

Can blind people make great architects?

Level 1 • Pre-intermediate / Intermediate

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 using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers will help you.

texture acoustics visually impaired accessibility barrier

- _____ is the way something feels when you touch it. (para 1)
- If someone is _____, they have problems with their sight. (para 2)
- _____ describes how suitable a place or building is for use by disabled people. (para 3)
- A _____ is something that prevents progress or makes it difficult for someone to achieve something. (para 3)
- _____ are the way that sound is heard in a room. (para 4)

viable tactile inclusion fixation spectrum

- _____ is the belief that all people should feel that they are a part of society, even if they have a disability. (para 5)
- A _____ is a very strong interest in something that prevents you from paying attention to anything else. (para 6)
- If something is _____, it is able to be done or worth doing. (para 8)
- If something is _____, it involves the sense of touch. (para 8)
- A _____ is the whole range of qualities, ideas, situations, etc that are possible. (para 9)

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?
- What, according to the article, are visually impaired architects more attuned to?
- How many practising blind architects are there in the world?
- How long in total has Chris Downey been an architect?

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Rachel Hall

2 September, 2019

- 1 Imagine you are 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 sounds, you'll feel air moving, textures and materials, you'll smell food 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 use that unique ability by training more visually impaired people to become architects. As a first step, the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London recently ran a five-day architecture and design course for visually impaired people.
- 3 The course is run by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, which wants to change attitudes towards disability and accessibility. DisOrdinary says that people are only disabled when they meet a barrier. If we remove those barriers, the disability no longer exists.
- 4 The founders of the project believe that including people with a range of disabilities in the architectural design process will build better spaces for everybody. "If different sorts of people aren't involved in architecture, then the result won't work," says Zoe Partington, one of the founders. If you develop a building with incredible acoustics, it's not just about disabled people; it works for everybody. It can still be a beautiful environment, but you can get the balance right."
- 5 Visually impaired architects also know that you need to design spaces so that people can easily find their way, and they know you need space for guide dogs – which also benefits wheelchair users and people with children. Jos Boys, one of the founders of DisOrdinary and a lecturer at the Bartlett, thinks there is growing interest in inclusion and alternative perspectives. "It feels like there's a new generation," 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 involved in."
- 6 Alan Penn is the leader of the Bartlett's work with DisOrdinary. He wants to increase diversity in architecture because he says it is a "monoculture" dominated by white architects from rich backgrounds. He is also trying to promote new ways of thinking about architecture. "You get different ideas if you have some people involved where the visual sense wasn't their main way of thinking about things," he says. "I'm trying to move away from the architectural fixation with the visual."
- 7 Although there are some visually impaired people working as architects, 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 job.
- 8 Downey doesn't think that, at present, architecture is a viable job 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 – exams are a barrier. "I don't know that you could go into a traditional architectural company," he says.
- 9 But 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 because they can apply these to a range of creative careers. His experience of becoming blind later in life has improved his understanding of the purpose of architecture.
- 10 "Since I've lost my sight, I've realized how much of the environmental experience I wasn't designing," he says. "I've discovered more possibilities and a strategy for a richer design than when I could see."

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4 Comprehension check

Match the beginnings and endings to make statements about the text.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. The DisOrdinary Architecture Project believes that ... | a. ... in a number of different creative careers. |
| 2. The founders of the project want ... | b. ... he has a better understanding of the purpose of architecture. |
| 3. Alan Penn suggests that architects from rich backgrounds ... | c. ... people are only disabled when they meet a barrier. |
| 4. Chris Downey doesn't believe that architecture is a viable job ... | d. ... dominate architecture. |
| 5. But he believes that people can use the principles of architectural design ... | e. ... to build spaces that work for everybody. |
| 6. He also thinks that, as a result of becoming blind later in life, ... | f. ... for people who have been blind since birth. |

5 Chunks

Rearrange the words to make phrases from the text.

- first a step as
- disability the longer no exists
- thinking way their of main
- twenty job years in after the
- the design of principles architectural
- creative a careers of range

6 Prepositions

Fill the gaps in the phrases from the text using these prepositions.

with

to

for

in

of

through

- involved _____ architecture
- light entering _____ the windows
- the architectural fixation _____ the visual
- a range _____ disabilities
- apply principles _____ a range of careers
- build better spaces _____ everybody

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7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	noun	adjective
1.	tradition	
2.	architecture	
3.	environment	
	adjective	noun
4.	disabled	
5.	accessible	
6.	diverse	

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- Architecture is the most important job of all.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. texture
2. visually impaired
3. accessibility
4. barrier
5. acoustics
6. inclusion
7. fixation
8. viable
9. tactile
10. spectrum

3 Find the information

1. visually impaired people
2. five days
3. to change attitudes towards disability and accessibility
4. designing a space so that people can easily find their way; having space for guide dogs
5. two
6. 31 years

4 Comprehension check

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

5 Chunks

1. as a first step
2. the disability no longer exists
3. their main way of thinking
4. after twenty years in the job
5. the principles of architectural design
6. a range of creative careers

6 Prepositions

1. in
2. through
3. with
4. of
5. to
6. for

7 Word-building

1. traditional
2. architectural
3. environmental
4. disability
5. accessibility
6. diversity