
“My School and Me”—Exploring the Intersections of Insiderness and Interior Environments

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ABSTRACT

Much of the scholarship on place and identity draws from fields like psychology, anthropology, and geography and as a result, interior environments have not been the focus. Understanding how interiors intersect with the self-making process is crucial to the field of interior design, on both theoretical and practical levels. This is particularly the case for learning environments, the places where children spend much of their day at crucial junctures of their development and establishment of self. Through the experiences of six high-school students from an inner city Minneapolis high-school, this paper explores how the concept of “insiderness,” first conceptualized by E. Relph (1976), can be appropriated to understand the person–interiors relationship. Photographs, journals, and personal interviews shed light on the process by which “insiderness” is constructed in interiors. With walls being noted as the primary constructor of “insiderness,” the analysis unravels the active *seeing* of the students across spatial scales and how characteristics of spaces inform how students contest and negotiate their identity. Through constructing and deconstructing their understandings of both the interiors they inhabit and themselves, students navigate larger societal and cultural messages. We call this exploratory theoretical model *The Spatial Scales of Self-Making*. By attempting to appropriate the term “insiderness” and theorize the relationship between identity and interiors as one dependent on varying spatial scales within the interior environment, this paper begins to move discourses away from a monolithic understanding of interiors. Scholars, educators, and practitioners of interior design who recognize that design parameters that range from programming to spatial layout, material selection, and signage can play a role in these meaning-making processes can help push the boundaries of what it means to create spaces and places in which people who are *seers* live their lives.

Introduction

Places, from homes to landscapes, have long been tied to identity. Albeit an ambiguous and difficult concept to unravel, identity’s relationship to the environment has been debated by academics for decades. The challenge to interior design educators, scholars, and practitioners is that much of the scholarship around place and identity comes from interdisciplinary studies in fields such as psychology, anthropology, and geography, and therefore, interior environments have not been the focus. Understanding how interiors come to be part of a person’s self-definition is crucial to the field of interior design, on both theoretical and practical levels.

One common vein of consensus is that for spaces to become places, a sense of meaning and connection must be formed between an individual and the environment. From within a phenomenological paradigm, Relph (1976) developed the concept of “insiderness” to capture peoples’ connection to the environment:

The essence of place lies not so much in [physical setting] as in the experience of an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’; more than anything else this is what sets places apart in space and defines a particular system of physical features, activities and meanings. “To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify

Places, from homes to landscapes, have long been tied to identity.

with it”, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with place. (Relph, 1976, p. 49)

Positioning identity as a fundamental feature of the experience of place, one that both influences and is influenced by those experiences, Relph noted that what is required for connections to form is, “an approach and attendant set of concepts that respond to the unity of place, person and act,” and stressed the links rather than the division between specific and general features of an environment (Relph, 1976, p. 45).

Scholars from the design fields furthered our understanding of how the built environment affects us psychologically in the form of “insideness.” Thiis-Evensen’s (1989) *Archetypes in Architecture* distinguishes between *inside* and *outside* and explores how the historical evolution of floors, walls, and roofs and their special meanings influence that relationship. Seamon (1993, 2000, 2007, 2008) also espoused the concept of “insideness,” as it offers an innovative way of understanding the “complex, multidimensioned structure” of spaces (Seamon, 2000, p. 172). Translating “insideness” and “outsideness” into a model for understanding race, meaning, and individuality, Seamon (2008) built on the phenomenological experience of place. Finally, in Frank and Lepori’s (2000) *Architecture Inside Out*, the focus is on a process of design that evolves from the inside, from movement, sensation, surroundings and a dialogue between the architect and the client.

The question that confronts scholars, educators, and practitioners of interior design is not so much whether “insideness” exists but *how* it comes to be and the role that interiors play in the process. What does it mean to be “inside” an interior space? Where and when do characteristics of interiors intertwine with the self? And, how does meaning-making get impacted by what one sees and knows? By attempting to appropriate the concept of “insideness” to express the person–interiors relationship, we further these discourses and explore answers to these questions,

thereby pushing the boundaries of what interior design scholarship and practice can entail.

Such an undertaking attains urgent dimensions when the question of *how* is applied to learning environments, environments in which children and teens spend a significant part of their life during a critical period in human development. At the neighborhood scale, “insideness” was found to be essential to children’s environmental understanding, environmental competence, and affective relationships, informing “who they are, who they want to be, what they value, and what they seek in a place” (Lim & Barton, 2010, p. 336). By exploring the intersection of “insideness” and interior learning environments, this study expands the literature on an underresearched population as well as building type.

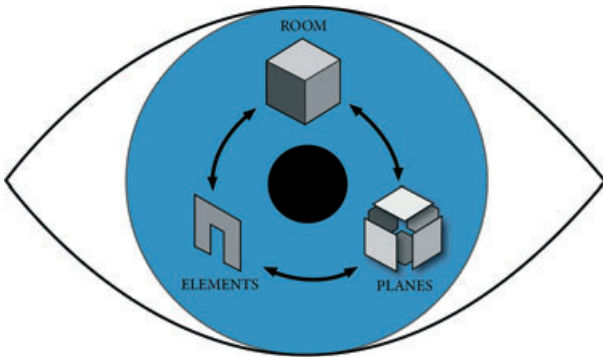
Accentuating the urgency of the need to extend our understanding of school environments are statistics that point to the nation’s educational facilities being in a state of crisis. What is more disconcerting is that generally speaking, the schools reporting deficient conditions are in central cities serving 50% minority students or 70% poor students (American Society of Civil Engineers, 2009).¹ The inequality of investment in funding the repair of public school facilities and the detrimental effects of such disinvestment in low-income areas have been recognized by some states as a violation of student rights (Cheng, English, & Filardo, 2011). Calling for equality in school environments, President Barack Obama declared:

If we want all students to have the opportunity to be successful, we must address the disparities in the quality of school buildings. For all students to achieve, all must be provided adequate resources; effective teachers, inspiring school leaders and enriching classroom environments (Building Educational Success Together [BEST], 2008).

A greater understanding of how school interiors impact student identity and in turn well-being can be translated into supportive learning environments for all.

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Figure 1. The Spatial Scales of Self-Making theoretical model.



Using qualitative interviews with six freshmen from an inner city Minneapolis high school, this study adds to interior design body of knowledge. By exploring how the school environment and student identity intersect, the paper begins to further the field’s theoretical basis to include ones that are interior-centered (Clemons & Eckman, 2011). On a theoretical level, our findings reveal that in interior environments, “insiderness” occurs through varying scales, from the overall room to the planes of walls, ceilings, and floors, as well as elements. Walls, in their capacity to “speak” to users, become a primary interior medium through which “insiderness” is informed. In parallel, our study sheds light on the active agency of the students in the process of constructing the self. A dialogue of self-construction is set up between the student and the interior environment through the practice of *seeing* and therefore, our exploratory theoretical model is called The Spatial Scales of Self-Making (see Figure 1).

Attuned to the environments they inhabit, students contest and negotiate their perceptions of these environments in a dynamic way, constructing and deconstructing their understandings of who they are and what these environments mean while navigating often conflicting and influential societal messages. The practical implications of the findings are discussed from within this more complicated understanding of interiors, closing the discussion.

Appropriating “insiderness” in the context of people–interiors relationships exposes the variability within the physical manifestations of interiors as well as the users’, whom we position as *seers*’, values, goals, and experiences. Theorizing interiors from within the lens of “insiderness” then, moves discourses away from a monolithic understanding of both interiors and seers, allowing scholars, educators, and practitioners of interior design to focus on the multiplicity of ways by which people craft meaning.

Background: Identity and the School Environment

Part of the complexity behind defining identity is the result of identity’s plural, dynamic, and relational character, each of these facets interacting and intertwining with each other. The plurality of identity is characterized by the many parameters through which one can define his/herself, including gender, race, culture, class, religion, age, ability, relationships, profession, history, as well as place (see Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004 for an overview of the literature on the plurality of identity). Identity’s dynamic nature comes from the variability and change that is inherent in terms of which facet is more prominent and important in defining the self—at one life stage for example, one can be primarily defined by gender while at another by age, profession, relationships, and so on. Finally, the relational quality is tied to aspects such as context, time, and other people, highlighting that often varying and contradictory identities must be managed. The idea that identity hinges on establishing similarity and difference between individuals, within and across groups, as well as space and time, also marks identity as relational (Hadjiyanni, 2007; Hopkins, 2010; Lawler, 2008). As Hall (1990) notes, identity is a “production” that is always in process; never complete and negotiated within representation, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (p. 225).

Understanding how interiors come to be part of a person's self-definition is crucial to the field of interior design, on both theoretical and practical levels.

When it comes to a discussion on the relationship between identity and places, things get even more complicated. In the 1960s and 1970s, French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault wrote on the intersection of society, architecture, and power, espousing the idea that spaces and places are institutional expressions of knowledge production (Foucault, 1986). Furthering discourses on how identity and societies are shaped by space has more recently been called upon by academics who want to restore a renewed interest on place into the conversation of educational reform (Gruenewald, 2003; Fine, Burns, Torre, & Payne, 2007). As Gruenewald (2003) argues, “contemporary school reform takes little notice of place” (p. 620). Failing to recognize that a place is an articulation of human decisions and by accepting a place's existence as unproblematic, society “become[s] complicit in the political processes that bring these places into being” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 627).

Part of the concern is that the physical quality of educational places speaks to students about how they are viewed and valued by themselves and others (Fine et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2000). It has been argued that low-income youth of color construe disparaged school environments as evidence of their “social disposability” (Fine et al., 2007; Kozol, 1992). Gaining a deeper understanding of how students may link their identity to aspects of the school environment is imperative to the design and construction of an educational structure that supports and encourages the successful flourishing of all students.

Although extensive, the literature on school environments draws from primarily quantitative studies, showing links between the school environment and motivation (Schneider, 2002); attitude (Earthman & Lemasters, 2009); self-esteem (Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2008); attention (Schneider, 2002); learning (Earthman, 2004); attendance (Durán-Narucki, 2008; Kumar, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2008); teacher retention (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2004); suspension rates (Branham, 2004); drop-out rates (Branham, 2004); and academic achievement (Blincoe, 2008; Boese & Shaw, 2005;

Bullock, 2007; Cellini, Ferreira, & Rothson, 2008; Crampton, 2009; Hughes, 2006; Picus, Marion, Calvo, & Glenn, 2005; Tanner, 2009).

In terms of the aspects of the school environment studied, these include daylighting (Tanner, 2009); noise (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984; Evans & Maxwell, 1997); indoor air quality (Leach, 1997; Rosen & Richardson, 1999; Schneider, 2002); views (Tanner, 2009); classroom density (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001; Maxwell, 2003; Moore & Lackney, 1993; Stokols, 1976); temperature (Schneider, 2002; Zeller & Boxem, 2009); lighting (Hathaway, 1995); color (Sinofsky & Knirck, 1981); seating arrangement (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984); privacy (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984); and overall building quality (Berner, 1993; Durán-Narucki, 2008; Evans, Yoo, & Sipple, 2010).

With respect to identity, studies of identity have come to be seen as an important analytic tool for understanding school and society (Gee, 2001). Recent studies have examined the link between identity and education from a plethora of different lenses, such as adolescent development (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2000); race and ethnicity (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Milner & Ross, 2006; Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011); gender (Lloyd, 2010); sexual orientation (Birden, 2005); disability (Panting & Kelly, 2006); socioeconomic status (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998); and diversity (McLaughlin, 1992).

Lacking in the literature are qualitative explorations that seek to develop a deeper understanding of how the school environment informs a student's identity. While some qualitative studies have begun to address this relationship, they have tended to focus on the macro-scaled environment of the neighborhood and did not examine links within the interior school environment (Fagg, Curtis, Clark, Condon, & Stansfeld, 2008; Lim & Barton, 2010; Pitner & Astor, 2008). Coming from interior design, this study focuses on unraveling how interiors get implicated in the process of identity construction and what this means for educators and practitioners of

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interior design. Furthermore, it offers a more nuanced approach that is tied to its qualitative methodology, one that exposes the intangible and immaterial ways by which “insiderness” is formed.

Methodology

The setting for the study is North High School (NHS), an inner-city Minneapolis school. NHS is part of the Minneapolis Public School System with an enrollment number in 2011 of 580 students: 70% African Americans, 23% Asian Americans, 6% White Americans, and 2% Hispanic Americans. Ninety percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Minneapolis Public Schools Fact Sheet [MPS], 2011). Identified as a “dropout factory,” partly because its senior class had 60% or fewer of the students who entered as freshmen (Zuckerbrod, 2007), NHS was phased to close by 2014 (Xiong, 2010). According to members of the school board, the declining enrollment and dismal academic achievement led them to make the decision in 2010 that North High was not economically feasible or educationally viable (Hallman, 2010).

This news was met with emotional resistance from both students and members of the community, who pushed back to keep NHS open (Weber, 2010). With over a 120-year history in the neighborhood and many area residents having deep bonds to the school as alumni and/or family of alumni, the community fought back and succeeded in keeping North open (Brandt, 2012). According to the school’s Web site, the alumni association is the largest of its kind and members feel close with the North community (MPS, n.d.).

Although the study’s emphasis is on the school’s interior, an elaboration on the overall building structure helps place the interior in context. NHS is a two-story structure that is made up of two buildings, connected by a fenced-in courtyard and two second-story skyways (Figure 2). The east building is mainly used for continuing education classes for adults and houses 88.5 FM, the jazz station in Minneapolis.

Figure 2. The exterior of North High School.



Some Jazz88.5 spaces are used by the radio class at NHS as well as students mixing their own beats in their free time. The building also contains the lunchroom and media center for NHS. The west building is the main building of the high school, which contains all classrooms, auditorium, gymnasiums, band and choir rooms, dance studio, and all general school offices. An architectural critic has noted that the physical structure, which opened in 1973, is “a series of brick boxes . . . that does not allow for connection to the community” (Millett, 2007, p. 298).

Data Collection

This study used a mixed methodology, made up of three methods, to garner the relationship between the school environment and student identity: auto-photography, journaling, and interviews. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the data were collected over six visits to the school, during the span of three weeks in the months of March and April of 2012. Contact with the school counselor was established via a personal connection of one of the researchers, who then made the suggestion that a collaboration with a daily homeroom would work best for the students so as not to disrupt any coursework. The counselor solicited the 9th grade homeroom teachers and selected the educator who volunteered.

Table 1. Student comments and photographs

	Comments		Photographs					Total
	Positive	Negative	Rooms	Walls	Ceilings	Floors	Elements	
Ilyse	4	2	1	2	3	0	0	6
Robin	4	4	1	3	2	1	1	8
Monica	5	3	2	3	0	1	2	8
Marshall	15	0	5	7	0	0	3	15
Kevin	12	0	0	12	0	0	0	12
Alecia	5	5	1	6	1	0	2	10
Total	45	14	10	33	6	2	8	59

Although students are randomly assigned to a homeroom teacher upon enrollment, students self-selected to participate in this study. In the first visit, the researcher attended a class session with approximately 12 students and described the study as well as explained the IRB requirements and the consent forms. Six students returned the proper consent forms to their homeroom teacher and were thereby, allowed to participate.

At the second visit, the researcher met the approved students and gave them a disposable camera and a journal, instructing them to take 10 photographs of self-selected elements of the interior school environment of things they liked and things they did not like. Concurrently, they were also asked to record in the journal why they took that particular photograph and how it made them feel. Instructions were kept simple and direct to limit the possibility of the researchers biasing students' responses and therefore, the instructions did not delineate what students should be photographing besides the fact that photos needed to be from within the interior. Students were then given one 45-minute homeroom session to complete the auto-photography and journaling project.

In a third visit to the school, these journals and cameras were collected. The film was developed and the data organized for a preliminary analysis in preparation for the last phase of the data collection. The personal interviews were conducted with two

students per visit (over the fourth, fifth, and sixth visit) to expand upon and more fully understand what the students meant to convey through the photographs of the interior environment. The interviews, about 20–30 minutes in length, were exploratory in nature and built off the individual students' photographs and corresponding journal entries, asking students to elaborate on what they meant and why they chose those photographs or words.

The data analysis conducted by the authors centered on identifying patterns and clusters of meaning within the photographs, transcribed interviews, and journals, following qualitative and phenomenological data analysis methods (Hycner, 1999). Photographs and comments were initially organized according to aspects of interior environments: rooms, walls, floors, ceilings, and elements. Subsequent analysis explored comments that related “insiderness,” following Relph’s definition to belong and identify with place. This was accomplished through comments that tied the self to the built environment in any of the three facets of identity: plural, dynamic, or relational. As shown in Table 1, the comments were overwhelmingly positive while the photographs taken were mostly of walls.

Participants

The participants for this study were six high-school freshmen aged 14–15, who attend NHS. All students came from one homeroom class and consisted of

The experiences of the six freshmen participants showed that the interior environment intersected with their self-making through varying environmental scales.

four females and two males. All but one were African American; one female identified herself as multiracial (see below). The parameters delimiting participants to this specific age group are threefold. First, adolescents are entering or are in the stage in which they address issues surrounding personal identity or identities (Brinhaupt & Lipka, 2002). Second, students in this age group are typically able to articulate their thoughts and feelings, both in written and verbal form. And third, as freshmen, participants would have attended the school for about 6 months, a length of time that is long enough for them to be familiar with the environment yet at the nascent stages of establishing a relationship with place.

Student Profiles

Ilyse² is an African American, female freshman student who recently transferred to North High School from a neighboring suburban school. She considers herself an advocate for change and wants to play that role during her years at North. She feels strong in knowing who she is and believes she can deal with a lot of change. She enjoys getting involved in things like student council and music. She is also working and saving money toward college. In her interview, her voice was confident and she offered many solutions on how she thought the school could evolve to better serve the students.

Robin is a multiracial, female freshman student at North High School. Her favorite courses were radio and English and she considers herself a good student. She did not mention being involved in any sports or other activities at school, besides radio but mentioned she would occasionally attend school games or dances. In her interview, Robin deferred until the next day and then seemed a bit uncomfortable and eager for the interview to be over.

Monica is an African American, female freshman student at North High School. She lives in the neighborhood and many of her family members have attended North High School. She plays golf for North High and considers being outside and in the sun

important. She sees herself as a good student and overall happy person. In her interview, her voice was strong and confident.

Marshall is an African American, male freshman student at North High School. He plays football for the school team and is unsure if he wants to play basketball as well. He also considers himself very curious about the things around him and wants to learn about them. He is planning to attend college on a football or academic scholarship and has already received interest from a few colleges. He is also a budding photographer who would like to major in the field in college. In his interview, his voice was content and confident and he seemed eager to offer his thoughts and feelings.

Kevin is an African American, male freshman at North High School. His favorite subjects are English, Spanish, and radio. He said that while he is a good student, he does not always enjoy doing school projects because they take a long time. He described himself as a happy person with a lot of friends. In his interview, he seemed happy, gave short answers, and appeared to get easily distracted.

Alecia is an African American, female freshman at North High School. She plays basketball for the school team and said that she sometimes likes school. Her favorite subjects were English, biology and geography. In her interview, she was slightly disengaged with limited eye contact. She spoke somewhat softly yet with more strength when voicing frustration over photographs dealing with uncleanliness.

Discussion—“Insideness” and Interiors

As the purpose of this study is to explore how the school interior intersects with student identity, the photographs and narratives collected were analyzed with that question in mind. The experiences of the six freshmen showed that the interior environment

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intersected with their self-making through varying environmental scales: from the room to the spatial constructors of walls, floors, and ceilings, as well as interior elements such as doors. What the students saw in their environments and how they interpreted it sheds light on the multifarious intersections and negotiations through which “insideness” emerges, a concept that is as much outward as it is inward. In these transactions of identity and environmental scales, the broader discourse on cultural and societal values transpires. Design as it turns out, can be a mediator in all these processes, from programming to spatial layout, material selection, and signage. Below, we delve deeper into the process of identity construction through each of these scales within the interior environment and unravel the design parameters that get involved.

Rooms

Interior environments are typically made up of rooms, which are generally defined by their function. Spaces photographed by the students included classrooms, the auditorium, and transit spaces like the hallways and staircases. Although classrooms are a school’s primary domain, only two of the six students photographed classroom spaces. The photographs focused mostly on what was taught in each class and the different subjects were relayed through displayed artifacts in these rooms. Marshall, who defined himself as a college-bound student, explained that all the displays within the classrooms made him want to learn more because he tries to “know as much stuff as [he] can.” To him, artifacts in the science case symbolized and sparked curiosity and knowledge (Figure 3). Through such displays, the classroom space became more than a container in which to teach; it became an active participant in evoking curiosity, motivation, and engagement within this student. Space planning decisions that account for the incorporation of display areas in classrooms enable “insideness” to emerge.

For Ilyse on the other hand, who is involved in Student Council and enjoys music, the radio classroom the

Figure 3. Artifacts in a science case displayed in the science classroom.



school shares with a local jazz station allowed for freedom of self-expression, a critical component in the development of a healthy identity and self-confidence in adolescents (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998):

I think it is fun, it shows creativity, like they [students] can do something with their lives and a lot of the times the songs are about their past life, or their childhood or something.

The temporal dimensions of “insideness” come through in this reflection; in the radio class and through music-making, students built connections between the past, the present, and the future, highlighting opportunities for what the future could be like.

Ilyse also photographed the electrified red of the chairs in the auditorium to grasp the energy that comes when that space is occupied, a place where once again, “art and creativity happen” (Figure 4). In her eyes, associating with creative spaces became a means to deconstruct an imposed identity:

They think that the school is so bad because of its past . . . it’s really not that bad, it has a lot of creativity and a lot of smart kids in the school but they don’t get noticed because

Figure 4. The electrified red of the auditorium chairs.



what had happened in past years... I think that they should start seeing.

In the process of constructing an identity, Ilyse had to deconstruct the negative portrayal of the school by the media, policy makers, and others. Choosing what to see and how to see it, Ilyse gave meaning to her surroundings; a meaning that she felt was more real and grounded than the one that prevailed among outsiders. From within an “us” versus “them” paradigm, Ilyse challenged nonbelievers to *see*, using interior spatialities to position an identity that will be defined by the future, not labeled by the past. Designers who are cognizant of the impact of such programmatic development on youth can be better devoted to exploring opportunities for self-expression, ones that range from rooms for specialized activities to walls that can be personalized.

Finally, hallways held messages of their own. As spaces of transit and movement, hallways are traversed by students multiple times per day. The three students who identified as athletes (Monica, Marshall, and Alecia) all took pictures of the trophy case display located in the main hallway outside the auditorium and spoke about the communication of pride and potential the trophies relayed (Figure 5). Showcasing all kinds of sports, from basketball to football, baseball, and softball throughout the

Figure 5. Trophy case in the hallway that helps students imagine.



school’s history, the trophies in the hallway were inclusive, making the students feel “good” and “like a winner,” supporting who they considered themselves to be as athletes. While the sports teams the students belonged to did not earn any of the trophies displayed, as some of the trophies were decades old, the trophies allowed them to imagine who they could be, once again tying what they saw to the future: “it just shows you, you can win stuff if you try” and “[the high school is] trying to show that North is still important and we can do [win] if we have more kids.”

Race was another element of a student’s identity that was brought forward within the hallway. Robin, the only multiracial participant in the study, took a photograph of a display of books in the hallway that showcased young female writers from a range of backgrounds (Figure 6). She noted this was important because it showed diversity and helped her connect to her own racial identity:

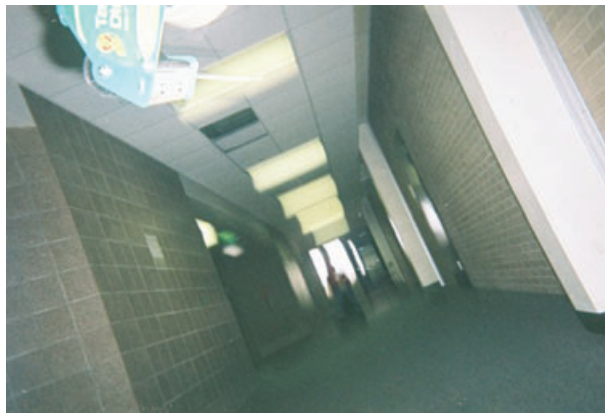
I am more than one race, so it’s different you know. It’s not just one group. People can fit in with their own group because if people are like them, they don’t have to feel like left out because they are the only one.

Allowing space for displays such as this one exposes the unseen, the multiple ways by which one can

Figure 6. A multiracial book display.



Figure 7. The hallway as an articulated whole.



belong and the many perspectives that are hosted in that space. The visible evidence that North did not limit the racial or ethnic narratives she could read about, helped Robin feel accepted, enabling her to establish “insiderness” with her school environment.

The hallway, as an articulated whole, was also mentioned by Marshall who described the “together” look of the hallways as beautiful (Figure 7). He explained that the carpet and inset doors made him feel as if he was older because they reminded him of a local college he had visited. In this case, the specific materials and articulated details within planar

surfaces connected to his identity as a college-bound student. The hallway and its design details became a medium through which Marshall was able to tie his aspirations and who he could be to his surroundings. The critical role that hallways played in instilling identity and belonging points to designers needing to devote equal attention to all areas of a program and space design. Design characteristics such as furniture layout and material selection can turn hallways from forgotten spaces of transition into conscientious constructors of “insiderness” and identity.

Spatial Constructors

Spaces and rooms are defined by typically six planes: four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. All of these planes are instrumental to interior designers and understanding the meaning behind them and how this meaning is constructed is key to designers’ ability to create spaces that can have positive impact and are relatable to people.

Walls

As 33 of the 59 total photos taken were of walls, our findings point to walls being a critical factor in the construction of “insiderness.” Walls highlighted ranged from exterior to interior ones, including partitions of bathroom stalls. Sometimes it was the wall itself that mattered but in most cases, it was what the wall carried. Being vertical and in alignment with bodies in space, walls “spoke” to students on a level that engaged their being. Below, we elaborate on how walls informed the construction of “insiderness” for the six students.

All six participants identified as Polars, the mascot of NHS, and all of them took at least one photo depicting the Polar name and logo (Figure 8). Seeing signs of their Polar identity was important in instilling pride and spirit, both as a collective school identity and an individual sense of belonging. Students attributed the strong Polar spirit for saving the school from closure. One student remarked, “If people wouldn’t have had spirit, like Polar spirit, then they’ll be down and

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Figure 8. The Polar sign sends messages of community and togetherness.

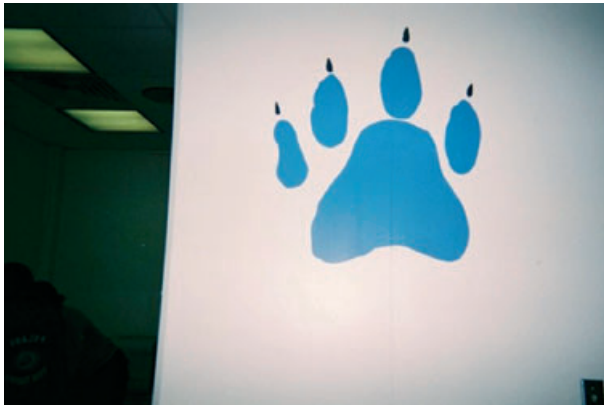


Figure 9. Art display becomes a forum for celebrating diversity of interests and abilities.



they wouldn't want [North High]," while another remarked, "[it] shows that the kids in school are trying to put forth an effort to make the school good again. It's showing, oh yeah our school isn't all bad, we can do this, we can pull the school back up." Because of events in the past, the showcase of Polar identity took on a more weighted meaning, one that stood for the strong community in which they belonged. Seeing their collective identity of a Polar expressed in the environment reminded the students that they were a part of something bigger and this contributed to their establishing of "insiderness."

Technological and paper displays of personal accomplishment and recognition were additional ways by which walls communicated a sense of identity. Hung on the walls at various locations throughout the school were televisions that featured the academic and athletic achievements of the students. Two students who had been publicly lauded for their achievements photographed these televisions. Monica said that it made her feel "like [she's] just not working for no reason" while Alecia stated that it made her feel "like a lady Polar." Robin also mentioned the importance of recognition when speaking of another display on the wall and positively recounted being recognized for an accomplishment in her radio class. In reference to past projects being displayed on the walls, Kevin mirrored this positive

imbuement of personal pride by remarking that seeing his work showcased on the wall makes him feel great, "like [he] accomplished something."

Artwork hanging on walls was another means by which the dynamic construction of identity through potentiality was reflected, as three students photographed works of student art. Two students relayed the importance of the wired art they photographed saying, "the students with special needs made those and [it shows] they have potential, they can do stuff too" (Figure 9). In this case, walls became a medium to celebrate the diversity at North of interests and abilities. While one of these students considered himself creative, the other did not but both spoke to the construction of a creative identity—if other kids could create art, in time, they could too. Other displays of art on the walls, such as student paintings and drawings, also reinforced the potentiality to be an artist, as one student remarked he could be a good drawer if he just put in a little more time.

The opportunity to imagine what one is capable of goes for bulletin boards as well. For Kevin, the sign "Work Hard, Be Nice" hanging in his classroom reminded him to work hard and stay focused. Marshall began to bridge the individual impact of bulletins to a collective impact for the whole school,

pointing to the words on this same bulletin board as reinforcing his perception of the school: “[the bulletin is] talking about our school, like how we be respectful and stuff and creative, kind and all that.” Ilyse built upon this idea even more, highlighting bulletins that conveyed efforts the school was making in showing and helping students become successful:

They want us to be encouraged to be more into extracurricular activities instead of the streets so they push kids toward things like ALC [a credit recovery program]...they have Step Up, which helps you get a job...they have Mr. Kosta’s music where you go down to the studio and make music...and so they do a lot of cool stuff like that and I think it helps get kids off of the streets.

Through displays, walls depicted the potentiality of these students, influencing their dynamic construction of who they can become. Recognizing the active agency of the person in the self-making process and how identity is not confined to stereotypes or identifications of the past, designers can be better prepared to tackle the programmatic and conceptual requirements of their projects. Walls that include expanses of flat, solid surfaces can allow for personalization within classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, or other spaces throughout the school.

Complicating the role of walls in identity construction were instances where messages received were not so clear-cut, such as the presence of graffiti on walls. Ilyse captured this contradiction. She took a photograph of the graffiti on the bathroom stall walls and deemed it important because it was a place to express your feelings about others, saying:

A lot of people go into the bathrooms stalls, instead of having somebody to talk to they write down their feelings on the walls...graffiti in a way is vandalizing but in another way it is another way of expressing art and feelings.

Juxtaposing Ilyse’s selective appropriation of the school environment as a place for self-expression with

other students’ sentiments on the subject sheds light on the multiplicity of perspectives and impressions present in a place. For these students, what was written on the walls went beyond self-expression and introduced the presence of gangs into the school environment in a very visible way, making them feel “negative,” “bad,” and “unsafe” in their environment. Alecia explained that:

If someone else was to see [the written gang symbol] then they all going to do is write their gang and then there is going to be an argument and obviously going to start a riot or something.

For her, the gang name on the wall signified a future hostile confrontation, threatening her sense of security, belonging, and “insiderness.”

Along with graffiti, the students linked the lack of cleanliness on some walls directly to a lack of caring by janitors, the MPS system, or other students. Four of the six students took photographs of walls smeared with everything from food to squished bugs, reporting that these had been present on the walls’ surfaces since at least the beginning of the year. From these examples, the students voiced that they understood why “people” called North dirty. The notion that the mess could have easily been wiped clean with a sponge communicated to the students that no one cared. This perceived lack of caring for the environment translated into a perceived lack of caring for the students, confirming studies that point to disparaged environments becoming evidence of students’ “social disposability” (Fine et al., 2007). Through explorations of how upkeep and maintenance impacts “insiderness,” we came to recognize that students who internalized this message of disposability, relinquished connection to the environment around them. Alecia for example, explained that seeing this grim made her feel like she just had to do what she could to get out of that “zoo,” forgoing the attempt to establish connection or any sort of “insiderness.” Balancing out the need for self-expression with maintenance, designers may want to consider materials and color selections that

Through explorations of how upkeep and maintenance impacts ‘insiderness,’ we came to recognize that students who internalized this message of disposability, relinquished connection to the environment around them.

Figure 10. A missing acoustic tile in the ceiling may influence sense of self.



better mask the normal wear and tear that occurs within a school environment.

Ceilings

The students in the study did not photograph the ceilings and floors with the same frequency as walls. Most of the photographs taken of the ceiling showcased unfinished or stained acoustic ceiling tiles, which the students described made them feel “bad,” “dirty,” “gross,” and “nasty” (Figure 10). Although Ilyse saw graffiti in the bathroom as a form of personal freedom of expression, she saw the missing acoustic ceiling tile that exposed the plenum as an example of why North has “such a bad name.” Meanwhile Alecia voiced that the stains on the ceiling made her feel as if she went to school in a basement. For both students, the sullied ceiling plane had the power to expose societal hierarchical discourses—from confirming the school’s reputation to constructing a concept of occupying space that was a “sub-level.” By placing herself in an imagined basement, Alecia, spatially and perhaps psychologically, positioned her educational experience beneath societal expectations.

In relaying other classmates’ sentiments about the sullied environment, one student echoed the feelings of Ilyse and Alecia: “[other students] go around school and are like ‘who cares, come on, I go to North,

who cares?’” For all these students, the unclean parts of the school environment deconstructed their sense of self as they were in conflict with who they were or how they saw themselves, restraining the establishment of “insiderness.”

Floors

Floors, in their materiality, were never photographed. The only time a floor was photographed was to show a junk food wrapper on the ground. Floors, it appears, were regarded for what they held rather than themselves. Robin expressed that when she saw trash on the floor, she understood why North was called “dirty,” yet quickly she made explicit that “North is not dirty, some kids in North are dirty.” Her suggestion was that North should discipline the students who get in trouble by making them clean up the school instead of detention or suspension. By caring about her school environment and having a sense of “insiderness,” this student, and Ilyse, began to posit how to cultivate that in others. “Insiderness” therefore, moves beyond being just an individual experience—it can turn the students into agents of change. The more connected, or inside, one feels to their place, the more they express positive investments in that place. “Insiderness” is as much an inward-looking concept as it is an outward-acting one, a notion critical to planting the seed for the growth of a collective community.

Elements

The three planes discussed above contain elements that were also found to impact how students saw themselves. While there are many elements within the interior environment, the ones photographed illuminated the role that signage and doors play in the interaction between identity and the environment. The lack of focus on elements does not signify a lack of importance yet perhaps an emphasis on elements that connect with action. The engagement of action, such as reading or moving through a doorway, could elevate the importance of these elements over others.

The experiences of these freshman revealed the multidimensional aspects of interior spaces and how all are not created equal—although all matter in the construction of the self, walls appeared to be the primary identity constructor.

Figure 11. Door reminds student of the movie *Ghostbusters*.



A double door, back by the wood shop (Figure 11), was photographed twice for the graffiti, scratches, and dirt present on its surface. Alecia, for whom “insiderness” was a struggle, recalled that the door reminded her of a scene from the movie *Ghostbusters* and remarked that it made it look like “a ghost went to the school.” Just like with the cleanliness and maintenance discussion, the state of the door surface communicated to this student that the school seemed abandoned and forgotten about, like a ghost town. Through the marred surface of the door, Alecia spatially positioned herself in an environment that had been abandoned, refusing to associate herself with the school environment.

Alecia was also the only student to take a photograph of an exit sign and expressed explicit feelings of leaving several times by saying: “Sometimes it’s boring and when I see the exit sign, I would be just ready [to go].” For her, the exit sign was a symbol of the freedom that existed on the other side, something that led to an escape from the place she no longer wanted to occupy.

Other signage in the environment also signaled a future action and intersected “insiderness” yet in a much different manner. For Marshall, passing by and seeing the “TRIO” sign, a program at North that helps students pursue higher education, reaffirmed

his identity as a college-bound student who was a part of the TRIO program. The sign reminded him of his pursuit of being a college student someday: “they help a lot . . . I’m just still going to use my scholarships for my education and get a degree in something.”

Conclusions and Implications

In the book *Writing and Seeing Architecture*, writer Christian de Portzamparc and architect Philippe Sollers strive to unravel what it means to *see* citing a writing piece by Sollers:

I cannot imagine seeing a Cezanne in one take. I sense that, in order to return it to vision, I have to think it almost point by point, stroke by stroke, plane by plane, slowly, fast, as if I would never be able to complete it as an ensemble. This ensemble must ‘rise’ with me like the way it was painted. (2008, p. 23)

Appropriating “insiderness” within the context of people–interiors relationships allowed us to expose the multiplicity of ways by which interiors are seen, constructed, and perceived as well as how these perceptions are not only dependent on the environment but also the users’ or as we found out, *seers’* values, goals, and experiences. Oygur and McCoy (2011) have elaborated on how users could be an inspiration or a constraint in the design process. Adding to those dialogues the idea of *seers* and shifting paradigms from *users* to *seers* opens up opportunities for design that could otherwise remain unexplored. The persons in a space become more than a passive user; as *seers*, they are actively engaged with their environment through their bodily senses and in turn, the environment becomes actively engaged with their being.

Just like Sollers constructs and deconstructs a Cezanne through *seeing*, the six high-school students we interviewed actively constructed and deconstructed interiors, *seeing* the interiors’ oneness as well as their parts, moving between the singular and the plural in their attempts to understand the

Weaving human-centered concepts, that originate from a wide range of fields, into the foundation of interior design curricula may help better prepare future designers to be critical thinkers, ones who work towards a more holistic understanding of the human experience in space and the role of the interior environment in it.

places they inhabit. The experiences of these freshmen revealed the multidimensional aspects of interior spaces and how all are not created equal—although all matter in the construction of the self, walls appeared to be the primary identity constructor. But even within walls there was variability. For example, private walls such as the ones in a bathroom stall were seen as lending themselves more readily to an accepted surface for self-expression than public ones.

The *Spatial Scales of Self-Making* model begins to unearth the contradictions that evolve due to conflicting messages and perceptions, bringing to the foreground a more complicated version of interiors. The built environment, we conclude, cannot be considered monolithic; no longer can spaces be blanketed with one term, one meaning, and one understanding. Instead, space(s) and their components must be considered as diverse as the *seers* who interact with them. School environments cannot be conceived only through a single, public nature—instead, what enriches possibilities is thinking of their public nature as adjustable and one that intertwines with a private nature, on scales that range in similar gradients as streets and homes.

Fascinating among the findings is the notion that “insiderness” is both an inward and outward directional concept. As it turns out, identity deconstruction, that is, the restructuring of identity definitions and perceptions that presently exist, is not a unidirectional process but concurrently bidirectional; it has the capacity to move outward into the establishment of community and into bringing about change. Considering the ways that places and peoples’ relationship to places can spearhead action is instrumental to anyone studying and designing places at any scale.

Although focused on the interior, the study’s implications extend to the varied system of scales that comprise our spatial environment. We acknowledge that the same process of “insiderness” can occur at larger scales that range from the world and the nation to the state, the city, the neighborhood, the building, and the interior. *The Spatial Scales of Self-Making*

model presented in Figure 1 is thereby at the nascent stages and can be extended to include all these different scales, with more research being devoted to better understand each of these relationships.

The web of connections that is inherent among these varying scales speaks to people as “placed beings.” Our findings begin to shed light on how lived experience and identity development in place do not exist in isolation, yet within a broader social, cultural, economic, political, technological, and historical context. By exposing the many factors that impact how students see and perceive a space, the paper unearths areas of intervention. Societal expectations of how a school should look, media representations of events, people, and places, as well as expectations of upkeep and maintenance mediated how students perceived their environments.

Therefore, the study’s theoretical implications intertwine with practical ones, for among others, educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Interior design curricula strive to balance the psychological and social dimensions of space with the physical ones. The development and evolution of theories such as the *Spatial Scales of Self-Making* model should be more readily explored within the field of interior design. Weaving human-centered concepts, ones that relate to human experience and originate from a wide range of fields (i.e., psychology, sociology, humanist geography, philosophy, etc.), into the foundation of interior design curricula may help better prepare future designers to be critical thinkers, ones who work towards a more holistic understanding of the human experience in space and the role of the interior environment in it. This in addition to service-learning opportunities that expose students to projects in the community and places in which they would not have ventured on their own, can enrich the questions students are asking (Zollinger, Guerin, Hadjiyanni, & Martin, 2009).

In recognition of the study’s limitations—the small sample size, the young age of the participants, their socioeconomic, cultural, and racial background, and so on—future research can continue building our

understanding of the various ways by which identity and interiors intersect within the context of the larger society, informing further development of our theoretical framework. As a start, the students in this study self-selected to participate. This can result in a skewed sample with the participants being more engaged or more observant than other students. A study using random sampling techniques can be more generalizable. Extending this research to a longitudinal or cross-sectional research design would be quite revealing in terms of gathering multiple data points across the same and different cohort groups over time.

Similarly, a study that expanded on the emic perspective, one where the results and conclusions were shared with the participants could add further insights. In parallel, the brief interviews did not allow for an in-depth investigation of what constitutes the participants' identities. Collaborative endeavors that bring social science and design researchers to work on the same project would enable a greater understanding of how participants' multidimensional identity/identities relate to interiors and how “insiderness” is established. Finally, studies of other environments used by children (playgrounds, parks, museums, etc.) as well as adults (office spaces, homes, health-related environments, etc.) along with a diversification of the backgrounds of participants can expand the theoretical direction that is applicable to interior design (Clemons & Eckman, 2011; Pable, 2012).

In closing, at the hands of interior design practitioners, school interiors can be designed to communicate individual potential, accomplishment, focus, and expressions of self that help construct continuity and identity within the students. Both the process of design as well as individual design factors come into play when working toward that goal. Programmatic development can expand to innovative ways by which students can enjoy self-expression within a structured school environment. Space planning can treat all spaces as equally important in the development of the self and examine how space usage can take

advantage of furniture and other amenities to enhance the experience of place. Meanwhile, material selections that enable easy maintenance as well as personalization and cleanliness create a school environment that fosters positive and enriching associations.

Understanding a little more about how the environment interacts with facets of identity and greater societal discourses on class, race, and gender, designers, architects, and planners can be more cognizant as to what questions or issues to address during programming and the design process—where for example should self-expression be encouraged and how? What are the broader implications of material selections that cannot be easily maintained? Interdisciplinary inquiry into a deeper exploration of how people see what they see in the environments they inhabit and how identity is informed by the environment can set a trajectory for the creation of innovative design solutions that can improve the lives of everyone.

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Notes

¹The billions of dollars being spent on the infrastructure of school facilities has not been equally available and distributed between facilities in low income areas and high income areas, with the lowest investment (\$4,140 per student) made in the poorest communities, and highest investment (\$11,500 per student) made in the high-income communities (BEST, 2008).

²Names of students used are not real.

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