

SOFT SPACE HOLDS IT ALL TOGETHER

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In multidisciplinary science buildings on college and university campuses, it is the “soft space” that many times unifies the complex. These spaces activate the building, promote social interaction between students and faculty, and set up locations for spontaneous collaboration and cross pollination. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these types of spaces foster interdepartmental communication at a student and faculty level. Informal spaces allows for one-on-one learning experiences and small group research.



Middlebury College – View of the West Wing through the Great Hall

Five Reasons to include Soft Space

1. Sell science to non-majors by reaching out to wider campus community
2. Foster interdisciplinary discourse between departments
3. Optimize internal departmental communication
4. Promote one-on-one interaction between faculty and student
5. Reinforce community of peers

These interaction spaces can be as diverse as great halls, cloistered retreats, flexible meeting spaces or alcoves for informal instruction. The cost of creating soft spaces isn't as much as many think. As part of the circulation space they can add as little as one to three percent of the overall construction cost. Sometimes perceived as a luxury, these spaces are woven into building circulation, simplify building junctures, and serve as multi-purpose spaces that make them cost-effective.

In recent science centers, a variety of spaces have been used to foster this type of interaction.

Exterior Campus Space

Here are four examples of form generators when it comes to defining exterior campus space - quads, lawns, cloisters and building as object. These often overlooked opportunities for student faculty interaction usually follow five basic rules of thumb:

- Support the campus master plan
- Building massing must be appropriate to the context of the site and the surrounding buildings
- Scale must fit within the existing/new landscape
- Promote pedestrian and vehicular circulation
- Create building-specific outdoor spaces

Public Commons or Atria

Key organizing elements for the building include public common areas with a programmatic element that draws people to these soft spaces. Examples include libraries, lecture halls, and food service areas. They are often included in a central atrium, a winter garden, or an internal courtyard. These spaces usually function as gathering spaces for students but also can be “booked” for formal functions, poster sessions, faculty student receptions, even musical events and formal dinners.



Middlebury College – Informal Lounge Area

Regardless of what form the public commons take – natural light, adjacency to primary circulation routes, direct access to an exterior (in good weather occupants just filter outside), bordered by multiple departments – shared spaces are key components to promote continued use. Catering kitchens or satellite food service facilities are increasingly finding their way into or adjacent to these spaces.

Science Libraries

Students used to do most of their homework in their dorm rooms. Today, there are too many distractions such as television, video games, instant messaging, social networking, to name just a few. Additionally, in the sciences, students have hands-on research that cannot be done in a dorm room.

People used to worry that libraries would disappear with the advent of the Internet. Why would you need to physically go to a library when you could find all the information you need online? Libraries have evolved in response to the changing study habits of today's college students. We like to call it the Barnes & Noble phenomenon – they offer free WiFi, they sell coffee.

They even offer comfortable and/or informal seating. Science Libraries are increasing important in science centers, they themselves are becoming large interactive soft spaces with a larger variety of spaces to promote team and individual learning.



Oberlin College – Center Commons

Informal Learning Spaces

Ten to fifteen years ago, no one asked for informal learning spaces; now, it's almost a standard part of any building program at a college or university. We try to locate informal learning spaces adjacent to the atrium or large organizing spaces, or adjacent to faculty offices and research space. The key is proximity to faculty – not an island tucked away in a dark corner. The set-up of these soft spaces usually includes tables and chairs for team or individual work, tel/data network connections, as well as white boards, blackboards and/or tack space. Some of these types of space can be signed-out by students or faculty for more formal sessions.



Massachusetts Institute of Technology – Informal Learning

Lounge Spaces

Lounge spaces include many of the same features as informal learning spaces – whiteboard or blackboard, tel/data, and natural light. However, unlike informal learning environments, there is soft (informal) seating and they're located adjacent to horizontal or vertical circulation paths. Additionally, these soft spaces can be at the end of the building taking advantage of panoramic views such as at Middlebury College. These spaces can be slightly off the beaten path for a more contemplative atmosphere.

At Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, for example, lounges are located between departments, building junctures and circulation nodes. Lounges can be department based, a common resource or a combination.

Soft spaces are vital for student interaction and collaboration. Additionally, they are becoming an important component for recruiting students and faculty to an institution of higher learning. Ultimately it is these spaces that many times define and culture of the institution and pay back dividends that far exceeds the cost.

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