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## 5 WOMEN WHO BROKE THE [DESIGN] GLASS CEILING

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**LUCA  
NICHETTO:**  
ONE OF THE  
MOST IN-DEMAND  
DESIGNERS TODAY





## LEADERS BY EXAMPLE

Interior designers Kia Weatherspoon and Little Wing Lee talk about equity in design, what drives them in their practices, and what it's like to be the only Black woman in the room.

Written and transcribed by  
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Kia Weatherspoon and Little Wing Lee understand design's ability to change lives. Leading human-centric practices, both interior designers approach their work with sensitivity, empathy, and political and cultural understanding about the communities they serve.

Weatherspoon is the founder of the interiors firm Determined by Design and the procurement-service provider Lucidity Procurement. She believes that people are at the heart of good design, and her work focuses on affordable low-income housing.

Lee's interest in personal histories initially led her to the field of documentary filmmaking, but a summer spent at the Design Discovery landscape architecture program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design inspired a pivot to interior design. The founder of Black Folks in Design, design director at Atelier Ace (the Ace Hotel brand's in-house creative team), and the founder and principal of design firm Studio & Projects, Lee is drawn to the multifaceted nature of design—and to its ubiquity, which makes the intention behind it so powerful.

In conversation together for the first time, Weatherspoon and Lee share their understanding of what it means to be a woman of color in an industry dominated by white men. Together with their teams, they are challenging the status quo of the architecture and design space by prioritizing community and diversity in their practices. *Text has been edited for length and clarity. »*



Kia Weatherspoon, founder of the interiors firm Determined by Design and the procurement-service provider Lucidity Procurement. Weatherspoon was awarded Designer of the Year at the 2022 ICFF.





KELLY MARSHALL

Little Wing Lee—founder of Black Folks in Design, design director at Atelier Ace (the Ace Hotel brand’s in-house creative team), and the founder and principal of design firm Studio & Projects—at the Ace Hotel Brooklyn, where she curated Spotlight One, the inaugural exhibition from Black Folks in Design.

**GRAY:** What led you to pursue careers in the design industry?

**KIA WEATHERSPOON:** For me, it was my brother being incarcerated for 15 years. [It was while visiting] prison facilities that I really started to think critically about space and its impact on people. When the space was inadequate, demoralizing, and without beauty, it affected not just me, but everyone in that space. After 9/11, I was [deployed] with the U.S. military in the Middle East at a BEAR [Basic Expeditionary Airfield Resources] base and I needed some comfort and solace in a tent. So, I hung three sheets around my cot and made three sheet walls. That was the first space I ever created. It was without beauty or decoration; [it was] more about the healing component. When I got out of the military, I knew I wanted to create spaces for people.

**LITTLE WING LEE:** My mother always taught me to see beautiful things and people in spaces. Both my parents were part of the Black Arts Movement in Boston. Anywhere we would go,

**LWL:** I never thought of it as a luxury. We didn't grow up with a lot of money. I wasn't going to Milan on vacation; I was visiting my grandmother's house, and she also had good taste and a very strong [aesthetic] sensibility; she collected vintage furniture and antiques. I never associated beauty with money or thought that to be in a beautiful or comfortable space, you had to spend a lot of money. Many of the spaces where I feel most at ease, or that I think are well-designed, are easy but considered. Care has been taken for those spaces. There has been thought, or some intention.

**GRAY:** How do you make interior design feel less exclusive?

**KW:** The way I learned to create a design concept—I've always focused on a concept, not a style or theme—was to search for a community story. And [at my firm], when we talk about community research, we go all the way back to who owned the land—not the site, but the land—which always means there's an indigenous history

**KW:** Is shortening the term "interior design" to "design" creating ambiguity about what it is we do—and its value? Should we take greater care to call it "interior design"?

**LWL:** In general, architecture is always at the top. It could be a gender thing—most architects are men. Historically, I think interior design was often seen as a woman's profession and given this secondary status. On projects where there's an architect, landscape architect, interior designer, and lighting designer, it's always the architect who gets top billing. It's important to give equal credit to all of the disciplines in order to convey that it is a team of people coming together to produce a space.

**GRAY:** How do you find your clients?

**LWL:** Every project or job I've ever had came from a connection I've had with someone. Your network is extremely important.

**KW:** When I first started Determined by Design, we looked for partners who were Black. I knew I wanted to do work in the affordable housing space, to work in communities, and to work with people who looked like me. I wanted to build communities for my people, and I get to do that.

**GRAY:** Can interior design be used as a tool for creating radical social change?

**KW:** Interior design is the greatest form of empathy in practice, if we choose it. I've started to hear language around the term "trauma-informed design." It's all specific to homeless populations and minorities, and it involves things like having soft seating at an entry point—but isn't that just good design? Why would any designer not think that to welcome someone into a space, you need softness and adornment? For designers, social justice has to be about creating spaces that bring people comfort, and not about being hyper-focused on socioeconomic »

## "Interior design is the greatest form of empathy in practice, if we choose it."

—KIA WEATHERSPOON, DETERMINED BY DESIGN

my mom would point out [details] and say things like, "Isn't that interesting, the way this rug is hung on the wall?" She was very aware of our own interior space. I took for granted that I always grew up in beautiful spaces, and when I was in spaces that weren't so "beautiful," I felt uncomfortable. I tried to figure out what it was about those spaces that was off. And because of my mother, I started to notice [for example] that bad lighting can really turn a space upside down!

**KW:** I love this idea of your mom pointing out things that were beautiful. Did you, at any point, think that beauty was a luxury, or just that it was everywhere?

or a history of color there. We stay hyper-focused on those narratives, and we weave them into spaces through materiality, space planning, lighting. You will never hear us say we're a luxury design firm. We're actually anti luxury, pro people.

**LWL:** [Because] interior design, or design in general, is marketed as a luxury [service], most people don't think about how design affects their everyday lives. It affects the way you're learning in school or the way you feel when you go to your office or to the doctor—all those [reactions are responses to] decisions that were made by a designer.





**TOP:** Lee is working on the interiors of the forthcoming Ray Harlem development, a project in New York City that will comprise residential units, retail, and a performance space for the National Black Theatre. **ABOVE:** Lee was an exhibition designer for the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.





standings and demographics. This is where the diversity piece of our industry is key. If I'm a white designer working on a project in an economically challenged community and I can't see myself in that community, then how can I be the best designer for it? If you can't imagine yourself there, you can utilize empathy to ask yourself, "Is this good enough for someone from my family?" That's how you implement design as a form of social justice.

**LWL:** It's important for designers to think critically about our work and discipline. When I first started working in architecture firms, I was the only Black designer, and the other Black employee would be in a completely different department. That was one of the reasons I started Black Folks in Design, because I know these people exist; I'm friends with them! Creating your own community is a way to create social change. You need to be able to get together, have a drink, laugh over these crazy experiences, brainstorm projects, and ask for advice.

**GRAY:** How has the design industry evolved for Black women designers over the past 10 years?

**KW:** I had no real expectation of the industry curating my path for me—I always chose my path. I think certain things within our industry—like pay inequity, race, diversity—are talked about more, but unless companies address pay inequities, they haven't really made any real effort, it's just lip service. That's not to be pessimistic. If designers of color can hear the narrative that you can create your own path and possibility, that's how change is going to happen.

**LWL:** I think you see change. Think about Crystal Williams, the new president of the Rhode Island School of Design: She's a Black woman. Or Juan Du, the dean of design at the University of Toronto. These are major positions in respectable design institutions and these two women are directing education and what's expected of design education—that's huge. But as Kia said, you need to

have your own vision for yourself, and work toward representation in that way. Growing up, I'd sometimes say to my mom, "I'm the only Black person here," and she'd be like, "OK, and what else is new?" I can't wait for this perfect scenario in order for me to do my work and express myself. It's rare to be in a space that is crafted for me, so I need to craft it myself. I can't wait for the rest of the world to catch up.

**KW:** That's been my greatest superpower: being the only one in the room. But also, "Imma bring another one with me." We tend to constantly perpetuate the struggle, but not celebrate it. It was good to be "the only one" because maybe I shifted the mindset of the 12 other people not of color in the room, or of the men if I was the only woman. You're always going to be "the only one" of something—use it as your superpower, lean into it, and start to shift the narrative ever so slowly. ✱



**THIS PAGE:** A common area in Capitol Vista, a multifamily, affordable housing complex designed by Weatherspoon's firm, Determined by Design. **OPPOSITE:** In addition to affordable housing, Weatherspoon has worked on hospitality projects such as Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books in Philadelphia.

