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Mars Study on Connection & Belonging

FLUX Evaluation, University of Manchester, 2026



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Use of FLUX:
What people said about why they used FLUX

Interviews and focus groups with people using FLUX provide a consistently positive account of the space and offer important insights into how it is experienced and used. The findings suggest that FLUX provides more than a physical place to spend time. Participants described a distinctive social environment in which they felt able to spend time alone or with others, participate in activities or simply be present, and interact with people without feeling obliged to do so.

Six interconnected themes were identified: freedom from the usual conditions of urban participation, an open but protected environment, being alone together, opportunities for spontaneous social connection, bringing different people together, and providing a restorative urban environment. The findings also identify some limitations and opportunities for development, particularly around making the purpose and permissions of the space clearer and ensuring that its intended inclusivity translates into accessibility for different groups.

Taken together, the findings suggest that an important contribution of FLUX is not simply that it creates opportunities for social interaction, but that it creates the conditions in which connection can occur without requiring it. Choice, informality, accessibility and the legitimacy of being alone appear central to participants' experiences of the space.



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Theme 1.
"You can just be": freedom from the usual conditions of urban participation

One of the clearest findings was the value participants placed on being able to use FLUX without the usual expectations associated with commercial, cultural, or organised social spaces. Participants repeatedly emphasised that they did not have to buy anything, book a place, participate in an activity, or have a particular reason for being there. That was particularly valued in the context of Munich, which participants described as an expensive city.

As one participant explained:

"You can consume, but you don't have to. I find that to be a really pleasant aspect, actually. If I want to buy something, I can, but I don't have to."

Another described FLUX as:

"A place where you can basically go even if you forgot your wallet."

Participants also valued the flexibility of the space. FLUX could be used for working, meeting friends, spending time with children, attending activities, eating lunch, or simply sitting. One participant summarised it as follows:

"An open, colourful place where you don't have to do anything, but can do a lot."

This flexibility appears important because it reduces both financial and social barriers to participation. Unlike spaces organised around a particular activity or type of user, FLUX allows different activities and forms of participation to coexist.

The absence of a requirement to spend money is especially important. It means that participation is not dependent upon someone's ability or willingness to consume. One participant explicitly linked this to their own financial circumstances:

"We actually need to save a bit of money right now, and being able to bring your own things makes a big difference."



Evaluation finding:
FLUX appears to provide a relatively low-demand form of urban social infrastructure. Its value lies partly in removing some of the financial, organisational, and behavioural requirements associated with other places in the city.

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Theme 2.
"Open but held": creating a welcoming and psychologically comfortable environment

Participants frequently described FLUX as open, but they also valued feeling protected from the surrounding city. That combination appears important: physical accessibility contributed to the sense that people were welcome to enter, and participants contrasted FLUX with places characterised by entrance gates, turnstiles or other obvious boundaries:

"There are no barriers, turnstiles, or entrance gates. You can simply walk through."

Another participant described it as:

"Such an open, free place. What I really like about Flux is that you can just walk in."

At the same time, participants did not experience FLUX simply as an exposed public space.

They described it as sheltered, contained and comfortable:

"It's an open yet protected space."

One participant described being able to **"curl up cozily while still being outside"**, while another noted that although a major road was nearby, FLUX felt **"nicely shielded from the road"**.

The design of the space also appears to matter. Participants valued its colour and visual distinctiveness, but also the availability of smaller spaces and different places to sit. This provided opportunities to position themselves according to their preferences for privacy, activity or proximity to other people.



Evaluation finding:
The physical characteristics of FLUX appear to contribute to its social function. Openness encourages entry, while shelter, smaller spaces and different seating possibilities enable people to regulate how exposed or socially engaged they want to be.

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Theme 3.
“Being alone together”: belonging without an obligation to interact

One of the strongest and potentially most important findings was that participants regarded FLUX as a place where it was socially acceptable to be alone: FLUX did not simply provide opportunities for people to meet, with people saying they felt comfortable spending time alone while remaining in the presence of other people.

One participant explained:

“Unlike other places in Munich, where people tend not to hang out alone, here it's completely normal to hang out by yourself too.”

Another explicitly connected this experience with belonging:

“It gives me a feeling of belonging here because nobody looks at me strangely, and because I can do whatever I want.”

Importantly, being alone should not be interpreted as loneliness. Some participants actively preferred spending time alone:

“I really enjoy doing many things alone. I don't have to accommodate anyone. I can just do whatever I want.”

Nevertheless, being alone at FLUX could involve a sense of connection to other people. Participants described small acknowledgements, such as smiling at others, and a broader sense of being part of a shared social environment:

“Everyone does their own thing, you can exchange a friendly smile, and then people go on with what they're doing.”

Another participant described:

“A general sense of goodwill, a bit like a neighbourhood village square. Community is allowed to happen, but it also doesn't feel weird if you're just sitting here alone.”

This suggests an important distinction between social interaction and social connectedness. People may derive value from being around others, feeling accepted, and having the possibility of interaction without necessarily speaking to other people.



Evaluation finding:

FLUX appears to provide a relatively low-demand form of urban social infrastructure. Its value lies partly in removing some of the financial, organisational, and behavioural requirements associated with other places in the city.

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Theme 4.

Creating conditions for spontaneous connection rather than manufacturing interaction

Participants described FLUX as providing opportunities for people to encounter and talk to one another. The environment itself, activities, and events provided reasons to begin conversations.

One participant commented:

“I find it relatively easy for small talk here because there are plenty of occasions, through the various events and offerings that take place here.”

Another described attending the opening:

“Within minutes, I easily connected with people here and started chatting about the location, how beautifully it was designed, and the story of how it was painted with the community.”

Some encounters were completely unplanned. One participant recalled:

“Once we found baby mice and rescued them together with another family. That definitely led to conversation.”

Therefore, FLUX appears to create opportunities for what might be described as serendipitous social encounters: people are brought into proximity and provided with shared experiences or potential conversation points without interaction being formally organised.

Importantly, the interviews and focus groups also show that such opportunities do not necessarily translate into new relationships. Some participants attended primarily with people they already knew and had not interacted substantially with strangers. As one participant explained:

“I've only been here with people I already knew.”

Another said:

“Nothing has really developed on a genuine conversational level so far.”

This distinction is important. The evidence supports the conclusion that FLUX creates opportunities and conditions for social interaction, but it does not demonstrate that all users develop new relationships through attending FLUX.



Evaluation finding:

FLUX facilitates the possibility of spontaneous social interaction, particularly through shared activities, events, and the design and use of the space. However, opportunities for connection should not be equated with the formation of new or sustained relationships.

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Theme 5.
Different people sharing the same space

Participants frequently commented on the range of people they observed using FLUX and valued its ability to accommodate different activities and groups simultaneously. One participant described seeing people working on laptops, families, people meeting for dates,and others simply resting:

“It's a complete diversity of people coming together here, and I think that is also the greatest added value.”

Another described the potential for:

“Different worlds [to] come together.”

This coexistence matters because participants did not believe that everyone needed to use the space for the same purpose:

“People don't have to be there for the same reason. They can also mix for different reasons.”

There was also interest in the possibility of interaction across age groups and other social boundaries. However, the data provide stronger evidence that different people can coexist at FLUX than that sustained interaction between different social groups routinely occurs.

There are also reasons for caution in interpreting FLUX as universally inclusive. Participants themselves recognised the limits of judging accessibility from their own perspective:

“It's difficult to speak about barriers for specific groups when you don't experience or have those barriers yourself.”

Others questioned whether the full diversity of the surrounding area was represented at FLUX and identified practical accessibility issues. For example, one participant described the space itself as wheelchair accessible but suggested that travelling to it using public transport could nevertheless be difficult for someone using a wheelchair.



Evaluation finding:

Participants perceive FLUX as an inclusive space in which different groups and activities can coexist. That is an important achievement. However, perceived openness should be distinguished from demonstrated equitable reach. Further evaluation could examine who uses FLUX, who does not, and whether particular groups experience barriers to accessing or feeling ownership of the space.

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Theme 6.
A restorative urban environment

Participants described FLUX as having positive effects on how they felt while they were there. Colour, greenery, quietness, informality, and the ability to withdraw from the demands of the surrounding city all contributed.

One participant said:

“My mood always brightens up whenever I'm here.”

Another reported:

“I feel like I always leave with a big smile.”

FLUX was variously described as an “oasis” and as somewhere offering respite from aspects of city life.

One particularly striking account was:

“This is a place that reconciles me with the big city again right now, and makes me think: ‘Well, it can work like this too.’”

Those accounts indicate perceived immediate benefits associated with being in the space. They should not be interpreted as evidence that FLUX produces sustained improvements in mental health or wellbeing, which would require different types of evidence. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that participants experience the environment as pleasant, calming, and restorative.



Evaluation finding:
FLUX appears to provide a restorative environment within the city, with participants describing positive immediate emotional experiences associated with spending time there.

An important tension emerged within the findings of this theme. The informality and absence of rules that many participants valued could also create uncertainty. Some participants were initially unsure where FLUX began, where they were allowed to sit, whether particular areas could be used freely, or whether access to the indoor space required a museum ticket.

One focus-group participant described:

“This ambiguity: does that already belong to it, or does it only start behind that? [...] Am I allowed to sit there, or only at the bench up front?”

Another participant made the broader observation that:

“Freedom can sometimes be overwhelming.”

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They suggested that simple information explaining that people could sit anywhere, charge their phones or use the space without purchasing anything might help.

Sensory accessibility also requires consideration. Although many participants enjoyed the colours, activities, and sounds of FLUX, one noted that the environment might be overwhelming for people who are particularly sensitive to sensory stimulation and suggested the possibility of a quieter area.

Those findings do not undermine the broader finding that participants experience FLUX as open and welcoming. Instead, they identify ways in which its openness could potentially be made more legible and accessible.

Evaluation finding:

A small amount of clear, welcoming information about what FLUX is, who can use it, and what people are free to do could reduce uncertainty while retaining the informality that users value. Consideration could also be given to how people with different sensory and accessibility needs experience the space.



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Conclusions

The qualitative findings suggest that FLUX provides a distinctive form of urban social infrastructure. Its contribution is not limited to hosting activities or creating opportunities for people to meet. Participants particularly value the ability to use the space flexibly and without financial, organisational, or social obligations.

A central finding is that connection at FLUX does not always take the form of direct social interaction. Participants described being comfortable alone, enjoying the presence of other people, exchanging small acknowledgements, feeling part of a shared environment, and knowing that interaction was possible if they wanted it. FLUX, therefore, appears to enable different intensities of social participation - from simply being around other people, through casual encounters and conversations, to attending organised activities and meeting existing friends.

That suggests a potential pathway through which FLUX functions as social infrastructure:



Importantly, the evidence is stronger for some parts of that pathway than others. Participants provide substantial evidence of feeling comfortable, welcome and socially at ease, and of perceiving opportunities for interaction. There is also evidence of spontaneous conversations and encounters. There is less evidence that FLUX routinely generates new, sustained social relationships; it does lead to spontaneous short conversations that are meaningful to many. While the qualitative findings cannot establish that FLUX reduces loneliness, they tell us that FLUX provides the opportunities for people to connect with others in ways that feel appropriate for them, and to have positive time alone.

The distinction above is important for understanding what success looks like. Evaluating a third place such as FLUX solely according to the number of new friendships it generates would overlook other potentially important social functions. Providing somewhere people can be alone without feeling socially excluded, encounter people different from themselves, spend time with existing relationships, participate without spending money, and experience themselves as legitimate members of a shared public space itself represents an important contribution to social connection and urban wellbeing


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“It's a complete diversity of people coming together here“

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FLUX and the Pinakothek der Moderne: Insights from the Qualitative Evaluation

Overview

The interviews and focus groups conducted as part of the FLUX evaluation provide useful insights into how visitors understand the relationship between FLUX and the Pinakothek der Moderne, and how FLUX may influence experiences and perceptions of the museum and the wider Kunstareal.

Although the evaluation was not designed specifically as an evaluation of museum engagement, the relationship between FLUX and the museum emerged repeatedly in participants' accounts. Taken together, the findings suggest that FLUX is doing more than providing an additional public space adjacent to the museum. For some participants, it changes the experience of the museum environment itself: providing somewhere to pause before or after a museum visit, improving perceptions of the physical setting around the museum, and presenting a more informal, playful, and accessible face of the institution.

At the same time, the relationship between FLUX and the museum was not always clear to visitors. Some participants did not realise that the two were connected, while one first-time visitor assumed that FLUX might require museum admission precisely because it appeared to be an artistic installation associated with the museum. This points to an important tension within the findings. There may be value in making the relationship between FLUX and the museum more visible, but this needs to be achieved without undermining the qualities that participants particularly valued about FLUX: openness, informality, freedom from obligation, and the ability to use the space without having to purchase something or participate in a prescribed activity.

FLUX changes the environment around the museum

One of the clearest findings was that FLUX has changed participants' experience of the physical environment surrounding the Pinakothek der Moderne. Participants who were familiar with the area described the previous outdoor environment relatively negatively. In one focus group, a participant argued that the quality of the external space had previously seemed inconsistent with the status of the museum. In their view, FLUX had increased the perceived value of this part of the Kunstareal and represented an "upgrade" to the space. Other participants similarly contrasted the current environment with the previous museum café and terrace, which they had not regarded as particularly attractive places to spend time.

The change, therefore, appears to be about more than aesthetics. FLUX has created reasons to remain in a space that was previously experienced principally as somewhere associated with entering or leaving the museum. Participants referred to the colour, planting, seating, café, and opportunities to spend time outside. For some, those features transformed the area into a destination in its own right.

That findings is potentially important for the museum because the experience of a cultural institution is not necessarily confined to what happens within the exhibition galleries. The environment immediately surrounding a museum can contribute to whether the institution feels inviting and whether people want to remain in the area. The qualitative evidence suggests that FLUX has improved this wider experience of the Pinakothek der Moderne.

FLUX can extend the museum visit

A related finding was that FLUX provides a place in which a museum visit can continue socially and informally after visitors leave the formal museum environment. One participant described how FLUX allows them to spend more time within the museum quarter. They gavethe example of visiting the Pinakothek der Moderne, taking a break at FLUX, and then continuing to another museum, concluding that FLUX "extends your stay" and that the two locations "complement each other well".

Other participants made a similar point. Rather than finishing a museum visit and then needing to search for a café or another place elsewhere in the neighbourhood, visitors can remain immediately outside the museum. One focus-group participant thought that could be particularly useful for people unfamiliar with the area: the presence of an attractive place to sit, eat, drink, or spend time removes the additional effort involved in finding somewhere else to go.

It seems, then, that FLUX functions as a form of social and restorative infrastructure around the museum. A museum visit can be cognitively and physically demanding, particularly after several hours. FLUX provides an environment in which people can pause, rest, and interact before deciding what to do next. One visiting couple, for example, described arriving at FLUX after spending approximately four hours in the museum because they were tired and needed a break; they experienced FLUX as a positive and comfortable place in which to recover.

This finding complements the broader findings from the FLUX evaluation concerning the importance of places that permit people simply to spend time without requiring them to undertake a particular activity. In this sense, FLUX potentially extends the museum experience while providing a very different kind of environment from the formal cultural space inside.

FLUX may also change perceptions of the museum

There was some evidence that FLUX influenced how participants perceived the Pinakothek der Moderne itself. One participant who had visited the museum many times described FLUX as "such a young, cool project that I wouldn't have initially attributed to such an established, traditional museum."

This is a significant observation. It suggests that FLUX may communicate something about the identity of the museum as an institution. Through its association with an open, colourful, and unconventional public space, the museum may be perceived as more experimental, contemporary, and willing to engage with the city in different ways.

Another focus-group participant described the decision to allow the colourful FLUX environment to extend into the museum as a "sign of trust" and characterised the museum's involvement as "brave". For that participant, the relationship between the established museum and the more informal, colourful character of FLUX was itself meaningful.

These accounts suggest that FLUX potentially provides the museum with a different form of public presence. Rather than engagement beginning when someone crosses the museum threshold, FLUX allows the institution to encounter people within an informal public setting in which visiting a museum is not necessarily their primary purpose.

A possible low-threshold route into museum engagement

Several participants identified the possibility that FLUX could encourage engagement with the museum among people who might not otherwise have considered visiting. One participant described FLUX

explicitly as an opportunity to reach “a younger target group”, describing it as an “entrance door” to the museum; they also identified its potential for families. Another regular museum visitor suggested that people who came primarily to FLUX might subsequently decide to enter the museum.

There was also a concrete example of how programming could facilitate this movement. A focus-group participant described being attracted by an event combining a drink with a guided museum tour. Although they had been unable to attend because of a scheduling conflict, they explained that the format could have resulted in an additional museum visit. Rather than needing to identify a particular exhibition and deliberately plan a visit, the combined format made museum participation seem easier and more spontaneous.

These findings do not demonstrate that FLUX increases museum attendance; the qualitative evaluation cannot establish such causal effect. But, they do identify a plausible mechanismthrough which FLUX might support museum engagement. FLUX provides a setting in which people can encounter the museum without initially having made a decision to visit it. Where there are simple, visible opportunities to move from FLUX into museum activities, the psychological and practical threshold for participation may be reduced. That possibility was articulated particularly clearly by another participant, who suggested that short talks about artworks could take place at FLUX. Looking at the diverse activities taking place around them, they reflected that people with relatively little previous exposure to fine art could potentially be introduced to it in a “very low-threshold way”.

The relationship between FLUX and the museum is not always clear

Alongside those positive findings, the interviews identified an important issue concerning the visibility of the relationship between FLUX and the museum. Some participants simply did not know that FLUX was connected to the Pinakothek der Moderne. One focus-group participant said “I honestly didn't know that it was connected... I honestly didn't know that it was part of it.”

Another participant who was visiting FLUX for the first time had interpreted it in almost the opposite way. Because FLUX appeared highly artistic, they assumed that it might be an installation associated with the museum and were consequently unsure whether they were allowed to enter without a museum ticket. When told that the space was freely accessible and free of charge, they explained that this had not been obvious.

This is a particularly useful finding because it demonstrates that ambiguity can operate in two directions. Some visitors may fail to recognise the museum connection at all; others may perceive the museum connection so strongly that they assume the institutional rules associated with museum entry also apply to FLUX.

The issue is, therefore, not simply one of increasing museum branding. More prominent institutional identification could make the relationship clearer while inadvertently making FLUX appear less freely accessible. The communication challenge is, instead, to convey two messages simultaneously: FLUX is connected to the museum, and FLUX is an open public space that can be used without entering the museum, buying a ticket or purchasing anything.

Participants wanted more porous connections between inside and outside

When participants were asked how the relationship could be strengthened, their suggestions were strikingly consistent. They generally did not propose making FLUX more like a conventional museum environment. Instead, they suggested relatively informal mechanisms that would allow people to move between FLUX and the museum.

Ideas included museum educators providing activities at FLUX, short talks about particular artworks, announcements at FLUX when a museum tour was about to begin, linking creative workshops at FLUX with museum visits, incorporating FLUX into museum tours, making the FLUX programme more visible inside the museum, connecting children's museum activities with opportunities to play or make things outside; workshop programmes culminating in small exhibitions inside the museum, and linking exhibition openings with subsequent events at FLUX.

Several of those suggestions are important because they involve invitation rather than obligation. Someone spending time at FLUX could hear that a short tour was about to begin and decide spontaneously whether to join. Similarly, a family visiting the museum could be told that there was an activity outside and move between the two environments.

The distinction matters because much of what participants valued about FLUX elsewhere in the evaluation was its absence of pressure. People repeatedly described being able to come and go, participate or not participate, spend money or not spend money, interact with others or remain alone. Stronger museum connections are, therefore, most compatible with the existing character of FLUX when they preserve this sense of choice.

Implications for the museum

Taken together, the findings suggest that FLUX can usefully be understood as a bridging space between the cultural institution and everyday public life. It is physically connected to the museum environment, but operates according to rather different social expectations. People can visit without deciding in advance to engage with art or culture. They can sit, meet friends, bring children, attend yoga, eat, drink, encounter an event accidentally or simply pass through. This creates opportunities for contact with the museum among people whose primary reason for being there may have nothing to do with museum attendance.

At the same time, existing museum visitors gain something from FLUX. It provides a place to pause, recover, and socialise and can extend the time spent within the Kunstareal. Participants also suggested that it improves the physical setting and, in some cases, changes perceptions of the museum itself.

The findings, therefore, suggest several principles for the next stage of FLUX:

1. **The relationship between FLUX and the museum could be made clearer, while communicating equally clearly that FLUX is free, open and does not require museumn admission.**

2. **The strongest opportunities appear to lie in creating small, low-threshold transitions between inside and outside rather than simply increasing museum branding. Short tours, talks, creative activities, invitations, and linked programming could provide opportunities for people to cross between FLUX and the museum without requiring a substantial commitment.**

3. **There is value in considering the relationship in both directions. The question is not only whether FLUX can bring new audiences into the museum. The evaluation suggests that the museum can also bring visitors into FLUX, where they can rest, socialise and remain within the Kunstareal for longer. FLUX and the museum may therefore be mutually reinforcing.**

4. **Care should be taken not to undermine the distinctive characteristics that appear to make FLUX successful. Its value lies partly in the fact that it does not feel highly regulated or institutionally prescribed. Participants value being able to use the space on their own terms. Increasing the connection with the museum should therefore not mean making FLUX feel more formal or making cultural participation appear to be the expected reason for being there.**

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Conclusion

The qualitative evaluation suggests that FLUX occupies an unusual position between museum and public space. It can make the museum environment more attractive, extend the museum visit, provide a different and potentially more accessible public face for the institution, and create opportunities for people to encounter cultural activities in an informal setting.

There is also evidence of unrealised potential. Not everyone understands the relationship between FLUX and the Pinakothek der Moderne, and some participants wanted stronger connections between activities taking place inside and outside the museum. The opportunity, therefore, is not simply to make FLUX more visibly part of the museum. Rather, it is to make the pathways between FLUX and the museum more visible and more permeable.

The qualitative findings suggest that this is most likely to work when movement between the two is easy, spontaneous and optional. In that sense, FLUX may offer something of broader significance for the museum: a space in which the boundary between cultural institution and
city becomes less rigid. People can encounter the museum without first committing to being a museum visitor, while museum visitors can move into a social public environment without leaving the cultural setting altogether. Preserving that permeability while strengthening the connections between the two appears to be one of the clearest opportunities identified by participants in the evaluation.



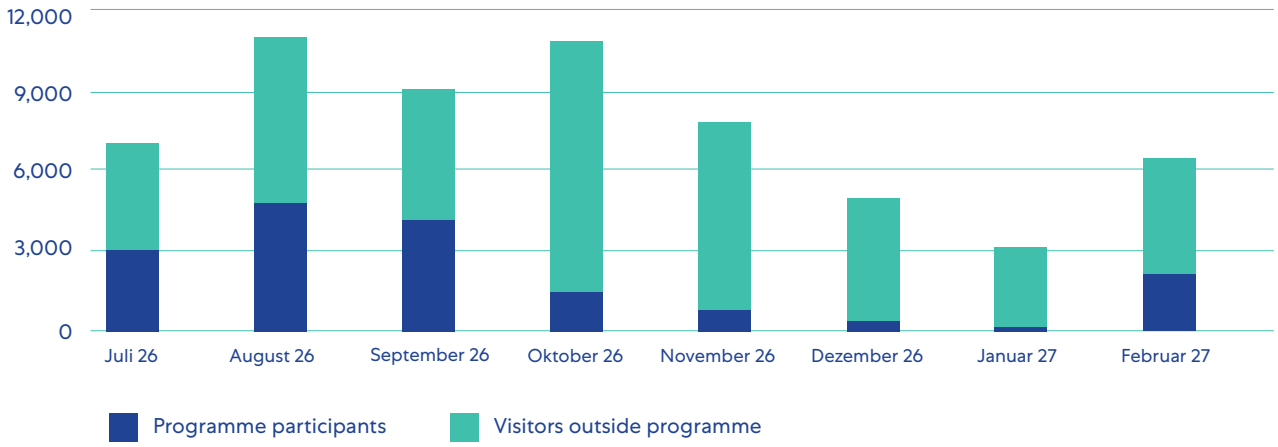
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Use of FLUX: Monitoring Data

Monitoring data from FLUX provide important context for the qualitative evaluation by showing both the scale of use of FLUX and the extent to which people used the space independently of its organised programme. Across the monitoring period from June 2025 to February 2026, 64,486 visits were recorded, although the months are not all directly comparable because June covers only the opening period and the completeness of the February monitoring data requires some caution.

Recorded use was substantial throughout much of the period. Monthly visitor numbers exceeded 10,000 in both August (10,813) and October 2025 (10,753), before declining during the winter months. However, overall visitor numbers alone do not fully capture how FLUX was being used. The monitoring data distinguish between people attending organised programme activities and those visiting FLUX outside the programme, and this distinction is particularly informative for understanding FLUX as a social space.

Figure 1. Recorded use of FLUX by type of participation
Monthly recorded programme participants and visitors outside of programme, July 2025-February 2026.



Note: Bars show recorded programme participants and visitors outside the programme. June 2025 is excluded because the monitoring data do not provide an equivalent programme/nonprogramme breakdown.
Source: FLUX monitoring data. The two categories do not always sum exactly to the separately recorded overall visitor total and should therefore be regarded as monitoring estimates rather than precise counts.

As Figure 1 shows, a substantial proportion of FLUX use occurred outside organised programming. During July–September 2025, programme participation accounted for a sizeable component of recorded activity, with 2,834 programme participants in July, 4,803 in August and 4,166 in September. Nevertheless, large numbers of people also used FLUX outside the programme during those months:
3,860 in July, 6,140 in August and 4,820 in September.

From October 2025, this pattern became more pronounced. In October, for example, 1,423 programme participants were recorded compared with 9,380 visitors outside the programme. The corresponding figures were 771 and 6,990 in November, 377 and 4,553 in December, and 135 and 2,918 in January. Programme participation increased again in February, with 2,088 participants recorded alongside 4,337 visitors outside the programme; this increase in programme attendance largely reflects high-attendance children's carnival activities recorded during the month.

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The monitoring data are important for interpreting the qualitative findings. They indicate that FLUX was not functioning solely as a venue to which people came to attend organised activities. Considerable use occurred independently of formal programming. This is consistent with participants' descriptions of FLUX as somewhere they could meet friends, work, spend a lunch break, bring children, sit alone, observe what was hap spend time without needing to take part in a particular activity.



Evaluation finding:

The monitoring and qualitative data therefore provide complementary evidence about the role of FLUX. The monitoring data demonstrate that substantial use of the space occurred outside formal programming, while the qualitative findings help explain why this form of use may be important. Participants repeatedly valued the absence of an obligation to consume, participate or interact, together with the freedom to decide how long to stay and what to do while there. At the same time, being in the space created opportunities for social presence, informal encounters and, in some circumstances, spontaneous interaction.

This distinction is central to understanding FLUX as social infrastructure rather than simply an events venue. Its potential social value appears to lie not only in bringing people together through organised activities, but also in providing an accessible shared environment in which people can be around others on their own terms. Formal programming may create particular opportunities for interaction, but the monitoring data suggest that the capacity to use FLUX without participating in that programme is itself an important component of how the space functions.

The monitoring data should nevertheless be interpreted as descriptive rather than as evidence of impact. They show how extensively FLUX was used and the balance between programmed and non-programmed use, but they do not establish whether visits resulted in increased belonging, social connection or reduced loneliness. Those questions require the qualitative evidence presented in the earlier sections and, for causal or sustained effects, would require additional outcome data to be collected.

Implications for the continued development of FLUX

The findings suggest several priorities for development and future evaluation of FLUX:

- Protect the low-threshold character of FLUX. Free access, no requirement to consume, flexible use, and the ability to participate without joining an organised activity are central to what participants value.
- Preserve choice over social engagement. The evidence does not support designing the space around an expectation that everyone should interact. Its value partly derives from allowing people to choose whether and how much they engage.
- Continue to create opportunities for informal encounter. Activities, shared resources, seating arrangements, and events can provide conversation points without making interaction compulsory.
- Make the invitation clearer. Light-touch information explaining that the space is free, who can use it, and what people are allowed to do could reduce uncertainty for first-time users.
- Examine reach as well as perceived inclusivity. Future evaluation should establish whether groups who might particularly benefit from free social infrastructure are actually accessing FLUX, and identify barriers among those who are not.
- Consider different accessibility needs. Physical accessibility, transport, sensory environments, and the clarity of information should all form part of understanding equitable access.
- Measure multiple forms of social connection. Future evaluation should not focus solely on whether visitors make new friends. Based on the current work, relevant outcomes of FLUX could include belonging, perceived welcome, social trust, social interaction, use with existing social networks, comfort being alone around others, opportunities for contact, and repeated use of the space.

Overall, the findings from the interviews and focus groups indicate that FLUX's strength lies inproviding a space where social connection is possible, but not compulsory. Participants canengage with others, spend time with people they already know, participate in shared activities, or simply be alone in the company of others. It is this combination of openness, autonomy, social presence and opportunity that appears to distinguish FLUX from many other urban spaces.

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“An open, colourful place where you don't have to do anything, but can do a lot.”

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Appendix 1. Scientific Methods and Analysis

Purpose of the qualitative evaluation

The qualitative component of the FLUX evaluation was designed to understand how people experience FLUX and how the characteristics of the space may facilitate or inhibit social encounter, community and belonging. Rather than evaluating FLUX solely in terms of attendance or participation in organised activities, the qualitative study sought to examine how people use and experience the space in everyday life, including experiences of being at FLUX alone and with others, perceptions of welcome and belonging, opportunities for informal and spontaneous interaction, accessibility and inclusivity, the physical and social characteristics of the space, and perceived effects on mood and wellbeing.

The qualitative research questions underpinning the analysis were as follows:

1. **How do people experience and use FLUX?**
2. **What characteristics of FLUX facilitate or inhibit people feeling welcome and that they belong?**
3. **How does FLUX create opportunities for social presence, encounter and connection?**
4. **How do the physical and social characteristics of FLUX influence these experiences?**
5. **What barriers to participation or inclusion are experienced or perceived by users?**
6. **What aspects of FLUX should be maintained or developed to strengthen its contribution as social infrastructure?**

These questions informed the analysis, but were not used as predetermined themes. Themes were developed through systematic engagement with the qualitative data.

Study design and sample

A qualitative evaluation design was used, comprising semi-structured individual interviews and three focus groups with people who had experience of FLUX. The dataset supplied for analysis comprised the following:

- **22 individual interviews**
- **3 focus groups, with a total of 14 participants.**

The use of both individual interviews and focus groups provided complementary forms of qualitative evidence. Individual interviews enabled participants to describe their personal experiences and perceptions in detail, while focus groups enabled participants to compare experiences, respond to one another, and explore areas of agreement and disagreement.

Participants and recruitment

Participants were people who had experience of FLUX and who agreed to take part in the evaluation. No participant demographic characteristics were collected because the study was not designed to compare experiences according to age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic circumstances, or other demographic characteristics.

Participants described considerable variation in their relationship with FLUX. Some were frequent or repeat visitors, while others had visited only once or a small number of times.

Participants described attending FLUX alone and with friends, colleagues, partners, families or children; using it for work or lunch breaks; attending programmed activities and events; visiting in connection with the museum; and using it simply as somewhere to spend time. For example, one participant described FLUX as a regular "go-to" place where they might sit with a laptop, whereas another described initially encountering the space while visiting the museum. Recruitment was, therefore, based on willingness to participate among people with experience of FLUX, rather than demographic sampling. The sample should be understood as a sample of people who agreed to share their experiences of the space.

That recruitment approach has implications for interpretation. The findings provide detailed evidence about how participating users experienced FLUX, but the sample cannot be assumed to be representative of all FLUX users. It is also particularly important to recognise that the study does not capture the perspectives of people who have never used FLUX, including those who may be unaware of it or experience barriers that prevent them from accessing the space.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to explore participants' experiences of FLUX. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in German. Questions were sufficiently open to allow participants to describe FLUX in their own terms while also exploring topics relevant to the evaluation. The interviews typically began with a broad question asking participants what kind of place FLUX was for them or about their first impressions of the space. Subsequent questions explored the following:

- **how and why participants used FLUX;**
- **opportunities provided by FLUX that participants perceived as unavailable elsewhere;**
- **the physical design and atmosphere of the space;**
- **experiences of attending alone and with other people;**
- **opportunities for conversation and spontaneous social encounters;**
- **feelings of welcome and belonging;**
- **potential barriers to access or participation;**
- **perceptions of who uses the space and its inclusivity;**
- **effects of being at FLUX on participants' immediate mood and experience;**
- **the relationship between FLUX and the Pinakothek der Moderne;**
- **aspects of FLUX participants particularly valued;**
- **suggestions for improvement; and**
- **aspects of the concept participants believed should be retained.**

Focus groups used a similar topic structure, but allowed participants to respond to, qualify, and sometimes disagree with one another. That was analytically useful because it exposed differences in experience that could be obscured by considering only individual accounts.

The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Participants were informed that recordings would not be retained following transcription. The materials supplied for the present analysis were English-language transcripts, provided after German to English translation had occurred.

Analytical approach

The data were analysed using Thematic Framework Analysis. Thematic Framework Analysis is particularly appropriate for applied qualitative and evaluation research because it provides a systematic means of moving from original participant accounts through coding and categorisation to higher-order interpretation while maintaining an audit trail between the data and the findings. It has a seven-stage process comprising (1) transcription, (2) familiarisation, (3) open coding, (4) development of an analytical framework, (5) application of the analytical framework, (6) charting the data into a framework matrix, and (7) interpretation of the data and development of themes.

Familiarisation. The first stage involved close reading of the qualitative dataset to become familiar with the breadth and diversity of participant accounts. Initial observations were made about recurrent experiences, similarities and differences between accounts, and issues that appeared potentially important to understanding the function of FLUX. Attention was paid not only to explicit discussion of social interaction but also to how participants described occupying the space, being alone, observing others, deciding whether to interact, the physical characteristics of FLUX, and occasions when interaction did or did not occur.

Open coding. The transcripts were then examined using open coding. Codes were assigned to sections of data representing potentially meaningful aspects of participants' experiences.

Examples included the following:

- **no requirement to consume**
- **freedom to choose what to do**
- **flexibility of use**
- **ease of entering the space**
- **physical openness**
- **protection from the surrounding city**
- **being comfortable alone**
- **social presence without interaction**
- **opportunities for small talk**
- **activities as conversation prompts**
- **spontaneous encounters**
- **spending time with existing relationships**
- **lack of interaction with strangers**
- **different groups sharing the same space**
- **perceived diversity**
- **barriers to accessibility**
- **uncertainty about the rules of the space**
- **sensory characteristics**
- **positive mood**
- **respite from the city**
- **suggestions for improvement**

Coding was not restricted to positive experiences. Negative, contradictory, and qualifying accounts were retained because those were important for understanding both the conditions through which FLUX might support connection and the circumstances in which those processes did not occur.

Developing and applying the analytical framework. Related codes were compared and organised into broader analytical categories. The developing framework was repeatedly checked against the transcripts to ensure that it represented variation across the dataset rather than simply the most positive or frequently expressed accounts.

Conceptually distinct experiences were retained separately where necessary. In particular, being alone, loneliness, social interaction, social connection and belonging were not treated as interchangeable concepts. This distinction became especially important because participants sometimes described being alone at FLUX as a positive experience while simultaneously describing a sense of social presence or belonging.

The refined analytical framework was subsequently applied across the dataset, enabling systematic comparison of experiences between individual participants and across interviews and focus groups.

Framework matrix and interpretation. Consistent with the Framework Analysis approach, coded material was organised conceptually by case and analytical category. Framework analysis allows data to be charted using both concise summaries and direct quotations, preserving the connection between interpretation and participants' original accounts. We organised the matrix by participant, category, and code before examining the matrix to identify salient patterns. Analysis considered both within-case patterns, preserving the context of an individual's account, and cross-case patterns, identifying similarities, differences and contradictions across participants.

Particular attention was given to the following:

- **experiences recurring across multiple accounts**
- **differences associated with how people used FLUX**
- **concrete examples of social encounters the distinction between perceived opportunities for interaction and interactions that actually occurred**
- **experiences of attending alone**
- **negative and contradictory cases**
- **perceived barriers to inclusion;**
- **relationships between characteristics of the physical environment and participants' social experiences**

Six interconnected interpretive themes were developed:

1 **"You can just be":** freedom from the usual conditions of urban participation	**2** **"Open but held":** the physical environment creates a psychologically permissive space	**3** **"Being alone together":** belonging does not depend on interaction
4 Creating conditions for serendipity rather than manufacturing connection	**5** Difference can coexist: different people sharing the same space	**6** A restorative urban environment—but openness can itself become a barrier


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“It's an open yet protected space.”

Themes were continually considered against the original data, including accounts that qualified or contradicted the developing interpretation. This use of continual reappraisal ensures that themes capture the meaning of the dataset while remaining interpretive rather than simply descriptive.

Approach to analytical rigour

Several principles were used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. First, themes were grounded in participants' accounts and are illustrated in the report using direct quotations. Quotations were selected because they exemplified a broader analytical finding, rather than simply because they provided particularly positive descriptions of FLUX. Second, deviant and contradictory cases were actively retained. For example, while some participants described conversations arising readily at FLUX, others reported that they had attended with people they already knew and had not developed conversations with strangers. For example, one participant reported that “nothing has really developed on a genuine conversational level so far”. These accounts are important because they challenge a simple assumption that providing shared space automatically generates social relationships. Third, the analysis distinguished between opportunity and realised interaction. Statements that FLUX seemed like somewhere a person could approach somebody were distinguished from descriptions of conversations that had actually occurred. Fourth, the analysis considered the wording of the interview questions when interpreting participants' responses. Some questions explicitly introduced concepts such as belonging, social connection, or mood. Greater interpretive weight was, therefore, given to experiences raised spontaneously by participants and to concrete examples of behaviour and events than to agreement with propositions introduced directly by an interviewer. Finally, frequency was not treated as synonymous with analytical importance. Less common experiences could be important when they identified a mechanism, boundary condition or potential barrier to participation.

Interpretation of the evidence

The qualitative design is suited to identifying experiences, perceived mechanisms, and contextual conditions. It is not, by itself, an effectiveness design and cannot establish that FLUX causes changes in loneliness, social connection, or wellbeing. Accordingly, the findings support conclusions about how participants experience FLUX and plausible processes through which its characteristics may facilitate social presence, belonging and opportunities for connection.

The following concepts were kept distinct during interpretation:

- **Social presence refers to being in a shared environment with other people.**
- **Social interaction refers to direct encounters, including conversation or participation in shared activities.**
- **Social connection is broader and can include feeling socially embedded, accepted or connected to other people.**
- **Belonging concerns feeling accepted as a legitimate member or user of a social environment.**
- **Loneliness refers to the subjective perception that one's relationships do not adequately meet one's desired social needs.**

Those distinctions are important because one of the clearest findings was that participants could value being alone at FLUX while simultaneously experiencing social presence and belonging. Being alone was, therefore, not interpreted as evidence of loneliness. Similarly, evidence that FLUX provides opportunities for social interaction was not interpreted as evidence that new friendships or sustained relationships necessarily developed.

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of the evaluation is the richness of the qualitative dataset, comprising 22 individual interviews and 3 focus groups of 14 people. The combination of individual and group-based data allowed detailed examination of personal experience alongside discussion, agreement and disagreement between users. Participants also represented different forms of engagement with FLUX.

Some used it regularly, others less frequently; some attended alone, others with existing social contacts; and people described using FLUX for work, relaxation, family activities, cultural events and organised programming. This variation enabled the analysis to examine multiple ways in which the space functions in everyday life. And, the systematic Framework Analysis approach provided a transparent structure for comparing accounts while retaining the context and complexity of individual experiences.

There are nevertheless important limitations.

1. First, participants were self-selecting people who had used FLUX and agreed to take part. Therefore, the sample is likely to privilege people sufficiently engaged with FLUX to participate in its evaluation. People who do not use FLUX, including those who are unaware of it, feel that it is not intended for them, or experience barriers to accessing it, are not represented.

2. Second, no demographic characteristics were collected. It is, therefore, not possible to assess systematically whether experiences differ by age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic circumstances, disability or other characteristics, nor to determine how closely the sample reflects the population using FLUX or the wider Munich population.

3. Third, participants' descriptions of the apparent diversity of other users are observations and perceptions rather than demographic evidence. Statements that FLUX attracts a diverse population should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

4. Fourth, some interview questions explicitly introduced concepts such as belonging, mood and social interaction. This creates a potential for interviewer framing to influence responses. The analysis addressed that by distinguishing spontaneous accounts from prompted responses and by prioritising concrete examples where possible.

5. Finally, the study captures participants' accounts of their experiences rather than longitudinal change. It therefore cannot establish whether using FLUX leads to sustained improvements in social relationships, loneliness, mental health or wellbeing.

Overall analytical interpretation

The qualitative evidence supports an interpretive model in which FLUX's potential social value arises through the interaction of its physical environment, low-threshold accessibility, freedom of use, and opportunities for social encounter, rather than through organised interaction alone. The proposed pathway generated from the analysis is as follows:



1. **An accessible and distinctive physical environment**
2. **Freedom and permission to use the space in different ways**
3. **Comfort autonomy, and psychological safety**
4. **Being around other people without an obligation to interact**
5. **Opportunities for spontaneous encounter and participation**
6. **Potential experiences of belonging, interaction, and social connection**

This should be understood as an interpretive model generated from participants' accounts, not as a causal pathway demonstrated experimentally by the study. A central implication is that the social value of FLUX should not be judged solely according to whether strangers meet or new friendships are formed. Participants also described less intensive, but potentially meaningful forms of social experience: being comfortable alone in the presence of others, observing other people, exchanging small existing social networks, encountering people different from themselves, and knowing that interaction is possible without being compulsory. The findings, therefore, suggest that FLUX functions as a form of social infrastructure that expands opportunities for different forms and intensities of social participation.

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Imprint

A Joint Publication of:
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Recommended Citation:
Mars Study on Connection & Belonging / FLUX Evaluation, University of Manchester, 2026.

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Publication Date:
October 2026

Photo Credit:
Gareth Gardner, FLUX 2026



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