

Griffin breaks barriers in architecture

Written by

Friday, 10 December 2010 14:06



Few architecture firms get the opportunity to work with renowned architect Renzo Piano on ground breaking design and construction of a world icon—in this case the new Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago, but that is exactly what Interactive Design, Inc. (IDEA) of Chicago did. What is more unusual, however, is that firm is helmed by Dina A. Griffin, a Black woman—in fact one of only 262 Black women architects in the US.

Griffin, however, takes it all in stride. And why shouldn't she? She is president of a small firm that, in their words, creates designs that enrich and inspire people's lives. The backgrounds of the IDEA staff are as diverse as the projects that they undertake. The firm only hires licensed architects. Currently they have 10 professionals with experience ranging from ten years to 30. Half of the staff are women—a testament to Griffin's commitment to bring more diversity into the field. Each architect specializes in a specific area of architecture—from design for zoo enclosures to cultural, governmental and historic preservation. Given this scenario, Interactive Design is the “can do” and “go to” firm.

Says Griffin, “The culture of our firm is very different from that of other architectural firms. We are small and decidedly not corporate. We have no administrative staff. We hire based on areas of expertise and personality that expand and round out our capabilities. Each of the architects handpicks a team of consultants that reflect the creativity and goals that we have set forth for our client.”

Griffin, a graduate of the University of Illinois School of Architecture at Urbana-Champaign, knew that she was entering a male dominated field and certainly one that was devoid of minority women. In high school, rather than taking the normal female-oriented courses, such as home economics, she opted to take industrial education and learned architectural drafting. This was her introduction into the profession. She was the only female in the class. Then, in an engineering class at Western Illinois University, where she was not only the only female in class, but the only person of color, a professor told her that there was absolutely no way that she could major in architecture. He told her, “You may as well try a less intense major”. This, of course, only fueled Griffin's determination to break barriers in the field of architecture. And that she has. In fact, Griffin was asked to deliver the commencement speech for the University

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of Illinois School of Architecture in May of 2010, where she shared her journey to the profession and how she used her love for technology to shape her career in architecture with the graduating class of 2010.

Griffin used her skills in computers skills to open doors in the architectural field. She initially secured a position in the facilities department of Montgomery Ward, which, at the time, used cutting edge technology in architecture and design. This was the genesis of her passion for computers. She then moved on to Perkins and Will with Andrew Heard and Associates. However, after seven months of working there, she realized that she would be pigeon holed solely working with computer 3-D modeling and CAD drawing and feared that she would never get the on-hands architecture experience she so needed and desired. So she brought it up with her superior and asked that she be transferred to work “in the field” This brought her some of the on-site construction experience she wanted; working on-site during the construction of the International Terminal at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. She used her improved computer skills and field work to land a position at OWP/P (recently merged with Cannon Design) in their Corporate Interiors Group. Having built up substantial experience both in building design and interiors, Griffin was recruited to Interactive Design to work on a major village hall and police station project. This was the break she had been waiting for.

She was groomed to take over the firm and in 1999 was made president. Griffin was also president of the Illinois Chapter of National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) and now sits on the boards of both the Illinois and Chicago Chapters of the American Institute of Architects and has recently been appointed a board member to the Leadership Advisory Committee for the Art Institute of Chicago. Since then, Griffin and her firm have worked on a multitude of projects including Farm in the Zoo at Lincoln Park Zoo, the Wilmette Public Library, the Anti-Cruelty Society and, one of her favorites, St. Leo Apartments, a 14-unit apartment building for disabled residents. Griffin relishes in the gratification she gets through interacting and getting feedback from the residents who enjoy the finishing touches designed by IDEA to make these apartments their homes.

In fact, given the size and composition of the firm, all of these works are a source of pride to Griffin and her partners, firm co-founder Charles Young, Bob Larsen and Paul Steinbrecher. IDEA has received numerous awards and accolades for their designs, such as the 2003 Distinguished Building Award for Farm in the Zoo by the American Institute of Architects, two Chicago Landmark Awards for Preservation Excellence by the City of Chicago for the 2004 Washington Block Façade Restoration, 2008 Carlson Cottage Renovation at Lincoln Park Zoo, and the 2005 Excellence in Masonry Design Award for St. Peter Claver Courts Apartments. They received many more for the crown jewel—the Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago including the 2010 Merit Award for New Construction by the Chicago Building Congress, the Friends of Downtown 2010 Best New Cultural Space Award; and the Midwest Construction Best of 2009 Awards for Outstanding Architectural Function and Aesthetic and Project of the Year in the area of Cultural.

When the Modern Wing subject is broached, Griffin’s eyes light up in delight. When the firm was approached by long-standing client, The Art Institute, to become the Architect of Record to implement the design for the new 264,000 square foot Modern Wing by Renzo Piano, Griffin

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knew that this was a golden opportunity for her firm. And, while IDEA was credited as Architect of Record, the team, headed by Charles Young and Bob Larsen, actually worked side by side with both the Art Institute and Renzo Piano's Building Workshop (RPBW). Over the course of the 10-year project, the core team, including Griffin, flew to Paris and Genoa multiple times per year to confer with RPBW. In addition managing the project website, she was very involved in the selection of the furniture, fixtures and equipment—the final touches that help shape the visitor's experience in the museum. "It was such an honor to work with Renzo Piano Building Workshop and the Art Institute on The Modern Wing as it was truly a collaborative project. Most Architects of Record do not have the opportunity to have much input on the overall project design, so our firm was able to have an impact on the finished product. It was very gratifying to be a part of a project that has garnered national and international recognition and to work with someone as acclaimed as Renzo Piano. I found him inspirational and personable, as he was the embodiment of someone who stays true to their craft." Griffin's source of pride from that project is seeing IDEA's name as Architect of Record etched into the cornerstone of the Modern Wing alongside that of Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

Despite the successes that she has experienced, Griffin is keenly aware of the gender and racial voids in her field. Says Griffin, "I would like to see more minorities, and specifically, more minority women in the field of architecture. When giving lectures to students in minority institutions, I educate and encourage them to consider architecture as a profession—many do not know it is even a field of study." Additionally, her passion for technology remains unabated. When few firms were utilizing websites as a method of communication between disparate parties, Griffin and IDEA hosted and administered the Art Institute's Modern Wing project site to ensure the project's confidentiality and integrity were maintained, and that the flow of information was instantaneous—an important aspect considering that the design team was located in three countries. This also proved an ingenious cost cutting move that saved the Art Institute hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Griffin and her partners look forward to expansive new projects that take the firm nationally and internationally. Currently, the firm is working on projects for the University of Chicago, the Chicago Public Library, the Public Building Commission of Chicago and the Anti-Cruelty Society. The firm also holds a term contract for General Services Administration Region 5 enabling them to respond to projects in a six-state area, specifically, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. "When our firm logo was created, the "E" in the acronym for our name and brand, IDEA, stood for Interactive Design Eight Architects. The word IDEA speaks volumes about who we are--we have creative and inspired IDEAS. Since that time, our staff has grown and we've taken on a multitude of projects that have tested and expanded our wealth of talent. So the "E" has now evolved into engaging, edgy, environments, enthused and exciting—words that reflect who are as firm and the type of projects that we like to undertake. We bring IDEAS together."