

# “Meet me at Sungod”: Using Photovoice to Understand Student Attachment to Public Open Space at UCSD

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## **Abstract**

Public open spaces are important parts of the campus landscape and serve a variety of roles. Previous research has shown that certain characteristics of public space, such as greenery and places to gather, provide community building and well-being benefits for students. This project uses photovoice, a participatory research method, to understand the roles and meanings public open space has for some students at UCSD. Drawn from 10 interviews with students, elements which promote place attachment include: positive emotions, natural elements, social elements, and logistical elements. For students at UCSD, different spaces serve different functions, ranging from quiet, restorative spaces to popular, park-like spaces. Public open spaces at UCSD represent a unique type of space, which play a crucial role in the lives of students by providing meaningful spaces for students to destress and relax. Students showed attachment to these spaces, revealing deep bonds with the places they described in their interviews. Public open space on campus should not be evaluated simply by the number of students who use them. Smaller and quieter spaces hold deep meaning for students and contribute important mental health benefits. A variety of thoughtfully planned spaces should be included on college campuses to meet the diverse and varied needs of students.

## **Introduction**

Public open spaces on college campuses facilitate a wide range of uses, ranging from transportation corridors and connectors to nodes and places for students to gather. Prior research has shown that public open spaces are important for students beyond their aesthetic value (Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). On university campuses with green spaces, students who frequently interacted with greenery reported higher quality of life and lower perceived stress (Holt et al. 2019). Public open spaces on campus can also have benefits for student learning and stress regulation. Natural landscapes on campuses can be learning spaces outside of the classroom and are shown to have “attention-

restoring” benefits which help improve student learning and mental health (Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). Moreover, public open spaces on college campuses might function as “third places”, areas outside of the home and work which allow students to engage in a wide variety of activity. These activities range from individualized, quiet, and passive usage (ex. studying alone, eating alone, resting in nature alone, etc.) to highly activated, group usages (ex. organized events, “hangouts”, etc.) (Oldenburg 1989). Public open spaces could be important forms of third spaces on college campuses which help to generate a sense of community, which further promotes well-being and civic responsibility (Francis et al.

2012). Positive qualities associated with high quality public open spaces such as its potential role as a third place and greenery help to promote place attachment, the influential emotional and psychological relationships between people and places which affect mental well-being and community connectivity (Moulay et al. 2018; Najafi and Shariff 2011).

Spaces on campuses should be designed to serve the community as a whole and address the needs of a diverse student population. This is especially important in a very large and segmented college campus such as the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), which separates its undergraduate student body into distinct residential colleges. In recent years, the campus has experienced rapid development and urbanization. The construction of many more housing and academic buildings has placed increased pressure on existing campus public open spaces. At UCSD, open space on campus is an essential component of the campus landscape, playing many roles for students, including: creating a cohesive campus identity, serving as effective mobility corridors, and creating meaningful social spaces (UCSD Open Space Master Planning Study 2015). The campus has a variety of open space types, ranging from the historic eucalyptus grove to more formal quads and plazas. While departments and residential neighborhoods serve individual groups on campus, open public space is a shared resource for everyone.

Using UCSD students and the campus as a case study, this project studies student perceptions of public open spaces on the UCSD by employing qualitative photovoice methodology. Specifically, it seeks to answer: (1) What roles do public spaces play for students and are these spaces considered third spaces? (2) What characteristics of public space attract students and promote place attachment? Beginning to answer these questions will help to inform the design and type of spaces on college campuses and ensure that students are able to experience the health, wellbeing, and community generating benefits associated with high quality public open space. Using Oldenburg's (1989) ideas on third places as a framework, this project evaluates elements of space which allow it to provide the psychological and community building benefits and facilitate the place attachment process.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The "Third Place" and Place Attachment***

Public open space plays important roles in urban environments, such as: providing places for recreation, activity, socialization, relaxation, and environmental engagement. These roles promote place attachment and create social ties within the community (Campbell et al. 2016). Previous work studying cities have long investigated specific elements of public space which facilitate social interaction and community building in urban environments (Jacobs 1961; Oldenburg 1989). Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third place" to describe "a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg 1989, 16). These spaces act as informal gathering spaces in cities, where people can socialize with strangers from their community. Characteristics of public space, such as its potential role as a third space contribute to a deep and positive bonding between people and specific places. This form of bonding is termed "place attachment" by psychologists and sociologists, who have found that place attachment has the potential to encourage people to use public places further and spend more time outdoors, connect with their community, and promote general greater livability in urban environments (Moulay et al. 2018). Place attachment is deeply connected to personal meanings, emotion, and behavior, therefore, these deep bonds between people and places influence human behavior. This means that attachment to place can help generate positive civic behaviors which develop all aspects of a community: physical, social, political, and economic. Beloved public spaces which promote place attachment can motivate people to collectively protect and improve their communities and participate in local planning

processes (Manzo and Perkins 2006). Moulay et al. (2018) proposes a theoretical model which illustrates the process of promoting place attachment and utilization of public spaces, calling on a combination of physical, social, and psychological factors. This includes: accessibility, proximity, aesthetic maintenance, (physical); mixed use, mixed incomes, commuting distance, free time, safety (social); and personal meanings, thoughts, behaviors, emotions, (psychological).

On college campuses, spaces such as quads, squares, and lawns may may create place attachment among students which improves student psychological well-being, promotes livability at UCSD's campus, and creates an engaged student body which engages with campus decision making processes.

### ***Greenery and Health & Well-Being***

Public open space also has benefits for human health and well-being. Specifically for college students, green open space on college campuses serves as places for learning and stress management. Natural landscapes on campuses are shown to have "attention-restoring" benefits which help to improve the ability of students to learn and improve mental health (Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). Other studies have also found that campus green spaces are essential for the overall mental health of college students (Liu et al. 2022). Students who frequently engage with green spaces, specifically in active ways, report higher quality of life, better overall mood, and lower perceived stress (Holt et al. 2019). Previous research on open space on campuses has focused primarily on the pedagogical and restorative effects of green spaces on college campuses (Holt et al. 2019; Lau et al. 2014; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). For campuses seeking to promote both the mental and physical health of students, planners and designers can use the concept of healthy design, in which natural features are utilized to assist users in relaxation and restoration. A diverse range of open space elements and sizes should be included on campuses to maximize these benefits for students (Lau et al. 2014).

## **Methods**

### ***Photovoice Methodology***

Photovoice methodology is a process for conducting participatory research in which participants use photography to identify their community's strengths and weaknesses. On the whole, the aim of participatory research to allow community members to reflect on and propose improvements for their communities, with a focus on working with participants rather than imposing research onto them (Wang and Burris 1997). This process allows participants to use their local knowledge to enhance their communities and reach decision makers. Participants discuss the meanings of their photos, highlighting strengths in their existing community and identifying areas of concern (Reese et al. 2020; Wang and Burris 1997). In this project, participants took photos of their "favorite public open space on campus" followed by an interview to discuss their thoughts on these spaces. The results of this project were presented to UCSD's Campus Planning office.

### Site Context

This project studies student perceptions of public open spaces at UCSD. The campus is characterized by its sprawling and segmented nature. Eight distinct residential colleges make up the majority of the campus urban landscape, each with their own architectural styles, residence halls, dining halls, and community spaces. This means that the residents of each college are highly connected with their neighborhoods and spend much of their day within these spaces. The campus also is currently undergoing rapid urbanization with the construction of many more academic and residential buildings increasing the amount of developed space on campus, which increasingly places pressure on existing open space. Interspersed between UCSD's residential neighborhoods are a multitude of spaces shared by all members of the campus community regardless of the college they are associated with. These spaces include: lawns, quads/courtyards, walkways, amphitheaters, and hammock areas.

### Participant Recruitment

Students were selected through convenience sampling (Creswell and Creswell 2023). Students who chose to participate in the study were compensated with a coffee or tea during interviews. A non-representative sample of 10 students participated in the project.

### Photo Collection

Participants were asked to upload photos of a favorite public open space on campus through a Google Form (See Appendix B). Using their personal devices, participants were first asked to upload 1 photo of the space of their choice as a whole. They were then asked to upload 1-2 photos of specific characteristics within the space. Within the form, public open space was defined as to give guidance to participants. Participants were also asked to think about why the public open space they selected was their favorite and consider the feelings elicited when they are in the space.

For the purposes of this project, public open space is defined as any space that is not taken up by a building on the UCSD campus. This

includes, but is not limited to: lawns, plazas, quads, squares, green space, walkways, etc. This working definition reflects the lack of consensus within existing research on the definition of public open space, which mainly conceptualizes it as open and green space, with less attention given to other types of public open spaces such as plazas and other forms of more "constructed" and built spaces (Koohsari et al. 2015). To mitigate this variability in defining public open space, the definition given to participants was intentionally left open ended as to encourage different interpretations and reveal personal meanings.

### Participant Interviews

Participants were interviewed in-person over coffee or tea, after uploading their photos. The uploaded photos were printed out and brought to the interview for reference. Interviews were recorded using Apple Voice Memos and notes were taken by-hand in a notebook. Building on prior research utilizing photovoice interview methodology, the questions asked in the interview were semi-structured (see Appendix A) and intended to obtain data about: (1) Why did students choose these photos? (2) What students did in these public open spaces? (3) If there was anything they might change about the space? At the end of the interview, students were also asked to discuss anything they might want to add about the public open space they chose.

### Data Analysis

Student responses to their chosen public open spaces formed the basis of findings and were identified through their answers to interview questions. After manually transcribing recorded interviews, data was analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to code and identify quotations discussing key themes and trends within the interview data.

## Results

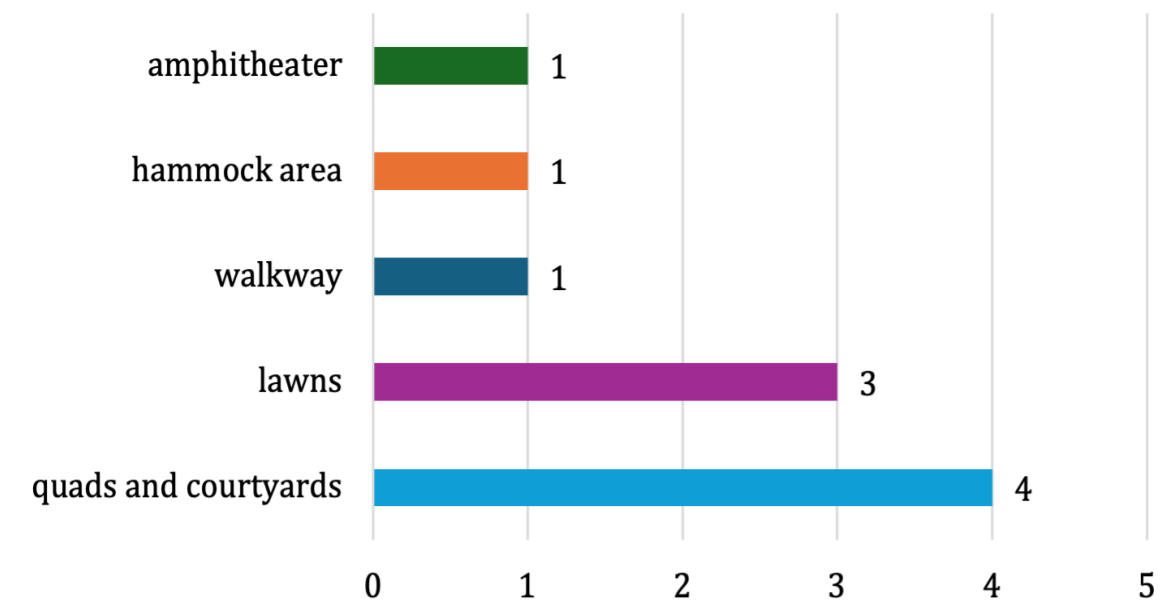
Ten students participated in the project, each uploading 2-3 pictures and taking part in a 10 minute in-person interview. A total of 28 pictures of public open spaces were collected. The public open spaces identified by students as their favorite were: Sungod Lawn, Matthews Quad, Muir Quad, WongAvery Library Quad, Center Hall Courtyard, Eleanor Roosevelt College Walkway, Old Student Center Hammocks, and Epstein Family Amphitheater.

### Typology of Spaces

The public open spaces identified by students can be classified into 5 categories: lawns, quads/courtyards, walkways, hammock areas, and amphitheater. Chart 1 shows the categories of public open space at UCSD and the number of students which identified each as their favorite. The category of public open spaces most commonly identified by students were quads/courtyards and lawns. The only public open space identified commonly by multiple students in this project was Sungod Lawn, a very large and iconic open space located in the center of campus.

Chart 1:

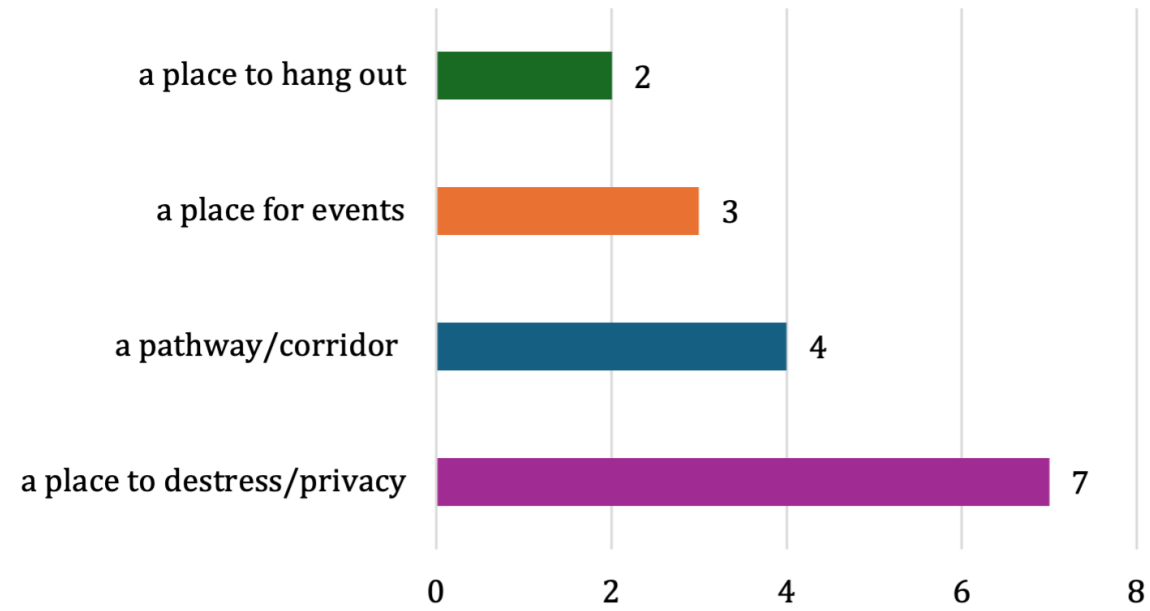
Types of Public Open Space at UCSD Identified by Students as "Their Favorite" at UCSD, by # of Students Identifying



### Roles of Spaces

When asked about what brought students to these public open spaces, students revealed the wide variety of roles these spaces played in their lives. Many of these spaces in this project played multiple roles for students, including: a place to *destress/privacy*, a *pathway/corridor*, a *place for events*, and a *place to hang out*. Chart 2 shows the roles public open space plays for students at UCSD and the number of students which identified each role. Students most commonly identified public open spaces as a place to *destress* and a *place for privacy*. Table 1 shows each public open space identified by students and the roles students identified these spaces play.

**Chart 2:**  
Roles Public Open Space Serves for Students at UCSD, by # of Students Identifying



**Table 1:**  
Negative themes of public open space at UCSD identified by students.

Location	A Place to Hang Out	A Place for Events	A Pathway / Corridor	A Place to Destress / Privacy
Sun God Lawn	x	x		x
Matthews Quad			x	x
Muir Quad			x	x
WongAvery Library Quad			x	
Center Hall Courtyard				x
Eleanor Roosevelt College Walkway			x	
Old Student Center Hammocks				x
Epstein Family Amphitheater		x		

**A PLACE TO DESTRESS/PRIVACY**

Student participants most commonly discussed how some public open spaces at UCSD serve as places to decompress and relax outside of the classroom. Specific elements of design in these spaces give students a sense of privacy and seclusion away from the rest of the busy campus. Students frequently attributed these spaces with a sense of calm.

**Figure 1:**  
Students discuss spaces as a place to destress with a sense of privacy.



"I like that you, kind of like, especially on the hill, you are shielded from the major walkways. Even when people are walking by you don't really see that or perceive that, so it makes you feel like more private and less like in a fishbowl."



"Definitely, calm and um, maybe like secure. Just because this is one of those few open spaces that are a little enclosed. And so there's like a sense of privacy. And I don't feel overwhelmed. So the opposite of overwhelmed."

### A PATHWAY/CORRIDOR

Some student participants noted that they used public open spaces as a pathway or corridor for traveling throughout campus. For some students, their favorite public open spaces exclusively serve as a pathway, rather than a space where they spend an extended amount of time. Some students used these spaces as a pathway due to their convenient location (e.g. Matthews Quad), while for others, they explicitly sought out these pathways due to certain positive characteristics (e.g. ERC pathway).

**Figure 2:**  
Students discuss spaces as a pathway or corridor.



"And also it's in between Price Center and things in Warren, there's like perfect pathways to cut across, which makes it easier to get to Pepper Canyon."

"This photo is when you walk into ERC where all the residential buildings are, they're shaped kind of like archways and there's a pathway that goes all the way through. I took this photo because it's my favorite walkway to go down. Everytime I'm walking, say like, between Sixth and Seventh or something, I just make a detour into ERC and walk through there."



### A PLACE FOR EVENTS

For some students, the main draw of certain public open spaces is that they serve as places for events, held by either university administration or student organizations. Some public open spaces (e.g. the Epstein Family Amphitheater) almost exclusively serve as event spaces, while others (e.g. Sungod Lawn) serve as event spaces alongside other roles.

**Figure 3:**  
Students discuss spaces as a place for events.



"The most memorable one is the most recent one, which was the Undercurrent concert. Um, there were two bands performing and I got there pretty early so I got a seat near the front. Yeah, it was nice. Also, just the farmers market in general!"

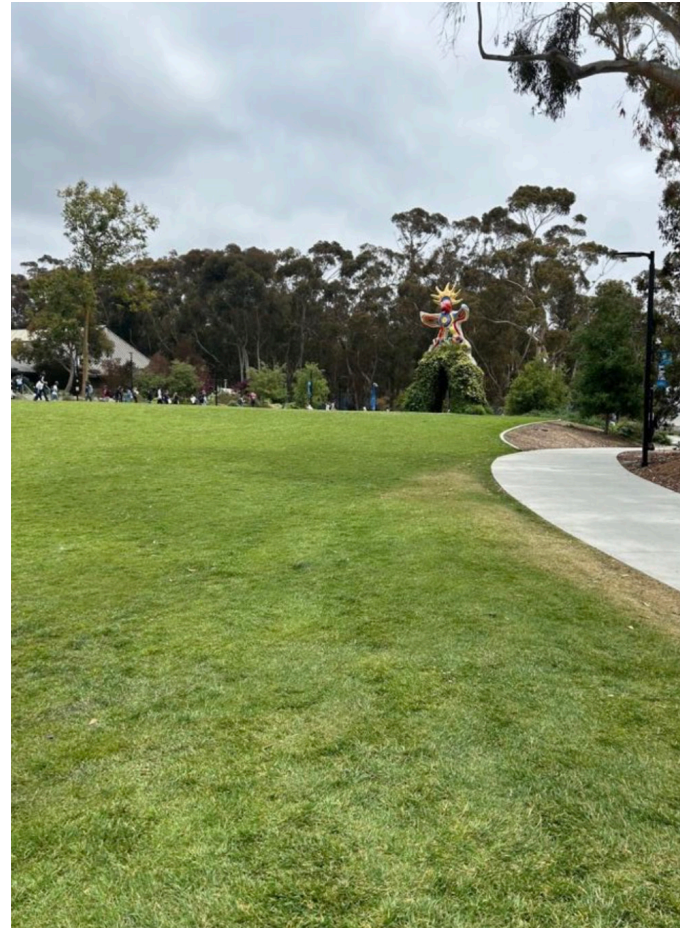


"If I'm there for a protest like I noticed a lot of student groups hold protests there, I wouldn't say calm, I would say alert and anxious, but also energized."

**A PLACE TO HANG OUT**

Lastly, some public open spaces discussed in the project are used by students to “hang out” and socialize with friends. While some spaces clearly were designed to be used alone for students to enjoy the restorative effects of green space, others, such as Sun God Lawn, are frequently used by students to spend time with friends..

**Figure 4:**  
Students discuss spaces as a place to hang out.



“I guess one time in particular was when I went there with like [X] and another one of our friends and they both play guitar and we had a little picnic.”

“I really like Sungod lawn because, especially when everyone is hanging out there. I feel like it’s a good hang out spot for people who want to chill in between classes.”

**Participant Identified Themes**

In the interview phase, participants were asked to discuss the photos they chose to include in the project. Participant responses to these questions can be divided into 8 themes. Of these 8 themes, 5 were *positive elements*, and 3 were *negative elements*. *Positive elements* include: positive emotions, natural elements, social elements, constructed elements, and logistical elements. *Negative elements* include: lack of name/underappreciation, uncertain permissions, and lack of constructed elements. Table 2 lists the public open spaces identified by students and positive themes they discussed. Table 3 lists the public open spaces identified by students and negative themes they discussed.

**Table 2:**

Positive themes of public open space at UCSD identified by students.

Location	Logistical Elements	Constructed Elements	Social Elements	Natural Elements	Positive Emotions
Sun God Lawn	X		X	X	X
Matthews Quad	X	X	X	X	X
Muir Quad	X	X		X	
WongAvery Library Quad		X			
Center Hall Courtyard		X		X	X
Eleanor Roosevelt College Walkway		X	X		X
Old Student Center Hammocks		X		X	X
Epstein Family Amphitheater		X	X	X	

**Table 3:**

Negative themes of public open space at UCSD identified by students.

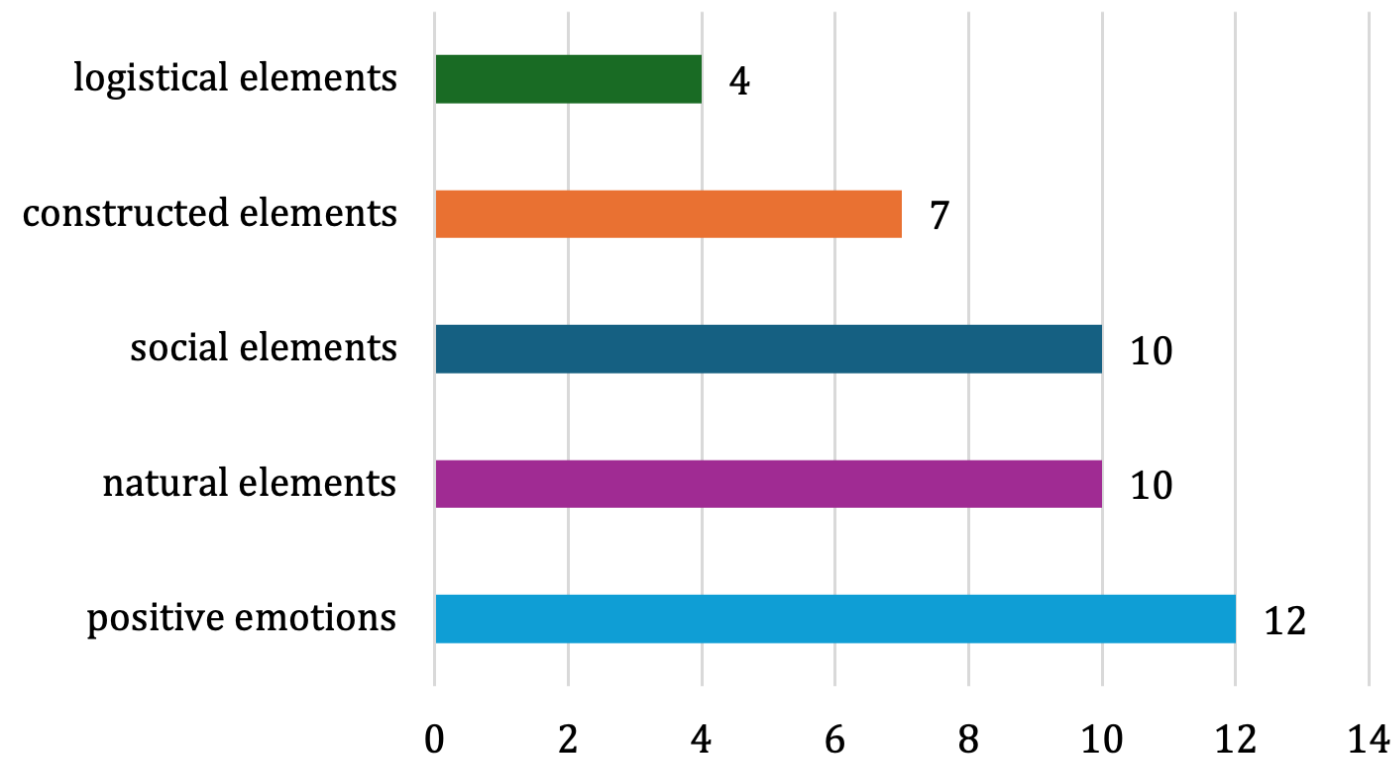
Location	Lack of constructed elements	Uncertain permissions	Lack of name/underappreciation
Sun God Lawn			
Matthews Quad			X
Muir Quad	X		
WongAvery Library Quad			
Center Hall Courtyard			X
Eleanor Roosevelt College Walkway	X		
Old Student Center Hammocks		X	X
Epstein Family Amphitheater		X	

### Positive Elements

Student participants were asked to take photos of 1-2 specific characteristics within the space they selected. All 10 participants of the project chose to include photos of elements they deemed to be positive, that is, elements that are essential to the space in some way and contributes positively to user experience. Positive elements encourage new users to visit the space and facilitate repeat use from existing users. These positive elements can be broken down into 5 categories: constructed elements, natural elements, logistical elements, social elements, and positive emotions. Chart 3 lists these elements and how frequently they were mentioned by students.

Chart 3:

Positive Elements of Public Open Space at UCSD, by # of Times Mentioned by Students

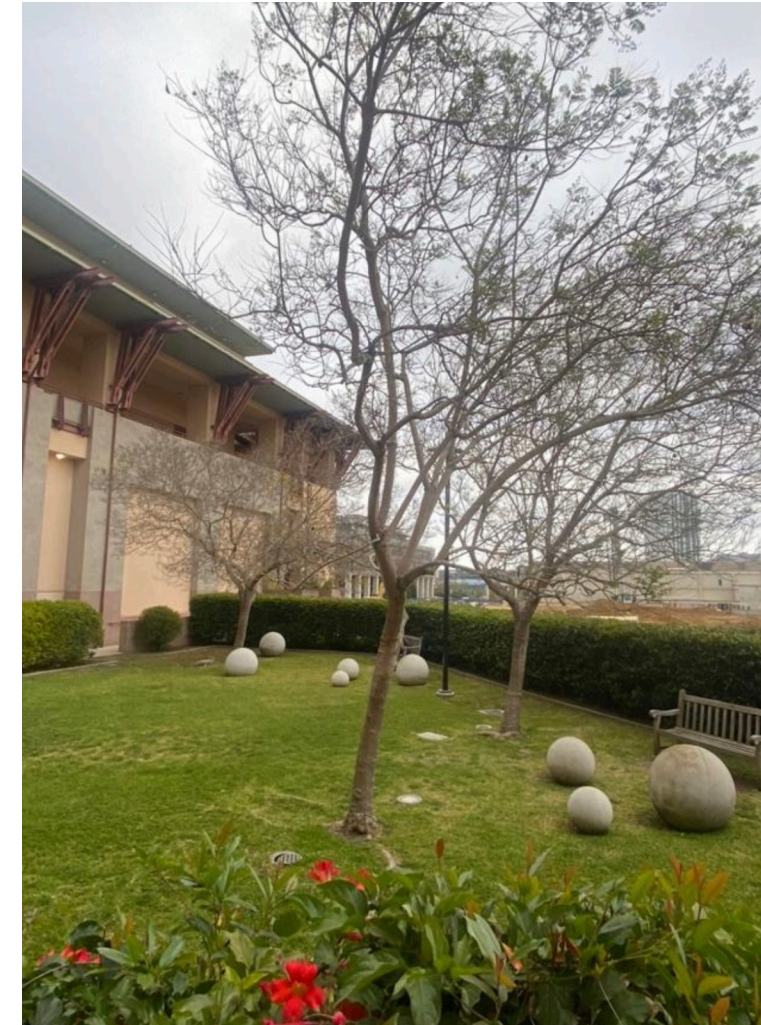


#### POSITIVE EMOTIONS

The most discussed positive element by student participants were the positive emotions associated with being in and interacting with the public open spaces students identified. The positive emotions most commonly discussed by students were feelings of *calmness*, *safety*, *happiness*, and *community*.

Figure 5:

Students discuss positive emotions from being in some spaces.



"I feel like going down the steps to the area it feels like I'm entering another world. I feel like the sound blocking is really good. There's like buildings basically all around except the entrance. You go from really loud to really quiet. And I don't know, it feels like magical almost. Sitting among the grass and stone feels really peaceful and calm and I like that."



"It's very...its feels, I don't know, it disconnects from Ridgewalk and I feel really safe in the space. So, I like it because there's people traveling by so it's like I'm not alone. But it's also separated enough so I do feel, I'm in my own space. Does that make sense? Not alone, alone."

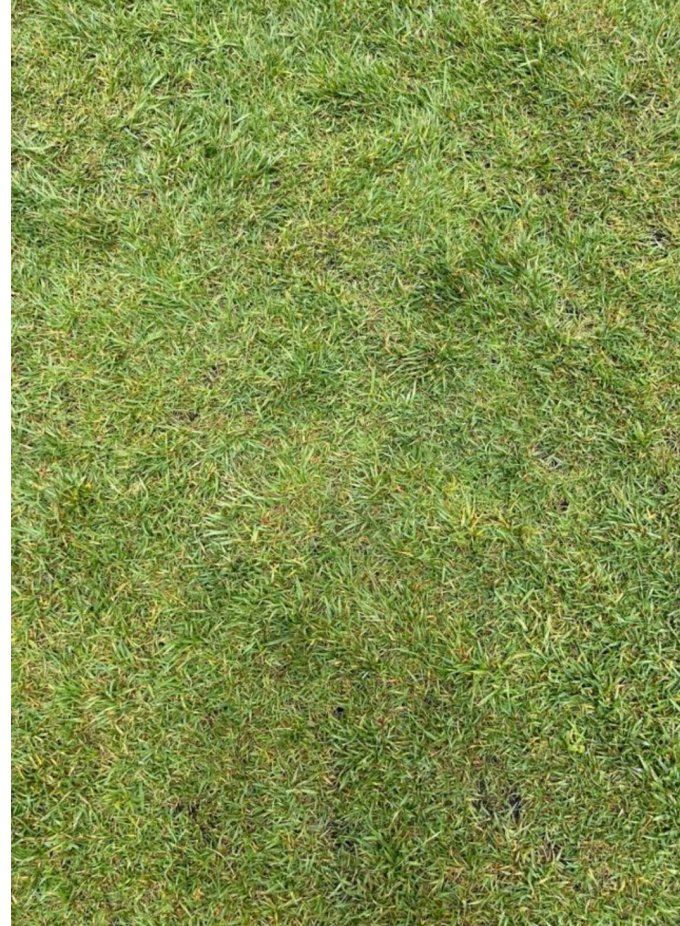
### NATURAL ELEMENTS

Students frequently identified natural elements as contributing heavily to the positive emotions felt when within public open spaces at UCSD. These natural elements include: *greenery* (in the form of trees, shrubs, grass, and other vegetation) and *sun*. *Greenery* and sun seem to be highly connected, with some students noting that these two elements combine to create a very positive, overall experience. Multiple students focused highly on the characteristic of grass specifically, discussing its importance for certain spaces.

**Figure 6:**  
Students discuss natural elements in spaces.



"But these trees specifically, I really like to lay down and look at them and look at how they sway in the wind. I love these trees, specifically when they sway in the wind. I think it's really peaceful and relaxing."

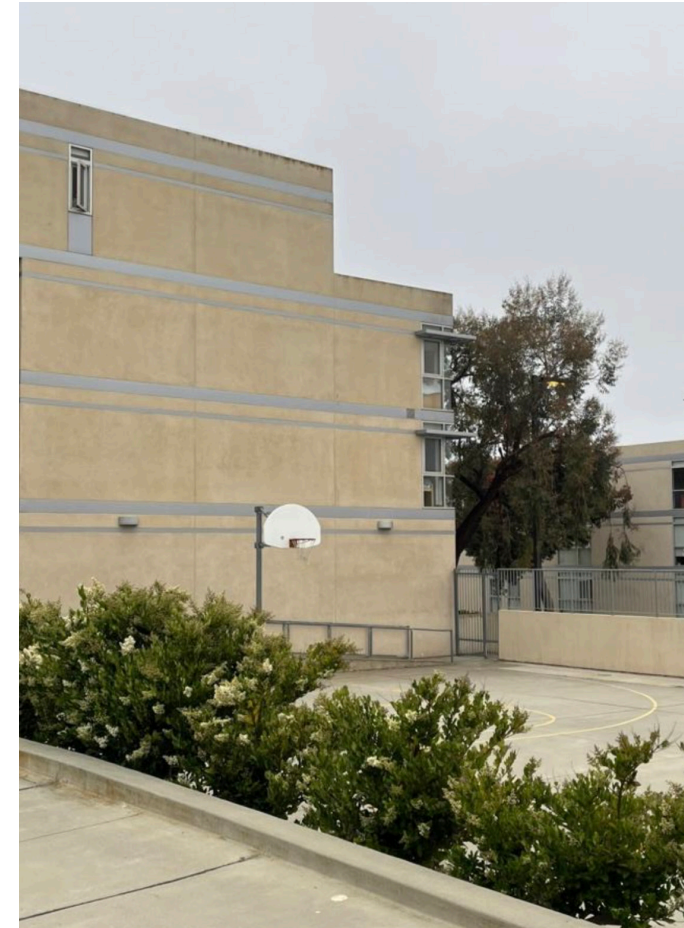


"I took a picture of it because that's where I'm sitting when I'm taking a nap or hanging out with friends or something. Typically, I know the grass isn't very good for the environment because it's high maintenance and there's a lot of water usage. But I do kind of like it in this scenario because you can just sit there and it's like hills and stuff so when you're leaning back on it you have something to lean on and it's not flat. And then, yeah, like it's just grass. But it's just comfortable. Like would you rather sit on grass or would you rather sit on concrete. Like I would rather sit on grass. It's like cushiony."

### SOCIAL ELEMENTS

Student participants also frequently identified social elements as being one of the main reasons they visited and stayed within the public open spaces they selected. Social elements discussed by participants include: *activity/people watching*, *broad name recognition*, and *socialization*. *Activity/people watching* refers to the act of observing the behavior and actions of others using the space alongside the participant. Participants frequently identified other activities occurring in public open spaces as providing a sense of community. *Broad name recognition* is a trend within the project in which some students noted that spaces which are named and are "iconic" in some way seem to attract greater popularity and use. *Socialization* refers to students interacting with friends and others within the space ("hanging out"), using the space in a social way.

**Figure 7:**  
Students discuss the social elements in spaces.



"The basketball court is really fun. Just because it's right outside of the dorms. And again, when you are walking through and you see like a bunch of people playing and also just at night it's really pretty. It reminds me of like, you know how in Hong Kong, it's like the apartment buildings and they have the courts just there' Gorgeous. Except for with this it's just like, it makes it feel like there's more community because there's always people hanging around the courts and what not."



"The statue is pretty iconic. You see a picture of that and you know it's UCSD. I feel like it sets up the field to be better. It's like "where you do wanna meet?" and it's like "Sungod". You immediately know it's the fucking, evil statue. Cause like having a name gives people a sense of direction and that helps them get around better."

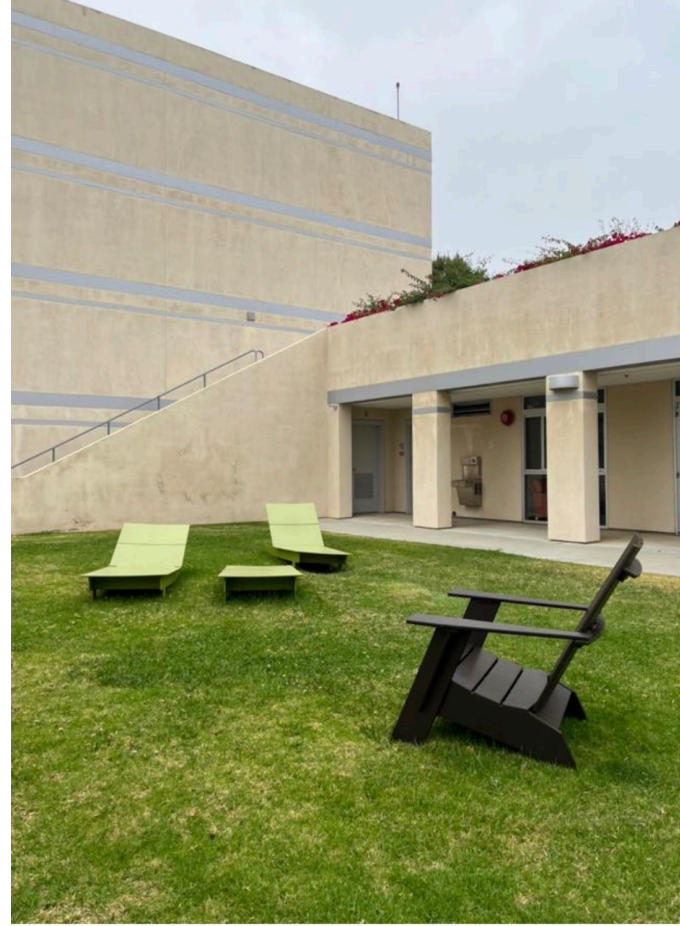
### CONSTRUCTED ELEMENTS

Students sometimes mentioned constructed elements as a main contributor to the positive experiences they felt within these spaces. The two main types of constructed elements are: *seating* and *enclosure*. Seating can be a wide variety of human-made objects which give users a place to rest and sit. Almost all the spaces selected by participants in this project included seating, however, only some participants identified it as a main positive element. *Enclosure* refers to the design of some public open spaces in which buildings almost surround and close in a space, such as a courtyard. Participants who identified *enclosure* also pointed out the positive emotions (*safety* and *calmness*) elicited from an enclosed space.

**Figure 8:**  
Students discuss the *constructed elements* of spaces.



"It's a line of concrete, I wouldn't call it a path. I think it's to step, the lawn. So it kind of turns the lawn into steps or kind of like beds. It's what I was sitting on. I thought it was pretty 'cause there were leaves on it. I like it, it's a good place to sit."



"I think it's just important to have like smaller, enclosed spaces like this that I guess are transitional. Not every open space has to be a huge lawn where you sit. I think open space can take on many forms."

### LOGISTICAL ELEMENTS

Lastly, some student participants noted that logistical elements contributed to their positive experiences in these spaces. Logistical elements include: the space's *location* and the presence of *pathways* and *other infrastructure*. The *location* of the space and its proximity to other uses makes it easy for existing users to return and makes it more likely for new users to naturally encounter these spaces. In particular, location of spaces relative to classrooms encourages use. The presence of *pathways* and *other infrastructure* allows a space to serve multiple functions. *Pathways* make it possible for a space to serve as a corridor, while other forms of constructed elements such as tables and chairs allow students to do work or socialize with friends.

**Figure 9:**  
Students discuss the *logistical elements* of spaces.



"[I visit] Pretty often, maybe three times a week because my classes are in Muir. Um, so yeah, pretty often."



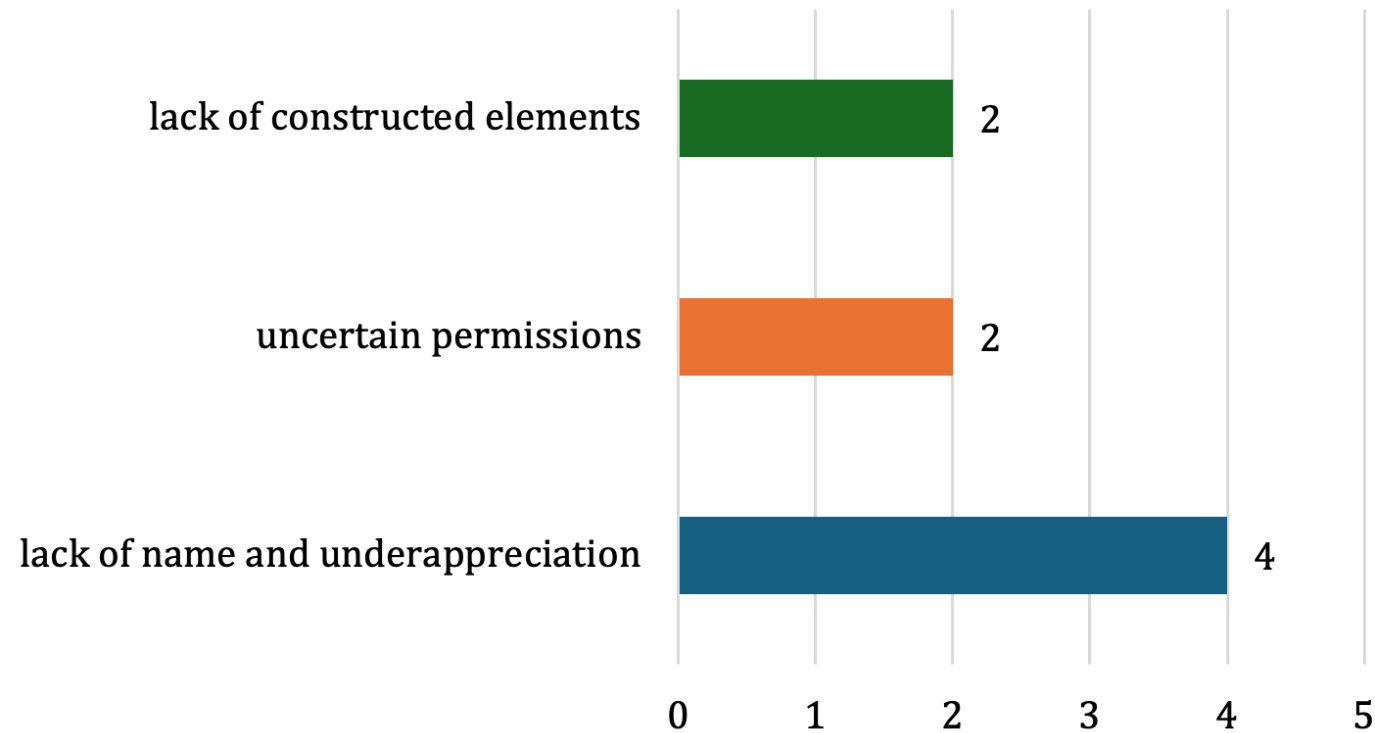
"I like other lawns on campus too but Sungod is very central, it's like close to where [Y] lives, usually I'm with other people so it's like an easy meeting point."

### Negative Elements

While all participants identified positive elements within the public open spaces they selected, some participants also identified negative elements within these spaces. Negative elements discourage new users from visiting certain spaces and limit what existing users can do in these spaces. These negative elements can be sorted into 3 categories: *lack of name/underappreciation*, *uncertain permissions*, and *lack of constructed elements*. Chart 4 lists these elements and how frequently they were mentioned by students.

**Chart 4:**

Negative Elements of Public Open Space at UCSD, by # of Times Mentioned by Students

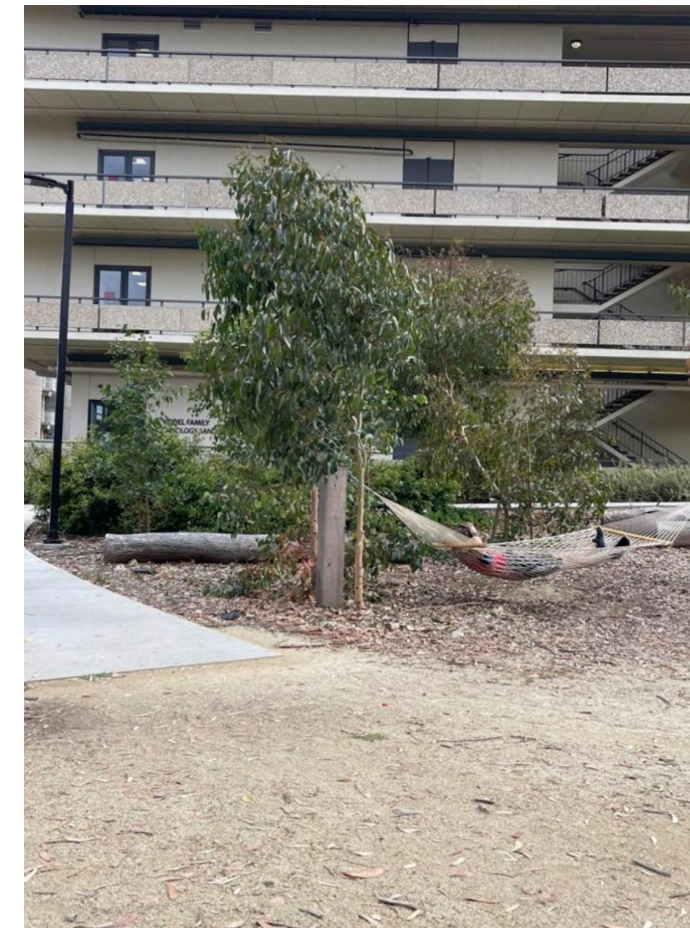


### LACK OF NAME AND UNDERAPPRECIATION

The most discussed negative element by student participants is a *lack of name and underappreciation* of the spaces they selected. Some of these spaces (i.e. the Center Hall Courtyard and Old Student Center Hammocks) lack an official or community given name. When discussing these spaces, students often describe the surrounding buildings and specific characteristics within them, rather than using a broadly recognized name for the space such as the case for Sungod Lawn and Matthews Quad. Spaces without a name are often forgotten or overlooked by the student body as a whole. However, this also means that these spaces provide benefits to users which are impossible to attain from a popular and busy space. Participants often note that these spaces are *quiet* and *peaceful* due to their isolated and forgotten nature. Participants recognize this tension, enjoying the solitude while at the same time wanting to share their favorite spaces with others.

**Figure 10:**

Students discuss the lack of name and underappreciation of spaces.



"I think definitely giving it a name would make it better. So people know what it is. Where it is. So people have a sense of ownership, so it's easier for others to share that this space is provided for us."



"I feel like it's definitely underutilized. I wish more people knew about it because I think it's great for grad photos for example. Or like small picnics or little events. But at the same time, I don't wanna say that because then people are gonna start swarming. I think how calm and not busy it is is what makes it beautiful. So I wouldn't want to ruin that. But I think it should be appreciated more by students here."

**UNCERTAIN PERMISSIONS**

Students also discussed *uncertain permissions* as barriers to the use and enjoyment of certain spaces. Students who noted uncertain permissions discussed confusion about whether they were allowed to enter and use these spaces, a discouraging factor which likely turns away students who are unwilling to risk the potential consequences. Spaces strongly associated with events (i.e. the Epstein Family Amphitheater) are most likely to face this issue. Additionally, lack of usage by fellow students also seems to discourage use. *Underappreciated spaces* (i.e. the Old Student Center Hammocks) with low student use initially discouraged the student which selected it from using the space.

**Figure 11:**  
Students discuss the *uncertain permissions* of spaces.



"I feel like it's closed to the public but when I did go there I felt kinda unsure about whether or not I could be there. 'Cause I think there were security on the sides, but I'm not sure. 'Cause there was no one there except one person sitting on the benches and it was super empty...I don't know if it was supposed to be closed and I was trespassing, but no one stopped me...Like there was ambiguity...So I don't know if this even counts as this is a public space."

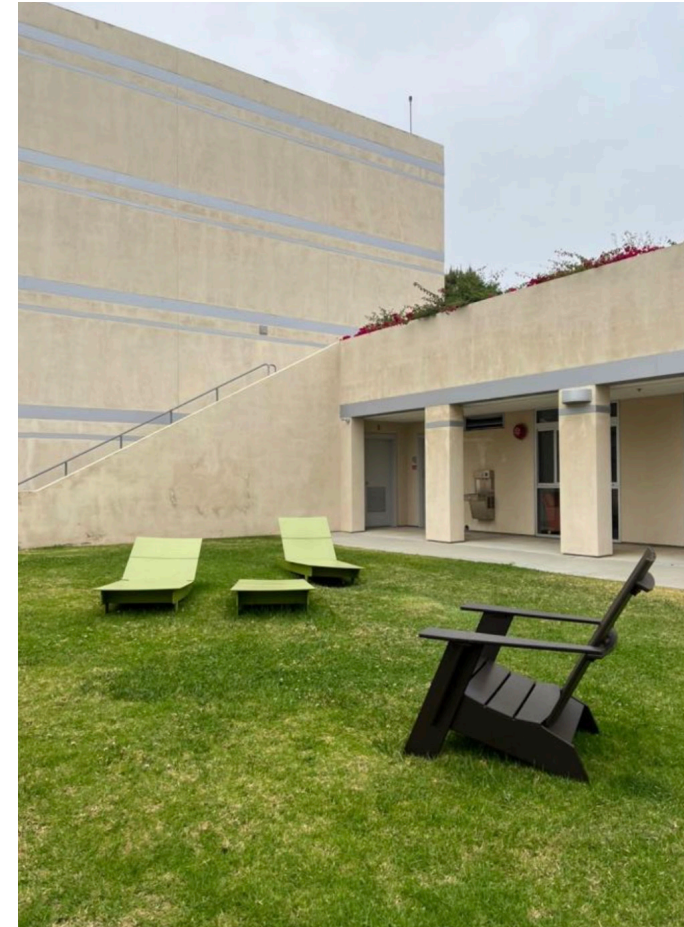


"I've always seen the space but I've never really gone into it because I've never seen anyone use it and I was like "so if anyone's not using it I'm not allowed". But I've realized this third year I've seen people use the space and I was like "ohh I can actually use this space" so I just started using it because I like reading in the hammocks and I was like "it's a space provided for me I should use it" you know?"

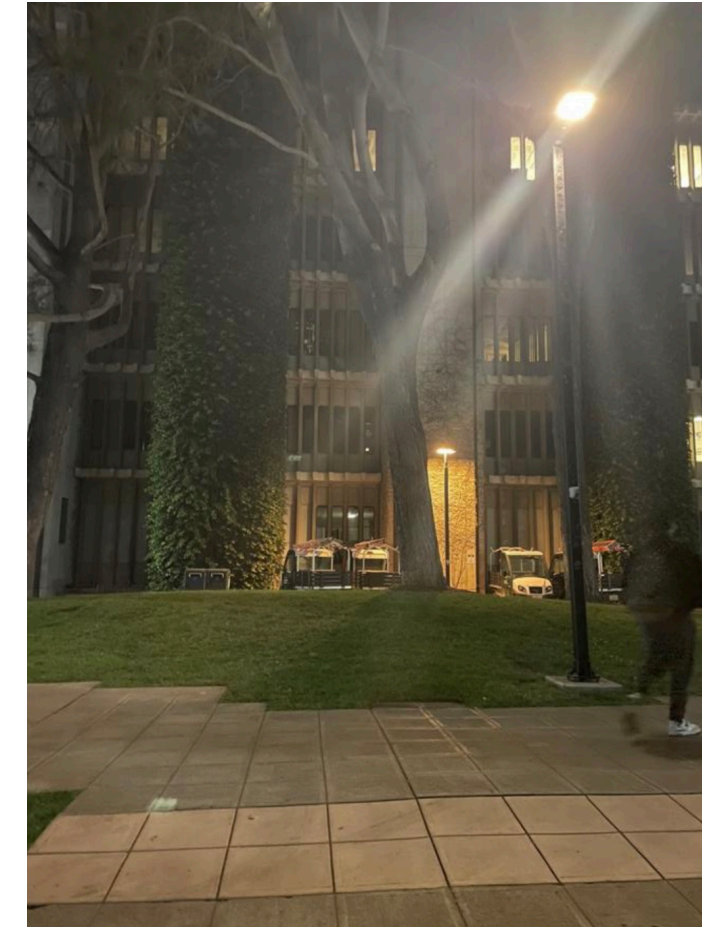
**LACK OF CONSTRUCTED ELEMENTS**

Lastly, some students noted that a lack of constructed elements prevented a space from reaching its full potential. Participants noted that although they liked these spaces, having additional constructed elements such as tables or other types of outdoor furniture would allow a space to become more multi-use and effectively serve more student needs.

**Figure 12:**  
Students discuss the *lack of constructed elements* in spaces.



"It's just a few like random chairs scattered. But I think it shows the lawn could be so much more. Like I feel like if they put out more chairs and it wasn't just these random ones over here, and if they cultivated some sort of theme or vibe, it could be a really nice place just to hang out."



"I think that there could be tables or something because then I would actually want to spend time in the place because there's only benches and if I'm gonna do homework, I can't really do homework on just benches."

## Discussion

This project utilized photovoice methodology to study student perceptions of public open space at UCSD. Specifically, it seeks to answer these two questions: (1) What roles do public spaces play for students and are these spaces considered third spaces? (2) What characteristics of public space attract students and promote place attachment?

Public open space at UCSD is diverse. The roles these spaces serve for students reflect this diversity, acting as places to destress and find peace, to places to travel through or spend time in. The diversity of positive and negative elements identified by students reveal contrasting preferences for spaces depending on the roles they play for students' lives. In smaller, quieter spaces such as the Old Student Center Hammocks, Muir Courtyard, or Center Hall Courtyard, students identified a feeling of enclosure as being conducive to their ability to relax and feel calm. On the other hand, the openness, central location, and popularity of Sungod Lawn seems to create an environment well-suited to spending time with friends. In contrast, a sense of privacy and limited use by others drew students into these quieter spaces. Moreover, places such as the Epstein Family Amphitheater were designed as event spaces, areas for students to gather in large numbers at planned times for active use, while walkways such as the one in Eleanor Roosevelt College are designed for more passive use, creating a pleasant environment for students passing through to get to their destinations.

### *A Different Type of Space*

Most of the public open spaces selected by students do not seem to be third spaces. While students use these spaces to rest and recharge, many students have indicated that they use these spaces to rest and recharge alone, rather than going to socialize or do work. When students do socialize within these spaces, gatherings are often planned with individual groups of friends rather than interacting with strangers. These public open spaces on campus do not meet the criteria of third spaces established by Oldenburg (1989), who describes third spaces as places where unplanned, informal socialization occurs with strangers. Sungod Lawn, the most popular public open space identified in this project, lacks a crucial characteristic of a third space: informality. The social activities are planned and do not promote socialization with other members of the community.

Although many public open spaces in this project are not considered a third spaces, they still serve essential roles for students. These spaces reveal the need for a new category of space outside of the three types of spaces present in the traditional third place framework originally created by Oldenburg (1989). Spaces such as the Center Hall Courtyard and Old Student Center

Hammocks almost exclusively encourages individual relaxation, an escape from the bustle of UCSD's campus. These spaces are highly valued for students, generating positive emotions and giving students places to relax. Instead of serving the role of a traditional third place, public open spaces at UCSD give students the opportunity to interact with and benefit from the mental health benefits of greenery and create an overall positive environment for students in college. Outdoor greenery distinguishes public open space from traditional third spaces which are typically, seen as indoor places such as coffee shops or bookstores. While these typical third places provide a comfortable place indoors to socialize with fellow community members, the draw of public open space is their quality of being outdoors with in an amongst greenery and perceived natural environments, which promote a feeling of quiet relaxation, shared alone or with friends, unique to these spaces.

### *Place Attachment and Public Open Space*

The crucial role these spaces despite their lack of role as a third space is shown through the place attachment students feel towards public open space on campus. Students used words such as "favorite", "magical", "love",

"community", and "ownership" to describe the places they selected in their responses. These words reveal deep and meaningful connections and bonds students have formed with certain spaces on campus. Especially students in upper class levels, certain spaces have been consistent parts of their lives since the beginning of their undergraduate education. These spaces play hyper-individualized roles for these individuals, creating positive memories and emotions permanently attached to the location. Many students describe going out of their way to visit these spaces, consistent with previous research finding the benefit place attachment has in encouraging people to go outdoors and use public places further and promote greater livability in urban environments (Moulay et al. 2018).

Place attachment is facilitated by consistent and meaningful use of a particular space by individuals. Therefore, factors that attract students to use public open spaces will likely contribute to the process of place attachment. Many of these factors were identified by students through their discussion of positive and negative elements within the spaces they selected, including positive emotions, natural elements, social elements, and logistical elements.

Busy and vibrant spaces with a great deal of human activity seems to attract more human activity. Many participants described enjoying "people watching" and other forms of usage occurring alongside their individual use of the space. Jane Jacobs, discussing urban parks writes, "The more successfully a city mingles everyday diversity of uses and users in its everyday streets, the more successfully,

### *Greenery and Public Open Space*

Greenery is by far one of the most important elements for public open space at UCSD. In this study, almost every participant identified greenery as a positive characteristic in the spaces they identified. Greenery is the second most mentioned positive element in this project, trailing only slightly to positive emotions. Even then, many of the positive emotions identified by students, such as the feeling of calm and relaxation, is tied to the effects of greenery on mental well-being. It is no surprise then that the only space identified multiple times by students is Sungod Lawn. This may be because of a variety of factors, including the positive elements identified by students, such as its accessible location and its size. However, this may also be explained by other, more personal reasons. Perhaps Sungod Lawn typifies the idea most students have of

casually (and economically) its people thereby enliven and support well-located parks that can thus give back grace and delight to their neighborhoods instead of vacuity" (Jacobs 1961, 111). In other words, people attract people, spaces which are well-loved and well-used attract more users to the space. Popular spaces such as Sungod Lawn are centrally located, surrounded by a mixture of other uses such as classrooms, food vendors, and residential halls, which make it accessible for a wide variety of students to utilize the space and create activity. This activity in turn, seems to attract more activity, creating a positive cycle of usage of the space. On the other hand, spaces which are quieter seem to have more difficulty attracting new users. For example, the participant who selected Old Student Center Hammocks discussed feeling uncertain about entering the space because they had never seen anyone else use it.

Similarly, many students discussed the presence of a widely accepted name as being conducive to use by other students. Spaces such as the Old Student Center Hammocks, which lack an official or community recognized name make it difficult for students to share with their peers, perhaps contributing to its limited use by students. On the other hand, Sungod Lawn, an iconic space on campus enjoys exceptional recognition by students, who discuss the space as being widely recognized, even by people who are not fully familiar with the UCSD campus. Participants in interviews pointed out that simply having a name makes it easy for students to identify the space, situate themselves in the context of the rest of the campus, and use the space as a gathering place.

public open space: a large, park-like, open area dominated by greenery, which creates a feeling of “being connected to nature”. Students seem to have predetermined notions of open space and expect areas which are open and grassy serving as places to gather and play sports. Despite many outdoor spaces on campus being maintained, human-created spaces, students identified the “natural look” of the environment as a reason they liked a space. Sungod Lawn, the most popular space identified acts as a central park for students, a large, manicured space allowing students to easily access “nature”.

The greenery elements of Sungod Lawn and other green spaces may attract students due to the mental health, well-being, and restorative associated with greenery in open spaces (Holt et al. 2019; Lau et al. 2014; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). Grass seems to be particularly important to many students. Two participants who selected Sungod Lawn both submitted highly focused pictures of the Lawn's grass and discussed the crucial element of grass in this space. Grass seems to serve a dual purpose: (1) acting as a space for students to interact with greenery and (2) acting as seating and facilitating group socialization and individual relaxation. Grass and other types of greenery are essential parts of public open space, a core characteristic which allows these areas to be unique spaces of relaxation and calm.

## Conclusion

This project begins to uncover the use of, and the personal meanings space has for college students at UCSD using photovoice methodology. Despite its very small sample size, the results of this project indicate that public open spaces at UCSD are diverse and serve a wide variety of roles for students. For UCSD, a rapidly urbanizing campus with a growing student population, public open space is increasingly important for students for its mental health and restorative benefits. Factors such as greenery and enclosure create a calm environment for students to escape from their busy day to day lives. These spaces are diverse in type and role, varying between students in their understanding and usage of the space. Although these spaces are not third spaces by the definition created by Oldenburg, they are still crucial to the campus landscape and represent a different type of space unique to outdoor, public open spaces. Due to the unique characteristics of this type of space, UCSD students exhibit place attachment with many of the spaces they highlighted, showing deep and positive bonds between individuals and diverse spaces on campus. Students who form attachment to these spaces and interact with the greenery within them benefit from the community building and well-being benefits of these spaces, making them important for the student experience. Public open spaces should not be evaluated by the number of students who use them, rather, they should be judged based on the meanings they have for students and the deeper connections they create between people and place. Smaller, quieter spaces with less users are equally as important to the campus landscape as larger and more popular spaces. Students perceive these spaces differently, using them for different purposes depending on their design, therefore, a wide variety of spaces should be included on campuses to fully meet the diverse needs of students.

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## Appendix A. Interview Questions

### Statement of Informed Consent

You are participating in an individual research project through UCSD TRELS studying student perceptions of public open space on the UCSD campus. The data collected from you will be anonymous and none of the photos or responses in the interview will be attached to your name. The findings will be presented in an academic paper. This interview will be recorded for data analysis purposes but will not be shared to anyone, The recording will be on my personal device and will not be accessed by anyone except for me. After the end of Spring Quarter, the recordings will be deleted.

## Interview Questions

1. Photo of the space
  - a. Tell me about this photo. Why did you take it?
  - b. How often do you visit this space?
  - c. What brings you to this space?
  - d. How do you feel when you are in this space?
  - e. Do you have a notable memory of when you used this space?
2. 1-2 Photos of specific characteristics in the space
  - a. Tell me about these photos. Why did you take them?
  - b. How do you feel about these specific characteristics?
  - c. What does this characteristic add or detract to/from this space?
  - d. What role do these characteristics play in this space?
3. From your perspective, what would make this space better?
4. After this discussion, is there anything else you want to add about this space?

## Appendix B. Photo Collection Form

### Studying Student Perceptions of Public Open Spaces at UCSD

Hello! Thank you for participating in my project. For this section, you will be asked to upload a few photos about a notable public open space at UCSD. After you upload your photos, I will reach out and organize a time for a follow up interview. If you choose to participate in this project, I will buy you a regular sized drink (Tapx) as a thank you!

For the purposes of this project, **public open space** can be defined as any space that is not taken up by a building. This includes, but is **not limited to**: lawns, plazas, quads, squares, green space, walkways, etc.

As you take photos, think about why a particular space is notable/your favorite and what kind of feelings are elicited when you are in the space.

jdt001@ucsd.edu [Switch account](#)

The name, email, and photo associated with your Google account will be recorded when you upload files and submit this form

\* Indicates required question

Name \*

Your answer

Phone Number \*

Your answer

Take and upload a picture of a notable/your favorite public open space \* at UCSD.

[Add file](#)

Take and upload 1-2 photos of specific elements within the space. \*

[Add file](#)

# Jarvis Tran

## Biography

I am a fourth year Urban Studies and Planning major with a minor in History. At UCSD, I am co-president of Urban Changemakers, a placemaking student org, focused on making spaces on campus more vibrant and inclusive. After college, I plan to work as an urban planner at the local municipal level before returning to school and pursuing a PhD in Urban Planning, doing research and teaching. My research interests include: public space, place attachment, third spaces, and how we influence the built environment and how the built environment influences us.

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