

The Design Language of Belonging

If you're interested in connecting, chatting, and/or collaborating, please reach out.

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Spaces and places that make us feel safe, loved, and celebrated.

A Place to Belong

Belonging can be expressed through a range of emotional states: coziness, joy, safety. Designing spaces that elicit these feelings, can be done through placemaking, an approach that emphasizes meaningful, people-centered environments. Placemaking can be expressed in a variety of patterns: spatial, behavioral, natural, and repetitional. These patterns serve as different dialects of belonging. For example, spatial patterns involve intentionally arranging physical elements, such as circular seating which promotes inclusivity.

An excellent resource for placemaking is Christopher Alexander's book, "A Pattern Language." Alexander offers patterns at different scales, from home to city design. That said, globalization has rendered our communities more diverse; industrialization has altered the ways in which we relate to our spaces. It's time to generate new patterns that foster belonging and inclusivity in our rapidly changing world.

Illustrations by Dave Dawkins



Spatial patterns involve intentionally arranging physical elements, such as circular seating; a catalyst for inclusivity.

I'm interested in a new pattern language that embraces more diverse perspectives and prioritizes equity and social justice. A pattern language that addresses climate change and technology. I want a pattern language created by the people, for the people.

Patterns in Practice

Let's look at some real-world examples of patterns that contribute to a sense of belonging.

In the neighborhood of Bywater, New Orleans, streets are intimate and narrow. Porches line the streets, with front doors just a few steps away from sidewalks. These semi-public semi-private spaces encourage casual socializing and a greater sense of community. As I walked through the neighborhood, I could easily envision the gatherings and block parties this community is known for.

In San Francisco, I live in what's colloquially known as a co-op: an intentional community of thirteen people living together in a Victorian house. Our kitchen is a valued space that has three main elements: the island counter, the adjacent stove and sink area, and our beloved couch. Whoever put the couch there is a genius. The couch's placement does an excellent job of fostering connection and community. Situated in the nexus of activity, it encourages us to build relationships while preparing meals, washing dishes, and snacking. It brings us together.

On the opposite end of the design spectrum, we have what is known as hostile architecture – intentional design choices of spaces and structures that promote unease and deter social activities. It shows up in the form of



The proximity between porches and streets in Bywater, New Orleans foster a greater sense of community.



Situated in the nexus of activity, [the kitchen couch] encourages us to build relationships while preparing meals, washing dishes, and snacking. It brings us together.

menacing spike-lined surfaces to prevent people from resting to studded platforms that deny skateboarders play. These intentional choices design people out of places. What if spaces were designed for the well-being and connection of humans

as opposed to optimizing for consumption and productivity? In so many cities we're caught in between the hard and inflexible edges of concrete buildings.

How would it feel to embrace softer edges and blended spaces that truly welcomed in and celebrated people of different shapes and abilities?

A Toolkit for Belonging

We have tools that encourage us to create spaces that foster belonging, such as co-design – the approach of designing with, not for, people. It ensures that the needs, preferences, and identities of the relevant communities are centered.

Through a project with IDEO.org and in collaboration with the Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department's Immigrant Cooperative, we redesigned their space with folks from their community, focusing on multilingual signs, iconography, and cultural photos to enhance the sense of belonging for RIM communities. These changes offer comfort and build trust, crucial for newcomers to the U.S.

By observing, analyzing, and refining design patterns, we can create spaces that resonate with individuals on a deep level. And, when we nurture individuals, we create opportunities for communities to form and grow together.

Whether it's incorporating natural elements, embracing cultural aesthetics, or fostering rituals that promote connection, designing for belonging enhances the human experience, nurtures communities, and paves the way for a future where every space can be a place of belonging.