

paradoxes in vertical schools

open and closed

The glass walls of classrooms, walkways, stairwells and balconies create feelings of openness and togetherness. Openness means that noise and smells can travel. Sometimes these comfort (music, cooking) and sometimes lead to sensory overwhelm. Closed classrooms and toilet cubicles offer spaces for privacy and control of the sensory and open input when needed but only if there is access when needed and locks work.

Privacy is the ability to control who or what comes into your personal space, then access to some privacy is essential for psychological wellbeing and adolescent identity development.

reset and energy out

Being in close proximity to others requires a high level of self-regulation and co-regulation. Some students told us that to be able to focus, they need to first "get my energy out" which then enables them to "reset".

Playful energetic exploration happened on stairs, in corridors, and in the gym or nearby parks through jumping, chasing and running. Other times "reset" involved taking a minute for themselves to find an inner calmness and self-control.

wary and secure

Being up high means you can see who is coming near your school grounds and wonder if they are a stranger to be wary of. Regular requirements to practice lock down drills is a reminder to everyone that there may be times when you are at risk in school.

With high visibility and permeability, students point out that there is no where to hide. Yet at the same time many students felt secure because they can see their teachers nearby. There is low risk of losing things even if a laptop is left, as the school or classroom has managed access points.

see and be seen

Vertical transparency with glass and atria helps connect the outside and the inside.

You can see the world, the city, the sky and activity beyond the school. You can also see many of the other grade levels and activity within the school.

There can be a feeling of transcendence, of awe and connection, of theatre and being on display.

alone together

The density of being close together for a lot of the day leads to an urge to breakout to "be ourselves for a little bit" seeking out spaces with prospect (views) and refuge.

Being ourselves can mean playing or quiet contemplation.

When many students want to use the same space for conflicting purposes, some students can feel a sense of injustice and may dominate, foul or sabotage a space to try and keep others away. Some places hold strong memories of friendships.

close and far

Vertical permeability means everything looks close, but it takes a lot of time and effort to get places. Vertical planes means gravity. The feeling of being inside all day can mean you lose track of time as light and temperature remain constant.

Students can feel anxious that they may be late to class or feel unsafe if they rush through a crowd. Yet the visibility of open staircases and atria allows you to see where to go, find your way and see your friends along the journey.

flexible and fixed

When the art class is held in the science lab, or there are regular class swaps to share facilities, it can feel like the whole school is your classroom.

Density means that there needs to be multiple uses for lots of spaces – corridors as classrooms, and furniture that can be moved.

As this lack of predictability can cause some students and teachers stress, the flexibility is balanced out by fixed routines, shared language and posters, and opportunities to try new things.

me. meaningful

I feel motivated. My world makes sense.

ma. manageable

The environment (including teachers) is a resource that helps me do what I want and need to do. It helps me cope by minimising stimuli and stress. I can manage my life as a student.

co. comprehensible

The physical/social environment at school makes sense to me. There is transparency, consistency, constancy, and predictability.