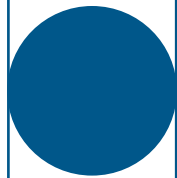


# SAVOR

DINNER, DIALOGUE, DESIGN



## **IIDA Savor Salon Dinners: The Art of Conversation in Design**

Hosts

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## DINNER, DIALOGUE, DESIGN

### OVERVIEW

Mohawk Group hosted a series of very special, salon-type dinners in six cities throughout the U.S., where architects and interior designers could spend a stimulating evening away from their devices, enjoy a great meal, and engage in some much-needed conversation. Mohawk approached Cheryl Durst of IIDA to co-host these dinners and to impart some of her broad knowledge about the cultural phenomena taking place today and how it affects both the way we design and our lives in general.

Our discussions flowed freely and certainly ran the gamut: how bad communication skills can be detrimental when dealing with clients (Minneapolis); how clients come to us to help define their cultures (Nashville); the healthcare industry's wants vs. needs (Houston); the cult of personality and celebrity (not surprisingly, Los Angeles); how the workplace has become an immersive experience (Denver); and how a lot of people (mostly younger) would rather be given an electric shock than spend time alone, away from their phones (Boston).

What was so gratifying is that we were able to identify commonalities, to see ways in which we are linked. Several attendees realized they are non-athletic types. Many realized they had worked at the same firm at different times. People discovered they had orbited around one another and even been in the same place at the same time—but never actually met.

And what dinner party would be complete without a few people recounting of brushes with greatness? Ours included a day in a cabana with John Stamos; an evening in a hot tub with Kevin Bacon; a day with Ginger Rogers (and her wig); helping Hillary Clinton out in a women's room. And of course, Cheryl's famous, "Do you know if I can buy pants in the Cleveland airport?" story. (Be sure to ask her about it.)

And while each city had its own flavor, several themes remained constant. We returned again and again to the concept of how the time—and ability—to have a great, one-on-one conversation is waning in these tech-saturated modern times. How we are listening less. How our non-stop "connectedness" is actually causing us to feel more isolated.

But it's not all gloom and doom. Having our devices attached to us like another appendage has led to a craving for things that make us feel more—more texture, more real experiences, and more connections to one another. The subject of authenticity was an integral part of our evenings: how we need it and how we're seeking it, whether by embracing nostalgia or enjoying a locally-made craft beer. We also discussed what gives us hope.

### CONVERSATION AS A LOST ART

Cheryl often brings up media scholar Sherry Turkle, author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, about the power of talk in the digital age, and *Alone Together*, about how we have grown to expect more and more from our devices—but less from one another. Using these powerful books as a catalyst to talk about our disconnected, connected lives, Cheryl spoke at length about these phenomena and how they have worked their ways into our lives, both personal and professional:

“I don’t want to cast a bad light on technology, but Sherry Turkle interviewed a group of fifth graders and asked them when was the last time they sat down at dinner and had a conversation. Out of one hundred kids, one said, ‘I eat dinner with my grandparents, and we talk about things.’ But everybody else talked about this breakdown in the family dinner. Not necessarily because their families are falling apart. It’s about time. It’s taking the time, and what goes into creating a meal.”

People spoke about how social sites like Facebook mean you know everything “about” your friends—what they had for lunch, when they got a new dog, when they got engaged—but lamented the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to just have a meaningful chat.

Cheryl talked about how this is partly neurological, that the reason you’ll see people on a date or a family at a restaurant—and no one is talking—is that the part of our brains that wants to have that conversation has already been used up. The same part of our gray matter is used by talking to another person and surfing the web on our phone. If we spend all day doing the latter, our brain thinks we’re “done,” that we’re “sated” in those terms, so we don’t have any more for our spouse, our friends, or our family.

We also love to talk about ourselves, and this has a neurological basis as well. Said Cheryl:

“One of the reasons we’re obsessed with ourselves is that when we talk about ourselves, our heart beats a little faster. Endorphins and serotonin start flowing through our body. The pleasure centers in our brain that cocaine bonds to, that sex responds to, talking about ourselves... ding ding ding... It’s in that same pleasure center. It feels really good to talk about ourselves.”

But there is hope for us yet. Even though we are bombarded with data, our preference is still for people. Cheryl explained that, at the end of the day, people are interested in people:

“I put myself as the most completely nosy person in the world. But that is something that all of us... love to hear something about someone else. And what our synapses are busily doing—we’re looking for ways to make a connection with somebody else.”

Conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing that we do. It establishes connections. It builds empathy. Engagement of this sort takes work, but it’s worth it.

## **LISTENING, EMPATHY, AND JUST BEING HUMAN**

These days, we spend more time looking at the top of someone’s head than looking in their eyes. But you learn a lot when you make eye contact. We need it to thrive. It establishes connections. Eye contact causes us to breathe differently, causes our synapses to fire like crazy. It’s another factor in establishing empathy. Sociopaths don’t make eye contact. Someone lying to you won’t make eye contact. This applies as much to working with clients as it does to interviewing potential employees. If someone doesn’t make eye contact... run! Cheryl explained:

“If you’ve held a baby or a small child, their eyes are locked on you. They’re not looking at their phone, they’re not looking over your shoulder. They are locked intently and intentionally and raptly on you. Because we know that babies are processing your face, they’re processing eye contact. That intent, intense look— their brain cells are firing, their synapses are firing, and they are learning as they are listening to you.”

Listening is another art that is being washed away in the tech wave. A lot of people are simply waiting to reply when having a conversation, and that’s different from hearing you. They’re distracted by their own thoughts (or, just as likely, their device) rather than taking in what you’re saying and fully processing it. Cheryl went on:

“I’m going to paraphrase Buddha a little bit: mouth open, no learning. And then I’m going to companion someone who isn’t often companioned with Buddha, Calvin Coolidge: No one ever listened their way out of a job.”

This isn’t just about good manners. If you’re not listening and making eye contact, especially when you’re very young, you could have bigger problems than not being polite. In a study published in the Wall Street Journal, kids who are five years old are very competent using an iPhone, and they’ll pay attention to what’s on the screen. But they’re not making eye contact with their parents. She expanded on this study:

“If we don’t make eye contact with our parents at that young age, brain cells are not developing as quickly, we’re not developing conversational skills and, according to psychologists, those young kids are becoming—and this is going to sound horrible—less human. The building blocks of humanity aren’t developing in them as quickly as they did in all of us.”

## ALONE TOGETHER: OUR TECH ADDICTION

In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle goes into great depth discussing how the digital revolution means we're all in this together, but we're very alone. We have all these devices, which means we're incredibly connected. But people also feel a profound sense of isolation. People feel left out. Why wasn't I invited to that brunch I saw on Facebook? Everyone's on a great vacation but me. Everyone else has a perfect husband, perfect kids, a perfect life. Cheryl posed the question:

"You guys have all heard of FOMO, right? The fear of missing out. Which is a real, identified medical condition. It's related to anxiety, that I need to be connected, I need to know what's going on because I am missing out on something."

This phenomenon spills over into our design lives too. People discussed how younger designers in particular don't know how to design a space that brings people together. One of the participants in our Los Angeles salon had this to say:

"A lot of the designs I see... in one case I thought they were doing a communal space— but they're actually designing spaces for people to be alone on their computers. And they're not thinking about what it's like to be in that space, to experience it, and to have that chance interaction and actually talk to somebody. That's really shocking."

A study at M.I.T. found that one's device doesn't even need to be in one's hand to be a distraction. It works the same if it's sitting on the table, even if you're not looking at it. Just the fact that it's sitting there is a barrier to conversation.

Our tech addiction can make our anxiety levels spike if we can't find our device. The condition even has a name: Nomophobia.

## AUTHENTICITY: AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING, BABY

What's the flip side to all this obsession with tech? Perhaps it's a bit of a surprise to find that Millennials, the ones who can't stop Snapchatting or Instagramming every moment of their lives, are also wanting very real, genuine things and experiences. Cheryl says they can spot a phony quicker than any generation. If it's not authentic, forget about it. Everything from the objects in your home to a shady core mission statement on the wall of an employer. You need to show them you're authentic in everything you say and do. But how does that manifest itself in design? Royce summed it up at the Boston dinner:

"For me, everything is about context and you're kind of talking about soul. I come at design from an art history background, so I always learned to think about things in context. I think about the past, think about the present, and that affects the future. And we can't really have the future without understanding that context."

People are looking for real experiences. They're going on eco tours in Costa Rica. They're taking working vacations on a farm. They're getting to know their butchers and bakers and finding out where their food comes from, how it's made, and who made it.

This desire for authenticity has made its way into design. At NeoCon, Cheryl reports, everything had a texture. A heft and a hand and a feel. Lots of wonderful, retro fabrics: wide wale corduroy, velvet, boucle. When you feel them, you know what you're feeling:

"Felt. My favorite—the macaroni and cheese of fabrics. It is the ultimate comfort fabric. But nothing was too slick, nothing was too shiny. Everything was this fixation on what is real and what is authentic."

Cheryl and Royce both see this as a natural progression, a backlash against the slick, sleek pane of glass through which we now live our lives. Royce spoke in Minnesota about the importance of tactility:

"As humans, we are wired to have tactility. We have fingerprints. We touch things. We are supposed to feel things when we touch things. We are losing that because we touch glass and look at glass all day long. And Gen Z, which is nineteen and younger, will be joining the workforce in about five years. They have a 7.25 second attention span and five to seven devices each. I think there's this moment where we're reacting against, responding against what we know about this influence of technology."

## DUDE, WHERE'S MY POLAROID?

"My daughter's boyfriend says to me, 'I got a Polaroid, I got a Polaroid and it's the coolest thing. And you know this thing spits out of it and you can smell the film.' And he thought it was the coolest thing ever. And I'm, like, that's my life." - Cheryl Durst

In addition to real experiences, this addiction to these modern, even futuristic, devices is resulting in a type of backlash in the form of nostalgia, which is definitely having a moment. The kids are loving Polaroid cameras, shows from the 60s, 70s, and 80s on Nick at Night, Lincoln logs, Etch-a-Sketch, Legos. Think about #TBT and #FBF (Throwback Thursday and Flashback Friday) on social media.

One of our attendees in Minnesota tells the story of going to an auction with her 13-year-old daughter, who "lost her cookies" for a manual typewriter from 1965. She carried it home and showed it off to all her friends. "They are wanting to connect. They want tactile things that they can have, touch, hold, and value."

## HOW WE'LL WORK IN THE FUTURE

At the dinner in Houston, Cheryl asked Royce if she could make a prediction about the fundamental changes in the workplace over the next three years. What was going to matter? What was going to be important?

"We already know that there's a lot of backlash to open plan, and we're starting to see furniture and materials and all kinds of things be designed now to incorporate more privacy in the open plan, and I think that will continue to the point where partitions could come back."

This statement immediately resonated with the audience, who talked about some of the work they were doing. One speaker said that in one new project, 90% of the offices were private. People talked about how the corner office is once again being seen as important. How status is going to again be a player in the workplace. "It's not surprising that if you're going to work so hard, you're going to want to get a reward for it," said one designer.

The gig economy is also going to become more and more a part of our lives. Freelance workers will make up more of the workforce, but be less "free floating." Co-working spaces will begin to specialize and form communities and social hubs in their own right. People will have a skillset and bring that skillset to different places for limited amounts of time. People will increasingly be hired for a "project" rather than a "job." Said Cheryl:

"If you consider yourself a supply chain expert, you'll go work at UPS, because as a company that's their brand and their expertise. Companies and brands will start issuing certificates of excellence. You'll have two week here and four years there, but if you did a project that had amazing outcomes in supply chain expertise at UPS, that's what you'll put on your resume."

## WHERE WE ARE AND WHAT CLIENTS WANT

One thing everyone could agree on is that we're all much busier than we've ever been before. Busy to the point of exhaustion.

"Everything is a little bit volatile. We all love what we do. We're getting through this moment as if it's a bad thing, it's a really good thing. We're bombarded with technology, we need more sifting, and filtering, and figuring out what's important and what to ignore."

Cheryl then asked what peoples' clients were asking for. What's important to them now?

Many of the comments centered around the idea that companies are looking for spaces to help innovate. Spaces that encourage serendipitous encounters and interaction. Spaces that are going to attract younger people. A space that will make 20-somethings who live in the suburbs want to come work in the city. We need to make the workplace engaging, to keep people challenged. All demographics. All ages. Cheryl concluded:

"I think the challenge is, for those of us who live and thrive in the world of design, the demands and the expectations. You're not just creating spaces, you're creating experiences. That's what the world sees you as. And regardless of what that place is or that place can be, it's still going to be critically important to humans and human nature and where we go next. We'll always have place. Technology will change and be different, but we will always have place. And place is what anchors us to the earth." -

## MORE REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Again, it isn't all bad news. Many people at our salons were genuinely hopeful about the direction we're going. One participant said it was time for everyone to stop whining about Millennials not having this or not having that:

"They're the key. Hopefully they will make our jobs better. They're just going to say, 'We don't want to work those long hours. We want meaningful work. We want balance. We want family life. And we want to come in be totally engaged, be part of team, and then leave.' Maybe they'll change the world for us."

Royce pointed out that her research in the education market, for example, indicates that it is heading into a much more open plan idea, with less "lecturing at" you, and a much more collaborative environment.

"So I do think maybe this is a temporary riff and that as Gen Z gets a little bit older, they're going to be used to communicating and collaborating because that's the school environment that they will have grown up in."

Others appreciate how creative young people are with technology, and how technology will allow us to do things in design that weren't possible before and make advances that wouldn't have been conceivable even a few years ago. One designer had this to say:

"I'm hopeful that things like talent and substance and content will be things that people will always seek out in spite of all of the stuff that's flying around out there. And I like the idea that technology is going to help me be a healthier person despite what I eat and drink. Nobody telling me that I didn't take enough steps today or that I didn't do this or that I didn't do that. I'm waiting for the technology to save me from that."

## IN CONCLUSION

Ultimately, these evenings reminded everyone that they need to do more of this. To listen more. To make more eye contact. Cheryl summed everything up in this way:

"It is a direct reaction to this life with technology. And that's exactly why we want to do this. We could have had you all Skype in. You could have been at home. But to actually show up and have a conversation. And you should walk away from every conversation having learned something. Either about something or about someone. And sometimes conversation for the sake of conversation. But the goal is to learn something. And you can if you listen. And wear corduroy."

***Mohawk Group and IIDA would like to thank the participants of our Savor Dinners in Boston, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Nashville for their insight and enthusiasm.***