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Press Information

New Mars Study on Connection and Belonging: Connection does not always require interaction

Research at FLUX in Munich explores how place can create opportunities for connection and belonging – including simply being alone among others

- **The research contributes to a growing body of evidence that focuses not just on fixing individuals, but on reimagining and nurturing the public spaces around them.**
- **A new study by the University of Manchester, supported by Mars in cooperation with FLUX, finds that social connection does not always require active interaction. It points towards a paradigm shift: away from understanding loneliness primarily as an individual problem and towards recognizing the role of our environments and social infrastructure in fostering belonging.**
- **The qualitative evaluation of FLUX in Munich shows that people value being able to spend time alone among others, with the freedom to choose whether and how they engage.**

Unterhaching, October 12, 2026 – What makes a place somewhere people feel welcome, connected, and that they belong? And does connection always require conversation or active interaction?

Exploring the answers to these queries is becoming increasingly relevant because research highlights the critical role of our environment in shaping social wellbeing. For a long time, loneliness research and interventions focused primarily on the individual - for example on social and emotional skills, social networks, or psychological interventions.[2] Today, scientific and public interest is also rapidly growing around a different question: What role do the shared places where our social lives unfold play in making us feel connected?

These questions are also at the heart of the new Mars Study on Connection & Belonging, conducted by the University of Manchester in cooperation with FLUX, [1] a collaborative project of the four museums of the Pinakothek der Moderne and the Pinakothek der Moderne Foundation. Designed by British artist Morag Myerscough,

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the “Third Place” is located in the Winter Garden and on the south side of the Pinakothek der Moderne and has been open since the summer of 2025. The program is complimentary and accessible regardless of the museum’s opening hours.

This research explores how people experience FLUX and what this can tell us about the conditions that may support different forms of social connection and belonging.

From changing people to rethinking places

The findings contribute to a broader development in loneliness research: alongside understanding and supporting individuals, increasing attention is being paid to the places and social infrastructure that can create opportunities for connection in everyday life.

An earlier global study on loneliness, conducted by Mars, Incorporated together with the University of Manchester and funded by Mars, Incorporated, provided indications that access to suitable places is part of the wider picture around loneliness and social connection.[3] This broadens the perspective: from asking what individuals can do differently to asking how the environments around us can create different opportunities for connection and belonging.

According to the research team at the University of Manchester, historical efforts to address loneliness have often overlooked the profound impact of our physical surroundings. Their evaluation of FLUX demonstrates that by shifting our attention to the places where everyday social life naturally occurs, we can understand how to design environments that offer diverse options for people to engage, participate, or simply coexist in a shared space.

FLUX: Belonging without having to interact

One of the clearest findings from the evaluation is the importance of choice. Participants used FLUX in very different ways: to meet friends, work, eat lunch, spend time with children, join cultural or other activities always free of charge – or simply sit and observe. They particularly valued being able to stay at FLUX without having to buy something, book a place or take part in an activity.[1]

Participants also described FLUX as “open but held” and “a place you can just be”: easy to enter and accessible, while at the same time feeling sheltered and comfortable. Openness, smaller spaces, and different seating options allowed

people to choose where and how they wanted to spend time – closer to others or more withdrawn.[1]

At the same time, connection did not always require direct interaction. People described feeling comfortable at FLUX when visiting alone, enjoying the presence of others, and knowing that interaction was possible without being expected. The researchers describe this emerging concept as “being alone together” – experiencing social presence, a shared space, and belonging without any pressure or obligation to interact.[1] What the qualitative data shows very clearly is a strong sense of belonging, acceptance, and social possibility.

Where interaction did happen, it was often informal and spontaneous rather than organised. Activities, shared spaces and the environment itself could provide natural reasons for conversation without making socialising the purpose of being there. And different people could use the space alongside one another – families, people working, friends meeting or individuals spending time alone – without needing to be there for the same reason.[1]

Together, these findings point towards a different understanding of social space: not designing places to initiate interaction, but creating the conditions in which different forms of connection can emerge.

“The FLUX findings, considered alongside other recent work on loneliness-friendly environments, suggest that socially supportive places do more than bring people together. They give people choice over how they engage with others,” explains Prof. Pamela Qualter, Professor of Psychology for Education at the University of Manchester. “Good places allow us to be alone, to be alone among others, to observe, participate, interact, withdraw, and gradually develop familiarity and belonging. The task for designers is, therefore, not simply to create spaces that make people socialise, but to create welcoming, accessible, safe, and flexible environments in which different forms of social presence and connection are possible.”

What places for connection need

The experiences at FLUX align in important ways with current research on environments that may support social connection.[4] Taken together, they point to practical principles for social spaces:

- Create places where people can “just be”, without the need to consume, spend money, or participate in structured programs. These low social and financial demands were among the qualities particularly valued at FLUX.[1]
- Create openness without exposure through sheltered areas, greenery, and different seating options to help people regulate how visible and socially engaged they want to be.[1]
- Give people choice over the intensity of their social engagement at any given moment – from observing and being alongside others to spontaneous encounters, active participation and conversation.[1] [4]
- Enable encounters without forcing them through shared activities and welcoming physical layout (e.g., shared areas, seating and circulation routes).[1] [4]
- Make room for different people and different ways of being to coexist naturally without friction. The FLUX findings suggest that coexistence itself can be socially meaningful, even when it does not lead to sustained interaction between different groups.[1]
- Provide opportunities for restoration, calm and retreat as well as active social interaction. Places can also offer respite from the demands of the city. Quieter, lower-stimulation areas can allow people to sit, observe, recover or withdraw without becoming completely disconnected from others.[1] [4]
- Understand belonging more broadly. The value of a social space is not defined only by how many conversations or new relationships it generates. Feeling welcome, being able to stay without justification, being alone among others and developing familiarity with a place over time can also be important dimensions of social connection.[1] [4]

This also suggests important implications for the design of spaces.

FLUX was never intended simply as an object to look at. It’s all about belonging. It was designed as a place to inhabit, use and make your own. The most exciting part is seeing how people take ownership of the space and give it a life of its own, says Morag Myerscough, artist and designer of FLUX.

A place between the museum and the city

The evaluation also considers FLUX's particular location at the Pinakothek der Moderne. For participants, FLUX offers a place to arrive, spend time or meet before

and after a museum visit, while also making a more informal and accessible side of the cultural institution visible. The researchers describe FLUX as a potential "bridging space between the cultural institution and everyday public life".[1]

"FLUX forges a link between the Pinakothek der Moderne, the city and society. As an open, cheerful space that bridges the gap between the museum and public life, FLUX helps to make the museum even more accessible, versatile and relevant," says Markus Michalke, Chair of the Board of the Pinakothek der Moderne Foundation.

At the same time, the evaluation identifies potential to make the relationship between FLUX and the museum more visible without losing the openness and informality that participants particularly value.[1]

Zusammen.Halt initiative and Mars Snacking Foundation strengthening places for connection and community

The Mars Study on Connection & Belonging is part of the social impact initiative Zusammen.Halt., through which Mars in Germany aims to contribute to a vibrant and future-ready Munich by supporting places that enable social connection and community.

Zusammen.Halt. brings together partners from research, design, culture and civil society and explores the role social infrastructure can play in creating opportunities for encounter, participation and belonging.

Alongside FLUX at the Pinakothek der Moderne, this initiative also support the new Über den Tellerrand Kitchen Hub in Munich-Sendling. Both of these local projects have recently received funding from the Mars Snacking Foundation.

"By supporting welcoming community spaces both in Germany and globally, our goal is to create inclusive environments that improve quality of life, strengthen connection, and foster a genuine sense of belonging," explains Anne Vela-Wagner, Executive Director Mars Snacking Foundation. "Projects like FLUX are prime examples of how modern social infrastructure can build stronger, more resilient communities. This research underlines the immense value of places that give people the opportunity to meet, participate, or simply spend quiet time among others—ultimately building stronger, more connected communities."

The approach brings research and practice together: research can help us better understand societal needs; funding can help make places for connection possible; and evaluation can generate new insights into how people actually experience those places.

Ultimately, the findings from FLUX suggest that not everyone needs the same thing from a social space at the same time. Sometimes connection means conversation, participation and shared activity. At other times, it may simply mean having somewhere to go, being around other people and feeling that you belong there.

Research notes and sources

1. 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, 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 analysed as additional descriptive context.

2. Evidence on interventions addressing loneliness.

The wider research context includes recent meta-analytic evidence examining interventions to address loneliness. A 2024 meta-analysis by Lasgaard et al., covering 280 studies across age groups, found small-to-moderate effects overall, with psychological interventions showing the strongest effects.

3. Global Loneliness Study / Business vs. Loneliness, 2023.

The Global Loneliness Study was funded by Mars, Incorporated and conducted by Economics of Mutuality with the University of Manchester. The study collected more than 50,000 quantitative and qualitative responses in the US, Mexico, UK, Germany, and China to identify core drivers of loneliness and patterns across different demographic groups.

4. 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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