

Community / Embodiment

By focusing on boundary spaces and the appealing aspects of existing community spaces I will design an artifact which increases feelings of community at CMU. Beyond collaborative work, I am examining spontaneous interaction and exploration within the CMU student community.

Objects and Locations Strengthening Community

Literature Review

The project began by reviewing existing projects and areas of inquiry in HCI, interaction design, and architecture as shown in Figure 1. I examined theories that address the role of spaces and objects within communities in several contexts. These theories were then grouped into three main areas for further exploration:

Spaces and Collaboration

Specific work focused on improving productivity through collaborative work environments.

Objects and Interaction

The ability of situated objects to change social relationships through play and new modes of interpersonal interaction.

Storytelling and Emergence

The importance of shared experience and storytelling in communities as shared experience.

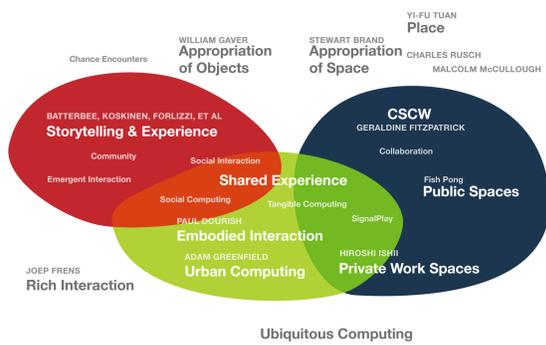


Figure 1

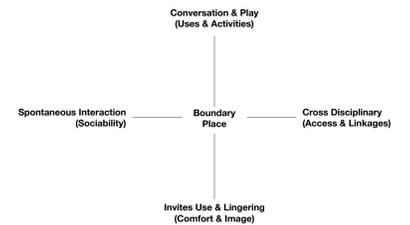
Expert interviews led me to William Whyte's approach to urban planning, resulting in finding the work done by Project for Public Spaces using Whyte's observational approach. The Project for Public Spaces has identified four major areas which effect how spaces are used and what makes them appealing.

I framed the types of physical spaces I would be looking at in terms of parts of home related to spaces at CMU. Since I am examining spaces that are used by multiple disciplines and encourage spontaneous interaction I connected this to the function of a front porch and a foyer on a typical home.

Porchs are visible to the general public, but function as a space to meet others. Foyers provide a similar function, but bring owners and visitors together in an interior space. At CMU I initially correlated these spaces to vestibules and hallways within buildings.

These correlations are show in Figure 2.

Values of Places



Spaces & Use

Homes	Bedroom	Family Room	Dining Room	Living Room	Foyer	Front Porch	Front Yard
CMU	Offices	Studios	Cafes	Classrooms	Hallways	Vestibules	Sidewalks
					Boundary Spaces		Open Space

Figure 2

Interviews & Observations

In order to better understand how students use spaces at CMU I interviewed a cross section of students at varying stages in their CMU experience. These students also had varying degrees of campus involvement and included CMU students who had spent part of their education at satellite CMU campus locations.

Many common threads emerged about the student experience at CMU, especially the high expectations and workload of the CMU environment. Even those who lived on campus look puzzled when I asked about relaxing on campus.

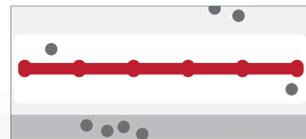
From these interviews I discovered the fence as a common bond shared amongst the students. While many of the graduate students that I interviewed had some relationship to the fence. Those who had "taken the fence" expressed feelings of ownership and pride about the activity. Those who had not "taken the fence" expressed a desire to do so as a way of leaving a mark and participating in a part of CMU history.

The fence emerged as providing much of what I was seeking to understand. I began focusing on why the fence worked as a rallying point for students and what this would mean for any object or space meant to foster interaction within the student community.



Synthesis & Design Implications

Location



Part of the fence's appeal is its central location. Visible from most buildings on campus, it sits at the intersection of many of the major pedestrian paths. While this does not mean that all students participate in the ritual of painting the fence, most students do notice it and look at it to see who has "taken the fence" and what their message is.

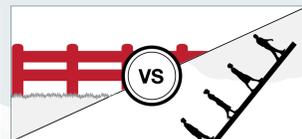
Openness



While the fence serves diverse groups, each group appropriates the fence and uses it as they see fit. There are rules that govern how the fence is painted, but they do not limit what gets painted. This openness adds to the appeal of the fence, both for participants and for passers-by.

Pedestrians are drawn to look at the fence simply to satisfy their curiosity about what has been painted on it. For those who take the fence, the openness means that they can advertise or simply make their mark as a part of CMU tradition.

Ownership



The fence is actually owned by the students, unlike most spaces on campus which are controlled by the University which the administration grants students access and rights. By owning the fence, students enforce the rules and own the fence — to the point that students actually take offense at the school administration interacting with the fence in any way that infringes on the openness. The student ownership allows appropriation as part of interacting with the fence.

Ritual

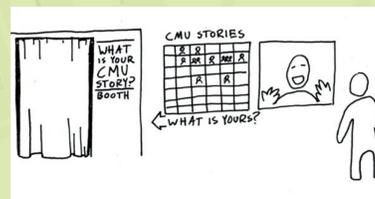


The history of the fence as a meeting place began with its location, but is now as much a function of tradition as location. The rituals that have been created around "taking the fence" are only enforced by students, but are taken very seriously.

In all kinds of weather, students will camp out for the opportunity to paint the fence between midnight and dawn. There are no police: it is only a reverence for the tradition and ritual that keeps the fence as it has been for so long.

What can be learned from the Fence and applied in a manner that allows a greater number of participants and addresses the changing nature of CMU?

Early Concepts



CMU Story Booth

Student record their experiences at CMU by entering the booth. Visitors and other members of the campus community can see the campus diversity in the snapshot view and gain an understanding about life at CMU by watching individual stories.

Openness, Ritual



Distributed Billboards

Normal billboards are uploaded to a network of distributed displays. Information is no longer limited to single departments, but is instead available to the entire campus.

Openness, Location



A New View on Campus

A viewfinder or screen placed near the fence allows students to place digital markers over top of physical locations on campus. By adding another layer of information parts of campus, it opens the possibility for greater participation from a larger number of students in a new way.

Location, Ritual



CMU Crystal Ball

A student-controlled database of information about CMU. By requiring questions to be asked at the crystal ball, the act itself would become a ritual for students to participate in — both seriously and in jest.

Ownership, Ritual

Timeline

Jan 2009 Concept Validation Design Probes	Feb 2009 Prototyping	Mar / Apr 2009 Testing & Refinement	May 2009 Final Presentation
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