



City Architects Report

The American Institute of Architects

October 28, 2025



Executive Summary

City Architects Are Quietly Redefining Civic Leadership Through Design



City Architects serve as connectors across departments, integrating planning, public works, and real estate. In Austin, the role was repositioned to influence capital investment decisions directly, while DC's Department of Buildings leverages design expertise to streamline permitting and support urban vitality.



Architectural leadership drives economic growth and innovation. In DC, the Pop-Up Permit Program and mass-timber pilot projects catalyzed redevelopment. Austin's "Putting Assets to Work" initiative aligns design thinking with fiscal strategy to activate underutilized city properties.



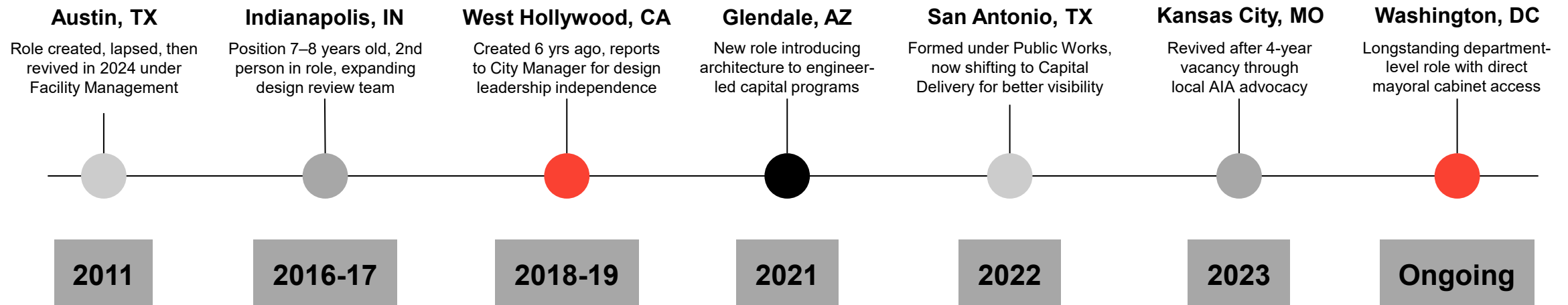
Impact is systemic, not symbolic. From permit reform in DC to micro-retail in West Hollywood, city architects influence policy, process, and physical outcomes that shape daily life.



Embedding architects in city leadership strengthens design accountability. Indianapolis and Kansas City demonstrate how structured design review ensures that publicly funded projects uphold standards for quality, sustainability, and community context.

Recent History of City Architects

The role has reemerged across U.S. cities. Some positions were established decades ago as part of civic design bureaus, while others are newly created or recently revived. Institutional maturity correlates with access to decision-making; longer-established roles are more embedded in executive leadership structures



City Architects in the Org Chart

Access to the mayor, city manager, councilmembers or agency leadership depends on whether a city operates under a mayor council or a council-manager system.

Strong Mayor

- Member of the Mayor's cabinet.
- Embedded in executive decision-making processes.
- High level of policy influence and public visibility.

Council-Manager

- Reports to City Manager.
- Indirect influence through capital projects and partnerships.
- Professional and technical focus

Department Leadership

- Leads a specific agency or division.
- Limited involvement in executive strategy and planning.
- Limited initial involvement in major city projects.

Independent Advisor

- May report directly to the City Manager or Mayor
- Advises on design standards, policy, and civic vision.
- Influences policy, design, and community engagement through project-based and long-range planning.

Responsibilities of a City Architect

Priorities reflect each city's political structure, growth stage, and civic design maturity.

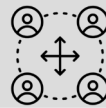


Capital & Process Modernization

- Streamlining permitting and design review (DC, Indianapolis, Glendale).
- Modernizing capital delivery systems (San Antonio, Glendale)
- Developing facility master plans (Austin, West Hollywood)

“

We've rebuilt how people experience city processes from permitting to inspections to make the city feel like a partner instead of a barrier.”



Sustainability & Resilience

- Expanding energy or green building standards (Austin, Kansas City)
- Retrofitting existing building stock to reduce emissions (Austin)
- Advocating for practical sustainability (San Antonio, Glendale)

“

It's not about chasing certifications it's about designing buildings that perform and endure over time.



Equity & Civic Experience

- Making public facilities more inclusive & community-driven (Kansas City, San Antonio)
- Upgrading fire stations and facilities for gender equity (Kansas City)
- Preserving cultural heritage districts (Kansas City, West Hollywood)

“

Equity means people seeing themselves reflected in their city in how we build, preserve, and deliver public spaces.

City Architects

Embedding design thinking in permitting and enforcement, DC's Department of Buildings shows how architects can drive systemic change in government.



2018

Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) restructured into the new **Department of Buildings (DOB)** to improve permitting and enforcement.

2021

Director of Department of Buildings is hired, bringing a focus on design thinking, service culture, and process innovation.

2023–25

Major modernization efforts launched: *Instant Permits*, *Business Hub* pilot, and code enforcement alignment with Clean Energy DC.

“

Cities need someone who can bridge technical, political, and human considerations architects do that naturally.”

“

We’re re-engineering how residents experience government making permitting feel less like red tape and more like good customer service.”

“

Design thinking isn’t about drawings; it’s about systems. When we redesigned our processes, we unlocked trust, speed, and accountability.”

Washington, DC

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Reorganized permitting processes to make the city more development-friendly and transparent.
- Created a “Business Hub” to provide concierge support to developers, small businesses, and homeowners.
- Adjusted fee structures that saved developers an estimated \$800K on adaptive reuse projects spurring downtown reinvestment.
- Promoted experimentation through “Pop-Up Permits” for temporary retail activations and community events.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Enforces DC’s Green Building Act and energy codes through permitting embedding sustainability in all approvals.
- Advanced mass timber construction pilots (e.g., Red Brick Howard Road project) to demonstrate cost and carbon savings.
- Collaborates with sustainability and planning offices to align building innovation with the city’s carbon-neutral goals.

Equity & Inclusion

- Prioritizes equity through service culture treating all applicants as valued clients.
- Established “Magic Wand Tours” to directly gather community and industry feedback on DOB services.
- Uses proportional enforcement offering support to struggling property owners while holding negligent actors accountable.

A new City Architect role is transforming Glendale's government from project management to design leadership.



2021

City creates first City Architect role within Engineering Department.

2022-24

City architect builds small internal team and begins modernizing capital project delivery.

2025

Leads Downtown Campus Reinvestment Projects: City Hall, council chambers, park, and civic plaza.

“

We're the only profession trained to synthesize competing priorities into one coherent outcome.”

“

We've moved from reacting to problems to planning ahead that's what having design at the table allows you to do.”

“

Bringing City Hall and civic spaces back downtown isn't just construction it's how we rebuild community pride.”

Glendale, AZ

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Driving a “building renaissance” in Glendale with coordinated civic construction.
- Downtown Campus Reinvestment expected to bring 300+ employees back to the city core.
- Delivered 15+ projects in four years, transitioning from reactive fixes to proactive capital strategy.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Applies practical sustainability: 75% reduction in energy use for City Hall renovation (EUI 29 vs. baseline 100).
- Emphasizes smart systems and daylighting over LEED checklists.
- Prioritizes durability and lifecycle savings for long-term civic assets.

Equity & Inclusion

- Civic reinvestment framed as renewal upgrading facilities equitably across neighborhoods.
- Advocates for design quality that boosts civic pride and community engagement.
- Building infrastructure that enhances everyday access to services for all residents.

After four years vacant, the role in Kansas City was revived through local AIA efforts: now leading projects that balance economic growth, cultural heritage, and gender equity ahead of FIFA 2026.



2015-19

Previous City Architect retires; position vacant for four years.

2023

Role reinstated after AIA Missouri advocacy urging City Council to fill it.

2025

City Architect oversees 7-person team managing civic projects ahead of FIFA 2026.

“

We make sure long-term quality of life doesn't get lost in short-term politics.”

“

Every fire station, every library we touch it's about equity in the details. Spaces that work for everyone, not just the next project deadline.”

“

Kansas City's history is its identity. Our job is to evolve the city without erasing what makes it home.”

Kansas City, MO

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Oversees capital projects and major civic infrastructure tied to FIFA 2026 readiness.
- Manages public–private partnerships to develop affordable housing on city-owned land.
- Leads major civic projects including Barney Allis Plaza and the Freeway Lid Park.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Enforces ordinance requiring LEED Gold for all new construction/remodels over 5,000 sq. ft.
- First in Missouri to pursue Parksmart Gold for parking structures.
- Advocates sustainability in a state lacking statewide building codes.

Equity & Inclusion

- Uses equity-based project rating system to prioritize capital projects by community health and income data.
- Leads gender-equity upgrades across 28 fire stations (individual bunks, showers, restrooms).
- Revitalizing 18th & Vine Jazz District, honoring Black cultural heritage while driving economic renewal.

San Antonio's City Architect is proving that design leadership within capital delivery can turn routine construction into community-building.



2016

City Architect position created within Public Works to lead vertical building projects.

2022

City architect appointed; manages 15-person team for civic buildings (libraries, police, fire, community centers).

2025

Transitioning into new Capital Delivery Department to elevate visibility and project oversight.

“

Without a design voice early on, cities end up managing construction, not shaping vision.”

“

We're focused on buildings that work not just for the ribbon-cutting, but for decades. Real sustainability is performance and maintenance.”

“

Every new facility is a civic touchpoint. When residents feel proud of their fire stations or libraries, that's when you know design is doing its job.”

San Antonio, TX

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Manages design and delivery of public facilities that enhance livability and attract residents.
- Oversaw \$20M Alamodome upgrades for NCAA Final Four, boosting tourism and city revenue.
- Leads community and library projects that support neighborhood revitalization and public safety.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Promotes “back-to-basics sustainability”: siting, daylight, and durable materials (e.g., masonry) over complex systems.
- Critiques over-engineered LEED buildings, calling for life-cycle efficiency instead of certifications.
- Collaborates with the Sustainability Office on practical project goals tied to budget realities.

Equity & Inclusion

- Incorporates community input sessions into facility planning.
- Revitalized Carver Library, a historically Black landmark, preserving legacy and pride.
- Ensures residents feel heard even when all requests can't be met.

Originally established in 2011 and reinstated in 2024, Austin's City Architect now leads cross-department planning and public-private redevelopment, using design as both a fiscal and civic strategy.



2011

Austin establishes the City Architect role within Public Works; first formal iteration.

2016-23

Position lapses after leadership changes.

2024

Role revived under Austin Facility Management Department with expanded influence over city real estate and redevelopment.

“

Using design as a business strategy is how we make smarter decisions about what the city owns, builds, and maintains.”

“

We're proving that city land can work harder not just as property, but as a platform for community benefit.”

“

Good design is sustainability and equity in the same breath; healthy, efficient, and accessible spaces for every city employee and resident.”

Austin, TX

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Leads “Putting Assets to Work” initiative to redevelop underused city properties through public–private partnerships (P3s).
- Works with redevelopment teams on projects like the Mueller Airport site and Navigation Centers.
- Aligns design with fiscal and urban outcomes “using design to make good business decisions.”

Sustainability & Resilience

- Enforces Austin’s Green Building Program (precursor to LEED)—all city projects meet at least 3-star standard.
- Incorporates WELL standards to prioritize human health and equity in workplaces.
- Focus on retrofitting aging facilities to reduce hidden energy costs.

Equity & Inclusion

- Uses WELL standards as an equity framework equal access to daylight, air quality, and safe facilities for all city staff.
- Advocates universal design (restroom and accessibility upgrades) amidst state-level pushback on DEI language.
- Teaches architecture students about public-sector design careers to diversify pathways into civic design.

By merging architecture and urban design under the City Manager, West Hollywood proves design leadership can drive both policy and community impact.



2018

City establishes the **Architecture + Urban Design Studio**, creating a City Architect position reporting directly to the City Manager.

2019–21

Abramson develops the “Four Hats” model Design Review, Design Collaboration, Design Oversight, Design Visioning.

2023–25

Leads innovative policies and cost-saving redesigns, including outdoor dining standards and micro-retail activations.

“

Architecture inside city government isn't about projects it's about shaping policies that let design thrive everywhere else.”

“

When we turn small spaces into outdoor dining or micro-retail, we're not just designing we're helping local economies breathe again.”

“

Design leadership only works if it's embedded in how a city thinks not as an afterthought, but as part of governance itself.”

West Hollywood, CA

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Created permanent outdoor dining standards after COVID, helping local restaurants recover and enliven streetscapes.
- Launched “Pocket Shop” program to activate empty storefronts with micro-retail concepts.
- Redesigned large civic projects, saving millions (e.g., reduced AIDS Memorial budget from \$14M → \$6.7M).
- Demonstrates how architectural leadership can deliver economic and social returns through design decisions.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Introduced tree canopy and biodiversity standards for urban resilience.
- Advocated for sustainable materials and green infrastructure within dense, mixed-use settings.
- Engages with citywide advisory boards to integrate sustainability into planning and development decisions.

Equity & Inclusion

- Embeds public participation across all projects via advisory boards (Disability, Cultural, LGBTQ+, Senior).
- Uses design education and public symposia (e.g., on biodiversity and housing) to democratize design literacy.

Indianapolis is proving how a small but strategic City Architect office can reshape downtown design standards and elevate development quality citywide.



2017

City creates the City Architect position under the Department of Metropolitan Development.

2023

Second person to hold the role; begins expanding the office from 1 → 4 staff.

2024-25

Leads major downtown design guideline update (first since 2008) and forms a new design review committee.

“

We turn city policies into tangible, visible results residents can experience every day.”

“

Creating clear, accessible design standards helps developers and the public trust the process they can see what good looks like.”

“

We’re small, but we’re nimble. connecting planning, design, and economic development so projects move with both speed and intention.”

Indianapolis, IN

Economic Growth & Innovation

- Conducts design review for all incentive-backed projects to ensure design quality supports city investment.
- Built an online design review submission portal for developers improving transparency and tracking.
- Collaborates with the economic development team to evaluate design early in the incentive process.

Sustainability & Resilience

- Works with the Office of Sustainability on programs like Thriving Buildings (benchmarking and efficiency tracking).
- Exploring integration of EV charging and white roofs into design standards for future developments.
- Advocates pragmatic sustainability in a politically cautious state context.

Equity & Inclusion

- Participates in citywide equity and anti-racism training.
- Contributes to the Cultural Equity Plan, highlighting and supporting diverse cultural communities (e.g., Burmese).
- Ensures affordable housing projects elevate neighborhood design and resident experience.

Thank you