People United

Welcome

The first 30 seconds of engagement with a cultural space: a practical guide

PEOPLE UNITED

People United is a creative laboratory and arts charity.

We explore how the arts can inspire kindness, community and social change.

www.peopleunited.org.uk

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Welcome

Half a minute can make a lasting difference. The impressions somebody forms within the first 30 seconds of entering a building can shape their experience, and determine whether they'll stay and come back, or head for the nearest exit, never to return.

Welcome, a new research project from People United, is about those crucial first 30 seconds of engagement with a public building. We've run workshops and visited a range of cultural venues with families, children and young people, and unemployed adults. We've sought the views of architects, designers, venue managers and psychologists. With a group of psychology students from the University of Kent, we've researched what others have written about the psychology of space. This document outlines the key things we've found out.

Why do we think this matters? People United promotes kindness and positive social change through the arts. People are more likely to get involved in artistic events and activities that take place in an atmosphere where they feel welcome, happy, inspired. But more than this, we believe welcoming, inclusive public spaces are at the heart of friendly, cohesive communities.

The following guide is aimed at anyone involved in running arts centres, museums, galleries, theatres and other cultural venues and public buildings, or anyone who wants to make their space more welcoming. It's not intended to be a comprehensive guide or to tell you the right and wrong way to do things – but we hope it will get you thinking about your space and the way people interact with it. While we're not suggesting you will (or can) redesign your building, considering these key points will help you to make small changes that can make your users feel more welcome, more inclined to stay and more likely to return.
We hope you'll find it informative, challenging and inspiring.

So, what makes a place welcoming?

1. Belonging

Belonging is about the connection people feel to a place, and the people in that place. Bikhu Parekh defined it as a 'shared commitment to a community' developed through 'ties of common interest.'[1]

It is also about people's sense of their own identity and the groups they feel they belong to.[2] We are most used to defining identity along lines such as ethnicity, faith, gender, class, etc. However, 'people's identities are multi-layered and single identities do not capture people's sense of who they are.'[3] People can feel they belong to a range of other formal and informal groups, (for example - friends, family, an estate, a political or social cause, a resident's association). Particular activities and stages of life are also strongly influential, (for example – being a young mum or a day care centre user). Policies such as having a diverse range of front of house staff, or showing work by disabled artists as part of mainstream programming,[4] could all influence people's sense of belonging. All these factors, together with how you engage with, and encourage, different groups to participate will influence whether or not people feel your venue is for them.

People like places where they feel at home, where they can be themselves. They want to be able to relate to your building – both the inside and the outside.[5] Often a sense of belonging has a strong local focus, so location can be important too. If your building is located in an area which is perceived as belonging to one particular community or group, you may need to make a concerted effort to involve and engage groups from other communities in order to demonstrate that your building belongs to all.

Like the best pubs, coffee shops or community centres, cultural venues can function as a 'third place' – those spaces outside home and work that are at the heart of vibrant communities. According to Ray Oldenburg, who popularised the concept, good third places are neutral, level ground – you're free to come and go as you please, and social or economic status doesn't matter. They're open and accessible, unpretentious and good natured; regulars help to set the tone, but are also welcoming to newcomers. Ultimately, they become

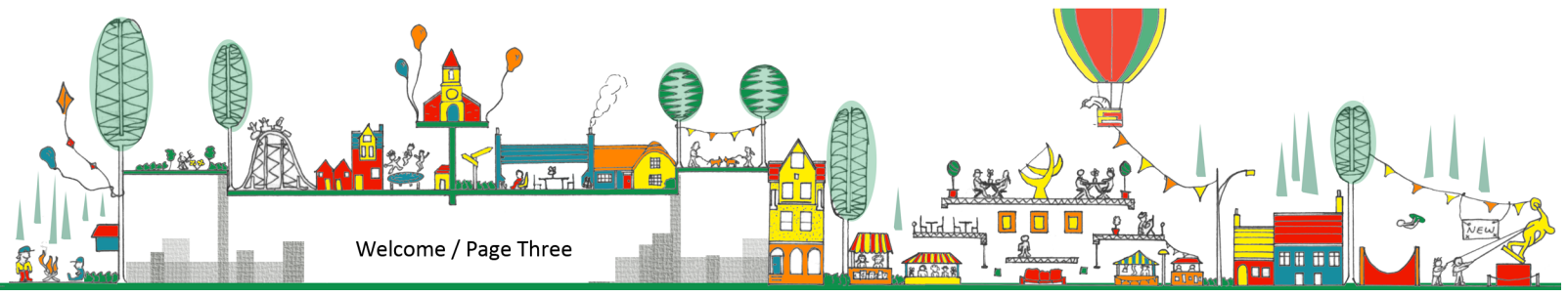
a home from home, and people feel that a part of themselves belongs there.[6] The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge in Canterbury has even named some of its spaces after rooms of a house such as The Front Room and The Kitchen to make their visitors feel at home.

Case Study: Arcola Theatre[7]

In 2010, the Arcola Theatre moved to a new home, turning a disused paint factory in Hackney into a fully functioning theatre with two studios. The move was completed in just a couple of months, thanks to the help of more than 1,000 local volunteers.

It's a testament to how deeply embedded in its community the Arcola has become since it was founded in 2000. Its productions receive national acclaim, but 60% of the audience comes from the neighbouring boroughs of Hackney and Islington. Providing a space for local people to try out their own ideas has always been its ethos, and all sorts of local groups have become involved, from young people to the over-60s, refugees, and many minority ethnic groups.

Through the efforts of some far-sighted local residents, the Arcola has also become a leader in environmental sustainability, and this is reflected in the new premises. Recycled building materials were used wherever possible, including scrap metal, walls, doors and even toilets and sinks. As a result, the Arcola's values are present in the very structure of the building.



2. Personal Interaction

Never underestimate the importance of a smile. Studies have shown that people are 10% more likely to trust someone who smiles,[8] and around 50% of people respond to a smile with one of their own.[9] Similarly, making eye contact makes people feel valued and welcomed (though staring at them for too long doesn't…).

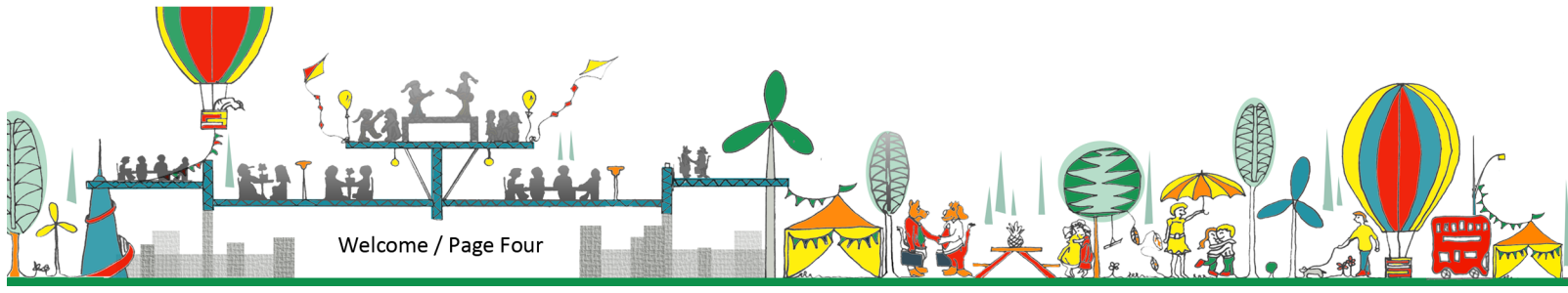
Friendly, well-informed staff can make all the difference. Workshop participants stressed the need for a 'meet and greet' person: nobody likes to feel lost or ignored when they walk into a building. Of course, this needs to be handled sensitively: people didn't want to feel 'harassed' or 'pressured' either.

ArtWorks

The importance of personal interaction could be seen when we visited a large theatre with a diverse group of adults. Before their visit, we asked them how welcoming they expected the venue to be, and afterwards we asked how welcoming it was in reality. One in five people (22%) said it was more welcoming than expected, and when asked why, most mentioned the staff:

- Staff were welcoming and helpful
- Because I got to meet the staff
- Nice staff, positive interactions

The theatre trip was one of several visits to cultural venues that we carried out with people on the ArtWorks project. This 15-week course, funded by Thanet Works, worked with 30 local unemployed people to develop their skills and prepare them for work. Participants came from a wide range of ages and backgrounds, including single parents, recent school-leavers and graduates, long-term unemployed, and parents who'd been out of work for more than 10 years to raise a family.



3. Accessibility

In *The Principles of Inclusive Design*, CABE states: 'Good design should reflect the diversity of people who use it and not impose barriers of any kind.'[10]

A welcoming building shouldn't exclude anyone – and, under the Disability Discrimination Act, you have a legal obligation to take all reasonable steps to make your premises accessible to all. Accessible entrances, routes, lifts and toilets should all be clearly signed (and think about the language that you use too – an 'accessible' or 'adapted' toilet is more inclusive than a 'disabled' one).

Of course, only a small proportion of disabled people use wheelchairs: think about what you can do to remove barriers for deaf people, the visually impaired or those with learning disabilities. Other groups can have access needs too: parents of young children, for example, need somewhere to park the buggy and change the baby.

Some groups, while physically able to enter a building, may have inhibited 'psychological access' – they can be shut out through anxiety, embarrassment or a feeling that a place 'isn't for the likes of them.' Breaking down these barriers is a vital part of creating a welcoming environment.

Case Study: The Roundhouse

– accessibility at the heart of design

In their recent transformation of the Grade II-listed Roundhouse in Camden, John MacAslan and Partners worked with a team of people with a variety of disabilities to make the building physically and psychologically accessible. Features include a colour scheme to help people find their way around, toilets with space for wheelchairs, and handrails that show up clearly against the walls and don't catch on clothes. The café, which opens directly onto other spaces and has a glazed wall to invite passers-by to see inside, has a variety of tables, chairs and benches to make it easily useable for people with wheelchairs or buggies. As CABE put it: 'By ensuring those with disabilities are included at the heart of the design, rather than as a 'bolt-on', the intention is that no one, no matter what their age or individual needs, need feel inhibited about coming to use the facilities.'[11]


Shoebox Museum

People United spent time at the Canterbury Heritage Museum, exploring with children and their families what can make museums more welcoming to the public. We used a quiz to get them thinking about some of the factors that came up in our research, then they made models of their ideal museum using shoeboxes. Some amazing museums were created, with features such as big welcome desks, large windows, skylights, colourful artwork, smiley and happy staff, baby-changing and family-friendly facilities, comfy chairs and lovely smelling plants.


4. Signage

> ‘When I walk into a building, I want to feel **informed** because **it can be confusing and isolating**.’
>
> – ArtWorks participant

> ‘When I walk into a building, I **don’t** want to feel **overwhelmed** because **too much information or attention is unwelcoming**.’
>
> – ArtWorks participant

Several participants in the ArtWorks project said they didn’t want to feel ‘lost’ or ‘confused’ on entering a building. Clear signs showing people where to go are important – yet, as Edward Casey wryly notes, ‘Approaching a cultural building … may involve the unwary spectator in a lengthy trudge around the base of a monolithic structure that appears to have emergency exits but no entrance.’[13]

At the opposite end of the spectrum, too many signs can create clutter and information overload; reserving signs for information, not advertising, can help.

Signs should be large and high enough to be clearly visible. Sans-serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica are easiest to read, and you should use strongly contrasting colours. Avoid putting words in capitals or italics, which some people find harder to process. Keep the language simple, and consider using graphics where these could help people with learning disabilities, those with visual impairment, and children.

5. Feeling Safe

> ‘When I walk into a building, I want to feel **cared for** because **that will make me want to return**.’
>
> – ArtWorks participant

> ‘When I walk into a building, I **don’t** want to feel **intimidated** because **then I will feel insecure and would want to leave**.’
>
> – ArtWorks participant

‘Security is both a feeling and a reality,’ writes Bruce Schneier. ‘And they’re not the same.’[12]

Creating a sense of safety is about much more than making your building secure or complying with health and safety legislation. While good exterior lighting, clear sightlines and vigilant staff can enhance both the reality and the feeling of safety, heavy-handed security and restrictions – however well intentioned – can have the opposite effect of making people feel less secure.

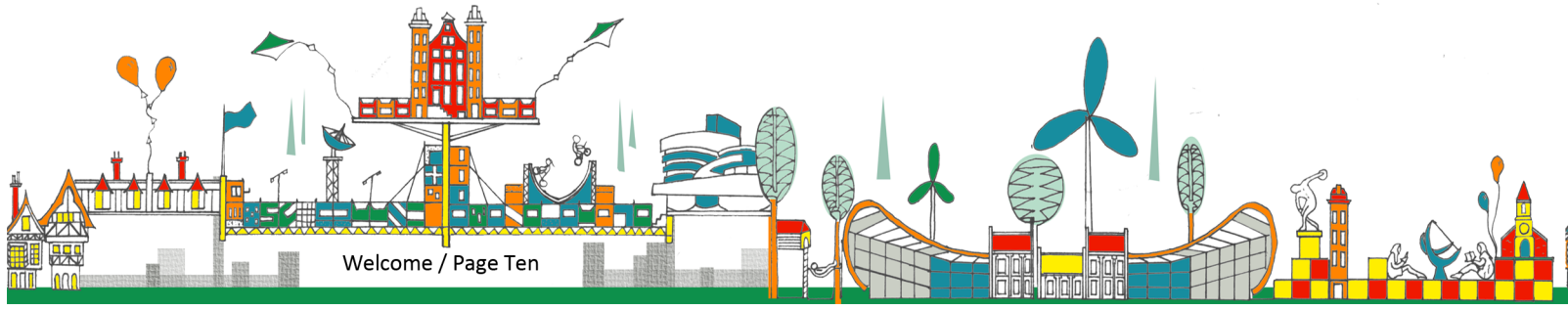
Unfamiliar public buildings and cultural institutions can provoke uneasy feelings for many: participants on the ArtWorks project spoke of not wanting to feel ‘intimidated,’ ‘daunted,’ ‘excluded’ and ‘like you’re not supposed to be there.’ Buildings that foster community, trust and openness feel safer than gated fortresses.

6. Architecture and Environment

You probably can't do much to alter the architecture and setting of your building – but it's worth thinking about the impression it creates. How does your space relate to its surroundings? Is it the hub of a thriving cultural quarter? An oasis in a drab, depressed area? Or is it widely regarded as an eyesore?

Engaging with your immediate environment can make your building more welcoming. Distinctive works of art outside your premises, for example, can create or enhance a sense of place and local identity.[14] The US non-profit organisation Project for Public Spaces (PPS) argues that:

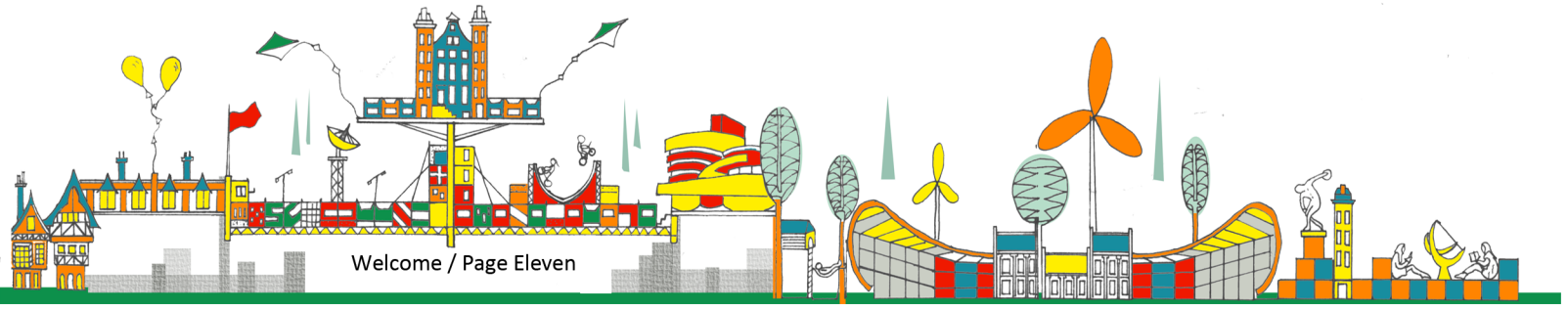
> *… public buildings are at their best when they not only function as active community places in their own right, but also when they form part of a larger civic district… A library and a city hall do not create a civic centre on their own. But add an outdoor reading room to the library, start hosting public exhibits at city hall, set up food vendors on the sidewalk, or a farmers market in the parking lot – and suddenly you begin to generate much greater levels of activity than before … When a civic institution stretches the boundaries of its own mission to engage its public space – whether it be a street, plaza, or square – and reaches out to other institutions in the neighborhood, that marks the rebirth of a civic center.*[15]

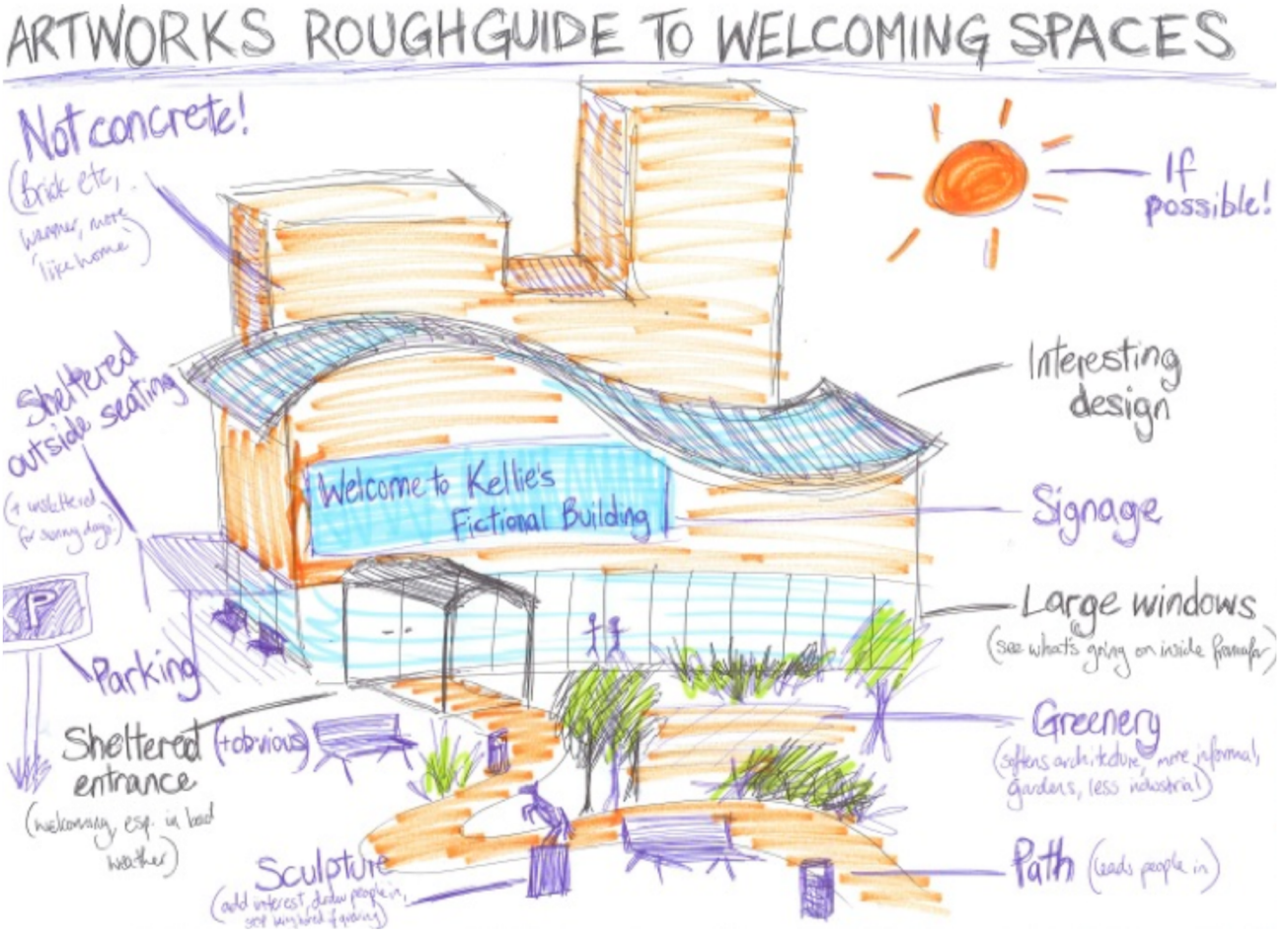


Case Study: Weymouth Old Town Hall

A community campaign saw Weymouth's Old Town Hall, a Grade II–listed building dating from 1539, converted into a heritage centre and a creative hub for local artists. Creating a welcoming, inclusive space which felt like it belonged to the community was a key concern.

Martin Hedley, who led the campaign, wanted a 'generic' building – "the more specific it is, the more you can exclude people," he says. That doesn't, though, mean a lack of character. Natural and traditional materials and colours help to create a space that people can relate to and feel comfortable in, with wood burners and open fires making it cosy and convivial. Feedback showed that people wanted 'to be able to make a mess' – luckily, Martin adds, the Old Town Hall lends itself to this![16]





"ArtWorks Rough Guide To Welcoming Spaces"

ArtWorks participants designed posters showing what they wanted to see when they visited a venue.

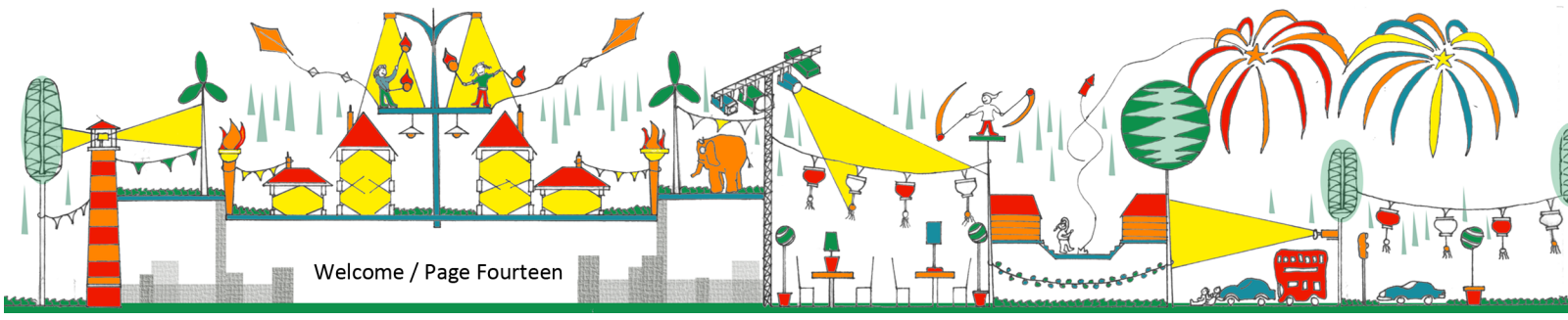
Designs by ArtWorks participant Kellie Hogben

7. Light

Like colour, light affects our mood and behaviour. People like natural light – and getting plenty of daylight has proven benefits, from improving schoolchildren's performance to slowing cognitive decline among residents in retirement homes.[17] Blue light-emitting diodes (LEDs) and full-spectrum fluorescent lights, which mimic the short-wavelength light present in daylight, keep people alert and awake. After dark, longer wavelengths, like yellows, oranges and reds, may be more in step with our body clocks.

Light appears to affect men and women differently. Experiments have shown women's negative mood decreasing in warm (reddish) light and increasing in cool (bluish) light; the opposite is true for men.[18] Similarly, warmer light was associated with a negative mood among younger adults aged around 23, and cooler light among older adults aged around 65.[19]

All this suggests that being able to control light is important – and anecdotal evidence supports this. Architect Michael Wicks, of CDP Architecture, Canterbury, gives the example of a university library which has lots of skylights allowing plenty of natural light in. But with no way to regulate this, the building can often feel too bright or dingy.[20]



8. Colour

'Colour and light are the visible interface between ourselves and our environment,' writes Dr Leonhard Oberascher, an authority on the psychology of colour. 'They are part of our everyday life, constantly influencing our feelings, our (well)being and our behaviour.'[21]

Exactly how colour influences our feelings, wellbeing and behaviour has been the subject of numerous studies. For example, lighter colours may be seen as more pleasant, while darker and more saturated hues arouse stronger feelings.[22] In an experiment, college students were asked about their emotional responses to various colours. Principal hues, including green, yellow and blue, elicited more positive responses than intermediate tones. Lighter colours were often associated with positive emotions, darker with negative.[23] Cool colours like blue and green help relaxation, while warm colours like red, orange and yellow promote physical and social activities.[24]

Age, gender and culture appear to influence our reaction to colour. Children and adults have different colour preferences, though both see yellow as happy.[25] Women appear to be more sensitive to colour than men.[26] In the college student experiment, Japanese students preferred the colour black while Americans liked red.

Colour can also play an important role in signposting and demarcating different areas. For visually impaired people, tonal contrasts are helpful – particularly between large surface such as floors, walls and ceilings, and to mark out potential hazards.

9. Fragrance

Smells provoke strong reactions that affect us at a deep level. Our olfactory receptors are directly linked to the limbic system – the part of the brain that's thought to control emotions – so we react to smell sensations on an emotional level before we've consciously processed them. The way a particular scent can awake a memory is familiar to everyone, while surveys show that emotional associations often determine what smells we like and dislike.[27]

Experiments have shown that bad smells can make us feel depressed, and even the memory of them can make us feel stressed.[28] One study found that the presence of an unpleasant odour made subjects judge photos of people as less attractive and paintings less professional.[29] Conversely, an experiment in Las Vegas found people gambled over 45% more money when a pleasant aroma was added to the casino.[30]

Fragrances like lavender and vanilla have been shown to aid relaxation and relieve stress, while stimulating scents like rosemary, peppermint and neroli improve alertness and mental performance.[31] Kate Fox describes how 'One Japanese company uses citrus scent to stimulate its workers at the start of the day, floral scents to boost their concentration in the late morning and early afternoon and woody scents such as cedar and cypress to relieve tiredness at lunchtime and in the evening.'[32]

While all buildings take on their own aroma, you can make a conscious decision to influence it. The Old Town Hall in Weymouth uses linseed oil on doors, which the building's guardian, Martin Hedley, believes people find familiar and comforting.[33]

10. Sound

Music can help to set a mood – or destroy it. Whether or not you use sound such as background music is up to you – but if you do choose to, it needs careful consideration. Having the TV on or the radio blaring is unlikely to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Studies suggest that background music can be soothing and create a pleasurable environment – more so than having music in the foreground. Experiments have found that classical music creates positive moods and makes people more likely to help each other.[34] The tempo of music has a big effect on the emotions it evokes – people tend to equate faster music with a happier mood.[35]

Ambient noises and the way sound carries within your building can affect people's impressions too. A noisy bar could destroy the mood of quiet contemplation in a gallery; on the other hand, a building where people feel they have to keep a reverential silence can intimidate and deter visitors.

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What Next?

Life would be very boring if all buildings were painted yellow, smelt of rosemary and had classical music playing in the background. The points above aren't meant to provide the right answers – but we hope they'll get you asking questions:

- How does your building welcome and represent diverse local communities and groups?
- Who is responsible for greeting, guiding and giving information at your venue?
- Does your building strike the right balance between security and openness?
- How can people "make themselves at home" and respect the cultre and history of the space they're in?
- How does your venue relate to the street or public spaces outside and neighbouring buildings?
- Walk around your building as if you didn't know it. How easy is it to find your way around? Could anything be signposted more clearly?
- What elements of the architecture and design feel inclusive? Do any exclude people? Who might have problems using your building, and what can you do about it?
- Could you do more to use colour to set the mood?
- Is the lighting appropriate to the activities taking place?
- What does the building smell like? What associations does this evoke?
- How do the sounds within your building affect the atmosphere? Could you use music hat links with the theme of the exhibition/ display/ demonstration/ retrospective?

We'd love to hear what you think too. Is there anything we've missed? What do you do to make people feel welcome in your building? Could you suggest more case studies? Get in touch:

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