



# Small firms and the AIA 2030 Commitment

**You are more powerful than you think**

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*The mission of the AIA 2030 Commitment is to support the 2030 Challenge and transform the practice of architecture in a way that is holistic, firm-wide, project based, and data-driven. By prioritizing energy performance, participating firms can more easily work toward carbon neutral buildings, developments and major renovations by 2030.*

Small firms have the potential for having a **large impact** on our profession's goal of achieving carbon neutrality. Ironical, isn't it? Owners of small practices might feel like their contributions are inconsequential in the overall scheme of things. However, small firms make up 77% of the architectural practices in the US. If every small architectural practice signed on to the AIA 2030 Commitment, we would have a greater chance of truly achieving integration of sustainability principles into every project.

Practitioners in offices of 15 or fewer people usually wear many hats: chief marketer, administrator, finance officer, and principal architect. It can be overwhelming to add any more tasks to the to-do list, and even more overwhelming if you think the goal is perfection. But the [2030 Commitment](#) is not as intimidating as you might think.

Established in 2009, the voluntary 2030 Commitment seeks to transform the practice of architecture in a way that is holistic, firm-wide, project based, and data-driven. By prioritizing energy performance, participating firms can more easily work toward carbon neutral buildings, developments, and major renovations by 2030.

Many firms have already begun integrating tasks related to the 2030 Commitment into their standard project processes and office culture so making the leap to joining the program is easier than ever. Among the 750+ firms who have made the commitment are two small Texas firms: English Architects in Houston and DSGN in Dallas.

Kathleen English, AIA, Principal at English Architects, has been interested in and applying sustainability principles since she was in architecture school. She has been involved in the USGBC since its early days and pledged to turn her firm 'green' back in 2002. In 2011, she helped AIA Houston host a 40-hour education program to help firms gain strategies to achieve net zero. It seemed only natural that she should 'walk the walk' and sign the commitment in 2014.

Kathleen says that uploading the data for the commitment is not onerous; it may require a total of 16 hours over the course of a project. More importantly, the data that is uploaded does not have to be perfect. The main goal is just to get data uploaded, because without the data, you do not know how you are really doing. Think of this like a financial report: if you don't track your financial data, you cannot judge the health of your business. Without tracking the data on your sustainability efforts you cannot see how you are doing. "Upload the ugly as well as the good," Kathleen noted, "because you cannot reach a goal without having a goal, and seeing the numbers makes people push harder."

Similarly, Robert Meckfessel, FAIA, President at DSGN was aligned with sustainability design practices before the commitment was introduced, so

joining in 2013 was a no-brainer. "How could we not sign up?" asked Robert, "We have always believed in this. It is one thing to say something and another to measure it....the proof is in the pudding. This is a way to measure ourselves and a metric to hold ourselves accountable."

For both Kathleen and Robert, tracking the data is a key component toward accountability. The internal accountability makes them a better firm, so they can see



DSGN's Fire Station No. 6 completed in 2015 –  
100% Carbon Neutral EUI – 16

how they are doing and strive to do better. Given the time challenges in a small practice having a champion in the office can be critical to make you follow through.

Beth Brandt became that champion for DSGN when she joined in 2013. Since she joined, DSGN has consistently uploaded their project data to the Design Data Exchange (DDx), AIA's national project database. Collectively, the data helps show how we are progressing as a profession. And to take away the intimidation factor, all data becomes anonymous once uploaded. It is a 'no shaming' system!

In terms of time, it took DSGN about a week to upload data their first year DSGN because they also uploaded past project data. Since then, it has been very efficient. Beth offered, "It is basic data you already have; you are not creating data just required of the DDX database." Robert also elaborated on this. "If you are in a municipal area such as Dallas that mandates energy compliance, then you already have much of the data you need for the Commitment."

English Architects makes a graphic each year to show the overall results of their project data. This graphic is intentionally made to mimic graphics from the



English Architect's Evelyn Meador Branch Library, Houston's first LEED Gold certified library.

annual [2030 Commitment by the Numbers](#) report. This way they can compare themselves to the bigger picture of projects around the country. "We order lunch and present the information to the whole office, giving everyone a chance to see and learn," said Kathleen. "Looking at the graphic and having dialogue provides clarity; it helps inspire more people to be further motivated to do better."

Both firms believe that the commitment is more important to us as a profession and to our planet than it is important to marketing our services. "Rarely does a client come to us because they want their project to be 'green'," Kathleen offered, "but

we can bring green solutions to them and encourage them to adopt them.” In one renovation project, the consequences of the program and accessibility requirements were going to exceed the budget. English Architects was able to show how a small new building would fit within their budget and include sustainability principles, thus offering further savings for the client over time. In this situation they were able to promote efforts towards carbon neutrality that benefitted the client in multiple ways.

Also, small firms are often known as generalists and not for one skill. “We may have a reputation as a sustainability firm, but we have never pitched ourselves that way,” Robert explained. “It is a value we hold thus it is innate in what we do and integrated into the practice.”

The AIA offers many resources to support firms who become 2030 Commitment signatories. With small firms in mind, the AIA Small Firms Exchange has created a webinar and AIAU course titled “[Making the 2030 Commitment Work for Your Small Firm](#).” This course aims to demystify the [2030 Commitment for Small Firms](#) through a panel discussion of three more small firms who have signed the Commitment.

Empowering small firms to join the 2030 Commitment can make a world of difference. As noted in the 2018 [2030 Commitment by the Numbers](#) report, “While large firms contributed 90% of total GSF included in this (2018) year’s analysis, the 2030 Commitment is relevant for firms of all sizes. In 2018, 80% of the firms meeting the 70% pEUI target have fewer than 50 people, and firms with fewer than 10 people have the highest average percent pEUI reduction, a whopping 60%!” See? Small firms really are more powerful than they realize.



DSGN's Vickery Meadow Branch Library to be completed in 2020 - 100% Carbon Neutral (regional baseline) & EUI of 6.7