

Can blind people make great architects?

Level 2 • Upper 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.

1. _____ a. architect
2. _____ b. civil engineer
3. _____ c. doctor
4. _____ d. actor
5. _____ e. dancer
6. _____ f. musician

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences with these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

accessibility
acoustics

barrier
affluent

attuned
visually impaired

viable
stigma

tactile
outcome

1. If someone is _____, they have problems with their sight. (para 2)
2. _____ describes how suitable a place or building is for use by disabled people. (para 4)
3. A _____ is something that prevents progress or makes it difficult for someone to achieve something. (para 4)
4. An _____ is the final result of a process. (para 5)
5. _____ are the way that sound is heard in a room. (para 5)
6. People who are _____ to something are familiar with it and able to deal with it in a sensitive way. (para 6)
7. An _____ person is rich enough to buy things for pleasure. (para 7)
8. _____ is the treatment of a particular type of behaviour as wrong or embarrassing and making people who behave in this way feel ashamed. (para 8)
9. If something is _____, it is able to be done or worth doing. (para 9)
10. If something is _____, it involves the sense of touch. (para 9)

3 Find the information

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

1. The School of Architecture at University College London ran an architecture and design workshop in the summer. Who was the course for?
2. How long did the course last?
3. What is the aim of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project?
4. What, according to the article, are visually impaired architects more attuned to?
5. How many practising blind architects are there in the world?
6. 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 currents, 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 the first step, the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London ran a five-day architecture and design workshop for people with visual impairments in summer, 2019.
- 3 One exercise in the workshop involves recording how different spaces make you feel. Poppy Levison 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."
- 4 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 meet a barrier. If those barriers are removed, the disability no longer exists.
- 5 The founders of the project believe that integrating people with a range of disabilities into the architectural design process from the start 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, one of the co-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."
- 6 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 also 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 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 engaged with."
- 7 The Bartlett's work with DisOrdinary is led by Alan Penn. He wants to increase diversity in a profession he describes as a "monoculture" dominated by white architects from mostly affluent backgrounds. He is also trying to promote new ways of thinking about architectural aesthetics. "I realized you'd get different ideas if you had 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."
- 8 Although there are some visually impaired people working as architects (often without revealing 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.
- 9 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 think you could go into a traditional architectural practice," he says.
- 10 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, especially because these can be applied to a range of creative careers. His experience of becoming blind later in life has formed his understanding of the purpose of architecture.
- 11 "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 was sighted."

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4 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. The social model of disability argues that people are only disabled when they meet a barrier.
2. The founders of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project want to build spaces that only work for disabled people.
3. Alan Penn suggests that most architects are white and affluent.
4. Alan Penn wants to focus on the visual aspects of architecture.
5. Chris Downey doesn't think people who are completely blind should learn the principles of architecture.
6. He believes that his experience of becoming blind later in life has helped his understanding of the purpose of architecture.

5 Find the word

Find the following words in the text.

1. a noun meaning *the way something feels when you touch it* (para 1)
2. an adjective meaning *involving more than one of the senses at the same time* (para 2)
3. a two-word noun meaning *a group that contains an example of all or most types of people* (para 5)
4. a noun meaning *the belief that all people should feel that they are a part of society, even if they lack some advantages* (para 6)
5. a noun meaning *the beautiful qualities of something* (para 7)
6. a noun meaning *a very strong interest in something that prevents you from paying attention to anything else* (para 7)
7. a noun meaning *the business of a doctor, lawyer or other professional person* (para 9)
8. a noun meaning *the whole range of qualities, ideas, situations, etc that are possible* (para 10)

6 Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| 1. visually | a. current |
| 2. guide | b. printing |
| 3. wheelchair | c. dog |
| 4. air | d. transit |
| 5. public | e. impaired |
| 6. 3D | f. user |

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7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	noun	adjective
1.	tradition	
2.	architecture	
3.	environment	
4.	value	
5.	doubt	
6.	vision	

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- All professions should be open to all people.
- Public buildings should be designed with everyone in mind.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. visually impaired
2. accessibility
3. barrier
4. outcome
5. acoustics
6. attuned
7. affluent
8. stigma
9. viable
10. tactile

3 Find the information

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

4 Comprehension check

1. T
2. F
3. T
4. F
5. F
6. T

5 Find the word

1. texture
2. multi-sensory
3. cross section
4. inclusion
5. aesthetics
6. fixation
7. practice
8. spectrum

6 Two-word phrases

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

7 Word-building

1. traditional
2. architectural
3. environmental
4. valuable
5. doubtful
6. visual