

Silicon Valley

MODERN LUXURY

THE HOME DESIGN ISSUE

Nature Meets Modern Architecture
New Builds Where Even the Stairs Are Art
One Enormous House—Dozens of Designers

Plus
A Yahoo Founder Takes His Art Collection
Public, VIP Dining in the Valley & More



CREATIVE STRATEGY

Business, computer science and design intersect for this user experience expert.

By Jeanne Cooper // Photography by Tony DiLorenzo

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Rena Merchant, a leader of Google's user experience team, may have begun her tech career as a Java developer, yet she always had an interest in art and design. "I love to paint. I love to dance. I love creative expression in that way, and I try to find time for it," says Merchant, who works out of Google's YouTube headquarters in San Bruno. It's not too surprising that, after a few years at a Canadian software and management company, following her degree in computer science from the University of Toronto, "I was craving bringing the design element in," she recalls. "About 11 years ago, I made the formal switch from development into user experience, which is still relevant to my technology background, but in more of a design-focused role."

Six years later, Merchant discovered the need for another set of tools when she helmed Citrix's GoToMeeting user experience team. "I had grown into a leadership role, but was lacking core business skills and the terminology," she explains. Merchant developed those through California College of the Arts' MBA in design strategy, a two-year, "incredibly transformational" program she undertook while still working for Citrix. "Design can help business in tactical ways—we create products that are visually compelling and work really well—but there's so much design teams understand about human beings and users, which can help businesses determine strategy," Merchant says. "[The MBA] helped me connect these dots in a strategic way and helped me figure out my context in large tech organizations: How do we elevate the strategic partnership between user experience and business teams?" As an example, she adds, "while at Citrix, we frequently leveraged customer insights to inform GoToMeeting product direction and used design thinking methods with the leadership team to innovate on company strategy."

With MBA in hand, Merchant left Citrix for a senior role managing Sony PlayStation's video and music experience before signing on with YouTube last fall. This spring, she spoke at Women in Silicon Valley on "the importance authentic leadership plays in building healthy organizational culture," she says. At YouTube, her growing design team focuses on viewers' experience of ads, which are "incredibly important from a revenue perspective, but can get in the way of some users," she observes. "It's been an exciting opportunity for me to deliver really large-scale impact, since all our products impact millions of customers and users worldwide."