

Co-designing for Environmental Engagement: Moving inside people outside and moving outside people outdoors

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Abstract: We developed, with youth, a framework categorizing how people interact with nature. Our framework, *inside* versus *outside* versus *outdoors*, was developed using assets-based co-design principles with a small group of young men. Artifact analysis from co-design sessions found that our group readily applied this framework to community park infrastructure, community and individual behaviors observed within parks, and to support conversations involving participants' personal values and sociocultural contexts.

Language to frame how people approach nature

Educators focused on promoting caring environmental attitudes have often emphasized first connecting people with nature. Sobel (2004) talks about how people must have “an opportunity to bond with the natural world to learn to love it before being asked to heal its wounds” (p. 9). But what constitutes the natural world? Sweitzer, Davis, and Thompson (2013) located their place-based climate change educational efforts in National Parks, investigating how the love and care people have for these exemplary natural places might inspire climate change action. Certainly, national parks are part of the natural world, but many people don't have access to these kinds of exemplary natural spaces. Focusing only on this type of nature to foster connection may introduce inequity. Researchers have responded to this limited outlook by exploring how people connect to the nature found within places that are more urban and human constructed – which can also be deeply imbued with human emotion and meaning, and therefore hold power as contexts to support nature-connectedness (Lim & Barton, 2010).

This is not to say that the nature in human constructed places like playgrounds within urban parks is exactly like the nature in large, protected, undeveloped areas like national parks. However, these differences are not easily captured by current language. We might use terms like wild, uncultivated, undeveloped, untouched, or native to describe a national park, but these same terms could also be accurately used to describe the grassy median found between each direction of a large freeway. During work with youth, researchers and participants collectively adopted language that spoke to the different kinds of nature found in a freeway median versus a national park. Further, we found that by using a simple categorizing language of *inside*, *outside*, and *outdoors* we were able to talk more clearly about the different sociocultural values we and our families held in a neutral way, allowing for generative conversations about how different people connect, or do not connect, to nature.

Context, methods, and analysis

We worked with four youth, ages 16 to 19 and self-identifying as Black men, during a six-week, county-sponsored youth employment program. This program, located in a suburban area adjacent to a major metropolitan city, involved work and mentorship with municipal employees to support park sustainability and plant cultivation efforts. Twenty hours of each 40-hour week were led by the authors. Through assets-based co-design, which highlights naming and using participant's assets and capacities to build community capital (Wong-Villacres et al., 2021), we collectively explored how community members used different local parks and how Wi-Fi connectivity within those parks might support environmental education. As part of information gathering to support our program goal, in an early session we listened together to an interview, conducted by Jen White, of writer Baratunde Thurston (Harven & Remington, 2022). In that interview, Thurston and White discuss how the idea of “going outside” versus “going outdoors” differed for them as children. This struck our group very powerfully. We quickly adopted the categorizing language of *inside*, *outside*, and *outdoors*. In this poster we present our qualitative analysis, using structural and value coding (Saldaña, 2021) of 18 co-design artifacts that captured group reflection and brainstorming and journal entries written by the researchers at the conclusion of every session. We report how we collectively developed *inside*, *outside*, and *outdoors* as a framework to determine ways to promote opportunities to reflect on and situate the park users we observed, ourselves, and our families.

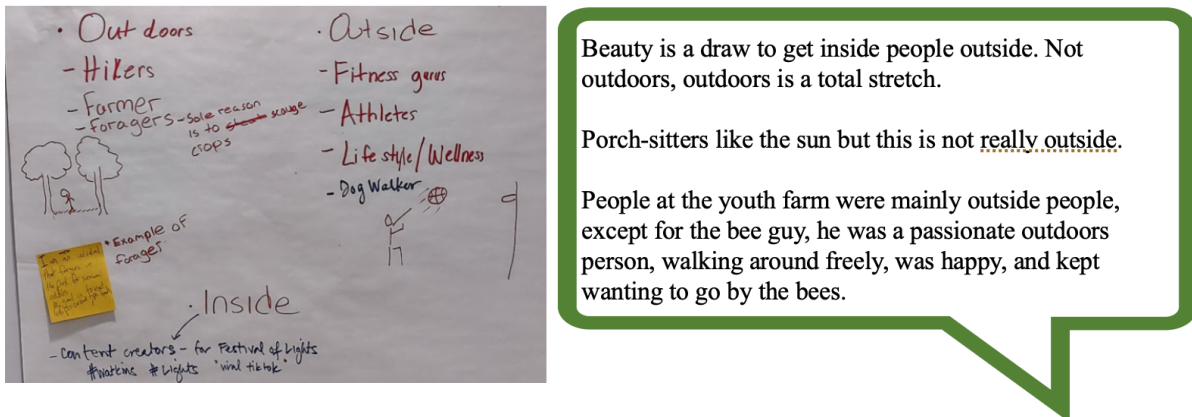
Findings: Three framework applications

Analysis indicated that our group used the framework of *inside*, *outside*, and *outdoors* in three primary ways. First, we used the language to frame a clearer understanding of community park infrastructure and community and individual behaviors observed within parks. In analyzing the design artifacts, we observed that our group

readily recognized how park areas fit within the framework in straightforward ways. For example, built installations such as playgrounds and basketball courts were “outside areas,” while unpaved nature trails were “outdoors.” As seen in Figure 1, participants found the framework useful to categorize people and activities that we had observed within various parks. Athletes, “fitness gurus,” people interested in lifestyle and wellness, and dog walkers as outside people, while hikers, farmers, and wild food foragers were outdoors people.

Figure 1

Co-developed ideas of how people might be categorized in the inside/outside/outdoors framework. On the left are captured ideas within a group brainstorming session. On the right are examples of some of the ways youth participants enacted these categorizations within group discussions.



We also observed the framework supported conversations about values. Journal entries recorded conversations in which inside people were discussed positively as content creators that might be enticed to bring their inside activities outside. Discussions about the value of being outside versus inside (fitness, mental health, and more connection to food), what might constitute each context, and what people might fear about being outside, such as being around insects, was also supported (see Figure 1). When discussing the challenges of shifting outside people (which many youths self-identified with) to outdoors people, a discussion of safety issues tied to race was sparked.

Perhaps most powerfully, we found the inside/outside/outdoors framework supported conversations involving participants’ personal sociocultural contexts. Analysis of researcher journals indicated that our group was able to use the framework to place themselves and their family members in the park space, and therefore in nature. For example, a researcher recorded how our youngest participant discussed their father as an inside person that only was outside to bring him to the park when he was young. This was the first time this participant shared anything about his family. As researchers who identify as older, non-black woman (one of us is White and one of us is Asian American) we found this categorizing language, supported through an asset-focused design approach that allowed participants to challenge beliefs about themselves and appreciate their strengths, broadened conversations and opened space to talk about values across socio-cultural backgrounds.

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