Zara Arshad

Design historian and curator working across British and Chinese cultural institutions

Formation, working methods, institutions, collaborators, and the politics of cultural mediation. Research completed 19 September 2026.

[External image / 外部圖片] Portrait of Zara Arshad from her official biographical page
Zara Arshad in the photograph accompanying her own biographical page, credited to Maryna Khivrych in 2022. Maryna Khivrych, 2022 / Zara Arshad · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

1. Who she is

Zara Arshad is a design historian, curator, writer, and researcher. She uses she/her pronouns. Her work concerns how designed things acquire public meaning: through exhibitions, collections, interviews, publications, and the institutions that preserve them. China, Korea, Britain, and increasingly Southeast Asia are central to her professional geography. She is the Zara Arshad associated with the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Design China platform, and The Unheard Archive.[1]

As of this profile's research date, her university record lists a design-curator appointment at Singapore's National Heritage Board beginning in April 2025, and a reviews editorship at Design and Culture beginning in March 2026. The Asian Civilisations Museum identifies her more specifically as its curator for design. Brighton records the award of her doctorate in February 2026. Older biographies that still call her a doctoral researcher therefore need to be read as dated snapshots.[2, 3, 4]

For someone encountering her for the first time, the important distinction is between designing an object and designing the circumstances in which objects become intelligible. Arshad began with a design education and practical communications work. Her later outputs include an interview archive, exhibition research, museum criticism, a podcast, and collaborative publications. The continuity lies less in a recognizable visual style than in a recurring question: whose knowledge makes a design history possible, and what happens to that knowledge when an institution presents the result?

This profile's interpretation is that her career develops through repeated encounters with that question. First, she helps practices circulate beyond their immediate settings. Then she becomes increasingly attentive to the filters involved: language, professional networks, collecting priorities, funding, authorship, and the prestige of particular institutions. This is

not a simple conversion from promotion to criticism. The need to make work visible and the danger of misrepresenting it remain entangled.

There is a revealing difference between the task of finding a designer for a magazine and the task of accounting for the people behind a museum collection. The first rewards the discovery of a compelling name. The second can require dismantling the impression that a small number of compelling names explain how anything happened. Much of Arshad's development takes place between these two demands.

2. Formation: a design education before a historical vocation

In a 2011 interview, Arshad described being born and raised in Britain, while also having lived in Syria and Indonesia. Her attraction to China encompassed its history, everyday culture, food, and written characters. She characterized her Goldsmiths education as conceptually oriented, allowing movement between kinds of design rather than enforcing a single specialization.[5]

The geographical facts should not be converted into an invented account of family identity. The sources consulted do not establish a birth date, a detailed childhood chronology, her parents' occupations, or a family explanation for the moves. Nor does a surname establish ethnicity, religion, or nationality. What is documented is an early familiarity with living across national settings, followed by a deliberate professional commitment to Beijing.

After graduating in 2008, she moved to Beijing. She later recalled initially considering advertising as a compromise between creative ambitions and her family's practical expectations.[6]

An early contributor biography names Bruce Mau, Troika, and Graffiti Research Lab among her influences.[7] This is a small, period-specific constellation, not a comprehensive intellectual genealogy. Its range nevertheless fits the breadth of her initial training: communication, experimental environments, and public intervention could belong to the same field of practice. These were models encountered through work and reputation; the evidence does not establish personal mentorship by any of them.

The most productive consequence of that breadth may have been an ability to recognize research, organizing, and writing as things a designer could do. In retrospect, her career did not require a clean departure from design in order to become historical. It required different ways of putting design competence to work.

3. Beijing: the administrative underside of social design

A particularly concrete early document is Arshad's 2010 essay about her work as Greening and Environmental Support Officer at the British Embassy in Beijing. With no dedicated

budget, she organized changes to waste handling, transport, and energy use. Bilingual recycling labels, paper reused as notepads, and a staff newsletter accompanied negotiations with security and domestic staff over access for local recyclers. A carbon audit helped frame the work. Proposed reductions were targets, not independently demonstrated results.[8]

The episode matters because its instruments were so ordinary. Graphic communication had to connect with procurement, workplace habits, and the people moving materials through a building. A well-designed label would accomplish little if the collection procedure failed. Environmental intent had to become an arrangement that other people could actually sustain.

Her contemporary professional biography also lists commissions or collaborations involving UN Volunteers in China, Teach For China, the Library Project, and design publications.[9] These affiliations locate her early work in a mixed environment of nonprofit communication, international organizations, and specialist media. They do not establish how much any client paid, or which activity supported her financially at a particular moment.

Beijing offered another kind of education alongside employment. In a city guide, she described the Central Academy of Fine Arts as a place to encounter graduate exhibitions, its museum, AIGA China, books, and art materials.[10] Such a place is more than a point on an itinerary. Repeated attendance makes a field legible: one learns who teaches, who recommends whom, what is being discussed, and which practices remain outside the most conspicuous venues.

4. Design China: turning situated access into an editorial platform

Arshad founded Design China in 2011. Her explanation to It’s Nice That placed the site in an information gap exposed by international design events: there was interest in Chinese design, but an inadequate supply of accessible, contextualized accounts for readers beyond the local scene.[11] Her own biography records participation in the organizing committees of the 2009 Icograda congress and Beijing Design Week in 2011–12.[12]

In her 2012 conversation with An Xiao Mina for Core77, the actual reporting process is unusually visible. Leads came through colleagues, exhibitions, graduate shows, posters, referrals, and newsletters. She followed images back to their makers. An assistant helped overcome limitations in her Mandarin, and the site coexisted with a full-time job. Her access to CAFA and Tsinghua networks was useful, but she recognized that they constituted only part of the field.[13]

The editorial operation therefore depended on a conjunction: physical proximity, institutional connections, curiosity, language assistance, and an English-language outlet.

None of these alone would have produced the same platform. The internet supplied distribution; it did not remove the need for situated knowledge.

A profile that describes her simply as someone who “discovered Chinese design” would misunderstand the relationship. Designers, teachers, and their audiences already existed. Arshad’s contribution lay in assembling routes by which particular practices could reach additional readers. The novelty was relational rather than the sudden creation of a cultural scene.

This distinction also exposes the platform’s vulnerability. An editor working through familiar schools and professional recommendations will encounter some kinds of work more readily than others. That is a practical consequence of access, even when the editorial intention is generous. The early platform begins a problem that her later projects address more explicitly: increasing coverage does not by itself correct the structure through which coverage is obtained.

5. The interview as a form of infrastructure

Her April 2013 interview with Aric Chen for Designers & Books already looks beyond a designer’s signature objects. Chen was then associated with M+ and had previously directed Beijing Design Week. Their exchange considers books, the imbalance of translation between Chinese and English, and the place of a research library within a developing museum. Lynn Zhang receives translation credit.[14]

This is a small but significant document in her formation. It brings curatorial practice into contact with the means by which people acquire knowledge. A museum collection cannot be adequately understood through objects alone if the books and languages needed to study them remain inaccessible. The question of translation is consequently also a question of professional capacity: who can research, teach, and criticize the work?

Chen should be identified here as an important interlocutor, not promoted without evidence into a personal mentor. Zhang’s contribution deserves equal precision. Translation was part of the production of the interview, rather than an invisible service performed after its intellectual content was complete. The published bilingual form is itself evidence of collaborative authorship at work.

Design China eventually ended in 2019. In a closing statement preserved by a third-party mirror, Arshad cited changing professional commitments and the arrival of better-resourced platforms. She thanked volunteer contributors and intended the accumulated material to remain as an archive.[15]

Ending the platform is as informative as starting it. An independent editorial project can fill a gap without becoming a permanent organization. Its continued existence depends on maintenance and available time, not merely on whether its subject remains interesting. In this case the closing statement supplies an unusually clear counterweight to the

entrepreneurial assumption that every successful initiative should grow indefinitely.

6. The RCA and V&A: learning to ask historical questions

Between 2013 and 2015, Arshad undertook the Royal College of Art and V&A master's programme in History of Design as a Friends of the V&A Scholar. She studied under Christine Guth and completed a dissertation awarded a distinction.[16] The move placed her inside a setting where objects could be approached through archives, material examination, interviews, and historical argument, rather than primarily through topical reporting.

A student exercise changed the scale of inquiry: an eighteenth-century Jingdezhen teacup recovered off Vietnam directed her attention to trade intermediaries. Its possible destinations remained hypotheses, keeping the distinction between an object's documented history and plausible movements visible.[17]

The surrounding cohort also treated research as a public practice. A 2015 V&A account describes twenty-six dissertations feeding into ibid., a collective publication and exhibition organized around intersecting themes. Ran Faigenboim designed the publication; Arshad's photographs appear in the account. Christine Guth and Sarah Teasley were among the contributors to its intellectual framing.[18]

This context matters without requiring an invented claim that Arshad led the entire project. The historian's work was being translated between a long dissertation, a designed publication, an exhibition, and public discussion. Each format demanded selection. A substantial body of research could not simply be poured unchanged into every container.

The master's programme also joined two different sources of authority: a specialist postgraduate art-and-design institution and a museum with collections, curators, and an established public. Her later career repeatedly works across that junction. Academic research gives an argument depth; museum and publishing work test whether it can become available to people outside the research process.

7. China Design Museum: collecting a past to organize a future

Arshad's master's dissertation, Design Museums in Contemporary China: Localising Global Models, is recorded as a 2015 RCA thesis.[19] Her project account describes research beginning in 2014 on three cases: China Design Museum in Hangzhou, China Industrial Design Museum in Shanghai, and M+ in Hong Kong. Interviews included Hang Jian, Aric Chen, He Jianping, Wang Min, Xiao Yong, Li Degeng, and Shen Yu; she reports depositing transcripts with the dissertation in the National Art Library.[20]

The selection is analytically important. "China" was not being treated as a single museum

system. The cases allowed her to examine how a widely circulating institutional form could be adapted to distinct ambitions and settings. The question moved from what Chinese designers were making to how institutions were deciding what would count as design history.

Her 2017 Design and Culture article, “Constructing Histories to Shape the Future,” concentrated on China Design Museum. The accessible abstract links its collecting and exhibitions to government policy and to the acquisition of 356 Bauhaus objects in 2011. Its acknowledgments credit Guth’s guidance and Li Degeng’s distinction between a museum’s building and its operational “software”: collections, exhibitions, and programmes.[21]

That distinction has broad explanatory power. A celebrated building can make institutional ambition visible before a museum has demonstrated how it will collect, interpret, or teach. Attending to the operational work asks what the institution will actually enable, rather than assuming that architectural presence constitutes intellectual achievement.

Arshad returned to the subject in a 2018 ICON feature. She examined the European emphasis of the opening displays and reported Hang Jian’s staged rationale: studying Bauhaus design would precede broader comparative work and the development of Chinese design. Her account also considered the tension between the new museum’s architecture and other buildings on the campus.[22]

Read together, the academic article and magazine feature identify a consequential paradox. A national design future can be pursued through the purchase and interpretation of a foreign design past. The issue is not adequately captured by calling that move either imitation or cosmopolitan exchange. One must ask what educational and industrial purposes the collection serves, and how its curators expect a borrowed historical model to become locally productive.

There is a second implication for Arshad’s own vocation. She is studying an institution in the process of defining itself, rather than treating museum categories as settled. That makes interviews and organizational intentions historically significant evidence, while also requiring a distinction between a programme announced and a programme accomplished.

8. The Future Starts Here: learning the division of curatorial labor

The V&A exhibition The Future Starts Here opened in 2018. Its credits identify Rory Hyde and Mariana Pestana as curators, Arshad as assistant curator, and Kieran Long with the original conception. Andrés Jaque’s Office for Political Innovation designed the exhibition; 2x4 supplied graphic design; Superflux contributed audiovisual work. Volkswagen Group was a supporter.[23]

These credits are essential to an accurate account. Arshad worked within an exhibition

team with distinct responsibilities and levels of authority. Calling the entire exhibition “her show” would obscure the very distribution of labor her later scholarship examines. Conversely, treating an assistant-curator credit as negligible would erase the research and coordination on which an exhibition depends.

The catalogue similarly identifies Hyde and Pestana, with Long, in its editorial leadership, and Arshad as assistant editor and contributor.[24] Exhibition and book were related but different operations. A visitor could encounter a spatial argument through an object arrangement, while the publication allowed other kinds of explanation and comparison.

A V&A interview with Superflux reveals some of the exhibition’s practical translation work. The studio worked with the curatorial team to connect displayed technologies to less visible systems: resource extraction, communications infrastructure, manufacturing, and circulation. Researching and clearing footage became part of making those relations perceptible.[25]

Superflux’s own project account describes a combination of found material and filmed sequences, designed to place technological possibilities within lived conditions and consequences.[26] This provides a concrete example of what an exhibition researcher must help accomplish. An object does not bring all its social relations into the gallery with it. Those relations have to be investigated and represented through additional media.

The practical difficulty is one of compression. A museum asks visitors to understand a large claim through a limited number of objects and minutes. The objects most capable of attracting attention are not necessarily those best able to explain an ordinary system. That difficulty becomes central to Arshad’s later assessment of the exhibition.

9. The criticism that includes her own institution

In the 2022 essay “Whose Future?”, Arshad used a review of the Smithsonian’s FUTURES to reconsider her V&A experience. She recalled challenging an early emphasis on Western Europe, the United States, and advanced technologies. Visually impressive objects, institutional identity, and attendance expectations nevertheless shaped selection. Her references connect Virilio’s unintended consequences, Dunne and Raby’s possible futures, Edgerton’s technologies in use, and Lorde’s critique of institutional power.[27]

These are different tools rather than a single philosophical system: anticipating consequences, multiplying possibilities, examining ordinary use, and questioning the authority to decide. Together they help explain why adding a more varied set of objects may leave the exhibition’s governing assumptions intact.

10. Everyday invention as a test of the design category

One project discussed in Arshad’s retrospective is Engineering at Home, by Sara Hendren and Caitrin Lynch, which appeared in the V&A exhibition.[28] Its independent

documentation describes Cindy, a woman adapting to limb loss, using everyday materials to perform daily tasks. The project also credits student collaborators William Lu, Mary Martin, and Toni Saylor.[29]

The significance for design history lies in the attribution of expertise. Here a person's practical knowledge of her own circumstances generates workable arrangements. A professional design studio is not the sole location of invention, and technical sophistication is not the only measure of a useful result.

Placed alongside Arshad's embassy work, this case suggests a continuity of attention: ordinary materials, other people's competence, and the conditions of use can matter as much as the persuasive image of an object. That is a comparison made by this profile; neither project should be reduced to an illustration of the other.

It also complicates a familiar account of the curator as discoverer. An everyday adaptation becomes legible to a museum through documentation by other people, then through selection and display. The chain contains several acts of interpretation. Responsible attribution means keeping those acts distinguishable from the originating person's knowledge.

The tension is productive precisely because there is no effortless solution. Museums can broaden the public recognition of such knowledge, while also drawing it into the institution's own categories. The question becomes how to show a practice without making the museum appear to be the source of its value.

11. Korea: from collecting established designers to examining selection itself

Her Korean research began through museum collecting. Rosalie Kim invited her into an acquisition initiative in 2016; a 2017 trip covered five cities. She later recognized that its encounters favored established studios and men.[30]

The problem is methodologically precise. A short collecting trip makes recommendations and existing recognition exceptionally useful. Those same efficiencies can reproduce the field's inequalities. A curator need not intentionally exclude people for the final selection to be unrepresentative.

The later turn toward oral history can be read as a change in the conditions of attention. Instead of requiring a practice to arrive as a collection-ready object from an already legible professional, the researcher can begin with a person's account of work, relationships, and constraints. This does not guarantee equality; interview selection, translation, and editing still matter. It changes what kinds of evidence can enter the process.

Arshad's 2019 Asia Culture Center fellowship in Gwangju provided time and institutional support for a project on contemporary South Korean graphic design. Her project account

places the research between May and November and identifies around fifteen participating designers or studios. Women, emerging practitioners, and experiences marginalized within professional narratives were explicit concerns.[31]

The shift is therefore more substantial than adding Korea to an existing geographical portfolio. She was reconsidering the way a professional field gets sampled and narrated. The earlier acquisition experience supplies a concrete reason for that reconsideration, while the fellowship supplies the means to try another approach.

12. The Unheard Archive: what the public interface does and does not contain

The Unheard Archive made this work public in 2020. Its homepage identifies the project as incomplete and expandable, presenting named entries rather than the claim to have mapped an entire national scene.[32] Contemporary coverage by Clara Weinreich describes an online storytelling catalogue, with fuller recordings and transcripts intended for institutional preservation. The website and the eventual archival deposit were related outputs, not necessarily identical collections.[33]

This distinction prevents a misleading account of the archive’s accessibility. A public index, an edited interview page, a deposited transcript, and a complete recording are different forms of access. The present research could inspect the site’s framing and list of participants, but could not retrieve all the individual interview pages or listen to the complete recordings.

Arshad’s own account identifies interlocutors including Lee Jaeyoung, Lynn Kim, Shin In-ah, Yang Meanyoung, Kim Somi, Woo Yunige, Sunny Studio, Chris Ro, studio fnt, Workroom, Hong x Kim, and Sulki & Min. It separately reports the deposit of selected transcripts with the Asia Culture Center and describes future public availability.[34]

The distinction between a participant and a representative of a whole field is important. An interview can preserve a situated account without making that person stand for “Korean design.” The strongest reading of the project is cumulative: different accounts complicate one another, including through differences in generation, institutional access, gender, and professional position.

It is also a form of evidence-making. Oral history does not merely extract information that already existed in a stable textual form. Questions, recollection, conversation, transcription, and editorial choices produce a new document. The value of that document depends partly on whether later readers can understand the circumstances of its production.

13. Korean practitioners were already organizing their own

histories

The project’s title should not encourage a heroic story in which an outside researcher gave voice to otherwise silent people. The Feminist Designer Social Club’s own Korean-language account dates its formation to July 2018. Its activities include professional discussion, publishing, interviews, a directory, and the podcast Design FM. This organizing preceded Arshad’s fellowship.[35]

Good Question provides another local perspective. The studio’s bilingual account identifies Ooh Yuni, a founding FDSC member, with a practice that includes feminist publishing. Its reproduced excerpt from an Arshad interview discusses how approachable graphic characters can help readers enter feminist material.[36]

That example changes the level of analysis. Feminism is not only a label attached to the identity of a designer. It can enter decisions about tone, illustration, publishing, and the intended relationship with a reader. The archive is useful when it preserves such decisions, rather than treating representation as a count of different kinds of participants.

Sulki & Min’s records supply a further check on the local history. Sulki Choi, Na Kim, and Chae Lee had already co-curated The W Show, a project associated with women graphic designers, before The Unheard Archive appeared. Their publication list also records the 2020 interview with Arshad.[37]

The relationship is therefore best understood as participation in an existing ecology of documentation and argument. Korean designers, collectives, publishers, and researchers were making their own accounts. Arshad added a particular interviewing and circulation project to that activity.

This makes collaboration more demanding than benevolent inclusion. Existing work has to be acknowledged; different agendas cannot be assumed to coincide; and an English-language account needs to answer the question of whom it serves. Those pressures are part of the intellectual substance of the project, not peripheral ethical decoration.

14. Translation is a budget, a credit, and a direction of travel

Arshad has acknowledged how English-language documentation can privilege Anglophone readers, while describing inadequate funding for a fully bilingual project and her continuing language learning.[38] Translation requires resources as well as intent.

The Chinese-English Aric Chen interview offers an earlier example of translation with a named collaborator. Later publication records show movement in the other direction. A Korean Sulki & Min volume published by Workroom Press in December 2025 includes an Arshad contribution concerning the context of their practice; its credits identify Lee Jiwon as translator of her text and several other contributions.[39]

That publication does not prove that every Unheard Archive interview has acquired a

Korean version, or that the wider asymmetry has been solved. It does establish a specific return route: material associated with an international discussion of Korean design entered a Korean-language publication, through credited translation.

Her writing record also lists “Multiple Ways of Knowing and Doing Design,” published in Korean and English in LetterSeed 24 in 2023, developing earlier oral-history work.[40] The bibliography thus reveals a practice moving between formats and audiences over several years. A conversation need not end with its first appearance online.

For understanding the vocation, this is more useful than calling her a cultural “bridge.” A bridge metaphor can make the work sound frictionless and symmetrical. The actual process involves particular editors, translators, funds, permissions, and readers. Its direction matters, and its incompleteness remains visible.

15. The doctorate: the people behind “the museum”

Arshad’s completed thesis is titled Museum meshworks: Representing “Korea” through art, craft, and design at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (1980–2004). Its published abstract describes archival and oral-history research into South Korean contributions to collecting and display. Governments and museums appear alongside makers, collectors, academics, and commercial intermediaries. Collaboration is examined through unequal relations, competing agendas, and labor that institutional histories have overlooked. Brighton names Yunah Lee, Rosalie Kim, and Claire Wintle as supervisors.[41]

The earlier V&A project description used a much longer period, 1919–2019, and also named Divia Patel among the supervisors. It should not be substituted for the final thesis’s scope. That page additionally lists a forthcoming chapter on South Korean maker-donors and the V&A collection, indicating a related line of work without establishing its eventual publication.[42]

The shift in the unit of analysis is consequential. Instead of starting with “the museum” as a single actor that discovers, purchases, and interprets things, the announced project asks how particular people helped those actions happen. An acquisition can then be investigated as a relationship rather than merely an accession date.

One must nevertheless distinguish this reconstruction of the research programme from a review of its completed findings. Brighton’s thesis record and abstract were accessible; the linked full PDF could not be retrieved during this research. The present profile therefore cannot evaluate chapter-level arguments, the treatment of individual donors, or how conflicting testimony is resolved.

Even with that limitation, the trajectory is clear. The early journalist’s problem was how to present work across an information gap. The doctoral historian asks how the gap itself came to be produced by the way an institution remembered its own activity. The second problem incorporates the first but changes the distribution of credit and responsibility.

16. Reverberations: commissioning a conversation about the profession

Reverberations, released in 2021, translated institutional questions into a podcast. Arshad's project account dates the initial event idea to late 2018 and its pandemic-era reworking to late 2020. She curated and hosted the series with Design History Society support, acknowledging guidance from Davinia Gregory, Elli Michaela Young, and Megha Rajguru.[43]

The programme was arranged around institutions, alternative organizational models, and the decolonization of design culture. Participants included Arike Oke, Sumitra Upham, Yewande YoYo Odunubi, Vivien Chan, Debika Ray, Etienne Joseph, Danah Abdulla, Tanveer Ahmed, and Rachael Minott.[44] The published feed records nine episodes, generally long enough for sustained discussion rather than a promotional sound bite.[45]

A Design History Society announcement of the middle group emphasizes independent practices and collective approaches.[46] The structure is revealing: examining museums alone would make established institutions appear to define the whole range of professional possibilities. Including other organizational forms makes it possible to ask which kinds of work require a large institution, and which might be organized differently.

The podcast also changes who carries the argument. An essay can place many references under one author's narrative control. A conversation preserves another person's phrasing and priorities, though editing and the original invitation still shape the result. Arshad's role here combines selection, preparation, hosting, and public framing.

It would be wrong to assign every guest's politics to her. The episode descriptions identify a field of discussion; they do not establish a shared manifesto. The contribution lies partly in constructing a setting in which differences in professional experience can become available for comparison.

The pandemic belongs to the mechanics of this work. It altered the planned format and the possibilities for gathering. The eventual podcast was a response to those conditions, not simply an inevitable next medium in an expanding personal brand.

17. Writing and teaching: research changes when it meets an audience

Arshad's publication record extends across scholarly articles, exhibition reviews, magazine features, object entries, and editorial work. Brighton records her contribution "Population Policy Posters" to the 2021 book Designing Motherhood, alongside a Form essay on oral history and design and reviews in specialist journals.[47] These are distinct scales of argument: a short object entry cannot carry the same apparatus as a dissertation, but it can put a historical question before a different readership.

Her own bibliography lists writing on Hong Kong infrastructure, a restored Shanghai house, speculative design, and ecology, as well as museum and graphic-design research.[48] The list establishes range; it does not license an analysis of every text when some are unavailable. The more useful point is that her practice has not depended on a single publication genre or one kind of commission.

A 2019 Nottingham Trent University report describes a lecture and research workshop for product- and furniture-design students. The session used Chinese design to challenge assumptions and asked students to bring research into their own developing work.[49] This is a concrete teaching mechanism: historical and contextual inquiry becomes part of how a designer frames a project before making it.

A V&A event listing likewise records her explaining the development of The Future Starts Here to a young audience, including research, object choices, and visitor experience.[50] Here professional process becomes teachable material. The museum is not only a destination for finished knowledge; its own working decisions can be examined.

Taken together, these activities suggest that her move toward history has not severed the relationship with makers. Research travels back into practice through workshops, conversations, and publications. The historian can help a designer recognize that the problem they have been given already contains assumptions about users, value, and the past.

This is also a practical account of versatility. The capacities are connected, but each setting imposes different obligations. Teaching requires a useful exercise; criticism requires a defensible judgment; scholarship requires evidence; editing requires enabling other people to complete work. The career depends on moving among those obligations without pretending they are interchangeable.

18. Archiving the archives: a second-order problem

In 2022, Arshad organized the three-part online series Where Design Fails? Exploring Design Archives within the Global Archival Cultures of Design project. Her subsequent report describes bringing institutional, academic, and practitioner or community perspectives into conversation. Setareh Noorani and Eduardo Augusto Costa were among the contributors.[51]

This takes the question of preservation one level further. An archive may remedy omissions in another institution while still having its own limits: storage, classification, ownership, staffing, access, and the circumstances under which material can be kept. A project that studies archives must consider those working conditions as well as the collections they contain.

With design historian and imagemaker Vivien Chan, Arshad developed Archiving Archiving, which became a basis for their collective astra*. The 2024 Design Trust grant

record describes research into independent archival cultures across East and Southeast Asia, naming connections with Malaysia Design Archive, Singapore Graphic Archives, The Book Society, and Hong Kong Design History Network. The proposed publication considered subjects including representation, sensory knowledge, climate, and preservation.[52]

Chan brings a distinct formation to the collaboration. Her own account connects illustration and image-making with historical research into Hong Kong's public housing and spaces of consumption, and emphasizes embodied and sensory methods. She credits Archiving Archiving: Scoping to the two co-editors, with book design by Fibi Kung and support from Design Trust and the Design History Society.[53]

The resulting project should not be described as Arshad's solitary initiative with incidental assistance. It joins related but distinguishable practices. Chan's emphasis on bodily experience and spatial history helps explain why the work's concerns exceed cataloguing documents. The archive can be approached through what people do with materials, where they keep them, and how those environments shape knowledge.

There is also a current-date distinction. Design Trust's September 2026 announcement schedules the first zine launch at Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong for 17 October 2026, with eight archives represented. As of 19 September, that launch remains upcoming.[54] The announcement establishes a concrete publication plan, not an event that has already taken place or a book whose contents this profile has fully examined.

19. Cultural support beyond one's own projects

Arshad is listed on the governing board of 爻 yáo collaborative, formerly China Residencies.[55] The organization's current description emphasizes exchanges and support connecting artists and cultural workers across mainland China, Hong Kong, and other places.[56]

A board affiliation is a different kind of professional relation from curating a show or founding a research collective. It implies participation in an organization's governance; it does not by itself establish the member's day-to-day responsibilities or authorship of particular programmes. The available evidence supports identifying her as a board member, not as the organization's founder.

This affiliation nevertheless belongs in the vocational picture. Residencies, grants, and exchanges help determine who can spend time somewhere, encounter collaborators, and produce work. Supporting such an organization involves the conditions of cultural practice rather than only the content of one's own research.

The connection also makes her Beijing period more than a completed chapter replaced by Korea and Britain. China-related relationships continue through another organizational form. Geographic movement does not require abandoning earlier networks; it can change

the type of participation those networks make possible.

20. Geofictions: a collaboration that changes what research can produce

Geofictions is Arshad’s collaboration with the media artist Yaloo. Their Geofictions: Work in Progress, published in 2021, combined research and visual exploration; Arshad’s project record credits the publication’s design to Minyoung Yang and support to the Incheon Foundation for Arts and Culture.[57] Brighton’s catalogue records the book as a substantial, 191-page publication.[58]

Their 2024 Kaohsiung residency followed a successful 2019 application delayed by the pandemic. Arshad described combining maps, photographs, observation, a collector’s materials, and conversations with marine scientists, interpreting archival research in dialogue with Yaloo’s visual practice.[59]

The collaboration makes a consequential change to the status of a research output. In a historical article, uncertainty usually requires qualification or further investigation. In a speculative artwork, a gap in knowledge can also become the starting point for an explicitly imagined proposition. The two uses should remain distinguishable even when they inhabit the same exhibition.

The project’s question concerned port development and possible ecological consequences.[60] Arshad acknowledged missing historical ecological data; the work should therefore not be mistaken for a completed scientific reconstruction.[61]

That limitation is not necessarily an artistic failure. It determines what kind of claim the work can responsibly make. Archival evidence may establish a transformation of land; contemporary scientific conversations may explain current organisms or conservation efforts; an artwork can ask viewers to imagine otherwise. None should silently substitute for the evidentiary work of the others.

21. Kaohsiung’s collaborators: the research is in the relations

The project’s credits identify local collaborators including Hanmin Elementary School, researchers at National Sun Yat-sen University, the National Academy of Marine Research, and the collector Mu Tsan. They also credit Handi Kim with the exhibition’s visual identity.[62] The place therefore entered the work through people and institutions as well as through photographs of a landscape.

A workshop invited 150 schoolchildren to imagine future marine creatures through drawings and clay models, which Yaloo scanned and adapted.[63] Their imaginative

contribution differed from scientific testimony or historical evidence; its transformation also required further authorship.

Pier-2’s Chinese-language exhibition record confirms 實地調研筆記：高雄—Notes from the Field: Kaohsiung—for 18–26 July 2024. Its description joins archival inquiry, environmental questions, and imagined worlds.[64] This host record is useful corroboration that the project reached a publicly presented form, beyond the intentions described during the residency.

The most interesting methodological conjunction is between a collector’s accumulated material, a scientist’s specialized knowledge, a child’s imagined creature, and an artist’s transformation of an image. These contributions are not interchangeable kinds of evidence. Their encounter can produce an exhibition precisely because the exhibition permits juxtaposition without requiring every component to answer the same question.

The curatorial obligation is correspondingly exacting: viewers should be able to understand when they are encountering historical documentation, scientific interpretation, or fiction. Speculation becomes weaker, not stronger, if those differences disappear into an undifferentiated atmosphere of research.

For Arshad, this work extends the historian’s practice beyond explaining objects that already exist. It uses historical inquiry to help construct a situation in which other possibilities can be imagined. The continuity with her museum work lies in mediation; the difference lies in allowing the collaborators to produce speculative material as part of the inquiry itself.

22. An ecological interest with an earlier history

It would be misleading to treat the Taiwan project as an abrupt ecological turn. The embassy work had already connected design to material consumption. A different antecedent appears in Arshad’s 2016 review “Colour, Vision and Materiality.” Starting from Eleanor Morgan’s research involving spider silk, she considered exhibitions of natural colour and Missoni textiles, attending to material origins, perception, and the work of nonhuman organisms.[65]

That essay offers a more specific continuity than the broad label “sustainability.” An object’s visible appearance can obscure the processes and living systems that make it possible. Looking harder at material production changes the account of who or what participates in making.

The question parallels, without being identical to, her work on overlooked human contributors. In one case, a museum’s authorship can conceal donors or collaborators. In another, a designed surface can conceal organisms and material processes. Both require attention beyond the named designer, but the kinds of evidence and responsibility differ.

The resulting practice is expansive without necessarily constituting a settled environmental philosophy. The public record supports recurring ecological interests and particular

collaborations. It does not establish that she has developed a comprehensive theory of climate politics or that all her projects should be interpreted through one.

23. Singapore: the next test is institutional

Arshad's Singapore appointment brings her back into direct museum work. An Asian Civilisations Museum programme for 13 September 2025 places her in conversation with furniture designer Nathan Yong about local industry, regional craft collaboration, and design education. The event forms part of the museum's work on Design Collection Singapore, a National Heritage Board initiative launched in 2023, with ACM focusing on furniture and fashion.[66]

This is a particularly consequential setting for her established questions. A developing national collection must decide which practices to preserve, how to connect them to broader regional histories, and how to distribute attention between recognizable designers and less visible contributors. Those are questions her research has examined elsewhere; they now become practical responsibilities within a different institutional setting.

Singapore's Design 2035 Masterplan places design within goals involving industry, cultural identity, resources, and social life, and includes the collection initiative among measures intended to increase design's recognition.[67] This is policy context, not evidence that Arshad wrote the policy or controls its implementation.

The comparison with her China museum research is suggestive. In both settings, collecting design can participate in defining a national future. The comparison should not erase differences between institutions or political contexts. Its value is to identify a recurring professional tension: critical historical knowledge may inform museum work while the museum also serves objectives set at another level.

It is too early, on the accessible evidence, to judge how successfully she has translated those commitments into Singapore's permanent collection. An event programme establishes a role and a public conversation, not an acquisition record or proof of structural change. The next meaningful evidence would be specific collecting decisions, their documentation, and the ways contributors are represented.

This makes the current position an open chapter rather than the final validation of her preceding career. It places her concerns somewhere they can be tested through institutional action.

24. How the practice is sustained

The public record describes a mixed professional economy. There have been employed roles, commissioned writing and design, teaching, funded research, fellowships, and collaborative projects. It does not provide a reliable account of her income, savings, fee levels, or the relative contribution of each activity. No conclusion about personal wealth or

financial security follows from a long list of affiliations.

Several mechanisms can nevertheless be identified. The Friends of the V&A scholarship supported a period of specialist training. An AHRC-funded collaborative doctoral project connected university research to a museum setting.[68] The Gwangju fellowship supplied a period for oral-history work. Residencies made sustained work in another location possible. Publication grants supported outputs that would be difficult to explain as commercial products alone.[69, 70, 71]

The distinction between supporting a project and supporting a whole livelihood matters. A grant may pay for travel, a publication, or specified research costs without making the recipient financially independent. The sources establish the existence of support, not an overall balance sheet.

Institutional resources also take forms other than money. Access to collections, introductions, a venue, a publication's audience, a recognized affiliation, or time with a specialist can change what research is possible. These advantages help explain the move from a small editorial platform to projects requiring substantial archival and curatorial access.

The same arrangements generate dependencies. A publication needs an editor and a schedule; a residency can be postponed; an archive requires maintenance after launch; a museum project has a hierarchy of decisions. Arshad's career is better understood through these negotiated conditions than through the idea of an entirely autonomous investigator following interests wherever they lead.

Her practice appears to work by assembling support around a question, producing something usable within that arrangement, and sometimes carrying the material into another setting. This is an inference from the documented sequence, not a claim about a consciously declared business model. It helps explain both the variety of outputs and the importance of relationships that persist between projects.

25. The network, with roles kept distinct

The relevant network is not a list of famous people with whom Arshad has been photographed. It consists of people and organizations doing different kinds of work. The distinctions below condense relationships documented in the preceding sections.

Person or setting / Documented relationship / What it helps explain

Person or setting: Christine Guth; RCA/V&A programme
Documented relationship: Teacher and scholarly guide during the master's period
What it helps explain: The transition toward historical and object-based inquiry

Person or setting: CAFA, Tsinghua, Beijing Design Week
Documented relationship: Early professional and reporting environment

What it helps explain: How situated access supplied leads and also shaped coverage

Person or setting: Aric Chen; Lynn Zhang
Documented relationship: Interview interlocutor; credited translator
What it helps explain: Museums, books, and language as a shared knowledge problem

Person or setting: Rosalie Kim
Documented relationship: Korean collecting collaborator and doctoral supervisor
What it helps explain: Continuity between practical museum research and institutional history

Person or setting: Yunah Lee; Claire Wintle
Documented relationship: Doctoral supervisors
What it helps explain: University research alongside museum-based inquiry

Person or setting: Rory Hyde; Mariana Pestana; the exhibition team
Documented relationship: Senior curatorial and production collaborators
What it helps explain: The division of authority and labor in a large public exhibition

Person or setting: Korean designers, FDSC, and publishers
Documented relationship: Interview participants and an existing local field of documentation
What it helps explain: Oral history as participation in ongoing arguments

Person or setting: Design History Society
Documented relationship: Professional association and project supporter
What it helps explain: Podcasting, research exchange, and publication support

Person or setting: Vivien Chan; Fibi Kung
Documented relationship: Co-researcher/co-editor; publication designer
What it helps explain: The collaborative production of Scoping

Person or setting: Yaloo; Kaohsiung collaborators
Documented relationship: Artistic partner; local sources, institutions, and participants
What it helps explain: Historical inquiry translated into speculative exhibition work

Person or setting: Asian Civilisations Museum/National Heritage Board
Documented relationship: Current professional setting
What it helps explain: The practical application of research to a national collection

No single institution explains the whole trajectory. The network connects design schools, magazines, museums, independent collectives, research funders, local archives, and artists. Different projects activate different parts of it. Its value lies not simply in size but in the possibility of bringing unlike forms of competence into relation.

There is also an asymmetry worth retaining. Arshad sometimes works with the authority and resources of a prominent institution, and sometimes as an independent interviewer or collaborator. Her position is not identical in every exchange. An account of her methods

must therefore ask what responsibilities follow from the particular role, rather than assuming that “collaborative” means power has disappeared.

26. What is distinctive, and what remains unresolved

Arshad’s work is most distinctive when a representational question becomes a question about procedure. Who was interviewed? Which language carries the result? What makes an object collectable? Who receives a credit? What does the public website actually preserve? These questions connect ethical ambition to decisions that can be examined.

A second distinction is her willingness to treat mediation as substantive work. Writing, transcription, exhibition research, hosting, editing, and collecting are not secondary to an allegedly more authentic act of making. They help determine what becomes available for future makers, historians, and publics to know. Her own movement between them gives her a practical understanding of their different capacities.

The record also suggests a capacity to revise a method after encountering its consequences. A reporting platform exposes the dependence of coverage on networks. Collecting established designers raises questions about whom short research trips miss. A futures exhibition prompts criticism of the objects museums find easiest to display. These are documented changes of emphasis; a tidy story of continuous moral improvement would be less convincing than the actual sequence of partial adjustments.

There are limits. The corpus consulted contains substantial self-description, interviews, institutional publicity, and project documentation, but comparatively little sustained independent assessment of her work as a whole. Publication and inclusion are evidence of participation and circulation, not automatic proof of major disciplinary influence. The doctorate needs close reading before its scholarly contribution can be judged. The long-term accessibility of archival outputs also requires more than a launch announcement.

Nor are the central tensions resolved by recognizing them. International circulation can favor English. A grant-funded project can foreground overlooked labor while depending on labor that remains difficult to finance. A museum can recover collaborative histories while retaining unequal decision-making structures. Speculative work can open a question while leaving historical evidence incomplete.

The importance of this vocation lies in the effort to work on those conditions from several positions at once. Arshad is neither wholly outside institutions nor reducible to their public voice. She has worked as a reporter, team member, scholar, critic, interviewer, teacher, and collaborator. What joins those roles is an increasingly exact attention to how knowledge is made available—and to the people, materials, and decisions that availability can hide.

27. A route into the work

For a first encounter, five items provide a useful progression. They are selected for the

different kinds of access they offer, rather than as a ranking of her achievements.

1. “How to Green an Embassy” (2010). The most concrete early account of practical design operating inside an organization: communication connected to routines and material handling.[72]
2. The Aric Chen interview (2013). A view of her interviewing practice, with books, translation, and museum knowledge already central.[73]
3. The Unheard Archive and the local sources around it (2020 onward). Read its public framing alongside FDSC and the designers’ own records; that pairing keeps the existing Korean field in view.[74, 75]
4. “Whose Future?” (2022). The clearest accessible statement of criticism arising from her own curatorial experience.[76]
5. The Kaohsiung residency account and host’s exhibition record (2024). Together they show a research process and its public outcome, while preserving the distinction between evidence and speculation.[77, 78]

For further listening, Jarrett Fuller’s 2022 Scratching the Surface interview offers a longer conversation about the breadth of her practice.[79] For scholarly follow-up, the 2017 China Design Museum article and the completed 2026 thesis are the principal texts to pursue. Their full arguments should be read directly rather than inferred from abstracts.[80, 81]

Research and source note

This profile uses accessible writings, interviews, institutional records, project pages, and publication information in English, Chinese, and Korean. It distinguishes an institution’s record of an event or appointment from a participant’s retrospective interpretation. Korean and Chinese sources are used particularly to verify collaborators, local organizing, publication credits, and the Kaohsiung exhibition, rather than treating English-language coverage as sufficient for every part of the story.

The largest limitation is access to full scholarly and archival material. The completed doctoral thesis is listed publicly, but its PDF download returned an access error during research. The 2017 journal article was available through its abstract and associated material, not as a complete text. Some Unheard Archive interviews could not be retrieved, and podcast audio was not transcribed or independently analyzed. Accounts of those works are limited accordingly. This document does not imply interviews with Arshad or her collaborators.

Dates are resolved through the most specific available records: the completed doctorate is dated February 2026 despite older student biographies; the oral-history research began in 2019 before its 2020 public presentation; and the announced October 2026 Scoping launch is still forthcoming at the research cutoff. The intended preservation of material is not treated as proof of its present accessibility.

The notes below identify the evidence used and, where material was unavailable or

mediated, the boundary of access. They also serve as a reading bibliography.

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