

Career and the profession

# Strengthening architecture's pipeline one community at a time

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, March 14, 2018



COLUMBUS CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN CAMP ARCHITECTURE

# AIA chapters continue to make impact in education by capitalizing on “out-of-school time” and reaching diverse groups of children

In 2017, AIA teamed up with the Armstrong World Industries Foundation to award grants for K–8 architecture and design programs aimed at underserved communities. Of the funded programs, more than half utilize “out-of-school time,” going beyond typical career days or presentations to introduce architecture to children when they’re not in the classroom.

Research on out-of-school time suggests its positive impact on student success in the classroom as well as its potential to develop students’ workforce interests. While transportation and childcare challenges sometimes prevent student participation, out-of-school time programs generally face fewer limitations than in-school time programs, meaning each community can determine how to best serve its young people.

## Starting with play

Making design exciting for kids through hands-on workshops has proven effective for North Carolina’s AIA Triangle and AIA Baton Rouge. At its ScaleUP Design Activity, [AIA Triangle](#) provides structural materials such as PVC pipes, challenging children to design and build in a variety of settings, including public festivals. Program facilitator Matt Szymanski, AIA, sees community events as great spaces for creativity. “There’s a certain amount of play that students want to do. In a festival setting that happens a lot more, whereas in a classroom setting you have to let that play atmosphere set in,” he says.

[AIA Baton Rouge](#) gives children the opportunity to plan their dream community with Building Blocks: If Kids Ruled the City, wherein young participants make decisions about buildings in their utopia—whether they be pizza factories or wastewater treatment plants.

Just as public events and workshops go a long way toward introducing basic concepts of architecture, longer, more immersive programs work, too. For the last eight years, Columbus, Ohio’s Center for Architecture and Design and AIA Columbus’ [Camp Architecture](#) have brought design to the forefront of hundreds of young minds. From city planning exercises to creating wearable architecture, students complete a variety of design projects in weeklong programs each summer. With the recent grant funding, Camp Architecture was able to offer need-based scholarships to children otherwise unable to afford camp expenses.

Joe Mayer, AIA, began working with the camp first as a counselor and eventually as a board member. He believes that the real power of the camp is its ability to inspire dedicated interest in architecture and design amongst campers. “It really allows them to focus on something that they care about personally that has a different focus than the broad-based education you have in school,” Mayer says. “It’s another layer of understanding.”

When parents and students choose to participate in out-of-school time activities, they build what educators refer to as “grit” or “rigor” around architecture, instilling determination and passion to pursue something long-term. Because of the project-based nature of many out-of-school time activities, students also develop proficiencies in problem-solving, decision-making, teamwork, and fine

motor skills—all of which will help them excel at architecture, should they choose to pursue it down the road.

## **Partnering for success**

Augmenting what a child learns in the classroom through out-of-school time learning maximizes understanding of subject areas and potential for growth. [AIA Seattle's](#) Architects in Schools program takes students out into the world of architecture before they dive into design activities in the classroom. The program, which started in one of Seattle's most ethnically and socioeconomically diverse elementary schools, includes firm visits and tours of the University of Washington Department of Architecture and the university campus. Students exposed to working architects and architecture students return to the classroom with a new perspective.

“We like to do the field trips at the beginning, so they get a sense of what it's like to actually study architecture or work in an architect's office,” says Margaret Knight, AIA, one of the program leaders. “It gets them excited about the idea of the profession, so that when we transition into things that are more learning- and project-based, they have that end goal in sight.”

Relationships with schools and community organizations are crucial for spreading design to more diverse groups of students. At AIA Triangle a partnership with local nonprofit Neighbor to Neighbor is the linchpin for bringing ScaleUp to different communities in their large membership area.

AIA Baton Rouge finds ways to get around challenges with Building Blocks: If Kids Ruled the City. “We still have a hard time with reaching communities that are really challenged, so we decided to make a kit so we could empower teachers to do it,” says executive director Kathleen Gordon. “We will partner with a school and customize a program to fit their needs,” she says, adding that oftentimes they bring architects, engineers, and planners into the classroom to meet students who aren't able to attend the out-of-school time version of the workshop due to limitations of transportation or guardianship.

Similarly, AIA Birmingham collaborates directly with inner city schools on [dreamArchitecture](#), an art competition that involves over 2,500 students annually. Students celebrate their work alongside parents, teachers, and community members at an evening awards presentation and reception, solidifying the belief that they can make a difference outside of school.

“We work with the Birmingham City Schools, where most students are minorities and a lot of kids are first generation to go to college,” says executive director Rhéa Williams. For 19 years the chapter has sought to make the project as accessible as possible by bringing teachers into their headquarters for continuing education workshops and providing actual materials so they can facilitate the projects in school. Williams finds that evaluating partnerships helps maintain momentum and ultimately allows AIA Birmingham to reach more students. “We focus on getting those relationships built, and if they don't participate one year, we follow up with them,” she says.

## **Overcoming obstacles**

AIA leaders working with kids identify two areas of opportunity for strengthening the pipeline: building general awareness about architecture and increasing representation. “Architecture doesn't come up

that often as a career choice,” says Williams. “There are so many times that, if a child had known about architecture earlier, they would have been working towards that goal the whole time.”

Architects with various backgrounds and levels of experience can impact representation by getting involved with K–12 programming. When students envision themselves in professional roles, they’re more likely to stay engaged. “It makes a difference to have volunteers that are diverse,” says Emmalyn Tyson, AIA, of AIA Triangle. “Having people the students can relate to and mentor them is huge.”

Tiffany Brown, Assoc. AIA, remembers not being surrounded by faces that looked like hers when she entered the field. As to growing a more diverse pipeline, “It’s a long-term process that needs to start in K–12, so we can get architecture into kids’ minds,” she says. Brown believes that if architects spend more time on education and storytelling, they can help change the makeup of the workforce. “No matter how young or old you are, whether you’re from the suburbs or inner city, you had it easy or you had it hard, we need to share our stories with each other,” she says.

The benefits of a more diverse workforce extend into communities and the built environment at large. “Increasing representation in the field only serves to give a better understanding of the breadth of real-world problems that design can solve,” says Mayer. “The more perspectives you get in the industry the better, because you’re more equipped to solve a broader range of challenges and solve them more effectively.”

Brown and Linsey Graff, Assoc. AIA, are members of AIA’s K–12 working group, which helps young people see architecture as a viable career option and provides the tools they need to get there. Based on her experience as a design educator and practitioner, Graff asserts that if architects are clearer about the positive impact they have on communities—rather than what school subjects they needed to excel in—more children will want to pursue architecture. “We as a profession need to streamline our message to kids,” she says. “There is a lot of stigma around what type of academic success you need to be an architect.”

But even if students don’t end up going to school for architecture or becoming licensed, architects should still spread that message of positive impact. “Not every single kid we teach is going to want to be an architect, and that’s fine,” says Graff. “But all of them have to know what it is, because it shapes their community and lives.”

*Architects across the U.S. encourage young people to get involved in architecture and design. To learn more about AIA’s education and outreach efforts, visit our [K–12 Initiatives page](#) and reach out to your [local chapter](#) to get involved.*

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