



2004

# Architectural Registration and it's Diversity Vortex.

Shannon Chance

Dublin Institute of Technology, shannon.chance@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/engscheleart2>

 Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

CHANCE, S. M. (2004). Architectural registration and its diversity vortex. *Crit: Journal of the American Institute of Architecture Students*, 58, 36-40. Originally published online in 2004 as an entry in Archvoices competition.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact [yvonne.desmond@dit.ie](mailto:yvonne.desmond@dit.ie), [arrow.admin@dit.ie](mailto:arrow.admin@dit.ie), [brian.widdis@dit.ie](mailto:brian.widdis@dit.ie).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)





Shannon Chance

### **Architectural Registration and its Diversity Vortex**

Architects: take a serious look at your demographics. While other professions are making strides to represent the diversity of America's population, yours lags markedly behind. Most U.S. architecture schools began admitting women and minorities between 1965 and 1972, but many who completed architecture degrees in the interim haven't yet received professional licensure. The ranks of licensed architects remain mainly white and mainly male, which denies society fair representation in shaping the built environment. Consider that African-American females comprise roughly 7% of the U.S. population but less than 0.2% of licensed architects; they've achieved proportionally higher success in law, medicine, and engineering. The architecture profession has done little to attract, foster, or retain diverse talent - a problem that both mirrors and exacerbates the profession's detachment from general society. To mend gaping disparities, the profession must take serious stock of its practices. It must acknowledge and eliminate numerous invisible barriers that deter talented "minority" designers from crossing into the Promised Land of Architectural Registration.

While the architecture profession has successfully attracted female students, it has failed to entice students who are ethnically and racially diverse. According to Melvin Mitchell, president of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), many minority groups do not understand nor value the architecture profession. This results from their lack of exposure to meaningful architecture as well as the profession's seeming indifference regarding critical social issues of housing and urban revitalization. Many talented minority students who do consider architectural careers ultimately detour to other professions that seem more socially relevant, more financially stable, and which highlight successful role models. The lack of color within architecture schools further deters many talented individuals from entering, and others from staying. In fact, many offices and schools proudly perpetuate a closed, controlled, and internalized culture, where difference really stands out and is openly shunned through both word and deed. In rebuking those who join organizations outside the architecture halls, professors and students disproportionately impose judgment against minority individuals. Recalling your own architectural education, evaluate the level of skepticism and hostility directed toward students who dared join a social fraternity. Then realize that denying students access to social support groups that can help them manage being different promotes their isolation and results in many minority students avoiding, or choosing to leave, architectural education. For those who do graduate with professional degrees, the odds of achieving architectural registration prove equally grim.

Look around your offices and witness a generation of lost architects, graduates of the 1980s and '90s disenfranchised by confusing and inconsistent internship requirements. This group of perpetual interns typical includes a fraction of the men in your office, but most of the

women and minority individuals. You'll seldom hear this lost generation identify themselves as "interns" because doing so would unnecessarily expose their vulnerabilities. Many of these designers have managed projects for so long and are so often utilized and passed off as architects that they have assumed all the roles, responsibilities, and skills of full architects despite lacking formal legal status. To most Americans, these half-status designers look just like Architects. The public ambiguity is often cultivated by architecture firms, which benefit from the generation's experienced service and their permanent junior status. Much of the lost generation has abandoned hope of completing the Intern Development Program (IDP) or obtaining registration. Most are far too experienced to associate themselves with a system designed for "twenty-somethings" just finishing school. At this point in life, IDP seems an insurmountable headache... equivalent to filing a decade of tax forms in arrears.

Unclear and shifting internship requirements have deterred countless architecture graduates. My own case illustrates how Virginia's promise to phase in IDP crumbled during the effort to standardize internship. I first applied to sit for the Architecture Registration Exam in 1999 under Virginia's "grandfather clause." I had carefully assessed my board's literature regarding percentages of credit that would be assigned for standard and non-standard professional activities (such as foreign work experience, post-professional master's degree, and architectural teaching experience). I met the listed requirements; however, Virginia's board took four months to review my application and return a letter requiring validation of my non-standard experience through IDP. I stalled in my pursuit of registration when I discovered vague IDP policies. Fortunately, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) eventually posted written clarification regarding the IDP policies for foreign employment on its website. The confirmed policies actually allowed me more credit for my experience than the state's written policy would have. But while I had continually checked for updates, many of my colleagues in similar situations understandably gave up.

Those of us who do tackle IDP find that the procedures, ironically, penalize the most honest and precise interns, and that the still-confusing system requires skilled mentorship for successful completion. Considering the huge amount of interpretation involved in classifying experience hours, interns who undertake the process most earnestly will have the hardest time completing all training categories. Ask yourself: Does an afternoon of travel and on-site construction meetings constitute four full hours of experience? (Some interns will round it all into the experience category, while others will omit travel time.) Typical site meetings cover all sorts of issues, but should this experience be recorded as construction administration, project management, or systems coordination? (Some interns will conscientiously divide this precious time, while others will place the entire block in whichever category they most lack hours.) Due to division of labor within firms and lack of access to high-stakes activities such as contract negotiations and Owner-Architect-Contractor meetings, many interns require much longer than three years to accrue hours in all categories. Quality mentorship can help interns manage the process. Minority interns, in particular, need mentors who can help them navigate gender and race issues that inevitably arise on construction sites and in offices. While the current lack of diversity among available mentors poses a problem, a concerted effort to register more diverse architects would simultaneously cultivate diverse role models for this mentorship system.

Finding suitable mentors isn't always easy, and points to another challenge built into our registration system: character references required by states such as Virginia and Maryland can perpetuate bias. Virginia will

only allow applicants permission to sit for the Architecture Registration Exam after the board receives professional degree transcripts, NCARB Council Records verifying IDP completion, *and* sealed letters submitted by three licensed architects that validate the intern's "integrity." All three licensed architects must have known the applicant at least one year, and cannot be persons who verified the applicant's work experience. This requirement impedes many interns, including those who work for small firms or in remote locations. The Maryland Board of Architects website lists necessary "Work Experience Documentation," explaining, "in order for the applicant to establish to the satisfaction of the Board that the applicant is a person of good moral character the applicant shall submit with this application, three (3) LETTERS OF REFERENCE." Until there is a decent level of diversity among registered architects from whom interns can request character validation, such practices will continue to disproportionately favor the white male majority and perpetuate "good 'ole boy" networks.

Female and minority interns face a variety of social stressors within practice, ranging from tacit exclusion to the overt fraternity-house atmosphere still evident in some offices. Social challenges often overwhelm interns who also endure internship's typically low financial compensation, inadequate advising and supervision, constant and overlapping deadlines, super-sized work weeks, and monotonous tasks sporadically punctuated by intense anxiety. Interns fall away as they discover an inequitable ratio of effort to reward in the architecture profession... the celebrated self-fulfillment promised in architecture school never materializes for many of them. Artful moments prove few and far between during the internship years, and options remain limited for interns who desire to work reduced hours to pursue alternate forms of self-fulfillment. Many young women leave practice during internship to bear children, and many stay away permanently when they find sustained fulfillment in raising children or in alternate careers. While most firms theoretically offer employees the opportunity to work reduced schedules to pursue other fulfilling endeavors such as child rearing, these part-time arrangements frequently disintegrate in architectural practice. Part-time employment is simply not as efficient as full-time work. The profession relies on high productivity of new interns, and individuals with obligations outside the office cannot be as productive as those whose lives focus around internship. Naturally, rewards and opportunities go to those who dedicate the highest percentage of their overall energies to the firm. IDP training also proves difficult, if not impossible, to complete when working on part-time or contractual basis. NCARB stipulates that training units may be earned in minimum blocks of ten consecutive workweeks of at least twenty hours each, and under the direct supervision of a licensed architect. The resulting choices disproportionately affect women who statistically provide more childrearing and who must bear at younger age than their male counterparts.

We have lost so very many of our diverse recruits already, but those of us who remain within the field must not abandon hope of finding fulfillment and of inspiring change through architecture. This litany, my eulogy to the lost architects, culminates with optimism. I still have a dream, that one day our profession will develop greater social relevance, and will cultivate diverse individuals with diverse talents who will create extraordinary and diverse places. How much richer our service to society would be if the hushed voices of our lost architects found opportunity to sing! I dream that one day this profession will face and conquer its latent patterns of discrimination and of perpetual internship, that it will encourage diverse individuals to realize their dreams and share their talents as full-fledged professionals.

Architects: you must awaken to the shortcomings within your offices and your regulatory agencies. You must reorganize the profession to foster diverse talent. You must eliminate harsh and inequitable practices that push talented individuals out of the profession, or to its margins. You must find a way to attract more diverse participation so that the profession may offer the full range of skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to successfully address the needs and aspirations of a diverse contemporary society.

Meanwhile, interns like myself must arise and prepare to speak with clarity. We must step forward to claim leadership of this fledgling profession. We must achieve licensure so that we can communicate as equals within the profession. And, we must prepare ourselves to speak confidently and articulately to a wide audience, on behalf of our chosen profession.

I seek registration as a means to diversify the architecture profession. I dedicate my life to social equity and cultural conservation through architecture. Achieving registration will allow me a legitimate voice in speaking both *to* and *from* the profession regarding these issues. My daily work as an architecture professor and city commissioner involves design theory more than the technical knowledge tested by the ARE, but completing the test will ultimately enable me to speak with greater authority. I ply my trade through crafted words rather than through building envelopes or structural systems. I ultimately intend to use words, and not necessarily the knowledge tested by the ARE, to promote a more relevant, equitable, and sustainable way of building.

I've existed in purgatory between school and licensure since 1993 - but I will overcome. After completing IDP and submitting recommendations, I have finally earned the right to sit for the Architecture Registration Exam in my home state. I will begin testing this month, aiming to become a full constituent among the ranks of Registered Architects after sixteen years of architectural preparation.

One day soon, my voice will ring out from legitimate ranks of the profession, calling again for diversity and social justice. As a new voice in the profession, I will resound my call for rejuvenating our cities ...for building with cultural and environmental sensitivity ...for preserving our built heritage ...for providing equitable housing. I will plead for architecture that nurtures all of society's diverse citizens. "We cannot walk alone," Martin Luther King, Jr., chanted in a speech that changed a nation. "And as we walk, we must take the pledge that we shall march ahead." I will march ahead with him, and I will speak for those interns and citizens who cannot yet speak for themselves.

REFERENCES  
(not applicable)