

Architect's Role in Creating Equitable Communities

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Introduction

“For nearly every injustice in this world, there’s an architecture, a plan, a design that has been built to sustain it.”

– Bryan C. Lee Jr., Assoc. AIA⁷



Roxbury Branch of the Boston Public Library Renovation, Roxbury, Massachusetts Credit: Anton Grassl Photography

INTRODUCTION

Design is centered on context—those who will inhabit a space, the neighborhood in which it exists, and the surrounding environment. As such, architects and designers naturally impact the areas where they design and build, resulting in outcomes that extend to social equity.

Guided by board- and member-level committees and task forces focused on equity, AIA continues to invest in developing frameworks, guidelines, and resources that consider equity in practice and project settings with a focus on climate action, racial justice, and designing for communities.

This resource shares how architects can, in their practices, bring about racially just and equitable outcomes for all members of the communities they serve.

These actions take place both within projects and beyond. Although there are myriad challenges in the design and development process that can hinder the depth of impact, providing designers frameworks for actionable tools, tactics, and strategies can help them understand the extent of their agency. With these tools in hand, designers can more sensitively drive equity in practice and in the communities in which they work and live.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Business as usual in the development of the built environment will continue to perpetuate the social, economic, health, environmental, and geographic inequalities that exist in our communities today. Disparities in well-being, health, wealth, policing, and education are distinct across race and class lines. We

know that up to 60% of health outcomes are determined solely by one’s ZIP code.¹ Highly segregated white neighborhoods report the best life outcomes.² Household income in these neighborhoods is nearly double incomes in segregated communities of color, and life expectancies are four years longer.³ The disparity in outcomes is a direct result of historically unjust policies and actions that have created barriers and obstacles for specific groups within American society. Architects’ capacity for impacting social equity is not limited to project parameters; immediate community advocacy, policy

i LEARN MORE:

» Ways to create equitable places. [The Just City Essays, Vol. 1](#)

decisions, city and regional planning choices, and more are within architects’ sphere of influence.

Oppression is the unjust use of power to subordinate a social group or category of people. It is a “combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups and benefits other groups.”⁴ Sexism, ableism, racism, classism, ageism, and other forms of discrimination and marginalization are upheld by existing policy, practice, and infrastructure. America’s built environment bears the scars of past and present injustices. Decades of disinvestment can be traced to policies of residential segregation that took the form of zoning regulations, restrictive deeds and covenants, and “redlining.” The burden of the COVID-19 crisis has been unequally distributed. Areas that experienced greater historic redlining currently have a higher prevalence of poverty and social vulnerability, making disasters harder to withstand. These neighborhoods have a lower life expectancy and higher incidence of chronic diseases—asthma, COPD, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, kidney diseases, obesity, and stroke—that are risk factors for poor COVID-19 outcomes.⁵ Our communities are places of social and spatial injustice.

An understanding of the history of places reveals patterns of violence and injustice. When repetitions of old patterns are observed or new patterns emerge within project processes and in public dialogue, architects have an obligation to speak up. By expanding awareness and understanding of context, tools, and areas of greatest impact, this resource outlines specific ways that architects can work to mitigate oppression and work for just and equitable communities.

How to use this resource

This resource is a collection of targeted ways that, using their agency and power, architects can work to mitigate oppression and advocate for a future with

just and equitable communities. Practitioners have integrated these tangible actions—tools, strategies, and time-tested practices—into their design practices to yield more equitable processes and outcomes.

Actions are separated between what fits within traditional project phases and what falls outside of a project scope. This resource further outlines expected impacts, potential participants, roles, and considerations for taking the action. Spread

throughout are examples of actions in practice and resources to support a deeper dive into a variety of topics.

This resource can be read in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. Alternatively, after reviewing the Introduction and Foundations sections, readers could explore the resource in a different order. Information in the Foundations section provides critical framing that the rest of the resource builds upon.

WITHIN PRACTICE

Inside a firm	» Investing in equity: recalibrating office culture » Setting organizational vision » Investing in equity: learning together » Investing in equity: redefining what we give » Partnering for equity: university-firm research
Advocacy in action	» Investing in equity: engaging with policy » Investing in equity: education and mentoring

WITHIN PROJECTS

Pre-design & engagement	» Involving community: neighbors as co-creators » Involving community: defining success & principles » Involving community: outreach & engagement » Understanding place: community asset mapping » Involving community: stakeholder advisory groups
Design	» Involving community: co-designing together » Translating community principles into design » Creating welcoming renderings
Construction administration	» Preserving community principles in construction
Occupancy	» Measuring equity: evaluating project outcomes



Team planning and collaboration Image credit: iStock, skynesher

ACTIONS AND THEMES

In focus groups, architects and practitioners shared an array of tools, frameworks, and best practices they've integrated to shift their business model toward greater equitable outcomes. These tangible actions are divided between what fits within traditional project phases and what falls outside of a project scope. Outlined for each action are expected impacts, key players and roles, and tips to initiate the action. Also included are examples of the action in practice and resources for additional learning.

In the development of this resource several cross-cutting themes emerged, characterized by the following questions:

❓ Power in practice

How does power in processes and power in practice affect equitable outcomes?

❓ Partnering for equity

How can partnerships extend an architect's ability to influence equitable community outcomes?

❓ Reimagining success

How do we define success and how do we measure equity in project outcomes?

❓ Exploring boundaries

Can examining and assessing the role of architects and architecture impact equitable outcomes?

Perception	Reality
Engagement requires a lot of resources and time.	Partnerships & creativity go further and faster.
The process of translating and reaching out can be daunting for teams that feel enormous time and performance pressure.	What is seldom figured in with this line of thought is the time that is wasted going backwards when communities are not on board early. It is also important to engage in creative ways, via strong partnerships, social media, email, and other lower cost less time intensive ways.

Tensions between perceived community engagement challenges and benefits. Architects and clients often feel the project process does not provide the time, funding, or specialized skills necessary for community engagement. In practice, building relationships with the community through meaningful engagement results in tangible wins for the project team, including schedule reductions and reduced mistakes, not to mention greater ownership and support within the community.



Compilation of focus group impact-agency findings. In this exercise, participants identified “talent development & culture” as the area with the highest opportunity for impact and agency. Participants felt that most entities had the least agency and impact around “project selection.”

HOW THIS RESOURCE WAS CREATED

This resource was built through a series of conversations with AIA members and experts working in the design and development industry with an equity lens. Ten focus groups and formal conversations were held over the course of six months with 67 practicing designers and architects. Important insights and salient themes emerged from those conversations about equity in practice and the challenges that arise. In addition, an advisory group provided oversight of the final document and outcomes of the research.

Reflecting on impact, agency, and power

We asked each focus group to assess the impact and agency that different actors in the development industry had on a variety of topics. Architects, acting as individuals or members of a firm, participating in professional organization activities, or providing support outside of the profession, have significant ability to impact equitable outcomes.

As we explore these interconnected and complex issues related to equitable practice, we must acknowledge that the architecture and design industry will have limited ability to impact these unjust systems when acting as individual agents. Architects’ work is stronger and more

meaningful when partnered across disciplines with the explicit intent of creating better and more responsive design for the communities where we work. The inherent challenge is the time and resources needed to build partnerships, community trust, and equitable practice at scale in the context of a service-driven industry. Many of the participants shared strategies, tools, and practices that help them bridge some of those challenges.

Within the profession:

» Individuals

Individuals are defined as architects or design professionals acting alone, within or outside a firm. The individual ranked low in agency and impact across topics; the highest agency and impact for individuals was seen in talent development and culture and citizen architecture.

» Firms and organizations

Firms and organizations were seen to have significant agency and impact that lead to an increase in equitable outcomes within a project process and in talent recruitment and retention. Large and extra large firms⁶ were identified as having an ability to influence equitable development based on both the projects they take on and the ones they do not and by sharing their research and outcomes with clients, powerbrokers, and others in the profession.

» Professional organizations (AIA, NOMA, ULI, etc.)

Professional organizations set and enforce standards of conduct, communicate broadly with members, and drive practice by offering resources and training and awarding standout projects/teams. This group has high levels of impact and can influence equitable development outcomes by introducing topics, partnering with other organizations, and refining standards of excellence to value equity and equitable outcomes.

Outside the profession of architecture:

» **Developers/clients**

Timelines and outcomes are often dictated through a broader context of returns on investment, development pro formas, and market-based economics. Developers and clients inclined toward more equitable practices are challenged at multiple levels to deliver on big promises often made and expected by the communities they develop in. Even those developers or clients practicing in a more “business-as-usual” mode are increasingly subject to greater requirements through Community Benefit Agreements, city policies, other community benefit goals, and investments often tied to financial incentives. Architects can influence the development process in support of equitable outcomes.

» **Policy makers + government agencies**

Government agencies primarily impact equitable development outcomes through the policies and procedures that govern development activities. For example, what development practices are incentivized? What processes are encumbered or overly burdened by existing procedures? By being in dialogue with decision makers, architects may influence important aspects of the development process that can lead to increased equity across place and space.

» **Community members**

Neighbors, business owners, end users, and other invested community members have a deep understanding of what is needed in their places and spaces. Valuing and learning from that knowledge, building trusted relationships, and creating responsive places and spaces can result in project or business success.

» **Other actors**

Architects and the groups listed above are not the only actors that influence equitable development. Elected officials, financial institutions, philanthropy and funders, planners and related disciplines, universities, and nonprofits all play a role in shaping neighborhoods and communities. Understanding power dynamics across all players in the context of a project or community better informs how the process may “flatten” or disrupt assumed hierarchies.

Perception	Reality
Engagement decreases design potential.	A relational process increases design potential.
This is a common belief. “Design by Committee” a frequently-heard refrain in relation to processes in which we engage non-designers.	Charles Eames’s famous diagram, shown here, suggests a different idea. The more overlap between the interests of the designer, the clients and community, the greater the opportunity for successful design.

Perception of how engagement impacts design outcomes.

The misbelief that community engagement limits design can turn off architects from engaging thoughtfully with the community. In practice, engagement yields more context-rich and asset-rich outcomes that benefit all.

Perception	Reality
We are not politicians, we are designers	We are enmeshed in political processes, and we hold power.
Engagement with communities is not a core skill taught in design school. There is a widespread belief that design is a technical problem solving discipline. This is reinforced by the market, which hires us to design, not to lead processes.	Every decision we make has power and our expertise at problem solving makes us central to negotiation of a project’s trade-offs. We can share this power with our community partners.

Architects’ perceived vs. actual political power.

While architects often feel our power is limited to project parameters, we are, as citizens, naturally involved in the political processes and, as designers and influencers, have power to affect political decisions.

Foundations

FOUNDATIONS

This section builds awareness of existing inequities in the built environment and their lasting effects on people. The section begins with defining pertinent terms and then outlines the historical context that has given rise to persistent inequities in the built environment and their lasting effects. While not always evident, there are significant risks associated with continuing typical design and development practices. With this knowledge, architects can identify existing inequities and discriminations in the built environment and then intentionally address, through project work and firm processes, specific issues and conditions that lead to a built environment that does not impact all people equally.

Designed to complement and deepen understanding on topics introduced in the Guides for Equitable Practice and the Framework for Design Excellence, this resource is a focused examination of equitable development in practice and projects.

GLOSSARY

This resource, meant to provide clarity and shared understanding, explores the power architects possess to drive equitable communities. Unless otherwise noted, definitions are from the glossary in AIA's Equitable Development Frameworks: An Introduction and Comparison for Architects. For a more complete discussion of language, please see the [glossary](#) from the *Guides for Equitable Practice*.

Agency

Enabling the confidence, rights, and status of individuals or groups to act on behalf of their own interests.

– *The Just City Index*⁸

Belonging

To feel accepted and comfortable in a setting despite age, gender, race, sexuality, or income.

– *The Just City Index*⁹

Community

“Community” has a broad scope: not only neighborhoods but any group that occupies or experiences a project, from a family to an entire city and beyond.¹⁰ Community includes the people (and organizations) that live, work, learn, worship, shop, and play in a project's area of impact.

Community engagement

The *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary* suggests that architects can engage with communities in three major capacities: as individual citizens, as professionals, and in the type of work their firms choose to do. Whichever the capacity, effective community engagement incorporates diverse voices equitably, respectfully, and authentically in all phases of work, with special attention given to context, including such elements as history, culture, politics, power dynamics, and social fabric.

Culture

Culture refers to the shared values, rituals, stories, language, and rules of a social group. Some cultural aspects are visible or explicit (e.g., fashion, language, food), while other aspects are unseen or implicit (e.g., attitudes, gender roles, approach to work-life integration).

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*¹¹

Development

The design and construction of communities with a mixture of uses—residential, commercial, and cultural—on land that is currently uninhabited. It can also include the re-creation of urban, suburban, and rural communities through renovation and new construction.

– *21st Century Development Framework*¹²

The process of converting land to a new purpose by constructing buildings or making use of its resources.

– *The Oxford English Dictionary*¹³



PLACES TO START

- » [The Guides for Equitable Practice Ch. 1 Introduction: The AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Ch. 1 Introduction](#): These guides make the moral, business, ethical, and societal cases for equitable practice and provide key insights to help individuals, firms, and other organizations build equity in architecture.
- » The [Framework for Design Excellence](#) distills 10 principles that define good design in the 21st century that works toward a zero-carbon, equitable, resilient, and healthy built environment.
- » The [Design for Equitable Communities toolkit page](#) outlines the impacts of design solutions, highlighting principles of inclusion and a focus on health and resilience outcomes.



LEARN MORE:

- » Learn more in [AIA's Equitable Development Framework Comparison](#)

Diversity

A mix of people with a wide range of visible and invisible personal and group characteristics, backgrounds, experiences, and preferences.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*¹⁴

An intentional state of mixed people, institutions, and cultural norms.

– *The Just City Index*¹⁵

Representation of all people in society, encompassing race, ethnicity, gender, identity, sexual orientation, age, national origin, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, education, marital status, parental status, language, physical appearance, and other characteristics used to marginalize groups.

– *J.E.D.I. Committee, AIA St. Louis, Definitions*¹⁶

Dominant culture/identity

Dominant culture consists of the values, beliefs, and practices that are the most common and influential within a society or group. The dominant culture is often [presented] as the norm, the preferred, or the “right” one in a society, organization, or institution. Dominant identities are those that are seen as the norm in a particular cultural situation and generally benefit the most in that culture.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*¹⁷

Empowerment

To give formal authority or power to a person or collective group by promoting action or influence.

– *The Just City Index*¹⁸

Equality

A form of fairness achieved by treating people with dominant and nondominant identities in the same manner, whatever the disparities may be at their starting points. Equal treatment, however well intentioned, may sustain inequities. The term is often used in contrast with equity.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*¹⁹

The provision of equal or equivalent distribution, status, rights, power, and amenity.

– *The Just City Index*²⁰

Equitable development

There are several definitions or sets of principles used to describe equitable development, but the term generally refers to a range of approaches for creating healthy, vibrant, and sustainable communities where residents of all incomes, races, and ethnicities* have access to the opportunities, services, and amenities they need to thrive. Equitable development strategies help low-income, minority, tribal,** and overburdened communities participate in and benefit from decisions that shape their neighborhoods and regions.

Equitable development is a systemic approach to the creation of communities that alleviates disparities in the distribution of benefits and burdens of growth. Projects, programs, and policies all play a role in the creation of neighborhoods that foster positive social, economic, and health outcomes for people of all backgrounds. These approaches seek to “provide meaningful choices for the most impacted people of color to live, work, and define their own culture throughout all neighborhoods.”²¹

It is both place-focused (housing, transportation, infrastructure, pollution) and people-focused (job training and placement, business development, education, health and wellness, financial management).

– *EPA’s Creating Equitable, Healthy, and Sustainable Communities*²²

* *Editorial addition: ages, gender identities, and abilities*

** *Editorial addition: disabled, elderly*

A positive development strategy ensures that everyone participates in and benefits from the region’s economic transformation—especially low-income residents, communities of color, immigrants, and others at risk of being left behind.

It requires an intentional focus on eliminating racial inequities and barriers and making accountable and catalytic investments to assure that lower-wealth residents: live in healthy, safe, opportunity-rich neighborhoods that reflect their culture (and are not displaced from them); connect to economic and ownership opportunities; and have voice and influence in the decisions that shape their neighborhoods.

– *PolicyLink*²³

Quality of life outcomes, such as affordable housing, quality education, living wage employment, healthy environments, and transportation are equitably experienced by the people currently living and working in a neighborhood, as well as for new people moving in. Public and private investments, programs, and policies in neighborhoods that meet the needs of residents, including communities of color, and reduce racial disparities, considering past history and current conditions.

– *Government Alliance on Race and Equity*²⁴

Equitable development is both a process and an outcome. It involves a mix of policies, programs, and practices aimed at creating healthy, vibrant, thriving places while mitigating the results of social injustices. Equitable development outcomes focus on community ownership and wealth building, self-determination, equitable resource allocation, prosperity, and increasing the agency of members of traditionally disinvested communities.

“Equitable development is driven by priorities and values as well as clear expectations that the outcomes from development need to be responsive to underserved populations and vulnerable groups, in addition to using innovative design strategies and sustainable policies.”²⁵

Learn more in [AIA’s Equitable Development Framework Comparison](#)

Equity

Equity is the state in which everyone is treated in a manner that results in equal opportunity and access according to their individual needs. Equity requires identifying and eliminating barriers that have disadvantaged nondominant identity groups to assure that all individuals receive equitable treatment, opportunity, and advancement regardless of identity; it also means that some individuals will need more support [due to existing structural barriers] than others. Equity differs from equality or parity. [This report] focuses on equity rather than equality because our society operates on an uneven playing field. Inherent power differentials have resulted in disparate treatment, usually based on identity. Given the profound structural disparities and vastly different starting points, focusing on equality by giving everyone the same support would not accomplish the goal of just outcomes.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*²⁶

The distribution of material and non-material goods in a manner that brings the greatest benefit required to any particular community.

– *The Just City Index*²⁷

Allocating resources in a way that recognizes individual advantages and barriers to ensure everyone has access to the same opportunities. Equity recognizes that advantages and barriers exist. Equity is the approach and equality is the outcome.

– *J.E.D.I. Committee, AIA St. Louis*²⁸

Inclusion

Inclusion is manifested in an environment in which everyone feels welcomed, respected, supported, safe, and valued. Inclusion is distinct from but related to equity and diversity.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*²⁹

The acceptance of difference and the intention to involve diverse opinions, attitudes, and behaviors.

– *The Just City Index*³⁰

Environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate and be their full, authentic selves.

– *J.E.D.I. Committee, AIA St. Louis*³¹

Justice

Dismantling barriers (racism, classism, sexism, etc.) to resources and opportunities in society (power, wealth, education, health care, etc.) so that all individuals and communities can live full and dignified lives.

– *J.E.D.I. Committee, AIA St. Louis*³²

Participation

The active engagement of individuals and community members in matters, both formal and informal, affecting social and spatial well-being.

– *The Just City Index*³³

Redlining

Redlining is a discriminatory practice of de facto segregation that excludes, most often, Black people from some neighborhoods by denial of mortgages and other services. When the Fair Housing Act passed in 1968, it became possible, in theory, for anyone to buy a home anywhere in the U.S.; however, the history of redlining and neighborhood covenants meant that the homes of many people of color had appreciated in value far more slowly than others, rendering non-redlined homes beyond the reach of those whose financial equity had not increased as much. Redlining is considered one of the clearest examples of institutional racism that has disadvantaged Black people and communities.

– *AIA Guides for Equitable Practice Glossary*³⁴

Voice

Allowing the articulation of different points of view and cultural norms to help shape decision-making.

– *The Just City Index*³⁵

“[Architects] share the responsibility for the mess we are in ... this didn’t just happen. We didn’t just suddenly get in this situation. It was carefully planned.”

– Whitney M. Young Jr.⁴⁴

DESIGN INJUSTICE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

From enslavement and denial of human rights and dignity to broken promises of 40 acres and a mule, Jim Crow laws and other mechanisms have been used to steal wealth, land, and opportunity through restrictive covenants, destructive highways, and federal mortgage policies that restricted Blacks, Jews, and others in support of “homogeneous [white] neighborhoods.” Slum clearance and other tools, including forced removal, predatory mortgages, credit scores, forced displacement, disinvestment, and gentrification, among others, have been instituted to deny Black Americans opportunities for adequate wages, access to necessary goods and services, and proximity to high-paying jobs.

The building parameters and outcomes of this system have long benefited the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry which, as such, has both directly and indirectly contributed to the creation and prolonged dominance of racist policies to protect its interests.

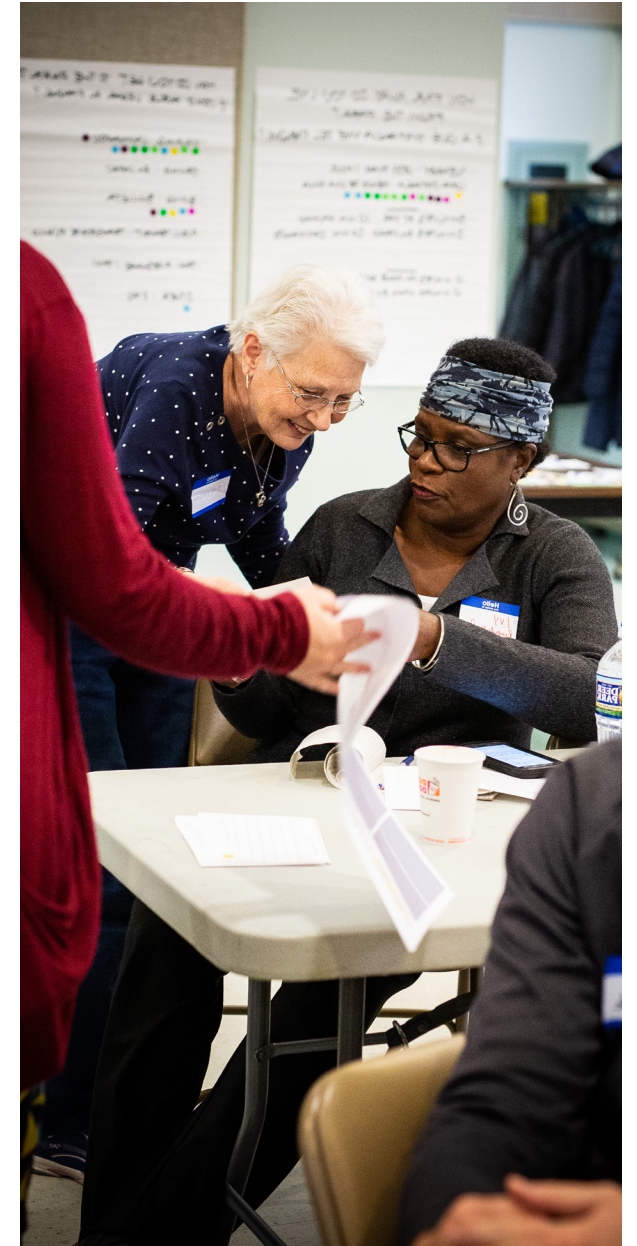
Even as the policies are retired, the effects remain.

- » Black homeowners are nearly five times more likely to own in a formerly redlined neighborhood than in a greenlined neighborhood, resulting in diminished home equity and overall economic inequality for Black families.³⁶
- » Redlined neighborhoods identified by federal officials as “risky investments” in the 1930s are today some of the hottest parts of Richmond, Virginia. In these places, there are few trees and a great deal of paved surface.³⁷
- » People living in redlined communities are more than twice as likely to seek emergency room treatment for asthma as their peers in non-redlined communities.³⁸

- » Studies show that green spaces in urban areas are larger and more easily accessed in white neighborhoods. This leads to varying levels of heat exposure and disparate abilities to benefit from the physical and mental health benefits of green space.³⁹
- » Lior Jacob Strahilevitz notes the role “exclusionary amenities,” such as polo grounds, golf courses, and tennis courts, play in deterring unwanted potential residents from seeking out ownership in specific communities or developments.⁴⁰
- » Homeownership is an often-cited way to build wealth in the United States. Black Americans do not have the same access to property ownership and wealth-building opportunities.

Building wealth

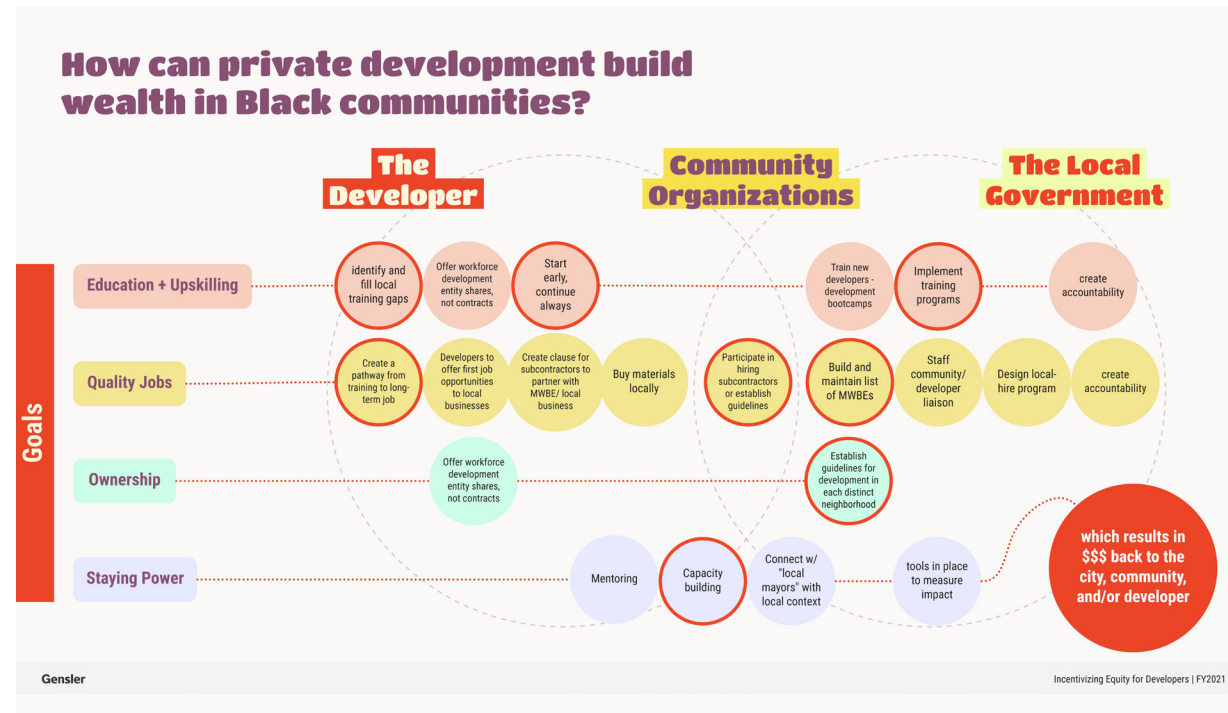
Roles within and related to the development process are sometimes considered distinct and separate, yet architects, developers, community organizations, and government have overlapping concerns, roles, and opportunities to create change. Each has a responsibility to consider how they might leverage new approaches and partnerships to drive educational access, job creation, and opportunities for ownership—all of which contribute to the capacity for community members to avoid displacement and build generational wealth. The diagram below summarizes tactical actions organized by stakeholder type aligned to the goals above. Architects, functioning within the intersections of the three goals of driving educational access, job creation, and creating opportunities for ownership, have a unique.



Right Credit: Side A Photography Community members sharing ideas at a visioning workshop

“... design does have an impact across the multiple issues and grievances that people have about the inequities that exist in American society and its spatialized contexts: quality housing, transportation, public spaces and facilities, environmental conditions, and the other tangible ways that designers help shape built environments.”

– Justin Garrett Moore⁴⁵



Cultivating Equity in private development. Credit: Incentivizing Equity for Developers, Gensler, 2021

Examples of inequitable experience exist within the walls of buildings as well. A lack of adequate restrooms for women results in long wait times to use the facilities. As recently as 2009, lawmakers using the women’s room at the U.S. Capitol had to walk to a distant facility designated for tourists. Addressing the speed of access to restrooms as well as the availability of facilities will make buildings work more equally for all users. Architects can address the inequity of restroom access directly through their building designs and by supporting regulatory and legislative changes.⁴¹ Another example is the design and staffing of a security desk in a building lobby. A less welcoming desk design, positioned in a way that restricts ease of passage through the entry and staffed by a

guard with an authoritarian uniform, could discourage use by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) visitors whose communities have experienced tensions with police.

It is important to see the ways that exclusion can take place in the built environment. Without this understanding, “people tend to believe that the plan and structure of cities are created for the purposes of efficiency or with the goal of furthering the general public interest, and they overlook the ways that design can exclude.”⁴² There is nothing inevitable about the built environment—everything is a result of decisions.⁴³

i LEARN MORE:

- » [The Racial wealth gap](#) in Trymaine Lee’s article for the NYTimes Magazine
- » Segregation and government policies in Richard Rothstein’s [The Color of Law](#)
- » [“Redlining’s Legacy of Inequality: Low Homeownership Rates, Less Equity for Black Households”](#) Brenda Richardson, ForbesMore articles and resources from the Association for Community Design, [“To Learn and To Share”](#)
- » [“Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment”](#) Yale Law Journal.
- » [The Arsenal of Exclusion and Inclusion](#), Interboro Partners
- » [The Pathways to Equity](#) program offers training programs aimed at shifting the field toward anti-racism and equitable outcomes.

Fundamentally, equitable designs are built through an equitable process. By shedding light on the structure and results of inequitable decisions, architects are better able to understand the context in which their projects exist and the possible implications their choices have. Additionally, an understanding of the history—social, political, and economic—of the projects you work on is foundational for achieving equitable outcomes. Without such a perspective, intervening can unintentionally cause harm. The following sections outline actions that can be taken within and outside of projects in support of equitable communities. Information in the Foundations section introduces the “why” of equitable development and the inequities that exist in the built environment.

“Risk drives everything. However, there is a lack of understanding that by not addressing equity, not looking beyond the project footprint upstream and downstream, we are opening ourselves up to more risk.”

— Rachel Bannon-Godfrey, AIA

THE SILENT RISK OF BUSINESS AS USUAL

Our spaces and places have been designed and continue to develop in ways that further divide people and lead to increased disparities in health (physical and mental), economics, education, and social mobility. New methods and practices are often considered “risky.” Architects need to understand the risks associated with not changing traditional architectural design practices and development processes.

Resilience strategy identifies the dual threats of shocks, “acute, sudden, sharp events that threaten a community, such as earthquakes, floods, disease outbreaks, and terrorist attacks” and stresses, “chronic, slow-moving disasters that weaken the fabric of a community and its ability to handle shocks, such as high unemployment, overtaxed or inefficient public transportation system, endemic violence, chronic food and water shortages, and systemic racism.”⁴⁶

Equitable development seeks to address systemic disparities in the built environment. Learning more about existing inequities and their impacts on people increases an architect’s ability to consider and mitigate these factors through design. Perpetuating conventional design and development practices will continue to fail many neighborhood residents. Advocacy is needed at a policy level to make changes in how development happens. Architects have an ability to effect change, project by project, and work for more just places and spaces. The next section outlines ways to make an impact during each design phase.



i LEARN MORE:

- » [“What a Day with Renewable Energy Could Look Like” AIA Blueprint for Better](#)
- » [Resilience 101, Shelterforce](#)
- » [Hazards, Vulnerability, and Risk in the Built Environment. Course 2. AIA Resilience and Adaptation Online Series.](#)

*Credit: Side A Photography
Precedent images for a mood
board visioning activity*

Application: Within practice

“Architecture is a service profession. We each need to answer the question: What are you working in service of?”

– Jennifer Newsom, AIA⁴⁹

SETTING ORGANIZATIONAL VISION

What are your firm’s values and how do you communicate them?

Articulating the organization or firm’s values, vision, and mission is an important step to unite your business and organizational culture. A clear mission allows for alignment of projects and internal processes and supports employees interested in contributing to something greater.

A strong and principled guiding vision is important when determining what projects come into the office. It’s also a way to drive aligned business into the office. For George Aye of Greater Good Studio, writings and articles that express his firm’s point of view and theory of change attract clients with shared values and goals.

Outlining your firm’s commitments to equity in the built environment and profession is a way to spur action and accountability. The events of the 2020 pandemic led to many firms committing to more inclusive and equitable values. The AIA Large Firm Round Table joined the NOMA President’s Circle to provide access to a diversity consultant. R. Steven Lewis, FAIA, NOMA, described the process of building understanding and language through interviews and conversation that “challenge[d] the commitment of leadership within the firm to not see this as a trend that is passing, but as a substantive change within the firm.”

A values-centered approach to setting organizational vision presents an opportunity to bring together the firm by creating buy-in and cohesion across staff levels. A strong and well-communicated vision leads to positive

talent recruiting and retention. Employees are attracted to and motivated by projects with a social purpose. “Mission-driven workers are 54 percent more likely to stay for five years at a company and 30 percent more likely to grow into high performers than those who arrive at work with only their paycheck as the motivator.”⁴⁷

Creating an organizational vision and values statement needs leadership support but can include employees from all levels of the organization. Broad-based commitment to a plan greatly benefits from a shared experience in the creation of the mission, vision, and values. Firm leaders can break down barriers by inviting all team members into vision planning conversations and declaring these “safe spaces.” It is imperative that leadership is willing to listen and not dismiss these conversations, which retains the safe space for more conversations and learning.

Consider:

1. Involve employees from all levels.
2. Use a strengths-based approach, focusing on what already works well.
3. Identify core beliefs or values the firm holds. What is your organization committed to that represents a higher social good for the community you serve? Distill the mission into a statement of what the firm exists to accomplish.⁴⁸
4. How is your organization addressing equity, both internal and external, in its mission, vision, and values? How is your organization understanding “do no harm”?
5. Consider how to bring the vision to practice. This could include a five-year strategic plan that outlines milestones or an evaluation method that is revisited annually to ensure alignment with organizational goals.

IN PRACTICE

SmithGroup has engaged in difficult conversations and brainstorm sessions about obstacles to career advancement. This process is intended to name and change existing policies within the firm that have been obstacles to growth for staff of color, opened the door for transformation. “Holding space to have those difficult conversations, even building a space to have those conversations and declaring it the safe space, that is step one,” says Rosa Sheng, FAIA.

Firm: SmithGroup

Founded: 1853

Leadership: Mike Medici, Troy Thompson, Russ Sykes

Number of employees: 1,300

Base Location: Detroit, MI

Known for: Integrated engineering + architecture services

LEARN MORE:

- » [“Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning”](#) Annie E. Casey Foundation
- » [“Social Business Model Canvas”](#) Social Business Design
- » [“Strategic Planning: Using Vision, Values, and Mission as a Firm Foundation,”](#) AIA KnowledgeNet



Credit: Getty Images

INSIDE A FIRM

Reconsidering architecture firm culture offers an opportunity to remake our offices as places of welcoming and belonging for all people, especially those with identities and experiences not widely represented in the field. Who is at the table/in the office/on the team directly affects what is being discussed and what solutions are being brought forward. From research to design decisions and community engagement, asking the right questions is key to identifying the best design solutions. Homogenous teams may limit what questions are asked, while diverse teams add value, make firms more competitive by offering new insights and connections to diverse clients and communities, and result in richer and more responsive projects.

“Increasing diversity, and thus perspectives, experiences, and empathy, in architecture can better prepare clients to address current needs and future unknowns. Moreover, a representative profession won’t benefit just one company, university, or city. Rather, its impact will radiate and weave into the fabric of our communities while dispersing the planning power held largely by wealthy white individuals and institutions.”

– Anjolie Rao⁵⁰

“In order to develop responsibly, we need a very diverse group of designers doing that work.”

– Nadine Maleh⁵⁵

Investing in equity: Recalibrating office culture

Architecture is not a diverse profession—the profession is no more diverse in 2022 than in recent years. According to the data from the Directory of African American Architects (DAAA), there were 2,378 registered Black architects in the U.S. in 2021, representing 2% of registered U.S. architects. That number has not changed since 2019, despite ongoing efforts to bolster exposure, improve education and talent pipelines, and create more inclusive work environments.⁵¹

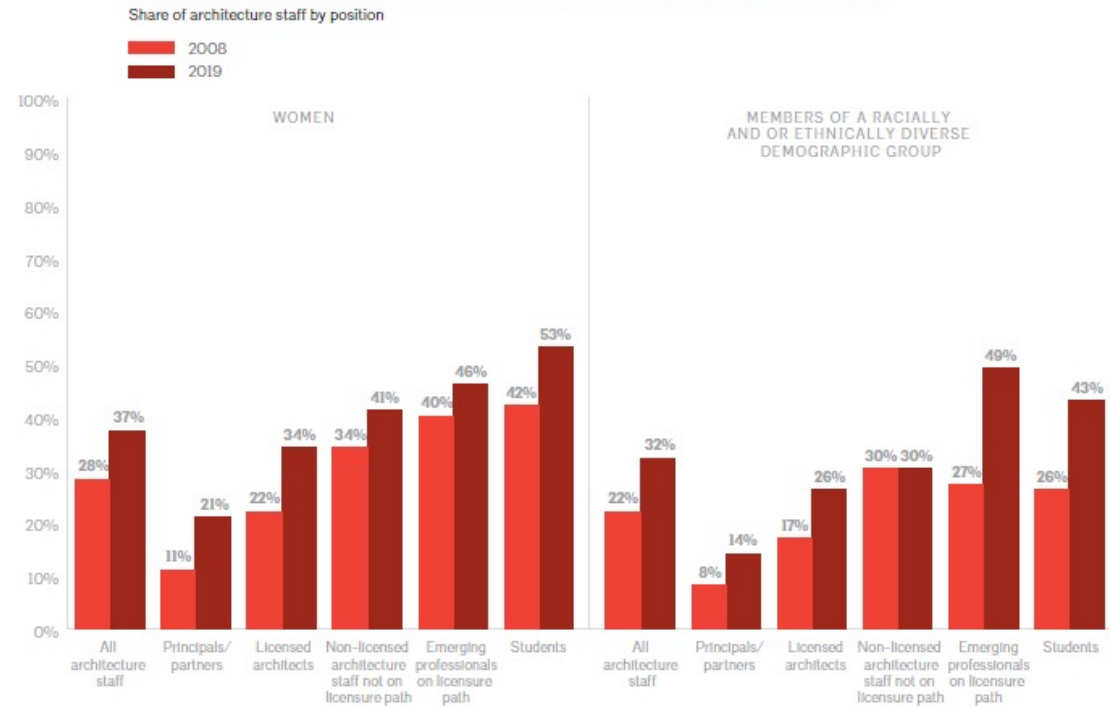
Diversity at firms, in terms of both gender and racial/ethnic makeup, is on the rise. The profession, however, continues to lag far behind the broader American labor force.⁵² And not without consequence.

As the *Baseline on Belonging: Experience Report* details, there is much to be done within education, firm culture, career development, and more to cultivate and retain more diverse architects and improve the profession for all genders and races.⁵³

Leadership makes space for new voices. Creating a retribution-free environment where employees at all levels feel safe giving feedback is an investment in the firm’s business development. New perspectives can also help anticipate issues and identify solutions that homogenous teams may not be able to see.

Firms and management should consider broadening the skills for which they recruit. Melisa Sanders, AIA, considers her firm an architecture collaborative. She brings in people with design backgrounds broader than the discipline of architecture, including but not limited to graphic designers, industrial designers, and others who aren’t necessarily formally trained, to support projects as consultants. Her focus is on the skills the individual brings to the table, not their credentials.

FIGURE 2.3: Share of women and members of a racially and/or ethnically diverse demographic group in architecture staff positions continues to expand, although there remain disparities in leadership roles



Source: AIA Firm Survey Report 2020, p. 5.

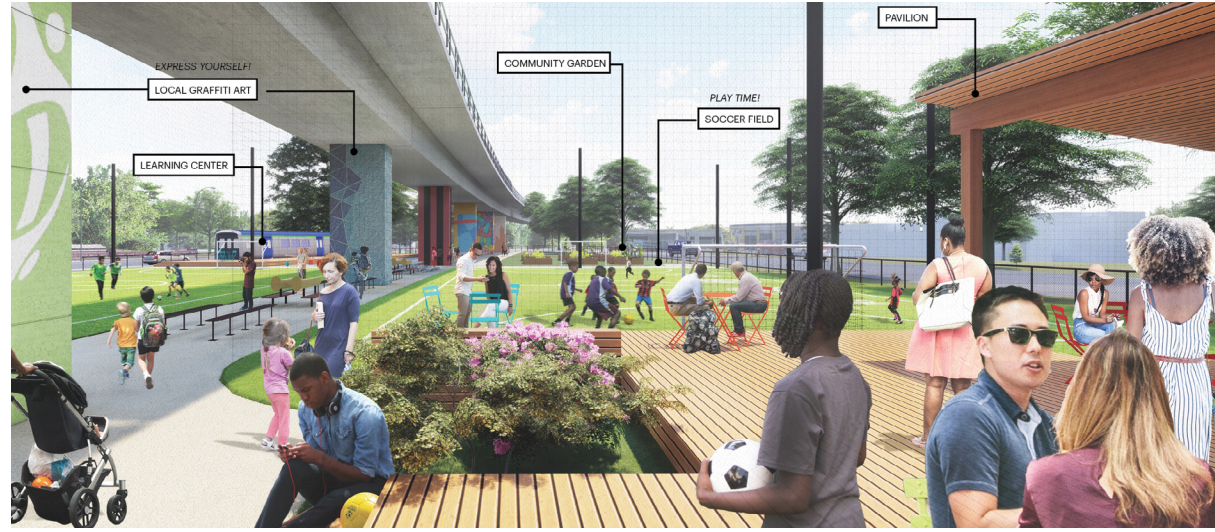
Hire a targeted recruiter with demonstrated relationships and specialized knowledge about sourcing diverse consultants. Adolfo Danilo Lopez, AIA, suggests partnering with an organization to bolster hiring. Recruiting through local historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and the Black Chamber of Commerce is another way to reach a broader pool of candidates. For example, AIA has offered **internships to six students** from HBCUs to participate in its new HQ design process.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [“The Pursuit and Promise of Equity in Architecture,”](#) Architect Magazine
- » [The Missing 32% Project,](#) Architect Magazine;
- » [Baseline on Belonging: Experience Report,](#) NCARB and NOMA
- » [Workplace Culture,](#) The Guides for Equitable Practice Chapter 2, AIA

“Great employees push the firm, make a space to tell leadership they are wrong.”

– Katherine Darnstadt, Latent Design



Rendering with easy-to-read tags identifying important project elements, Credit: HKS

Investing in equity: Learning together

Building firm-wide understanding of important justice issues is critical to successfully producing more equitable project outcomes. Firms are already engaging with learning opportunities that address issues of racial justice and equity. The 2020 AIA Firm Survey Report found that 14% of small firms and 67% of large firms provide leadership development opportunities to increase diversity within their firms. Anti-bias, implicit bias, and antidiscrimination trainings were identified as important for firms seeking to diversify their staff. Large firms offer trainings at a rate five times higher than small firms.⁵⁴

Learning together as a team not only increases skills and competencies, it creates a shared space of growth. Leaders learning from staff is a powerful way to shift hierarchies, model a different type of practice, and acknowledge expertise that is separate from firm or practice experience alone. By democratizing firm learning, each team member can see their unique expertise and contribution to the firm or project while having the

opportunity to demonstrate those competencies to leadership. A firm-wide approach to learning together offers an opportunity for younger staff to lead initiatives meaningful to them and to build topical expertise.

By helping architects create personal connections to present day issues and challenges as well as empathize with someone else’s lived experiences, R. Steven Lewis, FAIA, NOMA, is trying to ensure past injustices are not repeated. At ZGF, he has established a program, Lifting Other Voices Equally (LOVE), in which program participants participate in an hour-long candid conversation followed by a question-and-answer session and discussion. This is an opportunity to explore challenges that may be invisible to members of a different culture.

Undertaking difficult learnings together is an opportunity to build intra-firm relationships and learn processes for navigating difficult conversations. Both the processes and information learned are foundational for creating a more equitable and just firm culture.

Small firms might consider attending a local AIA chapter event together or pooling resources with other firms to bring in speakers, trainers, or mentors on a topic. Larger firms have an opportunity to host internal conversations and purchase training sessions for all employees. An investment in shared learning builds a common knowledge base and shared language that welcome more staff into meaningful professional development opportunities.

Consider:

1. Start at the team or studio scale. Consider areas of inquiry related to existing or upcoming projects. Are there learnings that can inform current work?
2. Consider who is included in the learning sessions and how to include staff from various levels within the firm.
3. Learnings and trainings take many forms. Determine whether a self-guided resource will be effective for the culture at your firm or if an in-house, multi-day, facilitated session might be a better fit.
4. Evaluate how the trainings align with organizational vision and values. Can learnings be brought into projects and processes? Do their messages and themes align with the [AIA Code of Ethics and ethical practice](#)?

i LEARN MORE:

- » [Pathways to Equity](#), a design leadership experience for social equity
- » [Racial Equity Institute](#), an alliance of trainers, organizers, and institutional leaders devoted to the work of creating racially equitable organizations and systems
- » [Creative Reaction Lab](#), building an intergenerational movement of redesigners for justice™



Community members completing a workshop activity in pairs, Credit: Side A Photography

Investing in equity: Redefining what we give

Many firms seek to create equitable outcomes through pro bono activities. While this leveraging of resources can have positive impacts, it is also important to recognize the potential for these types of activities to do harm. The margin that allows many medium- and large-sized firms to support employee work without pay tends to be much larger than that of typically smaller BIPOC-owned firms, which can be under-capitalized due to discriminatory lending practices. Pro bono efforts can displace BIPOC-owned firms or community-aligned firms that are already working in a neighborhood.

Another historic shortfall of the pro bono model is the damaging effect of firms offering help to communities without the cultural competency to connect well, to understand perspectives being shared, or to address the complex challenges of inequity. “In addition to using skills

such as creating and implementing effective processes and eliciting and communicating information about their work, architects engage more deeply and authentically when they understand the historic and systemic context in which the profession is viewed.”^{56 [1]} When the volunteer team is predominantly white and is working with communities that are predominantly people of color, there can be perceptions—and the reality—that the “white savior complex” is at play, affecting engagement and reducing the likelihood that the project will resonate with community members.

In those cases where there is no potential displacement of BIPOC-owned or community-aligned firms and there is strong intercultural competence and demographic diversity within the team, volunteer efforts can have positive social impact and can further equity in design and development. Architects and designers have a wide range of services and skills to offer in support of equitable outcomes. Donating time, resources, or technical

knowledge in all phases of a project, not just design, can infuse expertise where it’s needed most.

Billable hours as the primary financial model can be a significant barrier to supporting nonprofit organizations with design services. Smaller firms in particular can experience more challenges when taking on pro bono work. With less staff, there are fewer employees to spread non-billable work across. In addition, smaller firms often have fewer resources, which can translate into increased individual responsibilities beyond paid design work, including business development and marketing, organizational and financial management, and recruiting and mentoring. Finding time for pro bono work can be difficult but may offer opportunities for engagement and learning that help the firm improve its approaches and offer new and rewarding experiences for team members, including opportunities to work in new locations and with new project types.

Engagement in pro bono design services can also communicate a firm’s values, which can attract paying clients and prospective employees with aligned ideals. Existing employees can feel a greater sense of purpose and be more engaged with their work, billable or pro bono, which can increase retention.

Volunteerism and pro bono work can also foster authentic relationship-building, allowing architects and designers time to connect with community members and other like-minded members of the architecture community. Smaller firms or individual architects and designers can even commit to collective approaches through collaborative models like [Design Advocates](#),^{57 [2]} a platform for designers to connect and share practices and resources in service of the public good.

Several firms, like [Ten to One](#), have discovered the benefits of repeated public interest work and have developed business models that leverage the fully billable side of their work to subsidize a commitment to free

design services (for Ten to One, 10% of projects are pro bono). Through these sustained efforts, organic connections are made, trust is built, and the foundation is laid for true designer–community partnerships.

Pro bono work has the potential to inform all projects. The lessons learned, anecdotally or through post-occupancy evaluations, provide knowledge that can change how proposals are written, how community involvement and ownership is cultivated, and how a project is designed. Dedicating firm resources to assessments of project success (see [Measuring Equity: Evaluating Project Outcomes](#)) is an opportunity to build proof of concept for specific actions to be built into future contracts.

Resources for engaging in pro bono services

- » Grants and funding sources
 - [Autodesk Foundation Grant Application](#)
- » [Public Architecture](#) helps firms willing to donate their time identify and match with nonprofits in need.
- » AIA encourages pro bono work in its Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and offers related resources, including [pro bono services guidelines](#) and a contract document for pro bono work (B106–2010).

Consider:

1. Consider “lighter touch” opportunities, such as allowing employees to spend an allocation of paid hours on volunteer projects led by external organizations. This is a type of professional development that supports staff with a desire to make an impact. Additionally, supporting employees through stipends or hours allocated to attend local planning meetings or joining a local nonprofit board increases community connections and awareness of issues and can open doors to new business opportunities.
2. Establish an internal grant program, dedicating paid time or providing stipends for employee-driven research or writing projects. Gensler has established a

Research Institute, which manages research initiatives and offers an internal research grant program that prioritizes grant proposals focused on critical topics like equity in development and climate change. Research teams for winning proposals bill time against the grant at a fraction of their standard billing rates. Research deliverables are shared internally and externally to promote awareness of research findings and adoption of resulting recommendations.

3. Share approaches, frameworks, and other successful processes with other firms and groups to support collaboration and further the use of the tools that lead to equitable outcomes.
4. Support firm members who want to participate in university-sponsored programs to educate and mentor the next generation of designers.
5. If a firm-wide approach is desired, appoint a working group or committee for staff to oversee pro bono activities. This group should engage staff in setting goals of pro bono activities, asking “What inequities are we trying to address?” “What is the potential to do harm?” It is important to consider how these existing inequalities are not being addressed within a standard project structure. Where can resources be infused into a process to have the most impact? There should be a clear decision-making process when engaging in new pro bono activities to ensure this is meeting goals. A decision tree template with questions can be used to review proposals.
6. Connect with BIPOC-owned firms in your region to learn more about the projects they are working on and the clients they are interested in working with. Develop relationships that allow your firms to be in ongoing communication and to determine whether a potential pro bono project might have a displacing effect on those firms or could undercut their economic outcomes.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [Salazar Architect](#) in Portland, Oregon, takes a multipronged approach to understanding how to give back. From partnering with grassroots organizations on pro bono or low bono work to catalyze the change these organizations hope to see in their places to supporting the next generation of designers through involvement at universities, this firm lives its values through what it gives and how.
- » [Landon Bone Baker Architects](#) is an architecture and design firm focused on equitable outcomes for underserved populations and committed to providing a model for other architects in providing for their communities.
- » [AIA Pro bono services guidelines and resources](#)



Community members connecting during a workshop. Credit: Side A Photography

Partnering for equity: University-firm research

A strong body of research is needed to make the case for change to our clients, government officials, and end users that incorporating practices that lead to more equitable outcomes is effective and important. Time is a challenge for many firms, as evidence-based research can take years and data tracking is complex. Universities have the capacity for long-term research projects and information-tracking efforts.

Sean O'Donnell, FAIA, K-12, K12 education principal at Perkins Eastman, won the AIA Latrobe Prize because of the unique partnership between researcher (Perkins Eastman) and solution seeker (the District of Columbia

Public Schools [DCPS]). DCPS wanted to understand the impact of its investment in school facilities. The prize and partnership have imbued the process with additional power and unlocked access to archival data collected by schools and the system at large. As the project and partnership continued, academic partners were added from the fields of education, public health, and architecture to deepen the research expertise. Says O'Donnell, "It's a three-legged stool in many ways, between the agency that is really interested in the results and the expertise that is available [in academia] that we don't have access to in a conventional architectural practice."

As a graduate researcher, Ilana Judah successfully sought grant funding that required working with a

solution-seeking partner. With British Columbia Housing, she received funding to research climate resilience. After her graduation, the grant continued, funding the design process modifications to integrate resilience thinking into the case study project.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [A guide for engaging with civic leaders \(Blueprint for Better\)](#)
- » [Community-centered economic inclusion: A strategic action playbook \(Brookings\)](#)

“[Architects have an] understanding of how policy hits the ground in a community—practical and hands-on understanding of the impact of policy.”

– Ceara O’Leary



Community members sharing ideas at a visioning workshop. Credit: Side A Photography

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Investing in equity: Engaging with policy

Architects are well-situated to understand how policy takes shape in the built environment. Often, firm leaders have access to elected officials and decision makers. An architect’s professional title and firm profile can lend legitimacy to feedback and help amplify the challenges or opportunities identified by local communities that may be impacted by the project. Being seen as a reliable and trusted partner of government agencies is another opportunity to build business and to influence what business as usual is.

Leveraging these access points to bring more equitable development outcomes means participation at a range of scales. Architects can, as individuals or as firms, testify at city council and community meetings. Being relatable and intentional when speaking in public and on the public record is important. Speak with clarity and to be understood—avoiding design industry jargon. Help people understand how people will interact with a new building and the type of life it could foster.

Sharing firm research more broadly is a powerful tool to inform clients and elected officials. Large and extra large firms have many projects and metrics to draw from to share what’s worked and can speak to areas where policy could impact and incentivize equitable development. Similar conversations with funders can encourage investment in research targeted at increasing equity in development.

Rev. Laura AG Rossbert of Shopworks Architecture points out the impact of research on policy. Governments provide incentives to clients and firms to fund research. The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) financier in Colorado requires trauma-informed design to be implemented on affordable housing projects. The burden of convincing clients to adopt trauma-informed practices was removed when it became a requirement to access funding

Investing in equity: Education and mentoring

Architecture firms or architects as individuals can have a great deal of impact by getting involved in educational programs for a range of student age groups.

“For my statewide organization, the politics go from very blue, socially progressive, urban members to extremely red, very conservative, rural ones. I serve on the Government Affairs Committee and face many of the same issues there. But as chair of the J.E.D.I. committee, we are focusing on sharing stories and methods for how to do better as training for firms and individuals. We may not be able to convince everyone that it is important and worthy, but we can advance the education and actions of the people who are on board.”

– Kristen Nyht

NOMA Project Pipeline workshops teach kids how to advocate in a community and how to use their voice. Project Pipeline has exposed more than 10,000 young people to the fields of design and architecture and showed them a path to making constructive change in their communities.⁵⁸ As designers, we learn more about which questions to ask and gain insights into the most pressing issues for communities that large firms rarely get to access.

The ACE Mentor Program is another national organization engaging high school students in architecture, construction, and engineering.⁵⁹ ACE serves more than 10,000 students annually and relies on volunteers to support such a robust program. According to ACE, “We hear again and again that ACE mentors experience a profound sense of altruistic ‘giving back’ when involved with ACE and its young participants—the gratification that comes with sharing knowledge and wisdom with eager students. In addition, mentoring presents a variety of networking opportunities, as well as chances to sharpen individual presentation and other professional skills.”

Design as Protest is a grassroots effort that provides peer-to-peer mentoring and support through focused work to impact equitable change in the design professions.⁶⁰

Involvement in local AIA and NOMA chapters is also critical to supporting a diverse field of designers. Melisa Sanders, AIA, points out that many firms do not have leadership who can mentor designers of color. In those cases, provide opportunities for young designers to seek support outside of the firm and compensate experienced designers of color to mentor younger designers in formal and informal programs to build needed support networks. For Kristen Nyht, participation in her local AIA chapter has given her space to prioritize justice and equity as J.E.D.I. committee chair.

Making internal changes to firm culture and practices and engaging in communities outside of the office broaden the reach and amplify the effect architects and designers have on mitigating the harms to historically marginalized communities. Start with small, manageable changes to your practice, as an individual or as a firm. Learning more about topics related to inequity in the built environment and the architect’s role in either continuing or disrupting those inequities is a necessary first step.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [NOMA Project Pipeline program](#)
- » [ACE Mentor Program](#)
- » [Design As Protest](#)



Rendering showing a broad and representative group of people at Joe’s Movement Emporium Credit: NDC Volunteers- Design Collective

Application: Within a project

APPLICATION: WITHIN A PROJECT

How do architects design and advocate for equitable processes and outcomes in projects, from scoping to construction?

During each design phase for the project, there are a number of opportunities to impact equitable outcomes. Building in time and resources for authentic community involvement, organizational partnerships, comprehensive stakeholder participation, and measurement of outcomes increases the likelihood that a project will be responsive to local needs and desires. Setting equity goals early in the process and integrating community stakeholders in goal creation align local vision with the project, positioning it to become a positive community asset.

Focus group participants identified challenges within traditional contracts and encouraged architects to push for more robust community engagement and to lead conversations about construction administration and labor choices. Even within a conventional contract, there is room to provide services that directly benefit community members.

Additionally, earlier in the design process, there is more space for involving community voices, understanding places, and building strong teams. Once a shovel is in the ground, committed and creative designers have still found ways to advance outcomes that support community health and resilience and mitigate systemic inequities.

Project phases:

- Project choice & team creation
- Pre-design & engagement
- Design
- Construction administration
- Occupancy (including post-occupancy evaluation)



Community members completing a worksheet outlining their vision for a local park. Credit: Side A Photography

PROJECT CHOICE & TEAM CREATION

When tackling challenging problems, architecture and design alone will not have the solution. Being clear in our strengths, abilities, and power allow us to identify gaps and partner to bring additional skill sets to the project team, increasing our impact. An inclusive, co-creative approach in the problem definition and visioning stages sets the project up for greater community alignment and process success.

Partnering for equity: Knowing our limits

According to the 2020 Firm Survey Report, a majority of architecture firms are single-discipline, and that number has risen since 2017. Of the offered disciplines, interior design, zoning/code compliance, and predesign were the predominant design-related specializations. Less than half of firms, 45%, offered planning services in 2019, a decrease from 2017. ⁶¹

Expected impact:

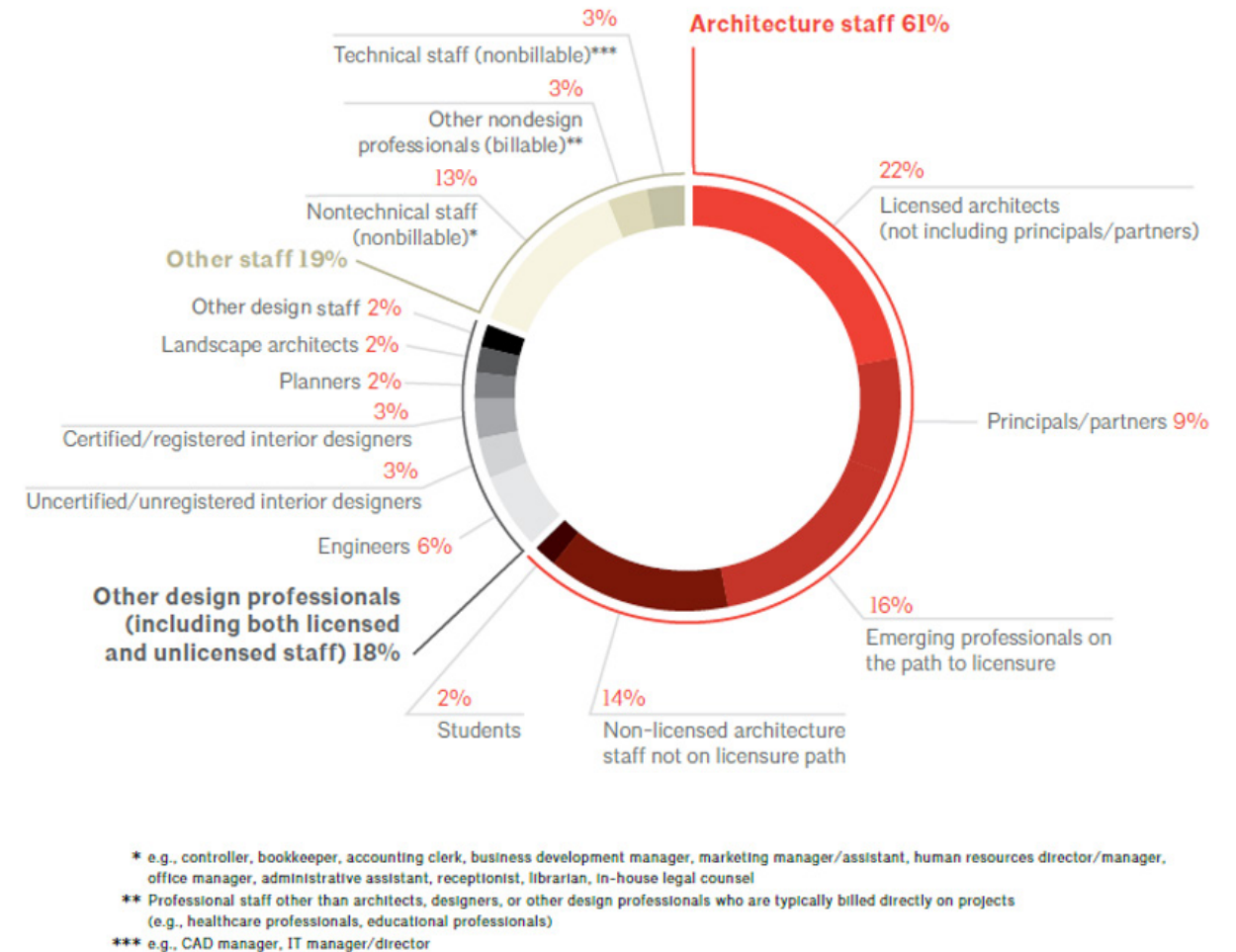
Teams with a range of lived experiences and identities, that have a strong sense of trust and respect within the group, and are confident that their contributions can truly influence decision making can greatly inform the type of questions being asked, how context is understood, and how feedback is synthesized. They are better able to consider new approaches to a project, better understand community and historic context affecting the project, and build trust with community partners.

Here we define actions that support the expected impact and shared principles. Actions are designed to reflect variable levels of agency for the individual, project team, or firm/organization.

Actions:

1. Consider the following to build teams—with staff members or those outside an architectural firm—that better relate to the community, bring new perspectives, and surface issues early to lead to more equitable outcomes:
 - » Do members of the team have prior experience and/or success in similar projects/contexts?
 - » Will this team mirror the community?
 - » What disciplines are needed to meet community and client needs on this project? In the creation of this resource, we spoke with many practitioners in topical focus groups. Participants suggested that integrating nontraditional roles like climate scientists, youth programming coordinator, dance instructor, or sociologist may prevent costly mistakes later.
 - » How might lived experiences be as or more important or impactful than years of learned experience?
2. Once you’ve assessed how your team’s skills map to project needs, consider with whom to partner. Start with minority-owned businesses. The chart below indicates other disciplines, sometimes inside the firm, that a team might consider involving.

FIGURE 2.2: Architecture staff continue to account for the majority of architecture firm employees
Averages across all architecture firms, weighted by number of positions



Source: AIA Firm Survey Report 2020, pg. 10. <https://www.aia.org/resources/6151-firm-survey-report>

“And why do you do all of the above? Because you see resident voice, resident opinion, resident value as central to the process as FAR, slump tests, and steel strength. You need to see resident perspective as important to your calculations as other inputs.”

— Raymond Demers

Building broad & representative teams

A focus on equitable outcomes necessitates a rethinking of project team skills and partners. Assessing internal hiring processes and rethinking what is valuable on a project allows a firm to build a more representative team from within. This strategy is more successful in firms with more staff to build teams from; smaller firms have an opportunity to build more integrated teams through partnering with other firms, especially those local to the project area, and/or hiring community advocates.

Partnering for equity is an intentional and effective way to broaden your team and bring in new relationships and skills. Consider women- and minority-led business partnerships with local engagement experts, designers, or other professionals and firms.

Other potential partners to consider are community leaders, local nonprofit organizations, social workers, faith-based groups, universities, and K-12 school groups. Identifying partners early on helps facilitate relationships and connections within the community and provides a trusted representative both from the community and to the community. Fair compensation is critical to any partnership; all parties should be appropriately valued for their time, services, and knowledge shared. It takes time to develop partnerships and build trust, and new partnerships that are truly based on connection to the community may not happen overnight. It is critical to proactively make the necessary investments of time and resources to build authentic partnerships.

Expected impact:

To reach the broadest audience and to hear an authentic community voice, representation on project teams and at community meetings matters. Understanding community history, unmet desires, and concerns is critical when creating a building and a program for design.

Collaboration with groups that are connected to the community and neighborhood will create more

meaningful engagement, improve participation, and provide an opportunity for strong dialogue about project and process goals and design concepts. These are not surface-level outcomes. Deep community engagement yields an empathy and understand that can influence project outcomes and extend to the sustaining operational considerations—like quality jobs, apprenticeship programs, and ownership opportunities—for wider neighborhood impacts. Adding contributors from outside the field of architecture will enrich the team’s understanding of the project and provide insights for a more successful project, facilitating results in the community that might not otherwise manifest.

Traditionally, hierarchical roles have been established to drive the design and direction of projects within the built environment, however by establishing the role of the community design advocate as a member of the development team, the power structure is shifted and allows for a new level of agency, design input and control for the community to hold project owners accountable.

Consider:

1. After understanding what skills and experiences are needed on the team, decide what your firm can provide and what you need to add through partnerships.
2. A successful partnership has at its foundation good preparation. Outline the scope of work, deliverables, roles, and responsibilities in a partnership agreement, a type of contract that outlines the project and process goals and what different partners are bringing to the table.
3. Compensate partners and participants fairly.

IN PRACTICE

ZGF Architects has committed to partnering with Black-owned firms. These partner firms bring understanding, connections, and awareness of context that majority-white firms cannot offer, taking advantage of lived experiences and increased consciousness and duty to local neighborhoods. The larger firm (500–999 staff) is learning and changing through the partnerships, learning to see aspects of culture that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Firm: ZGF

Founded: 1942

Leadership: Ted Hyman

Number of employees: 800

Base Location: Portland, OR

Known for: Sustainability

LEARN MORE:

- » [AIA Guides for Equitable Practice: Recruitment and Retention](#)
- » [Listen to 2020 Whitney M. Young Jr. Award winner Gabrielle Bullock, FAIA, speak on elevating and broadening a culture of diversity and inclusion in professional practice.](#)
- » [“How Community Design Advocates Can Be a Force for Design Justice”](#) Next City

The power and potential of aligning with equity

This resource is not suggesting when you should and should not move forward on a project. The resource suggests considering when and why a firm should move forward or not on a project and how to negotiate the scope and terms outlined by a prospective client. Bringing intentionality to project selection may have wide-ranging benefits. Choosing projects that support the firm's vision may allow for clarity in the portfolio and lead to more aligned work. When responding to a request for proposals (RFP), highlighting the benefits of a more rigorous process for equitable outcomes may be well received by the prospective client and could impact the client's future project briefs and RFPs. Articulating your firm's values in those conversations also leaves a lasting impression and can lead to more aligned project opportunities in the future.

If a firm begins to experience an unexpected decline in projects won due to misalignment with equity goals, community engagement timelines, or similar issues, engaging in honest feedback sessions with selection committees that did not choose their proposals offers an opportunity to understand criteria and project limitations. Similarly, hosting transparent office-wide conversations about internal project selection criteria can build an office culture of trust and deepen firm values. Saying no can feel risky, but setting a focus on projects that align with the firm's stated values will bring greater clarity, quality, and depth of meaning to the work accepted.

Project process is closely tied to the project selection criteria. Interviewing clients to understand if they will be a fit for your practice's process and values can save resources and build staff morale. Employees will feel more purpose and connection with projects, and the firm, by not accepting every project, will avoid overburdening staff on projects that don't align with the firm's values.

The process of selecting projects can be an opportunity to build a more equitable and diverse office culture. Creating a retribution-free environment provides a safe space for team members to voice thoughts and concerns about possible new projects. This not only helps avoid potential misalignment, but also builds a sense of agency and distributes firmwide values and vision through sensitive action. This strategy can build firm leadership from within and promote a culture of employee value by empowering individual team members.

Expected impact:

A portfolio of projects that are value-aligned will demonstrate the firm's point of view to potential clients with similar focuses.

Developing a set of protocols for project selection with a values-based equity and diversity lens will enable firms and organizations to reflect on project selection criteria and will support decision making based on equity and justice.

Feedback provided to clients or RFP criteria can help change projects and practice in the long term.

By adopting an inclusive system for vetting potential projects, staff build more understanding about firm business development and benefit from increased influence in critical firm decisions.

Consider:

1. Rubrics can't do it all. Understanding the possible impact of a project on a community is an important aspect of vetting a project. Work to shape your firm's marketing process, including "go/no-go" project pursuit parameters. Example questions include: When complete, will this project improve conditions that support equity and diversity? Will this project exacerbate existing inequities?
2. When prospective projects or RFPs come into the office, convene a group of staff to assess project fit.

IN PRACTICE

New Orleans-based firm Colloqate has hired community design advocates (CDAs) on two recent projects. These team members are residents hired to meet with community members and discuss design ideas and other important community topics. CDAs impact the design by serving as benchmarks within the process. They can view the project through a lens of empathy and sensitivity for the existing neighborhood culture(s), while providing considerations to ensure a positive return on investment for the community.

By using CDAs, Colloqate has seen much broader participation than with traditional public meetings, and CDAs have provided thousands of comments on a project. CDAs have become part of the design team, providing important feedback, validating narratives, and holding the firm accountable to the community it is serving.

Firm: Colloqate

Founded: 2017

Leadership: Bryan C. Lee Jr.

Number of employees: <10

Base Location: New Orleans, LA

Known for: Design justice, Design As Protest

This is also an opportunity to create more inclusive processes with diverse staff voices. Bring in staff from different positions and teams to build staff capacity and get new perspectives on projects. Develop a checklist or decision matrix with staff that includes guiding questions.

3. If the team feels that the project has the potential to do harm, there should be a feedback loop where clients are given the opportunity to address concerns that the team raises. Depending on the situation, it might be possible to adapt the scope.

Understanding place: Leveraging data

Architects and planners have an opportunity to look beyond the building footprint to the local community, economy, and ecology.

A shift in mindset to go beyond anecdotal or background community data allowed HKS to meet community needs and provide better design solutions. Geospatial data and other datasets surface critical gaps in equity that allow architects to more precisely tailor design and processes. Gap analyses provide a better understanding of neighborhood conditions that influence building design and programming. Gap analyses and other data-driven approaches can also reframe how construction contracts or community benefit agreements are structured, producing more inclusive and sustainable processes with more equitable outcomes.

Information is power—providing real-time data to community groups and supporting methods in which groups can access and interpret data should be part of the team’s approach. Socio-cultural factors are just the beginning, layering in information around economic development or climate justice further your ability to find gaps and align assets and investment.” Leveraging data to understand gaps in community resources opens opportunities for architects to change the outcomes for client and community alike.

Impact assessments, another type of data analysis, are structured, data-driven methods for “considering the implications, for people and their environment, of proposed actions while there is still an opportunity to modify (or even, if appropriate, abandon) the proposals.”⁶² Impact assessments can focus on the environmental impacts of proposed project, ADA accessibility, community health, and even social impact. Racial equity impact assessments (REIAs) are a systematic examination of how different racial and ethnic groups will likely be affected by a proposed action, policy, or decision. REIAs are used to minimize unanticipated adverse consequences in a variety of contexts, including the analysis of proposed policies, institutional practices, programs, plans, and budgetary decisions. The REIA can be a vital tool for preventing institutional racism and for identifying new options to remedy long-standing inequities.⁶³

The goal of REIAs is to help ensure that policies, projects, and programs have positive outcomes for historically marginalized communities by focusing the assessment in data rather than existing biases. Consider an architect and client who both assume the community would welcome the replacement of an old parking lot with a new parking garage. However, the community may prefer the aging asphalt as a place their kids play basketball and draw with sidewalk chalk when it’s not being used for business parking.

Expected impact:

Data is impartial. Whether obtained through a quick baseline analysis or deeper exploration using specialized software, data surfaces facts that may run counter to a client’s or project team’s assumptions.

Establishing data-gathering processes with your firm, and refining them over time, builds in more opportunities to discover gaps and help the client anticipate and respond to impacts.

IN PRACTICE

George Aye, co-founder of **Greater Good Studio**, describes declining projects as an energy-saving measure for staff. By focusing staff time and energy on projects that support the studio’s vision, Greater Good Studio’s creative force is concentrated on mission-aligned work. In addition, Greater Good Studio takes the extra step of communicating the firm’s values and process before the contract stage to ensure a good match. They also provide outlets for staff to communicate reservations about a potential project, creating a culture of inclusivity even around project selection, which is often left to the more senior design team members.

Firm: [Greater Good Studio](#)

Leadership: George and Sarah Aye

Number of employees: <20

Base Location: Chicago, IL

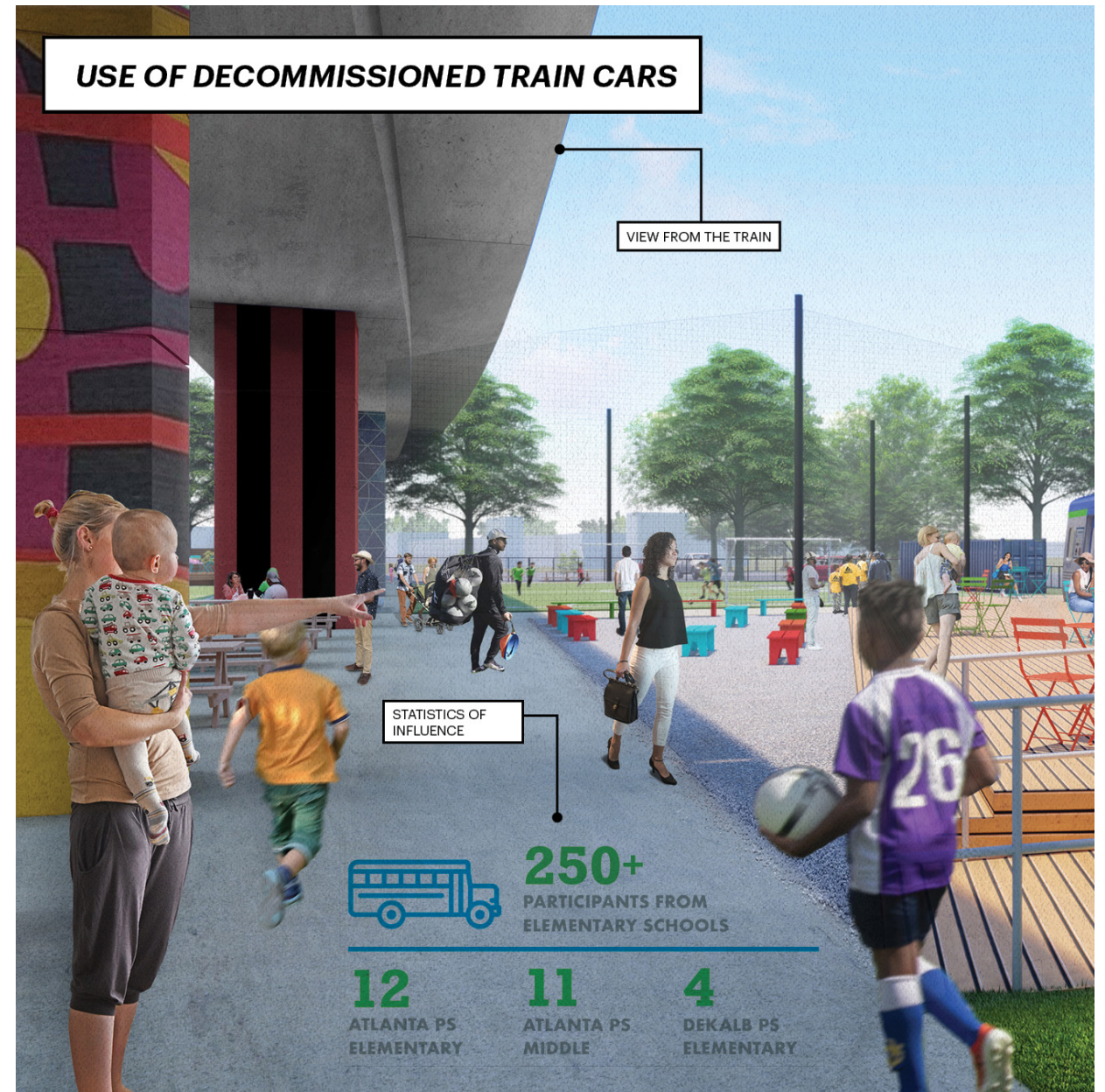
Known for: Social equity, social innovation

LEARN MORE:

- » [The Chicago Department of Housing’s draft Racial Equity Impact Assessment](#)
- » [Race Forward’s Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit](#)
- » [Developing a Plan for Assessing Local Needs and Resources, Community Tool Box](#)

Consider:

1. What data-gathering practices might be added to your team’s pre-design approach. Outside partners or new employee roles may be needed to support additional data-gathering and analysis.
2. Impact assessments are best used during decision-making processes, when their findings can be incorporated into design and development choices.
3. Racial Equity Impact Assessments are important tools in helping teams center equity in their projects. “When racial equity is not consciously addressed, racial inequality is often unconsciously replicated.”⁶⁴



Right: Station Soccer: Energy conservation strategies and environmentally sustainable materials are artfully woven into a responsive community-driven design solution. Credit HKS

Direct participation in projects, policies, and development that affect historically marginalized communities takes initial upfront investment to build capacity to strengthen democratic processes; however, it will yield an increase in local capacity for self-determination and increased influence.⁶⁷

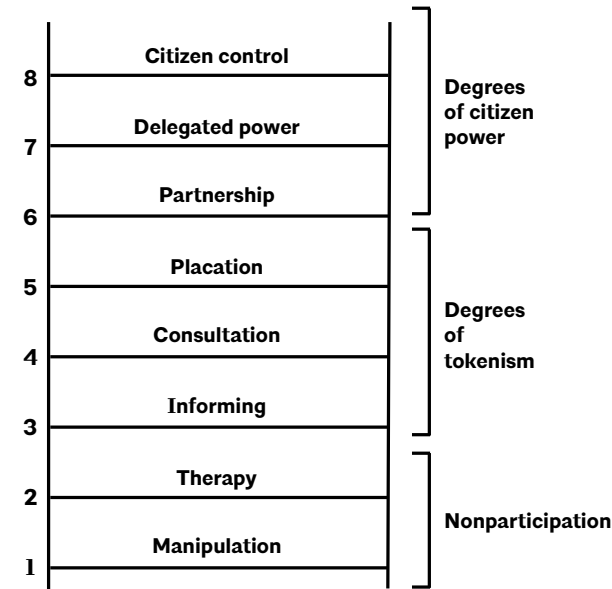
PRE-DESIGN & ENGAGEMENT

Involving community: Neighbors as co-creators

Involving community members in a meaningful way is still possible even if the contract is signed. The earlier community members and stakeholders can be involved, the more opportunity they have to shape the design. It's important to be specific about the degree of influence and areas of impact community members might expect to have, the current phase or status of the project, and how the feedback will be used. In addition, reporting back to community members following application of the feedback, before the project begins construction, signals transparency and builds trust in the design team and owner. Spectrums of participation, such as [Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation](#), provide useful clarity about the goals and types of community participation that are possible.

Once you have determined what level of participation you are able to offer to community members, map out a community participation strategy with key stakeholders. Their insights are invaluable as the process unfolds. Consider what questions you want to answer or what topics you'd like to know more about. Be specific about the knowledge you seek and be clear about your goals for community involvement. Authentic community engagement is more than picking the color of furniture or look of the building, it's weaving community priorities and needs into all aspects of the project. Communication and feedback loops are important to establish early. Active listening and communicating back to stakeholders and participants to confirm your analysis, articulate outcomes, and share new limitations or opportunities will be critical.

Bringing stakeholders together across the course of a project builds relationships and capacity. Consider how the project team might sustain momentum from the initial engagement process through project completion. Facilitating the creation of or partnership with a community organization helps the client and project team navigate complex community needs and desires and ultimately contributes to community power beyond the end of a project. Another positive outcome for the client may include supporters who later help to secure funding from municipal bonds or provide political support to help finance future phases and added public amenities or improve the approval process for future projects. Grants and other publicly funded incentive programs are often available to support the creation of community organizations, preventing the project owner from bearing the entire cost.



Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation featuring 8 rungs ranging from no power (Nonparticipation), counterfeit power (Degrees of Tokenism), and actual power (Degrees of Citizen Power). Credit: Journal of the American Planning Association, 1969

IN PRACTICE

When approaching potential new projects, Melissa Lee, with New Orleans-based firm Concordia, goes “beyond ‘do no harm’ and looks at promoting Black generational wealth.” As the firm makes project selection decisions, they consider “does this project support our firmwide goal to promote Black generational wealth?”

Firm: Concordia

Leadership: Steven Bingler, Bobbie Hill

Number of employees: <20

Base location: New Orleans, LA

Known for: community engagement

LEARN MORE:

- » [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power
- » [NAACP Guidelines for Equitable Community Involvement in Building & Development Projects and Policies](#)
- » Institute of Cultural Affairs' [Technology of Participation](#)

[Building to Heal: A Framework for Holistic Community Development](#), Enterprise Community Partners

If this is outside your firm's area of expertise, bring on a consultant to support your efforts. Additional community outreach, stipends for participation, and engagement consultants can be added to a contract. Colloqate Design is bringing on community design advocates.⁶⁵

By collaborating directly with community design advocates or general outreach through early engagement, communities are afforded a voice and seat at the table, allowing for a rich synergy of conversation across all levels of stakeholder engagement. Engaging stakeholders at all levels in the early stages of project discovery lays the foundations for strong working relationships, on both personal and professional levels, which can initiate trust and overall comfort for the community throughout the project life cycle. Trust, comfort, and agency are key and pivotal outcomes of early community engagement, as majority approval, or buy-in is typically required for advancing through municipal processes associated with re-development.

Consider:

1. At the beginning of a project, outline the scope for community involvement and include key stakeholders in creating an engagement strategy. Be clear about what you are seeking and how much influence community feedback will have.
2. Research the local community to learn about the important groups, local leaders and influencers, and important organizations and businesses in the area. Consider partnering with these groups for meaningful engagement. Keep in mind that community members may have experienced inauthentic engagement previously and might be reluctant to trust you. Community partners will be vital in determining how best to convene groups from the community, how to communicate out, and when/where to hold meetings. Not all community groups are broadly representative of the communities they serve. Consider who is missing from conversations and seek them out as well.

3. Support the formation of an advisory group that is representative of the community (see previous section, "Involving Community: Stakeholder Advisory Groups") and work with the client to think about how this group would continue to be involved after construction finishes. Compensation for the advisory group and other partners will be necessary to avoid exhausting their good will.

4. Be transparent with data use (including if the session will be recorded or what the sign-in sheet information will be used for). Use a range of methods, from anonymous surveys and one-on-one conversations to large-group workshops, to ensure participation is fully and equally representative. See more on this topic in "Involving community: Outreach & engagement."

Involving community: Defining success & principles

A co-created set of project goals, desired outcomes, and principles are helpful to establish early in the community engagement process. This builds trust between the project team and community members and creates alignment around performance indicators that should guide the design process and shape the project.

Respecting community members and end users as authorities on their needs and neighborhood flips the narrative from community-as-recipients to community-as-experts who project teams then value as partners. Early community consideration can save the client time and money in design and engineering due to community concerns and dictated changes to project planning and design.

These goals will be used to make decisions from conceptual design through value engineering and construction administration. Judith Hoskens, formerly of Cuningham Group Architecture and currently a partner at BNDRY Studio, leverages community-created goals and principles in her work related to material selection.

IN PRACTICE

Sheba Ross, Global Practice Director, Cities and Communities at HKS Architects, uses GIS mapping to identify gaps in community assets and match vacant or underutilized parcels to the need. This allows her team to consider how a project could begin to fill needs or how they might reframe the design question to help the client understand the opportunities at hand. She notes that large projects often have the space to redefine the problem before seeking a solution.

In the StationSoccer project, Sheba's team explored opportunities to install soccer fields and supportive amenities with the goal of increasing areas for play and recreation. Their data-based investigation in one area found a severe lack of broadband access. The team learned that children would play, then go to the closest McDonald's to access the internet to do homework. The HKS team shifted the design response to meet recreational, educational, social, and infrastructural needs. Their new look at the issues through data gathering yielded the recommendation to install Wi-Fi-enabled, decommissioned train cars next to the fields.

Firm: HKS Architects

Leadership: Dan Noble

Number of employees: >1,400

Base Location: Dallas, TX

Known for: data-driven approach, creatively multidisciplinary teams

As a matter of principle and to directly benefit the community, Hoskens strives to use materials created locally or by manufacturers employing local people. She also highlights the criticality of preserving key items in the design that are important to the community and preventing them from being removed in the value engineering process. Hoskens underscores that bringing local students into all phases of the design process can bolster creativity. They can also help measure project success post-occupancy by evaluating key performance indicators previously established with the community.

Consider:

1. Once community goals and design principles are established, agree on indicators to monitor progress.
2. Depending on the indicator, outline proper time frames. Some goals might be immediate (e.g., number of local people hired for construction) and some might be long term (e.g., reduction in violence and crime or improved health outcomes through lighting strategies or building façade systems).
3. Ensure resources are allocated toward monitoring and evaluation of goal progress. If a client is not willing, or cannot afford to fund ongoing services, consider partnering with a university, public entity, or other research institution or apply for a grant to support these activities. A large firm might allocate research and development resources for research to cover the costs. Smaller firms can leverage their local relationship with municipalities, local libraries and open-source GIS data, and universities to bring such resources to bear.
4. Ensure the data and research is accessible to your partner groups to build trust through transparency and confirm how their input has shaped the project. Consider open-source platforms or a Creative Commons license for findings.

Involving community: Outreach & engagement

Large-scale public visioning sessions and charettes still have a role in community processes, but to be more inclusive and equitable, it is important to meet people where they are at. Outreach methods in physical and digital spaces include meetings, forums, small group conversations, phone calls, text Q+A, and WhatsApp groups. Methods should be both active and passive to strive for diverse representation. Format and language will be contextual to the people and place in which the project is located.

Tools, such as surveys, interviews, visioning activities, and co-design activities, can be mapped across communication and outreach methods. Kia Weatherspoon, of Determined by Design, avoids single engagements. Instead, she plans tiered community events at a variety of scales, including more intimate settings for conversations that feel more comfortable. She's also found that she can connect with community members through property managers and resident services coordinators. Local schools are also effective ways to reach young people. Weatherspoon sees this as an opportunity to inform projects and to introduce young people to design. Project design and construction internships are another chance to expose young people to the design industry and they double as community engagement. Her commitment to engagement is rooted in a belief in the people to whom she is speaking with. People outside the design professions bring a fresh perspective to projects and can think differently about the process.

Trusted community members, local organizations, and neighborhood influencers all have a sense of how best to communicate and what barriers might be in place.

Bringing their expertise to planning meetings to establish how outreach and engagement on a project will take place will increase the likelihood of successful and authentic engagement.

It is important to plan ahead for how you will compensate for community involvement and participation. Community expertise is valuable, and that should be recognized formally. There are many ways to go about compensating people for their time and participation, including direct financial compensation in the form of a stipend, offering honoraria to community-based groups, and paying a set amount per meeting attended. It is important to be clear about expectations for compensated team members: Is this person an advisor, expected to bring others to meetings or expected to join as a participant themselves?

The city of Richmond, while updating its citywide masterplan, identified as a goal reaching groups traditionally underrepresented in the planning process. The city established six positions that include a stipend for individuals who have experience and connections within identified communities. "The value add for the planning department was that the engagement team used their own social networks, such as emailing friends and colleagues and tapping into community and special interest groups that they were already a part of."⁶⁶

i LEARN MORE:

- » ["Paying Community Members for Their Time"](#) Shelterforce
- » ["Tools and Resources for Project-Based Community Advisory Boards"](#) Urban Institute

Expected impact:

Using a range of methods and tools will increase the opportunity for those interested to participate in a meaningful and comfortable manner. This creates trust between the project team and community, reduces missteps by the project team, and should contribute to a result that is an asset to community members.

Engaging schools and students will offer a new perspective to the conversation and provide a sense of community ownership to the next generation of property owners, designers, developers, business owners, and elected officials. Students observe the world around them closely and, when asked, offer insightful observations and suggestions that can be overlooked by adults.

Increased trust, broad participation, and meaningful ways to contribute to a project are important for architects as well as community members. The information gathered provides rich material for design solutions that will better meet community needs. Additionally, listening to and engaging with community goes a long way to minimize unexpected responses. Hearing challenges to a project or an idea early in a process allows time to understand the issues more deeply and modify plans as appropriate.

Consider:

1. Identify what methods are appropriate to answer questions and authentically engage with community members. This might be guided by the advisory group, which understands the local context. Consider different stakeholder groups and the best ways to reach them.
2. Understand what languages will be needed for translating engagement and communication materials and ensure there is enough budget for translation and interpretation assistance.
3. Think about communication methods. Is there a local paper, newsletter, social media group, or similar mechanism that can get the word out about the engagement?

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in many public participation plans. Image credit: International Association for Public Participation www.iap2.org

4. Map the options for engagement activities throughout the project. Ensure there is sufficient funding available to compensate participants and build meaningful engagement platforms.
5. Be clear about the goal of each engagement and how the information collected will influence the final project. Be transparent with project data that impacts the community.

Understanding place: Community asset mapping

To gain a better understanding of place, consider the social, cultural, ecological, physical, and historical elements and connections that make up a community. Community asset mapping can be a powerful tool. Engage with community stakeholders to build out a picture of the places of value, past and present. This activity will not only open the project team's eyes to an "insider's view" of a place, but it can also shift neighbors' preconceived notions of their own places.

It is important to understand how these different mapping activities intersect to provide a holistic picture of the area, the people who live, work, shop, worship, or visit and the built environment that shapes these communities. This community data should be leveraged by the client and project team to inform decision-making about project design features and positioning, to identify who should be included on a community advisory board, and to select methods of outreach and engagement.

Social capacity, or one's ability to work together to organize public relationships rather than give responsibility for those relationships wholly to government actors or the flux of market exchange, can be used to apply knowledge gleaned through community asset mapping to connect the dots between established community members or organizations and the project team, consultants, and outside advisors. Applying social capacity can help collectively form a vision for how a project might support existing community initiatives.

Expected impact:

Better understanding of existing community networks and capacities will ensure the project can better contribute to these systems by helping to map and meet their existing goals and initiatives where applicable.



Community members and designers discussing design options. Credit: Side A Photography

R. Steven Lewis of ZGF focuses on the elements of Black joy “that have carried this people through struggle and oppression for all of this time and still exist as an engine to keep us moving. That’s contagious. It offers a great deal of possibility and hope for people on both sides.”

Participatory mapping with community groups can help them articulate assets and understand gaps in resources, informing the project team’s approach to their specific project and the organizations or individuals who might help them better meet community needs.

Increased awareness of the historic and contemporary conditions of inequity in a particular context can support better equitable outcomes by enabling project teams to influence decision-making in order to avoid repeating past transgressions.

Consider:

1. Physical mapping can include printing large-format maps of the neighborhood and working with community members in a group charette to identify specific challenges and opportunities that may impact the project.
2. Historical mapping works well as a large-format timeline that can be populated by community members familiar with events that shaped the neighborhood.
3. Social mapping, or stakeholder mapping, uses diagrams to list groups or individuals in the community and can highlight connections and influence at a neighborhood level, enabling the project team to partner more successfully with key groups that could influence project success in the eyes of the community.
4. The project team should reflect on how mapping might challenge assumptions about the neighborhood, how the project might respond to newfound context, and how they might build in space to support community initiatives and build community power. An example might be building a public plaza to host placemaking activities.

Involving community: Stakeholder advisory groups

A community advisory group is comprised of individuals who are representative of the community. They can be identified, recruited, and engaged through various methods, but generally they might already be part of a group, such as a residents’ association, local business group, school parent or tenant association, faith community, or local nonprofit enterprise serving the area. Having such a group at the table through the process can support broader community participation and ensure that the community goals and values are met at different stages in the process. This group not only has a critical understanding of the project’s setting, but also is deeply invested in the community. They can provide connection to a community’s unique culture of place and offer ideas to the design team, as well as convey information to and collect thoughts from a more diverse community. Investment in this organization might be needed upfront to build capacity.

Community members and other stakeholders are part of project decision-making. Their thoughts and opinions should influence project outcomes, ensuring the project is successfully responsive to community wants and needs (place-based and people-focused). This benefits the client by reducing the risk of schedule overruns from lengthy community opposition and inclines local government toward speedy approvals for the client’s similar future projects by demonstrating the client’s success with community relationships. Engaging in stakeholder advisory groups, especially if there is upfront investment made in trainings or skill building, can increase a community’s power to impact its future.

IN PRACTICE

One example of a successful community advisory group is the [Central Kenilworth Avenue Revitalization Community Development Corporation \(CKAR CDC\)](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization established to support projects in Riverdale Park, Maryland. The CDC was formed as a result of community conversations related to the renovation of a commercial corridor and, later, a comprehensive landscape plan resulting from community input.

The CDC has grown in capacity and influence since 2010. When a major infrastructure project planned for the area was changed due to budget cuts, the group mobilized and successfully advocated for adjustments to proposed value engineering methods. Since, the nonprofit has supported projects including:

- » Cafe and training kitchen
- » Job training center
- » Free trees distribution
- » Rain garden
- » Sponsorship of local restaurants to provide approx. 2,000 meals/month
- » Partnership with University of Maryland’s Architecture Department to create mobile resource hub pop-ups

Consider:

- 1.** What groups or individuals need to be represented on an advisory group for the community? This could be residents' associations, local support groups, nonprofit organization, residents, young people, school leadership, and faith groups. Established leaders and those working in communities often know others to involve. Don't hesitate to ask for recommendations.
- 2.** Clearly define roles and responsibilities. Seek to understand barriers to participating in the process. Local leaders or neighbors willing to get involved often have a lot of commitments already. Consider meeting timing, platform, and childcare, and, where possible, provide food, stipends, or other forms of compensation. Record video meetings and post them online so citizens with time constraints can view them at will.
- 3.** Respect different abilities and knowledge. Build trust and work with local groups with engagement experience that could facilitate the process.
- 4.** Avoid jargon unless it is necessary to the project. If so, clearly explain technical terms or provide term definitions, seeking to build consensus and understanding.

*Right Credit:
Determined by
Design Project:
Capitol Vista,
Affordable
Housing located in
Washington, DC*





11th Street Bridge Park aerial view of Anacostia Image credit: OMA and Luxigon

DESIGN

Involving community: Co-designing together

A step beyond involvement on the ladder of community participation is co-creation, or co-design, where community members are integral in the planning, programming, and design process. Their ideas have direct influence on the design choices. Projects created with authentic community input increase trust in civic participation and development processes. Future projects may be met with less skepticism from long-term residents if promises are kept and contributors can see where their ideas and creativity went in a project.

Being clear about how community input influenced a design is important to establishing a strong relationship and ensuring all voices at the table feel heard and valued. Relationships built between community members, design teams, and clients are connections that can be activated for future projects in the area.

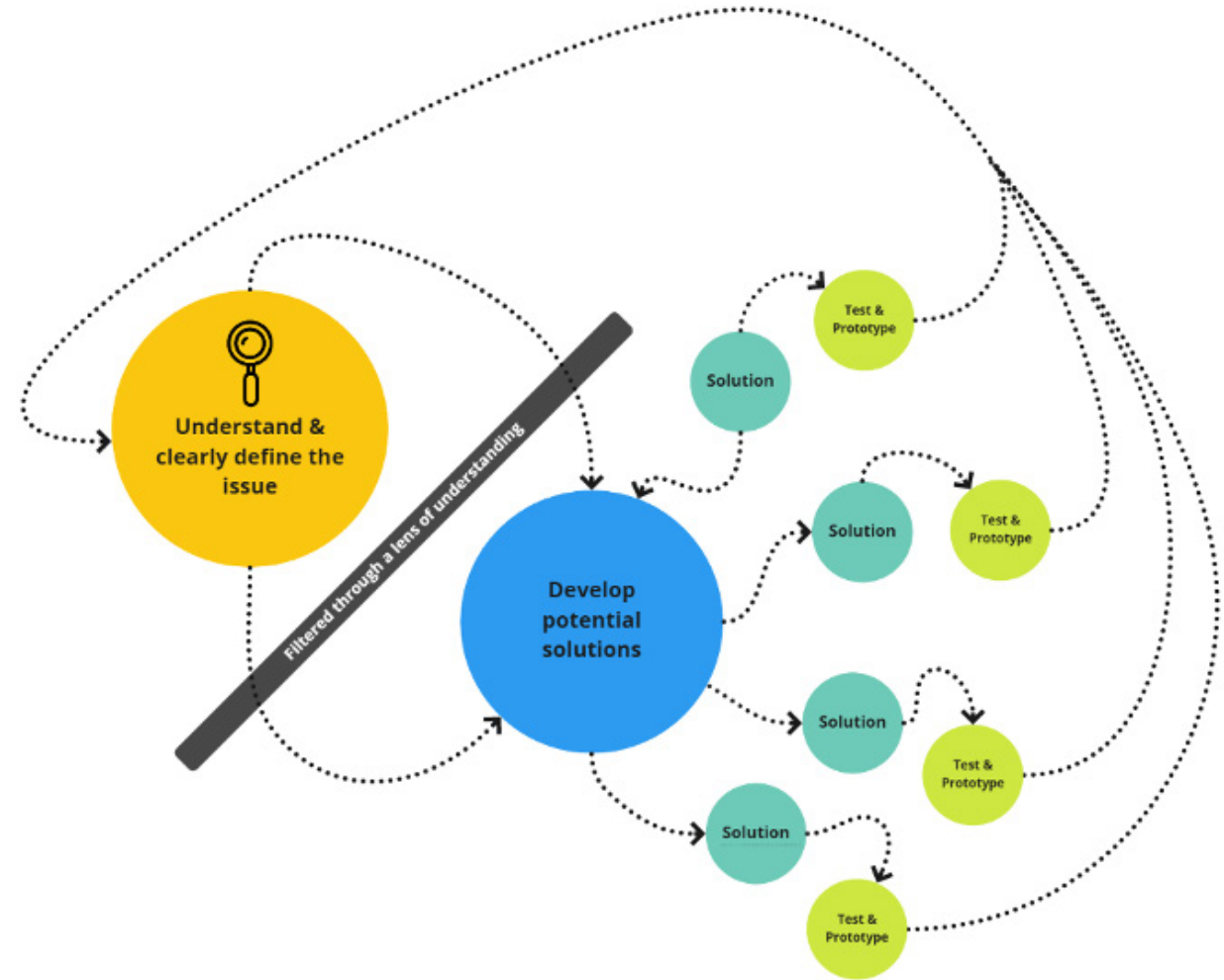
Moreover, project material selection offers an opportunity for significant positive community impact, if materials are chosen wisely. Avoid materials that have negative environmental, health, or social equity impacts—broadly as well as within the community. Focus on specifying products that are locally manufactured, highly durable, or created by manufacturers committed and certified to lead in social equity. This can help create local jobs, reduce waste in the municipality, and mitigate negative externalities that disproportionately affect communities of color.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [Dick and Rick: A Visual Primer for Social Impact Design](#), Equity Collective & Center for Urban Pedagogy
- » AIA Guides for Equitable Practice: [Chapter 8](#)
- » Take Action: [AIA Materials Pledge](#)
- » “[Understanding the implications of your materials selection](#)” AIA
- » [AIA Healthier Materials Protocol](#)
- » [BlackSpace Manifesto](#)

Consider:

1. Co-design builds on collaboratively determined design principles or project values set out in the engagement phase or articulated earlier in the design process (see section "Involving Community: Defining Success").
2. Ideally, co-design includes three phases: understanding and clearly defining the issue; developing potential solutions; and testing concept feasibility. The diagram below describes the process by which collaborative design can lead to better initial solutioning and fuel a transparent feedback loop which tests co-created concepts, learns, and adjusts according to outcomes and reactions from all stakeholders involved.
3. Architects are responsible for the impact our work has on people and places. We also must consider the materials we select, whether they support the physical and mental health of the end users and the community and whether they are sustainably produced and by whom. [The Materials Certificate Program](#) offered through AIAU breaks down how to make the best material selection for projects, people, and the environment.



Credit: Gensler

Translating community principles into design

Regardless of whether the process you and your client have contractually agreed to includes co-designing with the community, it is important to clearly translate the community-driven principles established early in the project into the programming and design phases. Drawing a direct connection between community input and design decisions shows that community voices are valued in the process. This goes a long way in re-establishing faith in development processes and allaying fears of displacement and gentrification.

Community principles need to be established and incorporated into design decisions, which could impact building or site layout, introduce new program elements, or influence material choices and aesthetics. Once concepts are created, it is important to check back with those engaged in creating the principles. Confirm that the information and its implications were fully understood by the design team and whether changes need to be made. For example, how well does the project authentically fit with the surrounding context and vernacular buildings through the lens of unique history and culture? Upon approval, record community decisions and priorities into the design documents.

Consider:

1. Create design concepts that explicitly incorporate the community principles. Communicate, through diagram or key, how the principles manifest in the design.
2. Seek and receive approval on how the community principles were translated into the design before proceeding.
3. Indicate in designs (preferably as a keyed note on design development drawings) what items are a “must” from a community perspective so that principles and preferences aren’t lost in future phases.



IN PRACTICE

Pricing and pricing changes are another reason design choices change during construction. Kia Weatherspoon of **Determined by Design** includes pricing estimates in her fixture schedules to get ahead of any pricing shifts and select an alternative fixture, if needed.

On a previous project, during construction, Kia was repeatedly told there was not enough budget for the light fixtures she specified. Her intuition told her something wasn't right. The Determined by Design team went straight to the manufacturer, procured fixtures within the allocated budget, and provided end users a beautiful, thoughtful design within budget. Challenging the boundary of what is outside of an architect or designer's control can yield results that support the design, community, and the engagement process.

Firm: [Determined by Design](#)

Leadership: Kia Weatherspoon

Number of employees: <20

Base Location: Washington, DC

Known for: design equity, affordable housing

*Credit: Determined by Design Project:
Interior of Momentum at Shady Grove,
Affordable Housing located in Rockville, MD*

Creating welcoming renderings

Take time to consider who should be represented in a rendering and seek out entourage, activities, and context that supports a holistic, inclusive vision. Represent diverse community-driven design principles in the renderings. This seemingly small action communicates who the project seeks to include and welcome.

Consider:

1. Think about the “who” of the project. Do community members see themselves in the image?
2. Add details learned through the engagement phase to root the new project in the existing place.



11th Street Bridge Park shade terrace Image credit: OMA and LuxigonImage



11th Street Bridge Park, Image credit: OMA and LuxigonImage

CONSTRUCTION ADMINISTRATION

Preserving community principles in construction

It is important to uphold community principles through construction. In the construction contracting stage, the design team can work with the client to specify parameters, such as a preference to hire locally or from training/apprenticeship programs, to ensure the community gets direct economic and workforce development benefits from the project. Designers can also partner with the client to modify the bidding process to prioritize locally owned firms or minority- and women-owned business enterprises (MWBE).

The threat of value engineering can also loom large for some more high-priced but necessary items. Taking the time to clearly articulate community priorities to contractors early in the process is a way to communicate what elements are of highest importance to the perceived success of a project.

During construction, when dealing with tough value engineering choices, refer back to the vision created at the beginning of the project to help keep the project on track and in support of co-created goals and aspirations. If possible, consult the stakeholder advisory group during construction. Explaining tradeoffs and the reasons for decisions can go a long way in maintaining the trust that has been built with key community members.

A contractor experienced in community-based projects can improve the process of meeting budget and stakeholder vision. When possible, list desired experience in working on community-involved projects as criterion during contractor selection.

“I think our profession often privileges the technical and aesthetic aspects of architecture in part because they are easier to measure and are more exciting to put in magazines or online sites like Instagram. Equitable communities work is so layered and complex that it’s harder to measure, harder to tell the story of in terms of how a singular project on a single site moves the needle toward equity. And it’s process heavy, which makes it harder to teach and harder to put in print.”

– Emilie Taylor Welty

OCCUPANCY

Measuring equity: Evaluating project outcomes

Community goals can be used to assess how well a project achieved its goal. It’s important, when establishing goals, to discuss how to measure success. Community members should be part of establishing those measures and the timelines associated with them. Is the goal to build community wealth by creating retail spaces for Black- and brown-owned small businesses? Check in on the success of businesses for several years to understand how well the strategy performed.

Investing time, whether as part of contracted services or as a firm investment in future work, to understand what strategies were tried in a project, what they set out to achieve, and the reality of the achievement allows a firm to build a base of knowledge to effectively work toward more equitable communities. Consider if partnerships with universities or local nonprofit organizations are possible to both find grant funding to cover this phase of work and to engage with local residents and students to complete evaluations.

Stories are powerful ways to communicate impact. Previous projects’ successes and impacts can be used to educate clients about the benefits of community participation. The [AIA Film Challenge](#) offers some compelling examples, often highlighting community benefits.

Consider:

Frameworks for measuring project health and impact exist. Enterprise Community Partners’ 2020 Green Communities Criteria⁶⁸ distills into a checklist the items required for an affordable housing project to be resilient, place-based, rooted in community, and contributing to positive health outcomes. Pursuing Green Communities

Certification builds a body of knowledge for sharing best practices and successful innovation.

Much work can be done within project scopes to mitigate systemic inequities in the built environment. Material selection, community involvement and participation, building partnerships and teams all have impacts on the type and quality of projects architects design and implement. It’s also critical to understand the impacts that projects have within the communities.

i LEARN MORE:

- » [AIA Film Challenge](#)
- » [Equitable Development Frameworks](#), AIA



King Open/Cambridge Street Upper Schools & Community Complex. Credit: Anthony Crisafu

Call to action



Community stakeholders identifying areas for intervention along the Maryland Line Trail. Credit: NDC

CALL TO ACTION

Architects have unique skills and the capacity to impact socio-economic and quality-of-life factors for innumerable populations beyond our projects' boundaries. We have the agency to make decisions about how we apply our education and experience, how we bring others into the design process, and how we choose to challenge ourselves, our project teams, our firms, our partners, and our industry. And we have power that, history reveals, is farther reaching than many of us realize or acknowledge. It is within our abilities and best interests as citizens and designers to create environments that provide for the needs of all.

Disclaimer

Please review this resource as a guide that provides general information. Please make your own individual decisions about actions to take or not to take. The views expressed are provided for opinion purposes and do not necessarily reflect those of any particular organization.

This resource aims to provide tactical steps toward creating more equitable communities and the context to spur action. Consider the following:

- » Share this resource with other members of the architecture and design community and point them to specific sections to nudge them toward exploration.
- » Adopt one action into your practice that feels possible immediately. Revisit the resource regularly to contemplate when and how to boost your approaches and processes with other new actions.
- » Host a discussion with your team or office. Review a particular section or set of actions from this resource. Discuss what changes to mindsets or methods might be beneficial.

- » Propose an audit of your team's or firm's approaches to engaging with the community. Translate the findings into changes to practice, if needed, and share the experience with other designers, project teams, or firms.
- » Consider how your experience and learnings from this resource might affect policy. Get involved at any level—join a neighborhood council or get elected to a board; attend community meetings; run for office; or serve on a planning, housing, or zoning commission—and share your knowledge.

It's up to all of us to adopt these actions into our practices. Each of these recommendations requires a first step, we encourage the use of this resource and the many identified in this document to help guide you forward on this journey!

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