

## Discovering Restorative Spaces on Campus to Reduce Stress for First-Year College Students

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the importance of restorative spaces on campuses in helping first-year college students cope more effectively with the various stress factors impacting their daily lives. Using Medgar Evers College as a case study, it explores specific common and uncommon spaces students visited to recuperate from day-to-day stresses, pre and during COVID-19. The results will ultimately identify and promote campus spaces that are healthy means for retreat, destressing, and rejuvenation for first-year students. The findings revealed that the College's Library—though a place to study—was considered the most restorative space on campus, where students retreated to reduce stress.

**Keywords:** Campus Spaces, Restorative Environments, Stress, Destressing, Environmental Psychology

### 1. Introduction

The environment can serve as a setting for socialization, an exchange of learning, an avenue to gain knowledge, and a place of solace or restoration. For many students, college is a place of learning but can also be a refuge from their home life challenges. Many researchers “have found strong evidence linking natural environments exposure to recovery from stress” (Payne, Loi & Thorsteinsson, 2020). Moreover, other researchers who focused on the psychological stresses in environments posit that, besides natural environments, many other spaces can be transformative (Bowler, 2010; Korpela et al., 2017; Thompson, 2011). Generally, experiencing the natural environments—grass, trees, flowers, or the ocean—ultimately are considered restorative places. However, what happens when students attend institutions in urban settings surrounded by brick and mortar with minimal greenery? Where can these students attain similar levels of daily restoration on their campus?

Research on Environmental Psychology was used as a foundation for exploring and addressing these questions. Environmental Psychology is defined as the study of the interrelationship between the physical environment and the human behavior (Gifford, 1994). Furthermore, Cassidy (2013) emphasized that “Environmental Psychology is as much concerned with the social environment as the physical environment” (p.4).

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Therefore, within the margins of Environmental Psychology, a restorative environment is any physical space that becomes calming and settling to one's energy and mental state. Although research and literature on restorative environments primarily focus on nature (Gifford, 1995), spaces that are not natural environments engender similar destressing and calming effects. In defining the relationship between nature and the environment, Kaplan (1995) identified four components of restorative environments: being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility. Understanding the effects of the natural environment is essential to determine whether the same results can be experienced in settings which are not considered 'natural.' Kaplan posited that "Natural settings are often the preferred destinations for extended restorative opportunities. The seaside, the mountains, lakes, streams, forests, and meadows are all idyllic places for getting away" (p. 6). Finding solace or 'getting away' in common and uncommon places and spaces in an urban setting without greenery was not reflected in Kaplan's prior research. Instead, in most cases, the natural environment is created in the confines of urban spaces. Therefore, Kaplan and other researchers suggested that adding a water fountain, giant trees, and open lawn areas are highly recommended to add greenery and natural elements to urban settings.

In contrast, everyday spaces such as the classroom, the library, the staircases, offices, and college centers are not viewed as spaces that can elicit any feelings of therapeutic orientation. These spaces are first and foremost used in the business of college life and can be argued to create more stress. For example, the heightened anxiety of exams/tests in the classroom or unstimulating lectures associated with some classrooms. Additionally, the offices are set up to serve students and the College's business needs in practical ways. These include filling out forms, answering questions, or directing students to appropriate offices. Yet, some researchers have noted that these experiences do not offer restoration.

However, the library has practical and multiple usages, including an embedded restorative aspect. According to Khoo et al. (2016), libraries are used to concentrate, collaborate, and contemplate. If arranged suitably, they can be structured and embraced for multiple usages such as study group meetings, low one-to-one chatting, reading, creating, researching, completing assignments, and finding solace between classes. Additionally, many college students who have their portable technology devices may only need the use of quiet, inspiring spaces without the clutter of bookshelves or towering monitors. Moreover, within a college's environment, unconventional spaces that are not considered restorative environments can have transformative features in helping to reduce the stress students in urban settings may face daily.

### **1.1 Medgar Evers College's Environmental Setting**

Medgar Evers College (MEC) of The City University of New York, a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI) comprised of 72% females and 28% males, is in an urban environment. However, there are spaces within its campus to allow students to feel calm and destress from their everyday frustrations and tensions. These spaces include trees, a small, enclosed area of lawns, a gaming area, lounge rooms, sitting areas for students to read or think, as well as a Welcome Center like a Starbucks Café setting. Presently, additional spaces of open greenery are created to minimize the view of buildings and constant road traffic. While these efforts are a welcomed addition to aid in giving students places to retreat and restore their energies, this study explored uncommon areas, which are not considered natural, in the College that may provide a sense of release and relaxation.

Even though classrooms are not considered common restorative spaces, they are the most used space on most campuses. Thus, this space would most likely affect students' mindset and psychological well-being. Bogerd et al. (2020) explored this fact in their field experiments, which looked at the effects of greening the classrooms on students' attention, wellbeing, and perceived environmental quality. In terms of the students' wellbeing, they noted that "all students reported low levels of stress, fatigue, and health complaints" (p. 9). This was found to indicate that attending one lecture alone did not necessitate the need for restoration. Although the findings did not show a significant change in students' wellbeing, it did highlight the fact that "students may benefit more from nature in the education setting at times and places when there is a higher need to unwind, relax, or restore, or from indoor nature at places that are used for recovery activities such as study break spaces" (p. 9). Further, finding unconventional spaces like indoor shrubbery and water fountains can be another way to help students reduce their stresses.

## **1.2 Spaces for Destressing on the MEC Campus**

While the College experience is meant to be an exciting and explorative period, it can create anxiety and stress. Stress is defined in many ways, but the definition most closely aligned with this research study is Lazarus' (1983) definition which includes the process of appraising events and assessing one's potential to control or cope with the event or settings. Many colleges, including urban settings, have created counseling centers, lounges, game rooms, cafes, and other spaces to combat and help students reduce their stress levels. At Medgar Evers College, the spaces have taken the form of a Welcome Center, Women Center, Male Development and Empowerment Center, secluded small highchair spaces spread out on each campus building, the Advising Center, and a Freshman Year Program. Freshman Year Program (FYP) was established in 1991 to provide a smoother transition into college life for incoming first-year students. The ultimate goal was to reduce the stress of entering first-year students acclimating to college life's rigors within the context of academic and co-curricular activities. The FYP program aims to create that bridge from the mindset of a high school student to a disciplined college scholar with knowledge of self, college life, and career pathways and promotes opportunities for bonding and integration through curricular and co-curricular activities. FYP surveys have shown that this connection helps to reduce some likely stresses of college life amongst first-year students. It continues to be a vital part of incoming students' connection to the college and their classmates. This space and many others allow students the opportunity to divert their attention away from the rigors of academia to everyday exchanges. It is not that students do not discuss their classes or professors in those spaces, but they can do it in a place where they feel comfortable and confident that their conversations will not negatively affect their grades.

Gallagher (1993) suggests that "places have power, and our surroundings shape our thoughts, emotions, and actions and can serve as a place of healing" (p. 23). Further, Proshansky (1983) adds that a place can create a connection and attachment, reducing everyday stress. Medgar Evers College can provide adequate spaces to help students cope with the daily rigors of their lives while they complete assignments and fulfill coursework. Therefore, it is essential to uncover and understand the restorative spaces on the MEC campus that serve as resources for reducing stresses, particularly for first-year students as they navigate their new environments.

Many colleges have created natural spaces outside the campus of verdant openings comprised of trees, lawns, fountains, and quiet benches to help students with their stressful moments. However, Medgar Evers

College is a small college in an urban area, so there is a lack of verdure; therefore, the research proposes to find other spaces on campus, uncommon and common, where students go to retreat and rejuvenate. The purpose of the research is to identify spaces first-year students retreat to lower their mental, emotional, and physical stressors in their daily lives.

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

This research was done mainly with students in the Freshman Year Program at Medgar Evers College, who completed at least one semester, and focused on the actual physical spaces at the College. All focus group and survey participants were enrolled at MEC, an urban college where many incoming students are required to complete Freshman Seminar 101 and 102 offered through the Freshman Year Program. The focus group consisted of six (6) females and two (2) males, representing students from upper-level psychology courses or seniors taking Freshman Seminar 102 classes in spring 2020. Its goal was to gather information about specific spaces students retreated to restore their energies before, between, or after classes. The responses were used to create the survey administered to freshman students in their second semester. Therefore, six (6) male and thirty-six (36) female students completed the online survey. Forty-one of the survey participants were enrolled in Spring 2020, of which four participants were taking all online classes. When the survey was initially administered, one student was not registered in Spring 2020 but was enrolled in fall 2020. The age range amongst the participants included ten students (20 years and younger), twenty-two students (21 years–30 years), three students (31 years–35 years), three students (36 years–40 years), two students (41 years–45 years), and two students (older than 45 years). While the Medgar Evers College student population is not entirely traditional age, the survey included demographic questions to gauge each participant's age, personal, and professional responsibilities. All the survey participants were enrolled in a Freshman Seminar 102 course and had attended the College for more than one semester.

### **2.2 Procedure**

IRB approval was obtained to perform two focus groups and disseminate surveys to Freshman Seminar 102 and Experimental Psychology courses. Prior consent was garnered from the instructors of the courses, and the recruitment flyer was created and shared with their students. Focus group participants were told that their insights were needed to explore places and spaces they visited or continued to visit throughout their tenure to destress and for relaxation. They were also told they would receive a USB drive as an incentive to participate. The researcher distributed the flyer to two (2) sections of Experimental Psychology and four (4) sections of the FS 102 courses to identify prospective participants for the focus groups. A total of eight (8) senior students volunteered to participate. The primary objective of the focus group was to elicit and generate questions for the survey instrument. The focus group was also intended to unveil the language and terms used in referring to the spaces on campus. Those terms were applied on the survey questionnaire to effectually explore and identify the areas students frequent on the College's campus to help reduce the stressors they may feel from their home, work, and school lives. Informed consent for the focus group participants was obtained via an audio recording.

The focus group was audio-taped to enable the researcher to freely interact with participants while effectively documenting all relevant discussions to the study. The specific questions discussed in the focus group, which informed the formatting of the survey questionnaire, are listed in the table below.

<u>Focus Group Leading Questions</u>
1) When you feel stressed, where do you go to feel better? On and off-campus?
2) What space allows you to feel relaxed?
3) What kind of place allows you to feel relaxed?
4) On the campus of Medgar Evers College, what are the top three (3) places that make you feel better? Which places restore your energy?
5) On the campus of Medgar Evers College, what are the top three (3) spaces that make you feel better? Which of these spaces restore your energy?
6) Where would you recommend on campus for first-time students to visit to restore their: a. Physical Needs b. Mental Needs c. Emotional Needs?
7) Does this place make you feel more attached to the College? Why or why not?
8) When you have free time between classes, where do you go on campus to pass the time?
9) What kind of activities on campus make you feel rejuvenated? For example, attending Presidential Lecture Series, Fairs, Athletic Events, Students Life Events?

Figure 1: Focus group leading questions

All the places and spaces identified by the first focus group participants were included in the survey. Unfortunately, efforts to engage in a second focus group, as planned, were thwarted by the sudden change to remote learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

The survey questionnaire was created in the summer of 2020. At the start of Fall 2020, Freshman Seminar 102 instructors were reminded to announce the research project to solicit students' participation. Again, the survey was distributed to eight sections of FS 102 courses. Initially, projections estimated a minimum of 120 face-to-face surveys completed; however, the surveys were distributed online and garnered a response rate of 42 students because of the pandemic. A passage to get informed consent was included with the survey. All data collected was anonymous and there were no identifying markers. Students who participated in the survey were instructed to email the researcher to request their USB drives.

### 3. Analysis Results

Pre-COVID, most Medgar Evers College students spent about 6—30 hours a week on their campus grounds to attend classes, study, take part in extra and co-curricular activities, obtain tutoring, speak to their professors, and socialize with their classmates. These various activities can deplete one's energy and raise stress levels. MEC's institutional research data have shown that students also enter the College with

psycho-socio and economic pressures from numerous family dynamic factors and obligations. They can include maintaining multiple jobs and responsibilities to spouses, children, parents, and grandparents while juggling full-time student enrollment. So, where can these college students go on campus for mental, emotional, and physical rejuvenation? This is especially important for students in urban settings. Banning et al. (2010) hypothesize that healthy environments are “places to relax, rewind, recuperate, unwind, and feel safe.” In their study, they found students located their restorative spaces on “. . . the campus’ natural and built environments and surrounding natural landscapes” such spaces as “water features, sculpture gardens, and grassy, treed/park areas” (p. 911).

However, many commuter college students tend to focus on ‘college businesses on campus and anticipate going home to rejuvenate and renew their energies. On the other hand, others may not have a home or refuge they can return to that would provide psychological and physical renewal due to the psycho-socio-economic challenges in their respective lives. Therefore, even though natural environments are said to be the most restorative spaces, Medgar Evers College students may not have the opportunity to experience those benefits daily apart from their campus environment.

The discussions in the focus group and the survey findings yielded similar results. Of the fifteen (15) different places and spaces on campus, most students cited the library as the space to destress and relax. The second place noted was an empty classroom on campus. The eight students who joined the focus group were very candid in discussing places and spaces they enjoy visiting on campus to feel relaxed and rejuvenated. Many of the spaces they described were places of solitude, with a minimal number of people, excluding the library. The library is always active—students and staff members quietly moving in and out of the different levels and spaces. There are also rooms where classes are held in the library; therefore, before the pandemic, it was customary to see clusters of 25 students walking through the library to attend class. Both students in the focus group and those who completed the survey specified that the basement and top floor of the library were the most frequently visited space by students to “take a breath.” The library’s main floor was used not for restoration but to complete assignments, meet friends, attend a class, tutoring, or gain quick access to a computer or printer. Students recorded other places such as staircases, as well as professors’ offices—possibly during office hours—as ideal places to spend free time between classes. One participant’s comment was echoed by many students in the focus group; the student stated, “being in the school library helped eased my mind off of things while I didn’t have class during that time and focused on preparing for the next class later on in the day.” The library represented a place of quietness and contemplation, but also academic engagement (Khoo et al., 2012). Other studies supported this finding; for example, Soria et al. (2017) stated that there is “support for the ongoing importance of students’ use of academic libraries and the critical roles that libraries play in students’ academic development, engagement, skills, and achievement” (p. 2). The findings showed that while the library itself represents a place of learning, it can also be a place first-year students visit to destress, rejuvenate, and become immersed in academic engagement.

Regarding uncommon restorative places, the result showed the library to be a place of interest for most students, irrespective of age. The Medgar Evers College Office of Institutional Research and Assessment Snapshot (2020-2021) highlighted that an average of 30% of the students are over 30 years old, and 13% are between the ages of 26-30. Although student-designated spaces are created on the campus, such as the

student lounges and the student game room, many students did not select these areas as places they used for restoration. This suggests that these places are under-utilized and may not satisfy the purpose for which they were created.

### **3.1 Before COVID and During COVID**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected responses to the survey as it was created when COVID did not exist and therefore had to be revised to include questions before and after the pandemic. Initially, the study focused on on-campus spaces; however, students commented on off-campus places they go to regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequent places students cited for restoration off-campus were parks, cafes, gyms, churches, and friends' homes. These places were located between the College campus and their homes. When students were asked to compare whether spaces on campus were less stressful than at home, most students stated they felt the same stress. Whereas, when asked to compare whether the various spaces on campus provided opportunity to destress and be rejuvenated, an overwhelming majority selected the library. The spaces students retreated to destress at home were their rooms, the bathrooms, and the kitchen tables. Students who stated that they used their bathrooms to relax indicated that this was the only place they could be alone.

In comparison, other students indicated that they used their kitchen table along with other family members. In the places of employment, students listed they visited the break rooms and cafeterias for rejuvenation. Thus, the spaces students mentioned on-campus, off-campus, at home, or in their places of employment have similar characteristics and can provide an opportunity for solace.

Since the survey was administered at the beginning of the COVID pandemic in March, April, and May 2020, students were asked to reflect on the spaces on and off campus that they felt made them feel less stressed. They detailed they visited various places in the Brooklyn area before COVID; however, after the pandemic, they were restricted to their rooms or close areas around their homes because of lockdown mandates. For example, in response to the question: where do you go to destress outside of campus? Students specified shopping malls, visiting parks, spas, restaurants, and friends' houses; however, these same students stated that due to the pandemic, they retreated to the balconies of their homes, bedrooms, porches, and bathrooms, while some continued to visit the parks. When specifically asked whether the home was considered more relaxing and less stressful than any place on campus, 21% indicated that home was where they retreated in their day-to-day life to restore energy and to feel rejuvenated (before COVID-19). When asked where they went to relax and regain their energy (since they were not on campus), these same students responded that it could be a room in their home or anywhere outside. This indicated either their rooms or kitchen were the places they felt most comfortable and relaxed.

Even though 76% of the students in the study were under 30, there were 67% of the students who conveyed that they did not socialize on campus. In contrast, a few students said they missed visiting spaces on-campus, deemed as restorative such as the Carroll Street lounges, Women's Development Center, Welcome Center, and cafeteria. In general, 40% of the respondents shared that the Carroll Street building was the most calming, Bedford Building was listed second with 31%, AB1 was third with 2.4%, and the Student Affairs Building was ranked fourth at 2.4%. Notably, the Carroll Street Building houses a students' game room, lounge, gym, swimming pool, and Starbucks area are potential reasons this building

ranked number one. Whereas, the Student Affairs Building has mostly business offices including financial aid, bursar, registrar, and the admissions offices.

#### **4. Conclusions**

For many, the natural environments—which include places with trees, water, and various forms of greenery—provide the most restorative places. This study attempted to find the common and uncommon places and spaces on the Medgar Evers College (MEC) campus, with few natural environment features, which help students to destress from their everyday struggles. As previously noted, the findings of this study suggested that the library was the place most conducive for restorative relaxation on campus.

Furthermore, the results hinted that the students' lounges on campus were being underutilized. This study did not reveal the reasons for this; consequently, administering a campus climate survey might gauge students' perceptions and needs for restorative spaces on campus. This method will ensure that efforts to meet students' needs are more intentional. Again, students cited their bathrooms and kitchen tables as places to destress at home. This was informative and showed that some students found what they needed being alone in the bathroom, while others found solace at their kitchen tables where family members were in the space. This study prompted the fact that MEC students face many challenges to academic success in and outside the home. Given that the College is in an urban environment, it is imperative to create specific restorative spaces to lessen their stresses and ultimately support their academic goals and development become imperative.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have limited student access to restorative places in and outside the home because of school and businesses disruptions and lockdown mandates. In addition, their responses to specific questions may have been influenced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the students who stated that home was considered less stressful than any place on campus—may have increased to over 40% if the survey was done during the pandemic instead of the beginning. As their realities changed and they were increasingly restricted to their homes, they adjusted to a new normal. Considering the pandemic, being home became less stressful than going outside, where the fear of contracting COVID-19 was heightened.

Lastly, the belief that the natural environment is the most restorative is understandable (Collado et al., 2017; Korpela et al., 2008) as many people acknowledge that they feel less stress in more nature-fledged places and spaces (Olafsdottir et al., 2017). However, restorative places can be common or uncommon. Therefore, this study hopes that attention is given to all the areas students regularly visit and restructure them to be restorative spaces and reduce everyday stressors.

#### **5. Limitations**

The sample study size for both the focus group and the survey was smaller than intended. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred amid data collection and, subsequently limited student participation. Another limitation of this study was that restorative scales were not used along with the survey questions. While most studies have used Perceived Restorative Scales (PRS) to measure restoration effects in their participants (Berto, 2014), this research relied on discussions from a focus group and a

survey aligned with the research objective. Thus, in future research, participants should be asked to identify how they feel in the spaces they identify as restorative environments.

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