

Career and the profession

# Public sector offers advantages for small and women-led firms

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, June 21, 2018



RADA DOYTCHEVA, FAIA, LED A PANEL OF ARCHITECTS AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS THAT DISCUSSED INEQUITIES FACING WOMEN AND SMALL FIRM OWNERS AT THE AIA CONFERENCE ON ARCHITECTURE 2018.

An A'18 session raised awareness about inequalities facing women and small firm architects, and what public agencies are doing to

## help.

Small firms are often faced with an uneven playing field. So are women in architecture. At the A18 session "The Missing 32 Percent (Women) & Missing Small Architects," a panel of architects and public agency officials from the Chicago area gathered to dissect the issues these groups encounter when attempting to grow their practices.

Women haven't yet broken into large firm leadership in great numbers even though their representation in the field is **climbing steadily**. Women principals tend to lead small firms, which can run into trouble obtaining diverse and meaningful projects.

Architects like Rada Doytcheva, FAIA, have identified some policy areas that have historically contributed to preventing small and women-owned firms from receiving bigger and more diverse project opportunities. "There is a status quo about the procurement and selection criteria," she said. "We get trapped by these entities that have power. There is established prejudice."

But in Chicago, small firms are seeing more diverse project opportunities thanks to local government programs and policy updates. Doytcheva notes that women-led firms, including her own, **RADA Architects**, have benefited from working on public buildings. "A lot of women architects I know in Chicago have grown because of public agency work," she said. "They have policies in place to empower women and minority architects."

The City of Chicago's **Department of Procurement Services** has been working steadily to increase city contracting opportunities for small businesses, including women-owned, minority, and veteran-owned businesses, as well as businesses operated by people with disabilities. "Government contracting is supposed to be representative of the community," said Jamie L. Rhee, Chief Procurement Officer for the City of Chicago.

Rhee has led reform to combat inequalities in procurement policy and provide mentorship opportunities for small business owners in Chicago. "Building a business is difficult, especially when you're competing and trying to do multiple jobs. We're very sensitive to that," she said. Under her leadership, the agency has created over twenty programs to support small businesses and those owned by women and minority groups.

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They also hold a monthly meeting, the Government Procurement Compliance Forum, which brings together government entities and non-profits that represent women, minority, and small business

owners. Rhee is glad that architects are coming to the table. “I’m happy AIA is joining us because that’s how you affect change. Let government do what they should be doing, which is remove barriers,” she said.

The GPC Forum set the stage for a Procurement Reform Task Force, led by the CPO and Inspector General which is helping to standardize and streamline procurement across all city agencies. So not only are these programs changing the game for small firm architects, but they are influencing the way city government operates. “In Chicago, we collaborate. We look at what works and we replicate it,” said Rhee.

The [Public Building Commission of Chicago](#) is also making strides to grant projects to small and women-owned businesses. “Our role is very different from a private developer. It’s important for us to give opportunities to firms that may not get them elsewhere,” said executive director Carina E. Sanchez. Because they act as a full-service public developer, the PBC involves local stakeholders, including small businesses, in all aspects of their planning and development.

“We’re able to look at each project individually beyond the brick and mortar,” said Sanchez. “We look at the community, stakeholders and make sure they have what they need.”

The PBC has a qualifications and records database of architects and engineers, so that the PBC can pinpoint the right opportunities for the right firms. “Knowing the firm’s qualifications allows us to go in there and do more targeted procurements,” said Sanchez. She indicated that architects who are interested in being part of the database can submit or update Letters of Interest and Qualifications (LIQ) at anytime.

This points to something that all panelists agreed on – that in order to get more opportunities, architects need advocate for themselves and band together with others. They see AIA as a primary vehicle for that. “The one thing we need to do as architects is get out of our chairs,” said AIA Strategic Council member Michael Elliott, AIA. “You have to push outside of yourself to connect and be recognized.”

*To get involved with small firm advocacy, join [AIA's Small Firm Exchange](#).*

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