

A Workshop on Architecture & Equity

Between Chicago city officials and the Van Alen Institute International Council on October 2, 2015

Participants

Chicago Participants

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Felicia Davis, Executive Director, [Chicago Public Building Commission](#)
Art del Muro, Managing Architect, [Chicago Public Building Commission](#)
Brad McConnell, Deputy Commissioner, [Chicago Department of Planning and Development](#)
Fernando Espinoza, Project Manager, [City of Chicago](#)
Ross Barney, Architectural Designer, [Ross Barney Architects](#)
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Van Alen Institute International Council

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Craig Dykers, [Snøhetta](#)
Elaine Molinar, [Snøhetta](#)
Carla Swickerath, [Studio Libeskind](#)
Trey Trahan, [Trahan Architects](#)
Carl Bäckstrand, [White](#)
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About Van Alen Institute

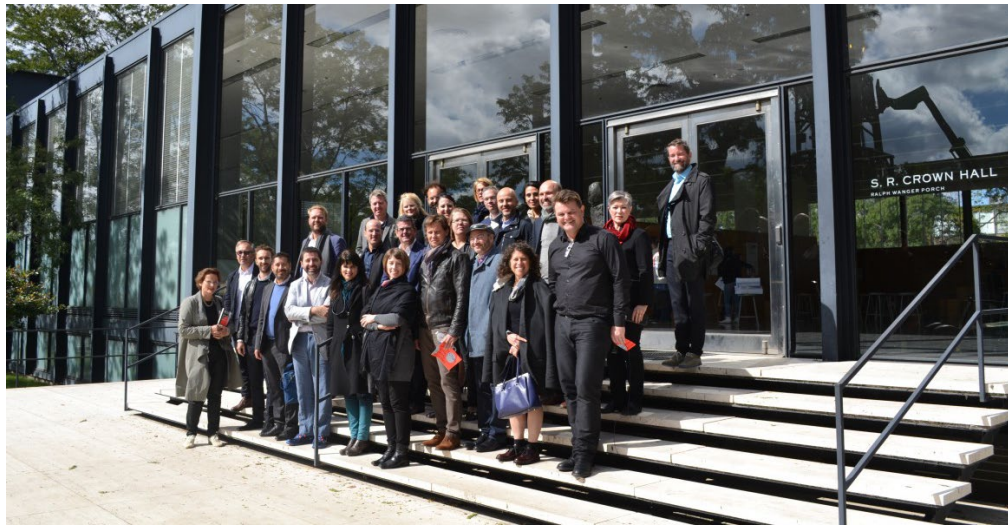
At Van Alen Institute, we believe that our lives are shaped by our environments and that with a better understanding of this dynamic, we can create new tools for tackling old problems. Our work is inspired by two fundamental questions: How do cities impact our minds and bodies? And in turn, how do we impact the environment?

Our three primary tools in tackling complex social, ecological, and cultural challenges are our **design competitions, research initiatives, and public programs**. By combining these three tools, we bring the analytical, creative, and communicative power of design to bear on pressing challenges.

About Van Alen's International Council

Van Alen Institute's **International Council** is a platform for exchange among leading architects, designers, developers, and planners, representing practices across more than 17 cities and ten countries. Members meet twice annually to identify and investigate issues facing cities around the world, and to guide the impact of the Institute's public programming, research, and design competitions.

Council members also convene with local policymakers, developers, researchers, and designers, identifying topics with potential for deeper exploration with Van Alen's international audience.



Introduction:

On October 2, 2015, the Van Alen Institute International Council convened for their fall meeting in Chicago on the occasion of the inaugural Chicago Architecture Biennial. As part of this two-day meeting, the Council organized a closed-door working session with local city architects, planners, and officials.

Their three-hour session explored **equity** – the quality of being fair or impartial – as it pertains to architecture and design. Prior to this meeting, Van Alen Institute had launched their *Building Equity* project with New York's Department of Design and Construction (DDC). This project used workshops to explore the potential for civic buildings and infrastructure to promote a more equitable society and to develop a metrics framework to evaluate the performance of built projects through the lens of equity. DDC synthesized the workshop results in a set of equity guidelines published in spring 2016.

Before the DDC workshops began, Van Alen seized an opportunity to explore the topic of equity on an international and localized scale in Chicago. The workshop in Chicago began with introductions from each of the participating local city officials and architects. Together, their insights laid the groundwork for small-group international interpretations and insights on how cities like Chicago, with its unique urban fabric, could move forward with more equitable designs.

The combined local and international perspectives from the workshop paralleled the complex layers of equity in the design sphere, where architects and planners are challenged with the task of bridging specific with universal space.

Participants in the session worked together to develop a series of takeaways and propositions specific to Chicago that could be applied at a broader scale. Their proposals are meant to catalyze deeper discussions in other world cities about the importance of equity in all aspects of design, the necessity for a redistribution of power and creativity in the development of new buildings, and the capacity for design to generate change through multidisciplinary collaboration.

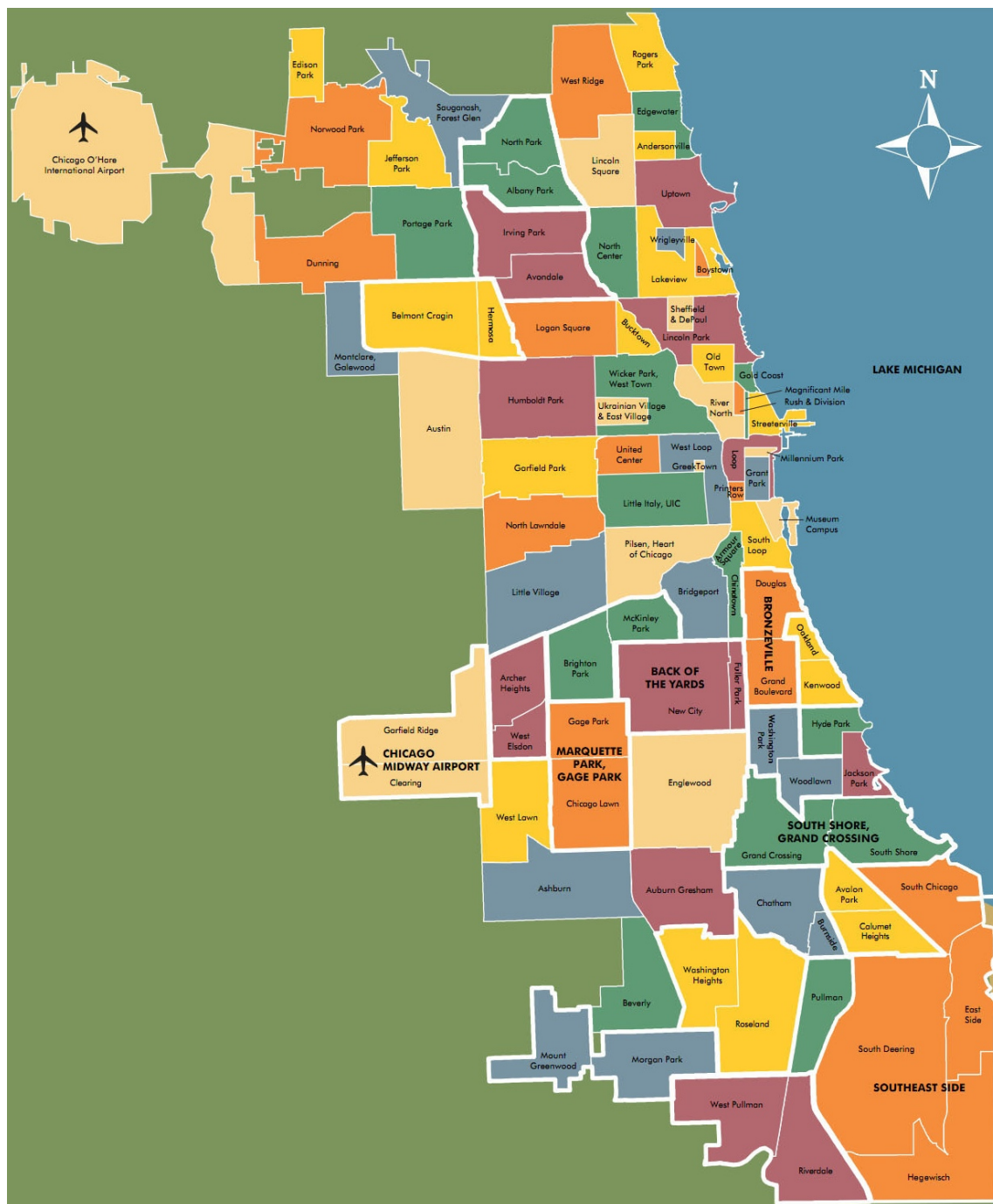
What Can We Learn from Chicago?

Insights from local officials & architects

Chicago is a city of *neighborhoods*. With these distinct pockets of culture come assets and challenges. Each of the city's 77 community areas carries unique tones, physical rhythms, and urban fabrics that have been carefully preserved across decades of development and renewal. City policymakers, architects, and designers are tasked with providing equal treatment to areas with vastly different needs.

Across the years, changes in Chicago leadership have led to changes in how equity of architecture is understood. Using the logic that if the city provided the same physical structures in every neighborhood, the government would be providing the same social opportunities to each neighborhood as well, prototyping evolved as an answer for civic buildings. The current administration, including participants in this workshop, has questioned that model and taken on a more case-by-case approach to city design. This is reflected in one of the first key takeaways from the Van Alen Institute International Council Equity Workshop: In order to treat people equally, you must treat them differently.





Workshop Takeaways

1. In order to treat neighborhoods **equally**, you must treat them **differently**

Different neighborhood cultures mean different needs. What one community finds beneficial, another may find useless. Residents of Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood line up at street ATMs with minimal fear of interruption. On the other side of town inside the south-side Seventh District police station, a woman deposits her paycheck knowing she'll be safe from robbery. Subtle changes to civic accommodation according to neighborhood needs can lead to long-term safety and security for more city residents.

2. Equity is about the **borrowing and lending of credibility**

Neighborhood dwellers have as much to offer to a new building as established architects, developers, and politicians. An equitable design is one that layers the credibility of everyday citizens with that of experts. The culmination of these credible sources is greater than the sum of individual insights.

3. Equity requires **listening at the community scale and the building scale**

Design projects balance the needs of cities, architects, developers, communities...and the list continues. A good design is attentive to every scale of its creation, listening and incorporating input from outside sources.

4. Equity of design leads to **equity of opportunity**

Buildings are stationary. Citizens are not. Equity of design means a consideration of lived experience, including the potential for job creation and lowered daily commutes.

5. Equity means **checks and balances: did the project do what the designer or architect said it was going to do?**

Too often, a finished building is unrecognizable when compared to its original design. An equitable architecture means checks and balances: Community members and civic leaders taking ownership of their built environment, and holding designers accountable from start to finish.



1. Appoint a steward of equity

How can policymakers elevate opportunities for everyday city dwellers to have a voice in new design projects? Workshop participants proposed a **public asset commission**: stewards of equity who serve as overseers for a neighborhood's growth.

This group would work with developers and policymakers through a system of checks and balances at pivotal points in each design process. With the initiation of a new civic building, the accompanying neighborhood public asset commission would enter the design process a) at the beginning, voicing the needs, concerns, and priorities of the surrounding community, b) at the end, asking the designer, developer, and construction entering the design process: Did you do what you said you were going to do?

The public asset commission would consist of several members, and could operate as a grass-roots organization of solely community members, city agency of experts, or, ideally, a mixture of both.

2. Build for the neighborhood

Neighborhood life is the scale at which most of us experience city life. The more a design enhances the experiences and opportunities available at that scale, the more long-term benefits it will have. This takes care. Neighborhoods change as swiftly as their residents.



In order to build for the neighborhood, policymakers need to constantly revisit and adjust existing plans. There is no finished map of any city, and as cultures and borders change, designers and planners need to be on top of the altered needs of each community.



3. Leverage existing infrastructure

Successes of the past provide a clear road-map for future innovations. To ensure equitable designs, it's important for planners to **balance respect for a neighborhood's historic fabric with new technological advances**. Designers need to do their research, identify buildings with meaning to the current residents of a neighborhood, and strengthen that existing authenticity with new tools.

Designers also need to **recognize and prioritize the insights of anchor institutions like churches**. Anchor institutions are a critical bridge to a neighborhood's cultural fabric. Time invested in these sites will teach planners and policymakers the needs of the community firsthand.

Lastly, policymakers need to **incentivize new projects in historical neighborhood "no go zones."** Creators of new civic buildings should understand the areas where developers "dare not tread" and use this knowledge to readdress the neighborhood's growth.

4. Leave projects unfinished

What would happen if architects, builders, and developers left buildings to be completed by their users? What would those user experiences add to the evolution and sustainability of new environments?

Borrowing and lending credibility could mean letting city dwellers experience and alter a space in its final stages of development. Community members ultimately affect the longevity of a built space as their needs, surroundings, and priorities evolve.

Designers should allow city residents play a role in the final stages of project development, making citizen involvement in the design as critical as the design itself. In taking ownership of the design, urban dwellers will link themselves to its longevity and destiny within their social fabric.

