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# BANKER & TRADESMAN

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## Harvard Designers Hope To Address Social Justice

By Colleen M. Sullivan

Banker &amp; Tradesman Staff

In a sometimes emotional and personal panel discussion, a group of designers and architects met at Harvard last night to discuss the impact of design and development on social justice and how their skills could better be used to bring about more a more equitable society.

Jointly sponsored by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, The Loeb Fellowship and the African American Student Union, the event was inspired by the recent protests in Ferguson, Mo. and elsewhere in the hope of generating a dialogue about what designers, architects and planners could do to remediate the impact of practices like red-lining and segregation that linger in communities today.

A panel discussion moderated by Michael Hays, an architecture professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, featured contributions from Kimberly Dowdell, an architect and currently a fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, Theresa Hwang, director of community design and planning for the Skid Row Housing Trust in Los Angeles, Seitu Jones, artist and former Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and Liz Ogbu, founder of Studio O and a consultant who works with planners to help design projects in urban communities around the globe.

Hwang and Ogbu both discussed what their work had taught them about approaching communities with sensitivity and making sure residents truly felt a part of the process when implementing a new project in their neighborhoods. Urban planners need to broaden their definition of design to try to tackle social justice programs, Hwang said, referring to her work in Los Angeles' Skid Row neighborhood to try to develop permanent housing that also addressed social service needs.

"We're trying to demonstrate how to use design to redistribute power," she said.

Ogbu discussed the importance of fully engaging with residents before even beginning the design process, discussing how on one of her projects her group worked with a story-telling nonprofit to solicit stories from residents about their neighborhood's past and their hopes for its future.

Dowdell talked about how her own personal experience of growing up in Detroit informed her passion for architecture: She shared a photo of her grandparents proudly posing on the steps of their home on her aunt's wedding day. That same home, where Dowdell had also lived as a child, was later looted and condemned by the city, before being torn down just a few years ago. While trying to understand and help revitalize cities like her own hometown was part of what had helped drive her into her profession, she has come to feel that design alone "ain't going to fix Detroit," and her more recent work and her studies as a fellow were aimed at creating multidisciplinary organizations that brought together not only designers and architects but also planners, developers and financiers to help address large-scale urban problems.

The panel discussion was followed by facilitated group brainstorming session, which the group hopes will be a basis for ongoing talks and events.