

Beyond these Spaces

The Index Podcast

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Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Design

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Guest:

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Firas Alsahin

Firas Alsahin is an award-winning designer, speaker, mentor, and thought leader in the architecture and interior design industry. As the Co-Founder and Design Director of 4SPACE, he has played a pivotal role in shaping the design landscape of Dubai and beyond. Known for his innovative, immersive, and futuristic design approach, Firas seamlessly integrates AI, sustainability, and storytelling into his work.

His portfolio spans high-profile hospitality, F&B, retail, and experiential design projects, earning international recognition. In 2023, he was honoured as the Interior Designer of the Year at the CID Awards. As an accredited design professional with the Society of British and International Interior Design (SBID), he upholds the highest standards of creativity, functionality, and industry best practices.

Beyond his design work, Firas is a sought-after keynote speaker and panellist at industry-leading events like INDEX, GulfHost, and the Restaurant & Bar Design Awards. He actively contributes to the industry as a judge for prestigious awards, including SBID, AHEAD, and Surge for Water, and mentors aspiring designers through academic and industry collaborations.

Firas is currently leading ImaginAlre, a groundbreaking AI-driven digital art initiative for the Restaurant & Bar Design Awards 2025, curating visionary design narratives from around the world. His forward-thinking approach has also driven 4SPACE's expansion, attracting global brands for strategic design partnerships.

A firm believer in the power of social media, Firas shares insights on design, AI, and branding, and is currently working on a new social media strategy for 4SPACE, reinforcing its position as a design powerhouse. His work continues to push boundaries, exploring futuristic concepts such as AI-driven workplaces, immersive retail, and visionary hospitality spaces.

Mohammed Adib

Mohammed Adib is a graduate of the AA School of Architecture and a postgraduate in interior architecture from Barcelona. Mohammed Adib has worked in the UK, Spain, Jordan, North Africa, and Asia over the last 30 years, and for the past 17 years has been based between Barcelona and the Middle East.

During his studies, Iraqi-born Mohammed collaborated with many offices in the UK and Europe. After university, he embarked on a “Grand Tour” working for 18 months in architectural offices across Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas. In 1993, Mohammed established Intercon in London as a niche design company specialising in large-scale commercial interior design. Under his design and management guidance, Intercon has completed over 180 projects in 15 countries and has gradually expanded its services to include architecture, product design, signage and wayfinding.

In 2017, Mohammed joined Dewan Architects + Engineers as partner and Chief Design Officer. His main responsibilities are the protection and development of the design language as well as establishing new markets. He has directed projects in the Middle East, South East Asia, Europe and Africa.

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Evolution of Tools in Architecture

Architecture has historically evolved alongside its tools, from Rotring pens and hand-drawn blueprints to AutoCAD, BIM, and generative design. Each generation of designers encounters disruption, facing the choice to adapt or be left behind. Mohammed Adib reflects on this progression, noting that while AutoCAD was once difficult to use, BIM felt revolutionary. Generative architecture emerged as an early form of AI, and despite initial resistance, these technologies ultimately became powerful amplifiers in the hands of skilled designers. Firas AlsaHin echoes this experience, recalling the shift from traditional drafting to CAD and the hesitation among practitioners who resisted change.

Continuous Disruption

Both Adib and AlsaHin emphasise that disruption in design is not new, but constant and necessary. The designers who succeed are those who understand not only how to use new tools, but also what those tools are not meant to do, applying them with clarity and intention.

Meaningful AI Adoption

A common misconception is that AI in design is limited to image generation, when its most impactful applications lie in workflow optimisation and problem-solving. Adib's firm approached AI adoption strategically by surveying sixteen departments to identify their most time-consuming tasks and ideal solutions. This process led to the development of Quibble, an in-house architectural intelligence platform designed to enhance efficiency and preserve institutional knowledge.

Quibble's Applications

Quibble enables fast retrieval of information from archived projects, dramatically reducing time spent searching for data. In document control, it automates error-checking in submissions, reducing an eight-hour process to just fifteen to twenty minutes. The platform continues to evolve, integrating with live BIM models to provide real-time insights across the entire project life cycle.

The Role of AI in Client Communication

AI is increasingly important in bridging the gap between early-stage design and client expectations, particularly in achieving photorealistic visuals. Clients often seek to understand the outcome early in the process, and AI can generate compelling imagery from basic models. It also enhances physical model presentations by transforming simple photographs into more refined and engaging visual tools.

Revising with AI

AI significantly improves the revision process after submission, enabling quick updates without the need for full re-rendering. Tools such as Gemini allow designers to make rapid adjustments to visuals, saving time and resources while maintaining quality.

Challenges of Visual Fluency

Despite its advantages, both Adib and Alshahin highlight the risks of introducing highly photorealistic imagery too early. Such visuals can distract clients with superficial details rather than focusing on core design concepts. Designers must therefore use AI thoughtfully, ensuring that communication aligns with the project stage and keeps attention on the most important aspects of the design.

The Role of AI in Creativity

The essential question arises: can AI contribute meaningfully to the creative act? Mohammed Adib firmly believes that AI should assist rather than take over the creative process, positioning it as a tool that supports designers rather than replaces them. For him, AI is an assistant, not an author, within the creative journey.

Delicatezza Biologica

Adib introduces the concept of *Delicatezza Biologica*, or biological sensitivity, which he argues that AI fundamentally lacks. This refers to an intuitive understanding of how spaces feel and are experienced physically, such as the subtle difference between a three-and-a-half-metre ceiling and a three-meter one. It extends to how people move through space, how they respond to light, and how materials are perceived through touch and atmosphere. These insights are rooted in lived experience, accumulated over time through observation and engagement with the physical world—something AI cannot replicate.

Firas Alsahin agrees that creativity must remain inherently human but offers a more nuanced view of AI's role. He points to AI's tendency to "hallucinate", producing unexpected or imperfect outputs, which can, in certain contexts, become a source of creative inspiration. Rather than viewing this as a flaw, he sees it as an opportunity to uncover new directions that might not emerge through conventional thinking.

Case Study: Designing an Indian Restaurant

Alsahin shares a project involving the design of an Indian restaurant that intentionally moved away from typical visual tropes. Traditional research methods, such as searching for precedents online, often reinforce what already exists. In contrast, AI introduced alternative suggestions when no direct references were found, opening new conceptual possibilities, and encouraging a more original design approach.

In this case, AI proposed drawing inspiration from the Red Fort in Delhi, known for its restrained, monochromatic architecture in red sandstone. This reference stood in stark contrast to the vibrant and highly decorative aesthetic commonly associated with Indian restaurant design. Alsahin used this as a starting point, conducting further research and developing the concept into a distinct design narrative, with the creative direction ultimately shaped by his own interpretation.

Collaborative Agreement on AI's Role

Both Adib and Alsahin arrive at a shared understanding: AI can serve as a powerful amplifier during the research and ideation phases, helping surface references and possibilities that may otherwise remain undiscovered. However, the essence of design, understanding human behaviour, emotional response, and the intent behind a space, cannot be delegated to machines. The responsibility for creative thinking and decision-making remains firmly with the designer.

The Client Has Changed

Transformation of Client Relationships

AI has reshaped how clients engage with design, altering the balance between professional expertise and client input. While it has made communication more visual and immediate, it has also introduced misunderstandings about the depth and process behind design work.

New Client Behaviours

Firas Alsahin identifies two emerging patterns in client behaviour. The first is the use of AI-generated imagery as a design brief, where clients arrive with visuals from platforms like Midjourney and expect these to be directly translated into built outcomes. This reduces design to surface-level interpretation, diminishing the strategic and conceptual role of the designer. The second is the expectation of shorter timelines, based on the assumption that AI accelerates the entire process. Mohammed Adib challenges this notion, arguing that time saved in production should be reinvested into thinking, refinement, and creativity—ultimately leading to stronger design outcomes.

The Challenge of AI-Generated Concepts

A more complex issue arises when clients present fully AI-generated proposals and seek only technical execution. Adib compares this to a patient prescribing their own treatment to a doctor, highlighting the risk of bypassing professional expertise. Architecture, he argues, requires more than visual output. It demands critical thinking, experience, and informed decision-making.

Collaborative Client Involvement

At its best, AI can strengthen collaboration, particularly when clients have a vision they struggle to articulate. Adib shares an example of a project in Phuket involving a Ukrainian client with limited English proficiency, who could only communicate what he did not want. Through continuous dialogue and the use of AI-generated visuals, the team established a shared language, enabling the development of a clear and collaborative brief. In this instance, AI enhanced the relationship, aligning expectations before the design was finalised.

AR, VR, and the Experience of Space

AI is also redefining how architecture is presented and experienced. Technologies such as augmented and virtual reality, once primarily used for internal coordination, now offer immersive tools for client engagement. Enhanced by AI, these experiences allow clients to understand scale, proportion, and atmosphere in ways that static images cannot, making design communication more intuitive and impactful.

Alsahin describes a scenario where a client needed to present a project to a CEO with a cinematic level of quality but lacked the time and budget for traditional animation. By using 3D renders in Runway to generate camera movements, his team created a polished two-minute video complete with music and effects—delivered in a fraction of the usual production time, demonstrating the efficiency and creative potential of AI-driven tools.

The Role of Better Tools

Adib situates these developments within a broader perspective: better tools should expand creative possibilities, not constrain them. While designers were once limited by what was physically achievable, today's technologies offer near-limitless potential. This shift, he suggests, should inspire greater ambition and confidence within the profession, encouraging designers to push boundaries rather than retreat from them.

What Machines Cannot Imagine

The Vision of Future Architecture

Popular culture often portrays future architecture as sleek, curvilinear, and highly controlled, shaped by the tools available to its creators. These representations feel consistent across decades, prompting a deeper question about whether they reflect true foresight or are constrained by the creative and technical boundaries of their time.

Mohammed Adib argues that such visions are not predictions, but products of their moment. The feasibility of these imagined environments is directly tied to the technology available when they are conceived. Films like *Avatar 2* required years of technological advancement before they could be realised, just as early 20th-century depictions of space travel were limited by the imagination and capabilities of that era. In this sense, architectural visions in media are always pushed to the limits of contemporary possibilities.

Closing the Gap Between Imagination and Reality

Historically, architecture has been driven by ideas that exceeded what could be physically built at the time. Today, however, that gap is rapidly closing. Advances in technology mean that almost anything that can be imagined can also be constructed. This shift moves the focus away from questions of feasibility and towards deeper considerations of purpose, intent, and authorship in design.

Modern Architectural Examples

Firas Alsahin points to the Museum of the Future in Dubai as a powerful example of what contemporary technology can achieve, with its complex geometry and integrated Arabic calligraphy realised with remarkable precision. At the same time, he notes that innovation in architecture has never been solely dependent on digital tools. Antoni Gaudí developed the Sagrada Família using experimental physical models, while Frank Gehry employed early 3D scanning techniques to construct the Walt Disney Concert Hall, demonstrating that creativity has always found a way to manifest, regardless of available technology.

The Christopher Nolan Comparison

Alsahin draws a parallel with filmmaker Christopher Nolan, who is known for prioritising practical effects over CGI to create a more tangible cinematic experience. This raises an

interesting question for architecture: as AI becomes more prevalent, will buildings designed without it carry a different kind of value or authenticity?

Adib offers a counterpoint, suggesting that the essence of design remains unchanged regardless of the tools used. Whether a form is sculpted by hand or produced through advanced fabrication, the outcome is still a physical space experienced by people. The distinction lies not in the method of creation, but in where the thinking originates.

The Defining Question

Ultimately, the central issue is not what machines can build, but what they should be allowed to conceive. The defining question for architecture today is whether creative thinking will remain a human responsibility or gradually be delegated to machines.

The Future We Choose

An Optimistic Vision of AI

Mohammed Adib imagines a future where designers work significantly fewer hours, twenty instead of sixty, while maintaining the same level of output and quality. In this scenario, time saved through AI is redirected towards life beyond work: family, health, and personal experiences. As life expectancy increases and living to one hundred becomes more common, designing for a longer, more fulfilling life takes on greater importance.

Realities of Increased Capacity

Firas Alsahin offers a more pragmatic perspective, noting that AI has increased his capacity rather than reduced his workload. Instead of working less, he has taken on more projects simply because it became possible to do so. This highlights a central tension: whether society will use technological advancements to reclaim time, or to further increase productivity.

Choices and Human Nature

Adib suggests that the outcome ultimately depends on human nature. Individuals driven by passion may choose to do more when given the opportunity, while others may prioritise financial or personal goals differently. Technology itself is neutral; whether it serves to enhance quality of life or intensify work depends entirely on the choices people make.

Advice for the Next Generation

Both Adib and Alsahin stress the importance of mastering foundational skills before relying on advanced tools. Adib cautions that without a deep engagement in the creative process, AI can produce work that is technically competent but lacks originality and depth. Truly meaningful design stems from lived experience, from observing how people interact with spaces and understanding their emotional responses.

The Value of Manual Experience

Reflecting on his own generation, Adib notes that creativity was shaped through manual processes, as there were no alternative tools available. This hands-on experience became embedded in their thinking and intuition. He expresses concern that younger

designers may rely too heavily on tools without first developing a strong conceptual foundation, potentially losing connection with design history and context.

The Misuse of AI

Adib identifies the misuse of AI as one of the greatest risks facing the industry, comparing it to platforms like Pinterest but at a far greater scale. Without critical understanding, AI can lead to an overwhelming volume of work that lacks depth or meaning. When used without intention, it risks amplifying repetition rather than originality.

The Antidote: Focus on Basics

The solution, he argues, is not to reject technology but to reinforce the fundamentals. Understanding why spaces work, how people move through them, and how they feel within them remains essential. With this grounding, AI becomes a tool that enhances creativity rather than replacing it.

The Constant in Architectural Design

Despite evolving tools and technologies, architecture remains rooted in solving problems within constraints—whether related to materials, budgets, or methods. What endures is the human need for spaces that feel intuitive, functional, and meaningful.

The Role of AI in Design

AI does not replace the fundamental human desire for well-designed spaces. Instead, it presents a choice: to use technology as a means of enhancing thoughtful design, or to allow it to substitute for it. As Adib suggests, certain aspects of design will always remain inherently human. The challenge lies in recognising and preserving them.