



AIA COTE[®]

Chapter Guide

A resource of best practices developed by local leaders
for local leaders.

2023

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This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is published and distributed with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.

Introduction

The AIA Committee on the Environment (COTE®) Network has created a best practices guide to help you develop and/or sustain a local, state, or regional AIA COTE group. COTE members have been establishing state and city chapters at AIA components across the country for most of COTE's 30-year history. As COTE continues to cultivate engagement at the component level, it continues to provide a platform to fulfill its mission, building upon the reach of the [national leadership group](#).

COTE Mission

The Committee on the Environment (COTE) is an American Institute of Architects Knowledge Community working for architects, allied professionals, and the public to achieve climate action and climate justice through design. We believe that design excellence is the foundation of a healthy, sustainable, and equitable future. Our work promotes design strategies that empower all AIA members to realize the best social and environmental outcomes with the clients and the communities they serve.

COTE Goals

We COLLABORATE.

COTE will expand its partnerships, actively listen, and act collectively.

We ENABLE transformation.

COTE will help architects transform their practices for climate action and climate justice.

We CHRONICLE design excellence.

COTE will elevate stories about people, buildings, and positive change.

We ADVOCATE for change.

COTE will promote policies that advance the AIA's mission and ours.

We STRENGTHEN our network.

COTE will connect and empower the COTE community and allies.

We created this guide to assist members in forming and sustaining local COTE groups and to strengthen the national network of these groups.

The Committee on the Environment plays an important role in helping AIA meet its published goals for climate action, including its links to public health and social justice.

We need committed leaders to take on this task and help lead the AIA. For regions and chapters without an active COTE component there can be real challenges to getting this group off the ground, and once established, it requires a consistent effort and process to keep it going. Before starting, it is important to clearly define goals, boundaries and expectations - the goal of COTE should be to provide leadership in areas that are unique to AIA, and to work collaboratively with other committees, partner organizations, and government entities in your region. The AIA 2030 Commitment and the Framework for Design Excellence offer primary focus areas for your COTE group. Local issues may also drive your group's focus.



Design is a leadership proposition, now more than ever, as communities and society tackle climate, health, and equity issues.
(Photo credit: Kira Gould)

How to Start a Local COTE Group

There are many ways to develop your local COTE presence. There may be one or many catalysts for starting a COTE group within your local AIA Chapter. The steps listed below can be followed *in any order* and should be considered in the context of your chapter's rules for committees. This is by no means a rigid process. It is likely to be organic, and many aspects will depend on the scale of your Chapter and City as well as local interests.



AIA Atlanta COTE, 2019



AIA Austin COTE, 2019

Form an interest group.

Assemble a core group of members and non-members (e.g., local ally groups such as USGBC, ILFI, CLF) who can give the process a good start. Consider bringing in members from other AIA committees as well. See the [Directory](#) section of this Guide. The core group is a source for ideas and resources for your local COTE group and provides great motivation to move forward. Consider the following: Why does a COTE group make sense here? What can COTE offer your community? If there are other groups that are doing similar activities, is there a clear need for COTE? In some cases, due to scale or component makeup, there might be a group that is already addressing COTE topics but may not want to use the COTE name or organize formally in that way.

Contact the leadership of your local or state AIA chapters/components.

Each chapter has rules and guidelines about committees and their work. Coordinating and building relationships with the chapter staff is important. They will also be vital resources for obtaining a current list of members and for help in publicizing meetings. State and local leadership may include individuals who want to take a role in organizing a local COTE group. They may also be able to provide a list of members who chose COTE as an interest area

when submitting their National dues. They will have guidance on how to communicate with local members, on funding, or assist you in securing sponsorships.

Commit to organizing an initial meeting.

A successful local COTE group typically begins with one interested individual taking ownership of the idea. While the ways to begin any endeavor are numerous, experience shows that two actions produce the best results:

1. Planning regularly scheduled meetings
2. Broadly and consistently publicizing meeting time and location

Take note of any AIA policies

All committees and activities related to the AIA should be aware of and make efforts to ensure adherence with federal and state antitrust laws. By complying with both the letter and spirit of antitrust laws, we protect the integrity of the profession and the reputation of the AIA. Additional guidance can [be found here](#).

If you have questions about the antitrust issues, please reach out to the AIA Office of the General Counsel at generalcounsel@aia.org.

In addition, it may be helpful to do a general policy check starting with your related Local Component or State Chapter. A directory of AIA National Public Policies and Position Statements may be [found here](#).

Finally, all members of committees should be aware of conflicts of interest issues. Your Local Component or State Chapter may have its own guidelines and form, but if you have any questions about this practice, please reach out to generalcounsel@aia.org for more information.

Select a chairperson or co-chairs.

The local COTE chair or co-chairs are the central point of the network, connecting COTE members nationwide. They organize chapter meetings to provide collegial support and knowledge-sharing for all practitioners. The initial chair may serve temporarily until another member is appointed. Terms may vary. See examples of various COTE component organizational structures in the [Examples](#) section of this Guide.

Plan the initial (organizational) meeting.

Using your core group as a sounding board, pick a date, time, and place for the first meeting. The two most popular times are during an extended lunch and right after work. If hosting an in-person meeting, common meeting places are the local AIA office (if available), a member architect's office, or a conveniently located library or coffee shop. If hosting a virtual meeting is better for your local chapter, consider using video conferencing software such as Zoom, Teams, or Skype. Check with your local Chapter to see if there is an AIA account you can use. When choosing between in-person and virtual, considering factors such as public health, accessibility, member locations, etc.



Figure 1. AIA San Francisco COTE hybrid event, 2022

Publicize the initial meeting.

Announce the meeting at a state or local AIA chapter meeting, in the state or local AIA chapter newsletter, on social media, and/or through e-mail notifications to local AIA members. Architects are known to respond positively to good graphics so consider what the announcement/invite looks like. Consider including useful documents such as the COTE [history](#) and other materials from the [COTE KnowledgeNet site](#). Consider making phone calls to or emailing potential attendees. Include an RSVP link with the invite so that you know how many to expect.

Send weekly reminder notices, with a final notice distributed the day before the meeting.

Host the initial meeting.

Just as every building needs a plan, every meeting needs an agenda. Regardless of how simple it may be, an agenda lets attendees know that the group is organized, has a purpose and objective, and it keeps everyone focused. A sample agenda for the first meeting is included in the [Resources section](#) of this Guide. Take notes!

Discuss who will act as chair/co-chair, and how long the term should be; however, these positions may be loosely defined until the group is better established.

The chair/co-chairs selected from the core planning group typically conduct the initial meeting. After welcoming the attendees and introducing themselves, ask attendees to introduce themselves while passing around a sign-in sheet. Hosting virtual meetings allows you to ask for people to rsvp to the event, therefore acting as your sign-in sheet. It may be necessary to verify names and emails during the call, however.

State the group's purpose. This can often be summed up in one or two sentences, such as "This COTE group addresses the unique issues related to... It provides..." Incorporate this statement into a formal group mission statement. The COTE Mission referenced in the [introduction](#) of this Guide is a good place to start; indeed, many local chapters use this with a reference to their region. Also, state what you perceive to be the goals and outcomes of the meetings, and ask the attendees about their interests and expectations. This may actually occur at several meetings as new members join and enthusiasm builds. AIA has developed a membership survey that may help you determine or broaden your goals and agenda for the year. Reference the [Resource section](#) of this Guide to obtain this survey.

Next, develop meeting norms. Discuss the frequency, format, dates, times, and location of future meetings. Additional norms may relate to participation (e.g., AIA members get to attend for free, but others pay a small fee to attend), leadership, confidentiality, and the inclusion of allied professionals. Still others may address amenities, like the provision of snacks and drinks. Food and drink always attract participation.

It is critical at these first one or two meetings to have a brainstorming session on the topics group members want to discuss, learn about, and educate others about. Also discuss actionable items the committee may be interested in pursuing, such as integrating sustainable metrics into the local awards program. The list may be extensive enough to require that some time be spent prioritizing. It's always best to start with one to two agenda items for the first year and build from there. See the [Examples](#) section in this Guide for examples of what other components have focused on. Consider using the Framework for Design Excellence as a guideline.

The group can help decide what meeting format(s) make the most sense for various topics. These may include workshops, presentations, roundtable or panel discussions, and/or casual meet and greets. Consider soliciting outside experts to present. When hosting a virtual meeting, you may have the opportunity to broaden your reach with outside speakers.

It is very helpful to develop an outline schedule for the entire year, sometimes referred to as a work plan. Some Chapters may require this. If enough members attend the initial meeting, consider delegating organization of future meetings amongst them.

Before the meeting ends, recap the norms and set the schedule and topics for the next few meetings. This will help members save the dates, and a published schedule is a great public relations tool!

Present the results of the initial meeting.

Meeting minutes are an essential component of a double-linked organization, one that shares information both up to the board level and back down to the individual groups acting on its behalf. Soon after the initial meeting, send minutes to the attendees as well as to people who were invited but unable to attend, and perhaps to others who might be interested.

Also be sure to post minutes on your website if you have one. This not only serves as an archive for future leaders but is also a good way to inform members who might be interested in joining your committee what you're all about.

Connect your group with AIA National COTE.

After your organizational meeting, affiliate your group by contacting the [COTE Network Leaders](#). Affiliating with AIA national COTE provides resources and learning opportunities, and ensures you are added to quarterly calls and an internal communication platform with other leaders around the country. Network leaders will provide you access to enter your current chair/co-chair's contact information into the AIA COTE Chapters & Leadership contact sheet and invite you to the COTE Basecamp platform.

Keep it going.

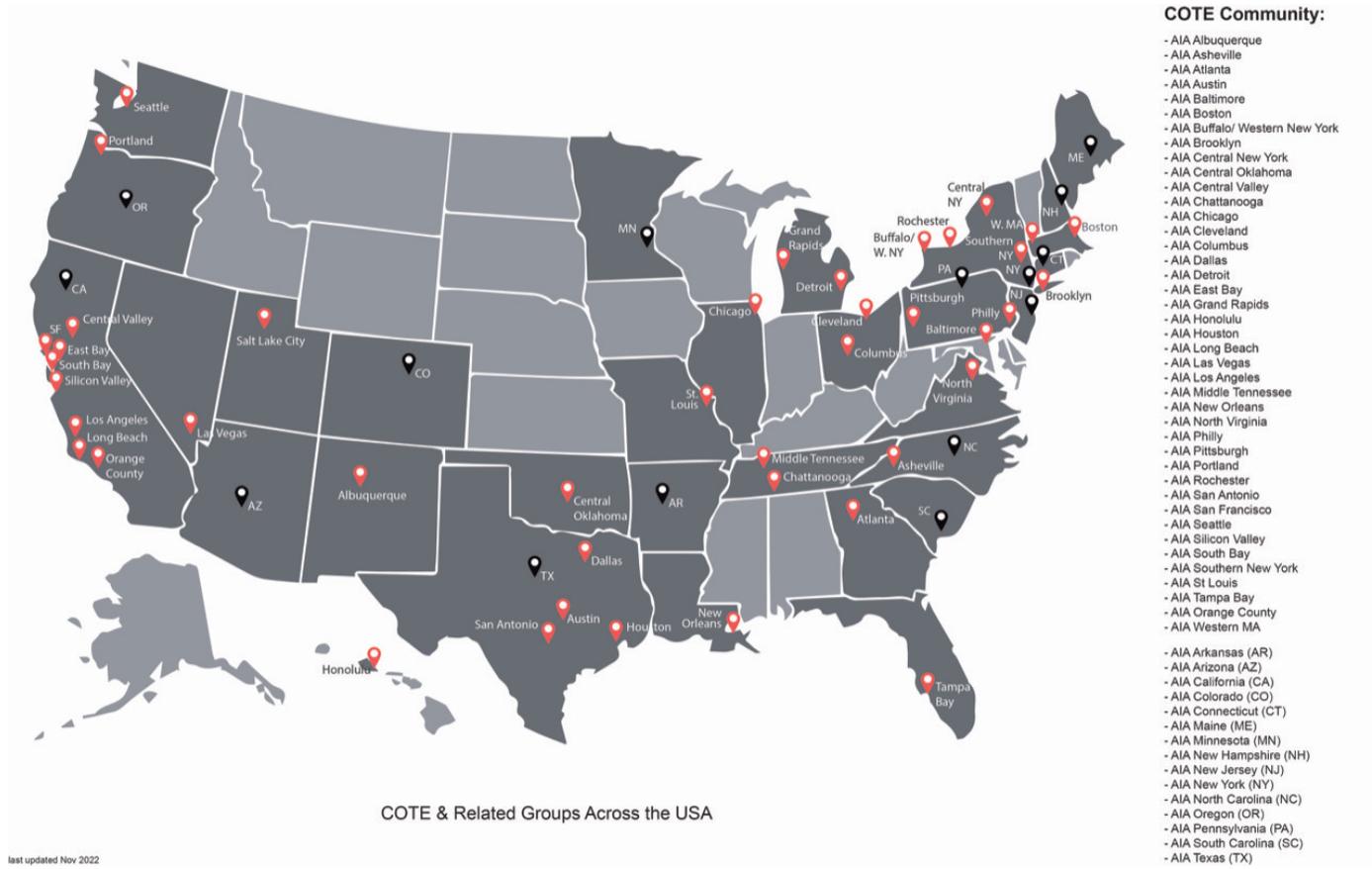
To recap, remember these things:

- **Start slowly.** Start off by holding meetings, capturing interest, and adding activities that are most closely related to AIA initiatives. Branch out if there is sufficient interest.
- **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Find allies and complementary groups in your region to collaborate with rather than create a new initiative similar to others in the area.
- **Activate leaders.** Find subcommittee co-chairs to run separate initiatives - this will keep the activities generated in scale with the level of participation / level of interest of your group. It will allow it to ebb and flow with the available bandwidth and hopefully minimize burnout.

Once you get the ball rolling, momentum and interest will keep it moving, but energy and focus are still key. Delegating duties and sharing responsibilities help to increase leadership capacity, organizational learning, camaraderie, and the chances for success. Keep the core group members involved throughout the year and, if possible, plan an annual or bi-annual organizational retreat or meeting that allows the leadership to analyze, brainstorm and establish long range goals. Leadership communication is key, consider using a communication platform like Slack or Teams to maintain engagement.

Local COTE Group Examples

COTE groups are the living, breathing component of COTE's mission. They pull a lot of the weight to move the needle. There are several COTE and related sustainability groups across the AIA landscape. The COTE Community is represented by local and state chapters, as shown in the map.



COTE components across the country have made significant strides for the AIA community. You all educate and train our members on very important topics. You keep them updated on developments in the industry. You advocate for climate action and important policy change. You help change what we award based on what we should value. You help reduce the impact of our industry and reach energy and carbon reduction goals. And you help build a growing network of change agents, among many other things. Remember, no effort is too small.

Below are a variety of COTE examples that show that no group is exactly alike.



AIA Atlanta COTE

This long-standing COTE group stays focused with a large team focused on education.

[Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA Atlanta](#)

Chapter Size: 1,797 Members / 4 Staff (full-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 10

Average Event Size: 15-20

Average Events per year: 12

Subcommittees:

- Sustainable Sites
- Water
- Energy and Atmosphere
- Indoor Air Quality/Materials



AIA Austin COTE

Originating around the same time as the local USGBC chapter, this COTE group's strength comes from its collaboration with local allied groups. [Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA Austin](#)

Chapter Size: 1,244 Members / Allied Members: 200 Companies / 5 Staff (full-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 15

Average Event Size: 20-30

Average Events per year: 12. 1-2 per month, plus conference presentations

Subcommittees:

- Environmental Justice
- AIA 2030 Working Group
- Design Excellence
- Health and Wellness



AIA California COTE

Chapter: [AIA California](#)

Chapter Size: 10,910 Members

Regular COTE Group Members: 30-40

Average COTE Event Size: 375-400

Average Events per year: 25

Subcommittees:

- Chapter Outreach
- Education
- Communications
- Advocacy
- Embodied Carbon Working Group
- Resilient Design



AIA Central Oklahoma COTE

The formation of this small COTE group was inspired by student involvement in the COTE Top Ten for Students Competition and education remains a top priority. [Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA Central Oklahoma COTE](#)

Chapter Size: 454 Members / 96 Allied Members / 1 Staff

Regular COTE Group Members: 10

Average COTE Event Size: 15-20

Average Events per year: 2



AIA Grand Rapids COTE

Despite existing within a very small chapter, Grand Rapids COTE has been able to maximize impact by taking advantage of virtual programming. [Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA Grand Rapids COTE](#)

Chapter Size: 239 Members / 65 Allied Members / 1 Staff (part-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 10

Average COTE Event Size: 10

Average Events per year: 4



AIA Philadelphia COTE

This early-adopter group has seen new growth through a collection of active subcommittees and key volunteers. [Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA Philadelphia](#)

Chapter Size: 1700 Members / Allied Members: 250 Companies / 4 Staff (full-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 30

Average Event Size: 50-75

Average Events per year: 16. 1-2 per month, plus conference presentations

Subcommittees:

- 2030 Commitment Working Group
- Design Awards Program
- Zero Waste
- Policy and Advocacy
- Environmental Justice



AIA San Antonio COTE

This group maintains member engagement by providing quality programming, good food, and great graphics. [Learn more >](#)

Chapter: [AIA San Antonio](#)

Chapter Size: 633 Members / 104 Allied Members / 3 Staff (full-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 10

Average COTE Event Size: 15-30

Average Events per year: 4-5



AIA Texas COTE

Chapter: [TxA](#)

Chapter Size: 7,500 Members / 104 Allied Members / 3 Staff
(full-time)

Regular COTE Group Members: 10

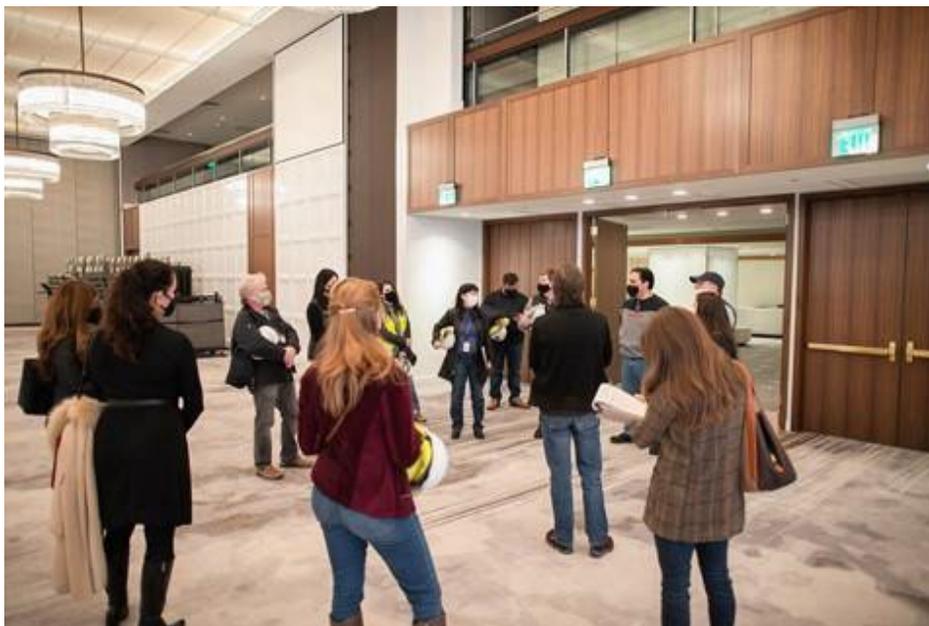
Average COTE Event Size: 15-30

Average Events per year: 4-5

How to Sustain a Local COTE Group

Goal Setting

It's important to set the Committee's goals for the year early and plan ahead. The more work you can accomplish up front, the smoother the operation. Many COTE groups start to plan for the following year at the end of the year before, between October to December. Some Chapters may even require this of you, soliciting a work plan for the Committee. You can start setting goals by checking in with your membership at the end of the year. Ask them what they thought went well, what didn't, and what they'd like to learn more about. See the "Maintain Engagement of Members" section below. Don't set too many goals, be reasonable with what you think you can accomplish in one year.



AIA Dallas COTE, 2020

Tapping into the National COTE Network

The local COTE components across the country are what make up the COTE Network. The Network's strength and power depend on engagement and communication. At the beginning of the year, or at the beginning of a new term, it is important to update your COTE component's leaders' contact information in the AIA COTE Chapters & Leadership Directory; you can get access to this shared doc by contacting your [COTE Network Leaders](#). At the same time, you can request an invitation to Basecamp, the COTE Network communications platform. The Basecamp group is made up of six different sections: *Administrative, Awards Program (local + National), In the News, Local COTE Best Practices, Program and Local News, and Top Ten Toolkit*. The platform provides leaders the

opportunity to connect with other components, stay updated on programming across the country, share resources, and stay up to date on National and Institutional news. Leaders are also invited to participate in quarterly Network calls with the AIA Sustainability staff members, [COTE Network Leaders](#), the national COTE Chair, and other local components.

Fundraising/Support/Sponsorship

While fundraising should not be the primary goal of your committee, it is a meaningful and necessary process to undergo in support of the committee's agency and vitality. These funds support the programming efforts you envision, as well as your local chapter's ability to support the committee. Depending on your AIA chapter's fundraising guidelines, committee budgets, or requirements, the specific strategies you explore to fundraise may look different. The very first step should be to check in with your chapter's staff to understand committee opportunities and boundaries. (For example, there may be some AIA sponsors that you should tap into or others you need to avoid.) However, there are some general principles that may ease the sense of uncertainty around how to bring money into your committee.

- **Who to Ask?** Whether a product manufacturer, a partner firm, or even your employers/companies, AEC and related businesses can avail themselves of the proud and visionary reputation that COTE has by aligning their own brands via sponsorship. Map out your network on a dry erase board. Who have you sat through lunch-and-learns with before? Leverage the connectedness of your COTE membership to find the right folks to ask to sponsor.
- **Develop A Simple, Value-Focused Pitch.** It's important to create a simple plan for your discussions that clearly articulates your value proposition. Essentially, why and how do they benefit from sponsoring the committee? This is also a good moment to leverage other committees and even the chapter guidelines/protocols for examples and precedents. Every chapter is a bit different in what they require and are willing to offer in exchange for sponsorship, so make sure you know the details as you internalize the pitch. Consider event-based sponsorship in addition to or instead of the typical annual sponsorship.
- **Relationships Are Everything.** In our day-to-day experiences as design and construction professionals, we're developing relationships with a range of potential sponsors for our respective committees. It is far more effective to ask for sponsorship from someone you know and have an existing relationship with. Of course, it's not

off the table to cold call, but you'll find that existing relationships yield quicker, easier, and more meaningful results.

- **Involve Your Sponsors.** Without turning your meetings or mail outs into an advertising campaign for your sponsors, it's a great idea to get them involved with the workings of the committee. Companies are hungry to connect with powerful mission-focused efforts and those who opt for sponsorship are even more likely to send their own representatives to meetings and help with committee related efforts. Leverage their investment and use that momentum to the committee's advantage.
- **Charge for events.** Although it's not recommended to do so for every event, it may make sense to charge for the events that add "more value" than normal to members. \$5-10 for a one-hour seminar is reasonable. Your Chapter's staff should be able to assist with setting up a platform for selling tickets and collecting the funds.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

COTE's mission includes climate action and climate justice through design. Collectively we work to promote design strategies that empower members to realize the best social and environmental outcomes.

What can you do as a leader to achieve this mission? How can your committee help to ensure a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse future within the profession and through design? Since 2019, the links between public health, climate, and equity became clearer than ever. These links have been acknowledged by the AIA Board of Directors and are reflected in many AIA and COTE resources.

The most robust resources now available to AIA members around issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion are the AIA [Guides for Equitable Practice](#). This includes best practices, relevant research, and tools to help members and firms address a variety of issues about equity, diversity, and inclusion; these issues have parallels in components and committee chapters, too. The AIA also partnered with the University of California Hastings College to conduct an [Investigation into Bias in the Architecture Profession](#), citing qualitative and quantitative data of bias based on gender and race/ethnicity in the practice of architecture.

COTE's national leadership has always been gender diverse. More than 40 percent of the chairs have been female. The Leadership Group percentage in recent years has been event

higher than that (in 2021, for example, 10 of 12 members were female). And in recent years, we've had an average of three members who identify as BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color). COTE's leadership renewed its commitment to establish connections to groups and individuals that will help us attract a wider range of people to our work and our community.

Diversity in our Industry

The AIA is committed to broadening equity, diversity, and inclusion to create a stronger profession. In order to achieve equity in the built environment, the architecture workforce needs to reflect the rapidly changing demographics of those people we are charged to serve. Consider who is at the table. Does your Chapter and your Committee membership represent the community you're serving?

- **Help** your Chapter facilitate anti-bias training for local membership.
- **Engage** with NOMA, and consider encouraging your Chapter to ask a representative from the organization to serve on the component Board and provide a safe and inclusive space for communication.
- **Reach** out to organizations such as NOMA to see how your group can support their efforts and collaborate.
- **Participate** and bring awareness to [NOMA's 2030 Diversity Challenge](#).
- **Inquire** and help expand youth groups such as NOMA's [Project Pipeline](#) and Michael Ford's [Hip Hop Architecture Camp](#).
- **Create** a subcommittee or interest group focused on equity, diversity, justice, and inclusion issues (these are called JED&I., DEI, EDI, or other variations) to explore how these issues intersect with climate action.

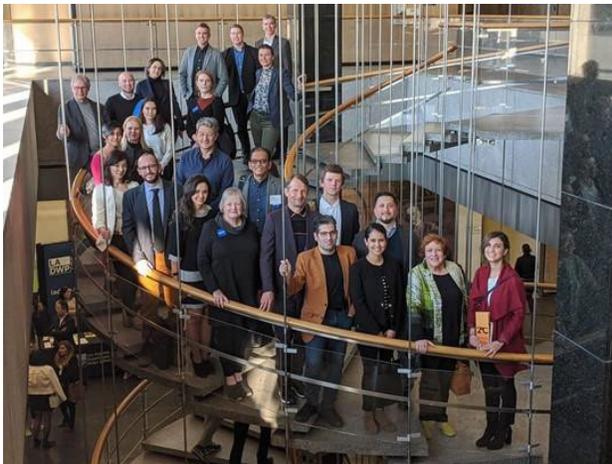
Diversity in Design

Our duty is to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public—the entire public. The buildings that we design are meant to shelter everyone. In terms of social impact, design has the power to inform more equitable, resilient, sustainable, and relevant built environments for the increasingly multicultural population of our nation.

How do we promote environmental justice through design?

- **Be inspired** by Blueprint for Better's [“Improving Racial Equity Through Greener Design”](#).

- **Create** collaborative spaces where everyone can actively participate in envisioning, design, and creation.
- **Bring** in a diverse group of guest speakers to talk about various topics related to environmental justice, equitable communities, etc. Expand reach outside of the AEC industry.
- **Reach** out to the community, local groups and/or stakeholders to learn how issues are affecting their communities at a granular level.
- **Disseminate** information provided by the Framework for Design Excellence’s “Design for Equitable Communities” measure. Encourage members to take the AIAU Course, [Design for Equitable Communities. AIA Framework for Design Excellence.](#)



AIA Los Angeles COTE, 2020
(photo credit: Nico Marques)



AIA Seattle COTE, 2019

Maintain Engagement from Members

Survey Interests

Listen to what your members want and need. Before you plan your programming for the year, survey your local AIA members of their interests. The more inclusive you can make your programming the better. You can find a link to a COTE Membership Survey in the Resources section of this Guide.

Delegate Responsibilities

You can’t do everything on your own, nor should you have to. Don’t be afraid to delegate responsibilities and tasks to your members. Empower your members and provide them the opportunity to make the difference they want to see. Consider engaging students or young

women and men. Tune into their interests and desires. If you're leading a medium to large component consider creating sub-committees, working groups, or task forces to deliver your annual agenda. If you're a smaller component, consider delegating tasks as they surface. Whatever organization of roles you choose to pursue, be sure to give clear direction, solicit feedback, and commend volunteers on their successes.

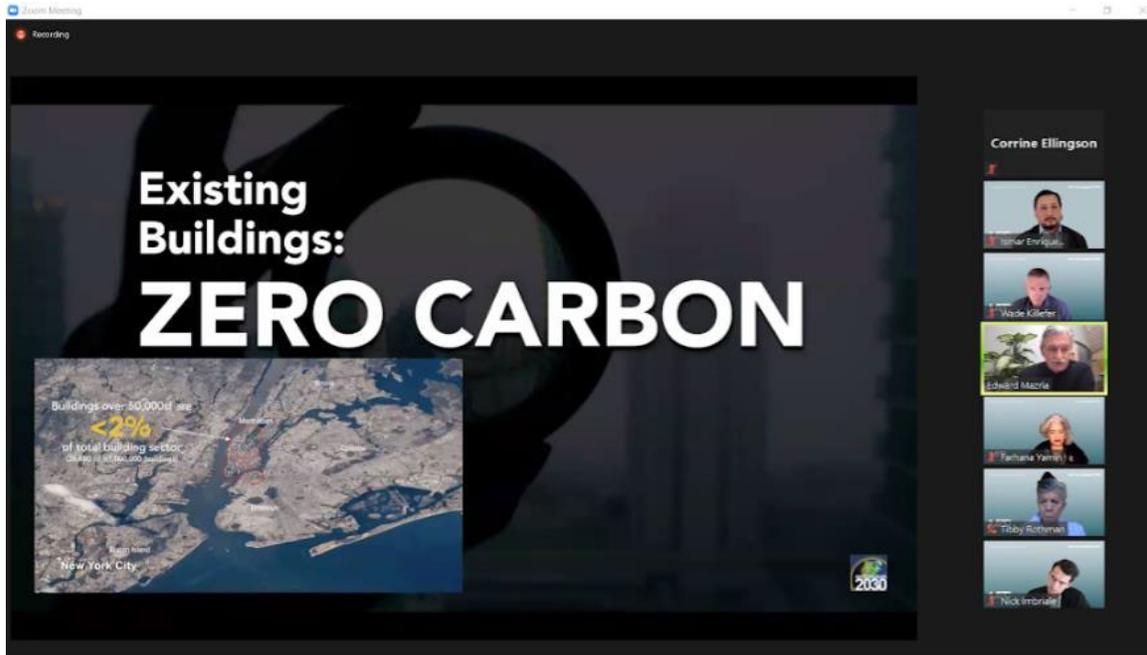
Provide a Platform for Communication

Communication is key to maintaining engagement. Social media and email are two consistently successful ways to communicate with members, however you may also consider using a platform such as Slack, Teams, or Basecamp. Share a link to the platform with members at the beginning of the year and engage frequently. It may take some time for members to catch onto. Consider making a list of engaging questions to ask and/or resources to share on the platform to instigate conversation.

Diversify Programming

It is crucial to a component's success to be able to provide engaging programming for members. At the beginning of the year set an agenda and create a working plan. The more upfront planning you can achieve, the better the outcome. Potential programming ideas may include presentations, seminars, roundtable discussions, panel discussions, workshops, and/or meet and greets. Most components find presentations and seminars to be their most successful, however consider your intended audience. Various events hold different values depending on demand. Some people need training and tools, some need inspiration.

Take advantage of the possibilities our virtual meeting world has opened up. You now have the ability to bring in speakers from across the country. Distance doesn't need to be a deterrent any longer. Consider collaborating with other COTE groups in and out of your State. Piggyback off of other relevant programming locally and nationally.



AIA LA, 2021 virtual event

Keep Meetings Consistent and Frequent

Extracurricular activities, such as volunteering with COTE, can sometimes be an inconvenience. Consistency leads to convenience. Make sure your component’s schedule for the year is well planned and shared with membership. This allows people to plan ahead and helps foster habit, especially regarding planning meetings. Most COTE groups meet once a month. Events don’t necessarily have to occur as consistently, but they should be frequent enough that members feel they are gaining value from your programming.

It is easy for folks to feel Zoom fatigue. Consider exercises that will provide variety to members’ normal meeting routine. Can you use a program like [Mural](#) or [Miro](#) to conduct a workshop? Can your meeting include breakout sessions? Is there a game you can play at the beginning of the meeting to excite people? Make it interesting!

Avoid Leadership Burnout

Since we are all volunteers sometimes it’s hard to sustain a committee. There may not be enough participation, or you may not be able to find a new leader. Whatever the struggle, we don’t want to see you burn out! Take a step back and consider your options.

It may not always make sense to have a formal committee. How is your time best spent? Would it make sense to merge COTE with another committee? Could the committee be simply an email listserv? If you're needing to find new leadership consider either putting out a call for nominations or an application. Contact colleagues and talk to your Chapter's staff to see if they know anyone who would qualify.

Diversifying roles within the committee can also help as it decreases the amount of work demanded from one person. Needing help putting together educational presentations or flyers? Connect with a local university and ask if any students are interested in helping. Lastly, tap into the COTE Network to solicit advice from other leaders.

COTE & AIA Information

COTE History

The AIA Committee on the Environment was founded in 1990, but it rose from conversations and events that began in the 1970s. For a graphic and narrative understanding of COTE from 1990 through 2020, visit the [COTE Timeline](#) and the COTE [history](#). COTE's [mission](#) was retooled in 2020.

AIA Sustainability

The COTE Knowledge Community has been elevating [sustainability](#) as part of design excellence since 1990. Today, this pursuit is part of a constellation of aligned efforts throughout the AIA, embedded in a number of groups and commitments.

Starting in 2006, AIA adopted Architecture 2030's [2030 Challenge](#) and in 2008 AIA replied to the challenge with the [AIA 2030 Commitment](#); signatory firms have been reporting predicted energy use intensity of buildings in the design process since 2010. In fall 2018, AIA approved [changes to the AIA Code of Ethics](#) that include environmental stewardship and climate response. In fall 2019, AIA released a statement, [Where We Stand](#), to clarify its position on climate and design leadership. In May 2019, a “big move” toward environmental stewardship and climate action coalesced into a Resolution that was passed, overwhelmingly, by members calling for urgent and sustained climate action and recommending the COTE Top Ten measures be adopted as an official Framework for Design Excellence. The AIA's Board acted quickly and decisively following up with adoption of the measures as the [AIA Framework on Design Excellence](#) and creation of a [Climate Action Plan](#). In 2020, the AIA Board of Directors and Strategic Council sought to highlight the connections between climate action, public health, and social justice, seeing the architect's leadership imperative on all three at once ([AIA Strategic Plan](#)). The [AIA's Blueprint for Better](#) campaign alludes to these connections. AIA staff worked to refine what was once known as the COTE Top Ten Toolkit to be the Toolkit (and resources) that support the framework. For support around AIA National's sustainability and resilience resources, please reach out to sustainability@aia.org.

COTE continues to actively promote the [AIA Framework for Design Excellence](#) (which was adapted from the COTE Top Ten Measures). COTE has supported AIA's stepping up on climate action in recent years: embracing the Framework principles; issuing its [Climate](#)

[Action Plan](#); approving a 2021–2025 [AIA Strategic Plan](#) with a priority of “climate action for human and ecological health”; and more.



AIA's headquarters in Washington, DC, is alive with the AIA's climate action message, unifying climate response, health, and equity as the central design challenges of our time. (Photo credit: Julie Hiromoto, FAIA)

AIA Knowledge Communities

The [Committee on the Environment](#) is one of [AIA's 21 Knowledge Communities](#). Listed here are a few other Knowledge Communities that, like COTE, align with AIA's Sustainability efforts.

- **[Building Performance](#)**: The goal of the Building Performance Knowledge Community (BPKC) is to promote architects as leaders in the application of technical design for building performance; in the use of high-performance design criteria, codes, and standards; and in programming, designing and managing building performance.

- **[Historic Resources Committee](#)**: The mission of the Historic Resources Committee (HRC) Knowledge Community is to identify, understand, and preserve architectural heritage, both nationally and internationally.
- **[Regional and Urban Design](#)**: The Regional and Urban Design Committee (RUDC) aims to improve the quality of the regional and urban environment by promoting excellence in design, planning, and public policy in the built environment. This will be achieved through its member and public education, in concert with allied community and professional groups.

AIA Member Groups

AIA also offers interest-based [membership groups](#). The groups deliver tailored online tools, access to forums and other significant resources. COTE works closely with the Resilience Network and other member groups.

- **[Resilience Network](#)**: The Resilience Network focuses on topics of disaster assistance, hazard mitigation, climate adaptation and resilience by creating a forum for knowledge sharing, networking, news and events and opportunities for external and internal project participation. Resilience is a systems-based approach to addressing shocks and stresses, and it requires a variety of perspectives, skills and experience.

COTE National Leadership

[Leadership Group \(LG\) members](#) comprise the national leadership group. They are appointed for an annual term, typically renewed for two additional years. The COTE Chair is selected annually by the LG (and immediate past chairs stay on for a fourth year to ensure leadership continuity and transfer of knowledge).

COTE Activities and Working Groups

- Climate Action & Climate Justice
- COTE Top Ten Awards (flagship program)
- COTE Top Ten Student Competition (flagship program)
- Stewardship of the Super Spreadsheet
- COTE Advocacy
- COTE Communications

- The COTE Network and Community (and Common App)
- COTE Partnerships (to support all COTE activity and programs)

COTE in 2023 & Beyond

In 2023, the national [Leadership Group](#) under the guidance of 2023 COTE Chair Lori Ferriss and the 2024 Chair Michelle Amt is focusing on the intersection of climate action and climate justice, advancing advocacy efforts at all levels, running and refining its flagship programs (the AIA COTE Top Ten Awards and the COTE Top Ten for Students Competition with ACSA), exploring key levers of change being investigated by AIA and others, advancing collaborative engagements, supporting the COTE Network, and communicating with the entire built environment community about the climate era imperative and tools that propel architects as leaders (such as the Framework for Design Excellence).

COTE Tools & Resources

We are continuing to develop tools and resources to help COTE leaders, members, and designers. Start with the collection below.

Meeting Tools

[Sample first agenda \(organizational meeting\)](#)

[Sample agenda \(regular COTE meeting\)](#)

Topics of Interest

Based on a recent survey of COTE leaders around the country, the top 10 topics of interest from members over the past few years (in order of most popular to least) are below. Of course, you are not limited to these topics.

- Energy
- AIA 2030
- Embodied Carbon
- Equity/Community
- Materials
- Framework for Design Excellence
- Advocacy
- Resiliency
- Well-being/Health
- Building reuse
- Client relations
- Common App

If you're looking for programming inspiration, reference the COTE Network Basecamp Program and Local News project and be sure to join the quarterly COTE Network calls to hear updates from other components.

Branding

Component leadership has access to Brandfolder, an online platform that contains all AIA logos, agenda and PowerPoint templates, and color scheme information that adhere to AIA National branding guidelines. Consult your component staff for branding assistance.

Online resources

Reference the resources mentioned in this guide here. Other valuable resources include:

- [AIA COTE KnowledgeNet site](#)
- [AIA Framework for Design Excellence](#)
- [AIA Sustainability](#)
- [AIA 2030 Commitment](#)
- [AIA Blueprint for Better](#)
- [COTE Design Datamap](#)
- [Climate Action Message Book Appendix](#)

Below is a list of sustainability and resilience resources created by AIA:

- [A Regional Tour of Climate Risk for Planning and Design: National Climate Assessment Series](#). This special AIAU series includes ten sessions, one for each of the NCA regions. Attendees may choose to attend just one or as many as all ten, depending on your region(s) of work and interest.
- [Performing Beautifully: Lessons from 2021 COTE® Top Ten Award-winning teams](#). This 90-minute on-demand course explores the design strategies and outcomes of the 2021 COTE® Top Ten Award winners. Created in collaboration with COTE, it includes videos from each team and commentary from 2021 jury chair Michelle Amt, AIA, and COTE® 2020 Chair Julie Hiromoto, AIA. Attendees will gain valuable insight, learn about new techniques, systems, and tools, and leave feeling inspired by the broad range of design solutions presented.
- [AIA-CLF Embodied Carbon Toolkit for Architects](#). The AIA-CLF Embodied Carbon Toolkit for Architects serves to provide architects an overview and the necessary steps to be taken to reduce embodied carbon in their projects. This resource is divided into three parts, introducing the necessary steps and resources to take in reducing embodied carbon.
- [Equitable Development Frameworks](#). This resource helps architects understand, navigate, and select systems for more equitable engagement and development in our communities.
- [Disaster Assistance Handbook \(4th edition\)](#). This handbook is essential reading for any citizen architect or component leader who wants to better understand their role preparing for and responding to disaster.
- [Materials Pledge Getting Started Guide](#). Simple, accessible PDF to introduce the five pledge statements underlying the new "Architecture & Design Materials Pledge." This resource is for companies who want to signal they care about material selection but don't know how to start.
- [The State of Resiliency in the Built Environment](#). This report is an important tool that advances the industry's understanding of the current state, and best practices necessary to increase the resiliency and sustainability of the built environment.
- [Architect's Role in Creating Equitable Communities](#). This resource shares how architects can, in their practices, bring about racially just and equitable outcomes for all members of the communities they serve.
- [Guides for Equitable Practice: Justice in the Built Environment](#). This supplementary edition is intended to help designers convey the opportunities, benefits, and challenges of making justice a deliberate aim of the building process.

- [Architects Guide to Business Continuity](#). This PDF guide and complementary AIAU course help architects understand the elements of a business continuity plan and its value in reducing risk and protecting profits; assess hazard and climate risks that can disrupt your ability to conduct business; apply a methodology for analyzing business impacts triggered by various hazards; and identify actions that reduce vulnerability and minimize disruption.
- [ROI of Codes, standards, and reporting supporting resilient design](#). These set of talking points can be used in your communications to enhance your argument and strengthen your message.
- [AIA Framework for Design Excellence Toolkit \(update\)](#). The Framework for Design Excellence represents the defining principles of good design in the 21st century. Click on each of the 10 defining principle tiles to explore relevant themes, compelling case studies, and the most impactful design strategies architects can call upon in their work.
- [Preparing to Thrive: 5-year Report of the Resilience Building Coalition](#). 5-year progress report on policy, education, research, planning and disaster response, to be publicly release on 5/20.
- [Architect's Primer on Renewable Energy](#). A PDF guide to introduce architects into incorporating renewable energy into their projects, including building-scale solutions, picking the right system, and options where on-site isn't possible.
- [Creating a Sustainability Action Plan that Works](#). This guide was created to help 2030 Commitment participants (or any firm!) develop and implement an effective, customized sustainability action plan that can grow with the firm. It includes key principles for change management, suggested elements for a plan, real-life examples from a 140+ library, and worksheets to get started.
- [Secrets to Success for Small Firms AIAU series](#). Developed in coordination with Sustainable Performance Institute, this 3-part AIAU series featuring firms who met the 2030 Commitment energy reduction targets in 2019, available on-demand via AIAU.
- [The Fundamentals of Resilient & Climate Adaptive Design Guide](#). A compelling one-page PDF outlining eight design principles to reduce harm and property damage, adapt to evolving conditions, and more readily, effectively, and efficiently recover from adverse events.
- [Hazard and Climate Risk: A user's guide and form for acknowledging risk](#). This resource is intended to support conversations between the architect and client to reach and document a mutual understanding of hazard and climate risk that will inform project requirements.

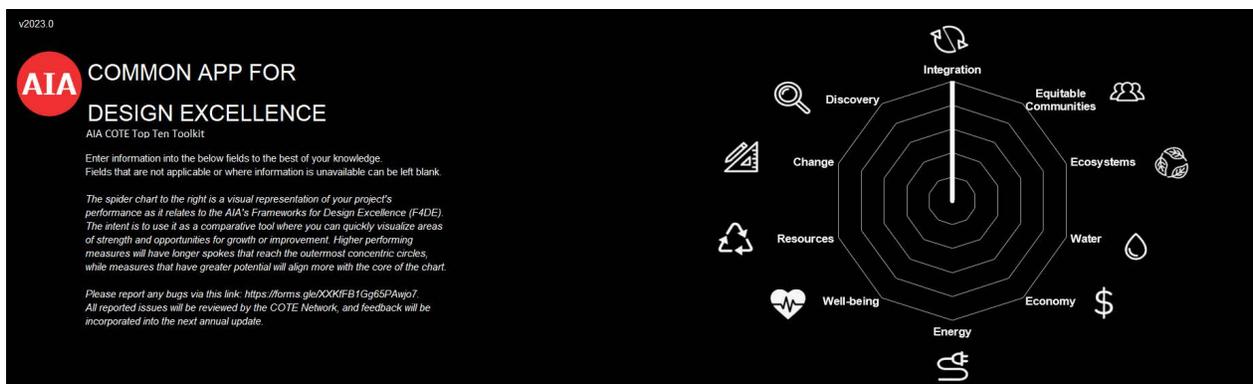
- [AIA Resilient Project Process Guide](#). This actionable resource, organized by project phase, identifies the points in which resilience and climate adaptation goals can be layered into specific design solutions. e
- [Architect's Guide to Building Performance](#). The best way to improve performance and know how your building will perform is through energy modeling early and often. The Architect's Guide to Building Performance helps architects better integrate building performance simulation into their design process.
- [Healthier Materials Protocol](#). The AIA Healthier Materials Protocol was created to provide clear, practical methods and tools to navigate materials and effectively translate awareness to practice. The document provides a stepwise method for setting healthier materials goal and criteria definitions, product selection, tracking, and specification, no matter the size and scope of the project.
- [TEOP for Architects](#). The TEOP for Architects guide introduces how architects can use the Tenant Energy Optimization Program (TEOP) process to ensure they are harnessing the energy-conservation potential of existing buildings, saving clients money, and remaining at the forefront of sustainable design.
- [Renovate, Retrofit, Reuse Guide](#). Prepare your firm to take advantage of an increasing number of retrofit projects to generate positive economic, health, and environmental benefits with this guide that includes data, guiding principles, and case studies.
- [Design for Adaptability, Deconstruction, and Reuse](#). Spaces that are designed to be flexible make reacting to crisis easier. This guide redefines what it means to be adaptable.
- [Modular and Off-site Construction Guide](#): From quality and safety to schedule efficiency and sustainability, modular building has a lot to offer owners and project teams. Learn more about the variety of benefits of modular construction with the AIA Modular and Off-Site Construction Guide.

Design Awards & Common App for Design Excellence

Design Awards

Design awards are typically the highest profile, longest running, most recognized program within each AIA chapter. They play a vital role in communication with the community, create an important source of revenue for a chapter, and provide common ground for members of the chapter to come together and celebrate their best work. Moreover, design awards programs embody and project the values of the architecture profession, which include the [AIA's Climate Action Plan](#). To uphold these values, many chapters have incorporated sustainability metrics and reporting into the submission requirements and evaluation process for their awards programs. COTE Committees have played an essential role in advocating for the inclusion of sustainability criteria within design awards, explaining that good design is sustainable design. In addition, COTE Committees have supported both Design Awards Committees in modernizing their process and local firms in understanding updated requirements for awards submissions.

COTE Common App for Design Excellence v2023.0



What is the Common App for Design Excellence?

The Common App is an Excel based tool that has been adopted by state and local AIA Chapters across the country as part of their Design Awards process. The Common App tool is based on the AIA's [Framework for Design Excellence](#) which represents the defining principles of good design in the 21st century. Comprised of 10 principles and accompanied by searching questions, the Framework seeks to inform progress toward a zero-carbon, equitable, resilient, and healthy built environment. Firms are asked to complete the Common App form as part of their submission for each project. Juries use the information provided on Common App forms to evaluate the sustainability achievements of each design project.

How does the Common App work?

Applicants enter project information and answer qualitative and quantitative questions related to each of the 10 measures from the Framework for Design Excellence in the "Common Application" tab. The performance metrics are aggregated and automatically generate the spider chart at the top of the sheet. The spider chart is a visual representation of a project's performance, which can be used to quickly show project strengths and opportunities for growth or improvement. Higher performing measures will have longer spokes that reach the outermost concentric circles. The "Output" tab includes the spider graph and the narrative statements from the form.

Common App Use

The Common App (or a slightly modified version of the Common App form) has been integrated into the design awards process in over twenty AIA Chapters. An additional 16 chapters have incorporated sustainability criteria into their Design Awards process.

Chapters that have integrated the Common App into their Design Awards process	Chapters that have incorporated sustainability criteria into their Design Awards process
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AIA Austin• AIA Boston• AIA California• AIA Central Oklahoma• AIA Colorado• AIA Dallas• AIA East Bay*• AIA Houston• AIA Long Beach/South Bay• AIA Los Angeles• AIA Middle Tennessee• AIA Minnesota• AIA New York• AIA Orange County• AIA Pennsylvania• AIA Philadelphia• AIA Redwood Empire• AIA San Antonio• AIA San Francisco• AIA Seattle• AIA Silicon Valley• AIA Texas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AIA Atlanta• AIA Brooklyn• AIA Buffalo/Western New York• AIA Central New York• AIA Detroit• AIA Grand Rapids• AIA Honolulu• AIA Maine• AIA Minnesota• AIA Nevada• AIA New Hampshire• AIA Oregon• AIA South Carolina• AIA St. Louis• AIA Tampa Bay• AIA Wisconsin

* Common App has been slightly modified from its original version.

Download the current version of the Common App for Design Excellence here.

How can I support my chapter in adopting the Common App?

- ["Climate Action in Design Awards," Henry Siegel, AIA CA](#)
- [Common App Slide Deck](#)

How do I learn more about the Common App?

- [Video instructions on how to complete the Common App](#)
Note: This video references a previous version of the Common App used in CA; however, much of the content is the same and the approach to completing the form has not changed.
- [Supporting juries with the Common App](#)
- [Technical Reviews & the Common App](#)

FAQs

Q. What is a local COTE group?

A. A local COTE group is a dynamic, interactive group that facilitates knowledge sharing between sustainable design practitioners in its geographic area and associated with a local or state chapter/component of AIA.

Q. What is the COTE Network?

A. The COTE Network is a network for local COTE group leaders across the country, assisting members in forming and sustaining local COTE groups and to strengthen the national network of these groups.

Q. Why host a local COTE or sustainable design interest group?

A. Hosting a local COTE group increases knowledge-sharing of sustainable design, and facilitates dialogue between architects, general interested public, owners, contractors and sustainability groups, improving the understanding of sustainable design on a local, community level.

Q. What are AIA Knowledge Communities?

A. Knowledge Communities are groups of people who share a common interest in a given area and who collaborate to deepen their understanding of that area through ongoing learning and knowledge-sharing.

Q. What is the COTE Knowledge Community and what does it do?

A. The COTE Knowledge Community working for architects, allied professionals, and the public to achieve climate action and climate justice through design. COTE is anchored by a belief that design excellence is the foundation of a healthy, sustainable, and equitable future. COTE's work promotes design strategies that empower all AIA members to realize the best social and environmental outcomes with the clients and the communities they serve.

Q. Can I be an individual member of the COTE Knowledge Community?

A. AIA members or nonmembers can join Knowledge Communities (learn about AIA Knowledge Communities [HERE](#)). Simply go to the [COTE Knowledge Community site](#) and click on 'Join our Community'.

Q. Can I post in the COTE Knowledge Community?

A. Yes, please do! Members are welcome to post. Here's a [guide](#) to posting discussion posts and blog posts.

Q. Why should I join the COTE Knowledge Community?

A. COTE offers a unique opportunity to improve your own practice while contributing to a knowledge base for sustainable design. Registering with the AIA as a member of COTE ensures that you'll receive all the mailings and notices sent only to members, like announcements and invitations for COTE events, including COTE meetings at the AIA National Conference.

Q. How often should the local group meet?

A. Monthly meetings are recommended, but a group may elect to meet more or less often, depending on the interest and availability of its members. Meetings could be over a brown-bag lunch on a designated day (say, second Friday) of every month. Some COTE chapters meet in the evening. To foster equitable participation and inclusion, consider a meeting time that works for all, so that members who are care-givers to others don't miss out on these valuable learning and networking opportunities that advance their career.

Q. Can meetings be virtual?

A. Yes. The times of the pandemic have opened up opportunities to reach wider audiences on a regional and national scale. Any combination of in-person and virtual meetings can be tried, and in-person meetings can also be broadcast as webinars.

Q. How can COTE spearhead or participate in advocacy efforts?

A. Aside from being a knowledge group, COTE can also function as an interest group, and spearhead or participate in advocacy of environmental issues relating to architecture and community on a local and national level. A few pointers for members:

- Keep a finger on the pulse of environmental policy relating to architecture and community that might be up for discussion in the State legislature and potentially get enacted on. Team up with the advocacy director of the Local or State AIA chapter who may have details of issues. Some AIA chapters have an annual 'Day of Advocacy' or like event where members meet their representatives - encourage COTE members to participate.
- Some AIA Chapters may have Political Action Committee (PAC) funds to support legislators whose views align with AIA's mission. If there are legislators who impact environmental policy, work with the Chapter to include them in PAC support.

- If relevant bills are up for voting, mobilize support or opposition through writing letters, emailing and calling legislators. Your views will be recorded by aides, and though we might think a cause is futile, legislators do listen to their constituents, when there are adequate numbers. Make a script for members to read out or email, and request everyone to make those calls. You can find your local legislators [here](#).

Q. What is the procedure for submitting COTE seminars for AIA CEUs?

A. Before the seminar, find out from component staff about CEU coordination; they will have a process to follow.

Once a speaker is finalized for a seminar, they have to provide the following information:

- Presenter Name, Title, and Organization
- Presentation Title
- Summary Description (recommend approx. 250 words)
- 4 Learning Objectives
 - See instructions on how to write Learning Objectives [here](#).

Send this information to your local component at least four weeks before the seminar so that they can send it to AIA National for approval. Distribute the [AIA CES Course Attendance Sheet](#) during the seminar, and send it to your local staff, who will assign appropriate CEU credits to AIA members.

Q. How can I utilize social media to post information and issues?

A. Here’s a [guide to COTE Social Media](#).

Q. How will local group expenses be managed and paid?

A. Each local group is responsible for managing its own expenses. Expenses may be covered by the local or state component, group members, vendor sponsorships, or a combination of these. Reference the [Fundraising](#) section in this Guide for more information.

Q. Our local component has a committee that functions with a similar purpose and format, but under a different name. Can our group affiliate?

A. Absolutely. The overarching goal is to create a knowledge network for AIA members and allied professionals working toward climate action through design.as and

Q. Why should we affiliate our local group with the AIA National COTE?

A. By affiliating and communicating with COTE National, you have a direct line to the AIA, helping it work toward better serving its members' needs. COTE National does not dictate content to local groups. Think of COTE as a peer-to-peer network. Each local group maintains its own integrity and the much-needed freedom to respond to the ideas and issues of its membership. By linking to the AIA National Knowledge COTE, you share your voice with groups – and hear other voices – across the country.

Q. What resources are available to a local COTE Group?

A. Resources include the [AIA COTE web page](#), the COTE discussion group, other Knowledge Communities' online discussion forums and other local allied professional groups.

Q. How can local COTE group members participate with the COTE Knowledge Community?

A. Individuals can author blog posts or discussion topics on the COTE Knowledge Community site. They can also submit comments, attend COTE events at the AIA Conference on Architecture or at Greenbuild, volunteer to serve a leadership role at the local or National level.

Q. What if I have questions about COTE or about starting a local COTE group?

A. Contact [AIA National COTE](#). You can also contact your [COTE Network Leaders](#).

COTE Directory

National COTE Leadership

The National COTE Leadership Group's members evolves every year. You can view current Leadership Group members [here](#).

Local and State/Regional COTE Committees

For a list of local COTE groups that we are aware of, see the map on page 19).

We maintain a Google doc of all COTE chapters and contact information for their leaders. To gain access to this and be listed on it, please contact the [COTE Network Leaders](#).

If you and your co-leaders are not on the COTE Network Basecamp (and our Leadership Directory), please email your [COTE Network Leaders](#) to get access to resources and peer leaders around the country.

COTE Allies & Affiliations

AIA COTE chapters' collaboration with other groups whose values align with COTE is highly encouraged. It is mostly by collaboration that big issues such as climate change and environmental justice can be better understood in all their different facets, and common goals formed.

Collaboration can happen in several ways:

- **Knowledge sharing:** conducting seminars by speakers of different groups to get their perspective of current issues
- **Advocacy:** join in with other groups to advocate collectively for issues that affect the community
- **Community involvement:** participate in another organization's community efforts such as building a Habitat for Humanity house, energy conservation measures at elderly housing, etc.
- **Publicity partnerships:** for conferences and other events
- **Allyship:** with social and environmental justice groups

Here's a representative list of potential COTE collaborators:

- NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program
- National Organization of Minority Architects

- US Green Building Council
- American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Condition Engineers
- Urban Land Institute
- International Interior Design Association
- American Society of Landscape Architects
- American Planning Association
- Passive House Institute
- Green Building Alliance
- Master Builders Association
- Building Decarbonization Coalition
- Carbon Leadership Forum
- Building Enclosure Councils
- City Sustainability Office
- University Sustainability Offices
- Conservancy Groups
- Local Environmental non-profits
- Corporate sustainability offices
- Local Utility Groups

Many COTE components have also found success in collaborating with other committee groups (such as BEC, Advocacy, Design Awards, Urban Design, among many others), AIA Knowledge Communities (see [list](#)), and AIA member groups (see [list](#)).

Meet at the beginning of the year with other Committee leaders to discuss your associated agendas to see how you may align. You may consider co-hosting an event together, sharing resources, and/or advocating for action on a certain issue. Consider creating a Committee liaison role to maintain a relationship between Committees and keep tabs on potential collaborative opportunities.

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Do you have ideas for the next version of this Guide?

We plan to update this Guide regularly and will be seeking input to make this more effective, inclusive, and relevant. If you have ideas about topics we're missing or stories we should consider including, please email us at cote@aia.org. And if you'd like to get involved directly in future updates or to send in photos of your chapter in action, we would welcome that.