

Community Leadership in Urban Design

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SUMMARY

A strategic focus on urban design can enhance the visibility of a local AIA chapter in the community and propel the chapter and its members into the forefront of important design issues facing a community or region.

ENHANCING AIA VISIBILITY IN THE COMMUNITY

This "community outreach plan" begins with the formation of an AIA chapter committee on Urban Design that reaches out to the community through community design charrettes. The charrette becomes a vehicle not only to address specific community design issues, but also to build strategic alliances with allied professionals and community leaders. As these relationships develop and mature, the network of alliances can be formalized as a new, joint nonprofit organization that assumes responsibility from the inaugural AIA chapter committee. Often called an "urban design coalition" or "community design coalition," the new nonprofit entity becomes a vehicle for broader community involvement and influence by the local AIA chapter and local AIA members.

GETTING STARTED

The core mission of an AIA Committee on Urban Design is to examine design issues that relate to a whole neighborhood, village, or city within the AIA component's territory. AIA members volunteer their time to examine these design issues, often through the medium of a community charrette, typically a one-day affair where residents, merchants, business owners, civic leaders, government officials, and other design professionals such as urban planners, preservation planners, and landscape architects gather to focus on specific design issues.

1. Getting started involves only a few basic steps.
2. Canvas your local membership to recruit a core group of five or six AIA members who will plan the future of the committee.

3. Formulate the mission, goals, and governance policies of the committee for presentation to the AIA chapter leadership.
4. Explore an early alliance with a local school of architecture to draw student participation into the work of the committee.
5. Ask local government officials if there are economic development funds that can be tapped as seed money for conducting neighborhood design charrettes focused on planning solutions for revitalization.
6. Be consistent in the message and delivery of the design product.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The AIA chapter committee, as the charrette leader, is responsible for preparing and disseminating preliminary information to the charrette participants, such as the history of development within the study area, photographs, maps, and any development preferences or goals established by the community in the recent past. Assembling these materials may take six weeks to three months, depending on the complexity of the issue and the number of available volunteer committee members.

The organization of the committee is simple—a leader or a pair of leaders who delegate assignments, and committee members who are willing to gather the necessary information before the charrette, help facilitate the charrette, and help prepare the report summarizing the results of the charrette for distribution to the government agency, the client institution, and the community at large.

ACHIEVING MATURITY

Over time, successful charrettes foster the growth of informal strategic alliances with other professional organizations, local schools of architecture, government agencies, and civic organizations with a common interest in urban design issues. The alliance network expands with each successful charrette. Eventually, the AIA chapter becomes a recognized leader in urban design issues, and is

invited to consider planning and design issues by local government and business leaders.

A NEW BEGINNING

As the informal network of alliances coalesces, the AIA committee must recognize the appropriate moment to leverage the network to form a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to continue the work.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY BENEFITS

Making a contribution to one's community is its own reward. But it is also satisfying when the local AIA component becomes a recognized community leader on design issues. Community recognition of leadership energizes the local AIA component itself, and the energy spills over into other programs and activities. The component becomes a catalyst and a forum for community leadership by local AIA members, providing tangible evidence of the value of AIA membership, which in turn increases membership in the local component.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 18.11.02 Eco-Charrettes Save Resources, Build Teams
- 22.08.03 Design Competitions as a Catalyst for Community Action
- 22.08.05 New York New Visions: A Model for Inclusive Community Planning

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA Components