

2026 AIA Columbia Design Awards

Introduction

AIA Columbia's Design Awards program is designed to encourage and recognize distinguished architectural achievement; to honor the architectural team, their clients and consultants who work together to improve the built environment; to demonstrate the breadth of services architects provide; and to raise public consciousness of the Architect's role in shaping the quality of life through design excellence.

Design Awards Categories

Projects can be submitted under any of the following categories:

- New Construction/Substantial Renovation Award
 - Under 5,000 SF
 - Over 5,000 SF
- Adaptive Reuse/Historic Preservation Award
- Interior Architecture Award
- Unbuilt Project Award

Projects, excluding Unbuilt or Student entries, may be executed anywhere in the United States or abroad and must have been substantially completed after January 1, 2019.

New Construction/Substantial Renovation (over and under 5,000 SF)

Projects submitted in this category will include a broad range of types, such as Commercial, Educational, Multifamily, Housing, Institutional, or Faith-based Architecture. Renovations and addition projects are eligible, but the project scope must be clearly and accurately presented through graphics and written descriptions. Projects eligible for an Adaptive Reuse/Historic Preservation Award are not eligible for this category.

Submissions in the New Construction category will be entered into two subcategories based on project gross square footage: under 5,000 SF and over 5,000 SF.

Adaptive Reuse / Historic Preservation

Projects submitted in this category may be of any project type (Commercial, Educational, Residential, etc.) but should include either a renovation within an existing building or a new construction that expands an existing structure or site. Projects that have been recognized for historical value through inclusion in Historic Districts or listing on Historic Registers should identify the type and reason for recognition in the written project description. Projects that do not have official recognition or designation are also eligible and should outline the historical significance in the project description. The intent of this award is to recognize thoughtful interventions or restorations that create a synergy between old and new construction. Routine maintenance, such as painting or reroofing, is not considered restoration work for the purposes of this award. Projects eligible for a New Construction award are not eligible for this category.

Interior Architecture

Projects submitted in this category should illustrate outstanding building interiors created by architects. These projects may include new construction or renovations of existing construction. Multiple entries may be submitted, but individual rooms or spaces within the same project shall be considered as one project.

Unbuilt Project

Projects submitted in this category may be unbuilt architectural designs of any project type or conceptual design studies that investigate a specific topic or project type for research purposes. Unbuilt client-sponsored projects (commercial or residential buildings, interiors, transportation, infrastructure, monuments, etc.) are eligible for recognition. Projects under construction or otherwise apparently assured of construction are not eligible. Project descriptions for Unbuilt Projects shall include a brief statement on the purpose of the project (competition, unrealized project for a client, theoretical investigation, etc.), and for client-sponsored projects include information describing why the project will remain unbuilt (lack of funding, change of design direction, etc.). All client-sponsored projects must submit a release from the owner. Projects cannot have been undertaken for academic credit or as a non-commissioned design competition entry.

Framework for Design Excellence

Developed by members of the AIA, the Framework for Design Excellence represents the defining principles of good design in the 21st century. It's intended to be accessible and relevant for every architect, every client, and every project — regardless of size, typology, or aspiration. The 10 measures that make up the Framework are intended to inspire progress toward a zero-carbon, equitable, resilient, and healthy built environment.

Entrants in the AIA Columbia Design Awards are required to provide a description of how their project addresses at least 1 of the 10 measures, listed below with optional prompts, in no more than 800 words.

1. Design for Integration: What is the big idea behind this project and how did sustainability inform the design concept?
2. Design for Equitable Communities: How does this project contribute to creating a walkable, human-scaled community inside and outside the property lines?
3. Design for Ecosystems: In what ways does the design respond to the ecology of its place?
4. Design for Water: How does the project relate to the regional watershed?
5. Design for Economy: How does the project efficiently meet the program and design challenges and provide “more with less”?
6. Design for Energy: Is the project energy-efficient and sustainable while improving building performance, function, comfort, and enjoyment?
7. Design for Wellness: How does the design promote the health of the occupants?
8. Design for Resources: How did the design team optimize the amount and makeup of material used on the project?
9. Design for Change: Is the building resilient, and able to easily accommodate other uses in 50-100 years?
10. Design for Discovery: What lessons for better design have been learned through the process of project design, construction, and occupancy, and how have these been incorporated in subsequent projects?

[Click here](#) to learn more about the Framework.

Eligibility

All entries shall be projects executed and designed by AIA Columbia members, or project teams consisting of at least one AIA Columbia member in good standing. Projects may have been executed anywhere in the United States or abroad and must have been substantially completed after January 1, 2019. The number of entries submitted by a firm or individual is not limited. Projects that have previously won an AIA Columbia award are not eligible in that category. All projects, regardless of size, budget, style, building type, or location, are eligible. Entries are welcomed and encouraged from both established and new practitioners at any size firm.

Design Awards Jury + Gala

The 2026 AIA Columbia Design Awards Jury Chair will be announced soon. Awards will be presented during the AIA Columbia Design Awards Gala on November 5, 2026.

2026 AIA Columbia Design & Chapter Awards Dates & Fees

Schedule

August 14, 2026	Awards portal opens
September 11, 2026	Deadline for early bird discounted entry fees.
September 25, 2026	Submissions must be completed no later than 11:59 p.m. ET
November 5, 2026	Awards Celebration. Professional Design Award Winners will <u>not</u> be announced prior to the Awards Celebration, and all entrants are expected to attend this exciting event.

Design Awards Fees

EARLY BIRD:

\$135 per submission
\$100 Small firm submission

AFTER September 11, 2026

\$200 per submission
\$165 Small firm submission

No refunds will be issued for Design Awards submission fees.

Registration & Submission Instructions

Registration, payment, and file upload will all be handled through OpenWater, an online awards management software that will help to streamline the submission process. OpenWater will host a gallery of all submissions for review by the jury.

There are two parts, or "rounds", to entering your project in the OpenWater system. The first part is registering and paying for your entry. If you haven't yet created an OpenWater account, you will be prompted to do so when you register your first entry. The second part is the submission round where you will enter detailed information and upload image files and release forms for your project.

Registration

The registration form will ask for a project name. You will have an opportunity to provide a project name on the submission form if you want to change it to an anonymized name for the jury.

After completing the registration form, click on "add to cart" to proceed to the "review and checkout" payment page. If you are paying by check, follow the instructions on the payment page and please note we must receive your payment no later than August 30. You will receive an email confirming that your registration has been received.

Submission

After you've registered and paid for your entry, you can continue to submit project information and file uploads by clicking on the "Click to Continue" link at the top of the page - or return to your submission at any time before the entry deadline.

Compile each entry with the following:

- Short Project Description. Provide a short description of the project in 100 words or less. This description will serve as the introduction to your project during the first round of jury deliberations.
- Architect's Statement. Provide a narrative of the project concerning the design program and solution in 800 words or less. This statement will give the jury a more detailed description of your project and may be referred to during the second round of judging.
- Framework for Design Excellence Narrative. In no more than 800 words, provide a description of how your project addresses any of the 10 measures of the Framework. See above in the Summary section for a list of optional prompts for each of the 10 measures. Required for all categories except Unbuilt Design Awards.
- Project Images. A maximum of twelve (12) JPG images, 10MB max. each, that are 16:9 and at least 300 dpi. See below for detailed instructions and "tips." Prior to uploading, name each image file with the project title and image number (for example, "Project X – Image 1")
- Jury Image. One (1) JPG image, 10MB max., that will be used as a reference to your project during jury deliberations. This file should be labeled with the project title and "Jury Image" (for example, "Project X - Jury Image").
- Public Display Image. One (1) JPG image, 10MB max., that will be used when publicizing Design Awards winners and entrants. This file should be labeled with the project title and "Public Display Image" (for example, "Project X - Public Display Image"). This is the ONLY image that may show your firm name and/or logo.
- Photo Release Form. Required for all categories except Unbuilt Design Awards. Each photographer per submission should have their own release. (You can download this form during the submission process.)
- Client Release Form. Required for the Unbuilt project category only. Each project should have their own release. (You can download this form during the submission process.)

Copying a Submission from One Program to Another - New Feature!

New this year, entrants will be able to copy a submission from one of our awards programs to the other! If you've entered a submission in the 2026 AIA South Carolina awards program, you can now copy it into the 2026 AIA Columbia awards program by following these instructions:

1. [Click here](#) to copy an entry from the AIASC awards (original program).
2. Enter the name of the entry you want to copy to the AIA Columbia awards (destination program).
3. Click on "Use This Entry" under the Action tab.
4. A copy of your submission will be generated and you can make any edits before submitting it into the AIA Columbia program.
5. Please note the system adjusts the copy of your submission in the original program to align with the fields (questions) in the destination program's submission forms.

Important Reminders:

- All information will be used as entered in the submission form on the website gallery and for publication. Please be thorough and consistent in completing your field entries and double-check for spelling errors.
- No logos or any other information that identifies the architect/firm is to appear anywhere in the Project Information section (Short Project Description, Architect's Statement, Framework for Excellence Narrative) or the Uploads Materials for Jury Review section (Jury Presentation File and Jury Image) - with the exception of the Public Display Image.
- Please be sure to confirm the exact wording of firm (including all associated architecture firms), owner, contractor and/or consultant names and titles.
- Use "N/A" or other appropriate text in required fields on the submission form if there is no info or it's not pertinent to your project.