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A Chapter of the American
Institute of Architects

AIA Detroit Christopher Kelley Leadership Development Program 2018-2019 Cohort

Session 7: Expanding the Definition of Practice

Date: 4/5/2019

Venue: Cranbrook House

Scholars: Nate Meade, AIA and Lauren Pedigo, Assoc. AIA, LEED GA

Session 7, titled “Expanding the Definition of Practice” focused on understanding ways in which the traditional conception of architectural practice has evolved. Changes in the economy, technology, policy, communities and the environment all influence the built environment; how do architects adjust business models, teams, services, and processes in response to and anticipation of these external influences? Through an understanding of how practices have adapted, the session prepared cohorts to embrace future challenges and help ascertain the value architects bring to the broader global community.

The intro to the session provided a brief background summarizing the business model trends that many firms are utilizing to address industry changes. External influences include technology, liability/legal system, building performance requirements, economic climate, education system, political influences and social/ demographic influences.

Presentation #1 was led by Speakers: Larry Fabbroni (PIL) + Abi Brown (JAMB Collective). The AIA Practice Innovation Lab shared opportunities to expand applications of practice. Applicants were selected via submission of applications with a selection committee sorting of interests such as architecture as science, architecture as art, and entrepreneurship. From the 60 participants selected from around the nation, 10 teams were organized to conceptualize non-traditional business models that innovate on architectural practice. JAMB, the winner of the People’s Choice Award, proposed a network for small firms to team with others, leveraging their resources to better compete with larger firms. According to their pitch, of the 21,000 architecture firms in the US, 77% employ less than 10 people. However, 51% of the revenue generated by the industry comes from the 5% of firms employing 50 people or more. Smaller firms clearly struggle to compete with larger ones, inherently disadvantaged with a lack of support staff for things like marketing, legal, and business development and administration. Technology presents another capital-intensive hurdle for small firms. JAMB proposed to orchestrate these resources among small firms to augment collective value and better compete with power of larger firms. Their value proposition allowed architects to “Act big, stay small, and do good.” JAMB went on to win the 2018 Charette Venture Group annual business plan competition.



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Next a speed discussion panel allowed scholars to personally connect with architecture professionals who chose to pursue non-traditional yet adjacent roles in industries like real estate development, academia, and design consulting. Abir Ali (The Platform), Alexis Kim (Smithgroup), Dean Zoyes (Zoyes Creative), Bryan Koehn (Progressive AE), Karl Daubmann (LTU), David Johnson (Smithgroup) shared how they utilize their background in architecture and design in various ways outside of typical architectural services.

A primary question was asked of the panelists “What do you think is missing in today’s practice?” Some feedback included:

1. Diverse way of thinking.
2. Involving professionals with other backgrounds to help drive and inform the design process.
3. Architects need to take more risks. Firm owners need to foster an environment where employees are empowered to take risks.
4. A culture that encourages risk-taking is a culture that experiences innovation.
5. Architects have become “timid” because they no longer own the risk, and sometimes they don’t even own their own trajectory in a project.



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Following the speed panel was a group activity titled “Strategic Panning”. The cohort was divided into groups of four joined by one panelist to work through hypothetical scenarios representing a cross-section of challenges facing the architectural practice and society. Following the exercise, each group shared how architects might address these challenges in the face of a changing world.



Together, the presentation, speed panel discussion and group activity explored ways in which the practice of architecture might adapt to enable designers to meet client and societal needs, form strategic partnerships, and stay relevant in a continuously changing profession.