



## On meditation, prayer, and reflection spaces

Student access to neutral spaces for meditation, prayer, or reflection (MPR) are an important part of supporting all religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs) in an inclusive and equitable way. As higher education increases its concern for students' mental health and takes a holistic perspective on wellness, MPR spaces are a necessary facility for students. MPR spaces allow students to engage in religious or spiritual observance, to step out of the pressures of daily collegiate life, or simply to clear their minds.

### Expectations for neutral MPR space creation and maintenance

In order to be inclusive of all RSSIs, Convergence recommends neutral MPR spaces that should:

1. Be located in easily accessible areas central to student life;
2. Convey a sense of respect for those who use the space, or ideally inspire awe;
3. Be adaptable to a variety of approaches to using the space without clear privilege for one form or another;
4. Include adjacent spaces for both ritual washing and the preparation of food;
5. Have neutral decor in the primary space or spaces, but include art and educational displays in adjacent spaces which highlight the diversity of the RSSIs; and
6. Be maintained by university staff to ensure spaces remain clean and welcoming while maintaining neutrality to RSSIs.

### On placement in central locations to student life

Due to the frequency that students would want access to a neutral MPR space, it is imperative that such a space be situated in an area central to student life. This location might be a room in the student union or perhaps in a room off the lobby of a central residential hall. The location needs to be readily accessible to all students, both those living on campus as well as commuters. Depending on campus size, multiple spaces may be necessary to sufficiently meet demand. Neutral MPR spaces must also be accessible at all hours to serve the diverse space demands of various student RSSIs. Some students may need to access the space before sunrise or well after sunset, while others may wish to utilize the space at midnight. Here again, student unions and residential hall lobbies, with 24 hour or extended hours access, offer ideal locations.

### On the appearance of space conveying respect or inspiring awe

When a disused classroom or a far-flung conference room is converted into a neutral MPR space with little to no investment in physically altering and decorating the space, it can convey the message that the university does not take RSSIs seriously nor considers them a salient part of a student's identity. A neutral MPR space should be constructed to show that the space is important and that those who use the space are respected. Flooring, windows, lighting, and wall paint can all be used to make the space stand out as intentionally constructed rather than merely repurposed. Ideally, the space should inspire a sense of calm, awe, or wonder, standing out as a unique campus space.





### On the adaptability of the space

As a reflection of neutrality, the MPR space should not be structured in a way to privilege one form of use over another. A space with rigid pews has a clear Christian heritage while a space that is devoid of any furniture with only carpets will appear to be a Muslim musallah. A neutral MPR space will avoid clear preferences such as these. Ideally, the space could be arranged so that any direction can be the focal point of the room, so that a podium with microphone could be placed anywhere in the room, and with accessible closet space for chairs and tables to allow various configurations of furniture (or no furniture at all). Adaptability of orientation and furniture should be able to be done by students without the need for staff to reconfigure the space. As the space will be used by multiple individuals and groups with conflicting needs, the space should be able to be reserved by student organizations to gather as a community. Ideally, more than one neutral MPR space would be available so that if one room is reserved there is still an open room for students to drop in unscheduled.

### On adjacent spaces for ritual washing and preparation of food

A neutral MPR space will also require additional rooms outside the main MPR space to meet student needs. Space for ritual washing can be built separately or as part of an expanded restroom adjacent to the MPR space. These facilities would be needed at each neutral MPR space location. On a campus with a larger MPR center, comprising multiple neutral MPR spaces, an important addition would be a room for the preparation of food, as many RSSIs utilize food as a part of various community gatherings.

### On neutral MPR spaces as places for passive educational experience

As the space or spaces offer a location utilized by students from diverse identities, decorations and informational displays highlighting that diversity can serve to educate all students who pass through the space. Crompton (2013) observes two representative types of neutral MPR space design: a “positive” type and a “negative” type (p. 479). In the negative type, neutrality is maintained through the complete absence of any artifacts, images, or paraphernalia associated with any RSSI, while in the positive type there is neutrality through a preponderance of items and images associated with the diversity of the RSSIs which use the space. It would be appropriate to implement the positive type of design with educational displays in a hallway, foyer, or other antechamber outside a neutral MPR space, while the main space used for meditation, prayer, or reflection follows the negative type of design.

### On maintenance of the space

When a neutral MPR space is in use, it is no longer neutral. Any books, ritual objects, art, or other paraphernalia left out color that initial neutrality. As Crompton (2013) noted, due to the diverse populations that use neutral MPR spaces, the spaces “become de-facto mosques, chapels or new-age spaces, depending on who uses them most” (p. 480). He continues, “only if scrupulously maintained in unstable equilibrium between these modes of failure can they provide universal access.” A diligent university staff person should maintain the MPR space so that all student groups will find the space equally accessible, making it feel welcoming to all.

### Reference

Crompton, A. (2013). The architecture of multifaith spaces: God leaves the building. *The Journal of Architecture*, 18(4), 474-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2013.821149>