



# THE BUILDING CIRCLE v. 1.1

A framework for writing value-driven  
architectural project narratives

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BY JIMMY STAMP

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# INTRODUCTION

The Building Circle is a framework for writing better architecture project narratives. By "better," I mean value-driven, comprehensive stories about a project's design and impact.

This is the product of what I've learned from writing about more than 100 buildings with ADVSCOPY and, before that, from two books and dozens of articles, essays, and reviews. I've used a version of the Building Circle to structure project narratives, award submissions, proposal cover letters, and entire RFPs.

Why should you write narratives?

Because narratives work. Because human brains have been trained to recognize and remember the patterns in narratives—stories—over thousands of years. We understand our world through storytelling. By creating a narrative around your work and your practice, you can convey values and provoke feelings in the reader—the prospective client—that don't depend on their direct experience. Stories make your work more memorable, more resonant, and more impactful.

The basic structure of the Building Circle was inspired by Dan Harmon's Story Circle (Fig. 2.), which is itself a distilled version of the Hero's Journey (Fig.1), a universal storytelling framework rooted in thousands of years of oral tradition and most famously articulated by mythologist Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Based on these proven models, the Building Circle separates a typical project narrative into eight parts, each with accompanying prompts derived from journalistic techniques, sales & marketing strategy, and the AIA Framework for Excellence.

I want to stress: this is a framework for thinking. It is NOT a plug-and-play template. If you try using it as a reference, always fit the narrative to your project, not your project to the narrative.

I hope you find this tool useful.

This is an early release version for newsletter subscribers, so if you try using it please let me know what you think and where it could be improved.

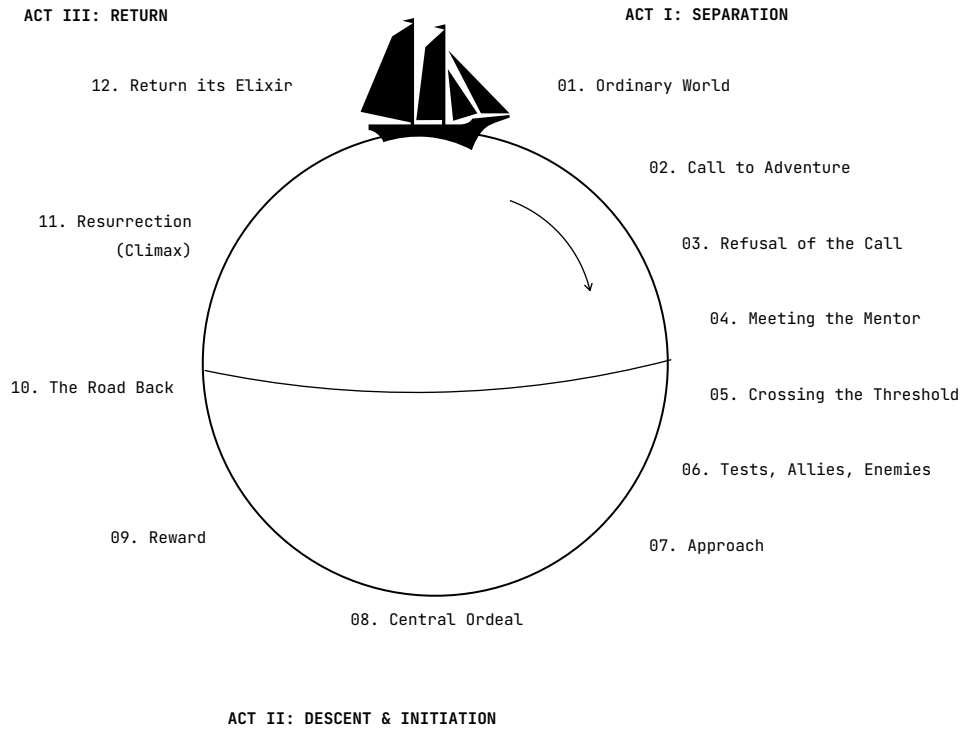
Thank you so much for reading,

**Jimmy Stamp**

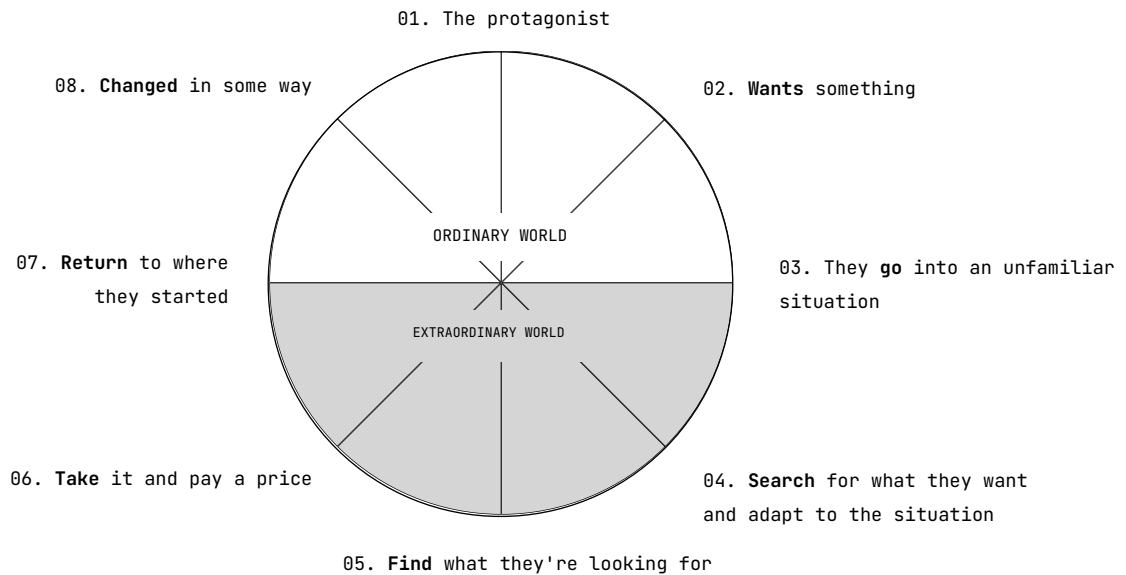
Principal, ADVSCOPY

[jimmy@advscopy.com](mailto:jimmy@advscopy.com)

**Figure 1: The Hero's Journey**

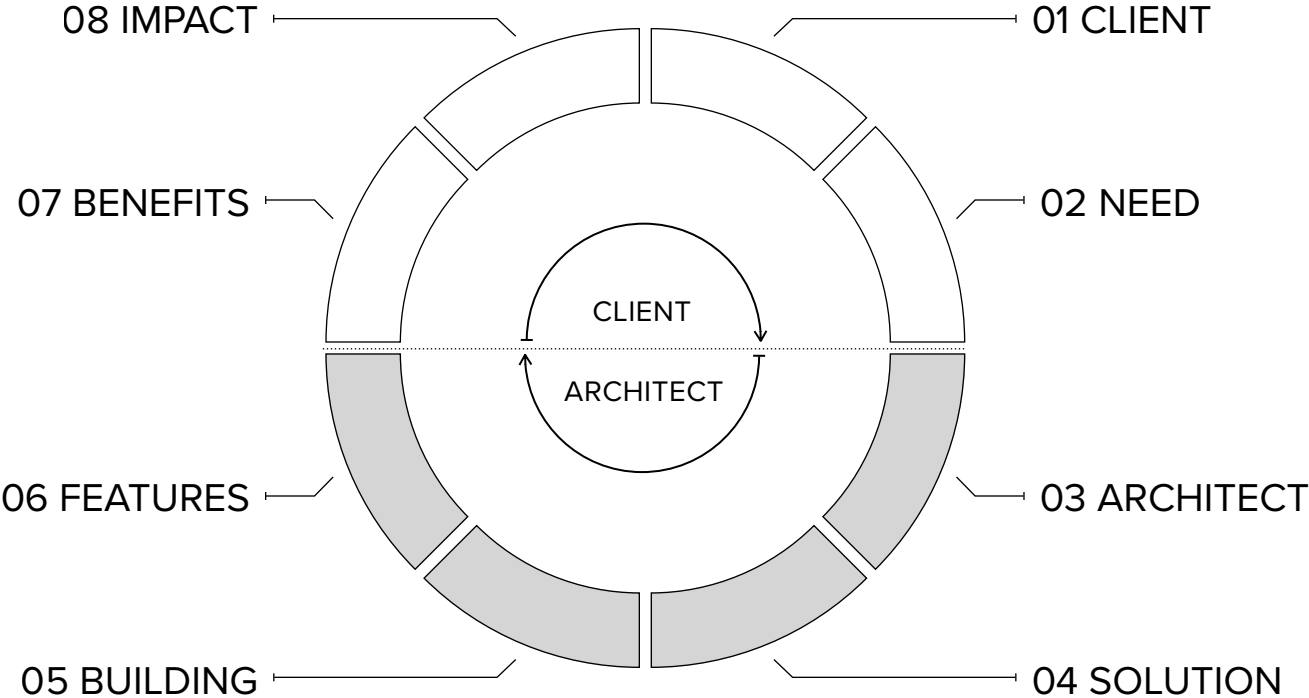


**Figure 2: Dan Harmon's Story Circle.**



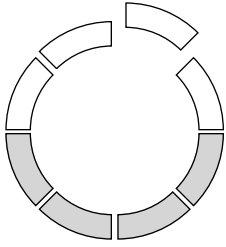
**THE  
BUILDING  
CIRCLE**

# THE CIRCLE



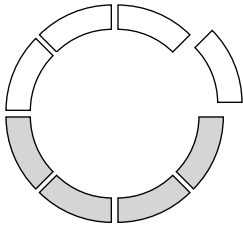
# THE STORY

Your client [01] has a need [02], so they hire an architect [03] to design a unique solution [04]. The resulting building [05], through its features and details [06], creates benefits for the client [07] to transform their life or business [08].



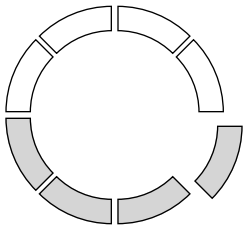
### **01 The client**

This section is all about painting a clear picture of who the client is and what life was like for them before hiring you. What do they do? Who are their customers? A single mom moving back into her family home? A rising young developer known for sustainable multifamily housing? A major liberal arts university? Give just enough context to understand the next step.



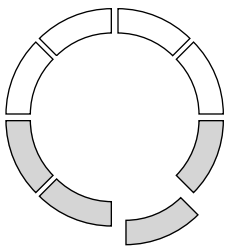
### **02 Has a Need**

The problem or the pain point. Something isn't right for the client. Maybe the home isn't big enough for the family or doesn't work for the way they live. The developer wants to build on a challenging site. The university wants to retrofit an old building into a new STEM lab. Whatever it is, you want to present the idea that something has to change. Be specific about what you mention because—spoiler—at the end of this story, those challenges will be resolved.



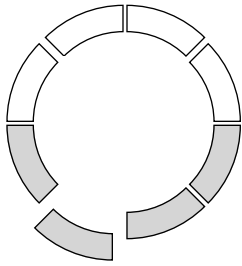
### **03 The Architect**

This is where you come into the story. What is the client asking for? What is the brief they gave you? And why did they select you over anyone else? Are you known for renovating historic homes? Working on challenging sites? Or do you have a track record of taking on complex renovations? In a screenplay, this is where the hero enters the "extraordinary world." The extraordinary world is your world. The world of design and problem solving.



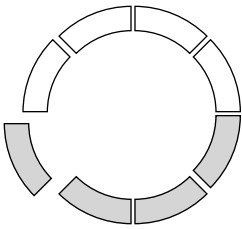
### **04 Designs a Solution**

The search for a solution begins. You've done this before. Perhaps you have a standard method. Share that with the reader and show your expertise by identifying common patterns and problems. Perhaps you challenged the client's request or offered an alternative. The family didn't need an addition it just needs a new plan. The challenging site was an opportunity not a liability. A feasibility study revealed that a new STEM building would be cheaper than a renovation.



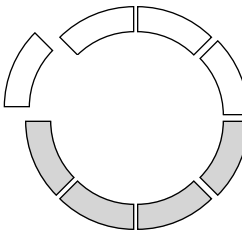
### **05 The Building**

Write about the big picture here. Give an overview of the design. At the most basic level, what does a building look like or how is it organized? How does the design contribute or relate to the surrounding context of the built and natural environment?



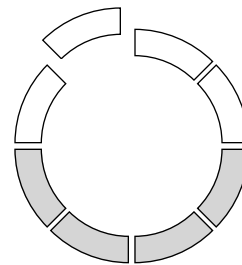
### **06 And its Features**

Building on the previous section, get specific. What materials are used and why? Are there any significant or unique design features or building details? Beyond physical details, think about what the space feels like. If you're inclined to get poetic, this is the space to do it. Prospective customers make decisions based on emotions. Appeal to those emotions by writing about the experience of the building.



### **07 Create Benefits**

How do the design decisions you make directly address the client's pain points? In the last two sections, you wrote about all the cool and clever things you did. Here you need to show why those cool and clever things matter to the client. Because although customers may make decisions based on emotion, they *justify* those decisions with logic.



### **08 That Make an Impact**

This is the absolutely essential. This is what everything has been leading to: the transformation. How did your project improve your client's life? It could be a feeling, like the sense of serenity a family feels when they enjoy breakfast together in their brand new kitchen. Or it could be more quantifiable – record breaking sales or an increased application rates. Your prospective clients aren't buying a building, they're buying the transformation.



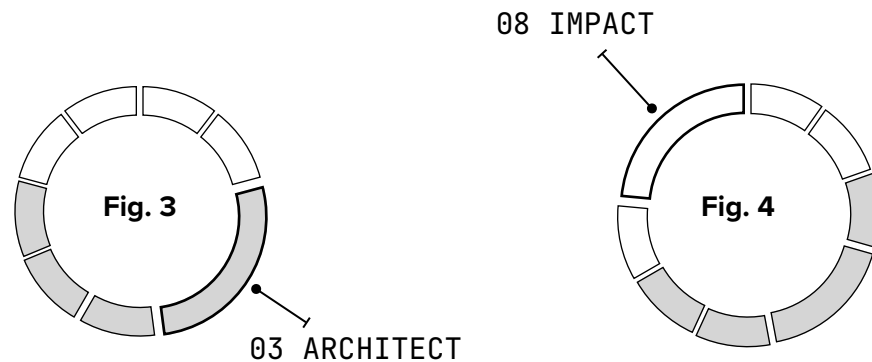
**A few quick notes on using this framework.**

As mentioned in the Introduction, this is framework for thinking, not a plug-and-play template.

For clarity, the eight story elements are shown as equal segments on the circle, but that does not mean each element should be the same length. Every project story is different.

For example, a complex project that resulted from a competition may have a longer "Architect" story (Fig. 3) explaining the selection and the designer's process. On the other hand, a small but important project for a non-profit or cultural institution may focus more on the impact than the design or selection process (Fig. 4).

Always fit the framework to the project – not the project to the framework.

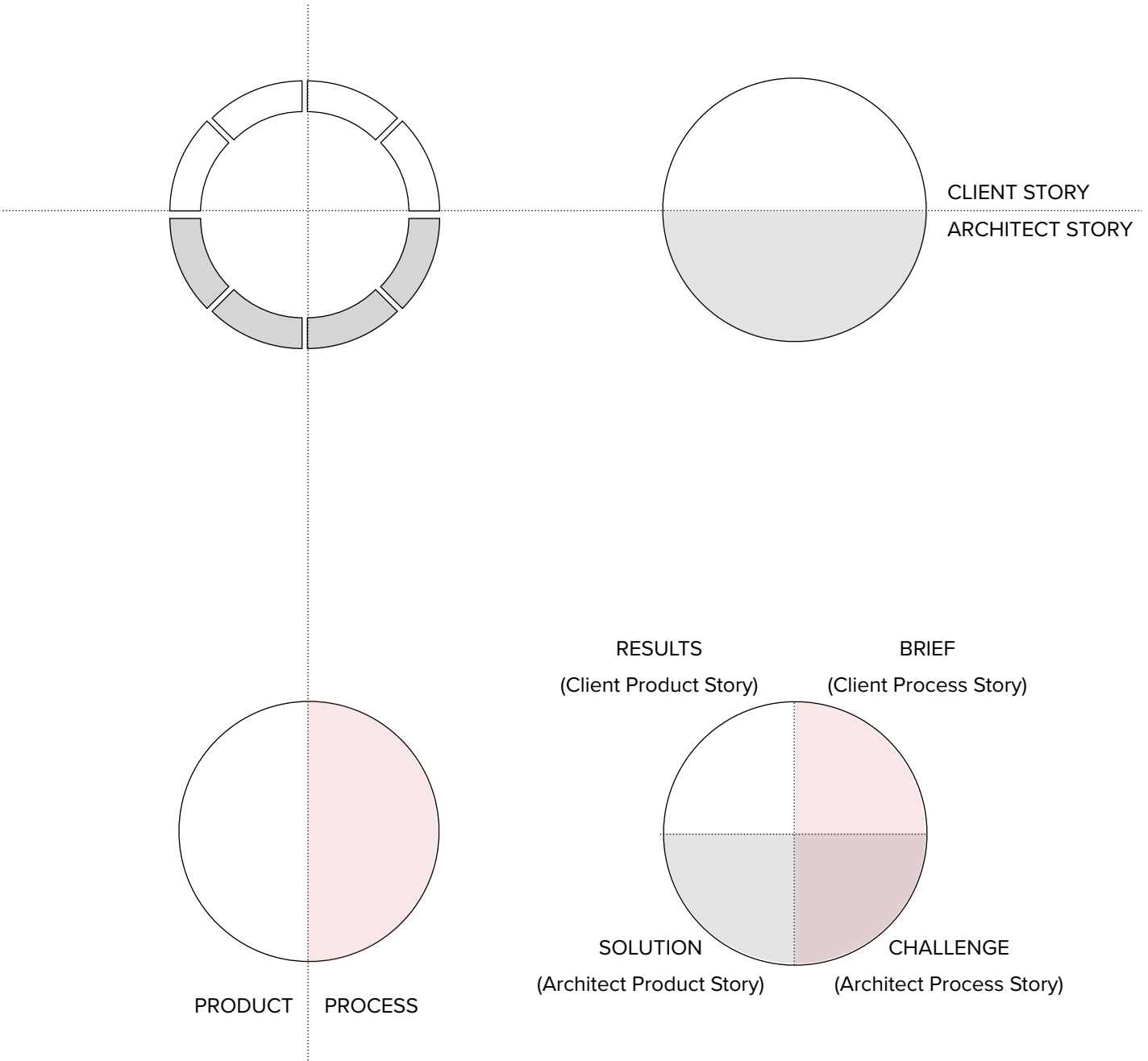


**Circle Structure**

Additionally, as shown on the following page, notice how the circle can be subdivided to illustrates how the main ideas that you want to convey are connected: the client story, the architect story, the process story, and the product story.

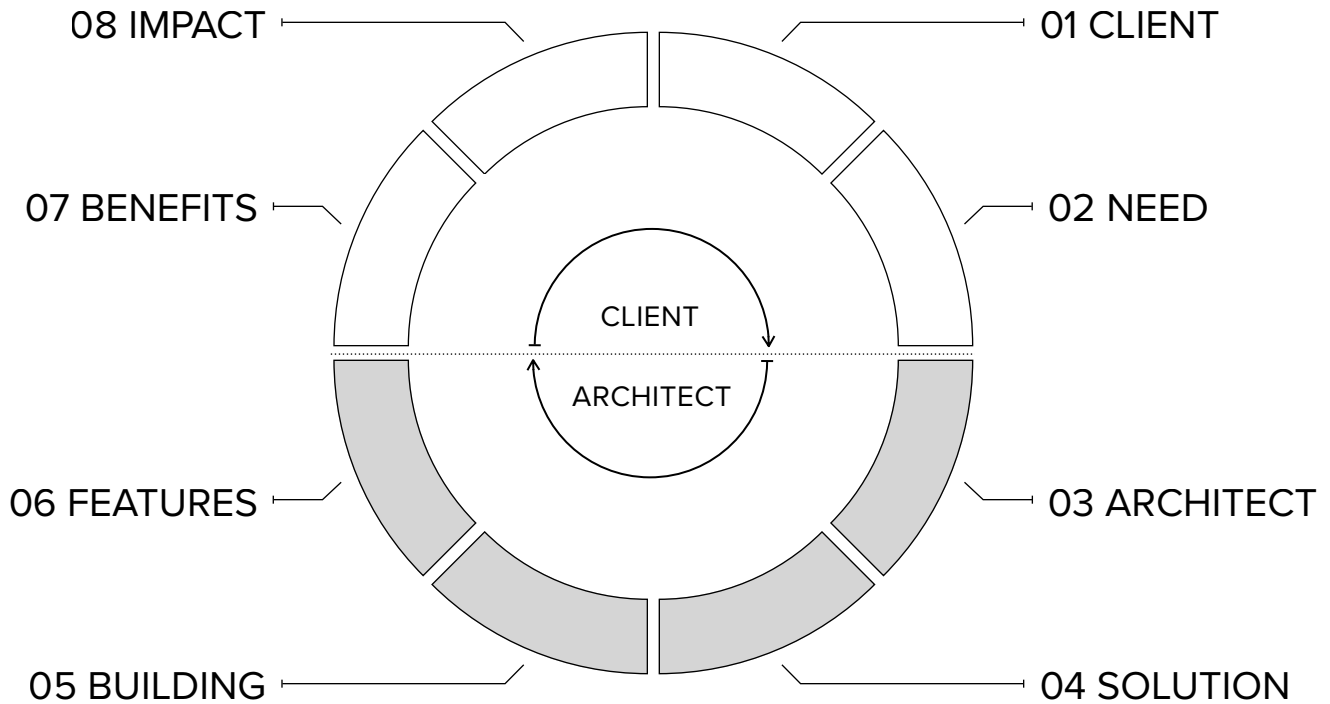
**Circle Prompts**

Pages 12–19 include five prompts per story element. These prompts are designed to spark your creativity and help get you writing when you feel blocked.



## BONUS:

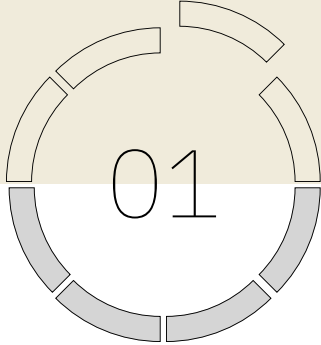
### THE CIRCLE AS A MODEL FOR RFPs & COVER LETTERS



## THE STORY

Align with your prospective client's values [01]. Show you understand their problems [02]. Introduce your practice [03] and explain how you solve those problems [04]. Give examples to offer proof of your experience [05], highlighting specific features [06] and their value [07]. Envision their future with you [08].

# **THE WORK- BOOK**



# THE CLIENT

PROMPTS

- 01. Who is the client and what do they do?
- 02. What are their goals?
- 03. What's important to them?
- 04. Who are their customers?
- 05. What are *their* goals? What's important to *them*?

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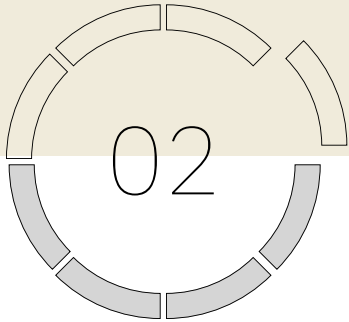
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# HAS A NEED.

PROMPTS

- 06. What are they hoping to accomplish?
- 07. Why? What problem is the client having? What are their pain points?
- 08. What did the client ask for? What is the scope of the project?
- 09. Is what they *think* they need and what they actually need the same thing?
- 10. Why did they choose this site?

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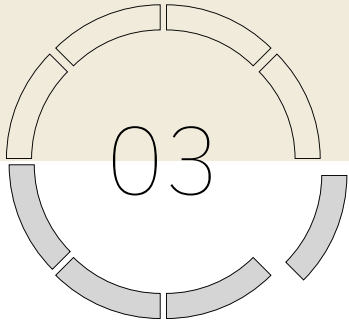
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# THEY CHOOSE AN ARCHITECT

PROMPTS

- 11. How did they find you and why did they choose you over another firm?
- 12. What distinguishes you from your competitors?
- 13. What relevant experience or expertise do you have?
- 14. Did you share any resonant insight during the selection process?
- 15. What is it about your work that resonates with the client?

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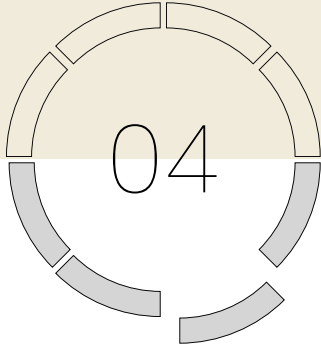
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# WHO DESIGNS A SOLUTION.

## PROMPTS

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- 16. What is your process like? How do you begin?
- 17. Beyond "listening," how do you involve the client and other stakeholders?
- 18. What major challenges did you have to overcome?
- 19. Do you use special tools or software? Or work with noteworthy collaborators?
- 20. What inspired the design? Is there a "big idea" or core concept?

## NOTES

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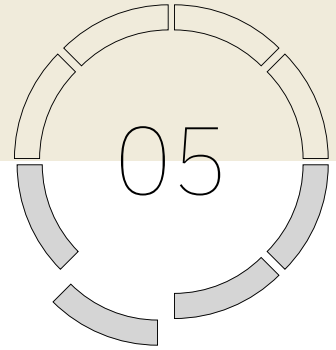
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# **THE BUILDING**

## **PROMPTS**

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- 21. What is the building’s relationship to the immediate site?
- 22. What is the building’s relationship to the broader context? The architectural, environmental, and cultural contexts?
- 23. What are the basic organizing principles?
- 24. What specific factors or goals shaped its form, massing, and spaces?
- 25. Were there any constraints or challenges with the site or program?

## **NOTES**

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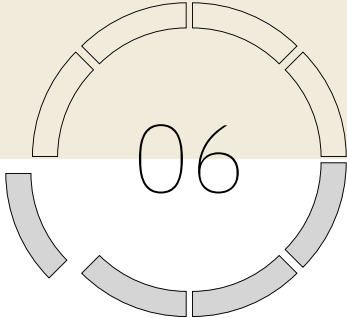
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# AND ITS FEATURES

## PROMPTS

- 26. What materials are used in the building? Where and why?
- 27. If there are amenities, how do they improve quality of life?
- 28. Are there any unique, unusual, or custom elements? Noteworthy details?
- 29. How does the project address accessibility, sustainability, & wellness?
- 30. How does it engage the senses and connect people to place?

## NOTES

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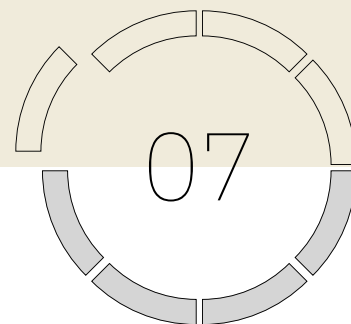
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# CREATE VALUE

## PROMPTS

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31. How do the building and its details create value for the client?
32. How do the details and features help resolve specific pain points?
33. Does it create new behaviors or opportunities?
34. Does it improve the experience for their customers or visitors? What about the broader community?
35. How do design choices balance cost and long-term value?

## NOTES

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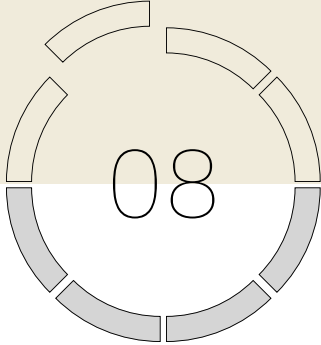
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# THAT MAKES AN IMPACT.

## PROMPTS

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- 36. Has it achieved the desired results?
- 37. How has the client’s life or business transformed by this project?
- 38. How is the community or context transformed? Who or what else is positively affected by this project?
- 39. Have any new relationships been created during this project?
- 40. What are the future implications for the client, community, & environment?

## NOTES

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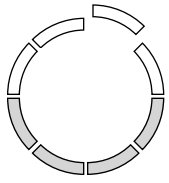
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**01 The Client**

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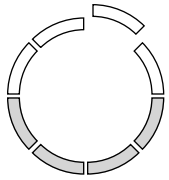
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**01 Has a Need**

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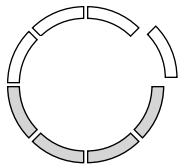
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**03 They select an Architect**

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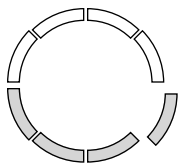
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**04 Who designs a Solution**

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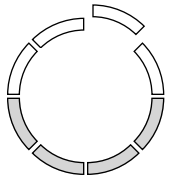
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05 The **Building**

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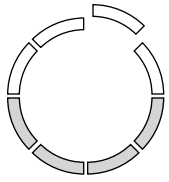
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06 and its **Features**

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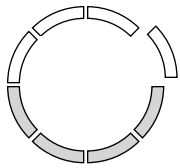
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07 Create **Benefits** or value

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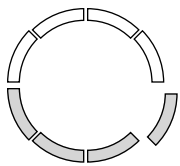
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08 That makes an **Impact.**

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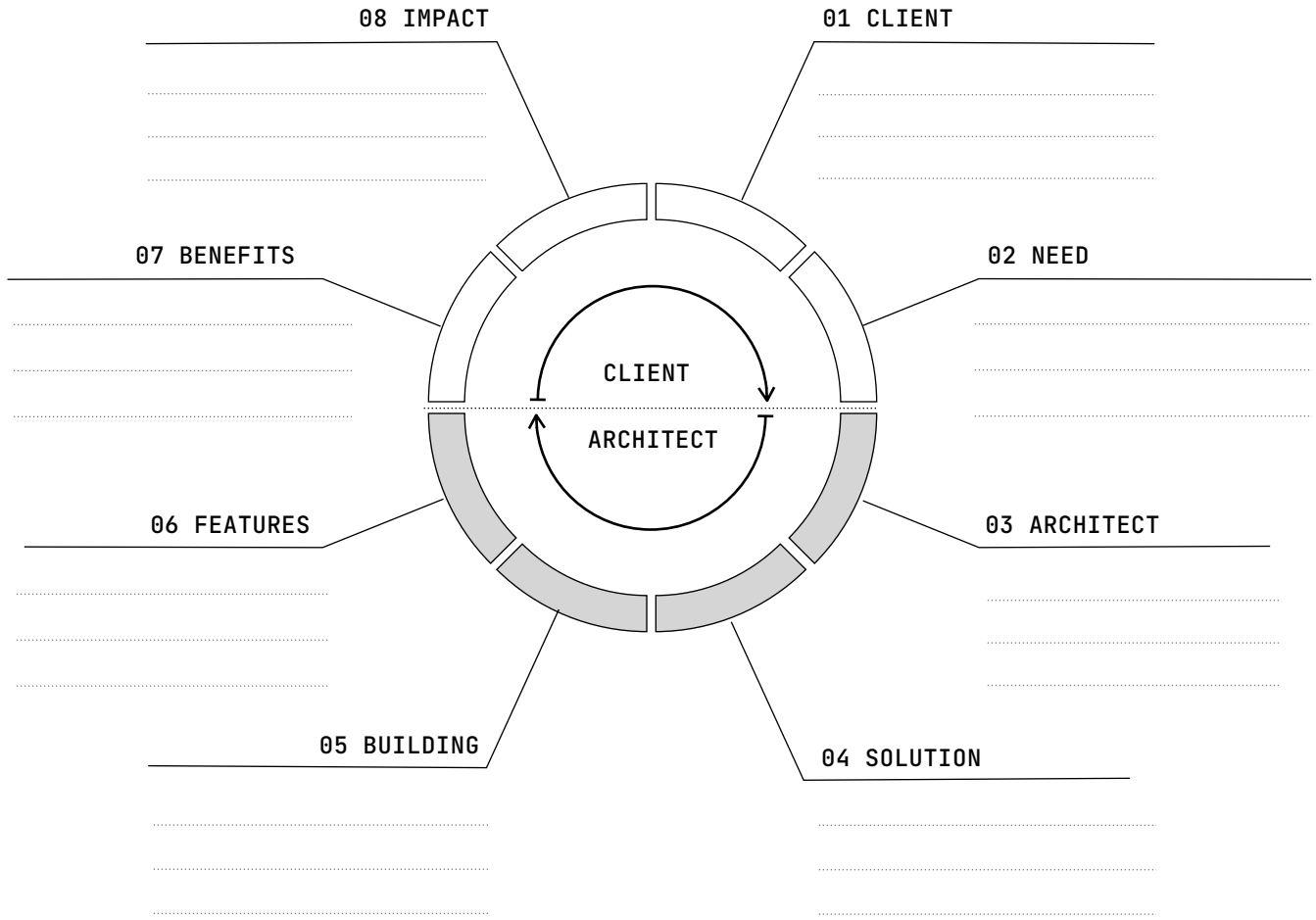
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**PROJECT**



**NOTES**

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