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DIVERSITY: THE NEW SOUND

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For many individuals, especially those who experienced the Civil Rights Movement, the word "diversity" carries meanings of primarily racial significance. However, the current student population strikes a startlingly different chord when we speak of diversity. Many of us have grown up in a society that some might be bold enough to call "post-racial." This does not mean that racial inequalities and tensions no longer exist, but that these issues are not as visible in our lives as they were for previous generations.

Because of this generational difference in experiences, students maintain divergent attitudes about the true meaning of diversity. For us, the term "diversity" no longer brings to mind thoughts of skin color, ethnicity, or gender. Students have become generally disappointed with the relegation of "diversity" to percentages and quotas on our campuses where we learn, in the laws that govern our practices, and in the professions that we seek to enter. The current generation of architecture students considers diversity as a concept that drives collaboration in new typologies of learning and professional environments.

Recently at FORUM, the annual meeting of the AIAS, our chapter leaders engaged in conversations that focused around the topic of diversity. The students were given a statement that acts as one pillar of a new vision for the AIAS: "Demonstrate the value of diversity in architecture and related disciplines." The students were asked to interpret this statement by determining its meaning and developing objectives for themselves and our organization. Four themes for a new model of diversity emerged during this session.

Architectural education–and interest in it–has expanded far beyond NAAB-Accredited programs. Of the 145 AIAS chapters in the 2009-2010 membership year, 35 of them, nearly one quarter, are at institutions that do not offer a NAAB-Accredited degree. This fact does not diminish the importance of accredited degrees of architecture, but demonstrates that a growing number of students are seeking to enter the profession through "non-traditional" educational paths.

We must recognize the value of these diverse educational tracks, and make architectural education more accessible. Many students become interested in architecture by the time they enter high school. By inviting them into our educational and professional communities and appreciating their skills and perspectives, we can encourage them to aggressively develop their interests and increase their engagement with the discipline.

Many students also understand that an education in architecture diversifies our career opportunities. The purpose of architectural education should not be to simply train architects, but to educate future teachers, mayors, and politicians, and to encourage the development of effective leaders and engaged citizens.

Contemporary practitioners are beginning to understand the dangers of working within silos. Demands of the modern global environment have required architects to become more agile and practice in more collaborative and interdisciplinary ways. However, many students sense a tension between architects and other professionals, such as such as interior designers, engineers, and contractors, who are involved in the design and construction of the built environment. These tensions begin in the academy, where few architecture students are given the opportunity to work with students from other disciplines.

We can cultivate a healthier professional climate by creating a more interdisciplinary working environment in our schools. Students are seeking to remedy these issues early in their careers by working with other student groups inside and outside of their campuses. AIAS members are creating working models that they will carry into their careers by collaborating with ASID, ASLA, and USGBC student groups. This type of interdisciplinary cooperation demonstrates our value to the greater academic institution and to society at large. By proclaiming, "We, as architects, are interested in other disciplines," we broaden our knowledge base and open doors that have historically been bolted shut.

It is difficult to read an essay, article, or blog post about architectural practice without mentioning the importance of collaborating with other professionals and experts within and outside architecture. One architect has noted, "much of my real learning over the years has come from the friendship of 'others': business consultants, teachers, and part-time actors moonlighting as data entry clerks for Goldman Sachs. There have also been organic farmers, social workers, musicians, nurses, and a man who repaired shoes." The diverse perspectives and expertise of individuals who are not architects—or even in the design field—can contribute much to the design process.

Our professional culture must detach from the "master builder" mentality. While architects are experts, we must recognize that we do not posses the full scope of knowledge and skills required to design and construct human environments. Buildings are created in a context of environmental, economic, and cultural factors that are beyond our expertise. For this reason, architects should not view themselves as the one authority with one solution–our knowledge of the built environment is finite, just as the knowledge of a structural engineer or carpenter.

Understanding this new model of diversity encourages us to reconsider broader cultural norms and practices. Our learning and working culture has, for too long, been disengaged from the people and communities that we seek to serve. If architecture is truly "a social act, involving a multiplicity of participants in design, development, execution, and occupancy," then we must involve all participants in the design process.

There are opportunities for civic development in the design of the human environment. By learning to design with our clients and communities, rather than for them, we can become more attuned with public concerns. In this way, we can create environments that are inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds.

The essential goal of this new model of diversity remains the same – encouraging idea generation (and better architecture) by bringing together individuals that possess a range of knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. The element that must change, however, is how we define "diversity." Students have learned, and we seek to demonstrate, that true diversity is not a question of physical characteristics, but a proactive engagement of experiences, perspectives, and knowledge.