ND2C National Digital
Design Conference

The next chapter in design.

Perspectives: Future Outlook on Design, 2026.

A future on our own terms

In a world where global trends are copied before they're even understood, Pakistan needs its own point of view; one shaped by our realities, our constraints, and our possibilities. We don't have to react to the world; we can interpret it, absorb it, and build from it.

And as AI rewrites the rules of creation, the real differentiator isn't the toolset but the human behind it - the taste, judgment, and imagination that no model can replicate.

This publication isn't our full statement - it's a listening post. We've gathered the thoughts of Pakistani design leaders from around the world to understand what's emerging, to challenge assumptions, and to start building a perspective that is rooted in our context.

Sana & Nida
Co-founders, ND2C

The Mood

A snapshot of how the design community is feeling, thinking, and looking ahead.

68%

Said they're hopeful about the future of design in Pakistan

68%

Are confident that AI will not take away their jobs

45%

Believe 'lack of good design leaders' is holding the design industry back

In their words

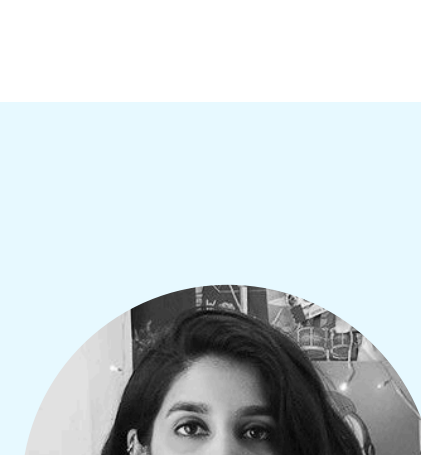
Faraz Maqsood Hamidi
Founder, The D'Hamidi Partnership

You must already be noticing the pendulum swing from AI-driven automation back to human-driven mediation. As AI tools rapidly commoditize the generation of visuals, layouts, and even initial concepts, the unique value of design will shift decisively. It will move beyond mere creation to curating meaning and fostering human connection.

The designer's role will transition from being the primary maker to being an interpreter and a guide. A mediator who can orchestrate the overwhelming output of AI and the nuanced, empathetic needs of the user.

The most sought-after designers will be defined both by their speed in generating options and their ability to ask better questions, to synthesize cultural context, and to imbue technology with intention, ethics, and warmth.

Because while artificial intelligence parrots data, authentic intelligence understands meaning. And that's a distinction that will define our relevance for years to come.



Shehzil Malik
Visual artist, Illustrator, Designer

Despite the hype around AI these days, I don't think it will replace the work of illustrators. In fact, I feel over time, the value of human-made illustrations will only deepen. Hand-drawn illustration will be about the craft: imperfect, expressive, and clearly made by someone who loves doing the work itself.

Where I worry though is that younger designers usually learn through small gigs, and those are the very opportunities AI might swallow. The industry will have to restructure to protect those early pathways.

Personally, I'll happily be that person who rejects the use of AI in every capacity. I also only want to work with companies who make a commitment to not use AI- this is already true for my publishers. I want both the art I make and the art I consume to have soul, and have the humanity you can't automate.

Usman Fiaz
CEO, Design Peeps

I believe ChatGPT's launch marked a quiet rupture in interface history. For decades, design taught users to navigate complex systems by revealing structure: menus, hierarchies, tabs, flows. But ChatGPT flipped that. It removed structure and replaced affordances with expectation; one empty box, infinite possibilities.

But this shift created a new burden. Design has long taught humans how to think like machines. Now we're asking machines to think like humans, but we've done little to rewire human cognition in return.

As AI collapses interfaces and automates navigation, design's new job is to subtly retrain reflexes shaped by 40 years of GUI thinking. This means building systems that feel intuitive before they're explained. Predictive, not reactive.

If design doesn't evolve to meet this moment, it risks becoming a bottleneck to adoption itself.

Sareena Naeem Shams
Creative Director, Frontmatter

As we step into 2026, disruption is the name of the game. While generative AI takes up a certain segment of the visual world, I believe prestige-oriented brands and designers will set their eyes on creating and offering bespoke design. This design will rekindle a love for the tactile nature of handmade things and the joy of creativity, setting it apart from the polished look of the past few years. Think textures, handwritten typography, micro-interactions on websites and more.

Authentic, purposeful design would bring focus to what can be felt physically and what truly has something to say in a world saturated with trends.

Ali Kapadia
Founder, Multiply.io

Apple's Liquid Glass push feels like it's preparing for spatial design in an AR-first future. 'Design is how it works', and how Liquid Glass works is an interactive suspension of disbelief in real spaces. Imagine interface materials reacting to and blending into physical surroundings.

It's skeuomorphism all over again, but now it's about migrating behavior from the real world to a real-world-esque digital one. Judging by the cross-device Liquid Glass adoption in 2025, 2026 might be the year we see the next major AR play by Apple.

Hasan Habib
CEO, Designist

A big shift I see for 2026 is the role of design leadership. As AI keeps getting louder and everyone is generating things nonstop, leaders will be the ones who help teams cut through that noise.

Good design leadership will become essential, not just for deciding what to make, but for shaping the culture around how we work. Leaders will need to bring people together honestly and authentically, and help teams stay focused on what actually matters, not what the latest AI trend is pushing.

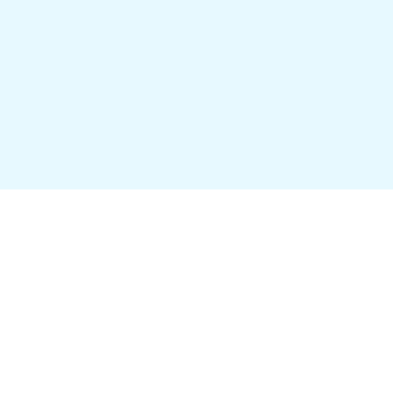
In a world where AI can produce endless options, design leadership is what will bring clarity, direction, and intention. It will become a defining factor in whether teams create meaningful work or just more noise.

Saba Zaidi
Senior Staff UX Design Manager, Gemini App

In 2026, the industry will accelerate its move toward General Intelligence, shifting beyond generative media or single-purpose applications to agentic actions where AI acts on the user's behalf without needing continuous input.

Success in this landscape will require designing for AI (e.g. designing for probabilistic outcomes) and with AI (e.g. using workflows like 'vibe coding'), to create powerful, personal, proactive tools.

This will drive a move toward visual metaphors of intelligence. We will shift beyond static surfaces to fluid particles, techno-organic form and reactive materials that dynamically adapt to AI sensing and user intent.

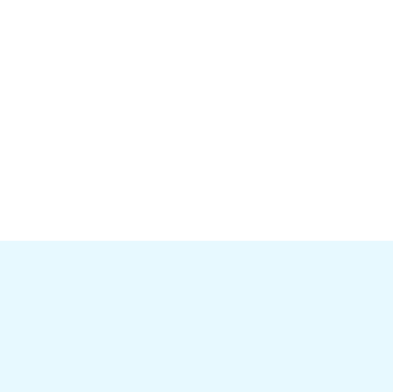


Ali Murtaza
Partner, Ideate Innovation

I believe 2026 will keep us on the uncertainty train of the last few years. As norms settle and some of the hype gives way to facts, I see two very different kinds of designers thriving.

The first are those who fully incorporate AI into their workflows, treating it like a smart, weirdly tireless team member. They'll spend more time framing problems and making strategic decisions, with a stack of tools doing most of the grunt work. This is the productivity-maxxing designer.

The second are those who go the other way. Likely a much smaller group, but designers so good at their craft that clients seek them out precisely because their work feels stubbornly human. They'll serve the people who are already tired of the all-encompassing cloak of AI that has engulfed the world. This is the artist-turned-designer-turned-artist.



Maham Sohail
Co-Founder, Ajeeb Studio

Despite all the rapid advancements in tech, software, and AI, I think the real design trend for 2026 will be a return to more human, instinctive, and abstract forms of creativity. AI will continue to be a powerful tool that speeds up workflows, but we are now reaching a point where its limitations in originality are becoming clearer. Because of this, the value of human intuition, emotion, and imperfection will grow even stronger.

With companies like Affinity challenging industry giants like Adobe and reshaping how creative tools are built and priced, creators are more empowered to come back to human-centered work rather than relying solely on AI driven pipelines.

Design in 2026, to me, will be defined by this balance. Human creativity at the core, complemented by efficient AI workflows in the background, not the other way around.

Arsalan Khatri
Head of Design, Disrupt Labs

I strongly believe that the lines between disciplines within and outside design will continue to blur. The 'design'-er will not just be functionally a design person, and in most cases be expected to handle much more.

AI as a (noisy) dimension will present a spectrum of tools, and there would be many which will rise and fall every quarter. Solid understanding of foundational principles, with the ability to execute, will be highly valued.

Ironically, as tools get better at generating a base design which is more than acceptable, it will create more opportunities for designers who have a 'taste' for great design and are able to tell the difference (and help execute it.)

Collective Perspective: Design re-rooted

We also talked to individuals who interact closely with the design space and are doing fascinating work in their practice. This has informed a collective narrative of where the industry as a whole believes the field is headed. Special shoutout to Kanza Riaz, Khizra Munir, Khurram Siddiqi, Manahil Huda, Sameen Nadeem, and Sara Jamil for their central contribution to this.

To sum up: the year ahead will not be defined by new tools or aesthetics, but by a quiet recalibration of what design is truly for. It will move closer to the ground and more attentive to lived realities.

Climate Discourse to Climate Work

In Pakistan, climate change will shift from being a conversation theme to becoming a tangible design practice. Environmental instability will increasingly shape what designers are asked to respond to, and how. Design's problem-solving roots will matter more than its decorative ones, and this will be reinforced by design education and institutional priorities.

A Return to Craft

This grounding will also reshape how designers engage with technology, especially AI. As more generative capacity is layered onto automated tools, 2026 will demand sharper judgment: what deserves attention and investment, and what should fade.

There will be a renewed demand for work that feels intentional, human, and context-aware. Designers will be pushed to articulate what cannot be automated e.g. judgment, cultural nuance, and emotional resonance. AI will remain in the toolkit, but increasingly as an assistant rather than an author.

In product and digital design, expectations that AI will collapse roles will begin to soften and lead to a realization that making something exist with AI is easy; making it good still requires depth that only comes from human involvement. As AI outputs converge around familiar systems and patterns, originality and discernment will become the true differentiators.

Locality as Language

Culturally, the year ahead will favor color over neutrality, texture over polish, and storytelling over surface appeal. Design language will draw more confidently from local environments rather than global templates, making work feel specific instead of generic.

Taken together, these shifts point to a broader realignment. Climate urgency and technological excess are pushing design in the same direction: toward responsibility, intention, and care.

Where we're curious.

These are the questions keeping us awake, the challenges we're chasing, and the ideas we're testing in real time. This year, we're not just observing the future of design; we're shaping it, one experiment and insight at a time.

If you're exploring similar questions or want to join us on this journey - as a researcher, designer, or sponsor - we'd love to hear from you.

Send us an email

Design Leadership

What does it take to lead design effectively in today's evolving landscape?

Design Maturity & Business ROI

Can organisations turn design into a measurable driver of growth?

The Human Advantage

What uniquely human skills will define the future of design?

Cities, Policy & GovTech

Can design transform citizens' experience of government and urban life?

Acknowledgement

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