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The 10 most innovative architecture firms in 2022

With new materials, techniques, and visions, firms such as Populous, HKS, Prince Concepts, and SO-IL are leading the way toward a better-built tomorrow.

By Nate Berg

Explore the full 2022 list of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, 528 organizations whose efforts are reshaping their businesses, industries, and the broader culture. We've selected the firms making the biggest impact with their initiatives across 52 categories, including the most innovative media, design, and urban development companies.

Architects are masters at taking novel ideas and turning them into physical spaces. The firms on this year's list of the 10 most innovative companies in the architecture industry have pushed the limits of what it means to build. One found ways of applying sustainable design at the scale of a stadium, ensuring that every event under its roof can happen without producing any net carbon dioxide emissions. Another firm developed a method of building floors that slashes excess material use, eliminating most of the concrete and steel that undergird the skyscraping floors of urban high-rises. Another firm is pushing the standard billboard into the realm of technicolor alien spaceships with a bold street-side advertising/art structure right in the heart of Hollywood's Sunset Strip.

This year's honorees include some of the biggest names in architecture, such as stadium giant Populous and HKS, which has made air quality a new focus in the pandemic age. Some smaller firms are also honored this year, including Detroit-based Prince Concepts and New York-based SO-IL, which are making their names in designing unique takes on housing. The clients behind the projects on this year's list also run the gamut. Fast-food giant McDonald's called on Ross Barney Architects to redesign a flagship restaurant in Chicago and turn another, at Disney World, into an environmental overperformer. Amazon chose to keep its name off the sustainable stadium it sponsored in Seattle, choosing the heart-on-its-shirtsleeves name Climate Pledge Arena. Moody Nolan, the largest Black-owned architecture firm in the United States, made itself its own client when it decided to build giveaway homes for the needy in each of the cities where it has offices. The companies that commissioned these projects understand the value of design—and in pushing the boundaries of what design can do. The designers behind the projects on this year's list are proving that bold ideas can make the leap into reality.

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10. SO-IL

For pushing a form of apartment building design that prioritizes outdoor space and social interaction, even in tight settings

Brooklyn-based architecture firm **SO-IL**, which is known for modern and minimal designs for buildings including a social housing project in Leon, Mexico, and art galleries around the world, has struck upon a novel way to bring the public-private space of the stoop—a Brooklyn architectural signature—and inject it even into residential apartment buildings, creating a space in front of every unit. It successfully did this with a project in Brooklyn itself, which debuted in August. Instead of the typical building layout with apartment doors lining a narrow hallway, SO-IL's design turns the building inside out, dividing it into three buildings that are separated by courtyards. Each is ringed with exterior walkways on each level that lead to the units and look out across the courtyards at the other walkways. In front of each unit, a small semi-covered room serves as a mini-stoop, neither fully private nor fully public. (Moving away from the interior corridor is the signature innovation.) Two additional projects are in the works and both build on the circulation and outdoor-space ideas explored in the Brooklyn condos. For one, a 13-story tower that will break ground later this year, there are porchlike foyers at the entrance of the units, and corridors on the building's exterior add more opportunity for light to enter the building.