

Building a Field by Bringing Theory to Practice:

M²'s “The Architecture of Immersive Experiences”

a Jim Joseph Foundation Case Study

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With this visually striking and intriguing invitation, 14 North American and Israeli Jewish educators embarked upon a five-day professional development experience with M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. The “evite” arrived in their inboxes three days before their arrival in New York, immediately conveying both welcome and mystery. At the appointed day and time, participants and facilitators gathered around the rose sculpture in Zuccotti Park in lower

Manhattan. After ferrying across the river to Brooklyn, participants worked alone and in groups to complete an “experiential scavenger hunt” of finding specific landmarks and locations, and taking in and capturing their surroundings through brief writings, sketches, or focused contemplation. The journey concluded at a large warehouse turned artist’s studio in Red Hook. After navigating through the large industrial space to reach the back, the travelers discovered a beautifully set table where they enjoyed a festive dinner and overview of the themes that would unfold over the next four days during “The Architecture of Immersive Experiences.”

Bringing Theory to Practice - The Work of M²

Since its launch in 2016, M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education has worked to advance, professionalize, and elevate the field of experiential Jewish education. The website’s homepage explains the meaning of “M²” and how it embodies the philosophy and mission of the organization:

M² represents Machshava and Ma’aseh—Intention and Action—two values whose interplay is at the core of Jewish life. At M² we believe that these values are the foundations of experiential Jewish education. M² is also Melechet Machshevet (Deliberate Craft), an idea that guided the building of the Mishkan (the tabernacle).¹

¹ M² website. <https://ieje.org/>

Many of M²'s signature programs bring cohorts of professionals together for many months to explore such concepts, the best known being their Senior Educators Cohort. In 2018, M² received funding from the Jim Joseph Foundation to create professional development around “deep dives” into specific conceptual frameworks. The first was a Relational Learning Circle, for educators seeking to put relationship-building at the center of their work. After seeing this program’s success at engaging educators in bringing theory to their practice, M² decided to develop a Circle that would explore the application of other conceptual frameworks to Jewish education, as well as reach educators who might not have the ability to commit to a year-long program.

The Design of Immersive Experiences Circle consists of three five-day seminars in March, May, and September 2019, offered as stand-alone experiences or in combination. Each draws upon a different field of knowledge to explore how educators can create and implement powerful immersive experiences, which M² defines as a “deliberately crafted educational experience where participants leave their home environment for a period lasting from two days to two months.” As Shuki Taylor, M²'s Founder and CEO, explained in an interview, applying theoretical frameworks to immersive experiences is particularly valuable because people generally believe they know what an immersive experience is and how to create one. Exposure to an unexpected theoretical lens is a powerful way to help people realize that there may in fact be more they can learn:

Before we started thinking about the content for this entire Circle, we met with a number of organizations who run immersive experiences. And by and large the feedback was, “We know what we’re doing, we do it well, it’s working.” There wasn’t really a strong sense of, we really need x, y, or z. However, as we dug deeper, we realized the way people were doing immersive experiences was always very, very specific to the organization. It doesn’t have that broader conceptual approach that helps people figure out, why do certain things work, how do we make them better? So we said, let’s start digging into this and started to research, what is immersion and what does it look like?

M² identified three conceptual frameworks around which to build the three Seminars:

1. **Narrative Design for Immersive Experiences** explores how concepts from literature and storytelling can be used to shape the content and flow of immersive experiences;
2. **Facilitating Meaning Making** uses insights from psychology, semiotics, and neurology to understand how participants interpret and create meaning from their experiences; and
3. **The Architecture of Immersive Experiences** looks to architecture and anthropology to show how immersive experiences can be structured to maximize their impact on participants (as explained in more detail in the section below).

Through each experience, M² seeks to expose educators to unfamiliar theories and concepts in order to demonstrate the range of disciplines that can enrich the field of education through their application to pedagogy (immersive experiences being only one area in which this is possible).

After selecting the conceptual framework for each seminar, M² embarked on an extensive research phase of six to nine months to ground the experience in a thorough understanding of both the theories to be explored and current practice in the field. The research phase for The Architecture of Immersive Experiences involved a literature review; an architectural site visit, presentation, and consultation; and interviews with educators who create immersive experiences to understand how M² might enhance their work and identify and address critical gaps in the field. The process culminated in a Concept Paper—a piece composed specifically to guide the design of the program—that defined and illustrated relevant ideas from anthropology and architecture and explained how they could be translated into effective educational practices.

Anthropology and Architecture

The Concept Paper first explores anthropological concepts around “rites of passage,” which have a clear applicability to immersive experiences. Many anthropologists have observed a common three-stage process by which personal growth or transformation takes place: separation from one’s natural setting, a period of “liminality” when one is moving from one stage to the next, and reintegration into daily life imbued with new knowledge and/or status. Stephen Markowitz, M²’s Senior Director of Research, explains why the liminal stage in particular is a valuable lens for understanding the “unique transformative power” of immersive experiences:

These liminal periods are a time when new ideas can be explored and old symbols reinterpreted and they have a sense of totality to them where new realities can be experienced on a variety of levels (cognitive, emotional, spiritual, bodily)... It is the task of separation to set up the potential of the liminal period and it is through the element of reintegration that it is translated back into the participant’s normative setting where its real value can be noticed and evaluated.

Having established the potential of liminality to deepen the impact of an immersive experience, M² professionals next wondered, what are some specific elements that enhance liminality by emphasizing how participants’ temporary settings contrast with those of their daily professional lives? Knowing that they wished to focus this particular seminar on “design”—how to structure the flow and stages of an immersive experience—led to architecture as a rich source of concepts and metaphors. The way we encounter and progress through physical spaces—such as cities and the buildings within them—can illuminate how we encounter and progress through time and experiences as well. After a number of guided tours with Tel Aviv-based architect Abraham Silver (who would also serve as Seminar faculty), Stephen Markowitz, Shuki Taylor, and Chief Program Officer Kiva Rabinsky identified the four key concepts that they wanted the Seminar participants to viscerally experience and observe, reflect upon, and ultimately understand how to incorporate into the design of their own programs (the definitions below are drawn from Seminar program materials):

- **Approach** draws people into an immersive experience. Once learners have been separated from their normative setting, the approach entices them to enter and further explore liminal spaces.
- **Conceal and Reveal** is a catalyst to elicit curiosity and build momentum. Concealment preserves the opportunity for surprise when the revelation occurs.
- **Positive Tension** is the intentional placement of an incongruous element into a setting that makes it stand out. Positive tension creates a disruption, stimulating sharp responses among learners.
- **Language and Materials** are the ingredients of design that contribute to the creation of particular cultures and atmospheres. The “music” of the experience, they may include physical materials and resources, rituals, setup, and internal language that creates or sets up the experience.

On the Town

Reflecting again on the Seminar’s opening afternoon and evening, the ways in which the above four concepts were incorporated into the day’s planning become clear. The emailed invitation began the process of **approach** even before the event started, priming participants to be intrigued, captivated, and eager to discover how the experience would unfold. The participants’ “scavenger hunt” was directed through booklets filled with paper “doors” that opened to **reveal** their next steps, culminating in dinner in a setting that was **concealed** until the very end. The initial meeting location contained a striking example of **positive tension**, with a 26-foot sculpture of a rose rising in the center of an urban park. As an article linked to by the invitation explains, “The rose is meant to both challenge the inorganic textures of Lower Manhattan and compliment the slender sky-reaching structures that define the neighborhood.”² Permeating all is the deliberate and thoughtful attention to **language and materials** by facilitator Mollie Andron (a graduate of the M² Senior Educators Cohort), from the lovely imagery and welcoming words of the invitation to the elegant dinner that concluded the day.

The following two days delved into the heart of the concepts and programming through architectural tours through Manhattan led by Abraham Silver, followed by evening debriefs with Shuki Taylor and Mollie Andron in which the architectural metaphors were unpacked and applied to educational experiences. A few examples follow of what participants saw and discussed as they traversed the city.

² <https://newyorkyimby.com/2018/09/isa-genzkens-rose-iii-debuts-in-zuccotti-park-in-lower-manhattan.html>

The Vessel at Hudson Yards, a walk-through sculpture that both entices and confuses as one approaches, unsure of how to enter:



A midtown building with a striking “cut-out” shape, which prompted reflections on how programs and experiences can be improved by what is left out as much as what is put in:



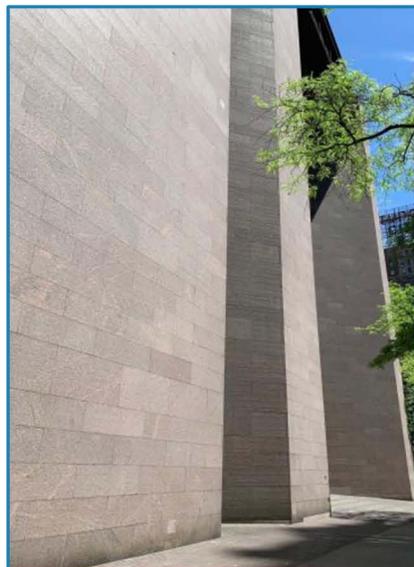
A view of Grand Central Station with the MetLife building rising behind.

Most participants initially saw only the clashing style of these two iconic buildings—finding the view of the modernist skyscraper a detraction from Grand Central’s elegant sculptures—until one pointed out that the panes of the station’s arched windows are almost exactly replicated in the rectangular geometry of the MetLife building’s façade. Suddenly the contrast became an example of positive tension, and an opportunity to consider how seemingly disparate objects or experiences can become more complex and nuanced as a result of their pairing:

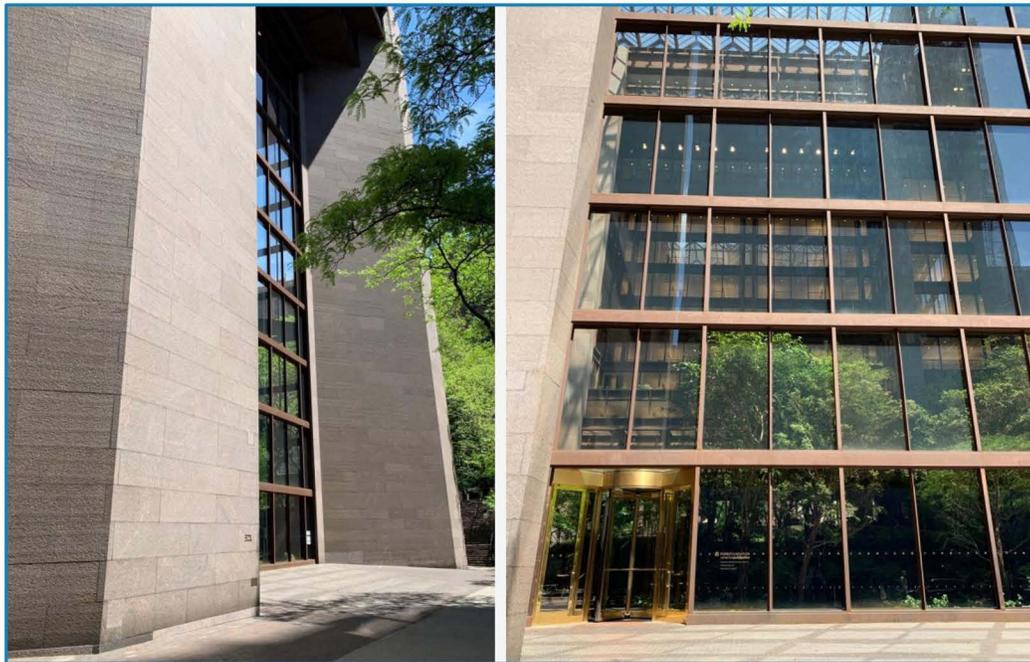


Finally, an example of “conceal and reveal” that left the group in awe.

Walking east on 42nd Street between 2nd and 1st Avenues, one comes upon a building that looms on the right like an impenetrable fortress:



Continue down the street and a **windowed wall** slowly comes into view, which can only fully be seen when standing directly in front of the building:



Only upon entry into the building (**the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice**) however, is the beauty contained within fully revealed:



Reflection, Understanding, and Application

Having absorbed the four architectural concepts through verbal descriptions, slideshow presentations of structures from around the world, and encountering examples throughout the Manhattan cityscape, seminar participants then worked to translate these ideas to education generally and immersive experiences in particular. After the tours on Monday and Tuesday, the facilitators led the group in unpacking the concepts together to understand how “approach,” “conceal and reveal,” “positive tension,” and “language and materials” can be used to shape the flow of immersive experiences and create and deepen the sense of liminality that makes such experiences so powerful. The group brainstormed examples they had either experienced or could envision: intentional use of time on bus rides to build curiosity and excitement about what is to come (approach and conceal and reveal); a surprise night hike or using unexpected tunes for morning prayers (positive tension); “branding” imagery for a program that is used everywhere from nametags to schedules to take-home swag (language and materials).

During the final two days, participants took their meaning making a step further through “Lab sessions.” Working in small groups, each participant presented a specific immersive experience they would be planning in the coming months and brainstormed with their colleagues how they might use one or two of the core concepts in the program design. Then, when the full group reconvened, people reported on how the exercise had sharpened their understanding of the concepts, the new ideas they had generated, and what they felt needed further clarification. Thus, the Labs fulfilled multiple learning goals by allowing participants to brainstorm ideas for their own programs, learn about and contribute to the work of their peers, and continue as a group to expand and refine their understanding of the Seminar’s theoretical frameworks.

Most of the participants interviewed cited this Lab time as being among the most valuable elements of the Seminar, allowing them to tap the wisdom of their peers, connect through shared professional experiences and challenges, and better understand how to turn abstract concepts into concrete practices:

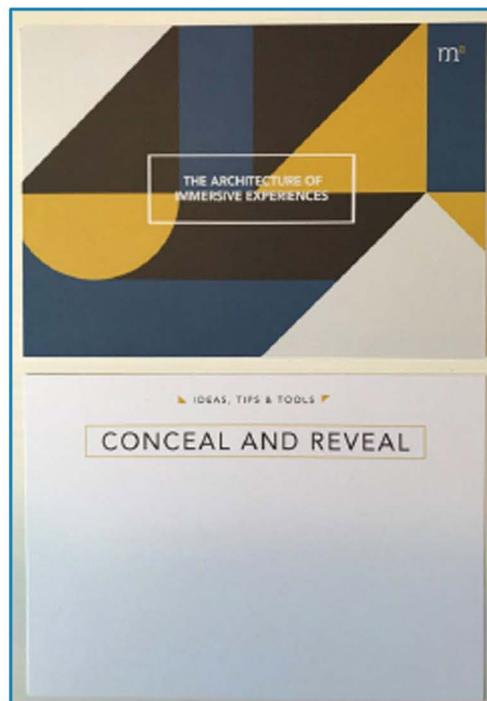
The small group discussions were just what I was looking for and waiting for as a chance to bring things down to the level of concrete. The level of, this is our work, this is what we’re doing, so let’s share tips and best practices and brainstorm for the actual problems and issues that we’re running into and things that we want to work on with our programs.

The Labs were perhaps the most valuable part. Just having access to a whole group of other professionals [who design immersive experiences] and being able to say: ‘I’m doing this—what are you doing? This is my challenge—what’s your challenge?’ That was so useful. I would have loved to spend a little bit more time with those groups.

[For the Labs] we had great instructions, we had great structure, we had great timing, we had common motivation. There were just a lot of things that really contributed to the Labs being successful. And they left us alone and gave us more time when we needed a little bit more exploration time to really tease out what we what we needed to work on. So I thought they really executed the Labs quite well.

[The Labs were] one of the most impactful parts for me, talking through things with the other two people to get ideas, and then branching out of what I know in my head to other people's experiences. I think that was really super interesting and a really good use of our time. I appreciated that they dedicated so much time to it.

The one critique that some participants had regarding the Lab work was that they would have appreciated additional specific examples of how the architectural concepts can be translated to the design of educational experiences. True to M²'s constructivist approach—in which program participants are encouraged to create and define their own experiences and outcomes—at the start of the Seminar participants were given beautifully designed “concept cards” with blank space for them to fill with their own reflections and insights (this was also an intentional modeling for participants of the use of “language and materials” as part of thoughtful program design):



While they appreciated the cards' visual appeal and the thinking behind them, a few participants said (and the facilitators also later recognized) that a resource containing actual “ideas, tips, and tools” might have been more useful for them at that stage, giving them a scaffolding of knowledge to build upon during the Seminar and take back with them to their workplaces.

Reintegration - Bringing the Concepts Home

As the Seminar participants learned, reintegration—defined in M²'s materials as “the capacity to take the learnings and experiences from the immersive experience and ‘fit them’ back into one’s everyday environment”—is ultimately what enables immersive experiences to provide meaningful learning and development for the long term. Interviews with six participants during the 4–6 weeks following the Seminar provided an opportunity to learn how this group was able to take their experience in New York and translate it to their professional settings (which included a range of Jewish educational organizations that offer retreats, Shabbatonim, and other immersive educational experiences). All of the interviewees said that they had or planned to incorporate one or more of the concepts they had learned into program planning and other aspects of their professional roles (and according to evaluation data gathered by M², this was true of all 11 participants who completed the post-program feedback survey). Examples shared by the interviewees include:

- Redesigning a retreat’s registration webpage to provoke curiosity and excitement about the event by previewing some, but not too many, details ([Conceal and Reveal](#))
- Starting the program immediately with an activity that encourages connections and conversation to “jump-start” the community-building that is a critical program goal ([Approach](#))
- Enhancing the design, quality, and consistency of everything that participants will “touch and hold” during a program, from nametags to schedules to the swag they’ll take home ([Language and Materials](#))
- Using the Seminar’s Lab sessions as a model for reflection and sharing opportunities at the program’s close, including providing similar cards (rather than generic notebooks) for participants to record their thoughts ([Language and Materials, Reintegration](#))

It should be noted that the fact that none of the interviewees offered an example of how they would incorporate “Positive Tension” reflects that this concept appeared to be more challenging for many participants to understand how to apply effectively, based on both the conversations and the broader evaluation data. This offers an important learning opportunity for M² professionals as they wrestle with the challenge of making complex ideas meaningful for practitioners who haven’t spent time engaging deeply with theory. As they are finding through their ongoing explorations of how best to teach and transmit these concepts, what might be compelling “on the page” isn’t always clearly applicable “on the ground.”

A broader question for M² is to what extent The Architecture of Immersive Experiences—and the other seminars that are part of the Design of Immersive Experiences Circle—helps further M²'s mission of grounding the practice of experiential education in research and theory in order to create, enrich, and develop the field. As one example of how this initiative represents a new direction for M², designing the programs as five-day “boot-camp”-style intensive experiences departs from M²'s usual long-term approach to professional development, and therefore is as much of a risk and experiment as the

seminars' content. Although the level of impact couldn't be expected to match that of M²'s more extended initiatives, being able to provide rich and substantive learning to a wider population of professionals (as far fewer can commit to time-intensive programs) was felt to be an equally valuable contribution to the field.

The reflections of those interviewed suggested that the experience, brief as it was, succeeded in creating meaningful impacts on participants' thinking and communication about the work they do. A number of interviewees said that the Seminar had given them "new language" for conceptualizing their work, both in their own planning and when sharing their ideas with colleagues. As shared in the quotes below, these participants felt that this new language helped them to situate their choices and practices within a "bigger picture" conceptual framework, thus making the process of planning immersive experiences less intuitive and more intentional:

I found that having the architectural cycle and the language and the concepts has really allowed me to understand, for instance, what we're doing here is "approaching." It's been great to be able to take a step back and see a much bigger picture than I could before, to move from intuitively understanding to actually, conceptually, getting it and being able to say, here's the theory behind what's happening. We're really designing and carefully crafting an experience for folks. It takes it beyond just my gut instinct into something that's actually translatable and professional and I can articulate beyond just, "because I think that sounds like a good idea."

[The Seminar] did exactly what it was supposed to do, in that it gave me language with which to think and speak about these different elements of an immersive program. Like, I always knew that the first thing that happens when you walk into an immersive program is the approach and it's important and it frames the week. But this showed me the importance of thinking more intentionally about what we want to see out of that approach and what some of the different options are for doing it.

I think once I start diving into my program, I am definitely going to be thinking about these concepts from the very beginning. I'm literally keeping all the materials we got right next to my desk so that I can keep looking at them and be like, 'Oh, I haven't thought about this!' I love having this language. You know, I have a Master's degree, and now I'm thinking, why wasn't anything like this taught or talked about?

The participants' enthusiasm about structuring their work around a conceptual framework is particularly striking given that the field of experiential education celebrates improvisation and passion, and is still often labeled as "informal" education (thus implying an absence of structure or theory). Within this context, M²'s belief that theory should drive practice is truly countercultural.

Looking Ahead

In addition to new ideas and language to bring to the design of immersive experiences, participants mentioned two additional ways that they hoped to build on the Seminar: staying connected with colleagues they had met there and finding additional opportunities for professional development, including M²'s more intensive programs (particularly the Senior Educators Cohort). Both of these goals suggest that the Seminar succeeded in helping at least some participants see themselves as part of a broader field with professional networks and pathways for growth and advancement. As one participant said, “When I learned there was actually such a thing as an ‘Institute for Experiential Jewish Education,’ I said to myself, ‘Oh, wow—these are my people!’” Another participant excitedly shared his realization that his professional role is part of a larger “field of study” that he can draw upon to inform and enrich his work:

I never really knew before what “experiential education” was. I just sort of knew what I did, but I didn’t know it was a formal field of study. So that’s something I’m much more interested in now. I already have some folks [at my organization] who are encouraging me to do the M² certificate program, and I’m definitely taking that more seriously. I really see the value of having this field of study, and I would like to use that more in my own work.

The experience of designing and implementing The Architecture of Immersive Experiences Seminar also provided M² professionals with valuable insights for the Institute’s current and future programming. As mentioned above, one key takeaway based on participant feedback was that many were seeking more concrete and detailed examples of how to translate the architectural concepts into educational settings. Shuki Taylor reflected that the choice to be more open-ended grew both out of M²'s commitment to constructivist approaches and the fact that the Seminar’s content was new and exploratory for M² as well, which made the experience of guiding participants’ learning both challenging and “exhilarating:”

The main thing that needs to be improved is the deck of cards, because many people said that they wanted more practical examples to take home. The constructivist piece, while it was useful to a certain extent, could have been balanced with a greater deal of mastery on our end. We would have benefited from more time to actually work through the practice of it ourselves as an organization, which is just the nature of doing something totally new. As we develop more programs like this, we need to have a really strong foundational back-up of having our own case studies, taking that into the field and practicing it more. The flip side is that in other programs we run, someone will come and ask the first three words of a question, and I know exactly how that question will end and exactly how I’m going to answer it, which isn’t always the best thing. So the experience of feeling a little more on the spot was exhilarating as well.

As this quote references, the Design of Immersive Experiences Circle is still unfolding, and M² will have an immediate opportunity to apply these and other insights to the seminar on “Facilitating Meaning Making” in September 2019. As part of its ethos, M² is as committed to its own ongoing learning and growth as an organization as it is to growing the field, with reflection as central to its own practice as to the design of its seminars for educators. M² professionals shared that they find themselves incorporating key concepts from the seminars—including approach, positive tension, and conceal and reveal—more and more as they envision and plan new programs. In order to extend and deepen this process of reflection and learning, M² is considering how it will engage in continued evaluation over the next months to learn how their programs continue to impact participants, and through them their colleagues, organizations, and perhaps the wider field.

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Glossary

M² Programming

Circle M² Circles are a range of seminar-based professional development programs (cohort and one-off), each focusing on the development of a different area of expertise which is foundational to the field of Experiential Jewish Education (EJE).

Seminar A five-day immersive seminar within a Circle that explores an area of expertise foundational to the field of EJE.

Lab Sessions Sessions within seminars designed to assist participants to understand and experiment with concepts learned. Achieved through the use of methodologies such as case studies, role plays, and Q&A.

Immersive Experiences

Immersive Experience A deliberately crafted educational experience in which the participant leaves their home environment and enters a new space for the duration of the experience.

Rhythm The pace at which an immersive experience unfolds. An ideal rhythm results in a program that well balances ideas and content with user experience.

Sequencing The intentional orchestration of programmatic elements in an order that results in an optimal programmatic flow.

Anthropological Principles for Immersive Experiences

Separation The mechanism by which learners are taken out of their normative routines and transition into a new space and environment, opening them to new opportunities and experiences. Separation is necessary in creating the conditions for liminality.

Liminality A fluid state of being that occurs when a learner is in a transitional setting or space which facilitates impactful and transformational learning. Liminal states can be defined by new social structures or paradigms and/or new physical environments, and are by definition unstable, unsettling, and even disorienting.

Reincorporation The process of returning from the liminal state back into the learner's normative setting. Reincorporation requires the capacity to take the learnings and experiences from the immersive experience and “fit them” back into one's everyday environment.

Architectural Principles for Maintaining Liminality

Approach That which draws people into an immersive experience. Once learners have been separated from their normative setting, the approach entices them to enter and further explore liminal spaces.

Conceal and Reveal A catalyst to elicit curiosity and build momentum. Concealment preserves the opportunity for surprise when the revelation occurs.

Positive Tension The intentional placement of an incongruous element into a setting that makes it stand out. Positive tension creates a disruption, stimulating sharp responses among learners.

Language and Materials The ingredients of design that contribute to the creation of particular cultures and atmospheres. The “music” of the experience, they may include physical materials and resources, rituals, setup, and internal language that creates or sets up the experience.