



## **Making City Buildings Better Reflect Civic Values**

For Rukhsana Reyes, City Architect of **Kansas City**, architecture can design a better-functioning polity

Reyes revels in the opportunity to improve the cityscape and its buildings, and to participate in the decision making behind public investment. As an authority on municipal buildings and a figurehead for architecture's role in a well-functioning city, she's seen how much impact working within the government can have for an architect advocating for the public.

### ***What She Does***

Reyes sees her job as helping quickly and efficiently shepherd key projects while reflecting municipal goals and values. Her assignment is to promote thoughtful building that advances residents' quality of life; the position description calls for creating "raving fans" through the city. It's also about building consensus, and moving fast.

"It's all about getting people on board," she says. "There's politics, funding, and so many more things going on beyond the architecture."

### ***How the Chief Architect Shapes Kansas City***

The city architect has been an official part of municipal governance, specifically the general services administration, since 1967, when the position was created to help manage city property and historic buildings.

- A merit-based position that isn't appointed or politically affiliated with any specific mayor, the job was initially concerned in large part with the city's historic building, like the city's riverfront public market, and the promotion of public art.
- A key part of the City Architect's arts-focused portfolio entails overseeing the 1% for the Arts Program. Since 1986, the city has mandated that 1% of the cost of every municipal building gets dedicated to sculptures, murals, installations and creative expression. It's one of the most public examples of the City Architect's work and creates welcoming spaces for the visitors and residents alike, from stainless steel silhouettes of jazz musicians and cowboys grace the Vine District. Neon-lined sculptures illuminate the exterior of the airport.
- The job description focuses on repairing and modification of all city property except those concerned with parks, aviation, and water infrastructure, and representing the department with different contractors and government representatives.
- Her staff handles excess land and prepares RFPs to steer developers and designers into using formerly city-owned property for the creation of public goods like new affordable housing, an especially valuable goal considering the region's affordability challenge.
- Reyes also chairs the LEED standards committee, and helps push for more sustainable building practices city-wide
- When the city's government debates projects that include and influence the built environment, Reyes isn't a voting member, but becomes a trusted source of insight and advice within the city council and other departments.



### ***How She's Helped Kansas City***

In the roughly two years she has been on the job, she's found the position impacts much more than that sizable brief contains. She's also spearheaded projects where policy and design intersect:

- Overseeing a complete overhaul of how space is being utilized in the city's 30-story Art Deco city hall, to make agencies and workers more connected and efficient.
- Reyes and her staff helped redesign and reopen the top floor of the police department's headquarters, which once had been used as a holding cell, to humanely handle the jail population. A jail cell won't get the same attention as a downtown art installation, but done with care and consideration, it can also make a difference.
- Her office has helped spearhead the design of Barney Allis Plaza, a block-wide urban park and performance venue for downtown set on top of an underground garage. Its addition, slated for 2026, will help revitalize the central business district and create a new social and cultural hub for the city.

### ***Her Role in the Architecture and Design Community***

Reyes also plays an important symbolic role within the larger Kansas City architectural community, both as a convener, an advocate, and someone who can help facilitate public contracts.

"If there's anything people are trying to accomplish with the city, I hope to lift them in the right direction," she said.

She also promotes the city's own talent and hopes to connect more local architects to opportunities within and for the city and elsewhere. As the home to several large, global firms such as Multistudio and Populous—the KC Global Design initiative, seeking to brand the city as a global design capital, just launched—the expanding industry can also help play a role in civic design. Reyes hopes her convener role can continue to connect homegrown talent to new gigs a bigger stage.

### ***What Success Looks Like***

Reyes envisions growing the office and rethinking and reworking the city's facilities for more resilience, efficiency, and impact. It's about imbuing the city's buildings—and interactions with its citizens—with consideration and care.

"I think success is solving problems, showing up and getting a seat at the table, and making happy customers," Reyes said. "That's many different city departments, but, of course, it's mostly for the constituents."