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Celebrating the Past, Designing the Future

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Struggling for Diversity

Kathryn H. Anthony, PhD

In scores of American cities, what were once racial minorities are now majorities, and both people of color and women have assumed leadership roles. The demographic portrait of the architecture profession in these and other cities, however, remains predominantly white and male. As of September 2006, 4 percent of the licensed-architect members of the AIA were Asian Pacific, 2.6 percent Hispanic, Latino, 1 percent African-American, and 13 percent women (the AIA does not collect information on disability or sexual orientation). For reasons too complex to discuss here, this profession has had far greater difficulty—in comparison to its counterparts in medicine and law—achieving a distribution that reflects the American population. Yet, despite seemingly insurmountable difficulties, talented men and women have broken through many traditional barriers to become historic “firsts” as leaders in the architectural world. As well, professional groups have formed for support in the ongoing effort to achieve greater diversity. The profession has benefited from the contributions of these active individuals. This essay highlights just a few of these heroic individuals.

After entering the male-dominated profession through an apprenticeship at a Buffalo, New York architecture office, at age 25 Louise Blanchard Bethune, FAIA, opened an office with her husband, Robert Armour Bethune. Louise Bethune became the first woman member of the AIA in 1888 and the first woman elected a Fellow of the Institute in 1889. Her well-known designs for the Lafayette Hotel and Kensington Church in Buffalo and the women’s prison for the Erie County Penitentiary were accompanied by a steady stream of educational, commercial, and industrial projects. Sophia Hayden was the first woman to graduate in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in 1900. Hayden designed the Woman’s Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. Julia Morgan was the first woman to graduate from the engineering program at the University of California, Berkeley (1894); to enroll in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1898); and to become a registered architect in California (1904). Her career spanned 47 years and approximately 700 buildings, including Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California.


In 1932 Paul Revere Williams, FAIA, of Los Angeles broke the racial barrier to become the first African-American member of the AIA and in 1957 the first African-American elected to the AIA College of Fellows. In his early career, Williams perfected a technique of rendering drawings “upside-down” so that his clients, some of whom may have been uncomfortable sitting next to him, could see his designs “right-side-up” from across the table. Throughout his 60-year career, Williams designed 3,000 projects, including schools, hospitals, churches, office buildings, and U.S. Navy bases. He became known as the “architect to the stars,” designing homes for such luminaries as Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Frank Sinatra, Betty Grable, and Cary Grant. In 1958 Life magazine named him one of “20 of America’s most distinguished Negroes.” Ironically, racial discrimination prohibited him from entering some of his own projects, including the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

In 1963 a controversial court order requiring racial integration allowed Harvey Gantt, FAIA, to gain admission to Clemson University. In 1965 he became the first African-American to graduate from that university. Since then, he has led a distinguished career as both architect and politician. Starting in 1984, Gantt served two terms as the first African-American mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Norma Merrick Sklarek, FAIA, became the first African-American woman member of the AIA in 1966 and the first elected to its College of Fellows in 1980. She faced significant discrimination when she started her career. Although she had earned an architecture degree from Columbia University in 1950, she received no job offers after applying to more than a dozen offices in New York City. She subsequently worked at well-known Los Angeles architecture firms, however, and her built works include the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and Passenger Terminal One at the Los Angeles International Airport.

In 1996 Raj Barr-Kumar, FAIA, became the first AIA president of color. In 2001 Gordon H. Chong, FAIA, became the first Asian American to assume that role. In 2002 Bradford Grant became the first African-American to serve as president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. And in 2008 Marshall Purnell, FAIA, became the first African-American to lead the AIA as president.

(From top left to right) Courtesy MIT Museum
Gordon Chong, FAIA
AIA Archives
Susan A. Maxman, FAIA
AIA Archives
Marshall E. Purnell, FAIA
Raj Barr-Kumar, FAIA
Zaha Hadid
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