

Untitled document



The Houston Forward Times received a letter ([VIEW LETTER](#)) from the Houston chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects (HNOMA) dated May 27th, addressed to Houston Independent School District (HISD) Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier, the HISD administration, board members, and several other community leaders, accusing HISD of purposely bypassing qualified Houston based African-American architecture firms in their selections for the 2012 Bond.

In their letter, which states it was written on behalf of all Houston-based architecture firms whose ownership is comprised solely of African-Americans, HNOMA states, “Not only are we extremely disappointed that Houston-based African-American architecture firms have been bypassed for the larger part of the bond work, we feel that HISD has disenfranchised our member firms and their employees with the selections made thus far.”

HNOMA goes on to list things in the letter that they claim are indisputable, such as:

- Of the over \$1.24 billion in projects that have been assigned to date, approximately 2% have been awarded to Houston-based architecture firms owned solely by African-Americans as the prime consultant.
- To date, HISD has awarded contracts to design six historic African-American schools. None were awarded to Houston-based firms owned solely by African-American architects. The architectural firm selected for Yates High School, one of HISD’s most storied African-American high schools, is based in Columbus, Ohio. Approximately \$8 million worth of restroom renovations were awarded to a firm whose owner resides in Dallas, Texas.
- None of the Houston based African-American architecture firms owned solely by African-Americans were invited to interview for the four African-American high schools that are being rebuilt. Of course, African-American firms should not be considered to design African-American schools exclusively. However, all of our members firms and their employees have contributed at some level to the success of previous HISD Bond programs and in many

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney, Associate Editor
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cases, contributed their own resources to bringing awards and notoriety to the schools that were completed in past HISD Bond programs.

In the letter, HNOMA further states, “We are respectfully, but fervently requesting that the Houston-based and African-American solely owned architectural firms be seriously considered for the balance of the projects that have not been awarded in the 2012 bond program.” The six firms that are listed in the letter are: Archi*Technics/3, IDGArchitects, P2MG, RDC Architects LLC, James S Walker Architects and Smith & Company Architects.

THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF MINORITY ARCHITECTS

The National Organization of Minority Architects was founded in 1971 by twelve Black architects from across the country and was established in large part to fight discrimination and other selection policies used by public and private sector organizations to unfairly restrict minority architects’ participation in the design and construction process.

One of the founding members of NOMA was nationally-respected Houston architect John S. Chase. Chase was the first licensed African-American architect in the state of Texas and enrolled at the University of Texas, which became the first major university in the South to enroll an African-American. Upon graduating from University of Texas, no white firm would hire him, so Chase moved to Houston and started his own firm.

Chase and the other African-American architects, who were the founding members of NOMA, wanted minority design professionals to work together to fight discriminatory policies that limited or barred minority architects from participating in design and constructions programs.

NO ANSWERS

Several of these firms listed on the letter have done previous work for HISD and have delivered award winning projects with some even listed on the HISD website.

A \$1.89 BILLION ARCHITECTURAL HEIST? Houston Black Architects Believe HISD Has Given Them the C

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One of those Houston-based firms, Archi*Technics/3, has been in business since 1984 and has designed and providing renovations for several HISD schools, and states that they have never had any issues on any of their projects, especially on an HISD project.

Christus Powell, CEO of Archi*Technics/3, states that his company has received work from HISD on all their bonds from as early as the 1990's to the 2007 bond and doesn't understand what happened to warrant being given the cold shoulder for the 2012 bond.

Powell states that not only hasn't he received an interview after bidding on the design contract work for HISD, he says that he hasn't even received a phone call.

"Based on my track record and stellar history of work with HISD, I would really like HISD to explain to me how they feel my company has gone from being a quality company in their eyes for over 30 years, to now not being even worthy of a phone call?," said Powell. "Other architects that have less work history than I have, less experience than I have and only have a limited portfolio of educational projects, have gotten projects over my company. It's truly disheartening."

According to the RFQ put out by HISD, in section 3.1 entitled SCOPE OF SERVICES, HISD was *"seeking qualifications from Architectural and Engineering Firms (A/Es) with proven design excellence in the design of complex facilities that would indicate the capacity to design K-12 school facilities."*

It goes on to state that: *"The Respondent shall select up to fifteen (15) of the firm's projects to highlight in detail as representing the firm's project experience. All of the projects must have been completed by the prime design firm. The work described must have been performed within the past ten (10) years."*

Powell not only states that his firm submitted the 15 projects that were requested by HISD that were designed within the past 10 years, he also believes that many of the architects who have been selected thus far may not have met that 15 project criteria.

PROVEN TRACK RECORD

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Archi*Technics/3 has an extensive body of work and an impressive resume to boast on, including recently designing 3 new schools and doing numerous renovations for HISD including Highland Heights Elementary, Eleanor Tinsley Elementary and Almeda Elementary, which is a LEED certified school.

They are the Architect of Record for the Academic Building for the new University of Houston-Sugarland Campus and Wharton Junior College. They have done design work for Prairie View A&M University and Texas Southern University. They designed the new KTSU Radio Station building and is currently a joint venture partner on the new School of Technology currently being built at Texas Southern.

Powell states that he is a property owner and pays property taxes to HISD and because he saw how bad the conditions of HISD buildings were, he believed that supporting the bond was the right thing to do. Powell also believed that a \$1.89 billion bond referendum would help small businesses like his continue to build capacity and create new jobs.

“I participated on the HISD Bond Finance Committee and helped raised funds to promote the 2012 Bond program and his company contributed towards that effort,” says Powell. “I don’t believe that I deserve any special favors or any guaranteed projects from HISD simply because I served on the HISD Bond Finance Committee or gave any money to help promote the bond. But choosing not to even call my firm can’t be because of a lack of experience or because of my resume of work, so I just want to understand how HISD came about their decision.”

In addition to those, Archi*Technics/3 has done two new schools in Fort Bend ISD; Quail Valley Elementary and Rosa Parks Elementary and renovations for Willowridge High School. They designed four new schools in North Forest ISD; Keahey Intermediate School, East Houston Intermediate School and Shadydale Elementary and B.C. Elmore Middle School. They have designed new facilities and provided renovations for Houston Community College, served as an Associate architect for Lone Star College and done renovations for Dallas ISD renovations and Aldine ISD.

WHO REALLY MAKES THE DECISIONS?

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Superintendent Grier, who appeared on Majic 102's Sunday Morning Live program with Marcus Davis last month, stated that HISD did not make the decision on the selection of the architectural firms independently. Grier stated that HISD brought together a collection of students, parents, staff, community people and principals, coupled with a committee of Houston-area architects, educators, engineers, futurists, lawyers, and building experts to help advise the district on project team selection, facility planning, and design. According to HISD, they solicited the expertise of professors from the University of Houston, Rice University, and Prairie View A&M University schools of architecture.

In a statement released by HISD concerning the selection process, Leo Bobadilla, HISD chief operating officer stated that they wanted to ensure that each school community had the opportunity to review proposals and ask questions.

"The recommended firms represent the best match for each project, taking into consideration the unique perspectives of the parents, staff, and principals who will be working with the architects and HISD staff to redesign their schools," said Bobadilla.

It was in April that the Houston Forward Times reported in the story "**NOW THAT THE BONDS HAVE PASSED...Does the Community really have a say?**," that several members of the committee, who were selected to review the three architectural firm finalists for the Yates High School campus were outraged at the fact that they believed their feedback and recommendations had fallen on deaf ears with HISD.

According to Houston Chapter Vice President Anzilla Gilmore, HNOMA is not aware of any charges of poor performance or any bad reputations that would have prevented HISD from considering any of their members for these opportunities, and they too want answers.

Gilmore goes on to state that most of their member firms have over 20 years of experience and have completed projects for other school districts in the area, including HISD and many have partnered with larger firms to strengthen their capabilities.

"All six of our member firms have submitted SOQ's (Statement of Qualifications) for the 2012 HISD bond, all six have worked for HISD in some capacity over the past 10-20 years and all six have the experience and capacity to do any of the work HISD awards," says Gilmore. "We

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would like HISD to consider the message they are sending to the next generation of African-American students interested in pursuing architecture and graduating from HISD schools today. A message that says you can attend an HISD school, but you can't design one."

Gilmore goes on to highlight the disparity amongst African-American architects in the decision-making process.

"Please note that HISD has stated that race is not a factor in their decisions," said Gilmore. "However, of the four Hispanic-owned firms selected to work on the 2012 bond projects, two of them were selected to design historically Hispanic high schools. Two of these firms are not Houston-based. As our letter stated, of the four historically African-American high schools, three of them will be designed by white-owned firms with no African-American architects involved. The other African-American high school, Yates, will be designed by an architecture team comprised of a African-American owned firm based in Ohio along with a local Hispanic owned firm."

Approximately \$650 million is still unassigned for projects relating to the 2012 Bond, so HISD still has a chance to select one of these six African-American firms for their remaining projects. But if the previous six months are any indication, HISD's selection process may very well produce the same results; no substantial work for African-American architects.

This bond passed based on the record-turnout of African-American voters during the presidential re-election of Barack Obama in November, so the question is do African-Americans regret voting for this bond and if so, would they ever vote for another one again. Only time will tell.