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REPORT
The charming index

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CHARM LAND —Global

Preface

We present 10 of the world's most charming places from an airport to a restaurant, and the venerable Stephen Bayley writes an essay explaining why charming the pants off people will always get you through.

WRITER

Hugo Macdonald

01: TRAIN RHÄTISCHE BAHN Switzerland

Once quaint and leisurely, rail travel is more and more mimicking the soulless experience regularly dished out by the airlines. Everything is sacrificed for speed as travellers squeeze into hermetically sealed tubes, sit on lightweight moulded plastic and pass the time staring at their electronic devices while a blurred landscape whips past.

Switzerland's Rhätische Bahn thinks some things are best left alone. Commuters on its bright red rolling stock are still free to open the window when carriages get a tad stuffy and prop themselves up on proper wooden armrests when reading the paper – the tunnels in the mountainous Canton Graubünden make wi-fi tricky. Train wagons are

solidly Swiss, with curtains, carpeting and woven seat fabrics made by locals that are unmistakably railroad in their look. Outside, the Alps give riders a perfect excuse to peer up from their work while shuttling back and forth across the Engadine at a less frenetic pace. After all, it's not how fast you go, it's how you get there. — *IC rhb.ch*

Most charming points: Scenery you never get tired of. What other commute can compete with the sights of the limestone Landwasser Viaduct and the Piz Bernina peak.

The chance to breathe fresh Alpine air. There's still something to be said for proper windows that slide down to the waist to let riders get a bit closer to nature (and have a cleaner shot of that drop-dead gorgeous panorama).

Swiss punctuality.



Charm is being written out of modern life at a time when we've never needed it more. It's being destroyed by an increasingly risk-averse generation of managers with an agenda to do the impossible: turn maximum profit while pleasing as many people as possible.

Charm is effortless but it's also a responsibility – you don't have to smile or thank the person who picks up your dropped change but if you do, then an interaction becomes something a bit nicer than a meaningless transaction. Charm also requires honesty and integrity – it's not something you can fake (though the American service industry tries hard), which is precisely what makes it such a special quality.

Charm is entirely human – it is about character and individuality. Whether it be a hotel or a street, a city or a shop, an airport or a café, if it's deemed charming, it's because there is something deeply human we connect to in it; the wear-and-tear of repeated use or the familiarity of a perfected routine. There's nothing charming about Dubai where skyscrapers



and 12-lane motorways collide. Or automated phone calls.

Charm is about conviction – having an opinion, following an instinct, feeding a passion – not asking a thousand people for their opinion and meeting everyone somewhere in the middle. The internet isn't just charmless as a vacuum of human interaction, it is also a tool whereby everyone is entitled to an opinion. From the comment threads to the poison of TripAdvisor, the internet gives voice to a million armchair commentators, encouraging people and businesses to “play it safe” to please the masses.

Charm is unquantifiable, which is why management consultants and MBA graduates overlook it. Decisions about the future of a town, building or business that are made in the boardroom don't consider the importance of charm. Taking a punt on a quality that can't be measured in facts and figures is deemed the ultimate risk. And yet charm is arguably the most important factor for securing repeat business, which in today's financial climate is invaluable.

Charm is fragile too – it's not something you can buy (Dubai, again), it takes time to nurture and requires safeguarding because, once lost, it's near impossible to reinstate.

It's for all these reasons that we have decided to put charm in the spotlight for 2012. On the following pages we've selected 10 key proponents of charm – each of which is doing what they do perfectly without following any management consultation. It's a call to arms. Or perhaps a call to charm. — (M)



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02: OFFICE PENTAGRAM London

Global creative agency Pentagram has a London office that epitomises the company's structure and ethos. Based in a former milk factory in west London since 1984, the offices were designed by founding partner Theo Crosby and many of the original 19th-century features have been kept or sensibly converted. The main office upstairs is a democratic space – open-plan clusters of desks where the different teams sit, with arched alcoves (formerly the ramp where the horses would collect the milk) where the partners have their individual desks in one long row, rather like bees.

For an agency that combines graphics, product and identity design and architecture it's no surprise the space is awash with interesting bits and bobs. Downstairs is an extensive archive and a homely kitchen and canteen. You might say this is the heart of Pentagram – when it was founded in 1972, it pioneered free lunches for its staff. Fast forward 40 years and a proper lunch is still on the menu every day. One more addition to the team is Rollo, partner William Russell's dog, who has scampered around the office since he was a puppy.

“For me the charm of our London office is the timeless quality of the space we work in,” says Angus Hyland another of the 16 partners. “It's a space that was created by five extraordinary minds and it continues to be reinvigorated by the current generation of designers.” — HM pentagram.com

Most charming points:

Cooperation – in every sense, the partners pool their earnings each year and divide them up equally.

Creative clutter – each workspace tells the story of the person who works there.

Clever conversion – the original features and structure of the former milk factory have been enhanced.



PHOTOGRAPHER: ANDREA WYNER



03: RESTAURANT OSTERIA DELLA VILLETTA Milan

Eating out is one of life's simpler pleasures but too often cold interiors, undecipherable menus and overzealous chefs get in the way of a good meal. A weekend lunch at Osteria della Villetta, an hour's drive east of Milan, restores faith in a profession that is at its best when it sticks to the basics. Patrons sit on well-worn chairs and rest their elbows on wood tables free of stiff tablecloths. The Liberty-style décor has remained largely untouched since the restaurant's doors first opened to hungry travelling salesmen in 1900.

The day's specials are read out and there's no need to peruse a bloated wine list – owner Maurizio Rossi, the fourth generation to command in the kitchen, has little trouble steering diners towards a bottle of franciacorta, the local rival to champagne. Regional comfort food (meatballs, sweet stewed peppers and pan-fried perch fished from nearby Lake Iseo) takes the place of fancy-named pastas and the well-measured service, with Rossi and his wife, Grazia, on the front line weaving between guests, leaves you feeling as if you've stumbled into someone's home. — IC osteriadellavilletta.it

Most charming points:

The pop of the cork every time owner Maurizio Rossi opens another bottle of well-made Italian bubbly behind the bar.

Local dishes made with local ingredients – the cold-cuts come from livestock literally around the corner.

Service that's familiar and never rushed. Guests linger long after the desserts and espresso have been cleared.

04: STREET GEMMAYZEH – MAR MIKHAEL
Beirut

Like many other places around the world, Beirut is losing its charm as high street chains takeover and “international style” condos go up. Luckily, globalised drabness has not yet reached Gemmayzeh’s main street and its extension into Mar Mikhael. True, the area, which takes its name from the local sycamore is taken over at night by restaurants and bars, but they merely add character and youthful vitality and come the next day, local businesses selling anything from *manakish* – the staple breakfast – to antiques are back.

There is a deep-rooted neighbourhood feel here with a mix of hip creatives who have moved in over the past decade and the long-time residents. This attachment helps preserve the area as developers are keen to take advantage of the neighbourhood’s charm.

Though towers are coming up, Gemmayzeh’s architecture is still its rich visual appeal with French Mandate-era apartment blocks with arched windows and colourful tiles. Some houses still have a basket on their balconies, waiting to be rolled down for deliveries. In between buildings are tiny shrines and steep staircases that take you up the hill; here, old people take in the sun and lovers sneak a kiss by lamplight after dark. — CC

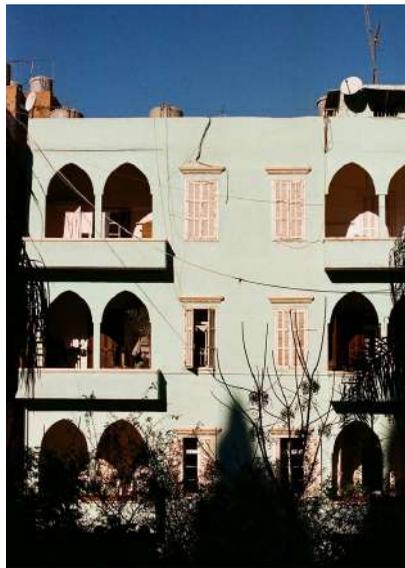
Most charming points: The architecture’s patina is haphazard and tells a story of constant use over time.

The tiny cafés and bars that sit between shops, old and new.

The mix of residents, all of whom claim ownership of and attachment to the street and neighbourhood.



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05: CAFÉ EKBERG
Helsinki

Stepping into café Ekberg is like stepping back in time. The décor of this Helsinki classic was last changed in the late 1950s and the furniture dates back to the 1930s. The lighting is low and the customers, a mix of 30 somethings and retirees, seem nicely settled. Uniformed waiters whizz around delivering coffee.

Founded in 1852, Ekberg is one of Helsinki’s oldest cafés. It’s been in the hands of the same family for four generations. The Ekbergs aim for a traditional Viennese café experience together with something that’s increasingly rare in Helsinki and indeed around the world: table service.

During the recession in the 1990s, the café introduced self service, but customers complained and

the waiters were soon brought back. “We firmly hold on to our table service policy,” says owner Maj-Len Ekberg. “Our customers appreciate not having to wander around the café gathering spoons, napkins and food.”

The café’s pastry selection consists of classics such as Napoleon pastries and champagne savorines, and the perennial favourite, Ekberg’s breakfast, features porridge, yoghurt, eggs, cold cuts and croissants. It’s all untrendy and traditional – which is why it’s so nice. — ENA cafeekberg.fi

Most charming points: An interior with warm colours and dark wood.

A menu consisting of traditional, professionally baked pastries and fresh sandwiches.

The feeling that they care about their customers.



06: AIRPORT KAGOSHIMA
Japan

It’s a crime that we’ve come to expect airports to be dismal – places to endure and escape from rather than enjoy. Whatever happened to the airport terminal as the hub of nation branding – the entry and exit point that shows off the best bits of its country and people to anyone visiting? We should all take notes from Kagoshima airport, the entry point to Japan’s happy little city on the southern tip of Kyushu island.

Built in 1972 by Yasui Architects, it handles around 170 domestic flights a day, four round trips to Shanghai a week and three to Seoul. And it’s a beacon of 1970s charm with its comfortably faded but immaculately clean interior. The 1,000-odd staff that work here are the best sales team for Kagoshima – welcoming and bidding farewell to travellers with impeccable service. “We respond to our customers with a sense of gratitude,” explains the

airport’s managing director. “We want to give the local bright welcome and we want people to use and enjoy our airport.”

There’s much to enjoy. The airport authorities dug into the earth just outside the airport and struck gold, or rather hot springs – and now visitors can enjoy a natural, hot foot bath before or after flying. In June this year they opened a permanent exhibition – Sora (sky) Stage, exhibiting the history of airplanes and of Kagoshima airport. For aspiring pilots there’s even a flight simulator to practise landing and taking off at the airport too. — HM

Most charming points: Cleanliness and service – the airport interior might be worn but it is clean and well-looked after by staff who take pride in their work.

Natural resources – a wall of glass in departures frames the view of the lush volcanic landscape beyond the runway.

Onsen – the hot water spring is the ideal way to relieve swollen fat feet.



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**07: HOTEL
FASANO SÃO PAULO
Brazil**

The Fasano family has been at the helm of Paulista hospitality for over a century, providing first São Paulo and latterly Rio with a slew of the finest restaurants, not just in Brazil, but in the world. It was fourth-generation family man Rogerio Fasano who branched from restaurants into hotels when he opened the Fasano São Paulo in 2003 and he seamlessly transferred the family know-how from one industry to another. His stroke of genius was employing local architect Isay Weinfeld to design the interior and after years of scouring the world for inspiration together they've created the ultimate home away from home. The leather and wood-clad interior throughout is softened with custom designed table and floor lights and rugs.

A hotel is only as good as its staff and the Fasano has one of the finest teams known to man. Presided over by Rogerio and his wife Ana Joma – the “quality director” who oversees

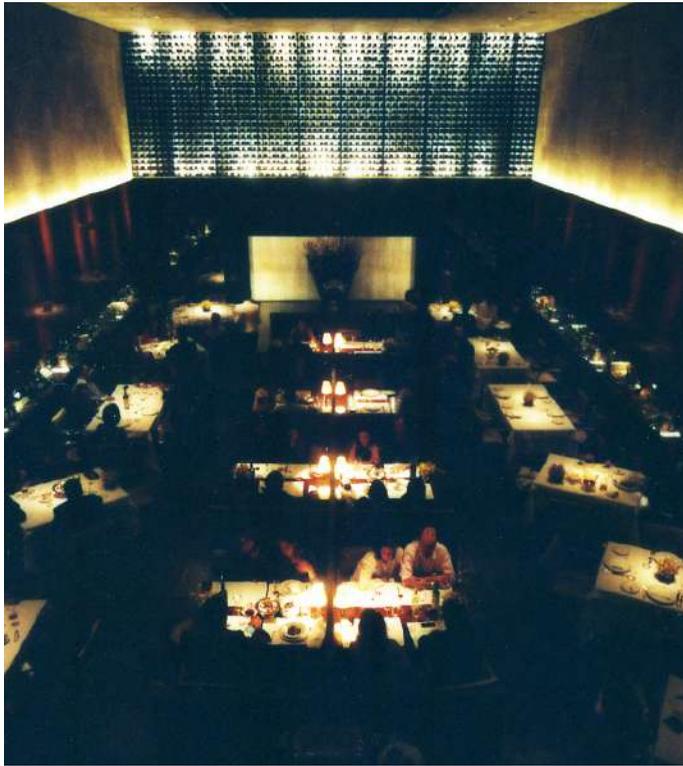
everything “from toilets to tapestries” – the team is like a family. One notable character, who sums up the Fasano’s charm is Attico, the indefatigable lobby bar waiter. Attico has served drinks to 18 Brazilian presidents in his long career with the Fasano clan.

“It’s important to create an inviting place where people feel comfortable, where they want to spend time and come again,” Rogerio explains. “One of the most important qualities for us is service. Most of our collaborators have been with us for many, many years – some as many as 20 or 30. They recognise our repeat customers, they develop a rapport and know what they like or don’t. Our customers value this attention.” — HM fasano.com.br

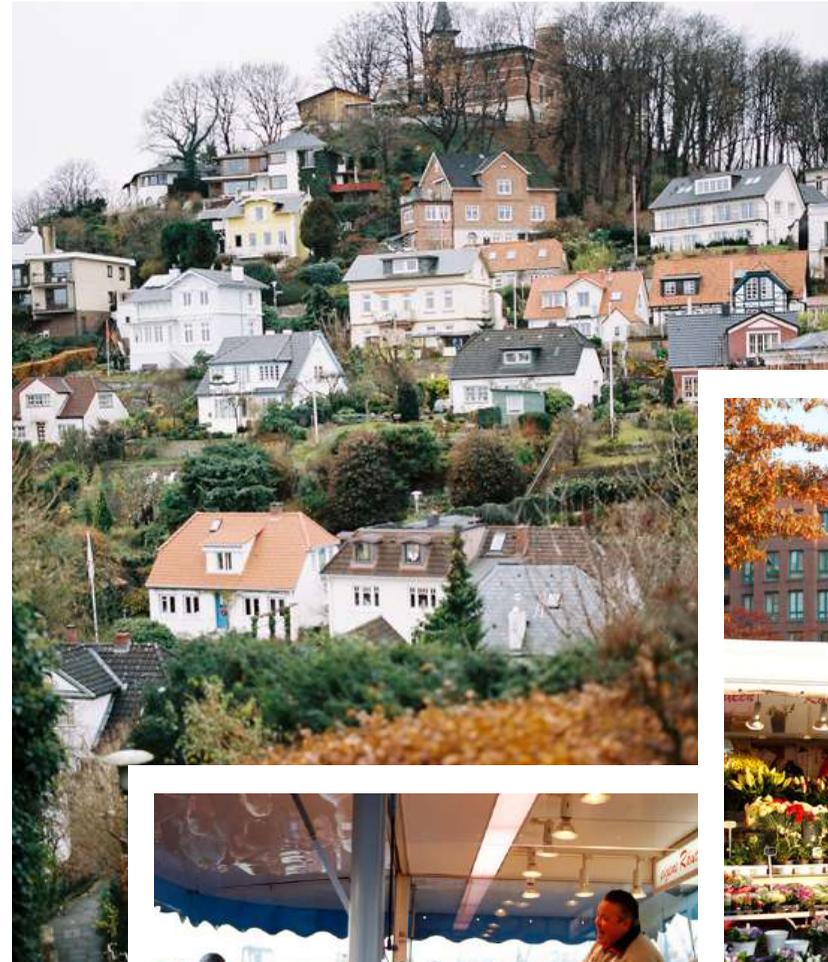
Most charming points: Design with integrity – solid, natural materials such as wood and leather age well, creating a rich patina.

Service – staff who behave like family make guests feel at home.

Low lighting sets the tone and pace of the environment.



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**08: CITY
HAMBURG
Germany**

At first Hamburg seems too reserved to be charming. This is a place that’s been called more British than Britain; a place where even lifelong acquaintances use the formal “Sie”. But after a walk through tree-lined, pre-war neighbourhoods like Winterhude or Pöseldorf on the inner-city Alster Lake or the hilly streets of the upscale western district of Blankenese along the River Elbe, it’s clear that the port city is just a little slow to warm up, that’s all.

Living in the “gateway to the world”, Hamburgers take deep pride in not only their city itself but also in abstract values such as high quality, integrity and tolerance. Hamburg is still the country’s print-media capital home to *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit* and *Gruener+ Jahr*.

It has more millionaires than anywhere else in Germany. It’s fast becoming an architectural showcase – Herzog + De Meuron have graced the huge HafenCity harbour development with a new concert hall, the Elbphilharmonie; and the port’s lovely old storage buildings are under tasteful renovation. As a famous sea shanty goes: “Hamburg is a beautiful little city.” Indeed. — KB

Most charming points: An inner city shopping district, with narrow streets and lots of public squares.

Longtime residents who are modest with their wealth.

Water, water everywhere. Not only does the Elbe pass through Hamburg’s huge harbour but the double lake, the Alster, is also an urban centrepiece. And you can row along quiet canals traversing the city’s prettiest residential areas.



PHOTOGRAPHER: TKTCKTKT TKTCKTK

09: SHOP BROOK FARM GENERAL STORE New York

On a quiet residential street in Brooklyn, under the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge, is Brook Farm General Store – a neighbourhood shop selling household wares that feels a lot older than its two-and-a-half years. Husband and wife team Chris and Philippa Winterbourne opened Brook Farm to work on a project as a couple and it's their personal approach that lends it charm.

Giving up careers in television (Chris) and fashion (Philippa), the pair built the simple, whitewashed space in 2009 on the ground floor of a rather plain residential building. "There's quite a contrast between the exterior and in here," says Chris. "People are often surprised when they come in." Filling the shelves with objects such as soft Tunisian hammam towels, American beeswax candles, Swedish body brushes and warm wool blankets – from Tourne, their own line – the Winterbourne's upbringings and family life also influence Brook Farm's offerings. While classic French butter dishes and Durablex drinking glasses reveal Chris's family roots in the South of France, the growing selection of wooden children's toys hints at the latest addition to the clan, their young son Arlo.

"I think our customers really appreciate the effort we put in," says Chris. "It's confusing in big stores; there are too many people



in charge. Here, when we work hard, we see the rewards directly." — AES brookfarmgeneralstore.com

Most charming points: Chris and Philippa keep a stack of vintage vinyl behind the counter and select and play them during the day.

Brook Farm feels like an extension of their home. Not only do they know about each product as if they use them everyday, but their dog Nutmeg greets customers at the door.

Brook Farm is a true general store, with high-quality for all uses – from Indian Ayurvedic soaps, Opinel pocket knives to Yanagi kettles and Tintin comics.



PHOTOGRAPHER: TFKTKTK TFKTKTK

10: TRAVEL AGENCY RASK Denmark

Few industries have been stripped of so much charm as the travel sector. Online ticketing and travel advice have rendered things anonymous, rigid, impossible and often scary. Thank goodness some people still believe in the travel agent.

The closure of high street leisure giants means "there is a vacuum where smaller operations can flourish and satisfy a particular clientele, that do care about where they stay, how they fly and with whom they travel", says Jonas West Eilersen, an MBA graduate who went against the trend and founded in 2010 RASK, a travel agency named after his Danish ancestor – a famous explorer.

"One of the things my clients really appreciate

when they are travelling is that they can call me – day and night. There are no call centres and no 'press two for service in English' menus." RASK also knows it needs to go the extra mile to offer customers clear advantages like "knowing lots of people behind the scenes in some of the world's best hotels, restaurants and airlines, or getting you on that sold out flight", says Eilersen – without having to pay extra for it. "It is part of my everyday job and I love it." — CC rasktravel.com

Most charming points: A professional concierge, who cares enough to deliver exactly what the customer requires.

Research and insider knowledge of all aspects of, and people within, the industry.

A voice on the end of the line to speak to at all times.



PHOTOGRAPHER: TFKTKTK TFKTKTK

ESSAY ON CHARM by Stephen Bayley

I'll tell you one thing you never hear. It's this. "I wish I were less charming." Aiming to wound, a schoolmaster wrote on my last report, "Charm alone will not get him through." Meaning, I think, that an affable, genial, out-going nature was not enough to ensure survival in a harsh world of statistical performance that even then was becoming dominated by dreary accountants and bland consultants.

In people, charm is an attractive asset (if not to my scrofulous, beetle-browed and negativist careers master). How else did the expression "charm the pants off" pass into currency? People whose interpersonal skills are based on the reading of a P&L account are rarely said to possess such mysterious and fascinating powers of undress. "He could double-entry book-keep the pants off anyone" is another thing you never, ever hear. Charm is disabling and unscientific, powerful but not measurable, hence disturbingly threatening to the management mentality.

We often see in buildings or places or things, characteristics which we call "charm". The French government's

guide to hotels even has a category called "hotel de charme". Clue: ivy, geraniums in pots, open fire, direct-line to peasant or historic associations. London's tourist authority describes Covent Garden's Lamb & Flag as a "charming pub". Clue: ivy, geraniums and so on. In architecture and products, it is always easy to detect charm, if not to define it. I suspect it is something to do with the curious relationship between accident and design. Charm is often a result of the former. Put it this way: John Pawson's superlative Novy Dvur monastery is beautiful and many other lovely things but it is not charming. It is too fine for that.

Or put it this way: a grumbling Porsche Neunelfer may be a desirable and fine car, but if performance were calibrated in charm, it would fall far behind a Morris Minor. Power is rarely charming; vulnerability always is. Dinner at Alain Ducasse in Monte Carlo? Very impressive but cold. A beer in Vienna's Café Preukl where you can still smoke and the furniture has not changed since about 1959? Chaotic but intensely charming. Or *gemutlich*, as they say in Austro-German.

It all comes from the Greek notion of charisma – that compelling attractiveness certain people have that inspires devotion,

something which sociologist Max Weber picked up and popularised in his study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The very charismatic Albert Camus believed that charm gets you to a (pants off?) position of "yes" without having actually asked a question.

Perhaps as a result, people are suspicious of charm. Anita Loos, for example, called public relations "fake charm". Because it is so powerful, but also so unaccountable, charm is a powerful weapon in the battle against the bureaucratic mind. The Holy Writ of the management consultant was by Alfred McKinsey, whose drab successors with their one-dimensional view of the world and bad suits still dominate government and business. McKinsey said, "You can measure anything. And if you can measure it, you can manage it." Like my schoolmaster, McKinsey was 100 per cent wrong. You cannot measure beauty, love, happiness or peace. You can only measure boring things.

In business as well as personal life, all negotiations are based on infrastructure where, during the date or the pitch, power creeps from one side to the next. Winning is a matter of emotions, not measurements. That's why charm alone will get you through. — (M)