



PILLARS

LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM

2025-2026 REVIEW





2025 PILLARS CLASS

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ABOUT PILLARS

The Pillars Leadership Training Program of the American Institute of Architects Kansas City prepares a representative cross section of the chapter's emerging leaders and individuals from the building community for their role in shaping the future of both the architectural profession and the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. The training program includes active participation in programs and exposure to community leaders and issues. Each class spends their time exploring core issues that affect our profession and the region within which we practice. Through discussions with leaders and colleagues, dialogue among themselves, tours and research the group will be able to understand and present to the AIA as a whole how we can make a positive change within our community. The AIA Kansas City Pillars program is a nationally recognized program for its originality and depth and has inspired similar AIA leadership studies in other US cities. The program continues to raise the bar of what young professionals want out of their profession and how we as professionals can make an impact on our built environment.



Residents of St. Michael's discuss their experiences.



Tour of Amethyst apartment unit.

OCTOBER: COMMUNITY & GOVERNMENT

In October, Pillars explored the intersection of architecture, social impact, and community development through a session focused on Kansas City's efforts to support veterans and families. The afternoon began at St. Michael's Veterans Center, where participants were welcomed with an overview of the organization's history, mission, and outreach efforts. Panelists shared stories of how the center has evolved into a holistic campus offering not only housing, but also access to additional community resources. The discussion highlighted how intentional design decisions - such as accessibility, shared gathering spaces, and phased development - contribute directly to residents' sense of dignity and belonging.

Following the presentation, attendees had the opportunity to speak directly with veterans about their experiences living at St. Michael's. Their stories offered a moving perspective on the role of the built environment in supporting stability, recovery, and connection. Edward English, Project Manager at Rosemann & Associates, then led a guided tour of the facility and Phase 3 construction, sharing insight into the technical and logistical challenges of expanding a campus while maintaining daily operations and community continuity.

The group next visited Amethyst Place, a nonprofit organization providing housing and wraparound services for women and children recovering from trauma, substance

use, and poverty. Starla Wulf Brennan, Executive Director, and Sarah Knopf-Amelung, Director of Strategy & Growth, led a discussion on how thoughtful design supports healing and empowerment. They described the organization's recent \$16.5 million expansion, which includes new residential units and dedicated spaces for therapy, education, and family engagement. The conversation emphasized the deep connection between architecture, advocacy, and social change, illustrating how built environments can reflect and reinforce an organization's mission.

The day concluded with a happy hour at Tower Tavern, where members continued their conversations about community-focused design, leadership in the nonprofit sector, and the architect's role as an advocate for equitable and resilient development.

Through this session, Pillars members gained firsthand understanding of how collaborative partnerships and intentional design can transform lives and strengthen Kansas City's social fabric - one building, and one story, at a time.



Panelists discuss AI in the built environment.



Pillars tour Atlas 9, guided by Dimensional Innovations.

NOVEMBER: AI IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

On November 6, 2025, the session kicked off with a tour of Atlas 9, an immersive, narrative-driven art experience design and built by DI (Dimensional Innovations) located in Kansas City, KS. This 46,000 SF building evokes a fictional 1995 movie theater that has been “transformed” into a multi-sensory world when something “strange” starts to go amiss. Visitors are set off on a “back to the future type journey,” as they move through themed spaces, an auditorium, speakeasy, arcade, pizza parlor, all part of a live story, blending art installation, set design, & interactive theatre. It’s not just static art, there are live performers, technological interactives and narrative clues.

Next up was a Tour of DI Headquarters. Pillars explored a behind-the-scenes look at how DI blends architecture, industrial design, technology, storytelling, and fabrication to create world-class immersive environments. During the tour, DI walked us through their integrated process, from concept development to full-scale fabrication, showing how designers, engineers, technologists, artists, and makers collaborate under one roof. We explored several key departments, including: Fabrication & Prototyping Studios, Design & Experience Labs, Graphics & Large Scale Printing, and Technology and Interactive Development.

Pillars wrapped up with a panel discussion about AI in the built environment. The panel explored how emerging AI tools

are transforming the built environment, from accelerating design workflows and visualization to enabling smarter, data-driven decision-making throughout the lifecycle of a project. The conversation emphasized responsible integration, enhanced creativity, and the new opportunities and challenges AI creates for architects and designers. Panelists included: 1) Chris Riebschlager - Director of Creative Technology, DI. 2) Callum Vierthaler, founder of Y-Group. 3) Alex Lamoureux - Project Designer, Populous 4) Michael Gekas, AIA - Virtual Design & Construction Executive, McCownGordon. 5) Gustavo Amaral, Ph.D. KU School of Architecture & Design. Moderated by Pillars, Alexandra Bojarski-Stauffer, AIA, Emerald Hive Design.



Pillars experience one of the largest 3D Printers in the world, used to 3D print the 9 story tall torch seen at the Raiders Stadium, while on a tour at Dimensional Innovations.



Panelists discuss transportation and infrastructure around KC. Pictured: Michael Shaw, Olivia English, and Greg Bolon.



Pillars tour the KC Streetcar Authority's maintenance facility. Pictured: Brushy

DECEMBER: TRANSPORTATION IN KANSAS CITY

In December, the Pillars had the opportunity to learn about the undervalued core of Kansas City: infrastructure and transportation. Starting off the day with an exciting (and competitive) game of transportation trivia, the group got to test their background knowledge against subject matter experts. The Pillars then got to hear from a panel of three KC transportation professionals: Michael Shaw - the assistant director for the Kansas City Department of Public Works, Greg Bolon - the district engineer for MoDOT, and Olivia English - the founder of LiveGreenUSA. Each gave a brief presentation over how our roads are created, maintained, and funded. The Pillars learned how transportation projects can impact local communities; both positively to serve a growing demand and also the struggles of dividing neighborhoods with large highways. The presenters also touched on sustainability practices that are being implemented around Kansas City - including how local trash is being recycled into roads.

After the presentations and panel concluded, the Pillars braved the cold and utilized the streetcar route to travel to their next destination. The group then had the opportunity to meet with Lauren Krutty, the planning and operations director for the Kansas City Streetcar Authority. Lauren highlighted the excitement and growth surrounding the streetcar, especially on the heels of the opening of the Main Street extension. She shared insight into some of the logistics of operations, the analytics behind the growth strategies, and how they are

preparing for the influx of people for the World Cup. Since Kansas City was once home to the third largest streetcar network in the early 1900s, it was exciting to see the return to our roots. After the presentation and a quick safety briefing, the Pillars threw on some orange safety vests and were taken on a tour of the streetcar maintenance facility. We got to see the maintenance process with the use of lifts and machines for both new and repaired vehicles, the required safety measures for employees, and how the streetcars are wrapped with different designs and advertisements. At the end, we even snapped a photo with Brushy (the friendly neighborhood snow-clearing machine).



Pillars take the opportunity to explore the different transportation methods around Kansas City by using the streetcar to travel to their next destination.



Pillars tour the KC Jazz District and Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.



Pillars are educated on finance and development strategies by Ryan Campbell and Aaron Plump at the PortKC office.

JANUARY: DEVELOPMENT IN KANSAS CITY

Braving the Kansas City monsoon, the Pillars donned their developer hats to learn about the various projects shaping the Kansas City Metro area. The Pillars started their journey where the Negro Leagues Baseball was born: in the heart of the historic Jazz District at the YMCA. Starting with Kekeli Dawes (Multistudio) and Bryce Cummings (DRAW), the group toured the historic YMCA, and learned about the Jazz District and the Revive the Vine initiative. The presentation primarily focused upon the plans to develop a new and expanded Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, hotel, and district parking garage. The Pillars were educated on how each type of project will support overall development of 18th and Vine. They also learned about zoning considerations, and how traffic and pedestrians flow through the area. The presenters also highlighted the impacts of local history on their designs, including the desire to maintain the beautiful culture of the area through murals, signage and exterior material selections. When completed, the new Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and Hotel will serve as a gateway to the newly revitalized 18th and Vine District.

After touring the 18th and Vine District, the Pillars moved over to the KC Riverfront. With the excitement brewing about the upcoming 2026 World Cup in Kansas City, there is much going on at the Current Landing. Taking a pause to meet with Ryan Campbell, director of commercial administration at CommunityAmerica Credit Union, the Pillars got a crash

course in business and development financing. From the initial risk analysis and appraisal to loan repayment, Ryan walked the cohort through how projects are ultimately funded. Finally, the Pillars met with Aaron Plump, director of development at PortKC. The Pillars were shown the progression of development at the Berkley Riverfront over the course of three phases. Due to the occurrence of the World Cup this year, Current Landing will be a hotspot for tourists and locals alike, with Phase 1 slated to be completed before the 2026 World Cup. However, Aaron reminded the Pillars that success does not happen overnight. The revitalized Riverfront stands as the result of years of trial, error, and persistence before becoming the destination it is today.



Pillars take the opportunity to explore the Current Landing development at the Berkley Riverfront.



Group photo in the Penthouse Suite at GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium



Presentations from KC2026 and the GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium Renovation design team

FEBRUARY: A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN SPORTS

The February Pillars session was an exciting look into sports in Kansas City and the value of investing in sports opportunities at all scales. The day began discussing the highly anticipated FIFA World Cup 2026 and its impact on Kansas City. Lori Kirchoff, Director of Project Management for KC2026, gave a presentation detailing what to anticipate in the coming months and the planning that continues to be essential for preparing to become one of 16 North American host cities for the largest sporting event on the planet.

With six World Cup matches being played in Kansas City, the Pillars were then able to hear from members of the GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium Renovation design team, Randy Braun (Walter P. Moore & Associates) and Brooke Craig (Populous), who explained the architectural and engineering efforts needed to transform the Kansas City Chiefs' home into a soccer venue. Since a soccer pitch is larger than an American football field, especially in width, modifications to the field and select seating areas were necessary to use Arrowhead Stadium to host the matches.

The afternoon continued with a trip to GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium where the Pillars were able to see the real-world application of the modifications. Pat Mitchell, Project Director of MEP & Construction, led the tour through the facility, including the opportunity to see behind-the-scenes and understand parts of Arrowhead's daily operations—the group even had the opportunity to visit the Penthouse Suite,

walk around on the field, and meet one of the stadium cats!

Our final stop of the day examined the importance of sports on a local scale. At the Kansas City MLB Urban Youth Academy, the Pillars were able to hear from Kalen Haynes, Dash Johnson, and Preston Ellsworth about the academy, the safe space it provides, and how underserved youth are empowered through baseball, softball, education, and social opportunities. The group toured the facility which features an MLB-sized turf infield, four outdoor fields, batting tunnels, concessions, and classrooms, but the most impactful part of the visit to the academy was the passion the staff has for their organization, their mission, and the youth that they serve.



Pillars tour the Kansas City MLB Urban Youth Academy's facility and take a group picture on the Alex Gordon Family Field



Pillars tour The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and see behind-the-scenes of the preparation and storage spaces



Group photo on the steps of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

MARCH: ART FOR ALL

The March Pillars session focused on the idea that art in Kansas City thrives at all scales; from internationally renowned museums to local creative spaces, there is no shortage of opportunities to enjoy, create, or support the arts in our community.

The afternoon began at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art where Matt Smith, Director of Exhibition Design & Gallery Management, and Dan Wehmueller, Executive Project Manager, provided a presentation detailing the history and future goals of the museum. The presentation was conversational, allowing the group the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the status of the museum expansion project, the connection to the community, and the creation of a cultural district.

After the discussion, the session continued with a tour of spaces in The Nelson-Atkins that are never seen by the public: art storage, framing, staging, and a ride in The Nelson's large freight elevators. Although the museum has over 45,000 works in its collection, only a small percentage of their art can be displayed at one time. This look behind-the-scenes revealed how much care and work goes into curating a world-class art museum.

The day concluded at the Belger Arts Center where the Pillars examined the value of art on a local scale and gained

an understanding of how the facilities, tools, and programs offered by the Belger provide opportunities for artists and connection with the community. After an introduction from Consuelo Cruz and Katie Hogan at the Crane Yard Studios and Gallery, the group traveled down the street to the Belger Glass Annex. There, the Pillars were captivated by a glass blowing demonstration by Emily Potter, Tyler Suter, and Michael Carson.

By the end of the session, the group was able to experience art in Kansas City at multiple scales while gaining an understanding of opportunities present for community involvement, local artists, and international recognition.



Pillars observe an exciting glass blowing demonstration at the Belger Glass Annex



Kevin Wallace presents on the Roy Blunt Luminary Park Project

APRIL: SUSTAINABILITY

The April Pillars session began with a presentation by Kevin Wallace from HNTB talking about the new Roy Blunt Luminary Park project: a 5.5 acre park over I-670, and how a project of this scale ties into larger sustainability goals for the city. This project aims to improve walkability, stormwater drainage, and bring green space to what is currently a noisy barrier between two halves of the city. Other project goals include reducing noise and air pollution for the neighboring residences and businesses, boosting local economy, and providing what residents want for this space after conducting several public meetings and surveys and referencing Dallas's Klyde Warren Park as precedent. Partners HNTB, OJB, BNIM, MODOT, and community groups all play a role in making a city project like this happen, and their collaboration hopes to bring a more inviting and active destination to the heart of the city and bridging the physical gap between downtown and the crossroads district. The engineering considerations for the project are also quite substantial. Kevin went into detail about the different structural and systems obstacles they have overcome to date as they look to retrofit this highway to comply with modern tunnel standards under tight existing constraints.

The day continued with a discussion with Steve McDowell, Principal at BNIM, and Lauren Harness, Program Director at Kansas City Design Center, about Greenline KC; a 10-mile loop that would connect neighborhoods, parks, arts, and neighborhoods around KC's greater downtown. The proposal would be to clean up, and in some cases construct, connections between existing infrastructure to create a safe and beautiful urban path for the people of Kansas City. BNIM along with the students at KCDC are currently in the visioning and planning stages and encourage ideas from the public on this potentially transformative pedestrian focused project.



Pillars tour the under-construction Overland Park Farmers Market at Clocktower Landing

After a quick coffee break, the Pillars met with Bryan Toben, Director of Parks and Recreation with Overland Park, and Mike Burton, a project manager with the city, to tour the ongoing construction of the new Overland Park Farmers Market. Formerly the farmers market was held in a parking lot in Downtown Overland Park (OP) under a canopy that the market had outgrown. The farmers market improvement project, now known as Clocktower Landing, includes a restoration of the clocktower in Downtown OP, an update to the plaza directly adjacent to the tower, new indoor spaces for farmers market vendors and shoppers, new shade structures for outdoor vendors, new restrooms to serve the market, ADA access from Santa Fe Drive, and larger gathering spaces where the city plans to host small concerts and other events. Bryan and Mike also cited the mass timber construction elements of the new farmers market building as something they pushed for and have been really pleased with during construction. The structure of the indoor spaces features heavy glulams and cross laminated timber (CLT) panels as part of the roof assembly. Clock tower landing will be open and available for the 2027 market season.

The session ended with a brief Q&A at BRR architecture with Emily Randel of Building Energy Exchange Kansas City. Emily spoke on the advocacy and project engagement work she and her team do in KC and how architects can improve the way they talk about sustainability internally as well as with their clients to educate and demystify new regulations in the metro. She cited specific legislation such as Kansas City, Missouri's adoption of the 2021 IECC codes as a major victory for their advocacy efforts and for the city as a whole.



Bryan Ari presents on hospitality design

MAY: FOOD

The May Pillars session explored how Kansas City's culinary identity has been shaped by migration, industry, hospitality, and the city's enduring love of simple, well-crafted food through conversations with food journalists and hospitality experts. The afternoon opened with Dr. Andrea Broomfield who traced the evolution of Kansas City's food history from its earliest communities to today's diverse restaurant scene. She described how Native American, Mexican, French, and African influences converged in the region long before the Louisiana Purchase, and how later waves of immigrants brought their own food traditions, creating a layered and evolving culinary landscape. She concludes that Kansas City's longstanding preference for hearty, approachable, high-quality food like Mexican and barbecue is tied to the pragmatic traders of the Santa Fe Trail and the traditions of African Americans once they were free to start businesses and sell food.

The session then shifted to the language of hospitality design, where Bryan Ari, owner of Kansas City's Fern Bar presented on how the physical layout of restaurants and bars shapes the guest experience. The discussion centered on how service style, workflow, and movement patterns all determine how a space should be designed. From bar layouts that operate like assembly lines to service areas that minimize unnecessary steps, the group gained insight into how thoughtful design enhances hospitality and efficiency.



Pillars tour Boulevard Brewing Company

His emphasis on customer experience as well as the ergonomics of his bartenders' workstations has led to Fern Bar receiving many nominations and awards for design and staff quality.

Staying at Fern Bar, the Pillars had a conversation with Jill Silva about the James Beard Awards, first talking about its origins, and then moving into Kansas City specific winners and nominees. She spoke on the evolution of chefs and bartenders, the rise of craft cocktails, and the importance of ethics, community involvement, and regional expertise and how they factor into award consideration. She ended with how service is the heart of Kansas City's dining culture and a distinguisher among restaurants and bars up for critical recognition.

The day concluded at Boulevard Brewing Company, where the group took a sustainability focused tour. Boulevard's commitment to environmental stewardship is made clear through initiatives such as the shared creation of Ripple Glass (which diverts over 150 million pounds of glass from landfills annually), its zero-landfill facility, on-site water sanitation system, green roof, solar panels, and extensive tree planting. Pillars also learned about the brewery's long list of community partners and events of which Boulevard is a participant.