

Career and the profession

Elevated Conversations, Tamarah Begay, AIA

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AIA's *Elevated Conversations* series features architects from diverse backgrounds and highlights their perspectives on their career paths, changes they've seen in the profession, the importance of diversity and inclusion, and more. To celebrate Native American Heritage Month, we spoke with Tamarah Begay, AIA, founder of *Indigenous Design Studio + Architecture*. Begay is the first Navajo woman licensed architect and an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico.

What inspired you to become an architect?

When I was young, I wanted to be a football player. Growing up with my dad, he'd set me next to the TV and teach me about football. I used to carry a little football around with me all the time. When I told him I wanted to play football, he told me, "Oh no, you can't do that."

I found out what architecture was soon after that. In elementary school, I remember a presentation of all different professions; there were firefighters, doctors, police officers, and nurses. There was a white male with a black suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with a roll of drawings and a model. He was the last to present, and I remember being very interested in his model. He presented himself as an architect. I went home, and I told my dad I wanted to be an architect, and he told me "Oh no, you can't be."

Growing up on the Navajo Reservation, the plan was that I was going to go to college, get a degree and sociology and come back to the community to help people. I went to school at the University of New Mexico to do that, but I

always caught myself walking over to the School of Architecture. I wasn't disinterested in sociology; I think it brings a lot of dynamics to architecture. Eventually, when I graduated, my father didn't know I graduated with an architecture degree. He gave me a look that said, "Oh wow, you did it."

It took me until I was really started in my professional career to realize what he meant when he said I can't be an architect. I was blinded by the stereotype of what an architect looked like. I remember early on, I'd be sitting in meetings, and I'd be the only person asked to take notes. The coffee would be gone, and I'd be asked, "Oh can you go make some more coffee?"

When I'd tell them that I didn't know how to make coffee, I'd get a disgusted look. I'd explain it to them, and they'd look at me like I wasn't part of the team. I always looked at it in a sports analogy, like football. I wanted to be part of the team, but they wouldn't let me be a part of the team, but I wasn't embraced in that way. I was at a firm that used me to get jobs, and when it would come in, they'd give it to a male counterpart. I was frustrated; I had ideas about design and how I wanted to approach it, but they wouldn't listen, so the ultimatum became, "Coach if you don't play me, then I'm out of here."

So, I set out to make my own team. I created a firm that is impactful to not just indigenous communities, but I want non-indigenous people to learn from the indigenous worldview. Taking those values and implementing them into the design process, means respect for Mother Earth and going back to traditional values. We're thinking about connections to the world, connections to language, culture, and tradition. If more people took on that perspective, and were committed to having diverse voices heard, we'd be on a better path with some of the biggest issues out there, like climate change.

Who were some of your biggest role models and mentors when starting your career?

My biggest inspiration were the female role models in my family. I had a grandmother who was a medicine woman; she'd talk to us about living in this world and leaving a path and making a difference, not just for yourself, but for your family, your community, and your people. There's such a big female presence in my family; they've all paved the path for me.

When I was in school, I'd research female Native American architects and there were not many. I wouldn't look to big architects; I'd look to local architects and a lot of our indigenous architecture. I'd go to school and look at Pueblo architecture, like Chaco Canyon. These people built small urban cities, and those buildings still stand. There's a lot of thinking and planning about how it was laid out based on Cardinal directions, the seasons, and the wind. If we can start to think about architecture like that today, then I think we can make a difference in issues like climate change and really designing with nature. A lot of these indigenous structures are great, and I often wonder why they aren't studied more in architecture schools.

We need to look at that and take a step back. We can learn a lot. So much of my inspiration came from understanding the history, culture, language, and traditions and implementing that, and coming up with planning principles that aren't exactly literal interpretations. The meaning behind the tradition and the stories is where you can learn a lot about architecture.

What advice do you have for young people from indigenous communities who may be looking to become architects?

I am teaching a graduate studio at the University of New Mexico this semester. A lot of people from indigenous communities don't get their voices heard very often, and I always tell those students to speak up. I recently gathered all the indigenous students in the UNM architecture program, and there were only like 12 of them. I asked if they knew each other, and they didn't!

I told them to talk to each other. They were all from similar communities; I told them they should talk about that, communicate with each other, ask questions, and don't be afraid to think about their identity and culture. I tell them to include that as part of their design.

There are too many nonindigenous people telling indigenous communities what they need. The government might apply a design or tell us what our schools should look like. I tell those students that we need to speak up and guide what architecture for indigenous communities should be. I'd tell young people to speak up, especially when it comes to their community.

Why is diversity especially important in architecture?

We're a very diverse country, and we need architecture that people can be stimulated by. People are losing their culture and their heritage. Why doesn't architecture become a beacon for us trying to learn about our history and represent who we are?

If you could change something about the field of architecture with a snap of your finger, what would it be?

I'd want the perception of architecture to change for people around the world. When someone thinks of an architect, the first thing that pops into their head is a white male. If we can change that, we have a long way to go, but explaining that there is more than architecture to drawing would be a good thing.

Sometimes I walk construction sites, and people will ask, "where's the architect?" When they find out it's me, they're often shocked that I'm a woman. I ask what they think an architect looks like, and they have no idea how to respond. It's important to change the perception of what architects do and what they look like.

I got introduced to architecture at a young age, and it was portrayed as a field for men. That's still often the perception today. I think it's hard for people to see women climbing up the ladder, becoming professional architects, and becoming principals in firms.

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