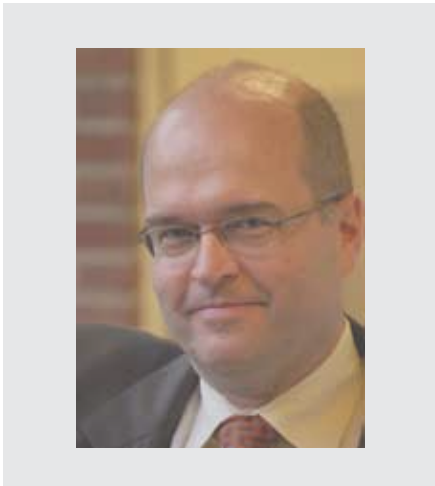


DESIGNING DIVERSITY

BY BRIAN KELLY



In August 2008, the ACSA Board of Directors resolved to renew the organization's commitment to diversity by benchmarking member schools' diversity plans, programs, and initiatives and by offering various venues for exchange of information on the topic. ACSA's commitment paralleled similar actions taken by, then AIA President, Marshall Purnell, FAIA, to address the architecture profession's historic under-performance with respect to diversity.

To put things into perspective, in 1968, civil rights leader Whitney Young was invited to address the AIA. Young chided those present with these words, "...as a profession, you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance." Those were strong words but they were backed up by facts. In 1968 only about 1% of the number of registered architects were African American. Of course, that was "then," welcome to "now," where according to the 2000 census, 2.7% of registered architects in the U.S. are African American and within the ranks of AIA 1% of the membership is African American (AIA Members as of March 4, 2009: www.aia.org/about/initiatives/AIAS076703).

The plight of African Americans in our profession is indicative of wide reaching and systemic problems facing the academy and the profession that cause us to fall considerably short of achieving

the ideals of diversity. Recent NAAB data (2008 Report on Accreditation in Architecture) shows African American enrollment to be at 6%, while those graduating with accredited degrees fall to 4%. Similar low percentages are found within the ranks of African American faculty (3%). When we look at the statistics of women and other underrepresented groups, we find comparable disturbing statistics. For example, according to the US Census data for 2000, women comprised 50.9% of the U.S. Population. Enrollment of females and degrees awarded by architecture schools to women in 2008 was 41%. While AIA data shows that 33% of its associates are women, only 14% of its female membership are licensed architects. More disturbing is the fact that within our own ranks only 26% of the professoriate are women and, like the profession, even fewer hold leadership roles.

But to reduce diversity to a numbers game would risk missing a bigger point. Admittedly we need to increase the number of individuals from underrepresented groups in our schools and in the profession. In order to do so, we need to ask hard questions about how others outside of architecture and academia see us. In short, are the messages we are sending to a broader diverse audience relevant, or do we continue to portray our world through an antiquated lens of abstract form, hermetic symbols, and elitist language?

A casual look at architecture school websites will probably yield the impression that there is considerable homogeneity. Whether this is actually reflective of the school's actual environment is another matter, but many of our websites seem preoccupied with media and all of its dynamic potential. In many cases our web sites place issues concerning the academic community, diversity, social relevance, and civic engagement in a background or nonexistent position. My mantra is: after arriving at the school's home page, if you can't find these topics after three clicks then it probably isn't part of the school's public image, and by inference it may not be an important part of the life of the school.

Over the course of this academic year, ACSA News will host a series of articles titled "Design-

ing Diversity." We hope that these articles will present the many dimensions of diversity and provide readers with useful insights and tools that can be used in their programs. We hope to illustrate diversity as not simply being about numbers, it is not a "one size fits all" proposition, and it is not defined in the same terms geographically or across institutional boundaries. Diversity is a sustainability issue for all ACSA member schools. That is, unless we accept Whitney Young's challenge to be relevant through social and civic contributions, we risk becoming a more marginalized profession.

We hope also to portray diversity as a core issue to our academic communities. Diversity is intimately interwoven with the ideals of studio culture, collegiality, and civility. Over the course of this year we will challenge readers to look closely at their academic communities and to ask difficult questions. Do the learning environments of our schools provide foundations of trust for underrepresented groups? Do we understand what it is like to be a minority student in our schools? Are our learning environments nurturing for African Americans, Hispanics, Women, Gay and Lesbian students, and so on? And, what about our faculty and staff colleagues? Do we as faculty and administrators even ask these questions, or are we too involved in the quotidian business of teaching and administering to pause and inquire?

Next month's contributor Robbin Chapman, Manager of Diversity Recruitment for the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, will pen an article tentatively titled, "Designing Diversity: Inclusive Excellence." Future installations will include diversity in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, perspectives from the Women's Leadership Council, addressing Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender topics in your institution, and discussion on the value of community colleges as vehicles for increasing diversity.

More information about diversity and tools for assisting you to advance discussion on the topic at your institution are available at: <https://www.acsa-arch.org/faculty/diversity.aspx>.