



Helping Elevate the Design of a Downtown Revival

For Marlee Cawthorn, City Architect of **Indianapolis**, ensuring the value of good design is key

Marlee Cawthorn, who became City Architect at the City of Indianapolis in 2023 after a decade of working for local architecture firms, believes the role of city architect allows her to help city leadership shape the future of the city's core, and ensure values of equity, civic connection, and good design are embedded in the work.

"I'm lucky that they value having an architect at the table so that we can make sure the design of the spaces that will have such a large impact on the city have a real quality to them at the end of the day" Cawthorn said.

What She Does

Cawthorn doesn't put her stamp on the city's architecture as much as elevate, improve, and illuminate. An architect with deep residential design and affordable housing experience, she understands what fellow architects face, what they need, and what they're asking for during a design review.

Cawthorn also serves as a key resource for the city's urban development investment, helping assist city leaders and coordinating with other city divisions, including planning, finance, and affordable housing.

How the City Architect Shapes Indianapolis

The City Architect, created by a former department director to provide more technical expertise and awareness, holds an eclectic position within city government, with a hand in varying aspects of the design, renovation, and development cycles across the city. Cawthorn leads the Urban Design Division within the Department of Metropolitan Development and oversees design review.

Most importantly, the City Architect functions as a resource for new construction or renovation projects across the urban core of the city, making sure design is at the forefront, and assists with any city-led redevelopment, such as the current effort to redevelop the City Market.

"I just approach projects very differently than anyone else on a project team on the city side," said Cawthorn. "There are people thinking about financing or zoning, but that's much more reactive, whereas I can think a little bit more strategically about what a project should be and what it should do, ensuring that a project will fit well within its context and have a positive impact on the space and how people interact with it."

The City Architect also serves as a key technical resource for the city's Historic Preservation Commission, which oversees historic district and individual properties.

How She's Helped Indianapolis

Ignore the outdated and inaccurate stereotype of Indy as a city where the main reasons to visit are conventions and college sports; in recent years, significant urban developments and public space projects, including the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, have been catalysts for a revisioning and revitalization of downtown.

Cawthorn has taken the mantle of this movement, and helped steer a new generation of urban investments that will reshape much of the civic landscape of the city core.



Currently, Cawthorn is helping a team renovate Indy's City Market, part of a wider Downtown Resilience Strategy from the Mayor's Office aimed at strengthening the city core. The project includes the addition of new downtown parks and civic infrastructure, and the transformation of the city's historic catacombs

Cawthorn and others are working on a pedestrian parkway, turning a main thoroughfare near downtown into a walkable promenade that links together many of the city's most popular entertainment venues.

A city housing hub is also in the works. The city took over a previous development site and seeks to design and open a site for temporary housing and housing navigation services, a one-stop shop for those experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

Cawthorn sees her biggest accomplishment being the revised [regional center design guidelines](#), which haven't been updated in 15 years. Her updates offer a timely update to community design standards.

The city also recently took over control of a former women's prison and Cawthorn is working on designing community input and feedback systems to help citizens lead the redesign and redevelopment of the site.

Her Role in the Architecture and Design Community

The City Architect job description contains the line "maintaining positive relationships with the design and architecture community." As her official duties include design review, Cawthorn sees that as a key to helping architects realize their visions and be a part of the design conversation.

"It's not my job to design your building," she said. "It's a back and forth, where we can make adjustments and get approval. The goal of this position really boils down to making sure that anything that the city is either involved in or supporting has a positive impact on a community through the power of good design."

Cawthorne is also the AIA section president, and works closely with the AIA community providing support and guidance to the city's existing and up-and-coming architecture and design talent.

"I'm able to have a presence in the design community in both respects this way," she said.

What Success Looks Like

In addition to her many ongoing projects, Cawthorn seeks to expand the office's capabilities and provide more efficient services. While none of the projects she's working on are complete yet, she's already thinking of the next phase of city design and redesign.

Cawthorne wants to create an outline for the future of the urban design division, and work more with long-term planning, and the city's Office of Sustainability. She'd like to do more with the Capital Improvement Board, which oversees venues like stadiums and convention centers. She sees her job as guaranteeing a vibrant environment that can be enjoyed by all, especially public spaces that are accessible and engaging.

"It's rewarding to be an integral part of some really transformational projects in Indianapolis," Cawthorn said. "Our downtown is changing so much. In a couple years, it's going to be very different."