

Creating Intentional Space: Peace in Public Places

Vara Kamin, Artistic Consultant
Michael Arvidson, Executive Vice President
Duo-Gard Industries Inc.
Canton MI

INTRODUCTION:

Despite its dynamic new popularity and growing need, public transportation can contribute to rider stress. Changes in daily routines, loss of privacy and flexibility associated with personal vehicle use, inconvenient schedules, waiting in varied extremes of weather conditions, the constant and often intrusive, unwelcomed exposure to advertising are all potential causes of stress, as well as waiting in shelters littered with waste, damaged walls or those marked with graffiti, or waiting with no shelter at all.

As transit professionals search for ways to create and manage positive passenger perceptions, reactions and behaviors, some intriguing possibilities lie in transforming the passenger experience by incorporating a unique approach to shelter and transportation design with the use of highly specialized sensory art that actively engages the imagination and stimulates the relaxation response. For the past decade, this type of sensory art has been placed in high stress environments in hospitals and healing centers throughout the United States.

Architecturally designed shelters and transportation centers incorporating art, often selected by local juried public art programs, is not a new concept. In fact, as community involvement and advocacy for public transportation continues to evolve throughout the country, there is a growing interest in how to best support the design and use of these 'public' spaces, while contributing in a

meaningful way to the passenger's personal experience while waiting, and when in transit.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT ON PASSENGER EXPERIENCE

The physical environment can influence feelings of safety, security and comfort, and depending upon the condition of the environment, even if the encounter is a transitory one, the converse could also be true: that of creating feelings of anxiety and stress. Although typically defined by its inherent purposeful function of providing protection from inclement weather conditions, the experience of waiting in a bus shelter or transportation station can have far more of an impact on an individual's daily experience than expected or anticipated.

For example, a single mother straddling a hungry, crying infant in her arms while doing her best to manage her toddler in a stroller; an elderly woman, obviously confused, asking someone, anyone who is waiting, if this is the right bus, but no one understands her, for she speaks a foreign language; a young man, on his way to his first job interview, anxiously wondering if the bus will be on time; a middle-aged man returning from his fourth job interview, dejected after being told he is 'over-qualified'; a woman on her way home from a chemotherapy treatment, weak, alone, in pain and praying she won't vomit on the bus.

These passengers could be waiting anywhere: on the corner of a city street, at the end of suburban block or in the middle of a

small town; in 100°F weather in July in Arizona or 25°F below zero in February in North Dakota. Although each one is living life with no obvious connections or shared experiences with one another, what these individuals do have in common is the use of communal space and their shared time in transition, waiting. Sometimes there are connections among riders, a brief comment, a smile or a helping hand, but for the most part taking public transportation is a private affair.

Each waiting passenger – and those already on the bus whom the others will be joining – is influenced by endless factors that are both intimately personal and external in nature. Many factors influence us all: the war in Iraq, the declining economy, recent plane crashes, an abducted child a thousand miles away, etc. The responses to these internal and external conditions are integrated at both the conscious and unconscious level, and they change from day to day, depending upon the complexity of the circumstances influencing the individual's experience.

PROMOTING PEACE IN PUBLIC PLACES: CREATING INTENTIONAL SPACE

Although the energy of anxiety and stress cannot be perceived by the naked eye in the same way that the energy of wind can be as it blows through branches and leaves of a tree, feelings of anxiety and stress can be felt and can be contagious.

It is well known that when someone coughs or sneezes, visually perceptible germ particles are emitted. While there are methods to remove harmful particles from almost any surface, the presence of anxiety and stress are not so easily nullified.

In laboratory animal studies conducted at the Center for Neural Science at New York University, it has been demonstrated that rats can detect stress signals in other rats in two forms: vocalization (a scared rat emits ultrasonic sounds that predators cannot hear to

warn other rats) and chemical signals that cause stress in other rats. If you put a rat in a chamber where another rat has been recently stressed, the second rat also expresses stress.¹

While bus shelters and transportation stations are a far cry from laboratory cages, and passengers are not to be equated in any way with laboratory animals, it is worth noting that the communal effects of stress are palpable and should, when possible, be taken into consideration when planning, designing and constructing shelters. To further illustrate, in hospital pediatric sedation units, where both parents and children are often in a heightened state of stress, in part due to anticipatory anxiety and fear, the specialized sensory images previously mentioned have been used as a positive point of focus and a tool for relaxation.

When focusing on the use of the specialized sensory imagery, color is an essential element of visual stimulation with well-documented psychological and physiological effects. Color can transform an environment. The psychology of color provides an avenue of expression and brings more in-depth meaning to the selection of one's environment. According to color theorists, certain colors are purported to bring about different effects on the viewer. For example, the color green promotes a sense of balance, harmony and tranquility and is often associated with nature, growth and change. The color blue is associated with truth, peace and calm, creating a sense of relaxation. The color turquoise exudes a refreshing, calming and soothing effect. The color violet encourages a sense of purpose, dignity and reverence. Orange and yellow are often equated with happiness and energy, encouraging joyful expression.

CONCLUSION

¹ *Journal of the Minnesota Dental Association, Volume 85, Number 2, March-April, 2006, Vara Kamin, pp 10-18*

It is becoming increasingly more evident that an individual's surroundings have a significant impact, not only on their physical well being, but on their emotional and spiritual health as well. Beauty helps to ameliorate anxiety, fear and stress. By designing shelters and transportation stations with purposeful visual support that is welcoming and well maintained, an open invitation to riders is created, and an appreciation for their patronage is expressed in a unique and caring way. Because human beings are multi-sensory, by providing a positive point of visual focus there is the potential to create a beneficial impact on passengers, and potentially, if the riders are less stressed, the bus drivers will derive a secondary benefit as well. While enhancing passenger experience, the shared encounter may also contribute to a new level of respect for shared public space and may potentially assist in decreasing vandalism and destruction as the places of 'waiting' become so much more, contributing to a sense of community.

References:

- Birren, Faber *The Power of Color*. Carol Publishing Group, 1997
- Gerber, R. *Vibrational Healing for the 21st Century*. New York: Eagles Books, 2000
- Gimbel, Theo *Healing with Color and Light*. Simon and Schuster, 1994
- Lipton, B. *The Biology of Belief*, California: Mountain of Love/Elite Books. 2005
- Pert, C.B. *Molecules of Emotion*. New York: Scribner, 1997

***ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Vara Kamin is Artistic Consultant to Duo-Gard Industries Inc. and President and Artistic

Director of Vara Kamin's Impressions of Light, Inc. She is a former public health nurse and graduate of Massachusetts General Hospital School of Nursing, an author and artist. Her writing has appeared in national magazines. Her original works of art are placed in both private and public settings, and for the past decade the replicated images of her paintings have been installed in high stress settings in hospital and healing centers throughout the country, including Johns Hopkins Hospital, Philadelphia Children's Hospital, Boston Children's Hospital, Jackson Memorial Hospital, and numerous other urban and rural adult and pediatric patient care units.

Michael Arvidson is Executive Vice President of Duo-Gard Industries Inc. He works closely with transit authorities across the country to design and implement strategies to enhance the experience of today's passengers in public transportation.