



# Episode 65

## Equity in Design



**Jason: [00:00]**

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Designer Discussions with Jason, Mirjam and Maria. Today we are talking about equity in design.

**Intro: [00:08]**

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**Jason: (00:46)**

So today we are joined by Nureed, and I'm going to have her explain who she is. But we are talking about equity and design because that is an issue that has been ongoing in this industry for a while. So, Merida, how are you doing today?

**Nureed: (00:54)**

I'm great, Jason. Nice. I'm really happy to be here. Hi, Maria. Hi, Mirjam.

**Jason: (01:03)**

So if you could just let us know just a little bit about who you are and how did you get involved in equity and development.

**Nureed: (01:14)**

Yeah, absolutely. So. My name is Nureed Saeed. I am the owner and creative director of New Interiors of Bicoastal Kitchen and Bath design firm. And I'm based in California and New Jersey. I also am the president of the Northern California chapter of the NKBA. And in addition to all of that, I serve on several boards as a volunteer in different capacities. And what I've done over the years, Jason, is I really spent a lot of time focused on where people need the most help and where equity matters. And so my most recent time I had spent serving in the Redress Movement, which is a movement that discusses why residential segregation has happened in the United States and what can we do to address it. Before that, I had run for office. I lived in South Orange, New Jersey. I ran for town Council, and I lost by 21 votes, almost beating the incumbent. But it was a win because what it got me was the ability to spend more time volunteering on several boards and commissions. And what I discovered all the way through is really how equity looks different in different forms and in different places. And those words of diversity, equity, inclusion that we all kind of hear lumped together, that they are actually different things, which inspired me to get a certificate in Diversity equity inclusion from the Cornell University School of Labor Relations.

**Jason: (02:48)**

So just before we hit record on, we had talked about the differences in how everybody defines equity. So if you could go a little bit into that so we can streamline what we're going to be talking about today.

**Nureed: (03:00)**

So the real things that we're talking about is there's these catchphrases of diversity. Well, diversity means essentially that there's one of everybody there, and that doesn't necessarily equate to equality or equity. It also doesn't equate to inclusion. Someone can all be at the table but it doesn't mean that they're all getting treated the same and being included in the conversation. And that's where the conversation inclusion comes in, right? I want to be included in that. And it's a really basic human, I think, emotion for all of us. Then there's the question of equity. And equity is not the same as the quality necessarily, right? Equity doesn't mean that we all necessarily are getting the same thing. Neither does the quality, really. The difference here is that in one instance, people are getting put in a place where they all are able to reach to the same achievement level or able to reach the same resources versus just everybody getting all the same thing. And if you're not starting from the same place, then everybody getting one of something doesn't necessarily really truly mean it's equitable.

**Jason: (04:10)**

When we had a talk about a year ago, I can hear the passion in you about equity and design. And that's something that has been huge for me. And that's one of the reasons I want to have you on. So why is it so passionate for you?



## Nureed: (04:20)

Well, there's the obvious, right? Which is that I've had my own fair share of life experience starting from a child till now, as an adult, where I'm a woman, I'm of South Asian descent, my parents are immigrants, I'm Muslim. And so there are many instances in different scenarios where things have happened to me where I'm like, well, this isn't fair, this isn't right. And so it's very personal to me and personal to what? I want my children to have a different world. And so I spend a lot of time volunteering because I want their life to be different. That's a really simple thing. But just because it's what happened to me does not mean I speak for every single person in every single group. And I don't even speak for people who are necessarily in my group. I don't speak for every woman. I don't speak for every South Asian person. I don't speak for every child of an immigrant. And I think it's really important to understand that the commonality we share in this struggle and in this experience is that we are all kind of trying to figure out what equity means for us and why it's so important to us and why we need it. So that's kind of like the base of where I start from is my experience. And I'll very quickly share this story of, you know, I was about six years old and I was in first grade and I grew up in Levittown, Pennsylvania, which is if you know anything about residential segregation and anything about the US. History, levittown houses are the first one is in New York. The second one is Pennsylvania, where I grew up. And the whole premise of this housing is that it was intended for white families who were coming out of the war and gave them access to buying homes with no down payment at the beginning of the FHA, when you grow up with that on the backbone of it, right? And it was very clear in those deeds and has since been deemed illegal, those deeds specifically said that black people were not allowed to buy those homes. So I grew up being kind of like this spot of color in a very, very white, working class place. So I went to elementary school there. I'm in first grade, and they're sitting down at Christmas time, and the kids are all getting ready to do an art project, and everybody's going to do one of those reads where you trace it out with your hand, and you make a little wreath with a green construction paper.



## Nureed: (07:20)

And the teacher says to me, okay, you sit over here and do the wreaths. And then over in the corner were two kids, and one was a young guy whose family was Jewish, and the other child's family was Jehovah's witness. So they also don't celebrate Christmas. And they were sitting over in a corner, and they were making snowmen. And I looked at the teacher, and I'm six, and I said to her, why are they making snowmen? Why do I have to make Christmas wreath? And she said to me, well, don't you want to make a Christmas wreath? And I said, well, no, I don't celebrate Christmas. Why would I make Christmas wreaths? And I was like, I want to make a snowman like that. And she almost didn't know what to do with me, right? So she didn't know, really. She didn't know who I was. She didn't know why I wanted it. She didn't understand anything, that it wasn't equitable for me, right? Because that's not what I celebrate. You don't even see me. And I, at six, decided to go sit out and be segregated with the other three kids who were making snowmen, because I was like, well, that's more my speed. I like snow. So, I mean, I think back on that as, like, one of the very first moments when I remember that at a very young age, I understood the difference for myself of just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean I want it. I want what's equitable to me. I want to be seen, I want to be heard, and I want to be valued at the place where I am. And I think that that's really important. As we look into the industry and we look at how we treat our coworkers. Our clients. We look at designers if we're the showroom specialist and we're in the showroom selling. And how we treat other designers if we're colleagues in a setting like cave is Jason. Where you and I met and thinking about that and how first impressions mean so much. How are you treating that other person? And I think about it. I have a lot of colleagues here in the Northern California chapter. And a few of my colleagues have said to me that they went into the very first networking event pre-covid. And people were not warm and they were not welcoming.



### **Nureed: (09:40)**

And they were very overwhelmingly white. And that as a black person. How they felt that they couldn't understand why other people wouldn't weren't like. Bringing them in. And so they felt very isolated, and they felt very segregated. And I think it's really, really important that as we're in, whoever you are, however you hold privilege, however you hold power, right? Whether it's race, socioeconomic, just by sheer nature of the fact that, like, I'm the president of that organization, right, and so am I welcome in people. How do I treat people when they come in? And I think it doesn't matter almost in some ways, doesn't matter the outward appearance. It matters the real base level of how do we want to treat and how do we want to see people, right? Do we want to see do we want to stick everybody with snowman, or do we want to stick everybody with a Christmas reef? What do we want, you know, or do we want to kind of allow everybody to have a little bit of what they need and see it all?

### **Maria: (10:56)**

I found an incredibly interesting conversation happening on clubhouse a long time ago when we had a woman who said, you know, I was traveling to high Point Market in the was traveling as a single woman, and I wasn't married, and I was traveling with a gay man. And you couldn't stay in North Carolina as an unmarried woman in someone's house, and you definitely couldn't be traveling with a gay man. And historically, when you start to see back how far things have sort of been discombobulated, you can look back and say, oh, my gosh, I can't believe that was happening. But we don't see that. We're still blind to it in the current day, right? And so we need to be having these conversations, and we need to be talking about how our professional organizations opening up and being welcoming to people and then seeing for themselves how they may be excluding people unintentionally, and that it is becoming each person's responsibility for this and not just the leaders in these roles to help encourage and include and start to listen better. When we were starting this conversation, I said, there's a big difference, and there's a visual that's used.

**Maria: (12:26)**

And what they do is they show three kids that are three different heights, and they're trying to look over a fence. One can already see over the fence, and there are three boxes. If you were to put one box out under each person, one person could totally see over the fence even more. But whenever you're looking at equity, what you're doing is you're putting two boxes underneath the shortest child so that they can see over the fence, and then one box over the other. Kid that couldn't see over the fence, but the person who's standing on level ground didn't need the box to start off with. And then that way, you have three eyes on what's happening. And I think there's a lot that has to do with each and every person in the industry starting to put some work and some time and some effort in. So, Nureed, what are some things that we can be doing that are actually helpful, that you fear helpful and that you appreciate when you experience it?

**Nureed: (13:28)**

Well, as a designer, I think what's really interesting is, you know, I think in my instance, it's very interesting because I think that since I'm pretty available on google, when you do a search, like, where I stand is pretty clear, and I'm very honest about who I am on all my social media and what I stand for and what I care about. And so I think it's interesting to realize that from a client perspective, I don't get clients who don't link with me politically, spiritually. And that comes in a range of all shapes, colors, forms. You know, I have all different kinds of clients. But what I don't get is I don't get people who don't understand right from the get go who I am. And I think what is important as designers is and, you know, it was interesting at our chapter officer training in Orlando, pam McNally, who is the EVP of marketing for the NKBA, she talked about how brands are standing for what they believe in. Whether you kind of like it or not, they're saying who exactly they are from the get go. And it's definitely true. And I think one of the things that we as designers can do is understand that we are, in fact, a brand.



## Nureed: (15:28)

We're not going to be one size fits all, and that it's okay that we should stand in exactly who we are and embrace our own love of that and appreciation for that. And I think what it gets you is it gets you better clients, more aligned clients, better experiences, and that all obviously translates into dollars, right? A better use of your dollar per hour spent because it's better for you, a better use of the relationship with the client, and a better end product, honestly, because that relationship is so good. And so I think the first place is for us, each of us individually, is to really own where we stand and know that there's plenty of business for all of us, and, you know, we'll find the clients who are aligned with us based on our value system. So that's, like, kind of, for me, the first place where I think people and that's a simple one, because you can do that with yourself, right? I think the next place is in the showroom experience. And again, I've only had one kind of strange experience in a showroom, believe it or not, in all my time of doing things. And I consider myself incredibly fortunate in that I have a lot of weird experiences that happened to me when I worked in fashion. But it's interesting to think about it because I think when I walk in, people consider me kind of like the model minority, right? That myth of, well, my parents are immigrants and they're both highly educated and they came here with a different kind of visa, right? They came here because my dad actually came here on an educational visa in the went to UC Berkeley and got a master's engineering and then worked for the state of Illinois and then the state of New Jersey for his whole life. And his whole life was in service based on the opportunity he was given. So it's the idea that I came from a different place. My mother has a master's degree in English. We are very well. You know, like, English was our first language, not any other language. So I think there's this thought process of hardworking, highly educated, not afraid to embrace English. And so, like, there's model minority, and then all the other things go with it. And so I think when I walk into a space, people look at me like that I get the privilege of that, right?

**Nureed: (17:28)**

But I hear my colleagues who are black or African American and they don't get the same privilege. They don't get that experience. They don't walk into a showroom and get that welcomeness because, like, oh, she must be something, you know? And I think it's really important for people like me I'm not the most privileged, but I still hold more privilege than other people. And so I think that's the other part of it, right, is like the calling out, the saying it the acknowledging of it and the making sure that other people are rewarded, recognized, seen, heard, acknowledged, brought into the fold. I try to make a really concerted effort to do that because that's what I want from other people. If I'm the odd one out in a space, I want someone else to bring me in. So I think it's really that's the other part of it. And again, that's, like, with us. And it's with us kind of talking to people when we see things happening in a showroom experience. And it doesn't have to be quite necessarily so in your face, I think, because, in fact, I think that probably makes people the person who's on the receiving end of it probably feel more uncomfortable. I know. Sometimes I do. I think it's like you see this happening and you kind of come in and try to, like, hey, let's, like, bring this person in. I think there's a partnership that we all have to take on and a responsibility we all have to take on as partners in this industry together to make sure that the equity we want to see happen isn't jargon we use at a corporate level that it is in fact, things that we use in practice every day by simply being the humans we want to be.

**Jason: (19:46)**

So how have you seen the design industry change over time in terms of equity, in a good way, bad way, or not at all?



### Nureed: (19:28)

So I think it's interesting, if you'd ask me when I started this more than eight years ago, I would have told you I saw very little of any other face than mostly, mostly white, you know, white and, you know, a mix of men and women, I would say. But interestingly, it always seemed like more men were rewarded despite the fact that there were more women in the industry. So I think that it's very interesting now after the things that have happened, after COVID, after, you know, all the things that have happened with the Black Lives Matter movement, I think that there's a real understanding that we can no longer hide from what is real. We are all faces of the industry in different ways, shapes and forms. And again, I don't think it's about you know, I see panel discussions that still to this day are predominantly white, whether they're female or male. And I think what's interesting to me is that I sometimes look at them and scratch my head and go, they couldn't find one person, one person who's highly qualified in this entire industry. I know that there are less of all of us collectively, but, like, really, you couldn't find one person who just knocks your socks off to be on that panel. That, to me, is like the part where I'm still really struggling with it, where I still attend conferences and go to panel discussions, and sometimes I really am very upset about them, honestly. And I had someone who works in PR, she said to me, oh, I need someone who can come and be in this panel discussion. And I said, oh, you know, your panel discussion is extremely one sided. And she said to me, yeah, no, I know. And she's like, it would be great if you could be in it. She was like, but you don't have enough Instagram followers. And that's like, I almost died. I was like, well, where are we going to start then? If you don't like, how are we going to start? The reality is that if marketing, if advertising, if PR is all geared and showing one face, well, that's why they have more Instagram followers, isn't it? Isn't that why they have more social media presence? Because that's all you see. If we're going to lift people up, we're going to have to come from a place of looking at kind of some of these demographics and also these sciences of these things and saying to ourselves, well, but really there's more behind it.

**Nureed: (22:28)**

And so, Maria, you might have an opinion on it since that's like, kind of your you really know about this. You all probably, you really all have such a great sense of it more than I do. But the math isn't going to meet the actual equity if we don't take a step forward. And the benefit to that is always going to be the thing that people think stops them from doing it, which is money. Right? We think that, oh well, there's more followers here and so therefore that's going to equate to more sales or more recognition. And I think what we're going to realize is that there's a whole swath of consumers who are not being seen, heard and listened to and they have buying power. They have the ability to go places. You know, I saw an article that talked about the types of projects that get featured in like the big magazines, architectural Digest and all of these and it talks about why the PR is always geared towards mostly white men and women and usually those are the people who are serving lux markets because that's just the way it's been. Again, it's about money. And what was interesting to me in that is that somebody had mentioned like well, you have to see other people in their homes, like normal people in their homes to really understand what this all looks like, what equity really means. And I mean as a designer, most of my clients are me. They are two family incomes with lots of children and trying to make it work and really like they have disposable income but not as much as you would think. And so we're being really creative about how to use their money and how to get them the renovation in the house that they want. I want their houses to be featured because there's something fantastic about that. And that's also part of the equity challenge to me is that even beyond race, beyond religion, beyond any other strata or category that you can think of is the component of socioeconomic wealth and how that really in our industry is the defining term of a how we make money in our own business. But also we think that maybe if people don't make a certain amount of money they're not worth servicing. And I don't think that that's the case.

**Maria: (25:18)**

One of my favorite, favorite, absolute favorite ways of discussing equity is the concept of having what if your child was left handed? Okay, so if your child comes home and they learn that they're left handed and you hand them right handed scissors or would you hand them or would you go out and buy them lefthanded scissors by even understanding that someone needs something differently and that you see them and you're listening and you're finding out what that difference is for them. That is what equity is trying to do in an underlying way that we are all rather blind to. So for example, one of the comments that you made is that the panels are heavily white and I agree with this 100%. Like how are we going to understand what beauty is if we can't see it through everybody's eyes, right? And so when I'm asked to do something, it's not that difficult to just say, well, who are the other people participating? And I'm just another white girl and honestly, I don't mean anything to anyone right now and I won't benefit you as a placeholder and I truly can't do as much for what you're trying to achieve by being there. And all you're doing is saving them time and energy and also teaching them a lesson in the process. And I do think that as the stereotypical white, interior design female, we can start being the voice of diversity and understanding that there are things we should be actively doing in hopes of changing what the design industry is going to look like moving forward. Are there any other things that like someone like me, right. I am the color of paste and I have lived in the United States and I have had access to all the privileges out there that are simple little things that we can be doing to actually change the outlook of where we're going.



### **Nureed: (27:18)**

Yeah. So I have a couple of different thoughts running through my head on this. The first thought I have is I love what you just said about really the idea of stepping to the side to make room for other people. And I think it's something again, I think people think about equity like a pie and that if they don't get their slice of the pie, then there's no pie left for that. And I think we have to expand our thinking and realize that this is not a pie. This is actually a very different thing that is more like I would like and more like to water. It's a resource. We all need it right now. There seems to be enough for us. That's a different topic for another day. And the idea that it keeps flowing, right? It keeps flowing more come you let a little bit out and more cups. And so I think we have to think about the idea of what you just talked about, the idea that you stepped aside and it makes the way for more people to do more things. I participated in this conference recently, and one of the reasons I participated was the panel was overwhelmingly white and it made me feel away. But then I decided that if I don't even participate, I just write it off all together, that I don't get to say what needs to happen, which is that, okay, admittedly there are more people who are white and affluent serving on boards, in panel discussions and so on and so forth. But if those people want to mentor me and then lift me up by me participating, then that's possible part of it. And so I think people in positions of particular positions of power have to realize that it is their job to lift the rest of us up. And what will come out of it is more water for all of us. It will not take away from them. We'll all get more of this very essential resource that we all need. So that's my first thought on it. And I love what you said, Maria, because it made me think about when I ran for office and my campaign manager is one of my dear friends and she also happens to be a white woman. And a lot of people said, Why don't you run? And she said, they don't need more of me. They need what Nureed is doing.



### **Nureed: (30:18)**

They need someone to actually be brave enough to step in front and say it and do it. And I will tell you, it was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life because what I got out of it was this amazing rewarding experience. But I also got a lot of I got a lot of hate, I got a lot of terrible things said about me. I got a lot of the vitriol that you hear people talk about and I got it right in my face. And the reason I say all of this is to say then the other part of it for me is and I again have conversation with my colleagues and my friends, which is that as a person of color, I don't want to always be the one who is educating everyone else on what to do. As a Muslim person, I don't want to always be educating everybody who is Christian, Jewish and everything else on what to do. I don't want to always be and as a woman, I don't want to always be telling a man, hey, you might not want to say that or do that. I think that each person, again, in the space that they hold, you want to be seen and heard and respected, but you don't want to be responsible for everyone's emotions and feelings. It is an enormous lift. It is so hard to live with that every single day. And so if I leave this talk saying one thing. It would be to ask everybody who is in a position of privilege and power to understand for a second what it feels like to not be seen. Not be heard. And then understand the lift that anyone who is not in a place of privilege and power has to take on them every single day to insert themselves in these spaces. What it took for me to go to that conference and take a deep breath and say the things that I needed to say without totally just being afraid or not wanting to participate, because it shouldn't be just my responsibility. I think we need people in our industry to take collective responsibility. And I know that that sounds maybe borderline socialists on my part for us to say, let's talk about the collective. But that's not. Necessarily what I'm trying to say. I just think that there's humanity in each of us and there's understanding in each of us, and we want all fundamentally the same things.

**Jason: (33:18)**

I love that. And this actually ties into the podcast we had where we had talked about diversity and design. And we had that one because of what happened at High Point Market last fall, is because they had a panel of all white people, and there was an uproar, and they had to immediately shut that down. We had a clubhouse talk right after that, and there was a lot of great information from minority designers, and they talked about a lot of the same things. As we end this, what would you like to see the design industry, MBA, AIA aside or whatever, do to try to address the issue of equity and design?

**Nureed: (33:43)**

Well, I think there's a couple of things. I think people have to put their money where their mouth is. Right. I think that if, regardless, again, of what category of person you fit into, if you see practices and behaviors at a showroom that are not in keeping with your own core values, don't shop there. Don't give them your business. Go somewhere else where they will see your core values, or if you are in a position of power to stop it, say something. Say that, I saw this sales, and go to the owner and say, I saw this salesperson, and it's really affecting your sales. You need to take a look at this. I think that there's, like, really little things we can do, each of us, to kind of influence it. I know from my perspective, I don't shop at places where I know that they've treated my peers poorly. Just because it hasn't happened to me doesn't mean that it's okay. And so I just don't go to those resources because I know my peers have had bad experiences with them, and that's like a big, big thing of it. Right. I think the other thing to keep in mind, and this is something I talked about a lot in terms of when I ran for office, because it was overall, at that point, it was a town council that had really very little diversity, despite it being a town population that was very unique compared to other towns in the United States.

**Nureed: (35:43)**

It was black and 10% other in that small little town of 16,000 people. It was what we want America to really theoretically look like and be. And yet the town council was not representative at that point. And I ran really under the premise of, like, we all need to be represented in some way, shape, or form on this board, on this council. And why I talk about that is that what that took away from me as I relate it to the design business is the one of the things I talked about the most is that it's not about having me on there to be one person, right? It's not about me being the president of the NKBA to be that one person, right? It's about what that brings in terms of overall equity, but also in terms of overall wealth, and I mean in terms of brain wealth, design wealth, creativity wealth. And there are studies that have been done that show that when you go back to small school aged children and you go through the educational process and you go into design firms where in one instance it's overwhelmingly homogeneous and one where it's overwhelmingly more diverse. And what you find is that the more interesting perspectives, the more interesting projects, the more interesting connections get made in a place where you have that diversity, that diversity creates diversity in thought, diversity and creativity. And that all in the end translates to money. It does. It will. There is no doubt it will, because you will be reaching more people and more people will resonate with that message and see your brand the way it should be seen, which is that I have something to offer and it's unique and it's creative and it's different because I have all these people at the table, not just one person.

**Jason: (37:09)**

Love it. Love it. We appreciate the time to read. So if anybody wants to get in contact with you, how do they do?

**Nureed: (37:13)**

So if you want to contact me, you can reach me on my email, which is Nureed nureed@NUinteriors. N u interiors with an S in the end. You can follow me on Instagram at new interiors and on Facebook at new interiors or my LinkedIn, which is Nureed saeed N-U-R-E-E-D-S-A-E-E-D.

**Jason: (37:42)**

So we hope you all have enjoyed this episode of Designer Discussions, and we hope to see you all here next week.

**Outro: (37:48)**

Are you wondering where to start marketing your interior design business? We are opening the Designer Discussions Marketing Studio, a monthly series of in depth actionable content to guide your marketing, PR and business development. We want to help you transform your business and elevate it to work with your dream clients.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Designer Discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria and Miriam on social media. You can find them on all platforms@designerdiscussions.com. Forget to, like, subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.



# DESIGNER DISCUSSIONS

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