



**Business as Unusual:
Reframing Firm Strategies**

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Reframing Firm Strategies for Transformation and Resilience

IT'S TIME TO THRIVE

Executives are discussing how they can position their companies to survive the COVID-19 crisis. Considering the uncertainties that surround us, it's only natural that business leaders talk in terms of survival and resilience.

“Resilience” implies an ability to spring back into shape – to recover from difficulties or the pressures of external forces. In looking at resiliency strategies it makes sense that design leaders have tended to consider longer-term, measured changes: evolutions of our practices. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, as I considered professional resilience, I wondered if instead of evolution, we needed to look at a more rapid pace of change – how could we transform our practice?

Design professionals have been trained as catalytic thinkers, problem solvers, and change agents. We creatives thrive when looking at challenges from diverse angles;

when exploring and cultivating ways to address those challenges; and when finding elegant paths toward value-driven outcomes. We do it for our clients, why not for ourselves? We must look beyond merely surviving. Our creative natures can and should open pathways on which we can thrive.



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The more you use, the more you have.*
~ Maya Angelou

CREATIVITY AS CATALYST

I've had the privilege of watching our firm work creatively with clients to address sudden needs surrounding COVID-19 outbreaks. We saw the need and were instinctively drawn to creative problem solving. In collaboration with our partners, we worked to identify and craft solutions to sudden, dire needs. In short: we did what design firms do. I'm looking forward to seeing more stories about how our profession applied creative thinking to help our clients through this crisis. But let's also look inward. How can the creativity we apply to helping our clients thrive be applied to helping ourselves become more resilient firms? Through design of our attitudes and organizations, we can thrive.

It might seem hard for us to find creative energy at a time like this. But Maya Angelou put it best: "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."

Nimble in Culture, Practice, and Business
To take full advantage of our creative potential, a key factor in being able to thrive in our industry is to be nimble, flexible, agile, and precise in our enterprise decisions.

Well before the COVID-19 crisis, diverse influences guided our conversations about change: the rapid rise of new



technologies and their impacts on design outcomes and process; changing client expectations; shifting perspectives as new generations of emerging professionals enter our firms; and more. Influences like these have driven us to consider specific strategies at varying levels on how to be resilient firms. But too often, the conversations center on mid- or long-term change. What we must recognize is that the time for change is now. We must adopt an attitude necessary to nurture resiliency in the ongoing rapid pace of change.

Let's have a flexible mindset: how we used to do things is not the only way to do them going forward. Let's have the agility to pivot - easily and quickly directing our creative and enterprise energies toward building resiliency. Let's act with precision on issues of genuine significance and impact, with rigorous attention to detail.

The actions below address the essential strategies of a resilient firm. These are by no means exhaustive, but I hope you find them relevant food for thought as you contemplate what is of genuine importance to your firm.

1. Creativity is Key

Creativity is pivotal to resilience. Know the values that are the beating heart of your brand. Let those remain the hub of your decision-making and look at what can and should change around them. We should be just as creative transforming our own businesses as we are working for our clients. From exploring non-traditional partnerships, to new levels of employee engagement and transparency, we must transform design processes, flexible hiring practices, and more. Ask yourself: do you frame all your conversations, actions and ambitions through the lens of your creative values?

2. Services Diversity

A resilient practice is in tune with a shifting marketplace. It recognizes that the client needs may entail diversification of services beyond traditional expertise. Look at how aims for energy conservation shifted into demands for high-performance design; how quickly advances in technology shifted client and user perspectives from traditional space evaluations toward awareness of and influence on the full building lifecycle; how quickly clients expected evidence as

basis of design decisions. We must think creatively about how we shift our own service offerings to diversify our revenue streams, connect with and proactively seek emerging client expectations, and recognize how much of our work leads to new service offerings we can and should have ownership stake in.

3. Workplace Demographics

To thrive, we need to take a radical look at how we approach hiring and retention. As a profession, we can't afford to lose another generation of design professionals like we did in 2008-2009. Even during times of crisis, our industry needs to support emerging professionals; curate and mentor new leaders; and take advantage of the new perspectives and skillsets a diverse workforce brings to our firms and our profession. Diversifying our services demands a new perspective on what our workforce looks like - building outward from traditional AEC disciplines into digital programming, data analysis and applications, digital creative services, and more. Finally, we need to embrace the shifting values represented through the voices of our emerging professionals: our ongoing movement in

equity, diversity, and inclusion isn't just embedded in hiring and mentoring practices - it's transparent across the workforce. With a recognized war on talent, resilient firms should be as focused on retaining their talent as they are in recruiting it.

4. Design Language and Value

Our industry often takes design value for granted. In my experience it's more the exception than the rule, especially for clients who feel the pressures of executing projects from myriad, diverse angles. The rallying cry "good design is good business" is more relevant now than ever as design thinking becomes a core value in many global businesses. As such, each of us must hone our own design language, and evaluate every enterprise decision through the lens of "good design is good business." A conscious design language is key to maintaining a strong and resilient internal design culture, and to articulating design value to clients and being recognized within your communities as leaders.

5. Leverage Digital Technologies

As clients increase their expectations for evidence-based design, gathering, managing, analyzing, and acting on data is increasingly essential for resilient design firms. What we could do with that



data is limitless. But that's not the end of our opportunities in leveraging digital technologies. Diverse, unexplored digital applications could advance our practices. Weeks ago, setting up an infrastructure and toolkit to enable remote design work was still optional. Suddenly, it's a necessity. Technology acceleration is no longer an "if". Resilient firms will find ways to use technology to transform business practices and design processes.

6. Be current. Be visible.

Think about the impact your online presence makes on your target audiences. I didn't say "clients" because those who seek you out online include prospective employees; potential design partners; the press; and more. Increasing numbers of people expect not only to find your website, but to find it up to date, and reflect who you are and what you do. Make sure your web presence is up to

date. While your website is still the center of your digital universe, look at activating social media and related channels to reach the people you want to reach.

7. Workplace Wellness

Engaged, committed staff usually means happy clients. Attend to the needs of your people. Yes, you should have a healthy workplace that contributes to their wellness. But remember, it's about more than clean air and standing desks; it's also your working practices. Accelerated by our current COVID-19 crisis, new social norms are transforming how and when we connect to our workplace and virtual working. They are likely to play a role in how we develop our workplace wellness moving forward. Options for working remotely will be a key near term consideration to define healthy, safe working environments.

8. Design with Purpose

Next-generation design leaders thrive on a sense of purpose and community-focused values. They need to be nourished creatively, emotionally, and intellectually. They need and expect to do work that truly feeds the health, well-being, and culture of the community a building serves. Emerging leaders in our client base look to us to express these values in how we work and whom we work with. As such, we should transparently articulate our plans to attain

projects of significance and impact and learn to tell our stories to clients in community-centric outcomes and terms. One consideration for a resilient practice is "design agency," the idea that everyone has the ability to enact transformative social change and be a positive force for their community through design of the built environment. A resilient practice creatively connects itself to the community at varying scales, from local to global.

9. Understand ALL Your Value

Diversifying services, leveraging new technologies, and recognizing the value of design –leads to something that our profession has been behind the curve on for a long time: intellectual property. Having spent considerable time in the past five years immersed in the research and development of ideas inside our firm, I am familiar with the excitement creativity generates. It's easy and enticing to forge ahead without recognizing the expanded value of design thinking created en route to a project solution. It's time we activated and protected that value. A resilient firm identifies genuine IP and leverages it with intention. That could mean new revenue streams around a marketable IP, or it might simply communicate to clients the additional value of IP as a part of marketing, contract negotiations, project execution, and ongoing post-occupancy services.

10. Leadership Qualities

Leadership is cultivated. Many of us likely evolved into leadership positions by doing great work. Those processes didn't necessarily set us up to succeed in leading subsequent generations of professionals. A resilient practice is led by people who consciously cultivate their leadership skills. Myriad books, podcasts, lectures, webinars and courses can help you. But starting from a place of authenticity, honesty, and transparency will go a long way toward engaging and connecting with the workforce you lead. A resilient firm's human-focused leaders display humility.

Don't Evolve. Transform!

Even if these challenges and strategies don't resonate with you and your business, I'd encourage you to consider one idea: this moment for designers is about transformation, not evolution.

Evolution is a process of accumulative change over time. It can be sought, measured and a natural consequence of the flexibility with which we approach our design practices. Until now, many of us have followed paths of evolution to advance our businesses and our profession. But we are rapidly running out of time. By contrast, transformation is the act or state of change with immediacy and can be considered a revelation or

breakthrough toward something completely different.

With the high likelihood we will face a new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, we should act now to overcome this crisis. To transform how we work, let's think and act as design professionals. Let's be ready for what's next. Let's be resilient.

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