

On this day, 40 years ago...

...a small group of mayors and design professionals gathered at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville for the very first Mayors' Institute on City Design.

The idea behind that gathering was both simple and ambitious. Inspired in part by his travels in Europe and the quality of its public spaces, then-Charleston, SC Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr. recognized the extraordinary influence mayors have over the physical character of their cities. He believed that bringing mayors together with leading design and development professionals to explore real challenges facing their communities could change the way they approached their work. With the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Conference of Mayors, MICD was born.

The world has changed enormously in the forty years since. What's remarkable is how little we've changed.

The challenges facing cities have evolved, as have the tools and opportunities available to address them. But the essential ingredients of an MICD session remain much as they were in 1986: a small group of mayors, an exceptional team of design professionals, real challenges from real cities, and the opportunity for candid conversation, fresh perspectives, and shared learning.

There's a reason we've stayed so close to the original model. It works.

More than 1,300 mayors and 175 sessions later, we've seen what can happen when mayors return home with new ideas, new connections, and a renewed sense of what's possible for their communities. Those conversations have helped shape remarkable transformations, from revitalized downtowns and waterfronts to new civic spaces, stronger neighborhoods, and more thoughtful approaches to city building.

As we celebrate this milestone, we're excited to revisit some of those stories and the lasting impact of the work that began around the MICD table. Below, we're sharing a selection of projects that began as challenges brought to MICD and have since become success stories in their communities. And we know there are many more stories still to tell. If you're an MICD alum, we'd love to hear what happened after your session, whether a project moved forward, an idea took a different direction, or something you learned continues to influence your leadership today.

Trinity Simons Wagner
Executive Director
Mayors' Institute on City Design

Our Impact

Bethlehem SteelStacks

In 2004, Former Mayor John Callahan attended an MICD session looking for redevelopment opportunities for a massive 163-acre site of a former steel company in Bethlehem, PA. The project required complex solutions for the ownership and financing strategies as well as the physical structures. Mayor Callahan attended a special session again in 2005 where the Resource Team helped steer the Mayor to find a clear strategy to transform this once-neglected brownfield into the beloved public space it is now.



> "Mayors—great, successful mayors—are artists. They see their city as a canvas and understand that a bold vision can lead to a compelling composition."
> *Former Charleston, SC Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr.*



The Riverside Armory

Mayor Patricia Lock Dawson of Riverside, CA came to the 77th National Session of MICD in 2023 with an underutilized historic building in her city's beloved, Olmsted-designed park. The Armory is positioned at a crucial site between the park and river, which the city had turned its back to for decades. Through her MICD session and additional Alumni Advising, Resource Team members helped Mayor Lock Dawson guide her passion for the space into actionable next steps, including a community-led vision that resulted in a thoughtful RFP. The RFP sparked new interest in creative uses; the Armory is now poised to become a local brewery has acted as a catalyst for more Riverside investment.

> "MICD re-awakened in me the importance of my creative and visionary leadership as Mayor — empowering me to see myself as our city's chief designer. I feel empowered to courageously convene our community stakeholders and citizens as co-creators for the city we love and want to become."
> *Roanoke, VA Mayor Joseph L. Cobb | MICD 82 Nashville (2026)*



Providence Riverfront

Some projects brought to MICD take decades and multiple mayors to come to fruition, as seen in the transformation of Providence's riverfront. The vision, originally brought to MICD in 1995, sought development guidelines for vacant land left behind by the relocation of I-195. Former Mayor David Cicilline advanced this momentum over three separate MICD sessions to align public-private partnerships, improve transit connectivity, and programmatically activate the waterfront.

The torch was then passed to former Mayor Angel Taveras, who brought the project back to the Institute in 2011 to refine land use and zoning on the east side of the river. Over nearly twenty years, this sustained, design-led mayoral collaboration successfully healed a highway scar and guided the creation of a vibrant civic asset that today proudly anchors WaterFire.

> "Virtually every significant urban design project in the country has MICD's fingerprints on it."
> *M. David Lee, FAIA, NOMA | President, Stull and Lee Inc.*

We want to hear from you!

As we celebrate our 40th anniversary, we'll share some of our most meaningful moments and we'd love to hear about yours. We invite you to share your reflections to our open question below by replying to this email or clicking the button below.

What is something that gives you hope for the future of our cities?

EMAIL US

The Mayors' Institute on City Design (MICD) is a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors.

Since 1986, MICD has helped transform communities through design by preparing mayors to be the chief urban designers of their cities.

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