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Designing Tomorrow: A 2026 Forecast

Episode 17 Transcript

Episode Description:

Welcome to the Season 3 premiere of the Alternative Design podcast, where we explore the importance of foresight in design, emphasizing its role in helping creatives become makers of a better future. Mark Bryan, Senior Foresight Consultant at the Future Today Institute, unveils his scenario of the future set in 2026. He envisions a world where decentralized organizations, gratitude silos, and AI clients shape the design profession. He also helps us discover how foresight is the key to designing spaces that not only stand the test of time, but responsibly shape a more sustainable and inclusive future for all.

Mark: [00:00:00] What I found invariably, is that when I would use it with clients, when it was in a design working scenario or session, it helped them want to be more innovative because they were less fearful about what the future could look like.

Kaelynn: Welcome to the Alternative Design podcast where we explore the power of foresight in design to create future-ready spaces. In each episode, we talk to diverse voices to discover the ways our world is changing and uncover insights that will influence the built environment of tomorrow. I'm your host, Kaelynn Reid, an Interior Designer and Certified Futurist and I want to help designers think like futurists so we can take actionable steps today to become makers of a better future.

Kaelynn: If you're a designer and are curious about what your professional life could look like in three years, keep listening to hear how gratitude silos, wearable drafting devices and virtual work pods could be a part of your future. In this season three premiere episode, we invited Mark Bryan, a Senior Foresight Manager at Future Today Institute (FTI) and IIDA's Futurist in Residence, to share a narrative about the future of the [00:01:00] design industry. Now, our title speaks to a forecast because that's what a lot of people think of when referring to a prediction about the future. But Mark is actually going to share a scenario which folds in multiple forecasts and alternative futures. Mark is also helping us to roll out the big change to the Alternative Design podcast, and that change is foresight. We are going to breakdown what foresight is and why it's a missing piece in the design process that could help us to proactively design better spaces that will meet the demands of our fast-paced world.

Kaelynn: Before we dive into Mark's scenario, I want to give some context on how he went from a licensed interior [00:02:00] designer to a certified futurist because I think for some people that might feel like a big jump! But I think you'll be surprised just how connected design and foresight can be.

Mark: So, my career, my background, I started in design. I graduated from Virginia Tech, back in 2004. So, I'll let everybody do the math on how old I am right now...and worked at pretty much every commercial sector that there is, except for K through 12 and medical lab spaces...and started to run into an issue where clients would get stuck, and they wouldn't know how to move forward...and really, I am a nerd at heart...and I started to do research and try to bring in more evidence-based design principles into the practice and into the projects, but then about six or seven years ago, started to just find that I was still having that same issue where clients would just get stuck. They would come in with some of their own data perhaps, or they would say, I don't really [00:03:00] know. You've presented me with a bunch of options, but I'm not quite sure which one is the right one. And so, we would counsel them and give them our input. But again, they really wanted to be able to "pre-experience"

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their space in a way. Renderings and, and visuals just sometimes can't. They really wanted to make an emotional connection to their futures.

Kaelynn: We are seeing this demand from clients all over the place. And while Mark was trying to solve this issue seven years ago, it's only become a bigger issue post-Covid. Every business, every organization, wants to be "future-proof". If 2020 taught us anything, it's that you need to flex in a second and do your best to look around the curve in the road if you can. This is where foresight comes in.

Mark: And so, I started looking into foresight and what that means. And then started to look at other things like a design research degree and a psychology degree and some other things. But [00:04:00] really just landed back on foresight because again, it made it possible to be able to help those clients pre-experience that future space...be able to pre-experience a future in a different way. And so, I went and was trained in foresight and then brought it back to the company I was working for, MA Design in Ohio, and brought it into the design process...figured out how to make it tangible for clients. Started selling it as a service and started to actually do some cultural analyzation with it at the company.

Kaelynn: Of the let's say three options you present to a client, you always have a favorite solution. But what if you could actually back that solution up with data and then allow the client to pre-experience their space and how people will use it, no VR (virtual reality) goggles necessary?

Mark: Our clients are winning stories and they're wanting narratives that talk about their future employees in that space and how they're being successful and what that means. And so, I think foresight allows you to be [00:05:00] able to do that because you're bringing in data and information. So, it's a secondary research practice. It's not just saying, I've experienced this, so I think x. I spent eight weeks researching supply chain and logistics before I started coming up with like trends and everything like that.

Kaelynn: So, to define foresight, it's a methodology that allows us to anticipate and plan for future possibilities by analyzing current research, data, and trends. Part of the methodology involves looking for signals of change that could develop into trends, and these trends are what can shape the future. When you've identified multiple signals and trends, you can then begin to shape forecasts and scenarios about the future that are grounded in evidence-based data. And once you can create multiple plausible predictions about the future, individuals and organizations can use them to prepare for change and take action steps to become more future-ready. If you're getting curious about how to [00:06:00] use the practice of foresight as a tool for your organization or even your design process, stay tuned. But I want to share one more big value prop of foresight you should consider.

Mark: So, some of the processes within design have been going on for a very long time, and I think what's happening right now is that our clients and the people that we're serving...whether that's the community, whether that's the individual going into the place that they live, they're needing ways to really rethink longevity with the spaces and the places that they're creating. I also think that design has become a little bit of an echo chamber. I forget who I was talking to, but, it was a recent "rep" and they were talking about how they joke that they get the same inspiration images over and over again. And so those inspiration images start to become an echo chamber where people are starting to see the same things and feed the same things. And so, I think when it comes to design, we need to be more responsible. And I think foresight allows us to be more responsible by taking in outside [00:07:00] ideas and thoughts.

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Kaelynn: Foresight gives us an incredible opportunity look beyond the walls of our design world and look for alternative signals about how the world is changing. This is why moving forward, Alternative Design is going to explore these signals and trends found outside of the design industry and use them to create informed forecasts about the future of placemaking. We see so much value in this because who doesn't want to design a space that not only maintains its relevancy, but better serves the humans who are experiencing it? It also gives the ability to find new opportunities and solve challenges more quickly in the midst of change. Do you remember the Nokia flip phone? In 2007 they were the handset giant on the scene, unmatched by any other company, with 50 percent of the handset market share. And while Nokia banked on a forecast of continued profit [00:08:00] growth, what they couldn't foresee was Steve Jobs walking out on stage at Macworld on June 29th and completely disrupting the handset industry with the unveiling of the iPhone. Now, if Nokia had taken the opportunity to consider other alternative futures that flexed with new consumer demands like wanting to be more connected to the internet and having a decent camera in your hand to post on the hip new social media platform called Facebook, perhaps they could have pivoted the business and kept their market share from plummeting to just five percent in five years. This is why engaging with foresight practices is so important. It's not about getting the prediction 100 percent right; it's about using the data and trends we have today to better prepare for a multitude of predictions. This proactive approach is exactly what is needed in our design process to help us get out of our [00:09:00] echo chamber, remove bias and ultimately design spaces that will better tomorrow's human experience. Up next, Mark's scenario on the future of the design industry.

Kaelynn: Let's hear what life could look like for a designer in the year 2026. Now, that's not very far away at all, but keep in mind how quickly the world can change if these last three years is any indication. Mark shared this scenario with us at the 2023 Industry Roundtable earlier this year.

Mark: So this first scenario, I titled it the Meta DDAO (Decentralized Designer Autonomous Organization). So that's a play on DAOs, which are decentralized autonomous organizations. Just so we have that level of expectation and understanding. And this scenario was an exploratory scenario using a day in the life framework. I pitched that it could be roughly in the year 2026, so just three years from now. The reason being is because of things like adoption rates and use cases for some of the technologies [00:10:00] and some of the things that I have got in the scenario. So, the main thrust of the scenarios and trends that are being explored are things like generative design, hybrid, enhancements, decentralized organizations, rewilding, time dosing, and async living. So, the main themes in here are talking about futures with Metaverse, and there could be a future Metaverse design program within a higher education institution or a school itself. New roles integrated into design process, having AI mentors, new interfaces, and platforms where we could have drawings...and even how wearables could start to evolve to become something that we could use and maybe that's the next evolution of Revit. As well as what does it mean for learning skills and how companies are offering that. You know, we talk a lot about companies in the workplace wanting to figure out...what can I do beyond paying individuals? And this was a signal that I saw. So, all of this is built off evidence too. So that's the underlying kind of theme for this scenario. And so here is the Meta [00:11:00] DDAO.

Kaelynn: What you'll hear now is Mark sharing his scenario with the help of a voice actor playing the fictional future character, Lilia. I'll also be popping in occasionally to point out some interesting observations for us.

Mark: So, picture its 2026 and we're in Seattle. In this future, we're going to follow Lilia, who was part of the first graduate class from the Design Institute of San Diego's Universal Interior Design program in the Metaverse of 2025.

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Kaelynn: By this time, designer hopefuls are learning a universally accepted curriculum in the Metaverse, a VR based social online platform.

Mark: After graduating, she moved to Seattle due to its work in creating decarbonized five-minute neighborhoods. Lilia lives in one of the retrofitted metro pole unit living silo buildings that hosts her apartment, a coworking space, and virtual work pods, and a private retail space that becomes a learning center at night.

Lilia: The city has been [00:12:00] piloting these neighborhoods that are focused on completely eliminating fossil fuel use. So, my apartment was actually an old grain silo, but now it's one of Uniliving's Metropole residences that has a coworking space and this really awesome retail shop that turns into a learning center for students at night! Everything in the neighborhood can be accessed in five minutes via bike, so it has way more of a local feel than I was used to back home. Work is a super short commute for me, I just step into a virtual work pod. I can basically log on and choose whatever work location I want to be in for the day, virtually of course, but it really helps me choose how and where I'm going to be most productive. It's Friday, so I chose to work in this remote coffee shop near Big Sur.

Mark: Lilia works for the DDAO or [00:13:00] the Decentralized Designer Autonomous Organization, which fused a conglomerate of firms and gig workers. The DDAO includes designers, architects, landscape architects, engineers, GCs (general contractors) for all aspects of the design project, as well as community process liaisons, translation avatars, facilitators, change management experts, biohack material consultants, and even caregivers. This has become the model for multidisciplinary firms in the future, aggregating services based on the DDAO's values to offer unique expert experiences within their framework of holistic design.

Kaelynn: Let's take a moment to break down a decentralized autonomous organization, because while that may sound like a far-reaching reality, DAOs already exist. They're business structures that involve little to no hierarchy, aka no bosses. You typically buy your way into the digital community formed around shared values or interests via a [00:14:00] token and "token holders" get an equitable voice in all business decisions. Some have called DAOs the cornerstone of web3, the creator economy, and potentially the future of work. Some of the really interesting benefits of DAOs is greater employee autonomy on where, when, and how work is done and the ability to participate in more purpose-driven work by choosing projects that align to your values.

Lilia: When I start working, I check into the DDAO and then select a virtual coworking pod. As soon as I get my Oculus screens adjusted and get comfy, I'll typically spend the first ten to fifteen minutes responding to messages that pop up from my async coworkers. Then I'll check my Project Planner Portal and connect with my AI mentor. Right now, I'm working on the new Flex Center project.

Mark: So, Seattle's first AI representative, along with their trusted developer funded Lilia's project, the new co-designed Flex Center, [00:15:00] which is going to act as a cornerstone to the West Seattle's five-minute neighborhood.

Kaelynn: It's 2026, and your client is a machine.

Kaelynn: While we may not see AI operating as the sole client on a given project for a while, it's extremely plausible that we will see clients leveraging AI to drive project decisions. But notice what Mark said... Seattle's first AI Representative. It might be strange to consider an AI in a political position, but that's exactly what the Synthetic Party is pushing for in Denmark. They hope to secure a

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seat in parliament with its AI representative and policies derived from its chatbot, Leader Lars. Mark shared this signal with us as one of the many that contributed to this scenario. Let's get back to it.

Lilia: So, of course, per standard design practice, the Flex Center project needs to adapt to the communities changing [00:16:00] needs at a moment's notice. It includes considerations for both climate change and pandemic preparedness needs. I'm really proud of the work we've done so far, it feels really good to contribute to my local community doing what I love.

Mark: Yesterday, Lilia finished coordinating with the furniture manufacturers at their urban infill manufacturing center. So today she's going to do some detail collaboration to keep the project on track as set forth by the client's timeline of values and according to the smart contracts that are in place. Lilia notices she has some comments from the community process liaison regarding diversity needs. There were fidgetal meeting sessions that spanned community hours yesterday, and the recorded notes were rendered overnight by the community liaison for full virtual walkthroughs for Lilia to review. Watching the time lapse screen, Lilia watches the three accessibility issues mentioned seeing several potential solutions. Lilia uses her "Autogen" wearable Autodesk's next platform after Revit to begin prompting generative design [00:17:00] ideas. Once her prompts are accepted, Lilia lets Autogen spin away to draft potential drop-in changes to explore further while she waits. Lilia takes a minute to review the site's VR history to make sure she's not missing any historic parameters or creating potentials for the project's greenhouse gas emissions to rise beyond the regulated levels because of the new changes.

Lilia: I've only had my Autogen wearable for a few weeks so I'm still being trained on it, but this thing has saved me hours of time. I love that the Autogen offers me multiple iterations of design schemes so I can then take them to my team to work on.

Mark: Once the optional drop-ins have been modeled, Lilia calls up an immersive collab session with some of her team and the AI mentor. Where she brings in the options to review in the Meta drafting space. They make some tweaks together and then Lilia takes a moment to ask for some input from other firms sharing her Meta drafting space. [00:18:00] Lilia then begins to implement these into the Metaverse blueprints. Once that's done, she ports over to her original collab, being brought up to speed with ease by watching the time lapse play black, where she and her team charette a few potential bar sections for the ghost kitchen in the center.

Kaelynn: Imagine being able to pause a meeting to implement what's being talked about and then being able to come back, watching the playback of what else was discussed while you were away, and jumping right back into the meeting.

Mark: After a while, Lilia's time capacity, "timeometer" built into her company biosynth shirt provided to her by her company as part of their ESG package notes that she seems a bit too tense. Her preferred time ratio of work life is off and that she's close to "metalag". So Lilia takes a time dose break. Lilia walks down to the street, to the rewilding garden in her sector, and on the way, she signs up for her next design coding class, which was a gift to her by the DDAO.

Kaelynn: I can [00:19:00] only hope by 2026, we have taken some giant leaps in the world regarding mental health and work-life balance. Having a shirt that alerts you when you are approaching too much stress and too much time in the Metaverse that you're in danger of metalag, feels like a step in the right direction. Of course, I'm looking forward to when you can sit in a task chair and have the same effect.

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Mark: Lilia sees some of her other local coworkers and they discussed some of the details they just worked on and sent notes through the Autogen. Before heading back to continue drafting, Lilia visits the gratitude silo to refresh her sense of newness, something that all workplaces are now recommended to have from the latest World Health Organization Urban Findings Best Practices Report of 2024.

Kaelynn: Now, that may have seemed like a lot to take in. And you might be asking yourself "okay, so what do I do with this"? Let me tell you how to turn that scenario into strategic action for your firm and your projects today. Let's breakdown the "how" of foresight so that you can start to use this as a strategy for yourself or for your business. There are two terms we use in the foresight biz that are helpful to understand. The first one is a "signal". A signal is basically a clue as to how the world is changing. It has to be concrete, as in something that has actually happened, something newsworthy. Like someone using bioengineered chicken at a restaurant. This actually happened in D.C. recently.

Mark: It can be a bit of a rabbit hole. And I, I mean, I will just be honest and say that Google is sometimes your friend when you're trying to find connecting signals. So, I'll start to look for things like white papers, I'll look for patents. I'll look for community forums. I'll look at [00:21:00] experts and what they're saying. So, I'm collecting data. There's a ton of research institutions that are out there, depending on what you're trying to cover. So that again, could be Harvard Business Review that could be coming from any publication that has sources that you can cite. Now, what I would say is when you're starting maybe with like a New York Times, try to find where they're getting their information from and then start to dig into that and find that original signal there versus citing just the New York Times. And same with like white papers too. You'll often find with white papers or other data, there's gonna be other citations within there that can help give you more information. That's how we know if it's a weak signal or a strong signal. You know, if we're seeing a lot more people talking about it, that if it's a lot more today and if that's gonna be a stronger signal that we might pay attention to, but we at FTI...I often try to find things that are on the fringe, things that are a little bit less, researched, if you will.

Kaelynn: Mark and I are kindred spirits in this way. Our brains work by identifying something alternative that seemingly has nothing to [00:22:00] do with design on the surface, but if you dig just a layer or two deeper, there's a ton of inspiration to be found for creatives. So, you can start looking for signals on Google, like Mark said, or you can keep listening to our show which brings you a new signal every two weeks to consider its influence on your design process. Okay so the second term to wrap our brains around is a trend. Now, we know what trends are, biophilic design has been a trend since like 2005. But this context of a "trend" is a bit different.

Mark: So, we at FTI talk about how signals become trends. And trends relate, paint the picture of what the narrative of the future could look like. So, trends to us are constantly evolving. They are coming from multiple vector points, meaning it's just not one single source. So, when I put together a trend, I've got at least three to four to five different signals that are feeding into [00:23:00] it, that are coming from different areas of disruption. And that points to me of like what that trend wants to be and how we start to title those trends as well.

Kaelynn: Once you've identified several signals and trends, those are the ingredients of an evidence-based forecast or scenario about the future. And here's where I'm going to blow your mind. It doesn't have to be accurate. That's right. The goal of creating a plausible forecast about the future is not that it comes to pass, but that you have taken the time to proactively consider what could be coming down the pike. And this, of course, is why we recommend creating multiple forecasts or multiple scenarios for your business or even your clients to consider. Because it's in this consideration of multiple futures that the very best part of foresight is realized. And that is hope for the future.

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Mark: We talk about this a lot, and I know you and I have talked about this, but [00:24:00] your future self as a stranger, like you get very intimidated by thinking about the future. That's why people get very fearful when you talk about the future because your brain is literally geared up to think about

your future self as a stranger. And so, what foresight allows you to do is to get over that hump and get over that glitch. And what I found invariably is that when I would use it with clients, when it was in design working scenario or a session, it helped them want to be more innovative because they were less fearful about what that future could look like.

Kaelynn: What if taking the time to think through possible futures could result in more innovative and successful design projects? In an increasingly divided world, could imagining the future be a safe space where people can put down their current affiliations, their immediate interests, and their present fears to explore new possibilities that are unthinkable today? According to research done by the Smithsonian on the "Futures" exhibit held by IFTF (Institute for the Future) last year, 80 percent of attendees reported being inspired to act to shape the future they desired after being [00:25:00] immersed in potential futures. The youngest groups in attendance, visitors under 40, reported they could not only talk to friends and family about the future more confidently, but that they saw themselves in it.

Mark: What happens if workplace headquarters go away? Specifically in my mind, what happens if it's a headquarters that's for a single company? I think we're seeing signals that are actually pointing towards that being a possibility, and I'm not quite sure if the design industry is prepared for it or if they thought about it. That in itself would be a foresight project that you could study and start to think about and then write a scenario of what that means. Not necessarily about getting it right, but helping your company find a stance on what that could mean and helping your company to figure out what are the actions we want to take to either make that happen or, again, make sure that that doesn't happen.

Kaelynn: Once you decide as an organization or team what you think is a plausible potential future for any given topic, you can begin to take action. Foresight is not [00:26:00] about coming up with really great emotionally engaging stories. I mean, it is, those are very helpful for getting past that human brain glitch Mark mentioned, but the point of forecasts and scenarios is to use them to take steps towards a desired future or even multiple possible futures. It's this proactive approach that can give us more confidence that we as designers are in fact being more responsible with the places we're creating and who they are impacting in what ways. Clients can have more confidence knowing that flexibility and longevity is being baked into their spaces by architects and designers who are considering what matters to future users of that space. And most importantly, foresight gives us all hope for a better tomorrow because it helps us realize our own power to shape it. So, join us as we at Alternative Design continue to find signals of change [00:27:00] and share how they could influence the art of placemaking and stay tuned as we break down forecasts and scenarios about the future of workplace, health, and education spaces.

That's it for this episode. Watch out for our next episode drop in two weeks where we look at microbreweries as not only a signal about the future of work, but an inspiration on how to create places to belong. A big thank you to Senior Foresight Manager, Mark Bryan at Future Today Institute, for not only being a guest on today's show, but for helping us learn and adapt their signal collection, trend development, and scenario frameworks as we develop content for these episodes. This episode was produced by myself and Brandy Small. Audio production and music composition and scoring by Andrew Reid. Alternative Design podcast is brought to you by Kimball International.

