

June 20, 2020

Dear AAP Community and Dean Meejin Yoon,

Today we, the Cornell Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS), write to you with grief and fear as we discuss racism, stories and collections that go beyond any data. We are glad to hear from Dean Meejin Yoon and her stance against racism. We would like to express our eagerness in wanting to work with the dean, along with other faculty and students at AAP in resolving some of these issues. From the conversations we have had with our Black peers, it is evident that Cornell AAP has been a more welcoming space to some than others. The Cornell NOMAS Chapter wants to aid in creating a diverse and inclusive space that supports and gives a voice to members of our community who have felt unheard.

There are 3 parts to this letter. It is attached to this email as a pdf:

Part 1: The Voices of Our Black Students

Part 2: Being an Ally

Part 3: Our Demands

On Monday, June 22nd, 2020, we plan to send this open letter to the entire department of AAP. We ask that everyone reads the entirety of this letter and engages and acts with us.

Sincerely,

The Cornell Chapter of NOMAS

## 1 The Voices of Our Black Students

In **making sure all voices are heard**, we reached out to members of the AAP Community who are in need of our **support**. As our society holistically takes time to reflect and act to create change, we must **understand** the challenges of those who have been burdened by systemic racism.

While many Black students have found their place of belonging at Cornell, that has not been without its challenges. Adjusting to Cornell is a major change for many students, a shift in culture, language, dialect, and more. But for Black students, especially within AAP it can be **isolating**. It has meant walking into spaces where many do not look like them. They have had to deal with opposition from microaggressions to blatant discrimination, when all they have wanted was an equal opportunity of education at our Institution. Students are grateful for opportunities like Prefreshman Summer Programs, but even when attending such programs it is evident of how marginal of a group they are when sometimes less than 5% of the students in that program come from similar backgrounds as them.

**As Black students, they have found themselves in courses learning histories that have essentially erased theirs.** Minority histories, cultures, and identities must be included into curriculum and programming as much of their contributions have been overlooked in current courses, lectures, and discussions. This includes **increasing Black faculty and staff** as well as programming. Student-led initiatives should also be considered and supported in this discussion of diversity and inclusion.

We also ask that Cornell AAP **increase effort** into outreach to find those who may not have had the privilege of resources and exposure to a future in architecture. The talent is out there, and as an institution built on the belief of “Any Person, Any Study” we should begin extending more resources to **providing equal opportunity** to students from underrepresented communities.

“When I attended the Prefreshman summer program I was excited to get a chance to get ahead at something I had no experience in. One of the first things I noticed was how small our group of students was. It made sense cause architecture, art & planning aren’t the most popular career choices, but still, only eight students out of 200 in the program was quite shocking.” - B.Arch

“While as a whole the program may seem “diverse” and “worldly” with students from all over the world, the Eurocentric focus of the program remains evident and feels very isolating. The faculty can do a better job of providing resources for black students...The department should program with multicultural student groups on campus that’ share similar interests as the department.” - B.Arch

“Standards of art are very western in terms of what is viewed as exciting, detailed, laborious, EDUCATED particularly in terms of color choices and composition. The art department has A LOT of issues educationally, we are hardly taught about movements at all, but we certainly aren’t taught about racially charged movements..” - B.F.A.

“I’d like to see a collaboration between CRP and other progressive and radical spatial thinkers throughout the university so that we can better collaborate to creatively understand space and design spatial interventions for social justice.” - B.S. URS

“... it was jarring when I first got to Cornell to see literally one black faculty member and have professors that were virtually all white.” -B.Arch

“The studio that I felt taught me the most about the power and change architecture could bring was taught by two black professors at AAP NYC. There should be more learning opportunities like that, because it benefits all students.” - B.Arch

“Cornell AAP prides itself on having a global perspective and boasts a diverse community of professors, students, and alumni. However, it is rare to see Cornell AAP

take more initiative to employ and exhibit people of color who are visionaries and would inspire the ALL students of AAP.” - B.Arch

“I remember my first week at Cornell when discussing why I thought it is important for students to receive more diversity programming, a non-black student replying “it is the office of admission’s problem, not ours” And that’s when I knew that the Cornell AAP community was not as aware of the importance of diversity and inclusion as it claimed it was.” - B.Arch

## 2 Being an Ally

### *The greater Cornell AAP Community as an Ally to Black Students*

We, as the Cornell Chapter of NOMAS, continuously strive to dismantle racism by being an ally to Black Students. We urge all AAP students, staff, and faculty to come together as a unity regardless of citizenship, color or sexuality to fight in support of Black students. The architecture program is diverse, but diversity does not always mean equal opportunity. We are asking our AAP community and family to stand with us as allies. We all must understand that the issue of racism is not just an American issue or just a Black and White issue. Although the US has a long history of racism and discrimination tied to its origin, racism exists within our own Communities. Racism is our issue. We might wonder what it means to be an Ally? How can we speak for Black Students despite not sharing similar experiences with racism? What can one do to help, or, how can one actively contribute to dismantling racism?

The idea of being an ally to another person or group of people has become a key concept in examining issues of oppression and privilege. Being an ally is more than being sympathetic towards those who experience discrimination. It is more than simply believing in equality. Being an ally means being willing to **ACT** with and for others in pursuit of ending oppression and creating equality. To be an Ally it is not enough to be compassionate, we must act to make changes!

Although one may not share the same experience of racism as Black students, one can “stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance”. It is important to look at the bigger picture when it comes to talking about racism and oppression. Let us take the horrific death of George Floyd: A Black man was killed by a White police, an Asian police officer stood aside and guarded the incident, an Arab man’s clerk called the police on George Floyd. Though this occurred on the streets of Minneapolis, racism and discrimination can also take place in your own studios, classes or apartments. Our silence against racist rhetoric is a form of violence. Being White or non-Black should not exclude one’s involvement in critical discussions around race, just like not being Black doesn’t exclude us from being discriminated against, hated, and even physically harmed based on our skin color or sexual orientation.

One can do a lot to help. NOMAS will be doing the following to set a precedent for the rest of AAP students and faculty and we ask that the rest of AAP follows this as well:

- Educating our members and the Cornell Community on the importance of taking an anti-racist stand.
- Holding the entire AAP Community accountable for racist remarks and reporting it immediately.
- Speaking up when we hear discriminatory language or see discriminatory actions against students of color.
- Condemning denial, minimization, and justification of racism.
- DEMANDING justice

**All of us have the ability to be an ally.**

### 3 Our Demands

*We, as NOMAS, stand with Dean Meejin Yoon in solidarity to dismantle systemic racism that our institution suffers from. We wanted to thank Dean Yoon for taking her time to listen to alumni, students and for having conversations with NOMAS to create an outline for change. We understand systemic racism is not something we can fix in a few days. After reading Dean Yoon's letter sent on Wednesday, we wanted to expand on the agenda and propose changes that AAP must consider.*

*In this open letter, NOMAS expresses the need for change in the following areas after holding active discussions with students from First to Fifth year B.arch curriculum who are in NOMAS but also including students outside of our organization, B.arch, B.F.A. and B.S. URS. Like Dean Yoon has already highlighted, we want to expand those changes in our **administration, degree curriculum, and admissions.***

#### **Administration: Transparency and Hiring**

##### **→ Transparency in dealing with racism at AAP**

- ◆ When professors are reported for being racist or using racist rhetoric in class, immediate consequences for that professor's behavior must follow. This cannot be a form of "that professor was talked to in private". **Disciplinary action is necessary and the protection of students in this process must happen.** Student must feel safe and comfortable enough to confide in administration about discrimination they have faced. Students who were directly impacted by that professor's word or action or were in the same group must be given the **choice** to be in a meeting where their voices are heard. **This issue later needs to be addressed as a school to everyone, clearly explaining to all students about what has happened and a clear statement of action of what APP will decide to do.** The issue must be made public. This must apply to **all tenure** Professors and

even professors who are only hired for a **semester** to a few years. By holding our entire AAP community accountable to an anti-racist standard, the school will be sending out a public message that it is upholding its stand against racism.

→ **Hiring More Black and Minority POC professors**

- ◆ Our department falls short on including diversity and equity when it comes to hiring professors. We want to see **more professors of color being hired and supported by the university**. This means Black men, women, Colored men and colored women, LGBTQ colored men and women.
- ◆ Student involvement in the hiring process is essential. This would mean student representatives being given the opportunity to interview **potential professors** and first year **Teaching Associates**. This will prevent any personal biased opinion on a candidate from administration.
- ◆ The Department of AAP must have **training that educates professors on race, culture, mental health and equity** through workshops before they officially step into the classroom to teach. We understand that not all professors may be familiar with our active struggle against racism and discriminatory remarks. This training should occur before their first class and continue at least once every semester.

**Curriculum: Integration and Representation**

*While we share the same sentiment stated by Dean Meejin Yoon in her letter on June 17, 2020 "our History of Architecture and Urban Development graduate program leads scholarship in counternarratives that challenge colonialist and design discourse influenced by western bias. This work is a promising foundation for our commitment to supporting the development of new syllabi, courses, seminars, and research that strengthen our anti-racist principles and actions with knowledge", we would like to see the following:*

- Integration of race, culture, gender, inequality, queer architecture into our **Core Studio Curriculum**. Some students join clubs like NOMAS, CUSD, Design Connect to bring these disciplines into their studies. However, so far, this has been a student led initiative. We want AAP to **lead** us into this change with accurate planning and administrative effort.
- 50% of the Semester Guest lecturers need to be of Black, Minority, LGBTQ and Women of Color Architects, Artists and Planners. **Representation matters**. For most young Architecture, Art and Planning students, portrayal of minorities not only affects how others see them but it also affects how they see themselves. AAP needs to provide that level of engagement and comfort among students and faculties.
- History and Analysis courses or other electives in AAP need to challenge Colonialism and design discourse influenced by western biases and actively educate students

around it. This applies to not only classes on Ithaca campus but also AAP classes happening worldwide such as **NYC** and **Rome**.

We are a recognized and leading educational institution, nationally and internationally . It is vital that Cornell AAP provides a socially, globally, and culturally conscious curriculum so that our students are also socially, globally and culturally conscious even after we leave the AAP community that we have been part of. It is more important than ever in this time of major societal global shifts and change.

### ***Admission: Endowment, Office of Diversity and Inclusion and Responsibilities***

*We would like to support the Alumni effort to bring back the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at AAP. The need for that office has become critical as we face major challenges as an Institution.*

We demand the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at AAP to be **endowed**. We want **proof of this endowment** so we know the office will have the funds needed to help and exist successfully as long as the university lives. We also ask that we know how these **funds** are being used **within the office**. In the past, this office was absorbed into Student Services due to a financial crisis. We cannot allow another financial crisis to hinder or discontinue opportunities given to Black and/or minority students, especially when these are often the communities affected most by any major crisis in this country. We also want to make sure that this office is not discontinued with the arrival of a new dean. **We want this to be a legacy not an era.**

### **The office must also take on these responsibilities:**

- **Reach** out to schools in Black neighborhoods and underprivileged communities to encourage minority student talents to **apply and to assist** with their application process.
- **Partner** with the **New York State HEOP and EOP program** to find underprivileged talented students to apply. The school already has a partnership with the NYS programs listed above but no students have been accepted from those programs in the last two years. This occurred not because talented students were absent in the programs but is due to the lack of information and advertisement.
- **Organize** a system that not only accepts students of color but helps them **succeed during their academic career** at Cornell. Students are often accepted into a program but face a tremendous challenge when dealing with the lack of financial support. The inherently expensive nature of the program—due to cost of materials, digital softwares, mandatory Cornell in Rome program, and living expenses—creates an additional level of stress for many students. In addition, the office should be involved with making students more **aware of diversity and inclusion resources, grants, alumni networks, and organizations available through the University.**

## Conclusion: Lasting change

**We are asking for lasting institutional change.** Change to support members of our AAP community who have often been overlooked, marginalized, and oppressed by systemic racism. The Cornell NOMAS chapter is hopeful. We demand to see a development of the changes addressed and implementation of them immediately. The changes above are direct responses to student experiences and are essential to working towards "Anti-Racism". We support Dean Meejin Yoon in standing with us against racism and leading in combating these issues. The entire AAP community is needed for the implementation and success of these initiatives.

As the Cornell Chapter of NOMAS, we would like to continue working with the Dean of AAP, the faculty and students to enforce anti-racism and end systemic racism. We want this to be a legacy not an era. During such promising times, we want AAP to be an ally and set a precedent for universities across the country. Our measure of success is not where we stand in the moment of comfort and convenience but where we stand at times of challenge and controversy. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said "In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends."

***Sincerely and adamantly,***

The Cornell Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students  
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\*Update June 24, 2020

Share your thoughts here: <https://forms.gle/QEgdumXUK9U2orTs8>

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