

“[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.

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- » [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