

THE STATE OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AT SASAKI

June 19, 2020

We, as current and former Black employees of Sasaki are thrilled that the firm is committed towards an anti-racist practice. As part of this commitment, we believe it is crucial to center the voices of Black employees to shed a light on our experiences and insights that may offer true clarity and direction to address the systematic ways that racism is designed into Sasaki's culture and business model.

In doing so, this independent report was developed based on the feedback from 11 current and former Black Sasaki employees to bring forth honesty and transparency around the challenges of the Black experience at Sasaki. Our goal is to catalyze a necessary sense of urgency to overhaul and redesign a firm that allows Black employees and other marginalized identities to grow and thrive.

The path forward must take deep critical action to address the root of the problem that is the pervasiveness of whiteness in design. At large, Black people are not disadvantaged—our beings and souls are wealthy with ideas, imaginations, and solutions. However, Blackness is only disenfranchising in a system of white supremacy. Therefore, since Black people are disenfranchised within Sasaki, this signifies that Sasaki as a whole is complicit within the white supremacist system.

We also recognize that this struggle transcends beyond just Blackness. We strongly believe that addressing the pervasiveness of white supremacy and racist practices within Sasaki and the design industry at large will not only serve Black people, but also the representation of many other marginalized groups (i.e. Indigenous peoples, Latinx, Asian, women), which will ultimately drive a profession that is truly capable of proving human potential.

We look forward to the necessary reflection, planning, and action towards a robust and permanent movement towards a true anti-racist and decolonized design practice.

Sincerely,



Melissa Isidor



Breeze Outlaw



Wendell Joseph



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SASAKI IS A COMPLICIT ACTOR IN A SYSTEM OF WHITE DOMINANCE

Amongst current and former Black employees, there is a widespread consensus that perpetuation of racism and white supremacy is deeply ingrained throughout Sasaki's culture, design practice, and business structure.

Sasaki continuously puts the onus of addressing racism in design practice on Black people to address what is actually a white problem.

The norm of Sasaki's design culture is white dominance and capitalist gain, and those who deviate from these values are often deemed unfit or unqualified. Too often, the blame is put on Black people for not having acquired enough skills or competency to assimilate into the design culture without taking a critical look to examine how the design culture perpetuates a space that is unwelcome and unable to even receive and support Black people. To address the extreme lack of Black people in the profession, Sasaki leadership takes a blind mentality shifted to Black people as being the reason why as if Sasaki isn't part of the entire system built against Black people.

At large, there is an ongoing unwillingness and lack of awareness within the firm to truly invest in the self-reflection, learning, and action to understand urban issues that impact Black communities, and Sasaki's own contributions towards designing a built environment that is unwelcome to Black life. Black experiences are often only addressed as a trend to sustain a good image without an actual sustained movement to address the pervasiveness of racism in design practice and culture.

Violence of an Apolitical Stance

While there may be a small handful of people voicing explicit anti-racist values, there is a pervasive design culture that perpetuates an anti-political and complacent stance. The ongoing aversion of politics within design projects is harmful and perpetuates exploitation and gentrification of Black and brown communities. This is particularly evident through the limited evaluation of the client's values behind project pursuits.

As designers of the built environment, our work goes far beyond an aesthetic intervention and has very real impact on people we claim to support. Choosing to remain apolitical may be a move to value your own comfort and privilege at the expense of Black and brown livelihoods.

"The constant request to educate Sasaki on ethical equity is exhausting. It often goes unheard if it is not aligning with their bottom-line of capitalism. I feel like the burden of addressing racism in design in a meaningful way will be on Black and brown people. And if Sasaki tries to address it themselves without proper education, they will reinvent the same system which is oppressing design."

Language that has been brought forth to amplify marginalized narratives has been shut down to not "make the white men feel like second-class citizens."

Poor Client Ethics & Evaluation

Clients may not always have the community's best interest in mind. Sasaki has not deeply invested in practices to evaluate client politics and motives, which has led to widespread collaborations with clientele that are driving gentrification and global imperialism.

"How do you celebrate an American award for your American firm designing development in Afghanistan—a country that has been ravaged by imperialism? Sasaki as a firm is disturbingly blind to its own complicity in global imperialism at the expense of Brown and Black people."

"It's honestly concerning that a firm of this scale and with this body of work is designing spaces that would not welcome people like me."

A leader in designing white-centric spaces

The majority of Sasaki's portfolio is in the development of spaces that are white-centered, unsafe, and unwelcoming to Black people. Furthermore, it is disheartening to witness the scale of projects that are actively contributing to the erasure of Black neighborhoods and gentrification, that are too often labeled as "successes."

Design definitions and processes within Sasaki and the larger profession are incredibly narrow, and silence decolonized views and approaches towards alternative approaches. There is a harmful western centricity in the admiration of designers and thinkers, precedent research, etc.

Upholding a Capitalist and Colonial Agenda

The atmosphere at Sasaki consistently upholds ideals of capitalism which causes Black people to have to make moral sacrifices for the sake of their career by participating in projects that further the agenda of gentrification. There have been project pursuits that aligned with Sasaki's new mission to be more active in equity projects and they failed to show up.

Within the marketing and pursuit process, Sasaki's culture is deeply motivated by competitive values that perpetuates stagnant, uniform, and harmful design outcomes. Pursuit and design processes focus more on pleasing clients than the actual people who live in the community.

Sasaki's "best projects" are often labeled as so because they have the highest fees or largest land areas with more minimal consideration around the deeper values of the client or the particular community. These are some of the glaring ways that Sasaki's project pursuit process is disturbingly aligned with capitalist and colonial values—i.e. the desires to exert power and control over the development of land while attaining profit.

This psychology enables the firm to perpetuate these major global issues.

EMPTY RHETORIC AND BROKEN TRUST

We asked, "Based on your experience, how confident is your trust in the leadership's approach towards addressing racism in design?"



On a scale of 1-5, the average score was only 2.2.* For a firm that touts its diversity and inclusion both internally and externally, these claims are a major contradiction of the perception versus reality.

Sasaki's claim to being a diverse space perpetuates an environment that feels dishonest and exploitative for the motive of capital gain. Furthermore, Sasaki's active stance to celebrate its false diversity and inclusion perpetuates an environment where Black employees feel further invisible and isolated.

"Sasaki doesn't value diversity, they don't understand it, and continually tout the diverse staff without doing the work necessary to understand race."

"People don't get it, leadership does not value it—it does not define the bottom line therefore no incentive to make change."

"Within the design staff, there is a seemingly dis-ingenuous interest in systems of power that affect Black people."

"There is a disconnect between rhetoric and action related to racial justice and opportunity."

"I fear that "addressing racism in design" is not a priority for the current leadership. It seems most principals just want to get paid to make beautiful designs."

*Based on 11 responses from current and former Black employees.

A CULTURE THAT DEVALUES DIVERSITY

Diversity goes beyond the ethnic makeup of partitions but also includes diversity in thinking and approaches that may be brought to a project. Sasaki's touted definition of diversity fails to address a broad lens of diversity in design. The oppressive nature of Sasaki's design culture forces assimilation towards white standards by devaluing diverse thinking and design approaches. Black-centered contributions to design are often de-valued or not taken seriously.

The culture at Sasaki prioritizes efficiency and production over long-term skill building and design. An extreme focus on graphics and production prevents opportunities for new ways of adding value to be incorporated into the design process.

Sasaki's design process is incredibly structured and leadership is unwilling to take risks to be part of the change, instead resorting to perpetuating same structures.

An Ailing Business Model

Within the corporate design industry, the proportion of design fees allocated on construction projects is incredibly low, which is a direct representation of how the profession doesn't even value its own work. The practice treats itself like a commodity with little resistance to shift this dichotomy, which only further devalues the work we all do. Feedback expressed concern that it feels like the principals want to exploit free labor from lower staff for their own capital gains. Staffing is hyper-based on utilization, which makes Black employees feel like a commodity rather than recognizing individual merits and ideas.

The business model is largely reactionary rather than proactive, and the leadership has failed to honestly identify any financial incentive to prioritize diversity. Therefore, it is only addressed as a trend rather than an actual priority.

Mental Health Implications

The negative experiences of Black employees in Sasaki have very real mental health implications both within the space that persist even outside of the firm.

"My experiences at Sasaki felt like torture and left me with trauma and PTSD."

"Sasaki culture is pervasive and used to oppress and belittle thinkers and contributors that do not conform to the Sasaki way of design."

"There is little to no understanding or care to accept the urgency of reimagining design process."

"The design practice needs to step into the 21st century and Sasaki in particular would benefit from not running like a fiefdom."

It's common place in Sasaki to say "Sasaki is a revolving door" as some sort of lighthearted joke, but it always rubbed me the wrong way. I now stand by that initial feeling in saying that "unofficial/internal mantra" is not something to be proud of or lightly joke about. It demonstrates the willfulness of making all the plans to do something and never doing the actions to correct it. And that is exactly what we mean when we say today is too late. Tomorrow is too late. And yesterday was too late. Change has to happen now.

Experiences of Isolation

Within all the experiences mentioned, the Black experience at Sasaki is prominently marked by feelings of non-belonging and isolation. Over the years, there generally averages only ~5 Black people present within a firm of 280+, and even less in design roles. Especially given the absence of Black representation in leadership, and general lack of POC representation at large, there is a perpetual sense of isolation and invisibility. This lack of diversity in leadership and disconnect of values leads to minimized opportunities for honest mentorship for Black employees.

Furthermore, as triggering experiences come up in society (i.e. George Floyd protests), Black employees struggle with the lack of competency of peers to understand and fully empathize with these experiences.

Tokenization & Exploitation

Feedback highlighted a culture of tokenism where Black employees are utilized for their knowledge around equity and race, with a lack of acknowledgement of broader skillsets and capabilities. Multiple comments reflected a pattern of feeling “gas-lighted” by being assigned more menial tasks or unfavorable projects than white employees with the same skillsets.

“TOKENISM FOR TEMPORARY BENEFIT” MODEL

Within Sasaki, there are ongoing trends of Black, POC, and women being put on proposals to win the work, yet they are not staffed accordingly when it comes time to do the job. This is one of the direct ways Sasaki is directly and disrespectfully profiting off of marginalized groups within its own “community.”

TIME & LABOR EXPLOITATION

Design and studio culture glamorizes working long hours with minimal compensation. Within the United States, Black and brown people have been historically exploited through slavery first through colonial times and continued today through the prison industrial complex. While these systems represent exploitation on the extreme end, there is a direct connection to why Sasaki and the larger design culture is not popularly pursued by Black and brown people. Subjecting oneself to an industry that glamorizes undervalued and free labor is both triggering and devaluing to many Black people.

“My time with Sasaki was marked by the perpetual fear of being labeled the “angry” or “assertive” Black person if I was too passionate with my opinions. My decision in avoiding these labels led to me not actively taking part in discussions, be less social, and as a result, not reach or show, my full potential. These actions from not only myself, but also my peers, led to us being complicit with such tokenism. My passion and motivation as a landscape architect with each day faded away as each day passed. Every suggestion I posed was dismissed. This left me feeling like my degree and hard work was for nothing.”

“Many people have expressed feeling tokenism and pigeonhole as the “Black face.” In addition, being Black at Sasaki is fearing that your ideas on equity will be co-opted without proper credit. I’ve heard numerous times how some folks’ ideas have been taken by leadership without credit and with the recent Intellectual Property policy it’s difficult to trust that ideas will not be co-opted.”

PERFORMATIVE MENTORSHIP

Some feedback highlighted a mentorship model that was often performative, ingenuine, and lacking real opportunity for learning and growth. Furthermore, it is challenging for Black employees to seek out mentorship from leaders who are lacking the competency to empathize and understand Black experiences.

A PATH FORWARD...

**We recognize that some of the forthcoming actions have begun to be recognized by the firm, but there is still so much more work so be done.*

#1 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Sasaki was founded as a minority-owned and controlled company. Today that couldn't be farther from the truth. In order to become an anti-racist practice, Sasaki must directly acknowledge and address how white privilege has enabled leadership to maintain white dominance through design. Furthermore, the practice must acknowledge how it has continuously failed to deeply value Black and POC contributions in design. This process must be grounded in truth and integrity.

"Sasaki must take a critical look at its current leadership. Making donations, and philanthropy in general, is sharing the leftovers. What we need you to do right now is share the power. Do you have an intentional anti-racist agenda for your corporate and institutional work? Is it on your website and in your marketing material? Are you growing your portfolio of public work? Does your resilience research focus equally on social issues as it does on ecology? Do you work with clients who have explicit racial equity agendas? When they hire you, is your equity agenda a primary reason for their selection? When the answer is yes to these questions, you will become a magnet for talented young black designers and planners."

"We bring our whole selves into the work that we do. I am a Black man. I did not stop being a Black man once I became an urban planner, and I never will stop being a Black man. In fact, my being a Black man makes me a better planner because I understand, both personally and professionally, the various ways in which the built environment has been designed not only without my consent, but in direct opposition to my existence."

#2 A CULTURAL AND BUSINESS OVERHAUL

CULTURAL OVERHAUL

The path forward will require an overhaul of Sasaki's culture that doesn't require Black people to conform to its culture. The firm culture must shift towards ideals that look beyond the western elite for inspiration and validation.

BUSINESS OVERHAUL

This path will also include an overhaul of the firm's, processes including project pursuits, design process, client relations, marketing, etc. **An anti-racist business strategy must transparently identify the leadership's plan to relinquish white dominance.** How are white leaders making space for Black and brown designers to have a seat at the table? A great example of how this is being done is Reddit co-founder stepping down from the Reddit board to intentionally make a seat for a Black leader AND investing his ownership gains towards Black community organizations. Succession planning should ensure retiring leaders are succeeded by a diverse new guard.

A Commitment to Anti-Racist Projects & Clientele

Sasaki must actively work towards clients/projects that have explicit anti-racist agendas. Leaders must be vocal about these standards/intentions starting from the pursuit process. The firm must develop infrastructure to avoid leading projects that feed gentrification. This will require creating equitable guidelines on projects that will be pursued (i.e. must have positive social impact, clients are anti-racist, projects don't perpetuate gentrification, work with more Black people on projects).

An important component of an anti-racist practice is building a strategy to invest in staff to speak up to clientele with racist agendas. This should be directly built into the business model (i.e. a financial buffer that accounts for a contract to be lost if a design team decides to speak out against a client that is contributing to harmful developments.) Sasaki's current business model does not account for these potential cases which pushes design teams to continue/execute on projects with problematic clients for the sake of profit.

SUBSIDIZE SOCIAL IMPACT WORK

Sasaki should build a business model to subsidize work that attempts to tackle structural racism within the built environment with admin budgets (e.g. Sasaki Foundation and/or marketing budgets). Furthermore, the firm should work towards a model with the foundation that allows Sasaki employees and Foundation partners to work in a collaborative dynamic rather than the current hierarchical model.

Anti-Racist Training

Moving forward, there must be firm-wide initiatives that all support employees to learn and engage with issues around race and exclusion in the built environment. This may include hiring certified racial training consultants. It is necessary that these conversations are sustained over multiple years (rather than one-time) because racism is pervasive at every inch of the profession and unlearning is a lifetime process that cannot be adequately addressed into a singular workshop.

PROJECT REVIEWS

As part of anti-racist training, Sasaki should develop a project review process to analyze how racist processes have shown up in past work. This will enable practitioners to identify and change direct practices that are harmful towards Black & brown communities.

Firm Transparency + Consistency

The firm should maintain consistent internal firm-wide reporting (minimum quarterly) on its initiatives towards an anti-racist practice. Too often diversity initiatives are not widely advertised internally which leads to lagging momentum and accountability. If the firm is not working towards an anti-racist practice, there should be explicit communication to take accountability for not accomplishing its stated intentions and goals. Furthermore, broader communications may build more awareness around anti-racist initiatives and involvement from more employees.

"No more "pay the bill" projects when those projects harm the Black community."

Shifting Values

Sasaki must shift away from white-centered structures of validation. Immediate actions may include implementing firm policies to:

- ▷ Stop submitting to awards with majority-white organizations + judges
- ▷ Stop attending and sponsoring conferences about urban issues that are not contributed to by the Black and brown communities at the heart of these issues.
- ▷ Stop attending conferences/talks with all white panels. If white employees are asked to join a panel, request that there is diversity amongst the group or give up your seat for a POC voice.

Additional Comments

- ▷ If a project is in a predominantly Black community, Black designers should work on the project.
- ▷ There must be an overhaul of Sasaki's engagement of methodology toward meeting people where they are.
- ▷ Sasaki needs to halt marketing diversity of the practice (internally + externally) that is contradictory to the reality. Diversity marketing should focus on the firm's actions towards a diverse practice while acknowledging its current shortfalls.

#3 RECRUITMENT + RETENTION

Outreach towards future employees can only take place AFTER Sasaki's racial equity agenda has been defined and your work reflects your commitments.

Retention

Retention of Black employees involves addressing the entirety of challenges aforementioned, predominantly overhauling Sasaki's design culture to welcome truly diverse methods of practice. Additional important aspects of retention include, but are not limited to:

COMPENSATION

Black and POC employees should be adequately compensated for their cultural competency as it relates to the firm's work initiatives.

The current model allows Black employees to be exploited for their knowledge and understandings of race in the built environment with minimal compensation that recognizes the value they bring to the overall business.

IMPROVED MENTORSHIP + SUPPORT

There is a need for an overhaul of the staffing approach and work process to allocate more time for mentorship and learning for younger staff. Sasaki must work towards developing a culture for experimentation and learning rather maintaining status quo design processes.

CLEARER PATHS FOR ADVANCEMENT

There must be an intentional, sustained, and fast-tracked effort to invest and advance Black and Brown leaders into the firm's power structure. This must be clear and well-articulated to firm staff.

Furthermore, the culture of advancement must shift away from the need to be "assertive" in order to attain recognition and growth.

Recruitment

COHORT RECRUITMENT

The practice needs to commit to hiring an initial COHORT of Black designers/planners of color so that they are not alone in the challenges that they will face. These batch hirings should take place at every level of the firm, including partners, so that they have peer support and a company presence.

RECRUITMENT TACTICS

The firm should reevaluate qualification standards while avoiding tokenism in recruiting practices. Recruitment should prioritize a focus on work experience and mentorship rather than job perks like food, celebrations, etc. There must be clear transparency in the recruitment process around opportunities for advancement.

Based on feedback, recruitment of Black employees is more successful if driven by intention and honesty. A direct acknowledgement of Sasaki's current lack of diversity is more well received than a false narrative.

TARGETED OUTREACH

Sasaki needs to actively recruit from public universities and HBCUs (not just GSD and MIT). The firm should identify particular institutions to set up long-term relationships/ programs for recruitment. This may include a sustained investment from Sasaki to an HBCU design program

Another strategy is to recruit professionals who grew up in the communities where Sasaki works and/or aspires to work.

The firm should continue and expand its outreach with high school students, while building more awareness in the firm for employees to get involved. Youth outreach may include career days at high schools, internships and scholarships.

About This Report

This report was compiled in June 2020, in an effort to bring transparency around the challenges of the Black experience at Sasaki and a sense of urgency to redesign a firm that allows Black employees to grow and thrive. This work was developed independently outside of Sasaki as an effort to gain more honest and truthful feedback.

The feedback includes responses from 11 current and former Black Sasaki employees. Responses were gathered via a written survey and phone interviews.

We recognize that each employee experiences a unique experience with the firm. The summarized findings identify recurring trends and themes from responses with regards to the Black experience as well as observations on the overall practice.

The raw data will not be available to protect the privacy of respondents.

This PDF report was compiled by Mel Isidor, who has been involved with Sasaki since 2016.
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