Application: Within practice

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.

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

– Jennifer Newsom, AIA[49]

⚙ 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."

– Anjulie Rao[50]

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.

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

– Nadine Maleh[55]

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

Share of architecture staff by position
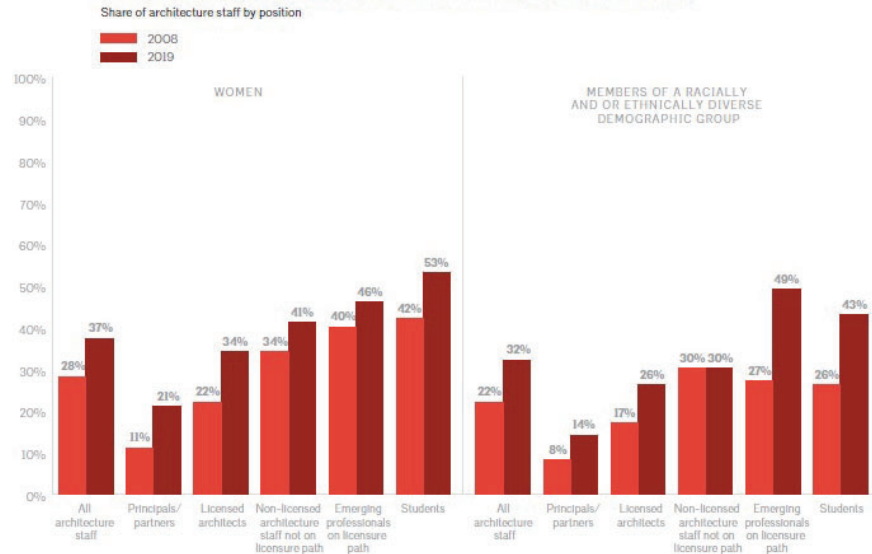
Source: AIA Firm Survey Report 2020, p. 5.

Hire a targeted recruiter with demonstrated relationships and specialized knowledge about sourcing diverse consultants. Adolofo 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.

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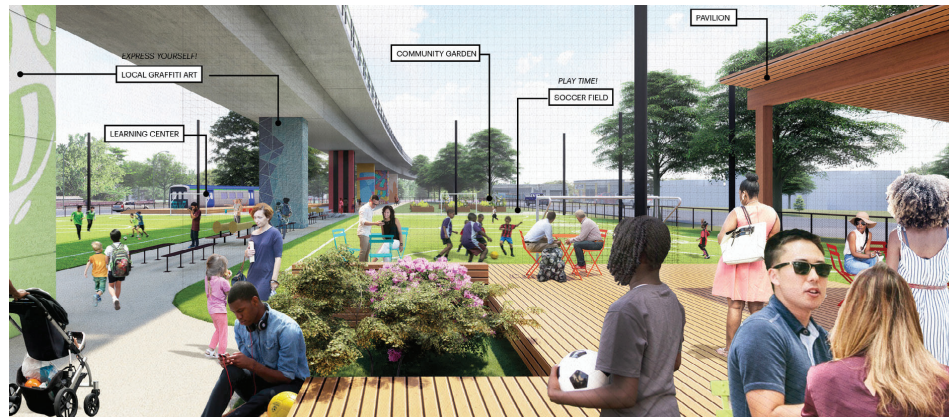
Rendering with easy-to-read tags identifying important project elements, Credit: HKS

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?

ⓘ 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.

ⓘ 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.

ⓘ 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) financer 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.

ⓘ 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