



ASLA DIVERSITY SUMMIT 2013 Report

ASLA HQ, Washington, D.C.

July 12-14, 2013

Introduction + Key Takeaways

Landscape architecture is a minority profession. The U. S. Bureau of Labor currently estimates that it employs just 21,600 people. Landscape architects frequently find themselves outnumbered in professional settings by architects, planners, and engineers.

Additionally, the demographics within the landscape architecture profession don't match the demographics of the country in terms of its racial and ethnic diversity. Census data projections show that the growth rates of both the African-American and Latino populations are increasing at faster rates than those of white Americans, even while the number of African-American and Latino graduates of landscape architecture programs remains not only stagnant, but low and far below the national levels.

This trend poses a major challenge to the profession. To remain relevant and able to serve the country's increasingly diverse communities, landscape architecture needs to become more ethnically and culturally diverse profession.

To develop an understanding of the reasons that landscape architecture is not attracting a more diverse cross section of people into the profession and formulate strategies to begin to address these issues, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) inaugurated a Diversity Summit in Alexandria, Virginia, July 12-14, 2013. It took place currently with the annual ASLA Advocacy and Public Awareness Summits, allowing participants from all three groups to exchange ideas during breaks. The opportunity to participate in the Diversity Summit was announced in LAND and ASLA sought nominees through the CEO Roundtable. Ultimately six Latino and six African-American practitioners, most of whom were in the early stages of their careers, were able to participate in the 1½ day event which was facilitated by Juanita Shearer-Swink, FASLA and supported by ASLA members of staff including Terry Poltrack, Director of PR and Communications, Barbara Drobins, Member and Chapter Services Director, and Heidi Petersen, Student ASLA, ASLA summer intern.

The participants were:

C.L Bohannon, ASLA
Wesley Brown, ASLA
Anita Bueno, ASLA
Jessica Centeno, Assoc. ASLA
Domini Cunningham, Assoc. ASLA
Ricardo Garcia, ASLA
Luis Gonzalez, ASLA
Mike A. Hill, ASLA
Janelle Johnson, ASLA
Tammy Martin, ASLA
Margarita Padilla-Posey, ASLA
José M. Rodriguez, ASLA

Juanita and Terry explained that the goal of the Summit was to provide ASLA with action items and strategies it could use to attract African-American and Latino students into landscape architecture programs and enrich the landscape architecture community while simultaneously raising the profile of the profession. Through the identification of the pathways, hurdles and types of support or aids which they had encountered on their way to discovering the profession, working through a design education, and finally as emerging professional landscape architects, participants would define and prioritize action items and proposed implementation strategies for ASLA to advance.



To start the Summit, participants formed pairs who interviewed and then introduced each other. Each person was then asked to tell his or her personal story – how they heard about landscape architecture, their decision to study landscape architecture, and their experiences as emerging professionals.

A number of participants started in architecture programs, and through their experience, realized they wanted to work at a larger scale or wanted to spend more time involved in the community, which led them to landscape architecture. A few participants came from horticulture backgrounds and discussed the struggle, echoed by every participant in the room, to distinguish their studies and careers from that of a landscaper or gardener.

This misunderstanding of what the profession truly is was a recurring theme and source of great frustration in the stories of the Latino members. A cultural misperception of the profession in the Hispanic community that landscape architects are “just gardeners,” and some of the accompanying negative stereotypes, turned some of the participants away from landscape architecture for a time until they discovered what the profession was. Both African American and Latino participants indicated that some of their parents wanted them to pursue more established and recognized professions.

Another barrier to accessing the profession was the simple lack of knowledge that the profession even existed. One participant was directed toward landscape architecture in a high school aptitude test but the counselor had no idea what landscape architecture was and pushed her in a different direction. The lack of general knowledge in the greater world that there is an actual profession called “landscape architecture” came up frequently. Through discussions it became clear that the experiences of Latinos and African Americans aspiring to become landscape architects had many things in common.

After telling their stories, the participants were asked to write on separate sheets of paper three key words that characterized the initiation of their path to landscape architecture; then three things that aided them and three things that were hurdles.

Through this exercise, common themes began to emerge. A love of the outdoors, nature, and a concern for the environment were commonly listed. The desire to be able to give back to the community in some meaningful way was expressed. For some it took someone introducing them to landscape architecture – either other design professionals or a college professor once they were already in college. For others there was self-discovery, either realizing that a special place was actually designed by a landscape architect or an ah-ha moment from a documentary (*The Social Life of Small Urban Places*) or a book (*The California Landscape Garden*) or asking a work colleague what that homework was they were working on.

The lack of awareness of the profession was listed as a major hurdle – the general sentiment “if only I’d known about it sooner” was stated by a number of participants.

Not surprisingly, another commonly listed hurdle was a financial one. Of note is the fact that this doesn’t just refer to the cost of a landscape architecture degree, but also the length of time it takes to complete the degree, the amount of work involved (resulting in less time for the family and employment essential for staying in school) and the cost of materials while pursuing one.

A sense of isolation was commonly felt. This feeling stemmed from being the only person with many other commitments, the only minority in their class, and or not knowing other African-American or Latino landscape architects to look to as mentors.

Access to nearby accredited degree programs was discussed. Especially for non-traditional students - those switching careers or with a family to care for - the ability to go to where the programs are is a major hurdle on the road to landscape architecture. Having to overcome some of the negative stereotypes related to being a landscaper was also a hurdle for some.



Included in the things that made it possible to enter the profession was flexibility in a landscape architectural program, one where the student could complete the degree at their own pace, or in the evening and still maintain a full-time job, versus the hurdle of the rigid traditional schedule of programs which require full time attendance. Certificate programs in California were identified as especially good examples of facilitating success. Two attendees were graduates, and a third with a traditional degree was married to a certificate grad. Those with the certificate stated point blank that if it wasn't for this type of program, they would not be in the profession today. Given this level of importance the fact that certificate programs which have the same syllabus but do not receive the same academic recognition is particularly problematic. For some people, particularly minorities, family commitments and the inability to stop working to go to school full time are major barriers to becoming a landscape architect. This conversation also focused on the rigors of design school because an education of this type frequently requires the student to stay up all night, adding yet another level of difficulty to the acquisition of a landscape architecture degree.

The participants' list of aids touched on the financial issues again, this time in the form of scholarships, financial aid that might cover a broader range of expenses, and work-study opportunities. Access to good and dedicated mentors was seen as an imperative when it comes to the success or failure of a landscape architecture education and for a successful emerging professional.

Realizing at some point in their education that they each had something special to add to the profession helped some participants as they persevered through school. By understanding their own worth, they came to comprehend and believe that what made them different really did provide them with something special to bring to profession. This was identified as another area in which mentoring, particularly by a minority professional, could play a significant role.

Narrowing Things Down

The next step in the process had the participants divided into three groups to begin narrowing and prioritizing the paths, hurdles, and aids.

After the groups met and discussed all of the assembled options, the first round of narrowing the pathways, hurdles and aids resulted in a shortened list from which to refine, prioritize, and work on strategies.

Pathways:

1. Interest in related fields.
2. Early exposure to things LA related; direct exposure to works (any medium); friends and family.
3. Desire to make a positive impact.
4. Access to nature; environment/surroundings.
5. Career guidance; academic counsel.

Hurdles:

1. Expense: education/licensure/career; education costs beyond tuition (model materials, printing, etc.)
2. Awareness: existence/understanding in history/publications; public's need for instant gratification (to see results immediately rather than understanding that landscapes grow into place); public/client/contractor lack of understanding of value; specialist v. generalist.
3. Isolation: lack of community/role models; access to networking; lack mentors, and the absence of diversity in mentors/faculty.
4. Stereotypes.

Aids:

1. Understanding your own value; passion and resourcefulness.
2. Financial aid, loans, scholarships, work-study.
3. Workshops and design camps (faculty/student/professional).



4. Mentoring; mentor/apprentice, student mentorship, full-disclosure of design Support systems (personal support outside of the profession).
5. Program flexibility, certificate programs.
6. Communications – cross cultural, cross discipline.

General discussion at the conclusion of the first day touched on the importance of exposure to African-American and Latino designers. The work of architect Julian Abele, who designed all of the buildings on Duke University's Campuses up until his death in 1950, yet wasn't allowed to visit the site because he was African-American, was discussed as an example. Participants felt that early exposure to designers and places designed by people of color is an important component in mentoring and raising awareness in the African-American and Latino communities. The day concluded with participants being asked to reflect on their collective accomplishments in the morning and afternoon and surface concerns that needed to be addressed going forward. There was general consensus regarding the progress that was being made.

The final day of the Summit started by reviewing the overall goals, participants were then asked to prioritize issue areas that ASLA needed to pursue, and then develop strategies on how to address these issues."

Returning to their groups, the participants had conversations about which of the listed pathways, hurdles, and aids were most important and provided realistic options for action. Their deliberations resulted in the following items under each category:

Pathways to LA

1. Early exposure to profession (all 3 groups)
2. Career guidance (2 votes)
3. Access to nature (2 votes)
4. Desire to make positive impact (2 votes)

Aids to LA

1. Financial aid/support (all three groups)
2. Mentoring (2 votes)
3. Workshop and design camp (2 votes)
4. Program flexibility (1 vote)
5. Understanding your own value (1 vote)

Hurdles to LA

1. Awareness (all three groups)
2. Expense (2 votes)
3. Isolation (all three groups)

To further narrow the conversation and focus, the groups prioritized the issues they believed to be the most critical, regardless of the category as follows:

Top Priorities

Group 1: Awareness
Mentoring
Early Exposure
Financial Aid

Group 2: Workshops & design camps
Career Guidance
Mentorship

Group 3: Awareness
Isolation



Making a positive difference

From here, the Summit participants brainstormed with the goal of identifying three priorities for which they could suggest strategies to ASLA. It was reiterated that while ASLA is interested in strategies they can act on and make effective change with, every idea should be on the table.

Identified Action Items: **Awareness**
 Mentoring
 Early Exposure

Returning to their groups, the summit participants brainstormed ideas and came up with the following strategies that ASLA National should use to diversify and enrich the landscape architecture community.

Awareness Strategies

Public outreach: Engage the community with fun events like Park(ing) Day, Pop-up Urbanism and “random acts of landscape architecture.” Leave copies of *LAM* around in laundromats and doctor’s offices.

School outreach: Have strategies in place that are appropriate for every level of schooling and are age appropriate. Create recruiting posters to hang in schools in the same way that the Armed Services do. After a firm is done with their presentation boards, they can be used to present to kids.

Tours: Visit sites that are designed by landscape architects.

Community Colleges and Vocational Schools: Engage in conversations about the profession with the maximum number of potential candidates.

Employment offices and Career centers: Provide them with information about landscape architecture.

Follow-up: Track outcomes and programs. It isn’t enough to do a presentation at a high school, you have to come back and see if the seed that’s been planted is growing.

Review and expand the target audience: Go beyond the “hip, down-town types.”

Workshop and design camps: Give kids a chance to see what design and landscape architecture is all about.

Make connections: Partner with organizations that already serve minority audiences and communities.

Mentoring Strategies

360-Degree Mentoring: Kids need mentoring before college to be exposed to the profession/ students need mentoring during their LA education; and new professionals need mentoring as they get immersed in the field via employment. It is also critical that Latino and African-American landscape architects complete the circle by becoming mentors themselves at the first step, fulfilling the need for “mentors that look like them.”



Social Media: Continue the conversation online in places like LinkedIn by creating an ASLA Group on Diversity to expand the conversation and connect people.

Understand your own value: Mentors help you realize that your differences are assets, not liabilities.

Personal and Professional: Students and emerging professionals need access to mentors in all facets of their lives.

Support for families: A design education is hugely rigorous – help students help their families understand what it entails and how best to support them through their education.

Meetings between emerging professionals and established LAs: ASLA could facilitate mentorship by promoting portfolio reviews and résumé workshops specific to under-represented groups.

Formal mentoring programs: ASLA could facilitate mentorship by creating an official program to “mentor the mentors,” in effect teaching people how to best help students and emerging professionals be successful.

Professionals who make themselves available: Establish a list of professionals who are willing to be called upon by emerging professionals as sounding boards, either via a phone call or email.

Early Exposure Strategies

Early exposure to nature and the outdoors: Piggyback on already existing programs, like school gardens. Connect with teachers to bring landscape architects to the gardens to show the “design component.” Partner with non-profits and use their existing models for success. Provide them with landscape architecture-specific, age-appropriate materials.

Nature and Environmental clubs: Provide these clubs with information on landscape architecture.

Follow up on Career Days: Present as a landscape architect on Career Day, but then make a point to follow-up with any children who seemed especially interested.

Nature play: Provide recreational opportunities for children to engage with nature in a playful way.

“Living projects:” A cure for “instant gratification.” Bring projects back year after year to keep track of how the projects are progressing.

Make partnerships with design firms and manufacturers: Expose children to all aspects of the profession as soon as possible.

Speak at schools: Spreading the word about who landscape architects are and what they do will engage children early with the idea of landscape architecture as something worth doing when they grow up.

The majority of the topics covered during the Diversity Summit were issues and challenges that affect *all* students and emerging professionals. A lack of awareness of what the profession is combined with a misperception of what it does plagues all landscape architects. The cost of a design education – tuition, time, materials – is incredibly high and acts as a major barrier of access to the profession. But while these issues are to an extent universal, the added weight of being a minority makes some of those things especially burdensome.



The Summit attendees felt that some topics, while not a part of the action items and related strategies, were still worth paying special attention to, and hoped that ASLA will continue the conversation on these topics.

The phrase, “Designers of Difference,” was introduced. This doesn’t just mean racial and ethnic diversity, but socio-economic status, equity of gender, differently-abled, and career-changers. ASLA must do what it can to ensure all people are successful.

Program flexibility is seen as key to the diversity issue. The limited availability of accredited programs severely blocks access that people may have to a landscape architecture degree. All the desire in the world to be a landscape architect does not change a person’s inability to quit a full-time job or uproot a family to move to where the accredited program is. This may be a determining factor in why someone gives up on becoming a landscape architect.

The Diversity Summit attendees have asked that ASLA revisit the issue of accreditation of certificate programs. Special attention must be paid to this as a way to expand the diversity of the landscape architecture community, both in terms of race and ethnicity, but also for career changers.

Expanding financial aid, for tuition, materials, and living expenses would go a long way to help people pursue a landscape architecture education.

The cost of licensing also is an issue. Emerging professionals find it difficult to afford the costs required to sit for their licensing exams.

ASLA has been tasked with raising awareness of the lives and works of minority designers, both historically and currently. A network of who and where they are would ease some of the isolation felt by minority members and may spark the early interest in landscape architecture of young Latinos and African-Americans.