

Learning Where We Belong

How learning places support individual, social and environmental connectedness

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A bamboo theater (Hengkengcun, China), made using natural materials, is a community gathering place for performances and discussion. Photo credit: Ziling Wang.

A fundamental human need throughout our lives is *to belong*. We form relationships to feel intimacy, safety and trust. We build a sense of who we are through connections with friends, kin, and social clubs (Tajfel, 1982). Our neighborhoods and natural environments offer a sense of familiarity and rootedness. Belonging is a feeling of acceptance, inclusion, and connection, rooted in our fundamental human drives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, 2000). And it happens in places that are designed to support or hinder it.

Feeling connected with others or to our context helps us feel *in place*; that we belong there (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). This contrasts with feeling detached, isolated and *out of place*, which leads to the uncomfortable feeling that we don't belong. Moreover, if we constantly feel out of place, it creates obstacles for our learning and development—it is difficult to grow when stuck in a lonely malaise of disconnection and detachment (Bowlby, 1979). Places that ignore the social and emotional needs of their users risk becoming spaces where, at best people pass through but don't form

connections or, at worst, feel alienated and excluded (Canter, 1977; Oldenburg & Warner, 1993; Relph, 1976).

While each of us naturally strive for it, recent research suggests levels of belonging are reaching alarmingly low levels. In the US, for example, a current study suggests that less than a third of adults feel belonging in their local communities, their workplace, or in their nation (Argo & Sheikh, 2023). And only just over half of adults feel belonging in their family or friend groups. Such declines in connectedness, particularly in Western countries, has been a concern for several decades (Putnam, 2000). However, the pandemic, coupled continued social, economic and political upheavals, have exacerbated this downward trend in many countries. Given that schools are the primary social institution responsible for supporting human development, many policy groups have called for rethinking how schools can be better designed to foster human belonging (Azevedo et al., 2022; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2021; St-Amand et al., 2017).

How can learning places develop a sense of belonging that is vital to human development? How do the qualities of their spaces, materials and elements support feeling connected to others, oneself and one's context? This paper shares key themes from the literature compiled by researchers at the [Designing Learning Places \(DLP\) Lab](#) at Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero. The themes herein emerged from reviewing over a hundred educational, architectural, urban design and socio-psychological research articles about how places support or undermine a sense of belonging. In sum, places cultivate belonging by providing affordances *to connect with others, one's environment, and with oneself*. If educators and designers aim to create places of learning, it is critical to consider how the spaces, materials and objects reflect the following qualities:

Visible & Connected

To belong requires us to know others and find familiarity in our surroundings. Places that support belonging offer a range of ways to view and connect with others and the local environment (Cooper, 2023; Cutieru, 2020; Dueñas et al., 2021; Gozalez et al., 2022; Schlickman & Domlesky, 2019; Won et al., 2021). A provocative example is the bamboo theater depicted on the opening page (Wong, 2015). No matter where you are, you can see and be seen by others, which creates social connectedness via easy eye contact. Through clear interior views, those inside also have ample sightlines to their surroundings, including the sky above. Such views invite those passing by to see activities of others, whether it is a formal performance or an impromptu picnic. Moreover, the theater's natural materials of rock earth and bamboo trees coherently connect to its natural setting. Made by local community members using local materials—such as found boulders for seats, the sloping dirt floor and weaving bamboo trees together—the theatre creates a direct experience with the natural environment. Its varied levels, heights



Multiple interior perspectives in the Avenues School Shenzhen Early Learning Center (Aşçi, 2024).

and vantage points create ample visibility to others and connectedness to one's natural surroundings.

Similarly, the Avenues School Shenzhen Early Learning Center, designed by Efficiency Labs (above), offers multiple visual perspectives to other learners to foster empathy and social connection (Aşçi, 2024). It also has areas offering learners moments for self-reflection. Such opportunities for introspection are vital for developing connections to one's values, ideas and identity. Memorials, such as the Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C use light, terrain shifts and forced perspective to slow down and contemplate themselves in the experience (Goldberger, 1995). More explicitly, objects like an affirmation mirror pictured at right, invite learners to literally view themselves and consider their values and identities. Embedding objects and designing spaces that allow for individuals to connect to their values

and identities brings us to our next qualities of places that support belonging.

Expressive & Invitational

We identify ourselves through seeking similarities and differences in the outside world, aiming to find pieces of our identity in our surroundings (Borzooeian, 2014; Proshansky et al., 1983). Places of belonging facilitate this by openly expressing values and meanings and inviting people to do the same. Through the intentional use of symbols, forms, colors, sounds and materials, a place can express culturally meaningful ideas and beliefs of (and to) its local inhabitants. For example, evocative murals by the African American artist Aaron Douglas in Cravath Hall at Fisk University, a historically Black college in Tennessee, conveys the historical importance and cultural significance of the Harlem Renaissance (Pennamon, 2023). A circular classroom table used in the Harkness method, a student-led discussion approach founded at Philips Exeter Academy, isn't just a piece of furniture. Its shape conveys the value of dialogue, equitable participation, and student empowerment (Dudek, 2000; Hillier, 1984). Oregon's Portland International Airport, pictured below, uses locally sourced wood and stone, interior gardens of native plants and trees, and



The Portland International Airport in Oregon infuses culturally connected colors, natural sounds and native plant life to express its community's environmental and artistic values.



Public benches painted with the LGBTQ+ flag in front of the Cambridge City Hall, Cambridge MA.

introduces sounds of birds and water throughout to express the city's connection to its environment (Browning, 2024). Each of these places facilitate belonging through encounters with distinctive material and spatial elements that express histories, commitments, and other cultural beliefs (Cheryan et al., 2014; Cooper, 2023; Ebrahimzadeh & Maleki, 2020; Locke, 2023).

Expressing cultural values does not have to come at the cost of explicitly excluding others. Rather, the act of expression should welcome other people and their identities, values and beliefs. Cultivating belonging requires designs that invite a plurality of people to experience and connect. The invitational door is open, not closed. Places invite connection by using imagery, murals, signage and symbols that affirm inclusion and reduce feelings of marginalization. Multilingual welcome signs in a lobby, racially and gender diverse images of scientists, or LGBTQ+ colors painted on city benches each express values of a community and invite others to feel seen, safe and included (Cheryan et al., 2014; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021; St-Amand et al., 2017; Tannebaum & Tannebaum, 2019). Offering comfort, familiarity and identity cues are just a few ways in which places invite belonging.



Families create planters from discarded shoes with personal testimonials about what the AEIOtU early learning center means to them (Soacha, Colombia.)

Through expressive and invitational qualities, such places cultivate connection and avoid fomenting feelings of isolation, exclusion and loneliness.

Belonging emerges not from expressive cultural symbols alone, but from inviting shared action in place (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Specifically, actions in which people can express their ideas, values and identities. Places enable this through a dialectical process of expressing and inviting others to express in kind. For example, the entrance to an early childhood center, AEIOtU, in one of the poorest barrios of Bogotá, Colombia, is lined with planters that parents make from discarded shoes, each offering a quote from the family about what the school means to them. Signs throughout Yume Wo Katate, a Japanese ramen restaurant in Tokyo, invite patrons to publicly share their short and long-term dreams when they are finished with their meal, which are then hung on the walls for others to see (Shea, 2014). These places create opportunities for belonging by inviting people to participate in expressive actions that, in turn,

create new elements that convey meaning and values. Such recursive co-creation in places support a sense of ownership and belonging, which enables learners, in particular, to more comfortably rely on their peers for support and feedback, fostering closer relationships (Levy & Adjapong, 2020; Szatek, 2020).

Communal & Compact

Finally, places that enable belonging offer a diverse array of areas for communing with self, others and one's surroundings (Cutieru, 2020). The Universidad de la Libertad campus building in Mexico City, pictured below and designed by Rosan Bosch Studio, offers students a range of quiet nooks for individual relaxation and reflection (Rosan Bosch Studio, 2023). Cafe tables, staircases and breakout rooms host impromptu small-group conversations. Windows offer views to the outdoors and lush vegetation spills from planters throughout the interior. And the common areas become settings for community events, meals and celebrations. Places of belonging create multiple opportunities individuals, groups and the community to relate and connect which strengthens social relatedness and attachments (Argo & Sheikh, 2023; Cooper, 2023; Cutieru, 2020; Ebrahimzadeh & Maleki, 2020; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021).



Students enjoy a variety of communal spaces at the Universidad de la Libertad in Mexico City (Rosan Bosch Studio, 2023).

While some communal experiences are planned, many others are unplanned and serendipitously emerge. Places of belonging are designed for chance encounters, particularly encounters across social boundaries (Cutieru, 2020; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021). Little Island, a public park in New York City designed by Heatherwick Studio, offers a warren of paths through rich fauna and open fields for resting and relaxing (Cutieru, 2021). Several small performance areas and a large amphitheater hosts musicians, talks, and book readings. They offer a hub of planned and unplanned activities, drawing in residents to socially mix across demographic lines. While the place is visible and connected, as well as expressive and invitational, its range of elements and areas are supremely communal.

Little Island, like many places of belonging, is also *compact*. One does not need to go far to get various needs met, whether it is finding a place to rest, eat or visit a restroom. Everything is close by. In urban design, compactness refers to the distributed density of functional areas. It is key tenet of the popular concept of “the 15 minute city” where residents can easily access what they need through mixed-use, walkable environments in which homes, jobs, services, and public spaces are closely located together (Moreno, 2024). Compact neighborhoods may



A learning neighborhood at SEK International School Cuidalcampo in Madrid, Spain emulates compactness with its nearby areas for learners' various daily functions.

offer a variety of locations, like bars, restaurants, gyms, parks and coffee shops, which encourage social mixing and interaction (Mouratidis, 2018). In the context of schools, Imms & Beyers (2017) illustrate how many schools are experimenting with compact neighborhood-like designs, such as one of the pictured at right at the SEK International School Cuidalcampo in Madrid, Spain. Studies strongly suggest that compactness encourages social interactions and connections primarily through the chance encounters that arise as people move through their day (Gonzalez et al., 2022; UN-Habitat, 2013).

Conclusions

Learning flourishes when places create core developmental conditions for human development. Among these conditions is the feeling of *belonging*: that we are connected to ourselves, to others and to our local environments. When these connections exist, we feel in place and can grow. When absent, feeling out of place, alone and excluded severely limits our ability to learn and flourish. Drawn from a range of disciplinary studies, this paper has assembled several key design qualities of spaces, objects and materials that create conditions for belonging. Learning places should be *visible and connected*, allowing



The Little Island Park in New York City provides a rich array of contexts for spontaneous connecting with self, others and the natural and urban landscape (Cutieru, 2020).

relationships to others, self and the environment to emerge. Objects and elements should *express* local cultural values and, in kind, *invite* learners, teachers and community members to express theirs. They should offer a range of *communal* areas for gathering and be *compact* in serving the needs of learners. These key ingredients can serve as a guide for designers and educators aiming to reshape their classrooms, schools or other contexts.

Keep in mind that while designing places for belonging is critical for learning, it is also quite also complex. Belonging is a universal human need, but how and when it is experienced varies across people (Dehghani Tafti et al., 2025; Gartus et al., 2015). Learning places should offer ample opportunities for belonging, but feelings of connectedness will depend on the experiences, histories and preferences we bring to it. Some may find designed forms and selected symbols familiar, while it might be too foreign for others. Serendipitous encounters in compact and common spaces emerge in unpredictable ways. Rather than overly determining it, designs should embrace the variation of belonging by creating an array of generative conditions for it to emerge. And as people change and places evolve over time, so too will designs. Designing learning places for belonging is adaptive and not a simple one-off activity. Creating places that support connections to self, others and one's surroundings must embrace an evolving approach as our learners and the world continues to change.

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