



Making Perfect Sensory

In recent years there has been a greater understanding of the importance of how a space makes you feel, our environment contributes to our emotional wellbeing, mental and physical health. The need for spaces that have a positive impact on humans has only been enhanced by the pandemic.

There are many considerations that are important when designing for wellness; spatial design and flow, lighting, smells and sounds...while colour and surfaces can also have a huge influence. We've gathered a panel of industry experts at **Ultrafabrics'** fantastic Clerkenwell showroom to discuss the importance of textures and colour when it comes to designing spaces with sensory wellbeing in mind.

We begin by asking whether our guests felt there had been a change in clients' attitudes towards sensory design and wellbeing since the pandemic.

Inge: Yes. I think people have lived in tiny spaces and gotten bored of their surroundings. They want more colour and more texture and, in some ways, that has been great for us because it has really made us think about space and the wider experience.

David: I'd agree with that. I think that's what everyone wants right now. Since we've been locked down, we've had time to look at ourselves and what's important, and also how you really feel about the spaces you're in. For myself, being locked in one space and only being able to go out for one hour, you really start to re-evaluate everything and you start to treasure all those small opportunities. I think it is an emotional and a sensory thing. We need all these things again. We found ourselves needing to reconnect with the world around us. This is hugely important for us all right now.

Rachel: I think that everybody recognises that stress and mental health issues have risen significantly throughout the pandemic and, in order to balance things out, people have been seeking out spaces that make them feel good, that make them feel calm, make them feel safe and make them feel happy. Businesses do want their people to come back to work – but they also want them to come back feeling safe and looked after. They want to give them the

positive experience of being in the right, professional working environment, with the right lighting, with the right working habits in place, to be able to turn up at a certain time, go home at a certain time – and hopefully have a life. I think businesses are now recognising that they need to encourage a healthier, more balanced lifestyle so that people don't become burnt out.

David: I totally agree. I think, as businesses, we are trying to bring our people back into our studios – and, for us, that has been a massive problem because you ask people how they want to work – whether they want to work from the office or to work from home – and we then had to work out what was the right way to bring them back into the office. We had to work out how to introduce the right touchdown spaces, how to get people back together, how to re-establish a community in the workspace. So we had to rethink our own offices – as well as rethinking our clients' spaces, because this is what they are looking to us for when it comes to the commercial side of our business.

So are our guests now finding that clients are looking to introduce elements – including colours and textures – that have more of a domestic look and feel?

Lucy: I was finding that 'residential' was pretty much everywhere before the pandemic. Everything was about making spaces feel more comfortable and feel more like a home away from home. I feel that this has been pushed



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to the side now – there’s now more emphasis on flexible, agile working, with maybe different settings and different ways of working, but not so much of the ‘let’s make this look like a living room’. It’s now about variety – smaller spaces, larger spaces, different heights for working surfaces etc – rather than trying to make a space feel like home. I think, in most cases, people have realised that they can work from home if they want, and they can sit on a sofa and work with a laptop, but if they are looking to come into the office, they’re probably looking for a dual-monitor and an ergonomic chair and desk.

Rachel: I still think there’s a desire for comfort, for those certain textures and colours you find from your home, as opposed to sloppiness! The space should be ergonomic, of course, and I think we’ve seen a lot of people who have been working from home and have discovered that it’s not very good for their back – but they still want the office to have those colours and textures that make them feel comfortable.

So are we seeing a greater variety of colours and textures now being used in workspaces – and possibly bolder and different ones at that?

Zena: We’ve just completed a smaller project in Watford for a long-term blue chip client. Our client felt quite comfortable in going along with different types of concept and we moved deliberately away from their brand colours, which are quite strong, and we went completely towards dialled-down shades. When we started painting the walls, which meant a lot of blocking of colour, and a lot of gradual toning, which they had never done before, we asked them how they feel when they came into the space and how they wanted to feel when they came into the space. When we first started the painting across the three floors, a lot of the comments were along the lines of, ‘Wow,

that’s a lot of colour!’ and ‘Did you see the colour at the end of that wall?’ Then, within a couple of days, they started saying how calm they had started to feel, and within two weeks they were telling us how much they loved the colours. They were walking into the space and immediately feeling relaxed. Since that reaction we have gone into colours even more with that client – and also into different textures with them. They are completely open to this now. People have been stuck at home and are now really enjoying having their senses heightened again – and the more senses we are able to reach within the interior, the better the design.

Tim: One factor that has really affected people is spending so much time outside – and that being a much bigger part of everyone’s day. Obviously, a lot of the offices designed by our friendly M&E engineers are very efficiently hermetically sealed and carefully controlled. Being able to bring the outside in and having a variety of environments for everyone at a range of times – so being able to work from the sofa if you want to or being able to work in the garden if you want to – the influences of nature, being outside and having so much choice really is having a big impact on the way we are able to design. Plus, I think that the less experimental clients, who previously just carried on with the same old formula, now realise that they can’t afford to not ask the question of whether there is a better way of doing things. Just by asking that question, you will come up with other options.

We ask our hosts, Ultrafabrics, whether they are seeing emerging trends when it comes to sensory design, colour and texture.

Genevieve: We are certainly seeing more colour – and its very much tonal colours that we are seeing. We are also seeing more requests for different textures – and I think this is maybe coming from being slightly scared

to touch things for the past 18 months. The sense of touch plays such a huge role in our wellbeing, the materials, and surfaces around us can create a sensorial experience, so it’s vital that they feel soft and have those premium haptics. When we speak about reducing stress, we know how important touch is in grounding us in a space, and soft to the touch materials play a role in this. Now, more than ever, there is a need for the surfaces around us to be able to withstand regular cleaning and disinfection so that we feel comfortable to touch them, especially after all those months of being told to avoid touch.

Of course, our physical comfort is going to directly impact our wellbeing. Using upholstery that has climate regulating properties or is breathable will enhance seating comfort and is so important when you are seated for long periods of time, such as in an office environment, where it can improve performance and reduce stress. But this material comfort is equally important in hospitality applications where you are creating a luxury experience.

The ingredients of a material are also becoming increasingly important. This directly impacts the air quality of an environment, which in turn affects our physical health and wellbeing. Fabrics that have low VOC’s will not be emitting nasty chemicals, and we ensure that all Ultrafabrics are Indoor Advantage Gold certified for this reason. Also, using premium ingredients will mean lasting durability and fabrics that can endure years of active use without losing form or function.

I actually think specifying materials that have sustainability credentials does impact the users’ wellbeing. Everyone is more aware than ever of the importance in moving in a more sustainable direction, living and working in environments that fit with our own ethics and beliefs makes us feel good. We are seeing more and more people look for animal-free alternatives that still provide a luxury premium experience. It’s no longer a question





of compromise. Being surrounded by spaces that we connect to makes us feel good and improves our wellbeing.

Genevieve makes a number of interesting points here – not least that we use touch to ground ourselves in a space. This is not particularly easy when it comes to ‘softer’ environments, such as retail and hospitality. Tim tells us that he has seen an alternative that we believe may well be the future!

Tim: In Brixton, where we are based, there is a ramen shop that has a little Japanese UV robot that walks around and cleans the space. With the technology being so good, it can clean a whole multitude of surfaces that a cloth and a sanitiser is unable to do. So an advanced bit of technology allows us to not have to worry about dehumanising and sanitising our spaces. Then again, you don’t need to have touchless lifts – you could just have a door person. You can humanise the problem. None of us wants to be living, socialising or working in a lab.

David: There was a real knee-jerk reaction to start with – it needed to look like people were doing something but thankfully that’s quickly being stripped back.

Maria: We are definitely seeing our clients question the purpose of their space much more. They now want a narrative much more

than ever – a narrative that will help bring people back into the office. What is the feeling that you want to evoke? I think that’s very powerful – and a story like that, built around a variety of different spaces, which could be muted or could be vibrant, makes more sense than a blank canvass without that variety of colours and textures. When it comes to people’s wellbeing in the workplace, this is needed more than ever right now.

Lucy: We’ve definitely seen a shift away from brand colours, which are obviously more client facing and used just to make sure people know who you are! Instead, people are looking at who is occupying the space day in and day out, how they can make that space better for them and allow them to be happier and more efficient.

Conclusion

While there is a clear trend for more colour and interesting textures in workplaces, as Lucy says, there is a cultural shift away from the client-facing corporate style, towards staff-focused wellbeing-oriented spaces – firstly, to get people to return and, secondly, to ensure they are happy and comfortable to be there. We’ve said it before (and no doubt we’ll say it again very soon) but variety really is key – from a variety of spaces and amenities, through to colours, textures, shades and tones. ♦

Meet our guests



Rachel Basha Franklin
Founder
Basha-Franklin

Rachel has dedicated her career to delivering design solutions with her client’s needs as her core focus. She has a driving passion for design and works towards giving her client’s aesthetically accomplished solutions that work for the business and end users. She has invested her energy into researching and understanding what her client’s needs are and has delivered key projects to some of the UK’s leading companies. Rachel has worked in Sydney and London, and has project experience in Europe, China, Singapore and Jamaica.



Zena Janowska
Senior Interior Designer
BDP

Zena is an interior designer with expertise across a number of design sectors; these include retail, hospitality, high-end residential and healthcare. Over the last five years, Zena has been part of the design team involved with interior design for regional and London schemes for PwC. Zena is passionate about human centric design, focusing on user experience and was lead designer for the recent Mixology finalist project, PwC Watford.



Inge Moore
Founder
Muza Lab

Muza Lab, founded by Inge and Nathan Hutchins in 2016, creates multi-faceted hotels, superyachts, luxury developments and private residential spaces. The firm’s ever-evolving style is underpinned by a dedicated approach to exquisite detailing, layering of textures, eclectic use of materiality, and ease of use. With a global outlook and a commitment to craft and a sense of discovery, the team infuses each project with thoughtful consideration and deep creativity to bring to life designs that evoke memorable experiences.



Maria Papadopoulou
Associate
Perkins&Will

Maria is an associate at Perkins&Will with 14 years’ experience in architecture and interior design. After completing a degree in architecture at the University of Thessaly in Greece, she started working on residential projects before moving to London and joining the Perkins&Will interiors team. Significant projects in the last eight years include designing workplaces for some of the world’s leading financial services and tech companies, including Microsoft and The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).



David Mason
Director
Scott Brownrigg

David joined Scott Brownrigg’s London office in 2016 as Project Director for the interior design sector. He leads teams of interior designers to champion innovation and is responsible for heading major schemes and continuing to grow and develop business within the sector. David has successfully led a range of high quality, highly complex projects, which have provided him with a wide variety and depth of experience within the hospitality and residential sectors, having delivered international schemes in the Netherlands, Qatar and Antigua.



Tim Gledstone
Partner
Squire & Partners

Tim has taken a leading role in the design direction of Squire and Partners, delivering several prestigious central London residential developments. He has also led the practice’s design and interiors teams to create its office at The Department Store, which subsequently won a RIBA National Award. Most recently, Tim has led the design of new hyperlocal Brixton workspace, The Department Store Studios. Leading a team of architects, illustrators, interior designers and model makers, Tim’s creative input continues to shape the direction of the practice.



Lucy Bagshaw
Associate Director
tp bennett

Lucy is an Associate Director working across the interior design and sustainability departments at tp bennett. Whilst her background is in architecture and interior design, she works within the sustainability team at tp bennett to ensure a more cohesive approach in embedding sustainable initiatives, values and ideas into projects as well as its own business. Lucy has been heavily involved with supply chain engagement and responsible sourcing, as well as research pieces into equitable and inclusive design.



Genevieve Boaler
Showroom Manager
Ultrafabrics

Genevieve has a background in textile design and is passionate about how the materials we surround ourselves with make us feel. Responsible for Ultrafabrics’ European marketing activity and London showroom, Genevieve is inspired by the company’s commitment to producing high-performing fabrics that also create sensorial experiences.