



Issue Brief: Homelessness

Overview

Homelessness in Seattle is a prevalent and pressing problem, and the number of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness continues to grow significantly in our city. While there is a relationship between the high cost of housing and the unprecedented number of unsheltered homeless in our communities, addressing the problem of long-term homelessness will require a focus on issues beyond affordability. Wide-ranging solutions are needed to address the root causes of homelessness, including the high cost of living in our region, mental illness or trauma, addiction, domestic violence, financial hardship, unemployment and a need for greater social services funding.

City leaders, businesses and local residents have recognized the need to act. Our Mayor and County Executive have declared a state of emergency around homelessness and are exploring and implementing a range of new strategies to address the problem. Ultimately, finding solutions will take a coordinated effort by many organizations working on a wide variety of human service, housing and economic platforms.

Impact on Architects or the Built Environment

Architects will not be able to address all of the issues associated with homelessness, nor are we experts on homelessness issues. But we do have a strong desire to learn, understand and provide assistance. Shelter as a basic human right is a value at the heart of the profession, and architects feel compelled to act.

Architects have a unique skill set to bring to the search for solutions. By working to address the spatial reality of this pervasive social problem, architects can contribute to fresh thinking about potential solutions—especially those involving shelter.

Architects also have the opportunity to recognize how our work can contribute to displacement, one of the core causes of homelessness, and to consider how these adverse impacts might be mitigated through programming, project design or financing strategies.

AIA Seattle Action

Advocacy Goals

- ⇒ Educate AIA members about the complex challenges involved in finding solutions to homelessness and provide opportunities for interested members to take direct action.
- ⇒ Invite discussion about complex issues related to design and development, housing affordability, displacement and homelessness.
- ⇒ Develop and visualize new ideas for constructed solutions at the building and urban scales.

- ⇒ Support the “housing first” approach in which people experiencing homelessness are offered permanent housing with few to no treatment preconditions, behavioral contingencies or barriers. This approach is based on overwhelming evidence that all people experiencing homelessness can achieve stability in permanent housing if provided with the appropriate levels of services.
- ⇒ Advocate for a wide range of emergency, long-term and permanent housing options, including existing and new structures.
- ⇒ Promote increased funding for affordable housing through both public and market mechanisms.

Proposed Actions

- ⇒ Expand AIA’s homelessness task force to include AIA members interested in working on the issue.
- ⇒ Facilitate member and community education and awareness on homelessness issues. Engage in additional fact finding, research and coalition-building on a wide range of issues related to the increased prevalence of homelessness in our communities.
 - Offer member education through conferences and short programs; include issues related to homelessness as topics for upcoming Urban Housing Forums; sponsor other presentations at the Center for Architecture & Design; and collect and disseminate data.
 - Convene a discussion on Found Land—exploring untapped places where we can build subsidized housing such as backyards, vacant lands, lands in pre-development for several years, Sound Transit land being held for future stations, etc.
- ⇒ Join advocacy coalitions to promote direct public funding, market regulation and incentives that create new housing as well as living wages through job development in the construction industry. In particular, advocate for an increase in subsidized housing funding and availability.
- ⇒ Advocate for policies that will allow single-family landowners to densify their own parcels.
- ⇒ Promote the need for increased mental health services as a built environment issue.
- ⇒ Develop a clearinghouse to provide members with opportunities to address the homelessness crisis and to serve people experiencing homelessness.
- ⇒ Develop an AIA pro bono exchange to connect individual architects with housing organizations needing help with design elements such as redesigning their facilities to be more useful to clients. Follow AIA guidelines on pro bono practices.

Past Actions

2016

Living Small

Through an AIA Seattle travel and research grant, AIA member Garrett Reynolds explored compact housing models in Europe and Japan in an exhibit, April 21 – June 11, 2016.

Urban Housing Forum

AIA Seattle hosted a day-long conference on Urban Housing in April 2016.

Housing Affordability Panel Discussion

AIA Public Policy Board hosted a panel discussion on housing affordability and regulations in the new Center for Architecture & Design on May 10, 2016.

2017

Urban Design Forum

A representative of the AIA Seattle Public Policy Board spoke at the Homelessness panel on March 22, 2017, joined by representatives from the City of Seattle, Facing Homelessness and Habitat for Humanity.

City of Seattle Councilmember Engagement

In March 2017, members of the AIA Seattle Public Policy Board met with local city council members to discuss opportunities for promoting advocacy and implementing strategic changes surrounding homelessness.

Key Messages

We believe that housing is a human right. Architects have technical skills that can impact solutions related to shelter and housing and the willingness to act to address suffering caused by homelessness.

Seattle and other Puget Sound communities must address the growing inequalities in our society. Architects can support this process by advocating for livable cities, increased density, enhanced mobility and alternative, affordable forms of housing.

Homelessness solutions must address root causes inherent to our economic system and the way we address addiction, mental health issues, domestic abuse and disparity.

Background

Research Conducted

A facilitated discussion of AIA members was convened to identify and vet a variety of issues related to housing. The Public Policy Board met with George Scarola, Director of Homelessness, City of Seattle Mayor's Office, and Rex Hohlbein, architect and founder of Facing Homelessness. Efforts to gather member opinions and resources will be ongoing, as will work with coalitions addressing issues related to homelessness. In addition, an AIA task force has been convened to gather information related to homelessness, including ways that architects individually and as a profession can address the crisis.

Partners

Downtown Seattle Association
Housing Development Consortium

Washington Low Income Housing Institute
City of Seattle
King County
University of Washington

Member Input

Members of AIA Seattle have attended events promoting access to public/private services, affordable housing, good design, and equitable solutions to solve the urban housing crisis.

Resources

[Seattle Initiatives: Addressing Homelessness](#)

[Seattle's Housing Affordability and Livability agenda](#)

[Homelessness Investment Policy: The Path Forward for the City of Seattle](#) (Poppe Report)

[Seattle/King County joint task force on homelessness & 2018 sales tax vote](#)

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