




# Forward

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### **Designing for Diversity: Issues for Architectural Interns**

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As we enter the 21st century, diversity has become an increasingly important issue for the architectural profession. For the last quarter of the 20th century, diversity has already received great attention in engineering, law, and medicine. For architectural interns, diversity has a special prominence. Architects' professional experiences during critical rites of passage can have long-lasting impacts, coloring their perceptions of their future prospects in the field. Interviews, internships, the Architect Registration Exam, and the first job are milestones in the professional development of all architects. This is especially the case for underrepresented designers such as women, persons of color, persons with physical disabilities, and gays and lesbians. In fact, the manner in which underrepresented architectural interns are treated in the workplace and their responses to that treatment can either make or break their careers.

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Staff photo of Ross Barney & Jankowski Architects, Chicago, IL, one of the nation's most diverse architectural firms.  
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My research for Designing for Diversity of 400 architects nationwide compared the experiences of white men, white women, men of color, and women of color. Through interviews and surveys, I examined how different demographic groups of architects experience major hurdles in their careers. My results revealed that what often serve as gateways to the profession for white male architects can sometimes serve as roadblocks for those underrepresented in the field. Those for whom the architectural internship was a dream-come-true usually moved on to satisfying professional careers. Yet those for whom the internship was a nightmare started off on the wrong foot, often feeling bewildered and depressed, not knowing where to turn. In the worst cases, negative internships drove young architects right out of the profession, never to return.

While some participants in my research were members of professional affinity groups like AIA-

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This edition of

sponsored women in architecture organizations, Chicago Women in Architecture, or the National Organization of Minority Architects, many were not. It is often during the architectural internship process that belonging to such organizations can serve as an invaluable safety net-if architects are willing to seek them out. Yet many never do. Many young women may never have experienced gender-related problems in school, and as a result they tend to shun women's groups, believing that they are truly on equal footing with their male counterparts and fearing the feminist label. But only when things begin to go awry in the workplace, through no fault of their own, they may feel the need to turn to others like themselves for help.

Mentors historically trained most architectural interns. The daily interactions between mentors and mentees allowed young architects to learn the craft on the job. Nonetheless, research on mentoring indicates that senior members of almost any field are most likely to foster especially close relationships with those who are their mirror images. Those who are not often are left behind. This pattern creates acute problems in a profession such as architecture that is relatively homogenous in terms of gender, race, and sexual orientation

Today's more systematic approach offered by the Intern Development Program, in contrast to the informal mentoring of the past, stands to greatly benefit those underrepresented in the field. By offering participants a broad spectrum of experiences, it is much more likely today than ever before that women, persons of color, and gays and lesbians will receive fair treatment at this critical entry point in their careers. But nonetheless, fairness is never a guarantee.

Given that the percentage of women graduating from architecture programs across the United States is on the rise, while the percentage of women and persons of color who are registered members of the American Institute of Architects remains relatively low, the need to critically examine and continually monitor the nature of the internship experience-especially for underrepresented architects-is paramount. What happens to those women who graduate from architecture school but fail to become registered and/or join the AIA? Where are they going and why? How are African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans treated on the job? Understanding the internship can help provide the key.

For example, in the landmark study conducted by Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996), one intern who had been routinely working 60 to 70 hours a week for a year and a half apparently "slacked off" to 50 hours a week after his wife had a baby. As he told researchers, "The partner called me in and I got called on the carpet for not working hard enough." At his office, and in many others, the internship process is far from family-friendly. In fact, I have heard several such examples from recent graduates of architecture school. As one of our former students recounted, he walked into his large Chicago office at 7:00 a.m. on a Saturday and greeted his colleagues with his usual "Good morning!" "We've been here all night," they growled, "We don't have time to say 'Good morning.'" Although I first heard this story years ago, I'll never forget it.

This is a serious problem that affects both men and women architects. The internship usually coincides with women's childbearing years. If a young couple decides to have children, and one of them is an architectural intern, chances are that the frequent expectation of marathon working hours will conflict with the 24-hour-a-day job of caring for a newborn. Ultimately this situation will negatively impact both of them, personally and professionally. And more often than not, the woman surrenders her career, or at least temporarily puts it on hold. Motherhood is just one reason why many women give up on the architecture profession. For more on this dilemma, see the excellent study by Ann de Graft-Johnson, Sandra Manley, and Clara Greed, *Why Do Women Leave Architecture?*

Young female architecture graduates accustomed to a critical mass of women in their academic design studios are often faced with a rude awakening, suddenly discovering that they are the only professional woman in the office. Many architects are employed in small firms where it is likely that the only woman in the office is a secretary. And because a large percentage of African-American and Latino students studied at historically Black colleges and universities, their adjustment to professional practice may be even more drastic.

How did architects in my study perceive the internship experience? What kinds of relationships did they have with coworkers at this critical juncture? To what extent did they feel that coworkers were willing to share information with them?

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My results indicate that for the most part, men's internships were positive. In an open-ended question about the internship, nearly all the white males who responded reflected upon it favorably. So did most male architects of color. Here is one example:

*" . . .as far as the coworkers sharing information, I learned a lot in the bigger office. I learned a lot in the small office because I just had to do it, but...I didn't have a recipe that I could look at. I was preparing the recipes, if you will." (Native American male, age 53)*

One notable exception was the following:

*"My internships were a patchwork quilt of experiences. In general, most white co-workers were unwilling to share information, and this unwillingness to share was definitely due to racism . . . I think many white coworkers were intuitively aware that working with me would not advance their careers. Most stayed a bit distant from me, but a few whites became friends (who) helped me, or at least informed me about what was happening to me.*

*"Let me relate one incident. At a large corporate firm, a senior partner was selecting the staff for a team. A mid-level executive specifically asked the senior partner about me, and the senior guy said not to place me on the team. This mid-level person told me about the incident. At that point I decided to plan to leave. I was the only black person at the firm at that time." (African-American male, age 43)*

Women's experiences with the internship were mixed. For many it was an exciting opportunity to learn more about the profession. Yet for others it was highly problematic. Several women expressed concern that their internship was a fragile period in their career. Compared to more long-term employees, interns are especially vulnerable to the whims of changing management, and often the first ones to be fired or laid off. Being terminated from a job can be devastating to anyone, but to underrepresented architects who may feel less confident about their abilities, it is an added blow. At the internship stage, as they make their debut in the profession, negative experiences are magnified.

Here are some of their comments.

*" . . .sometimes women feel that they are being kept out of the information loop . . . I do recognize that I am usually not invited to the client meetings . . ." (white female, age 42)*

*"Significantly lacking in site visits." (Latina/white female, age 28)*

*"I received many praises from project managers with whom I worked at the beginning of my tenure. I found that most of my co-workers were very willing to share information with me. I was the only woman in the architectural area of the office . . . I received only one formal evaluation which I asked for after 1 1/2 years of employment. I was rated at that time quite highly and given a raise.*

*"After three years of employment and many personnel changes I requested an evaluation on several occasions which I never received. At my four year mark, I was fired by a relatively new principal in charge of personnel and told that my work was deficient citing work for which I had only had minimal involvement. This was my first professional job . . . I found the firing to be devastating." (Native American/white female, age 47)*

So what can managers of architecture offices and underrepresented architects do to prevent problems such as these? Designing for Diversity discusses a number of effective strategies for maintaining diversity, aimed at both employers and employees. Space does not allow a full discussion of them here, yet in a nutshell, some key advice for interns: Alert your employer if you believe you are being treated unfairly or inappropriately in the workplace. Speak with a human resources specialist if available. Ask to see policies and procedures and make sure that they are being followed. Confer with colleagues and friends in other firms to see how they handled similar situations and what solutions proved successful. Join affinity groups and seek help from your peers; remain an active member so that you, in turn, can help others in the future. If your efforts to seek fair treatment are unsuccessful, and if other job opportunities are available, escape from a firm where working conditions are not promoting your personal growth and development. Let others know of your experiences, and do not be afraid to spread the word about firms that are both helpful and harmful in fostering diversity. It is only through peer pressure and shared knowledge that firms will recognize the importance of diversity and

fair treatment for all.

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For more about diversity in architecture, consult:

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