

Access, Participation, and Belonging in Sacred Spaces

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Keywords: Architecture, Spirituality, Religion, Faith, Equity, Inclusion, and Disability

Introduction

Sacred spaces are often described as places of welcome and belonging, although belonging may not be experienced equally. Barriers can be found in entrances, seating, washrooms, gathering areas, wayfinding, and the spatial organization of worship and ritual. They can also be seen through sound, lighting, communication, language, social expectations, gendered spatial arrangements, cultural traditions, and assumptions about how bodies and minds should move, perceive, communicate, and participate. This discussion circle moves beyond ongoing discussions about code compliance and universal design features. Its primary focus is on the less visible ways that religious practices and cultural norms influence accessibility, participation, and belonging.

Scope

The circle focuses on spaces used by religious communities for worship, ritual, learning, gathering, and care. It does not assume that every person should experience belonging in every practice or that inclusion requires removing the ritual or religious and cultural identity of a sacred space. Some religious traditions organize worship by gender, role, initiation, or degrees of sacrality. These arrangements raise important questions rather than simple objections: accessibility must be considered within the meaning and practices of religious tradition, while still asking whether worshippers with accessibility needs, visitors, and community members have equitable opportunities to enter, understand, participate, contribute, and exercise choice. In this discussion, belonging does not mean unrestricted access to every place or act of worship. It refers to being recognized as a valued member or guest whose accessibility needs are considered, recognized and meaningfully included in the community's practices and decisions.

Discussion Approach

The session will begin with a brief guided grounding exercise centred on attention, position, and relationship to space. Participants will be invited to notice how sound, light, movement, language, spatial boundaries, and social cues shape their own sense of orientation and welcome. The exercise will not ask anyone to simulate a disability or claim an experience they do not have. Instead it will establish reflective conditions for listening, recognizing the limits of imagination, and distinguishing personal assumptions from knowledge gained through lived experience. Participants with relevant lived experiences may share what they choose; no one will be expected to disclose a disability, identity, or exclusionary experience.

The session will then move forward to participants examining short spatial and relational scenarios involving worship, ritual, gathering, and community participation. A guided group discussion will consider how a single environment can facilitate participation for some people while excluding others, and how architectural decisions interact with community practices. The discussion will recognize the value of lived experience and encourage participants to listen to people with accessibility needs rather than make assumptions on their behalf. When participants do not have direct experience, they will be encouraged to ask more informed questions, reflect on

their assumptions, and consider whose knowledge and involvement should guide future design decisions and improvements.

Guiding Questions

- What becomes visible when accessibility is understood not only as compliance with physical design standards, but through embodied experiences of entering, moving through, participating in, and belonging within a sacred space?
- How do sound, lighting, signage, language, gendered or ritual arrangements, social attitudes, and expectations of behaviour affect participation?
- When religious boundaries or practices shape who may enter or participate, how can communities distinguish meaningful tradition from avoidable exclusion?
- Whose experience and authority should inform decisions about access?
- How can sacred spaces support respect, choice, connection, meaningful contribution, and continued participation beyond simply providing physical access?

Potential Contribution

The circle positions accessibility as an ongoing relational practice shaped by buildings, communities, and traditions. It does not offer a universal checklist for sacred spaces. Rather it invites a more careful account of how physical, sensory, informational, cultural, social, and spiritual conditions combine to enable or constrain participation. By recognizing embodied and lived experience while respecting the specificity of religious traditions, the conversation seeks to identify more responsible ways to ask who is welcomed, who can participate on equitable terms, and who can experience genuine belonging.