

## 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 pre-design were the predominant design-related specializations. Less than half of firms, 45%, offered planning services in 2019, a decrease from 2017.<sup>61</sup>

**Expected impact:**

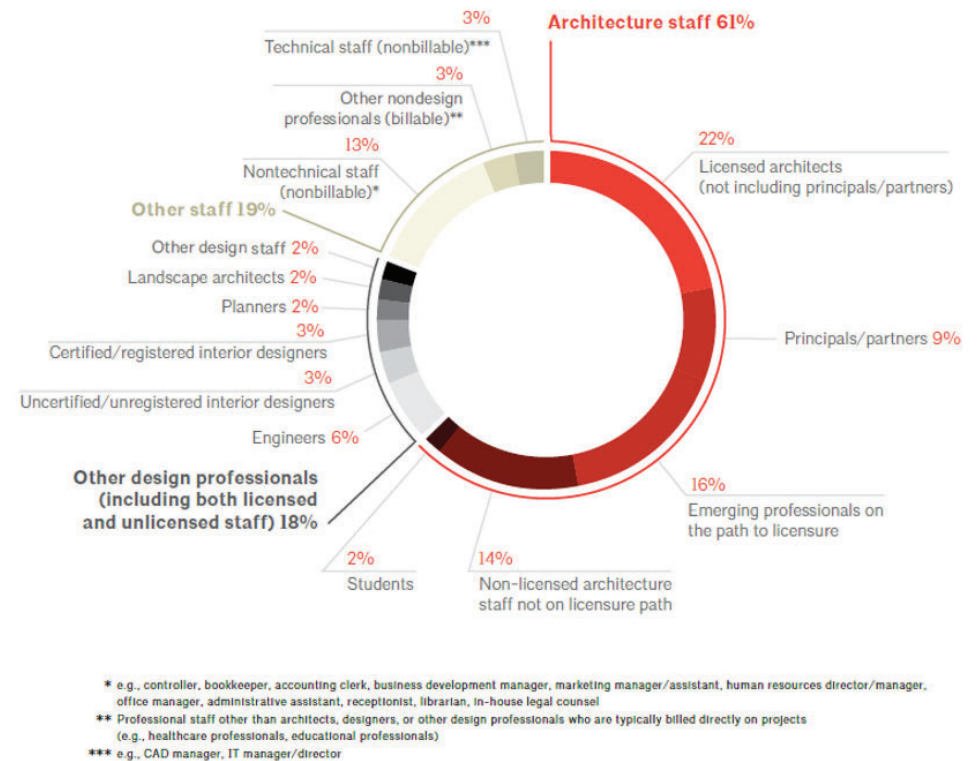
Teams with a range of lived experiences and identities, that have a strong sense of trust and respect within the group, and are confident that their contributions can truly influence decision making can greatly inform the type of questions being asked, how context is understood, and how feedback is synthesized. 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.”<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup>

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."<sup>64</sup>

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

