

Education

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The Future Belongs to Woodbury

To where? This university in Southern California has a little-known architecture school with big ambitions. Most of its students belong to a minority group and are the first in their families to attend college. The school has received millions of federal dollars to expand access even further. Does Woodbury exemplify a demographic revolution in architecture?

If you're looking for it, which seems unlikely, you will find the main campus of the Woodbury University School of Architecture on the site of a former convent in a nondescript section of California's San Fernando Valley, where Burbank and Los Angeles meet. Though the back lot of Universal Studios is just a few minutes' drive away, this isn't the landscape of Hollywood's dream machine.

The landmark closest to the school is the weedy, fenced-in tarmac of Bob Hope Airport, a regional alternative to LAX. Woodbury may be in the great trough that is the San Fernando Valley, but it's in the valley of working-class immigrant families and, like, totally *not* in the cliché valley of airhead blondes driving pink Mercedes convertibles.

Woodbury's physical remoteness is a near-perfect metaphor for its invisibility within the architectural profession. When I asked a series of East Coast and even West Coast practitioners what they knew of the place, the answer was, uniformly, "nothing." Even the local indie paper, *LA Weekly*, recently called it the "best architectural school you've never heard of." The closest thing to a celebrity on this campus (Woodbury has another, in San Diego) is probably visiting assistant professor Barbara Bestor, AIA, a cheerful doyenne of bohemian design who is something of a Los Angeles institution—but decidedly not a "starchitect."

Woodbury, in fact, is fairly new to the architecture game. Though the school recently celebrated its 125th anniversary, it has only had an accredited architecture program since 1994.

Woodbury's physical remoteness is also a pretty good metaphor for the status of its minority student population within the larger architectural profession. According to the AIA's most recent survey of firms, 19 percent of architecture-firm staff are minorities. By contrast, at Woodbury, roughly 70 percent of the 600-odd architecture students are members of a minority group: 37 percent are Hispanic, 14 percent are Armenian, 17 percent are Asian, and 32 percent are listed as "other." Woodbury may be the only architecture school in the United States where "other"

means white. On a recent afternoon, a salsa beat emanated from amplifiers on the school's grassy quad, as sorority sisters raised money for charity by selling churros and horchata.

The population at Woodbury is broadly representative of the valley community that the school calls home. But it is also indicative of the direction that American higher education—including architectural education—is taking as a whole. Woodbury, along with several other institutions, including Cal Poly Pomona, the University of Houston, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, finds itself at the forefront of a new trend: the rise of the minority architecture student, and in particular of the Hispanic architecture student. In fact, Hispanics now make up 14 percent of all architecture students, according to a 2009 report by the National Architectural Accrediting Board. In coming years, that number is likely to rise significantly, as the percentage of minorities in the general collegiate population expands. Projections indicate that by 2015 the number of high school students of Hispanic descent will have risen by about 50 percent in just 10 years, and Asian students, by 24 percent.

The makeup of Woodbury University's student body has qualified it as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), a governmental designation that makes it eligible for federal grants. In 2009, the architecture school received a five-year, \$2.8 million grant from the Department of Education to expand its graduate program. With that funding, the school has already built a pair of digital-fabrication laboratories—the second is at the satellite campus in San Diego—and the money will allow it to expand a computer lab, provide stipends and research money for faculty, and devote \$100,000 a year to scholarships for high-performing students.

In 2009, the school received another three-year, \$600,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to support the Arid Lands Institute, a think tank run by designers Hadley and Peter Arnold that is devoted to the development of “designers and leaders who will be resourceful and inventive in addressing water scarcity in the west.” Woodbury's designation as an HSI made it eligible for the grant, but it was the school's small size and nimble administration that made the innovative program possible. “We went from an idea to getting chartered in six months,” Hadley Arnold says. “You can't do that at a bigger university.”

“At Woodbury—and I'm going to try not to make this sound like a cliché—there's an appreciation that students show toward being taught that's not very evident at some of the more established schools, where it's expected. Here it's an adventure, it's exciting. Our students are very hungry. They've struggled really hard to get here,” says Ingalill Wahlroos-Ritter, AIA, who has taught at Yale University, Cornell University, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) and is now chair of Woodbury's undergraduate architecture program. “It's tremendously rewarding to be part of the transformation that you see around you every day.”

That sense of mission and accomplishment is a common thread among the school's faculty. “We call it the Woodbury Miracle,” says Norman Millar, AIA, a gentle bear of a man who became chair of the architecture program in 1999 and is now the school's dean. “We get these students, and ... we open their eyes.”

In fact, about 70 percent of Woodbury students are the first in their families to attend college, and many are unprepared for the academic rigors of a collegiate education. “Our students have to do remedial math and writing in their first year,” Millar says. Special emphasis is placed on writing, which helps them to “develop their ideas and to make critical arguments.” **In 2008, Woodbury’s B.Arch. program received a citation from *Excelencia in Education*, a national organization that recognizes institutions for accelerating the achievement of Latino students.** The six-year graduation rate for all Woodbury students entering in 2004 was 47 percent; Hispanic B.Arch. students graduated at the same rate, which is a bit short of the national average of 57 percent.

The typical student at an “elite” institution is the child of professionals who has come to architecture through some combination of exposure via parents, school, travel, and native artistic inclination. Woodbury’s working-class students often come to the field after watching their family build a home, or through parents who work in the construction industry.

“I decided [to be an architect] between eighth and ninth grade, when my family’s home was being built,” says Joseph Aguilar, 20, a second-year student from nearby Riverside, Calif., whose mother is a corrections officer. Jesus De Anda, 26, a third-year student also from Riverside, became interested in an architecture career while watching his father, a construction worker, deliver building materials to job sites. He will be the first member of his family to graduate from a university, but when he does he expects to be over \$120,000 in debt, an uncomfortable prospect in the current economy.

Though Woodbury offers a variety of scholarships and work-study opportunities to its students (De Anda is an assistant in the school woodshop), it is a private institution, and tuition is considerably higher than at comparable public universities. A year’s undergraduate tuition at Woodbury is currently \$29,132; at Cal Poly, in-state tuition comes to \$4,807.

To keep tuition costs down, many Woodbury students transfer in to the school after a stint at a local community college. De Anda came after two years at Riverside Community College. Fidelina Ramirez, 25, a fifth-year undergraduate whose interest in architecture stemmed from her high school years, when she helped her father launch a business designing recycling centers, transferred in after two years at Cerritos College, a community college near her home in La Mirada, a Los Angeles County suburb.

Ramirez was also accepted at the more prestigious SCI-Arc, but Woodbury’s willingness to accept her work at Cerritos was the difference. “Woodbury gave me credit for basically everything,” she says. “I didn’t start at the bottom like I would have had to at SCI-Arc.”

The Arid Lands Institute is, in its own way, an extension of the university’s commitment to the heritage of the school’s community. “Very frequently our students are grandchildren of farmers, and they’ve been raised in a completely urban ecology,” says Hadley Arnold, who speaks of her program with great intensity and greater velocity. “I think the students have really engaged with a new idea of citizenship. They’re relating to landscape as a valid field ... that is not just produce-a-building.”

The students do, in fact, seem to be committed to something more than just the form-driven, capital-A Architecture for which Los Angeles is famous. (Though you will find a good number who are interested in just that.) “The professors were interested in places that I was raised around,” says Jeremy Delgado, 27, a recent Woodbury graduate who studied with the Arnolds in the Arid Lands Institute. “This really impressed me because my impression of architecture at the time was that only rich people would hire an architect.” Delgado now runs his own small design studio, Friendly Office, with an emphasis on public service projects.

Louis Molina, a participating adjunct who grew up in the valley, may be the only Hispanic architecture faculty member on Woodbury’s Burbank campus. You might expect Molina to be somewhat resentful of this, and suspicious of his colleagues as do-gooding interlopers, but that would be to dramatically misinterpret Molina, a sparkplug of a man who seems congenitally optimistic. “It’s something we need to improve,” he says of the lack of Hispanic faculty, “but ... it offers me an opportunity to be a mentor or role model with the student body.”

Strolling the concrete paths that lead across the Woodbury campus, with the California sun shining and a Latin beat hanging in the air, it’s hard not to share his enthusiasm. “The youth of today is great,” Millar says. “They’re agile, they care about stuff, they know how to use machines, they’re tolerant.” At Woodbury, they are the cresting wave of the future.