

Positioning Design as a Solution to the U.S. Housing Affordability Crisis

Gensler | SMPS Chicago Excellence in Marketing Awards Submission

Gensler's North Central regional communications team partnered with The Pew Charitable Trusts (Pew) to develop and execute a fully integrated communications campaign centered on a design-driven solution to one of the nation's most pressing challenges: the housing affordability crisis. Through a phased rollout across seven cities, we elevated Gensler's voice in business, policy, and housing conversations traditionally dominated by economists, developers, and government leaders. This first-of-its-kind effort for our team required strategic creativity and cross-sector coordination to position Gensler not just as an architecture firm, but as a leader providing creative solutions to complex, large-scale issues. By combining targeted media relations, digital storytelling, and cross-platform content, the campaign achieved wide-reaching visibility and measurable business impact.

Marketing Objective

The primary objective was to position Gensler as a national leader in the office-to-residential (O2R) conversation, showcasing our design expertise as a credible, innovative force in addressing issues shaping the future of our cities. Our campaign aimed to:

- Generate national and local media coverage highlighting Gensler's thought leadership, with at least 50% of placements including direct quotes.
- Expand Gensler's visibility beyond traditional design publications, prioritizing business, consumer, and policy-focused media.
- Elevate Gensler spokespeople by securing interviews and quotes across press materials.
- Drive digital engagement, including increased traffic to Gensler.com and social growth on LinkedIn and Instagram.
- Position Gensler offices and leaders in each city as local authorities on creative housing solutions.

Our target audiences included:

- Civic leaders, policymakers, and developers seeking feasible and cost-effective strategies for repositioning underused office buildings and addressing housing shortages.
- Local consumers to raise awareness of Gensler's impact and leadership at the community level.
- Design and AEC professionals to reinforce Gensler's reputation as a pioneer in adaptive reuse, urban strategy, and O2R.

Research, Planning, and Implementation

Our campaign was structured in three phases to align with the rollout of Gensler and Pew's city-specific research: first Denver, Minneapolis, and Seattle; followed by Los Angeles and Houston; and finally, Chicago and Washington, D.C. From the outset, our teams collaborated to build a detailed strategy that would maximize reach, visibility, and impact. This included the development of targeted media lists, embargoed press materials, key messaging for each city, and a robust owned content strategy.

Initially, we hosted an embargoed media webinar to brief journalists and provide an opportunity to view the content before being publicly released. While effective in providing context, we recognized that one-on-one interviews yielded better engagement and media uptake. For the second and third

launches, we shifted to individualized embargoed pitching ahead of each report's release, offering early interviews with our spokespeople. This strategic pivot proved successful in increasing the number of placements featuring direct Gensler quotes. In parallel, we supported local office leaders with media training and talking points ahead of each launch to ensure consistency across channels and messaging.

Owned content on Gensler.com and social platforms further extended campaign visibility, amplifying key findings to both professional and public audiences. The reports for each city were exclusively hosted on Gensler's website, allowing us to leverage them for storytelling by housing them within a [blog](#), which was used as the primary link in all pitching and media coverage, driving traffic to our website. For the first two launches, we used city skyline imagery for our primary social media graphics ([1](#), [2](#)), which generated some engagement. For the third launch ([3](#)), we leveraged new renderings that offered more dynamic standalone visuals for Instagram. Specifically, inviting and encouraging our audience to actively consider what these new spaces could look like and offer.

Results

The campaign generated more than 65 media placements across a wide range of outlets, including but not limited to [Bloomberg](#), [Fast Company](#), [Vox](#), [CoStar](#), [The Architect's Newspaper](#) and [USA Today](#). Around 50% of the coverage featured direct quotes from Gensler, meeting a primary goal of spotlighting our design voice beyond design media. In total, four Gensler leaders were quoted and earned placements in influential regional publications such as the [Seattle Times](#), [The Minnesota Star Tribune](#), [Chicago Sun-Times](#) and [Houston Chronicle](#). The resulting coverage spans a broad, but balanced, spread of outlets that elevates Gensler as a leading voice shaping the future of our cities.

Across owned channels, we saw a significant engagement from third party public and professional LinkedIn users, discussing the proposal and including Gensler as part of the housing solution conversation. Over the course of the campaign, the blog received nearly 2,000 unique views. The report PDFs were downloaded a total of 4,345 times, as of July 2025. A full breakdown of Gensler.com blog traffic can be found on slide 20 in the exhibit deck. From the first to the third launch, likes on day-of Instagram posts increased from 100 to 424, a 324% increase across the campaign. The sharp growth, especially in the final phase, suggests awareness and engagement built over time, reflecting improved creative, greater public interest in the last two cities, and cumulative campaign momentum. While likes alone do not capture the full picture, this trend demonstrates a strong audience resonance and validates Instagram as a high-performing owned channel in the campaign.

There were no associated budget or costs associated with this campaign, only time spent. We did not employ outside consultants for this campaign.

Beyond media and digital metrics, the campaign elevated Gensler's profile with public and private stakeholders—spurring follow-up discussions around adaptive reuse and housing innovation in several of the featured cities. The effort ultimately strengthened Gensler's reputation as a design-led strategic partner, driving visibility in new sectors and building momentum around future opportunities.

2024-2025 Excellence in Marketing Awards Submission

POSITIONING DESIGN AS A SOLUTION TO THE U.S. HOUSING CRISIS

Gensler



CLARIFICATION STATEMENT



Seven cities. Three launches. One strategy.

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This first-of-its-kind effort for our team required strategic creativity and cross-sector coordination to position Gensler not just as an architecture firm, but as a leader providing creative solutions to complex, large-scale issues. By combining targeted media relations, digital storytelling, and cross-platform content, the campaign achieved wide-reaching visibility and measurable business impact.

MARKETING OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this campaign was to position Gensler as a national leader in the office-to-residential (O2R) conversation, showcasing our design expertise as a credible, innovative force in addressing issues shaping the future of our cities.

GOALS

- **Generate national and local media coverage** highlighting Gensler's thought leadership, with at least 50% of placements including direct quotes.
- **Expand Gensler's visibility beyond traditional design publications**, prioritizing business, consumer, and policy-focused media.
- **Elevate Gensler spokespeople** by securing interviews and quotes across press materials.
- **Drive digital engagement**, including increased traffic to Gensler.com and social growth on LinkedIn and Instagram.
- **Position Gensler offices and leaders** in each featured city as local authorities on creative housing solutions.

- **Civic leaders, policymakers, and developers** seeking feasible and cost-effective strategies for repositioning underused office buildings and addressing housing shortages.
- **Local consumers** to raise awareness of Gensler's impact and leadership at the community level.
- **Design and AEC professionals** to reinforce Gensler's reputation as a pioneer in adaptive reuse, urban strategy, and O2R.

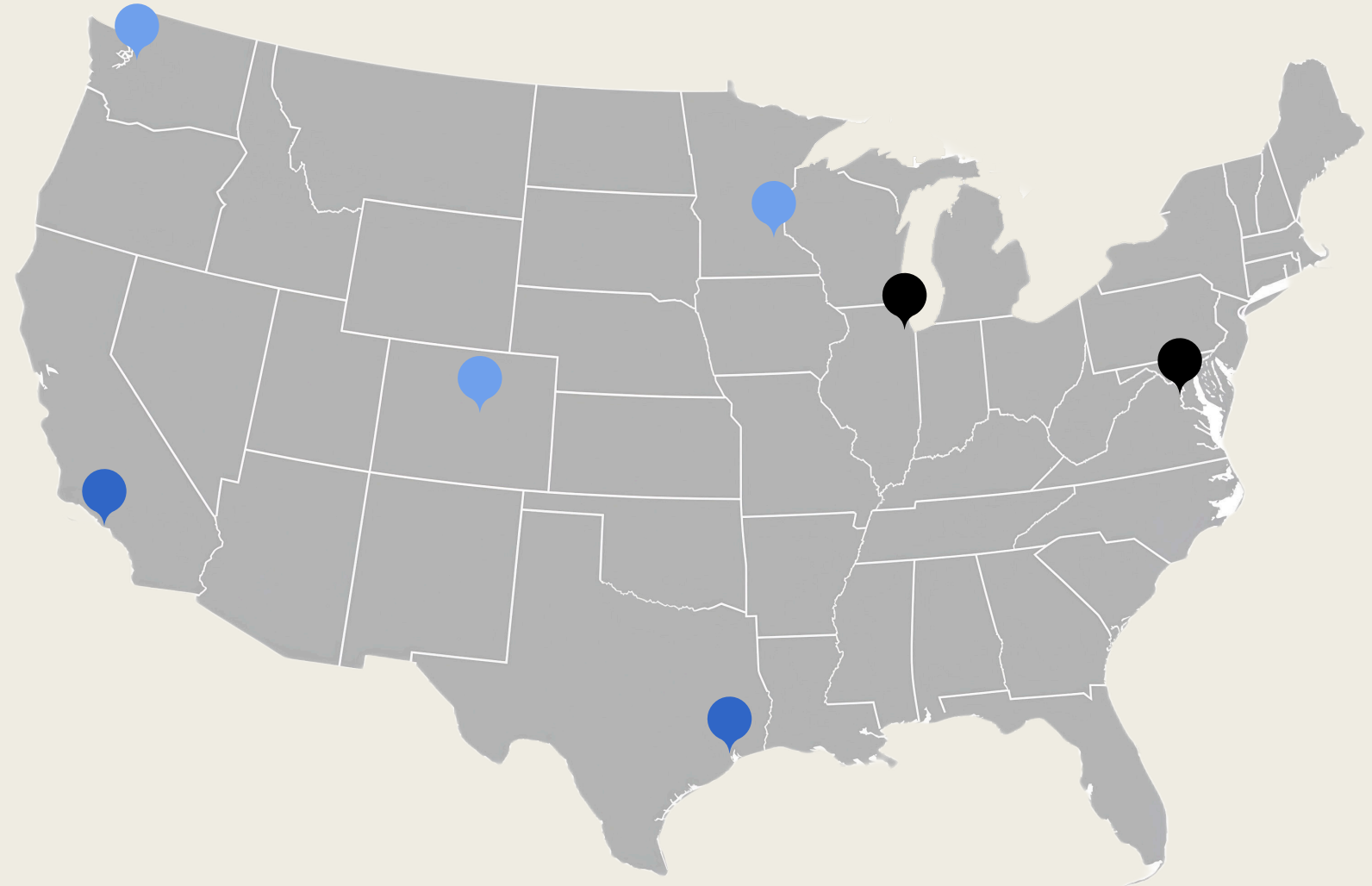
TARGET AUDIENCES

RESEARCH, PLANNING, & IMPLEMENTATION

APPROACH

Our campaign was structured in three phases to align with the rollout of Pew's city-specific research: first **Denver**, **Minneapolis**, and **Seattle**; followed by **Los Angeles** and **Houston**; and finally, **Chicago** and **Washington, D.C.**

From the outset, our teams collaborated to build a detailed strategy that would maximize reach, visibility, and impact. This included the development of targeted media lists, embargoed press materials, key messaging for each city, and a robust owned content strategy.



TACTICS

Media Relations

Social Media

Gensler Blog

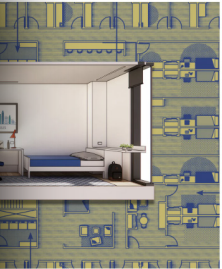
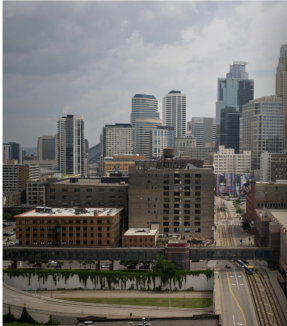
MEDIA RELATIONS

Initially, we hosted an embargoed media webinar to brief journalists. While effective in providing context, we recognized that one-on-one interviews yielded better engagement and media uptake. For the second and third launches, we shifted to individualized embargoed pitching one week ahead of each report's release, offering early interviews with our spokespeople.

This strategic pivot proved successful in increasing the number of placements featuring direct Gensler quotes. In parallel, we supported local office leaders with media training and talking points ahead of each launch to ensure consistency across channels and spokespeople.



Media Webinar

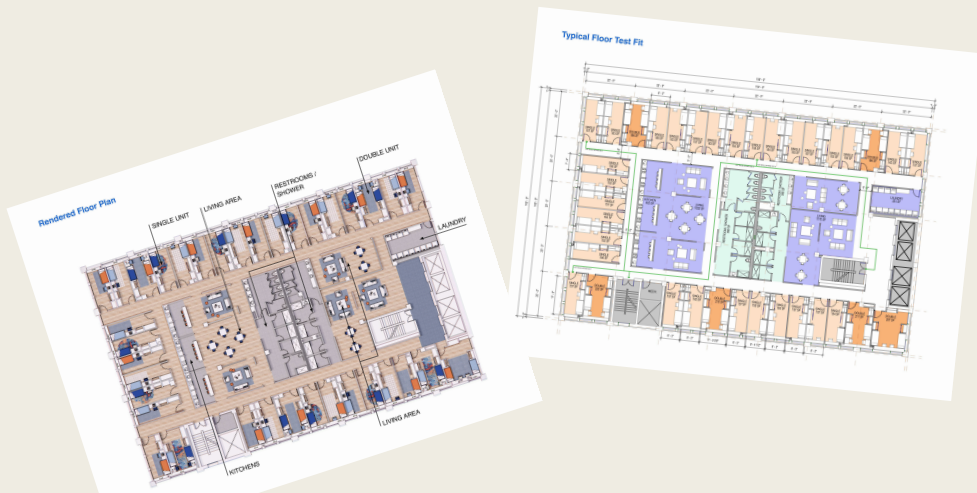


SOCIAL MEDIA

We partnered with Pew and our communications counterparts in their respective offices to create a collaborative post to go live on launch day.

For the first two launches, we were limited to floor plans and test fits for our visuals. We ultimately used stock skyline imagery for our primary social media graphic, which generated some engagement, but not as much as we would have liked.

For the third launch, which focused on Chicago and D.C., we leveraged new, more visually engaging renderings that offered more dynamic standalone visuals for Instagram. Specifically, inviting and encouraging our audience to actively consider what these new spaces could look like and offer.



GENSLER BLOG

[READ IT
HERE](#)

Owned content on Gensler.com and social platforms further extended campaign visibility, amplifying key findings to both professional and public audiences.

The reports for each city were exclusively hosted on Gensler’s website via a blog written by the project team, which was used as the primary URL in all pitching and media coverage, driving traffic to our website. The blog became a key storytelling tool for our team with legs beyond the website.

dialogue BLOG

How a New Vision for Flexible Co-Living Conversions Can Support Housing Affordability

Gensler and The Pew Charitable Trusts studied building typologies in three cities to better understand the potential found in this unique office-to-residential conversion model.

October 22, 2024 | By Wes LeBlanc and Terry Hogan



Photo by Toan Chu on Unsplash

Cities across the United States are grappling with a long-term housing affordability crisis. The misalignment of housing costs and the housing budgets of renters is worsening, with a record 50% of renters cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent. In many cases, this is exacerbated by regulatory frameworks that encourage and prioritize construction of traditional, market-rate housing that is higher-cost and beyond the means of most renters.

At the same time, office occupancy has fallen significantly nationwide as the real estate market responds to declining office demand, leaving many downtown properties vacant. These properties are located in transit-accessible and job- and amenity-rich locations. Gensler has assessed thousands of these office properties for their possible conversion to housing. However, many are not economically viable due to configurations that appeal to office tenants but are incompatible with traditional residential layouts. Large floor plates

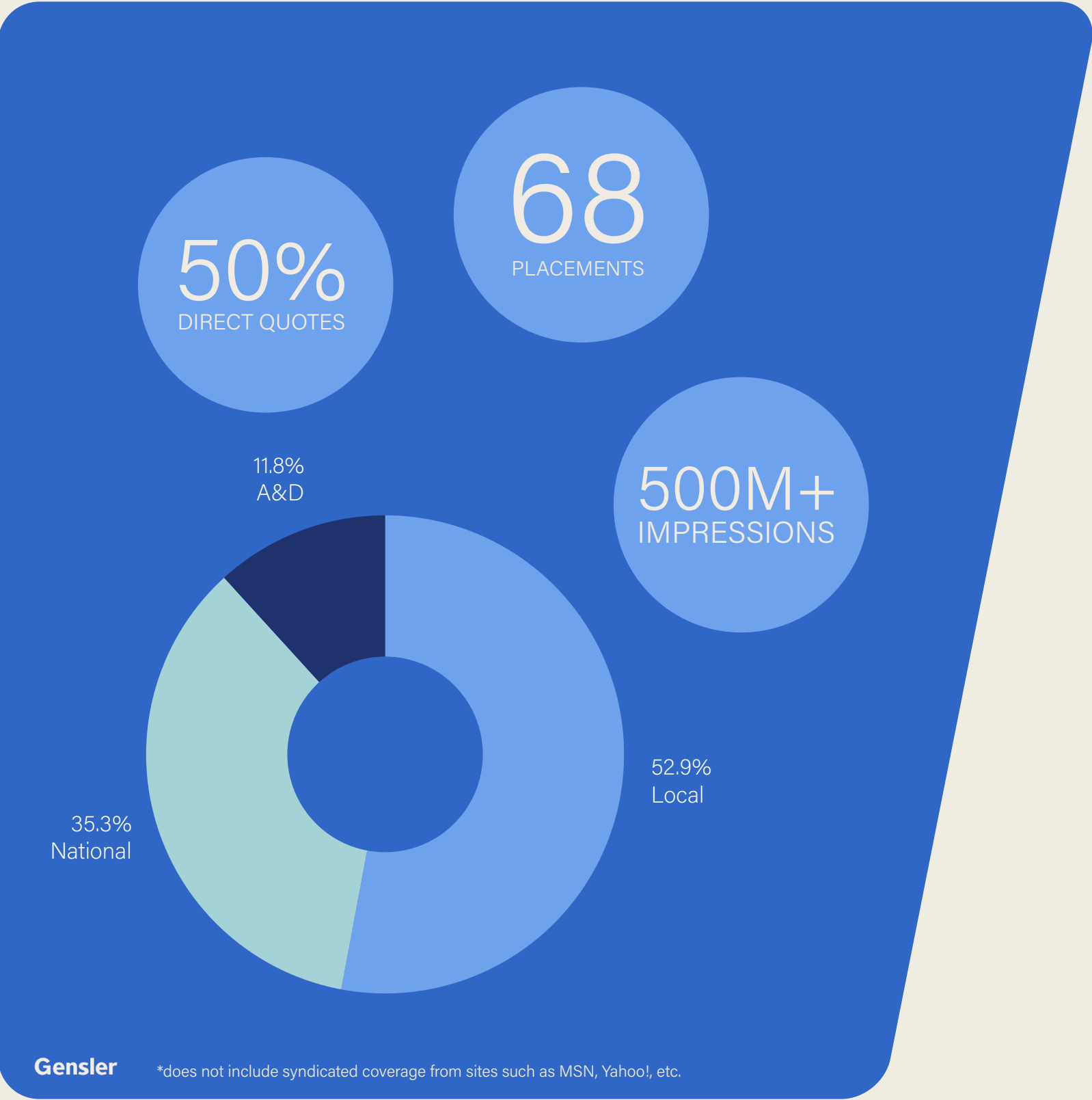
RESULTS

MEDIA RELATIONS

The campaign generated **more than 65 media placements** across national and local print, online, and broadcast outlets, including but not limited to *Bloomberg*, *Fast Company*, *Vox*, *CoStar*, *The Architect's Newspaper* and *The Business Journals*.

Roughly **half of total coverage featured direct quotes** from Gensler, meeting a primary goal of spotlighting our design voice within policy and business media. In total, four Gensler leaders were quoted and earned placements in influential regional publications such as the *Seattle Times*, *Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Houston Chronicle*.

The resulting media coverage spans a broad, but balanced, spread of outlets, that elevates **Gensler as a leading voice** shaping the future of our cities.



MEDIA RELATIONS

LOCAL IMPACT

Exhibit 1: As a result of our outreach around the Chicago report, we secured an interview with The Chicago Sun-Times for our project spokesperson and Chicago office leader, not only resulting in awareness for our work on the study, but positioning us as pioneers when it comes to creative solutions to the problems our city is facing.

The article was also syndicated by its sister site and local radio station, WBEZ.

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT MONEY NEWS

Solution for Chicago's empty office buildings could be microapartments, study says

Gensler and the Pew Charitable Trusts said co-living buildings with microapartments could be a step forward in helping downtown Chicago thrive.



[READ IT
HERE](#)

MEDIA RELATIONS NATIONAL STAGE

Exhibit 2: We secured an interview with Fast Co. leading up to the Los Angeles and Houston reports being released.

Following an in-depth conversation with our spokesperson and client, we were directly quoted throughout the article, directly supporting our goal of elevating Gensler's voice on a national scale.

FAST COMPANY

How abandoned office buildings in L.A. could be transformed into \$1,000 a month studio apartments

A new report from Gensler and the Pew Charitable Trust proposes converting old office buildings into SRO-style housing.

SHARE ↗

[READ IT
HERE](#)



MEDIA RELATIONS

NEW CHANNELS

Exhibit 3: This was the first of four broadcast placements across the course of the campaign. It was our spokesperson's first TV interview, which required additional media training to ensure he felt comfortable and prepared.

By securing broadcast coverage with Denver's NBC affiliate, we reached our local consumer target audience, while also achieving our goal of raising Gensler's profile at the community level.



Proposal would make dormitory housing out of Denver office units

Dozens of people would share common bathrooms and kitchens, while having small private sleeping quarters, under the plan released by Gensler.



[WATCH IT
HERE](#)

MEDIA RELATIONS

MASS AWARENESS

Exhibit 4: This is a snapshot of our coverage secured across the entire campaign, spanning local, national, and design trade media; print, online, and broadcast.

With nearly 70 placements total, we successfully met our goal of inserting Gensler's voice, via direct quotes, beyond our traditional design media targets, in outlets where our clients traditionally dominate the real estate.

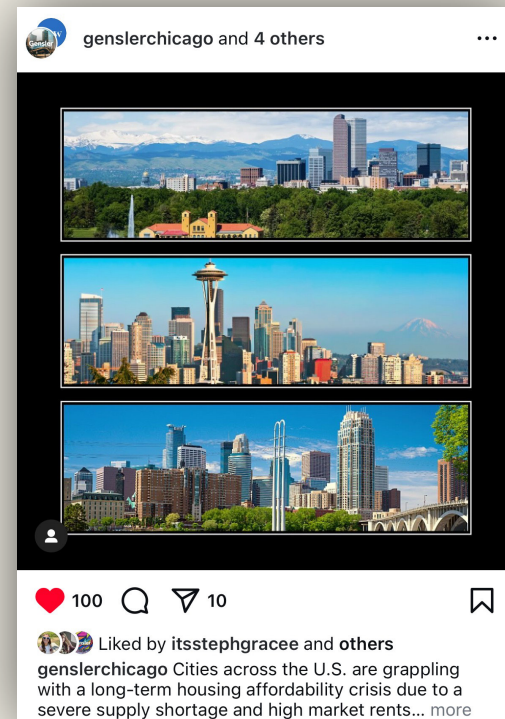
**Not comprehensive to avoid sharing articles that may be behind a paywall, syndicated articles, and those linked in previous slides.*

LOCAL BUSINESS & CONSUMER	NATIONAL BUSINESS & CONSUMER	ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN
<u>Bisnow Houston</u>	<u>Bloomberg CityLab</u>	<u>AllWork.Space</u>
<u>Chron.com (Houston)</u>	<u>CoStar</u>	<u>APA Planning Magazine</u>
<u>Colorado Times Recorder</u>	<u>CRE Marketbeat</u>	<u>Architect Magazine</u>
<u>KPRC-TV (NBC) Houston</u>	<u>Forbes</u>	<u>Building Design + Construction</u>
<u>LAist</u>	<u>MRSC</u>	<u>Building Design + Construction</u>
<u>Seattle Magazine</u>	<u>Realty News Report</u>	<u>I+S Podcast</u>
<u>Twin Cities Business</u>	<u>Smart Cities Dive</u>	<u>The Architect's Newspaper (digital)</u>
<u>Washingtonian</u>	<u>USA Today</u>	<u>The Architect's Newspaper (print)</u>
<u>WGN Radio</u>	<u>Vox</u>	

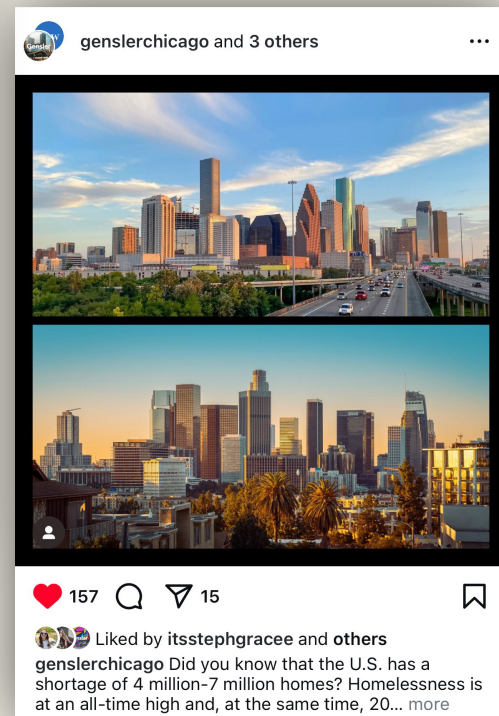
SOCIAL MEDIA

ENGAGEMENT GROWTH

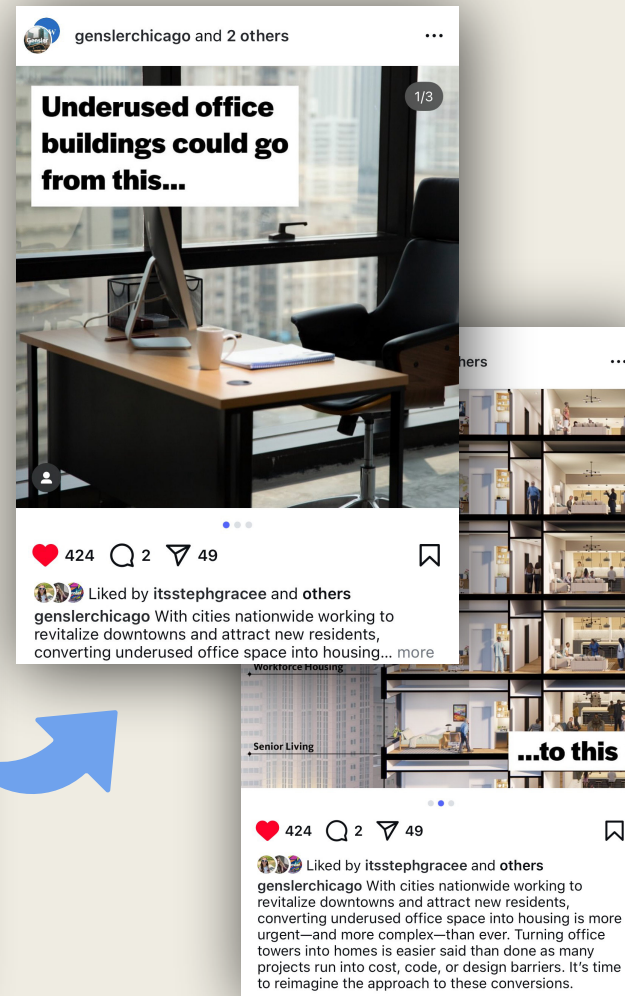
Exhibit 1



Launch 1



Launch 2



Launch 3

- Likes on the launch day Instagram posts increased from 100 to 424, a **324% increase** across the campaign.
- The sharp growth, especially in the final phase, suggests awareness and engagement built over time, reflecting improved creative, greater public interest in the Chicago and Washington, D.C. reports, and **cumulative campaign momentum** from earlier efforts.
- This trend demonstrates a **strong audience resonance** and validates Instagram as a high-performing owned channel in the campaign.

SOCIAL MEDIA ORGANIC BUZZ

Exhibit 2: Beyond our owned digital strategy, we were pleased to see organic engagement and content shared across major networks, primarily on LinkedIn and Twitter. This demonstrates our campaign's visibility our key audiences: private and public leaders, decision makers, and general consumers.

Smart Cities Dive
4,049 followers
6d · 🌐

Researchers have proposed yet another way for cities to use the glut of office buildings left vacant amid the shift to remote and hybrid work: Turn them into dorm-style, co-living residences with private sleeping areas and communal kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms and laundry facilities for each floor. The idea comes from a report issued today from [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and [Gensler](#).

Office-to-residential conversions are tough. Could dorm-style co-living be...
smartcitiesdive.com

Amanda Glandon and 5 others · 1 comment

Bobby Fijan
@bobbyfijan
Follow

As a creative and practical solution for **existing** and **empty** center city office buildings ... this is perfect

Typical Floor Test Fit



Rachel Cohen @rmc031 · 6d
NEW: A roadmap for building lots of new affordable market-rate housing is out today, bringing back SROs for the 21st century

This is one of the best housing policy ideas I've covered i...

The Minnesota Star Tribune
15,930 followers
6d · 🌐

Researchers at Pew Charitable Trusts teamed with planning firm Gensler to explore how converting empty office buildings into "single-room occupancy" rental units could solve downtown areas' lack of affordable housing and struggling commercial real estate.

One solution for downtown Minneapolis' vacant offices: affor...
startribune.com

Amanda Glandon and 11 others · 2 reposts

← **Post**

Tracy Hadden Loh @lohplaces

This was an **INCREDIBLY** fun read – a truly innovative research project and thought exercise – on the potential of office-to-residential co-living

[gensler.com/doc/pew-gensle...](#)

12:32 PM · Oct 22, 2024 · 352 Views

Rachel Cohen · 3rd+
Policy Correspondent at Vox
6d · 🌐

A roadmap for building lots of new affordable market-rate housing is out today from [Pew Research Center](#) and [Gensler](#), bringing back SROs for the 21st century

This is one of the best housing policy ideas I've reported on in a while, and some cities can move on it immediately

What if cities finally legalized adult dorms?
vox.com

31 · 3 comments · 5 reposts

Business Insider
10,943,046 followers
6d · 🌐

"Flexible co-living," or dormitory-style apartments where residents share kitchen, bathroom, laundry and living spaces, could be a more efficient path to converting unused space, according to a study published Tuesday by [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and design firm [Gensler](#).

The report comes as companies reevaluate their need for office space in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. With many workers still remote or in hybrid positions, office vacancies have climbed. The national office vacancy rate is set to rise to around 20% by the end of this year, according to commercial real estate firm [CBRE](#).

Office-to-residential conversions have been touted as a solution to problems in both commercial and residential markets, but such overhauls are often costly and complicated.

Read more about flexible co-living on [Business Insider](#): <https://lnkd.in/d4uaRSxG>

Would you consider living in a "flexible co-living" arrangement?
The author can see how you vote. [Learn more](#)

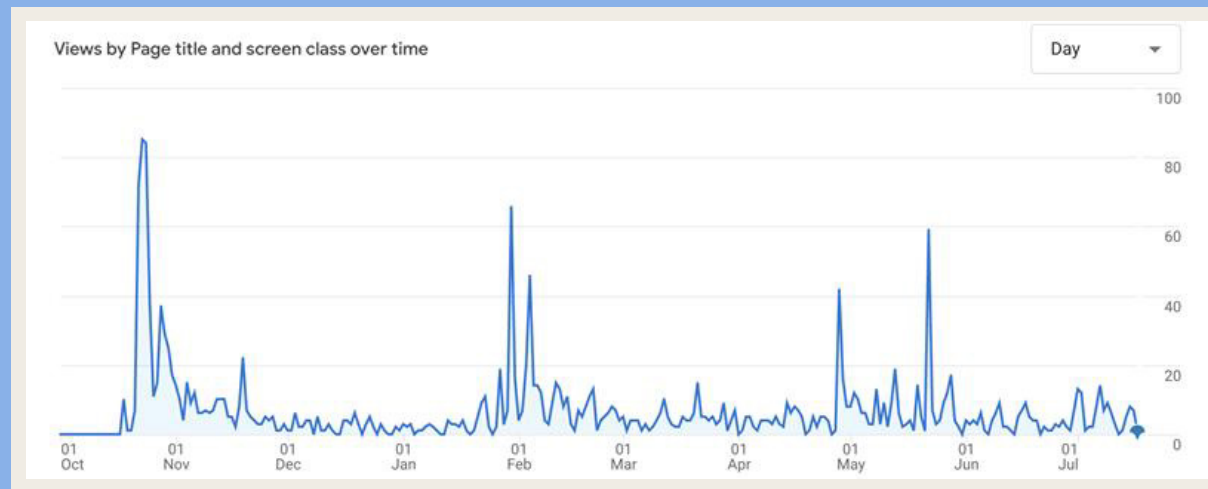
Yes
 No

6,046 votes · 23h left

49 · 75 comments · 1 repost

GENSLER BLOG HIGH TRAFFIC

Exhibit 1: This visual represents traffic to the blog since its publication in October 2024.



4,345

Total Report
Downloads

1,906

Unique
Views since
first
published

1:39

Avg. Time
Spent on
Page

BY THE NUMBERS

- In total, since the initial publication, the blog has accumulated nearly **2,000 views** with a major spike in its launch window, ranking as high as the **#5 most popular blog** on Gensler.com.
- Since the third launch in April 2025, **the blog remains the 12th most popular** on the site, with a strong average time spent on the page of 1:39.
- Highlighting a **healthy distribution** across owned, earned, and organic channels, top traffic sources include:
 - Direct links
 - Organic search
 - Gensler newsletter
 - Social media (LinkedIn + Instagram)
 - Article backlinks
 - ChatGPT
- Geographically, **traffic came from across the map**, led by Chicago, San Francisco and DC, and reaching as far as Toronto, Singapore, and London.
- Since October total report PDF downloads surpassed **4,000**, which is above average compared to other research available on Gensler.com.

THANK YOU