

Environmental Branding

➤ Can identity
and values be
transformed into
lived experiences?

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Have you ever walked into an anonymous office, devoid of any recognizable features, and found yourself wondering: where am I? What kind of space is this? Who was it designed for?

How did it make you feel? Did you feel welcomed, part of something – or did you feel alienated, like an outsider, as if that space wasn't meant for you? Now imagine that same **space shaped** so deliberately that it becomes a dimension capable of **telling a story** – one that **invites you to feel part of it**. How would that change your sense of belonging to that place and to the people who share it with you?

Over the course of our lives, **we spend nearly 90% of our time indoors¹** – but how many of these spaces are actually designed to create meaningful experiences? Spaces capable of engaging us so deeply that they tell a story we can relate to, making us feel part of something greater than ourselves?

Some environments seem to “speak” to the people who inhabit them: they convey messages, evoke values, and foster a shared identity. Others remain neutral, indistinct, unable to establish any real dialogue with those who experience them. This is not simply a matter of functionality or aesthetics for their own sake, but of understanding how **space—originally a tool—can evolve into a meaningful and recognizable communicative dimension: a kind of spatial syntax capable of creating a connection between an organization, a place, and the people within it.**

¹ *When buildings don't work: The role of architecture in human health*, Gary W. Evans, Janetta Mitchell McCoy

When design consistently and coherently reflects an organization's values, space becomes an immediate and strategic experiential touchpoint: an environment that does more than host and support operational and productive activities—it **invites people to *feel, understand, recognize, and create.***

It is precisely within this relationship between space, people and storytelling that an opportunity emerges: to use design not merely from a functional or decorative standpoint, but as a vehicle for experience. This means shaping an **organic experience grounded in the creation of meaning for a specific community**—so that its members can truly feel part of it. Because **it is this very sense of belonging that underpins the cohesion and commitment each individual develops toward the community, its people, and its shared goals.**

Throughout history, human beings have assigned meaning to places through signs, symbols, shapes, colors, materials, and, ultimately, rituals—not simply to decorate, but to **recognize themselves, to orient themselves, and to feel part of something greater than themselves.**

We have seen this since the earliest cave paintings depicting hunting scenes—among the most famous are those in the Lascaux caves in France—and later in the symbolism and propagandistic codes of the regimes that shaped the 20th century, all the way to the playful offices of Silicon Valley's Big Tech companies. These spaces still live on in people's collective imagination today, sometimes even prompting a certain apprehension at the thought that a similar approach might be proposed to them.



Bacardi, Milan - Il Prisma.

➤ What is environmental branding?



Good
vibes
only

Over time, various disciplines have engaged with this question—architecture, graphic design, branding, exhibit design, retail, wayfinding—all driven by an underlying inquiry: how can space communicate something meaningful to those who experience it?

Environmental branding emerges from this context, **not** as a **style**, but as a **strategic approach** that expresses the identity, values and culture of an organization or brand through a multidimensional experience. Its goal is to **create meaning by transforming an anonymous, sterile space into a place—an immersive extension of the brand's personality and values**. Here, graphic and spatial languages converge to actively support and foster **connections between people, the brand, and the space itself, whether physical or digital**, turning it into a strategic asset.

Originally, this approach found application in contexts where identity must be immediately legible: museums, cultural venues, retail environments, hospitality spaces and major institutional headquarters. In these settings, **space cannot simply function—it must guide, welcome and tell a story**.

Environmental branding operates on what often remains implicit: the signs we see every day without noticing, the messages that require no explanation, the atmospheres that make a space feel like part of us. It **translates identity and values into a lived, sensory experience** – one that accompanies us over time and creates continuity with what an organization truly is.

➤ What are the effects of environmental branding on performance?



So far, we've focused on perception, recognizability, and values. But this kind of experience does not remain confined to an intangible, symbolic dimension. When space is able to communicate with people in a coherent, engaging and meaningful way, its **effects become visible, impacting performance, engagement and overall outcomes.**

1. Impact on operational performance

According to data collected by Gensler in 2023, the visual quality of a workplace has a direct impact on performance. Teams working in environments with a strong visual identity show a **25% increase in productivity** and a **30% rise in personal satisfaction.** This is because well-executed environmental branding goes beyond decoration – it creates an ecosystem that supports focus and operational efficiency.

2. The power of first impressions

Today's market confirms that physical space is a company's first calling card. A report by Crowdspring highlights that **as many as 94% of consumers form their initial opinion based on the quality of design and the visual branding of an environment.** Whether it's a retail store, a showroom, or a hospitality venue, the physical setting plays a decisive role in shaping a brand's credibility and perceived value.

3. Space as a driver of company culture

Space plays a **crucial role in people management**. Research by Ambius shows that **90% of employees consider the physical environment a key factor in feeling truly part of a company's culture**. Through **environmental storytelling**—the strategic use of colors, mission statements, and visual references—space ceases to be a simple container and becomes a tool for engagement, capable of aligning people with the organization's core values.

Environmental branding becomes even more relevant in hybrid work settings. According to the Microsoft Work Trend Index, **85% of leaders say that the shift to hybrid work has made it harder to assess productivity and employee engagement**. The challenge is not only **organizational, but cultural**: in the absence of clear, shared reference points, the sense of fragmentation increases. In this context, physical space—when it effectively communicates identity and intent—acts as a unifying force, restoring continuity and recognizability to the work experience.

Recognition also plays a central role in retention and engagement. According to a longitudinal analysis by Gallup, employees who feel recognized show **45% lower turnover rates**. And as we've seen, this recognition does not come solely from managerial practices, but also from the environment itself: **spaces that make values and culture visible help strengthen the bond between people and the organization**.



Engineering 2K, Milan - Il Prisma.

➤ What are the key trends shaping environmental branding today?

In 2026, environmental branding reflects a deeper shift: less about new formal languages and more about a different way of understanding the relationship between space and people. **The focus is no longer on the environment itself, but on the quality of the experience** it can generate, in terms of **wellbeing, orientation and sense of belonging**.

A **growing focus on neurodiversity** is intersecting with a **renewed emphasis on the sensory dimension**. On one hand, **inclusive design** is leading to **environments that are more legible**, predictable, and accessible – capable of **adapting to different cognitive and perceptual needs**. On the other, materials, textures, and tactile stimuli bring back a more immediate and tangible experience, **supporting orientation and comfort**.

These are not separate directions, but complementary responses to the same need. This pursuit of accessibility and clarity also extends into the digital realm, which becomes an ally in making space more adaptive. Dynamic signage, interactive maps, and indoor navigation systems allow environments to update in real time, respond to diverse needs, and guide people more effectively.

At the intersection of inclusivity, materiality, and technology lies a further evolution linked to sustainability and regenerative design. Here, **design moves beyond simply reducing impact and begins to generate value – not only environmental, but human as well**. It becomes a **tool for enhancing wellbeing, strengthening the connection to place, and making an organization's values tangible**.

These trends are not standalone directions, but parts of a broader system converging toward a shared goal: **transforming space into an environment that can adapt to, include and empower people, making them feel part of something larger than themselves**.

➤ How is an environmental branding strategy developed?

VISUAL IDENTITY

Spatial visual identity translates brand codes into a coherent and recognizable system. Color—through color zoning—guides movement, differentiates functions, and establishes hierarchies, while materials make values tangible, turning them into concrete perceptions. Patterns and typography become active spatial elements: the former integrates into surfaces and infrastructure, while the latter directs the gaze, enhances legibility and sets rhythm. The result is an environment where identity and orientation converge.

WAYFINDING AND STORYTELLING:

Wayfinding goes beyond simple orientation – it guides and narrates. Essential information directs movement, while more narrative content, such as values and history, is seamlessly integrated along the journey without interrupting the experience. Corridors, stairways, and waiting areas become moments of micro-storytelling, building familiarity over time. The language of space itself also contributes to conveying culture, while the system can influence behavior, encouraging interaction or supporting concentration. Digital integration makes everything more accessible, dynamic and adaptive.



FLOOR 2



GROW 1-2-3-4-5

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM



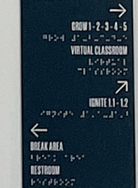
IGNITE 1.1-1.2



BREAK AREA

RESTROOM

FLOOR 2





Art installation by Carlo Cossignani,
created for the event "Let's make green green again" - Il Prisma.

SENSORY BRANDING:

Sensory branding operates on the perceptual dimension, transforming space into a memorable experience. Light, sound, scent, and touch work together to shape atmosphere, identity and continuity. Light defines scenarios and moods; sound enhances comfort, concentration and privacy; olfactory stimuli trigger immediate recognition; while materials, textures and microclimate make the experience physical and tangible. The result is a space that is felt even before it is interpreted.

ART & CULTURAL INSTALLATIONS:

Art installations introduce a cultural layer into space, making values visible. When designed specifically for their context, they become shared reference points and activate meaning. They can foster moments of interaction, create rituals, and—when participatory or digitally integrated—evolve into living elements that strengthen a sense of belonging. **There is also a layer of design that is not immediately noticeable, yet** over time becomes the **most memorable**. It is what transforms a well-designed space into a truly lived one.

BRAND COLLATERALS:

A space truly begins to tell its story when design moves beyond the architectural dimension and extends into the details – everything we encounter almost without noticing, yet which ultimately shapes how that environment is experienced.

It is at this more subtle, latent level that **collateral** elements gain value: not as objects in themselves, but as **living parts of the concept, capable of enriching its language and making it more immersive and “natural”**. **A painting does not simply fill a wall: it introduces a pause**, a perspective, a chromatic vibration that interacts with materials, light and the very rhythm of the space. A vase, a plant composition or a carefully placed material presence can immediately shift the perception of an environment, **bringing balance, depth, and a more sensory dimension**.

A pair of headphones, for instance, can become a simple yet strongly identity-driven gesture: not just a functional object, but an **invitation to enter a different dimension – more personal, more immersive**. Music itself can become an integral part of the project, helping to define rhythm, focus, pause, and atmosphere. **Even the most discreet elements—books, vinyl records, small decorative objects, textures—contribute to this silent construction**: they suggest a culture, evoke an atmosphere and accompany everyday movement without imposing themselves, yet leaving a trace.

Every element can reinforce a company message, evoke values, and create subtle references to the culture of the place or the language of the brand. Some details are perceived immediately, others remain almost subconscious, but together they generate a memory of the space. Within this balance, collateral elements do more than simply fill a space: they make it welcoming, recognizable and deeply human.



Il Prisma Live, Milan.

➤ Conclusion

Transforming an anonymous space into an identity-driven *place* means moving beyond designing square meters and starting to shape experiences that trigger a sense of belonging. An environment that “speaks” the language of the brand not only enhances productivity and satisfaction but also acts as a **cultural glue, capable of withstanding the distance of hybrid work and the volatility of today’s market.**

Today, **environmental branding challenges us to go further:**

- **Ethics meets aesthetics:** integrating inclusivity and regenerative sustainability not as slogans, but as tangible matter and accessible pathways.
- **From function to experience:** blending digital precision with the warmth of materials and the expressive power of site-specific art.

Because if space does not tell a story, it remains an empty container. But when it does, it becomes the place where the future of an organization takes shape – every single day. A successful workplace is one where the **company’s narrative is not written in a manual, but embedded in the walls, breathed in the atmosphere, and lived through everyday gestures.** Designing an engaging and meaningful workplace ultimately means **giving form to a promise: making every individual feel part of something greater.**



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Il Prisma is an international architecture and planning firm with Italian origins, designing spaces and experiences for the human being. The company has offices in London, Milan, Rome and Lecce, and is divided in 3 Business Units: Cityscape, Worksphere and Destination.

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DESIGN HUMAN LIFE