

Beyond These Spaces

The Index Podcast

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Next Vision: Leadership, Creativity and the New Era of Design

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Guest:

Diane Thorsen

Design Director, Gensler

Diane Thorsen

Diane is the Design Principal and Global Hospitality Lead at Gensler, the world's #1 design firm with 5,700 professionals across a global network of offices. Based in the Middle East for the past 18 years, she brings deep regional insight and a passion for curating hospitality experiences that reflect local culture. With a strong foundation in interior architecture, she believes great design begins with understanding the client's vision and cultural context. Her award-winning work is known for its refined style, human-centric focus, and commitment to creating meaningful experiences from the inside out.

Manuja Sharma

Manuja Sharma is the Founder and CEO of nuja inc., a full-stack brand marketing agency in Dubai. nuja inc. helps brands find clarity, consistency, and momentum by aligning their why (brand), how (behaviour), and what (business). With her team of brand strategists and creatives, she has worked with brands such as Nellis Architecture, The Total Office, Designsmith, Vedra, Jaipur Rugs, Kohler, APE Grupo, Thorn Lighting, among others, helping them cut through the noise with standout storytelling. Alongside leading nuja, Manuja works closely with founders and leadership teams on brand and business alignment through strategy sprints, workshops, and advisory sessions. She regularly speaks at and moderates panels around branding, design, and business growth, along with writing a weekly newsletter that blends brand thinking, business lessons, and personal reflections on leadership, failure, and growth. Manuja believes that great branding isn't a good-looking logo - it's creating touchpoints that are thoughtful, emotional, and human. When she's not

shaping brands, you'll find Manuja teaching yoga, playing an unhealthy amount of padel, chasing a new squat PR, or unwinding with her husband and their pack of rescued dogs and cats.

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Vision Shaped by Experience

Vision in design is often described as a bold, future-facing idea - something instinctive, almost mystical. But as Manuja Sharma and Diane Thorsen explore, vision is far more grounded. It grows out of passion, is tested by reality, and matures through perseverance and collaboration.

Beginning with Passion

Diane reflects on how most designers enter the field with passion — the excitement of creating something meaningful. Early in a career, this passion fuels big dreams and a sense of limitless possibility. But the profession quickly reveals its complexity. The work is demanding, the expectations high, and the responsibility immense. This shift from idealism to reality becomes the first turning point in shaping a designer's vision.

The Reality Check

Designers soon discover that creating extraordinary spaces is not just about creativity. It requires discipline, resilience, and a deep understanding of how design affects people's lives. Diane describes this as a “rude awakening,” but also a necessary one. It is in this moment that vision becomes more intentional — less about grandeur and more about impact.

Tenacity as the Driving Force

For Diane, tenacity is what carries designers through the messy, difficult parts of the process. Projects are rarely smooth. They require patience, problem-solving, and the willingness to stay committed even when the work feels overwhelming. Tenacity transforms passion into something sustainable. It allows designers to grow through challenges rather than be defeated by them.

Learning Through Humility

Diane shares candidly that she often took on more than she was ready for — opening a business early, stepping into roles without all the answers. These experiences taught her humility. Knowing what you don't know, she says, is a powerful part of developing vision. It opens the door to learning, curiosity, and better decision-making.

The Power of Collaboration

A defining realisation in Diane's journey is that designers are not meant to work alone. Vision expands when people work together — when strengths are combined, ideas are challenged, and perspectives are shared. She describes this as “hunting in packs,” a mindset that leads to more ambitious and meaningful outcomes.

Vision as an Evolving Practice

Through passion, reality, tenacity, humility, and collaboration, vision becomes something dynamic — not a fixed idea, but a practice that grows over time. It is shaped by experience and strengthened by the willingness to keep learning.

Lone Wolves vs. Collaborative Teams

We explore the dynamic between individual visionaries, often referred to as "lone wolves," and the power of collaborative teams in the design industry. We delve into the implications of personal branding and the importance of teamwork in achieving impactful design outcomes.

The Value of Vision

Manuja opens the discussion by highlighting the importance of having a shared vision. She emphasises that a singular vision is less impactful unless it resonates with others. She reflects on the notion of the "lone wolf" in design, where individual designers may prioritise personal recognition over collaborative success. Manuja questions the effectiveness of this approach: "Does it really impact how well the team, the business, or their design language resonates?"

Diane acknowledges the role of lone wolves in the industry, citing the existence of renowned "starchitects." She notes that while these individuals carry a strong personal brand, their success is often built on a foundation of collaboration. Diane argues that behind every great designer is a team of like-minded individuals who contribute to the creation of exceptional work. She emphasises the significance of surrounding oneself with inspiring people who share a passion for quality and curiosity - a quality she believes is often lacking in designers today.

The Shift in Design Visibility

Manuja points out a trend in the industry where many professionals, despite having less experience, gain visibility and build strong personal brands quickly. She questions whether visibility equates to a greater vision and whether it influences people's perceptions of that vision.

Diane counters this perspective, asserting that visibility is not synonymous with having a vision. She highlights the current era's obsession with branding and competition, particularly on platforms like Instagram. Instead, she champions the idea of scarcity as a form of luxury—discovering something unique and special. Diane believes that true power lies in allowing one's work to speak for itself, rather than seeking constant visibility.

This chapter underscores the tension between individualism and collaboration in the design world. While lone wolves may achieve personal recognition, the most impactful work often emerges from teams that embody shared values, curiosity, and a collective vision. The discussion invites readers to reflect on their own practices and the importance of collaboration in fostering creativity and innovation.

Authenticity, Luxury, and Scarcity in Design

In this chapter, Diane Thorsen and Manuja Sharma discuss the evolving concepts of authenticity, luxury, and scarcity in design, particularly within the hospitality sector. Their conversation highlights the shift from material goods to experiential luxury, emphasising the importance of emotional connections in creating memorable design experiences.

The Vanilla Landscape of Brands

Diane begins by reflecting on the current state of the hospitality industry, noting the overwhelming number of brands across various sectors, including lifestyle, fashion, and wellness. She describes how many offerings have become "very vanilla," lacking distinctiveness. However, she finds immense value in discovering unique gems that possess quality and authenticity. For Diane, true luxury lies in the appreciation of something special that stands apart from the mainstream, providing a sense of exclusivity.

The Shift Towards Experiential Luxury

Manuja echoes Diane's thoughts on authenticity and introduces the concept of luxury's evolving definition. She mentions recent trends indicating a decline in the prices of luxury goods, contrasting this with the rising demand for experiential luxury, such as exclusive stays at boutique hotels or high-profile events like Wimbledon. Manuja poses a question about how hospitality chains and brands with strong ethos can adapt to this shift toward more experiential offerings. Will they evolve to meet the changing expectations, or remain satisfied with their current approach?

Redefining Luxury through Emotional Connection

Diane responds by suggesting that the term "luxury" needs redefinition. She argues that the focus should shift from material wealth to the emotional experiences that design can evoke. She emphasises the human desire for connection and authentic experiences that stir emotions, whether they be calmness or excitement.

Diane believes designers should prioritise crafting spaces that facilitate these feelings, rather than simply creating aesthetically pleasing environments. She explains that true

luxury arises from the culture of indulgence — the desire to treat oneself and share meaningful experiences with others.

The Depth of Luxury

Diane elaborates on the multifaceted nature of luxury, noting that it varies from person to person. For some, purchasing a product from a particular store may represent luxury, while for others, staying at an exclusive remote location may hold the same value. However, she asserts that at its core, luxury is about forming deep connections with a culture, a place, and emotions.

The most profound luxury, according to Diane, is the ability to create lasting memories shared with family and friends. This shared experience becomes a treasured part of one's life narrative, embodying the essence of total indulgence.

This chapter highlights the crucial transformation in the understanding of luxury within design. The focus has shifted from mere material possessions to fostering emotional connections and creating memorable experiences. As designers, the challenge lies in crafting environments that resonate with individuals on a deeper level, allowing them to indulge in the richness of authentic experiences.

Protecting Vision Through Collaboration and Budgets

In this chapter, Manuja and Diane discuss the challenges of maintaining a visionary approach in design and hospitality amidst the constraints of collaboration, budgets, and stakeholder pressures. They explore the importance of emotional connection in design while addressing the practical realities that can dilute creative vision.

The Challenge of Emotional Design

Manuja begins by expressing some skepticism about the ideal of creating spaces centered around emotion. She draws a parallel to her work in brand storytelling, emphasizing the importance of evoking feelings — whether love or opposition — towards a brand. However, she raises a crucial question: in large-scale projects, how can the desired emotional vision remain intact despite the complexities of meetings, budgets, and diverse stakeholders?

The Role of Collaboration

Diane acknowledges that this challenge is common among designers and architects. She emphasizes that effective collaboration across all parties and disciplines is essential. Diane reflects on the unique environment of the Middle East, where the vision for development has evolved from creating Instagram-worthy moments to fostering genuine living experiences.

She stresses that when developers come to the design team with a visionary idea, it requires a collective effort to define the "North Star" — the ultimate goal of the project. All parties must align to work towards this shared vision.

Navigating Constraints

Diane points out the unfortunate reality that tighter budgets and shorter timelines often dilute the end result of design projects. However, she notes that there are exceptional developers who understand the value of collaboration and are willing to invest in crafting something unique.

To achieve this, deep research is necessary. Diane warns against superficial approaches, as the current trend of mass production can lead to a homogenisation of design — "everything becoming very vanilla."

The Importance of Cultural Understanding

Diane emphasises the significance of understanding the culture of a place, which is vital in stirring the desired emotions in design. She highlights that every project must deliver a return on investment, acknowledging that every stakeholder is ultimately running a business.

When the design team and developers work in true partnership and collaboration, magic can happen. By aligning their efforts toward a shared North Star vision, they can create beautiful, impactful spaces.

This chapter highlights the delicate balance between creative vision and practical constraints in design and hospitality. While emotional connections are crucial, protecting that vision amidst stakeholder demands requires collaboration, cultural understanding, and a commitment to depth in research. When all parties unite toward a common goal, the potential for extraordinary outcomes becomes possible.

A Project That Stood the Test of Time

In this chapter, Manuja Sharma and Diane Thorsen reflect on enduring projects in the hospitality industry that exemplify successful alignment with vision and sustainability. Through Diane's anecdotes, they explore the importance of passion, collaboration, and respect for nature in creating spaces that resonate over time.

The Essence of Lasting Projects

Manuja opens the discussion by asking Diane to highlight a project that has truly stood the test of time, embodying a strong vision and special significance.

Diane enthusiastically responds, noting that the hospitality sector has seen many such projects. She emphasises that successful endeavors are often fueled by passionate teams dedicated to creating meaningful experiences. The energy of a team that genuinely understands the vision and the essence of the location contributes to the project's success.

Key Ingredients for Success

Diane reflects on the elements that make certain projects resonate deeply. She identifies three critical factors:

- **Positive Energy:** A collaborative spirit from both the client and the project consultancy team.
- **Aligned Budget:** Financial resources that match the vision, allowing for adequate exploration and creativity.
- **Realistic Time Pressure:** Sufficient time to research and collaborate, leading to thoughtful design.

A Remarkable Experience in South Africa

Diane shares a specific project that stands out in her memory — a venture in South Africa for a Swiss client who purchased land in a fragile wildlife habitat. The project was approached with a profound respect for the environment, long before sustainability became a mainstream trend.

The design aimed to minimise impact, relying on natural resources and avoiding electricity, showcasing a light touch to preserve the land's integrity. This project exemplified a sincere commitment to working harmoniously with nature.

Lessons Learned from Nature

Diane recounts humorous and insightful experiences with the client, who initially struggled to comprehend the behaviours of wildlife. For instance, after laying pipes to irrigate the grass he envisioned, he returned to find them uprooted by elephants. This incident prompted the client to reconsider his approach, leading him to embrace the wildness of the land rather than fight against it.

Diane highlights this as a remarkable lesson in collaboration with nature — working alongside someone who appreciated the environment and sought an extraordinary outcome for guests.

This chapter illustrates how a project can endure through time by aligning vision with sustainability, collaboration, and a respect for nature. Diane's experiences remind us that true success in design involves not just creating spaces, but fostering a deep connection with the environment and the people who inhabit it. By embracing these principles, designers can craft remarkable experiences that resonate for years to come.

Mentorship, Curiosity, and Advice for Emerging Designers

In this chapter, Manuja Sharma and Diane Thorsen delve into the importance of mentorship, curiosity, and authenticity for emerging designers. Diane shares her insights from her extensive experience in the design industry, offering valuable advice to those looking to carve their own paths.

The Impact of Mentorship

Manuja begins by acknowledging Diane's reputation as a warm and inspiring mentor to many designers. She emphasises the significance of sharing experiences and insights with the next generation. Manuja encourages aspiring designers to believe in their vision and not just seek visibility.

The Value of Curiosity

Diane reflects on her journey, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to work with talented designers at various stages of their careers. She highlights the crucial role of curiosity in design. In an age where artificial intelligence is prevalent, Diane stresses the importance of being curious about the world, traveling, and understanding the masters of the craft.

- **Learning from the Past:**

Diane believes that emerging designers should delve into the history of art, architecture, and design. She emphasises the significance of learning from past masters and understanding the craftsmanship that underpins the profession.

- **Hands-On Experience:**

Drawing upon her own beginnings as a hand-drafter, Diane acknowledges the value of understanding how things come together through practical experience. She encourages designers to learn from their mistakes, as these experiences shape their growth.

Creating a Unique Identity

Diane advises designers to develop their own brand and point of view. She warns against merely following trends, urging them to create something unique that reflects their individuality.

- **Challenging the Norm:**

Diane champions those who push boundaries and challenge the status quo. She appreciates the current generation's willingness to question everything, while also recognising the desire for Instagrammable perfection that can sometimes lead to a lack of authenticity.

Building a Collaborative Environment

Diane emphasises the importance of trust within design teams. She encourages designers to leave their egos at the door, fostering an environment where everyone feels valued and heard.

- **Pride in Work:**

Diane insists that designers should take pride in their work, producing pieces they are genuinely proud of. She expresses concern over the fast-paced demands from developers, noting that creativity cannot be rushed.

- **Embracing Creativity and Technology:**

While acknowledging the role of AI in design, Diane cautions against viewing it as a shortcut. True creativity requires time and effort, and she advocates for balancing technological tools with traditional artisanal methods, like sketching and hand-drawing.

This chapter underscores the significance of mentorship, curiosity, and authenticity in the journey of emerging designers. Diane's insights serve as a reminder that while technology can aid the design process, the heart of creativity lies in personal experiences, collaboration, and a genuine passion for the craft. By embracing these principles, aspiring designers can carve out their unique identities and contribute meaningfully to the industry.

Future Signals — Wellness, Belonging, and Indulgence

In this chapter, Diane Thorsen and Manuja Sharma explore the emerging trends shaping the future of design and lifestyle. Through their discussion, they highlight the importance of wellness, belonging, and indulgence as key drivers that will influence various sectors, including fashion, hospitality, and entertainment.

Understanding Future Signals

As a lifestyle advisor at Gensler, Diane shares her role in studying market signals to anticipate future trends. She notes the remarkable demographic shift: there are now more people over the age of sixty-five than under five, prompting significant implications for design and lifestyle choices.

Diane explains that this shift towards longevity will influence decisions across multiple sectors. Individuals are increasingly taking control of their health and wellness, driving a market focused on longevity and healthspan.

Key Drivers Shaping the Future

Diane identifies three primary drivers that are shaping the future:

1. **Wellness:**
 - a. The culture of "I am the CEO of my own health" emphasises individual responsibility for health and wellness.
2. **Belonging:**
 - a. People desire a sense of community and connection, often expressed through brand loyalty and the phenomenon of fandom culture. Consumers seek branded residences and products that foster a sense of belonging to a tribe.
3. **Indulgence:**
 - a. There is a growing desire for self-care and indulgence, with individuals eager to treat themselves and invest in their well-being.

Diane argues that combining these drivers creates vast potential for innovative solutions. For example, merging wellness with sport and retail can lead to new experiences that resonate with consumers.

Examples of Industry Collisions

Manuja highlights real-world examples of these trends, such as the proliferation of Ralph Lauren cafes, which blend lifestyle branding with dining experiences. She also cites Hümantra, a brand that promotes hydration through a community-focused running club, illustrating the intersection of health, belonging, and luxury.

The Role of Designers

Diane emphasises the responsibility of designers to harness research, creativity, and curiosity to address human needs. She argues that the goal is not only to create functional spaces but also to evoke emotional responses and foster genuine human interaction.

However, she cautions against falling into the trap of speed and past successes, which can lead to a loss of authenticity, creativity, and craftsmanship. Designers must strive to create experiences that resonate on a deeper level, connecting with the evolving needs of individuals.

This chapter underscores the significance of wellness, belonging, and indulgence as guiding principles for the future of design. By understanding these key drivers and embracing the responsibility to innovate, designers can create meaningful experiences that enhance human connection and well-being. As industries collide and evolve, the potential for impactful design solutions grows, paving the way for a more connected and fulfilling future.

Rapid Fire — Design Opinions and Dubai

In this chapter, Manuja Sharma and Diane Thorsen engage in a rapid-fire discussion, exploring Diane's candid opinions on various design trends, hospitality insights, and her thoughts on Dubai. This lighthearted exchange offers a glimpse into Diane's personal tastes and professional insights.

Design Trends to Forget

Manuja kicks off the rapid-fire segment by asking Diane about a design trend she secretly wishes never happened.

Diane reflects on the design trends of the 1980s, particularly the combination of brown and orange. She finds this pairing to be an odd moment in design history, stating, "There was so much of it that it became something that really did not gel with me in any shape or form." Interestingly, she mentions that color can significantly influence our feelings, and she is not a fan of orange.

Banning Words in Hospitality

Next, Manuja asks Diane what she would ban from hospitality design forever.

Diane expresses her desire to ban the word "curate." While she acknowledges its frequent use in the industry, she wishes to see it replaced with more meaningful language.

Overlooked Design Details

Manuja then inquires about something designers obsess over that guests might not even notice.

Diane points to small details, particularly the lack of space for bath towels in hotels. She finds it frustrating that this common oversight persists, especially when hotels often claim to prioritise sustainability while still replacing towels daily. She feels this is a superficial approach to a deeper issue.

Future Laughs: Trends to Mock

Manuja asks Diane about a trend she believes people will laugh at in the next ten or twenty years.

Diane confidently replies that AI will be the subject of future laughter. She describes the current perception of AI as a panacea for all problems, calling it "a little dystopian." Diane emphasises the value of years of experience and learning through mistakes, asserting that these cannot be replaced by technology.

Valuing Experience

Manuja resonates with Diane's sentiments, highlighting the importance of not discounting the expertise and insights that seasoned professionals bring to the table. She stresses that their knowledge stems from research, experience, and the lessons learned from past mistakes.

Favourite Spaces in Dubai

Finally, Manuja asks Diane about her favourite space in Dubai.

Diane shares her love for the beaches of Dubai, noting their remarkable transformation with the addition of new spaces. She appreciates the community engagement these areas foster, but also expresses concern about the need for sensitivity in protecting natural environments. Reflecting on her first visit to Dubai in 1996, she reminisces about the simpler charm of Jumeirah Beach.

This chapter showcases Diane Thorsen's candid opinions and insights on design trends, hospitality, and her experiences in Dubai. Through this rapid-fire exchange, readers gain a deeper understanding of Diane's perspectives while enjoying a lighthearted conversation about the industry.

Conclusion:

Manuja Sharma expresses her gratitude for the engaging conversation with Diane Thorsen, emphasising that having a vision is not a fleeting moment but a continuous process shaped by personal experiences and curiosity. She appreciates the insights shared during their discussion. Diane reciprocates the sentiment, stating that it has been a pleasure and enjoyable to converse with Manuja.