very eye opening, because it was, it wasn't just the designer there, but actually kind of just organizing and managing some of the requests that comes [through]. So eventually, I think the spark came through that just for the fact that, okay, it's like, there are different audiences, so how can I actually help them to create something? You know, we require our standards, but [something that] it's kind of simple and easier for them? You know, so I guess, I was also trying to go for my masters. And at that point, the accessibility and compliance that the government is applying here in Canada came into effect. And I thought, oh, wow, inclusive design so it makes sense. Being honest, I perhaps was expecting like, oh you know, in here, these are the things that you have to do. You know, so kind of that structural learning, I guess. But when I joined the program, it was totally different – it surpassed what I was expecting really, and I'm pretty happy, because it's actually kind of changed, or switched the way I work now. So it was a pleasant experience, overall. So that's how I ended up there.

07:53

Tania

That sounds very, very interesting Grace. And going back a little to when you were back, when we were together back during the graduate program. How did you both decide to work together and unite forces in your research? I know you both were designing or were interested in kids and in spaces... but tell us about your research, your focus, your process, how the collaboration went, and a little bit of the outcome of the study?

08:33

Grace

Sure, so I can start here. So being honest with you, I didn't have an idea of what I wanted to do at that point. And it was because like, you remember Peter, the program director from the, from the [masters] program, and he came with a bunch of ideas. And just like maybe brainstorming a little bit, and kind of just trying to learn what I want to do and what actually kind of just I was interested in, I think I ended up partnering with Nikki. So I guess it was interesting for me to explore a little bit more about children with special needs. And the fact that they were in a state of mind that they were open to whatever we can come up with, and the opportunity that they have the real opportunity that they have. At this point, it will be that they were building a new facility. So it makes it even more interesting because it was something that it's going to be implemented somehow. So I guess that's how I ended up partnering with my partner Nikkie.

09:43

Nikkie

And I'm just building off what Grace was saying it was really, really just happenstance that we got partnered because I think for me at the very get go I was like, I'm interested in the built environment, this is what I want to do. And then it just so happens that Peter was connected with Grandview kids who were the industry partner we ended up working with. And then it was just sort of at every moment through our lab courses through research methods.... it just so happens that as we were brainstorming ideas, Grace, and I just kept on matching. Even when we were doing a course about multi set building, multi sensory translation models, we ended up just having similar interests. And so I guess the stars kind of aligned. And then one thing that I really wanted to say about this project, too, is that beyond the collaboration between me and Grace, it really ended up being a really big

collaboration with the broader community. And so we had a lot of support from Grandview from the staff there from the therapists, family and the kids and also the architects who were, who were doing some of the design work for Grandview. And, and so we ended up building sort of this larger network and support system of people who really cared about the same problem, but offered a lot of different perspectives, especially really, really valuable lived experience.

11:15

Tania

What about the outcome of the research like what you ended up designing and co designing?

11:26

Grace

Okay, so basically, for my end, what I ended up designing was a transitional support system. Based on the interviews that we had, like, and also by observation, there was a recurring theme that I was able to differentiate, which was transitions. So as you know, transitions is like, has different effects in everybody. So when you don't know where you're going is like this type of a stressor. So that actually affects the way you perceive the environment or your feelings, and so on. So basically, the point was that children with special needs had to go to these children treatment centers. But there is a process, right, so people have to prepare before they're going while they're in the center and after the visit. So basically, for me, it was kind of just taking the pieces that were already built, and trying to create this connection between them that will allow them to have a start and finish. So the idea behind it is to provide like in the start, most important the most information as possible. So for example, if the children are going there is like, Okay, so this is what the steps we're going to take, these as the people that you're going to meet. And these are the spaces that we had, we will have to navigate. So it was just like developing these tools, this kind of toolkit, and also combining it with Wayfinding inside the physical space. So everything has a connection. So at the end of the day, it was kind of you know, it's a cycle. So you start here with this point, and then you close that. And overall, it was kind of just with the aim that children will feel like the behavioral issues that they have will be kind of minimized. And that will help them to have better outcomes in the treatments, because most of the time, they are super, super stressed. And let's say the therapist will have to go there and spend, like let's say 20 minutes or less trying to calm them down. And that was time that could have been utilized for the actual treatment. So it was this kind of recollection of that either we did through the same structure; interviews, the observation, and then finally, just to have this codesign session where they actually have the pieces and they established, which was the level of severity of behaviors that they have. At which point, that allowed me to develop these transitional support system.

14:14

Tania

That's super interesting! That's great.

And what about yours, Nikki? What was your outcome? And how did it connect with Grace's?

Nikkie

Yeah, and I think the thing that really ties my project in Grace's project is is really creating an inclusive user experience that provides clarity that that provides comfort and just a sense of welcoming and so for me, the thing that was produced was a sensory design guideline to ensure that treatment centers are designed, inclusively and are responsive to sensory needs of a broad range of users. And so considering that within Canada one fifth of our population are persons with disabilities and among both children with autism and also [children] without [autism], many children have sensory processing disorders which affect the way that they process sort of different sensory stimuli and the way that they understand the sensory stimuli. And so having environments that are really responsive to their needs, also allows them to receive better therapies and really be able to focus on what they're there in the treatment centers for, because treatment centers across Ontario, they really serve children and youth from 0 to about 18, or maximum 21 years of age. But then after that, they may not be able to access those services anymore. And so it's really, really important that as early as possible, they receive these types of therapies. And that if there are any barriers to that, including the barriers within the design of the building, that might impede focus or might make a child uncomfortable, that we can address those as much as possible.

16:27

Typically, guidelines or standards, they often in terms of accessibility, they often address physical accessibility, but not necessarily addressing more sensory or cognitive disabilities. And so being able to draw from the lived experiences of our participants and bringing that to the forefront of the sensory design guideline was very very important.

16:56

Zoya

So you guys are saying like, how you guys worked with Grandview and a wider network of professionals who are actually implementing like your work as well as you're part of the research that contributes to it... Are you guys continuing to work with them in any way? Or is it like your part is kind of complete? And you're moving on to other things, and they're going to take it from there? Or how does it work?

17:29

Nikkie

In terms of where we're at... so we've provided these transitional supports and essential design guidelines to Grandview. So they are available, and they have been looking at them, and they will be implemented in their new build. And so hopefully, from what I gather, by this time, next year, they will start building is the hope, but we never know, during the pandemic, everything is sort of a surprise. But at this point, I think our piece is sort of wrapped up. And they've included our research in their compliance documents. So whoever will be designing the building should be incorporating those pieces.

18:15

Zoya

So how has inclusive design changed you? How has the transition been like for you post graduation re entering into like, the regular design world, if you want to call it that? And what are your ambitions moving forward?

18:38

Grace

Yeah, so for me, I will say, he came to me, like completely. So yeah, and even like, just having the experience of working with Grandview Kids, and my MRP overall, it just opened my eyes to how valuable is for example, the work that people do with children overall. So I guess, in the workplace that I am right now, the focus for me was actually “Okay, so how can I contribute to create materials, products or services that can actually help these individuals create something that is valuable and that could be helpful for children?” So I guess that is an example, but overall that's how I felt – it has changed my way of thinking. It's about like, what can I actually provide there that could be valuable for the people that are working there because it's like teaching something. And the other hand is kind of gaining some knowledge from them, and trying to combine these two forces to create something for the benefit of these other –third and fourth audience – and it's kind of just this kind of connected system. That's how I see it. Because it's like, when you work with someone, and you try to build something, there will be these other ramifications that actually get the benefit. So, yeah, overall, just like it's inclusive design is kind of the motto of how a designer should be working for sure.

20:30

Zoya

Connected system is definitely the right term. I feel that way too.

20:36

Zoya

Yeah. And you Nikkie?

20:42

Nikkie

Absolutely. For me the same I just, honestly, during the program, I just felt like my brain was stretched. And, and I felt challenged every day to really think through even a lot of my own personal biases, and, and really relearning how to listen and learn new ways to just to see a problem. And so for myself, I feel like I'm continuing to learn, but how it really fits into my broader life beyond school...as I mentioned, sort of, before the podcast started, I've been doing a lot of interviews, because I have been looking for work. And I'm really excited to be sort of joining a firm soon. And so actually, through the interviews, I had a lot of conversations about how accessibility and inclusion could be worked into either their policy work or their events work or their strategy development. And it was really, really exciting to see other people starting to really have a deep focus and making this a priority. And so I think one of the things that I particularly enjoy is being able to work with different stakeholders, and to solve problems together and I think that's something that I'm really looking forward to seeing more of in the future.

22:22

Tania

So talking exactly about that, when you talk with others about inclusion and diversity and accessibility? What do you think you need to explain more? Like, when you're talking with people that are not experts, or these stakeholders that you have been interviewing with? What do you find you have to explain the most?

22:53

Nikkie

Sure, um, I can take this one first. Because I found after the program, I've been trying to have way more conversations with, with everybody in my life, with my family, with our friends, some some of them having a bit more knowledge and some not. And I think first and foremost, I am not necessarily trying to explain anything, because I really, really want to understand where they're coming from. And I feel like everybody is truly – they're an expert of their own experience. And I'm sure everybody has faced some sort of exclusion, although definitely certain people have faced way, way more than others. And so I think starting from a point of trying to understand and listen, and then from that start a conversation to be able to perhaps challenge different perspectives of being able to understand perhaps a different way of experiencing something because I mean, the same thing, for example, the same thing could happen to two people, but they could experience it completely different, depending on their personal experiences, the identity they bring forward and all of that shapes their experience. And, and so I think it's really just having that conversation and trying to find new ways of looking at something.

24:33

Grace

So in my case, it just kind of kind of going back to interviews and so on. I remember that, for example, trying to explain inclusion. It was just a matter of fact explaining is like, do you know, like, from your products or your services is like, which is the feedback that you have got from your audience? And most of the time, it was like, you know, that's a very good question.

And then it was the time for me to say, “well, you know what, that's where we're talking about when we're saying inclusion”. So it's just like, hear what the other end has to say. And not have the bias that pretty much most organizations have them. Because it's like the fact that you're producing something that you think is valuable for others, but you're not actually making the time to have that feedback at that retro alimentation. Right. So I guess that was, for me, the most simple way to explain it. And considering, like, for example, the marketing world is like, it's interesting, because they're like, one of the principles in doing marketing is like, okay, you have to know your audience. But how many times do you actually involve them into the process? So that was something that was very interesting for me too, because you're talking all the time about audiences, but at the end of the day it's like, I guess you just have one contact with them... and that's all.... and then these are the two products that you can choose from, and you are just not that involved in them something else that they might think it's valuable, right?

26:21

Tania

I really love that because actually, that made me think of a quote that we actually posted on the @hellomanifold social media. That said that “diversity is being invited to the party. and inclusion is being asked to dance”. So that made me think of that, like, how they want us to know them. But what is the difference between making them part of the process or really, really making them instead of us?

26:56

Zoya

I think it's a big deal now for a lot of companies to incorporate diversity and inclusion initiatives, but like they understand things in their mind, but it's not yet embodied. It's not integrated. It's just not a natural way of doing things as yet. So it's very, very hard, because particularly like in this climate, everybody wants to be more inclusive, and so forth, but then it's like, everybody's also still just trying to survive the pandemic – I think businesses in particular. So it's a lot to juggle.

27:46

But that brings me to my next question, which is... so given that there are so many people who are, I think, well intended, they have good intentions, and they want to do better, but they're everyday people, and maybe they don't have the education that we have, for example in inclusive design. And we went through a two year process that as Grace said, changed us – they don't have that, and maybe they just don't know where to start. And this is something that I've been asking everybody, it's like a little research of my own. What do you think is one thing or thought that everyday people can adopt right now, to be more inclusive?

28:30

Nikkie

I think sort of, even from from the get go something that I think it's always important to share is pieces that support learning, and in all the ways that people learn, and just being able to also change the mindset of how we think about people, how we categorize people, often the ways that we, when we're trying to problem solve, and we make a design decision – exactly like what you said – we can accidentally cause exclusion. And bringing it back to the sort of Kat Holmes is like, exclusion and inclusion is not necessarily bad, but it should always be intentional, and thoughtful. And so thinking through, who currently is excluded. So whether it's an educational setting, most recently as a graduate teaching assistant, I've been thinking of like, okay, who might be having trouble accessing the course or who might be excluded. If you're a business who is used to having a brick and mortar store and now is selling goods online... between those transitions and that change with that circumstance [considering] who now has more affordances because of online shopping, but then who also is more excluded. So perhaps those who might not be able to leave their house as much to go to brick and mortar store now can have better access to those services, but perhaps somebody who is perhaps older and may not have the technological knowledge to shop online, or even that trust with online shopping, they may all of a sudden not be able to buy those products.

And so I'm sort of really being able to with every decision, think through how has that impacted the people who I'm really trying to serve?

30:47

Zoya

That's beautiful, Nikkie!

30:53

Grace

So for me, I think there's nothing bad about having good intentions. But when you try to be inclusive, it could actually be more harmful, I will say, because at the end of the day, your

biases will be the ones that dictate your good intentions, and then necessarily the needs of the people that you're trying to help.

I guess it's a little bit difficult. I will say at the start, perhaps for some people, it's a bit scary as well, because you don't know exactly "what is inclusion?!" Put it that way, okay? But I think one of the tools that all of us have learned, it's the fact that you take the time to listen. And by doing so, I don't want to use the typical phrase, oh, just wear the other's shoes. Because at the end of the day, you will never know what actually the other people had to endure. But at least you are opening your mind to learn about what they have to say, and try to shift your thinking in a way that could be beneficial for both of us. So it's a win win for both.

32:18

Nikkie

Can I add something to that?

It also makes me think like, you know, when I've been talking to people who may not be as experienced in this space, I feel like there's a big sentiment of you know, I'm not an expert, I don't know how to do this. And, and therefore, you know, I shouldn't be the person implementing these things. But I think something that I really want to emphasize is that we all have the power and the capacity to create change. And so being able to, I think us having gone through the program, being able to also encourage others to have that confidence, and to not be afraid to have those hard conversations with others. And, and challenge their own perspectives. Because I find with good intention, it also takes a lot of bravery to look deep inside yourself and challenge your own biases and your and the things that you currently bring to the table and how those can be improved. And they, in terms of inclusion can only be improved when we have a better understanding of others, especially people who we don't often interact with. And I think sometimes people might not have interacted with others who are really, really different. And sometimes that's where stigma also comes from. It's sort of a social thing that has been created also.... it's something that is a tool that suppresses others and it comes from a lack of understanding. And so what can we do to just have better representation within our communities, better connections and networks.

34:22

Zoya

That's really, really...you guys are so smart.

[laughter]

34:32

Tania

Like what you were mentioning Nikki was something that I was reading about the other day about what is like *action bias*. And when you find something that is uncomfortable for you and then you try to fix it really quickly because you feel uncomfortable, or you feel embarrassed or ashamed that certain things can happen in your workspace or in your family, or in your friends circles. So even before you try to understand or define the problem and understand it from the perspective of who is being excluded, you just try to fix it, fix, fix, fix, fix, fix, and then that doesn't really solve the problem. Or sometimes it silences more the people that were being excluded. Right. So that was really interesting, as a reminder, for me,

especially because I am always in a hurry to solve things and sometimes I just need to listen more. Sometimes first define, and then start understanding and then fixing, right?

35:46

Tania

That was super nice like, again, being in class to listen to you.

Grace

Yeah. Thank you guys we were so excited to be here – perfect opportunity to catch up.

36:03

Nikkie

So nice, and just hearing from also everybody else how the program has changed us and sort of where mindsets are at now. It's pretty incredible. And I'm really happy we got to study together.

36:21

Grace

Yeah, thank you so much.

36:27

Zoya

Thanks for listening to our conversation with Nikkie and Grace. I hope that you learned something. And if you're interested in anything that you've heard here today, you want to find out more or if you just like to connect with either Nikkie or Grace, then please check out the description of this episode, or head on over to our website so you can read the show notes at www.hellomanifold.com/conversations.