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AIA Detroit Christopher Kelley Leadership Development Program
2017-2018 Cohort

Session 7: Industry Culture
Date: April 6, 2018
Venue: dPOP!
Scholars: Nicole Gerou and Katy Litwin

Between the numerous people that left the architectural industry at the time of the great recession, to the baby boomer generation retiring now and in the near future, a significant skill set gap is developing. In an effort to close this gap, various changes have already been made in how the industry functions. These changes include fast track licensure, new construction methods and movements towards Diversity and Inclusion. In this session, scholars and guests talked about what is culture and what are some of the challenges our industry faces.

David Lathrop, Director of Research and Strategy for Steelcase, was the first keynote speaker who hosted an interactive and engaging dialogue around The Changing Culture of Architecture & Design. Conversation centered around the forces that are creating tension in the design industry today, how they are affecting the industry, and what the future could bring. He centered the discussion around the fact that the industry is actually in the business of placemaking, not design. He then began to unravel what that really means, and how it relates to industry culture.

David approached the discussion by first getting to know all of the scholars on a more personal level, asking about their interests, experiences, and what cultural issues they would like to gain more insight in pertaining to the workplace. David claimed "Human change is one of the most difficult things for an organization to do. Culture is a way of conveying what's appropriate...conveying the rules." He stated " there are two ways people know what to do. Through structure, and through culture. Structure is a leverage of control, and culture is the measurement of trust through relationships with the people." The remainder of the session explored ways to answer the question "How do you induce change?"

Following David's engaging dialogue, the scholars took their own turn in exploring what opportunities and obstacles we face today and what our aspirations are for the future through an interactive brainstorming session. This collection of ideas represented unique perspectives of the diverse scholars within the profession today, and became the prompts for conversation in the following roundtable discussion


This session provided a platform for emerging leaders, including an architecture student, to discuss the issues and opportunities of Industry Culture with key industry leaders of local A&E firms. Four leaders came together to form a panel, moderated by Nicole Gerou and Katy Litwin, to share how they are shaping the culture of the industry through their work and their firm today, including what goals they have for the future. The dialogue was a positive forum which combined the voices of the next generation of leaders with the lessons learned by the leadership of today.

Panelists included Alicia Bayley, Director of Architecture at HAA, Scott Catallo, Principal at NORR, Heather Greene, Project Director Workplace + Interiors at Stantec, and Bob Varga, Design Leader and Vice President at Smith Group JJR. The panelists brought a wide range of experiences to the discussion, as they are all leaders in their firms at varying scales.
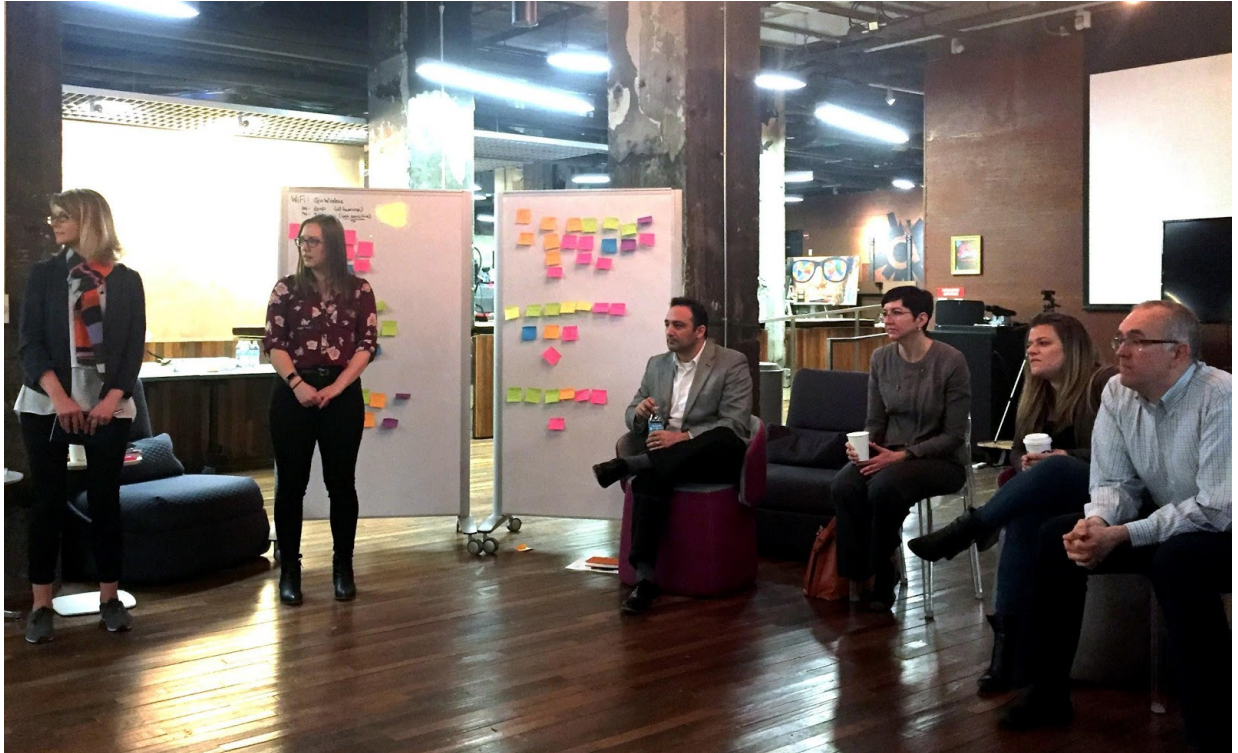
The first question to the panelist was "What does culture mean to you?" One answer was "the culture of innovation equals authenticity...we have to break the boundaries of how we work to inspire." Another spoke of brand vs culture, often confused as the same, but the main difference is one is outward facing (how we want people to see us) and the other is who we are inside. Other conversations centered around how leadership is about communication and bringing others up with you as you rise, and good leaders simply listen.

By the end of Session #7, the scholars left with first-hand advice from leaders in the industry who are shaping the culture of their firms on how to positively influence the design environment, organize groups to inspire those within, and how to learn something different for the next generations coming.