

PITTSBURGH
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30 Under 30 award winner: Meet Nickie Cheung, Rothschild Doyno Collaborative

By Richard Cerilli

Nickie Cheung believes his work as an architect goes well beyond designing buildings and offices for clients. He sees architecture as a way to bring people together – and to alleviate long-entrenched societal problems.

His most memorable project so far as a staff II architect at Strip District-based Rothschild Doyno Collaborative illustrates his perspective. He was on a team working to redesign a former photo development office in Sharpsburg for the Pittsburgh office of Second Harvest, a national nonprofit that supports and operates food banks and thrift stores, to use as a community space.

“The space was really dark because it had been a photo studio and didn’t have a lot of windows,” Cheung said. “We added windows to let a lot of light in and turned it into a space that I think serves as a framework for Second Harvest to build their own identity and serve the community. There’s a senior center a few blocks away, and the space is designed to be a place for people to come together. Architecture is really about



photo by Jim Harris/PBT

designing spaces to house memories and build better relationships.”

Cheung’s passion for helping underserved communities through architecture extends to his volunteer efforts, as well. He is a founding member of a plan to establish a scholarship for minority architects he hopes will go public this summer, and he also donates his time as a member of the American Institute of Architects’

Pennsylvania Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

Tell us about your involvement with the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA). As a member of NOMA, I have been involved in each of the three action teams — Team Build, Team Design and Team Develop. Team Build works on empowering K-12 students with the tools to successfully pursue careers in architecture,

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Team Design uses design as a medium to advocate for and imagine a more just community, and Team Develop helps create opportunities to empower minority architects and architecture students through education and licensure. Last summer, I was one of the teachers that created a 15-minute video as a part of the Project Pipeline miniseries consisting of weekly educational architecture workshops to help students continue learning about architecture while maintaining quarantine and social distance due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This past February, I became the team build co-leader and will be helping to create the fourth annual Project Pipeline summer camp to teach architecture to K-12 students.

Why do you think it's important to work with youth organizations in Pittsburgh? Working with youth organizations strengthens the process of undoing a legacy of systemic inequality and provides Pittsburgh's youth the necessary support to pursue their dreams. Children of minority families and low-income households are more commonly relied on to support, economically and emotionally, their families to make ends meet. With this added responsibility placed on youth, youth organizations play vital roles in their communities by providing

safe and supportive spaces for kids to find friends with similar interests and to explore their own passions and ideas.

Tell us about your work with underserved communities.

Underserved communities are often intimidating and isolating as a result of negative media coverage and abandoned buildings being left in states of disrepair. However, I have learned that there is often a vibrant community of individuals who strive toward a brighter future in these neighborhoods, and as an architect, I strive to celebrate the community members that support, love and empathize with one another. As an architect, I have striven to find ways to create spaces for communities to celebrate their neighborhood identity and legacy, whether that is through the rehabilitation of existing abandoned buildings or by helping to create educational forums for community members about sustainability and architecture. I actively seek volunteer opportunities where I can provide support simply through my physical ability and also contribute my architectural expertise in community committees and designs.

What would you tell your future self 40 years from now? Keep trying to make your 10-year-old self proud.

BIOBOX

Nickie Cheung, staff II architect, Rothschild Doyno Collaborative

Age: 25

Birthplace: Boston

Education: Bachelor of architecture, Carnegie Mellon University

Family: Mother, Annie; father, Chue Lung; sister, Mandy; girlfriend, Sabrina Liu

Hobbies: Swimming, hiking, running, drawing

Donates time to: Starting a scholarship for minority architects

Recommendations:

Book: "Call Them by Their True Names," by Rebecca Solnit

Song: "I Will Stay," by Flux Pavilion

Take-out dining choice: Pho from Pho Minh

Exercise: Pre-pandemic: swimming and going to the gym; during pandemic: running and body weight exercises

Stay-sane tip: Reach out to somebody the moment you think of them to see how they're doing and tell them you appreciate them.