

Leadership Arts Institute Legacy Project 2019: Utilizing Light and Image in the Café Momentum Service Center

At-risk youth are known to experience particularly high levels of stress on a daily basis. According to the American Public Health Association: “If left untreated, chronic stress [in at-risk youth] can contribute to fear, anxiety, depression, attention and concentration problems, an increase in impulsive or risk-taking behavior and — particularly among boys — hostility, aggression and violence. Each of these factors alone can hinder educational success, contribute to school dropout and increase disease risk in adulthood.”

Since opening in 2015, 300 at-risk youth have completed an innovative program at the nonprofit Café Momentum. Café Momentum is a Dallas-based restaurant and culinary training that engages homeless and “throw-away” teens in a 12-month paid internship program that addresses basic urgent needs and teaches life skills by providing education and employment opportunities. After completing the program, interns are placed in jobs with community partners and are given the opportunity to attend community college at no charge. 85% of participants do not reoffend during their pivotal first year after graduation. This is remarkable when compared with Texas’ average rate of just 52%.

The current phase of Café Momentum’s development is the construction of a service center that will offer additional resources for interns, including academic support, private therapy, exercise classes, emergency clothing, snacks and hygiene products. The center will serve as a private home base for the interns and will expand the program’s influence beyond restaurant hours. It will be a safe haven for Café Momentum’s interns, more than 60% of which are homeless.

Café Momentum signed a lease with the city to house its service center in an abandoned underground tunnel below Thanksgiving Square and adjacent to the restaurant. Architectural renderings of the interior of the center have been developed and construction has started.

In assessing how the new service center could use new modalities in relieving stress and creating a healing experience, members of the Leadership Arts Institute have referenced studies on the beneficial use of light and image.

Psychology professor Jan Packer conducted a study that found that viewing art can help relieve mental exhaustion and restore focus in the same way that being outdoors can. A study from the University of Westminster found that participants reported reduced stress after lunchtime visits to an art gallery and their levels of the stress hormone cortisol measurably decreased. Additionally, viewing art activates the parts of the brain associated with contemplation, even without conscious effort. Contemplation and introspective thought are key to managing the physical manifestations of stress. Experiencing art can also improve analytical and problem-solving skills as well as provide emotional benefits.

Studies on how lighting affects the physical and mental well-being of humans focus on circadian rhythms that occur in nature over the 24 hour daily cycle. Light is the primary influencing factor

on circadian rhythms in humans. Improper lighting has been linked to circadian disruption, which leads to higher stress as well as increased anxiety and depression. Indoor lighting that controls light and delivers it at the right times of the day is an effective means of improving well-being by regulating circadian rhythms. These studies indicate that transforming lighting applications is especially relevant to populations that are highly sensitive to the effects of light, including teenagers.

Combining these two non-invasive modalities, the Leadership Arts Class of 2019 has proposed an installation for the Café Momentum Service Center with the purpose of lowering stress and providing an atmosphere of well-being.



Figure 1: Example only.

Adding significant value to the project, business professionals from the Leadership Arts Class of 2019 will give two presentations to the current class of Café Momentum interns. These presentations will include information on their professions in architecture, lighting and art as well as information about how and why the piece was constructed.

The installation will be a backlit glass wall that tracks the sun to feel like a window and replicate natural light. Lighting will be concealed behind the glass and controlled with an exterior daylight sensor to mimic the sun. The wall behind the glass will be painted with abstract art inspired by nature and created either by a professional artist or Café Momentum interns. The interstitial space between the new glass wall and the existing exterior wall will be used as a space to create shadow art. The face of the glass may also be a paintable surface for temporary tagging and could provide interns the opportunity to create art on a daily basis.

Leadership Arts Institute's Dallas Class of 2019 is raising funds for the construction of an artwork utilizing cutting-edge light and design technology at Café Momentum's new Service Center. The artwork will employ diurnal lighting and nature elements to create an optimal environment for the youth served by Café Momentum. An opening reception to thank donors and attract new community partners will be held in late April of 2019.

Café Momentum is a nonprofit restaurant and professional training facility in the heart of downtown Dallas. Interns rotate through all aspects of the restaurant, while focusing on the development of social and life skills with a comprehensive case management team. We work to establish a baseline of stability in their young lives, providing an ecosystem of support around our interns. Serving fresh, locally sourced, sophisticated American cuisine; every meal is prepared and served by our award-winning team of chefs and the young men and women involved in our program.

A program of Business Council for the Arts, Leadership Arts Institute (LAI) was founded in 1989 at the request of businessman and philanthropist Ray Nasher, to develop the next generation of business leaders for the arts in North Texas. Each year, a limited number of business professionals are selected for LAI. The program provides training in leadership, nonprofit board best practices, and knowledge of critical issues affecting cultural institutions in North Texas. The methodology consists of 10 seminars led by expert speakers and an annual project that serves as a practicum. Upon completion of the program, graduates have the option of being individually matched to serve on a nonprofit board of directors.