

AON CENTER SOUTH PLAZA

PROJECT NAME Aon Center South Plaza

LOCATION Chicago, IL

CATEGORY General Design

Aon Center's South Plaza is the front door to the fourth-tallest building in Chicago's skyline. This redesign project creates a formal entry and a casual front yard to enhance social opportunities for today's workforce. The client embraced a vision of transforming what was a private garden into a more public park and neighborhood amenity. A ten-foot elevation change from street to plaza level—previously a vertical barrier—was replaced with a lightweight landform creating a seamless transition between public and private realms. Robust planting areas with native, pollinator-friendly vegetation account for four-season interest and the complexities of existing subsurface infrastructure.

NARRATIVE

AN EVOLVING PLAZA

Chicago's Aon Center—originally known as the Standard Oil Building—was designed by Edward Durell Stone and completed in 1974. The building's surrounding plazas (south, east, and west) were designed by his son, landscape architect Edward Durell Stone Jr, and reflected the unique design synergy of the father-son team. The original South Plaza featured large-scale sculptures by world-renowned artist/designer Harry Bertoia. In 1994 the plazas were redesigned and portions of the Bertoia *Sonambient* sculptures were relocated to other areas of the property while others were sold at auction. The 1994 design also introduced a large elevator entry structure along the public sidewalk to bring the sunken plaza to ADA standards, obstructing views into the plaza and to the building's front door.

In 2020, as part of a larger vision to reshape high-rise workplace experience for modern workers, the building owner/client, 601W Companies, set out to redesign the aging South Plaza landscape again. 601W leases more office space in downtown Chicago than any other building owner, and tenant recruitment and retention via well-designed amenity spaces is one of their primary strategies for setting their workplaces apart from their competitors. The new South Plaza improves visibility and circulation to the building entrance while providing a delightful, active space for the 8,000+ people who work at Aon Center daily.

CONNECTING ARCHITECTURE TO THE CITY LANDSCAPE

The fourth-tallest building on Chicago's skyline, Aon Center is situated in a highly visible location and surrounded by architectural gems including Millennium Park and Jay Pritzker Pavilion. To better connect Aon Center to its urban environment and ameliorate challenges related to the substantial elevation change between the street and plaza levels, a new lightweight slope was introduced. This new element creates a more natural grade change, welcoming the public, tenants, and visitors effortlessly into the plaza. What once was a private, insular space is now a vibrant neighborhood amenity.

The Aon Center's distinct architecture also provided inspiration for the new plaza design. Though simple in form, the building's triangular marble columns are impressive, reaching 1,136 feet into the air. The new South Plaza pays homage to this design characteristic, employing similar triangular forms to connect the landscape and existing architecture. The new plaza echoes the simplicity of the original Durell Stone landscape design, while embodying the more relaxed corporate office attitude of today.

DESIGNED FOR COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT

To support tenant recruitment and retention, the project redefines the building's most public-facing landscape. Previously existing as a garden to be viewed but not used, the plaza's rigid formality seemed out of step. The new space aims to be an active, flexible park environment, enhancing social interaction and opportunities for activities like gatherings, concerts, picnicking, games, and after-hours lounging around fire pits. With spaces that equally accommodate large events, small groups or singular individuals, the plaza offers maximum flexibility. Movable, sturdy furniture gives users agency to transform the space according to their individual needs.

Though the desire to create both a formal entry and casual "front lawn" environment may feel contradictory, the design needed to marry these functions within a small 25,000-square-foot area. A grand stair and dark-toned granite paving create a figurative red carpet to the front door, with active zones to the east and west. As such, casual "front lawn" activities do not interfere with the impressive walk to the grand lobby.

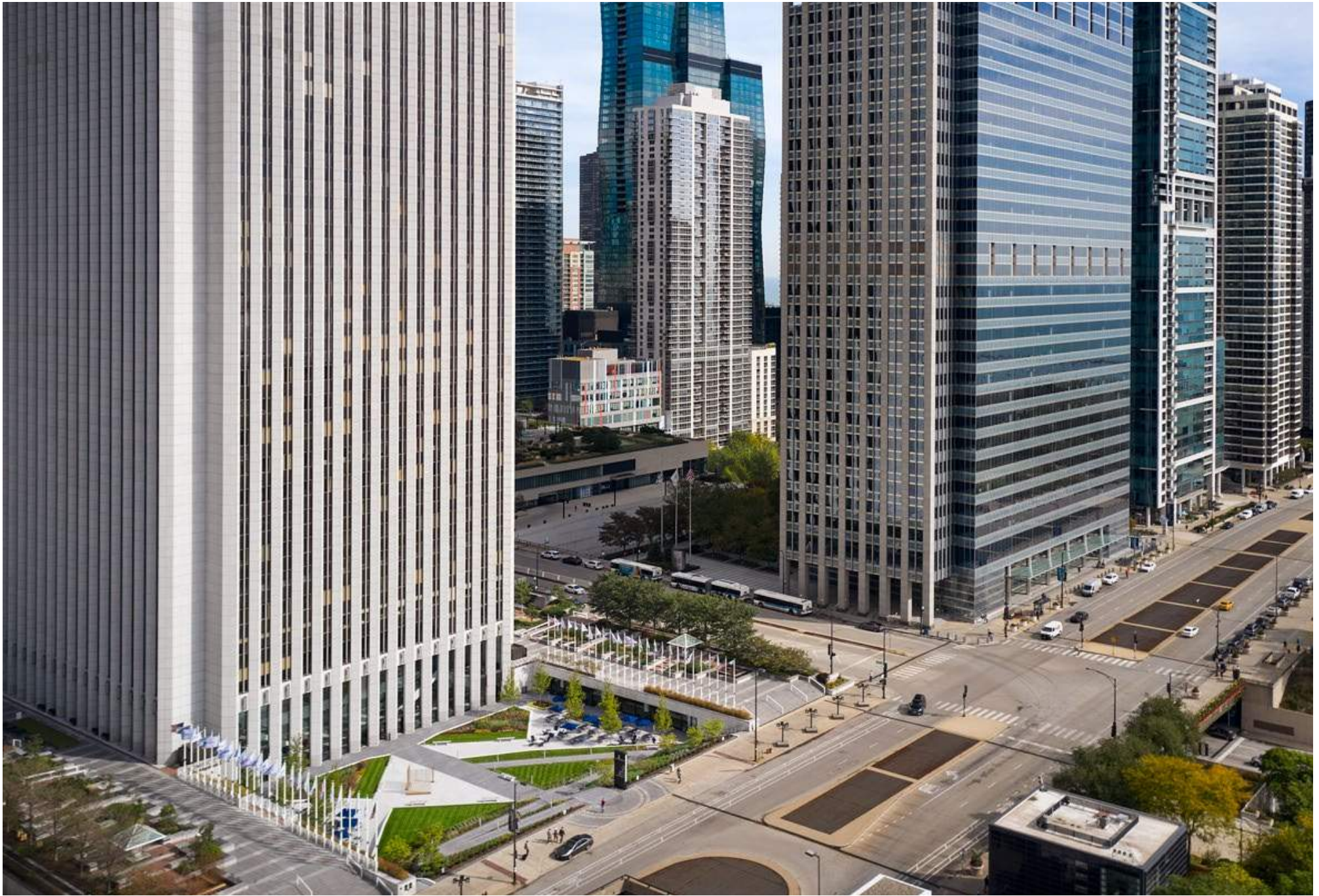
Set within one of the busiest areas of downtown Chicago, spaces that connect people to nature during their workday are important for health and well-being. The urban meadow planting is made up of 65% pollinator-attractor species to support on-site beehives. 60% of total planting areas are native species and the pervious area of the plaza was increased from 12% to 40%. Planting areas were designed for vibrant year-round interest, while also accounting for the complex infrastructure existing throughout the subsurface of the plaza.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT'S ROLE & AWARD WORTHINESS

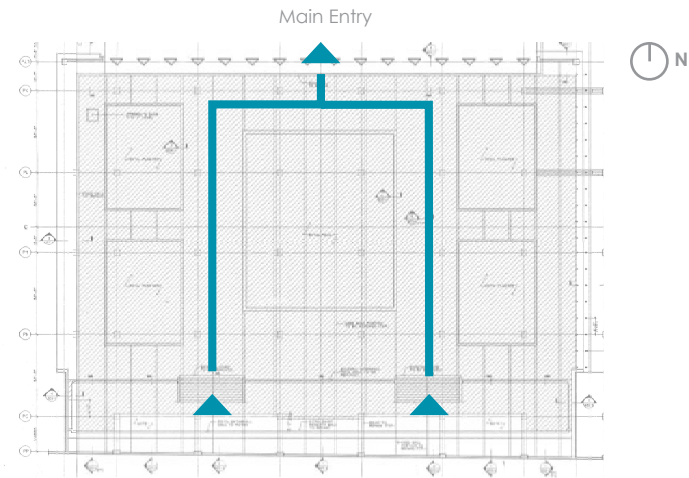
The Landscape Architect lead a collaborative design team to create a cohesive design strategy. The remnants of two previous plaza designs, aging infrastructure, a landscape surrounded by the existing building, harsh urban constraints, and a challenging project budget of \$6 million required a highly collaborative and agile team of technical and design experts.

Key Roles also included:

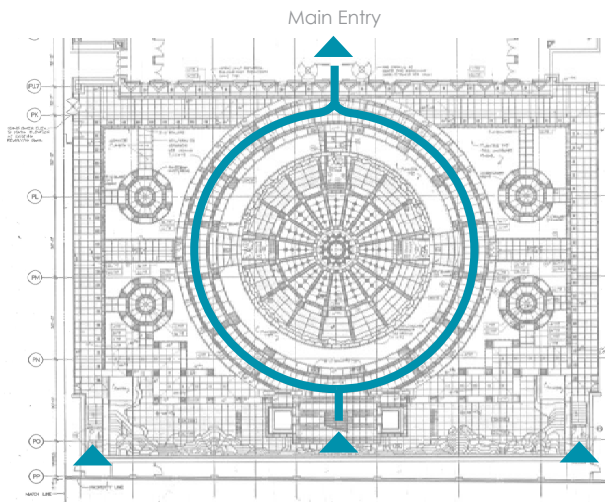
- Project design leadership
- Foster client relations with many stakeholders
- Leading a team of architects, engineers, lighting designers, signage consultant, and water roofing consultant
- Project management
- Monument signage design
- General contractor relations and construction supervision



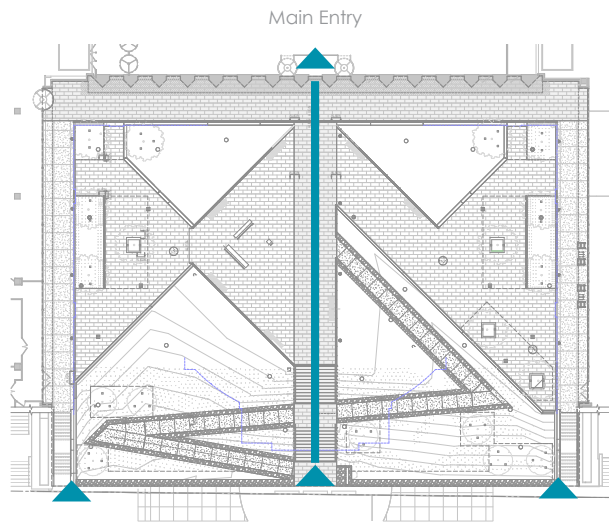
CONNECTING ARCHITECTURE TO THE CITY LANDSCAPE



1973



1994

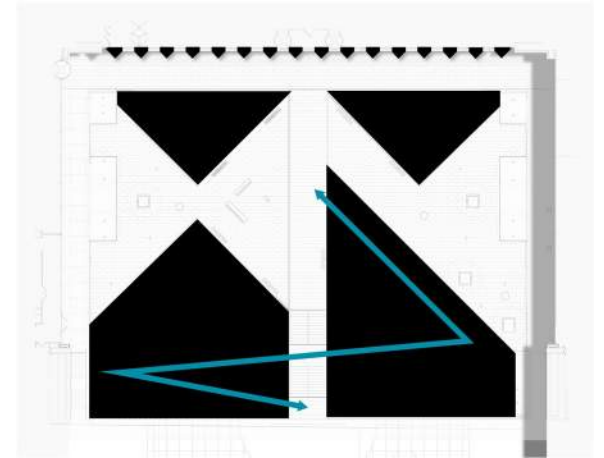
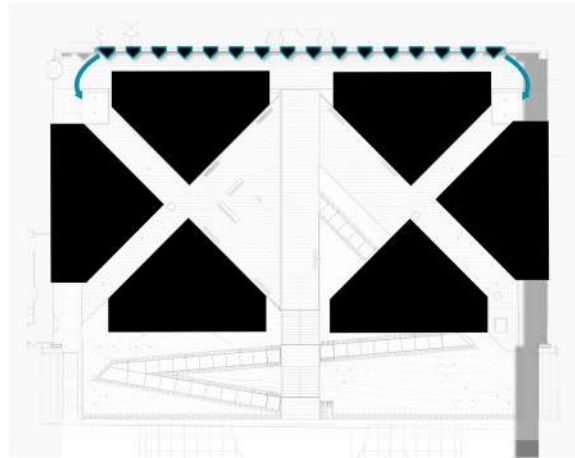
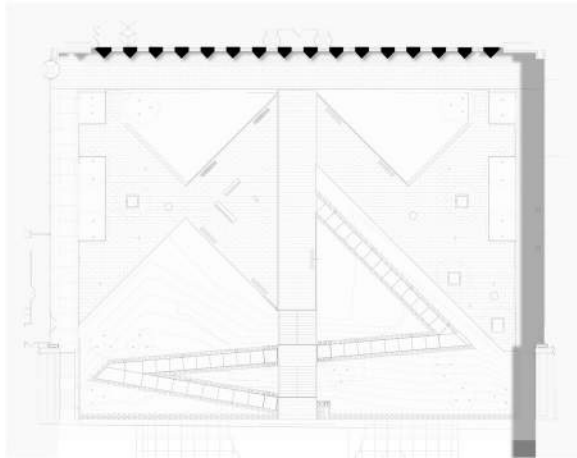


TODAY

AN EVOLVING PLAZA

Plaza circulation in both previous designs was circuitous, routing pedestrians around water features to the front door. The new design reorients the access to the building, improves circulation, removes the elevator tower to open views to the space and creates open space for more flexible use.

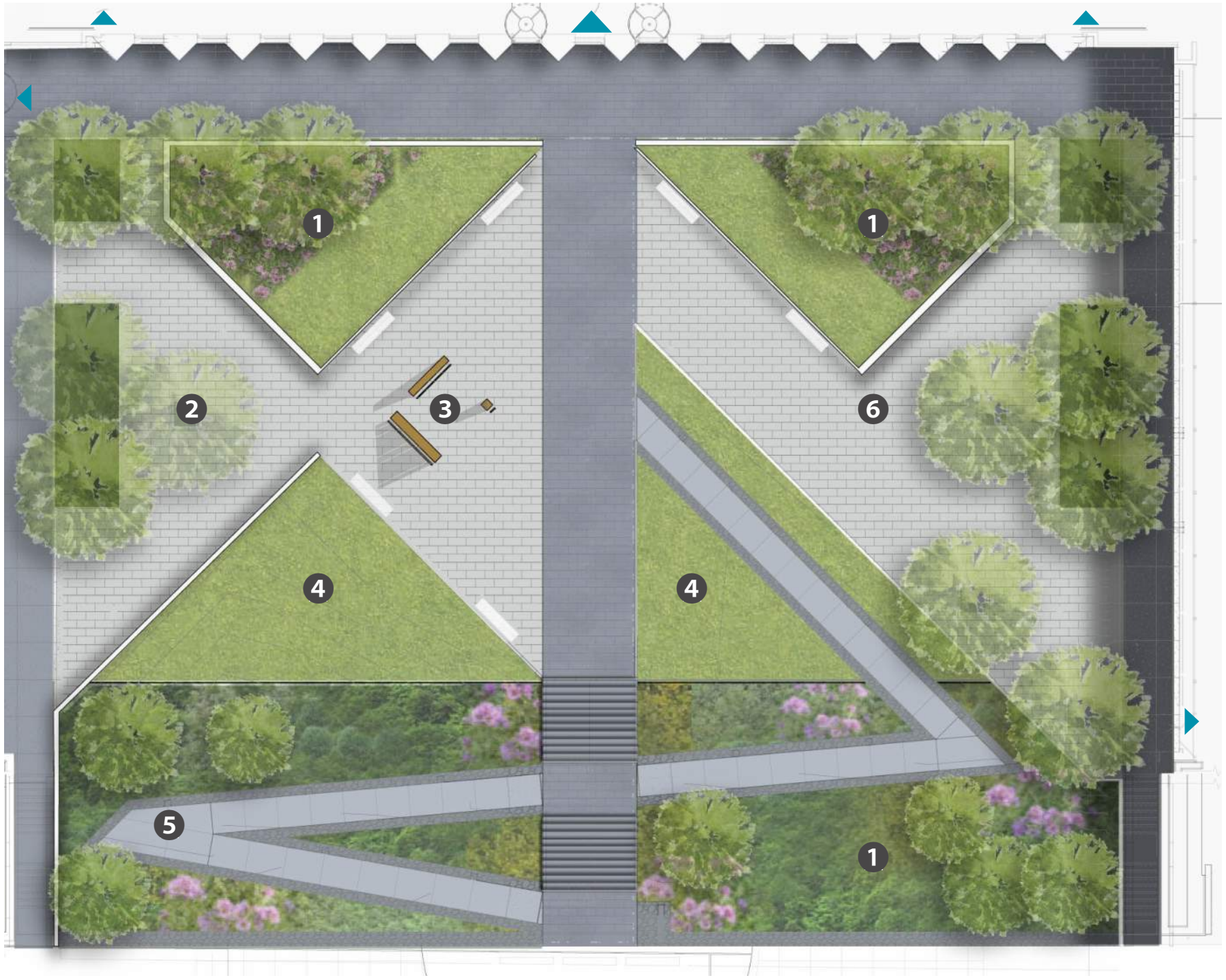




Main Lobby

Cafe

Amenity Space



1/ Urban Meadow
4/ Front Lawn

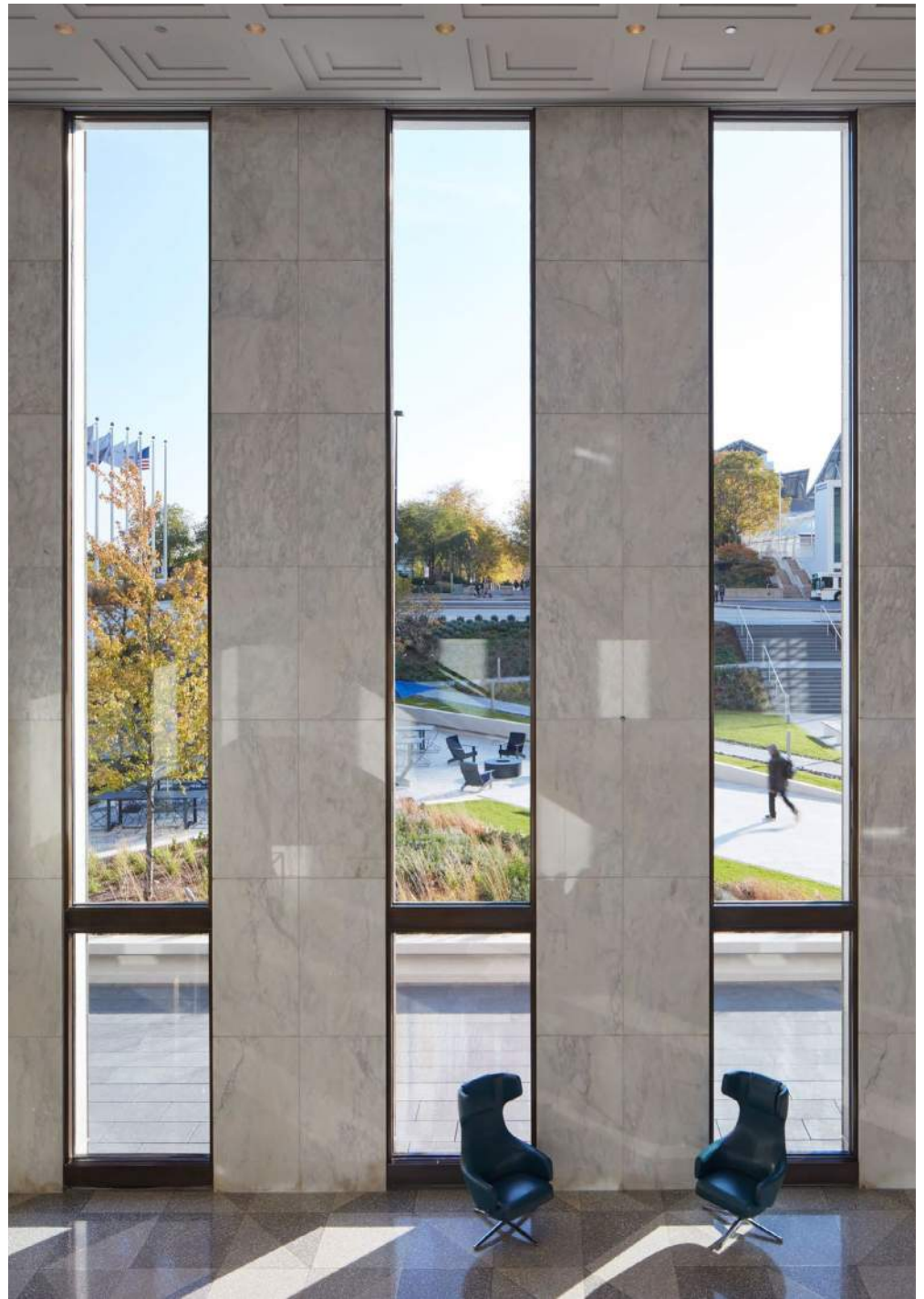
2/ Cafe Seating
5/ ADA Route

3/ Harry Bertoia (1974)
6/ Group Gathering



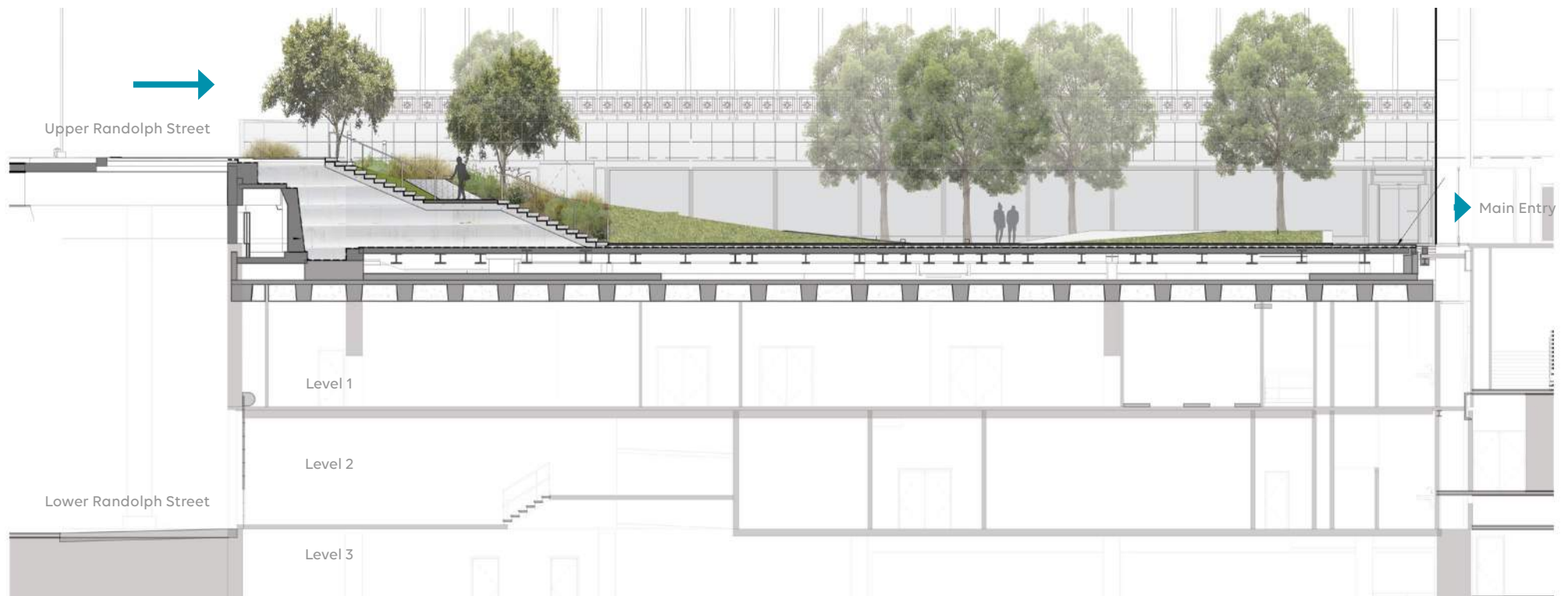


Architecturally, the office tower's front door is hidden. Reorienting circulation to the building and using the landscape as wayfinding helps bring visibility to the front door.





DESIGNED FOR COMMUNITY



North-south section: Surrounded by building structure on five surfaces, the plaza acts as an inhabitable green roof. Acute attention to structural loads throughout the design process was critical to the final design solution. A light-weight landform helps mitigate the ten-foot vertical elevation change, welcoming the city to Aon Center.



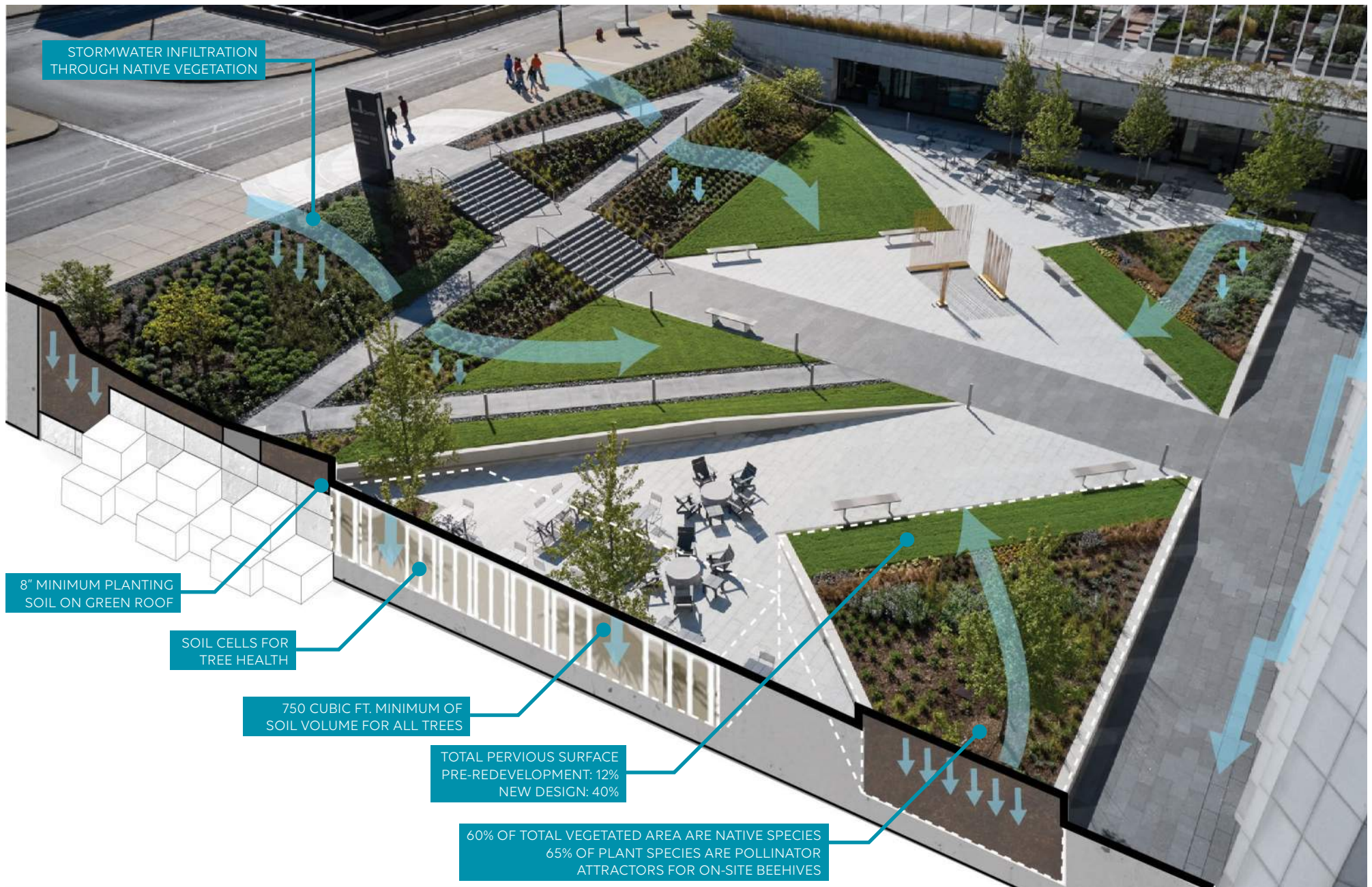
East-west section: Aon Center is situated in a highly-visible location surrounded by neighboring architectural gems such as Millennium Park and Jay Pritzker Pavilion. By removing the elevator and guardrails, Millennium Park (located across the street) becomes a borrowed and integral landscape for the South Plaza environment.







Three of the original Bertioia *Sonambient* sculptures are the centerpiece of the new plaza design.



DESIGNED FOR THE ENVIRONMENT





BEFORE

AFTER

