

YOUNG ARCHITECTS FORUM CONNECTION

September 2011

AIA - PGH YAF Leaders

By Sean Sheffler

The idea that architecture is an “old man’s profession” may seem like an outdated stereotype, but at AIA Pittsburgh’s 2007 Holiday Party, one would have certainly thought otherwise. In a crowd of party-goers that were predominantly middle-aged men, the diversity that has changed the face of the profession was almost nowhere to be found. The small group of young professionals sitting in the corner ended up feeling completely out of place, and, more importantly, looking for a way to change that.

The truth is that the 2007 Holiday Party wasn’t a fair representation of architectural demographics in the region. Pittsburgh in particular has a strong contingent of women that are working to shape the face of the profession – and how it is perceived – throughout Western Pennsylvania. Recent demographic information provided by the AIA-Pittsburgh office (staffed entirely by women, by the way) reveals that of the 524 architects currently listed as AIA members in good standing, 79 are women. In other words, 15% of Pittsburgh’s chapter is female, a figure that stands just slightly below the national average of 17% (based on AIA national demographics from May 2011).

Look outside of the AIA – to recent graduates, unregistered



professionals, and non-affiliated architects – and the numbers climb even higher. The strength and influence of women in architecture is even more apparent in the AIA-PGH Young Architects Forum, where two young women in particular have been instrumental in the group’s success.

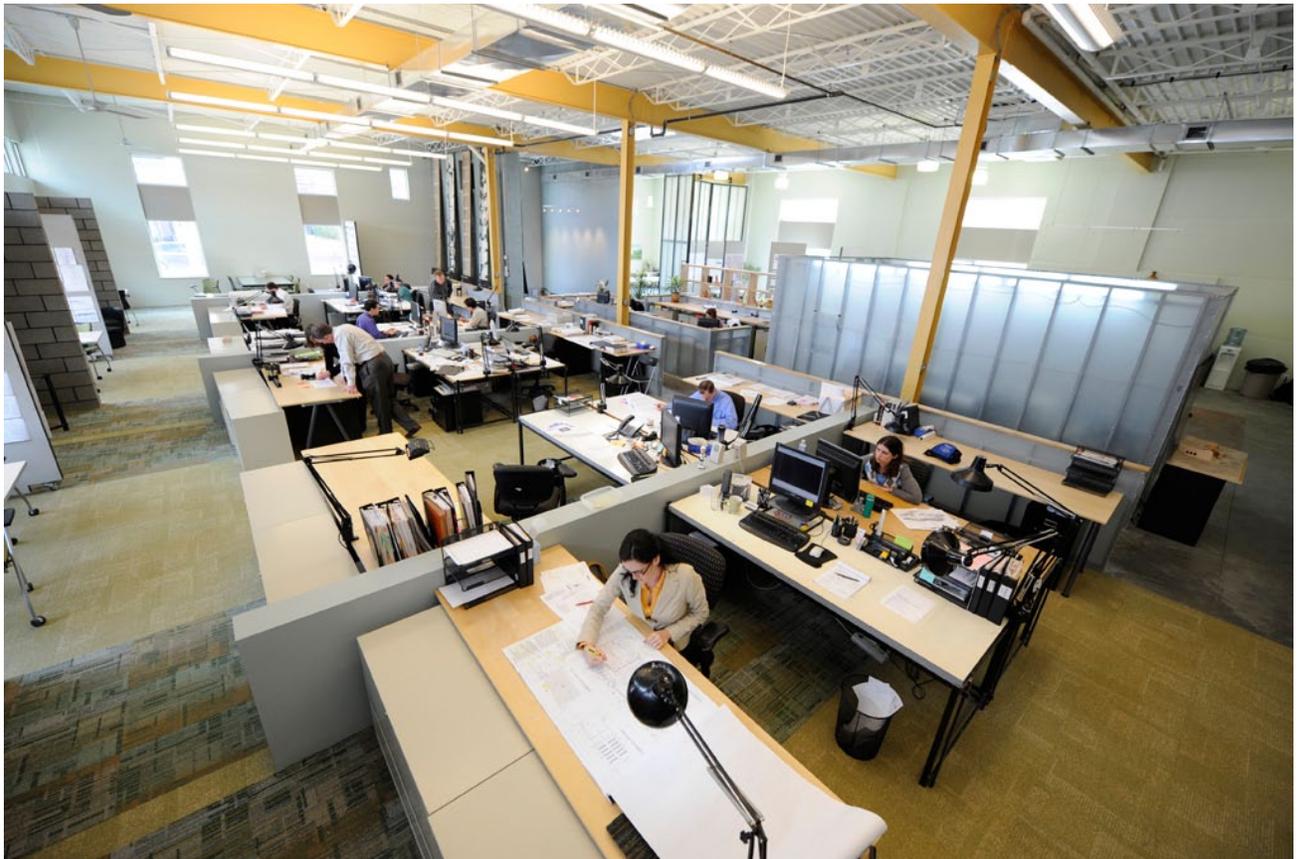
Melanie Buzgan Dower, was nominated to fill the Associate Director position, and took on the task of organizing interested parties into repurposing the Programming Committee, thus becoming the de facto leader of the YAF Steering Committee. Under Melanie’s leadership, the AIA-PGH YAF defined its own mission statement, and began developing programs to meet the needs and interests of

young architects in the region. More recently, the AIA-PGH YAF was able to create a plan for succession of leadership by defining officer positions, each with their own set of responsibilities and terms.

Two major strides towards celebration of young architects through the AIA were realized during Melanie’s term as chair. The first was the inclusion of a Young Architects Studio Competition in the annual “Design Pittsburgh” Awards Reception. The competition is open only to architects who have been working in the profession for ten years or less, giving young designers in the city an outlet for their creativity in a extremely prestigious setting. The other is a Champagne

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Toast at AIA Pittsburgh's annual Holiday Party, celebrating those young architects who achieved their architectural registration during that calendar year.

A native of Canton, Ohio, Melanie is a graduate of Kent State University, where she received a Master of Architecture and Master of Urban Design in 2005. She studied two separate semesters in Florence, Italy, for her graduate and undergraduate program, focusing on analytical

study of historic urban spaces and what made them successful. She also participated in the 2005 Shrinking Cities Charette held in Youngstown, Ohio, which focused on the issue of "What to do with a shrinking city" by planning a sustainable future for forgotten and abandoned urban neighborhoods. Melanie is a Staff Architect with Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, a LEED accredited professional, and is currently sitting for her exams to

become a Registered Architect. She is also pursuing credentials to become a Certified Planner. Currently serving as the AIA-PGH YAF Past Chair, Melanie is also nearing the end of three terms as AIA Pittsburgh's Associate Director. She continues to improve her leadership skills in the profession, while balancing that with personal life as she has begun an even more exciting role as Mom to her 15-month old daughter, Olivia.