



AN INCLUSIVE DESIGN PROCESS

Allison Johnson | Sustainable Design Leader

My name is Allison Johnson and I'm a project architect and sustainable design leader at HOK.

When we apply to architecture school, we often think we know what we're getting into. But I'm learning that this profession is one of continual discovery. I'm constantly learning new things and I'm constantly surprised.

I've found that we can capture unique perspectives not just from the owner, but from the people using our spaces daily. This could be a patient or an inmate. This could be a student or an engineer. There are moments in the design process when we can learn from one another.

In our St. Louis studio, we were designing a dormitory at Ohio Reformatory for Women. The program included a courtyard specifically for the residents of the dormitory. These happened to be women serving a life sentence.

We were given the opportunity to lead a design charrette and work with inmates taking a horticulture class at ORW. We taught the women about landscape design and shared project ideas and outside-the-box thinking. This then empowered the incarcerated women to design a courtyard of their own.

During the charrette, we taught the women about sustainability and demonstrated to them the environmental benefits of designing with native plants. Then we broke out into groups and brainstormed with the women. They developed their ideas in future class meetings before merging them into one cohesive plan. Less than a year later, the women planted and installed the courtyard they had designed themselves.

They expressed to us afterward that the experience was life changing and gave them hope. It showed them that they could accomplish something positive. The takeaway is that we have to look for opportunities to advocate for the people who are using our buildings and engage them in the process.

Another time I've done this was in an art-starved rural school district in Holly, Colorado. I taught them photography and they taught us who they were through their images. This better prepared us to design for them.

Ultimately, design is about so much more than a building. There is a chance to build a mutually beneficial relationship. We can reveal so much by sharing our hopes and what makes us tick and how we work. It sets the stage for us to be better designers for owners while helping the people who use our buildings feel pride in their spaces.