

## Can blind people make great architects?

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

Which of these professions do you consider to be the most creative and which the least creative? Rank them from 1 to 6.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. architect
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. civil engineer
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. doctor
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. actor
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. dancer
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. musician

#### 2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences with these key words from the text.

daunting	visualize	harness	barrier	viable
reverberate	affluent	visually impaired	outset	attuned

- If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you form a picture of it in your mind.
- If sounds \_\_\_\_\_, they are repeated many times as they hit two opposite surfaces.
- If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you get control of it in order to use it for a particular purpose.
- If someone is \_\_\_\_\_, they have problems with their sight.
- A \_\_\_\_\_ task is one that makes people worried because they think it will be very difficult to do.
- A \_\_\_\_\_ is something that prevents progress or makes it difficult for someone to achieve something.
- The \_\_\_\_\_ of something is its beginning.
- People who are \_\_\_\_\_ to something are familiar with it and able to deal with it in a sensitive way.
- An \_\_\_\_\_ person is rich enough to buy things for pleasure.
- If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is able to be done or worth doing.

#### 3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

- The School of Architecture at University College London ran an architecture and design workshop in the summer. Who was the course for?
- How long did the course last?
- What is the aim of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project?
- How long in total has Chris Downey been an architect?
- How many practising blind architects are there in the world?
- What, according to the article, are visually impaired architects more attuned to?

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*Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London (UCL) has been running an architecture workshop for people with visual impairments*

**Rachel Hall**

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- 1 Visualize yourself entering a new building. What do you notice first? The answer for most people will probably be the internal structure, the colour of the walls, the light entering through the windows. But stay a little longer and you might start to experience the space differently: you'll hear sound reverberating, you'll feel air currents, textures and materials, you'll smell wafts from the kitchen.
- 2 For blind people, this multi-sensory experience is their first impression of a space. And now a new programme is trying to harness that unique ability by training more visually impaired people to become architects. As the first step in running a foundation course aimed at people who see things differently, the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL ran an architecture and design workshop for people with visual impairments in summer, 2019.
- 3 "Going to start an architecture degree as a visually impaired person is so horrendously daunting. There's so much that's inaccessible," said Poppy Levison, one of the students on the five-day course, who is about to start studying at Central Saint Martins. "I've been brought up to analyze spaces," she says. "I remember my vision support worker when I was four asking: 'Is it better if the window's behind you in the classroom?' It's something I've always been asked to think about."
- 4 One key exercise in the workshop involves documenting how different spaces make you feel. Levison has particularly enjoyed sharing thoughts with her fellow students. "I know my experience, but that's not what's always going to be best for everyone," she says. "Some people really like daylight, and some people really don't. It's about finding ways in the future to balance those ideas within a building."
- 5 The workshop is run by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, which aims to change attitudes towards disability and accessibility. DisOrdinary promotes the social model of disability, which argues that people are only disabled when they are confronted with a barrier. If those barriers are removed, the disability ceases to exist.
- 6 As such, the founders believe that integrating the perspectives of people with a range of disabilities into the architectural design process from the outset will build better spaces for everybody. "If people from a whole cross section of society aren't involved in architecture, then the outcome at the end won't work," says Zoe Partington, an artist and one of the co-founders. "If you develop a building with incredible acoustic capabilities so sound doesn't reverberate around, it's not just about disabled people; it works for everybody. It can still be a beautiful environment, aesthetically amazing, but you can get the balance right."
- 7 Visually impaired architects are also more attuned to the importance of wayfinding, which is especially valuable in public transit areas, as well as the need for space for guide dogs – which likewise benefits wheelchair users and people with children. Jos Boys, a co-founder of DisOrdinary and a lecturer at the Bartlett, thinks there is growing interest in inclusion and alternative perspectives. "It feels like a new generation's coming in," she says. "My experience with younger students is that they're much more interested in that stuff. They see it as a positive; it's something they really want to get engaged with."
- 8 The Bartlett's work with DisOrdinary is led by Alan Penn. As well as wanting to increase diversity in a profession he describes as a "monoculture" dominated by white architects from mostly affluent backgrounds, he is looking to foster new ways of thinking about architectural aesthetics.
- 9 "It occurred to me you'd get different ideas if you had some people involved where the visual sense wasn't their primary way of thinking about things," he says. "I'm trying to disrupt the architectural fixation with the visual. I don't want to patronize blind people or lead them up the garden path."
- 10 He says there is genuine interest from the profession in increasing representation from people with visual impairments and other disabilities. "As soon as I mention it to leading practices, they want to be involved. They have the same issues about diversity and new thinking."

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- 11 Although there are some visually impaired people working as architects (often without disclosing their disabilities for fear of stigma), Penn has identified just two practising blind architects in the world. One of these is Chris Downey, a San Francisco-based architect. He lost his sight 11 years ago, after 20 years in the profession.
- 12 Downey is doubtful that, at present, architecture is a viable profession for someone who has been blind since birth. While there are ways to enable the blind and severely visually impaired to contribute – for instance, through tactile drawings and 3D printing – licensing exams are a barrier. “I don’t know that you could go into a traditional practice,” he says.
- 13 Nevertheless, there is a spectrum of visual impairment, and Downey thinks that even for those who are completely blind, there is value in learning the principles of architectural design, not least because these can be applied to a range of creative careers. His experience of becoming blind later in life has fundamentally shaped his understanding of the purpose of architecture.
- 14 “It’s less about the sight I’ve lost and more about the realization of how much of the environmental experience I wasn’t designing, I was leaving to chance, leaving to possible failure because I wasn’t designing for it,” he says. “I’ve discovered more possibilities and a strategy for a richer design than I was working with when I was sighted.”
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### 4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- What does the social model of disability argue?
  - that visually impaired people do not really have a disability
  - that people are only disabled when they come up against a barrier
  - that there are different levels of disability according to the amount of space
- Why do the founders of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project want to involve people from a whole cross section of society?
  - because they want to build spaces that work for everybody
  - because they want to build beautiful environments
  - because they believe in multi-sensory experiences
- What is the ‘monoculture’ that Alan Penn describes?
  - the fact that there are only two blind architects in the world
  - the fact that most architects are white and from affluent backgrounds
  - the fact that architecture is almost entirely visual
- Why, according to Chris Downey, is there value for blind people in learning the principles of architectural design?
  - because there is a spectrum of visual impairment
  - because they could become involved in producing tactile drawings and doing 3D printing
  - because those principles can be applied to a range of creative careers

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#### 5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a noun meaning *a smell that floats through the air in a gentle way* (para 1)
2. an adjective meaning *difficult or impossible to reach* (para 3)
3. an adverb that means *in a way that relates to beauty, especially in art* (para 6)
4. an adverb meaning *in the same way or in a similar way* (para 7)
5. a noun meaning *the belief that all people should feel that they are included in society, even if they lack some advantages* (para 7)
6. a noun meaning *a very strong interest in something that prevents you from paying attention to anything else* (para 9)
7. a six-word idiomatic phrase that means *give someone false information that means they will waste their time* (para 9)
8. a noun meaning *the treatment of a particular type of behaviour as wrong or embarrassing and making people who behave in this way feel ashamed* (para 11)

#### 6 Verb + noun collocations

Match the verbs in the left hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- |           |                            |
|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1. run    | a. attitudes               |
| 2. share  | b. barriers                |
| 3. change | c. new ways of thinking    |
| 4. remove | d. a course                |
| 5. foster | e. someone's understanding |
| 6. shape  | f. thoughts                |

#### 7 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. Alan Penn aims to fosters new ways of thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ aesthetics. [ARCHITECTURE]
2. The DisOrdinary Project aims to changes attitudes towards disability and \_\_\_\_\_. [ACCESSIBLE]
3. The foundation course is aimed at people who see things \_\_\_\_\_. [DIFFER]
4. There is genuine interest in increasing \_\_\_\_\_ from people with visual impairments and other disabilities. [REPRESENT]
5. Alan Penn wishes to increase \_\_\_\_\_ in a profession he describes as a monoculture. [DIVERSE]
6. The principles of design in architecture can be applied to a range of \_\_\_\_\_ careers. [CREATE]

#### 8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- All professions should be open to all people.
- It's obvious that certain jobs can't be performed by people with disabilities.
- Public buildings should be designed with everyone in mind.

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### KEY

#### 2 Key words

1. visualize
2. reverberate
3. harness
4. visually impaired
5. daunting
6. barrier
7. outset
8. attuned
9. affluent
10. viable

#### 3 Find the information

1. people with visual impairments
2. five days
3. to change attitudes towards disability and accessibility
4. 31 years
5. two
6. the importance of wayfinding

#### 4 Comprehension check

1. b
2. a
3. b
4. c

#### 5 Find the word

1. waft
2. inaccessible
3. aesthetically
4. likewise
5. inclusion
6. fixation
7. lead someone up the garden path
8. stigma

#### 6 Verb + noun collocations

1. d
2. f
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. e

#### 7 Word-building

1. architectural
2. accessibility
3. differently
4. representation
5. diversity
6. creative