

My School and Me:  
Exploring the relationship between school environment and student identity

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through auto-photography, journaling and interviews with six freshman students at North High School in Minneapolis, this study explores how “insideness” is constructed and the role the school environment plays in the process. Conceiving of the environment in terms of scales, the analysis delves into the ways in which different scales of the interior environment intersect with the construction of identity and how these interactions affect the establishment of “insideness.” In parallel, the discussion unravels the cultural and societal structures as well as power dynamics that are also implicated in this process of identity construction. The study’s four major findings are: (1) The process of “insideness” construction is contingent not only on the intentions of the individual yet also the scales of the environment; (2) students’ perceptions of environmental scales—from elements, such as doors to the nation—intertwine and inform one another; (3) “Insideness” is both an inward and outward directional concept; and (4) Wall planes are primary constructors of identity within the interior environment. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings, for both the design and education community, are given.

## Table of Contents

Page	
Abstract	i
Table of Contents	ii
List of Figures	iv
Chapter 1 – Introduction	
Introduction	1
The Issue - State of Educational Facilities	1
The School Environment and Student	3
Purpose and Significance	4
Chapter 2 – Identity and Place	
Overview	7
Concept of “Insiderness”	10
Identity as Plural	12
Identity as Dynamic	14
Identity as Relational	16
Chapter 3 – Methodology	
Precedent Studies	19
Setting	21
Participants	22
Data Collection	23
Data Analysis	25
Chapter 4 – Discussion	
Scale: Spaces	27
Scale: Spatial Constructors	34
Scale: Elements	45
Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Implications	
Overview	48
Implications: Academics	50
Implications: Designers	51
Implications: Education Personnel	53
Implications: Policy makers	53
Further Research	54

References	55
Appendices	
Appendix A: Interview Questions	62
Appendix B: Student Snapshots	63

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. Science Class Display .....	29
2. Science Class Display .....	29
3. English Class Display .....	29
4. Trophy Display .....	32
5. Trophy Display .....	32
6. Polar Banner .....	37
7. Polar Logo .....	37
8. Polar Logo .....	37
9. Art Display .....	38
10. Wire Art Display .....	38
11. Art Display .....	38
12. Bulletin Board .....	39
13. Bulletin Board .....	39
14. Bulletin Board .....	39
15. Stained Ceiling Tile .....	44
16. Open Ceiling .....	44
17. Door .....	46

## **Introduction**

Designing and providing educational environments that support the well being of *all* students is an important piece of the puzzle to assure that all children have a positive self-image and identification with their place of education. The physical environment is not simply just a backdrop for education; rather it is a place that plays an active role in shaping a student's self definition and relationship to the educational environment and society at large. Therefore, having a better understanding of how the school environment relates to a student's identity definition is an instrumental step in efforts to create environments that support the well being of every student.

### *The Issue - State of Educational Facilities*

In 1999, the National Center for Education Statistics issued a federal report on the Condition of America's Public Schools, which serves as the most current, and comprehensive analysis of the nation's educational facility infrastructure. The findings of this meta-analysis showed that three-quarters of schools reported needing to spend some money on repairs, renovations, and modernizations to put the school's onsite buildings into good overall condition, to the amount of \$127 billion (NCES, 1999, Table 5 & Table 23). The average amount of repair or modernization needed per school is \$2.2 million, or \$3,800 per student (NCES, 1999). Approximately one-fifth of schools have less than adequate conditions for life safety features, roofs and electrical power and 59,400 schools report needing repairs, renovations or modernization in order to reach good condition (NCES, 1999).

These facility problems vary by location and local community economy as the least affluent school districts made the lowest investment (\$4,800 per student) while the most affluent districts made the highest investment (\$9,361 per student) (American Federation of Teachers, 2006). Generally speaking, the schools reporting deficient conditions are in central cities serving 50% minority students or 70% poor students (American Society for Civil Engineers, 2009). The billions of dollars being spent on the infrastructure of school facilities has not been equally available and distributed between facilities in low income areas and high income areas, with the lowest investment (\$4,140 per student) made in the poorest communities, and highest investment (\$11,500 per student) made in the high-income communities (BEST, 2008).

The inequality of investment in funding public school facilities repair and the detrimental effects of a poor school facility in low-income areas have even been recognized by some states as a violation of student rights and legislation has been enacted to change the way that funding is allocated (Cheng, English & Filardo, 2011). President Barack Obama has highlighted the importance of equality in school environments, declaring;

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

With a greater understanding of how school facilities impact student identity and in turn well-being, further support can be built to ensure that all students have access to a supportive school environment and a sense of belonging in their communities.

### *The School Environment and the Student*

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between school environments and students and from varying perspectives and foci. These studies have tended to center around measurable student outcomes or specific physical elements of the environment and used quantitative tools of measurement to explore these relationships. Although this study builds on the ones that preceded by adding a qualitative and in-depth focus on the relationship between the school environment and student identity, an overview of the prior research helps position this study's contributions.

Quantitative research exploring student outcomes have shown links between the school environment and motivation (Schneider, 2002), attitude (Earthman & Lemasters, 2009), self-esteem (Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2008), attention (Schneider, 2002), learning (Earthman, 2004), attendance (Duran-Narucki, 2008; Kumar, O'Malley & Johnston, 2008), teacher retention (Buckley, Schneider & Shang, 2004), teacher instruction (Chaney & Lewis, 2007), suspension rates (Branham, 2004), drop-out rates (Branham, 2004), and academic achievement (Blincoe, 2008; Boese & Shaw, 2005; Bullock, 2007; Cellini, Ferreira & Rothson, 2008; Crampton, 2009; Hughes, 2006; Picus, Marion, Calvo & Glenn, 2005; Tanner, 2009).

With respect to the effect of the school environment on these particular factors, they have been studied by examining physical design elements such as daylighting (Tanner, 2009), noise (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984; Evans & Maxwell, 1997), indoor air quality (Leach, 1997; Rosen & Richardson, 1999; Schneider, 2002), views (Tanner, 2009), classroom density (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran & Willms, 2001; Maxwell, 2003; Moore & Lackney, 1993; Stokols, 1976), temperature (Schneider, 2002; Zeller &

Boxem, 2009), lighting (Hathaway, 1995), color (Sinofsky, E. & Knirck, F., 1981), seating arrangement (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984), privacy (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984) and overall building quality (Berner, 1993; Durán-Narucki, 2008; Evans, Yoo & Sipple, 2010).

What is lacking in the literature are qualitative explorations that seek to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between school environment and student, specifically as it relates to identity. While some qualitative studies have begun to address this relationship, they have tended to focus on the macro-scaled environment of the neighborhood and not examined links within the *interior* school environment (Fagg, Curtis, Clark, Condon & Stansfeld, 2008; Lim & Barton, 2010; Pitner & Astor, 2008). Furthermore, while much place-based literature has delved into how physical environments may inform identity, a solid framework with developmental psychological concepts has yet to be fully realized (Lewicka, 2011).

### *Purpose and Significance*

The purpose of this study is to explore how the school environment and student identity intersect, using the phenomenological-rooted concept of “insideness” to further build a solid theoretical framework for place-identity. This inquiry will be explored using an exploratory, phenomenological methodology that allows six freshmen in an inner city Minneapolis high school to reflect on interior aspects of their school environment and connect those to personal thoughts and feelings. Given that interdisciplinary scholarship now positions identity as plural, dynamic, and relational, this study delves deeper into the process of identity construction and the role that space and place play. A deeper

understanding of how “insideness”, a belonging and identification with place, is constructed builds on calls by other researchers to further inquiry into place-based research that explores how people create meaning in places and the larger sociopolitical context in which these processes take place (Lewicka, 2011). By unraveling how this process may take place, theory can inform design education or practice. As such, the findings have implications for academics, designers, a broad range of educational personnel (administrators and teachers), as well as policy makers.

In academia, much of a designer’s education is centered on the physical structures, aesthetic principles and methodological steps of designing successful spaces. Building a better understanding of the psychological and social experiences of space can greatly enhance the designers’ ability to design an environment that is supportive of all dimensions of the occupant. This holistic approach to the design of spaces can be cultivated, and in turn disseminated, through constructing a stronger foundation of knowledge based in theory, specifically those which address the human, lived experience. Lewicka (2011) states,

Theoretical progress can be achieved through closer contact with advancements in developmental theories, particularly theories of early attachment, but also through studies that refer to the importance of self-continuity for lifespan developmental processes. We should also consider whether some concepts developed within the phenomenological tradition, used to describe processes of creation of sense of place, can be reinterpreted within different conceptual frameworks (p.226)

The study seeks to explore processes by which people form meaningful relations with places and emphasize possible theoretical implications.

The job of interior designers, architects and planners is to design spaces that support the health, safety and well-being of all occupants and in order to do so, it is imperative that all facets of the occupant are considered: the physical, social and psychological. Greater investigation into these social and psychological aspects of the occupant, as they specifically relate to the built environment, needs to continue to be constructed and understood so that a solid foundation of knowledge can be established, used and built upon by practicing members of the architecture and design community. The setting of the study also highlights the important social responsibility that designers and architects have in creating supportive environments for all.

Teachers, on a daily basis, can manipulate and adjust the environment that best supports their students and creates an inclusive space of learning. The people at an administration or policy level are making decisions that affect the way in which the system and district operates and if they better understand the relationship between student and interior environment, they can more effectively allocate funds to areas within the environment that have the greatest impact on the children.

## **Identity and Place**

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on identity and place with the aim of linking those theoretical directions to the study on hand. In order to do so, underlying aspects of identity concerning plurality, dynamism and relational aspects will be addressed as they relate to the school environment. By building from current concepts of identity and looking at the ways in which identity and place have been linked and studied in the past, this study adds further dimensions to place-identity research. Relph's phenomenological and place-based concept of "insiderness" is used to gain a greater understanding of how the school environment relates to student identity.

Studies of identity have come to be seen as an "important analytic tool for understanding school and society." (Gee, 2001) Recent studies have examined the link between identity and education from a plethora of different lenses, such as adolescent development (French, Seidman, Allen & Aber, 2000), race and ethnicity (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Milner & Ross, 2006; Syed, Azmitia & Cooper, 2011), gender (Llyod, 2010), sexual orientation (Birden, 2005), disability (Panting & Kelly, 2006), socioeconomic status (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998) and diversity (McLaughlin, 1992). While the role of place has been neglected in these psychology-based studies, the intersection of the school environment and identity has been discussed within a broader, philosophical context.

In the 1960's and 70's, French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault wrote on the intersection of society, architecture and power, espousing the idea that spaces and places are institutional expressions of knowledge production (Foucault, 1986).

These discourses on how identity and societies are shaped by space are also examined by such intellectuals as LeFebvre (1974), Massey (1994) and Soja (1989,1996) and have been more recently called upon by academics who want to restore a renewed interest of place into the conversation of educational reform (Gruenewald, 2003; Fine, Burns, Payne & Torre, 2004). As Gruenewald (2003) states, “contemporary school reform takes little notice of place” and argues that educational place can hold our culture and identity (p.620). Failing to recognize that a place is an articulation of human decisions and by accepting a place’s existence as unproblematic, society “become[s] complicit in the political processes that bring these places into being.” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.627) The quality of the educational place speaks to students about how they are viewed and valued by themselves and others (Fine et al., 2004; Maxwell, 2000). It has been argued that low-income youth of color construe these disparaged environments as evidence of their “social disposability.” (Fine et al., 2004; Kozol, 1992) If this argument holds truth, gaining a deeper understanding of how students may link their identity to elements of the school environment is imperative to begin to design and construct a holistic educational structure that supports and encourages the flourishing of all students.

Heidegger (1969) wrote, “Everywhere, wherever and however we are related to beings of everyday kind, identity makes its claim upon us.”(p.26) Current conceptions of identity show the issue of identity is not one that can be neatly defined or easily categorized; instead, it is a complex, dynamic concept with indistinct borders and various definitions, with each bleeding into the next. Lawler (2008) points out, “It is not possible to provide a single, overarching definition of what it is, how it is developed and how it

works. There are various ways of theorizing the concept, each of which develops different kinds of definition.” (p.2)

Psychology has been the discipline that has traditionally attempted to understand, define and define matters of identity and has produced a plethora of theory on the subject (James, 1890; Freud, 1927; Mead, 1934; Jung, 1939; Hilgard, 1948; Erikson, 1950, 1959, 1968; Tajfel, 1981). Each theory of identity varies slightly, as different identifications of self tend to be studied by different types of researchers (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). These various ways of defining identity have been the subject of scrutiny (Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Overall, the current research conceives of identity as plural, not singular; as dynamic, not static; and as relational, not independent. All of these characteristics of identity interweave and inform one another, which make it an extremely difficult entity to deconstruct. This study is concerned with the positioning of identity, or identities of the student by and within the context of the school environment. The social psychological focus on belonging as a definition of identity will be emphasized, as it ties most strongly to “insideness.”

It was not until the late 1970’s that theoretical conceptualization and preliminary research on the intersection of place and identity became established. Since then, there has been considerable effort to understand this relationship (Alkon & Traugot, 2008; Feldman, 1990; Fleury-Bahi, Félonneau & Marchand, 2008; Korpela, 1989; Lalli, 1992; Pratt, 1998; Rowles, 1983; Taylor, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996;). In the early establishment of the term ‘place-identity’, Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff (1983) echoed the underlying ideas that identity is a complex, dynamic structure that embody characteristics that both endure and change over the course of time and space and remain

relational to surrounding environment. As Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983) state, “the development of self-identity [does not have to be] restricted to making distinctions between oneself and significant others, but extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found.” (p.57)

### *The Concept of “Insideness”*

The need for an integrated understanding of place and identity was addressed in Lewicka’s (2011) meta-analysis of place literature, in which she called for a theory development using phenomenological based concepts. This sentiment is also mimicked in the work and writings of David Seamon (1993, 2000, 2007a, 2007b), in which he espouses the importance of looking at the nature of experience and recalls the works of philosophers, human geographers and contemporary architects. One of the phenomenological-based concepts that Seamon advocates exploring the humanist geographer Edward Relph’s (1976) concept of “insideness,” as phenomenological explorations of space and place as it offers an innovative way of understanding its’ “complex, multi-dimensioned structure.” (Seamon, 2000, p.172) It also brings a principled organization to the concept, so as to avoid the vagueness and unstructured issues that the study of place-identity has faced in the past (Lalli, 1992; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

In this study, it is proposed as a place-based concept from which to explore the relationship between place and identity. The term directly addresses the relational and belonging aspects of identity while being based in the plurality and dynamism of lived experience.

Within a phenomenological paradigm, Relph (1976) developed the concept of “insideness” to explore an alternative approach from which to understand our connection with the environment. He states that what is required is, “an approach and attendant set of concepts that respond to the unity of place, person and act” and stresses the links rather than the division between specific and general features of an environment.” (Relph, 1976, p.45) He defines the concept of identity by citing Erikson and positing that “identity of something refers to a persistent sameness and unity that allows itself to be differentiated from others” and that identity is a fundamental feature of our experiences of place that both influences and is influenced by those experiences (p.45). For Relph, varying combinations and intensities of the ‘insideness-outsideness’ dialectic profoundly affect the human experience of meaning and feeling within a place, resulting in different identifications with that place for different people (Seamon, 1996).

It is important to highlight that this duality does not imply a structured scale; rather it is a simplified starting point of a dynamic spectrum based on human experiential factors from which one may begin to understand the relationship between place and identity. As Relph wrote,

the essence of place lies not so much in [physical setting] as in the experience of an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’; more than anything else this is what sets places apart in space and defines a particular system of physical features, activities and meanings. *To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it*, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with place. (Relph, 1976, p.49, emphasis mine)

The experience of being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ is highly contingent on our intentions, or zones of interest and attention; as our intentions vary, so does the boundary between and

within “insiderness” and “outsiderness.” (Relph, 1976) This lack of clarity can be attributed to, in part, by the varying degrees of intensity to which “insiderness” and “outsiderness” is experienced. It is not enough to merely say that one either identifies (experiences “insiderness”), or does not identify (experiences “outsiderness”) with place, as the subtlety of human experience is much too nuanced for broad generalizations (Relph, 1976). Although Relph’s work has brought some critique, the concept merits examination and begins provide a language that affords the articulation of experience as it relates to identity and place, and a starting point from which to build phenomenological-based person-environmental studies (Seamon, 1996).

What is missing is the understanding of the *process* by which “insiderness” is established. Relph (1976) defines the concept and outlines the various degrees to which it may be experienced yet does not dissect *how* “insiderness” is constructed for an individual as it relates to the specific elements of the environment and the role that space and place play in the process. Adding new dimensions to the notion of “insiderness” are current conceptions of identity’s plural, dynamic and relational nature that give us new directions for the study. Here, these plural, dynamic and relational facets of identity are separated for the sake of clarity and to show how each relates to the project in hand.

### *Identity as plural*

As cited in Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), a myriad of researchers have argued against singular conceptualizations of identity and provided evidence for their assertions (e.g., Ashmore, Jussim, Wilder, & Heppen, 2001; Deaux, 1996; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Jackson & Smith, 1999; Luhtanen &

Crocker, 1992; Phinney, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Each theory of identity and its emphasis varies slightly, depending on the approach and paradigm of the individual academic. In developmental psychology, emphasis is placed on the developing self across time, context and multiple identifications while in social psychology more emphasis is placed on the social situation and influence of others (Burkitt, 2008; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Syed, et al., 2011; Tajfel, 1981). Various models based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, class, (dis)ability, size and locality, describe different facets of identity, each with their own theories and conceptual frameworks. All of these identity facets interact and intertwine with each other as they inform a person's sense of self. Perhaps, instead of a 'singular' identity, it may be more appropriate to think in terms of identities, as this speaks to the dynamic plurality that exists as people seek to define themselves in the context of varying relations.

Like the previously listed facets of identity, place is another dimension through which one can define his/her self (or selves) and becomes part of the plurality of "self." In the context of the school environment, several questions begin to rise to the forefront:

- Which, is any, of a student's "identities" are impacted by the school environment?  
And,
- How is that process taking place—i.e. what factors intersect the process of identity construction?
- Do different "identities" more closely tie with the establishment of "insiderness" within the school environment?

### Identity as dynamic

Which bring us to the next characteristic of identity, that it is dynamic, not static. As Hall (1990) notes, identity is a 'production' that is always in process, never complete and negotiated within representation and "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p.225). In Erikson's epigenesis developmental model, Identity v. Identity Diffusion is the stage that Erikson establishes as the bridge between child and adulthood in which the adolescent becomes more conscious in his or her attempts to integrate the self into a cohesive whole and begins to undergoes extensive self-examination and searches to find continuity within and between self and the world around them.(Erikson, 1959,1968). Erikson framed identity formation as a process and mergence of "selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications, and their absorption in a new configuration" that is dependent on the dynamic interaction surrounding social environment, personal experience and time (Erikson, 1959,p.122). Relfh (1976), in his conceptualization of "insideness" mirrors this thought, stressing that identities are not static and uniform but dependent on both time and environment (p45).

Identity's dynamic nature calls into question the role that the school environment plays in the process of change. Students spend a significant part of their day in their schools as well as a significant number of years during a time when their sense of self is being developed within school environments. Transitions in school have demonstrated to be periods of identity exploration and renegotiation (Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985, as cited in Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

While developmental and social psychologists have considered this dynamism of identity as it relates to psychosocial environment, this study considers the dynamism, or processes of identity, as it relates to the school environment. Research shows that media presentations, policies and stereotyping impact how one sees themselves and their position in life and are culturally uneven (Dunn, 2005). The neighborhood in which setting of this study takes place has been repeatedly negatively impacted by media representation and public policy. Back in November of 2010, the superintendent of the Minneapolis School District recommended that North High School, the setting of the study, be phased to close over the next four years due to the low enrollment and achievement (Xiong, 2010). This news was met with emotional resistance from both students and members of the community, who pushed back to keep North High School open (Weber, 2010). Because of outcry from members of the community, the superintendent has since changed her position and suggested that North High will be increasing enrollment in the coming years (WCCO, 2011).

This incident raises questions of power, its relationship to identity and how they may interact over time:

- Who has the power to decide what is an acceptable environment?
- How is that conveyed?
- How does that power dynamic impact a student's identity definition – is the identity in the process of being constructed or deconstructed?
- What is the role of the environment in which direction the change will go-- construction or deconstruction? And,

- How does this construction or deconstruction factor in to the establishment of “insiderness” for the student?

While these questions may not be easily answerable, they open up the conversation to consider the role of the student identity and how it may be impacted by issues of spatial power via the school environment.

### *Identity as relational*

Part of the dynamism of identity stems from its’ relational quality to context, time and others, and therefore, very often varying and contradictory identities must be managed (Lawler, 2008). While this plurality makes identity a difficult concept to fully grasp, there are key qualities that connect the differing approaches; one of which being the ubiquity of the relational negotiation of sameness-difference (Hopkins, 2010). So, “approaching the ideas of sameness from two different angles, the notion of identity simultaneously establishes two possible relations of comparison between persons or things; similarity on one hand, difference on the other.” (Jenkins, 2004, p.3-4) The idea that identity hinges on establishing similarity and difference between individuals, within and across groups, as well as space and time, marks identity as relational (Hopkins, 2010).

This relational ‘sameness-difference’ duality recognizes the psychosocial aspects of identity development highlighted in both developmental and sociological psychology and is what Jenkins (2004) calls the ‘internal-external dialectic of identification’ (p.52). For Tajfel (1981), it was the in and out-groups of the social environment, while Erikson (1968) focused on inner sameness with the outer psychosocial environment. However,

the 'relation' that most lacks emphasis in identity inquiry is how identity is relational with the surrounding environment, or place.

Most recently, in an attempt to work towards an integrated model of place identification, Droseltis & Vignoles (2010) reviewed past investigations and identified four major conceptualizations of place-identity: (1) self-extension, (2) environmental fit, (3) place-self congruity and (4) emotional attachment. While Droseltis & Vignoles (2010) break down the differences, the four conceptualizations of place-identities definition also have an intersection of commonality. In each of the four, the common denominator is that each is trying to establish a relational dimension, or level of 'sameness' between individual and place. Whether they define this through affect, subjective sense of self, fitting place into self or self into place, the underlying base that each is trying to reach is an establishment of sameness or difference with the environment around them.

Relph's concept of "insiderness" is possibly most helpful in speaking to these relational aspects in place-based study. Echoing Erikson's process of identification within the psychosocial domain, "insiderness" can be seen as the degree to which one makes an identification in a physical space and works to synthesize and integrate that into a new form and meaning, unique to one's self (Erikson, 1959; Relph, 1976). For Erikson, the more one is able to find continuity with their psychosocial environment, the more they will develop a healthy identity and for Relph, the more one is able to cultivate continuity or sameness with their physical place, the more they are able to develop a sense of "insiderness." Again, what is missing is an understanding of *how* this is done.

If identity is negotiated from a multitude of various relational continuities, the role of place must be considered in the process of identity construction or deconstruction.

With respect to the school environment, the questions that begin to emerge are:

- What aspects of the interior school environment are establishing a continuity or discontinuity with the student? That is, facilities, size, overall quality, colors, layout, lighting, etc? And,
- Which of the above interior characteristics relate to the experience of “insiderness?” How do they relate?

It is by locating this study in the common intersections of theoretical approaches to and varied definitions of identity that the study seeks to work towards a holistic understanding of relationship between people and place as a function of identity, using “insiderness” as a grounding concept. Place identity, therefore, is about the creation of meaning with place through the negotiation and incorporation of sameness or continuity with environment. It is relational to the environment while existing as a plural and dynamic facet of identity. As Droseltis & Vignoles (2010) state, “If we are to achieve an integrative understanding of place identity processes, we need to aim for an holistic understanding of the complexity of human existence in context.” (p.33)

## **Methodology**

This study used the qualitative method of phenomenological research approach, as it speaks directly to the students' experience of the interior school environment. Three methods were employed to garner the relationship between school environment and identity: auto-photography, journaling, and interviews.

Phenomenology is the “study of structures of consciousness as experienced from first-person point of view” (Smith, 2011). As a method for the study, the phenomenological approach allows the experience of the student in and with their school environment to emerge via auto-photography, journaling and narratives. The procedures of this approach consist of identifying the phenomenon, bracketing biases and collect data from several participants who have experienced this particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p.60). The data is analyzed by identifying significant statements and creating textural and structural descriptions to convey the essence of experience (Creswell, 2007, p.60). This approach fits with this particular study, as it allows the voice and experience of the student to be truly heard and furthermore embodies phenomenology's core philosophy of connected mind-body and space.

### *Precedent Studies*

Other researchers have also used a similar methodology in conjunction with the concept of “insiderness.” Lim & Barton's (2010) use Edward Relph's concept of “insiderness” to explore how urban children relate to and create a sense of place in their

urban environment. By having the children take photographs, draw maps and walk researchers through their experience of the urban environment, the findings of the study discussed the multiple ways, and dimensions children construct “insideness” in their sense of place. These constructions included interactions among various understandings, competence and affective dispositions that the children had with their neighborhood environment (Lim & Barton, 2010). The use of the concept of “insideness” by the researchers begins an attempt to understanding the process in how students start to cognitively connect and affectively feel a part of their environment, an idea that is very closely related to issues within identity.

Another project that used the methodology of student auto-photography and accompanying written thought was an October 2009 exhibit, put on by the 21st Century School Fund, Critical Exposure and Healthy Schools Campaign, in the Rotunda of the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington D.C entitled *Through Your Lens*, a photo and essay contest that invited students and teachers to document the tributes and troubles of the American public school system in large cities around the nation. The goal of the project was to raise awareness about the state of the school environment and begin to enact change to improve conditions, so that all students may flourish in an academic environment that supports their well being. This research study seeks to build upon both the Lim & Barton study and *Through Your Lens* project, using qualitative methodology, place-based theory and photographic narrative to investigate how the school environment relates to student identity. The goal being to lay a foundation for this type of research and investigating the ways in which it can be used by designers to create more supportive environments and policymakers to enact positive change.

### Setting

North High School is located in an area in Minneapolis that has a high crime and poverty rate and has struggled with closing racial achievement gaps (Williams, 2007). It is part of the Minneapolis Public School System, which is comprised of 18 elementary schools (K-5), 18 elementary schools (K-8), 4 middle schools, 7 senior high schools, 2 special education schools, 4 district alternative schools, 16 contract alternative schools, 2 charter schools and 1 specialty program. The total enrollment for the 2010-2011 schools year was 34,570 students with 5,651 total staff members. The demographics of the district are 39.6% African Americans, 29.8% White Americans, 17.1% Hispanic Americans, 9.0% Asian Americans and 4.5% Native Americans. 65.6% of the students are on the reduced/free lunch program, 23.2% of the students are English Language Learners while 15.9% of the students are classified as special education students (Minneapolis Public School Fact Sheet, 2011).

At North High School, the latest enrollment number is 580 students with 70% African American, 23% Asian American, 6% White American, 2% Hispanic American and 0% Native American. 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch while 22% receive special education services and 17% receive ELL services. The graduation rate of North High School for the last 5 years was 73% in 2011, 78% in 2010, 81% in 2009, 90% in 2008 and 79% in 2007 (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2011). Using data collected by a study by John Hopkins University for the Education Department, researchers for the Associated Press labeled schools who's senior class had 60% or fewer of the students who entered as freshman as 'dropout factories', with North High School being 1 of 7 identified in the state of Minnesota (Associated Press, nd).

The physical structure of the current North High School opened in 1973 and has been referred to as “a series of brick boxes...that does not allow for connection to the community.” (Millett, 2007) While this study is primarily concerned with the interior environment, it should be noted that the overall architectural environment has been criticized for its severe lack of aesthetic appeal and connection with the greater community (Lewin, 2001; Millet, 2007). It is a two-story school made up of two buildings, connected by a fenced in courtyard and two second-story interior skyways. The east building is mainly used for continuing education classes for adults and houses 88.5 FM, the jazz station in Minneapolis. Some Jazz88.5 spaces are also used by the radio class at North as well as students mixing their own beats in their free time. The building also contains the lunchroom and media center for North High School. The west building is the main building of the high school, which contains all classrooms, auditorium, gymnasiums, band and choir rooms, dance studio and all general school offices.

### Participants

The participants for this study were six adolescent, high school freshmen aged 14-15, who attend North High School. All students came from one homeroom class and consisted of four female and two males. All but one were African-American; one female identified herself as Swedish, Native American and African-American.

The connection with the participants was made by contacting the career counselor at North High School who gauged and solicited a small group of teachers who may have been interested in working with the study. Connection was made with a science teacher who headed a daily freshman homeroom. Upon an initial visit to the school during the

30-minute homeroom period, the researcher and project was introduced to the 12 students in the class. A question and answer period was facilitated for the students to ensure they understood the study and consent forms were distributed. The students who agreed to participate returned signed consent forms with parental approval on the first day of data collection.

The parameters delimiting participants to this specific age group and location are threefold. First, the participants aged 14-15 are entering or in the stage that developmental psychologist Erik Erikson dictates as “Identity v. Identity Confusion” in which they have begun to address issues surrounding personal identity, or identities (Erikson, 1950; 1968). This, as Erikson (1968) stresses, does not exclusively limit issues of identity to this age group yet is when issues of identity begin to become more prominent. Second, the participants within this age group were selected as they are assumed to articulate their thoughts and feelings, both in written and verbal form. Third, the length of time that the freshman participants have spent and will spend in the school environment was a determining factor. The students will have attended the school for about 6 months, a length of time that is long enough for them to be familiar with and attend to the environment yet at the nascent stages of establishing a relationship with place.

### *Data Collection*

In the footsteps of the previous two examples, the data was collected via three methods; auto-photography, journaling and interviews and collected over two sessions. In the first session, the students were given a disposable camera and a blank journal then

instructed to take 10 photographs of self-selected elements of the interior school environment of things they liked and things they did not like. Concurrently they were also asked to record in the journal why they took that particular photograph and how it made them feel. These journals and cameras were then collected, the film developed and the data organized to be preliminarily analyzed in preparation for the second session of data collection.

In the second session, the phenomenological interviews were conducted on a subsequent date to expand upon and more fully understand the student and what they meant to convey through the photographs of the interior environment. The interviews were exploratory in nature, and used the individual students' photographs, corresponding journals and overall research purpose to create the structure and questioning for the interviews. A printed handout of the student's photographs and comments were brought to each of their interviews and used as a reference and guide for the questions throughout the interview. During the structured class time, each student individually sat down for the interview in a private office adjacent to the classroom. These dialogues lasted about 20 minutes and were spread out over four days with each interview recorded and transcribed. Each interview started with showing the participant the first photograph they took and asking them to elaborate on their written comment for that particular photograph. While each interview varied based on the students' photographs, the questioning was structured to unravel a greater understanding of the plural, dynamic and relational facets of the individual student. Guided questions were created for each student and were cross-referenced with one another to ensure parallels between the interviews (see appendix A). Because issues of identity are complex, multi-varied and personal, the

interview format allows for thick, deeper verbal descriptions as well as the ability to capture non-verbal cues such as body language and vocal intonation.

### Data Analysis

In phenomenological research Creswell (1998) states that "Researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning." (p.52) It is precisely this approach that was taken in analyzing the data and extracting findings. To do this , the procedure outlined in Creswell's (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* was followed: transcribe, review, horizontalization, clusters of meaning into themes and use various types of descriptions to convey data while remaining reflexive throughout the process. Three sets of data were gathered:

- Photographs: Photographs of interior spaces of the school environment. The students took these with the camera provided by the research.
- Narratives: The narratives came in two forms: written and verbal; the first from the journals and the second from the interviews. The purpose of both was to delve deeper into understanding how the photograph relates to the student's identity and what the student expected to show through the photograph

The first step of the analysis process reviewed and studied the photographs and journals recorded by the students. Because this is an exploratory study, predetermined

categories of classification were not sought; rather patterns and clusters of meanings within the photographs and statements were pulled out, both within and between student data. The journals were reviewed and significant statements highlighted, again looking both within and across the data. Review and exposure to the written and photographic narratives was multiple so as to allow the saturation and renewed perspective each time the data was examined. To remain focused on the goals of the study, the primary research question loosely guided the analysis, and questions provided in the identity literature review were used as support.

The interviews consisted of questions that were informed by the students' photographs and journals as well as the three previously outlined aspects of identity. The questions explored the relationship between student identity in terms of plurality, dynamism and relational aspects and the school environment. Since this is a phenomenological based study, the questions were structured to address the primary research question while remaining open and guided by student response. The process of identifying pattern and clusters of meaning within the transcribed interviews followed the process carried out with the journals, by highlighting significant statements both within and between narratives.

### **Findings and Discussion**

As Relph (1976) contends, “insiderness” is contingent on our zones; this study posits that “insiderness” is also contingent on the varying scales within the environment. The analysis of the photographs and narratives collected from the six freshmen of North High School focuses on unraveling the ways that identity interacts with particular scales of the interior environment and how this process impacts the construction of “insiderness.” Humans interact with their environment at multiple scales, from the detailed interior to the global environment, each impacting identity in varied ways and to varied degrees. It is in these multifarious intersections with the self that “insiderness” emerges, a concept that is as much outward as it is inward. In these transactions of identity and environmental scale, the broader discourse on cultural and societal values emerges. As this is a study of the interior environment, the discussion centers on how the spaces, constructors and elements of the interior environment connect to identity and “insiderness” while connoting cultural values. The study acknowledges that the same process can occur at larger scales.

#### *Scale: Spaces*

At the scale of individual spaces within the school environment, the function of these spaces can play a role in the construction of student identity over time. Spaces such as the auditorium, classrooms and hallways were revealed to foster the construction and expression of identity, with varying degrees of impact on the establishment of “insiderness.” Note that identity construction is inherently tied to and exists in tandem

with identity “deconstruction,” that is, a restructuring of identity definitions and perceptions that presently exist, and therefore the process is not unidirectional but concurrently bidirectional.

### Auditorium

In the process of constructing an identity, spaces can also help deconstruct an identity that students may feel is thrust upon them when they begin at North High School. Students articulated that they do not want to be judged based on past events; instead they want to negotiate their own identity within the spaces of school. For Student A, the auditorium was a space where “art and creativity happen,” and this association with creativity and growth became a means to deconstruct an imposed identity and construct a new one, stating;

They think that the school is so bad because of its past...its really not that bad, it has a lot of creativity and a lot of smart kids in the school but they don't get noticed because what had happened in past years...I think that they should start seeing.

These spaces of creativity become a vessel in which the students become visible and can negotiate their dynamic dimensions of identity construction. Gruenewald (2003) highlights that a purpose of education is to prepare citizens to participate in the creation of a equitable society yet education's lack of attention to spatial forms, it maintains spatial relations of domination.” (p. 629) In order to combat this spatial domination, it is imperative that the students have a space where “art and creativity” can happen. A space in which they can assert their own power, own voice and begin to construct a new identity of their own choice, dismantling spaces of domination.

## Classrooms

Overall, classrooms were represented with a focus on what was taught and different subjects were captured through displayed artifacts. Student D, who defined himself as a college-bound student, took numerous pictures within various classrooms that displayed these artifacts. He explained that all these displays within the classroom made him want to learn more because he tries to “know as much stuff as [he] can,” as to him, the artifacts symbolized knowledge. Through this symbolic display, the classroom space becomes more than a container in which to teach; it becomes an active participant in evoking curiosity, motivation and engagement within the students.



Figure 1: Science class display



Figure 2: Science class display



Figure 3: English class display

Beyond displays as a function within the class space, certain classrooms allowed for a freedom of self-expression, a critical component in the development of a healthy identity and self-confidence in adolescents (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998). Student A spoke to the importance of having a space of self-expression when speaking of the radio classrooms the school shares with a local jazz station.

We have studios on the other side of school and a lot of kids go there, after school or they go during lunch. Like I am one of the kids, like I go there, listen to beats, I listen to my friends do their music. I think it is fun, it shows creativity like they can do something with their lives and a lot of the times the songs are about their past life, or their childhood or something.

Having a space in which the students can freely create beats and lyrics that express who they are and what they have gone through, enables them to take part in a dynamic process of constructing their own identity.

By allowing a space for students to speak, a space to be heard is inherently created. In the radio classrooms, students listen to other students' narratives within a safe space. As one student put it: "if kids can't express themselves, that's how kids be depressed." Studies show that depression in adolescence has a significant impact on their development, performance, physical health, personal relationships and overall well-being (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011). Expression through music, crafts, art and other creative outlets can play a significant role in ameliorating depression and lead to a stronger, more integrated self (Castillo-Perez, Gomez-Perez, Calvillo Velasco, Perez-Campos & Mayoral, 2010; Reynolds, 2000; Warren, 1993). The role of music in the expression of identity is especially important the African American community, as it is integral to the way they live and communicate (Wilkins, 2000, p.10). The lyrical expressions of rap and hip-hop allow for the expression of an individual and collective identity, thus recalling Afrocentric spatial practices (Wilkins, 2000, p.10). So, if the space does not allow for freedom of expression, the students are invisibly shut out of the space, rendered powerless and their zone or intention to establish "insiderness" is sufficiently stymied. This domination is "maintained not through material force but through material forms." (Gruenewald, 2003, p.628) When designing interior designers must be asking: are spaces designed so that children feel as if they are empowered to express who they are and are the forms being manipulating to support that well-being?

## Hallways

Although spaces of transition, hallways hold messages of their own through their own design and what they carry. At North, showcases for display and overall spatial articulation impacted different facets of the students' self. The three students who identified as athletes (C,D and F) all took pictures of the trophy case display located in the main hallway outside the auditorium and spoke to the communication of pride and potential the trophies relayed. They conveyed that seeing the trophies in the hallway made them feel "good" and "like a winner," supporting who they considered themselves to be as athletes. While none of the trophies displayed were earned by the sports teams that the students were directly apart of, the display offered the possibility of who they could be, as Student C stated, "it just shows you, you can win stuff if you try." This sentiment was mirrored by Student D, who self-identified most strongly as an athlete, playing football, basketball and hoping to attend college on an athletic scholarship, saying, "[the high school is] trying to show that North is still important and we can do [win] if we have more kids." When retelling of an away game the football team had played earlier in the season, he highlighted how "the other stadium looked like a college campus" and they had fans filling the stands. He stated that it "kind of makes it hard to win games if you ain't even got a crowd" and when thinking of North's own stadium in comparison, this made him feel poor. Coupled with a losing season, this difference in stadium environments elevated the importance of the other ways in which North displayed pride and potential within the school environment. Student D took a picture of a paper towel dispenser with the manufacturer, *Fort James*, name imprinted on the front and recalled that seeing this reminded him of how this company had donated money to

his middle school football program when no one else did. Because the student strongly defined himself as an athlete, he tied the school history and various other displays in the hall to establish a continuity and “insiderness” with that facet of his identity.

Though the displays contained team-earned trophies, the students placed a greater emphasis on individual athletic success and identification. The displayed trophies as a strong athletic identity constructor were prominent as it tied the identities of a collective past to the possibility that these students could also become winners. All students who participated in athletics emphasized the importance of winning and being a “winner”, stressing the value on competition and the significance that winning has self-worth and a ‘positive’ self-identity. Because the emphasis on individual advancement within American culture is prominent, competing is considered an activity that builds character, produces excellence, defines success of self and breeds a survival of the fittest mentality. The student’s desire to establish himself or herself as a winner goes beyond the game; it is an establishment of themselves as survivors. The strength of athlete identification, communication of an underlying core cultural value via the trophies and the school sports’ history affected the degree to which the student established an “insiderness” within the environment. Designers must be cognizant of the values being supported via the function of spaces and the strength to which they may be internalized for various individuals.



Figure 4: Trophy display



Figure 5: Trophy display

Two of the student athletes also took a photograph of the Dasani water machine located in the hallway, indicating that this was important because the water gave them energy. Yet both students expressed frustration because it was the only source of cold water in the school and they had to pay for it. Student F conveyed that the Minneapolis Public School district was responsible for allowing them to have access to free, cold water and it wasn't fixed because "[Minneapolis Public Schools] probably just want more money." This Dasani machine unsuspectingly sends a dual message to some of the students; on one hand the water machines in school connects to the student's athletic identity in their need for energetic replenishment yet on the other hand conveys an underlying statement of the student's neglected well-being as they have to pay if they want to drink cold water. Since a large number of the students live in the surrounding low-income neighborhood, it places an unnecessary financial burden on the students for an amenity that is considered a basic need. This hidden interpretation of environmental elements may hinder the student's ability to create "insiderness" with an environment if they feel as if the perceived people 'in charge' of the space are looking to profit off them.

Race was another element of a student's identity that was brought forward within the hallway, through the case of a book display. Student B, the only multi-racial participant in the study, took a photograph of a display of books in the hallway that showcased young female narratives from a range of backgrounds and noted it was important because it showed diversity. She explained that it was "good" that North displayed all these books because it represented North's diversity and connected her own racial identity, stating, "I am more than one race, so its different you know. Its not just one group. People can fit in with their own group because if people are like them, they

don't have to feel like left out because they are the only one." By seeing that North did not limit the racial or ethnic narratives she could read about, she interpreted that North did not limit acceptance of a racial identity to just one, which was especially important to her as a multi-racial individual. This acceptance of who she was played an important role in her ability to begin to establish "insiderness" with her school environment, as it was the one topic throughout the interview in which she was the most verbose and open.

The hallway, as an articulated whole, was mentioned by Student D who described the "together" look of the hallways as beautiful. He scaled the space down to smaller elements, explaining that the carpet and inset doors made him feel as if he was older because they reminded him of a local college he had visited. In this case, the specific materials and articulated details within planar surfaces were read as a function of the space and evoked an image that connected to his identity as a college-bound student. The hall became a medium for which the student was able to tie the dynamism of his identity definition, as a college *bound* student and establish "insiderness" with the environment for supporting that aspect of himself. The fact that carpet rather than cement was used and the doors were inset rather than flush with the walls underlines not only the importance of design details yet begs the larger question about what design details of a space communicate about the support and care of its occupants.

#### Scale: Spatial Constructors

Spaces are composed of elements that create the whole; walls, floors, and ceiling planes define the boundaries of the spatial experience yet each interact with the students in different manners to various degrees. By breaking down the space into its composed

constructors, a greater understanding of interaction and influence between the interior environment with facets of the identity and process of “insiderness” is garnered.

### Walls

The walls of North High were the primary element for identity construction for the students. Through display and their own character, walls communicated individual potential, accomplishment, focus and expressions of self that helped construct a continuity and identity within the students. Walls also possessed the capacity to establish a discontinuity between student and environment through dirt, grim and unwanted writings upon their surface. While there were intersections of common communication for students, the strength to which the walls spoke to each student and informed “insiderness” was dependent on individual perspective and affiliations of self. Through both practice and agency walls are transformed from fixed and static elements of interior environments into dynamic constructors of identity.

### *Polar identity*

All six participants identified as Polars, the mascot of North High, and this identity was informed by the signage of the Polar name and logo throughout the walls of the school. All participants took at least one photo depicting the school name or mascot. Seeing signs of their Polar identity was important in instilling pride and spirit, both as a collective school identity and an individual sense of belonging.

As a collective identity, students attributed the strong Polar spirit present in school and the surrounding community as being responsible for saving North High from

closure last year. One student remarked; “If people wouldn’t have had spirit, like polar spirit, then they’ll be down and they wouldn’t want [North High],” while another remarked, “[it] shows that the kids in school are trying to put forth an effort to make the school good again. It’s showing, oh yeah our school isn’t all bad, we can do this, we can pull the school back up.” Because of events in the past, the showcase of Polar identity took on a more weighted meaning, one that stood for the strong community they are and could become. Student F remarked that it made her feel proud that a Polar sign was even hanging in a rarely used hallway, demonstrating that even in isolated spaces within the school, pride was not forgotten yet thriving. This perhaps paralleled the existence and importance of pride for “forgotten” North High in the face of closure.

The communication of a collective Polar identity moved to establish meaning for the individual. This inculcation of school pride was cited as being important in making school a happy place for the individual. Student C indicated that she identified herself a happy person and remarked that school spirit “makes me happy and then like, its normal.” Others noted that without the showcase of school spirit, North would be a “boring” and “sad” place. Advertising the Polar name and mascot became a medium of pride in North High School, which the students voiced as critical in cultivating and constructing an identity tied to North High. The wall display of Polar identity throughout the school became a dynamic, fluid spectrum of meaning in which the students negotiated their belonging as part of a greater communal identity while also mediating what being a Polar means to them as an individual. In relating this idea to Relph’s concept of “insiderness,” from moving from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ the school as a function of identity, the students seem to confer levels of belonging that relate both to their collective and

individual identities. For them, establishing “insideness” is not a just an interaction between the individual and environment yet an interaction between the individual *and* collective facets of identity and place.

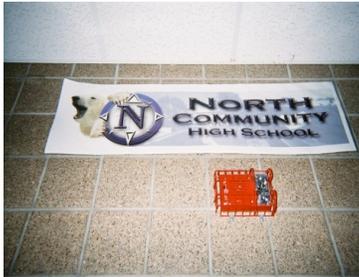


Figure 6: Polar banner



Figure 7: Polar logo



Figure 8: Polar logo

### *Television Display*

Wall communications of identity were also present through technological and paper displays of personal accomplishment and recognition. Hung on the walls at various locations throughout the school were televisions that featured the academic and athletic achievements of the students. Two students who had been publicly lauded for their achievements photographed these TV's. Student C said that it made her feel “like [she’s] just not working for no reason” while Student F stated that it made her feel “like a lady Polar.” Student B also mentioned the importance of recognition when speaking of another display on the wall and positively recounted being recognized for an accomplishment in her radio class. In reference to past projects being displayed on the walls, Student E mirrored this positive imbue ment of personal pride by remarking that seeing his work showcased on the wall makes him feel great, “like [he] accomplished something.” This personal recognition for accomplishments via technological and project display on the walls of the school begin to play a role in the positive reaffirmation and construction the students identity. As noted in Student F’s sentiments, seeing her individual accomplishments recognized by the school, resulted in a greater sense of

belonging, or “insiderness” with school, as she was able to further identify as a ‘Polar’.

### *Artwork*

Artwork hanging on walls was a means by which the dynamic construction of identity through potentiality is reflected, as multiple students photographed works of student art. Two students relayed that the importance of the wired art they photographed saying, “the at aide [students] made those and [it shows] they have potential, they can do stuff too.” While one of these students considered himself creative, the other did not but both spoke to the construction of a creative identity by showing them that if other kids could create art, in time, they could too. Other displays of art on the walls, such as student paintings and drawings, also re-enforced the potentiality to be an artist, as one student remarked he could be a good drawer if he just put in a little more time.



Figure 9: Art display

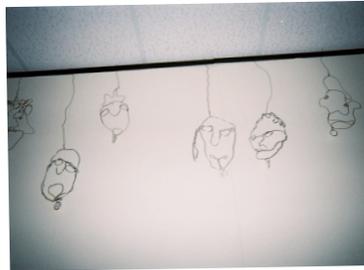


Figure 10: Wire art display



Figure 11: Art display

### *Bulletin Boards*

This idea of capability goes for bulletin boards as well, as the words written on the wall literally spoke to who the students are and who they wanted to become. For Student E, he liked the sign “Work Hard, Be Nice” hanging in his classroom because he was nice and also needed to be reminded to work hard and stay focused. Student D began to bridge the individual impact of bulletins to a collective impact for the whole



## *Graffiti*

In other cases, messages received were not so clear-cut, such as the case of graffiti on walls. To some students, graffiti was seen as an expression of self whereas to others, it was perceived as vandalism. This disparity in how graffiti is perceived sheds light on societal values of what is deemed appropriate self-expression within space. Graffiti as a form of identity and cultural expression is a contested issue, seen both as an act of vandalism and necessary expression (Alonso, 1998). Alonso (1998) points out that attempts to stigmatize or criminalize this expression by the dominate power only encourages a “counter-hegemonic discourse” that challenges the normative structure of the environment (p.22). The ability to express one’s self is an important aspect of American teenage life, especially within a community where their voices may be oppressed through other means. Yet when the expression of a student’s identity is perceived as a threat by other students (as it is with the expression of gang symbols in school), it threatens the feeling of safety within the school environment, proudly affecting one’s ability to establish “insiderness” and belonging.

Student A took a photograph of the graffiti on the bathroom stall walls and deemed it important because it was a place to express your feelings about others, saying, “a lot of people go into the bathrooms stalls, instead of having somebody to talk to they write down their feelings on the walls...graffiti in a way is vandalizing but in another way it is another way of expressing art and feelings.” She supported this thought by speaking about how the students writing the graffiti in the bathroom just need somebody to hear them out and suggested that there may be better ways in supporting the students in this

way by giving them an ‘appropriate’ surface on which to express themselves, one that does not disturb the public learning environment.

The student’s selective appropriation of the school environment as a place for self-expression aligns with the other students’ sentiments on the subject. For them, what was written on the walls went beyond self-expression and introduced the presence of gangs into the school environment in a very visible way. This made some of the students remark that it made them feel “negative,” “bad,” and “unsafe” in their environment. Student F explained that: “If someone else was to see [the written gang symbol] then they all going to do is write their gang and then there is going to be an argument and obviously going to start a riot or something.” For her, just seeing the gang name communicated on the wall signified a future hostile confrontation, threatening her sense of security, belonging and “insiderness” within the school environment.

Not all walls are thereby equal—private walls such as the ones in a bathroom stall lend themselves more readily to an accepted surface of expression whereas public ones do not. This dichotomy frames school environments not as monolithic spaces of a single, public nature - instead their public nature is adjustable and adopts varying degrees and forms very similar to the public/private scales in streets and homes. The idea that it may be okay to express oneself on a more “private” wall inside a bathroom stall versus the public surfaces of the school environment raises the question of appropriate surfaces and spaces within the school environment in which a student may freely express themselves. This movement and appropriation between public and private visible expression, reveals the variability by which students may need to constitute a visible presence for their inculcation of “insiderness.” In other words, some students may prefer a public declaration

of belonging while others a private disclosure of connection. This again, brings in questions of power and control of spatial elements. If “insiderness” is established in part by a feeling of ownership within the environment, giving students a surface over which they have control will cultivate this “insiderness” while empowering students with their own voice and perhaps curtailing inappropriate defacement of school property.

### *Maintenance*

The students linked the lack of cleanliness on some walls directly to a lack of caring by janitors, Minneapolis Public Schools or other students. They took photographs of walls with smeared with old food and squished bugs, reporting that these had been present on the walls’ surfaces since at least the beginning of the year. From these examples, the students voiced that they understood why “people” called North dirty. The notion that the mess could have easily been wiped clean with a sponge yet had not been done communicated to the students that no one cared. The lack of caring for the environment translated into a lack of caring for the students. The quality, or cleanliness, of the environment communicates to the students their value to both themselves and others; the disparaged environments become evidence of their “social disposability.” (Fine et al., 2004) If the students begin to internalize this message of disposability, they begin to relinquish connection and care to the environment around them. This was evidenced by Student F, as instead of actively wanting to deconstruct North’s negative identity for herself, she said that seeing this grim made her feel like she just had to do what she could to get out of that ‘zoo,’ forgoing the attempt to build any sort of “insiderness.”

## Ceiling

The students did not photograph the ceilings and floors with the same frequency as walls. Most of the photographs taken of the ceiling showcased unfinished or stained acoustic ceiling tiles within the school environment, which the students described made them feel “bad,” “dirty,” “gross,” and “nasty.” For Student A, the missing acoustic ceiling tile that exposed the plenum was an example of why North has ‘such a bad name’ while Student F voiced that the stains on the ceiling made her feel as if she went to school in a basement. For Student F, the sullied ceiling plane had the power to construct a concept of occupying space that was a “sub-level” within the structure. By pushing herself to an imagined “sub-level” of the structure, she spatially, and perhaps psychologically, positioned herself beneath the expectations of the educational institution.

This brings into question the importance of cleanliness and maintenance within the environment. Cleanliness can be a subjective construct, one that relies on societal values and stands. In American society, trash, stains, or decay are considered signs of abandonment and lesser value or worth. This is a society that spends billions each year on stain removers from elements that range from clothes to carpets and walls. Therefore, how an interior is presented can impact the users’ self-definition. If the cleanliness of the environment has the power to convey the level of caring present, how powerful of an influence is it in being able to construct a sense of belonging and “insiderness”? At what point, or for whom, does the uncleanliness of the environment stop becoming a representation of an identity of de-construction and transform into one that constructs?

For the students that participated in this study, the unclean parts the school environment played a deconstructive role, as it was in conflict with who they were or how they saw themselves. Yet in relaying other classmates sentiments about the sullied environment, one student said, “[other students] go around school and are like ‘who cares, come on, I go to North, who cares?’,” highlighting that the uncleanliness of the environment has already affected the level of belonging some students feel with North High. The discontinuity of the dirtied environment and self doesn’t allow for an establishment of “insiderness” or belonging with the school environment, which in some students may breed an uncaring attitude.



Figure 15: Stained ceiling tiles



Figure 16: Open ceiling

### Floors

Floors, in their materiality, never made it into the data besides the student who referenced the carpet (see discussion on *Hallways* above). Instead, several students photographed various junk food wrappers on the ground. Floors, it appears, were regarded for what they held rather than themselves. Students expressed that when they saw trash on the floor, they understood why ‘people’ called North High ‘dirty,’ yet quickly made explicit that “*North* is not dirty, some *kids* in North is dirty.” The students suggested that in order for the physical environment to reflect the students inside, North should discipline the students who get in trouble by making them clean up the school

instead of detention or suspension. By caring about their school environment and having a sense of “insideness” themselves, the students began to posit how to cultivate that in others. “Insideness” therefore, moves beyond being just an individual experience yet turns the students into agents of change. It is as much an “inward” looking concept as it is an “outward” acting one, a notion critical to planting the seed for the growth of a collective community.

### Scale: Elements

While there are many elements within the interior environment, the ones photographed illuminated the role that doors and signage play in the interaction between identity and environment. The lack of focus on elements does not signify a lack of importance yet perhaps an emphasis on elements that connects with student action. The engagement of action, such as reading or moving through a doorway, could elevate the importance of these elements over others.

### Doors

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

abandoned, perhaps mimicking an internal feeling of abandonment by the school. When asked if she felt like she belonged at North High, she shrugged, relaying a lack of “insiderness.” This again begs the issue of the importance of cleanliness within the environment and its role to facilitate construction of “insiderness” and set a baseline expectation of caring.



Figure 17: Door

### Signage

Student F was also the only student to take a photograph of an exit sign and expressed explicit feelings of leaving several times by saying: “sometimes its boring and when I see the exit sign I be just ready [to go].” For her, the exit sign was a symbol of the freedom that existed on the other side, something that led to an escape from the place she no longer wanted to occupy. For her, “insiderness” was hindered by the exit sign when she was feeling under-stimulated within the environment.

Other signage in the environment also signaled a future action and intersected “insiderness” yet in a much different manner. For Student D, passing by and seeing the “TRIO” sign, a program at North that helps students pursue higher education, reaffirmed his identity as a college-bound student who was a part of the TRIO program and reminded him of his pursuit of being a college student someday saying, “they help a lot...I’m just still going to use my scholarships for my education and get a degree in

something.” Just seeing the sign of TRIO, the student began to construct an identity of success and future course of action. In this way, both signs had the ability to allude to future action, whether short or long term and help or hinder the establishment of “insiderness” depending on the individual student.

## -- Chapter 5 --

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Building off Relph's concept of "insiderness," this study explored how "insiderness" is constructed and the role that space and place play in the process. Through interviews with six high school freshmen, it focused on the process by which "insiderness" is established in a school environment within the larger context of culture and society. The study had four main findings; (1) The process of "insiderness" construction is contingent not only on the intentions of the individual yet also the scales of the environment; (2) students' perceptions of environmental scales—from elements, such as doors to the nation—intertwine and inform one another; (3) "Insiderness" is both an inward and outward directional concept; and (4) Wall planes are primary constructors of identity within the interior environment. There is no overarching way that all this happens; it is dependent of the plural, dynamic and relational facets of identity, cultural values and the varied scale of environmental form. The study's implications are both theoretical and practical, for academics, designers, school personnel and policy.

Below is a brief overview that ties back to the questions posed in Chapter 2 with regard to how the different facets of identity relate to the built environment. While these issues are interwoven in the paper, they are highlighted here for clarity.

Under plural identity, the questions posed centered around understanding which 'identities' were impacted by the school environment, how that process was taking place and if certain 'identities' tied in more closely to the establishment of "insiderness". Instead of just being about scales of the environment, it is also about scales of identity and

perception. It was not just the photographs just connected to an identity yet that the photographs told a story about what they perceived, what they saw in the environment.

In looking at the dynamic facet of identity, the conversation and questioning centered on the role that the school environment might play in the process of change in students' identity over time. Examining who establishes what is an acceptable environment, how that is conveyed, whether that plays a constructive or deconstructive role in identity formation and how "insiderness" is factored into this role. One of the most prevalent themes that emerged was the need for students to negotiate their own identity. They did not want the imposed identifications of students past to impede on their own definitions of self. Physical spaces and displays of self-expression emerged as important manifestations that helped the student begin to establish a greater sense of belonging, or "insiderness" with the school environment. The displays by the school, through images of the school mascot or displayed trophies, helped some students begin to construct an identity for who the students wanted to become. In case of the school mascot, the identity with the school was established at both an individual and collective level.

With identity being relational, the questions were about what aspects of the interior school environment are establishing a continuity or discontinuity with the student and, which of those relate to the experience of "insiderness" and how? Aspects of the interior ranged from rooms to details but overall, the physical element of walls emerged as an important element of the interior. From what they held to their condition, the walls established a continuity or discontinuity with how the students regarded themselves, who they may want to become and to a capacity, how they are valued. Whether a proud display of work or smear of old food, each marking was a confirmation or stood in

resistance to how they self-identified. By displaying school pride, the environment also held the capacity to begin to establish a collective identity of belonging with the individual. By reminding them that they are a part of something bigger than themselves, a sense of belonging, a sense of “insiderness” began to be established.

### Implications for Academics

Lewicka (2011) called for studies that emphasized the importance of self-continuity in development processes and seek to connect this to a stronger tie within the phenomenological lived experience. By looking at the process of students’ identity construction as it relates to the environment and utilizing the concept of “insiderness,” the study builds on *how* “insiderness” is constructed within the environment, and begins to contribute to a more solid foundation for a place-based theory that can be adopted by the architectural and design disciplines.

A theoretical implication of the study is that the built environment cannot be considered monolithic yet composed of a series of scales, each of which act and interact to varied capacities with the individual. No longer can spaces be blanketed with one term, one meaning and one understanding - the space(s) and its components must be considered as diverse as the individuals who interact with them. Although focused on the interior, the study’s implications extend to the varied system of scales that comprise our spatial environment. This inherent complex connection and communication between scales within the environment speak to the interconnectedness of ourselves as ‘placed beings’. Throughout the study there is an underlying understanding that lived experience and

identity development in place do not exist in isolation, yet within a broader cultural context.

In the interior design or architectural curriculums, the psychological, social and physical aspects of space and place are considered yet great emphasis is put on the ‘physical’ foundation of knowledge. This study begins to gain a greater understanding into these complex psychological aspects of space and how they relate or are manifested in the physical, both being and building. By using the holistic term “insideness,” a stronger foundation of knowledge and theory *within* design is constructed, based in the psychological, social and physical holistic experience of space. It is within the diverse interactions of varied facets of identity and varied scales in the environment that the process of “insideness” is established. There is no overarching way this is done, yet differs depending on how the individual establishes a sense of belonging or continuity with the environment.

Furthermore, “insideness” must no longer be considered a unidirectional establishment for an individual; instead it is a concept that also has the capacity to move outward into the establishment of community. While more study on the links between identity and the built environment needs to be done, these findings begin to probe more complex questions related to identity that academics and designers need to be asking.

### *Implications for Designers*

On a practical level, in understanding a little more about how the environment possibly interacts with facets of identity, designers, architects and planners can be more cognizant what questions or issues to address during programming and keep coming back

to throughout the design process. If one desires to create an environment that is inclusive and creates a sense of “insiderness” for the occupant, the process by which people attach themselves to the environment via their identity must be understood.

Immediate implications are the considerations of the power that each scale within the interior environment yields. The school environment cannot be thought of as a monolithic space; rather it is a series of connected scales, each of which communicate and are imbued with their own meaning: from the school environment to spaces within school, to spatial constructors within spaces and elements within the spatial constructors. The establishment of “insiderness” is mediated by mediums of various scales within the environment. The fact that ceilings and floors were not photographed with the same frequency as walls and more readily showcased ‘negative’ aspects of the environment introduces an interesting question of the elements within a space that attract the most attention. Why is it that walls were highlighted with more frequency than other planes as a primary identity definer? Perhaps it is because the walls are the same orientation of the human being and naturally seen at eye level, connecting more directly our physical bodies with the physical form. Similarly, limited elements were photographed (only doors and signs) . A possible explanation is that the students more readily perceived the elements that directly pertained to their own activity, interest or affect. Furthermore, interior forms can be sending messages that intertwine with broader issues of class, race, gender or other cultural values and designers must recognize the weight of these linkages and not regard these spaces, planes and elements as isolated features that are disconnected from this larger discourse.

### Implications for Education Personnel

The implications for teachers and school personnel is perhaps the most poignant, as much of the findings point to actions that the school should continue or change in order to create the most supportive environment for the students.

Teachers interact daily with all the students and are the ones that get to know the students best. By understanding how aspects of the classroom and school environment affect the students, they can more easily manipulate the aspects of the immediate environment to support the students. The teachers may choose what to display, where, who's work and for how long. If they are aware of the role that the displayed work or words play in the interaction with students' identities, they may be able to diurnally adjust these aspects when needed.

The biggest implication for school personnel is the issue of maintenance. As discussed, the cleanliness of the environment had large ramifications in the way that students felt, both about the school and themselves. By placing a high priority and allocating enough funds to support the maintenance of the environment, the school can begin to build a message of positive communication between built environment and student identity.

### Implications for Policymakers

As mentioned above, the issue of facility maintenance is one of extreme importance. It is not only the responsibility of the individual school to look after the quality of the school environment yet the responsibility of the policymakers to ensure that

there are laws and practices in place to maintain a baseline quality of all school environments.

### Further Research

Further research can build upon the understanding about the various ways in which identity and interior environment intersect within the context of the larger culture. Exploring this relationship and expanding our understanding of the ways in which students interact with their interior school environments will allow for a greater construction of holistic, supportive environments for *all* and contribute to the creation of an equal and just society. This line of work can be extended to other environments used by children—be those playgrounds, parks, museums, etc. A study of adults can yield similar or different results particularly as such studies delve into workplace environments, leisure environments, etc. In closing, a deeper understanding of how identity is informed by the environment can inform changes that can improve the lives of everyone.

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## Appendix A

### **Interview Questions**

By using the students' photographs and journals to guide the interview, the research objective and proposed questions in the literature review served as a guided focus for the overall objective and goal of the interview phase of data collection.

For each of the participant's photographs, a few key questions were prepared that sought to begin to uncover the ties between the photographs they took and the plural, dynamic and relational aspects of their identity. Rather than focus on more simplistic 'what' or yes/no questions, great emphasis was placed on delving into the 'why' of each photograph and corresponding feeling or thought to elicit understanding into the deeper connections to the students' identity and larger social context. Garnering understanding into why a student felt or thought something about a particular aspect of the environment allowed for greater insight into who the participants were and how aspects of the environment were interacting with their identities. Asking 'why' also allowed for the sharing and elicitation of the participant's perspective, which was key to beginning to understand how the school environment connected to larger, cultural and social factors.

If questions were answered with a yes/no type answer, asking 'why' was an immediate follow-up question. If this failed to produce a richer answer, comparison questioning was used, in which the participant was asked to reposition himself or herself in an environment. Examples of this include asking the students to reflect on things they have seen in other schools, if they think what they photographed was exclusive to their school or how they would feel or think if 'opposite' of their photograph existed. This proved helpful as it allowed the students to approach the question from a different perspective and formulate a richer response.

## **Appendix B**

### **Student Snapshots**

The following is a brief snapshot of the students, gathered via the personal interviews. Because this project deals directly with the students' identity, these summaries serve as a brief introduction to each participant.

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

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

Student C is an African-American, female, freshman student at North High School. She lives in the neighborhood and many of her family members have attended North High School. She plays golf for North and believes being outside and near sunlight

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

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

Student E is an African-American, male freshman at North High School. His favorite subjects are English, Spanish and radio and says that while he is a good student, he doesn't always like doing projects because it takes a long time. He describes himself as a happy person with a lot of friends. In his interview, he seemed happy, gave short answers and seemed to get easily distracted.

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