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## DOCTORING UP DESIGN

Host: Josh Cooperman

Interview with Duan Tran

Josh: This is Doctoring Up Design, a lively interactive lecture series presented by Design Hardware and held in their recently remodeled showroom on 3rd Street in Los Angeles. Doctoring Up Design was created to address your pain points in the ever-changing world of design and architecture. This episode of Doctoring Up Design features one of the most knowledgeable and creative architects in the business today. Duan Tran is a partner and principle designer with KAA Design, an award-winning California architecture firm. They have been crafting architectural gems for over 30 years.

Tran is a futurist, if you will. One who knows not just where the industry is today but where it's going. And that's how you see what's now and what's next. I'm Josh Cooperman, host and publisher of Convo by Design and host of Doctoring Up Design, and I had the opportunity to sit with Duan at the Design Hardware showroom to discuss this very idea of what residential design means now to those who both build and inhabit these spaces. Some really interesting ideas came out of our conversation and I hope you enjoy it. So, sit back or hit cruise control and enjoy this episode of Doctoring Up Design, presented by Design Hardware.

Design Hardware's recently remodeled and always evolving showroom is where you will find a gallery style space with a thoughtful display of products purposefully positioned to allow unbridled exploration and discovery. High-end faucets, luxury tile, natural stone, wood floors, and bespoke hardware selections are presented in a holistic manner strategically arranged to stimulate creativity and transition your vision from the conceptual stage to a fully realized space. Conveniently located, free parking is available and you can find everything you're looking for if not in the showroom, itself, then online. So, it doesn't matter where you are in the country or the world, you can find what you're looking for at Design Hardware. So stop by to find inspiration, collect samples, get expert advice and tackle everything on your shopping list all in one place. Visit them online at [DesignHardware.com](http://DesignHardware.com) or in the real world 6053 W 3rd St. in Los Angeles.

I'm not sure when the last time we spoke ...


Duan: Yeah, it's been a while.

Josh: It's been a while. But, as you've heard ... It's funny, you get in here early and you hear ... It's the same conversation with everyone. It's like, "When was the last time I saw you?" "Well, it's been at least three years."

Duan: That's right.

Josh: So, there's that.

Duan: I wonder what's happened the last three years.



Josh: And you know what's really funny? I was saying for a while, "You know what? I'm just done talking about the pandemic."

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: You know what? I'm not. I'm not done talking about it.

Duan: No.

Josh: And I don't think that we will be for quite some time.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: Because of the industry that we're in.

Duan: Right. Right.

Josh: And while we weren't there, I'm going to imagine that these feelings had to be very similar to those after 1921.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: Because the things that came out of design, subway tile inside the home ...

Duan: Right.

Josh: Getting rid of porous wooden furniture in bathrooms.

Duan: Right.

Josh: Where bacteria can grow. Probably a pretty good idea for the time.

Duan: Right.

Josh: Right? And then, all of a sudden, before you know it linoleum.

Duan: Right.

Josh: And all of these new products and all of these ways of thinking about design. Your firm is a ... It's funny. It's a legendary firm.

Duan: Appreciate that.

Josh: The work that you guys are doing is simply remarkable. And I don't mean remarkable in the last five years; I mean in five, 10, 15. How long has the firm been around?

Duan: 30.

Josh: Yeah.

Duan: 30.

Josh: It's funny because I've had conversations about your headquarters. Do you like that office?

Duan: We are. Yeah.

Josh: Are you back in the office?

Duan: We are. We actually have a new office. I don't know if you knew that. We actually moved during COVID times, ironically. But we have a similar workspace, kind of work/loft situation in that Marina Del Ray area. So, we've got to have you over.

Josh: Now I'm confused because I'm trying to remember because the old office was actually the set where they did ...

Duan: Castaway stuff.

Josh: Yeah.

Duan: Yeah, right.

Josh: Do you know how I found that out? I was ...

Duan: Little-known facts.

Josh: It's true. That's the old office.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: Okay.

Duan: That's the old office.

Josh: Because I was talking to the set decorator who worked on that building and we were comparing notes and she said, "Wait a minute, that was my set." No way! Because I was at your offices and I filmed there.

Duan: Yeah. Wow. Okay.

Josh: Do you still have the lectern?

Duan: No, we don't have the lectern. Actually, you know what? We might actually do have the lectern. We used to have it. But yeah, it's funny. 20+ years ago.

Josh: That's amazing.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And how long have you been with the firm?

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Duan: God. Going on my 23rd, 24th year. So nearly half my life. That's crazy to think about.

Josh: A few things have changed.

Duan: Few things. Yeah.

Josh: And I'm curious, in the time that you've been with the firm, how has it changed you and the manner in which you think about design?

Duan: Wow. That's a great question. It's so funny ... And Josh, you know probably the trajectory of the firm. When I joined, Grant Kirkpatrick and the other members of the leadership back then, we were a younger firm, kind of a young upstart, anything's possible. Maybe a little reckless and having a little fun within the industry.

Josh: That's what Grant said ...

Duan: Like you've said ...

Josh: ... When I talked to him. Yeah, yeah.

Duan: Yeah, you should.

Josh: Yeah.

Duan: We didn't know enough to be dangerous, which was great. It's kind of exactly ...


Josh: You knew just enough to be dangerous.

Duan: Yeah, maybe just enough, which is great. It's kind of where you want to be when you start off. And so, we started this trajectory where we focused on high-end custom residential, of course, which is our core business, but then spread into ... dabble a little bit in commercial and to retail. We just did a little bit of everything. And then over the last few years we did pre-fab and we do the landscape graphics department. And economy hit us. Hit everybody 10-15 years ago.

Josh: [inaudible][crosstalk]

Duan: And it caused for the restructuring. And I think for the firm, and for myself ... And I can speak on behalf of my partners Grant and Eric, as well. It was really just a disruptive moment where we had a change to reprioritize what was important to us. Rather than take on this, "Let's take on this world," mentality and try to do everything, we really got back down to basics. Like what's really important? What's our core passion? And then, ultimately it was high-end residential design, which caused us to maybe shed a few of these other disciplines in-house that ... They helped contribute to the larger story, like interiors and a few other things, but it was about residential architecture and then also with our landscape team.

I think the firm, similar to my personally trajectory, has been one of focus and just specialization and just really owning the space that we're in that we've earned over the last 30+ years. And then, I like to think, doing the best work that we've ever been doing.



Josh: It's interesting. Does having the kind of success that KAA has had and the work that you've done there ... Does it give you license to then go and be more experimental.

Duan: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. It's a little bit of both. It's license to be experimental. As a creative, you do want to push the conversation in whatever arena that is. It can be in terms of our approach towards site design, our approach towards materiality, our approach even to how we manage the internal rollout of a project with a client. We're constantly reevaluating that to a fault. We joke around sometimes we tinker a little bit too much with the machine, but that's a little bit of the joy.

But at the same time, it's also about being true to who you are and really focusing, again, on the high-end residential and landscape design. It gives us opportunity to do a little of both.

Josh: I asked the question because I think it's important.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And you mentioned 08-09.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: What happened in 08-09 ... And you see it now because there are all these designers who have now been in the business for 12-13 years.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: These are designers, architects, interior designers, landscape architects who before that were law students.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And maybe they were in retail.

Duan: Right.

Josh: Or maybe they were real estate agents.


Duan: Right.

Josh: Or maybe they were doing something else and got flushed out of the system.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And when there is something traumatic and you're flushed out of a system, any system, you start to rethink your identity and you start to re-think the meaning of life and your purpose in it, right? And then you go and try to ... Maybe you find your passion. Maybe you find your purpose. Maybe you find just a place where you want to be.

Duan: Yeah.



Josh: Here we are.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: After three years of something really traumatic socially, environmentally. From a health perspective it's changed everything. Now you have another entire generation, the next generation, of new designers.

Duan: Right.

Josh: And new creatives.

Duan: Right. And new clients.

Josh: I want to get to that in a minute because that's really important.

Duan: Right.

Josh: With the creatives, as in anything when someone is new at something you do it for about a year and a half, maybe two years ... You know exactly where I'm going with this.

Duan: Yeah. Yeah.

Josh: And you think you know everything.

Duan: Right.

Josh: And then you can go create your own work.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: You don't get a license to be creative and experimental until you know the fundamentals and you know the rules and you know how to do it with your eyes closed.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: Look, I'm not an architect.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: I'm not a designer. I'm a journalist and doing a podcast. And doing the podcast that I do for nine years and people who have come out over the last year saying ... Like on Facebook groups where they're like, "Oh, if you want to be a good podcaster, here's what you need to know." Dude, you've been doing this for six months!

Duan: Right.

Josh: What do you ...

Duan: In your basement. Yeah.

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Josh: But architecture is not different. Interior design and architecture, any creative endeavor, I feel, is the same. And so, what I love about what we were talking about is that you have earned this creative license to be experimental at a time when being experimental is absolutely critical to the industry.

Duan: Right.

Josh: You mentioned new clients.

Duan: Right.

Josh: And what new clients are looking for. That had to absolutely turn your professional world upside down.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: How do you deal with that?


Duan: Yeah. It's a great question. I think for us ... And again, on the heels of being a mature 30-year firm ... I think of the things I've been really great at is just really developing and being clear in what the philosophy of the firm is. It's just maturing as an adult. As an adolescent you grow up, you go through your teenage years and you're trying to find your identity. And you might be really successful in a certain arena but not until you get to a certain point where you've been practicing a while, where your philosophy becomes more clear. Clear not only internally but clear enough to the point where you're able to express that to a client and/or if you're really special, be able to have a client see that without you even expressing it because it's so clear in your work.

I think that's been the thing for us is our clients have ... We're in a position now we can so much own and be clear about the philosophy of the work and how we approach a project. And it's so much into the D and A. It's so much into the photography. It's so much into what's actually tangible that our clients are seeking that out and it's actually starting to speak for us. Now what's beautiful about that, as well, is that again, with a new generation of clients, I think we're very much in line and lock step with where we are culturally in a post-COVID world. So much about what our work is fundamentally based upon is about a thoughtful approach about marrying the client's agenda to the site specifically. We don't do spec homes. We're not doing generic projects to hopefully check the boxes for 90% of a clientele in a certain economic group. We really get past the superficial to be able to understand what it is to marry Josh's house on that beautiful property that you bought.

I think that work and what transcends ultimately resonates and that's what clients are attracted to and see in what we do.

Josh: In that conversation, in the vein, in that thought, you have ... It's funny. Some of the conversations I've been having today have been really interesting in that there are certain ideas that exist elsewhere but not here in the states. And it's really interesting how sometimes Americans ... There's this idea, this American exceptionalism, this sort of arrogance that comes from thinking that we know so much and we know it all. And when it comes to design and architecture, I would put American ingenuity against anyone else in the world.

Duan: Yeah.



Josh: Socially, it's a little different.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And socially, our society has changed. That being said, when society changes, the creators have to adapt.

Duan: Right.

Josh: And look, in Europe they work, what? A four-day work week?

Duan: Right.

Josh: And they take two-month summer vacations.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And they seem to be doing just fine with that idea.

Duan: Not too bad. Yeah.

Josh: I feel like post-pandemic what we've come out of is there's been a reflective period where people are reflecting back and saying, "Wait a minute, why am I killing myself working 60-80 hours a week driving two hours or an hour and a half two and from work only to get bits and pieces with my family, only to feel guilty when I'm on vacation and I see the phone ringing? Why am I looking at the phone on ..."

Duan: Right.

Josh: It's the whole rabbit hole.

Duan: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah.

Josh: The idea of what you do is still in flux and it's still changing.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: This idea of high-end luxury real estate is really no different than what ... Economy of scale, right?

Duan: Right.


Josh: What anyone who lives in a residence of any kind really wants.

Duan: Right.

Josh: What have you seen that is resonating that people want? What are they asking for? This is a super long question, really sorry.

Duan: No.





Josh: But I also view what you do ... I view you as a futurist.

Duan: Yeah. Thank you.

Josh: Because you have to be.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: You have to not only imagine what your clients are telling you they want today but what they're going to want in five or 10 years from now versus if you do it right, which you do, your structure is still going to be there in 75 or 100 years.

Duan: Right.


Josh: What's that going to look like? How functional is that going to be? And look, God forbid, but if there is another pandemic in another 100 years it won't take 100 years but when that happens again, what is that going to look like? How do you ... I need that. How do you plan for that?

Duan: Yeah. Great. It's funny. If I were to generalize a response ... And I would say especially here in Southern California there's a certain mentality that when people are building homes of a certain scale and caliber, they're thinking of them as trophy homes. It's a way to represent symbolically where they feel their stature is in life or what they should be living in. It's to symbolize how they feel they should perceive how they live; casually, entertainer's house and a few other things. But I think, on the heels of what you're saying, I think it boils down ... And the trends that we're seeing are ... It's the QOL question; the quality of life.

I think everybody's had to ask themselves in different ways over the last three plus years, and I imagine even more so as we move forward, "Okay, I live in the big house that has all the fun and cool things. But what does it really mean to live in this house? Because I want to be healthy, I want to be happy. It's more than just showing off a big house just to show off a big house. But what gives this home meaning? What really resonates? Why do I feel connected to this home, especially if I have to work out of my house? What is that connection?"

Programmatically, we're seeing a completely different focus on what was previously the gym, which could have just been a couple pieces of equipment in the garage ... Call it the day, that's my gym. Now it's a completely exacerbated program of wellness and pool and massage rooms and saunas. And it's really an ode to we got to take care of ourselves. The idea of indoor/outdoor spaces and living with nature versus, "Let's live in an air conditioned box and there's a pretty view out towards Century City." There's a bunch of those kind of things that, I think, are starting to permeate back into a client's agenda much more authentically now.

Again, five, 10 years ago it was a box to be checked to say, "Oh, and I have a gym. Come over and check out my gym." Now it's like, "How do you actually use that gym for you specifically?" And I think that's an exciting thing because ... We talk about this a lot in our work, as well. We do exclusively homes. We don't do commercial, restaurants and other institutional buildings and so our clients relationship to the work that we do is very different. These are end users and so being able to have that conversation with a client and to get to something that's a very tangible representation of what they aspire to be



and to help that equate to a higher quality of life moving forward, it's a fantastic ride, as you can imagine. And we're excited to be art of that conversation.

Josh: As quickly as things are changing from a material and supply standpoint, how has that affected the business? And I feel like working with certain vendors is great.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: But then clients will say, "Well, I want this Italian product and I want this French product and I want this Asian whatever, this German engineered. I want ..." Whatever they're asking for. It's really interesting, isn't it, when they say, "I have to have this in my design."?

Duan: Right.

Josh: To, "Well, you're not going to get it."

Duan: Right. Or, "Can you wait to get it?" Yeah.

Josh: It's nuanced, right?

Duan: Yeah. Right.

Josh: It's the same thing. Because you already know the answer to that question.

Duan: Right. Yeah.

Josh: If it's going to take 23 months to get it in and you're ready to specify next month, not that you're going to get it but you're specifying it so you're ...

Duan: Yeah.


Josh: It's going to take almost two years. The answer is no, they're not willing to wait for it.

Duan: Right.

Josh: So let's find something else. How do you find ... How are you resourcing now? And I get sometimes, as well, that we let the designer pick that or sometimes the contractor is doing that. Do you guys have your fingerprints on everything? Or is a lot of that done separately?

Duan: It's both. I think it depends on the client. There's things that we're definitely ... We have a very hands-on involvement in terms of procuring, guiding material selections. Other times, of course, we're working collaboratively with our interior designers and other people that are specifying materials; contractors and whatnot. But again, real interesting situation over the last three years. And I think we're in the midst of it, even though COVID, hopefully, is ... the worst is behind us. It's the great disrupter in terms of the supply chain.

At the very least ... And I would actually say this has been a healthy disruption. It's kind of moved all of our cheese. What we thought we could get, what we thought we should be able to do, those kind of decisions and specifications that we would make just on mental cruise control now need to be re-evaluated. And I would have to say, in large part, even



though it's been challenging at times, there's no question, because it's a different approach, that we've oftentimes come up with a different, more unique approach to how to execute a project, how to select or get to an end wood finish or how to do something completely different that the idealist part in me feels like, "Wow, that's a really great thing for the creative industry." Because it takes stuff like this every once in a while.

I'm not asking for another pandemic or anything like that, but it takes somebody to flip the world upside down to make you rethink what you thought you knew so that it allows us all to stay on our game. And for those who are able to thought-lead in that particular situation, really, just pushing the agenda forward. I imagine that, moving forward, hopefully with a new generation of designers that are actually coming into it now, which is fascinating to me ... They don't even have an understanding of what it was like pre-pandemic. There's new designers that are three or less years into the industry and so they're already pre-conditioned to think about it this way. And how we continue to ride that momentum and just be continuously re-evaluative and not afraid of thinking and re-thinking about how we used to do things, I have to imagine, is ultimately going to not only continue to push the design theory and agenda forward, but also ensure that we're also growing as a larger industry, as well.

Josh: When it comes to specifically product specification for KAA, have you come to the conclusion that specifying is more important to keep in-house to control?

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: I've heard it both ways. Some people say, "You know what? We just can't handle it internally because we can't hire the right people to handle the project management with regard to specification."

Duan: Right.


Josh: Or others who say, "You know what? I can't have this anymore. I don't feel comfortable letting others control my destiny, and so we're going to ..." Where do you stand on that?

Duan: I think we have a little bit of both. Again, it depends on the client. But I would say if we had to err on one side or the other, it's hard to ... And maybe this is the control freak in me ... Give up too much of the end result. There's a certain stewardship that I think we, as the architects on a project, feel that we want to be able to guide a client and ensure that we're not only taking 75%, that we're pushing it past the goal line. That's important. It's important to be able to stand behind and ultimately ensure that we can get past that end result in a thoughtful, creative way that works to the client's agenda.

I would say, in large part, we try to keep that stuff in-house as much as we can. But at the same time, we're smart that we don't know everything. We don't have all the right resources and/or the expertise. Building a community around us to be able to support whatever the design intent or the direction is, is key and one of the benefits of being around for 30 years.

Josh: Speaking of stewardship and mentoring, which is always the next thing that comes there, you're at a point in time in your career ... I'm not going to say elder statesman ...

Duan: I got a little white hair, but ...



Josh: Seriously, though. Look, as a partner in a firm like this, you have this responsibility to pass on ... Or maybe you don't. Here's what I would compare it to.

Duan: Sure.

Josh: When I used to work for Playboy and I used to host the Playboy Radio Interview I would talk to all the jazz musicians as they came through for the Playboy Jazz Festival at the Hollywood Bowl. One of the things that I noticed about that industry ... And it's a creative endeavor more than an industry ... But one of the things that I noticed was there was a tip to tail, rail to rail philosophy about mentoring and giving back.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: No matter how famous, no matter how big, no matter how many records they sold, no matter how many GRAMMYS they won, no matter ... Arturo Fuente and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, still, if a student came up to him and said, "Nice to meet you. Can you tell me something I don't know?" Would never pass up an opportunity to tell that young musician something they didn't know.

Duan: Right.

Josh: I always thought that that was just so fascinating and wonderful about that ego-aside. No ego. Just giving back. I view the creative side of architecture the very same way. I don't think mentorship exists the same way, but I also know from you and I speaking in the past and talking to Grant that there's a certain level of importance that you guys put on that.


Duan: Yeah.

Josh: Talk to me about the philosophy of giving back and building better from the ground up.

Duan: Yeah. Well, it's fundamental. Having that mindset approach, again, it starts a lot with Grant as the founding partner but it's very much in the DNA of the firm now is that it's not about once any of us get to a certain point where we're pulling up the draw bridge. In fact, it's how many more bridges can we put out there to create an inclusive, diverse firm culture that not only leverages and continues to support the leadership of the firm and the agenda of the firm, but also there's so many of those people that have sacrificed and want to be part of this firm.

You've spoken to so many designers. Design is such a collaborative environment. As much as, sometimes, we get the benefit of, "Oh, that's this architect," and "This is ..." There's a whole team of people that honestly should be on the stage with me giving this ... having this conversation with you because they're well-versed and they contribute to the way that I think and visa versa. The way that we see in terms of mentorship and thinking about what that next generation is that we're all in the same space. And my ideas aren't just my ideas; it's all of our ideas. And we inform each other every which way and it's so exciting any time we go into work and we're able to work and collaborate with even the younger staff and our teams, to be able to take advantage of that energy. Take advantage of that young ambition that we all had 20-30 years ago when we were starting our own businesses and going into the field and being able to have that infuse.

At the same time, given the fact that we've been in camp for a while, be able to give back about the realities. It's a very ... I like to think, a very mutually beneficial relationship



that's exciting to see, especially as younger architects and designers become distinguished and they start finding their voice and you can start seeing a little bit of yourself in them and you get excited for their career trajectory, as well. And there's nothing more validating than that.

Josh: I love that we had a change to talk about this.

Duan: Yeah.

Josh: And if anyone wants to see Duan's work or any of KAA's projects, check the show notes and there will be a link to their site. Duan, thank you.

Duan: Appreciate, Josh.

Josh: This has been another episode of Doctoring Up Design, a podcast presented by Design Hardware. Thank you, Duan, for taking the time to catch up. Loved it. Thank you for listening and subscribing to Doctoring Up Design. Please make sure you are subscribing to the show so you don't miss a single episode. You can find all the links to subscribe here as well as in the show notes to reach out to Design Hardware and contact the participants of each episode of the show. This is Doctoring Up Design, a podcast created to help the design and architecture industry navigate the constantly changing business. For more information on this and past episodes, visit [DesignHardware.com](http://DesignHardware.com).

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