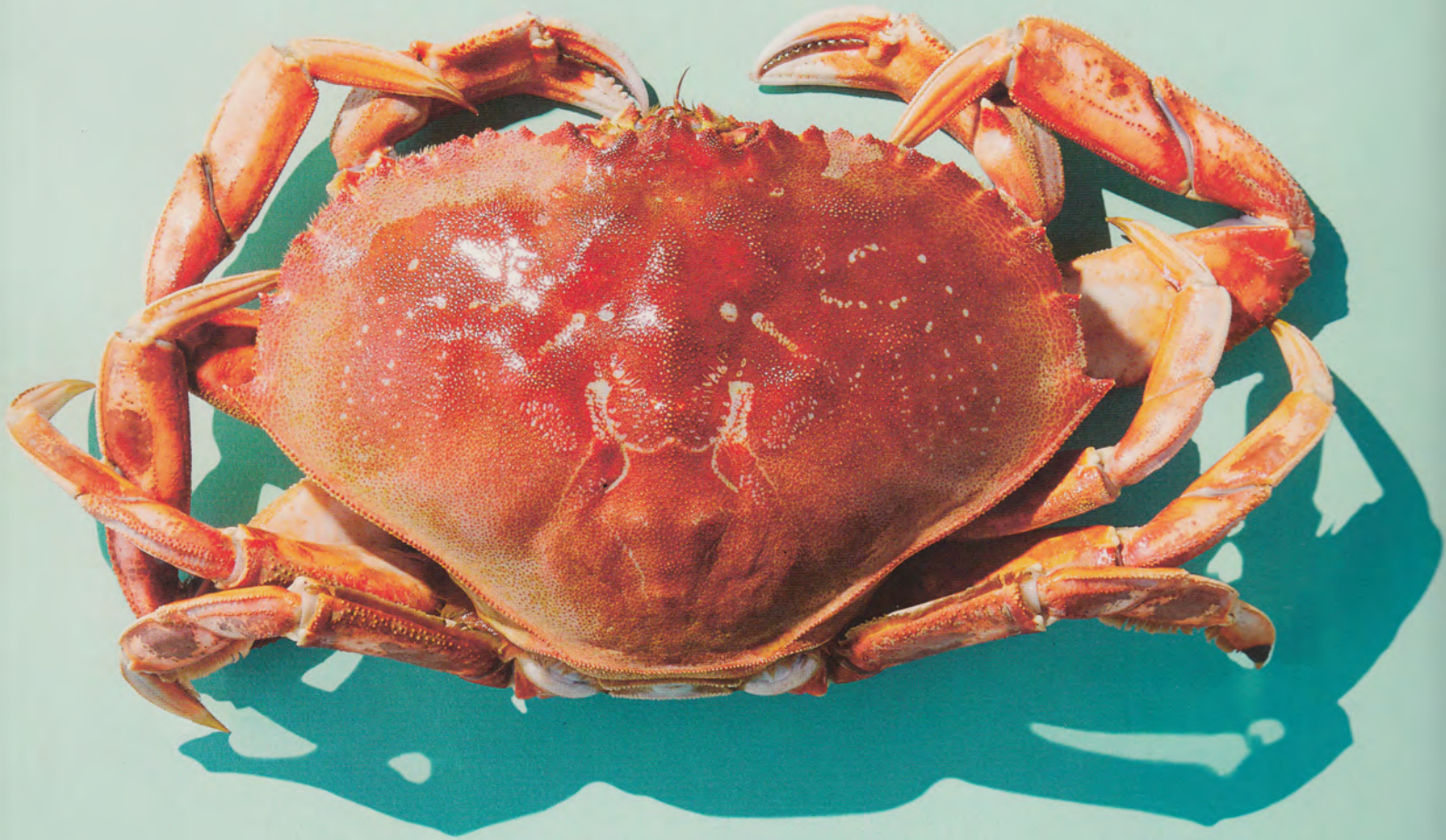




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The Changing Face of Design



Youth Design mentors and class of 2015 (left) pose for a group photograph in Boston. The final product of student Gabriel Cruz's pattern designs (right), trimmed and mounted for exhibition at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

It's no surprise that tech has a diversity problem. According to a recent report in *USA Today*, "Hispanics make up 5 percent of college-educated officials and managers nationwide, 4 percent at Yahoo, and even less at Facebook and Google. African Americans make up 6 percent of officials and managers nationally, but 2 percent or less at these three tech giants."

Stating that "inclusion inspires diversity," Apple pledges to hire "more inclusively, choosing partners who make diversity a priority." They've got a long way to go. Of the 83 senior executives at Apple, as its recent diversity report notes, one is Hispanic, two are African American and eight are Asian. Meanwhile, Google has launched Diversity Core, a program that encourages Google employees to contribute 20 percent of their time to initiatives aimed at attracting more women and minority job candidates. Yet according to its most recent diversity report, African Americans make up 2 percent of the company and Hispanics 3 percent. Those figures are unchanged from last year. At Facebook, Hispanics represent just 4 percent of employees. Black employees comprised just 2 percent of the Facebook workforce. Maxine Williams, director of diversity at Facebook, when speaking to National Public Radio, argued that there are not enough diverse candidates qualified for the jobs and called the obstacle to diversity in tech a "pipeline" problem.

Meet three organizations across the country—and the people behind them—who are working to solve the pipeline problem. They

are starting boot camps, opening design academies and sponsoring immersion programs to provide training, skills and opportunities in design for talented urban teenagers. In the process of building a path forward, they are bringing a generation's new ideas, new voices and, yes, new faces to the table. The design firms and tech companies benefit just as much—if not more so—from their contributions, which broaden teams' worldviews and spark new forms of creativity. Alone, these programs won't fix the lack of diversity in tech, but they're a start.

Boston strong

Denise Korn, who founded Boston's Youth Design in 2003, didn't set out to run a nonprofit. "I wanted to start a platform for change to diversify the design industry." In Boston, a big equity gap exists between the challenged neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan and the privileged neighborhoods of Back Bay and Beacon Hill. Korn set out to close the gap by "opening the doors wide for all talented urban kids to pursue creative careers and prepare them for what the industry demands."

To help students enter the creative economy, Korn realized she had to create a program to educate them, provide them with design skills and then build a pipeline that would lead to employment in the industry. The answer was Youth Design, an ambitious, rigorous program that currently serves 65 Boston public high school students

in its core program and hundreds more in high schools and community partner organizations across the city. The program spans two academic school years and two summers, with an immersion program at Massachusetts College of Art the first summer and mentor-led, hands-on, paid internships the second summer, at organizations including design firms, museums, hospitals and newspapers—“anywhere with a creative department and designers who are ready to mentor and share their brain trust,” Korn says.

The nerve center of Youth Design is the Youth Design Studio, located on the third floor of a United South End Settlements house. There, students prepare portfolios for college applications and collaborate on design projects while huddling over nineteen gleaming iMacs. In a virtuous circle, Tamika Reid, who finished the Youth Design Program in 2009, serves as a Youth Design mentor each summer and returns to Youth Design to volunteer throughout the year. She graduated from Pratt in 2014 and now works at Proverb, a Boston design firm.

Why does Reid feel compelled to give back? “When I was a rising senior, I felt lost,” she remembers. “My family wanted me to go into finance, but I could tell I wanted to be a graphic designer. Youth Design helped me find my voice so I could say what I was going to do with my life. I mentor because I want to help young artists find their voice just like I did.”

In the first paid summer of the Youth Design curriculum, students attend Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where they take a dual-credit, college-level course in the fundamentals of art and design and train with digital tools like Adobe Creative Suite and Microsoft Office. They also overlap with the second-year students, which builds a community of like-minded creative young people paired with professional design mentors who help them “connect the dots,” Korn says. The second summer, students are paid to work in an agency environment. “I make sure kids always get paid,” Korn says. Youth Design raises money from individual and corporate donors, family foundations, and national grants.

So far, all of the Youth Design students have graduated from high school. Youth Design graduates, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue a higher education, have graduated from Rhode Island School of Design, Pratt, and Massachusetts College of Art and Design. They’ve also found work at IBM, Continuum and Proverb.

Young Creative Agency: A diversity of voices and viewpoints in New Orleans

The genesis for Young Creative Agency began when Alberta Wright was teaching in a New Orleans charter school. “I saw a kid named Jalen walking down the hall, no hall pass, ten minutes late for class—he had a handmade design on his sweatshirt, which was a big deal at that school since he was violating their dress code,” Wright remembers. In school, Jalen was known as one of the “bad kids,” Wright says, “always cutting up in class, usually



Recent graduates of the Young Creative Agency program in New Orleans celebrate with their certificates of completion and payment for client work.

out of school for court dates.” Instead of reporting him, she asked him about his sweatshirt, which featured a spliff-smoking Rasta. It turns out he had cut the stencil himself and silkscreened his own sweatshirt. “It was super inappropriate,” Wright recalls. “But I saw the planning, the motivation, the creativity and the problem solving. He created something complicated, and he had done it completely on his own.”

To help kids like Jalen, Alberta launched Young Creative Agency (YCA) in 2015. The idea is simple: bring young high school creatives into the local economy by providing them with the skills they need, then matching them with paying creative assignments. In other words, the kids work in an agency model, on real projects, for real clients. And at the end of the day, they get paid for their work. Brilliant.

Alberta believes, “If kids like Jalen had a place like YCA that compensated them, maybe they wouldn’t be on the streets doing things that got them into court. Maybe if they had a mentor that shared their interests and taught them how to design cool stuff, they’d have something that replaced the activities that kept putting them in jail.”

On a recent visit to YCA in New Orleans’s Central City neighborhood, I saw nine high school students comping up posters for the nonprofit bike shop next door. Unlike the chaos and pandemonium of many classrooms, this one hummed with a quiet intensity. Freelance designer and mentor Dionne Grayson circled the room, looking over the shoulders of students and answering questions like, “Ms. Grayson, how do I send an image to the back?”

Client jobs come from organizations that are mission aligned with either youth development or supporting young artists, Wright says. The students of YCA put together a creative brief, conduct brainstorming sessions, assemble mood boards and then pitch their work to clients in a formal presentation.

Recent client projects have included everything from logos to flyers and posters to the design of executive summaries—also, collectible pins and limited edition calendars that hang in every room of the new Ace Hotel and are on sale in its gift shop.

“We use client jobs as problem-based learning in a real-world context,” Wright says. “Our goal is to make these kids competitive in the job market. According to Greater New Orleans, Inc., a regional development agency, the city is on track to add 10,000 jobs to the creative economy by 2025. I’d like local kids to get these jobs, not transplants or their more privileged peers.”

Thanks to Young Creative Agency, the kids of New Orleans can embark on higher-wage careers. “YCA provides a space, a program and a job,” Wright says. “That attracts kids. And we are better able to reflect the diversity of New Orleans. That changes the way everyone lives. Young Creative Agency isn’t about graphic design. It’s about transformation.”

Oakland: Promise and peril

Oakland lies at the intersection of tech: its perils, pressures and promises. Just a few miles across the Bay from its more glamorous sister, San Francisco, Oakland is home to gun violence, a scandal-plagued police force, a failing school system, the same abundant sunshine that falls on the rest of the Bay Area and relatively cheap rents. Tech is discovering those cheap rents, too. Pandora has set up headquarters. Uber bought the old Sears building—all 330,000-plus square feet of it. And rumors swirl that Autodesk, Google and Microsoft are looking for space.

Three years ago, Susan Mernit, Mary Fuller and Zakiya Harris saw what was happening to their city and asked, “How will young people of color find their way in this world of work? Their parents are homeless, their grandparents are being forced out of their homes, they have to move farther out to Antioch and Pittsburg.” Frustrated by seeing young people of color watch opportunities develop for others, but not themselves, the trio started Hack the Hood as a means “for young people of color to see themselves as creators of tech, not just consumers,” says Harris, who now serves as chief education officer.

This summer in Oakland, 40 young people aged 15 through 25 will participate in Hack the Hood Boot Camps, six-week-long summer intensives that teach students how to build websites for local small business owners who need them. Using Weebly as a platform, Hack the Hood boot campers learn the basics of web design, project management, scrum skills and code switching—helping them navigate from the culture of the street to the culture of the workplace.

As Imran Siddiquee, communications manager for Hack the Hood, explains, “Once they master the skills of web design, we connect the kids with a small business owner who wants to promote their business online. In that connection, that’s where the magic happens. The kids come to Hack the Hood seeking opportunity. They find



Students of Hack the Hood in Oakland, California, collaborate on web design projects, developed in conjunction with local small businesses needing online platforms.

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confidence and a path forward. They get the skills they need to compete in a booming job market that threatens to push them out of their own neighborhoods.”

By the end of the six weeks, says Siddiquee, “the business has a website, and the kids have marketable, high-value skills and a piece they can put in their portfolio. They are prepared for the next step in their journey. Young people of color will be ready. Will the tech industry be ready for them?”

The changes roiling Oakland are tumultuous, and for Harris, the urgency is palpable. “In Richmond last month, three young men were murdered,” she says, her voice rising in anger. “They were 14, 16 and 21. Two out of three had parents struggling with homelessness. And one, Joshmahl Russell, was a Hack the Hood student.” To see his video posted on Hack the Hood’s blog, “The First Video I Would Wear,” is to see promise cut short.

In contrast to the bleakness of Russell’s story, there’s the bright promise of Jose Martinez Maciel, who came to Hack the Hood as a shy seventeen-year-old without a computer in the house. Today, he has developed more than ten websites and started his own video game company, and his work has been shown at the White House.

Thanks to a \$500,000 Google Impact Challenge Grant, Hack the Hood has scaled up to include a paid staff of fifteen, and this summer, it rolled out boot camps in seven locations around California. If all goes well, hundreds of Hack the Hood boot campers will support more than a thousand businesses across the state.

Tony Richards, the executive director of Youth Design, knows that the path to success depends on more than Photoshop skills. “The secret sauce for our kids is to find a network that provides the three things you need for success: a good education, equitable jobs and leverageable social mobility,” he says.

That’s a systemic problem. And it requires a systemwide response. Tech, I’m talking to you. Uber, are you listening? ■