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AIA Detroit Christopher Kelley Leadership Development Program 2018-2019 Cohort

Session 4: Engaging Your Community

Date: January 11, 2019

Venue: Detroit Center for Design + Technology

Scholars: Karin Neubauer & Bria Johnson

The fourth session, entitled “Engaging Your Community”, was organized by Karin Neubauer and Bria Johnson at the Detroit Center for Design + Technology in Midtown. Through a critical comparison of pro bono work in different professional service firms and conversations about how to identify and work with community stakeholders, designers can more effectively impact their communities. Additionally, the way in which a message is crafted and delivered to a community will have a dramatic impact on the success of a project. These issues and skills were advanced in a lively five-hour session.



The first presentation of the session was an introduction into pro bono services by **Laura Johnson** and **Mark Lezotte** of **Butzel Long**. Johnson and Lezotte are the leaders of the firm's pro bono committee and direct the firm's resources toward important causes. These causes are not limited to representing a person in litigation, but also include volunteering at legal aid clinics and many other forms of pro bono work. There is no industry requirement to do pro bono work in Michigan but there is a deep sense of duty for it that is engrained in the profession. Financially, the billable hours are still counted for whoever is working on pro bono work, but they are categorized as “unrecoverable costs” in the firm's accounting. Lezotte encouraged architects who are interested in doing pro bono design work to consult their insurance carriers to determine if the work will be covered by the professional service coverage.



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The second presentation provided a different perspective on voluntary community design services from **Alex Briseno** of **HKS Architects**. Briseno presented the HKS effort to provide design services to those who would not otherwise be able to afford it – called Citizen HKS. Potential projects are submitted to a committee within the company via a Project Request Form. These potential projects are evaluated against the company's values and, if approved, go to the CEO for final approval. There are some stress points in the evaluation process. It has been difficult to partner with faith-based organizations due to differences in values. Briseno then presented three successful Citizen HKS projects: the Kachumbala Maternity Unit in Uganda Africa, Lane Tech Sensory Hub at Lane Tech College Prep High School, and master planning work done for Cass Community Social Services in Detroit.



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Following a short break, the cohort had a short discussion of the TED talk by **Theaster Gates**, “How to Revive a Neighborhood: with Imagination, Beauty, and Art.” Justin Fiema highlighted the importance and value in focusing on building community through “hubs” which naturally creates connectivity between the hubs. Leland Curtis noted that building community was the primary goal and renovating the buildings was resultant from that – an interesting way of shifting the usual frame that architect’s see through. The cohort was also very interested in his relationship to his neighborhood and the importance of that to the success of the projects. Gates’s sweat equity and knowledge of his neighborhood gave him credibility and increased the probability of project success.



The first roundtable discussion was called “Designing for Community” and featured **Dawn Bilobran, Kemba Bayon, Lilian Crum, and Marilyn Wheaton**. Bilobran’s perspective focused on writing grants correctly to get funding. It can be helpful to understand the specific details of “Matching Grants” and whether the project budget can support matching the grant money. Historic tax credits in Michigan will be making a resurgence with the new governor. Preconstruction grants are very important because many people forget the costs of that work when they are looking for grant money. Wheaton encouraged the cohort to connect to non-profits through their network and to incorporate artists into the work earlier. Through these connections she believes that a project will be more robustly tied to a community.



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The second roundtable discussion, entitled “Navigating Institutions + Resources”, featured **Dawn Bilobran, Kemba Bayon, Lilian Crum, Marilyn Wheaton, and Anne Choike**. The roundtable participants emphasized the importance of identifying stakeholders who need to be on board with your project. They communicated that focus groups can be helpful to identify stakeholders. When in meetings with community members it is important to ask questions and not present your ideas as the only acceptable outcomes. Trust from the client and community is most important in community-based projects. Identifying who the “user” can direct the focus of the project toward the most productive aim. Finally, the roundtable participants encouraged the cohort to take the list of stakeholders from the client with a grain of salt. Designers must determine the most critical stakeholders for ourselves.



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Wrapping up the session was a workshop by **Eleni Kelakos** on presentation skills and telling your story. Kelakos provided the cohort with a simplified method of quickly communicating with people in a networking scenario. Her “elevator overture” can be shortened to the form of “I [blank] work with/help [blank] who want to [blank].” This format can quickly break the ice with a stranger and allow for a deeper connection to develop. There are three planes of Transformational Presence (charisma): energetic, physical, verbal. By focusing on how one is communicating through each of these planes one can put strangers at ease and set up a deeper connection with them. Kelakos also taught the cohort four methods to quickly explain to someone what you do. The “Hollywood Pitch” draws a comparison between what you do with easily accessible examples. “[blank] is like Love, Actually meets Transformers...” The “Ask First, Tell Second” pitch forefronts a question before explaining what you do. “Do you ever get scared public speaking?... I teach that.” The “For Example, For Instance” pitch follows an elevator overture with a quick example of how you’ve had success in your practice. “[Elevator Overture] ... for example... [example of when you successfully achieved something]”. Finally, the “Mini Story Pitch” tells a short story of success that you have had in your practice as a way of demonstrating expertise and competence.