Designing Healthy Habits

How Experiential Design can be a catalyst for Behavioural Change towards a healthier and happier lifestyle
The Green Exercise Partnership (GEP) is a joint venture between Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, NHS National Services Scotland and Health Scotland (the health improvement board of the NHS in Scotland). The GEP aims to build links between the health and environment sectors, following growing evidence that public health can be improved by getting people engaged with the natural environment.

Through its Greening the NHS Estate programme, the GEP aims to establish at least one greenspace demonstration project in each of the 11 mainland Area Health Boards. The projects aim to show the health benefits that flow from positive investments in, and management of, the NHS estate – the greenspace around hospitals and healthcare centres.

The design of healthcare buildings, and the space that surround them, can have a powerful positive or negative influence on wellbeing and health related behaviours. Well-designed physical environments can save the NHS money and increase wellbeing among patients, staff and visitors. The hospice movement has long understood the need to create a therapeutic healthcare environment, but hospitals have not (BMA 2011). Using existing assets in hospital grounds, such as gardens and allotments, has been shown to reduce stress and improve wellbeing.

Creative and informative design around green sites plays a key role in engaging and changing attitudes. It is important to raise awareness of the benefits of the outdoors as a ‘natural health service’.

In order to achieve fresh thinking and behavioural change we need to inform people of access opportunities – routes available such as paths for walking and cycling – and encourage them to get outdoors for walks, meetings and lunch breaks. Fun, creative campaigns and activities can also act as prompts to change behaviours.

Good Experiential Design creates a unique sense of place, helps people find their way, communicates important information and builds a greater connection between the users and the green spaces. Above all it improves the human experience by connecting staff, patients and visitors to the outdoors... even a 10 minute break outdoors can make a positive impact on mental wellbeing.

“We are confident that our investment in an integrated design approach to signage, information and interpretation design is effective in promoting the benefits of enjoying the outdoors.”

Kevin Lafferty, Access, Health & Recreation Advisor, Forestry Commission Scotland
The Keep Out Campaign at Gartnavel Hospital

The Keep Out campaign subverts familiar visuals into motivational messages to tackle sedentary behaviour in staff, patients and visitors.

There are many reasons not to go outside – poor weather, short breaks, lack of information, bad habits – but once people are outside they do enjoy the space. The campaign uses a series of motivational prompts which have been successful in getting people to use outdoor spaces more regularly, for physical activity and relaxation.

Project Results

- increased awareness of and familiarity with the greenspace resource at Gartnavel;
- more people rating the grounds as attractive;
- an increase in regular, weekly visits to the grounds;
- more people using the new paths and routes.

A Green Approach to Work, Care and Recovery

A study by The Design Council (2014) reported that physical inactivity costs the NHS £900 million per year and that physically active employees take 27% fewer sick days.

Investment in outdoor infrastructure is an effective low-cost example of preventative spend that can bring health benefits at a population level.

As well as greenspace usage being beneficial to NHS staff, numerous modern studies and reviews show how outdoor and greenspace activities can be an effective supplementary therapy for people with a range of mental and physical disorders. Medical research from around the world demonstrates that ‘green prescriptions’ – doses of nature tailored to patients’ needs – can deliver physiological and psychological benefits.

The NHS and the GEP have been developing and encouraging use of the greenspace around hospitals and other healthcare settings as a valuable health promoting asset.

As a result of the Social Return on Investment, it is calculated that for every £1 spent on this green healthcare activity, £3.86 worth of social value was created, meaning that an SRoI ratio of approximately 1:4 can be attributed to the programme.

2. Design Council’s ‘Active by Design’ quotes Dept. of Health 2009 statistics for the whole of the UK.
4. UHI’s 2012 research at the Forth Valley Hospital and is the SRoI attributed to their ‘Branching out’ programme for cardiac patients.
A study at Gartnavel Royal Hospital, Glasgow, highlighted areas of improvement which would encourage staff and visitors to use the grounds more readily. Survey respondents suggested, amongst other things, that more bins, better lighting, seating areas and signage would improve the grounds and encourage more frequent use.5

Acting on this, a landscape architect began to develop ideas for paving and benches in key areas of the grounds, as well as a better network of paths to create easier access from campus buildings. Clearer, more attractive signage was also developed to highlight the new path routes available, making navigation easier for people and reinforcing the relaxing nature of the environment.

To add diversity to the landscape, fruit trees and wildflower areas were planted with the addition of interpretation to encourage users to engage with the new developments.

The new paths and seating create the opportunity for staff to take lunch or enjoy meetings outdoors. By providing space, staff are able to de-stress away from their usual work environment and return energised and revitalised.

Panel display information to engage people with the new developments made on-site, enriching their experience of time spent outdoors.

Creative Techniques to Promote Greenspaces

Amusing takes on familiar road markings encourage appreciation for the grounds and create a positive, inviting environment.

5. Gartnavel Campus Footfall Observation and Path User Survey Report, November 2014
Impact of Improvements on the Human Experience

Staff and visitors say they enjoyed using the space and far fewer thought there were improvements to be made. Staff have reportedly been enjoying lunch breaks outside and some have even opted to take walking meetings where possible. Visitors to the site have found the grounds much more inviting, some stating that before they had not known the grounds were available to them. Patients also enjoyed the information displayed around the campus which they discovered on the course of their walks with staff and visitors.

Staff have taken notice of the Keep Out campaign particularly the spray-painted messages on paths and stickers indoors reminding people to use the grounds.

34% of all resps.

An encouraging 34% of staff, patients and visitors who took part in the survey said the campaign was likely to make them consider taking time out to enjoy the outdoors more often in the future.

Everyone is welcome to explore the magnificent grounds of Gartnavel in its setting of mature woodland. On the trails you will pass a Victorian ‘palace’, a walled garden, an orchard and the former chapel. Climb to the top of the hill for a bird’s eye view of Glasgow or stroll round the local nature reserve at Bingham’s Pond. The Gartnavel site has something for everyone to enjoy.
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Key Learning Points

- Our health and cognitive function is improved in positive environments where stress is reduced. Healthcare facilities should endeavour to provide these positive physical environments.

- Development of green spaces allows easier access and enriches the experience for staff, patients and visitors to the hospital campus.

- An integrated approach to design between internal and external spaces can encourage use of new green spaces.

- Experiential design can create a calm environment and offer distraction to people in anxious situations.

- Where possible, build plans for greenspace and experiential design into original designs for a new site.

- The BMA (2011) concluded that a more therapeutic healthcare environment would induce positive clinical outcomes, reduce drug consumption, shorten lengths of stay, create better doctor-patient relationships, and improve mental well-being.

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