Erica Hocking

10 September 2006

Redefining Study Habits: The Library East Commons

On a typical weeknight on the Georgia Tech campus, one thing can almost always be assumed: there is homework to be done. With the ease of the first week now completely lost, ideal study places receive a regular flow of students trying to get their work done in whatever environment suits them best. For many students, that environment is, and has traditionally been, the library. Over the last few months, however, the library has transformed one of its wings from the previous conceptions of absolute silence and uncomfortable seating, to a new approach toward learning. In almost direct contrast to the 3rd Floor West wing of the library, outfitted with nearly one hundred cubicles and over twenty rows of bookshelves, the recently renovated East Commons is a combination of computer stations, couches, chairs, and work tables that flow in an arc around the new Jazzman's Café. Despite the years of research designed to create a space that truly satisfies students' needs for learning, however, it must be asked whether or not the designers have succeeded in creating such a study space.

The answer is yes, but in order to understand this answer, one must first understand what it means to be a Sacred Space, and more specifically, a Knowledge Space. The designers of the East Commons intended for the new wing to be a Sacred Space, in that it would "exemplify, typify, reinforce, and perhaps even extol the everyday life patterns" of Georgia Tech students (Hester 279). In other words, the designers wished for this space to serve as an integral part of the Tech community. Even more specifically, it was designed to be a Knowledge Space in that it would serve as an area that is conducive to learning. Just as there are desks in a classroom (the most basic of all Knowledge Spaces), the various tables, chairs, and couches of the new East

Commons were constructed with this requirement in mind. While it is obvious that the traditional library construction of bookshelves and cubicles satisfies these conditions, it will become clear that the new East Commons goes beyond these roles to truly become a Sacred Space at Georgia Tech.

In the case of the East Commons, a dwelling perspective seems to be at its essence (Ingold 185). As Martin Heidegger argues, "We build and have built because we dwell…the essence of building is letting dwell" (350, 361). With students shifting their focus toward the use of technology and the importance of a social study environment, the East Commons was designed and built to accommodate these behaviors of dwelling. As part of the planning procedures for a library renovation, a study was conducted in October of 2003 to determine what was drawing students to the campus' popular study locations. According to Crit Stuart, associate director for Public Services, researchers "took pictures of the places and of the tables in those spaces. [They] talked with students about why they chose to study at that place and compiled a list of reasons" (qtd. in Stephenson 6). Furthermore, Stuart states that a student advisory council, formed the following year, "conducted a series of intense interviews with students" to better understand student demand for Knowledge Spaces (qtd. in Stephenson 6). Just as Hester uncovered the Sacred Spaces in Manteo by conducting surveys and recording what people did in various locations, the researchers at Tech strove to understand exactly what made certain study spaces sacred by observing the students' current dwelling habits (273).

Accommodating these habits obviously required a shift in learning materials, as can be seen in the contrast between East Commons and the 3rd Floor West resources. The East Commons has been equipped with over twenty computers, situated in clusters throughout the wing, highlighting the importance of digital information in current study habits. The computer

workspaces, themselves, provide for academic versatility as each computer station has room for extra chairs, accommodating both group work and individual study. In the 3rd Floor West, however, the few computers that are provided are outdated and are meant only for looking up printed resources. While wireless connection is available for laptop users, this wing is obviously dedicated to printed texts and learning materials.

Another key difference between these two Knowledge Spaces lies in their furniture. Whether used for reading, taking notes, or working on a laptop, the armchairs and couches that are interspersed throughout the East Commons' three main sitting areas offer a quality space for those who wish to work in a relaxed position. They help to create a social environment and facilitate group studying, providing a sense of connection among the students. Even the tables within the East Commons have even been designed to accommodate the shift from individual to social studying. They are built upon wheels in order to allow the students to arrange their optimal environment. If they wish to work in a large group, they can easily push tables together. If not, the students can move the table into a more secluded space. Traditional study environments, like that of the 3rd Floor West, are furnished with drastically different furniture. Among the hundreds of chairs present in the wing, less than a dozen are designed to be used as comfortable armchairs. Even among these chairs, they are situated so far apart form each other that they do not promote any sort of social interaction between their occupants. As for the tables in the 3rd Floor West, they are small, individual workspaces, separated from the surrounding tables by three gray cubicle walls. The spaces were engineered with completely individual work in mind, and the construction makes no attempt to offer comfort or coziness.

With the construction of he East Commons, a new brand of library user is emerging at Georgia Tech. While the 3rd Floor West represents the traditional conceptions of a student in a

library, the East Commons offers a new perspective on the library's user. One of the easiest user differences to recognize is in the area of group work. As people arrive at the East Commons, they often appear in groups of at least two people. While there are those who still prefer to work individually, most occupants of the East Commons study socially. Even if people do not physically work together, they arrive as a unit and elect to work within close proximity of one another. This group atmosphere is further promoted with the addition of Jazzman's as the café serves as a gathering place for students to temporarily abandon their studies and talk with one another over food and drink. Just as The Duchess Restaurant served as a place "where locals gathered for morning coffee and political discussions," and thus functioned as a Sacred Space within Manteo, Jazzman's fulfills a similar human yearning for group bonding and has become an integral part of the East Commons (Hester 276). The 3rd Floor West, however, almost directly contrasts this notion of social studying. Nearly everyone who enters this wing enters alone. With only about a dozen people occupying the 3rd Floor West at any given time, they remain spread out throughout the maze of cubicles, each occupying a study space that is clearly delineated as their own. Also, as if the cubicle layout didn't make it obvious enough that social interaction was not welcome in this atmosphere, there are several signs posted that ask the students to refrain from talking at all, creating a user that functions in isolation.

Yet another aspect in which the two opposing study spaces help to create two distinctly different users deals with sensitivity to ambient noise. As the East Commons is often heavily populated and serves as a social atmosphere, ambient noise is an inherent part of this Knowledge Space. It therefore creates a student who not only tolerates the subtle murmur around them, but may actually appreciate the outside noises. Just as many students choose to listen to music while studying, the gentle hum of other conversations may provide just the right amount of ambient

noise for the student to feel comfortable. The 3rd Floor West, on the other hand, severely restricts the amount of ambient noise that is permitted. As students are instructed not to talk and to turn cell phones to vibrate, the only noises that may be heard are those of chairs moving along the floor, papers rustling in a binder or book, and the occasional sneeze or sniffling. No real sounds of human interaction can be heard, thus creating a sterile environment that solicits students who operate best without the interference of ambient sounds.

One last aspect to consider in user differences is the type of work in which the East Commons and 3rd Floor West inhabitants participate. As it has already been established, the East Commons has been set up for the facilitation of digital learning, specifically in the form of computer interface. The numerous computer workstations and the abundance of outlets throughout the Knowledge Space invite the users to participate in the new technologies used for learning and receiving information. While the East Commons sitting areas still provide ample study space for reading and traditional bookwork, the focus is clearly on the accessibility of electronic resources. As computer use is limited to the battery life of those who choose to bring their laptops to the 3rd Floor West, however, a direct contrast is again present between the users of the separate Knowledge Spaces. Without the convenience of outlets in close proximity to the cubicles, prolonged computer use is nearly impossible, further establishing the wing's focus on learning from the printed word. Books and papers serve as the primary mediums for information acquisition, effectively creating a user who feels most capable with these materials. With such contrasting views on social studying, the presence of ambient noise, and the type of work to be completed by the user, the dichotomy between the new East Commons and the traditional 3rd Floor West, and more specifically the differences in users created by these spaces, is evident.

As students across the nation have grown more accustomed to, and comfortable with, studying in a social atmosphere, it is obvious that the East Commons has drawn from these recently acquired habits to emerge as a vital space in which Georgia Tech students can effectively learn. While the East Commons is bustling with groups of students constantly coming and leaving, the bookshelves and cubicles of the practically deserted 3rd Floor West now stand in solitude as memorials to study habits of the past. With the emersion of a redefined library user, the general yearning for companionship and social interaction among students has been effectively satisfied, allowing for the East Commons to co-emerge as a successful Sacred Knowledge Space. Although the East Commons is a success, "building…is a process that is continually going on, for as long as people dwell in an environment" (Ingold 188). The versatility of the new study space allows students to continue to improve the function of the East Commons as it relates to their dwelling. Through such a cycle of dwelling, building, and refining, the notion of the library and its user will only continue down this path of transformation.

Works Cited

Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Writing (1964).*

New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977.

Hester, Randolph T., Jr.. "Sacred Structures and Everyday Life: A Return to Manteo, North

Carolina." *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*. Ed.

David Seamon. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993. 271-295.

Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling, and skill.* New

York: Routledge, 2000.

Stephenson, James. "Project completes first-floor plan." *Technique* 8 Sept. 2006: 6.