

# THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE THIRTY-FOUR  
DESIGN FOR A CHANGE**

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GUEST: ASHLEIGH AXIOS**

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**Shawn:** Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Where bold leaders combine with big ideas to create game-changing disruption.

I'm Shawn Nason, your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future.

We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this edition of *The Combustion Chronicles*, we have Ashleigh Axios. Ashleigh is an international speaker, strategic creative, and an advocate for design's ability to break barriers and create positive social change. She is the chief is the Chief Experience Officer and a partner at Coforma, a digital consultancy and design firm that crafts creative solutions and builds technology products that support communities. Ashleigh is also the chair of the board for AIGA, the Professional Association for Design, and has also formed and led the in-house creative agency for marketing, communications, and brand identity solutions at Automattic, a technology company on a mission to democratize publishing and commerce.

Prior to her role at Automattic, Ashleigh served as the Creative Director and the digital strategist for the Obama White House, bridging two presidential terms in the Office of Digital Strategy. Essence Magazine named her as one of the 29 most powerful black women in the Obama White House as she was the first female and youngest White House creative director and longest serving designer in the administration. Ashleigh is a past president of AIGA Washington, DC where she formed DotGovDesign, an initiative connecting and empowering government designers. Ashleigh, welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*.

**Ashleigh:** Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

**Shawn:** Well, awesome. And wow, so many accomplishments, Ashleigh, as we were reading through your bio and things that you've done. I'm wondering if you'd actually be willing to share a little personal story with our listeners of where your last name, Axios, came from, because I know there's a really cool story behind that.

**Ashleigh:** Oh, absolutely. I'd be very happy to. So my husband and I, actually, when we were engaged, we did what I think a lot of couples do, which is kind of talk about our values, and the

lives that we wanted to build with one another, and kind of how, you know, two people are gonna come together towards a shared mission, and kind of working together as a unit and we're both designers, so I don't know how much you all know about designers, but we really like creative briefs for our work. So, it kind of naturally ended up kind of forming a creative brief for us because we're kind of talking about our values, and outlining where we wanted to go, and how we want to spend our time in the future and we also have this challenge of figuring out what we're gonna do with our last name.

And like, I think, a lot of couples, we didn't really love the idea of just, you know, me, taking his name, or trying to merge our names. My former last name was very common. So, we ended up doing some digging, and finding, looking at root words from different origins, and finding something that aligned with the values that we have as a couple and so we landed on Axios after a long time of kind of consideration and exploration. And it means worthy or having weighted value. So, we both changed our last name and it's kind of a reminder to us to kind of put our time and our energy into causes that will make a difference.

**Shawn:** What an awesome story. When I first heard that, I'm like, I laughed first off because yes, design brief. I lead in our own company a group of designers. And they said, "We have to have a design brief around this and not being a designer." I'm like, "Okay, whatever." But to even design brief your last name, that is probably one of the coolest things I've ever heard, Ashleigh. So, kudos to you and your husband on that one. So, let's talk about design. You're a passionate advocate for the power of design and particularly in the movement for social change. So where does your drive to help others and your push for positive social change come from?

**Ashleigh:** It's a great question. I mean, I can only kind of speculate to some degree. But I remember from a very young age being drawn to the experiences of others and just being highly empathetic and one of the things that has stuck with me for a really long time was my mom taking me and my brother out to feed the homeless in the DC area when I was pretty young. And it was cold outside. We had a huge pot of chili with others. And we're feeding folks out of the back of a van.

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And so early on, you know, that was just one experience. But one that has stuck with me, just the awareness that there are people who are in need, you know, I think children, we have our own needs and demands on the world, but kind of just...I was struck by how much need there was and it kind of put my own needs even at a young age in perspective. So, I think about that

every time the temperature drops kind of suddenly. That still comes to mind. And I think it was just one of many kind of moments that led me to feel like if I'm gonna be here in this world and I've got options, I have privileges that I can kinda have some choice in what I do, my career, my path, even as I was kind of learning that I had creative skills, I wanted to do, to use them in a way that was really going to make a positive impact in the lives of other people.

And so, yeah, that's kind of where it's come from. And it took me a while to kind of combine my skills with those interests. And to be perfectly honest, I felt kind of lonely at first. People are like “artist kid wanting to do good. I don't know. Good luck with that. Can you donate paintings?”, you know? Like, you know, there wasn't quite a path for it for a little while. But luckily this has started to build as a space and really one that's embraced greatly. You know, I've been fortunate to work with some great nonprofits and on so many different causes doing just that, using my creative and design skills for good.

**Shawn:** It's a beautiful story. And so glad you shared that with us. And, you know, we talked a lot about disruption and what happens in disruption and one of those things is pushing against the status quo. So, let's put this in your field on what you do. What strengths or even, like, superpowers do you believe are inherent in design that make it so well suited for creating that necessary disruption and push for change?

**Ashleigh:** First, I don't think it's necessarily, like, inherent in design as design. This is, like, thing that is out there that you can kind of, like, have or not have. But I think what happens is folks who practice designing as this verb or action that we do, we end up building skills that many folks just have naturally, but you can become really great at over time. So, I think that folks that invest in designing well are adept at seeing things with a really realist lens.

This is where, for me I think, my kind of creative art background as a kid is also really helpful, because I started out by just observing and drawing. And I had to, you know, I didn't have to, but I just enjoyed focusing on what was in front of me and really trying to see it and put it down on paper. And I think even if folks aren't coming from that background, that type of seeing the reality around us translates into design research, translates into so many of our applications of design.

And then I think where folks tend to think about design a little bit more and the work of designers is that kind of visioning creative of helping imagine and demonstrate what a better future, a better solution might be in a way that helps take other people there. So, designers don't stop at just sharing the world as it exists, but are generally taking something from a base

kind of point A to a much improved point B. And I think that's true, whether what's being crafted is a chair, or a policy, or an organizational structure or website, you know, that kind of design process is about improving.

So, I guess to highlight the qualities again, I think designers who are well-trained whether through formal education or kind of on the job and through experience, all learn to kind of see what's around them really realistically. And even when folks are saying that's good enough or that's how it's always been done, a good designer will see that as just the status quo to be improved upon. And they'll be able to discern issues and really make suggestions that visualize change for direct improvement. And that for me is what design is all about. It's, you know, changing something for the better.

**Shawn:** That Perspective on design is really awesome. I really wanna get specific about a talk that I heard you give on how selfish design can change the world. And to me, when you talk about selfish design, I'm like, "Okay, that's someone who's, like, disrupting the industry to claim that." So will you explain a little bit to our listeners what you meant when you talk and what you mean when you talk about selfish design today?

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**Ashleigh:** Sure. So firstly, there are a ton of selfish designers out there already today. But I think a lot of them are kind of doing selfish wrong in my own assessment. Like, they're just, I don't know, like, it's so easy to work on things. This gets to what we're talking about earlier, but kind of just...is like the negative side effect of that. They see things right in front of them and they wanna fix it, right? And so sometimes, they don't go past an arm's length away from them.

And so, this is how you have folks working on, you know, adding things that are in their pantry to the internet of things and, it's like, digitizing how much cereal they have left in the box to send them, you know, a notification on their phone, and tasks that really just benefit the privileged and kind of reinforce things as they exist today. It might be an improvement on that small piece, but they're way too close. They're kind of not looking that far kind of out into the needs of others and their leaving, I think, is really high impact and massively beneficial areas for development and innovation off the table completely.

And again, like, many of them are just adept at doing this because we look at things that are around us and want to improve them, but I think that's low-stakes. So, there's nothing wrong with designing in a way that brings you joy, and satisfaction, and helps you in your own kind of life, and brings you kind of that emotional satisfaction. But the premise of this talk and perhaps

counterintuitively is that supporting others through our design efforts releases the most reward hormones. And it's truly some of the most feel-good stuff that we can do.

When we bring ourselves out of the picture and support others, we get a chemical release that brings us joy and I don't think that's how we are thinking about it today. I want people to kind of experience what I've experienced and being able to help others outside of my direct community and my direct sphere, and the joy that that brings, the kind of euphoria that that brings is pretty incredible. But when we think, I think as a society, and I think this is especially true in the United States, about what will we try to project, what will bring us the most joy or satisfaction at the end of the day, we tend to think about the things that are... promoted socially and our economy. So, the most money from the most clout in recognition.

And it's just not scientifically true. It ends up being that, like, we can be self-indulgent in a totally different way that will actually bring us more joy and happiness on the other end of it. And I will add on here that what I didn't get into in that talk, but I kind of had on the back burner, and I was like, "Oh, it won't go that personal," but I'll share with you all if you're curious.

**Shawn:** Yeah, I was actually getting ready to say, "Okay, there's gotta be some stories even more behind this." So just definitely curious and would love to hear.

**Ashleigh:** Okay, perfect. Well, I didn't share in that talk, but, you know, in disrupting the status quo, we also create room from really good discoveries and innovations even about ourselves and our communities. So, one specific example for me is folks, you know, often like to reference the kind of rainbow iconography and assets that I created for the Obama White House around the 2015 Supreme Court decision in the U.S. to legalize same-sex marriage across the United States. And at the Obama White House, we chose to celebrate the LGBTQIA community, either way the decision went, right? We decided, we're gonna light the White House up in rainbow colors, and change our avatars, and put out these videos and assets to kind of celebrate the work that had happened to that point, or hopefully and luckily, it turned out this way, the decision by the Supreme Court.

So, I spent hours, really off hours because we were really busy that time with a bunch of other policies and things, but working on this project to get it done in a way that did right by this community that I was not a part of, and that hard work, that really recognized the hard work that so many individuals had done to get the U.S. to that point in time. And it wasn't until years later that I came out as bisexual, so, you know, I think, you know, it feel like, "Okay, maybe this

is just one instance." But what I like to kind of say or try to illustrate here is that the status quo in particularly in the United States has made things so inhospitable for so many people.

And, you know, in this case for me, my whole life that I actually repressed a part of who I was into my 30s by working on something that I thought was for others at the time, working hard on something to meet the needs of a community that I didn't believe I was a part of.

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I was inadvertently creating an environment that was more hospitable to even myself, one that would help me come to better, you know, be self-aware and have self-acceptance, and to be more broadly increased by who I am as a complete individual. So, you know, again, it's not to say that this is gonna happen for everyone or that it's always that direct of align, but I think, you know, this giving, we like to say, selflessly to others, I think, is actually this...because things are so broke and so off is actually incredibly selfish. We're supporting ourselves by creating more openness and liberation through our practices as creatives.

**Shawn:** Well, Ashleigh, thank you for sharing that story and that vulnerability in that.

**Ashleigh:** Yeah. Thank you for listening. It's not every day. I think actually that's the first time that I kind of connected those dots for folks. But it's nice to be able to do so in a group that I know is gonna really accept and listen.

**Shawn:** Yes, yes. So, let's continue on this journey. I mean, hello, you were, you know, named one of the top 29 most powerful black women in the Obama White House. You bridged over both presidential terms there. Let's flip to the other side of the coin here. What has been your biggest challenge on your journey through all of this design space?

**Ashleigh:** I choose to go into some really tough arenas for work. And so, I'm being just really frank and transparent. I think it often feels, like, failure much of the journey until there's a real breakthrough. You know, there's like a lotta uphill along the way. And you know, one example is kind of my service to the board of AIGA, the professional association for design. And, you know, I chose to join the board of directors in 2016 to help push to adjust the creative community to be a more accepting, and open, and to really change the dynamic personally to what we were talking about before to actually, you know, use the human-centered design principles to make the association that's meant to serve designers, really more open and listen to the needs of designers, really do the work to better reflect the changes overall, and the demographics of the United States, and to have our profession better reflect that.

But I'm kind of more of the reformer type than just the outside advocacy person who is pushing for change, making direct request. I go in and I try to do the hard work that is building, rewriting policies, directly building coalitions around the work. You know, hearing those hard stories of the ways in which a community has failed in the past, it's very similar to the work that I was doing in the Obama White House too.

I mean, there's a running joke online, like, not to read the Facebook comments, right? Like, there's so many people just hated government or just, you know, at the time, you know, really hated the Obamas. But we're there to serve this broad swath, the community that for the White House was the United States. And for AIGA is the United States design community. And so, challenges are really meeting that need, and building trust, and building a shared understanding towards a new vision. So, it's up uphill type of work where a lot of times, it feels pretty thankless if I'm being honest, but it is super rewarding. So, I keep digging in because it's making my life better. And it's making so many other people's lives better at the end of the day.

**Shawn:** Awesome. Awesome. Your work isn't easy. And that is evident in the things that you take on. So, thank you again for sharing that with us. So now, let's go to your time in the White House, what is the project that you're most proud of doing as a designer?

**Ashleigh:** That's another tough one. I'm proud of a lot of what I've done. But I feel like, you know, it always falls short too, right? I feel like my best project should always be the one that I'm working on right now because it's pushing forward from where we are in the moment. But I don't wanna give you a cop-out answer. I think one of the projects I'm most proud of, it's really fairly simple, but turning the White House website, [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov), into an accessible responsive site, which it just feels, like, such a discreet thing. But it really helps that the precedent for government websites and helps generate and create a push across the federal government to really invest in accessible platforms.

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And our bar there was largely around communicating. We had some areas for direct engagement. But I think it's the ripple effects of that that make me most proud, the fact that it's helped ensure that the VA website that is actually supporting numbers of veterans and getting the care that they need was affected because of that change, and that it had a direct influence there. Just as one example that makes me proud, I think knowing...you know, I try not to measure the success just based on how it does in the moment because your moments are fleeting, but the impact over time. And that's one that I've seen just the kind of rippled impact

of inspiring and giving others an opportunity to push for some of the things that they needed to see happen in other areas of government.

**Shawn:** That's really cool. I had never thought that that one website can have that big of an impact. But as you're sharing the story, I thought, "Well, yeah, you know, they're gonna look to the one example as a leader." And who would've known, right, that you would have impacted so many people's lives by just that change. You know, Ashleigh, we're coming to the point now where I love to give our listeners this time and space for a call to action. So if there was one thing you would want our listeners to take away from your story or things that you've shared today, what would that one thing be that you would want them to have?

**Ashleigh:** I guess in alignment or my interpretation of your podcast name, I would say, like, almost, you know, entropy, the world is...you know, this is gonna sad, but the world is in gradual decline, right? It's just how things work. And whether or not you identify as a designer, we all have to do our part to not only counteract that decline but to make things better. And, like, doing that work is rewarding as hell, so why not?

**Shawn:** Awesome. I look forward to seeing some of your work here over the next years and watch the amazing cool things that you do. Well, we've come to that time where we do this little thing called the "Combustion Questions", Ashleigh. And they are three randomly selected questions that I will ask you. And we just ask that you just give your initial response to it and have some fun with it. So, are you ready for your "Combustion Questions", Ashleigh?

**Ashleigh:** I'm ready.

**Shawn:** Do you prefer happy movies or scary movies?

**Ashleigh:** The scary movies.

**Shawn:** And why?

**Ashleigh:** Who doesn't like that jolt of adrenaline? It's so fun.

**Shawn:** I don't like those! So, I'm one of those people that would've picked happy movies. But you and my wife can watch all of those horror movies together, while I'm watching something happy.

**Ashleigh:** Yeah. Tell her to hit me up.

**Shawn:** Awesome. So, number two, if you can have an hour-long conversation with any animal in the world, what animal would that be? And what would you talk about?

**Ashleigh:** Oh, my gosh. Red Panda. They are cute. They just seem to look like they're always having so much fun. I wanna know how to just make everything into a playground like they do. So, yeah, I'd love to have a conversation with the red panda.

**Shawn:** A red Panda. That would be very interesting, I think. All right. Number three, what do you think about roundabouts? Like, driving roundabouts because I know you live in DC.

**Ashleigh:** I don't mind them. But that's because I also grew up in New Jersey and we had jug handles. So, I'm used to wilds traffic patterns and nonsense that drive most people crazy. So, I'm happy to be the odd person out on that one. But I don't mind them. They actually seem way more sane and organized than jug handles, if you're familiar with those.

**Shawn:** Now you're gonna make me have to go look up jug handles in New Jersey to see what the hell that is.

**Ashleigh:** So pretty much what a jug. I'll explain it real fast. But a jug handle is, if you wanna turn left at a traffic light, you have to get in the far-right lane, go through the traffic light, and loop around, and then go through the traffic light again. It does not make much sense.

**Shawn:** Okay. Well, Ashleigh, thank you again for sharing your story with us today. Stay safe and be well, Ashleigh. And have a great day.

**Ashleigh:** Thanks for having me.

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*.

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ought to slay dragons, but to really soar you have to make friends with them--and even kiss them.

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Stay safe and be well.