Thank you for tuning into the real estate and Evasion podcast. Brought to you by EU Li Women's leadership initiative. The utilized mission is to provide leadership and the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. The Wli is the engine that drives you will IBC to be recognized as a leading organization, supporting women as leaders in the industry. Hello hello, this is Judy, host of the Innovation podcast, for EU LIBC's Women's Leadership Initiative, where we talk about everything and everyone taking part in innovation and what that means in the real estate business. And this episode, I'm chatting with HDMI's very own Melissa Higgs. Melissa is an architect who's passionate about creating innovative public spaces where communities come together. She's a believer in the power of architecture and design as a catalyst. For positive change in the world, her practice with HDMI is focused on designing buildings, brands, and shared experiences that connect people and community. Melissa, welcome to the channel. I'm very glad to be your host today.
How are you? Oh, I'm great. I'm so happy to be here, Judy. Thanks for having me. 

I know I gave a little introduction but I'm sure a lot of people are interested in what HTML is all about the rebranding that you've done.

And the sort of work that you do, and with the practice.

Yeah, great. Maybe I'll start a little bit about HCA now.

and a little bit about me, so I'm an architect and I'm a principal in one of seven principles at HC Me now and I feel really privileged and lucky to work on primarily public buildings.

So I get to work on community centers, aquatic centers, libraries, and we do quite a bit of that work across the firm.

We also do some education, so everywhere from you know, child care right up through elementary school.

Schools post secondary and we do projects from small scale things to you know, really big significant community buildings, and I think the what ties it all together for us is really around.

How do we find ways in all of our work at all scales to kind of maximize our impact through our work?

Your team is made of so much more than architects.

What can you tell me a little bit about that?

Yeah, I'd love to. I mean, the the firm has been around for more than 40 years actually. And we, you know, are kind of roots really started in more traditional architecture.

So a small firm that was focused really on architecture and to some extent to urban planning and urban design.
and overtime, especially in the last kind of five to 10 years. We've really kind of changed our focus in our direction and it is really around that idea of creating kind of maximizing our impact. And I think you know. So we've evolved. I would say over the last ten years into being more of an interdisciplinary team and the catalyst, I think really, for that big change for us was this, you know, this desire to try to help communities to solve the kind of pressing issues. But I say maybe the big challenges that we're facing. And by that I think we mean, you know, they're really big things like loneliness, which I know Vancouver gets tagged with quite a bit, and I think a lot of urban centers do. There's this density and proximity, but maybe a lack of connection that leads to loneliness. You know the idea of health and mental Wellness? Resilience that both as individuals but also in a community scale. You know the climate crisis and you know they're really big things. Racism, discrimination, inequity, like. They're really wicked mixed up problems, and I think as architects you know, we're pretty well trained to deal with that kind of complexity, but I think we recognize that you know, to solve those kind of problems through our work, we just we need multiple voices, and we need different perspectives and lived experiences and really design ideas and different ways of thinking at the table to really kind of solve those problems. So yeah, we really changed our team and we have now, you know, quite a wide range of creatives at the firm.
From architects, graphic designers, industrial interior design strategists, social environmental researchers, community engagement specialists. And, you know, we really try to work together to bring those different perspectives to the table. To kind of tackle those problems from, you know, from different or unique angles. It seems to be the discussion of R times today. Rethinking. Who is it? That's on this discussion table and who's really voicing the opinions? And are we actually capturing the voice of the diversity and inclusive nature of our communities? Could you share some insight on the artist in residence program that HMA takes part of or or or provides a platform for in your practice? I think that really highlights a lot of the interdisciplinary and collaborative approach that you take. I'd love to talk about that. About five years ago we haven't. We have a almost like a sub, but we have something called tilt which is our tilt Curiosity labs, which is a it encompasses a range of things, but the short, the short description of it would be. It's areas that we want to investigate that are not project or client driven. So giving us a little bit of a freedom to investigate issues or ideas in our cities that we want to dig into it and one of the initiatives that came that is run through tilt is artists and residents, and it's a pretty simple system. Where we offer a stipend and we have a an application process and we work with artists for usually around right now where it's about 10 weeks per artist in residence and they only ask really is that the artist share with our team so they are welcome to work in our space. A lot of artists need space to work,
so we ask that they engage with us through their process so that we can learn from them and that they can learn, learn from us through the process and we it has been like Judy, it's just been so much more than I can imagine. Like one of one. They're so in so many standouts. But one of the standouts for me would be we worked, we had a woman come to us who is a choreographer and dancer. And she said, I want to work with you to think about how bodies experience space, because dancers have, you know, they experience and think about space in a different way. So I would like to choreograph a dance for one of your buildings. And so she choreographed dance for Aquatic Center in Surry called Grandview Heights Aquatic Center, where she tried to understand what the concepts basically the building was and then represented through dance. And it's just so it's just been incredible. We're working with an artist right now called David. Ellingsworth, he's just finishing up with us. We've we have worked with. Oh my gosh, names work for me right now. So many we've worked with a food based artist animal toy. We work with the woodcarver, we've worked with painters. We work with Ola Volo to do a mural. So I think and it actually changes us. I guess there you might ask, why do we do it? We do it to push ourselves and to see things through different perspectives. And it's one of those things that has really. It brings us together as a firm. It also we share the outcome and it gives the artist.
Hopefully some kind of a platform for their work as well.

So there's a, uh, hopefully, mutual benefit. But I think it just changes our thinking.

It's it's very different when you commissioned those artists.

Not to showcase their work, but rather learn from their work.

There's so much inherent value.

In that in that approach, yeah, it's it's been really, really rich, like beyond our expectations.

I don't know if a lot of people know this who are listening to this podcast, who are listening to this podcast,

but HDMI recently went through a very significant rebranding. I mean, the logo, communication,

Web style, website style reads very different than the previous version,

and I'd love some insight on your approach to branding and communication.

And why. Take the pivot into this rebranded version.

We're seeing today. Yeah, I'd love to and it kind of ties into the conversation.

We just had around around the fact that we were changing as a firm and changing who not as who we are but how we how we go about our practice and what we want to do.

And so I think we realized that our previous brand really reflected it was still hanging on a little bit more to more traditional architectural practice.

You know it had the name architecture and design in it,

which was a move for us to acknowledge that we had other design types.

But you know the actual logo itself was,

you know there was black and white.

It had quite kind of hard lines.

Even the photography style. The way we kind of captured our our buildings and spaces and places was you didn't have a lot of people in it.
It was much more traditional in terms of how architecture kind of shows up in magazines and things, and I think we felt a little bit. Honestly like my analogy would be it felt a bit like we were wearing clothes that still fit us but didn't quite reflect who we were. Or maybe who we wanted to be. So yeah, it's been wonderful having our own internal kind of graphic design and branding team. And so some of the things you might see is that we kind of moved away from that kind of upper case firmness to sort of lower case. Letters that are a little bit less legible. They focus a little bit less on the names and more about the idea of. I think we're trying to reflect the idea of collaboration. You know, HC may have some market values we didn't want to, you know, move entirely away from that, but. You know we wanted to, just to be honest, we want to place ourselves differently in the industry and have people know about all these other things that we were doing that weren't really reflected in how we are showing up in the world. From a branding perspective. Uhm, yeah. So I think one of the things we've had for quite some time as this website experiment which was kind of it was our old brand, was kind of instead of having A traditional website that kind of showcased our work, we always had this quite. We started off with a question saying, you know, we'd show a photograph and say, you know, what would you like to see here? Or how do you feel about you know this issue? So we were we were getting to this idea of inviting people in to be more a part of US, and I think we reached the brand, hopefully really. Celebrates, I think a couple key things would
be this idea that we wanted to acknowledge that there are so many people with individual curiosity’s within the firm, and we wanted to kind of lead with that. I think there's been this long kind of myth that's been sold about architects. As you know, a single individual at the top of a pyramid, and you know one big idea that comes from one person. And in practice anybody who works with architects. Kind of, I hope, knows that that that's not the way it is. It's really about a collective of ideas. And then I think the other really big thing we wanted to showcase in the brand. Was that moments of real meaningful? Life happened in our in our community buildings and the spaces that we work on and we wanted to reflect that even in terms of how we document our buildings. And I think one of the interesting things we did was start kind of crowdsourcing photographs. Actually, where we, if we found images of our work through other people's Instagram feeds, would reach out and say hey we love this picture of the you know you and your family playing at this space or getting a book in this library. Are you OK if we use this image on our site and we just got all this kind of amazing richness of people actually being human and? And doing the things we want them to do in our buildings. Yes, I think the logo really is was a big way of reflecting that. It's much more playful. It's got warm colors in it, and I think I guess the last thing I would say is that it's I think what we want it to be. As kind of a promise to the communities that we serve, that that's how we want to engage with them.
It's how we want to go through our design process. And then it's hopefully reflects, reflects that that about us. I really like that. You've sort of taken an intangible quality and reflected that through, you know, graphics. Can you tell me how does that now get translated into the architecture? So I love that you guys have changed your approach with regards to I want to say almost post completion, right? Like you're, you're now crowdsourcing photos and you're crowdsourcing. Experiences, let's take let's rewind and say we're at the we're at the schematic stage of a drawing, and we're thinking about a building. How has that now rebranding and new approach? How does that manifest in that stage? That's such a great question, and I love that you asked, and I think you started that you started your question with the idea. I think of the intangible, like how do we like? How do we make that tangible? And I think that is something that when we when we talk about maximizing our impact, that's always the really challenging question. It's one we've we've been working actually for several years. Now on a framework called the fresh for calling it the social impact guide where we can figure out. OK, we we may have set out these visions and these values with the community about you know community building and connections and maybe perhaps making a welcoming, inclusive space. How do we know in the end that we have achieved that through the work and we have all these great metrics for environmental performance of our building and for years. And you know, really proud of that and part of the whole industry for kind of shifting around.
You know, lead and addressing the climate.

Prices through those, those really tangible metrics,

but we don't have a way of capturing the intangible things like the communications between people,

how people's ability to access a building,

so we're moving cultural barriers,

removing social equity, and cost barriers.

All the intangible barriers to people coming into buildings,

and what that actually means at a community scale around addressing loneliness and community resilience.

So we're trying really hard,

actually, that's part of the answer.

The question to develop a framework where we can actually track.

Track things like access Inclusion,

health and well being community resilience so our post occupancy work is actually going back and saying OK,

we set a vision statement with the client and we had a series of principles.

How can we measure those outcomes in let's say?

Better attendance rates and better academic performance,

perhaps at some of our high schools.

If we have a before and after,

we can check from a usage rates,

but also just can we go back to the community and engage with them again?

Two years five years after and say,

you know, do you feel more connected to your community as a result of this building?

So there's so? I guess part of the answer to the question is,

it's around what are we trying?

What are we trying to achieve?

And I think it's been huge for us establishing and really getting our clients on board.

And again, they're really lucky to work with community,

you know, Parks and Recreation a lot of time there and libraries and.

Certain culture folks. They're really.

They're all about the impact in the and and you
know the end result of that at a community scale.
So they're really on board with working on that with us.
But in terms of your really specific question around schematic design,
I think that doing the kind of engagement that we are quite often now able to do.
You know, having the social impact researchers on our team to be able to sit with us and talk a little bit about the impact of putting something here or there or creating social moments in spaces.
I think one of the big things for us would be.
Really working with our clients to convince them that some of the program spaces that make up a place, whether it's like the gymnasium, the fitness center, the pool, those are huge and important, but actually almost equally or maybe more important is what we call the in between spaces kind of the glue spaces where people actually they might come to engage in a sport or to get a library book, but I think if you put a cafe there and you provide seating and Wi-Fi and you know a great view of people will stay longer and they're much more likely to kind of bump into someone they know or make a new connection.
And so it wasn't really seeing the needle shift quite a bit in terms of people understanding that the kind of really, truly public spaces, interior and exterior, are really the fabric of the community and rentals.
Really important connections happen, so that's kind of shaping our thinking.
But I think the other piece of it is how do we know we're making progress?
And that the how do you measure the intangible?
So we really as a firm trying to get out and get onto that.
love how you touched on the spaces in between because it's sort of that leftover space where you know we're focusing on private.

It's it's almost like we're focusing on the private and focusing on the public, but there's that semi private semi public.

That sort of falls through the cracks, something that I think definitely works in.

Your benefit is that HDMI works with a lot of public entities.

You mentioned, you know, park boards, community centers, how do you see that?

Approach in the non public sector you know. So if I I'm where I'm HDMI working with a private developer who just wants to build, you know, a spec house.

Four to six story wood frame as little amenities as possible,
you know maximize floor plate efficiency.

How do you? How do you see that your learnings and your results inform and and maybe alter that very traditional approach?

Yeah, that's also really interesting question and I will.

Touch a little bit on,

we are we are I am right now working with a private developer on a planned Community facility in Coquitlam

that is quite they're really trying to achieve incredible and high social social outcomes. The work and maybe I'll talk a little bit about that,

but I guess to your question it's really, I think about values and when we think about if I look back on the idea of branding and and having the the kind of interdisciplinary team that we have,

I think a lot of the time it is.

It is trying to understand what is valuable to people and I think.

You know, for a lot of our, for a lot of private developers,
the value is in, you know,
the reality is they they wanted to have a competitive
edge.
You know what makes their four or six story walk
up more desirable and perhaps cell versus the one down
the street.
And I think we are increasingly understanding that people
people
are looking for more.
People want to be able to connect so that there
is actually value.
And that's you know, I think I think our our
community clients see that and they get and they understand
that that's the business that they're in.
But I think our role in terms of branding communication.
And in visual visual languages,
is trying to explain what the differences explain what the
benefit is and try to make it visible to people.
And I think in terms of branding people are so
much more savvy now.
I think there's we have so much more access to
information.
Social media is everywhere, so I think people can start
to see and I think we're getting more engaged,
especially in the built environment and spaces that people
want
to live in terms of demanding what it is that
they want.
And I think the industry will shift a little bit.
You know to try to provide those social more social
amenities.
No,
you're right, especially when it comes to branding.
I mean, marketing is faster than than construction.
To take on innovation and redefine the story.
And we're certainly seeing a lot of branding.
Now, take the approach of community building and you know
new tech,
new condominiums and apartment projects come out with
branding that's
very different than what we would have seen.
You know 510 years from now.

What I love about your process with the rebranding is you have your branding team in house. So you've fully managed that process from A-Z. That's first of all very different than you know, a lot of other businesses, particularly architecture, that's also very different than how the development industry markets its projects.

So you've, you want to imagine that you've nailed down your branding as a company, and then, let's say a private developer comes in. Works with you guys to build a building. They then outsource their marketing to a third party that may or may not capture the right message that may or may not highlight the right spaces.

How does that you know? First of all, how has why take your branding in-house has how what has been the successes and results behind that?

And how do you see that evolving when it comes to the developer side? Yeah, I think for us, if I'm honest, we've been on a journey at least for five years. Maybe a little bit longer than that where we really. At the leadership level sat down and decided you know what to do. Maybe silly to understand our vision and to really lead with our vision and our values.

And. I think that as I said it, like that idea to have more impact. I think our first thinking was that you know we can bring in our visual and communication team when we brought them in at a very small scale and I think our first thinking, if I'm really honest, Judy was like these, you know this these this team will help us better communicator architectural ideas and they will amplify our architecture and we were very architectural centered about.
it. And then, you know, in really quickly, really early on, we just saw the impact was so much greater than that.

You know the way that they were able to help us communicate ideas to our end customers like the Community and our clients was quite transformative and they helped us with that. So I think we immediately saw the impact there.

But we also. They were helping us communicate ideas more effectively through branded campaigns with our existing clients. So if we had a new community building and we wanted to connect with the Community in a really meaningful way. We had them. We brought them in to help us kind of create a wordmark and a branded campaign for those initiatives and we just saw the impact in terms of the uptake in participation rates.

Even just the idea of getting people kind of excited and again telling a story. But what this building could be like? We're just amazed by their approach and their perspective and where and where it took us.

So you know what? What happened from Watford. Something quite small. We had all these engage engagement campaigns that really kind of grab peoples attention and got a little bit of of notice. I would say and then pretty quickly we had external clients asking us if our team could could do rebranding for them and a classic like really great significant values align client for us was was pacifist Canada. It's now possible Canada it was at the time.

Canadian Passivhaus Institute and I hope A lot of your listeners dealing in the built environment. I've heard of passive house,
but just in case, it's a really kind of ultra low energy certification program that I think is one of our really key tools and India dressing. Reduction of climate emissions. So when we had came and passed, both institute come to us and say, could we do a re rent? Could be worth one rear and we were just absolutely thrilled. And I think if you want to kind of Google that as a case study the the difference from can fee which I think most people didn't know to pass those Canada which I feel like is is the rear ending was incredible and amazing. And right now we're doing. Work with Squamish Nation, which is again so so impactful and kind of the work that we want to be doing. So that work is just incredible, so I guess I'm losing track of what your original question was. I think it evolved overtime for us, where we saw really how much more reach we could have to have more impact. I think it's that that's the real motivator for us, and I mean our team has grown. Since, you know, from one one creative joining us just specifically in terms of communication and visual branding. We have three creatives now. We have a client lead and the services lead and we are just really seeing the incredible potential they have to tell stories too too. Help us advocate on issues that we want to advocate on by kind of translating. Sometimes you know written or verbal thoughts into something that's really engageable and digestible for people. So I think in terms of I think your original question was what did it look like to do it internally?
I think we had this incredible advantage of feeling really known, like we had people on the inside who kind of knew what our vision and values were and saw how we how we actually operated. In some ways, I think they reflected us back to ourselves as leaders of the firm in a way that. That we couldn't have expected it to be honest. Maybe if we'd gone with an external. Branding UM company, but I think that's the that's the trick is to is. They're great listeners, and so if it was in terms of our external clients, I think they're listening really deeply and trying to understand authentically what an organization or or client is and then trying to reflect that visually. It really touches on the importance of bringing in people with different skill sets and different experiences. Because you know me and you could be sitting on the table and we could listen to the same. We could hear the same thing but not interpret it or or, you know, brand it. The right way to actually reflect the message that's been said and it's really important to. Lupin, those players as part of our team who have that expertise and know how have their ears on the ground. And no, you know, whenever we actually captured the diversity of the community or one have we fall into the gap of a very niched survey that actually in fact captures only a specific part. Little did we know there's so much of those. So much of the community that's seen that survey, for example, but not actually responded, so I commend you guys for bringing in your your team in house and and starting to invite people that challenge your skill set and add to that. And having a very open approach to com pounding your skills rather than than soloing them.
How do you? How do you see that?
In the future, how do you you know?
It seems like you guys started off by,
you know, let's do a test run and and
bring in someone to to brand it and it somehow
exploded into a burst of opportunities that you didn't expect.
How do you see that unfolding in parallel or or
you know,
with the practice of
HDMI? Yeah, I think it's just going to keep growing.
We're a little bit we're loving.
I think you kind of touched on the idea of
challenge like I think the other disciplines coming in are
kind of challenging us and pushing.
It's in a really good way,
which is kind of humbling,
but also it gets us somewhere so much better like
we're kind of.
I'm loving that part of like we're working with an
environmental psychologist right now on that social impact framework that
I touched on,
and it's been really great to have her perspective and
say,
yeah, you're saying this book?
Is that really happening? And how do we?
How do we capture it?
How do we document it?
And you know, I think the the idea of bringing
more people in just makes the ability to sort of
solve those bigger problems and to hold us accountable for
the things that we do.
And I'm really in a more robust way,
so I think for us it's just.
It's just the beginning and we see whether it's through
collaborations on project specific things with people outside,
or bring it into our own team.
I think I think the I think they can
summary.
I think the problems we face are getting more complex
and we just need more voices at the table and
it especially at the city scale,
right? I think for a lot of people who are
in the development industry or see this incredible impact we
have on people's behavior and.
Their sense of safety and happiness in cities.
I think working the built environment it's so critical to
always be questioning how we're doing things.
And are we doing things in the right way?
I think the key word of this podcast really is what
you just mentioned is that projects are becoming more and
more complex,
and this idea of of wanting to grab it and
run with it by yourself is just not going to
work anymore and we need to start really incorporating more
and more of that. Those diverse speakers and those diverse
voices that can speak to the potential problems and solve
the existing problems so that we can future proof our
our cities and communities for the future.
Thank you so much. This was very informative.
I'm really excited about the evolution of HCMS practice for
all of our speakers.
HDMI has a ton of books that they publish terms
of community building pools and public spaces,
and I really invite anyone who's at the other end
of this podcast to check them out,
check out their work and their recent rebranding,
Melissa. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak
with you and learn a little bit more about HTML
practice.
Thanks Judy was a pleasure.
I love the conversation so thanks for having me.

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