

Business of Design with Lesha Fernando



Hospitality design is often judged at launch. The lighting is calibrated, the finishes untouched, the imagery carefully framed. The real assessment happens later, when occupancy stabilises, when staff move through the space at speed, when materials begin to wear, and when guests return expecting consistency rather than novelty.

For Lesha Fernando, Associate at HBA, that longer horizon defines success. After more than two decades in hospitality design, her focus has shifted from first impressions to sustained performance, how a space functions, how it feels over time, and whether it continues to deliver on its promise.

"My path into design was not immediate," she says. "What finally captured my attention wasn't interior, but landscape. I became fascinated by how people move through space, how natural environments shape emotion, and how spatial sequences influence behavior." That curiosity led her into hospitality, which she describes as "one of the most complex design fields, operating at the intersection of emotion, experience and performance." The responsibility embedded in that complexity is what continues to motivate her. "You are not simply designing spaces, you are shaping memories, rituals and moments of escape."

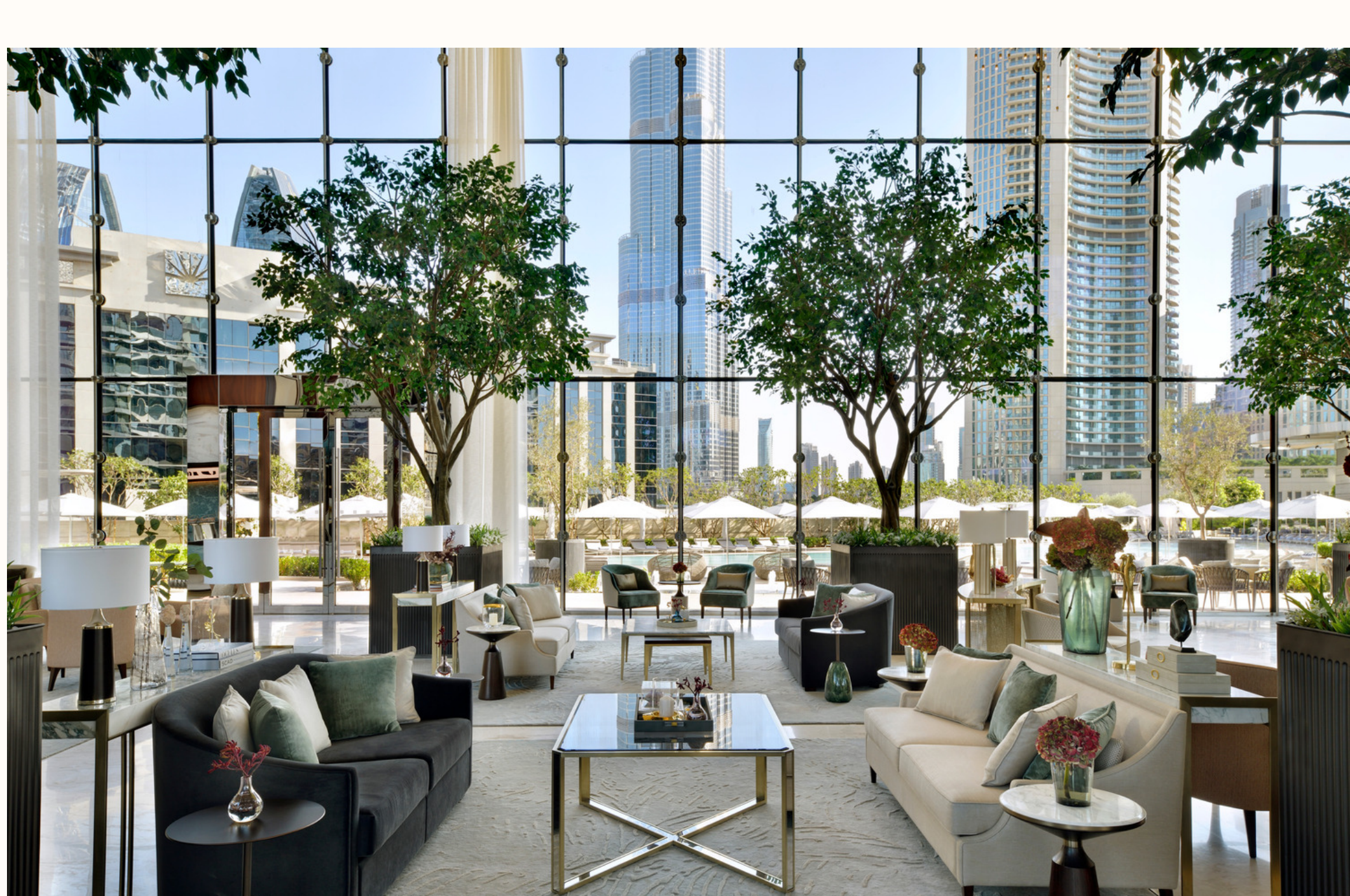
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Mantra as a Design Leader: Design for Use over Oomph

As her career progressed, her definition of good design moved away from visual impact toward clarity and durability. "Good design disappears into experience. If a guest intuitively knows where to go, feels emotionally connected, and remembers how the space made them feel rather than how it looked, that's success."

That shift places emphasis on planning rather than embellishment. Circulation must be instinctive, transitions must feel natural, and materials must be selected for how they age, not how they photograph. Designing for use requires discipline, especially in a region once defined by spectacle.

Her understanding of wellness has also evolved. Rather than isolating it within spas or gyms, she began to see it as something embedded across the entire guest journey. In hotels, resorts and residential developments, wellness becomes spatial and experiential, integrated into the project rather than confined to a single space.

Of course, these ideals are tested in real-world conditions. Hospitality projects rarely unfold under calm circumstances. Timelines compress, expectations shift and commercial scrutiny remains constant.

"Those moments taught me that leadership isn't about having all the answers, but about creating clarity, trust and decisiveness when things are uncertain." In those environments, excess falls away and intention becomes visible. Lesha describes her approach as calm and direct, focused on setting clear direction while empowering teams to take ownership.

Equally important is knowing when to guide and when to step back. "Different situations call for different levels of support. My role is not to impose a singular aesthetic, but to understand what each project truly requires and create an environment where designers can flourish within that framework." Leadership adapts to context rather than dominating it.

Retention follows the same principle. "People stay where they feel trusted, challenged and seen. Beyond creative freedom, designers want growth, honesty and exposure to real responsibility." By involving emerging leaders early in client conversations and decision-making, she ensures confidence develops alongside competence.

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The Tightrope: Global Legacy, Regional Evolution and...Commercials

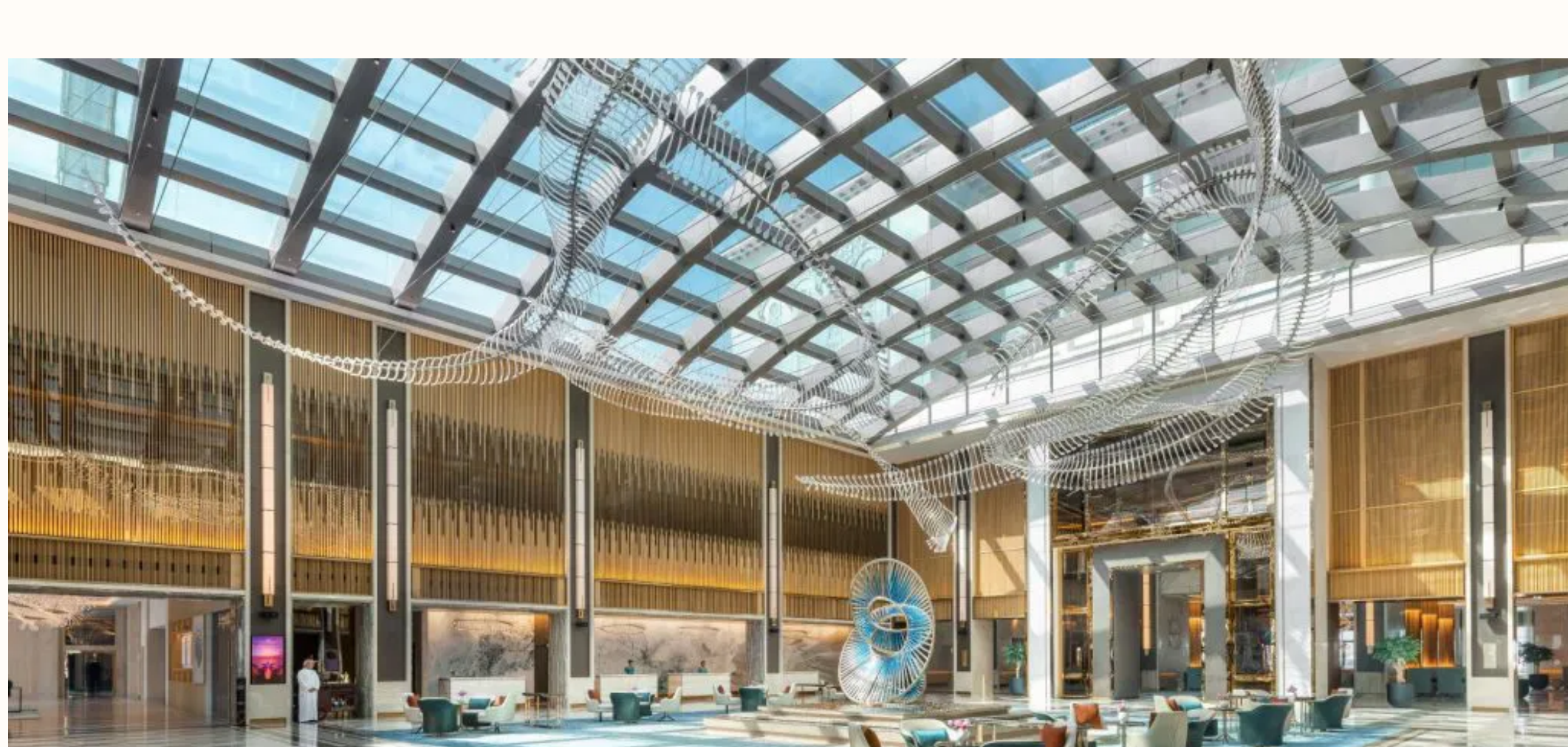
Operating within HBA's global framework introduces another dimension of accountability. Consistency and refinement are assumed, yet they must respond to regional context. "HBA's strength lies in its ability to balance global consistency with deep local relevance," she explains. "Legacy doesn't mean repetition; it means responsibility to evolve intelligently."

Across the Middle East, clients prioritise authenticity and long-term positioning. Projects must feel culturally grounded while remaining commercially sound and operationally precise. Her role is to ensure that each project responds to its context, culturally, materially and emotionally, while aligning with brand standards.

Collaboration across global studios reinforces that balance. "We actively share knowledge, benchmarks and insights across offices, recognizing that design excellence today is collective rather than isolated." The exchange strengthens interpretation without fragmenting identity, underpinning One HBA, the firm's integrated global model. "One HBA represents a fully integrated approach to design, bringing together our global expertise, diverse disciplines and regional insights into a single cohesive platform."

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Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Dubai

Holding the Line

But creative ambition inevitably intersects with commercial reality. "The most frequent disconnect occurs when a concept is not sufficiently grounded in operational or budgetary realities." When that gap appears, design intent is already under strain. "We mitigate this by involving technical teams, operators and procurement partners early in the design process." Aligning feasibility with storytelling from the outset reduces friction later and protects clarity of intent.

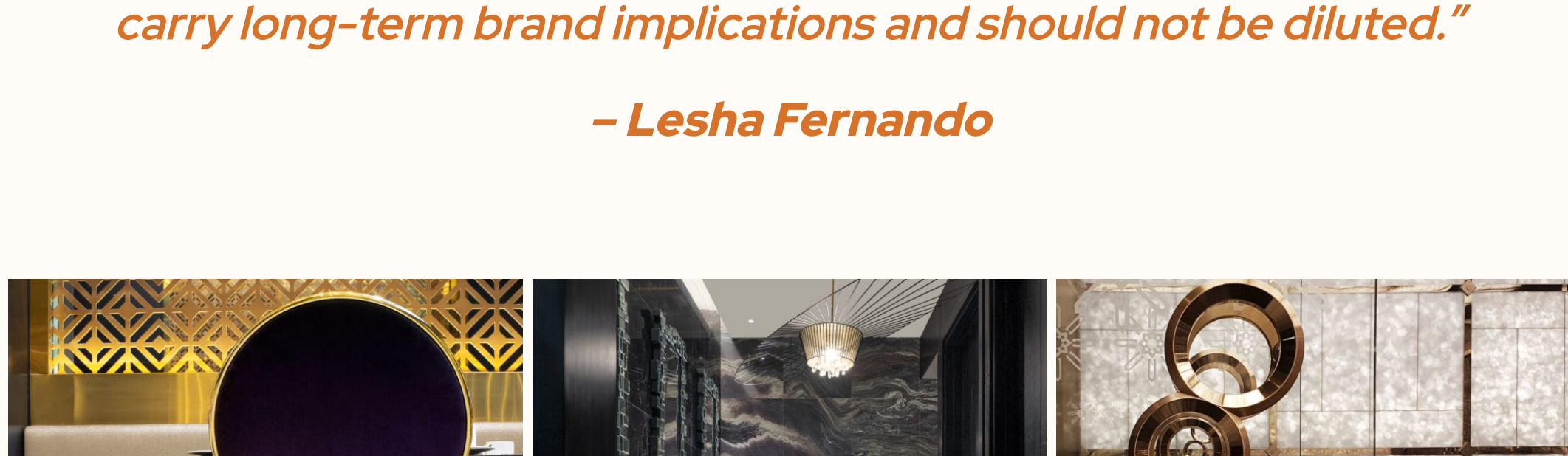
Even with alignment, cost compression remains a predictable stage in development cycles. The discipline lies in identifying what can adapt without weakening the experience. "I am open to compromising on elements that are replaceable, but I remain firm on spatial quality and guest experience. Certain decisions carry long-term brand implications and should not be diluted."

The market itself has also become more exacting. "Clients today are more discerning, asking informed questions about longevity, authenticity and guest engagement." Operator expectations have sharpened as well. "Speed, flexibility, data-informed decision-making and clear expectations on investment without compromising the guest experience are now fundamental." Design is now judged for how it performs over time, commercially and operationally.

Budgetary transparency remains part of that conversation. "When should cost discussions become fully transparent? From the outset." The question, however, is whether this remains the industry norm or still an aspiration.

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Al Rayyan Hotel, Doha

Beyond the Green Label

Sustainability is often framed as either technical or expensive. "One common misconception is that sustainability is either prohibitively expensive or purely technical." For Lesha, it begins with foresight, durable materials, local sourcing and long-term thinking.

"My responsibility is to integrate sustainability seamlessly into the design process, not as an add-on, but as a fundamental consideration." Beyond certification, this includes reducing waste and embedding wellness holistically across the lifecycle of a project. Longevity, environmental responsibility and commercial sense begin to overlap.

The Long View

Looking ahead, she sees a growing appreciation for culturally grounded and immersive environments. "The biggest opportunity lies in creating emotionally immersive, wellness-driven environments that feel personal rather than generic."

Her view of legacy remains measured. "A legacy of thoughtful leadership, strong teams and projects that age with dignity, spaces that remain relevant long after trends fade."

In hospitality, endurance rarely announces itself. It becomes evident quietly, in properties that continue to function, resonate and earn trust long after opening night.