

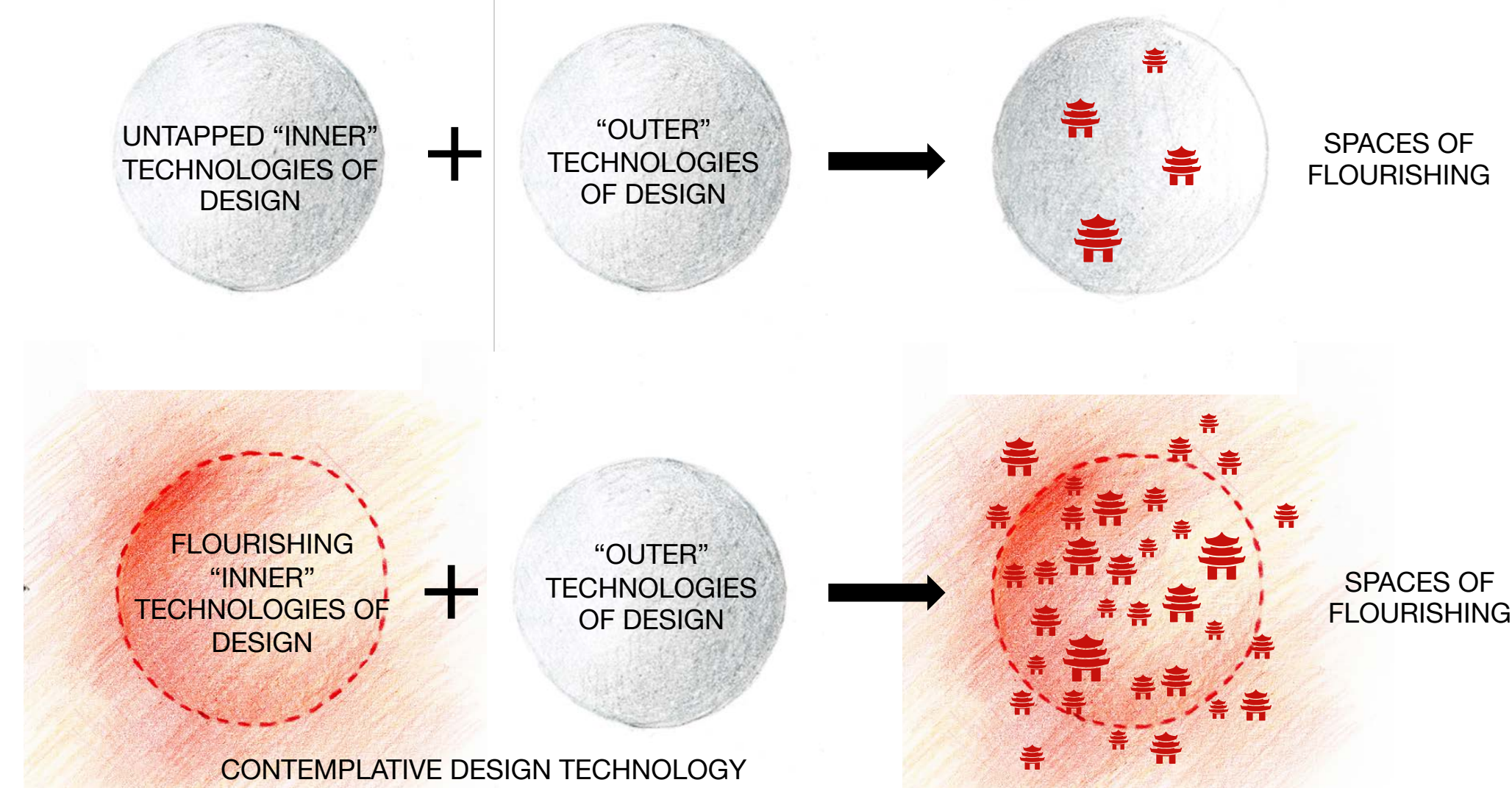
The Contemplative Designer Framework: A Novel Pedagogy to Empower Designers to Flourish and Design Spaces of Flourishing

- Sarika Bajoria, Adjunct Professor at Parsons School of Constructed Environments and University of New Haven I Founder, Contemplative Designer I Principal, Sarika Bajoria Unlimited Design Firm
- Dara Cunningham, PhD. Principal, Neuroarchitecture
- Laura Malinin, PhD. AIA Associate Professor of Interior Architecture & Design at Colorado State University

THE CONTEMPLATIVE DESIGNER FRAMEWORK AND PEDAGOGY

Background:

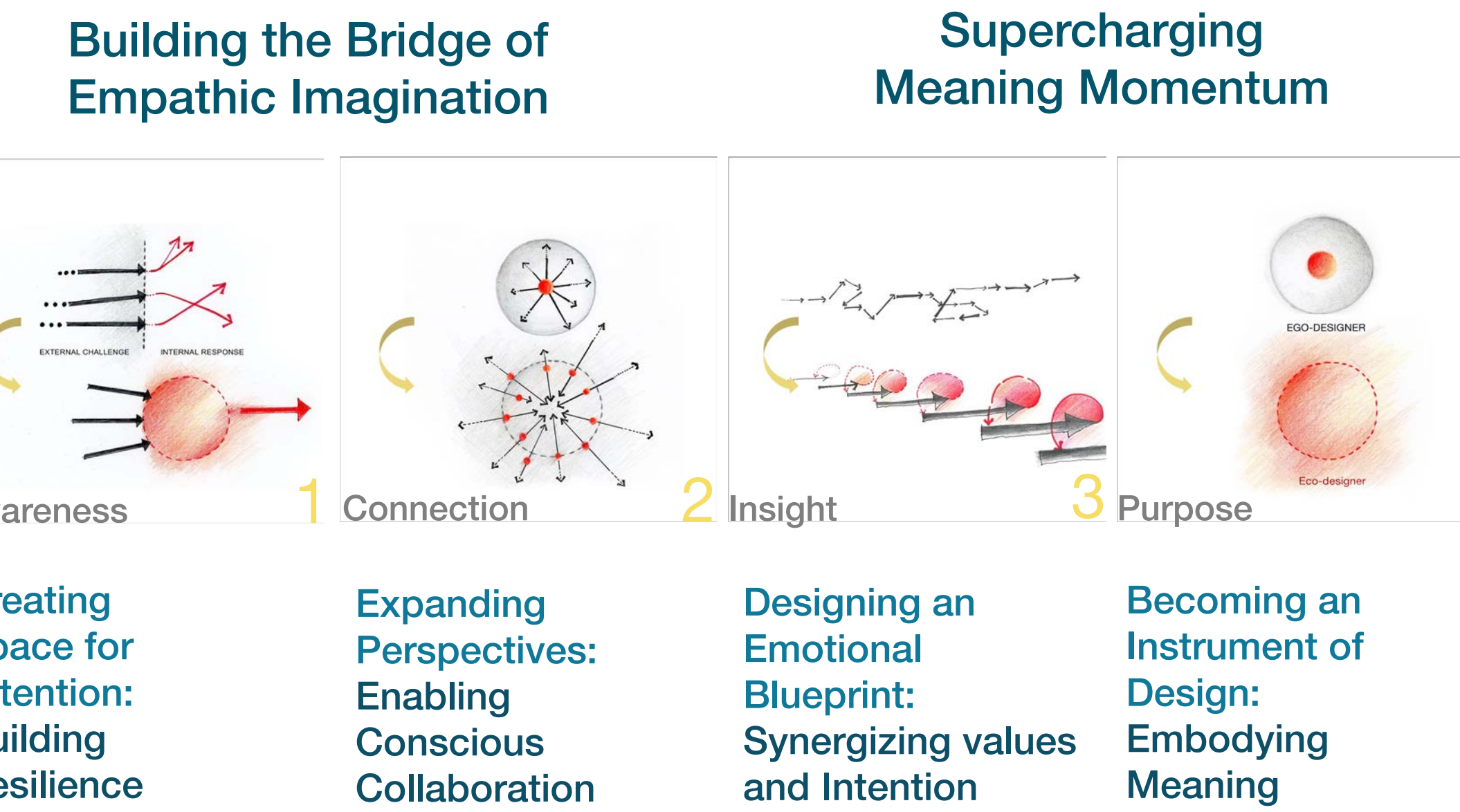
- As humanity braces for unprecedented global challenges, our built environment's importance as a mediator of *self-actualization* and *self-transcendence* looms larger than ever. Designers must be fully equipped to bring these “built environments for flourishing” into being but this pursuit is hindered by an epidemic of burnout in a substantial proportion of design professionals and design students.
- Although a few studies have attempted to bring mindfulness-based interventions into design curricula, these approaches have generally been discipline-agnostic and limited in duration, likely curtailing their effectiveness and sustained utility.
- We propose that when designers train in *contemplative design technology* that synergizes “inner technologies” of contemplation with the “outer technologies” of design, they are better equipped to flourish in their daily design lives and, in turn, design spaces of flourishing:



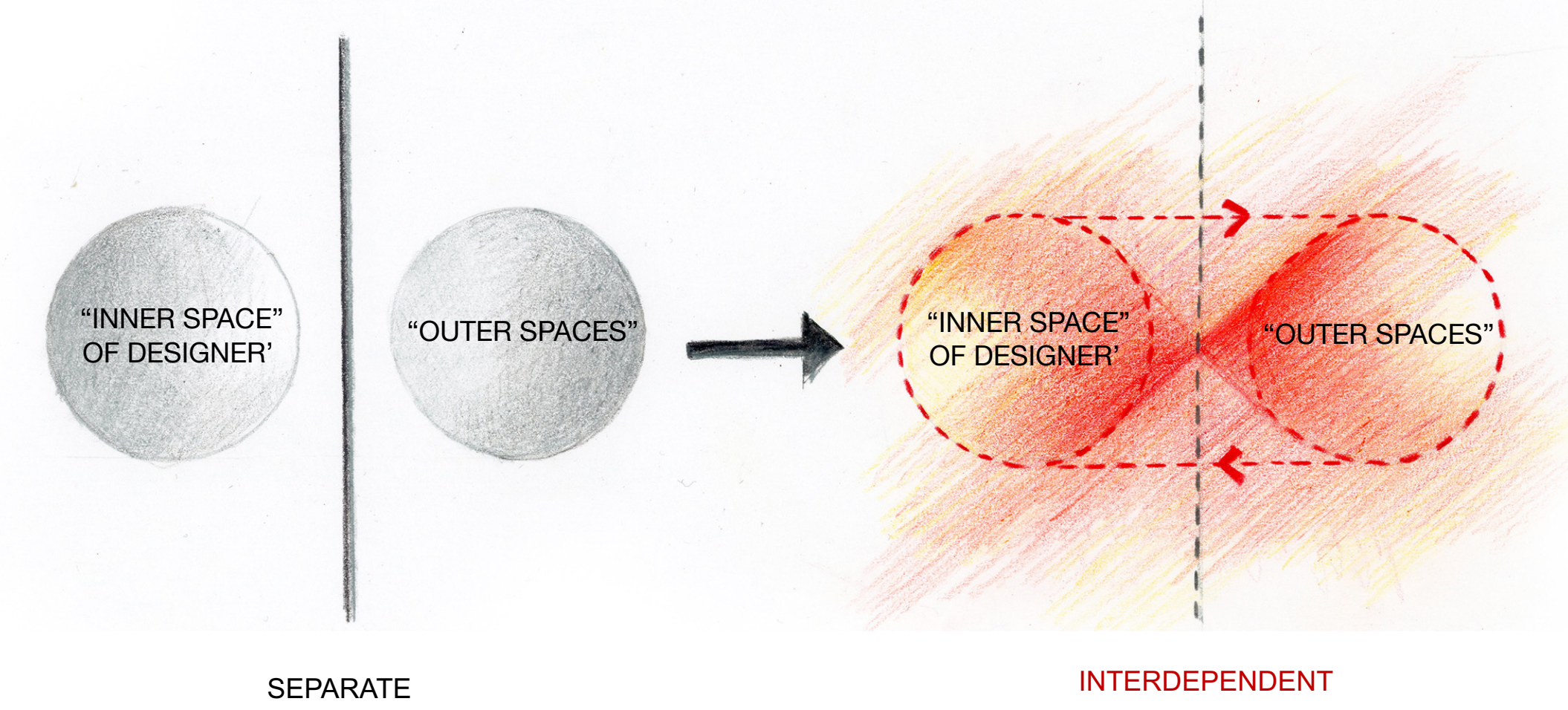
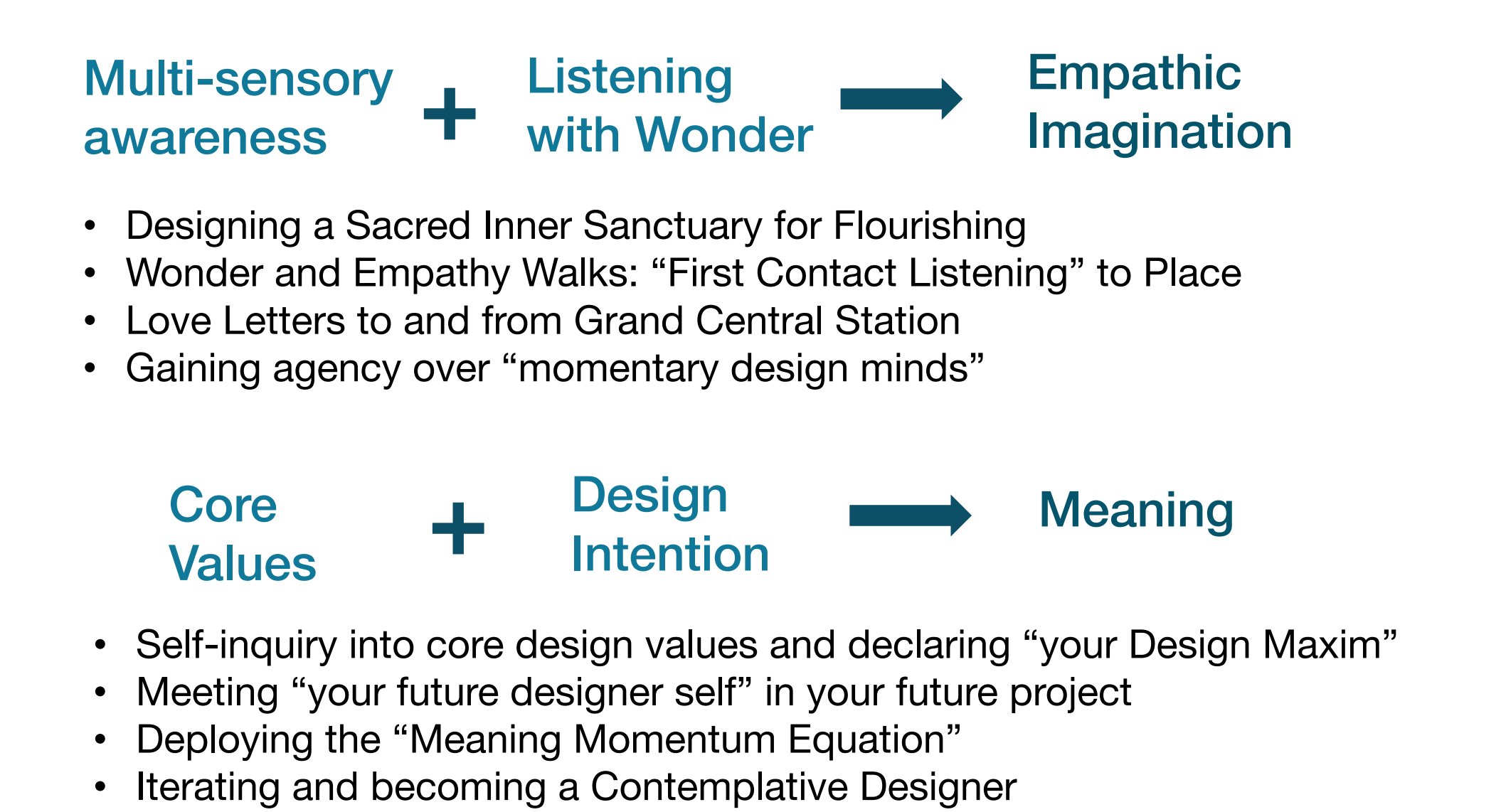
The Contemplative Designer Framework:

- Contemplative Designer is a framework that integrates contemplative practices that are tailored to how designers work, think, and imagine as part of the design process.
- It draws on diverse knowledge bases, including the science of human flourishing, neuroaesthetics, psychology, and ancient contemplative traditions.
- It consists of four design-focused dimensions that align with the four core dimensions of human flourishing: awareness, connection, insight and purpose (Dahl et al, PNAS, 2020).

Training Designers in Flourishing Design Skills:

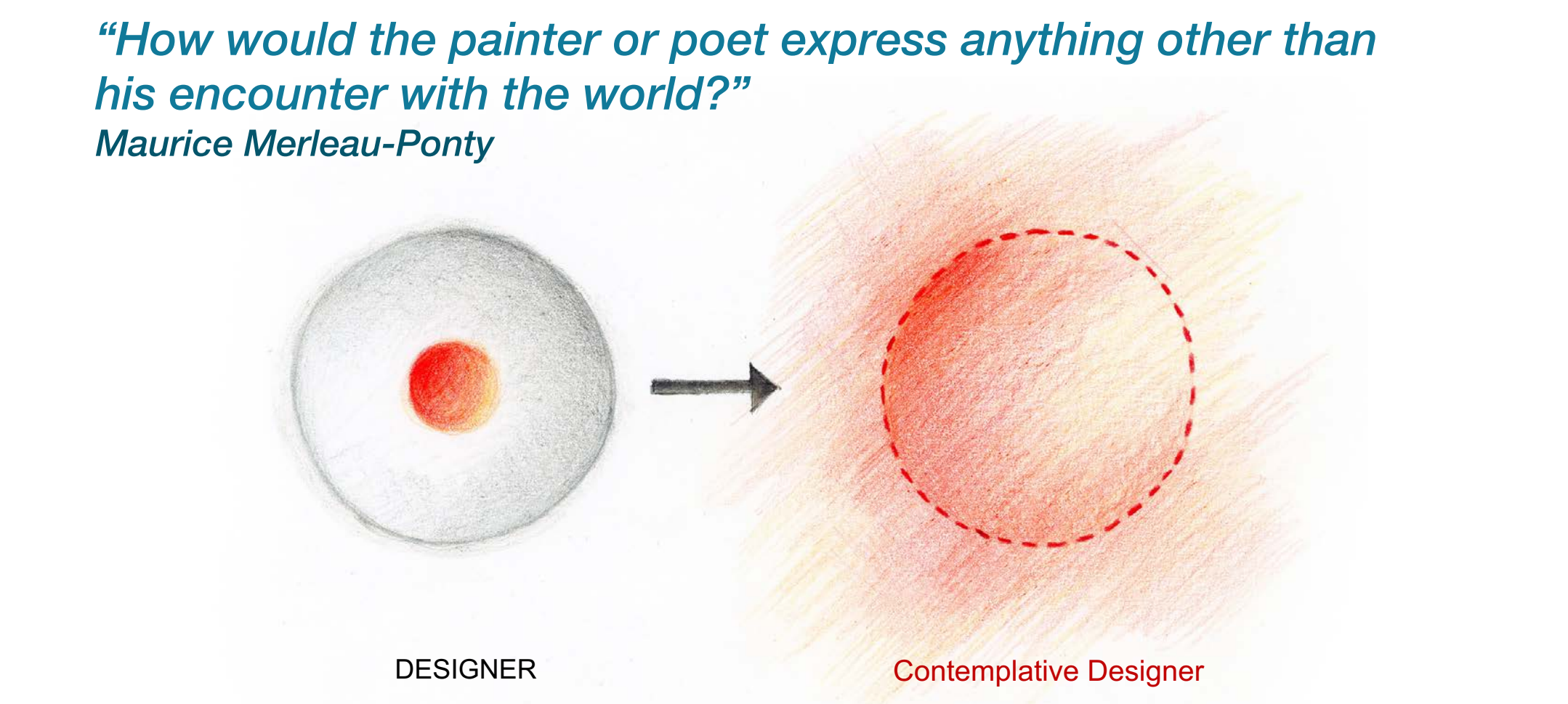
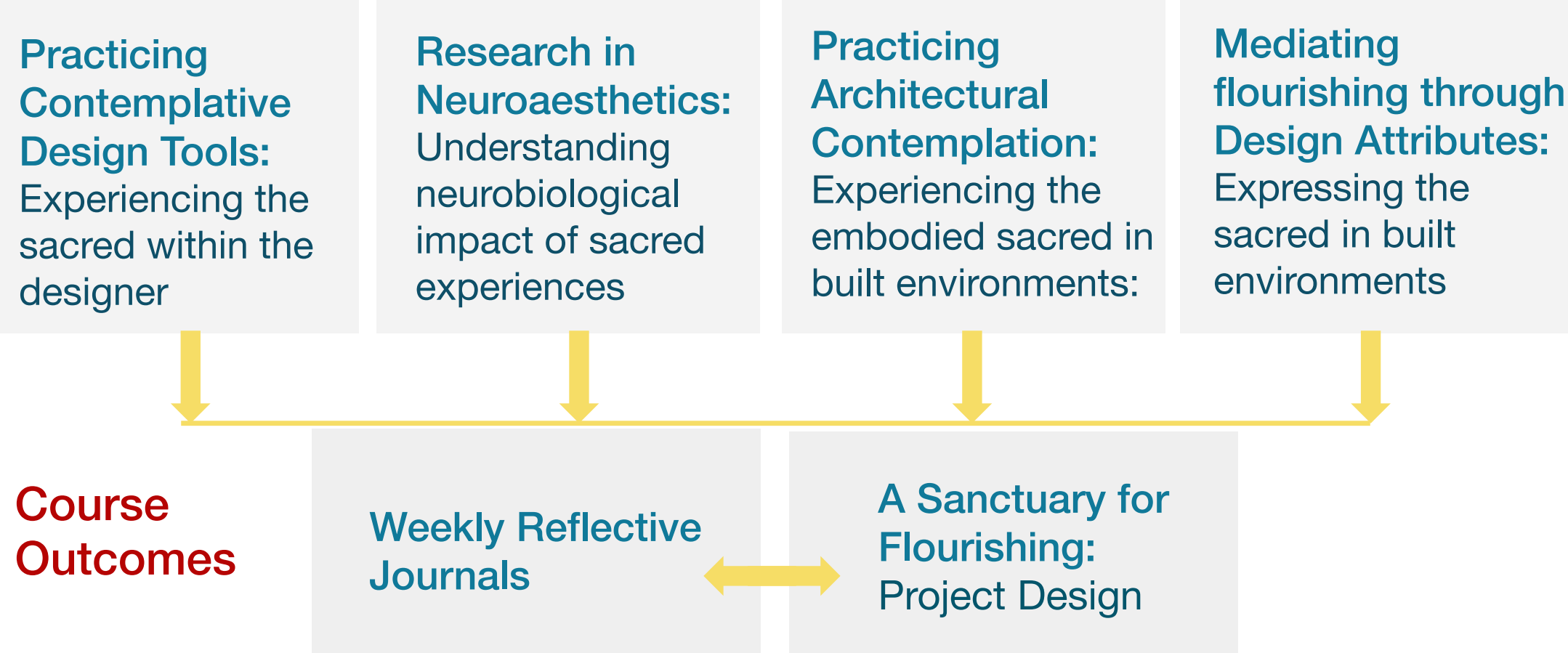


Inner technologies of the Contemplative Designer Framework:



Course Curriculum

The Contemplative Designer Framework formed the pedagogy of two courses: i) an interdisciplinary design seminar ii) an interior design studio at two different universities in Fall 2024.



THE RESEARCH STUDY: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE DESIGNER FRAMEWORK ON DESIGN PROCESSES, OUTCOMES AND WELL-BEING OF DESIGN STUDENTS

Research Questions:

- What is the impact of the Contemplative Designer Framework on student design processes?
- What is the impact of the Contemplative Designer Framework on student perceived well-being?
- What is the impact of the Contemplative Designer Framework on design outcomes and spaces?

Research Methods:

- Students' design process artifacts, reflective journals and final project designs evaluated using grounded theory, thematic analysis, and an ecological model of creativity framework.
- 2 Interviews conducted with each student at the end of the fall 2024 and spring 2025 semesters assessed sustainability of benefits on well-being using the Reflective Activity Systems Theory (RAST) framework.
- Student project designs were expert reviewed by design educators and professionals to evaluate the effectiveness of the spaces to mediate dimensions of flourishing.

Research participants:

The following participants were recruited from the two design courses taught by Professor Sarika Bajoria at two different universities in Fall 2024. Course assignments and activities were matched between the courses:

- 14 undergraduate sophomore, junior and senior students from various design majors enrolled in elective interdisciplinary design seminar at University A.
- 13 undergraduate senior and junior interior design students enrolled in an Interior Design Studio at University B.

Students practicing "architectural contemplation as embodied sacred experience" through empathic imagination & drawing at the Nevelson Chapel, NYC



Student Reflective Journals: Contemplative Design Process : One Student's Journey

Building the Bridge of Empathic Imagination: Love Letters to and from Grand Central Station:

Dear Grand Central station,

As I look up the grandeur of your high ceiling fills me with awe, while the stars gently float... I feel both small and infinite.

You remind me that between the platforms live and converge, and in the fleeting moments of passing, you hold peaceful beauty.

Love, A traveler, traveling.

Dear Traveler,

It is through you that I feel more alive...and I exist to witness your moments.

I see the weight of your thoughts and the dreams unspoken. I hope the moments you spend in my embrace bring you peace, comfort and protection.

Let my vastness remind you of your own...

Love, Grand Central Station

Supercharging Meaning Momentum: Designing an Emotional Blueprint of Intention

My core values: belonging and authenticity.

My design maxim: Form ever follows Self.

"For most of my previous practice of interior design I hadn't listened to spaces or to the building itself the materials talk to you if you're quiet enough."

"Design is a conversation – me, the space, the materials and what feels right."

"Self-inquiry into my core values and intention maxim... it felt like my design had a backbone—something I could return to."

"Reflection needs time. You can't rush revelation"

Project Design: A Sanctuary for Flourishing in New Haven Green and Washington Square Park



External Expert Reviewers Evaluation of Student Project Designs

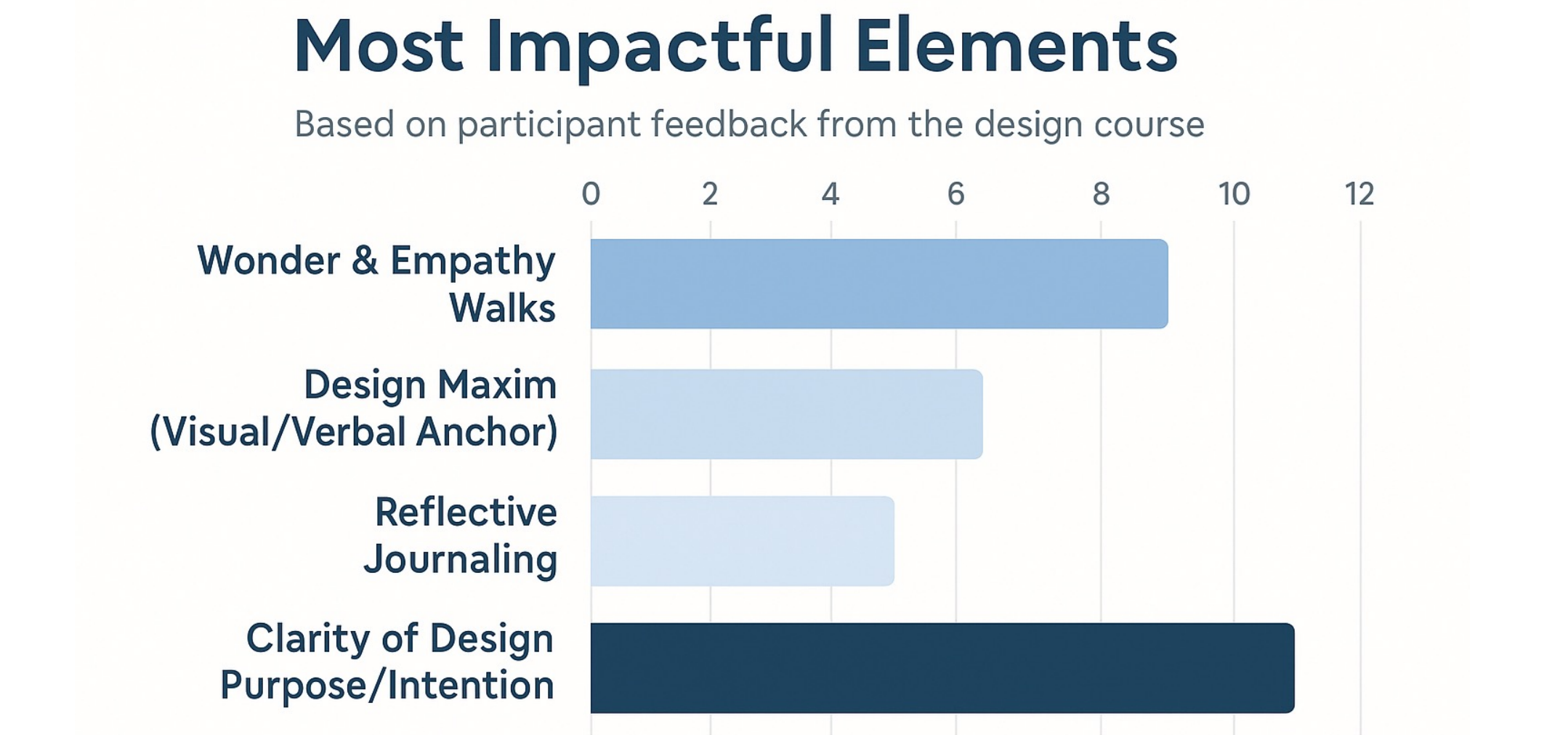
"The project challenges conventional urban attitudes by 'disturbing' the green spaces and churches. To wake up a society, maybe this is what it takes. It is a contemplative urbanist take!!! I am certain that, if built, this project would foster a whole new level of connectivity for the citizens of New Haven... There are moments that could be sublime."

"The chapel space has the capacity to mediate or invoke insight and self-knowledge through the stained glass skylight, the tiered two-story volume, and the views to the reflecting pool and community garden for both personal reflection and collective rituals through a thoughtfully articulated design."

"Simple but exquisite design proposal. The dialogue between the open and closed cylindric forms contextualized by low curved walls to create waves around them is excellent... The chapel is particularly successful at offering opportunities for insight at many levels... perhaps a sense of the sacred could manifest."

"The students demonstrated how contemplative design can support urban well-being through beauty, softness, and care... The layered program invites both solitude and community, and the spiral form poetically reinforces continuity and reflection. It's inclusive, grounded, and attuned to both people and place."

Student Interviews Thematic Synthesis



Five Dominant Themes Emerged from the Research Interviews

1. Embodied and Sensory Awareness
"Design feels like dance when you pay attention and pause."
2. Social Sensitivity and Relational Design
"I noticed so much more when I walked as if I didn't know the place."
3. Purpose, Identity, and Integration
"Sometimes I just feel it, but then I have to defend it with data."
4. Introspection and Reflective Practice
"The words gave shape to what I was feeling all along."
5. Advocacy and Broader Impact
"We should be learning to listen before we learn to draw."

Research Next steps:

Second-round interviews are underway and design processes artifacts are being analyzed to address the research questions.

In-person participants and an online cohort will evaluate student designed spaces in a virtual reality environment and answer questions about their experiences and strength of the design intention imbued within the spaces (collaboration with Benjamin van Buren, PhD. Assistant Professor of Psychology at The New School & Director of the New School Perception Lab)

