

Diversity: What the Numbers Tell Us



by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

“Merely engaging in high-minded debates about theoretical future reductions while continuing to steadily increase emissions represents a self-delusional and reckless approach. In some ways, that approach is worse than doing nothing at all, because it lulls the gullible into thinking that something is actually being done, when in fact it is not.”

—Al Gore, in a speech at NYU Law School, quoted in *The NY Times* September 19, 2006

Al Gore’s objection to lots of talk but little action in reducing emissions has something in common with the urge to say the right things about the challenges facing African American architects, even though there are

many successes to balance the bad news. But all this does little actually to advance the cause of greater opportunity for black architects. In the Old West, they had a pithier phrase than Al Gore’s sincere but plodding language: *Talk is cheap but it takes money to buy whiskey.*

African American architects licensed to practice in one or more of the states at press time numbered 1,558, of whom 185 are women. There’s no single model. Black practitioners range across a vast spectrum of firm size, ownership, employment status, gender, personal history, location, self-appraisal, and aspirations.

Some of the architects came from humble beginnings, grew up in segregated or all-black high schools,

were discouraged in more or less subtle ways by their instructors from embracing architecture as a career, and simply by persevering fought their way through architecture school and into practice. Others, from more privileged backgrounds, found their way into practice with fewer bumps, but not without facing various forms of discrimination in architecture school and beyond. Some have aspired to owning their own firm; others have sought the special status conferred through a full partnership in a large, establishment, majority-owned firm. Still others have found careers in the public service, with its security and solid benefits—permanently or as a stepping stone to private practice. Finally, a small contingent—a little over a hundred, took to teaching full-time in the architecture schools, providing a steady income and offering a modest supplemental income by taking on small design projects.

The mood today.

A small number of black-owned firms operate on the same lines as majority firms. They win a share of work from private and public sources, though more from the public patron. But many other firms work very hard to carry on—because they are small, or because they lack the benefits of networking, because, as the late Chicago-based publishing magnate and publisher of *Ebony*, John Johnson once told me, they’re “outside the area of gossip.” So they end up with a low volume of work and unadventurous clients, and they miss out on opportunities to do pioneering work, attract attention, make the professional journals, and recruit the most

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talented staff.

One example of barriers broken

When John Johnson (1918–2005), was planning the new world headquarters for Johnson Publishing in Chicago's Loop, he turned to Dubin, Dubin, Moutoussamy. John Moutoussamy (1920–1995), name partner in the Chicago firm had designed schools, colleges, apartment buildings. But he had never designed and completed an office building because no white person would ever let him do it.

Said Johnson: "Now I'm black and he's black. If he can't build my building, whose building can he build? You know, he has the same credentials as all the other architects, he's a member of a respectable firm. And I said, 'All I know is I'm in the publishing business and I will have to let people know that you [the bank] turned me down because I had a black architect, fully qualified, and the only reason is he has never built an office building before is because you and people like you never allowed him to build it.'"

So Johnson, leading publisher of black-directed media, broke down long-standing biases against black-owned property in Chicago's Loop and insisted on having the black partner of a Chicago firm design his company's headquarters. I will cover this and other stories of barrier-breaking patrons in a later episode of this diversity series.

Black architects as individuals

By virtue of being in a tiny numerical minority, black architects often work as lone individuals in a firm, and thanks to remnants of racist attitudes, are often closely scrutinized and expected to produce a level of

work not demanded of their majority colleagues. They are often denied the benefit of the doubt at promotion time when matched against majority and female colleagues. Some succeed despite the odds. For example, Ralph Jackson, FAIA, about whose life more in a later episode, is now the design partner in the 132-year-old Boston firm Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott.

Many African American practitioners are employed by industry, public agencies, and as faculty at schools of architecture. This gives offers them a certain security more seldom afforded owners or employees in private architectural practice.

Some revealing statistics

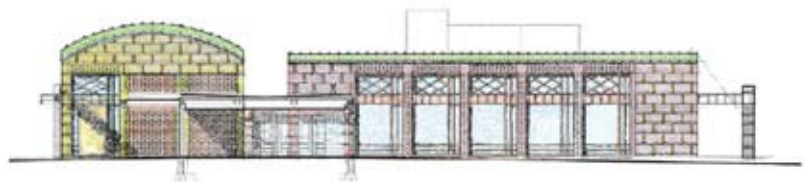
The bare figures defining the status of African American architects are nevertheless shameful. I use them as the basis of this first episode in the diversity series. Note the low levels of black architects as a percentage of all architects, when compared to their numbers in the overall U.S. population; the modest levels of black faculty in the schools of architecture and the low percentage of black students; and the scarce rate of improvement

over the recent past. One bright sign, happily, is that profitability levels of black-owned firms typically rival, even exceed those of majority firms.

(Note: Where figures designate only African Americans, it is so stated. Otherwise, the term *minorities* includes Asian and Hispanic/Latino groups and a breakdown was not available.)

For a start, here are some totals. U.S. Census Bureau's 2004 Community Survey figures [<http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet>] show that out of a population of 285,691,501 at the time of the survey (the population on October 1, 2006, actually stood at 299,879,191, but the demographics breakdowns weren't yet available), 34.8 million were African American. That's 12.1 percent, a ratio that has remained constant over the past decade.

Switching now to the architect population of the United States, the numbers depend on the source. The 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures—the latest available—place the number of architects at 192,860, a hugely inflated figure that includes unlicensed and any unregistered individuals who call



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themselves architects.

A far more accurate number is the 101,179 recognized by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards as having passed the licensing exam in their state (NCARB neither collects nor maintains demographic data on its registrants on the advice of counsel, according to the summary of a demographic diversity audit report (DDAR) issued by the AIA in December 2005.

Now if we see eye to eye with the argument—and I see no reason not to—that in a just society African American architects' representation in their profession should match their representation in the population, and taking NCARB's statistic of 101,179 as a base, then 12.1 percent of architects should be black. In truth, the actual ratio, using Dennis Alan Mann's Center for the Study of Practice, University of Cincinnati database of 1,558 registered architects, is 1.5 percent, a figure that has changed little in recent years. Note that 185 of the 1,558, or 11.9 percent, are women. If you compare these numbers with the ones contained in Mann's 1991 database (870 architects, 49 of them women), the last 15 years have seen a great surge of 63 percent for black men and 278 percent for women, for a total increase of 79 percent from 1991 to 2006. This would be an encouraging

figure were not the base numbers so small, as they end up exaggerating percentage increases.

Using the AIA's own figures in its DDAR, 1% of its 52,000 registered-architect members are black, 2% are Hispanic/Latino, and 3% Asian.

The black-owned firm

Here's another type of measure: the numbers of black-owned firms. According to Mann, 608 of the 1,558 names in his database have identified themselves as firm owners, or 39 percent, an intriguingly high ratio, which, Mann told me, ranges from large firms such as Columbus-Ohio based Moody-Nolan all the way to one-person firms. (Many of these one-person firm principals have regular day jobs as employees and work on independent projects after hours. Twenty-one percent of minority partners are sole practitioners, according to the AIA's latest (2003) Business of Architecture report, but that includes all minorities except women, who are tabulated separately.

Meanwhile, of the total of 17,589 firms listed as AIA firms, 6 percent, or 1,055, are shown as minority-owned firms, according to 2006 AIA figures, a decline from the 1,190 existing in 2000. The federal government defines a "minority-owned business enter-

prise as one that is at least 51-percent owned and controlled by minorities." The number of women principals and partners rose from 11.2 percent in 1999 to 20.7 percent three years later.

Minorities account for 16 percent of architecture staff at AIA member-owned firms. And though this includes non-black minorities (but not women), it has not even begun to approach the combined percentage of those three minorities in the overall U.S. population (about 25 percent).

The good news: profitability

Some 75 percent of minority firms reported profits of 10 percent or more before taxes, discretionary bonuses and profit-sharing. Not only were the minority firms' profits higher than the rate for all firms; of those which cited a loss, minority firms accounted for slightly less than the average for all firms, which was 13 percent.

The best explanation, according to Pradeep Dalal, formerly AIA's director of economics and market research, is that minority firms, as defined above, are eligible for minority set aside status and are slightly larger than the percentage for "all firms" resulting in slightly higher profitability and slightly lower losses. Moreover, minority firms reportedly take on a broader range of building types, and the better balance in typologies is more likely to produce profits than would a lop-sided workload.

Note: to be eligible for minority status, firms must self-identify themselves as a minority-owned firm. The status comes with limitations in ownership and size. To be so designated by a public agency, a minority firm must be 51 percent minority-owned and must be under a maximum size based on volume and type of work. That's

African-American Representation



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a trade off that could retard a firm's overall growth.

Many inside and outside the profession have attacked set aside programs because they allegedly create an artificially-protected practice environment. Yet these rules have helped many minority firms get a start in the marketplace.

Dennis Mann estimates that 47 percent (39 percent who are owners plus 8 percent as employees) of the black architects who work in the private sector work in firms that are 100 percent black-owned; some five years ago Mann estimated that only 16 percent worked in white or white/other minority owned firms, but he sees these numbers rising as younger black architects join majority firms. Meanwhile, 217 or 14 percent of black architects work in the public sector.

In school

The enrollments of black students and the presence of black faculty in the schools of architecture have long been a reflection of black architects' status in the profession as a whole.

The nation's architecture schools fall roughly into three types—private, state, and HBCUs (Historic Black College and University). Five HBCUs exist offering NAAB-accredited degrees—two in the south, three in the mid-Atlantic states.

The number of fulltime professional degree students in all accredited schools totaled 21,107, according to latest available NAAB sources, of which 1268 were African American or 6 percent. Comparative figures for Asian students came to 1728 or 8.1 percent and Hispanic students 1877 or 8.9 percent. For details, visit NAAB's Web site. [<http://www.naab.org/>]

A comparison of school graduation and career attrition rates is useful. That's the ratio of graduates who ended up as architects versus those who left to go into other lines of work. The post graduation attrition rate for architects as a whole is said to be around 45 percent; the ratio for African Americans (68.4 percent) stands out as a tragic waste of talent, expenditure, and initiative. That is the price the entire profession pays for the severe challenges black architects face in practice—a mix of reluctant patrons, unsupportive majority firms, social attitudes, and low pay.

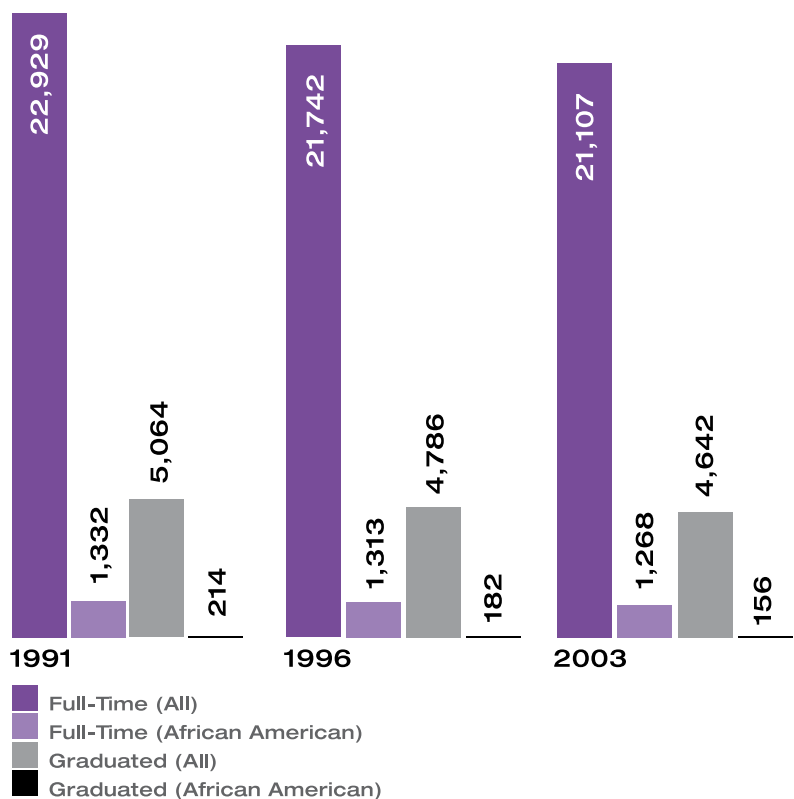
Faculty presence lags

Black faculty representation in America's schools of architecture is

slender. The current NAAB database shows a total of 109 fulltime faculty (50 tenured), compared to 105 Asian (52 tenured) and 142 Hispanic (67 tenured), out of a fulltime faculty total of about just under 2087 (1254 tenured). (The Hispanic figures are skewed by the presence of large numbers of Hispanic faculty at the Universities of Miami and Puerto Rico). The ratio of black to total architectural faculty is thus 109/2087 or 5.2 percent. In 1997 it was 6.5 percent; in 1983, 4.4 percent.

The ratio at HBCU colleges is less than encouraging. Out of a total of 47 fulltime faculty at the five HBCU schools, 21 are African American, or 45 percent. The highest ratio is at Howard University (75 percent); the

12 Year Comparison of Architecture School Attendance and Graduation



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lowest at Prairie View A&M University (29 percent), according to current NAAB figures. The March 2007 episode of this series will offer a closer exploration of the status and prospects of black students and faculty at U.S. schools of architecture.

More than numbers

With a few exceptions, such as profitability, the numbers are not encouraging. And there's a lot these figures don't tell you—about the anguish many black employees of majority firms feel as they look around them and find they're often the only ones of their race, closely scrutinized; about the extra effort many black-owned firms feel they must exert—often with inferior resources and less glamorous commissions—in order to be accepted by clients on the same basis as majority firms. They don't tell you about the slights when a black client goes to a majority architect for design services.

But you'll see in upcoming episodes of this monthly series that there's much for black as well as majority architects to feel good about. Look for a parade of significant innovative work by an array of quality-conscious black practitioners, along with stirring stories on how some had a smooth path to success, some overcame steep professional, social, financial and personal hurdles.

In November, expect a look at fascinating black trailblazers. The July 2007 episode will explore African identity by examining historic African architectural roots. These have prompted many black architects and critics to advance Afrocentrism as a counterbalance to the dominant Eurocentric mindset that drives contemporary teaching and architecture criticism. And in the September 2007 episode, get a glimpse at the criti-

cal role patrons and patronage hold in shaping the prospects of black architects.

Also coming up is the role of black women in the profession, and finally a look at the three great drivers that if applied will shape the prospects of the African American architect for the better for generations to come.

Captions:

1. "The Builders," by Jacob Lawrence, 1947. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, N.Y.
2. For the Africana Studies and Research Center expansion by Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, principal architect Ralph T. Jackson, FAIA, uses texture and color to establish the program's identity and presence on the Cornell campus.