

20 on 20/20 Vision

Perspectives on Diversity and Design

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Reflections on *Designing for Diversity*

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Although my book, *Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession* (University of Illinois Press, 2001) was recently published, like every author, I can now reflect upon it in retrospect. With the added perspective of time, how do I view my research, the book and the issues it raises?

My research for *Designing for Diversity* began in the early 1990's and ended in 2000. Probably the most significant change since then has been that our national economy has taken a sharp downturn, due in large part to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. One consequence of this slowdown is that young architectural interns now have fewer choices for employment. In the late 1990's, most of our architectural graduates—even those with only a Bachelor's degree—had a steady stream of job offers. Now they are lucky to find work. Those who might not have done so otherwise choose to return to graduate school.

How does this situation impact underrepresented architects, such as African-Americans, Latino/a-Americans, Asian-Americans, women, gays and lesbians? With fewer choices, they are less able to escape from what may be frustrating working conditions with limited opportunities for professional growth. Many are trapped and will remain so. My research documents that the ability to flee unfair work settings is often a gateway to future professional success.

Two books published since my own have influenced my thinking as well. One addresses diversity from the perspective of the legal profession, and the other from that of architecture. My personal experiences since completing the book have also underscored the importance of designing for diversity. I discuss each below.

Sex and Power

Susan Estrich's *Sex and Power* (Riverhead Books, 2001) attempts to explain why women have difficulty breaking through the glass ceiling in business, politics, and other fields and suggests how women can change the rules and wield the power they have to get ahead. Recently Estrich spoke about her book during a visit to the College of Law on my campus. Her research prompted me to draw some connections to our architectural profession. Estrich cites statistics about the dearth of women who run today's Fortune 500 companies, are in the top five positions, or are members of their boards of directors or their inside directors. Even though women now represent 50% of law

school classes in the U.S., partnership for women in American law firms is decreasing. She noted that, at the time of her talk, no women chaired any of the 13 committees in the U.S. Senate, nor have they broken into the top ranks of another well-known profession: terrorism.

Estrich cites four reasons why the status of women in America today is not what it should be. The first is discrimination—but no longer the old-fashioned, blatant kind. This new-fashioned discrimination is much more subtle, and often it is done unconsciously. She cited an example from her experience about the allocation of computer equipment at her workplace. Her story rang true to me. As recently as fall 2000, I was still using my 1992 Macintosh LC III computer at my office. My computer, like the one that Estrich described, was the school's "dinosaur," an entertaining conversation piece for students visiting me during office hours. To make matters worse, for months a colleague with whom I was team-teaching and I were requiring our students to present their work on the Web. Yet my computer was so out of date that I couldn't even access my students' projects, much less print anything off the Web. Instead, I was forced to visit my male colleague's office and review them on his machine, or to wait in a long line at our student computer lab and view them there. Both Ms. Estrich and I have been full professors for years. One would assume that our personal computing equipment would have measured up to those of our colleagues. Clearly they did not.

This raises some perplexing questions for architects. At your work place, who has the best, the brightest, the fastest computer? And who has the dinosaur? And why? What are the consequences of having an old computer? To what extent does it impede one's ability to work effectively? As Estrich points out, we need to look at who is making the rules and how these rules affect underrepresented groups.

According to Estrich, the second reason why women still face so many problems in the workplace is children. In the legal profession, ages 25-37 are the critical period for making law partner. Yet those are also the years during which most women bear children. While men are assisting more so than they have done in the past, Estrich argued, parenting is still far from a gender-neutral exercise, and women are typically doing much more of it than men. She found tremendous equality at the bottom of the professional ladder among first year associates, but with motherhood the situation changes. Women lose out. In our architectural profession as well, ages 25-37 encompass the transition from architectural internship to registration to advancement in a firm. And when women architects choose to take time off to care for young children, it is often very difficult for them to get back on track when they return. The situation is even worse when economic times are tough, as they are today.

A third reason why women still fare poorly is what Estrich referred to as “the comfort factor.” While she argues that sexual harassment laws have marked significant progress for women in the workplace, the irony is that now many middle-aged men are more afraid of being sued for sexual harassment than women are afraid of being sexually harassed. As a result, men are often even more uncomfortable than they were before with women in social settings outside of work, where bonds are formed and informal mentoring can occur.

Thus another set of questions can be raised: When was the last time an architecture colleague of the opposite gender, or of a different race, asked you to join him or her for lunch? How many of your co-workers have done so? How much time do you spend with each other out of the office, and in what kinds of settings?

The fourth reason for women’s current status in the workplace is what Estrich refers to as women’s own ambition and willingness to help each other, a phenomenon she calls “traitorism.” She cites that too many tenured women faculty turn their back on their younger colleagues, and that women in positions of power—with the ability to influence who gets what, when, where, and how—often fail to help those in the lower and middle ranks.

This prompts a final set of questions: How many of today’s leading women architects make a conscious effort to know their younger counterparts? How many well-known women architects participate in professional women-in-architecture (WIA) organizations, or attend WIA special events? How many tenured women architecture professors do the same with their junior colleagues? What are the consequences for those who do, and those who do not? The same questions can be asked for those who are under-represented by their race or sexual orientation.

These are just a few reflections on why I believe the issues raised in *Designing for Diversity* are even more important today. Our national economy has worsened, and underrepresented architects are often the untold victims of it. Our society continues to operate under unconscious rules that disadvantage women and other underrepresented groups. No matter what technology has in store for us in the future, it is still more likely than not that one thing will not change: women will continue to be the only ones to bear children. The architectural profession must adapt to that fact. Women and men, those of all races and sexual orientations must be able to feel comfortable with—and not fear—each other in the workplace. All of us under-represented in the architectural workplace, be it in school or in practice, must help each other.

Building a World Fit for People

In my book, I noted that while diversity must also encompass those with special physical challenges, it was outside the scope of my investigation on gender and race in architecture. And I acknowledged that much important work on designers with disabilities needed to be done. In this regard, *Building a World Fit for People: Designers With Disabilities at Work*, by Elaine Ostroff, Mark Limont, and Daniel G. Hunter (Adaptive Environments Center, 2002) has provided an important contribution to the diversity literature.

Building a World Fit for People opens a window to a world seldom seen, a world where obstacles are continually confronted. That world has improved, but not enough. Yesterday: A hearing-impaired architecture student had to threaten a law suit so that he could understand his professors' comments in design juries. An architecture student who used a wheelchair was unable to reach the desks provided at his university's design studios. Today: A hearing-impaired architect remains exasperated with the American Institute of Architect's refusal to fund an interpreter for him at its national meetings. A landscape architect is unable to enter the grand indoor garden display at the convention of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Just as some of the first African-American architects were ironically denied access into the buildings they had designed, so too are many designers with disabilities still denied full participation in their professions.

Yet behind every struggle is a success, and another world seldom seen. An architecture professor who uses a wheelchair plans field trips where students witness the environmental barriers he encounters on a daily basis. A designer-turned-disability activist persuades her town to construct accessible aisles adjacent to parking spaces. An architect who wears leg braces and uses a walking stick designs hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. Whether they be practitioners, educators, or government officials, the designers profiled in this book have all left their marks on the products, spaces, and places where they live.

Personal Experience

Although I have been a longtime proponent of universal design throughout my career as an architectural educator, it was my late husband's seven-year bout with cancer that opened my own eyes to the special environmental needs of persons with disabilities. Barry passed away in 2001 at age 46, a casualty of leiomyosarcoma, cancer of the stomach muscle lining that spread throughout his body. He died just months before my book was published. With the exception of his Greek fisherman's cap that concealed

surgical scars and radiation treatments from a head tumor, Barry's disability was, for the most part, invisible. Throughout most of his illness he was an avid walker, often covering five or more miles a day. And except for medical emergencies, he rarely needed a wheelchair.

Yet for over two years, due to chronic gastrointestinal bleeding from his tumors, Barry required a steady stream of blood transfusions—over 400 in all—and daily blood tests at the cancer clinic. When his hemoglobin level was low, having to walk a short distance or up a few steps would take his breath away. It was then that I was especially grateful for elevators, ramps, and that invaluable disabled parking permit. I recognized how fortunate we were to live in a country where these amenities were mandated by law. Yet it was also then that I realized that while at the surface, many public spaces may *appear* to accommodate those in wheelchairs, they actually do not. Nor do they work well for those with *invisible disabilities* like cancer. We often had great difficulty finding places for Barry to sit, rest, and simply catch his breath.

During the last week of his life, as his body was running out of steam, Barry was in a wheelchair. His arm muscles were much too weak to push it himself. It was only when I had to push his wheelchair over poorly maintained curb cuts that I learned to turn the chair backwards in order to avoid sending him crashing onto the street. It was only when I took him to the door of a men's restroom and realized that neither he nor I could go no further that it dawned on me that something in our built environment is still amiss. Perhaps we all need experiences like these to wake us up to the fact that accessibility is a right, not a privilege, that we all deserve.

As invisible illnesses like cancer, AIDS, and Alzheimer's disease become more widespread, design professions must actively seek out more designers with disabilities who experience the need for accessible environments every day.

2020 Vision

In my book, I bemoaned the fact that the American Institute of Architects national diversity conferences had experienced a hiatus in recent years. For many of us who had long been at the margins of the profession, the diversity conferences of the mid-1990s were among the most energizing events of our careers. I also discussed specific ways to reform our architectural profession so that its gates are truly open to all. Although they are by no means the be all and end all, diversity conferences—along with other concerted efforts across the spectrum of architectural education and practice—are an important vehicle towards that end.

Thus *2020 Vision: A Diversity Conference for Design Professionals* is a welcome sign of change. Might it signal a new era for diversity in architecture in the 21st century? Or is it a temporary blip on the radar screen? Let us hope that it is a permanent commitment on the part of the AIA to provide an arena where our voices can be heard. Despite our differences, we who are the "photographic negatives" of the architectural profession need to band together both to honor our past—and preserve our future.