

# Therapeutic Proximity: Rethinking Accessibility Through Environmental Psychology and Daoist Urbanism

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## 1 Introduction

The concepts of proximity and permeability are central to spatial planning and urban theory. Traditionally, they have been understood through the lens of territorial morphology, transport networks, and the optimization of physical access to housing, services, and employment. From this perspective, permeability often refers to the ease with which bodies and flows of goods can traverse space, while proximity is measured in terms of distance and time. Such definitions have underpinned a significant body of planning practice, from the promotion of mixed-use neighborhoods and transit-oriented development to recent debates on the “15-minute city” ([Carmona 2021](#), [Gehl 2011](#)).

Yet accessibility is not only a matter of physical configurations. Research in environmental psychology demonstrates that access is always mediated by perception, emotion, and cultural meaning ([Appleyard et al. 1981](#), [Bell 1996](#), [Lynch 2008](#), [Whyte 2010](#)). A square may be technically “open,” but if it is perceived as unsafe, hostile, or exclusive, its permeability is undermined. A park may be geographically close, yet remain psychologically distant if its design does not foster belonging or cultural resonance ([Nassauer 1995](#)). This dimension of perceived accessibility has received comparatively little attention in planning

discourse, despite its crucial role in shaping whether environments truly support inclusion (Biglieri et al. 2025).

In parallel, non-Western philosophical traditions such as Daoism provide alternative understandings of proximity and permeability. Daoist thought emphasizes harmony, fluidity, and relationality rather than rigid demarcations or linear flows. Permeability in this sense is not only about the absence of barriers but also about the presence of balance – the effortless interweaving of human and natural systems, yin and yang, built form and emptiness (Nelson 2021). Urban environments inspired by such principles might be better positioned to nurture wellbeing, accessibility, and social cohesion.

This paper proposes a reconceptualization of proximity and permeability through the combined lenses of environmental psychology and Daoist philosophy. It draws on a series of practice-based experiments in designing inclusive environments: (1) citywalks in Hangzhou, China, that explored happiness and accessibility through environmental psychology and cultural narratives, (2) work at Tianmei’s World Academy (TMWA) as a decentralized “network of classrooms” cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary educational platform that models permeability in learning environments, and (3) reflections from research on night trains at the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS), which position long-distance rail travel as a regenerative infrastructure for proximity in motion. By situating these cases within ongoing academic debates, the paper seeks to expand planning’s understanding of accessibility beyond physical nearness to include psychological, cultural, and therapeutic dimensions.

The central question guiding this contribution is: How can environmental psychology and Daoist notions of permeability expand planning’s approach to proximity, so that accessibility is understood not only as a spatial condition but also as a lived and inclusive experience? Recent planning scholarship similarly argues that proximity and accessibility must be understood as lived, perceptual experiences rather than solely geometric or network properties (Fusi & Tiboni 2024, Sepe 2024).

## **2 Methods**

The methodological approach is interdisciplinary and reflexive, combining environmental psychology, urban planning, and cultural philosophy. Rather than a single empirical study, the work draws on a series of practice-based interventions that serve as living laboratories for rethinking proximity and permeability.

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The first case consists of citywalks in Hangzhou, China, organized as experiments in perceiving happiness and accessibility. Participants engaged in structured walks that combined environmental psychology talks, guided visits, group lunches, and mindfulness practices. The walks were designed to foreground not only spatial configurations but also narratives, perceptions, and affective responses, allowing participants to reflect on what “happiness” and “accessibility” mean in everyday environments (Relph, 2008; Seamon, 2018).

The second case is Tianmei’s World Academy (TMWA), a decentralized cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary educational platform that functions as a “network of classrooms.” Unlike conventional institutions tied to fixed locations, TMWA operates through distributed and flexible spaces, often embedded in everyday environments such as cafés, cultural centers, or online forums. This model was analyzed as a form of permeability that challenges centralized access to education and creates new proximities across disciplines, geographies, and social contexts.

The third case builds on ongoing research at RIFS exploring night trains as infrastructures of regeneration. As part of a broader project on redefining business as “an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way,” night trains were studied not merely as transport technologies but as environments that foster rest, reflective practices, intercultural encounters, and slower temporalities. Here, permeability was conceptualized as both physical (crossing borders and regions) and psychological (opening spaces for dialogue, learning, and rest).

Across these cases, three conceptual frameworks developed through practice were used as methodological tools: • The Invisible Backpack, which refers to the personal and collective histories that shape how individuals perceive environments, influencing whether they feel included or excluded. • The Puzzle Mindset, which emphasizes complementary strengths and diversity, highlighting how collective dynamics can create inclusivity through mutual recognition rather than competition. • The Center of My Environment, a participatory design tool encouraging individuals to recognize their agency in shaping environments, thereby fostering permeability as empowerment.

The research is therefore reflexive and situated. Rather than separating researcher from subject, it positions the author as a practitioner-researcher whose lived experiments generate insights into how proximity and permeability can be rethought in planning practice. This aligns with emerging human-centred methods that explicitly measure cognition and emotion to inform spatial decisions (Sun Choi et al. 2024).

### 3 Results

The findings across the three cases converge on the need to expand proximity and permeability beyond spatial metrics to include psychological, cultural, and experiential dimensions.

Citywalks in Hangzhou revealed how narratives and cultural memory transform perceived accessibility. Participants reported that historical streets, which initially felt distant or opaque, became “closer” once their histories were narrated and collective reflection was facilitated. The walks also highlighted the role of environmental affordances in generating happiness: shaded alleys, flowing canals, and convivial cafés were perceived as nurturing wellbeing, not only because of their physical features but because of the emotions and meanings participants attached to them. Proximity, in this context, was redefined as the felt sense of connection to place, while permeability was redefined as the openness of environments to multiple interpretations and uses. These findings resonate with recent AESOP work linking perceived accessibility to design qualities at the micro-scale of urban settings (Fusi & Tiboni 2024, Sepe 2024).

Tianmei’s World Academy demonstrated how educational access can be reimaged as permeability across disciplines, spaces, and cultures. The decentralized model enabled participants with diverse backgrounds to connect in environments ranging from city cafés to online platforms, creating new proximities that would not have been possible within centralized, institutional structures. Here, permeability was less about physical movement and more about dissolving epistemic and cultural boundaries. Accessibility was reframed not as the ability to enter a building but as the ability to bring one’s “Invisible Backpack” into dialogue with others in a safe and inclusive setting. Framing accessibility as negotiated, experiential, and programmatic rather than merely locational echoes current debates in urban design practice (Sepe 2024).

Night trains emerged as infrastructures that generate therapeutic proximity. Unlike airplanes or high-speed trains, night trains provide time for slow reflection, reading, spontaneous intercultural encounters and rest. Participants described them as environments where strangers became co-travelers in dialogue, where landscapes unfolded gradually, and where rhythms of rest could support mental wellbeing. In this case, permeability referred to the capacity of the train to connect regions and cultures while maintaining an atmosphere conducive to inclusion and reflection. Proximity was less about reducing travel time and more about deepening relational and reflective time. Methodologically, this complements sensor- and cognition-aware approaches that seek to capture affective states in situ to inform human-centred spatial design (Sun Choi et al. 2024).

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This contribution extends planning debates on accessibility by foregrounding the psychological and cultural dimensions of proximity and permeability. While current discussions often focus on physical access – measured in meters, minutes, or transport links – the findings demonstrate that accessibility also depends on whether environments foster perceptions of safety, belonging, and meaning. Without this dimension, formal access may fail to translate into lived inclusion (Biglieri et al. 2025, Trojanowska 2021).

By integrating Daoist philosophy, the paper offers a conceptual framework for reimagining permeability as balance and harmony rather than simple openness. In Daoist thought, true permeability is not unlimited flow but the capacity of environments to sustain relational equilibrium (Nelson 2021). Applied to urban contexts, this suggests that inclusivity requires more than removing barriers: it requires cultivating environments that welcome diverse ways of being and knowing.

Methodologically, the paper demonstrates how environmental psychology frameworks such as the “Invisible Backpack,” “Puzzle Mindset,” and “Center of My Environment” can serve as participatory tools in planning. These frameworks make subjective experiences visible, allowing planners to integrate the affective and cultural dimensions of accessibility into design processes. The city-walks, decentralized learning networks, and night trains illustrate how such tools can be embedded in practice to create living laboratories of inclusive design.

For policy and planning practice, several implications emerge: • Urban design should not only maximize physical permeability but also enhance perceived accessibility by nurturing psychological safety, cultural resonance, and opportunities for belonging. • Participatory processes must account for diverse “Invisible Backpacks,” recognizing that past experiences and cultural identities shape how environments are encountered. • Planning for inclusivity requires fostering therapeutic urbanism, where environments support healing and resilience alongside mobility and function (Seamon 2018). • Decentralized and distributed models (as exemplified by TMWA) can democratize access by making learning and participation more permeable across space and culture.

Finally, the paper situates itself within a broader research trajectory. As part of ongoing work at the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) on redefining business for regenerative futures, and as a foundation for a forthcoming PhD on Daoism and therapeutic urbanism, this contribution proposes a reframing of planning concepts to better respond to the challenges of accessibility and inclusion. The conference theme of revisiting urban interactions is therefore engaged

not only at the theoretical level but also at the methodological and experiential level, offering a multidisciplinary bridge between psychology, philosophy, planning, and practice.

In conclusion, revisiting proximity and permeability through environmental psychology and Daoist philosophy underscores that accessibility is not merely a technical problem but a profoundly human one. True accessibility is achieved when environments not only allow entry but also actively nurture confidence, wellbeing, and belonging. For planners and policymakers, this calls for a shift from designing spaces for efficiency alone to cultivating environments of therapeutic proximity, where inclusivity is felt as much as it is measured.

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