NO LONGER

Calling Out the System for Design Activism

IMPACT
DESIGN
COLLABORATIVE

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WELCOME

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ACRONYMS

AEC: Architecture, Engineering, Construction
NAAB: National Architectural Accreditation Board
NOMA: National Organization of Minority Architects
BLM: Black Lives Matter

WHO IS **IDC**

Impact Design Collaborative is a 501(c)3 nonprofit existing at the intersection of practice and research. We aim to reimagine the responsibility of designers and the built environment for everyone. Impact Design Collaborative initiates change, discovers interventions, and connects a new generation of creators.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the courage and power of the local organizers who have started marching in response to George Floyd's murder. Changing a system which is built on oppression and supremacy is extremley daunting and it is the leaders of the Black Lives Matter Movement who have inspired a new generation of activists and changers.

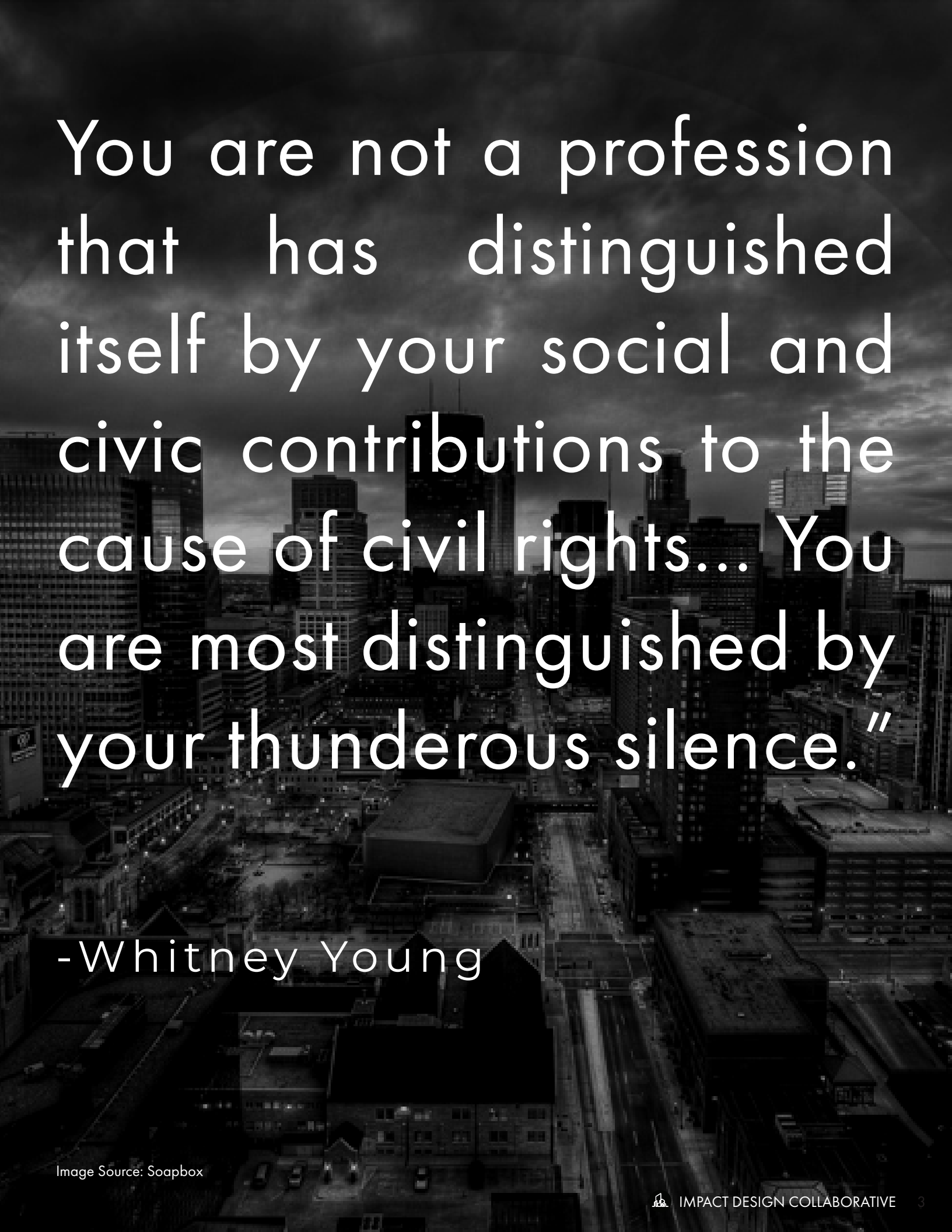

Image Source: Soapbox

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INTRODUCTION

"You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights . . . You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence" [1]. When the AIA brought Whitney Young, a renowned African-American architect, to the 1968 American Insitute of Architects' National Convention, they did not expect to be called out in such a way. Young explained his frustration with the architectural profession and its apathy for the consequences of its work. He looked out over a white audience and denounced them for not recognizing the impacts of their work on the black community.

Now 52 years later, Young's words could not resonate more with the current climate of architecture, race, and activism. George Floyd's murder demanded every profession reevaluate the extent to which their discipline enabled systemic racism and oppression. As designers, we shape the space where oppression and progress happen.

However, the design profession has historically been more than comfortable with removing its responsibility for molding a more sustainable and just society. Many of the Impact Design Collaborative's Collaborators noticed while marching in the peaceful protests that designers were stepping as citizens and not designers. This led all of IDC to ask themselves the same question: where are all the designers and why aren't they stepping up to promote change? We wanted to shed some light on the history that has led to such an apathetic system, how the built environment interacts with social movements, and how design is misused to proliferate discrimination. A dramatic shift in the practices, composition, and authority of architecture, engineering, and construction professions must occur to power the design revolution for a more equitable future.

A Dictator's Guide to Design

Acts of civil protest have long been connected to the urban fabric in which they occur. From grassroot organizers to dictators, public agents have leveraged the formation and enaction of the built environment. One of the most famous examples of manipulating city landscapes to stop future protests was done by Napoleon III who commissioned Georges-Eugène Haussmann, in France post-revolution, to completely redesign Paris' city landscape into the city we know now [2]. One key thing that Haussmann did was connect all large boulevards in order to make it easier to stop revolts and future protests since revolts would gain the government's attention by completely blocking smaller roads and stopping traffic flow. While these historic acts of suppression seem a thing of the past, oppressive design still pervades in the modern era. An article published by The Atlantic in 2014 delved into more modern examples throughout the world of how governments have found ways to minimize or eradicate protests [3].

Image Source: 92 News HD

Image Source: Illuminations Media

The designs of Georges-Eugene Haussman still impact the protests which occur in the streets of Paris today. It shows the importance of designers knowing the historical intent of the built environment.

One example the article discusses is Burma. The Burmese Government moved their capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw, which is a very isolated place where the population is likely significantly lower than the one million they claim. Like France, they have large, broad boulevards. But they also have a lack of central public spaces for residents, such as a public square, which increases the difficulty of using spaces to gather. It is stated that "a moat even surrounds the presidential palace" which furthers the buffer between public and the government.

Naypyidaw follows a similar technique to that of Haussmann. The wide streets make it difficult for congregation of coordinated crowds, allowing police forces to quickly dissipate civil disobedience.

Another significant example takes place in Pyongyang, North Korea. Here, "Only the most loyal North Koreans are allowed to reside in the city's many identical apartment blocks." This creates a buffer to the center of the city and makes it easier to spot protests in order to quash them. Like in the French Revolution, these boulevards have similar qualities of those designed by Haussman and include enormous public squares that lack a public.

The apartment blocks of Pyongchang diffuse public space across the city, minimizing the capacity for public gatherings.

Designing Protests

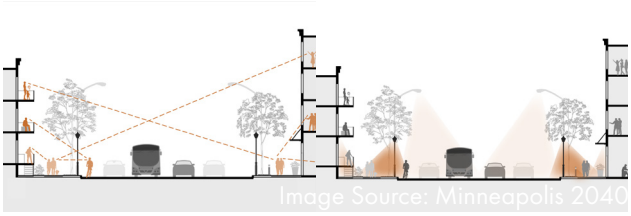
The news of George Floyd's murder sparked protests across 1,700 cities in all 50 states [4]. This was a remarkable act which showcased the solidarity of the American people in demanding meaningful change. The act of protesting, across different types of urban fabrics, is strongly connected to the built environment as these are the platforms upon which the masses demand to be heard. The first act of a protest is often to enter into the streets and to recapture spaces not intended for human occupation [5]. This is more than simply an act of rebellion to establish public boundaries: it is an act of creativity. In Tali Hatuka's book, The Design of Protest: Choreographing Political Demonstrations in Public Space, she states "There is no winning spatial choreography in the making of change" [6].The unpredictability of protests is often what determines their success, and in turn, makes governments fear them. By taking over a space made for cars and transportation, the people calling for change are changing the space from a transient in-between space to a place of interest. By occupying the streets, protests grab the attention of vehicle drivers who had no plan to join in the protest, and absorb them into the movement. If protests happened in suburban, made-for-humans spaces, they would not gain the same amount of attention. It is this crucial movement of humans from a peripheral space to a civic space that makes protests so powerful.

We are not recommending a new framework for urban design to consider civil movements, we believe that designers need to be mindful and aware of the connection between civic action and the built environment. Cities of all demographics, topography, and built form have demonstrated that civic engagement and formation will occur regardless of its surrounding built environment. The responsibility for understanding and forming the connection between space and protest falls onto designers, and now more than ever, is it time for designers to experience this in the cities they have formed.

Protests across the country led to new forms of interaction with the urban fabric. In Detroit, the first act of protest was entering the streets.

Protesting Design

One of the more nuanced forms of design which has come to light during the movement is environmental design for crime prevention (EDCP). This field of study researches the connection between environmental design and crime with the intention of developing future spaces to reduce crime. As you can imagine, the ethical implications of who has the power to inform EDCP is inseparable from a majority and minority system. Many of the designs for EDCP originate from the notion of passive surveillance: promoting civilian site lines to public spaces to reduce crimes. However, EDCP does not consider the trends for who is surveilling and who is being surveilled. The idea of white surveillance shows up in several cases, from Treyvan Martin to Ahmaud Arbery. While the design of this surveillance can be claimed as unintended, there exists several other examples of weaponizing environmental design to target vulnerable populations [7]. Whether the use of EDCP is moral or not, city officials cannot ignore its strong connection to systems of supremacy. Minneapolis, the city in which George Floyd was murdered, funded an Environmental Crime Prevention Plan to meet its 2040 City Goals. [8] Their policy sets forth several principles to attempt to reduce crime through EDCP. But not once does it reference race or how to reduce systems of power through EDCP.



These images come from the Minneapolis 2040 Public Safety Through Environmental Design. They reference the impact of designs like lighting and site lines to reduce crime, but never acknowledge the power dynamic connected to it. Who is watching who and how does this reinforce supremacy systems?

While Minneapolis' policy fails to recognize its racial underpinnings, many other cities have taken more aggressive measures. Today, public spaces have been reformed into surveilled spaces.. Facial recognition technology is now being used to categorize and identify protesters. Police departments have been adamant in stating that these technologies are solely used to locate persons of extreme interest, but the technology is beginning to show obvious biases and inaccuracies. One study found that a real world facial recognition system had an 81% recognition error [9]. It became even more abhorrent when a Google software engineer pointed out that Google Photos were classifying black people as gorillas [10].

These types of technological abuses may seem outside the scope of designers; however, human centered design thinking could drastically improve the policy framework for regulating facial technology. As of today, only 4 cities have developed a policy for facial recognition, which means nearly all public spaces in the US are being subjected to a nascent and errorful technology that has immense implications for civic engagement [11].

In response to unregulated facial recognition technology, protestors across Washington D.C. have responded. They documented the faces of over 13,000 people to show the ease and danger of the technology in compiling information.

The use of surveillance has a flip side that can make spaces feel more secure. Knowing that digital eyes monitor a public space can offer a sense of safety for all. However, concerning examples exist across the US as to how positive surveillance is used and distributed. In St. Louis, a study found that the distribution of public surveillance cameras were directly connected to the racial demographics of neighborhoods. The Central West End, a historically white and wealthy St. Louis neighborhood, had twice the amount of publicly owned cameras compared to the Fourth Ward, a historically African American neighborhood. The Public Safety Director, Jimmie Edwards, reported that "there are no cameras where 80 percent of the crimes have occurred" [12]. St. Louis shows that even when public surveillance is seen as a public good, it still falters through obvious racial disparity.

Local designers and municipal officials need to take ownership for the means through which public spaces are created and surveilled. The efficacy and faith in surveillance can only be successful if its operation stems from public oversight. This begins with municipalities developing transparent and comprehensive policies that regulate the use and application of facial recognition and public surveillance technologies, taking into account the racial shortcomings of current technology. In addition, citizens need to demand a dramatic overhaul for the funding and implementation of policing and crime prevention methods. The shift in public policing infrastructure and design needs to begin at all levels of government. Designers need to step into the forefront of empowering the change.

Demanding a New Profession

Institutions set the tone for shared principles and expectations for professions. The leading organization for design education is the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). NAAB outlines the educational and organizational requirements for design schools in order to train future design professionals. Currently, NAAB has requirements for university accreditation to include policies on racial diversity and inclusion, but these requirements are half-hearted and fail to achieve true diversity in the architecture profession. In order to be accredited, an architecture program must "describe its plan for maintaining or increasing the diversity" [13]. The fact that a program needs only to "maintain" its level of diversity shows the NAAB's apathy towards representing and educating architects of color. Not only that, but there is little else found in the accreditation requirements which state explicit goals to promote racial equity. By failing to elaborate on progress that must be made, accredited programs can hold status quo for pursuing a more equitable future. We urge NAAB to critically reconsider whether their current policy on diversity promotes change or maintains a system of apathy in design education. A new wave of design students are showing that designers can lead the movement on demanding racial equity. NAAB needs to foster an environment for them to do so.

The Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) professions as a whole fail to empower people of color, especially black individuals, in their line of work. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics documented that African Americans comprise 6.4% of the construction field, and only 6.1% of architecture and engineering fields [14]. A majority of African Americans are being left out of the building process, and by consequence are unable to provide input on what gets built. By preventing African American individuals from entering the architecture, engineering and construction spaces, the United States perpetuates a racist building process with a single-minded perspective on architecture. Empowering the built environment begins by empowering designers of color. Universities, design professionals, and developers need to acknowledge that a culture which has fostered underrepresented groups's participation in AEC does not exist but can be changed. The change needs to begin at all dimensions of the AEC profession. Funding for programs which promote the advancement of underrepresented designers need to be supported by universities, NAAB, and local communities. AEC firms must create a culture which supports leadership and board positions to break the cycle of obstacles of professional growth for designers. Finally, AEC professions must condemn projects which profit off of promoting racial disparity in the built environment.

National Architectural Accreditation Board Social Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Req.

The program must demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusion among current and prospective faculty, staff, and students. The program must:

5.5.1 Describe how this commitment is reflected in the distribution of its human, physical, and financial resources.

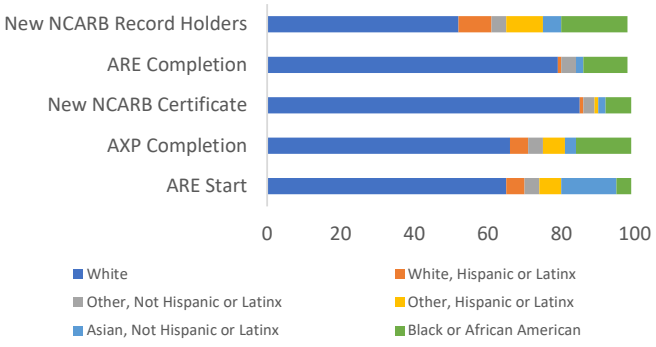
5.5.2 Describe its plan for maintaining or increasing the diversity of its faculty and staff since the last accreditation cycle, how it has implemented the plan, and what it intends to do during the next accreditation cycle. Also, compare the program's faculty and staff demographics with that of the program's students and other benchmarks the program deems relevant.

5.5.3 Describe its plan for maintaining or increasing the diversity of its students since the last accreditation cycle, how it has implemented the plan, and what it intends to do during the next accreditation cycle. Also, compare the program's student demographics with that of the institution and other benchmarks the program deems relevant.

5.5.4 Document what institutional, college, or program policies are in place to further Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action (EEO/AA), as well as any other social equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives at the program, college, or institutional level.

5.5.5 Describe the resources and procedures in place to provide adaptive environments and effective strategies to support faculty, staff, and students with different physical and/or mental abilities.

Race and Ethnicity Statistics from the National Council of Architectural Registration Board (2019)



The National Council of Architectural Registration Board regulates and permits architectural licenses. NCARB reports approximately 2% of registered architects are black or African-American. Is this a diversity level we would want to maintain?

CONCLUSION

At Impact Design Collaborative we do not hesitate to call out the systemic flaws and misdoings in the current design ecosystem. Design as a profession must be more deliberate in its inclusion of black individuals, who have been ignored for far too long. The built environment has been a tool to disenfranchise minority communities, this is the urgent topic of our upcoming research. It is time the built environment and design profession are reclaimed and repurposed for social change. The next generation of designers and developers refuse to accept apathy towards racial equity. The upcoming design revolution demands a more sustainable and equitable future and nothing will stop the movement's pursuit.

TAKE ACTION

Educate

Many designers of color laid the foundation for progressing a more equitable profession and built environment. Learning more about designers who have historically been overlooked because of their race places our profession and built environment into context. Their stories need to be told and remembered as heroes of design. This list is not exhaustive and we highly recommend our readers to learn more about the history of race and the design profession.

Julien Abele,
1881-1950

Beverly Loraine Green,
1915-1941

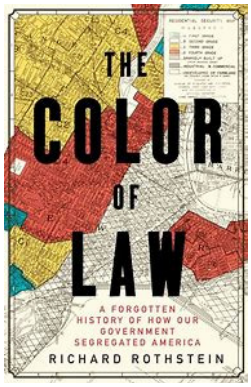
Whitney Young,
1921-1971

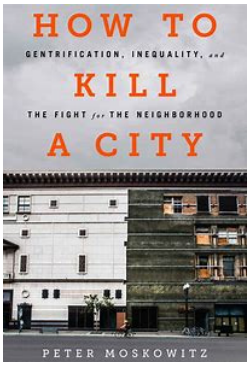
Norma Sklarek,
1926-2012

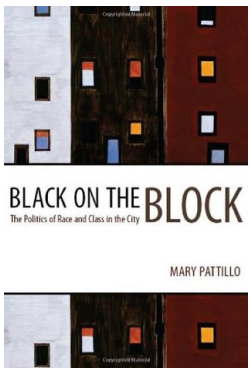
John Chase,
1925-2012

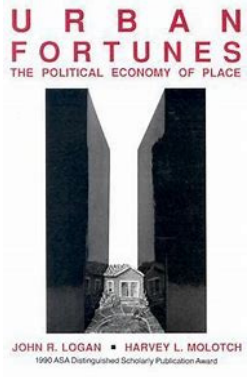
Marshall Purnell,
1950-

Learn more about how systems of power have led to the oppression of minority communities. These articles and books show through a diverse set of approaches the connection between race, oppression, and the built environment.









TAKE ACTION

Initiate

Help IDC shift NAAB's language for diversity requirements for accredited design programs. Tweet @NAABNews calling for constant improvements in diversity with the hashtag #nogainthrumaintain #change55

If you are a design professional in a leadership position, start advancement programs for new black designers. Several organizations have shown the importance and efficacy of these programs removing institutional barriers to professional success.

@NAABNews
Maintaining the current framework for diversity in design does not mean a just and equitable future. Standing in place is not a step forward. **#nogainthrumaintain #change55**

Collaborate

Starting systematic change is no easy task. Working alongside other movements such as Defund the Police and Black Lives Matter promote civic engagement and enable systemic change.

Changing culture requires crossing disciplinary boundaries and building bridges between professions. Organizing community advocacy groups of diverse backgrounds fosters equitable advancement for the built environment.

DEFUND THE POLICE

Defund the Police is a new social movement reconsidering the role and enforcement of policing in society. The movement is prioritizing empathy-based social programs which leverage trained professionals to make positive change. To learn more about Defund the Police and its efforts, visit defundthepolice.org.

TAKE ACTION

Support

Share support and business for design and development firms which are led by professionals of color. Not only do they perform exceptional work, they are leading the change. Again, this is not an exhaustive list of all the incredible designers of color currently working, but we hope it shows the importance of highlighting their accomplishments.

Donate time and resources to the amazing work of the National Organization for Minority Architects (NOMA). They have led the advancement for a creating a more equitable profession for designers of all races.

Several academic and industry professionals have created the modern discussion about meaningful change. Contributing and supporting their work will ensure the dialogue continues across the country.

Bryan Lee,
Colloqate

Liz Ogbu,
Social Designer

Roberta Washington,
Roberta Washington Assc.

Mark Gardner,
Jaklitsch/Gardner Architects

David Adjaye,
Adjaye Assc.

Mabel Wilson,
Studio &

the NATIONAL ORGANIZATION of MINORITY ARCHITECTS

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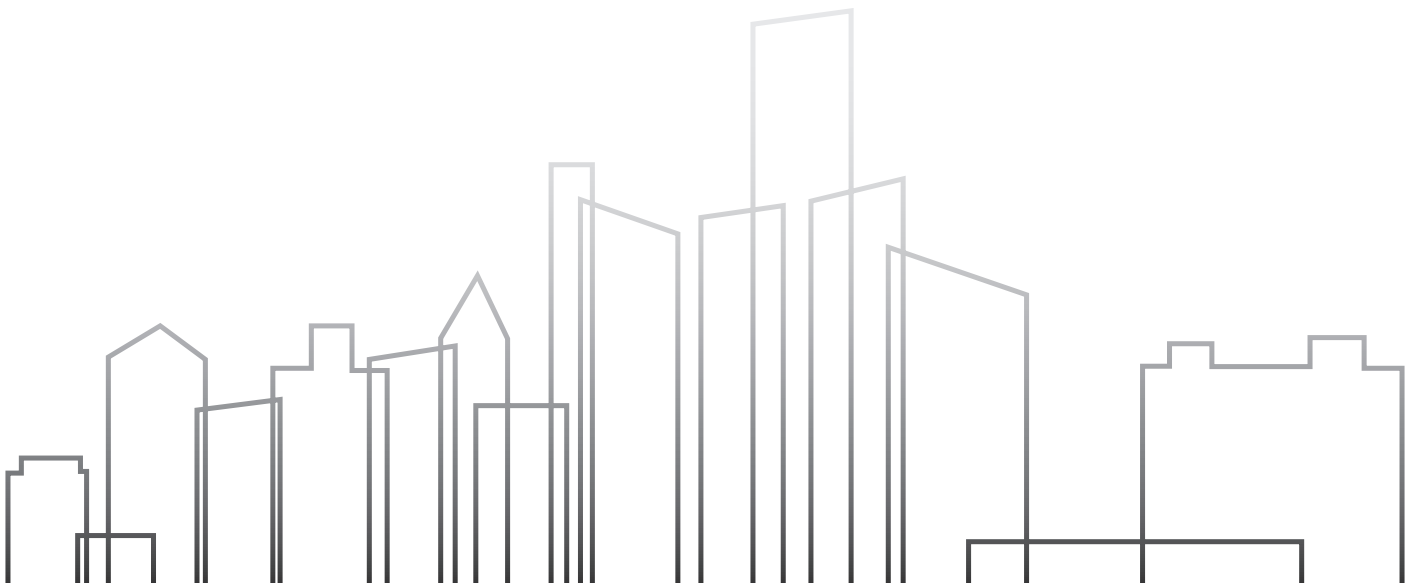
IF YOU ARE A DESIGN PROFESSIONAL, A STUDENT, DEVELOPING A NEW PROJECT, OR PASSIONATE ABOUT DESIGN AS AN INTERVENTION, FEEL FREE TO CONTACT US AT

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