

VISITOR-CENTRED DESIGN

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING, RESILIENT TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Strategic Insights White Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2026, every dollar invested in visitor-oriented, civic, or community infrastructure is under scrutiny. Funding bodies, elected representatives, and community stakeholders demand clear, demonstrable outcomes — economic, social, and cultural. Visitor-centred architecture is not a cosmetic choice; it is a strategic tool that shapes how people interact with, understand, and value a place.

This paper demonstrates how thoughtful design influences visitor behaviour, maximises engagement, and supports measurable outcomes. Drawing on research in environmental psychology, cognitive science, and contemporary visitor experience studies, it provides practical insights for project decision-makers who must weigh investment, community expectations, and long-term relevance.

A practical decision-maker checklist is included, providing quantifiable indicators to assess whether a project delivers enduring value while remaining resilient to evolving visitor and operational demands.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Tourism, civic, and community infrastructure projects in 2026 operate within a high-pressure, scrutinised environment. Public and private investment is contingent on demonstrable return, whether through increased visitation, local economic impact, social inclusion, or cultural outcomes. At the same time, visitor expectations have shifted: people increasingly seek authentic, meaningful experiences rather than passive information or entertainment.

This context applies to a broad range of projects: regional libraries, cultural hubs, heritage trails, galleries, event spaces, civic squares, and tourism experiences. These are no longer neutral spaces — their design communicates values, identity, and quality, and can determine whether communities, visitors, and funders perceive them as worthwhile.

Recent studies highlight three dimensions of visitor engagement (Falk & Dierking, 2016):

1. Personal context – prior knowledge, motivation, and expectations
2. Social context – companions, group dynamics, and cultural norms
3. Physical context – spatial layout, circulation, and sensory cues

Architecture and design are central to all three. Entry sequences, materials, lighting, spatial rhythm, and wayfinding influence behaviour, dwell time, and emotional connection. For decision-makers, the strategic challenge is to ensure design maximises these outcomes while demonstrating long-term resilience and community value.



FIRST IMPRESSIONS SHAPE ENGAGEMENT

Visitors form judgments within the first 15–30 seconds of arrival (Bitgood, 2013). First impressions affect orientation, perceived quality, safety, and engagement, influencing how people move through and interact with a space.

Design considerations for long-term value:

- Timeless, high-quality materiality: durable finishes that do not date reinforce both aesthetic and perceived value.
- Clear arrival sequences: intuitive circulation reduces congestion and staff intervention.
- Operational efficiency: well-planned thresholds and entry points minimise friction and maximise early engagement.

These elements are relevant not only for tourism-focused sites but also civic and community spaces. A library that feels welcoming, or a civic forecourt that is legible and safe, sets the tone for every interaction, increasing satisfaction and dwell time, and improving the perception of investment worthiness.

Decision-maker insight: first impressions can be measured through observed flow, dwell-time studies, and visitor surveys, linking design directly to outcomes that matter to boards and funders.

COGNITIVE LOAD LIMITS VISITOR ATTENTION

Visitors have limited working memory. Overly complex layouts, competing signage, or excessive digital interaction can overwhelm them, reducing retention, satisfaction, and engagement (Sweller, 1988).

Recent trends highlight a digital saturation paradox: while interactive technology can enhance storytelling, many visitors increasingly seek heritage, authenticity, and low-digital experiences. In tourism and civic projects, balancing digital and sensory engagement is essential to avoid cognitive overload.

Strategies for decision-makers:

- Prioritise clarity: focus on the most important information first; layer additional content for those motivated to explore further.
- Simplify navigation: intuitive spatial hierarchy reduces frustration and supports self-directed exploration.
- Limit unnecessary technology: digital touchpoints should enhance, not dominate, the experience; interactive content must be refreshed regularly to maintain relevance.

By reducing cognitive load, projects increase visitor comprehension, satisfaction, and likelihood of repeat visitation. Decision-makers can assess proposals by asking: “Does the design allow visitors to navigate and understand the space intuitively without overwhelming digital or information inputs?”

EXPERIENCES ARE SEQUENTIAL

Engagement is strongest when experiences are structured as a narrative. Sequence guides attention, builds understanding, and supports emotional connection (Bitgood, 2013).

Principles of sequential design:

- Orientation first: visitors understand context and purpose.
- Core engagement: signature experiences or key information are emphasised.
- Reflective closure: spaces for contemplation, takeaway learning, or action reinforce memory.

Sequential design is relevant across tourism, civic, and community projects. For instance, a regional heritage trail can sequence points of interest to build a coherent story, while a civic hub can lead visitors from arrival through key facilities, workshops, and exhibition spaces in a logical, intuitive flow.

Decision-maker takeaway: sequential design is measurable through dwell time, visitor progression analysis, and feedback on perceived clarity and enjoyment. It also ensures that projects deliver meaningful experiences without relying on transient trends.

MOST VISITORS ARE CASUAL

Research shows that most visitors arrive with low prior motivation. Engaging these audiences is critical to achieving community benefit and funding justification (Museums Australia, 2022).

Practical strategies:

- Provide intuitive navigation and clear entry points.
- Offer optional, layered experiences that engage motivated visitors while remaining accessible to casual ones.
- Include multi-sensory cues (tactile, visual, auditory) to capture attention without overwhelming cognitive load.

This principle applies broadly: casual engagement in a civic space can result in increased social cohesion, repeat community participation, or incidental tourism benefits. By designing for these audiences, decision-makers ensure that projects deliver measurable social and economic outcomes beyond footfall, and remain inclusive and relevant over time.

TIMELESSNESS AND LONGEVITY AS STRATEGIC ASSETS

While adaptability is often cited as a design goal, it introduces operational and content risks: increased costs, inconsistent quality, and ongoing maintenance demands. In 2026, decision-makers are better served by timeless, durable, and high-quality design that can be refreshed in content and programming, rather than constantly reconfigured structurally.

Guiding principles for durable, future-ready projects:

- Material and spatial quality: robust, enduring architecture avoids trends that date.
- Content refreshment: exhibitions, displays, and experiences should evolve without altering the core spatial logic.
- Operational resilience: consider maintenance, staffing, and programming models to support long-term sustainability.

This approach reduces financial risk, strengthens funder confidence, and ensures that spaces remain valued by communities and visitors alike over decades. Decision-makers can assess proposals by asking: “Does the design support high-quality, enduring engagement while allowing for manageable content updates over time?”

PROJECT DECISION-MAKER CHECKLIST

A practical framework for evaluating proposals:

Category	Questions for Quantifiable Evaluation
Audience	Are visitor types and motivations clearly defined? Does the design serve casual and motivated audiences effectively?
Orientation & Navigation	Can visitors locate key areas intuitively? Are arrival points, paths, and focal experiences legible and welcoming?
Cognitive Clarity	Are information and content sequenced logically? Does the design balance sensory, low-tech, and digital engagement?
Experience Sequencing	Are visitor journeys coherent, memorable, and emotionally engaging? Are takeaways clear?
Timelessness & Quality	Do materials, spatial organisation, and design avoid transient trends? Can the space endure decades with minimal structural change?
Operational Realism	Are staffing, programming, and maintenance considerations embedded in the design? Is the space manageable without compromising quality?
Measurable Outcomes	Are indicators defined for dwell time, satisfaction, repeat visitation, and social or economic impact? Are evaluation systems in place?



EVIDENCE AND PRECEDENT

Well-designed visitor, civic, and community infrastructure consistently demonstrates:

- Psychologically-informed layouts: guiding attention and behaviour.
- Sequential, layered experiences: engaging casual and motivated audiences.
- Operational realism and durability: ensuring spaces remain high-quality, relevant, and manageable over time.

These principles apply across libraries, galleries, heritage trails, interpretation centres, and civic hubs. They justify investment, demonstrate measurable impact, and support community and economic outcomes, while reinforcing local identity and pride.

TURNING DESIGN INSIGHT INTO ACTION

Visitor-centred architecture is not a cosmetic choice — it is a strategic asset. By linking evidence-based design to measurable social, cultural, and economic outcomes, it enables projects to deliver real value for communities, visitors, and funders alike.

Decision-makers who prioritise:

- First impressions and sequential engagement
- Cognitive clarity and low-digital overload
- Inclusivity for casual and motivated audiences
- Timeless design, quality materials, and thoughtful content refresh

...can ensure that their projects are resilient, relevant, and measurable, while providing a high-quality experience that strengthens community pride and regional identity.

The opportunity is clear: every civic, tourism, or community-focused project is a chance to create spaces that connect people, tell authentic stories, and support long-term economic, social, and cultural outcomes.

TURNING DESIGN INSIGHT INTO ACTION

What next for project decision-makers?

- Evaluate current or proposed projects against the checklist provided.
- Ask your teams how design decisions will deliver tangible outcomes for visitors and the community.
- Explore partnerships with experienced architects and experience designers who can translate strategy into spaces that perform, endure, and inspire.

The time to act is now. Thoughtful, visitor-centred design is not just about a building or facility — it is about investing in places that generate enduring impact, elevate the visitor economy, and leave communities proud of the spaces they share.

References

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