



SANDOW Design Group Roundtable Series

ThinkLab Connects with *Interior Design* Rising Giants of Design

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RISING TO THE CHALLENGE



2020 was a year like none other. Small businesses in the U.S. were especially affected by the pandemic, and the *Interior Design Rising Giants of Design* were no exception. Rising Giants are the group right under the top 100 *Interior Design* Giants of Design.

ThinkLab sat down with two groups from the Rising Giants of Design to hear the stories behind the data and their projections for the future. It's clear that the Rising Giants of Design are passionate about a few key issues, and they aren't afraid to look inward to improve their own business processes. Over this series of these roundtable discussions, a more complete picture emerged of what this data means to their businesses, with their partners, and within the broader ecosystem of design.

Interior Design Rising Giants of Design panelists were hand-selected to represent a cross section of perspectives on the industry's current obstacles and initiatives. To begin the conversation, they were asked to share a **BOLD PREDICTION** about the future.



KEY PLAYERS

The event was sponsored by Delta Faucet Company and The Rug Company, which were given exclusive access to the event and collaborated on the topics of both discussions.

SPONSOR ATTENDEES: DELTA FAUCET COMPANY

Faye Adams, Corporate Learning Manager, Sales & Marketing
Elle Millard, Corporate Learning Manager
Scott Sandala, Corporate Learning Manager

SPONSOR ATTENDEES: THE RUG COMPANY

Mason Morjikian, Managing Director of Sales, U.S.
Colette Sabins, Marketing Manager, U.S.

FACILITATORS

Amanda Schneider, President, ThinkLab
Meredith Campbell, Research & Content Development, ThinkLab



Balkaran Bassan

Senior Designer, Areen Design

BOLD PREDICTION

“As companies are strategizing, the world is our oyster. This is a unique time in that we have high-level, macro changes happening all around us. The big question: Will this pandemic be a catalyst for change and growth, or is it just going to be a temporary shift? Are we going to have these conversations and then just revert to the practices, processes, or systems from before? I hope we don’t just go back to the way things were!”



Alanna Call

Associate Creative Director + Storyteller,
CID Design Group

BOLD PREDICTION

“During the pandemic, we were able to recruit and bring in new team members from all over the country. The growth and new talent has been exciting, and we’re all learning from each other. Maintaining company culture and giving everyone the same experience while co-located is both an area of challenge and rich opportunity.”



Laura Evans

Associate Principal, Abel Design Group

BOLD PREDICTION

“There is a change in office culture across the board and in the architectural landscape of what workplace will look like in the future. We are going increasingly paperless and adopting new technologies. These modifications have helped us grow in our virtual collaboration capabilities as a team and with our clients. However, these digital experiences also help validate how valuable in-person interaction is.”



Guy Geier

Managing Partner,
FXCollaborative Architects

BOLD PREDICTION

“A couple of things I think will make a permanent impact: Technology is going to enable us to do work in a different way — even when we are back in the office. The workplace will be hybrid for us, and it will be interesting to manage a more distributed workforce, but the technology will help enable it. Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) has become top of mind over the last year. Everything we do as a firm will be rooted in that framework.”



Hayley Morgan Heider

Associate, Looney & Associates

BOLD PREDICTION

“I’m looking forward to internally examining the way that we work. After 15 years, I’m seeing a big shift in how work gets done. Utilizing flexibility and building a team that’s co-located across the country is empowering and exciting for our firm.”



Barry Ludlow

Principal, Design Republic

BOLD PREDICTION

“The willingness of people — be they real estate brokers, owner’s reps, clients, etc. — to say, ‘This is all new. There are no experts. How can we do this better together?’ The sharing of information and creation of thought leadership has been amazing to watch. Hopefully, this collaboration and information-sharing makes us all better going forward.”



Alison McNeil

Partner and Governing Council Member,
DIALOG

BOLD PREDICTION

“This has been a moment when we’ve all experienced the same thing at the same time, like a pause button has been pressed due to COVID-19. It’s a collective experience like nothing else we’ve ever experienced. An acceleration of woke ideas. People are moving towards remote work, something we never thought possible. In hospitality, there is an attention to well-being. Conversations around social justice are happening all around us. Every segment is experiencing ‘wokeness.’”



Shea Odell-Scott

Associate Design Futurist, CID Design Group

BOLD PREDICTION

“The idea of placemaking and identity — the redefinition of what the home is — has been interesting in the multi-family sector. Your home is your everything now. People will be looking for community in different places. They might not be looking for camaraderie from their coworkers in a remote setting, but they might find it with their neighbors instead.”





James Simeo

Principal, CO Architects

BOLD PREDICTION

“I hope we will acknowledge the lessons learned, building on the capabilities we’ve acquired in the past year, with a remote and physical presence. With the new work models, how do we maintain our culture as a firm and the quality of our work? There are more unknowns than answers, which provides an exciting puzzle to solve over the next couple of years.”





Janet Whaley

Associate Principal and Director of Interiors, Cuningham

BOLD PREDICTION

“Flexibility in the way that we work internally and flexibility of spaces for clients. Design needs to respond to different situations. For a hospitality client, the lobby needs to flex to support multiple types of events. Restaurants need event spaces that can be flexible. There’s a renewed desire for experiences because we’re missing connection.”



Brent Zeigler

President of Design and Principal,
Dyer Brown

BOLD PREDICTION

“The slowdown gave us an opportunity to rethink. We were able to look critically at the work we do and the clients we have. I hope we will use these slower times to build better perspectives that prepare us for the busier times.”



We've always listened to our clients to understand their unique needs, but I think the range is going to be wider than ever going forward. There isn't a universal answer.

—Guy Geier
Managing Partner, FXCollaborative Architects

With a double-digit decline, *Interior Design Rising Giants of Design* were hit hard by the pandemic. However, they are well-poised for a bounce back with only 5% of design staff lost. They predict growth of 9% in 2021 and anticipate a 10% increase in quantity of projects – a 5-year high if it comes to fruition.

HERE'S WHY:

The latest AIA Billings Index (April 2021) reported the highest ABI score since before the Great Recession. The value of new signed contracts reached the highest score since data collection began in 2010. This recovery is happening quickly, with architecture firms in all regions reporting increased billings for the 2nd consecutive month.

The *Interior Design Rising Giants of Design* panelists said they have used this time to evaluate their own business. As it is said, “never waste a good crisis,” and the panelists echoed this sentiment. One panelist asked, “With so many boats in the water, how do you keep them all afloat?” 2020 was the opportunity to be introspective about their team structure, leadership team, and client relationships. And the million-dollar question that our panelists are exploring: What changes from the last year will remain going forward?

01

DESIGN PROCESS CHALLENGES



HERE'S WHY:

Being forced into a remote-working environment has affected the Rising Giants of Design in the same way as in other industries: Some are embracing remote, and others are eager to get back to the office. Each firm is handling things differently, but how business gets done will shift in this hybrid world. Some things will stick, and others won't.

For some of our panelists, remote work opened up a whole new world in terms of recruitment. They were no longer bound to geographic constraints to find talent. And while the silver lining for them is increasing attraction and retention, the mentoring piece remains a challenge. This was echoed across the board. With architecture and interiors being apprenticeship-based professions, losing the spontaneity of that interaction has been an adjustment for all panelists.

Building and maintaining culture in this remote environment has also been a hurdle. "How do we maintain equity of experience for those who remain remote?" asked one panelist. The group was split on whether productivity improved or declined in a remote setting. The "pause" enabled these Rising Giants to evaluate their structure and benchmarks for professional development. Defining what it takes to get promoted isn't as clear as a passed exam anymore. Soft skills are crucial, and they are much harder to define and cultivate.



When you are in the office, you are there for the serendipitous moments. Space will start changing to support more of that. You will be meeting with people and using the third spaces. It will be about coming together.

—**Janet Whaley**
Associate Principal and
Director of Interiors,
Cunningham

What does reentry look like? Not so much what are the parameters around it, but what does it feel like? Everyone has had a collective experience. For some people, it's about isolation; for some people, it's about freedom; and for some people, it's about making their own schedule.

—**Brent Zeigler**
President of Design and
Principal, Dyer Brown



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

As we heard from the panelists, returning to the office means something different for each of them. Since everyone has a different policy, gather feedback regularly from firms.

As firms try to define and plan what this means for them, share stories of what you are seeing others do. Compile examples from colleagues across the country, and be a resource for your design partners as they work out what this all means for them — especially the vendor relationship and the physical + digital library piece.

When the opportunity arises to present virtually, our panelists agreed that you must present your materials in 15 minutes or less — and hone your craft. Utilize new platforms to combat Zoom fatigue. We love Loom for video and Miro for whiteboarding/collaborative presenting.

ThinkLab.design
Interior Design Rising Giants of Design
Roundtable Summary, 2021

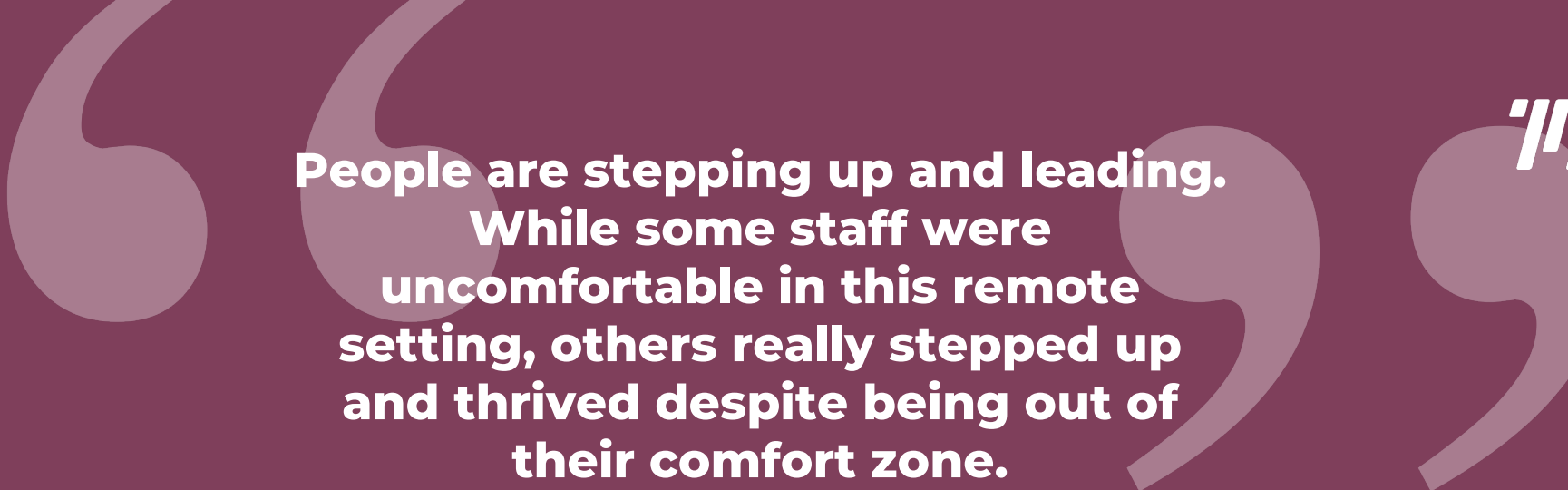


IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



All boats rise together — share and learn how other firms are doing it. Even outside of your own region. There is no historical data right now, so embracing the unknown with a flexible mindset will allow for adjustments going forward. One panelist observed: “As the physical office is no longer about just getting work done, it’s a perfect time to evaluate collectively what it means to your organization. What’s important?”

The panelists agreed that maintaining the company culture and mentoring in a virtual or hybrid environment poses challenges. Many expressed worry that staff were getting overlooked or might feel isolated. The word of the year: intentionality. Where spontaneous communication isn’t possible, set mentoring “office hours,” 1-to-1 catch-ups, and the like to combat isolation. To engage more junior staff, one panelist suggested giving them a part in client presentations so they feel a sense of ownership in the process.



**People are stepping up and leading.
While some staff were
uncomfortable in this remote
setting, others really stepped up
and thrived despite being out of
their comfort zone.**

—Hayley Morgan Heider
Associate, Looney & Associates

02

ECOSYSTEM EVOLUTION



HERE'S WHY:

Roughly 58% of Rising Giants of Design cited “creating new business and diversifying” as their top business challenge. And while this was a big topic of conversation, social justice was also top of mind for these panelists. The role they play as designers in Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) is foundational to their business and keeping their design philosophy forward-thinking.

Diversification for Rising Giants is multifaceted: From a firm perspective, it comes in the form of strategy services. From a capability standpoint, designers are uniquely gifted at storytelling and must harness not only their ability to tell a story, but also the art of crafting a story that clients want to hear. From an industry standpoint, diversification means expanding to different vertical markets. This aligns with ThinkLab data that a firm is 3x as likely to be working on a residential project now than pre-pandemic, and this is especially notable for Rising Giants.

However, the conversation around diversity in the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) framework has an entirely different meaning. In multi-family, it means being sensitive to the neighborhood. In hospitality, it's dialing into the narratives of people who may have been overlooked — delving into the stories of place and tailoring the experience.



You can't provide equitable, diverse, inclusive environments if you aren't listening to what people's needs are.

—**James Simeo**
Principal, CO Architects

There's an intersectionality to JEDI conversations. Different narratives provide depth and understanding, and you must listen at multiple levels. There are various threads and scenarios that need to be woven together for a richer experience that will integrate the key issues. Not just representation for the sake of it.

—**Balkaran Bassan**
Senior Designer,
Areen Design



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

JEDI was an important topic to our panelists. They want to know that they are working with partners who value the same things that they do. Be authentic as a company about the strides you are taking. And share lessons along the way. As it relates to marketing, a first step is to make sure a diverse group of people is represented in all product photography.

As A&D firms are diversifying across segments of design, they are looking for inspiration from different vertical markets. Showing the same product in various environments helps designers visualize the different places they could use it. Hint: Hospitality design is influencing ALL verticals.




IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



In designing with JEDI in mind, the panelists had a few great suggestions. Go beyond just hiring a local artist — dial into movements and narratives of people who have been overlooked, crafting a multi-person narrative by talking to 6 or 7 people. Inspired by those you've met, use these individuals as personas, and journey through the space from their perspective to gain greater empathy. In hospitality, this may mean moving from a narrative of luxury and aspiration to a narrative about experience and the collection of experiences.

With projects becoming ever more complex, a diverse set of expertise is needed on the team. One panelist described the gathering of these communities of practice as “flocking” — people coming together to solve a problem collectively. Collaborator examples included a mechanical engineer, a sociologist, and an IT expert.





I'm looking for partners in design who are flocking towards the same set of principles that we are. I want to understand where they stand on it. How do your values align to our values? Be clear about it. I will pick you ahead of anyone else based on your story and values.

—Alison McNeil
Partner and Governing Council Member,
DIALOG

03

SOURCING PRODUCTS



While designers have led the way on sustainability for years, the conversation is much broader now. With 111x the specification power of the average consumer, *Interior Design Rising Giants of Design* are using that power to influence change.

HERE'S WHY:

Move over sustainability — you aren't the exclusive focus of the conversation anymore. Wellness, the circular economy, and resilient environments are top of mind for our panelists (along with JEDI, as previously mentioned). What will it take for widespread adoption? Looking to the fashion industry, where consumers are already demanding sustainable materials, what was the tipping point, and when will that shift happen for our industry? The panelists suggest it will take a 4-pronged approach: **Designers pushing for it + clients asking for it + manufacturers making it + regulations mandating it.**

Our panelists were troubled by the workplace trend of short leases and inexpensive furniture that causes spaces to be completely renovated every few years. Contributing to the circular economy challenges designers and manufacturers to design products that can be reused and repurposed and spaces that are timeless and cared for like historical preservation projects.



Health and wellness are becoming the primary motivators in the design of spaces. That includes sustainability, but it goes way beyond green design and expands the kinds of issues we are dealing with in space.

—**Guy Geier**
Managing Partner,
FXCollaborative Architects

Sustainability has always been core to our values, but we're seeing a shift to regenerative design and a holistic approach — not just parts and pieces. Human wellness, planet wellness, and community wellness.

—**Janet Whaley**
Associate Principal and
Director of Interiors,
Cunningham



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

The visual presentation of products is crucial in this physical + digital world. While a stunning, easy-to-use website is crucial, we've heard that junior staff are also utilizing Instagram to "shop" for product. Tag your products so that they can easily be found. Inspire with unexpected applications. An example given was mixing fashion with carpet: a fun pair of red heels on a carpet tile.

The panelists agreed that they need to understand your story and be so inspired by it that they want to share it with their client. Weaving a story of how you are doing things authentically in your craft and what's behind it speaks volumes to this audience. We've heard this to be especially true with sustainability. Designers want to hear the story behind the entire life cycle of the product.



IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



The panelists challenged the industry to think about lease terms and the waste associated with them. Projects are often designed and built for 5- or 10-year leases and then demolished for a new client. How can we design spaces that are more universal when everyone wants the "next thing"? One panelist said that "sustainability equals accountability."

A suggestion from the panel was to work with manufacturers on products that can be easily reused or recycled. Could a floor tile be reclaimed and reused on a different project instead of going in the landfill? How about furniture that can be disassembled or reupholstered/refinished and given a new home? This is the heart of joining the circular economy, and our panelists feel a strong responsibility to lead the way with their manufacturing partners, construction experts, real estate teams, and clients.

04

RISE OF THE SAVVY CLIENT



New working models, employee demand for wellness, and the increased emphasis on placemaking provide both opportunities and challenges for the panelists. The quick churn of spaces and shorter lease terms create tension for sustainability, but at the same time, flexibility is more important than ever.

HERE'S WHY:

We heard from the panelists that the pandemic prompted a shift for many of their clients, who are now asking for spaces that support the well-being of their employees. Where it may have been something that the design team had to influence in the past, wellness is now being demanded by the employees as a result of the events of 2020.

With so much unknown and uncertain, our panelists agreed that flexibility has to be built into spaces. Not only for the unique needs of the occupants, but also to enable the suite to age in place instead of having to rip everything out and start over every time, which isn't a sustainable practice.

For multi-family clients, potential occupants will likely be looking for community. They might not be looking for camaraderie with their coworkers in a remote setting, but they might find it with their neighbors instead.



Wellness has been huge for us since the pandemic. Where clients previously weren't willing to make the investment in wellness, they are excited about it now. We have done the research and believe in the importance of creating healthy spaces.

—**Shea Odell-Scott**
Associate Design Futurist,
CID Design Group

The change will be grassroots — it will come from employees demanding it. Business are surveying their employees, and they are hearing 'wellness, wellness, wellness!'

—**Barry Ludlow**
Principal, Design Republic



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

In this Amazon era, designers need samples and information faster than ever, because their clients are demanding it. Use digital tools to help streamline your workflow for quicker response. Examples: let Material Bank do the heavy lifting of sampling. Or utilize pre-populated email templates for your standard replies to let firms know their message has been received and that you are working on it.

Operate with a great deal of empathy knowing that many of your firms are navigating not only a new return to office policy but also a flood of work and are likely short-staffed. When you understand what's happening in their world, you can help them avoid errors and get creative with applications. Which is exactly what our panelists said they value in a vendor partner.



IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



The panelists predict that design must respond to a variety of different situations going forward. In hospitality, flexibility means that the lobby can flex to support multiple types of events. In restaurants, the space must be able to transform into new “venues.” Within the workplace, a flexible space may mean incorporating internal protocols, such as hybrid work, or creating multipurpose spaces that can support a variety of meetings or functions.

Another panelist suggested that designers could work with manufacturers to develop products that can be reused or recycled. And by understanding the holistic properties of the product — not just what's in it — they are ensuring they're meeting their overall project goals.

Additionally, the panelists suggested we consider how spaces are bringing people together. How are we fostering human connection coming out of this time of isolation?

We're getting on social media, we're reading blog posts. We want to know the pulse of the local community. The empathy factor is what makes a good storyteller. That's what enables us to grow our business: story-driven design. It's about placemaking and authenticity. We're not just designing lobbies, we're designing experiences.

—Alanna Call

Associate Creative Director + Storyteller,
CID Design Group

CONCLUSION

Spurred by drivers such as hybrid work, sustainability, JEDI, and business diversification, *Interior Design Rising Giants of Design* predict a future of transformative design. Processes and places will be tuned in to the well-being of the individual, the organization, and the broader community systems.

01

EVOLUTION OF PEOPLE + RELATIONSHIPS Hybrid work will drive the culture of the organization, the relationships with manufacturers, and the way that firms measure professional advancement.

02

BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY Now is the time for the circular economy, resilient design, and wellness of individuals and the community. A four-pronged approach for widescale adoption: **Designers pushing for it + clients asking for it + manufacturers making it + regulations mandating it.**

03

SOCIAL JUSTICE Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) is the framework by which every project will be measured, and designers will be looking for manufacturers whose values match theirs.

04

RISE OF SOFT SKILLS Storytelling, empathy, and building communities of practice (flocking) is the new currency of design. As clients become savvier and design becomes more complex, having project teams (including vendor partners) made up of diverse expertise becomes the next competitive advantage.