

BUILDING TRUST  
(FROM THE INSIDE OUT)



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q4: RELATIONAL TRUST

Q4



## Building Trust (From the Inside Out)

Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA  
Executive Vice President and CEO, IIDA

IIDA's Cheryl Durst discusses issues facing the interior design profession.

**DesignIntelligence (DI):** We're with Cheryl Durst, Executive Vice President and CEO of IIDA. I want to start with a quote from the IIDA website:

“In 1997, Cheryl joined IIDA as the Senior Director of Education and Professional Development. Promoted to Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer in 1998, she began the task of rebuilding and redefining the organization, which was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and closure due to organizational mismanagement. Despite this significant challenge, Cheryl implemented an aggressive fiscal redevelopment and turnaround strategy.”

That's an impressive opening statement. Can you share some background on your organization and its origin story?

**Cheryl Durst(CD):** In the late '80s, there was a decided movement to more closely align existing design organizations. At that time, there were more than a dozen design organizations dedicated to the interior and to the physical environment. Those organizations came together and decided to create one coherent organization. By 1989 or 1990, the movement had a name, Unified Voice.

By 1991 there were seven dedicated partner organizations in Unified Voice. By 1994 of those seven, three ultimately came together to create IIDA. One of them, the largest, was IBD, the Institute of Business Design. CFID, which was the Council of

Federal Interior Designers, was primarily designers working for the federal government, but also state, local, and municipal concerns. And ISID, the International Society of Interior Design, was the smallest of the three, and it was a residential component. The other two were primarily commercial design organizations.

Those three ultimately created IIDA. There were some other interesting organizations like the Institute of Store Planners (ISP) that were a part of the larger group of seven. It was an evolutionary moment for our industry when these three ultimately came together to create IIDA.

**DI:** Who drove the movement to converge and the decision to focus on commercial interiors?

**CD:** It was very much a volunteer-led effort. There were designers like Cheryl Duvall who had her own firm, Duvall/Hendricks, in the Washington DC and Mid-Atlantic area. Designers from all over the country who were leaders in the profession, in their own firms and in larger firms like Gensler. Art Gensler was an early IIDA proponent and supporter, as was David Mourning, who was the CEO and founder of IA.

There was broad support within the volunteer community. It wasn't a group of executive directors from a bunch of associations fomenting this merger. Rather, it was designers and architects explicitly advocating for the meaning of commercial interior design.

If you consider the history and the period from the mid-'60s onward, the office had become a force. It was a cultural phenomenon. When we think about attitude and behavior in the context of the built environment, the office tells a story. This group of volunteers — architects and interior designers — were explicitly

talking about what does “work” and the workplace mean, in the context of business, strategy and humanity? That was one of the early underpinnings of the conversation within IBD, and ultimately, within IIDA.

**DI:** It's amazing to hear that history. What's going through my mind is now here we are 30 years later...

**CD:** And we're still having that conversation...

**DI:** Yes, the time has come to...

**CD:** Have it again. I know.

**DI:** Post-COVID, what is the office? The office generated an industry. We had commercial real estate and urban centers, but the office became a thing, a way of life and working. It shaped society. But now, after the pandemic, what is remote work and what is the new office? It's so interesting to consider it in that context.

**CD:** It's fascinating when you think about the conversation. Obviously, commercial design is more than just the workplace, but many of the early conversations we had in IBD, and consequently the early days of IIDA, were centered around productivity, satisfaction and happiness. About the employees and the people who inhabited these spaces being created by designers. And not just designers and architects, but also manufacturers.

The early conversations that created IIDA involved the entity now called MillerKnoll, (previously Herman Miller and Knoll), along with Kimball, Interface, and Milliken. The furniture sector, as well as floor coverings, was instrumental to our existence. Steelcase was one of our first charter industry members. They helped support the founding of IIDA, as did USG.



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To further connect interior design and architecture is a not-so-subtle goal of mine.

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It was very much a conversation around the importance, meaning and wherewithal of the built environment. The Merchandise Mart and NeoCon were instrumental to our history. IIDA was chartered at NeoCon. The Mart was supportive of all of these conversations. NeoCon is about the commercial design industry, office furniture, all those showrooms and manufacturers resident in the Merchandise Mart. It was a culmination of a moment, a cultural milestone in our industry.

**DI:** Wasn't that the time in the evolution of design practice when discussions about the value of design and business started? A Design for Business awards program emerged, and Art Gensler and many others understood the importance of business in his firm. As you said, it was a moment in time. The older I get, the more I appreciate learning this history.

**CD:** Absolutely. So true. And it's not just the analysis and research around the workplace, but it was about the celebration of workplace design. Our Interior Design Competition is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Our Will Ching Design Award is celebrating its 31st anniversary in 2024. We have successfully continued those programs, expanding to some one dozen international design competitions, but those two were originally IBD competitions. One notable pillar of IBD was to not just to "talk" about design, but also to celebrate commercial interior design and those creating the physical environment.

**DI:** Who was Will Ching?

**CD:** Will Ching was one of the founders of IIDA and one of the founders of the Governing Board for Commercial Interior Design Standards. He was a tireless design advocate and successful interior designer in NYC throughout the '70s, with notable clients like Chubb and Time, Inc. The award named for him celebrates firms of 5 or fewer – recognizing that small firms are mighty and that design excellence and superior client service don't require a "cast of thousands".

**DI:** Thank you for laying that groundwork. Let's shift and talk about you, how you got here and came to have what appears to be an amazing impact over your 26-year IIDA tenure. Because I didn't see in your bio that you have a background in design.

**CD:** I am not a designer. I went to school in Boston — to Boston University. I was a dual major in journalism and economics. I was educated as a writer, a technical writer, specifically. Early in my career, my husband and I lived and worked in Washington DC. At the time the Kennedy family owned the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, but also the Washington Design Center in Washington DC. I was the director of event planning there.

For a brief while, I was also the director of education. I was charged with organizing educational programs for interior designers. Chronologically, this was pre-IIDA's existence. But that need, that requirement for education, was predicated on introducing legislation in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, recognizing interior design as a profession. And so, the Washington Design Center needed a comprehensive curriculum because continuing education is always a critical and essential component of the introduction of legislation.

**DI:** Well, I can tell by talking to you for 10 minutes, you're another great example of a cross-disciplinary person, initially a so-called outsider, who brings skills in communication, speaking and writing, and adds incredible value.

**CD:** Communication skills are always incredibly important — especially for those in professional services. Prior to my work in this industry, I was a high school teacher.

**DI:** That explains much.

**CD:** That ability to communicate and articulate design has been a thread throughout my entire career. I started with IIDA as the director of education. I'm in love with narrative, storytelling and the written word. I believe it is a skill designers should have. I'm a firm believer that to support a profession, you need to be able to coherently articulate what that profession is.

**DI:** Too often we grumble and grouse at cocktail parties about our lack of perceived value or profitability. Well, they sure didn't teach strategy, storytelling and persuasion back when I was in school to provide us with the skills to escape that vicious cycle.

**CD:** It should be a part of the curriculum, don't you think, for both interior designers and architects? As well as presentation skills — to tell the story of design. I love that our profession is so passionate and dedicated. But to be able to verbally tell the story is essential. Obviously, designers are phenomenal storytellers through the spaces they create. A space tells a story. But to also be able to articulate that in narrative form or verbally, or when you're pitching to a potential new client, is an important skill for designers to possess.

**DI:** Let's shift to our theme for this quarter at Designintelligence: relational trust. As humans and businesspeople, the ability to tell stories implies and requires trust between the parties. When I was in school, there was almost a lack of trust between us and our clients, and us and our consultants. We were taught that talent wins out, that we're the lone genius, and the clients need to be "educated" because they don't know what we cape-wearing geniuses are going to bring to them in great design value.

Trust can have so many types. Within the interior design discipline, among collaborators and partners, between architects, contractors, manufacturers, clients, users... Do any of those kinds of trust strike a chord?

**CD:** Top of mind is the designer / client relationship that requires trust on both sides of the equation. Since Design in its totality is an art, a science, and a business — it's not just "one" thing. It's not like when I go to see my cardiologist, and she is talking to me specifically about heart health.

When a designer is talking to a client about a project, they are talking to that client about a multiplicity of factors that include attentiveness to the bottom line, the return on investment, about change management, about longevity, about culture, about both "people" and "place" requirements. And perhaps most importantly, about the two largest investments made by any organization: people and real estate. The conversations around interior design are multiple, varied and comprehensive. They deal with so many crucial things. The ability for that designer to articulate value or discern what might be most important to that client, and then for the client to have trust in that designer, demands entrusting them with your bottom line, your capital — both financial and human, the health and well-being of your employees and of course the health and well-being of your brand.

If you further peel back the ecosystem of design, you will note we have a complicated distribution network: product manufacturers, designers, dealers, and clients. Then a project manager, and maybe a tenant or owner's representative. When you think about all the people around the table (or the Zoom call) when a project is being launched, from an integrated standpoint, knowing how that project is being led takes tremendous trust. You're layering in construction, right? You're layering in a general con-

tractor. That's a lot of people on a team. Whether we're talking about integrated medicine or integrated design, the ability for all those professionals at that table to have not just the trust factor, but the respect factor, too, is paramount.

**DI:** As we compare ourselves to other industries, they all have big ecosystems too.

**CD:** True.

**DI:** And just as many players. We always talk about our large, complex, fragmented industry but the issue of trust is still at the core. I was halfway through my career before the idea of listening to the client, engendering trust or caring about what they or others do, was ever introduced. What's your take on how the interiors industry differs from architects and engineers? Having seen three decades worth, how is that happening in the interiors profession as contrasted to architecture?

**CD:** Earlier you cited being halfway through your career as an architect before developing collaborative or team acumen. I believe for interiors that capability, that skill set, comes much earlier. Because interior design is so dedicated to supporting not only the human beings in the space but also the team creating the space, and the client that is "aspiring" to the space — and paying for the service.

**DI:** And their hands-on work...

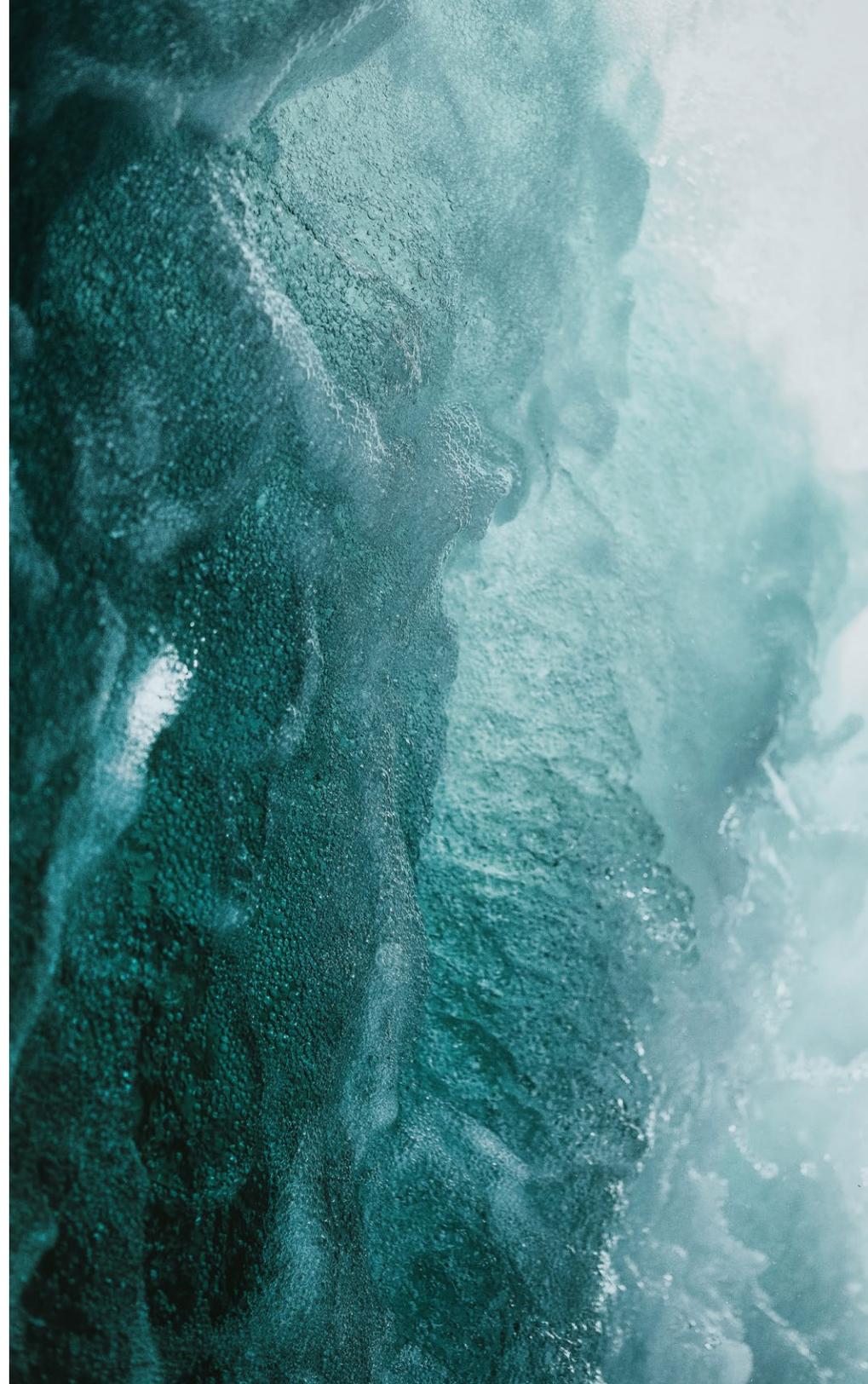
**CD:** Yes. Whether it is commercial, residential, hospitality or retail design, interior designers are obsessed in the best sense of the word. They're obsessed with humanity. How human beings are being maximized or how the experience of human beings will be maximized in a space is at the top of the food chain for interior designers. At an earlier stage in their educations and careers, you hear interior designers talking about a "people first"

ethos. Interior design is a people-first profession. Before you even get to the creation of physical structure, you're assessing how human beings are emotionally related to, attached to and affected by that physical structure.

**DI:** If we agree that as a class of people, interior folks have perhaps been more oriented to customers and listening and trusting, then let's put that in the context of our changing world. We've got environmental issues, social issues, pandemics, misinformation... At DesignIntelligence, we're calling them concurrent crises. As a collective profession, we have always been challenged with engendering enough trust and value to be as profitable as we should be. Now you've got Phil Bernstein at Yale teaching classes in new value modes and entrepreneurship. That's so welcome. Let's not sell billable hours or time or drawings! Let's come up with a radically different way to do that. What's the thinking along those lines in the interiors profession, around increasing value and generating trust?

**CD:** For decades, interior designers have been paid for "what" they do — the output of a project, but not necessarily paid for thinking — for important and revelatory strategic outcomes. If you ask the average human being, what is the output of an interior designer, they're going to think about an aesthetically pleasing, functional place that supports a human being. But the rigor of the thinking that creates that place and the experiences that occur within that place and the relationship of that place to business outcomes will not be the first thing people think about with regard to the practice of interior design.

Where we see the evolutionary shift in recent history for interior design is that every engagement with a design firm doesn't necessarily result in a physical place. Because interior design is consultative, right? We have lived through the era of design thinking. The term has become a bit of a fad or cliché. But when



it first came into popular lexicon, there was a genuine desire to talk about design thinking as a process with definitive valuable outcomes.

You now see firms — large, medium, and small - actively engaging in the essential consulting model of interior design, where designers are being paid for how and what they think. Sometimes that thinking may result in a physical project, and sometimes in a change of process or culture. It results in a positive change of some sort for the client. This level of problem-solving fosters innovation that speaks directly to the value of interior design.

A fair portion of my career has been about connecting value and communicating value, so when the public, or a client, or a legislator, or an architect for that matter, hears “interior design,” there is the realization that there is inherent value in that the profession. We know the professions of interior design and architecture have not always “gotten along” in the best of worlds. There have been many comparisons and much questioning of the value of interior design from our colleagues in the architecture profession, even though many classically trained and educated architects have practiced in the interior environment.

**DI:** Are you seeing a growth in consultative or strategic services in revenues and firms taking that on?

**CD:** Absolutely. And not just the largest firms. Most firms, although still very much engaged in project work, are providing, particularly in this semi-post pandemic moment that we’re in, an expanded scope of services that has its roots and origins in answering the question: “How do we get employees to return to the office?” Everyone is asking what is hybrid work? What is distributed work? What does it mean and is there such a thing as returning to the office? That’s a conversation about the physical environment, but it’s just as much about emotion and attitude.

Clients are turning to firms that maybe they have traditionally worked with in one way but are now having strategic conversations with them about human beings and the workplace, to think differently about people, place, strategy and the future.

**DI:** The other side of that question is what I’ll call encroachment. The major management consulting firms and real estate firms are getting into design consulting. In my day, we would say, “These people are just selling fear and mistrust. They’re going to the clients and building trust, and they’re taking work away from architects and interior designers!” Now, the optimistic, inclusive way to think about that is: “That’s not an erosion of the profession, that’s an expansion of the profession. Talented architects and interior designers are going to work for these people and we’re all coming together.” What are your thoughts?

**CD:** Well, the McKinseys and KPMGs of the world — the accounting, auditing, and consulting firms — have purported to have design expertise for a long while. We know that on the broker side, the JLLs and CBREs are engaging their clients in conversations about real estate, and in some instances, those are design conversations. I think we’re at a crossroads moment: Who gets to be an expert? Whether that’s an expert on climate change, or an expert on demographics, sustainability, inclusion or design, is the ecosystem of design large enough to accommodate all these experts? Perhaps only clients can tell us, but I am aware of large clients accepting design advice from organizations that purport to have design expertise, and then those same clients need to spend more money and time on top of money and time they’ve already spent to have that work or that engagement reanalyzed or redone by actual design professionals. That’s a reality in our world.

Is it encroachment? That’s an interesting and provocative question. But if a consultant comes to a client and says, “I can provide you a design solution,” and they are not qualified to

provide that design solution, either by accreditation, education or experience, that's when we need to support clients in being smarter about how they're selecting their design experts. Some of that is a question around qualification. Some of it is being tied into your consulting firm so tightly that you don't know you can look outside that consulting firm for other expertise. But it's a bit of a wild, wild west out there with a lot of people entities and organizations grabbing design or the outcomes that design can bring as an expertise when they're not qualified to do so.

**DI:** For so many years, our reaction as architects would be simply to grumble, complain, and ignore it. I don't think that worked well. To recognize the context, embrace it, deal with it, and either join it or do it yourself, or provide even more value and more trust than they're doing because you are more qualified in so many ways. That's my editorial comment.

**CD:** Michael, a firm recently invited me to participate in a presentation to a client. I sat in on the pitch. The client very candidly said, "Why should I choose you, design firm A, when I could choose another consultant, a real estate group, to provide design consultation?" The designers at the table were very surprised at the candor of the question. And the response was both interesting and apt if you think about where the emphasis was placed.

The principal designer said, "My goal as a firm is to support you, your organization, and your business goals in that space. A broker's goal is a signed lease. If you look at the objective at the end of the process, where's the priority?" I thought that was a great way to respond. And I have since seen many more instances that typically happen in these pitch situations where clients are asking these very pointed, relevant questions that have everything to do with design as a business.

**DI:** What a wonderful answer, and what a great way to build trust between you and a client. Hopefully they could back that promise up and deliver on it.

**CD:** Well, they got the job, and I believe they did deliver.

**DI:** Fantastic. At Designintelligence, we have a strategic advisory component. We want to be a trusted advisor. One of the first things we remind our clients of is what you and I have been talking about. That is, the future is talking to us. Are we listening? What is it telling us? I'll turn the question to you, as an organization, how are you responding? How are you looking and responding to the future?

**CD:** Yes, the future is talking to us and it's not whispering either! It's right here right now. And as a profession, how will we contend with the complexity of physical space? And increasingly, it won't be just physical space, it will be virtual, and augmented and enhanced and blended. How are we translating and maximizing the human experience in all the different ways we're going to relate to "place" in the context of entertainment, hospitality, retail, healthcare, education, and of course, work? How will we all live together? How will we coexist, not just in a classroom or dorm room or home, but on this entire planet? And what about diminishing resources and an expanding population?

Designers need to be comfortable with and cognizant of foresight and the future. The skills around foresight and being a futurist from multiple aspects. One of the things I love most about this profession is how multifaceted it is, how multidisciplinary. How embracing of constant change and complexity not only aids evolution, it encourages it.

For interior designers to be adept at being the broadest thinkers possible bodes well for their future preparedness and foresight acumen. I'm not supporting only designers who specialize, but I'm a firm believer that designers are serial specialists. Grounding oneself in broad-based thinking with the disciplines and the vertical markets, but being conversant with how to be a futurist about the physical space, human beings, and the environment will bode well for the interior design profession.

**DI:** That diversity is so smart and optimistic. As things get more complex, we've generated roles for specialists, we still have roles for generalists, and now, new roles for enablers to connect both types, which is what I spent the last 20 years of my career doing.

**CD:** So many projects now are not only multifaceted, but they're using multiple firms. McDonald's recently relocated their headquarters from the Chicago suburbs to the West Loop in downtown Chicago. Three distinct firms worked on that project. There are many other examples of the intellect and value that multiple firms bring to projects.

Is this a case for building a discipline around managing how work happens when multiple firms are on a project? It's certainly characteristic of hospitals, and large corporate clients. Who is that professional with the best aptitude for managing multiple firms and the design process on a project and who can bring three (or more) distinct points of view together for one single client? And, of course, ensure the timely and budget-positive delivery of a project?

I believe that person is a design practitioner, a design specialist who is immersed in outcomes. Not necessarily what we now call a project manager, although there are certain inherent elements. How will we educate these project team specialists? What is the curriculum for that kind of design professional? I am fascinated by how our industry will be educating its next generation of professionals.

And, of course, I would love to have educators join us in that conversation.

**DI:** My book, *Managing Design*, touches on those questions. It's been a long-standing debate between schools and practice. There are only so many hours, and we have to get accreditation, and you can learn those skills somewhere else. It goes on forever.

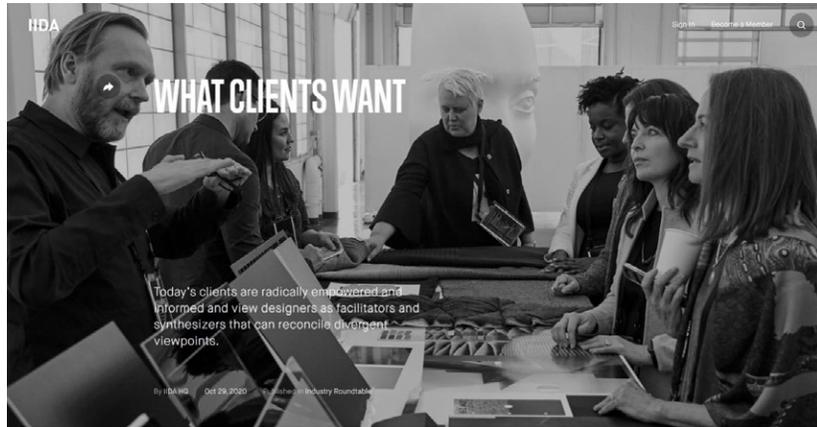
**CD:** Right. And nobody really wants a seven-year path to a design degree. But it makes me wonder if we're including the most critical components in education. Are interior designers being prepared for confronting a world of business? A world of science? If you look at design and new construction, one of the fastest growing areas in almost every city is the life sciences.

There's a fair amount of knowledge required for that specialty building type. Designers are definitely rising to that challenge, but for many of them the knowledge is gained through on-the-job training. Education is a great backbone to prepare you to go out into the world, but the complexity of our world and our profession is breeding multiple bodies of knowledge.

How are we preparing our professionals to face this new world of the physical environment? What do consumers and clients want and what do cities need? We could be creating design specialists in the urban environment. How does what happens in a city from a design standpoint tie directly to economic where-withal, tax base, equity and inclusion? You're not getting that piece of it just yet in a design education.

**DI:** To cope with a more complex world, what kind of business relationships, strategic alliances and synergies do we need? As an organization, or in any member firms, can you cite any examples of people who might be looking at new alliances? The old way was: I'm an experienced, talented person. I know it all. It processes through me. Now we have artificial intelligence, the internet and big, complex teams. On the relationship side, do we need to open our arms more broadly to cooperation instead of competition? Are you seeing any of that in the interiors world?

**CD:** When we talk about new kinds of relationships in our industry, it's interesting to look at the relationship many firms have with product manufacturers. Product manufacturers aren't just selling products. They commission a tremendous amount of



research. They have their own end user relationships. I'm seeing a greater synergy as we continue to recognize we're necessary to one another in that ecosystem. I'm also seeing stronger relationships between product manufacturers and design firms working cooperatively with the client as opposed to competing to get in front of the client first.

That's just another level of trust I've seen improve over the years. It sometimes feels like interior design is a team sport, and that can get complicated for the client.

We did a book series called *What Clients Want*. We told the story of the value of design but had the designer and the client tell the story. I would venture to say trust is the most used word throughout all four volumes of that series. And it wasn't instant trust. It was built over time. Because many organizations had an inherent mistrust of design and the design process.

**DI:** I appreciate you sharing that. The fact that the word trust is prevalent in your books is serendipitous for us in this conversation. Let's bring it back to you. Your story is remarkable, what

you've done with the organization in your several decades there. I also want to learn your secrets — how you built trust and consensus within that organization to become such a great leader?

**CD:** My mom had this great aphorism: “Work is easy. People are hard.” Whether it is a staff member, a client, or a firm, I deeply feel I've been entrusted with running this organization. To do that I've made a deep investment in understanding people and their motivation. I firmly believe IIDA was created out of love — a love for this profession and a desire for value, integrity, and dignity.

In everything we've done as an association, value, integrity, and dignity, along with knowledge and community, have been my pillars. Those are related to the pillars for interior design as well. Seeing this organization transform from a bankrupt, distrusted organization into a credible, respected and forward-looking leader in the built environment is incredibly rewarding.

We've now made that shift. In addition to serving our members and the commercial interior design industry, we've grown to become a knowledge and learning organization, educating our members and the next generation of designers as well as the broader industry and even potential clients. One example is our



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Work is easy. People are hard.

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Design Your World program, started in 2020. There, we teach a course in commercial interior design to high school kids from under-resourced communities who haven't had exposure to the power of design. We're teaching them to see life through the lens of design.

I am optimistic about that, because we know our industry has not always been the most equitable. It hasn't always been representative of the world. Introducing a new community to the value of design has been an amazing journey. It reinforces my belief that interior design is one of the most optimistic professions. You have to believe in human beings to provide and create for them.

**DI:** What a wonderful, hopeful, positive outlook. Cheryl, I've so enjoyed telling stories with you today. In particular, learning more about your story, that of your organization, and how you have done much to restore trust and respect within IIDA. They're stories our readers can learn from. Thank you very much. I hope we can continue the conversation.

**CD:** I hope so. To further connect interior design and architecture is a not-so-subtle goal of mine.

**DI:** A noble goal indeed. You're a true pro. Thanks for making it easy.

*Cheryl Durst is Executive Vice President and CEO of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA). An exceptional communicator, innovator, and visionary leader, she has spurred progress, driven change, encouraged the expansion of the interior design industry and is committed to achieving broad recognition for the value of design and its significant role in society.*

*Cheryl oversees IIDA's strategic direction and heads its International Board, setting an agenda that leads the industry in creating community, advancing advocacy and continuing decades of work toward equity. She is a member of the International WELL Building Institute Governance Council and a Trustee for Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and the NYSID. She has been referred to by Interior Design magazine as "an ambassador for innovation and expansion, and a visionary strategist." Cheryl was inducted into the prestigious Interior Design Hall of Fame in 2016 as the recipient of its first-ever Leadership Award. She is the first African American woman to be inducted into the industry's Hall of Fame.*

*A lifelong knowledge enthusiast and voracious reader who has considered librarian, astronaut and journalist as potential careers, Cheryl never walks away from meeting someone without gleaned a bit of their story — a talent she currently employs on her monthly podcast, The Skill Set, which focuses on the intangible skills that make us good at what we do.*

#### ABOUT IIDA

*The International Interior Design Association is the commercial interior design association with a global reach. We support design professionals, industry affiliates, educators, students, firms and their clients through our network of 15,000+ members across 58 countries. We advocate for advancements in education, design excellence, legislation, leadership, accreditation, and community outreach to increase the value and understanding of interior design as a profession that enhances business value and positively impacts the health and well-being of people's lives every day.*

[www.iida.org](http://www.iida.org)