

The Diversity Differentiator



By Janki DePalma, CPSM, LEED AP

As business development and marketing professionals, we spend much of our efforts highlighting how our firms are different and, most importantly, demonstrating our firm's value over that of competitors. In other words, "In a world full of sameness, we're different from other firms because of our (fill in the blank—people, values, process)."

Could that difference boil down to diversity?

True diversity of thought isn't about checking the box and making sure skin tones and genders are represented. Diversity is about realizing that other experiences and insights can help foster empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand things from another's point of view, even if you don't have that experience. This understanding can help build trust, which, in turn, allows decisions to happen faster and collaboration to be more engaging.

Diversity can be the secret sauce to relationship development. When members of a service team bring different experiences, expertise, and viewpoints, new ideas and solutions bubble up.

Numerous studies have shown that diverse firms are more profitable than less diverse firms. McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, performed business diversity studies in 2014, 2017, and 2019; each year showed greater financial improvement with diversity. The 2019 study showed increased profits of 25% for gender diversity and 36% for racial diversity in executive teams.

Diversity can add to the bottom line, but how does it help our firms serve and connect with our clients better?

How Diversity Helps Serve Clients

In the A/E/C world, we provide unique solutions to a situation or challenge. As the problems become increasingly complicated, firms are asked to provide solutions to address different stakeholder needs. This is where a diverse team that reflects the clients' needs can be a true value to a project.

I turned to Nicola Springer, executive vice president and director of PK-12 projects at Kirksey Architecture, to understand the tangible ways diversity of thought can help solve problems. Springer led the design team at an elementary school campus consolidation in East Austin that included the closure of another elementary school in a historically minority community. The project was part of a record \$1.1 billion bond for much-needed modernization and new construction.

East Austin residents were vocal about the loss of their neighborhood schools and how that emphasized the historical inequities that had affected their neighborhood for generations.

Ultimately, the district knew it needed the modernization to create a new community of two merged schools, allow for 21st-century learning, and produce a space that recognized the neighborhood's culture and celebrated its future potential. Springer recognized that her team's experience with urban school districts, along with Kirksey's ability to engage stakeholders in a meaningful collaborative way, was a perfect fit.

She believes beginning with a diverse team is an ideal way to connect initially, but the series of connections that follow must also facilitate inclusivity and encourage diversity of thought and voices. "Urban school districts are a microcosm of our society, and they face difficult challenges. Schools are multigenerational spaces that bring together all aspects of the community," explains Springer. She adds, "Our job as architects is to create solutions. To do that, we have to listen."

Kirksey's interactive design approach gave her team the tools it needed to connect and engage with the Austin ISD clients and the community stakeholders. Their collaborative approach to the process gave people a platform to share their stories and allowed Springer's team to listen and discard any preconceived notions or assumptions.

"The design process is just as important as the end product, and it's an important medium to build trust," acknowledges Springer. "You bring



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your team along to meet the client/ stakeholders where they are. You collect all the voices, experiences, and aspirations; build consensus; document that collection; and synthesize that with requirements and standards of the district.” She explains that only after the collection process is complete, the firm can translate the information into architecture that facilitates learning but also “serves the emotional desire of sharing the vision and telling the unique story of a community.”

Paving the Way for Diversity

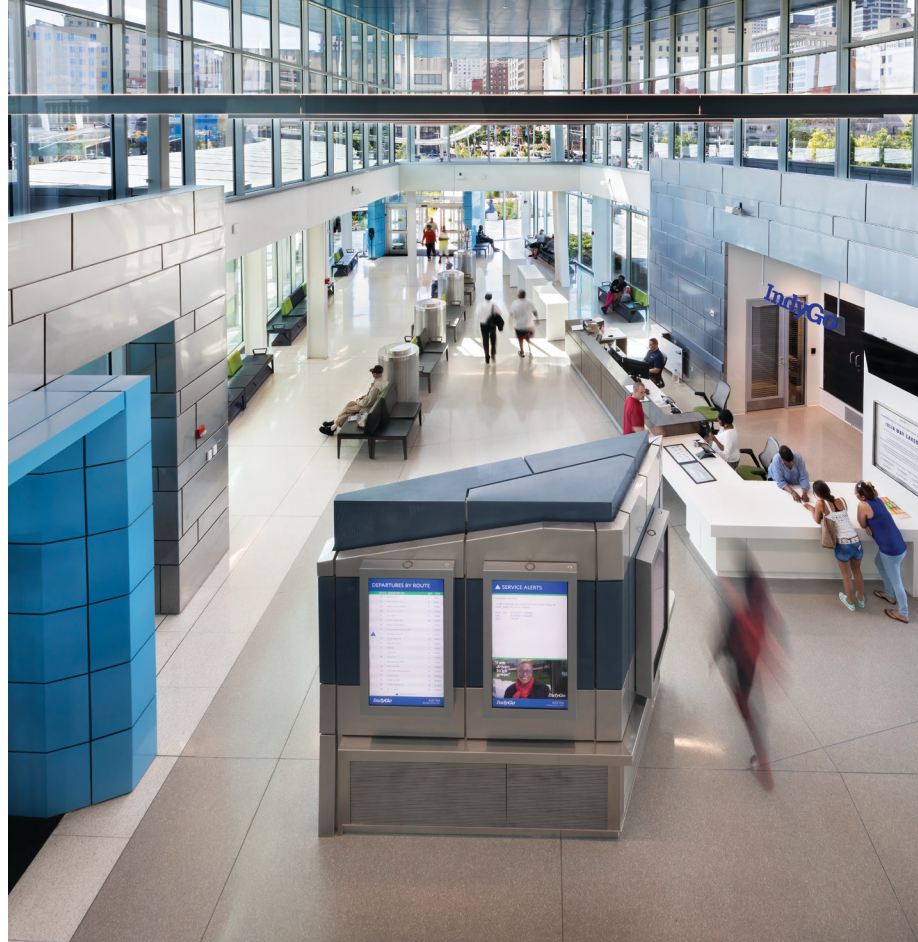
The Austin ISD case study is just one example of how diversity can help serve clients. Now, how can we create diversity within our firms? Without delving into the systemic issues that create an imbalance of diversity within the A/E/C industries, firms can make some immediate changes to help elevate alternative perspectives on projects. Some questions to think about include:

1. Are there any teaming partners that would add value to this project? Beyond teaming with MWBE to fulfill project requirements, are there additional insights a partner can add?
2. Can someone else add a missing perspective? Are there others in your firm who can offer hidden alternative perspectives? Think about answering the question, “Whose voice is missing?” If your project team looks too homogeneous, you may want to mix it up.

3. How can we add new and various perspectives to the firm? This may include expanding recruitment efforts beyond the usual schools and investing in key hires at higher levels. Firms need to engage, mentor, and give opportunities to talented people from various backgrounds.

Diversity has the magic property of multiplication—bringing perspectives and viewpoints that broaden solutions. Diversity isn’t about taking something away or restricting. The more voices heard, the more opportunities there are to provide solutions that help clients solve their problems.

Challenge your firm to think about the evolution of how it brings value to clients. The “same old same old” most likely isn’t good enough for long. Keep asking the question, “Whose voice isn’t being heard?” and work toward finding a way to get that voice a microphone. ■



Julia M. Carson Transit Center, Indianapolis, IN. AECOM, Axis Architecture + Interiors. ©Susan Fleck Photography, fleckphoto.com.

📖 Story Behind the Picture

The Julia M. Carson Transit Center was named after the first woman and first African American to represent Indianapolis in the U.S. Congress, and second African American woman elected to Congress from Indiana. The transit center revolutionized public transportation in the city by creating a central place from which buses arrive and depart. Twenty-six of the 31 routes go through the center, making it easier for riders to make transfers. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow passengers to see when buses arrive and overlook the outdoor park-like setting.



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