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0.2%

THE NUMBER OF BLACK WOMEN ARCHITECTS HAS QUADRUPLED IN 15 YEARS. BUT FOUR TIMES A FRACTION OF A PERCENT DOESN'T AMOUNT TO MUCH.

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By Hannah Mccann

First, the good news: The number of black women licensed to practice architecture in the United States has quadrupled over the past 15 years.

The bad news? That number is still only 196.

"I am not ready to celebrate," says Kathryn Tyler Prigmore, 51, who was among the first 20 black women to be licensed. "Ten years ago, I think everyone thought the number of minorities and women in the profession would be significantly higher than it is now."

Black women represent only 0.2 percent of a total population of approximately 91,000 licensed architects. In law, black women account for close to 2 percent of the profession; in medicine, the figure is 4 percent.

None of the major architectural organizations tracks the number of black architects, or black women architects, gaining licensure. But since 1991, architecture professors Bradford Grant and Dennis Mann have maintained their own comprehensive database, the Directory of African American Architects (accessible online at blackarch.uc.edu). The first directory listed 44 women; last month, Grant and Mann added Adrienne M. Horton of New Mexico and LeAnn Elder Branzell of Florida.

"It's depressing in the 21st century, in a time when we speak so freely of diversity, that [the profession] is still obviously exclusive," says Kelly Powell, 33, whom Grant and Mann added to the directory in January. Powell is a senior architect/project manager with Davis Brody Bond Aedas in New York.

Forecasters predict that the number of black women in architecture will continue to climb steeply. More black women are enrolling in architecture schools; they represent as much as 4 percent of the graduating population, according to the National Architectural Accrediting Board.

Yet an uptick in black women studying architecture doesn't necessarily translate to architectural practice. In a field where graduates regularly strike out on unexpected paths, women and minorities seem more likely than most to forego licensure and choose alternate careers.

There aren't hard numbers on the rate of



Yamani Hernandez
Architecture and construction career cluster

attrition, given a scarcity of demographic data (although several architectural groups are now working together to gather information, says Theodore Landsmark, president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture). But anecdotal evidence suggests that the high cost of architectural education, a lack of role models, and an inflexible model of success—which rewards long hours and ignores community-based design—are all factors in keeping American architecture less than fully diverse.

Different Priorities

Why has diversification stalled? It may have to do with women architects having different priorities. “One theory is that [women] choose paths that are not traditional practitioner paths,” says Allison Williams, 55, a principal in the San Francisco office of Perkins+Will who became licensed in 1980.



Kemba Mazloomian
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This theory is bolstered by the results of a study in Australia, where women make up 43 percent of architecture students but less than 1 percent of firm directors. In 2005, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects surveyed 550 female members and concluded that they had different goals than their male counterparts. For example, women tend to reject the scale of a project, practice size, awards, and journal coverage as measures of their personal success. For women, the most meaningful measures of career progression often are client satisfaction and personal satisfaction—in the form of taking on new challenges and finding a balance in their lives.

In keeping with the results of the Australian study, many American black women architects say they find satisfaction in socially responsible design. Renetta Moss, 50, a county government architect in Houston who was added to the directory this January, says simply, “I don't aspire to be a great architect. I aspire to use my architectural knowledge and skills to do great things for society.”

Another reason that women architects—of all races—diverge from the traditional career path is because of the profession's imbalance between life and work. “In a culture of all-nighters, where does a mother fit in?” asks Raye McDavid, 36, who became licensed and gave birth to her son in the same month last year. “We are still, obviously, at a disadvantage because we can't put in the types of hours our male colleagues can,” she says, suggesting that digital technology should allow for more flexibility.

McDavid says she sometimes feels that she needs to work harder to get the same recognition that male colleagues do. “I make a statement and get no reaction,” she says. “My colleague says the same thing, and it's a revelation.” McDavid is currently setting up her own practice, RAM Architecture.



Allison Williams
Design
principal
Perkins+Will
San Francisco

Add together the quality-of-life costs with the dollars-and-cents expense of schooling and interning, and what an architect earns cannot match the paycheck of an attorney or physician—a drawback for all prospective architects, and especially those coming from low-income backgrounds.

Yamani Hernandez, 29, graduated last spring with a master's degree in architecture from the University of Washington. She complains about the low rewards of the profession on her blog, strangebungalow.blogspot.com. “The education, internship and licensure process in general is long as hell,” she writes. “And the resulting salaries are crazy low compared to the other professions.” For many people of color, she says, choosing a career path doesn't allow “the privilege of doing something you love.”

Hernandez decries what she calls “the atrocious under-representation of people of

color in the profession.” She now works for Chicago Public Schools, managing architecture and construction programs for high school students.

Relegated to the Margins

Kemba Mazloomian graduated from the University of Michigan in 1997 with a master's degree in architecture and now works as an editor in Chicago. “I worked in office after office where my white male co-workers, and even the clients we worked for, questioned my competence, rechecked my calculations, [and] dismissed my relevance on projects,” she recalls in an e-mail. Her colleagues, Mazloomian says, “engaged in such a systemic campaign of emotional sabotage, that I invariably would seek work at another office—only to find that the office had changed but the dynamic remained the same.”

Prigmore, a project manager at HDR Architecture in Alexandria, Va., still has moments when she feels marginalized. At last year's American Institute of Architects (AIA) convention in Los Angeles, she remembers, “I asked one of the booth attendants for information on where to get my registration packet. Without asking any questions, she immediately directed me toward the exhibitors' registration booth.”

Prigmore was redirected back to the same area and returned to the booth she had visited. The attendant “was pretty embarrassed to find out I was both a speaker and a fellow,” she says.

In a career spanning more than 35 years, Sharon Sutton, 65, who teaches architecture at the University of Washington, has encountered setbacks she blames on institutional resistance to diversity. “I got a Ph.D. [in psychology, in 1982] because I figured if I was overqualified, I would be able to take a leadership position,” she explains. “I haven't. Forget being director or dean of a school. I've begun saying, “The boys ain't ready. They just ain't ready.”

Not everyone agrees that black women architects are at a disadvantage. “I can remember moments when I definitely felt it wasn't a level playing field,” says Williams. “But in a really competitive arena, which is the only arena I've worked in, for the most part [the playing field] tilted in my favor as many times as it tilted against my favor. ... It really does have to do with being proud of who you are and comfortable in your skin.”

Framing the Future

Whatever their experiences, when black women such as Hernandez and Mazloomian decide not to pursue licensure, the future of the profession as a whole is at risk, according to a little-publicized 2005 AIA report, “Demographic Diversity Audit,” which was prepared—reportedly at a cost of more than \$250,000—by Holland & Knight, an independent team of researchers.

In surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted by the researchers, 11,500 participants “overwhelmingly endorsed the concept that diversity is of critical concern to the future of the architecture profession,” according to the final report.

Theodore Landsmark chaired the AIA Diversity Committee when it commissioned the study. He warns, “The consequence of not [diversifying] is that the profession will occupy a diminished niche within the larger built environment and come to be seen to be providing services only to corporate and wealthy individuals, rather than



Raye McDavid Principal
RAM Architecture
New York



Renetta Moss Special
projects manager
Harris County Facilities and
Property Management
Houston



Kelly Powell Senior
architect/project
manager
Davis Brody Bond
Aedas
New York

the much wider range of people who are affected by good architecture.”

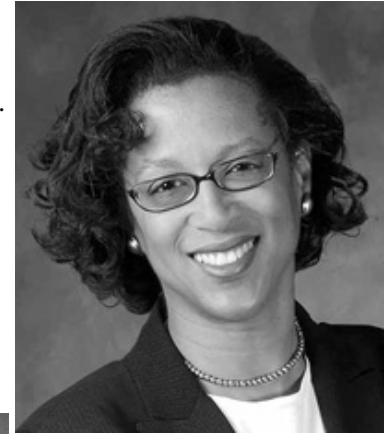
To recruit more minority students, architecture schools are targeting high schoolers who have been exposed to the field through construction or design, Landsmark says. “Rather than do the kind of scattershot recruiting that has tended to occur, it makes more sense to set up a table in The Home Depot in a community of color,” he says.

Meanwhile, architecture programs are trying to diversify their faculties and curriculums. At the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Planning, for example, new course offerings include “Social Change and the Architect” and “Gender in Architecture,” and the school recently hired June Manning Thomas, an urban planner who is black and lectures on race, ethnicity, and gender. (She also happens to be Mazloomian's mother.)

By contrast, Powell says that when she attended Michigan in the mid-1990s, she retreated to the library to discover the work of black architects on her own.

Without such efforts, architects may well lose touch with their clientele, and their businesses could suffer, warns Landsmark. “It is safe to say that within the next decade, most of the clients will not look like what most of the architects look like today,” he says.

Prigmore sees that contrast between clients and architects now. In client meetings, she says, it's becoming rarer for her to be the only woman and only black person in a room: “It happens more frequently—and is most disconcerting—when the group is only architects.”



Kathryn Tyler
Project manager
HDR
Architecture
Alexandria, Va.



Sharon Sutton Professor of
architecture, urban design,
and planning
University of
Washington
Seattle

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