



Mireille Chakib Daou
Founder and Principal, MDgroup

Born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, Mireille Chakib Daou, spent her early years studying at the French Lycée before moving to the United States during the Lebanese Civil War. She completed high school and later earned a Bachelor of Arts in Interior Design with a minor in Fine Arts from Marymount University in 1992. After gaining valuable professional experience in the U.S., she returned to Lebanon and founded MDgroup, a multidisciplinary design-build firm specialising in residential, commercial and hospitality projects. With over 30 years of experience, she has built a career that bridges creativity, technical precision, and cultural sensitivity. Her work reflects a synthesis of Western professionalism and Middle Eastern artistry, emphasising timeless design quality and execution. As a woman in the construction industry, she continues to advocate for inclusion and mentorship, inspiring young designers to pursue their ambitions with confidence and purpose.

Designing beyond boundaries: A Woman's journey in Interior Design and Construction

Mireille Chakib Daou

Abstract

When I graduated from Marymount University, Virginia USA, in 1992 with a BA in Interior Design and minor in Fine Arts, I carried with me a vision that design could be more than decoration; it could be a language that connects people, culture and emotion. More than three decades later, that belief continues to guide me as I lead MDgroup, a design-build firm based in Lebanon that has completed projects across residential, commercial and hospitality sectors.

Beginnings in the United States

My professional journey began in the United States, where I was fortunate to work alongside experienced designers and architects who emphasised process, precision, and collaboration. Those early years taught me that design excellence depends as much on communication and organisation as on creativity.

The U.S. design culture valued clear documentation, teamwork and client engagement. I learned how to translate ideas into executable plans, manage budgets, and respect deadlines. These lessons formed the foundation of my professional discipline. But beyond that, they nurtured my belief that good design must be both functional and human-centred as much as it is aesthetic. Every space should respond to how people live, work and feel.

Returning Home to Redefine my Path

After gaining valuable experience abroad, I made the life-changing decision to return to Lebanon, my home country. The nation was in a phase of reconstruction and reinvention, and I wanted to contribute to that renewal. I brought back not just technical expertise, but also the conviction that design could play a vital role in rebuilding identity and fostering resilience.

In Beirut, I founded MDgroup, a practice that began as a design studio and gradually evolved into a comprehensive design-build firm. I wanted to bridge the gap between design vision and execution, to ensure that what we conceptualise on paper materialised with integrity and precision on site. Over time, MDgroup grew into a multidisciplinary team handling every phase of turn-key projects, from concept development and technical detailing to construction and finishing.

Our projects spanned a wide range of scales and typologies: private residences, corporate offices, retail spaces, and hospitality projects, among others. Each project reflects our core philosophy, that good design harmonises aesthetics, functions and emotions. We approach every space as a narrative, blending contemporary design language with local craftsmanship and prime materials.

Navigating a Male-Dominated Industry

Becoming a contractor and leading a design-build firm as a woman in Lebanon was not an easy job. The construction field remains largely male-dominated, and when I first entered job sites, I often

encountered skepticism. Many assumed that a woman's role in design was limited to aesthetics and not technical execution.

To succeed, I had to prove my competence, not through words, but through knowledge and results. I immersed myself in every aspect of the work: materials, engineering coordination, site supervision, and budgeting. I learned to navigate the challenges of construction management and speak the language of craftsmen and suppliers. Over time, the results of our projects spoke louder than any ideas.

Leading MDgroup required not only technical skill but also emotional intelligence. I learned to balance assertiveness with empathy, to lead teams by example, foster trust, and encourage collaboration. I believe that strong leadership comes from mutual respect and shared purpose.

Operating in Beirut also meant dealing with unique challenges, from economic instability to material shortages and political uncertainty. Yet these difficulties shaped my resilience, they taught me how to design with flexibility, creativity, and optimism.

Design Philosophy: Where Culture Meets Function

My design philosophy has always centred on people and place. I believe that every space should reflect its users' lifestyle and cultural identity while maintaining a sense of universality and timelessness.

At MDgroup, we approach design as a holistic process that merges art and engineering. Every element, from light and proportion to texture and detail, is carefully considered to achieve harmony. I

draw inspiration from both modern simplicity and the richness of Lebanese craftsmanship. Collaborating with local artisans allows us to create spaces that feel authentic and rooted, using natural materials such as wood, glass, stone and metal in innovative ways.

Sustainability is also integral to our practice. In a region where resources are limited and the environment faces mounting challenges, responsible design is essential. We strive to incorporate energy efficient systems, eco-friendly materials and adaptive reuse strategies where possible. Our goal is to create spaces that not only enhance quality of life but also respect the planet.

Three Decades of Evolution and Empowerment

Over the past thirty years, my career has evolved alongside the field itself. Technology has transformed how we design and build, from digital modeling to advanced project management tools. Yet, the essence of design remains unchanged: it is still about empathy, creativity, and problem solving.

Through MDgroup, I have had the privilege to collaborate with talented professional, loyal clients, and dedicated craftsmen who share a common vision. Together, we have completed projects that stand as a testament to perseverance, quality and passion.

Being a woman entrepreneur in design and construction has also given me a platform to advocate for inclusion and mentorship. I am deeply committed to encouraging young designers, especially women, to pursue their ambitions confidently. The industry needs

diverse voices, and I believe that women bring unique perspectives that enrich design through intuition, detail and emotional depth.

Looking Forward

Today my mission is to continue expanding MDgroup while exploring new frontiers in design innovation. I see every project as an opportunity to push boundaries, to integrated technology, sustainability, and culture into a cohesive experience.

As I reflect on my journey, from the classrooms of Marymount University to the construction sites of Beirut, I see a story shaped by perseverance, adaptability and purpose. Every challenge has strengthened my resolve, and every success has deepened my appreciation for this profession.

Design, at its best, is not just about creating beautiful spaces; it is about improving the way people live, work and connect. It is about building environments that inspire, comfort, and empower. And as a woman who has built her career across continents and through shifting times, I stand by this conviction: good design has no gender, no boundary and no limit. It is and should always be, Design for All.



Sue Alouche
Professor, l'École de Design Nantes Atlantique

I am a design and branding strategist whose career began in 1980 in London, working with global brands on retail projects. At the same time, paradoxically, I had to face a life-changing accident which challenged my own resistance to the built environment.

In 1990, I co-founded my own ethical design agency and later became an independent consultant for NGOs and charities, echoing my own values of diversity and inclusivity.

In 2004, my professional experience in social and ethical branding came with me to France when I started teaching at l'École de Design Nantes Atlantique, hoping to inspire the next generation of socially-conscious designers.

From Disability to Design for All: A Journey of Resilience

Sue Alouche

Abstract

In 1980, I joined Terence Conran's celebrated retail design agency where I was Studio Manager to a team of 30 designers. Believing the world was my oyster, life took an unexpected turn in 1984 when a serious road accident left me unable to walk for two years.

The initial response from my employer was empathetic, but, I was eventually let go. My view of the world changed dramatically, being in a wheelchair for 2 years, you see things from a different perspective.

Fortunately, four former directors had set up The Design Solution and offered me a position. I joined them in 1986 without hesitation, but, with a major physical challenge: an office on 5 floors with no lift. Relying on walking sticks as my aids, it worked. I was eventually promoted to Associate Director.

Their empathy and trust in me was a powerful lesson. I gained first-hand experience of fighting against the built environment, cementing my resilience and informing my life-long advocacy for Design for All.

KEYWORDS: *Empathy and Kindness, Ethical and Sustainable Design, Diversity and Inclusivity, Inaccessibility, Built Environments, Design for All, Resilience, Socially-Conscious Design. Circular Design, Circular Economy.*

Back on my feet. Embracing Ethical and Sustainable Design

By 1990, I was able to walk again (not without disability) but was ready for a new challenge. I left The Design Solution to co-found my own agency, Eureka!, with a co-Associate Director. We were driven by a vision centred on sustainable and ethical design – a radical idea for 1990.

Our launch materials reflected this commitment: we used the grainiest ecological paper, vegetable inks, and embraced a "less-is-more" strategy and aesthetic. Our unique approach attracted pioneering clients of this epoch, such as The Body Shop and later, Lush cosmetics, as well as corporations such as the BBC. Following on from this, various arts and cultural organisations jumped on board.

Despite our innovative concept, the recession of the early 90s proved insurmountable, and in 1994, we parted ways. More resilience was needed.

Strategic Consulting for Social Impact

Following Eureka!, I established myself as an Independent Consultant focused on ethical and environmental issues, leveraging my strategic experience to support the charity and NGO sector. At this time, organisations, such as these, were just beginning to see

the value of viewing themselves as 'brands' and starting to employ emotional triggers and stories for their causes. This is where I could help. This strategic shift gave me a focus on social problems:

The World Development Movement (WDM): I worked on projects addressing displacement and poverty. Critically, the WDM was among the first to publicly call out global brands and manufacturers for unethical practices involving factory workers in China and India¹ (WDM, 1995).

Marie Stopes International: My work centred on communicating issues of women's rights, education and contraception, still considered a taboo, to a 'younger' public.

Centrepoint: I developed strategies to promote the work of this homeless charity for young people, helping to raise awareness and gain vital funding from businesses.

In 1997, I returned to academia to deepen my theoretical understanding of social design issues and to pursue a Master in 'Design Studies' at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design. My thesis, (S.Woolway-Alouche), 1997) *Aroma, the vision of the future*²,

¹ This critical piece of research which spanned 6 months inside factories, specifically targeted a brand producing Barbie, Sindy, and Action Man dolls. It was the first time this issue had gained interest in the UK parliament as an Early Day Motion in 1996 <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/14030/barbie-sindy-and-action-man>

² The premise of my thesis research was that Aroma could offer a way (and was already naturally helping visually impaired people in the built environment to find their way around). But, I wanted to work particularly in retail design, in order to develop a sense of appetite, to render their shopping experience more experiential. I worked with 3 visually impaired people from the Royal National

explored the retail experience for visually-impaired people and earned me a Distinction.

A New Design Language and a Move to France

The early 2000s saw a personal and professional transition. I was now working freelance for my husband's design agency, Made by Man (which later merged with Reich and Petch, Canada), specialising in the design of cultural and arts sectors.

In 2004, we made the personal decision to move to France with our 2 children. It was a total culture shock for us all, and I needed to learn a whole new 'design language.' I reached out to a design school I had noticed just before we left the UK and was soon given a part-time role as Professor Adjunct at l'École de Design Nantes Atlantique in 2005.

The world had become a harder place to live and work.

Speaking only a smattering of French, French lessons came first. In France the notion of Brand Strategy was under-developed which gave me other opportunities. But it was not easy to work as a freelancer in France, until 2009, when Nicholas Sarkozy, introduced the Auto Entrepreneur scheme - as I was one of the first 500 to join the scheme, I was invited to the Élysée Palace to meet him.

Institute for the Blind and who kindly took part in trials in Tesco supermarkets and eventually went on to become friends. My other professional partner on the project was BOC Sciences who was just starting to trial aroma experiences in cars and offices.

The results were interesting, as they worked well for the visually impaired, but not so well for members of staff who had to endure the odours over longer periods of time. This was something I had to address. My work was featured on Radio 3 and in Design Week.

My extensive professional background proved invaluable for the challenges of the time: an ageing population, refugee crises, climate change, racial issues, unethical practices and inclusivity. These issues created opportunities to infuse my teaching with my core values and experience.

Ageing, transgenerational Design, Diversity and Sustainability. A More Focused Approach.

Over the years, my work at the school evolved. I taught brand design to International Bachelor Retail and Product students and was also involved in the work of specialist Master Labs focusing on Sustainable Design, Food, Care and Media. My teaching was intensely focused on real-world social challenges:

Refugee Aid: During the Syria crisis, I led a week-long workshop with 2 colleagues focused on having empathy with and developing ideas to help the daily life of refugees³ (UNHRC, 1995). Privately, I organised collections for refugees at The Jungle in Calais through my social network, Knowing Nantes⁴.

³ During the research phase of this workshop, we used roleplay tools developed recently by the UNHRC - Passages (An awareness game confronting the plight of refugees.) A lot of the exercises focused on the issues of empathy, acceptance and inclusion. The students found the roleplaying difficult – it made them realise the extreme difficulties they face particularly in their displacement from country to country.

⁴ Knowing Nantes is a social network formed in 2005 for Anglophones arriving in Nantes from all over the world, who were as lost as I was. It currently has 7,300 members on FB and also has a dedicated page for setting up in business in France.



17th November 2015 Knowing Nantes' aid to the Refugees based at the Jungle, Calais.



Dialogues - a book of applied research. Led by Aalto University (Helsinki, Finland), L'École de design Nantes Atlantique (France) and the Politecnico di Milano (Italy).

Transgenerational Design and Empathy: I co-led workshops for TANGO an Applied Research Project⁵ (Aalto University, 2013) for Sustainable Design and Art Pedagogy. Entitled 'Understanding and Connecting With Me As I Get Young' and 'Design to Improve Life,' using extreme user role play.⁶



Design to Improve Life using extreme user roleplay. A workshop undertaken with Elyssa Sfar.

⁵ The Applied Research Project "For Sustainable Design and Art Pedagogy was a transgenerational design and research project and a series of workshops and exhibitions organised by TANGO <http://www.designtango.eu/courses-test> held in 3 countries culminating in conferences, guest lectures and the development of Dialogues - a book of applied research. Led by Aalto University (Helsinki, Finland), L'École de design Nantes Atlantique (France) and the Politecnico di Milano (Italy). I was one of two Lead-Professors in the Trans-generational Empathy workshop.

⁶ A workshop focusing on Designing for the Ageing Population with 'Design for All' principles, using Methods from IDEO to enable students to feel like old people (by dressing up to restrict their senses and movement and role play). By asking them to adopt their grandparents for a month of intensive observations and discussions, to really earn about their needs and their daily lives, to improve them and fulfil their desires through design.

From Empathy to Circularity.

Beyond l'École de Design, I developed and ran workshops for the University of Nîmes (Integrating Empathy into Service Design) and courses for Rennes Business School, (Sustainable Brand Design in the Luxury Industry and User Experience Management in the Cultural Arts Sector)⁷.



Students outside FRAC, Rennes, inside walkabout to study users, and finally, mapping the Customer Journeys.

My academic focus broadened in 2013 with the publication of my book on personal branding, *What's the Difference that Makes the Difference*⁸. (Fuchs, Alouche, 2013)

Following this, I was invited to write a doctorate proposal on the circular economy⁹. Although I was not selected for the doctorate

⁷ I developed this course to give the students hands-on experiences of users in cultural centres in Rennes, France. It was important for them to see the difficulties of different types of users first hand in the built environment, but also the exhibits themselves. The focus was on inclusivity, accessibility and design experience. Each year, I organised a partnership with a different cultural centre, partners included the FRAC and La Criée Centre for Contemporary Art.

⁸ *What's the Difference that Makes the Difference* is a personal branding workbook developed by Yvonne Fuchs and myself and has since been developed into workshops and seminars for students and freelance and start-up businesses alike.

position, the research revealed the immense potential of the circular economy in the built environment and other design disciplines. This led me to develop seminars and projects focused on circular design, such as *The Rag Pickers of Tomorrow*.



Parisien Rag Pickers 1899-1901. Taken from Tom Szaky's Book, *The Future of Packaging*.



Below: Rag Pickers in India at the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation - Ahmad Masood/Reuters.

⁹ A doctorate research proposal for the University of Brighton/Philips Lighting, Entitled 'Adding more meaning to Lighting Design in the Circular Economy.' Backed by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council.

Full circle: Research, Writing, Retirement, and finally putting my feet up.

My career has come full circle. I have walked miles in my own shoes, as well as others¹⁰, learning along the way the challenges facing the human race and how to design to the real needs of human beings. I also retain a keen interest in circular design and the social effects of contemporary geopolitics.

I will be retiring at the end of this year after a fulfilling career. My immediate focus will be to write a book on the history and cultural significance of the original Red, White, and Blue bag, now an iconic symbol associated with displaced refugees. I am passionate about communicating its rich cultural, social, and design history as well as telling refugee's back stories.

I plan to continue looking for research opportunities in these vital areas and to take up art classes to explore new ways of communicating these themes.

¹⁰ One of the most famous expressions in Empathy training is "Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes. The saying is often contributed to various Indian tribes, but it also comes from a poem written by Mary T. Lathrap "Judge Softly" or "Walk a Mile in His Moccasins" in 1895. I am still looking for the perfect pair of comfortable shoes for my retirement.

REFERENCES

Aalto University. (2013). DIALOGUES for Sustainable Design and Art Pedagogy: The AH Design project. Art + Design + Architecture publication series. Retrieved from <http://www.designtango.eu/archives/1408>

Fuchs, Y., Alouche, S. (2013). What's the difference that makes the difference. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whats-difference-workbook-Branding-Workshop/dp/1447838408>

Garner, C. (1995, December 23. Poverty pay of Barbie doll workers. The Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/poverty-pay-of-barbie-doll-workers-1527023.html>

Lathrap, M. T. (n.d.). Judge Softly")Walk a Mile in His Moccasins); Retrieved from <https://jamesmilson.com/about-the-blog/judge-softly-or-walk-a-mile-in-his-moccasins-by-mary-t-lathrap/>

Design TANGO PROJECT (n.d.) TANGO research. retrieved from <http://www.designtango.eu/courses-test>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1995). Passages: An awareness game confronting the plight of refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/473dc1772.pdf>

UK Parliament. (1996). Early Day Motion: Barbie, Sindy and Action Man. retrieved from <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/14030/barbie-sindy-and-action-man>

***University of Brighton. (2015). Lighting the way. Retrieved from
https://www.brighton.ac.uk/about-us/news-and-events/news/2015/02-05_lighting-the-way.aspx***