

Chicago Architect

**Beyond Measure: Honoring
Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA,
Recipient of AIA Chicago's 2025
Lifetime Achievement Award // 36**

**+ Decarbonization Awards
+ Lerch Bates People's Choice Awards**

AIA Chicago

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Chicago Architect, an outreach tool of AIA Chicago, is published four times a year as an authoritative resource for architects, the larger design community, and the public about architecture and related issues of interest to Chicago architects. The magazine communicates industry trends, the value of high-quality design, and the role of AIA Chicago and its members in the world of architecture.



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Dear Members and Colleagues,

As 2025 drew to a close, and as I completed my year as president, I found myself reflecting on the many ways our members and firms rely on this organization for connection, support, and leadership. Throughout the year, I was reminded again and again of how meaningful it is to see old classmates, past colleagues, and even competitors come together around a shared purpose. That sense of community has underscored every milestone we've celebrated.

At Designnight, we honored work that exemplified impactful transformation, exceptional detailing, contextual responsiveness, enhanced user experience, and clarity of vision. During the annual architecture celebration, we recognized recipients across seven of AIA Chicago's premier award programs. Moments like these reflect not only the strength of Chicago's design culture but also the generosity with which our community uplifts one another.

This year also deepened my appreciation for how architects learn from — and inspire — each other. In recognizing Gensler as the 2025 Firm Award recipient, we highlighted a people-first model rooted in mentorship. Across *Chicago Architect's* pages, we featured projects that embraced resiliency, repurposing, and adaptive transformation, offering new ways to think about practice in a rapidly changing world. These examples echo the spirit of collaboration I've witnessed through programs and committees, where peers continually exchange ideas to strengthen our profession.

Our commitment to shared knowledge was equally evident in conversations with Chicago's architecture school leaders and in the important work of our Knowledge Communities, which help bridge academia and practice and foster peer-to-peer learning. Whether gathered around a conference table or a Zoom screen, members showed up not as competitors but as colleagues seeking to advance the field together. That spirit — also similar to what happens each month in the AIA Chicago Large Firm Roundtable meetings — remains one of the most inspiring parts of having served in this role.

We also celebrated our collective achievements, including *Chicago Architect* earning an ASBPE Gold Regional Award for Publication Design and Executive Director Jen Masengarb, Assoc. AIA, being elected to the CACE executive board, which represents the 200-plus AIA chapters across the country. Additionally, in an important step for our chapter's future, we undertook a comprehensive bylaws review, the first since 1989, which brought together members across categories to modernize our governance with care and clarity.

Thank you for your engagement and support throughout 2025. Serving as chapter president has reminded me daily why this work matters: **When architects come together, whether in celebration, in dialogue, or in pursuit of shared goals, we strengthen not only our profession but our broader community.** It has truly been a privilege to witness the power of that connection.

Jason Golub, AIA
2025 AIA Chicago President
president@aiachicago.org

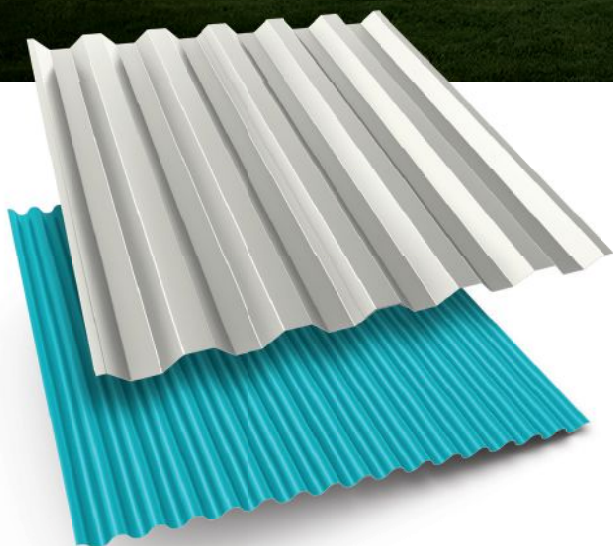


Jason Golub, AIA
2025 AIA Chicago President

Colorful Cladding



Photo: alanblakely.com



Ribbons of neon-bright metal panels create texture

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case study
and video



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Phius Zero Historic Retrofit transforms a historic Oak Park home into a net-zero model of high-performance preservation. It was designed by TBDA, which received the 2025 Decarbonization Honor Award for its work on the project. ERIC HAUSMAN

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Beyond Measure: Honoring Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA, Recipient of AIA Chicago's 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award



▲ ON THE COVER

Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA, is the only architect to have designed the world's tallest building twice: the Burj Khalifa and Jeddah Tower, pictured here. AS+GG

► OUR PREVIOUS ISSUE

is available to view digitally at AIAChicago.org/ChicagoArchitect

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COUNCIL ON VERTICAL URBANISM

Daniel Safarik has been with the Council on Vertical Urbanism since 2013. He has served as director of research and thought leadership since 2020 and as editor-in-chief of *Vertical Urbanism* magazine since 2023. Read his profile of 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Adrian Smith, FAIA, on page 36.



OKW ARCHITECTS

Dan Solera is director of communications at OKW Architects and has worked in the architecture and interior design industry since 2007. He is currently leading a research effort on the Great Recession's impact on a lost generation of architectural talent, which he writes about on page 42.



OKW ARCHITECTS

Cole Gagnon, AIA, has been a fixture of the AEC industry since 1999. She has worked at OKW for 14 years and served as its president since 2024. She is mentioned in — and contributed to — an article on page 42 focused on OKW's research into the Great Recession's lasting impact in the profession.



TONE STOCKENSTRÖM PHOTOGRAPHY

Krisann Rehbein served as executive director of the ACE Mentor Program of Chicago from 2017 until early 2026, overseeing programs serving more than 400 students annually and coordinating scholarships and paid summer work experiences with industry volunteers. Read her celebration of the 25th anniversary of the program on page 46.

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AIA Chicago Hosts Chicago College Day

ALL PHOTOS BY FIONN HUI

This past September, more than 200 high school and college students joined their parents, teachers, caregivers, and consultants for the annual Chicago Architecture + Design College Day. The free event enabled students to learn more about careers in architecture, construction management, interior design, landscape architecture, urban planning, and more.

Hosted at Harold Washington Community College, the event featured a student-led panel and introduced a new resource showcasing various accredited architecture programs. Students engaged with representatives from more than 40 universities across the country who answered questions about their degree programs.



Distinguished Service and Presidential Citation Honorees Announced

AIA Chicago is proud to announce the recipients of the Distinguished Service Award and Presidential Citation, recognizing exceptional leadership and service to the architectural community.

2025 Distinguished Service Award

This year, the board of directors has bestowed this honor upon two recipients:



Arquitina, a national organization co-founded by **Alicia Ponce, AIA**, is

celebrated for its transformative impact on diversifying the profession by supporting Latina architects through mentorship, professional development, and community building. Since its founding, the organization has created vital networks and resources that empower Latina women in architecture,

addressing systemic barriers and fostering leadership at every career stage. Arquitina's work has expanded opportunities for underrepresented voices in the profession, strengthening the entire design community through increased diversity and inclusion.



Julie Hacker, FAIA, has been selected in recognition of her decades of commitment to residential design excellence, preservation,

and her role as a dedicated mentor. As principal of Cohen and Hacker Architects LLC, she has championed thoughtful, contextual design that honors Chicago's architectural heritage while meeting contemporary needs. Hacker's influence extends beyond her award-winning practice: She has shaped the profession through her tireless mentorship of emerging architects, her advocacy for preservation, and her leadership within AIA Chicago's Custom Residential

Architects Network (CRAN). Her dedication to elevating residential architecture as a vital component of the built environment has inspired countless architects throughout her distinguished career.

2025 Presidential Citation



Selected by 2025 Chapter President Jason Golub, AIA, this honor recognizes **Kimberly Dowdell,**

AIA, NOMAC, for her historic leadership and enduring dedication to the Chicago architectural community. Dowdell, a vice president at Amrize, served as the **100th president of AIA** in 2024 and is a past president of NOMA. Her career is defined by a mission to improve quality of life through design, bridging the gap between policy, practice, and urban revitalization. 

Announcing the 2025 Martin Roche Travel Scholarship Recipient



The AIA Chicago Foundation is pleased to announce **Zaineh Ghanayem** as the recipient of the Martin Roche Travel Scholarship for her research project, *Temporary*

Permanence: The Urbanization of Jordan's Refugee Camps. Through site photography and architectural drawings, Ghanayem, an MArch student at UIC, will document how temporary shelters transform into permanent urban settlements. As an Arabic speaker, she will bridge lived experience with spatial

analysis to reveal how community and domesticity evolve under conditions of displacement. She will travel to Jordan in summer 2026 to conduct independent research.

To learn more about the Martin Roche Travel Scholarship, visit AIACHicago.org/MartinRoche. 

A Win in Veto Session

Sometimes the unexpected happens in a veto session.

During the “quiet” stretch between the close of regular session and the start of veto session, I met with Quinn Adamowski from Landmarks, Illinois, one of our legislative partners. We began mapping out initiatives for 2026, and one priority quickly rose to the top: extending the River Edge Redevelopment Zone (RERZ) Historic Tax Credit program (RE-HTC), which was set to expire in December 2026.

Soon, about 10 municipalities and numerous statewide organizations, like AIA Illinois, joined the conversation, forming a coalition with a shared goal: push the RE-HTC sunset from December 2026 to December 2031. As discussions evolved, so did the strategy. Instead of waiting until the 2026 regular session, we saw an opportunity to attach the extension to an existing bill already moving through the 2025 veto session. That bill sought to extend sunsets for several tax credits and acts, and RE-HTC fit perfectly.

We threw our support behind the idea and worked with the coalition to secure its passage. In the early hours of the final day — 3 a.m., to be exact — the extension crossed the finish line.

While we didn’t achieve the full 2031 date we had hoped for, the new sunset of December 2028 is still a significant victory. Now with the extension secured, our focus shifts from simply keeping RE-HTC alive to expanding it, allowing more communities to benefit from the preservation of the built environment.

This win illustrates what your AIA membership makes possible. Through our advocacy work in Springfield, we protect and advance the tools that help architects and their clients bring meaningful projects to life. The RE-HTC extension means more opportunities for adaptive reuse and historic preservation work across Illinois — opportunities that might not exist without the collective voice of AIA members pushing for smart policy. It’s this kind of behind-the-scenes work that strengthens our profession and expands what’s possible for the communities we serve. 



Eric Klinner, CAE

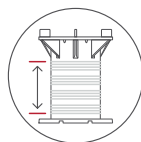
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The Illinois Medical District has broken ground on a one-acre public park to enhance the nation's oldest medical district and better connect it to the nearby Fulton Market and United Center areas. **Hana Ishikawa, AIA**, principal of **site design group, ltd.**, is the lead designer for the new park, which will include a COVID-19 memorial.



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The Mosque Foundation broke ground for its new community center in Bridgeview, Illinois. The 50,000-square-foot facility, designed by **Legat Architects**, creates a symbol of unity for the Chicagoland Muslim community.



Legat Architects has acquired Indianapolis-based **Studio 3 Design**. The acquisition strengthens Legat's reach across the Midwest corridor.

AJ BROWN IMAGING



The **Legat Architects**-designed Bright Futures Preschool in Galesburg, Illinois, received three design awards: *Excellence in Interiors Above 5,000 Square Feet* from AIA Illinois; *Preservation/Renovation Honor Award* from AIA Northeast Illinois; and *Metamorphosis Award – First Place, Interiors*, from Retrofit.



Vocon opened its new Chicago office, expanding the firm's national presence with a local team led by Studio Director **Sophie Bidek, AIA, LEED AP BD+C**.

The office builds on more than 100 projects Vocon has completed in the Chicago region and reflects the firm's continued commitment to serving clients throughout the area.



Andrew J. Buck, AIA, was promoted to principal at **KOO**, recognizing his leadership and positive impact on the firm's work.



Lohan Architecture completed the new headquarters of Alexander Chemical in La Porte, Indiana. Adapting an existing concrete first floor and foundation of a former munitions plant, the new office building employs heavy timber construction and daylighting to dramatically improve the working conditions for its users.



Rand Ekman, FAIA, LEED Fellow, has been elected to the AIA Architecture 2030 board of directors as the director for development. Rand is chief sustainability officer emeritus and partner in the Chicago office of **HKS**, and he served as president of AIA Chicago in 2012.



Lohan Architecture and their team of planning and engineering consultants completed the first phase of an extensive Ravinia Festival Music Pavilion renovation. In July 2026, the pavilion will welcome back artists and fans with a new stage, seating, backstage spaces, and improved acoustics.

KENDALL MCCAUGHERTY | HALL + MERRICK + MCCAUGHERTY



Valerio Dewalt Train has completed Phase 2 of Shedd Aquarium's transformation, which reconfigures visitor circulation, enhances accessibility, and improves the guest experience through architectural interventions.

PEOPLE + PROJECTS



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DAVID CHASE



Sheetal Vora, Assoc. AIA, architectural designer at **Perkins+Will**, was selected for AIA's Next to Lead program. Designed to advance racially and ethnically diverse women in architecture, the program provides leadership training, mentorship, and pathways into AIA governance. She was also recently recognized as a recipient of the AIA Emerging Professional Grant, further highlighting her dedication and contributions to the field.



Elizabeth Godbold, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Fitwell ambassador, and **Michelle Sablack, AIA, EDAC, LEED AP BD+C**, were recently promoted to partners at **WJW Architects**.



LAMBDA ALPHA INTERNATIONAL

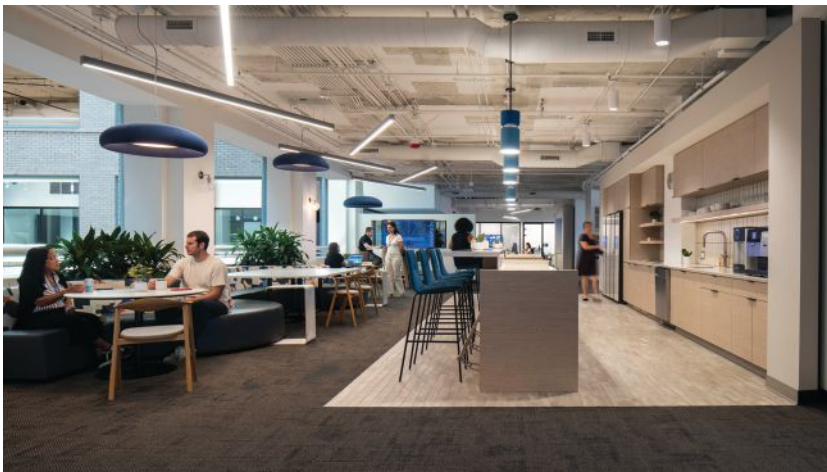


Doug Farr, FAIA, was honored with the *Daniel H. Burnham Distinguished Service Award* by the Lambda Alpha International Land Economics Society Chicago Region Chapter.



Julie Hacker, FAIA, and **Stuart Cohen, FAIA** (pictured front row, second and third from right), were recently awarded the *Cultural Ambassador Award* by the City of Evanston for "their highly influential and inspiring work across multiple decades reflecting architecture as an art affirming Evanston's rich architectural heritage."

TOM ROSSITER



In a strategic move that highlights their commitment to client engagement and team member development, **Ghafari** has relocated their Chicago office to the sixth floor of the historic Railway Exchange Building.

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DECARBONIZATION AWARD

The Decarbonization Award aims to recognize projects that surpass basic energy reduction, highlighting their leadership in sustainable design. The purpose is to showcase innovative projects that demonstrate a commitment to the goals of the 2030 Commitment while maintaining functional and aesthetic excellence.

JURY



**Marisol Gallagher, AIA,
LEED AP BD+C, CPHD**
Marisol Studios
Denver, Colorado



**Pablo La Roche, PhD,
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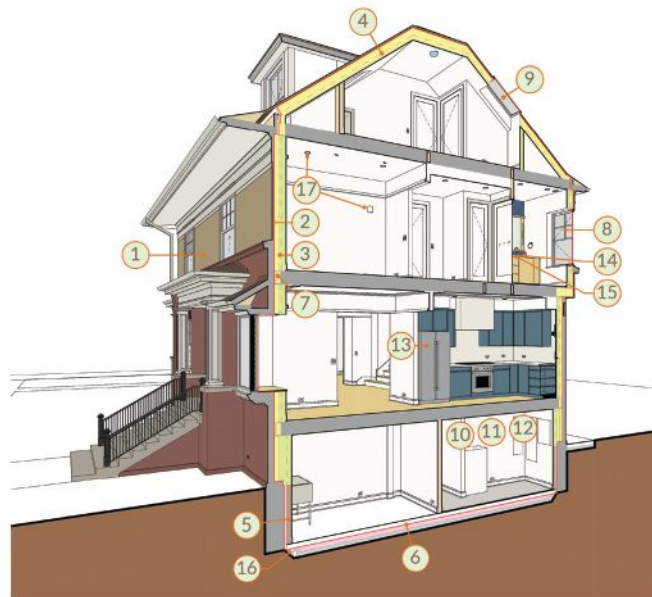
TBDA

PHIUS ZERO HISTORIC RETROFIT

OAK PARK, ILLINOIS

In an Oak Park historic district, a dated home in need of extensive maintenance became a Phius Source Zero-certified model of high-performance preservation. The retrofit reimagined the plan for a modern family, strengthening indoor-outdoor connections and creating flexible rooms for work-from-home, gym, and guest use. Envelope insulation and airtightness were upgraded to Phius standards, mechanical systems were replaced with high-efficiency equipment, and a rooftop PV array now delivers annual net-zero energy. With modest interventions, the project eliminated operational carbon (a 100 percent reduction) while elevating comfort, air quality, and resilience, creating a delightful place for a young family to grow.

- 1 Historic exterior preserved
- 2 Continuous retrofit air barrier with AeroBarrierDouble
- 3 Retrofit double stud wall construction for extra insulation
- 4 Roof retrofit with sistered rafters and closed cell spray foam
- 5 Continuous insulation over the foundation with mineral wool batts in framing
- 6 Retrofit slab with new vapor barrier and underslab insulation
- 7 Closed cell spray foam at existing rim joists
- 8 Triple pane Passive House certified windows
- 9 New energy efficient North-facing skylights
- 10 Continuous energy recovery ventilation
- 11 Geothermal heat pump for heating, cooling, and dehumidification
- 12 Energy efficient water heating from geothermal heat pump system
- 13 Energy Star rated appliances
- 14 On-demand hot water recirculation system
- 15 Low-flow fixtures
- 16 New interior drain tile with sump pump
- 17 LED lamps in all fixtures



SECTION

ERIC HAUSMAN



ERIC HAUSMAN



ERIC HAUSMAN



CONTRACTOR: Bosi Construction | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** Carsello Engineering; Build Equinox; and AeroSeal |
ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS: Sarah Aitchison, Assoc. AIA; Tom Bassett-Dilley, FAIA, CPHC, LFA, NCARB; Joe Juhl, AIA, CPHC, NCARB; and Garrett Kilbride

SMNG A LTD. AND FARR ASSOCIATES
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THE ACADEMY FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC) is a nonprofit public charter school campus housing a pre-K through eighth grade elementary school, a community health center, a Head Start center, and a three-acre urban farm with a fresh food market. The 71,000-square-foot learning laboratory is the world's largest Phius-certified school and is nearing completion of the first Living Building Challenge certification for a school in Illinois. It achieves net-positive energy through an ultra-tight envelope (21 percent better than Phius), dedicated outdoor air with energy recovery, and radiant heating/cooling slabs supplied by a 50-well geothermal system, complemented by a 520-kW photovoltaic array. Paired with a 520-kWh battery and the urban farm, the campus delivers community-scale resilience while low-embodied-carbon assemblies — mineral wool insulation and low-carbon concrete — halve material impacts, setting a replicable standard for all-electric, net-positive schools.

TOM ROSSITER, FAIA



CONTRACTOR: Power Construction | **CLIENT:** The Academy for Global Citizenship at Cultivate Collective Campus | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** dbHMS; Power Construction; Stearn-Joglekar Ltd.; V3 Companies; site design group, Ltd.; WSP; Reitano Design Group; Baumann Consulting; Shen Milsom & Wilke; and Urban ReSOLVE | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Todd Niemiec, AIA; Chey Hsiao Taylor, AIA; Doug Farr, FAIA; Len Sciarra, AIA; Angel Valtierra, AIA; Genesis Gadberry, AIA; Alex Haggerty; Kysa Heinitz, AIA; Randall Mattheis, AIA; Rafal Stawarz; Tucker Touchette, AIA; and Echo Allen, Assoc. AIA

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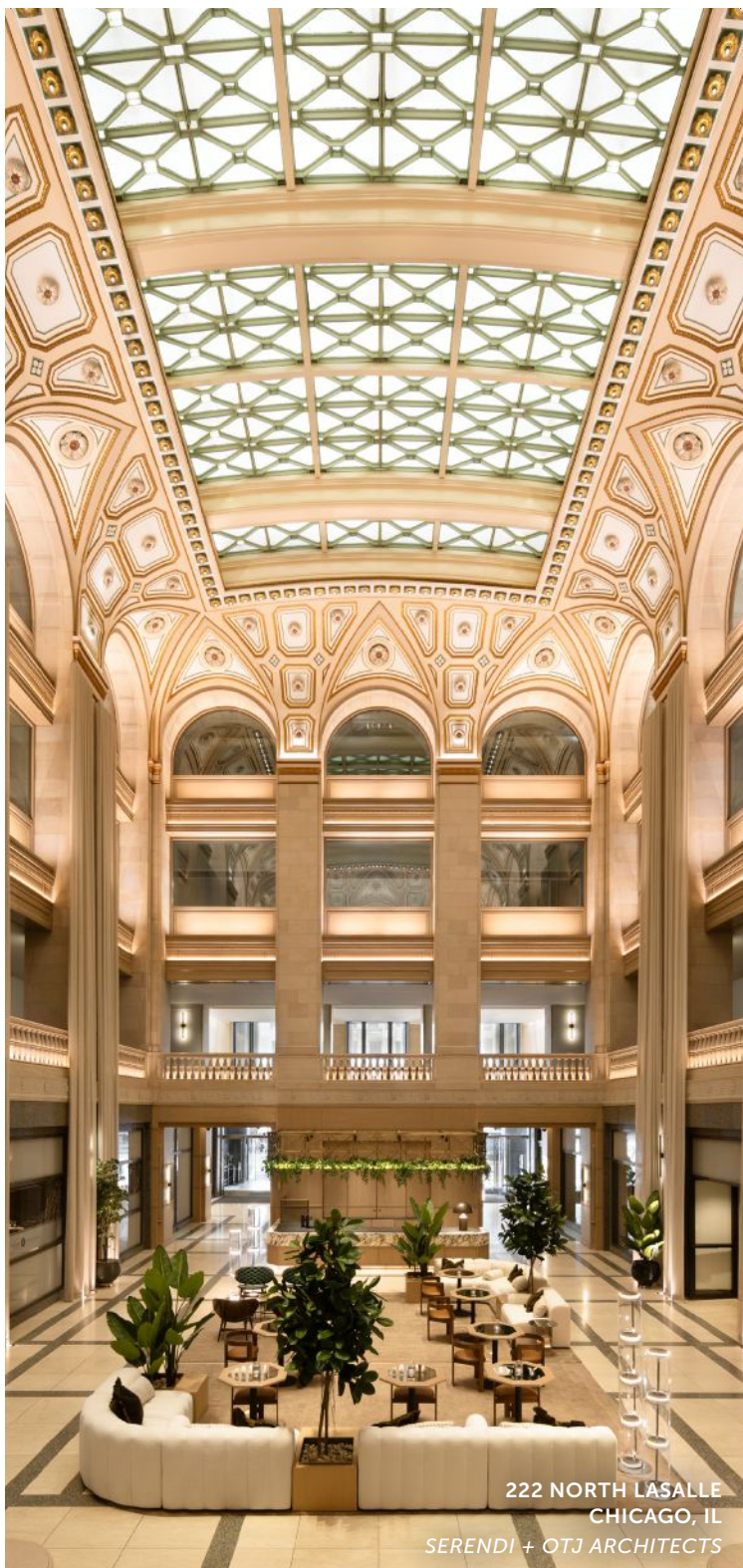
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CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE CENTER





SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL (SOM)

CITY OF APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY

APPLETON, WISCONSIN

Shaped by 17 years of community collaboration, the renewed Appleton Public Library transforms its 1981 brutalist-style structure into a vibrant civic anchor, demonstrating how thoughtful, minimal interventions can deliver lasting impact within tight economic constraints. Two new skylights and a glazed addition bring natural light deep into the once-dim interior, illuminating the expanded lower-level children's area, now nearly twice its original size. With its welcoming, contemporary design, the library reemerges as an inclusive and sustainable community hub, reflecting shared values and reaffirming its role at the heart of civic life.

CONTRACTOR: The Boldt Company | **CLIENT:** City of Appleton | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** Omni Ecosystems; raSmith; Studio J9 LLC; CCS International Inc.; dbHMS; Gwen Grossman Lighting Design; Kirkegaard; Andrea Telli Consulting; DeKalb Mechanical; and Geothermal Inc. | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Scott Duncan, AIA; Adam Semel, AIA; Jason Fisher, AIA; Jorge Rovira, AIA; Jane Cameron, FAIA; Chris Whelan, AIA; Martin Rauber; James Harbacek; Scott Beebe; Zhiyi Chen, AIA; and Asiye Yukselen, Assoc. AIA



MICHAL KOSZYCKI, AIA, AND TITUS WONSEY

CONTINUING A RADICAL CRAFT: DESIGN INTERVENTIONS AT JANE ADDAMS HULL-HOUSE MUSEUM

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

This project introduces two thoughtful interventions — a reception desk and bookstore shelving — into the historic interior of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago. Honoring the site's domestic scale and legacy of craft, the design responds to the Italianate architecture through careful detailing, material selection, and proportion. The reception desk, carved beneath the central stair, creates a signature centerpiece for the institution, while the earnest bookstore shelves recall the Hull-House Kilns and its workshop traditions. With minimal footprint and maximum impact, these additions redefine circulation spaces and deepen public engagement, transforming the museum into a more inclusive, functional, and civically resonant environment.

CONTRACTOR: Michal Koszycki, AIA; and Titus Wonsey | **CLIENT:** Jane Addams Hull-House Museum | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** Third Coast Restorations Inc.; MK Cabinetry; Encore Finishing; and MAX CNC | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Michal Koszycki, AIA, and Titus Wonsey



GENSLER

IRONWORKERS LOCAL 63 TRAINING CENTER

BROADVIEW, ILLINOIS

Forged from legacy and built for the future, the Ironworkers Local 63 Training Center stands as a bold architectural landmark, embodying the union's core values of craftsmanship, innovation, and sustainability. Located just west of Chicago along a high-traffic corridor, the building's distinctive form pays homage to ironworking expertise, taking inspiration from the concave shape of a perfect weld bead. Its curved glass façade showcases the precision and artistry of the trade, serving as both a beacon of pride and an emblem of the profession's future. Nicknamed "The Glass House," the facility functions as an immersive laboratory of learning. Its interior supports a wide range of training activities, including pressurized curtain wall installation, rigging, and crane signaling, flexing to become a venue for industry and community events. Passive ventilation, solar power, and precast walls made with repurposed aggregate from neighboring Indiana steel mills reflect the union's leadership in sustainable construction practices.

CONTRACTOR: Skyline Construction | **CLIENT:** Ironworkers Local 63 | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** IMEG; Nayyar & Nayyar International, P.C.; and Terra Engineering Ltd. | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Scott Hurst, AIA; Jason Pugh, AIA, AICP, NOMA, LEED AP; Sean McGuire, AIA; and Ryan DePersia, AIA, LEED AP BD+C

JGMA



JGMA

HUMBOLDT PARK WELLNESS CENTER

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Humboldt Park Wellness Center is a facility that provides state-of-the-art health and wellness services for patients of the hospital campus and members of the community. This building features programs that promote healthy lifestyles, including a pool, indoor track, and multiple fitness areas on the first and second floors. The third floor of the facility contains community programs, with direct views to Humboldt Park and to the neighborhood. The design does not only aim to be a symbol of health and wellness for the entire hospital campus, but it also promotes a sense of community by offering spaces for gathering and socializing.

CONTRACTOR: ALL Construction Group | **CLIENT:** Humboldt Park Wellness Center | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** ML Structural; Callan Consulting Engineers; Terra Engineering; site design group Ltd.; and Counsilman-Hunsaker Aquatics | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Juan Moreno, AIA; Dan Spore; Samra Pecanin; and Maria Monteagudo Molina



HEIDI LIGHTNER ARCHITECTS

THE ALSTON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The Alston is Chicago's newest luxury steakhouse restaurant and members' club. The name, Alston, meaning "noble stone," is designed to be a place of substance, layered in its details and deliberate in its design. The restaurant aspires to more than luxury; it reflects character, grace, and elevated taste. Guests are taken on a journey from the arrival to a series of distinct yet cohesive dining spaces. From the soft glamour of the champagne bar to the moody intimacy of the private club, each space tells a story — glamorous, immersive, and unapologetically indulgent. Rich, layered interiors feature custom lighting and a large digital ceiling screen that displays evolving art, creating a dynamic atmosphere in the main dining space. A silk floral installation weaves from the arrival to dining room, while a sculptural metal screen artfully separates the private dining room from the Grand Hall. The open kitchen brings warmth and vitality, inviting guests to see the hearth's flame, hear the energy of service, and take in the aromas. The design blends drama, intimacy, and craftsmanship into a singular, immersive experience.

CONTRACTOR: Kern Konstruktion | **CLIENT:** The Alston | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** RTM Engineering Consultants; AKLD; and Anthony Thalier | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Heidi Lightner, AIA; Brad Lightner, AIA; and Lindsey Koza



RATIO

JOURNEYMAN DISTILLERY AT THE AMERICAN FACTORY

VALPARAISO, INDIANA

Journeyman Distillery at the American Factory reimagines the century-old, National Register-listed ANCO industrial complex as a vibrant destination for dining, events, gathering, and distillery production. Through adaptive reuse and thoughtful presentation, the design honors the site's manufacturing legacy while activating a long-dormant eyesore as a place of craft, culture, and economic opportunity. The project also incorporates a transit center for the ChicaGO DASH bus, providing daily connections to downtown Chicago and expanding access to jobs, tourism, and regional connections. The American Factory fosters pride, resilience, and inclusive growth — a model of sustainable transformation rooted in place and purpose.

CONTRACTOR: Berglund Construction | **CLIENT:** Journeyman | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** Project Management Advisors; City of Valparaiso Redevelopment Commission; City of Valparaiso Redevelopment Authority; Abonmarche; IMEG; and Charter Sills | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Scott Sarver, AIA; Wes Urschel, AIA; Jess Hughes, RID IIDA; Cody Bornsheuer, AIA; Steve Pantazis, AIA; Wei Lei, Assoc. AIA; Amber Watkins, Assoc. AIA; Julie Zent; and David Valaskovic, AIA (ret.)



LAMAR JOHNSON COLLABORATIVE

EMBRY

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Embry redefines residential luxury in Chicago's West Loop. Offering 58 residences, including duplexes and penthouses, the design focuses on column-free interiors, oversized terraces, and expansive city views. LJC's investigation of the human-scale experience began on the street, flourished in the lobby, moved up the building to the typical window bay, and culminated at the building's crown. The bronze-clad exterior integrated window wall system creates a dynamic façade that responds to light and shadow. Through exploration and iteration, rhythm, texture, and form shaped the façade and brought human-centered elegance and innovation to a vibrant urban neighborhood. The project is also a financial success — fully sold out, breaking sales records for both average sales price (more than \$800 per square foot) and highest individual sale (\$7.5 million) in the West Loop.

CONTRACTOR: McHugh Construction | **CLIENT:** Sulo Development | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** KARA MANN; Ventana; DeSimone Consulting Engineering; Salas O'Brien; Eriksson Engineering Associates Ltd.; Tim Sheahan and Mark Icuss (Compass); and Cotter Consulting | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Alan Barker, AIA; Ben Buehrle, AIA; Jameson Skaife, PLA; and Dayuma Cruz



LAMAR JOHNSON COLLABORATIVE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Spanning nine floors in Chicago's Fulton Market District, this office design reimagines workplace culture through interconnected spaces, biophilic elements, and flexibility. A dramatic nine-story staircase anchors the interior, enhancing vertical connectivity and spontaneous collaboration. The workspace prioritizes wellness and adaptability with abundant natural light, sustainable materials, and a layered mix of private, social, and collaborative areas. The result is an inviting and high-performing environment that reflects the energy of its urban surroundings while fostering innovation and connectivity.

CONTRACTOR: Executive Construction Inc. | **CLIENT:** Boston Consulting Group | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** CBRE; Turner Townsend; ESD/Stantec; Light Hive; Magnusson Klemencic Associates; Novo Sustainability; site design group ltd; Continua; BOS; Ziken Signage; Four Four Design; Kalisher; and All Kinds | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Lamar Johnson, FAIA; Lina Chiu, AIA; Paul Bryant, AIA; Todd Emeott, NCIDQ; Logan Christensen; Peter Cuvalo, NCIDQ; Cambrie Barowski; Mark Spencer, AIA; and Lance Yeary, NCIDQ



HEIDI LIGHTNER ARCHITECTS

CHATHAM RESIDENCE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

This captivating new construction residence located just outside of Chicago blends handmade Italian brick, limestone accents, and a slate roof into a timeless architectural masterpiece. At its heart, a sweeping stair hall anchors the home; at its soul, a two-story library honors craftsmanship and curation. All rooms connect seamlessly through this central hall, while elegant portals frame layered views throughout, inviting abundant natural light and connection to the landscape. The design fosters both everyday comfort and gracious family gatherings. Every element, from bespoke millwork to soaring skylights, is custom and intentional, creating a home of refined comfort, enduring beauty, and quality craftsmanship for generations.

CONTRACTOR: Power Luxury Residence Group | **CLIENT:** Anonymous | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** Summer Thornton Design; Goodfriend Magruder; Diligent Design Group; Craig Bergmann Landscape Design; Hoiland Studios; and Thomas Loof | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Heidi Lightner, AIA; Brad Lightner, AIA; and Lindsey Koza

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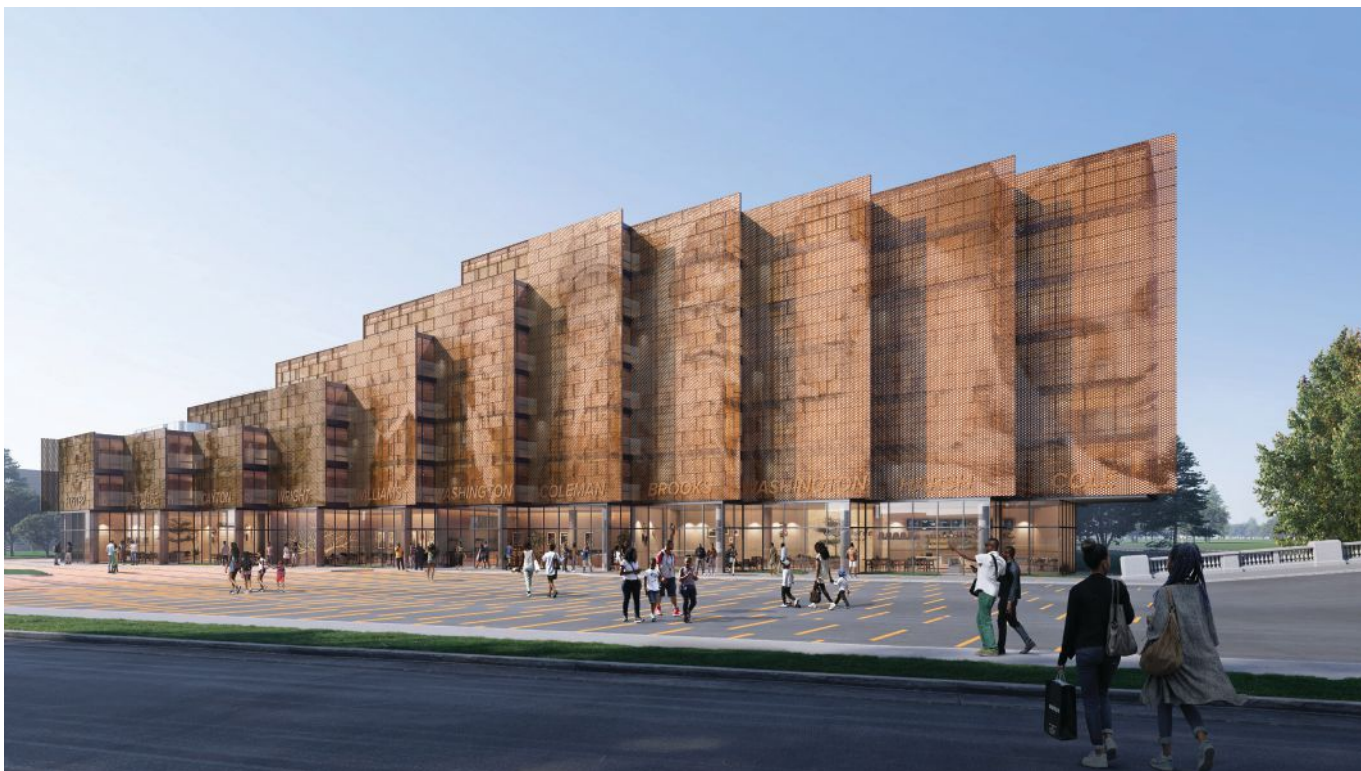
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360 NORTH GREEN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

360 North Green's clean, modernist form pays homage to Chicago's architectural lineage, while its interiors reflect a refined, yet approachable, material palette rooted in craftsmanship and comfort. A dual-tower configuration and column-free floor plates maximize flexibility and daylight for evolving workstyles. Layered amenities, including landscaped terraces, a hospitality lounge, speakeasy, and conference center, extend the workplace experience well beyond the desk. A richly detailed lobby and adjacent public plaza connect the building to its surrounding creative district. With a high-performance envelope and LEED Silver aspirations, 360 North Green raises the bar for wellness-driven workplace design for professional services tenants.

CONTRACTOR: Power Construction | **CLIENT:** Sterling Bay | **PROJECT COLLABORATORS:** site design group ltd.; RWDI; Shiner+Associates Inc.; Magnusson Klemencic; Terra Engineering Ltd.; Gurtz Electric Co.; NovoSustainability; Protection Engineers USA Fire Protection; LightHive; Buro Happold; F.E. Moran; ESD/Stantec; Jensen Hughes; Walker Consultants; WT Group; and Morrison Architectural Planning Strategies LLC | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Jim Prendergast, FAIA; Brett Taylor, AIA; Scott Kadlec, AIA; Eleftheria Riga-Derrico, AIA; Maria Tasada, AIA; Michele Mercer, AIA; Irene Urmeneta, AIA; Jing Wang, Assoc. AIA; Jun Wang; Lori Mukoyama, NCIDQ; Jeff Espiritu, ASID; Rohaja Saaba, AIA; and Maria Ding, AIA



JGMA

BRONZEVILLE EVOLVE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Bronzeville Evolve honors a neighborhood that has deeply shaped American culture. The design celebrates Bronzeville's musical and cultural legacy while supporting its ongoing evolution. Guided by Valerie Allen — the only Black female developer leading a team for the Oakwood Blvd. & Lake Park RFP — the process was rooted in equity, representation, and authenticity. The project blends music, history, and urban living, offering quality housing, inclusive amenities, and an outdoor museum honoring jazz, gospel, and blues. Every design move reflects Bronzeville's rhythm, scale, and spirit. More than a development, it is an investment in a vibrant, resilient community and its enduring future.

CLIENT: City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development | **PROJECT COLLABORATOR:** Chicago Homes One | **ARCHITECT TEAM MEMBERS:** Juan Moreno, AIA; Lori Day, AIA, LEED AP; Ryan Chester, AIA, LEED BD+C; Tyler Kimmel, RA; Nathan Jordan; and Kyle Walsh



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Burj Kalifa, Dubai's iconic supertall, was designed by Adrian Smith while at SOM. JAMES STEINKAMP

BEYOND MEASURE:

Honoring Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA

2025 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD HONOREE

Smith Is the Only Architect to Have Designed the World's Tallest Building — Twice

by Daniel Safarik, Director, Research and Thought Leadership, Council on Vertical Urbanism

For most of his career, **Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA**, has been associated with superlatives, in particular, with supertall buildings — defined as those more than 300 meters, or 984 feet. In fact, he has designed more than 25 with Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture (AS+GG) and dozens more with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). He is the only architect to have designed the world's tallest building twice: the Burj Khalifa (828 meters), which began design in 2003 and completed in 2010, and Jeddah Tower (1,000 meters), which was proposed in 2011, paused construction in 2018, and has now resumed construction. His influence on the skylines of global cities has few peers.

But if you talk to people who know him, a richer, more nuanced picture emerges. The superlatives don't just describe the projects he has brought to life. There is a recurring theme of generosity, magnanimity, and collaboration that he has brought to his work. Adrian Smith, it seems, is a gentleman who makes giants.

"He knows what he wants," said **Lauren Rottet, FAIA, FIDA**, president and founding principal at Rottet Studio. "He knows what's best for the client and the site, and that's that. He just keeps smiling and he bears with it, and he gets everyone to buy in on his ideas. That very calm, consonant demeanor and the smile on his face. I think that he moved mountains with sweetness and a beautiful smile and intelligence. It was with that, more than with force or coercion, that he really made significant architecture happen."

Smith values "the collaborative nature of the collective voice," according to **Robert Forest, FAIA, RIBA**, a partner at AS+GG, who credits him with helping him grow as a



Adrian Smith, FAIA, RIBA. AS+GG

management partner and develop a management discipline that can bring clients and consultants together to create extraordinary projects.

That collaborative nature and patient determination fuse with a notable lack of ego, considering the high profile of the projects that he has shepherded into existence. AS+GG partner **Gordon Gill, FAIA**, reminds us of the crucial role Smith played in assembling a dream team to build Millennium Park, the Chicago lakefront's crown jewel.

"That ability to pick up the phone and call guys like Frank Gehry to get them involved, that unselfish approach to architecture, that instinct to be more collaborative

HONORING ADRIAN SMITH, FAIA, RIBA

in order to improve the quality of an urban space for everyone ... shows a tremendous amount of leadership," Gill said.

Unquestionably, there is a high carbon cost to constructing super- and megatall buildings, which has justifiably invited criticism from many circles. But to look at Smith's work through this lens would underestimate the high-performance and efficient designs of even the tallest buildings he has designed and the pioneering work Smith has done to improve the environmental profile of tall buildings, such as the Pearl River Tower in Guangzhou, China. Completed with SOM in 2013, the building incorporates wind turbines for electricity generation, accounting for its distinctive cinched profile where the air passes through the structure. Critical consideration must also be given to the trailblazing carbon-reduction initiatives Smith has undertaken. At work on passive energy generation prototypes since 2006, Smith's achievements in sustainability are also found in the Chicago Central Area Decarbonization Plan, as winner of national and local AIA awards in 2011 and 2012, and his and AS+GG's 2022 book, *RESIDENSITY: A Carbon Analysis of Residential Typologies*, a thorough examination of embodied carbon use in nine high-density residential typologies. The Decarbonization Plan has had an outsized influence on Chicago's downtown, extending well beyond



Completed with SOM in 2013, Pearl River Tower in Guangzhou, China, incorporates wind turbines for on-site electricity generation that shape its distinctive cinched profile. TIM GRIFFITH



While at SOM, Smith led the design of the Master Plan for Millennium Park and its surface infrastructure, including the skating rink, site lighting (excluding Gehry's trellis lights), the oval lawn seating area, and pathway layout. Working alongside Mayor Richard M. Daley, Ed Uhlir, FAIA; John Bryan; and other civic leaders, he also played a key role in assembling the project's dream team that brought architects such as Frank Gehry, FAIA, and artist Anish Kapoor into the effort. TERRY GUEN DESIGN ASSOCIATES



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Smith pictured in 1974 with fellow architect Alan Hinklin at SOM's offices in the Inland Steel Building. He began working at the firm in the late 1960s, later serving as chairman of the SOM Foundation before founding Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture with Gordon Gill, FAIA, in 2006. AS+GG

Smith's own project portfolio, to include a concerted effort to retrofit and convert underperforming office buildings into residential and hotel properties through initiatives such as the LaSalle Corridor Revitalization.

It is also perhaps less well known that, in addition to designing skyscrapers around the world, Smith was a key figure in restoring Chicago's State Street to vehicular traffic with an attractive median and sidewalk planters after a lackluster period as a transit mall that saw slumping retail occupancies and rents. Just a few blocks north, he played a similar role in improving Michigan Avenue's streetscape while continuing to add significant tall buildings to the city's already impressive lineup. Some 19 projects throughout Chicago can be attributed to Smith, starting with his first job with SOM, drawing landscape details for the sunken plaza in front of 875 North Michigan Avenue, formerly known as the John Hancock Center, in the late 1960s.

The Council on Vertical Urbanism, previously Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH), recognized Smith with its Lynn S. Beedle Lifetime Achievement award in 2011, and he has been a keynote speaker at three global CTBUH conferences since then. Many of the key insights and full-circle understandings about his work have been revealed in his presentations to, and interactions with, the council.

During his acceptance speech for the award, the trailblazing Smith noted that he had been working on the idea of a turbine-equipped high-rise since the 1995 design for the Samsung Togak tower, Seoul (unbuilt).

Not all of Smith's unconventional, ahead-of-its-time thinking about sustainable skyscraper design was as obvious as big wind turbines on a tower. I can recall having the privilege of staying a night at the Intercontinental Hotel in



North Elevation - X Brace at 12th floor

Some 19 projects throughout Chicago can be attributed to Smith, starting with his first job with SOM, drawing landscape details for the sunken plaza in front of 875 North Michigan Avenue, formerly known as the John Hancock Center. © MCSHANE-FLEMING STUDIO

HONORING ADRIAN SMITH, FAIA, RIBA

the Zifeng Tower, Nanjing, China, and being surprised to see operable windows providing natural ventilation to the rooms. The subtle incorporation of this unusual feature in a way that supported the sleek profile was a quiet gesture for sustainability. It wasn't flashy — it was just the right thing to do, and I'm sure Smith had to argue for it (nicely).

Smith's evolution has paralleled and, in many ways, epitomized that of the council. The companion CTBUH Award for Excellence is named after Fazlur R. Khan, the legendary structural engineer who conceived the X-bracing concept for the John Hancock Center and the bundled-tube approach to the Sears (now Willis) Tower.

Smith shared at the time that Lynn S. Beedle would often drop by the SOM offices in the late 1960s to chat with Khan about starting up a group that would later become CTBUH. In the room, absorbing every word, was a young architect named Adrian Smith.

"When you start getting a building like the John Hancock Center into your blood, it somehow sticks with you and becomes something that you aspire to in the future — the pursuit of tallness," Smith said.

As the recipient of the council's highest honor and with design credits for the world's tallest building, the throughline of his work embodies the balance that CTBUH has always sought and now pursues with renewed vigor: the pursuit of excellence not only in reaching great heights but also in improving the condition of human habitation in the world's cities. Even the most iconic and singular tall building works have been conceived with a keen interest in co-developing and integrating with their surroundings, creating whole communities.



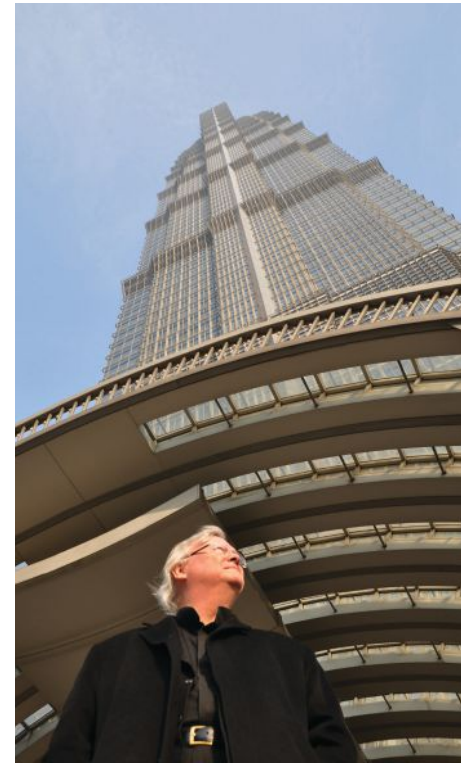
Smith presenting clients a model of Jeddah Tower in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Designed by Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, the megatall tower is poised to become the world's tallest building, standing over 1,000 meters and anchoring the \$20 billion Kingdom City development. AS+GG

Smith has prioritized the ground plane, the quality of life in cities, and the positive environmental contribution of vertical urbanism throughout his career, and his commitment to these principles has directly informed — and, indeed, is inextricable from — the council's own.

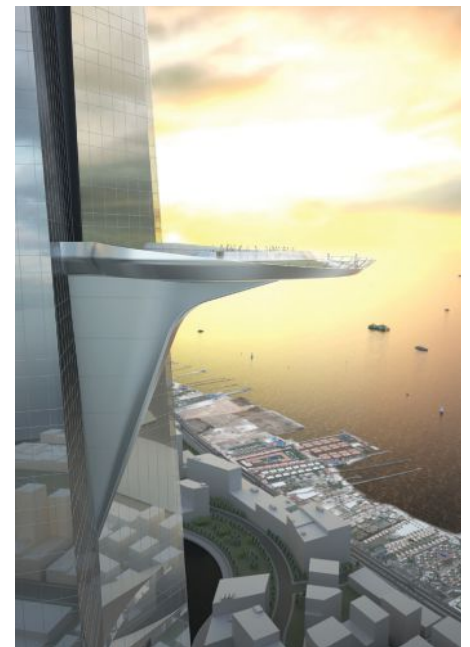
To see his recognition by his hometown professional peers in the American Institute of Architects, here in the birthplace of the skyscraper, is a welcome further validation of our shared commitment. **CA**



Gordon Gill, FAIA, left, collaborating with Smith on a design competition. Together, the two architects founded Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture (AS+GG) in 2006 as a firm dedicated to the design of high-performance, energy-efficient, and sustainable architecture on an international scale. AS+GG



Smith is pictured in front of Jin Mao Tower in Shanghai, China. Designed by SOM and completed in 1999, the tower was one of the city's earliest supertalls and remains a defining example of high-rise architecture blending modern and traditional forms. GORDON GILL



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Cole Gagnon, AIA, built her career in Chicago, moving from small teams to complex, leadership-level projects. Her experience reflects a generation of midcareer architects disrupted by the Great Recession, contributing to today's skills gap. BEN LIPOWITZ PHOTOGRAPHY

GUTTING THE MIDDLE: **How Architecture Lost a Generation of Talent – and What It Will Take to Rebuild**

by Daniel Solera, Director of Communications, OKW Architects
with Contributions from Cole Gagnon, AIA, President, OKW Architects

Anyone of working age during 2008 has a story about the Great Recession. Many of those stories involve nervous huddles around the water cooler, panicked whispered gossip about changes in headcount, and a sense of impending doom that permeated offices. While many stories about the recession focus on the scale of job losses, they don't delve into the massive loss of institutional knowledge. In the architecture industry, the multiple waves of layoffs affected every level but disproportionately hit a very specific rung of the ladder, the impact of which is still felt today.

At the top of the hierarchy, partners and owners managed client relationships and brought in work. At the bottom were new associates, who were more comfortable with digital software and asked to do more and to do it faster. This left an awkward gap in the middle — employees who could manage relationships and steer projects while also producing documents — creating a weight on a fragile bottom line.

What happened next created a knowledge and skills gap that the industry has yet to fill at scale.

At its lowest point in October 2009, national unemployment had more than doubled from five percent in 2007 to 10 percent. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that the architecture industry not only hemorrhaged far more jobs than the national average, but it also continued to shed headcount long after the nation returned to job creation in 2010-2011. In 2010 alone, the U.S. lost the equivalent of 0.6 percent of its jobs. Architecture had shed almost 14 percent of its personnel.

The Recession not only reshaped markets and upended entire industries, but it also changed many people's attitudes toward work. The scale of job loss was so profound and wide-ranging that it forced many people to find employment in other industries and cities. This type of foundational shift meant that even during growth years, job applicants were casting much wider employment nets. While the architecture industry is larger today than its pre-2008 peak, even with a pandemic shakeup, there is still a gap in most firms' personnel rosters.

Who Must Go?

Cole Gagnon, AIA, is part of that gap. After earning her Master of Architecture in 1999, she began her career in Chicago, cobbling together experience in small teams and across projects. Six years into this path, she joined OKW Architects and began working on complex projects with a variety of team members.

By 2008, she was a licensed architect and LEED AP with a proven track record for getting work done. When the opportunity arose to step into a project manager role for NEWCITY, a transformative mixed-use project in the Goose Island area of Lincoln Park, she didn't hesitate. "I had nine years of experience and felt confident that I could fill that role," she recalled. "The economy, however, had other plans."

What happened next is a familiar story to many: uncertainty, a worrisome lack of work, and the dreaded meeting with upper management.

Speaking to *Architect* magazine in 2013, Paul Zaferiou, principal at Lam Partners, described a common thought process during the fall of 2008. "You have principals at the top who are stakeholders, and you have a lot of young people at the bottom who are coming up. Then you have this wonderful middle who have been there for 10, 12, 15 years, who are the real backbone of these firms."

He goes on to describe what this group has accomplished beyond their years: "They have the institutional knowledge. They've been through a lot of jobs. They've seen the construction. They know the pitfalls. They have great communication skills. Those are the people, in most cases, [who] had to be let go."

Born in 1976, Gagnon is on the younger end of Gen X, which means she experienced the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s while in school and entered the workforce right before the dot-com bust of the early 2000s. But by 2009, she



OKW's Andy Koglin, AIA, right, reviewing a project with architectural associate Giovanni Almanza.

BEN LIPOWITZ PHOTOGRAPHY

and her peers were between 32 and 44 years old, established in their profession, and en route to their peak earning years.

That all changed when Lehman Brothers collapsed, marking the height of the banking crisis that triggered the Great Recession.

After being laid off in 2009, Gagnon spent the next four years keeping busy — but not in architecture. She worked for STL Architects as an MEP coordinator on a contract basis before joining Power Construction as a BIM coordinator. Like many people in her position, she was forced to look outside the industry to follow the jobs.

“For a while, I focused on learning Revit while getting comfortable being on the other side of things,” she recalled. “For nearly two years, I worked with Power on a range of projects, leveraging my architectural experience, even if I wasn’t in an architecture firm.”

Though slowly, the architecture industry recovered, and in 2012, OKW called with an opportunity. The firm was much smaller, leaner, and had begun to diversify its client base to protect itself against another slowdown. However, the balance of personnel had changed — and not just at OKW.

While the nation grew in employment by 1.7 percent on average each year from 2014 to 2018, architecture added jobs at five to six times that percentage. Growth came largely from new, young associates, not necessarily returning architects. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the industry employed nearly 111,000 people as architects at its peak in 2008. That number dropped as low as 82,000 in 2012, and it wouldn’t be until 2023 — 15 years later — that the industry would surpass its pre-2009 numbers. Meanwhile, with accredited schools still funneling an average of 6,500 graduates every year in between, the industry is much younger today than it was in 2008.

So, what happened to those who left the industry altogether? Some found employment in related fields, like commercial real estate, while others found creative outlets for their architectural training. Ryan Pavlik and John Cramer were Gagnon’s peers at OKW until they, too, faced layoffs during the economic downturn. Pavlik threw caution to the wind and opened an independent bike shop before becoming an owner’s representative. Cramer returned to school to study historical preservation and later joined a firm specializing in the practice. Both stayed

within the broader architecture field, each in their own niche, using their background and passion for architecture in new and creative ways.

But many, unfortunately, left the industry altogether and never came back.

Where Did They Go?

Andy Koglin, AIA, is a principal at OKW Architects and served as the firm’s president from 1999 to 2024. He graduated during the early 1980s recession and saw similarities to the conditions in the late 2000s. “Everyone who had been hired the last year was getting laid off,” he recalled. “The difference is that folks who had been trained as architects still wanted to be architects. They found a way to creep back into the industry as the market restored itself.”

Whereas Koglin’s peers were likely to find a foothold in the industry after losing their jobs, the magnitude of the Great Recession persuaded many, like Gagnon, to look elsewhere. Former architects were lured by more lucrative opportunities in commercial real estate or creative pursuits in completely different industries. Many applicants realized they could use their architectural training to build entirely new careers. But, unlike Gagnon, many in the architecture industry chose not to return once the industry recovered.

This shift in perspective from architect as a specific vocation to a set of transferable skills persists.

Bryan Zacharias, a project manager at OKW, graduated in 2010, arguably the worst year for architectural prospects. He recalled what the dean of his architecture school told students at commencement: “Probably none of you will get jobs.” That was a sign of things to come, he said.

Like many of his peers, Zacharias struggled to find full-time employment as an architect after graduation. Through a combination of one-off gigs and retail positions, he kept his skills sharp while waiting for architecture jobs to return. Although his determination would pay off a year later with an entry-level job at OKW, his peers couldn’t say the same.

“For the most part, they ended up in business management positions,” he said. “A lot of them left the industry entirely. They found jobs that were temporary holdovers, but then they started moving up and eventually made careers out of them.”

Who Was Left?

When Zacharias started his career as an architect in 2011, he felt the weight of expectations.

“It came down to sink or swim,” he said. “A lot was asked of me. Often, I would be working with a project manager — someone with 10 years of experience — with no one in between.”

Zacharias didn’t think his workload was abnormal at the time. But in retrospect, he realized he was doing the work that someone with three to five years’ experience would do today. It soon became apparent to him that “there was just nobody else in the office who had that experience level.”

The skills gap is a direct result of the gutting of the middle tier of staff during the Great Recession. Many firms today face a similar staffing gap and are struggling to fill it.

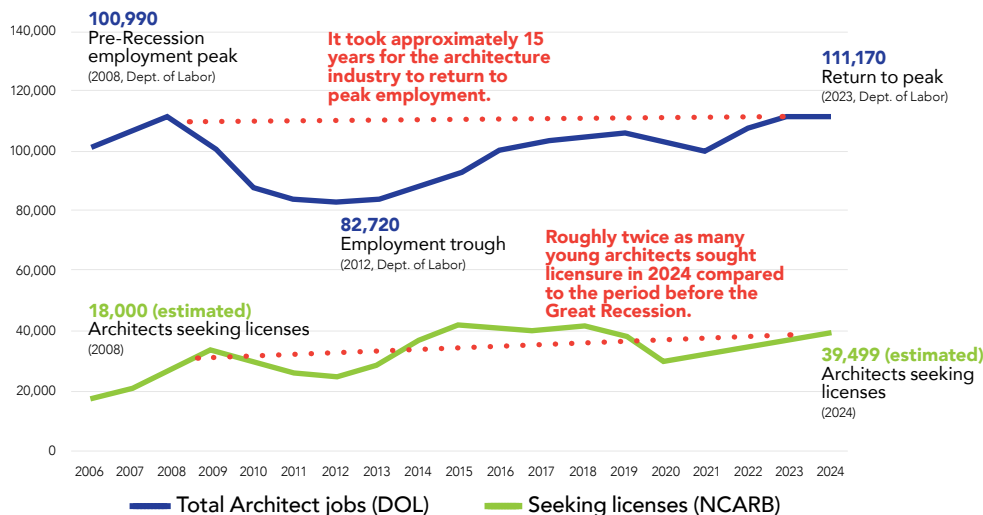
“People who would have been project architects at the time were wiped out,” Koglin remembered. “Today, they would be project managers, people who have a real knowledge of how to put buildings together. Finding these people — they’re like unicorns.”

INDUSTRY COMPARISON

Change in employment (2008-2024)

TITLE	GROWTH
Attorneys	32.1%
Accountants	26.7%
Architects	0.1%

ARCHITECTURE'S SLOW RECOVERY



Despite steady growth in the number of architects and licensure candidates, concern remains about the profession's long-term capacity. As senior architects approach retirement and midcareer roles remain difficult to staff, the loss of experience threatens to outpace gains in overall workforce size.

Source: "NCARB By The Numbers," Analysis by OKW Architects

Jennifer Riskus, senior director of economic and market research at the American Institute of Architects, confirmed that positions requiring 15 to 20 years of experience are the hardest to fill. Compounding the issue is the impending retirement of many senior and executive-level architects. The National Council of Architecture Registration Board (NCARB) shows the stark reality in its 2025 State of Licensure report. It not only noted that the pool of licensed architects fell by four percent by the end of 2024, but 13 percent of licensed architects are over 65.

"As the oldest baby boomers begin to reach their 80s," the report stated, "the number of architects might continue to fall over the next several years before evening out at a 'new normal.'"

Many of the architects from this tier are a potential bastion of institutional knowledge, technical skills, and mentorship opportunities. When they leave the industry in the next five to 15 years, their retirement will exacerbate the issues the profession faces. Some large firms have had to persuade retired employees to return on a part-time basis purely to mentor young associates.

What Do We Do?

Many blame the COVID-19 pandemic and remote work for the softening of professional skills across industries. They point to a lack of personal connection as the reason good talent is hard to find in the labor market. Although

the pandemic feels like an obvious target given its disruptive effect on working environments globally, the more direct cause dates to the Great Recession. By gutting the middle — laying off people who would have become principals, business owners, and crucial mentors — many companies hobbled their younger employees' paths to professional growth.

Now a project manager and group leader at OKW, Zacharias recognizes the responsibility he has to bridge the gap he experienced as a new associate.

"As some of my peers are getting into mentorship and positions of leadership, we've done a lot of reflecting on the environment in which we started and how we can alleviate some of the pain points for people who are coming up today."

With an industry as diverse and complex as architecture, construction, and engineering, it's unlikely that a one-size-fits-all approach will solve this predicament. But across firms, mentorship is crucial. Whether through a formalized program or by senior executives leading by example, the profession of architecture needs to show not only its newest associates but also those who have grown in the practice since 2011 that their education doesn't end with a diploma or their first completed project.

Advocacy groups such as AIA, the International Interior Design Association, and others regularly organize continuing education events and programs. But is it enough? The entire real estate

and construction ecosystem has been affected by the Great Recession. The architectural community needs to collectively address the knowledge gap before handling the mentorship gap and facing the impending leadership cliff. This needs to happen not only as a professional extracurricular but also to bring about lasting change at an industry level.

Leaders and advocates for the practice need to accept the reality that young architects are increasingly finding new avenues to parlay their education — in other words, architecture students who have no plan to practice architecture. Finding ways to keep the architecture profession relevant and interesting to retain this demographic and attract new talent is crucial to its long-term survival.

This conversation needs to begin with the architects who represent the gap: the missing mentors. Firms across the nation need to elevate the voices of those who returned to the practice and profession of architecture — those who are now leading studios or guiding firms.

"While we persevered through one of the worst moments," Gagnon said, "drawing on our generational grit and resilience, we need to look beyond our struggles and challenges to see what came in the wake of the Great Recession. We need to recognize that those graduating into the recovery lacked any real mentorship once they were able to find an architectural job."

Only then can we, as a profession, fully acknowledge this reality and work to correct it on a grand scale. **CA**

ACE Mentor Program of Chicago Celebrates Its 25th Anniversary

From Students to Colleagues: ACE's 25-Year Mission to Build Chicago's Next Generation

by Krisann Rehbein, Executive Director, ACE Mentor Program of Chicago

On a Thursday evening in downtown Chicago, a group of high school students gathers around a table covered in drawings and models. Architects and engineers lean in to offer feedback and quick sketches of their own. A few mentors smile — they remember being in these same seats.

For 25 years, the ACE Mentor Program of Chicago has been creating moments like this with a simple proposition: Invite

high school students into real architecture, engineering, and construction workplaces and show them how projects get built. The result is a growing network of young people who understand the industry, can speak its language, and know where they fit — and what opportunities lie ahead in their careers.

At *Building Futures*, the 25th-anniversary event held in April 2025, more than 60 alumni returned — many seated with the firms



ACE students visit a construction site with Turner Construction. RICARDO PEREZ, TURNER CONSTRUCTION

that now employ them. Others are in college and used the night to look for summer work. Today, you'll find ACE alumni throughout Chicago's architecture, engineering, and construction community — often one-third to half of the people in the room. Many now mentor students, lead project teams, or represent their companies.

The program's Design Build workshop in summer 2025 made that pipeline visible. Every facilitator was an ACE alum who once participated in the same intensive. Alumni now guiding students through schedules, budgets, shop drawings, and site safety is the program working as intended.

ACE is growing. During the 2024-2025 school year, **372 students** completed the program — up **75 percent** in four years. They came from **101 schools** across the region, mostly Chicago public schools, plus charter, private, and suburban schools from the West Side and South Side to the North Shore, Berwyn, Chicago Heights, and Naperville. Students represented many backgrounds and languages; some will pursue professional degrees, others the trades. What they shared is curiosity about how buildings are conceived, financed, designed, and constructed. As the 2025-2026 year begins, enrollment is again at a record high.

The structure is simple. For **17 weeks**, one evening a week, students travel downtown to firm offices — often their first time in a design studio or engineering floor. Mentors feed the group, review work, and set assignments tied to real project constraints. The program is **free**: ACE covers meals, CTA passes, software access, and materials. Students who are recommended can access internships, scholarships, workshops, and externships — many of them paid.

This access is built on a broad coalition. Volunteer mentors contribute thousands of hours. Firms open their spaces and job sites. Sponsors underwrite scholarships and paid internships. In a typical year, the program records about **\$1.75 million in in-kind support** and, leading into the anniversary, raised more than **\$533,000** for scholarships and programming. Those dollars translate directly into bus rides, meals, licenses, plotter time, and the one-on-one guidance that helps students cross from interest to opportunity.

The impact extends after graduation. Alumni stay connected to mentors and to one another; many return to mentor the next cohort. Some now lead project teams, manage field operations, teach in universities, or serve public agencies.

One note from an alum captures the program's practical value. Aldo Garcia, now a first-year engineering student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, wrote: "I was an ACE student from my sophomore through senior year of high school. I grew up on the South Side and come from a family with no background in engineering or the corporate world. I can confidently say the opportunities ACE provided prepared me more than any class I've taken so far. Beyond learning about engineering, I gained skills in communication and networking, and I still keep in touch with several ACE mentors."

ACE Mentor Chicago's 25th year is not just a celebration; it is a status report. The model works, the numbers are rising, and the network is durable. When a city's builders invest in its students — and those students return to build the city — the result is measurable progress. The next 25 years have already begun, and there's room at the table for anyone ready to join. 



An "Intro to Architecture" talk hosted by Perkins&Will. FRANCISCO LOPEZ DE ARENOSA, SOM



Students do an "ART-citecture" activity with DLR Group. KAILEY SMITH, DLR GROUP



ACE students participate in a structural building activity with Jacobs. LAILA MIADA, LIC



BEHIND THE SCREENS

NAME

Todd Hensley

AFFILIATIONS/ CREDENTIALS

Affil. AIA Chicago

TITLE

Partner

COMPANY

Schuler Shook

DEGREE(S)

MFA, Theatre Design,
University of
Minnesota
AB, Communications,
Morehead State
University

AIA CHICAGO INVOLVEMENT

Third Thursday
Host Committee,
Designight Host
Committee

You started your career working at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. What is it like to have returned to this space years later in your new capacity at Schuler Shook?

The Lyric Opera — both the company and its building — are incredibly meaningful to me and to Schuler Shook. I began here as an assistant to Duane Schuler, who was Lyric's resident lighting designer. Duane met Bob Shook for the first time in this building, and they soon afterward formed Schuler Shook. I joined them as a theatre planner and architectural lighting designer. Through the years, we designed major building renovations at the Lyric with SOM and have recently returned to reimagine the audience seating and lobby spaces with Goettsch Partners.

Designing performances is thrilling, but the performances always come to an end. Designing the *places* where the performances happen is enduring. I'm so grateful to come back here as a theatre planner — the Lyric gave me opportunities I never dreamed of. It feels like a wonderful return to where I started many years ago. I love making spaces where art happens. We get to create projects where performance moments are remembered, discussed, even cherished, for years and years. It's an exciting career!

Considering the energy demands of theatrical lighting and systems, what is the most effective step you've taken in your design work toward a more sustainable performance environment?

Ah! The happy "secret" is that solid-state stage lighting (LED lighting) is remarkably less power hungry. An all-LED light plot can represent about one-third of the connected electrical load of incandescent sources. That allows us to use much less dimming and wiring throughout the theatre,

which reduces the demand for miles of copper wire. The dollar investment is now in the lighting instrument itself and far less in the wiring plant. And the heat loads are vastly reduced. Now, the hottest thing driving the HVAC design is the people in the audience.

LEDs use a lot less power, but it also takes real resources to create those chips and precision fixtures. We are pushing the stage lighting manufacturers to include cradle-to-cradle design for their products. Manufacturers must step up and consider the full life cycle for those LEDs when they eventually fade out and lose their brightness. We can't just throw away those fixtures.

What does equity mean to you when designing a space meant to host diverse stories and diverse audiences?

I'm working on this every day. Everyone at Schuler Shook is trained and practiced in asking the question, "Who *isn't* coming to this space, and why?" We advocate for designs that reduce threshold anxiety, making spaces feel expressly created for each person who walks in. We also lead the way by recommending accessibility features that go beyond the code minimums, making a venue truly welcoming for everyone. Our lighting designs strive for light equity, ensuring that all projects have good visual acuity, warm revelation of space, and safe lighting levels in every community.

I'm proud that we've gotten to design theatres throughout the city. I'm particularly excited that we've designed stage lighting and rigging systems for some Chicago Park District fieldhouse theatres, ensuring that they are accessible and flexible for neighborhood artists. Everyone deserves to tell their story and to have their time in the spotlight.

What has been a large challenge or obstacle as a theatre consultant — perhaps related to bridging the needs of creative production teams with the constraints of architecture — and how are you working to/how have you overcome it?

Since the pandemic, performing arts are in a time of change. Theatres are still dealing with the “Netflix Effect” of patrons staying home to enjoy shows on their couches. At the same time, Broadway is having a big year, and live music events are selling like never before.

I believe that people will always crave community. Have you ever been to a show where hundreds or thousands of people all jumped at the same surprise, belly-laughed out loud together, or even held their breath together? Streaming platforms can’t create those communal moments. So, the challenge is to serve artists in their mission to engage their audiences. Design can meet this with an understanding of how people connect with artists and with each other.

Where do you find inspiration when approaching the design of a new performance space, particularly given your extensive portfolio of over 400 projects?

I’m inspired every time the phone rings! Each project holds its distinct uses, visual goals, and funding scenarios, and it’s exciting to address them. We get to work on projects that people dream of for years before we’re involved.

I coach our staff to ask, “What’s on the menu? What uses will this space support? What’s the highest and most frequent use?” That balance of programming is fascinating to me. I don’t play Sudoku; instead, I solve puzzles at work by helping clients bring projects into focus. To me, it provides the best dopamine rush.

Which building or public space in Chicago do you wish you had the opportunity to work with the team that designed it?

The Uptown Theatre. Wouldn’t it have been great to work with the Rapp brothers to integrate all those details? The next best would be to complete the theatre’s renovation and restore its lighting.

What is the most effective step you’ve taken in your work or your firm toward a more equitable profession?

I helped create our firm’s DEI Committee, and I continue to serve on it. We have over 65 staff members in the U.S. and Australia, and we get together regularly as a firm for training and discussion. It has sharpened our thinking and broadened our outreach. We continually discuss what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean for Schuler Shook. I think it’s one of the most important things I can do for our company.

What is your favorite quote about design?

Louis Sullivan’s “Form ever follows function.” We’re all about optimizing function in all our spaces. Great projects come from great teams, and brilliant function can be achieved within all types of buildings. In the best scenario, such as Frank Gehry’s design for the Pritzker Pavilion, we see a work of art that beautifully supports the arts onstage.

What’s the best concert or performance you’ve seen in the last year?

Any of the great productions at Lyric Opera! And as a person who sees a lot of shows, I also recommend anything at the Chicago International Puppet Festival. Very different forms, and both with wonderful ideas and visuals that you won’t forget! 

“We’re all about optimizing function in all our spaces. Great projects come from great teams, and brilliant function can be achieved within all types of buildings.”

— TODD HENSLEY, PARTNER, SCHULER SHOOK





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