

## Tranquility Within Tension

Many public places we encounter have the ability to evoke different emotional responses based on the use of that place. For example, your mood in a scenic public park will differ greatly from your mood in a hospital due to the connotations that are associated with each place. However, it is possible to alter an emotional response to a place by making it more aesthetically pleasing. For example, one way to alter a depressed emotional response in a hospital is to integrate aspects of a blissful public park within the gloomy hospital. This theory is the basis for my made public art project, "Tranquility Within Tension."

One aspect of college that almost every student dreads is taking exams. At MIT, there is one place that everyone associates with exams, Walker Memorial Gym. Based on survey results, MIT students take approximately 80% of all of their exams in Walker Memorial Gym. Walker Memorial Gym is a large, old gym converted into a testing site through the addition of over 200 desks placed in straight rows. In order to reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor gym, one must journey up 4 flights of stairs or 59 steps. As you climb each stair, you not only get out of breath, but your anxiety levels rise as you get closer to that which will soon decide your fate.

I began my project by taking a survey of the community that I was addressing, the students that take their exams in Walker Memorial Gym. One purpose of the survey was to determine the main aspects of the place that evoke negative emotional responses. Many people complained that the building is simply dark and ugly and that the staircase specifically is long, dark, and dreary. Thus the current aesthetics evoke negative emotional responses, which do not aid in mental preparation for an exam. Another purpose of the survey was to determine what places evoke positive emotional responses for students. The last question of the survey was "When you think of peace and tranquilly, what places come to mind?" A strong majority of students mentioned the beach. Thus, the goal of my project was to integrate aspects of a tranquil beach within the staircase full of tension in order to evoke positive emotional responses and thus decreases anxiety levels.

The first step to my project was finding the beach images. I decided to use beach scenes from a Hawaii book that had easily identifiable aspects of a beach, such as a palm tree or white sand. Each image was blown up, placed onto foam board, and cut into 3 inch pieces (the height of the stairs). The strips were placed across the stairs on the front face as to not obstruct use of the stairs. Therefore, the images can only be seen when ascending the stairs, or by my target audience, those on their way up to an exam. Together the pieces make a beautiful beach scene on each flight of stairs, but even separately, a piece of palm tree or an ounce of sand is enough to make the mind reflect on a tranquil beach.

In addition to installing the images, I also altered the dark and gloomy lighting. The psychology of colors states that colors can affect our moods both mentally and physically (Dr. Morton Walker, *The Power of Color*). I felt that another way I could decrease anxiety levels was to change the lighting to colors that are associated with positive emotional responses. I chose blue and green. Blue represents peace, tranquility, calm, stability, harmony, unity, trust, truth, and confidence. Green represents nature, environment, health, good luck, renewal, youth and vigor. Placing colored cellophane over the lighting fixtures changed the lighting to the aforementioned colors.

As a whole, the "Tranquility within Tension" piece has the ability to alter the emotional response of the anxious students who ascend the once gloomy Walker Memorial staircase. The installation will remain in place indefinitely in order to impact every MIT student at some point during his or her MIT career.