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Research Article

Designing for Persistence: An Integrative Conceptual Framework for Art, Architecture, and Psychological Need Support in Athletic Locker Rooms

Geonyoung Kim

Independent Researcher, South Korea
Email: gypower2007@gmail.com

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Abstract
Sustained participation in competitive sport depends not only on physical ability but also on athletes' psychological experiences of autonomy, competence, belonging, and identity. Although sport psychology has extensively examined motivational environments, the architectural settings in which athletes experience achievement, disappointment, and interpersonal interaction have received comparatively limited attention as potential sources of psychological need support. This article develops an integrative conceptual framework for understanding how artistic and architectural interventions in athletic locker rooms might contribute to motivational persistence. Drawing on self-determination theory, athletic identity research, environmental psychology, and evidence concerning participatory arts, the article identifies three interrelated design dimensions: individual narrative ownership, collective belonging, and spatial agency. These dimensions are translated into three architectural propositions: personalized progress displays, participatory identity walls, and adaptable reflection spaces. The framework distinguishes environmental affordances from psychological outcomes and emphasizes that spatial design cannot independently produce resilience or prevent sport discontinuation. Five research propositions are developed to guide future empirical investigation, alongside recommendations for participatory design, longitudinal assessment, and comparison-based evaluation. The article contributes a psychologically informed approach to athletic facility design while reframing persistence as autonomous, meaningful engagement rather than unconditional endurance. It argues that locker rooms may be productively conceptualized as socio-spatial environments in which design can support, constrain, or complicate athletes' experiences of identity and motivation.
Keywords: Athletic Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, Locker-Room Architecture, Environmental Psychology, Design.

1. Introduction

Competitive sport demands sustained commitment under conditions of uncertainty. Athletes repeatedly confront challenges involving physical exhaustion, competitive disappointment, injuries, selection decisions, and changing expectations. Their ability to continue pursuing athletic goals cannot be adequately explained by physical preparation or individual determination alone. Psychological motivation develops within social environments that can either support or frustrate fundamental human needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Research in sport psychology has established the importance of autonomy-supportive environments. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Manninen *et al.,* (2022), involving 38 studies and 12,457 participants, found that self-determination theory-based instructional interventions produced small, heterogeneous improvements in intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, while also reducing some forms of controlled

motivation and amotivation. These findings indicate that motivational experiences can be influenced by environmental and interpersonal interventions, although the magnitude and consistency of effects depend on intervention characteristics.

The physical environment, however, represents a comparatively underdeveloped dimension of this discussion. Sports facilities are conventionally evaluated according to functional criteria, including safety, circulation, equipment accommodation, hygiene, and training efficiency. While these considerations are indispensable, they do not fully address the psychological experiences of athletes occupying these environments. Among athletic facilities, locker rooms present a distinctive architectural context. They accommodate preparation before competition, social interaction among teammates, equipment management, and transitions between athletic participation and other daily activities. They are also settings in which athletes may privately or collectively experience disappointment, uncertainty, pride, and anticipation. This dual function suggests that locker rooms should be examined as more than transitional service spaces.

Research in environmental psychology has demonstrated that architectural characteristics can be relevant to psychological stress and well-being (Evans and McCoy, 1998). More recent discussions of built environments in sports science have also emphasized the potential importance of athlete-centered spatial design, including individualized recovery areas and environments accommodating different user needs. Nevertheless, these perspectives do not establish that locker-room design directly increases athletic motivation or reduces dropout. The relationship remains a theoretical and empirical question.

A second relevant body of literature concerns athletic identity. Chun *et al.,* (2023), in a systematic review of 54 studies, examined how athletes construct, maintain, and renegotiate their identities across different stages of participation. Their findings emphasize that athletic identity is not static and may become particularly vulnerable during injury, transition, or role conflict. This perspective is important because motivational persistence does not necessarily require athletes to maintain an unchanged identity or pursue an original goal indefinitely. Rather, adaptive persistence may involve revising personal expectations, redefining success, and reconstructing meaning following setbacks. Artistic expression may offer one means of representing these processes. A systematic review of participatory arts interventions by O'Donnell *et al.,* (2022) identified perceived benefits involving connectedness, emotional regulation, meaning-making, identity, and empowerment, although the evidence for effectiveness was limited by methodological weaknesses. While these findings concern adult mental health rather than athletic locker rooms, they provide a rationale for examining participatory visual expression as a potential component of psychologically informed spatial design.

The present article integrates these research traditions to address the following question:

How might art and architectural design in athletic locker rooms create environmental conditions that support psychological needs associated with meaningful, sustained athletic participation?

Three objectives guide the analysis:

1) First, the article identifies psychological mechanisms potentially relevant to the relationship between spatial environments and athletic motivation.
2) Second, it translates these mechanisms into specific architectural and artistic design propositions.
3) Third, it develops a research agenda through which the proposed relationships may be evaluated empirically.

The article's central argument is that athletic locker rooms may be conceptualized as socio-spatial environments whose design affords opportunities for personal expression, collective belonging, and environmental choice. These opportunities may support psychological experiences associated with motivational persistence, although their actual effects remain to be established.

2. Methodological Approach

2.1. Research Design

This article adopts an integrative conceptual approach rather than an experimental or systematic-review design. Its purpose is to synthesize relevant theoretical and empirical findings from sport psychology, environmental psychology, athletic identity research, and participatory arts in order to develop an interdisciplinary design framework. The analysis draws on foundational theories and published research addressing four areas: psychological need satisfaction and motivation, identity development among athletes,

relationships between built environments and psychological experience, and the potential psychosocial functions of participatory artistic activity.

The literature is used to establish theoretical connections rather than to calculate pooled effects or make comprehensive claims about all available research. Accordingly, this article does not report a systematic database search, formal study-quality appraisal, or exhaustive evidence synthesis. It also does not present original participant observations, surveys, interviews, or experimental outcomes.

2.2. Conceptual Synthesis

The conceptual synthesis follows three analytical stages. The first stage identifies psychological constructs relevant to athletic persistence, particularly autonomy, competence, relatedness, identity continuity, and perceived environmental control. The second stage considers how these constructs might be influenced by physical and symbolic features of shared athletic environments. The third stage translates the resulting relationships into design propositions that can be examined through future empirical research.

An important methodological distinction is maintained throughout: evidence that a psychological mechanism is associated with motivation does not establish that an architectural intervention targeting that mechanism will produce the same outcome. The proposed design framework therefore consists of theoretically informed hypotheses rather than demonstrated causal relationships.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Self-Determination Theory and Motivational Persistence

Self-determination theory provides the primary motivational foundation for the proposed framework. Deci and Ryan (2000) identified autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs associated with motivation and well-being. Autonomy concerns the experience of acting with personal endorsement and willingness. Competence refers to perceived effectiveness in interacting with one's environment. Relatedness involves experiences of interpersonal connection and belonging. These needs are especially relevant in competitive sport, where athletes must negotiate external expectations alongside personal aspirations. Autonomy-supportive conditions can help athletes experience participation as personally meaningful rather than exclusively externally imposed.

Evidence from organized physical activity settings supports the relevance of this distinction. Manninen *et al.,* (2022) found that self-determination theory-based instructional interventions were associated with improvements in selected forms of autonomous motivation, although their effects were generally small and heterogeneous. Importantly, these findings concern instructional interventions, not architectural design. Nevertheless, they suggest that the motivational significance of an environment depends partly on how individuals experience choice, competence, and interpersonal support within it.

The present framework extends this reasoning to the built environment by proposing that spatial design may offer opportunities for psychological need support. A locker room allowing athletes to control personal displays, select among different seating arrangements, and participate voluntarily in collective artistic activities might create opportunities for choice and self-expression.

Whether these opportunities translate into greater autonomy or motivation must be empirically tested.

3.2. Athletic Identity, Setbacks, and the Meaning of Persistence

Athletic identity refers broadly to the extent to which individuals identify with the athlete role. Although strong athletic identification can provide direction and meaning, an excessively exclusive athletic identity may create difficulties when athletes experience injuries, performance decline, or career transitions. Chun *et al.,* (2023) reviewed 54 studies examining athletic identity and identity work. Their synthesis emphasized the importance of understanding identity as a process involving development, maintenance, revision, and reconstruction. This perspective challenges the assumption that psychological resilience necessarily means maintaining an unchanged commitment to a particular athletic goal.

An athlete recovering from injury may need to reconstruct their understanding of athletic competence. Another may redefine success after failing to achieve a desired competitive outcome. Persistence should therefore be distinguished from rigid endurance. In the present article, motivational persistence is conceptualized as continued, self-endorsed engagement with personally meaningful athletic goals, including the capacity to revise those goals when circumstances change. This definition recognizes that discontinuing a

particular competitive pathway may sometimes represent adaptive decision-making rather than psychological failure.

Architectural design cannot determine whether an athlete should continue participating. It may, however, provide opportunities for athletes to reflect on their experiences and construct meaningful personal narratives. The potential contribution of art is especially relevant here. Visual expression may allow athletes to represent experiences that are not adequately captured by competitive statistics, including rehabilitation, changing aspirations, and personal growth.

The proposed relationship between visual identity expression and motivational persistence remains conceptual rather than empirically established.

3.3. Participatory Art, Meaning-Making, and Social Connection

Artistic interventions can be understood as more than decorative enhancements to architectural space. Participatory art involves individuals in processes of creative expression, potentially allowing them to represent personal experiences and contribute to collective meaning. O'Donnell *et al.,* (2022) reviewed 32 studies involving 1,058 participants examining participatory arts interventions and adult mental health and well-being. The review identified perceived benefits associated with connectedness, emotional regulation, meaning-making, identity redefinition, and personal empowerment. However, the authors also emphasized methodological limitations affecting conclusions about effectiveness. These findings offer a useful but indirect foundation for examining participatory art within athletic environments.

The distinction between passive visual exposure and active participation is particularly important. A motivational slogan selected by a coach or facility designer communicates a predetermined message. In contrast, an artwork developed through voluntary contributions from athletes may provide opportunities for individuals to express their own interpretations of success, struggle, and belonging. This difference has potential implications for autonomy and identity.

An artwork representing only championships and elite performers may reinforce a narrow hierarchy of achievement. A participatory installation incorporating diverse athletic experiences may offer a broader representation of team membership. However, the social consequences of such installations depend on their implementation. Mandatory participation, public disclosure of sensitive experiences, or unequal representation could undermine the intended psychological benefits.

Participatory artistic design should therefore prioritize consent, individual choice, and the recognition of different experiences.

3.4. Environmental Psychology and Spatial Agency

Environmental psychology examines relationships between people and their physical surroundings. Evans and McCoy (1998) identified architectural characteristics as potentially relevant to psychological stress and health, while acknowledging limitations in the evidence linking particular building features to specific outcomes. Kaplan (1995) further developed a framework for understanding restorative environmental experiences, particularly in relation to directed-attention fatigue. These studies suggest that environmental characteristics deserve consideration when investigating psychological experience. However, neither establishes that particular locker-room layouts improve athletic resilience.

The present framework introduces the concept of spatial agency to describe athletes' opportunities to select, adapt, and control aspects of their immediate physical environment. Spatial agency is used here as an operational design concept rather than as an independently validated psychological construct. It may involve choosing between communal and quieter seating, controlling the visibility of personal displays, or adjusting movable architectural elements. The underlying proposition is that environmental choice may provide opportunities for autonomy-supportive experiences. Such opportunities are especially relevant in shared spaces, where uniform architectural arrangements may not accommodate different psychological preferences.

4. An Integrative Framework for Psychologically Supportive Locker-Room Design

4.1. Conceptual Structure

The proposed framework connects three environmental dimensions with psychological mechanisms potentially relevant to motivational persistence. The first dimension, narrative ownership, concerns athletes' opportunities to represent their personal histories and define meaningful progress. The second dimension,

collective recognition, concerns opportunities to experience membership and recognition within a shared athletic environment. The third dimension, spatial agency, concerns opportunities to select or modify immediate environmental conditions according to individual preferences.

These dimensions are hypothesized to relate to autonomy, competence, relatedness, and perceived environmental comfort. The framework does not assume that these relationships are direct or universal. Instead, the effects of architectural interventions are expected to depend on factors including team culture, coaching practices, individual preferences, and the extent to which athletes participate in design decisions.

4.2. Narrative Ownership: The Progress Locker

The first proposed intervention is the Progress Locker. Conventional athletic lockers primarily serve storage and equipment-management functions. The Progress Locker adds an optional visual surface through which athletes may represent personal experiences and development. Possible elements include photographs, drawings, training milestones, personal reflections, and visual symbols. Unlike conventional displays emphasizing championships or rankings, the Progress Locker would allow athletes to select experiences that they consider meaningful. An athlete might represent the completion of rehabilitation, the acquisition of a difficult skill, or a personally significant moment of perseverance.

The intended psychological mechanisms are autonomy and competence. Athletes would retain control over whether they participate, what they display, and when their displays change. This design proposition is informed by self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and research emphasizing the dynamic character of athletic identity (Chun *et al.,* 2023). The intervention may provide a physical opportunity for athletes to construct and revise narratives of progress.

Nevertheless, its effectiveness would depend on implementation. If the display became a compulsory record of achievement, it could introduce comparison or performance pressure. Therefore, personal control and voluntary participation are essential design conditions.

Proposition 1: Athlete-controlled visual displays of personally meaningful progress will be positively associated with perceived autonomy and competence when participation is voluntary and non-comparative.

Proposition 2: Opportunities for visual representation of setbacks and personal development will be associated with greater perceived continuity of athletic identity during periods of performance difficulty.

4.3. Collective Recognition: The Participatory Identity Wall

The second intervention is a participatory visual installation integrated into a communal locker-room area. The proposed Identity Wall would incorporate contributions from athletes representing personal experiences, collective memories, and interpretations of team membership. Its purpose would differ from that of conventional championship displays. Rather than defining collective identity exclusively through competitive achievement, the installation would recognize the contributions of individuals occupying different roles within the team. Athletes might contribute visual representations of meaningful experiences, lessons learned, or personal symbols. The artwork would evolve as team membership and experiences change.

The theoretical rationale draws on the importance of relatedness within self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and evidence concerning the perceived psychosocial benefits of participatory arts (O'Donnell *et al.,* 2022). The proposed mechanism is collective recognition. By making individual contributions visible within a shared composition, the installation may create opportunities for athletes to experience belonging.

However, visibility alone does not guarantee inclusion. An athlete may feel excluded if contributions are selectively displayed or if participation becomes socially compulsory. The design process must therefore account for differences in comfort, privacy, and willingness to participate.

Proposition 3: Voluntary participation in collectively produced visual installations will be positively associated with perceived recognition and team belonging when the process is inclusive and athlete-directed.

4.4. Spatial Agency: The Reset Space

The third intervention addresses the spatial organization of psychological transitions. Locker rooms frequently prioritize shared seating and efficient circulation. These arrangements support practical activities but may provide limited opportunities for individuals who prefer temporary privacy. Following competitive

disappointment or demanding training, athletes may differ in their immediate preferences for interaction. Some may seek social contact, while others may prefer a quieter environment before engaging with teammates.

The proposed Reset Space introduces flexible seating and partial spatial separation within the existing locker-room layout. Potential elements include movable benches, adjustable partitions, acoustic treatments, and individually controllable lighting where technically feasible. The purpose is not to prescribe solitude as a universal recovery strategy. Rather, the intervention provides alternatives within a shared environment. Its conceptual foundation lies in environmental psychology and the importance of investigating how architectural characteristics relate to stress and subjective comfort (Evans and McCoy, 1998). The Reset Space also draws indirectly on research concerning restorative environments (Kaplan, 1995). Because these studies did not investigate locker-room design, the intervention must be evaluated independently.

Proposition 4: Access to optional, adaptable reflection spaces will be positively associated with perceived environmental control and comfort following demanding athletic experiences.

4.5. Integrating Individual and Collective Needs

The three interventions address potentially complementary psychological experiences. The Progress Locker emphasizes personal narrative ownership. The Identity Wall emphasizes collective recognition. The Reset Space emphasizes spatial agency. Together, they seek to create an environment in which athletes can experience both individuality and belonging.

The integration of these elements is important because psychological needs may not always align. For example, a highly communal environment may support interaction while limiting privacy. Conversely, extensive individual separation may reduce opportunities for informal team engagement. A flexible architectural approach may accommodate these differences without prescribing a single ideal experience.

The model therefore proposes that psychological support emerges not from a specific aesthetic style but from the relationship between design affordances, user choice, and social context.

Proposition 5: The relationship between psychologically informed locker-room design and autonomous athletic motivation will be mediated by perceived psychological need satisfaction and moderated by team climate and athlete participation in design decisions.

5. Implications for Empirical Research

5.1. Study Design

The proposed framework requires empirical evaluation before conclusions can be drawn about effectiveness. A future study could adopt a longitudinal, mixed-methods, controlled design involving multiple school or community athletic teams. Facilities implementing the proposed interventions would be compared with facilities retaining their existing configurations. Where random allocation is impractical, a staggered implementation or matched comparison design could help reduce threats to internal validity. Measurements should be collected before installation, shortly after implementation, and at later follow-up points.

5.2. Outcome Measures

Primary outcomes should include perceived autonomy, competence, relatedness, and autonomous sport motivation. Secondary outcomes could include perceived environmental control, team belonging, identity continuity, environmental satisfaction, and self-reported responses to competitive setbacks.

Behavioral outcomes, such as continued participation, should be interpreted cautiously because participation decisions depend on numerous external circumstances. Existing validated instruments should be selected and adapted only where psychometrically justified.

5.3. Participatory Design and Qualitative Evaluation

Athletes should be involved in identifying environmental needs before interventions are finalized. Participatory workshops could explore existing frustrations, preferred spatial arrangements, and the personal significance of different artistic features.

Following implementation, interviews could examine whether the interventions are experienced as supportive, unnecessary, distracting, or uncomfortable. Qualitative findings would be especially important for understanding differences between intended design functions and actual user experiences.

5.4. Ethical and Practical Considerations

The proposed interventions involve several ethical concerns. Personal displays could unintentionally reveal sensitive information or create social pressure. Collaborative artwork could reinforce existing hierarchies if some athletes' contributions receive greater recognition. Reflection spaces could create supervision or accessibility concerns if implemented without appropriate safeguards.

Accordingly, participation must remain voluntary, personal information must be protected, and architectural modifications must comply with relevant safety and accessibility requirements. For adolescent participants, appropriate ethical approval, parental consent, and participant assent would be required.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

The principal contribution of this article is the integration of motivational psychology with architectural and artistic design. Existing sport psychology research demonstrates the importance of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and social conditions for motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Manninen *et al.,* 2022). Athletic identity research emphasizes that athletes continually construct and revise their understanding of themselves, particularly during challenging transitions (Chun *et al.,* 2023). Participatory arts research identifies potential psychosocial processes involving identity, connectedness, and meaning-making, while also documenting limitations in the strength of available evidence (O'Donnell *et al.,* 2022). Environmental psychology provides a basis for investigating how architectural conditions relate to psychological experience (Evans and McCoy, 1998).

The present framework connects these perspectives by proposing that physical and symbolic features of locker rooms may offer opportunities for psychological need support.

The proposed contribution is therefore conceptual rather than evidentiary. It establishes a set of testable relationships between design affordances and psychological experiences without claiming that these relationships have already been demonstrated.

6.2. Persistence Without Coercion

A central distinction in the framework concerns the meaning of persistence. Athletic cultures frequently celebrate perseverance, sacrifice, and the refusal to abandon goals. However, psychological well-being cannot be equated with unconditional continuation. An athlete may reasonably revise or discontinue a competitive goal because of injury, changing interests, or personal circumstances. The proposed framework therefore does not treat athletic dropout as an inherently negative outcome. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of supporting athletes' capacity to make self-endorsed decisions.

A psychologically supportive locker room should not communicate that an athlete's value depends on winning or remaining in sport indefinitely. Rather, it should create opportunities for recognizing progress, maintaining meaningful relationships, and reflecting on changing goals. Under this interpretation, the objective of architecture is not to manufacture determination but to support the conditions under which athletes can experience agency and meaning.

6.3. Design as an Affordance Rather Than a Psychological Intervention

Another important implication concerns the limits of architectural influence. The presence of an artistic installation does not guarantee emotional connection. A private seating area does not automatically reduce stress. A personalized display does not necessarily increase confidence. These interventions provide opportunities for particular experiences, but their consequences depend on how individuals interpret and use them.

The proposed framework therefore conceptualizes design features as environmental affordances rather than direct psychological treatments. This distinction prevents the overextension of findings from psychology and environmental research into unsupported architectural claims.

It also establishes a more rigorous foundation for future evaluation.

6.4. Practical Relevance

The framework has potential relevance for school athletic facilities, community sports centers, and training environments. Its interventions can be explored through relatively modest modifications rather than extensive

reconstruction. Removable displays, modular seating, and participatory installations may be feasible in existing facilities, although costs and implementation requirements would vary. The emphasis on adaptable elements also allows facilities to respond to changing user preferences.

More broadly, the framework encourages collaboration among athletes, designers, coaches, and researchers. Such collaboration may help ensure that architectural decisions reflect actual user experiences rather than assumptions about what athletes should find motivating.

7. Limitations

This article has several limitations. First, it is a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or empirical investigation. The selected literature supports the theoretical discussion but does not constitute an exhaustive representation of all relevant evidence. Second, several supporting studies concern populations or settings outside competitive youth sport. Findings from adult participatory arts interventions, general environmental psychology, and organized physical activity cannot be directly generalized to adolescent athletes using locker rooms.

Third, the proposed relationships between architectural features and psychological outcomes remain untested. Fourth, the framework does not establish that changes in psychological need satisfaction will produce measurable reductions in sport discontinuation. Fifth, the effects of spatial interventions may depend on sporting discipline, gender, age, cultural context, facility characteristics, and existing team relationships.

Finally, the framework emphasizes psychological experiences but does not provide detailed technical specifications for architectural implementation. Future research should integrate building safety, accessibility, maintenance, privacy, and cost considerations into the design and evaluation process. These limitations reinforce the need for controlled, longitudinal, and context-sensitive empirical investigation.

8. Conclusion

Motivational persistence in sport is shaped by psychological needs, social relationships, and evolving personal identities. Although these factors have received substantial attention in sport psychology, the potential contribution of everyday athletic spaces remains an important area for interdisciplinary investigation. This article develops a conceptual framework connecting art, architecture, and psychological need support within athletic locker rooms. Three design dimensions are proposed: narrative ownership, collective recognition, and spatial agency. These dimensions are translated into personalized progress displays, participatory artistic installations, and adaptable reflection spaces.

The framework argues that the psychological significance of locker-room design should be investigated through athletes' experiences of autonomy, competence, relatedness, identity continuity, and environmental control. It does not claim that architectural interventions can guarantee resilience or prevent athletes from abandoning competitive goals. Instead, it proposes that thoughtfully designed environments may create opportunities for athletes to reflect on their development, experience belonging, and exercise greater choice within their immediate surroundings.

The significance of this approach extends beyond athletic performance. By recognizing that athletes are individuals whose identities and aspirations evolve through both achievement and adversity, architectural design can be reconsidered as a potential contributor to environments that respect psychological well-being alongside competitive ambition. The central challenge is not to design spaces that demand perseverance, but to investigate how spaces might support athletes in finding their own reasons to continue, reconsider, or begin again.

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