



## PILLARS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

20TH ANNIVERSARY

### 20 YEARS OF PILLARS: BUILDING LEADERS, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

For two decades, AIA Kansas City's Pillars Leadership Program has helped shape not only emerging leaders within the architecture profession, but also stronger advocates, collaborators, and community champions across the Kansas City metropolitan area. What began as an initiative to cultivate leadership within the profession has grown into one of the chapter's most influential programs, connecting architects and design professionals with the people, systems, and conversations shaping the future of Kansas City.

Since its inception, the Pillars Leadership Program has prepared a diverse cross-section of emerging professionals for leadership roles within their firms, communities, and AIA Kansas City. Through active participation at monthly sessions and direct exposure to civic and community leaders, participants gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected forces influencing the region—from government and development to sustainability, transportation, arts, food, entertainment, innovation, and technology.

The impact of the program is perhaps best reflected in the voices of its graduates.

For Galen Lif, AIA, a member of the inaugural Pillars class 20 years ago, the experience came at a pivotal point in his career.



2006

“I can’t believe it has been 20 years since my Pillars class,” Lif reflected. “It came early in my architecture career, so I was learning how to be an architect, and I was meeting fellow members of the AIA. Hearing everyone’s differing career paths was eye-opening.”

What stood out most to Lif was the opportunity to engage directly with leaders throughout the community.

“The best part of the Pillars experience for me was engaging with local leaders in government, philanthropy, education, and business,” he said. “The amazing part to me is that everyone we asked to participate said yes and were eager to help us gain knowledge to be better leaders and citizens.”

That lesson in leadership and service stayed with him long after graduation.

“I reflect on that every time someone asks me for help, as I try my best to say yes.”

Lif credits Pillars with strengthening his confidence and launching a lifelong path of involvement within AIA at the local, state, and national levels.

“Pillars jump-started my path to committee service, board service, local presidency, state presidency, national strategic council, and national board committee work,” he shared. “Best of all about Pillars is the relationships formed during that year are still ongoing today.”

Five years into the program’s history, graduates were already seeing how Pillars could help create both professional roots



2011

and lasting community connections. For Evan Fox, AIA, the program provided a sense of belonging after relocating.

“I joined Pillars shortly after moving from Chicago to Kansas City, and I can say without hesitation that it’s one of the best decisions I made in those early years here,” Fox said. “The program gave me an immediate sense of place. It showed me how Kansas City works, introduced me to the people shaping it, and helped me understand where I could fit in.”

The relationships formed through the program became foundational to both his career and personal network.

“Several of my classmates are still among my closest friends in the industry,” he said.

Pillars also sparked a deeper commitment to AIA Kansas City leadership.

“After the program, I stayed involved by chairing Design Awards, volunteering at chapter events, and eventually joining the board,” Fox shared. “I’m fortunate to be serving as chapter president this year, and I know I wouldn’t be in this seat without the foundation Pillars gave me.”

For Whitley Stephens, a graduate from the program’s 10th year, Pillars reinforced the importance of leadership through connection, collaboration, and engagement with the broader community. Over the years, graduates like Stephens have continued to demonstrate how the program develops leaders who understand that architecture extends far beyond buildings—it shapes neighborhoods, policies, relationships, and civic life.



2018

“The foundation I gained through Pillars continues to inform my involvement with the AIA. I’ve since served as AIA Kansas City Emerging Professional Director, helping strengthen connections between emerging professionals and the broader organization, contributed to the AIA Kansas City Educational Outreach Committee, introducing students across the metro to careers in design, and served on the AIA Kansas City Elections Committee. Today, I serve on the KC Architectural Foundation Board and remain active in the community through the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Centurions Leadership Program, the Kansas State Historic Sites Review Board, and other civic efforts. Pillars played a key role in building my confidence professionally, strengthening my network, and establishing a leadership foundation that I continue to cultivate today,” Stephens said.

That broader perspective continues to resonate with more recent graduates as well. Annie Ringhofer, AIA, says the program deepened her understanding of the city and the role design professionals can play within it.

“My experience in the Pillars program expanded my perspective as an individual by providing a stronger foundational understanding of the ongoing initiatives and developments shaping Kansas City,” Ringhofer said.

She noted that the program highlighted both the complexity and interconnectedness of the community.

“The structure of the program reinforces the abilities and opportunities for architects, designers, and AEC professionals to engage, connect, and make a difference in these important



2026

conversations,” she shared. “Our class saw this firsthand as these connected threads continued to build on each other across each session, even with different topical focuses.”

Ringhofer also emphasized the lasting professional value of the experience.

“The learning I gained through the Pillars program has been highly valued within my firm and continues to inform a greater awareness and responsiveness to Kansas City’s evolving issues through design,” she said. “The relationships built within each class of the program are a significant asset and a meaningful way to build community and connections within AIA.”

Over the past 20 years, the Pillars Leadership Program has built an impressive legacy—not simply through curriculum or programming, but through people. Its 313 graduates have gone on to lead firms, chair committees, serve on boards, advocate for their communities, and strengthen the profession in meaningful ways. Equally important, they have built relationships that continue to influence and support one another long after their program year concludes.

As AIA Kansas City celebrates this milestone anniversary, Pillars remains a powerful reminder that leadership is not developed in isolation. It grows through curiosity, service, conversation, and connection to community. For 20 years, Pillars has helped emerging professionals find their voice, expand their perspective, and step confidently into leadership roles that continue to shape the future of Kansas City and the architectural profession alike.