

IMAGINE A WORLD?
PART 1



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q3: BALANCING PRIORITIES





Imagine a World: Part 1

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Pascale Sablan connects advocacy and architecture.

DesignIntelligence/Michael LeFevre (DI): We're joined by Pascal Sablan, FAIA, NOMA, LEED AP, global president of the National Association of Minority Architects (NOMA) for 2023 and 2024, AIA Equity and the Future of Architecture committee member, AIA Whitney M. Young Jr. Award recipient in 2021, founder of Beyond the Built Environment and "Say It Loud," and an associate principal at Adjaye Associates in New York. An amazing list of accomplishments, and still going. Welcome, Pascale.

Pascale Sablan (PS): Thank you so much for having me. I really am proud to be here and am humbled by the opportunity to connect with your audience.

DI: Our annual theme at DesignIntelligence is pragmatic design. That is, post-COVID, let's stop talking about it, let's do it. Let's get real, get back to work and be practical. Under that annual umbrella, our theme this quarter is balancing priorities. From what I observe, that has a connection to your current pursuits and your mission in life. Would you agree?

PS: Balancing priorities? I don't know how effective I am, but yes, we're trying to find a through line that deals with the idea of

multiple things and create moments where we're able to amplify some when necessary, and at times shift the weight, attention, resources and priorities to be strategic. When I hear the word "pragmatic" there's something I want to push through. I want to make sure it doesn't limit the level of audaciousness we're trying to realize.

DI: I commend the intention and ambition.

PS: That's how the theme lands for me.

DI: You seem to have a clear, compelling mission: to raise awareness about the need for more Black women in architecture – and increasing inclusion in the profession in general. This has been an issue for 150 years, and it seems to be finally reaching a tipping point. At least in terms of awareness, it seems we are reaching a critical mass. But are we ready to be beyond the point of awareness to a place where we have achieved more integration and leadership? Back to being audacious, are we making a difference? Are we doing something? Are we still at the point of awareness? Where are the leverage points and where are you focusing?

PS: My focus has been about women and BIPOC designers – Black, Indigenous, people of color. We're trying to think about justice as it relates to society and the profession, equity, diversity and inclusivity. Regardless of the various hats I wear and the different organizations and firms I'm a part of, the work is consistent. The mission is always the same. It's just leveraging different vehicles, resources, tools and networks. In certain spaces, this is a moment of awareness, but in other spaces I've been occupying, it's part of our foundation and we've always been working toward action.

I used to have visceral responses or reactions to this question. But it's not finally, or just now, it's always been an important topic for me and for marginalized communities. It might just be something you are aware of now, but it doesn't mean we haven't been here doing this work. At NOMA, we are beyond awareness as an organization, the understanding and awareness of the issue. NOMA was founded and structured on the principles of finding equity and justice and action. Similarly, at Adjaye Associates, in the work we do and the communities we serve, that's been part of the model. But there are other professional



spaces I've participated in and organizations I've been engaged in where this is new. And we set some large, audacious goals as a result.

What has been inspiring for me to witness and be a part of is seeing people start to formulate strategies for how to achieve that. I saw those strategies, policies and structural changes start to be implemented. Now, as a leader in this space, I find myself in conversations about reporting on progress. One of the biggest challenges NOMA has been spearheading that increasing the number of African American architects in the profession. And this is something that goes to what are the issues that are limiting it.

NOMA is now part of the six Alliance organizations. They are the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the Association of International Architecture Schools (AIAS), the American Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), the National Architecture Accreditation Board (NAAB), the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) and NOMA. We meet twice a year, and our executive directors meet multiple times a year. Our common goal is to leverage our resources, share what we're doing and set goals and milestones that help each other track trends and report on how we're doing. Part of that work at NOMA is that we took over the production of the directory of African American architects originally started by Dennis Mann and Bradford Grant. In that work, we've been able to keep track of the number of African American licensed architects from year to year.

Mann and Grant started the directory under the University of Cincinnati. In January 2020, Cincinnati decided not to fund the directory anymore, and so it shifted, and NOMA took it over. We've also created the AIA Large Firm Roundtable (LFRT) and the NOMA 2030 Challenge, which was about doubling the

number of licensed African American architects by the year 2030. At the time we started that pledge, we were at 2,299. As of today, I believe we're at 2,501. The goal is to get to 5,000 by the end of 2030. To further that initiative, we've created partnerships and have been working with firms toward that end. We've been leveraging that as the tip of our spear as we work with the other alliance organizations to move that forward.

What you're starting to see is these organizations starting to publish, share, document and implement policies that speak into the systematic issues that make it challenging for women and diverse designers to enter the space and how that's starting to transform the profession. A lot of us in this work have been well beyond awareness for a while and are now in the action mode. The group I think that's still in the awareness-raising stage is general society. There, I don't know if we've yet been able to successfully make the argument to everyone about the important roles they have in designing and deciding their built environments and spaces. That's why it's important to engage with us as a profession to help solve the issues plaguing their communities.

As it relates to the profession of architecture, I think we're past the tipping point and are now about action. We're evaluating which actions have yielded the best results and what tweaks and adjustments we need to make to our strategies to amplify those impacts or where we should pivot to find other ways of accomplishing the same goals. From a societal standpoint, that's where the awareness work still needs to happen, and we're still growing in that capacity. I would want the action to be tethered with that messaging so society can become aware of it and take actions and steps to engage in meaningful ways.

DI: I'm excited to hear you talking about the six organizations forming an alliance. As we talk about the growing

responsibilities in our profession, there's discussion that we've got to work in newer, bigger, systematic, transformational ways. You can't just do it on your own. You are doing that with clear goals, results reporting and an action focus.

PS: Collectively as a profession, we acknowledge it's not just the marginalized groups that need to do the work. We've all accepted our roles. Each of these organizations have programs and initiatives they've developed with their membership and leadership in mind. They're saying, in this large issue we are working toward, "This is our piece we can start to dismantle." There's a huge sense of urgency and accountability being leveraged to transform those organizations to move that mission together. That's empowering for me and fuels my passion to see this not fall on deaf ears. By sharing the story, by keeping track of these metrics and what we've been doing, by letting people know about resources, we're able to make changes and make progress. We are in a different place today than we were in 2020.

DI: Your passion is clear. I just saw your first address as NOMA president and your energy is infectious. Where do you get that energy? Can you talk about some of your mentors who helped and shaped you? How did you get here?

PS: I have always had a bubbly, happy personality. It's a great way to walk through life. The issues we're dealing with are serious, but it doesn't mean we can't have joy in the work we're doing. That starts to translate how I communicate my ideas or our ideas and how I engage different communities. It's not from a position of shaming or doom and gloom, but from a position of: It's okay, we can do this. This is within reach. This is within our lifetime to solve. Imagine a world where we've effectively unlocked these chains and shackles, when we didn't have to navigate and operate around ridiculous obstacles. What kind of freedom would it yield in the profession when people can be their authentic selves and be welcomed into the profession in meaningful ways?



Throughout the years, I've had incredible mentors. One of my first was a wonderful boss who transformed how I saw myself in a leadership role and empowered me to feel like a leader. That's Sadir Jean Baker. He was a partner at FX Fowle, now FX Collaborative. He was in charge of the international studio I was part of. He poured so much leadership skills and knowledge into us. When we had client meetings, he would say, "Okay, this part of the design, Brian did, and this is what Noble came up with, and this is the part Pascale did." I'm seeing him present to clients saying our names. It was never: "This is what I did." He was always so generous in acknowledging the team's contributions and was consistent and relentless about it. It was beautiful to see. It never dimmed his light.

The amount of time he was shining light on other people never took anything away from him as a leader. That made me respect, love and revere him even more. That started to frame how I saw myself as a leader in this profession where it wasn't and isn't about me, it's about everyone else. It's about highlighting that. I have nine siblings, so it's also about being different and being loved. You are not going to be identical to your siblings. You're going to need and want different things and be able to say, "Wow, did you know this person did this and did you know what that person did?" Being able to cheer people on as if it was your own win was fundamental.

The way I've been navigating with advocacy work has been about collective responsibility. Knowing sometimes I'm putting in the work that won't have a direct impact to me but will help someone else. That's something I've learned from my big family. In volunteering at AIA, NOMA and all these other organizations like the Mary Louis Academy, where I was a board of trustees member for many years, we worked so hard to dismantle

sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. But I saw a gap. When are we celebrating? When are we elevating? When are we cheering? That's what compelled me to create Beyond the Built Environment, to specifically address that gap I was seeing.

Because I had participated in a meaningful way in these different organizations, I already had the network established. I knew who I was partnering with. We've hosted 36 "Say It Loud" exhibitions so far, which have elevated the work and identities of 918 incredible, diverse designers globally. These exhibitions are almost always in partnership with a local NOMA or AIA chapter – some local group that helps move the agenda and the mission forward. It's collective work we're all pitching into. I'm happy being the "very loud cheerleader" spearheading the effort, but it's really about elevating and singing about the accomplishments of women and BIPOC designers in the profession and making sure their diversity is documented to transform our profession moving forward.

DI: Did you have early leadership influence from your family, or did it evolve? There's a difference between a late-to-the-game leader who was lucky to find that spark and those seemingly born or destined to it, who had it genetically or environmentally. Where would you place yourself on that continuum?

PS: What a great question. I'm not sure I know how to answer it because I was always an artist. Always drawing and painting. I was commissioned to do a mural at the Pomonok Community Center in Queens, right across the street from Queens College, when I was 12. As I'm painting my jungle gym with this multicultural community, somebody walks by and says, "Whoa, you can draw straight lines without a ruler. That's a cool skill for an architect to have." The person was just thinking out loud,



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not necessarily even talking to me, but they said it and kept moving. And I thought, "That's it! Architecture is a profession where I can use my art skills and literally change the world. I'm so excited."

So whenever somebody asked me, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" It was easy. I'm going to be an architect! It was a done deal. There was no hesitation, no wavering or quivering in my voice. It wasn't until I was a junior in high school that I started to apply to schools and universities with this major in mind. My parents said: "Whoa! We have to be certain this is how you want to go. I don't think you fully know what it means to be an architect."

My mom found a "What's an Architect" seminar hosted at One Penn Plaza, in New York. When I got there, it was a boardroom of all boys and I'm the only girl. Of course, my mom came because she wouldn't let me go out by myself. She said, "Pascale, you see, you're the only one."

And I said, "Yeah, but I'm here."

It was such a great program. They took us to newly constructed projects, construction sites, architecture firms, model shops. They literally made the profession as tangible as possible. And I remember sitting in this tiny conference room hunched over this model. I couldn't believe we got to do this for a living. Yes! It gave me that much more confidence in the pursuit. That's why I was strategic about which schools I considered because I wanted schools known for architecture.

That level of confidence and being steadfast in your decision at a young age is rare. And so, I always say I was privileged with purpose. I was privileged to know early on what I wanted. I

don't know that I was privileged by knowing I was a leader. When I was in my second week of architecture school, the professor asked me and another student to stand and said, "These two will never become architects because they're Black and because they're women." That was the first time I realized when I walked into a room, I wasn't just representing Pascale, but I was representing much more. That's the moment I decided I couldn't just study to become an architect, I also needed to be an activist that pushed the profession to avoid those and similar experiences for other people.

I try to inspire other firm leaders to feel confident in empowering their staff who are inclined toward advocacy. To also say to them they don't have to choose between being an architect and fighting for a more equitable and just profession.

I have maintained that commitment in my current role. I am both an architect and an advocate and I believe that you can hold both of those identities at once. I try to inspire other firm leaders to feel confident in empowering their staff who are inclined toward advocacy. To also say to them they don't have to choose between being an architect and fighting for a more equitable and just profession.

DI: That's empowering to make it one thing and not a choice. I look forward to continuing this conversation.

PS: Thank you. So do I.

Pascale Sablan is a visionary architect, activist, and leader who has dedicated her career to making the built environment more equitable and just. With over 15 years of experience in the field, Pascale is a trailblazer who is breaking barriers and inspiring the next generation of architects.

Pascale has been recognized as one of the most influential architects of her generation, with a practice characterized by a commitment to excellence, innovation, and sustainability. She currently serves as an Associate Principal at Adjaye Associates, co-leading the team in the New York office and performing key roles on a range of major international projects. In addition to her work as an architect, Pascale is the founder of Beyond the Built Environment, a non-profit organization that seeks to empower women and people of color in the architecture industry. Through a variety of initiatives, including an annual conference and a mentorship program, the organization provides opportunities for education, mentorship, and professional development.

Pascale is also a leader in the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), serving as the Global President of the organization. In this role, she is working to promote diversity and equity in the architecture profession and to ensure that the voices of underrepresented communities are heard and valued. Pascale's ultimate goal is to realize a just world, where everyone has access to the benefits of good design. She believes that architecture has the power to shape our lives and that by promoting diversity and equity in the profession, we can create spaces that are more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming for all people.

Pascale's impressive career and advocacy work make her an inspiration to architects and activists around the world. Her commitment to diversity, equity, and justice is a powerful reminder of the potential of design to create a better world for all people.