Come to Your Senses

By Catherine Warren Leone
To create relaxing, healing environments, designers tap into sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.
Since the time of Plato, the act of thinking has been perceived as a logical, conscious and verbally based process, with emotion derided as a roadblock to sound thinking. Who hasn’t heard the maxim, “Think with your head, not with your heart”? But prominent neuroscientists across the globe have studied images of the brain in action and placed emotion in the driver’s seat, asserting that thinking is emotion-based, intuitive and fast.

And while emotions form the basis of thoughts, the five senses — sight, sound, smell, taste and touch — fuel those emotions, wielding the power to persuade, relax and heal. It makes sense, therefore, that interior designers are turning to sensory design, an approach that focuses on addressing all five senses in a space.

“It’s important for interior designers to raise their perception of sensory data and not just focus exclusively on the visual aesthetic. By recalling their own sensory experiences in their designs, interior designers can create more humane built environments,” says Joy Malnar, Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the co-author, along with her husband Frank Vodvarka, of *Sensory Design* [University of Minnesota Press, 2004], which urges those in the design field to utilize the full spectrum of human senses.

Certainly sensory design has earned its place in high-end spas and resorts. But today, hospitals, airports, retail environments and corporate offices alike are embracing the senses to forge brand identity while creating inviting environments.

**BRANDED SPACES**

Emotions have a profound impact on corporate and organizational branding. In fact, a January 2007 study led by Stanford University neuroscientist Brian Knutson found consumer purchases to be primarily dictated by feelings rather than logic. The researchers determined the importance of emotion by scanning subjects’ brain activity as they considered a series of products.

“Emotions affect awareness, consideration, persuasion, recall and loyalty in the marketplace,” says Dan Hill, author of *Emotionomics: Winning Hearts and Minds* [Adams Business & Professional, 2007] and President of Minneapolis, Minn.-based Sensory Logic, a consulting firm that specializes in understanding consumers’ emotional responses to products, retail settings and advertising.

Consequently, branding is of utmost importance to every business, nonprofit group and organization.

“Nowadays, a corporation, law firm, country, university, museum, hospital, celebrity and even you in your career can be considered as a brand,” writes Vincent Grimaldi de Puget, an investment banker specializing in brands and technology, and a faculty member at

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—Dan Hill, President, Sensory Logic
Scientists say more than half the brain is devoted to processing visual images, and 80 percent of learning is based on visual input. In a market research project for the Wild Bean Café, owned by BP Gas, Dan Hill of Sensory Logic videotaped subjects as they walked through four proposed formats for the coffee shop. The goal was to analyze their positive and negative reactions to color, layout and flow of the space, as well as how much sensory input could be given without overwhelming the consumer.

Hill’s research showed that a space should not be crowded since “emotionally, you want to feel comfortable.” This includes visual clutter, too. For example, if an ad on the back wall has five or more words, generally the consumer will only read the first one. So it’s important to make it a key word — not “the,” for instance.

One spatial matter is nonnegotiable: People don’t like to feel trapped or hemmed in, Hill says. In one Wild Bean Café format that broke the visual flow with a barrier of goods, the subjects felt a sense of fear. “Fear overrides all other senses,” Hill says.

Smell. One of the most powerful senses, smell can trigger associations and draw upon memories of other smells. The smell of cedar, for example, can evoke strong reactions, says Joy Mamar, co-author of Sensory Design. The smell reminds her University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign architecture students of their youth. “It’s about a fond memory that’s attached to going into the closet and smelling the scent,” she says. The same smell, she adds, is even more important to the culture of native Northwest Americans known as the Makah, whose homes were made of cedar.

Houston-based Bennett Design Group designed more than 40 airport lounges for Continental Airlines, and extra efforts were taken to keep jet fuel and gas smells from seeping into the lounge area at a Washington, D.C., historical restoration. Fuel smells make customers feel unsafe and unhealthy, says Bennett Design Group owner Belinda Bennett, IIDA, so the team incorporated special HVAC equipment to get rid of the unpleasant odor. “It would be a new idea in the airline industry to make lounges explore aromatherapy as it’s used in healthcare,” she says.

People are drawn to natural materials because they possess an innate richness and warm up an environment through texture, says Mary Piette, IIDA, of The Bommarito Group. Stone, for one, exudes an aura of strength and coolness. In the gift shop at Overlook Hospital in Summit, N.J., Piette used limestone, granite and wood-grained materials.

Taste. "Color affects the appetite, in essence, the taste of food," says Bennett who designed Ruth's Chris Steak House in Mishawaka, Ill., as well as many restaurants in Texas. As a result, she notes, it's important to know what type of food the restaurant serves. Bennett reserves blue color schemes for use only in seafood settings, while she says pink helps encourage dessert sales. A general rule of thumb, she adds, is to use colors of food in the design of a space. Lighting can also make food seem more appealing. "Cool [blue] lamps will not enhance food appearance," she says.

Food — and taste — can also make a space feel more inviting and welcoming, Piette says. "We recommend creating public waiting rooms that have fresh natural food offerings such as pitchers of fresh water with lemons or cucumber slices and offerings of fresh fruit," she says. "It's a way to support health and relaxation."

Environmental branding – what Grimaldi defines as aligning a three-dimensional space with a brand’s positioning – can work as a major differentiator in establishing a brand identity. By expressing a brand’s essence in showrooms, work areas, trade exhibits or any other customer-oriented space, the consumer experiences the brand. “It is a very powerful marketing tool,” he says. “In a retail space, there is no remote control to avoid commercial breaks — environmental branding literally enwraps the consumer and delights the five senses.”

A brand authority for many, Marc Gobé’s bestselling book Emotional Branding: The New Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People [Allworth Press, 2001], places the consumer — not the product — at the center of a branding strategy. Gobé, whose clients at branding and design firm Desgrippes Gobé have included Coca-Cola, AOL, Godiva, Victoria’s Secret and Estée Lauder, advocates exploring how a brand can sensitively connect with people on an emotional level.

In the case of Godiva, Gobé suggested changing the store’s design to “emotionalize” its retail brand image. He took the store from “elegant but slightly intimidating and austere” to “warm and sensuous” by creating a design inspired by the Art Nouveau movement of the late 1800s, known for its curvilinear details and floral and plant-inspired motifs. The redesign succeeded, he says, because it communicated Godiva’s “heritage of sophisticated European pleasure in a more warm and sensuous manner that heightens the irresistible allure of chocolate.” Gobé says customers responded positively to the new design, and Godiva reported a marked increase in sales worldwide.

Mark Weaver, AIA, Principal and Partner at Hnedak Bobo Group (HBG) in Memphis, Tenn., cites the Wilderness Lodge at Walt Disney World as another example of a space where sensory design helps create a distinct brand. “[The space] incorporates sounds of frogs and crickets and the sight of lit fireflies to produce an authentic, rustic, natural park effect for its guests,” he says. “And these various sensory elements combine to create a familiarity for guests.”

SIT BACK AND STAY AWHILE
But branding isn’t the only area that sensory design can profoundly impact. Design that speaks to the senses can evoke comfort and relaxation, causing end-users — customers or otherwise — to want to spend more time in the space. National bookstore chain Barnes & Noble is as much a popular weekend destination as it is a...
place to buy books. The stores welcome visitors with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and soft leather couches for reading and relaxing.

When HBG designed the new Westin Memphis Beale Street Hotel, creating a unique, sophisticated sensory experience was a top priority. “[Westin Hotels and Resorts] have design standards tailored to this ‘human design’ as it relates to the way guests experience their hotels, with the full spectrum of human senses in mind,” Weaver says.

Throughout the space, HBG relied on organic elements original to Memphis, including indigenous flowers and plants from the region, and the Mississippi River. The designers represented those elements in finishes, fabrics and artwork to elevate the senses. Scent and sound are especially represented in the space, specifically in the hotel lobby. A specially designed floral scent is infused into the lobby, and Westin’s signature music is played throughout public areas.

“When dealing in [the hospitality] industry, you must understand the basic emotion that produces the ‘wow’ feeling. The ‘wow’ factor can vary based on customer type, but hospitality design specifically strives to target the five senses to create an uplifting and soothing environment for decompression and escapism,” Weaver says. “My goal as a hospitality designer is to create design experiences that elicit passion, beauty and cultural identity through innovative design concepts that inspire the guest, stimulate the senses and engage emotion.”

Even the corporate world is taking a cue from the hospitality arena. “As for corporate design … we have seen a switch from purely aesthetic architectural forms to those that produce greater quality of work life for employees,” Weaver says. “The average time employees spend at work in an office building is 40 hours per week, usually more. Our clients care about their employees and are focused on progressive, employee-friendly design initiatives.”

Sensory design measures in the corporate world typically include integrating the outside environment with that of the interior through the use of large windows. “Just the act of introducing nature elevates the senses, making for happier, more productive employees,” he says, adding that vivid textures, lighting and colors “create active interior spaces full of energy and movement, conducive to workplace interaction.”
THE POWER TO HEAL

But getting end-users to stick around is not the goal of every design. In hospitals, for instance, one of design’s goals is to help reduce patients’ length of stay. So the role of sensory design is to create “a patient-focused, family-centered and safe place to be,” says Mary Piette, IIDA, Project Manager and Designer at The Bommarito Group in Austin, Texas, who, with Sylvie Bucci, IIDA, Senior Designer at Gensler Houston, presented “Sensory Experiential Design” during NeoCon 2007.

In their hospital design work, the two have been influenced by the work of Roger Ulrich, Ph.D., a behavioral scientist and Director of the Center for Health Systems and Design at Texas A&M University. In one of Ulrich’s best-known studies, he discovered that patients who had undergone surgery recovered sooner if there was a window with a view in their rooms than those who did not have a window. “We believe it’s crucial to build and create wonderfully integrated sensory experiences,” Piette says.

Successful branding is, indeed, the seduction of the senses. Whether through an enticing aroma, an inviting plush chair or a stress-reducing view outside the window, the senses make the most positive of all emotional connections.