

Why design matters

The
invisible
force
shaping
connection,
brand
and
impact

Spring 2026

2026  Talking point



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Overview

In a world of sameness, digital saturation and rising expectations, we believe design has become one of the most underleveraged forces in the global events industry.

This report reframes design as a strategic, human-centered, human-dependent discipline, not decoration or production polish.

A skilled designer shapes how people feel, behave, connect and decide. Here, we explore how design matters not only at events, but across adjacent fields where human experience, brand perception and long-term impact are at stake.

Drawing on research, industry insight and real-world examples, we examine how intentional design strengthens and seeds relationships, builds brand power and reinforces long-term commercial resilience.

Our goal is to inspire an industry-wide shift toward values-led design thinking, reinforcing the point our Head of Design and three-time D&AD Award winner, Anna Gyseman, frequently makes, “Good design is good business.”



“Good design is good business.”

ANNA GYSEMAN, Head of Design, IMEX



Why design matters now

The highest-performing organizations treat design as a core business discipline.

A five-year study of 300 publicly listed companies by McKinsey¹ found that top-quartile design performers outpaced their industry peers by 32 percentage points in revenue growth and 56 percentage points in total shareholder returns.

The message from this data is clear: design drives commercial strength.

Yet in the global events industry, design is still often conflated with aesthetics or production values. When everything looks good but nothing feels different, this isn't a production failure but the absence of skilled design thinking.

Design is the invisible architecture shaping emotion, attention, memory and meaning. And in a crowded,

competitive global marketplace, that architecture matters more than ever.

A new generation of eventgoers are rewriting the rules of what a live experience can and should be, and event designers who don't evolve with them risk being left behind.

Eventbrite's 2025 Fourth Spaces report² demonstrates that Gen Z and Millennials aren't simply showing up for entertainment. They're looking for belonging, identity and real human connection in a world where much of their social life already happens through a screen. When 84% of interest-based event attendees say they've made close friends through live gatherings—and nearly half report that events have deepened their sense of self—it's clear the bar has moved.



For those in B2B events, this is where it gets interesting

The classic conference format—keynotes, panels, structured networking — is increasingly out of step with how younger professionals want to engage. Gen Z expects events to feel multidimensional, blending ideas and experiences in ways that reflect the richness of the communities they’re part of online.

The fastest-growing live formats aren’t organized around job titles or sectors but around shared passions, curiosity and interests.


Oliver Bailey, who leads on UX at IMEX, shares his view, “I think the events industry has never been more relevant than it is right now. We’re in an industry that brings people together. As designers, we need to think about how we facilitate the forming of new relationships. And to do that, we have

to be inclusive, we have to make events good for everyone. Achieving that requires collaboration, innovation and creativity. This is precisely where design comes in.”

And in an age where attention is at a premium, why wouldn’t you invest in a design-led mindset?

According to David de Bruijn, Chief Creative Officer and Head of Ideas at WINK, “It’s the craft of design that’s the big narrative right now. It’s the craft that matters and reality has become the new luxury. Experiential is now forward-facing and clearly moving to the front row of marketing. “My advice? The answer isn’t just another event. It’s about real connection. Design what truly adds value to people’s lives, then amplify.”



A black and white photograph of David de Bruijn, a man with curly hair, a beard, and sunglasses, smiling. He is wearing a dark t-shirt and a patterned scarf. In the background, there is a professional video camera on a tripod and another person wearing a cap and sunglasses.

“Reality has become the new luxury.
Experiential is now forward-facing and clearly
moving to the front row of marketing.”

DAVID DE BRUIJN, Chief Creative Officer and Head of Ideas at WINK

Chapter 01

Designing for joy: Human connection as the first KPI

In 2023, the World Health Organization declared loneliness a pressing global health threat, exacerbated by the move to remote and hybrid work.

Human connection is no longer a soft outcome; it's a business and societal imperative.

When designed well, events are exchanges of energy, felt in our bodies and psyches, and remembered long after the doors close and the lights go down.

And, as author and events industry commentator David Adler describes, we're not just in the event industry, we're in "the goosebumps business." When designed intentionally, live, face-to-face gatherings create an emotional exchange and moments that cannot be replicated digitally.

Freeman's 2025 research³ into Gen Z's craving for live events reinforces this shift. Conducted in partnership with The Harris Poll it showed the majority (89%) of Gen Z professionals say relationships forged at in-person events are critical to their professional confidence, and 86% want their companies to allocate more spending to live events.

By extension, why should the business of doing business be dull? Isn't there a place for designing in joy and upliftment, creating environments where warmth, inclusion and shared experience are deliberate outcomes?





“We’re not just in the event industry, we’re in the goosebumps business.”

DAVID ADLER, events industry commentator



Business doesn't need to be boring

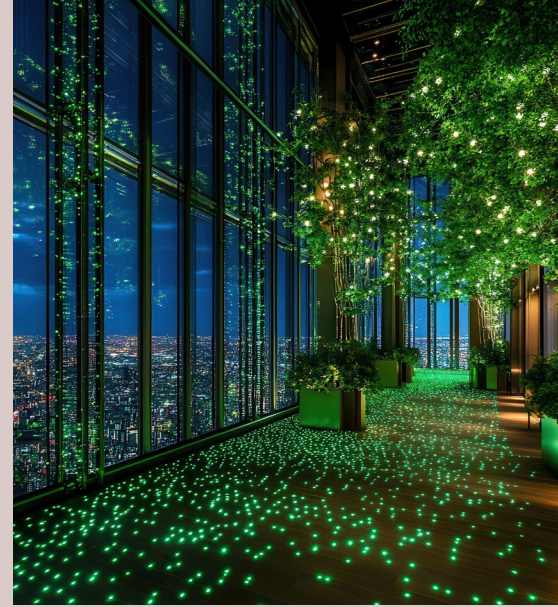


In conversation with Jay Schwedelson on his Do This, Not That podcast⁴, Carina Bauer, IMEX CEO, explained, “One great journalist described IMEX as a trade show that behaves like a festival. I love that because, yes, doing business is number one. But just doing business would be boring right? It’s too transactional. So, at IMEX we build layers that create loyalty and retention. We want people to want to be there, even if they might have to be there.”

Author of Our KPI is Joy⁵, co-founder of The Strategy Table and IMEX Head of Programming, Tahira Endean says, “I’ve spent decades designing events across the globe, and one thing has never left me: we are capable of so much more than logistics. My book draws on real stories, hard-won experiences and lessons learned and a deep belief that the moments we design can shift how people think, feel and relate. In a world increasingly mediated by screens, that human dimension matters more than ever. Getting the intention right and giving yourself and your team permission to design for joy leads to an environment where trust, innovation and growth all quietly take root.”



Over design as over stimulation



“How do we best engage in an ocean of engagers?”

BEN MOORSAM founder of Debut Group

Ben Moorsom⁶, founder of Debut Group and behavioral engagement expert knows how far planners have come in understanding the power of experiential design, “We have a responsibility as designers and planners and curators of human experiences to find both balance and resonance. We’ve come from decades of cognitively overloading audiences and using sheer guesswork in design. In the old days we thought engagement was about energizing people, but we repelled and overloaded people because we didn’t know any better. In truth, we over-designed by overstimulating.

“And now that the average person can become a content curator, I think the big question is, how do we best engage in an ocean of engagers?”

Ben adds, “More stimulation isn’t more value, or more retention. And we go wrong when we assume a design philosophy that treats the human brain more as an infinite vessel. It’s not! The unwanted side effect of sensory escalation is people exiting your venue to seek restoration.”



Chapter 02

Designing for brand power: Standing out in a world of sameness

Pioneering design thinker Mark Curtis⁷, writes in, “Who Designs the Future When Everyone Can?” that the classic ‘Design Rule of Three (Thinking, Doing, Culture) remains valid, but the centers of gravity will probably move (in the future).

1. Thinking → less about post-it ideation, more about systems, ethics and emergent intelligence

2. Doing → blends human and machine creativity; AI becomes a design material

3. Culture → moves from craft communities to ecosystem stewardship: how humans, algorithms and organizations co-design responsibly, balanced by a focus on being authentically human as a (maybe *the*) source of differentiation.”

And he’s firm in his belief, relevance is not accidental. “It’s designed.”

In a saturated global marketplace, differentiation is rarely rooted in budget. It comes from a design philosophy embedded into the organization’s culture. Brands that weave well-being, craft, place identity and experience thinking into their DNA create distinctiveness that protects margins and builds loyalty.

From hospitality companies such as Caesars Entertainment, who champion well-being as a frontline brand expression, to luxury fashion houses like Hermès celebrating human craft in the age of AI, the message is clear: intentional, distinctive brand leadership translates into attention.

David de Bruijn⁸ believes the current momentum around experiential is where reality and design come together most powerfully.



“Relevance is not accidental.
It’s designed.”

MARK CURTIS co-founder of Fjord

Corona at the Winter Olympics



When we spoke to David de Bruijn, he had just come back from a month at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan and Cortina on behalf of his client, Corona Cero. They became the first-ever global beer (and non-alcoholic beer) sponsor of the Winter Olympics back in 2024 and led with a campaign called “For Every Golden Moment”.

David describes the Corona brand team as “super consistent in their craft, tone of voice and design approach”. He goes on, “With a client like Corona the brand lives in the fine details and the design approach. The attention to detail is the craft that turns something from being a brand activation into a space or experience that adds something to your life. It’s like showing up as a service provider, if you like.

“For example,” he adds, “as part of their Beach 100 campaign, designed to celebrate 100 years of Corona and to bring their “This is Living” strapline to life, we brought three sand artists to a beach in Brazil. They then sculpted a list of the 100 best beaches in the world out of sand.

“They did this with deliberate care and skill. Of course, we could have gone digital and used AI, but the whole point was the labor, the intention and the human art of it.”



It's the craft that matters

At the 2026 Winter Olympics, Corona's multiple agencies worked together to build on its "For Every Golden Moment" platform (developed by creative agency GREY), by creating TIME CERO. "We designed this to help athletes turn pressure into presence. Across the Games, we built a living system of calm. A new kind of support system. No loud branding noise, but sensitively designed spaces and activations that fitted the moment and invited each athlete to feel present and calm," explains David.

Another example of the team's attention to the human experience and their brand values was the Cero Stress Plant Shop. David explains, "We started with the idea that the athlete's rooms are usually faceless and boring, so we invited them to nurture a plant during their stay in the Olympic village. It's a very simple, basic human idea to want to tend a living thing. At the end of the Games, those plants were all gifted to the people of Milan and each athlete wrote a personal message on their plant. Out of that we created another brand moment by building a plant shop on the rooftop of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II next to the Duomo.



The design philosophy

What was the design philosophy behind all these great ideas? “We started with the human journey and decided to go beyond what you might expect from brands and sponsors during the Olympics. The athletes are humans first, performers second and they’re experiencing a huge moment in their life. One of our questions was, “If I were an athlete, what would I want a brand to add to my experience that would help me?””



Working with artists



David Shrigley at the launch of his show 'What The Hell Was I Thinking' at the Kunsthal Rotterdam.

Looking through an arts and culture lens, art agent and publicist, Jo Brooks, who works with the artist David Shrigley, DJ Fatboy Slim and many more, shares her design thinking, “If you’re a brand that wants to work with an artist, it’s not like the old days when artists were resistant to commercial work. Many now understand that to meet staff, material, studio and exhibition costs, they need commercial partnerships.

“But for a partnership to be successful you both have to agree what value looks like. What’s your common story? Where’s your leverage? In the age of Ozempic, for example, the work of artist Beryl Cook is having a resurgence. That’s a counter-culture moment that a brand could design around.

“My work is all about design, but design as theater,” concludes Jo.



Chapter 03

Designing for place and purpose: Responsibility by design

At its best—and worst—design shapes behavior and, as we’ve argued here, behavior shapes impact.

In an era of heightened scrutiny over sustainability, accessibility, diversity and inclusion, we believe design choices carry responsibility.

According to Anna Abdelnoor, Founder of non-profit isla, who advance event sustainability through credible data and practical guidance, “Design is never neutral. Every layout, material, supplier, agenda slot and budget line is a choice—and every choice carries consequence. When we design for purpose, we shift the question from “what will look good?” to “what will this do? Will it exclude or include? Will it extract or regenerate? Does it just add, or does it add value?”

“Designing through a “do no harm” lens, and then asking what more design can contribute, changes the outcome entirely. It moves sustainability from an add-on to an organizing principle. When you look at an event, a space, or a system this way, you don’t just reduce impact but create something more inclusive, more resilient and more meaningful—by design.”



A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair, resting her head on her hand and looking thoughtfully to the side. She is wearing a black top with a tiger print and several gold necklaces. The background is blurred with bokeh lights.

“When we design for purpose, we shift the question from “what will look good?” to “what will this do?”

ANNA ABDELNOOR, founder of non-profit isla

Trade show design evolution



Detail of the Visit Ireland booth at IMEX Frankfurt May, 2025

For trade show exhibitors and venues alike, strong design seeds memorability. Memorability builds preference and preference drives growth. Why not add an environmental layer as well?

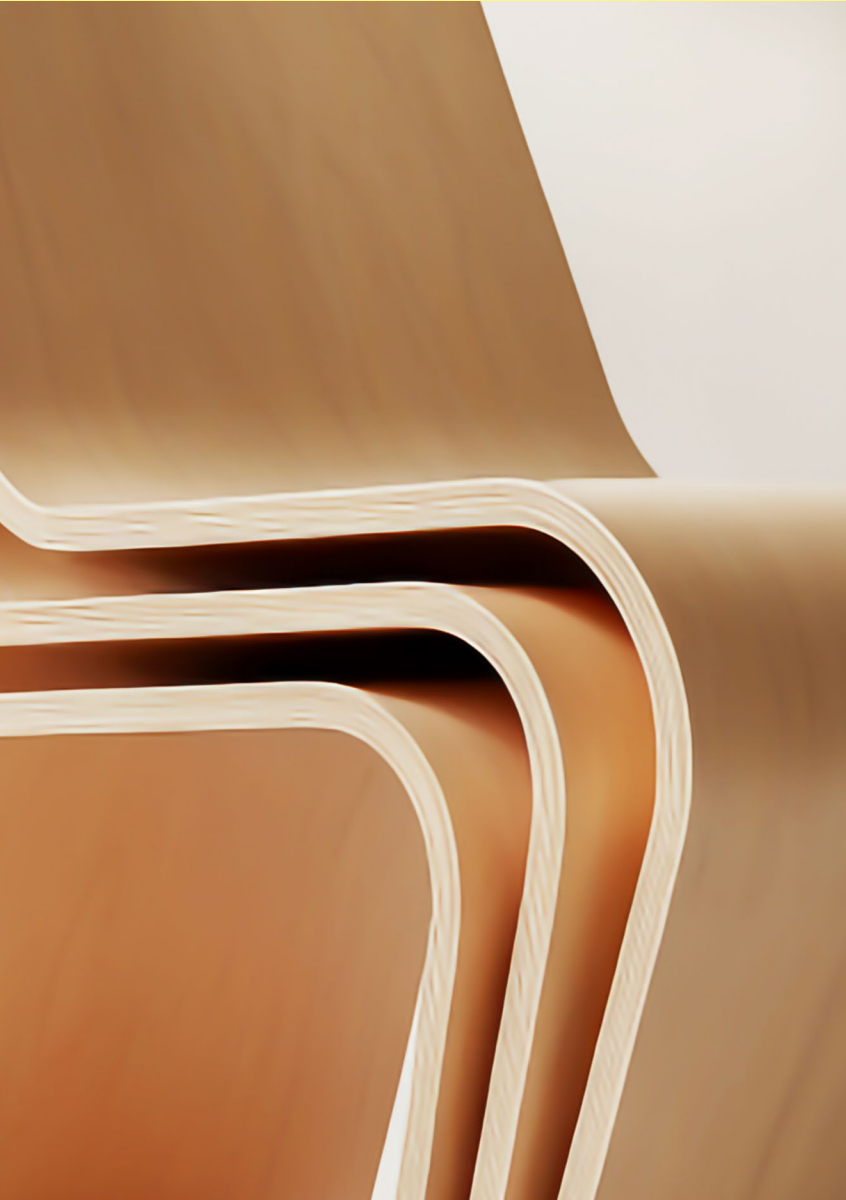
According to Mark Thomason⁹, Managing Director, Elevations, exhibition booth designers, “When Covid hit, I needed to make five-and-10-year plans for the company’s future, which I hadn’t done before. And being older and having grandchildren made me think differently about the time ahead, and our work.”

For the last three years Elevations have used a carbon calculator for their own business. “Travel and manufacture are the numbers that jump off the page when you look at the dashboard,” says Mark. “Carbon costing wise, it’s roughly a three-way split in our industry. A third is always manufacture, this is where material reuse is so important.

One third is travel and one third is general preparation and the office. We now scrutinize each part and look for carbon savings and efficiencies wherever we can.”



Making different design decisions



He remembers when they were approached by the team from Visit Ireland about a new exhibition booth. “Their RFP (request for proposal) didn’t have a sustainable component at that time. I said to them, let’s work together on this and they agreed.

“Visit Ireland have been a fantastic test of what can be done when you decide to design an exhibit from a more sustainable angle, and they’ve been a receptive client. One simple innovation for the Visit Ireland booth was using stacking chairs. And what’s lovely is this idea came directly from our workshop. The team realized they could make seats out of plywood here and they’d all stack together. 60 stacked chairs take up a much smaller freight footprint.

“Also, we can get four uses out of the artificial grass we use on the Visit Ireland booth, whereas nobody gets reusability from booth carpet. It’s all thrown away once the show is done,” he declares.

According to Mark, having a green mindset means you see and make different design decisions. He says, “I now know that sending a 40ft container has the same carbon cost as an economy flight to Las Vegas. I also know that digital screens, which obviously require power, can become wallpaper. The human eye and brain visually eliminates the ratio of a TV, which is 9:16. I call digital boards, digital visual noise. Every marketing department feels they’ve told a story using those but nobody’s listening. We’re all walking on by, or soaking up a podcast, or we’re heads down on our phones.”



Great design is green design



The UK Design Council's Skills for Planet¹⁰ details what's required for the green transition (a new development model designed to ensure environmentally sustainable and fairer societies). Its explainer outlines the shift toward regenerative thinking and reinforces a growing expectation: design must deliver not only experience, but environmental accountability.

Matthew Burgess, Senior Events Manager, Design Council (UK), says, "I never considered myself a designer as an event planner until I worked at the Design Council. And now I use my skills in design to effect change across supply chains and with stakeholders at every level. Positive impact begins at the design stage. We're always encouraging designers and commissioners of design to challenge what a great event looks like in those very early stages. For me, great design is green design," he explains.

"We know that 80% of the environmental impact of a product or an event is at the design stage, at the very start of the project. The Skills for Planet Movement is the Design Council's flagship initiative to upskill one million designers in green skills by 2030. Our findings show that although 71% of designers feel green skills are necessary in all future work, only 43% of them feel ready."





“Design must deliver not only experience, but environmental accountability”

MATTHEW BURGESS, Senior Events Manager, Design Council



Design as quiet work



A telling example of design doing its quiet work could be seen in the Hosted Buyer Lounge at IMEX America 2025, developed in collaboration with CORT Events.

The brief was simple: create a 40,000-square-foot space that served nearly 5,000 high-value buyers across three days. The solution wasn't logistical—it was behavioral.

The colab created intentional micro-environments: soft lounge clusters, high-top pods, powered work zones, quieter biophilic corners—all mapped to how people naturally move, pause and recharge during intense show schedules.

The result? Buyers moved intuitively between zones as their needs shifted throughout the day.

In a B2B environment where the quality of human interaction is the product, this kind of design intelligence simply requires a shift in perspective, and a commitment to a higher-quality customer experience.



What is place leadership?



The Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa located in a reincarnated grain silo in Cape Town, South Africa.

It's clear the old walls between tourism, talent attraction, inward investment and civic identity have come down, even though some still resist the obvious.

Prof. Greg Clark, CBE, a globally recognized authority on urban strategy, investment and innovation, who's guided more than 400 cities and numerous national governments, argues that destinations the world over need to consider place leadership from several angles, including brand.

But what is place leadership? It's a strategic approach that emphasizes the importance of community, place-based identity and active local involvement.

Place strategy is increasingly whole-of-city work, and business events, with their unique power to convene global expertise inside local ecosystems, belong at that table. An annual conference in the right sector can do more for a city's positioning and memorability than a marketing campaign with 10 times the budget.

Yet many places are in flux, demographically, economically, politically, climatically and more. Prof. Clark's work reveals that those destinations finding their footing amid such turbulence all share a common trait: intentional leadership that aligns government, business, academia and community around a shared sense of direction. Business events have a bigger role in that story than most city leaders appreciate or even understand. Conferences, exhibitions and meetings are still too often filed under tourism—useful for hotel occupancy, good for restaurants, but rarely considered a lever for long-term social or economic strategy.





Right: The Ovo Hydro Arena in Glasgow, Scotland. Below: The basalt lava facade of Mumok museum Vienna, Austria.



For the events industry, Prof. Clark sees this as both challenge and invitation. Stepping into a more strategic role means building new partnerships, measuring new outcomes, and showing up in conversations that have historically taken place elsewhere. Successful examples of place leadership combined with brand building, include Vienna, a resident-led brand with data-driven governance; Cape Town, with its cross-sector urban improvement and events alignment, and Glasgow which has unified its climate and culture narrative. These destinations have converted visitors into advocates, investors, students, residents and more.

As Prof. Clark aims to demonstrate, brands founded on a strong place leadership strategy tap into convening power, concluding, “Global mobility, knowledge-driven economies and competition between places have elevated the importance of convening, collaboration and narrative. Business events are uniquely positioned to contribute to these dynamics, provided the sector is willing to evolve its role, invest in new capabilities, and engage seriously with the long-term future of the places it serves.”



Final thoughts

The next era of design leadership

As we've argued throughout, good design is good for business, and good for humans.

Design can change or influence us, on purpose. In 2026, Frankfurt RheinMain (home to IMEX Frankfurt) has been designated World Design Capital. The region has positioned design not as a whimsical artistic expression but as a collaborative civic mindset shaping economic and social futures. It's a new age of expression and recognition for this powerhouse part of Germany.

We now know, and can prove, designing for joy strengthens brand loyalty and moments of human connection. Designing for brand power leads to differentiation in a crowded and noisy digital world and

designing for place and purpose produces a measurable economic and carbon return.

Together, all these aspects of design generate long-term commercial growth and positive cultural and environmental impact.

The opportunity in 2026 and beyond is to design more intentional events; to explore how human-centered, values-led design can redefine what gatherings mean, and what they make possible for the betterment of all, and our planet.

The goal isn't just to send people home from an event with insights. We must send them home feeling like they've achieved their objectives and found their people.



Appendix

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