

**Design Precepts for Autonomy**  
**A Case Study of Kelvin Hall, Glasgow**

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**Chapter 18**  
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The way that architects design public buildings has an impact on people's capacity to exercise their autonomy. Using an exploration of the architecture of Kelvin Hall, a public building in Glasgow, and interviews with its project architect, this chapter investigates the relationship between Clossick's 'depth structure' architectural theory of spatial relationships, and Colburn's philosophical theory about the nature and value of autonomy. The two ideas, autonomy and depth structure, can be brought together usefully to offer pointers to designers of public places.

We begin by setting out the core theory: the value of autonomy, the design precepts it implies, and the idea of depth structure. Then a discussion of the case study: Kelvin Hall, a mixed-use public building in Glasgow. We offer a worked example of a depth structure that fosters autonomy, and suggest a design toolkit and useful vocabulary. The case study shows how the configuration of internal boundaries in Kelvin Hall generates a depth structure which exemplifies the design precepts and thereby allows people to flourish to their fullest potential and exercise their ethical right to autonomy.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is an ideal of the self-authored life. That's Joseph Raz's phrase.<sup>1</sup> Colburn has developed and extended this theory.<sup>2</sup> On his view, the autonomous life is one where a person decides for herself what is important, and lives her life in accordance with those values. The autonomous life is characterised by three conditions, on Colburn's view: endorsement, independence, and responsibility. In endorsement, one has some goals, values, ambitions and preferences which (perhaps implicitly) set out a pattern of contentment for one's life.<sup>3</sup> With independence, those endorsements must not be covert: that is, they must be explained by things which wouldn't make us repudiate them if we became aware of them. That rules out e.g. manipulation or malign influence which works only because we're not aware of it.<sup>4</sup> With responsibility, the autonomous person actively and successfully shapes their life in line with their values. That means that your life must go as you wish, and you must be the one who makes it so, by exercising responsibility, both in the sense that you make it so (that is, your decisions explain the way your life goes) and that you bear the consequences.<sup>5</sup> Turning from what it means to be autonomous to the question of how we help people live that way, it is worth emphasising the following important design precepts which follow from the theory just summarised. If we seek to make design choices which support people in living self-authored lives, we need to attend to these precepts in our architectural and urban practice.

**Self-directedness and clarity**

The responsibility condition tells us that it matters that people's lives are explained by their own judgements, decisions and actions. That means trying to arrange things so that people

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>4</sup> Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, pp. 26–31; Ben Colburn, 'Authenticity and the Third-Person Perspective', in *Autonomy, Authenticity, and Multiculturalism*, ed. by G. Levey (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 121–41.

<sup>5</sup> Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, pp. 31–32.

can live according to their decisions about what is valuable without needing constantly to negotiate or engage in transactions with people on whose discretion they depend. This doesn't mean that people have to be isolated, or avoid interaction with others: we are social beings, and we mostly self-author in cooperation with other people. But those interactions must be clear and non-arbitrary, if they are to respect the individual's responsibility for how their life goes, and thereby to contribute to their life being autonomous as a whole.

The term 'autonomy' might make you think that this is about giving the individual maximal freedom of choice without interference. But that's not so! A range of choices is often important for autonomy. But what usually matters more than the size of this range is that it is clear, in several ways: that the choices are significant, that they are distinct, the individual can know what their meaning will be for them, given their values without unreasonable difficulty. Without this clarity, it is hard for someone to know how to pursue their values, which threatens the responsibility condition. It also makes it more likely that their choices and actions are explained covertly, by factors which - if only they weren't opaque - they would repudiate; so, lack of clarity also threatens the independence condition.

There is a third precept which we think is also important: anti-perfectionism, which requires that the architect avoids making judgments on people's behalf about what it is valuable or important for them to do. But both the underpinning theory and the design implications here are complicated, so for reasons of time we set it aside for now and concentrate on self-directedness and clarity.

Architects are aware of these precepts, although not in these terms. Karen Pickering, one of the architects who worked on Kelvin Hall (our case study below), describes how they fostered self-directedness by giving users the information upfront to form a 'mental map', as though in doing so, the building itself has an attitude of friendliness towards its users.

*Karen: We always design a building where you can have a clear mental map. So, you arrive at the building, you know where the front door is, and you know where to go. And you can see the different spaces. I think that's the key thing about it being accessible for everybody, it's not an intimidating building, you feel like you can walk in and nobody's going to stop you. You can go in for a coffee, you can just go on and have a wander and have a look at the Scottish Screen Archive ... it's friendly and it feels safe.*

Karen also understands the importance of clarity. As she indicates, accessibility isn't only physical, it's also psychological.

*Karen: The key thing for us was, you arrive in the building, and you can see where everything is. If you're in the gym you can see people doing all their weight stuff, and then the big window here, you can see people on their running machines. We put these big windows in, so that people can see what's going on inside. It makes it more accessible to ordinary people, saying "now I can see what's going on in the Kelvin Hall".*

The precepts give us a kind of rough and ready design spec for how one might respect and foster autonomy in spatial design: we want to secure the conditions of autonomy, and attending to the precepts of self-directedness and clarity is a good way to do it.

## Depth

Suppose that you think that individual autonomy (in Colburn's sense) is important, and that you therefore want to build our precepts into your design practice. What, practically, does that mean for someone shaping our environment, including individual spaces/places and the urban environment more generally? We think that a key part of the answer, at least for public buildings such as Kelvin Hall, is to offer a navigable depth structure.

Depth structure is Clossick's term for the landscape of bounded sociospatial zones within which the social life of human beings takes place.<sup>6</sup> Peter Carl defines depth as the capacity of the city to accommodate a wide variety of settings, each with its own character and direction: the way a building or block structures the 'fruitful coexistence of formal and informal life'.<sup>7</sup> The landscape of zones which comprise the depth structure in public places is one mechanism by which humans are able to structure and control our social life, by making decisions about which zones to enter and by acting on implicit information about how to behave.<sup>8</sup> By social life here we mean all human life, not just that which directly involves interaction with other people. As social animals who live in large groups, all human life is social life, even if our social energies may temporarily be focussed on attaining aloneness. A navigable depth structure which offers clarity lets us make these kinds of social choices in a self-directed way.

A depth structure, shown in the diagram in Figure 1, is comprised of zones, thresholds and boundary conditions.<sup>9</sup> Usually you'll find a series of zones in a building or block, adjacent to one another, each with its own differing set of norms, decorum and behavioural expectations. Zones may accord with rooms, but not necessarily. At the edges of the zones are thresholds, defined by physical boundary conditions. The boundary conditions can include architectural elements, furniture or objects, lighting, colours, textures, human gatekeepers and signage. Differences in norms in each zone may be radical or subtle, but people with normal psychological characteristics usually adhere firmly to shared assumptions about what behaviour is expected in each zone, and about which individuals exhibit the appropriate characteristics to permit entry.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Clossick, 'The Depth Structure of a London High Street: A Study in Urban Order' (London Metropolitan University, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Peter Carl, 'Type, Field, Culture, Praxis', *Architectural Design*, 81.1 (2011)

<sup>8</sup> The claim that spatial boundaries exist, and reflect the cultural matrix of social conventions, values and norms has been claimed by numerous authors, key examples include Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1959); E Clark, 'Order in the Atoni House', in *Right and Left: Essays in Dual Symbolic Classification* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973); Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Jane Clossick, 'Depth Structures in High Street Publics: the sociospatial ordering of three Tottenham High Road case studies' (Forthcoming, 2020).

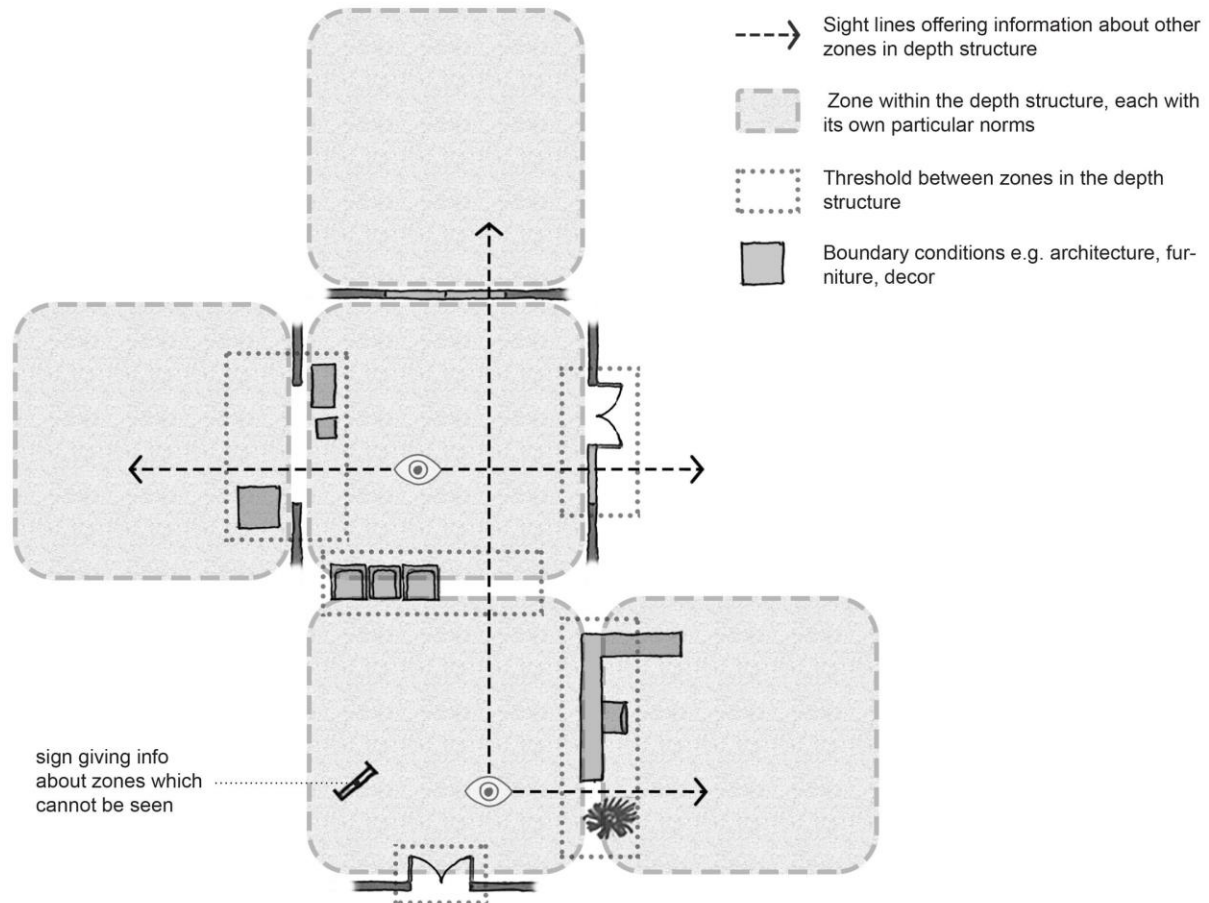


Figure 1: Diagram of a typical depth structure, drawn by J. Clossick

Karen describes the zones in the depth structure of Kelvin Hall:

*Karen: The Scottish Screen Archive wanted to go at the back of the building, that was the first piece of the jigsaw. Obviously, the entrance and the café and reception have to be at the front. And then Glasgow University didn't mind being at the back and upstairs because they weren't public facing. And then the academics from the Hunterian, they're in their ivory tower right at the back in that little penthouse. Everybody just naturally found their space.*

People use the clues available to them via architecture and other corporeal phenomena about the organisation of the depth structure to control the way they carry out their social life in public places. Few would be able to articulate this process verbally, because it is based in embodied or tacit knowledge. Dalibor Vesely has called this embodied conversation between people and their environment which helps them decide how to behave and where to go the 'communicative space' of architecture.<sup>10</sup>

Karen explains the communicative nature of the threshold of the front door in her buildings:

<sup>10</sup> D. Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004).

*Karen: I think the key thing is the front door. Sometimes in architecture you might want to be a bit more, I don't know, subtle? A bit more, oh kind of, intriguing? But I think the main thing is making a very big and obvious front door. The bigger the better, and that is actually more inviting for people. So, if you get the front door right, then you've got 80% of getting people to feel comfortable and happy in the building.*

There are several different kinds of information communicated by a depth structure: decorum, location of thresholds, and information about other zones. Decorum: the norms, decorum, expected behaviour and individual characteristics required to enter a zone. Thresholds: their location is communicated by the boundary conditions, enabling people to decide whether to cross a particular threshold from one zone to the next. Other zones: information is communicated via sight lines, signage and gatekeepers about zones deeper in the structure, so people know what other options are available and can choose whether to pursue them.

Using a combination of architectural features, movable objects and signage, designers can create public buildings which exhibit the clarity to enable the self-directedness which is core to autonomy.

## **Kelvin Hall**



Figure 2: Kelvin Hall Phase 1, architect's render, reproduced with kind permission of Page\Park. For more information about Kelvin Hall see <https://pagepark.co.uk/project/architecture/kelvin-hall/>

Kelvin Hall is an example of a building with clarity in its depth structure which enables self-directedness for its users. Kelvin Hall in Glasgow was built in 1926-27 as an exhibition venue and has been undergoing refurbishment since 2014 by architects Page\Park (a render by Page\Park of their design for Kelvin Hall is shown in Figure 2). Phase 1, the extension which we are examining here, was completed in 2016. The refurbishment is a partnership between Glasgow Life, the University of Glasgow and the National Library of Scotland. Kelvin Hall is now a cultural centre, with access to collections, temporary displays, teaching and research, alongside a fitness centre. Entry to Kelvin Hall is free, it is a public building, although the fitness centre requires a paid subscription. Each of these uses occupies a separate zone, connected by a long and wide spinal corridor which Karen calls 'the avenue' down the centre of the plan.

The case study shown in Figures 3 - 6 considers the clarity of the three types of depth structure information communicated by the architecture: decorum, the location of thresholds and information about other zones. The sequence examines moments of transition between some of the zones: between the street and the foyer; between the foyer and the café; between the reception and the avenue; and between the avenue and the sports centre. For each, features which create clarity are tabulated; the thresholds and sightlines to other zones are identified in plan; and boundary objects are photographed.

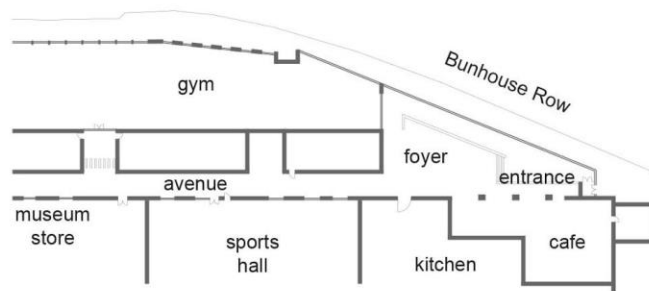
## Main Entrance

Between the street and the entrance to the building. Two zones, the inside and the outside, and at the threshold of are a number of boundary conditions so threshold doesn't have a clear boundary line, but extends from the paving slabs outside, through the doors to the point where the floor becomes polished concrete. Although anyone can walk in off the street, some activities which would be acceptable on the street (e.g. begging) would be strictly prohibited inside and this prohibition would be enforced by the gatekeepers.

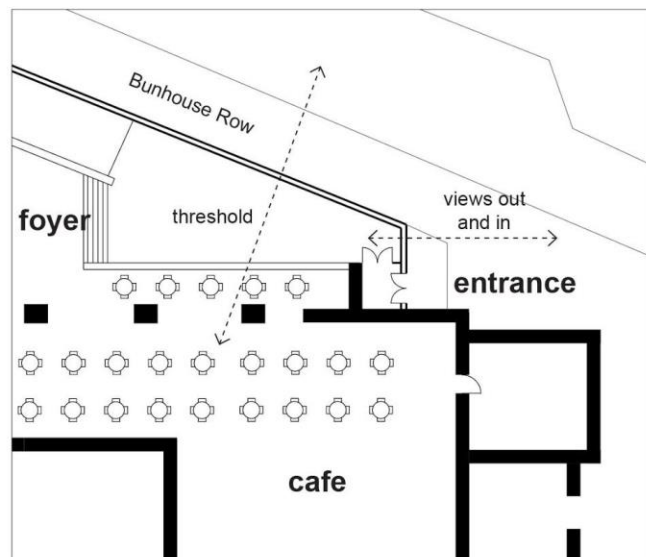
Feature	Type	Details
Door	Threshold location / decorum	Two sets of automatic doors, opens when approached, with a porch in between.
Walls	Threshold location	Extruded dark beam running across the entrance to the corridor.
Floor	Threshold location	Outside: municipal paving slabs (street), to specialised paving slabs (directly outside entrance) to a coir mat (in the porch) to polished concrete to the interior.
Ceiling	Decorum	No ceiling outside, internally there is a glass ceiling.
Signs	Information about other zones	List of all the public facilities available within; opening times of the different parts of the building. .
Gatekeeper	Decorum	Although no gatekeeper at the door, the reception staff have clear view..
Sight lines	Information about other zones	Clear view from outside through glass walls through to foyer and cafe. Once through the door, there is also a clear view down the avenue to the rest of the building.



Polished concrete floor signifies threshold



Main entrance from Bunhouse Row





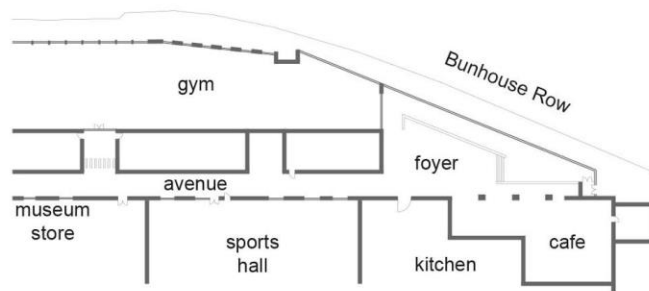
## Cafe / Foyer

Between foyer (which sells sports goods), and the Kelvin Hall Cafe. At threshold is slight blurring of precise location of boundary because cafe furniture spills out into foyer. Anyone can enter the cafe provided they purchase food or drink, or if they sit at one of the tables - people use the tables to work. Cafe staff do not prevent people from sitting at the tables to work unless the cafe is full of people who want to eat or drink. Unlike the reception area, people do not stand in

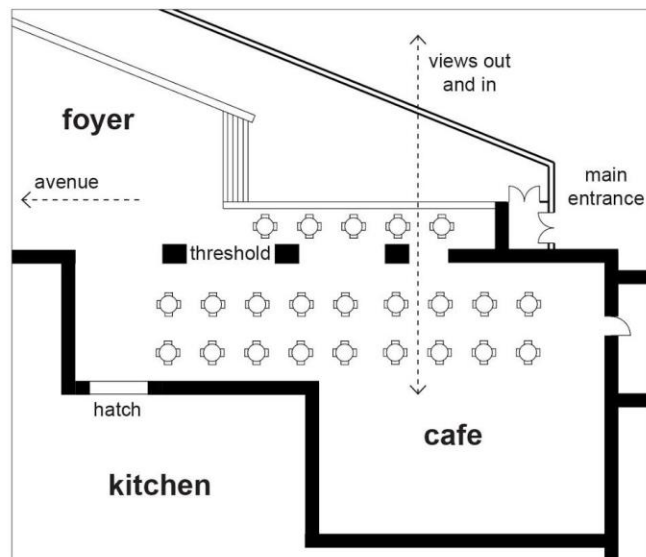
Feature	Type	Details
Door	Threshold location	Very large (>3m wide) openings to cafe from foyer.
Walls	Threshold location / decorum	Changes from cast concrete (reception) to white render and timber panelling - muffling sounds in cafe.
Floor	Threshold location	Changes from grey terrazzo (reception) to timber, although the reception floor continues to approx. 2m into cafe area.
Signs	Decorum	Free standing sign and menu - signs about cafe. No signs to other zones.
Objects/furniture	Threshold location	Bins to cafe entrance. Chairs and tables inside cafe. Cafe entrance and location of serving hatch is marked with a free standing drinks fridge and with racks containing leaflets for local activities.
Lighting	Threshold location	Cafe has low level hanging light fittings, foyer has ceiling mounted lights.
Gatekeeper	Decorum	Cafe staff in serving hatch.
Sight lines	Information about other zones	Clear view from the cafe into the reception area, out to the street, towards the main entrance.



Threshold with cafe staff as gatekeepers



Signs as boundary objects at cafe entrance



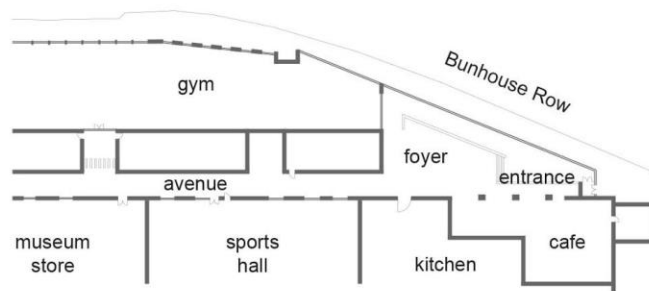
## Foyer / Avenue

Between the reception and the corridor which leads into to the sports centre entrance, the University of Glasgow Hunterian collection, conference suite and the National Library of Scotland. Threshold is simple, demarcated with a number of boundary indicators. Only people who intend to access one of the functions of the building will cross this threshold, although anyone can do so.

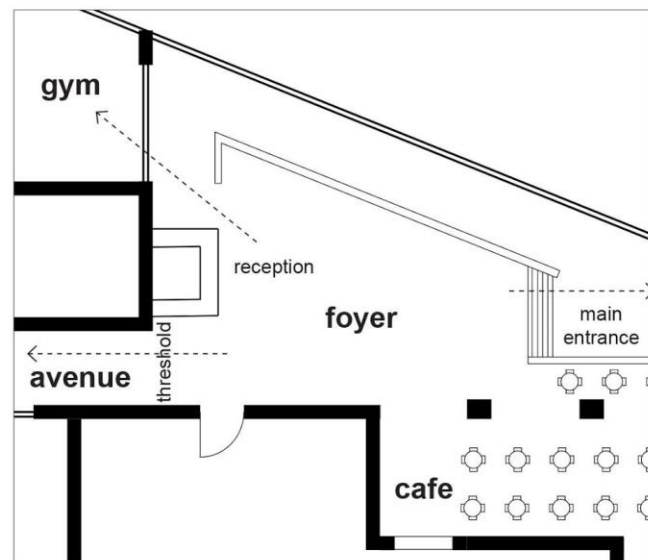
Feature	Type	Details
Walls	Threshold location	Changes from timber panelling behind reception desk, to white painted plaster in avenue. Dark painted stripe across the ceiling and part way down the wall indicating threshold.
Ceiling	Threshold location	Dark brown extruded beam running across entrance to avenue.
Signs	Information about other zones	On wall, with list of zones in building, also inside corridor showing the location of the sports hall. Two free standing signs showing temporary T-rex exhibition (right) and info about the National Library of Scotland (left).
Objects	Decorum	Demountable barrier, which can prevent access to avenue.
Gatekeeper	Decorum	Reception staff, but we entered the avenue and no one challenged us.
Sight lines	Information about other zones	Clear view from the cafe into foyer, out to the street and towards the main entrance. Clear view to the sports hall and down avenue.



Reception desk and view down avenue



Sign as information and boundary object



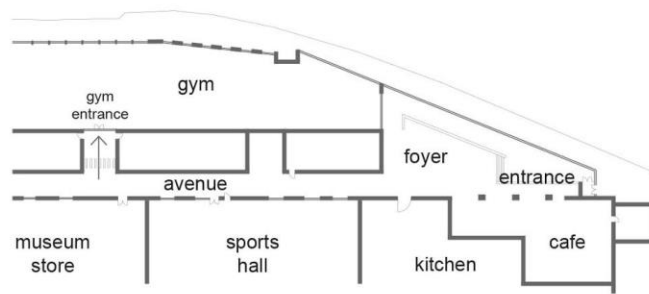
## Avenue / Glasgow Club

Threshold between corridor which runs through the centre of the building and the entrance area to the gym and sports centre, the Glasgow Club. It is a barrier formed by card entrance gates. The sports club is accessible only by staff and by those who pay a subscription. There are clear sight lines between the corridor and the sports centre, through glass walls and windows to the avenue, so there is clarity about other zones in the building, enabling individuals using it to understand what's happening in adjacent zones.

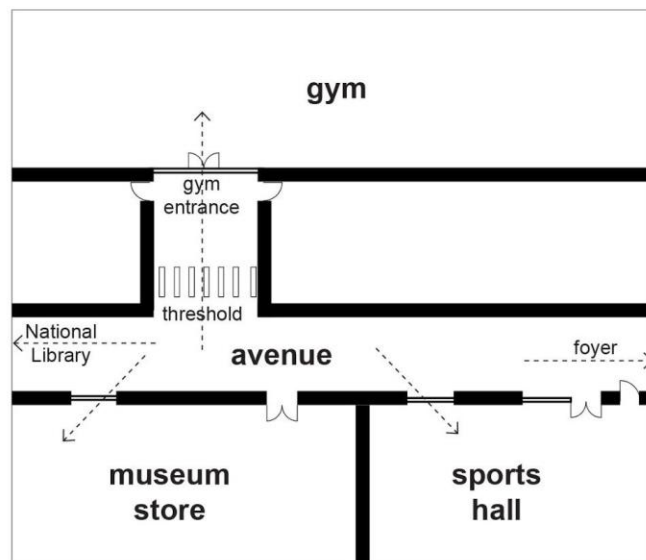
Feature	Type	Details
Walls	Threshold location	Wall colour changes dramatically, the sports centre colour is orange
Fixed furniture	Decorum	The threshold is marked by metal and glass card-operated barriers/gates
Ceiling	Threshold location	The ceiling drops above the gates, there is a light well above
Lighting	Threshold location	There is natural light falling from the roof behind the barriers, to the corridor side the light comes from recessed strip light
Gatekeeper	Threshold location / decorum	Automatic gates require clients to tap a pass to enter the gym
Sight lines	Information about other zones	There is a clear view from the corridor through the glass doors into the gym, through glass walls into the sports hall to the opposite side of the corridor



View from avenue to sports hall



Card gates as boundary objects



Kelvin Hall is a building that works well for its users. The reason we suggest, is because its architecture clearly communicates three core types of knowledge: location of thresholds, decorum of zones and information about other zones. It communicates this information through its architectural features: doors and openings; walls and wall finishes; fixed and movable furniture and objects; floors and ceilings and their finishes; gatekeepers; signage and sightlines between zones.

Because it communicates its depth structure clearly, Kelvin Hall epitomises the autonomy-minded design precepts we discussed earlier. In relation to clarity: the combination of zones and clear boundaries at their thresholds makes it easy to see what your distinct options are, where you must go and what you must do to pursue each one. It helps to make those options distinct (both by transparently indicating what they are - the sports hall is different to the repository - and by using difference in surface, lighting and signage). The clarity results in self-directedness, because it allows people to navigate without depending on mediation or instruction, without seeking permissions from gatekeepers: on the whole people will just follow the norms without needing intervention.

Kelvin Hall is exemplary on both clarity and self-directness, and was designed purposefully by the architects to be so. Karen even managed to persuade the clients to spend more than strictly necessary to achieve them:

*Karen: You walk along the avenue and you can see into the sports halls, you can see into the gym. We made them big openings - we could have made them solid walls – and those openings were expensive because it's fire glass. You then get to the end [of the avenue] and you can see the big video screen of the libraries. You walk through the building and you know there are lots of different things going on.*

Although they can't necessarily articulate it verbally, architects know what they are doing when they design successful depth structures. The terms 'depth structure', 'boundary conditions' and 'clarity' may prove normatively useful for architects like Karen in making the argument to clients for the value of autonomy-minded design. Obviously, the way that it works here is very particular to this building, and to the combination of cultural, academic and leisure activities it contains. But the idea that these precepts are important rules of thumb to keep in mind in order to protect and promote autonomy in our architectural design, and thereby to help people live lives of wellbeing that they shape for themselves.

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