

WHAT IS TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN?



Design that is trauma-informed centers healing as an integral part of the design process and prioritizes it as an observable outcome in the built environment.

Informed by trauma is grounded in the understanding that all people experience adversity and external factors, such as the built environment, can play a role in supporting healing and fostering resilience.

It goes beyond tactical interventions when a trauma-informed design process offers an opportunity to disrupt the structural systems that perpetuate trauma.

It is good for everyone because spaces are purpose built and empower individuals and communities to steward the design of homes, schools, neighborhoods, etc.

HOW DOES TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN APPEAR IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

Trauma is a leading health concern in the U.S., impacting 6 in 10 people, and disproportionately impacting residents of affordable housing.

Housing and community development practices must seek to understand and acknowledge residents' collective lived experience and expertise. If overlooked, housing owners and operators risk perpetuating trauma among the very communities they seek to serve.

Historically, the housing sector has evaluated community development impact through the lens of the number of units produced or preserved.

However, a trauma-informed design approach, centers residents' lived experiences and understands success not just in terms of bricks and mortar, but on the well-being of residents and the staff that serve them.

TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMMUNITIES

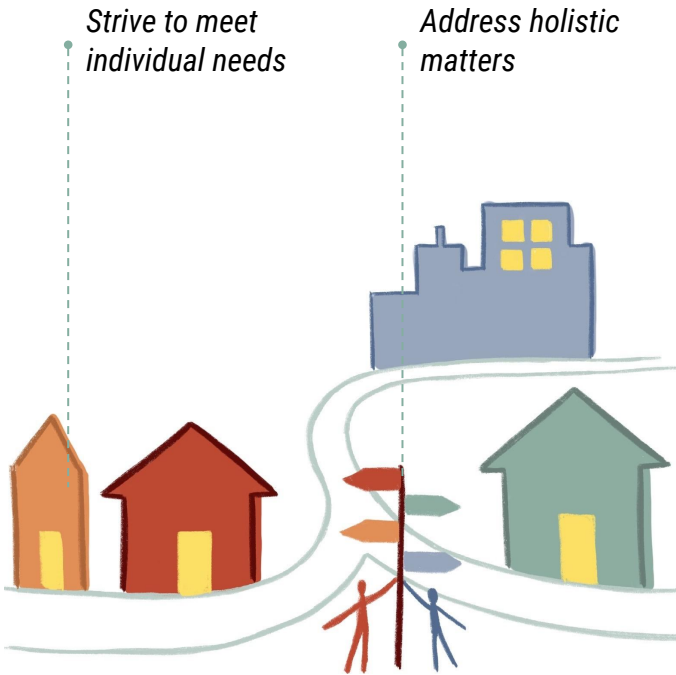
SAFETY & TRUST

Housing communities designed to **create a sense of safety and trust** offer spaces, services, and programs that are welcoming, inclusive, and representative of the local context and culture.



CHOICE & EMPOWERMENT

Housing communities designed to **lift up choice and empowerment** offer residents clear options of spaces and services to use that enable them to make choices of how to best meet their needs.



COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

Housing communities designed to **build community and collaboration** cultivate social cohesion with a diversity of space and service offerings.



BEAUTY & JOY

Housing communities **spark beauty and joy** encouraging residents to take care of their environment to cultivate growth, pride, and delight.



TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES AT-A-GLANCE

These design opportunities, in no particular order, are a sampling of evidence-based interventions to consider when designing trauma-informed spaces – actual design recommendations should be based on the particular project, program, and context.

Clear access and wayfinding	Entrances are easy to find and locate throughout the property and building design with clear wayfinding signage
Provide access to nature	Access to nature is linked to promoting positive health impacts, joy, healing, solace, and reflection.
Flexible, adaptable spaces	Ability to adjust spaces increases sense of safety, comfort, and purpose.
Offer a variety of spaces	Offering different types and sizes of spaces accommodates varying degrees of socialization and comfort.
Provide movable furniture	Provide lightweight furnishings that give users the choice to rearrange the space.
Design for acoustical privacy	Limit or mitigate loud noises (e.g. building equipment, big events, etc.) and prioritize users’ acoustic privacy.
Offer positive distractions	Design features that alleviate stress and elicit positive reactions, feelings, and hold attention.
Provide inclusive furniture	Space and furnishings are welcoming to all.
Design for property security	Building provides security measures throughout the property.
Design for visual safety & privacy	Provide appropriate security measures and allow users to make some adjustments as needed.
Provide predictable spaces	Organizations of rooms and spaces are intentional, easy to understand and predict, and navigate by users.
Design unobstructed sightlines	Unobstructed views, ample lighting, soft and wide corners throughout the property exterior, interior spaces, and corridors.
Offer spatial openness	Perceived sense of open space available that allows residents to choose their path based on their level of comfort.
Use high quality materials	Durable materials show quality and care for residents
Offer artful features	Art can create belonging and connection, foster empowerment, and serve as an outlet for self-expression.
Strive for visually simple and clear design	Simple, uncluttered, and clean design features achieve organized and visually balanced spaces.
Consider natural materials	Natural materials draw connections to nature, support a healthier environment for people, and promote a sense of calm and clarity.
Use cool color choices in common areas	In common areas, consider blues, greens, and purples which have calming effects.
Light-filled spaces	Maximize natural daylight as much as possible in all spaces.
Provide clear circulation paths	Provide barrier-free, visual transparency and wider-than-usual corridors where appropriate

Refer to the following section for tactical interventions to implement according to the spatial program type.

TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | SAFETY & TRUST

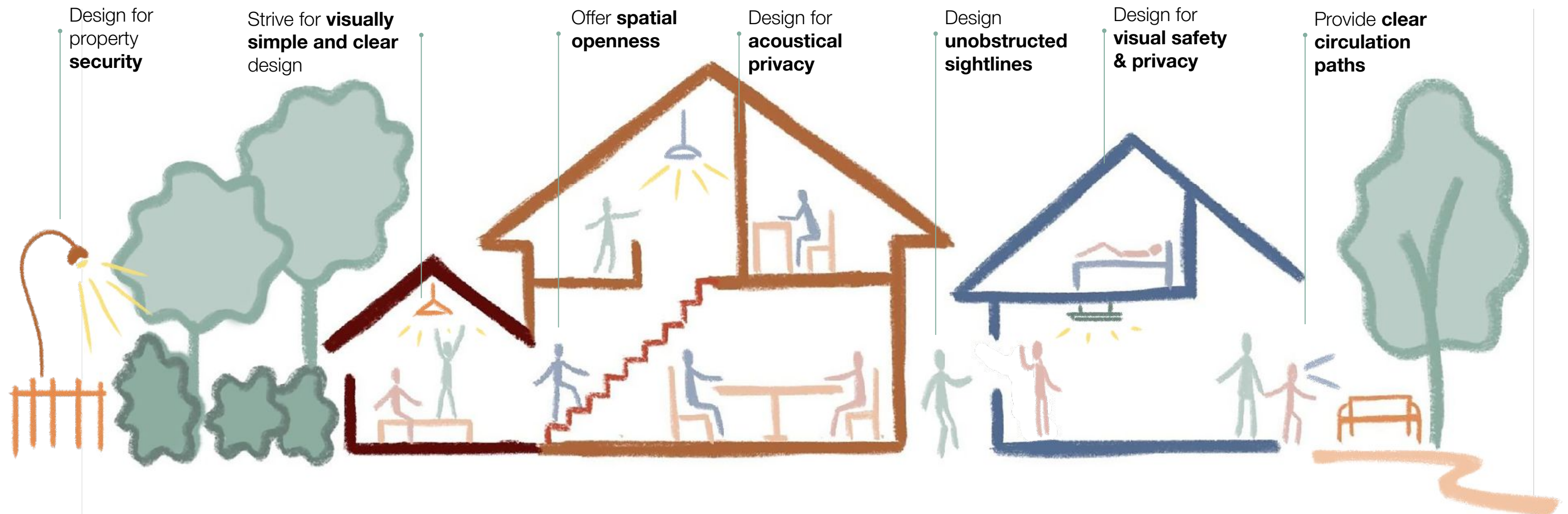


As a fundamental need, understanding safety as defined by those served is a high priority.

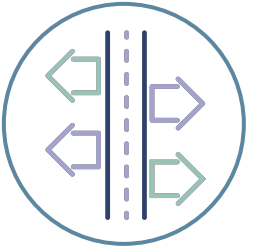
Therefore, spaces in the built environment, informed by the local context, should prioritize individuals' sense of physical, psychological, and community safety and should offer a variety of space sizes, use quality materials, respect privacy and acoustics, and promote equitable and inclusive access for all.

“Being outside is peaceful. It’s where I feel most safe with friends.”

- Resident, Flat 9 at Whittier



TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | CHOICE & EMPOWERMENT



A sense of agency, representation and choice is important for all people, especially in affordable housing communities where many residents, historically, have been impacted by decisions made without their voice or consent.

Therefore, the built environment should offer a variety of design features that allow individuals to make choices aligned with their needs, to feel heard and represented, and to practice self-care.

“I feel a strong sense of trust when I can navigate spaces on my own.”

- Resident, Hawthorne Place Apartments



TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION



Healing happens within the context of relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making.

Therefore, physical spaces support rest and connection, and celebrate the history and strengths of the community.

“I can rely on my neighbors. We know each other and look out for each other, too.”

- Resident, POAH Community in Cincinnati



TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES | BEAUTY & JOY

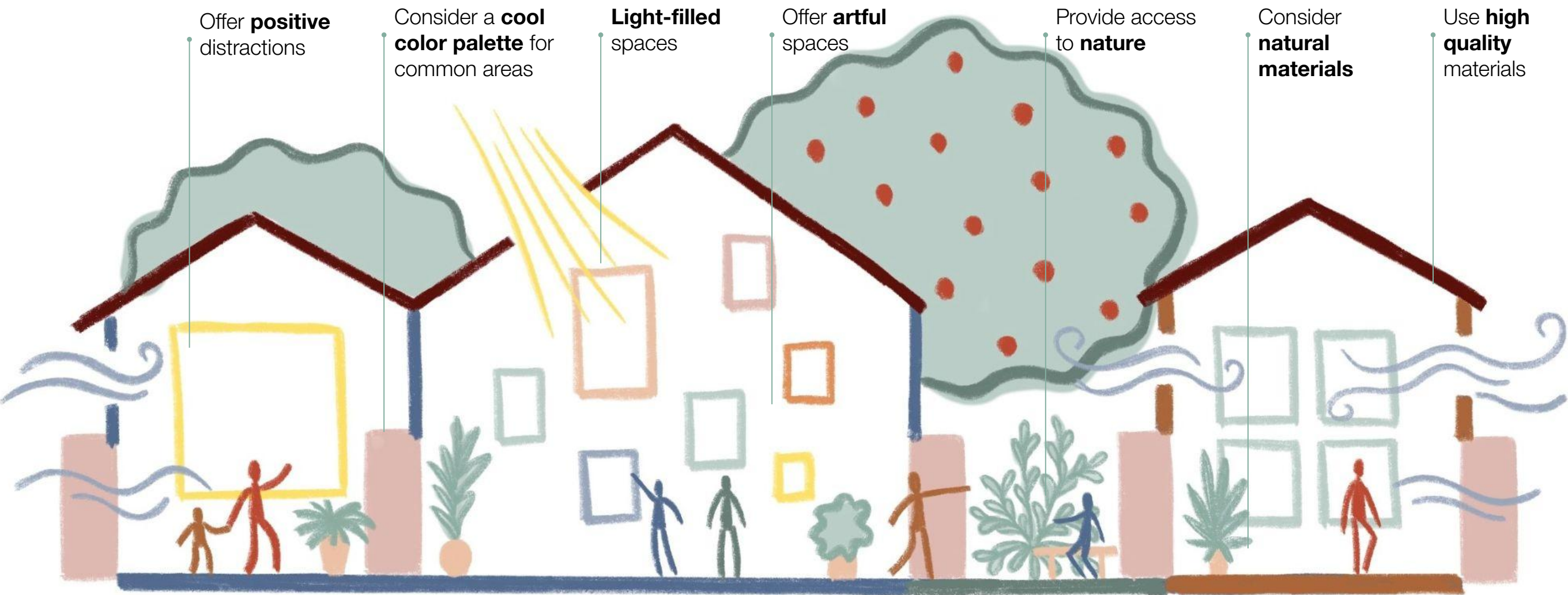


Promoting recovery and healing happens with the appropriate social and spatial supports.

Therefore, spaces in the built environment should evoke hope, resiliency, and imagination.

“It is the first place that has felt like home.”

- Resident, Brandy Hill Apartments

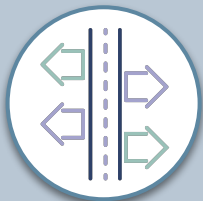


FROM TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

PRINCIPLES



SAFETY & TRUST



CHOICE & EMPOWERMENT



COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY



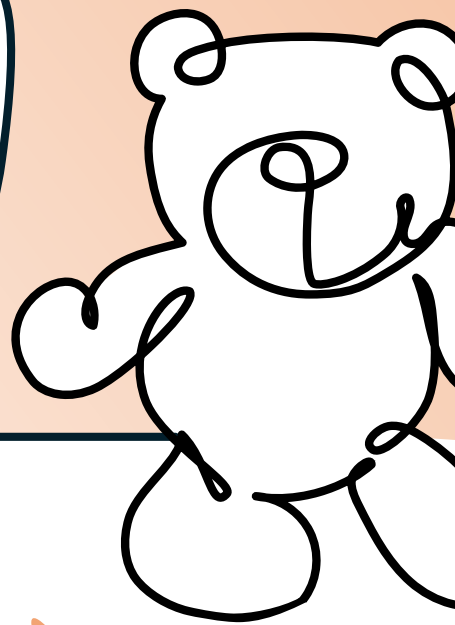
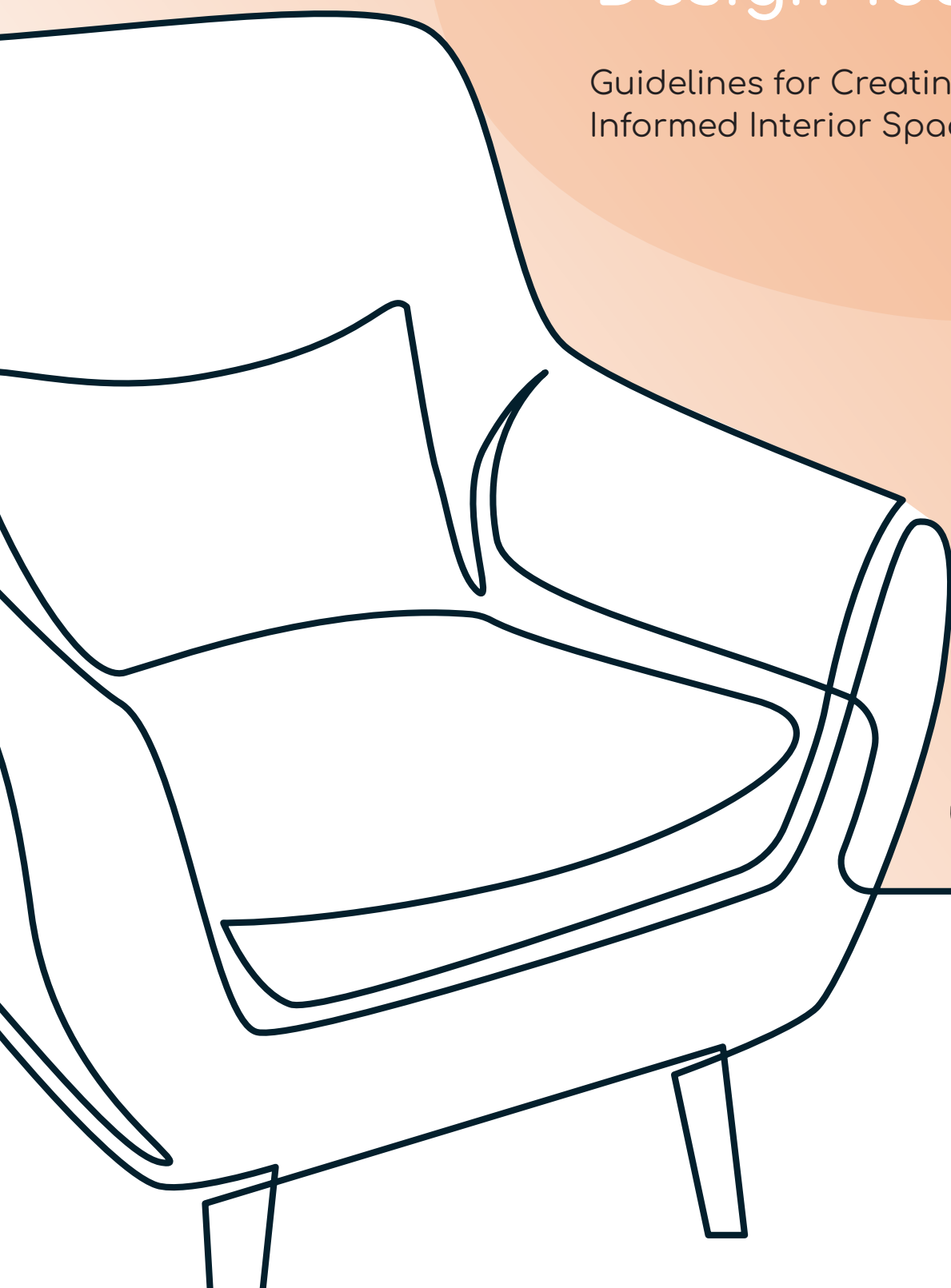
BEAUTY & JOY

DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

- Clear **access and wayfinding**
- Provide access to **nature**
- Flexible, adaptable** spaces
- Offer a **variety** of spaces
- Provide **lightweight** furniture
- Design for **acoustical privacy**
- Offer **positive** distractions
- Provide **inclusive** furniture
- Design for property **security**
- Design for **visual safety & privacy**
- Provide **predictable** spaces
- Design unobstructed sightlines
- Offer **spatial openness**
- Use **high quality** materials
- Offer **artful** spaces
- Visually simple and clear** design
- Consider **natural materials**
- Use a **healthy** color palette
- Provide **clear circulation paths**
- Light-filled** spaces

Trauma Informed Design Toolkit

Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces



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Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces

Calming spaces make a measurable difference in our experience. Think about what it feels like to be sitting by a lake, listening to the birds chirping and the water lapping against the shore versus standing in the middle of a loud construction site. Our environment and the space around us directly impacts the way we feel inside, our ability to focus, stay calm, learn and feel safe.

That is why the Wonderfund has committed to making spaces trauma informed for children and families engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. Based on our learnings, we have created the [Trauma Informed Design Toolkit](#) to provide helpful guidelines for others who seek to create calming, anxiety-reducing environments for the people they serve.

The Wonderfund is a Massachusetts non-profit that serves children engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF). Our population is 50,000 children who have open cases with DCF, 10,000 of whom are in foster care. We provide financial and material support in emergency situations, funds for children to experience extracurricular and enrichment activities, presents during the holidays and a focus on making spaces trauma informed for kids who have experienced abuse and neglect.

The Wonderfund's [Trauma Informed Design Toolkit](#) is the direct result of conversations with DCF social workers who work on the front lines every day with traumatized children. We were informed that when foster children have supervised visits with their biological parents - which are often stressful moments for both parents and children - the visits were taking place in sterile office space with bland walls, fluorescent lighting and uncomfortable furniture. We recognized an opportunity to create child-friendly environments that could reduce stress, provide natural opportunities for parents and children to bond and engage and rewrite the script for how families felt coming into a DCF office. How? By making simple, trauma informed design choices as we renovated office spaces and transformed them into family visiting rooms.

The beauty of this approach is that it is easy to do! By following trauma informed principles, providers can achieve better outcomes for the families they work so hard to serve every day.

In this toolkit, we provide guidelines, suggestions and examples with a focus on creating trauma informed child and family friendly spaces. It should be noted that the principles of trauma informed design can be applied to any environment and that each space and the people who use it will be different. It is critical to examine each space, its purpose and its user group through a trauma informed lens to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Wishing you happy designing!

The Wonderfund Team

“Trauma is the experience of an event that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.” - National Institute of Mental Health

“Individual trauma is the experience of an event or series of events that is perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that can have long lasting adverse effects on physical, social, emotional or spiritual well being.” - SAMSHA, Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014

What is Trauma?

Common causes of childhood trauma include physical, sexual and emotional abuse; death of a loved one; incarceration of a parent; violence in the home or close community; living with adults who have mental health or addiction issues; experiencing racism; and stress caused by poverty.

Studies show that experiencing trauma without intervention and support from safe adults makes it far more likely that a child will grow up and suffer from things like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, addiction and poverty.

Trauma Informed Care

A Trauma Informed approach to care shifts the question from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” According to the Center for Health Care Strategies, Trauma Informed Care aims to:

- Recognize the impact of trauma and understand potential paths to recovery
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in a person
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies and practices
- Seek to actively resist re-traumatization (i.e. avoid creating an environment that reminds people of their traumatic experiences and causes additional stress.)



Trauma Informed Design

Trauma informed design seeks to create environments and spaces that are calming, comfortable, soothing to all five senses and not re-traumatizing or reminiscent of past traumatic environments. By using a trauma informed approach to design, we can greatly improve the outcomes of the interactions that occur in a space. Trauma informed design can be applied to any setting, including hospitals, schools, social service offices, mental health facilities, residential treatment programs, police stations and state agencies.

TRAUMA INFORMED ENVIRONMENTS:

- Understand that the physical environment affects an individual's sense of identity, worth and dignity
- Recognize that the environment plays an important role in the attitudes, moods and behaviors of the people experiencing the space
- Feel welcoming, safe and stress reducing, with the goal of removing potential triggers and allow people the ability to think and function with greater clarity and agency
- Ultimately contribute to more successful outcomes for those being treated in or using the space

Why Is Trauma Informed Design Important?

Trauma informed design creates environments that are proven to positively impact outcomes for people using the space. By creating calming environments and removing potential triggers, we can help ensure that people have a better chance of having successful interactions, which can lead to better outcomes overall.

Key Considerations in Trauma Informed Design

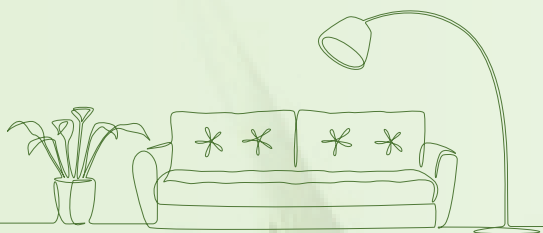
CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT:

- Understands the population that will be using this space - Who are they? Why are they in this space? Are they children? Adults? Are there cultural considerations? Physical or intellectual disabilities?
- Produces a sense of calm and positivity by removing stressors and adverse stimuli
- Generates the feelings of safety and comfort
- Provides positive, multi-sensory experience through textures, sounds, color and light
- Allows for individual agency – choices, self-reliance, functionality with flexibility, privacy if needed and gives some control to the users of the space



Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces

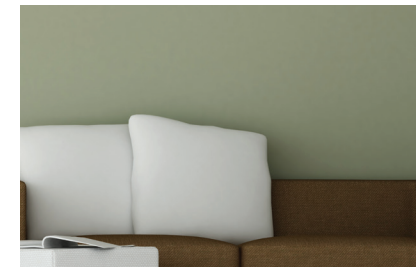
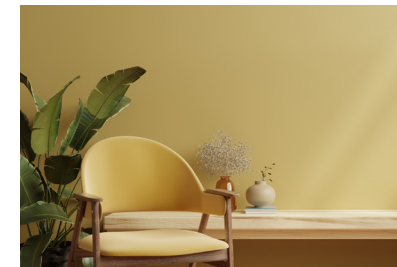
- Be intentional by understanding who is using the space and why
- Color - soothing colors to create calm
- Layout - create clear sight lines for a sense of order and openness
- Furniture - utilize pieces that are comfortable and durable
- Accessories - toys, books and pillows can decrease anxiety and provide opportunities for bonding
- Art - artwork on the walls can distract, soothe and entertain
- Light - natural light is calming and connects us to the natural world, while indirect and lower level illumination improves a sense of comfort



COLOR

Colors have an immediate and powerful impact on the users of the space.

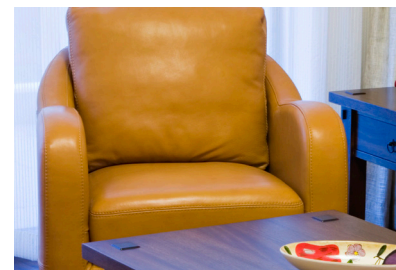
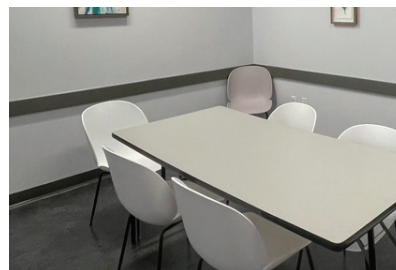
- Create a feeling of calm and openness
- Choose lighter colors that are perceived as calming; Neutral and natural colors such as pale blues, grays and greens are good options
- Avoid deeply hued red, orange and yellow, as they may arouse negative feelings and make confined spaces feel crowded and stressful



LAYOUT

This can have a profound impact on moods and behavior

- An open, simple layout with clear sight lines and few barriers reduces stress and increases a sense of safety, order and predictability
- Eliminate clutter and overcrowding
- Provide opportunities for privacy or personal space
- Provide feelings of safety with some seating against a solid wall with clear sight lines to the rest of the room
- Empower users by allowing for functionality with flexibility. Allow users to move some furniture, adjust lighting, serve themselves and have options for how to interact with the space
- Arrange furniture to promote positive equitable interactions. Chairs arranged corner to corner feels more communal and less confrontational than chairs separated by a desk



FURNITURE

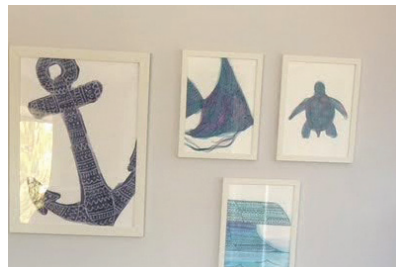
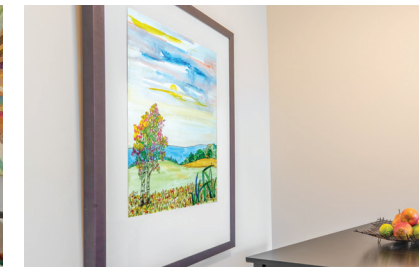
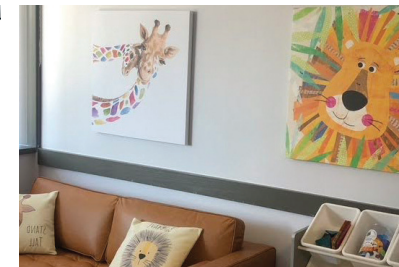
Offer functionality with flexibility

- Quality, durability, and functionality are important and communicate respect and dignity for the users
- Natural materials and colors enhance connection to nature
- Comfort is important and communicates respect and care for the user
- Choose materials that are easy to keep clean and maintain, like wipeable surfaces (ie faux leather) and performance fabrics
- Allow for some pieces to be movable which offers agency to users

ACCESSORIES

Small details can have a big impact

- Plants provide a connection to nature, as well as visual interest
- Magazines, toys, informational material, if available, should have a specific place so as to reduce clutter and visual complexity
- Games and toys are great tools to have in a room to foster bonding between family members or between clinicians and clients. The key is to make sure they have all of the pieces, are safe for all user groups and are stored in an organized fashion
- Throw pillows make a space feel cozy. Users can gain a sense of security by holding them or using them to make sitting more comfortable
- Sensory-friendly toys like fidgets, pop its, and swings are often very helpful for children with sensory processing challenges
- Refreshments/water should be self service, easily accessible and easy to keep tidy and clean
- Attention should be paid to limiting or eliminating accessories that could be thrown or used as weapons



ART

Artwork speaks to the heart and soul. Make it beautiful.

- Art and images on the wall not only add visual interest but create a pleasing distraction that can alleviate stress
- Landscapes and images from nature can have a calming, positive effect on the observer
- Artwork and wall decor featuring soothing colors and soft textures are soothing to the eye and nervous system
- Avoid art with symbolic significance that could arouse negative feelings by understanding your user group

LIGHTING

Simple enhancements to lighting can change the whole experience.

- Increasing natural light in a space improves mood and makes a room feel less crowded
- Soft light from lamps can give a space warmth
- Overhead and fluorescent lighting can be harsh on the sensory system. If overhead lights must be used, dimmers can provide significant improvement
- Providing space with lighting options improves its functionality for different uses and empowers users to create the environment most suitable for their needs
- Avoid small lamps in environments where individuals struggle with lashing out physically



Putting the tools to use

Trauma informed design is achievable for anyone, in any space. It should not feel daunting, difficult or expensive. By making simple choices and swap outs, we can make any space feel more welcoming and safe. We can better honor the individuals using the space, reduce their stress levels and give them the best possible chance of a successful outcome.



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TRANSFORMATIONS

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Before

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Before



Updated



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Before



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Thank you to all that helped build this guide.

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Trauma Informed Design Toolkit



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