COTE Top Ten Measures of Design: A tool for your firm

Our collective definition of what makes a sustainable project has fundamentally shifted over the past 25 years. One approach you can use to capture that shift and translate it into built form is to use [COTE's Top Ten Measures of Design](#) as a roadmap for design. By asking open ended questions, and coupling those with good facilitation early in a project's conception, it can weave sustainability so deeply into the design concept, nobody can tease them apart.

In 2016 COTE reevaluated its 25 year old measures for sustainability. We looked at a variety of ways to quantify the measures, including rating systems (LEED, WELL, LBC among others), the current measures, and the Sustainable Leadership Opportunity Scan. We also reached out to experts across multiple fields and rebuilt the measures to reflect the most current criteria for deep sustainability. The result was not just criteria for awarding projects, but an open-ended framework for defining design excellence.

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One of the ways you can use the new measures is in an early workshop with your client, particularly if a site has not been chosen yet. Your project then begins with vision instead of a checklist. The measures are accessible to a lay audience, in language which they understand and can contribute to. This framework sets the project on the path for a wide range of certifications and awards. It's a core part of an integrated design process, where the concepts generated by the team can inform a 'project constitution', a series of touchstones, or something more practical, such as documentation of the Owner's Project Requirements (OPR).

The Design for Energy measure as an example of a "foundational measure" that has always been part of our lexicon, but one that has increased in complexity and nuance over time. There are the standard LEED credits (for energy modeling, commissioning, measurement and verification, refrigerant management, renewables, etc.) that are still relevant, but new ways of implementing these ideas exist, such as conceptual energy modeling, where the architect takes responsibility for building performance early in design, establishes benchmarking data (perhaps with AIA's [2030 DDx tool](#)), and sets early goals and targets. Most importantly, architects can use this measure to engage engineering partners as well as technically savvy clients that require a quantitative approach at the outset. 'You're too early, come back later' is no longer an excuse for kicking the energy analysis to design development.

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Design for Community is an example of a new COTE Top Ten measure that has been extremely successful. Although the timeless idea of community is a part of [AIA's Core Values](#), proof of its existence is hard to demonstrate. However, civic clients have a lot to contribute that can support design direction, functionality, and aspirational sustainability goals. For example, a

Fire Department can incorporate a lens of the Racial Equity and Social Justice Initiative (RESJI) onto the location choice of a new station, prioritizing underserved neighborhoods. Even private clients are moved when they realize how their building can contribute to the larger context of community where they are building.

The questions asked by the COTE Top Ten measures are part of the discovery process. Architects care deeply about this process and can best support it with our unique skillsets, yet we never have enough time or bandwidth to adequately address it under a business model driven by fees and schedules. These questions not only illuminate opportunities to integrate sustainability, but to further a deeper understanding of our clients, create strong and healthy neighborhoods, and positively influence design outcomes.