



Chicago Architecture Center Strategic Plan

2026 – 2030



CHICAGO
ARCHITECTURE
CENTER

Adopted March 12, 2026



Letter from the CEO

The Chicago Architecture Center (CAC) was founded in 1966 by a group of concerned citizens to preserve and then celebrate Chicago’s architectural legacy. Over our first 60 years, the CAC has evolved into a major cultural institution, respected worldwide for our architecture-centered portfolio of offerings. What has remained consistent is the people at the heart of the organization: the staff who devote their careers to this mission, the board who provides oversight and the volunteer community who devote their time and talent.

From the beginning, we have been guided by two intertwined values:

- The built environment is fundamental to our quality of life – in Chicago and everywhere else.
- The more people who appreciate and care for the Built Environment make it better for everyone.

This five-year strategic plan will be paired with annual staff and volunteer community workplans that align with and advance the goals of the plan, in turn generating quarterly and annual metrics to be reported to the board.



We took this plan as an opportunity to document the best practices of the past and determine what we will carry into the future. Each of our legacy programs (i.e. architectural tours, education program, Open House Chicago) was formed by deliberate responses to a distinct challenge of the built environment and we’ve documented that here. What will our next challenge be and how will we respond? This strategic plan serves to answer those questions, and to guide and position the CAC for its next legacy program on this strong foundation.

In partnership,



Eleanor Esser Gorski, AIA

CAC's History of Impact on Chicago and Architecture

The Chicago Architecture Center has always been powered by people who believe the built environment is critical to our quality of life—in Chicago and elsewhere. We believe the more people there are who appreciate and shape the built environment, the better it will be.

Beginnings: 1965-1979



Problem: Urban Renewal was erasing Chicago's architectural heritage.

Response: Private citizens united to mount a rescue effort to save First Chicago School buildings in Chicago.

Legacy: CAC's founders successfully pushed for the creation of the Chicago Landmarks Commission.

Growth: 1971-mid-1980s



Problem: Advocating for Chicago's architectural legacy in earnest required citywide coverage and a year-round effort.

Response: CAC created a volunteer stewardship role in the tour docents and their program.

Legacy: The CAC docents developed an impressive catalog of tours and, over time, effectively made Chicago "the City of Architecture."

Impact: 1983-1997



Problem: The neglected health of the Chicago River was elevated to a critical level.

Response: Creation of the city's first architectural river cruise allowed the public to see the river and its conditions up close and provoked discussion.

Legacy: By 2011, the health of the river was so improved that the Environmental Protection Agency declared it fit for recreational contact.

Transformation: 1992-2009



Problem: A downtown revival was taking root but Chicago was still not seen as a global city.

Response: Professionalized staff, expanded tour offerings and a headquarters on Michigan Avenue produced an architectural address fit for tourists.

Legacy: CAC built architectural tourism into a business synonymous with Chicago.

Evolution: 1999-2012



Problem: Budget cuts in Chicago Public Schools threatened student access to architectural education and arts-related electives.

Response: CAC developed award-winning curricula, produced in partnership with local educators and architects.

Legacy: Introduced in 2002, the *Schoolyards to Skylines: Teaching with Chicago's Amazing Architecture* textbook, offered K-8 audiences a step-by-step guide to engaging architecture.

Expansion: 2010-2020



Problem: A changing Chicago was reorganizing itself around new public spaces (ex: Riverwalk and Millennium Park), new City Hall leadership, and new debates on the future of cities.

Response: CAC introduced new platforms for large-scale participation, including festival formats such as Open House Chicago and Engineering Fest.

Legacy: As CAC worked to right-size its offerings, a new state-of-the-art Chicago Architecture Center along the Chicago River exemplified the spirit of the times.

Leadership: 2022-Present and Beyond



Problem: A global health pandemic led to a fractured landscape, testing public resolve to find consensus on built environment issues and the future of cities.

Response: A portfolio of programs continues to be developed to enhance public engagement and input in leading issues of design and architecture.

Legacy: To be identified through the efforts outlined in this strategic plan.

CAC's Guiding Principles

For the crafting of the 2026-2030 strategic plan, the participation of the team was essential, along with voices of the current board, financial supporters and other cultural institutions. Through this process, the core tenets of the organization became evident and are documented below. This is the foundation that the plan can start from and will remain constant as the plan is implemented:

Our enduring future – who we are:

- We are an inter-connected team of professionals and volunteers.
- We are a trusted partner and convener.
- We are a non-profit organization supported by individuals, members, foundations and corporations, open to all.
- We are a learning organization and a pioneer in public architectural education.
- We are a leader of architectural tourism and a booster of Chicago.
- We are innovators who explore the leading edge of design and urbanism in our work.
- We are stewards of the architectural legacy of Chicago.

Our enduring organization – how we will get there:

- We celebrate Chicago and its heritage of architecture and design.
- We inspire current and future generations to take active roles building the communities they want, need and deserve.
- We train and steward a best-in-class volunteer community that is the foundation of the Center.
- We empower educators to use architecture and design as a teaching tool.
- We activate architecture mindful of its local culture and history.
- We guide and partner with fellow architectural and cultural organizations around the world.
- We convene leading minds to debate and problem-solve the architectural and design issues of our time.
- We use our physical center and exhibitions as evolving, immersive teaching tools that demonstrate the principles and impact of good design.
- We hold the following core values: One Team: collaborate, Continued Learning, Respect, Integrity.



Our Vision:

To become the world's leading architecture center and a global ambassador for Chicago as the capital of architecture and design.

Our Mission:

The Chicago Architecture Center showcases Chicago and ideas from cities worldwide to inspire better living through design.

Our Purpose – why we exist:

The CAC advances public interest and education in architecture and related design disciplines by delivering a comprehensive portfolio of exhibitions, tours, programs, lectures, independent research and digital resources that build public understanding and appreciation for Chicago's architectural legacy and encourage participation in building its future. *(from the CAF/CAC bylaws)*

2026-2030 Strategic Plan

Strategic plan goals will be implemented through annual internal workplans that are aligned with resources and the annual budget.

GOAL 1: Be the Standard

Set the standard for what it means today to be a best-in-class architecture center

2030 Target: Create new awareness of the unique position CAC holds in Chicago's cultural landscape with a stronger brand with greater visibility to drive our membership, giving and visitor ship.

Measuring Success: We will measure our success by annually evaluating brand strength, evaluating demand for learning programs, improved member retention, and the launch of new partnerships.

1.1 Redefine our work based on our renewed vision, mission and purpose

- Review and define CAC audiences and their needs.
- Examine CAC's portfolio of offerings and update them to best meet our current and aspirational audiences.
- Innovate new offerings that the CAC is uniquely placed to lead.
- Investigate emerging technologies and adapt our practices to harness these tools in a way that keeps human creativity and experiences at the forefront.

1.2 Reconsider our physical footprint in the city to fulfill our mission

- Investigate and plan for capital improvements to 111 E. Wacker and external opportunities that expand CAC's physical presence in relationship to its programs and audiences.
- Balance on- and off-site program offerings that strengthen the CAC mission and create more audience engagement.

1.3 Prioritize a strong workplace culture and maintain financial sustainability

- Invest in third-party evaluation for staff and volunteers to build culture.
- Include a financial review in the evaluation of new programs and initiatives.
- Establish baseline metrics by Q1 of 2027 to use as a measure of our progress on plan goals and targets. Long term outcome measurement will be based on program evaluation frameworks and theories of change developed in 2026.

GOAL 2: Engage the City

Continue to develop CAC as a thought leader in city and community issues of the urban environment

2030 Target: City leaders, neighborhood groups and residents see CAC as a useful partner on development and design issues, driving our membership, giving and visitor ship.

Measuring Success: We will measure our success by annually evaluating our engagement around development and design issues and honing our approach as indicated.

2.1 Create a community of innovation and collaboration with the CAC volunteer corps and with other organizations to advance our mission and extend CAC's programmatic presence in Chicago's neighborhoods.

2.2 Educate and empower volunteers and residents to be informed advocates for design and development in their communities.

2.3 Lead, convene and partner with others to advance urban topics centered on design and architecture.



GOAL 3: Exchange Globally

Leverage our global network to strengthen our team, expand outreach and bring the world of ideas to Chicago

2030 Target: International ideas, talent and partnerships are woven into CAC program development and workplan.

Measuring Success: We will measure our success documenting a baseline of international involvement in 2026 and demonstrate improvement year over year.

3.1 Deepen program series that showcases international architects and connects them to professional networks and emerging talent in Chicago.

3.2 Build on relationships with architecture and design schools locally, nationally and internationally to deepen mentorship opportunities, carry out residencies and foster the next generation of design innovators.

3.3 Leverage international relationships to build staff and volunteer exchange programs; create study and travel programs that educate and engage trustees, donors, volunteers and members and share best practices with similar architectural organizations.

