Designing with a World View

Amplifying Diverse Voices spotlights IIDA's vice president and CEO, Cheryl Durst.

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"It's a phenomenal time for our industry, even though we aren't at an ideal place from a diversity standpoint. The industry has been galvanized. There is a greater sense of urgency to shift the demographics of our profession for all the right reasons."

CHERYL DURST | CEO and vice president of IIDA

As a visionary leader and champion of the design profession, Cheryl Durst has driven change and advancement of the Interior Design industry throughout her career with the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) in Chicago. Through her role as the Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer of IIDA, Cheryl is committed to achieving broad recognition for the value of design and its significant role in society to help create diverse and inclusive communities. 360 sat down with Cheryl to understand how design and the physical environment can help people feel more included.

360: You've written that "design in all its manifestations is a force for change." How do you think design can make a difference in our communities?

Cheryl Durst: Design is this incredible force for optimism. It's about encouraging and amplifying all that we are as human beings. As a force for change, design is as much about practicality and formality as it is emotional and intellectual. Design is also about justice — it's about putting everyone on seamless, equal footing and it's a voice for social change.

Design is ultimately empathetic – it is thinking, feeling, sensing. The design thinking process that designers use forces people to look at problems and themselves differently.

360: Why is diversity in design important and needed?

CD: The very notion of design is that it is universal. Because it has so much effect on society, design can't feel like, look like or sound like any one point of view. Design is for the world. I have this mantra that you can't design for the world if you aren't of the world. It is incumbent on designers to have a diverse mind and point of view. Because designers aren't creating for a homogenous or monolithic society. The wider view of design is that it's about access to all.

"Design has an impact on the entire world. Which means design can't afford to have a single point of view."

360: What does the notion of inclusive design mean to you?

CD: I think it means having empathy and an understanding of culture. It's not necessarily just the physical aspect of design but designing for the experience your employees are having in the workplace. Do you have affinity groups? Do you have employee support groups? Are you celebrating Women's History Month, or acknowledging Black History Month? All of that is a design conversation. It's about the folks you have as a part of your team and your organization. It speaks to the design and the experience we have as human beings.

We don't just live or work in one way. In fact, Steelcase was one of the first organizations I heard talk about understanding the difference between how introverts work and how extroverts work — that's diversity! It's about understanding there are a multiplicity of approaches to life and work. Diversity is about appreciating and celebrating that multiplicity is continually going to be important in our society.

"Designing for inclusivity is about incorporating all aspects of our society as opposed to a single point of view."

360: Can you provide some examples of how the physical environment can help people feel more included at work?

CD: Something as simple as artwork can make a difference. The typical corporate artwork looks white. A more inclusive space could include an art collection from Jason Vandervee who photographed the Harlem renaissance — something that isn't just Western or European, but is more expressive of what society looks like. More inclusive art immediately sends a signal to anyone in the office there is a wider world view.

You can extend attention to global culture to textures or materiality. Are there certain textures we could use in the space that represent a culture? One example would be including indigenous art like the sea glass from South Carolina's Gullah culture. That's an important aspect of US culture that is often ignored.

360: Do you see a shift already taking place toward more spaces designed with inclusivity in mind?

CD: Clients and end users are already asking those questions. How can we be more open and reflective of society and our workplace? These are also recruiting tools for candidates who are looking for cues that it's an open and accepting organization. Those tangible things will send those cues that an organization has a global or world view. If you have a global company, then you should look like a global company.

360: You've written about the need for confronting racism and injustice and that design is a part of the larger equation in doing so. What barriers exist to making design more diverse?

CD: It's primarily about a lack of information about the profession. That ties directly with diversity, but it is also tied to the elimination of arts programs — particularly in K-12 schools. For kids, there's a lack of exposure to interior design as a possibility. It's critically important to talk to kids about the viability and value of design as a career.

At the same time, in a lot of minority communities, immigrant communities or communities where the child is a first-generation college graduate, design isn't encouraged as a first choice career. Kids are urged to enter other more traditionally successful careers like medicine, dentistry, law, etc., where there is an assurance of realness. Parents don't necessarily encourage their kids to go into a design career, because they themselves aren't quite sure if design is a career.

360: How do you change perceptions around design as a career?

CD: It all goes back to being an advocate for our profession. A lot of people think of design as a hobby. In pop culture, you've got cultural icons like HGTV, Home & Gardens Magazine and the like. Those aren't exactly positioning design as a career. It means that those of us in organizations like IIDA and ASID need to do our part in preaching the gospel of design and demonstrating that it is a viable and an empowering career.

That's been part of our message at IIDA. As a designer, you impact human behavior and human life. Designers have such incredible agency. Designers are affecting not only the day to day lives of human beings but ultimately affecting the entire human experience. The better we are at harnessing the message of the power of design, the better we will be at shifting people's mindsets of the profession.

360: How is IIDA tackling those barriers to entry for students and trying to get more diverse perspectives?

CD: Money is another big barrier. Design school is expensive, the materials and tools needed for classes are expensive. It's one thing to get kids into design school but it's another battle to keep them there. IIDA offers scholarships including one founded by John Nelson designed to help retain African American students in undergraduate design programs. Even though it's been just four years since the program started, we've found recipients are staying to finish school. Post-graduation, Nelson is supporting those students with career advice and entrance into the field.cThe design firm IA Interior Architects created a diversity scholarship with us as well with that same purpose. These kinds of efforts are moving the needle.

In addition, we are establishing a program with Chicago Public Schools to create a design camp for middle school students. There will be a six-week curriculum that provides kids the basic tenets of design and the importance of a career in design. In 2022, we have plans to roll that camp out to our different chapters around the country.

From an equity and inclusion standpoint, pipeline programs are successful. They introduce kids to the profession at an early age and move the pipeline forward. Our curriculum will be taught by two amazing Black designers. Many people subscribe to the belief that you have to see it to be it. It is essential for kids to not only hear about a career in interior design but also to be instructed by a Black interior designer. The exposure and visibility lets people know that design is a viable career option for them. The last significant piece is helping their parents understand that it's a viable career for their kids.

"Designers are life-long learners and creators. We are also life-long educators – constantly advocating for the value of design and the industry. Being an advocate for the profession of design has been a critical part of my career."

360: How has the past year impacted the work you do?

CD: For a lot of people, their first introduction to interior design is from a residential standpoint. Often when you say design to people the first thing they will think of is the home. When the pandemic first hit, we were all forced home and it afforded the industry to talk about design differently. The home became this place where we sheltered — it was a place we felt safe. It became a learning environment for students at home and it became a healing environment for covid victims. People began to think about function, use, comfort and purpose a lot differently than we did pre-pandemic.

Then that conversation shifted to the question of "when will we go back to the workplace?" We started rethinking how we would need to exist and gather in public spaces and in the workplace. It gave the opportunity for a lot of designers to have new conversations with their clients on purpose and around function. Clients started asking new questions on air quality, HVAC, social distancing and more as we started thinking how we'd get back to the workplace. After safety measures were tackled, clients then started rethinking the quality of their workplace.

Now we're all going back soon and it's become a question of equity and inclusion. If you're in the workplace but others aren't, how do we make sure the folks who are satellite or still working from home have a flawless, seamless experience just like those in the room? How can we design so everyone has as equal of an experience as we can?

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IIDA is an international membership organization that brings together all the voices within the design industry to amplify, advance and extend the value of interior design and professional interior designers. In addition to bringing together the design community, IIDA provides mentorship for students growing in their design career and advanced training for designers looking to evolve as specialists. The growth, expansion and connection IIDA provides is beneficial to the design community as a whole and is aligned with the growth of interior design as a profession. IIDA partners with organizations like <u>NOMA</u>, the <u>Black Artists and Designers Guild</u>, the <u>Marwen School</u> in Chicago and the <u>IIDA Foundation</u> to continue advancing diversity and inclusion in design.