

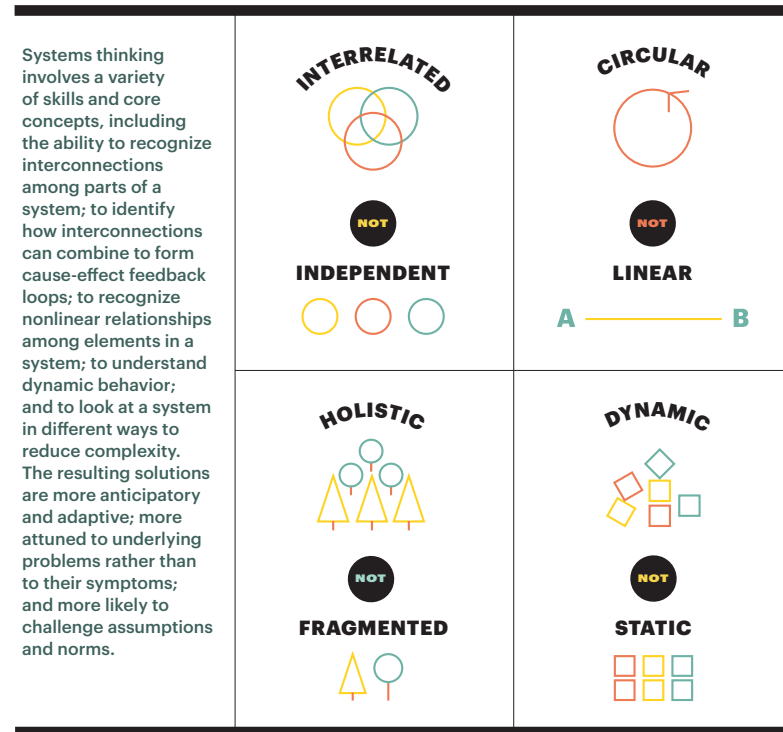
SYSTEMS THINKING FOR CULTURE CHANGE

The three-step approach employed by the American Institute of Architects Minnesota (publisher of *ENTER*) to further culture change in the profession of architecture holds promise for organizations of all sizes and sectors

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SYSTEMS THINKING

LEADS TO SOLUTIONS THAT ARE HOLISTIC, INTERCONNECTED, AND COURAGEOUS



Every organization, every profession, has its own culture—its own patterns of behavior. And if there was ever a time for culture change, this is it.

Over the past few years, four profoundly destabilizing forces have been building upon each other, creating the need and opportunity for change:

- The nation’s reckoning with systemic racism;
- The rise of climate change as a societal priority and business imperative; and
- The COVID-19 pandemic, which has fundamentally shifted our thinking around where, when, and how we work.

Systems theory tells us that destabilization of a system makes it more susceptible and more amenable to change. With this level of destabilization, there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape organizations and professions for the better—for more fulfilling work, greater innovation, and stronger outcomes.

Systems thinking is a core skill of those who have been trained in architecture. Like design thinking, the systems thinking of architects and designers can be brought to bear in addressing society’s most complex challenges—including the challenge of culture change.

The Culture Change Initiative of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Minnesota applies systems thinking to proactively create and sustain culture change in the profession of architecture. Those engaged in this



initiative are already seeing progress in their organizations and firms. It embraces a simple yet powerful framework that any team, department, or organization within any sector or industry can use to create culture change. The key steps are: 1. Define the desired culture, 2. Identify leverage points, and 3. Cultivate change.

ORIGINS OF THE CULTURE CHANGE INITIATIVE

In 2018, in the midst of the #MeToo movement, AIA Minnesota embarked on an effort to create culture change. Horrified by reports of sexual assaults perpetrated for decades by Richard Meier, FAIA, and anonymous accusations made against dozens of other prominent architects across the nation, AIA Minnesota recognized the prevalence of everyday sexism and bias and the need to change the culture of a profession that allowed such behaviors and ways of thinking to go unchecked.

AIA Minnesota leaders also saw the important link between the culture of the profession and the ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce. Architecture is overwhelmingly white and male. To create architecture that serves the needs and aspirations of an increasingly diverse population, the most successful architecture community will be that which reflects the gender and racial/ethnic makeup of the broader public.

DEFINING THE DESIRED CULTURE

From the outset, the goals of the Culture Change Initiative have been to examine

STEP 1

Define the Desired Culture

EXAMINE THE CURRENT CULTURE

CONDUCT PRIMARY RESEARCH:

Document experience of the current culture and aspirations for change

To do so, AIA Minnesota assembled a

70+
MEMBER
CULTURE CHANGE
RESOURCE TEAM

with an overrepresentation of women and people of color to reflect the broader population the profession aspires to represent

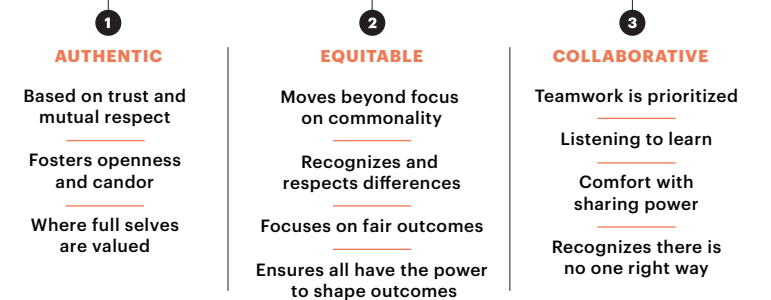
CONDUCT SECONDARY RESEARCH:

Gather and analyze research reports and media interviews



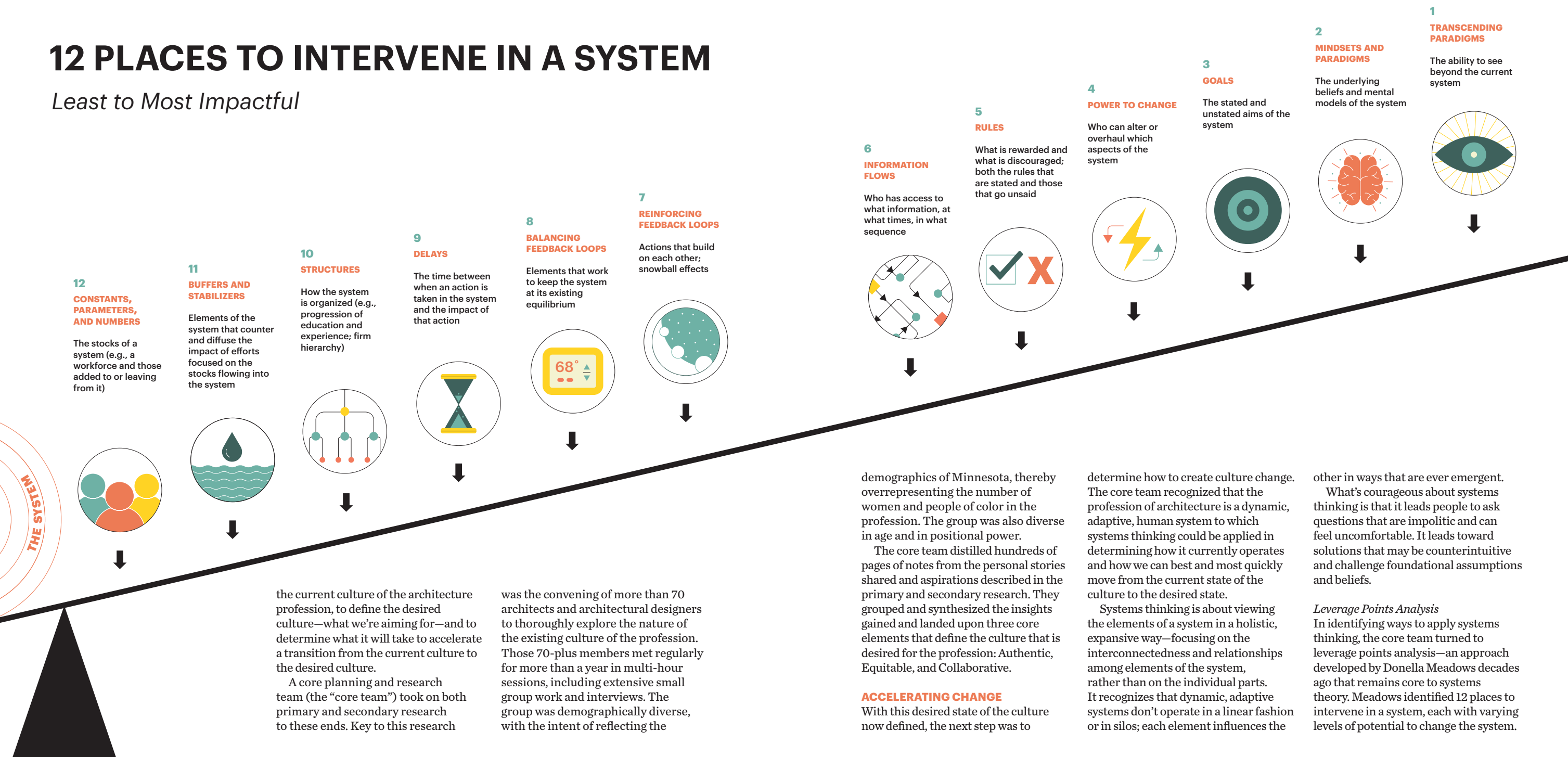
DEFINE THE DESIRED CULTURE

AIA Minnesota defined the desired culture as:



12 PLACES TO INTERVENE IN A SYSTEM

Least to Most Impactful



the current culture of the architecture profession, to define the desired culture—what we’re aiming for—and to determine what it will take to accelerate a transition from the current culture to the desired culture.
A core planning and research team (the “core team”) took on both primary and secondary research to these ends. Key to this research

was the convening of more than 70 architects and architectural designers to thoroughly explore the nature of the existing culture of the profession. Those 70-plus members met regularly for more than a year in multi-hour sessions, including extensive small group work and interviews. The group was demographically diverse, with the intent of reflecting the

demographics of Minnesota, thereby overrepresenting the number of women and people of color in the profession. The group was also diverse in age and in positional power.
The core team distilled hundreds of pages of notes from the personal stories shared and aspirations described in the primary and secondary research. They grouped and synthesized the insights gained and landed upon three core elements that define the culture that is desired for the profession: Authentic, Equitable, and Collaborative.
ACCELERATING CHANGE
With this desired state of the culture now defined, the next step was to

determine how to create culture change. The core team recognized that the profession of architecture is a dynamic, adaptive, human system to which systems thinking could be applied in determining how it currently operates and how we can best and most quickly move from the current state of the culture to the desired state.
Systems thinking is about viewing the elements of a system in a holistic, expansive way—focusing on the interconnectedness and relationships among elements of the system, rather than on the individual parts. It recognizes that dynamic, adaptive systems don’t operate in a linear fashion or in silos; each element influences the

other in ways that are ever emergent. What’s courageous about systems thinking is that it leads people to ask questions that are impolitic and can feel uncomfortable. It leads toward solutions that may be counterintuitive and challenge foundational assumptions and beliefs.
Leverage Points Analysis
In identifying ways to apply systems thinking, the core team turned to leverage points analysis—an approach developed by Donella Meadows decades ago that remains core to systems theory. Meadows identified 12 places to intervene in a system, each with varying levels of potential to change the system.

→ STEP 3

Cultivate Culture Change

1 SEED

Inspire young people to consider a career in the field. Bring in new employees and new collaborators. Encourage new thinking and new experiments.

2 NURTURE

Make sure the environment has been prepared with the supports and resources that people of various backgrounds and identities may need to thrive. Regularly pause to question assumptions and ways of doing things. Shine light on efforts that are having the desired impact.

3 WEED

Create space. Give initiatives and individuals with potential to exemplify the desired culture more room to grow. Challenge and sometimes remove individuals and efforts that are crowding out the desired culture. Hold people accountable for their impact on the culture.

4 HARVEST

Assess outcomes. Compare intentions to impact. Re-examine and rework seeding, nurturing, and weeding approaches.



The core team conducted a leverage points analysis of the system of the architecture profession through the lens of culture change. This analysis illuminated the many ways that the various structures, processes, rules, goals, and mindsets of the profession are self-reinforcing, and where efforts are counterbalancing—where the profession is getting in its own way.

Overall, when it comes to most efforts to change a system, people tend to want to focus their attention on the

resources flowing into the system—in this case, the number and diversity of people who pursue architecture as a career. But it takes extraordinary effort, extraordinary resources, for interventions focused on numbers to have impact in moving the system. This has played out in architecture “pipeline” efforts for years.

There is no question that pipeline efforts are crucial. To create a profession that reflects the demographics of the public

the architecture community serves, young people need to be inspired and encouraged to pursue a career in architecture. But pipeline efforts aren’t enough; the current members of the profession need to change themselves and the organizations they’ve built and that they sustain.

It’s clear how true this is in the context of women in architecture. For years, women have represented about 50 percent of those graduating from schools of architecture, a percentage

that mirrors the broader population. Yet career progress among women often stalls out. There are other forces within the system that are counterbalancing. The fact that there are still very few women who hold top positions in architecture firms—especially lead design roles—speaks to the powerful aspects of the system that go beyond the pipeline of new entrants. Having few women or people of color in top positions within architecture flows back and influences the numbers flowing into the system, often dissuading young women and people of color from pursuing an architecture career.

To create a profession that reflects and can best serve the public, strong pipeline efforts are necessary, focused on the numbers flowing into the system. At the same time, the culture that diverse young people enter needs to be one in which they can thrive. This requires focusing interventions on more powerful leverage points—things like: who has access to what information; the actions and approaches that are encouraged and discouraged; who holds power in what situations; the goals of the system; and the mindsets that are foundational to the system.

Focusing on mindsets is the work of individual and organizational self-awareness—of being honest about the mindsets each of us holds, being curious about where those mindsets came from, and examining how tightly or loosely we hold onto those mindsets.

From its primary and secondary research, the core team identified the mindsets currently held within the profession—both those that are dominant and those that are emergent. They then took this a step further and identified *desired* mindsets within the profession—those that, on balance, would be more likely to accelerate than hinder the creation of an authentic, equitable, and collaborative culture. In most cases, the mindsets needed to accelerate change already exist within the profession, but they are emergent, not dominant.

Cultivation

Leaders often hope to simply direct that change happen; they establish new policies and tell people to abandon

past mindsets and adopt new ones. It’s not quite as simple as that. Systems theory—in particular, complexity theory—tells us that the work of culture change is cultivation. It’s about creating the conditions for change to take root and grow. Culture change cannot simply be the work of those in positions of leadership, if it is to take hold; culture change is everyone’s work.

While the desired change does need to be defined, getting there is an adaptive and iterative process where listening, observing, and responding are key. The analogy the core team found most useful was that of cultivating a garden—constant and simultaneous attention to: seeding new ideas and new people, nurturing through supports and resources, weeding to create space for promising efforts to grow, and harvesting learnings that can be applied back throughout the system.

“Communities of practice” are recommended as a way to support this work of cultivation, where people across an organization, profession, or industry collaborate to reinforce each other’s learning and experimentation.

AIA Minnesota created the Community of Practice for Culture Change (CPCC) to further the desired culture of the architecture profession. More than 60 members of the CPCC have been actively supporting each other in the work of pattern spotting within their organizations to determine where common mindsets of the profession are showing up, experimenting with interventions at various leverage points, and sharing back the learnings they’ve gained from those experiments.

The CPCC is also working with hypothetical scenarios to anticipate and gain comfort with the interpersonal dynamics involved in systems interventions. At the end of the day, the systems of firms, organizations, and professions are created—and changed—by people. Cultivating change entails person-to-person interaction, even when a leverage point relates to process or structure; it involves recognizing and bridging differences, and it requires sustained, adaptive effort.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

SUPPORT THE WORK OF CULTIVATING CULTURE CHANGE

AIA Minnesota created the national Community of Practice for Culture Change (CPCC)

60+
ACTIVE MEMBERS

meeting bimonthly to engage in applied learning and to stay connected to others who are also working toward the desired culture.

EMERGING OUTCOMES

AIA Minnesota is entering the second year of the Culture Change Initiative implementation. While it’s too early to measure impact in the Minnesota architecture community overall, those who have engaged in the Community of Practice for Culture Change are reporting culture change accelerating in their firms. The number of members of the CPCC continues to grow, and its demographics remain diverse in terms of age, seniority, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Members of the CPCC and others in the architecture community also point to the culture change that has occurred within AIA Minnesota as an organization over the past decade. They have noted that shifts in mindsets, goals, rules, and transparency of information have transformed the culture to be one that they view as authentic, equitable, and collaborative. A retrospective analysis has made clear that AIA Minnesota was employing the define-leverage-cultivate approach years before it was established by the Culture Change Initiative.

This culture change is evidenced by the composition of the organization’s

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SMALL STRUCTURES, BIG IDEAS *continued from page 85*

Finn hopes that efforts like Envision Community will encourage more Americans to begin reckoning with the long-term consequences of their desire for “larger house footprints than [are found in] any other nation on the planet.” In the 1950s, he notes, the average size of a single-family dwelling in the U.S. was about 900 square feet. Today, it's almost 2,300.

“That's the critical thing we should be talking about,” says Finn. “We can design smaller spaces to feel bigger, and we can do it in a way that is more multifunctional. We can also start to talk about making housing that lasts twice as long or can be renovated twice as easily. It's all part and parcel to a larger conversation.” ■

SOUND CHECK *continued from page 55*

takes for the reflections to be supported in your area in the audience.

Pavielle: With all this talk of fine tuning, I'm wondering if either of you have ever achieved what you would say is the “perfect show.”

Jim: It's an interesting question. A colleague did the sound for a college graduation ceremony where [musical artist and writer] Dessa was the speaker. She said, “You better be out there failing every week, because the only way you learn—the only way you improve yourself—is to fail.” I mean, all we do in our business is fail [if the measuring stick is perfection]. I'm always like, “Oh man, I should have put the vocalist up a little bit louder, and I should've pulled the sax back, because the sax just blew her out of the way.” I haven't ever done a perfect show.

Jay: I'm always striving for perfection, but the perfect show is very elusive. For me, it's where I wouldn't have changed anything about my mix, I hit all my cues, the performance was inspired, and the audience was appreciative. That's a lot of variables. In my 38 years [in this work], I can count the perfect shows on one hand. ■

SYSTEMS THINKING FOR CULTURE CHANGE *continued from page 63*

leadership. The demographics of the AIA Minnesota board of directors have changed dramatically. Compared to 2015, there are twice as many women serving on the board, and seven times the number of people of color. Thirty-four percent of the board members are people of color—this compares to 21 percent of the Minnesota population and just four percent of the AIA Minnesota membership. Culture change is also evident in staff surveys, where all team members express strong feelings of belonging and agency—that when they express an opinion or idea, they have confidence that their contribution will make a difference to the outcome. And AIA Minnesota's collaborations with other organizations and individuals have grown in number, type, and geographic reach.

Beyond that which is quantitatively measurable are the qualitative

indicators of change. These include unsolicited emails and letters sent by people who say they had long felt on the outside of the organization and the architecture profession and now feel seen, heard, and valued. These same people have also raised concerns and criticisms because they feel close enough to the organization to be candid, and because they know the organization is capable of and committed to change.

We know culture change is possible. Systems thinking is a key approach to making it happen in the near term. Knowing what you're aiming for, focusing on high-impact interventions, and constantly cultivating the conditions necessary for change—this is the path AIA Minnesota and the architecture community have taken. While it is imperfect and iterative, every indicator points toward this approach making a real difference in accelerating the pace of change. We hope it inspires change efforts within the broader building industry and well beyond. ■