

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** We actually had to fly back from our vacation, we didn't have coats or anything and we bought these silly hats in the airport because that was all we had to stay warm and we would take turns making each other laugh and cracking jokes and I think that was a way to create a buffer against all the things that were going wrong around us, all the uncertainty we're facing. We knew we could find these little moments of joy.

**Robert Glazer:** Welcome to Elevate. A podcast about achievement, personal growth and pushing limits in leadership in life. I'm Robert Glazer and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity and helping others to do the same.

Welcome to Elevate podcast, our quote for today is from Steve Jobs and it is; The broader ones understanding of the human experience the better design we will have.

Our guest today, Ingrid Fetell Lee explores how the way we design our world influences our happiness. She's the author of Joyful, the surprising power of ordinary things to create extraordinary happiness, creator of the website Aesthetics of Joy. She also has an amazing TED talk that we'll talk about more. Where joy hides and how to find it, which has drawn more than 17 million viewers. Ingrid, welcome, we're really excited to have you on Elevate podcast.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Robert Glazer:** I'm curious, what first drove you into a career in design?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** That's a good question, I was working in the field of branding and I was in a strategist type role, I spent my day collaborating with designers. I would work on these projects with them and look over at what they were doing and I thought that looks fun, I want to do that. That sent me down a rabbit hole of trying to understand more about the field of design. It wasn't something I was exposed to when I was younger. I didn't know you could be a designer for a living. I started to look at all the different kinds of design, graphic design, interaction design, and architecture and fashion design, I landed on industrial design or product design, which is about everything smaller than a building. That is a physical product that you own, how all those things get made. That's the field I ended up choosing to go into.

**Robert Glazer:** Who were real design mentors? Design idols if you never worked with them?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** It's changed so much over the years, I'm trying to think back then who drew me in to the field of design. One of the things I was interested in at that time was sustainable design. I was reading a lot of people like Victor Papanek, Ralph Kaplan, who were at the forefront of raising consciousness about what are we doing when we manufacture something, when we have an idea for something and we put it on a mass production line and we produce it at scale. What are

the consequences of those choices? Those are some of my formative inspirations and influences in the design world.

**Robert Glazer:** You've talked about a specific moment in design school that made you first see the connection between joy and design. Could you talk to us a little about that moment?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Sure. I was at the end of my first year at design school, it was a head spinning first year. I had no design background before that, I was learning color for the first time, I was learning to draw, I was learning how to make models of my ideas and bring them to life. Also, trying to understand what made for good design. At the end of that first year I had everything that I had made, at these reviews you stand in front of your table, there's a cluster of people around you. A group of professors and a group of people who are observing, you just let them talk about your work. One of the professors said, your work gives me a feeling of joy. This was definitely not what was I was looking for. I was so influenced by sustainable design and I was conscious of materials. I would have loved for them to say, wow, what material did you make that out of? Or how do you envision this being produced? I was excited about those kinds of ...

**Robert Glazer:** Function.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Yah. Functions. Super functional. Joy was not on my radar at all. I was intrigued because I have spent most of my life thinking joy is this elusive and intangible feeling. When this professor said your work gives me a feeling of joy, I immediately started to wonder, what was it about the things I had created that elicited that feeling of joy? I'd always thought material things were incidental to joy. They were not important. We're often told that material things don't really matter. To hear this feedback was confusing. I asked, how do things create joy? How do tangible things create intangible joy? This whole panel of professors couldn't answer the question. They hemmed and the hawed. At the end they just said it's intuitive. That answer wasn't good enough for me. That's what started me off on this quest, this was ten years ago, it set me off to try to understand what is that connection. Between the physical world and the emotional one. How can we use that.

**Robert Glazer:** I've heard you tell the stories about the professors in the speech, what I haven't heard is what the grade was? You got in this debate, how did you do?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** All I know is I passed. When you're in design school, no one is looking at grades, just trying to survive. You're trying to go from I made it through that year, I passed enough so I could stay here and keep doing this. That's all I remember.

**Robert Glazer:** Another thing you've talked about, just setting the definitions for everyone, can you define how you view the difference between happiness and joy?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** It's important because those two words are often mixed up. Both in popular culture and even scientists sometimes use, you'd think there's this perfect lexicon that scientists use, their overlapping definitions. Some use one word and swap it out at a different time, broadly speaking, across the scientific community, happiness is synonymous with something they call subjective well being. It is a broad evaluation of how we feel about our lives over time and it's more reflective and evaluative. If you asked yourself on scale of one to seven, seven being my ideal life right now, and one being the worst life that I could be living right now, where are you? That's how happy you are. Whereas joy is much more immediate, the way psychologists often define it is as an intense momentary experience of positive emotion. It's much more visceral. We can measure it through direct physical expressions, things like smiling and laughter and often people will describe a feeling of warmth in their upper body, there are physical feelings that go with a moment of joy. That distinction is really important and powerful because we often overlook these little moments of joy.

When I do workshops people often say, I feel that multiple times a day and I don't even notice, when we pay attention to that feeling we realize we feel it frequently through the course of day to day. It doesn't last forever, it's these little spikes that occur. Those little moments actually have a lot of power, they influence our health, they influence our focus and concentration for the better. They make us more emotionally resilient when we have lots of them over time. In the process of searching for happiness, we ignore these little moments of joy, yet they are one of the things that leads to greater happiness in the long run.

**Robert Glazer:** It seems paradoxical that if you had many more moments of joy you'd be happier. You've written a lot about, spoken about work place design, happiness and engagement are used synonymously in the work place. People who are not happy are usually not engaged in their work, not doing good stuff.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** I find the distinction so helpful is because happiness is hard. There's so much that goes into it. Whereas joy is much easier, if we can start to focus on these little moments of joy and stringing them together and adding them up. You talk about in a work place, in a work place a really powerful thing is emotional contagion. The fact that are emotions spread to each other. Our emotions can jump work places. I recently read that if you go home and you're with your partner and someone is really negative at your workplace you can actually transfer that negative emotion through you to your partner to their workplace. Emotions are so contagious, that's one of the way's emotion can be really powerful. For good and for ill in a work place. These little moments are sort of seeds that can start something. Ideally, something really good.

**Robert Glazer:** I'm curious, I'm not sure if this is something you weighed in on, you talked a lot about work spaces and how they can affect joy. There's a lot of writing now that's coming out, ten years later, sort of rethinking the whole open work space and whether that is ... I don't know if it provides joy or not, but whether it's productive or conducive to good work. Has that crossed into your research that you've done in your work?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** I've spent a lot of time thinking about it because I'm intrigued, I like to think about what is the ideal work space from a joy perspective, the open plan office has positives and negatives, I've worked in many open plan offices, one of the observations I would make about an open plan office, from the perspective of joy and aesthetics, the aesthetics I study, is we thrive in natural environments and research seems to suggest that this translates to artificial environments too. We thrive on something called prospect and refuge. The idea behind this is we love environments that are open enough that we can see, we have good visibility, we also need places to take shelter. We feel when we are in a really open environment where there are no nooks, no screens, there's nowhere that offers protection, we have no refuge. The open box office is all prospect and no refuge. I can see how that creates anxiety.

The other problem is in the man made environment, there are a lot of things that we find that we don't find in the natural environment. Hard surfaces, hard surfaces made of concrete, glass, these things carry noise, they don't buffer noise, they carry noise in a way that natural materials don't so much. When we have these hard, open plan spaces, you have a lot of noise and that noise can be really stressful. There are structural features about the way that we build these open plan offices that are also problematic. I wouldn't say I am entirely against the open plan office, I just think there are better ways to do it.

**Robert Glazer:** There's going to be a lot of new concepts, the problem a lot of people see is that because it's so open, people are putting on their noise canceling headphones, they're not talking to others, they're slacking each other. It defeats a lot of the purposes, people are trying to create their own refuge where it doesn't exist.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Yes. Exactly, The noise canceling headphones are a source of refuge when you can't get physical refuge. You can see in offices that have phone booths or have quiet areas, or library areas or different kinds of spaces that allow people to have different modes of work that are more successful. For example, one of the benefits I would say of an open plan office is that it gives more access to natural light. In a traditional office you often have people who are more senior have the outer perimeter of the office, they get all the windows and natural light, then you have everyone else in cubicles in the middle, I wouldn't say those cubicles are much better, in terms of what they offer, there's still noise that carries over the barriers, they're gray, and their enclosed, and they have little light. One of the benefits of an open plan office is they democratize access to some of the most precious resources in a building. Light and views are two of those things.

I think there are ways to do it where you get the benefits, but you also give people space's to take cover when they need to focus or have quiet.

**Robert Glazer:** Interesting. You started researching this, which I assume lead to your TED talk, where joy hides and how to find it, which became a huge success, was it your research that was the inspiration for that talk and did you expect such an incredible result from it?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** You never know, it's such a vulnerable thing, putting an idea that you've been working ... I'd been working on that at that point for nine years and change, almost ten years, it's such a vulnerable thing. To put it out there. You don't know what people are going to resonate with or connect with. I had finally finished my book, I finished writing the book just a few weeks before TED, it was really right before. I wanted to share this idea we often overlook our surroundings, we think of them as just stuff, if we knew how much they affected us, and if we knew the potential for things like color, paint is so affordable. Plants, some of these things seem so simple to actually influence our wellbeing, I think we'd take a very different view of the way we treat, both our homes and our work places and the public spaces that we traverse on a daily basis.

**Robert Glazer:** I was going to ask you that. You worked on them together. I assumed maybe that TED talk drove the book, a lot of people watch a TED talk and it's so popular they write a book, but this was a parallel process for you.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** It was. The TED was in many ways a surprise, because they asked me four weeks before TED, I literally just submitted the final manuscript and I'd been working on this book for a very, very long time. This research took me many years. I was celebrating that, I got the call, I suddenly went back into the mode of oh boy I have to prepare something really big. They were just in the heels of each other. I was, in fact, illustrating the book while I was working on my TED talk at the same time. They were in sequence.

**Robert Glazer:** Most people would love to have that was very fortuitous. You had a best selling book called Joyful, which is out, it's been a huge hit, endorsed by Adam Grant, Susan Cain, Arianna Huffington called it an inexhaustible guide to what makes life good. There's a lot of stuff in the book, but I am curious, as you said you had to do a lot of research, what was the biggest takeaway from your research, what was the biggest surprise as you did the background research for the book?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** There are so many things that have surprised me over the course of this process. One of the things that really surprised me was how deep and unconscious the effects of our environment actually are. For example, research shows that, this is an amazing set of studies, done at a housing project in Chicago. The project constitutes a number of identical buildings where trees and grass had been planted at the beginning, when these buildings were put in, but then some were not maintained as well as others. You have some buildings, all the buildings are the same, but some buildings have nature outside them, they have grass and trees, and some have dirt lots. Researchers were able to analyze the patterns of crime and of aggression in these buildings and what they found is that having more nature outside the building contributed to a significant decrease in crime and violent incidents around the building and in the building. Just having exposure to nature somehow influences behavior on an unconscious level.

Similarly, when inmates in a prison were given nature videos to watch, aggressive and violent incidents declined by 26%. Something is happening. You

can see this with many other different kinds of things. Research on the way order, a sense of order in our environment affects us. The more orderly environments, when people are asked to take a test, a math test, and they look at asymmetrical environments, they are more likely to cheat on the test, when they've looked at asymmetrical environments then when they looked at symmetrical, orderly environments. These effects are really subconscious, I suspected that our environment played a role in our wellbeing, to see how much it influences our behavior towards others was really ... shocked me.

**Robert Glazer:** That's interesting. You also talked about circular objects versus angular objects, can you talk about that?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Sure. Some of these effects can be traced to specific parts of our brain, specific neurological responses. For example, one of the things that I noticed is that round things are often joyful, if you look at childhood, all of childhood is round. You've got bubble and balloons and Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds and Hula hoops and balls. So much of childhood is round. When neuroscientists place people into fMRI machines, they show them pictures of angular objects and round ones, what they find is the angular objects, when people look at angular objects it stimulates activity in the part of the brain called the amygdala. That part of the brain is associated with fear and anxiety, when people look at curved versions of the exact same objects that part of the brain stays silent. Something is happening when we look at these objects, the researchers speculate there is an evolutionary reason for this, in nature, things that are angular are often dangerous to us. Antlers, thorns and jagged rocks. Things that are round are safe. Our brains don't have to be on heightened alert. We can relax and be at ease.

**Robert Glazer:** I thought that point was fascinating in the TED talk and you had some great video around that. We're going to take a quick break for a word from our sponsor and will be back in a few minutes.

**Adam Grant:** Hi, I am Adam Grant, as a Wharton psychologist, I've spent most of my career studying two big questions. How do we unlock original thinking and build cultures of productive generosity? With those questions in mind I recently co-founded a pretty extraordinary community dedicated to discovering ground breaking ideas while trying to make the world a better place. It's called the next big idea club. Together, my friends, Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, Dan Pink and I, search far and wide for the eight most original, most essential non-fiction books of the year and we send them straight to you. We also interview the authors and we send you the key insights across video, audio, and texts formats. Remember, this is a book club, so when you join the exclusive online forum you get the chance to discuss every season's selections not just with other members but also with me, Malcolm, Susan, and Dan.

**Robert Glazer:** Get insider insights from Dan Pink, Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, and Adam Grant, and sign up for the next big idea club today at [www dot next big idea club dot come slash ten off](http://www.nextbigideclub.com) and get ten percent off your subscription.

Welcome back to Elevate, where we are joined by Ingrid Fetell Lee, we're talking about her book, Joyful, before the break and I'm curious, one of the other things you talk about is that our world is designed in opposite way from a lot of the joyful concepts that you've talked about both in the book and your talk. Can you give us some examples of where we're doing things that don't produce joy. I know you talked about a few, but I think you had a couple more.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** We were talking about round things, it's interesting if you think about work environments, the basic unit of many work environments is the cubicle, or the cube. Not round at all, if roundness is connected to ease and playfulness work environments often feel like we can't bring that playful side of ourselves to that space. Bringing some of these curves in helps disrupt that sense of rigidity. Other spaces lacking in joy, hospitals and nursing homes. Those are spaces often lack joy. They're so focused on being functional and sterile that they lose all sense of vibrancy. Research shows that when hospital patients have a view, this is a study of gallbladder patients actually, recovering from surgery, that when they had a view of nature out their hospital window, that they recovered more quickly, and that they needed less pain medication. In similar studies, with natural light, have shown the same effect. Having color, having vibrancy in those environments also helps to make them feel more alive.

**Robert Glazer:** It can be hard to put certain shapes where shapes don't exist, what about color? Color is simple. Does it seem out of place? Does it seem too weird? To put bright color in places where it's all gray today.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** It's really simple. It's simple, it's cost effective, and you don't have to have control over your whole office space to do it. Sometimes people say all I have control over is my desk, what can I do? Things like a really bright coffee mug, it's amazing how one small pop of color can make the whole space around it feel more alive. You've just inserted one little thing, putting one little yellow throw pillow on a beige sofa transforms that sofa. Little gestures and color is a powerful way to do it. Research shows that people working in more colorful work environments are more confident, alert, friendly and joyful than those working in drab spaces. That's a good one to start with.

**Robert Glazer:** Are you seeing companies start to take notice about this? I know you found some incredible one off examples, are the big companies starting to take note of this? Are the googles and the facebooks, are you seeing a movement, are work space design people calling you? I'm curious whether people are getting the message on this, particularly since you looked into a lot of the science.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** I think there is awareness. Environment is important in a workspace. Historically we've seen it go from workspaces are spaces of complete efficiency, to workspaces are a way to communicate what your brand is and what it stands for. The period we've been in is one that a lot of the companies of the forefront of this have been creating really branded environments. Environments that really speak to what their company values are, trying to use space as a way to communicate that. Now, I am hoping we are moving into a place where



companies are starting to become more aware of the effects of that space on the day to day experience on their employees. Not from a functional perspective, but from an emotional prospective as well.

**Robert Glazer:** Do you think that we're on a path towards a collective appreciation of joyful design? Or is this going to take a little longer?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** It will take some time. Over the past few years I've definitely noticed a greater awareness. I would say that Instagram in particular has played a really big role in this. In shaping visual culture and making us more aware of the way things look. That's had bigger impact in certain sectors, the travel sector, the hospitality sector, the food, all of that has been heavily influenced by that. There are a lot of places like hospitals and nursing homes, homeless shelters, and housing projects, and many work spaces too, that have not been influenced by this as much.

I am hoping it will start to migrate across from these sorts of discretionary places where we go when we have free time, and it's fun, to the places we actually need to be a lot of the time.

**Robert Glazer:** You made me think of an example, where my family and I did some service work last year in Puerto Rico, we were at two children's hospitals and one was in the suburban area and one was in urban, the suburban one looked like a 1950s, heavy metal doors, gray, you can't see into the rooms, really depressing, it felt more like a prison. Obviously this had to do with the resources. The one in the city, all glass doors, color everywhere, even though there was a time difference, it was a different feeling being in both of those places. There's still no reason, it's harder to replace the metal doors with glass ones, but just color, decoration, I remember we just felt, the kids were in no different situations in those two hospitals, even just going around giving out toys we felt totally different in each of those circumstances.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** We don't always connect it to the environment at the time, sounds like you put that together, sometimes we just walk into a space and there's something in us that just sinks. We have been taught to ignore that impulse. That is the thing that I am hoping most of all to help people understand that it's just to reconnect with that impulse. Our ancestors had those impulses about their surroundings because surroundings when you're living out in the primitive world, when we were living out in the open, our sense moment to moment of what was in our environment had a distinct relationship to our survival.

If we were near sharp things that may put us in danger. If there might be predators that could watch us that we couldn't see because we had no prospect, we didn't have those views, if we are making a turn into an environment that feels not lush and alive, but dead and devoid of food sources and water and light. We have that impulse to tell us that. Even though we don't rely on that for our day to day survival, those impulses are valuable because they tell us what messages are still coming in to our unconscious from our



senses. The more that we can make our surroundings feel alive the more relaxed and the more joyful that we feel.

**Robert Glazer:** When you're dealing with adversity what do you do to find joy?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Great question. One of the most tried and true things is to try to cheer someone else up, because I think it was Mark Twain who gave this advice, when you're feeling down the best thing to do is to cheer someone else up. It works because emotions are contagious, if we can make someone else laugh then that makes us laugh, and it's sort of creates this cycle.

I was just thinking back, when you talked about adversity, it was about a year ago that our pipes burst in our house, and our house got flooded, and we had just finished a renovation and we had to start over. My husband and I were really struggling. One of the things that we did, we actually had to fly back from our vacation, we didn't have coats or anything, we bought these really silly hats in the airport, that's all we had to stay warm, we would just take turns, making each other laugh and cracking jokes and I think that was a way to create a buffer against the things that were going wrong around us and all the uncertainty we're facing, we knew we could find these moments of joy. That's one way, finding some way to laugh is really powerful as well.

**Robert Glazer:** If you had an unlimited budget, someone gave you an unlimited budget to design anything in the world, what would it be?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Oh wow. I would be interested in re-imagining incarceration. I won't even say a prison. Just re-imagining the experience of that. I think we have that in this country really wrong, you can look at Europe and some of the models in Europe and see there are much more humane ways to handle the design of spaces to house people who are moving through the criminal justice system. I feel strongly about and would love to see changed. I don't know if I am the right person to design it. But I could imagine a consortium of people who would be really amazing.

**Robert Glazer:** Has anyone done a beta prison, tested a radical design, or has it just been too hard of a thing to get approval for?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** In Europe, I've seen one in Norway, where there aren't any locks on the doors. It's radically different. They look more like university dorm rooms than they look like prisons. I think it's an attitude thing. In this country we have a real penal attitude toward criminal justice as opposed to rehabilitative attitude. When your focus is on punishment and retribution as opposed to rehabilitation. What you're going to design is going to reflect that. The fundamental underpinnings of the system have to do with our values around it. Such things exist, but I haven't seen anything in this country. Yet.

**Robert Glazer:** Last question I always like to ask, I modified it for your industry. What is a design mistake that you've learned the most from in your career?

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** The biggest design mistake I've ever made is trying to control everything. Trying to think that I could make something perfect. That doesn't exist. Whenever I've been successful it's been because I have remembered that people are going to transform the thing that I am creating, and they're going to make it their own, they're going to transform it. Leaving space for that is the most important thing that I took away. You're never going to design something 100% and get it all the way there. You're going to get it 90%. If you leave space for people to make it better they will. As opposed to if you try to design it 100% people will make it their own, and it will end up worse than you imagined it, if you leave space people will make it better than you imagined it.

**Robert Glazer:** That's a great learning. Ingrid, thank you so much for taking the time to share your story and experiences with us today, your work shows how so many people take design for granted and underestimate how much it has an impact on both our mood, and our lives.

**Ingrid Fetell Lee:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

**Robert Glazer:** To our listeners, thanks to tuning in to the Elevate podcast, with Robert Glazer, if you enjoyed today's episode, I'd appreciate if you could head over to Apple podcast and give us a review, you can learn how to review us by following the link on the podcast page, and we'll be sure to include links to Ingrid, as well as to her new book Joyful, and her TED talk episode, right on our website, Robert Glazer dot com. Until next time, keep elevating.