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raceAhead

by ELLEN McGIRT

Free your mind, and good design will follow

By Ellen McGirt | December 1, 2020

“This is a time for radical imagination,” says Deanna Van Buren. “It does something to your brain. We can’t solve the problems we’re facing if we don’t all get into that elastic mindspace.”

I had never heard of an elastic mindspace before, but at that moment, dear reader, I had never wanted to get into anything more.

I was catching up with Van Buren, the co-founder and executive director of [Designing Justice + Designing Spaces](#), in advance of our fireside chat at next week’s Fortune Brainstorm Design session, the first in a series of three virtual discussions presented in partnership with [Salesforce](#) and [IBM](#). The session is called “[Resilience by Design: Driving Business Transformation](#),” and the mindspace stretching has already begun.

Van Buren is something of a marvel in the design and social justice world; her non-profit is working to end mass incarceration and build thriving communities through a variety of radically reimagined architecture and infrastructure projects that seek to address societies persistent ills of racism, poverty, and unequal access to opportunity. Check out their [Love Campus](#) project, a social justice hub and restorative reinvestment project in Detroit, as just one example of their work.

The Oakland-based architect-designer-real estate developer says a fully collaborative and robust design process can save the world. “We can’t keep putting band-aids on the old systems,” she says. “Sticker dot voting or post-it notes won’t get us there.”

It’s now a global imperative. Limits—of time, space, materials, use cases, etc.—are what spark great design, and the global pandemic has forced everyone to reexamine the products, services, systems, processes and assumptions that undergird the modern world all at once. And not just professional designers are on the hot seat for answers.

“It’s like the lightbulb joke,” my dear friend Jessica Helfand, a podcast partner on [The Design of Business | The Business of Design](#), explained to me. “How many designers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?” she laughed. “To which the answer is ... Does it have to be a lightbulb?”

No, but now, it does have to make business better and the world brighter. So get your radical imagining on. “We need everyone,” says Van Buren. “That’s the only way to get surprising new outcomes.”

Best of all, we’re all in on the joke.

So, if you’re a senior design executive (or simply a design adjacent senior executive) maybe you should stop by the session on December 8. [You can register here](#), we still have some spots left. Also speaking will be PepsiCo’s chief design officer Mauro Porcini and global chief commercial officer Ram Krishnan about how design and design thinking can help create business value.

Better yet, if you’ve been looking to get to know the senior designers in your firm, this is a great excuse to say hello and sign up together. Forward them this email and connect! My Brainstorm Design co-chairs, Brian O’Keefe, Clay Chandler, and I are planning a terrific small group session for stretching brains and sharing ideas.

It’s time to make the world a little brighter, by design.

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