

gutundgut



Inspirational Paper for the
Development of Visitor Centers

Introduction

Digitalization has fundamentally changed the way we exchange information. Just think about work, culture, tourism, leisure time, traffic or business and imagine today's visitor center. Do information points still need to be staffed with people when a good app can do the same? One can even question the economics of contact and information points. How much sense do they make for operators in the future, when the information can also be communicated via a website?

We are convinced that we need visitor centers. Because we see them as valuable places offering a personal welcome, information exchange and social interaction, these places know and can serve our important needs. This inspirational paper embarks on an open search for the future potential of visitor centers and offers suggestions for making them more inspiring, digital, multidimensional and networked.

This is relevant as the operators and thus the visitor centers find themselves facing continuous change. In our opinion, much more emphasis should be placed on this fact. As will be shown, the innovative content lies in the modularization of the functions and their careful conceptual coordination.

Our considerations are particularly interesting for organizations that need to communicate bundled information from different stakeholders while representing a single brand at the same time. This includes, for example, tourist destinations, nature and national parks, flagship stores or cities and traffic centers. A smart visitor center has a chance to become a lighthouse, a meeting point, a popular place to stay, an information center and a source of inspiration for outside guests and local people.

What is a Visitor Center?

Visitor centers are public places that share information, knowledge and emotions with visitors. They are, for example, usually connected with a company, an institution, regions, and historical sites of remembrance or attractions. Sometimes they primarily serve as a source of information for tourists. Often, they provide a selection of offers, are a starting point for guided tours or offer a gastronomic service.

Visitor centers are as diverse in their design and function as their creators. Companies establish adventure worlds in order to anchor their brand and products in people's minds. Social organizations place an emphasis on their relevance and draw attention to their concerns. Nature parks use visitor centers to condense a decentralized experience into a small room while conveying the key messages. At historical sites of remembrance historical stories are told. Visitor centers also serve as attractive bad weather alternatives to excursions. Sometimes the architecture of visitor centers will draw attention and therefore already serve as an attraction. Even entire complexes, such as a train station and other traffic centers are there to receive visitors and provide information and a sense of orientation. While some visitor centers in their traditional function are primarily a contact point for visitors, some visitor centers today offer something extra: while in search of additional information, visitors are surprised by an experience, invited to linger, and told stories through interactive formats. This is motivating for the operators in so far as it also opens up new value creation options and enables them to enter into a direct exchange with their guests.

Which possibilities does the future bring with respect to visitor center design, if digitalization opportunities are increasingly used and networked thinking is applied more often?

Create a valuable place

Creating a place to meet

Think of it as a modular space

Weighing decentralization vs. lighthouse function

Enter exciting partnerships

Make users the focus

Using digital possibilities:
individualized, emotional, up to date

Interact with visitors and allow them to participate

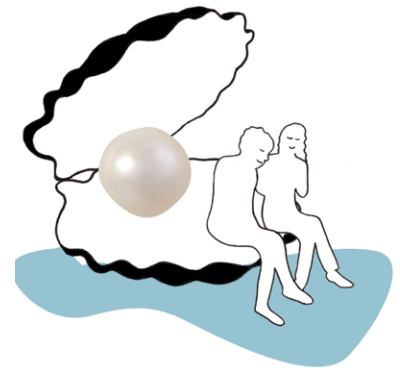
Ensure profitability

Recognizing the value for employees

Create a valuable place

Our goal is to create places that are enjoyed by people, where they feel comfortable and like to return. Places where people want to spend time. These places inspire, surprise and make their visitors happy because our surrounding influences how we feel. The effect of nice rooms and outdoor settings has the power to touch us in a positive way. With well thought out designs and careful planning of visitor centers, we can influence the extent to which people can develop.

In order to successfully and purposefully develop such places, we are glad to use the Placemaking method. Placemaking involves designing places that become valuable by communicating value to the visitors. Placemaking also means identifying and reinterpreting the outstanding characteristics of an existing place. A key prerequisite for this is the openness for collaboration. The core of the method is the early inclusion of local events, the people and their stories. Culture plays a leading role. Placemaking results in surprising project collaborations that have not yet been thought of before.



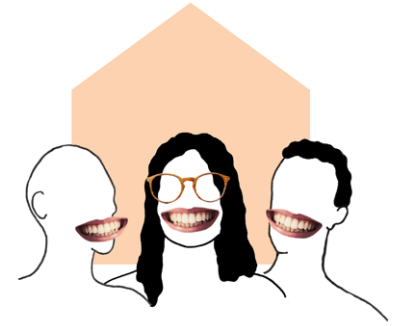
A project that inspires us:
Die LocHal Tilburg in The Netherlands:

The LocHal, a former train depot and workshop, is a multifaceted place that brings different people together. The main use as a library is complemented through gastronomy, workplaces, meeting rooms and lots more. The preserved old scaffolding in combination with modern interior design creates a unique and lively atmosphere.

Creating a place to meet

When the people that are permanently in the visitor center (employees, involved people, renters, etc.) like to be there, then they will give a warm welcome, open the door invitingly and step into contact with people from outside (guests, visitors, users, commuters, etc.) and interact with them.

In an effort for sustainable development, local tourism must increasingly see itself as a developer of living spaces. If the tourism activities in a location are only aimed at external guests and do not consider the needs of the local people, then such tourism has only a fragile basis and support on which it can develop in the future. We consider the idealistic and personal involvement of local people and employees as key – also during the conceptualization of a visitor center. In places where locals feel good and truly at home, they will automatically convey this positive feeling. If we think of the visitor center as a place of exchange, then it creates the potential for the development of a lively atmosphere in touch with the people. Then, a waitress will also answer questions about the region and a seller of local products will provide information about an excursion. Such a way of thinking underlines the visitor center in its core function: to welcome. When locals visit this meeting place out of interest to see what is on offer and out of interest in the guest, something new can be created.



Mountain Lab Adelboden, gutundgut project (2019), initiated and implemented with partners.

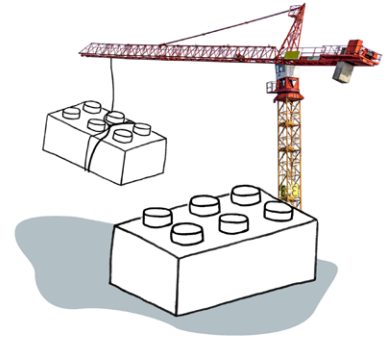
In the remodeled Tourist Office in Adelboden, the top floors of the chalet have been set up as coworking workspaces. Here employees, guests, locals, and winter/summer athletes have a chance to meet. Surrounded by fresh air, lots of snow in winter and the smell of green pastures in summer, is the opportunity to combine leisure time with work and to be inspired by nature.

Think of it as a modular space

How can visitor centers remain of interest in the long run? How can it be ensured that they do not turn into static objects? How can a visitor center permanently maintain its purpose as an inspiring place?

We think the key lies in convincing collaborations and different themes that keep the visitor center interesting. If the visitor center is seen as a large stage, then it can be used again and again. If the demand for flexibility and modularity, in which certain areas grow and shrink as a function of each other, is already taken into account in the conception, a new image will always be presented to visitors.

The visitor center will derive its value through its diversity by bringing together tourist information, culture, art, gastronomy, recreational activities, local products, local businesses, flexible forms of working and other areas. It can vary from serving as a market, musical stage, exhibition room, aperitif location, meeting room and can continue to surprise again and again. Interdisciplinary and participative work bring the added value and keep a visitor center appealing. People are attracted by the low threshold, lively and no pressure to buy atmosphere.



Utilization concept of a Visitor Center, gutundgut project (2019)

The diagram shows how the principle of a market hall can inspire the planning of visitor centers. With simple means, the structure of the space is changed and thus its function and effect is altered.

Weighing decentralization vs. lighthouse function



What if the location is not given, the tables are turned, and no new place is created or built, but rather already popular and lively public places are used? In this way, existing infrastructure can be used sustainably. Then, the visitor center can be moved for example, to the library, the village bakery and local museum. A well networked visitor center does not have to function on its own, as one may think.

Conversely, it can be a great opportunity to design, remodel or rebuild a visitor center in such a way that it is absolutely worth seeing for its (interior) architectural aesthetics alone. However, even an architectural lighthouse must also be designed to meet people's needs in order to function as a whole.

A mobile version, on the other hand, can be independent of the main visitor center and interact with guests and locals at events in the region with the appropriate staff. But also installations that are not staffed can be of interest to reach target groups around the clock and on site – with interactive displays, steles or other forms of communication.



A project that inspires us: Visitor center in the Biesbosch National Park in The Netherlands

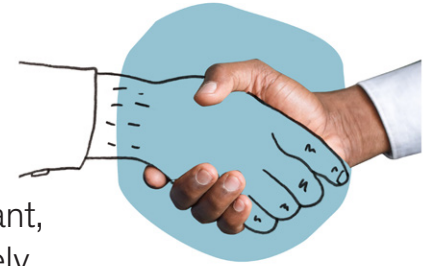
The building from the architectural Studio Marco Vermeulen shows how a visitor center can draw attention through innovative architecture. Source: DetailInspiration, Photo: Ronald Tillemann



Mobile Tourist Office for Engadin St. Moritz Tourism, project from gutundgut (2019)

The visualization shows possible uses for a decentralized concept of a visitor center, here with an electrical motor-cycle.

Enter exciting partnerships



This way of thinking, wherein flexibility and collaboration are important, indicates that exciting partnerships are a central component of a lively visitor center. They are especially exciting when they do not follow the logical sequence, but are instead surprising and refreshing and bring a new perspective to an existing location. Then the experimental art installation hangs in the train station, coworking spaces move into the tourism office and a school class visits the organic butcher shop as a place of learning.

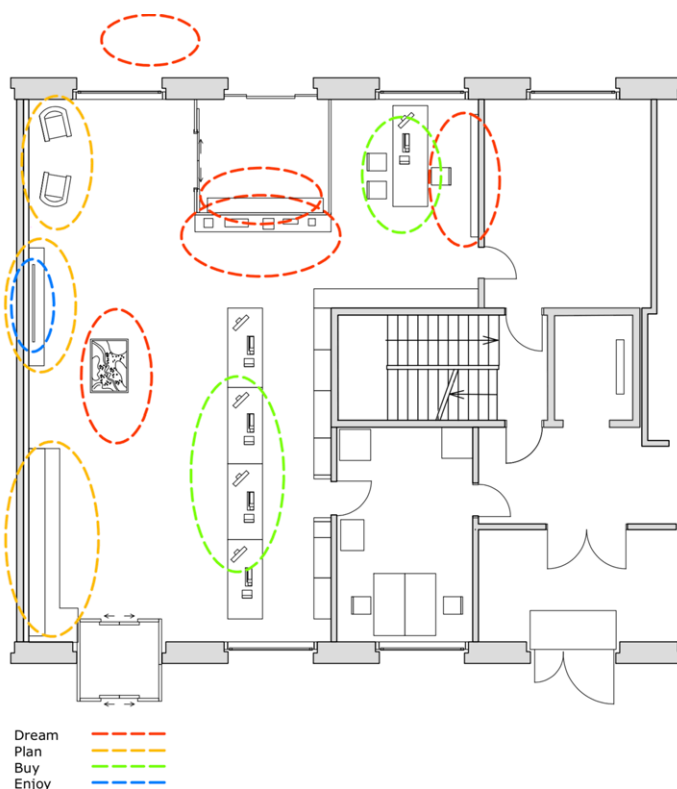
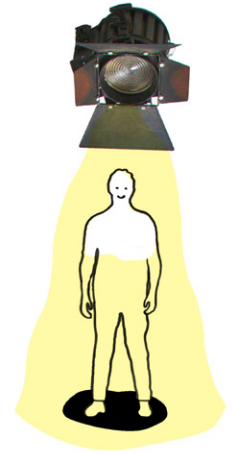


Schlachthaus Heiden,
project in work from gutundgut (2020)

In addition to strengthening local organic farms and the connection to local businesses, the planned project “Schlachthaus Heiden” also wants to become an information center for sustainable farming and meat processing from farm slaughtering. The goal is that visitors and school classes will come for a visit. The old building, a former slaughterhouse, is reinterpreted and converted. Sketch: Frank Dittmann

Make users the focus

Each and every one of the visitors comes to a place such as a visitor center for a different reason with different needs and questions. Only those who know their visitors can offer them the best possible benefits, the best experience and are able to inspire them. User patterns, preferences and trends, anticipated movement streams and length of stay, all the way to culinary needs, must be carefully analyzed and translated into convincing concepts. In order to meet the needs of different types of customers, a flexible concept is necessary. User oriented thinking is needed to design a place that should become a feel good location for visitors. It goes without saying that an extended length of stay is no indicator of wellbeing. The most efficient process in a tourism center, where users only spend a limited amount of time, can also inspire.



Travel Center Interlaken,
gutundgut project (2019)

Even with simple measures, existing rooms can be designed in a user oriented manner and transformed into a positive visitor experience. With the “Dream-Plan-Buy-Enjoy” concept we worked out recommendations for the Travel Center Interlaken. A coffee sitting area ensures a feeling of well being, a mountain relief shows the region, and a social media wall inspires with travel reports.

Using digital possibilities: individualized, emotional, up to date

Intelligent communication systems and digital features open up new possibilities that must be used in any case. In a time in which visitors already get the information about a place or service on the internet, a visitor center must increasingly fulfill other tasks that go beyond the communication of information. Digitalization offers attractive approaches for a personalized service and convenience, thus enabling a positive visitor experience.

The digital possibilities also serve to communicate and inspire with more emotion. And this in a timely manner and depending on current events.



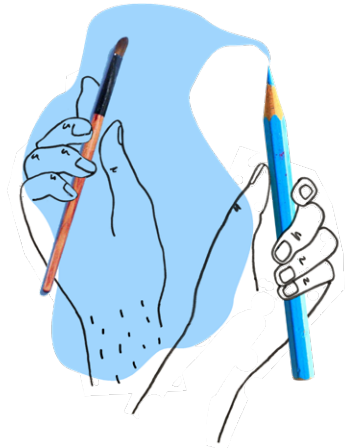
A product that inspires us:
The interactive books from iArt www.iart.ch

A new way of conveying information digitally – playful and sensory. At a first glance, the books look like conventional illustrated books. However, they are virtual, the contents are conveyed in a multi-media and interactive way.

Photo: Mark Niedermann

Interact with visitors and allow them to participate

A visitor center is a representative microcosm of the initiator. It reflects the region, the company or the history and shows the focal points. It must explain, inform and inspire on an emotional level. Guests and visitors can actively contribute to that process by incorporating their ideas into the further development of the place. Participatory approaches enable visitors to help shape the place, which is then continually optimized and renewed. The feeling of helping to shape a place strengthens the connection.



Kambly SA, Trubschachen

The Kambly baking events are an example of involving children and parents in the experience. gutundgut was given the task of conducting a potential analysis for Kambly in 2019 and to work out recommendations, which have already been successfully implemented in the Kambly Experience. Source: kambly.com

Ensure profitability

In the end, a nice place is of no use if it does not generate any economic value creation opportunities. In order to guarantee profitability, visitor potential must be precisely analyzed and the visitor center must be designed for this user group. A successful visitor center also has excellent opportunities to convey brand values and to strengthen the branding. New ideas, such as the integration of affordable coworking places, open up opportunities for value creation in addition to admissions for exhibitions, catering and the sale of local products. A sensibly coordinated business organization is a key prerequisite. Special attention must be paid to the processes and the meaningful use of employees. Collaboration can also give rise to new value creation opportunities – between tourism and hotels, vacation apartments, the ski school or with local business.



Mountain Lab Adelboden,
gutundgut project (2019)

The workplaces in the renovated tourism office in Adelboden offer a new economic value creation for the tourism organization. Additionally, it can profit from the positive brand transfer – in a completely new setting, at the workplace. Complete packages including overnight stay and workplace can also be booked.

Recognizing the value for employees

An integrated visitor center fulfills several functions simultaneously and turns into a place where people like to spend time. Through its changing face, which is modularly built, it remains not only interesting for visitors, but also for employees. The tasks are diverse and changing, flexibility is required every day, and the opportunity for social contacts is given – in our opinion, all elements that make up an exciting workplace. The creative brand transfer also has an effect on employees and strengthens their connection with the employers. In rooms that are not only designed for function, but where aesthetics, art and playfulness are the focus, creative thought processes and development potential are promoted – here people like to work.



User conceptualization of a Visitor Center, gutundgut project (2019)

The open design brings employees and guests together.

Steps in concept development

Planning a visitor center is a complex process. The following components are intended to give an idea and to provide examples of some of the issues that need to be considered and carefully coordinated during project management.

Clarification about the location

Where will the visitor center be, to what extent does the location make sense and what potential does it offer? Is a decentralized concept more advantageous?

Analysis of the environment

Which zones are bordering the location? Which stores and relevant businesses are nearby? Who lives in the area? Who stops by?

Analysis of the visitor potential

What is the estimated number of visitors per year and wherein lies the value creation potential?

Analysis of the target groups needs

What are the target groups and what demands and needs do they have for a visitor center? To what extent can these groups be categorized and their needs assigned? How can the target groups be inspired?

Customer journey

Where and how do we determine the target groups of the visitor center? What inspires them to come to the visitor center? Which information triggers the desire for a visit and for which reasons do they take a trip?

User journey

How do visitors move through the visitor center? Which needs drive their behavior? What expectations do they have and what challenges and problems do they bring with them? How can this information be used as an opportunity when conceptualizing the visitor center?

Establishment of a network

Which local people must be there from the beginning? How can a broad level of acceptance and thus sustainable project development be achieved? Which future partnerships are conceivable? Which support and project groups determine the direction of the project?

Establishment of a sponsorship

What type of sponsorship makes sense for a target oriented operation and how can this structure be achieved?

Financing concept

How is the visitor center financed? Which arguments can be used where to generate additional funds?

Operating concept

How are the operational processes designed? Items to be considered include building and technology, maintenance and cleaning, visitor service, personnel administration and the company's financial management. Who will perform these tasks in the future and in which organizational structure and with which workload?

Feasibility study

A careful review of the facts and figures will determine whether a concept is financially feasible.

Content concept and offer development

What content related concept does the development of concrete offers in the visitor center follow? What is there to see, to enjoy and to experience?

Implementation planning

How are the different stakeholders incorporated in the implementation process and which measures ensure a realization on schedule and within budget?

Master planning architecture

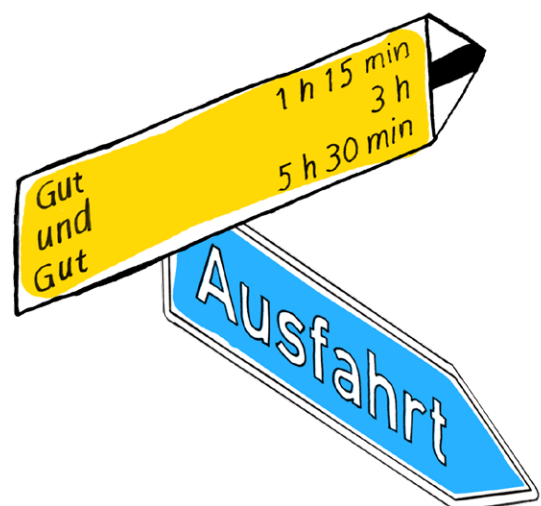
Which image will leave a lasting impression of the visitor center?

Summary

These guiding ideas for the development of visitor centers are characterized by a fundamental openness. Open for encounters, for new interpretations of a space, for new partnerships, for digitalization possibilities, for modular and mobile concepts. A dose of fun with experimenting is also needed. Through user orientation and participation, visitors become integrated.

The visitor center of the future will also have to meet several demands due to its complex functions. However, this will increase the opportunities for value creation as well as the quality as a workplace for its employees.

The visitor center is anchored locally and its visitors, both guests and locals, come gladly and repeatedly – because this beautiful place is different every time and people are warmly welcomed and inspired.



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