

## Designers Lighting Forum

### **Lighting in Trauma-Informed Design Spaces**

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April 14, 2026

Credit(s) earned on completion of this course will be reported to **AIA CES** for AIA members. Certificates of Completion for both AIA members and non-AIA members are available upon request.

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Questions related to specific materials, methods, and services will be addressed at the conclusion of this presentation.

# Learning Objectives

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At the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Define trauma and understand its implications on human responses.
2. Identify the core principles of trauma-informed design (TID).
3. Evaluate lighting strategies that support comfort, autonomy, and safety.
4. Apply trauma-informed design lighting concepts across different building types



## Overview of Trauma

“Trauma is not what happens to you. It’s what happens inside you as a result.”

– *Dr. Gabor Maté*

## What is Trauma?

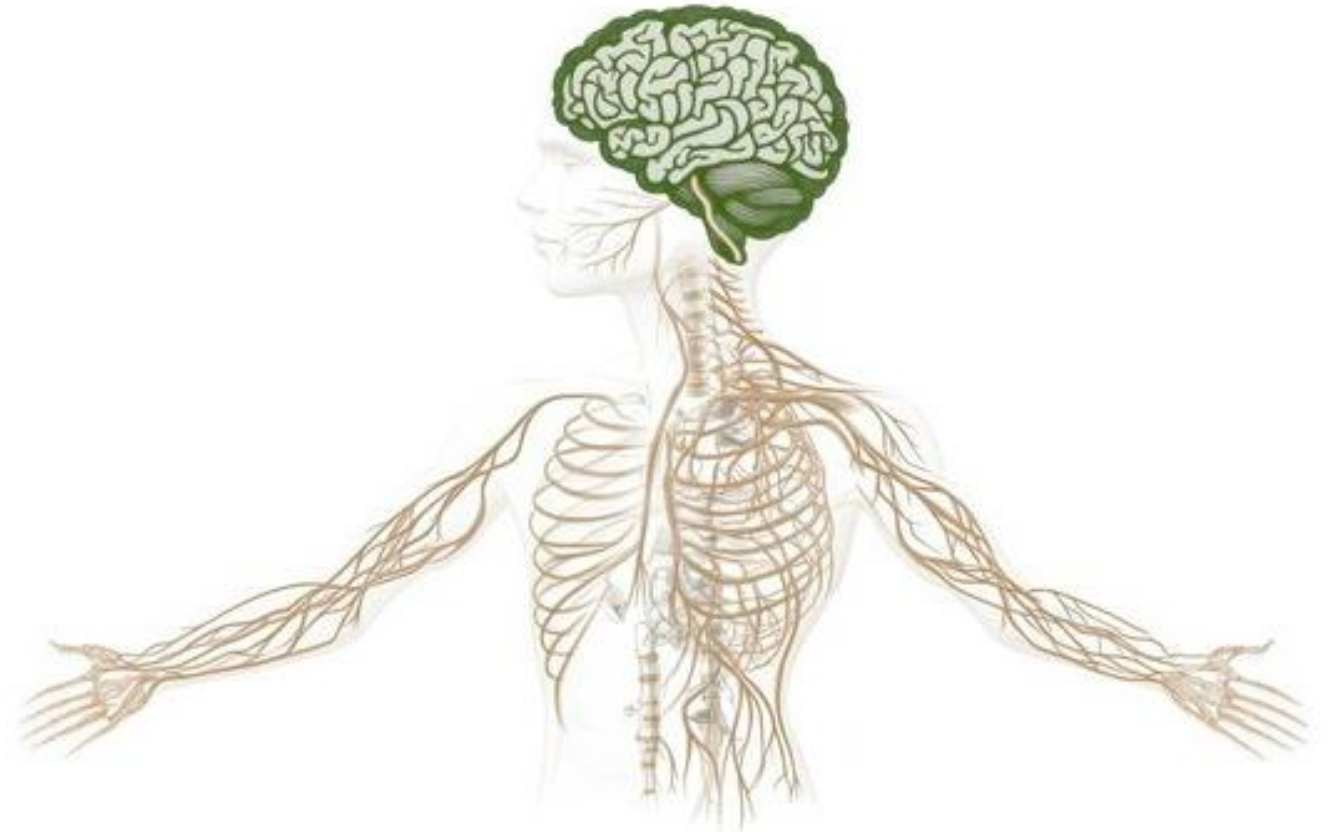
### Cambridge Dictionary

- Severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience or a case of such shock happening.
- Physical injury, usually caused by an accident or attack, or a case of such injury happening.
- Severe shock caused by an injury.

### American Psychology Association Dictionary

1. Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings, intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g. rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge and individual's view of the world as a just, safe and predictable place.
2. Any serious physical injury, such as a widespread burn or a blow to the head.

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Concept of Trauma**
- Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.





## • Types of Trauma

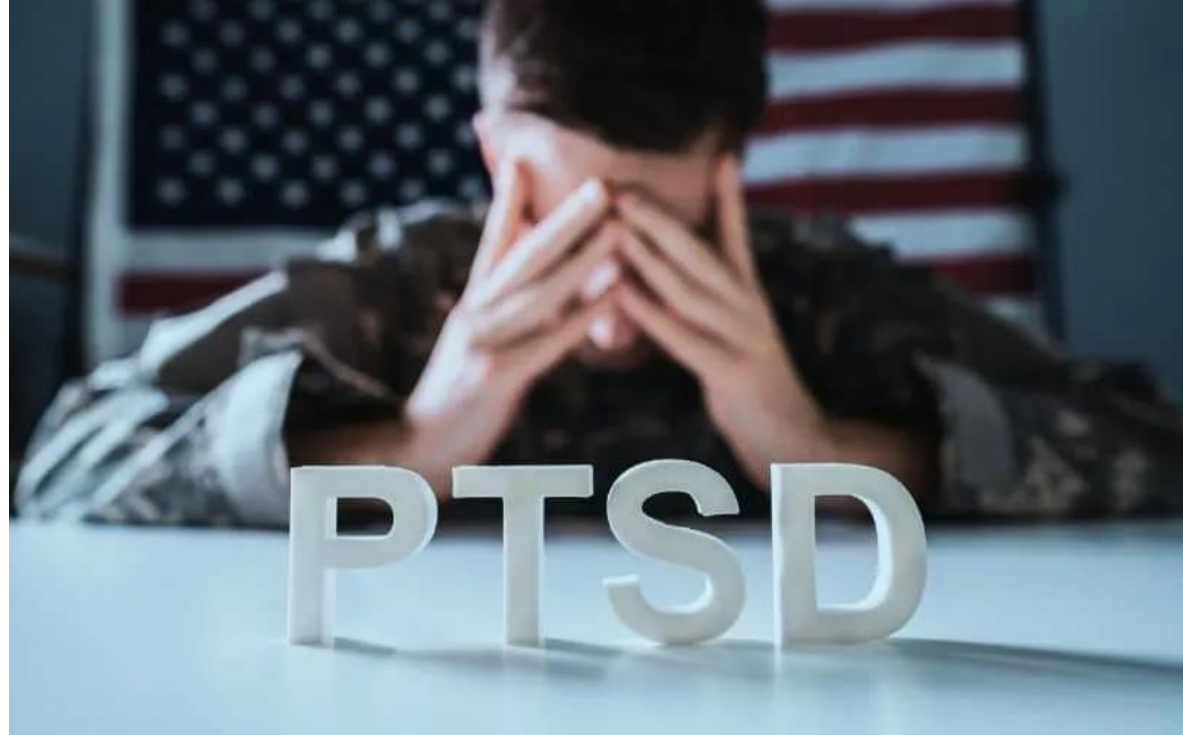
- Childhood trauma
- Domestic violence
- Substance abuse
- Homelessness
- Community violence
- War/refugee experience
- Medical trauma
- Incarceration
- Natural Disasters

## Defining Trauma: Short vs Long-Term



### Short-Term Trauma

Sudden events – accidents, assaults, surgeries



### Long-Term Trauma

Systemic violence, poverty, racism, ongoing abuse, homelessness

## Trauma's Impact on Perception of Space



- Effects on the nervous system: fight/flight/freeze/fawn
- Trauma changes how individuals interpret space, light, sound, and more
- High importance of psychological and physical safety



University of Illinois Hospital Atrium

## Environmental Triggers



- Lighting (flicker, glare, noise)
- Loud sounds
- Poor sightlines
- Lack of privacy
- Institutional aesthetics
- Repetitive layouts
- Confusing circulation





# Trauma-Informed Design Principles and Process

“We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

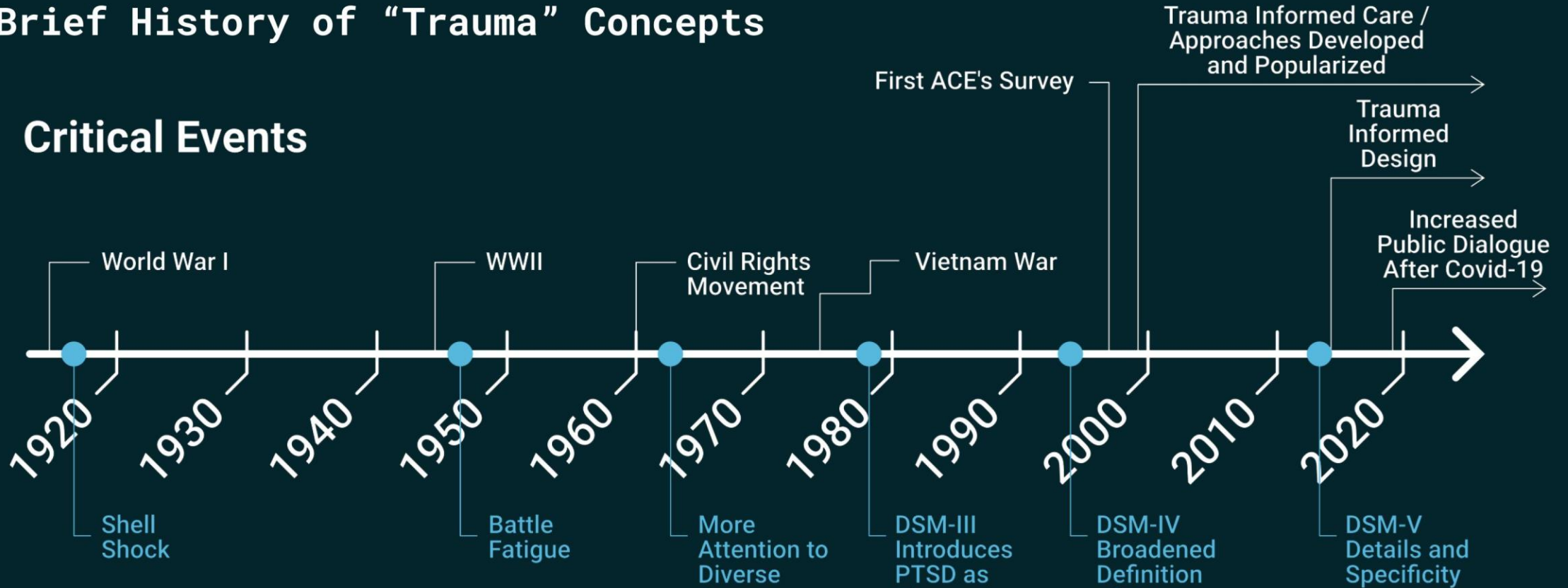
— *Winston Churchill*

- What is Trauma-Informed Design?
- Trauma-informed design is an approach to creating environments that prioritize the emotional and psychological safety of individuals who have experienced trauma.
- It integrates an understanding of trauma and its impacts into the planning, design, and management of spaces, aiming to foster healing and empowerment.
- Trauma-informed design focuses on restoring dignity, choice, connection, and safety for both survivors and caregivers.

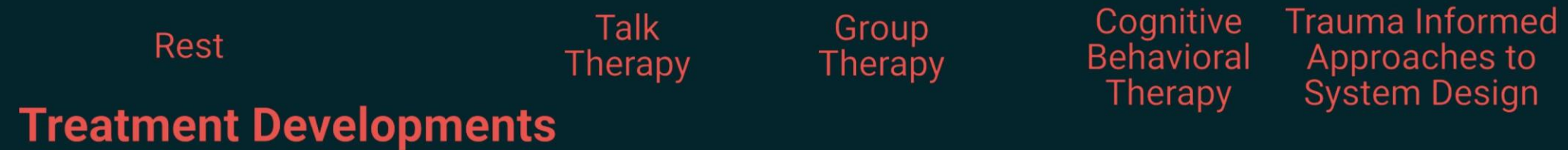


# A Brief History of "Trauma" Concepts

## Critical Events



## Diagnostic Developments



Trauma Informed Care / Approaches Developed and Popularized

Trauma Informed Design

Increased Public Dialogue After Covid-19

## Key Questions to Ask

Who uses the space,  
and how do they  
define safety?

What types of  
trauma are common  
for these users?

How can we give  
them control,  
comfort, and refuge?

How do the  
materials, layout,  
and lighting support  
or harm healing?

## Core Principles of TID - Safety



# Core Principles of TID - Comfort



## Core Principles of TID - Choice



## Core Principles of TID - Connection



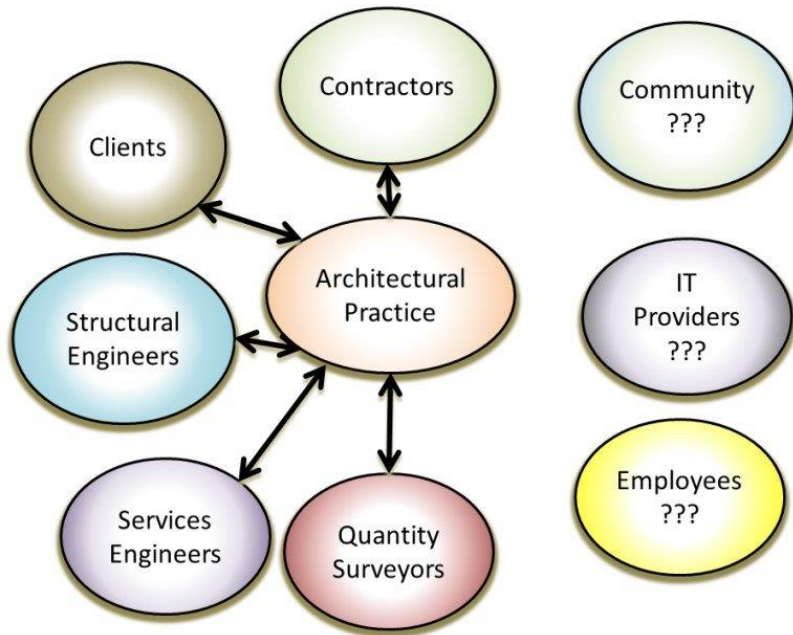


## Design Principles

- Dignity and self-esteem
- Privacy and personal space
- Low-stress, sensory-friendly environments
- Visual simplicity
- Biophilic design
- Cultural responsiveness

- TID Process

- Phase 1: Setting the vision
- Phase 2: Pre-Occupancy Research
- Phase 3: Design, Collaborate, Refine
- Phase 4: Post-Occupancy Research



- Design Tools and Concepts

- Sensory boundaries: zoning by texture, acoustics, lighting, color



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- Nested layers: places to step in or out socially



- Design Tools and Concepts
  - Sensory boundaries: zoning by texture, acoustics, lighting, color
  - Nested layers: places to step in or out socially
  - Identity anchors: local art, resident personalization

- **Lighting Considerations in TID**

- Site-specific light levels, styles, and rhythms
- Control: user-adjustable light and color
- Noise: no buzzing or flickering
- Material finishes and color temperature
- Avoid fluorescent and institutional fixtures





## Implementation by Space Type – A Limited Look

“People need places where they feel safe, where they can rest, recover, and just be.”  
— *Design Resources for Homelessness*

# Healthcare



Need for accurate visibility, safety, comfort, and user control

## Healthcare

- Patients, staff, and visitors should all be thought of.
- Patient rooms and patient occupied spaces are the areas designers & owners are focusing on.
- Waiting rooms, lobbies, and other spaces should include TID concepts
- Staff areas are another critical aspect of this design.



- Lighting Considerations –
- Healthcare
- Dimmable fixtures for patient rooms
- Lighting that flatters skin tone for self-perception and dignity
- Tunable white or warm static white lighting in therapy zones
- Personal control for reading/task lights
- Reduce buzzing, glare, and shadow lines
- Access to daylight and biophilic imagery when windows aren't feasible
- Calming, subtle lighting & colors

## Different Stakeholders/Needs

- Patient
- Caregiver
- Staff



## Behavioral Health



Safe and soft lighting – it's possible to do both!

- Lighting Considerations –
- Behavioral Health
- Safety is paramount – layered lighting, no dark corners, ligature- and vandal-resistant fixtures
- Soft, indirect lighting – especially in patient de-escalation or respite rooms
- Staff areas must balance visibility and privacy
- Avoid harsh overhead lighting as the only light source
- Patient-controlled lighting when possible



# Education

Trauma can impact learning readiness



- Lighting Considerations –
- Education
- Indirect daylighting with solar control
- Dimmable lights in classrooms to support sensory regulation
- Breakout spaces with various lighting strategies (soft lighting and bright lighting) and sensory-friendly designs
- Reduce overhead glare and use adjustable task lights for desks
- Visual complexity: minimal but not sterile



Quad Preparatory School - VCA

## Correctional Facilities

Humanizing Spaces



- Lighting Considerations –
- Correctional Facilities
- Support security while minimizing an institutional feel
- Daylight access where possible, tunable white lighting as an option when not possible
- Opportunities for choice – reading lights, dimming in cells
- Indirect, low-glare fixtures in group therapy or program rooms
- Design for predictability and visibility without over-surveillance



## Homeless Services and Affordable Housing



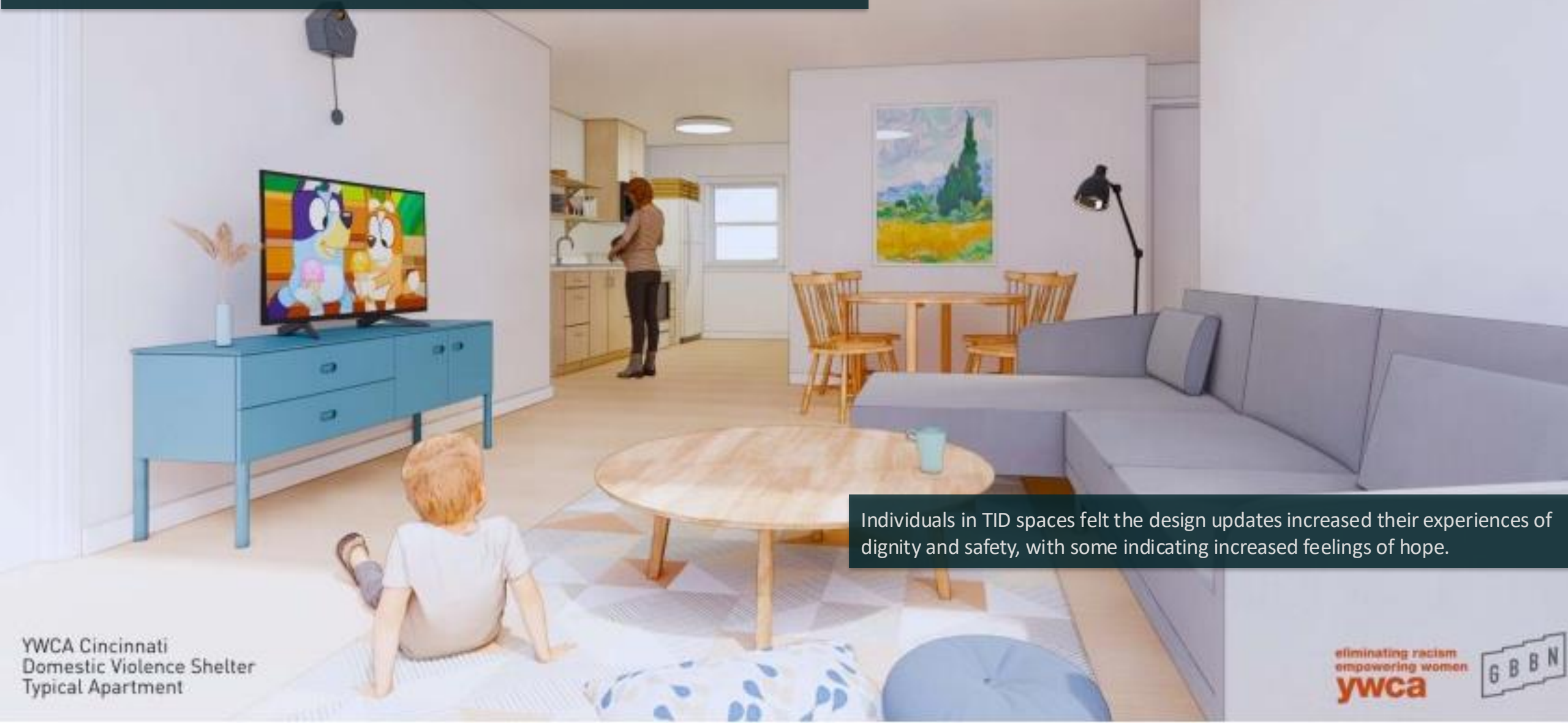
Many residents have experienced trauma, addiction, poverty, and marginalization

- Lighting Considerations –
- Homeless Services and Affordable Housing
- Layered light in communal areas to support flexible use
- Personal lighting in sleeping areas or dorms for dignity and agency
- Include daylight, views of nature, or lighting with biophilic warmth
- Storage with lighting for autonomy
- Include lighting in outdoor gardens, seating areas, and gathering spaces



Path Home – Jennifer Helgerson Interior Design

## Domestic Violence Facilities



Individuals in TID spaces felt the design updates increased their experiences of dignity and safety, with some indicating increased feelings of hope.

- Lighting Considerations –
- Domestic Violence Facilities
- High priority on emotional and psychological safety
- Options for low-level, personal lighting in bedrooms
- Warm, inviting ambient lighting in counseling spaces
- Child-friendly lighting in playrooms
- Clear wayfinding with lighting for predictability
- Avoid motion-activated surprise lighting in sleeping areas



Rose Haven Day Shelter - Gensler



## Case Study – Family Peace Center – Soderstrom Architects

“Choice is an intangible quality that architecture can provide.”

— *Design Resources for Homelessness*

# Family Peace Center



Bright welcoming lobby – Sense of Safety

# Family Peace Center

Staff Break Room – A space for recharging

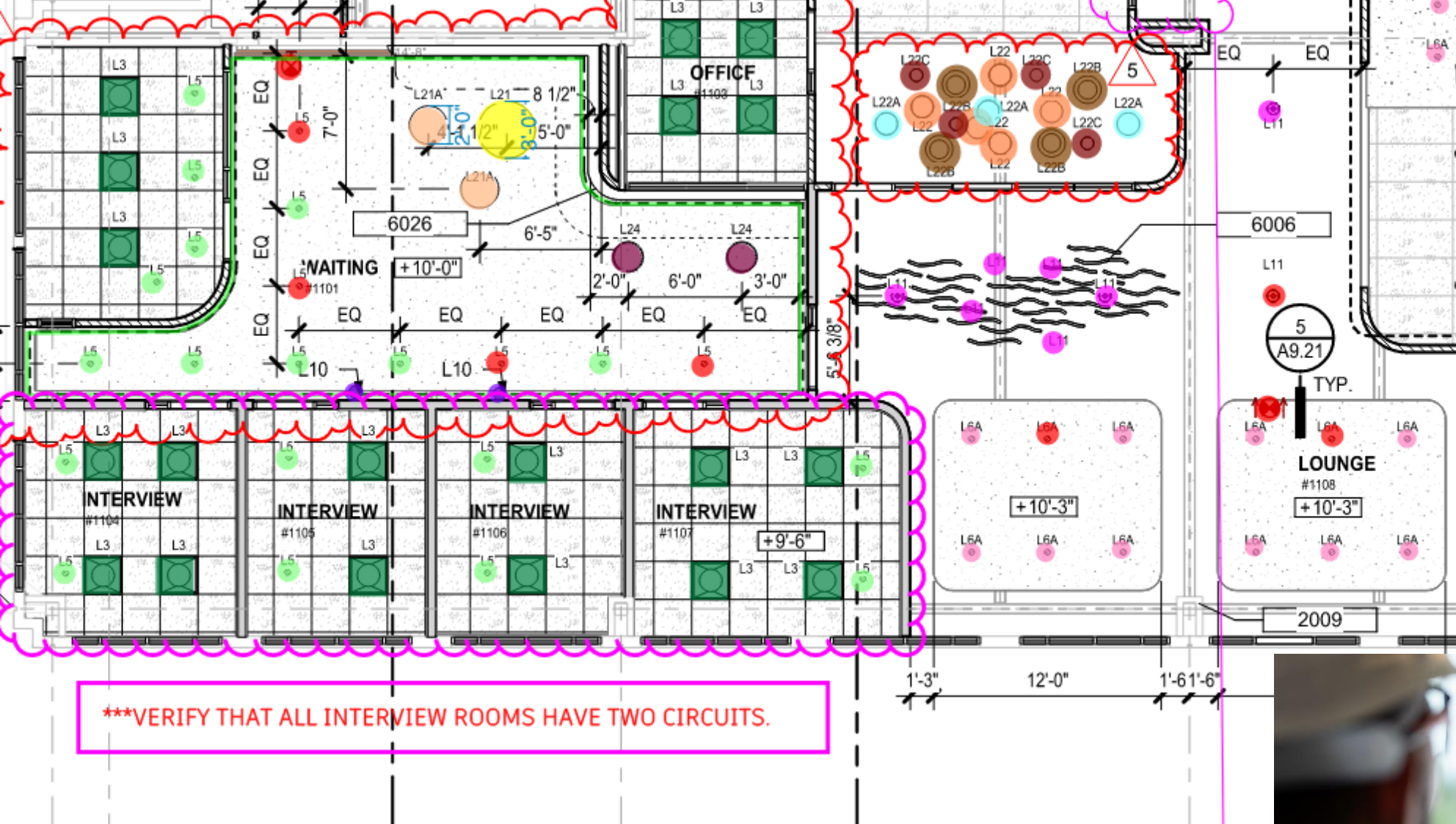


# Family Peace Center



Natural materials, soft corners, playful lighting





Controls & Multiple Circuits



- **What You Can Do Today**
  - Prioritize lighting early in trauma-informed projects
  - Consider lighting control, softness, flexibility, tone, and context
  - Engage users with lived experience early and often
  - Lighting isn't just functional – it's emotional infrastructure



# Questions?

“The space around us can either open us up or shut us down.”  
— Bessel van der Kolk, MD



This concludes The American Institute of Architects Continuing  
Education Systems Course