

Creating Mindful Spaces: Educational Practices for Interior Design

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At the beginning of the day, in the cool of the early morning, as light and color are beginning to come back into the world, bring attention to the quality of inner space, the space in this room and the space in the world around us. Developing that attention, we notice the space that's always here, the space around things, the space within things. This helps us to recollect, to awaken to the inner space, the space of our minds which receives and contains, which encompasses all thoughts, feelings, perceptions, moods (Amaro, 2020, p. 543).

There have been numerous suggestions for the definition of mindfulness across disciplinary fields (Alvear et al., 2022). To define mindfulness, Gethin (2011) reminds us of the original translation of the Buddhist term *sati*, which “plays on aspects of remembering, recalling, reminding, and presence of mind” (p. 275). Simply, mindfulness is based on present-centered attention-awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). By avoiding automatic behavior patterns, one can draw novel distinctions from the immediate experience, viewing the present from various perspectives (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Bishop et al. (2004) proposed an operational definition with two components: first, “the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained in the immediate experience,” thus focusing on the present, and second, the orientation of the mind, which is “characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (p. 232), encompassing non-judgment. A recent study by Alvear et al. (2022) revealed that mindfulness as attention/awareness and as a non-evaluative attitude were the most common definitions provided by meditation practitioners.

We can cultivate mindfulness either via *formal meditation*, within an allocated timeframe, or through *informal mindfulness practices* that are embedded within everyday life activities, which can take place anytime, anywhere (Nhat Hanh, 1987, 1993; Rinpoche & Swanson, 2007; Sucitto, 2015). While practicing mindfulness, our attention may be objectless or it may rest on an object in the present moment. This could involve repeating a certain word, breathing, bodily postures, senses, feelings, or a mental image created through visualization (Rinpoche & Swanson, 2007; Sucitto, 2015).

Mindfulness, Inclusivity, and Experiential Learning in Design Education

There is an ongoing increase in mindfulness applications in education (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc, 2016) and explorations of how mindfulness can support learning (Anālayo, 2022; Ergas, 2019). Accordingly, design educators have centered on mindfulness as a distinct potential form of inquiry. For example, Christian (2018) studied mindfulness within the context of an interior design studio. After being exposed to exercises such as free-writing and short breathing meditation during class, students designed spaces that offer mindfulness practices for users in a hospice setting. After conducting “mindfulness-based design practice” workshops, Andrahennadi (2019) found that students cultivated mental qualities such as acceptance, compassion, and a deeper sense of connectedness. Altay (2021) adopted informal mindfulness methods to expand the bodily and multi-sensory awareness of everyday public interiors, while Altay and Porter (2021) proposed that formal and informal mindfulness practices in design education can encourage curiosity and creativity, enhance embodied and spatial awareness, and open up a space for self-compassion as well as empathy for others. Rojas et al. (2015) also discovered that mindfulness practices could strengthen empathic relationships by supporting a designer’s inner awareness, which is essential for inclusive design. Lim et al. (2021) expanded the notion of inclusive design that goes beyond the physical necessities (barrier-free and accessibility components) to account for psychosocial inclusivity, where interior designers have a significant role and responsibility (Paron, 2020; Pérez Liebergesell et al., 2021; Tauke & Smith, 2020).

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Incorporating mindfulness practices in interior design can support educational quality and standards in the domains pertaining to human-centered design applications as well as design process creativity (Council for Interior Design Accreditation, 2022). As acknowledged in the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) (2022) Declaration, design professionals should not only offer environments that ensure the quality of life for diverse people but also seek ways to encourage discovery and imagination, as well as enhance a sense of presence. Further, Danko (2003) stated that education should nurture “personal understanding and empathy which requires individuals to develop both an inward personal consciousness and an outward social-awareness of their role in the world” (p. 82). Opening our perspectives inwardly and outwardly may allow us to reflect on our own practices of inclusion/exclusion, suggested both within interior design (Pérez Liebergesell et al., 2021; Tauke & Smith, 2020) and mindfulness practices (Sucitto, 2018).

Many pedagogical programs in art and design are including inclusive and “direct present moment experiences” as an integral part of instruction (Altay, 2017; Altay et al., 2016; Beisi, 2006; van Kampen, 2019; Yüksel & Uyaroglu, 2021) based on experiential learning theory (ELT), initially proposed by Kolb (1984). The experiential learning cycle (ELC) frames learning through four modes: experiencing (concrete experience); reflecting on the experience to make meaning from it (reflective observation); analyzing what is reflected through thinking (abstract conceptualization); and taking action (active experimentation).

Recently, Stock and Kolb (2017) pointed out the significance of mindfulness in ELT, “Opening oneself to *experiencing the present moment* fully through all of one’s senses and internal feelings sparks *reflection* about all of the perspectives and paradoxes inherent in one’s situation. This reflection leads to *conceptualization* and ultimately in *action* on one’s experience” (p. 6, emphasis added). Mindfulness techniques can support a person’s experiential learning by guiding their own learning via nonjudgmental awareness and reflective observation (Yaganeh & Kolb, 2009). Focusing on learning in organizations, Yaganeh and Kolb suggest, “We encourage others to develop innovative ways to cultivate deliberate experiential learning in organizations and to share the results through articles and presentations so that one day it becomes the norm” (p. 18).

Despite ongoing and growing conversations in design education about mindful practices and their value, Andrahennadi (2019) notes, “there is a significant lack of contemplative mindfulness-based methods within the higher design education sector. . .” (p. 887). Moreover, Christian (2018) asserts, “evidence supports that mindfulness practices in higher education can reduce stress while increasing focus and creativity; however, connections with design are less established” (p. 29). How then can we adapt mindful ELT practices to interior design education which offer embodied awareness, introspection, inclusivity, and development of empathy and connection?

Educational Practices with Mindfulness

My interest in mindfulness began 30-years ago when I first encountered “space” in architectural design education along with awareness practices. Here, I will share three activities, which foreground mindful experiential learning incorporating informal mindfulness practices. These activities, applied within an undergraduate, interior design curriculum at Bilkent University in the Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design, emerged through the dynamics of the temporal context of learning, developed and re-tailored for each group of students’ motivation and course structure, and can be “tried out” in other educational contexts (Figure 1).

Visual Treasure Hunt Activity

When reality is experienced in its nature of ultimate perfection, the almond tree that may be in your front yard reveals its nature in perfect wholeness. The almond tree is itself the truth, the reality, your own self. Of all the people who have passed your yard, how many have really seen the almond tree (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p. 58)?

One of the short and effective activities to bring first- and second-year students to the present moment is introduced in the Human Factors/Ergonomics course after a couple of weeks into the semester. In “Did You Notice?,” students observe the classroom and write on post-it-notes aspects of the environment they had not seen before. After 5 minutes, the notes are gathered and posted on the walls and read out loud. This activity recognizes everyone’s perspective, but also serves as a reminder to momentarily observe the environment and experience the ‘now’ as suggested in the ELC by Yaganeh and Kolb (2009). The post-it-notes remain on the wall throughout the semester to remind the class and others about the mindfulness practice of acceptance (i.e., post-it-wall).

An extended version of this activity, carried out for first-year students as they begin their spring semester basic design studio—a joint course taken by students from the three departments of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design, Architecture, and Landscape Architecture and Urban Design—is the “Visual Treasure Hunt.” This activity can be a day-long

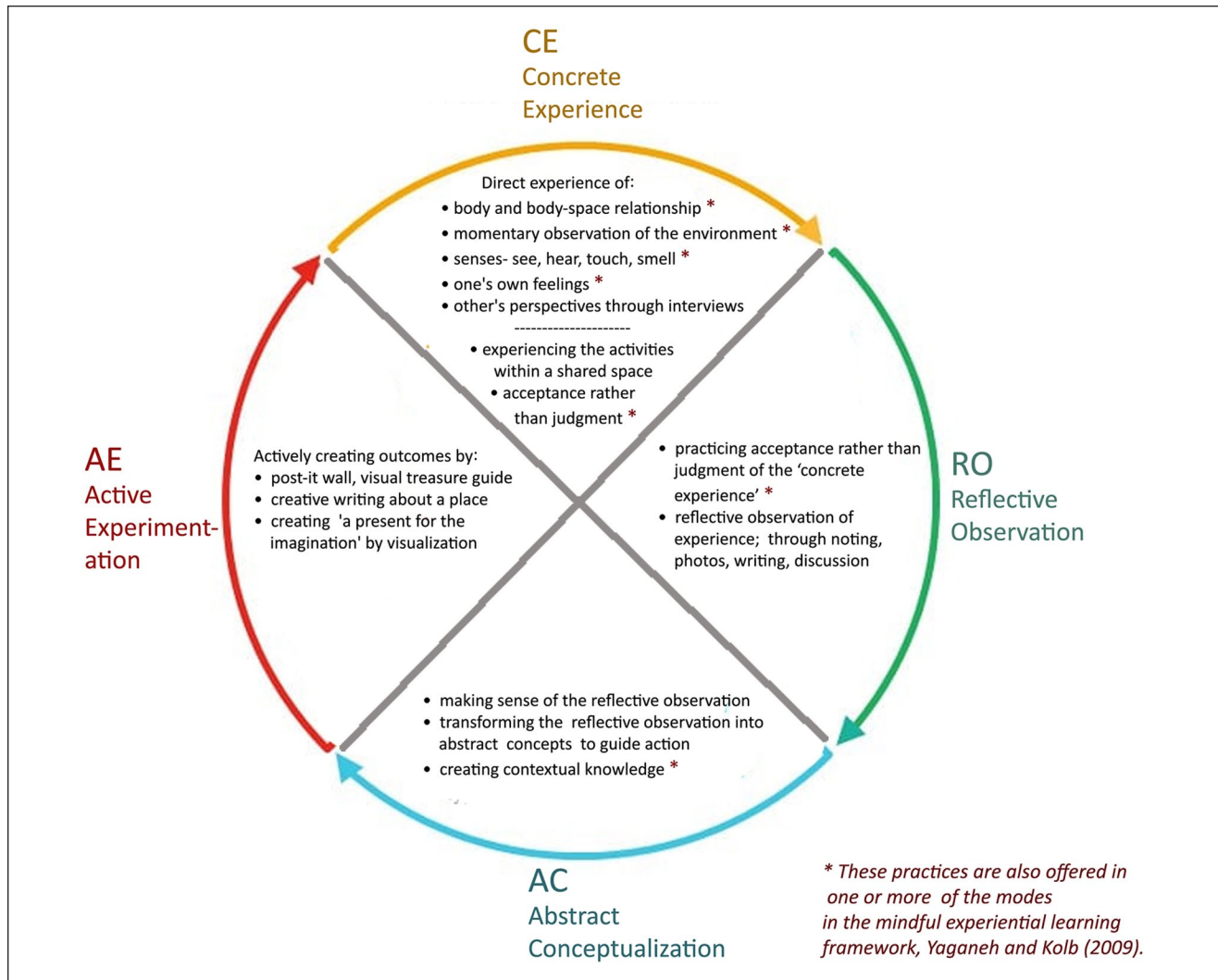


Figure 1. Mindful ELC of educational activities in interior design. Summarizes the practices/activities described as they correspond to the different modes of learning in the ELC.
ELC = experiential learning cycle.

workshop or students may conduct the first part of the exercise out of studio hours, ending with a joint discussion session. In the brief, students are initially asked to prepare a guide that reveals visual treasures hidden and unnoticed on campus through sketches and photographs as experienced through movement in space. Afterwards, these treasures are located on a campus map forming a collective “visual treasure guide.” With the contribution of all the students’ momentary observations formed through concrete experience, the map provides a guide for everyone to actively experiment with the campus, taking into consideration the students’ unique perspectives (Figure 2).

Writing About a Place Activity

When I design a building, I frequently find myself sinking into old, half-forgotten memories, and then I try to recollect what the remembered architectural situation was really like, what it had meant to me at the time, and I try to think how it could help me to revive that vibrant atmosphere pervaded by the simple presence of things in which everything had its own specific place and form (Zumthor, 1998, p. 10).

The captivating place descriptions of the everyday by Zumthor (1998), read and discussed within an earlier course session, gave the inspiration for “Writing About a Place.” Starting out as a voluntary activity, third- and fourth-year students in an elective course (Concept Formation and Development in the Design Process, which delves deeply into the initial stages of

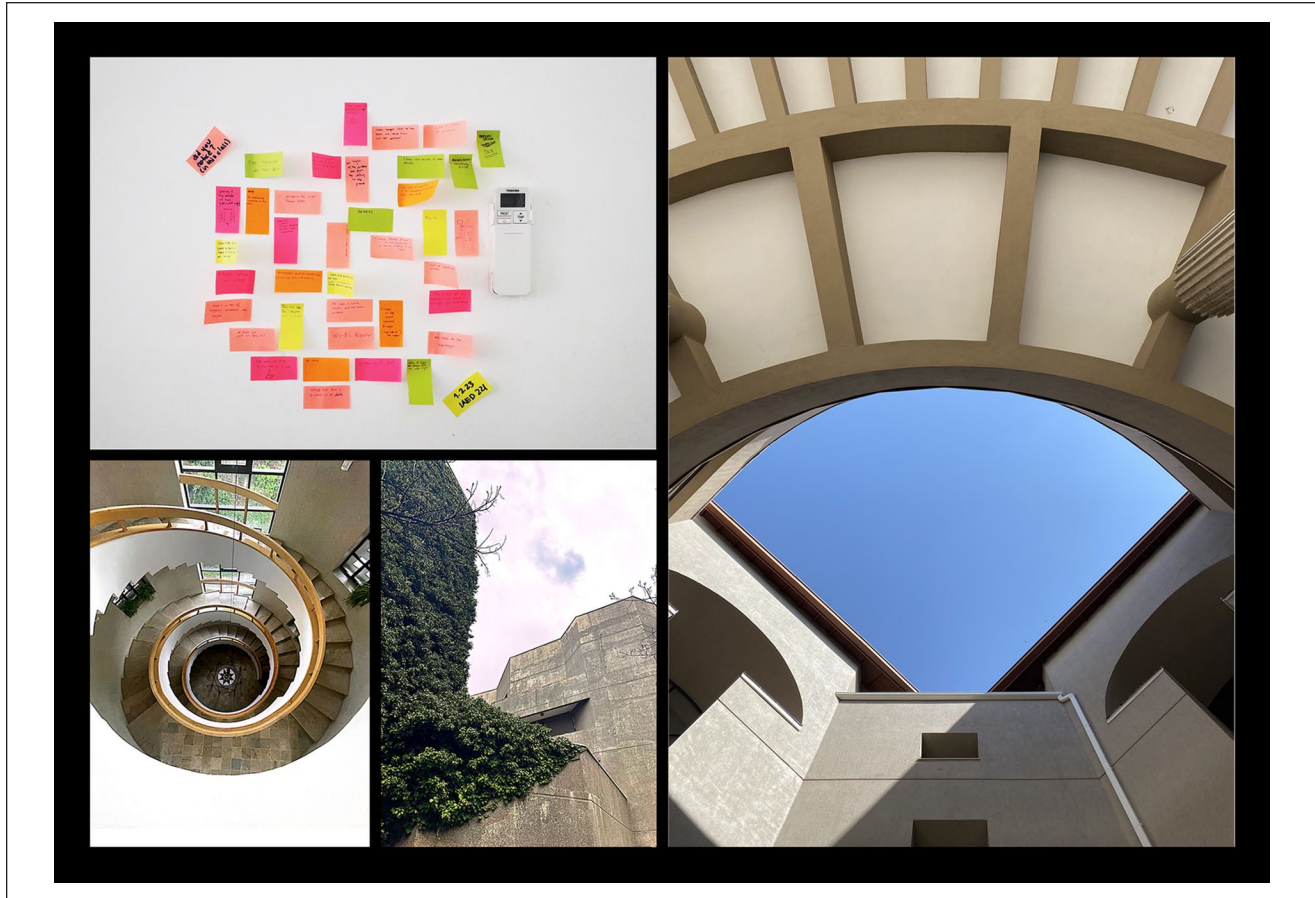


Figure 2. Did You Notice? and Visual Treasure Hunt. Students share features they noticed in the classroom on post-it-notes (top left, photo by author); students share visual treasures they encountered in Bilkent University campus through photos (bottom left and middle, Ö.T. Cenk, bottom right, G. Şen).

design) were encouraged to write about a place—any place—that influenced them in some way, out of class time, and share their essays the following week.

Exploring new ways of expressing space- with the inclusion of changing multi-sensory experiences, personal memories, and meanings was the goal. The shortened extract below is a third-year student remembering a cafe where she spent her birthday:

I can still remember it vividly. It looks as if a crazy person went shopping in a flea market and bought everything that was at least a bit odd. I celebrated my birthday here, and I don't think they sang me happy birthday, which is always a plus. When you walk in, you don't know how big or small this place is. Everything is tangled, and there is no order in this tiny world. It's as if I'm Alice and I'm in wonderland. . . I was with my family, I had ice cream, and I was happy. I even kept the spoon, pathetic. I believe food is always a part of a space that elevates the experience. There is taste and smell that walks hand in hand with the visuals of this space. I can still remember everything vividly because of these things. My family. The food. The menu. The chairs. I remember the laughter and the intimate conversations of the people sitting next to me. Eating or talking, you always catch another item that you hadn't noticed before. Everything is an unplanned happy occurrence (B. Karan).

With the positive outcome of writing about memories and space, the next year, I invited the above student to read her story to the new class. Afterward, the voluntary participants increased twofold. Below is a fourth-year student describing her grandmother's house (shortened):

To get there, we need to get up and leave early on Sundays. It is kind of a family routine. When we get there, we are already tired of the journey itself, the sun hitting the car window, and having more people than the capacity of the car. Still, we know it is a nice journey because an entrance covered with ivy greets us. It hides birds inside, of which we are not sure but whose voices we hear. . . As we walk down through the sloppy stairs full of bags in our hand, the ramp surrounded by greenery invites us downstairs. . . When we turn

around the corner, we always find grandmother waiting for us in her seat. We leave our bags on the table, pick a berry from the tree, and drink cold spring water from the tap in the corner. It is a kind of routine that is recommended by the place itself. We sit on the old and dusty but comfortable seat, hear the sound of the fruits falling on our overhang, and breathe in the fresh air. We can experience the blue marble pool we fell into as a child, the old concrete that wounded our knees every time we fell, the sun leaking from the yellow broken canopy. . . (M. İlkyaz).

In this activity, the past spatial experience is brought into the present moment through reflection (reflective observation from the ELC) and active experimentation with writing. Moreover, we expanded our empathic understanding by listening to each other's recollections in the classroom's shared space.

A Present for the Imagination Activity

A powerful architectural experience eliminates noise and turns our consciousness to ourselves, to our very being. In an impressive space, we hear only our own heartbeat. The innate silence of an experience of architecture results from the fact that it focuses our attention on our own experience: I find myself listening to my own being (Pallasmaa, 2015, p. 29).

This activity, which also took place in the elective course mentioned above, emerged out of the question: "What is the quality of spaces where we feel whole, we feel at home, not needing to do anything else?" Accordingly, the aim was to offer a present (i.e., a gift) for the human imagination, such that one could feel "it is enough to just be here," thereby contemplating two characteristics of mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004): attention and awareness of the present moment and acceptance and contentment rather than judgment. Moreover, the double meaning of "present" encouraged students to be mindful while viewing design as an offering or gift to oneself and others. Overall, the task duration was three weeks. While the introduction, one critic session, and sharing of gifts took place within studio hours, students conducted all other activities outside the studio.

First, students explored their sense of presence and contentment in their everyday lives. A roadmap for this phase was provided through the following brief: Students were encouraged to be watchful of their predominant sensory experiences (what is seen, felt, touched, heard, etc.), their body movement (whether standing, sitting, moving, laying down, peeking below) as well as their feelings in spaces. This gave them a chance to reflectively observe their mind states during and after spatial encounters which they recorded through their process work. As one fourth-year student wrote:

I lay down on the grass area under the dorms at the campus last week. I felt the soil underneath and looked at the blue sky above. It's been months since I haven't experienced this. I took deep breaths and realized once more that I am "alive," and we are too busy with the responsibilities of city life, and we are forgetting our true nature (D. Zengin).

Students interviewed family members and friends about where they felt most present. They also referred to songs, films, artwork, etc. for inspiration. Following a joint critique session to collectively reflect on the design progress, students transformed their inquiries into mindful spaces submitted with their process reflections (Figure 3). Visualization was an appropriate output, allowing freedom in imagination without the real-life constraints related to gravity, construction, budget, etc.

After the completion of the exercise and course, students' perceptions ($n=29$) of their learning experience were investigated via an online questionnaire developed by the author.¹ Student responses to the open-ended questions highlight the diverse modes of learning. Some students expressed an appreciation of the present moment, "I look at objects for a secret experience. I investigate an exciting angle with changing lights, movement, etc." Others noted heightened bodily and sensory awareness, "Before, I was mostly focusing on one perspective, mostly standing. But I have realized that those actions like looking above, down, and observing the area with all the senses totally guide and affect my design project." Many students mentioned their shift of focus to the memories, emotions, moods of their own or others, "I understood better which aspects of the space gave you which feelings. For example, with this exercise, I started to realize that I match happiness with feeling, touching, and seeing natural elements."

Students enhanced their reflective capacities during the design process, "In this exercise, we followed our design choices step by step, which made me realize that every single detail I made through the design has a reference point, in other words, cause and effect." One student transferred the skill of listening to the situation's talkback (Schön, 1984) to the design studio environment, "For the early stages of the design (*in the studio*), whenever I was stuck with my conceptual ideas, I would take a step back and use the knowledge I gathered, and then move on."

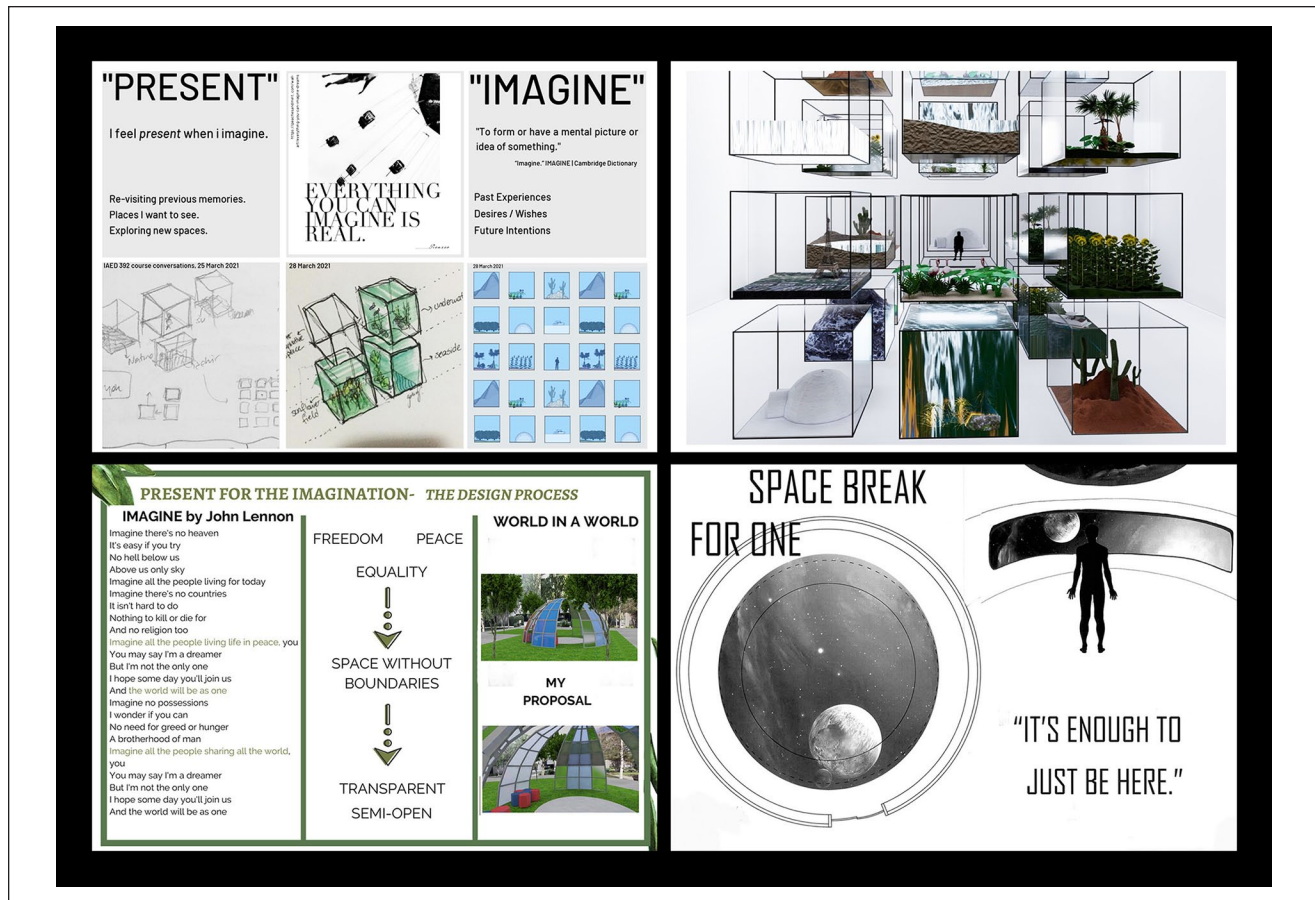


Figure 3. A Present for the Imagination. The memories of the past and dreams of the future are experienced in the present (top, G. Düzgün); a public inclusive urban space is offered, inspired by song lyrics Imagine (bottom left, S. Ekincioglu); a place of solitude is offered where one can view the earth from outer space (D. Külünkoğlu, bottom right).

A pronounced positive quality of the exercise was the lack of limitations, constraints, and restrictions, fostering students' creative potential, "Being free while designing the space was so impressive and relaxing for me. Drawing an imaginary space was most valuable for me, without depending on realistic problems." Students also valued the exchange of gifts at the final stage, "Everybody has 'this here is enough' moments, but when you somehow express it and share it with others, in my opinion, then it is truly great, and a crucial part of our community. I can say it is innately rewarding."

Conclusion

As we navigate through the different domains in our lives, our capacity of awareness here and now with curiosity and without any judgment as to what we experience (Alvear et al., 2022), can allow the creation of mindful spaces. In this respect, mindful experiential learning can offer a skillful means for cultivating inclusivity both internally (within our minds) and externally (as we design spaces). Only when "all" is held within our heart/mind-space, can design-for-all be truly possible.

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Ethics Approval

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Informed Consent

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Note

1. The questionnaire, developed by the author, consisted of nine questions. Three 5-point scaled questions asked the degree of effectiveness of the activity with regards to spatial awareness, creativity, and approach to the design process. Three follow-up, open-ended questions explored how the exercise enhanced the above qualities, if their answer was positive. The next question asked what was most valuable and useful in the exercise, whereas the last two questioned the challenges/limitations and suggestions for improvement. The University Ethics Committee approved this research.

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