

20 on 20/20 Vision

Perspectives on Diversity and Design

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Where Are the Architects Who Look Like Me?

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Abstract

Although there have been several meetings and forums discussing diversity in the architecture profession, action has not been taken at the local level of all AIA chapters. This paper discusses the benefits of mentorship in recruiting and retaining minorities and how the AIA and other organizations can promote diversity.

In an ideal world, I would have a professional mentor who looked like me. She would be an African-American female. She would be a licensed architect with years of experience, both good and bad. She would pass on pillars of knowledge about how to succeed in this "white gentleman's profession." She would advise on which community service endeavors to pursue to benefit myself and other young girls. She would counsel me on how to balance family and professional life. She would be my shoulder to lean on and ear to talk to when I was feeling successful or discouraged. Alas, I must deal with my reality.

The Research

In small metropolitan areas and most rural areas, there are few African-American architects, and the majority of these are male. I live in a small metropolitan area with, to my knowledge, six licensed African-American architects, and none of the six is a woman. According to the Directory of African-American Architects, the total number of registered Black female architects in the United States is 143 (Grant).

One hundred forty-three Black female architects translates to an averages of less than three per state. Thirty-five years after Whitney Young's historic speech to the AIA, the organization is still struggling with diversity, still searching for solutions, still exploring the problem. Researchers put forth several reasons why the numbers are climbing at a slow rate.

First, how can young people aspire to be architects when they never see one who looks like them? In 1990, John Dixon remarked:

"If black students and their families hardly ever hear of a black architect, the most promising young people are unlikely to look to architecture as a career; ...if clients rarely see or hear of a black architect, black architects are not going to have the credibility they need,"(Dixon 1990, 7).

Five years later, Philip G. Freelon noted, “when young people are looking for a profession, it is essential that they see faces that look like their own. If they don’t that sends its own message about how they’re going to fit into that profession,”(Dahir 32). Role models are important when children are thinking of their future.

Second, how can a student feel encouraged to stay the course when the architecture of their culture is not discussed, written about, or seemingly valued by their professors or mainstream culture? For non-Caucasian students to have mentors that look like them at the university level, there must be non-Caucasian professors. Dixon reminds us, “if the designs and writings of black faculty members are rarely published, their chances for advancement or influence are reduced,” (Dixon, 1990, 7). There is a reason why forty-five percent of African American architects currently in practice graduated from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Grant). The environments at these colleges regularly foster pride in cultures other than the mainstream European models and have curricula reflecting these values. Role models are important to students discovering themselves and their place in the world.

Third, how can young interns succeed at becoming registered architects without positive reinforcement that a place exists for them within the profession and a workplace that values their contribution? In a 1992 editorial, Robert Easter, then NOMA’s vice president, commented “One area that needs work, ...is keeping minority architecture graduates from giving up on architecture during their apprenticeship” (Dixon, 1992, 7). Almost ten years later, Kathryn Prigmore, an architecture professor, noted, “In her experiences mentoring students, ... African American students are often not recruited as aggressively, nor are they nurtured as their Anglo counterparts” (Knoop). Success at the intern level can determine whether a potential architect pursues licensure or follows an alternative career path. In 1992, at a symposium celebrating Black women architects Sharon Graeber, a Baltimore project architect, noted “Many hundreds of black women have graduated from architecture school in the last ten years? Why have so few become registered?” (Prowler). According to the same article, at that time, there were forty-nine registered Black female architects. Clearly, many graduates either decide on careers other than architecture or stay in architecture but do not pursue licensure.

Fourth, how can young architects succeed in the profession when they do not have competent mentors? One project architect remarked, “at age 30, I should not [have been] the woman in the office with the most architecture experience,”(Bussel, 46). It’s true that many women succeed without female role models and many African-Americans succeed without African-American role models. Most of us advance by having multiple mentors. However, from experience, I believe that most people benefit from

having, at least, one role model who has similar racial or ethnic background and is the same sex. The profession cannot overlook the value of role models, especially those who have been traditionally underrepresented.

In August 2001, members of the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) and National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) met in a summit to discuss the failure of the AIA to fully own up to Whitney Young's 1968 challenges. At this summit, Curtis J. Sartor reiterated some of the same points made ten years earlier by Dixon. Sartor's reasons why so few African Americans entered the profession include:

1. Lack of awareness of architecture as a career option;
2. Lack of visibility of African American architects;
3. Lack of monetary rewards within the profession;
4. Lack of power and influence compared to other professions;
5. Isolation of African American students in architecture programs;
6. Low SAT scores;
7. Architecture is not intrinsic to African American culture;
8. Family opposition; and,
9. Racism (Knoop).

The summit participants believed "mentorship and recruiting are critical components for bringing African American students into the profession and helping them get licensed" (ibid.). Trying to make it in any profession where you are a minority can be difficult and discouraging.

My Story

Despite all the reasons for me not to be an architect, I am one of the exceptions. When I was young I enjoyed art and design and I easily succeeded at mathematics. At a young age I was introduced to architecture at a Girl Scout career event. From there, my aspirations grew. It did not matter how difficult others told me it was or how many times architects, that I later met, asked me how certain I was about my career choice. The more I researched and discovered, the more I wanted to become an architect.

After high school I set off to Howard University ready to focus my energy on architecture. Here, I experienced the difficulties of design studio, the pressure of juries, and the difficulty of trying to squeeze twenty-five hours of work and responsibilities

into twenty-four hours. Not to mention sleep. Despite it all, I felt exhilarated because, at a historically black university, others who looked like me and with whom I had similar cultural backgrounds surrounded me. I did not feel the pressure of being "the only one." In college, for the first time, I met black women architects. Despite what people may say, having role models and peers who look like you boosts a person's esteem in their career choice.

Now as a young professional, I find myself trying to find ways to connect with other interns and especially with Black, female architects. I find it very discouraging that there are no licensed African -American female architects in my area or AIA chapter. Black female architects realize the shortage. Patricia Harris asks "But how many can name a female African-American architect?" she replies "I would encourage young black women to look for us," (Harris 28). This is where I find the AIA is lacking in its efforts. In my short time involved with the organization, I find it to be very disjointed; ideas promoted at the national level do not always trickle down to the local level. Perhaps this is related more to my individual chapter or state. Yes, there is a national committee on diversity, but what is this group doing on a local level? How are they encouraging local chapters to take on issues of recruitment? I have not seen any concerted effort to attract and retain a diverse population to the profession in my area.

I have seen many professionals who want to assist interns. However, their efforts are at an individual level. It would benefit the AIA to provide an avenue for licensed professionals to connect with interns. Once a student becomes an intern there should be a concerted effort to provide assistance to those who want to become licensed. On a local level, there needs to be an active program to recruit and retain mentors. I joined my local AIA board because there were no board members who looked like me. In my short time on the board, I have come in contact with several interns who want and have had difficulty locating mentors outside of their offices. This is an important part of career development, but it can go unnoticed if AIA chapters do not take the time or do not have the means to focus on developing resources for interns.

The Role of the AIA

Despite all of the research done and editorials written about diversity in architecture, and the United States in general, in 2003 we are again back at the task of looking for solutions to what seems a never ending problem in the profession. I cannot help but think of Whitney Young's statement calling for an end to study and a call to action. He urged the AIA to "accept [his] recommendation for a moratorium on the study of the Negro in this country. He has been dissected and analyzed, horizontally and vertically and diagonally," (Young).

To improve diversity, the AIA committee should do more to impact the local level. One method used by others is producing a set of best practices. First, the organization should produce a compilation of events and program ideas including guidelines from chapters that are already making an impact on diversity in the field. With this method, chapters, who have never thought about the ideas and those that do not know where to begin, are not creating from scratch. This repeats the role model idea: chapters that are already implementing programs on diversity should serve as role models to other chapters.

Second, K-12 initiatives are necessary nationwide. AIA chapters can have a big impact by exposing children to architecture and how it impacts their daily lives. Members of the Council of Architectural Component Executives (CACE) could use materials already produced by local chapters as well as information from National Council of Architectural Boards (NCARB) and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ASCA) to distribute packages to high school counselors. Part of the K-12 initiative should include having architects at career and college fairs.

Additionally, to reach young people, the AIA should also investigate forming strategic partnerships with organizations that are already serving young people. Scouting organizations are already reaching scores of children. These organizations have career forums and are always looking for presenters in large and small settings. In addition, at least one national program exists with architectural professionals providing mentorship to students. The ACE Mentor program, founded by Dr. Charles H. Thorton, is “an innovative way of attracting young people, particularly minorities, women and the less privileged into colleges and engineering and educational programs to increase the flow of students into the engineering and educational system” (ASME International). AIA chapters could partner with ACE chapters to have architects and intern architects serve as mentors to high-school students. The AIA does not have to reinvent mentorship; programs exist to accomplish the organization’s established goals. Using resources that are already available would benefit the AIA and the community at large.

The task may seem daunting. To succeed the AIA needs to enlist members at the local level and encourage them to reach out to their communities and young architects. For now, I will continue to look for architects who look like me. Until I find one, in my area, I will be for other girls the architect who looks like them.

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