PastForward Online 2022 Conference Proceedings: From Vision to Action
Envisioning a Better Future: An Interview with American Institute of Architects CEO Lakisha Woods

**William Bates:** Hello, everyone. I’m Bill Bates, and I’m a member of the board of trustees of the National Trust and also the 2019 president of the American Institute of Architects. I’m here today to talk to our guest, Lakisha Woods, executive vice president and CEO of the American Institute of Architects. Over the past several years, Lakisha has held several significant leadership roles in the design and construction industry. She most recently served as the president and CEO of the National Institute of Building Sciences, which convenes experts in the building industry, design, government, and regulation to identify and develop solutions to critical issues impacting the built environment, including climate action and natural disasters and inequity. Likewise, Lakisha is currently the Board chair of the American Society of Association Executives and served as the vice chair of the U.S. Green Building Council. I ask you to join me in welcoming Lakisha Woods, our guest today.

**Lakisha Ann Woods:** Thanks, Bill. Well, hello, everyone. I am delighted to spend some time with you during the PastForward National Preservation Conference. Conferences like these are so important because they create stronger bonds of partnership, lines of communication, and opportunities to explore shared commitments to progress. In my view, the work of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the priorities of the American Institute of Architects are already quite aligned. For starters, AIA is focused on ensuring that architecture strengthens our communities, just like the National Trust. And as Bill just noted, a sustainable future requires that conservation and preservation are among the top choices made by architects and the design community. To that end, AIA is committed to providing the tools and the resources that architects and the broader design community need to preserve and
conserve spaces and places that improve the quality of life of the community and further our understanding of our shared history. Thank you again for the opportunity to join you today.

William Bates: Yeah, and that’s a great segue into my first question. As you know, the 2022 agenda for our PastForward conference is about leading change together, and the conference’s theme is about moving from vision to action, and that’s important. We have developed a vision that we think is preferable for our country and for preservation, and so I’d like to talk a little bit about the importance of partnerships to help solve big problems. That ideal of moving from vision to action together, would you mind talking about that a little bit?

Lakisha Ann Woods: Absolutely. One of the best aspects of my role is the opportunity to speak to other members of the architecture, engineering, and construction sector that I often refer to as AEC. Even though we all play different roles, what unites us is a common vision of a built world that empowers and inspires. Events like this are important reminders that solving big problems means working together to turn vision into action. The pandemic, the worsening climate crisis, and the urgent need to address inequities have made clear that partnerships are more important than ever. Successfully addressing the challenges we face requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort. I am proud of the work AIA has done and eager to build on our success by, among other things, deepening AIA’s partnerships, because convening and bringing people together are so important for us to really solve those big problems.

William Bates: That’s great, and while we’re on this thought of big problems and solving them, as I know from my time at AIA, its strategic plan has two top priorities, and they’re focused on using the power of design to address issues like climate emergency and creating a more equitable society. Given that, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about AIA’s role in addressing these and how it dovetails with the importance of preservation.

Lakisha Ann Woods: Well, Bill, as you know, part of the reason I was so excited for the opportunity to come work with AIA is
because of the phenomenal strategic plan that has been developed. Focusing on climate and equity and how those two intertwine is so important not just for us, but for everybody in the built environment and everything that impacts it. I think it is something that we are going to continue to work on with others in partnership as we discussed. But that strategic plan is something that we must really use as our mainstay and our course. Everything that we are doing at the organization ties back to that, and that’s one of the things that I’ve been working on early on in my job here, is making sure that the work that we do is really focused and connected back to the strategic plan.

I’d say the best answer for this question is really paraphrasing the mission of the National Trust, and that is preserving our historic places and spaces builds stronger communities by telling the full story of our history to reflect the contribution, experience, and voice of everyone, which speaks directly to the equity pillar of the strategic plan. And also, preservation is almost always a more sustainable option, which of course directly aligns with the strategic plan’s sustainability pillar. Equity and sustainability are all that we’re focused on, and clearly, that’s why it’s such a great partnership with the National Trust.

William Bates: My next question revolves around the thinking of the great transition, the ongoing generational change that we see, and the impact that it has on methods and stories that we in
the AEC space can do to turn vision into action. What do you think about the work of the AEC sector and where that might take us in collaboration?

**Lakisha Ann Woods:** I have spent my whole career representing associations in this space, and the great transition and recognizing the need for generational change, it is long overdue. For those people who don’t know, I started my career at the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association, and from there, I went to work for the Associated General Contractors of America and then to the National Association of Home Builders, then, of course, the opportunity to lead as CEO of the National Institute of Building Sciences before I came here to AIA. I love construction. I love everything that impacts the built environment, and the people that we target to help us is so important.

I’ve long spoke about the importance of increasing the diversity in this space and specifically about how we need to increase the number of women and diverse individuals who are targeted to be a part of our industry. The trades numbers are still so significantly low. I used to give a speech about getting women into this space, and shared that it was the slowest nontraditional career growth of any other nontraditional job. There are examples like how phrasing is changed, from a policeman to a police officer, or from a fireman to a firefighter, that demonstrates culture changes that have to happen in order to increase that diversity in our space.

The construction industry over 30 years went from 3.2 percent female to 3.6 percent female, and the other sectors went from 3 percent or 9 percent to 20 or 30 percent. There are cultural changes that must happen in order for us to truly bring the changes that are needed in diversity within this industry. And of course, new minds bring fresh ideas and perspectives. In the AEC space, as in all sectors, this is very true, and it’s undergoing this significant generational shift because now we have no choice. All of our people are retiring out of our space, and we’re forced to make changes.

But the good news is for the first time, there are four generations that are active in the workplace. Accomplishing any goal requires harnessing all points of view and experiences. That means all of us
in the AEC sector must work together to ensure that voices, perspectives, and stories of everyone everywhere are reflected in all of our projects. It also means incorporating a diverse set of perspectives into the design process early.

I’m reminded of a quote from award-winning architect Zaha Hadid: “A brilliant design will always benefit from the input of others.” Hadid shared that quote a few years before she passed away, but it signifies the power of collaboration and how our work can have a lasting impact that can inspire future generations. As you can see, I’m very focused on equity and diversifying our space, and I think it is the key stepping stone to impacting all of the positive change that is available and coming for us as we move forward as a profession.

**William Bates:** It’s a great answer, and I agree with you about expanding the inclusive work that we see in these sectors. It makes me wonder how we can collectively impact our communities to inspire and enhance the quality of life in America and to focus on sustainability, equity, and health to make the world a better place. What are your thoughts around that?

**Lakisha Ann Woods:** Thanks for that question, Bill. First, I think we have to get out and let people know what we do. Become more involved in local politics or discussions about the built world in your community. There are no better ambassadors for the power of the built world and design to shape the lives and change minds and to inspire than each one of you. As we expand that understanding through words and deeds, we need to make sure that we’re doing everything we can to let people know about the work that we do and why it’s important and how it impacts the community.

Here in Washington, we are already working as a team to advance policies that harness our collective potential to drive positive and lasting change. We’re working with allies in Congress to secure appropriation requests that strengthen preservation as an effective vehicle for greater equity in our communities, and that’s just to name a few ways that AIA and the National Trust are working together. We know that we need to advance our common vision of a built world, and we will work together so that we make sure it honors everyone.
William Bates: Our work in Washington is really necessary to making sure that there’s an awareness of the importance of the built environment and historic preservation, and we really appreciate the efforts that AIA is putting forth in that regard. Regarding my last question, I was wondering how are environmental issues and social justice issues linked together, and how can a commitment to sustainability and equity help solve the greatest social issues of this generation?

Lakisha Ann Woods: Since its founding in 1865, AIA members have been committed to safeguarding the public’s health, safety, and welfare to improve the nation’s quality of life through the power of design. And like the members of the National Trust, AIA members continue to identify and preserve an even more comprehensive catalog of our shared architectural heritage, especially sites crucial to telling the full story of this nation. AIA believes that neither the protection of the historic built environment nor the decarbonization of the building sector are mutually exclusive, but instead are essential together to increase the sustainability and resilience of our communities while honoring the history of everyone. Social justice is something that we will continue to work on as a profession. The things that we do can positively impact our community, but it is an ongoing factor that we must continue to work on. We must adapt our culture within our firms, within our organizations, and adjust ourselves as humans. That’s really what’s going to change and impact our social equity within our industry.

William Bates: I really appreciate your time and insights today. They’re so relevant to both organizations, and you’ve given us a lot to think about. I look forward to seeing how AIA and the National Trust work together in the future to tell the full American story and build stronger communities through the power of design and place and history in the years ahead. Do you have any concluding thoughts, Lakisha?

Lakisha Ann Woods: I’m just so happy to have had the opportunity to connect with you, Bill. It’s always great to see you and have a chance to touch base and talk. I am honored that the National Trust invited me to participate in this event. Thank you,
and thanks to the National Trust for their leadership for the past 70 years in protecting, preserving, and conserving America’s historic places and spaces so that they continue to inspire and teach us. Although I’m still only eight months on the job, every day I’m learning so much more, and I’m thrilled that people have shared their thoughts, their visions, and their ideas where they would like to see AIA move, and the direction, so that we can continue to positively impact society and our profession as a whole. I am here to listen and learn and continue to work to positively impact this organization. I’m thrilled to be here and look forward to our continued partnership with the National Trust.

William Bates: Thank you again, Lakisha, and thanks to everyone who’s contributing to this conference. I look forward to continuing to work together to make a brighter future for our country. Thank you, everyone, and have a good conference.  

LAKISHA WOODS is executive vice president and CEO of the American Institute of Architects. WILLIAM BATES is a member of the board of trustees of the National Trust and also the 2019 president of the American Institute of Architects.