



SURYABALA SAH, NCIDQ, RID, LEED AP BD+C, WELL AP, RA, ASSOC. AIA Interior Designer, Office Co-Leader of Design Resilience at Gensler, Houston

As a Technical Designer in Gensler’s professional services practice area, Suryabala delivers quality work with excellence at all stages of a project, from schematic design to construction. In her role as a Design Resilience Co-Leader of the Houston office and a sustainability expert, Suryabala helps her clients achieve their carbon targets and broader sustainability goals by integrating resilient design approaches to minimize the operational and embodied carbon impacts of facilities. In addition, Suryabala utilizes building performance design and visualization tools in collaboration with the design teams to analyze sustainable concepts and climate strategies. Key aspects of Suryabala’s design style include functional effectiveness and visual simplicity. A seasoned professional, Suryabala provides effective design strategies and meticulous documentation to best meet her clients’ visions and goals.

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

A: I am a technical designer and sustainability expert on various workplace projects in the Gensler Houston office.

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

A: As a trained Architect and practicing Interior Designer, I moved from Gensler Bangalore (India) to Gensler Houston as an intra company transferee in September 2019. A few months in, I realized the need for, and importance of, getting the NCIDQ appellation and I decided to do that at my earliest. Soon after I also realized that since my education path was different (non-NAAB), my application needed an added evaluation procedure that caused me to wait till September 2021 to finally apply. Since I was already quite late in starting my NCIDQ journey, I decided to take all three at once. IDFX, being the simplest of the three, was the first one, followed by IDPX, which seemed the most difficult of the three exams. PRAC was the last exam I took because the nature of the exam was different from others.

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

A: I took all three exams in Spring 2022. Fortunately, I was able to pass all three in my first attempt, but the four months of preparation leading up to it was extremely challenging.

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

A: I started in January 2022. I took the IIDA Texas Oklahoma NCIDQ study sessions. Additionally, I used the Interior Design Reference Manual by David Ballast, and Building Codes Illustrated by Francis D. K. Ching. I made my own flash cards through the course especially for items that required memorization or looked tricky. I also took the Qpractice subscription for one month.

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

A: I am a trained Architect with a BArch degree and changed my path to Interior Design by choice. I started my career with Architecture Projects in Gensler’s Bangalore office. After three years in the profession, I decided to change my career to Interior Design, and since then I have worked and enjoyed every stage of the profession. The journey of working from concept to CA on various workplace projects over seven years has been a very satisfying one.

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

A: Our profession gives us the power to change so much in the world, from user experience to sustainability to inclusive design — we can make the differences we’d like to see. I would suggest doing what you can to gain experience

in all stages of the projects and begin your journey towards licensure as early as you can. And to remember that with determination and persistent effort — it's possible!

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

A: Firstly, having the NCIDQ appellation distinguishes you from others in the industry. Additionally, in the United States, Gensler emphasizes the importance of having licensure as an essential requirement for professional growth within the firm including promotions/appointments.

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

A: Earning my NCIDQ Certificate has made me feel more confident about the profession and I also feel distinguished amongst my peers. In my case, more importantly as an immigrant, it gives me a professional legal standing in the country. It feels like a huge achievement to have completed all the exams and finally get the certificate after the significant effort that I put in to get here.

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: I already have USGBC's LEED BD+C, IWBI's WELL AP and Fitwel Ambassador certification in Texas. I am also a registered Architect in India. Currently, I do not plan to pursue any other credential/certifications in the near future.

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

A: The industry could work on creating job opportunities in the A&D profession for a diverse population. I believe diverse individuals would also benefit from additional education opportunities and focused mentorship. Gensler provided me with both job and leadership opportunities, and the firm embraced my diverse experience and background. The firm also provided me with a dedicated DEI mentor who helped me bridge any gaps that I had

and helped me keep focused on my path to licensure. The equal opportunities I have been given, coupled with effective mentorship, has helped me to progressively grow in my career.

Q: What are common misconceptions people have? How can we combat these misconceptions and communicate more effectively?

A: Diverse individuals bring diverse perspectives and aspirations to the table. However, oftentimes "the difference" is often looked upon as "inadequate" compared to the standard path. True passions and skills have no color or race. We can combat the misconceptions by embracing the differences and leveraging the diversity.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

A: As a part of my external engagements, I volunteer with USGBC Texas as a board member at its Gulf Coast chapter. I also engage with BIFMA environmental impacts committee and few other groups who work on sustainable materials initiatives in the Texas region. Like I mentioned before, our profession gives us endless opportunities to learn, grow and to give back to the community.