



ESSAY

The Power of Many

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly



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Foundational Assumptions

When we consider the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the practice of architecture, our thoughts quickly turn to race and gender issues. Both are critically important and of concern given how poorly we have done in addressing them over the long history of our profession. But I wonder if an underlying issue lurks beneath these visible failures. One of the sacred texts states that “the kindest act of an evil man is wicked to God.” Applying this to the topic of DEI makes me wonder if some of the foundational assumptions of our profession are so misdirected that we are challenged to address these issues in a substantive way.

The Power of Many

Overland Partners’ Rick Archer shares his firm’s journey toward diversity, equity and inclusion

As an example, take the notion of the “starchitect.” Though we seem to be moving toward collaborative practices that are trying to make meaningful advances in addressing the problems that face our world today, we continue to reward individuals who produce eye-catching work that does nothing to address matters such as climate change, affordable housing, health or wellness. Are these “PR-architecture” projects (as coined by Kate Wagner) continuing to lead our profession astray and are they leaving us and our constituents longing for more? Quite possibly.

What does starchitecture produced by singular egos have to do with diversity? Everything. If the work produced by

a firm is purely the result of one person's imagination, why does that firm need a diverse workplace? If a firm simply produces work that is self-focused, does it matter if the staff reflects the diverse world around us? Isn't that environment simply perpetuating the culture of indentured servanthood that has marred the profession of architecture for generations?

When I was a young architect practicing in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s, I was approached by one of the recognized luminaries in our field. He had heard about my work and invited me to join his practice. I was honored, until I learned that I would be working without pay for the privilege of executing his ideas. Perhaps that opportunity would have been attractive to an independently wealthy individual. It wasn't to me. I was married and the father of two young children — with no trust fund. Working gratis wouldn't make sense for me, and I suspect it wouldn't for most other people, much less graduates who didn't come from the privilege I enjoyed. You can imagine the staff composition and philosophy of that prestigious architect: not particularly diverse, not welcoming of diverse perspectives on design, not focused on larger societal issues.

But this concern is not limited to big-name firms. The vast majority of placemaking is done by well-intentioned architects who are working independently of the communities they seek to serve. Practices like the one I helped found, Overland Partners, struggle to include the many voices that are required to do truly inclusive work, even if varying perspectives are represented in the office.

It is not that we do not want to, it is simply that we have been patterned to believe that there is *one* way to see the world — our way. That way may make it easier to arrive at a solution, but is it consistently resulting in the best or the right solution? Probably not.

Here's the point: If we are going to address the world's complicated, diverse problems, creating work environments that include people of different backgrounds, treating everyone equitably *and* welcoming diverse perspectives are not just important — they are essential practices. In the words of Glenn Martin, "Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution." If we really want to be part of the solution, we must invite those closest to the problem into our design process. Furthermore, homogeneity is the killer of innovation. In a profession that is historically homogeneous, we must be intentional about bringing diverse thinking, experiences, perspectives, world views and abilities to our practices. Cultural and experiential diversity must be highly valued if we want to remain relevant as a profession.

Collective Intentions

At Overland, we intentionally built our studio around the collective skills, talents and contributions of a team, not a singular architect/partner. That is why we are named "Overland Partners" rather than Archer, Blonkvist, Schmidt and Smith (admittedly a mouthful). The result is a creative community of problem-solvers known for innovation, design-thinking and outcomes that result in measurable transformations for the people, projects and



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places we serve. We started as four white, well-educated men — best friends from college. We came from pedigreed practices but were not yet a proven firm name that would attract top graduates. This meant laying down our egos and finding talented people willing to come to work for us. In the 1980s, that led us to hire people others might not have hired; our first employees were all women or members of a minority group. Though being diverse wasn't our expressed intention, we built a team of people who did not look like we did. Even more impactfully, they did not look at the world like we did. That may have been the best thing that ever happened to Overland.

We still have a long way to go. We are learning that our current recruiting strategies must continue to embrace the diversity that has become one of our hallmarks. As an example, we have cultivated connections to primarily white institutions when nearly 85% of Black architects in the United States are educated at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). We are just beginning to intentionally seek talent outside of our usual pathways and are hopeful that this will make us even more representative. In addition, recent projects in the inner city and across the globe have made us aware that the architectural reference points we use are hyper-European. We need to challenge each other to bring more diverse perspectives into our design research. This is one way our methodology can begin to shift to embrace more perspectives.

Empowerment

Before the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on our backlog of work, our firm employed 82 people from as many as 14 different nations. It was beautiful to walk around the office and hear Chinese, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, French, Swahili and English. This diversity wasn't just limited to ethnicity, race and country of origin. Unlike many architecture practices that lean politically left, our team included community activists *and* card-carrying NRA members. We quickly learned that while diverse teams outperform homogenous ones, that is only the case when leadership truly understands how to lead a diverse workforce, when they have learned empathy and are open to different ideas. But it also means raising up the next generation, so that underrepresented/minority professionals are fully included. And until leadership looks like those in the studio, how will emerging leaders be able to visualize themselves in the future? We know this takes time, but the first steps can be taken today.

Providing leadership in a diverse workplace, as in any workplace, requires clarity of mission, vision and core values. Overland had these in place from the outset; they became the framework for diversity, inclusion and interdependence that is foundational to our culture. We have been and continue to be intentional about trying to create an environment where all team members can thrive and are supported in their efforts to grow as architects and urban designers. We encourage participation and leadership in organizations that elevate their voices and expand the influence and opportunities of the profession to diverse and underrepresented communi-

ties. We have a robust intern program that employs students from many schools, including the University of Texas at San Antonio, a predominantly Latino population, many of them first-generation college students. We have embraced the International Living Futures Institute with more ILFI-certified architects than almost any practice in the United States and with a commitment to Just management practices. And two of our employees, Greg Street and Dyami Luster, have helped to launch NOMA Central Texas. Unlike our early days, we are now able to intentionally seek and attract some of the best and brightest minds from around the world. Our spectrum of gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, age and political views consistently ranks among national leading firms. We need and value the skills, training and knowledge of our younger team members and pursue a culture where their ideas and input are encouraged and embraced. We are becoming ever stronger in learning to embrace diverse viewpoints in our work. We are discovering the joy of letting go of control and welcoming everyone's ideas. We are breaking down silos and fostering teams that cross-pollinate. In so doing, we receive the gift of being a diverse workplace with diverse perspectives: improved design outcomes.

We extend the same philosophy of inclusion and camaraderie to how we work with our clients and key stakeholders. No two Overland projects are the same because they reflect each client's unique mission, vision and values. We see projects as adventures we walk together *with* our clients. To guide us on those journeys, we created The Human Handprint™, our holistic design process that

validates our brand promise of “unlocking the embedded potential” and optimizes positive, measurable outcomes and impact for our clients and projects. Part of the thinking behind The Human Handprint is that no two people have the same print, that the world is diverse by design. As a result, our process is specifically tailored to each client and their mission by the team designing their project.

Lessons Learned: Hope House

A recent example is Hope House. A center for social service and a museum of African American history, Hope House addresses the marginalization *and* history of the Black community in our hometown, San Antonio. George Frederick runs Hope House as a ministry to predominantly Black men and women who live in poverty in San Antonio, many of them experiencing homelessness. His colleague, Everett Fly, is an architect and landscape architect who has researched San Antonio’s Black history and is discovering and exposing a rich heritage that has been untold and nearly lost.

How were we to reflect the Black experience in the design of Hope House when our leadership is entirely white and mostly male? How could we express Black culture in built form? Sadly, in San Antonio, there are only six practicing registered architects who are Black. Thankfully, two of them, Greg and Dyami, are colleagues at Overland. We invited these gifted, recently licensed architects to design the project. Senior leadership’s role shifted to being counselors and advisors rather than

directors of the outcome. To augment our team, we engaged Ure Ogguro, a Nigerian-born architecture student and former employee, to produce the renderings that depicted our work. Her drawings sent the right visual clues, making the work product reflect the community for whom it was created. They reminded us that design process is integral to the outcomes it delivers.

The Hope House project is located in a historic district that has been predominantly Black since the 1950s. The neighborhood is deemed historically significant, however, because of its late 19th-century and early-20th-century homes, mostly built by European Americans. These dual stories have raised challenging questions: “Who’s history are we preserving?” and “Is there room for a culturally appropriate formal expression that is not allowed under the preservation guidelines?” Clearly, this conversation cannot and should not be led by people of my background. Rather, Dyami and Greg bring appropriate value and weight to the public discourse while being empowered as architects and individuals. While they don’t have 40 years of experience as I do, what they bring is far more important: perspective, empathy, ownership — and lived experience. The project, the community and our firm are all better for it.

International Outlook

Another example of our approach to diversity is our work in China. We employ extraordinary young Chinese architects like Yanjing Chen, An Liu and Sijie Dai, as well as Anglo-American Ben Parker, who is passionate about

China and fluent in Mandarin Chinese. This cadre of international talent has made our projects in China more culturally relevant. This group has also helped manage contractual risk and other relational dynamics. If we did not employ and empower architects from China, I would question if we should attempt to do work there.

Many of our Asian clients want us to bring our “American ways.” Because they build what we imagine faster than we can draw it, it would be easy to get caught up in the heady spirit and pace of these large, complex projects. More so, in countries where citizens are not accustomed to being asked their opinions, where decisions are made from the top down, community engagement is virtually nonexistent. This makes it essential to include the ideas of young designers and architects who understand the culture if we are to produce work that is appropriate and relevant.

Immersion and Empathy

As we address the cultural divides around race and nationality, we must also address the divide in income disparity. Overland recently completed two of the largest, most effective centers for people experiencing homelessness: The Bridge in Dallas and Haven for Hope in San Antonio. Designing for these populations requires skills that are generally not cultivated in our academy or profession. Most architects have not experienced this kind of displacement, so by culture, context and upbringing, it is impossible for us to empathize with the lack of education and misfortune that results in being unemployed or under-housed.



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My personal entry into the world of displaced people began when my partners and I began volunteering overnight at the local homeless shelter. We came to know individuals and families in the community who were experiencing homelessness. We heard their stories; we witnessed their lives; we learned to love them. We wanted to help them find solutions that would empower them to succeed independently. We volunteered for years before we designed our first center for the homeless. When we interviewed for the Bridge Homeless Center in Dallas, we spent time onsite and talked at length with those encamped nearby. We made friends, like Willy Hickerson, who became part of the community that informed the design during public workshops. Building on this momentum, we invited people living on the streets to help us imagine a better way.

When the Bridge received a national AIA design award, I

distinctly remember a colleague from another firm who had designed a similar center for the marginalized saying, “Maybe one day an architect will ask the homeless what they want, but we certainly didn’t.” Then it was our turn. After I spoke about the center before the AIA National Convention, one of AIA’s Gold Medalists approached me with what seemed like disdain, “You sound more like a social worker than an architect.” “Thank you,” I replied.

An Inclusive Approach

Simply being diverse is not that difficult. We can recruit, mentor and promote deserving architects — male, female, Black, white and more. What is difficult is embracing diverse perspectives from our employees, clients and other stakeholders. That takes real work — a willingness to be uncomfortable. To let go of control. To count

others as more important than ourselves.

Over a decade ago I had the opportunity to travel to Benin, in West Africa, to design a center for sports training in a place that had been the epicenter of the slave trade. In our small entourage was a young Black American couple, Reggie and Stacey Williams. We became traveling companions and friends. As we encountered village after village still reeling from slavery's effects, I began to see and experience through Reggie and Stacey's eyes. Here, in a place where I was the distinct minority, I expected anger, resentment and bitterness. After all, 300 years before arriving in these remote places, people who looked like me had stolen these people's ancestors. But I was received with love and compassion by the Africans and by Reggie and Stacey. Under their tender guidance, I awakened to the fact

that I had failed to appreciate the enormous gift and privilege I enjoyed on the backs of people from Africa, people who were forced to serve my forebears and by extension their descendants — people like me.

Is it possible our profession has done and is perhaps still doing the same? Isn't it time we embraced a new inclusive approach, not just by having offices that reflect the diversity of the world, but by including all our colleagues as co-creators? Diversity, equity and inclusion demand that we move beyond starchitect or style-based practices. These limited perspectives, while often generating beautiful architecture, are not focused on our social challenges. Only by welcoming more diverse perspectives will we begin to create a world where all people can flourish by – and through - design.

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