

**The immigration Summit - Part 2.
Design Is Not Neutral: Immigration, Practice, and the
Future of Our Cities. Q+A with Mitra Memari, AIA,
Community Regional Director, Partner at HKS**



Mitra Memari is Community Regional Director and Partner at HKS. She leads strategic, purpose-driven change in the built environment, aligning people, purpose and design to create lasting impact for clients and communities. She brings teams together around shared goals and guides complex initiatives with focus. Committed to design that serves people, sustainability and equity, Mitra helps shape the firm's practice through inclusive leadership and design excellence.

-Why does immigration matter specifically to architects and designers—beyond policy, at the level of the work we produce and the communities we shape?

Immigration matters to our profession because design is not neutral. It reflects assumptions about how people live, and those assumptions break down in a global city.

People immigrate at different stages of life. A child adapts differently than a teenager. An adult arriving mid-career carries a different relationship to space, identity, and belonging. Those layers show up in how families live together, how communities gather, and how people move through the built environment.

If architects do not understand that, we design for a version of the city that does not exist. If we do, we design spaces that actually work.

-Where can architects and designers have the most tangible impact on immigration today—what are the pressure points where our work actually makes a difference?

At the points where lived reality and rigid systems collide.

Housing is the clearest example. Our codes and building typologies are often out of sync with lived reality. They assume a fixed, nuclear model, while many immigrant communities operate through multigenerational living, shared resources, and spaces that adapt over time.

The second is the profession itself. Who we hire, who we sponsor, and who we retain all matter. Talent does not disappear when policy tightens. It relocates. We either build pathways or we watch that capacity leave.

The third is civic space. For many immigrants, public space is the first point of belonging. If we get that wrong, exclusion is designed in. If we get it right, integration accelerates.

-What is lost—concretely—when the profession does not include diverse cultural and lived experiences, particularly in the context of immigration?

Precision. We lose the ability to read a place accurately.

Without diverse perspectives, especially from people who have navigated multiple systems, cultures, and constraints, we default to simplified solutions for complex realities. That leads to housing that does not fit, spaces that do not invite, and projects that underperform.

We also lose adaptive thinking. People who have immigrated, whether as children, students, or adults, have had to constantly recalibrate. That ability to translate between worlds is exactly what good design requires.

So what is lost is not just diversity. It is intelligence in the work itself.