

PG PERSPECTIVES

What the Design
World Is Asking

PriestmanGoode
Trend Report 2026

JUNE 2026

PriestmanGoode.

Executive Summary

Comfort is the new ambition

From Amtrak's reframe of passengers as guests to biophilic aviation interiors, why emotional intelligence is becoming a baseline design requirement, not a premium.

Accessibility: the word we keep misusing

Why designing for the full spectrum of human need isn't a niche consideration and what it looks like when it's done without compromise..

Responsible design: discipline, not direction

Sustainability has a branding problem. From closed-loop material innovation to designing for disassembly.

Experience over statement

The most referenced projects of the year were the ones that asked the simplest questions, and answered them with design.

Copenhagen: handmade, human, deliberately slow

In a landscape still absorbing AI-generated imagery and parametric mass production, 3 Days of Design offered something increasingly rare: evidence of process.

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Design doesn't happen in a vacuum. Neither does this report.

Every season, the design world gathers, at trade fairs, symposia, award ceremonies, in converted warehouses and airport hangers, to take stock of where we are. The first half of 2026 was no different. Across Aircraft Interiors Expo 2026 (AIX) in Hamburg, Milan Design Week, Clerkenwell Design Week (CDW), London, Greater Together Los Angeles (GTLA), the RedCabin Rail Summit, RedCabin Aircraft Innovation Summit and 3 Days of Design in Copenhagen, a set of recurring questions surfaced again and again, dressed in different materials, different contexts, and different vocabularies.

At PriestmanGoode, we don't attend these events to confirm what we already think. We go to have our assumptions tested. And they have been. Because beneath the product launches and panel discussions, a more urgent conversation was happening, about what design is actually for, who it's actually serving, and whether the industry is honest enough to answer those questions with anything more than a render and a press release.

Design has never been better at looking good. The harder question is whether it's getting better at doing good.

This report distills the themes that stayed with us. They're not trends in the traditional sense. They're structural shifts in what people expect from the designed world, and by extension, what we expect from ourselves.

Theme 01

Comfort is the new ambition.

For years, aviation design has operated on a particular hierarchy: performance, efficiency, revenue yield; and somewhere further down, comfort. The passenger as a metric.

At AIX, the conversation around cabin design had shifted noticeably towards the emotional register. Wellbeing-led interiors, biophilic influences, materials chosen for how they feel as much as how they perform. The language around LATAM Airlines' new A321XLR cabin, 'ultimate comfort, and unmistakably LATAM', was telling. Comfort not as a luxury tier, but as a baseline ambition. An identity statement.

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Throughout Milan and CDW, this theme played out in the product realm, with soft furnishings introduced into traditionally hard-material contexts, tactile contrast as design logic. The instinct is the same: spaces that feel as well as function. And at the RedCabin Rail Summit, the discussion around safety on rail, particularly the safety of women travelling alone, reframed comfort in its most serious sense. Social comfort. The design of environments that don't just move people, but make them feel they belong there.

If a passenger or a staff member doesn't feel safe, nothing else in the design brief matters. Safety is the precondition for everything else.

This is a significant reorientation. It asks designers, and commissioners, to take seriously something that data struggles to capture: how a space makes you feel. Whether you exhale when you sit down. Whether you feel seen, or surveilled. Whether you feel like a guest, or cargo.

Amtrak's framing at RedCabin was one of the most direct articulations of this shift: the ambition to move from moving passengers to hosting guests. Two words. Completely different design brief.

At PriestmanGoode, we've been working in this register for some time. But 2026 so far has reminded us that comfort has to be earned across every touchpoint, material, acoustic, social, and that the industry is only just beginning to ask the right questions.

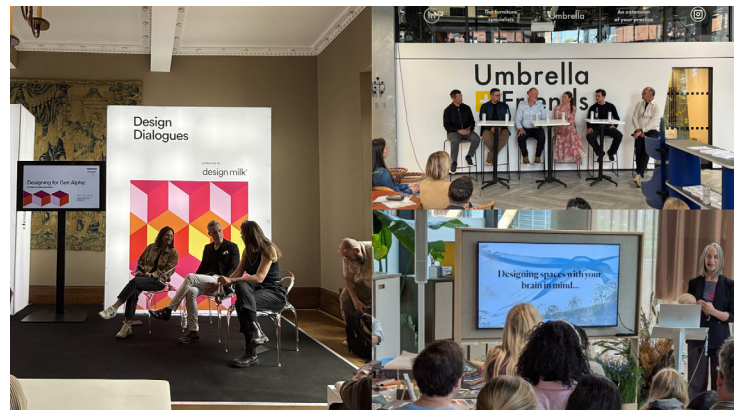
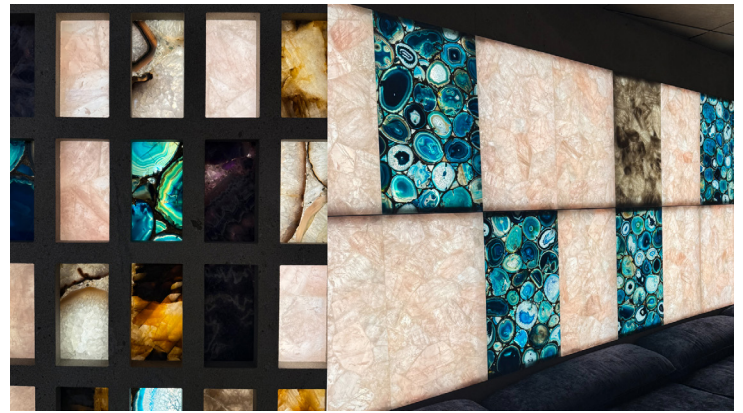
Theme 02

Accessibility: the word we keep misusing.

Accessibility is one of the most used words in contemporary design discourse. It's also one of the most misused. Too often, it functions as a box to check, a separate lane, a compliance measure, an afterthought with a budget.

At CDW, a session on neurodiversity and design made an argument that sounds simple but carries significant implications: designing for heightened senses isn't a niche consideration. When you design for someone with sensory processing differences, you create environments that work better for everyone. The logic is the same as the kerb cut, a feature designed for wheelchair users that transformed how prams, luggage, cyclists, and delivery drivers navigate cities. Accessibility, done properly, is just better design.

The question isn't 'how do we design for people with diverse needs?' It's 'why weren't we already?'



Top - Milan Design Week, La Casa Di Marmo ; Bottom - CDW Design Talks

GTLA extended the accessibility question into a different dimension: not just how people use spaces, but who gets to access excellent design in the first place. Thomas Heatherwick

Studio's description of the Birmingham City FC scheme, turning the stadium inside out to make it relevant and usable for the local community, was a pointed example of what genuinely inclusive design means at scale. Similarly, Shazia Hussain's work at the London Legacy Development Corporation, and what has been achieved at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, demonstrates that world-class design infrastructure can serve communities beyond its original purpose, and beyond its original intended audience.

These aren't fringe conversations. They are asking design to account for itself, for what gets built, for whom, and what happens to it afterwards. For a discipline that has historically skewed its attention towards the affluent, the young-bodied, and the neurotypical, this is overdue.

For transport and product design, the implications are direct. Flexible, adaptable interiors that accommodate a genuine spectrum of human needs, physical, cognitive, sensory, are not a premium category. They should be the default. We're not designing for edge cases. We're designing for people.

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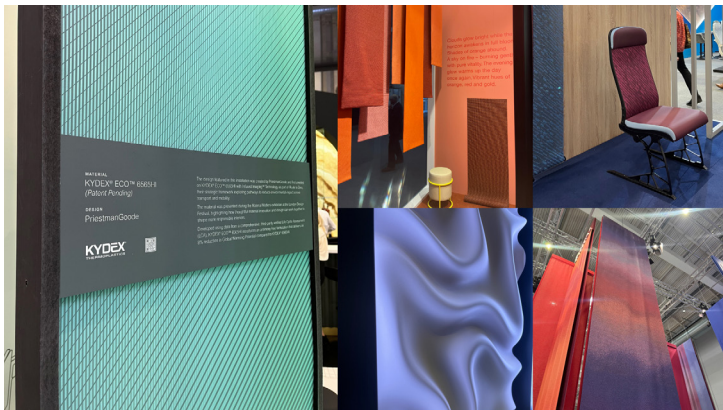
Theme 03

Responsible design: discipline not direction.

Sustainability in design has a branding problem. It has become so ubiquitous a claim, on panel descriptions, product sheets, award submissions, that it risks losing meaning entirely. The year so far has had moments that cut through that, and moments that exposed how thin the commitment still runs.

The more technically rigorous conversations at AIX centred on material innovation: recyclable thermoplastics supporting closed-loop production; lighter components that reduce fuel burn without compromising structural integrity; materials selected with full consideration of what happens at end of life, not just at point of sale. At RedCabin's Aircraft Cabin Innovation Summit, the Green Cabin Alliance workshop pushed in the same direction, focusing not on broad sustainability ambitions but on defining clearer requirements and establishing measurable outcomes. The instinct is the same: accountability over aspiration.

At CDW, the framing was more philosophical, and more radical. The concept of 'constant change without constant waste' positioned adaptability not as a feature but as a responsibility. The growing pull towards 'shy tech', technology embedded so discreetly it doesn't define the space, was presented as a form of design humility. The product shouldn't shout about its intelligence. It should just work, last, and get out of the way.



Top - AIX 2026; Bottom - RedCabin Aircraft Interiors, Discover & Edelweiss

The world doesn't need more design. It needs better design, built to outlast the brief, the trend cycle, and the next generation of hardware.

What responsible design actually requires is not a manifesto. It's process rigour, specifying materials with full supply chain visibility, designing for disassembly, choosing craft over convenience where it extends longevity, and being prepared to push back when a client brief prioritises novelty over durability.

The harder question this raises for our industry: who is responsible for responsible design? The designer who specifies? The manufacturer who supplies? The operator who commissions? The answer, obviously, is all of them. Which is precisely why it requires explicit commitment across the supply chain, not just from whoever happens to be writing the sustainability section of an award entry.

Theme 04

Experience over statement. The ego is leaving the building.

There is a version of design that exists to impress other designers. It photographs beautifully, wins awards, and generates exactly twelve months of cultural relevance before it becomes a reference image. The shows this year felt, in places, like a deliberate rejection of that version.

The Heatherwick studio Birmingham City FC project kept being referenced not because it was the most spectacular thing at GTLA, but because it asked a disarmingly simple question: what is this space for when the game isn't on? And then it answered that question with architecture. The stadium turned inside out, activated for the community that surrounds it, is an act of design ego removal. It says: this building's purpose is bigger than its headline function.

At RedCabin, this played out across both rail and aviation. At the Rail Summit, the framing around passenger experience explicitly moved away from 'journey' as a series of functional touchpoints towards something more like hospitality. At the Aircraft Cabin Innovation Summit, the Discover Airlines and Edelweiss cabins made the same argument in material form, both built on the same Thompson seat hardware, but arriving at entirely distinct outcomes because what was being designed was the experience of being inside that airline, not the seat itself.

The best design wasn't trying to be seen. It was trying to work.

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At CDW, 'shy tech' surfaced again in this context, the argument that technology's highest achievement in interior design is invisibility. Not the show of capability, but the seamlessness of integration. Design that doesn't announce itself. Spaces that feel generous without explaining why.

This has significant implications for how we pitch and present our work. A brief that leads with 'wow factor' is asking a different question to one that leads with 'how will this feel to use, every day, for the next fifteen years?' Both questions are legitimate. But only one of them tends to produce design that lasts.

Theme 05

Copenhagen: handmade, human, and deliberately slow.

3 Days of Design this year was a study in productive contradiction. On one hand: playful, interactive work, design that wanted to be touched, inhabited, discussed. Pieces that leaned into community activation, that treated whimsy as a serious design strategy rather than a concession to consumer comfort. On the other: a pointed, deliberate lean back into process. Makers foregrounding craft. Showing the work, not in the Instagram sense, but in the epistemological one.

In a design landscape still absorbing the implications of AI-generated imagery and parametric mass production, Copenhagen offered something increasingly rare: evidence of hands. Objects and interiors that carried the intelligence of their making, not just their finishing. Process documented and displayed not as nostalgia, but as argument, that how something is made matters, that the distance between idea and final object is where design actually happens.

In Copenhagen, the most quietly radical thing a designer could do was show how long something took to make.

The playful dimension was equally intentional. Several exhibitors built installations designed around interaction and collective experience, design as social infrastructure rather than static object. The instinct here connects to broader themes from the quarter: the centering of experience over aesthetics, the prioritisation of use over display, and a growing interest in what design does for communities rather than what it says about designers.

For PriestmanGoode, Copenhagen was a useful recalibration. We work at scale, aviation, rail, product systems that touch millions of people. But the instincts on display in Copenhagen, the primacy of craft knowledge, the commitment to process transparency, the willingness to make design that invites participation rather than observation, are not incompatible with that scale. They're a

reminder that the best transport design has always been about what it feels like to be inside it. Not what it looks like from the outside.

Conclusion

The questions that stayed with us.

One underlying question, asked in different registers: is design keeping pace with what people actually need from it?

The honest answer is: not always. The industry remains capable of extraordinary work, technically, formally, ethically, but it also remains capable of impressive-sounding resistance. Sustainability as branding rather than practice. Accessibility as a minimum compliance threshold rather than a design standard. Experience as a marketing term rather than a measurable commitment.

What this year offered so far, at its best, was clarity about what the alternative looks like. Cabin design that centres emotional intelligence. Rail environments that make women feel safe. Stadiums that serve their communities year-round. Interiors that outlast their first use. Objects that carry the knowledge of how they were made. Design that gets out of the way and lets people live in it.

We don't need more design that is impressive to look at. We need design that makes things genuinely better, for the people who use it, the communities it touches, and the material world it leaves behind.

At PriestmanGoode, these are not abstract principles. They're embedded in every brief we take on, every material decision, every push back to a client when we think the ambition needs to be bigger, or the scope of consideration wider.

The world is not asking design for aesthetics. It's asking design for answers. That's the brief. And it's the most interesting brief we've ever worked with.



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Founded in 1989, PriestmanGoode is one of the world's foremost multidisciplinary design consultancies, a 100% employee-owned studio with a 35-year legacy of shaping the environments in which people move, travel and live. Headquartered in London, the practice operates at the intersection of transport, product and brand design, working across commercial and private commissions.

In the commercial sphere, PriestmanGoode has defined the passenger experience for some of the most globally recognised transport operators. The studio has collaborated with Qatar Airways, Lufthansa Airlines Group, British Airways, Riyadh Air, Korean Air, Singapore Airlines, United Airlines, Air France and Malaysia Airlines, among many others, delivering cabin interiors, seating systems and end-to-end brand experiences that are encountered by millions of travellers every year.

In rail, the practice has brought the same rigour to programmes for Amtrak, VIA Rail Canada, Siemens Mobility, ÖBB, Brightline and CRRC Sifang, establishing a body of work that spans both hemisphere and mode.

Alongside this, PriestmanGoode has built 'Private Studio', a practice dedicated to bespoke craftsmanship, spatial ingenuity and client relationships. The Private Studio team has led the ground-up design of bespoke interiors for the Airbus A350, A330 and Boeing B787 and B737 widebodies, as well as ultra-long-range business jets including the Gulfstream G700. Beyond aviation, the studio extends this same ethos to private rail and the world of yachts and superyachts. Each commission is developed in close collaboration with the client, translating a singular vision into a fully realised environment, resolved to the last detail across architecture, materiality, lighting and finish.

What unites both strands of the practice is a deeply held design philosophy: that excellence must be earned through empathy. PriestmanGoode designs for people first, believing that great design is at once simple, elegant and intuitive, rooted in a genuine understanding of how individuals inhabit and experience space. This human-centred discipline informs every decision, from the geometry of a seat to the considered warmth of a material palette, ensuring that complexity is always resolved into clarity.

The studio's distinctive "outside-in" methodology draws on insights across industries and cultures, allowing PriestmanGoode to bring fresh perspective to established typologies and to anticipate the experiences of tomorrow. Sustainability is threaded throughout this process: through the studio's Route to Zero framework, materials and lifecycles are re-engineered for longevity and adaptability, ensuring that design serves not only the present client but the broader world.

As a fully employee-owned practice, PriestmanGoode operates with a unity of purpose that is rare in a studio of its scale. Every project is a direct expression of the firm's collective investment in the quality of the outcome, an approach that has made it, over more than three decades, the trusted creative partner for those who expect nothing less than the world's best.