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WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

DESIGNING FOR EQUITY IN THE FUTURE MEANS LAYING THE GROUNDWORK IN THE PRESENT.

BY KATARINA KATSUMA, ASLA

Social inequality has quickly forced its way in recent years from the margins of liberal debate to an urgent political and humanitarian concern. In a hyperdeveloping world, inequitable, oppressive environments arise easily wherever designers, if there are designers, don't consider the communities for which they are designing—whether there is adequate access to green space and essentials such as fresh food and clean air, water, and land.

In design education, there is urgent demand from students for a strong social component to their work—it appears from the studios of nearly every school. But there is a growing awareness in landscape architecture that minority voices are missing. Educators express concern and frustration about exactly how to diversify the student body coming in the door and how to prepare those students to listen to communities that are in no way accustomed to intrusions aimed at rooting out spatial injustices, whether on street corners, around landfills, along vulnerable coastlines, or in floodplains.

“If [landscape architects] either knowingly or unknowingly choose to seclude groups or make things inaccessible, then it's not really fulfilling the mission of our profession,” says Kathleen King, Associate ASLA, a landscape designer at Design Workshop in Denver and a cochair of ASLA's new Environmental Justice Professional Practice Network (PPN). Landscape architects have the opportunity to help alleviate some of these social tensions by working with communities to create more equitable environments. But to achieve equity in the environment, some of the things design professionals and educators must do are teach students how to engage with the community, discover the metrics that contribute to and aid in equitable design, diversify the profession for more informed and meaningful designs, and create greater visibility of the profession.

Austin Allen, an associate professor of landscape architecture at Louisiana State University (LSU), has been teaching a course titled Open City, Just City for the past two years. Five years ago, the course began simply as Open City; as his

research and teaching evolved, Allen found it unavoidable to add “Just” to the title. In the fall of 2014, his studio took as a focus the social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, shortly after a black resident, Michael Brown, was killed by a white police officer from a force documented to practice rampant racial discrimination. “I felt one of the things that we had to do with our design and planning was go back to Pruitt-Igoe,” Allen says. He was referring, of course, to the notorious 1950s public housing project that had been just several miles away from Ferguson, near downtown St. Louis, before it was leveled in the 1970s and became a shorthand term globally for disastrous urban planning and racial and economic injustice. Allen traces the legacy of Pruitt-Igoe, the killing of Brown, and the citizen protests in Ferguson to a common social climate in the city. “It took a little bit of digging, but you go, ‘aha!’ as you start to see these movements of people, the migration, the policy in St. Louis, and how all [the social upheaval] comes about, and we start to engage students back with the discipline,” he says.

Matthew Williams is a 2014 MLA graduate of LSU, where there were courses dealing with community engagement. “If you don’t

know how to talk to the people that you’re designing for, there is a level of trust that you will not have in certain communities,” says Williams, who is currently working with the Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans to create a cultural center that celebrates and heightens awareness of this relatively unknown culture. Mardi Gras Indian culture originated with runaway slaves who were sheltered by, and adapted aspects of, Native American culture to hide their identities, and are referred to by Williams as African American culture bearers in New Orleans today. The Mardi Gras Indian Cultural Campus was originally an academic project brought to LSU by Allen in conjunction with Tulane University’s School of Architecture that Williams continued to work on after graduation. His community engagement with the Mardi Gras Indians has enabled him to help them create their own concept for the cultural center, rather than have one dictated to them.

Kofi Boone, ASLA, an associate professor of landscape architecture at North Carolina State University, cites some of the Principles of Environmental Justice created during the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 that he considers directly applicable to landscape architecture. Engaging with a

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEANS DESIGNING WITH A COMMUNITY, NOT FOR THEM.

community at a design level is not about creating a space the designer thinks a community needs, but rather working with constituents to find what it is they would like to see in their midst. This gives them the opportunity to speak on their own behalf, and arms them with the tools necessary to affect policy to make change happen. During his time at NC State, Boone has taught many classes focusing on community engagement, often actually going into those communities with the class. “Early on, there was a perception that community engagement required in some way a compromise in design quality, that the effort to collaborate with communities somehow detracted from more formal design thinking, process, and products,” he says. “I think that perception shifted for the better.”

Community engagement is a design method that is becoming more common in practice and is more likely to be part of landscape architecture education. C. L. Bohannon, ASLA, an assistant professor of landscape architecture at Virginia Tech, says the school’s program introduces students to community engagement projects in their third year of study, and by their fifth year capstone projects, “these students are going after issues that deal with a cause, and they’re working with communities.”

Julie Stevens, ASLA, an assistant professor of landscape architecture at Iowa State University and also a cochair of ASLA’s Environmental Justice PPN, is in her third design/build course with her students on creating therapeutic spaces for inmates—such as outdoor classrooms, an aspen grove for the perception of solitude, and a lawn mound for seating and connection with nature—at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville (see “A Garden Behind Bars,” *LAM*, November 2013). “It’s a little outside of what people think of for environmental justice,” Stevens says, but the right to landscapes for all means the incarcerated as well, especially when it provides the opportunity to aid in their rehabilitation. As part of the studio, students conduct focus groups with inmates at the prison to help identify needs and desires and then work with the inmates to build these spaces.

To teach equity, design professionals must learn what specific qualities contribute to equitable and inequitable environments. The Lafitte Greenway in New Orleans by Design Workshop, winner of an ASLA 2013 Professional Award of Excellence, was one of the first revitalization projects after Hurricane Katrina. Design Workshop engaged with the com-

munity members to find their programmatic needs and desires, all within a limited budget. Before the project began, Tulane University's School of Public Health received a grant to measure the "baseline physical activity among the residents in and around the Lafitte Greenway," says Kurt Culbertson, FASLA, the chairman and CEO of Design Workshop. The firm also collected statistics of its own, such as crime rates and a variety of environmental, economic, and aesthetic measurements, with the idea of "going back and measuring those impacts over time to see if we positively impacted the things that we were trying to create," Culbertson says. Measurements of real-world examples can indicate whether certain design practices work to create equitable environments, and their outcomes can serve as teaching models in studio for future designers. Although some of these considerations are already part of the design process, they must be specifically accounted for to make sure equity issues are being fully addressed.

Metrics can help to design equitably, but what would also help to design for a diverse community is a diverse landscape architecture profession. "Would we know something better if we had kids who grew up on the South Side of Chicago talking about crime

and safety?" asks Boone. "Would we be richer as a profession with kids in Indonesia talking about climate change? It's not to say that because you're from a certain ethnicity, you have a certain take, but where people live and how they grow up gives them a lens."

Pulling in students from a variety of backgrounds means diversifying landscape architecture as a profession to allow for the greater possibility of diverse life experiences. One of the six goals set out by ASLA's Environmental Justice PPN is to support the exposure of landscape architecture to "underserved student populations" to bring better diversity to landscape architecture programs. Before the 2011 closure of the master of landscape architecture program at Florida A&M University, which is on the list of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the program managed to graduate more MLA African Americans in its last three years than all other Florida MLA programs combined in the previous 10, says Andrew Chin, the assistant dean of the School of Architecture at Florida A&M. Bohannon worked as an assistant professor for the program at the time and recalls that the school "had the student body that everyone else wanted in terms of diversity; it was a nice cross section." There

are currently only two HBCUs left that offer landscape architecture courses—the BLA program at North Carolina A&T and the MLA program at Morgan State University in Maryland. But diversity doesn't come exclusively from HBCUs, and Bohannon emphasizes that all schools should focus on increasing their diversity for the profession to progress.

In an ideal world, the representation of ethnicities in the profession would reflect the current representations in the U.S. population. However, when comparing the 2010 U.S. Census numbers with statistics pulled from the 2014 ASLA Survey of Graduating Students, the biggest gap is with African Americans, who account for roughly 14 percent of the population, as opposed to only 1 percent of graduating landscape architecture students. Statistics for Caucasian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian, and other graduating students, on the other hand, are similar to those of the U.S. population.

The importance of diversifying has become a national priority in recent years, as seen in ASLA's new Environmental Justice policy as well as its Diversity Summit, now in its third year. The purpose of the first summit was to

help ASLA and the profession “understand why diversity is an issue within the profession and [help identify the] first steps in an action plan.” The second and third summits focused on “new strategies for early exposure and creating a mentorship model,” according to a report of the 2015 ASLA Diversity Summit.

People may be interested in the work that landscape architects do, but they may not be aware that landscape architects are the ones who do it. “The community knows what landscape architecture is,” says Diane Jones Allen, ASLA, a professional in residence at LSU and principal landscape architect for her design firm, DesignJones LLC. But “they think architects do landscape architecture.” The low level of awareness of landscape architecture as a profession creates a barrier. High-profile landscape architecture designs such as the High Line attract broad public attention, but projects dealing with the everyday landscape in ethnically diverse neighborhoods could help to create better awareness and exposure among populations in greatest need of equitable designs. “There is a stereotype of what people think landscape architecture is supposed to be,” says Boone, and a lot of the environments minorities come from don't have anything to do with this stereotype. “The environment we

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—C. L. BOHANNON, ASLA

deal with is not just postcard stuff; we know that, but we’re not championing these everyday landscapes” that people come from.

There is also the widely perceived need to create exposure to the landscape architecture profession before students reach university age, similar to other design professions’ recruitment strategies. For the 2010 ASLA Legacy Project, the ASLA Potomac Chapter partnered with the ACE Mentoring Program, an organization dedicated to mentoring high school students in the pursuit of careers in design and construction, to build an outdoor classroom and greenhouse garden for Calvin Coolidge High School in Washington, D.C. Elizabeth Miller, FASLA, the director of the physical planning division for the National Capital Planning Commission, took part in the design process where local residents participated in a design charrette. This event was followed by two volunteer “plant it” days to transform a one-acre site into not only a teaching amenity for the school but also a space for the community to gather. “There were a couple of students who said, ‘Yeah, I really like this. Maybe this is something I’d like to do and go to college for,’” Miller says. “It definitely increased their awareness of what kind of opportunities might be out there for them.”

The need to design landscapes and environments with equity in mind may already be ingrained in the current generation of landscape architecture students. “This generation,” Bohannon says, “if there’s a cause, they get behind it.”

“I absolutely think [the future] is in the new generation of designers and planners. I think if we free people in terms of the [older design] models that have been restrictive,” Allen says, it gives them a much more open way of approaching the kind of work we do as landscape architects. And by engaging the community, students can begin to understand what communities really need and how to work with them to design those places with equity in mind.

As Robert Bullard emphasized in the opening session on environmental justice and resilience at the 2014 ASLA Annual Meeting, “The country that we are looking at now will look different in 30 years. So when we plan for the future, we have to understand that we need some of those people in the room now.... We have to recruit, educate, and pass the torch to those leaders and emerging leaders that we know can take us across the finish line.” ●