

MuseumsForward

Museums as neighborhood living rooms: Investigating feelings of belonging through “highly accessible and permeable” museum spaces

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Abstract

As institutions that have often been and continue to be sites of systemic social exclusion, museums are exploring how their design and architecture might be reinterpreted to lead to wider accessibility and greater social inclusion. This article describes findings from a study that investigated if and how neighborhood living rooms in museums foster feelings of belonging in visitors to better understand current efforts to promote social inclusion through museum architecture. Data for this study were collected at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ E. Claiborne and Lora Robins Sculpture Garden and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts’ John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden, using observations and semi-structured interviews. Thirty-five people participated in the study. Study results reinforce previous research on the connection between feelings of belonging and a sense of community. Results confirmed the potential for neighborhood living room spaces in museums to serve as valued local resources that create cohesion between museums and their neighborhoods by cultivating a sense of belonging. Findings from this study speak to the viability of the current trend of reinterpreting museum architecture to break down the barriers between the museums and their neighborhoods, and highlight the role of museum placemaking in extending a sense of belonging from the outside in to successfully create “a membrane between museum and community that extends beyond physical space” (Kryder-Reid et al., 2015).

Keywords

belonging; museum architecture; community engagement

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Problem

As institutions that were “designed by the few for the few,” museums have often been sites of systemic social exclusion (Price & Applebaum, 2022, p. 136). This is especially true for groups that have historically been and continue to be marginalized, disenfranchised, and discriminated against. Museums are often viewed as elitist institutions that “[reflect] dominant group values and practices” and lead to “fish out of water” experiences for marginalized groups (DeWitt & Archer, 2017, p. 369).

In an effort to recognize their exclusionary nature, many museums are taking a more community-centered approach to their work, from raising and distributing food to providing self-care programs and serving as voter registration and polling stations.

In considering how to center the needs of their communities, a number of museums are exploring how their design and architecture can be reinterpreted in ways that lead to wider accessibility and greater social inclusion, seeking to “reverse the ‘once grand and imposing structure’ that is the traditional museum” (Crooke, 2006, p. 183).

For example, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, is constructing a new building. Aiming to better serve Harlem residents and draw in new audiences, they are designing a multi-use “living room” for neighborhood residents and visitors (Flynn & Barwick, 2020, p. 2). Poland’s Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw is similarly renovating to create a building that “[serves] a public function” through an accessible ground floor that includes spaces designed for social gatherings and public forums (Fudala, 2019, p. 2). The defining features of these neighborhood living room spaces are their ability to: (1) facilitate unprogrammed public access; (2) be recognizable as openly accessible by people passing by; (3) enable connectivity; and (4) reflect the needs of potential users. This article describes a research study examining the impact of these neighborhood living rooms in museums on people’s feelings of belonging in order to understand the potential of these spaces to function as sites of community building for their local areas.

Community Placemaking as Community Building

What does it mean to exist within a place? Research has shown that humans both shape and are shaped by the places around us, creating people-place relationships that are “both mutual and crucial” (Gifford, 2014, p. 543). This premise is foundational to the field of environmental

psychology, which investigates the psychological processes that influence the ways in which people interact with their environments. Place attachment is a critical part of those processes. Described as the bonding that occurs between individuals and the places that are important to them, or more generally as “an emotional connection to a place” (Giuliani, 2003; Gifford, 2014, p. 560), place attachment includes the social dimensions of place, in which one’s feelings of attachment are connected to the people in a place. Place attachment can facilitate both a sense of community and a sense of belonging. Both the physical and social dimensions of place attachment play a crucial role in the process of placemaking.

Placemaking has emerged as a growing movement advocating for the use of a collaborative, community-driven, and bottom-up approach to reinventing public spaces as “the heart of every community” (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). Foundational to placemaking is the concept that public spaces strengthen communities. Research has shown that access to public spaces is associated with a sense of community, as these spaces allow for social bridging by creating a place for community members to engage with one another and participate in “collective meaning making” (Toolis, 2017, p. 185). Additionally, public spaces encourage community involvement, functioning as sites of community recreation and regeneration, and building community capacity (Glover & Johnson, 2013).

Placemaking has emerged in response to ongoing patterns of the privatization and commodification of public space, particularly urban public space, within the United States (Glover & Johnson, 2013; Toolis, 2017). Toolis (2017) argues that this privatization of public space, fueled by processes of neoliberalization, creates spaces that are increasingly exclusive and segregated by reducing opportunities for social bridging and reproducing existing socioeconomic and racial inequalities. She emphasizes placemaking as a tool for reclaiming public space and fighting exclusion.

Recent literature emphasizes the capacity of museums to positively impact their communities and work against exclusion through their role as placemakers. Museum placemaking projects demonstrate the ability of museums to foster a sense of place and enhance local identity. Toolis (2018) found that museum participation was linked to significant increases in place attachment and a sense of community in visitors. In her study, Toolis defined place attachment as measuring “the affective bond between a person and place,” with her scale focusing on place attachment at the city level, and defined a sense of community as “a perception of belonging, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared

emotional connection” (p. 51 and 52). Through their placemaking projects, museums center neighborhood assets to rediscover or cultivate place identity, find collective vision and purpose, strengthen communities, and create a place that is “welcoming, meaningful, and shared” (Vergeront, 2016). As agents of placemaking, museums hold the potential to provide a much-needed resource to their neighborhoods through the creation of accessible public spaces.

Belonging as Foundational to Community Building

Much of the literature discussing placemaking and the potential of public spaces to build community highlights the relationship between feelings of belonging and a sense of community (Giuliani 2003; Glover & Johnson, 2013; Toolis, 2017). Giuliani (2003) describes a sense of belonging as “an essential component” to defining community, and Toolis (2017) defines a sense of community as being characterized by a feeling of belonging. Psychologists often define belongingness as the feeling of being a part of something. Hagerty et al. (1992) describe belonging as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (p. 173). They break a sense of belonging down into two defining attributes: (1) valued involvement, meaning the experience of feeling valued, needed, or accepted; and (2) fit, or the experience that an individual’s characteristics align in some way with their environment (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). Price & Applebaum (2022) create a model of belonging that they describe as “a hybrid of psychological and cultural concepts of belonging” (p. 140). At the center of the model, they place people’s feelings of inclusion and exclusion in response to an experience, which they refer to as People Fit. The next level is the physical environment within which those feelings occur, which they call Place. The outermost level is then the context of the experience, including both the greater community and the purpose of the visit, which they refer to as Context. The authors emphasize the interconnected nature of these levels, noting that “all the pieces interact with and influence each other” (p. 140).

The Path Ahead

Recent literature on belonging and museums examines the potential of museums to foster belonging and promote social inclusion while simultaneously calling attention to the ways in which museums currently perpetuate social exclusion. *TrendsWatch* (2022) highlights

the findings of the First Street Foundation's *2021 National Risk Assessment Report* that museums, as a form of social infrastructure, are key in helping communities develop a sense of belonging. Crooke (2006) highlights the findings of the UK Ministerial Report *Building Cohesive Communities* which emphasizes the "learning potential of museums as places where cross-cultural themes can be explored" as a means of enhancing community participation and addressing social exclusion (p. 181).

While it is clear that museums can and do exist as sites of social bridging and community connection, recent research highlights that many still experience museums as spaces in which they do not belong (Dawson, 2014; DeWitt & Archer, 2017; Price & Applebaum, 2022). Toolis (2018) found that low-income residents and residents of color experience museums as "unfamiliar, unaffordable, white and elite, and constraining, sterile spaces," preventing them from accessing these cultural resources (p. vi). Price & Applebaum (2022) note that museums "reflect and uphold white supremacy and traditional gender norms" and, as a result, "leave most people out" (p. 137).

Museums clearly have more work to do in order to truly become sites of belonging. Museums Association (2021) highlights the need for museums to "Provide spaces and resources for different kinds of experiences and encounters" in order to successfully "welcome, engage and empower everyone" (p. 5). Similarly, Stephen Weil argues that in order for museums to "contribute importantly to the health of human communities," they must "be a site for community confrontation, interchange, and debate" (Watson, 2007, p. 42). For museums to become sites of social inclusion and community exchange, they must first create spaces where these processes can occur.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impacts of "highly accessible and permeable" non-gallery museum spaces, or neighborhood living rooms in museums as they are called in this article, on peoples' feelings of belonging (Flynn & Barwick, 2020, p. 1). This study was guided by two research questions:

1. Who are the users of these spaces and what is their relationship to the museum?
2. To what extent, if at all, do people feel that they belong in neighborhood living rooms in museums?

Methodology

Study Design

This study used a descriptive survey design, in which data were collected and analyzed with the goal of identifying trends and patterns within a sample group that can be generalized to a wider population of museum visitors in the United States (Pickard, 2017). This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining observation with semi-structured interviews, in order to better understand the use and impacts of neighborhood living rooms in museums.

Site Selection and Sampling Strategy

Data collection occurred at two sites: the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), Richmond, VA, and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), Montgomery, AL. These sites were identified due to their active and ongoing efforts to engage their communities through their neighborhood living rooms. At the VMFA, participants were recruited on-site in the E. Claiborne and Lora Robins Sculpture Garden. The Robins Sculpture Garden opened in May 2010 as part of the VMFA's four-year expansion project which added more than 165,000 square feet to the museum's previous 485,000 square feet (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, n.d.). In 2012, the VMFA collaborated with the non-profit Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to transform the Robins Sculpture Garden into an "active, vital, and well-managed public space" (Project for Public Spaces, 2012). The VMFA and the PPS worked with museum staff, stakeholders, and the public to develop a plan for improvements based on community needs with the goal of "creating a welcoming environment and encouraging community use" (Project for Public Spaces, 2012). The Robins Sculpture Garden is a 3½-acre space that includes both open lawn and styled gardens, a waterfall and reflecting pool, and the sculptures on display. There are multiple seating areas throughout the space, including benches and umbrella-covered tables and chairs.

At the MMFA, participants were recruited on-site in the John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden. Since its opening in Fall 2018, the Caddell Sculpture Garden has acted both as a site of rest and relaxation for visitors as well a venue for community gatherings (Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 2023). The Caddell Sculpture Garden features both open lawn and styled gardens, and includes a large fountain and sculptures on display, benches throughout, and a seating area with chairs and tables. With its numerous seating options and public Wi-Fi signal, the MMFA believes that "There is something in the Garden for everyone" (Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 2023). These data

collection sites were chosen because they meet Flynn and Barwick's (2020) criteria for a neighborhood "living room" in a museum, namely that they (1) facilitate unprogrammed public access; (2) are recognizable as openly accessible by people passing by; (3) enable connectivity; and (4) reflect the needs of potential users. Visitors making use of these spaces were approached at random and asked to participate in the study.

Description of Sample

A total of 35 adults participated in this study, 25 at VMFA and 10 at MMFA. Seventy one percent of participants identified as women (n=25), 23% as men (n=8), and 6% of participants identified as non-binary (n=2). Seventeen percent of participants were aged 18 and 24 (n=6); 31% were aged 25 to 29 (n=11); 29% were aged 30 to 39 (n=10); 17% were aged 40 and 49 (n=6); and 6% were aged 50 to 59 (n=2). The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian (71%, n=25), while 9% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander (n=3), 9% as Black or African American (n=3), 6% as Hispanic or Latino/a (n=2), and 6% as Multiracial or Multiethnic (n=2).

Thirty four percent of participants were in the space with someone under the age of 18 (n=12), and 20% of participants were members of the museum in which the space was situated (n=7). The majority of participants lived within 15 miles of their respective museums, with 83% being local (n=29) and 17% being non-local (n=6).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a mixed-methods approach combining observations with semi-structured interviews. Observations served to better understand the role of the living room space in the overall layout of the museum, including general patterns of use and the fluidity of movement between the neighborhood living rooms and other museum spaces. Every 45 minutes, the researcher recorded the number of people in the space, and a general description of what they appeared to be doing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people in the neighborhood living rooms and lasted on average approximately 5 minutes. The interview guide included both open- and closed-ended questions aimed at gathering qualitative and quantitative data to better understand both participants' visit that day and their overall visitation habits, how participants were using the neighborhood living room

spaces, and whether or not these spaces impacted their feelings of belonging. Interview questions measuring belonging were adapted from Price & Applebaum's (2022) Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI). To ensure that semi-structured interviews stayed within a reasonable time limit for participants, the three Likert scales featured in the CIBI, measuring General Belonging, Place Belongingness, and Cultural Context Belonging, were shortened and combined into a single belonging scale with three sections (See Appendix A for Interview Guide).

Data Analysis Procedures

All semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants' responses to open-ended questions were then analyzed using emergent coding to identify shared themes and patterns across responses. The resulting qualitative data were then coded and analyzed using a coding rubric (See Appendix B for Coding Rubric). The belonging Likert scale was analyzed by finding averages for all items within the scale, the average for each of the three sections, and the overall average for each visitor. The second and third Likert scale questions used negative wording and therefore were reverse coded in order for averages to accurately reflect visitor intent. All closed-ended questions, including the demographic portion of the Interview Guide, were quantified and analyzed. To analyze observational data, field notes were reviewed to determine the categories of activities taking place in the space.

Results

1. Who are the users of these spaces and what is their relationship to the museum?

Of the 35 adults who participated in this study, 92% (n=32) had been in the museum's neighborhood living room before. Roughly half (53%, n=17) said they visited frequently, and the other half (47%, n=15) said they visited occasionally. On the day that data for this study were collected, 46% (n=16) of participants were spending time in the space with a friend or significant other, 34% (n=12) were in family groups containing children, and 20% (n=7) were by themselves. Forty-three percent (n=15) were participating in a creative activity, such as painting, reading, or journaling; 37% (n=13) were resting or relaxing (i.e., "I have a day off from work, so I'm trying to relax," "Vibing. Sitting," and "Just looking at the art and relaxing"); and 20% (n=7) were socializing (i.e.,

“It’s the first date night we’ve had in like months,” “Hanging out with my friend,” and “Giving the kids some time to play with each other while we talk”). On average, people spent 90 minutes in the space.

Seventy-four percent of participants said that they had no plans to visit the museum galleries that day (n=26), while 26% had either already visited or were planning to visit the galleries that day (n=9). Of those who did not plan to visit the galleries (n=26), half (n=15) noted a specific desire to spend time outdoors, saying things like, “I kind of came here more for the outside scenery and stuff. I’m not really looking to go to the museum today,” and “It’s an outside day. The weather is finally nice.” Five expressed that, as one participant put it, visiting the galleries was “just not on the agenda for today.” Four responded with a limiting factor that prevented them from spending time in the galleries, such as having a dog with them or having to go to work soon. And two people said they were already familiar with the galleries and therefore not interested: “I’ve been in there plenty of times. I feel like I’ve seen my fill.”

All but 2 study participants had visited the museum galleries in the past (94%, n=33), with 66% (n=23) of participants responding that they occasionally come to see the galleries and 29% (n=10) of participants responding that they frequently come to see the galleries.

2. To what extent, if at all, do people feel like they belong in neighborhood living rooms in museums?

a) Belonging

Three dimensions of belonging were measured, including General Belonging, Place Belongingness, and Cultural Context Belonging, with all scale items all ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 shows the mean ratings for items in these sections, and suggests that overall, people felt they belonged in the museum’s living room space. Of the three dimensions, participants recorded the highest scores in the Cultural Context Belonging scales.

Table 1: Users’ mean ratings on belonging scales (N=35)

Scale section	Scale item	Mean item rating	Mean section rating
General Belonging Scales	I felt connected with other visitors in the space	3.31	4.16

	I had a sense of belonging in the space	4	
	I felt like an outsider in the space (R)	4.74	
	When in the space, I felt as if people did not care about me (R)	4.6	
Place Belongingness Scales	When I was in the space, I felt a part of it	3.85	3.66
	I felt connected to the space	4	
	The space was designed for me	3.14	
Cultural Context Belonging Scales	Visitors in the space reflected my community	4.2	4.68
	I felt very comfortable in the space as a person of my gender	4.88	
	I felt very comfortable in the space as a person of my race and/or ethnicity	4.82	
	I could be by myself here	4.82	
Overall Mean Visitor Score		4.3	

When asked how they would define belonging, 48% (n=17) of participants described feeling welcomed. Responses included, "I guess just a space where I can just be me and no one's going to critique me for it, and other people are pretty much on the same page," "I just feel like I'm allowed to be here. I'm meant to be here and it's just a place for me," and "A sense of welcome, I suppose, a sense that the area itself is welcoming you and helping you to belong."

Twenty-nine percent (n=10) of participants defined belonging as feeling a sense of community, for example "Being with your community," "Being able to connect with people you know and people you don't," and "Feeling like you belong to a community."

Twenty-three percent (n=8) of participants defined belonging as being comfortable. Responses included, "I think of feeling comfortable in my

own skin," "Just being somewhere and not feeling uncomfortable, being able to exist and not feel uneasy about anything," and "Something like, well, comfortable."

When asked what communities they had in mind when answering the interview questions, 48% (n=17) of participants described community as the ability to connect with others. Responses included, "A sense of acceptance, feeling like you can talk to anybody here and it not be weird," "The opportunity to meet people or just watch everyone and be inspired," and "When you feel connected to people."

Twenty-six percent (n=9) of participants described community in terms of place/location. Responses included, "The immediate local community of neighbors," "I guess community is a little slice of the people who probably are closest to the museum," and "I'd say the neighborhood. Because that's definitely who comes here the most."

Finally, 26% (n=9) of participants described community in terms of shared interests with others. Responses included, "Just everyone kind of agreeing to share the space and be peaceful," "Part of the arts community," and "The student community of Richmond, whether it be like VCU or high schoolers."

b) What made people feel like they belonged in the museum's neighborhood living room

When asked what about the museum's neighborhood living room space provoked feelings of belonging for them, 43% (n=15) of participants described the flexibility to use the space as they wished. Responses included "This is an open space and you can use it whatever way that you want, that's why it feels so belonging," "Everyone's doing their own thing. It just feels like a common space," and "I think everyone doing their own thing just makes you feel like you belong and can do whatever you want."

Thirty-two percent (n=11) of participants described the sociability of the space as contributing to feelings of belonging, saying things like, "I guess one thing that's cool about the sculpture garden is that it feels like people are open to having conversations here," "It's very easy to go up to people and talk. This would not be the first place I would come to if I wanted to not see people. It's like, this is the people-oriented place," and "I feel like half the time I'm here I see someone I know."

Fourteen percent (n=5) of participants described a connection to the art within the space as fostering feelings of belonging. Responses included

“Well, one thing that does is certainly the sculptures themselves,” and “Oh definitely the sculptures and the art.”

Eleven percent (n=4) of participants described having access to nature as the cause of their feelings of belonging, responses included “I feel like the amount of green space there is makes it feel like it's belonging,” “For me, the trees and the nature,” and “I don't have a yard, so it's really great that there is this green space that I can exist in as a person and also as a pet owner.”

Participants emphasized how valuable they perceived the neighborhood living room space to be, with one participant enthusiastically stating, “Oh it's a gem! It's a Richmond gem for sure,” and another participant joking that she would “come and chain [herself] to a tree if they ever tried to destroy this place.”

c) What made people feel like they did not belong in the museum's neighborhood living room

When asked what made them feel as if they did not belong in the space, 40% (n=14) of participants responded that there was nothing that made them feel as if they did not belong. Twenty-three percent (n=8) of participants responded that feeling as if they did not fit in with the users of the space, or that users did not reflect them, contributed to feelings of non-belonging. Responses included, “If it's the middle of the day on a Tuesday and it's a bunch of toddler groups, and like, me,” “Tax bracket,” and “I would, to be honest, like seeing more people of color. Sometimes I don't see as much.”

Twenty percent (n=7) of participants responded that the limited resources available within the space made them feel that they did not belong. Responses included, “I get really anxious trying to find a spot to sit,” “I wish the tables were larger and that they had more chairs. Then you could actually have more group sitting,” and “When the bathrooms are closed.”

Seventeen percent (n=6) of participants responded that something within the space did not align with their personal tastes and that led to feelings of non-belonging. Responses included, “The only thing I can think of that makes me not feel belonging is those buildings back there. Because aesthetically they're not particularly appealing, they're kind of off-putting,” “I'm just going to say the giant weird head. I don't like the head,” and “When I see naked figures, I'm going to be straight up honest. It just feels weird.”

d) Perceptions of the museum

Seventy-one percent (n=25) of participants responded that having access to the neighborhood living room in the museum had a positive impact on their perception of the museum, while 29% (n=10) said that their perception of the museum was not impacted by having access to the neighborhood living room space. Though they were not directly asked if having access to the living room space impacted their likelihood of visiting the galleries, nearly a third of participants felt compelled to explicitly mention that having access to the space made them feel more inclined to visit the museum interior. Participants stated, "It just makes [the museum] a lot more welcoming," "I first came to see the garden, and then being here is like, you know what? I have to go inside," and "I think it makes the museum a lot more inviting and makes it seem like there's easier access and it makes sense to go in."

Limitations

The day of the week, time of day, and time of the year in which data collection occurred all impacted the available participants for this study. These factors likely played a significant role in both who was present in the neighborhood living room spaces and how the spaces were being used, potentially impacting the study findings. Additionally, both data collection sites for this study were outdoor spaces and oncoming storms during the latter half of the data collection period led to a reduced number of visitors in these spaces.

The size of the sample collected for this study also likely impacts its findings due to the limited number of perspectives available in a smaller sample group. Future research could benefit from gathering a wider range of perspectives, particularly from an older demographic of visitors as well as a larger number and diversity of museum visitors that identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This is especially important when discussing belonging and museums, as it is groups that have historically been and continue to be marginalized, disenfranchised, and discriminated against within the United States that experience social exclusion the most prominently in museum spaces.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impacts of “highly accessible and permeable” non-gallery museum spaces, or neighborhood living rooms in museums, on people’s feelings of belonging. Thirty-five people were observed and interviewed in two such spaces at the VMFA in Richmond, VA, and the MMFA in Montgomery, AL.

1. Who are the users of these spaces and what is their relationship to the museum?

Most study participants lived in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding their respective museums, and participants identified neighborhood residents as the main users of the museum’s neighborhood living room space. Almost half of the participants stated that they spend time in the space at least once a week, with some participants saying that they visit multiple times a week. These findings support what Flynn & Barwick (2020) identify as the strength of neighborhood living room spaces in museums, to reframe the museum “as part of local residents’ daily lives” (p. 6). Most participants came to the museum specifically to spend time in the living room space with no plans to visit the galleries. Local residents are choosing to spend their time in the museums’ neighborhood living room space, and they are doing so often. By providing space for encounters and opportunities outside of the traditional gallery experience, these spaces “reflect the needs of potential users” in a way that expands how the museum can serve as a local resource (p. 2).

The wide variety of activities taking place in the living room space demonstrated the many purposes that it can serve for local residents. Visitors in the museum’s neighborhood living room space spent their time doing everything from sunbathing to working on homework to gathering with friends. When discussing how they make use of the space, participants noted that it provided residents with something that they otherwise do not have access to, a backyard for the neighborhood. Publicly accessible, free-use space, and particularly green space, is a severely limited resource in urban areas, as discussed previously, due to the ongoing privatization and commodification of public space within the United States. Without access to shared spaces, communities face exclusion, the erosion of civic identity, and the perpetuation of existing socioeconomic and racial inequalities (Glover & Johnson, 2013; Toolis, 2017). This study demonstrates that through the development of neighborhood living rooms, museums have the ability to “contribute importantly to the health of human communities” through the creation

of a comfortable place where local residents can connect with each other, create shared meaning, and utilize resources that they do not typically have access to (Watson, 2007, p. 42). In doing so, museums both promote social inclusion and directly contribute to “[turning] a museum into an integral part of its neighborhood fabric” (Flynn & Barwick, 2020).

2. To what extent, if at all, do people feel like they belong in neighborhood living rooms in museums?

Three key findings emerged in answering this research question. First, results suggest that belonging exists as a foundational component to community building, demonstrated by roughly one third of participants that chose to define belonging as feeling a sense of community. This echoes the findings of research highlighting the relationship between feelings of belonging and a sense of community (Giuliani 2003; Glover & Johnson, 2013; Toolis, 2017).

Second, results show that people who use neighborhood living room spaces in museums feel a strong sense of belonging that extends into the museum. While belonging has been studied amongst museum visitors broadly (Dawson, 2014; DeWitt & Archer, 2017; Price & Applebaum, 2022), it has not been studied in relation to these kinds of spaces, and so this study makes a new contribution to the literature.

Third, the results suggest that it is the flexibility and sociability of the neighborhood living rooms that fosters a sense of belonging in people. Participants emphasized the ability to use the living room spaces for their own purposes and to fulfill their own needs as the primary feature of these spaces that sparked feelings of belonging. Participants also highlighted their perceived ability to speak to and connect with others in the neighborhood living rooms as being a significant contributor to feelings of belonging. This emphasis on the sociability of the space as being a notable factor in creating feelings of belonging directly supports research arguing for the social dimensions of place as being a key aspect of place attachment, and the role of place attachment in facilitating a sense of community and a sense of belonging (Giuliani, 2003; Gifford, 2014).

It is through their flexibility and sociability that these spaces serve as sites of museum placemaking. Toolis (2017) highlights the role of placemaking as connecting people to each other, to the places they live, and to vital resources. Vergeront (2016) states that by “building on existing knowledge of and relationships with a place” museum

placemaking projects “engage visitors, partners, and neighbors” to create a place that is “welcoming, meaningful, and shared.” As flexible, multi-use social spaces, these neighborhood living room spaces in museums exist as sites of community gathering and transform to meet the needs of community members, becoming everything from yoga studios to dog parks to home offices, successfully creating cohesion between museums and their neighborhoods.

Implications

Belonging

As museums continue to recognize and work against their long history of social exclusion, it is valuable to keep in mind both how they can better function as community resources and how their architecture can contribute to feelings of both belonging and non-belonging in visitors. At the intersection of these two field-wide concerns is the emerging trend of constructing Flynn & Barwick’s (2020) neighborhood living rooms. This study speaks to the viability of this trend’s goal of using neighborhood living room spaces in museums to break down the barriers between the museums and their neighborhoods and to establish the museum’s role as a site of community exchange. Participants’ responses demonstrated that having access to the living room space made them feel more inclined to visit the museum interior.

This study reveals the ability of these spaces to bridge the gap between museums and their neighborhoods and act as a gateway space to increase not only visitors’ levels of comfort with the museum but also to positively impact their perceptions of the museum. By extending a sense of belonging from the outside in, these living room spaces successfully create “a membrane between museum and community that extends beyond physical space” (Kryder-Reid et al., 2015). As more neighborhood living room spaces continue to emerge, further research will be needed to better understand how these spaces foster belonging with wider museum audiences and non-local communities.

Additionally, based on the findings of this study, further research is recommended on the potential of other museum efforts outside of traditional gallery spaces, such as pop-up exhibits, to extend people’s feelings of belonging from these spaces to the museum itself.

Community Engagement

The results of this study demonstrate the positive impacts of museums taking a community-centered approach in the work that they do, both

for visitors and the museum itself, through the creation of neighborhood living rooms. While this study has demonstrated that the creation of accessible public spaces by museums is both crucial and valued, particularly in urban areas, it is not the only approach a museum may take in meeting the needs of its communities. This study argues that museums can and should strive to be an essential part of the infrastructure that supports their communities, as TrendsWatch (2022) puts it, “doing whatever needs to be done” (p. 3). Long (2013) argues that “...it's no longer a question of whether a museum should engage in addressing social issues, but a matter of how and for whom” (p. 145). Following the example of culturally-specific museums that have long existed as “big bundles of assets that make their communities better, stronger, and more resilient” (TrendsWatch, 2022, p. 3), museums must continue to reimagine their approach to community engagement practices to focus on not only building relationships with their communities, but better serving as resources to meet the broad and varied needs of their communities.

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Appendix A

Instrument

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. A. Do you plan on visiting the galleries today?
B. If not, please elaborate.
2. Approximately how many times have you visited the Museum before today?
3. Who else came with you to the Museum today?
4. Approximately how many times have you visited [Living Room Space] before today?
5. What are you doing in [Living Room Space] today?
6. Thinking about your experience using [Living Room Space] today, please answer the questions below:

Scale Section	Scale Item	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
General Belonging Scales	I felt connected with other visitors in [Living Room Space].					
	I had a sense of belonging in [Living Room Space].					
	I felt like an outsider in [Living Room Space].					
	When in [Living Room Space], I felt as if people did not care about me.					
Place Belongingness Scales	When I was in [Living Room Space], I felt a part of it.					
	I felt connected to [Living Room Space].					

	[Living Room Space] was designed for me.					
Cultural Context Belonging Scales	[Living Room Space] visitors reflected my community.					
	I felt very comfortable in [Living Room Space] as a person of my gender.					
	I felt very comfortable in [Living Room Space] as a person of my race and/or ethnicity.					
	I could be myself here.					

7. What does the word *belonging* mean to you?
8. What community or communities were you thinking about when you answered these questions?
9. What is one thing that made you feel like you did belong in [Living Room Space]?
10. What is one thing that made you feel like you did not belong in [Living Room Space]?
11. In what ways, if at all, does having access to [Living Room Space] shape your experience at or perception of the Museum?

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Are you a member of the Museum?
 - Yes
 - No
2. What is your age?
 - 18 to 24
 - 25 to 29
 - 30 to 39
 - 40 to 49
 - 50 to 59

- 60 to 69
- 70 or older

3. To which gender do you most identify?

- Woman
- Man
- Non-Binary
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe: _____

4. What is your racial/ethnic identity?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino/a
- White or Caucasian
- Multiracial or Multiethnic
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify): _____

5. Are you visiting with anyone under the age of 18 today?

- Yes
- No

6. What is your zip code? (or country, if outside of the U.S.): _____

Appendix B

Coding Rubric

Variable	Question #	Label	Value
Visit_Plan	1	A. Do you plan on visiting the galleries today? B. If not, please elaborate.	A. 0 = No 1 = Yes B. 1 = Not on the Agenda 2 = Desire to be Outside 3 = Been There, Done That 4 = Limiting Factor
Visit_MuseumFrequency	2	Approximately how many times have you visited the Museum before today?	1 = First Time 2 = Visits Occasionally 3 = Visits Regularly
Visit_Attendees	3	Who else came with you to the Museum today?	1 = Alone 2 = With Companion(s) 3 = With Children
Visit_NGSFrequency	4	Approximately how many times have you visited [Living Room Space] before today?	1 = First Time 2 = Visits Occasionally 3 = Visits Regularly
Visit_NGSActivity	5	What are you doing in [Living Room Space] today?	1 = Relaxing 2 = Creative Activity 3 = Socializing
Scales_GBS	6	I felt connected with other visitors in [Living Room Space]	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_GBS	6	I had a sense of belonging in [Living Room Space]	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral

			4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_GBS	6	I felt like an outsider in [Living Room Space] (R)	1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree
Scales_GBS	6	When in [Living Room Space], I felt as if people did not care about me (R)	1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree
Scales_PlaceBelongingness	6	When I was in [Living Room Space], I felt a part of it	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_PlaceBelongingness	6	I felt connected to [Living Room Space]	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_PlaceBelongingness	6	[Living Room Space] was designed for me	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_CCBS	6	Visitors in [Living Room Space] reflected my community	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

Scales_CCBS	6	I felt very comfortable in [Living Room Space] as a person of my gender	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_CCBS	6	I felt very comfortable in [Living Room Space] as a person of my race and/or ethnicity	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Scales_CCBS	6	I could be myself here	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Def_Belonging	7	What does the word belonging mean to you?	1 = Feeling Welcomed 2 = Sense of Community 3 = Being Comfortable
Def_Community	8	What community or communities were you thinking about when you answered these questions?	1 = Place/Location 2 = Shared Interests 3 = Connecting with Others
NGSPerception_Belonging	9	What is one thing that made you feel like you did belong in [Living Room Space]?	1 = Flexible Use 2 = Sociability 3 = Nature 4 = Art
NGSPerception_NonBelonging	10	What is one thing that made you feel like you did not belong in [Living Room Space]?	1 = Nothing 2 = Limited Resources 3 = Not My Aesthetic 4 = Not Fitting In
NGSPerception_Museum	11	In what ways, if at all, does having access to [Living Room Space] shape your experience at or perception of the Museum?	0 = No Effect 1 = Positive Effect 2 = Negative Effect

Member	DQ1	Are you a member of the Museum?	0 = No 1 = Yes
Identity_Age	DQ2	What is your age?	1 = 18 to 24 2 = 25 to 29 3 = 30 to 39 4 = 40 to 49 5 = 50 to 59 6 = 60 to 69 7 = 70 or older
Identity_Gender	DQ3	To which gender do you most identify?	1 = Woman 2 = Man 3 = Non-Binary 4 = Prefer not to answer 5 = Prefer to self-describe [Text (open-ended)]
Identity_RaceEthnicity	DQ4	What is your racial/ethnic identity?	1 = American Indian or Alaskan Native 2 = Asian or Pacific Islander 3 = Black or African American 4 = Hispanic or Latino/a 5 = White or Caucasian 6 = Multiracial or Multiethnic 7 = Prefer not to answer 8 = Other [Text (open-ended)]
Visiting_Children	DQ5	Are you visiting with anyone under the age of 18 today?	0 = No 1 = Yes
Zip_Code	DQ6	What is your zip code? (or country, if outside of the U.S.)	1 = Local [Within 15 Miles of Museum] 2 = Non-Local [Farther than 15 Miles from Museum]