

Adopting the “J.E.D.I.” Mindset

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**YISELLE SANTOS RIVERA**

Global Director of Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (J.E.D.I.), HKS

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In pursuit of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion in architecture, Yiselle Santos Rivera discusses her background, research agenda, elevating voices and “connectors” while asking: Do we just “do buildings”?

DesignIntelligence (DI): You have a dual perspective on the state of diversity and inclusion in architectural practice. At HKS, you’re the leader for that subject matter across a large international firm. And you are beginning a new leadership role within the National Association of Minority Architects (NOMA).

Yiselle Santos Rivera (YSR): I was appointed to a new position as NOMA research and development chair, a strategic appointment under Jason Pugh’s presidency. The NOMA president has a two-year term, so I will have this position for the next two years. My goal is to embed research and development as part of NOMA’s strategy moving forward. I’m hoping after these two years the position becomes a permanent fixture on the NOMA board.

DI: The R&D position is intriguing. Within HKS you call it J.E.D.I., right? For justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. What is your mission in those two organizations? Do they overlap? And are you still practicing architecture while you’re doing all this?

YSR: Right now, I’m primarily working on the development of our firmwide J.E.D.I. strategic initiatives, designing for equity measures, supporting our practices and defining my new role in NOMA. This is largely in response to the current climate and the need I see for this work in our firm and the industry. Technically, I am the global director of Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at HKS, but I wear three hats within HKS: championing J.E.D.I., being an architect and doing medical planning.

Professionally, I am the AIADC board treasurer and a member of the AIA New Urban Agenda Task Force. I also serve as advisor to the DC NOMA board and the Insightful Chicago board. Now, I'm adding the role of research and development chair for NOMA.

Last year, I was the AIA national board associate representative and served my second year on the Equity and the Future of Architecture committee. I try to advance the idea that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion is a mindset through which we view the world in the work we do. It becomes an overlay.

As a volunteer in associations, I try to use that same lens with membership to provide value and content for mem-

bers, so they can learn what it means to design for J.E.D.I. and become ambassadors for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Then, they can apply that mindset and skill set to their practices and projects.

For the past two years at HKS, I have primarily focused on creating structures of accountability within the firm. This is a four-part organizational framework. I am the director and work collaboratively with 12 council members that span the breadth and depth of the firm. They represent different disciplines, levels and perspectives, with a mix of gender diversity, thought leadership and geography. That group, the J.E.D.I. Council, strategizes on initiatives that move the firm forward.



Many of them, for example, concentrate on developing internal resources to support our staff and our people, content such as: How do you become an ally? How do you understand microaggressions? And how do we celebrate our people, where they come from and their culture?

We also have a network of J.E.D.I. champions throughout the firm — one or two members per office or per studio, the grassroot supporters or champions for the work. They help build workplace culture and share their thoughts and findings with me and the council so we may develop strategies for implementation.

We collaborate to synchronize and move the entire firm forward. We are working on how to better engage with HBCUs, historically black colleges and universities. Some champions are active in AIA, NOMA and local organizations. Others work to celebrate cultural heritage through monthly celebrations or potlucks in their offices. Some of our champions are taking the lead in creating a toolkit or assessment tools to help us build more inclusive spaces. Many champions are focused on education because that practice tends to be at the forefront of this conversation.

How do you create more inclusive spaces? For example, genderless bathrooms have become more prevalent in the industry. We have people concentrated on mental health and health care facilities.

Other groups that are essential enablers or advisors include our marketing team, the talent acquisition team,

HR, professional development and researchers. We work collaboratively to build processes and initiatives that raise the equity in the firm, which include how to monitor retention and measure diversity.

These groups collaboratively develop initiatives and create firmwide reporting metrics. As signatories of the UN Global Compact, HKS commits to environmental, social and governance progress by addressing certain sustainable design goals and UN Global principles. To support the UN Global compact and align with like-minded organizations, we created an Environmental, Social and Governance structure, or ESG. ESG is a partnership between our chief sustainability officer (CSO), our citizen HKS (CHKS) directors and the director of J.E.D.I.. The CSO is focused on sustainable design, green materials, carbon neutrality and so on.

Citizen HKS is our public interest, pro bono outreach group. For me, this initiative is the clearest avenue for HKS to design for J.E.D.I. since its mission is to create buildings, provide access to much needed resources and empower marginalized communities to thrive.

Although J.E.D.I. spans multiple SDGs, I'm focused on reducing inequality and increasing gender parity to elevate representation in our firm. As we know, our industry struggles with reaching parity in gender and representation. To tackle those SDGs, we are looking at understanding our firm baseline, creating strategies to increase representation in leadership roles and highlighting what makes people choose to stay at HKS, be successful and thrive.

There are many layers to the conversation, but my work and many of my initiatives fall under the ESG umbrella, or, as it used to be called, Corporate Social Responsibility. The thread that ties the work I do at HKS to my work as a volunteer in these organizations is to always elevate the voice of underrepresented and marginalized communities so they can have a seat at the table.

DI: The depth and breadth of what you're doing and the momentum you have within HKS is impressive. How long have you been in your role? How long have some of these efforts been building momentum?

YSR: I took on this role in April 2019. There was existing firmwide momentum around gender parity, and that's why my role felt like a natural progression. We already had a program called Better Together that looked to increase women in leadership. We also knew we wanted to engage with our clients in more meaningful ways and find value alignment. This also transitioned nicely into our support for the UN Global Compact. Knowing we wanted to address issues of gender equality, our leadership understood there was a need for clear focus at a firmwide level on these topics. When I took on my new director role, my time was split 50-50 between J.E.D.I. and projects.

For a year, I balanced work, understanding we were creating a baseline as the first strategy for the changes that we needed to implement firmwide. I worked on several hospital projects — small renovation suites — while also learning about existing initiatives and potential synergies with other departments.

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I try to advance the idea that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion is a mindset through which we view the world in the work we do. It becomes an overlay.

Thankfully, I always had buy-in, but I have learned since then this is not necessarily the case for other organizations. But things are changing. The climate of the world is changing. I was the second practitioner in the industry to formally have a title like mine. Today, there are certainly more.

DI: And now it's a full-time role?

YSR: Yes, although my ultimate goal is to be able to manage both roles. Yet COVID-19, the tragic murder of George Floyd, and the awareness sparked by these events have taken an emotional toll on society and our profession. I've had to dedicate as much time as possible to this work. It takes time to create and formalize a structure of accountability, create and formalize a framework plan, and then develop an implementation strategy throughout the firm. This is also not a one-woman show. Sure, it may require someone's full-time dedication, yet this work is by all of us, for all of us, and it can only be achieved by working collaboratively together.

DI: How will your role at NOMA — the research and development angle — differ?

YSR: My role at NOMA is part of Jason Pugh's presidential EDUCATE, ELEVATE and EMPOWER platform. Although this new NOMA role focuses on research, the goals are not far removed from my work in HKS. Both are rooted in the justice, equity, diversity and inclusion mindset and look to provide tools that help architects build equitably and inclusively in support of marginalized communities. Success for both roles requires a clear understanding of the principles of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. We must first

be "it" to do "it". J.E.D.I. work starts with awareness. My goals are to create content and outcomes that embrace those mindsets, so people can adopt and achieve them.

Today, we are able to move faster because J.E.D.I. language has become more familiar in the industry. It's on social media. More people understand it or at least have heard this language. After almost two years in my HKS director role, I'm now transitioning to research. I believe this is what practitioners need most — tools not only to understand the mindset but to enable the creation of outcomes that employ the principles in designs, buildings and user experiences.

For example, the AIA's design framework for excellence includes designing for equitable communities and designing for change.

In that framework, there are prompts for questions that lead you to consider opportunities for interventions in your projects. In designing for equitable communities, you must think about walkability, community engagement and buy-in. We could be more prescriptive in the tools we provide. At least a base of metrics that enable people to focus on what it means to design for these outcomes. In medical planning, we use avatars. When you consider avatars, when using the J.E.D.I. lens, you must consider who has historically not been at the table. Race, gender, geography, age, access to technology, etc. Not just which stakeholder, client or community member, but what kind of community member? What do they need and how do they need it? How do they access what they need? This a useful tool in healthcare and LEAN practices.



Ideally this could be used in every building type and every practice to encourage inclusive practices.

I would love to create research opportunities that put a stake in the ground for what it means to design with the J.E.D.I. mindset. What is unique about NOMA — because it is the organization that represents minority architects and its mission is activism — is that we have the opportunity to be the voice for those underrepresented in our local communities and be active participants in marginalized communities' ability to thrive. NOMA's membership is representative of the communities we want to serve through the J.E.D.I. mindset.

If we can leverage that wealth and mindset of the membership and the passion members have for advocacy, the research would inherently embody this way of thinking. NOMA's research would also help its members address these issues in their firms, as well as at state and local levels, creating true activism and change.

I was part of the AIA's COVID-19 Health Impact Task Force, led by Molly Scanlon, PhD, FAIA, FACHA, an architect and researcher who works in the public health space. When I shared my interests in social determinants of health, health equity and access to care in marginalized communities, she welcomed the opportunity to address this issue and noted that architects are not inherently at the table when public health and policy decisions are being made.

We both recognized the need to move away from those conversations and statements like, “This is not in our scope.” Where people say, “Stay in your lane, architect. You do buildings,” I say, “Do we just ‘do buildings’?”

I went to school in Puerto Rico, and there I learned architecture as environmental design. Design was taught to be contextual and rooted in community. The work we were doing was related to the communities adjacent to the university. One of my first projects was creating an object for a homeless person that could transform into a habitable space and provide shelter from the environment. Many of the people who lived near the university were impoverished, some homeless, and used whatever they could find to create shelter. The streets and open spaces became their homes. What could we do as designers to provide them a useful artifact? It was a first-year project, but we tried to give them some agency so if they didn’t have appropriate spaces, they could create their own. They could populate the space in active ways and form communities.

To me, architecture was never just about designing buildings. It has always been about facilitating and creating collaboration. Activism. A way to understand my community through the lens of design, to provide solutions to have better lives. It was never a pristine building out of context from its environment and community.

DI: I think we can declare forever: We do NOT just “do buildings.” Anybody who continues to say that is exposing their problems.

I’m glad to hear your agenda for research, data, metrics,

tools, science and education for diversity and inclusion. For too long, the extent of our rigor has been: “We have a problem. I want to be a better person. I want to get rid of bias.” Well, how? No, we do NOT just “do buildings.” We’re beyond that. But the question is, how?

Because of the small number of people of color in architecture, many of us have little experience in the issues surrounding diversity. I’m embarrassed to say it, but most of the bias I’ve experienced in design and construction has not been related to race or gender. It’s been the biases between architects and engineers and between contractors and architects. The issues you’re focused on are more far-reaching and serious. But it brings us back to the question for all of us with limited experience exposure: Where do we begin?

YSR: That is THE question: How do I start? There are many ways to answer that question, but you start where you feel most comfortable and then transition to a place where you are challenged. Start by acknowledging that this conversation is difficult and can be personally invasive. But start by asking, being challenged and most importantly welcoming the opportunity to make mistakes and grow.

Start with yourself. Start with understanding your place in this work and in the industry. There’s a lot of soul-searching. I hate to use that word, but a lot of self-reflection needs to happen. Self-awareness yields “other” awareness. We must come to the table recognizing we have our own biases and being comfortable with those biases, recognizing nobody has it figured out because we all have bias. We exist in a world of bias — for many reasons.

DI: Reasons like it's in our DNA. It's human to have biases. It's how we react to them and what we do about them that matters.

YSR: Right. For a lot of people this is very political, and they struggle unpacking the work this way — recognizing that systemic racism is real and that we exist within this framework. For better or worse, we all fall under this framework. This is the space we exist in. This is not a shame or blame discussion. This is just our reality. As soon as we can come to terms with where we are in the world and where we've come from, the sooner we can try to understand how to overcome this together. How we make things better. It usually begins with self-reflection and research.

When people ask me where to begin, I say: Start with awareness. Begin by reading books. I didn't grow up in the contiguous U.S., I grew up in Puerto Rico. I have my own bias about American culture, having lived my formative years in a "colony" of the U.S., although we can't call it as such. As a result, there are things that exist in my bias. Frankly, there's baggage. I'm reading a book titled "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" by Isabel Wilkerson. It has been enlightening to understand the genesis of cultural disparities in this country. Another great book is "How to Be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi. People have visceral reactions to thinking of themselves as racist or tackling that topic. "White Fragility" by Robin Diangelo is another great book for people a little bit further along. A fourth book is "The Color of Law" by Richard Rothstein. It touches on the impact of segregation through government intervention, redlining, and homeowner associations — how public policy and government policy affected and continue to affect how we build

communities and cities.

The book on my mantle I would like to get into is "A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and Its Assault on the American Mind" by Harriet A. Washington. I want to understand where we come from so that we can know where we want to go. Since my role as director of J.E.D.I. exists under the ESG umbrella, I can see the natural intersection of my role and sustainability through climate justice.

Our industry can have a real voice in this space since architects can impact site selection, access to resources, material selection and energy consumption. Energy use is responsible for 40% of carbon emissions. This is part of our legacy through our stake in the built environment and climate impact.

There is urgency in this work, not only because of what is happening across our country — fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornados — but also because of what COVID has exposed. We know climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. To take it a step further, if climate impact is part of our design vernacular as architects and designers, then climate justice is the next step toward merging the J.E.D.I. lens with what we're actively doing as an industry to mitigate the impact of unsustainable practices.

DI: That's wonderful advice: Start with where you are. Reflect. And excellent references you shared. To frame our discussion, I'd love to find out more about who you are. What kinds of hills have you had to climb that put you on your path?

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YSR: Many things have led me to this point. My mother, for example, has and always will be an inspiration for me. She's been a glass-ceiling shatterer all her life. She was the first woman dean of the School of Dentistry, the first woman president of the Puerto Rico College of Dentists, and the first resident of the pediatric dentistry program to pass the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry. She was also the first Puerto Rican dentist to be appointed to the U.S. Department of Health's Advisory Committee on Training in Primary Care Medicine and Dentistry. My mom is very accomplished. That may have been, in part, why I was drawn to another profession. I don't think I could've followed in her footsteps, constantly hearing the accolades echoed in the distance. Though what was more formative was not necessarily her achievements, but how much it took out of her to get there. And when she achieved success, she still faced negative reactions that led to animosity, anger and frustration. As a child, you always want your mother's happiness. You see her gain recognition, but it is still not always positive because her achievements are less than as a woman and a woman of color. So many things in my life and career have heightened that awareness. The disparity of not being able to holistically celebrate my mother for everything she is and does. That's in the back of my mind always.

Also, my father is just as accomplished as my mother. He was one of the first Puerto Rican healthcare administrators to receive an executive certificate from Harvard University. At one point, he was the administrator for thirteen prominent hospitals in Puerto Rico. Yet he bought his first car from the money he made shining shoes.

Growing up in Puerto Rico, I knew there was a strong cultural anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric. Knowing I was part of that community was less than ideal. These situations influenced and continue to influence how I show up today. I knew coming out at an early age could adversely impact my parents' careers and my own. I look back on this now and recognize the many things I minimized that resulted in my not showing up authentically to the table. But these things are part of who I am — and always will be. I know we don't truly check ourselves at the door. We carry our experiences into our work. Early on, I would censor myself. I would code-switch. Now, I do my best to show up authentically and hold space for others so they may be able to do the same.

I learned about American culture watching TV. When I arrived in the U.S., I had preconceived ideas of what success looked like in the workplace. Nobody in leadership looked like me. Whether consciously or subconsciously, I hid parts of myself much like I had done since childhood to fit in. Even though I started my career in Washington D.C., an open and welcoming city, and had phenomenal mentors and leaders in the LGBTQ community, I had to confront my own biases and roadblocks before being able to embrace my identities in the workplace.

Another hurdle: few women in leadership, fewer women of color, and fewer still LGBTQIA+ women of color. The journey becomes harder when you don't see yourself reflected in leadership. It can feel like there are no reasons to show up authentically at the table. I equate this somewhat to the colonized mentality — the tension between thinking success is the colonizer yet wanting to own your power while in the oppressed group. Thankfully, there is greater

awareness now of the need and value of women in leadership, but there is still long way to go to reach true parity. There are many layers to the conversation, like the disconnect between community engagement and architecture in practice.

When I joined the profession, although not denied opportunities of engagement, I wasn't necessarily encouraged to be an active participant in the community. I was lucky to have mentors visible in associations, but they were not necessarily the predominant group. For me, it was a necessity. It was a way to build community, to build my village.

That's why I became engaged in AIA and built Women Inspiring Emerging Leaders in Design (WIELD). I wanted to create platforms to amplify others' voices, especially of those underrepresented in leadership. I feel these activities should be encouraged in our practitioners but expected of our leaders. It also gets us closer to the communities we serve.

DI: I appreciate your sharing the challenges you've overcome. You had great role models at home but had to minimize who you are so as not to jeopardize your parents' status. But you persisted. Now it's the right time and the right place, and you're finding opportunities to maximize them.

The question remains: How do we better connect? Everybody I talk to lately goes back to your earlier statement. Most of us in school spent our time learning how to draw and design buildings. Now everything's connected.

To practice today you have to be a researcher, a scientist and learn how to shed bias, all while being an environmentalist. You are doing all that. Did you get the skills in school? What are you telling people who are learning to connect all that? Not just connecting as people, but also connecting so many more systems and design factors?

YSR: That's such a good question, and it's a big part of the conversation about the future of academia. What do you teach? What is valuable? What is important? I've been part of many conversations about what I would tell the older generation, people that didn't have the privilege of learning architecture the way that it needs to be practiced now. I feel lucky that I started with the premise that architecture is not just building buildings. Urban design, planning, city strategy and so many other disciplines are moving front and center now because they need to.

This is not necessarily just about how we view architecture, but how we view our systems and ecosystems. To ask: What does it take to design something comprehensive and inclusive? At HKS, this is about systems thinking and integrative thinking. People-centered, human-centered design. It is a work in progress, but we are intentional in this work. How do we find better synergies? How do we find better ways to leverage our strengths so that as a collective, we create something more meaningful and impactful?

DI: Great questions. Synergy doesn't add more complexity and pieces. It reduces them. We have more players and diverse perspectives, we have the potential for synergistic breakthroughs, and with more players and diversity, maybe we have new roles for connectors and synthesizers?

YSR: Absolutely.

DI: I was a connector. I still am. As an architect, I was. And my role working in a construction company was to translate and interpret language and connect designers and builders. You are certainly a connector.

YSR: As I look back, I can see that I have always been a connector and see this as inherent to architectural practice or design thinking. It is about connecting things together, and I like putting things together. Now my work may be slightly focused toward people and relationships instead of buildings, but it is still about creating a connection and a structure to support it.

My goal is to connect meaningfully and strategize how people and constructs, like design, come together. I believe this work requires a unique skill set - an openness to continuous learning, active listening, and empathy toward others to leverage everyone's expertise - in order to facilitate connections and enable success.

What I enjoy most about my current role and its positioning in the industry is the opportunity to increase self-awareness, in myself and in others, and build bridges across our differences. I strive to elevate others, so together we can create truly innovative and meaningful work. We know that high-performing, well-managed, diverse teams are more innovative and more profitable. The work unfolds as we provide tools to increase intercultural competency in our leaders so they may recognize differences, leverage authenticity, and enable connections — meaningful synergies — intentionally.

To build better together, we must welcome the opportunity to challenge and be challenged. We must empower our leaders to be part of the journey towards inclusion and belonging - whether a manager, leader, or a participant in any part of the design process. This shift toward building resilient practices begins with ourselves - how we find our authentic voice and use it to create positive impact in our firms and communities. Let's encourage synergies, systems thinking and connectivity to acknowledge our past, respond proactively to shifts in the present, and be hopeful for the future we can create together.

We are no longer living in the times of the starchitect or isolated practitioner. We serve our communities best when we align in values with our partners, when we show intentionality in who we partner with and in how we partner with others. As a design industry, we thrive when we arrive to the table as advocates, as facilitators, when we build through connections, when we show up equitable and authentically for each other.

Yiselle Santos Rivera, AIA, NOMA, LSSYB, LEED AP B+D, WELL AP is a medical planner and Global Director of Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (J.E.D.I.) at HKS. Yiselle thrives on building equitable practices, empowering the next generation of leaders and creating inclusive platforms for engagement. She serves on the AIA DC Board and is founder of Women Inspiring Emerging Leaders in Design (WIELD). She was recently appointed Chair, Research & Development at the National Association of Minority Architects (NOMA).