



Inclusive Placemaking for Health

Bridging Design, Public Institutions, and Community Wellness

2026 The Vision is Yours: A Regional Conference for Placemaking and Placekeeping

MacKenzie Twardus | Tom Zeigenfuss | Gabrielle Gilliam | Elliott Kenney



Acknowledgements

The following presentation contains sensitive content including mention of mental illness and personal experiences.

The perspectives shared reflect the lived experiences and professional viewpoints of each speaker. We recognize that our backgrounds shape how we see and practice design.

The content in this presentation is for informational purposes only and is not intended as clinical advice or a substitute for professional mental health support.



Learning Objectives

Identify gaps in current public-sector “health and wellness” frameworks and identify strategies to integrate mental health and disability into design and planning.

Analyze how trauma-informed planning, neurodiversity research, and wellness programming can shape more inclusive public spaces.

Apply insights from three case studies to develop wellness centered strategies for projects at multiple project stages— from site planning to public programming.

Evaluate which communities are being served or excluded by wellness-focused projects and determine opportunities for more equitable engagement and design.

Describe partnership and storytelling approaches that help government agencies and designers secure support and sustain long-term wellness initiatives.

Speaker Introductions



**MacKenzie
Twardus**



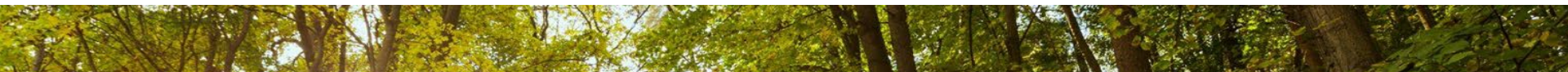
**Elliott
Kenney**



**Tom
Zeigenfuss**



**Gabrielle
Gilliam**





Part 1

Thinking Beyond

“Health and Wellness”

MacKenzie Twardus | Associate Principal, Planner + Landscape Architect | Hanbury

As placemakers and placekeepers...

We design for health and wellness

We design for climate resilience

We design for equity



What about intentionally designing for mental wellness?

Mental and Behavioral Health Disorders Are Increasing in U.S.;
Effective **Preventive Interventions** Should Be Expanded, Report Says
-National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, April 2025

“Loneliness is a growing epidemic. And the way our cities and communities
are planned, designed and built is a major part of the equation”
-Matter Space Soul, Loneliness and the Built Environment





Let's talk about it...

What Is Mental Wellness?

Mental wellness is an internal resource that helps us think, feel, connect, and function; it is an active process that helps us to build resilience, grow, and flourish.

Mental wellness is a **resource** because it is dynamic, renewable, and positive.

Mental wellness is a **process** that we must engage in proactively, it is not a static state of being.

Mental wellness is not only “mental” but has several dimensions:



THINKING
Mental Dimension



CONNECTING
Social Dimension



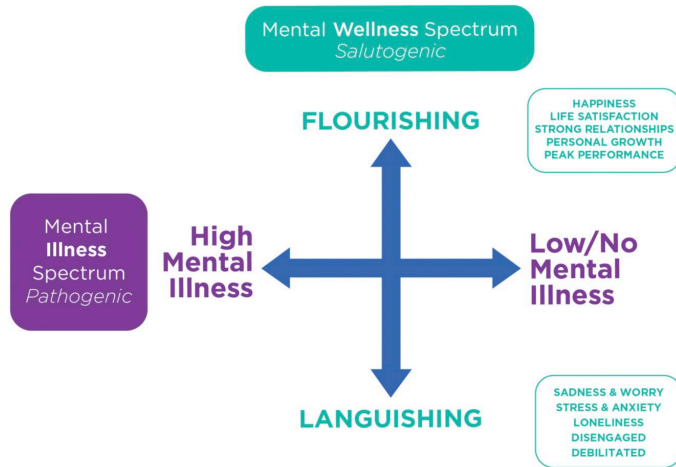
FEELING
Emotional Dimension



FUNCTIONING
Psychological Dimension

Mental wellness is **more than just the absence of mental illness.**

Dual Continuum Model of Mental Wellness and Mental Illness



The dual continuum model was adapted by GWI from concepts developed by Keith Tudor (1996) and Corey L.M. Keyes (2002). Source: Global Wellness Institute

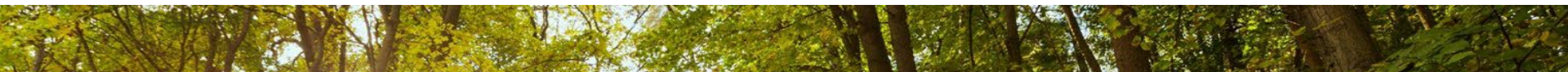
© 2020 Global Wellness Institute

Mental wellness is an **active process of moving from languishing to resilience to flourishing.**

Mental wellness helps to **shift the perspective away from stigma to shared humanity.**

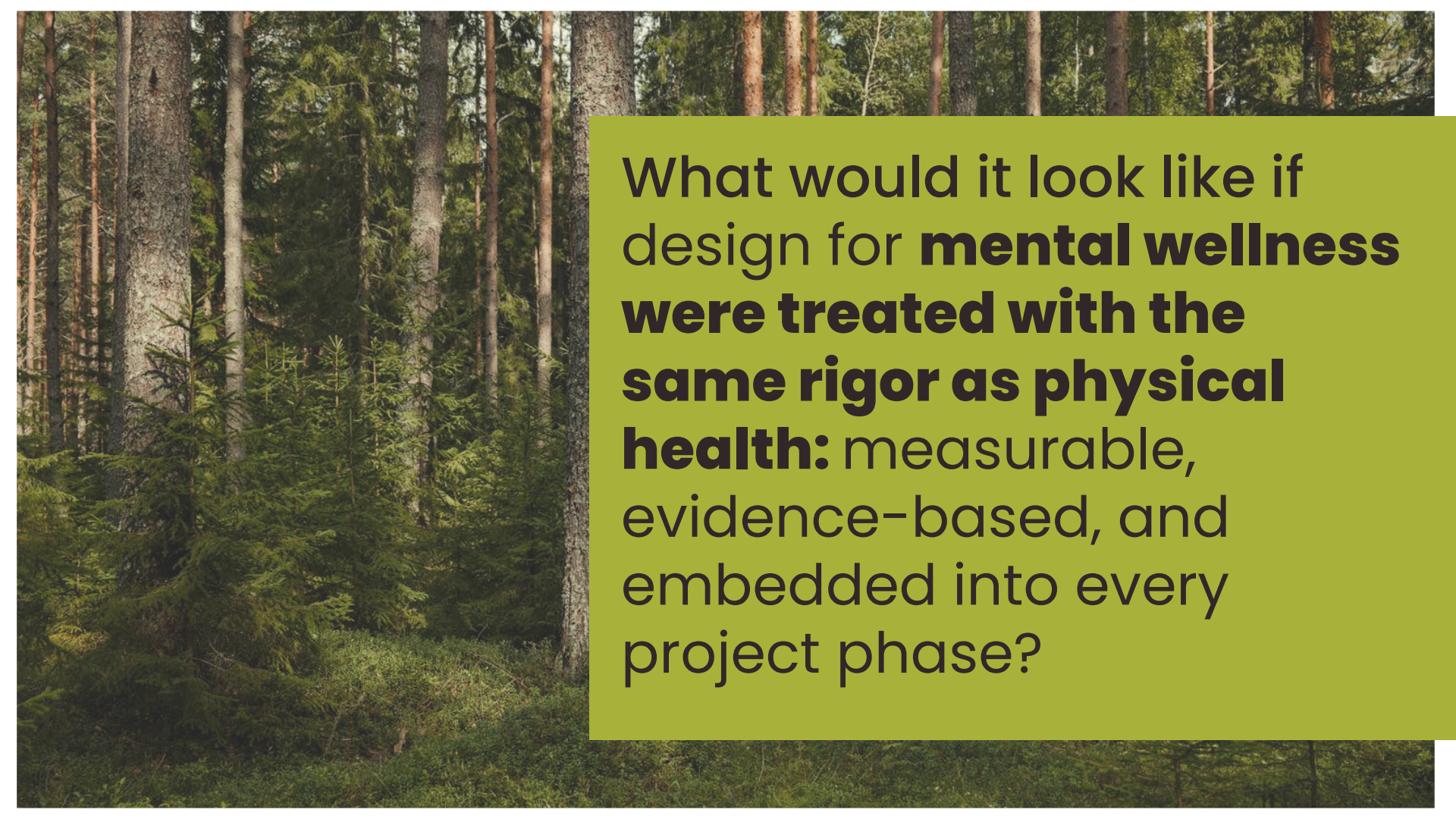
Mental wellness grows out of a **grassroots, consumer-driven movement.**

Mental wellness is **multi-dimensional, holistic and personal.**



The Gap: Design + Mental Wellness





What would it look like if design for **mental wellness** were treated with the **same rigor as physical health**: measurable, evidence-based, and embedded into every project phase?

How do we get there?

Break the Silence

Design from Evidence, Not Assumption

Start Where You Are

Be Purposeful in Design

Measure What You Mean



Break the Silence

1

Personal Level

Name your own relationship with mental health, because silence in practice starts with silence in ourselves.

2

Project Level

Ask explicitly: who is this for, and what mental health outcome does this design support? Listen first, always.

3

Public Health Level

The work of placemaking sits at the intersection of the spaces people inhabit and the public health trends shaping their lives. That is not coincidence, that is responsibility.



Firm/Organization Level

4

Create the internal conditions where mental health can be named, discussed, and designed for, not assumed.

5

Professional Organizations – ASLA, AIA, WELL, APA

The frameworks we rely on are largely silent on mental health. That gap is a choice we can change.



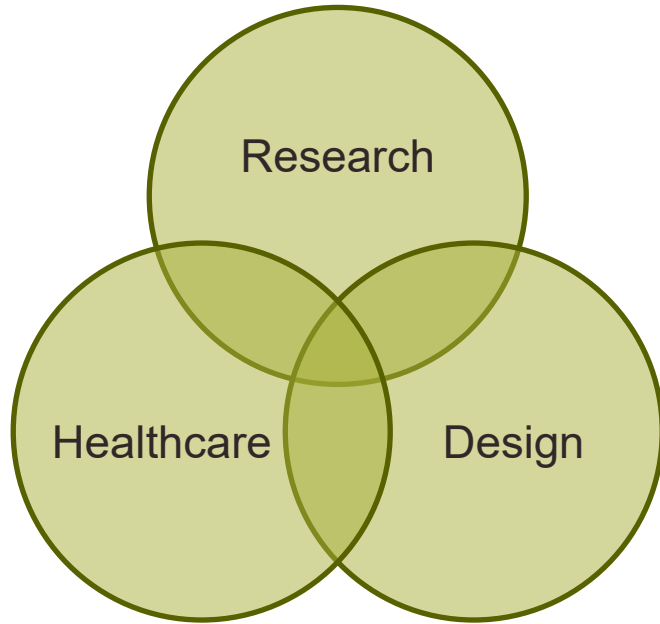
Engage in understanding the language



IN CRISIS	STRUGGLING	SURVIVING	THRIVING	EXCELLING
Very anxious Very low mood Absenteeism Exhausted Very poor sleep Weight loss	Anxious Depressed Tired Poor performance Poor sleep Poor appetite	Worried Nervous Irritable Sad Trouble sleeping Distracted Withdrawn	Positive Calm Performing Sleeping well Eating normally Normal social activity	Cheerful Joyful Energetic High performance Flow Fully realising potential

Source: Delphis Continuum of Mental Health Model

Design from Evidence, Not Assumption

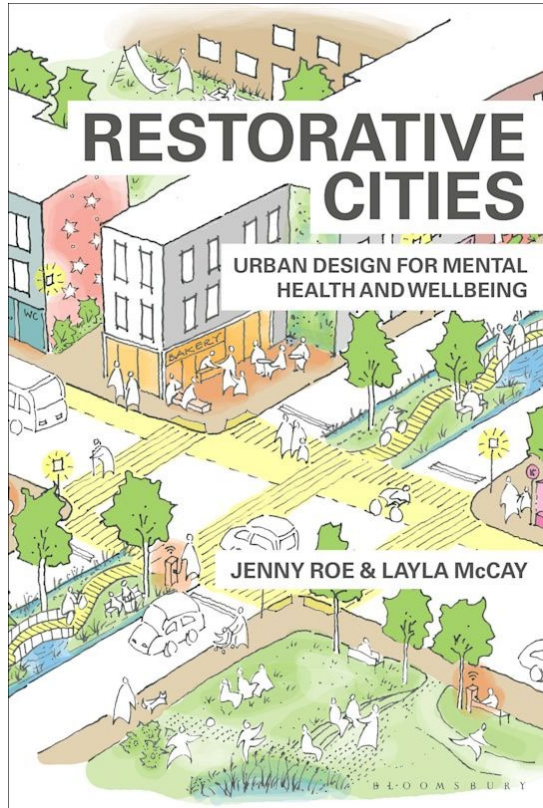


The research exists.
The resources exist.

The missing piece is bringing them into the room from day one, before wellness has a chance to get cut.




Restorative Cities



Centre for Urban Design + Mental Health

UD/MH
JOURNAL OF URBAN DESIGN AND MENTAL HEALTH
Edition 4 | February 2019 | www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com

SPOTLIGHT ON HONG KONG
GATED GURGAON
SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
AIR POLLUTION & MENTAL HEALTH



ALONE TOGETHER EDITION

UD/MH
JOURNAL OF URBAN DESIGN AND MENTAL HEALTH
Edition 5 | September 2019 | www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com

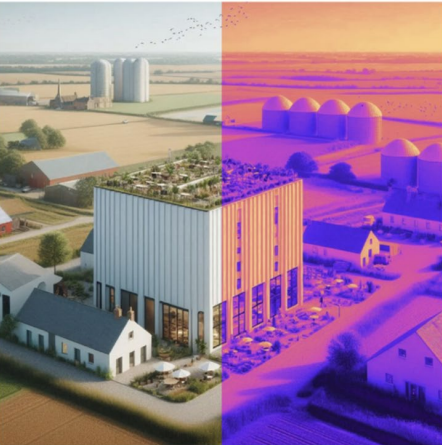
PLAY AND MENTAL HEALTH
SCHOOL DESIGN
SUICIDE PREVENTION
LAS VEGAS INSIGHT



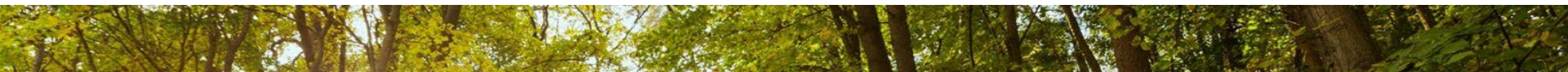
URBAN PLAY EDITION

UD/MH
JOURNAL OF URBAN DESIGN AND MENTAL HEALTH
Volume 10 | 2025 | www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com

ABSENCE OF URBAN DESIGN
CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION
INVISIBLE IN THE CITY
INADEQUATE MEASURES



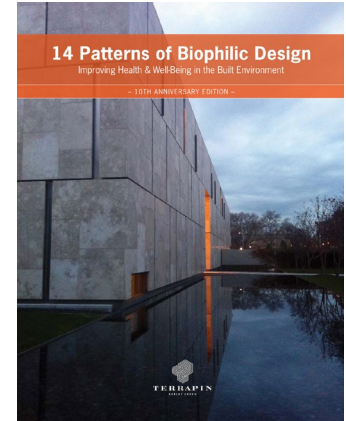
UNCERTAINTIES EDITION
Exploring the Uncertainties at the Intersection of
Urban Design and Mental Health



Terrapin Bright Green

Health Outcomes from Biophilic Experiences Key Benefits by Research

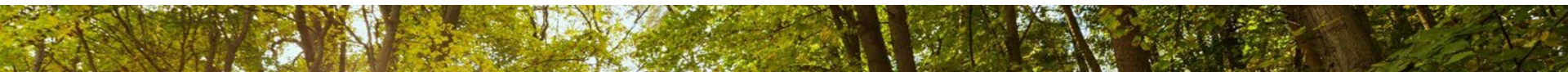
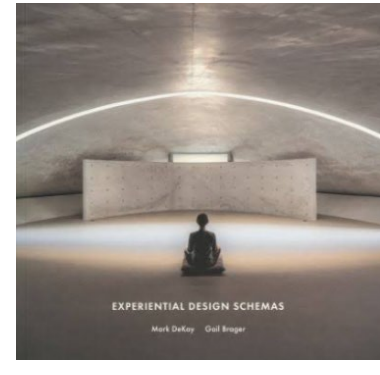
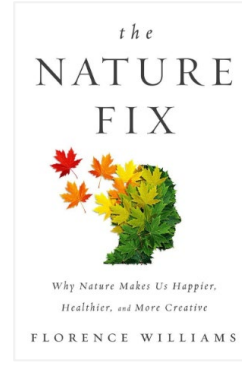
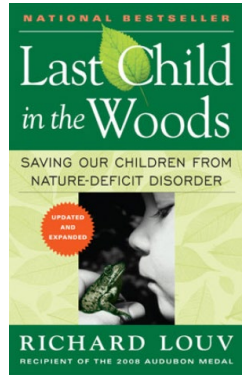
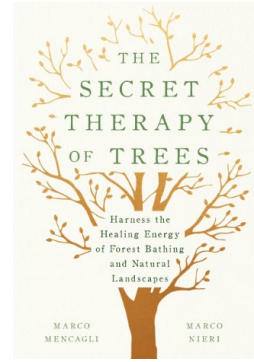
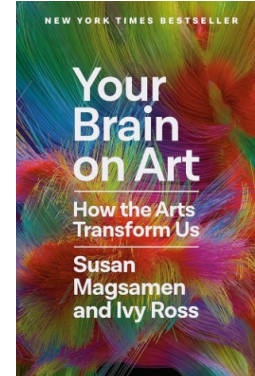
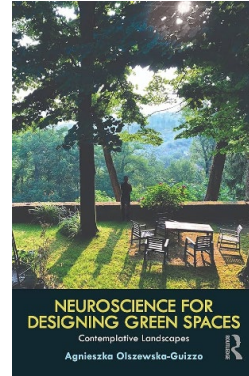
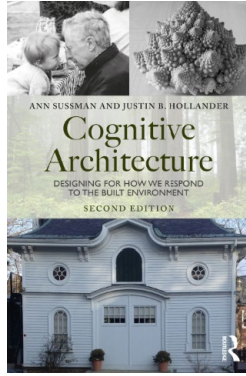
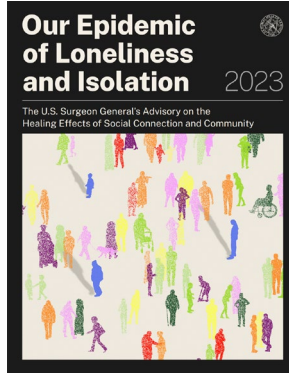
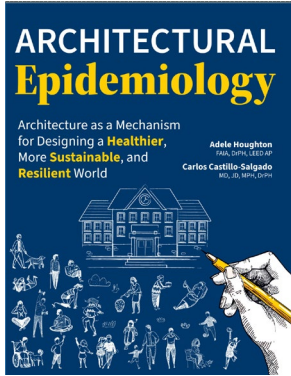
	Biophilic Pattern	Physiological Stress Reduction	Cognitive Performance	Emotion, Mood & Preference
Nature in the Space	Visual Connection with Nature	Heart rate, Blood pressure, Parasympathetic system activity	Mental engagement, Attentiveness	Attitude, Neurological rumination, Motivation, Future discounting
	Non-Visual Connection with Nature	Blood pressure, Stress hormones, Immune function, Relaxation, Joint flexibility	Cognitive performance and fatigue recovery, Creativity	Perceived mental health, Tranquility, Pain management, Energy moderation, Environmental stewardship
	Non-Rhythmic Sensory Stimuli	Heart rate, Systolic blood pressure, Sympathetic nervous system		Dwell time, Behavioral attention and exploration
	Thermal & Airflow Variability	Comfort, Well-being, Productivity	Task performance, Productivity	Perceived temporal and spatial pleasure (alliesthesia)
	Presence of Water	Overall stress, Heart rate, Blood pressure	Cognitive performance, Creativity	Positive emotion, Tranquility
	Dynamic & Diffuse Light	Circadian system functioning, Visual comfort	Cognitive and behavioral performance	Attitude, Overall happiness
	Connection w/ Natural Systems	Overall health		Perception of environment
Natural Analogues	Biomorphic Forms & Patterns	Stress recovery	Learning outcomes	View preference
	Material Connection with Nature	Heart rate variability, Comfort, Calming, Blood pressure, Stress hormones	Task performance, Creativity	Material preference
	Complexity & Order	Perceptual and physiological stress responses	Environmental navigation, Learning outcomes, Mental relaxation	View preference
Nature of the Space	Prospect	Overall stress, Perceived safety, Comfort		Visual interest, Fatigue, Irritation, Boredom
	Refuge	Restoration, Perceived safety		Visual preference, Social-emotional learning
	Mystery			Pleasure response, Visual preference
	Risk/Peril			Pleasure response
	Awe	Stress related symptoms, Increased parasympathetic activity, Reduced inflammation	Capacity for attention, Reduced self-referential processing	Pro-social behavior, Attitude, Overall happiness



SOURCE: Health Outcomes from Biophilic Experiences | 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design | Browning, Ryan & Clancy, 10th Anniversary Edition, 2024. New York: Terrapin Bright Green, LLC.



Additional resources



Start where you are

Connection

1

Spaces that reduce social isolation without forcing interaction. Porches, shared thresholds, programming overlap, and community anchors that invite but do not require.

2

Choice and Agency

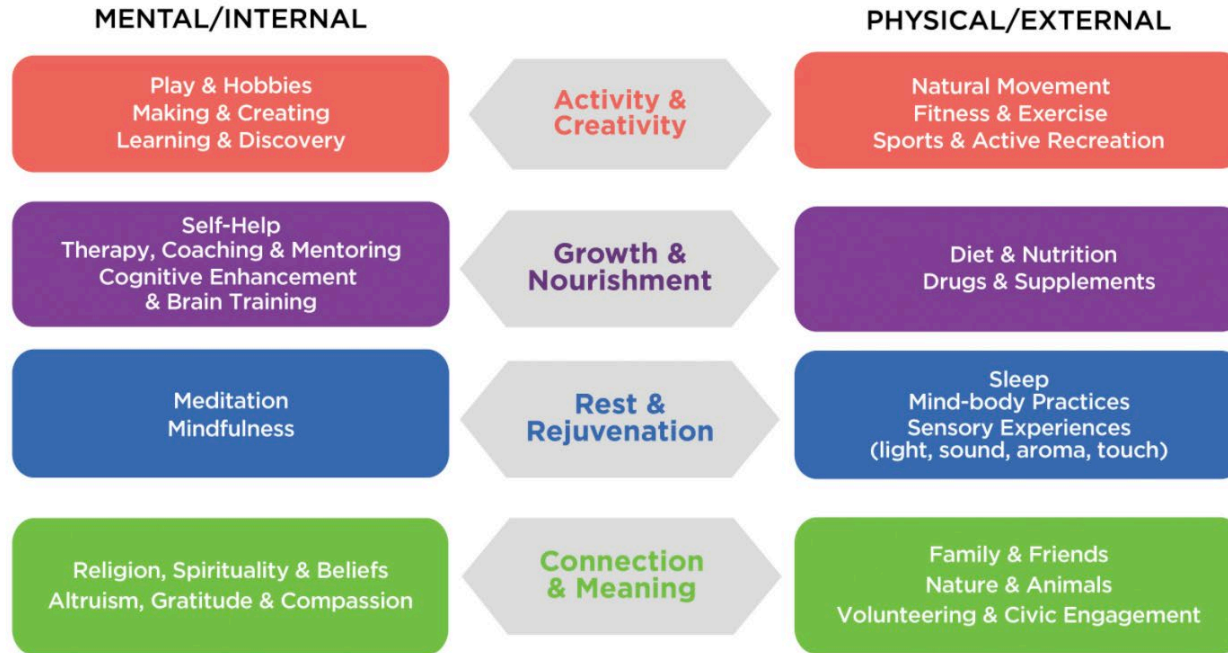
Users need control over their environment: noise level, light, privacy, pace. Design that removes choice removes mental wellness benefit.

3

Everyday Experience

Wellness is not a special trip to a facility. It lives in the daily walk, the porch, the transit stop, the pocket park. Design the ordinary with extraordinary care.

Pathways to Mental Wellness



Be purposeful in design

1 **Design Responsibility**

Wellness is not a clinical afterthought. It is shaped by every spatial decision we make.

2 **Connection, Choice & Everyday Experience**

Design that enables belonging, autonomy, and repeated positive interaction. Not a single amenity — a system of moments.



Be purposeful in design

3 **Diverse Lived Experiences**

Underserved communities — disabled, neurodiverse, low-income, BIPOC — must be centered in research, process, and outcome.

4 **Name It**

Who is this for? What mental health outcome does it support? Design responsibility means making the implicit explicit — in every brief.

5 **Build in Choice**

Social or solitary. Active or restorative. Indoors or outside. Embed at every scale: site, building, unit, landscape, and programming.

Measure what you mean

**Track
outcomes**

**Stay curious
and informed**

**Advocate,
especially
when it feels
hard.**

We cannot have health without mental health

Even quietly, **the places we shape, shape us in return.**

With intention, they can become places of healing.





02

Making a Place for Us **with Disability-Centered Design**

Elliott Kenney
University of Maryland MLA

Who are public spaces designed for?

Thinking Beyond ADA Minimum Requirements

ADA limited in scope, concerned with access needs for few disabilities, physical access without attention to social/interpersonal use

Belonging = Full Experience

Attention to full unique sensory, social, cognitive, mobile experiences. What sensations are enjoyable? How do we engage and interact with space, with friends, family, or neighbors?

Neuroinclusion with Disability-Centered Design Approach

This presentation focused on neuroinclusive design but uses a disability-centered design approach that is broadly applicable to other disabled communities.

Neuroinclusion (and Beyond)

Disabled belonging is a wellness issue.

Access, usability, and sense of belonging improve mental & physical health and increases visibility & public participation

This presentation is focused on **neuroinclusive design**, BUT....



A disability-centered design approach can be used by & for any disabled community



Overall framework can be adapted for general wellness-focused design (mental health, stress relief, grief, etc.)

Clarifying Language



Identity-First Language

“Disabled person” (not person-first language, ex: “person with disabilities”)

Identity Labels

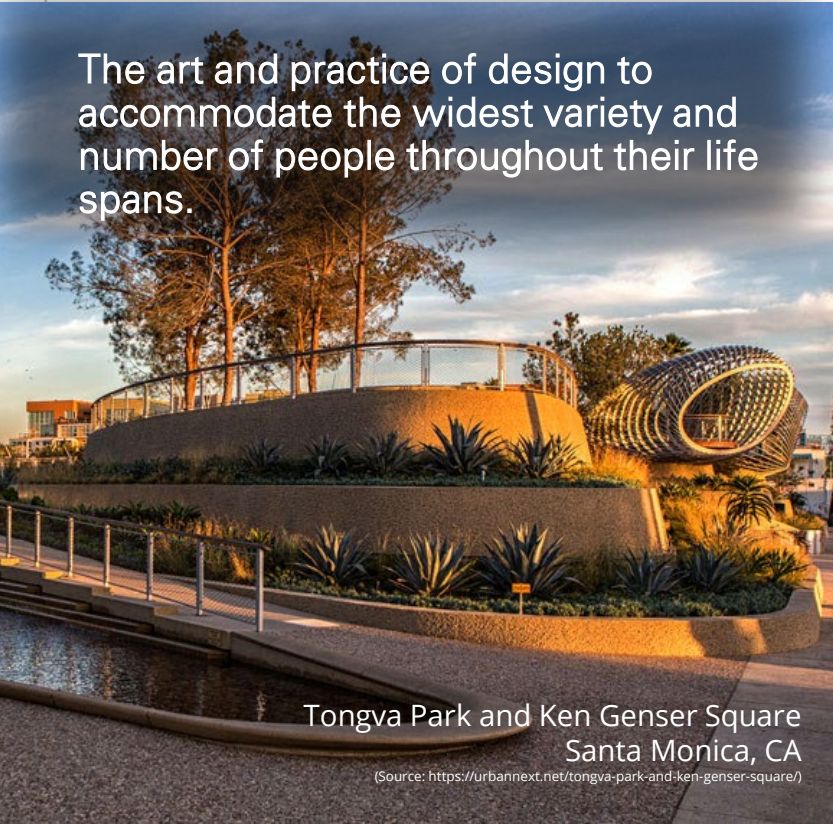
“Autism” (not medical labels, ex: “autism spectrum disorder”)

Neurodiverse, Neuroinclusion, Neurodivergence

Not all interchangeable. **Neurodiversity / neurodiverse** = diversity (including normative). **Neuroinclusion** = similarly, inclusion of all. **Neurodivergent** = divergent from normative

Universal Design:

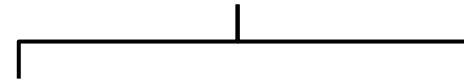
The art and practice of design to accommodate the widest variety and number of people throughout their life spans.



Tongva Park and Ken Genser Square
Santa Monica, CA

(Source: <https://urbannext.net/tongva-park-and-ken-genser-square/>)

Improved, Imperfect Approach



Benefits

Intersectional

Beyond bare minimum

Centers access (no
“back way access”)

Values flexible use

Weaknesses

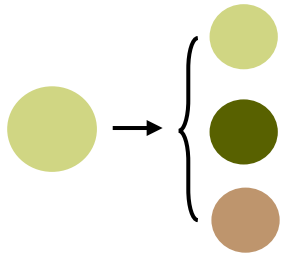
Inconsistent
implementation
“just good design”

Often limited disability
scope (ADA)

Participation not
emphasized

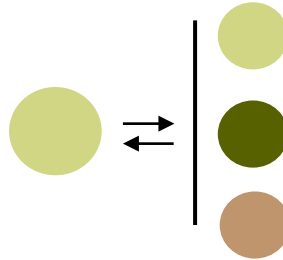
Continuing the Trend

Universal Design



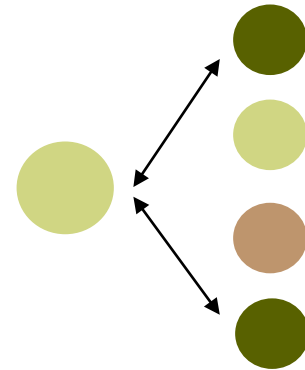
Human-Centered Design

Similar to Universal Design, but **emphasizes participation**



Design from the Margins

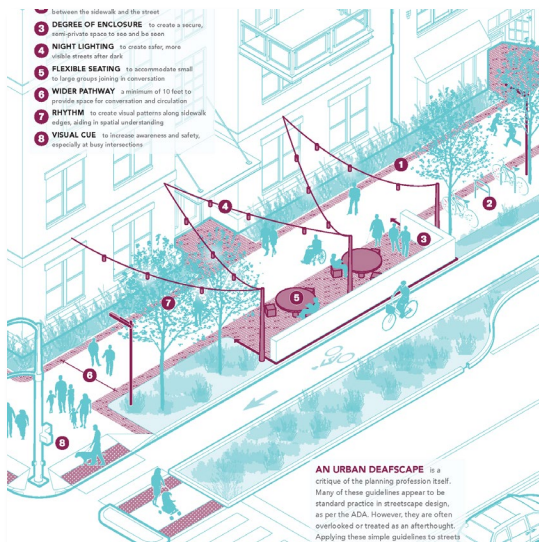
Similar to human-centered design, but with **focus on most marginalized**



Evidence of an Emerging Approach

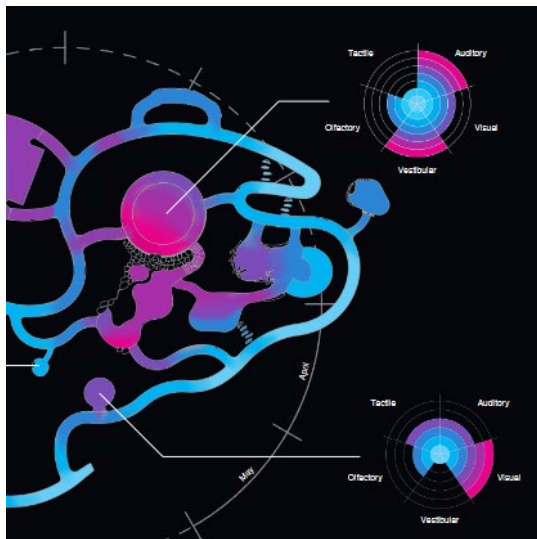
DeafScape

By Alexa Vaughn (2018)



Hypo-/Hypersensitivity Mapping Methodology

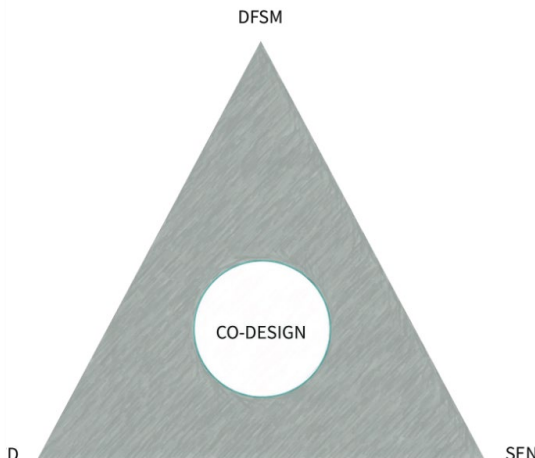
© Benjamin Jensen (2023)



Sensory-Responsive Environments Framework

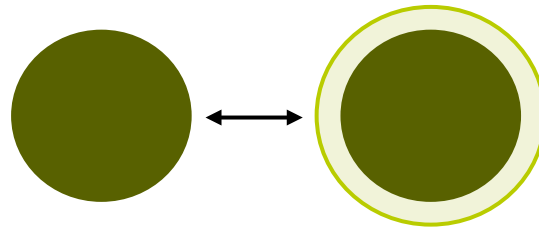
By Kathryn Finnigan (2023)

SENSORY-RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FRAMEWORK



Disability-Centered Design (DCD)

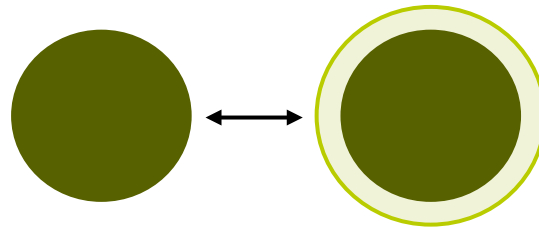
The art and practice of design that celebrates disability by centering the unique patterns of disabled spatial experiences.



Disability-Centered Design (DCD)

The art and practice of design that celebrates disability by centering the unique patterns of disablilst spatial experiences.

Expertise within disabled communities



Design how we experience space

Testing DCD with a Neuroinclusive Public Park Design

GOAL

Design the public conservation park in a way that **centers neurodivergent ways of experiencing** space

Objectives

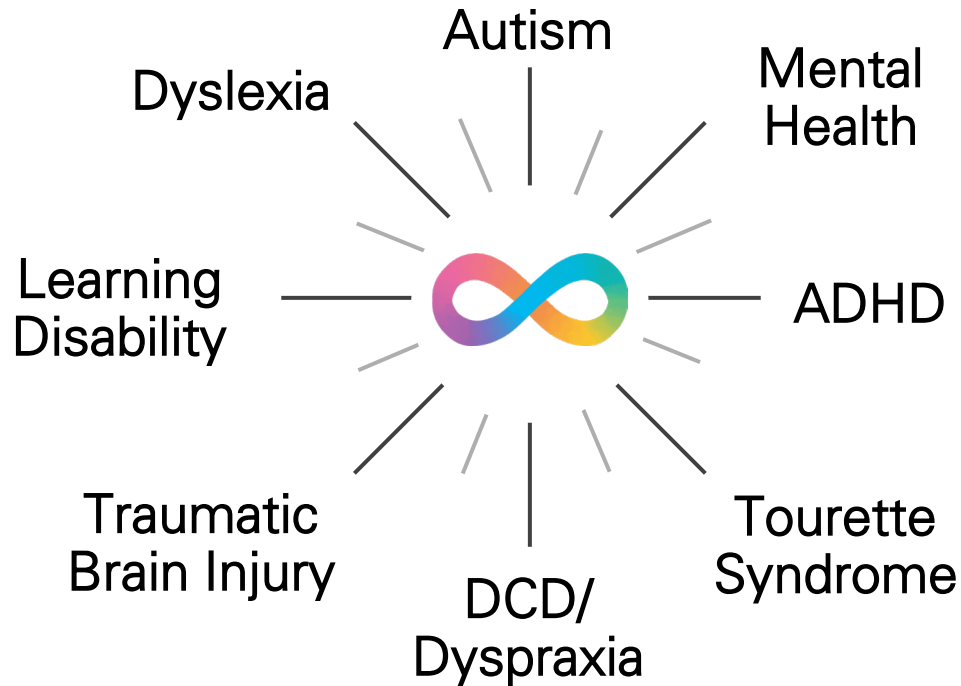
?

?


?

What is Neurodivergence?

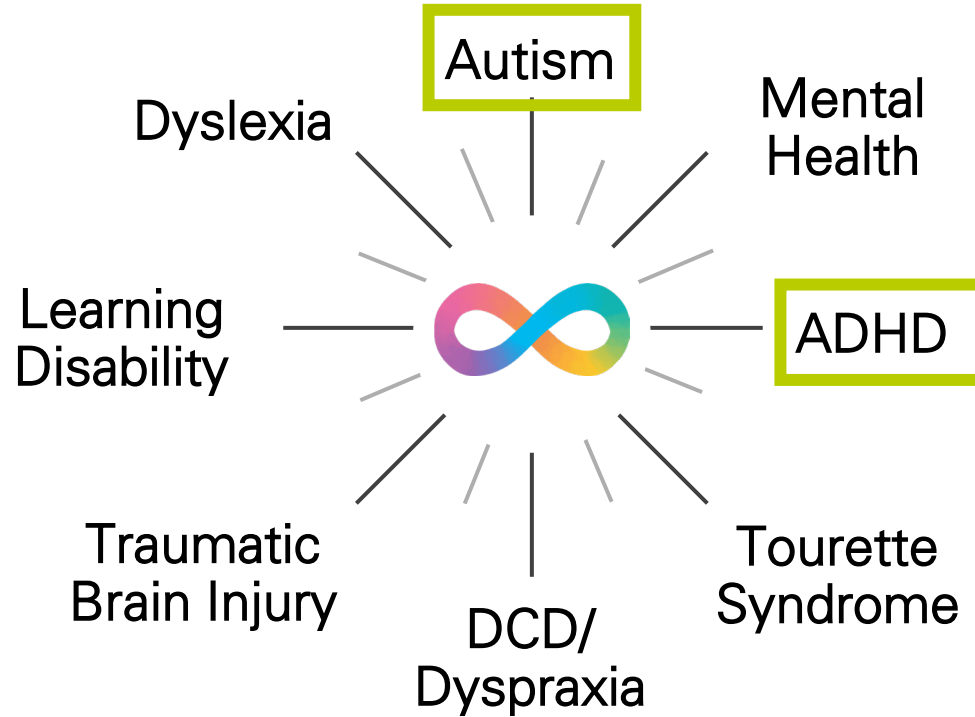
Not an
exhaustive list



Not every
neurodivergent
person considers
themselves disabled



What is Neurodivergence?



Existing Neuroinclusive Design Guidelines*

* Very little for outdoor landscapes

Autism

Include quiet areas / sensory relief spaces

Design for full spectrum of hyper- to hyposensitivity (sensory avoidant to sensory seeking)

Clarity of rules and uses—avoid ambiguity

Possible color and material preferences

ADHD

?????

Research that unregulated attention hinders navigation

Framework Overview



Expert Conversations
Literature & Guidelines **Site Analysis**

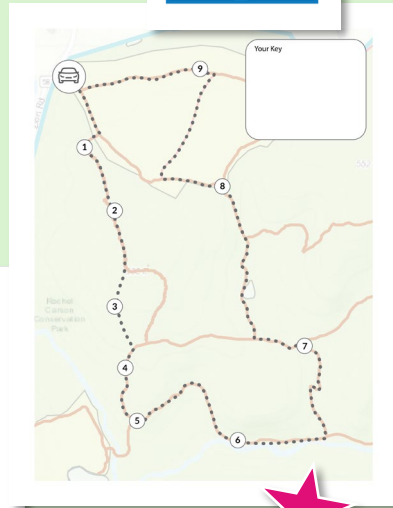


Focus on experience of space as well as accessibility concerns

Collaborative, creative, expressive

Focus on personal and social use preferences

Online first CRITICAL PLANNING JOURNAL VOL. 6
Accessibility Auditing: Four Case Studies



INSTRUCTIONS

AT STOPS

Cue Card Questions: Answer Questions with Smile/Frown Cue Cards
When prompted, hold up a smile or frown card to answer a question. Whenever a cue card question is asked, Elliott will clarify how to use the cards to answer.

Smile Card: Generally, the smile card means things like "more good, more strong, etc." and the frown card means things like "less good, less strong, etc."
No Card: You can also answer by not holding up a card. Not holding up a card always indicates a neutral answer.

Open Ended Questions: Verbal/Written Response
Answer open-ended questions with a verbal response.

Written Response: You can also write your response on the scrap paper on your clipboard and show it to today's volunteer to notate and read aloud.
Elliott will always clarify when a question is open-ended.

BETWEEN STOPS

Speak (Write) Up: Verbal/Written Observation
In between stops, if something stands out to you (sensation/sound/etc.) or you want to share an observation related to navigation or signage, you can comment out loud to the group.

Written Observation: You can also write your observation on the scrap paper on your clipboard and show it to today's volunteer to notate and read aloud.

ANYTIME

Notate Map: Mark Observations/Reactions on Map
You can use any or all of the colored pens and stickers provided to log observations, thoughts, or reactions on your map.

You can decide what the colors and stickers mean but make sure to log your meanings in this key box at the top right corner of the map.

Upload Photos: Capture Something Notable
If something about the landscape stands out to you, you can take a photo of it and upload it using this QR code.

Make sure to write a bit about why you took the photo and mark on your map where the photo was taken.

Sensory Audit

Feedback from Existing Design

Conducted at park with ecological & contextual similarities to the design site but with existing trails and infrastructure

Applicable Feedback

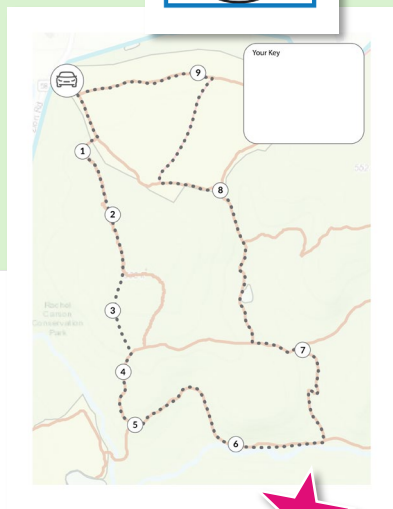
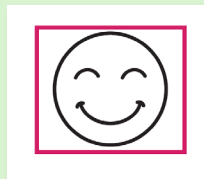
Pre-determined route with stopping points at design features & relevant environments

Assessing Experience of Space

Focus on sensory palette & preferences, trail design, signage design, navigability

Flexibility and Choice

Numerous ways to give feedback, allowing participants to fit to preferences and needs



INSTRUCTIONS

AT STOPS



Cue Card Questions: Answer Questions with Smile/Frown Cue Cards



When prompted, hold up a smile or frown card to answer a question. Whenever a cue card question is asked, Elliott will clarify how to use the cards to answer.



Generally, the smile card means things like "more good, more strong, etc." and the frown card means things like "less good, less strong, etc."



You can also answer by not holding up a card. Not holding up a card always indicates a neutral answer.



Open Ended Questions: Verbal/Written Response

Answer open-ended questions with a verbal response.



You can also write your response on the scrap paper on your clipboard and show it to today's volunteer to notate and read aloud.

Elliott will always clarify when a question is open-ended.

BETWEEN STOPS



Speak (Write) Up: Verbal/Written Observation



In between stops, if something stands out to you (sensation/sound/etc.) or you want to share an observation related to navigation or signage, you can comment out loud to the group.



You can also write your observation on the scrap paper on your clipboard and show it to today's volunteer to notate and read aloud.



Notate Map: Mark Observations/Reactions on Map

You can use any or all of the colored pens and stickers provided to log observations, thoughts, or reactions on your map.

You can decide what the colors and stickers mean but make sure to log your meanings in the key box at the top right corner of the map.



Upload Photos: Capture Something Notable



If something about the landscape stands out to you, you can take a photo of it and upload it using this QR code.



Make sure to write a bit about why you took the photo and mark on your map where the photo was taken.

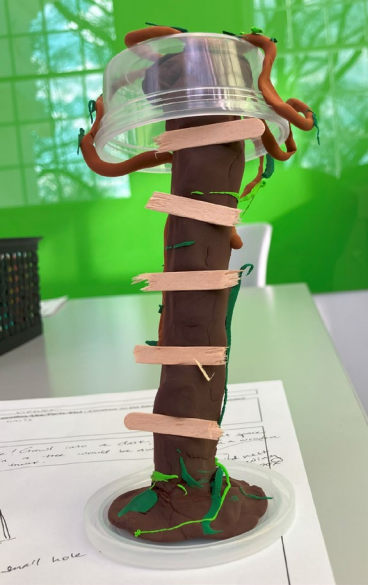
Response Examples

Q: What draws your attention here?

“The sound of the wind. You can close your eyes here because you feel safe. You can feel the wind and sun on your skin. It’s delicious.”

Q: Is there anything here that feels uncomfortable?

“I wish the bridge felt more intentional – I like that it blends in and feels like a natural extension to the trail, but the metal parts snag my eye in a way that feels interruptive.”

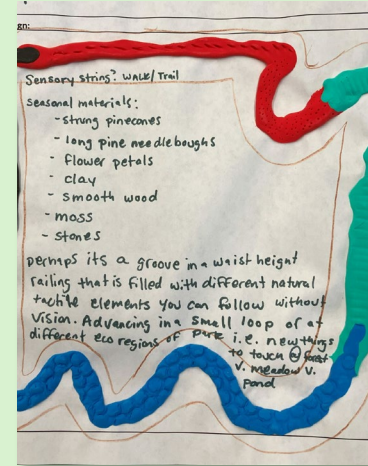


Event Name: # People in your group:

Event Description:

When would the event take place? How long will it last? Where in the park will it take place?

Who is it for? How far will they travel? How will they get there? How long will they stay?



ACTIVITY 1: PERFECT DAY INSTRUCTIONS

WORK ON YOUR OWN: 20 MINUTES

PROMPT: What would be your perfect day at the Lower Serpentine Barrens Conservation Park?

Consider: What time of year is it? Who are you with? What are you doing? What are you seeing? Where are you going?

Write a Short Narrative.

Use the worksheet to write a short story of your perfect day in the park. You can use one of the example park plans as a basis or you can come up with your own ideas for what is in the park and how it looks.

If you don't have enough space on the worksheet, you can continue on the back or use a second page.

At the end of the 20 minutes, staple all of your pages together and leave them on the table.

Remember: You only have 20 minutes! If you find yourself running out of time but have more to say, you can outline the rest of your story instead of writing in full sentences.

Design Workshop

Focus on Design Site

Two-fold interest: generate feedback on concept designs and direct preferences for site uses & features

Flexible Engagement

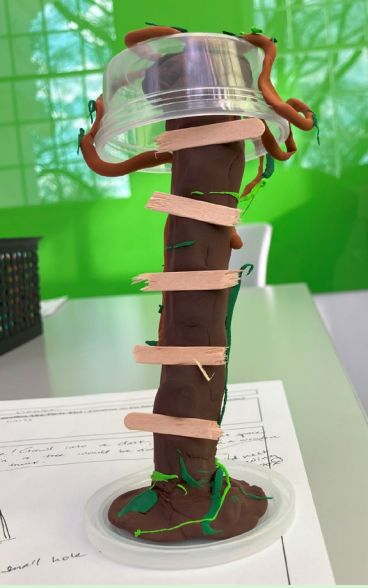
Concurrent activities allowed participants to direct their own participation

Many Ways to Imagine

Diversity in activity types triangulated preferences and deepened engagement

Tapping into the Power of Creativity

Creative & expressive activities prompt participants to imagine experiences



Event Name:	# People in your group
Event Description:	
When would the event take place? How long will it last? Where in the park will it take place?	
Who is it for? How far will they travel? How will they get there? How long will they stay?	



Response Examples

“A perfect day at the park would consist of a low-key art class. The group, maybe 5 – 10 people, would start at a notable landmark that everyone could easily find, such as a gazebo. Everyone would get a sketchpad and pencils, or maybe a pad of watercolor paper and paint. Then we would all walk around the park’s walking trail. We’d stop at all the interesting features: a rock pile, the pond, a creek, a particularly attention-grabbing tree, a patch of native wildflowers, whatever.”

ACTIVITY 1: PERFECT DAY INSTRUCTIONS

WORK ON YOUR OWN: 20 MINUTES

PROMPT:

What would be your perfect day at the Lower Serpentine Barrens Conservation Park?

Consider: What time of year is it? Who are you with? What are you doing? What are you seeing? Where are you going?



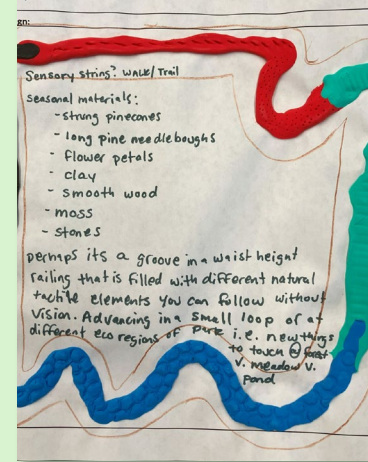
Write a Short Narrative.

Use the worksheet to write a short story of your perfect day in the park. You can use one of the example park plans as a basis or you can come up with your own ideas for what is in the park and how it looks.

If you don't have enough space on the worksheet, you can continue on the back or use a second page.

At the end of the 20 minutes, staple all of your pages together and leave them on the table.

Remember: You only have 20 minutes! If you find yourself running out of time but have more to say, you can outline the rest of your story instead of writing in full sentences.



Input + Conditions Drive Objectives

GOAL

Design the public conservation park in a way that **centers neurodivergent ways of experiencing** space

Objectives

Develop **visual and written systems** for clear and thorough communication about the site.

Develop a **nature-based design** that allows full engagement with and immersion in the natural (non-anthropogenic) environment.

(Sensory Audit)

Include areas that **facilitate interaction** through art, community events, and sensory play.

(Design Workshop)

Reduce current rates of soil erosion and prevent new causes of erosion.

(Site Conditions)

How Does This Inform Design?



Zones



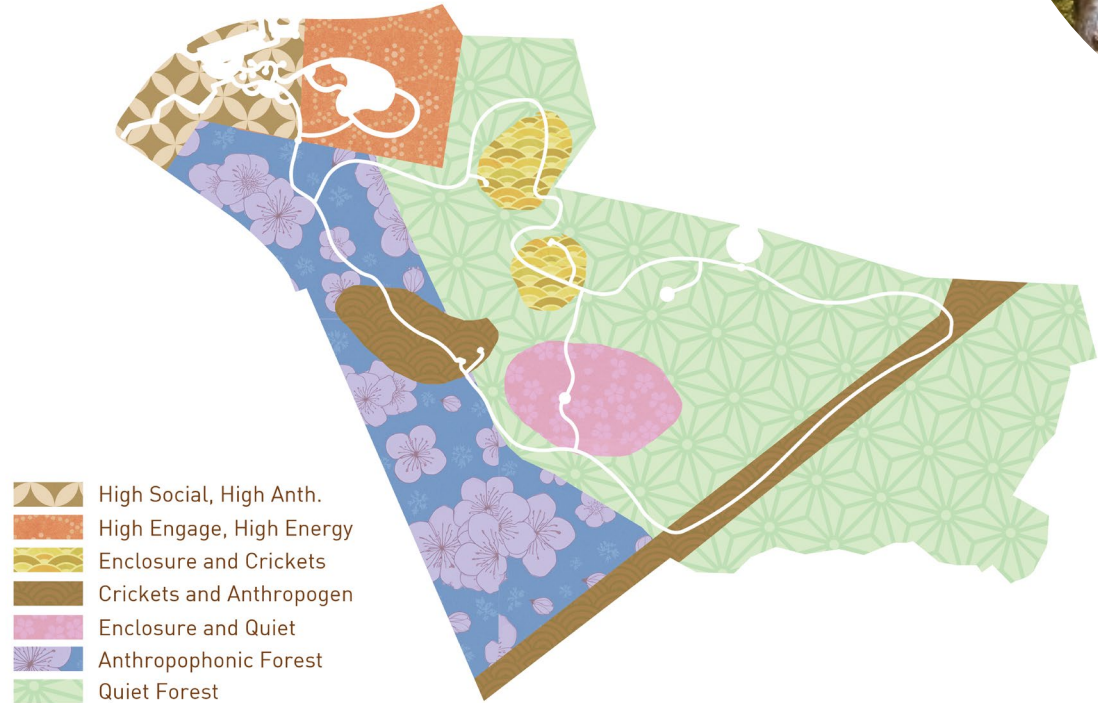
Themes



Materials



Features



How Does This Inform Design?



Zones



Themes



Materials



Features



Places to Absorb



Places to Prospect



Places to Climb



More Information,
the Better



Immersion in
Natural Aesthetic



Clear and Easy Trail



Separation of Trail
and Stops



Opportunities to
Touch



How Does This Inform Design?



Zones



Themes



Materials



Features



PAVILION PARK SIGN

PAVILION INFO SIGN

TRAILHEAD

Front Side Thin Wide Side
RAILING (Learning Deck) TRAILSIDE

How Does This Inform Design?



Zones



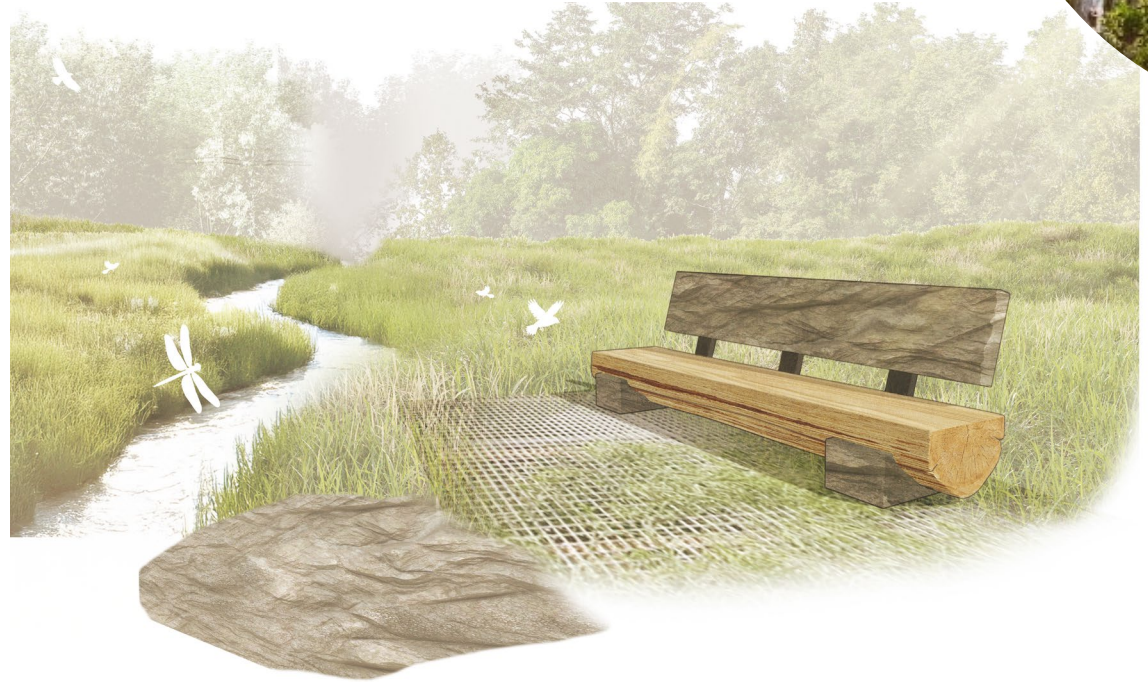
Themes



Materials



Features



When Complexity Improves Design

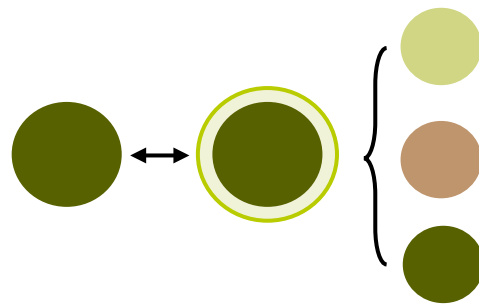
Universal Design is a Great Wingman

Bolster DCD with UD.

UD can fill gaps where DCD approach is weakest, creating more **intersectional** space

Balancing with Conservation Needs

DCD can drive access and usability in areas of a site where necessary conservation strategies limit options for access infrastructure.





Contact

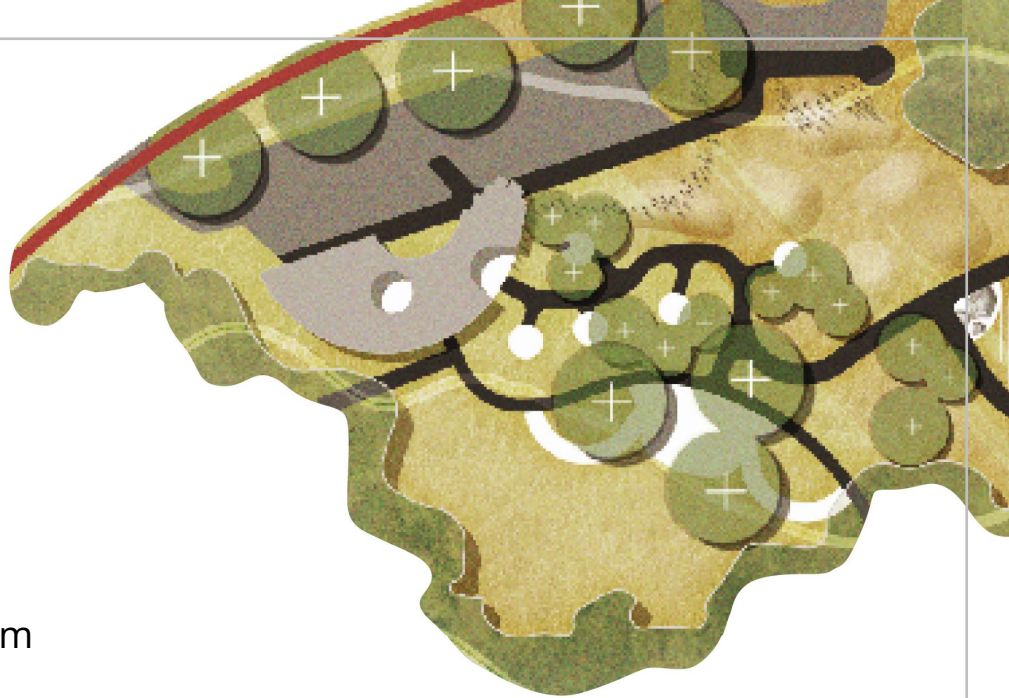


Elliott Kenney

kelliott.kenney@gmail.com

203.430.9403

[linkedin.com/in/elliott-kenney](https://www.linkedin.com/in/elliott-kenney)





3

Wellness Evolution

Hanbury | Campus Housing & Student Life Environments
Tom Zeigenfuss | Principal, Higher Education Market Leader



From After-thought to Wellness Ecosystem

Where We Started


On campuses – residence halls were primarily seen as places to sleep and keep your things. Wellness - if thought of at all - was relegated to basement weight rooms in left-over space and Counseling Services were “somewhere else.”

Where We Are Now

Now residence halls have become holistic wellness ecosystems: social environments, quiet refuge, sensory comfort, daylight, and nature - designed to optimize all aspects of wellness.

What Changed

Student mental health data, loneliness research, and cross-disciplinary collaboration forced a new framework for housing and campus life.





GYM RULES

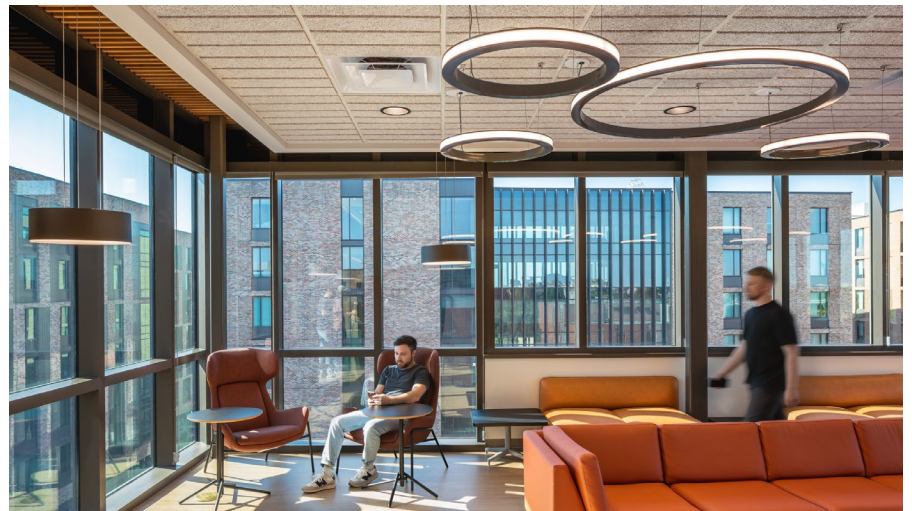
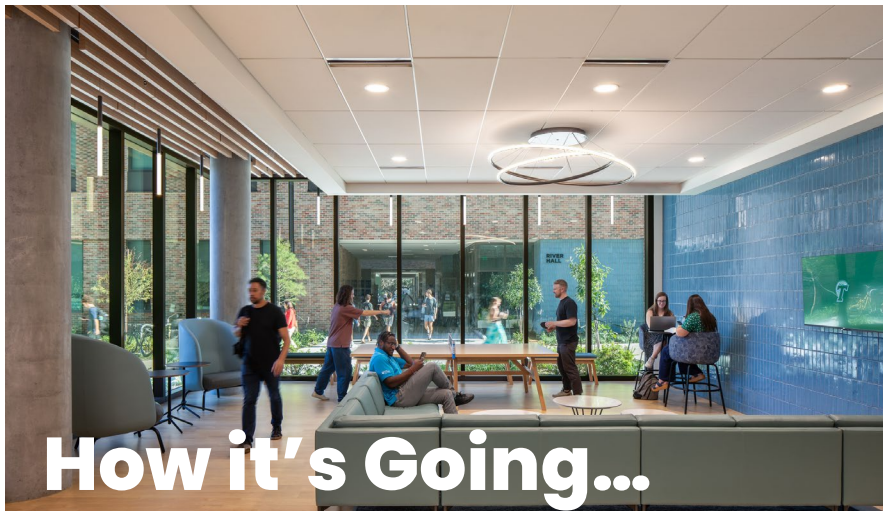
- Use Equipment Safely
- Be Courteous to Others
- No Food or Drink
- Wipe Down Machines

RACK YOUR WEIGHTS

THINK BEFORE YOU DRINK



How it Started...



Why now? Understanding of wellness is changing



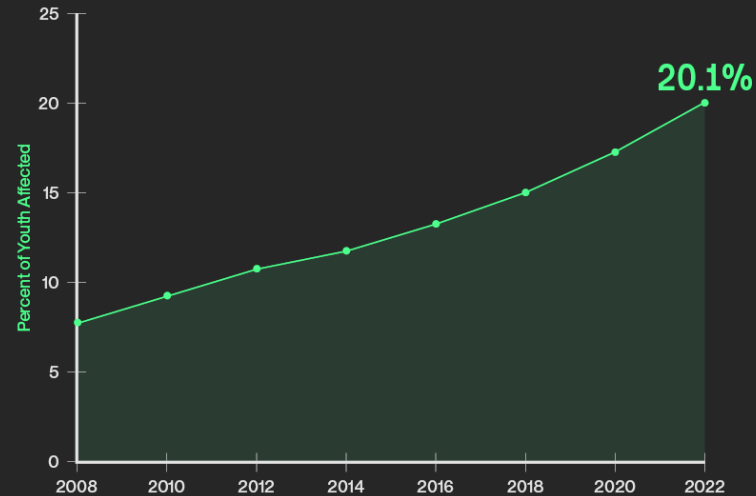
The Jed Foundation

Why now? The student context is changing



DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Anxiety & Depression Levels of 12-17 year olds

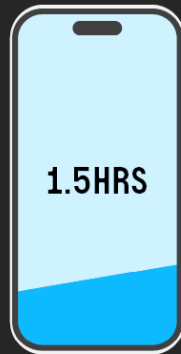


Why now? The student context is changing

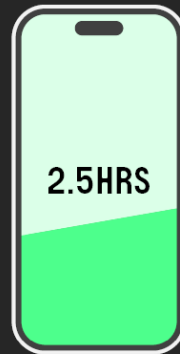


DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

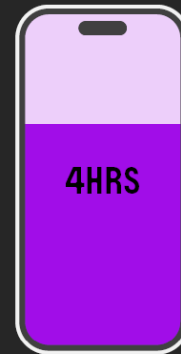
Hours of Screen Time per Day at Age 10



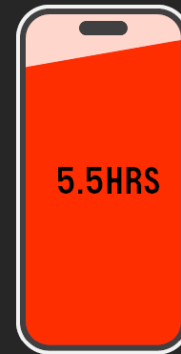
GEN X



GEN Y
Millennials



GEN Z



GEN ALPHA

Why now? The student context is changing

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Future Trends in Pedagogies and Strategies for Learning



Shortened Attention Spans

- "Micro-learning"
- Small, Digestible Bursts

Visual-First Communication

- Video assignments
- Visual storytelling

Adaptive Learning

- Algorithmic Personalization
- Encourage Self-Led Exploration

Peer-to-Peer Learning

- More Collaborative Discussion
- Validation & Critical Thinking

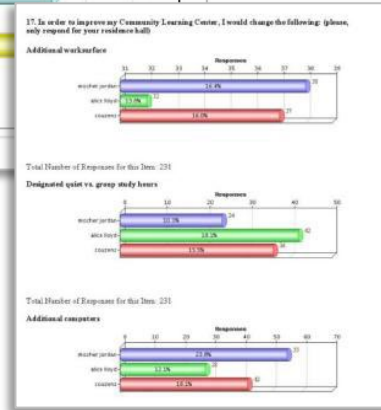
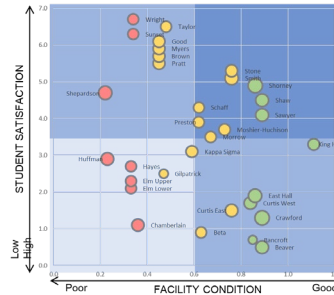
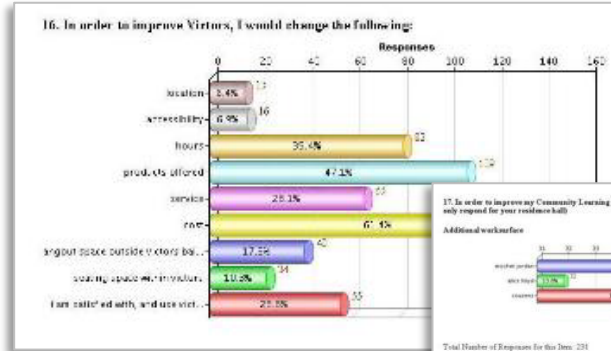


Case Study: Virginia Tech – redefining wellness

Residential Well-being creates intentional residential communities that are characterized by belonging, flourishing, compassion for self and others, and meaningful engagement in the Virginia Tech community.

Virginia Tech Residential Well-being Mission

Understanding the Problem: Start with the Data





Understanding the Problem: Start with the Data

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Psychological well-being
- Obesity
- Sleep
- Digital well-being



Defining wellbeing: What dimensions matter?

BELONGING: Sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.

-Strayhorn, 2019

Belonging Increased by:

- Engagement & Co-curricular involvement
- Cross-cultural Experiences
- Positive engagement with faculty, staff, and peers
- Feeling respected by peers
- Feeling cared about by faculty & staff



Defining wellbeing: What dimensions matter?

FLOURISHING: Flourishing emerges from pro-social activities, socializing with friends, and meaningful involvement. It is also understood as something that can be undermined by unhealthy digital habits.

Flourishing Increased by:

- Meaningful involvement
- Pro-social activities
- Strong sense of Belonging
- Socializing with friends
- Negative association with social media VT example: Digital Well-being/First Digitally Well” campus



Defining wellbeing: What dimensions matter?

LONELINESS: Research at Virginia Tech suggests that loneliness is shaped by how easy it is to build friendships, join common-purpose activities, and find quieter, lower-stakes ways to meet people. Initiatives such as the Connection Project, mindfulness and meditation programs, and shared cultural experiences form part of the toolkit for reducing loneliness and building connection.

Loneliness Impacted by:

- Decreased with a roommate
- social skills interventions work (VT example: The Connection Project)
- Common goal activities
- For introverts: mindfulness & meditation
- Enhanced social support
- Increase social contact
- Shared cultural experiences

Framework: Creating priorities

Hierarchy of Need (Simplified Maslow)





Framework: People / Place / Purpose

1 People

Belonging, identity, and the felt sense of welcome. Who does this space serve — and do they feel it?

2 Place

Daily environments that support mental health through light, nature, acoustics, spatial variety, and restorative design.

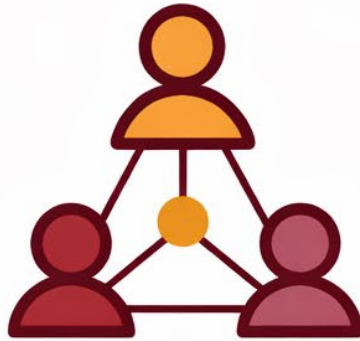
3 Purpose

Connection to meaning, community, and routine. Design that gives people a reason to return — and to stay.

Making Change: Wellness initiatives



**Better
Together**



**The
Connection
Project**

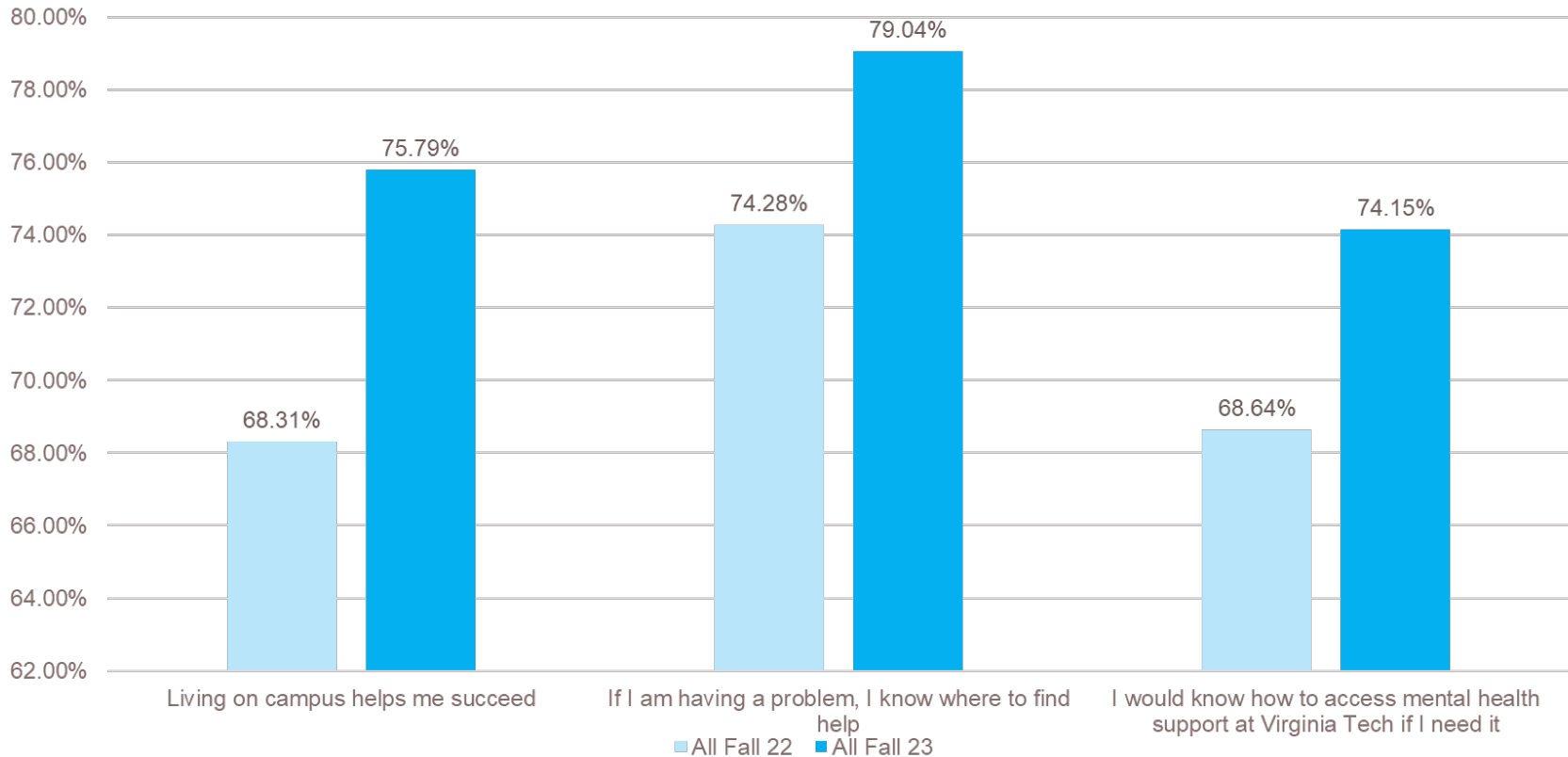


**Digital
Wellness**



**Leave No
Hokie Behind**

Measuring Progress: Updating the Data



Measuring Progress: Updating the Data

75.8%

I feel that I belong at Virginia Tech.

80.7%

89.9%

I feel I'm part of the campus community.

93.8%

70.6%

I am involved in clubs, organizations, and/or employment opportunities.

73.4%

89.9%

There are faculty and staff who care about me at this institution.

93.8%

Measuring Progress: Updating the Data

Healthy Minds, 2021: 34% of students were flourishing.

Mean (Range 8-56)	Percent Flourishing (Score: 48-56)
42.74	33.9

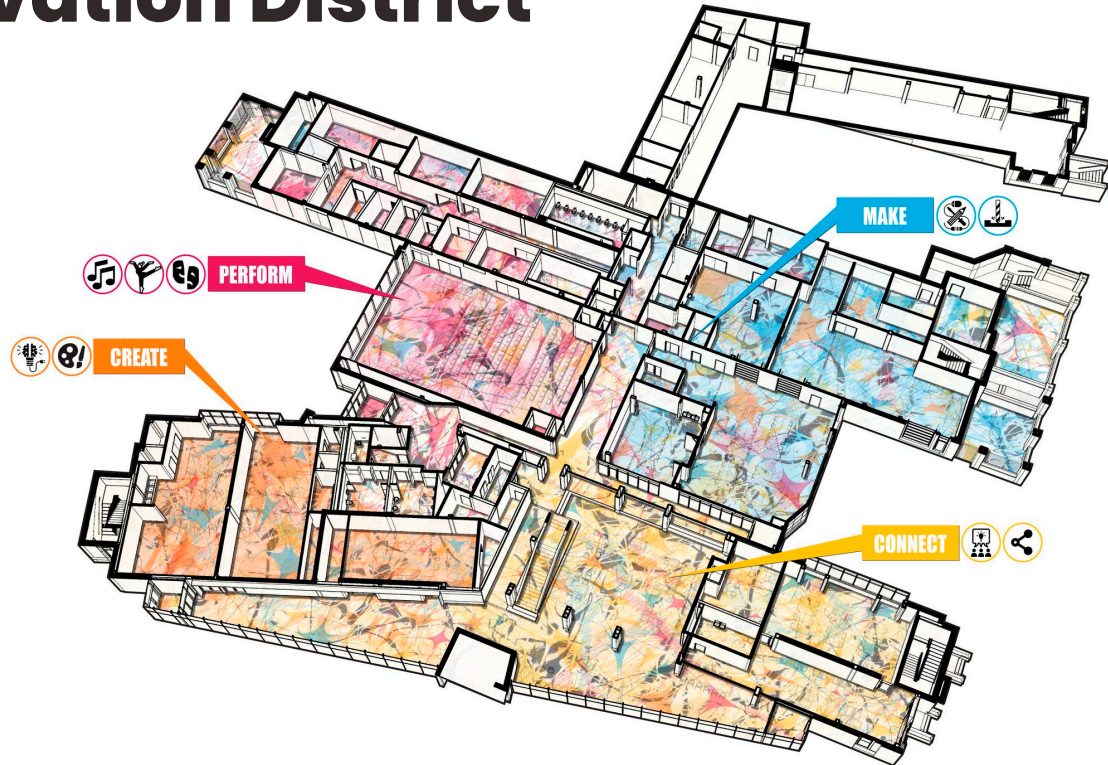
National College Health Assessment F2021: 45% were flourishing.

Mean (Range 8-56)	Percent Flourishing (Score: 48-56)
43.68	45

Residential Experiences Survey: 59% were flourishing.

Population	Mean (Range 8-56)	Percent Flourishing (Score 48-56)
All Fall 2022 (n=2000)	47.8	58.8%
All Fall 2023 (n=1333)	47.8	59.6%

Maintaining Progress: Creativity & Innovation District

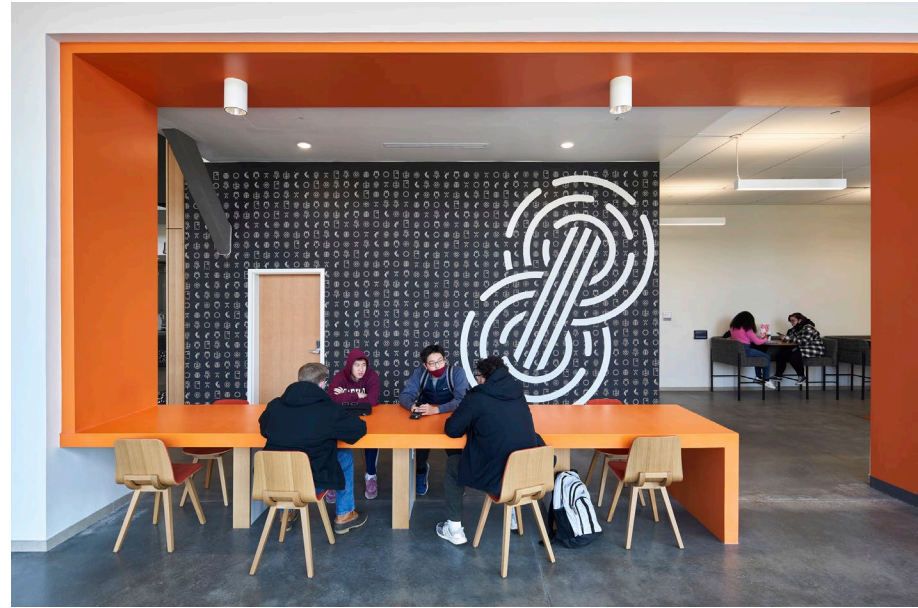
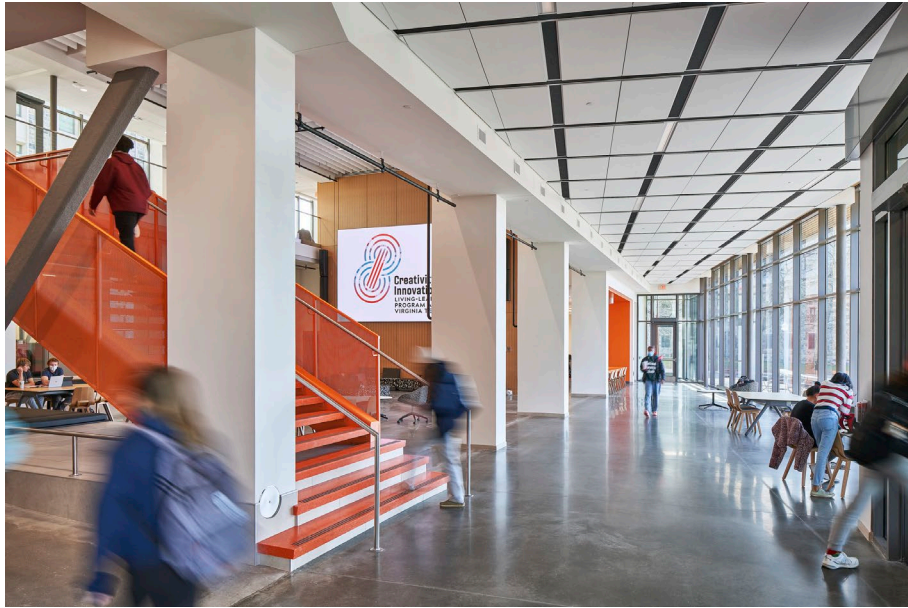




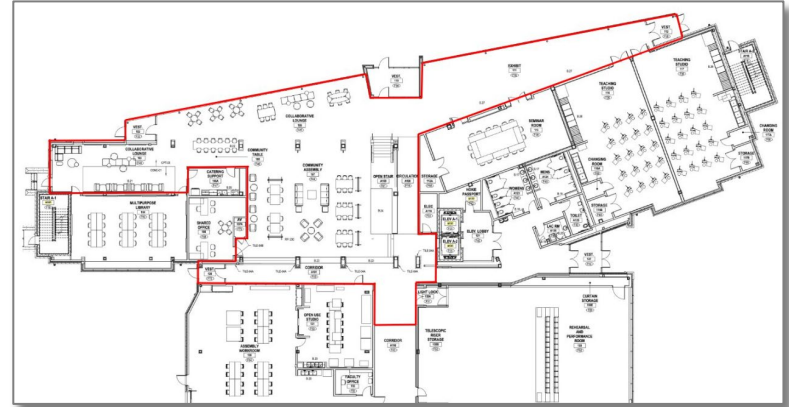
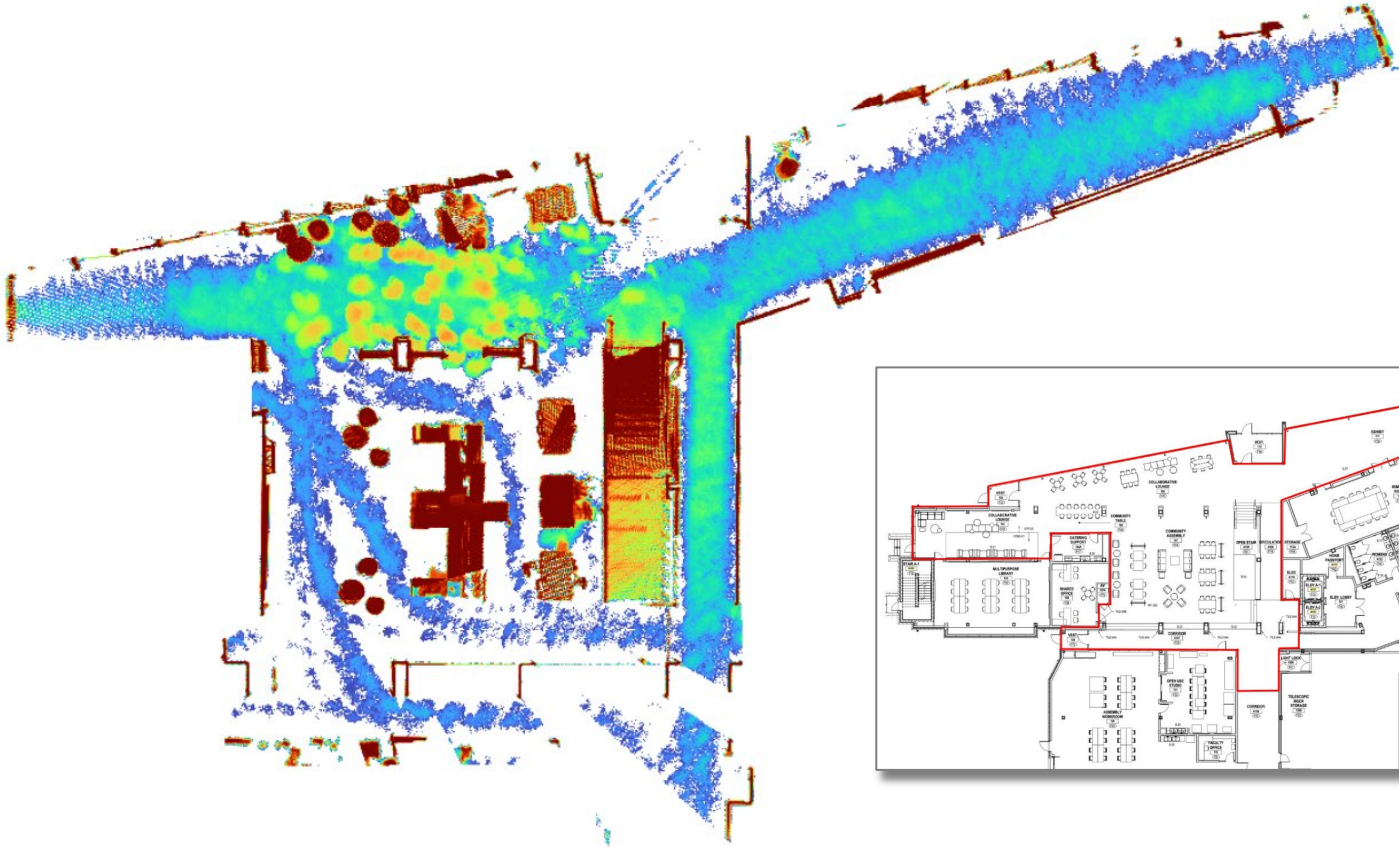
Maintaining Progress: New tools & ideas



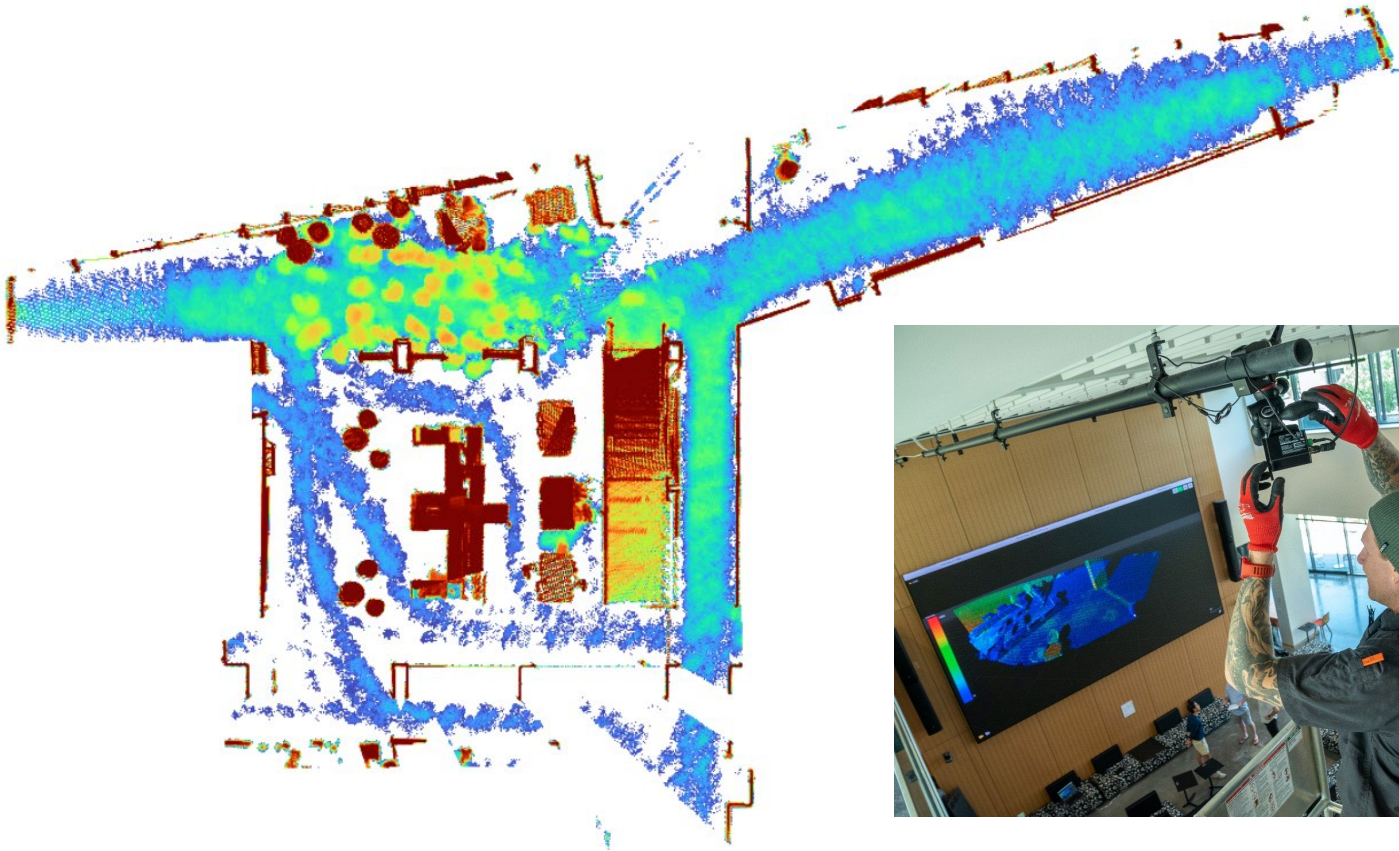
Maintaining Progress: New tools & ideas



Maintaining Progress: New tools & ideas



Maintaining Progress: New tools & ideas





Design Strategies in Practice

1 “Alone Together” Spaces

Environments that allow social proximity without social obligation: reading nooks near common areas, semi-enclosed seating, soft edges between public and private.

2 Social Collision Points

Intentional zones that generate spontaneous interaction: shared kitchens, laundry adjacencies, outdoor gathering nodes, threshold moments.

3 Restorative Environments

Quiet zones with daylight, natural materials, and reduced stimulation. Designed for recovery, not productivity. Nature integration as baseline, not amenity.

Design Implications: Quiet Together



Design Implications: Quiet Together



Design Implications: Movement



Design Implications: Movement



Design Implications: Outdoor Connections



Design Implications: Meditative Space



Design Implications: Daylight



Design Implications: Biophylic Ideals



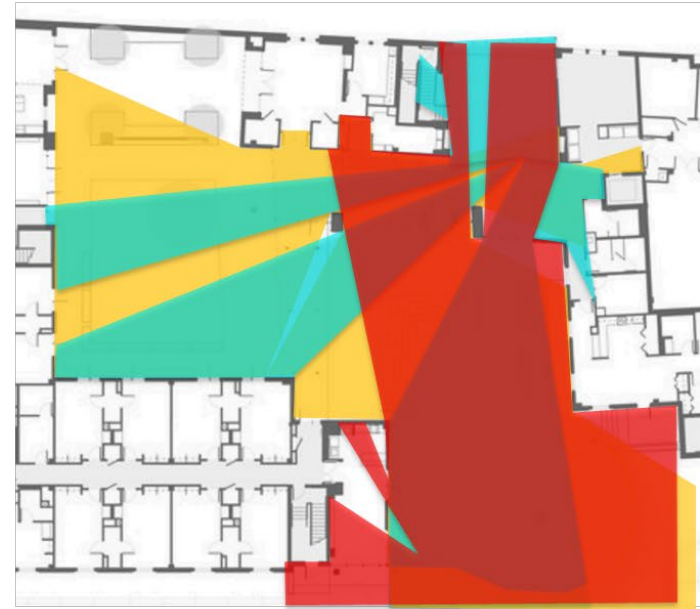
Design Implications: Belonging



Design Implications: Belonging



Design Implications: Safety



Design Implications: Safety



Design Implications: Views & Place





**People, Place, &
Purpose - *wellness*
*by design.***



MONTGOMERY PARKS

The Power of Nature-Based Mindfulness Programming

A Presentation by Gabrielle Gilliam
Wellness & Advancement Specialist
At Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, MD



Brookside Gardens Mindfulness Programming

Yoga

Tai-Chi

Forest Bathing

Guided
Mindfulness Walks

Mindfulness Retreats

Strolls for Well-Being





Strolls for Well-Being

- Evidence-based program created by Dr. Ruth McCaffrey in 2006
- Large body of research showing the psychological and overall health benefits of time spent **connecting with** nature
- Program began with Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens in Delray Beach, FL and Bloedel Reserve in Seattle, WA
 - Currently offered at Iowa State University (Ames, IA) and Brookside Gardens (Wheaton, MD) as well



The program **draws on the gardens' unique features** to support mental and physical health of participants.

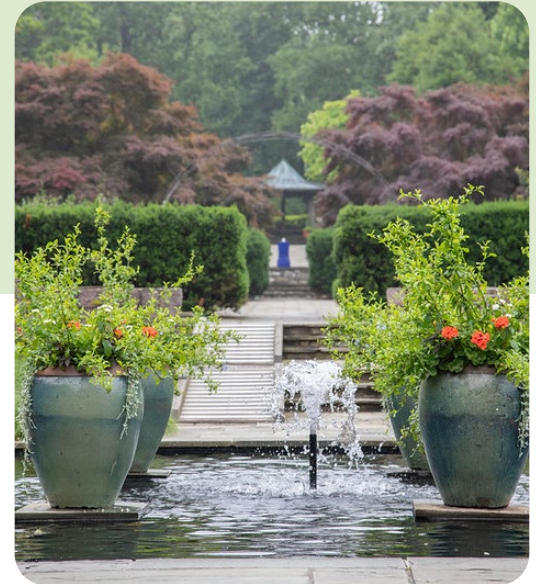
Morikami Japanese Garden



Bloedel Reserve



Brookside Gardens





Strolls for Well-Being Guidebook

Themes:

Awareness | Possibility | Reflection
Transition | Connection | Journey
Trust | Forgiveness | Gratitude
Joy | Freedom | Fulfillment

Features:

Map, Inspirational Quote, 6 Pause
Prompts, Poem, Space for Notes





Examples of meaningful features

- Thresholds
 - Highlight transitions
- Structured Areas
 - Point to curation and intention
- Water Features
 - Create opportunity for reflection





More examples

- Windy or Organic Paths
 - Encourage trust and flexibility
- Perennials and Trees
 - Show seasonal shifts of long-lasting features
- Annual Plants
 - Teach about impermanence





Examples of Prompts

Reflection: Pause 1 (pg 36)

Return to the water's edge, where you have practiced calming and clearing your mind. Consider the Taoist proverb, *No one can see their reflection in running water. It is only in still water that we can see.* If you can, lean over to look at your reflection as you contemplate what these words might mean for you.



Connection: Pause 2 (pg 52)

Take a moment to practice mindfulness, becoming aware of the air on your skin and the seasonal colors all around. Poet Gary Snyder wrote, *Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.* Appreciate that you belong here, that you are connected to this intricate system. Bees pollinate flowers and the flowers, in turn, provide sustenance. You, too, are integral; you, too, have a role to play.

Trust: Pause 3 (pg 69)

The paths in this garden bend and split, turning toward and away from one another. As in life, there is vulnerability in walking forward, in following each curve and choosing which direction to take. Contemplate the role trust plays when you don't know what you'll find around the bend.



Program Evaluation

- Pre and Post Surveys
 - Demographics
 - Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)
 - Tracks positive and negative emotions
 - Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS)
 - Measures desire and efforts to engage in personal development
 - Feedback about program, initial impact and plans going forward
- Focus Groups
 - Longer term impact
 - Opportunity for story telling



Focus Group Findings

- Reason for Joining
 - A craving for structure, and support during difficult life changes
- Impact on Well-Being
 - Easing of grief and effects of stress
 - More gratitude & forgiveness
 - New coping tools & friendships
- Relationship to Nature
 - Shift from distracted time in nature to observant time in nature
 - Seeking out new experiences in nature
 - Nature's resilience inspiring hopefulness, attention to silver linings
 - Deeper connection to Brookside Gardens, visiting more, telling friends



Stories of Impact

“I would get out and walk in the neighborhood almost daily. But as far as seeking out a place where you're closer to nature. I would do that on occasion, maybe once every two or three months. Whereas after the program, I made it a point to try to get to Brookside whenever I could, just because of the feeling I knew I would have once I was there from having gone through the program” –N.

“I'm still working through a lot of the side effects to my joints that this horrible [cancer treatment] infusion had. I think the resilience of plants kind of helps you believe in a certain amount of resilience in yourself. So I think that that it helped me with that.” –L.

“I did go out [in nature] prior to the program, but it's a completely different experience as of now... I really connected spiritually in nature and it was a completely life changing experience for me. So it was beautiful.” –A.

Developing Mindfulness Programs



- Capacity & Scale Considerations
 - Staffing Available
 - Budget
 - Features of Space
- Desired Outcome
 - Emotional Healing
 - Connection to Nature
 - Belonging
- Awareness of Limitations
 - Bigger isn't always better



Other program ideas

- Self-guided mindfulness walks
- Cultural walks
- Queer ecology walks
- Sensory signage
- Labyrinth
- Zen garden





Most Important Part

The space reflects the needs
and desires of those using it.

Programming helps people
see themselves in the space.

A photograph of a dense forest with tall, thin trees and a thick undergrowth of green plants. A bright green rectangular overlay is centered in the middle of the image, containing the word "Discussion" in bold black text.

Discussion

Inclusive Placemaking for Health

Bridging Design, Public Institutions, and Community Wellness

2026 The Vision is Yours: A Regional Conference for Placemaking and Placekeeping

MacKenzie Twardus | Elliott Kenney | Tom Zeigenfuss | Gabrielle Gilliam

Thank you!



Credits: This presentation was adapted from a Slidesgo template and includes icons from Flaticon and images from Freepik and Pexels