DESIGNER DISCUSSIONS

Episode 31
Diversity in Design with Kiwana McClung

Jason: [00:00]

Hello, and welcome to Designer Discussions. Today we're going to talk about diversity and design.

Intro: [00:10]

Welcome to the Designer Discussions podcast. Tune in each week where we discuss marketing, branding, PR and business advice for design professionals.

Jason: (00:24)

Welcome, everyone. As we end Black History Month, I wanted to actually have a talk on diversity and design, and I'm happy to be joined by Kiwana. She's one of the professors, and she's the head of diversity at the University of Louisiana Lafayette. So how are you today, Kiwana?

Kiwana: (00:39)

Doing well.

Jason: (00:42)

I wanted to have you here because you are on the diversity. You actually lead the diversity for your University. And long time ago, I actually talked to one of back in the day, I don't want to say my age, but she's dynamic now. She's risen up the ranks as the director of the diversity at the University. So I wanted to have you on today just to talk a little bit about that because we actually had this topic on clubhouse when we had a clubhouse event. And this was one of the most attended clubhouse events we've ever had. And there were people from all spectrums, whether it was design education talking about diversity. And so I wanted as we close out Black History Month to actually have a follow up on that topic. And I wanted to have you here to talk about it. So I'm going to start here and I'm going to just let you explain to our audience a little bit about who you are.

Kiwana: (01:39)

Yeah. So like Jason, I'm Kiwana McClung, and years ago, Jason taught me at Southern University. But then I guess I didn't realize just what I was getting into when I decided that I wanted to take that route, study architecture and get into the architecture profession. But probably around graduate school is when I realized just the issues that permeate the design professions and how hard it is for people of color to get into those programs or even just be retained. They may be able to get in, but how do you then keep them and retain those students? I got very involved in student organizations to help retain my fellow classmates. So the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students was the student organization for minority architects at LSU, which is where I went to graduate school. And that organization in that organization, I got the chance to just go out to high schools around the city and recruit students and say, hey, have you thought about studying architecture or interior design or any of those majors in College? That's a possible career. And a lot of students didn't even know it was possible. They didn't know it was an option. And so I jumped into it. Very soon after getting out of school, I realized that the problem was echoing throughout the profession and that I wasn't going to see anybody that looked like me doing that kind of work. And so it became imperative for me to get involved at the national level and at the state level in those organizations and try to do what I can to recruit those students, retain them, give them somebody who was at least on the track that they could look to, to know that they could do it when the chance came up just a couple of years after graduate school to go into academia. Okay, let me give it a shot. I don't necessarily know if I have what it takes to do this, but I'm going to go after it. And surprisingly, was able to get a position at Ulafia and jumped right on being the student advisor advisor for the student organization of the national organization minority architecture students at Ul and on just recruitment initiatives.

Kiwana: (03:39)

I jumped on the recruitment committee for our Department. I very quickly spoke up in meetings just about things that I saw that could be a problem in terms of retaining our students of color, our female students, our minority students, our international students. And it was an uphill battle because I think a lot of people just do not understand how all of the issues that these students face permeate every part of architectural education and profession, from the curriculum to the kinds of projects that they are assigned to, who they have to look to as a mentor who is out there in the field to the type of jobs that are available to them and to the types of jobs that they are able to do when they get out. There also the licensure component. Right. It's a big issue for a lot of students, especially women, coming out of school around the same time when you're starting families. So we see a lot of that with our interior design students. We saw a lot of that with our architecture students. And for me, I felt like all of those things need to be addressed. I've dedicated the last ten years or so just to see how we can address all these issues and seeing incremental process progress. I'm sorry. When you attack it from all in, if you're just going to say, oh, we recruited, we got some numbers now. Good. We don't we needed to do not going to work, because then how do you retain those students? How do you get them to understand the impact in their place in those professions? You have to do more. Just recently, I was asked to step in as interim chief diversity officer for the University. My predecessor and I work together a whole lot just on initiatives. I'll come to her and say, this is what I'm doing in my Department, and I'd love your help with this or I'd love your advice. And she would ask that I come in and speak on some of the work that I'm doing, some of the things that I'm doing that are working. And so when she decided to move on, the University thought that I would be a good fit for the role. So I stepped into the role.

Kiwana: (03:39)

And currently I've been trying to take all of those things that I've learned, just kind of working at a departmental level at my College or working at a national level by writing papers and doing speeches about it, trying to take those things and spread them throughout the University and push forward the initiatives that my predecessor had already put in place. And I can definitely say it's been a whirlwind, but I think that you all are. I can understand why that clubhouse session was so popular, because it is an issue that has been just it just keeps coming up and people are just kind of at a loss that for a number of years we were just talking about it. And then finally we started saying, okay, let's throw some money at the problem. But I think that we're starting to realize there's a real culture problem in the design profession, and that cultural problem has so many different, complex aspects. And we need to be honest about looking at those things and figuring out how do we change the culture to accept the people rather than making people try and fit within this very rigid culture.

Jason: (07:52)

Love all that you have to say. So I may head back just a little while. When I talk, minorities only represented 2% of the overall industry. I read a recent study, as of 2018, it moved up to around 4%. So it's been incremental increase, but it's still small. And one of the things that when I was at LSU, I used to hear from not just black students, but Asian, Mexican as well, that they were happy that I was at the University to show that there was somebody else other than the traditional white to actually teach them. So with what you have now, are you hearing that same thing in the University from the students that you have now, not only from the minority, but also from the traditional white students? Are you hearing that as well?

Kiwana: (08:39)

Absolutely. All of our students want to work in environments in which there are people that are different from them, that have different views. I think that they grew up in a world that's just a little bit more diverse. They're used to different perspectives and different people and having access to all of these different types of content, all these different types of opinions, and so they want their professional environment to look like that. So, yes, all of my students the interesting thing is there are two classes that I teach in the School of architecture design that are diversity, equity, and inclusion related, one at the undergraduate level and one at the graduate level. And that's where I get the most input from those students, where I have my white students saying, I never learned about these different things or these different ways that people's particular culture aren't accepted into the gross environment. All these different ways that certain people and their abilities aren't considered in a built environment. I never learned about those things, and I wondered how would I address those things when I go out into the profession? And this class gave me ways to do that. So absolutely, Jason. I think across the board, our students, our international students would speak to me all the time about all of the things that they were facing that I just had no clue about. But they felt comfortable because they felt like, oh, this is a minority woman. She might understand a little bit of what I'm going through it's, even if she doesn't understand all of it. Let me come to her and tell her that I'm dealing with this issue. And they knew that I would be empathetic to that issue and in a lot of ways point them in the right direction towards solving it. And so, yeah, all the students across the board, not just definitely my students of color, when they see me, they're, like, running up to me like, oh, my God, I have somebody that I can go to. So I need to talk to them.

Kiwana: (10:39)

But two, my white students are they stop and they talk after class and they say, I never knew this. Can I talk more about that? They're researching these things more and more as they transition into graduate school, and it's becoming imperative for everybody that we address these issues. So, yes, the students do want this. And I think that that's probably what needs to be recognized. First and foremost about it is that it's not just that we have this changing world, and we have to address what's happening in this changing world also that the people that you are teaching are asking that they be educated in ways that allow them to integrate themselves into a profession where people of all different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, will have to be served and that they understand how to serve them.

Jason: (11:39)

So you're the head of diversity for the University. So in that position, what is happening in other schools of architecture across the country in terms of this topic.

Kiwana: (11:51)

In other schools of architecture, we're now seeing a trend where they are creating dedicated positions, especially for those schools that have a little bit more resources, a little bit more money. They're creating dedicated positions for people to come in and address. Diversity, equity, inclusion. So I brought into the school of architecture and design. While I'm pretty sure it looks good on them to have a minority hire, I was not brought in specifically to address diversity, equity and inclusion issues, but I did because I saw it as being important. Now we are starting to see schools of architecture across the country creating dedicated tenure track positions and even Dean's positions, Deans of diversity, equity, inclusion at their universities.

Kiwana: (11:51)

In order to fill that gap. They are seeing how important it is to have someone in that role to help guide the Department, not to take it on all the work, but to help guide that Department and what they should be doing. And I think too, that, of course, we know that across the country, chief diversity officers, that's a big position. It's becoming even bigger now that people are realizing just how much they have to handle and how much they have to deal with. But that position is now getting the support it needs because various departments and other colleges across University are now creating their own little diversity, equity and inclusion point person that can now work with that sheet person on particular issues. So I'm glad and happy to see that happening. I can tell you myself from being in this position that it is very hard to do things that you need to do if you don't have a support or a point person across all of these different colleges and departments in order to talk to about how we all stay on tracking on board on the same page. But I'm glad to see that across the country, universities are now pulling people into these roles and thinking about how that could become a more connected network of people all working towards the same goal, but probably in different ways because different departments have different needs when it comes to the EI. So that's what I'm speaking as a train from there.

Jason: (14:19)

How are the universities using the professional realm or the design professionals? How are they using them? And I also ask, how do you think the design professionals can become more involved to be an impact to help this be an overall benefit to everyone?

Kiwana: (14:51)

Right. So what I've been seeing in the realm of the profession, it's been happening in so many different ways. So there are some firms who are actively involved in making sure their firms address the issues. Some of that is at their own firm level, just making sure that they are thinking equitably about all of their rules throughout, not just the process of filling out their staff and their professionals who work in their office, but also in the process of building and creating architecture. And then there are some firms that are just thinking more about how they could get involved with initiatives that are happening outside of their firms. And so they're doing it in that way, getting involved with their local AIA chapter who may be planning some events and initiatives and doing some outreach things, partnering with the local Nomads chapter, Nomad chapter. I know that that's something that's been happening here in our state. We partnered our School of Architecture partnered with the AIA for their state conference last year so that we can have a DEI panel. And I was actually a part of that panel discussion along with Ray Manning and some other folks, where we got the chance to just talk about what we do to change this trend and get it to pick up a little bit more. And we also show all the things that are happening at the academic level, particularly in our school of architecture and design, in terms of addressing issues of VI. So what's happening in our classrooms, what we're doing, the projects in our studio that address these issues of social equity out in the built environment and the work that the student is in doing. We created an exhibit of work so that the conference builders, who are mostly professionals out there practicing, can see that the people that they will be hiring into their firms are being educated on this information and they are worth hiring.

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Kiwana: (15:51)

And then we partnered just later last year and started earlier this year with Normal, Louisiana, and they've taken that exhibit and built it out, and they are connecting with the professionals in New Orleans Metropolitan area and showing off that exhibit for them. So that's at the Taylor warehouse in Orleans. So we have a lot of things that are happening here. And I've been hearing just about and staying up on all the things that have been happening just across the country with firms partnering with their AIA chapters, with their local Nomad chapter, with Nomad National, I believe Noma National at the last AIA conference actually had a panel, their own sort of session where they could talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I think that all these partnerships are great, so great things happening. But of course, the more could be happening, but it's more than what I saw as a young student coming out of school, much more than what I saw happening. So I'm encouraged by that.

Maria: (17:56)

So my question was, as professionals that are in the industry and we know it's flawed and it's got a history attached to it, we have a lot of people who are coming into the field that we can help support in their businesses, and they aren't having to come through in a more traditional sense of design, especially interior design programs. What are some things that you're seeing that are working that we can be doing to help foster that environment?

Kiwana: (18:51)

We need to get professionals to reach back into schools definitely. I think understanding that sometimes they just need to be able to see a face that's out there doing it and telling them how important this is isn't imperative. Also just kind of if we can get professionals that are working in areas that are a little bit nontraditional or working for clients that are nontraditional, that are sort of doing projects that might be out of the norm or might be out of sort of like what we believe is this is the style, this is the aesthetic. Right. Then we are opening up ideas about what is the design. We're opening up that conversation a little bit more. And I say that because over the years being in the Department, as Jason kind of mentioned earlier, you are a face that is recognizable, familiar and comfortable to a lot of your students of color. So they come to me that included our interior design students. They come to me and they say, listen, come on, I'm having this issue. I'm feeling a little way about this. And one of the most common things that they would come to talk to me about was they would feel that their design choices or the things the decisions that they were made were being made were being rejected not because they were good, but because they didn't fit a certain kind of belief about what was good design. And I had one student in particular who she was doing her senior project. It was based in Madagascar, which is very different from the rest of her classmates. She was very much into studying the tribes there, I think, which was a fishing tribe in Madagascar and their aesthetic and their beliefs and things that they make and really starting to create a space that speaks to them and their culture rather than in something that just kind of fits whatever else we see in the world. And she got a lot of pushback about that. And it took some advocacy from me just to say, Listen, get away from what we think about in the Western world about good design, and think about what the people of Madagascar, which is the purpose place where she designed it for want need and think of as good as good design, they need for their own cultural sort of autonomy and expression.

Kiwana: (18:51)

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Kiwana: (18:51)

I said, and that's not going to look like anything that's being done in the west. And I don't think we should be asking the students to do what we'll be doing in the west. We should be asking the students to think about what the clients need and that perspective and just getting that understanding people's brain to switch off that natural tendency to just go to what we're already biased to think is, oh, that's not working. Getting people to switch that off and think a little bit more critically just gets them to say, okay, I'm thinking about this. I'm looking at this through the wrong lens, and I need to look at this through a more inclusive lens. It's that kind of thing. It's just recognizing that everything is not good for everybody. And our students recognize that when they get the chance to speak to somebody and speak for a group of people that don't get to speak for themselves, they take it and they push the envelope because they understand those people are being left out of design decisions and not a part of that process. So yes, I think we need to have some of those professionals realizing that, but we also need to have our educators just being a little bit more thoughtful about how we can be inclusive in terms of education and design education. That's awesome. I do think that there's a lot of whitewashing that happens in design, and in some of that, it becomes exclusionary of other visions and other aesthetics. And it actually takes away from the whole industry as a whole, and it causes a limitation.

Maria: (22:53)

And I love your perspective on that. Right.

Kiwana: (18:51)

And I want to add to that that it always blows me away when some of those same things that I see my students kind of bringing up and saying, oh, I want to show this in the classroom that gets kind of rejected. They end up showing up later in the industry somewhere with somebody who does have, like, this power and approval can put that forth. And now all of a sudden it's accepted. So it's like, okay, that print, I know a student that has years ago picked that print for their finishes or something, and somebody shut it down and said, that's too tribal. And then all of a sudden it's being used. And in the industry, there's a big thing. And it's like, oh, wow, now tribal prints are in. So it blows me away every time, just the way that those things kind of unfold. And I think we need to take a long look at why they unfolded that way, who's benefiting when that idea is accepted, and why isn't it accepted when a student of colors put it.

Jason: (23:59)

I love all of that. I love all that. So for designers, you touched on this briefly. How can designers become more involved in the diversity realm to help change the outcomes that we see now?

Kiwana: (24:13)

I think that designers can be getting more involved. One way that I think that would be great is I know you all have to see having these sort of master class things happening with all these professionals or lead people in their field across the globe. And I think that format, the format of having somebody come into schools, design schools and maybe just teach a master class, and what they do is great. So we don't have a lot of minority designers out there, but we do have some and they're doing amazing things across the globe. And if we could get them to come into our schools and just do a master class, that could be the one thing that changes somebody's mind and somebody say, oh, you know what?

Kiwana: (24:13)

It is worth it for me to remain in this major. It's worth it for me to pursue this as a career because look at what this person is doing out there. Like, I can do this or give somebody who never knew that they could take certain risks or go a certain route with what they're doing, get them to see the options and what's available to them. I think that would be valuable. So that's one of the things that I think that we can do to get professionals more involved with schools and get the idea out there about what the profession is really like and the types of work they will be able to engage in. I know you've had this position for almost a year now. Has it been a little under a year. Jumped into the position, but been at the University for almost nine years now. Now in this new position, where do you see yourself taking the University in the diversity around within the next five to ten years? So what I am really interested in is definitely pushing forward a sort of a research effort for diversity. My predecessor came up with this idea before I stepped in, but I was already kind of doing that from my perspective as an educator, as an academic. But what we have been doing for the last 15 years in diversity, equity, inclusion is telling people how important it is. It's important we must do it. And this is why. Right. Which is great. What we have found over the last few years, that when you put the data behind it, when you show that there's a financial imperative, that there are dollar loss, like dollars that are significant amount of dollars lost because you are not doing DEI work, because you're not addressing those students of color, then you start to realize, oh, this is much more dire than we think.

Kiwana: (27:13)

And because it looks so different across the different fields for a variety of reasons, I'm really interested in seeing more research come out about this, not just research saying these are the numbers and the numbers are low, but research really looking at what impact that has on our society in terms of money, in terms of social outcomes for people, in terms just overall for everybody. How does it harm us to not value diversity? We are working on establishing a research arm out of the Office of Campus Diversity, where departments across the University, where schools and colleges can partner with the Office of Campus Diversity on research initiatives that could not only get published information out there about their diversity issues and why they existed, what the problems and issues are, but that those things can be translated into actual dollar, so that the people at the top who don't think that this is important, who don't think this is an imperative, can see it is look at how much money you're losing, look at how many people you're leaving behind, and look at the impact it has long term on your state, because certain groups of people are not getting what they need and are not able to finish College and not able to get the education that allows them to go where they need to go. So that's something that we're working on in this office. In addition to all of the things that should be happening, which we should be thinking about facilities and inclusive signage and all of those things, we should think about trainings and allowing people to train on LGBTQ plus issues, on issues related to women and issues that are affecting people in terms of bias and racism. So we're continuing all of those things, but also thinking about how do you make this effort legitimate, how you get the data on your side to be an extra argument for it?

Mirjam: (29:13)

Kiwana, I have a question for you that's coming more from the public relations and marketing side and the media side. I'm curious to get your perspective on what the representation of diverse designers and architects is, especially in the media, because I will say that I've definitely noticed and I follow what journalists are looking for and what they cover in this space. Right. And I've definitely seen an increase in interest to feature designers and architects, especially designers that's more where I specialize, but that have a diverse background. And I think that's really encouraging. So I'm sure there are still certain titles that are not quite as up to date as others, but still, there are a lot of requests that come out and they sometimes will explicitly say diverse designers are preferred, are given preferential treatment. And I think that's necessary probably to close that gap. And I think something similar is happening with a lot of brands and the marketing materials that they are producing, that there's more awareness that they need to be more inclusive with how they speak to their customers and how they represent them in their materials. So I'm curious to get your thoughts on that.

Kiwana: (31:10)

Yes, I, too, have seen an uptick in just the number of diverse designers and people of color, particularly people who are activists in this realm, being asked to kind of speak out about what the issues they see and the trends and what they think should happen going forward. And I, too, think that that's good. I think that in terms of the people who are in charge of ensuring that it's important and it's become a big thing because we are realizing that the message has to be there. It's not just about is your organization or is your company actually working on diversity issues? How are they talking about it? And it's the messaging out there inclusive, and it's a messaging really thinking about all aspects of that. And so I think the inclusion of all those people are not only a signal that this is important, but also a signal that we need somebody else to kind of be the one to look at at it all of this and tell us if we're being inclusive or not.

Kiwana: (31:10)

And it's such an interesting thing because just like I talked earlier about how my white students are wanting to know more about these things so they can better serve the public. That's something that we hope. We hope that in the future it'll already be something that everybody knows what to do. But we spent so many years having one general phenotype in that kind of design special representing everything that we have a number of people who have been working in the profession 30 years, 40 years, who just don't know, they don't know what is the right messaging. It's so completely different because for so long, so many perspectives have been left out. So I think it's being done out of necessity in order to realize that we cannot embarrass ourselves by allowing people who don't understand and who are very clear on what we need to do to come out there and speak for our company, for our entity. But it's also going to probably become less and less of an imperative. And the more we get diversified, the more we'll have people out there who's going to speak on those things. And then everybody will just become well versed in ensuring that all perspectives are heard and understanding where their blind spots are and seeing those blind spots. And so that it won't become such a like, just like you said, hey, we specifically want a person of color. It won't be so much of a line item anymore when everybody is well versed on it'll. Just be the way it is, right? That will just be the way it is. I think that it will increase, but we won't need to reach out. We won't need to rush around and try to find someone who's a person of color to kind of speak. We will get to the place where everybody will just kind of understand this is what we need to do. Anybody can really who's in that route to speak on it.

Maria: (34:10)

We had an influencer who made the comment that if she gets asked to participate in something or be on a panel, the first thing she asks is, is it a diverse panel? She will ask that first before she will accept. And I think that just by having that as a prerequisite and to understand if you're just going to be another one of the same, that's going to be on the panel, that that is your opportunity to help remind people of what we want to hear, right?

Kiwana: (35:18)

Absolutely. And on the opposite side of that, I will often ask if I'm asked to sit on a panel or join a committee or something like that, I will often ask, I'm not being asked just so that you can check box. Right. I don't want to sit on any board that's just trying to check a box and say, okay, we got somebody black. We did it. No. Are we actually going to be addressing these issues in a really meaningful way? And I think that when I've made that clear that people are realizing, oh, we are not just going to have somebody just sit here. She wants to know that we're doing something about it. So I'm happy to hear that those things are happening. I've also been hearing about those things happening, Maria, and all across the country in different ways. We recently had someone who came in as a visiting professor last semester at our school who used to be the head of the architecture Department at Dunwoody. And he said, and I think the reason why he stepped down was this is not a time because that was in Minnesota, of course, and it was right after the George Bush thing. He's like, this is not a time for this Department to be ran by a white man. It's just not. And he kind of realized that that was not a good look, nor was he the person to leave them in this new era that they're in, especially with that issue happening right there, not very far from their campus. So I applaud everybody who's doing that work with people who realize it's not someone trying to replace someone like, I don't want anybody to be replaced, actually.

Kiwana: (37:18)

I love all perspectives in the design profession, but we do need to realize that innovation and success and growth comes from diversity companies, especially our Fortune 500 companies and our big corporations. They did the research, and they know that their dollars depend on them understanding the diverse needs of their clients and the people they are serving. And so they make sure that their teams of people have all of these perspectives and I'm excited to see the design profession get on board. But I think schools, architecture, schools of design should look at this same lens as corporations that if you want to continue to get bodies in the seats at your University, if you want to be able to keep your firm going, you are going to need to be looking to hire and approve diverse talent.

Jason: (38:22)

I have to say, as we close it south, that I am so proud of you because honestly, I've just been hearing you and I'm just like this is the same person that would not take no for an answer in the classroom. And I know whatever you put your mind to you will accomplish. So I am so proud of you hearing all of this. And if there is anyone out there that wants to get in contact with you to help out or to see how they can be a change agent, how do they contact you?

Kiwana: (38:18)

Yes, they can contact me directly at my email. Kiwana K-I-W-A-N-A McClung Mcclung@louisiana.edu. And I'd be happy to talk with anybody about that. I'm on Facebook as well. You can just look up Quarterback on Facebook and Instagram. You can send a message to So at Louisiana.edu or Diversity at Louisiana.edu and I will get the message if that's easier for you. But thank you, Jason. Jason, you were one of the very first professors that really just kind of pushed me and challenged me. And I know that I was one of those stubborn students. I have not lost that stubbornness at all. It is still in me and I directed in other ways and other places now. But I am so happy that you asked me to come back. And good to see, too, Jason. I think a lot about those early years of my architectural education and they very much shaped who I am today and why I do the things that I do and why I fight for people, because the people who are doing those things, I saw what was possible. I had people of color who are out there practicing as architects, as academics, as designers who can look to and I know a lot of my students don't have that. So I appreciate having you as that example so that I can be the example for others.

Jason: (40:22)

And we have enjoyed having you here. And if there's any way that we can help out in the future, let us know because as you know, this is a passion of mine and we will be having a follow up to this in the future. So if you're interested, reach out to Kiwana and we will be talking about this in the future. And we hope to hear you all next week on Designer Discussions.

Outro: (40:52)

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Designer Discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and Tag, Jason, Maria and Mirjam on social media. You can find them on all platforms@designerdiscusions.com. Don't forget to like subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.

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