

## Grassroots Leadership, Design, and Service Conference // July 18 - 21, 2019



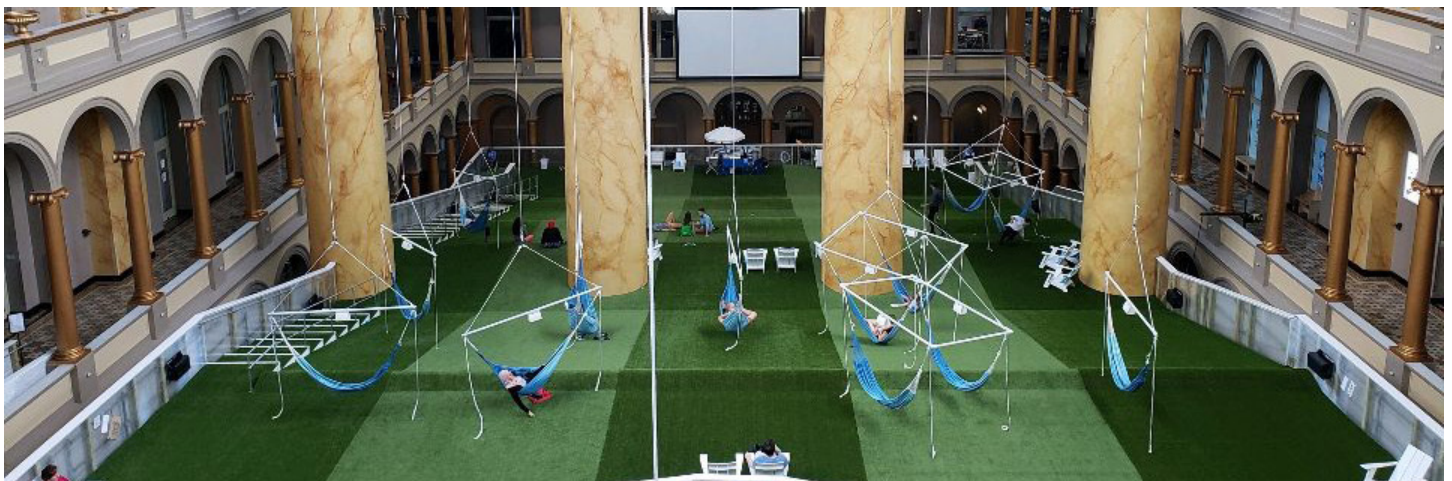
Officers Left to Right: Elizabeth Ott (2019 Grad), Aubrey Bader (4th Year, NCARB Student Advisor), Jenna Ely (3rd Year, Treasurer), Tyler Forsberg (4th Year, Events Coordinator), Maggie Redding (4th Year, Media Relations), Kari Essary (4th Year, Vice President), Rachel Albee (4th Year, Treasurer), Zach Orig (4th Year, Media Relations)

Summer is a time to relax, connect with loved ones, and gain internship experience, but it is also a time to prepare for the upcoming academic year. To get ready for the 2019-2020 year, the American Institute of Architecture Students - University of Tennessee, Knoxville Chapter (AIAS UTK) sent eight officers to the Grassroots Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. where we met with student leaders from the U.S.A., Canada, Mexico, and countries in the Middle East. We explored chapter leadership strategies, investigated topics relevant to students, and networked with professionals in the area. While at the conference, we also heard from three remarkable keynote speakers and several breakout workshop leaders who inspired us to imagine how architecture can impact the community.

The first morning of the conference, AIAS members participated in the first-ever Student Capitol Hill Day. They met with members of Congress to discuss architecture student loan debt forgiveness, which is important to many of us. Recent University of Tennessee graduate and 2018-2019 Freedom by Design Chair, Elizabeth Ott, says the following:

Capitol Hill Day was an event for student advocates to come together and present to Capitol Hill Representatives, Senators, and their staffers a new bill that would permit the student loan repayment percentage as a matching requirement for employers to contribute to the employee's retirement. As architecture students, we expressed how costly the profession is and how valuable this subtle change could be - young professionals wouldn't have to make the horrible decision of paying back loans or saving for the future. They can do both. It was a surreal experience to be amongst the people who make a change in this country and tell them our stories and why we are passionate about this change!

Grassroots also serves as the official transition between the outgoing National Board of Directors and the incoming board with the opening ceremony hosted by the National Building Museum. We said goodbye to recent graduates Paul Bamson, 2018, as the outgoing South Quad Director and Elizabeth Ott, 2019, as the outgoing Freedom by Design Advisory Council Chair and welcomed the 2019-2020 national board. While visiting the National Building Museum for the ceremony, we had the opportunity to experience the museum's summer exhibition in the main hall and hear from its creators from LAB at Rockwell Group. This exhibit, titled *Lawn*, is representative of the summer experience and incorporates a sloping turf lawn, hammocks suspended from the museum's roof trusses, and an AR experience that allows the user to chase and catch digital fireflies - all while in an air-conditioned space. This experience was further augmented by a looping track of background noises featuring rustling leaves, passing cars, barking dogs, and chirping insects.



*Lawn* by LAB at Rockwell Group

The following days, we heard from three keynote speakers, spoke with regional leaders in our quad groups, and explored fascinating topics during breakout workshop sessions. Hearing from the inspiring keynotes, we learned about leadership, design, and service, respectively. Jaime Van Mourik, Vice President of Education Solutions at USGBC, spoke about leadership by sharing her professional journey and speaking on the lessons she learned while finding her career and developing as a leader. The following morning, Valentina Sumini, Postdoctoral Associate at the MIT MediaLab in Tangible Media, showed us how she and her team, in partnership with SOM, are designing for space exploration. She discussed the many obstacles of space exploration and showed us how the team was using design to create habitable - and comfortable - living and working communities. At the end of the day, Lauren Cantrell, Government Relations & Advocacy Senior Specialist with Habitat for Humanity International, shared her service journey and discussed how she became an advocate for sustainable, affordable housing. While she has no direct connection to architecture, her message was that anyone can be an advocate and that through architecture, there are opportunities for us to promote growth in our communities. Our keynote speakers were remarkable because they showed us how with the right support, desire to learn, and motivation we can use architecture as a tool to strengthen our communities.

Between keynotes, our officers attended sessions about marketing, UX design, resin casting, leadership and fundraising, Freedom by Design practices, K-12 engagement, resilience in cities, and many other topics. Regardless of the specifics, all of the breakout sessions featured knowledgeable, inspiring professionals who are excited for the future of architecture. After these keynotes and sessions, we had free time to explore the city and meet other students in a relaxed environment. For example, our quad reception was hosted by EYP architects where we met with UT grads, Cullen Sayegh and Brent Castro. Even in this setting, conversations tended to center around how each chapter and college does things differently and how to improve one's chapter and college. For instance, some of us talked with Auburn students about their Rural Studio while students from other universities asked us about our curriculum, interested in our representation and structures courses.

Grassroots came to a close after the Council of Presidents (CoP) meeting. This meeting serves as a time for chapter leaders to discuss studio culture policies, charge national committees with certain tasks, and crowd-source ideas to better their chapters. Keynotes and breakout sessions before this meeting shape what ideas are discussed. As such, much of the time was spent reflecting on how AIAS chapters can influence their respective communities by partnering with student organizations and working with the administration on initiatives that benefit all students. Even though much of the discussion was about the challenges we face as students, the overall atmosphere of the conference was hopeful. The Grassroots Conference is meant to inspire student leaders and set the tone for the rest of the year. Students who attend leave the conference feeling excited about architecture and ready to create valuable content for their chapters.



Grassroots Conference Group Photo