

Between Arrival and Belonging: The Production of Safe Space through Lived Experiences, Everyday Practices and Art- Based Inquiry

Master's thesis

Shweta Mistry

Sustainable Art and Design

University of Lapland

Spring 2026

The title of the work: Between Arrival and Belonging: The Production of Safe Space Through Lived Experiences, Everyday Practices and Art-Based Inquiry

Name of Author(s): Shweta Mistry

Faculty: Art and Design

Degree Programme: Sustainable Art and Design Program

Type of Work: Master's Thesis

Year: Spring 2026

Number of pages, number of attachments: 109 pages, 14 attachments

Additional information: The photographs have been taken by me, otherwise mentioned accordingly.

Abstract: This thesis explores how safe space is experienced, understood and produced by international students based in Rovaniemi, Finland; focusing on spatial, emotional and creative dimensions. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of production of space and Massey's relational understanding of space, the study reconceptualises safe space as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a fixed or bounded location. The research adopts a qualitative methodology combining semi-structured interviews with arts-based approaches, including photography, journaling, drawing and other creative practices. These methods enable participants to express sensory, affective and abstract experiences that may not be fully articulated through verbal data alone. The findings demonstrate that safe space is not singular or stable but continuously produced through everyday practices, routines, and material arrangements. It is also shaped by affective atmospheres, embodied experiences, and sensory interactions with environments. Furthermore, safe space extends beyond physical settings and into imagined and remembered dimensions and may be both actively created and unexpectedly encountered. This study contributes to spatial theory, migration studies, and arts-based research by positioning safe space as relational, processual and co-constructed, thus highlighting the role of everyday practices in shaping experiences of belonging.

Keywords: Safe space; spatial production; arts-based research; relational space; belonging; international students

I give permissions to use the following pro gradu thesis in the library (30.04.2026, Shweta Mistry)

Dedication

I wanted to keep this short, but it has been two long emotional years, and life is too short to not use my words well.

My first master's thesis was a tribute to my mum. Eight years later, here I am, once again, full circle.

In the loving memory of my mum, your womb was my safest space and gave me really strong lungs. Time with you can't be put into papers enough, but I breathe deeper, stare often, pause more, hold my breath, and breathe two extra deep breaths for you.

In the loving memories of my grandfather, because of you, knowledge, books and art became my safety and my grandmother, my childhood summers in your home with the food and the room of mangoes are the safest scents I know.

<3

For my dad, thank you for being my strongest safety net and I'm sorry I have stretched you too thin at times.

For my darling niece. You are magic! For everything you have offered, I am honoured and endlessly grateful. I love you so much, and I adore you to the very tiny patches of skin on your fingertips.

For my brothers D and P, you have been the brightest lighthouses in my life.

For my loved ones, I'm forever grateful.

For all my teachers, my deepest gratitude for the safe space you created for me to learn and ask, times countless, repeatedly.

For the strangers I met in Japan, you have become a warm part of my memories of a place where I first felt 'at home' with myself.

For the lovely strangers I met here in Rovaniemi, who are now part of one of the best chapters of my life, I couldn't have done it without you.

For my participants, who volunteered so gracefully and opened their life in this project. I hope I was able to create a safe space for you too. :)

For everyone who made me feel safe, a heartfelt bow, I'm sure you are someone's Polaris.

For the trees, the skies, the wind, the stars, the flowing and still waters, sunshine, and moonlight, all the places and their seasons that became little bubbles of safety.

And most importantly, to my younger self, thank you for the unwavering faith, I hope I'm your most safest space today and you know that You are it!

Contents

CHAPTER 1: ARRIVING IN UNFAMILIAR GEOGRAPHIES: FRAMING SPACE, SAFETY AND MOBILITY	6
1.1 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND NEW GEOGRAPHIES	6
1.2 THE PROBLEM OF “SAFE SPACE” IN MOBILITY CONTEXTS	9
1.3 SPACE AS PRODUCTION	9
1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES	10
1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	11
1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	11
1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	12
CHAPTER 2: LAYERED SPACES: THEORISING THE PRODUCTION OF WHERE WE FEEL SAFE	13
2.1 FROM SPACE AS CONTAINER TO SPACE AS RELATION	13
2.2 THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE	14
2.3 LIVED, IMAGINED, AND POLITICAL SPATIALITY (EXTENDING SPATIAL THOUGHT)	15
2.4 FROM SPACES TO SAFE SPACES	16
2.5. SAFE SPACE AND ART	19
CHAPTER 3: MAKING SPACE VISIBLE: METHODOLOGY, ART, AND REFLEXIVE PRACTICE	22
3.1 ART-BASED RESEARCH (ABR) AS METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	22
3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING – (RESEARCH POSITIONING)	25
3.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: LEFEBVRE’S PRODUCTION OF SPACE	26
3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	28
3.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS	29
3.6 DATA ANALYSIS	30
3.7 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY	32
3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	33
CHAPTER 4: PRODUCING SAFETY IN NEW GEOGRAPHIES: LAYERS OF SPACE IN PRACTICE – A LEFEBVRIAN ANALYSIS	34
4.1 SPATIAL PRACTICE: PRODUCING SAFETY THROUGH MATERIAL AND EVERYDAY PRACTICES	36
4.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE: CONCEPTUALISING AND DEFINING SAFETY AND SAFE SPACE	41
4.3 REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE: LIVING, FEELING AND REMEMBERING SAFETY IN SPACES	45
4.4 BEYOND STRUCTURE: WHERE ART APPEARS AND THE EVERYDAY INTERSECT	51
4.5 SYNTHESISING THE LAYERS: SAFE SPACE AS ONGOING PRODUCTION	54

CHAPTER 5: SITUATING THE SELF: REFLEXIVITY, EXPERIENCE AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SAFE SPACE AS AN ARTIST - RESEARCHER WITHIN THE SPACE	56
5.1 MY POSITIONALITY AS AN ARTIST-RESEARCHER AND MY LIVED EXPERIENCE OF 'SAFE SPACE'	56
5.2 SAFE SPACE BEYOND INTERIORS: FOUND, SENSORY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENCOUNTERS	58
5.3 ART PRACTICE AS INQUIRY: EXPERIENCING SAFE SPACE THROUGH MAKING	61
5.4 REFLEXIVE INSIGHTS: INFLUENCES ON INTERPRETATION	66
CHAPTER 6: PRODUCING SAFE SPACE: LIVED, IMAGINED AND NEGOTIATED SPATIALITIES	70
6.1 SAFE SPACE AS SPATIAL PRODUCTION	71
6.2 SPATIAL BELONGING AND THE MIGRATORY EXPERIENCE	74
6.3 IMAGINED, ABSTRACT AND FUTURE SAFE SPACES	76
6.4 AFFECT, ATMOSPHERE AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE	77
6.5 SAFE SPACE BEYOND INTERIORS: "FOUND" SPACES AND THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT	78
6.6 SAFE SPACE THROUGH ART: REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE IN PRACTICE	79
6.7 SYNTHESISING THE LAYERS: SAFE SPACE AS ONGOING PRODUCTION	84
CHAPTER 7: BETWEEN ARRIVAL AND BELONGING: CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS	86
REFERENCES	90
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	94
ATTACHMENTS	96

Chapter 1: Arriving in Unfamiliar Geographies: Framing Space, Safety and Mobility

What does one think of when they think of space? What does one think of when they think of ‘safety’? My earliest recollection of the word ‘space’ has meant ‘space – the universe existing once you leave the Earth’s orbit’, and later with lived experiences, space has also come to mean something more clear and more intimate: ‘personal territory, something that could be claimed or withdrawn, privacy’. Safety on the other hand, has always meant different things on different occasions, it is something that I can measure in tangible and intangible forms – the scent of first rain, the taste of a ripe, fresh summer mango, a blank fresh paper where possibilities are endless, sunshine glimmering through leaves, and even shadows, a wall – the familiarity of objects, atmospheres, and sensory traces that evoke belonging. Space and safety for me, unfold into layered and deeply subjective meanings.

Dictionary definition reveals this multiplicity. ‘Space’ may refer to measurable physical dimensions, distance, or volume, but also abstract extents of time, opportunity, and privacy. It can signify the expanse of universe beyond the Earth’s atmosphere, or the distance between individuals that is required for comfort. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) These definitions suggest that space is at once material and conceptual, physical, and abstract, experiential. But these descriptions portray space as something neutral – a background against which life unfolds. Spatial theorists, although have challenged this assumption increasingly, arguing that space is not merely occupied but produced through social relations, practices, and meanings.

If space is socially produced, then safety too may be understood as something constructed and created rather than provided or given. The notion of ‘safe space,’ widely invoked within contemporary discourse, raises important questions: How does one create comfort and belonging in places that are foreign? How do material arrangements, relationships, aesthetic gestures, and everyday routines participate in this process? These questions become particularly pressing for international students in new geographies, where the production of space becomes inseparable from the search for safety.

1.1 International students and New Geographies

International students start a journey to a new country with aspirations and uncertainty. This migration is often accompanied with hope, ambition, personal growth, yet also stress and dormant fear, often encountering language barriers and cultural differences when they try to

integrate in a new society and relate with the members of their host countries, resulting in experiences of displacement. While adjustment to a new educational and social environment is stressful to many students, many international students experience stronger stressors through additional factors such as culture shock, immigration status, homesickness, and discrimination (Sümer et al., 2008). Gu, et. al. (2010) argues that while going to a university is a progressive journey of self-discovery for students where they can access themselves and hear themselves being assessed in personal, social and academic settings, for international students this is a more complex and challenging process, as they must also adapt to new and sometimes threatening norms of behaviour, languages and academic pedagogies on a number of personal, social and emotional levels. They further challenge that international students' intercultural adaptation (here in a new geography), is linear and passive as externally expected, but it is also a set of complex shifts between language mastery, social interaction, personal development, and academic outcomes.

While existing research has documented psychological and social dimensions of this adaptation, less attention has been given to the material and spatial practices that support the process. What tangible or embodied acts enable international students to stabilise themselves within unfamiliar environments? How do physical surroundings participate in facilitating this belonging, resilience, and identity negotiation? These questions invite a spatial perspective on international student experiences, where adaptation is a practice grounded materially.

My first experience of relocating as an international student to a new country sharpened my awareness of how safety and belonging are negotiated through everyday spatial practices. From the moment I decided to apply to university, I remember feeling stressed and overwhelmed. What followed was a long journey marked by setbacks and moments of momentum, where joy and anxiety coexisted and continually reshaped my experience. The process often felt like a repetitive learning curve that rarely seemed to move forward. When I finally moved into my student apartment in Minaminagareyama, Matsudo-shi, Chiba, Japan, my first action was spatial: I rearranged the room I was assigned. A space previously inhabited by hundreds of people, gradually became something intimate and recognizable as time passed. Through objects, textures, and small aesthetic gestures—blue bedsheets, photographs, and familiar belongings—the unfamiliar slowly became habitable.

After moving to Rovaniemi, Finland, it felt that safety was easily 'accessible,' but during a period of loss and grieving I realised it was not as available as I had initially thought.

As a griever, safety did not emerge primarily from the spaces I had created for myself, but from spaces that already existed and from routines that became meaningful and necessary during that time. Familiar paths, repeated daily practices, and quiet moments of continuity offered a sense of grounding to me when emotional stability felt uncertain. My reflections are not presented here as anecdote alone, but as a starting point for the inquiry developed in this thesis. It foregrounds the central concern of my study: how safe space is actively produced within new geographies. For the me then, safety was not simply found – it was made gently over time.

Within arts-based research, personal and embodied experiences are often treated as legitimate sites of knowledge production, shaping how questions are asked and how relationships between space, emotion, and practice are understood (e.g., Patricia Leavy; Shaun McNiff). From this perspective, everyday spatial gestures—such as rearranging a room, moving through familiar routes, or sustaining routines—can be understood not only as personal coping strategies but also as forms of inquiry into how individuals negotiate safety within unfamiliar environments. Positioning these experiences within the research context foregrounds the central concern of this study: how experiences of safety are negotiated within new or shifting geographies. Rather than being simply found or permanently secured, safety emerges through ongoing interactions with space, routine, and lived experience. My study therefore approaches safety not solely as a fixed condition but as a relational and processual experience that unfolds through everyday practices of inhabiting place.

The following sections expand on these ideas by situating the study within broader discussions on space, safety, and arts-based inquiry. In doing so, my thesis engages with existing scholarship that examines how artistic practices and visual methods can illuminate lived experiences of place, emotion, and belonging.

Safe space, therefore, is understood in this thesis not just as a physical location, but also a social, relational, material construct emerging through practices, objects, atmospheres, and interactions. Why does ‘safe space’ matter? For me, it supported my belonging, learning, creativity, healing, identity exploration, cross-cultural integration, and finding my place in a new place when I first experienced life as an international student. So, for international students navigating new cultural and spatial landscapes, the creation of safe space may become fundamental to the processes of belonging, learning and self-expression. Thus, my study approaches such actions not as incidental adjustments, but as meaningful spatial productions embedded within broader negotiations of identity and place.

The interpretative orientation of my research is grounded in the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped through interaction, experience, and context. In this study, meanings of space and safety are not treated as fixed or universal, but as continuously produced through participants' practices, environments, and relationships. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of international student mobility, where experiences of space, belonging, and safety are shaped by shifting cultural, social, and spatial conditions.

1.2 The Problem of “Safe Space” in Mobility Contexts

The concept of ‘Safe Space’ has gained importance within higher education and broader cultural discourse. It is frequently used within institutional policy, inclusion initiatives, and classroom practices as a means of fostering psychological comfort and protection from harm. My own personal experience of ‘safe space’ has been in similar situations – university classes, work placements, inclusivity related literature and some sort of ‘reminder’ when discussions and debates are about to happen. In these contexts, though, safety is often framed as something to be ensured through guidelines, behavioural norms, or designated environments. While such approaches are valuable, they tend to limit safety as a provision – something granted or regulated within institutional structures.

Within mobility contexts, however, this framing becomes insufficient. International students living in new geographies encounter safety not only as a policy but also as a lived, everyday negotiation. Existing discussions rarely examine how safety is spatially produced – how rooms, objects, routines, and relationships participate in this process and safety formation. There is a limited engagement with ‘safe space’ as a material and relational production. Hence, safety is often assumed rather than questioned. If safe space is simply provided, then how is it actually made?

Mobility studies in the social sciences emphasise the movement of people, ideas, and material practices across borders. Yet mobility also destabilizes spatial familiarity, requiring individuals – international students to renegotiate their relationship to a place. Here, the production of safety may be inseparable from the production of the space itself.

1.3 Space as Production

To address this gap, my thesis draws on spatial theory to reconceptualise safe space as socially produced. Rather than understanding it as a neutral container in which an experience unfolds,

I approach 'space' as constructed through social relations, material arrangements, and lived practices. From this perspective, safety is not an inherent quality of a location, but an outcome of spatial negotiation. Understanding how international students produce 'safe space' therefore remains a framework attentive to the material, relational, and experiential dimensions of space. While spatial theory offers multiple approaches to understanding how space is constituted – including Lefebvre's (1991) production of space, Massey's (2005) relational and networked perspectives, Soja's (1996) concept of Thirdspace, and Foucault's (1986) analyses of power and spatial ordering – my thesis draws specifically on Lefebvre's (1991) framework to examine how safe spaces are actively produced by international students.

Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space provides a generative framework for examining how material arrangements, social relations, and lived experiences intersect in the creation of space. Instead of treating space as a static background, Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises it as a dynamic process, continuously shaped by interactions between the physical, the conceptual, and the lived. Central to Lefebvre's (1991) framework is the idea that space is produced through a dialectical relationship between spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. This triad allows for an analysis that moves beyond physical environments alone, studying also the meanings, routines, symbols and embodied experiences. For this study, through Lefebvre's (1991) framework I seek to understand space not only as a structure but as a lived and felt experience.

My thesis also attends to the creative ways in which international students inhabit and shape their environments; through everyday arrangements, aesthetic choices, and artistic interventions – from personal objects to creative decorations. Thus, considering how embodied and aesthetic dimensions provide both empirical insight and analytical leverage, aligning with my study's art-based research approach, my research foregrounds participants' agency, creativity, and reflexivity in producing spaces of comfort and belonging.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to understand the production of safe space by international students who have lived in Rovaniemi, Finland for varying amounts of time. While much existing research focuses on international student populations with respect to identity formation, cultural assimilation, discrimination, mental health, and belonging, less attention has been given to the spatial and material processes through which safety is actively constructed. This study therefore aims to

shift the focus from adaptation as internal adjustment to adaptation as spatial production, foregrounding students' agency in shaping environments they experience as safe.

Objectives:

- To explore how international students define and conceptualise 'safe space'.
- To analyse the material, relational and everyday practices through which safety is spatially produced.
- To investigate the role of artistic and aesthetic practices within the production of physical safe spaces.
- To examine how non-artistic objects, atmospheres and routines contribute to experiences of safety.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How is 'safe space' spatially produced by international students in new geographies?
2. How do international students define and understand 'safe space' in the context of mobility and belonging?
3. How do everyday objects and non-artistic interventions participate in the spatial production of safety?
4. How is safe space lived and experienced emotionally, symbolically and atmospherically?
5. To what extent do artistic or aesthetic practices play a role, in the production of these physical safe spaces, and how does it vary across individuals?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study reframes 'safe space' as a dynamic spatial production, and a practice among international students, demonstrating how art may function as one of the parameters that helps international students navigate themselves in new geographies, new cultures, and find a sense of belonging. With this research I also signify that 'safe space' has meaning behind the predefined or policy-driven definitions that are usually limited to people of colour, LGBTQ+ populations, feminism and so on, and instead expands the boundaries to include each and every individual in the society. Here, it focuses on international students and their migratory experiences through physical spatial production of material arrangements, relational networks, conceptual understandings, and their unique, individual lived experiences. This helps extend the spatial theory into a network of migratory belonging and repositions safety as a dynamic

and layered phenomenon that can be created countless times, that is not provided and something that requires care and attention on an individual level.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on spatial theory to conceptualise the production of space and its relevance to safe space. Chapter Three details the methodological approach, including art-based research practices and reflexive positioning as artist - researcher. Chapter Four presents the analysis/findings through a Lefebvrian spatial analysis. Chapter Five discusses my position as an artist-researcher and how I express and analyse safe space. Chapter Six discusses the implications of these findings for spatial theory and migration studies. Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by summarising contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Layered Spaces: Theorising the Production of Where We Feel Safe

2.1 From Space as Container to Space as Relation

Traditional understandings of space conceptualize it as a neutral, static container in which social life unfolds. In this view, space is passive and pre-existing, independent of human activity (Harvey, 1973). In this view, spatial arrangements are assumed to exist prior to social relations, serving only as a setting for interactions to occur. However, this angle has been widely critiqued as it overlooks the dynamic and socially constructed nature of space. Lefebvre (1991) challenges this idea by arguing that space is not just a container but something that is actively produced with the aid of social relations, everyday practices and material conditions. This understanding is also developed within human geography, where scholars emphasize that space is inseparable from lived experience and is continuously shaped through embodied practices and everyday interactions (Simonsen, 2007; Thrift, 2008).

Contrasting to this idea of space as a passive container, Lefebvre (1991) reconceptualizes space as socially produced through the interaction of material practices, lived experiences and representations. Space is therefore not pre-given but constructed and reconstructed continuously through everyday life. This understanding shifts the attention from static spatial forms to the processes instead through which spatial meanings emerge. Soja (1996) extends this perspective by emphasizing the socio-spatial dialectic, in which space is both shapes and is shaped by social relations.

Contemporary research further highlights the processual and relational nature of spatial production. Space is understood as co-constituted through interactions between individuals, social structures and material environments, thus suggesting that spatial experience is dynamic and constantly evolving (Gieryn, 2000; Massey, 2005). This relation shows that space is not just a product of social life but also an active force that influences behaviour, identity, and social relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Thrift, 2008).

Building on this shift, relational approaches conceptualize space as constituted through networks of social relations and not bounded by physical entities. Massey (2005) argues that space is a product of interrelations and should be understood as open, multiple, and as an entity that is continuously under construction. Rather than existing as a fixed surface, space emerges here through the coexistence of diverse trajectories and experiences. Recent scholars reinforce

this perspective by emphasizing that spatial relations are also shaped by affective, material and social interactions, further highlighting the fluid and emergent nature of space (Vilismaier & Lang, 2015; see also recent relational space literature).

At the same time, space is inherently political. Spatial arrangements reflect and reproduce power relations, thus influencing who has access to, control over, and belonging within specific environments. These dynamics are deeply entangled with broader structures of inequality, including race, class and nationality, making spatial experiences unevenly distributed (Soja, 1996; Massey, 2005). Contemporary studies continue to highlight how space functions as a site of negotiation and contestations, where different groups experience inclusion, exclusion, and varying degrees of safety (Haselbacher et al., 2024). Understanding space, both as relational and political is therefore essential for examining how experiences such as safety and belonging are produced within complex social contexts.

2.2 The Production of Space

Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of the production of space provides a foundational framework for understanding space as a dynamic and socially constructed process. Instead of viewing space as fixed, Lefebvre argues that it is continuously produced through the interaction of material practices, conceptual representations, and lived experiences. This triadic framework highlights that space is not singular but layered, encompassing physical, mental, and experiential dimensions. Contemporary scholars continue to apply this framework in their studies to understand how everyday routines and practices, institutional structures, and subjective meanings intersect in the production of spatial experience (Schmid, 2008; Elden, 2004).

Spatial practice refers to the material and physical dimensions of space, including how it is used, navigated, and reproduced in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991). It encompasses routines, movements, and interactions that structure daily spatial engagement. Through repetition, these practices contribute to the formation of familiarity, stability, and order within space. Recent studies emphasize that spatial practice is closely linked to embodiment and habit, shaping how individuals experience and make sense of their environments (Middleton, 2018; Bissell, 2018). Everyday actions - such as commuting, studying or socialising, play a crucial role in producing space by embedding meaning into physical environments. Spatial practice therefor reflects how space is lived materially and enacted through routine.

Representations of space refer to the conceptualised and planned dimensions of space, often produced by institutions, planners, and systems of knowledge (Lefebvre, 1991). These include maps, designs, policies, and dominant narratives that define how space is intended to function. This dimension is often associated with power, as it reflects the perspectives of those who have authority to organise and regulate space. Some scholars argue that representations of space are not neutral but are embedded within ideological and political frameworks that shape spatial order and access (Elden, 2007; Brenner & Schmid, 2015). As such, conceived space may not align with lived realities; often creating tensions between institutional intentions and individual experiences. This highlights the importance of examining how space is both imagined and structured through systems of control and knowledge.

Representational space, or lived space, refers to the symbolic, emotional, and experiential dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1991). This is a space of imagination, meaning and affect, where individuals form personal and cultural attachments to their environments. While representations of space are abstract and institutional, representational space is fluid, subjective and grounded in lived experiences. Ahmed (2006) suggests that bodies are oriented in space in ways that shape feelings of comfort, belonging, or alienation. This highlights the embodied nature of spatial experiences, where emotions and memories play a big role in how space is perceived and inhabited. Recent research further emphasizes that lived space is produced through affective and sensory engagement, as well as through creative and reflective practices that allow individuals to interpret and reimagine their environments (Anderson, 2014; Duff, 2016). Thus, representational space plays a central role in understanding how meaning of safety and belonging emerge.

2.3 Lived, imagined, and Political Spatiality (Extending Spatial Thought)

Building on Lefebvre's (1991) framework, contemporary spatial theory expands the understanding of space by integrating relational, political, and hybrid perspectives. These approaches emphasize that space is not only produced but also contested, negotiated, and experienced differently across social contexts. By extending spatial thought, scholars highlight how lived, imagined, and structural dimensions of space intersect to shape experiences of belonging and exclusion.

Massey (2005) conceptualises space as relational, produced through interactions between multiple trajectories and social relations. This perspective challenges static notions of space by emphasising its openness and multiplicity. Central to this is the concept of power geometry,

which highlights how different individuals and groups are positioned unequally within spatial relations. Power geometry draws attention to how mobility, access and control over space are shaped by broader social structures such as class, race, and nationality (Massey, 2005). These inequalities influence how space is experienced, making some environments more accessible or welcoming than others. New research continues to show how spatial relations are deeply embedded in power systems, reinforcing unbalanced experiences of belonging and safety. For example, Finn and Holton (2023) explain how everyday spatial environments in higher education are shaped by institutional norms and social hierarchies that can privilege certain groups and marginalize others. Their study shows that feelings of belonging are not only socially produced but spatially embedded.

Soja (1996) build on Lefebvre's (1991) triad through the concept of Thirdspace, which integrated physical, mental and lived dimensions of space into a unified framework. Thirdspace is a representation of a hybrid and dynamic spatiality where multiple meanings, identities, and experiences exist together. It moves beyond binary understandings of space by acknowledging complexity and contradiction. Thirdspace is particularly useful for understanding lived spatiality, as it captures the interplay between material environments, imagined meanings, and embodied experiences. Scholars argue that this perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate and negotiate space, in particular the contexts of cultural hybridity and transition (Soja, 1996; Bhabha, 1994).

Foucault (1986) introduces the concept of heterotopia to describe "other" spaces that exist alongside or outside dominant spatial orders. These are real places that function as counter-sites, where alternative social arrangements and meanings can emerge. Heterotopia often reflects and challenges dominant norms, revealing the relationship between space, power and difference. Such spaces can serve as sites of resistance, refuge, or transformation, where individuals experience forms of belonging, that may not be possible in mainstream environments (Foucault, 1986; Genocchio, 1995). Contemporary interpretations of heterotopia emphasize this relevance in understanding how marginalized groups create and inhabit alternative spaces of meaning and safety within border spatial systems. (Johnson, 2006; Saldanha, 2008)

2.4 From Spaces to Safe Spaces

A safe space is a physical, social and emotional environment that is intentionally structured to reduce harm on individuals or groups, promote a sense of safety, belonging, freedom of speech,

for marginalized communities or vulnerable populations. The concept of ‘safe space’ has evolved across disciplines, from psychology and education to social justice work, feminist theory, and urban studies. At its core, a safe space is a constructed environment – both physical and social – where individuals experience reduced risk of emotional, physical and identity—based harm. But these spaces are not naturally found, instead are practiced. They emerge as intentional practices, norms in society, and spatial arrangements that prioritize inclusion and wellbeing of an individual or a community (Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005).

Historically, the term ‘Safe space’ is derived originally from the 1960s and 1970s, where it was used to describe physical meeting places where like-minded people could be themselves, share their experiences, express identities, discuss and meet in safer environments to build communities free from judgement or harm (Kenney, 2001). It has now moved to workplace culture and educational institutes worldwide, mostly as a set of policies or a code of conduct on preventing discrimination, harassment, hatred and threats towards every single individual (Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016). However, some scholars argue that safe spaces cannot be fully guaranteed through policy alone, as they are continuously negotiated through social practices and relationships.

Recent research further maintains the concept of ‘safe space’ as both spatial and relational, emphasizing that safety is experienced differently depending on an individual’s identity, context, and power relations. Rather than defining it universally, safe space is subjective and contingent, shaped by how individuals perceive and interact with their environments (Roestone Collective, 2014). This highlights that ‘safe space’ in an ongoing process of creating specific conditions that enable individuals to feel secure, recognized, and included, and hence, is not simply a physical setting.

Based on Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space, safe space can be understood as something which is actively produced through the interaction of spatial practices, representations, and lived experiences. From this perspective, safety does not reside in space itself, but emerges through everyday routines, social relationships, and embodied experiences. This shifts the focus from identifying where safe spaces are located to understanding how they are created and maintained. Scholars applying spatial theory argue that safety is constructed through material arrangements, social interactions, and symbolic meanings. These, together shape how a space is experienced (Anderson, 2014; Duff, 2016). For example, routines, relationships, and familiarity can contribute to feelings of comfort and predictability, whereas

exclusionary practices or power imbalances can produce feelings of unsafety. This aligns with the idea that space is both a product and a process that is continuously shaped by those who inhabit it (Schmid, 2008).

Importantly, safe space is not fixed or stable but remains dynamic and contested. It is constantly negotiated across different spatial dimensions – material, relational and symbolic; thus, reflecting broader social structures and inequalities. As such, safe space can be understood as an ongoing spatial production rather than a static condition.

For students, particularly those navigating institutional environments such as schools and universities, experiences of safety can be closely tied to spatial belonging. Porter, et.al (2021) studied the feeling of safety within 15 year olds in schools, finding complexity of feeling safe, with students having a difficulty with being themselves, feeling they would be ridiculed for how they looked, or for being unable to do things, pointing out that sometimes it was the space systems that contributed to this feeling of unsafety, and a lower sense of security. They point that something as simple as a small space can become unsafe when it is crowded and impacts negatively on student interaction and the feeling of connectedness. Building on Brown (2017, p.412) “to belong socially is to belong spatially”, Porter, et al. (2021) confirm that safety also relates to the allocation of space, be it within classes with seating plans, or having specific space within the school to gather with friends or simply be by oneself.

Here it can be argued that while the formation or creation of a space in a place like school, university, campus affects a student’s personal perspective, belonging, and success, it is also not possible to assume that the construction or production of that space of safety in a building or an environment is ‘one size fits all’. Feelings of safety are multifaceted (Porter, et. al., 2021), and for instance, a child’s ingenuity in challenging the spatial rules defined by adults, by claiming a place that is out of view from adult eyes can show the human need for having a space as an element of ownership and autonomy, giving oneself agency to choose and feel safe, outside the watchful gaze of authority figures and outsiders of a group (Brown, 2014). From a young age, we are aware of the spatiality of a space/ place and learn to differentiate between what makes one feel safe, and unsafe. When we have agency, even as children to choose a place or space to make it our favourite for several reasons, we understand our own participation in the production or creation of that space, and safety it provides.

In higher education contexts, spatial experiences play a significant role in shaping student identity and interaction. Samura (2018) recollects that as an educator it was interesting

to understand why some spaces simply felt better than others which is what led to learning about student's experiences on college campuses. She says space is more than just a background or a setting where something takes place or happens, but moreover it is something that affects peoples' interactions and in turn those interactions shape that space. In her research on college students, she discovered that a spatial approach offers a language to students to talk and discuss about difficult topics such as racism, sexuality, and so on, and by focusing on the how students interact with different spaces helps gain a deeper insight into their diverse and complex experiences.

These dynamics are further intensified for international students, whose experiences of safety and belonging are shaped by unfamiliar cultural, social, and spatial contexts. Wong (2023) builds on spatial theories of Foucault (1970, 1986), Lefebvre (1991), Massey (2005), and Soja (1996) and argues that 'space' is not something that can be regarded as neutral, but it is an entity where structural inequalities of power and privilege are reflected. This also depends on the design and operations of said space along with wide social relations. The physical aspect of a space is the tangible and the material aspect of it that is fundamental in belonging to something or somewhere, as for international students this is a setting that creates belonging or non-belonging through sensory lived experiences (Wong, 2023).

Safety plays an important role when choosing accommodations and international students (and their families) spent a lot of time in researching locations that have low crime rate, transportation availability, and they prefer to be in inner city or suburban areas as well as living close to families or friends (Corney, Plessis, Woods et al. 2024). This also further impacts the sense of belonging an individual may have to a place or an environment, and if international students do not feel safe in their new environment, they will not experience the feeling of belonging to it. Thus, safe space in migratory contexts is deeply relational and spatial, emerging through the interaction of environment, social relations, and individual perceptions. It is through these processes that students, individuals begin to negotiate belonging and construct a sense of "home" within new and unfamiliar settings.

2.5. Safe Space and Art

Artistic practice offers a critical lens through which safe space can be understood beyond fixed physical environments, thus extending into symbolic, emotional, and imaginative domains. In creative practices, space is not only represented but actively produced, allowing individuals to construct and negotiate distinct meanings of safety, belonging and identity. Arts-based research

(ABR) suggests that creative practices enable forms of expressions that exceed verbal articulation, providing access to embodied and affective dimensions of experience (Leavy, 2020; Kara, 2020). In this sense, art becomes a site where safe space is not simply described but materially and symbolically enacted.

From a spatial perspective, artistic practice aligns closely with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of representational space, where lived experiences memory, and imagination intersect. Through processes such as drawing, painting, or installation, artists (individuals) produce spaces that may not exist materially, but are experienced as meaningful and real. Artist Ojo Agi (2021), for instance, says her safe space is the paper, brown paper, where she creates places of belonging that still don't exist. She expresses how drawing for her is an expression of agency and here the paper acts as a 'physical' safe space but also an 'abstract safe space'. This illustrates how artistic practice can work as both a material and conceptual site for constructing safety. Contemporary artists further demonstrate how safe space can be produced, contested, and reimagined through artistic practice. Do Ho Suh's fabric installations, where he recreates domestic environments of past homes, that can be folded, transported, highlight how space is carried through memory and embodied experience rather than a fixed location. These "portable homes" in his installations function as emotional and symbolic safe spaces for individuals navigating migration and displacement, emphasizing instead, the lived and affective qualities of space.

In contrast, Mona Hatoum's work challenges the stability of safe space. By transforming familiar domestic objects into unsettling forms, revealing how spaces associated with comfort can also become sites of vulnerability, she showcases that safety is not inherent but contingent, shaped by broader socio-political conditions and power relations. Similarly, Bouchra Khalili constructs narrative spaces through film and multimedia installations that centre migrant voices and experiences. In her work, storytelling becomes a spatial practice through which individuals reclaim their agency and articulate belonging, producing safe space through collective expression. Njideka Akunyili Crosby's layered domestic interiors further extend this understanding by depicting hybrid spaces where multiple cultural identities intersect. These works reflect relational space (Massey, 2005), where belonging is negotiated through everyday material and cultural practices rather than tied to a single geography.

In a different but a complementary way, Mickalene Thomas creates richly constructed interior spaces that centre Black women as subjects of visibility and affirmation. These spaces

operate as intentional counter-spaces, where safety is produced through representation, dignity, and the reconfiguration of historically exclusionary spatial narratives. Together, these artistic practices demonstrate that safe space is not fixed or given, but continuously produced through imagination, memory, materiality, and social experience. Art enables the creation of alternate spatialities such as spaces of refuge, resistance and possibility. Through these, individuals can negotiate identity, belonging, and safety. In this way, artistic practice becomes a vital medium for understanding safe spaces as lived, relational, and evolving spatial productions.

Chapter 3: Making Space Visible: Methodology, Art, and Reflexive Practice

3.1 Art-Based Research (ABR) as Methodological Approach

For this research I have used Art-based Research methods (ABR) as my central methodological framework. This research is a qualitative, art-based study informed by researcher reflexivity. In ABR, artistic processes are positioned as primary means of investigation and knowledge production (Leavy, 2018). In this process, art-making functions simultaneously as method and outcome, allowing creative practices to generate insight through embodied and material engagement. Arts-based methods; including visual arts, storytelling, performance, and multimedia practices – have been widely used to explore complex social issues such as identity, community and marginalization. Eisner (2008) argues that artistic forms support multiple ways of knowing and interpreting experiences, allowing for richer, more nuanced understandings of human life.

The artworks created in this research are treated as data rather than illustrations. Arts-based research invites alternative forms of meaning-making that challenge purely discursive models of knowledge (Baron & Eisner, 2012). Similarly, Sullivan (2010) emphasizes that artistic practices constitute a form of inquiry, where making becomes thinking. The participants of this study were provided with freedom of choice when choosing their method of art creation, and the materials for making it. As my research focuses on the subject of ‘safe space’, it was required to create an environment where the participants would feel comfortable with the medium and material of their choice, that they reckon as the most comfortable, safest, and close to their choices. Hence, this approach is particularly suitable to exploring safe space, as safety is often felt rather than easily defined. Sensory and atmospheric dimensions of space – such as light, texture, enclosure, and rhythm; may be more effectively explored visually and materially than through language alone (Pink, 2015). Through artmaking, participants engaged with these embodied dimensions directly.

In ABR approach, artistic processes function as central methods of knowledge production. Creative practices enable participants to explore and express experiences that may not be fully accessible through verbal language alone. From my personal experiences, safety has emotional multitudes, and expressing safety also requires one to feel ‘safe’. ‘Safe space’ is

emotional and spatial, and as space has many factors, for example: physical, abstract, emotional, timely, articulating it with words alone is insufficient.

Scholars who practice ABR argue that creative methods expand the scope of research by engaging emotional, sensory, and aesthetic dimensions that are often excluded from traditional academic approaches. For example, Leavy (2020) highlights how arts-based research practices enable deeper engagement with complex human experiences, while McNiff (2013) emphasises that artistic processes themselves function as forms of inquiry, generating high insights through making and reflective practices. Thus, artmaking can become a reflective and investigative process through which emotions, memories, and spatial understandings can surface. In this research, artworks are treated as forms of data, carrying the participants' experiential and affective information that complements the interview narratives. This approach aligns with art education practices that emphasize learning through making, material engagements, and embodied reflection.



Figure 01: Flow of Research Design

3.1.1 Participatory Art-Based Research as Research Design

This research is designed to be participatory, positioning participants as active contributors rather than passive subjects. Participatory ABR is an approach that combines creative processes with collaborative inquiry, emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants. Grounded in qualitative research traditions, participatory ABR challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge production by valuing lived experiences, embodiment, and creative expression (Leavy, 2020; Barone & Eisner, 2012). Participatory research emphasizes shared authority, co-creation and ethical relationality (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Furthermore, the work of Freire (1970) emphasized dialogue, empowerment and the co-creation of knowledge, where participants are not treated as passive subjects but as active co-researchers who contribute to shaping both the research process and its outcomes. In this study participants were invited to define “safe space” in their own terms and to shape how it was expressed artistically. Through dialogue, making, and reflecting, knowledge is co-created between the participants and me, as a researcher. This collaborative orientation resists imposing external categories onto lived experiences and supports participant agency. As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) note, participatory approaches shift research from being conducted “on” participants to being conducted “with” them.

Within art education contexts, participatory methods align with pedagogical values of dialogue, reflection, and shared inquiry. Meaning in this study emerged relationally through conversations and creative engagement, rather than being predetermined. It is also particularly valuable in community-based research contexts, where it promotes inclusivity and accessibility. Creative practices can engage participants who may find traditional verbal or written method restrictive for expression, thereby broadening participation and expression. This aligns with the broader goal of democratizing research and producing knowledge that is socially relevant and meaningful (Leavy, 2020).

3.1.2 Researcher as Artist – Practitioner: My engagement in Arts-Based Practice

In addition to artworks by participants, I engaged in artistic practices, including photography, sketching, creative writing throughout the research process. This engagement served as a form of practice-based inquiry, allowing me to explore the material, symbolic, and affective dimensions of safe space firsthand. By actively participating in the creation and curation of my own spaces, reflecting on the ones from the past and the spaces I have created now; I was able to reflexively understand how aesthetic, relational and everyday objects, routines, contribute

to a sense of safety, familiarity, and belonging in new environments. While these practices were not treated as primary data, they act as a methodological lens that informed the interpretation of participants' creative outputs, providing me insight into processes that might otherwise remain implicit in interviews or visual work.

This reflexive engagement aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) triadic conceptualization of space, as it embodies both the material production of space (spatial practice) and the lived, symbolic experience of space (representational space). Art-based research methods, including researcher reflexivity through personal practice, have been widely recognized as a legitimate form of qualitative inquiry that captures dimensions of experience, which are inaccessible through verbal methods alone (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015; Knowles & Cole, 2008).

Thus, my practice-based approach complements participants' artistic contributions, enhancing the depth of analysis and supporting a more nuanced understanding of how international students actively produce safe spaces within unfamiliar geographies.

3.2 Research Design and Epistemological Positioning – (Research Positioning)

I ground this research in an interpretivist and constructivist research paradigm. This paradigm understands knowledge as situated, relational, and co-constructed through lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking objective or generalizing truth, I acknowledge that meanings of safety, space, place, and belonging are shaped by personal histories, embodied encounters, and contextual realities. Knowledge here, therefore, is approached as layered and emergent, rather than fixed.

Within the art education research, such an epistemological position recognizes that understanding can be generated through sensory engagement, material exploration, and reflective dialogue (Eisner, 2008). Artistic practice is not treated merely as representation but as a legitimate mode of inquiry. As Barone and Eisner (2012) argue, arts-based research expands the ways in which knowledge can be constructed and communicated. This study therefore positions art as a way of knowing – one that enables access to affective, spatial, and experiential dimensions that may not be fully articulated through verbal language alone.

My study explores how international students understand and produce safe spaces within new geographical contexts. The concept of 'safe space' is inherently subjective, relational, and context-dependent, requiring an approach that prioritizes lived experiences,

meaning-making, and individual perception rather than measurable variables. I aim to achieve an in-depth engagement with participants' narratives, allowing for the exploration of how 'safety' is experienced across material, emotional and relational dimensions. Rather than seeking generalizable outcomes, I aim to understand the nuanced and situated ways in which safe spaces are constructed and perceived in everyday life.

3.3 Analytical Framework: Lefebvre's Production of Space

3.3.1 Understanding Space as Socially Produced

My study draws on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space as my primary analytical framework. Lefebvre conceptualizes space as not a passive container, but as a dynamic and socially produced phenomenon shaped through interactions between material practices, representations, and lived experiences (Lefebvre, 1991). This relational understanding of space challenges notions of space as fixed or neutral, instead positioning it as continuously constructed through social relations and power dynamics.

Scholars have further emphasised that space is inherently political and embedded in everyday practices (Edward Soja, 1996; Doreen Massey, 2005). Massey, in particular, frames space as a "meeting place" of trajectories, highlighting its openness, multiplicity, and ongoing construction. In my study, this perspective is relevant for understanding how international students encounter and reshape unfamiliar environments through daily routines and interactions.

In the context of this study, viewing space as socially produced allows for an exploration of how "safe space" is not pre-given, but emerges through agency, practices of adaptations, negotiation, and meaning making. This is especially significant for international students, whose spatial experiences are shaped by displacement, cultural transitions, and the need to establish belonging in new environments.

3.3.2 Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

Central to this framework is Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice refers to the physical and material use of space in everyday life; representations of space relate to planned, designed, or conceptualized spaces; and representational space concerns the lived, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1991).

This triadic model has been widely applied in human geography and social research to examine how space is simultaneously material, conceptual, and lived (Soja, 1996). It provides a multidimensional lens through which different layers of spatial experiences can be analysed in relation to one another.

In addition, Michel de Certeau (1984) complements Lefebvre's (1991) framework by emphasizing everyday practices – such as walking, dwelling, and routine interactions, as ways in which individuals appropriate and reconfigure space. This is especially useful for understanding how individuals navigate institutional or unfamiliar environments in ways that may diverge from their intended design.

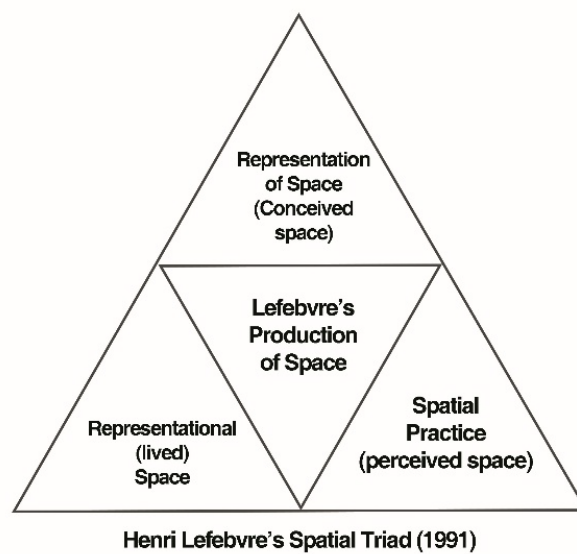


Figure 02: Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Triad (1991) for analysis of Production of Space

3.3.3 Application to This Study

For my research, I use Lefebvre's (1991) framework as an analytical lens to interpret how international students produce safe spaces through everyday practices, material arrangements, social interactions, and emotional experiences. This enables an examination of 'safety' not as a pre-existing condition, but as something actively constructed through spatial practices and lived realities.

Specifically, spatial practice is examined through students' daily routines like study habits, movement patterns, and use of campus or domestic spaces; representations of space are explored through institutional narratives of safety, such as university policies, housing structures, or designed environments; and representational space is analysed through students' emotional attachments, feelings of comfort, and symbolic meanings associated with particular

places. This approach aligns with existing research on critical student geographies, which highlights how belonging and safety are produced through everyday spatial negotiations rather than formal provision alone (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Kirby, 1996). Ahmed’s work on orientation and belonging is particularly relevant, as it illustrated how bodies come to feel “at home” in some spaces while experiencing discomfort or exclusion in others.

By applying this framework, this study thence moves beyond viewing safe space as a fixed or provided entity and instead understands it as a process shaped by agency, context, and experience. This is particularly relevant in the context of international students’ navigating new geographies, where space is continuously negotiated, adapted, and redefined in response to cultural, social, and emotional needs.

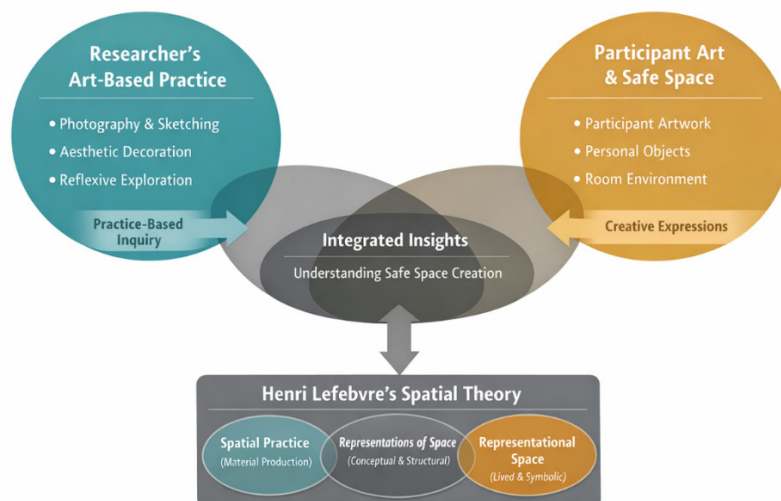


Figure 03: Researcher, Participants and Spatial Theory relation

3.4 Research Design and Methods

This study is situated in Rovaniemi, Finland, a northern city characterized by its distinct seasonal changes. Arctic light conditions, and close proximity to natural landscapes quietly shape how space is perceived and inhabited, influencing experiences of comfort, grounding, and belonging. Place is understood not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent in shaping experiences (Pink, 2015). Hence, the physical environment plays a significant role in international students’ processes of adaptation and place-making.

Natural events like Polar Night, Midnight Sun, long months of winter, and short summers have shaped how I adapted to this new geography, and like me, many participants are recent arrivals to this geographical context. Environmental qualities such as light, climate, and

landscape influence how space is perceived and inhabited. As Massey (2005) argues, space is relational and continuously produced through interaction. In this research, the northern context plays a central role in shaping how safety is experienced and constructed by international students, thus acknowledging the setting not merely as a backdrop, but as an active element in the formation of safe spaces.

The participants in this research consisted of seven international students who have lived in Finland, and in Rovaniemi, Finland for various time periods. These are students who are currently living and studying in Rovaniemi. Recruitment occurred through voluntary invitation. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality. Qualitative research values depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the focus of my research was on rich, detailed accounts rather than statistical representations. Participants' diverse backgrounds contributed to varied perspectives on how physical and abstract safe spaces are understood and created.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

The interviews were semi-structured, conducted verbally for some participants and in written format for other participants. I decided to present the participants with the opportunity to choose what method of interview they were comfortable with, as the interview was about 'safe space'. The questions for these semi-structured interviews had questions that explored participants' experiences and understandings about the term 'safe space', their experience and understanding of spatial adaptation, safety, art, art in context to safety, and safe space, and their own art-making process. Open-ended questioning allowed participants to narrate experiences in their own terms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The verbal interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Following the artmaking, reflective semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants about their art, the process they had chosen, their experiences about their reflections for the creation of their safe space in a physical form. Following the exhibition, reflective conversations were conducted about the whole experience. This dialogic method allowed participants to articulate meanings that surfaced during the creative process and after when they saw their artworks being exhibited in the gallery. Reflective dialogue supports deeper phenomenological insight into lived experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The integration of visual and verbal reflection strengthened the richness of the data. The interview questions are included as an attachment at the end of the thesis.

Similar to the interviews, the participants engaged in individual art-making sessions in which they created artworks reflecting their understanding of a ‘safe space’. The emphasis was on the process – to reflect on their choices for choosing a particular medium, or method of creation, and not on the technical skill of the participants, thus encouraging intuitive exploration. Based on Sullivan (2010), artistic practice was treated as a mode of inquiry through which knowledge emerges materially. Artmaking enabled the participants to engage with non-verbal affective dimensions of safety that extended beyond discursive explanation (Leavy, 2018). The artworks were documented and preserved as primary research data. They were also used as partial results for this thesis as displays with their understanding of safe space together with their artworks in the exhibition.

The dataset for my research included:

- Interview transcripts – 2 verbal, 5 written
- Artworks produced by the participants – 7 artworks
- Post-art reflection interview transcripts – 7 written
- Researcher journals
- Researcher artworks

This type of integration of multiple forms of data allowed for triangulation and layered interpretation (Denzin, 1978). Together, these materials provided verbal, visual, and experiential perspectives that enable a multi-layered understanding of safe space and the production of safe space, and if and how art plays a role in this production.

As an attachment there will also be data included that was collected during the exhibition ‘*In the safe layers of space*’ (March 2026 at Galleria Puoti, Lapin Yliopisto, Rovaniemi, Finland), where visitors were asked to freely mention what safe space looks like and means to them.

3.6 Data Analysis

My analysis for this research followed an inductive qualitative approach that integrated verbal, visual, and autobiographical materials.

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis and Interpretation of Art-based data, Reflexive and Integrative Analysis

I identified the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes related to safety, materiality, memory, place, production of space, and art and safe space. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding

was iterative and reflexive. Artworks were analysed through attention to material choices, compositional qualities, and symbolic elements, always in relation to participants' own interpretations. The focus was on meaning-based interpretations and not aesthetic critique. Reflexive journaling supported autobiographical analysis of my experiences as an artist-researcher. Finally, an integrative analysis brought these strands together, allowing themes to emerge across multiple forms of data and revealing the layered nature of participants' experiences and understandings about "safe space".

My journals and own artworks support the reflexive examination of interpretive processes. This approach supports a transparent and self-aware form of qualitative inquiry, where the researcher's influence is acknowledged rather than bracketed out of the analysis (Finaly, 2002).

3.6.2 Lefebvrian Spatial Analysis

For my study, the thematic categories form the interview structure – including understandings of safe space, personal experiences, physical environments, emotional connections, social dimensions, and creative expressions – were analytically mapped onto Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad. Themes relating to material settings, routines, and spatial organization (such as personalisation of rooms, everyday habits, and use of environments) were interpreted as *spatial practices*. Participants' definitions, expectations, and idealisations of safe space were analysed as *representations of space*. Emotional, symbolic, and memory-based experiences, along with reflections expressed through artistic practices, were examined as *representational spaces*.

The application of Lefebvre's (1991) triad was not treated as a rigid categorisation, but as a flexible analytical tool. Themes were first identified inductively and then interpreted across the three dimensions, allowing for overlaps and interactions between categories. For instance, the arrangement of personal objects (spatial practice) was often closely connected to emotional attachment and memory (representational space).

This analytical framework enables this study to conceptualise "safe space" not as a fixed or pre-existing condition, but as an ongoing practice/process of spatial production shaped by everyday practices, meanings, and lived experiences. Within this framework, art-based expressions were particularly significant in revealing representational spaces for some participants, as they captured symbolic and affective dimensions of safety that extended beyond verbal articulation.

3.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As an artist-researcher who has lived as an international student in multiple cultural contexts, my engagement with the concept of safe space is both scholarly and experiential. I have chosen to reflect and analyse my own experiences as an international student in a new geographical place, firstly from my time in Japan (2015 – 2018) and then Rovaniemi (2024 –). My experiences are layered upon earlier understandings of personal space and privacy, shaped during my childhood and a part of adulthood in India. These cumulative experiences inform my sensitivity to spatial negotiation, belonging, and the production of safety.

While this project emerged with the intention of reflecting back on my experiences of confronting grief and mourning at a time when I chose to be away from ‘home’ in a new, almost unfamiliar place, it expanded and evolved into the nuanced layers of safety I have encountered, created, or am being provided – eventually constructed across intersecting identities; a human being, a girl, a woman, an immigrant, a migrant, a student navigating unfamiliar environments. Rather than positioning my subjectivity as bias, my study acknowledges it as a situated epistemological standpoint that informs both research design and interpretation.

ABR incorporates reflexive researcher positioning. While my study is not autoethnographic, it acknowledges my situated experience as an international student navigating grief and mobility. Rather than using my experiences and understanding of ‘safe space’ as primary data, my reflections inform the conceptual framing of safe space and sensitised me to spatial practices beyond domestic interiors, including landscapes, routines and material environments. It also shapes my sensitivity to participants’ spatial negotiations. This reflexive stand acknowledges that knowledge is situated and co-constructed.

My position as an artist-researcher aided with an additional layer of inquiry through my own artistic practice and self-critical journaling. Reflexivity is central to qualitative research, particularly when the researcher occupies a relational position within the field (Finlay, 2002). Autoethnographic elements acknowledge that knowledge is situated and that the researcher’s experiences contribute to the interpretive process (Ellis et al., 2011). Through my own artistic creations and written reflection, I examined my positionality within the study. Through the whole research process, I engaged relationally with the participants and my own creative process. My position here acknowledges that knowledge emerges through interaction and shared experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and through my interpretive and participatory position I contribute to, rather than observe from outside, the formation of meaning.

Thus, this study incorporates a self-critical dimension, acknowledging my own spatial experiences as an international student. While these experiences are not treated as primary data, they inform the interpretive process, particularly in recognising non-domestic and everyday forms of safe space such as routines, movement, and environmental settings.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

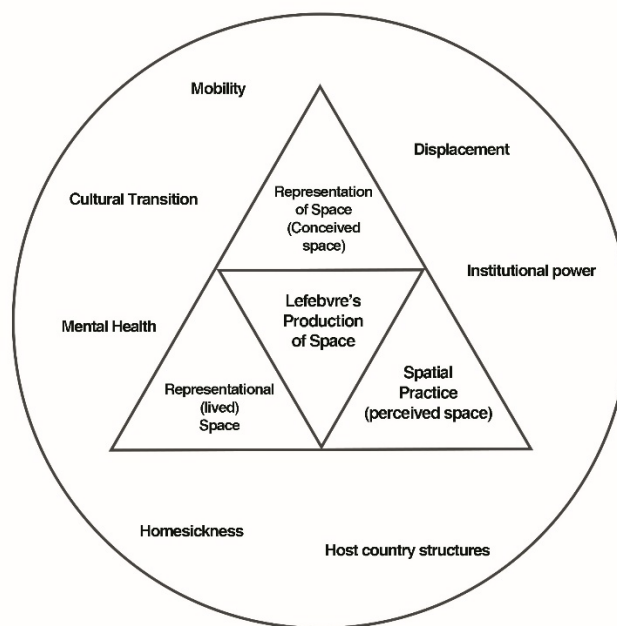
Ethical care was central throughout the research process and followed the qualitative research standards (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were provided informed consent and retained agency over their level of participation. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization, and participants were given the option to withdraw at any stage. As discussions of safety may involve emotional sensitivity, my research prioritized respectful listening and participant well-being. Ownership and representation of the artworks were handled collaboratively and transparently. All the artworks created during the research were returned to the owners after the exhibition period had ended.

Trustworthiness was supported through transparency of process, reflexive practice, and the inclusion of multiple forms of data which is necessary during sensitive interviews. This approach aligns with constructivist criteria of credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation across interviews, artworks, and reflective accounts strengthened credibility as expected through Denzin' (1978) process of research practices. Detailed description during interviews and participant-led interpretation of the created artworks helped ensure that my findings remained grounded in lived experiences. Reflexivity was maintained through continuous self-examination of my role and influence within the study (Finlay, 2002).

Chapter 4: Producing Safety in New Geographies: Layers of Space in Practice – A Lefebvrian Analysis

“Safe space” in my study, does not emerge as a singular location, but as a layered and evolving spatial practice shaped through everyday life, memory, and meaning – making. This chapter presents my analysis of how international students produce and experience “safe spaces” within new geographical contexts. Drawing on the interview data and art-based expressions, my analysis explores the multiple ways in which safety is constructed through material arrangements, conceptual understandings, and lived experiences.

The analysis is guided by Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of production of space as socially produced across three interconnected dimensions: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. These dimensions provide a framework through which participant’s experiences are interpreted, allowing for an examination of safe space as an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a fixed condition.

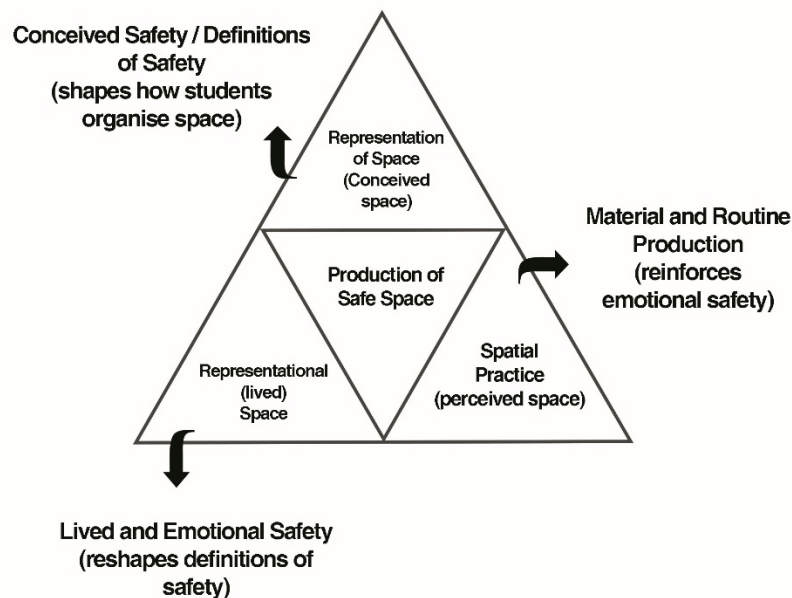


Lefebvre's Spatial Triad Framework for International students navigating new geographies

Figure 04: Relationship between Lefebvre's Spatial Triad and different pointers affecting international students in new places.

I have organized this chapter according to Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad. Section 4.1 examines spatial practice, where I focus on the material and physical construction of safe space through domestic environments, objects and everyday routines. In Section 4.2, I explore representations of space, by analysing how participants define, conceptualise, and structure their understanding of safety and a safe space. In Section 4.3, I address representational space, highlighting the emotional, relational and symbolic dimensions of safe space, including memory, affect, and interpersonal connections. Finally, in Section 4.4, I consider the role of artistic and aesthetic practices and examine whether art appears in the production of safe spaces and where alternative, non-artistic forms of spatial meaning-making emerge.

Even though I have presented the data in distinct sections, these dimensions are interconnected, and participants’ experiences often move across multiple layers of space simultaneously. My analysis therefore adopts a flexible interpretation of Lefebvre’s framework, recognising these overlaps between material, conceptual, and lived dimensions in the production of safe space.



**Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad interpreted as
Production of Safe Space**

Figure 05: Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad interpreted for this study as Production of Safe Space

4.1 Spatial Practice: Producing Safety Through Material and Everyday Practices

4.1.1. Domestic Spaces as Sites of Safety: Rooms, Homes, and Study Environments

Participants responses highlight that domestic environment – particularly rooms, apartments, and study spaces – function as primary sites in which safe space is actively produced through arrangement, personalization and everyday negotiations. Rather than being inherently safe, these spaces become meaningful through continuous modifications and adaptations to individual needs, moods, and routines. Several participants described deliberately reorganising their environments to support different states of being, such as work, rest, or reflection. One of the participants expressed,

“I need multiple options depending on my mood, I keep switching places to sit while working. So that is why I have kept two different sofas one is much comfier and softer other is little strict keeps you awake, then I have dining chairs on two sides. Once facing kitchen, one facing window. So, I literally keep rotating when working.”

Here, the use of multiple seating arrangements, varied spatial orientations, and flexible layouts demonstrates how individuals actively engage with their surroundings to create comfort and maintain focus. This fluid interaction with domestic spaces reflects an ongoing process of adjustment, where safety is not fixed but responsive to changing emotional and practical conditions.

A recurring theme across participants is the importance of incremental and often subtle modifications in shaping a sense of safety. These include the addition of lighting, carpets, plants, decorations, and other movable elements that transform otherwise neutral or temporary housing into lived and personalised environments. Notably, these interventions are not always large or permanent; rather, they often involve as another participant said, *“soft adjustments”* that allow individuals to reshape a space without fundamentally altering its structure. This highlights the role of accessibility and adaptability in the production of safe space, particularly for international students who may inhabit temporary or shared accommodations. Through these practices, domestic spaces shift from being merely functional to becoming emotionally resonant and supportive.

Personalization emerges as a central mechanism through which safety is established, although its significance varies across participants. For some, familiar objects, photographs, postcards, and decorative elements are essential in creating a sense of belonging, thus preventing spaces from feeling “cold” or impersonal, like a hotel room. For others, safety is less dependent on objects and more closely tied to specific relationships or non-material factors. Nevertheless, even when not explicitly prioritised, elements of familiarity – such as arranging furniture in ways reminiscent of one’s home environment – appear to operate subconsciously, suggesting that spatial memory plays a role in shaping comfort. As a participant reflected,

“I never thought it was important but eventually I ended up placing my bed or even my things the same way I used to back in my home.”

In this sense, domestic spaces become sites where past experiences, cultural references, and present conditions intersect.

The question of sharing versus privacy further complicates the production of safety within domestic environments. While many participants expressed a desire to share their spaces with trusted individuals, they also emphasized the importance of maintaining boundaries and moments of solitude. Safe space, in this context is not defined by exclusivity or isolation alone, but by the ability to control access, interaction and social dynamics within a given environment. Even in shared environments, participants described creating micro-spaces – such as a chosen chair, a bed area, desk, or corner – that function as personal retreat. A participant reflected,

“Since I moved out from my hometown and started living abroad, I have had to share my safe space most of the times. Sometimes it was just a curtain that divided my bed, but that small place, where my bed was, was enough to become my safe space.”

Another participant described the action of sharing a space, and thus individual safety with a group as a continuous process,

“I feel like whenever you can, for example when I go to laavu with some friends there is a process in which everyone puts their stuff down, and take over the area, like in a way reserve it, maybe that applies all the time, when I’m with a group of friends and we choose a table at a cafeteria or something, more about reserving the space than changing it. ”

This demonstrates that safety can be produced at multiple scales within the same environments, reinforcing the idea that domestic space is layered and negotiated.

Overall, these analyses suggest that homes, rooms, and study environments are not passively experienced, but are actively shaped through material arrangements, personalization, and social negotiation, thus aligning with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of spatial practice. Domestic safe spaces, therefore, emerge not simply as locations of residence, but as continuously produced environments where individuals exercise agency to create comfort, familiarity, and control within new and often transitional geographies.

4.1.2 Material Objects and Atmospheres: Lighting, Arrangement, and Sensory Comfort

Participants' responses show that the production of 'safe space' is deeply embedded in material conditions and sensory atmospheres, where elements such as lighting, spatial enclosures, objects and environmental qualities play an important role in shaping their comfort and security. Across responses the 'home' is the primary site of safety, not merely as a physical structure but as a space gradually produced through familiarity, personalization, and emotional investment. For most participants, decorating and creating one's own space played a huge role in the feeling of safety and belonging after moving to a new geography as an international student. Several participants emphasised how their sense of safety developed over time, as spaces became more associated with routines, relationships, memories, thus transforming initially unfamiliar environments into intimate and secure settings.

A recurring and significant factor in the experience of safety was lighting. Participants associated well-lit environments with visibility, control, and reassurance, while darkness often evoked feelings of discomfort and vulnerability. For example, one participant described a preference for consistently illuminated spaces such as the university library, where artificial lighting contributed to a predictable and controlled atmosphere, contrasting with feelings of unease in dark, outdoor environments. Similarly, others also highlighted the importance of adjusting lighting when in their homes – through lamps or ambient sources – to create warmth and reduce the feelings of isolation, especially during long winter months in Rovaniemi. For example, a participant added,

“I also added more lights in the last couple of months because I felt too dark in my apartment, and this year I bought two little lamps to put in corners to make it even brighter.”

Beyond lighting, spatial configuration and enclosure – including walls, ceilings, and the scale of a space – also contributed to feelings of safety. One participant described smaller, enclosed environment as “cozy” and controllable, reinforcing a sense of protection, while many participants realised overly open, crowded, or undefined spaces could evoke discomfort. At the same time, participants pointed out the importance of objects and arrangements, such as plants –

“I added some indoor small plants, as I felt safe and back home seeing green and during winter, we barely see any green spaces...”,

furniture, decorations, and personal belongings, which transform otherwise neutral environments into lived spaces that reflect identity and familiarity. Here, these elements do not function purely as decorations, but as an active component in the production of space, that contributes to a sense of calm, belonging, and emotional grounding.

Importantly, the data also highlights the role of nature and outdoor environments as atmospheric conditions of safety, complicating a purely interior understanding of spatial comfort. While some participants associated safety with enclosed and controlled interiors, others described finding comfort in natural settings such as forests, waterbodies, or seasonal landscapes. In these cases, safety emerges from sensory immersion – light, air, openness, and rhythm – suggesting that atmospheres of safety can be both constructed and encountered. It shows that safety can also emerge without human-designed spatial order.

Taken together in consideration, these findings reflect upon safe space, within participants’ experiences, as not solely defined by location but being produced through an interplay of material features, sensory conditions, and personal adjustments. This aligns with a Lefebvrian understanding of spatial practice as constituted through everyday interactions with the physical environment.

4.1.3 Routines, Repetition, and the Everyday Production of Safety

Responses of participants illustrate that safe space is not only a location in fixed environments, but is continuously produced through routines, repetition, and everyday practices. Across participants, habitual actions – such as listening to music in morning, walking in nature, commuting or sharing regular moments with familiar people – emerge as supporting structures that bring a sense of predictability and control within otherwise shifting and unfamiliar environments. These routines functioned as daily anchors in life, allowing participants to cultivate moments of calm, focus, and emotional regulation. For example, a participant said,

“...be it being with friends and laughing out louder without any judgement and just listening to music and dancing while cooking alone, watching movies and feeling emotionally connected with characters, it's not a just a tangible place for me it's the emotional engagement.”

Here, for instance, engaging in repeated practices such as morning rituals or returning to familiar social interactions contributes to maintain a sense of continuity, particularly within the context of mobility and transitions as international students. Another participant who describes being with her dogs as her safe space relates it to earlier experiences of safety,

“Working on Husky Farms where I lived before. There, we never had keys to any buildings, and I felt safe and relaxed walking around, especially with dogs. I never had been scared to walk with my dogs there in the forest in the evening. I think my dogs are also part of the reason why I would say outdoors is my safe space with them together.”

In addition to individual routines, relational patterns of repetition – such as consistently meeting the same people, maintaining contacts with friends and family, or engaging in ongoing online interactions – further reinforce feelings of safety. These repeated interactions transform relationships into dependable spaces of support, suggesting that safety is not only spatially situated but also temporally sustained through continuity. A participant expressed,

“The time here (at a tea stall) on Friday night after a long week for all of us working or studying, was just right time to relax, release work exhaustion, the jokes, the teases, the laughter and deep, very deep discussions. Been just truly you without any fear of being judged by people around you.”

At the same time participants described varying preferences in how these routines are experienced, with some emphasising solitude essential to their sense of safety, while other highlighted shared practices and social presence. This variation reflects the flexible and subjective nature of spatial practice, where safety is produced differently depending on individual needs and rhythms. One participant described a sense of co-creation in this routine,

“When I'm outside, no matter the weather and walk with my dogs together. They are Huskies and I have always felt safe and at peace when I'm walking with them as they have a relaxing influence on me. It doesn't matter if I take them on a walk, bike jogging or even sledding in wintertime, as long as Risto and Kato are there it's a good place to be.”

Moreover, everyday systems and infrastructures, such as reliable public transport or structured daily schedules, also contribute to this sense of stability, indicating that routines are embedded not only in personal habits but within broader spatial and social systems. Through repetition, these practices gradually transform unfamiliar environments into spaces that feel known, navigable and secure. In this sense, safe space is not simply created once but is continuously reproduced through the rhythm of everyday life, aligning with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of spatial practice as constituted through habitual actions and lived routines.

4.2 Representations of Space: Conceptualising and Defining Safety and Safe Space

Participants' reflections reveal that "safe space" operates strongly at the level of representation of space, where it is conceptualized, defined, and imagined in relation to broader experiences of mobility, identity and adaptation. Rather than being understood as a fixed or purely physical entity, safe space is articulated as a necessary conceptual anchor that supports individuals in navigating unfamiliar cultural and geographical contexts. For many participants, the need for safe space did not simply increase or decrease after relocation; instead, it was redefined and expanded.

4.2.1 Defining Safe Space: Between a Physical Place and an Emotional State

Participants' definitions of 'safe space' reveal how multifaceted and deeply personal concept they are, often extending beyond a fixed physical location into relational, emotional and atmospheric dimensions. Several participants described 'safe space' as both tangible and intangible, where material environments such as rooms, forests, or shared spaces – in school, university, public places, coexist with emotional and social conditions. For example, one participant expressed safe space as "*a tangible location with or without walls*" that holds positive memories and peaceful emotions but also emphasised the role of "*the right kind of people*" in creating such a space. This reflects the participants understanding of safe space not as a static entity, but as something produced through a combination of environment, memory, and social interaction.

Participants here, articulated safe space as essential for their well-being, emotional regulation, and resilience. They imagined it not only as comfort, but as a necessary condition for coping homesickness, culture shock, and social isolation. Here, safe space can enable the processes of adjustment, self-reflection, and personal growth, thus functioning both as a

psychological refuge and a foundation for engagement with the external world. In emphasizing its importance for other international students, safe space is reinforced as a shared conceptual necessity, rather than an individual preference. Thus, within the Lefebvrian framework, safe space emerges here as an ideational construct – a set of meanings, expectations, and imagined functions that shape how individuals seek, recognise, and produce safety in new geographies.

4.2.2 Safety as Control, Freedom, and Non-Surveillance

Participants also conceptualised ‘safe spaces’ through **sensory and atmospheric qualities**, with references to temperature, light, smell, and texture contributing to a sense of bodily and mental stability. These descriptions show that safe space is not only cognitively defined but also experienced through embodied perception. Additionally, some participants framed safe space as a state of being rather than a location, describing it as a condition where emotions are controlled, expressed freely, or remain unaffected by external surroundings.

Across responses, a recurring theme was the ability to exist without surveillance or self-regulation. One participant described safe space as the absence of self-policing behaviour – *“a place where I don’t have to be on guard...I can just be.”* This conceptualisation highlights safety as a condition of freedom from judgement and external scrutiny, aligning with the broader understandings of space as socially regulated. Similarly, multiple participants defined safe space as a place where they could “be themselves”, express vulnerability, or exist without filters, suggesting that safety is closely tied to autonomy, authenticity, and emotional openness. This shows that safe space to some, is also conceptualized as a mechanism for negotiating cultural displacement and the continuity of their identity. This aligns with Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of representation of space as spaces of planning and abstraction, where individuals construct internal definitions that guide how space should function. For international students, this concept of safe space forms a conceptual bridge between familiar past environments and present unfamiliar surroundings, allowing them to maintain their cultural practices, emotional stability and a coherent sense of self.

4.2.3 From Institutional Discourse to Personal Meanings

Experiences and understandings of the term ‘safe space’ itself varied significantly among the participants. While some participants encountered the concept through institutional or political contexts, such as the feminist or the LGBTQ+ discourse, others had not previously engaged with the term explicitly, and instead understood it intuitively, through everyday experiences. This distinction suggests a shift from institutionally defined notions of safe space to more

personalised and lived interpretations. In both cases, however, participants expanded the concept beyond formal definitions, grounding it in their own spatial, relational and emotional realities.

Considering these interpretations together, 'safe space' is positioned here as a conceptual construct (representations of space) that is shaped by individual expectations, social norms, and lived experiences. Rather than being defined solely by physical boundaries, safe spaces emerge from an interplay between ideas of comfort, control, belonging, and emotional security, which are later materialised and experienced through everyday spatial practices and lived environments. This reinforces the understanding that safe space is not pre-given but conceptually constructed and later realised through spatial and lived practices.

4.2.4 Imagined and Ideal Safe Space

Participants' reflections on their ideal safe spaces reveal that safety is not only experienced in the present but also actively imagined and projected into the future, aligning closely with Lefebvre's (1991) notion of representations of space as conceptual and abstract constructions. These imagined environments function as aspirational spatial models, shaped by personal desires, memories, and evolving needs. A recurring theme across participants is the integration of nature and domesticity, often envisioned as a private dwelling situated near lakes, forests, or open landscapes. Such imaginaries reflect a desire to merge the emotional comfort of the home with the openness and tranquillity of the natural environments. It may also suggest that safety is conceptualised as both shelter and freedom simultaneously. One of the participants described their attunement of safe space to Finnish culture –

“I think if I had unlimited money, and (you) know, I would love as a safe space like a little mokki, right?”

Many participants also emphasised the importance of a creative and functional personal spaces within these ideal environments. Dedicated studios, artistic corners, or flexible rooms equipped with tools for crafting, music, reading were frequently mentioned. These spaces are imagined not only as sites of productivity but also as environments that foster self-expression, autonomy, and emotional well-being. The inclusion of artistic elements - such as décor, culturally meaningful objects, or aesthetic seasonal arrangements – further highlight how safe space is conceptualised as something that must be visually and materially curated, even at the level of imagination. But, also, for some participants, safety was less about design and more about conditions, as participants described,

“I wouldn’t design an ideal safe space because I cannot foresee how I will understand safe space in the future. The ideal situation is that as life continues, the safe space can match my own state. Whether it includes artistic elements is also uncertain.”, (Participant 3)

“Nah not really possible. I only like not having many people around and check for places where I’m more likely alone with the dogs.” (Participant 4)

This indicates that ideal safe space can also be defined through what they exclude.

The question of privacy versus sharing of these imagined spaces are also further reflected upon by the participants desires for their ideal safe spaces. While several participants expressed a desire to share their ideal environments with close friends and family, this was often conditional and temporary desire, reinforcing the importance of control over social interactions. Others preferred entirely private or semi-private settings, suggesting that safety is closely tied to the ability to regulate access and maintain personal boundaries. This shows that even in imagined forms, safe space is not inherently social or individual but exists along a dynamic spectrum between solitude and togetherness.



Figure 06: Participant 2’s artwork expressing her ideal safe space with touches of extra light, and decorations on the walls

Sustainability also emerges as a conceptual concern, though it is interpreted in different ways. For some participants, it relates to environmental consciousness and responsible resource use, while for some it is understood in terms of emotional and practical maintainability – “*a place that I can upkeep without big efforts.*” Participants also describe it is a space that remains comfortable over time and does not become overwhelming. This shows that an ideal safe space is not only imaged for immediate comfort but also for their ability to endure and adapt over time, reinforcing their role as stable yet flexible environments.

Participants also recognized that their concept of safe space is not fixed but evolving, shaped by life transitions, cultural contexts, and personal growth. While some identified a stable “core” of safety – such as familiarity, comfort, or connection – many acknowledged that its material form and spatial expression would shift depending on future environments. This adaptability emphasizes that imagined safe spaces are not rigid ideals but rather an unrestricted framework, continuously reinterpreted in relation to changing circumstances.

Within Lefebvre’s (1991) framework, these findings demonstrate that safe space, at the level of representation, operates as a mental blueprint that informs spatial practices and lived experiences. By articulating what safety *could* look like, participants reveal the underlying values and expectations that guide how they produce, modify and inhabit space in their present lives. Thus, imagines and ideal safe spaces are integral to the broader production of space, bringing memory, desire, and future possibility within the ongoing negotiation of safety in new geographies.

4.3 Representational Space: Living, Feeling and Remembering Safety in Spaces

Abstract safe spaces further extend this relational dimension, as participants identified relationships, cultural practices, routines, and online communities as sources of safety that exist beyond physical environments. These intangible connections – ranging from family ties and friendships to daily habits and digital interactions, provide continuity, stability, and a sense of belonging, thus reinforcing the idea that safety is not only located in space but also carried through social and emotional networks across contexts.

4.3.1. Friendships, Intimacy, and Social Belonging as Relational Safety

Participants’ responses show that safe space is not only produced through physical environments but is deeply embedded within social relationships and interpersonal dynamics,

where people themselves become central to the experience of safety. Many participants reflect on relationships – particularly with partners, close friends, and family as key contributors to their emotional comfort, trust, and a sense of belonging. For instance, participants emphasized that shared domestic space gain their sense of safety through mutual care, respect, and the way individuals treat one another, thus suggesting that safety is relationally constructed rather than spatially fixed. In this case, safe space is co-produced through interaction, where emotional security depends on the presence of support and understanding others.

One participant described working at husky kennels as her safe space, and another described the routine of listening to Indian classical music as soon as she wakes up. Another participant explains that,

“Daily habits involve establishing and maintaining life order; cultural customs relate to self-identity. These two “abstract spaces” can provide a certain sense of stability.”

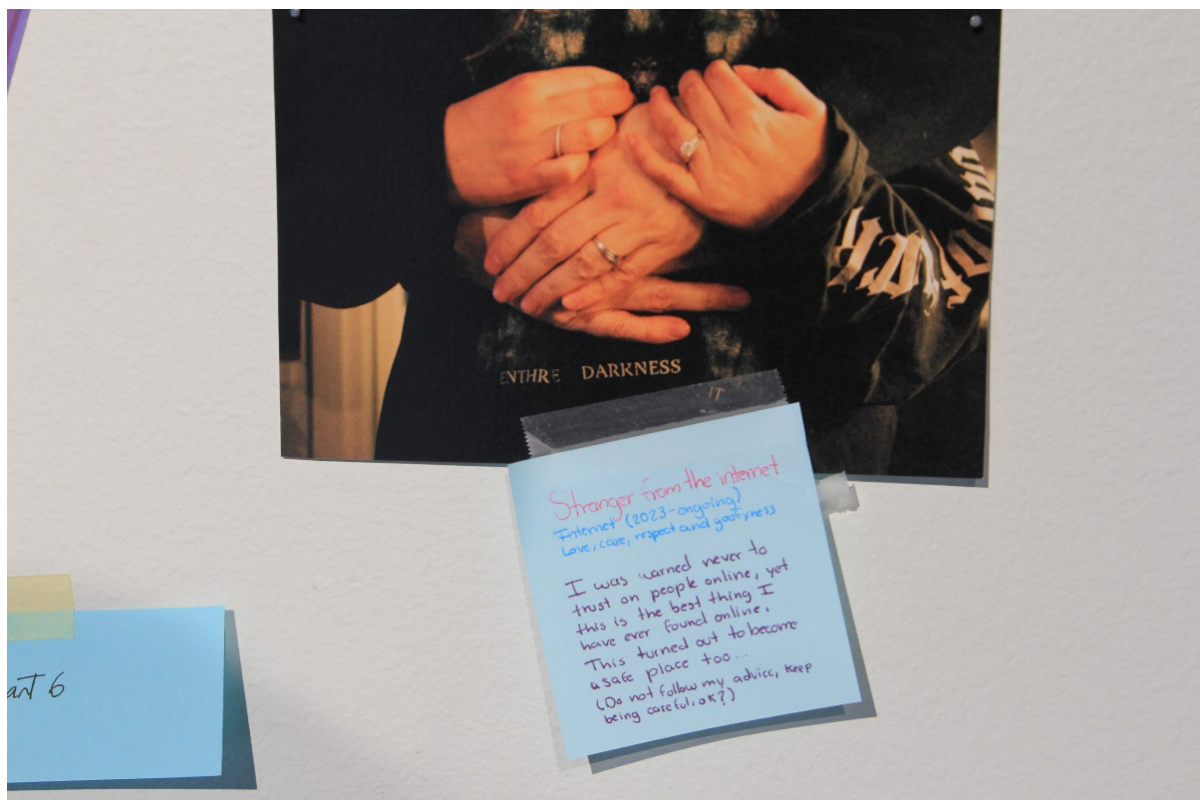


Figure 07: Participant 6's interpretations of her safe space through photographs and writing

In semi-public spaces such as universities or cafes, participants particularly pointed to the importance of “vibe”, shared values, and gradual relationship-building in cultivating a sense of safety, indicating that belonging is something that develops over time rather than being immediately present. This duality highlights that safety is not inherent to a place itself but is

contingent upon the social atmosphere and interactions occurring within in. But there was also a nuanced balance between solitude and sociality in the production of relational safety. While many participants associated safe space with being alone – emphasising privacy, control and the ability to fully relax, this did not exclude the presence of others. Instead, safe spaces were often described as selectively shared, where access is limited to trusted individuals. Participants expressed a preference for inviting others into their space on their own terms, reinforcing the importance of autonomy in managing social interaction. This suggest that safety is not defined by isolation or togetherness alone, but by the ability to navigate and regulate both states fluidly.

Here, friendships, partnerships, and familial connections provide emotional grounding that can be carried across different environments, helping individuals cope with unfamiliar or challenging situations. For international students in particular, these relationships play a crucial role in mitigating feelings of loneliness, cultural displacement, and instability. A participant also described the relationships as something like portable safe spaces, saying,

“If everyone was not here, I would be homesick. If the friends were not there. More like I am very grateful to the Finnish language community. To learn a language, safe space is very important as there is pair work and so on, but in that class everyone is very close so there is motivation to learn the language and ‘choukisen’ (a long, drawn-out battle) – to learn a language, and if I did not have that I wouldn’t do it. I feel held up and supported by everyone.”

She further stresses,

“Alone is more comfortable, with friends is more appreciation and family is like my identity, my home. So, it is different kinds of safe spaces and safe feelings. I mentioned that safe space for me is somewhere I can be myself, but my personality is different depending on different people, so I feel like my personality with family, friends and alone is very different, but all is myself.”

In such case, participant also notes that their sense of self shifts depending on the social context – whether with friends, family or alone – yet all these variations are still perceived as authentic. This highlight that safe space is not tied to a singular identity but rather accommodates multiple expressions of self within different relational contexts.

Overall, these findings position relational safety within Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of representational (lived) space, where meaning is produced through everyday experiences, emotions and social interactions. Here, space is not merely inhabited but felt and negotiated

through relationships, demonstrating that the production of safe space is as much a social process as it is a spatial one.

4.3.2 Memory, Nostalgia, and the Presence of ‘Home’

Many participants’ descriptions show that safe spaces are closely tied to memory, nostalgia and emotional connections to ‘home’, where past experiences and cultural practices shape present feelings of safety. These spaces are not defined solely by comfort or positivity, but by their ability to hold a wide range of emotions, allowing individuals to feel calm, vulnerable, or reflective without any restrictions. Participants described safe spaces as places where they could experience sadness, vulnerability, or emotional release without restriction. Here, safety is experienced as the freedom to process emotions, rather than the absence of negative feelings. A participant said,

“I would say I can regulate my emotions freely, I can say what I want to say”

And another participant mentioned,

“To me it's more like that it doesn't add anything to my negative emotions. But also, it doesn't necessarily enhance positive emotions either, I would say. I think it's neutral in the sense that most spaces are neutral. Most spaces take energy away in some ways for me. And in safe spaces are like they don't take anything.”

This suggests that for these international students, such spaces function as containers for both stability and emotional expression.

Memory reinforces these spaces in diverse ways. For some participants, repeated positive experiences – such as time spent with loved ones or in nature, gradually strengthen their attachment to a place, allowing it to be continuously recognized as safe. For others, these spaces become so familiar that they are no longer tied to specific memories but exist as a normalized part of their everyday life, a constant, taken-for-granted presence. One participant mentioned,

“It gives me memories of my childhood when I used to cook food with my parents, (joy and laughter) so whenever I feel low, I like to spend more time and cook some elongated recipes.”

Nostalgia and these connections to home further shape these experiences, as participants draw on cultural practices, sensory elements, and symbolic objects, such as food, music, or photographs to recreate familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. These elements function as bridges between past and present, helping students manage homesickness and maintain a sense

of identity, thus enabling students to reconnect with their cultural identity and personal history while adapting to a new geographical context. Safe spaces, therefore, function as environments where individuals can process challenges and reconnect with themselves, reinforcing their role within Lefebvre's (1991) representational (lived) space.

Overall, these findings position memory, nostalgia, and the idea of 'home' firmly within Lefebvre's (1991) representational (lived) space, where meaning is produced through lived experience, emotional attachment, and symbolic association. Safe space, in this context, becomes a temporal and relational construct, shaped by the continuous interplay between past memories, present realities, and the ongoing process of making oneself at home in a new place. Participants' responses on their artistic process, and their reflections about the same also reveal 'safe space' as a lived and unfolding experience and not as a fixed idea. Many participants felt that they could discover and deepen their understandings about safe space through the creation of artworks. The artistic process itself also evoked feelings of calm, comfort and emotional presence. A participant mentioned,

"I think it makes you connect deeply with your place and make memories that will last for the future as a reminder of what your safe space was long time ago. It connects deeper with emotions and makes you reflect more."

In some cases, the artistic process or the process of having to create a physical interpretation of their safe space enabled them to express aspects of safety that were difficult to articulate in words. But for some other participants it remained just an ordinary or neutral activity, reinforcing that meaning is not inherent but produced through engagement. Importantly, the reflections led some participants to new insights about the role of nature, relationships, routines, or self-care in creating or maintaining their safe space. Thus, showing that safe space is continuously reinterpreted through experience. In this sense, artistic practices function as a form of lived spatial production, where safety is not only represented but actively felt, negotiated, and understood over time.

4.3.3. Affect, Atmosphere, and Embodied Experience

Participants describe safe space as deeply felt and embodied experiences, where both emotional states and bodily sensations are shaped by the environment. Feelings of comfort, calmness, and relaxation were commonly expressed, often together with a sense of warmth, safety and ease in the body. A participant said,

“Yes, I would say spending time here help me maintain my good energy of course. Also, it helps to deal with negativity or loneliness. Which ultimately helps in productivity whether in studies or life.”

For many participants, these spaces help regulate mood – reducing stress, loneliness, or negative emotions, while also supporting focus and productivity in daily life. Even when it is not always consciously noticeable, participants suggest a subtle bodily shift, where being in a safe space feels more relaxed compared to other environments.

But, at the same time, these experiences are not always purely positive or active; safe spaces can also feel neutral or simply undemanding, allowing individuals to exist without pressure. In some cases, they may even lead to stillness or reduced activity, thus highlighting that safety is not about constant productivity but about the ability to pause. This reflects how atmosphere operates not only through physical setting but through the sensory and emotional tone of space.

Importantly, participant’s reflections on the role of safe space for international students further emphasize their effective and restorative function. They describe safe spaces as environments where individuals can cope with culture shock, emotional strain, and the pressures of adapting to unfamiliar social norms. They offer a setting where one can “let go,” express vulnerability, or momentarily step away from the need to perform in a new cultural context. In this sense, safe spaces become a kind of emotional refuge, allowing the body and mind to relax and recover. A participant reflected that,

“As an international student, any new environment—especially a geographical one—inevitably brings new cultural patterns. For me, a safe space is about leaving a clue in an unfamiliar environment that connects to something familiar, ensuring that during the adaptation period I can return to a previously stable self-identity through this "safe space.”

Another participant said,

“Safe spaces can give you right kind of motivation to do better and just don’t give up.”

A participant commented on the importance of safe spaces for everyone, not just international students, saying

“Yes, I think it's very important for every individual, not just international people to have their own safe space, I think these spaces are the reflection of

our own selves, where we can make our body and mind more refreshed. It might be more important for international students to have something that feels the same warmth of their own home back in their home countries.”

Whether understood as a “*tiny home*” away from home, or as a space that supports emotional release and self-recognition, safe spaces play a crucial role in shaping how individuals feel, inhabit, and adopt to their surroundings. This highlights Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of lived space as one that is produced through everyday experiences, emotions, and embodied interactions.

4.4 Beyond Structure: Where Art Appears and the Everyday Intersect

4.4.1 Art as Anchoring: Creative Practices in the Production of Safe Space

Creative practices play a meaningful role for many participants in their production of safe space. These practices form a semblance of anchors in unfamiliar environments. Participants mention creative activities such as knitting, weaving, photography, writing, cooking, journaling, not only as hobbies, but as means to process their emotions, express themselves and connection. Participants stated that by engaging in these practices they were able to cope with stress, loneliness, and cultural transition, and found a sense a calm, focus and continuity.

A participant said,

“I mean, I knit a lot and that makes me feel very safe because I learned to knit when I was a child and it reminds me of my family, and all of my family knits and so on. And yeah, in general, definitely, I don't do art as much as I would like and so on, you know, it is life. But whenever I do art, I feel very safe and relaxed and like watercolour painting or just drawing some sort.”

For some participants, these creative practices were more of an internal function, solely as a way of processing their emotions, or reflecting on their identity across various times and places.

A participant reflected,

“During my study and life in Rovaniemi, when adjusting imbalanced physical and mental states, the process of independently creating animal portraits gave me an absolute sense of solidity and joy.”

For many participants, these practices also facilitated social connections, thus bringing them more in touch with like-minded communities and activities.

“I don't really do any art. But I do knitting for relaxing. But that is also as a part of cultural transition because a lot of people in Finland, knit. I would not

do it in Japan. And also, it's useful because it is cold here. I won't be using it a lot in Japan. As winter is long here, the time of using it is also longer."

Here, these creative practices therefore exist on both individual and collective levels of spatial production. Through creative practices, for international students, safety emerges through doing, making, and engaging. In this sense, art becomes an active process through which many participants find grounding in new geographies.

4.4.2 Aesthetic Practices as Spatial Claiming

Most of the participants, even the ones who do not actively practice art or are interested in art, engaged with art through aesthetic practices to shape and personalise space. Participants mentioned about decorating rooms, arranging objects, selecting colours, and incorporating culturally meaningful items in their space to assert their control over their environments. This is a way to make a space – for most participants their current house/room into a ‘home’. Here, they can transform unfamiliar or temporary spaces into places that reflect their identity and preferences. A participant said,

"I mean as I said, like, art postcards are very obvious thing, but I think there's so many arts in the items we choose to buy or use to curate our space but if it's... we're thinking very classical about art: in my van Gogh postcards."

And another participant commented on how there was a change in her past and present self,

"I haven't done that back in Japan, I started decorating after coming to Rovaniemi. I decorate with plants and flowers in my space... decorating with postcard and pictures, a memory of my time spent here."

For some participants this included integrating elements associated with their now place - Finland, Finnish culture (Moomin cups). While for others this involves maintaining their connection with their past environments through familiar material choices, like for one participant it was art postcards and Van Gogh art posters. These aesthetic decisions of lighting, layouts, or the presence of handmade objects or plants contribute to the overall atmosphere of a space, giving them an opportunity to feel comforted and a sense of belonging. Thus, through these practices, space is not only occupied by individuals, but actively claimed and redefined – aligning with Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space as something that is continuously produced through lived experiences.

4.4.3 Everyday Objects and the Non-Artistic Production of Safe Spaces

More importantly it is necessary to note that for not all participants “art” is something they use to frame their environments. Instead, some participants often produced their safe space through everyday objects and routines. These things may not be considered artistic but still carry a strong personal meaning. For some participants, items collected over time, the functional arrangement of objects or furniture in their respective rooms, or their habitual activities contributed to a sense of order, familiarity and stability. A participant said,

“...using items that can be easily moved or stored to shape the space’s structure and atmosphere, not large furniture or objects.”

She also reflected on the influence of the surrounding elements such as weather, seasons, nature on the production of her space as significant,

“Different lands nurture different people. My living space is compact but warm, with a gentle vitality, elements of plants and animals, walls built from stacks of paper books, and wool and wooden items. The materials and colors of the living space closely resonate with environmental conditions.”

And another participant also mentioned,

“I put up fairy lights and cushions and a lot of dog beds to make it cozier for my dogs.”

For some participants, safety emerged from the accumulation of their lived experiences within a space and not form an intentional artistic expression. Objects here become meaningful through use, memory, and presence, and not only for their aesthetic value.

A participant remarkably states,

“I would say my room is an artistic space and a personal safe space. The “safety” of this space does not come from displaying artwork; rather, it’s because this space has gradually accumulated items I’ve produced or collected since arriving in Rovaniemi. These items are arranged according to my need for order and carry strong personal will, thus constructing an artistic safe space. Therefore, it can be said that art, in my safe space, plays the role of witnessing my existence here—an ontological role.”

In this way, the production of safe space extended beyond artistic categories, and highlights instead how ordinary material practices such as organizing, maintaining, or simply inhabiting a space play a crucial role in shaping lived environments.

4.4.4 The Absence of Art: Alternative Pathways to Safe Spaces

There were also participants who explicitly rejected or minimised the role of art in their safe spaces and emphasized on different ways they acknowledge safety. For these students, safety is found in relationships (a participant's dogs), routines (cooking and listening to music, et cetera), nature, or specific activities, and not in creative or aesthetic practices. Some described themselves as "not artistic", while other participants prioritised practical, emotional or environmental factors over artistic engagement. Here, safety is constructed through presence, interaction and atmosphere and not through making or decorating. Nature, animals, social connections and solitude emerge as key elements, suggesting that safe space is not dependent on artistic interventions. This showcases the diversity of spatial production, where art is only one of the many possible ways to it.

Together, these multiple perspectives show that while art can play a significant role in the production of safe space, its absence does not diminish the capacity to create meaningful and supportive environments. Instead, here it reinforces Lefebvre's argument that space is produced through multiple, overlapping practices, shaped by individual needs, experiences, and ways of inhabiting the world.

4.5 Synthesising the Layers: Safe Space as Ongoing Production

Bringing together the different layers of my analysis, safe space here has emerged not as a singular or fixed entity, but as something that is continuously produced through the interaction of material, social, and lived dimensions. Across participants' experiences, it became clear that 'safe space' cannot be reduced to one form or definition. Therefore, 'safe space' is not a fixed location, as it shifts across homes, nature, social environments, and even moments. It is not purely physical, since objects and environments alone do not guarantee safety without meaning and experience. It is not purely emotional, as feelings of safety are shaped by spatial arrangements, routines, and social relations. Finally, it is not necessarily artistic, as while individuals use creative practices and aesthetics to contribute to safety, they are neither universal nor essential.

Instead, 'safe space' is best understood as an ongoing negotiation across material, relational, and symbolic dimensions. It is produced through everyday practices, relationships, memories and personal interpretations, constantly adapting to changing contexts, environments, and identities. In this sense, 'safe space' reflects Lefebvre's (1991) conception of space as

something dynamic and continuously created – lived, experienced, and reworked over time rather than passively occupied.

Chapter 5: Situating the Self: Reflexivity, Experience and the Interpretation of Safe Space as an Artist - Researcher Within the Space

While my study centres the experiences of the participants, my own position as an international student in two different countries and cultures, inevitably shaped the analytical lens through which I interpreted the data. My understandings of safe space changed throughout the research, making me more aware of the different and subtle layers of how safe space is produced, experienced, and imagined. Rather than positioning the differences in my understandings and the participants as bias, this reflexive awareness allows for a more situated interpretation of the data, helping me acknowledge that the production of safe space is not only an external phenomenon, but also one that is deeply embedded in lived and embodied experience.

5.1 My Positionality as an Artist-Researcher and My Lived Experience of 'Safe Space'

My research is influenced by my own lived experiences of space, movement and belonging through different times of my life and as an international student navigating unfamiliar environments, while also carrying my personal histories of attachment, loss and responsibility. Throughout this research, I was reflecting and ruminating over my own spatial experiences, which led me to realise that safe space for me has not always been something that I deliberately created. Often, it has emerged unexpectedly; especially through routines, seasons, living nature, and through engagement with the abstract. These moments of safety for me are often temporary and situational, shaped by atmosphere, movement and my sensory engagement rather than ownership or control (Anderson, 2014; Pink, 2015). This resonates with participants' accounts of "found" spaces and reinforces a relational understanding of space, where safety emerges through interactions between body, environment, and context (Massey, 2005). This has further shaped my understanding of safe space through the processes of transition, adaptation, and negotiation. Safe space, in this sense, has not been fixed or stable condition for me, but something that I continuously redefine through changing environments and experiences.

There have been many such abstract spaces that I reinterpreted as my own pockets of 'safe space'. This became particularly evident in moments where safety appeared in spaces I

had not actively sought (*Figure:08*). Instead of constructing it myself through deliberate control and design, it emerged through presence, atmosphere and the temporary suspension of external expectations. My experience of encountering this space that felt ‘safe’ when I was experiencing loss, made me later realise that here, safety, was not dependent on permanence or ownership, but on the ability to momentarily inhabit a space without obligation. In contrast to “back home”, where my emotional experience was shaped by social expectations, this encountered space in Rovaniemi allowed for a different form of presence – one that did not require explanation, performance or validation – particularly the absence of performative emotional labour. The ability to grieve without observation or interpretation became central to how I experienced safety.

“this place, it provided me a space I needed to grieve whenever I wanted, no judgement, no expectations, no looks of pity or concern, no offhanded remarks from people I did not even know about MY LOSS..., but here, with these trees, in a foreign land, a land I will have no claim over, I found safety, being safe enough to be able to grieve...here, I did not have to perform grief”



Figure 08: ‘Backyard is made of this’ – expression of ‘found’ safe space.

Here, my reflection while existing in these ‘found’ safe spaces, highlights how a safe space within both participant data and my own experience, is closely tied to the absence of surveillance and the ability to exist without being interpreted, reinforcing the idea that safety is socially and relationally produced rather than materially guaranteed (Foucault, 1977). Here, safe space acts as an emotional permission and freedom from social performance (Ahmed, 2006).

5.2 Safe Space Beyond Interiors: Found, Sensory, and Environmental Encounters

My field notes add to these understandings and definitions I have of a safe space. Rather than documenting fixed environments, I reflect how safety emerged for me through interaction with light, sound, material arrangements and everyday spatial practices. In this sense, safe space is not experienced as a stable location, but as something relational and continually produced through engagement with the environment (Massey, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991).

One recurring element across my reflections is the role of light as an affective and transient condition of safety. Moments where light interacts with surface, structures and natural elements are rather brief, but for me, meaningful instances of comfort, acting as *“reflections of light and light play are like small transient pockets of safe space”*. I reflect that safety is not always continuous or permanent, but can exist in fleeting, atmospheric conditions that are sensed rather than consciously constructed. This aligns with affective understandings of space, where atmosphere is produced through sensory encounters rather than physical boundaries (Böhme, 2017; Anderson, 2009). Such experiences further emphasize Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of representational space by emphasising the sensory and temporal qualities through which space is lived.



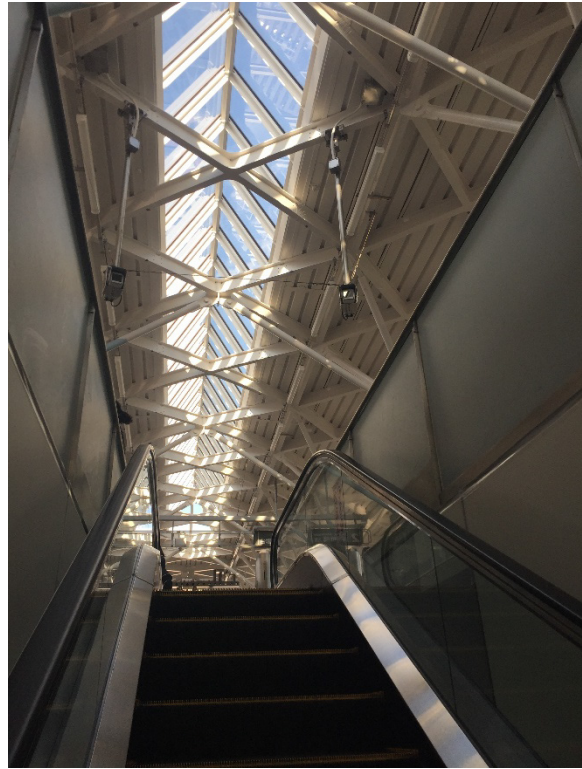


Figure 09 (page 58): Light play and reflections, 2015, Nara, Japan

Figure 10: Light play and reflections, Tokyo, Japan 2016 (left)

Figure 11: Appearing and disappearing of things in a space, Tokyo, Japan 2017 (right)

Similarly, sound also emerges as an important yet often overlooked dimension of safety. For me, rather than silence, it is the presence of familiar and rhythmic sounds that contributes to a sense of grounding; heavy rain, wind blowing through the trees, birds chirping and my further observations from my time back home, in India, and Japan, “*the reassurance of blinking lights, railway tracks, ship’s horns, moving water in the bay, even certain sounds contribute to safety.*” For me, these auditory elements create continuity and orientation within a space (Ahmed, 2006), reinforcing how safety is produced through repeated sensory encounters rather than solely through visual or physical boundaries, and challenging the dominant assumptions that safe space must be quiet or controlled, instead showing that safety may also emerge through rhythmic, familiar and even industrial soundscapes (Anderson, 2009; LaBelle, 2010; Pink, 2015). Often times I find myself recording rustling leaves and trees in the wind, or the play of light and shadow on physical surfaces, or water. This act also provides me with a small temporary safe space and helps with grounding in the moment.



Figure 12, 13: light play out in the wild on the trees (2025, Rovaniemi, Finland)

Material practices also play a significant role for me in shaping safe space. The act of arranging, re-arranging, reorganizing and orienting objects (refer Figure 12) reflects my active engagement with space, where control, accessibility, and familiarity are constructed through everyday actions. When I moved to Japan, and adjusted my room, especially with the direction of the bed when sleeping, and the altar. In Japan I had unconsciously changed the direction of the bed and shifted the tables around to open up the room towards the view of the balcony and windows. This demonstrates that these spatial adjustments are not merely functional but contribute to emotional and psychological comfort (Ahmed, 2006). These practices align with Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice, where routine actions and material arrangements produce lived space over time (Lefebvre, 1991).



Figure 14, 15: Arranging and re-arranging objects

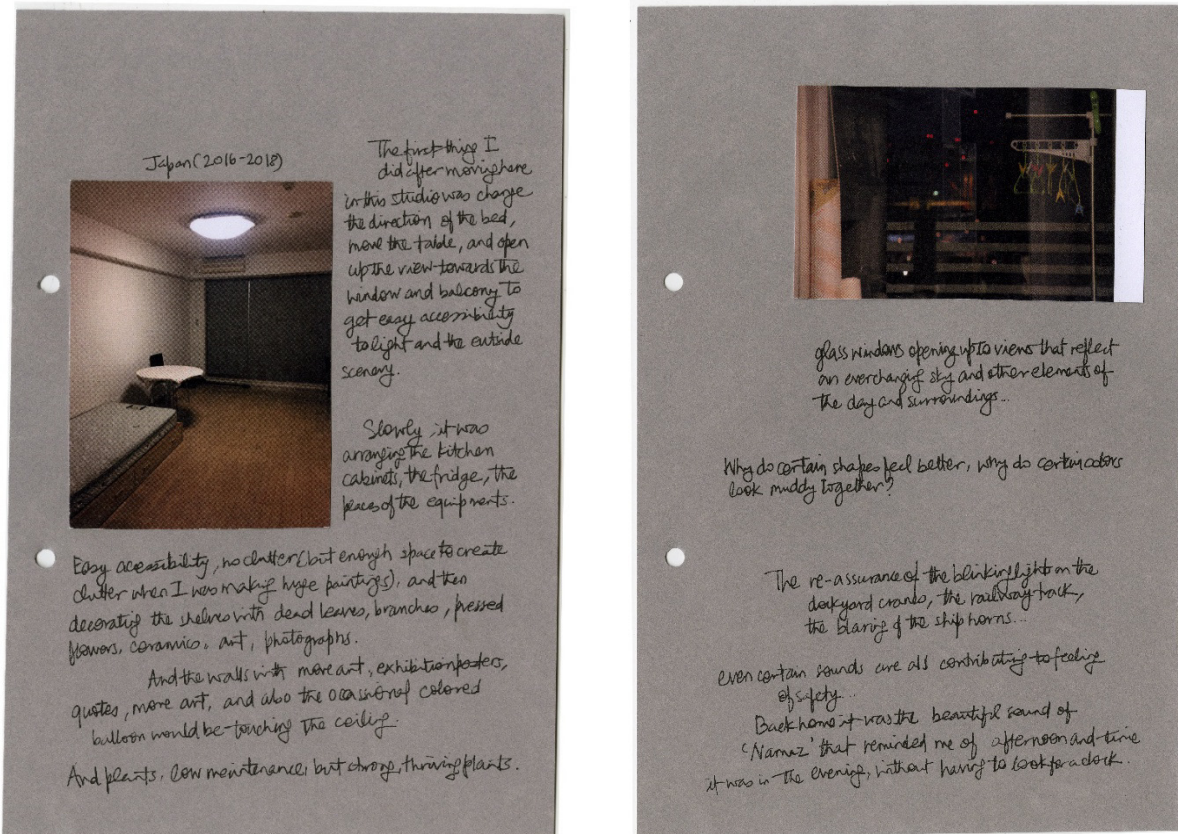


Figure 16, 17: Personal reflection on safe space

These reflections also introduced me to a critical awareness of the subjectivity of safety. I questioned myself, “Does this mean ‘I’ assign safety to a place?”, highlighting the interpretative nature of spatial experience where safety is not an inherent quality of an environment but is constructed through perception, memory, and personal association (Ahmed, 2006; Pink, 2015). This reflexive questioning reinforces the idea that safe space is relational and contingent, shaped by both the individual and the environment. It further emphasizes Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of representational space by demonstrating that safe space is not only socially produced but also sensorially experienced, materially enacted and reflexively interpreted.

5.3 Art Practice as Inquiry: Experiencing Safe Space Through Making

In this study I position my own artistic practice not only as a form of representation but as an integral part of both data generation and analysis. For me, the use of art-based practices, particularly journaling and visual engagement played a central role not only in documenting experience but in shaping the analysis itself. Here, these practices functioned as spaces of

thinking – where meaning was not immediately defined, but gradually unfolded through repetition, reflection and return. Here, reflecting over my feelings of finding safety near huge water bodies,

“it’s a place where I feel I can ask, and mull, and ruminate over cycles of words, spirals – just moving like ‘word mobiles’, a repetition of questions, safe enough place to repeatedly ask myself, ‘what is the meaning of this life?’”

This iterative process reflects key principles of ABR, where knowledge is generated through creative practice and embodied engagement rather than extracted through linear analysis (Leavy, 2018; Kara, 2020). Writing became a spatial practice for me, producing an internal environment where my emotions, memories, and interpretations could be revisited and reconfigured over time. This also aligns with the participant’s responses of journaling and expressing their interpretations of safe space through words and connects to Lefebvre’s (1991) framework of spatial practice and lived productions of space. This slow and cyclical nature of journaling also mirrors approaches within Arctic arts-based research, where creative processes are used to engage with environment, temporality, and lived experiences (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018). In this sense, the act of writing was not separate from the research but became a form of spatial production in itself: an internal “safe space” that paralleled the external environment being explored.

Crucially, these cyclic reflections resulted in a conceptual shift for me, where I realised how safety is not located in artistic outcomes for me, but in the act of making itself. While I started with the questions,

“Is ‘art’ my safe space?”

I could answer,

“Maybe no. It’s the ACT of CREATION that is my safe space.”

This distinction within my reflection reinforces the role of arts-based research as a process-driven approach to knowledge production, where meaning emerges through doing rather than representation (Leavy, 2018). It also challenges the conventional understandings of art as inherently therapeutic or safe. My data instead reveals a distinction between art as product and art as process. In ABR framework, art is understood as a mode of inquiry through which knowledge is produced, rather than simply illustrated (Leavy, 2018; Kara, 2020). In this context, my art functions simultaneously as data, analytical process, and interpretive outcome,

contributing to how safe space is explored and understood within research. Through photography, journaling, installation, drawing, I explored safe space not only as a concept but as an experience, something felt, negotiated and constructed through the act of making. This aligns with ABR approaches that emphasize process, emergence and reflexivity as central to knowledge production (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018).



Figure 18: Studio Space, Tokyo University of the Arts, 2017, Tokyo, Japan

Through making, I engaged with safe space in a way that extended beyond verbal or thematic analysis. Decisions related to composition, material, colour, and form become ways of thinking through spatial and emotional relationships. This aligns with ABR approaches that emphasise the generative nature of creative practices, where meaning emerges through doing rather than being predefined (Leavy, 2018; Kara, 2020). In this sense, my art does not simply reflect findings but actively participates in producing them.

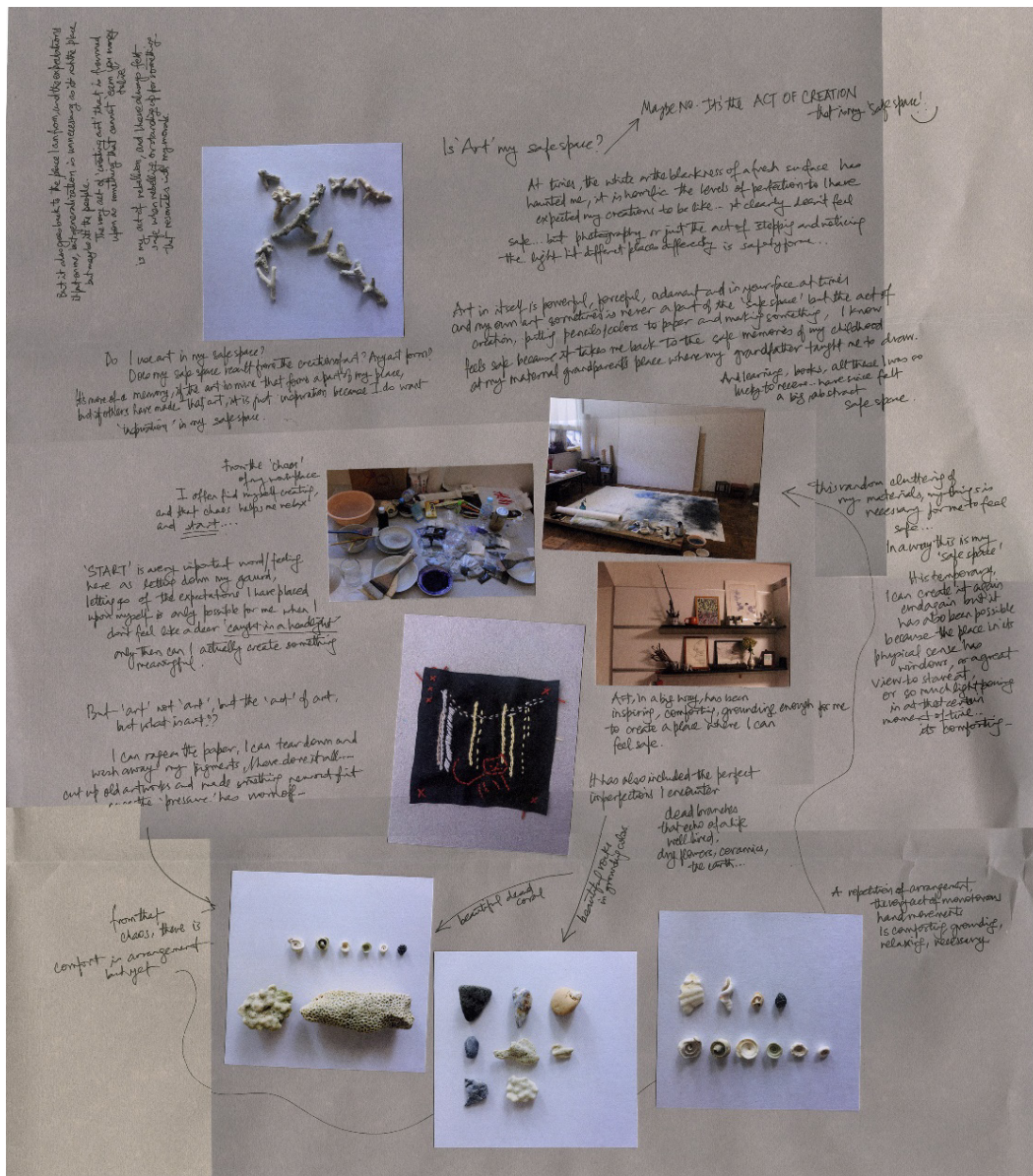


Figure 19: Cyclic reflection of art and art practice as an abstract safe space

The act of beginning, or the moment of “starting” also emerged as a critical point within my process. For me, letting go of expectations and engaging with material without pressure allowed for a temporary suspension of self-judgement, thus enabling creative engagement and process-based inquiry. In this way, artmaking became a space of negotiation between control and release, structure and chaos. This also aligns with ABR approaches that emphasize emergence, process, and reflexivity as central to knowledge production (Leavy, 2018; Kara, 2020).



Figure 20, 21: Artistic practices, here stitching as a process – one of my abstract safe spaces

Left: adjustment to seasonal changes of Rovaniemi

Right: adjusting to a new life after just moving to Rovaniemi, especially physical distance from loved ones

Furthermore, the practices are deeply connected to my memory and personal history, where the act of drawing or making evokes earlier experiences of safety and learning for me. In this sense, art operates both as a present practice and a bridge to my past experiences, reinforcing its role in the relational production of safe space. My artwork can also be understood through Lefebvre's (1991) concept of representational space, where lived experiences, imagination, and symbolism intersect. Within Arctic and place-based art practices, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) emphasise that artistic processes are deeply connected to environment and lived experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant in my study, where these environmental conditions, atmosphere and everyday practices shaped both the participants' and my own experiences of safe space. I tried to translate the abstract feelings of safety felt by me in these sites, seasons, elements, relationships, atmospheric events into visual or material form, thus rendering the dimensions of safe space visible, which otherwise are difficult for me to articulate. This reinforces the role of art not only as expression but as a critical analytical tool within the research.



Figure 22: Artistic practice of stitching and crafting as abstract safe space

5.4 Reflexive Insights: Influences on Interpretation

The integration of my own experiences and artistic practices within this research process highlights the blurred boundaries between researcher and participant. Instead of occupying a purely observational role, I became a part of the process of meaning-making, engaging with similar questions of safety, belonging, and spatial experiences. This reflects broader qualitative and ABR approaches that position research as relational and co-constructed (Leavy, 2018). My position in the research inevitably shaped how I interpreted the data. But this reflexive position also requires careful consideration. While there are overlaps between my experiences and those of the participants, these should not be assumed as universal. Participants' responses are shaped by their own identities, cultural contexts, and personal histories, which may differ vastly from my own. Recognising these differences is essential in maintaining the integrity and complexity of the data.

My own experiences of safe space were not directly shaped by the participants' data, nor were the participants' experiences shaped by mine; however, my understanding of the interview data was inevitably informed by my own positionality. This influenced how I attended to participants' responses, including what I noticed, prioritised and emphasised during analysis. Reflexive research acknowledges that processes such as coding, theme development,

and interpretation are not neutral, but are shaped by the researcher's perspectives and experiences (Rose, 1997). For instance, my sensitivity to themes such as movement, routine and environmental experience influenced how I engaged with participants' responses. Moments that resonated with my own experiences, such as finding safety in outdoor spaces or everyday practices may have received greater attention during the analysis. While this can enrich interpretation by enabling deeper understanding, it also requires critical awareness to avoid over-identification.



Figure 23: Left: Participant 3's installation of the corner of her room.

Figure 24: Right: The placement of my bed – also like back 'home', aligned to a wall

A conversation I had with one of the participants who created a replica of the corner of her now room in Rovaniemi, resonated with my experiences of finding similar solitude or emotional grounding with having my bed placed in a way where I could rest my back to the wall when sleeping. Also, my discussion with another participant where she emphasised on 'walls and a ceiling' being a primary source of safety in general when looking at structure, helped me reflect on my own experiences with walls, and high or low ceilings in a given space. Furthermore, having encountered safety as something found in moments of solitude, particularly within natural environments, I was more attuned to similar responses within the data, especially those relating to withdrawal, emotional regulation and sensory engagement.

By observing, and reflecting, and recreating my own space, I was able to observe how objects, lighting, and decorative arrangements generate emotional and sensory responses, and

how these interventions interact with personal and social meanings. My reflections and observations also helped me gain insight on the role of art in this creation of my own individual safe space.

My reflections of,

“While water, a huge, expanding waterbody has evoked within me feelings of safety, it is melancholic, it is lonely, deep, holding too much, but full of melancholy”

And “and while the sea, ocean, water is comforting, it’s the trees, the flowers, the dancing branches all around that are uplifting...life affirming? Being enveloped by the trees, not even an open grassland, it has to be surrounded by tall trees, and have the light, sunshine flickering through, causing thousands of tiny, beautiful shadows to feel safe and sheltered.”

This interpretation of natural environments as safe was not neutral, it was influenced by my own affective responses, where forests were protective and life-affirming, while water bodies evoked introspection and melancholy. This highlights how interpretations are not detached but relational, shaped by the researcher’s embodied experiences and emotional orientations (Ahmed, 2006).

At the same time, engaging reflexively allowed for a more nuanced reading of the data I collected. By recognising my own positionality, I was able to question assumptions and remain attentive to differences in participants’ experiences, recognising that safe space is ambivalent; it can hold both comfort and discomfort simultaneously, that different environments produce different emotional atmospheres, thus complicating any singular understanding of safe space. Acknowledging my positionality here strengthens the analysis by making visible the interpretive lens through which the data was understood by me and not just being presented as objective or neutral. This aligns with boarder qualitative approaches that position knowledge as situated and co-constructed rather than objective and detached (Massey, 2005; Rose, 1997).

Finally, this reflexive process shows that the analysis of safe space is not produced solely through participants’ narratives, but through an ongoing interaction between participant data, theoretical frameworks, and my own lived and creative experiences as an artist-researcher. At the beginning of the research, I had not dived deeper in understanding how an individual themselves is the one who has the agency to call a place ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ and thus create for themselves their personal safe space. This was prominently because, I started this research as

a question to understand how I had found a safe space in the wild, out in the nature, and having the desire and curiosity to understand if other people also felt they had a 'safe space' in the wild or created it. While I still maintain my initial answer of safe spaces existing in the wild, I do realise, especially after interviewing my participants, that we, as individuals hold limited but meaningful agency in how we choose to acknowledge a place as 'safe' or 'unsafe', and in turn producing or creating it.

Chapter 6: Producing Safe Space: Lived, Imagined and Negotiated Spatialities

My study is grounded in Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of the production of space, particularly using his spatial triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. This framework has enabled an analysis of 'safe space' across material, conceptual, and lived dimensions. Additionally, relational understandings of space (Massey, 2005) informed my approach by emphasizing that space is something that is continuously created through social interactions, trajectories, and power relations. These perspectives together allowed me to examine safe space not as a singular entity, but as a layered and evolving spatial phenomenon.

For the methodology, I adopted a qualitative ABR approach, combining semi-structured interviews with creative practices. This was important for me, and this study, to capture the affective, embodied, and often non-verbal dimensions of safe space that may not be as easily expressed through language alone. Participants' reflections and art creations were treated as complementary forms of data, enabling me to get a more nuanced understanding of how 'safe space' is both experienced and produced for different people with different stories. The inclusion of artistic practice in this study also helped position space as something that can be actively created and reimagined and not simply described.

In this chapter, I build on the analysis presented earlier and move beyond descriptive coding to interpret the findings through the theoretical lens outlined above. Here, I bring together empirical insights and spatial theory and examine how safe space emerges through the interaction of everyday routines, emotional experiences, social relations, and imaginative practices. While the chapter focuses on participant data, the analysis is informed by my reflexive and arts-based explorations presented in the previous chapter, which shaped my analytical lens. My positionality also influences how I interpret participants' experiences. Feminist and reflexive methodologies emphasise that knowledge is situated and shaped by the researcher's social and spatial position (Rose, 1997). Acknowledging this allowed me to engage more transparently with the research and recognise both connections and differences between my experiences and those of the participants.

6.1 Safe Space as Spatial Production

The findings from my study challenge the idea of safe space as a fixed or pre-existing location and instead reveal it as a dynamic and ongoing process. Across participants' responses, safe space was not tied to a single physical environment consistently, but was described through their individual experiences, routines, emotions and relationships that unfolded over time. This supports my argument that safety is not something that is simply "found" in space, but something that is actively produced with the help of everyday practices and lived experiences.

6.1.1 Beyond Locations: Safe Space as Process

Lefebvre's (1991) framework positions space as something that is continuously shaped through spatial practices, representations, and lived experiences, and does not view it as a passive container. For example, many participants associated safety with routine and repetition, returning to familiar environments, engaging in habits or interacting with known people – which contributed to a sense of stability and comfort. One participant noted that spending time in their safe space helped them maintain "good energy" and manage their feelings of negativity or loneliness, thus suggesting that safety is reinforced through repeated engagement rather than inherent qualities of the space itself.

At the same time, responses also suggest of safe space being experienced as not consistently positive or stable. Some participants also expressed ambivalent or changing experiences, where comfort could shift into stagnation or isolation. For example, one participant reflected that while their safe space felt "comfortable and relaxed" it could also become "too relaxed", making it difficult to remain productive. Another participant expressed uncertainty about whether their safe space had a measurable effect, suggesting that feelings of safety often operate at a subtle or subconscious level. These accounts highlight that safe space is not fixed or guaranteed, but transitory and continuously negotiated through challenging emotional and situational contexts.

This understanding of safe space as a process, is further reinforced with the role of affect and embodiment. Participants frequently described safety with how their body felt – relaxed, calm, or at ease, and not solely in terms of physical surroundings. This aligns with affective and relational approaches to space, which emphasize that spatial experience is shaped through embodied interaction and emotional engagement (Ahmed, 2006; Anderson, 2014). In this sense, safe space emerges through the alignment of body, environment, and experiences instead of being in a specific place.

My findings also show that safe space is produced through interaction rather than isolation. While some participants associated safety with being alone or in a private environment, other described it in relation to companionship, such as spending time with their pets or familiar people. Here, feelings of comfort, joy, and emotional grounding are felt, thus suggesting that social relationships play a key role in the production of safe space. This reflects on Massey's (2005) argument that space is relational, constructed through interactions and connections rather than existing as an independent entity.

Together, these insights suggest that safe space should be understood not as a fixed location or static condition, but as an ongoing spatial production shaped by routines, emotions, relationships, and embodied experiences. It is through these everyday practices that international students, or individuals actively construct and maintain their sense of safety, even in challenging environments. This shifts the focus from identifying where safe spaces are to understanding how they are continuously created, negotiated, and sustained in daily life.

6.1.2 Negotiating Material, Social and Symbolic Dimensions

My findings show that 'safe space' is produced through the negotiation of material, social, and symbolic dimensions, which aligns closely with Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad. For spatial practice, participants expressed safety as something that emerges in their everyday life through repetitive, ordinary, and material actions. Spaces such as rooms, study areas, or specific corners of their home became meaningful not because of their inherent qualities, but through continuous use and familiarity. Participants strongly expressed the importance of small materials elements, such as lighting, personal objects, or specific arrangements of their space in contributing to a sense of control and comfort. Similarly, routines for some participants, such as sitting in a particular place, walking, cleaning, cooking, or engaging in daily habits reinforced their feelings of stability and predictability. These micro-practices illustrate how safety is not constructed through extraordinary conditions, but through consistent, embodied interactions with space (Middleton, 2018; Bissell, 2018).

For representations of space, participants' responses also reflect broader expectations and imagined ideals of safety shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. Participants envisioned a "safe" environment as quiet, private, organized, or socially inclusive – often aligning with dominant spatial norms found in housing systems, university environments or societal expectations. At the same time, they also articulated ideal or future safe spaces, to reveal how safety is also conceived and projected beyond present conditions. These imagined

spaces highlight the role of conceptual and planned dimensions in shaping how individuals understand and seek safety, even when such conditions are not fully realised (Lefebvre, 1991; Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

In representational space, the lived and symbolic aspects were evident through participants' emotional, sensory, and imaginative experiences of safety. Feelings of joy, comfort, calm, or emotional release were central to how safe spaces were described. They were often tied to memories, personal meaning, or creative expressions. For some participants, art, imagination, or abstract associations played an important role in constructing safe space, thus extending it beyond physical environment. This aligns with affective and phenomenological understandings of space, where meaning is produced through embodied and emotional engagement (Ahmed, 2006; Anderson, 2014). Safety for international students is built through small, everyday acts. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that safe space is not singular but layered, continuously negotiated across individual material practices, conceptual understandings, and lived experiences.

6.1.3 Tensions, Contradictions and Fragility of Safe Space

When participants described safe space in terms of comfort, familiarity, and emotional ease; their responses also revealed contradictions and friction that complicated its meaning. Often times, safe space was a space that existed between different states of being freedom and constraint, connection and isolation. For example, some participants associated safety with relaxation and calmness, and other noted that these same conditions could lead to decreased motivation or a sense of stagnation. This suggests that safety, despite desirable can also produce unintended effects, thus showing its dynamic and context-dependent nature.

These contrasting responses reflect the fragile and contingent nature of a safe space, where feelings of comfort can shift depending on one's emotional state, social context, or duration of engagement. Participants' uncertainty about whether their safe space influenced their mood or not, further reinforces that safety is not always consciously recognised but operates softly through embodied experiences. These insights align with broader spatial theory, which emphasize that space is continuously produced and therefore subject to instability and change (Lefebvre, 1991).

Artistic perspectives also illuminate this fragility. For example, in Mona Hatoum's work, she destabilises familiar domestic environments, revealing how spaces associated with comfort can also evoke discomfort or vulnerability. This challenges the assumption that safe space is

inherently secure. Instead, it positions it as something that is shaped by broader socio-political and emotional conditions. Similarly, participants' experiences suggest that safety is negotiated and not guaranteed, and is shaped by personal needs, social relations and situational factors.

All these findings, together show that safe space exists in a constant state of negotiation between contrasting factors – freedom and control, comfort and limitation, belonging and withdrawal. Rather than being a fixed entity, or a universally positive condition, safe space is a fragile and evolving spatial production, which is shaped by enabling and constraining factors.

6.2 Spatial Belonging and the Migratory Experience

For many international students the experience of moving to a new country is not only a geographical shift but also an emotional and spatial negotiation of belonging. Here, 'safe space' becomes more deeply intertwined with the process of finding or creating a sense of "homemaking" in unfamiliar surroundings. Participants' responses reflect how safety is not immediately present, but gradually formed through everyday interactions, memories and personal adjustments. But these experiences are also not uniform, as access to and control over a space varies across different contexts. Here, I explore how safe space is both personally constructed and unevenly shaped by broader spatial and social conditions.

6.2.1 Safe Space and the Making of "Home"

The analyses from the participants' responses show that safe space plays a central role in shaping their sense of belonging within the context of migration as international students. For many participants' safe space was not initially present, but developed over time through familiarity, routine, and emotional attachment. This suggests that belonging is not tied to a fixed location, but emerges through repeated engagement with space, where unfamiliar environments gradually become meaningful and comfortable for individuals.

Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation helps explain this process, as bodies come to feel "at home" through alignment with their surroundings. Participants' responses of feeling relaxed, comfortable, or able to "be themselves" reflect this embodied sense of being, where space begins to support rather than challenge their presence. Similarly, Massey's (2005) understanding of space as relational, highlights that belonging is constructed through interactions, relationships, experiences and not inherent spatial qualities. Safe space, in this sense, emerges as a key mechanism through which individuals negotiate their position in new environments.

Participants' responses also suggest that safe space can function as a bridge between unfamiliar and familiar contexts. Through everyday practices, emotional connections and personal adaptations, spaces that were once neutral or even uncomfortable can become sites of comfort and identity. This transformation reflects how safe space is actively produced, thus enabling individuals to construct a sense of "home" even within temporary or transitional living conditions.

6.2.2 Power, Access and Uneven Spatial Experiences

While safe spaces contribute to belonging, the findings also reveal that access to such spaces is uneven and shaped by broader power relations. Participants' definitions of safety often emphasized their ability to relax, express themselves freely, and not feel "on guard". This suggests that safe space is closely linked to autonomy and freedom from judgement or surveillance. However, these conditions were not always consistently available across different environments, especially in international and public settings.

Massey's (2005) concept of power geometry explains how individuals are positioned differently within spatial relations, and how it affects their ability to access, control, and feel comfortable in certain environments. It can be considered that international students too, may go through these power dynamics in a new culture. Participants' experiences suggest that institutional spaces such as universities or shared accommodations can impose expectations or norms that limit self-expressions or create subtle forms of pressure, personal or self-controlled spaces were more frequently associated with emotional safety and authenticity.

This difference also reflects tensions between personal and institutional definitions of safe space. While institutions may define safety through policies or regulations, participants' experiences emphasise more subjective and embodied dimensions, such as emotional ease, privacy, and the absence of judgment. Research similarly shows that feelings of safety are shaped not only by physical conditions but by social dynamics, identity, and perceived acceptance within a space (Samura, 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005).

These findings suggest that the production of safe space is not equally accessible to all individuals. Factors such as identity, cultural background, and social positioning influence how freely individuals can occupy and shape space. As a result, safe space must be understood not only as a personal experience but as something that is embedded with broader structure of power; somewhere where the ability to feel safe, belong and express oneself is unevenly distributed.

6.3 Imagined, Abstract and Future Safe Spaces

Participants' responses also point to the existence of safe space beyond immediate physical environments. For many, it was not limited to where they currently are, but extended into imagined, remembered and abstract realms. These perceptions of safety show that individuals actively construct and project their spaces of comfort, even when such spaces are not fully realised in their present surroundings.

6.3.1 Imagined and Ideal Spaces as Representations of Space

With the analyses it can be deduced that safe space exists beyond present reality. Participants frequently referred to ideal or imagined versions of safe space, describing environments that would support their comfort, identity or wellbeing. For them, these spaces often included qualities such as privacy, familiarity, emotional ease, or a stronger sense of belonging – these elements were not always fully present in their current environments. This future-oriented thinking of the participants reflects Lefebvre's (1991) concept of representations of space, where space is conceived, planned, and imagined rather than directly lived.

These kinds of imagined safe spaces can illustrate that safety is not confined to existing spatial conditions but extends into aspirations and expectations of individuals. Participants' reflections suggest that safe space can act as a conceptual guide, shaping how individuals navigate and evaluate their current environments. In this sense, imagined spaces are not separate from reality, but actively influence how space is experienced and produced in the present. This aligns with broader spatial theory, which recognises that space is continuously shaped by both material conditions and imagined possibilities (Soja, 1996).

6.3.2 Abstract and Non-Physical Safe Spaces

My analysis also demonstrate that safe space is not purely physical as participants also described it in abstract and non-material terms. Elements such as music, memories, imagination and personal identity were linked to experiences of safety, thus suggesting that safe space can exist independently of a fixed location. For some participants, listening to music, recalling familiar environments, or engaging in personal reflection created a sense of emotional grounding and comfort. This was especially possible in they were physically situated in less secure or unfamiliar spaces. These reflections highlight that safe space is deeply connected to representational space, where meaning is produced through lived, symbolic, and affective experiences (Lefebvre, 1991). Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation further supports this understanding, as feelings of comfort and safety emerge through how individuals relate to and

inhabit both physical and non-physical environments. In this way, safe space becomes an internal and relational experience that is shaped by memories, emotions, and identities, and not solely by external conditions.

These abstract forms of safe space show the agency individuals have in producing safety, even in contexts where physical environments may not fully support it, by drawing on imagination, memory, or sensory experience, participants extend safe space beyond material constraints, reinforcing its fluid and multidimensional nature.

6.4 Affect, Atmosphere and Embodied Experience

We can also understand that safe space is felt in the body and not just thought. Participants' responses of safe space were not only expressed through physical settings or routines but were deeply embedded in emotional and bodily experiences. Feelings such as calmness, comfort, relaxation, emotional release were repeatedly used to describe what made a space feel "safe". This suggests that safe space is not only cognitively understood, but also affectively and physically experienced by individuals.

Safe space emerged as an embodied experience, where participants described noticeable shifts in how they felt physically and emotionally when in certain environments. Expressions such as "at ease", "relaxed", or "not on guard" indicate that safety is registered through body rather than solely through conscious evaluation. Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation highlights how bodies align with spaces that feel familiar and supportive, allowing individuals to inhabit them comfortably. When this alignment occurs, space is experienced as safe; when it does not, discomfort or unease may arise.

Participants' descriptions also state the importance of atmosphere in shaping safe space. Elements such as quietness, lighting, familiarity or the presence (or absence) of others contributed to an overall feeling or mood within a space. While these atmospheric qualities are subtle, responses prove that they are still influential in affecting an individual's emotional state without always being explicitly recognised. Affect theory emphasises these pre-conscious and relational dimensions of experience, where feelings circulate between bodies, objects, and environments (Anderson, 2009; Bissel, 2018). In this sense, safe space is not located in any single element but emerges through interaction of multiple sensory and emotional factors. Participants' responses also suggest that affective experiences of safety are not always stable or uniform. A space that feels calming at one moment may feel isolating at another, depending on emotional state or context. This reinforces the idea that safe space is not fixed but

continuously negotiated through embodied experiences. The role of an individual's personal perception is also important as it shows how one actively interprets and responds to spatial conditions based on their emotional and psychological needs.

Together these analyses demonstrate that safe space is not only something that is materially arranged or socially defined, but something that is felt, sensed and lived through the body. Understanding safe space through affect and embodiment expands its definition beyond physical or conceptual dimensions, emphasising its experiential and relational nature.

6.5 Safe Space Beyond Interiors: “Found” spaces and the Role of Environment

In the earlier sections I have framed safe space as something that is produced through routines, relationships, and embodied practices, but participants' responses also reveal that moments where safety is not actively constructed but, instead, it is encountered within surrounding environments. In several responses, outdoor settings – such as forests, walking paths, or quiet natural areas were described as spaces where participants felt calm, grounded and temporarily at ease. Although these places were not necessarily designed or controlled by the individual, they offered a sense of relief and comfort. This suggests that safe space can emerge through encounter and not intentional production, thus expanding dominant understandings of safety as something exclusively built or maintained.

These experiences can be understood through affective and sensory approaches to space, where environments influence how bodies feel and respond. Anderson (2009) describes atmosphere as something that is collectively produced yet individually experienced. It shapes the emotional and bodily states in subtle ways. In context of Rovaniemi, environmental conditions such as silence, cold, light variation, and seasonal changes play a significant role in shaping these atmospheric experiences. Participants' descriptions of calmness or mental clarity in outdoor settings reflect how sensory engagement; through movement, temperature, sound and visual openness, contributes to feelings of safety. Edensor (2015) argues that landscapes are not passive backdrops but active participants in shaping affective experience, reinforcing the idea that safety can be mediated through environmental interaction.

It is important to note that these “found” safe spaces challenge the assumption that safety requires ownership, privacy or control. Unlike domestic or interior spaces, natural environments are wild, unpredictable, open and often shared. Yet participants' experiences suggest that safety can still be felt in these contexts, especially through temporary withdrawal

from social pressure or structured environments. This aligns with relational understandings of space (Massey, 2005), where safety is not tied to bounded locations but emerges through interactions between body, environment and moment. Here, safe space becomes situational and transient, shaped by presence and not permanence.

Together, these findings extend the concept of safe space beyond interior, constructed, or institutional settings. They highlight the role of environment and sensory experience in producing moments of safety that are not owned or fixed but felt and encountered. By foregrounding these non-constructed and experiential dimensions, my study contributes to a broader understanding of safe space as not only produced through social and material practices but also emerging through atmospheric and environmental engagement.

6.6 Safe Space Through Art: Representational Space in Practice

The role of art in the production of safe space is varied according to participants' responses. While some actively engage in creative practices such as photography, journaling, painting, cooking, others do not identify themselves as "artistic". Even so, they participate in forms of everyday aesthetic expression, such as decorating spaces or arranging objects. This diversity challenges the narrow definitions art has and suggests that creative expression exists along a spectrum – from formal artistic practices to subtle, everyday acts of spatial arrangements. Through an ABR approach, these practices can be understood not only as outcomes, but as processes through which participants interpret, negotiate, and construct their sense of safety (Leavy, 2018; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018). In Arctic art education and research, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) emphasise that art is deeply embedded in lived environments and everyday practices, reinforcing the idea that creative engagement is relational, situated, and not limited to formal artistic production.

6.6.1 Art as a Site of Spatial Production

Participant's engagement with creative practices demonstrate that art can function as a site of spatial production, where safe space is actively created instead of being simply found. Activities such as knitting, photography, journaling, or arranging personal objects; contribute to shaping one's environment to feel comfortable, familiar and personally meaningful. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of representational space, where space is lived, felt and symbolically constructed through everyday practices.

At the same time, the data shows that art is not essential for everyone. Some participants rejected artistic identity, yet they still engaged in everyday aesthetic practices that shaped their

environments. This expands ABR beyond formal artistic outputs, aligning with Pink's (2015) emphasis on sensory and material engagement and Jokela and Huhmarniemi's (2018) view, that art in everyday and environmental contexts operates as a way of relating to a place. In this sense, safe space is produced not only through intentional art-creation but also through subtle acts of arranging, inhabiting and personalising space. Thus, art is not essential, but one of the many ways in which safety, and safe space is produced.

6.6.2 Visualising Belonging, Memory and Identity

Participants' artworks and creative practices reveal how safe space is closely tied to belonging, memory, and identity. Through visual and material expression, individuals construct spaces that reflect their personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and present experiences. Objects, images, and handmade elements become carriers of meaning, thus transforming spaces into sites of emotional and symbolic attachment.

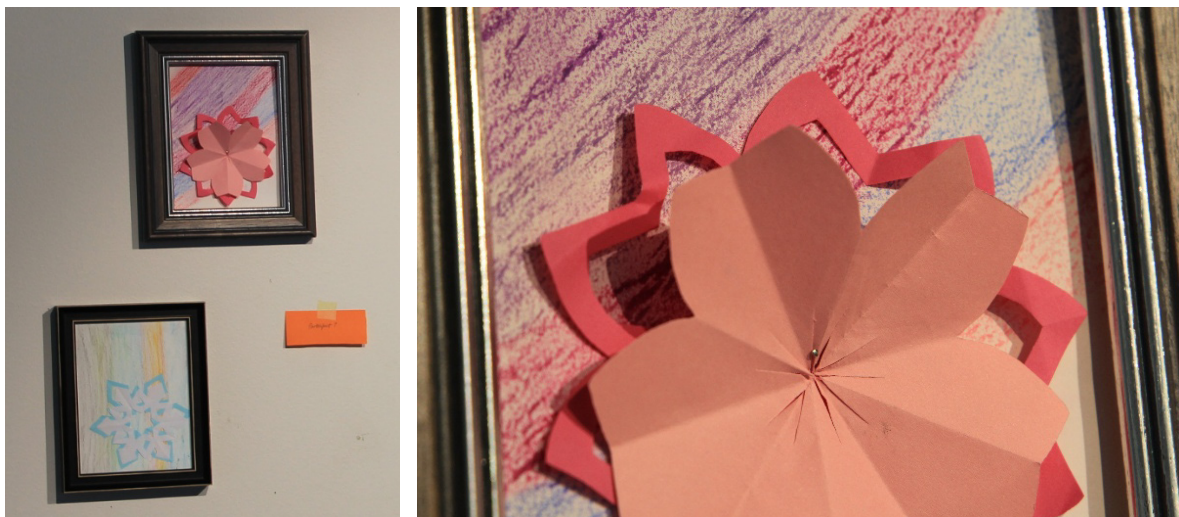


Figure 20: Participant 6's artwork reflecting her merging of her home culture and new culture through seasonal depictions

This resonates with artistic practices that engage with memory and migration, for example Do Ho Suh's portable homes, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby's hybrid domestic interiors, where space becomes layered with multiple identities (Massey, 2005). Similarly, Bouchra Khalili's narrative-based work highlights how storytelling produces spatial belonging. Participants' use of journaling, photography and symbolic arrangements reflects similar processes, in which creative expression becomes a means of situating oneself within unfamiliar environments. These practices can also be understood as forms of place-based meaning-making,

where identity is negotiated through intersection with both environment and memory (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018).

6.6.3 Art as Safe Space: Expression, Agency and Reflection

For some participants creative practices functioned as a form of emotional release and reflection, particularly in relation to stress, loneliness, and cultural transition. Activities such as knitting, writing, or painting were described as calming and grounding, suggesting that art itself can be a temporary safe space. Within ABR, this aligns with the understanding of art as both a method and a process of inquiry, where meaning is generated through making (McNiff, 2013; Leavy, 2018). Post-art reflections further demonstrate how participants engaged critically within their own experiences. In some cases, the act of creating enabled new insights, allowing participants to articulate feelings that were not initially expressed in interviews. For others, participants questioned whether art produces safety or simply represents it, thus highlighting the complexity of these experiences. Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) similarly emphasise that art processes can foster reflection and relational understanding, particularly in context-sensitive contexts and participatory settings. This reinforces the role of art not only as expression but as a space of agency, where individuals actively negotiate their emotional and spatial realities.

Creative practices like weaving, painting, journaling and photography further demonstrate how safe space can be actively produced through embodied and reflective engagement. Weaving, for instance, involves repetitive, tactile actions that can promote a sense of rhythm, control, and grounding often associated with calming effects and emotional regulation. The material engagement with threads and patterns allows individuals to externalise internal state while simultaneously creating a structured and predictable process, which can contribute to feelings of safety and stability (Collier, 2011). Similarly, painting enables the expression of emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally, instead functioning as a non-verbal language through which individuals can process complex experiences. Within art therapy research, painting has been shown to reduce stress and support emotional release, reinforcing its role as a space of psychological safety (Kaimal et al., 2016).

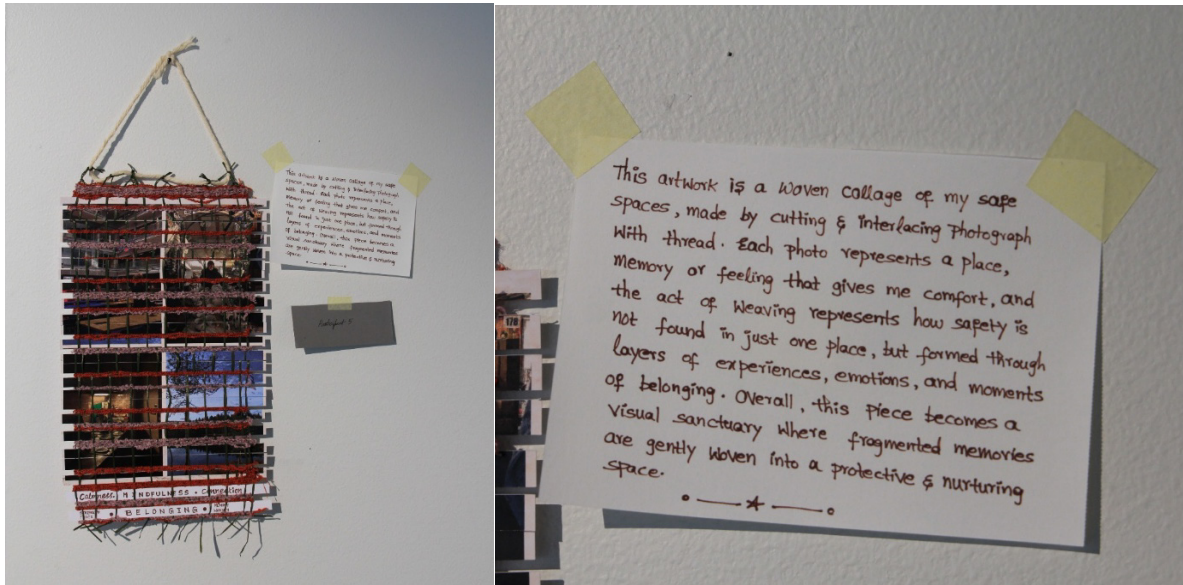


Figure 21: Participant 5's expression of safe space through art-based process of weaving

Journaling on the other hand, operates as a reflective and narrative practice, allowing individuals to organise thoughts, process emotions, and construct meaning from their experiences. Writing about personal experiences has been widely associated with improved emotional clarity and reduced stress, as it enables individuals to make sense of difficult or transitional moments (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). In the context of my study, journaling can be understood as a form of internal safe space, one that is portable, private and continuously accessible.

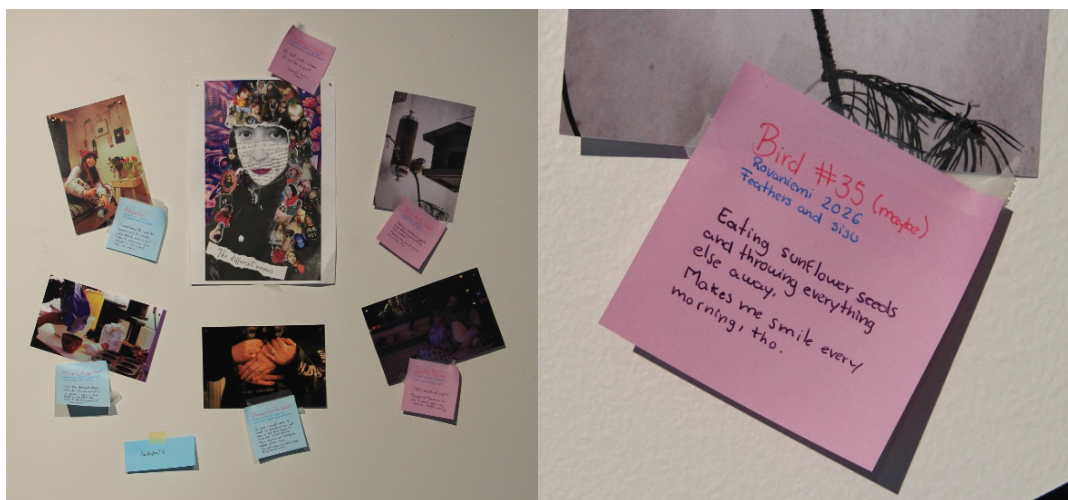


Figure 22: Participant 6's expression of safe space using art-based process of photography, collage and journaling

Photography similarly offers a way of engaging with space through attention, framing and perspective. To many individuals capturing particular moments, objects, environments is

meaningful or comforting and transforms ordinary surroundings into sites of personal importance. Rose (2016) suggests that visual methods such as photography allow participants to construct and communicate spatial experiences in ways that extend beyond verbal description, aligning closely with ABR approaches.



Figure 23: Participant 1's representation of safe space through photography

All together, these practices highlight how safe space is not only located in environments but also emerges through creative processes that engage the body, senses and emotions. Within ABR, such methods are not merely tools for data collection but are themselves forms of inquiry and meaning making (Leavy, 2018). Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) argue that art practices, particularly in context-sensitive and everyday settings, enable individuals to build relationships with their environment and themselves. In this sense, weaving, painting, journaling, photography function as micro-practices of safety, where individuals actively construct, negotiate and experience safe space through creative engagement.



Figure 24: Participant 3's expressions through photography as a creative practice (participant is neither interested in art nor practices it) (Photographer: Halin, M., 2026)

6.7 Synthesising the Layers: Safe Space as Ongoing Production

The discussion presented in this chapter demonstrates that safe space cannot be understood as a fixed, stable or singular entity. Instead of being tied to a specific location or defined solely through physical, emotional or artistic dimension, safe space emerges as a dynamic and ongoing process. It is produced through the continuous interactions of material arrangements, social relations, sensory experiences and individual interpretations. Thus, reinforcing Lefebvre's (1991) argument that space is not a passive container but an active product of lived practices.

Across participant responses and my reflexive observations, safe space can be explained to be relational and contingent, shaped by movement, context and experience. As Massey (2005) suggests, space is constituted through interactions and trajectories, and therefore, cannot be understood as static or universally experienced. This is evident through this study, in how safety is negotiated differently across environments, whether through everyday routines, encounters with natural landscapes, or moments of solitude. It highlights that safe space is not given, but continually made and remade.

My findings also complicate reductive understandings of safe space as inherently positive or stable. Instead, safe spaces can be temporary, partial and even contradictory, holding both comfort and discomfort simultaneously. This aligns with the broader discussion of spatial

production where material, social and symbolic dimensions intersect. For instance, material practices such as arranging objects or engaging with environments interact with emotional and sensory experiences. While symbolic meanings – memory, identity, and imagination further shape how safety is perceived and produced.

Furthermore, the inclusion of arts-based and reflexive approaches within this research extends the understanding of safe space beyond conventional frameworks. Even though they are not essential to all experiences, artistic and creative practices reveal how safe space can be actively produced through process, repetition, and expression (Leavy, 2018; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018). At the same time, the absence of art in certain contexts reinforces that safe space is not dependent on any singular mode of production, but exists across multiple, overlapping dimensions.

Together, these insights position safe space as an ongoing negotiation; one that is continuously shaped through the interplay of material conditions, relational dynamics and symbolic meanings. This understanding moved beyond static definitions and instead conceptualises safe space as a lived and evolving process, thus setting the foundation for the concluding chapter to reflect on its broader implications.

Chapter 7: Between Arrival and Belonging: Conclusions and Contributions

This study explores how safe space is experienced, understood and produced by international students, including the role of art in this production, with attention to the spatial, emotional and creative dimensions of this concept. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) framework of the production of space and Massey's (2005) relational understanding, my research examined 'safe space' not as a fixed location, but as something that is actively constructed through everyday practices, social relations and individual interpretations. The study moves beyond simplified definitions by grounding safe space in lived experience. Using interviews alongside arts-based and reflexive approaches, it shows how safety is negotiated across material, sensory, and symbolic dimensions, particularly in migration contexts.

A key finding is that safe space is not stable or bounded, but an ongoing process. Participants' experiences show that safety is produced through interactions with environments, routines and relationships, rather than belonging to a specific place. This aligns with Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), where space is understood as relational and constantly evolving. Everyday routines play an important role, especially simple acts like arranging spaces, returning to familiar environments, or repetition create comfort and stability, especially in unfamiliar settings.

Safe space is also felt and embodied, described through emotions such as calmness and ease, often linked to light, sound, and atmosphere. However, it can be temporary and sometimes mixed with discomfort. Artistic practices emerged as one way of producing safe space, though not for everyone. Often, it is the act of creating, rather than the outcome, that provides a sense of safety, while everyday aesthetic practices also contribute.

My study contributes to existing literature by extending spatial theory into the contexts of safe space and lived experience. It applies Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space to show that safe space is actively produced rather than inherently given. It also highlights the role of everyday practices and routines in shaping spatial experiences, offering a micro-level perspective that complements broader theories.

The research further expands the understanding of art by moving beyond formal artistic production to include everyday aesthetic and material practices. The idea of "found safe space" challenges dominant assumptions by showing that safety is not always intentionally created

but can also be encountered through sensory and environmental experiences. In addition, the study contributes to discussions of spatial belonging in migration contexts, showing how international students navigate and produce safe space in unfamiliar environments. Art-based research plays an important role by allowing creative and embodied practices to become analytical data, thus revealing how safe spaces are materially and emotionally produced. It also highlights aspects of safety that may remain less visible through conventional methods.

This study shows the value of combining interviews with arts-based methods to explore complex ideas like safe space. Interviews provided detailed insights into participants' experiences, while creative methods allowed expression of sensory and emotional aspects that are harder to capture through words alone. Creative practices enabled more personal and embodied engagement, revealing symbolic and affective dimensions of safe space. However, the approach also had challenges. The interpretive nature of the research means the analysis is shaped by both participant narratives and my own perspective. While reflexivity helped address this, subjectivity remains part of the process. Differences in participants' engagement with creative methods also led to varied depth and types of data.

Limitations of the study

This study's methodological approach presents several limitations. The qualitative and interpretive design prioritizes depth over breadth, thus limiting the generalisability of findings beyond the specific context of international students in Rovaniemi. My study was conducted for a small group of international students and does not aspire to be read as a generalized output of experiences of international students everywhere. The use of arts-based research (ABR), while valuable in capturing embodied and non-verbal dimensions of experience, resulted in varied levels of participant engagement and differing forms of expression, which may affect consistency and comparability across the dataset. Additionally, the interpretation of visual and creative outputs is inherently subjective, relying on my analytical lens and contextual understanding. Although this study employs Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial framework to structure analysis, the application of the spatial triad involves interpretive judgement, which may shape how data is categorised and understood.

Finally, my reflexive positioning as an artist-researcher, may also influence the interpretation of participants' experiences, particularly in relation to recognising certain forms of "safe spaces" such as routines, environments, or non-domestic settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may explore safe spaces across different groups and contexts beyond international students, such as working professionals, artists, children, or individuals in workplaces, studios, museums, or educational settings. This would broaden understanding of how safe space is produced in different environments.

Comparative studies across cultures and locations may further reveal how social, cultural and environmental factors shape experiences of safety and belonging. There is also growing potential to examine digital and online environments as emerging forms of safe spaces and safe space production.

Longitudinal studies would help provide deeper insight into how perceptions of safe space change over time, especially in relation to migration, life transitions, thus offering deeper insight into safe space as an ongoing and dynamic process.

Final thoughts

My research has explored ‘safe space’ as something lived, produced, and continually negotiated across spatial, emotional, and creative dimensions. Bringing together participant experiences, theoretical frameworks, and reflexive insights, this study highlights how safety is not confined to specific locations, but emerges through movement, interactions and meaning making.

Safe space, in this context, exists at an intersection of space, safety, belonging, and expression. It is shaped by everyday practices, sensory encounters and personal histories, while also extending into imagined and future possibilities. Art, while significant, is only one of many ways through which safety can be experienced and produced. At a broader level, my research reflects an ongoing journey which is both personal and collective; of understanding how individuals navigate and create conditions of safety within changing environments. It acknowledges that safe space is neither static nor universally defined but is instead continuously shaped through lived experience. Safe space is not a place we enter. Safe space is felt before it is defined. It is something we continuously create, carry and sometimes unexpectedly find.

Finally, for me, ‘intimacy’ and ‘safe space’ go hand in hand. It is only in one’s safe space where one can peel off their layers, the costumes, the days’ expressions that have been stuck on their face and be free, be present. Maybe you are counting the steps until you reach home, maybe the turn where the ginkgo tree bends just slightly is where you finally

breathe deep, maybe that one house or signboard is where you start feeling relaxed. 'Safe spaces' come in many forms. For me, they have been both physical and abstract. Moving and still. Permanent and temporary.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.
- Anderson, B. (2009). Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2), 77–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005>
- Anderson, B. (2014). *Encountering affect: Capacities, apparatuses, conditions*. Ashgate. <https://www.routledge.com/Encountering-Affect-Capacities-Apparatuses-Conditions/Anderson/p/book/9781409460046>
- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. SAGE Publications.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bissell, D. (2018). *Transit life: How commuting is transforming our cities*. MIT Press.
- Böhme, G. (2017). *The aesthetics of atmospheres*. Routledge.
- Boostrom, R. (1998). “Safe spaces”: Reflections on an educational metaphor. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30(4), 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220279818354>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brenner, N., & Schmid, C. (2015). Towards a new epistemology of the urban? *City*, 19(2–3), 151–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1014712>
- Collier, A. (2011). Using textile practice in therapeutic and reflective contexts. *Journal of Arts & Health*, 3(2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2011.560143>
- Corney, T., du Plessis, K., Woods, B., et al. (2024). ‘If you are feeling alone and you are not feeling safe, it impacts everything’: A mixed-methods exploration of international students’ accommodation, subjective wellbeing and mental health help-seeking. *BMC Public Health*, 24, Article 1262. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18691-8>
- Cornwall, A., & Jewkes, R. (1995). What is participatory research? *Social Science & Medicine*, 41(12), 1667–1676. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(95\)00127-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(95)00127-S)
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. McGraw-Hill.

- Duff, C. (2016). Atmospheres of recovery: Assemblages of health. *Environment and Planning A*, 48(1), 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X15603222>
- Edensor, T. (2015). Light design and atmosphere. *Visual Communication*, 14(3), 331–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357215579975>
- Eisner, E. W. (2008). Art and knowledge. In J. G. Knowles & A. L. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp. 3–12). SAGE Publications.
- Elden, S. (2004). *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the possible*. Continuum.
- Elden, S. (2007). There is a politics of space because space is political: Henri Lefebvre and the production of space. *Radical Philosophy*, 146, 20–30.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4), 273–290. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23032294>
- Finlay, L. (2002). “Outing” the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>
- Finn, K., & Holton, M. (2023). Exploring the spatial belonging of students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2243285>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Genocchio, B. (1995). Discourse, discontinuity, difference: The question of “Other” spaces. In S. Watson & K. Gibson (Eds.), *Postmodern cities and spaces* (pp. 35–46). John Wiley & Sons.
- Haselbacher, M., Kuokkanen, K., Palonen, E., & Reeger, U. (2024). Inclusion and exclusion in urban public space: Contemporary challenges in Vienna and Helsinki. *Urban Planning*, 9, Article 8291. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.8291>
- Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200303132>
- Huhmarniemi, M. (2018). Art-based action research in the development work of arts and art education. In *The lure of Lapland: A handbook of Arctic art and design* (pp. 9–23). University of Lapland. <https://lauda.ulapland.fi/handle/10024/63653>

- Johnson, P. (2006). Unravelling Foucault's "different spaces". *History of the Human Sciences*, 19(4), 75–90.
- Kaimal, G., Ray, K., & Muniz, J. (2016). Reduction of cortisol levels and participants' responses following art-making. *Art Therapy*, 33(2), 74–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2016.1166832>
- Kara, H. (2020). *Creative research methods in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Policy Press.
- Kirby, K. (1996). Indifferent boundaries: Spatial concepts in feminist thought. *Genders*, 23, 45–61.
- Knowles, J. G., & Cole, A. L. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- LaBelle, B. (2010). *Acoustic territories: Sound culture and everyday life*. Continuum.
- Leavy, P. (2018). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- McNiff, S. (2013). *Art as research: Opportunities and challenges*. Intellect Books.
- Middleton, J. (2018). The socialities of everyday urban walking and the "right to the city". *Urban Studies*, 55(2), 296–315.
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2011). Expressive writing: Connections to physical and mental health. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 417–437). Oxford University Press.
- Pink, S. (2015). *Doing sensory ethnography* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Porter, J., McDermott, T., Daniels, H., & Ingram, J. (2021). Feeling part of the school and feeling safe: Further development of a tool for investigating school belonging. *Educational Studies*, 50(3), 382–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2021.1944063>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Roestone Collective. (2014). Safe space: Towards a reconceptualization. *Antipode*, 46(5), 1346–1365.
- Rose, G. (1997). Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), 305–320.
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Saldanha, A. (2008). Heterotopia and structuralism. *Environment and Planning A*, 40(8), 2080–2096.
- Samura, M. (2018). Understanding campus spaces to improve student belonging. *About Campus*, 23(2), 19–23.
- Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space: Towards a three-dimensional dialectic. *Space and Culture*, 11(1), 27–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331207311606>
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Blackwell.
- Sullivan, G. (2010). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in visual arts* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Sümer, S., Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K. (2008). Predictors of depression and anxiety among international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86, 429–437.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00531.x>
- Gieryn, T. F. (2000). A space for place in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 463–496. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.463>
- Vilsmaier, U., & Lang, D. J. (2015). Making a difference by marking the difference: Constituting in-between spaces for sustainability learning. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 16, 51–55.
- Wallin-Ruschman, J., & Patka, M. (2016). Learning from critical collective spaces: Reflections on the community–diversity dialectic in safe spaces. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 9(2), 6–15.
- Wong, B. (2023). Exploring the spatial belonging of students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(3), 546–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2243285>

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Marai Huhmarniemi, for her constant guidance, support, and thoughtful feedback throughout the process of this thesis, especially her immense patience with answering my questions repeatedly. Her insights helped shape both the direction and depth of my work, gave me immense support when I felt like my research was unnecessary, and made me enjoy the process of research, discovery and understanding. I was able to find my place in my own self as an artist-researcher and have more faith in my work.

I am deeply thankful to all the participants who generously shared their experiences and creative expressions. This research would not have been possible without their openness and trust in me and the process itself.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my finnish language teacher Hannu Paloniemi, for creating a space where I could enjoy learning a new language. His guidance and patience helped me believe I could learn another language even if it will take time, no matter the fumbling and mumbling, if I try. The classes also became a place to connect, get support and make new friends.

I would like to also express my gratitude to Michael Jacobs, although short, conversations with him and the guidance I received mean a lot to me, and I shall carry them with me for future endeavours.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends – it has been a journey, short but felt quite long; my teachers – I shall carry with me all I that I had the opportunity to learn from you all; and peers for their encouragement, conversations, and support during this journey. Finally, I am grateful to my family for their constant support, patience, and belief in me.

AI Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been used in limited and responsible manner to support tasks such as scoping of related literature, identifying similarities between multiple articles, creating a structure for clear flow of headings, grammar correction and creating visual diagrams for my research flow. Artificial Intelligence was not used to create arguments, analysis, or discuss the findings and conclusions. All the decisions regarding analysis, findings, discussions and conclusions were done by me, the author. All the AI generated text has been reviewed, edited, and rewritten multiple times by me to ensure accuracy, coherence and alignment with the aims of my study.

Process Stage	Use	Tool Used
Through all sections	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General grammatical formatting and proofreading. 2. Polishing some sections into academic style writing. 3. Creating a structure for the headings based on my own data and mind maps. 	ChatGPT
References and Citations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recheck intext citations, and format them in APA style. 2. Find further references for similar arguments. 3. Finding similar themes and concepts across articles and book chapters. 	ChatGPT NotebookLM
Visual Diagrams	Figure 01, 03	ChatGPT

Attachments

Interview Questions:

Section 1 – Understanding Safe Spaces

1. How would you describe what a ‘safe space’ means to you?
2. Where did you come across the term ‘safe space’? How did you understand it in real life situations and environments?
3. Can you give an example of a safe space you’ve experienced before? What makes it safe?
4. Do you believe a safe space is more about the physical environment or the feeling it creates? Why?

Section 2 – Personal Experience and Physical Environments

5. Can you describe a place in Rovaniemi where you feel most safe or comfortable?
6. When did you first start feeling this way? Which physical features contributed to it, if any?
7. What specific physical features make you feel safe in any given space?
8. Have you made any changes to your living or study space accordingly?
9. Are there any spaces you or your peers have actively created or arranged to feel safe? (e.g., Your room, a study area, a gathering spot?)
10. What physical characteristics make a space feel safe for you (lighting, layout, privacy, accessibility, nature, etc.)?
11. Are there places in Rovaniemi where you feel unsafe or less comfortable? Why?
12. Are there non-physical or abstract spaces – such as relationships, routines, cultural practices, online communities, - etc. that feel safe to you?
13. Are there particular artistic environments (studios, galleries, cafes, cultural centers) where you feel more at ease than in others? Why?

Section 3 – Emotional Connections and Memories

14. How do you feel when you are in your safe space? Which emotions do you usually experience?
15. Are there any moments or memories that strengthened your connection to that place?
16. Does this/these space/space help you manage stress, homesickness, or challenges? How?
17. Did art from your home culture play any role in helping you adjust to life in Rovaniemi or other new places before? Did you use a physical or abstract object/concept when creating your safe space?

Section 4 – Importance and Reflection

18. How do you usually feel in your safe space? Reflect on your emotions and how your body feels in this space. Does spending time there affect your mood or daily routine?

19. Has your need for safe spaces changed since you arrived? How does this affect your well-being?

20. Why do you think having a safe space is important for international students to start a new life in a new geographical place?

21. Would you recommend other international students to create their own safe spaces? Why?

Section 5 - Creation and Personalization

22. Have you made any changes to your living or study environments to make it feel safer or more comforting? If yes, what changes?

23. How important is personalization (decoration, furniture arrangement, familiar objects) in creating a safe space for you?

24. Do you share your safe space with others, or is it more of a private retreat? Why?

Section 6 – Social Dimension

25. Do the people in or around your safe space contribute to its feeling of safety? How?

26. Is your safe space somewhere you go alone, with friends, family, or both? Why?

Section 7 – Future and Ideal Space

27. If you could design your ideal safe space here, what would it look like? Would creative or artistic elements be a part of it?

28. Would it be indoors or outdoors? Would you share it or keep it private?

29. What makes a safe space sustainable for you?

30. How do the surrounding elements (nature, seasons, climate) influence your space?

31. Do you think your concept of a 'safe space' will remain the same when you leave Finland, or will it change? How?

32. How do safe spaces contribute to your sense of belonging in a new environment?

Section 6 – Art and Safe spaces

33. Has art played any role in the safe spaces you have created since moving to Rovaniemi, or discovered in Rovaniemi, or at some earlier point in your life?

34. If in the past art played a role, did it have a relation or connectedness to your experience here in Rovaniemi today?

35. What kind of art is it according to you?

36. Do you engage in any artistic or creative activities that help you feel grounded or safe?

37. Have you ever used artistic expression to cope with stress, loneliness, cultural transition, or homesickness?

38. In your opinion, can creative activities help create a feeling of safety? Why or why not?
39. Do you feel that the city, university, or community offers creative spaces that are welcoming or safe? What are your experiences?
40. Do creative practices help you negotiate between your home identity and your identity here? How?

Questions for after creation of your art piece – Reflecting on Physical space through art.

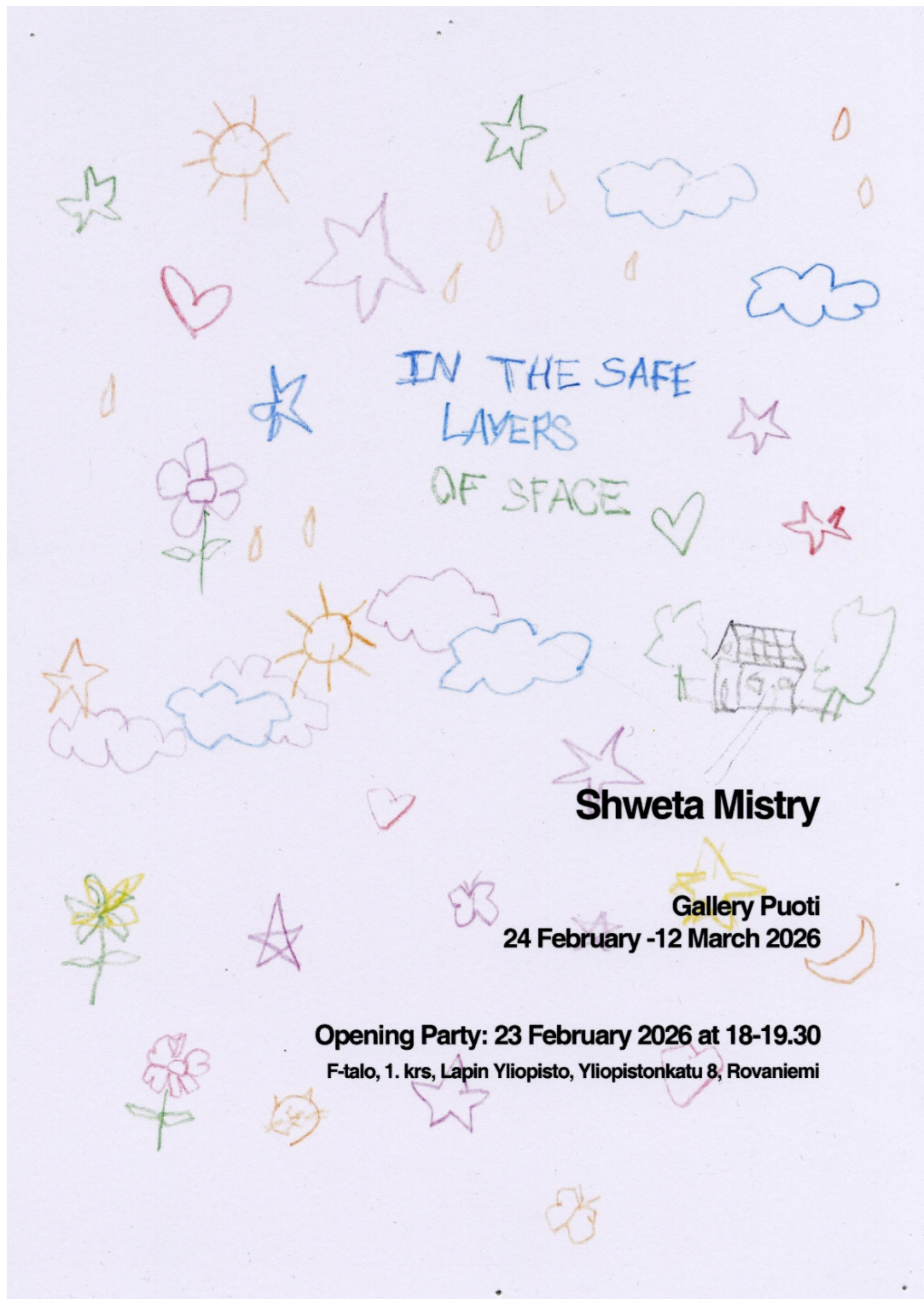
1. How did you find it to express ‘safe space’ using a means of art?
 2. Could you relate to using art as a way of expression for your definition of ‘safe space’?
 3. What medium did you choose and why? Did the medium also feel safe?
- About your art and process –
1. How does this artwork represent a physical space that feels safe to you?
 2. Which elements of the artwork relate most directly to the physical qualities of that space (such as layout, light, materials, or atmosphere)?
 3. Does the artwork reflect a real location, a transformed version of it, or an imagined safe space?
 4. What feelings emerged for you while creating this artwork?
 5. Did these emotions change as the work developed?
 6. Were there moments during the process when you felt particularly calm, grounded, or emotionally present? Or did it make you emotional, or intense?
 7. Did creating the artwork feel comforting, challenging, or freeing?
 8. How did the act of making – drawing, imagining, arranging, choosing materials, etc. – affect how you experienced your idea of safety?
 9. Did the creative process help you express aspects of your safe space that are difficult to describe in words?
 10. Do you feel that art allows you to explore safety differently than conversation alone?
 11. Did any memories or personal associations surface during the creation of this artwork?
 12. How do those memories connect to your understanding of safety and comfort?
 13. Does the artwork link your past experiences with your present life in Rovaniemi?
 14. Looking at your finished artwork, what does it reveal about what you need from space to feel safe?
 15. Do you see the space you created or represented as something temporary or lasting?
 16. Did you realize something new about what makes you feel safe?
 17. How does this artwork reflect care – for yourself, for your environment, or for your well-being over time?

18. Has creating this artwork changed how you think about physical space, safety, or comfort?

19. Is there anything the artwork expresses that you did not expect at the beginning?

20. Would you want to return to this artwork or process again?

Is there anything else you would like to share about safe spaces in Rovaniemi from an international student's perspective that should be known?



'In the Safe Layers of Space'

An Art-based Research Exhibition on safe space for the master's thesis - *'In the layers of where we arrive and where we feel safe: international students, new geographies, and where Art might appear'*

This exhibition emerges from an art-based research project that explores how physical or abstract spaces are 'safe spaces' and how they are experienced, created, and expressed through artistic practices. This exhibition offers a layered visual enquiry into the meaning of "safe space" beyond its original, focusing instead on embodied, emotional and site-specific experiences of international students here in Rovaniemi.

Developed as part of a master's thesis in Sustainable Art and Design at the University of Lapland, the exhibition presents art not only as an outcome, but as a method of research. Through interview, creative processes, and reflective dialogue, participants were invited to explore and express 'places' where they feel safe – spaces of calm, grounding, and emotional resonance within a new geographical environment.

The exhibited works span diverse materials and approaches, including painting, drawing, photography, textile-based practices. Each artwork reflects a personal interpretation of safe space, shaped by physical qualities as well as memory and feelings. Together, the works form a collective yet deeply individual mapping of safety as lived experience.

Shweta's own works are presented alongside those of the participants, offering a parallel reflection on arrival, care, and the act of making space through artistic practices and beyond. Rather than illustrating research findings, the exhibition invites viewers to slow down, observe, and consider how safety is felt, formed, and sustained through everyday spatial encounters.



Visitor's reflections about their safe spaces.



Visitor's reflections about their safe spaces.

Somewhere where I can express myself without feel judged. A place where I can share, learn and discuss.

The Place where I'm with My trusted People. Family. It can be loud or quiet or loud but always calm to me.

図書館
本に囲まれた
空間

Somewhere where I can crumble in pieces, breathe and slowly gather myself back together

thank you for existing ♡
Respect
Possible to share your thoughts
Not unwanted touch
Empathical beings
and
Non manipulative
Natural healthy ♡

through lots of moving and lingering in places for temporary times ~ my safe space was found inside me
It is spiritual, religious and it carries me through.

When I'm surrounded by my classmates, ~~that~~ who have become my best friends.
♡

My safe place is a place where I can be amongst others without having to explain nor apologize away my cultural heritage.

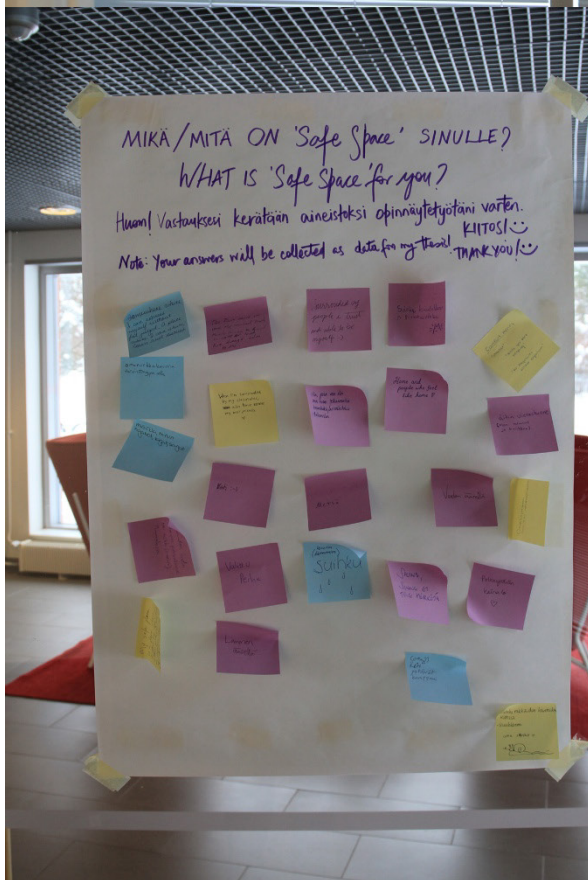
Nature

Oma koti, kun kaikkii ovat samalla sohvalla ♡

Visitor's reflections about their safe spaces.



Exhibition at Gallery Puoti, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland.



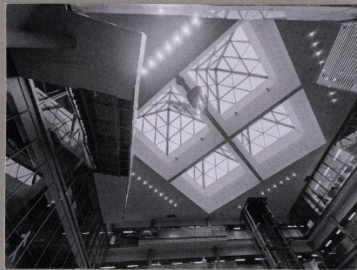
Exhibition at Gallery Puoti, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland.

Notes from my own reflections with visual imagery

Physical structures with high ceilings,
glass windows, complex
looking geometry, the convergence and divergence of
lines and shapes...

Light play
Reflection dances...
when movements create more rippling effects...

The complexity of all the lines, creating sections,
yet sometimes giving the illusion of merging,
the portrayal of 'holding together', it is also
one of the physical attributes I look
for to feel safe in a new place.



Does this mean I assign 'safety'
to a place?



Straight lines, multiple of it forming a pattern
Overlapping, making strong structures!
contributes to the safety of an environment,
especially manmade,
but it has to be specific...
even the colors play a big role in
this arrangement, particular.

Beautiful, beautiful light...
sunlight, sunshine, moonlight, starlight, glowing
beings, reflected rainbows, candlelight, firelight,
flames...

yellow light, orange light, pink purple hues,
blue light, white light, the particular
time and way it seeps in through objects
so marvelous,
comforting, transient and melancholic...

Reflections of light and light play are like

small
transient
pockets
of
safe space.



When life is reflected in shadows, on physical structures, manmade—
structures like walls and roads, through glass...
While tall bridges, bridges do not make a feeling of safety, in me, tall trees being
in their shade, their shadow feels grounding and comforting...
the harmony of existence is particularly comforting on handrails, however I define
that area as 'safe space'.




While water, a huge, expanding water body has evoked within me feelings of safety, it is melancholic, it is lonely, deep, holding too much, but full of melancholy.

The meaninglessness of existence is profoundly visible to me, through large water bodies, especially on grey days on the bright days when all reflections of the sky and light - it blue, it is awe-inspiring, in a lonely way.

human existence is infinite, so small, to be like the sea creatures, just floating, hauntingly mesmerizing, sea-weeds gently shimmering in the sea currents.

it is a phase I feel I can ask, and mull, and ruminate over cycles of words, spirals just moving like 'word mobiles' a repetition of questions, safe enough, hence to repeatedly ask myself, 'what is the meaning of this life?'





Windows overlook towards a view, and sometimes what a view that is! The silent changes of the seasons, the sky, the passage of time, people watching, all that is possible through a good window!

Especially pin glass windows, particularly of shapes like rectangle, square, triangle and the circle of ship windows!

Are your dreams your safe space?
Are your ambitions your safety?
Are your goals and backup plans your safety net??

Isn't a safe space a place or state of being where hope is possible?
But then, do people, being experiencing/experienced trauma/hard disasters also hold onto hope think of it as a safe space?

Dreams, having a dream, an opportunity to believe in the possibility felt like a distant, almost tangible, safe space!
It still feels that way today!

The feeling of 'coming home'. The silent anticipation that grounds me at the particular turn in the road, the shadow of that tree, or that art on the walls on that one particular building on the left, the feeling of 'my space', my 'safe space' soon becoming visible, meaning

all these physical attributes of my environment also contribute to the 'extended safe space'!

Here in Rovaniemi, it is the turn and slope down the bus stop, the big Δ of Prisma, the old station building, the colored house, the factory and its smoke.

22 February 2026.

I wanted a year to do this, writing down my gratitude in a way for this place.

I was not looking for this place, but rather it was perfectly safe, there, existing and just 'there' because I was grieving and yet I had responsibilities, goals, decisions I had taken that needed my attention and energy. While I did grieve and mourn my loss at my 'new' home, it was desperately lonely still, even with the sunshine, and large windows that I adore.

I was sitting at that bench, often times when I was close to crying, but I can't run away from studios, they need my attention tea, but my mum's not here anymore, and trees are the only thing that are giving me hope... this place, it provided me a space I needed to grieve whenever I wanted, no judgement, no expectations, no looks of pity or concern. No offhanded remarks from people I don't even know about MY loss, because if I was back 'home, home', I would have had to 'be present' for the society, cater to them 'visits to offer their condolences', even offer them tea, back 'home' I would have had to put up a great big fucking act, a show...

but here, with these trees, in a foreign land, a land I will have no claim over, I found safety, being safe enough to be able to grieve, a lot over the months - the past whole year...

Maybe if I were in another place I could have found another place with different 'physical attributes' or just differences to have been able to be, but it was only this place where I could lower my defences, breathe deeply and stare, and be alright?

I don't think I remember when that bench broke or even if it is mended now.. but I remember looking out at the water, sunlight filtering through the trees, gentle cool breeze, thinking my mum would have loved it here...

A backyard full of tall trees, overlooking a waterbody would be magical.

and while the sea, ocean, water is comforting, it's the trees, the flowers, the dancing branches all around that are uplifting... life affirming?

Yes. Life affirming.
Hopeful. Rising Towards the sky,
the sun, the light.

Being enveloped by the trees, not
even an open grassland,
It has to be surrounded by tall
trees, and have the light.

Sunshine flickering through, casting thousands
of tiny, beautiful shadows to
feel safe and sheltered.