At this point, a lot of architects can recite chapter and verse on the negative impact buildings’ greenhouse gas emissions have on the environment. Plain and simple: buildings are the single largest contributor to the annual production of greenhouse gases.

In 2008, the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the leading professional membership organization for architects in the United States, asked its members to adopt the AIA 2030 Commitment—a voluntary program that calls for its adopters to commit to a set of practice- and design-related actions, including designing buildings that release decreasing levels of greenhouse gases. The commitment has a clear long-term goal: by 2030, it will be standard practice to construct climate-neutral buildings, that is, buildings that do not use greenhouse gas emitting energy to operate.

In short, AIA has identified several goals for firms that sign the commitment. First, they must identify a sustainability team and then develop and implement a series of steadfast business operational actions that are aimed at reducing the impact of business operations. It is then necessary to create a firm Sustainability Action Plan with design goals and staff training, as well as education, operational initiatives and a business strategy.

Finally, they should report their annual progress to the AIA. A central part of this last goal is reporting the firm’s overall progress toward meeting the 2030 Commitment goals. The fossil fuel reduction standard for all new buildings and major renovations shall be increased to 60% in 2010, 70% in 2015, 80% in 2020 and 90% in 2025. By 2030, all new buildings and major renovations should be carbon-neutral.

The 2030 Commitment introduces a process for tracking information in terms of a firm’s dedication across all projects within its portfolio. This approach is distinct from celebrating a few exemplary high-performing projects, which the AIA recognizes through its annual Top Ten Green Projects awards program.

The underlying goal for the AIA Commitment is to create broad, sweeping changes in the industry. "These are great goals, but architects still wonder: how do we achieve them?" said Zurich Esposito, Executive Director of AIA Chicago. "And how do we measure our progress toward reaching them?"
AIA Chicago’s Committee on the Environment has developed a tool using standard software for architecture firms to use to measure their success toward achieving their 2030 Commitment goals. Firms will enter key energy use information into a user-friendly spreadsheet that will help ease the AIA’s ability to evaluate performance toward the 2030 goals. An example of the report is above.

Many local architects from firms of all sizes contributed to creating this measurement program. Some of the key Chicago supporters include: the AIA Chicago Board of Directors; Leonard Sciarra, AIA of Gensler, Travis Soberg, AIA with Goettsch Partners, Steve Kismohr, AIA of Harley Ellis Devereaux, Colin Rohlfing of HOK, Vuk Vujovic, AIA of Legat Architects, Nathan Kipnis, AIA from NKA Inc., Rand Ekman, AIA, Marya Graff, AIA and Jessica Figenholtz, all with OWP/P | Cannon Design and Bill Sturm, AIA of Serena Sturm Architects.

By providing this visual interface, AIA Chicago hopes firms will have a clear, understandable snapshot of their progress toward AIA 2030 goals as well as a means to compare data across offices and between firms. Ultimately, the goal is that the challenge is not relegated only to the Chicago region. “The AIA has agreed to introduce our measurement tool at a national level,” Esposito said. “It will be used by architecture firms across the country. This project demonstrates one big way that Chicago design professionals are leading the way toward a more sustainable built environment.”

-Rand Ekman, AIA, Director of Sustainability, OWP/P | Cannon Design

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