



**SANA MAHMOOD**, NCIDQ, PMP, LEED, WELL, TRUE, RICS  
Senior Vice President, Planning & Design at Douglas Elliman

Sana is a luxury and lifestyle hotel and branded residential design executive who specializes in ensuring consistency across global brands. By managing the design vision process of large, international hotel chains and boutique lifestyle brands, she maintains a cohesive standard across each organization's brand identity, interior architecture, technical design details, global FF&E, OS&E, and guest experience.

Sana's executive-level expertise includes serving as the voice of design functions, holding P&L accountability, leading teams, and managing client relations. Her savvy entrepreneurial spirit and experience with creative ability enable her to provide solutions where there are gaps in design processes for real estate developers. In addition to staying ahead of design trends, hiring, developing and directing staff, she oversees day-to-day project activities.

Creating refined, elegant interiors is Sana's greatest passion. She first gained exposure to the level of luxury required for elite clients while working in Asia. She further honed this expertise, taking on design leadership roles for VIP clients, including royalty and celebrities. Her attention to detail and understanding of fine craftsmanship is applied in the execution while customizing solutions, managing global FF&E resources, and leading international teams.

Sana quickly advanced through all aspects of the industry in luxury and lifestyle brands, rising to global senior executive. Her background includes experience in Europe, Asia, and North America; leading successful projects for elite international hotel chains, including the Ritz-Carlton, the Four Seasons, and Waldorf-Astoria; and designing luxury interiors for events, including a World Expo in Shanghai and the Olympics in Beijing.

**Q: Brief intro/What type of work do you do/ where do you work?**

A: Prior to the pandemic, I provided design management advice for hotel and branded residential schemes for real estate developers. This work requires pre-development knowledge (market feasibility, development cost, competitive set, etc.) to determine the best product for market. I am currently seeking new opportunities.

**Q: When did you decide to take the NCIDQ Exam? How did you decide what order to take them in?**

A: It was important for me to be an NCIDQ Certified professional as I was growing in management and providing advice to clients. I also wanted to advance in my career and move up to more lucrative projects, and therefore taking the NCIDQ Exam was important. I took the Practicum first,

and the multiple-choice exams second to reduce the level of stress and study time.

**Q: Did you fail any exams/retake any? How did you stay motivated through that process?**

A: I took my first exam in 2010 and failed. I decided to take the exams again, but in pieces. In 2014, I took the Practicum and passed. In 2019, I took the multiple-choice exams and passed. It was difficult to stay motivated as I relocated internationally and was not able to take the exam. For this reason, I have big gaps in my exam years.

**Q: How long did you study for the exams? What did you use to study?**

A: I used Qpractice for all three exams and followed their recommended study guidelines.

**Q: Has the practice of interior design lived up to your expectations that you had as a student? Any surprises or disappointments?**

A: The design profession has lived up beyond my expectations. I have an international career in design which I am highly grateful and proud of.

**Q: What advice would you give to current students that you wished you had received?**

A: Be adventurous and find your swim lane. Don't be a designer for every type of interiors, find your passion, and work to make yourself an expert in the area. For example, if you're a hospitality designer, don't work for companies that do higher education or healthcare. Find your lane and stick to it no matter what.

**Q: Why did you become NCIDQ Certified/why was it important to you?**

A: Advisory work requires certified professionals and it was important for me to gain the trust of my clients and colleagues. Furthermore, NCIDQ has a strong reputation in the international space, as all other nationals use an interior design degree as a form of professional certification.

**Q: How has having an NCIDQ Certificate benefited you and your career?**

A: Absolutely.

**Q: Have you/are you interested in pursuing any other credentials/certifications or licensure/registration/certification in a jurisdiction? If so, please provide those details.**

A: As an interior designer, it's also critical to follow the trends of the industry when it comes to sustainability. Since I work in advisory, I already achieved my LEED, WELL, PMP, TRUE, and RICS certification to compliment my NCIDQ Certification.

**Q: What could the industry do to overcome obstacles from diverse individuals being represented and having equal opportunity?**

A: Promote design professionals to take more risk in their career paths. Try something different and out of context of an office, like a start-up, take part in an accelerator, take a sabbatical, fellowship, etc. Interior designers

and architects move from one firm to the next, it's a linear route. We should promote diversity in experiences while still remaining in your swim lane of expertise. Mixing interior design skills with other industries should be seen as diversity.

**Q: Anything else you'd like to share?**

A: The biggest misconception is that interior designers are decorators/stagers. What is the difference between interior design and interior architecture? Best way to combat these misconceptions is to make it clear to the design community with a glossary of terms for the non-professionals to know the difference.