A Guide to Solitude

To What Extent can Design Change our Current Perspective of 'Isolation' and Regard it as a Benefit to Mental Health?

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01.

The world of men has forgotten
Th joys of silence,
the peace of solitude,
which is necessary, to some extent,
for the fullnes of human living.
Man cannot be happy for long
unless he is in contact with the
springs of spiritual life
which are hidden in the depths
of his own soul.
If man is exiled constantly
from his own home, locked out
of his spiritual solitude,
he ceases to be a true person.

-Thomas Merton

Merton, T. (1958). Thoughts in Solitude. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Introduction

It can be assumed that society's concept of 'Isolation' has been irreversibly altered due to recent events. A state of imposed isolation has had negative impacts on mental health due to the fear and loneliness it permits (Sher 2020). Before this 'imposed isolation', design seemed to encourage as much interaction and socialisation as possible. This indicates that the value placed on connection overrides the value of solitude. Despite this, there is a rich history in many social groups and individuals, particularly in the religious sector and creative industries, that sought solitude and saw it as necessary for a balanced and healthy mental state. It is not a new concept that one can experience loneliness when surrounded by people, yet one can be physically isolated and feel entirely at peace. The peace that solitude offers, compared to the harsh realities of isolation, and its relation to spatial design is the topic of this research. This research defines solitude and contrasts it with social isolation and loneliness. Theologian and Lecturer Paul Tillich describes this contrast aptly: "loneliness expresses the pain of being alone, and solitude expresses the glory of being alone" (Tillich 1963).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines solitude as "The state of being or living alone; loneliness; seclusion; solitariness (of persons)" (Simpson and Weiner 1991). The Collins English dictionary defines it as "the state of being alone, especially when this is peaceful and pleasant" (O'Neill and Summers 2016). The word is almost always expounded in a twofold way: mental state and spatial place. The correlation between these two subjects has informed this research.

This literature review seeks to encourage a change in the current outlook on 'isolation' and inform how spatial design can achieve this. There has been much investigation into the history of solitude's benefits with specific relation to spiritual silence in Christian religion and how space and place aided this. There has also been study into the thought processes and societal shifts influencing Modernist and current architecture, highlighting how urbanism, socialization, and technology have affected the mental state and influenced design principles and processes.

A review on how imposed isolation affects mental health, and philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas on "space, knowledge, and power" in architecture, have also been analysed (Highmore 2009). The importance of choosing isolation rather than it being imposed is investigated. Data concerning the natural healing properties of isolation in green space have also been reviewed alongside specific examples of design that are instrumental in encouraging a mentally calm state.

This research aims to discuss how design can increase mental well-being in an isolated setting. We have been alerted to an increase in anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies resulting from the abolition of our acclimatized, comfortable setting (Chi, Becker et al. 2020). It is important that future design endeavors to shift the power balance from the dread of 'imposed' isolation to the glorious freedom of solitary space.

Historic Influences & The Current Context

Trappist monk Thomas Merton considered solitude necessary for everyone to have a balanced life, regardless of religion or geographical location (Teahan 1982). In his book "Thoughts in Solitude," he describes that one reaches the state of solace, not when their physical surroundings reflect this, but rather by internal acceptance and supernatural revelation (Merton 1958). This research looks specifically at Christian monks, however, many other beliefs hold fast to the benefits of aloneness (Long and Averill 2003). The motivation for Christians seeking solitude comes from the Bible; in the Gospel of Luke, it states, "But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray" (Nelson 1995). Another Bible passage entitles the place Jesus would go as "a solitary place" (Nelson 1982). Historically monks followed this pattern in order to find deep communion and rest with God. Merton viewed his very identification as being hidden in his creator (God), whom he slipped away to sojourn with (Merton 1958). John F Teahan described the life of a religious sojourner as one who does not merely employ quiet and retreat in his immediate surroundings but seeks this "climate" as a place of freedom and communion with God (Teahan 1982). This presents an exciting contrast; in seeking recluse from others, monks found is a form of interaction. In seeking aloneness, monks found a greater understanding of self and a deeper, more satisfying communion with God.

Conclusions drawn from a history of spiritual solitude inform, that space, although practical and very much needed, is just a vessel for the soul to find peace in isolation. Therefore, spatial design must form a means to reaching this haven of solitude. The 'Designing Solitude' section of this essay refers to a modern type of such design in the spiritual retreat 'Essence' (Arnold louise n.d). Monks always had a motive and drive-in seeking isolation; to find inner peace and peace with God. These concepts of old can perhaps be reinvented today in order to impact well-being and mental health.

There has been an increase in connection and socialisation through design in the recent past. Urbanism saw the joining of rural villages and independent towns to form comprehensive cities (Mark 2014). A study of Le Corbusier's work on utopian dwelling has been described as confusing the conventional difference between public and private places (Rabaça 2016). Le Corbusier himself stated that urban design should be like a regiment tool – where outdoor space, work, social space, and the home are all in very close proximity, giving freedom to each member of society (Corbusier 1967). Interestingly, Le Corbusier considers urbanism as something that evokes freedom, peace, and solitude.

Jean-Baptiste Godin's 'Familistere 1859' was a multifaceted space consisting of a courtyard and housing wings, connected by a roof dome. Shops, laundry, play areas, and many other conveniences were found on-site. Godin imagined that each resident in a "restricted space" would hold each other to a moral standard due to their constant exposure, which would create peace, safety, and freedom (Lallement 2012).

The Architects' goals to create clean and safe spaces and relieve distress in the working class are honorable but do not include the social need for solitude (Lallement 2012). Philosopher Michel Foucault remarked that the constant visibility and inability for residents to do anything in private made the Architecture "oppressive" (Highmore 2009). The liberty and freedom expected were overrun by the fear such design imposed.
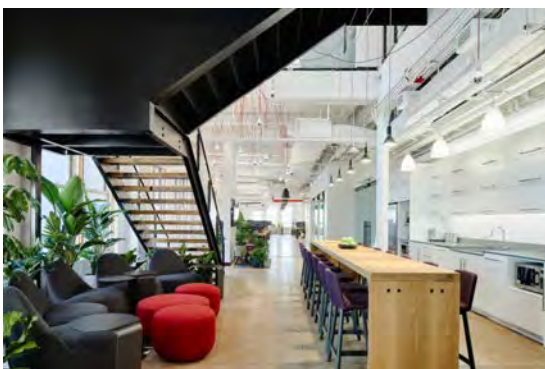

Familistere de Guise (Godin, 2015)
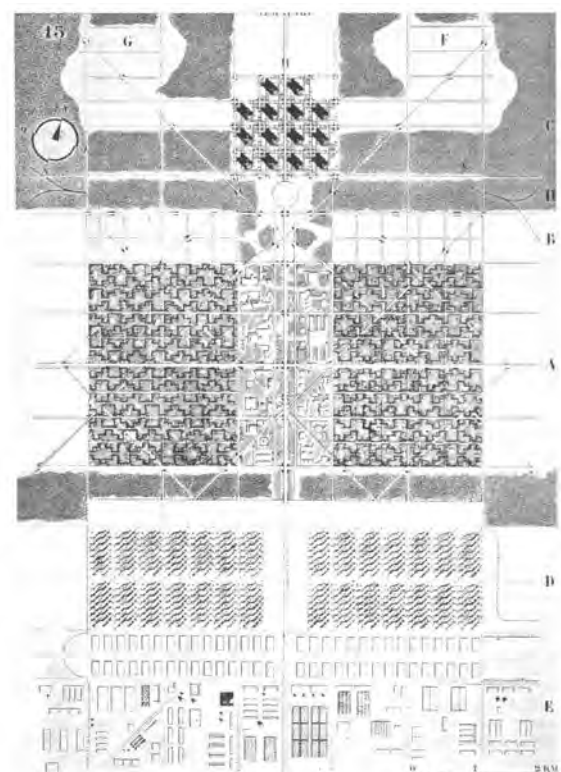
La Planimetria della ville radius (Kohlstedt, 2020)

Haven Life Communal Working Space (Thomson, 2019)

Haven Life Private Working Space (Thomson, 2019)

Haven Life Co-Working Office (Thomson, 2019)

Looking at modern design principles for commercial offices can give insight into whether solitude or social interaction are more beneficial in the workplace. Before the coronavirus pandemic, modern city design encouraged the use co-working spaces. Using such design allowed a company to provide an open plan building with conference suites, canteens, and private offices to be used by a client or business (Robelski, Keller et al. 2019). In a comparison study between the co-working office benefits and the home office, the former received positive mental health results. Workers could separate their personal life from work, increase social interaction, and maintain overall job satisfaction better in a co-working environment. However, some participants felt their work was more readily interrupted (26.6% neutral, 26.6% positive), and there was an intrusion to their privacy (28.1% neutral,17.2% positive) (Robelski, Keller et al. 2019). The participants benefitted from times of social interaction during the working day. The balance of solitary space and social space is, therefore, essential when designing workplaces that encourage balanced wellbeing and mental health.

With the afore mentioned principles of design infiltrating work and home life, it is also important to consider how the rise in use of technology via the internet and social media has impacted mental health. The University of Pittsburgh studied how social media affects young adults' mental health, specifically relating to depression (Lin, Sidani et al. 2016). Those who spent significant amounts of time on many different social media sites had significantly higher depressive tendencies.
Raymond Kethledge, the author of the book 'Lead yourself first,' spoke on integrating solitary times into a busy day. He claims that the benefits of retreating to natural, green space and leaving technology behind can produce freedom of thought and peace (Kethledge 2020). His work explains that our time is a most valuable and nonreturnable amenity, and when is it so full of constant access to information through the internet, time for "restoring the soul" is taken away (Kethledge 2017). The monk Thomas Merton described the realms of "unreality" as a disaster, and life is better cultivated by our unity with nature and the awareness of our immediate surroundings (Merton 1958).

When coworking spaces are deserted, public spaces entered with caution, and the home and outdoors becoming our permanent location, how does global mental health respond to imposed isolation?

Since lockdown began, there has been much analysis of how the restrictions have affected mental health. Central China experienced lockdown before the U.K. A report of the anxiety, stress, and sleep levels of individuals who isolated for 14 days at home was conducted (Xiao, Zhang et al. 2020). During isolation, anxiety and stress levels were increased resulting in poor sleep quality and it was concluded that the quantity of social interaction altered the results dramatically (Xiao, Zhang et al. 2020). Chinese college students were also noted to have increased rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depressive episodes during the pandemic (Chi, Becker et al. 2020).

A U.K. study by The Health Foundation on how uncertainty within employment impacted the mental health of 6000 adults showed that 46% of participants had poor mental health and 62% of people were more concerned about a family member and their mental health after the lockdown began (Finch and Eastaugh 2020). Furthermore, it was noted that young people, women, single individuals, and those who rented rather than homeowners experienced poorer mental health (Finch and Eastaugh 2020). The International Journal of Medicine studied the impact of coronavirus isolation on suicide rates by comparing such research. Their findings concluded that loneliness, distress, fear, depression, sleeplessness, and anxiety are all results of the pandemic, particularly in vulnerable members of society (Sher 2020). The imposed isolation has negatively impacted mental health due to a lack of social connection and loneliness, and a fear of the unknown, causing anxiety and stress.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on suicide rates (Sher, 2020)
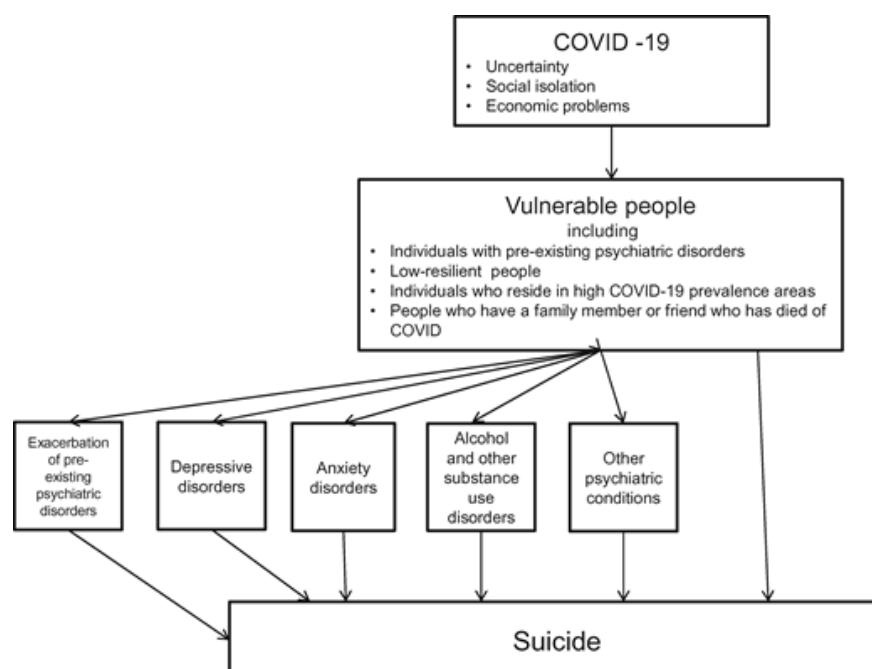
The Power of Choice

The ability to choose how we experience time alone holds an essential role when it comes to pursuing solitude. The contrast found in the effects on mental health when isolation is imposed or chosen are discussed below and arguments made for choosing solitude.
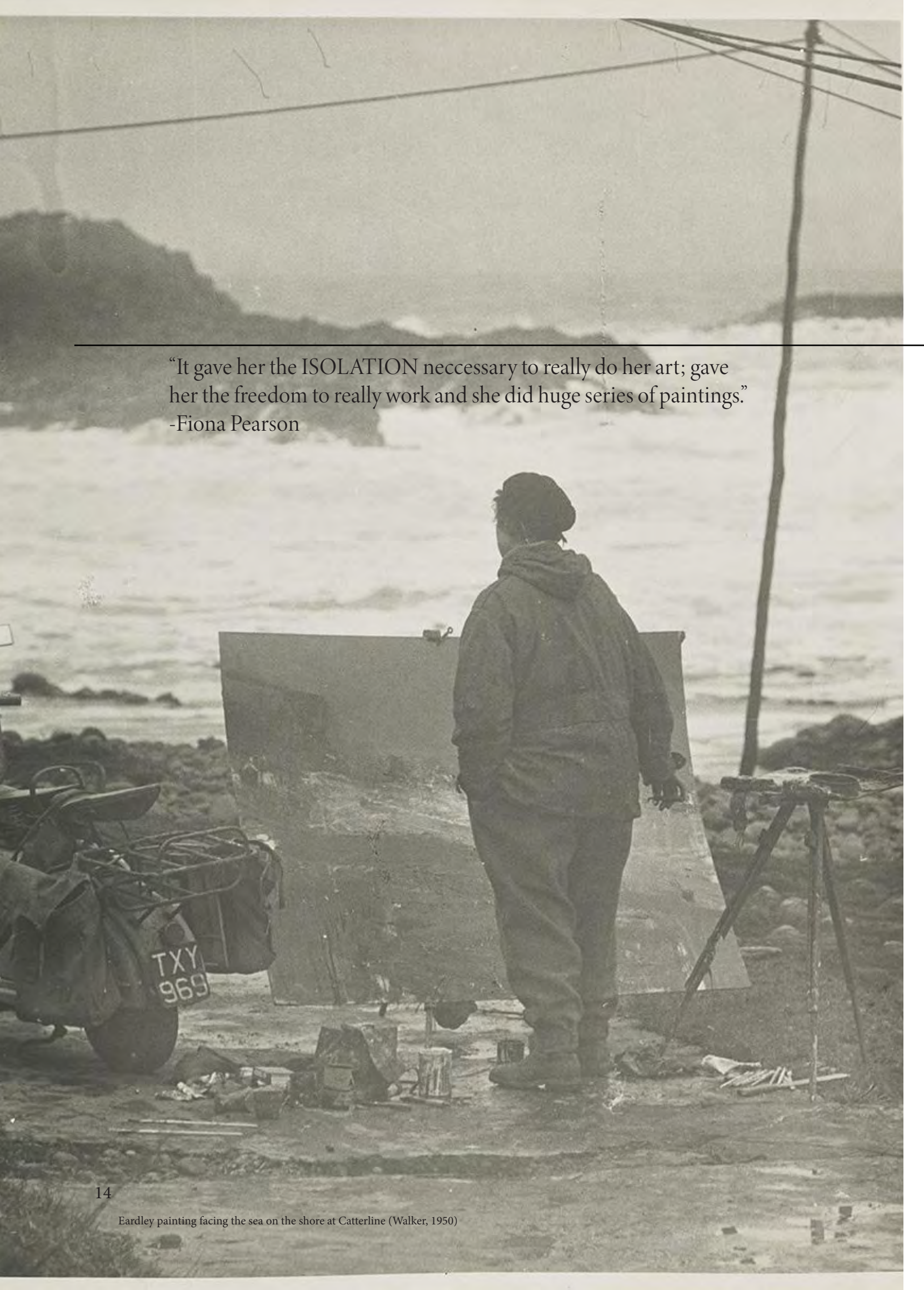
A study by the Institute for Biomedical Problems (IBMP) analysed six males' mental health during a 520-day astronaut stimulation to Mars. The participants were allowed no contact from home. They were confined to a 550m cubed setting and had no sense of dark and light or weather patterns. The results were surprising as there was no significant behavioral crisis on all the members' average scores relating to insomnia, depression, and psychological stress. Only one participant showed worrying signs of depression (Basner, Dinges et al. 2014). When compared to the pandemic research, the question begs itself, why does a seemingly more manageable state of lockdown affect mental health far worse than a strenuous astronaut stimulation?

The power of choice given to the participant in stimulated isolation, compared to an imposed one, may allow the mind freedom and peace, as there is control of the situation. A French philosopher named Michel Foucault had an interesting viewpoint on this. What informed Foucault's theory was what happened historically when the plague hit a French town (Elden 1999). All town dwellers had to isolate at home; towns were divided into sectors; surveillance was used to control; inspections were enforced; and those who contracted the plague were restricted to an out of town hospital (Foucault 1977). The control of the disease itself, and those enforcing the restrictions, took away the people's liberty and made life a nightmare.

Foucault noted the similar power found in the Panopticon prison by Jeremy Bentham which consisted of a central tower that let correctional officers survey cells containing prisoners (Bentham 1843) (Sargiacomo 2009). The prisoners could not see whether the guards were looking at them due to lighting but were aware they could be being watched at any time. The constant surveillance conformed them to the "automatic function" of discipline. The prisoner's ability to do as they pleased in peace was completely removed, and their adherence to prison law was governed more by themselves than any brutal force (Foucault 1977). Architecture, therefore, can conform, confine, and imprison. The visibility of the prison, as with the Familistere, provoked fear and a constant feeling of invasion of privacy (Lallement 2012). The power of choice, completely removed, results in a deterioration of mental health. This is also true of the present pandemic. Designers can impact the mind by imposing fear or allowing freedom of movement and privacy. When designing spaces that benefit mental health, care must be taken to make the user experience free, allow for moments of aloneness and choice.
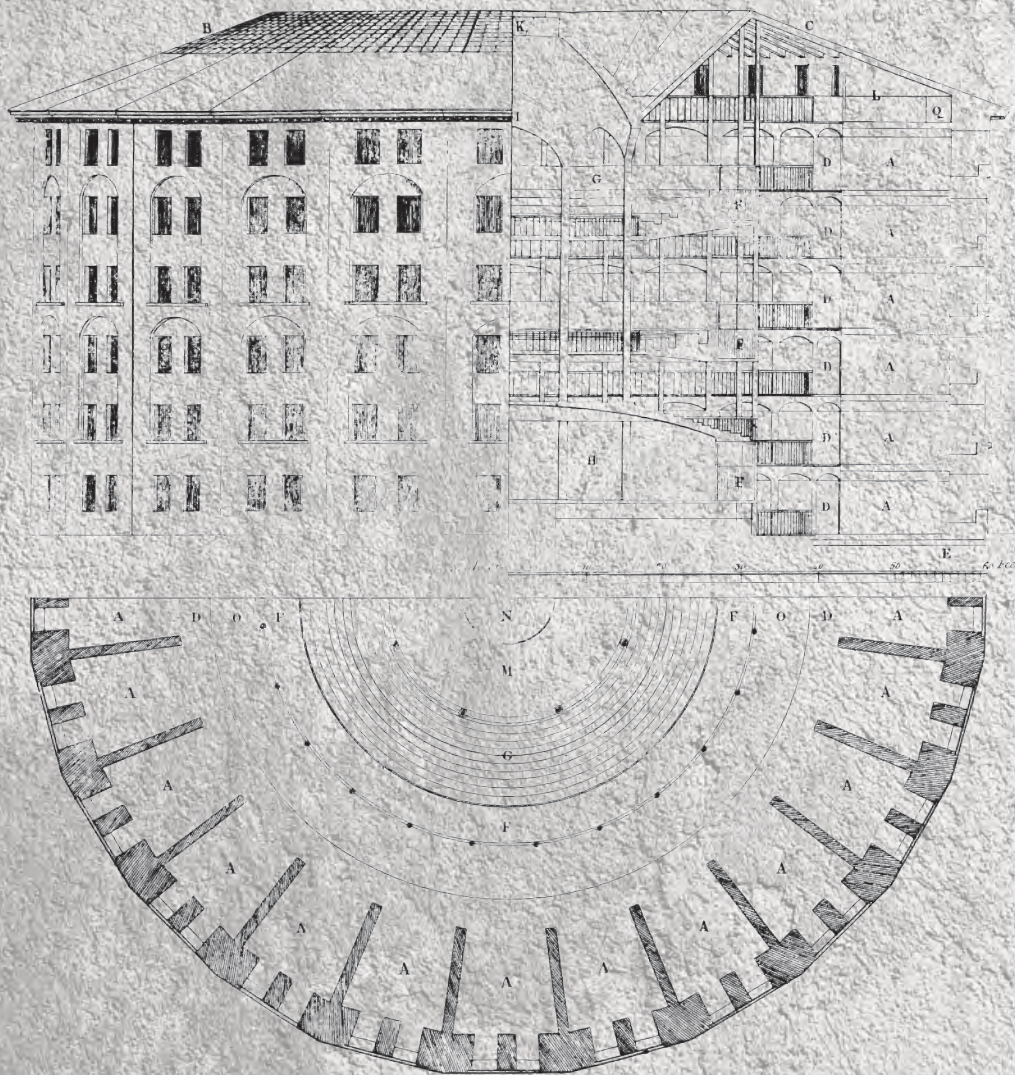
Easily seen are the similarities between the effects a plague on society and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic isolation. Liberty, freedom, and peace of mind are forcibly taken when we are restricted and 'controlled'. We feel 'open for inspection' and conformed by fear (Foucault 1977).

Elevation, Section and Plan of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Prison (Reveley, 1791)

"It gave her the ISOLATION neccessary to really do her art; gave her the freedom to really work and she did huge series of paintings."
-Fiona Pearson

Eardley painting facing the sea on the shore at Catterline (Walker, 1950)

Freedom to choose how we experience solitude then is essential in our pursuit of solace and retreat. It is important to note that many consider social interaction in the most critical area of life for benefitting mental health (Argyle 1987). Particularly at times of ill health or disease, sympathetic relationships can counteract the obstructive mental health this brings (MacRae 2011). In 'Individual Differences in Preference for Solitude' after multiple tests, authors conclude that those who seek alone time enjoy the benefits of recuperation and solace between social events (Burger 1995). This indicates the balance of social isolation with the solitude that is required.

Those who choose isolation often retreat to green space and the natural world. Joan Eardley, a twentieth-century Scottish Avant-Garde painter, suffered from depression. She frequented the lonely Scottish coastline of Catterline and immersed herself in. her natural surroundings (Eardley n.d). Eardley often painted in storms at the beach to experience her work in a new way. Isolation was described as her 'sanctuary' – the place she felt her creativity fully expressed (Scotland 2016). The advantage of the natural environment for mental health and well-being gives immediate gratification and relief to individuals during highly stressful times and makes a difference in the long run (Exeter 2014). Those who frequent and live in greener areas are more satisfied, develop less stress, and experience overall well-being at a more satisfactory level (Kabisch, Korn et al. 2017). Rachel and Stephen Kaplan theorized that our concentration skills are superior in green spaces as the tranquil simplicity and beauty found in nature are more compatible and easily comprehensible than bustling urban settings (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989).

House of Text Private Rooms (Smirnova, n.d.)

Designing Solitude

In a talk on 'Designing for Solitude,' Ben Fullerton recounted the essay's invention by Michel de Montaigne (Fullerton 2010). Montaigne, A French aristocrat and politician, secluded himself in his library after quitting his role in parliament and during his time of solitude invented short from writing or 'essays' as we know them today (Ophir 1991). Fullerton encourages the use of alone time, particularly the personal removal from technology, to boost creative energy. He ponders how we can "recreate Montaigne's library" our own lives to think introspectively and create innovatively (Fullerton 2010). Some designers have attempted to answer this question.

Anastassia Smirnova remarked that current and past design, instead of encouraging encounters with self, usually seek to remove these experiences and encourage connection (Smirnova 2020). Smirnova considers that our constant state of connection leaves us no time or room for education on how productivity can be achieved privately and purely alone. This dependence on others encourages loneliness when they are removed and dependence on social engagement for creative productivity (Smirnova 2020). Smirnova designed a space for the Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, seen in figure 5, that, rather than encouraging as much footfall as possible, conceptualizes solitude and the individual use of time throughout the space (Smirnova 2020). The public space allows for times of concentration and creative expression like Montaigne's library, but is situated in the public domain.

Original Napping Pillow - Travel (Ostrichpillow, n.d.)

Original Napping Pillow - Work (Ostrichpillow, n.d.)

Other design categories in the creative industries impact space in an interesting way. These result in beneficial moments of solitude in a busy urban setting. Some product design adapts and changes the user's spatial experience, bringing it under the umbrella of spatial design. Sometimes a small, simple design intervention can change how space is perceived and change its use. The following examples display the change from public to private, work to rest, and social to solace.

Brand Ostrichpillow places importance on a time of aloneness and self-care each day, and their products enhance and provide this experience. The 'original napping pillow' offers a moment of solitary comfort and repose, free of light and distraction (Ostrichpillow n.d). The design removes the user from any current stressful situation and gives reprieve for a quiet moment. A similar product, the nutshell, is designed to reduce stress and encourage solace during a busy day, particularly relating to social interaction (Dezeen 2014).
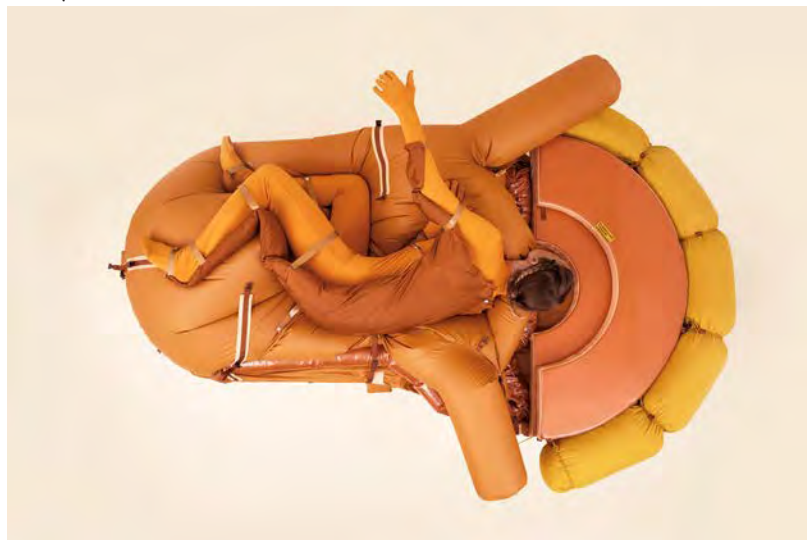

The Nutshell helps reclaim "Social Solitude" (Magee,2014)

The Nutshell (Magee,2014)

Solitary Survival Raft (McRae, 2020)

Solitary Survival Raft (McRae, 2020)

Looking into modern speculative design can give greater insight into how design expresses emotion and challenges viewpoints and impacts the future of design.

A design by Lucy McRae named 'Solitary Survival Raft' was developed during the coronavirus pandemic to convey and inspect themes of 'fear and hope.'(Fairs 2020). Lucy describes her designs as: "prototypes to test the body when confined, or deprived of physical contact."(Fairs 2020). The design's visual impact attracts viewers, and immediate questions are raised concerning the design's inspiration are raised. The raft looks safe and protective, however, upon realizing the design is centered around breaking away from anxiety, the viewer is perplexed. The inflatable float and matching bodysuit explore the contrast of desire to be free within fear confinements. A bubble can be inflated around the user and various confined spaces allow the user to be covered and held (Fairs 2020). This design fulfils a spatial purpose and meets the needs of privacy and comfort required for solitude, while also bringing awareness to the struggle the imposition of fear gives. Solitary design must be further explored speculatively to highlight the need to remove fear from solace.
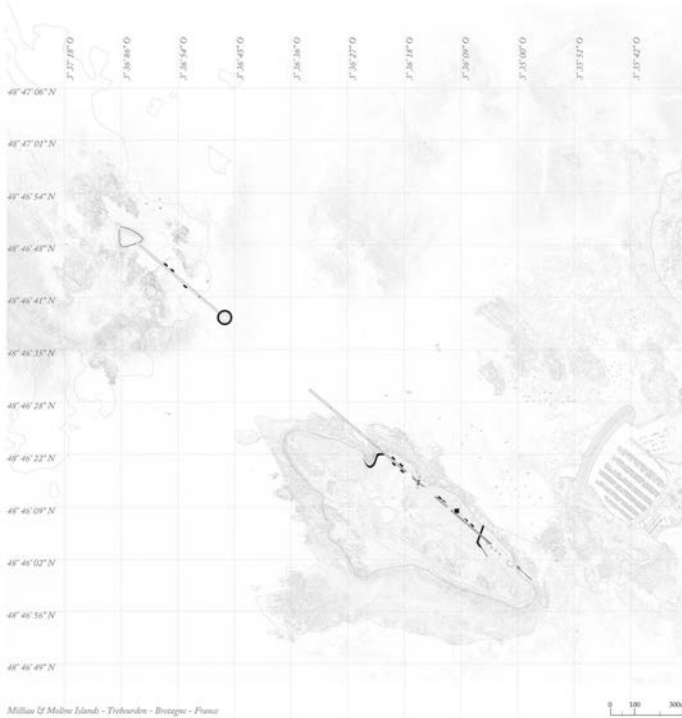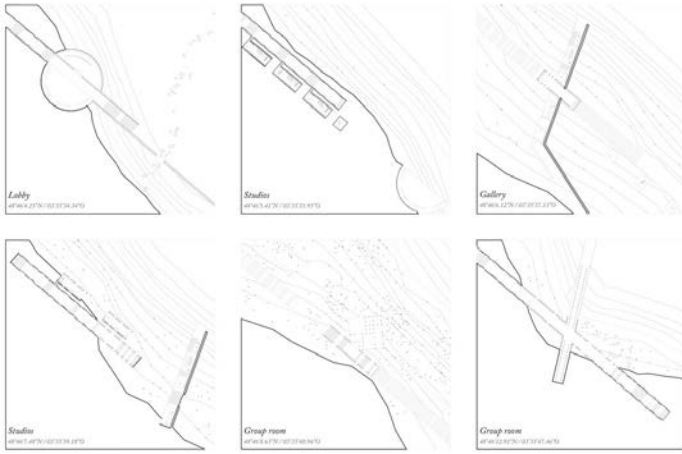
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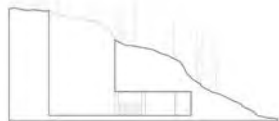
Experience Design

A project by Architect firm beta collective is an incredibly profound exploration of how isolation can create a sense of self and encourage artistic vision (Arnold louise n.d). A series of designed spaces along an island in Millau and Molene take the user on a self-reflective journey, and as they contemplate their place in the world, they begin to define who they are. Various spaces encourage creativity by allowing time and solitude of thought and space and integration in the surrounding nature.
The retreat allows one to enter into a more excellent knowledge
of who they are and thus inform their artwork (Arnold louise n.d).

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Essence, Arnold Louise + Huot-Marchand Coraline + Sessini Enzo + Vazeux Corentin (Beta-architecture.com, 2020)

Conclusion

This literature review has discussed current knowledge on the history and present context of isolation and solitude. A look at how monks retreated to a solitary and natural space to connect with their creator and the peace they found there has shown how necessary it is for society to seek introspective solitude from daily life again. The search for solace is relevant as the design world has been pursuing urbanism and socialisation, turning away from the purity of time alone. It is also very relevant as we have seen how difficult it is for society's mental health to cope with isolation.

The importance of social connection and the balance needed to achieve a settled and content state of wellbeing have been explored. Design that encourages time alone to recuperate and find self has displayed our desire for solitude in busy life. Spatial design particularly, plays a role in how we experience solitude. Further study on the subject must look more specifically into the power of choice when choosing solitude, as this seems to determine our mental reaction. In conclusion, for design to change our current perspective of isolation and view it as a benefit to mental health, our minds must make the conscious choice to seek solitude rather than fear isolation.

Isle of May birds eye view (James and Yeoman, 1992)

02.

"There are times when solitude is better than society, and silence is wiser that speech."

-Charles Spurgeon

After concluding the initial secondary research presented in the Literature Review, it was necessary to conduct Primary research to better understand the topic of solitude, isolation, and their connection to mental health. This research aims to better understand how design can benefit users with solitude rather than feel controlled and fearful of it.
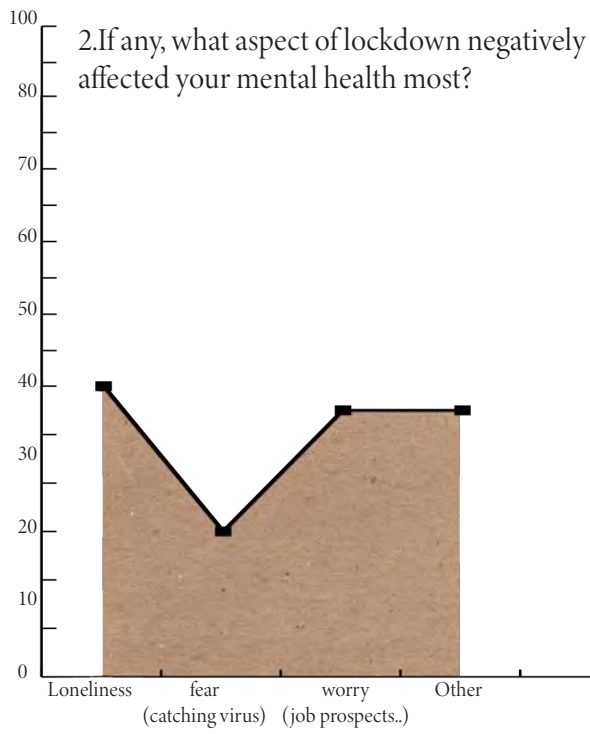
Various methods of experiencing solitude were underpinned by the secondary research and assumptions made by this. It was seen that historically, monks and pilgrims sought solitude to cultivate internal peace, self-reflection, and communion with God (Merton 1958). In more recent history, designers with good intentions to bring communities together and provide safe spaces inadvertently created 'oppressive' buildings where no escape and solitude could be found (Lallement 2012) (Highmore 2009). However, it was discovered that design for spaces such as the coworking office managed to balance social interaction and solitary time. Theses designs showed to benefit workers' mental health. The work of Michel Foucault, and his theories on how social situations and imposed restrictions can cause society's mental state to be one of panic and anxiety, were compared to participants who voluntarily submitted themselves to a mars stimulation and maintained mental health(Foucault 1977) (Basner, Dinges et al. 2014). It was assumed that for isolation to be beneficial, it must be chosen. It was seen that integrating times with nature, removed from technology, can encourage inner confidence and ability to thrive when socializing and working (Kethledge 2020).

These findings have provided the basis for further research to better understand how people seek and find solitude, and how their mental health is affected by this. This research is very much essential and current as recent developments with the coronavirus pandemic isolation have shown. When choosing the methodology addressed in this study, it was clear that quantitative data was required to measure trends and themes. A qualitative approach has also been employed to gain a deeper understanding of society's specific opinions on the topic. The methods consist of a questionnaire to gain an overview of the topic, in-depth surveys, and a cultural probe targeted at particular users, and a personal research diary for reflections and insight.
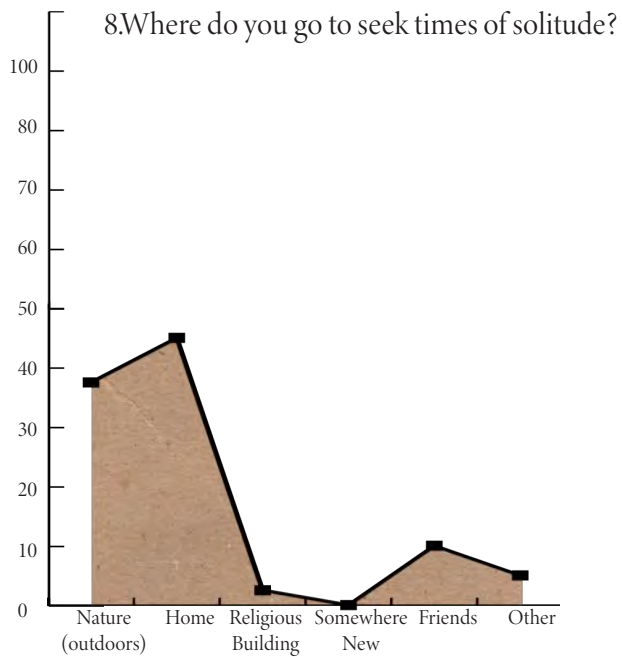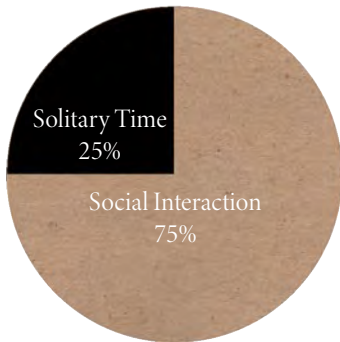
The first form of research conducted was a quantitative survey questionnaire that was sent out via social media. Floyd J Fowler, in his book "Survey Research Methods," describes a necessary survey having three things; being quantitative in nature, based on set questions asked to gain data, and using a select sample of the population to answer the questions. Fowler states that the combination of three methodologies supports a good survey: sampling, designing questions, and collecting data (Fowler 2008). A specific sample of the population must be selected wisely. The questions must be asked intelligently and be easy to answer. The data must be collected with ease, possibly via the internet (Fowler 2008).

This part of the research aimed to understand how individuals reacted to the isolation due to lockdown. It explored whether or not people thought solitude was essential, and where they go and what they do during times of solitude. The questions were designed in such a way that the participants could easily see the researcher's flow of thought. The survey contained seven multiple-choice questions, (some of which contained optional comment boxed for more profound insight), two image choice questions, and one open-ended question at the end. The survey took an average of three minutes to complete, and the image questions and multiple-choice questions were designed to obtain quick, honest answers to keep participants interested. The survey had a 100% completion rate, although the final open-ended question was skipped twice. The survey was uploaded to a social media platform, and 40 responses were acquired between 18:00-22:00 4th November 2020. The sample of people remained anonymous, but due to the survey being uploaded to a personal social media account, the data's limitations are that the participants were all friends of the account. Therefore, the overview was limited to specific groups of society with whome the account member was connected. However, the responses were varied enough to be valid as every individual is different despite their mutual connections. Examples of survey questions are shown and the entirety of the data collected is displayed in the appendix (pages 44-47).

Survey

2.If any, what aspect of lockdown negatively affected your mental health most?

3. What benefits mental health more?

Solitary Time
25%

Social Interaction
75%

8.Where do you go to seek times of solitude?

Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)

Interview

The second form of research took on a more Qualitative nature. An online interview was conducted via email. Participants opted to take this form of the interview rather than face-to-face due to the coronavirus restrictions. The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods was consulted when writing the interview questions (Bell 2009). Vicki L. Plano Clark describes a good interview as being questions and answers, preferably in an in-person setting, where the researcher must obtain consent from the interviewee. An understanding of how to record the data is important along with insight into what questions are required to gain deeper understanding. She states that the interview acts as a customary starting point of qualitative data. They explore the participant's personal response to the study's topic and their familiarity and intimacy with the topic (Clark 2008). Two participants were selected for the interviews, both with occupations and lifestyles chosen based on previous studies into spiritual solitude and mental health. Both interviews were structured and reasonably short to keep the interviewee interested and encourage honest, communicative answers.

The first interviewee was a nun from Stan brook Abbey; the Abbey was chosen for the exciting contrast found between their times of Solitude and Social interaction. The Abbey sisters seek solitude, offer quiet days and retreats for guests, and run a shop selling their confectionary, and take an active role in being sustainable in their work (Anonymous 2020). One of the sisters agreed to be interviewed. The interview was conducted via email. Based on the previous research, a religious participant was chosen to gain a more modern insight into a Solitary lifestyle.

The second interviewee was selected due to his work as a mental health nurse. The questions were directed to him personally, but his background of dealing with mental health was considered. His understanding was assumed to have informed his personal opinions on how Solitude and Social interaction affect mental health.

The interviews had limitations due to the coronavirus pandemic, as face-to-face interviews could not be conducted. Therefore the context and visual signals from the participants could not be registered. Also, there was no rapport developed through conversation; however, exchanged emails provided more familiarity and a more expressive form of collecting data. The interviews were a successful and informative methodology and gave more extensive and personal views of specific participants who know the effects of solitude on the mind. The whole script of the interviews is displayed in the appendix (pages 48-50). Verbal Consent as given to use both interviews in this research.

Cultural Probe:

After conducting the surveys and interviews, the third form of design research was decided upon; a cultural probe. The interviews formed an in-depth view of solitude and how it is experienced personally. However, greater insight into daily life was required. This had to be conducted more engagingly and visually. William W. Gaver wrote about designing cultural probes, referring to a study that was conducted entitled The Presence Project (Gaver and Pacenti 1999). Gaver's project inspired the Cultural Probe designed for this research. He states that designing probes does not focus on supervised methodologies and rigorous inspection, but rather on creative command and discovering how design affects culture and informs new designing methods. A combination of creative tasks were given to inform the designers about users and how they behave in their environment. The tasks were compiled into a package and given to participants to take, engage with, and send back to the designers for them to analyze (Gaver and Pacenti 1999).

Cultural Probe Photography (Wright, 2020)

Cultural Probe Photography 2 (Wright,2020)

When designing the Cultural Probe for this research, it was essential to define its primary goal. The Probe was designed to understand better, daily life. How it has been affected by the coronavirus isolation, how the user experiences alone time now, and where and why they seek to find time alone. Three tasks were prepared for the participants. The first was to write a letter to themselves before lockdown, detailing what they have learned that they wish they had known before regarding social interaction, solitude, loneliness, and how these events will change them. The second task consisted of a camera that allowed the participants to show visually where they find solitude in their daily lives (a single-use camera was provided so the snaps would be authentic, taken only once, thus adding appeal and user interest to the Probe). The final task designed was inform of a diary where users were asked to keep a daily log of solace times. They were to circle words that described their solitude experience that day and detail where and when this was and how they found it affected their mental health. The Probe was given out to 3 participants chosen for their different backgrounds with variances in age for a varied response:

·   A School Student
·   A University Student
·   A Nurse

The Probe ran for five days to provide insight into how various individuals experiences solitude on a daily basis. This research informed how design could meet society's daily needs and inform how people want to include isolation in their daily lives. The results are shown above and complied in the appendix section.

The fourth design, research methodology, consists of a more phenomenological based Qualitative study. A research diary was assembled based on the discoveries of writers discussed in the secondary research literature review. The literature discussed people removing themselves to lonely places without others, infiltrating integration times with nature, away from technology and daily life (Merton 1958) (Kethledge 2017). The researcher tasked themselves with seeking their own specific solitude requirements, integrating times of green space exposure and days of pure isolation into their life, and recording it through images and discussing through a journal. The researcher constructed the diary, developing it during the other studies, and visually presented it to reflect emotions and experiences. This study allowed the researcher to be involved environmentally and physically in the study, seeking solitude as others have previously done and so reflected on how this had affected them. Lisa M. Given writes in Sage research methods concerning Journals that it is one of the most efficient ways to gather rich insight into the individual's experiences, responses, and feelings. Participants, particularly introverts, feel comfortable in a journal's safety and reveal more than they would publicly or in conversation (Given 2008). To make a research diary informative, it should be written routinely, shared with a partner, yet remain private and free, be structured and graphically designed, include items other than writing (notes, photographs, clippings), and have bits of analysis (Somekh and Lewin 2005). The diary was not conducted for rigorous analysis nor to track cycles or patterns but rather to provide the researcher a more intimate involvement with the research. Understanding those who had participated in the design probe and recording their images and analysis allowed for this. The diary is presented as a physical picture diary with notes displayed in the appendix (pages 58-59). This journal's limitations come from the basis that it is merely a one opinion documented. However, the methodology aimed to provide the researcher's mind with a richer understanding of solitude and how it can be experienced supports the views as portrayed in the literature previously reviewed. Therefore, the strengths and observations found throughout this journal outweigh the weaknesses.

Diary Entry 11 (Wright,2020)
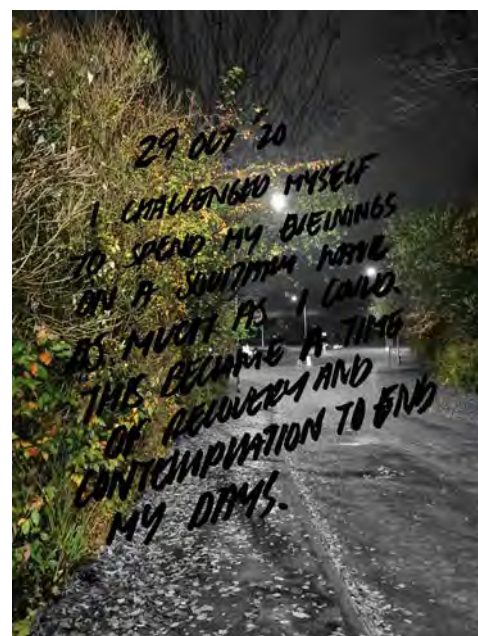
Diary Entry 14 (Wright,2020)

To conclude the Methodology chapter of the research that will be analyzed prospectively, it is essential to note the value that the insights have brought to the study. This knowledge can inform future Solitary retreats design by correlating the findings to the site and setting where people best find this. Beginning with more generalised survey methods and quantitive data (as displayed in graphs provided) brought an initial understanding of of how participants view and engage with solitary time. This provided the researcher with a universal knowledge base. The targeted interviews provided in-depth and specific answers from a more definite user group as specified by previous literature discussed. These interviews allowed understanding of how solitude is sought by a person of faith and a nurse who has worked with those suffering from adverse mental health. The cultural probe further provided more profound insight into how society chooses to seek solitude and what happens during their alone time. Design implications of what activities retreat should offer will result from the participants' more profound and in-depth personal experiences. The personal research diary allowed engagement phenomenologically and helped attain a personal emotional response to the topic. When analyzed, this data will give designers knowledge of what users want when designing Solitary spaces. This design hopes to encourage people to view and seek solitude in their lives to help fight mental health problems.

03.

"There are times when solitude is better than society, and silence is wiser that speech."

-Charles Spurgeon

The Literature Review and Methodology findings of this Design Research Portfolio have given the reader an overview of isolation and solitude's current context. Various methods, in which societies' current knowledge base surrounding the subject, have been examined. This was to gain further insight into the importance of time alone, to test prior views in the light of the coronavirus isolation, and to reinforce historical values to benefit mental health in today's society. This research aims to inform the future of spatial design, by highlighting the importance of solitary space and time in benefiting mental health. The findings are, therefore, not merely psychological but form concepts for designing in a post-lockdown society.

       The analysis has scrutinized the effects lockdown had on mental health and discovered why this was. It has also clarified that interrupting routine life with reflection and aloneness can give the needed break and recovery lacking in modern societies' fast pace. The power of individual to choose when and how they experience Solitary time is essential, and the inclusion of social interaction also plays a crucial role. It has also been made evident that to benefit an individual's wellbeing, the mental space constructed for Solitude is just as important as the physical location. However, particular settings are regularly retreated to as vessels or channels of recovery through aloneness, primarily in green space, home, or on long drives. These findings are explained and argued for below through analysis of the primary and secondary

1. In general, how would you rate your overall mental or emotional health during the coronavirus Isolation period?
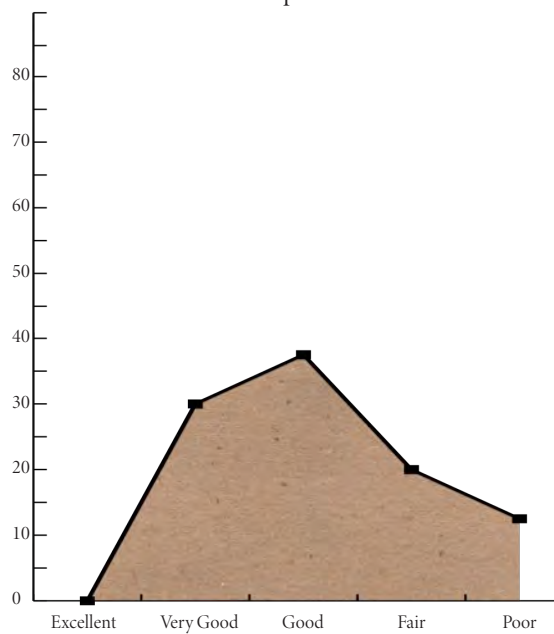
2. If any, what aspect of lockdown negatively affected your mental health most?
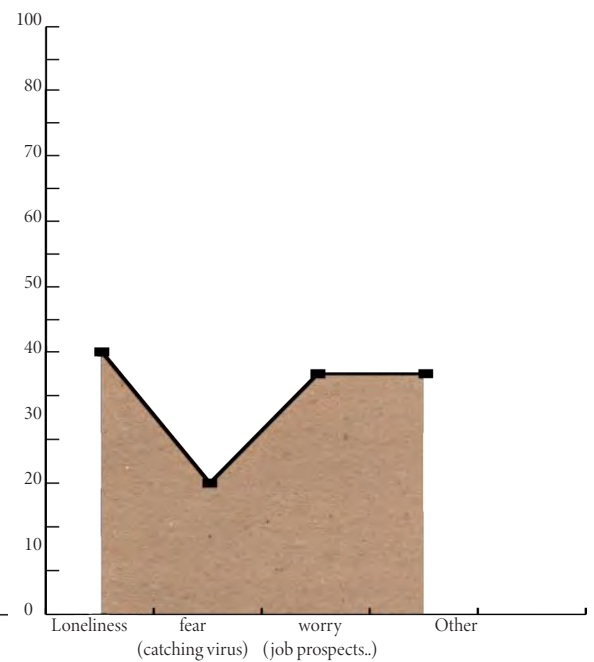
Lockdown

It was essential to understand how society reacted to coronavirus isolation and conduct further research on the limited available studies on the subject. When asked concerning the participant's overall mental and emotional health during the isolation period in survey question 1 shown above, 37.5% of people said their mental health was good, with 30% stating it very good and fewer people (12.5%) considering it to be poor. This result was not anticipated when compared to the reports discussed in the literature review. Isolation brought higher suicide risks, PTSD, and anxiety rates (Chi, Becker et al. 2020, Sher 2020). However, it was confirmed that loneliness (30%), and worry concerning job prospects or rent (27.50%), were the main contributors to fear and anxiety during this time (shown above). Additional contributors were commented on, 5/11 comments being based on the lack of seeing family and friends during this time. The contrast found in the results compared to previous knowledge discussed may be accounted for by the survey's limitations due to its small scope of participants. Further research on a larger scale will gain more reliable results and allow for more in-depth analysis.

Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)

5. What benefits mental health more?

17.5%

82.5%

Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)

Preponis, G (2020) Letter to Pre-lockdown Self

Despite this, much can be gleaned from these results. Although many viewed their mental health as 'good', various particulars did impact it negatively. The need for social interaction is apparent, and it can be gathered that while solitude has proven benefits to mental health, equally important is being connected to others. It has been discussed that in incredibly stressful times, social interaction is critical and solitude is mainly beneficial when interspersed between social events (MacRae 2011) (Burger 1995). Results of the Survey question 5, shown above, agree, with 75% of participants considering social interaction to be more beneficial than Solitary time (25%).

Analysing the cultural probe "letter to self before lockdown" provided fascinating and more in-depth emotional responses to lockdown, and continues the discussion on social interaction. Participant 1 advised herself in her letter that to maintain proper health throughout lockdown. She must embrace the 'unstable' and 'scary' changes that it brings. Her letter is shown above and in the Appendix (page 52). Again, the lockdown was viewed negatively, yet embracing times of aloneness and seclusion rather than fearing them can result in a better experience. Further description of how socializing was overwhelming before lockdown, and a break from this would have been welcomed, allowed the participant to see the real value of solitude. Nonetheless, being wholly locked away from society made her realize how necessary social interaction was. Again, this contrast between aloneness and socializing is exposed. Supporting this standpoint in the research diary, shown in Appendix page 58, the researcher discussed being an introvert by nature and prone to social anxieties and stress. Lockdown provided a needed break from constant society. However, the loss of social interaction became overwhelming. It can be gleaned that integrating solitude into a busy and stressful life can bring real peace. Theses times can give the mind room to breathe and recover. Reflection in these times can also be necessary to maintain and value social relationships, making social experiences more valuable and desirable. These findings are significant due to their relativity in today's social media society. They acknowledge the importance of relationship and connection yet claim that this is best enjoyed when integrated with self and reflection times. When designing spaces for good mental health, it is crucial to encourage moments and times of Solace as well as areas that enhance the social experience of a building.

With the above results in mind, it is also vital to consider society's current views on solitude. The literature review discussed people of faith that valued solitude, immersing themselves in physical seclusion from the world, and, more importantly, seeking a climate of peace and freedom of thought throughout life (Teahan 1982). Identity and life meaning were considered hidden in God, and time alone allowed them to pursue this (Merton 1958). Research was undertaken to understand modern views on these concepts through the interview with the Benedictine Nun. When asked whether her community seeks solitude, the participant made an interesting point: "Solitude isn't empty, it's filled with God's presence" They have a motive for desiring solitude, and they do not feel completely alone here (Marian, 2020). This principle can apply to all members of society. When finding peace is the motive, time spent alone provides recovery and encourages good relationships. The Nun also described how solitude is crucial in their lives and is regularly pursued as a community. However, the most central desire for their time alone is to equip them better to 'give...more fully to one another in community' (Marian, 2020). In this time alone, they find love and understanding by being filled with the love of God. This Interview is found in the Appendix, page 48. A correlation between this, and other research methods analysed previously, confirms that solitude improves harmony in relationships and is vital when interspersed within the social context.

In the Cultural Probe daily diary, participants selected the best words to describe their Solitary time each day of the study. The most commonly associated words were: thoughtful, regenerating, and happy, followed by boring, lonely, and inspiring. Interestingly no one considered their alone time as dull or tedious. However, more negative aspects such as sad and nerve-racking were circled once during the study. The more negative words were circled on the occasion of the participants being alone most of the day or, on one occasion, going through an MRI scan. Throughout the study, most people circled the word 'necessary' and 'thoughtful' at least once, defending the point that solitary time is vital to good mental health. By circling the words 'regenerative' and 'inspiring,' it can be analysed that time alone for the participants allows the mind to reflect and boosts creativity as those who circled this took part in crafting or creating (Appendix, pages 53,55). This correlates to previous studies in the literature review concerning how creativity is best expressed when alone time has been pursued (Kethledge 2020) . Therefore, when creating spaces that encourage creativity, spatial designers must allow for times of reflection, pause, and solitude.
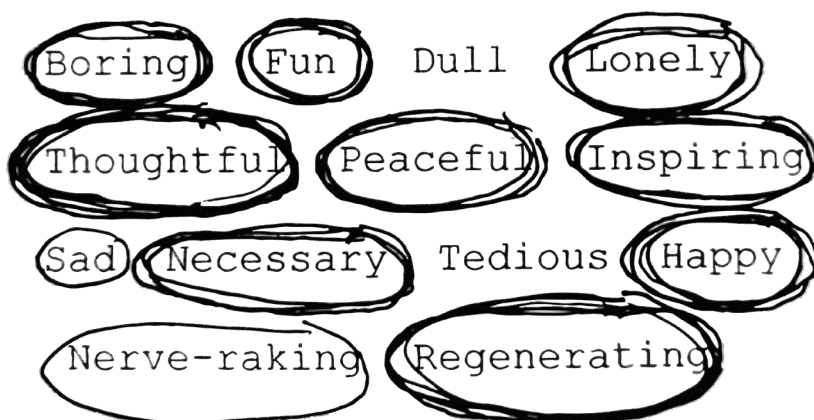
Compolation of Daily Words to Desribe Solitude (Wright, 2020)

9. Do you think for Solitude to be enjoyed, it must be chosen? (rather than imposed upon.i.e, the coronavirus isolation)
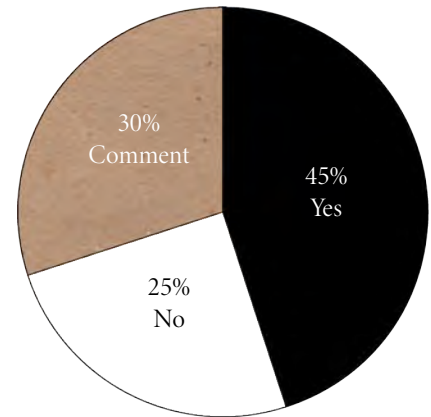
Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)

It was discovered, through reviewing the work of Michel Foucault, that there is a thin line between the negatives of imposed isolation and the benefits of choosing solitude. Results from further primary research on whether or not choice is adamant in this case are in agreement with these discoveries. Nevertheless, much new and unanticipated information was gained on how having something imposed can also be a benefit.

When asked in the survey whether, for solitude to be enjoyed, it must be chosen rather than imposed upon, 45% of the respondents said yes while 25% said no, the remaining 30% choosing to comment as shown above. Therefore, as previous research suggests, most people believe the imposition of isolation does encourage the retreat and peace Solitude seeks to provide. One participant further supported this viewpoint: 'When solitude is chosen, it is a freedom; rather than the constriction or prison it can become when imposed on someone.' (Anon,2020). The prison Foucault spoke of was designed to conform prisoners through fear (Foucault 1977). Similarly, when time alone is forced and given requirements, it is viewed as a prison of loneliness and fear. In the cultural probe diary, participant 3 described how they experienced a more temporal yet intense form of imposed isolation, stating how going through an MRI machine made them 'scared and nervous' (Robertson, 2020). Despite this being a more extreme example, it is evident that being taken from a comfortable space and forced into a confined one significantly affects the mind. Likening this to the global lockdown, it can be observed that freedom is found when we want and seek solitude, rather than it being forced upon us. Particularly in our immediate surroundings, society does not want to feel imprisoned but free. Rather than confining and exposing through architecture such as the Familistere discussed in the lit review, spaces should be flexible and open, allowing users to be social or private, free to choose and meander through these areas.

The Power of Choice

Despite this argument, another comment on the survey question, as mentioned above, opened a new and interesting discussion, highlighting a new theme in the research. One participant stated that although it is 'wonderful' to choose alone time, sometimes it needs to be forced on you to eliminate guilt (Anon, 2020). The imposition of lockdown allowed others to spend the required time with family; this only being realized upon reflection (Anon, 2020). For some, lockdown in one area presented itself as a break and needed imposition, providing the social interaction and solitude that was not being fulfilled in their lives. It can be assumed that the participants who felt this had accepted the negative factors lockdown also brought and chose to view certain aspects as beneficial to their well being. To better design for mental health retreats, they must not confine their visitor, but rather offer a separation and interjection from daily life. Settings and surroundings can provide needed removal from daily life to allow the mind to recuperate and reflect.

The interviews gleaned similar results. The Benedictine nun stated that before entering the monastery, busy social and work life did not allow much solitude. She made it clear that imposed isolation at that time of her life could have benefited her (Marian,2020). In the current context of technology, constant interaction, and socialization, as discussed in the literature review, there is not much room for reflection. There is a desire for solitude that modern design does not meet, so much so that the idea of having it forced upon some individuals is desirable. It is evident that when loneliness and fear are involved, society cannot cope with being alone. However, when recovery, rest, and a healthy amount of social interaction are provided, solace is found.

Society cries out for solitude; modern life tends to restrain this. Therefore, the power of choice impacts how we more positively experience solitude, yet choosing it must be cultivated by the individual, so it does not need to be imposed upon them.

The research challenged the idea of solitude having a particular setting, revealing it is as much a state of mind as a specific place. The most consistent finding between the research methods was that being alone in nature provides peace, retreat and significantly benefits mental health. The results are discussed more fully below.

When asked where Solitude can best be found, almost every participant across the research stated where and how they experience it. This highlights the importance of what happens during Solitary time, somewhat overriding the setting in which it occurs.

The cultural probe study's diary expounded on this. Participant one stated that Solitude was found in various tasks' simple rhythms during a hectic day by crafting coffee, caring for plants, and taking time to do the dishes (Preponis,2020). Doing something productive and taking care of oneself simultaneously allowed the participant to associate alone time with recovery and not guilt. Participant three in the diary stated that she enjoyed sitting and contemplating life in a busy town at work (Wright,2020). Infiltrating meaningful times of reflection into mundane life activities can allow Solitude to be pursued and benefit mental health, even during unsuspecting and busy times.

The mental health nurse interview also highlighted that despite Solitude mainly being found when alone, perhaps having a mindset different from others creates space and separation. The nurse very effectively described "a daydream while in a lecture...or shedding tears of sadness while at a classical music concert as you feel the music's emotions" (Robertson, 2020). Both forms of personal reflection and expression, moments of Solace in daily life, yet experienced when surrounded by people. The nun interviewed also agreed, stating that the introspection and recollection of thoughts can be found anywhere (Marian,2020). Reading was also mentioned in every research method to recluse from the surrounding world. Evident is society's desire for Solitude regardless of setting. This discovery did not correlate to previous research. Designers must be aware of the implications this gives when designing spaces that encourage Solace.

Graph Visualisations Word Cloud (Wright,2020)

Image of Caring for Plants (Preponis, 2020)

Although, as seen previously, many people think solitude is a mindset and inner choice sought in any setting. There were also findings of particular places often sought to encourage solitude. These findings seemed unanimous throughout the research methods.

In the cultural probe, participant three went to the beach one day to study in a new atmosphere, finding this refreshing and stated it allowed her to reconnect with her imagination (Wright,2020). It is interesting to note that going somewhere fresh and new alone can rejuvenate the mind and encourage creative expression. Two comments on the survey question 8 reveal that some find the best place to find solace is on a car journey alone, view appendix page 46. The personal research diary also contained insight into long car journeys being one of the most recurring and beneficial solace states during its writing period (Wright,2020). Hour-long commutes to university and long drives to visit friends in the north offered much time to prepare and seek peace. Journeying and going to new places alone can give the mind needed respite when studying or before social interactions.

In question 8 of the survey it was gleaned that 40% of people find solitude in nature. The interview revealed how the Benedictine nun found solitude in nature. perhaps The most frequently related finding throughout the research methods, backing up the literature review's knowledge. She stated that 'the beauty of nature reflects the beauty of the Creator, and touches something deep within the human heart". The effects of nature on mental health is something that has been proven vastly (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). This research has reinforced that thought, and it can be confirmed that society needs the natural world to ground and provide retreat and peace. Though a different to methodology than the other research methods, the personal research diary allowed the researcher to understand their own green space experiences and whether it related to these findings, see Appendix page 58-59. Daily retreats into the countryside and nightly walks gave the mind time to still and recalibrate. Perhaps more than anything discovered in the research diary was the calm an experience outside can give to the anxious, overthinking mind. The images found in the cultural probe daily diary images shown also speak for themselves; participants take most images outside or from a window or car looking out. Humanity is comfortable in its original setting, encompassed by the natural world.

Image of Green Space (Preponis, 2020)
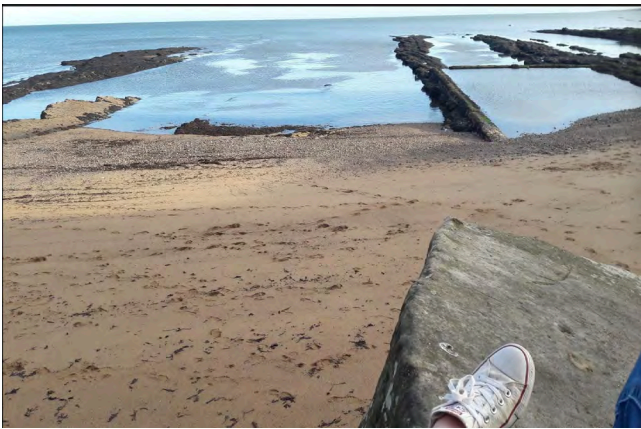
Image from beach (Wright, 2020)

Image of Sunset on Walk (Robertson, 2020)

Looking at how people best experience solitude, it can be gleaned that solace can be a fantastic way of inspiring creative expression. It can also be observed that removing oneself from daily life and submerging in specific solitary spaces encourages balanced mental health and wellbeing. Natural green space, the home, and solitary drives are the most common and useful places chosen to best experience solitude. When designing specific places offering valuable aloneness and reflection, these areas' setting should be comfortable like the home and enveloped by green space.

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Limitations & Further Study

The Research Methodologies provided in-depth insight into how solitude is viewed and sought in the current context. These insights provided a foundation for the future of design, informing the various psychological concepts and physical elements needed for spatial design of mental health retreats. Further research would help glean public opinion on what aspects of current retreat spaces do not fulfill mental health needs. This research may combat these. Qualitative methods should be employed to inquire about the practical design requirements the public wants designers to incorporate into retreats. Limitations of this research come from the small scope of individuals reached through the research methods. To gain more reliable insights, a more extensive range of individuals should be involved. The information gleaned, however, is genuinely in-depth and insightful due to its intimacy with the participants.

In conclusion, to consider time alone as beneficial to mental health, it must first be desired and sought after by the individual. The job of designers in the future is to encourage modern society to break from constant interaction and seek solitude. The need for social interaction interspersed with time alone is one spatial design must meet to fulfill society's mental health requirements. The design must not be restrictive or imposing but must offer comfort, privacy, and safety for users to reflect and recover. Despite solitude being primarily a state of mind, setting and surroundings can offer much-needed separation from daily life – providing a respite many do not even realize they need. Exposure to green space has been proven one of the most significant ways to enjoy solitude. Journeying alone and the comfort of home and personal space can also inspire design concepts where privacy and solace are interspersed in social settings. Spaces must also encourage imagination through setting in green space and solitude to allow freedom of thought to the creative mind.

 For those choosing to seek solitude, the choice is adamant in how time alone is experienced, and mental health is affected. Choosing solitude gives freedom to the solitary mind and the ability to enjoy its benefits. However, various busy times of life would benefit significantly from having alone time imposed, considering this time is not conditioned by fear. The individual must fill alone time with something worthwhile to them, creating, reading, thinking, or praying. The design world must create spaces that encourage and meet the needs this research has determined they need.

Apendix

Supporting the analysis and conclusions found in the Methodology and Analysis

Survey, Interview, Cultural Probe, Research Journal

1. In general, how would you rate your overall mental or emotional health during the coronavirus Isolation period?

2. If any, what aspect of lockdown negatively affected your mental health most?

3. What benefits mental health more?

Solitary Time
25%

Social Interaction
75%

4. Do you think people need solitary time in this day and age? if so why?

Yes
92.5%

No
7.5%

Survey:

Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)
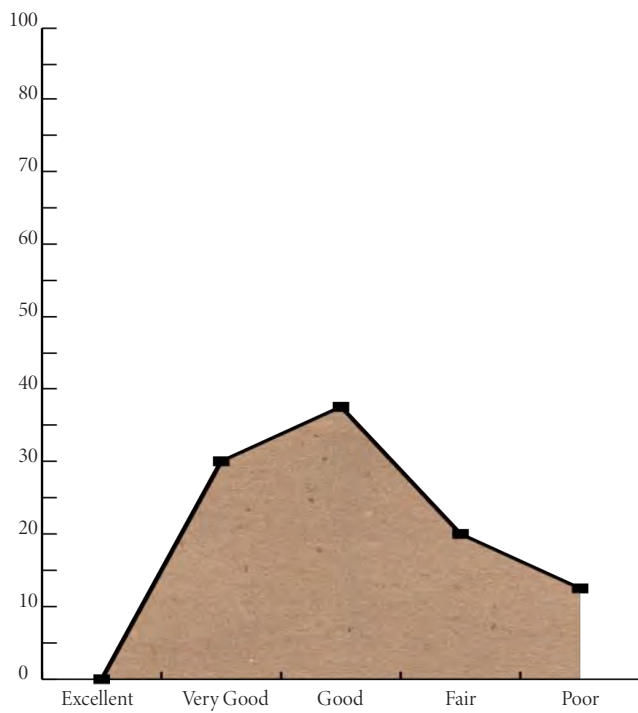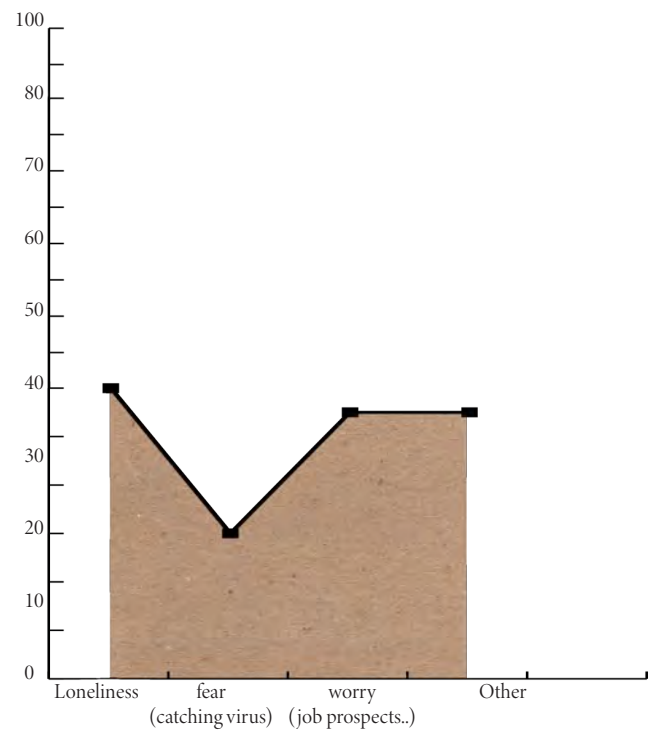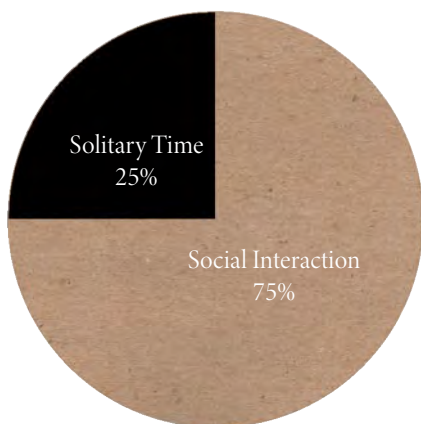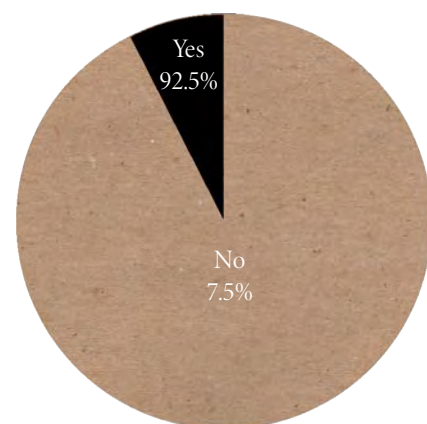
4. Do you think people need solitary time in this day and age? if so why?

-Time to reset yourself
-I'm a natural introvert so I like being alone, I think it's good in moderation
-I think it would be bad for us to be completely active all the time
-To unwind...reflect...pray
-Everybody needs a chance to catch their breath and take a moment to themselves.
We're always too 'connected' with people all the time and live busy lives. It's good to step away from that from time to time to have some 'me' time
-To an extent, yes. This day and age is so busy it can be beneficial to slow down and take a moment for yourself
-Occasionally you need time to recharge and focus on yourself
-To process and meditate
-Important to switch off from social media.
-Just to process everything that is happening around them
-Solitary time gives opportunity for reflective thought and concentration which are difficult in social settings. It can also provide a chance for calm and quiet, which reduce stress. Time to think and ponder. Away from distractions esp phones
-Because solitary time gives us the chance to process advice we have been given and events we have experienced
-Life is so busy and in this day and age with the pressures of social media and trying to have a 'picture perfect life' it is important to step back and think about what is really important. I think that coronavirus has highlighted this for many people.
-Everything has been so fast paced with how society works that we have forgotten to
To get away from the fast paced world around us and be able to reconnect with ourselves to allow us to experience life in a more positive way. spend time with loved ones and spend time realising we really want out of life
-It is important to understand and be in your own thoughts, I think learning to be on your own and enjoy parts of life alone is natural and people shouldn't rely on others to find happiness.
-Everyone needs some time out to focus on themselves
-Time to recharge and process the day
- Need to recharge and process
-To self reflect and be at peace in our own company.
-To reflect and find peace

5. What benefits mental health more?

17.5%

82.5%

6. Do you think people need solitary time in this day and age? if so why?

55%   45%

45
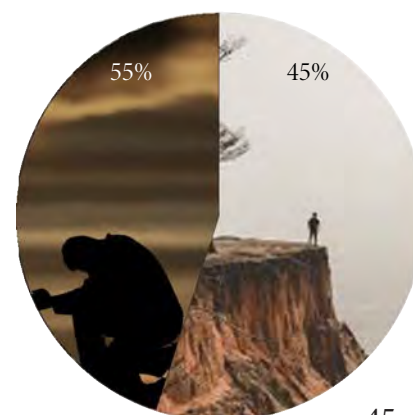
7. Do you think that time alone allows you to understand yourself better?
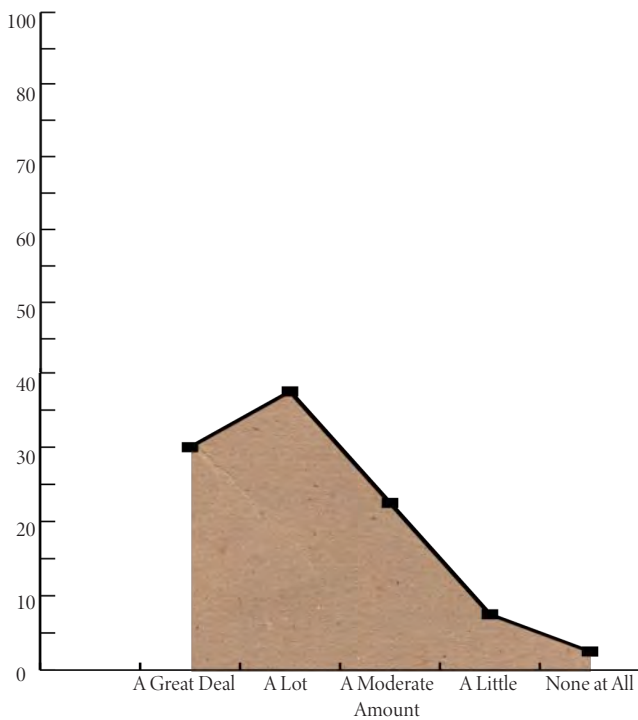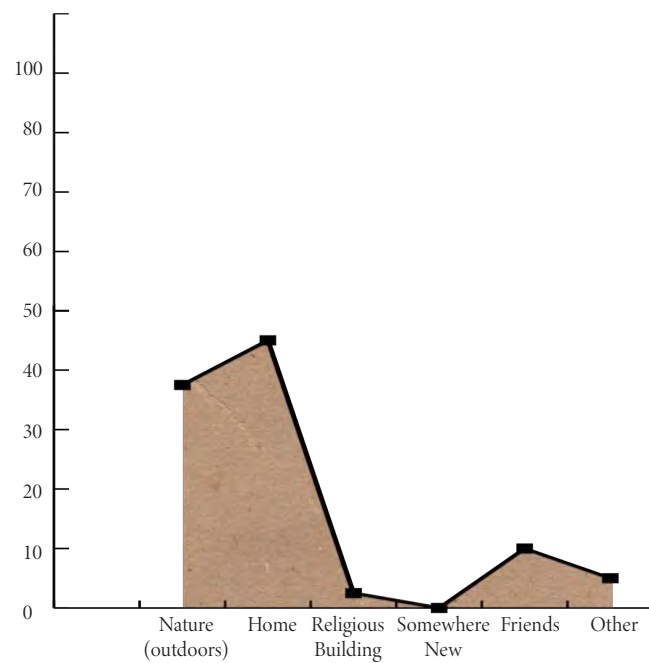
-Get to know myself without the influence of others
-It makes you learn about yourself more and have time to yourself
-I've learnt the most about myself through relationships with others.
-You realise what people and things contribute to make you, you.
-Forced to think for yourself without negative influences
-Gives you the time to clear your thoughts and process everything.
- Yes allows to reflect on what you are thinking about and what you have done
-I learnt a lot about myself during lockdown in different ways. For example I learnt that having a structured routine benefits me the most and not having pressure makes me want to learn new things.
-It allows us to reflect on ourselves

8. Where do you go to seek times of solitude?

-Car journey alone
-driving around alone

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9. Do you think for Solitude to be enjoyed, it must be chosen? (rather than imposed upon.i.e, the coronavirus isolation)
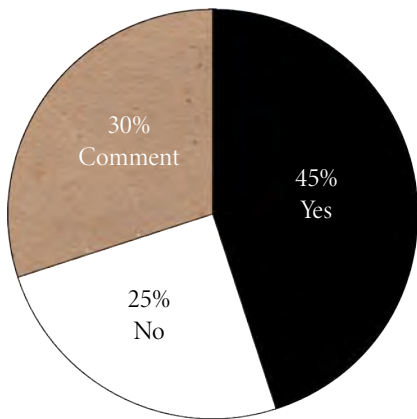
-Yes..we were trapped and thas not a relaxing time by yourself because you couldnt choose to do it

-When solitude is chosen, it is a freedom; rather than the constriction or prison it can become when imposed on someone
Comment 1 in text (Anon, 2020)

-Sometimes we don't even realise that we need the time to recharge and log off from the world

-No many people, although isolation was forced upon them, have been able to begin to enjoy the times of solitude and reflection, however, it is never as satisfying nor effective as setting aside time to purposefully be in solitude
-Although choosing alone time cab be wonderful, having it imposed takes the guilt of being lazy away
Comment 2 in text (Anon, 2020)

-I think people may not have chosen solitude before lockdown but feel the benefits of it afterwards once they have time to reflect
-Now i think aout it,I think it gave me time to spend wiht loved ones
Comment 3 in text (Anon, 2020)

10. What do you do in times of Solitude? (read, write, listen to music..?)

Graph Visualisations Word Cloud (Wright,2020)

Graph Visualisations (Wright,2020)

-Do you seek Solitude in your life? If so, what motivates you to do this?

Yes.   It's important to remember that for a nun, solitude isn't empty – it's filled with God's presence. William of St Thierry, a Carthusian monk, said 'A monk couldn't be less alone than when he is alone'! (i.e. because when he is alone he is with God). (The Golden Epistle)

     As Benedictine nuns, the most important part of the Benedictine life is living with others as a community.   St John says, in his first letter, 'Someone who does not love his brother or sister who he can see, cannot love God who he can't see.' (First letter of St John, Chap 4, vs 20)   In other words, we express our love God by growing in love of those we live with.   It's worth reading chapter 4 of St Benedict's Rule, called 'The Tools of Good Works'.

     Solitude then, is not central to our life as nuns, but it is an important part of it.   We keep the 'nigh silence' from 8pm until 8am to cultivate a time of solitude and prayer.   It is important to spend time with God in order for us each to grow in a personal relationship with him.   And periods of time alone also allow us to give ourselves more fully to one another in community.

-Do you think for Solitude to be enjoyed, it must be chosen? (Rather than imposed upon, i.e., the coronavirus isolation)

Before I entered the monastery in 2013 aged 30, I didn't have much time for solitude in my busy jobs. Modern work and living doesn't allow much space or time for solitude, and unexpected 'imposed' solitude can be very welcome.   It can allow people to experience something which they otherwise wouldn't have sought or found.

     However, regarding the coronavirus, it is important to distinguish between solitude and loneliness/isolation.   They are not the same thing.   Some people have been isolated from family or loved ones for long periods.   Others have lost their jobs or have been off work for long periods.   This isn't healthy.   Our life as nuns includes time for social contact each day and time for work within the monastery (and it takes a lot of work to run a monastery…).

-What about Solitude benefits your mental health?

Solitude gives the chance to reflect, process, take stock on things that have happened: each day, each year (e.g. looking back at 2020 and coronavirus), or over the whole of my life.   It is a way of accepting myself and others, which is very important for good mental health.   See answer to question 6 below on solace.

     It also clears the mind of distractions and allows you to think clearly and be focussed without your mind being cluttered with other trivial wandering thoughts.

-Why do you think people need Solitary time in this day and age?

Because life is too busy!   Solitude is always relevant in every 'day and age' – I think it is a basic human need.   Lots of people (some without any faith at all) visit the monastery to make a retreat or spend time in solitude, which shows that it is something that people need.

-In your opinion, does society today seek Solitude?

Yes and No.   I think some people are 'afraid' of solitude because it can at first confront you with the darker aspects of yourself (which you are then meant to work through so you can change for the better!)   Some people try to blot out sense of personal unhappiness or guilt with a busy 'social life', constant partying etc.   Many people in society today also seek a shallow kind of affirmation through multiple superficial 'friendships' or social media, and are afraid to lose this.

However at the same time, there are some people who have discovered the value of solitude. Mindfulness has been very popular recently, and there is an interest in meditation techniques.   People are also discovering the monasteries as a little oasis where they can come and experience solitude in a busy world.

Verbal Consent to include Interview in Research was given

- Where do you go to seek times of Solitude? Do you think Solace can be found anywhere, or are there specific places you prefer?

You can recollect your thoughts and enter into yourself in any place. The Great Carmelite nun, Saint Teresa of Avilla said, 'We have heaven within ourselves since the Lord of heaven is there.' (The Way of Perfection) Of course, places of silence and stillness help. We each have our own cell (please don't think of prison bars – it comes from the Latin cella meaning a single dwelling e.g. cells of a beehive). No one else can enter our cell – it is a place of solitude. The monastic life originated in 4th century Egypt where hermits would live in individual dwellings under the guidance of a more experienced abba or father. One abba told his junior monk 'Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.' (Sayings of the Desert Fathers). I also like to be outside in nature. The beauty of nature reflects the beauty of the Creator, and touches something deep within the human heart.

You said 'solace' in your question. Please could I ask, why do you see solitude as a solace? A very common image of solitude is the 'desert', recalling the wandering of the Israelites in the desert after the Exodus, and also the 40 days spent in the desert by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. (see Matthew chapter 4, Luke chapter 4, or Mark chapter 1). It is actually a place of testing and struggle and at times a place where we'd rather not be. When I first entered the monastery, solitude confronted me with negative aspects of my behaviour: daily little things when I was unkind to others etc. It also confronted me with negative periods of my life history e.g. bereavements, illness, family break-up etc. which I had to then work through and come to accept as somehow held in God's mysterious plan. So it's not always a solace (and for this reason I think some people try to avoid solitude – see question 5 above) but in the end it leads to the peace of self-acceptance and a closer union with God.

Although I said solitude is filled with God's presence, sometimes for long times solitude seems quite empty and God seems to vanish. This is a common experience, sometimes called 'the Dark Night' in mystical writings.

-Monks and Pilgrims have been known to make pilgrimages to nature for aloneness or to places of religious value. Have you ever taken a pilgrimage? Please write how this experience changed or affected you.

The first type (to nature) I would describe as a retreat or hermitage rather than a pilgrimage. Incidentally St Benedict didn't allow his monks to become hermits until they had lived in the monastery in community with other monks for a long time. It is primarily through community life (which includes periods of solitude) that we grow personally and spiritually.

I have been on pilgrimage to Walsingham and Lourdes before I became a Catholic (I'm a convert to Christianity). These were places with lots of other people and the witness of others who were also seeking God really deepened my faith and made me think this is for real.

I'm from Newcastle originally and I also liked to go up to Northumberland to places connected with the Northern Saints such as Lindisfarne. St Cuthbert lived as a hermit for some years on a little island just off Lindisfarne. These are places of solitude and great natural beauty. I felt more anchored after visiting these places.

-Do you think that alone time allows you to understand yourself better? If so, do you think this affects the way you treat others?

Definitely. I think it's important to spend time alone to grow in self-knowledge. This means learning your good and bad sides, and reflecting on how you treat others. I think that learning our own weaknesses helps us to bear with the weaknesses of others (which is vitally important when you have 20 women living under the same roof!) I used to be annoyed at a sister who always blew up and lost her temper, then (by my reflection in times of solitude) I realised that there were times when I used to snap at people myself. So I realised that I had to be more accepting of 'Sr Vesuvius' and also take care myself not to lose my own calm.

Solitude also makes us more compassionate towards others. Compassion means in Latin 'suffer-with'. God is described as compassionate in the bible. It is a very deep form of love to be able to identify with how another person is feeling.

-How did the Coronavirus Isolation affect your work/home life?

I had to shield as I have an underlying health condition. It was a mix of feeling nervous and enjoying spending time with my wife. The time was refreshing, and I lost weight due to the many walks we took.

-Do you seek Solitude in your life? If sp, what motivates you to do this?

Perhaps not on purpose, but due to lifestyle and work commitments, I find myself alone. I enjoy my own company generally and am quite a positive person. It's good to spend time alone and think and meditate on life.

-Do you think for Solitude to be enjoyed, it must be chosen? (rather than imposed upon, i.e., the coronavirus isolation)

I don't enjoy having things imposed upon me, but I try to make the best of it when I do. It's often easier to go with the flow.

-Do you think Solitude is beneficial to your mental health? If so, how?

I enjoy time alone to think and get on with my hobbies, time to read, study, and create.

-Where do you go to seek times of Solitude? Do you think Solace can be found anywhere, or are there specific places you prefer?

I think real Solitude can only be found when you're on your own; however, I suspect there are many solitude forms. Perhaps you may be the only person in a room that holds a particular position or opinion. A daydream while in a lecture or on a bus or shedding tears of sadness while at a classical music concert as you feel the music's emotion. It can be refreshing or depressing. Too much can be wonderfully bad for you.

-Monks and pilgrims have been known to make pilgrimages to nature for aloneness and restoration. Have you ever taken a pilgrimage? If so, How did this experience change/ affect you?

Many times, mainly after I had be angered or irritated. I used to walk off my ire and think about the situation. It caused me to reflect, and often I would end up apologizing. I believe the only real pilgrimage I went to was after my mother died. I went to America for ten months working at Camp America, the christian salvation army. Made lifelong friends, shored me up in my faith, and gave me peace in my heart.

-Do you think alone time allows you to understand yourself better? If so, do you think this affects the way you treat others?

If it doesnt, then you most definitely have a deficit in your personality and emotional capacity. Life is full of experiences that allow you to pause to reflect on who you are and what others mean to you. Regret is an awful emotion. I wish id been a better son to my mother. I have no way to fix that but to live up to how she would have wanted me to live, honor her.

-In your background of working with mental health, what are essential things in a patient's environment that help make them calm?

-Do you think that having alone time is vital for a patient suffering from impaired mental health?

-Where would you recommend someone to go to seek Solitude?

-How have you seen mental health badly affected by isolation

-Have you seen mental health affected well by isolation?

Cultural Probe: Sample of Results of Cultural Probe

Wright, R. (2020) Cultural Probe Photography 2

Wright, R. (2020) Cultural Probe Photography

Dear Pre-Lockdown Guilia ,

I know you already think your life is going to change in the next few months, but it isn't going to change in the way you think. There's still some good parts, but there's also some not so good parts. Try not to be so scared of this change, yes it's unstable and scary but try to embrace it! It'll make everything else much more fun and tolerance, see it as if the world has been put on pause, just like you had wished the whole world when you felt overwhelmed in the past. With everything put on pause, you'll start to notice the details come forward.

Right now you think you're an introvert and socialising can be at times a stressful experience, yet you'll realise how much you look forward to long walks, chatting to the cashier at the shop, and talking non-stop to your than flatmate. Speaking of socialising up during [...] the online classes. The lecturers are trying really hard to make this work, make them feel valued and heard.

You'll suddenly have so much time to yourself in the afternoons, don't spend it watching "Friends" for the 12th time, and stop getting excited each time Monica and Chandler get engaged, it's hardly a surprise anymore! Instead, start watching (and finishing) Sex and the City" TV show with your flatmate, it's a great way to open the debate of how ahead of its time it was yet also so anti-feminism too.

Finally, don't worry too much about your relationship with James. You'll soon become closer than you ever thought you could, even if you won't physically see each other for a while. You'll realise how this →

time apart will strengthen your relationship and you'll both realise the love you have for one another and yes you will actually move in together during all of this chaos, despite what your anxiety tells you. Just make sure to be open about how you're feeling and about what you need.

Take this time to get to know yourself better. Stop filling silence with music and just listen to your heart beating and your lungs breathing. Listen to the music your body makes through its small but vital movements. That is the music of life.

Lastly, hug mum and dad tightly when you leave Beirut in January, you'll miss them more than ever, and seeing them at Christmas will feel like forever.

Love,

Guilia

P.s: Buy stock in Zoom.

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Letter to Pre-lockdown Self (Preponis, 2020)

Image of Green Space (Preponis, 2020)

Image of Caring for Plants (Preponis, 2020)

Image of Bathtub Retreat (Preponis, 2020)

Panel 1 — Title page

This Diary belongs to:

Age:

Ocupation:

Panel 2 — Day 1

November   2020

Day 1:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

Panel 3 — Day 1 (continued)

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

I made myself more time for myself at the start of the day. I made myself an espresso with my mocha pot, which takes quite a while to make the coffee. This was part of my morning routine, simply waiting and enjoying this time. Evening in the water slowly bubbling up etc. I then found it whilst caring for my plants, inspecting their leaves and their overall health. I found it in the evening too, by simply doing the dishes and taking my time.

It helped me prepare for the day ahead.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

It forces a little bit of my time on my self, showing my mind/body that its wellbeing is just as important as all the things I have to do today.

Doing "productive" things whilst taking care of myself helps me associate positive thoughts to the concept of

Panel 4 — Day 2

November   2020

Day 2:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   (Regenerating)

Panel 5 — Day 2 (continued)

2. Did you seek Solitude today? Today was another day filled with meetings and a busy schedule. In the morning, I woke up before anything (partner and I), enjoyed some alone over time in the living room. It relaxes me when I can live to dignity near the leaves of my plants move as the sun rises. In the afternoon, I went into my bathtub (without filled up water inside) and simply sat there with my book. Sitting in the bathtub helps me block out everything else, it's like a barrier with the outside, and reading of course helps me "escape reality". Before sunset, I spent 20 minutes near arthur's seat by a bench, looking at the sun going down and people enjoying their afternoon.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Waking up earlier than usual helped me by taking my time to properly wake up, without any distractions. Silence often helps me feel more at peace, it makes things less intimidating in a way.

Sitting in the bathtub with a blanket and my book is a bit of an odd habit of mine. I think in some deep way sitting in the bathtub reminds me of being in a cradle? Giving me that

Panel 6 — Day 3

November   2020

Day 3:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

(Quiet)

Panel 7 — Day 3 (continued)

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

(1) I found my solitude in the bedroom which has a view of the main street and of the crags. It was very peaceful. I live seeing people in busy and going about their day.

(2) I really enjoy taking my time whilst doing my makeup. I made sure I gave myself enough time and enjoyed exploring new lines on my skin.

(3) The first time of solitude was mixed in with cooking. It gave me the chance to clock off for the day and focus on something I enjoy doing and that doesn't require too much energy.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Today, time alone helped me. Quite brief but it allowed me to make sure I took care of myself at the same time too. Took care of my needs and made sure I had a nutritious meal.

I think it helps me when during my time alone, I do something that helps my health or benefits me in a way. So that I don't feel that

Panel 8 — Day 4

November   2020

Day 4:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

(Thoughtful)   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

Panel 9 — Day 4 (continued)

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

1) Whilst taking a shower, it's a simple action but its nice to be alone with my thoughts.

2) In the bathroom, getting ready for the day. Seeing my reflection and studying my face helps me understand myself better.

3) Not quite in solitude, but with my partner next to me, whilst watching a film on the projector. I like just sitting together in silence and enjoying the film together without the need to talk.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

It helped me put life on pause and letting my mind and thoughts catch up with everything else.

I definitely need time to process what the day brings and often when I don't let myself do that, I feel like the day was empty and insignificant. I don't want the days to simply pass by and the

Panel 10 — Day 5

November   2020

Day 5:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   (Fun)   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

Panel 11 — Day 5 (continued)

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

1) I took the afternoon off to do some arts and crafts. I painted a mug and really enjoyed focusing on something so peaceful and simple.

2) The hallway in my flat has lovely coloured fairy-lights. I love sitting here ready. I sat in the hallway and listened to music without lyrics. I sometimes find that lyrics in songs are distracting and in the shower of the melody.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

I think when I take time off to focus on something creative like painting, it allows me to make mistakes and celebrate them, rather than worry about them. Painting lets me embrace everything that I can't normally enjoy. Allowing myself to not have a plan

Participant 2, Andrew , Nurse

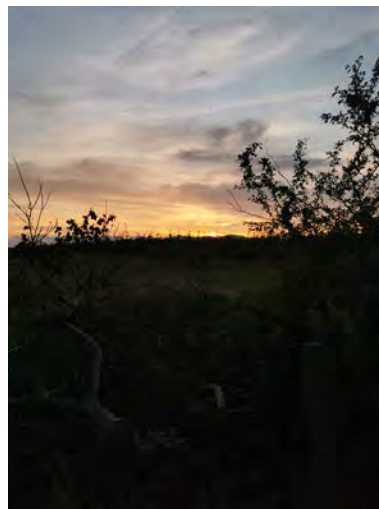Letter to Pre-lockdown Self (Robertson, 2020)

Image of Sunset on Walk (Robertson, 2020)

Image of Tree on Walk (Robertson, 2020)

Image of Countryside (Robertson, 2020)

Image of Countryside 2 (Robertson, 2020)

This Diary belongs to: _____

Age:

Ocupation:

November   2020

Day 1: _____

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Went a walk by the river Tay

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Refreshing and was able to clear my mind filing my thoughts.

November   2020

Day 2: _____

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   (Fun)   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Had a nice drive around

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Always enjoy driving get outnabout. Its a good stimulus and fun

---

November   2020

Day 3: _____

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   (Inspiring)

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Spent time making cards for a friend

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Felt inspired to become more creative

November   2020

Day 4: _____

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   (Happy)

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

wer really on my own was Painting the livingroom However was alone in my thoughts

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Felt happy to be putting our stamp on our newhouse

November   2020

Day 5: _____

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

(Nerve-raking)   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Force solitude inside an MRI machine

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

Not anxious but slightly nerve racking. Its a scary Machine.

5 Day Daily Solitude Diary Entries (Robertson, 2020)

Participant 3, Keziah , Student

Dear,
Pre-lockdown Keziah

Take every opportunity you can, stop being such an introvert! You spend too much time in your room, watching tv-get out an experience the world that God has made.

Find a hobby! Something to do with your time :- Help other and love everyone you come into contact with.

Go out more walks, breathe the fresh air for your attitude and for your skin!

Be courageous, whats the point in being shy or nervous? Be prepared for university and enjoy it - get out there and get involved in the CU and making friends! :)

Letter to Pre-lockdown Self (Wright, 2020)

Image from train (Wright, 2020)
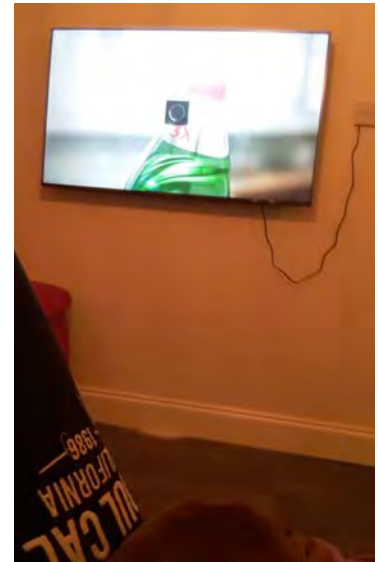
Image watching TV (Wright, 2020)

Image from beach (Wright, 2020)

This Diary belongs to:

Age:

Ocupation:

November   2020

Day 1:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   [Happy]

Nerve-raking   [Regenerating]

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Today I sat at the beach to study in a new atmosphere, the fresh air was refreshing

I also had a time to read at tonight, it was peaceful and relaxing to have time to myself.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

It helped to read, to reconnect with my imagination

November   2020

Day 2:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

[Boring]   Fun   Dull   Lonely

[Thoughtful]   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

I was alone at work today, in the last hour there was no customers and no work to do. It was maybe 'forced' but it was a time to think.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

To be able to stop and to think, even while being surrounded by people in the town, is a very rewarding thing.

November   2020

Day 3:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   Fun   Dull   [Lonely]

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy
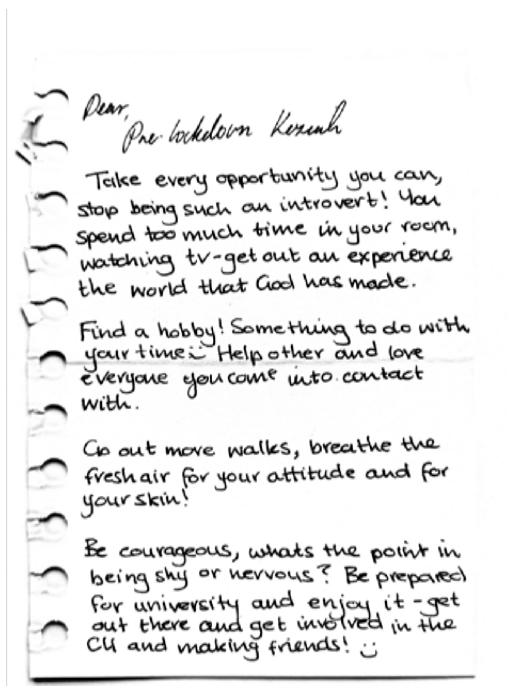
Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Today I went to uni, my time of solitude was on the way and way back on the bus.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

It was a relaxing time before I had to meet lots of people for a tutorial. The landscapes in the sunlight were beautiful and inspired me to be happy through the trials that could come.

November   2020

Day 4:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

[Boring]   Fun   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

Today I had to study and do uni work all day. I was stuck in my room.

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

This solitude was not the good kind. It was more being alone, being stuck in my room was a bit depressing :(

November   2020

Day 5:

1. Please circle the words you associate most with your time alone today:

Boring   [Fun]   Dull   Lonely

Thoughtful   Peaceful   Inspiring

Sad   Necessary   Tedious   Happy

Nerve-raking   Regenerating

---

2. Did you seek Solitude today? If so, where did you find it?

I went a walk (with my dog). While not being totally alone, I was outside, in the fresh air. I listened to music also :)

3. How did your Solitary time affect your mental health?

It was nice to get out the house and it was fun to listen to music and be with my dog

---

5 Day Daily Solitude Diary Entries (Wright, 2020)

Research Journal:

Diary Entry 1 (Wright,2020)

There are farms and hills surrounding my home and visiting them can sometimes be the best part of my day. I am quite a procrastinator and I think this is due to the fact I often find myself daydreaming and lost in thoughts - my mind can at times be racing with thoughts both happy and worrysome. On a walk I can do something healthy and enjoyable and also process all of these thoughts. This is something I have discovered over lockdown.

Diary Entry 2 (Wright,2020)

I started going out at night for a routine walk. The darkness and cold atmosphere is appealing and leaving my walks until nighttime has been beneficial as it gave me a break inbetween studying and relaxing. I intentionally did not put my earphones in or look at my phone whilst walking and used the time to think over my day.

Diary Entry 3 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 4 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 5 (Wright,2020)
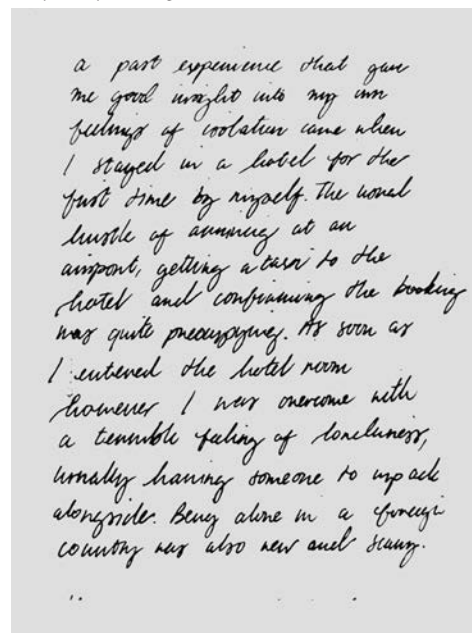

Diary Entry 6 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 7 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 8 (Wright,2020)

There are farms and hills surrounding my home and visiting them can sometimes be the best part of my day I am quite a procrastinator and I think this is due to the fact I often find myself daydreaming and lost in thoughts - my mind can at times be racing with thoughts both happy and worrysome. On a walk I can do something healthy and enjoyable and also process all of these thoughts. - This is something I have discovered over lockdown.

Diary Entry 9 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 10 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 11 (Wright,2020)

Diary Entry 12 (Wright,2020)

Diary Photography (Wright,2020)

There are farms and hills surrounding my home and visiting them can sometimes be the best part of my day I am quite a procrastinator and I think this is due to the fact I often find myself daydreaming and lost in thoughts - my mind can at times be racing with thoughts both happy and worrysome. On a walk I can do something healthy and enjoyable and also process all of these thoughts. - This is something I have discovered over lockdown.

Diary Entry 13 (Wright,2020)
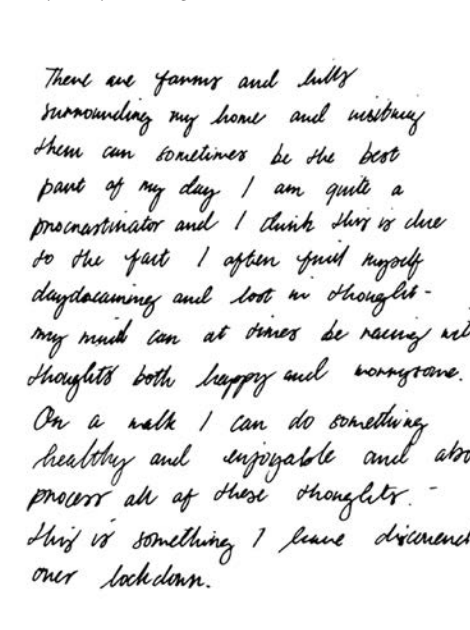

Diary Entry 14 (Wright,2020)

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Appendix Image References:

GUIDE TO SOLITUDE

Silence   Choice   Peace   Journey   MentalHealth

Socialisolation   Safety   Nature   Reflection   Creativity

Pilgrimage   Time   Isolation   Lonely   Freedom

A Guide to Solitude

Diary of Solitude