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Industry leaders are continuing to focus on equity and inclusion in the workplace.

LGBTQIA+ Faces of the Workplace Design Industry

by Anna Zappia

In a time of unprecedented challenge, designers and architects continue to focus on inclusion and equity, highlighting the experiences of people who identify across the spectrum of genders and sexual orientations. I recently spoke with industry leaders who shared their perspectives on cultivating a diverse representation in the A&D community.

How can we cultivate diverse representation and inclusion in the A&D community?

Ricardo Nabholz, creative director at TPG Architecture (he/him)

The A&D community is comprised of multiple identities based on socially determined categories including gender, race and ethnicity, age, ability status, profession, socio-economic status, and sexuality. Some of these identities are more outwardly apparent to colleagues and others are less visible, such as one's sexuality or gender identity. Each person's unique workplace identity represents the distinctive combination of their visible and shared identities. People are often defined by others based on the identities that are valued and privileged.

Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities are often still perceived as non-normal or as deviating from social expectations. Because of this, when someone is "out," their LGBTQIA+ identity becomes a central focus in the ways other people define and think about them.



Ricardo Nabholz, creative director at TPG Architecture (he/him).

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This perception of abnormality can be subtle and present in everyday interactions, such as the assumptions of gender and heterosexuality in conversations. This can translate into awkward social interactions in the workplace where LGBTQIA+ individuals might feel compelled to remain silent.

Richard Bliss, LEED AP, studio design principal, Ted Moudis Associates (he/him)

Ultimately, we can cultivate greater diversity, representation, and inclusion in the design community simply by respecting and understanding everyone in our industry. Individuals who bring great talent to the architecture and design community deserve to be treated with respect, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. I've never had to conceal who I am while working at Ted Moudis Associates, which is a testament to our respectful and inclusive company culture.

I'm grateful to work in a safe and supportive environment for over nine years that embraces everyone and makes them feel welcomed despite any

differences. I keep a photo of my husband and myself on my desk, and no one has ever given it a second thought. That sentiment rings true for anyone just joining our firm, which feels like being part of a family. As workplace designers, we have the ability to create built environments that support the needs of their occupants. As friends and colleagues in the workplace design industry, we deliver the same amount of thought and consideration toward respecting each other and appreciating everyone's skill sets and contributions.

We are seeing some interesting initiatives across all sectors that support the LGBTQIA+ community. Are there any in architecture and design that you look to as a great example?

Marlo Pratt, associate, experiential graphic design leader, MHTN Architects (they/she)

There has been a dramatic shift in support and advocacy for the LGBTQIA+ community within the last six years, most notably the Marriage Equality Act and added class protections. The increased awareness has

had a ripple effect across workplaces, with policies being put in place to be more inclusive. My own workplace has made a culture shift within the written language of policies, and an examination of how the physical space can support diversity. Important language was added and additional leave created for all genders and partners in instances of births and adoptions, bereavement, and family sick leave.

Additionally, we recently remodeled our new office space to include all-gender restrooms and created more private spaces that support a variety of individual needs, including a wellness room for medical/lactation and sound-proof phone booths for private conversations. Being able to take a phone call privately from a same-sex partner, not having to select a gender to use the restroom, and the ability to see to medical needs outside of a toilet stall in a gendered space all give the users choice on what aspects of their life they want on display and when. This alleviates the mental energy that can accompany navigating a gendered and heteronormative environment.



Richard Bliss, LEED AP, studio design principal at Ted Moudis Associates (he/him).



Marlo Pratt, associate, experiential graphic design leader at MHTN Architects (they/she).

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What are some of your favorite organizations that support the LGBTQIA+ community?

Richard Bliss: I would love to give a shout-out to three non-profit organizations that are continuously helping the LGBTQIA+ community.

God's Love We Deliver is an organization that ensures people living with HIV/AIDS, or any individual in need, receives nutritious, high-quality meals. This organization's incredibly generous staff and volunteers provide services free to clients, regardless of their income. People who are less fortunate should not have to forfeit good nutrition due to lack of financial resources.

Advocating for safety and inclusion in the education system, GLSEN works to ensure that LGBTQIA+ students are able to learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment. This organization envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. Since 1990, GLSEN has improved conditions for LGBTQIA+ students across the United States. Their programs and resources foster solidarity, support, and personal growth.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, commonly called The Center, is truly the heart and home of New York City's LGBTQIA+ community. Every year, The Center provides a gathering space for community groups to bring people together, whether to make connections, find support systems, or take advantage of the organization's many resources.

Do you think we are seeing more advocacy, and what are some ways that allies can get involved?

Marlo Pratt: While there has been considerable change on a national level, barriers exist to social acceptance. As an advocate, you are in a unique position to be a catalyst for change. Allies can navigate workplace cultures while advocating for others who don't share the same platforms. Include those in the LGBTQIA+ community who would like to be involved, as representation and visibility matter, and respect the privacy of those in the community who don't wish to participate.

Some places to start are:

Review and update policies with gender inclusive language. This can include parental leave, family bereavement, and dress codes.

Examine cultural practices unique to your place of work. For example, are personal items such as family photos habitually displayed? Do invitation plus-ones include gender exclusive language?

Ask for and use appropriate pronouns.

As a workplace ally, some things to take into consideration are:

Coming out is a never-ending process that starts again with every new person we meet. Do not out a LGBTQIA+ person unless they have given you permission to do so. Safety is still a concern for those of us in the LGBTQIA+ community, and geographic locations and workplace cultures create invisible barriers to navigate.

Look to promote a diverse population of all genders, races, ages, and abilities. Visibility and representation matters. It sends a clear message that your workplace celebrates the uniqueness of all individuals and offers a culture where people can thrive.

As we return to the workplace, we want to support collaboration and teamwork with LGBTQIA+ colleagues. What are some ways we can do that?

Ricardo Nabholz: We should work to normalize LGBTQIA+ identities by decentering heteronormativity in conversations. For example, asking about someone's spouse, as opposed to a person's wife or husband, normalizes the possibility that they might be in a same-sex relationship; indicates that the person asking is receptive to LGBTQ people; and, therefore, provides the space in the conversation for their LGBTQIA+ colleague to freely share about themselves.

Another example is to normalize the sharing of gender pronouns in a non-confrontational medium, such as including one's pronouns in email signatures. This simple step normalizes transgender identities, helps to decrease the reliance on assumptions about gender, and indicates support for transgender colleagues. These two approaches can be important parts of a larger strategy for increasing support for LGBTQIA+ colleagues and creating a more inclusive workplace environment. ■