



2026 ASPIRE DESIGN AWARDS CALL FOR ENTRIES

CELEBRATING DESIGN EXCELLENCE ACROSS THE SOUTHEAST

INTENT

The 2026 Southeast AIA Aspire Awards recognize architectural work that exemplifies design excellence, leadership, and impact across the Southeastern United States. The Awards celebration is a time for design professionals and those who celebrate excellence in design to join together and on September 13th. These awards celebrate projects, practices, and ideas that elevate the built environment while advancing environmental stewardship, social equity, resilience, and design innovation.

Aspire invites architects and design teams to submit work that aligns with the AIA Framework for Design Excellence, a holistic, values-based approach that defines what it means to create ecological restorative environments, interior design, engineering, site, and architecture that is good for people, good for the planet, and grounded in community; informing the public of the importance of design.

ELIGIBILITY

All entries in Professional Design Awards categories shall be projects executed and designed by AIA members in an Aspire state (Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina). Additionally, the Design Partner Awards shall be executed in conjunction with an AIA member and an IIDA or ASLA member. Projects may have been executed anywhere in the United States or abroad and must have been substantially completed after January 1, 2021. The number of entries submitted by a firm or individual is not limited. Projects that have previously won an Aspire award are not eligible in that category. All projects, regardless of style, building type, or location are eligible. Entries are welcomed and encouraged from both established and new practitioners at any size firm. Additionally, entries of all project programs, types, budgets, et cetera are encouraged. If you submit, please also plan on attending Aspire.

All entries in the Student Design Awards category shall be projects executed and designed by students currently enrolled in an accredited architecture degree program, landscape architecture or interior design program or those who have graduated after January 1, 2026. Students may enter individually or in teams and must be sponsored by an instructor or professor in an architecture program in an Aspire state.

UNPAID LABOR DECLARATION POLICY FOR DESIGN AWARDS ENTRANTS

If you cannot answer 'Yes' to the Unpaid Labor Declaration Policy below, you are not eligible to submit for the Aspire Design Awards.

"The firm does not utilize, employ, or otherwise engage labor that is unpaid, including working students, and neither does any firm of which the candidate is an owner or manager, in part or in whole.

The firm acknowledges this wording shall cover all persons working under their employ, regardless of position or title. Exceptions recognized by Federal law (such as legally defined internships or educational cooperative programs) are exempt from this Policy.

The firm further acknowledges that they have not utilized any unpaid labor as defined above for any work submitted for this awards program. The submitter personally acknowledges adherence to the terms of this Policy."

DESIGN AWARDS : Semi-Finalists will be announced Mid-August. Winners will be announced at the design awards on September 13, 2026 in Asheville, NC. Everyone who submits is encouraged to attend Aspire and support one's peers in the profession.

2026 CATEGORIES

Professional Design Awards - \$295 per entry until June 19 (\$350 *after* June 20)

Commercial / Institutional

New Construction (over and under 15,000 SF)

Projects submitted in this category will include a broad range of types such as Commercial, Educational, Multifamily, Institutional, or Faith-based Architecture.

Submissions in the New Construction category will be entered into two subcategories based on project gross square footage: under 15,000 square feet and over 15,000 square feet.

Special Projects

Projects submitted in this category include construction, objects, works of environmental art or architectural design under 1,000 square feet.

Substantial Renovation

Projects submitted in this category primarily focus on renovating previously built projects. Renovations, additions, and projects that are within the scope of a larger project are eligible, but project scope must be clearly and accurately presented through graphics and written descriptions

Residential

One & Two Family

Projects submitted in this category will include single family residential projects of no more than two (2) units.

Submissions in this residential category will be entered into two subcategories based on project gross square footage; Under 3,500sf and over 3,500sf.

Substantial Renovation

Projects submitted in this category primarily focus on renovating previously built projects. Renovations, additions, and projects that are within the scope of a larger project are eligible, but project scope must be clearly and accurately presented through graphics and written descriptions

Affordable *NEW*

In consideration of one of the nation's most significant issues, affordable housing, as well as the AIA strategic plan with a priority on equity, this award Recognizes architecture that demonstrates excellent design responses to the needs and constraints of affordable housing at a variety of scales.

This category recognizes exceptional design in single-family or multi-family residential projects that prioritize affordability and dignity for residents. Projects may be 100% affordable or mixed-income developments.

Eligibility:

To qualify, a project must meet at least one of the following:

- *Income Threshold: A minimum of 20% of units are reserved for households at or below 80% Area Median Income (AMI).*
- *Financing: The project utilized recognized affordable housing subsidies (e.g., LIHTC, HOME funds, or local housing trusts).*

Required Submission Narratives: Submissions must include a concise response addressing the following:

- *Quality of Life: Describe how the design improves the daily lives of residents with limited budgets. For mixed-income projects, explain how the design ensures "tenure-blind" equality between affordable and market-rate units.*
 - *Operational Affordability: Detail specific strategies used to reduce energy and maintenance costs. Focus on how these choices lower the long-term financial burden on both the tenants (utilities) and the building owners (upkeep).*
 - *Affordability Metrics: State the specific AMI levels served, and the primary funding mechanisms used.*
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Design Partners ***NEW***

Interior Design + Architecture

Projects in this category recognize excellence for both architecture and interior; specifically, how they uniquely relate to each other. Both the Interior Design Firm and the Architecture Firm will receive the award.

Landscape Design + Architecture

Projects in this category recognize excellence for both architecture and the landscape; specifically, how they uniquely relate to each other. Both the Landscape Design Firm and the Architecture Firm will receive the award.

Design Excellence Awards

COTE. *NEW*

This award recognizes well-designed projects that exemplify the AIA's Framework for Design Excellence and the COTE Measures of Sustainability. ASPIRE COTE award applicants should include a narrative aligned with the 10 principles of the Framework for Design Excellence, along with appropriate supporting graphics, that highlights key design concepts, building systems, and site elements that demonstrate concepts of sustainability, resilience, and equity in the built environment. Selection favors well-designed solutions that exhibit an integration of natural systems and appropriate technology quantifying features, when possible (using suggested metrics), verification through building systems modeling, analysis, and best practices.

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aia.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2024-03%2Fcote-super-spreadsheet-version-4.1.1.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

Urban Design/Master Planning

Projects submitted in this category include municipal master plans, civic improvements, private development plans, campus plans, environmental programs, redevelopment projects, and transportation plans that have a significant urban design or master planning component. Urban Design/Master Planning projects should not be individual buildings. Projects that involve changes to existing context are eligible, but project scope must be clearly and accurately presented through graphics and written descriptions.

Historic Preservation

This category honors projects of any type that thoughtfully reimagine existing buildings or sites through renovation, expansion. Submissions may include projects within designated Historic Districts or listed on Historic Registers, with recognition and significance clearly noted, as well as undesignated projects that demonstrate meaningful historical value. The award celebrates inspired interventions that create a dynamic dialogue between past and present, where preservation and innovation coexist. Routine maintenance does not qualify.

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

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. Unbuilt projects are eligible for Merit Awards only.

Unbuilt Landscape

Master plans, visionary proposals, competition entries, research-driven design, community-based planning frameworks, pilot prototypes, or phased landscapes not yet constructed.

Unbuilt entries must demonstrate feasibility through clear implementation logic (phasing, governance, stewardship, maintenance, cost realism, or policy pathway).

Student Design Awards - \$35 per entry

Projects submitted in the Student Design Award category should be the work of students currently enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate architecture/ interior design / landscape design degree program, or those who have graduated after January 1st, 2026. Projects must have been completed in pursuit of a degree or academic credit. Entrants must be sponsored by a professor at their university. Group projects are eligible for recognition and will be considered as a group submission. All group members should be credited with roles clearly identified on the submission form. Student projects are entered into either the Undergraduate Student or the Graduate Student subcategory. Multiple entries are permitted; however, individual rooms or spaces within the same project are considered a single submission.

ARCHITECTURE (Student):

Submissions should reflect principles of the AIA Framework for Design Excellence, such as Design for Integration, Design for Well-Being, and Design for Resources, and align with the AIA Materials Pledge through thoughtful selection of healthy, low-carbon, and responsibly sourced materials. It is recommended to include three (3) of the ten (10) focus components to show integration of theory to design.

DESIGN (Student):

Projects submitted in the Non-Architectural (Interior Design / Landscape Design). While not needing to follow the AIA Framework for Design Excellence, submissions should reflect Design for Integration, Design for Well-Being, and Design for Resources, and align with thoughtful selection of healthy, low-carbon, and responsibly sourced materials.

Jury's Choice | Design Excellence

The Jury will select one overall winner from all submissions that represent the very best of the design excellence for design for climate, people, and communities. Note: All submissions will automatically be reviewed in this category.

DESIGN AWARDS JURY

The 2026 Aspire Design Awards Jury Chair is Steve Raike, FAIA, LEED AP BD+C; Partner, Lake Flato Architects

The jury is a diverse and highly qualified group that is keenly aware of the Southern Vernacular, building in this climate and strongly values the AIA environmental, resilience and carbon initiatives.

DESIGN AWARDS SCHEDULE

May 18, 2026	Registration opens at https://aiaaspire.secure-platform.com/site
June 19, 2026	Early bird discount registration ends.
July 17, 2026	Submissions must be uploaded no later than 11:59PM EDT

DESIGN AWARDS FEES

\$295 per submission until June 19 (\$350 *after* June 19)

STUDENT DESIGN AWARDS FEES

\$35 per submission until July 19

REFUND POLICY

No refunds will be issued for Design Awards or Student Design Awards registration 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. First, you will complete the "Registration Round." If you haven't yet created an OpenWater account, you will be prompted to do so when you register your first entry. In the registration, you will declare your project, input basic project and firm information and pay for your submission(s). (If you need to change the category or name of the project after you've completed this round, contact AIA Aspire staff, and they can help you update that information.) Once finalized, your information will be saved and moved to the next round, the "Submission Round." This part of the submission is where you will enter detailed information and upload image files for your project(s).

Registration for Professional & Student Entries

Online registration and submission will open on May 18, 2026 early bird registration must be completed by June 19, 2026; and submissions must be received no later than 11:59 p.m. eastern on July 17, 2026.

Please note: you may register an entry after the June 19 early bird deadline, but the fee will increase (see the Categories & Fees tab in the menu above). No entries will be accepted after July 17!

The registration form will ask for a project title and require you to select an awards category (Design Awards or Student Award). If you are entering the Design Awards, you will also have to select a subcategory (see Categories tab in the menu above for a list of the subcategories). If you don't yet have a title or know which subcategory you want enter, provide a generic name and choose a subcategory for now. This will allow you to complete the form, pay for your entry, and receive an entry number. If you want to make any changes after you've completed the registration process, contact Robert Harrahill robert@aiasc.org so we can give you access to your application.

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 and please note we must receive your payment no later than July 17. You will receive an email from "awards@aiasc.org" confirming that we have received your registration.

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 on July 17.

Compile each entry with the following:

- Short Description. In no more than 100 words, briefly explain the design intent and scope of your project.
- Architect's Statement. In no more than 800 words, provide a more detailed explanation of the design problem and your solution. Include any special features of your project or issues that were addressed during the design process.
- Framework for Design Excellence Narrative (F4DE). In no more than 800 words, provide a description of how your project meets any or all of the ten F4DE measures. Additionally, as possible, please include any ULI information / data.
- Project Images. A maximum of twelve (12) JPG images, 10 MB max., that are 16:9 and at least 300 dpi. Prior to uploading, name each file with the project title and image number (for example, "Project X - Image 1"). It is important that the file name does not exceed 16 characters and does not include special characters.
- Juror Image. One (1) JPG image, 10 MB max., to be used as a reference to your project for the jurors during the jurying process. 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, 10 MB max., using the same criteria as above, that will be used when publicizing Aspire 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 and Student 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.)
- For Student Design Awards: you'll need to provide the name and contact info of the professor or instructor who is sponsoring your entry, as well as College/University and Program of Study. Select either the Undergraduate Student or the Graduate Student subcategory on the registration form.

After you've compiled all the items listed above, log in to your account and select your entry to proceed to the submission forms. Complete all forms in this section, entering in project information (both concealed and for the jury) and uploading your image files. All line items and upload boxes are required, unless otherwise noted.

After you have saved and finalized your submission, you will receive an email confirmation that we have received it along with a reminder that if you chose to pay by check we must receive your payment by July 17, 2026 to advance your entry to the jury round.

Photographs/Drawings/Diagrams

Projects submissions should include a combination of photographic images, renderings, and drawings sufficient to present the project to the jury. Photos may be in color or black & white. At least one interior image is requested with all submissions, unless interiors were not in the scope of the project. Technical drawings such as plans, sections, and elevations may be presented at any scale, but should include a graphic scale and north arrow for reference. While not required, every submission is strongly encouraged to depict the relationship of the project to its site context and any significant synergy generated by the design solution.

Awards & Publicity

Awards will be announced and presented at the ASPIRE conference in Asheville, NC on Sunday, September 13, 2026. It is important that all applicants plan to attend the Ceremony or have a representative from the firm in attendance to accept any awards presented.

Semi-Finalists will be notified after jury deliberations. Certificates for all award-winning projects will be presented at the awards ceremony.

Winners of Design Awards will receive three certificates: one for the architect, one for the owner, and one for the contractor. Winners of Student Design Awards will receive one certificate per student listed in the credits. Additional certificates will be available at the expense of the award recipient.

AIA Aspire Design Awards intends to publish all design award entries. Therefore, it is essential that drawings and photographs are not restricted against publication. It is the entrant's responsibility to clear all drawings and photographs for release. A form will be provided to you to secure the necessary permission. With your online submission, please include a separate JPG file containing one Public Display Image titled with your entry number. This can be a photograph or a collection of images that best represents the project and will be used publicly - online, electronically and/or in print media.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS:

- All information will be used *as entered* 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 on the project submission form (Short Description, Architect's Statement, Framework for Design Excellence Narrative, project images, etc.). *This info should be entered in the Collaborative Acknowledgement documentation only!*
 - Please be sure to confirm the exact wording of firm, owner 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.
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- Design Awards celebrate excellence in the profession. Everyone who submits is encourage to attend the Aspire Awards to celebrate and show their support for design excellence.

IMPORTANT REFERENCE LINKS:

FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGN EXCELLENCE (for Professional Design Awards only)

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, sustainable and healthy built environment. Submissions should clearly articulate how design decisions support long-term value, environmental responsibility, and community benefit, particularly within the unique cultural, climatic, and social contexts of the Southeast.

Framework for Design Excellence:

<https://www.aia.org/design-excellence/aia-framework-design-excellence>

COTE Super Spreadsheet

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aia.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2024-03%2Fcote-super-spreadsheet-version-4.1.1.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

Aspirational Architecture Design Awards

1. Design Vision & Innovation

The primary driver of distinction.

- Clarity and strength of the central design idea
- Originality, experimentation, and risk-taking
- Advancement of architectural thinking, typology, or delivery
- Integration of design, systems, and experience into a cohesive whole

Jury lens: Does this project push architecture forward?

2. Environmental Leadership & Regenerative Thinking

Focuses on aspiration over compliance. Design excellence for the site / local vernacular.

- Climate-responsive and low-carbon design strategies
- Meaningful integration of passive systems and material intelligence
- Embodied carbon awareness and responsible material selection
- Resilience, adaptability, and long-term ecological stewardship

Jury lens: Does the project lead rather than follow environmental responsibility?

3. Human Experience, Equity & Community Impact

Architecture as a catalyst for people and place.

- Quality of spatial experience and well-being
- Inclusivity, accessibility, and equity in outcomes
- Responsiveness to cultural, social, and community context
- Contribution to the public realm or collective good

Jury lens: Who is served, and how meaningfully?

4. Influence, Transformational & Professional Impact –

Rewards leadership beyond the building.

- Potential to inform future projects or policy
- Transferability of strategies across regions or scales
- Educational value to the profession and public
- Alignment with aspirational frameworks (AIA Framework for Design Excellence, Materials Pledge, etc., ASLA,)

Jury lens: Does this project elevate expectations for the profession?