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Feature Stories

Laying Out a Blueprint for Diversity

By David Pluviose

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Ted Landsmark, President, Boston Architectural College and President, Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

Architecture intersects nearly every facet of life. Many times, an architect's drawing board is where the places we live, eat, meet and worship first take shape. When we want to build commemorative projects like the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial, we call an architect. When universities seek the right balance between form and function in new academic halls, an architect is called. Though the architectural needs of society are highly diverse, the pool of available architects is anything but.

2004 statistics from the American Institute of Architects — the profession's leading membership association — indicate that just 7 percent of its licensed or registered members are underrepresented minorities. Only 12 percent are women. As Blacks and Hispanics each make up about 13 percent of the overall population and women comprise roughly half of the population, this gaping disparity has prompted widespread calls for change.

Though fields such as law and medicine have become increasingly inclusive, architecture remains "a profession dominated by White males, whereas many other professions have overcome that. Architecture seems to be slow in overcoming that," says University of Maryland architecture professor Gary A. Bowden. "Part of that, I think, goes back to the fact that architecture traditionally has been such as patronage kind of relationship between a rich architect and his rich clientele." That historical relationship, he says, creates and maintains a closed circle of architects from privileged social classes, and "minorities tend to be left out."

But that may be starting to change. The AIA has named Washington, D.C.-area Marshall E. Purnell, of Devroux and Purnell, as its first Black president. Prior to his election, Purnell had been already named an AIA Fellow, the association's highest honor. Another Black architect, Boston Architectural College President Theodore Landsmark, is the current president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture — the second Black to serve in that role. Hampton University Department of Architecture Dean Bradford Grant was the first. Landsmark says he is uniquely positioned to respond to the architecture profession's diversity imperative.

"As a person who grew up in the projects in Harlem, who always wondered who the people were that got to decide what kind of space I lived in, I knew that many young people ask the same questions and that some, if given the opportunity, would themselves want to enter this profession," Landsmark says.

Despite strong representation of some underrepresented minorities in leadership roles within the profession, 83 percent of licensed U.S. architects are White males. In particular, the fact that Black females make up less than 0.2 percent of all licensed architects has many in the industry scrambling for answers.

"There are about 102,000 licensed architects in the United States," says Landsmark. "Of that number 1,571, at the latest count, are African-American. Of that number, 186 are African-American women.

“As the demographics of the world’s client base has changed, there has emerged an increased appreciation of the value that diversity brings to the design field because design inevitably must reflect the values of local cultures,” he continues, adding that “building is going on in much more diverse cultures than the architectural profession has served in the past.”

Recently, Bowden hosted a panel discussion at the University of Maryland featuring leading architects tasked with coming up with ideas on how to bring more diverse faces into the profession. In addition to Purnell and Landsmark, the panel featured two prominent female architects: the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign’s Dr. Kathryn H. Anthony, author of *Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession*, and past ACSA President Geraldine Forbes Isais, director of the University of New Mexico’s architecture program.



Geraldine Forbes Isais, director of the University of New Mexico’s architecture program

A Challenging Registration Process

Part of the challenge in boosting the diversity of the architecture field is an extensive registration process, many architects say. At a minimum, in most states, registered architects are required to have completed a five-year bachelor of architecture program or obtain a master’s in architecture if their bachelor’s is in any other discipline. At that point, aspiring architects must go through the three-year Intern Development Program, and following that, they must complete a grueling battery of nine exams administered by the National Council of Architecture Registration Boards, or NCARB.

The “architecture exam, given in every state, is a tedious and long exam which further limits the number of registered architects and women, actually,” Bowden says. “The registration path limits women, in a certain way, because it is designed to take a person straight out of college and then have them work as a professional for three years and then be able to take the exam — those are [women’s] most productive and likely childbearing years. And so many women exit that process to raise children and never catch up again.”

 An infographic with a blue and white color scheme. The title is "The Path to Becoming an Architect". Below the title, it states "In most states, registered architects must complete:" followed by a bulleted list of requirements:

- *A five-year bachelor of architecture program or obtain a master's in architecture if their bachelor's is in any other discipline
- *A three-year Intern Development Program
- *A battery of nine exams administered by the National Council of Architecture Registration Boards

 The background of the infographic shows a construction site with a crane.

To combat that scenario, some have suggested altering the licensure process to allow women to take maternity leave and resume the process without penalty. A common argument against that approach, however, is that any extra time to complete the exams would create an unfair advantage for women.

“The key here is to realize that when the playing field wasn’t level to begin with, saying that we have to hold a level playing field at the gate becomes an inequitable situation for certain groups,” says Isais. “And so that issue I think is squarely on the table now for NCARB to look at.”

Another option, which was proposed during the University of Maryland forum, is to partner with community colleges to help diversify the profession. The idea has been gaining traction industrywide. The two-year Miami Dade College is 80 percent minority, and architecture professor Lyle Culver says that diversity is reflected in the 1,000 or so students in MDC’s architecture and design school. He says the schools “is really an entry point for many people from all over. We just had a graduation, and on our campus alone there were 65 nations represented. I see students from

all over the world coming to study architecture.”

Culver says many of his nontraditional students have day jobs and raise families; a stark contrast from the elitist traditions of the architecture profession.

“At Miami Dade, we educate the poor,” he says. “We have students that take the bus, Metro, bring their models from their home, [people who] travel considerable distances to get here. We don’t have permanent studios like most architectural programs, where the students can leave their projects here, work on them, and come back.

The diversity at MDC’s engineering school doesn’t stop with the students either, he says.

“Even our faculty — we’re all minority,” he says. “I’m Hispanic, my neighbor is from Brazil, another colleague of mine is from India. We have Cuban-Americans, we have Venezuelan Americans, we have Puerto Rican Americans. Our chair is from Spain. We’re a melting pot as far as the faculty is concerned, which also makes it real dynamic and vibrant.”

And, Landsmark notes, architecture as a whole can suffer if the life experiences of architects differ significantly from the perspectives of a broadly diverse pool of clients.

“Individuals from more diverse cultures have a deeper understanding of how more diverse clients use the environments within which they live and work,” he says. “Women as architects have a clearer sense of why the height of a kitchen cabinet might affect how a woman might use her kitchen. Latino architects have a greater sense of how extended families use common space in residences to support patterns of care giving and raising families.”

Culver says many of his students are able to fulfill their goals of becoming registered architects via an articulation agreement with Florida International University’s architecture program. He and other community college architecture faculty shared success stories during a first-ever presentation at the ACSA’s annual meeting in Philadelphia in March. According to Landsmark, discussion during the meeting revolved around developing articulation agreements between community colleges and professional programs to ensure full transfer of credits. Also discussed was the development of internships that would enable community college students to get the field experience enjoyed by their four-year college counterparts.

“It was a very informative and successful presentation that will encourage other community colleges with design-oriented programs to begin to develop relationships with the professional schools in their local areas,” Landsmark says. “We’re all anxious to get more information about those community college programs because it was clear in Philly that they are doing an outstanding job of preparing students to move on to professional education and licensure.”

One of the major challenges community colleges have in seeking articulation agreements with five-year programs is the proprietary bias many architecture schools have against design credits from other schools, even if an articulation agreement exists. Many design courses place a heavy emphasis on one-on-one instruction, and even elite programs shun transfer credits from other elite schools, says Carl L. Strona, emeritus professor of architecture at two-year San Diego Mesa College.

“Schools of architecture all consider design the core of their program,” he says. “Every program believes they’re the only ones who know how to teach design. If you went to Yale for four years, and decided to transfer to Harvard, they’d make you start over, because ‘What in the world do they know down there in New Haven.’ This is the elitist attitude of these schools.”

In a career that has spanned three decades, Strona has helped San Diego Mesa build its architecture program from the ground up and set up an articulation agreement with Woodbury University. The agreement, which allows San Diego Mesa students to transfer their design credits to Woodbury, is still something of a rarity in the industry.

Typically, Strona says, five-year architecture programs view community college programs as being the

equivalent to “high school drafting, and granted, a lot of the programs are. But our program, and I can probably name a half a dozen in the state — offers the equivalent of the first two years. We teach structure, we teach theory, we teach history of architecture, four semesters of architectural design, four semesters of computer drafting and architecture computer drawing — a whole spectrum. That’s not a typical drafting program, and they continue to look at it as if it were and it’s very frustrating.

“It’s a fact that community college transfer students do better in the upper division than students that start from scratch — GPA, success rate, everything else,” Strona continues. “Why wouldn’t it work in architecture?”

He says many five-year architecture programs “correctly judge what community colleges used to be, and I don’t think they’ve educated themselves and the community colleges haven’t done a good job educating those university programs as to what kind of a job they can, and many times are doing.”

--*David Pluviose*

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