

A Learning Spaces Collaboratory Conversation: *Reflections on the Geography of Place*

Our group of architects and academics had the opportunity to explore and reflect on ways in which geographers looked at place and explore the connections of people to place as expressed by Professor Henry Way, Associate Director of the School of Integrated Sciences and Professor of Geography at James Madison University, in a conversation with the larger LSC zoom community. We here share some of our thoughts.

Topophilia—the emotional connection to place—is one of the concepts that Professor Way explored with us. As we thought about our work in designing and using campus buildings, we were reminded of these words from Maya Angelou: *I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.* This reminded us of the importance of the affective interactions with spaces on campus and how they shape learning.

Think for a moment of what you do when you enter a new space.

How do you experience it? How do your emotions impact what you do in the space? What impact do your identities and positionality play? Might these feelings impact your desire to engage and learn in the space? Have contemporary stressors impacted or altered the ways in which we experience, perceive and deploy our uses and understandings of space?

Professor Way talks about the campus as an ecosystem, using the geographer's lens to understand how the spaces create places that fit (or don't fit) together to contribute to a greater and more synergistic whole. He notes that innovation happens at the edges, as this is where the constraints of history, privilege, discipline, tradition and normativity seem to relax. As with many animals, we have a habit of marking our spaces, often in ways that keep others out. This exclusion sometimes supports a narrow, discipline-focused education that is less and less attractive to our students and younger faculty.

What if the markings and silos were removed or if they were ephemeral, allowing spaces to be transformed by the occupants and renewed by new purpose at every use. Might these kinds of spaces promote different forms of connection, learning and engagement? Might they be more inclusive?

If students from half a century ago returned to our campuses, one of the biggest changes they would notice is the technology that supports teaching and learning. However, on most campuses, the technology has not yet transformed the teaching and learning spaces, rather, like the early days of motion pictures, we've taken what we previously have done and used the technology to help (e.g. data projects instead of slides or overhead transparencies). As we start to more fully see diverse technologies and teaching and learning become more fully integrated and self-supporting, we must ask what kinds of spaces we will need.

How will we make sure that these spaces support all learners and don't reinforce existing differences? Who on campus will look at the ecosystems of teaching, scholarship and research and make sure we have the full range of spaces (and technologies) we need?

We have a long tradition on our campuses of optimizing operations and pedagogies at a very local level. This is often to the benefit of the faculty in a particular area, but not to the students who experience many areas in the course of their education. COVID-19 has only further illustrated the urgency and potency of these concerns as instruction, learning and engagement must redefine themselves against the very real backdrop of a public health crisis.

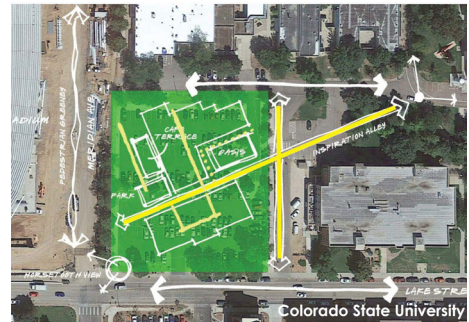
How will the pandemic influence our understanding about technologies and their shifting relationships to universities' missions and instructors' roles?



As we become better attuned to the importance of identity and positionality of staff, students and faculty, we are faced with a number of challenges in understanding the relationship of place and space on campus. A major issue is timescale. In our physical spaces, we have a number of different timescales battling for our attention and resources. Our buildings are meant to endure for many decades, oftentimes a century or more, and renovations come infrequently. Our faculty and staff careers are also measured in decades, but our students change annually and their careers are measured in a few short years.

How do we retain a spirit of flexibility and adaptation in our spaces to attend to the changing interests and needs of our students while trying to retain and manage the overall physical ecosystem of the campus? Who are the stakeholders in these discussions and whose needs are paramount? As we attempt to make our campus spaces more inclusive, responsive and engaging, are all identities and interests represented? Do these viewpoints that have been underrepresented in the past now need to come to the fore in order to promote equity?

As we think about the evolution of the campus, can we take time to deconstruct it? That is, if you “unbuilt” a university, what would be the key elements or characteristics that must be kept? How would student, faculty and alumni views differ and, ultimately, who is the institution built for? How would the “new” university articulate its importance and relevance to the multiple publics and stakeholders who would be asked to support and invest in it?



A geographer sees hierarchies in the way spaces are constructed. Can we level those hierarchies, make them more visible and decide if they have value, so that meaningful decisions might be made regarding their maintenance or their dissolution?

In light of the learning transformations prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have discovered with the migration to virtual learning that students are now having to do their work in spaces we never imagined (and, often, have no control over). If a larger array of virtual or socially distanced classes are on the horizon, how do we need to think about existing and emerging learning spaces? How can we help students create/find spaces in which to learn virtually that attract their attention rather than distract? What will help students and faculty work effectively in virtual spaces? Also, this transformation of space hasn’t just happened virtually.

On many campuses, we have re-conceptualized existing spaces and given them new purposes, whether they be ballrooms that are now socially distanced classrooms, parking garages that are art galleries, or football luxury suites that are now much more public in their utility as seminar or exhibition spaces. The pandemic has brought myriad challenges to academe, and it has forced architects, administrators, faculty, students and communities to face a number of existential questions. Thus, our final question is:

How do our physical spaces, once thought to be stolid and enduring, need to evolve to help us meet both the moment and the changing needs of higher education post-pandemic?

It is the struggle with, and the ultimate responses to, these questions that will set the course of higher education for the decades to come.

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<https://www.pkallsc.org/research-resources-lsc-zoom-roundtables/>

