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## Architect Ben Crawford on Why Mentors Matter

**HOK's Dallas design principal shares the story of the teacher who kept him on course and why he feels an obligation to give back through the ACE Mentor Program.**

Ben Crawford was studying architecture as an undergrad at Rice University in the late 1980s when he took a look around and wondered: *Do I belong here? Have I made the right choice?*

"It was a challenging time for me," recalls the architect who now leads HOK's Dallas design team. "I had grown up in Atlanta attending private schools, so Rice was familiar in that sense. Socially, though, it was quite different. I had been spent most of my upbringing grounded in the black community—my Atlanta neighborhood, my church. In the architecture school, I wasn't seeing many people who looked like me. Meanwhile, I had all these friends who were attending historically black colleges and seemed to be having a great time."



A long-time architecture professor at Rice University, the late Spencer Parsons, noticed Crawford was struggling and shared some wisdom that still resonates today.

"He said, 'You know, there's always room in this profession for one more talented person and one more individual voice and viewpoint.'"

Crawford would heed that advice, earning a Bachelor of Architecture at Rice and discovering other mentors who would push him as Parsons did. While still an undergrad, he spent 14 months interning in the New York office of I.M. Pei, working alongside veteran designers on landmark projects such as the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. After starting out at FKP in Houston, Crawford accepted a design role with the firm Pickard Chilton in New Haven, Connecticut. There he gained an invaluable mentor in founder Jon Pickard, who influenced Crawford as a designer and leader. In 2006 Crawford joined HOK, where he counts Roger Soto, Peter Ruggiero and Jay Tatum as mentors, sources of inspiration and friends.

When Crawford was promoted to serve as design principal of HOK's Dallas office, he knew he wanted to find a way to engage and give back to his new community. The ACE Mentor Program provided that opportunity. ACE seeks to introduce high school students to careers and opportunities in the fields of architecture, construction and engineering.

**Above:** *In addition to mentoring high school students through the ACE program, Crawford volunteers his time to support and guide college design students.*

During the school year, Crawford and his colleagues at ACE meet regularly with kids and work with them on projects related to design and construction. One of Crawford's favorite ACE activities involves a bag of Legos. Students assigned to be "architects" build something with the Legos and then create drawings that detail how to assemble what they've created. The students serving as "contractors" are then given the Legos and the drawings and told to replicate what the architects built.

"It forces the kids to think about how they're communicating ideas and instructions," says Crawford. "You'll see these 'light-bulb' moments where they realize they drew something incorrectly or maybe omitted an important step, and then they'll take corrective action. As a mentor, it's a rewarding process to see play out."

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Soon after he began volunteering with ACE, Crawford was asked to serve on the board of the local Dallas chapter. One of his goals in that capacity is to introduce more students of color to the program and to the field of architecture. According to the American Institute of Architects, fewer than 2 percent of its members are African American.

"I feel a responsibility to raise kids' awareness to the fact that there are a variety of professions out there," says Crawford. "I tell them if they show a sincere interest, they can find receptive people. Those who will open their doors, minds and hearts."

When they ask him about architecture, Crawford provides students with honest-yet-encouraging advice much like he received from Professor Parsons some 30 years ago.

"I let them know that there can be long hours, and they're not necessarily going to get rich or famous. But they're also going to have the opportunity to change the world, impact lives and leave something enduring when they're gone," he says. "How many other professions offer that?"