Outer Spaces: Observing Common Spaces Outside the Library

Background
In Spring 2014, MSU Libraries’ User Experience Workgroup conducted a comprehensive space study of the Main Library. Primary methods of assessment included observational seating sweeps1 and a “guerrilla survey” (Fig. 1) in high-traffic areas. Acknowledging that Library facilities do not exist in a vacuum, I set out to conduct similar seating sweeps in other campus common spaces, or “outer spaces” (Table 1). The purpose of the outer spaces sweeps was to determine if students engage in distinctly different ways depending on the location, design, and intent of a space.

Methodology
In April 2014, seating sweeps were conducted on four separate occasions in five non-library campus locations. Locations were selected based on proximity to the Main Library, intended usage, capacity, and design. Efforts were made to visit each location on two different days, in the morning and the afternoon. Patrons were unobtrusively observed, and information about their activities and the furniture/equipment they used was recorded on a seating sweeps grid (Figure 2). Data collected at “outer spaces” were compared to Main Library sweeps data. To maximize comparability, a subset of Library sweeps data was selected based on area (first floor, West wing).

Table 1: “Outer spaces” summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Academic Department</th>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Admissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Bott</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Classrooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Holden</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>Cafe</td>
<td>Classrooms; Recreation services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Main Library (LW)</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Cafe; Reference; collections; Writing Center</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Cafeeteria; Retail; Writing Center</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>VMC</td>
<td>Academic Veterinary Medicine</td>
<td>Math; English; Foreign languages</td>
<td>Starbucks; Classrooms; Math library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Wells Hall</td>
<td>Academic Galen Library</td>
<td>Math; English; Foreign languages</td>
<td>Starbucks; Classrooms; Math library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1: Library “guerrilla survey”  
Fig. 2: Outer spaces seating sweeps grid

Main Library (LW)
4 seat tables; bar height tables & chairs; lounge seating; no natural light in basement; moderate on L1; moderate traffic in basement; high on L1

Main Library (SW)
2-6 seat tables; lounge seating with side tables; wooden carrels; utilitarian aesthetic; moderate natural light; high traffic; wood paneling; student artwork

Holden Hall
2-4 seat modular tables; bar height tables and chairs; lounge seating and booths with tables; low natural light; poorly lit; bright colours and “busy” patterns; moderate traffic

Bott Nursing Building
Bar height tables and chairs; booths with tables; lounge seating with side tables; minimalist aesthetic; high natural light; floor to ceiling windows; high traffic between classes

Veterinary Medical Center
4 seat tables; wooden carrels; bench seating in foyer; utilitarian aesthetic; low natural light; low traffic in “library”; high traffic in foyer between classes

Seating counts by building type

Group Activity
- Among those sitting in a group...
  - Sitting alone
  - Sitting in group
  - Talking
  - Not talking
  - 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Furniture use
- Bench
- Carrel
- Floor
- Table
- Lounge furniture

Table 2: “Outer spaces” summary

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Limitations
- Space and time: 5,200-acre campus with 538 buildings (95 academic); minimum 15 minutes per sweep
- Some departmental areas restricted to affiliated patrons
- Unable to conduct surveys in non-library spaces
- In absence of detailed floorplans and seat inventories, difficult to determine capacity and proportional popularity of a location or furniture type
- This study’s extent does not warrant generalizable conclusions

Outsider Space Observations
- Academic and support spaces are preferred over residential spaces, despite intentional design features to encourage use (see Seat counts by building type)
- The more disciplines with which an academic space is associated, the heavier use it receives
- However, in multidisciplinary spaces (Holden, Library, Union, Wells), the rate of group study is significantly lower than observed in monodisciplinary spaces (Bott, Vet Med) (see Group Activity)
- Additionally, there is a 100% rate of interaction among people sitting in groups in monodisciplinary spaces; whereas groups in other spaces appear slightly less likely to converse (see Group Activity inset)

Main Library “Guerrilla Survey” Highlights
- In March and April 2014, 699 surveys were distributed in high traffic areas; 151 responses were received, for a response rate of 22%
- 86% (115) of survey respondents came to the library to study
  - 64% (97) to study alone; 12% (18) to study in a group
- If they had to leave the library, 51% (77) of respondents would go somewhere else on campus (see chart below for details)

Where on campus would you go if you had to leave the Library?

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"Invisible Tapes" and Michal B. "User Experience Workgroup" and Mea Culpa (2013) for their roles in the Main Library space study.

"Talking/Chatting categories are defined and assigned by Library Experience Workgroup and Facilities.

Reach us at (517) 432-1800, Michigan State University, in the Main Library space study.


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