10 Principles for Designing Places That Support Social Connection


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Insights from the Mars Study on Connection & Belonging by the University of Manchester in cooperation with FLUX, and wider research on social connection, belonging and the built environment.

1

Create places where people can "just be"

People should be able to spend time somewhere without having to buy something,
participate in an activity, or interact with anyone. FLUX demonstrates the value of this low-demand form of presence, which maps directly onto the report's foundational principle of "space to just be."

Design implication:
Consider whether someone can comfortably spend time in a place without needing to buy anything, participate in an activity, or justify their presence. Make room for simply being there.

2

Make it comfortable to be alone among others

FLUX participants valued being able to attend alone while remaining in the presence of other people. Being socially connected and being alone are, therefore, not necessarily
opposites.

Design implication:
Create spaces where spending time alone feels natural and socially accepted. Spaces that provide opportunities to observe everyday activity and enjoy the presence of others without becoming the focus.

3

Give people choice over how social they want to be

Different people, and the same person at different times, want different levels of interaction.

Design implication:
Offer different levels of social engagement, from quiet retreat and being around others to observing, participating, and interacting. Allow people to move between those experiences on their own terms. Don't assume that greater interaction is always better.

4

Use activities as bridges rather than obligations

Activities in FLUX provided something to do and a reason to enter the space. FLUX creates opportunities for connection without requiring people to come specifically to "meet people."

Design implication:
Create accessible, low-pressure activities that people can join, observe, or simply pass by.
Let activities create an invitation for connection without making participation a requirement for belonging.

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Make room for unplanned encounters

Connection does not always need to be organised.
FLUX showed the importance of informal and serendipitous encounters.

Design implication:
Create an environment where spontaneous encounters can happen naturally (e.g. shared tables, seating, circulation routes, entrances, activity areas). Shared activities and spaces can provide opportunities for conversation and connection, without making interaction an expectation.

6

Make people feel that the space is for them

Being technically allowed into a place is different from feeling entitled to occupy it. FLUX highlighted welcome, openness, and psychological safety.

Design implication:
Go beyond the question of physical access. Consider whether different people will feel welcome, comfortable, and entitled to use the space. Consider social, physical, sensory ,and psychological barriers, including those that may not be immediately visible.Don't assume that greater interaction is always better.

7

Allow familiarity and belonging to develop

Repeated encounters with a place, and with the people within it, can transform somewhere anonymous into somewhere familiar.

Design implication:
Create reasons for people to return and opportunities to develop familiarity with the place over time. Give people opportunities to contribute to, personalise, or participate in the life of the space. Think about connection to place as well as connection to people.

8

Provide opportunities for restoration as well as interaction

Sometimes people need respite rather than conversation. Van den Berg and colleagues' distinction between social proximity, distracti-on, and recovery/reflection resonates strongly with FLUX participants' accounts of simply spending time in the environment.

Design implication:
Balance socially active areas with quieter, more sheltered spaces. Give people the opportunity to pause, observe, reflect, or withdraw from stimulation while remaining connected to the surrounding social environment.

9

Design for different people and different ways of being

There is unlikely to be a single configuration that constitutes the perfect "social space." People have different social, sensory, and emotional needs.

Design implication:
Build flexibility into the environment through varied seating, spatial arrangements, activities, and levels of stimulation. Accommodate different group sizes, needs, and ways of using the space rather than prescribing the "correct" way of participating.

10

Don't judge success simply by how much people interact

This may be the most important FLUX lesson. Someone who comes alone, spends an hour around other people without speaking to anyone, feels comfortable, and leaves feeling part of something has not "failed" to engage.

Design & evaluation implication: Look beyond conventional measures such as participation rates and interpersonal interactions. Consider whether people feel welcome, comfortable, connected and free to choose how they engage. Also include belonging, agency, accessibility, repeated use and opportunities for connection when evaluating a space.

RESEARCH NOTES AND SOURCES

Mars Study on Connection & Belonging / FLUX Evaluation, University of Manchester, 2026.

The Mars Study on Connection & Belonging is a qualitative study of FLUX conducted by a University of Manchester research team led by Professor Pamela Qualter. The research was designed to understand how people experience FLUX and how characteristics of the space may facilitate social encounter, community and belonging. The team conducted 22 individual interviews and three focus groups with 14 participants who had visited and experienced FLUX. FLUX monitoring data were also analysed as additional descriptive context.

Van den Berg & Schoenmakers (2026), Space for Loneliness: Design Guidelines for Loneliness-Friendly Environments.This report brings together research on the built environment and loneliness, emphasising that loneliness-friendly spaces should support various needs, including social proximity, connection, distraction, and recovery.

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