

FEATURE

WHAT ENDURES: Building a Vision That Lasts

By Karen Current and Jess Farrier

In AEC circles, vision often arrives dressed as a forecast.

It shows up as a five-year plan, a bold market move, or a rebrand that promises to get ahead of what is next. These strategies and tactics focus effort and attract interest. Yet the longer an AEC firm engages with real places and real people, the more a different definition of vision takes root. As marketing teams, we feel a shifting definition of vision every day because our work depends on understanding how change shapes stories, expectations, and opportunities. Vision is not only foresight; it is the ability to stay oriented to what matters while the context changes. **Drawing on fifty years of practice, the landscape architecture firm DHM Design has learned that steadiness often comes from what you protect, not what you predict.**

Our firm's practice in landscape architecture and ecology makes this clear. We work with systems that remember. A river carries the memory of storms. A prairie remembers the drought. A plaza holds the imprint of civic life. At the same time, a hurricane or forest fire can remake a site overnight. An invasive species can take decades to mitigate. When you carry that reality into the studio, vision becomes more about honoring patterns and consequences. For marketing teams, this means describing a project in a way that respects what its landscape has carried and what it might need to carry next. No design survives unchanged. The people in each community show up to each project with a history and identity that shape every decision. **Vision, then, is not a rigid line into the future; it is a steady orientation to place and purpose.**

From Prediction to Attentiveness

In our industry, we can predict where a trend line might go. Attentiveness asks how we will react when it curves. That influences the choices marketers and leaders make every day. A pursuit may be attractive on paper, yet misaligned with commitments to ecological health, access, or cultural respect. Choosing not to pursue is an act of vision. In practice, vision is a filter. It orders priorities, tunes our language, and steadies our actions when the work gets hard. It is useful, not abstract.

As markets shift, for example, with the growth of wellness across hospitality, recreation, residential communities, and healthcare, attentiveness helps teams translate enduring values into sector-specific language. Marketers study how each audience talks about comfort, restorative environments, and operational needs, then align messages to those expectations without diluting core commitments. We refine descriptions to highlight access to nature, circulation patterns, and long-term site care. We adjust narratives to show how thoughtful design supports the well-being of visitors, residents, and staff. This is not a change in identity; it is vision in action, protecting what matters while opening new doors.

Stewardship at the Center

Design is creative and technical, and it is also caretaking. When stewardship drives the vision, both story and behavior change. A firm becomes a set of commitments rather than a list of services. For designers, that means balancing human presence with natural systems, honoring cultural heritage and local identity, and listening before putting a pencil to paper. These commitments shape brand perception because they shape the work itself. Stewardship is not sentimental; it is a foundational framework. It clarifies why some opportunities are right and others are not. It guides tradeoffs when budgets tighten. It turns sustainability into a discipline that can be seen in drawings, details, and maintenance plans. Over time, that consistency builds credibility.

Strategy that Learns to Bend

The AEC industry is constantly recalibrating. Holding a steady vision in a changing context requires perspective paired with conviction in our own methods. We believe in longevity of relationships, consistent metrics in evolving market conditions, and staying true to our voice. Our process invites critiques and remains present so that each project is more than an outcome – it is also a story of how we persevere through challenges and site limitations.

When firms serve a diversity of markets, they have room to move when conditions change. We watch funding cycles, policy shifts, and competitive patterns to understand where our strengths align with opportunity. When one sector tightens, we can pivot to another because our core expertise is the same across markets. This flexibility is not luck. It comes from decades of working in civic spaces, parks, resorts, campuses, and cultural landscapes. The vision does not change. The direction of effort does.

As marketing teams, we hold a set of priorities that translate across sectors and scales: those priorities are key chapters in the overall story. Treat inclusive engagement, water-wise design, and universal accessibility as through-lines that guide a river reach, a civic plaza, or a campus edge. When priorities are consistent, clients learn what to expect. A consistent center invites experimentation at the edges. **Purpose is the guardrail.**

Practice, Reflect, Repeat

Marketing doesn't end at ribbon-cutting. It becomes the model that helps win the next job. The most resilient teams protect the learning loop; they conduct interviews and share lessons learned. Treat project sheets and case studies as living documents. Build stories from small, concrete moments rather than generic claims. Differentiation doesn't need to outshout competitors when it sounds calm, specific, and consistent.

Turn the learning loop into something visible.

Field lessons, site observations, and community feedback should shape how teams write, present, and pursue. Update case studies to reflect what changed over the life of a project. Refine narratives when a planting strategy performs better than expected or when collaboration with a community partner reveals a better path forward. Revise internal materials with the same care brought to projects; the clarity of communication reflects the clarity of vision. These small adjustments create a record of growth clients can trust and allow a consistent vision without repeating the same story.

Turning Expertise into Possibility

Transferring skills across sectors helps maintain a steady vision through change. When a market feels unsteady, look for places where core expertise solves problems elsewhere. The through-line is always the same. Understanding the goals, listening to communities, and designing for long-term health. Our job in marketing is to surface those patterns and show clients how skills proven in one context strengthen work in another – applying river restoration lessons to support civic resiliency pursuits. Expertise becomes the asset that makes consistency possible.

AEC Playbook: Make Enduring Vision Practical

1. See the Pattern: Vision is attentiveness
 - o What must endure on the site (ecology, access, culture)?
2. Set the Center: What are the clear commitments?
 - o Some through-lines might be inclusive engagement, water-wise design, or universal accessibility
3. Simplify the Story
 - o Why does it matter? Replace jargon with outcomes people can feel: shade, safety, access, water quality, and dignity
4. Study and Share
 - o What are some lessons learned? What do we need to change?
5. Shift without Drift
 - o When markets move, keep true to your mission and adjust the audience lens and examples

Holding a steady vision in a changing context requires patience paired with accountability. A steady character will outlast staff transitions, market shifts, and changing economic conditions. After five decades in practice, we find that one conclusion is hard to avoid. Vision that lasts is a habit, not a trend. It is built in plain speech, consistent stewardship, and a growth mindset that treats each project as both outcome and teacher. It is tested in storms and sustained through many seasons.

We are active participants in a profoundly creative industry. The path from ideas to built work is where enduring vision happens. Teams that treat vision as attentiveness are anchored in stewardship, guided by flexible strategy, and renewed

through learning. In that way, steadiness is not resistance to evolution; it is the condition that makes healthy evolution possible. With it, we can see clearly, act with care, and build places and relationships that last. In marketing and BD at DHM Design, we carry this consistency forward by telling the story in a way that honors the past and prepares for what comes next.

Byline: *As Principal/Marketing Director, Karen Current leads firmwide marketing and corporate strategy at DHM Design, drawing on more than twenty-three years with the firm. She oversees branding, communications, business development support, and the systems that keep a sixty-person practice aligned. Karen often compares her role to that of an air traffic controller, coordinating concurrent campaigns, proposals, and collateral needs while balancing many goals and personalities. She leads a talented marketing team and helps shape how the firm shares its work and values. Outside the office, she is a songwriter and musician and enjoys time with her family, two dogs, and a new kitten.*

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Byline: *Jess Farrier, Proposal Manager at DHM Design, manages the firm's strategic pursuits with over a decade of experience overseeing opportunity pipelines, proposal development, data capture, and content creation. She supports cross-disciplinary team building through strategy and relationships, and manages quality assurance for all submittals. Jess is known for clear messaging and disciplined process, and mentors emerging professionals while building practical tools to keep the marketing department efficient and responsive. Outside work, she's raising three young daughters, and most weekends are spent at parks, school events, and family adventures.*

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