



HOW DESIGNERS CAN IMPACT DIVERSITY IN DESIGN

I was recently asked if I felt professional design associations were responsible for the lack of diversity in design. The reality is that the lack of diversity in design is a complex matter and can be attributed to numerous systemic factors. Therefore, it is unfair to single out any one particular design association, community organization, or employer for this wicked problem within the profession. Yet, I do feel that designers who are currently involved in a design career, along with those who have successfully navigated their career journey, possess the greatest potential to impact the lack of diversity in design.

Some would assume that the underrepresentation in design is a pipeline problem, a scarcity of BIPoC designers. The pipeline is often blamed when societal problems intersect with people and education. But it is a myth. A significant number of individuals from diverse backgrounds do express interest in entering the design field and seek a degree in order to do so. By condensing this complex issue down to a lack of minorities graduating with degrees in the design profession, we fail to shine a light on the systemic barriers that prevent marginalized youth from succeeding in the design profession. Perhaps a better approach to addressing the poor representation in the design profession is to look at individuals who have successfully navigated their design journey and those who have the greatest potential to influence the pipeline.

In my thesis *Design Journeys: Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Design Disciplines* (2016) (designexplorr.com/research), I uncover the various possible root causes for this complex problem. These include:

- Limited access to art and design classes.
- Lack of exposure to design.
- Less focus given to careers in creativity.
- Inequities within design education.
- Scarcity of opportunities along designers' career journeys.
- Attempts to dismantle the Civil Rights Act.
- Socio-cultural and socio-economic issues.
- Mass incarceration.
- Institutionalized racism.

While each of the aforementioned problems do contribute to the lack of diversity in design, they are difficult to undo. Many of them are deeply ingrained in our society and will take immense effort from social movements to remedy. If we wish to see the change that's so desperately needed in the profession, designers who have successfully navigated their design journey need to be encouraged to share their love of design in places where they can create impactful connections with the next generation of young designers.

The Limited Role of Professional Associations and Organizations

After reading the aforementioned points, you may be tempted to ask why this change can't be brought about by professional organizations. After all, organizations are generally a collection of individuals, each of whom possesses the potential to bring about change. However, the differentiating factor here is the fact that individuals within an organization are required to operate within certain boundaries.

Convincing an entire organization to redirect their thinking is a challenging task requiring effort from numerous individuals within the organization itself. Should that organization not easily step outside of its circle of comfort, or culture, the necessity to bring change rests solely on the volunteers. Many associations heavily rely on a revolving pool of drained volunteers to lead initiatives and perform activities, which can also limit their effectiveness at bringing about change for the profession.

In addition, there is a distinct lack of cross-disciplinary initiatives that occur among design organizations. Diversity initiatives undertaken jointly between different associations and disciplines are incredibly important when addressing complex problems, because combined such efforts will create the greatest opportunity to bridge the gaps for underrepresented youth. Their collaborative nature is exactly what's needed to address wicked problems. Underrepresented youth face hurdles in numerous types of design organizations, whether it is schools, employers,

or independent groups, due to a lack of experience with navigating them. Joint initiatives that combine diverse thinking and collaboration to reach a greater number of marginalized youth are most effective at helping aspiring designers be prepared to maneuver future institutional roadblocks.

I believe that education is one area where professional associations can make sweeping changes. Many associations also agree. However, educational organizations have pertinent priorities, like students' academic attainment and well-being, that require their immediate focus. Although they may view the lack of diversity in design as an important problem that should be remedied, due to educating students and managing daily operations, they often have to place it on the laundry list of other priorities.

Employers stand to lose the most if the lack of diversity is not addressed in organizations, professional associations, and educational institutions. For instance, having a more diverse staff helps organizations to design solutions that serve a more diverse set of users. Employers also play a key role in deciding which groups are represented in the design profession based on their hiring practices. However, many employers fail to undertake diversity initiatives, like diversifying their school hunt, due to constraints such as size, resources, networks, and the cost associated with developing and maintaining them. In addition to this, their understanding of these diversity initiatives may be limited, which makes them a low priority in many cases.

Why This Change Needs to Come from Professionals

Professionals within the design industry are best suited for this goal because they do not need to operate within a governed system. They possess the perfect degree of autonomy, which can be put toward remedying the lack of diversity in design. By choosing which systems, organizations, and communities they participate in, design professionals can boost the voices of those who are marginalized and help them obtain opportunities for success within the design field. These professionals can also use the knowledge they have gained from being part of the workforce to empower others. The experience and educational knowledge they possess is

incredibly valuable and can be shared to help close the opportunity gap that is keeping underrepresented individuals out of the design field.

This will certainly take effort from multiple individuals, but it can be done by directing their skills and resources in the right places. Design professionals can volunteer for causes that empower the underrepresented youth and help them get acquainted with the different ways they can succeed within the existing system.

In addition to this, the role of designers is constantly evolving. This can put designers from marginalized groups at a disadvantage if they don't have access to the resources needed to stay abreast of the changes. This potentially limits the value they can offer employers, making them less likely to be hired for professional design roles. Those who are best able to help design students and professionals stay relevant are design professionals themselves who are active in the field and adapting their career to meet the changing demands.

How Professionals Can Get Involved

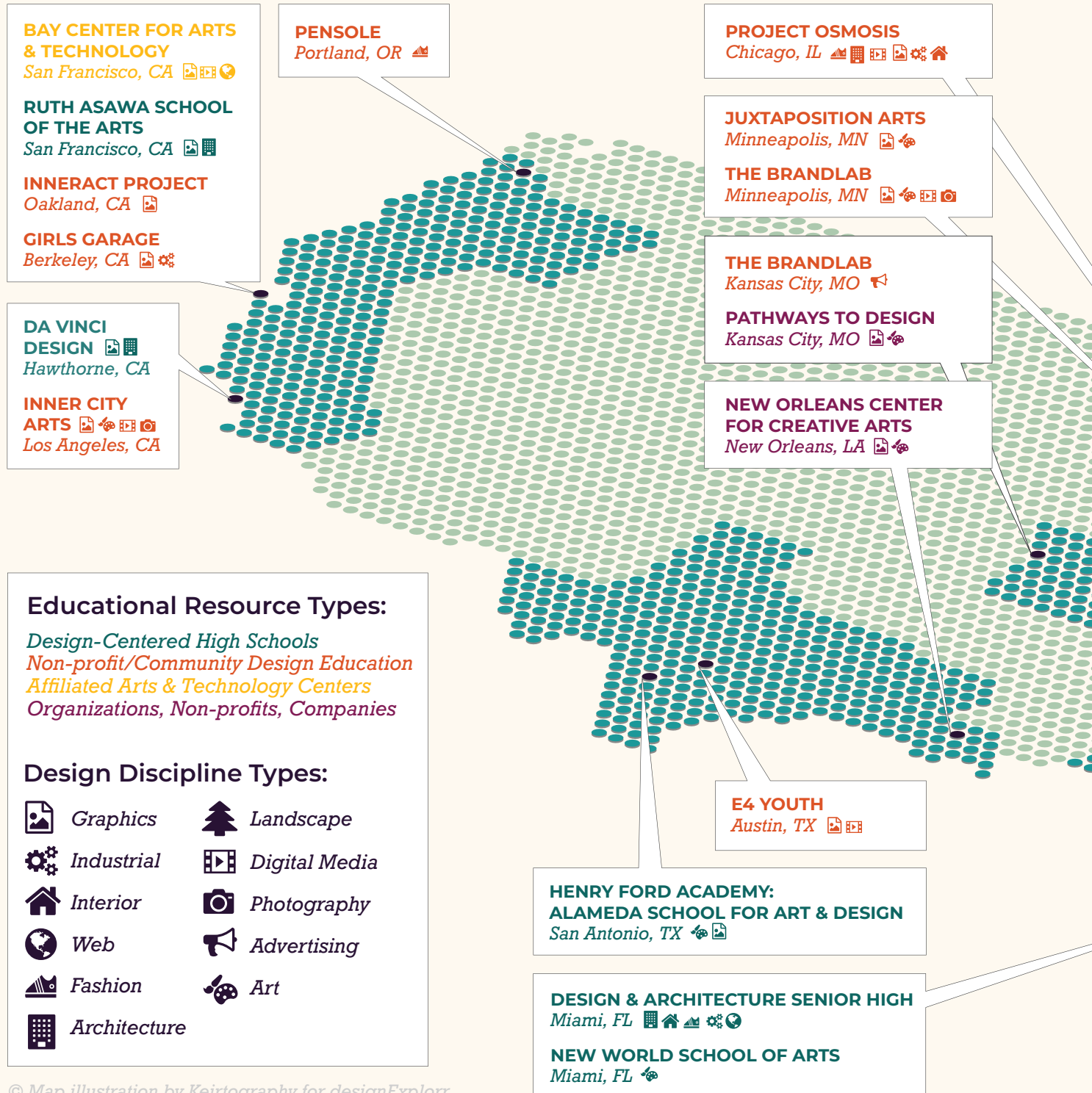
We can design the profession. Our profession will be what we make of it. And you can be a part of its impact. Get involved by volunteering with various organizations, institutions, or youth centers in your area. Or if you are unsure where to start, contact one of the organizations listed on the accompanying map. If you are already part of a group that is actively working to improve the lack of diversity in design, please get in touch so I can add your organization to the map. My hope for sharing these dynamics and the list of schools and community-based organizations is to highlight who has the greatest potential to create change in the profession. Are you with me?

—Jacinda Walker
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Jacinda Walker is renowned for her work in design and diversity. She is the founder of designExplorr, an organization whose mission is changing the face of design.

DESIGNERS HAVE THE GREATEST POTENTIAL TO IMPACT THE LACK OF DIVERSITY WITHIN THE DESIGN PROFESSION

This graphic represents the organizations, businesses, schools, and community-based groups that are addressing the lack of diversity in design by working with underrepresented youth. It spotlights the places where designers—you—can share their love of design with youth and help them succeed in the design profession. See something missing? Let me know at jacinda@designexplorr.com.



Educational Resource Types:
Design-Centered High Schools
Non-profit/Community Design Education
Affiliated Arts & Technology Centers
Organizations, Non-profits, Companies

- Design Discipline Types:**
- 📄 Graphics
 - 🏠 Landscape
 - ⚙️ Industrial
 - 📺 Digital Media
 - 🏠 Interior
 - 📷 Photography
 - 🌐 Web
 - 📣 Advertising
 - 📄 Fashion
 - 🎮 Art
 - 📄 Architecture

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CINCINNATI ARTS & TECHNOLOGY CENTER
Cincinnati, OH 🎨🎧

WEST MICHIGAN CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Grand Rapids, MI 📷🎨🎧🎧

HENRY FORD ACADEMY: SCHOOL FOR CREATIVE STUDIES
Detroit, MI 🎨📷

COLLEGE FOR CREATIVE STUDIES
Detroit, MI 📷🎨🎧🎧🎧🎧

HENRY FORD LEARNING INSTITUTE
Dearborn, MI

LUMA INSTITUTE
Pittsburgh, PA 📷

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Pittsburgh, PA

BROCKWAY CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Brockway, PA 📷🎧

BUFFALO CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Buffalo, NY 🎧

DESIGNEXPLORR
Cleveland, OH 📷🎧

NEWBRIDGE CLEVELAND CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Cleveland, OH 📷🎨🎧

NEW DESIGN HIGH SCHOOL
New York, NY 📷📷📷

MANHATTAN EARLY COLLEGE SCHOOL OF ADVERTISING (MECA)
New York, NY 🎧🎧

THE HIGH SCHOOL FOR INNOVATION IN ADVERTISING AND MEDIA (IAM)
Brooklyn, NY 🎧🎧

ONE CLUB FOR CREATIVITY
New York, NY 🎧

FLATIRON SCHOOL
New York, NY 🎧

NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
Boston, MA 🎧

FUTURE PREP 101
Boston, MA 📷🏠🎨🎧🎧🎧

INCLUDE INNOVATION
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NORTHLAND HILLS HIGH SCHOOL
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METRO STEM HIGH SCHOOL
Columbus, OH 🎨📷

FT. HAYES METROPOLITAN EDUCATION CENTER
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DOWNTOWN HIGH SCHOOL & VOCATIONAL SCHOOL
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New Haven, CT 📷🎧

DESIGN-ED
Spotswood, NJ 📷🎨

BALTIMORE DESIGN SCHOOL
Baltimore, MD 📷📷📷

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF MINORITY ARCHITECTS
Washington, DC 📷🎨