



STRATEGIC **PROJECT** **NARRATIVES**

THE BUILDING CIRCLE v1.2

A structural framework that architects, designers, and AEC marketers can use to write persuasive, value-driven project narratives that turn readers into clients.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	03
2	The Building Circle	05
5	Workbook	12
19	Simplified Templates	21

INTRODUCTION

Writing a strategic narrative is the most impactful thing you can do today to advance your architecture or design practice.

What's a strategic narrative? Great question. Let's break it down:

By "strategic," I mean applying research and insight to achieve a defined goal. And by "narrative," I'm essentially talking about storytelling. But there are two big differences in my mind: "narrative," in contrast to "story," implies a distinct perspective and does *not* have a definitive ending.

So, a strategic narrative is an informed description of an ongoing event or experience from a specific POV that is shared to achieve a specific goal.

The Building Circle is a structural framework I created for writing **strategic project narratives** – one of **six key narratives** I use at ADVSCOPY help strengthen design practices. It's just one of the tools we use with clients. But it's a good one.

Based on Universal Principles of Storytelling

The Building Circle is the product of what I've learned from writing about more than 100 buildings with ADVSCOPY, publishing two books about architecture, 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 winning RFPs.

But it's also the product of a millennia of storytelling

Its basic structure was inspired by Dan Harmon's Story Circle (Fig.1). Harmon is a famed TV writer and craftsman perhaps best known for creating *Rick and Morty* and *Community*. His Story Circle is itself a distilled version of the Hero's Journey (Fig.2), a universal storytelling framework rooted in thousands of years of oral tradition – as famously articulated by mythologist Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

These circular frameworks 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. Using this narrative structure will make your work more memorable, more resonant, and more impactful.

Built with Proven Copywriting and Architectural Principles

Following Harmon's model, the Building Circle separates a typical project narrative into eight basic parts. Each part has one goal: communicate that specific aspect of the project's design. As you'll see, together, they can structure a full project narrative or a single sentence. You can easily adapt it for your own narratives to tell your reader everything they need to know about a project in just a few words.

The Building Circle isn't used for crafting a narrative about buildings. **It's used to craft narratives about transformation** created *by* buildings — and how you, the architect, made the transformation possible. *That's* what your client bought. And that's what future clients will buy.

The following pages explain all eight parts of the narrative in detail. And for those of you who love structure (I know you're out there!), I also break down the different quadrants of the circle and how they shape the overall narrative. Finally, I've also included a workbook with prompts for each section to spark your creativity and help get you started. If you're a marketing professional who doesn't have a background in architecture, these prompts can also help you know which questions to ask. They're derived from journalistic techniques, copywriting principles, 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 the Building Circle as a reference, always fit the narrative to your project, not your project to the narrative.

I hope you find this tool useful. It's a work in progress so please let me know what you think and where it could be improved.

Thanks so much for reading,

Jimmy Stamp

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Figure 1: Dan Harmon's Story Circle.

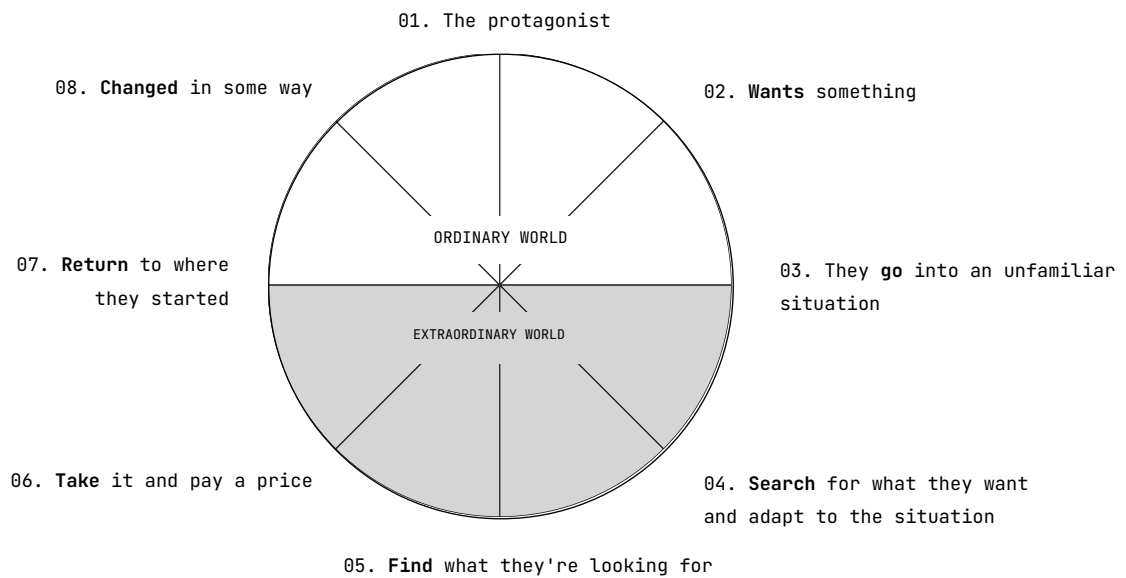
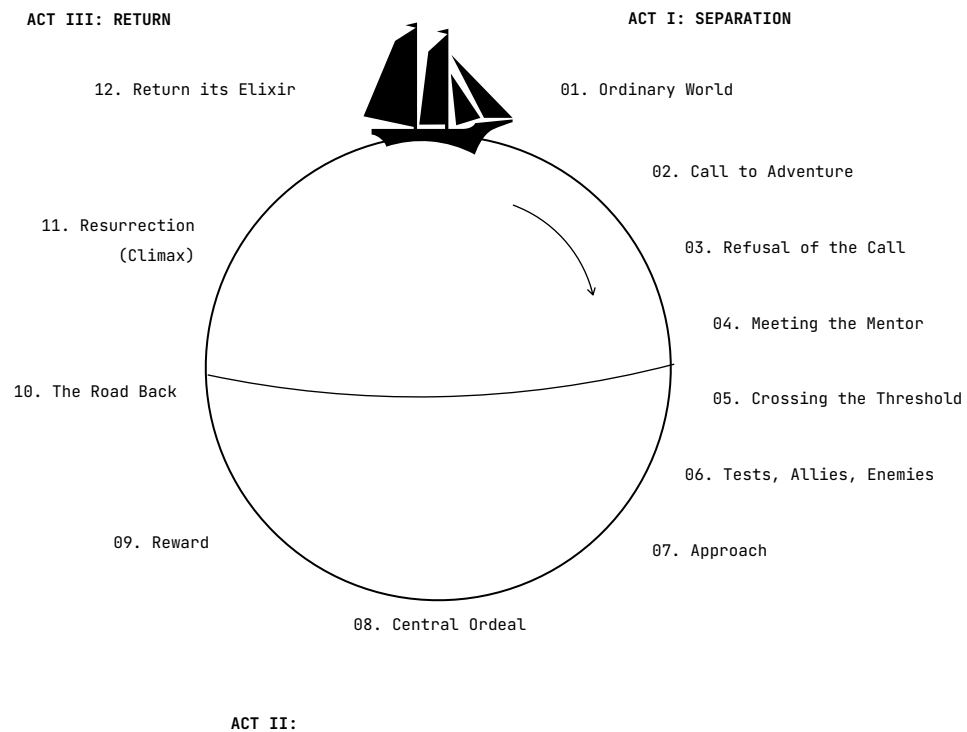
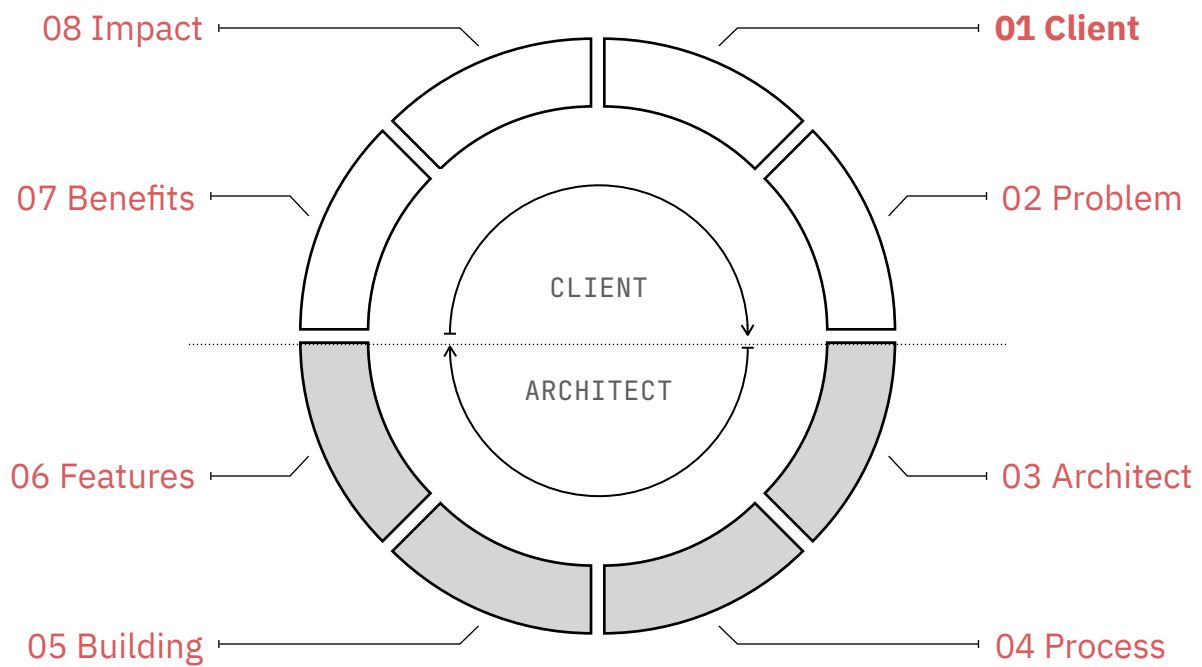


Figure 2: The Hero's Journey



THE BUILDING CIRCLE

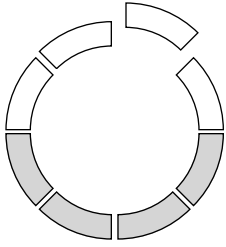


The **client** [01] has a **problem** [02], so they hire an **architect** [03] whose design **process** [04] produces a **building** [05] with **features** [06] that create **benefits** [07] resulting in a transformative **impact** [08].

Now here's *one way* that might work as the introduction to your narrative:

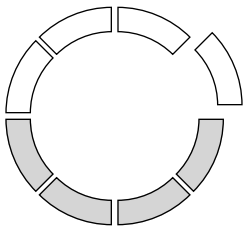
To help [client] with [problem] , we designed a [building] whose [features] resulted in [benefits] that are [impact] .

**THE
BUILDING
CIRCLE
BREAKDOWN**



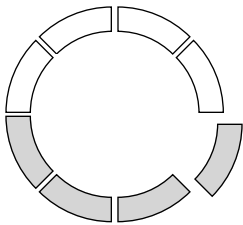
01 The Client

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



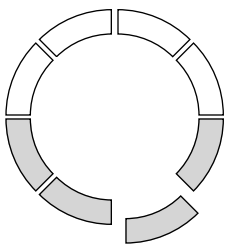
02 Has a Problem

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.



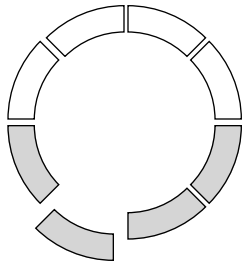
03 The Architect

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.



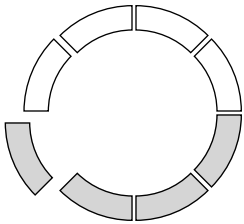
04 Implements their Design Process

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.



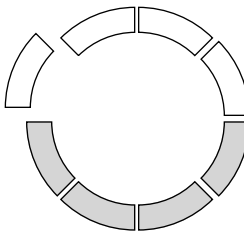
05 The Building

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?



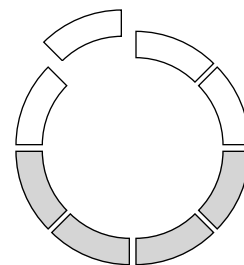
06 And its Features

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.



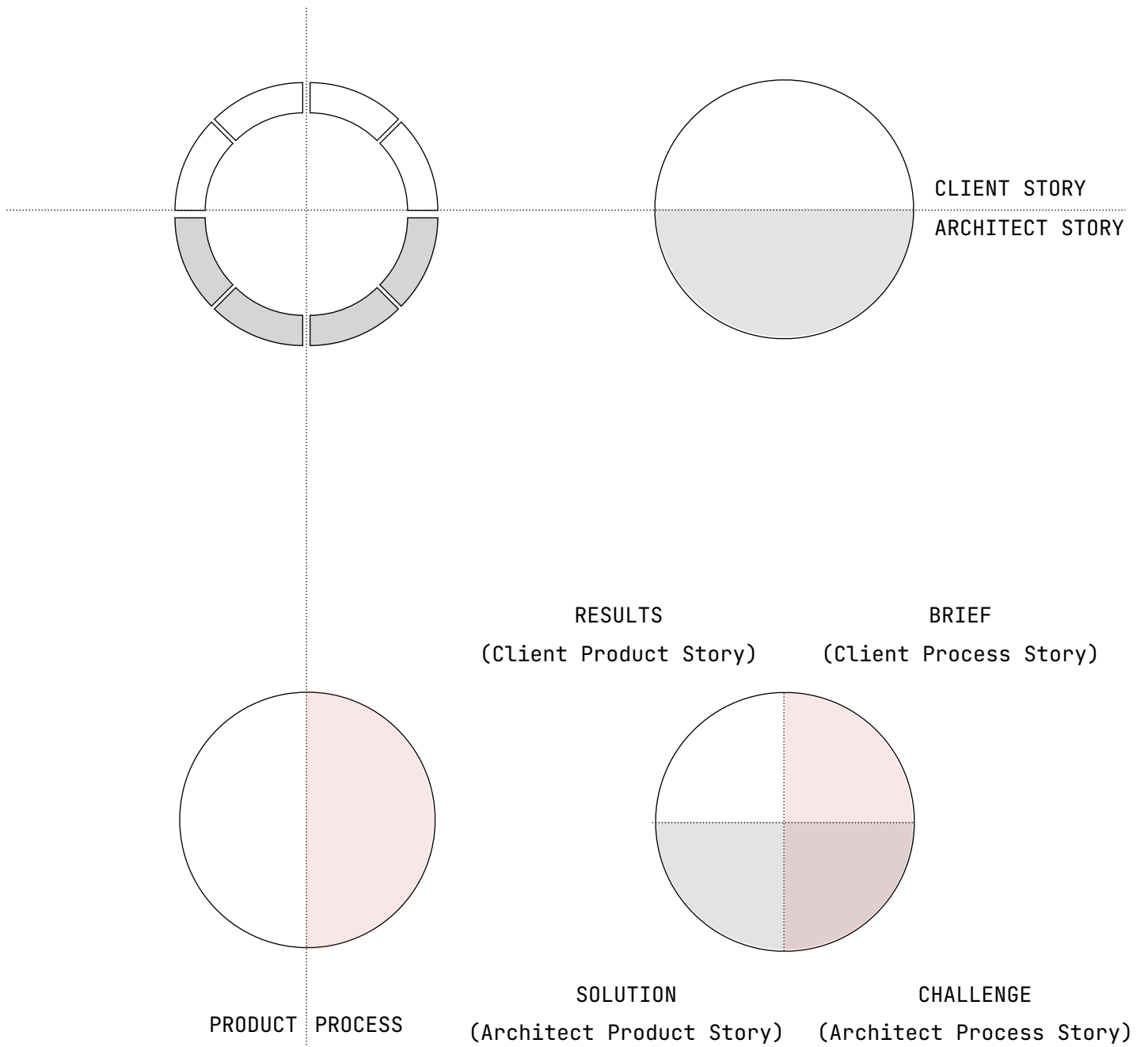
07 Create Benefits

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.

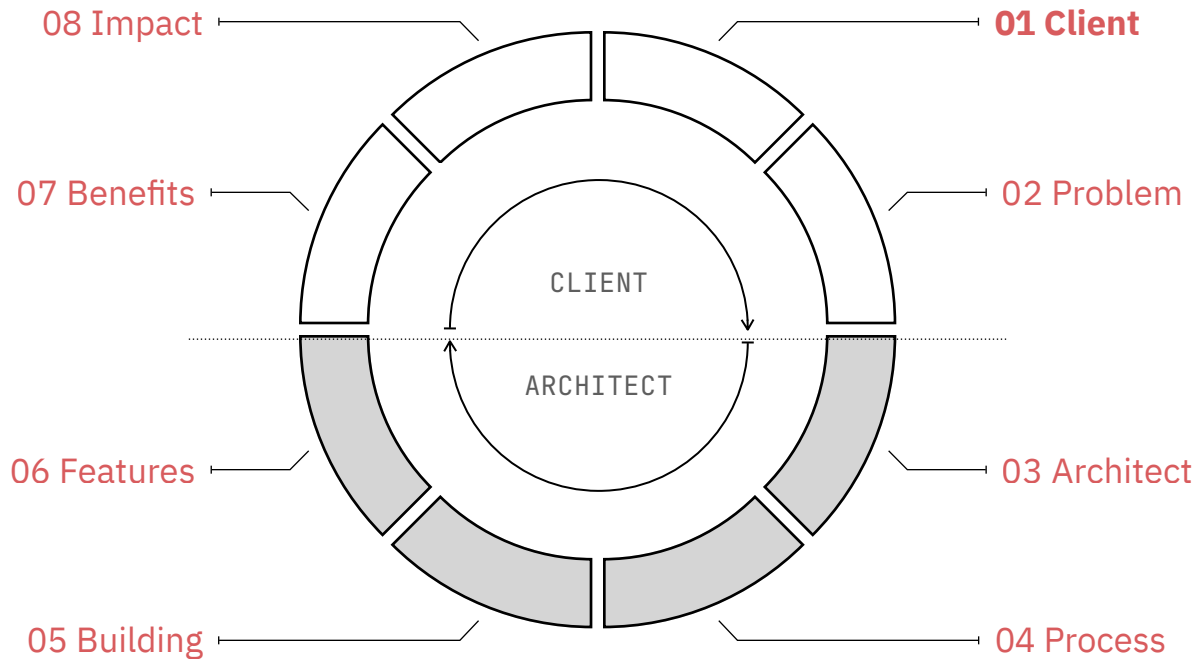


08 That Make an Impact

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.

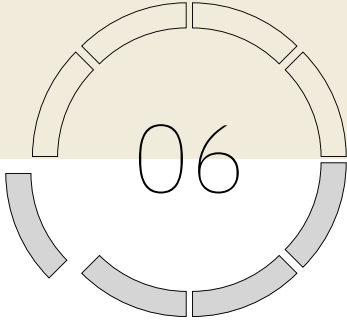


BONUS: **THE CIRCLE AS A MODEL FOR RFPs & COVER LETTERS**



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
BUILDING
CIRCLE
WORKBOOK**



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?

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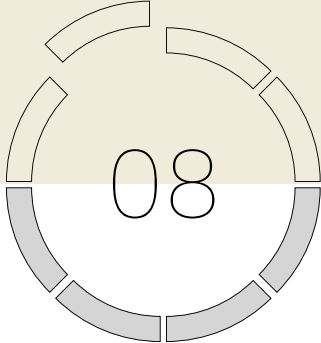
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THAT MAKES AN IMPACT.

PROMPTS

- 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?

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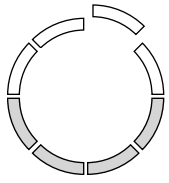
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01 The Client

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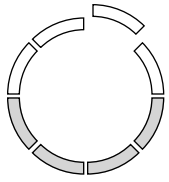
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01 Has a Problem

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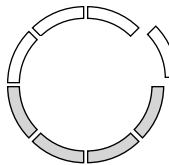
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03 They select an Architect

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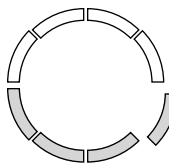
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04 Who implements their unique Process

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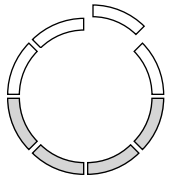
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05 The Building

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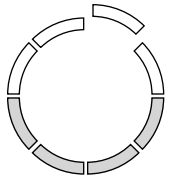
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06 and its Features

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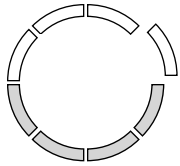
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07 Create Benefits or value

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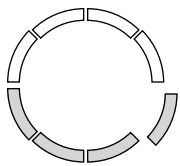
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08 That makes an Impact.

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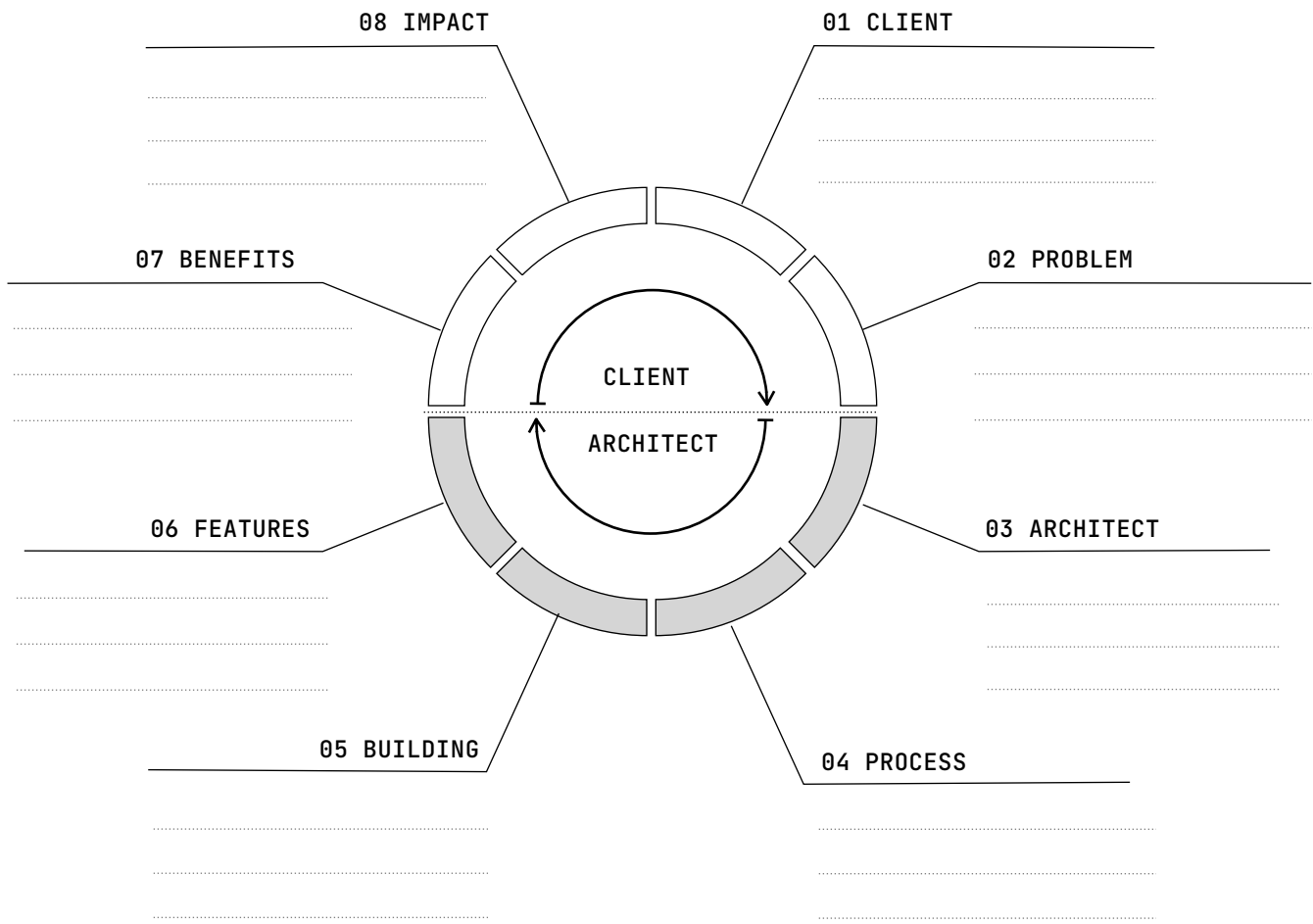
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PROJECT



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