

***“Suggestions for How we Begin
to Achieve Equity by Design”***

03

Design Leadership: Now What?

By Jennifer Rittner

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Leaders in the design community have expressed their desire to work toward equity within our industry, posting across social media the #BLM hashtag and affirming their support for inclusion. At the same time, many of them are asking, “what can we do next?”

The “what next” is possibly the most challenging facet of this conversation. For every suggested “next step” there are dozens of other paths that might have been taken. Each outlined path risks erasing or negating other marginalized communities and contributions. Each new suggestion implies that none have come before. Many have.

Acknowledging Colleagues and Allies

Many designers and design educators who identify as BIPOC, disabled, gender queer, religious minorities, or immigrants from the southern hemisphere have been doing the work of demanding equity in our industry for decades. We thank all those who came before us. We acknowledge everyone who is doing this work quietly, in the shadows, without credit or compensation. We are grateful for everyone who tried but then stopped because the work was hard and it became overwhelming to do it alone. We appreciate everyone who supported that work, even if from a distance, providing emotional support and encouragement to our colleagues as they risked their own careers and health in the fight for change.

We see you

We will also continue to celebrate our brothers and sisters who have achieved success by designing their own paths and platforms. In truth, we honor and admire them. They have thrived against the odds. At the same time, too many of us are laboring in states of isolation and anxiety.



Caption: Reconstructing Practice Summer Convening, 2018, design by Nidhi Singh Rathore; conference organized by Lauren Williams, Bianca Nozaki-Nasser, Godiva Veliganilao Reisenbichler and Nidhi Singh Rathore

Addressing Leadership

If you are a leader in the design industry and have not been proactively, structurally establishing equity in a space where you have power, this is for you. What follows are suggestions for three domains of our industry to initiate meaningful change. These are not detailed prescriptions as much as approaches to change that ask for a radical, collective reckoning on your part. Importantly, this reckoning is intended to activate change, not to manifest more hand-wringing, gestures of support, or conversations that enable inactivity.

Rather, they fall under the larger rubric of #CedePower.

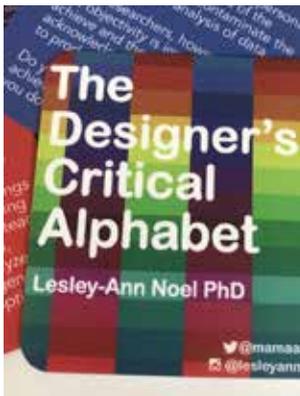
Relinquishing control, of course, is the hardest thing, isn't it? Most people will argue that their individual power is limited and that ceding any power will diminish them professionally, financially, and in their pursuit of social capital. At the same time, many BIPoC designers and design advocates have been called on in recent weeks, months, and years to provide **free** advice to you and your institutions to figure out how you can continue to be both relevant and equitable. With all due respect, stop that.

In addition, we've been watching as some leaders in the design community have used proximity to blackness as a platform for their own relevance. Proximity to blackness is not equivalent to equity. Saying that you have hired, or that you work with, live with, or buy products from BIPoC designers is not the same as equity. Elevating or amplifying your voice because of its connection to blackness is the opposite of equity.

Defining equity is itself a challenge, in that it requires a starkly honest interrogation of your own privilege and a reckoning with the ways in which you have shored up those systems that benefited you over others, or systematically devalued requests for equity that threatened to undermine your position. You have to interrogate basic assumptions you have built up about your own achievements and worth. You have to evaluate assumptions you have made about leadership practices and management styles that have perpetuated patriarchal white supremacy in your places of work. This process

of truth and reconciliation is both personal and professional, and requires that you accept new mental models about the world that shift the current norms and assumptions we have all labored under, but which have empowered your success at the expense of so many others. To build a more inclusive culture throughout your spaces of power, to really join the fight against racial justice you must reconcile with these toxic, self-serving beliefs.

To be clear, we are calling on you to institute structural change from your positions of leadership on behalf of your colleagues who have been marginalized in those spaces. But the larger repercussions echo far beyond our industry. Through your leadership, white supremacist patriarchy has continued to be normalized in this country. Design has enabled it, affirmed the mechanisms for it, and supported its narratives and visual, experiential manifestations:



Designer's Critical Alphabet by Lesley-Ann Noel, a teaching tool for design leaders, faculty and students

The design of buildings and neighborhoods have perpetuated the criminalization of poverty and enabled cultural erasure through gentrification.

The design of brands, advertising, and marketing campaigns have centered middle-class whiteness, consumerism, disposability, and cultural appropriation while ignoring inequitable labor practices, environmental devastation in historically disenfranchised communities, and chronic negation of complex cultural representation.

The design of products have fed the “more, newer, now” paradigms that have fed individual and collective anxieties about being left behind while those with means and privilege continued to thrive.

Design for social impact models have largely served as colonizing mechanisms, elevating white saviors (who are often well-meaning designers) at the expense of communities who are rarely afforded the privilege of speaking for themselves, or defining their own forms of representation or action.

Design has often served to treat people who have been broken by systems as the problem, never addressing the dismantling of unearned power as the fundamental target for change.

For every designer who pushed against the status quo, design leadership has largely served to minimize, ghettoize and undermine any calls for action that might dis-entrench your own privilege and power.

Change on Publishing Platforms

If you are a design publisher or podcast producer, you have a megaphone for communicating all matters of content and context about design to the design community and the broader public. If you have been doing this work for more than a decade, we have heard you. We know your perspectives and preferences. They have largely not served us and have rarely reflected an inclusive or representative point of view beyond tokenized gestures (are you right this second mentally recounting the 6 black designers you've invited onto your platform in the past 10 years? That's the point). We are ready to move on.

We ask that you elevate to positions of power on your platforms BIPOC, gender spectrum, religious minority, and disability voices who are deeply embedded in conversations about equity. We ask that, having benefited from the infrastructures you created to amplify your own voices for so long, that you cede total creative power, providing the next generation of inclusive voices with that infrastructure that you claimed for yourselves. This includes turning over editorial positions on your platforms — design magazines, academic journals, trade magazines, podcasts — to BIPOC, gender spectrum, religious minority, and differently-abled professionals, not just for a week or an issue, but for the long term.

This is a transition, not a token gesture. We ask that you continue to support these platforms with resources and the social capital you have achieved. To be clear, we do not want to write **for you**. We are asking that you cede control of the platforms so that we can speak openly, forcefully and honestly for ourselves without having to ask permission or be confronted with the violence of your cultural disapproval.

Know that we have witnessed your acts of cultural negation as you have stood as gatekeepers, rather than door-openers, for decades.



By Office of Congresswoman Alma S. Adams — <https://twitter.com/RepAdams/status/1270400410629668864/photo/1>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=91095816>

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Juneteenth gathering organized by Ricardo Gomes, 2020.

As you have not used the power of your platforms to elevate new voices in systemic ways, you have abdicated moral authority. Consumers of your content are more aware than ever of these inequities and are likewise calling for change.

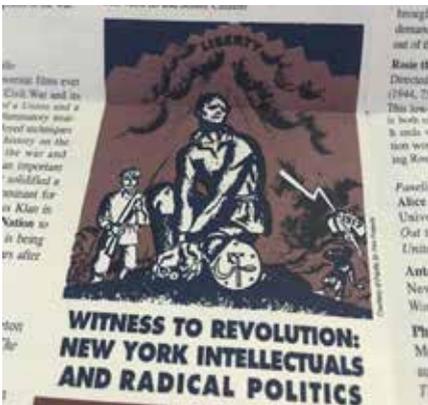
These new voices will say new things that have the potential to move the design field in surprising directions, creating content that is more inclusive and honest. Hopefully, their conversations will shape new perspectives and give more people more opportunities to feel and be whole as they interact with the world of designed objects, experiences and services that reflect their values and identities to a much more inclusive degree. We welcome the uncomfortable aspects of these conversations. We also look forward to their healing power. We are ready for the changes they will inform.

Change in Academic and Institutional Leadership

We are demanding truth and reconciliation and a radical change of leadership in academic departments and institutes of design. We appreciate the infrastructures you have built, but despite attempts at inclusion, we continue to be marginalized in your spaces, as made potently clear by our colleagues who initiated #blackintheivory.

We ask that you actively mentor BIPOC, gender spectrum, religious minority, and differently-abled staff, students and faculty in your institutions to rise in decision-making spaces and positions of power. These mentorships should be structured and intentional, leading to actual changes in leadership in which mentees gain the tools for success in new positions.

Importantly, mentorship should not mean training historically marginalized people to participate in their own marginalization. Rather, it should be clear that mentees are valued for their differences and divergences of presentation, identity and perspective. Just as importantly, mentees should not be “hand-picked” by leadership because of their friendliness to leadership. Intentionality around identifying divergent voices is critical to success.



Why History? program at the New-York Historical Society, 1990. A blueprint for radical change within an institution.

We also ask that your institutions establish term limits for leadership positions to ensure that new voices are elevated routinely and systematically, and marginalization is un-entrenched.

To support the development of an inclusive leadership, institutions must not place additional burdens on historically marginalized individuals that increase their workload or to become stand-ins of representation for all disadvantaged groups. Put simply, we are not asking for new task forces or ghettoized, underfunded “initiatives.” Our ascent to leadership is **the** work, not **in addition to** the work. We ask that you provide appropriate support structures for us in this work to optimize our successes and learn from our mistakes.

Contributions by historically marginalized faculty — especially when they are specifically sought-out or recruited for leadership positions — should count as more than “service,” and must be more adequately compensated through salary, tenure, promotion and retention processes.

We look forward to re-shaping these institutions to become inclusive from the top down and the ground up, not only in ghettoized task forces and short-term initiatives. These long-term, institutional policy changes may impact the way design is taught and practiced, as [Rosa Sheng](#) discovered during her efforts to make architecture education and practice more inclusive. These changes may be uncomfortable. We are ready to embrace our role in defining that new future.

Change in Design Firm Leadership

This is your time to put your money where your heart is. We ask that you proactively seek coalitions and collaborations with organizations that have been doing equity-based work in your communities. We ask that you listen to their needs and concerns, but do not apply your “tried and true” solutions to them as if they are vacuums waiting to be filled. Instead, use your tools and platforms to elevate and amplify their voices on **their** terms. This is not your fight to define. Your greatest capacity right now is to be the tools of their best intentions, providing guidance where it is clear that you have insight or intuition, but never undermining

the desires of the community to speak for itself. Be an ally. Be a quiet, hardworking ally. Be a humble, non-self-aggrandizing ally. Be a long-term ally even when your work is technically done. Don't promote your ally-ship on social media. Amplify their voices over your own.

Develop reasonable metrics for accountability in the long term, again, even when your work with them is technically "done" so that we may collectively learn and improve.

While we fear that by naming names we also risk overlooking or erasing the work of so many of our colleagues, we can point you to a few key resources in this work:

[Afrotectopia](#)
[AntiRacist Classroom](#)
[The Black School](#)
[BlackSpace Urbanist Collective](#)
[The BIPIOC Project](#)
[Creative Reaction Lab](#)
[Data & Society](#)
[Data for Black Lives](#)
[Design Action Collective](#)
[Designer's Critical Alphabet](#)
[Digital Undivided](#)
[Hyphen Labs](#)
[The Latinx Project](#)
[Mapping Access](#)
[The Vaid Group](#)
[Revision Path](#)
[Equity Meets Design](#)
[Design for Diversity™\(D4D\)](#)
[National Equity Project](#)
[The Equity Lab](#)
[Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#)
[WAI Think Tank \(Africa\)](#)
[Indigenous Design Collaborative](#)
[Peacemaking Program | Center for Court Innovation](#)
[Alaska Native Dialogues on Racial Equity Toolkit](#)

[Racial Equity Impact Assessments \(REIA\)](#)

[Colloqate Design](#)

[AORTA](#)

[Talking About Race](#)

[UrbanAC](#)

[Wampum.Codes](#)

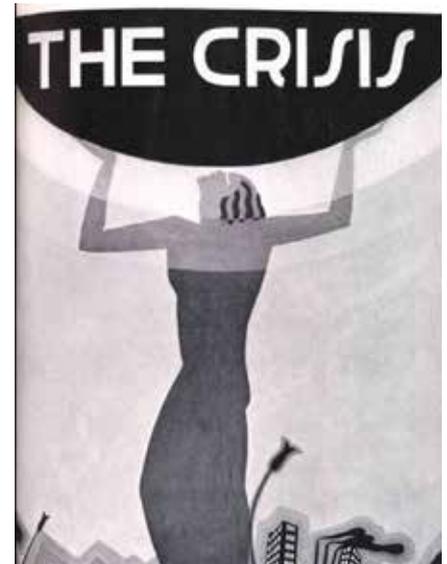
Dismantling the systems of power that have marginalized our communities for so long is going to take time, so we must start now, together, with honesty and a sense of committed purpose. Your corporate clients have been complicit and you have largely remained silent. Your silence has protected you from accountability. We don't need to participate in "cancel culture," but we can be aggressive in our calls to hold corporations and big brands accountable.

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That means, you must bring people who say uncomfortable, confrontational things into rooms with you. Be uncomfortable. We're okay with that. We've been uncomfortable for a long time. Bring advocates and activists into corporate meetings and support them when they ask challenging, provocative questions. Pay them as consultants for every second of their time. Activate their proposals for change. And support your colleagues in doing the same.

Final Thoughts

We are your colleagues. In our work with you, we have also perpetuated systems that have marginalized members of our communities, as well as the many other communities that have been similarly erased or disenfranchised by design. In speaking up now, we acknowledge some of our own failures, but also recognize that we have been trying to have these conversations with you for a long time. At times, we have been met with outright hostility, but that's rare. Mostly, we have been silenced or pressured to stay silent: told to have a sense of humor or to take down the rhetoric or to be a team player or to fit in with the culture. Often we were just ignored and passed over. We are asking you to think about each time you dismissed our concerns in the past, or treated us like we were the problem because we dared to speak our concerns, or our anger, out loud.



Aaron Douglas, 1927, *The Crisis Magazine*

Perhaps just as painful for us, is when we have been invited into your spaces simply or explicitly to “perform our oppression.” This is a complex thought, but we’d like you to grapple with it. While we often have become the spokespeople for identity difference and inclusion, our identities are not, in fact, the sum of our experiences. We are also here to do the work we are trained to do and are immensely capable of doing. We do it perhaps with different perspectives, but that work is not only in service of our marginalization. In academia, in particular, we are ghettoized as educators who teach “social impact” or sub-culture studies. While many of us do take on that work, explicitly and intentionally, it should not be assumed that is all we do, know or care about.

The practice of equity in design is to recognize and mechanize the ways in which design serves to make us all whole, all free, all the arbiters of our own best futures. For design to accomplish that lofty goal is for the design profession and the design academy to build equity in our own spaces. Right now, that means elevating and amplifying those who have so far been largely excluded from power.

Ceding power is scary. We get it. But this is your turn to do something right. We ask it now so we don’t have to demand it later. Remember, ceding power is a privilege. It means that you have had it when others haven’t. That’s what you can do now.

#cedepower

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