

CHARLES
MINDFUL
WELLNESS

2026 WELLNESS REPORT

Emergent Practices in Wellness Design

For organizers, support providers, and facilitators of care in public spaces

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Wellness treats people like projects. The person on the other end becomes easier to measure and manage.

In my work as a Black queer support provider, asking someone to monitor themselves is not a neutral request. For a person already under watch, self-surveillance does not arrive as self-awareness.

People enter public spaces carrying conditions no wellness practice can resolve: economic pressure, grief, racism, isolation, overwork, surveillance, and ordinary uncertainty. A practice can help someone live through those conditions. It can also teach them to tolerate a condition that should be changed. Both get sold under the same label: wellness.

The difference is a matter of design. What the tools can capture gets measured. The measurement then gets treated as the whole story. Some forms of distress get treated as personal failures. Belonging gets sold back to the people it was taken from. And care that is already holding lives together goes uncounted.

This is a practice-based field report. The research matters because of what becomes visible when an idea has to survive an actual lived experience. I am writing from over 10 years of teaching, facilitation, program design, and work inside public and community spaces. I am less interested in predicting the wellness industry than in what happens when a practice meets conditions and the people already living inside them.

Emergent does not mean newly invented. Some of these practices are old, communal, cultural, or ordinary. What is changing in 2026 is their visibility.

The same reduction keeps appearing: something produced by an environment, institution, relationship, history, or material condition gets handed back to a person as an individual problem to solve. Stress becomes a failure to regulate. Belonging acquires a price. A body is reduced to what an instrument can read. Care that has held a place together for years stays off the ledger because nobody built a line for it.

FRAMEWORK

THE PATTERN What is happening, and what the evidence does and does not establish.

THE REDUCTION What the conventional response compresses, individualizes, or erases once context is removed.

IN PRACTICE One observable design action that changes the pattern.

FOR YOUR ROOM One question for the person who runs the space.

IN THIS REPORT

1. Nervous Systems, Not Nervous Projects
 2. Mental Health as the Ground
 3. The Return of Relationship
 4. Beyond Representation
 5. Pleasure Is Not a Reward
 6. Spirituality Without Bypass
 7. Digital Practice and What Remains
- Plus: Public Space Is Part of the Practice

A NOTE ON METHOD

This report speaks in a declarative voice. One rule licenses it: every claim on these pages sits in one of three registers, and the mark on the sentence tells you which.



Sourced

A chartreuse number points to published evidence, listed in the sources at emergentpractices.charlesnarles.com/sources.



Observation

An orange mark is professional observation from practice. No study stands behind it, and it does not pretend one does. Twenty-one claims in this issue carry it.



Contested

A blue number is cited evidence the field is actively arguing about. The references show the disagreement as well as the support.

Colour never carries the distinction alone. The marks differ in form, and the references name each source's register, so the system holds in greyscale and for screen readers. Read for pattern, not certainty.

ONE

NERVOUS SYSTEMS, NOT NERVOUS PROJECTS



For much of the last decade, wellness mirrored the logic of productivity culture. Track the habit. Improve the metric. Discipline the body into compliance. Even care became something to get right.

What that model consistently overlooked was context. Bodies do not respond to ideals. They respond to conditions.

The body carries the cost of chronic stress, economic precarity, political violence, and environmental instability whether or not a person manages them well.¹ Regulation is not a personal achievement under those conditions. ● The body is responding accurately to its environment, even when that response is inconvenient.

Research in neuroscience and trauma psychology has made its way into public discourse, particularly ideas drawn from polyvagal theory, stress physiology, and attachment science.⁴ These frameworks have shifted how people interpret reactivity, shutdown, and vigilance. What once looked like dysfunction reads now as adaptive intelligence shaped by experience.

LEARNING TO READ YOURSELF

The market for wearables and biometric tracking keeps growing. Every instrument decides in advance what counts as a signal. Everything else disappears from the score. Sleep score, heart rate variability, steps. A clenched jaw at four o'clock on the third bad Thursday in a row isn't a metric your fit watch wants to track.

The watch is doing exactly what it was built to do. A number can help someone notice a pattern, ask a better question, or confirm something they already suspected. The design problem begins when the number stops being one piece of information and becomes the authority on what the person is experiencing.

Reading yourself is the skill people come to wellness spaces to build. ●

Somatic literacy is becoming a sought skill, not a byproduct. People want to be taught how to read what their bodies are actually saying.³

Practices that take internal experience seriously train attention and slow things down enough for sensation to register. They treat the body as a subject rather than a project. ●

In my work, I hear the request more plainly: stop telling me what my body should be doing and help me notice what it is doing. ●

The practices that do this build the capacity to notice.² Fluency in what the body is already communicating is what makes them feel different from fitness.

Over time, noticing patterns in sensation³ shifts the experience from performing the body to listening to it.

INTENSITY LOSES ITS AUTHORITY

Intensity culture is losing ground. ● People are choosing pacing over performance, and they are not apologizing for it.

Intensity can be useful, but intensity alone does not build capacity. Practices that allow for pacing, choice, and interruption are proving more sustainable.



THE PATTERN

Bodies are responding to prolonged stress, grief, instability, and overload. What reads as dysfunction is often an accurate response.

THE REDUCTION

Regulation gets sold as a skill the individual is failing to acquire. Training someone to stay calm inside a damaging condition makes the condition easier to sustain.

IN PRACTICE

Build in interruption, adjustment, and choice. Let participants change pace, intensity, position, or level of involvement without having to justify the change.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What can a person change about their own participation without having to explain why?



TWO

MENTAL HEALTH AS THE GROUND



Wellness once promised refuge from reality. Calm rooms, soothing language, carefully curated experiences. That separation made sense when stress was framed as episodic.

It is less convincing now.

Mental health is no longer treated as an adjacent concern or a specialty track within wellness. It is the context in which all practice occurs. Anxiety, grief, dissociation, and fatigue are the conditions people arrive with.⁵ Practice starts from there.

Calm cannot be the price of entry.

A person should not have to stop outside the door long enough to make their face neutral, slow their breathing, or find the right words for what is happening before they are allowed to participate. The design question begins at the threshold: what can someone bring in without becoming a disruption?

Calm can still be welcome. Sometimes it is exactly what someone wants from a practice. It stops being welcome when it becomes the admission requirement, the moral achievement, or the proof that the practice worked.

Public discussion of trauma, burnout, and emotional exhaustion has grown. Therapy language has entered everyday conversation. Consent, boundaries, and capacity are baseline expectations now.

WHAT CREDIBILITY LOOKS LIKE NOW

A teacher who communicates clearly, is honest about intensity, and responds when something surfaces, without pretending the moment has become tidy, is doing work that may not look pretty. ●

Credibility is in the choices a participant actually has.

What a practice does for clarity, agency, and emotional contact matters more than how it looks. Spaces built on suppression, forced positivity, or bypass are losing authority. ● What remains useful are practices that can hold reality without demanding detachment from it. ⁶

Nervous-system regulation has moved from a clinical concept into everyday wellness language. What settles a nervous system and what produces a high followed by a crash are different experiences, and people can tell them apart. ●

Does this practice help me stay present? Does it expand my capacity to handle what I am actually living through? People want tools that work under real conditions, not just ideal ones.

The distinction between wellness and clinical care holds, and gets clearer under pressure. Wellness can support mental health. It protects choice, helps someone stay oriented, and makes space for what a person is actually experiencing. It should not pretend to be clinical care.

THE PATTERN

People arrive carrying anxiety, grief, dissociation, and fatigue, and they understand those responses as adaptive rather than broken.

THE REDUCTION

Distress becomes a performance problem: calm down, stay positive, participate correctly. At the other extreme, wellness is asked to do work that requires clinical care. Both are the same overreach, a practice claiming it can hold what it cannot.

IN PRACTICE

Make participation possible without requiring calm, positivity, or disclosure. State the scope of the practice and make pathways to additional support visible when clinical care is needed.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What does someone have to be, feel, show, or do in order to participate?



THREE

THE RETURN OF RELATIONSHIP

SECTION 03 · THE RETURN OF RELATIONSHIP

Continuity is the variable.

The same five sessions, and the same effort, on both tracks.

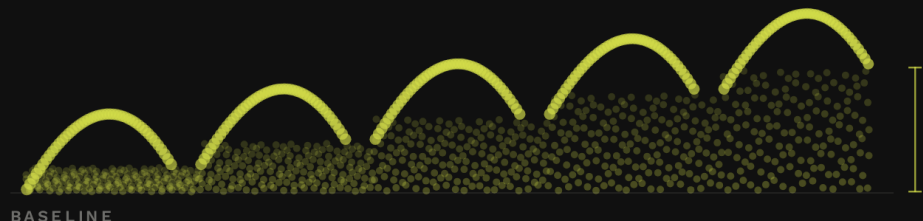
DROP-IN

The work falls back
and piles up flat



ONGOING CONTAINER

The work settles
where it landed



Regulation deepens when you are not starting from zero each time. Familiarity lowers strain, which is what lets the next session begin higher than the last.

The idea that healing is primarily private has always been incomplete. Nervous systems are shaped in relationship.⁸ Regulation stabilizes more easily in environments marked by predictability, reciprocity, and recognition.

There is a clear movement away from anonymous participation toward smaller, more consistent formats. Cohorts, circles, and ongoing groups are replacing drop-ins that prioritize scale over relationship. Familiarity reduces the work of arriving somewhere new and rebuilding trust from scratch.

Return changes ordinary things first. By the third meeting, someone knows where the bathroom is, whether a late arrival will be met with accountability or shame, how modification is handled, and whether the facilitator remembers what happened last time. None of that is dramatic. Together, those details reduce how much uncertainty a person has to manage before the actual practice begins.

And sometimes you do not want to return. A drop-in class can offer flexibility, privacy, low commitment, and the freedom to leave without becoming part of a community. Continuity asks for time, availability, and some willingness to be known. They make different things possible.

TRUST IS BUILT BY RETURN, NOT REACH

In my work, I see people reorganizing around facilitators they can return to, not content they consume once and move on from. ●

Some things only become visible the second, fifth, or tenth time through.

When the same people keep working together, familiarity does something a one-time class cannot. Drop-in culture still has a place. Return makes a different relationship possible.

Charisma fills a room for an hour. Consistency is what someone comes back for.⁷

You can tell when a facilitator was paying attention last time.

They follow up, they adjust, and they repair when something goes wrong. Those actions tell participants more than performance does.

CARE THAT DOES NOT LAND ON ONE PERSON

Collective care also redistributes responsibility. Instead of placing emotional labor on a single facilitator, groups are structured with shared agreements, clear norms, and explicit boundaries.⁹ This reduces burnout and prevents the quiet replication of hierarchy inside spaces that claim to resist it.

Leadership here looks less like performance and more like stewardship. Authority is demonstrated through consistency, responsiveness, and repair rather than charisma or intensity. The result is a group where asking for what you need does not automatically make you a problem to manage.

THE PATTERN

Repeated contact lowers the work of learning a place from scratch.⁸ Familiarity lowers strain and makes regulation more possible.

THE REDUCTION

Relationship gets reduced either to charisma or to one-time access. The facilitator becomes the center, and the group is treated as an audience rather than part of what holds the space together.

IN PRACTICE

Build for return without making return compulsory. Use consistent norms, shared agreements, and more than one route for care or support so no single facilitator becomes the whole structure.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What becomes possible because people can return, and what should remain possible for someone who cannot?

FOUR

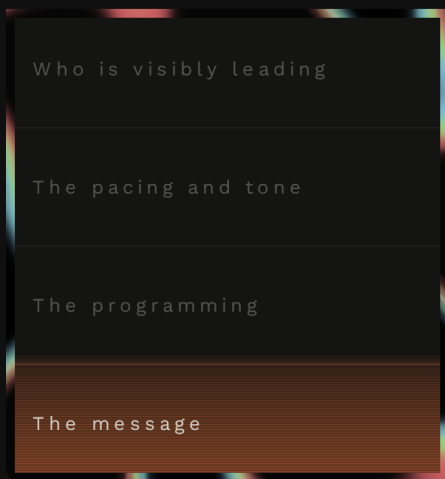
BEYOND REPRESENTATION

SECTION 04 • BEYOND REPRESENTATION

Depth of change.

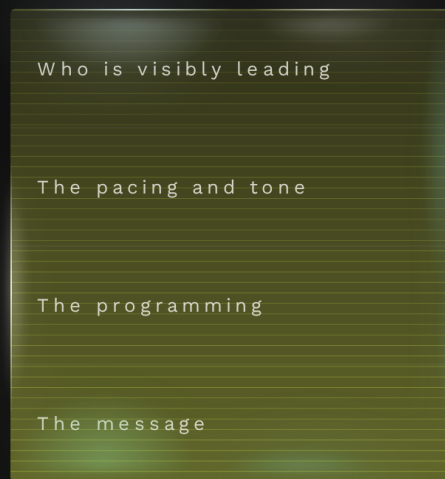
Both begin. Both complete the message. Then one of them stops.

INCLUDED IN A MESSAGE



A finish on the outside.
Nothing moved inside.

CONSIDERED IN A DESIGN



Everything moved inside.
You can feel it from outside.

One creates goodwill. The other creates loyalty. Inclusion that stops at the message layer is what increasingly reads as theater.

Representation can change who is visible without changing how a space works. ●
A room can signal inclusion and still be built around a body that is not yours.

THE ROOM IS THE FIRST OFFERING

An environment does something to a body whether or not anyone says so. A space can offer healing and reproduce the dynamics that caused the harm.

A room starts answering questions before anyone speaks. Who is expected? What counts as normal? What happens if I need something different? Layout, rules, pacing, and visible leadership answer before the facilitator does. People read rooms before they commit to them. ●

The question has shifted from what does this class offer to what is going to happen to me in this room.¹¹

Institutions use the language of safety and inclusion without changing who leads, who is centered, or what bodies are treated as the default. Content cannot rescue a contradictory context. ●

The environment is the first offering.

Look at the room before you read the mission statement. Where are the mirrors? Which restrooms are gendered? Who is pictured on the wall? How close are the mats or chairs? Can someone modify without becoming conspicuous? Those details tell a participant who the space expects long before the word *inclusive* appears.

None of this makes representation superficial. Seeing yourself in leadership, imagery, curriculum, or the people around you matters. The distinction is that representation can open a door without telling you what the space will ask of you once you enter.

INCLUDED IN A MESSAGE, OR CONSIDERED IN A DESIGN

Seeing faces that look like yours in the marketing does not tell you what happens after you arrive. Were the space, its rules, and its leadership built with your experience in mind?

A message can invite someone in. Design determines what happens after they arrive.¹²

Wellness spaces that center whiteness, thinness, and cisgender normativity as their defaults are losing the trust of the people whose participation they are most publicly seeking.¹³ The gap between stated values and structural choices is visible to the people most affected by it.

The most trusted spaces are the ones where certain bodies are not guests but architects.¹⁴

You can feel the difference in who gets oriented without an explanation, whose experience is assumed rather than questioned, and whose access needs are considered before anyone arrives.

Belonging is built into pace, tone, leadership, language, and the expectations a space carries about who will walk through the door. A room either does that work or it does not, and people can feel which one they are standing in.

THE PATTERN

Rules, leadership, pacing, access, and expectations can all stay unchanged while who is visible changes. Trust depends on what the space does after the invitation.

THE REDUCTION

Inclusion gets reduced to visibility. The message changes while the defaults governing the space stay intact.

IN PRACTICE

Audit one concrete layer of the space: leadership, orientation, access, language, pacing, or permission. Change the default before asking excluded participants to adapt to it.

FOR YOUR ROOM

Who has to translate themselves before they can use what you offer?

FIVE

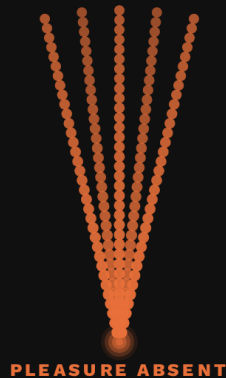
PLEASURE IS NOT A REWARD

SECTION 05 · PLEASURE IS NOT A REWARD

Available range.

Same body, same pressure. What changes is how many responses are reachable.

Fewer reachable responses



More reachable responses



When pleasure is absent, regulation becomes effortful. When it is present, the body has more options. Not a reward. A condition that supports capacity.

Pleasure is being treated as more than a reward at the end of effort. Under vigilance, fatigue, and chronic pressure, a body reaches past relief toward whatever restores flexibility, curiosity, and range. Ease, sensation, and subtle enjoyment are part of how the nervous system remembers it can move, adapt, and stay open without collapsing or bracing.

When pleasure is absent, regulation becomes effortful. Everything requires discipline, control, or override. When it is present, the body has more options. It can soften without losing awareness. It can stay in contact without becoming overwhelmed. That may be useful. It is not the only reason pleasure belongs in the practice.

POSSIBILITY AND REALITY

Joy does not trivialize reality. It keeps the harsh truth from becoming the only thing a person can feel.¹⁵ Without access to softness, many people move through their lives in states of tension that narrow perception, limit choice, and reduce tolerance for complexity. Pleasure interrupts that contraction.

It allows the body to experience safety without withdrawal. It allows presence without force.¹⁶ This matters especially when stress is ongoing rather than temporary. In those conditions, pleasure is a route to relief that does not require leaving.

Ease is not escape.

Sometimes pleasure is as ordinary as choosing the version of a movement that feels good and stopping before it becomes impressive. Nothing improves on paper. No milestone is reached. Enjoyment does not have to submit a résumé before it is allowed into the practice.

There is a trap here, including in this report. The moment you defend pleasure by listing everything it improves, you make pleasure earn its place through usefulness again. Pleasure may support regulation, range, or connection. It also has to be allowed to matter when it produces nothing it can defend.

WHO GETS TO REST

Rest does more than help someone recover from productivity. It is a stabilizing condition for perception, decision-making, and connection. Slowness functions as information gathering rather than avoidance.

Rest and pleasure have never been distributed evenly. The demand that a body produce something before it has earned ease carries a specific history in this country, and that history was never race-neutral. ● An account of pleasure that skips it is describing somebody else's life.

Curated quiet, sold by the month, asks the people it was taken from to buy it back. ●

Caution runs the other way too. Rest under these conditions stays constrained. It needs time, safety, and a body not currently in danger, and none of those are evenly distributed either. ● Pleasure as a practice should not become one more standard someone can fail.

Softness is not the absence of rigor. Repeated experiences of ease can make softness feel less risky over time.

This includes movement that emphasizes sensation over shape, creativity without outcome, and rest without justification.

THE PATTERN

Ease gives the body more options. Without it, everything runs on discipline. Access to both has never been evenly distributed.

THE REDUCTION

Pleasure gets justified through productivity: recover so you can work, rest so you can perform, enjoy yourself because it produces a measurable benefit. Pleasure that has to earn its way in has not been let in.

IN PRACTICE

Design at least one part of the experience where enjoyment, softness, or rest requires no achievement, explanation, or measured outcome.

FOR YOUR ROOM

Where can someone enjoy something that leads to no outcome you measure?



SIX

SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT BYPASS



What happens to spirituality when life becomes difficult? Does it support decision-making, relationships, responsibility, and clarity, or does it create distance from reality?

Spiritual language can sound elevated while leaving daily life untouched. A practice becomes bypass when it helps someone avoid a conflict, responsibility, grief, or material condition that still needs attention.¹⁷

GROUNDING MEANS CONTACT

Grounding means knowing where you are while you are in what you feel.

You might notice your feet on the floor, the chair underneath you, what you can see and hear, the temperature of the room, or the pace of your breath. The point is to stay oriented enough to know what is happening and choose what comes next. Calm is optional.

You are in the middle of a difficult conversation. Your feet are still on the floor. You notice you are holding your breath. You hear yourself getting louder. You choose whether to continue, pause, or leave. The feeling is still there. So is your ability to respond.

You can be grounded and still be angry, frightened, energized, grieving, or uncomfortable. Relaxation is a different thing. Grounding is contact with the present while the feeling is happening.

In yoga or somatic practice, that may mean noticing weight, gravity, breath, the floor, and the places where the body is supported.

Distance is not automatically avoidance. Retreat, ritual, prayer, imagination, silence, and transcendence can interrupt ordinary life in ways that are meaningful because they create distance from it. The harder question is what happens when someone returns. Does the distance make contact possible again, or does it become a place to stay so that something difficult never has to be faced?

Grounding is the measure.

WHAT STILL HELPS

The question is whether a spiritual practice brings someone into closer contact with their life or helps them move away from it. Does it sharpen accountability or blur it? A practice worth keeping returns you able to meet what is actually real.

Ritual, philosophy, and contemplative practice still matter when they shape perception and behavior over time, not only identity.

In yoga philosophy this means the ethical teachings as much as the techniques. Intention, presence, and discernment matter most when they become lived practices rather than abstract ideals.

When spirituality repeatedly reduces contact with reality, it starts to function more like avoidance than wisdom. Whether it changes how someone moves through the world is the test.¹⁸

Does it support honesty in relationships.

Does it increase responsibility rather than bypass it.

Does it make reality more workable.

If a practice changes how someone responds, relates, or takes responsibility, it is doing more than decorating an identity.¹⁹

THE PATTERN

Spiritual practice can support orientation, meaning, accountability, and ethical action. It can also create distance from what still needs to be faced.

THE REDUCTION

Spirituality gets reduced either to a performance of transcendence or to a technique for feeling better. In both cases, contact with consequence, relationship, and responsibility disappears.

IN PRACTICE

Build a return to reality into the practice. After reflection, ritual, meditation, or retreat, ask what becomes more possible to notice, say, repair, decide, or do.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What does someone do differently after leaving?

SEVEN

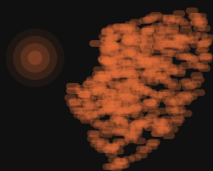
DIGITAL PRACTICE AND WHAT REMAINS

SECTION 07 · DIGITAL PRACTICE

Volume is not the same as depth.

Both sides are receiving. Only one of them is absorbing.

MANY INPUTS



Arriving faster than it can be integrated

FEWER INPUTS



Each one lands. Repetition, return, depth over time

The emphasis is moving away from exposure and toward relationship. Fewer voices, but more consistent ones. Fewer practices, but more repetition.

The volume of wellness content has exceeded its usefulness. ● Constant input does not create integration. It produces fragmentation, comparison, overstimulation, and the illusion of understanding without lived application. Saving, watching, and understanding more does not mean practicing more.

A phone can hold a hundred saved meditations and still not tell you which one you have practiced enough times to remember without the phone. The difference between a library of practices and a practice is repetition.

Access to information is not depth. A feed can move attention to the next idea before the last one has had time to become practice.

The harder part is deciding what deserves a return. A handful of voices held over years does what a feed cannot. Stay with something long enough to test it in your life before replacing it with the next thing.

A screen can make teaching, community, information, and participation available across distance, disability, schedule, geography, cost, or privacy. The problem begins when access gets confused with integration. Having the practice within reach is not the same as having practiced it.

THE SHIFT, IN FOUR MOVEMENTS

One. Endless input creates fragmentation faster than understanding. Attention moves on before an idea has time to be used, tested, or integrated.²⁰

Two. People are choosing fewer voices they trust instead of trying to keep up with everything. ●

Three. Series, cohorts, and repeated classes make return easier. Repetition gives a practice time to deepen.²¹

Four. Not everything useful needs to be tracked. Some practices become durable because they are repeated, even when nothing about them appears in a record.

Digital wellness is becoming less performative and more functional.²²

WHAT REMAINS

You keep less than you save.

A practice becomes yours through return, not perfection. You miss a day, come back. You get bored, come back. You forget why you started, come back. Nobody can sell you that, which is why nobody tries.

You can forget what a technique is called and still notice that your shoulders drop sooner when you enter a familiar room. Repetition leaves traces that are easier to feel than to document.

You can be very well informed and completely unpracticed.

What did your hands do today? What did your spine do?

Our attention is harvested and sold back to us as content. Your nervous system is keeping its own record the whole time, and that record is short.

Close the app and put your feet on the floor. Start where you left off.

THE PATTERN

Access to more information does not become deeper practice. Repetition with fewer sources builds what volume cannot.

THE REDUCTION

Access gets mistaken for integration. Saving, tracking, and consuming are treated as evidence that practice has happened.

IN PRACTICE

Choose fewer practices and build return into the format. Design for repetition before adding more content or more tracking.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What happens here that nothing records?



INSTITUTIONAL APPLICATION

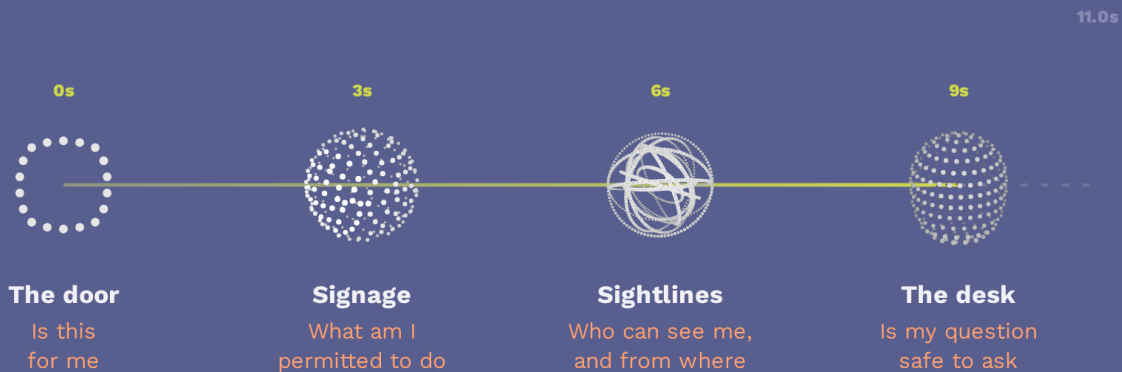
PUBLIC SPACE IS PART OF THE PRACTICE

FOR LIBRARY WORKERS

Before anyone speaks.

Everything a patron reads before anyone speaks to them.

None of this is in your catalog. All of it is in your service model.



A space that has not visibly decided who it is for will be read as a space that has decided. And the reading will not be generous.

For library workers.

Your library says it serves everyone. Your Black queer patrons know what that promise costs them to navigate: whether they are being watched, whether privacy is possible, whether they were even expected here.³² Designing for everyone hides the fact that every space has defaults. When exclusion gets considered one identity at a time, the people the room is hardest on disappear from the design.³³

Everyone is still a promise worth defending. The question is what the word asks the institution to do. Does everyone become a reason to examine the defaults of the building, or an excuse to pretend there are no defaults?

WHO ARE YOU DESIGNING FOR

Being included in a message and being considered in a design are different things. Libraries live inside that difference more than almost any institution, because the library is one of the few remaining public spaces that does not charge admission. That makes it a default destination for people with nowhere else to be. It does not automatically make it a place they were designed for.

The places people used to gather without paying are being rebuilt as products. Membership clubs, listening rooms, curated quiet sold by the month. ● What happened on a stoop or in a barbershop now carries a price, and the free version drops out of the story once the branded one arrives.

Belonging gets confused with paid access. Continuity already exists in unbranded, noncommercial places; packaging it is not the same as creating it.

A library is one of the last rooms where a person can stay all afternoon without buying anything. That is rare enough now to be worth defending. It is also not the same as being designed for. Free admission and good design are separate achievements, and a building can have the first without the second.

Who can stay all afternoon without explaining why they are there?

A collection can be inclusive while the room is not. A program can be well-intentioned while the pacing, the tone, and the visible leadership all communicate who was expected.

Ask it plainly. Who was this branch built for. Not who uses it. Who was it built for.



FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON, LIBRARY READING ROOM, TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, CA. 1902. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION; NO KNOWN RESTRICTIONS. COMMISSIONED TO PROVE AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL TO WHITE VIEWERS AT THE 1900 PARIS EXPOSITION. A ROOM BUILT FOR BLACK READERS, PHOTOGRAPHED TO BE LOOKED AT BY SOMEONE ELSE. BOTH FACTS ARE IN THE FRAME.

The people in the room are patrons and subjects of representation at the same time. An institution can serve someone while performing an idea of service for somebody looking in.

WHAT DOES YOUR BUILDING COMMUNICATE BEFORE ANYONE SPEAKS

People read rooms before they commit to them. ● Your patrons do it before they reach a desk, before anyone greets them.

What does the signage assume. Where are the sightlines, and who is visible to whom.²⁸ Which spaces require asking permission. Which do not. Who is at the desk, and what does that tell someone about whether their question is going to be safe to ask.

None of this is in your catalog. All of it is in your service model.²⁸

SURVEILLED, NOT SERVED

Surveillance of Black life is a long-standing norm rather than an aberration, running from lantern laws through biometrics.³⁶ Securitization inside libraries lands first on patrons of color, patrons experiencing homelessness, and patrons with mental-health needs.²⁹ A patron who is watched here was watched at the school, the clinic, the housing agency, and by police before they walked in. The library is a public institution, and it inherits that history whether or not it participated in it.

Neutrality is not the safe position. Intent does not change what a patron can or cannot do, and the unequal effect is what they have to navigate.³⁴ A space that has not visibly decided who it is for will be read as a space that has decided, and the reading will not be generous. Inclusion language makes an institution sound self-aware without changing those defaults.³⁵

In a library, stewardship can look almost boring: the same faces, the same hours, the same answer to the same question. Predictability is a form of care that library systems are highly skilled at delivering when they choose to.



CHEMISTRY LABORATORY AND MECHANICAL DRAWING CLASS, TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, CA. 1902. FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION; NO KNOWN RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLICATION.

THE PART ABOUT YOU

You absorb what your patrons carry. Housing instability, grief, and mental health crises move through your building every shift,²³ and incident reports ran 29% higher in 2023 than the year before.³¹ It was never stated as part of your job and you just kept going. Did you consider what your body and mind are doing under that prolonged pressure?

The body is responding accurately to its environment, even when that response is inconvenient. Your fatigue is data about a workload nobody counted.²⁴

What keeps this labor invisible is vocational awe. It holds that library work is inherently good and therefore beyond critique, which turns admitting the job is breaking you into a character flaw instead of an honest report.³⁰

Library work and wellness work are not equivalent. They overlap at one point: both encounter people in distress and are expected to respond without being clinicians.²⁵ The two fields do not always mean the same thing by crisis.²⁶ The scholarship on that overlap exists and has for years.²⁷ Staffing, training, workload, and pay have not followed it.

Care gets discovered late. It gets called new the moment somebody can put a subscription on it, and the people who were already doing it uncompensated drop out of the story. ● Your building runs on that arrangement right now. The institutional question is whether to count, resource, and pay for care the organization already depends on.

THE PATTERN

Library workers absorb what their patrons carry, and no job description accounts for it. The building communicates who it was built for before anyone speaks.

THE REDUCTION

The institution counts the visible service and misses the conditions holding it together. Inclusion becomes a statement, and the labor holding the building together stays out of staffing, training, and pay.

IN PRACTICE

Choose one institutional default and one uncounted form of labor. Change the policy, staffing, training, resource, or physical design that keeps each one in place.

FOR YOUR ROOM

What does this institution expect people to absorb without acknowledging, resourcing, or changing it?



CLASSROOM LESSON, CA. 1902. FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION; NO KNOWN RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLICATION.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE WORK

Not all reductions look alike. A sleep score is not a library security policy, a one-time class is not an inaccessible building, and a meditation app is not an under-resourced public worker. They should not collapse into one problem.

What each one tracks is the same. Context leaves the metric, relationship leaves the transaction, history leaves the design, labor leaves the service, and a participant is left holding a problem whose causes extend beyond them.

Putting context back does not mean a practice has to solve everything around it. Usually it cannot. A yoga class cannot change a labor policy. A creative workshop cannot create affordable housing. A grounding technique cannot end racism, grief, surveillance, or economic instability. Admitting those limits does not make the practice useless. It makes the claim smaller and the responsibility clearer. What is the practice asking the person to carry, and what should the design be carrying instead?

What remains is still substantial. A space can give someone more choice, a facilitator can make participation less punishing, an institution can examine a default instead of defending it, and a group can distribute responsibility instead of building itself around one charismatic person. Someone can leave with a practice they can use without needing to buy another thing.

That is where I locate the work now: not in perfecting people for the conditions around them, but in designing conditions that ask less unnecessary adaptation from the people inside them.

Admitting the limit is the hardest thing to sell. A practice that admits its limit promises less than one offering a whole life. It is also the only kind worth building, because a promise that size is the only one you can keep.

PURPOSE BEFORE MARKET

What does it mean to criticize the packaging of care while being paid to teach, design, and facilitate it?

The same scrutiny has to apply to my own work. I teach, facilitate, design programs, and consult with institutions for pay. Compensation for skilled labor does not confer ownership of the care, relationships, traditions, or community practices that make the work possible.

People should be paid for teaching, preparation, facilitation, design, administration, and the responsibility they carry. Leaving that labor unpaid reproduces the same reduction: care becomes essential while the people providing it disappear from the ledger.

The opposite of commodifying care is not expecting care for free. Refusing exploitation means refusing false ownership and paying for labor.

The distinction is between *resourcing* care and *enclosing* it. Resourcing care means paying for labor, expertise, time, materials, access, coordination, and sustained attention. Enclosing care means taking something people already know how to do together, branding it as proprietary, restricting access to it, or selling the feeling of belonging as though the provider created it.

A paid offering should be clear about what is actually being sold. A workshop sells skilled facilitation, a consultation sells analysis and design work, a training sells curriculum, preparation, and instruction. None of those transactions give the provider ownership of community, healing, culture, belonging, or what changes in the person who came.

A practice should say what it can do, what it cannot do, what participation costs, what people retain after they leave, and whether the institution is addressing the conditions that made the intervention necessary.

Marketability is not ethical authority. ●

CONTINUE THE WORK

The report is one entry point. The work continues through research, public programs, and partnerships with institutions.

THE PUBLICATION

Emergent Practices in Wellness Design

A field report about what changes when wellness looks beyond individual behavior and begins paying attention to the environments, relationships, rules, and institutions shaping everyday life.

Read the full report, sources, and expanded materials online.

Read the report →

emergentpractices.charlesnarles.com



THE RESEARCH

Charles Mindful Wellness Research Program



A home for ongoing experiments in how people learn, gather, create, relate, and participate.

Through Mindful Creative Labs and Experiments in Being Together, the research changes conditions and studies what becomes visible when familiar rules no longer operate as expected.

Explore the research →

research.charlesnarles.com



INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Bring the work into your organization

Charles Mindful Wellness works with libraries, schools, museums, hospitals, nonprofits, and other public-serving organizations.

That can take the form of facilitation, curriculum design, staff learning, program development, or consulting, with attention to what an institution currently asks people to navigate, and what could be designed differently.

Work together →

institutions.charlesnarles.com



ABOUT CHARLES MINDFUL WELLNESS

Charles Mindful Wellness is the practice of Charles Muhammad, a teacher, facilitator, curriculum designer, and researcher working across embodied practice, participatory learning, community gathering, and institutional design.

The work moves between studios, classrooms, public institutions, digital spaces, and community settings. Across those contexts, the concern remains consistent: how the conditions surrounding participation shape what people are able to notice, choose, practice, and carry with them afterward.

Charles has taught movement, meditation, philosophy, and embodied practice since 2012 and develops curricula, programs, workshops, research environments, and public experiences in Washington, DC and beyond.

charlesnarles.com · research.charlesnarles.com



SOURCES

Full citations, source notes, and documentation for the numbered claims in this report are available at

emergentpractices.charlesnarles.com/sources



Source notes identify where evidence is contested and distinguish published research from professional observation.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

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Cover and interior photography from the Charles Mindful Wellness archive. People pictured appear with their consent.

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Frances Benjamin Johnston, Tuskegee Institute series, ca. 1902: *Interior view of library reading room; Chemistry laboratory; Mechanical drawing class; Classroom lesson*. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. No known restrictions on publication.

RESEARCH DOCUMENTATION

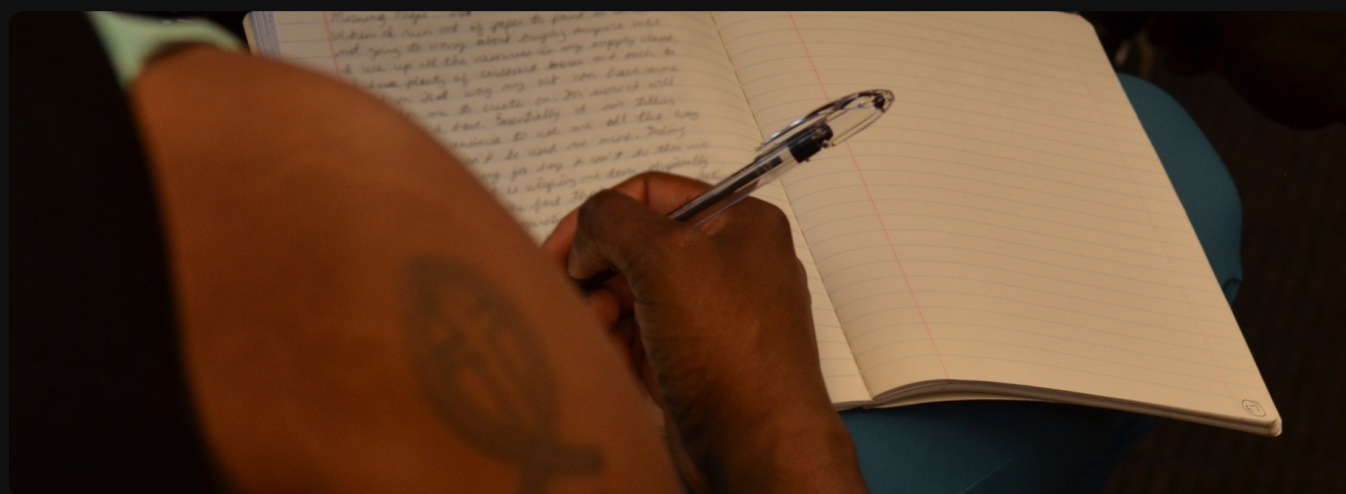
Full citations and source notes: emergentpractices.charlesnarles.com/sources

EDITION

Emergent Practices in Wellness Design: 2026 Wellness Report. First edition, 2026.

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Wellness has become very good at teaching people how to manage themselves.

Track the habit. Regulate the nervous system. Build resilience. Find calm. Belong.

But what happens when the body is responding reasonably to conditions no breathing exercise, sleep score, meditation app, or morning routine can resolve?

Emergent Practices in Wellness Design examines what becomes possible when wellness stops treating the individual as the entire site of the problem. Drawing from published research and more than a decade of teaching, facilitation, program design, and work inside community and public spaces, Charles Muhammad traces seven shifts already reshaping the field: nervous-system literacy, mental health as a starting condition, relationship and return, inclusion beyond representation, pleasure and rest without justification, spirituality grounded in reality, and digital practice built around repetition rather than endless consumption.

The inquiry eventually moves beyond wellness itself, into the institutions and environments where people actually live their lives.

At the center is a deceptively simple design question:

What are we asking people to carry that the practice, the room, or the institution should be carrying instead?

This is a field report about care, context, power, participation, and the conditions we design around one another.