

2019 IIDA Student Roundtable Report

(re)Designing Our Profession for Diversity



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On the Cover (from left to right)
Peggy Koyanagi, Student IIDA; Mei Han Khor, Student IIDA; Conner Do Hyun Kim, Student IIDA

This Page and Cover: Deanna Gonzalez, Student IIDA

Attendee List

NEW YORK

Students

Ayelet Klammer, Student IIDA
Fashion Institute of Technology

Ava Malatesta, Student IIDA
Kean University

Tiffany Nguyen, Student IIDA
Marywood University

Chloe Blottman, Student IIDA
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Perine Boules, Student IIDA
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Hailey White, Student IIDA
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Jinal Patel
New York Institute of Technology

Karla Perez, Student IIDA
New York Institute of Technology

Nicole Vilchez, Student IIDA
New York Institute of Technology

Maye Al-kuwari, Student IIDA
New York School of Interior Design

Crystal Pickar, Student IIDA
New York School of Interior Design

Mara Stepe
New York School of Interior Design

Gabriela Barrera Jaime, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Angela Bouton, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Xinchun Hu, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Claire Keener, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Katherine Levinton, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Amrita Ravi, Student IIDA
Pratt Institute

Professionals

Julio Braga, FIIDA
IA Interior Architects

Allison Brown, Associate IIDA
Perkins+Will

Sana Khan, Associate IIDA
HOK

Angie Lee, IIDA, AIA
FXCollaborative Architects LLP

Speaker

Jon Otis, IIDA
Object Agency (OIA)

LOS ANGELES

Students

Bren Carrillo
Art Center College of Design
Pasadena

Conner Do Hyun Kim, Student IIDA
Art Center College of Design
Pasadena

May Lin
Art Center College of Design
Pasadena

Alvin Oei
Art Center College of Design
Pasadena

Alynn Tergevorkian
Art Center College of Design
Pasadena

Gabriela Barrientos, Student IIDA
California State University,
Northridge

Quenna Lopez, Student IIDA
California State University,
Northridge

Gema Ortiz Mena, Student IIDA
California State University,
Northridge

Deanna Gonzalez, Student IIDA
Chaffey College

Jeannette Jurado, Student IIDA
Chaffey College

Amanda Ortiz, Student IIDA
Chaffey College

Cassandra Paulson, Student IIDA
Chaffey College

Stephanie Struckus, Student IIDA
Mount San Antonio College

Ellen To, Student IIDA
Mount San Antonio College

Esteffany Inzunza Grivel, Student IIDA
San Diego Mesa College

Mei Han Khor, Student IIDA
San Diego Mesa College

Peggy Koyanagi, Student IIDA
University of California - Los Angeles

Professionals

David Fridlund, IIDA, AIA
Wirt Design Group

Pam Juba, IIDA
Wolcott

Pam Light, FIIDA
HOK

Susanne Molina, FIIDA
ONE Design Collective

Speakers

Gabrielle Bullock, IIDA, FAIA, NOMA
Perkins+Will

Annie Chu, IIDA, FAIA
CHU+GOODING Architects

From IIDA

Ryan Ben
Moderator / Student Engagement
and Advancement Manager

John Czarnecki
Honorary IIDA, Associate AIA
Deputy Director and Senior Vice
President

Aisha Williams
Senior Director of Industry Relations
and Special Events

Krista Sykes
Report Author

a call for change:

to successfully design for diverse audiences, there must first be a push to cultivate diversity within the interior design profession.

Jinal Patel



Karla Perez, Student IIDA

Nicole Vilchez, Student IIDA



Introduction

As the world becomes increasingly more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and more, the interior design profession faces a distinct challenge.

How can design practitioners create environments that support and celebrate these rich differences? And, how can design better reflect a more diverse world? In late 2018, IIDA and OFS hosted the 2019 IIDA Student Roundtable—two events in New York and Los Angeles—where a total of 36 interior design students and 11 educators and practitioners gathered to discuss this issue. What emerged was a call for change: to successfully design for diverse audiences, there must first be a push to cultivate diversity within the interior design profession. For this to happen, it is up to all, at every level of the profession, to take action.

Stephanie Struckus, Student IIDA



RACIAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The notion of diversity is complex, and includes different expressions of race, religion, sexual orientation, income level, and cultural background. Diversity also involves generational affiliation as well as one's stage in life. Many students who participated in the roundtables are embarking on second careers, and several are parents, both of which constitute additional types of heterogeneity. Some participants are children of immigrants, while others are natives of other countries who are in the United States to attend design school. Likewise, geographic location impacts views on diversity. Despite taking place in two of the most diverse cities in an already diverse country, the conversations in New York and Los Angeles sounded quite different, as would those in, say, Miami, Memphis, or Milwaukee. Nevertheless, during both roundtable discussions, common themes emerged that offer broader lessons about diversity's essential role in the future of the interior design profession.

The need to enhance racial and cultural diversity is apparent in the A&D industry. And while the IIDA Student Roundtable discussions focused on students in interior design programs, IIDA membership overall includes both commercial interior designers and architects. In most large and mid-sized firms, interior designers and architects are increasingly working together in a collaborative way, side by side. Still, in terms of gender disparities, the majority of practitioners in architecture are men, while women are largely the majority in interior design practice.

The 2019 *IIDA Interior Design Compensation Report*, which is specific to commercial interior design, described an average industry professional: a white, 39-year-old female. Report findings also revealed that the majority of survey respondents (around 85 percent) indicated their race as white, with no other individual race accounting for more than 2 percent of the industry, and 87 percent identified as female.

In its 2018 survey of the architecture profession, *Equity by Design* found that female and minority architects and designers on average earn lower compensation than their white male contemporaries. And while the 2018 survey shows progress for white women closing equity gaps with men, the same cannot be said for minority respondents. Notably, more than 80 percent of respondents identified as heterosexual or straight, and 70 percent of respondents' report that their firm leadership is all or mostly white.

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) *Diversity in the Profession of Architecture* report, published in 2016, provides additional insight regarding the perceived factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of minority architects and designers. The majority of survey takers—69 percent of the respondents who were people of color and 61 percent of whites—believe that difficulty in affording college tuition and supplies is a factor in the lower numbers of minorities, as well as a lack of role models (68 percent of people of color and 66 percent of whites) for aspiring professionals to follow.



The move to increase diversity is more than a numbers game. “It is not just about having diverse individuals within an organization,” said Amrita Ravi, an Indian woman in her final year of graduate studies at Pratt Institute. “We have to ensure that these individuals are valued, have a voice, and make a contribution.” Gabrielle Bullock, IIDA, FAIA, NOMA, an African-American woman who is principal and director of global diversity at Perkins+Will and 2018–2019 IIDA International President, put it another way: “Think about *diversity* as someone asking you to the party. Inclusion is someone asking you to dance. *Equity* is someone asking you to share your

**“THE MOVE TO
INCREASE DIVERSITY
IS MORE THAN
A NUMBERS GAME.”**

Amrita Ravi

playlist.” In other words, conversations around diversity help practitioners aspire to equity—the creation of an environment in which each person’s contribution is collectively valued.

The advantages of diversity in the workplace—including greater innovation, better decision making, and increased financial performance—have been well documented. The good news is that, on the whole, the design industry embraces diversity and its accompanying benefits. The not-so-good news is that, despite having absorbed this message, many—individuals and organizations alike—seem unclear on how to act on it and improve the current condition. What steps can be taken to increase diversity and utilize our differences to their fullest extent? The roundtable discussions proved quite valuable, offering concrete ideas for students, educators, and practitioners on next steps toward achieving greater diversity within the profession.

Amrita Ravi, Student IIDA



Writing New Narratives

NEW YORK

The New York roundtable kicked off with a presentation by Jon Otis, IIDA, a professor of practice at Pratt Institute, founder and principal of the multidisciplinary design studio Object Agency, and a vice president on the 2018-2020 IIDA International Board of Directors. Otis underscored that, despite changing demographics, the profession still overwhelmingly privileges the white, male, heterosexual point of view. Attendee Amrita Ravi shared this viewpoint: “In my experience, design as taught is very whitewashed; it’s about the Western world, American and European designers.” This stems not from a conscious desire to sideline

other perspectives, but rather from the persistence of entrenched and long-unquestioned notions about design professionals and the people for whom they design. For decades, the idea of the straight white male—as architect and client—has been the norm, in large part because there had not been enough heterogeneous voices within the profession to challenge these beliefs. Today, despite a continuing gender imbalance at the top—according to a 2013 study conducted by *Interior Design* magazine, 75 percent of firm leaders at the time were male—a growing majority of female students and practitioners shows that women have been steadily

gaining ground in recent years. The same is not true for minorities. Tiffany Nguyen of Marywood University spoke directly to this. “Being Asian-American at my school can be difficult because very few of my classmates or professors share my background.” This is a main reason that Otis founded the Diversity by Design Foundation (dxdf), a nonprofit initiative dedicated to increasing awareness of design careers among people of all backgrounds.

Jon Otis, IIDA



According to Otis, “dxdf will ultimately focus its efforts on targeting the pipeline from early education to practice, funding initiatives that encourage people of all backgrounds to see a career in design as a viable path for their lives.”

Angie Lee, IIDA, AIA, a Korean American who is principal and design director of interiors at FXCollaborative in New York and a vice president on the 2018-2020 IIDA International Board of Directors, likewise stressed the urgency to increase diversity within the profession and to make space for these different perspectives. “We’ve been coaxed into a male point of view, and we’ve been reluctant to confront this fact. But in today’s political and social climate, there

is a great need to have more and varied voices at the table and in the room,” Lee noted. “As designers, our roles as storytellers require us to deliberately flex our empathetic muscles.”

Amanda Ortiz of Chaffey College agreed, “Storytellers—that’s what we really are. For me, being creative and thinking outside the box is what I can do, how I can contribute, what I was meant for.” Designers must write new narratives and tell their own stories, or as Alvin Oei, student of Art Center College of Design put it: “As designers, we have the power to change things because we are trained to articulate problems in a way that other people aren’t.”

“STORYTELLERS—THAT’S WHAT WE [DESIGNERS] REALLY ARE.”

Amanda Ortiz, student at Chaffey College

Angie Lee, IIDA



LOS ANGELES

Across the country, Bullock and Annie Chu, FIIDA, FAIA, a vice president on the 2018-2020 IIDA International Board of Directors, initiated the Los Angeles roundtable by doing just that—sharing their experiences as two minority women in a traditionally white-male-dominated profession. Chu, who emigrated to the United States from Hong Kong at age 16, is a principal at Chu-Gooding Architects and teaches at Woodbury University’s interior architecture program. With her many accomplishments, she has become a sought-after figure in the design field, frequently asked to sit on juries, committees, and lecture panels. As an Asian woman, Chu joked that her ethnicity and gender may be a reason for this popularity. “With me,” she quipped, “they can check two boxes.” She views her unique position

as an opportunity and urged roundtable participants to do the same. “It doesn’t matter why they ask [you to participate]. It gives you a soap box, it puts you at the table, and you need to represent your tribe. We need our voices heard.” This point seemed all the more relevant for Chu who, throughout her design education under a largely white-male faculty, acutely felt the lack of a role model—someone within the field who looked like her and shared her background. As an educator, an active member of the design community, and a practitioner renowned for culturally responsive design, Chu has consciously become a role model for others.

Annie Chu, IIDA, FAIA



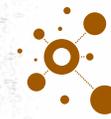
POSITION YOURSELF AS A LEADER

Whether you are a first-semester student or a seasoned practitioner, it pays to cultivate your leadership skills. **How?**



BUILD YOUR NETWORK

Join student or professional organizations, attend industry events, find a mentor, or become a mentor. These activities will help build your network.



BE A CONNECTOR

As your network grows, introduce people with similar interests. This will keep you involved with others and earn you a reputation as a person who helps make things happen.



CULTIVATE EXPERIENCE

Ask for more responsibility in your internship, job, or organization. You will gain valuable knowledge and new skills.



LEARN

Utilize widely available resources on leadership and communication. Look beyond the design profession for information to keep up with the world around you. For inspiration, check out The New York Times Best Sellers List for business books and TED Talks, both of which offer highly regarded material that will help guide you on your path to leadership.

AN AGENT OF CHANGE: GABRIELLE BULLOCK

As an African-American woman, Gabrielle Bullock belongs to one of the profession's least represented groups, and she, too, was without a role model as a young designer. After rising through the ranks at her firm, she parlayed her all-too-frequent experiences as the only African American (and often the only woman) in the room into a groundbreaking diversity initiative for Perkins+Will's 2,200 employees. As firmwide director of global diversity, Bullock oversees the Perkins+Will Diversity, Inclusion, and Engagement program, which aims to create a varied and inclusive industry culture by focusing on issues such as the recruitment/retention of diverse talent, leadership training, and community outreach. For Bullock, keeping the mission to increase diversity top of mind is essential, as it is all too easy to revert to old hiring patterns. "Whether it is in a school, an organization, or a firm, a strong homogenous culture will stifle voices, perspectives, and ultimately impact the quality and innovation of that practice," said Bullock. "If we're not intentionally inclusive, we risk being unintentionally exclusive."

Bullock regularly pushes accepted boundaries. She is the first member of her family to become a designer, the second African American woman to earn an architecture degree from Rhode Island School of Design, and both the first African American and the first woman to reach the position of managing director of Perkins+Will. She continued this pioneering path when, in 2013, she approached Phil Harrison, CEO of Perkins+Will, with the idea to create a proactive diversity-and-inclusion initiative within the firm, the first of its kind in the industry.

Spearheading the newly established program as the firm's first director of global diversity, Bullock visited all of the firm's North American offices, initiating honest (and often difficult) conversations with staff about diversity challenges within each studio as well as the value of diversity for clients and the profession as a whole.

The feedback from this yearlong process of "listening tours" informed Bullock that (among other things) diversity education and training were needed. She engaged Global Diversity Collaborative, a diversity and inclusion consultant, to hold half-day workshops at the individual offices. Through this process, each studio identified its gaps—such as gender inequity, lack of racial diversity, or intergenerational communication—and worked with Bullock to develop a strategic plan to address these issues. Plans included curricula to educate leadership and employees about widespread diversity concerns, including micro-inequities and unconscious bias, and accountability scorecards to measure and evaluate the impact of the strategies.

Since 2015, Bullock has been issuing annual reports within the firm that chart the progress of the Diversity, Inclusion, and Engagement program. While it will take time to see the program's full effects, results are encouraging, showing steady increases in gender and racial diversity among Perkins+Will's staff and leadership. In terms of drawing attention to inequities within the design community, the program is already a success, serving as a model initiative for increasing diversity and inclusivity within the design industry at large.

Gabrielle Bullock, IIDA, FAIA, NOMA



Raising Awareness

Two themes linked to the issue of awareness repeatedly emerged in the roundtable conversations.

The first was the need to strengthen the talent pipeline. To create a diverse and inclusive design workforce, the profession must enable more minority and socioeconomically challenged individuals to enter the design field. Here, a major challenge relates to awareness and access. “Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often aren’t aware of design as a career choice because their environment and experiences have not exposed them to the possibility,” noted Julio Braga, FIIDA, design director and principal of IA Interior Architects in New York. “In terms of increasing diversity, the younger we begin to engage children in design, the more likely it is that they will develop a passion for the subject and become successful design professionals.”

Julio Braga, FIIDA



Karla Perez, a student at New York Institute of Technology, pointed out that aside from awareness and access, money is often a limiting factor; many can't afford the steep price tag associated with design programs. And even if students find a way to finance their educations, the relatively modest salaries available to interior design graduates, compared to beginning wages in other professional service fields, can make repaying student loans difficult. In other words, the return on investment for a design education leads some to abandon this career path all together.

These financial concerns intertwine with a second pervasive theme—that of raising awareness, and consequently the status of the interior design profession. Interior design is a fairly young profession, with requirements for licensure, registration, certification, and job titles varying from state to state. Susanne Molina, FIIDA, principal at One Design Collective in Los Angeles, stated that students should leverage this opportunity. “Politicians want to hear from students, because

you are their future voters, you are their constituents.” Throughout the country, the practice of interior design is more varied. This lack of standardization contributes to a misunderstanding of interior design as a profession. Mei Han Khor of San Diego Mesa College contributed an international perspective when saying, “I’m an international student from Malaysia. The interior design profession in the United States is very different than in my country, which doesn’t recognize interior designers as professionals. I’d really like to change the understanding of the profession in my country because interior design is something that can improve people’s quality of life.”

THESE AWARENESS ISSUES MAKE TARGETED OUTREACH—ESPECIALLY TO SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN, DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES, AND STATE LEGISLATORS—A TOP STRATEGY FOR ENGENDERING DIVERSITY WITHIN THE INTERIOR DESIGN INDUSTRY.

Taking Action

Otis, Chu, and Bullock all emphasized the pressing need for change, to move beyond well-intentioned discussions to well-considered actions. Otis's Diversity by Design Foundation; Chu's commitment to teaching, public speaking, and leadership in the professional realm; and Bullock's role as director of global diversity at Perkins+Will are accomplishments that require time, effort, and commitment to initiate and maintain. With this in mind, taking action may seem daunting, especially for students whose time and resources are often stretched thin, and for educators and practitioners, who juggle multiple projects on a daily basis. Hailey White of the New Jersey

Institute of Technology put it succinctly: "As students, our workloads are already insane, and we are trying to do other things on top of that. So the question becomes, how do we fit it all in?" Yet, the roundtable discussions carried an overriding message: to be an agent of change, your actions do not have to be big, just strategic. Small steps matter. Jeannette Jurado of Chaffey College said, "It is very empowering to realize that just showing up and being me is a statement in itself."

Greater diversity can be encouraged in individual organizations and in the profession at large, regardless of age or stature in one's career. Stephanie Struckus of Mt. San Antonio College gave some inspiration in Los Angeles, "At any level in our careers we can be influencers; we have the power to leave the door open behind us, or even to take the door off the hinges." For example, students can:

CULTIVATE NEW PERSPECTIVES

Look for courses and lectures that include global content, such as non-Western design examples, or request it from instructors. Otis lamented that, despite huge demographic shifts, the model for interior design education has changed very little in the past century. "We are locked into a way of thinking," said Otis. "We have new digital tools, but the approach to how we teach design hasn't changed. We need to adapt our curricula to a new world, a diverse world."

LEARN FROM COLLEAGUES

Classmates are an amazing, and often untapped, source of knowledge. Connect with others in your program and learn all you can about their backgrounds and experiences. Crystal Pickar of the New York School of Interior Design said, "In class we learn so much from just sharing our different personal journeys."

FIND A MENTOR

Seek out a faculty member or practitioner with similar values who is willing to offer guidance. Sign up for the IIDA Student Mentoring Program, which connects students with a local professional.

OFFER SUPPORT

Take every opportunity to assist others, from starting study groups to becoming a teaching assistant (TA). Struckus found that as a TA, she was able to help cultivate women's voices. "New students are often insecure and intimidated to display their work. I help make space for their voice and then help them strengthen it, smoothing the way for their next steps."

JOIN IN

Professional and student organizations offer a range of programs and opportunities to connect with likeminded individuals. Join groups that appeal to you. If an IIDA campus center doesn't exist at your school, start one. "I feel like all of the IIDA events are rewarding. I believe that knowledge is power, so to hear everyone speak encourages me to keep pushing," said Amanda Ortiz of Chaffey College.

INTERVIEW EMPLOYERS

As you move toward an internship or full-time position, look for firms that share your beliefs. Do your homework and ask questions. Pam Light, FIIDA, senior vice president at HOK in Los Angeles, said, "When someone comes in and asks me questions that apply to his or her growth, I am more inclined to hire that person because I know they want to learn, have researched my company, and are here because our values align."

Jeannette Jurado, Student IIDA



The suggestions here, such as learning from and offering support to colleagues and engaging in professional organizations, apply equally to educators and practitioners as well as students. Other strategies for professionals to increase diversity within the interior design industry include:



Claire Keener, Student IIDA

MENTORSHIP

Share knowledge with students and young designers, informally or through an established mentor program, such as the IIDA Student Mentoring Program, offered each year in March.

OUTREACH

Strengthen the pipeline by engaging in or even initiating an outreach program. To expose children of all ages and backgrounds to art and design, partner with local schools or community centers, or present to your own child's class. Jeannette Jurado of Chaffey College explained, "For Native Americans, interior design is not typically on the priority list. It isn't something most Native Americans have had the opportunity to consider. I want to show them how interior design can affect overall wellbeing, help them see that interior design can automatically improve living conditions and lifestyles."

INTENTIONALITY

Seek out and hire diverse talent. Refashion recruitment teams to reflect the diversity your organization looks to achieve. Advocate for more diverse project teams. Take stock—if everyone in a given work or social group looks and sounds the same, make a conscious change.

CURIOSITY

Listen to other educators, practitioners, students, and clients. Learning more about different people's needs, experiences, and aspirations fosters cultural proficiency. "It's a process of un-training and re-managing expectations about whom we look to as resources of knowledge and experience," said Lee.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Recount steps taken and assess the results. Ask for feedback from students, coworkers, and clients. Analyze what works, what doesn't, and where there is room to improve.

Moving Forward

With rising frequency, clients are younger, more diverse, and looking to hire design teams that echo the demographics of their own organizations.

Likewise, there has been increasing interest in community-related projects, which require designers who reflect and understand the underlying cultural and socioeconomic issues these communities face. “It won’t be hard to find these kinds of projects,” Bullock predicted. “It will be hard to find the designers who can relate.” She noted that all practitioners have a role in cultivating these designers, in being

these designers. Individuals and firms have a duty to inspire those with different backgrounds to enter the profession, engage with global content and society’s shifting demographics, and foster diverse workplaces where all contributions are valued.

The IIDA/OFS roundtable participants—students, educators, and practitioners alike—agreed that, while discussion is encouraging and must continue, action must happen now. “We are currently

in an advocacy role,” said Lee, “and it’s time now to shift into an activist mindset. Advocacy works within the established structure and rules, and we do everything possible to leverage the power we have. But when we adopt an activist attitude, we start to rewrite the rules. The work we do along established paths is important, but we also need to break out of the comfort zone and do what’s right.” The time has come to (re)design our profession for diversity.

About IIDA

IIDA is the commercial interior design association with global reach. We support design professionals, industry affiliates, educators, students, firms, and their clients through our network of 15,000+ members across 58 countries. We advocate for advancements in education, design excellence, legislation, leadership, accreditation, and community outreach to increase the value and understanding of interior design as a profession that enhances business value and positively impacts the health and wellbeing of people's lives every day. www.iida.org

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About the Author

Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Krista Sykes is a writer and editor with a background in architecture and design. She has worked with many practitioners, institutions, and publications, including *Contract* magazine.