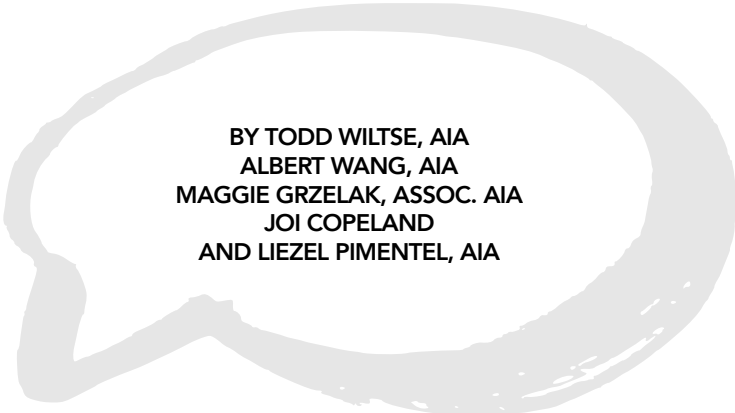




# How WJW Architects Created a Dialogue for Racial Justice and Equity

**F**or decades, Worn Jerabek Wiltse Architects has focused the majority of our design attention on the needs of underserved populations, including people with disabilities; families seeking affordable housing; health care and housing for seniors, veterans and those in need of addiction recovery and mental health services; along with holistic community redevelopment efforts. As a result of decades of disinvestment and institutional racism, a common factor for all these populations is that they inevitably intersect with communities of color.



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*“There has to be a conscious decision every day to sustain this conversation. Making a conscious choice every day, even when you’re tired, keeping that conversation going and pushing past your fatigue to sustain these discussions is so important. And when we sustain it, nobody’s tired: People who are oppressed aren’t tired; allies aren’t tired. The conversations are just happening because it becomes something we just do.”*

— Joi Copeland, Architectural Designer

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As a firm, we are proud of this design focus and also proud of our progress toward meaningful gender equity — 50 percent of partners and associates are women, up from 25 percent just four years ago. However, racial inclusivity and dialogue have proven more difficult.

The recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Dominique Fells and too many others to name, along with the resulting outpouring of protest in Chicago and across the nation, leave us grasping for answers. **We find that in spite of our experience designing for and within communities of color, we don’t know how to talk about race.** We don’t know enough about how our designs could better respond to race. We don’t know enough about how to address the systemic lack of diversity within the profession.

What we do know is that architects don’t have all the answers. That said, we want to strive to ask the right questions, listen to the voices of the community with an empathetic ear



WJW volunteers at the Kilpatrick Renaissance community garden in Portage Park, a development designed by the firm.

and then take action based on what we learn.

In the wake of the outrage over George Floyd’s murder, a group of young architects and architectural designers within our firm took the initiative to self-organize a forum for

dialogue and action on the issues of racial justice and equity. Building off the work of our grassroots Volunteer and Education committees, they created multiple forums for learning, listening, fundraising and direct action.

As leaders of the firm, the partners concluded that the most important role that we could play was to provide unflinching support and space for these endeavors, and to make it clear to the staff that these explorations support the core mission



*"We started the dialogue because we saw it as a necessary step to acknowledge the systemic racism, racial inequality and police brutality that are major issues in the United States. It was a small action that we hoped would lead to larger actions as individuals in educating ourselves on racial equity, justice and policing, creating ongoing conversations about these topics and working towards concrete actions and change that are so desperately needed. The dialogue has led us to think about these issues as they relate to us as individuals and as an architecture firm in Chicago."*

— Maggie Grzelak, AIA, Architectural Designer



*"Consider that we have a relationship with history and that history is our maker. This means that history provides us with richness, but it also gives us burden, and burden is a difficult bag to carry. So, while we may not be 'responsible' for the past, our relationship with history means that we are 'accountable' for it."*

— Albert Wang, AIA, Project Architect

of the firm. A top-down exercise or pronouncement from management would not have had the profound effect that we've already seen from this bottom-up engagement. While we know that the 24 people that comprise one architecture firm cannot formulate solutions for all manner of deep-seated societal problems, we are heartened by the courage our younger thought-leaders are demonstrating in facing these challenges.

Below are excerpts from the ongoing internal dialogue, curated by Maggie Grzelak, architectural designer, and Liezel Pimentel, project architect. The focus to date is on the development of questions, more than the generation of answers. Architects

love process: Consider this a window into how our firm is engaging in the transformational processes currently underway, as architects and as community members.

**How do we begin a discussion, as a firm, about racism, equity and social justice?**

- Just start! We started with an all-firm Zoom call, not knowing where it would go and what form it would take.
- Recognize that this problem isn't new.
- Speak up about the inequities we notice and experience.
- Provide a platform for other voices to share their experiences.

- Seek out information that we find uncomfortable or that may even offend us to understand the scope of the problem.

**How do we sustain that conversation?**

- Have a champion and distribute the load to rotating staff.
- Keep talking: Every two weeks, we hold a scheduled meeting for those who want to participate to continue the conversation.
- Create a Google Doc that includes books on race, justice and policing; organizations to support that focus on racial equity, police reform and an end to police brutality; places to donate, volunteer opportuni-

ties and updated lists of demonstrations and protests going on throughout Chicago.

- Create a designated chat channel for discussion on these topics, activism and education.

**How can we as a firm begin educating ourselves, and what actions can we take?**

- In meetings, have a member of the WJW team lead a discussion on a particular topic that may include articles, news clips and conversations with individuals outside of the office who are involved in making real change.
- Share actions related to local advocacy and activism.

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*“The hardest part was knowing the best approach to start the conversation. We quickly realized that there is no ‘best approach’ — it was simply something that needed to be done, all of the awkward and uncomfortable moments included. The dialogue is about unlearning and actively seeking to be antiracist through actions and conversation, and the dialogue is only the first step.”*

— Maggie Grzelak, Assoc. AIA, Architectural Designer

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*“The conversation is taking shape in various forms — emails, discussions, article reviews, book clubs, podcast recommendations, protest schedules, journaling, etc. Knowing this isn’t a new problem, we’re analyzing past experiences through a critical racial lens. We’re speaking up about the inequities we see and that we unintentionally impose on others. And most importantly, we are listening. By giving minority voices the platform and acknowledging there are other lives lived beyond our own we can absorb, unlearn and advocate.”*

— Liezel Pimentel, AIA, Project Architect

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- Gather and document lived experiences with racism and intersectional forms of oppression.

**How can that discussion begin to inform our practice?**

- Critique the current process of gathering and implementing community and resident input.
- Look for opportunities for increased community engagement before, during and after design.

**What does it mean for a project not to end when the building is built?**

- Continued involvement and volunteering.

- Keeping up-to-date to provide a competent and functional end-product that is continually evolving; it takes research to be at the forefront.
- For conceptual projects, such as the Peace Boulevard design for the 2017 Architecture Biennial, incorporate a diversity and equity lens in the submission and dialogue to advocate for the inclusion of all voices at the table.

**As a firm, how can we advocate for and take actions toward a more equitable future for the practice of architecture?**

- Seek opportunities to mentor students.

- Promote equitable hiring practices.
- Use the Women of WJW group as a forum to think about the issues of being a woman in architecture through an intersectional lens.
- Work with organizations that advocate for diversity in the profession — NOMA, Hip Hop Architecture Camp, ACE Mentor Program.
- Advocate for industry-related policies that support social and racial equity.
- Leverage the firm’s experience in engaging with and designing for underserved communities to advocate for justice.

**Questions for further discussion:**

- How can our advocacy or action further advance policies that support equitable housing policies and antiracist policies to benefit the residents of the buildings we design? What organizations are already doing this work and how can we support them?
- What can we take from what we know as architects practicing in Chicago to engage our non-architect friends and family in these discussions?
- What does it mean to be an antiracist architecture firm? **CA**