AU: Hospitality and Outdoor Spaces

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**Evan Troxel:** Well, this, this episode's a little bit different. We're hosting a guest, which we don't do all the time, but we've been doing more of. And, one of the differences I think, with this episode versus others is Archispeak University. Let's learn something today. And so we're gonna learn about hospitality and outdoor spaces from a design professional's point of view. What do you got there?

**Evan Troxel:** Welcome to AU. We're gonna do hospitality and outdoor spaces 101 today, and hopefully we all learn something. I think we're gonna learn something, don't you?

**Cormac Phalen:** Yeah. It's kind of exciting. It's one of the things that is kind of a growing market. You know, we see it in both the things that we do, that we specialize in. You see it in other markets and you know, it's good to kind of like learn about what's going on. What are the trends, how do you expand the indoor spaces to the exterior?

**Evan Troxel:** Right. And, Like I was saying, I've never really done this kind of space, although I guess technically I have, when we do schools, there's always outdoor eating components and outdoor zones and we're always trying to merge indoor and outdoor coming at Southern California angle, right, where we have the luxury of being able to do that a lot of the year. Usually when schools in session we're able to do that, right? It's only the times when school's not in session. The brunt of the summer is on, and we're not worried about it. But, um, there's been a lot of development in this space. There's products and all kinds of innovation that's been happening.

And something that that I've talked about for a couple years now is architects don't know what they don't know. And if, unless you have an excuse to learn , because it's on your current project, what are the chances you're not gonna learn about this stuff? Right? So our goal with this is to expose this stuff so that your next project or maybe your current project, this will get your gears turning, give you a little bit more information so that when you show up, you're not a total dummy.

You don't know nothing about this this category of design and you could lead a client through a decent conversation and talk about pros and cons and obviously features and benefits. So, I'm excited about this conversation.

So today we are joined by our guest, Liz Neuffer, and she is currently a project designer at Aria Group. For the last 10 years, she has completed projects and worked with restaurant clients across the country and internationally. Liz works with restaurant groups and independent restaurateurs to craft original and authentic guest experiences with a holistic and atmospheric design philosophy.

**Evan Troxel:** Well, this is gonna be a fun conversation with Liz. Let's, uh, let's jump into it. You ready?

**Cormac Phalen:** Yeah, Let's.

**Evan Troxel:** Liz, it's great to have you here. Welcome to the podcast.

**Liz Neuffer:** Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

**Evan Troxel:** So, give us a little background. I told you you weren't gonna have to give your whole background, but just kind of set the stage of where you're coming from, where you work. Tell us about the firm that you work for and the types of projects that you're doing.

**Liz Neuffer:** For sure. Yeah. My name is Liz Neuffer. I'm a project designer at Aria Group. It's a firm of about 120 some-odd people, located in Oak Park, Illinois, just west of Chicago. We are a unique firm in that we're both architecture and design. So we collaborate together as one, and for the most part, our project work is in restaurants and hospitality and some larger entertainment spaces and things like that. And we do dabble in some retail and wellness, so we kind of spread the love everywhere. But I would say the majority of our work does land in the restaurant realm.

**Evan Troxel:** Let's talk about the kind of work that you're doing, hospitality work. The thing that I'm really interested in, I guess it's not too different than residential work, depending on where you live in that, there's a big mix of indoor-outdoor design. And coming from Southern California, one of the beautiful things about practicing there is it's an environment where indoor-outdoor makes a lot of sense. And with hospitality, especially going through the previous few years with Covid and things like that, I'm assuming that you saw a lot of that in in your practice. So can you talk about the kinds of experiences and the shifts in the evolution of hospitality through that time and where that's led to now?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, for sure. You hit the nail on the head. I feel like Southern California really opened-up the pun intended *doors* of how we can bring the outdoor inside and also the inside back out. And the climate there is just perfect for that setup. And then I think with the pandemic, I think that whole idea, people wanted to encapsulate that elsewhere you know? Regardless of climate, they wanted to be able to be outside and bring their bubble along with them. So I do feel like the pandemic was in a way, kind of a jumpstart and to figure out where hospitality and where restaurants could go. And I think Southern California was kind of the genesis of that. And so, a lot of the design that has been started from what we were seeing in Southern California has trickled across the country, and just manifested its way into different realms of the industry.

**Cormac Phalen:** Did you use kind of like that pre-pandemic mentality of designing for outdoor spaces as a way to kind of solve some of the design issues during the pandemic, because I'll say that, before I moved back to the Detroit area, which I've only been back for about a year, I spent the last decade and a half in the DC area and for every single restaurant you could name, there was this shift towards everything being outdoors, not indoors. Then as we started to see it roll back post pandemic, everyone has kind of kept both as an option. They're like, oh, we can do both and expand upon that. So is that something that you saw as an early trend that then was refined during Covid?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, for sure. I think so. I think we always had patio designs. Going there was always like, let's have a patio for just a couple of seasons. And it wasn't what it is now. It was just, let's find some inexpensive tables, some inexpensive chairs, get 'em outside so we can get some additional revenue.

And I think the switch was really the restaurateurs and landlords too, realizing the impact that the outdoor dining can bring to the table in terms of revenue. So, I think it's kind of both the design aesthetic along with the whole idea of really wanting to pull diners outside so that they can get that full experience that they wouldn’t be getting inside.

It's kind of a really unique dynamic on how it's shifting and how all of these restaurateurs and our clients that we work with and landlords really understand the importance that the outdoor dining experience can bring.

**Evan Troxel:** When my wife and I go out to a restaurant, which isn't that often, but when it is, it's like we almost always are looking for an outdoor option and that it's just something that we value for us. First of all, I can't imagine what it would've been like to own a restaurant during the pandemic, and I really can't imagine what it would've been like if there were zero options to move any of your operations outside.

I just can't even imagine how hopeless it would have felt to have been a restaurant owner. And in the town that I was in, you know, obviously there was like this move out to the parking areas. Then, there was a lot of parking, right? And people weren't out utilizing that parking, because a lot of the stores were closed.

But for the restaurants that were, obviously some policy changes had to happen at the city level to enable that to happen. And then we saw kind of this move outside into what used to be a car park, right? And now it's a dining space and it's a service space. And there were some restaurants that did the simple thing, right? They put up a tent, they put up something incredibly fast and cheap and easy. And then there were other ones who really invested in the experience to create something worth coming back to. I'm sure there's better ways to say that, but creating an extension of their restaurant, expanding their footprint outside, and still making you feel like you were getting a great experience.

And this is something that I think a lot of restaurateurs didn't think about, including architects in that process. But for the ones that did, I think it was kind of night and day difference in the experience. And this is something that architects can say, yeah, that's the kind of thing that we do. Right? We think about that kind of stuff. It's not just about getting a cheap set of tables and chairs and some heaters and a tent. It's like creating an experience with plants and including decks and all kinds of neat little ways to make it feel less like a parking lot or a tent and more like the restaurant experience.

I would love to hear your experience kind of as you went through that with different clients. And I'm sure there's lots of different levels of what they were willing to pay for or invest in upfront versus maybe even where they ended up, but what was that like working in the hospitality industry through that time?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, I remember we did this exercise actually with the Village of Oak Park where our office is located, and they asked us to come up with some winter dining experience. They wanted to try and figure out a way to pull people back in. So it was actually a really great exercise for us.

We gathered a bunch of designers. We typically are four main studios, so it was kind of a cross studio thing in our office that we got to just pull designers together and come up. It was almost a little bit of a design challenge and charette of all of these different ideas. What can we pull together? And it was looking at greenhouse construction. Is there anything from greenhouse construction that we can pull in? We had one group that was looking at scaffolding. How can we take scaffolding, something that's just on the streets and tarp it and heat it and like just thinking of these everyday building materials or different ways to envelope these outdoor systems or outdoor areas.

So that became a really interesting exercise. They didn't really move forward with a whole lot of it, but it was still a fun design.

**Evan Troxel:** I bet.

**Liz Neuffer:** But in terms of actual clients, we were asked to do quite a bit of exercises of what else can we do? A lot of the winter vestibules were brought in, you probably have seen 'em in Detroit where it's just tacked onto the front doors or something of that system that we can bring into play that's temporary. So it was looking at a lot of that type of work.

**Cormac Phalen:** Well, kind of back to what I was asking you earlier is, so how did you know that kind of like different kind of test fitting, some work, some didn't work kind of thing. How did that kind of start to form what you're doing now, and is it vastly different now than what you were doing kind of pre pandemic when it comes to outdoor spaces?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yes and no. I think yes, in the way that clients are more willing to spend the money and they're willing to add it to the value of the space. I think that's definitely a different mentality. And then yes, in a way, we still have a lot of the same systems that we can work with these patio operable systems, the louvered systems.

I think there's more products out there for sure now than there ever was. I remember trying to find enclosed patio systems before and it's like two products out there. Now they're all over the place. I think what's cool about the products now, is that they're a little bit more all encapsulating. They have the lights, they have the heaters, they have the windscreens and everything's incorporated. A lot of these systems now have guillotine systems, so when they're up, it's enclosed. And then when they roll down, it's a full railing. So, you don't even have to design a new railing.

Everything's fully functional within the system. So I'd say, yes, it's different in terms of where products are at and where that design is taking us and the mentality shift. But I think in other senses, a lot of our clients always wanted to have some presence on the street because it brings people in.

When people see people dining outside having that experience, it brings more crowds in. So I feel like that shift, it's been exemplified, but I do feel like there's always been a desire to have some type of outdoor dining element. It's just now kind of boosted itself and just exploded.

**Cormac Phalen:** Do you think that what they were kind of reluctant to maybe do beforehand, now that they see the value of extending that dining space outside, has now become just part and parcel to the mission of what they do now. It's like, rather than just thinking, okay, we might have a little bit of a outdoor dining or a little bit of a presence, now it's equally as important as say indoor dining.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yes, definitely. It even changes our larger restaurant clients who have multiple concepts within their portfolio, what concept can go in that location. If we have a location that isn't going to have as large of a patio or we can't get that square footage past the city or municipality or landlord or whomever, they might turn around and switch the concept because it just might not work for what they were planning on.

**Cormac Phalen:** This is just a question of curiosity, have you seen where maybe because they see the success of this expanded indoor-outdoor kind of environment that they've maybe decided not to go to a certain place because maybe the AHJ or client or landlord wouldn't allow them to do it.

**Liz Neuffer:** I'm sure that happens. I feel like I don't have a good enough take on all of the real estate happenings that go on with some of our clients, so I'm sure that's happening more than I even realized. But yeah, I would think that is happening for sure.

**Evan Troxel:** I'm just thinking about the psychological aspect that you mentioned where people see people, they see the busyness, or they see the experience that people are having. It's like window shopping, except it's the restaurant version of that. Right? And so you see the food, you see the people having a good time, you see the atmosphere that the restaurant has created and it creates a billboard for that restaurant that is real life. And there's a psychological impact to passersby, right? Who are making a decision about where they want to go from an a restaurant owner's point of view. Is that part of the, the story that you're telling them when you're working with them early in the design phase about the opportunity and the opportunity cost of having that kind of a amenity for their patrons to experience?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yes, for sure. I think we definitely put as much thought now into going back to your question Cormac too about what the design on the exterior can be. And that definitely plays into the full concept because now we're not just designing two separate spaces. It's not, here's the interior part, here's the bulk of your design, here's what's really bringing people in, and then here's the ancillary patio. It's here's everything together. Here's how those two can bleed together and work together. And the blurring of those lines is happening for sure. There isn't a distinctive difference. So, I think yeah, to your point, Evan, it's definitely part of the story that we're selling.

**Cormac Phalen:** Because I could imagine that, I hate to keep going back to the time and period that we don't want to remember anymore. But, you saw all the pop ups. so, you saw all those trial and errors of spaces and stuff, and some were successful, some weren't. And you know, now you see that they've said, okay, we really like the concept of outdoor dining, but we need to do a much better job of it. So they're now making a much more concerted effort to make it part of an integrated design rather than just kind of a makeshift kind of feeling.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, it's definitely that change of that mindset and I mean, I feel like that's even partially where a lot of the new design trends are stemming from is that whole idea of if you're comfortable sitting in your living room inside, why wouldn't you be comfortable sitting in your living room outside? So of course it's going to trickle into the commercial and restaurant industry of wanting to make sure that the patrons who are sitting outside have the same experience as the patrons sitting on the inside. You want them to, depending on the type of restaurant, you definitely want that patron to stay. And so by giving them those same luxuries, it just makes more sense. I think a lot of the design has come from that idea of, you know, let's give them a comfortable chair. Let's make sure they have some beautiful plants and soft lighting. I think a lot of that design just stems from that innate sense of wanting to bring that design 360.

**Evan Troxel:** Let's talk about the elements of what makes an outdoor dining space or outdoor space. Comfortable, right? Something that's come up more and more and more is thermal comfort over the last, I don't know, decade, decade and a half. You hear it all the time. Thermal comfort and what? Usually that's applied to indoor spaces.

But I think here the same concept applies, and so let's just talk a little bit about comfort being outside, and then I think we can get into thermal comfort because we can get more specific about how to achieve that. But you mentioned, like soft seating, there's tables and chairs, which everybody sees in dining, but then there's an explosion in soft seating and fire pits and all of these different kind of elements.

I'm curious because I, like Cormac, haven't designed specific hospitality type spaces before. Give us your experience with what are the kinds of building blocks that people have access to now product-wise and experience-wise that we could give architects to basically arm them with a pallet of components or elements that really are the building blocks of a great outdoor space.

**Liz Neuffer:** You definitely need to start with figuring out if there's going to be a structure. I think that's number one, because I think that trying to figure out where the patio pergola system or structure is going to live and what it's containing. Uh, you know, is it gonna be a fully conditioned space? All of that. So I think figuring out that element becomes a big part of the conversation. Um, and then definitely the whole approach of lighting is a new approach with the exterior space. You don't really want to spot tables typically on the inside, you want to spot tables and get that dramatic glow on the outside.

You really don't need that. There's street lighting, there's ambient lighting. I think that's why there's a uptick in a lot of the bistro cafe style string lights you're seeing. Even moon lighting and trees and solar lighting can be a really cool way. So I think lighting is a really big component to think through and think about how people are going to see the meal in front of them if it's dark outside.

I think that's a really big component. Um, you mentioned the chairs. I think that's a huge thing. I think we need to find products that can withhold the or stand up to the elements a little bit better, that are still comfortable. I think there's a lack in that right now of products that are reliable, that look good and stand up. I think climate has a big part in that, so it is hard to find these things. But, I do feel like finding better products would be great in terms of the seating. Soft seating for sure. Trying to figure out you know, is it going to be an off the shelf sofa or is it going to be a custom banquette that we're working with?

Making an overhang, because of course, again, the elements. If you're in a climate that has a lot of rain, you now need to make sure the upholstery you're specifying, the foam that the custom booth manufacturer's using has an exterior grade. There's a whole other thought process in place there. And then in terms of programming the space, that's a whole other element too. A lot of clients want a space for the dining element. They want a space if it's a bar atmosphere. Maybe there's a drink rail so that people can stand and linger. There's also the lounge component. Which then takes into account the fire pit aspect. Is there some type of feature outside such as a water feature, a fire feature or anything that we can now put chairs around and make that be the the communal focal point.

So programming becomes a little bit different on the exterior too. And then you mentioned the thermal comfort part. That definitely comes into play for sure. With patio heaters, there's all different products out there if you didn't want to condition the space, now let's look at different patio heaters and fans. That's another key element, keeping the the air moving.

**Evan Troxel:** I was going to ask you about zoning, right? Because I think something that we all also saw through the pandemic there was an opportunity to kind of rethink offices. Offices have traditionally been open offices or a series of rooms, closed offices, and I think something that I heard and read a lot about was wanting different types of space for different types of work that people could pick and choose depending on their needs for the project or the meeting or whatever they needed to do.

And I feel like hospitality spaces are kind of similar in that way, right? Like sometimes you wanna sit at the couch with the fire pit, sometimes you want an intimate conversation with somebody at a table in the corner. Sometimes you want to sit at the bar if you're alone and you want to meet new friends and talk, watch the game, or something like that.

And so, zoning wise, I mean, you started to talk about programming. Can you just go a little bit deeper into that and just talk about what trends you've really seen people adopt when it comes to paying for these kinds of spaces. Are they really finding value when it comes to their customers either what their customers want or maybe what their customers don't know that they want, and they're actually seeing the customers figure this out as they have those opportunities.

**Liz Neuffer:** It's a good question. I think variety is the answer. I think having variety is definitely the way to go. I think making sure you have a variety of different types of tables, so with two tops or four tops at which relates to how many people are sitting at the table. So making sure you have a variety of that.

And then also variety of, are there cozy nooks that people can have a little bit more intimacy? Do you bring in soft seating and also have those little elements where you can have a little bit more intimate dining? It's just making sure you have a good variety of spaces for people to feel comfortable with where they want to be.

I think with lounge seating, it's a little bit of a hit or miss depending on the type of concept or client we're working with. Some clients love the lounge seating, and people want to sit and lounge, but it's really hard to have a dining experience when you're sitting on a low sofa.

So that one's a little difficult. It's some, it looks great in the space and we always want to put it in as designers are like, look at this great lounge setting. You know, we really want to make this such a unique space. And we usually get turned down by clients saying, yeah, but you can't really have a full dining atmosphere when the table's half the height of where it normally is.

**Cormac Phalen:** I went to a taco joint that all of their outdoor seating was couch based. And if you can just imagine, plopping down on a couch and eating tacos. Wasn't fun.

**Liz Neuffer:** It's great for Instagram and it's great for that element, but I think the practicality of it is not there. So, it tends to get left off.

**Evan Troxel:** And it's important to bring that up to the client, right? From your point of view, you've got to bring it up because what are they expecting to clean? What maintenance is needed? Cormac and I have done a lot of schools and a lot of the design work for schools is driven by the maintenance staff.

And I can only imagine here, like that's definitely something you have to at least bring up to say, well, if you have got couches, you're going to have to pull 'em apart every night and clean between the cracks and like that kind of a thing becauseif that doesn't happen and somebody finds something, they're, they're going to write a bad review about that restaurant. Right. And, and I could just see that being a big point of conversation upfront.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah. So a lot of our clients have, our bigger clients, I will say, have their own A + D personnel. They have people who have experience in the architecture and design industry. So it's great working with them. They understand it. It's such a collaborative process, which makes it so much fun.

But then they usually have another part of their company that is operations, and it's usually finding that balance. So we're working with their designers and their architects to find a design that works. And then the operations teams come in and they give this long wishlist of all the things that they want.

And it's trying, obviously we wanna make it operationally successful. But a lot of times it's their asks, you just can't keep up with them. But finding that balance is absolutely correct and, and looking at cleanability and maintenance and how often these things need to be cleaned is something that does come up quite often.

And the UV, if we're talking about outside, the fading of fabrics is something too that comes up. Umbrellas, that's something that comes up quite a bit too with the fabric on the umbrellas, you know. Look out for specifying black umbrellas. They will fade.

**Evan Troxel:** Well, I have a question about climate, because I think a lot of people in the audience could say, well that's great for you Evan being in Southern California when you were designing there because you have a climate that makes sense for indoor-outdoor. And I think that's true. It does. But I think because of technology, because of product innovation that has happened, that kind of is taken off the table to a much larger extent. So maybe you can talk about where you've seen success. I mean, you're in Chicago, right? And Chicago's great when it's great, and then there's times of the year when it's not.

Are there still examples of successful outdoor hospitality settings in climates that are much different than Southern California for most of the year, where it's still a success because of technology and products and things like that? Again, I want to arm designers and architects out there with a cachet of ideas that can help them get over the obstacles and the objections of clients. I want to tap into your experience here so that we can arm people for success.

**Liz Neuffer:** I don't think it's there yet with the fully climatizing unless we're climatizing these outdoor elements. I think it's possible. Definitely throughout the fall here for sure. We have warmer winters now, so I guess this could be changing.

There are ways that it can be successful, but I don't think we can count on it to be 365 days. I think there's going to be times where you're just going to have to deal with the elements and not have that space. It's just going to be too windy, too drafty.

But I think these patio enclosure systems do a good job of keeping the heat and all of that thermal comfort in control. I think it can be successful if you're willing to specify the right things and spend the money on it. But if you're looking for something that's not as fully developed, I don't think it's going to be something that can remain open all year round in the climate like Chicago. That being said, I remember going to a brewery in the middle of the winter and it was all outdoors and there was just big fire pits and people were just gathering around the fire pits and we're bundled up. And so I think it's also who's willing to be out there.

**Evan Troxel:** Yeah, well we've seen a huge kind of shift toward electric heat, more specifically than any kind of natural gas or propane heating. And so this is where I'm going to be ignorant and just say what's available, what's out there? Because, I think when you think about sustainability, a lot of architects are conscious of this in a very big way, and they want to specify products that make sense for when it comes to climate. So can you give a bit of insight into the types of things that are available for heat sources that are electrical based?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yes, there's both electrical and gas. I feel like the market is more going towards electrical just because of sustainability purposes and they're just easier installs for the most part. We don't have to worry about plumbing and getting all the natural gas. Of course there are those older propane tank run heaters. I don't think those are really gonna last a whole lot longer. The maintenance of them are just terrible for restaurant owners to have to think through and have propane tanks on tap all the time. So I think electric is really cornering the market a little bit more these days. From my experience.

There are some really great products out there now that I think look even better. And I think that's, that's the coolest thing of where some of these products are going is they look like they belong in this space. It doesn't just look like this massive heater tacked onto these patio systems.

They're slim lined, they're streamlined. I know Bromic has a really neat heater. It's called the Eclipse where it's round. It's a disc and it's also a light source and heat. And they look really cool. They're very minimal, very streamlined and slim. and they put out quite a bit of heat and you can place those around the patio.

And that's a great company to work with because they help you place how far away they can be. So you can make sure all your patrons have adequate heating so you have an Overlap. There aren't any gaps in where the heating can fall, and they do a really good job. I'd say that those products have come a really long way.

**Evan Troxel:** That product in particular with the integrated lighting, it's nice, right? Because you talked about the importance of lighting earlier, and creating a mood is something that you can do with lighting. And if you have kind of a dual-purpose unit, you can mix and match one or the other or both at the same time. And you're creating a really interesting atmosphere. From what I recall, that heater is like a top-down heater. It's like an umbrella type pendant almost.

**Liz Neuffer:** It's almost got like a gooseneck arm to it. Yep.

**Evan Troxel:** Yeah, and the heat is just above you, which is where you want to feel it, especially as you're walking around and people are moving through the space and it just creates like this nice little heat cloud.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah. Those products are great. They're great to work with in terms of the company itself, and I think the product that they put out in particular is one of the best on the market. They definitely have the slim line and the aesthetic. It kind of gives designers a new tool in their toolbox of thinking through okay, it's not just a functional element, but it's a beautiful element. So it's something else that designers can feel proud to put into this space. And it doesn't have to be an afterthought of, oh, we forgot, how are we gonna put these heaters in? Where are they gonna go? They're gonna be an eyesore. Instead it's, oh, these great heaters can be part of the design or part of the lighting element, or it can be part of the design moving forward.

**Cormac Phalen:** And it's just like that latest evolution of, first it was function, so you know, you had the propane heater or then when it started to go to electric and they were like the big blocks that we're hovering overhead and may or may not kind of get you the heat that you're hoping for to then something that, not only takes in mind the functionality of it, but also the aesthetics of it, which, we're always hoping for.

We want to extend our space out into the exterior space and we're thinking, oh, great, but now you're going to want heaters and you're going to want this, and you know how ugly they're going to look and, it's really great to start to see manufacturers really push towards being equally as important from functionality to aesthetics.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, I definitely agree. I think we're seeing that with heaters. I think we're starting to see that more with quite a few other exterior products too. I mentioned the patio systems. I think those are getting a new design. It's not just this clunky aluminum or steel frame system. They can be really elegant and bring in some type of shade sail or canopy too. It really also is another way to bring in some softness and protect patrons from some of those sunnier days and make sure you're not being blinded when you're dining.

**Evan Troxel:** Even drapes, right? I did my backyard at my last place. I did a retractable canopy, but the retractable canopy only works certain times of the day, right? I mean, that sun gets low and it's coming in underneath and so I did curtains and they were kind of a sheer material and they were an outdoor material, so you could pull them back when you wanted to, but you could also let them out when you need to block the sun lower and it creates an outdoor space. It really starts to really delineate the spatial quality of what's going on outside. And I found it worked really well as an architectural device, but also created some intimacy and it functioned as well as it created this quality of space.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah. Thinking through the solar element is one that I think all designers and architects need to think through on, on the exterior. Because on the interior it's already something we think about of whether we're putting roll down shades or things like that, but on the exterior it's even more important and you need to think through is this. Is the system going to be blocking the sun at the right times?

Do your solar studies and make sure it's all working. I think those louvered systems do a pretty good job. But again it's looking at it only at the top. So looking at the sides and making sure that you're blocking the sun. I do feel like wind is another big component that gets overlooked, especially here in Chicago.

We've had some run-ins with even heaters blowing out due to the wind and not being rated for the wind that we thought that we were getting. So that's something else that I think is another thing that needs to be thought through when you're looking at an outdoor space. Going through all of the elements in making sure you're checking the boxes of all of these things are thought through and umbrellas, they move in the wind. Even if they're on a very heavy plate, if they're up and open, it's a parachute, it will slide. So making sure that these elements are thought through or told to the operational side of the restaurant and making sure that they're educated as well.

**Evan Troxel:** Doing schoolwork in California, we always had exterior circulation. I know on the East coast it's very different. The school's one big building basically with interior circulation corridors and everything. But you know, it rains sometimes in Southern California. And the thing was always like, well just make the most minimal canopy that you can because it always rains straight down, right?

**Cormac Phalen:** Yeah.

**Evan Troxel:** As an architect, we're always trying to extend it out. Not just for rain, but for shade and wind. You're going to create vortexes and eddies and you're goning to bring in debris and you really have to think about all of that stuff as a designer when it comes to these outdoor spaces. My wife is extremely sensitive to wind. If you're eating outdoors and it's slightly cold, it's like that wind will just change your mind instantly about that, and you don't want to be there anymore.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yep. It's definitely something to think through when you are dining out. Like how much do you really want to sit outside? Because it's nice out now, but you might be there for an hour or two maybe, and is it still going to be as nice out later? So yeah, for sure. Thinking through all of that is something we definitely need to do.

**Cormac Phalen:** Well, I went from doing a lot of K–12 schools to doing a lot of higher education. And a lot of that trend now is geared towards student living and a lot of student living wants to be outdoors and creating those spaces outdoors. And so extending those spaces, especially in northern climates and things like that, where they spend most of their time outside. You would think that they wouldn't with all the snow and stuff, but they're always making spaces, like the designers are thinking about the spaces that they're creating to be a 365 days a year type space.

**Evan Troxel:** Speaking of outdoor heating though, is there a benefit or a trade-off that you have seen in your experience versus indoors? In HVAC outdoors, in spot heating or maybe some fire as far as energy goes, or expense for an owner? Do you guys take all that into account when you're talking through these ideas?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, we definitely think through the expense more of the upfront costs. I will say, I don't know if it's fully vetted of the maintenance and the costs of the bills thereafter. But I do think it's something that does get brought up at the forefront of the project. This is what you can expect for from this type of product, and this is the upfront cost. But yeah, the maintenance thing is something that I don't think we probably need to do a better job of, but I think it's just something that comes more out of the owner side to figure out of what they're willing to spend.

**Evan Troxel:** Yeah. Operational costs I think are definitely going to be on some owners' minds more than others. But the idea to me it's not, you can't just look at that. You have to look at the whole picture, right? You have to look at the whole dining experience, the integration of indoor and outdoor from so many different aspects when you're talking about these kinds of projects. Thats just another element of that conversation. I think some are going to bring it up and some aren't. Some are just going to say that this is something that we do for our patrons. That's it.

**Liz Neuffer:** Right. Yeah. You're getting more seats. So, I feel like in the long run hopefully it's a wash because you're now extending the life of the restaurant by expanding the footprint outside, and you're now turning tables over more days throughout the year. So I feel like the added cost would balance itself out at some point.

**Cormac Phalen:** I mean, they have the space already. In certain cases they were never using them. So now they're expanding that, and they're increasing their footprint of the number of seats. I would see that the return on the investment for purchasing heaters to extend the outdoor environment would be rather quick to be quite honest with you.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, you, you bring up a good point, Cormac. We had a client recently that has this building, it's not being used, and it's part of a block that they own and they wanted to us to look at how we could potentially demo out a portion of the wall and extend out to this rooftop.

It's just this huge expansive rooftop. So I feel like that's a whole other dynamic that is being looked at is how we have this space, how can we capitalize on it? And I think rooftops are one that are are starting to pop up more and more of creating bars and lounges and restaurants and even more event spaces, like entertainment spaces for those backyard games and elements like that. More of the fun, carefree, just kind of go hang out, elements. And a lot of those are happening on rooftops.

**Cormac Phalen:** We've seen a trend in the student life, student housing, student act buildings and things like that. We've actually seen lot of clients more open to using rooftops. You know, a lot of times they're worried about liability and things like that.

And if we can overcome that aspect for them and show that there are benefits to utilizing those spaces that are already there, and you can decrease the footprint of the building by increasing the use of what the building already has, it's been something that they've been very open to and starting to see.

And we've got a new project that we're doing that at least three of the multiple buildings that we're doing, are all using rooftops. And you know, it was something that we hadn't seen in the past. And Now they're like, oh, this is an option. Let's do it.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah we're definitely seeing that too, of capitalizing on that square footage. So I think it makes for interesting design and new design.

**Cormac Phalen:** It does. Yeah. And then it goes back to the conversation you were having about the types of furniture and the types of finishes that you would use up there, because now you're actually increasing a little bit of its exposure, both from solar, from wind, from everything else. And it is an interesting challenge, but it is one that it's kind of fun to try to tackle.

**Evan Troxel:** I agree, and I think it's one of those things where it gives people a different perspective and they're more likely to be interested to find out what it's like to do something. Get a different experience, right? Everybody's eaten in an outdoor patio. Have you ever eaten on a rooftop? Have you ever eaten on a pier?

It becomes one of these things where it's like people like to try those kinds of things. And if somebody has the ability to offer that amenity because it's been well thought through and designed and creates a cool experience, then that becomes a huge draw potential for that business.

Well, this has been a fun conversation, Liz. Is there anything that we've missed, uh, like any other tips or ideas, things that have crossed your path that you think are worth sharing to the other design professionals out there?

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, I think some good tips are don't think about it as an exterior. Really just think about it as an extension of the interior and how can you bring those comforts out. Even if there's a influx of greenery. I think that's bringing that greenery inside and thinking about it as the landscaping on the outside.

I think it's really just those comfort elements and how they can be pulled outside for sure is something that I think is a good mentality to have on how to move forward with exterior design.

**Evan Troxel:** Well, this has been a great conversation and I hope that audience gets a lot out of it and thinks about this, and obviously there's a lot of products out there that can help make this possible. We'll put links to the ones that we talked about in this episode in the show notes, so everybody can check those out.

And Liz, I'm sure that you're online. Your company's got a website, so we'll put a link to Aria Group in the show notes as well. Is there anywhere else that people, if they had a question about this, that you might be able to point them in the right direction that they can get in touch with you, like through LinkedIn or just through your website?

**Liz Neuffer:** LinkedIn or the website. Yep, either one.

**Evan Troxel:** Well, thanks again for taking the time to do this with us today. I've learned a lot and I appreciate it.

**Liz Neuffer:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.