

Architecture profession slowly gains diversity

The complexion of America's architects has been a subject of introspection and discussion since at least 1968, when Whitney Young, Jr., president of the National Urban League, chastised attendees at the AIA's national convention for the scarcity of African-American and women practitioners.

That dialogue finally appears to be producing results. Kate Schwennsen, FAIA, the AIA's second female president, just concluded her term; current president RK Stewart, FAIA, has expressed a fundamental commitment to expanding diversity; and Marshall Purnell, FAIA, will serve as the association's first African-American president in 2008. Increases in diversity are not limited to the AIA's leadership, but there have been few comprehensive studies. The research that does exist suggests a mixed record of success—particularly when it comes to licensure.

According to the AIA's 2006 firm survey, women compose 26 percent of all architecture staffs, up from 20 percent in 1999. There are also more people of color, whose representation

grew 7 percentage points, to 16 percent. But these gains have not benefited all groups equally. Although the AIA's survey did not track specific races, other indicators suggest that African-Americans, in particular, continue to be underrepresented.

Dennis Mann, codirector of the Directory of African-American Architects, says that his directory currently includes 1,578 licensed African-American architects. That figure accounts for 1.5 percent of all licensed professionals in the nation, a percentage virtually unchanged since Young's powerful speech.

"There are approximately 1,200 African-Americans in a professional degree architecture program in any one year. That hasn't changed much," Mann observes. By comparison, both he and Steven Lewis, president-elect of the National Organization of Minority Architects, say that anecdotal evidence indicates the number of Asian-American and East Indian students is on the rise.

The composition of architecture schools is a good predictor for how the profession as a whole will

look in 20 years. The National Architectural Accrediting Board tracks some racial groups as well as the number of women, but the law firm Holland & Knight, who surveyed the profession as a whole in 2005, described these data as unreliable—making it difficult to draw any conclusions. Meanwhile, there is no definitive study of architecture practice among Hispanics, America's fastest-growing group.

One area that has been studied in some depth is licensure. Holland & Knight found that while 69 percent of white respondents said they were licensed or registered, only 45 to 48 percent of all other races said the same thing. A similar imbalance remains between men and women: Whereas 73 percent of male respondents said they were licensed or registered, only 45 percent of female respondents were.

Although people disagree about the importance of licensure, many observers side with Ted Landsmark, president of the Boston Architectural College, who stresses that obtaining a license sets in motion a domino effect to increase diversity. "If ever architects are to be perceived as leaders in the profession and rise to a place that a Marshall Purnell has achieved, it is because they are licensed practitioners with private,

corporate, and government clients," he explains. "Without that leadership, then there aren't the role models who will attract other diverse people into the profession."

Curtis J. Moody, FAIA, whose firm Moody/Nolan is the largest African-American-owned firm in the U.S., believes that a lack of current role models is one explanation for the underrepresentation of licensed African-American architects. "If you're the lone African-American in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, you're less likely to be mentored by an African-American who's gone through it."

For women, the obstacles to achieving licensure are different. Jane Weinzapfel, FAIA, of Leers Weinzapfel Associates Architects, in Boston [AIA 2007 Firm Award winner; RECORD, January 2007, page 20], notes that child rearing can present a roadblock. "Our mechanisms for licensure need to acknowledge that there can be a collision with life events," she says.

For his part, Landsmark says that recognizing all forms of diversity is crucial for architecture's ongoing viability. "A profession that continues to shrink in relation to the size and emerging diversity of the client base will result in a niche that has little relevance to the major environmental issues that lie ahead," he observes. *David Sokol*

Design symposia focus on African-Americans

African-Americans are underrepresented among the ranks of architects in the United States today. Figuring out why that's the case—against a backdrop of nagging questions about race and housing, exposed by Hurricane Katrina—is the task of three, first-of-their-kind symposia beginning this month.

"Unspoken Borders: Perspectives on Race in Design," which the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, presents from March 30 to 31, promises to be the most comprehensive. It will supplement panel discussions with off-campus tours, including one to a controver-



Robert Taylor

sial luxury condominium and big-box retail development in Cramer Hill, an African-American and Latino section of nearby Camden, New Jersey.

"People need to see what's going on out there," says

Sherry Taylor, chair of the school's Black Student Alliance, which organized the symposium.

African-American neighborhoods will also be the subject of Harvard University's "Forced Perspective: Widening the Frame Through Which the Profession Views Itself." This event, on April 20, will pay close attention to New Orleans and the sluggish pace of rebuilding.

"We can no longer depend on the government to be our knight in shining armor," says Steven Lewis, Harvard's Loeb Fellow and the event's director. In addition to examining New Orleans, Lewis also hopes to draw more attention to black builders' historically unsung roles. "Our handprints are everywhere, but our signature is invisible," he says.

"WE HAVE TO ASK OURSELVES IF THERE'S HIDDEN OR IMPLIED RACISM."

Blame for this invisibility could lie with architecture schools, which fail to attract enough people of color: That's the view of Mark Jarzombek, who is cohosting "The Black Architect's Journey," in Boston, at the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, from March 16 to 17. MIT holds the distinction of having graduated Robert Taylor, the first African-American to earn an architecture degree, in 1880. This makes the campus an apt setting for a discussion of race and design, Jarzombek says, but the school's record of diversity since its early days has been mixed.

"Why are these students going to some places and not others?" asks Jarzombek, who teaches architecture at M.I.T. "We have to ask ourselves if there's hidden or implied racism." This will no doubt be food for thought at all three events. *C.J. Hughes*