DESIGN FOR BELONGING: HOW TO BUILD INCLUSION AND COLLABORATION IN YOUR COMMUNITIES

Reviewed by Becky Seabrook

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Inclusion and collaboration are two critical areas of conversation in the museum field, so it was intriguing to hear that a book exploring the intersection of inclusion, collaboration, and design had been published.

That book is *Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities*, and it is part of a series of books produced by the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (a.k.a. Stanford d.school). With a companion website (designforbelonging.com), a hashtag (#DesignForBelonging), and an assortment of podcasts, there are a variety of ways to engage with the fundamental premise espoused in the book: it is possible *and* desirable to design for belonging.

Author Susie Wise claims that a sense of belonging is both "the thing that matters most" in life and "the ultimate goal of DEI work." While the author acknowledges that belonging is a feeling and that you cannot design a feeling, she suggests it is possible to be more thoughtful and deliberate in our approach to design in order to increase the likelihood that people will experience it. She challenges the reader to shift their focus from solely objective measures, instead suggesting that feelings of belonging be used to gauge the true effectiveness of experience design. According to Wise, designing for belonging is first and foremost a relational problem, not a technical problem. While data can help us measure our progress, it is not the focus. Connection is.

a **Stanford d.school** guide

DESIGN FOR BELONGING

HOW TO BUILD INCLUSION AND COLLABORATION IN YOUR COMMUNITIES

SUSIE WISE

Design for Belonging:
How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities
Susie Wise
Illustrations by Rose Jaffe
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In keeping with this premise, the author begins by welcoming the reader with an introductory section ("Welcome! You Belong Here.") that includes an illustration of the author's "host-heroes of belonging," a group of 13 individuals from a variety of backgrounds who have inspired her thinking. Wise draws inspiration for the host-heroes moniker from the work of Margaret Wheatley, a thought leader on organization and community who posits that the true role of a leader is not to save people ("hero") but to bring them together in the service of dialogue and action ("host").

The illustration of the host-heroes, the first of many throughout the book, was done by Rose Jaffe and helps to set a fun, positive, and approachable tone. In "Welcome! You Belong Here." Wise introduces the concept of belonging and its opposite, othering, terms which were coined by one of her host-heroes, john a. powell of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley. She then introduces three key concepts in the book, each of which will be explored in its own section: "Feeling Belonging," "Seeing Belonging," and "Shaping Belonging."

The first section ("Feeling Belonging") introduces the work of host-heroes Victor Cary, Dr. Camille Farrington, Christine Wong Yap, and bell hooks, and explores the framework of belonging/othering in greater depth. Wise provides examples from her own work and challenges readers to recognize instances of belonging and othering in their own lives. She speaks to the role of identity in belonging/othering, as well as external factors that are in place

in our communities, such as social structures and policies.

The second section of the book ("Seeing Belonging") focuses on "moments of belonging" and the work of host-heroes Laverne Cox, Aleta Hayes, Boots Riley, Peter Block, john a. powell, and Dr. Brené Brown. Wise identifies nine moments of belonging, which she defines as points along one's journey where there is an opportunity to build a sense of belonging: invitation, entering, participating, code switching, contributing, flowing, dissenting, repairing, and diverging and exiting.

In the final section of the book ("Shaping Belonging"), Wise focuses on the process of designing for belonging and the work of host-heroes Dr. Claude Steele, Dr. Carolyn Finney, and Dr. David Yeager. Wise introduces a list of "levers of design," or tools that are available to get you closer to your design goals. Her initial list of levers includes space, roles, events, rituals, grouping, communications, clothing, food, and schedules and rhythms, though she acknowledges that the list is not exhaustive and is meant only as a starting point for the design process.

In terms of what this book is and is not, it is neither a comprehensive review nor a deep dive on the topic of inclusion and collaboration. Rather, it introduces a basic framework that encourages a more deliberate approach to designing for inclusion and collaboration. Positioned as a "how-to" resource, the reflection questions and exercises interspersed throughout the

book's sections provide the reader with an opportunity to check their assumptions while the moments of belonging and levers of design are meant to help direct the design process.

This book is not specific to exhibition design. It was written for a general, cross-sector audience and is geared toward experiences that are mediated by people for people. Most examples are more closely aligned to programs or team building than to design of a physical space.

That said, there are certainly concepts within the book that can be applied to exhibition design, and perhaps more importantly, to the exhibition-design process. The moments of belonging and levers of design could be valuable resources in the creation of a more inclusive and collaborative design process. They could also be used when developing complementary programming or docent-mediated experiences. As a museum professional whose responsibilities extend beyond exhibitions to the holistic guest experience, I saw opportunities to apply this framework across museum departments, including but not limited to marketing, education, community engagement, guest services, and museum culture at large.

In terms of moments of belonging, for example, I was intrigued by the section on entering. Be it the entry to the museum or the entry to an exhibition, I found Aleta Hayes's suggestion that, "how one enters a space is a profound moment of design," quite compelling. It's helped our team to plan for a new entrance for a permanent exhibit gallery, and I've shared it with our Guest Services team as a catalyst to re-envision that aspect of our guest experience.

On the other hand, within the levers of design, the section on food focused on the literal act of sharing food to build a sense of inclusion. Given that it's often impractical, undesirable, and/or contractually prohibited to have food within an exhibition space, this example might be more applicable to a team-building event, museum café menu, or layout considerations.

Though their relevance to exhibition design in particular and museums more generally varies, these lists serve as a great reminder that it's not just what we do but *why* and *how* we do it that should be top of mind if we are serious about creating true spaces of belonging in our communities.

What has resonated most with me, however, is the sentiment that Wise chose as the first sentence of the book. "Belonging begins when we acknowledge each other as people." Beautiful in its simplicity and inspiring in its belligerent optimism, it's a sentiment that can serve as a guide for the difficult but necessary work that's happening across the sector. ▍