

INTRODUCTION

My name is Taylor Staten and I am the Design Principal at TnS Studio, a design studio that specializes in architecture, graphics, and planning. I earned both my Bachelor and Master degree in Architecture from Hampton University and have 8 years of professional working experience.

I have worked at a 75-person design firm where I was the only Black Architect, and in a 300-person office where I was one of two. I wasn't prepared for that. I had attended majority Black schools from preschool through college, and the reality of the architecture profession, that I would always be the only Black Woman Architect in the room, quite often felt uncomfortable.

Navigating this foreign place without a mentor was hard for me and I made lots of mistakes. The following ten pages will both highlight the top five mistakes I made that impacted my career as well as personal stories and revelations from previous places of employment.

This guide is designed to act as a virtual mentor to the next generation of brilliant Black Architects, allowing you to learn from my mistakes instead of your own. The goal is for you to DO BETTER than I did.

I hope this helps.

Love,
Taylor

THE DO BETTER GUIDE for Young Black Architects

FIVE Mistakes to Avoid Early in Your Career

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If you notice, each part is named after a Kanye song. Listen to catch the vibe.

Everything I Am. Don't be what you're not.

From what I said to how I wore my hair, to those that knew the REAL me, “work me” was a complete phony. Only a few times had I been in a large group of White people, once in a professional setting, but I still had no clue what to do. I didn't think I could be my true Black self and greet everyone with a hearty “What's Good,” when I arrived. So instead, I said “Happy Monday” knowing good and well I wished I was still at home. I hate Mondays.

MISTAKE #1:

Being who you think they want you to be instead of who you know you are... don't do that.

I laughed at their jokes, completely oblivious to the movie references, and have never said “awesome” more times in conversation. I thought I had to completely revise my vocabulary each time I stepped into the office.



Freshman Year at Hampton

Growing up, Black was all I knew. My neighbors were Black. My friends were Black. My doctors and teachers were Black. I even went to college at an HBCU (Hampton University) and was surrounded by all kinds of Black people. I never really felt like I was a “minority.” Then I started working and was basically thrown into this sea of professional White people, and didn't know what to do.

I didn't know who I was or how I fit in. So I watered down my Blackness.

I thought code-switching was a necessity. And I code-switched HARD. *Code-switching is the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting.* My mom had raised us to speak properly. While my high school friends would say, “doe” (for door) and “flow” (for floor), my mom didn’t allow it. So growing up, my friends joked and said, “I talked White.” So when I code-switched, it must have made me sound even Whiter. I convinced myself that I had to be the opposite of every Black image they’d seen on TV or read about in the news. I was subconsciously trying to make sure they were comfortable, while increasing my own discomfort.

I was going out of my way to do something I had no business doing. But please know: **IT’S NOT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO CHANGE A WHITE PERSON’S PERCEPTION OF BLACK PEOPLE AS A WHOLE.** You are only ever responsible for you. You control only your actions and are responsible for the legacy you leave behind and failing to be myself was probably my biggest mistake.

It took me years to understand the importance of it, but **YOU ARE THE SECRET SAUCE.** No one thinks like you or has ideas like you, so your perspective is your super power. When you choose to pretend, you in turn choose to disable that power. Don’t do that.

It’s crazy that being yourself can feel counterintuitive, right?



Bemis Laboratory, School of Architecture

**DO BETTER
and be your
best Black self.**

But one choice I’m glad I made was to attend an HBCU. In five years I had made lifelong friends, traveled the world to see beautiful architecture, and maintained my identity while doing it. I studied with brilliant Black minds and I wouldn’t trade my experience for anything.

Although I didn’t realize just how White the architecture profession was until my first internship, I knew I wouldn’t have the opportunity to be surrounded by Black people at a firm. So I chose Hampton. I chose to have my last educational experience before entering the “real world” to be one with people who looked like me and shared my experiences. It’s where I found myself right before I lost it.

Do better than me. Regardless of your college experience, realize that you can be you at work. You can wear your natural curls. You can bring your own style to business casual. You can pepper conversations with slang, even though you might have to explain to your 50-year old co-worker what it means.

But, at all times, BE YOU.

Good Morning. First impressions are crucial.

A summer internship was mandatory after the fourth year of my five-year program. It was written into the curriculum so I simply treated it as another graduation requirement. I almost approached it with this stuck-up attitude, similar to one I imagine rich kids would get if their parents told them they had to work for their allowance. Like, I'll do it, but only because you're making me (if you just read that with a snobby voice, you a real one).

MISTAKE #2:

Treating your internship like a luxury instead of a career-defining opportunity... don't do that.



SmithgroupJJR (now Smithgroup) was my first job out of school. I started as an intern in the firm's Durham, NC office and was rehired as an Architect I when I moved to Dallas, TX.

Overall, I would grade my internship performance at a C, which is average. Each day I went to work, I gave the bare minimum effort. I did only what I was asked to do, no more and no less. I came to work on time, took an hour lunch, and left at 5pm on the dot. I attended scheduled work outings and socialized with my colleagues, but wasn't wise enough to soak up all of the information around me.

I didn't ask enough questions about my assignments or the firm as a whole and that was a big mistake. HUGE! I wasn't good at Revit then. Like at all. I was actually intimidated by it, but was assigned to a health-care project that was in Revit for schematic design. My supervisor told me the basic project info, I nodded and smiled and began to work. I didn't ask a single question. I ultimately messed up the model (I altered various wall types without creating a duplicate first, if you know, you know). I messaged the BIM Manager and never heard anything from him or the project team again. That day was the last time I touched the project and I knew someone was going to have to fix what ruined.



“Take advantage man, take advantage.”

That was the impression I made. I was polite and cordial. I was friendly and sociable. But I didn't work hard enough. In an internship, especially one that takes place over the summer, you have to be aware of how you spend the short time that you have. Use the time well to make a good impression. Make sure that you are:

- Always on time (and not too eager to leave at EXACTLY 5pm)
- Asking for enough information to perform the task WELL
- Talking to your supervisor about the company culture and past projects
- Getting help with software when you're unsure of the firm's BIM standards

These are the things that will make a difference in your work and your experience. Do better than me.

Can't Tell Me Nothing. Be confident, not arrogant.

Being the only Black person in the office was beginning to take a toll on me mentally and emotionally. I dealt with microaggressions that made me overcompensate to cover for my lack of self-confidence. I started to feel like I didn't "belong" in a certain position or didn't "deserve" to work at a certain firm, so I began to act arrogantly as an attempt to convince myself of my value and ability.

Needless to say, that was a mistake. I worked faster and became defensive to any type of criticism related to the quality of the work I produced.

MISTAKE #3:

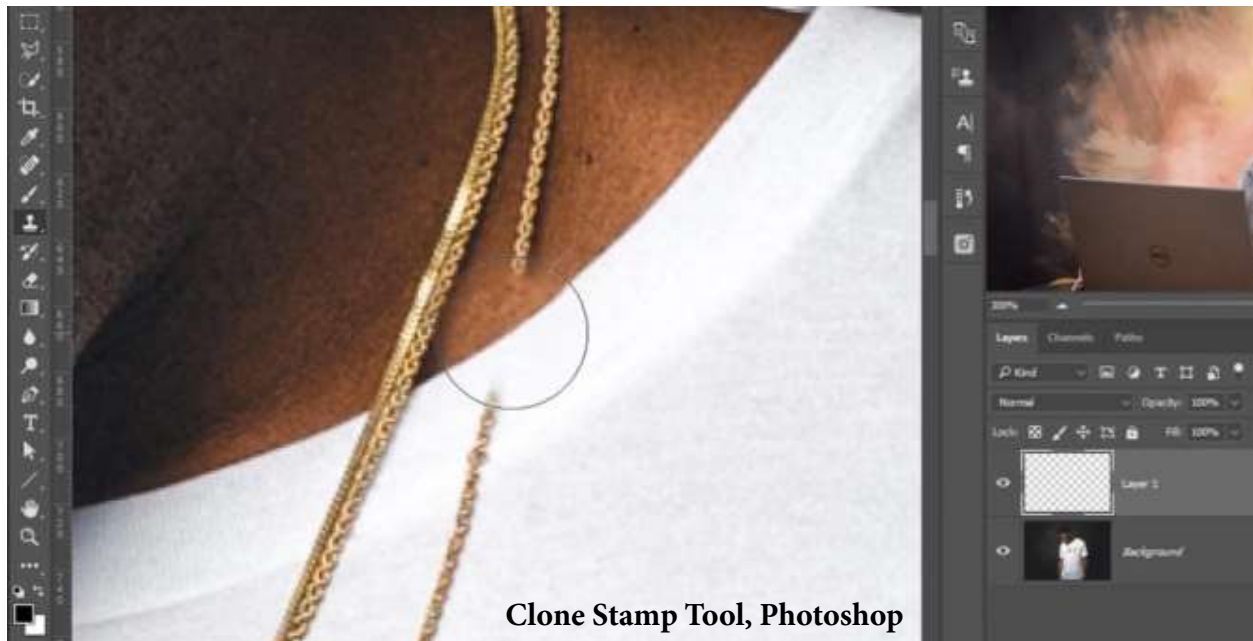
Operating with a know-it-all attitude when there's so much you need to learn... don't do that.

I thought I was an expert at Photoshop. And I was compared to my 50-year old supervisors. They were old school and barely even knew Revit. One day I was modifying a hand-rendered image for a client presentation and my coworker was watching over my shoulder. He said, "You know there's a better way to do that, right?" My response? "HOW ELSE AM I GOING TO FIX THAT?! THIS IS THE ONLY WAY!" He looked at me, then slowly turned away and resumed his work.

I cringe every time I think of that exchange. I thought I knew best. I took my time using the paintbrush tool to match the nuances of surrounding tone to cover the existing watercolored driveway with grass and was done fixing the image in about an hour.



HarborChase of Plano Rendering



It's funny how life works. A few years later I was in an identical situation. I was at my desk modifying an image in Photoshop and a coworker walks past. He doubled back and says, "Can I show you a trick real quick?" I said, "Sure." I gave him control of the mouse and he shows me this tool that can copy the surrounding area and essentially paint it on the area I wanted to camouflage. What would have taken me 30 minutes to an hour to do, he did in a few minutes. It was an "aha" moment. I immediately thought back to the first time that happened to me and realized what my former coworker was trying to teach me. I felt so bad.

My arrogance was costing the project money, because time is money. He was merely trying to help and I mistook his attempt at assistance as an attack on my talent. A big lesson in this was: DON'T TAKE IT PERSONAL. It's most often not even about you.

Be humble, be teachable and always keep learning.

Do better than me. Don't walk around the office like you have something to prove. You don't. But you do have a job to do, and how well you do that job will start to build your professional reputation. Understand the difference between confidence and arrogance and avoid the latter.

- **Confidence** is self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities.
- **Arrogance** is the exaggeration of one's own worth or importance often by an overbearing manner.

You can't learn if you're arrogant. And the goal is to remain teachable because there is always something you don't know.

New Slaves. You better speak up.

At one firm I worked, I felt like a slave. I would come in early (a little before 8am) and my supervisor would be upset if I left before 6pm. Most days I stayed until 7pm, but other times I was at the office until 9pm or 10pm because of poor project and time management by my superior.

There was one day I remember vividly, though. I went to go talk to the newest hire, another brown face in the office, and after a few minutes my supervisor walked up to me and said, “Okay that’s enough. Get back to work.” I was in shock at the moment, but I wrapped up my conversation and headed to my desk. It was embarrassing, but I was even more embarrassed that I folded so easily.

MISTAKE #4:

Fearing you’ll fit the stereotype of “Angry Black Wo/Man” for speaking up... don’t do that.



My husband came to pick me up that night. I was working late and I broke down crying. He listened to me sob about how I wasn’t being respected and how I hated that my supervisor made me feel so small and powerless.

But the truth was that I DID have power. My words were my power, only I didn’t know it yet. I would tip-toe around what I wanted to say to avoid reaching an “Angry Black Woman” moment. I was so afraid of that becoming my label that I kept shrinking. But your playing small doesn’t serve the world.

My face today if anyone tries to come at me sideways. I’m not the one.

Your speaking up is not only advocating for yourself, but considering the Black people that will come behind you. I know you're familiar with the phrase, "Snitches Get Stitches," but the rules are different at work. And if you're a Black Woman, no one will snitch on you quicker than a White man, or at least in my experience that's been true. They will tell HR on you in a hot minute and with no shame.

I was creating drawings for a feasibility study and my supervisor told me that he needed the updated presentation by the end of the day. It was an unreasonable request, so I explained why that wouldn't be possible. I had a number of drawings to update and formatting them into the booklet would take time. (FYI: Your supervisors manage projects but may not use any software. This means they can be oblivious to just how long it takes to create something presentable.) I also had to leave early that day, because it was my day to pick up my daughter. I grabbed my bag and got up and He assumed I was leaving for the day. He blurted, "You're leaving now?!" I told him that I was going to the Mother's Room, but he didn't understand. So I was standing there with my pump bag in my hand explaining to a White man that I wasn't going home, but about to go pump breast milk. I hated it.

But guess what he does about it? Yep. He tells HR. I found out in an email from the HR manager the following day. She asked me if I needed to be reduced to a part-time position to accommodate my ability to meet my weekly hours. The whole situation was trash, but did I speak up? Nope.

**Sometimes you
gotta check folks,
like...
I'M SPEAKING.**



Learn from my mistakes. Use your voice in the office to stand up for yourself.

- NEVER let anyone interrupt you in a meeting.
- Correct anyone whose tone isn't right when talking to you.
- Let coworkers know when their statements are offensive to you.
- Alert HR of any existing policies that may need to be re-evaluated for bias.

Do better than me and don't operate out of fear, but be inspired by a portion of my favorite quote:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be?" - Marianne Williamson

The Good Life. It's all about relationship.

My father-in-law instilled in my husband the importance of relationships. He, both my father-in-law and husband, can't go too far without bumping into someone they know and make the acquaintance of strangers quite easily. I'm the opposite. I'm far less likely to talk to people and I absolutely hate small talk. When I started working, "networking" was the buzzword, but I shied away from events that would force me to engage strangers. I blamed it on my personality.

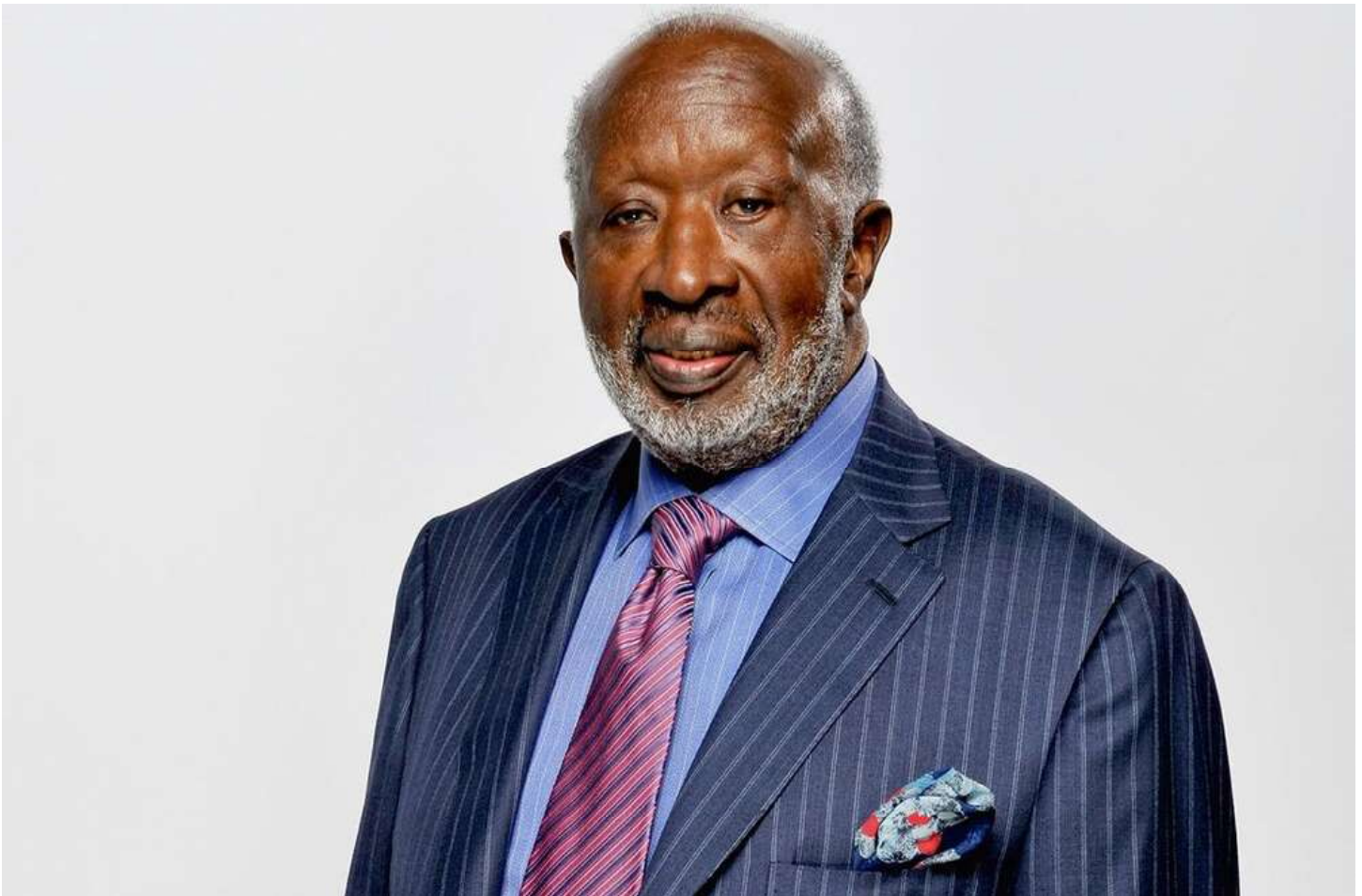
MISTAKE #5:

Neglecting to build your professional network because you are not an "extrovert"... don't do that.

HIDDEN RULES AMONG CLASSES / FROM RUBY PAYNE'S "UNDERSTANDING POVERTY"

	POVERTY	MIDDLE CLASS	WEALTH
POSSESSIONS	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees.
MONEY	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved, invested.
PERSONALITY	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	If for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued.
SOCIAL EMPHASIS	Social inclusion of people he/she likes.	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency.	Emphasis is on social exclusion.
FOOD	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
CLOTHING	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class. Label important.	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important.
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
DESTINY	Believes in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate chance.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices now.	Noblesse oblige. ('Nobility Obliges')
LANGUAGE	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has money.
WORLD VIEW	Sees world in terms of local setting.	Sees world in terms of national setting.	See world in terms of international view.
LOVE	Love and acceptance conditional, based upon whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance conditional and based largely upon achievement.	Love and acceptance conditional and related to social standing and connections.
DRIVING FORCES	Survival, relationships, entertainment.	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.
HUMOR	About people and sex.	About situations.	About social faux pas.

My husband sent me this chart in a text message not too long ago and it made perfect sense. The key to wealth is connections. So building and maintaining relationships with powerful people is essential.



August of this year, we watched the Netflix documentary called *'The Black Godfather,'* a very compelling film that told Clarence Avant's life story. It was good, but there was ONE key takeaway from his entire story that can be summed up with his quote: "I don't have problems, I have friends."

Clarence Avant was a man that understood the necessity of networks.

It's not always what you know, but who you know.

Don't let your "introverted" tendencies keep you from building your network. It's necessary.

- Make friends at work (find those who are in the AXP process and beyond)
- Join local chapters of professional organizations and attend meetings (NOMA, AIA, etc)
- Attend events with high profile people you want to meet and introduce yourself

Whatever you do, learn from my mistakes, these five big ones, and DO BETTER.

Got questions?

Feel free to email Taylor at taylor@tnstudio.org.



S M A R T E R D E S I G N