



U N I T E S

Groundbreaking Initiative—AEC Unites— Launched to Increase Black Participation in the AEC Industry

Washington, D.C., Oct. 3, 2023—Today national leaders in architecture, engineering and construction are launching AEC Unites to inspire, promote and spur equity and inclusion in the AEC industry for Black talent and Black-owned businesses. Historically, Blacks have been severely underrepresented in AEC, which employs over [13 million workers](#)—9% of the U.S. workforce. In 2022, Black workers held only [7% of all AEC jobs](#) even though they represented 13% of all workers. By contrast, White workers comprise 77% of the workforce yet hold 87% of all construction jobs and 83% of all architecture and engineering jobs.

As a nonprofit membership organization, [AEC Unites](#) seeks to increase intentional opportunities for Black talent and Black-owned businesses in all facets of the AEC industry. Through efforts that will range from partnerships with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other groups, to mentorship, training, professional development, and coaching, it will serve as a resource for Black talent. To create sustainable opportunities and support Black-owned businesses, it will offer member companies a database of Black-owned AEC businesses and a playbook on how to work with them.

AEC Unites is the brainchild of Deryl McKissack, who founded [McKissack & McKissack](#) in 1990. The company is the outgrowth of a design and construction company started by her great-great-grandfather who was freed from slavery after the Civil War. McKissack attributes AEC's lack of diversity, and her motivation to act, to systemic racism and unconscious biases, both of which she has experienced many times over as a Black female civil engineer.

"These prejudices were obvious on the first day of my first job as a field engineer for a major AEC firm. My boss had a Confederate flag hanging on the wall behind his desk," McKissack explained.

Though that was one of her earliest experiences with racism, it was far from her last. "Experience has taught me that Black businesses and professionals get hired for major projects in this industry mostly when it's required—and then it's usually as subcontractors rather than project leads," McKissack said. "It's a constant struggle to be accepted as lead.

"It's hard for minorities to get in the room, let alone get a seat at the proverbial table. Yet that's how we meet potential clients and establish strong relationships that will lead to new business opportunities. People often hire who they know," she pointed out.

Fighting for Equity and Inclusion Must Be an Industry-Wide Effort

McKissack was moved to seek systemic change after the events of George Floyd and by the reprehensible display of [nooses on jobsites](#). Moved to action, she enlisted industry leaders as her co-founders and is serving as AEC Unites board chair and president.

Joining AEC Unites as co-founders are [Turner Construction Company](#) President and CEO Peter Davoren as board co-chair and secretary and [Jacobs](#) Executive Chair Steve Demetriou as board co-chair and treasurer. Members of the [founding board of directors](#) include Hensel Phelps President and CEO Mike Choutka, WSP USA CEO Lou Cornell, Gensler Co-CEO Diane Hoskins, Stantec EVP and COO Stuart Lerner, Moody Nolan CEO Jonathan Moody, Clark Construction Group CEO Robert D. Moser, Jr., H.J. Russell CEO Michael Russell and former HOK Chairman and CEO Bill Helmuth, who passed away earlier this year, posthumously.

After a national search, AEC Unites' leadership team hired [Tia Perry](#), an award-winning AEC leader with a proven 17-year track record in fostering equity and inclusion and driving membership growth, as executive director.

Why Equity and Inclusion Are Critical to AEC's Profitability

Research shows the majority of [Americans will be minorities](#) by 2045 and diverse and inclusive teams are [33% more likely to achieve above average profitability](#) and enjoy a [2.5 times higher cash flow](#) per employee. These realities have broad implications for the AEC industry.

"The construction industry is called upon to deliver vital civil infrastructure needs in every community in our country. But the shortage of labor and companies prepared to deliver this work and serve the growing needs of private and public sector clients limits our ability to meet demand and affects the strength and competitiveness of our country," Turner Construction Company President and CEO Peter Davoren said.

"The industry not only has the capacity to absorb more people into our workforce and engage them in meaningful work with good wages but also welcomes the opportunity to do so. AEC Unites can help us fulfill this goal," Davoren noted.

In fact, the construction industry is one of the largest in the United States. In 2022 it had a market value of around \$2.8 trillion, which was roughly 4.3% of our nation's GDP. More significantly, it is an industry that delivers work for every other industry and makes modern life possible with its output.

"With building and construction so important to our nation's strength, AEC is fundamental to the success of every other industry and contributes so much to our GDP that it must become more inclusive," Jacobs Executive Chair Steve Demetriou said.

“Given the tight costs and returns that apply to building projects today and the changing nature of the nation’s populace, it takes diverse project teams to be attuned to the perspectives and cultural requirements of projects’ end users. They offer teams fresh new perspectives and creative solutions—input that is critical to avoiding costly mistakes that will compromise usability or occupancy rates and impact profitability,” Demetriou continued.

Safety is another problem when racism and biases surface in teams because many AEC tasks are team efforts—especially on jobsites, where tasks can be risky and require a team to complete.

“If someone is racist or biased, it can compromise safety or increase errors,” Demetriou said. “Hostile work environments can be dangerous. Eliminating tensions improves teamwork and makes jobsites safer and more productive.”

For reasons like these, and more, AEC Unites’ members seek to eliminate hate and bias in the workplace and advance inclusion and opportunity for Black talent and Black-owned businesses.

“We want to create a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone can be at their best, be authentic and be treated with respect and dignity,” Davoren added. These sentiments are supported again and again by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, who has consistently pointed out that [our nation’s great competitive advantage is our diversity](#)— especially since it fuels innovation—and “we must give all Americans the opportunity to participate in the economy of the 21st century.”

Diversity in AEC Will Raise Economic Equity

“Given the numbers on Black employment, earnings, and net worth, changing the status quo will take a concerted effort from all industry stakeholders,” AEC Unites Executive Director Tia Perry pointed out. Today the median annual wage for Black workers is 30% lower than that of White workers, which amounts to a \$220 billion annual disparity between Black wages today and what they would be in a scenario of full parity, [McKinsey research showed](#).

[White workers make 570% more than Black workers](#) in the U.S. and have the nation’s lowest median net worth at \$24,100. Black workers disproportionately work in low-wage job categories and [endure a 2-1 unemployment disparity](#) to White workers. Black workers also make less money on average than similar White workers, according to the [Economic Policy Institute](#).

“These numbers have enormous implications for economic security and the ability to build immediate and generational wealth,” Perry continued. “They are even more troubling given the AEC industry’s economic power, well-paying jobs, labor shortages and potential for growth.”

Building a more inclusive and just AEC industry for Black businesses, professionals and talent is a long-term endeavor. “Intentional action is critical to change the current status quo. Increasing opportunities for Black businesses and talent will take hiring, enabling and supporting them from entry level positions to the C-suite and boardroom,” Perry commented.

To address this, AEC Unites will conduct a robust membership campaign in the coming months and [has developed a set of concrete actions](#) it asks its members to follow. It asks all members of the AEC community to please consider [joining now](#).

About AEC Unites: Founded in 2023, AEC Unites is aimed at inspiring, promoting and achieving equity and inclusion in the architecture, engineering and construction industry. Structured to facilitate intentional opportunities for Black talent and Black-owned businesses in AEC, it is a nonprofit membership organization open to all AEC companies who seek to eliminate hate and bias in the workplace. For more information or to join AEC Unites, visit <https://aecunites.org/>.