



# 2020 BLACK WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE SCHOLARSHIP BRUNCH BREAKOUT GROUP NOTES

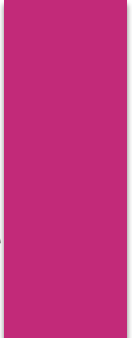
October 18, 2020



# BACKGROUND


On October 18, 2020, the BWA Network hosted the annual Black Women in Architecture Brunch as concluding programming for the 48th Annual NOMA Conference. However, the brunch looked a little different than previous years, as it was hosted entirely online due to travel and gathering restrictions in place due to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, the brunch was a huge success, boasting more than 110 women representing over 15 US states and territories, including the first international registrant. This growth shows the impact that The Network has built over the years, and will continue to develop in the future.



This year's brunch created a forum to discuss the response from the architecture community to the deaths of black and brown people at the hands of police violence. In addition to regular attendees, leaders representing the largest firms in the country from the AIA Large Firm Roundtable were invited to participate in virtual small-group conversations to discuss the role that firms play in the movement to achieve equity, diversity, and inclusion in the architecture profession, among other topics. Attendees had the opportunity to speak directly with these representatives, and firm leaders were encouraged to listen and share their own insights.

The results of these conversations are summarized below, along with the questions that were asked in each of the groups. The goal of sharing these responses is to document our thoughts, emotions, and experiences in the midst of a year that has challenged how we perceive ourselves and society.





# Roundtable Questions and Responses




## **What was the initial response from colleagues and design firms as the national call for racial justice reached the architecture and design professions?**

Generally, attendees noted that the initial silence from some firms was uncomfortable, pointing out that firms were slow to respond out of fear of appearing too political. Some early responses consisted of passive social media posts. As responses became more organized, particularly at the large firm level, firms began taking more definitive actions such as hosting firmwide meetings and publishing clear goals with actionable items. In one call, people were brought to tears as they opened up about their own experiences faced in the architecture profession.

## **Should architects play a role in the social justice movement? How so?**


From one group: “We agree that architects should play a role in social justice by speaking out against overt racism and microaggressions while being a voice in community associations, hearings and groups. It is important to mentor aspiring architects to further increase [the number of African-American architects] and our collective voice.”



Architects are charged with protecting the health, safety, and welfare of the public, and we should leverage our agency in this position. It is the responsibility of architects to be informed whenever they are in a leadership position, at any project scale - big or small. They must get involved civically and work on public projects, and continue to speak up and out about injustices. Everyone should play a role in this movement, but individuals must define what their role is; anyone should want to fight injustice in their own way, however they can.

**In response to the national outcry for social justice, what have design firms done successfully? Has your firm announced strategies, either publicly or internally, for how it will address justice, equity, diversity, and/or inclusion? What has your experience been as you try to make a difference at your firm?**


Prior to 2020, many attendees found it difficult to raise concerns regarding diversity and inclusion within their firm, both large and small. Amidst the response to the police violence seen throughout the year, many firms have created and strengthened new and existing diversity committees, acknowledging that there is still much work to be done to create lasting, measurable results. Some attendees felt cautiously optimistic about this renewed focus on diversity while others still remain skeptical



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cautiously optimistic about this renewed focus on diversity, while others still remain skeptical. Some specific initiatives mentioned included establishing specific goals for the retention, recruitment, and promotion of minority and black designers, creating spaces for deeper conversations about microaggressions, and partnering with organizations like NOMA. One firm also took the definitive step to adopt the JUST label. This process included evaluating current firm policies and bringing in outside consultants to explore more opportunities to integrate new policies into existing firm culture.

**What role, if any, should academic institutions play in the social justice movement? How can design education be used to cultivate the next generation of design activists?**

From multiple groups, it was noted that academic institutions are essential to the outreach and retention of incoming students. As the first official introduction to architecture, institutions must recognize the important role they play in the formative years of young architects. There should be more involvement and exposure to architecture for younger students at the grade school levels.






Once in school, programs must be more supportive to ensure students finish their coursework. Traditional studio culture often deters underrepresented students from the profession. Administrators must speak to all students, including white students, about issues regarding diversity and inclusion. Universities also have a responsibility to their students to create a stronger foundation after graduation. A disconnect still exists for many students as they transition from studio life to professional settings.

Students should also acknowledge the power of their own agency. It was clear that many architecture schools have a long way to go to diversify their curriculums and faculty, something that many current professionals agreed upon based on personal academic experiences. Students should demand this of their academic institutions.

### **What does an 'equitable firm culture' look like to you?**

The first step that must be taken is acknowledging that firms have historically been complicit in community building that is inequitable and that systemic inequities exist outside and inside the practice.




An equitable firm culture includes equal and transparent access to all opportunities within firms through clear pathways to advancement, mentorship, shadowing and policy change. It should be one that includes the values of collaboration, creativity, complexity, transparency, and diversity (gender, ethnicity, geography, perspectives, beliefs). However, there is a distinction between equity and equality, and this should be taken into consideration.

Overall, firms must provide opportunities for staff to focus on learning and discovery about issues facing the BIPOC community and have clear, definitive actions to address white privilege both professionally and personally.

**What do you expect from allies in this movement? Firm leaders? Firm Staff?**

Allies should express empathy and know the distinction between allies and accomplices. They must educate themselves on the acceptable language and terminology to participate in difficult conversations. Everyone must acknowledge the multidimensional perspectives of people from different backgrounds - that everyone's struggle is different.


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We acknowledge that we must continue to work with organizations such as the AIA, recognizing that there is strength in numbers, while also holding our allies accountable.

Firm leaders must encourage pathways to leadership within firms and join employees in their pursuits, including listening to younger staff as they speak up. These future leaders will need to be cultivated. Firm leaders also must value the expertise and personal experiences that BIPOC staff bring to the table. Black women specifically need to be acknowledged as leaders, and more diversity will be expected within firm leadership in the next few years.

Firm leaders are also in the unique position to determine which projects and clients are right for the firm. They must focus on projects that matter and can result in a positive impact on the community.



## **How do we ensure that the conversations we are having now and the ideas we are discussing are intentional and impactful?**

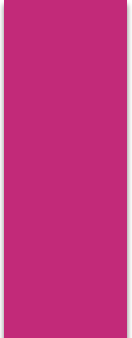
As we participate in these meetings, we must guarantee there is follow-thru by establishing actionable items after every discussion. It was noted that during the initial response to the incidents of 2020 earlier this year, meetings were organized but actual change lagged.

In addition to diversity being a moral proposition, we should demonstrate that there is an economic advantage to having diverse employees and more black female architects. Ultimately, only a diverse culture can truly help firms thrive.

### **General**


Having conversations like these with allies in the AIA and large firm leadership positions spark a feeling of hope for the future of the profession. Firm responses up to this point have largely been reactionary, but firms will be expected to lead this charge.

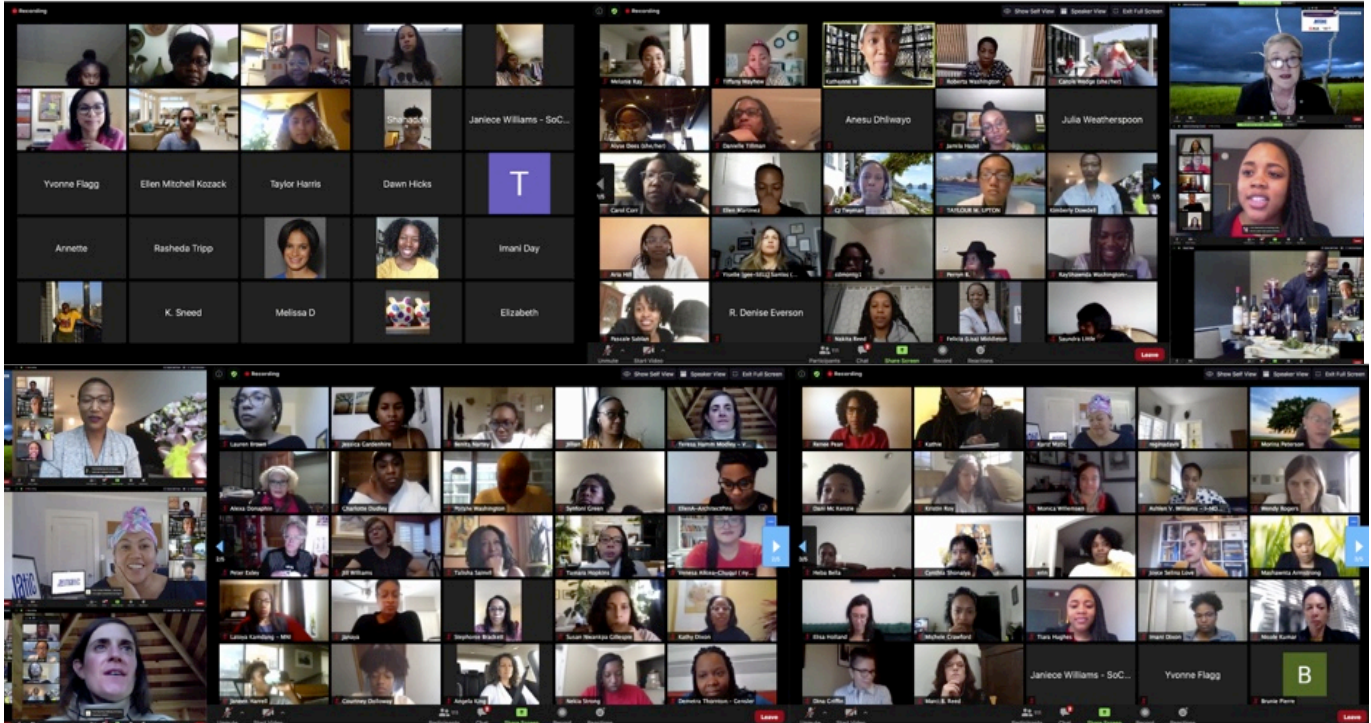
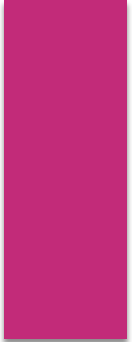
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### **Recommended Resources From Group Discussions**

- Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It by Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove
  - Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives by Sarah Williams Goldhagen
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Thank-you to all the participants that made this years event a success

JOIN US NEXT YEAR