

January 8, 2024
AIA Seattle JE:DI Council

Subject: Accessibility and Inclusion at AIA24

Call to Action

AIA Seattle's Justice and Equity for Diversity and Inclusion (JE:DI) Council is writing to AIA24 Conference Organizers to urge the AIA to prioritize virtual access for all upcoming conferences, including AIA24. If that is not possible, we emphasize the need for increased transparency, communicating considerations and decisions made regarding virtual delivery to members at the time of registration.

AIA Seattle is committed to identifying, naming, and dismantling systemic discrimination within the architecture community in order to nurture universal inclusion and fairness in the built environment, for the communities we impact, both locally and nationally. Our JE:DI Council is a resource to the board, staff and committee leaders of AIA Seattle in the planning and execution of programs and services for AIA members and the public, as related to the topics of justice, diversity, inclusion, and equity.

It is our understanding that AIA National is not currently planning to provide a hybrid/virtual option for the National AIA Conference to be held in Washington DC in 2024. In doing so, we also recognize the accessibility barriers that this decision constructs. These barriers include (but are not limited to): location access, financial access, disability access including immunocompromised access, flexibility/anatomy of work schedule, etc. Beyond that, there is concern that providing registration only for in-person participants sets a tone that does not consider carbon emissions or the impact this has on equitability for members.

As a leader for the profession, we advocate that AIA National provide a hybrid registration option for members to provide a larger access to the keynote, seminars, practicums, and continuing education. Speaking to our own membership, we have a few examples of why this is an imperative petition.

Michele M. Hill AIA is currently serving as President of AIA Seattle. In this leadership position, she would normally attend conferences such as the Leadership Summit and AIA24 as a representative/delegate of our component. However, Michele is medically restricted from air travel and from attending large, in-person events due to being immunocompromised. Her work advocating for disability inclusion is a key part of the reason our chapter is continuing to provide virtual access to our programs and continuing education. She has spoken locally and nationally about disability inclusion and belonging in the architecture profession. It is particularly unfair and inequitable that she is excluded from attending AIA National's conferences due to her disability and lack of accommodations via virtual access. There are so few examples of successful architects with disabilities; by excluding her and others like her, these individuals who enrich our profession will remain invisible.

2023 was a financially challenging year for many AEC firms. Rio Namiki AIA, an active member of our component, was not excluded from the financial burden. Beginning in the first quarter of 2023, Rio's firm entered austerity measures to reduce overhead costs, one of which was an annual professional development stipend. The stipend's purpose was to further their education and one of the ways that she paid for study materials and conferences. A professional conference like the AIA National conference is an important event but out of reach for many like Rio. It is especially taxing to those who face economic and physical hardship such as those derived from race, gender, disability, pregnancy, age, etc. A three day event can cost as much as \$1,800 to \$3,000. For example, a AIA24 in Washington DC would cost:

- \$600 to \$1,200 for the registration
- \$700 to \$1,000 for transportation
- \$300 to \$600 for the accommodations
- \$150 to \$180 for food and beverage
- Loss of wage or PTO for 3 or more days, if an employer can't cover the hours to attend the conference and travel.

Rio chose to forgo the A'23 conference in San Francisco, but managed to attend another conference that felt like the price and the effort was justifiable - the National NOMA 2023 Conference. The virtual attendance was a fraction of the cost compared to the in-person at \$225. Though the content was more limited than in-person attendance, Rio was able to work part time and also attend many virtual sessions. The virtual participation allowed her to gain knowledge that she could bring back to her work, be inspired, and connect with fellow colleagues.

Her experience is one of many - lack of access and the affordability could hinder those who are already marginalized, wedging a deeper socio-economic divide that persists in the profession. The ability to attend AIA conferences virtually would ensure that the profession remains equitable and inclusive, uplifting those who have been marginalized and hearing from those who we need to hear the most.

Matthew Hagen AIA, an active member and leader of our component, did attend the A'23 conference and when attending noticed the capabilities of the conference. Real time captions were provided at some of the events, particularly ones that included topics of accessibility or the main keynotes. The conference also included many technical and elaborate productions. He found it hard to believe that simply providing videos of the seminars and slide materials was an impossible hurdle by the conference production. At a minimum, providing materials and video of the seminars would serve as a valuable asset to continue educational growth in our community and provide greater access to all of our members.

Taking into account the real life examples, the Code of Ethics, and general themes of Equity, Diversity, and Belonging indicated on the AIA's own website make a strong case for improving our own

organization, components, and members. We strongly recommend taking action to make the premier event of our organization as inclusive as possible.

The first Canon of the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct names that not only should we expand and improve our skills, but also should not engage in discrimination:

Canon I: General Obligations

Members should maintain and advance their knowledge of the art and science of architecture, respect the body of architectural accomplishment, contribute to its growth, thoughtfully consider the social and environmental impact of their professional activities, and exercise learned and uncompromised professional judgment.

E.S. 1.1 Knowledge and Skill: Members should strive to improve their professional knowledge and skill.

Rule 1.401 Members shall not engage in harassment or discrimination in their professional activities on the basis of race, religion, national origin, age, disability, caregiver status, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

The AIA National Conference is a premier event to expand and improve our skills, and without a possible virtual means of participating, our immunocompromised, financially burdened, less time available members cannot attend.

Canons IV and V clearly state we should have an equitable space and work in fairness:

Canon IV: Obligation to the Profession.

Members should uphold the integrity and dignity of the profession.

E.S. 4.1 Honesty and Fairness: Members should pursue their professional activities with honesty and fairness.

CANON V: Obligations to Colleagues

Members should respect the rights and acknowledge the professional aspirations and contributions of their colleagues.

E.S. 5.1 Professional Environment: Members should provide their colleagues and employees with a fair and equitable working environment, compensate them fairly, and facilitate their professional development.

Rule 5.101 Members shall treat their colleagues and employees with mutual respect, and provide an equitable working environment.

It is hard to see how fairness or an equitable space is provided when it is impossible for all of our members to participate in the conference.

Canon VI reminds us of the necessity of working to respond to the climate crisis:

CANON VI: Obligations to the Environment

Members should recognize and acknowledge the professional responsibilities they have to promote sustainable design and development in the natural and built environments and to implement energy and resource conscious design.

E.S. 6.1 Energy conservation: Members should set ambitious performance goals for greenhouse gas emission reduction with their clients for each project.

We cannot deny the fact that travel to a conference does not have a significant impact on our greenhouse emissions. Providing a virtual means of attending would provide an opportunity for our members to reduce their carbon footprint and work in tandem with Canon VI.

Furthermore, we have seen other organizations present a successful hybrid conference structure/virtual lectures, including the recent livestream option for Kimberly Dowdell's inauguration as president on December 15, 2023. Beyond our members' experience with A'23 mentioned above, in fall of 2023 the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) provided their members with the option of virtual conference registration. This registration gave access to a number of keynotes, workshops, and seminars at one-third of the in-person conference fees. Many of these opportunities had continuing education units associated with them as well. NOMA, which today has about 3,565 members, has always been a resilient and creative organization in the space of virtual conference delivery. They recognize the importance of providing access to their content knowing that they are directly reaching the minority group in the profession of architecture. It concerns us that the AIA, with over 98,000 members, does not consider the same for their membership - minority or otherwise.

There is a clear need to have a virtual component provided for our national conference, and any conference affiliated with the AIA and its member components. We advocate for virtual accessibility as a means to remove barriers of geographic distance, significant financial costs, and time limited access to provide an equitable experience for all members, including ones who are immunocompromised, have a disability, and/or who are conscious of their carbon impact. We urge the AIA to offer a virtual conference opportunity so members who cannot attend in person can still access the information. This virtual/hybrid access would serve as a solution that not only meets the needs of our members, but the ethics we strive to achieve every day, and will give the AIA an opportunity to continue to act as a leader in addressing the pressing issues facing our profession and society.