



Juan Antonio Olivares, Untitled (right ear), 2023, acrylic and graphite powder on aluminum honeycomb panel, 24 x 39.75 x 1 in.  
 © Juan Antonio Olivares, Image Courtesy The Artist and Aguirre.

# What Makes

Long a SANCTUARY for deaf students, the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf’s campus is now largely abandoned, yet a visit reveals the crucial ROLE such spaces play in creating a vibrant, INCLUSIVE community.

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# a Space Deaf?

OUT ON THE LAWN of the abandoned deaf school, things were quiet. Not just the low-tide silence that makes up my everyday existence as a deaf person, but visually. The grass, a little too verdant for early spring, stretched down a gentle slope and out across an open field. Above, bare branches cut a geometric pastiche across the cloudless sky. Large 19th-century buildings shadowed my back, gray stone and leaden glass like something out of a *Harry Potter* set.

The campus, a 33-acre haven on the outskirts of Philadelphia, was home to the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (P.S.D.) from 1822 to 1984. Founders purchased the land for \$1 and constructed the school using rocks from the local quarry, shaping P.S.D. into a shining beacon of what the deaf can do when given opportunities for self-determination. A K-12 residential institution, the school was home to 2,000 students

at its peak, offering education in academics and vocational skills, including printing, beauty school, auto mechanics and even running a small farm. By the 1980s, enrollment had dwindled, in part due to the wider availability of the M.M.R. vaccine, leaving fewer young people deafened by measles or rubella, and in part from changing educational pedagogy that established “inclusion” as the new gold standard.

Like many cultural groups, deaf communities have shared languages and histories, a rich tradition of storytelling and theater, and shared values of both moral and aesthetic varieties. Here in the United States, American Sign Language (A.S.L.) is central to our culture, though there are over 300 signed languages created and signed by local deaf communities across the globe. Culturally, deaf people often recognize deafness – and the language and comradery it

confers – as a positive component of our identity, a sensory difference whose challenges are not inherent but rather the result of barriers thrown up by ableist and audio-centric systems; to the world’s medical diagnosis of hearing loss, we declare “deaf gain.”

Unlike other sociocultural groups, though, about 90 percent of deaf children in the U.S. and Western Europe are born to hearing parents. Because deafness is a low-incidence disability, many parents are meeting a deaf person for the first time in their own child. Nervous and underinformed, they defer to the experts, who have financial incentives to support the pursuit of assimilation: hearing aids, cochlear implants, speech and auditory therapies, education in a mainstream classroom and the avoidance of signed language.

What happens when the apple falls far from the tree? Society’s conception

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of “culture” typically falls within the model anthropologists call “vertical transmission,” a set of ideas transferred between generations within a family unit. The prevalence of this is ensconced within our figures of speech – culture is “passed down” from grandparent to parent to child.

Since most deaf people don’t share deafness with our families, our culture is typically “passed over” between peers, rather than intergenerationally. Because deafness is not only genetically recessive but also naturally diasporic and intersectional, with a rich diversity in race, ethnicity, class, gender, geography and additional disability, the function of the deaf schools as physical hubs for social and cultural exposure has long been essential.

But the U.S. federal law governing special education has made it increasingly difficult for families to send their deaf children “out of district” to schools like P.S.D. The law and those who enforce it – typically hearing, nondisabled women – contort the stipulation that a student be educated in the “least restrictive environment” to mean in the “closest neighborhood school,” surrounded by “typical” peers.

But, in practice, this means a deaf child is often isolated, with incomplete

access to instruction and social interaction via assistive technology like hearing aids, and without access to signed language.

The majority of deaf children in the U.S. today are implanted, mainstreamed and do not learn A.S.L. Uncoincidentally, the majority of deaf children in the U.S. today also suffer from at least some degree of language deprivation, which, though preventable, can cause permanent cognitive damage.

For deaf people, deaf schools are about as close to ancestral homes as we can possibly get. They are safe spaces where we are the majority, where we can learn and play without communication barriers, and they are the keepers of our historical archives. Much of P.S.D.’s archives remain safe for now – the school relocated to a smaller campus as a day program, now serving just under 200 students.

The P.S.D. students were also why I was back at the old campus in the first place. Some of the high schoolers were reading my novel, *True Biz*, featuring a fictional residential school based on a reimagining of the old P.S.D. grounds. One of the school’s archivists, as well as staff members who had once been students there themselves, were going to give us a tour.

The students jumped from their buses alight with curiosity and field-trip giddiness, their signs stirring the atmosphere back into motion. Our guides explained to us which buildings had been dorms, classrooms and recreational areas, and how things had been, at various points segregated by sex, age and race. One former student described to the group of skeptical teens the way the deaf had previously called home – sending early text messages over phonelines through teletypewriter machines. Another told of a “crop circle” that had appeared on campus one morning, sending residents into a frenzy and even drawing interest from local news crews. (It later came out that a maintenance worker had moved a bush.) At some point, one student still stuck on the size of the campus raised his hand and said, “You mean *all* of this was for deaf people?”

Formal discourse about the principles of what makes a space “deaf” exists within academic architectural spheres. Coined at Gallaudet University in 2005, the concept of DeafSpace seeks to explore the ways in which traditional architecture and urban planning create barriers to deaf people who rely on visual and kinetic information, and how deafness brings opportunities for innovation in design.

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DeafSpace makes five categorical considerations: sensory reach, space and proximity, mobility and proximity, light and color, and acoustics: design principles that play out in a variety of practical ways. Deaf-friendly design generally includes gentle lighting to prevent eyestrain, ramps and wider walkways to allow signers to walk side-by-side without interruption, strategic mirror placement to provide information around corners or behind, arched seating arrangements for better sightlines and background-noise dampening for those using assistive hearing technology.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about DeafSpace is the ways in which it so often serves all people better, implementing many elements of universal design.

The disabled, the elderly and people with small children all benefit from ramps and wide walkways. And who couldn’t benefit from a little less visual or listening fatigue? DeafSpace is a reminder of how much easier ensuring accessibility can be when it’s an integrated design principle rather than a retrofit, and how much hearing and nondisabled people might learn from deaf folks, if only they would take a moment to stop and listen.

Being more than 200 years old, P.S.D.’s former campus doesn’t reliably adhere to DeafSpace principles. Nevertheless, it was a vital physical space for so many generations of deaf people, where education was designed especially for deaf learners, and where they had the freedom to communicate and learn from one another. Even several centuries ago, the deaf school founders knew what we seem to have forgotten in education and many other spheres today: there is no diversity, equity or inclusion without access.

Together, we tested the doors of the gymnasium, excited and relieved when the door obliged and let us in, providing respite from the cold. We flipped the lights, but nothing happened; a few flickered on after a minute or two, while some never did. The students joked about whether the locker rooms were haunted, spooking one another by moving stall doors. For a few minutes, the gym came back alive as the boys scrounged up a usable basketball for a round of three-on-three. Even in the half-dark, they looked at home on the court, the splintering bleachers and wood-vaulted ceiling the only reminders that they were of a different time.

We closed up the building, and the students trekked back to the school

buses, laughing and whooping. But when their buses retreated down the winding drive, it was quiet again. While some of the campus’s outbuildings have been leased by a church and a few doctors for offices, others are vacant and left to ruin. More than that, there are no plaques mentioning the school’s centuries-long existence, no recognition for its notable alumni, nothing to mark that we had ever been there.

On the drive home, I allowed myself to dip into the feeling I’d been staving off all morning: grief. I thought about what happens when society confuses self-determination and community-building for segregation, and all we’ve lost in the name of forced assimilation. I passed the city’s premiere children’s hospital, where researchers had restored an 11-year-old deaf boy’s hearing using experimental gene therapy, to international fanfare. One day, scientists hope, they will be able to “cure” deafness in infancy or even alter fetuses in-utero, before the person even knows who they might have been.

I still think of that student, the one who was incredulous that such a lush and substantial space had once belonged to us. Looking out over the precipice of our eradication, I can’t help but share in his wonder, and doubt. 🍷