



Room for All Our Talents

Editorial

By Robert Ivy, FAIA

The two leading candidates for the Democratic nomination clearly illustrate that America is changing. Look around the American workplace or the adjacent seat on mass transit. Demographics and personal observation prove that the monolithic culture many of us knew as children has shifted to a polyphonic blend of peoples and cultures. Architecture remains woefully behind the power curve, however.

Theodore Landsmark, the president of Boston Architectural College, recently reiterated a fact that some of us had regrettably become familiar with, because it has not appreciably changed: Only 1.5 percent of America's architects are African-American (at a time when the U.S. Census shows that African-Americans comprise approximately 12 to 13 percent of the total population). Latinos and Asians share low numbers in architecture, too, though not at the 1 percent level. Speaking at a plenary session on diversity in St. Louis called by the AIA in April, Landsmark pointed out that the profession has not kept pace with the demographic changes in our larger society.

Other segments of the population remain poorly represented within the architectural ranks. While women now account for approximately half of the student population in schools of architecture, their numbers among registered architects in the AIA hovers around 13.8 percent, though that number fluctuates. Landsmark described a demographic nadir in which there are only 208 licensed women architects who claim African-American origin. Only 208 in the United States!

Balance those abysmal statistics against our expanding need for talent in the design and construction sector. As architectural firms scramble to attract and keep the best and brightest, the pipeline seems to be clogging up. While architectural programs are growing, the total student population in schools of architecture remains stuck at a constant number—33,000 at last count, or approximately a tenth of the number of

engineers. We need more talent now, for the work already booked and more to come. Outsourcing abroad will not address all our needs.

The recent AIA gathering in St. Louis brought together leadership from across the industry in a unique, ambitious assembly, including representatives from large firms and small; the executive and elected leadership of the institute; academia; and associations and affiliated organizations such as NOMA (the National Organization of Minority Architects), the NAACP, Arquitectos (an organization of Latino architects), AIAS, the International Archive of Women in Architecture, ACSA, NCARB, and others. All recognized the need for sympathetic groups to band together in strategic alliances to promote diversity. Examples of effective collaborations might include lobbying government agencies or participating in shared marketing.

After listening to speakers from representative bodies within and outside of architecture—such as the diversity program manager for a large law firm, in a discipline which hits the problem head-on—the members of the gathering outlined several shortcomings that are endemic to our chosen profession: poor communication with minority youth (few seem to know or care about the design professions); structural incompatibility between schools of architecture (many minority students begin work in community colleges but find transitioning to 5- or 6-year programs difficult); a studio-centered university culture that still places too much emphasis on individual achievement; and incomplete or inadequate mentorship of graduates.

Hand-wringing alone will not solve the problem. Carole Wedge, FAIA, the president of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott, one of the oldest practices in the nation, can count 30 countries represented among her employees. She insists that in order to succeed, a company needs to “make its values articulated and clearly stated,” and in her own firm's case, the business objectives and the values of the organization engage

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and involve diversity. As the client base shifts, her own company will more fully reflect the people and organizations that it serves. “If we could become diverse, anyone can become diverse,” she states.

How can architects actively reach the talent pools of the future, particularly among minority communities, if the community doesn’t know about or appreciate what the design professions can do? Too often, architecture is perceived as an elite club for white men, one that has kept the door shut and locked. One organization making remarkable strides in changing those perceptions by engaging students in the entire design and construction process warrants our attention.

Enter the ACE Mentor Program. Since 1994, when 17 design and construction firms joined together to adopt a group of 90 high school students, 37,000 students have matriculated through the program. From its genesis in New York City, ACE now counts 110 American locations in its roster, with a special focus on the inner city.

While not a panacea for all, ACE is answering many of the questions raised by the AIA forum on diversity. First, consider whom it serves. According to Charles Thornton, the distinguished engineer of Thornton-Tomasetti who helped found the organization, 82 percent of ACE students qualify as minorities within urban centers. Designed to function as an after-hours program, ACE pairs groups of 15 to 25 students with representatives from the design and construction industry, who serve as mentors.

The ACE literature describes the mentors’ role: helping students through a design project that simultaneously introduces them to the language, career potential, and individual paths inherent in the field. What better way to learn the value and the possibilities of design and construction? As Thornton says, “You would never be able to get these kids’ attention in one 30-minute assembly in school.” Time spent during the academic year yields knowledge and relationships.

In addition, ACE has given away more than \$1 million in scholarships, a legacy that continues to involve the alumni beyond graduation day. Mentors and mentees sometimes forge bonds that result in subsequent employment. Through ACE, students benefit from an ongoing link that begins with a volunteer who helps inform young people about planning, design, and construction, expands to tours of offices and sites, and ultimately engages them in a design project that mimics the challenges that set our professions apart.

If your own firm isn’t volunteering with ACE, the program has

room for your talents. Not only a student, possibly a minority student, will benefit; you and the future of the design and construction professions will, as well. ACE, however, cannot do it all.

Hidden within the rhetoric about representation of minorities within architectural firms looms another question that complicates the entire discussion. Racial or ethnic diversity only forms one component of the diversity picture. One aspect has thus far eluded us—the general cultural gap that yawns not only between racial groups but also between generations. Older architects sometimes feel that they have earned their positions in their firms by giving up weekends and family life, and you should, too—a lesson that falls on deaf ears within Generation Y. Their lifestyle choices for the here and now and their long-term goals may not be ours, after all, regardless of all our striving.

These are daunting challenges, yet the goal is worth the price. If we are able to listen well to the next generation, to our clients, to our public; if we are committed enough to support and to mentor; if we value education enough to ensure that it reflects our common values; and if we are willing to monitor and evolve our workplaces, the profession of architecture can change to meet the demands of the 21st century. Colloquiums like the plenary session hosted by the AIA are worthwhile touch points, if followed by committed action. Your own actions in your own company, or as individual mentors in programs like ACE, will matter. A diverse world will simply become a richer world, a real world, and a world with room enough for all our talents.

