

# DESIGN- THINKING & *REGIONAL AWARENESS*

The **AIA|LA** Advocacy Platform



**AIA|LA**

# Our Challenges, Our Strengths

Southern  
California  
is an idyllic  
place.

As a region, we have the best weather, the wonderful and varied natural terrain and some of the most creative and diverse people on the planet. It's important to celebrate LA's beauty and grace as often, as loudly and as clearly as we can. However, we're also the hotbed for almost every physical, natural and human-made challenge the world has to offer including climate change, severe drought, an aging infrastructure, unaffordable housing, a concrete and treeless environment and, much of the time, unforgiving traffic as well as being in a region prone to earthquakes.

Let's face it. We don't really have the money, the time and seldom do we seem to have a system in place that has the social and political capital necessary to engage and solve these issues and yet we know we can take on these challenges. A prime example of this is measure R that is making major inroads into our transportation network, so we know we can do it. However continuing to do business as usual - attempting to solve these vast and substantial problems in isolation from each other - will only yield marginal results, at best. By learning to ask better questions, and focusing our efforts on the future we'd like to see how we, as a region, could work together to identify more effective and aspirational solutions.

As Architects we are accustomed to integrating complex criteria from multiple disciplines to elicit elegant solutions that satisfy fiscal, social and functional issues. This methodology is called **design-thinking** and it holistically and synthetically interweaves solutions that resolve a multitude of problems simultaneously. **Design-thinking** is not referring to aesthetics but rather how the integrated system as a whole performs on a multitude of layers.

**Design-thinking** utilizes both analysis and synthesis, rather than focusing only on the problem to identify potential solutions, which enables decision makers to focus on the solution that they'd like to realize and then works holistically to develop that solution. A **design-thinking** approach allows many problems to be addressed with one solution, utilizing resources more effectively and, equally important, is open to divergent solutions from a diverse area of expertise so that the best or preferred solution can be selected.

**Design-thinking** enables government and leadership to better define the problems, research opportunities, generate possibilities and resolutions, prototype and combine ideas, choose the preferred and most powerful alternative, implement tasks, execute resources, and then learn through feedback to measure success.

These are the issues we believe are of utmost importance to our region and demonstrate the need for thinking big with a visionary perspective employing **design-thinking**.



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# Streets as Public Places

## THE CHALLENGE

*Streets are our predominant public open space. The street is the living room of our Cities. It is where we interact with our fellow citizens. Increasingly, it is important that we understand it as the site of overlapping and simultaneous uses, all of them equally important.*

*Historically the street has been seen as a place for transportation, and typically that has meant the automobile and how fast it can move. However, the street is how we connect to one another, it is a place of business, of sidewalk cafes, a place for artistic expression and to exercise as well as a conduit to move through whether as a pedestrian, a cyclist, a transit rider, in a wheel-chair, a diesel truck or in an automobile. In addition to our streets being responsible for our goods movement, it also is our utility, internet and cable network and is responsible for our power, water and gas conveyances.*

*Streets are integral to our watershed management and are discussed in the following advocacy platform.*

*Streets are so much more than mobility corridors, they're places to live, linger and love so how can we make streets truly serve our purpose to make sustainable communities?*

## THE SOLUTION

Streets do so much, the AIA|LA feels strongly that now is the time to utilize the forum of the street to advance a synthesized approach through **design-thinking** to solve a multitude of urban issues

### WHAT WE ARE ASKING

AIA|LA encourages city leadership to do the following:

To strengthen programs that recognize the complete nature of streets and prioritize funding in such a way that the whole health of the street, leveraging all of the funds available from the varied uses to create complete streets that serve our community.

- Sustain and enhance Great Streets initiatives.
- Prioritize funding to improve the streets in our neighborhoods.
- Have architects be a part of the urban design and planning conversation.

# Designing Healthier Watersheds

## THE CHALLENGE

*It is said that healthy watersheds are required to sustain healthy cities. Our watershed is far from healthy- in fact, it sends millions of gallons of very polluted water to the Pacific Ocean daily, captured and conducted to the sea by our intricate system of public streets. At a time where California water is an increasingly scarce and coveted resource, modifications to street infrastructure could help replenish and revitalize our depleted aquifers.*

*Our streets, sidewalks and public right of ways comprise the single most important component in Los Angeles' watershed management. In the name of efficiency, communities typically prioritize the utility and function of the street to service commerce and vehicular transportation over watershed viability and social well-being. As we look to repair our streets and sidewalks comes the opportunity to rebuild in ways that provide multiple benefits, both environmental and cultural. We encourage City and County governance to prioritize green infrastructure and livability.*

## THE SOLUTION

Complete green streets can be a holistic solution that is also efficient and cost-effective for local governments. Streets afford opportunities to cool our urban environments with a healthy tree canopy and plenty of unpaved areas for water infiltration and food-production. They can provide critical storm-water management by way of filtration, percolation, and runoff capture; they reduce heat gain and help offset excess CO2 through planting and increased tree canopy. Safety and social interaction becomes a priority with expanded permeable pedestrian refuges; and best of all, the long-term costs are lower, balanced by benefits that outweigh traditional engineering and piping solutions. All of this helps replenish our aquifers, an important water storage device.

It is AIA|LA's recommendation that to rise to the challenge and to address these inextricable demands with **design-thinking**. We need to look beyond simply repaving the existing street network and work to create the multi-use, common open space resource that this modern and evolving city wants and needs.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING

AIA|LA encourages civic leadership to utilize **design-thinking** to do the following:

- Capitalize on street repair opportunities to enhance water management and water absorption.
- Unpave our open space.
- Mandate new parking lots provide for water absorption.
- As boulevards and streets are rebuilt prioritize access for multiple modes of transportation



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# Housing Affordability

## THE CHALLENGE

*According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the 2013 Housing Wage (wage needed to afford housing) is \$18.79, exceeding the \$14.32 hourly wage earned by the average renter by almost \$4.50 an hour, and greatly exceeding wages earned by low-income renter households. In addition as our population continues to grow the need for affordable housing will become even more critical and with 10,000 people a day turning 65 from now until 2030, the demand for affordable senior communities will far outpace the supply. The lack of supply has also been exacerbated by the dissolution of the California's redevelopment agencies making it challenging for developers to cobble together the financing.*

## THE SOLUTION

We need to facilitate the production of more housing opportunities, especially in areas of Los Angeles County that are poised to have excellent connections to the expanding transit network. One way to facilitate the production of more housing is to remove several of the high-cost barriers imposed upon projects by various regulations that often do more harm than good at addressing some of the safety, welfare and social equity issues they're hoping to solve.

AIA|LA sees a two-part solution to the challenge: streamline the entitlement and development services processes, and provide relief for planning and zoning regulations for affordable communities.

More effective coordination of the requirements of multiple departments and agencies is needed to allow for a focused, clear dialogue between staff and the design and development community. Expedited processing of affordable communities will allow these communities to come online faster and make better use of human resources.

There is currently some relief of zoning code requirements, encouraging developments to include additional affordable units, other concessions would allow architects to help developers bridge the financing gap left with the departure of redevelopment agencies. A reduction in parking requirements, especially for affordable senior communities is one example that could help potential projects pencil out and create the affordable units needed to meet the region's demand.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING

- AIA|LA encourages civic leadership to utilize **design-thinking** to do the following:
- Streamline the entitlement process and development services.
- Provide relief for planning and zoning regulations for affordable housing projects.
- Use excess government owned land available to affordable housing at no or minimal cost.



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# Architects and Policy

### THE CHALLENGE

*Our communities are beset by a myriad of woes each crying for a solution. In an era of scarce resources the natural tendency is to patch the worst of the conditions and hope for the best. As a consequence our communities, and their infrastructure continue to deteriorate at an alarming rate. The recent water break of a 100-year old pipe on Sunset Boulevard is an excellent example. Infrastructure costs even more when neglected. The funds to repair that break could have been used to rebuild and upgrade the street in a variety of ways. Siloed solutions are short sighted, costly and ineffective.*

### THE SOLUTION

As we have laid out in the introduction we suggest that government utilize the Architect's approach to problem solving from a holistic, design-thinking perspective where each solution is intended to solve a multitude of problems simultaneously.

### WHAT WE ARE ASKING

AIA|LA encourages city leadership to integrate **design-thinking** by doing the following:

- Include Architects as party to policy discussions that involve our built environment.
- Create an Office of Architecture and Urban Design.
- Appoint architects to boards and commissions.
- Have architects assist and advise in the review process of significant projects.



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# Streamline Entitlement and Permit Procedures

## THE CHALLENGE

*Current permitting and approval processes are time-consuming and cumbersome, often in the service of resolving redundant, inapplicable and/or contradictory directives. The burdensome time and costs navigating these complexities often undermine the outcome and detract from the pool of resources available to supply direct and tangible benefits to the public. An institutional change in the culture of city staff is called for to insure better customer service, support business creation and add much-needed housing and jobs to the region.*

## THE SOLUTION

AIA|LA encourages city leadership to streamline development services in a way that achieves greater clarity and certainty. Better coordination of the requirements of multiple departments and agencies is needed. In LA recent managerial innovations like the Transit Corridors Cabinet, the Restaurant and Hospitality Express Permitting program and the Parallel Design-Permitting program are excellent examples which facilitate greater dialogue between city staff and the design community, resulting in better architecture.

Simplifying the review process will make better use of valuable human resources, facilitating more innovative projects directed at solving increasingly complex design and environmental issues. With a more predictable process, the development community can redirect resources to deliver projects of greater public and private benefit. Simplification sends an encouraging message to the investment community and supports greater economic development of the region.

Many major cities have already implemented an integrated approach to entitlement and permit processing. In the case of New York City, a number of significant and complex projects have recently been realized in record time. New York's self-certification program saves valuable city staff resources and restores design responsibility to the architect where it belongs. AIA|LA looks forward to working with Government and sharing specific recommendations on how to improve these processes.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING

AIA|LA encourages city leadership to do the following:

- Create greater clarity and certainty
- Develop better coordination between departments
- Remove redundant and conflicting requirements

# Reform the Gross-Receipts Business Tax

## THE CHALLENGE

*Due to the unique contractual relationship Architects are required to have with their clients, Architectural firms typically coordinate the professional services of a wide range of specialty consultants. It is common for an architectural firm to pay business taxes on the billings of these pass-through consultants for which the architect earns no fee. In addition to the architect's tax, the consultant also pays tax on the same scope of work. In effect, this is double taxation and an explicitly unfair system that disenfranchises the important and growing service sector of our economy. The double-taxation encourages architects and related design professionals to relocate to neighboring communities where these taxes are not paid twice.*

## THE SOLUTION

The architectural community is unified in its opposition to the double taxation on pass-through income and requests that the gross-receipts tax be phased out promptly.

Reforming gross-receipts business tax will lead to job growth, economic expansion and an increased sales tax base. Reform will also facilitate increases in property values and taxes, increase city revenue from permits, licenses and fees and encourage business location within the City and region.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING

AIA|LA encourages city leadership to do the following:

- Create consistency and fairness in the administration of the business tax.
- Revise the requirement that architectural firms must pay tax on the same receipts on which their consultants are paying (double taxation).
- Incentivize high-value, service sector job growth that will attract more high-paying jobs to Los Angeles.
- Administer a more streamlined audit and appeals process.
- Develop and adopt a Taxpayers' Bill of Rights.
- Pursue a 15-year phase-out of the business tax.
- Clarify what constitutes a "new business" and reward loyalty to firms that remaining our communities.



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